

Economic and Skills Development Partnership
Tuesday 26 January 2021
9.00 - 11.00 am
Online Only - Microsoft Teams



AGENDA

Item	Description	Page	By
1.	Welcome and Autumn event summary	1 - 2	Chairman
2.	Action Points from Last Meeting	3 - 8	Chairman
3.	Kickstart Scheme: Activate Learning		Andy Marshall / Abi Hawkins
4.	The impact of the pandemic on the commercial property market		Mackay Securities
5.	ESDP Action Plan 2020-2022		Chairman
6.	Any Other Business		All
7.	Dates of Future Meetings		All to note
	20 April 2021		
	20 July 2021		
	19 October 2021		

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ESDP's Autumn Event

'Securing Bracknell Forest's Business Future'

An Optimistic Outlook for Bracknell Forest

On 20th October forty-five delegates from Bracknell Forest businesses and Bracknell Forest Council were joined by Bracknell Forest MP James Sunderland in an on-line discussion on securing Bracknell Forest's business future as it recovers from the impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Cllr. Marc Brunel-Walker, Bracknell Forest Council's Executive Member for Economic Development & Regeneration, opened the event. He informed the meeting that, despite the Covid-19 Pandemic, 76% of Bracknell Forest's enterprises are still trading, with 28% of businesses benefiting from the government's Furlough Scheme, and around half of company employees working from home. Bracknell Forest is, however, bucking the National Trend in recovering from the Pandemic, having a strong business economy and many locational advantages; including its position within the 'Tech Heart' of the UK. Bracknell Forest is therefore able to adopt an optimistic Plan-led approach.

Andrew Yeadon, Director of Public Perspectives, presented the results of two major business surveys carried out in Bracknell Forest during 2020. Whilst the **Infrastructure Survey** was undertaken before the Covid-19 Lockdown, it still revealed how optimistic Bracknell Forest businesses are over future growth, including positive views on the availability of business premises and housing, and on the impact of the Lexicon. There were positive perceptions of the availability of local green space, education opportunities, cycling and walking facilities and the broadband network; many of these having improved since surveys in 2015. There was, however, notably less positivity over bus services and the availability of electric vehicle charging points.

The **Skills Survey** was undertaken near the beginning of Lockdown and showed that 42% of companies found it hard to fill some of its vacancies and 62% found there to be a skills shortage when recruiting. It was revealed that many businesses do not offer training and development to their staff, including apprenticeships under the Apprenticeship Levy. Fifty-two percent of businesses offered flexible working and 42% home working which may well have increased since the survey.

Andrew Hunter, Bracknell Forest Council's Director of Place, Planning and Regeneration, spoke about the local authority's **Response-Recovery-Renewal** Framework for approaching transitioning to a new normal, incorporating COVID-19 learnings. Whereas the Council's overall strategy remains to deliver the Council Plan objectives by 2023, some delivery mechanisms will change, and operational recovery will be limited by service capability. The Council and its partners will continue to adapt to the impact of the pandemic and may need to re-prioritise some objectives in the Council Plan. Pre-COVID-19 financial pressures are likely to increase and decision making must reflect this ensuring, however, that the overarching priority is the health and economic well-being of residents. The

Council's Local Plan is now timetabled for submission in March 2021 with examination in the summer/autumn of 2021 before adaption in early 2022. The Plan will run until 2037.

Paul Britton, CEO of the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce, described the work of the Bracknell Local Chamber Advisory Group (LCAG) work in responding to government policy and in helping shape the Chamber's **Business Manifesto** which includes 5 strategic priorities for 2020; the Western Rail Link to Heathrow; a comprehensive and resilient infrastructure network; practical, real-world interventions to ensure any business impacts of Brexit are mitigated by frictionless trade and investment and freedom of movement for the workforce; improving standards of skills development, education-business partnerships and life-long learning; and delivering mental health fitness, diversity and belonging in the workplace.

Paul also informed the delegates about the Chamber's **Restart, Rebuild, Renew Campaign**. A **Restart** of services such as schools and public transport that enable their businesses to operate. A **Rebuild** of resilience and mitigation against the impact of sectoral and regional restrictions. A **Renew**, due to be launched in Q1 of 2021, to return the economy to prosperity and growth through bold and substantial measures aimed at delivering an economic recovery across the whole of the UK.

James Sunderland MP gave an upbeat conclusion to the discussions with his thoughts on Bracknell Forest's economic future. He pointed out that the borough has a talented and capable workforce and will continue to attract foreign investment. His view was that Bracknell is 'in a very good place', as shown by the results of the two surveys and the discussions that had taken place. Bracknell Forest will bounce back from the impact of the Covid crisis and any impact from Brexit.

James ended the event on an extremely positive note, giving encouragement to the businesses attending on-line and emphasising his support to the Bracknell Business Community.

Bob Collis, ESDP Chair

Economic and Skills Development Partnership

Tuesday, 14 July 2020

9.00 - 11.00 am

Online - Microsoft Teams



- Present:
- Bob Collis, Chair of the ESDP
 - Councillor Marc Brunel-Walker, Executive Member for Economic Development & Regeneration
 - Councillor Bob Wade, Small Business Champion
 - Simon Cridland, Bracknell Forest Council
 - Simon Fryer, Fryer Commercial
 - Lisa Harvey, Department of Work and Pensions
 - Nick Kirby, Pegasus
 - Nancy Lalor, Learning to Work
 - Chris Mansfield, Bracknell Forest Council
 - Stuart Matthews, Academy Representative
 - Natasha Sedgwick, Thames Valley Berkshire Business Hub
 - Peter Smith, Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce
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- Anneken Priesack, Bracknell Forest Council
 - Rob Reading, Bracknell BID
 - Ian Ferguson, Partnership for Better Business
 - Ben Alexander, Bracknell Forest Council
 - Benn Heatley, Afton Chemical
- Apologies:
- Stephen Chown, Bracknell Forest Council
 - Karen Hampton, Frimley Health Foundation Trust
 - Andrew Hunter
 - Julie Rees, Wellington College

Action Points

Minute	Item
25	<p>Minutes and actions from previous meeting</p> <p>The minutes of the previous meeting were agreed as a correct record, subject to Peter Smith's attendance being noted.</p> <p>Arising from the minutes, it was noted that the photos from the most recent photographic competition were on display at South Hill Park.</p>
26	<p>Bracknell Forest Council 2020 Business Surveys</p> <p>Anneken Priesack advised that two Bracknell Forest business surveys had been conducted; one on infrastructure and one on employment and skills. The surveys were repeats of those conducted in 2015. The initial infrastructure survey report had been shared with Partners, and further in-depth analysis would be undertaken and shared again. Some questions on the impact of COVID-19 on businesses had been included in the employment and skills survey, and partners were interested to see the outcome of these questions.</p> <p>The results from the infrastructure survey had been generally positive, with some</p>

	<p>comments around parking and congestion. The town centre had been seen as a positive change and walking and cycling routes had improved. The lack of electrical charging points was a key issue in the responses.</p> <p>Arising from discussion, the following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of dividing bigger office buildings into smaller units was a growing trend, as it was anticipated that as working from home increased, businesses would be downsizing their office spaces. • An online only survey to understand the impact of Covid-19 on businesses was also being developed by BFC and would be shared as widely as possible. • The Council were assessing whether the mix of office space was right, and whether more co-working space would be valuable in the borough. The employment element of the local plan would remain the same total floorspace, but the breakdown of the space was not fixed. • Partners discussed the various approaches to working from home in their businesses. It was suspected that office space would be used more economically in future.
27	<p>Bracknell BID</p> <p>Ian Ferguson, Partnership for Better Business and Rob Reading, Bracknell BID Manager attended the meeting to update on the Bracknell BID.</p> <p>Partnership for Better Business had been operating for 15 years across the UK, supporting many of the 300 or so existing BIDs nationally. While the majority of BIDs were in town and city centres, a quarter were in business areas.</p> <p>In Bracknell, the BID was formed of a number of businesses of different sizes across the Southern and Western Business Area, the boundary of which was defined in the Local Plan.</p> <p>In a survey of participating Bracknell BID businesses, the following answers were of note:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 93% of businesses had said that good internet was very important to them, and there were pockets of poor-performing broadband in some areas of the BID. • 92% said that traffic infrastructure and congestion were key issues • 84% said that amenities and facilities for employees were important, for example the lack of nearby cafes for lunch. • 65% of businesses said that a single point of contact for the district would be helpful <p>In order to unite the two geographical areas to encourage investment, two key priorities had been established:</p> <p>Objective 1: Infrastructure aimed to develop and maintain walking routes, cycle routes public transport and electrical charging points.</p> <p>Objective 2: Business growth and investment would focus on security and the prevention of crime through intelligence sharing, and activity to support recruitment and retention.</p>

	<p>It was also noted that the area would be reprofiled and signage amended to refer to the Business Area rather than Industrial Area.</p> <p>The BID Budget was based on a 1.5% levy on all businesses in the district above a certain rateable value, which would generate around £600k per year. The budget would be used to ease congestion and attract businesses to the area.</p> <p>The BID had formally begun on 1 April 2020, and the COVID-19 lockdown had made it difficult to establish the business initially. The first tranche of levy money had recently been collected by the Local Authority, as there had been no easement of payments to the BID levy. The BID had appointed its first manager, Rob Reading, in June.</p> <p>A BID website was in development and would be complete by the end of July 2020. Thames Valley Police had dedicated 2 PCSOs to the area, and a Police base would be established. Inter-trading opportunities were starting to be explored.</p> <p>In response to questions, the following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The BID levy was unaffected by Government reductions during COVID-19 lockdown, and remained a bill in its own right, however the Business Rates team at the Council had suspended recovery action during COVID-19. It was suspected that some businesses did not realise that the payment was statutory. • It was noted that the BID could benefit from developing the green infrastructure in the business area. • The business plan had been adopted by ballot last year, and the BID Directors provided a steer on the plan from their monthly meetings. • It was noted that while the plan and framework were in place, there was flexibility within the plan to address any issues arising. • The Partnership for Better Business model involved using the expertise of businesses in the area and it was confirmed that this approach was being taken in Bracknell
28	<p>Business Recovery discussion</p> <p>Natasha Sedgwick presented the work of the Thames Valley Business Growth Hub.</p> <p>The Business Growth Hub was an impartial and fully funded support for businesses in Berkshire, funded by the LEP and the EU. The team had expanded during lockdown to meet the needs of businesses during the period.</p> <p>The Growth Hub offered a range of support from 1:1 support, online marketplaces to virtual masterclass webinars.</p> <p>The Growth Hub had developed a COVID resource portal on their website which had received 9400 hits since its launch in April. There was also a COVID-19 update bulletin for businesses to disseminate regular updates and local and national guidance. Webinars were being run for the hardest hit sectors, such as hospitality and leisure, and a new Recovery and Growth programme had been established to provide 12 hours of support from a business advisor to businesses recovering from lockdown.</p>

The Growth Hub model had been established in 2014, and there was a Hub in each county. In Berkshire, the Hub worked with all businesses from entrepreneurs and start-ups to scale up businesses. Businesses could refer themselves or be referred to the Hub for support.

In Bracknell, there was little awareness of the Hub amongst the business community so Partners were asked to circulate Hub details and promote through their social media and newsletters.

In response to questions, the following points were noted:

- Information around the Government's Kick Start programme had been delayed.
- Enquiries to the Hub during lockdown had been mainly around cashflow management, accessing funding, and the Government's furlough scheme.
- A Business Growth Mapper tool was available through the Hub, which identified areas for development
- Natasha agreed to meet with Rob Reading to discuss how SMEs in the BID area could be supported.
- Partners requested the contact details for the Hub. Website: www.berkshirebusinesshub.co.uk, Phone: 01344 388 005 email: info@berkshirebusinesshub.co.uk

Chris Mansfield updated Partners on the town centre reopening plans.

The Lexicon had followed a four-phase approach to lockdown; lockdown, containment, reopening and rebuilding.

During the lockdown phase, retail and hospitality units had closed, the town centre car parks were made free, businesses were putting staff on furlough, and the Council were providing financial support schemes to businesses. The Council had been supporting businesses in the Lexicon, but also businesses in smaller business centres out of the town centre. A total of £10,230,000 in grant funding across 788 grants had been distributed through the Council.

During the containment phase, the town centre remained closed and was carefully managed. The Council was communicating more directly with retailers to find out their circumstances plans for reopening, and with Thames Valley Police to support the safe use of the town centre.

In the reopening phase, on 15 June non-essential retailers had been allowed to reopen, and from 4 July hospitality units had been allowed to trade. Signage and public information had been displayed throughout the Lexicon, and on Crowthorne and Sandhurst high streets. The Public Protection Partnership had assisted businesses with the licensing arrangements and risk assessments for their trading from 4 July, and there had been some leniency around using outdoor public spaces for seating. The Lexicon staff were working with the Council to prepare for the introduction of mandatory face masks in shops.

For the rebuilding phase, the Council were working with The Lexicon and the BID to enhance the provision in Bracknell Forest. It was noted that business floorspace requirements were likely to change, and that the Economic Strategy and ESDP Action plan may need to be revisited and adapted.

	<p>The Reopening Highstreets Safely fund may be drawn upon to support reopening plans.</p> <p>The current focus was on planning to contain any subsequent local outbreaks.</p> <p>In response to questions, the following points were noted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The vast majority of town centre-based staff had been on furlough, with a small number remaining on site premises over lockdown. • The onus was on businesses to apply for the grant funding; however, the Council had been contacting businesses to advise of their eligibility. • The remit of the Reopening High Streets fund was tight and could only be used for certain things such as additional hand sanitisers. Any use of the fund would need to be signed off by central Government.
29	<p>Sub-group Updates</p> <p>The subgroup updates were deferred to the next meeting.</p>
30	<p>Dates of Future Meetings</p> <p>20 October 2020</p>
31	<p>Any Other Business</p> <p>Bob Collis informed the members that the ESDP is planning to hold an Autumn Event, probably in October on a theme of strategic planning and recovery from the COVID-19 outbreak. Whilst it would be good to be able to hold a physical meeting it is very likely that it will be a virtual meeting. Members would be informed of arrangements once plans were in place.</p>

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