

30<sup>th</sup> November 2023

Submitted via email: [business.enterpriseservice@bracknell-forest.gov.uk](mailto:business.enterpriseservice@bracknell-forest.gov.uk)

Dear Sir/madam,

**Bracknell Forest draft Economic Strategy 2024 – 2034**

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Council's consultation on its revised growth strategy for the Bracknell Forest draft Economic Strategy plan. The comments below draw upon the consultation of the full draft of the Bracknell Forest Economic Strategy and the associated Action Plan. The Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce (TVCC) has consulted with key businesses located in Bracknell and their comments are reflected in our response below.

As part of the comments, there is a need, we believe, to highlight the importance that the delivery of the sustainable growth sought by the Economic Strategy is not stifled by restrictive planning policies. Such policies have the potential to dissuade investment, including by foreign owned companies who see the wider Berkshire area, because of its proximity to London Heathrow, as an attractive location. Investors welcome certainty, with clear long-term ambition, where planning regimes and the delivery of infrastructure support their ambitions. We must also encourage and ensure we are planning for economic development and have policies, that enable faster and more positive responses to changes in business circumstances and investment opportunities.

Contained in the draft Economic Strategy are references to, in the Introduction, a "business-friendly planning environment" and an "enterprise-friendly planning regime" at paragraph 7.1. Within the draft Action Plan there is a lack of clarity as to how these aspirations to establish a planning regime in Bracknell Forest to foster economic growth will be implemented. There needs to be clarity of the type which the TVCC is proposing through amendments to the Bracknell Forest Local Plan Main Modifications to create a more favourable planning policy context at the Jealott's Hill International Research Centre as part of our response to the draft Economic Strategy.

The draft Economic Strategy at E.P.3 references Bracknell Forest's knowledge economy being smaller than that of the comparator areas and neighbouring local authorities and appears to be less resilient. There is some degree of specialisation mentioned indicating the presence of nascent clusters (e.g., High-end TV and Film, Scientific Research and Development (R&D) and health and life sciences). There is a recognition that these clusters are not necessarily peculiar to Bracknell Forest and extend across neighbouring local authorities across Berkshire and the Thames Valley and of course nationwide in the context of shaping the UK economy as a science and technology super power.

However, what is unique to Bracknell Forest is the physical presence of an already existing world leading and internationally respected R&D facility at Jealott's Hill. There is the clear opportunity for the Economic Strategy to not

only highlight but emphasise the national importance of Jealott's Hill as a hub/focal point for a R&D cluster in the form of a technology park which could drive economic growth (P.CC.I.C.1). Growth at this existing world leading facility should not be ignored at the expense of other potential types of clusters which, as the Economic Strategy notes, could physically be located elsewhere.

From a Syngenta perspective, and reflecting E.P.4, if the planning environment to create a cluster at Jealott's Hill is not created then this does put Bracknell Forest at risk of outward migration of a specialist company and its highly skilled jobs, should the benefits of staying in the UK not seem sufficiently attractive in future. TVCC is supportive of what Syngenta has sought to promote, namely a specialist cluster at Jealott's Hill which has the potential of establishing wider economic benefits and job creation feeding through to the local economy and, potentially, attracting foreign direct investment from specialist firms who want to work with Syngenta.

Therefore, there needs to be greater clarity in the Economic Strategy as to how current or new planning policies will be used to provide the right conditions to encourage more productive, knowledge economy/high productivity businesses to either locate or stay in Bracknell Forest (E.P.2.3). In part, this can be achieved by engaging with companies, such as Syngenta, and developers to enable more provision of light industrial space and space suitable for high tech and creative digital businesses in the specialised sectors, such as the R&D opportunity at Jealott's Hill.

There is a clear link to having a Local Plan which takes a proactive approach to fostering investment in economic development and creating a positive planning policy context for Jealott's Hill (P.CC.I.C.1.3). This is why TVCC is supportive of modifications to the emerging Local Plan in favour of greater flexibility to foster economic growth at Jealott's Hill.

### **General Comments and the Chamber's Business Manifesto (2024)**

We support the vision for the overall Economic Strategy, and the four main strategic themes (Economic Performance, Business Competitiveness, People, work and wellbeing, Place, Climate Change, Infrastructure and Connectivity) seek to deliver a balance between delivering the right strategic themes for Bracknell. The mix of housing in the appropriate locations and securing sustainable economic growth linked to ensure we have the resilient infrastructure (water, electricity, gas, telecommunications, road, rail, etc) in place to support the future needs of the resident and business community. For example, how are the local authority engaging, strategically, with the appropriate authorities to secure the required future power (esp. electricity) needs for its existing business community and to those sight that will attract new investors? This is not a unique issue, for Bracknell Forest, but one that needs addressing. TVCC has previously consulted on this and we refer you back to our previous response here: [12 09 2019 Bracknell Forest Council Local Plan Consultation & Jealott's Hill \(Section 6.5 and Policy LP 7\)](#)

We refer you to the TVCC's [Business Manifesto](#), (2024) and supporting local policy priority statement for Berkshire. We are encouraged to see common themes. We welcome the Council's continued strategic focus on key issues we identify that affect Bracknell and we would like to draw your attention to the following key points:

- We would encourage your continued and active support for the timely delivery of the Western Rail Link to Heathrow (WRLtH). We note that this isn't referenced in the draft strategy – this is a fundamental 'gap' -, and we would encourage you to advocate the environmental benefits the scheme will bring to Heathrow Airport and its environs.
- Promote the need for a strengthened approach to inward investment, we note this is referenced in the current draft, but this could be strengthened further, we refer you to our inward investment page in the Business Manifesto.
- Key Account Management – we emphasise the importance and value of sustaining effective business engagement (and avoiding a stop-start relationship). TVCC has an active KAM programme, and we can support the local authority in shaping and delivering a funded programme.

Within the context of the Economic Performance, we wish to make the following, broad comments, but welcome the opportunity (see duty to cooperate below) for continued dialogue and discussion with the business community.

### **Economic development & Business competitiveness**

Within the vision we support the broad thrust of the Plan that seeks to protect key employment areas, and focus on ensuring a diverse and thriving economy, encouraging people to live and work in the Borough. We welcome:

- the vision that Bracknell aims to be an "growing and resilient economy".

- and encourage the Council to work with its key business partners, like TVCC. We have a direct contract with the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) to deliver inward investment. We lead the delivery of the Berkshire Local Skills Improvement Plans. We host business-led sector working groups, including those covering health and life sciences and sustainability. We are a leading centre of excellence in supporting Bracknell businesses trade (import/export) internationally. We are evidentially a key delivery partner for the Council to “attract and retain high-quality businesses”.
- Under the actions listed, a sector, and market-based, approach should reflect on sub-regional (Berkshire); regional (Thames Valley) and national strategies in place and/or under development to ensure Bracknell is best-placed to maximise the benefit. This will and should include reference to the developing Local Industrial Strategy for Berkshire and the Government’s Industrial Strategy and Sector Deals.
- A strong/er focus on delivering ambition to support sustained levels of economic growth. This includes a continued commitment to secure higher levels of inward investment into the Borough. Working alongside the Chamber, we also welcome focus on delivering a programme of effective account management that maintains engagement with the business community.

Linking back to our own [Business Manifesto](#), the proposals will help deliver many of its aims and objectives, including the promotion of a business-led approach to help accelerate the delivery of sustained economic growth, infrastructure investment and resilience in the Thames Valley.

Further, protecting skilled jobs, creating new work opportunities, offer additional housing, particularly those that are deemed more affordable, are all areas that TVCC has actively championed in the past, and lobbied Government, where necessary.

We thank you for the opportunity to respond to your consultation.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul Britton**  
**Chief Executive**