

**BRACKNELL FOREST ECONOMIC
PARTNERSHIP
3 APRIL 2025
10-11.45AM**



Present:

Councillor Paul Bidwell, Cabinet Member Economic Development and Regeneration
Nikki Burns, FSB Berkshire Lead
Ben Jokiel, Activate Learning
Jim Reay, Syngenta
Keira Head-Lewis, Berkshire Film Office
Chris Mansfield, Bracknell Forest Council
Paula Robertson, Bracknell Forest Council
Chloe Smith, Representative of Peter Swallow MP
Steve Bulley (virtual attendance), Berkshire Growth Academy
Andrew Johnson, Diggecard
Adrian Davies Dept Works & Pensions
Natalie Webb – The Lexicon

Apologies:

Simon Fryer, Fryer Commercial Property Agent
Tom Woolven, BRP, Schroders
Nancy Lalor, Learning to Work
Paul Day Firestream Ltd
Andrew Hunter, Bracknell Forest Council
Simon Rogers, SR Industrial
Tom Henderson, The Lexicon
Bryan Almond, Onsemi
Ian Ferguson, Bracknell BID
Michael Potter, Curve Workplaces Limited

1. Minutes and actions from the previous meeting - 21 January 2025

The minutes and actions of the last meeting that took place on 21 January 2025 were noted.

2. Quarter 3 Update - Exception commentary

Chris Mansfield provided a breakdown on performance over quarter 3 focusing on those that needed particular attention:

Business competitiveness: Focusing on the rate of business births per 10,000 working-age population. It was reported that the rate was 49.0% in 2023, as of February 2025, compared to the 2024/25 target of 77.7%, which was based on Windsor and Maidenhead's 2022 rate. This decline in business births was highlighted as a concern, indicating a need for focused attention on understanding the causes and exploring potential solutions. The Berkshire Growth Hub continued to offer comprehensive business support for both start-ups and existing businesses in Bracknell Forest, and additional business support opportunities were being explored for all stages of business growth.

People, Work, and Wellbeing: Focusing on the percentage of the working population in the lowest three occupational groups. It was noted that this percentage had increased to 15.7% in 2024, against a target of 12%. These occupations included sales, customer service, process plant and machine operatives, and elementary occupations. This trend was identified as a concern, with a focus on encouraging residents to move into higher paid, more fulfilling job opportunities. The chart provided showed all occupation categories for Bracknell Forest from October 2023 to September 2024.

Overall, the indicators were reasonably positive, with no major shifts in the wrong direction. However, there was a desire to see more positive movements across various indicators, particularly in comparison to neighbouring areas. The presentation emphasised the importance of monitoring these indicators closely and taking proactive steps to address any emerging concerns.

It was noted that the data was sourced from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the Berkshire Observatory, with some data being annual and others part of the census, leading to time lags in reporting.

There was a question about further granularity of the business births data to understand the types of businesses establishing themselves in Bracknell Forest.

Action: The Growth Hub is predominantly working with creative arts, digital technologies, and healthcare products and services and would provide this data. CM to circulate.

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

Jim Reay began by reflecting on the previous meeting's extensive discussions about Bracknell's economic health and various aspects. He emphasised using intuition real-world business experience and historical knowledge to guide efforts.

Since the last meeting, insightful conversations had taken place with business leads. Positives were highlighted such as the Lexicon's catalyst effect, efficient traffic network, green spaces, cycling routes, train services, and the town's compact nature. Bracknell was competitive in pricing and offered convenience. However, challenges were raised including dated infrastructure, parts needing renovation, and the absence of a unifying theme. Some business leaders felt the Council could be more welcoming and responsive, especially regarding national planning laws. Concerns included the potential loss of large companies and the shortage of small industrial units and workshops.

Arising from these discussions, several thematic areas had been identified for focus in the near-term: innovation and business, sustainable and local supply chains, the screen sector, and the economy for everyone. Additional themes included improving child and elderly care services, providing small industry units, enhancing the Council's business-friendly approach, developing a slogan for Bracknell, and attracting and retaining large employers.

It was agreed that the Board should focus on four key themes in the near-term:

1. Growing and attracting innovation and technology businesses
2. Promoting local procurement
3. Fostering pride in Bracknell Forest; and
4. Engaging with the screen sector.

It was agreed that task groups should be set up with the aim of taking forward these themes and scoping out a project to produce positive outputs for the business community in the Borough. Discussion is detailed below:

1. Grow and attract business – Innovation and Technology

Positives:

- **Existing co-working spaces:** Bracknell Forest had a variety of co-working spaces, such as Arlington Square and Easthampstead Works. These spaces provided flexibility and affordability for startups and small businesses. Reflect and Access, were highlighted as successful examples of co-working spaces that encouraged businesses to use their facilities.
- **Business support services:** There were existing business support services, such as networking events and mentorship programmes, which could be leveraged to help new businesses grow. Steve mentioned that business support services existed but questioned whether they were signposted strongly enough.
- **Academic partnerships:** Potential partnerships with local academic institutions could foster innovation and provide valuable resources and expertise to businesses.

Negatives:

- **Underutilisation of co-working spaces:** Some co-working spaces were not fully utilised, indicating a need for better promotion and connectivity. Paul suggested getting in touch with all co-working spaces to understand their occupancy rates and utilisation.
- **Lack of awareness:** Many small businesses were not aware of the available support services, leading to missed opportunities for growth. Nikki emphasised the need for better communication and promotion of existing resources.
- **Fragmented efforts:** Efforts to support businesses were fragmented, with different organisations working independently rather than collaboratively.

Recommended actions for the task group:

- **Gather data.** It was recommended to assess the current utilisation rates and capacities of co-working spaces to identify gaps and opportunities.
- **Improve communication:** Enhancing the visibility of business support services through targeted marketing and outreach efforts was suggested.
- **Promote networking ~~Create a network~~:** Establishing a network of co-working spaces and business support services to foster collaboration and share best practices.
- **Partner with academia:** Developing formal partnerships with academic institutions to provide research, innovation, and training support to local businesses.

Proposed Leads:

- **Steve Bulley, Nikki Burns, Jim Reay and Andrew Johnson:** To lead the efforts in the business growth area, focusing on supporting small businesses and startups. Paul Day (Filestream), Bryan Almond (On Semi) CM to contact Paul Day and Bryan Almond. Council to coordinate the group.

2. Procurement to support local growth

Positives:

- **Opportunity:** Large organisations, including the NHS and local authorities, had expressed openness to supporting local procurement. A procurement

lead from the Berkshire NHS Trust expressed willingness to talk to small businesses about procurement processes, similarly with procurement specialists from large companies

- **Existing frameworks:** There were existing procurement frameworks that could be adapted to better support local businesses.
- **Potential for policy change:** There was an opportunity to influence policy changes that could make procurement processes more accessible to small businesses.

Negatives:

- **Complex procurement processes:** Current procurement processes were complex and difficult for small businesses to navigate. Paul mentioned that small businesses were often debarred from procurement processes due to high financial turnover requirements. Sometimes there are policies which inhibit choosing local companies.
- **High barriers to entry:** Small businesses often faced high barriers to entry, such as financial turnover requirements and extensive documentation.
- **Limited engagement:** There was limited engagement between large organisations and small businesses, leading to missed opportunities for local procurement.

Recommended actions for the task group:

- **Simplifying processes:** It was suggested to work with large organisations to simplify procurement processes and reduce barriers to entry for small businesses.
- **Educate small businesses:** Providing training and resources to help small businesses understand and navigate procurement policies was recommended – Noted that there was some training already offered but this may not be communicated or targeted effectively.
- **Promote Local Procurement:** Encouraging large organisations to commit to a percentage of their procurement from local businesses.
- **Facilitate networking:** Consider creating forums and events where small businesses could connect with procurement officers from large organisations.

Proposed Leads:

- **Paul Bidwell, Nikki Burns and Jim Reay:** To lead the efforts in improving local procurement processes and support small businesses. Ian Ferguson (Bracknell BID), Paul Day (Filestream), Michael Potter (Curve Workplaces Ltd) Council support to coordinate the group.

3. Pride in Bracknell Forest, a community and business friendly place

Positives:

- **Strong community:** Bracknell Forest had a strong sense of community and a family-friendly environment, which could be leveraged to attract residents and businesses.
- **Existing marketing efforts:** Organisations like the Lexicon and the Business Improvement District were already investing in marketing and promotion.
- **Green spaces:** The presence of green spaces and good infrastructure added to the attractiveness of Bracknell Forest.

Negatives:

- **Inconsistent messaging:** There was inconsistent messaging about the strengths and benefits of Bracknell Forest, leading to confusion. Natalie from the Lexicon mentioned the need to understand who the marketing messages were targeting.

- **Limited awareness:** People outside of Bracknell Forest were not aware of its positive attributes, affecting its reputation.
- **Need for community engagement:** There was a need for greater community engagement to foster pride and investment in the local area. Parts of the town, and some roadways appear less polished than ideal.

Recommended actions for the task group:

- **Develop key messages:** Creating a set of key messages that highlighted the strengths and benefits of Bracknell Forest and ensuring that they were consistently communicated.
- **Enhance marketing:** Leveraging existing marketing efforts and collaborate with local organisations to promote Bracknell Forest more effectively.
- **Community initiatives:** Launching initiatives that encouraged residents to take pride in their community and invest in its upkeep.
- **Improve first impressions:** Focusing on improving the appearance of key entry points to Bracknell Forest to create positive first impressions. Paul mentioned improving the appearance of areas like the entrance which came straight towards a large commercial sign to create a better first impression as well as the entrance from the station.

Proposed leads:

- **Natalie Webb/ The Lexicon, Chloe Smith, (Peter Swallow MP representative). Invite Bracknell BID:** To take the leads on promoting Bracknell Forest as a community and business-friendly place. Tom Henderson (The Lexicon), Ian Ferguson (Bracknell BID), Simon Fryer (Fryer Commercial), Ben Jokiel, Philip Bell (Involve) Council support to coordinate the group.

4. Priority Sector for 2025 – Creative/Film/Screen Industries

Positives:

- **High demand:** There was high demand for filming locations in Bracknell Forest, particularly its green spaces. Keira mentioned that many requests for filming in Berkshire were for its forests and green areas.
- **Local talent:** There was potential to upskill local talent and businesses to participate in the film and television industry. Activate Learning already was offering short courses to help tradespeople access the film industry.
- **Economic Impact:** The creative and film industries could have a significant positive impact on the local economy through job creation and business opportunities.

Negatives:

- **Unpredictable industry:** The film and television industry could be unpredictable, with fluctuating demand and project timelines.
- **Limited awareness:** Local businesses were not aware of the opportunities to provide goods and services to production companies. Nikki highlighted the need for better communication and promotion of opportunities within the film industry.
- **Need for skills development:** There was a need for targeted skills development to ensure local talent could meet the demands of the industry.

Recommended actions for the task group:

- **Promote opportunities:** Increasing awareness of the opportunities for local businesses to provide goods and services to production companies.
- **Skills Training:** Offering targeted training programmes to upskill local talent and businesses for the film and television industry.

- **Collaborate with Industry:** Working closely with industry partners, such as the Crown Estate, to attract more productions to Bracknell Forest. Keira mentioned that the Crown Estate had big partners like Amazon and Netflix actively filming in Bracknell.
- **Highlight successes:** Promoting successful projects and productions that had taken place in Bracknell Forest to enhance its reputation as a filming location.

Proposed leads:

- **Keira:** Keira expressed interest to promote the creative and film industries in Bracknell Forest. Nikki Burns (FSB). Further conversation needed with Dom Unsworth (Resource Productions Ltd)/BFO) Council support to coordinate the group

In concluding discussion, it was noted that there were several people that could not make the meeting, and it was important to explain the situation to them and understand their areas of interest. The task groups required everyone's effort ("all hands to the pump") to ensure progress without significant delays.

There was a need to administer, and project manage the tasks in a way that was light touch for contributors while maintaining momentum. Jim would be discussing this with Ben, Chris, and Paula following the meeting to determine the best approach.

4. **Any Other Business**

Mayor's Charity Golf Event

Councillor Paul Bidwell highlighted the Mayor's Charity Golf event scheduled for May. He emphasised the importance of this event, noting that it had been advertised on Facebook and would soon be featured on the council's website.

Action: Councillor Bidwell asked everyone to circulate the information within their respective groups, stressing that the event supports a very worthy cause – All

Berkshire Economic Strategy

Jim Reay provided a brief update on the Berkshire Economic Strategy, which had been adopted by the six unitary authorities on 16th December. He explained that the strategy included a voice of business, with representation from various sectors, including life sciences. The strategy focused on several key areas such as the technical/professional services, life sciences, etc and ensuring adequate infrastructure across the county. Jim emphasised the importance of clear sector-specific asks, such as power connectivity, planning decisions, and access to talent and skills, to drive forward the county's economic growth. The strategy aimed to align local efforts with broader regional initiatives, ensuring cohesive development and robust economic performance.

5. **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting was Tuesday, 1 July 2025 at 2pm. Venue to be confirmed.