

AN ECONOMIC STRATEGY FOR WOKINGHAM 2025-2035

Building a growing and greener economy for everyone

1. Executive Summary

The Borough of Wokingham is a high performing economic area within the sub-region of Berkshire. Five of the eight growth sectors identified in Government's Industrial Strategy Green Paper are present in the Borough. But, despite its record of economic growth, changes in business competitiveness, employment patterns, skills needs, and infrastructure, all present challenges which need to be addressed. The size of the business population declined by 5.7% in the four years to 2023. The fall has predominantly been in the Borough's Information Technology sector which accounts for nearly 20% of all businesses and high rates of productivity; the dominance of this sector, could make the area vulnerable to future shocks. Decreasing business stock coupled with high levels of working from home has impacted the commercial property market pointing to a fundamental shift in the structure of employment space in the Borough. Whilst there is a highly skilled workforce overall, economic inactivity levels (driven primarily by students, those looking after family/the home and retirees) are amongst the highest in Berkshire and the South East and a more generally affluent Borough masks challenges experienced by parts of the community. Over 3000 adults are estimated to have learning disabilities and c3500 people between the ages of 18-64 provide 20 hours + of unpaid care, many of whom report financial difficulties due to their caring responsibilities. There are 5000 workless households in the Borough and 34% of the working population is employed in the foundational economy supplying everyday essential goods and services but where recruitment and retention challenges are significant. Those with lower-level skills may struggle to access quality jobs and there is evidence of gender pay disparity. Low levels of housing affordability make the Borough less inclusive for younger people and those with lower income.

The vision is that by 2035, Wokingham Borough will be a "**growing and greener economy for everyone**". In line with the wider Council Plan, this Economic Strategy aims to ensure the future continued economic success of Borough by tackling barriers to growth, ensuring the right conditions for growth and by striving to make sure economic success is open to all and that nobody is left out. It is recognised that economic growth must not be at any cost and must take an inclusive growth perspective, i.e. growth that combines increased prosperity with greater equity; that creates opportunities for all; and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity fairly. The Council is committed to working with partners and stakeholders to deliver the right strategic balance of business growth whilst ensuring an inclusive people-centred and green approach to creating wealth and higher living standards for all in the local economy. To achieve the vision, the following five key strategic objectives have been identified:

1. Developing the principles of inclusive growth through community wealth building to ensure an economy for all
2. Maximising productivity
3. Increasing business innovation and competitiveness

4. Improving skills, employability and tackling inequalities
5. Enhancing place and infrastructure.

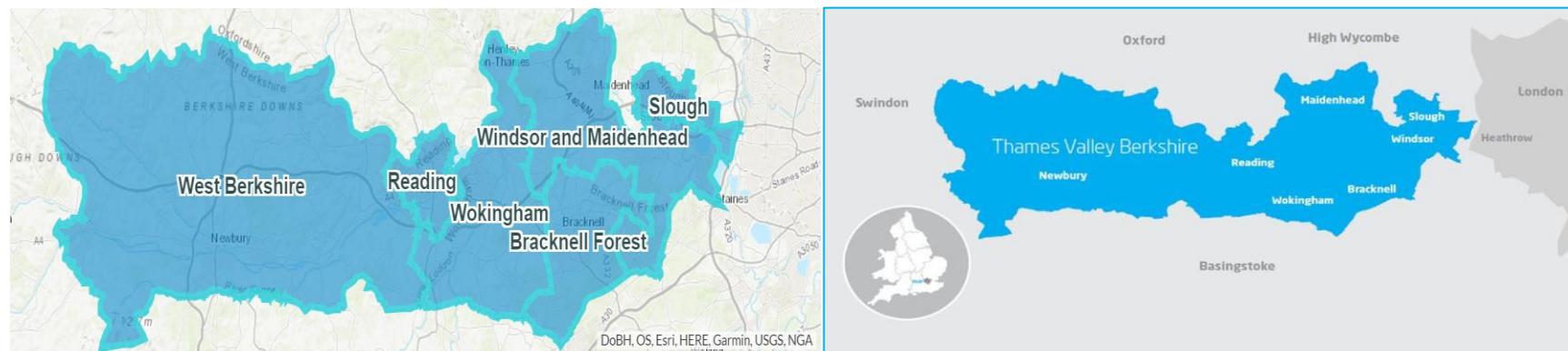
The purpose of this Economic Strategy is to:

- Provide an understanding of the current economic performance of the Borough in comparison to the wider sub-region based on existing evidence.
- Communicate the vision for the future to potential investors, businesses, partners and the community about the economy it wants to shape.
- Set out priorities with suggestions for action by the Council and partners to be agreed in a forthcoming Inclusive Growth Economic Action Plan.

The Borough does not operate in a vacuum. It is one of six Local Authorities within Berkshire (all of which have been considered as part of the Berkshire Economic Strategy), whilst also being part of the wider Thames Valley economic sub-region. The Berkshire Prosperity Board has been established to drive economic prosperity in Berkshire and the Berkshire Economic Strategy 2025 -2035 has been approved; it will be important to align agreed actions with the strategies and aims of the Prosperity Board.

2. Introduction

Wokingham Borough is a strategic location for businesses situated to the West of London in the centre of Berkshire at the heart of the Thames Valley corridor. In 2021, the Borough had the highest productivity per filled job in Berkshire and the South East. Wokingham Borough has the fastest growing population in Berkshire.



The area is exceptionally well connected to both UK and overseas markets. Sitting between the M3 and the M4, it has excellent transport links to London and the wider Southeast by both rail and road and is in close proximity to the country's major airports – Heathrow and Gatwick. The world class University of Reading is based in the Borough.

This strategic location has attracted major global technology, life science and more recently creative businesses such as Microsoft, Oracle, Hewlett Packard, Bayer, Sanofi and Shinfield Studios as well as a plethora of small and medium enterprises including scale-ups. Wokingham's businesses are able to take advantage of the Borough's strong and varied commercial space, good broadband and mobile connectivity.

All of these factors have attracted (and continued to foster) an exceptionally well skilled workforce, which has resulted in low unemployment. From a residential standpoint, the Borough has numerous quality schools and colleges, as well as a strong suite of local amenities and opportunities. Whilst this is to be celebrated, we know that not everyone has the same experience and that for some, it is harder to take advantage of these opportunities.

2.1. Why an Economic Strategy for Wokingham Borough

On many measures, Wokingham Borough is a success story however it faces distinct challenges:

- Economic output, while strong, is dominated by IT and Communication which could lead to over reliance on this sector.
- The number of businesses has been declining and there are more businesses not surviving than being created.
- Changing working practices has seen the lower demand for some offices impacting the commercial property markets.
- Economic inactivity levels continue to be amongst the highest in Berkshire and the South East, with many of these having taken early retirement.
- Over 3000 adults are estimated to have learning disabilities and are less likely to be in employment.
- There are 5000 workless households.
- 2525 children are eligible for free school meals and 2798 children are estimated to live in low-income households.
- The labour market is characterised by highly skilled professionals. Those with lower levels skills or lack of experience may not be able to access the same variety of quality opportunities.
- 34% of the working population is employed in the foundational economy supplying everyday essential goods and services but where there are significant recruitment and retention challenges,

- There is evidence of a rising pay disparity between pay for males and females.
- Average disposable income is substantially below the average for Berkshire and the Southeast.
- Low levels of housing affordability make it difficult for young people to stay in the borough or be attracted in.

These threats pose a risk to the continued success of Wokingham Borough; complacency is not an option.

This Economic Strategy aims to ensure the future prosperity and competitiveness of Wokingham Borough. It will focus on tackling barriers to growth in the Borough's highest potential growth-driving sectors, creating the right conditions for inclusive growth, building in resilience to future shocks and striving to ensure that prosperity is shared by everyone. It is set in the context of existing strategies including amongst others, the Local Plan, Community Vision 2035, Housing Strategy, Local Transport Plan and Climate emergency Action Plan that set out the outcomes the Borough is looking to achieve. It is also aligned with the wider Berkshire Economic Strategy 2025-2035.

The Strategy has three purposes:

- Provide an understanding of current economic performance of the Borough, its strengths and weaknesses, threats and opportunities in comparison to the wider sub-region based on existing evidence.
- Communicate the vision for the future to potential investors, businesses, partners and the community about the economy it wants to shape.
- Set out priorities with suggestions for action by the Council and partners to be agreed in a forthcoming Action Plan.

The Strategy is not prescriptive, instead the Council is committed to collaborating with both internal colleagues and external partners and stakeholders to realise the vision set out in this strategy and enabling them to ensure that Wokingham Borough **builds a growing and greener economy for everyone**. A series of workshops will be convened in Spring 2025 to agree strategic priorities and formulate a detailed Action Plan. Actions agreed will be linked to indicators that will help measure success in delivering outputs and ultimately outcomes. These will be monitored at least annually and reported back to both stakeholders and the appropriate Council governance.

3. Methodology and approach

3.1. Overview

The Economic Strategy is based on three evidence sources:

1. Data from key statistical sources such as ONS

2. A survey of local businesses
3. Secondary Sources: relevant national and local sources

3.2 Comparator areas

To understand Wokingham Borough's relationship to the wider economy and its competitive performance, three main comparator areas have been examined:

1. The Berkshire area comprising the six unitary Local Authority Areas (LAAs) of West Berkshire, Reading, Wokingham, Bracknell Forest, Windsor & Maidenhead and Slough.
2. The central functional economic area (FEA) comprising: Reading, Windsor & Maidenhead, Wokingham Borough and Bracknell Forest.
3. The South East Region.

The performance of the individual Local Authority Areas (LAAs) in the central Berkshire FEA has been examined where relevant.

4. Where we are now.

4.1. Context

This Economic Strategy is set in the context of significant challenges and opportunities at the global, national level and regional level.

The global economic outlook remains subdued by historical standards. Downside risks predominate, including geopolitical tensions, trade fragmentation, higher-for-longer interest rates and climate related disasters. The Fifth Industrial Revolution is underway with the emergence of disruptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence which have the potential to transform both home life and the workplace. Climate change is already taking place. Whilst this is a threat to the planet, the move to net zero creates new opportunities in the green economy. A growing and ageing population, together with a declining birthrate, is reducing the size of the working-age population.

At a national level, productivity growth remains a constant challenge. The Government's launch of a UK Modern Industrial Strategy sets out a 10-year plan to promote economic growth, to invest in high growth key sectors and to co-develop Local Growth Plans to concentrate efforts on places with the greatest potential for the UK's growth sectors.

At the regional level the Berkshire Prosperity Board has been established to drive economic prosperity in Berkshire through six themes of: education and skills; social, accessible and affordable housing; health and inequalities; strategic infrastructure; net zero and sector development. A new Business Advisory Board will embed a strong and diverse business voice into the Prosperity Board. The Berkshire Economic Strategy 2025-2035 has been approved with the aim for Berkshire to be UK's most productive and fastest-growing local economy by 2035.

4.2. Wokingham Borough key economic facts

Key economic data



£92,134 GVA per job
23.5% growth (2017-2021)
Berkshire 8.2%
SE: 7.24%



178,169 people
14% growth (2011-2021)
Berkshire: 9.16%
SE: 6.52%



8,360 businesses
-5.7% decline (2019-2023)
Berkshire: -5.3%
SE: -2.4%



57% qualified to NVQ level 4 or above
Berkshire: 50.2%
SE: 45.2%



5,000 workless households



2,525 children eligible for free school meals



3,000 people with learning disabilities



3,500 unpaid carers providing 20 hours+ care per week



79.1% in employment
4.9% decline (2022-2024)



29.2% employed in Information and Communication & Professional Scientific sectors



34% of working population employed in the foundational economy



Rising pay disparity in full time work between men and women

5. A vision for Wokingham Borough's economy

5.1. The vision

The economic vision for the Borough is that by 2035, Wokingham Borough will have built '**a growing and greener economy for everyone**'.

This supports the vision of the Berkshire Economic Strategy that, by 2035, '**Berkshire will have the most productive and fastest growing local economy in the UK**' but also supports the Borough's wider Community Vision to be: '**a great place to live, learn, work and grow and a great place**

to do business' with '**economic success that everyone is part of**' whilst '**protecting and improving our places**'. As a consequence, this Economic Strategy takes a new approach to economic development incorporating the principles of inclusive growth and Community Wealth Building to deliver the right strategic balance of business growth whilst ensuring a people-centred and green approach to creating greater prosperity for all. Specialisation in local economies can also lead to greater productivity through an increase in knowledge, driving innovation adoption and diffusion within existing sectors, and assisting the transition to new areas of high-value activity.

Through this strategy, by 2035, Wokingham Borough will be recognised as the leading area for the identified UK growth sectors of Information Technology and Life Sciences, with an emerging growing sector in Creative Industries. Sub- sector specialisms in areas such as AI, Medical Technology, Digital Creative and Green Technology will have developed, capitalising on the Borough's existing strengths and diversifying the knowledge economy to protect against potential future economic shocks. The business environment will be more entrepreneurial with greater numbers of social enterprise, start-up and high-growth companies achieving higher levels of sales, exports and access to finance whilst at the same time reducing their carbon footprint. A strengthened innovation ecosystem will support clusters of businesses to network, share good practice and innovate attracting higher levels of well managed inward investment. The Borough will be viewed as a dynamic business location of choice with good availability of differing types of employment space offering high levels of connectivity as well as genuine places for innovation.

Growth will be inclusive and people-centred focusing on social goals, environmental sustainability and economic prosperity for all. Local procurement and shorter supply chains will lock wealth into the local community as well as helping to reduce emissions. The Borough will continue to be seen as a great place to live with more social housing and better housing affordability retaining residents and attracting skilled workers from elsewhere. The workforce will have the right skills to meet employers' needs. There will be more highly skilled jobs but also more entry level positions to support a well-functioning critical foundational economy. Younger people, those furthest from the labour market and skilled returners will have targeted support providing clear pathways into work with access to training leading to improved prospects and well-being. Those already in work will be equipped with the necessary skills and progression routes to continually up-skill themselves. A culture of life-long learning will be embedded in the community ensuring skills stay relevant for the future world of work. Employers will seek to recruit locally ensuring well-paid jobs with gender pay parity and equal opportunities in the workplace. The number of workless households will decrease and the number of children eligible for free school meals will be reduced.

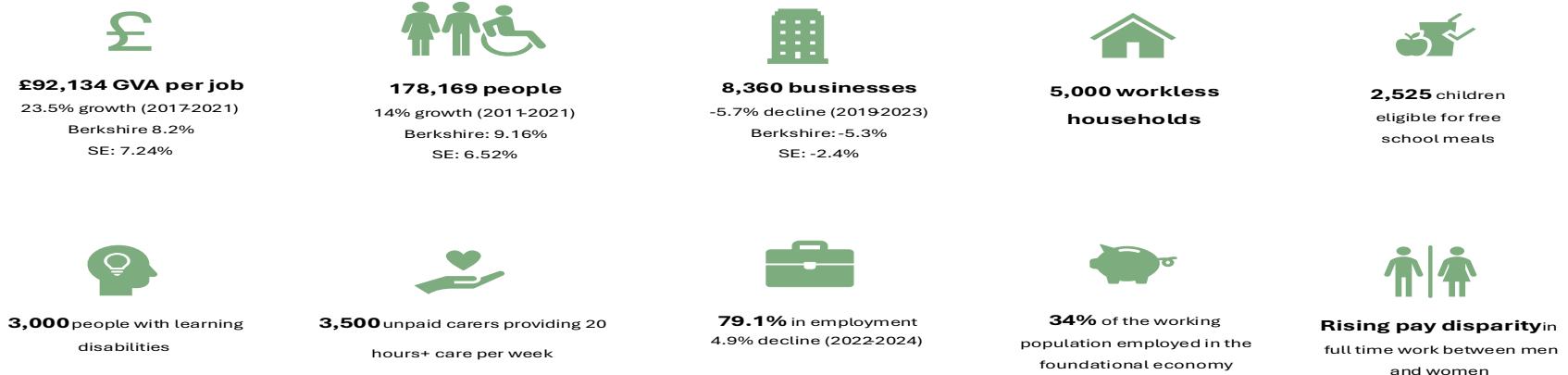
5.2. Strategic objectives

To achieve the above vision, the following five key strategic objectives have been identified. The current state of these is explored below with a summary section listing priorities for action, challenges, opportunities, and potential solutions.

1. **Developing the principles of inclusive growth through community wealth building.** Developing local procurement policies, generating social value, shortening supply chains, leveraging the impact of our anchor institutions and ensuring a local people and community centred approach to the economy.
2. **Diversifying the economy and maximising productivity.** Encouraging and supporting sector/cluster development. Developing the Innovation Ecosystem through collaboration with The University of Reading and other anchor institutions to boost the economy through innovation. Proactive management of inward investment to increase wins and retentions and promote the Borough.
3. **Increasing business innovation and competitiveness.** A proactive approach to support more start-ups and high growth potential companies to address decline in business stock. Diversification of the knowledge intensive business base to guard against losses of any large businesses. Engagement with the most strategic businesses in order to retain them.
4. **Improving skills, employability and tackling inequalities.** Creating an inclusive and fair employment landscape with support and opportunities for all members of the society to access training and local well-paid secure employment – in part through identifying and addressing the things that are driving economic and employment inequalities. Reducing levels of economic inactivity and low-paid jobs. Equipping workers with the skills to support our developing sectors.
5. **Enhancing place and infrastructure.** Working with partners to ensure business parks and commercial space remain as leading locations to attract and retain investment, there is a good provision of affordable housing, further improvements on our IT infrastructure and continuing to work towards net zero.

6. Overarching strategic objective 1- An economy for everyone through inclusive economic growth and community wealth building

6.1. Overview



The economy of Wokingham Borough is successful in terms of GVA, yet prosperity does not flow to all in the Borough. There are 5000 workless households, 2525 children are eligible for free school meals and 2798 children are estimated to live in low-income families.

The principles of Community Wealth Building are increasingly being adopted in local economies to deliver an inclusive and people-centred approach to local economic development with wealth re-directed into communities focused on social goals, environmental sustainability and economic prosperity for all. The Council recognises as a priority the importance of strengthening the building blocks of health and wellbeing for everyone in Wokingham Borough, so that everyone has the opportunity to thrive. These building blocks – including housing and transport; our education and skills and having good work; money and resources; the food we eat; and our family, friends and communities – are essential to creating a society in which everybody can thrive. For some people in Wokingham Borough, though, they are not all firmly in place; this Economic Strategy is designed to contribute to building a Borough where everyone can thrive by strengthening key building blocks of our health and wellbeing.

The following section outlines how these principles could work in practice; potential opportunities for delivery are presented as a cross-cutting theme in the relevant sections of the Strategy. Pursuing an inclusive economic growth and community wealth building approach aligns with the Council's commitment to '[Marmot](#)' principles to reduce health inequalities and give everyone better opportunities and life chances – [link](#).

6.2. Incorporating Community wealth building principles in Wokingham Borough

- General business support is readily available to SMEs in Borough. Growing the base of locally owned and socially minded enterprises which are more likely to employ, buy and invest locally would be financially generative for the Borough by locking wealth in place.
- Access to finance is the life blood of many small businesses yet some struggle to access credit and there is often a loss of connection between lenders and communities. While Berkshire offers some access to finance, it will be important to continue to seek to increase flows of investment *within* the local economy, by harnessing the wealth that exists locally.
- Wokingham Borough Council, the NHS and the University of Reading act as anchor institutions (key strategic employers) for the Borough. As some of the biggest employers in the Borough, the approach they take to employment can have a defining effect on the prospects of local people by improving employment opportunities and conditions of employment.
- Progressive procurement can also support community wealth building. Anchor institutions can play an important role in creating dense local supply chains and ecosystems of businesses that are more likely to support local employment and recirculate wealth locally. The new Procurement Act 2023 will improve and streamline the way procurement is done and benefit prospective suppliers of all sizes, particularly small businesses, start-ups and social enterprises.
- Land and property used by anchor institutions can also be reviewed to determine how they can best support the local economy.

7. Strategic Objective 2 – Diversifying the economy and maximizing productivity

7.1. Overview



15th out of 362 Local Authorities

in the latest UK competitiveness index



GVA per filled job

Higher than the averages for both Berkshire and the South East



Decrease in count of knowledge economy businesses

Primarily driven by the IT sector



Strong in several key sectors

Digital tech, Life Science and Creative



University-backed innovation

with forthcoming collaboration with the Natural History Museum and Kew Gardens



Declining inward investment

across Berkshire since 2017/18



Business support ecosystem

Berkshire Growth Hub, Federation of Small Business and FSE

The Borough enjoys the highest levels of productivity per filled job in Berkshire and the South East due primarily to the concentration of large companies and the dominance of large numbers of knowledge economy businesses with increasing levels of specialisation. In 2021-2022, Wokingham Borough saw a GVA per filled job figure of £92,134 – higher than the Berkshire figure of £84,093 for the same year and significantly higher than the

South East with £63,164. The area has the highest percentage of knowledge economy businesses (with higher levels of productivity, research and development and innovation) of its comparators, comprising 23.5% of the business population. The borough has strengths in Information Services, Scientific Research and Development, Computer Programming and Consultancy, Head Office & Management Consultancy, and Film &TV. These support five of the eight growth driving sectors identified in Government's pending Industrial Strategy and is therefore an opportunity to position the Borough of Wokingham as a place in which Government could concentrate its efforts to support economic growth.

ICT is the second largest business sector at 18.6 % of all businesses in 2024, the highest of comparators and over double the South East. The Borough also has a markedly higher percentage of businesses in the subsectors of 'Computer programming, consultancy and related activities' as well as 'Activities of head offices, management consultancy activities.' Many of these businesses will be based in the Borough in order to be close to major international ICT businesses such as Microsoft and Oracle, and to have access to the same highly skilled local workforce. As well as being a major generator of GVA and knowledge-based employment this sector enables the success of other knowledge economy sectors.

ICT and Life Sciences clearly play a crucial role in the Borough's economy and its identity as a successful business location and are essential for growth and prosperity however both have recently witnessed a decline in their share of total businesses in the area by -1.84% and -2.82% respectively, affected by the adverse macro-economic climate. A number of large ICT businesses have downsized their operations in response. The decline in ICT has been mirrored in the Berkshire and South East and although Wokingham Borough saw the smallest decline and retains its lead in number of ICT businesses in Berkshire, the impact of changes in this sector needs to be addressed given its importance to the Borough.

Knowledge economy businesses are rapidly diversifying into subsectors. In ICT sub-sectors such as Data Infrastructure, Software as a Service (SaaS), Artificial Intelligence (AI), Cyber Security, Environmental Measurement and FinTech are being established. In Life Sciences high-value specialisms such as Biopharmaceuticals and Medical Technology are developing and the subsectors of Film and TV production, Creative Content and Creative Digital and Media & Publishing are growing in the Creative Sector. Such diversification could enhance Wokingham Borough's knowledge-based economy and help to mitigate future shocks in the economy. The challenge for the Borough will be to diversify, capitalising on the growth of specialist sub-sectors while not losing its parent sector strengths.

There are specific opportunities to explore including the development of Shinfield Studios at the Thames Valley Science Park is part of an emerging creative sector across Berkshire. Shinfield is one of the largest studio complexes in the UK and a powerhouse of film, TV and innovation. As such it provides an opportunity to extend the creative cluster within Berkshire linking to existing clusters such as Bray Studios and Pinewood and Leavesden in adjoining geographies. Due to its sector strengths and University of Reading research specialisms, the Borough is also well placed to take advantage

of the growing 'green' economy in areas such as weather monitoring, sustainable built environment, environmental analytics, and green finance and investment. The table below sets out a range of growth clusters and sector specialisms.

Existing and emerging clusters across the Berkshire/Thames Valley which presents opportunities for the Wokingham economy

Digital:

- [Thames Valley AI Hub](#) led by the University to elevate the Thames Valley technology landscape and position it as a leader in AI.
- Reading Tech Cluster established to promote and improve interconnectivity for technology businesses in the Berkshire area.
- Fintech (financial technology) has been identified as an up-and-coming sector in the Thames Valley with Berkshire at the core. The Kalifa Review of the Fin Tech sector in 2021 included a recommendation to *"Accelerate the development and growth of the fintech cluster excellence to take advantage of domestic opportunities and compete on the global stage, through increasing research and development investment in the fintech sector."*

Life Science:

- [Thames Valley Health and Life Sciences Working Group](#), a regional network of industry corporates and SMEs, together with universities and research organisations.
- RSSL [Biotech Innovation Hub](#) based on the University of Reading campus providing a supportive ecosystem for early- stage biotech companies

Creative:

- [Screen Berkshire](#) cluster led by Resource Productions CIC, University of Reading, Shinfield Studios, Bedlam Film Productions, Amazon MGM Studios and Berkshire Film Office to bolster the growth of film and high-end TV production industry in the region. There is an opportunity to collaborate with the adjacent geographies Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire and Surrey Creative sectors to grow the sector at a regional level.

Green:

- Agri-tech and crop protection has been identified as a nascent significant cluster across Berkshire, Hertfordshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire combining science research (Rothamsted) with corporate capability (Syngenta), an innovative SME base (including Wokingham based Innovation Agritech Group) and skills base with identifiable strengths in food and crop research at the universities of Oxford, Reading and Hertfordshire.

Despite the success of the Berkshire economy, the innovation ecosystem is viewed as under par and fragmented, particularly in relation to the well-qualified nature of the workforce and in comparison, to other areas. There is an absence of levers of economic growth such as enterprise zones and catapults, and the

area lacks innovation spaces. Whilst some cluster development is taking place and presents an opportunity for Wokingham Borough businesses to engage, co-ordination, connection and collaboration between and within clusters is sometimes weak, with no plan for sector growth.

Whilst Wokingham has benefitted from some very high profile global companies located in the area such as Bayer, Microsoft and Oracle and FOCs account for just over 20% of employment in the Borough, nevertheless the area has second lowest number of FOCs as a percentage of total businesses in the central FEA and as part of diversifying and strengthening developing sub sectors and clusters, there is scope through a targeted inward investment approach to attract new FOCs to the area.

7.2 Strategic Direction

Historical high levels of productivity provide Wokingham Borough with a key competitive advantage. It has the opportunity to exploit this further by focusing on the drivers within its power, i.e. supporting key clusters and specialisms to support the innovation ecosystem and increasing inward investment. The Borough has the highest percentage of knowledge economy businesses of its comparators employing highly skilled workers, but clustering is fragmented. Nurturing clusters could support the development of a more robust innovation ecosystem driving innovation adoption and diffusion. This would help to position the Borough as a place in which Government could concentrate its efforts to support UK growth driving sectors. Large companies and FOCs are important to productivity of the Borough however rates of FDI across Berkshire have been declining. Wokingham Borough's highly attractive destination, sector strengths and University of Reading research specialisms provide an opportunity to increase FDI wins and retentions.

7.3 Priority areas for Action

Priority area for action	Challenges	Competitive advantages and opportunities	Potential solutions
1) Productivity	Productivity levels are already high; the challenge will be to retain the levels of high productivity.	Strong sector makeup and specialisation, innovation, business competitiveness, and skills account for high levels of productivity.	Continue to monitor the different factors of productivity to ensure continued and increasing levels.

<p>2) Develop cluster networks to enhance knowledge economy specialisation and nurture the innovation ecosystem</p>	<p>Clusters are fragmented and weak for some sectors. The innovation ecosystem is viewed as under par.</p>	<p>Existing and emerging clusters of businesses in Digital, Life Sciences, Creative, Green economy need to be supported allowing them to set strategy and devise plans to grow their sector as part of robust innovation ecosystem.</p> <p>This would enable clusters to stimulate innovation to tackle major challenges and position themselves for any funding opportunities which may arise.</p> <p>It would also support those sectors identified as key growth sectors in the new Industrial Strategy, of which five out of eight can be found in Wokingham Borough.</p>	<p>Collaborate with key partners on the development of an Innovation Ecosystem strategy linking to the Innovate Berkshire theme of the Berkshire Economic Strategy.</p> <p>Work with partners to develop clusters with networks of knowledge.</p> <p>Consideration of recruitment of Sector Leads to 'curate'/facilitate engagement/innovation within and between clusters in the region and beyond.</p> <p>Development of the creative cluster with strategic partners</p>
<p>3) Diversification of growth sectors to guard against potential economic shocks.</p>	<p>The Borough is dependent on ICT Services for its high performance yet smaller businesses in this sector have proved more vulnerable to recent economic shocks. The structure of the IT sector is changing and the dominance of very large IT companies headquartering in the Thames Valley may not be the model for the future.</p>	<p>The Borough has a vibrant and successful Knowledge Economy with a range of top-class businesses including global companies and numerous productive and high-growth SMEs.</p> <p>The University and other nearby research institutions have specialist R&D expertise in key sectors with which the area can build on its strengths to diversify its knowledge economy.</p>	<p>Identify subsectors within these broad sectors that meet the Borough's objectives and where barriers to growth can be addressed at a local level.</p>

		<p>Diversify the Knowledge Economy to capitalise on the growth of specialist sub-sectors such as AI, Software Development, Cyber Security, Environmental Measurement and Medical Technology as well as the growing Digital Creative and Green Sectors.</p>	
4) Attract and retain Foreign Direct Investment.	<p>Wokingham Borough FOCs are lower than elsewhere in Berkshire.</p> <p>Overall Berkshire FDI rates are declining, and account management processes are unclear.</p>	<p>An increase in targeted FDI presents an opportunity to further increase productivity and grow innovation.</p>	<p>Promote the benefits of locating in Wokingham Borough.</p> <p>Proactive involvement with the inward investment process to increase FDI wins and retentions.</p>

8 Strategic Objective 3 - Increasing business innovation and competitiveness.

8.1 Overview



Decrease in overall business count

-5.7% decline between 2019/23 – a stronger decline than the Berkshire and South East figures



Decline in business births

In line with figures for both Berkshire and the South East



High business survival rates over five years

when compared to Berkshire and the South East



Size profile of businesses in line with the Berkshire and South East averages



Decline in share of businesses in key sectors

Digital tech and Life Sciences have both seen a decline



Strong presence of IT businesses

Making up over one fifth of all business in the area

Wokingham Borough is a popular location for businesses offering access to a large pool of well qualified workers within commuting distance, good transport and IT communications infrastructure and a range of commercial and retail premises available. The business population of circa 8,600 includes many well-known, large companies and corporate headquarters as well as a range of SMEs providing 82,900 jobs. Wokingham Borough's

businesses make up nearly 30% of businesses in the central FEA and 20% across Berkshire. Wokingham Borough has roughly the same percentage breakdown of number of micro and small and medium sizes business as Berkshire and the South East but has more large businesses compared to these areas and the central FEA. Of the 255 large businesses in the Berkshire, 50 are based in Wokingham Borough making it more vulnerable to employment and output losses, should just a few of these large businesses relocate. In terms of turnover however, Wokingham Borough ranks low for businesses in the £10-50m and >£50m bands compared to competitors and lowest in the £1-5m turnover band where fast growth companies are often positioned.

Global economic stresses resulted in a decline in business population across the South East by 2.4% over the period 2019-2023. This decrease was steeper in Berkshire and Wokingham Borough which saw declines in business counts over the same period of -5.3% and -5.7% respectively. In terms of the business survival rates, Wokingham Borough boasted strong five-year survival rates in the period of 2018-2021 compared to both the Berkshire and South East averages. However, since 2020 the number of business deaths in Wokingham Borough has outstripped births. Whilst high churn rates are normally a sign of entrepreneurial dynamism, the net loss in business counts in the Borough indicates less resilience at the firm level; this trend needs to be reversed.

In addition, although Wokingham Borough has seen an increase in the number of high growth firms, it has the lowest concentration of high growth/high growth potential firms as a percentage of all active firms. The Scale Up Institute has lobbied for regions to segment high growth scale-up businesses, supporting and shining a light on their success as a model for others. This aligns with the Productivity Heroes project outlined in the Berkshire Economic Strategy. Access to finance can be a key barrier to business growth/scaling. There is the [Thames Valley Berkshire Funding Escalator](#) which provides loans to high growth potential firms in the area and [Henley Business Angels](#) invests and mentors early stage businesses connected to the University; more could be done to address this need.

Innovation is one of the main drivers of productivity and wider economic growth. It includes not just research & development (R&D) of products and services but also new business models, organisational changes and markets; NESTA research suggests that less than 20% of investment in innovation by firms is in R&D. Large companies and SMEs in the Borough are involved in their own innovation and Wokingham Borough has the key advantage of being home to the University of Reading and Thames Valley Science Park with areas of specialism in research and innovation which align with the pending Industrial Strategy growth sectors . The number of spin-outs from the University of Reading is small in relation to comparators; there is an opportunity for the University to support the diffusion of R&D (**knowledge exchange**) to SMEs in Wokingham Borough's growth sectors and encourage more spin-outs. Equally, the supply chains of larger organisations are lifelines for smaller businesses and start-ups offer creativity and innovation to large companies.

8.2 Strategic Direction

Wokingham Borough has a strong mix of large companies including global names and productive SMEs accounting for 20% of all businesses across Berkshire. Almost 20% of large Berkshire businesses are based in Wokingham Borough and it is important to understand and support their needs in order to retain them.

The Knowledge Economy accounts for the largest number of businesses and the Borough leads in the number of ICT businesses across the South East. Although the recent decline in the number of ICT businesses was less in the Borough than the South East due adverse economic conditions, its dominance could leave the Borough vulnerable to future economic shocks. There is an opportunity to diversify the Borough's knowledge economy base to reduce over reliance on the main ICT sector. The Borough has had a strong legacy in business creation and survival rates and there is an opportunity to reverse the recent net loss in businesses by providing proactive business support to enhance entrepreneurialism and increase the proportion of high growth potential and scale-up businesses. Equally, there is an opportunity for the University and large companies to increase innovation adoption and diffusion, amongst SMEs in target sectors through greater knowledge exchange.

8.3 Priorities for Action

Priority area for action	Challenges	Competitive advantages and opportunities	Potential solutions
1) Proactive approach to the business support ecosystem	Decline in business counts. Business deaths greater than births. Lower proportion of high growth firms than comparators. Dominance and over reliance of IT sector.	The Borough's strong legacy record on new business creation and survival rates demonstrates an entrepreneurial and dynamic local economy providing an opportunity to reverse the trend in business deaths. Growing socially minded SMEs is more financially generative for the local	Proactive approach to identify and support: <ul style="list-style-type: none">existing high growth, potential high growth and scale-up companies in target sectors and sub-sectors including the green economy.business creation in target sectors and sub-sectors

	<p>Access to finance is the life blood of many small businesses yet some struggle to access finance to grow their business.</p>	<p>economy locking community wealth in place.</p> <p>The opportunity is to provide support to new and existing high growth potential businesses in the target sectors and subsectors and their supply chains to increase survival rates.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> social enterprise businesses to support and grow co-operative, mutual, social and community enterprises in key sectors of the everyday economy. <p>Ensure a co-ordinated and comprehensive businesses advice service to increase sales, including through exports (in line with the Export Powerhouse project outlined in the Berkshire Economic Strategy), access finance and reduce carbon emissions. An increase in leadership and management skills will also be needed.</p> <p>Continue to seek to increase flows of investment <i>within</i> the local economy, by harnessing the wealth that exists locally.</p>
<p>2) Business engagement with Wokingham Borough major companies</p>	<p>Many large IT and Life Science companies headquartering in the Borough have downsized their operations following the Covid 19 pandemic.</p>	<p>Almost 20% of large Berkshire businesses are based in Wokingham Borough.</p> <p>There is an opportunity to build closer relationships with these companies and understand and support their needs in order to retain them.</p>	<p>Proactive account management of large businesses.</p>

3) Maximising innovation	<p>Numbers of University spin outs are small in relation to comparators together with lower levels of knowledge transfer and business interaction.</p>	<p>The University and companies within the Borough act as centres of excellence in sectors which have been identified in Government's Industrial Strategy.</p> <p>There is an opportunity is to increase innovation adoption and diffusion, amongst SMEs in these target sectors.</p>	<p>Encourage large companies and anchor institutions to engage in knowledge transfer and supply chain activities connecting them to innovative SMEs. For example, challenge competitions, data science collaborations, student placements. Champion 'entrepreneurship meets intrapreneurship' (Meet the Buyer) style events to develop local supply chains, an innovation pipeline and mentoring initiatives.</p>
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9 Strategic Objective 4 - Improving skills, employability and tackling inequalities.

9.1 Overview



178,169 people

14% growth (2011-2021)
Berkshire: 9.16%
SE: 6.52%



Ageing population

Projected increase in percentage of
population aged 50+ by 2035



Highly qualified population

when compared to Berkshire and the South
East



79.1% in employment
4.9% decline (2022-2024)



Several industries with above average
concentrations of employment
such as IT and Life Sciences



Rising pay disparityⁱⁿ
full time work between men
and women



Lower rates of
disposable income
when compared to the
comparator areas

The attractiveness of the Borough of Wokingham as a place to live and work has resulted in the fastest growing population compared to comparators. The population of Wokingham Borough rose by 14%, 21,000 people, in the decade to 2021; the fastest growing population in Berkshire and double

that of the South East region. It is forecast to slow to 5% by 2035, but with a decrease in the working age population aged 25-49. In contrast there will be significant growth in the 65+ age group and the largest percentage growth in the 50-64 age group amongst comparator areas.

Skills levels among the working age population outstrip comparator areas and wellbeing and life expectancy are the highest in Berkshire.

There are, however, challenges from an economic perspective. Levels of employment have declined, most notably in the knowledge economy and the Borough has a higher number of retirees (compared to the Berkshire and South East averages) with the potential for reducing valuable skills and expertise. Forecasts indicate an ageing population and a slower rate of growth which could lead to possible labour shortages. Increases in weekly earnings and disposable household income for those who work in the Borough has been much slower than comparators and there is evidence of rising pay disparity in full-time work between male and female employees (something which we plan to look into further to better understand) and inequality between males and females being employed in senior roles. Housing affordability is the second worst in Berkshire.

A more generally affluent Borough also masks the challenges in cohorts of residents in the community i.e. those with learning disabilities, unpaid carers, workless households, low-income families and workers in the foundational economy supplying everyday essential goods and services.

It may be that low levels of housing affordability in Wokingham Borough are a driving factor for the projected decline in the younger population who are unable to afford to live in the Borough early in their careers and therefore are forced to move away from the area. Some may move back later in life when it's more financially viable.

Economic inactivity levels have increased comprising with inactivity levels within the 'Retired' population within Wokingham Borough stands at 25.4%, significantly higher than the Berkshire area and South East. This high number of retirees will have taken with them valuable skills creating the potential for a 'brain drain' effect.

Furthermore, over 3000 adults are estimated to have learning disabilities and are less likely to be in employment – thereby presenting an excellent opportunity for skills development and employer support. There is also c.3500 people between the ages of 18-64 provide 20 hours + of unpaid care, many of whom report financial difficulties due to their caring responsibilities. There are 5000 workless households in the Borough and 34% of the working population is employed in the foundational economy supplying everyday essential goods and services but where recruitment and retention challenges are significant. 2525 children are eligible for free school meals and 2798 children are estimated to live in low-income households.

All of these factors present challenges to the workforce population in Wokingham Borough, with things from a health standpoint being underpinned by the two-way relationship between good health and good work - health being good for work and good work being good for health.

9.2 Employment and employment specialisms

In the period 2017-2021 there was an overall increase of 3,600 jobs in the Borough of Wokingham, but sectors were affected differently resulting in the loss of 2,600 jobs. Large losses were seen in the ICT (-13.3%) and Arts and Entertainment (-12.5%) sectors only offset by job growth in Financial & Insurance, Public Administration and Defence and Manufacturing. Figures for employment in 2023 showed a further 2.81% decrease from 2021 and a significant a loss of 2,400 jobs.

Location quotients indicate concentrations of employment. Compared to the South East region Wokingham Borough has concentrations in Information and & Communication, Wholesale, Professional, Scientific and Technical, Mining, Quarrying and Utilities, Manufacturing, Education, Business Administration and Support Services and Arts and Entertainment. As would be expected, the Borough has a competitive advantage among comparators in employment in Computer programming and consultancy.

Given the Borough's need to diversify and grow emerging sub-sectors there is a requirement to ensure that current well qualified employees and the future workforce are equipped with the skills to support businesses in new specialisms, for example in AI and Creative Digital skills.

9.3 Matching provision to skills requirements

Wokingham Borough's working age population is demonstrably higher skilled when compared to both the Berkshire and South East averages, with higher levels of qualification across NVQ levels 1-4 and above; 57% of the working age Wokingham population is qualified to NVQ level 4 or higher, 7% and 12% higher than Berkshire and the South East respectively. The Borough also has a correspondingly lower percentage of the working age population who have no qualifications at all. This skills profile correlates with the industrial makeup of the Borough, with the key industrial sectors of IT and Life Sciences often requiring higher level qualifications to access.

Wokingham Borough's skills profile improved in the period 2017-21, with the percentage of the working age population qualified to NV4 level 4 and above increasing by almost 11%, above both the Berkshire and South East Averages of 10.3% and 8.4% respectively. This is most likely a combination both of highly skilled workers moving into the Borough for work at an increasing rate, as well as new highly skilled workers entering the workforce to meet the needs of knowledge economy businesses.

In terms of employment by occupational group, 71% of Wokingham Borough's residents in employment are employed in the top 3 occupational groups, the highest in the central FEA and the South East, indicative of the Borough's strong knowledge-based economy. By contrast the Borough has a far lower proportion of its employment base in the bottom 3 occupational groups when compared to Berkshire and the South East consistent with the high skills profile of the Borough. The fact that the Borough does not have as many entry level jobs may make it difficult for young people who chose not to/were unable to go to university to have success in the Wokingham Borough job market and seek employment elsewhere. In addition, demand for skills in the care industry are forecast to grow significantly; it will be essential to ensure skills are in place to meet demand at the local level.

9.4 Earnings

Despite having an exceptionally well qualified population, Wokingham has not seen anywhere near increases in gross median weekly pay for those who work here compared to comparators, thus making the Borough even less affordable of a place to live. The increase of 3.3% has been circa one fifth of that seen in Berkshire and the South East. In addition, there is a significant disparity between males and females being employed in Manager, Director and Senior roles in the Borough.

9.5 Wealth, health, and wellbeing

It is imperative that, in the endeavour to improve the overall economic prosperity of Wokingham, this Strategy translates into improved wealth, health and wellbeing **for everyone**, particularly those furthest from the labour market. Those with low educational attainment and low skills are more likely to be faced with limited economic opportunities and lower wages, as well as increased chances of poor health, which itself comes at an economic cost. Less wealth and purchasing power in the local economy will have an adverse knock-on effect on local businesses and town/village centres, as will worse health as it negatively impacts productive and active workforce - so creating vicious cycles and exacerbating inequalities

. This will likely lead to the attraction of lower skilled, low pay businesses to the area and has the potential to be especially detrimental to town centres and high streets, negatively impacting public perception of these spaces. From a skills standpoint, higher skilled individuals may move out or commute to better jobs elsewhere, which benefits neither the environment nor the local economy. Interventions to improve educational outcomes, health and social inclusion are outside the scope of this strategy however monitoring the following key indicators will allow the Borough to track the effectiveness of this Economic Strategy in seeking to improve wealth, health and wellbeing for everyone.

9.5.1 General Disposable Household Income (GDHI)

The GDHI of Wokingham increased by 5.59% between 2016 and 2020, a lower rate of increase than the averages for both Berkshire and the South East at 9.28% and 7.91% respectively. 2525 children are eligible for free school meals and 2798 children live in low-income families.

9.5.2 Life expectancy

As per the latest data (2017-19), Wokingham Borough has the highest life expectancy in Berkshire and the South East both for men (82.35 years) and women (85.84 years). Although many people in the borough are thriving and have good health, this is not the case for everyone. We have a 5y gap in LE between most and least deprived tenths of neighbourhoods in the borough.

9.5.3 Health

The 2021 Census figures show the population of Wokingham to have very good health indicators, with over 88% of respondents categorising their health as either 'Very Good' or 'Good'. This figure higher than averages for both Berkshire and the South East. However, there is evidence of disparities in health and life expectancy across the Borough.

9.5.4 Housing affordability

Between 2018 and 2022, Wokingham had the second worst housing affordability, median house price/earnings ratio, in Berkshire with an increase of 6.65%. Windsor and Maidenhead experienced a significantly higher 13.47% ratio compared to the Berkshire average of 1.25% and the South East 4.64%. The figure for Wokingham Borough underlines that the area is increasingly less affordable to live in, which risks pricing out people born in the Borough as they get older and *acting* as a barrier to retain young people or attract talented people from outside of Wokingham who may want to live and work in the area. Housing affordability of very challenging to the recruitment and retention of key workers such teachers/teaching assistants.

9.5.5 Wellbeing

Residents in Wokingham scored slightly above the Berkshire average for all wellbeing questions relating to life satisfaction, worth, happiness and anxiety in the 2021 Census. The figure was marginally worse than the South East. Average responses for Wokingham Borough, Berkshire and the South East are high (7.5/10) but should continue to be monitored, partly so that we are able to understand who is not thriving and who needs more support, but also due to the year-on-year decline in the period of 2017/18 – 2021/22 skewed by the Covid 19 pandemic.

9.6 Strategic Direction

Wokingham Borough had the fastest growing population with the highest levels of qualification in the South East in 2021. However, levels of employment have declined, and economic inactivity persists with rates of 'retired' population higher than comparator areas. In addition, increases in earnings and disposable income have been much slower than comparators and there is evidence of rising pay disparity coupled with low levels of housing affordability. Those furthest from the labour market and low-income families may face multiple barriers to accessing the opportunities available. An ageing population is forecast which could decrease the supply of skilled workers. The opportunity is to renew and grow the workforce through recruitment schemes including targeted support for those furthest from the labour market and tackling other barriers to employment; ensure that the current well-qualified employees and the future workforce are equipped with the skills to support businesses in new sub-sector specialisms with progression routes to continually up-skill.

9.7 Priorities for Action

Priority area for action	Challenges	Competitive advantages and opportunities	Potential solutions
1) Workforce population	<p>The Borough needs to grow the workforce so that skills and labour shortages do not affect the growth of companies in key sectors and clusters or businesses may move elsewhere.</p> <p>Forecast increases in the 65+ age group and shrinkage in the working age of the population 25-49 forecast.</p>	<p>The Borough had the fastest growing population in Berkshire and the South East between 2011-21.</p> <p>Forecast shortages could be addressed by the 'inactive' population.</p> <p>Only 8% of Wokingham residents work in the lowest occupational groups but are important to the functioning on the Borough.</p>	<p>Undertake further analysis to understand the barriers to work, particularly those that are currently outside the labour market.</p> <p>Roll out the Connect to Work programme - a new supported employment programme</p> <p>Collaborate with partners and employers to initiate schemes to recruit skilled returners and retain</p>

	<p>Workers in the lowest occupational groups such as Care workers are vital to the Borough and need support to access good jobs.</p> <p>Too many people are excluded from the labour market – especially those with health conditions, caring responsibilities or lower skills levels</p>		<p>young people and graduates in the Borough with pathways into work in line with Government's new 'Get Britain Working' strategy.</p> <p>Work with employers and trade bodies to ensure trades have up to date skills, can access apprenticeships and internships to update skills and have supported pathways into work.</p> <p>Encourage large organisations and anchor institutions to exercise progressive employment and local labour market activities to help build progression routes and recruit from hard-to-reach groups improving the prospects and wellbeing of local people.</p>
2) Employment	<p>Loss of jobs in key knowledge economy sector of ICT.</p>	<p>Strong existing knowledge economy provides an opportunity to recruit for new sub-sectors including the Green economy.</p>	<p>Work with large employers to minimise losses where possible and discuss diversification opportunities.</p>
3) Qualifications and skills	<p>Growing diversification will require new skills to support new specialisms.</p>	<p>The highly qualified workforce and access to leading education providers provides the opportunity to deliver the skills identified for target clusters and specialisms.</p> <p>With studios such as Shinfield and Arborfield located in Borough, as well</p>	<p>Develop a local Skills Plan, taking account of the LSIP, for Wokingham Borough to understand skills needs and upgrade skills where needed through apprenticeships, traineeships and higher-level management and leadership training.</p>

		<p>as the presence of a growing number of Creative Content businesses, the Borough has an opportunity to address the skills shortages facing the film industry and the wider Creative Digital sector. This would support the proposal for a Creative Digital Skills Academy outlined in the Berkshire Economic Strategy.</p>	<p>Ensure that current well qualified employees and the future workforce are equipped with the skills to support businesses in new specialisms, for example in AI and Creative Digital skills.</p>
4) Earnings	<p>Lower levels of increase in gross median weekly pay for workers. Evidence of gender pay disparity</p>		<p>Support local employers to recruit locally and upskill their employees.</p>
5) Wealth, health and wellbeing	<p>Borough residents have seen increased rates of disposable income though lower than comparators, but this is set against low housing affordability.</p> <p>Overall affluence masks pockets of deprivation on a number of indicators.</p>		<p>Monitor this basket of measures to evaluate the success this Economic Strategy and other relevant policies in translating into improved wealth, health and wellbeing for everyone, particularly those furthest from the labour market such as those with learning disabilities.</p>

10 Strategic Objective 5 - Enhancing Place and Infrastructure.

10.1 Overview



Decrease in demand
for office space including
at the Borough's key business
parks



Declining CO2 emissions

But still higher than the average for the South
East



Low levels of housing affordability

when compared to Berkshire and the South
East



High rates of working from home may
affect productivity and adversely affect
the vibrancy of towns centres.



**Lowest levels of
indoor 4G availability**
when compared to
comparator areas

The Borough of Wokingham offers a strategic location for businesses as well as an attractive place to live and work. The Covid 19 pandemic has changed working practices with the Borough reporting the largest increase in working from home across Berkshire, leading to an oversupply of lower-

grade office space. At the same time there is increasing demand for industrial space and space for innovation is absent. More housing and more affordable housing are required, and environmental sustainability remains a challenge.

10.2 Employment space

Wokingham Borough has a good supply of business and industry/warehousing space. The highly regarded business parks of Green Park, Thames Valley Business Park, Thames Valley Science Park and Winnersh Triangle provide high quality business environments in established locations with first class on-site amenities.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that demand for employment space is weak and likely to remain so, as hybrid working practices continue to be a feature of the new post-Covid era. Large companies are downsizing, rents are plateauing and only the very best commercial space (Category A plus) is being let easily. This type of accommodation offers a high level of amenities in order to tempt workers back into the office. Less attractive, cheaper space is proving harder to let. The advice to landlords is to break up large spaces into smaller, flexible units and to refurbish.

This evidence from commercial agents is backed up by the Council's 2023 Employment Land Needs Study which found that there is no quantitative requirement for additional office land/floorspace as gross supply exceeds gross demand and recommended that there was no need to allocate any additional land for office use. It noted that some lower grade offices developments have experienced higher levels of vacancy with corresponding pressure for alternative uses, including residential and more recently industrial where there is demand for new floorspace.

Whilst there are a variety of co-working spaces, innovation space in the Borough is limited to the Thames Valley Science Park, and there is limited networking and business support programmes to support innovation and scaling businesses. There may be unmet demand for innovation space in Wokingham Borough which would enable large businesses to mentor and engage with SMEs to increase innovation.

The Borough benefits from several established retail centres, including town, district and local centres, which together help to meet the needs of local communities, alongside visitors and businesses. The Town Centre Strategic Framework aims to champion thriving town and local centres to provide the focus of their communities both in social and economic activity, ensuring they can adapt to the challenges they face.

10.3 Environmental sustainability

Wokingham Borough recorded decreasing greenhouse gas emissions year on year over the period 2017-2021. Emissions are lower than the central FE and Berkshire are but greater than the average for the South East.

The Borough unanimously declared a climate emergency in July 2019 committing it to achieve carbon neutrality by 2030 through the implementation of a Climate Emergency Action Plan (CEAP). The Plan identifies 9 key priority areas and 91 actions to mitigate carbon emissions and work towards the 2030 goal covering: transport, renewable energy generation, building retrofitting, carbon sequestration, waste and recycling, new developments, procurement, engagement and behaviour change for residents and businesses and the Council's own specific actions. The Council is committed to monitoring the progress of the CEAP to reduce CO2 emissions.

The newly created National Energy System Operator NESO (formerly National Grid ESO) established to unify and optimise a national approach to energy and deliver a clean, secure, decarbonised energy system fit for the future is based in the Sindlesham area of the Borough.

10.4 Housing

The population of Wokingham Borough increased by 15% from 2011 to 2021, higher than England (6.6%) and Southeast (7.5%). As of 2021, Wokingham Borough is the 28th most densely populated of the South East's 64 local authority areas with 8.9% growth forecast from 2018 to 2028. The Local Plan sets out a plan to allocate enough land for new housing including new higher targets for affordable housing and the new energy efficiency and environmental standards that developers will be required to meet.

10.5 Working patterns

Wokingham Borough recorded the largest increase across Berkshire in people reporting that they work from home, up 37% from 13.3% in 2011 to 50.7% in 2021. Although the pandemic may have skewed the figures, key trends are apparent. Wokingham Borough had a higher percentage of individuals working from home in both 2011 and in 2021 when compared to the central FEA, Berkshire and the South East. This is likely to be due to Wokingham Borough having more jobs within its industrial mix that can be done remotely than the comparator areas. This has implications for commercial office use and vibrancy of town centres.

10.6 Travel to work

The distance that Wokingham Borough residents travel to work is an important metric, as it is one of the factors that contributes to the area being an attractive place, not only for people to live, but also for businesses to base themselves.

The most common distance for Wokingham Borough residents to travel to work was between 5km and 10km (around 10% of residents). This is further than the most common distances for other Berkshire local authorities, positioning the Borough as slightly less attractive in terms of average time residents must spend commuting however this is offset by the large percentage claiming to work from home.

10.7 ICT Infrastructure

Levels of ICT connectivity are good with the Borough though full fibre coverage is significantly lower and should be addressed as existing and new businesses will expect high levels of connectivity given the industrial makeup of the area.

10.8 Strategic Direction

Changes in working patterns following the pandemic have resulted in decreasing in demand for office space; at the same time there is increasing demand for industrial space. There is an opportunity to repurpose surplus commercial and public-sector space into genuine innovation spaces, where supply is weak, to support knowledge economy clusters such as high tech and creative digital businesses and light industrial space. Housing affordability is lower than comparators; the Local Plan sets out a plan to allocate enough land for new and affordable housing. Further work is needed to reduce carbon emissions and provide high levels of connectivity. The strategic geography and business advantages of the Borough provide an opportunity to further promote the Wokingham Borough as an excellent location to live, learn, work, grow and do business to investors.

10.9 Priority Areas for Action

Priority area for action	Challenges	Competitive advantages and opportunities	Potential solutions
1) Employment space	There is a decrease in demand for office space including at the Borough's key business parks.	The Borough has well established and highly regarded business parks which have acted as leading locations to attract and retain investment.	Consider options to create Innovation Spaces to support knowledge economy clusters.

	<p>Higher than average numbers working from home pose challenges for commercial agents.</p> <p>There is an absence of innovation spaces in the Borough.</p>	<p>The investment and management of innovation spaces, offering entrepreneurs and businesses access to innovation services and networks, has been shown to be a key ingredient in the formation of innovation ecosystems offering the benefits of agglomeration.</p>	<p>Engage with developers to enable more provision of light industrial space and space suitable for high tech and creative digital businesses in the specialised sectors.</p> <p>Promote Wokingham as a key business location.</p> <p>Review register of land and property owned by anchor institutions to determine how they can best support the local economy.</p>
<p>2) Climate change</p>	<p>Emissions are greater than the average for the Southeast.</p>	<p>The Borough's emissions are low but further decline in knowledge economy businesses may hinder future progress towards a cleaner economy.</p>	<p>Monitor the progress of the CEAP to reduce carbon emissions. In particular support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving energy efficiency of commercial properties • access to public transport • active travel options • transition to EVs • residents and businesses to make behavioural changes to actively address climate change <p>Incorporate the environmental and sustainability elements of the Borough's Social Value Policy within procurement processes.</p>

3) Housing	Low housing affordability	The provision of more housing and social housing may increase housing affordability helping to retain residents who were born in the borough and also to attract skilled workers from outside.	Continue to promote Wokingham Borough as an excellent location to live, learn, work, grow and do business.
4) Working patterns	High rates of working from home may affect productivity and adversely affect the vibrancy of towns centres.	There may be unmet need for flexible co-working space as well as genuine innovation space. This could also attract 'returners' back to the workplace rather than being isolated at home.	<p>Look to promote recruiting locally for businesses within the Borough.</p> <p>Review part-time working policies with employers to offer more flexible working.</p> <p>Review the need/desire for rentable by the hour office space/flexible hotdesking, for those working from home in the Borough which will encourage more collaborative working.</p>
5) IT connectivity	Wokingham Borough has the lowest indoor 4G availability across all operators.	Businesses will expect high levels of connectivity given the industrial makeup of the area and can be used to promote the area.	Promote good levels of ICT connectivity.