

**BRACKNELL FOREST ECONOMIC
PARTNERSHIP
1 JULY 2025
2-3.30PM**



In Attendance:

Ben Jokiel, Activate Learning (Chair)
Nikki Burns, FSB Berkshire Lead
Jim Reay, Syngenta
Kiera Head-Lewis, Berkshire Film Office
Chris Mansfield, Bracknell Forest Council
Paula Robertson, Bracknell Forest Council
Andrew Johnson, Diggecard
Adrian Davies Dept Works & Pensions
Natalie Webb, The Lexicon
Simon Fryer, Fryer Commercial Property Agent
Bryan Almond, Onsemi
Ian Ferguson, Bracknell BID
Nancy Lalor, Learning to Work
Paul Day, Firestream Ltd
Andrew Hunter, Bracknell Forest Council

Apologies:

Simon Rogers, SR Industrial
Michael Potter, Curve Workplaces Limited
Steve Bulley, Berkshire Growth Academy
Councillor Paul Bidwell, Cabinet Member Economic Development and Regeneration
Paul Britton, Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce
Chloe Smith, Representative of Peter Swallow MP
Jayne Donnelly, Representative of Peter Swallow MP
Josh Reynolds, MP for Maidenhead
Phil Bell, Involve

1. Minutes and actions from previous meeting – 3 April 2025

Clarification was sought on who to contact to find out more about contributing to the work of the task groups. As not had been present at the last meeting, anybody that was unsure, or would like to contribute to any of task groups, to contact Chris Mansfield or Paula Robertson.

The previous meeting had asked for some data and was provided below from Steve Bulley

Berkshire Growth Hub interventions

Healthcare products & services	14%
Creative & creative arts (inc music, TV, film)	12%
Food & drink suppliers	8%
Hospitality & leisure	8%
Manufacturing	8%
Other	8%
Retail (incl online)	8%

Accounting & legal services	6%
Business support activities - other	6%
Computer consultancy & software development	6%
Construction & the built environment	4%
Digital technologies - other (inc cloud, cyber, fintech)	4%
Consumer & domestic services	2%
Education & training	2%
Energy & environment (inc sustainability & net zero)	2%

(Produced 01.07.2025)

2. **Quarter 4 update - exception commentary**

The Partnership received an update on the Quarter 4 performance of the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy 2024–2034, with a focus on key metrics that had either underperformed or continued to show negative trends. The presentation is attached.

Business Competitiveness and Growth

- Bracknell Forest continued to experience a decline in the number of businesses compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. The business growth rate had worsened slightly, moving from -2.68% in Q3 to -3.75% in Q4. While this represented a decline, it was noted that Bracknell Forest had one of the smallest reductions in business numbers across the region. For comparison, West Berkshire and Reading saw declines of -9.35% and -6.67% respectively, while Slough recorded a slight increase of +0.24%
- Highlighted the borough's reliance on micro businesses—those employing between 0 and 9 people—which made up 89% of all businesses. This segment had seen a 4.18% decline since 2019. The top three sectors for micro businesses remained consistent since 2019: Construction, Professional/Scientific/Technical, and Information & Communication. While Construction had grown by nearly 13%, the other two sectors had seen sharp declines of -20% and -31% respectively.
- Concerns about the reasons behind these sectoral shifts. It was suggested that changes in contracting laws may have impacted the number of sole traders, particularly in the technical and professional sectors. Others noted that some businesses had relocated to areas such as Cambridge, citing better availability of mixed-use industrial and office spaces. The lack of suitable commercial property in Bracknell was highlighted as a barrier to business retention and attraction.
- A strategic review of available property stock and business needs would be helpful. Suggestions included identifying target sectors for attraction and considering the development of more flexible, smaller-scale office spaces to support the borough's micro-business base.

Enterprise Birth and Survival Rates

- The rate of new enterprise births per 10,000 working-age population had continued to decline from 2021 to 2023, placing Bracknell below neighbouring authorities.
- Potential barriers to entrepreneurship could include a lack of awareness or encouragement among younger people. It was proposed that educational

outreach particularly in colleges could help promote self-employment as a viable career path.

- Despite the low start-up rate, Bracknell Forest performed well in terms of business survival. The four-year survival rate for businesses started in 2019 was relatively high compared to neighbouring boroughs. This was seen as a positive indicator of the borough's business environment once enterprises were established. Suggested that this could be leveraged in marketing efforts to attract new businesses, particularly by highlighting lower overheads and favourable conditions for long-term success.
- Noted that sole traders were likely underrepresented in official data, as many did not register separate business bank accounts or operate under limited company structures. This gap in data was acknowledged as a limitation in fully understanding the local business landscape.

People, Work and Wellbeing

- The percentage of the working population in the lowest three occupational groups; sales and customer service, process plant and machine operatives, and elementary occupations had increased for the second consecutive quarter. The figure rose from 15.7% to 16.4%, against a target of 12%. While this trend was not unique to Bracknell, there was concern about the implications for local economic resilience and social mobility. Comparative data showed that Bracknell Forest was broadly in line with other Berkshire authorities, though Slough had a higher proportion of workers in these categories, likely due to its concentration of warehousing and manufacturing roles.
- Noted that despite having good or outstanding schools, Bracknell's university progression rates lagged behind areas like Wokingham. This was seen as a potential factor influencing occupational outcomes and economic mobility.

Strategic Reflections

- There was a need for a clearer strategic identity for Bracknell Forest. Comparisons were drawn with Reading, which benefits from a university presence and a broader commercial offer. The absence of a university in Bracknell was seen as a limiting factor in attracting and retaining young talent and fostering innovation.
- There was recognition of broader national and global trends affecting local performance, including the shift to remote and hybrid working, it was acknowledged that some traditional metrics might no longer fully capture the realities of modern business operations and employment patterns.

Considerations arising from discussions:

- **Developing a Strategic Property Review** Consider undertaking a comprehensive review of commercial property stock to assess suitability for micro and target sector businesses.
- **Promote Bracknell as a Micro-Business Incubator** Leverage the borough's high micro-business survival rate and low overheads to position Bracknell as an ideal location for start-ups. Consider tailored support programmes and targeted marketing.

- **Enhance Entrepreneurship Education and Outreach** Partner with local education providers to promote entrepreneurship among young people and provide resources on business setup and resilience.
- **Improve Data Collection and Analysis** Explore alternative data sources to better capture sole trader activity and review performance metrics to reflect modern business models, including hybrid and remote work.
- **Target Sector-Specific Business Attraction** Identify and attract sectors aligned with Bracknell's strengths, such as construction, AI, and logistics. Develop a sector-focused strategy to guide business attraction efforts.
- **Address Workforce and Skills Alignment** Align education and training with higher-skilled job opportunities and investigate the relationship between housing stock and employment patterns to ensure long-term economic sustainability

3. **Priorities for task and finish groups – updates**

Priority Areas

The meeting received updates on four key priority areas which had been identified at the last meeting and taken forward by individual task and finish groups. A summary of progress against actions from each group was presented to the Partnership and is attached to these minutes.

Group 1. Grow, Build and Attract Business – Innovation and Technology

This group had reviewed progress on initiatives to support business growth and innovation in Bracknell Forest. Updates included work to identify barriers to new business formation, mapping of co-working spaces, and engagement with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB). A comparative analysis of business growth across Berkshire had been initiated, and discussions were underway regarding access to commercial property data. Work was also progressing on mapping available business support and exploring partnerships with local universities

During discussion, it was noted that whilst early engagement with universities such as Reading and Royal Holloway had taken place, further progress was needed. It was suggested that businesses might be better placed than the council to initiate meaningful partnerships with universities.

Members discussed the potential for Bracknell to position itself as a location for university spin-offs, particularly those seeking affordable space and strong local support. It was acknowledged the need for a clearer strategy and a more cohesive voice when approaching academic institutions.

It was agreed that a joint approach involving both the council and local businesses would be more effective. The group also discussed the importance of understanding why Bracknell has a high startup survival rate and whether there are identifiable clusters or support mechanisms that could be leveraged further.

Actions to take forward:

- Jim Reay and Bryan Almond offered to support Chris Mansfield in initiating conversations with universities, particularly Reading, to explore collaboration opportunities.

- Members were asked to consider whether any local businesses had strong existing relationships with universities that could be leveraged.
- It was agreed that further work was needed to understand the local business landscape, including potential sector clusters and the reasons behind Bracknell's high startup survival rate

Group 2. Procurement to Support Local Growth

This group had focused on how procurement processes could better support local businesses. The FSB's 2021 policy report highlighted barriers such as complex compliance requirements, lack of feedback on unsuccessful bids, and perceptions of bias in public sector procurement. Several actions were underway, including promoting procurement opportunities through the Bracknell Forest for Business newsletter and exploring the development of a local supplier directory.

David Fleming from Syngenta on the group had shared insights into sourcing practices and identified opportunities for local engagement.

There was discussion on the potential for simplifying procurement processes and supporting SMEs with onboarding and registration. A model was being explored nationally whereby smaller businesses could partner with larger suppliers to meet procurement criteria, drawing on examples from Heathrow's supply chain initiatives. While this model was seen as promising, concerns were raised about its complexity and the need for strong contractual frameworks and oversight.

Actions to take forward:

- Members agreed to explore whether corporate social responsibility (CSR) reporting could be used as a hook to encourage larger companies to spend more locally.
- It was suggested that the council investigated whether any local procurement targets or mandates existed and whether these could be strengthened or better enforced.
- They should continue identifying short-term procurement opportunities that could be opened to smaller businesses without requiring extensive financial history

Group 3. Pride in Bracknell Forest – A Community and Business Friendly Place

The group had reviewed initiatives aimed at promoting Bracknell Forest as a desirable place to live and do business. The discussion drew on insights from the emerging Communities Strategy and the Bracknell Forest Vision 2050, which was in development. Key themes included the borough's strategic location, transport links, education quality, green spaces, and leisure facilities. Work was also underway to gather consumer data through The Lexicon and to support green-themed businesses in collaboration with the Climate Change team

Members highlighted the importance of aligning messaging across sectors and ensuring that the borough's strengths were clearly communicated. The Berkshire Local Visitor Economic Partnership was noted as a vehicle for promoting Bracknell within the wider region. It was also discussed the need for accessible data on commuting patterns and visitor behaviour to inform future planning.

There was a strong emphasis on ensuring that the Vision 2050 document would be a collaborative effort, with sign-off from a broad range of stakeholders including the voluntary and business sectors. Members discussed the potential for spin-off

materials tailored to specific audiences, such as businesses, and the importance of having a clear and accessible narrative about what makes Bracknell Forest attractive.

Actions to take forward:

- Explore how the Vision 2050 document could be adapted or supplemented to create business-specific promotional materials.
- Ensure all relevant data and reports were made publicly available on the website to support wider use and visibility.
- Consideration be given on how to better articulate the borough's education strengths, noting that all schools in the area were rated "Good" or better.

Group 4. Screen Sector

An overview was provided of the screen sector's role within the broader industrial strategy, with reference to the creative industries. It was noted that Bracknell Forest was part of the smallest skills cluster funded by the BFI yet remained competitive. It was noted that a further three years of funding was anticipated, which would support local businesses and attract filming to the area. Kiera circulated a summary of the key points from the Industrial White Paper which highlighted the Governments intentions.

Challenges were discussed, including competition from neighbouring areas such as Buckinghamshire, which benefited from stronger transport links and established institutions like Royal Holloway and the National Film and Television School. Concerns were raised about planning permissions being granted for film studios and later repurposed for other uses, such as data centres. It was acknowledged the need to monitor such developments and to ensure that planning processes support the long-term growth of the screen sector in the borough.

4. Get Britain Working - Introduction

The Partnership received a presentation from Chris Mansfield, the Head of Economic Development and Regeneration, on The *Get Britain Working* (GBW) programme. This was a key component of the Government's modern industrial strategy, aiming at stimulating economic growth by creating a more inclusive and healthier labour market. The programme's national objectives included achieving an 80% employment rate across the UK, reducing unemployment (then at 1.5 million), economic inactivity (over 9 million), and long-term sickness (2.8 million). It also sought to improve access to healthcare, education, and skills training, thereby supporting a more productive and resilient workforce

The GBW programme sought to support individuals who were outside the workforce to re-enter employment. This included access to training, apprenticeships, and job-seeking support for young people. It also aimed to help those already in employment to upskill and progress in their careers. Employers were to be supported in recruiting, retaining, and developing staff.

A key objective was development of the *Get Berkshire Working* plan, which would span all six Berkshire unitary authorities

Local partners were expected to play a vital role in supporting lead local authorities to develop their plans. This included providing intelligence on local labour market challenges, identifying employment barriers across different groups and areas, highlighting existing provision, proposing interventions, and promoting cross-sector collaboration. Partners could also help in identifying and addressing duplication and supporting synergies

A specific initiative under the GBW umbrella was *Connect to Work*, launched by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). This programme aimed to help individuals in England and Wales find and maintain employment. It provided targeted support to tackle economic inactivity and was designed to assist eligible participants in securing sustainable work. The programme connected local work, health, and skills support, aligning with frameworks such as Individual Placement & Support (IPS). A delivery plan was being prepared for central government sign-off, with the intention to launch within the year.

The Partnership would be kept informed of progress and an update brought to the next meeting for members to contribute their thoughts.

5. **Berkshire Business Board update**

Jim Reay, the Chair of the Berkshire Business Board, provided an update on its direction and current work.

The Berkshire Business Board had adopted a sector-oriented approach, focusing on seven key sectors: life sciences, data centres and telecoms, hospitality, defence, the creative screen industry, and professional services. Representatives from each of these sectors, as well as from higher and further education institutions, such as the University of Reading, contributed to the Board's work. It was noted that construction was being considered as an additional sector due to increasing demand for skills, particularly considering major infrastructure developments such as the Heathrow third runway.

In May, the Board issued a survey to sector representatives to gather insights on their ambitions for the next three to five years. The survey asked for projections on growth potential, financial metrics and the conditions required to unlock that growth. Respondents were also asked to identify barriers that could not be overcome by market forces alone. The Board was currently reviewing the responses, which varied in credibility and feasibility. Some proposals were straightforward, whilst others such as a request for a national VAT policy change—were beyond the Board's remit.

The Board planned to reconvene in September to refine its findings and align them with the priorities and risk appetite of the six unitary authorities. Jim emphasised the importance of maintaining an action-oriented focus and cautioned against allowing broader devolution discussions to distract from immediate deliverables. He encouraged the Partnership to concentrate on what could be achieved locally in Bracknell, which would, in turn, strengthen the case for any future devolution settlement.

During the discussion, members reflected on the value of business engagement and the importance of maintaining a strong dialogue with local enterprises. It was noted that whilst a previous business survey had yielded 500 responses through a phone-based approach, there had not been a recent follow-up. Members questioned whether a new survey might be beneficial, particularly to assess progress since the last round and to ensure that the voices of a representative cross-section of businesses were being heard.

There was also discussion around the challenges of engaging with larger employers and ensuring that feedback mechanisms were inclusive and effective. The group acknowledged that some businesses were more responsive than others and that repeated engagement often yields diminishing returns. Nonetheless, the importance of capturing the lived experience of senior business leaders—many of whom had decades of sectoral insight—was strongly endorsed.

In closing, the group agreed that the business voice must remain central to economic planning and that efforts should continue to ensure that engagement was both meaningful and representative.

6. **Any other Business and date of next meeting.**

Meeting Duration & Structure Noting that there was a lot to discuss within a short period of time, future meetings would be extended to two hours. The next meeting was scheduled for 9th October at 10am. A representative from the Bank of England would be attending. An appointment would be circulated following the meeting.

Action Points & Follow-ups Clarification was requested on who to contact regarding some of the of the task and finish groups and it was noted that Chris should be contacted in the first instance – chris.mansfield@bracknell-forest.gov.uk.

Data & Reporting Noted that a new weekly data set was now available for the BID area, including visitor demographics such as origin, gender, age, and income. This was based on BT data and may be extended beyond the BID area if deemed valuable but was subject to correct permissions for sharing.

Business Rates Discussion It was clarified that councils acted as agents for the government in collecting business rates and did not retain the funds. Councils did not have the authority to reduce business rates.

Independent Remuneration Panel - The council was seeking two volunteers to join the Independent Remuneration Panel, which reviewed and recommended councillor allowances. Interested individuals should review the following link: [Bracknell Forest Council](#)

Chair