

Review of the Economic Development Strategy Refresh

Annual progress report
(June 2021 – June 2022)



West Berkshire
COUNCIL

Economic Development Business Support

20 businesses have received a

share of over **£85,000** in **Welcome Back Business Grants** to drive footfall after lockdown

W E L C O M E

B A C K

44 businesses have benefited from our

£700,000 in **Additional Restrictions Grant Challenge Fund** to aid recovery, green growth and innovation



450 businesses have benefited from a total of

£6,420,000 in **Additional Restrictions Grant** to help with the impacts of the pandemic

22 Independent businesses have featured in our 'Shop Green, Shop Local' online magazine to promote sustainable Christmas Shopping



Interventions and events facilitated to support high streets

15



Employments created (Kickstart)

29

KICKSTART SCHEME

4 Webinars and events held



Newsletter subscribers (May 21 – 22)

Subscribe



Number of businesses supported with advice and guidance

258

2,294 to 3,293



Unemployment
3.1%



71.4%

qualified at
NVQ 3 and
above

87.8%



of the 16-64 population
is economically active

Average pay
per annum

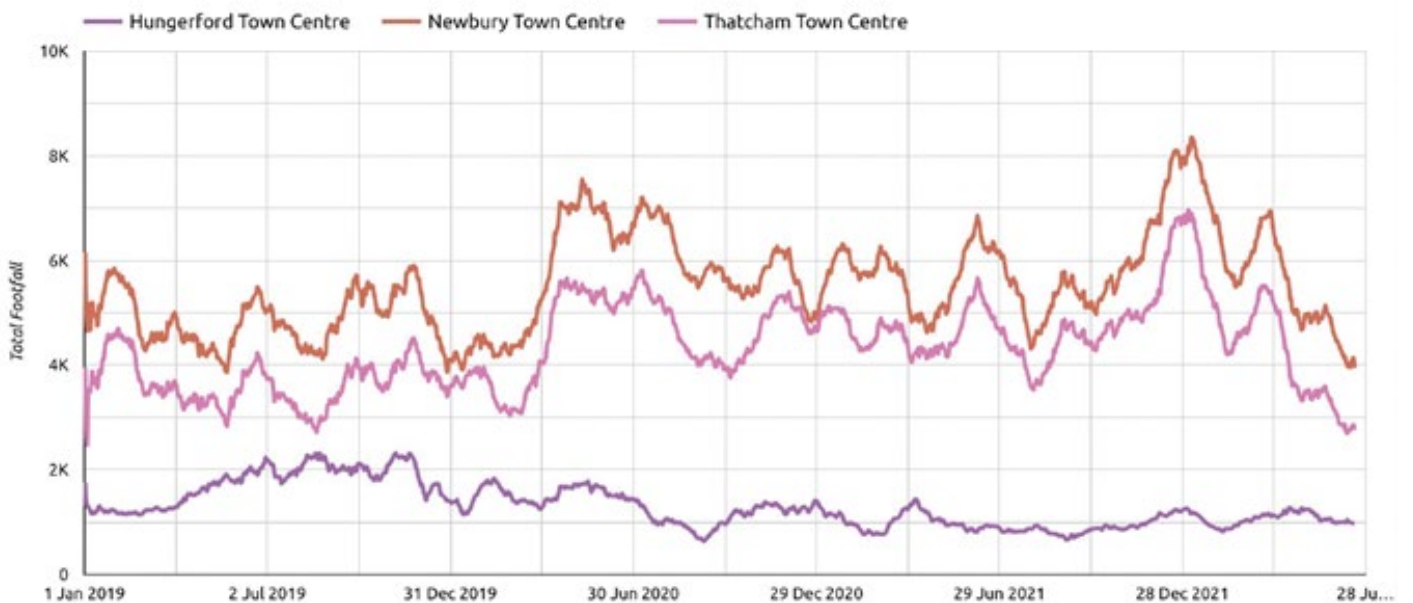
£34,850



House prices
vs income ratio

10.94

Town centre footfall



Introduction

West Berkshire has a diverse and resilient economy, with over 9000 businesses, a well-qualified workforce, excellent connectivity, and is part of the strongest regional economy in the UK outside of London: the Thames Valley. Although, like the rest of the world, our economy was affected by the pandemic, it was in a position to mount a strong recovery and continue to grow.

Our [Economic Development Strategy refresh](#) was written to build on this position of strength by ensuring that our priorities were aligned with the altered needs of the economy as a result of Covid-19. The refresh was ratified in August 2021 and it reviewed and updated the priorities and actions of the original [Economic Development Strategy](#), which was first written in March 2019.

A year on we are now reviewing the progress that has been made towards the vision of the refresh: that West Berkshire's economy emerges from the Covid-19 environment stronger than it was before.

This progress report is structured along the 4 themes of the strategy: People, Place, Infrastructure and Business Environment. It will look at the progress made against each priority and explore areas where our work has been delayed or priorities have pivoted.

Our Economic Development Strategy Delivery Plan sets out the actions and timescales for how we intend to achieve the aims of the strategy, and the two documents should be viewed in conjunction.

Pivoting in response to major Government announcements or shifting local priorities is a key requirement of the Economy Team. When the strategy refresh was written, in March 2021, we were between periods of national lockdowns and it was not known that they would continue for almost another year. As a result we had to invest a significant amount of time providing emergency support for the local economy, specifically the Additional Restrictions Grant scheme (ARG) from its inception in November 2020 to March 2022, has required 60-70% of the time of the Economic Development Officer. This has resulted in some actions being reprioritised, particularly in areas where we have less direct ability to influence the local economy.

This was compounded by another major pressure on our capacity; the refresh of the London Road Industrial Estate regeneration project which, as explored in a case study below, has required significant time and resources.

As the team has expanded and the demands of the aforementioned projects have reduced we have been able to expand our scope, however there remains a lot more work to be done.

People

Empower everyone to enter the workplace

We funded a two-week course offering skills to local people on how to start their own business or go self-employed, delivered by the [Rebel Business School](#). Promotion was targeted through community groups particularly at women who are not part of the workforce, resulting in 17 pre-start-ups attending in total.

We have created and are soon to ratify, in collaboration with Adult Social Care, a partnership agreement with the Department for Work and Pensions that facilitates a closer working relationship between the Council and DWP. The first action to arise has been working with DWP to offer advice to Ukrainian refugees who are seeking employment.

Put in place employment support for the newly unemployed

There was a major uptick in unemployment claims in West Berkshire by mid-2020 as a result of the pandemic. In order to respond directly and create job opportunities for young people we made extensive use of the Government's Kickstart scheme, which is described in the case study below.

We also facilitated a sector-based worked academy (SBWA) at Newbury JobCentrePlus in March 2021 which provided a cohort of 10 young people with practical workplace admin skills.

We work with partners to improve careers advice, such as [Berkshire Opportunities](#) to whom we provided £5,000 in 2021/22 to enable them to continue to support people into employment.

Encourage the uptake of apprenticeships

Our strategy includes a commitment to create a 'community apprenticeship levy' to gift the Council's excess apprenticeship levy funds. This work pivoted in response to the Government's Levy Transfer Scheme announced in September 2021, which nationalised the transfer system. Human Resources led on committing the Council's excess levy through this scheme, and local businesses are now regularly signposted to it.

An initiative to embed Employment and Skills Plans (ESPs) in conditions of major planning applications and procurements has begun, with the aim of creating local apprenticeships and training opportunities. The first output was a planning condition requiring a commercial development in Colthrop to provide an ESP.

Support Newbury College's University Centre

The Skills and Enterprise Partnership, chaired by Newbury College, allows us to maintain close contact with the College, however we continue to look for an opportunity to support the University Centre directly, particularly in the area of digital technology. Next year we will be aiming to explore the opportunity to arrange placements for their students within the Council.



Work with partners to improve careers advice and put employment and skills at the heart of everything we do

The work experience opportunities at West Berkshire Council project was managed and delivered by the HR team in summer of 2021 and we will be considering how we can support this by making placements available in future years.



Case study: Kickstart scheme

**KICKSTART
SCHEME**

We became a Kickstart Gateway organisation in late 2020, and we used the scheme to make a total of 55 temporary job opportunities available for young people in West Berkshire. In total we were able to recruit 29 people to these roles; 13 within the Council and 16 within local businesses that we directly supported. We published case studies about the experiences of two Kickstarters, which can be viewed here: <https://bit.ly/3QpP2Cw> and here: <https://bit.ly/39yaPXZ>



We also offered a coaching and advice service to support local businesses to apply for Kickstart funding to create jobs. Support was given to approximately 50 businesses, most of whom applied to the scheme with many reporting back on their success.

In total we have distributed over £190,000 in wages and start-up grants through Kickstart

Places

Reshape our town centres

We have successfully developed a revised strategic objective and delivery strategy for the London Road Industrial Estate that focuses on developing the site for economic growth, described in the case study below.

Following announcement of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund we have been asked to develop the investment plan to draw down West Berkshire's £1 million allocation. The investment plan was submitted on the 1st of August, and it includes a mix of impactful projects across the district which have the support of local stakeholders.

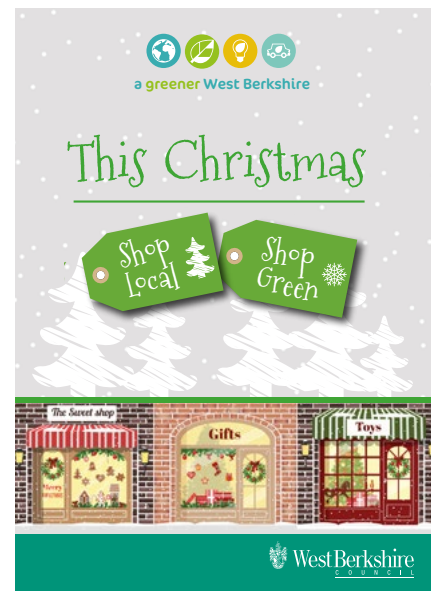
We delivered two grant schemes over 2021/22 to enhance the economic recovery of our towns: the Welcome Back Fund and Welcome Back Business Grants, both of which were supported by major promotional campaigns.

Welcome Back Fund: £173,000 from the European Regional Development Fund was spent on events, publicity and beautification to support Hungerford, Newbury and Thatcham high streets. This followed a survey of all town and parish Councils to invite interest and proposals.

Welcome Back Business Grants: we developed a unique local scheme to fund businesses to host events or make improvements which drove customer footfall. In total we distributed £85,000 of recovery funding to 21 businesses who applied.

[Shop Local Shop Green](#): in collaboration with our Environment Team we rolled out two campaigns aimed at promoting local sustainable businesses, involving 28 in total. They were selected through an application process to feature in digital magazines that were sent to local residents.

In June 2022 we commenced procurement for consultants to deliver place-making strategies for Thatcham and Hungerford town centres which will be delivered by March 2023



Support rural businesses to diversify and support the Lambourn Horseracing industry

Rural business forum – engagement and planning has begun for a conference event in autumn 2022 that will bring together major stakeholders in the rural economy, with the aim of supporting existing and new rural businesses to become more resilient, grow and diversify.

Supporting comments have been provided on a number of planning applications for rural business diversification and we will continue to offer our support for this where appropriate.

Use the local plan to deliver sustainable development in Newbury, Thatcham, Hungerford and Pangbourne

The Local Plan Review is due to be submitted to the planning inspectorate in March 2023. We have put forward comments on policies in the plan which will facilitate economic development priorities in our town centres, [London Road Industrial Estate](#) and the rural economy.

The Newbury Town Centre Masterplan was ratified by Executive on 10 February 2022 and we are now developing an accompanying delivery and stakeholder engagement plan.

An outline redesign for turning Newbury Wharf into a flexible public space, as proposed by the Masterplan, is due to be delivered by consultants by August 2022. We have already used this project as the basis of a funding proposal for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund



Enhance our leisure offering

The proposed development of the Newbury Lido was approved at Executive in March 2022 and has been allocated £5 million in capital funding for structural work, improved access, a new pool and play equipment. We have prepared and submitted two Levelling Up Fund bids for the Lido work, the first unsuccessfully in March 2021 followed by a revised version for round 2 on 1st August 2022.

The Sports and Leisure team have developed a proposal for expansion of Goosecroft sports ground in Purley on Thames, which we are putting this forward to be considered for the UK Shared Prosperity Fund investment plan. If approved it would deliver 3 junior football pitches, and one cricket pitch.



Case study: London Road Industrial Estate

The regeneration of the London Road Industrial Estate has been a long-standing objective of the Council since 2003. One of the key aims of our team over the last year has been to progress the project forward, after it was restarted in 2019 following a legal challenge.

A review of the project was undertaken which took into account the post-pandemic economy, market demand and the district's ambition to be carbon neutral by 2030. On the basis of this work a report was developed which outlines a fresh approach for the site focusing on safeguarding existing employment and creating 200 additional jobs, attracting investment into Newbury and achieving carbon neutrality – superseding a previous development brief that had been agreed in November 2020. The [report and new way forward](#) was agreed at Executive on 9th June 2022.

We will now be working towards this new delivery strategy, which includes work underway on place-making, lease extensions in place, re-naming of the site and a planning application for the former depot site by mid-2023.

[View the London Road Industrial Estate micro-site here.](#)

Infrastructure

Support delivery of Environment Strategy green infrastructure targets

The Low Carbon Workspaces grant has been promoted through our newsletter, with 18 West Berkshire based businesses successfully applying for funding, totalling £57,000 in grants to implement building energy efficiency measures.

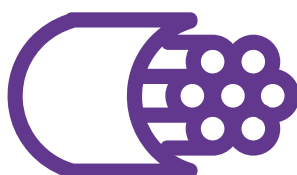
As part of the Additional Restrictions Grant we developed a unique local scheme called the ARG Challenge Fund, offering large grants to stimulate environmentally friendly growth and carbon reduction measures. Businesses received funding for projects such as solar panels, e-commerce websites, an air-source heat pump, development of a travel carbon-tracker app, and an e-cargo bike. A number of these projects have now been completed and we are in the process of developing video case studies of the successful proposals.



We have built close links with the Environment Delivery Team and collaborated on projects such as the ARG Challenge Fund, and Shop Local Shop Green. We will be continuing to support delivery of the Environment Strategy – which is well underway.

Digital infrastructure focusing on full fibre and 5g coverage

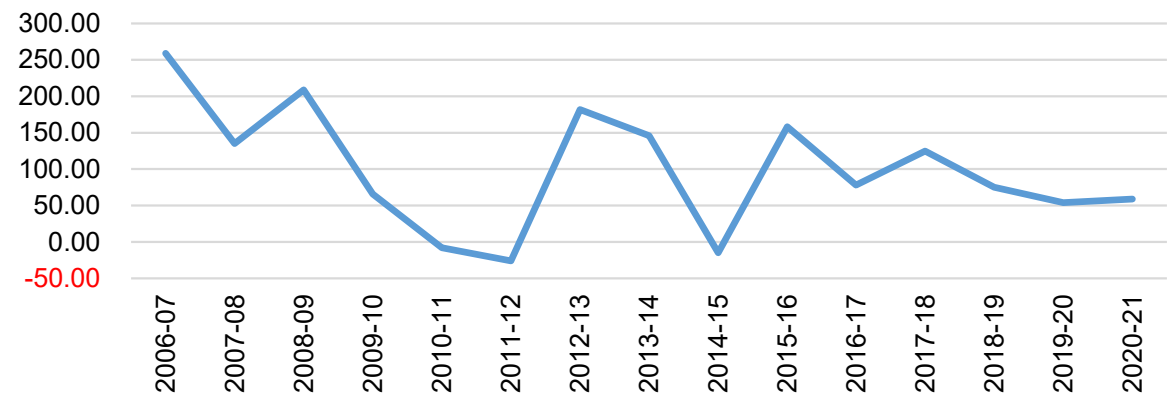
Our Chief Executive chairs the Thames Valley LEP Digital Infrastructure Group (DIG), and we have set up a secondary group of Council officers in order to support local delivery of the larger DIG's targets. The mini-DIG aims to develop a programme of local initiatives in line with the wider targets which can viewed here: www.thamesvalleyberkshire.co.uk/digital-infrastructure-group



Ensure affordable housing delivery

The [Housing Strategy 2020-2026](#) describes how the Council will facilitate affordable housing delivery; primarily through the planning process, and we provided a consultation response to this strategy. There was a net delivery of 59 affordable homes in 2020-2021 and the Local Plan Review will set out the Council's position on affordable homes in new developments for the future.

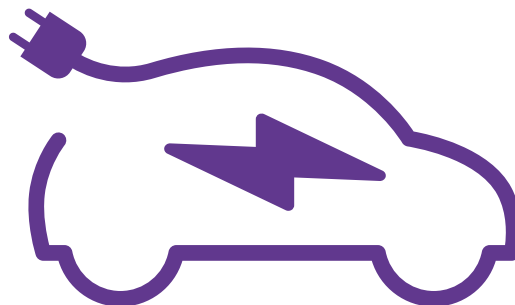
Net affordable housing completions
2006 - 2021



Enhance intelligent and sustainable transport infrastructure

The Local Transport Plan is in progress and being delivered by consultants WSP. The main body of work is currently being drafted, and we will be contributing comments from an economic development perspective when the plan goes out to consultation in autumn 2022.

In planning consultation responses we promote the inclusion of sustainable transport infrastructure, including EV charging points and cycle provision on commercial premises



Business environment

Create an environment to help start-ups and small businesses grow

The recruitment of a Business Engagement Officer has allowed us to extend our direct business engagement significantly and enhance the guidance and signposting that we offer to local businesses and start-ups.

The Business engagement officer post shares some of the goals and priorities of the discontinued Newbury West Berkshire Economic Development Company (EDC). The EDC was created in 2020 and discontinued in early 2021 as a result of a lack of funding and outcomes not meeting expectations.

The [Business West Berkshire website](#) was launched April 2022. It provides a brochure for inward investment and one-stop-shop for advice for local businesses. So far the website has attracted 401 unique visitors and 3k views, including visitors from the USA, China and Europe.

Thirty four start-up businesses were referred to the Berkshire Business Growth Hub from March 2021 - 2022, for bespoke growth and financial guidance.

Our strategy included an action to develop the business case for incubator space. Great Western Rail submitted an application for 3 business growth units at Newbury Railway Station, which was approved in 2021. We will continue to explore opportunities to develop incubator space with prospective partners and funding providers.



Remain business friendly as a council

In November 2021 the [Social Value Policy](#), which we developed in collaboration with the Commissioning team, was formally adopted by Executive. This policy allows officers to give weighted consideration to social value impacts when procuring contracts, including measures to promote spend with local SMEs.

We are planning to co-host a supplier engagement event with Commissioning to get suppliers' feedback on how the newly adopted Social Value Policy is affecting them.

We host quarterly webinars to engage with the business community around a variety of topics, including local grant schemes, Kickstart and the Rebel Business School, which have drawn attendance from 8 to 30 businesses at a time. We also maintain an active presence at other engagement opportunities such as local events hosted by the Federation of Small Businesses and Newbury BID.

We gave support to hospitality businesses to apply for outdoor tables and chairs licences when social restrictions were in place, resulting in several successful applications.

Support businesses that have been affected by Covid-19 to reopen and trade resiliently

Coronavirus business grant support, specifically the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) has been a key area of work for the team and led to the informal secondment of the Economic Development Officer into the Business Rates team for most of 2021. See the case study below.

Foster relationships and create stronger engagement with local businesses

A business engagement plan has been developed which outlines all activities aimed at creating a closer relationship with businesses in the district. This includes our regular newsletter, and partnering with the Chamber of Commerce to undertake local business surveys. We are also developing plans to increase our engagement with institutions such as AWE, Vodafone and rural estates.

We are working collaboratively with local organisations such as the [Thames Valley LEP](#) to broaden our offering outside of West Berkshire on initiatives such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and the Digital Infrastructure Group (DIG).

West Berkshire Growth Board – the creation of a strategic local partnership to facilitate growth is an ongoing objective, however it has been postponed to due to uncertainty around the future of the LEP.

Promote the West Berkshire brand and provide a soft-landing to new companies

We are developing an account-management approach to attracting inward investment into the district that will be led by a new Business Investment Officer funded through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, if our investment plan submitted 1st August is successfully approved.

We continue to use the Berkshire Film Office (BFO) to promote West Berkshire as a location for filming, and to act as a liaison between productions and the Council. Since we joined in 2019 the BFO have facilitated 22 productions in West Berkshire. With the development of Shinfield studios we expect to see more opportunities for local filming to help build the West Berkshire brand and improve commercial outcomes for local businesses in the film industry.



Case study: Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG)

Following the November 2020 national lockdown the Government released discretionary business grant funding, called the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) to all local authorities. We were tasked with managing the policy and distribution of this fund to offer the best support possible to local businesses.

We developed a policy and application process and reviewed the bulk of applications with support from the Business Rates team. Over the 16 month lifespan of the scheme over **450** local businesses were supported with a share of **£6,420,000** that was paid out in total. Feedback from businesses was positive, many expressed that our system of automatic repeat payments gave them confidence, and that a broad range of industries were supported. However we did also hear from some applicants that the decision process was unreasonably long, as there was very high demand and significant pressure on resources.

Below is some feedback we received from a well-known local business that supplies the hospitality sector:

'Many thanks for your email last night, we wanted to reply but were way too emotional. We actually had a good night sleep for the first time in months as a result of your email, cannot thank you enough for your efforts. The grant below really will be the difference between make or break for us.'

Conclusion

We will continue to take forward the Economic Development Strategy by progressing our existing actions and initiating those that we are committed to deliver.

Some of the key outcomes that we aim to achieve this year, as expressed by our key performance indicators, are to: progress the

London Road Industrial Estate regeneration project; future-proof our town centres through place-making initiatives; continue to prioritise economic development in the planning process; improve employment and training outcomes through large developments; and facilitate inward investment in the district through engaging and supporting business.

