Department of State and Regional Development

The Business Retention and Expansion Survey

Resource Kit

The majority of the material in this kit has been adapted from the Business Retention and Expansion (BR+E) Resource Manual, developed by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, in Ontario, Canada, and their contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

Contents

A1 Background Information

The BRE Survey is a stand alone component of the NSW Department of State and Regional Development's (DSRD) Community Economic Development package.

The BRE Survey is a tool used in NSW and around the world to assist local businesses to survive and grow in the modern economy.

BRE Surveys can be targeted at a town, an industry or a Local Government Area (LGA).

NSW Department of State and Regional Development

The Department of State and Regional Development is the New South Wales Government's business development agency.

DSRD delivers programs and services that support the NSW Government's commitment to winning new business activity for NSW, and developing the capacity and productivity of the State's economy.

DSRD provides advice and assistance to help businesses of all sizes establish or expand in metropolitan and regional NSW.

It works to attract significant investment projects to NSW that have the potential to benefit the State's economy and promote Sydney and NSW nationally and internationally.

DSRD provides support to the State's tourism industry to improve its competitiveness and promote sustainable tourism growth.

It facilitates growth and innovation in technology, science and medical research to improve the health, environment and economy of NSW.

DSRD adopts a whole-of-government approach and actively encourages collaboration with business and the community in its work. Its services are delivered through a network of offices in NSW.

The principles of community economic development

Economic development is a process of identifying and harnessing local and regional resources and opportunities to stimulate economic and employment activity. It is about communities utilising their human, physical and financial resources to maintain and enhance their unique strengths and their quality of life. Development must also be consistent with the aspirations of the community as a whole.

DSRD's Community Economic Development package aims to assist in the flow of positive benefits to a community emanating from planned development which is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable.

Shaffer (1990), quoted by the Institute for Sustainable Regional Development, suggests that there are five essential characteristics of economically viable communities:

- A slight level of dissatisfaction or healthy frustration with the local economic situation
- A positive approach to seeking solutions
- Support for those trying to improve things
- A high level of local discussion around development issues

- A history of successful project implementation.

Why existing businesses are so important
The needs and opportunities of the local business community are central to any analysis of the local economy and the design of strategies for development. Existing businesses in the community also represent a major source of investment and resource for job creation, where there is scope for them to strengthen and expand - a study by McKinsey and Associates in 1993 found that more than two thirds of investment in regions comes from local businesses.

To design effective strategies for community economic development, it is necessary to gain an accurate understanding of the needs, weaknesses, capacities and strengths of the business community and its potential for growth.

The BRE Survey
The BRE Survey provides communities with a mechanism to collect and collate necessary business information to underpin strategies to improve the local economic environment. With its well established and proven methodology, it offers very good prospects for success, which means it is also a good starting point for communities on the economic development pathway.

The BRE Survey is an effective mechanism for addressing important challenges confronting local communities including:
- Overcoming problems and exploring opportunities sooner rather than later
- Encouraging both whole communities and individual businesses to be more responsive to change
- Making the local business environment more productive and attractive.

It provides a sound basis for community and planning workshops, and a strategic plan which can deliver positive, sustainable and measurable outcomes.

The BRE Survey:
- Improves understanding of the needs and perspectives of local businesses
- Connects businesses to resources and assistance programs
- Identifies and addresses immediate concerns of individual businesses
- Develops strategies and actions that will support economic development and growth in local employment
- Increases the competitiveness of local businesses
- Provides community support for local business and improves profitability
- Increases community enthusiasm and capacity to become involved in other initiatives.

Notwithstanding Shaffer's comments, the BRE Survey can be used at any time in the economic cycle. While some communities have used the Survey as part of a response to economic downturns or shocks, it is also relevant when the economy is healthy and/or growing as a means of 'taking the pulse' of local businesses and identifying what support can be provided to ensure that businesses can fully capitalise on opportunities.

A number of communities have used the BRE Survey more than once, as a means of tracking business sentiment in the community.

To be of real value, the project requires the participation of a maximum number of local businesses and of local government and business support organisations.

The BRE Survey:

- Is not designed to be a means of developing a database of local businesses.
- Does not need to be statistically rigorous to the standards of say, an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) survey, in order to be effective.

A2 Is your community ready for a BRE Survey?

Every community is different and will approach community economic development with a different combination of strengths and assets.

As a guide for groups that are considering a BRE Survey, we offer these "readiness criteria" as a starting point.

Answer These Questions

1. Do we have a core group of community members who understand and believe in the concepts of the BRE Survey and who are willing to commit the time and energy needed to champion the project?
2. Are we able to clearly state why we need the Survey and what we hope our community will achieve by involvement in the process?
3. The most successful BRE Surveys involve a partnership of key local organisations. This makes it easier to market the Survey and encourage business participation, and implement strategies arising from the project. Is there potential for a partnership between at least two local organisations, such as the local council, the chamber of commerce, other local industry organisations, and educational institutions?
4. Do we have a volunteer base with the ability, willingness and time to become active participants on the project?
5. Do we have adequate financial and/or in kind support and resources to carry out a BRE Survey?
6. Are we willing and able to accept ongoing responsibility for the development of strategies and actions and continuing implementation of these approaches to improving the economic envirionment of the community?

YES to all questions?
Your community is ready for a BRE Survey. Depending on the size of your community and the number of businesses in it, you may also wish to use the community readiness checklist in B1.
NO to one or more?
Your community probably needs a bit more preparation before taking on a project as demanding as a BRE Survey. The checklist in B1 may help you to pinpoint more specific areas that need strengthening.
NOT sure or need more information?
Contact the DSRD Community Economic Development Manager (CEDM) for your region, a contact list is provided at the end of this resource kit.

A3 Setting up the program

Key Players

Local taskforce/steering committee

Essential for the success of the BRE Survey is the establishment of a local taskforce or steering committee which is responsible for:

- Championing the project and motivating others to participate
- Determining the overall scope, objectives and policy of the BRE Survey, including the number and type of businesses to be surveyed and how they will be surveyed
- Assisting in volunteer recruitment, where applicable
- Overseeing and supporting implementation of the Survey

- Responding to any immediate needs of businesses identified through Surveys
- Developing and implementing action plans.

The taskforce or committee should be diverse and include representatives from interested organisations such as the local council, chamber of commerce and/or progress association, key local businesses, business advisory services, development boards or corporations, community technology centres and educational institutions such as TAFE or adult and community education.

Experience has shown that the key attributes required of taskforce/steering committee members are:
- Commitment to and enthusiasm for the BRE Survey
- Leadership skills
- Knowledge of the local economy
- Good local contacts
- Ability to think strategically.

In selecting members, diversity is important. As with any group, diverse perspectives and opinions provide greater potential for achieving good outcomes.

Depending on the size of the group, it may be necessary to form a small leadership group to deal with issues as they arise.

A main street committee or economic development committee would also be appropriate for this role. Again, depending on the size of that group and other commitments of its members, it may be necessary to form a sub committee with specific responsibility for the BRE Survey.

Project Manager
A project manager should be appointed with responsibility for the day-to-day activities of the BRE Survey. This includes the following:
- Harness community and business support for the project
- Identify a list of businesses for the survey
- Distribute surveys by mail or hand delivery, and/or organise visits to businesses
- Where an online survey is to be conducted, send link to businesses and reminders when necessary
- Recruit and train volunteers to follow up businesses and/or conduct interviews with businesses
- Respond to immediate business concerns identified by the Survey in conjunction with appropriate organisations
- Liaise with interested organisations
- Act as a media contact
- Assist in follow-up work and implementation of recommendations, particularly developing a community action plan
- Organise initial meeting with interested people and organisations, and community meeting for presentation of results.

The project manager oversees the BRE project. He or she may serve as chair of the taskforce/steering committee and/or leadership group, if applicable.

The project manager may be a resident in the community and/or a volunteer, or a community may choose to engage a consultant from elsewhere to perform some or all of the above functions. However, where a consultant is appointed, there needs to be a locally based coordinator to act as the primary contact and spokesperson, provide direct oversight and liaise with, for example, local businesses and volunteers.

The project manager and/or local coordinator needs to be dedicated to the BRE Survey, with sufficient time to manage and implement activities and ensure the timely completion of the project.

Consultant
As stated above, a community may choose to engage a consultant to provide information, guidance, training and analytical services through all or part of the project.

Consultants have been used in many ways in BRE Surveys. Examples of different approaches are discussed in Section C, but include:
- Providing guidance on and input to the identification of businesses to be targeted
- Mentoring the local coordinator
- Training of volunteers
- Developing and implementing strategies to engage businesses in the project
- Interviewing of key businesses
- Assist in developing and facilitating responses to urgent issues identified in the Survey
- Writing the report, including data interpretation, formulation of recommendations and development of action plans.

Volunteers
Overseas and Australian experience shows that the success of the BRE Survey will be enhanced if the project is able to obtain ongoing support from a team of volunteers.

Volunteers can perform many roles in BRE Surveys. They include:
- Participation in the taskforce/steering committee
- Contacting business owners by telephone or by calling in to the business: (a) to explain survey; (b) to promote participation; and, (c) to assure confidentiality
- Collecting the survey form and/or interviewing the business to fill it out
- Inputing survey responses into the database.

Where volunteers are involved in interviewing businesses, it is desirable that this be done in teams of two. These teams may comprise taskforce members, educators, businesspeople, retirees, accountants, bankers, students, Work for the Dole participants, etc.

Generally, the BRE Survey projects which have achieved the highest levels of response have incorporated face-to-face interviews by volunteers. Examples are provided in Section C.

Benefits to volunteers
- Being part of the working team
- Contact with local businesses
- Building knowledge about the local economy, and
- Contributing to an important community project.

Issues to consider
- The number of volunteers required
- Stressing confidentiality - individual information is not released, only aggregated data
- Volunteer briefing/debriefing.

Support Network
The ultimate success of the BRE Survey should be judged on the action which arises from it. Prompt and effective follow-up and action is crucial. It is therefore desirable, even before the Survey commences, to identify a group of people from various agencies which can respond to issues, concerns and opportunities identified in the Survey and provide information or assistance to

businesses. Some of these organisations (eg the local council) should be represented on the taskforce/steering committee but may include:

- DSRD
- Real estate agents
- Service/infrastructure providers.

B2 and B3 provide a checklist of the skills required in different roles and phases of a BRE project.

A4 The stages of the program

The process and activities described below are based on experience with successful projects in NSW and overseas. Individual communities should determine their approach based on local requirements and the skills and resources available to them.

Stage 1: Project Preparation and Planning

A number of steps need to be taken prior to conducting the survey, including preparing a plan and timeline for the duration of the project, contacting the media through a press release and selecting and training volunteers.

Step 1: Initial contact

CEDMs are available to explain the BRE concept to communities and provide assistance to local projects.

The process would normally commence with a visit by a CEDM to the community. The CEDM would preferably meet with a group of four to six key community leaders and residents who have an interest in or a responsibility for economic development in the community. The result of this meeting will determine the next course of action.

Purpose of the Meeting

- To explain the BRE Survey process
- To assess the "readiness" of the the community to be involved in the project
- Have a general discussion regarding the organisational capability of the community and determine which organisation should be responsible for the project
- Review factors that communities should consider before starting the BRE Survey, including:
  - Availability of volunteers
  - Availability of cash and in kind support
  - Need and role for a consultant.

Who Should Attend the Meeting?

- Chair of economic development committee or organisation
- Economic development officer/manager and/or Director of Planning and Development of the council
- President or Executive Director of the chamber of commerce and/or local business associations
- Local business person who is a champion for economic development
- Representatives from key industry sectors.

Depending on the findings from the meeting, the CEDM will advise the organisation responsible for the project on the likelihood of DSRD funding support.

If appropriate, the CEDM will then liaise with the project leaders in the development of a funding application. This may or may not entail more meetings with the proponents.

Step 2: Leadership Team and Taskforce/Steering Committee Recruitment and Orientation
Once it is decided to proceed, a small leadership group of four to six people should be formed to champion the project and contribute to developing the application. The leadership group could become the taskforce or steering committee. A local project coordinator should also be appointed.

An early consideration should be whether a consultant will be involved in the project.

Step 3: Publicise project
Effective promotion to the commuity is a crucial part of the BRE Survey process.

When a funding offer has been received from DSRD, and consistent with conditions of the funding agreement, the project should be publicised to the community.

This can be done through media contact or a public meeting to explain the BRE Survey, organisational needs, implementation steps and anticipated results.

The latter can also be a way of recruiting additional members of a taskforce or steering committee.

Some communities have considered bringing famous people to the community to promote the project. There are costs and benefits to this approach.

Step 4: Project Design
Goals and Objectives
Although there are standard overall objectives for the BRE Survey, the approach and methodology you use need to reflect the particular circumstances of your community.

Communities which have conducted BRE Surveys have been asked what their overall objectives were in conducting the project. They generally relate to:

- Assessment of business sentiment
- Identification of impediments to growth and support needs
- Identification of gaps in the business mix
- Development of a vision or strategy for business support and development.

In terms of the most valuable outcomes from the Survey, users have cited:

- The identification of skill shortages and needs
- Awareness raising of issues and opportunities with local stakeholders/decision makers
- Identification of services/infrastructure deficits
- Identification of businesses with growth potential
- Identification of diversification opportunities for businesses.

This feedback provides some sense of the possibilities presented by the BRE Survey. You should have a clear idea of what you want to achieve through conducting the BRE Survey and it is desirable to have a view of the short, medium and long term goals of the project.

Identifying Businesses
The credibility of the survey data depends on how many businesses and which businesses are surveyed. This should be done by the taskforce, in consultation with the CEDM and the consultant, where involved.

Before making any decisions on the number and type of businesses to be surveyed, you should develop a database of businesses in your community. Possible sources are:

- Business directories developed by the Council or local business organisations
- The ABS Business Register
- Telephone directories.

When seeking the assistance of local organisations in providing contact details for businesses, it is vital that those organisations understand and support the purpose of the project. It is important that they provide accurate information to their members on what the project is about.

Numbers to survey

There are two broad determinants of how many businesses can and should be surveyed:

- How many are needed to make valid findings
- How the survey is to be conducted; whether online, by mailout, mailout with follow-up, or face-to-face interviews, or a combination of these – each of these methods can be expected to yield significantly different responses.

With respect to validity, the first point to make is that the BRE Survey does not need to meet the standards of say, an ABS survey, to be effective. While it has been suggested by some that a BRE Survey cannot be valid with a response rate of less than 30%, there is in fact no 'magic' level of response required to make findings reliable, irrespective of the number of businesses in the community. The aim should be to obtain responses from sufficient numbers of businesses as to allow confidence that the opinions being expressed and opportunities and issues being identified are accurate, reliable and representative of the broader population. Proper and considered analysis and, if practicable, further investigation of responses will provide assurance in this regard.

In general, depending on the number of businesses in the community, 50 to 100 responses will give enough data for analysis. As a guide, BRE Surveys conducted in NSW in the past have ranged from a minimum of 30 responses (for very small townships) to over 600 (for a large LGA). Thirty responses are generally accepted as the minimum required for proper analysis.

That said, as a general principle, the higher the population of businesses, the more businesses should be surveyed. On the other hand, the lower the number of businesses, the higher the **proportion** (%) that should be surveyed.

A simple to use calculator is available on the National Statistical Service website at http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.NSF/pages/Sample+Size+Calculator+Description?OpenDocument

This calculator will help you to determine how many businesses you should survey. For example:

- assuming there are 600 businesses in the community,
- with a confidence level of 10% (meaning that if 50% percent of your sample picks an answer you can be "sure" that, if you had asked the question of the entire relevant population, between 40% (50 minus 10) and 60% (50 plus 10) would have picked that answer),
- the calculator shows that you would need to survey 83 businesses.

However, if the confidence level is reduced to 5%, the calculator shows that a sample of 235 businesses would be required. This demonstrates the diminishing value from substantially increased effort.

It is suggested that a confidence level of 10% is acceptable for this type of survey, but this is a decision which needs to be made locally, based on available resources and the overall purpose of the Survey.

If you are conducting an LGA-wide Survey, you should treat each town as a separate community for the purposes of determining how many businesses are to be surveyed.

Of course, there may be reasons why you may wish to obtain a higher level of response than strictly required. For many communities, very high levels of response are key to obtaining support and commitment from the broader business community for any initiatives arising from the Survey and engagement in local economic development. Very high levels of response can also lend credibility to findings which can in turn be very useful in securing support from Government agencies for initiatives.

As mentioned above, the way the Survey is conducted will also significantly affect the number of responses you can expect to obtain. For instance, for purely mailout surveys, with no follow-up, response rates of 10% to 15% are typical, but response rates of 20% have been achieved in some BRE Surveys, without concerted follow-up.

However, it is evident that, over time, response rates to mailed-out questionnaires are continuing to decline, possibly due to factors such as pressures of work, the constant string of unsolicited requests for information, participation in a range of other surveys and the reporting requirements of the taxation system. There have also been many reports of questionnaires being mailed out with scant responses being received resulting in a need to eventually resort to interviews in order to scramble together sufficient coverage of businesses.

It is strongly recommended that face-to-face interviews be used wherever possible, perhaps augmented by some phone interviews if necessary. In small communities, these may be conducted by a project panager or coordinator, or taskforce members. In larger communities, a team of volunteers might be required.

Quite apart from reducing the problems with low response rates, there are other advantages in the interview approach. The first of these is the greater appreciation by the interviewer of the issues confronting business proprietors. On this basis, it is highly desirable that the key interviewer is the project manager or coordinator, taskforce member or a member of the main street committee or executive. (There are often opportunities for key ‘off-the-record’ information to be exchanged.)

Another advantage is the opportunity for respondents to add supplementary commentary and, where an interviewee is unsure about a question, there is a chance to clarify the matter. In addition, an interviewer may be quite surprised at the opportunities to fully appreciate the nature of some businesses and often collateral benefits such as developing business linkages or networks will arise.

Finally, the interview approach provides the opportunity to engage with and learn about businesses which would not otherwise be involved in such exercises. Typically, there is a small minority of businesses in any community which will participate in any economic development activity, including BRE Surveys. While the support of such committed businesses is vital, broadening your net to include other businesses can bring great benefits to those businesses and the community in general.

There is also an option for businesses to complete the survey online. This is generally done by sending a link to the survey directly to the business’s email address. The online option provides the advantage to businesses of being able to complete the survey at a convenient time to them and faster than they would be able to complete by hand. It also significantly reduces the administrative burden on the part of the project managers and volunteers.

However, it is important to be realistic about the numbers of businesses who are likely to take this option. Regional businesses, especially small businesses, are less likely than metropolitan businesses to use the internet on a regular basis for business purposes. A major reason for this is inferior internet connections.

Sampling

If there is a relatively small number of businesses in the community, it could be viable to obtain responses from all or most of them. However, if there are more than, say, 100 businesses in your community, you should consider sampling. To avoid the risk of bias, the sample should be random. For instance, if you have a database of 500 businesses and you want to survey 100, you would pick every fifth business on the list. A back up list should also be established to meet any shortfall.

Obviously, you may also wish to ensure that there is appropriate coverage of different industry sectors. This will be discussed further below.

Refer to B3 for guidance on sampling.

Types of businesses to survey
In all locations, there will be several major companies that employ significant numbers and there are many instances where the failure or relocation of such firms has had a major impactl on rural communities in particular. Therefore, the major employers in each area to be surveyed should be identified and at least the three largest (perhaps even five or six) be included in the Survey.

Businesses which bring money into a local economy by selling goods or services outside the community or by selling to non-resident visitors might also be a priority.

Other businesses can be selected by asking some of the following questions:
- What types of businesses employ the most people?
- What businesses make the community unique?
- Have any business areas experienced problems or shown potential for growth?
- Should the project focus on one or more business sectors?

In a larger centre or for an LGA-wide Survey, you may wish to include all businesses in one sector of particular importance to the area (such as all manufacturers, tourism enterprise operators, or in the case of Mudgee, for example, the wine industry) or a sample of all sectors.

Location of Businesses
When planning your Survey, consider whether or not you want to compare your results, depending on where businesses are located in your community. For example:
- Do retailers in the main street have different issues/concerns than those located elsewhere?
- In an LGA-wide Survey, it will clearly be important to assess differences in issues/concerns of businesses in different towns.

Resource Considerations
As noted above, resources will influence the number of businesses to be surveyed.
Ask these questions:
- What financial resources are available for the project?
- Do we have volunteers to conduct the survey and if so, how many businesses can they survey?

As a rough guide, about eight, or even ten or eleven interviews could be expected to be completed per day (provided no considerable travel was involved). Using previous surveys as an indicator,, and assuming a team of two would be conducting a half-hour interview at a cost of $40 per interview, a typical survey would therefore cost approximately $2,400 to $4,800 (for 60 to 120 responses). This would typically be considered an inkind contribution based on the time given free of charge by volunteers.

A sample project plan for a BRE Survey is in B4.

Timing of the Survey
To be fully effective and ensure that momentum for action is maintained, the whole process should be completed in no more than nine months. There are a number of examples of projects which have run over 12 months with the result that, by the time findings are published many businesses have forgotten having participated in the project. Rather than spending additional weeks or months in chasing additional responses, it is generally preferable to complete the project in a timely manner, and proceed to implementing action.

In order to maximise responses, the questionnaire and interviews should not coincide with busy points in the business cycle such as the end of the financial year or Christmas. The survey should also be conducted well clear of other major surveys, eg the Census or other ABS surveys.

Step 5: Volunteer recruitment
Volunteers are an essential part of increasing local capacity and community ownership of the outcomes from the project. Volunteers also help to reduce the overall project costs and reach a greater number of businesses.

As mentioned above, volunteer interviewers can be recruited from different sources. For example, they might be drawn from the general community. There are a number of approaches which can be taken with respect to community volunteers:

- Publicise the project and the need for volunteers in the local newspaper and at community meetings
- Have taskforce members personally invite people to volunteer
- Ask members of sponsoring and endorsing organisations to volunteer.

As an alternative to community volunteers, staff of business and economic development agencies and/or municipalities may be able to do business visits as part of their work duties. In a number of cases, interviews have been conducted by students from TAFE, adult and community education, high schools and even a Work for the Dole project.

Interviewers have a number of responsibilities that must be clearly explained before they commit to being involved. See B3 for the qualities required of a volunteer.

Contact potential volunteers in person and confirm by letter.

As mentioned earlier, it is preferable for teams of two to conduct interviews so each team member can offer the other peer support. This also allows one person to conduct the interview and the other to record the responses, reducing the likelihood of omissions or inaccuracies.

The number of volunteers needed is related to the number of businesses to be surveyed. In NSW, volunteers have conducted as little as one interview and as many as 40.

Step 6: Conduct Volunteer Training
When an adequate number of volunteer interviewers have been recruited, it is desirable to conduct a training session to prepare the volunteers for their visits.

All interviewers should attend the training session.

Interviewers should also be made thoroughly familiar with the questionnaire and must understand the meaning of each question.

Other issues to address in interviewer training are:

- Confidentiality
- Print clearly — legible surveys are important
- Promptness
- Courtesy
- Highlight any issues which need to be acted upon quickly (sometimes known as “red flags”).

Interviewers must also understand the need to avoid being leading or indicate any partiality by giving apparent agreement or disagreement to responses.

Step 7: Developing the Survey questionnaire
Standard Questionnaire
DSRD has developed a standard questionnaire for use by all communities.

The questionnaire has sections on:

- Impact of the local environment - is it a help or a hindrance?
- Business details
- Markets
- Employee issues
- Business plans and decisions
- Information and training needs.

DSRD expects that this questionnaire will be satisfactory in the vast majority of cases.

Additional Questions
Communities may add up to five local questions to the questionnaire. These questions should focus on local issues not already covered in the core survey. They may be related to issues such as services provided by the Chamber of Commerce or on other business issues such as IT useage. To assist communities, DSRD is assembling a list of additional questions which have been used by communities in NSW and elsewhere. These will be available at http:/www.regionalcommunities.nsw.gov.au.

The agreement of DSRD must be sought for questions which you would like to add (to maintain the integrity of the questionnaire). The guidance of the CEDM should be sought on this.

Local questions should generally be placed at the end of the questionnaire.

Refer to B5 for guidance on how to formulate local questions.

Industry specific surveys

In particular circumstances, there is the capacity for communities to conduct industry specific questionnaires, or of particular types of businesses, such as home-based businesses.

You should talk to your CEDM about whether this is warranted for your community.

Test Survey at a Practice Visit
It is worthwhile to conduct practice interviews to acquaint key taskforce members with the questionnaire and the interview process. It is also a good test of locally-developed questions. This experience can also be useful in preparing volunteers.

It is best to select practice visit businesses that are supportive of the process and economic development in general.

The interview group should be limited to three or four since more may be overwhelming to the business operator.

A letter of confirmation with details of the date and time of the interview should be sent to the businesses ten days in advance of the test survey.

Stage 2: Conduct Survey
Step 8: Distribute questionnaire
Even if businesses are to be interviewed, letters should be mailed to them, with a copy of the questionnaire in each. Business people are more likely to agree to the interview if they get the

survey in advance. They should also be given an alternative means of responding whether by mail or faxback or online.

Refer to B5 for a sample letter.

You should aim to allow a reasonable amount of time between sending the letter and conducting the interviews. If they are left too late, this can cause frustration to both the volunteers and businesses, resulting in lower participation.

Where you are relying on mailouts, with or without follow-up, you should set a deadline of about two to three weeks to complete the questionnaire.

Hand-delivering letters and questionnaires can have a postive impact on businesses. As an additional encouragement to businesses to participate, it can be useful for the taskforce/steering committee members to read through the contact list and identify any business with which they have a personal relationship and deliver the letters to them personally.

If you decide to provide the option for businesses to complete the Survey online, it is advisable that businesses be asked to complete it prior to interviews being conducted, or the mailout of questionnaires commences, to be added to the project database. This will prevent a business being mailed a questionnaire that they have already been completed.

Step 9: Schedule Interviews
If possible, plan to complete all interviews within three weeks of the letters being sent out. Provide a deadline for the volunteers to have their interviews completed.

Businesses will be expecting volunteers to call to arrange a time for interviewing.

When calling, volunteers should:
- Mention the letter
- State the purposes of the BRE project
- Stress the confidentiality of survey responses.

Business owners/managers have full schedules, so volunteers should offer several alternative times for interviews, such as breakfast or evening meetings, or at a location other than the office.

Volunteers should call the project manager or local coordinator if there are any questions or Concerns, eg they were unable to reach someone or a refusal.

Step 10a: Conduct Interviews
Prior to the visit, interviewers should review their package of material and carefully read the survey questionnaire.

Interviewers should realise they are meeting with the business owner/manager to gather information not to give advice.

Before the interview begins, interviewers inform the business owner/manager of their commitment to confidentiality. You may wish to develop a confidentiality agreement, which should be signed before the interview.

If the owner/manager does not wish to respond to a question, the interviewer should not force a response. Let the business person know that there is no need to explain the reasons.

As an alternative to conducting interviews at the business site, you could organise to conduct multiple interviews in a separate location such as a town hall.

A checklist for volunteers is in B6.

Step 10b: Conduct follow-up
If the Survey is being conducted by mailout, businesses who have not returned the questionnaire within three weeks of it being mailed out should receive a follow-up phone call or visit.

Step 11: Thank participating businesses
So businesses are reassured that their participation is valued, it can be worthwhile to send thank-you letters to them immediately after the interview or their questionnaire is returned.

Stage 3: Review of feedback from the surveys

As noted earlier, prompt response to issues and concerns raised in the Survey is vital for the exercise to have credibility and not simply lead to greater community cyncism about such initiatives.

There are two points at which assessments need to be made:

- Immediately after interviews or questionnaires are returned
- Once all responses have been added to the database and full analysis can be conducted.

Step 12: Review completed surveys for urgent issues and take action
Immediately after leaving the interview, the interviewers should notify the project manager or local coordinator of any issues or concerns identified in the questionnaire which may warrant action or intervention from outside. In the case of mailouts, the local coordinator and/or project manager should review the responses as they are received and/or added to the database.

Examples of issues include:

- Relocation
- Closing
- Employee layoffs
- Problems with expansion.

It may also emerge that a number of businesses are experiencing difficulties with certain services or infrastructure. Rather than delay action until all responses are received or a report is produced, it is preferable to move quickly on any such issues.

However, it is important to evaluate these responses carefully before taking precipitate action. In the case of relocation for example, businesses occasionally indicate an intention to relocate without any real prospect of doing so. This can also be the case with closure. Moreover, closure is very often driven by factors outside the control of anybody outside the business and its owners or financial backers.

The whole questionnaire should be reviewed to establish whether there are consistent themes emerging.

It is therefore advisable to discuss these issues with members of the taskforce/steering committee who may have particular insights or perspectives and other agencies, such as DSRD, which may be able to provide assistance, before approaching the business in question. Until it is decided that action may be warranted, it is preferable that the identity of the business be kept confidential.

In some cases, you may need to call businesses expressing complaints or asking for help to clarify their needs and to determine the need for further consultation.

Action may include:

- Identifying relevant DSRD programs to assist expanding businesses

- Identifying suitable premises for businesses wishing to expand
- Trying to remove local stumbling blocks and resolve concerns or complaints
- Providing information or referrals requested by businesses.

If the business has indicated its willingness to be contacted by DSRD, a representative may be invited to any meeting.

Simple requests for information can often be met by sending materials with the thank-you letters or by calling the business.

Stage 4: Data analysis and Recommendations

DSRD provides assistance with data input and analysis. A report is produced by each community undertaking the project including:

- Aggregated survey results
- Economic development opportunities
- An action plan.

Step 13: Data Entry

It is important to enter the data on a timely basis and print the preliminary report for the taskforce while momentum for the BRE Survey is still high. It is therefore important that people responsible for data entry are available as soon as the questionnaires begin to return.

It is desirable that the local coordinator/project manager monitors data input to ensure that there are no anomalies and is available to provide advice to the people entering the data.

Step 14: Analysis of responses

On completion of data entry, reports containing tabulated results of the business surveys can be generated from the database.

The database allows for extensive cross-referencing and filtering of findings.

The analysis of responses is a complex and time-consuming task. If the taskforce/steering committee does not have this expertise they should engage someone who does. Check expertise in the community or identify funding to hire a consultant to summarise the results, identify themes, and make recommendations for action.

Alternatively, a set of basic reports can be generated for initial review by the taskforce, with or without the involvement of a consultant.

Refer to B10 for tips on data analysis.

Step 15: Prepare report, including Action Plan

It is recommended that a draft report be presented to the taskforce/steering committee for its feedback, if it has not been involved in reviewing data and findings at an earlier stage.. This is especially valuable when the report has been written by a consultant from outside the community. This will provide an invaluable ‘reality check’, and an opportunity for people with intimate knowledge of the local economy to provide advice on the feasibility of proposed action and identify additional actions, along with views on who might be responsible for taking them forward.

Following are the main issues to be addressed in reviewing the draft report, whether in a meeting or otherwise:

- Review local objectives of the BRE Survey project
- Analyse for themes and opportunities, asking: Which findings stand out?
- Which findings suggest opportunities for meeting local goals? What is the theme?

- Relate conclusions to the data presented and knowledge of taskforce/steering committee . Focus on conclusions that help solve original objectives.
- Review, identify and prioritise possible actions.

A date should be set for a public meeting.

A suggested format for the report is in B11.

Tips for developing action plans are in B12.

Stage 5: Report to the community

A community meeting is held to publicise the findings and the resultant action plans. A greater degree of community ownership will be achieved by this action.

It may take at least one month between the taskforce retreat and the public meeting to finalise and print the final report with recommendations. People attending the public meeting, as well as the businesses participating in the project, should receive a copy of the final report.

Step 16: Initial Public Meeting to Present Findings and Recommendations

The public meeting signifies the start of local action plans to improve the business climate. In addition to providing information to the community, the meeting can be a celebration of the completion of a major phase of the BRE Survey.

The leadership team should prepare an agenda and confirm the dates, times, and format with all people who will be participating in the meeting.

There should be three parts to the meeting:

1. Explaining the BRE Survey process
2. Thanking businesses and volunteers
3. Presenting findings and possible opportunities for action.

The public meeting agenda should include:

- Background of the BRE project
- Celebration of accomplishments
- BRE Survey volunteer recognition and appreciation
- Summary presentation of findings
- Recommendation for action plans
- Where appropriate, start up of committees to implement action plans and specific projects.

Step 17: Implement the Recommended Action Plans

The implementation of the action plans will depend on what other activities are being undertaken in the community or at a broader level.

Once priority projects are identified, teams must be assembled to lead each project. A taskforce/steering committee member or other qualified person should lead each action plan committee.

Three to six people in the community who are interested in assisting with economic development should be identified and contacted to take part in the action plans as required. This ensures additional community input and commitment to follow through with projects.

Many BRE Surveys are precursors to an Economic Development Strategy, in which case it may be advisable to hold action until its completion. These strategies will need to be reflected or could be subsumed in any subsequent community strategic plan or referred to the local mainstreet committee for implementation and monitoring.

B1 Community readiness Checklist

Is Your Community Ready for a Business Retention and Expansion Project?

Community-readiness Checklist

Following are some questions to lead discussion concerning the readiness of the community to start up a BRE Survey.
1. Are there people in the community who are visionaries or action-oriented, who could be recruited to serve on a project leadership team?
"Ask a busy person and the job will be done!" This well-known saying implies that someone with a full plate is often well organised and manages his or her time and efforts well. Community members who are not only visionaries but also get things done are the people you should approach to be involved in a BRE Survey. If the community lacks these people, it may be difficult to gather support for a BRE Survey.

2. Are there a number of people with skills to lead economic development plans and projects to completion?
The ability to manage projects is critical to the overall success of the BRE project. All the skills of project management are required: planning and design; implementation and evaluation; and delegation and strong interpersonal skills.

3. Is there an existing organisation with a primary focus on economic development?
An existing organisation is a potential source of leadership for the project. It is prudent to involve this organisation in the project to make sure that the efforts aren't contrary to or duplicating others' work. Another reason to discuss this question is to understand the power structures and relationships in the community. You'll need to determine if a particular organisation that might be considered as the most appropriate (because of its mandate or its name) in fact has the credibility within the community to take that role. Will the community accept the lead role of this organisation?

4. Is there an organisation in the community that will take a lead role and provide support to the project?
The preference in most cases would be to have an organisation with an economic development mandate take a lead role. If there is no organisation with a focus on economic development, there may be another organisation that is interested in improving the business climate for a healthier community overall. No matter which organisation takes the lead role, a key element is its credibility in the community, particularly in the eyes of the business people. In addition, the organisation must bring commitment, energy and enthusiasm to the lead role, along with resources — time and people.

5 Is there a strong volunteer force in the community, capable of sustaining a complex project over an extended period of time?
If the community already has a strong volunteer ethic, the project will have a higher potential for success. If it doesn't, and the BRE project is to proceed, the organising team may have to spend considerable time and effort in recruiting people to help with the planning, business visits and follow-up.

6 Does your community have economic relationships with other communities and development agencies?
The BRE Survey is meant to result in actions that will ultimately improve the business climate and help retain existing businesses or help others to expand. It may be necessary to involve other communities in the solutions that come out of your BRE process, such as infrastructure improvements or industry development. If a relationship already exists with other institutions or

agencies involved in funding, education, or providing a service to the business community, it may be advantageous to involve those institutions in developing solutions.
For example, if a small community in a hinterland area conducts a BRE Survey and identifies potential for tourism development, there probably needs to be good links with Visitor Information Centres in coastal areas to capitalise on the potential for day trippers.

7. Does the community have a current, comprehensive economic strategy with an action plan?
If a plan exists, it may contain a strategy to retain or expand existing businesses. If so, the plan can be used to support the proposal to have a BRE project in the community. Alternatively, a BRE Survey can provide vital information for input to a strategy.

B2 Checklist of skills required to conduct a BRE Survey

Coordination/project management
- Skills in planning, organising, designing, implementing, and evaluating
- Management skills (running meetings, involving people, planning effective projects)
- Strong communication skills
- Conflict-resolution skills
- Professionalism, representing the community for the BRE Survey
- Able to respect and exercise confidentiality
- Experience in community economic development an asset
- Strong communication skills (writing and speaking)
- Knowledge of media contacts in community

Management of volunteers
- Volunteer management skills
- Organisational skills
- Communication skills
- Recruitment skills

Data Entry
- Attention to detail and accuracy
- Reliability
- Professionalism, representing the community for the BRE Survey
- Able to respect and exercise confidentiality
- Willingness to work within project timeframe
- Computer skills

Developing responses/action plans
- Familiarity with economic and business resources in the community
- Contacts with key business resources in the community (public and private)
- Familiarity with surveys (development and interpretation of findings)
- Awareness of economic and business trends
- Analytical skills
- Group facilitation skills to lead taskforce in process of analysing findings
- Computer skills
- Professionalism, representing the community for the BRE Survey

B3 Qualities required of Volunteers

Personal attributes

- Awareness of the program
- A full appreciation of the need for confidentiality
- Mature approach to dealing with other people
- Committed to the project and to encouraging businesses to participate
- Enthusiasm and reliability
- Willingness to work within project timeframe

Skills

- Confident and plausible manner
- Good listening skills
- Ability to record responses accurately and concisely

B4 Guidelines for Sampling and Selecting Businesses

The process of sampling is simply the method by which businesses or respondents are selected to be included or invited to participate in the Survey. Decisions must be made at the outset of the project as to what the sample plan for the community will look like.

Step 1. In order to make an appropriate selection, a geographical border that defines the area from which you can pull a sample must be established.

Step 2. Next, businesses within the area should be quantified in terms of type and size of business. It is also advisable to categorise businesses as small, medium, or large according to the number of employees. The ABS has a number of sources of data which can be used to establish this. The Australian Business Register is one such source.

Depending on the size of your business community, you may wish to develop a chart of the above (or at least the types of businesses to be surveyed). You can then determine how to distribute surveys across type and size of business.

If it is not possible to get size-of-business information by type of business, each piece of information can be used independently to design the sample plan.

Some communities or areas will have many types of business while others will have few. It may not be possible to address each type, and it is advisable to combine any business types that may be similar and small in numbers.

Following is an example for a large LGA, adapted from the 1998 Business Register:

Industry	Number of persons employed				
	Less than 10	10-49	50-99	100 or more	Total
Manufacturing	139	15	3		157
Construction	337	13			350
Retail	529	45	4	7	585
Wholesale	148	16			164
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	131	36		6	173
Transport and storage	121	8	1	1	131
Property and business services	330	18	1		349
Personal and other services	116	7			123
TOTAL	1851	158	9	14	2032

A number of sectors, including mining, electricity supply and communication services were represented in the LGA but have been deleted on the basis that they are very small in terms of importance to the economy.

Step 3. Based on the above example, using the sample calculator, it has been determined that 105 surveys will be conducted. (In this instance, being an LGA, it would be necessary to break the businesses down by location and identify how many businesses are to be surveyed in each location. It is likely that many more than 105 businesses would be surveyed).

You can then decide how many businesses are to be invited to participate from each of the business type and size groups.

One approach is depicted in the table below. The numbers across the bottom and in the far-right column are the most important. These numbers are determined by applying the distribution from your community to the total number of business interviews planned. (Numbers do not add up because of rounding.)

Industry	Company size							
	Small		Medium (10-49)		Large (50 or more)			
Manufacturing	5	4%	3	3%	1	1%	9	9%
Construction	12	11%	3	3%			15	14%
Retail	19	18%	9	9%	3	3%	31	30%
Wholesale	5	4%	3	3%			8	8%
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	5	4%	8	8%	2	2%	15	14%
Transport and storage	4	4%	2	2%	1	1%	7	7%
Property and business services	12	11%	4	4%			16	15%
Personal and other services	3	3%	1	1%			4	4%
TOTAL	65	62%	33	31%	7	7%	105	100%

In this case, it has been decided that:

- 7 of the 23 large businesses (almost a third) are to be surveyed, thereby ensuring that the most influential businesses are included
- 33, or just over 20% of the medium-sized businesses are to be surveyed
- 65, or 3.5% of small businesses are to be surveyed.

Within the constraints of the overall number of surveys to be conducted, this provides a reasonable cross-section of different sized businesses, putting additional weight in terms of proportions to large and medium-sized businesses, but most weight in numbers on small businesses.

Allocation to individual industries reflects the proportions for each business size, ie 19 small retailers represents 3.5% of all small retailers.

The relatively high representation of retailers in the Survey closely reflects their overall importance to the local economy (about 30% of those to be surveyed compared with almost 29% of the business population).

It is stressed that this is one way of allocating surveys. Individual communities may decide to put additional weight on large businesses or particular industries.

Step 4. Once a plan has been set, businesses should be selected (in as random a manner as possible) to complete the survey.

Step 5. It is quite likely that as the appointment making and the interviewing process progresses, some businesses will refuse or be unable to participate in the time set aside for interviewing. In each case, care should be taken to replace the selected business with one that fills the same criteria in terms of size and type of business.

B5 Draft press release

New project to boost business in (*Town*)
(Local business champion) is encouraging businesses in (town) to get behind a new project that will help grow business and improve economic development. (*Local leader*) says that the project is essential to retaining and expanding a broad base of business and services in (*Town*) and to getting Council, (*other organisations*) and the business community working together.

“The first stage of the Business Retention and Expansion project is a survey of local business owners which will get underway in (*Month*). The project is a joint effort between the Department of State and Regional Development and (*all groups involved*). The project recognises that the existing businesses in any town are its most valuable economic and employment asset.”

The project manager, (*Name*), stressed this point recently when talking to the local taskforce who are steering the project. “You can spend a lot of time and money trying to get firms from elsewhere to relocate to your town with a very low chance of success. Meanwhile, your existing business base feels taken for granted and therefore neglected. Through the Business Retention and Expansion project we are aiming to remedy this situation by asking local firms about their needs and plans and how they think the local business environment could be improved.

“All firms/a sample group of firms in (*Town*) will receive a letter and a survey covering all the relevant topics, with a reply paid envelope. Local volunteers will help chase up any firms who don’t return the survey by (due date).”

(*Local leader*) urged business owners to take the opportunity to air their views and to contribute to the pool of information about the local business scene. “Individual comments and plans will be treated in total confidence, but the aggregated information will be of great value in solving local problems, planning for the future and general promotion of the community.”

“This business project is designed to help you”, says (*Local leader*), “so please don’t ignore or dismiss it. The community will appreciate your co-operation and participation. Most importantly, we will put the feedback from businesses to practical use.”

(Project manager) said the project would also provide the opportunity to match up individual business needs with NSW Government assistance programs.

The survey is being conducted by <local organisation name> and is funded by (organisations) and the NSW Department of State and Regional Development.

Enquiries to (project manager) on (tel)

Issued on (date)

B6 Draft Letter to Businesses

< local organisation's logo to be inserted>

< Name of proprietor>
< Name of business >
< Address >
< Town > < Postcode >

Dear < Proprietor >

Business Retention and Expansion Survey
The economic well-being of our community is based on our existing businesses. In recognition of this, positive action is being taken to identify and meet the needs of these businesses.

I am writing to introduce to you the Business Retention and Expansion Survey which is being undertaken in < Town >. This survey is being conducted by <local organisation name> and is funded by our organisation and the NSW Department of State and Regional Development (DSRD).

The aims of the survey are as follows:
- to formulate an up-to-date profile of the local economy
- to identify needs, issues, concerns and opportunities of local businesses and their views of the local business environment
- to learn about business' future plans so that we can assist with solving problems and exploring new opportunities
- to create employment opportunities for this town.

The success of the project depends on as many businesses as possible taking part in the survey. Your co-operation in this regard would be most appreciated.

A copy of the survey is enclosed for you, along with a reply-paid envelope. You may wish to complete the survey form and return it in the reply-paid envelope. Alternatively, the survey can be completed online. You will need to use the following reference number <reference no>. If you have any questions or would like us to visit your business to discuss the survey, please contact <project manager's name > on <phone number> for assistance.

The survey will be collected by a volunteer who has been briefed on the program. If you have not returned the survey or completed it online by < date >, one of our volunteers will contact you and if you would like, assist you in completing the survey.

A report covering the findings and recommendations from the survey will be presented to a community meeting at the conclusion of the project. An Executive Summary of the report will be made available to all respondents.

Once again, we believe it is important to achieve a very high participation rate in the survey if the results are to be of value to our community. We hope you will spare the time to complete the form.

Yours sincerely

< sign off>

Any personal information provided to the <local organisation name> and DSRD is voluntary and protected by the *Privacy and Personal Protection Act 1998 (NSW)* and the *Privacy Act 1988 (Commonwealth).* The information may be used to send you communications such as newsletters, flyers and invitations about business-related activities. Please refer to DSRD's website www.business.nsw.gov.au and <local organisation's name> website <local organisation's website> for more information on our privacy policies and your rights to access or correct the information.

B8 BRE Local Question Guidelines

Local questions should be included at the very end of the survey.

1. Keep questions to a minimum. The database has been developed to accept a limited number of locally-developed community questions.

2. Establish an objective for the question(s). This should be more than just a topic and should indicate how the results will be used. An objective answers the question: “What do I want to know and be able to do or decide after this question is answered?” If a question simply fills a “it would be nice to know” role, it most likely should not be included.

3. Use only simple language when writing a question. Do not assume that all respondents are at the same level of understanding on an issue or topic. Be very careful that respondents will consistently understand the text; if there is any doubt or confusion about what a word means, responses will differ. A good example of a confusable word is “community”.

4. Don’t try to get too much out of one question. Often, issues need to be approached step by step.

5. Do not try to shorten sentences, abbreviate, or leave out words when developing the question. It is best to take as much time and as many words as needed to ensure that the question is clear and everyone will understand it in the same way.

6. Ensure that the responses (if specific ones are expected) relate well to the question being asked. For example, if asking, “Is market development an important issue for your business?” do not supply and expect responses to fit a rating scale of very important, somewhat important, not very important, not at all important. The question in the example requires a “Yes” or “No” response and not the scaled one desired. If you want business to rate an issue, use a second question.

7. Be sure that the type of responses you are looking for are clearly reflected in the question text.

8. Whenever possible, try to provide a list of possible responses. This helps greatly with the usability of the responses as it groups similar ideas before the data is processed. Open-ended questions that require verbatim responses to be written down are labour intensive. These types of questions should be viewed as providing qualitative insight into how respondents are feeling about an issue.

9. Don’t expect respondents to be able or willing to respond to very detailed questions (eg, in the area of revenue dollars or employee statistics). Be reasonable in your requests.

10. Test the question(s); first by answering it to see if it makes sense and is appropriate and second by imagining what the responses might be and how the project will use the information. If the responses can’t be imagined, or it isn’t clear how the information could be used, the question is not worth asking. Third, ask the question of someone else who is not involved in the BRE project for an “outsider’s” opinion.

B9 Checklist for volunteers

A. When calling for an appointment

1. May I speak to the owner of <business>?

2. My name is Joe Bloggs, I'm working on the Business Retention and Expansion project now running in <town>.

3. Have you received the letter and questionnaire we sent you about the project? It's the <colour> survey form.

4. When would it be convenient for me to go through it with you?

5. It'll save time if you fill in as much as possible before we meet.

6. If they say they're too busy, stress that we consider every business important and are very keen to have their input.

B. Tips for the Interview

1. Sit next to them with the form between you (or at least make sure that you both have a copy of the questionnaire in front of you).

2. Remember your role is to record their responses. Encourage them to give full responses, but don't express your own views.

3. If you feel they need advice, record your observations at the end of the questionnaire. The project manager will arrange follow-up.

4. Confidentiality is paramount. Always keep completed questionnaires in a folder or envelope. Don't mention which firms you are visiting or what they've said.

5. Thank them for their time and input.

6. If they miss the appointment, make one further attempt.

B10 Tips for BRE Data Analysis

Data analysis involves:

- Processing the data that has been entered into the database
- Reviewing printouts from the database
- Interpreting the results to identify themes, issues, or opportunities.

It is important that this process be done in a systematic and thorough way, as the results of the analysis are the basis for recommendations and the development of action plans.

This section provides general tips on interpreting results and examples of further follow-up analysis using the database or other available information about the community economy.

When all the data from individual surveys has been entered into the database, it is possible to print reports showing the total results of responses. Results for each survey question are presented in tables that follow the same order of questions as in the survey.

The challenge in analysing the data from the survey is to know when a result is significant or not. For some questions, it may be clear that most businesses are concerned about a particular issue, are satisfied or unsatisfied with certain local services, or have a particular need. However, you may get results showing issues that are not clear and for which you would need to dig deeper using the database or further investigation.

Standard Report Formats

The database provides several reporting options based on different ways of sorting the survey results.

Community reports provide survey results for the respondents in a single community for a single project. If responses have been collected from businesses in several towns in an LGA, a separate report on each of these communities can be produced along with the totals for the larger area.

The database provides summaries of responses to questions which have set responses.

It is also possible to generate community reports that document the responses to qualitative questions. These are of two types:

1. Qualitative Data — a summary of the survey responses to questions that do not have a defined set of responses (ie, “write-in” questions).
2. Qualitative Comments — a list of the comments entered for all survey questions.

A third type of analysis is a “cross-tab” reporting option, which involves sorting by selected questions/responses. For example, one could see how many of the companies that are considering relocating (Question 20) believe the Development Approval (DA) process and/or the availability of appropriately zoned land are unsatisfactory (Question 5).

The reports show the total number of respondents (businesses that responded to the questions), and for each question, can show both the number and percentage of respondents who gave a particular response. Note that some questions have multiple responses (ie, respondents are asked to check all the statements that apply to them) so the percentage figures can add up to more than 100%. Other questions have supplementary, follow-up questions that are responded to only by businesses who replied positively to the first (eg, those on international trade). For these types of supplementary questions, the percentage values are still presented in relation to the total number of respondents (and not as a percentage of the sub-set).

It is always wise to keep in mind the size of your sample in relation to the total number of businesses in the community. A general guideline is that whenever you have fewer than 30 respondents, percentage values can be misleading. In such cases the actual count may be more meaningful. This caution becomes particularly important for qualitative questions where usually only a sub-set of respondents may respond. For example, it would be more accurate to communicate results by saying that 4 out of 20 respondents felt that access to capital was the most significant barrier to expansion than to say 20% felt that way. Also, any graphs or slides that are prepared should be reviewed so other community members do not misinterpret results. You should generally avoid reporting or placing significant weight on comments, and particularly complaints, made by only one business, especially those which are at odds with other comments. An exception might be if it is a particularly important business to the economy. In this case, before reporting it, it is preferable that you establish whether it has sound basis and/or whether it has siginficant implications for the business and/or the local economy.

General Questions to Guide Discussion
In reviewing the whole report, what are the results that stand out?

Are there any themes that emerge when you compare responses from different sections?
- For example, questions in the Local Environment, Employees, and Business Plans and Decisions sections concern the availability of appropriately trained labour and its effect on the business and its future. Do the results for these questions consistently point in the same direction?
- In planning any actions related to the themes that you have identified, it will be necessary to consider what other information should be gathered that is related to the issue. Is this a localised issue or a problem also faced by other communities in the region? Is this a trend at a national or statewide level? An obvious example in this regard is skilled labour. Rather than attempt to address this issue independently, for example by a campaign to attract skilled labour from elsewhere or promoting greater participation in apprenticeships or traineeships, you are probably more likely to have success by collaborating with other communities.

Significant results may not be self-evident at first glance. Once you have reviewed the reports for overall themes or issues it is worthwhile to review responses to individual questions more thoroughly by asking such questions as:
- Do the results differ depending on the sector the respondents are in?
- Do the results show differences depending on the size range of the businesses?

For example, if only two or three businesses out of 100 are planning to relocate (Question 20) this may not seem significant. But if they are all in the same sector or are large employers, there may be critical underlying reasons or a large potential impact on the local economy that need to be understood and addressed. On the other hand, further investigation or consultation with taskforce members may reveal that the issue is not clear-cut.

Also, if respondents are divided or polarised in their responses to a particular question this may indicate a possible area for deeper analysis. For example, in Question 5(b), where respondents rank cost factors for their business, half may have ranked energy costs as poor and half as good or excellent. You may wish to do conduct further investigation to see if the way businesses responded to the question relates to the particular type of energy they use. Firstly, check what industry the businesses are in. You may then need to speak to the businesses concerned to ascertain what type of energy they use and/or would prefer to use. If there is considerable interest in, say, natural gas, it may be worthwhile exploring the potential to have natural gas supplied to the community.

These distinctions will also be obvious with respect to transport services, where different types of businesses will require different types of transport.

In reviewing the results of individual questions it is worthwhile to continually ask:

- What do we know about the local economy and businesses that would account for the results?
- Do the results confirm pre-existing information or differ from what we expected?

For example, it may be well understood that internet coverage in certain parts of an LGA or township is slow or unreliable. The impact on local business planning of this situation may be confirmed by the responses to Question 5(a) and (c). The results of your survey may have as much value for reinforcing existing priorities (or renewing commitment to solve a long-standing issue) as in revealing new findings.

On the other hand, if you have an unexpected result it may reflect a common misperception in your community. There may be others in your community who would be surprised or interested by the result of the survey — sharing this result could be a potential objective of a follow-up communication action.

Comparison to State Results

Over time, results from each of the communities conducting Surveys will be compiled and it will become possible for communities to benchmark their results against other communities. This can be a powerful way to look at your own situation because it can highlight differences that you may wish to explore.

For example, the businesses in your Survey may say that problems with DAs and local regulations are constraints on expansion. It would be useful to see how this result compared to that of other communities. Depending on the results, the action plan might then include exploring with Council the possibility of improving processes to match those of other communities where the level of satisfaction appears to be higher.

The evaluation of the BRE Survey conducted by Dr Roger Epps also provides a useful source of comparison data. However, it should be noted that the questionnaire on which the evaluation is based is significantly different to that currently being used. Dr Epps report can be downloaded from www.regionalcommunities.nsw.gov.au website.

Some cautions about comparisons

If you analyse your results using this comparative format there are several limiting factors or possible problems to keep in mind.

1. Sectoral differences between your community and the Statewide results.

Each of the communities participating in the program has planned its own survey method, tailored to its local situation. As a result, the sectors (eg, tourism, mining, manufacturing, agriculture) represented in the total State data may not be the same as the sectors that were included in your community's survey. Other surveys may not even include a particular sector that is very important in your community.

Any such differences can easily be established by reviewing the websites of other communities and/or speaking to appropriate people in those communities, such as the Economic Development Officer of Council or those who were involved in the BRE Survey.

2. Sample differences between your community and State averages.

Again, because each community contributing data plans its own survey method, the results must be interpreted carefully. For example, communities may choose to focus their effort on small and medium-sized businesses rather than large employers; survey results may vary according to the size of the business.

3. State average.

A State comparison, simply because it is an average, can hide very real differences between communities.

Conclusion

The general tips and examples given above are meant to provide a positive stimulus for effective data analysis. This short discussion is not a course in statistical analysis nor could it substitute for expertise in using database software. Ideally, some of the individuals on your BRE team will have such relevant skills and abilities while others will contribute invaluable local knowledge.

The real value of the data analysis step is the opportunity for fruitful and creative discussion about the meaning and significance of the survey findings. This discussion should not be intimidated by overly voluminous or sophisticated number crunching. Some of these survey findings will be relatively straightforward to follow-up, but do not be discouraged by the possibility that you will raise as many questions as you answer.

B11 Suggested Format for BRE Report

Organisation name, project name, contact name, and number

Introductory paragraph (summary of BRE project)

Purpose (goals and objectives of BRE in general and those of the individual project)

Community involvement (organisations, businesses, individuals; acknowledge contributions)

Project activities (summary of activities to date eg, planning, training, interviews, follow-up, data analysis)

Results achieved (provide examples of results to date eg, follow-up on urgent issues identified by individual businesses)

Presentation and analysis of key BRE survey findings

- Profile of businesses
  - Industry
  - Length of operation
  - Whether established locally or relocated
  - Reasons for relocation (if significant)
  - Number of employees and variations over time
- Markets
  - Relative importance of local versus external markets, by industry
  - Discuss potential for greater development of external markets, taking into account expansion prospects identified in Part E
- Employees
  - Difficulties in recruiting – any particular occupations which stand out
  - Current and potential Involvement in apprenticeships and traineeships
- Business Plans and Decisions
  - Turnover versus profits – summary of expectations by industry, identifying any Anomalies eg, if profits are not expected to increase in line with or at a higher rate than turnover, the business may not be operating efficiently and/or have rising costs
  - Expansion expectations – identify type and any differences by industry
  - Impediments to expansion – identify any common themes
  - Cooperation with other businesses – identify any common themes and discuss feasibility of undertaking/encouraging/supporting any action, taking into account comments at 18(b)
  - Identify any business inputs needed in the community – address feasibility of attracting businesses to provide those inputs
  - Relocation/closing down
- Local environment
  - Overall opinion of community as place to do business
  - Main assets
  - Level of satisfaction with services and infrastructure
  - Opportunities for improvement – identify any common themes with other earlier sections, such as infrastructure and services problems impeding expansion
  - Business costs – identify and include common issues with other sections
- Training needs
  - Identify priority areas for professional development activities and mode of delivery
- Recommendations (identify action plans for community committees).

B12 Tips for developing Action Plans

Action planning will link the information that you have gathered so far with actions that the community can see and implement. The action plans, if completed successfully, will address the issues and further the goals of your community.

It is the process of planning what needs to be done, when it needs to be done, by whom, and what resources or inputs are needed to do it.

The most effective action plans consist of the following elements:

- A statement of what must be achieved
- A spelling out of the steps that have to be followed to reach this objective; some kind of time schedule for when each step must take place and how long it is likely to take (when);
- A clarification of who will be responsible for making sure that each step is successfully completed;
- A clarification of the inputs/resources that are needed.

Actions should be realistic and logical. There is no point in recommending actions which are not feasible to be conducted within the community. Actions should also be specific. Generic recommendations eg, ‘Investigate options for networking opportunities’ are too vague to be easily implemented and therefore likely to be ignored.

Generating Ideas for Action Plans
A number of processes can be used to develop action plans:

- The consultant and/or project manager develops the action plan and this is reviewed by the taskforce/steering committee
- A brainstorming session by the consultant, project manager and taskforce/steering committee
- It is also possible to develop an action plan by means of a public meeting.

Whichever process is used, it should commence with generating as many ideas for actions as possible. The next job is to review those ideas and select the ones that should be taken on first.

The following issues should be considered in making these decisions:

- Which of these actions could be realistically carried out by our community given existing resources (volunteers and dollars)?
- Are any of these actions beyond our sphere of influence? Which actions require outside resources or influence? Is there potential to secure assistance from outside agencies?
- Which of these actions would give our community the biggest “bang for our buck”?
- “Pick the low hanging fruit.” Identify any “big or easy wins” that would be relatively easy to accomplish and would yield a tangible product or outcome for the community.
- Identify short-term and long-term actions.
- Some complex or demanding actions may need to be broken down into smaller steps that would be less intimidating but would set the stage for other actions at a later date.

Some Action Themes
Following are suggestions for actions which could be considered, by theme, in the standard questionnaire.

Development of business databases

- The development of a business directory is a common recommendation of BRE Surveys. This is a means of raising awareness of services and products available locally and can play a role in promoting the community as a place to do business.

Promoting investment/relocation

Use positive findings to promote your community as a good business environment eg:
- High levels of relocations or new business establishments
- Positive views of local environment
- Markets outside the local area
- Positive future expectations in terms of turnover and profits
- Increasing employment.

Some of this information could be incorporated within an economic profile on a Council or other website. However, caution should be exercised if positive findings are isolated or in significant minority.

The Survey will also reveal whether businesses' competitiveness is affected by the need to source key business inputs from elsewhere. This may indicate potential to target such businesses to relocate or establish in the community.

New market development

Ultimately, responsibility for development of new markets lies with individual businesses. Notwithstanding this, there is potential to take various actions to support businesses to develop new markets, including export, eg:
- Conducting workshops on marketing techniques
- Facilitating support from DSRD Export Advisers, Industry Capability Network and/or AusTrade.

Employees

Actions may include:
- Promoting the location to skilled workers in other places
- Facilitating access to skilled migration schemes
- Promotion of apprenticeships and traineeships
- Upskilling of existing employees through pooling of staff for training courses in high demand skills.

Supporting expanding businesses

Expanding businesses can be supported in various ways, such as:
- Referral to DSRD and other agencies
- Identification of appropriate premises
- Identifying and facilitating contact with providers of key business inputs
- Improving DA processes
- Development of industrial land.

Promoting/supporting business networking

It is vital to recognise that networking is not an end in itself. There must therefore be a clear focus for networking activities, whether by industry and/or activity. This should be evident in the responses.

Networks require considerable resources and commitment from participants and supporting agencies. It is also important to evaluate their feasibility before identifying any such action.

One option to consider is whether outside assistance could be used to support and/or enhance existing networking activities and groups.

Improving infrastructure/services

In the past, when asked what improvements should be made to improve the community and its economy, there have been a number of recurring themes:
- Traffic and public transport matters
- Parking inadequacies
- Street beautification
- Improvements to telecommunications, energy etc.

Achieving improvements to infrastructure is challenging. When asked about outcomes from the BRE Survey, 67.9% of respondents identified the identification of service and infrastructure deficits as the most valuable direct outcome, but only 57.1% report improvements in this area. While still quite a high proportion, it also reflects the relative difficulty and cost of redressing any such problems.

Action needs to distinguish between infrastructure and services which are provided locally and those which are provided from outside the community. The commitment of Council and potentially, other Government agencies and private sector organisations will be required. (Importantly, if the Survey is conducted by organisations other than Council, caution needs to be exercised in identifying action by it and how this is expressed).

It is also important to critically evaluate responses and weigh them against what is feasible. For example, while a small number of businesses may identify a need for natural gas, there may not be enough of them for connection to be cost effective. Alternatively, it may be worthwhile recommending the conducting of a feasibility study into its connection.

In other areas, action may simply be in the shape of lobbying eg, encouraging electricity providers to put a higher priority on repairing power failures or brownouts in a timely way.

Respondents may also identify developments specific to their industry. For example, a group of horticulture operators may identify a need for a packing shed. While such a development may well have the potential to greatly enhance their competitiveness, it is necessary to determine whether it is technically and financially feasible, and if so, where funding would be sourced.

The recommendation in the action plan relating to this and other such issues might be 'Seek funding to undertake a feasibility study into establishment of a packing shed'.

Improvements to the economy

In the past, when asked what improvements should be made to the economy, there have been a number of recurring themes:
- Attraction/development of new industries and businesses
- Increase availability of affordable industrial land.

Many comments will be generic in nature, reflecting a general sense that there needs to be greater economic activity in the community. Of course, there may be equally strong counterveiling views in the community.

Further to earlier comments, it will not be useful to make a generic recommendation such as 'pursue new industry development opportunities' or 'attract new businesses'. References to specific industries should be reviewed critically in order to decide whether there is potential for action. Generally, it will be most effective if the new industry or business builds on local strengths.

Clearly, the availability of industrial land is a key component in any efforts to attract new businesses or allow existing businesses to expand. Again however, any recommendations for action in this area need to be based on a sound analysis of the potential returns and of course whether there is suitable land available.

Another recurring theme is 'greater encouragement from Council for economic development'. This can cover a multitude of issues from DA processes to how Council approaches economic development in general. Again, any recommendations in this area should be specific and where the Survey is not being conducted by Council, caution needs to be exercised in how any recommendations for action are expressed.

Business skills development/business practice improvement

The table in the questionnaire is a means of identifying priorities for professional development. It does this by asking businesses to compare their current level of skill in key areas to their desired level of skill.

To identify priorities, it is necessary to identify the skills which are considered most important overall and where the gap is greatest.