



Champions' Annual Report

2016-17

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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to appraise all Members of the work and progress undertaken by the Council's Champions during the year 2016-2017.

The report informs Members of activities and their outcomes and outlines proposed future activities.

Business Champion Councillor Wade



1 The Business Environment

On the 23 June the UK voted to leave the EU. This has sparked a series of difficult questions yet to be answered by the Government. However, intense negotiations between the UK and the EU will soon begin, focusing on many issues such as trade agreements, movement of people and funding.

Furthermore, although the world markets are collectively much bigger than Europe; many trade agreements dealing with the rest of the world will need to be reviewed and negotiated by the UK as it leaves the EU.

Brexit does pose serious issues for some businesses in Bracknell Forest, particularly those that have a European headquarters locally. It is currently uncertain what the effects will be for business and how such issues will be taken into account during negotiations.

2 Retention of key businesses

Bracknell Forest boasts a strong economy, being at the heart of the Thames Valley, also known as the Silicon Valley of Europe due to the high density of innovative tech companies based here. It can also list 13 European headquarters of multi-national businesses such as: Fujitsu, Dell, Panasonic, 3M, Hewlett Packard and Honda.

However, with these names comes risk of losing these companies and the need to concentrate on retention. That is why the Council, through the Regeneration and Economy team, have a “Business Liaison Programme.” This is where strategically important businesses are assigned a “Business Champion,” including the CEO, Director or Chief Officer. They meet with these companies on an annual basis, or more often if required, to understand any issues for the business and see what the Council can do to help.

The programme has been running effectively for more than two years and continues to be reviewed as required.

3 Bracknell Forest - Economic & Skills Development Partnership (ESDP)

The purpose of the Economic & Skills Development Partnership is to facilitate and promote the continued economic development of Bracknell Forest. The partnership acts as the voice of business and brings together representatives from the private, public and education sectors.

Over the last year the ESDP, of which I am a member, has delivered alongside the Regeneration and Economy team:

- Secured significant financial support for infrastructure improvements in Bracknell Forest.
- The endorsement and support of establishing a Bracknell Business Improvement District in the Southern and Western Business Areas.
- Created a Lexicon Employment Strategy.
- Improved the rail capacity at Bracknell train station and reduced travel times into London.
- The continued support to Elevate Education, providing employment support to young people.
- Proposed an Article 4 direction of key employment areas in Bracknell Forest, so that office conversions to residential will have to go through the full planning process.
- Consulted on the Government's Industrial Strategy.
- Consulted on the Heathrow explanation plan.
- Consulted on various planning documents such as the Functional Economic Market Area (FEMA,) Economic Development Needs Assessment (EDNA) and Strategic Housing & Employment Land Availability Assessments (SHELAA.)
- Nominated a new Chairman, Bob Collis, a former director of Transport Research Laboratory (TRL.)

4 Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (TVB LEP)

Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) is a business-led partnership. ESDP has one LEP director (Campbell Christie – CEO, B&W College) and Cllr Brunel-Walker attending the LEP.

Between 2015 and 2021 the LEP has access to £122M of public funds (UK and EU) available to deliver economic growth initiatives in Thames Valley Berkshire.

The LEP has contributed to the sustainable economic growth of Thames Valley through the implementation of its Strategic Economic Plan.

The LEP brings together business, unitary authorities, education and the community sector to drive the local economy to new levels of growth by securing better access to talented people and bright ideas, and to use both more effectively; focused on three key priority areas:

- Delivering essential housing

- Enhancing urban connectivity
- Growing the STEM skills base and targeting business support

5 Business Rates

The impact of the re-evaluation of Business Rates has had a serious impact on businesses in general and, in particular, to SMEs.

In Crowthorne, the increases have outstripped the majority of Bracknell Forest. After action by local Councillors and Traders, the business rates of many SMEs/shops have been significantly reduced, but more has to be done. The complicated re-evaluation process for business rates is in the hands of individual traders, who find the process challenging and time consuming. Some traders are now considering closure!

6 Networking

The primary way in which SMEs enhance their businesses is through networking groups both local and national. These include the Federation of Small Businesses, Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, the Bracknell Enterprise and Innovation Hub etc.

Generally, business entrepreneurs conclude that the importance of face-to-face introductions for building relationships is paramount in developing potential business opportunities.

7 Conclusion

Thames Valley Berkshire is an economic powerhouse of enormous importance to the UK. It performs strongly on most key economic measures. It has the highest economic output per head of population of all English sub-regions outside of London and has England's most productive workforce. With high employment rates (77% of the Berkshire working age population are employed compared with an England average of 73%,) it is anticipated that the greatest uplift in economic output will be driven through productivity improvements, rather than an increase in the number of people employed.

Bracknell Town – the Lexicon – is a flagship in Bracknell Forest (and the UK) demonstrating the economic growth, stability and confidence in the region.

Theresa May triggered Article 50 on 29 March - starting the two year departure from the EU. The vast majority of SMEs in the UK export to the EU, and this trend is unlikely to change because selling to distant markets is even more challenging for SMEs. Even if Brexit immediately gives way to a Norway-style trade deal, small business owners will face greater costs when trading with the EU. These factors will reduce profitability and make borrowing more difficult for small businesses.

The next two years will be very uncertain for the UK economy and especially for SMEs.

Councillor Bob Wade

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Commuters' Champion Councillor Harrison



Overview

The past year has been a period during which Bracknell Forest's commuters have started to see real, physical changes to address the needs they have identified to Bracknell Forest Commuters' Champion. Much of this has been trailed in advance and announced by Executive Members and the Network Rail Alliance during the course of the year.

In addition, new issues have arisen as a result of the Highways Agencies' roads programme, so work has been ongoing to provide constructive comment where it is necessary.

Councillor Harrison would like to thank officers and members of the Council for their support in funding improvements to commuter services and the Network Rail Alliance, in particular, for their co-operation.

Activity

Rail Services

Bracknell Station Facilities

The Commuters' Champion has regularly visited Bracknell Railway Station to see the progress of the improvement works. It has been gratifying to watch the works underway to extend the platforms at Bracknell Station and note that crews have been working into the early hours of the morning to reduce disruption to rail services.

Coincidentally, Councillor Harrison has recently started a regular commute to London by rail again and appreciated first-hand the experience of commuters living in Bracknell Forest. At the time of writing, the improved concourse and customer toilets at Bracknell Station are still under construction but, for a regular commuter from Bracknell Station, they will be welcome.

Warning!

August could be a difficult month for commuters on the Waterloo line as there will be significant changes at Waterloo Station to extend platforms for longer trains. Commuters who use this service and have yet to decide when to book their summer holidays, may like to bear this in mind.

Road Transport

The Commuters' Champion has taken the opportunity to join the Highways England Customer Forums to contribute feedback on the subject of the ongoing M3 Smart Motorway road works.

The Commuters' Champion is a nominated substitute on the Berkshire Local Transport Body and the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and often attends, in addition to the Bracknell Forest Council Executive members and officers, to stay informed as to the progress and delivery of strategic projects across Berkshire. There will be potential for local authorities in our area to take more control over transport priorities in future with the prospective launch of Transport for the South East.

Councillor John Harrison

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Older People's Champion Councillor Thompson



The Council has a prime interest in the welfare of the residents of Bracknell and, as Older People's Champion, I make it a priority to be aware of the work of the various organisations and groups within the Borough who are there for the benefit of older people.

The Voluntary Sector Council and partners are visibly brought together in the work of the Older People's Partnership Board which has enabled an interchange of views and enabled a focus in relation to their activities and I have found this a useful forum.

In furtherance of the objectives of the Board, one aspect that has emerged is that it would benefit from contributions from a wider range of members from the voluntary sector to broaden the scope of its activity.

The Health and Social Care Act (2012) established the requirement for local Health and Wellbeing Boards as a forum where key leaders from the health and care system can work together to improve the health and wellbeing of their local population and reduce health inequalities (I attend its public meetings as an observer.)

Given the remit of the Health and Wellbeing Board, it is considered that in some ways the work of the Older People's Partnership Board may be considered a duplication. In the light of this, the Older People's Partnership Board is considering its future and alternatives are being considered so that a wider range of members can have a forum at which to meet. If you have views on this, please do let me know and I will pass on any ideas.

In considering the general wellbeing of older people within the community they are well served by parks and open spaces and public transport which provide a service for the community. There is good provision of adult education courses and leisure facilities. Health services compare well with the national scene, but service providers are well aware of the need for an increase in GP provision to meet the needs of a growing elderly population.

Previously the services offered within the Bracknell town centre have been somewhat restricted, but with the regeneration of the new town centre (opening in September 2017) work has been undertaken with the Council's Access Group, of which I am Chairman, to ensure that the needs of people with disabilities are fully represented. These representations have been taken into account in making the centre user friendly, for example the provision of two dementia friendly parking spaces.

I am a member of the Council's Health, Overview and Scrutiny Panel, Licensing and Safety Committee, Governance and Audit, Planning Committee and Performance Review Groups which consider upcoming decisions of the Council. I am also a Council nominated trustee of Age Concern Bracknell Forest. I meet regularly with Council Officers and in all of these roles I endeavour to further the interests of older people.

In reviewing the year, there is ongoing concern with loneliness and isolation. There is no one solution to isolation and loneliness, but Adult Social Care, Health and Housing are working closely with both small community groups and the voluntary sector to develop a 'Welcome Map' that will be available for people to search for activities that are available in their area (either by geography or by their particular interest) and where people wishing to join will be given a warm welcome. This approach is also reflected in the overall Council approach to supporting individuals and communities to help themselves. Overall, we each have a responsibility to seek to help to reduce this. One approach is organised interaction between schools and older people and there are many others as might be seen from activities identified in Keeping Active and Keeping Social below.

A subject which has received much publicity is dementia. I believe that each of us will have some knowledge of its effect, but this can be wide ranging in relation to the individual and can give a high degree of stress to family and carers. Positively it appears to be at the forefront of national attention. Locally, the Council and Berkshire Healthcare Foundation Trust provide support through the Bracknell Community Mental Health Team for Older Adults and there is also a designated dementia adviser.

Digital exclusion can be an issue for older people and there have been a range of courses run to address this.

In October a public event took place at the Leisure Centre "Planning for Later Life" with the lead being taken by Age Concern Bracknell Forest and working with the Council. I was a member of the steering group. The agenda included digital exclusion, financial planning, the internet, legal matters, independent living and adjustment to change and self care. Overall the event was a success.

March was the month designated as the month for Ageing Well in the Bracknell Forest Year of Self Care. The local public health team published an interesting leaflet identifying some of the activities in which an individual can participate. Its headline themes were Keeping Active and Keeping Social. Participating in group activity and having various interests is known to be a key to wellbeing.

Overall in relation to local matters Bracknell has a growing elderly population and continues to look at ways of addressing needs through ensuring people are fully engaged in their local communities.

I commend my report to the Council.

Councillor Clifton Thompson

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Voluntary Sector Champion Councillor Finnie



In common with volunteers throughout the country, the demand on our local volunteers increases significantly at this time. Due to the considerable debt which the current government has inherited, more and more local services are being transferred to the voluntary sector. We are very fortunate in this community to have an excellent voluntary sector, very ably assisted by INVOLVE (formerly Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action) who provide a wonderful support to the community.

We live in an age when an increased reliance is placed on the voluntary sector. As many people will be aware, the future of our libraries has been under review. In many areas we have heard that this type of review has resulted in closure of libraries. Our Borough Council are considering how we can keep all our libraries open if we can be given some voluntary support. This would be well received, but it puts a further pressure on the voluntary sector.

I regret that it is no longer possible for the Borough Council to give financial support to voluntary groups, other than to Borough groups such as INVOLVE, whose grants have been considerably reduced in line with current financial constraints and we are all very grateful for the excellent contributions which they make to our community.

Our food banks in Bracknell and Crowthorne continue to be in great demand and we are all very grateful to the volunteers who organise them. Although we live in a fairly affluent area, some of our residents have greater need than others and we are very appreciative of those volunteers who do so much to those in need.

I would like to hear from any Member who has experienced any concern with the voluntary services in their area.

I am very grateful to all volunteers in our community for the wonderful service which they provide.

Councillor James G. Finnie

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