

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