



Champions' Annual Report

2017-18

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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 2017-2018.

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

Business Champion Councillor Wade



1 The Business Environment

The UK is set to leave the European Union at 11pm GMT on Friday 29 March, 2019. Leaving the EU will have an impact on every business in the UK and many further afield.

The 'transition' period from 29 March 2019 to 31 December 2020 will enable the UK to get everything in place and allow businesses and others to prepare for the moment when the new post-Brexit rules between the UK and the EU begin. It also allows more time for the details of the new relationship to be fully 'hammered out.' Free movement will continue during the transition period as the EU wanted. The UK will be able to negotiate its own trade deals - although they won't be able to come into force until 1 January 2021.

Leading campaigners for Brexit have suggested that if the UK was unable to secure replacement trade and leave the EU's single market, they could rely on World Trade Organisation rules to access European and other markets deals. However, the UK would face tortuous negotiations to fix the terms of its membership of WTO, its director-general has warned.

I repeat from a year ago, "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."

The immigration controls seeking to manage the flow of people into the UK will also be challenging, since both highly skilled AND seasonal workers are important and in short supply. It will be difficult to categorise and monitor all groups.

Brexit poses serious challenges for all businesses in Bracknell Forest; and the way forward is still far from certain; making future investment decisions difficult to achieve.

Businesses are concerned about what Brexit will involve; while seeking to leverage the weaker pound. It's difficult to point to a precise or definitive impact of Brexit on the UK economy. Commentators and experts vary in their opinions, often proving either far too pessimistic, or far too optimistic.

2 Retention of key business

Bracknell Forest is an unbeatable place for companies to locate. It's 'where great business is in good company' – and world leading names such as Dell, Fujitsu, Vodafone, 3M, Hewlett Packard, Honda and Panasonic all agree.

Over the last 7 years more than £700 million has been invested into Bracknell Forest by a range of key stakeholders. As part of this, the creation of The Lexicon is one of the biggest transformations the borough has seen in 70 years, which has performed over expectations.

The Thames Valley Berkshire Business Growth Hub is designed to support entrepreneurs and businesses. They help both start-ups and established companies, providing free support and advice that includes networking events and workshops on a range of business issues.

Bracknell Forest Council has played and continues to make, a significant contribution to the local businesses and organisations promoting business in the Borough through their involvement in the LEP and Economic Skills and Development Partnership.

3 Retention of small business

There is a changing emphasis in small businesses and High Street retail outlets that now appear to largely focus on 'services' and 'convenience,' rather than 'product.'

The challenge of the internet with its ability to allow 'shopping around' and the convenience of on-line shopping/delivery has impacted the viability of many businesses, for example, local banks. This need for good value for money is caused by many residents of Bracknell Forest being 'asset rich' and 'cash poor.'

'Service' providers such as coffee shops, restaurants, hairdressers, beauticians, opticians, dry cleaners, IT and mobile phone support, electricians, plumbers, gardeners, lawyers and estate agents etc. are prolific. So much so, some have found the competition overwhelming!

Many 'product' stores have closed and some replaced by charity shops, which offer good value for money in the current cash-strapped environment and are also good for recycling!

Local outlets, such as 'convenience' stores, pharmacists, cobblers, butchers, DIY support, opticians are still in demand.

Clearly, the changes in purchaser's ability to access goods and services challenges business to adapt and those who don't may fail.

Working with the local community, efforts are being made to replace a post office and petrol station, the lack of which is viewed very "inconvenient!"

4 Fitness for work

With all the changes in the work environment, the need to ensure 'fitness for work' is essential, through re-training, upskilling or apprenticeships. Great store is held in achieving the highest standards in education, but this does not guarantee the development of life skills. A willingness to work, attentiveness, time-keeping, appearance etc. are all as important to core skills when interacting in business.

The Mayor recently organised an Apprenticeship seminar at which 90+ participants discussed the merits of apprenticeships and the associated life skills achieved.

5 Infrastructure Impact

One of the downsides of major success is the impact it has on the locality. Increased traffic, congestion, the inability to park and pollution all challenge the growth of established and new businesses.

The development growth in Bracknell Forest has inevitably increased traffic congestion, which is exacerbated by the new developments and the inevitable roadworks!

Through the planning process and the various Stakeholder Groups (associated with the larger developments,) providers, businesses and residents attempt to mitigate the conflicting requirements in such a way as to generally maintain the character and attractiveness of the area for all.

It is interesting to note that car sales have eased due to a combination of austerity, more reliability, the 'diesel vs. petrol vs. electric' debate, pollution, running costs and fuel economy.

Unfortunately, improvements to public transport systems are generally frustrated by complexity, cost and delivery. However, BFC lobbying and local pressure groups still promote the need for alternative methods of transport including National Rail and Airport links.

6 Environmental Impact

Part of the success in retaining and attracting new business rests with the desire to make the place a good environment for work, education and recreation.

The BFC Local Plan, in consultation with all those involved, including business, educational and recreational interests, has and will continue to shape the environment attempting to preserve the environment within the needs for more housing.

Discussions with the Local Trader Association give an insight into the challenges they experience in attracting people into their shops. Environmental concerns are high on the list, especially street scene and parking.

7 Housing

The significant housing programme in Berkshire has done little (so far) to make houses 'affordable.' The challenge for growing new businesses is access to viable accommodation. Ultimately, this issue could frustrate the creation and longevity of new businesses.

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

Bracknell Forest Economic & Skills Development Partnership facilitates and promotes 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, supported by the Business Champion.

9 Thames Valley Berkshire Local Economic Partnership (TVB LEP)

Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership is a business-led, multi-sector partnership mandated by government to lead activities that drive local economic growth. To date they have secured and allocated £182m of UK and European public funds to deliver a wide range of initiatives in the Thames Valley Berkshire area.

One LEP director (Campbell Christie – CEO, Bracknell & Wokingham College) and Cllr Marc Brunel-Walker are members of the Economic Skills and Development Partnership. As a result, Bracknell Forest Council continues to significantly benefit from their membership.

10 Networking

Business networks help business people connect with other managers and entrepreneurs to further each other's business interests by forming mutually beneficial business relationships.

The need for businesses to network is clear. Organisations such as the Thames Valley LEP, BFC Economic Skills & Development Partnership, Bracknell Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses, various Business Forums, Stakeholder Groups, Education establishments and local Councils; all provide an opportunity information sharing and partnerships.

The role of Business Champion has been to participate in and inform (both formally and informally) the various organisations of the needs and pressures of business enterprises. Also, to get directly involved with the challenges of small businesses, including escalating Business Rates, issues affecting the environment and planning and supporting the impact of closures such as post offices and petrol stations.

11 Conclusion

It is a decade since the UK economy peaked ahead of one of the most severe recessions in recent history. Ten years on, the UK is in a relatively strong position despite the uncertainties of Brexit: employment is at record levels, growth has been steady and business activity continues to rise.

However, whilst Great Britain may have record employment, wages have not kept up with inflation. The cumulative effect of inflation has pushed up prices by 33% since 2007. Wages have only risen by 15%. The economy is growing, but real wages are falling and living standards are not rising.

Article 50 was triggered in March 2017 - started the 2 year departure from the EU. However, due to the 'transition period,' complete freedom from direct EU controls will now extend to January 2021.

In the meantime, BF Council officers, Executive Members and Champions continue to promote the business and educational sectors, which includes aspects around the environment, infrastructure, health and housing provision.

Unrestricted

The Lexicon has given both existing and new business a very strong and vibrant place to grow, employing several thousand residents.

Councillor Bob Wade

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Commuters' Champion Councillor Harrison



Overview

Over the past year, Bracknell Forest's commuters, including yours truly have benefitted from the completion of the longer platforms and the introduction of ten car trains. The improved ticket hall in Bracknell with a seating area has provided some comfort during the cold, wet winter months.

In a previous year's report, slow services from Bracknell to Waterloo and overcrowding were identified as passengers' top two priorities. The Department for Transport has attempted to address these concerns during the franchising process by requiring bidders to explain how they will increase capacity and cut journey times. The longer trains already introduced have helped with the overcrowding and SWR plan to introduce a different style of carriage towards the end of the year, to provide more space when passengers are having to stand. It is also planned to remove the First Class designated areas to provide more space.

Rail passengers have experienced some significant disruption to services and will also have noticed the change in the franchisee on the Reading to Waterloo line from South West Trains to First MTR South Western Trains (branded South Western Railway.)

Ironically, this has been caused primarily by attempts by Network Rail and SWR to improve the passenger experience to meet commitments made to the Department for Transport as part of the franchise bid.

As part of the biggest rail modernisation programme in over one hundred years, some delays were caused by signalling work overrunning into the morning peak. Rail safety systems require that only one train may be present on a section of track at any time. The investment in the signalling will allow the sections of track controlled by each signal to be shorter and therefore more trains to be on the railway at the same time.

The RMT has also been taking industrial action in protest against the possible introduction of trains where the driver controls the opening and closing of the passenger doors. Under the present situation where the guard unlocks the doors, delays occur when the guard is caught up with selling tickets, assisting passengers or dealing with fare evasion and is in the wrong place when the train stops at a station. There are also occasions when trains are delayed from departing due to "lacking a member of staff." Allowing drivers, who are after all highly trained, safety conscious professionals, to control the doors could improve punctuality and reliability of services while reducing planned station dwell time could allow shorter travel times. SWR has stated it plans to keep the second member of staff on the trains, but the RMT do not accept the assurances.

The long running works at London Bridge station have now been largely completed, meaning commuters from Bracknell can travel on a simple London Terminals ticket

into the City of London, with a single change at Waterloo East, without needing to use the Underground.

Councillor Harrison would like to thank Officers and Members of the Council for their support in funding improvements to commuter services.

Activity

Rail Services

Bracknell Station Facilities

The Commuters' Champion has regularly visited Bracknell Railway Station and seen the completion of the improvement works.

Delay Repay

SWR have joined the "Delay Repay" scheme where passengers whose journeys have been delayed more than 15 minutes can claim a refund into their bank accounts with a simple form online. The system seems to be working well and the Commuters' Champion has benefitted from a number of refunds and shared the link on social media for the benefit of other passengers when they complain about train delays.

Timetable Changes

As part of its bid to run the South Western franchise, SWR has committed to reduce journey times. While this is welcome, the revised timetable on which SWR consulted achieves this in part by reducing the frequency of stops at lesser used stations. This would impact Martins Heron station and a number of passengers have expressed their concern.

The Commuters' Champion has taken the issue up with SWR and along with the Ward Members for Harmans Water and the Executive Member for Economic Development, encouraged passengers to take part in the consultation.

It is likely that the revised timetable does not take into account the additional housing proposed in the emerging Local Plan. This new evidence will be used to urge SWR to reconsider the downgrading of Martins Heron and restore four trains an hour during peak times. The Commuters' Champion has lobbied SWR to achieve its faster journey times by use of technology, rather than by inconveniencing passengers.

Road Transport

The Commuters' Champion has participated in 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.) This body allocates devolved Central Government grants to strategic projects across Berkshire. The Commuters' Champion often attends, in addition to the Bracknell Forest Council's Executive Members and Officers, to stay informed and to help make Bracknell Forest's case for transport schemes that benefit our residents.

Unrestricted

Bracknell Forest Council has made a number of successful bids over the past few years which have funded new roads such as the Warfield Link road and junction capacity improvements to keep the traffic moving.

Councillor John Harrison

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Older People's Champion Councillor Thompson



For the year to the end of March 2018 the principal focus has been on transformation within the Council, due to the necessity to curtail expenditure so as to be able to meet commitments and maintain services. Visible evidence of this is the move from the Council offices at Easthampstead House to Time Square.

Furthering the use of technology as part of this with a drive towards a paperless society has proved a challenge and will continue to do so. My concern in this connection is that in particular older people are not excluded. I am pleased to note that arrangements are in place to cater for the whole community.

Home based Social Care to enable residents to stay at home is the direction to which services have moved. Bracknell Forest 'Help Yourself' is a community website designed to help connect people to information, activities and services to stay independent and well. Alongside this the Council is securing more care home provision for residents where this is needed.

During the year the Care Quality Commission carried out a review of the local system in Bracknell Forest. I was one of those who met with the Commission. In October they issued a positive report finding that there was a system-wide commitment to serve the people of Bracknell Forest well, with good quality health and social care services being provided in a timely way.

Making care as person centred as possible and putting people in control of their care is at the heart of the plans to transform social care. More, older people than ever before are being supported through the use of personal care budgets and direct payments to arrange their own care the way they choose. This is now well embedded as the first choice option for people with care and support needs.

Last year I mentioned isolation and loneliness. Progress has been made in reducing this, but it is still with us. It is something where each one of us can help.

A significant change is the way that the Council is addressing this. For example, the Adult Social Care Health and Housing Department has recruited two staff members (community connectors) who will work with people to bring them back into the community and encourage those who are lonely to take up hobbies and make friends.

Public Health is also providing social prescribers who will work with health professionals and with the community connectors to support vulnerable and lonely people.

Generally I have continued my other activities on Overview and Scrutiny, Licensing & Safety, Planning, Governance & Audit and Performance Review and as a trustee of Age Concern Bracknell Forest and, as previously, ensure with these I give due regard the interests of Older People.

I have continued as Chairman of the Access Group which provides a positive channel for residents and interest groups to address their concerns

Matters I mentioned in last year's report included dementia, GP provision, general wellbeing, adult education and parks open spaces. These remain in focus.

Heatherwood Hospital is the subject of improvement works to include a planned care centre. This can be seen in the context of partnerships to assimilate the NHS working with social care and the voluntary sector - something to keep a close eye on in 2018.

The latter end of 2017 saw the opening of the Lexicon complex in the centre of Bracknell. The Lexicon is visitor friendly and is a place to go to shop and relax in a safe environment.

The interests and concerns of Older People are diverse as are organisations willing and able to help. Apart from the information available on the Council's website, information as to voluntary and community services can be accessed through Involve, the locally based community support organisation.

I commend this report to the Council.

Councillor Clifton Thompson

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Voluntary Sector Champion Councillor Finnie



The importance of the role played by the Voluntary Sector in our Borough should never be underestimated, as we all benefit from their wonderful contribution.

Our youth organisations including the Guides, Scouts, Cadets, and many more are mainly organised by volunteers, who give an excellent service preparing youngsters for their future. This service is very important and gives youngsters a tremendous start to the challenges of life. On entering adulthood many of these go on to join leisure clubs, including sporting activities such as football, rugby, hockey, tennis, badminton and many more. Most of these clubs are also organised by volunteers, which again shows our debt to the Voluntary Sector.

Later in life, these “youngsters” will become senior citizens when they will be very grateful for the assistance which our senior citizens receive from many volunteers. Other volunteers give important help to our physically disabled residents and those suffering from mental challenges. We are extremely grateful to those wonderful volunteers who do so much to help those in need.

The volunteers who are helping to keep our libraries open during this period of financial constraint should also be mentioned for their commitment. Our Health Services also benefit from invaluable voluntary assistance and this is something for which we are all very grateful.

There is no doubt that all residents are enormously dependant on the voluntary services and we are very appreciative for the support the voluntary service gives. We are fortunate in Bracknell Forest to have an excellent organisation called INVOLVE (formerly Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action) who do so much to assist voluntary groups when required.

The one common request I receive from many voluntary groups and from Involve is the desire for more volunteers and I ask everyone to consider if they would like to become a volunteer in order to assist others. Many volunteers tell me that they find it really rewarding helping others. If you would be prepared to assist the voluntary sector in some way, please complete the attached form.

Councillor James G. Finnie

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I would like to VOLUNTEER and assist the –

Youth – Disabled – Elderly – Other

(Please indicate preference)

Name

Address
.....
.....
.....

Email

Telephone number

Please return to:-

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