



Champions' Annual Report

2020-2021

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The purpose of this report is to appraise all Members of the work and progress undertaken by the Council’s Champions during the year 2020-2021. These reports cover the period May 2020 to May 2021. With the continual changes in Covid, these reports do not necessarily reflect the current Covid impact.

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

Small Business Champion

Councillor Bob Wade



1.0 The Business Environment

The coronavirus outbreak has forced organisations to re-evaluate how contact centres are operated; how employees deliver relevant customer experiences; where they work; and how digital channels can be used to support business continuity through the crisis and beyond.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has forever changed our experiences as customers, employees and residents. Our attitudes and behaviours are changing as a result. The crisis is fundamentally changing how and what consumers buy and is accelerating immense structural changes in the consumer goods industry.

With these emerging new behaviours, organisations have an opportunity to accelerate the move to digital commerce, by expanding existing offerings and creating new lines of service to capture new marketplace opportunities and digital customer segments.

Immediate action is needed to address short-term liquidity challenges, but also to solve for costs, profitability and generate funding to invest in new opportunities. Many are faced with plummeting sales and revenue and increased costs. Interventions to adapt may require investments in key technologies, processes and people. For some, liquidity has become a matter of survival.

In the middle of all of this, is post-Brexit! One impact on UK businesses of leaving the EU, has been a shrinkage in workforce. Since the referendum, the UK has seen a 70% decrease in net EU migration. This is especially problematic because, until now, positive net migration has made up for an ageing homegrown workforce coupled with a reluctance for the UK workforce to do certain seasonal jobs.

All in all, the next few years will be extremely challenging and there will be significant changes in the business, charitable sectors, and the additional National Health Service challenges, including future pandemic services/vaccinations.

The impact of having to live with the Covid virus (and others?) together with the teething problems of post Brexit and forging new trading alliances; coupled with the e-commerce and taxing issues; **will keep small businesses hands full!!**

2.0 The High Street

Nobody needs reminding that 2020 wreaked havoc on retail, but the grand shake-up has spawned some invaluable ideas giving rise to new trends, tactics and innovations. The High Street must now move towards a “community centre” environment – a place to go, not just to shop.

Many anchor stores have already suffered with John Lewis set to make 18 (of 47) store closures after falling to its first ever annual loss in 175 years - dramatically affecting their supply chains. They also plan to introduce JL-branded areas into their Waitrose supermarkets. JL online shopping now accounts for 75% of sales compared to 42% pre-pandemic.

Work needs to be done to create “destination” shopping locations to encourage us to continue to physically shop. There is a need to build models for imaginative shopping areas that cater for the needs of the 21st century consumer who want more than just stores open 9-5.

There is a need to make shopping an immersive experience that people want to visit and share on social media; bringing all this together to create a future retail experience which combines the best of online and physical retail.

Much more emphasis will be put on retailers who can offer an experience with added value. People now want more out of their shopping experiences. High streets that can offer an “all round experience” should do well.

Unfortunately, the high streets that cannot offer a broader experience will not be able to compete with online shopping - if you can get it cheaper online, why leave the house?

Taxing online sales will not stop this on-line trend from continuing its current upward trajectory. This challenge must be recognised by all traders working together and taking advantage of other agencies and local councils in promoting their local assets.

The need to re-invent our high streets becomes more urgent every day. The future vision of The Lexicon continues to progress. The refurbishment of Princess Square and the development of The Deck continues.



The new affordable homes, shops, leisure and health facilities are one step closer as BFC announced its development partner to take forward the town centre’s next phase of regeneration focusing on key areas adjacent to the main Lexicon retail area.

3.0 Working from Home (WFH)

Many firms have announced plans to allow at least part-time remote work in the post-pandemic world. However, hybrid work has its limitations. WFH workers can have less opportunity to chat with colleagues and bosses, and some research shows people in an office get promoted more frequently than remote workers.

Certain groups can be more affected than others including introverts, who can find it harder to be vocal in remote meetings, and people with care responsibilities whose careers can be impacted by being less visible. Homeworkers miss out on the post-meeting huddles when many real decisions can get made.

However, WFH is here to stay. The future landscape is going to change with this new working culture. Many companies have opted to reduce their office space, and some have completely moved to a WFH model. These changes will affect the future culture in the workplace. It must be remembered that it is not always easier to perform duties from home. The challenge is to create a healthy organisation for the future.

4.0 Mental Health Issues

The past 12 months have been tumultuous. As we continue to adapt to a new “virtual” WFH environment, many have found themselves at an emotional crossroads with increasing rates of anxiety, depression, impatience and potential burnout.

Clearly, the need for positive mental health is essential to guarantee consistent enthusiasm for growth and high levels of natural energy and passion, as well as high levels of engagement.

Whilst business used to be founded on performance and pay, it is suggested that there is now a third critical criteria for success – purpose. There is a need to promote the organisation’s purpose relevant to the individuals working within it. This culture must value open and focused listening and feedback, repeatedly asking team members of all levels the question, “How can I help?” and making expert advice and support easily and confidentially available to staff, if required. Feedback and commentary from staff must lead to action.

5.0 Prompt Payment to SMCs

Large business chiefs have been told they must pay SMC suppliers within 30 days as the government seeks to strengthen the Prompt Payment Code and offer support to cash-strapped small businesses. Almost 3,000 firms have signed the code — a voluntary but widely adhered to pledge introduced in 2008 — but many small firms still complain of payment delays. The Federation of Small Businesses estimates around 50,000 small companies have gone under annually because of late payments. This is particularly challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.0 The Labour Market

Last year saw big shifts in the labour market as the pandemic rapidly changed our habits. Areas of job growth were often linked to this with e-commerce, customer service, coaching, creative freelancing and healthcare among the sectors where hiring rose. Hiring for e-commerce roles was up 143% on 2019 as online shopping rapidly expanded. The highest growth was between April to October 2020.

Healthcare support staff, including roles such as carers, saw hiring double, with the majority being women. Construction saw strong growth too, as did finance. Of the 15 fastest growing job categories, finance had the most working from home openings.

7.0 Directors of Small-Limited Companies

Some 2+ million small-limited companies have been excluded from any of the Treasury COVID-19 support schemes. Directors have not been eligible for the self-employment income support scheme. Many do not qualify for small business grants, as they are not in commercial premises.

Although the bounce-back loan scheme is available to some, many do not see taking on large debt in such an uncertain business landscape, as a realistic option.

Furlough is a Catch-22 for company directors. Unpredictable cashflow means their salaries are low, so the scheme does not cover their living expenses. And if they furlough, they are not allowed to work on saving the business!

The Treasury is being lobbied by many parties to adopt the policy proposal for the Director's Income Support Scheme (DISS). Encompassing a Limited Companies corporation tax rebate; convert Bounce-Back Loans to Grants; increase the discretionary grant fund allocated to local authorities; to allow furlough for all Limited Company directors to continue to work to support their businesses and extend Business Support Grants to all small businesses. To date HMG have not responded.

8.0 SME borrowing

Almost half of the UK's small and medium-sized businesses sought external financing in 2020 because of the pandemic, lifting total outstanding bank debt to £213 billion.

British Business Bank's annual SME finance report found 43% of companies received funding from financial institutions as well as government-backed emergency loans and grants, compared to 13% in 2019. Another survey revealed a third of business owners expected to shrink over the next 12 months echoing Bank of England predictions that £22b may never be repaid.

BFC has throughout the past year delivered on all the government financial support schemes (over £10M).

9.0 South Hill Park (SHP)

Since the Government announcement regarding the road map for when venues can re-open, SHP has been busy planning a summer season of courses and workshops, indoor and outdoor entertainment, and cinema screenings.

SHP has thanked everyone for the kind wishes and support over the past months. The response to their fundraising campaign has been fantastic, raising over £320K. Even in tough times there is amazing community support.

10.0 BFC Support for the Business Sector

The Council has focused its support in two broad areas:

- Coronavirus response measures
- Advice, guidance and information

Coronavirus response measures:

From the first Lockdown in March 2020, the Council has devised and implemented a series of measures to manage the initial closure of non-essential businesses and services through the following actions:

- Signage, barriers, hand sanitizers and marshalling of retail centres.
- Distribution of Covid risk information to enable businesses.
- Operational adjustments to car parks and associated facilities.
- Support for outbreak management through our Public Health and Environmental Health functions.
- Online briefings and webinars to assist safe reopening and return to work.

Advice, guidance and information:

- Worked closely with the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership and TV Chambers of Commerce to share and disseminate key information and advice in relation to grants, furlough schemes etc.
- Thames Valley Berkshire Business Growth Hub provides the direct B2B advice and support on the Council's behalf.
- Collaboration with the Bracknell Business Improvement District (BID) to disseminate information and react to specific business queries.
- The Council undertook two business surveys in 2020 covering business infrastructure and skills. Both surveys have been published and widely shared to help inform the recovery and renewal strategies.
- The impact of COVID-19 on Bracknell Forest businesses, how to boost the local economy and aspirations for the borough through the Economic & Skills Development Partnership (ESDP).

11.0 Economic & Skills Development Partnership

Bracknell Forest **Economic & Skills Development Partnership** facilitates and promotes the continued economic development of Bracknell Forest.



The ESDP Event - Securing Bracknell Forest's Business Future:

Late last year, 45 delegates from Bracknell Forest businesses and Bracknell Forest Council were joined by the 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. Despite the 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.

12.0 Bracknell Investment Group



Amongst the projects under development, the Bracknell Investment Group (BID) area will be looking at developing the green infrastructure within the business area and that, while a Business Plan is in place, there is flexibility to address any issues arising.

Thames Valley Police had allocated 2 PCSOs to cover the BID area, and that a Police 'base' is to be established within the area.

In response to questions relating to COVID-19, it was stated that the collection of the BID Levy is unaffected by the recent government business rates relief schemes as payment is statutory.

Bracknell BID has continued to publish its series of weekly 'E-News' bulletins for BID area organisations and others who find them useful. The E-News bulletins provide information about the BID and give guidance on where businesses can find information about government support in recovering from the COVID-19 Pandemic.

News about the Bracknell BID can be found at: <https://bracknellbid.co.uk/about-bracknell-bid/bracknell-bid-news/>

13.0 Networking

During the past year, networking has essentially been through virtual meetings. Despite some “Zoom/Teams” fatigue and the use of social media, SMEs have been maintaining their contacts on a very regular basis.

As Small Business Champion, it has been challenging to keep on top of the business environment; ensuring that the council services are understood and delivered to SMEs, particularly in retail.

14.0 Conclusion

Britain’s economy contracted by 10% in 2020, its biggest slump in 300 years, with a 4% dip projected in the first three months of 2021.

Although current inflation is low, there is an undercurrent of increasing costs. The Care sector is finding the need to increase their fees well above inflation.

Struggles within the UK’s retail sector are not limited to high street shops, as a combination of high demand and shipping cost issues is causing shortages in many imported goods and services.

Businesses need to be constantly innovating to match market changes and changes in technology. Understandably, SME business owners are busy with the day-to-day issues, but they must think about potential changes and contemplate the future.

In future, some companies will remain 100% remote, while some are considering a hybrid approach and of course some companies want everyone back. Whatever way companies move forward, there will be obstacles as people navigate the next phase of this Covid driven WFH environment. In addition, hybrid workforces, where staff split days between going to the office and working remotely, could create inequalities.

The one theme spanning the whole pandemic is the **resilience** shown throughout the business and community environments. During this time there has been remarkably high levels of creativeness, innovation, health care and social awareness. For example, the creation of so many vaccines within a year (rather than 10) is incredible.

Despite the setbacks of Covid and Brexit, hopefully the future will reflect the UK’s ability to rise to the challenges and those less fortunate will be supported by us all.

Councillor Bob Wade

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Commuter Champion

Councillor Nigel Atkinson



Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant changes for both commuters and public transport operators in the last 12 months and for me, this has been the first year for many years, where working from home has replaced my regular train commute. The Government message to public transport users over most of the last year has been to avoid using public transport and travel by other means. Train patronage dropped to circa 95% below pre-pandemic levels in late March/April 2020 and train and bus timetables have had to be modified at short notice to react to the national lockdowns.

We have effectively seen the renationalisation of the railways, with both our train operating companies (TOC) Great Western Railway (GWR) and South Western Railway (SWR) operating under Government short term 'Emergency Measures Agreements' (EMA), where the Government has taken on franchise commercial risks. GWR's franchise will operate under an EMA until at least 26 June 2021 and the Department for Transport (DfT) has stated that it intends to commence discussions with the TOCs including GWR, to transition to new directly awarded contracts for the longer term. SWR is currently operating under a Government 'Emergency Recovery Measures Agreement', which succeeded the EMAs. This will expire at the end of March 2021 when SWR's franchise will become a management contract. Control of the franchise and nearly all commercial risk will pass to the Department for Transport, with this agreement in place until at least 1 April 2023.

So, what does all of this mean for Bracknell Forest residents who are intending to resume commuting by train after the end of this second lockdown? First Group's Chief Executive Matthew Gregory said: *'We welcome this agreement, which marks a further evolution of the contractual framework for our SWR train operating company, both in the context of providing resilient services throughout the coronavirus pandemic and also a more sustainable long-term approach.'*

'These new directly awarded management contracts will focus on passengers and operational performance, with a more appropriate balance of risk and reward. We look forward to working constructively with the DfT to make this a reality, and to use our expertise and understanding of the needs of our customers to deliver improvements that we know passengers want.'

It is too early to tell what effect these new operating regimes will have for commuters, but we have seen recent significant improvements in train punctuality, albeit with a much-reduced timetable, and there has been a marked improvement in the cleanliness of trains.

A key issue for rail commuters when they return to work, is the ticketing structure that will be in place post lockdown that takes account of hybrid working, where commuters may work from home 2 to 3 days per week.

I have been Lobbying James Sunderland MP for Government clarification on this, and the Government has recently announced that it has written to all TOCs to ask that they begin immediate work on developing a flexible season ticket, which will be able to be used two to three times per week at discounted prices. The current intention is that these will be introduced from June 2021, when lockdown restrictions are due to end.

Government taking control of the rail franchises as a result of the pandemic, has made it harder to engage with GWR and SWR on investment opportunities that will benefit our residents. I have made some progress with GWR on this, as outlined in Section 1 below.

Buses have suffered a similar fate to trains in lockdown, with a similar Government message to avoid travelling on buses wherever possible. This has applied to Reading Buses, owner of Courtney Buses and operator of the Green Line routes 702/703. The Government has recently announced a significant £3bn 'bus revolution' investment across England, which will result in passengers benefiting from more frequent, reliable, easier to use and cheaper bus services. This is discussed in more detail in Section 3.

1.0 Great Western Railway (GWR)

The new trains for journeys through Crowthorne and Sandhurst Stations that I mentioned in last year's report, have still not entered into service. I have been asking GWR for updates on the introduction of these trains on a regular basis. COVID-19 related issues have been given as the reason for the delay, particularly in relation to driver training. The first unit, has though, been delivered to Reading Depot (see photo below). Discussions with David Strunz, Assistant Regional Development Manager at GWR continue in terms of BFC being invited to a launch event for these trains, which as I reported last year, are being rebuilt from former London commuter trains. They will be bi-mode diesel and electric, using the third rail electrical power supply for part of the Reading to Redhill and Gatwick journeys. This is a welcome move from an environmental and sustainability perspective, as they will be replacing diesel only trains. However, it is important that these 'new' trains are of an equivalent standard to brand-new trains being introduced elsewhere, so that our commuters enjoy the same benefits as on lines with brand new trains.



I attended a site visit to Crowthorne Station with Stuart Jefferies, BFC Transport Strategy Manager and David Strunz on 23rd September 2020, to investigate opportunities to improve the parking at this station and reduce commuter on-street parking in local roads. As part of the new Local Plan, the development of the adjacent Derby Fields site will provide an opportunity to increase the size of the existing station car park and refresh and improve the cycle parking facilities to make these more attractive.

At Sandhurst Station, I have been in discussion with David Strunz about providing more cycle storage capacity. This station has limited parking facilities and so any increase in cycle storage would relieve pressure on commuter parking in local streets. This station is not easy to find an affordable workable and secure solution, but we are continuing to investigate options.

I attended a GWR Stakeholder Conference on 16th October 2020.

2.0 South Western Railway (SWR)



In last year's report, I covered the then extensive and prolonged guard strike throughout December 2020 and significant losses that SWR announced in January 2020. At that time, questions were being raised about the continuing ability of SWR to operate its franchise and that nationalisation may be likely, with the Government taking over this franchise train services.

As I outlined in my overview, that is effectively what has happened, albeit as a result of the pandemic. At least this might now provide a period of stability for the SWR franchise, although similar challenges exist as with GWR for investment funding, now that the TOCs are Government controlled. These factors have made it difficult to engage with SWR, but commuters still face the same issues and so it is important that we continue to lobby SWR to ensure the best possible outcomes for our commuters and other train users.

The new Class 701 trains that were due to be introduced last year have also not entered service. Again, COVID-19 issues and manpower shortages at Bombardier, the train manufacturer have been cited by SWR as the reason for delay. Recent discussions with David Wilby, SWR Regional Development Manager have indicated that Summer 2021 is the current SWR forecast date for their introduction. A SWR launch ceremony for this £1bn fleet was held on 14 October 2020, where it was announced that these trains would be branded as 'Arterio'. On a more positive note, some of these units have now arrived on the SWR network and are currently undergoing testing and driver training.



I have continued to lobby to ensure that these new Arterio trains will be suitable for journey times of an hour or more on the Bracknell to Waterloo railway line, with sufficient seat legroom and fold down tables at seats, to allow commuters to work on their laptops on the train. I raised this concern again at the SWR Stakeholder meeting on 5 November 2020, but didn't receive a very positive reply from SWR's Managing Director, Mark Hopwood. These trains will serve a number of different inner and outer suburban routes and it seems that their design has focused on high-capacity inner suburban routes in terms of seat pitch and lack of at seat fold-down table. I will, however, continue to lobby for train carriage layouts that meet Bracknell Forest commuter needs.

Last year, SWR offered me the opportunity to visit the Bombardier factory in Derby where these new trains are being manufactured, to see the seating configuration. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, this visit which was originally scheduled for February 2020, has not taken place yet. It is more likely that with the delivery of several train units to the SWR Wimbledon depot, this visit will take place there.

3.0 Buses – £3bn 'bus revolution'

On 15 March 2021, the Prime Minister launched a £3bn 'bus revolution' strategy aimed at providing passengers across England with more frequent, reliable, easier to use and cheaper bus services. This is aimed at driving increased bus patronage as the second lockdown ends and passengers need reassuring that bus use is safe post pandemic. This announcement also included reference to 4,000 new British-built electric or hydrogen buses that the Government announced last year.

BFC is planning to initiate mini videos to show residents that local buses offer a quality environment, with Wi-Fi available on many buses. With many commuters not planning to return to work on a full-time basis, driving up bus patronage will be challenging, hence the focus on marketing the bus routes in as positive a light as possible.

How the post COVID-19 and Government investment will impact the Courtney Bus routes operated by Reading Buses is too soon to know, but I will continue to monitor this and hopefully, a meeting can be arranged with Reading Buses for later in the year.

Whilst the introduction of electric buses in Bracknell Forest would be welcome and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) funding may be available for this, there are still challenges in securing this funding, particularly where other operators would see investment in Reading Buses as giving preferential treatment to one operator.

4.0 Courtney Buses and White Bus



Local operator Courtney buses is slowly being rebranded as Thames Valley Buses, following the takeover by Reading Buses. Services have been impacted over the last year due to COVID-19, with patronage down and bus frequencies reduced. However, with the schools reopened on 8 March 2021, all Courtney services are now operating to their normal timetables.

As a result of BFC financial pressures, funding to support bus routes that are not commercially viable has unfortunately, been reduced recently. This has resulted in a number of service reductions, the most significant of which is the loss of the 6-day a week service 162/162A connecting Ascot, Winkfield and Winkfield Row to Bracknell town centre. Whilst the replacement 299 service operating on a reduced frequency on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays offers a means for Northern Parish residents shopping in Bracknell Town Centre to continue to use the bus, there is no longer a viable means for the small number of regular commuters and secondary students who previously used this route, to travel by bus.

White Bus service X94 introduced last year, linking Ascot Heatherwood and Frimley Park Hospitals continues to operate. COVID-19 has impacted this route like many others, but as lockdown ends, it is hoped that this route will continue to operate, linking these two hospitals together.

5.0 Active Travel

As lockdown measures ease, the Government is promoting 'Active Travel', with £175m of funding announced in November 2020 to support cycling and walking. This would include in connection with commuter journeys.

This Government initiative is aimed at reducing road traffic and reallocating road space for active travel use. In other words, creating cycle lanes on existing roads. Bracknell Forest is fortunate to already have an extensive segregated cycle route network which cyclists perceive to be safer than sharing the road with vehicles. Notwithstanding this, opportunities will be sought to try to benefit from any Government funding available for suitable schemes.

6.0 Berkshire Local Transport Body and the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)

I am a nominated substitute on the Berkshire Local Transport Body and the Thames Valley Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), and attended meetings in March, June and November 2020, and March 2021. This body provides funding from a multi-million-pound devolved Government transport budget. Recent and ongoing Bracknell Forest highway



projects that have benefited from this funding include the A322 Downshire Way dualling and the ongoing A3095 improvements.

Funding is being secured for further improvements on the A322 Bagshot Road to improve capacity at the Sports Centre Roundabout.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank BFC Highways and Transport officers for their continued help, advice and support to me in the role of Commuter Champion over the last 12 months.

Councillor Nigel Atkinson

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Older People's Champion

Councillor Moira Gaw



Overview

For the year to the end of March 2021, the principal focus has been on supporting older people along with the services and local interests they rely on, throughout the pandemic and beyond.

1.0 Vaccination Programme

The two Covid 19 vaccine sites in Bracknell have responded in line with both national timelines and guidance.

The majority of Bracknell residents aged 50 and over, as well as those residing in local care homes and those who are housebound or qualify in terms of being high-risk, an eligible frontline health or social care worker, have a high-risk condition, learning disability or the main carer for someone at high-risk from coronavirus have received their first dose of vaccine in line with the Joint Committees on Vaccination and immunisation guidelines. This is superb news for older people in Bracknell Forest and all made possible by local GP's, nurses, pharmacists, and paramedics as well as the army of local volunteers who have played a pivotal role in ensuring that both sites run smoothly.

2.0 Mayoral Support



I have been fortunate to be able to collaborate with the Mayor of Bracknell Forest, Councillor Ash Merry, with several Lockdown projects. A fantastic virtual Tea Party was held with the residents of Astbury Manor to celebrate V.J. day. This provided a good opportunity to explain the Mayoral Role and to show the Civic Regalia and hear some of the stories from residents who experienced V.J. day. It was also a very appropriate opportunity to thank the staff and residents virtually for their continued resilience and optimism.

3.0 Older Persons Day

The 1ST of October is Older Persons Day. A day recognised as an opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate the extraordinary contributions and achievements of older people. This year the day was recognised by a bespoke message delivered by the Mayor of Bracknell Forest for each older resident. It was a message of both hope for better times ahead, and grateful thanks for the continuing sacrifice and contribution made by older people in Bracknell Forest. The lights in Times Square turned deep pink to mark the occasion.

4.0 New Dementia Care Centre

Working in partnership with the local NHS to deliver a state of the art, 66 bed dementia care centre at Heathlands in Wildridings, remains a priority and is still on target for the operational date at the end of 2021. Work is progressing on this exciting new venture which will see the joint working model reflect the future care and nursing home provision in the Borough.

5.0 Age Concern Bracknell Forest

The well supported Age Concern facility in Crown Wood has had to remain closed to daily guests during the pandemic but the trustees have taken the opportunity to ensure the facilities are upgraded to meet the demands of life post pandemic. Included in their new unit is a bespoke cinema which can cater for all tastes in movies from musicals to westerns. I am looking forward to having a preview before the doors open again.



This unit was also able to support elderly people and their families over the Christmas period with non-perishable food packages complete with contact free collection.

At the AGM I learned of the new plans which include making the facilities at the Age Concern Unit in Crown Wood, available to other users who have a similar vision. The Wednesday Club which offers bespoke entertainment for older people also hopes to restart. This support club is held in Priestwood Community Centre.

6.0 Men's Sheds



The Men's Shed initiative has been very successful around the country and focusses attention in the main, on opportunities for men to mix with like minded contemporaries in a safe environment. The model created, allows for men to meet in a workshop environment where a common interest in making and crafting items for the local community is the focus. Men's Sheds are community spaces for men to connect, converse and create. The activities are often similar to those of garden sheds, but for groups of men to enjoy together. They help reduce loneliness and isolation, but most importantly, they are fun. Winkfield and Crowthorne Parish Councils have been actively assisting in the search for a facility to host a Mens Shed in Bracknell Forest.

7.0 Health and Wellbeing

Bracknell Forest has recognised the challenges the pandemic presented to Care Homes across the borough and the impact the virus and associated restrictions is having on care home residents, their families and front-line staff across health and social care. Joint working between the Council and its partners to build and maintain local care homes resilience is strong and will continue as the journey towards recovery and renewal progresses.

Full details can be found by following the link:

<https://www.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/health-and-social-care/coronavirus-information-and-support/council-services/health-and-social-care-service-updates>

The Bracknell Forest "Help Yourself" community web site, is designed to help connect people to information, activities, and services to stay independent and well, is popular. The online community map provides details of 450+ community groups and activities:

<http://health.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/>

The principal interface between the community and the Council is by way of the Customer Services Team. The team is conscious that older people can need more help and to this end, the following is a brief outline of provision available:

If you set up an online account - <https://myaccount.bracknell-forest.gov.uk/> you can log enquiries, and track progress. You can also view your council tax account through here.

8.0 Businesses

It has been one of my priorities to ensure that all older residents are aware of opportunities to support businesses that provide discounts for them. This is a lengthy job and Winkfield Parish Council is nearing completion of the list of businesses operating within. All local businesses that provide a discounted service for older residents will be listed, from cafes to car washes, and from photo copiers to picture framers. This will serve a twofold purpose of providing businesses with a captive market and residents with opportunities to buy from businesses that serve them best. Crowthorne Parish Council are currently undertaking a similar exercise. The aim is that a Parish Community Directory will be created which can be rolled out at other Parish and Town Councils in the Borough. This facilitates easier updating of new provisions and services moving forwards.



Pictured is the Mayor of Bracknell Forest, Councillor Ash Merry at Oaktree Garden Centre. Older residents of the Borough can enjoy a discounted service every Wednesday.

9.0 Funding

During the Pandemic, much of the support network for the older community has had to close its doors. It has been a privilege to be able to direct different services to sources of possible funding to keep services abreast of what can be accessed. This has been directed via Parish Councils, the National Lottery Community Fund, Insulation grants and funding for homes, the Co-op local community fund and with the support of Involve, our local charity that helps and supports other charities and community groups in different ways. This has ensured that services for older people remain ready to open as soon as permitted. Other sources of funding for older people that have been promoted recently are: The Allen Lane Foundation, Charles Hayward Foundation, the Masonic Charitable Foundation, the Grocers Hall, and the Community Fund.

The Good Causes blue bin scheme is available for all residents to collect points to support different endeavours within the Borough. Older people from the Charters Short Mat Bowls Club which was started over 24 years ago and has members aged from 65 to 89, has recently benefitted from the scheme. Keeping the club running means a lot to them. Other organisations representing older people who have benefitted from the Good Causes Scheme are: Age Concern Bracknell Forest, Wednesday Welcome Club, Coats, and the Sandhurst Day centre. The £1000 tri-monthly sponsorship is split between three good causes.

10.0 Isolation and Loneliness Review

There is no agreed definition of “loneliness”. One explanation of loneliness is that it is a painful feeling that occurs when there is a gap, or a mismatch, between the number and quality of social relationships and connections that we have, and those we would like. The Wellbeing and Finance Overview and Scrutiny Panel conducted a review of isolation and loneliness, which I was fortunate to contribute to, and found that although the problem is widespread and affects all demographics, older people are suffering disproportionately particularly where they are cut off from the digital world. One of the recommendations moving forward, is to provide intuitive and assisted technology in conjunction with up-skilling in the relevant community age groups, which will benefit residents by informing them directly of available services and resources.

11.0 Circular Walks

As an extension of the very popular circular walk in Sandhurst, a pilot scheme was led by Winkfield Parish Council. The aim was to encourage residents to follow a measurable health route sited at Ascot Jubilee. Other circular walks are planned for Asher Park and Allsmoor. The key messages delivered were that walking briskly for 10 minutes counts as exercise, being active is good for your mind and body and only 30 minutes a day of walking alleviates depression. This has proved popular, particularly with older residents who are not able to walk very long distances and affords a safe exercise medium while also providing some challenge. When the current restrictions are lifted, there will be opportunities to roll this programme out throughout the Borough where appropriate.

12.0 Older Drivers Forum

Working in partnership with Thames Valley Alert and Thames Valley Police, the Older Drivers Forum has hosted two free webinars, aimed at helping and advising older drivers and their families and friends, on using the roads safely in order to drive safer for longer. Older motorists have a wealth of experience, confidence, and tolerance however, sight, hearing, reaction time and judgement of speed and distance may not be as sharp as it once was. The Older Drivers Forum is about keeping mature motorists on the road safely for longer. Building on the success of the webinars in November 2020, more places were allocated to accommodate all interested parties. Expert speakers were on hand to answer a range of questions posed by participants which encouraged and improved confidence on key areas such as night driving and tackling roundabouts.

13.0 Big Bingo

Research has found that playing Bingo has multiple health benefits for older people. Improving listening skills and short-term memory skills. It also promotes socialisation, a key aspect of a happy and healthy lifestyle.

Plans are at an advanced stage (pandemic permitting) to host a Big Bingo event in the Lexicon, so that residents can celebrate with the older community of Bracknell Forest.

Thank you to both colleagues, officers and the many community groups who have helped with support and good advice during the year, the contributions have been very much appreciated. I am looking forward to both the challenges and the opportunities in the next year.

Councillor Moira Gaw

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Large Business Champion

Councillor Ankur Shiv Bhandari



1.0 The Large Business Focus

This is my first report as the Large Business Champion. I wish to start this by highlighting the reasoning behind an additional focus, separately on Large Businesses in the Bracknell Borough.

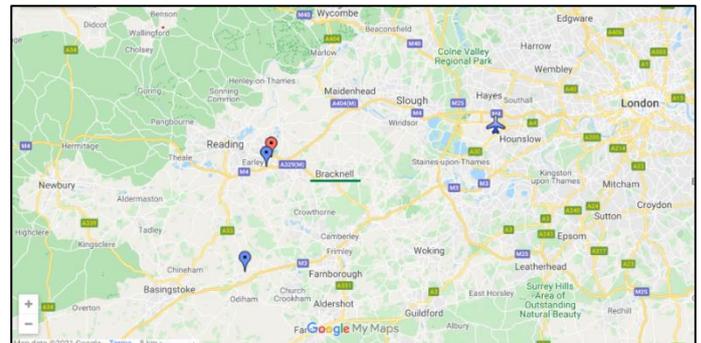
Historically, the business champion report has focused on the overall business scenario in the borough. However, now there is a distinction to focus on small and large businesses separately whilst at the same time, realising synergies where possible for both the categories. A business is classified as a large business if it has more than 250 employees. We are fortunate in our borough to have some fantastic large businesses such as Fujitsu, Waitrose, Panasonic, Boehringer Ingelheim, Syngenta, to name a few. The focus on large businesses is to ensure that our large businesses can get all the support they might need from the council and to attract new large businesses to the borough.

This last year has been challenging for almost everyone on many fronts, including our large businesses. This report will touch upon some of those challenges, but my report is primarily forward-looking. For this report, I will focus on the businesses that have a corporate presence in the borough of Bracknell Forest.

2.0 The Bracknell Advantage

Bracknell offers distinct advantages for large businesses to prosper in the borough. Some of the key benefits are:

- Proximity to a strong road network infrastructure with robust access to both M4 and M3 motorways.
- Proximity to Heathrow airport.
- Proximity to London and ease of access through road, rail and bus networks.
- Access to a strong talent pool due to its location.
- A preferred place to stay for employees supported by beautiful green parks and countryside, robust education provision for school children and a good IT infrastructure.
- 85.9% (68,200) of Bracknell Forest's working age population is economically active compared to an average of 82% of those in the South East and 79% in Great Britain.
- Bracknell Forest has a highly skilled work force with 42.7% of its' workforce being educated to NVQ level 4 (degree level) and above. This is marginally lower than the South East figure of 43.3% but higher than Great Britain's at 40.3%.
- Excellent infrastructure with a recently renovated town centre for which phase 2 was completed in 2017. When the Lexicon opened, the development included:



- 70 new retail and food and beverage outlets, including two 80,000 sq. ft stores housing Fenwick and Marks and Spencer, and a 12-screen cinema.
 - 3,800 spaces were provided in new or upgraded car parks.
 - 8 core buildings and 6 place-making squares for events and activities.
 - £6.5 million extra investment in the highway infrastructure from Bracknell Forest Council.
- Bracknell Forest also fares well in the latest iteration of the English Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019) where it ranks as the 284th least deprived area out of 317 local authorities.

3.0 The Journey so far

Bracknell has been home to many large businesses for several years including Panasonic, Waitrose, Fujitsu, Syngenta, Boehringer Ingelheim etc. However, we have also lost some big businesses or had their presence significantly curtailed such as Vodafone, BMW, Dell, HP etc. This highlights the need for effort to ensure both retention of existing large businesses and to attract new ones. Business needs change and we as a council need to see how best we can continue to support these changes. The renewed focus of Bracknell Forest Council to support large business will support this journey more strongly moving forward.



syngenta support these changes. The renewed focus of Bracknell Forest Council to support large business will support this journey more strongly moving forward.

4.0 Challenges and opportunities from Brexit

Brexit has opened many doors for businesses all over the country and large businesses in Bracknell have a distinct advantage to capitalise on this opportunity. This of course also comes with some challenges as any change brings. In collaboration with the Thames Valley Berkshire Business Growth Hub and Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Bracknell Forest Council is providing relevant information and support to our businesses. Some details can be viewed here:

- [Brexit Update Bulletin from Berkshire Growth Hub \(mailchi.mp\)](#)
- [One-to-one Brexit Advice & Support — Thames Valley Berkshire Business Growth Hub \(berkshirebusinesshub.co.uk\)](#)
- [Thames Valley Berkshire LEP Recovery and Renewal Plan-compressed.pdf](#)



[Home](#) > [The council and democracy](#) > [Brexit](#)



Brexit

The UK has now left the EU and the transition period has ended.

You can check what you may need to do to adapt by answering the questions on the [Brexit checker](#).

5.0 Challenges and opportunities from the pandemic

The entire COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the overall physical, social, and economic wellbeing of Bracknell Forest large businesses. Although the impact has been largely detrimental, there are some opportunities that have emerged from it as well, such as:



- Increased comfort levels with flexible ways of working.
- Putting a spotlight back on the importance of science.
- Realisation of the importance of the growth of manufacturing and other non-retail sectors for a robust economy.

I am sure these factors will feed into the decision making of the future for many large businesses. From a council's point of view as well, these factors will provide input to future decision making. An example is the decision to move forward with the creation of a futuristic science park at the Syngenta Jealott's Hill site which has the potential to put Bracknell on the global scientific research map.

For now, the council in collaboration with its various partners, continues to provide support to businesses on managing the COVID-19 situation. Some details can be viewed here:

[Coronavirus: Advice for Businesses — Thames Valley Berkshire Business Growth Hub \(berkshirebusinesshub.co.uk\)](https://berkshirebusinesshub.co.uk)

Councillor Ankur Shiv Bhandari
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Voluntary Sector Champion

Councillor Mike Gibson



Overview

Only a short while ago, last year's report was amid the pandemic and we were hoping that by this time the worst had been got through. Typing this in the middle of lockdown waiting for the first easing measures to come through I am wondering where we will be when the next report comes out. Volunteering and community spirit have been at the heart of surviving the necessary strictures that have been placed upon us. The vaccine role out, again staffed by many volunteers in the organisation and management on maintaining a flow through of our residents, is just one of the many ways volunteers have been used to help deal with the pandemic. I know that Councillors have been volunteering in this capacity and my thanks go out to them.

1.0 Volunteering

There are many ways to volunteer and recently, given the need to self-isolate, I have had to look for other ways to help. Zoom and similar platforms have been an excellent way to keep in touch it also has allowed people greater accessibility to volunteer to engage and participate in groups that have previously not been able to offer such opportunities. For example, the Conservative Disability Group, of which I am a trustee, had 36 attendees at our AGM last month. Many of whom would not have been able to attend if the meeting was held on a face-to-face basis. We also hold weekly meetings where individuals have volunteered their time to talk about their experiences and relevant issues. I hope to be running such an event in the not too distant future.

<https://www.conservativedisabilitygroup.com/>

2.0 Music

I have been volunteering to MC musical concerts for "Live to your Living room" for artists such as Nancy Kerr and James Fagan. This has been with hundreds of audience members from all over the world and I recommend you have a look at the website:

<https://livetoyourlivingroom.com/>

Through volunteering to help I'm going to be hosting a shanty session "Forebitter or Worse" for the Oxford Folk Weekend 12 April which you will be disappointed to have missed before this report is presented to Full Council. Still there are valuable lessons to pass on the arts in Bracknell and beyond.

3.0 involve



involve have been doing their usual sterling work and I was very pleased to see that the Bracknell Town Council Mayor for 2020/21, Cllr Michael Titheridge has selected involve as the Charity to support during his mayoral year.

Involve have set up the Bracknell Volunteer Pool for those who want to be able to help out and volunteer within the community when they can, but who don't necessarily have the time to settle into a permanent, regular role.

<https://involve.community/volunteering/pool/>

I am sorry that the Chief Executive officer, Philip Cook, has moved on to pastures new. Those on the Council that have worked with Philip will know what a fantastic impact he has made in Bracknell since joining involve. His replacement, another Philip, Philip Bell, is already in situ and I look forward to working with him in the coming year.



As a gentle reminder for any of you who aren't on the reading list and to find out more about what involve does, and to sign up to get regular updates and hear news about the voluntary sector in Bracknell Forest, then just click here: <http://involve.community/newsletters/>

4.0 CAB

With the merging of Citizens Advice, Bracknell with Windsor and Maidenhead we are also losing Chief Executive Tina Stevenson to Reading. The merger will not be making any cuts and will be in a stronger position to serve their local communities.

I attended the recent AGM and I am assured of the continuing good work that the CAB carry out.

5.0 Council and future work

There has been some work continuing within the council such as the Loneliness and Isolation review under Cllr Malcolm Tullett, which has included looking at the voluntary sector within it as part of its review. Participation in this excellent review has triggered my desire to make a further review on the impact of Covid, specifically on the Voluntary Sector.

With the resources of the Council being targeted at where they are most needed, I have decided to set up a working group on the effects, both good and bad, Covid has had on the Voluntary Sector once the resources are available to achieve this. I have spoken to the deputy leader Cllr Dale Birch and agreed to look at this further and to be most effective, we need to be looking at it post Covid.

When resources are available, I will be setting up a group to look not only at where Covid has impacted on the Voluntary Sector, which we need to support, but also where new opportunities have arisen. It is important to recognise that where changes have been made, some have been for the better and it is important that we do not lose sight of these either.

There has been a massive increase in volunteering, and it will be important to harness this as a power to the good. Access for the disabled, older people, and the vulnerable has increased hugely using virtual platforms, as I have mentioned earlier. Whilst I do not intend to ignore where problems have arisen, it will be important to see the whole picture.

6.0 Conclusion

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the volunteers in Bracknell Forest. Volunteering has a far-reaching impact on people's lives. I would encourage anybody to volunteer if they have a few hours a month to spare. It is very rewarding. Councillors are essentially volunteering so I commend this annual report to all of you again with my thanks. Here is a final link to involve if you know of someone who wants to get involved.

<https://bracknellforestgetinvolved.org.uk/>

Councillor Mike Gibson
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