

Workplace operators Qualitative Survey

Interviewee: Gary Hedges and Hylton Jackson

Workspace: Bridmet

Location: Gore Cross

Type of workspace: Manufacturing premises in Business Park

How long have you been providing workspace: 6 years

Key questions:

1. *Do you think Bridport's workspace offer matches business needs now? And do you think it can respond to future trends (ie, Shifts to smaller or bigger workspaces, serviced workspace, or in and out of town spaces?)*

It's not that bad of a balance for the size of the town, labour pool, and industrial space available. But if you're going to introduce 750 houses with 3 people each (Foundry Lea), you're going to need more space. There's going to be a lot of demand.

The problem we do see now is if you want to expand your business into a space bigger than a few thousand square feet. Industrial space in the area is practically all and always rented. There may be 2 units available on Gore Cross at the moment.

When there is a bit of turnover, you have to take the opportunity when it comes. But you need to be 'in the know' and capture it before it gets marketed.

There is much more movement available in places like Weymouth, where there is more scope to manipulate and feed through the system.

2. *How have occupancy rates/level of vacancy changed at your workspace over the last few years? (ie are they stable, or significantly up or down)*

It's been very stable. There were some units that were for sale for a long time (private to private). The council still owns three units on the site. Chris Seal owns some of the units. Most of the units go out for sale and then are occupied for the life of the business. Businesses don't appear to be growing, we have stable businesses here.

But, this is stifling for Bridmet. We are outgrowing the buildings quickly. We have 50k sq ft here on Gore Cross, and 50k sq ft in Pymore, which is not ideal to have the distance between them. There was a discussion about securing 100k at Vearse Farm to replace Pymore. We have a lot of questions around Vearse Farm. It would be nice for locals to know what's going on. Will there be any anchor tenancies?

3. *What types of businesses exist in your workspace (i.e. parks, estates, high streets)?*

Mainly building services/manufacturing, a few engineering firms, builders merchants, plumbers, top gear (online mostly now). There are no storage spaces, and this affects smaller businesses.

4. *What changes have there been in the type of businesses operating in these trading spaces? (ie, more food, less manufacturing, more storage, etc)*

On the estate right now the trend is moving slowly towards national trade counters – like plumbers merchants, screw fixes – but this is more down to the return on the rents via national trade counter companies. Rental for these places is way higher than what these smaller, local businesses could afford.

This needs to happen though, Bridport is isolated. The arrival of Tool Station has been useful for residents and businesses. But, this has added another layer of competition that didn't happen before.

~~5. Do you see a trend of businesses starting small and scaling up? For example, have your tenants moved in because of a change in their business needs? Or is trading on the market a pipeline to other trading spaces? (i.e. retail/industrial)~~

~~6. Do you have an overall 'identity' or priorities for your workspace tenants, or are you agnostic on what types of businesses can operate from your workspace?~~

~~7. Do you have a marketing strategy to find new tenants? Do you find it costly to invest in marketing to attract new tenants?~~

~~8. Do you have any information/understanding on why businesses don't follow through with tenancy after their initial enquiries?~~

~~9. Do you work in partnership with a local estate agent? How do you set your lease terms or rents?~~

~~10. Have you made any changes to your lease terms based on business demand (ie, shorter lease terms, adjustments to rent, etc)~~

11. *Have you adapted your units/made any renovations to accommodate incoming tenants or respond to perceived business demands?*

Yes, and this is ongoing. We're always responding to growth and seizing opportunities that present themselves.

We employ 130 people between the two sites. There are about 80 on the shop floor and 50 doing other types of work. We have enough work to employ more on the shop floor if the space for growth was doable.

Recruitment is difficult. This is a reflection of manufacturing in the UK, which stopped investing in training apprentices and started sending manufacturing overseas where it was cheaper. Now, we're seeing "reshoring" efforts, and work is coming back so there is demand, but a lack of trained workers.

12. Bridport Town Council wants to know about the needs of young people. How many of your tenants are under the age of 30? Do you have much demand for your workspace from the younger demographic? And what kind of space are they looking for/renting?

Opportunities just are not there for young people, and I think this comes down to the relationship between schools and local employers. There is no engagement, which is both frustrating and surprising. The only choice for young people is to stay on in sixth form. Anything outside of the box is not supported. And this is wrong! It's not good for anyone – not the community, not the businesses, not the kids.

The problem, I think, is that the schools are running as businesses. So it's in their financial interest to keep the kids at school as long as possible. But, as we all know, all kids are different and require different things – and school and university might not be the best route for some.

What Bridport needs is a skills hub. I've been looking at this with Bridport Town Council for some time now. It could be like a job centre for apprenticeships. The sort of skills hub we need here requires funding and someone to drive it. It needs someone who can engage with businesses *and* schools and link them up. This looks like proper careers advice and help for students who don't want to go down the further education route for whatever reason. And this skills hub could be beneficial for parents as well, to educate them on what's available locally. Many parents aren't fully aware of opportunities within our community.

As we mentioned previously, there is not enough skilled labour – in any industry – and we need to train our own young people to do this type of skilled work. There is a real separation between schools and employment that needs to be addressed.

At Bridmet, we are doing our bit with our apprenticeship scheme. But changes in government policies have meant that colleges can't engage as meaningfully or at all with local businesses, so any apprenticeship scheme becomes a cost to the business. And this is not affordable for small businesses.

Bridport needs a dedicated person to find local kids for local jobs.

Positive - not a glut of engineering jobs - Keep hold of staff. Not enough unemployed people here, not skills to attract from other roles.

13. As a workspace operator, do you feel your business is affected by any government policies (ie rates system)?

There's a lot of 'Yellow tape'. We make it hard for ourselves in the UK, where we're not as pragmatic as places like Germany. In the UK, health and safety has gone overboard. When equipment requirements or restrictions change for health and safety policy reasons, these changes are very costly, and it really affects the smaller businesses. People should be as safe as possible at work, but there are some changes that seem to be made without taking into account the type of work that needs to be done. We aren't allowed to use step ladders anymore in manufacturing!

14. Bridport Town Council supports the Bridport economy and is keen to see businesses thrive and make steps toward more sustainable practices. As a workspace operator, how do you see your role and responsibilities within local economic development?

We started marketing to build awareness of brand to drive recruitment mainly, but some of these steps we are taking also chimes with people's own personal beliefs. We're making progress as a business. We've not done this kind of marketing historically. We'd usually keep our heads down and get on with the work. But Bridmet is stable and growing and we know we should recognise this need to showcase. We want our employees to be proud to work at Bridmet.

15. Have you taken any measures to decarbonise your workspaces and/or make them more sustainable? Examples; energy saving, energy generation, electric vehicle charging etc

Our energy supply is now 100% renewable energy. We have changed all our lighting to LED (at a cost of £100k), and all of our company cars are electric. We'll be installing electric car charging points in the next couple of months. We are getting a quote for solar panel installation – but we'll need grants to be able to do this.

Ours is an energy hungry business, and equipment changes frequently. We prioritise efficiencies of productivity rather than energy use, and look to using more energy efficient machines. All our plant machinery is new or relatively new. We have a battery-powered forklift rather than gas. But some of our business needs don't allow for efficient use of renewables – for example our deliveries require diesel trucks to reach the distances required. And of course, we can't source our raw materials locally.

The cost of changing equipment or installing renewables is high, and most businesses will need support from the government to make it viable.

~~16. From your perspective, who should foot the bill/take responsibility for making energy efficiency upgrades to units in your workspace?~~

~~17. Any other information you'd like to share about workspace availability and provision in the area?~~