

**BRACKNELL FOREST ECONOMIC
PARTNERSHIP
16 OCTOBER 2024
13:30-15:00**



Present:

Councillor Paul Bidwell, Cabinet Member Economic Development and Regeneration
Nikki Burns, FSB Berkshire Lead
Ian Ferguson, Bracknell BID
Ben Jokiel, Activate Learning
Adrian Davies DWP
Jayne Donnelly, Representative of Peter Swallow MP
Bryan Almond, Onsemi
Jim Reay, Syngenta
Andrew Johnson, Diggecard
Michael Potter, Curve Workspace
Simon Fryer, Fryer Commercial Property Agent
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
Jo Gosling, Bracknell Forest Council

Apologies for absence were received from:

Nancy Lalor, Learning to Work
Tom Woolven, BRP, Schrodgers
Paul Day Firestream Ltd
Peter Swallow MP
Joshua Reynolds MP

44. Welcome and Introductions

Councillor Bidwell, Cabinet Member Economy and Regeneration welcomed attendees were welcomed to the inaugural meeting of the Bracknell Forest Economic Partnership (BFEP). The Partnership were informed the BFEP would be vital in driving forward the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy 2024-2034.

45. Outline of Partnership - Terms of Reference and Purpose

Andrew Hunter, Executive Director for Place, provided an outline of the BFEP's Terms of Reference and the Partnership's purpose. Meetings were to take place four times a year, with the BFEP comprising representatives from a wide variety of sectors, including businesses of varying sizes. The aim of bringing these representatives together was to help drive forward economic prosperity within the borough.

The BFEP sought members who could offer knowledge of their business sectors, as well as insight into the broader needs of the local business community. Members were also expected to act as ambassadors for Bracknell Forest Council within the local economy. It was noted that the BFEP would adopt the Nolan principles in all its work.

Members were encouraged to focus on practical ideas that could emerge from the BFEP, similar to how the Bracknell Forest Skills Hub had evolved from the previous Economic, Skills and Development Partnership. Benefits for BFEP members would include the opportunity to represent the interests of local businesses and employers, as well as opportunities to network with other groups.

There were four main areas of focus for the BFEP:

- Economic performance
- Business competitiveness
- People, work and wellbeing
- Place, climate change, infrastructure, and connectivity

Cllr Bidwell reiterated the importance of expanding Bracknell Forest Council's network and knowledge base by holding robust and honest conversations to identify the needs of businesses.

During the discussion on how the BFEP should function, the following points were raised:

- Given Brexit, Covid, a new generation, and new ways of working, the economy had transformed dramatically in a short space of time. It was important to recognise that the economy now operated differently compared to the past.
- It was crucial not only to track progress but also to provide evidence for why progress had or had not been made.
- It would be useful to discuss issues even if Bracknell Forest Council did not have direct power to address them.
- It was hoped that the BFEP could influence and lobby on issues affecting businesses, including lobbying via Peter Swallow MP.
- It was suggested that BFEP members be encouraged to propose agenda items to ensure they were driving discussions.
- Conversations would need to be honest and robust. At times, meetings might include confidential information that members would be expected to keep private.

46. Appointment of Partnership Joint Chairman

As required by the terms of reference, the Partnership would have joint chairs: one from the skills sector and another from the business sector. Members of the BFEP were informed that this role would not be overly demanding, as officers would provide support both during meetings and with any work required outside of meetings.

After discussion, it was agreed that the Joint Chairs for the Partnership would be:

- Ben Jokiel (Skills)
- Jim Reay (Business)

It was agreed that discussions with the Joint Chairs on how to operate going forward would take place following the meeting.

47. **Overview of Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy and Action Plan**

Chris Mansfield, Head of Economic Development and Regeneration, briefed members on the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy 2024–2034 and its associated action plan. This 10-year strategy had been adopted by Bracknell Forest Council in early 2024. An outline of the vision was provided, with each of the strategy's themes supported by a number of aims, which would serve as benchmarks for evaluating progress.

A Balanced Scorecard Assessment had been developed to track progress across the four themes.

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

- A shortage of vocational skills within the borough posed a key challenge to the local economy.
- Bracknell remained a popular place to live due to relatively affordable housing and high levels of wellbeing.
- There were fewer companies within the knowledge economy, creating a "chicken and egg" scenario when attempting to build a skilled workforce.
- A high proportion of companies operating within the borough were international businesses.
- There were lower levels of business creation and entrepreneurial spirit compared to neighbouring areas.

Arising from questions and discussion, the following points were raised:

- It was important to represent all businesses, including non-knowledge-based sectors.
- The lower levels of entrepreneurial spirit could partly be attributed to the absence of a university in Bracknell Forest, with many young people relocating to Reading, Oxford, or London after completing their studies.
- Bracknell Forest had a smaller market compared to areas such as Reading.
- Startups tended to focus on areas with higher demand and established supply chains, which contributed to lower business activity in more rural areas.
- While some businesses no longer required local demand due to the digital world, infrastructure remained vital for their success.

48. **Partnership Work Programme and Strategy Monitoring:**

Chris Mansfield briefed the BFEP on the Partnership Work Programme and how the strategy would be monitored. The BFEP would play a significant role in monitoring the strategy to ensure it was being effectively delivered. It was acknowledged that the strategy would likely need to evolve in response to developments in the local and national economy.

A total of 24 actions had been identified, each aligning with one of the four strategic themes. Each action included an assessment of the current state, a target state, priorities for action, and proposed timescales. The aim of the action plan was to enable the group to identify problems and address them.

It was noted that a range of delivery mechanisms would be needed to implement the strategy, as the BFEP or Bracknell Forest Council would not always have the direct

power to effect change. Therefore, it was important to increase the influence of the BFEP to shape decisions made by political leaders and business stakeholders.

Members were asked to reflect on whether any of the four themes particularly resonated with them and consider how they could contribute to developing and driving that aspect of the strategy.

The BFEP reviewed the areas in the action plan that had been flagged as red, indicating where Bracknell Forest was performing comparatively worse. These areas were:

- Business Growth Rate
- Knowledge Economy
- ICT Businesses
- Skills Levels

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- Realistic growth targets were necessary, given challenges such as the limited availability of office space in Bracknell compared to nearby areas like Reading.
- A lack of small business spaces was hindering the growth of startups.
- Large businesses had a wide range of nearby options, such as Green Park in Reading, making it difficult to retain them in Bracknell.
- The transition to net-zero could present a growing challenge for small businesses, which might struggle with the associated costs and regulations.
- Two large companies had recently relocated to nearby areas, and it was suggested that this be seen as an opportunity to investigate whether they had considered Bracknell Forest and, if so, why they had ultimately chosen not to move there.

Chris confirmed that he was happy to receive emails from members regarding the action plan.

49. **Regional and National Economic Development**

Andrew Hunter provided an update on regional and national economic development. Talks were ongoing with the government regarding further devolution within Berkshire. To support this, the Berkshire Prosperity Board had been set up, comprising all six Berkshire local authorities, with the aim of creating a more prosperous region. As the economies of these authorities were interconnected, it was hoped that a collaborative approach would yield positive outcomes for all. Berkshire had been identified as the second strongest economy outside London in the UK, and it was hoped that the Berkshire Prosperity Board would strengthen Berkshire's case to central government for funding to drive growth.

The Berkshire Prosperity Board was made up of the political leaders of each local authority in Berkshire, with each leader taking charge of a different workstream. The Leader of Bracknell Forest Council was responsible for the Net Zero workstream. Alongside this, a Berkshire Business Board would also be established. BFEP members interested in joining were encouraged to get involved to ensure Bracknell Forest's representation on the Board. A Berkshire-wide economic strategy would be developed, which would have some overlap with the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy 2024–2034.

Once further information on the Berkshire Business Board and the Berkshire economic strategy was available, it would be shared with the BFEP.

During the discussion, the following points were raised:

- It was important to take a more robust approach to lobbying central government, ensuring they understood that national targets could not be met unless they were specifically addressed.
- When pitching for investment to central government, it would be essential to clearly define what the investment would achieve and how it would make a difference.
- Consideration needed to be given to how investment and support could be provided to non-knowledge economy businesses, particularly in adapting to the digital economy.
- Skills shortages needed to be tackled to attract more businesses, but there was a "chicken and egg" problem, as employers in the area needed to require the right skills to draw skilled workers.

50. **Any Other Business**

Cllr Bidwell emphasised the importance of communication with businesses and the use of networks to ensure they were aware of the work being carried out by the BFEP. It was noted that a new website for the partnership was underway. The BFEP was also informed that the local authority did not want to act as gatekeepers and would allow members to drive the work if they wished. The intention was for the partnership to operate as a network rather than being bureaucratically led.

There was a discussion on the challenges of attracting businesses to Bracknell Forest. One issue identified was that nearby areas such as Reading, Wokingham, and Slough were more well known and had clearer identities. It was felt that Bracknell Forest had not developed a strong identity following its new town status. However, the vast green spaces within Bracknell Forest were recognised as a key selling point.

CHAIRMAN

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