

Economic Development Strategy

Annual Review 2023



WestBerkshire
COUNCIL

Economic Development Business Support

£297,994
of Rural England
Prosperity Funding has
been allocated to the
upcoming rural business
grant scheme.

We have continued
our support for local
sustainable businesses
by expanding our
'shop green, shop
local' online magazine
from 22 independent
businesses to **42**



37 West Berkshire
businesses went
through the High
Growth or Startup
programme in 2023.



Newsletter subscribers
(May 22 – 23)

Subscribe



3,293 to 3,730

Number of
businesses
supported with
advice and
guidance



94

4
Webinars and
events held



District Stats



Unemployment
2.6%



No qualification:

West Berkshire

2.5%

vs

National average

6.6%

85.9%



of the 16-64 population
is economically active

Average pay
per annum

£38,641



House prices are

9.97

times average
annual income



8,135

registered firms
located within
West Berkshire

Introduction

Since our last annual review back in [June 2022](#), we've seen some changes in both the national and local economic climate. While the economy has been recovering from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new international shock factor has had a considerable economic impact.

The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions imposed upon the state in February 2022 caused a substantial rise in both domestic and global inflation.

As the UK looks to recover from the impacts of inflation, we have reviewed the progress made to our commitments outlined in the [Economic Development Strategy Refresh](#) written in August 2021.

This progress report will maintain the same structure as last year's review, maintaining the four themes of the initial strategy: people, place, infrastructure, and business environment. These sections will review our commitments and update the district on the pipeline of work the team has undertaken. This review is the final annual review of the current Strategy, as we prepare a new Strategy to reflect the aspirations of the new administration elected in May 2023.

A large proportion of the Economic Development team's resources over the year have been committed to the Town Centres and Bond Riverside projects. Details of the progress made on both projects can be found in the Place section of the review.



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

Following on from the implementation of the work experience opportunities at the West Berkshire Council project in 2021, the Economic Development team has since hosted two additional work experience students over the summer of 2023. These students have gained insight into the functions of the team and work experience to further their career goals.

West Berkshire Council also hosted the “Return to Work” careers fair at Shaw House on September 6th, 2023. The fair was free of charge for local employers based in West Berkshire. The purpose of the careers fair was to give residents who’ve been unemployed since the COVID-19 pandemic and are ready to re-join the workforce an opportunity to meet local employers and get a feel for the current job market and opportunities available to them.

As part of the council’s commitments to support Ukrainian refugees, we worked with our partners at the job centre to host a careers fair for Ukrainian refugees to try and facilitate their employment in the local economy while they settle in the UK.



Employment Skills Plans

To improve educational attainment and skills in the construction industry, the council can request that developers of major applications prepare an Employment and Skills Plan (ESP) under a Section 106 agreement. With the help of the council and other key partners, such as Jobcentre Plus, these plans outline the types of training and employment opportunities that will be offered to residents throughout the development.

Since early 2023, we’ve been working on standardising our ESP to improve their implementation and garner greater outcomes for the district’s residents and businesses. We’ve done this by working closely with the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) to deliver the updated ESPs, and we are currently in the process of being certified by the board.

The key outcomes of the new ESP are as follows: create work placements, create jobs, provide training weeks, achieve a certain number of qualifications for placements and staff, and work with careers fairs to provide insight to young people about the construction industry.

We continue to submit requests for ESPs on major planning applications that meet the required threshold and request the provision of ESPs during the pre-application phase.

Places

In August 2022, West Berkshire Council was allocated £1,000,000 as part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to invest in priorities relating to supporting both communities, Places, and local businesses. The two major projects funded by the UKSPF are the Goosecroft sportsground in Purely on Thames and the Newbury Wharf redesign. These projects aim to improve the availability and perception of amenities across the district to improve the quality of life for our residents. Further details on these projects can be found later in the Place section.

As part of our commitments to reshaping our town centres, we have successfully secured £750,000 of funding from the reclaimed Berkshire Business Rates Retention Pilot from Thames Valley Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP). These funds will be split across the Newbury Wharf project, as outlined in the Newbury Master Plan, and the Bond Riverside regeneration programme. The aim of these projects is to improve the connectivity, local amenities, and long-term viability of Newbury as a central economic hub for the district.

The Economic Development Team has also been collaborating with local stakeholders across West Berkshire to support the organisation of events and Town Centre Place Making. While a large part of our placemaking role has been handed over to the Town Centre Steering Groups, we continue to support these groups by attending and assisting the Town Centre Steering Groups wherever possible.

As part of the council's work on town centre initiatives, the Economic Development Team has been collaborating with local stakeholders, such as the Newbury BID, to support their organisation of events in the town centre. The goal of these events is to create unique experiences for locals while also promoting our town centres as attractive and worthwhile locations to visit.

The recent Mo and Red Ribbon event, which was coordinated by the Corn Exchange and 101 Outdoor Arts, is an illustration of this partnership. The event attracted around 3,000 people to gather at the Wharf to see the story of Mo.



Reshape our town centres

Newbury

The [Newbury Town Centre Masterplan](#) was approved by Executive on the 10th of February 2022, and we have a Newbury Town Centre Steering Group made up of Newbury's stakeholders that guides the programme.

Progress has been made across multiple elements of the Newbury Town Centre Masterplan particularly on the Newbury Wharf project and increasing pedestrianisation of the town centre.

Pedestrianisation

The Council administration has made a clear commitment in their manifesto and in the new Council Strategy to carry out a trial extension to Newbury town centre pedestrianisation hours. This aligns with the key aim of the Newbury Town Centre Masterplan. The proposal would see an extension to the hours of pedestrianisation which currently runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

With the town centre being traffic-free for longer, residents will be able to enjoy an improved environment in the evenings, more space for outdoor dining and events, and encourage residents to make sustainable travel choices.

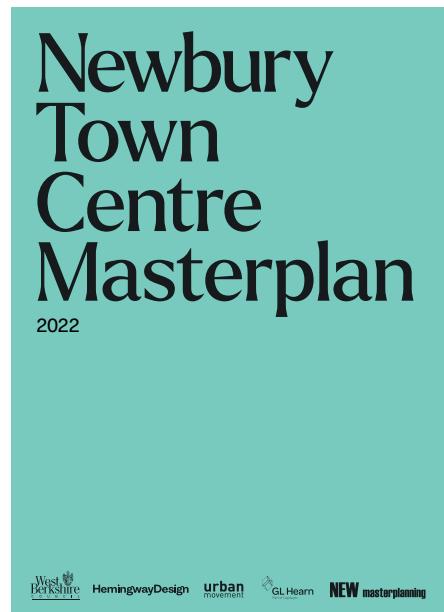
Thatcham and Hungerford

With Hemingway Design hired as consultants, the town centre initiative has made significant strides on the place-making strategies for [Hungerford](#) and [Thatcham](#) over the past year. Through multiple workshops and online public polls, these place-making initiatives have been developed in collaboration with the town councils, companies, stakeholders, and local communities in each town.



There was a great response from the community, with 1000 replies to the consultation for Thatcham and 800 for Hungerford. The strategies for each town centre were then developed using these replies in order to better represent the amenities that the local communities wanted.

Steering groups have now been set up for each town, chaired by the Town Councils, which will aim to take the strategies forward and work projects up into more detail.



Case study: The Wharf

An outline redesign for turning the Newbury Wharf into a flexible public space, as proposed by the Masterplan, was delivered by Adams & Sutherland in April 2022. In May 2023, West Berkshire Council appointed Adams & Sutherland as the lead consultant for the public realm improvements to the Wharf. This project is funded by the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF).



With the currently available funding, the Council will be proceeding with public realm improvements to both the waterfront and the peace garden. These improvements will be delivered in two phases across the financial years 2023/24 and 2024/25, in line with current available funding from the LEP and UKSPF.

A planning application for the initial grant-funded works was submitted on 21st December 2023,



Bond Riverside

An identity competition ran in local schools to develop a new brand and name for the site. A judging panel eventually decided on Bond Riverside as the new name for London Road Industrial Estate.

The regeneration of Bond Riverside (formally London Road Industrial Estate) has been a long-standing objective of the Council since 2003. A new way forward for the programme was agreed upon in June 2022.

In order to carry out the goals set in the programme report, an officer has been recruited on a fixed-term post to work on the implementation of the programme. As well as this, consultants have been procured to develop a place-making, SUDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems), and energy strategy for the site. These strategies will create a blueprint for the physical delivery of the project going forward.

The team will now be working towards the implementation of the Quick Win projects set out in the Place-Making Strategy. This includes SUDS and environmental improvements around the highway of the site. As well as this, a review of the current programme report is underway to better reflect the administration's new goals for the site.

Following the local elections in May 2023, the new administration's priorities on Bond Riverside have shifted, with the return of football to Faraday Road being one of the key changes. As a result, the return of football has been passed over to the Countryside Team, and the area of land is no longer part of the Bond Riverside Regeneration Programme. The new administration has also triggered a programme review of the Bond Riverside regeneration to align the programme with their strategic objectives and ensure that all options are considered before moving forward.

Aspirations by the new administration to bring organised football back to Faraday Road Football Pitch have started to come to fruition. The pitch has been cut, scarified, and reseeded, along with changing rooms added in the summer of 2023, with the opening event held on the 19th of November.



Enhancing Leisure

Over the past year, notable progress has been made across multiple projects in the district to enhance local leisure facilities and provide greater amenities for residents. The aim of these projects is to address the major under-provision of grass playing pitches in West Berkshire, as identified by our Playing Pitch Strategy (2018–2022).

As mentioned previously in the Bond Riverside section, footfall has returned to Faraday Road and will offer football-related amenities to the people of Newbury.

As part of our investment plan for the UKSPF, the Goosecroft sports ground in Purely on Thames was allocated £230,000 to deliver three new junior football pitches, a cricket table, and an artificial cricket wicket. This project is being delivered by Purley Parish Council, subject to planning permission.



The Northcroft Lido reopened in August following a complete renovation. The goal of this transformation was to enhance the experience of visitors and provide greater flexibility in use for the site while also extending the outdoor swimming season to a period of six months.

Infrastructure

The Council has continued to support the delivery of green infrastructure across the district to improve the district's long-term sustainability and prosperity.

In November 2022, the economic development team submitted our investment plan to the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) as part of the REPF. The plan outlined how we aim to invest the £597,994 that is allocated across three projects: a grant scheme for village halls, a rural business grant scheme, and an extension of the Eling Cycle Way.



Village halls net zero grant scheme

The village hall net zero grant scheme has been allocated £100,000 of REPF funding, with the funding being split into two £50,000 payments to be paid out over two financial years starting in 2023/24. This project has received funding after the auditing programme of village halls by Connecting Communities Berkshire highlighted a need for capital funding for village halls to invest in green energy and NET-zero measures. The aim is to ensure the long-term viability of village halls as viable community spaces.

The scheme is being delivered by the Environment Delivery Team.



The Eling Cycle Way extension

Eling Way is a cycle path created on a former rail track, running 3km from Hermitage to Hampstead Norreys. This proposal is to extend the southern part of the Eling Way within Hermitage Village, contributing to the ambition of developing the entire former track into a cycle path and creating a cycle connection between Newbury and the rural villages along this route.

As such, £200,000 of the REPF funding has been allocated to the project in the 2024–25 financial year, with additional potential match funding from other sources such as the community infrastructure levy (CIL).



Enhancing green infrastructure

We continue to support the provision of green infrastructure as part of our role in planning application consultations, in line with national and local policy. Our key areas of provision are electric vehicle charging points, cycleways, and walkways on major commercial applications where the provision of said infrastructure is viable and adds to the feasibility of the site.

Business environment

Business engagement

Throughout the last year, our business engagement has increased significantly. We held the 2nd Rural Business Forum in November 2023, along with engagement events with local businesses every quarter. We've established regular engagement with Vodafone and other major employers in the district. This led to our senior management team visiting the Vodafone site to discuss possible local initiatives that would benefit our local businesses and employment in the district.

Following on from the rural business forum our senior management team visited the Dyson estate in Compton to discuss their development plans, technology, and innovation and how we can work closer to support one of our major private landowners in the district. It also helped contextualise the requirements rural estates need to develop, which will be useful in the upcoming Whole Estate Plan pilot (2024). They also visited a number of other rural businesses across the horse racing, logistics, viticulture and bespoke manufacturing industries to discuss their plans for growth and how the Council can offer support.

We work with the Berkshire Film Office by offering up our locations for film crews to film, whether that's road closures or space hire. This generates revenue, both directly and indirectly, for the council. In 2024, we hope to continue to promote West Berkshire as a place for film and TV and enhance our local skills in the creative areas. Berkshire saw more than 79 film crews in 2023, despite the strikes that have affected the filming industry. We are also continuously promoting skill-based workshops for our residents, such as scriptwriting courses and an introduction to editing.

Business support

The [Business West Berkshire website](#) has been continuously updated since its launch in April 2022 and continues to provide advice to local businesses and businesses seeking to invest in West Berkshire. Since the website's launch, we've had 4,900 unique users and 16,903 views.

We continue to hold quarterly business engagement events, with a variety of activities targeted at the current council goals and company requirements that we've discovered. These activities include the procurement event, the energy-saving breakfast, and the rural business forum.

As a council, we've been proactive in supporting our small independent businesses, which was demonstrated through our Shop Local, Shop Green initiative, which helped promote small sustainable businesses. We also offer biweekly drop-in sessions for businesses that are looking for business support from the council, typically relating to business management advice, interacting with the council and the wider Berkshire district, and access to promotional materials. So far, we have positive feedback from individuals who've attended drop-in sessions.

Create an environment that helps start-ups and existing small businesses to grow

The Council has used UKSPF grant funding, in conjunction with the five other Berkshire local authorities, to fund the Berkshire Local Enterprise Partnership's Growth Hub, which aims to provide business support to start-ups and existing small businesses to stimulate growth. Each Berkshire Authority has contributed £60,000 of UKSPF funding to the project over a 3-year period.

The [Berkshire High Growth Programme](#) is designed to work with businesses that are looking to grow. Providing up to 12 hours of intensive support, businesses will have an initial meeting with a dedicated Growth Hub Business Adviser, followed by tailored business support through 1-2-1 sessions and a choice of masterclasses covering the key business topics.

The other programme run by the Growth Hub is the [Berkshire Startup Programme](#). This programme aims to provide entrepreneurs with the business knowledge they need to take them from a start-up to a fully operational SME.

Newbury Best in Business Awards

In 2023, the Council sponsored the best new business category as part of the Newbury Best in Business Awards. This category was for businesses that had started up in the last 5 years and achieved high growth over the period.

While the awards have been absent for the last three years due to the pandemic, the previous awards have brought together the business community in West Berkshire and built strong, lasting relationships. We were delighted to see such a high volume of applications for the award, highlighting just how resilient and innovative West Berkshire's small businesses are even after the economic strain caused by the pandemic.

The award was given to The West Berkshire Cleaning Company for their investment in staff training and upskilling.



Case study: Procurement event

In June 2023, West Berkshire Council's procurement and economy team co-hosted the council's supplier fair at Shaw House in Newbury. The purpose of the event was to give local suppliers the opportunity to meet with the West Berkshire commissioning and procurement teams face-to-face in order to provide local businesses with a greater understanding of our tendering processes. The event also allowed local businesses to meet with category managers for their respective sectors in order to hear about the latest upcoming opportunities.

Supporting rural businesses

West Berkshire's character and economy are heavily influenced by rural industries, such as agriculture and horse racing. The team continues to assist and collaborate with rural businesses and key stakeholders to strengthen the economy and ensure the rural community's interests are represented in our projects.

To improve our engagement with rural stakeholders, the council hosted the first Rural Business Forum back in November 2022. The forum gave officers and members a chance to speak directly with rural businesses to gain insight into barriers affecting growth in rural communities. Since the success of the first Rural Business Forum, the Council has subsequently hosted a second forum on November 6th 2023, which again saw great buy-in from our rural partners.

We continue to give support for planning applications aimed at rural diversification where they are consistent with local policy as part of our obligations outlined in the economic development strategy. The team has also managed to secure funding from central government as part of the REPF for a rural business grant scheme aimed at encouraging rural diversification. The projects related to the REPF are explained in greater detail later in the review.

In 2024 we will explore opportunities to support the development of Whole Estate Plans with local estates to help support our rural estates in bringing forward appropriate development. Whole Estate Plans are designed to support large landholdings that consist of a wide array of commercial, social, and environmental interests and bring these together to achieve sustainable development onsite.

Rural business grant scheme

The Rural Business Grant Scheme have been allocated half of West Berkshire's REPF funding, a total of £297,994 over two financial years.

The purpose of the business grant scheme is to provide small-scale investment in micro and small-scale enterprises in rural areas in order to support diversification and improve the economic resilience of rural communities.

The Economic Development Team will maintain an open dialogue with rural businesses and stakeholders over the grant scheme's lifespan to provide the best possible outcomes for rural communities and the district. The scheme will be open for applications in January 2024.

Conclusion

2023 is the final year of our current Economic Development Strategy, first written in 2020 and refreshed in 2021. While we continue to fulfil the commitments that it set out, it is time for an update to set out our roadmap for the next 4 years. Our team is currently working on this new Strategy, based on the goals of the administration for supporting the economic prosperity of the district, as outlined in the new [Council Strategy](#). We will publish and consult on the new Economic Strategy in 2024.

The key advancements we aim to achieve by the end of the financial year are commencing with the public realm improvements to Newbury Wharf as part of the masterplan for the town; initiating projects in Thatcham or Hungerford in line with our town centre strategies; implementing environmental improvements to Bond Riverside; promoting sustainable economic growth in planning applications; and maintaining open business engagement to facilitate private sector growth in the district.

