

**BRACKNELL FOREST ECONOMIC
PARTNERSHIP
21 JANUARY 2025
10.00 AM - 12.00 PM**



Present:

Councillor Paul Bidwell, Cabinet Member Economic Development and Regeneration
Nikki Burns, FSB Berkshire Lead
Ian Ferguson, Bracknell BID
Ben Jokiel, Activate Learning
Tom Henderson, The Lexicon
Bryan Almond, Onsemi
Jim Reay, Syngenta
Michael Potter, Curve Workspace
Lily Hudson, Berkshire Film Office
Keira Head-Lewis, Berkshire Film Office
Andrew Hunter, Bracknell Forest Council
Chris Mansfield, Bracknell Forest Council
Paula Robertson, Bracknell Forest Council
Stuart McKellar, Bracknell Forest Council
Chris Rogers, Representative of Peter Swallows MP
Cathy Wilkins, Stepping Stones Recovery
Nancy Lalor, Learning to Work
Paul Day Firestream Ltd
Steve Bulley, Berkshire Growth Hub
Simon Rogers, SR Industrial

Apologies:

Andrew Johnson, Diggecard
Jayne Donnelly, Representative of Peter Swallow MP
Adrian Davies DWP
Simon Fryer, Fryer Commercial Property Agent
Tom Woolven, BRP, Schroders
Bernadette Fisher, Stepping Stones Recovery College

1. Minutes and actions from previous meeting

The minutes of the partnership which were held on 16 October 2024 were noted.
There were no matters arising.

2. Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy action plan performance

Chris Mansfield, Head of Economic Development and Regeneration, gave an update to members on the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy 2024–2034 and its associated action plan.

An overview of the current performance of Bracknell Forest's economy was shared, with key points including:

Economic Performance

- Business Growth Rate showed a decline of -3.75% in September 2024 compared to the 2024/25 target of -2%. This decline was also evident across the comparator area.
- Percentage of companies with £1m to £5m turnover reported at 7.91% in Q2, which was an increase from 7.05% in Q1.
- Percentage of businesses in key sectors had declined from 15.42% in Q1 to 15.14% in Q2, against a target of 22% for 2024/25.
- Percentage of companies with 50+ employees was slightly lower in Q2 at 2.56% compared to 2.64% in Q1.
- Percentage of ICT businesses had decreased from 12.67% in Q1 to 12.36% in Q2, against a target of 19.26% for 2024/25.

People, Work, and Wellbeing

- Gross domestic household income (GDHI) compared to inflation had increased to 5.53% in Q2 from 4.24% in Q1.
- Full Fibre Availability: Reported at 93% in Q2, which was below the 2024/25 target of 99.6%.
- 5G Availability was reported at 92% in Q2, which was below the 2024/25 target of 99.2%.

Business Competitiveness

- The presentation also mentioned ongoing efforts to explore suitable data sources for specific indicators and highlighted a successful business support event held in partnership with Berkshire Growth Hub.

The key points arising from discussion were as follows:

- There were challenges in business effectiveness and growth rates.
- Support for new businesses through the Growth Hub startup program was ongoing, with a focus on fostering entrepreneurial ambitions.
- There was a positive trend in the number of businesses with a turnover of 1 to 5 million, indicating growth from small to medium-sized businesses.
- Companies with larger employee numbers showed a slight decline, indicating that growth beyond the startup phase was not happening as expected.
- There was a decline in knowledge-based industries, which affected confidence in economic growth.
- The trend showed a decrease in certain types of businesses in the area, with discussions on recognising clusters in different groups and sectors.
- Financial support and interpretation of data were crucial for understanding and addressing these challenges.

Comparative data was requested to make some constructive analysis of the data moving forward.

Action: Provide comparative data to the partnership BFC Economic Development team [data shared with minutes – BFEP comparison data_January 2025]

3. **Bracknell Forest Economic Partnership - priorities 2025**

Joint Chairmen, Ben Jokiel and Jim Reay, lead discussion on the priorities for 2025 taking into account the feedback from the [Business Survey 2022-23](#).

Several key questions were put to the partnership prior to the meeting and in reviewing these, there was detailed discussion raising the following points:

- **Comparative analysis:** As raised in the previous item, there was a need to compare the boroughs performance with other areas. It was acknowledged that each would have different rates, environments and cultures but it would help to gain a better understanding of its own strengths and weaknesses. This comparative analysis would help identify areas where they could improve and learn from the successes of others.
- **Promotion and business understanding:** There was a strong emphasis on promoting the benefits of the area and understanding the businesses it was trying to attract.
- **Targeted marketing and communication:** Effective communication and marketing strategies were highlighted as crucial for promoting the benefits of the area. This involved clearly articulating the advantages of the local environment and ensuring that the message reached the right audience. It was mentioned that Bracknell Town Council may have some scope to help with this by utilising some of its own office space in the town centre.
- **Business attraction and support:** The importance of promoting small businesses, the supply chain, and digital connectivity across the Bracknell Forest economy was discussed. It was noted that The Lexicon was trying to do more to help local businesses outside of the town centre to use its digital platform to promote other services.
- **Local Transport Network:** The local transport network was highlighted as a challenge, with suggestions to look at data and understand the needs of businesses. The local transport services were not good, making it easier for people to come from further away than from relatively local areas. This issue was particularly relevant for attracting and retaining skilled workers, as the local transport network's inefficiency posed a barrier.
- **Understanding business needs:** The discussion concluded with an emphasis on understanding the needs of businesses and promoting the benefits of their area. Participants highlighted the need for a clear picture of the current situation, i.e. was the aim to attract particular sectors or was it about the size, in order to move forward.
- It was suggested that views on the vision of Bracknell should be sought from young people as their opinions would have a different take on their own thoughts for the future of the borough. It may also be getting in touch with local tourism companies for any information from outsiders.

Overall, discussion highlighted barriers, and the need to promote and market the borough to attract businesses to the area. However, the partnership needed an understanding of the audience before targeted marketing took place, an improvement in local infrastructure, and an understanding of what the right type of space was to be delivered for the different business needs.

Action: Form a small task and finish group consisting of Simon Fryer, Nikki Burns, Michael Potter, Ian Ferguson and Jim Reay scope out a framework to segment the strengths and gaps within Bracknell Forest for the relevant sectors and scale of business, bringing this back to this group for completion. Ultimately this would serve as a basis for promote and attract economic investment into Bracknell Forest.

Action: BFEP representatives to prepare short outline of barriers, challenges, opportunities to promote economic growth in Bracknell Forest. To include, commercial property requirements, access to supply chains, skills, employee retention, entrepreneurial enterprise.

4. **Bracknell Forest Council budget 2025/26 consultation**

Stuart McKellar, Executive Director for Resources, gave a presentation to the Partnership on the current budget 2025/26 proposals which was currently out for public consultation. Residents, local groups, and partner organisations were encouraged to provide feedback on the draft budget plans through an online survey available on the council's website.

The presentation outlined several proposals for consultation. For the revenue budget, these included:

- Closing the upper decks of Braccan Walk car park for three months a year to save £9,000 on business rates.
- Increasing residents' parking zone fees by £10 to make the scheme self-funding by the end of 2025/26.
- Increasing the charge for the garden waste service by £5 to make the scheme self-funding by the end of 2025/26; and
- Other proposals included focusing grounds maintenance work on essential tasks to save £15,000 a year, reviewing the local discretionary business rate relief system for charities, reducing the number of parking machines and extending repair times to save £15,000, and promoting independence for adults through early intervention and prevention to save £458,000.

For the capital programme, the proposals included spending:

- £2.7 million on repairing and improving Bracknell Forest roads in 2025/26.
- £100,000 on environmental work to prevent flooding and protect wildlife.
- £445,000 on essential maintenance at South Hill Park.
- £445,000 to make council buildings more energy efficient
- £210,000 to upgrade windows and improve energy efficiency in the old magistrates' court building; and
- £500,000 for council properties used mainly for temporary accommodation.

Key points arising from discussion were as follows:

- Economic impact on car parks: There was a general sense of disappointment with some of the decisions made, particularly those affecting the town's car parks. The concern was that targeting car parks could reduce opportunities for customers to come into town, which could negatively impact the local economy. The importance of car parks to the town's economy was emphasised. The belief was that it was only a small amount of money but would make a significant impact, and decisions regarding car parks should be more carefully considered. There was a discussion about using online payment methods like Ringo, but concerns were raised about impact of the cost of entirely using this method for

users. The BID already used a shuttle bus for businesses in the BID business areas.

- Small businesses and charities: There was a worry that seemingly limiting charity and independent use in the town could have made it seem like corporate giants were preventing smaller businesses from thriving. The public talked passionately about supporting charity and independent businesses, and any actions that limited these could be viewed negatively. There was a call for more support in the form of rate relief or funding to help small businesses start and grow. It was noted that there was a national small business rate relief scheme that could be utilised.
- Grounds maintenance savings: There was concern about the decision to focus grounds maintenance work on essential tasks like highway safety only rather than appearance-related work to save £15,000 a year. This went against previous discussions about enhancing the town centre.

The Partnership highlighted the need for careful consideration of decisions that impacted the town's economy, support for small businesses, and the balance between cost-saving measures and maintaining the town's prominence. *Following the meeting the link to the consultation would be circulated and members were asked to feedback to officers as soon as it were possible.*

5. **Regional/national economic development context**

Andrew Hunter, Executive Director of Place, provided an update on regional and national economic development. Talks were ongoing with the government regarding further devolution within Berkshire.

The Devolution White Paper outlined the competencies for Strategic Authorities, which included competencies in transport, local infrastructure, skills and employment support, housing, strategic planning, economic development, regeneration, environment, climate change, health, wellbeing, public service reform, and public safety. The default assumption was for strategic Authorities to have a combined population of circa 1.5 million

There are three types of Combined Authorities: Foundation Strategic Authorities (non-mayoral) and Mayoral Strategic Authorities and Established Mayoral Combine Authorities (including the Greater London Authority and all Mayoral Combined Authorities). Strategic Authorities had to cover sensible economic geographies, be contiguous, and avoid creating devolution 'islands'. Those who meet specified eligibility criteria may be designated as Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities. This unlocked further devolution, most notably an Integrated Settlement.

The new offer included mayors setting funding priorities, integrating local growth plans, strategic transport powers, local skills improvement plans, strategic planning for housing and infrastructure, devolution of business support, public sector alignment, and integrated funding settlements.

Funding aimed to simplify the funding landscape with consolidated funding pots for Mayoral Strategic Authorities and dedicated local growth allocations for Foundation Strategic Authorities.

The programme also set out the need for Local Government Reorganisation, setting out that new unitary councils had to be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve

capacity, and withstand financial shocks, typically with a population of 500,000 or more.

There was no detailed timeline as such for Berkshire and discussions were ongoing. The Berkshire Prosperity Board was already meeting weekly which consisted of a number of relevant parties and work would continue to progress this, engaging with other geographical county areas.

6. **AOB and date of next meeting**

The next meeting would be arranged and take place around late April/early May 2025. A location to be agreed. Ian Ferguson would ask if it could take place at a venue in the BID area.

CHAIRMAN