

ROBERTSBRIDGE AND EMPLOYMENT PROVISION

1. Employment facts and trends

1.1 Robertsbridge is located in the Ward of Salehurst (which includes Bodiam and Hurst Green) which has a population of some 2,728 and an unemployment rate of just 2.3% (ESCC 2011). In our own Neighbourhood Plan survey 1% were unemployed and 5% home workers.

1.2 Previously the village has supported over a hundred employees on two main sites – the timber yard in Brightling Road (now Mill Rise housing) and the Mill site (now seeking planning permission for alternative development)

1.3. The survey revealed that 21% of those employed are home-based and 36% of respondents work within Salehurst and Robertsbridge. This is a highly significant number and shows the opportunities already available. (The figure working in Salehurst and Robertsbridge rises to 56% when the Darvell Community are included.)

1.4 The current main (employing more than twenty people, full or part time) employers are

- Gray Nicholls sports equipment factory at Station Road
- Culverwells retail and repair garage next to the railway station
- Robertsbridge Community College
- Salehurst Primary School
- Robertsbridge Children's Services

1.5 The main locations for businesses are

- High Street – 12 businesses
- Station Road – 9 businesses
- Russet Farm – 12 businesses
- Redlands Farm – 5 businesses

1.6 The survey showed 4% of respondents were considering a business start up in the next five years, a further 1% in the next 10 years. Of those already in work 6% were considering looking for new premises. Adding these two groups together is 57 people. Of these 21 would consider taking a premises in Salehurst and Robertsbridge Parish if it were available.

1.7 The High Street and Station Road have public houses, restaurants, shops and other services who recruit locally when they can find suitably skilled staff. In face to face interviews with owners/managers from the larger businesses they noted that improved tourism would help their businesses grow.

2. Suitability of locations for business use

2.1 Businesses have shifted from central locations to more rural sites. This is because of

- need for more parking for employees and visitors
- need for more space for large deliveries

- lower rents
- ability to work unusual hours without disturbing residents

2.2 Road access by the A21 is adequate for businesses, although slow journey times from Pembury to Lamberhurst and through Hurst Green will always stop larger businesses locating in the Robertsbridge area.

2.3 George Hill is unsuitable for large vehicles beyond Heathfield Gardens (when accessed from the South). Northbridge Street is suitable for large vehicles until it becomes “the Clappers” where road width becomes restricted.

2.4 There has been a successful transfer of employment to Redlands Lane sites (Russet Farm and Redlands Farm). There may be opportunities at the west end of Poppinghole Lane to develop employment using conversion of agricultural units. To benefit from the pedestrian and cycle access to the village of Robertsbridge that Redlands Lane enjoys (via the bridle path that has a bridge over the A21) a bridle/cycle path would need to be created from this bridge on the east side of the A21 to land at Poppinghole Lane.

3. Existing and future supply and demand

3.1 The District Council’s ‘Review of Employment Land Requirement in light of Proposed Revised Housing Targets’, July 2013 concludes that in order to meet the economic objectives for the Rother and Hastings area, provision should be made for at least 100,000 sq. m. of net additional floor space in the district with at least 10,000 sq. m. in rural areas outside of the main settlements (paragraph 16.21 of the Rother Core Strategy, September 2015). This figure is currently under review and likely to be updated in June 2017. The floor space allocations made to date comprise existing allocations, outstanding planning permissions and windfall allowances. This includes a strategic land release of c.48,000 sq. m. north of Bexhill (mentioned above), together with Rye Harbour Road and Marley Lane, Battle and it is to be noted that the site to the rear of Culverwells Garage in Robertsbridge has subsequently been granted permission to form some 1,300 sq. m. of employment floor space. The office development to the rear of Culverwells Garage would create employment space for c. 140 people.

3.2 From the total allocations of 120,000 sq. m. in the Core Strategy September 2015 it can be calculated based on average completion rates for 2007-2011 of 3,890 sq. m. per year that there is approximately 30 years’ supply of employment land but that this will overwhelmingly be in the major sites provided in Bexhill, Battle and Rye, rather than the rural village locations.

3.3 Interviews were carried out with the owners of two main business units in Robertsbridge – Russet Farm and Redlands Farm. Both locations experienced difficulties in letting out larger offices, although did have frequent requests for small storage units and in particular storage units with car storage ability. There are also intermittent requests for small workshops. At the time of writing both business units are full.

3.4 Neighbouring business parks – Interviews were also carried out with owners of Quarry Farm, Bodiam and Vinehall Farm, Johns Cross. These have dozens of businesses located at these sites.

3.5 Evidence supplied to Rother planners regarding a 2016 planning application for housing on a former employment site (rr/2015/3106) stated in its conclusions:

7.2 Robertsbridge is in a relatively isolated location and lacks the critical mass and range of services necessary to attract business occupiers and employers. It is due to these locational and economic shortcomings that the village of Robertsbridge has never developed as an employment centre of any scale. The retention or loss of 145 sq m of permitted but unbuilt B1 floor space at the former Country Crafts site in Robertsbridge is of no significance in this report.

RDC granted planning permission on that site with no requirement for B1 use, confirming that RDC recognises that demand for B1 office space in Robertsbridge is weak.

3.6 In addition a recent application (rr/2015/2403) for conversion of a small downstairs unit from A2 to C3 was granted permission on appeal because in the words of the Inspector:

“Given that context and the size and location of No 40 I am not persuaded that its conversion to a dwelling would adversely affect the functioning of this rural service centre. “

3.7 However since the RDC Core Strategy was published there has been approval and implementation of application rr/2015/1874 for the provision of new workshops and store buildings for a long established local business, Culverwells. The approval is for 475 sq. m. of new B1/B2 business space and creation of five additional jobs.

3.8 There are proposals which have been brought forward by the owners of the Mill site which was a former major employment site. Whilst their proposals which have been discussed with RDC planners are in the main to provide new housing on a generally brownfield site, their latest proposals disclosed to the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group envisage the provision of 720 sq. m. of commercial space split into two units.

3.9 In 2015/6 permission was granted for application rr/2013/2380 which was an application for the construction of 17 dwellings and 1300 sq. m. of business space, referred to para 3.1 above.

3.10 Therefore currently since the publication of the RDC Core Strategy in September 2014 there has been approval given or consent will be sought for a total of 2495 sq. m. of business space which we believe adequately fulfils the parish's obligations to participate in the target of 10000 sq. m. of employment space set out in the CS, para 16.21.

4. Conclusions – supply and demand.

4.1 Looking at the changes of business location that have occurred in the Robertsbridge area over the past 10 years, locations outside the centre of the High Street and Station Road must be considered. This leaves the outskirts of the village that have easy access to the A21, e.g. the BT site on George Hill, the Mill site, Heathfield Gardens East and Poppinghole Lane. It is to be noted however that on enquiry of the owners of the BT site in April 2016, they indicated they were not intending to countenance redevelopment:

“Thank you for recent query into the availability of Robertsbridge ATE. Whilst it may appear a less busy site for BT, it is still fully operational with no immediate plans for disposal especially within

the next 10 years. It is unfortunate that BT cannot be of further assistance at this time with regard to this matter. "

4.2 It is unlikely that Robertsbridge would attract large businesses with a strong delivery element due to the limitations of the A21. It would be better to concentrate on small engineering businesses and start up service businesses. The focus on people rather than large delivery lorries means they do need to have safe access to the High Street shops and train station.

4.3 Many residents will continue to start businesses in their own homes, so it is anticipated that small offices do not necessarily have a market.

4.4 From the research questionnaires and interviews conducted it is the firm belief of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group that the anticipated level of provision of business space set out in para 3.10 above is sufficient to fulfil the parish's obligations for the RDC Core Strategy. In addition however we believe that additional sustainable employment will be created by a further increase in home working as well as the possibility within the parish boundary of further conversion of former agricultural units to business use.

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