



Champions' Annual Report

2015-16

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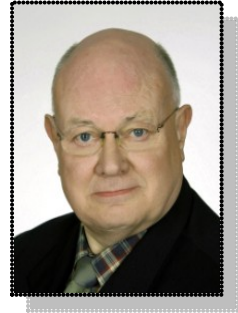
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Introduction

The purpose of this report is to appraise all Members of the work and progress undertaken by the Council's Champions during the year 2015-2016.

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 may decide to leave the EU. If the UK were to leave, there would be intense negotiations whereby the UK seeks to reach agreement with the EU, for example, on free trade.

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 in the event of leaving the EU.

Whatever happens in June; either way the business world will find new challenges. Here in Bracknell Forest the opinions vary and as yet no clear view has been established.

2 Businesses and the EU

Circa 95% of all UK businesses do not trade directly with the EU. The large multi-nationals will carve out their future around whatever the outcome of the referendum.

SME (small and micro) businesses may find it difficult to engage in the EU arguments, but are concerned about the potential political, economic and emotional reactions to leaving the EU impacting their UK markets.

The British Chamber of Commerce survey indicated around three quarters of their membership would prefer the status quo.

3 Economy

The world's "stuttering" economic recovery is set to continue to disappoint into the next year, the head of the International Monetary Fund has warned. Rising US interest rates, a Chinese slowdown and disappointing world trade will all weigh on growth prospects in 2016.

The IMF estimates the global economy will expand by 3.6pc, but growth is likely to be "disappointing and uneven."

4 Bracknell Forest - Economic & Skills Development Partnership

The Economic and Skills Development Partnership was set up in 2008 to combat the effects of the recession. In 2013, the Council had funded prime economic development in the borough, and formed a new Business and Enterprise team in 2014.

To date, the Economic and Skills Development Partnership alongside the Business and Enterprise team had:

- Developed a new customer contact system

Unrestricted

- Conducted two business surveys
- Recruited new and additional businesses to the partnership
- Promoted the council as a key economic player in the borough
- Secured £14m real grant funding from the LEP for infrastructure development
- Received an increase in the number of business enquiries
- Developed elevate and the elevate hub
- Pioneered the business contact programme
- Attracted inward investment from China, including five delegation visits
- Supported Honda in their relocation
- Supported Sharp, Boehringer Ingelheim and Fujitsu in their relocation and consolidation
- Launched Small Business Saturday
- Supplied 96% of premises in the borough with superfast broadband
- Been the biggest beneficiary of the Berkshire local authorities for highways funding
- Held four careers events for young people

The ESDP and the Business and Enterprise Service are collectively a good news story, but now there are major financial challenges within the council.

However, the council is keen to continue supporting economic development in the borough, but due to budget restrictions, the Business and Enterprise Service has been reduced.

The ESDP have been asked three questions to consider going forward:

- What were the most important priorities for the partnership?
- How could the business community in Bracknell Forest be developed further?
- What did ESDP partners want to do to move forward with the partnership?

A meeting of the sub-group chairmen to discuss future tactics, priorities and the appropriate ESDP sub-group structure has been held and a way forward has been agreed. The focus will be on retention of our existing firms and attracting new companies to the borough.

5 Thames Valley Berkshire Local Economic Partnership (TVB LEP)

Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) is a business-led partnership. To date they have allocated £140m of public funds (UK and EU) to deliver economic growth initiatives in Thames Valley Berkshire.

The LEP has contributed to the sustainable economic growth of TVB through the implementation of a Strategic Economic Plan, which has four programmes:

Enterprise & Innovation

The LEP has funded initiatives to improve the business support available across the area, including the Thames Valley Berkshire Funding Escalator, a Business Growth Hub where all companies can start their growth journey and ConnectTVT, where ideas from tech start-ups can be shared and flourish.

Employability & Skills

To achieve the highest levels of education in our workforce, TVB is helping to develop five new Solutions Labs, which will equip young people with the STEM skills needed.

Infrastructure

The LEP prioritise infrastructure that supports growth through investment in transport improvements to enhance connectivity (£16.6m has been allocated for 2015/16.)

£1.5 million was allocated from Growing Places Fund to Bracknell Forest Council for a new infrastructure regeneration initiative. The money will help with much needed infrastructure improvements to the town centre - including the bus station which is a vital transport hub for the town.

International

Continue to promote the area's key growth sectors and its value proposition in order to encourage international businesses to invest and grow their supply chains in TVB.

6 Superfast Berkshire (Broadband)

The majority of people in Bracknell Forest now have access to superfast broadband (96% of premises in the borough.) The issue was pursued by Bracknell Forest Council with residents and businesses getting behind a campaign together with the MP for Bracknell Forest, Dr Phillip Lee.

7 Bracknell Forest Council – Business Support and Advice

BFC has created a website page as a 'one stop shop' for businesses in Bracknell Forest and sign posts to providers of support and advice.

The links provided to relevant organisations save time and enable individuals to start, grow or enhance their business.

<http://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/business>

8 Networking

The primary way in which SMEs enhance their businesses is through networking.

This takes the form of both large organisations and small groups, e.g:

- The Federation of Small Businesses
- Berkshire Chamber of Commerce
- Business Biscotti
- Bracknell Enterprise and Innovation Hub
- The Business Forum

- BNI etc.

The big question is: “Are these networking events effective?”

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

Networking is the main stay for SMEs

9 Conclusion

The Bracknell Forest Council business team has been actively involved with the commercial needs of the borough through the Bracknell Town Regeneration project, the Economic Skills and Development Partnership, the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership and involvement in networking groups.

In spite of the BFC financial cutbacks, the business team will continue promote Bracknell Forest as a place for investment and growth; especially in forging links with fast growing economies such as China.

On the European issue small business owners do not feel fully informed and are still unsure on the EU referendum vote. They say more information on the impact of the EU to their businesses is needed; particularly the administrative burden of complying with EU regulation and more detail on the cost of EU membership.

Small businesses make up over 98% of all businesses in the UK and create two thirds of the jobs in this country. Both sides of the EU “in/out” debate should be helping small businesses (and the public) understand the issues, so they can make a fully informed decision. This is vital to our future prosperity.

Councillor Bob Wade

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Councillor Harrison



Overview

Over the past year the Bracknell Forest Commuters' Champion, Councillor Harrison, has consistently pushed forward the priorities of commuters in Bracknell Forest, listened to new concerns arising as the result of developments and the changing economic situation and carefully monitored the progress of improvements to Bracknell Forest's infrastructure.

Councillor Harrison would like to thank residents for being forthcoming with their views on commuting from Bracknell Forest and thank officers and members of the Council for their support in pushing for improvements to commuter services.

Priorities

Two years ago, the Commuters' Champion related that the top priorities for the area's commuters were:

- Overcrowding on railway services
- Slow services from Bracknell to London compared with other towns at similar distances
- Rising train fares

Since that report two other issues have been raised:

- Disruption to road travel caused by changes to the A329(M)
- An approach to rail passenger refunds by South West Trains which is out of step with the best in the industry

Activity

Rail Services

Overcrowding

The Commuters' Champion, together with the Executive Member for Transport and Planning and the Executive Member for Economic Development and officers from the Planning and Transport Department have held regular meetings with the SWT-Network Rail Alliance. It would be extreme narcissism to claim that the South West Trains investment programme resulted from the work of the Commuters' Champion, but by drawing attention to the issue and demonstrating the solid support of BFC we have encouraged SWT to invest in extra capacity on the Reading to Waterloo line.

- Towards the end of 2015, South West Trains completed the roll out of 108 Class 456 refurbished carriages. The first part of the delivery of a programme of extra capacity, which will provide an additional 250 carriages and 10 car trains on the Bracknell-Waterloo line has started.
- Work to extend the Bracknell platform to accommodate 10 car trains is planned.
- The opening of Waterloo platform 20 to Reading services has provided more capacity to run extra services and works to lengthen platforms 1-4 are planned.

Train Fares

The Commuters' Champion welcomed a decision by the Government to extend the fares regime introduced in 2014, which limits regulated rail fare increases to 2%. It also means that for the first time since 2003, people's earnings are on average rising more quickly than fares. Latest figures show that earnings are increasing by 2.4%.

Bracknell Station Facilities

In support of the recommendation by the Commuters' Champion, Bracknell Forest Council has offered to help South West Trains improve facilities at Bracknell Station. Design work has progressed well and it is likely that the public will soon see significant work to the concourse.

Rail Refunds

The Commuters' Champion has written to the Office of Road and Rail consultation about passenger refunds for delays making the case for -

- Automatic refunds where possible
- Better information to passengers about how to claim
- Better information to travellers as to what is going on during disruption
- All Train Operating Companies should follow the practice of the best when it comes to service disruption refunds, for example the 'Delay Repay' scheme, where passengers are eligible to claim for compensation for any delay of 30 minutes or more. CrossCountry, East Midlands, Virgin Trains and several other Train Operating Companies operate this policy, but SWT and FGW do not.

The Office of Road and Rail has indicated in its response that it agrees with many of the points raised and will impose new refund policies on the franchisee, when the franchise is next awarded.

Road Transport

The Commuters' Champion regularly attends the Berkshire Local Transport Body and the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to push forward the priorities of commuters and businesses in Bracknell Forest. Through participation in these fora, Bracknell Forest has been successful in gaining funding through the LEP for schemes to improve traffic movement in the Borough, including the Coral Reef junction and Martins Heron roundabout.

Residents have recently suffered traffic delays on the A329(M) between Bracknell and Reading, as a result of changes to the road layout in conjunction with the M4 Smart Motorway scheme. The Commuters' Champion has written to the Highways Agency to emphasise the issue and open up a dialogue about how it might be solved.

Councillor John Harrison

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Older People's Champion Councillor Thompson



During the year 2015 to 2016 my activities as Older People's Champion have followed much the same pattern as in recent years.

One of the regular features is my participation in the Older People's Partnership Board which, as might be deduced from its name, is concerned with matters affecting elderly people locally.

- Various initiatives and developments are regularly reported to it. For example at the last meeting there was a report from Forest Care on the latest appliances that could be worn or carried about, including one relating to monitoring of falls and suspected falls and another which can pinpoint the whereabouts of the holder. The latter is of particular relevance to dementia.
- Another initiative reported to the Board relates to loneliness and isolation, a subject of ongoing concern.

A matter which I have raised is the absence of an active forum to follow on from the Over 50's Forum, which was a successor to the Senior Citizens' Forum. At its best it was a useful organisation dedicated to identifying and raising matters of concern and which held regular public meetings where speakers would talk about topics such as money management. The question asked is - Is there a demand for it and, more pertinently, who would organise and run it? Without overt demand, there seems little likelihood of a successor.

Another aspect of life is that of people living and working longer and providing training to facilitate this. This is something which is available for Older People in Bracknell and there are non-vocational courses - something which can help towards combatting loneliness and isolation, as can the different organisations within the Borough. Recreation facilities are available at the Leisure Centre in Bagshot Road.

Health is a matter of concern to the elderly. I am a member of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Panel which, through a working group, is looking at GP capacity within the Borough.

Going to the shops is a day to day activity for many of our older residents and, prior to the commencement of the redevelopment of the Town Centre, representations were made through the Access Group of concerns of disadvantaged and elderly residents. The new town centre will be welcomed.

The Look In continues as a café for the elderly, but personally I note that I no longer see those who were regulars at its earlier location.

In the year there were issues with public transport, which followed cessation of service by one of the operators. I believe that the problems arising have now largely been overcome.

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Later this year, probably in early October, a conference is to held in Bracknell with the theme 'Planning for Later Life.' All will be welcome. Not only those who have later life to look forward to, but those for whom later life is an actuality. The Conference follows in the paths of the 'Voice of Experience Conferences' and more information will be available soon.

In preparing this report I am aware that I have not mentioned digital inclusion, the Buy with Confidence Initiative, the Better Care Fund and Self Care.

There is a wide spectrum of activity affecting the elderly. As Champion I will continue to try to keep abreast.

I commend my report to the Council.

Councillor Clifton Thompson

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Voluntary Sector Champion Councillor Finnie



The Borough of Bracknell Forest is very fortunate to have an outstanding voluntary sector who provide a wonderful service which is gratefully appreciated by our residents. It is particularly appreciated at this time, when the voluntary sector has been facing the additional challenge of central government having to introduce the strictest financial controls for many years, and the unavoidable disturbances resulting from the redevelopment of Bracknell Town Centre. Hopefully we should see an end of these two challenges in the not too distant future and then we will be able to work together in a more relaxed manner.

Due to current financial constraints, the Borough Council has been forced to limit their voluntary gift giving to three major voluntary groups – INVOLVE (formerly known as Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action,) Shopmobility and Victim Support. These three organisations have had their grants cut this year and have to reappraise their organisations, and I am very grateful to them for the economies which they have made so that they can continue supporting the voluntary sector.

Two voluntary food banks continue to provide a superb service to the more needy in our community. Some people question the need for these facilities – the wonderful volunteers who run these facilities will assure you of their need.

Concern continues to be expressed about the possible lack of suitable facilities for the voluntary sector in the future – particularly in the new Bracknell Town Centre. This is a very important matter which will be kept under review.

No one should ever underestimate the importance of the voluntary sector and how much we rely on volunteers throughout our lives.

I would be pleased to hear from any volunteer who requires assistance, or anyone wishing to volunteer.

Many thanks to all our volunteers.

Councillor James G. Finnie

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