

Is there a need to improve relationships between local councils and the local businesses they represent?

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand the benefits of improving collaboration between local councils (city, community, parish, and town councils) and the local businesses they represent in England and Wales. A study of the literature review discovered that town centres / local businesses are not just concentrated on the High Street but consist of shopping centres and retail parks in addition to what is known as the High Street. The literature review provides a clear understanding that town and city centre economies have complex governance with various forces shaping and affecting their viability economically. Furthermore, the literature emphasises that local businesses are facing challenges, such as online shopping, complex governance of town centres, and micro-economic issues such as the loss of a major employer and its consequential impact on a local area, and these challenges cannot be addressed in isolation.

The primary research was conducted using a structured survey. Key findings from this research suggest there is collation with the literature review. A key finding from the primary research demonstrated that most responses had positive relationships as opposed to negative relationships with local businesses. However, the majority do not have some form of business group to work with.

Another key finding was that the higher than the national average of empty shop ratio are within the areas of unitary councils or metropolitan councils.

Finally, another finding was the lack of an economic role local councils play within their parish; this was further confirmed with the lack of markets held in their parish.

In conclusion, the findings from the research demonstrate there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and their local businesses.

Three key recommendations are made to assist local councils to create positive relationships with local businesses, local business groups and enable the formation of local business groups; develop economic activities; and to undertake further research.

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Glossary of Abbreviations, Acronyms and Terms

ACER:	The Australian Council for Educational Research Ltd
BBC:	The British Broadcasting Corporation
BID/BIDS:	Business Improvement Districts
BRC:	British Retail Consortium
CEO:	Chief Executive Officer
CiLCA:	Certificate in Local Council Administration (Level 3 qualification)
DMU:	De Montfort University
GPC:	General Power of Competence
LGIU	Local Government Information Unit
Local Authorities:	City, Community, County, District, Parish, Town, and Unitary Councils
Local Council:	City, Community, Parish, and Town Councils
LLP:	Limited Liability Partnership
N/A:	Not Applicable
NABMA:	National Association of British Market Authorities
NALC:	National Association of Local Councils
NMTF:	National Market Traders' Federation
Principal Councils:	District Councils, County Councils, and Unitary Councils
Private Sector:	Operated by individuals or companies for profit
Public Sector:	Local Authorities
PwC:	Price Waterhouse Cooper

SALC:	Somerset Association of Local Councils
SLCC:	Society of Local Council Clerks
STEM:	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
SWOT:	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
UCL:	University College London
UK:	United Kingdom
URL:	Uniform Resource Locators

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Background

The UK has experienced a decline in the High Street starting in the 1990s. Senior Lecturers at University of Liverpool Dolega & Lord, (2020) suggested that this started with the retail sector losing business to out-of-town shopping centres.

Online shopping provides another challenge to town centre retailing, and this challenge has become more prominent since the COVID-19 pandemic with a move to home and hybrid working, which results in a reduced footfall in town centres. A report commissioned by Price Waterhouse Cooper (PwC), (2023) concludes that we are yet to see the full effects of the pandemic on retail in Great Britain. BBC News (2021) reported that 8,739 chain shops closed within the first 6 months of 2021. A total of 11,449 shops closed in 2021 and this increased to 17,145 in 2022 (The Guardian, 2023). A further blow to the high street was announced on 3 August 2023 with budget retailer Wilko on brink of collapse with 12,000 jobs at risk along with 400 stores as they prepare to appoint administrators (Butler, 2023). Wilko finally ceased trading, and all stores closed on 8 October 2023, with all 12,000 jobs lost (Evening Standard, 2023).

It is evident that there are multiple challenges facing the High Street. Another challenge is the demise of district councils in England: there were 296 district councils in 1974 (Copus, 2021) and only 164 in 2023 (Local Government Information Unit¹, 2023). There has been a move to a system of unitary local government in England since the 1990's and Sandford², (2020) is of the view that a system of unitary local government would replace multiple political leaderships and senior officer teams, and thus multiple strategies and perspectives, with a single local government perspective. Wales has had a unitary local government system since 1996 (Bowyer³, 2018).

A reduction of district councils has resulted in reductions of economic teams within principal councils. A key role of economic development teams is to help develop the local economy, and reductions within these teams leaves a void in support for the local business community, hence inviting the question: is there a need to improve relationships between local councils and the local businesses they represent? Therefore, the focus and scope of the research will be that of local councils in England with overlap to Wales, which have built or not built a collaborative working relationship with local businesses. These councils will vary in size and location within England and Wales.

¹ Also known as LGIU.

² Mark Sandford is a senior research analyst in the House of Commons Library.

³ Osian Bowyer is a senior researcher at the Welsh Parliament.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this research is to answer the question:

“Is there a need to improve relationships between local councils and the local businesses they represent?”

To understand and inform, this research will gather examples of collaborative working between local councils and local businesses, understanding the benefits of collaborative working from both theory and practice.

The key objectives of this research:

- 1) To establish if there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses via a survey;
- 2) To identify theory through literature and practice through a survey on collaboration between local councils and local businesses and what this achieved;
- 3) To determine a council’s perception of the success of collaborative working with local businesses through tangible, measurable results; and
- 4) To ascertain conclusions and recommendations that were discovered through the research.

1.3 Structure

The study will be structured as follows:

Chapter 2 discusses the **Literature Review**. The University of Edinburgh describes a literature review as ‘secondary’ research and “is a piece of academic writing demonstrating knowledge and understanding of the academic literature on a specific topic placed in context” (2022). This literature review will look at sources from both academic literature and documents from respected and credible sources within the local council, central government, and business sector and identify any gaps that arise.

Chapter 3 discusses the **Methodology**. Robson⁴ defines it as: “The theoretical, political, and philosophical backgrounds to social research and their implications for research practice and for the use of particular research methods” (2002, P. 549).

This chapter identifies the research methods used, how the data was collected and analysed, and taking account of ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 discusses the **Results and Analysis**. This chapter identifies the response rate, profile of the respondents, provides analysis with an explanation of the research findings and a critical reflection of the chosen methodology.

⁴ Colin Robson is an Emeritus Professor, University of Huddersfield, UK.

Chapter 5 discusses the **Conclusions and Recommendations**. Summarising the findings and analysis of the research; assessing the impact and implications on the work of local councils; and making recommendations on future areas of study arising from the research (Jacklin-Edward, 2022).

1.4 About the Author and Positionality

David started his local government career in 2008, as a parish clerk and town clerk. David is now the town clerk and CEO to Bridgwater Town Council in Somerset. David holds the Certificate in Local Council Administration (CiLCA) and is the approved CiLCA trainer for Somerset. David delivers training for local council staff and councillors across the Southwest of England. David is a Fellow of the Society of Local Council Clerks.

David recently worked with the Local Government Reorganisation Team at the former Somerset County Council, building links to connect the emerging new unitary authority for Somerset with local councils and communities across Somerset.

David, having previously owned a High Street hospitality business, understands the need to build strong relationships between local businesses and the local council. David has built strong relationships between Bridgwater Town Council and local businesses along with Bridgwater's Town Team and Bridgwater Chamber of Commerce. David's previous employment was with Langport Town Council, where he built strong relationships with the local businesses of Langport via a bespoke local business grouping, in which all businesses were independent except for Boots. While David's experience may evoke a form of bias, he has improved relationships that has resulted in clear benefits to the local community and economy. This is an important advantage to this study and did not result in leading language with the primary research questions. To ensure no bias was present in the primary research, mitigation was in place with piloting of the research prior to a live launch.

By undertaking this research, David hopes to discover and investigate the reality of the condition of the High Street and to gather examples of collaborative working between local councils and local businesses, understanding the benefits of collaborative working from both theory and practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

High Streets are often the primary shopping area for their community, providing housing and office space, in addition offering a convenient location for a range of other services (London Councils, 2013).

There are a variety of shared definitions of the components needed for a High Street/town centre. GENECON LLP and Partners⁵, (2011, p. 3) argue the evidence does not offer a commonly accepted definition of the 'High Street' in its own right. GENECON LLP and Partners (2011, p. 3) are firmly of the view that in much of the evidence, references to the High Street are quickly superseded in both commentary and analysis by the unit of the town centre. Centre for Retail Research⁶ agree and hold the view that "the 'High Street' in any British town or city is normally the central retail thoroughfare thus the 'High Street' is the common term used to discuss city and town centre shopping" (2023).

With the increasing removal of district councils and budget cuts within principal councils, local councils are increasingly playing a bigger role, taking on more responsibility in their respective communities (The Society of Local Council Clerks, 2023, p. 6; Wills, 2019).

A constant feature in local and national press is that various businesses be it the village shop and/or pub to the High Street of a large town or city, all of these are facing a struggle for survival against multiple factors, such as, reduced footfall; cost of living crisis; online shopping; out of town shopping centres; car parking charges; business rates and operational costs (Enoch⁷, et al., 2022).

This literature review will explore and evaluate literature that will look at the complexities of the High Street economy, vacancy rates within High Streets, challenges to the High Street, local councils, and their role with the High Street economy. The literature review is structured into three sections: the High Street Economy; High Street and Local Councils; and Summary. This structure will enable the identification of key themes with the High Street and local councils and any missing data, which will provide the criteria that the primary research will be based.

2.2 The High Street Economy

In a comprehensive review of the evidence of the crisis within High Streets, Wrigley & Lambiri⁸, (2015) noted that town centres and High Streets can be regarded as

⁵ GENECON LLP and Partners is a leading UK placemaking and economics consultancy.

⁶ The Centre for Retail Research provides expert research on online retail, store numbers, retail change, consumer trends and retail crime in Britain.

⁷ Dr Marcus Enoch is Senior Lecturer in Transport Studies in the Department of Civil and Building Engineering at Loughborough University, UK.

⁸ Both have a PhD and are lecturers at University of Southampton.

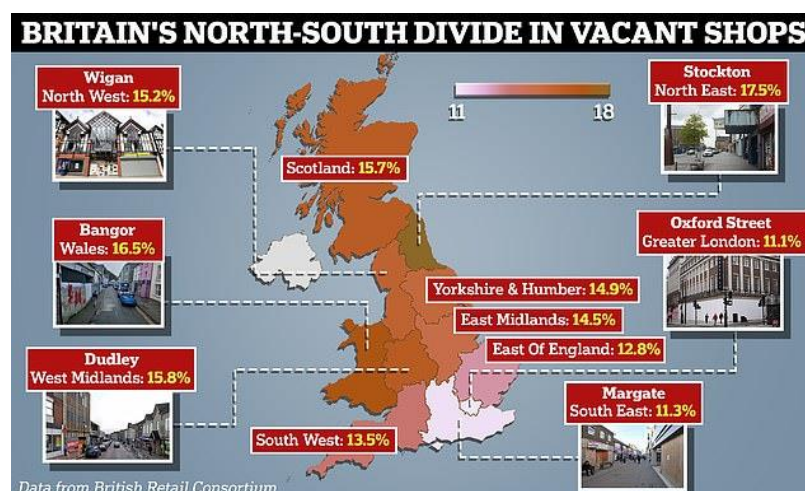
complex urban ecosystems which constantly evolve – their performance and economic health being shaped by a number of short, medium, and long-term forces. To add to these complexities, there are several organisations that play a role in town centre/high street governance, some of these management forms include:

- Chamber of Commerce (Private Sector);
- Local Business Groups not affiliated to a national organisation, such as a Chamber of Commerce; (Private Sector);
- Town Team (Private Sector);
- Town Centre Managers (both Public and/or Private Sector);
- Town and Parish Councils (Public Sector);
- District/Borough Councils (Public Sector);
- County Councils (Public Sector);
- Unitary Councils (Public Sector); and
- Business Improvement Districts (BIDS) (both Public and Private Sector).

De Magalhães⁹, (2012) observes that some of these management forms have been linked to approaches to urban governance that advocate a reduced role for the state and the sharing of governance responsibilities with stakeholders outside the public sector and put an emphasis on partnerships and collaboration in the provision of public goods and services (Leach & Percy-Smith, 2001; Sullivan & Skelcher, 2002).

A recent research report by a leading think tank dedicated to improving the economies of the UK's largest cities and towns Centre for Cities, (2022) noted that some, but not all High Streets are declining. Taking the data from Figure one, the highest vacancy rates (over 15%) are all within a unitary authority or metropolitan authority area. However, their performance varies greatly from one end of the country to the other: in June 2021, vacancy rates went from 10 per cent in Brighton, England (a unitary council) to 33 per cent in Newport, Wales (a unitary council) (Centre for Cities, 2022).

Figure one: Britain's North-South divide of vacant shops. Data first quarter of 2023 taken from McIvor, (2023) and image from Duell, (2023).



⁹ Claudio De Magalhães Senior Lecturer in Planning and Urban Regeneration at the Bartlett School of Planning, UCL, UK.

Looking at national average across Great Britain, the British Retail Consortium reported the following statistics in the first quarter of 2023:

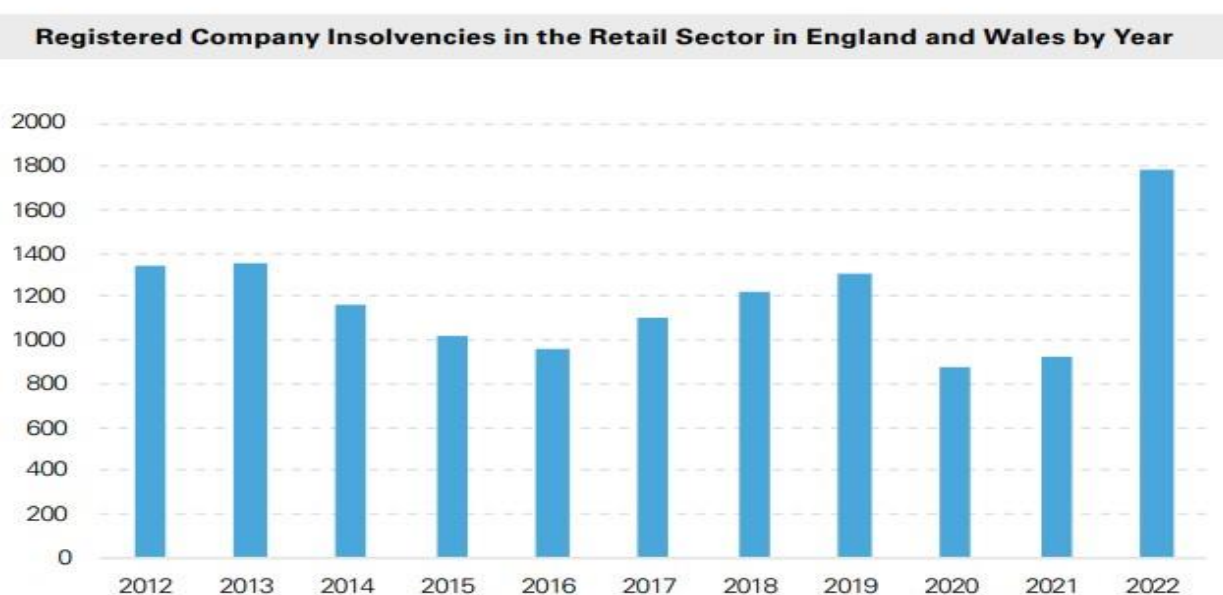
- “The High Street vacancy rate was also 13.8 per cent unchanged from previous quarter;
- Shopping centre store vacancies fell to 17.8 per cent in the first three months of 2023 down from 18.2 per cent in the last quarter of 2022; and
- Retail park vacancies were 8.7 per cent in the first quarter of 2023. This remained the retail location with by far the lowest vacancy rate” (British Retail Consortium, 2023).

In a recent website article on the changing levels of activity in the High Street, Centre for Cities observed that:

“the performance of the high street is a symptom of the strength of the city centre economy as a whole. In economically weak city centres, typically struggling with post-industrial decline and a low-productivity labour market, demand for high street businesses is weak because of low levels of disposable income. By comparison, in stronger city centres, the presence of high-paid workers creates a market for shops and restaurants to sell to, and high streets thrive as a result” (2022).

The retail sector appears the hardest hit sector of the High Street. Data covering 2022 released by the Insolvency Service (2023) provided a year-on-year comparison from 2012 and recorded that retail sector company insolvencies in England and Wales almost doubled last year (up by 92.5%). O’Brien, (2023) states that the retail sector now accounts for 8.1% of all business insolvencies in the UK. Ominously, the increase recorded in the retail sector outstripped the rise seen in the overall data - 92.5% increase in retail versus the 57.0% rise seen for the overall business universe in England and Wales.

Figure two: Registered Company Insolvencies in the Retail Sector in England and Wales by Year (O’Brien, 2023).



The data in Figure two released by The Insolvency Service, (2023) is of registered companies. The figures could be higher than quoted since not all retail businesses are registered with Companies House.

In 2011, the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills commissioned GENECON LLP and Partners to produce a report to identify challenges to the High Street. The following challenges were stated by GENECON LLP and Partners:

- Externalities – high streets are influenced by externalities that are generally outside user/occupier control. These might include macro-economic factors such as the recession/loss of consumer confidence, or centralised decision-making by property owners/retailers;
- Spatial and physical factors – high street performance is affected by factors such as the development of new residential areas or demographic changes; changes in the physical environment; accessibility related to car access and car parking and cycle/walking friendliness; amenity in terms of streetscape, public space, and private/public space;
- Market forces and competition – the development of the high street is undoubtedly affected by the emergence/presence of competitive alternatives to the high street, through a range of channels;
- Demographics – changing demographic trends are likely to have important implications for our high streets. There are implications related to the impact of factors such as: ageing populations; transient populations such as students/immigrants; and the socio-economic catchment/level of disposable income that influence the face of high streets;
- Regulation and legislation – a range of regulatory and legislative policy initiatives have impacted on high streets including planning policy and licensing legislation and the introduction of financial incentives;
- Management - the management of high streets has the potential to affect change and can contribute to the differential impact of certain factors or events (2011, p. 2).

2.3 High Streets and Local Councils

Evidence in section 2.2 demonstrates a struggling High Street / town centre. This section will look at literature on how local councils could have a positive influence on the economy of the High Street.

In a wide-ranging review of the High Street, Portas spoke of the need to put in place a 'Town Team':

"a visionary, strategic and strong operational management structure for high streets. Local councils could enable this by facilitating key stakeholders and host such a body and/or provide funding. Portas, continues that a Town Team could include key landlords, large and small shopkeepers, council representatives with specific knowledge of planning and development, the mayor or MP, other local businesses and service providers, and local residents" (2011, p. 22).

Local councils have a range of tools at their disposal, from the General Power of Competence¹⁰ this enables them to operate various schemes and could provide

¹⁰ The General Power of Competence (GPC) was introduced by the Localism Act 2011 and took effect in February 2012. In simple terms, it gives councils the power to do anything an individual can do provided it is not prohibited by other legislation. It has since been introduced to Wales by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (Local Government Association, 2013, p. 8).

funding to a Town Team. Local Government Association reported one such scheme operated under the GPC:

"a principal council established a fund, financed by the New Homes Bonus. Called 'Think BIG' (Business Investment in Growth), the fund aims to provide loan finance to local businesses with growth potential, where they have not been able to secure the funding elsewhere such as from the banks. Acting on the advice of an independent panel of experts, following 20 applications, four loans have been made to date worth £285,000 in total. The average turnover of businesses supported is £672,500. These loans have safeguarded 40 jobs and there is the potential to create 43 new jobs. While this is a principal council example this scheme could be adapted and replicated within local councils" (2013, p. 11).

Conversely, building influence is not always about direct financial support, local councils can collaborate with the various stakeholders in their community to achieve positive outcomes. Within literature numerous definitions of collaboration can be found. The Australian Council for Educational Research's (ACER) definition of collaboration provides a clear context to the benefits:

"collaboration refers to the capacity of an individual to contribute effectively within a group. This involves perseverance, contributing to team knowledge, valuing contributions of others, and resolving differences. Effective collaboration involves a division of labour with participants who are engaged in active discourse that results in a compilation of their efforts." (Scoular, et al., 2020).

When local councils work with local businesses to build relationships to host and promote events, or to jointly invest financially and emotionally in public realm and amenities can produce the outcome where the area is more attractive and accessible. However, Andrew Carter, Chief Executive of Centre for Cities provides this piece of advice:

"good jobs and a strong local economy are the keys to saving high streets. Any interventions that seek to improve cities' amenities without boosting consumer spending power are doomed to fail from an economic perspective" (2022).

Local councils could support national schemes, such as, the National Fiver Fest. This scheme is for independent businesses and is free. The scheme is about collaboration and showing a united front. It's run simultaneously across towns all over the UK. It's also run at three very specific times of the year, which are deemed the quiet times for businesses (Totally Locally, 2023). This scheme is recognised by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) in the Star Council Awards 2023 where a local council has promoted the scheme within their parish (National Association of Local Councils, 2023).

Another way in which local councils can provide support to high streets is to promote tourism under section 144 of the Local Government Act 1972 and hold markets either using the section 50 under the Food Act 1984; or Royal Charters (if granted).

National Association of British Market Authorities (NABMA) conducted a survey of markets and 241 Markets responded. The respondents are categorised as follows:

Table one: Survey of market categories of respondents (NABMA, 2022, p. 7)

58%	Unitary, District, County and London Boroughs
26.7%	Parish/Town/Community Council
9.6%	Private
2.9%	Trader Operated
2%	Other
0.4%	Social Enterprise
0.4%	Trust

The Survey reveals that currently 84.7% of the 241 markets are managed by local authorities (NABMA, 2022, p. 7).

NABMA, (2022, p. 8) reported that the Rhodes Survey and Markets 21 both suggested trader numbers of around 45,000/46,000 with an estimated 95,000 people working in Retail Markets in 2009. By the time the three NABMA and National Market Traders' Federation (NMTF) surveys were carried out (2014/2018) trader numbers had dropped to around 32,000 with people employed in the industry down to 57,000 (NABMA, 2022, p. 8).

2.4 Summary

The literature review discovered that town centre / local businesses are not just concentrated to the high street but consist of shopping centres and retail parks in addition to what is known as the high street.

The literature review found that town and city centre economies have complex governance with various forces shaping and affecting their viability economically. Furthermore, the literature emphasized that the local businesses are facing challenges which cannot be addressed in isolation.

The literature review identified several examples in which local councils could support the local economy. However, the literature overall in this area is inadequate and requires further research to produce evidence of examples of ways in which local councils could support the local economy and the benefits this unlocks.

The literature discovered that the highest empty shop ratios are all within unitary authority or metropolitan authority areas.

Further research is required to ascertain if local councils work in isolation and achieve tangible positive impacts to the local economy; and if there is a need to work in collaboration.

The literature review was not able to answer objectives 1, part of 2, and 3.

This chapter has highlighted strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the literature review, and an analysis can be found as [Appendix 1](#). These will form the basis for the primary research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter expounds the research methods used to undertake the primary research used to enable the key question to be answered, which is 'the aim' of this dissertation: *Is there a need to Improve Relationships Between Local Councils and the Local Businesses they represent?* This chapter will look at how the information was processed and validates the choice, appropriateness, relevance, and application.

A [SWOT analysis](#) of the literature review verified the strengths and weaknesses of the literature review and this will form the basis for the primary research. In addition, an explanation is given of the ethical considerations and the limitations of the primary research.

3.2 Research Design

Hakim¹¹, (2000) compares a researcher designing a research project with an architect designing a building. The building metaphor is not unique in the approach to research design, as Thomas¹², (2017, p. 5) says "that designing research is like designing anything else – a bathroom or a kitchen."

The literature review was not able to answer objectives 1, part of 2, and 3. Therefore, further data is required to meet the objectives of the research:

- 1) Establish if there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses via a survey;
- 2) To identify theory through literature and practice through a survey on collaboration between local councils and local businesses and what this achieved;
- 3) To determine a council's perception of the success of collaborative working with local businesses through tangible, measurable results; and
- 4) To ascertain conclusions and recommendations that were discovered through the research.

There are multiple research methods to choose from, and after careful consideration the following methods have been chosen:

- Open (inductive); and
- pre-structured (deductive) qualitative and quantitative survey (Stenius & Cunnington, 1972).

¹¹ Dr Catherine Hakim is a pioneering British social scientist, author, and a Professorial Research Fellow at Civitas, the London think tank.

¹² Kate Williams set up the Upgrade Study Advice Service at Oxford Brookes University, UK.

The primary research deployed a pre-structured survey. The word survey refers to the study of a population through observation of its members (Jansen, 2010). Groves¹³, et al., states:

"the survey is a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities for the purpose of constructing quantitative descriptors of the attributes of the larger population of which the entities are members" (2004, p. 4).

The target audience for the pre-structured survey were local council clerks in England and Wales.

The survey will be both qualitative and quantitative. Farnsworth¹⁴ PhD, (2019), writes "that there are inherent differences between qualitative and quantitative research methods, although their objectives and applications overlap in many ways."

The core difference as stated by Farnsworth PhD:

"qualitative research generates "textual data" (non-numerical). Quantitative research, on the contrary, produces "numerical data" or information that can be converted into numbers." (2019).

The creation of effective survey questions is essential to accurately measure the opinions of the participants. Brown¹⁵ states that:

"if the questions are poorly worded, unclear, or biased, the responses will be unserviceable. A well-written question will mean the same thing to all respondents." (2017).

The research survey for this dissertation was piloted between 13 May 2023 and 16 May 2023. The final survey was launched on 20 May 2023 and ended on 7 June 2023. This survey was open to councils via clerks, as the main point of contact to either respond or pass on accordingly within their council.

To ensure that the survey being deployed was effective, the author mapped the survey questions to the objectives and aim (see table 2 on the next page).

¹³ Matthew Groves is an Associate Professor at The University of Groningen, Netherlands.

¹⁴ Bryn Farnsworth is a Scientific and Technical Writer at iMotion, Copenhagen, Denmark and has a postdoctoral position at Umeå Centre for Functional Brain Imaging, Sweden.

¹⁵ Jennifer Leigh Brown Jennifer has been leading digital strategy, research, content and design efforts for nearly 20 years.

Table 2: Mapping of survey questions to research objectives

Research Objective	Survey Question Number	Rationale
Establish if there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses	4, 6, 8, and 9	Q4 will give insight into whether the council engages with businesses through the options listed. Q6 will give data on whether the respondents area has markets. Q8 will provide data on economic activities of the council. Q9 will provide data on empty shop ratio. This will provide key data that will provide clarity to this research objective.
Identify theory through literature and practice through a survey on collaboration between local councils and local businesses and what this achieved	3, 5, 6, 7, and 9	Q3 will provide data on the size of council. Q5 will give insight into the demographics of town economy. Q6 will give data on whether the respondents area has markets and who is responsible for them. Q7 existence of business relationships within the parish Q9 will provide data on empty shop ratio. This will provide key practical data on collaboration with local businesses.
Determine a council's perception of the success of collaborative working with local businesses through tangible, measurable results	10	This will be an open text box providing qualitative data on each respondents' perception of success with examples.

It is important to gain factual information from the respondents regarding their councils, and the local setting. This will provide clarity to the responses received and key demographic data, such as vacancy rates and the north-south divide to compare with section 2.2 of the literature review.

Table 3: factual information with rationale.

Factual Information	Question Number	Rationale
Type of Council (Town/Parish/City/Community)	1	Type of council can impact on what scope the role the council could play, such as, a parish council may have no 'High Street' in their parish and thus will have no need for a 'Town Team'.
Size of Budget	2	Size of budget may increase or decrease the role of the council.
Nature of High Street	4	This will provide clarity to respondents' responses to other questions and will provide more credibility to the data.

The second part of the primary research was intending to use interviews. Interviews are used to gain insights into a person's subjective experiences, opinions, and

motivations – as opposed to facts or behaviours (Busetto¹⁶, et al., 2020; Hak, T. 2007). Due to resource constraints, it was impractical to undertake interviews and the approach was amended not to undertake interviews and leave this option open for a future piece of work.

3.3 Research Ethics

As a leading institution for research, De Montfort University (DMU) recognises the need for research to be conducted with integrity at all levels and by everyone conducting research (De Montfort University, 2023).

Why do research ethics matter? Bhandari¹⁷ advises that:

- “Research ethics matter for scientific integrity, human rights and dignity, and collaboration between science and society. These principles make sure that participation in studies is voluntary, informed, and safe for research subjects.
- There is a need to balance pursuing important research aims with using ethical research methods and procedures. It’s always necessary to prevent permanent or excessive harm to participants, whether inadvertent or not.
- Defying research ethics will also lower the credibility of the research because it’s hard for others to trust the data if the methods are morally questionable.
- Even if a research idea is valuable to society, it doesn’t justify violating the human rights or dignity of study participants” (2022).

Thomas, (2017, p. 33) advises that in any research involving people, you must think about questions such as:

- Is there any discomfort for the participants?
- Are you invading participants’ privacy?
- Do you have the right to take up people’s time?
- Might you be damaging the standing or reputation of participants or others?

Participants were encouraged to read the participant research information document ([Appendix 2 a](#)) for this research project, and it was made clear that participation is voluntary, and they were free to withdraw from the research at any time. Data was anonymised, stored securely and only used for this research. Prior to the research commencing, an Ethics approval form ([Appendix 2 b](#)) was completed, approved, and submitted to DMU confirming the core ethical principles of transparency, confidentiality and voluntary input were to be adhered to.

3.4 Data Collection

There needs to be reliability and validity with any research and the instruments used to collect the data. Thomas¹⁸ is of the view that:

¹⁶ Loraine Busetto, Department of Neurology, Heidelberg University Hospital, Im Neuenheimer Feld 400, 69120, Heidelberg, Germany.

¹⁷ Pritha Bhandari has multiple STEM degrees and has written and published over 60 articles (more than 125,000 words) on research methods and statistics

¹⁸ Gary Thomas is Professor of Inclusion and Diversity at the University of Birmingham, UK.

“reliability is about the consistency and dependability of a data-gathering procedure...it’s about the extent to which a research instrument...will give the same result in different situations” (2017, p. 33). In addition, Thomas adds that “validity is about the degree to which the data you collect and the findings you emerge with provide accurate, meaningful answers to your research questions” (2017, p. 33).

The survey used the platform: Microsoft Forms. This platform was chosen as it is free to use (if the researcher has Microsoft 365), secure, easy to customise, and meets accessibility requirements for respondents. The platform enables the collection of data and makes the analysis easier.

Another addition to this platform is the ability to create a Uniform Resource Locators (URL) link, to enable the survey to be easily shared on digital platforms. This enabled the researcher to utilise the following digital communication platforms:

- Community Clerks’ Network Group on Facebook
- The Clerks’ Corner Group on Facebook
- LinkedIn
- NALC’s Social media and Newsletters
- SLCC’s website

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysing the data using Microsoft forms enabled data to be filtered and sorted using different variables and to calculate a mean average overall and to each question. Chapter 4 will detail how the analysis was undertaken and the results presented.

3.6 Problems encountered and limitations

As with most surveys, there can be response and researcher bias. Response biases are present in standardised surveys when values collected from, or reported by, respondents systematically deviate from the actual, true values (Bogner & Landrock, 2016).

This could have been encountered with questions 6, 7 and 8 as the respondent may not wish to show their council through a negative lens, Bogner & Landrock (2016) argue that this is often a consequence of satisficing.

The primary limitation is the focus of the research – solely local councils. With more resources and time, it would be beneficial to gain a viewpoint from stakeholders in addition to local councils to provide validity to the local council’s responses.

Key problems encountered were:

- Low number of responses, it would have been beneficial to have obtained a higher number of responses to provide external validity and more data to ensure a more illustrative study;

- Not including a qualitative question on if their local council sits within a unitary or district and county council area. This would have provided additional valuable data that could have supported or contradicted some of the findings in section 2.2 of the literature review; and
- Time and resource factors, which resulted in not accommodating interview based primary research.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter an explanation was provided of the concept of research design from academics and the design of the primary research that was deployed for this research project. Research ethics were clearly explained along with data collection and analysis. Problems and limitations with the research were also highlighted.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the results and analysis of the primary research that was carried out are presented. Connections will be made to the literature review and draw comparisons with the primary research. Profile of the respondents and response rate will also feature.

4.2 Response Rate and Profile of Respondents

The approach to the survey was to gain a broad and representative responsive rate ergo; it was circulated within the following mediums **Table 4:**

Community Clerks' Network Group on Facebook (1,900 members). Post achieved 4 likes, 16 comments.
The Clerks' Corner Group on Facebook (1,700 members – both Clerks and Councillors). Post achieved 20 likes and 10 comments
LinkedIn (471 connections). Post achieved 489 impressions;
SALC (200 members)
SLCC's website/mailling list (5000 members: SLCC, (2023))

It is inevitable that there will be an overlap of members with people being members of some if not all the target mediums. Taking account of duplication, a pool of approximately 6,000 is the reach audience. As of 2022, there are 10,480 parish/town councils in England and 878 community councils in Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Overall, approximately 52.8% of town, parish and community councils in England and Wales were targeted.

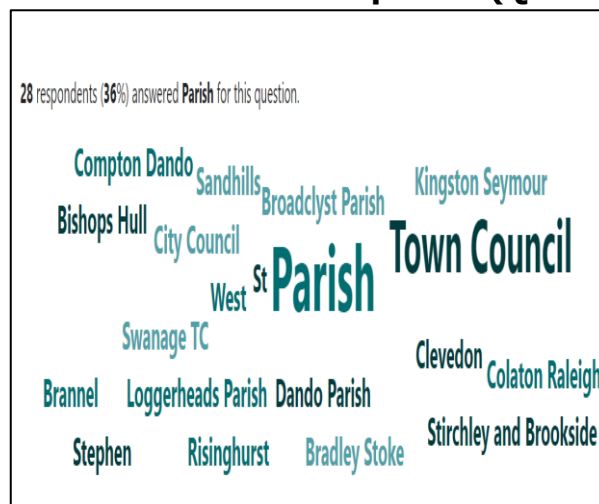
A total of 78 responded, equating to 1.3% response rate from a pool of 6,000 potential respondents. This represents a nonresponse bias of 98.7%. A good response rate that is deemed reliable is with a 5%–10% response rate with a sample size of at least 500 (Wu, et al., 2022; Fosnacht, et al., 2017). However, Fincham¹⁹, (2008) is of the view that the "response rate does depend on the type of survey and its intended audience, with response rates approximating 60% for most research should be the goal of researchers is the view of Fincham²⁰, (2008) within the medical field.

¹⁹ Ph.D., Professor, The University of Missouri Kansas City School of Pharmacy, Kansas City, Missouri, US.

²⁰ Ph.D., Professor, The University of Missouri Kansas City School of Pharmacy, Kansas City, Missouri, US.

Microsoft Forms compiled the data demonstrating (see Figure 3) that 28 respondents (36%) were representing a parish council.

Figure 3: Respondents that answered 'parish' (Question 1).

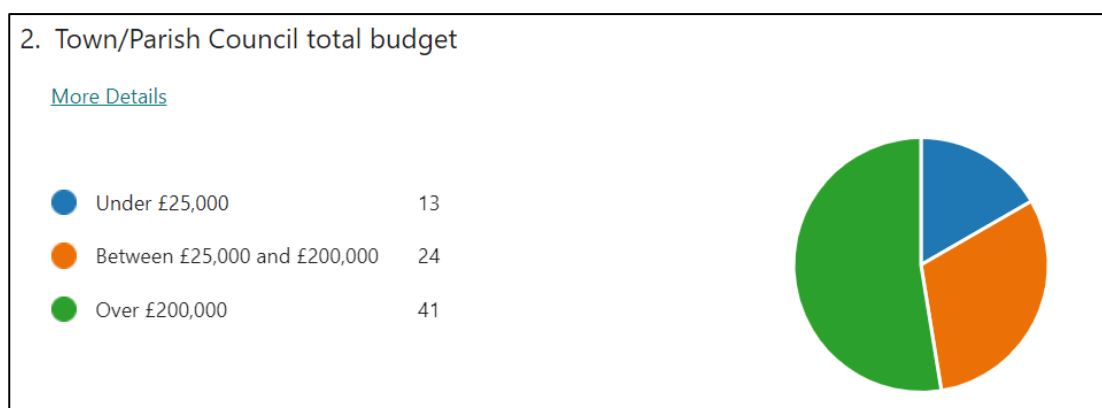


A deeper analysis of the data in Figure 3 discovered that 23 did not put either city, community, parish, and town council after their parish's name. This demonstrates a flaw with using pre-structured surveys if not using a dropdown with a list of options for a response. After reviewing the figures:

- 32 Town Councils 41%
- 44 Parish Councils 56%
- 1 city 1%
- 1 community 1%

The respondents' size of budget, Microsoft Forms compiled the data demonstrating (see Figure 4) that 13 respondents (16.66%) had a budget under £25,000; 24 (30.76%) respondents had a budget between £25,000 and £200,000; and 41 (52.56%) had a budget over £200,000. It was not unexpected to have more responses from councils with a larger budget, as the assumption is these councils will have more resources to apply, and smaller councils will have less of a role to play in the economic development of their parishes due to lack of a High Street and thus would not respond to the survey.

Figure 4: Respondents' Budget size (Question 2).



4.3 Findings from the research

The remaining questions sought to gain an understanding of local councils' economic activities / economic development within their local economy and the economic health of their parish.

4.3.1 Question 3: Staff/councillors organising economic activities

Question three asked if their town/parish council employs a member of staff or appoints a lead councillor to liaise with local businesses / organise town centre economic activities.

An overwhelming number (56%) of councils that responded do not engage with their local economy via the options listed. Qualitative data obtained in a text box for this question revealed that the reasoning for the lack of engagement with local businesses was mixed with key themes being 'only a few businesses in our parish'; 'no point in organising activities'; 'local businesses appear uninterested in engaging'; and 'local council lack capacity to attend meetings or to get involved with local events'.

Of those 44, 56% of respondents were from the following size of council. **Table 5:**

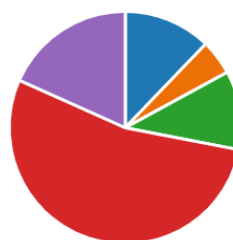
Under £25,000	Between £25,000 and £200,000	Over £200,000
25%	40%	35%

Figure 5: Data from survey on staff/councillors organising economic activities (Question 3)

3. Does your town/parish council employ a member of staff or appoint a lead councillor to liaise with local businesses / organise town centre economic activities?

[More Details](#)

Employs a member of staff	10
Appoints a lead councillor	4
Both a member of staff and lead...	9
Neither	44
Other	15



4.3.2 Question 4: Nature of respondent's local economy

Question four sought to understand the make-up of the respondent's local economy. 38% (30 respondents) had a High Street consisting of a mix of independent and chain businesses, with the second highest (28% - 22 respondents) having a village pub and shop. Of the 20 respondents that selected 'other' and provided qualitative data, the following themes developed:

- Just a village, a handful of businesses or just a village pub;
- Couple of small industrial areas, no retail area;
- No single 'High Street' area; and

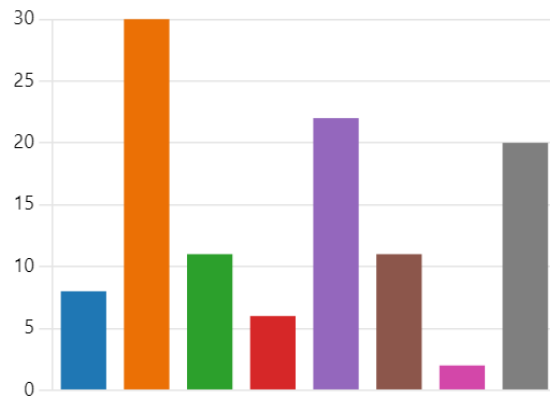
- Farm shop and licenced holiday lets that caters to village as well as tourists.

Figure 6: Data from survey on nature of respondent's local economy.

4. Nature of town/parish economy *(select all responses that apply)*

[More Details](#)

High Street with only independe...	8
High Street with mix of indepen...	30
In town centre shopping centre ...	11
Out of town shopping centre co...	6
Village Pub and Shop	22
Village Pub	11
Village Shop	2
Other	20



4.3.3 Question 5: Markets in respondent's local economy

Question 5 returned a similar percentage of responses to question 3 when asked if they have a market in their area with (51%) saying they do not. This data cannot be compared with the data in section 2.3 of the literature review from the NABMA (2022) survey, as the audience in NABMA survey was targeted at those that have markets.

A theme is developing that the larger the council in terms of budget (over £200,000) the more likely to have activity in their parish. The assumption is that they serve a larger parish and more resources to be more active in their community.

Table 6: breakdown of the 40 (51%), respondents were from the following size of council.

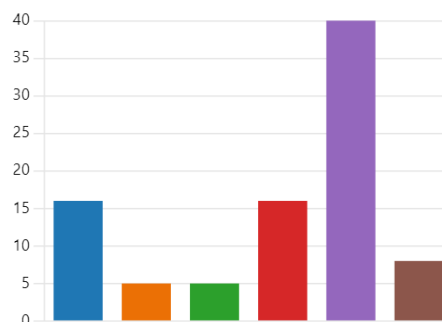
Under £25,000	Between £25,000 and £200,000	Over £200,000
32%	42%	26%

Figure 7: Data from survey responses on markets in their community.

5. Town/Village Markets *(select all responses that apply)*

[More Details](#)

Privately operated	16
District Operated	5
Unitary operated	5
Town/Parish operated	16
No Market	40
Other	8



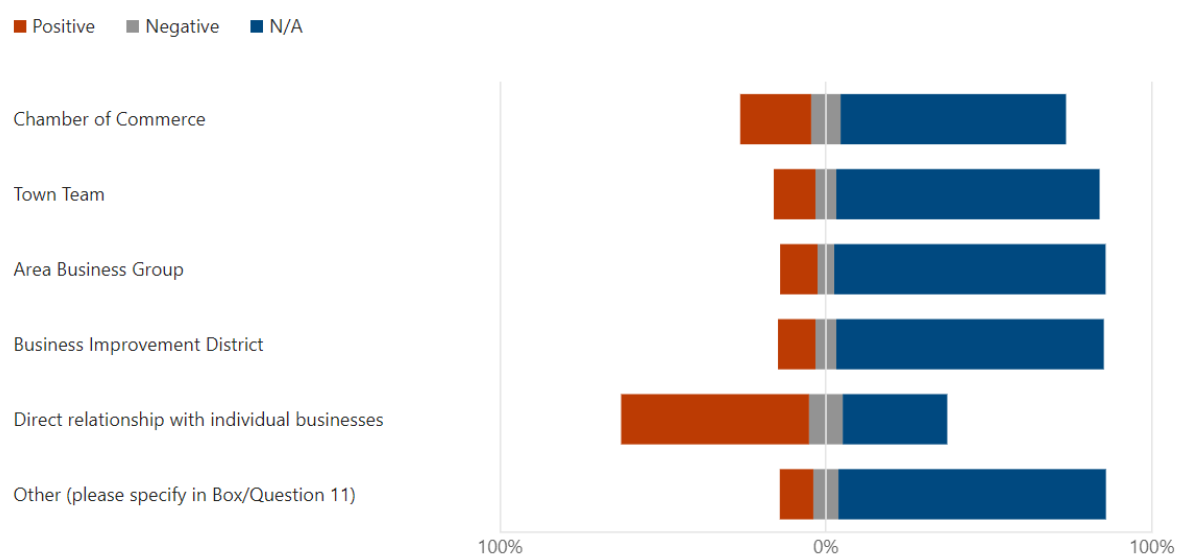
4.3.4 Question 6: State of relationships between local councils and local businesses

Question 6 focussed on the state of relationships between local councils and local businesses. The data obtained from this question demonstrates that a majority had positive relationships versus negative relationships, especially directly with local businesses. The direct relationship is impacted as a median of 82% of the respondents do not have a Chamber of Commerce, Town Team, Area Business Group, or a Business Improvement District within the parish.

Table 7: Percentage breakdown of responses to Question 6.

Response	Chamber of Commerce	Town Team	Area Business Group (bespoke)	Business Improvement District	Direct Business relationship
Positive	21.8%	12.8%	11.5%	11.5%	57.7%
Negative	8.9%	6.5%	5.2%	5.2%	8.9%
N/A	69.3%	80.7%	83.3%	83.3%	33.4%

Figure 8: Data from survey on the state of relationships between local councils and local businesses.



4.3.5 Question 7: Initiatives/events respondents' council utilise to boost economic activity within their parish

Question 7 asked respondents about what initiatives/events their council utilise to boost economic activity within their parish. This was a simple select 'those that apply' question. 47% (including those that responded N/A) of respondent councils do not play a role in local initiatives/events. However, 50% responded that their council directly organise initiatives/events.

Breakdown of percentages per option:

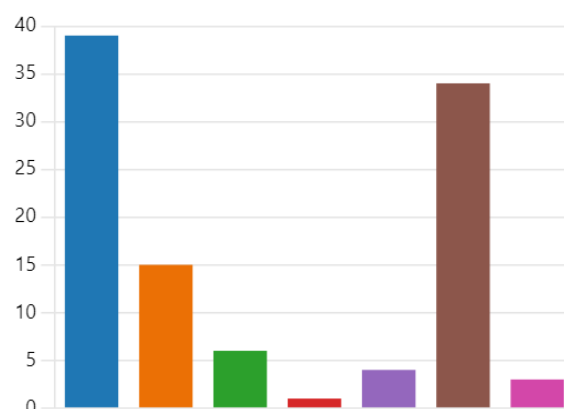
- a) Town/Parish organised 50%
- b) Town/Parish partnership (with local business group) 19.2%
- c) Town/Parish partnership (with district council) 7.6%
- d) Town/Parish partnership (with county council) 1.3%
- e) Town/Parish partnership (with unitary council) 5.1%
- f) My Council does not play a role & N/A 47%

Figure 9: Initiatives/events respondents council utilise to boost economic activity within their parish

7. Initiatives/events to boost economic activity within your parish: *(select all responses that apply)*

[More Details](#)

Town/Parish organised	39
Town/Parish partnership (with lo...	15
Town/Parish partnership (with di...	6
Town/Parish partnership (with c...	1
Town/Parish partnership (with u...	4
My Council does not play a role	34
N/A	3



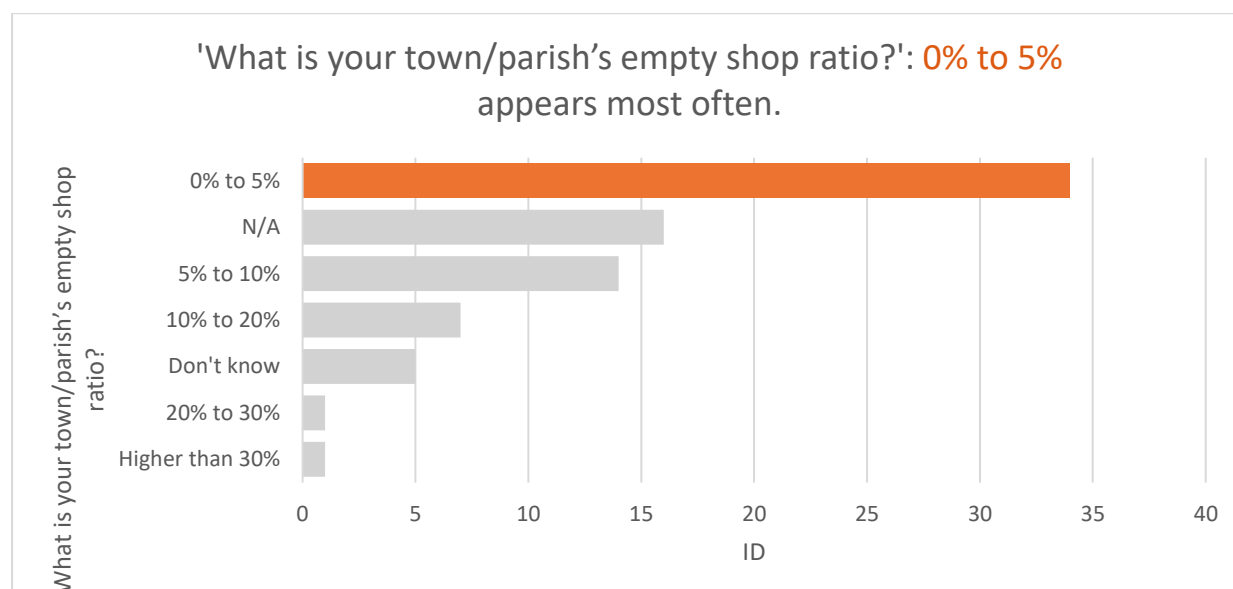
The data collected from this question and questions 3, and 5 are an incredibly close match that indicates that over half the respondents do not engage or provide economic activities within their area. This gives rise to the question, does the lack of engagement and economic activity equate to a downturn in the economic health of their community? This will be clarified by the next question (8) of the survey.

4.3.6 Question 8: Respondents town/parish's empty shop ratio

The breakdown of data from question 8 'What is your town/parish's empty shop ratio?' **Table 8:**

Empty Ratio %	Under £25,000	Between £25,000 and £200,000	Over £200,000	Total Number
0 to 5%	5.1%	16.7%	21.8%	34
5% to 10%	0%	2.6%	15.4%	14
10% to 20%	0%	2.6	1.3%	7
20% to 30%	0%	0%	1.3%	1
Over 30%	0%	0%	1.3%	1
Don't know	0%	2.6%	3.8%	5
N/A	11.5%	7.7%	1.3%	16

Figure 10: Data from survey responses on their town/parish's empty shop ratio



The data obtained from question 8 suggests that 48 equating to 61% of respondents have an empty shop ratio lower than the national average of 13.8% (British Retail Consortium, 2023), as identified in section 2.2 of the literature review. The data in table 9 indicates that the majority of the respondents that had a lower than the national average empty shop ratio are more active in their community, organising events designed to generate footfall or are a small parish, and thus have a lower number of businesses, which to a degree skew the findings.

Table 9: Demographic data with local council organised events designed to increase footfall.

Village pub and/or village shop	High Street / Town Centre	Organised events within their community
18/48	30	31/48

Further analysis has shown that the majority of the respondents that had a lower than the national average empty shop ratio had a large local council with a budget over £200,000.

Table 10: Responses budget profile for lower than national average empty shop ratio.

Under £25,000	Between £25,000 and £200,000	Over £200,000
4	15	29

Interestingly, the 2 respondents answering an empty shop ratio of 20% to 30% and higher than 30% (one a piece) come from different parts of England. The respondent that answered 20% to 30% came from a Southwest English seaside town in North Somerset, while the higher than 30% was a former mining town in

Northeast England. The North Somerset figure is an outlier in terms of the demographics however, the respondent data from Northeast England confirms collation with Britain's North-South divide in vacant shops data, as per section 2.2 of the literature review. One striking piece of data is that both towns are within a unitary council area.

Table 11 (on the next page) compares these two responses in more detail. There is key data emerging from their responses – relationships.

Both respondents have a Town Team – the first recommendation of Portas, (2011) and both reported a negative state of the relationship between the Town Team and their Council. Portas is of the view that:

"we need the belief and engagement of all the local stakeholders to create the sustainable high streets of the future. The best results will come from maximum collaboration at the local level to create High Streets that people want to use, enjoy, and return to" (2011, p. 22).

The Local Government Association explains about the benefit of better relationships with the voluntary sector, which local business groups are a part of:

"not only do better partnerships between the two enable councils to deliver their statutory duties and support their residents and better relationships between these partners also strengthens communities and increases civic participation" (2022).

While the local council in the Southwest has a positive relationship with the other business groups in their parish, the same cannot be said with the local council in the Northeast, which has returned the highest empty shop ratio. This strengthens the need to improve local council and local business community relationships.

Table 11: data comparison table for the two highest empty shop ratio responses.

I.D./Region	Town Council	Budget Band	Appoint a member of staff/councillor to liaise with businesses	Nature of town/parish economy	Markets	Relationship – Chamber of Commerce	Relationship – Town Team	Relationship – Local Area Business Group	Relationship – BID	Relationship – Direct with businesses	Initiatives/events to boost economic activity within your parish	Could you describe the benefit to the town centre economy of your council's involvement in economic activities?
62/Southwest	Yes	Over £200k	Both a member of staff and lead councillor;	High Street with mix of independent and chain shops; High Street with only independent shops; in town centre shopping centre complex; out of town shopping centre complex.	No	Positive	Negative	Positive	Positive	Positive	Town/Parish organised; Town/Parish partnership (with local business group); Town/Parish partnership (with unitary council).	We have a grant fund to encourage large scale events that will directly aim to increase the town's economy.
77/Northeast	Yes	Over £200k	Neither	In town centre shopping centre complex; High Street with mix of independent and chain shops.	Privately operated	N/A	Negative	N/A	N/A	Negative	Council does not play a role.	We are rarely involved

4.4 Summary

This chapter analysed the results and evaluated responses to the primary research undertaken. The objectives of the study were:

- 1) To establish if there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses via a survey;
- 2) To identify theory through literature and practice through a survey on collaboration between local councils and local businesses and what this achieved;
- 3) To determine a council's perception of the success of collaborative working with local businesses through tangible, measurable results; and
- 4) To ascertain conclusions and recommendations that were discovered through the research.

From the primary research findings there are collations that supports some of the findings in the secondary research, key points:

- North/South divide with empty shop ratio;
- The two highest empty shop ratios were within unitary council areas; and
- Negative state of relationships or a non-existent relationship has a negative impact on economic activity.

A key finding from the primary research demonstrated that most responses had positive relationships as opposed to negative relationships with local businesses. However, the majority do not have some form of business group to work with.

Another key finding was the lack of an economic role local councils play within their parish; this was further confirmed by the lack of Markets held in respondents' parishes. As expected, many respondents that were from larger councils (a budget of over £200,000) were more engaged with the business community and operated markets and other economic activities.

One flaw with the data was the majority of the respondents that had a lower than the national average empty shop ratio. 37.5% of those who reported an exceptionally low empty shop ratio were a small parish, and data they provided confirmed that they only had a village shop or pub, which to a degree skew the findings and cannot be compared with the data in the literature review (2.2), as this focused-on towns with a clearly defined retail centre referred to as the 'High Street'. However, it is worthy of noting that 64.5% of those reporting a lower than the national average empty shop ratio are active in their community and organised events designed to generate footfall.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will conclude the primary and secondary research that has been carried out. In addition, recommendations will be made for the benefit of NALC and SLCC and the basis for further research.

5.2 Conclusions

The research aimed to answer the question '*Is there a need to Improve Relationships Between Local Councils and the Local Businesses they represent?*'

The secondary research identified numerous challenges the High Street / local economy is facing, along with ways local councils could help support the local economy in withstanding the challenges.

The primary research, with the limited responses received, showed there were some stark data trends evident. The key trends that emerged were:

- An overwhelming number (56%) of councils that responded do not engage with their local economy by either appointing a council recognised lead councillor or member of staff;
- 51% of respondents do not have a market in their parish;
- The majority had positive relationships versus negative relationships, especially directly with local businesses. However, the direct relationship produces a contrasting result as a median of 82% of the respondents do not have a Chamber of Commerce, Town Team, Area Business Group, or a Business Improvement District within the parish;
- 47% of respondents do not play a role in local economic development initiatives/events. However, 50% responded that their council directly organise initiatives/events; and
- The above average empty shop ratios in the primary and secondary research were in all in unitary council or metropolitan council areas.

The findings from the primary research demonstrate there *is a need to improve relationships between local councils and their local businesses*. However, the data is murky, as of the responses received 61% had a VOID ratio lower than the national average of 13.8% (British Retail Consortium, 2023). This does not corroborate with the literature review, which portrayed a bleak picture of the High Street. The rationale for this lower-than-expected VOID ratio could be due to response bias or the profile of the limited number of respondents.

5.3 Recommendations

5.3.1 To create positive relationships with local businesses, local business groups and enable the formation of local business groups

By having some form of organised/official group for local businesses you will provide a networking opportunity for local businesses to share tips, problems and solutions, and best practices. It will also provide a forum for which local councils can coordinate with, to gain a holistic view of thoughts and positionality of local businesses. Such a forum could be critical to ensuring local events are beneficial for the local community and supported. Section 2.3 of the literature review noted that Portas is of the view

“that we need the belief and engagement of all the local stakeholders to create the sustainable high streets of the future. The best results will come from maximum collaboration at the local level to create high streets that people want to use, enjoy, and return to” (2011, p. 22).

Also covered in section 2.3 of the literature review, local councils are in a unique position to fill the role of ‘community enabler’ and facilitate a local discussion with local businesses and key stakeholders to create a town team or local area business group. If the local council is eligible to exercise the General Power of Competence, they could also provide some funding to assist with the initial launch of such a group.

If local councils have such local business groups in place, they should take steps to improve and strengthen their relationships, but ensure all parties are clear with roles and expectations from the outset.

5.3.2 Economic Activities

Local councils should undertake in-depth research as required to scope out different types of economic activities that they could either directly take responsibility of delivery or work in partnership with local business and community groups or the principal council.

Such economic activities are not limited to, but could include:

- Establish Markets (could be themed: artisan, Christmas, craft, food and drink, and vegan);
- Increase local planting and bunting;
- Town centre entertainment;
- Look at national events and think locally to piggyback;
- Shop Front Improvement Grants;
- Coordinating the setting up of a local business group; and
- Work with local businesses to launch Totally Locally Fiver Fest or the new Magic Tenner Deals.

Local councils should lobby national bodies like NALC and SLCC to increase awareness of national events where local councils could piggyback to create localised themed events to generate increased footfall for the High Street.

5.3.3 Further Research

The scope of this research is limited by the response rate and illustrative of local councils' viewpoints. As useful as this has been, it would be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding on the local economic activities delivered by local councils and relationships of key stakeholders of High Street settings across England and Wales.

The primary limitation is the focus of this research – solely local councils. With more resources and time, it would be beneficial to gain a viewpoint from stakeholders in addition to local councils to provide validity to the local council's responses.

Any future research should include interviews to develop a deeper understanding, and the survey element could be opened to local business groups.

Any further research could lead to a guide being published by NALC as part of the suite of publications: 'Good Councillor Guide to', which could highlight the benefits of local councils engaging in local economic development; establishing positive relationships with local businesses and stakeholder groups; and a toolkit of economic projects that local councils regardless of size could engage with for the benefit of their community.

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Appendices

Appendix 1:	SWOT Analysis of Literature Review
Appendix 2 a:	Research Participants Information Sheet
Appendix 2 b:	DMU Ethic Form Submission
Appendix 3:	Survey Questions
Appendix 4:	Pilot Survey Questions
Appendix 5:	Results Summary Data

Appendix 1 **SWOT of Literature Review**

Literature Review	Strength	Weakness
Opportunity	The literature review identified an example of ways that local councils could support the local economy; however, the literature is inadequate and provides an opportunity to undertake further research to produce evidence of examples of ways that local councils could support the local economy.	The literature review identified a limited number of examples of ways in which local councils could support the local economy; however, the literature is inadequate and requires further research to produce evidence of examples of ways in which local councils could support the local economy.
Threat	Further research could be time consuming and not provide tangible data / examples.	Low response rate will make the less credible.

Appendix 2 a Research Participant Information Sheet

Version No. 1

Date

23/04/2023

Research Participant Information Sheet

Title of Project: Is there a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses?

Name of Researcher(s): David Mears

You have been invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish to. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part or not. Thank you for reading this.

What is the research about?

This study aims to answer the question: Is there a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses? To understand this need, this research will gather examples of collaborative working between local councils and local businesses, understanding the benefits of collaborative working from both theory and practice.

The research for this study is being undertaken by the researcher named above who is a BA (Hons) Community Governance student and is required to complete a community research study in Faculty of Business and Law at De Montfort University, Leicester.

What does the study / participation involve?

If you agree to participate in this study, we will ask you to take part in a survey and if you indicate you may be asked to participate in an interview. The data collection will be done by asking questions via Microsoft Forms and if you chose to participate in an interview and selected, you will be required to attend an interview via Microsoft Teams for no more than one hour.

Who is doing the research?

David Mears, Community Governance BA Hons Student at De Montfort University.

If you have any concerns about this research, for any reason and at any time, you may contact my supervisors Kelly Holland and Sally Thurston. Their contact details are provided at the end of this information sheet.

Who is funding the research?

This research project is being not being funded and isn't incurring a cost.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen because you work for a town or parish council in England. Up to 10 participants will also be chosen to take part in an interview.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

I am interested in taking part, what do I do next?

If you are interested in taking part, please contact the researcher named above using the e-mail provided at the end of this document.

What if I agree to take part and then change my mind?

You can withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason. This can be done by email using the contact details at the end of this document for me, however, as the questionnaire is to be completed anonymously data cannot be withdrawn.

Any data collated up to the point of withdrawal will be kept securely on a password protected database and securely disposed of following the withdrawal request (only interview data can be withdrawn).

What happens to the information I provide?

If you agree to participate in this study, the research will be written up and used in a dissertation and a digital copy of this project will be submitted on Turnitin. The dissertation may also be circulated to participants and SLCC for publication.

Please note that data submitted on Turnitin may be shared with third parties. This research may also be used by other researchers and regulatory authorities for future research.

If you require it, you may request a copy of the findings from the researcher named above by e-mail which will be submitted to you. As you are sharing your details with DMU, we want you to know how we use your personal data and what your rights are. You can find this information at <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/policies/data-protection/data-protection.aspx>

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be necessary to the study and will be kept for five years after the study has been completed. All collated data during the research will be stored on a password protected database and will be kept strictly confidential.

Data will be managed by the researcher named above for the duration of the project. Only the researcher and Supervisor have access to the data. The Faculty Head of Research Ethics may also require access to check that the study has been conducted in accordance with the approval.

Interview participants will be given an ID code which will be used instead of your name. Any identifiable information you may give will be removed and anonymised. Any published data released to a third party will be anonymised so that it cannot be traced back to the participant.

You should also be aware that the researcher may be duty bound to pass on information that you provide that reveals harm has occurred to a child or other vulnerable individual.

Will anyone know that I am taking part?

Confidentiality is being offered for this research; however, this has limitations. If you tell me that a criminal offence has, or may have been, committed for example, I have a duty to pass that information onto the police. Only in those circumstances would I have to reveal your identity.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results will inform my dissertation and maybe used by SLCC or NALC to further advance their work in providing information and resources to local councils.

What are the possible advantages and disadvantages of taking part?

The advantage to taking part will enable your experience to be of benefit to others in the local council sector. While we hope that your experience will be pleasant, if at any point during the study you feel distressed you can choose to remove yourself and the session will end.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

The benefits of taking part in this study will enable me to investigate potential and varying benefits for the community that comes with improving the relationship between local businesses and local councils. I will share my learning through my dissertation to enable town and parish councils to discover numerous ways to work closer with local businesses in their community.

What if something goes wrong?

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for a legal action, but you may have to pay for it. Regardless of this, if you wish to complain, or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, the normal University complaints mechanisms should be available to you.

Who can I complain to?

If you have any concerns or complaints, you can initially speak to the researcher, who will acknowledge your concerns within ten working days. If no satisfactory outcome is achieved or you wish to make a formal complaint, please contact my supervisors Kelly Holland or Sally Thurston in the Faculty of Business and Law, De Montfort University, Leicester at the following addresses Kelly.holland@slcc.co.uk or sally.thurston@slcc.co.uk

If this achieves no satisfactory outcome, you should then contact the Administrator for the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation Office, Faculty of Business and Law, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH or BALResearchEthics@dmu.ac.uk

Who is organising and funding the research?

David Mears is organising this research and this research project is being not being funded and isn't incurring a cost.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and approved by De Montfort University, Faculty of Business and Law Research Ethics Committee.

Contact for Further Information

Researcher: David Mears P17034563@my365.dmu.ac.uk

Supervisors: Kelly.holland@slcc.co.uk and sally.thurston@slcc.co.uk

Thank you for taking part in the study.

Appendix 2 b DMU Ethics Form Submission

This form is specifically designed for Community Governance students. It is based on a form supplied by the Faculty of Business and Law.

Students should complete this form in consultation with your SLCC3004 *Community Governance Research Project* advisor.

This form is to be completed and uploaded to the module on Blackboard through Turnitin. (**Note for tutors:** when providing a location for submission on Blackboard it is suggested to a) turn off originality setting; b) not request generation of similarity reports; c) ask for no submission to any other repository).

SECTION 1. Applicant
Your Last Name: Mears
First Name: David
Student number: P17034563
Email address for contact:
Course title: Community Governance
Module: SLCC3004 <i>Community Governance Research Project</i>
Advisor name/s: Kelly Holland and Sally Thurston

SECTION 2. The Research	
2a Research title: Is there a need to improve relationships between local councils and the businesses they represent?	
2b Rationale: The UK has experienced a decline in the High Street starting in the 1990s. Dolega & Lord, (2020) (Senior Lecturers, Department of Geography and Planning, University of Liverpool) state that this started with the retail sector losing business to out-of-town shopping centres. Online shopping provides another challenge to town centre retailing, with BBC News (2021) reporting that 8,739 chain shops closing within the first 6 months of 2021. A total of 11,449 shops closed in 2021 and this increased to 17,145 in 2022 (The Guardian, 2023). My literature review has discovered multiple challenges facing the High Street, one these challenges is the demise of district councils in England, from 296 in 1974 (Copus, 2021) to 164 in 2023 (LGIU, 2023), this has resulted in reductions with economic teams within	

principal councils. Part of the role of economic development teams is to help develop the local economy, with their reductions this will leave a void, and asks a further question on what could local councils (town and parish councils) do to support their local economy? The survey will discover if these challenges are happening in practice and if town and parish councils have found ways to mitigate these challenges

2c Research aim: The aim of this research is to determine whether there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and the businesses they represent.

2d Research objectives:

- **Establish** if there is a need to improve relationships between local councils and local businesses via survey and interviews;
- **Identify** theory through literature and practice through survey and interviews on collaboration between local councils and local businesses and what this achieved;
- **Determine** (through interviews) a council's perception of success of collaborative working local businesses through tangible, measurable results;
- **Ascertain** conclusions and recommendations discovered through the research.

2e Research methods:

Please provide details of both quantitative and qualitative research methods to be used by answering these questions.

1. What are your specific research tools? e.g., survey, focus group, interviews....

Survey will be open to town and parish councils in England. Interviews with 10 town and parish councils in England.

2. For each method, who will your sample include and why? (*Not names but job roles, positions in civic society etc*) How will they be selected and recruited?

Survey – open to councils via clerks in England, as the main point of contact to either; respond or pass on accordingly within their council. Interviews with survey participants of twelve councils, that will be a sample of four from each group of councils (small, medium, and large) with a 50% split in each category of those with an active/positive relationship and those that do not. These will be identified from the survey responses and the definition used for small, medium, and large will be the categories used in Transparency Code for Smaller Authorities (2014) and the Local Government Transparency Code 2015 (turnover under £25k, turnover between £25k and £200k and turnover over £200k).

3. Where and how will you collect the data for each method? (*e.g., online, sites/locations, times of day*)

Survey will be conducted using Microsoft Forms 24/7 and interviews will be conducted via Microsoft Teams during the hours of 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

4. Do you need written permission from an organisation before you start your research (*e.g., school, work premises, law courts*) using each tool and why or why not? NO. My employer is fully committed and supportive of this research project and degree.
5. Is there any risk to yourself in either case (*e.g., lone working with a respondent*)? If so, how will you protect yourself?

All data gathering is being undertaken remotely, which reduces the risk of physical harm. As the convenor I will hold the right to terminate interviews and survey if required.

6. Is your research funded by a third party, including your employer? If so, please give details.

There is no cost to this research.

Other notes:

- Your research must take place in the UK.
- You must include a copy of your questionnaire and/or your schedule of research questions with this submission.

SECTION 3. Conflict of Interest

	Yes	No
3a Do you have any personal or financial connection with any organisation(s) being researched? If so, please give details of the organisation and any financial or in-kind benefits received from the organisation for undertaking the research. (Please tick)		X

SECTION 4. Research Ethics and the Protection of Participants' Interests

NB. Participants (including yourself) should suffer no harm as a result of participation in your research

4.1 Please ensure that participation by those in your sample is **voluntary with informed consent**. If this is not the case, then explain why.

A participation sheet and consent form will be embedded by a hyperlink within the survey.

4.2 Explain how your participants' identities will be protected with regard to

1. The confidentiality of data. Stored securely on a password protected PC. Only accessed by myself and my supervisors (if requested).
2. Anonymity in any reported findings from the research. Survey responses will be anonymised, and interview participants will be allocated a code.
3. Avoiding emotional harm or upset to those taking part. It is highly unlikely that participants will become distressed in the subject matter of this research.
4. Security of data including recordings (*e.g., encrypted data, password protection*) Password protected.

SECTION 5. Sensitive Research

This section asks you about 'sensitive research' areas: illegal activities, prohibited websites, extremism, or radicalisation; please answer 'yes' or 'no' to the questions below. (For more information see <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/sensitive-research.aspx>)

Please tick as appropriate. If an explanation is needed, please write in the question box.	Yes	No
5a Does your research investigate illegal activities ⁱ such as trespassing, theft, hate crime, fraud, piracy, or harmful cultural practices that are previously unknown to the police? NB Crimes may not be permitted for research purposes.		X
5b Does the research involve deception? If so, are the participants fully informed of the nature of the research? If not, why not?		X
5c Please answer these questions with Yes or No. If you tick 'Yes' you must explain and seek additional advice.		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will your research fit into any of these categories? (Terrorism, extremism, radicalisation, de-radicalisation) 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will your research involve visits to websites that might be associated with radicalisation or terrorist/extremist organisations or groups or illegal sites such as the dark net? 		X

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does your research involve the downloading and storage on a computer of any materials relating to extremism or radicalisation (for example, records, statements, or other documents)? 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Might your research involve the electronic transmission of such materials? 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the research been commissioned by the military or GCHQ or involve the acquisition of security clearances (including the Official Secrets Act)? 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the research been commissioned under an EU / US security call or similar? 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the research involve the viewing, usage or transfer of sensitive personal data as defined by relevant Data Protection Regulations? 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are you specifically recruiting (as participants) pregnant women 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will adults without the capacity to consent be involved in the study including adults with learning difficulties? 		X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will prisoners or young offenders (aged 16-21) be involved in the study? 		X

SECTION 6. Codes of Ethics

6a Which Code of Research Ethics will be adhered to during the course of your research?

Examples of Codes can be found at <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/faculty-specific-procedures/business-and-law-ethics-procedures.aspx> Please give its name and web address.

[DMU Research Ethics CoP - v2 - Nov 2021](#)

Please tick as appropriate.	Yes	No
6b I confirm that all information collected will be processed in accordance with GDPR 2018	X	
6c I confirm that I will follow DMU's ethical codes of conduct for Good Research Practice	X	
6d I confirm that I will follow DMU's Policy on Managing Research Data	X	

SECTION 7. Supporting Documents

You attach below, **within this single document**, the following supporting documents. All documents should be dated.

- Participant information sheet (see submission guidelines for an example)
- Consent form (see submission guidelines for an example)
- Data collection tools (e.g., draft survey questions, draft interview or focus group schedule)

SECTION 8. Declaration and Signatures

I confirm that I have read and will comply with *the Responsibilities of the Researcher* guidelines at <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/responsibilities-of-the-researcher.aspx>. I have considered my own personal safety, and when my ethics application is authorised, I will complete a separate risk assessment if required.

Signature of Applicant (a digital signature is acceptable)	David Mears	Date: 23/04/2023
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Students e-mail the form, complete with the required documents, to their project advisor by the 14th of April 2023. When the form has been approved by the advisor and module tutor, you are required to upload it to Blackboard. You will be notified if further action is necessary.

In medium and high-risk cases, the tutors send an email to Susie Fowler (sfowler@dmu.ac.uk) to advise of medium and high-risk cases with student name/module code, for that application to be authorised.

9a Risk Level Assessment to be completed by the project advisor.

Please indicate how you determine the risk level of this application below.

Please refer to FREC Ethics Guidelines (Pages 9-11) at:

<http://dmu.ac.uk/research/ethics-and-governance/faculty-specific-procedures/business-and-law-ethics-procedures.aspx>

Note for Module Leader: For MEDIUM and HIGH-risk applications, please notify DMU. Low risk cases are stored on Blackboard.

Low Risk		Medium Risk		High Risk	
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9b	Yes	No	N/A
The advisor comments on the following issues			
The study design is appropriate and within ethical parameters	X		
The research questions are clear and within ethical parameters	X		
Recruitment method is explicit, fair, free from duress and data protection is not breached	X		
Sample and sampling method is appropriate and ethical	X		
Participants are fully informed about the research in writing	X		

SECTION 9c. Outcome of review completed below by Advisor and Module Tutor		Please comment as required	
I recommend this study is given ethical approval (no changes required)			
I do not support this application (please give reasons)			
I recommend the applicant addresses the changes listed below and the resubmission is re-reviewed by the Module Tutor			
Please list the <u>specific changes</u> the applicant must make to obtain ethical approval			
Please write any additional comment you may have (optional)			
Name of project Advisor:		Name of Module Tutor: James Derounian	
Date:		Date: 4.5.2023	
Participation is voluntary with informed consent?	X		
Vulnerable people have additional interventions to ensure informed consent (e.g. parents, guardians, carers, advocates etc)			X
Participants are given details of how to complain			X
DMU consent form template has been used	X		
Data will be stored securely, and for the appropriate duration	X		
Permission has been, or will be, sought from external host organisation (where applicable) or good reasons given where it has not been sought			X
Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy will be ensured and maintained	X		
Possible adverse outcomes to participants are identified and suggestions to minimise or deal with these are presented			X
Risks to the researcher are identified and suggestions to minimise or deal with these are presented			X
Do the procedures identified necessitate formal assessment by another ethical committee? If yes, which one?		X	

If the research proposal is medium or high risk, the student will be asked to complete an alternative form for submission to DMU.

Note that issues related to off-campus research are not relevant for distance learning students.

Appendix 3 Research Survey Questions

1. Name of Town/Parish Council
2. Town/Parish Council total budget a) Under £25k b) Between £25k and £200k c) Over £200k
3. Does your town/parish council employ a member of staff or appoint a lead councillor to liaise with local businesses / organise town centre economic activities? <i>(please select all responses that apply)</i> a) Employs a member of staff b) Appoints a lead councillor c) Both d) Neither e) Other, please detail
4. Nature of town/parish economy <i>(select all responses that apply)</i> a) High Street with independent shops b) High Street with mix of independent and chain shops c) In town centre shopping centre complex d) Out of town shopping centre complex e) Other, please detail
5. Town Centre markets <i>(select all responses that apply)</i> a) Privately operated b) District Operated c) Unitary operated d) Town/Parish operated e) No Market f) Other, please detail. Response:
6. Relationship between Town/ parish council and local businesses: (Please indicate your answer to each question) a) Chamber of Commerce (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) b) Town Team (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) c) Area Business Group (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) d) Business Improvement District (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) e) Direct relationship with individual businesses (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) f) Other (please specify) (optional response)

<p>7. Initiatives/events to boost economic activity within your parish: <i>(select all responses that apply)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Town/Parish organised b) Town/Parish partnership (with local business group) c) Town/Parish partnership (with district council) d) Town/Parish partnership (with county council) e) Town/Parish partnership (with unitary council) f) My Council does not play a role
<p>8. What is your town/parish's empty shop ratio?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) 5% to 10% b) 10% to 20% c) 20% to 30% d) Higher than 30%
<p>9. Could you describe the benefit to the town centre economy of your council's involvement in economic activities?</p> <p>Response:</p>

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Appendix 4 Pilot Survey Questions

1. Name of Town/Parish Council
2. Population <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Up to £5k II. £5k to £10k III. £11k to £15k IV. £16 k to £20k V. £21k to £25k VI. £26k to £30k VII. £31k to £40k VIII. £41k to £50k IX. £51k plus
3. Town/Parish Council total budget <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Up to £100k II. £101k to £200k III. £201k to £300k IV. £301k to £400k V. £401k to £500k VI. £501k to £700k VII. £701k to £900k VIII. £901k to £1.1m IX. £1.1m to £1.5m X. £1.5m plus
4. Does your town/parish council employ a member of staff or appoint a lead councillor to liaise with local businesses / organise town centre economic activities? <i>(NB can select multiple responses)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Employs a member of staff II. Appoints a lead councillor III. Both IV. Neither
5. Demographics of town economy <i>(NB can select multiple responses)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. High Street with independent shops II. High Street with mix of independent and chain shops III. In town centre shopping centre complex IV. Out of town shopping centre complex
6. Town Centre markets <i>(NB can select multiple responses)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Privately operated II. District Operated III. Unitary operated IV. Town/Parish operated

<p>7. Business relationships <i>(must answer a response to each question)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Chamber of Commerce (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) II. Town Team (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) III. Area Business Group (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) IV. BID (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) V. Direct relationship with businesses (Positive) (Negative) (No such organisation in my town/parish) VI. Other (please specify) (optional response)
<p>8. Economic activity: <i>(NB can select multiple responses)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Town/Parish direct (sole) initiatives/events to boost economic growth/footfall II. Town/Parish partnership (with local business group) initiatives/events to boost economic growth/footfall III. Town/Parish partnership (with district council) initiatives/events to boost economic growth/footfall IV. Town/Parish partnership (with county council) initiatives/events to boost economic growth/footfall V. Town/Parish partnership (with unitary council) initiatives/events to boost economic growth/footfall VI. My Council does not play a role
<p>9. What is your town/parish's empty shop ratio?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. 5% to 10% II. 10% to 20% III. 20% to 30% IV. Higher than 30%
<p>10. Could you quantify the benefit to the town centre economy of your council's involvement in economic activities?</p>
<p>We will be interviewing 10 councils to gain a deeper insight into their approach to their local economy, if you are interested, please provide your name and email addresses.</p> <p>If you wish to receive the results of this survey, please provide your email address</p>

Appendix 5 Results Summary Data

Question 1.

28 respondents (36%) answered **Parish** for this question.



2. Town/Parish Council total budget

[More Details](#)

Under £25,000	13
Between £25,000 and £200,000	24
Over £200,000	41



3. Does your town/parish council employ a member of staff or appoint a lead councillor to liaise with local businesses / organise town centre economic activities?

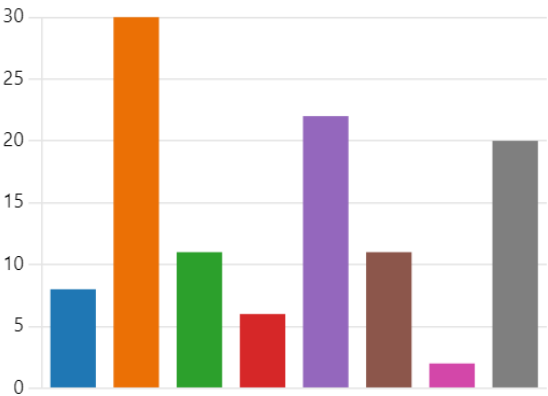
[More Details](#)

Employs a member of staff	10
Appoints a lead councillor	4
Both a member of staff and lead...	9
Neither	44
Other	15



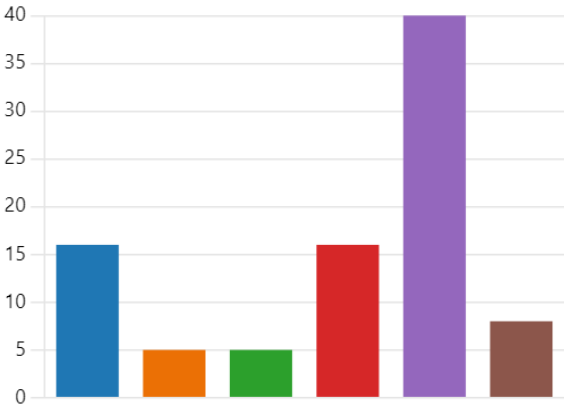
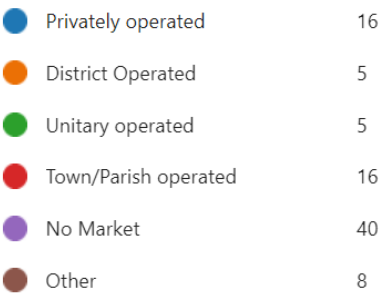
4. Nature of town/parish economy *(select all responses that apply)*

[More Details](#)



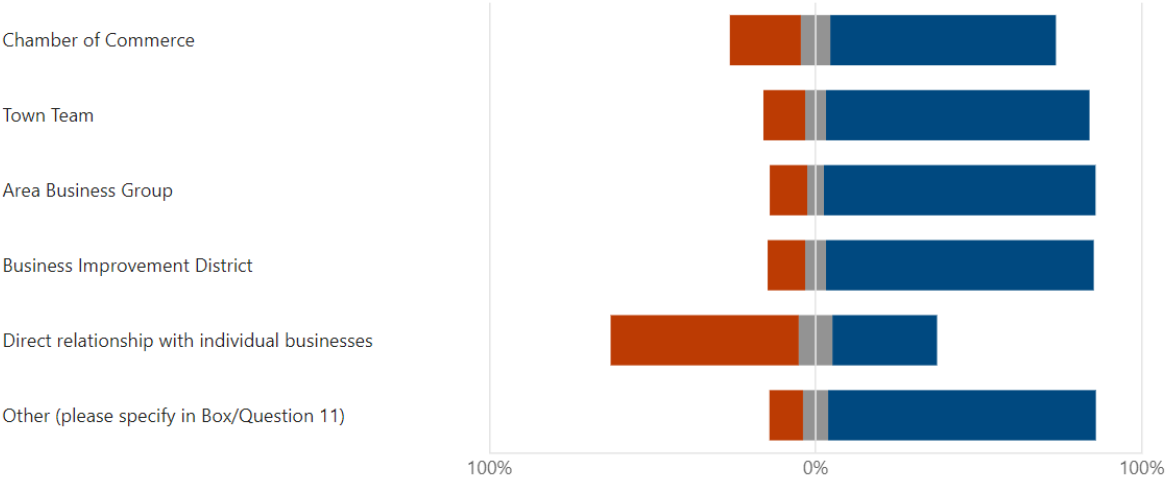
5. Town/Village Markets *(select all responses that apply)*

[More Details](#)



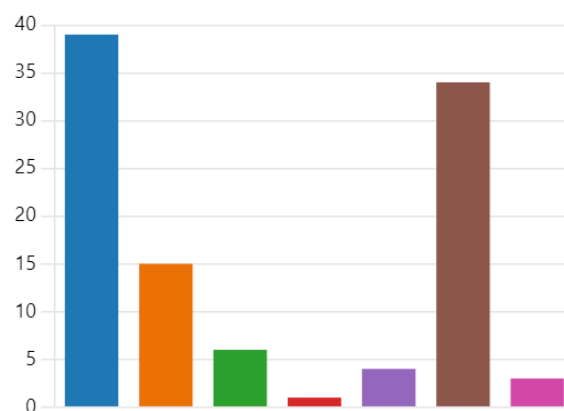
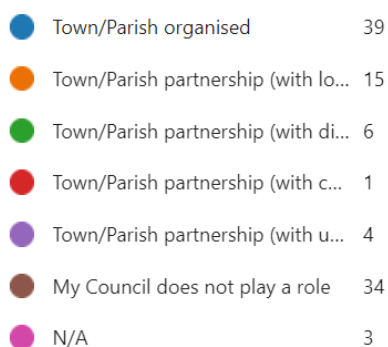
Question 6.

Positive Negative N/A



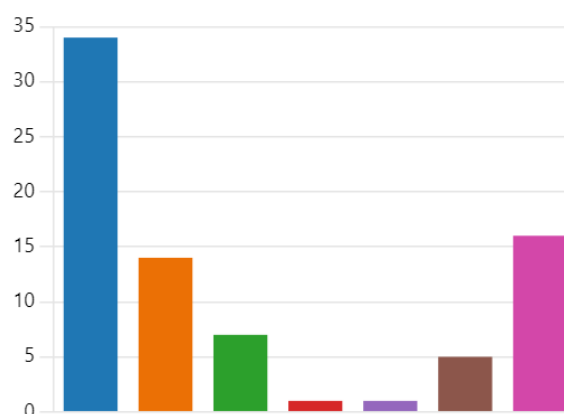
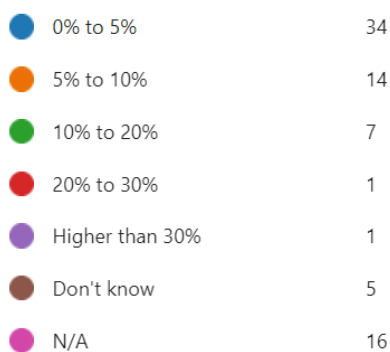
7. Initiatives/events to boost economic activity within your parish: *(select all responses that apply)*

[More Details](#)



8. What is your town/parish's empty shop ratio?

[More Details](#)



17 respondents (27%) answered **event** for this question.

relationship with some businesses
 increases footfall time
 event days worked
 towns economy visitors
 shopping centres shop
 footfall through events
 Town centre
 market and events
 support Higher footfall
 council events and activities
 market Community events
 local businesses
event

Question 9 ↑