



Bob's Blog

Bracknell Forest's Economic Skills & Development Partnership (ESDP)

July 2023

Welcome to the July 2023 edition of Bob's Blog. My Blog is aimed at keeping ESDP Members up to date with what's happening in the Partnership. Please feel free to pass these Blogs on to your colleagues and contacts if they are interested in the work of the ESDP.

ESDP General Meeting

The ESDP General Meeting held in person at the **Waitrose Conference Centre**, Bracknell on 6 June 2023 was attended by 18 members and guests, including **Susan Halliwell**, Bracknell Forest Council Chief Executive, and **Cllr. Paul Bidwell**, Executive Member for Economic Development and Regeneration (see right with me). We had two great presentations, covering progress with the development of the Council's **Economic Strategy**, and an update on the on the **UK Shared Prosperity Fund**. I've summarised some of the key points from each presentation below.



Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy: On behalf of Bracknell Forest Council, Simon Matthews presented progress on the development of the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy. The Strategy will set out the economic strengths and weaknesses of the Borough and what can be done to improve future performance. Simon reported on some of the headlines arising from the data analysis undertaken so far. Some of the notable points identified so far; falling under four main themes are as follows:

The Economy: Bracknell Forest's economy is strong, although not outstanding in relation to neighbouring local authority areas. Bracknell Forest has been resilient to economic set-backs but its potential for 'business creation' has, however, been weaker than in some areas. Bracknell Forest's Gross Value Added (GVA) – a measure of economic activity - declined by 2.49% between 2016 and 2020, whereas all other comparator areas, apart from Reading, saw GVA increase.

People, Work and Skills: The Borough has a generally lower level of skills than elsewhere, but unemployment is low and there is a high level of self-employment.

Health and Wellbeing: Housing is relatively affordable when compared with neighbouring areas, such as Reading.

Infrastructure and Connectivity: The Borough has a high level of car-usage, with the train line to London Waterloo considered to be slow and therefore a possible set-back to growth. There is also a challenge over implementing enough Electric Vehicle Charging Points. The Borough's 'campus-style' office space is going to be a challenge in terms of future use and occupancy by businesses, especially with the changes in working practices, such as hybrid working and the need for the Grade A plus office space that companies are now adopting. There is good IT Connectivity.

Simon stated that how the Borough's business potential is 'branded' in the future will be important in retaining and attracting new businesses. The study is now in its strategy development phase. It is anticipated that a draft of the strategy would be produced by the end of July and that this will be followed by a consultation stage.



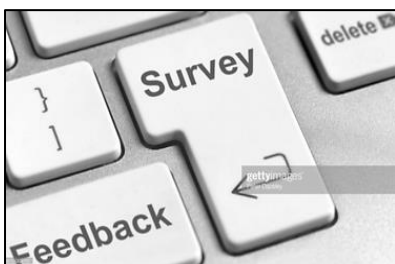
UK Shared Prosperity Fund: Chris Mansfield updated the group at the General Meeting on progress with Bracknell Forest's allocation under the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF); a central pillar of the UK Government's Levelling Up Agenda. **A Local Partnership Group** is being set up to provide a critical overview of the projects to be delivered under the fund. The Council's investment plan is focused on 3 UKSPF investment priorities; Communities and Place; Local Business and People and Skills. The Council's allocation comprises approximately £62K in year 1, £125K in year 2 and £811K in Year 3. Early-stage beneficiaries include **The Ark**, a Voluntary Community Transport Scheme, the **Berkshire Growth Hub**, the **Craft Coop** and the **Bracknell BID**. The latter will support improvements to the Western Road area. Funding will be allocated in year 2 to the **Skills and Training Hub** being promoted by the ESDP (see below).

Climate Change Business Strategy

Seb Wright of Bracknell Forest Council provided an update on the Borough's climate change business strategy agenda. The strategy will be focussed specifically on support for businesses of all sizes and across all sectors, and will guide the Council's activities in this area for at least the next several years. The Council sees its role as mainly in facilitation, signposting and providing advice. Aims include reducing carbon emissions from businesses in Bracknell Forest, improving business engagement on climate and environmental issues and helping to improve business performance and growth in Bracknell Forest. The Council's Team wants to work with local businesses, particularly SMEs, to dispel the myth that bringing in measures to help mitigate climate changes will be costly, and to show that small low-cost changes can be made to help the climate change agenda. The ESDP is supporting the development of the strategy through its Infrastructure Sub-Group, with three of its members attending the Working Group.

Skills and Training Hub

The ESDP has continued to support the development of a **Skills and Training Hub** for Bracknell Forest, working with the Council and local businesses through leadership provided within our **Employment and Skills Sub-Group**. This is a major initiative which has attracted substantial funding under the Council's UK Shared Prosperity Fund allocation. A Steering Group, which includes several ESDP Members, has been established to provide guidance on the development of the Hub. The project will receive funding in Years 2 and 3 of the Council's allocation and provides a great opportunity for working with private sector partners in providing information services on training and skills development and also training services specific to Bracknell Forest businesses. Please get in touch if you would like to get involved or want to know more about the project.



The **Bracknell Forest/ESDP 2022 Business Survey Report**, commissioned to gain an understanding of the impacts of changing economic conditions on businesses in Bracknell Forest is available for all. The surveys were carried out in November 2022 using computer assisted telephone interviewing of 517 Bracknell businesses. They provide wide-ranging information on local business performance and expectations as well as on the impacts of covid, changes in working practices and comparisons with previous annual surveys. The report can be downloaded from the ESDP's Website at: <https://www.esdpbracknell.co.uk/>

Employment & Skills and Infrastructure Sub-Group Meetings: The next meetings will be announced soon. Please get in touch if you would like to join a Sub-Group.

General Meetings: The next General meeting for ESDP members and interested businesses is scheduled to be held on **Tuesday 17 October 2023 from 9.30 am to 11.00 am**. We are hoping to hold the meeting in-person again. We will supply more information about the venue and agenda nearer the time. The next **ESDP Event** is pencilled in for **Tuesday 19th September**. We'll keep you informed.

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