

Bracknell Forest Story of Place – October 2011

- 1.1 Bracknell Forest lies 28 miles west of London, at the heart of the Thames Valley and within the county of Berkshire. Our economy is of above average size and productivity compared to the county and nationally. Good access links, a well educated labour force and the quality of the environment are key attractors to the companies that have and continue to locate here, including a number of multi-national organisations. The Borough has experienced some of the highest population growth rates in the country leading to pressures on housing, infrastructure, services and the Borough's environmental assets including sites designated as being important for nature conservation at an international, national and local level.
- 1.2 When describing Bracknell Forest, it is very easy to look at the bigger picture and to paint a positive view of life in the Borough. To most this is a pretty accurate reflection, however it is important to remember that individual lives and experiences are what matter most. It is important that a high quality of life in the Borough is available to everyone, and so those who deliver public services must remain responsive to changing needs and continually strive to improve.

A Thriving Population

- 1.3 The Borough's population is 116,500 (mid-year 2010 estimate). Between 1991 and 2001, this grew twice as fast as the average for South East England (14% compared to 7%). The population growth rate has slowed from this since 2001 whereas the demand for increased number of households causes pressure for more housing. The population is relatively young (median age 37.9 years compared to England 39.5 years). Only 14.7% of the population is of pensionable age, compared to 19.3% nationally, although this is expected to grow.
- 1.4 The population is relatively healthy. Average life expectancy is increasing and is currently 79.7 years for men and 83.8 years for women. Smoking related deaths and early deaths from heart disease and strokes are below national levels, although the proportions of the population who drink more than recommended levels or have malignant melanomas are higher. However, none of these figures is excessive in the national context.
- 1.5 Educational attainment of children and young people has improved significantly between 2001 and 2011. Overall results are consistently in line with or above the national averages for younger children and GCSE performance in 2011 improved with close to 60% of students now achieving five or more passes at the top A* to C grades including English and mathematics. The A Level results in 2011 were the best ever achieved by schools in the borough, showing a continued improvement over a number of years with higher number of students studying a broader range of courses.
- 1.6 Bracknell Forest residents are generally well-educated, with a higher-than-average proportion qualified to NVQ Level Four and above. However, in parts of the Borough, particularly Bracknell town wards, attitudes to learning are

sometimes less positive. This is where we have focused our work with parents and carers to support their children's learning.

A Desirable Place

- 1.7 Bracknell Forest covers 109 sq km of central Berkshire and includes the former New Town of Bracknell, together with Sandhurst town and the villages of Crowthorne and Binfield, along with a number of smaller settlements across Warfield and Winkfield. Close to London, the area has easy access to the motorway network (M3, M4, M40 and M25), Heathrow, and direct train links into London. Improving access to services for those most at risk of disadvantage remains a priority for the area.
- 1.8 The north and east of the Borough form part of the Green Belt whilst land south of Bracknell and east of Crowthorne is internationally important for nature conservation. The Borough is proud and protective of its green character, with a third of our area comprising woodland. The Borough also has one of the highest ratios of publically accessible open space to its population. Much of this open space is maintained at a high quality. However, prosperity and population growth make demands on the environment as well as transport and housing.
- 1.9 The average house price has remained well above the national average for many years. The average price peaked at £229k in December 2007 and during the recession reached its lowest of £186k in March 2009. Prices are now rising, reaching £213k in August 2010 (27% above the national average). Finding acceptable locations for new housing and providing appropriate infrastructure continue to be major challenges for both partners and residents where the Council's Core Strategy Development Plan Document requires approximately 11,000 new dwellings between 2006 and 2026 to be built. In 2009/10 the area exceeded government targets for building affordable houses – 153 compared to a target of 105.

Cohesive Communities

- 1.10 The 2001 Census showed that 90.6% of the population was 'White British' and 72% was Christian. The BME population at that time was 5.9%. However, the 2007 ONS estimates showed that 85.2% of the population was 'White British' and 14.8% of the population was BME and 'white other'. Since 2001 the proportion of school pupils from Minority Ethnic Groups increased from 6% to 16.1% in 2011. 8.6% of pupils have English as an Additional Language (EAL) and 78 different languages are spoken in our schools, although many of these in very small numbers.
- 1.11 Work has also been undertaken to understand the increasing diversity amongst faiths and beliefs across the borough. Experian Mosaic Origins research completed for the Council in 2010 showed that whilst Christianity remains the majority religion in the borough, Hindus are the largest religious minority group at 1.6% of the local population, followed by Muslims at 1.4% and Sikhs at 0.3%. Despite the steady change in the composition of the population, the area is generally a cohesive community where people get on well together.

- 1.12 Bracknell Forest is one of the least deprived areas of the country (ranked 291 out of 326 local authorities in England on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010). Property prices and levels of car ownership are significantly higher than the national average and average free school meals eligibility remains relatively low in the national context (7.8% in 2011). However, these headline figures mask significant pockets of deprivation. For instance, eleven primary schools have free school meal eligibility in excess of 10%. 11% of 0-16 year olds in the borough are living in poverty, compared to a national average of 21.6%. However, there are six wards in the borough that have child poverty rates higher than the national average with the highest ward rate being 23%.
- 1.13 Bracknell Forest is within the relatively economically buoyant Thames Valley and the aspiration is to maintain a vibrant local economy throughout the borough, and in particular to protecting the local economy as far as possible during the downturn. The number of people claiming Job Seekers' Allowance rose to a peak of 2.6% in August 2009 due to the recession, but has since fallen again and has remained steady for the last 12 months. The figure was 2.2% in August 2011, and the proportion remains lower than both the national and south east averages.
- 1.14 The economic downturn has also had a significant impact on the proportion of young people in education, employment or training. During the quarter November 2010 to January 2011 (as reported to the Dept for Education), the proportion of young people aged 16-18 in Bracknell Forest who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) was 6.1% (typically this represents around 130 young people). This remains a key priority for the area. An overriding ambition for the economy is to regenerate Bracknell Town Centre as soon as possible to create a centre which provides a vibrant economic, social and cultural heart to the Borough and a real sense of place.
- 1.15 The overall level of crime in Bracknell Forest fell by 10% in 2010/11 (a total reduction of 25% since 1st April 2007). Anti-social behaviour also fell by over 11% in 2010/11 (with the most serious categories falling by more than 17%). Significant reductions in a number of crime categories have been recorded since 1st April 2007: burglary of houses - 48%, assaults - 34%, criminal damage - 43%, robbery - 63% and vehicle crime - 55%. Priorities for the local Community Safety Partnership for 2011 include reducing domestic abuse, serious sexual offences and violent crime.