

# Wokingham Borough Council Economic Development Strategy 2025-2030

## Executive Summary

This Strategy sets out how Wokingham Borough Council will facilitate economic growth locally within the context of the government's wider agenda for growth.

The primary focus of this Economic Development Strategy is to assess the performance of the Wokingham economy which has been broken down into three key pillars, with a fourth sub-pillar under the third. Through consultation, the three main pillars have been chosen as they reflect three distinct aspects that, when combined, make up an overall picture of our local economy; while the fourth sub-pillar ties this strategy in with the forthcoming Town Centre Strategy, focussing on the smaller parades of shops which that strategy omits.

- Economic and business landscape
- People work and skills
- Place, infrastructure and connectivity
  - Small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades

In line with the pillars outlined above, the key objectives set out in the strategy are as follows:

- Encourage business growth through strategic partnerships and business support programmes
- Collaborate with both local employers and residents to ensure skills requirements are matched by provision
- Ensure more affordable housing is built, our strong IT infrastructure is maintained, and environmental sustainability is promoted
- Make certain our community spaces are safe, clean and attractive; while helping our local businesses thrive

## Introduction

Wokingham is situated within the heart of Berkshire, and by extension, the wider Thames Valley. The borough is exceptionally well connected, with excellent transport links to London and the wider South-East by both rail and road, as well as being in close proximity to two of the country's primary airports – Heathrow and Gatwick. This strategic location has made, and continues to make, the Borough a fantastic location for high profile, international businesses, with Microsoft, Oracle and Hewlett Packard being just some examples. Wokingham's businesses are able to take advantage of the Borough's strong and varied commercial space offering, its business-friendly planning environment and the excellent broadband and mobile connectivity available. All of these factors have attracted (and continued to foster) an exceptionally well skilled workforce, which has resulted in high employment levels and a correspondingly low claimant count.

From a residential standpoint, the Borough also boasts a superb offering. With multiple thriving towns in Wokingham, Woodley and Twyford all being surrounded by an abundance of green space and easily accessible commercial areas. Add to this the numerous quality schools and colleges, as well as a strong suite of local amenities – naturally these areas have proven attractive for both individuals and families alike. Our residents have developed close, resilient communities with their own unique character, which has further re-enforced Wokingham as an outstanding place to live and work.

## Timescale

This Economic Development Strategy covers the period between 2025 to 2030 in order to remain current and reflect the pace of change in Wokingham's local economy. The research contained within it informs the action plan which will be produced separately, which will contain the actions for the Economic Development team to implement over the next five years. Our progress against these actions will be evaluated and reviewed on a yearly basis, thereby allowing us to be proactive in making any adjustments.

## Economic Vision

Wokingham Borough Council's wider Community Vision is for the Borough to be a great place to live, learn work and grow and a great place to do business. In line with this, the Economic Development components of this vision (i.e., what success will look like) are as follows:

- Further build on our strong local economy with continued inward investment into the Borough
- Lean into our existing sectoral strengths in the Digital Technology, Life Sciences and Creative industries
- Promote a culture of lifelong learning that ensures skills stay relevant for the future world of work
- Provide sufficient affordable, specialist housing to meet the requirements of all those residents in priority need
- Strive to improve air quality through encouraging use of public transport, walking and cycling initiatives, as well as electric vehicles

- Ensure that our villages and town centres are thriving, and offer residents and visitors a range of retail and leisure options
- Be forward-looking in supporting the transition towards adding experiential aspects to our town and village centres
- Guarantee our Borough and communities remain safe for all

## Summary of the main challenges and opportunities that Wokingham faces

Strengths (internal)	Weaknesses (internal)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highly skilled working age population, 57% qualified to NVQ level 4 or above. This is higher than the averages for both Berkshire and the South East</li> <li>• Excellent transport links to London and surrounding areas</li> <li>• High value sectors such as Digital Tech and Life Sciences, where considerable R&amp;D is occurring, contribute significantly to the overall productivity of Wokingham's economy, with an above average share of businesses in the sectors compared to both Berkshire and the South East.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aging population resulting in inactivity levels being dominated by early retirees – also concerns around increased prevalence of unpaid carers.</li> <li>• Higher than average house prices result in young people being unable to afford to stay in the borough.</li> <li>• The labour market is characterised by highly skilled professionals, managerial and technical occupations. Those with lower levels skills or lack of experience could find it harder to access the same variety of quality opportunities as those with higher levels of academic qualifications. Therefore, there is a need for further employment support programmes, aimed entry level positions spanning all industries.</li> </ul>
Opportunities (external)	Threats (external)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emerging new sectors such as Film and TV provides a considerable opportunity for new employment as well as growth in the related skills clusters and supply chains.</li> <li>• Significant opportunities for inward investment in the Local Authority, as evidenced through recent investment from the Natural History Museum and partnership work between the University of Reading and Kew Gardens.</li> <li>• Opportunities for continuation of partnership working with Berkshire Local Authorities (in part through the Prosperity Board), our business community and educational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changing working practices could see some businesses closing offices impacting commercial property and high streets.</li> <li>• The link between where you live and work is broken, Wokingham has been desirable due to commuter distance to London, this is no longer a key factor due to the recently increased prevalence of remote working.</li> </ul>

organisations such as the University of Reading and Activate Learning.	
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## Strategic Pillars

For each of the pillars, the following objectives have emerged, outlining how we will endeavour to achieve our Economic Vision. These are based on the research outlined in the annex of this strategy and the findings from consultation sessions with members of our local business community, as well as our Council Executive:

### Pillar 1 – Economic and business landscape

- Despite the impact of Brexit, COVID-19 and other national and international pressures Wokingham has shown signs of economic resilience and remains a strong local economy overall.
- Wokingham benefits from established sector clusters in:
  - **Digital Technology**, Wokingham is home to tech giants such as Microsoft, Oracle and HP, whilst we have seen a decrease in growth in this sector over recent years, the sector remains a significant contributor to our local economy.
  - **Life sciences**, with two of the top ten leading pharmaceuticals companies in the UK (Johnson & Johnson and Sanofi) choosing their UK head office to be based in Wokingham. This is further enhanced by the UofR being a leading research centre in the field.
- Shinfield Studios, an 18-stage film studio is fully operational in Wokingham as of June 2024. This represents a significant investment in the film and TV sector and provides opportunities for establishing a successful creative cluster.
- As per the latest UK Competitiveness Index (2023), Wokingham fares exceptionally well, ranking 15th out of all 362 Local Authorities.
- Between 2017 and 2021 Wokingham saw an increase of around 23.5% in its GVA per filled job – significantly faster growth than Berkshire and the South East.
- Wokingham has seen a decline in business counts between 2019-23 of around -5.7% - a figure roughly in line with the Berkshire average but a sharper decline than in the South East.
- The Borough performs above the Berkshire average for business survival rates after five years (41.4%), with 44%, but is almost exactly in line with the figure for the South East average at 43.9%.
- Wokingham makes a strong contribution to the wider innovation ecosystem of Berkshire, with the Borough being home to numerous companies (primarily in the Digital Tech, Life Science and Creative industries) which are highly innovative - Microsoft, Oracle, Bayer, Johnson & Johnson and Shinfield Studios being some examples.

- The Local Authority remains a desirable inward investment destination, having recently attracted investment from the Natural History Museum which will be opening a state of the art science and digitisation centre at the Thames Valley Science Park. Additionally, the University of Reading has announced research collaboration with Kew Gardens, aiming to develop nature-based solutions to tackle global issues of biodiversity loss and climate change.

Objective	Encourage business growth through strategic partnerships and business support programmes
i.	Collaborate with existing business support partners and seek out new support programmes to support startups and scale ups
ii.	Work with the Berkshire Prosperity Board to develop and strength sector specific networks and supply chains
iii.	Partner with University of Reading and seek to collaborate and support businesses based in key locations such as Thames Valley Science Park

## Pillar 2 – People, work, skills and wellbeing

- According to the latest Census data, Wokingham's working age population is higher skilled when compared with the Berkshire and South East averages, with 57% of the working age Wokingham population being qualified to NVQ level 4 or higher, compared to 50.2% and 45.2% for Berkshire and the South East respectively.
- There were 82,900 people in employment between January-December 2023 – a 2.81% decrease from 85,300 in January-December 2021.
- Wokingham significantly over indexes in 'Information and & Communication' businesses at a rate of 2.75 times the South East average.
- In the period of 2018-22, Wokingham has seen far less of an increase in gross median weekly pay for those who work here. The increase of 3.3% has been circa one fifth of that seen in Berkshire and the South East.
- Between January-December 2023, the three primary contributing groups to Wokingham's overall economic inactivity level were 'Students' (27.8% of economically inactive population), those 'Looking After Family/Home' (26.65%) and individuals who are 'Retired' (25.4%). Behind this, 10.6% of those economically inactive within the Borough were classed as 'Long Term Sick'

- Wokingham's desirability as a destination to live is well justified, ranking as the fourth happiest area to live in Great Britain in Rightmove's latest 'Happy at Home Index 2023' – the second highest in the South East. However, we must acknowledge there remains pockets of deprivation in the Borough and we need to be able to provide support.
- The Borough's labour market is primarily characterised by highly skilled professionals, managerial and technical occupations. Therefore, in order to future-proof our economy, there is a need for further employment support programmes, aimed entry level positions spanning all industries so that our labour market is truly inclusive.

Objective	Collaborate with both local employers and residents to ensure skills requirements are matched by provision
i.	Support our young residents into good jobs within the Borough.
ii.	Work with local employers to understand skills needs and gaps in provision.
iii.	Assist Wokingham employers in recruiting locally and upskilling their employees.

### Pillar 3 – Place, infrastructure and connectivity

- Wokingham saw the second highest decrease in housing affordability between 2018-22, only behind Windsor and Maidenhead, and currently has an average house price standing at £511,505, significantly higher than the national average
- Increased housing provision is essential in accommodating the Borough's growing population, which surged by almost 14% from 2011 to 2021.
- The Borough saw the largest increase across Berkshire in people reporting that they work from home, from 13.3% in 2011 to 50.7% in 2021.
- Wokingham boast strong digital infrastructure, with high levels of broadband connectivity across SFFB, UFFB and Gigabit.
- The Borough has recorded decreasing greenhouse gas emissions year on year (2017-2021), with the latest emissions per KM<sup>2</sup> figure being 3.7. This puts Wokingham's emissions lower than the Berkshire average (7.9 ktCO<sub>2</sub>e), but greater than the average for the Southeast (2.1 ktCO<sub>2</sub>e).

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Ensure more affordable housing is built, our strong IT infrastructure is maintained, and environmental sustainability is promoted</b>
i.	Work with the Housing and Planning teams to ensure more affordable housing is being built – both to retain residents who were born in the borough, but also to attract skilled workers from outside.
ii.	Collaborate with Berkshire's Digital Infrastructure Group to maintain the strong IT/comms infrastructure of Wokingham and promote this aspect to potential incoming businesses/investors.
iii.	Promote environmental sustainability throughout the Borough through working with the Climate Emergency team.

## Pillar 4

- Wokingham Borough boasts an array of smaller towns and districts as well as local centres and shopping parades which are of great importance to our residents, with the 'ease of access' factor being their primary draw.
- As defined in the Council's Local Plan Update, the Borough has three 'Small Towns and Districts' and twenty one 'Local Centres'
- The offerings across all of our parades can be categorised in the following manner:
  - **Convenience** - the provision of everyday essential items, including food, drinks, newspapers, medicine and confectionary.
  - **Specialty** - the provision of items not obtained on a frequent basis. These include clothing, footwear, household and recreational goods.
  - **Service** - the provision of a service for example, hairdresser, dry cleaning, solicitor, mini cab, insurance, doctor and estate agent.
  - **Catering** - public houses, restaurants, takeaways and cafes.
- Local parades are of particular benefit to the elderly and to those people without the use of a car who cannot easily reach the larger centres.
- According to Research by the High Streets Task Force, "100% of district centres and 65% of town centres have seen a recovery in footfall since the COVID-19 pandemic; whereas 61% of regional centres and 70% of major cities have seen their footfall reduced.
- A 2023 study into home-working, commissioned by Wokingham Borough Council suggests that these local parades of shops are increasingly being used by Generation Z customer highlighting that, "there has been a shift to increased spending in local independent retailers in recent years, with local shopping areas that are authentic, human, and unique being likely to fare better with Generation Z consumers, who are committed to environmental protection and supporting local industry."

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Make certain our community spaces are safe, clean and attractive; while helping our local businesses thrive</b>
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i.	Collaborate with our Community Safety and Climate Emergency teams to ensure our districts, local centres and shopping parades are safe, clean and attractive places to visit.
ii.	Engage further with businesses outside of our major town centres to better understand any issues they may be facing and how we can assist them.
iii.	Support local businesses in improving their digital presence through signposting them to advice on digital transformation, e-commerce adoption, online marketing strategies, and customer engagement.

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# Wokingham Borough Council Economic Development Strategy 2025-2030 Annex

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## Why Wokingham needs an Economic Development Strategy

Wokingham Borough Council's previous Economic Development Strategy was for the period between 2016-21, and as such, is now out of date. In order for the Council to best plan how to continue in improving the economic prosperity of the Borough, it is crucial that we have an up-to-date evidence base, outlining our performance in a plethora of key economic development metrics. Through assessing how we currently perform, we will be able to more confidently set a direction of travel, taking action towards the identified key priorities/objectives. With these priorities established, we will be able to be clear with our local stakeholders on our vision for Wokingham's economy, and have the evidence base to support future bids for funding/investment. It is also important that the Council has a refreshed Economic Development Strategy so it aligns with the overall Council Plan.

- **Understanding:** Our current economic performance, strengths and challenges, differences from, and interactions with, the wider economy
- **Setting direction:** Our future, our industries, businesses, jobs and skills on which to focus and what we can do to change and improve them
- **Communicating the vision:** Working with potential investors and businesses, partners and the community
- **Providing the evidence:** Data and analysis to support bids for future funds and cases for investment

- **Council Plan:** Align with emerging council priorities and objectives

## Research Methodology and approach

The methodology for producing this Economic Development Strategy can be broadly split into two stages, outlined as follows:

1. Built an evidence base comprised of relevant literature, ONS data and findings from consultations with local businesses and our Council Executive which were then analysed and used to inform the draft strategy.
2. Following internal review of the draft document, produced the final version of the Economic Development Strategy to be reviewed by the Council Executive. The main report will be accompanied by an Executive Summary, Annex and Action Plan.

### Our approach

The primary focus of this Economic Development Strategy is to assess the performance of the Wokingham economy which has been broken down into three key pillars, with a fourth sub-pillar under the third. Though consultation, the three main pillars have been chosen as they reflect three distinct aspects that, when combined, make up an overall picture of our local economy; while the fourth sub-pillar ties this strategy in with the forthcoming Town Centre Strategy, focussing on the smaller parades of shops which that strategy omits.

- Economic and business landscape
- People work and skills
- Place, infrastructure and connectivity
  - Small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades

## Wokingham: local economy and business landscape

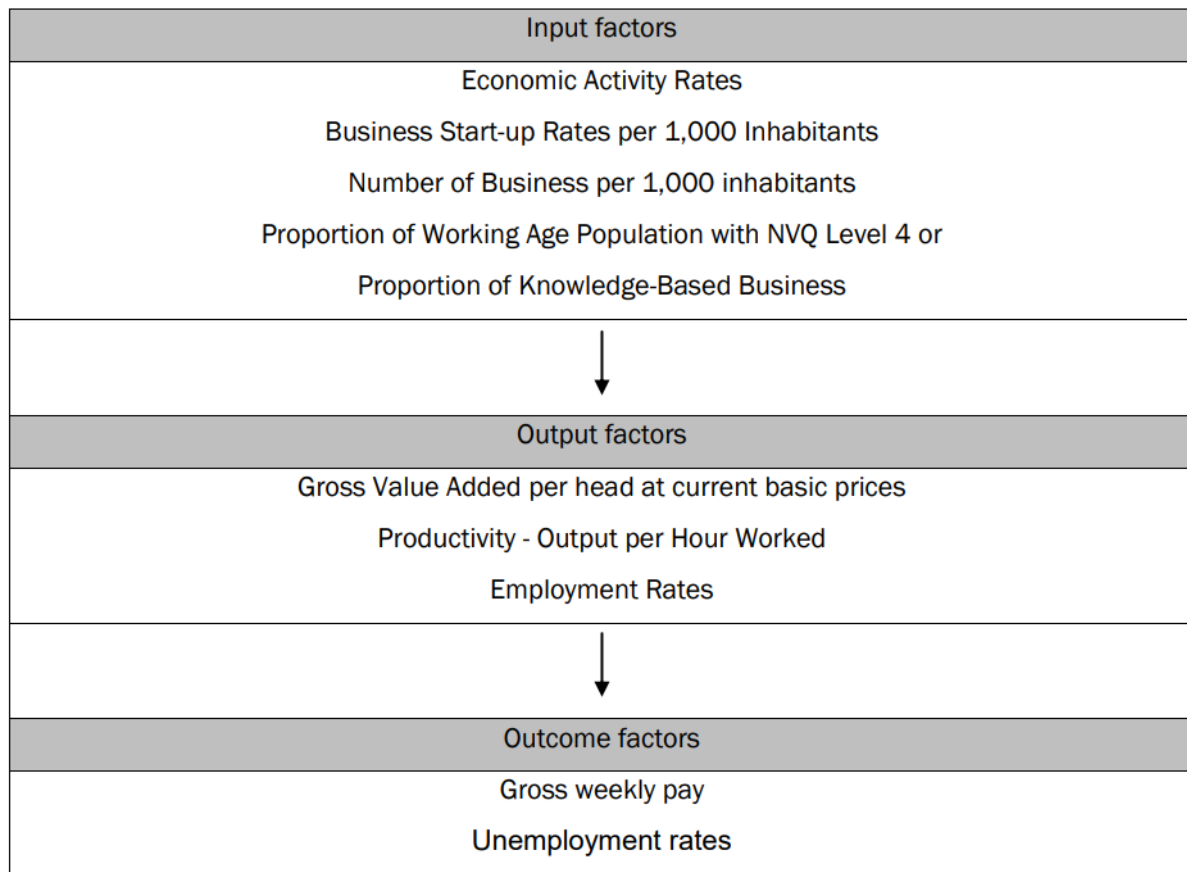
### Local economy and business landscape assessment

#### Competitiveness

As per the latest UK Competitiveness Index (2023), Wokingham fares exceptionally well, ranking 15<sup>th</sup> out of all 362 Local Authorities. It is ranked as the fourth most competitive Local Authority in the South East (excluding London), behind only Runnymede, Elmbridge and neighbouring borough, Windsor and Maidenhead. Competitiveness as a location can be defined as how attractive an area is for businesses to operate, and synthesises performance in various different aspects of the local

economy such as business start-up rates, the skills profile of the area, GVA per head and employment rates. This index is calculated by drawing on several different economic development-related metrics outlined in the model below:

**FIGURE 2.01: THE 3 FACTOR MODEL UNDERLYING THE UK LOCAL COMPETITIVENESS INDEX**



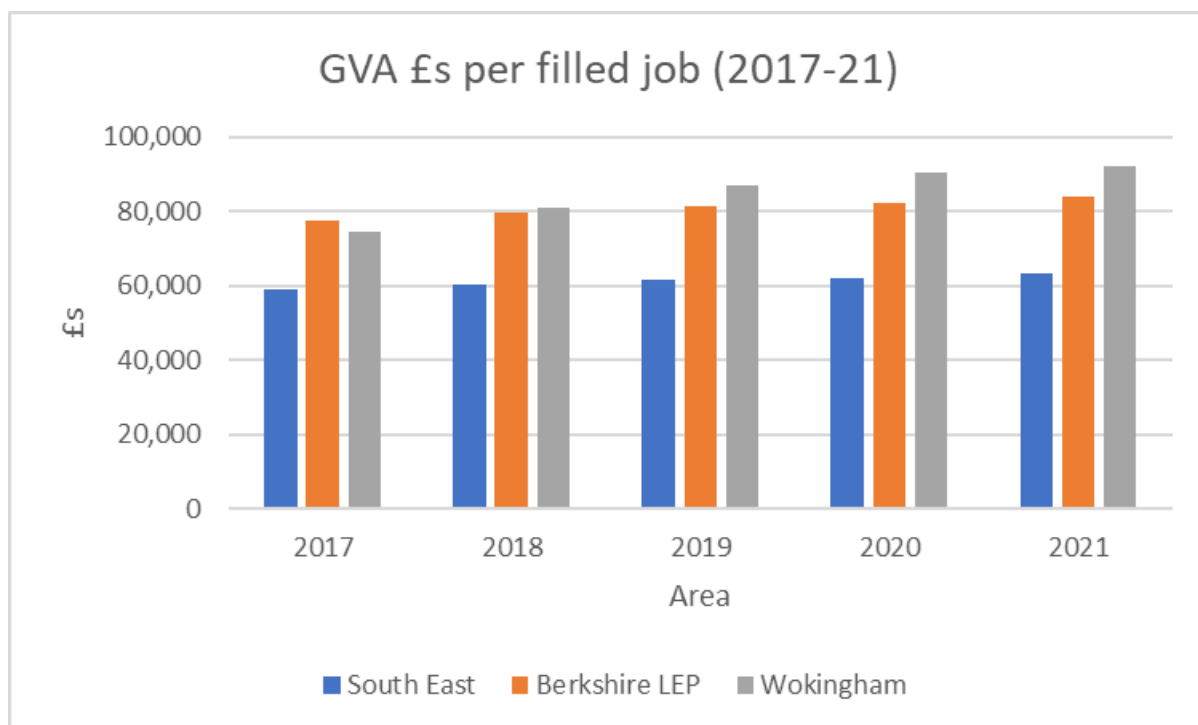
Source: Huggins, R. and Thompson, P. (2013) UK Competitiveness Index 2013, School of Planning and Geography, Cardiff University: Cardiff

## Productivity

GVA (Gross Value Added) per filled job is the economic value generated per employed position, indicating the contribution of each job to the overall economy. GVA per hour worked measures the economic output per hour of labour, reflecting the efficiency and productivity of workers.

According to the latest data, Wokingham over indexes on GVA per filled job when compared to figures for both Berkshire and the South East. In 2021 (latest data), Wokingham 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. Perhaps more interestingly is the pace of Wokingham's increase in GVA per filled job year on year (2017-2021), which massively outstripped the comparator areas. During the aforementioned period, Wokingham saw an increase of around 23.5% in its GVA per filled job – significantly faster growth than Berkshire and the South East which posted figures of +8.2% and +7.24% respectively.

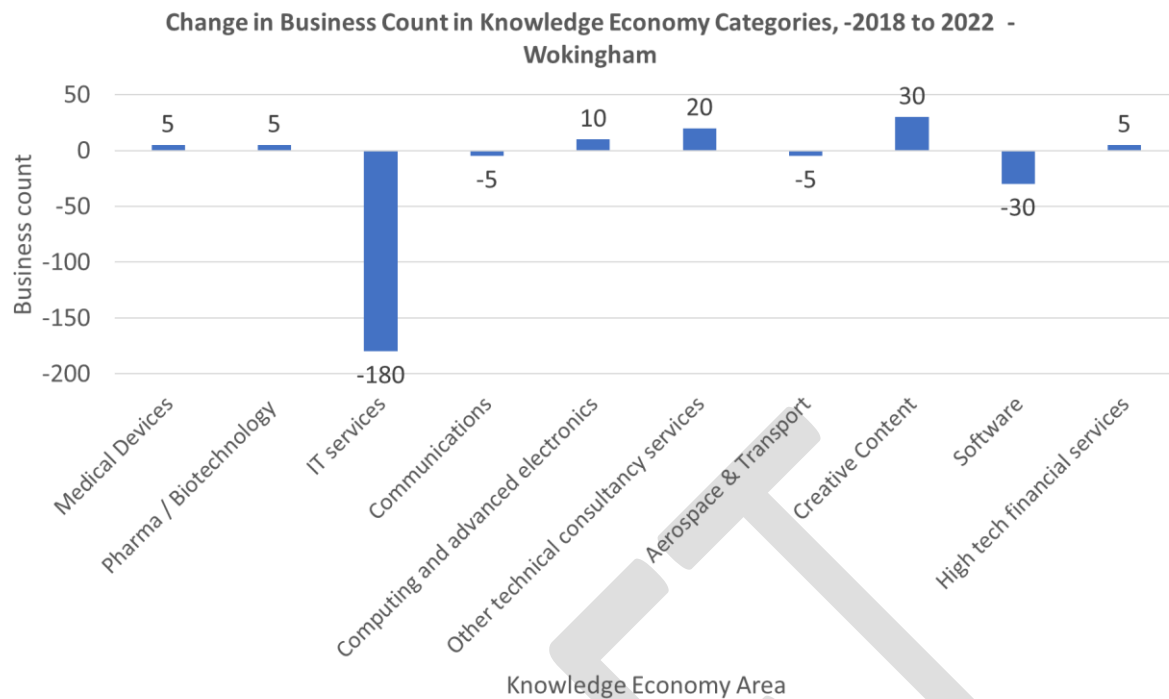
The primary factors for Wokingham having such strong GVA per filled job are both the concentration of multiple large companies within the Borough (many of which being multinational companies), which are generally more productive, as well as the significant amount of high-growth startup and scaleup businesses – the most within the Berkshire Local Authorities.



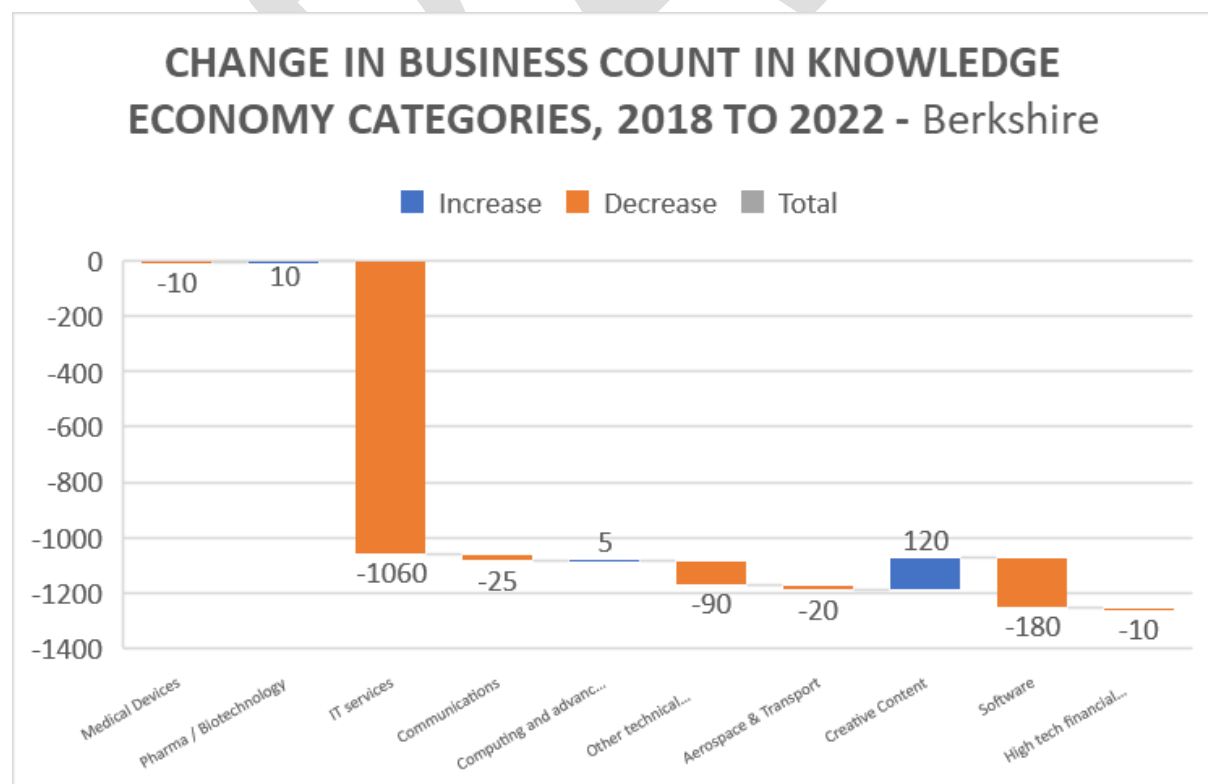
## The knowledge economy

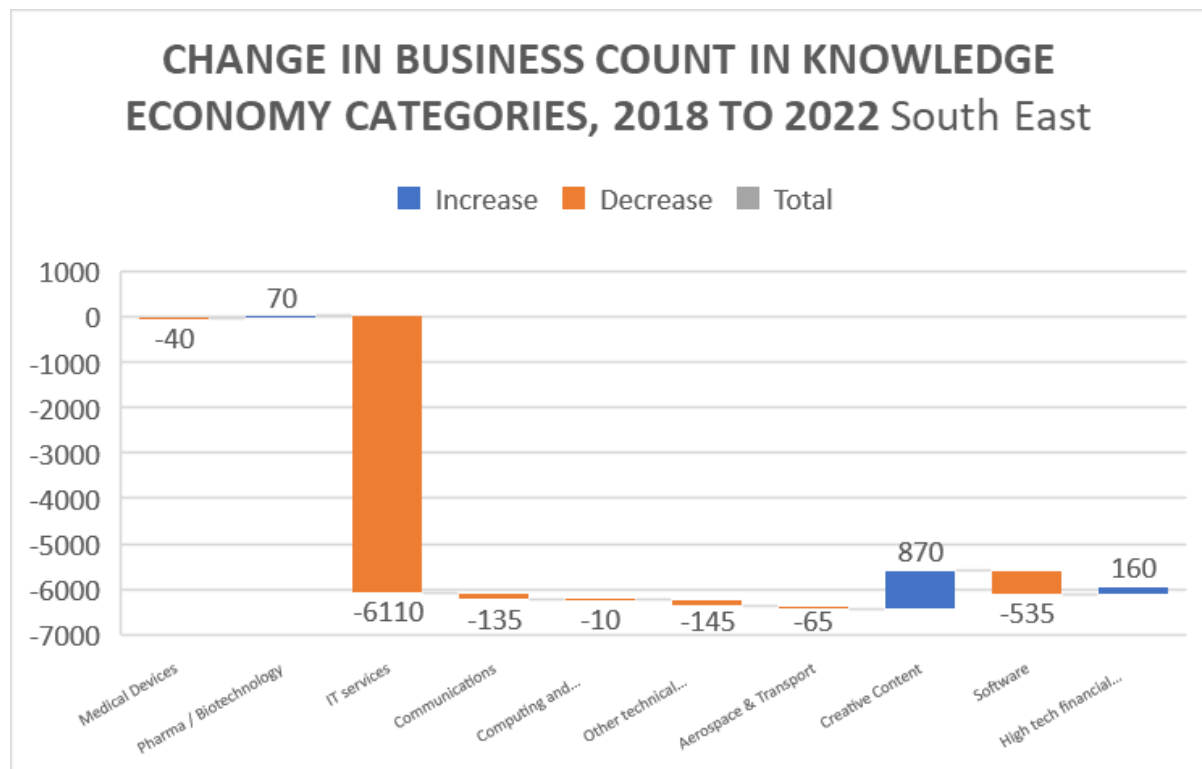
When analysing the strength of Wokingham's local economy, a key aspect which should be considered is that of its 'knowledge economy', i.e. the part of the economy which is based on creating value through the application of intellectual capital ranging from highly technical industries and knowledge intensive services to the creative industries. These types of businesses tend to be higher value and have higher worker productivity so they are more valuable overall in bolstering local economic growth. In addition to employing highly skilled workers, businesses within the knowledge economy are often intensive users of information technology and have high levels of research and development and innovation. The health of Wokingham's knowledge economy, i.e. the strongly embedded presence of knowledge-based services and supply chains is crucial, as it allows for the Borough to both attract and retain high value companies.

As outlined in the graph below, in Wokingham the change in KE business counts between 2018-2022 saw a significant decrease in IT services as well as smaller reduction in software businesses. In contrast, the main increases can be seen in creative content and other technical/consultancy services.



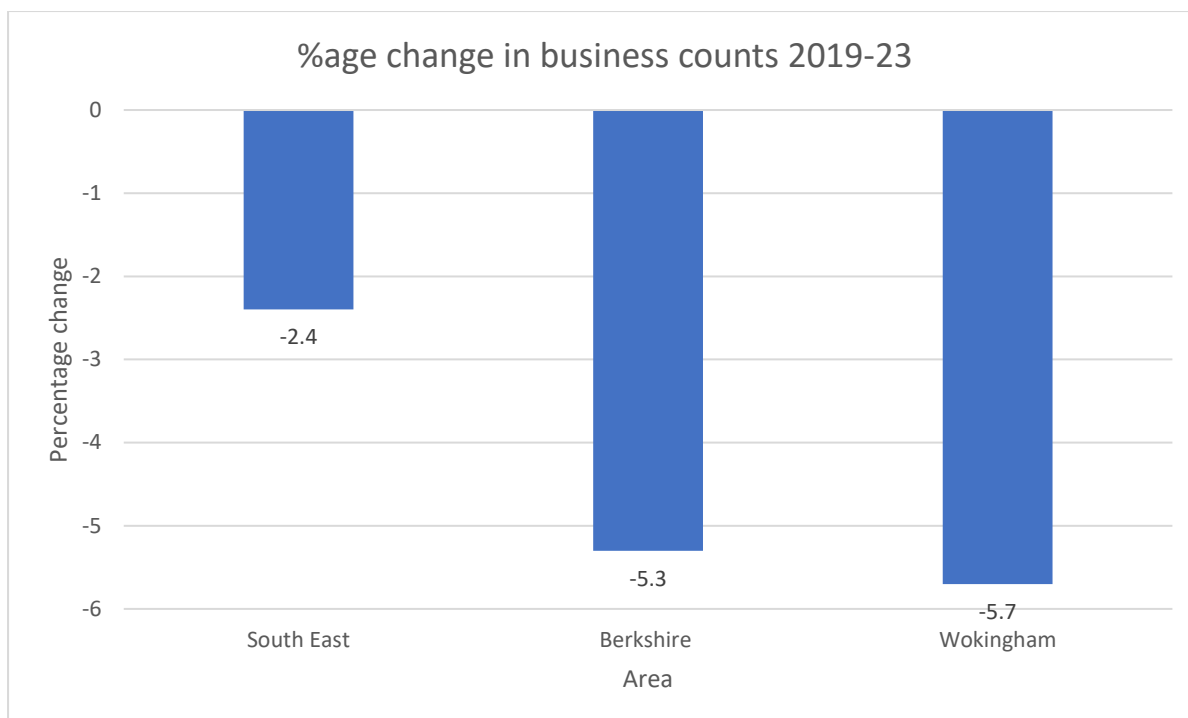
When assessing these figures against the comparator areas of Berkshire and the South East, we see some commonality. Firstly, the main point of concern for Wokingham's knowledge economy (decline in count of IT service and software businesses) is mirrored across both comparator areas. Similarly, so is the increase in the count of creative content businesses, which is to be expected given the significant investments made in the film and TV sector within the UK; but specifically within Berkshire's Cine Valley with the development of locations like Shinfield Studios in Wokingham.





### Business growth and decline

According to the latest 2023 figures, Wokingham had a total business count of 8,360 – falling from 8,865 five years prior in 2019. In the period of 2019 and 2023, the business population in the South East region fell by around 2.4% - primarily due to multiple macroeconomic stresses such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the surge in energy prices as a result of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, this decrease was mirrored in both Berkshire and Wokingham more specifically over the same period, with the two areas showing declines in business counts of -5.3% and -5.7%.



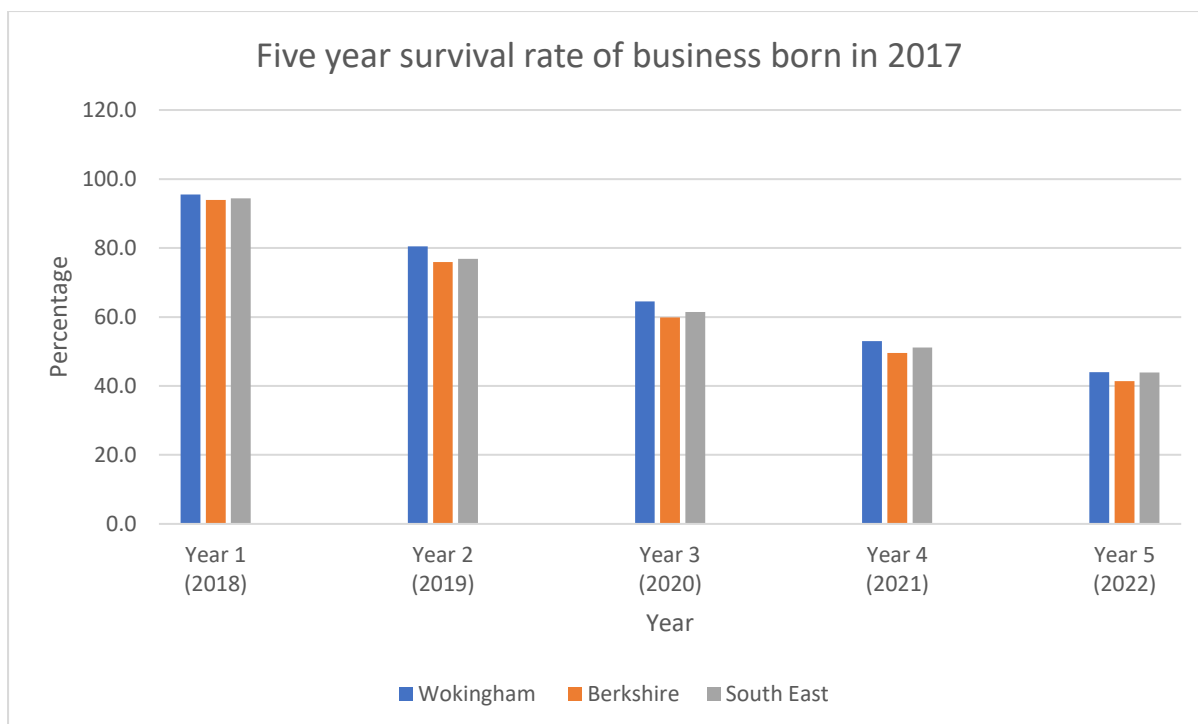
## Business creation and survival

When looking to measure how entrepreneurial a local economy is, the number of businesses created per 10,000 members of the working age population can act as an indicator, with the higher the number naturally pointing towards an economy being more supportive of entrepreneurs. Between 2019 and 2021 (latest available data), Wokingham has seen a year-on-year decline in the number of business births per 10,000 people – falling from 97 to 85. In this time, similar declines have also been seen in both Berkshire and the South East (104 > 87 and 92 > 84 respectively). The increase in working age population throughout this period has not been matched by a corresponding increase in number of new businesses born, much of which will be the result of the COVID-19 pandemic during this time and the numerous associated challenges that placed on the economy. It will be important to continue to monitor these figures (when more up to date ones are released) to assess whether Wokingham's figures are returning toward the pre-COVID baseline.

	BUSINESS BIRTHS PER 10,000 WORKING AGE POPULATION, 2017 to 2021				
	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>South East</b>	88	88	92	85	84
<b>Berkshire</b>	101	101	104	89	87
<b>Wokingham</b>	99	106	97	86	85

In terms of the business survival rates, Wokingham boasts higher year on year figures in the period of 2018-2021 when compared to both the Berkshire and South East averages, with survival rates in the Borough equalling those of the South East in 2022 but still remaining above Berkshire. In this, Wokingham is underlined as an area with above average business survival rates, pointing to a healthy local economy which fosters entrepreneurialism.





## Business size

From a percentage standpoint, the number of business broken down by size band barely differs between Wokingham, Berkshire and the South East. Of the 255 large businesses across the six constituent local authorities of Berkshire, 50 of them are in Wokingham – therefore the Borough over-indexes in this size of business within the County. Given the number of people these large businesses employee, Wokingham is marginally more vulnerable to employment and output losses, should just a few of these large businesses relocate.

Percentage of businesses by employment size band - 2023				
	Micro 0-9	Small 10-49	Medium 50-249	Large 250+
<b>South East</b>	89.53	8.57	1.50	0.40
<b>Berkshire</b>	89.27	8.24	1.90	0.59
<b>Wokingham</b>	90.07	7.78	1.56	0.60

## Key industries and sectoral shift

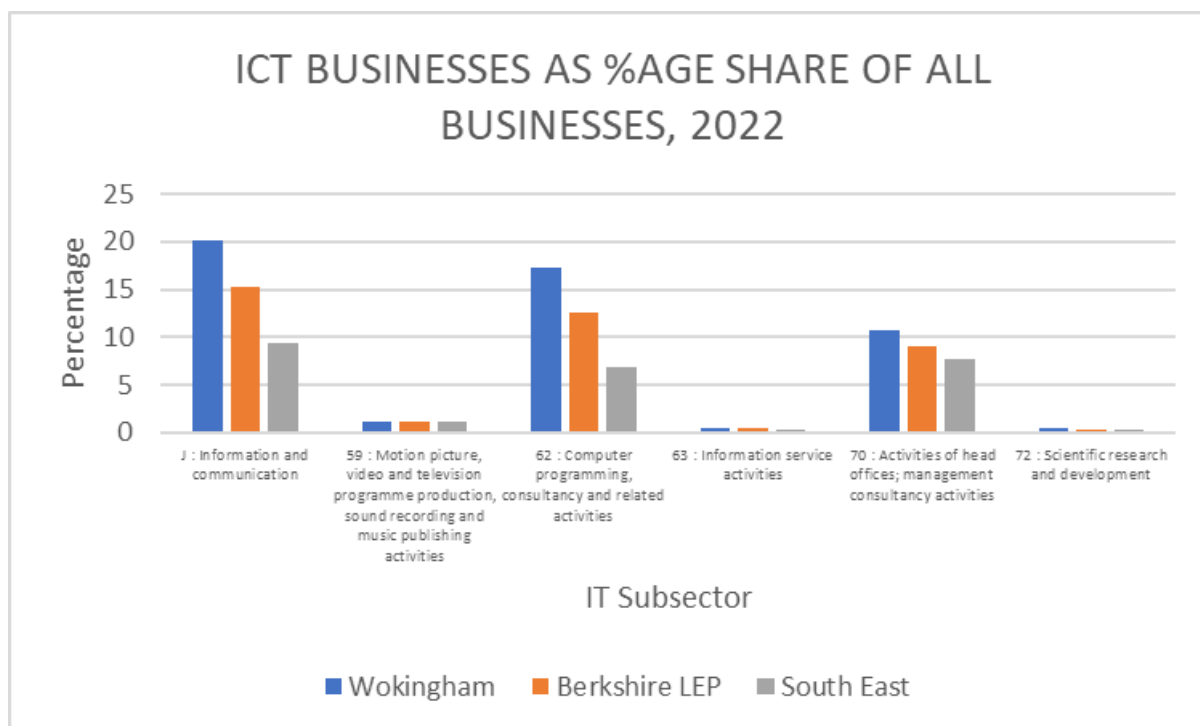
In the same vein as both Berkshire and the South East, Wokingham's primary industrial sectors are 'Information and Communication' and 'Professional, Scientific and Technical', both of which have seen a decline in their share of total businesses in the area – in Wokingham's case, -1.84% and -

2.82% respectively. These industries play a crucial role in the Wokingham economy and its identity as a successful business location, as they are essential for the growth and prosperity of the area given the substantial contribution they make in GVA for the Borough. They also work to support other sectors in the local economy, by attracting skilled workers who support local services; and are also relatively environmentally friendly compared to others such as 'Agriculture, forestry and fishing', 'Mining, quarrying and utilities', 'Manufacturing', 'Construction' and 'Transport'. Like the majority of economic statistics from within this time period, the macroeconomic stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic and energy crisis brought about by the war between Russia and Ukraine will have impacted the data. It will be important to continue monitoring these figures going forward to assess whether the 'Information and Communication' and 'Professional, Scientific and Technical' industries begin to trend back towards their pre-COVID share of total businesses within the borough, and for the Council to work to facilitate this.

	SECTORAL SHIFT: (PERCENTAGE POINT) CHANGE IN BROAD INDUSTRY GROUP SHARE OF TOTAL BUSINESSES, 2019 TO 2023																	
	1 : Agriculture, forestry & fishing (A)	2 : Mining, quarrying & utilities (B,D and E)	3 : Manufacturing (C)	4 : Construction (F)	5 : Motor trades (Part G)	6 : Wholesale (Part G)	7 : Retail (Part G)	8 : Transport & storage (inc postal) (H)	9 : Accommodation & food services (I)	10 : Information & communication (J)	11 : Financial & insurance (K)	12 : Property (L)	13 : Professional, scientific & technical (M)	14 : Business administration & support services (N)	15 : Public administration & defence (O)	16 : Education (P)	17 : Health (Q)	18 : Arts, entertainment, recreation & other services (R,S,T and U)
Wokingham	-0.05	0.47	0.48	1.32	0.18	0.19	0.54	0.3	0.13	-1.84	0.12	0.53	-2.82	-0.08	0	0.06	0.01	0.48
Berkshire	-0.01	-0.01	0.13	1.25	0.28	0.13	0.97	0.89	0.44	-2.49	0.03	0.53	-2.89	0.19	0.01	0.11	-0.03	0.51
South East	-0.24	0.04	-0.07	1.4	0.07	-0.11	0.61	0.83	0.42	-1.63	0.06	0.38	-2.02	0.27	0.01	0.01	-0.12	0.07

## Information and communications

Looking specifically at the key subsectors within the IT industry, given how integral the industry overall is to Wokingham's local economy; several things should be noted. Firstly, Wokingham considerably over indexes when compared to Berkshire and the South East in terms of Information and Communication businesses overall, with the industry making up over one fifth of all businesses within the Borough. The Borough ranks highest in this metric when compared to the other composite Berkshire local authorities. Wokingham also has a markedly higher percentage of businesses (as a percentage of all businesses) in the subsectors of 'Computer programming, consultancy and related activities' as well as 'Activities of head offices; management consultancy activities'. Many of these such businesses will be based in Wokingham in order to be close to major international IT businesses such as Microsoft and Oracle, and to have access to the same highly skilled local workforce.



## The visitor economy

While Wokingham is not a significant tourist destination in its own right, it benefits from being in close proximity to major attractions within the wider county of Berkshire (primarily in Windsor), with Windsor Castle, St George's Chapel and Legoland being some key examples. More specifically in Wokingham however, there are several country parks which are regularly visited both by residents and tourists – Dinton Pastures, California Country Park and the Finchampstead Ridges. There are numerous shopping districts within the Borough with a diverse visitor offering, spanning across our three towns of Wokingham, Woodley and Twyford.

From a more business-focussed visitor standpoint, many of Wokingham's surrounding areas (Reading specifically) are well equipped to cater to the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) market, with numerous hotels at varying price points (both chain and independent), as well as several well-equipped conference spaces. While Wokingham does have hotels such as Cantley House and Easthampstead Park, as well conference spaces in areas such as Winnersh Triangle Business Park – it lags behind its neighbours.

It should be noted however that, as response to the challenges the economy faced from COVID-19, the commercial office sector has undergone significant changes and these have the potential to cause an ongoing negative impact on the MICE sector in Wokingham due to the potentially lower demand for business overnight stays, locally held meetings, conferences and exhibitions as a result of the significant increase in remote working. Wokingham hotels based in the immediate vicinity of our business parks such as Premier Inn: Winnersh, Travelodge: Winnersh Triangle and Crown Plaza:

Reading East which are reliant on the weekday MICE sector may need to refocus into generating more leisure business to supplement any decline in business visitor revenues. Moreover, many 'traditional' office spaces in the area have already successfully transitioned their offering towards a more 'home-from-home' hotdesking approach, such as the Here + Now buildings on Thames Valley Park. This is a trend that we expect to continue, and the Council should look to make it as easy as possible for developers to renovate such spaces to reflect the needs of our local business community.

## Local economy and business landscape scorecard

Indicator	Key metric	Summary of current state	Priorities
Competitiveness	UK Competitiveness Index	As per the latest UK Competitiveness Index (2023), Wokingham fares exceptionally well, ranking 15th out of all 362 Local Authorities	Continue to monitor our performance in future iterations of this index and provide targeted support for businesses within the Borough – particularly in areas such as assisting start-ups and addressing skills gaps within the local economy.
Productivity	GVA per filled job	Wokingham over indexes on GVA per filled job when compared to figures for both Berkshire and the South East. Between 2017 and 2021 Wokingham saw an increase of around 23.5% in its GVA per filled job – significantly faster growth than Berkshire and the South East.	Carry out research into local business finance and investment readiness of SMEs – look for collaboration opportunities with the Growth Hub and FSB. Signpost our local businesses towards opportunities for improving the management and leadership skills of their staff.
The knowledge economy	Percentage of knowledge economy businesses	While Wokingham's knowledge economy is strong overall, the change in KE business counts between 2018-2022 saw a significant decrease in IT services as well as smaller reduction in software businesses. In	Continue to facilitate networking groups in key knowledge economy sectors and clusters working with partners across the wider area. Also, look to set up and run groups for specific key industrial sectors.

		contrast, the main increases can be seen in creative content and other technical/consultancy services.	
Business growth and decline	Growth in number of registered businesses	Wokingham has seen a decline in business counts between 2019-23 of around -5.7% - a figure roughly in line with the Berkshire average but a sharper decline than in the South East.	Work with partners such as the Growth Hub and FSB to provide targeted business support to sectors in Wokingham are that are most important to retain and grow – those chiefly being IT and Life Science businesses, with creative businesses also playing an important role.
Business creation and survival	Startup rates per 10,000 working age population	Between 2019 and 2021 (latest available data), Wokingham has seen a year-on-year decline in the number of business births per 10,000 people – falling from 97 to 85. In this time, similar declines have also been seen in both Berkshire and the South East (104 > 87 and 92 > 84 respectively).	Continue to work to provide tailored support to start up and scale up businesses in the area.
Business size	Percentage of companies in the 50-249 and 250+ size brackets	From a percentage standpoint, the number of business broken down by size band barely differs between Wokingham, Berkshire and the South East. Wokingham slightly over indexes in the number of large businesses it has compared to other Berkshire LA's, marginally more vulnerable to	Continue to carry out business engagement work with the aim of building stronger relationships with larger companies in the borough. Ensure we understand issues they face around recruitment, planning and understand any existing involvement they have with the Council.

		employment and output losses, should just a few of these large businesses relocate.	
Key industries and sectoral shift	Shift share by industrial sector	Wokingham's primary industrial sectors are 'Information and Communication' and 'Professional, Scientific and Technical', both of which have seen a decline in their share of total businesses in the area – in Wokingham's case, -1.84% and -2.82% respectively.	Consider working with external organisations to target support to these industries key to our knowledge economy to help facilitate innovation.
Information and communications	Percentage of IT businesses and subsectors	Wokingham considerably over indexes when compared to Berkshire and the South East in terms of Information and Communication businesses overall, with the industry making up over one fifth of all businesses within the Borough. Many of these smaller businesses will be based in Wokingham in order to be close to major international IT businesses such as Microsoft and Oracle, and to have access to the same highly skilled local workforce.	Monitor the recent decline in business counts within the Information and Communications sector to assess whether these will trend back to their pre-COVID baseline in the coming years. Look to specifically support the Publishing, Broadcasting and Film & TV subsector as it will also simultaneously allow us assist our rapidly expanding screen industry.
The visitor economy	N/A	Wokingham is not a significant tourist destination, but it benefits from being in close proximity to major attractions within the wider county of Berkshire. Wokingham itself is	Work with tourism organisations to promote Wokingham's attractions and continue to explore submitting an EOI for a Berkshire LVEP. Carry out risk analysis for MICE sector and work with accommodation

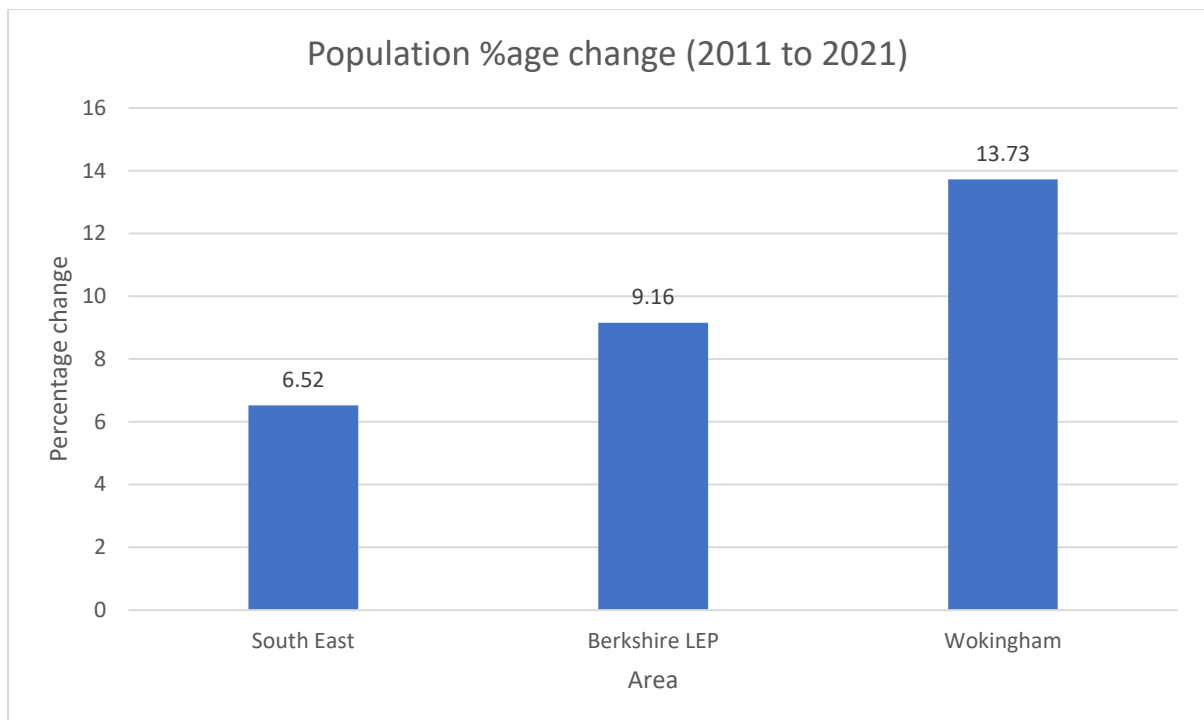
		not especially well equipped to cater to the MICE market, relying somewhat on the numerous hotels, as well as several well equipped conference spaces adjacent to the Borough. Many 'traditional' office spaces in the area have transitioned their offering towards a more 'home-from-home' hotdesking approach.	providers to explore alternatives.
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## Wokingham: people, work and wellbeing

### People, work and wellbeing assessment

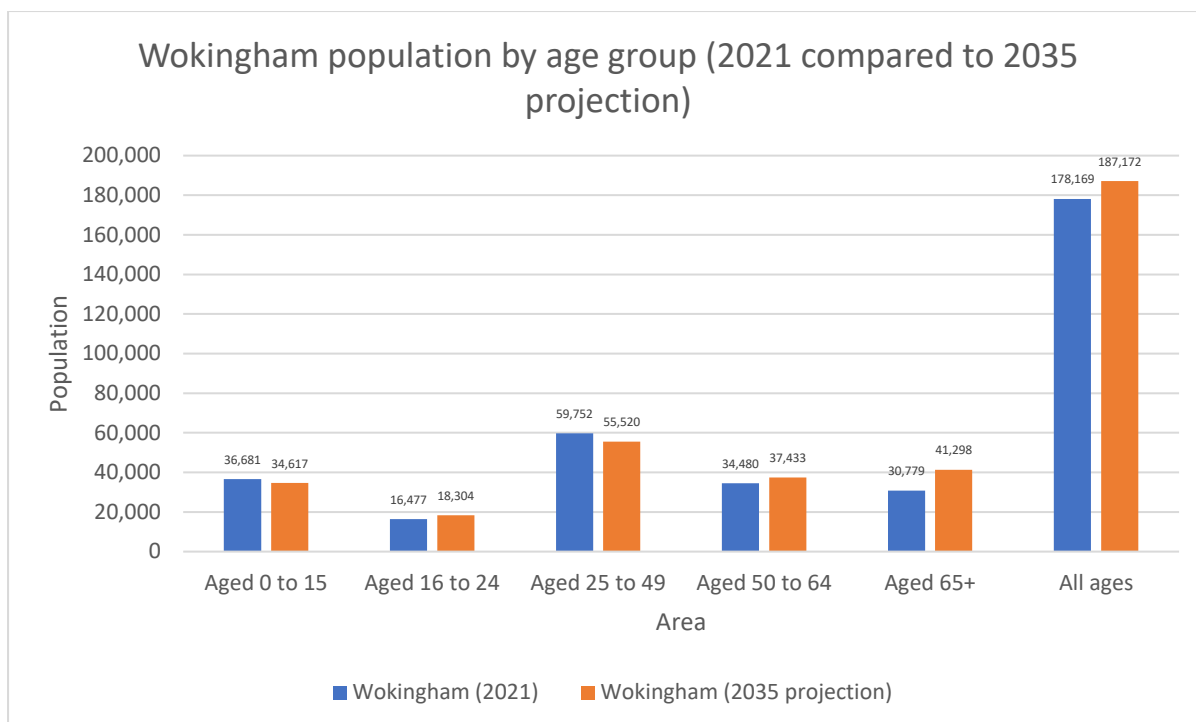
#### Population Change

According to the latest 2021 Census data, the population of Wokingham was 178,169, an increase of over 21,000 or almost 14% since the prior decade. This is a rate of growth that is considerably higher than that of the South East as whole (6.52%). Furthermore, this increase of 13.73% makes Wokingham the fastest growing local authority in Berkshire between 2011-21 – significantly faster than Windsor and Maidenhead, which saw the slowest population growth out of all local authorities in Berkshire in the same period at 5.61%.



Looking at the population projections by age group for 2035, we see that Wokingham is projected to have ageing population, with a significant increase of those in the Aged 65+ category, from the most recent figure of 30,779 to a projected 41,298. There is also a projected increase, although less stark, in the Aged 50-64 category, rising from 34,480 to a projected 37,433. These projections are compounded by a predicted decrease in the number of young people within the Borough, with both the Aged 0-15 and Aged 25-49 groups showing a projected decline. With this understood, it may be that Wokingham's low levels of housing affordability is a driving factor for the projected decline in the younger population, as this group struggle 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.



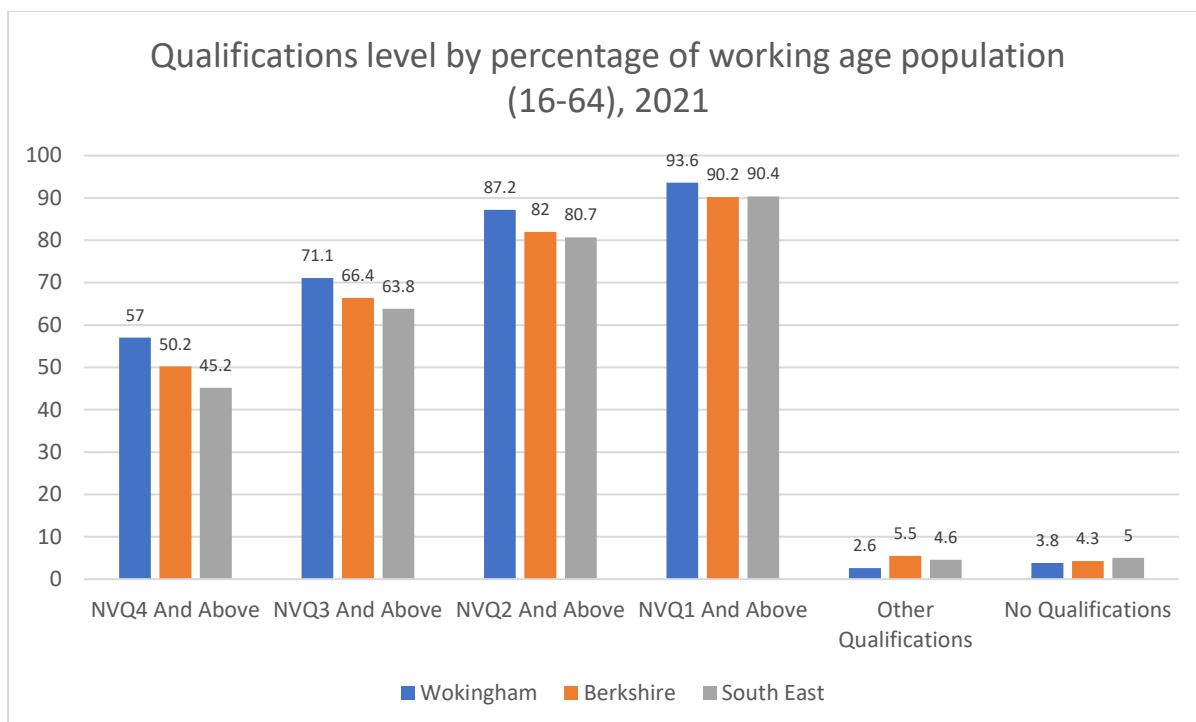


## Qualifications and skills

According to the latest Census data, Wokingham'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. The Borough also has a correspondingly lower percentage of the working age population who have no qualifications at all.

The largest gap can be seen at NVQ Level 4 and above (post-A level) where there are approximately 7% more of the working age population qualified when compared to the Berkshire average and circa 12% more than the average for the South East. This skills profile correlates with the industrial makeup of the borough, with the primary industrial sectors of IT and Life Sciences often requiring higher level qualifications to access – industrial strengths that Berkshire and the South East also possess, but to a lesser extent when factored into their respective industrial mixes.

Additionally, Wokingham's skills profile has improved in the period of 2017-21, with the percentage of the working age population qualified to NV4 level 4 and above having increased by just shy of 11%. This is above both the Berkshire and South East Averages – 10.3% and 8.4% respectively. This can only be a positive, as it's likely indicative of 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 have been through schools and FE institutions in the Borough.



Despite the numerous benefits of Wokingham having a high skills profile, it also poses some challenges. Such a highly skilled workforce competes for a number of high skilled jobs within the Borough, and given that we don't have as many entry level jobs, it makes it difficult for young people who chose not to/were unable to go to university to have success in the Wokingham job market. It is important for the Council to consider how we're able to support those of our non-degree educated young population into the workforce to ensure they have avenues to access good jobs within the Borough.

## Employment

According to the latest ONS employment figures, there were 82,900 people in employment between January-December 2023 – a 2.81% decrease from 85,300 in January-December 2021. In the period of 2017-2021 (the same five-year period of the latest data for employment by industry) there was an increase of 3,600 jobs across all sectors. The industrial groups which saw the biggest increases in employment (in percentage terms) between 2017-2021 were 'Finance and Insurance' (+56.3%), 'Public Administration and Defence' (+50%) and 'Manufacturing' (28.6%). At the opposite end of the spectrum, 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing' (-14.3%), 'Information and Communication' (-13.3%) and 'Arts, Entertainment, Recreation and Other Services' (-12.5%) were the industrial groups which saw the biggest decline in percentage terms.

Percentage change in employment (number) by BIG, 2017 to 2021																		
	1 : Agriculture, forestry & fishing (A)	2 : Mining, quarrying & utilities (B,D and E)	3 : Manufacturing (C)	4 : Construction (F)	5 : Motor trades (Part G)	6 : Wholesale (Part G)	7 : Retail (Part G)	8 : Transport & storage (inc postal) (H)	9 : Accommodation & food services (I)	10 : Information & communication (J)	11 : Financial & insurance (K)	12 : Property (L)	13 : Professional, scientific & technical (M)	14 : Business administration & support services (N)	15 : Public administration & defence (O)	16 : Education (P)	17 : Health (Q)	18 : Arts, entertainment, recreation & other services (R,S,T and U)
Wokingham	-14.3	16.7	28.6	0	0	20	20	0	0	-13.3	56.3	0	8.3	12.5	50	0	0	-12.5
Berkshire	-10	33.3	0	-4.3	-11.1	-6.7	-4.7	4.5	0	0	0	0	22.6	6	9.1	-2.3	4.3	-25
South East	-3.6	10.7	-3.9	3.3	-7.1	-13.1	4.9	14.6	0	-4.6	1.7	0	15.3	3.6	5.4	-6.1	2.8	-13.9

## Employment specialisms

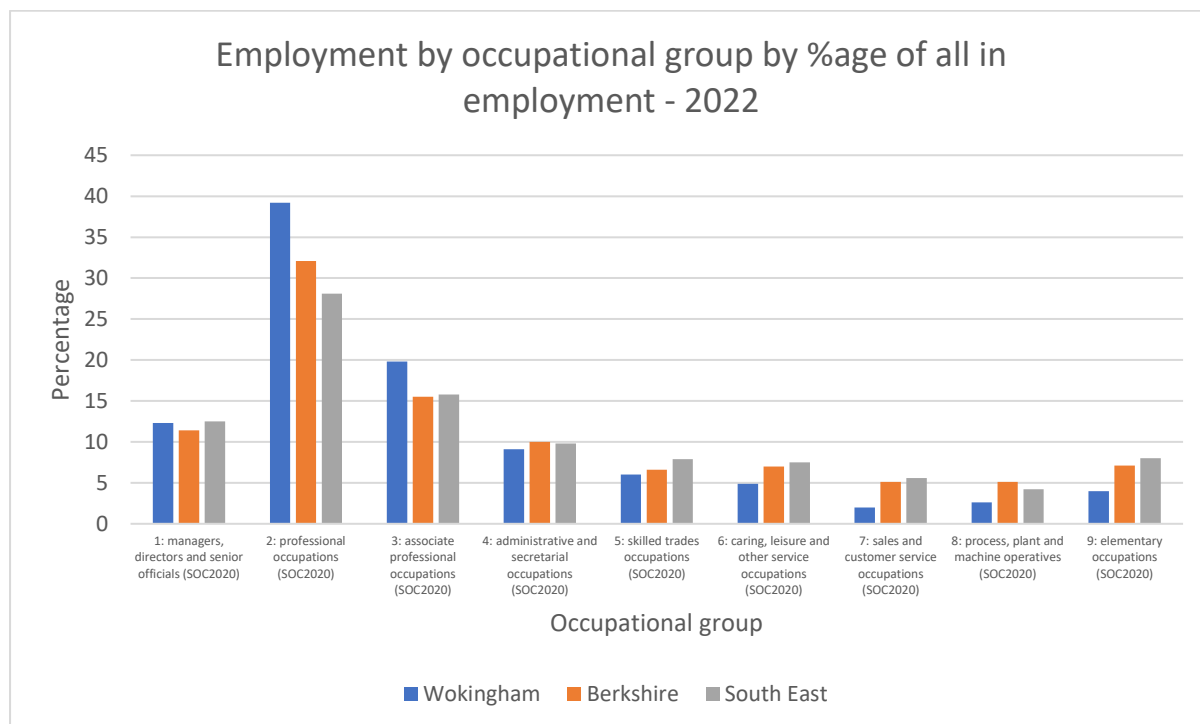
Location quotients (LQs) measure concentrations of employment in an area compared to either the region or nation. Compared to the South East region, Wokingham significantly over indexes in 'Information and & Communication' businesses at a rate of 2.75 times the South East average. It also has a positive location quotient for the broad industrial groups of 'Wholesale' (1.72), 'Professional, Scientific and Technical' (1.6), 'Mining, Quarrying and Utilities' (1.43), 'Education' (1.33) and 'Business Administration and Support Services' (1.15). Analysing this in tandem with the aforementioned 13.3% decrease in the number of jobs within the 'Information and Communication' industry, this is something we will want to continue to monitor as a Borough given the considerable strength of our IT specialism and its pivotal role in our local economy.

Location quotient by BIG (regional - South East), 2021																		
	1 : Agriculture, forestry & fishing (A)	2 : Mining, quarrying & utilities (B,D and E)	3 : Manufacturing (C)	4 : Construction (F)	5 : Motor trades (Part G)	6 : Wholesale (Part G)	7 : Retail (Part G)	8 : Transport & storage (inc postal) (H)	9 : Accommodation & food services (I)	10 : Information & communication (J)	11 : Financial & insurance (K)	12 : Property (L)	13 : Professional, scientific & technical (M)	14 : Business administration & support services (N)	15 : Public administration & defence (O)	16 : Education (P)	17 : Health (Q)	18 : Arts, entertainment, recreation & other services (R,S,T and U)
Wokingham	0.54	1.43	0.89	0.67	0.56	1.72	0.66	0.33	0.93	2.75	0.5	0.61	1.6	1.15	0.53	1.33	0.53	0.87

## Occupations

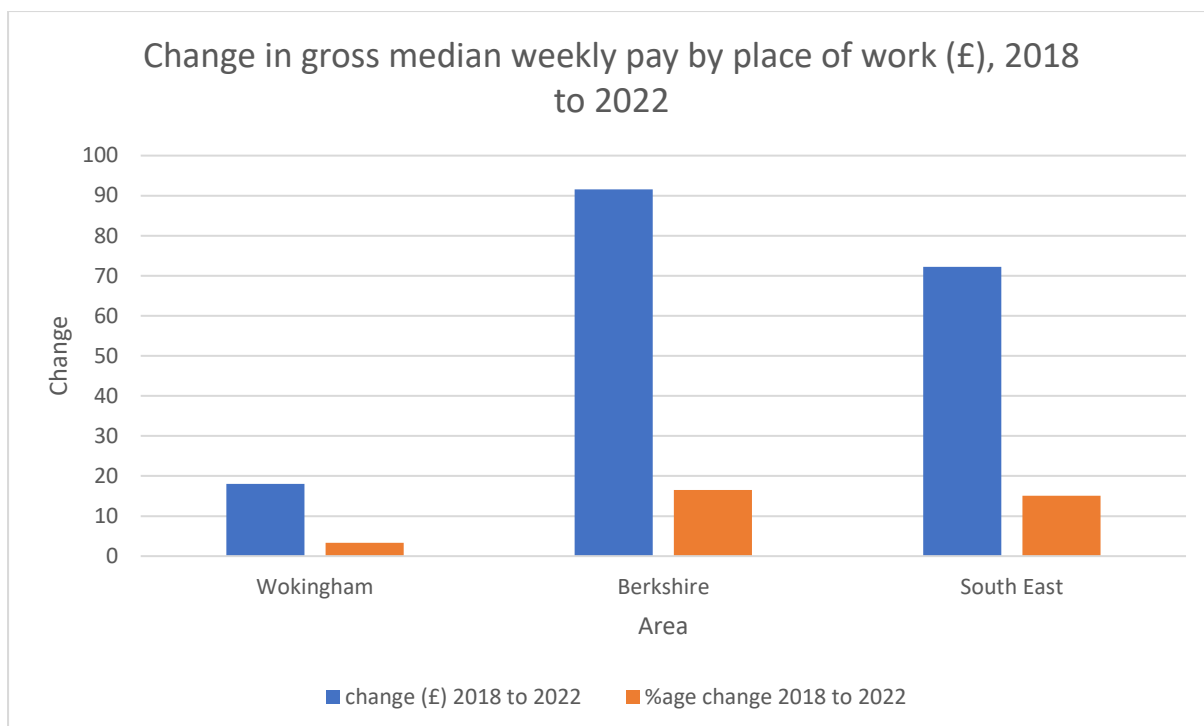
In terms of employment by occupational group as a percentage of those in employment Wokingham is broadly in line with the figures for both Berkshire as a whole as well as the South East, however the Borough significantly over-indexes in both 'Professional Occupations' as well as 'Associate Professional Occupations', which is indicative of our strong knowledge economy. Moreover, Wokingham has a far lower proportion of its employment base in Occupational Groups 7, 8 and 9

when compared to Berkshire and the South East – which is to be expected given the over-indexing of knowledge-intensive, professional occupations within our local economy.



## Earnings

Interestingly, when compared to the averages for both Berkshire and the South East over the period of 2018-22, Wokingham hasn't seen anywhere near increases in gross median weekly pay for those who work here. The increase of 3.3% has been circa one fifth of that seen in Berkshire and the South East.



## Wealth, health and wellbeing

It is crucial to ensure that, in the endeavour of improving the overall economic prosperity of Wokingham, this translates into improved wealth, health and wellbeing for all of its residents. 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 in the local economy will have a negative knock-on effect on local businesses and services in terms of their ability to operate successfully. This will likely lead to the attraction of lower skilled, low pay businesses to the area. This has the potential to be especially detrimental to our 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.

Although interventions to improve educational outcomes, health and social inclusion are outside the scope of this strategy, monitoring wealth, health, well-being and economic inclusion will assist in improving the fairness of outcomes.

- **General Disposable Household Income (GDHI)**
  - According to the most recent Census data, 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 – 9.28% and 7.91% respectively.
- **Life expectancy**

- As per the latest data (2017-19), Wokingham remains as the Local Authority with the highest life expectancy in Berkshire, both for men (82.35 years) and women (85.84 years). This of course puts Wokingham above the average for Berkshire as a whole, but also for the South East. Due to its already high life expectancy in the second most recent data run (2007-2009), Wokingham has seen the lowest increase (1.53%) in life expectancy out of all the Berkshire LA's – around half of Bracknell Forest at 3% (the Local Authority with the biggest increase). The South East as a whole saw an increase in the middle of these figures at 1.92%.
- **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 is marginally higher than the averages for both Berkshire and the South East.
- **Housing affordability**
  - Between 2018 and 2022, Wokingham had the second worst housing affordability, i.e. the ratio of median house price to median gross annual residence-based earnings, within Berkshire - with an increase of 6.65%. The only local authority to see a larger increase in the area was Windsor and Maidenhead with a significantly higher 13.47% increase in the same period. The Berkshire average was 1.25% and the South East was 4.64%. These figures underline Wokingham as being an area which has become increasingly less affordable to live, which has the potential to cause issues further issues, both for people born in the Borough being priced out as they get older, as well as for attracting talented individuals from outside of Wokingham who may want to work in the area, but are discouraged by the commute.
- **Wellbeing**
  - In terms of responses to the wellbeing assessment questions in the 2021 Census, Wokingham scored slightly above the Berkshire average for all four questions – those being:
    - 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?'
    - 'Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?'
    - 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?'
    - 'Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?'
  - When compared to the South East, the borough scored marginally worse, however given the average responses to the questions was circa 7.5/10 for Wokingham, Berkshire and the South East respectively, levels of resident wellbeing in all three areas are high. We should continue to monitor changes in these questions year-on-year as there has been a small decline in perceived wellbeing for all three areas in the period of 2017/18 – 2021/22, although these figures will have been skewed by COVID-19 and appear to be trending back towards the pre-pandemic baseline.

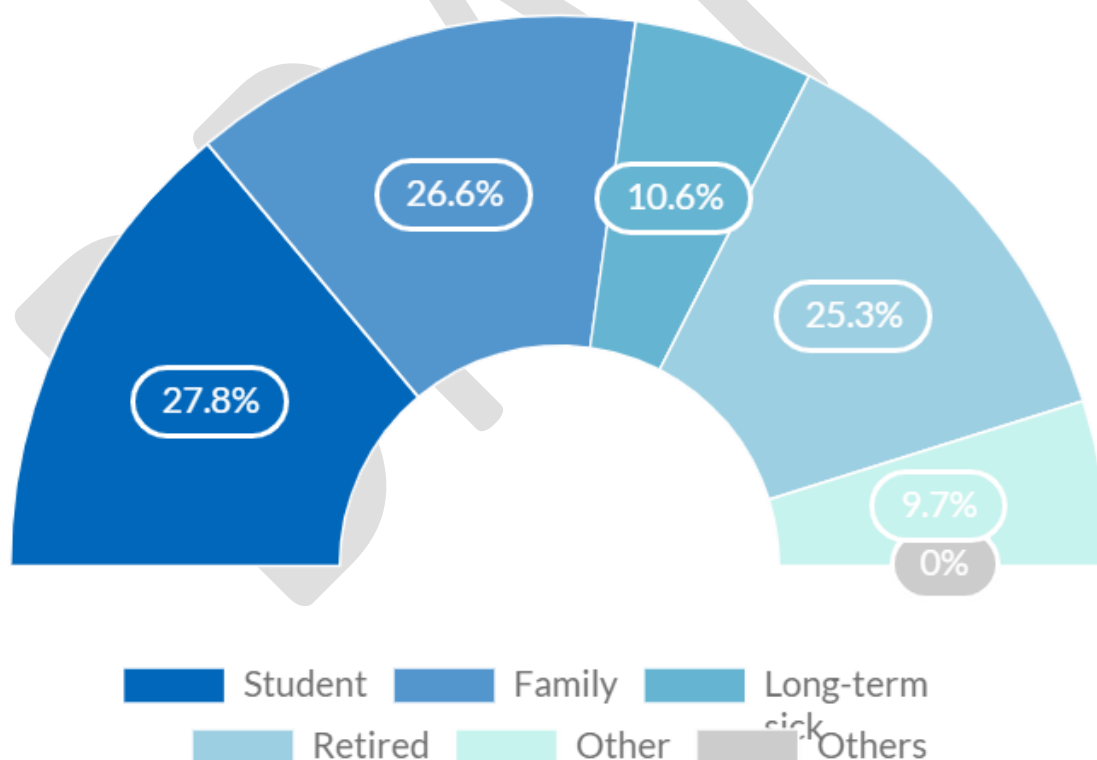
## Inactivity levels

According to the latest economic inactivity figures (January 2023-December 2023), the three primary contributing groups to the overall economic inactivity level are 'Students', those 'Looking After

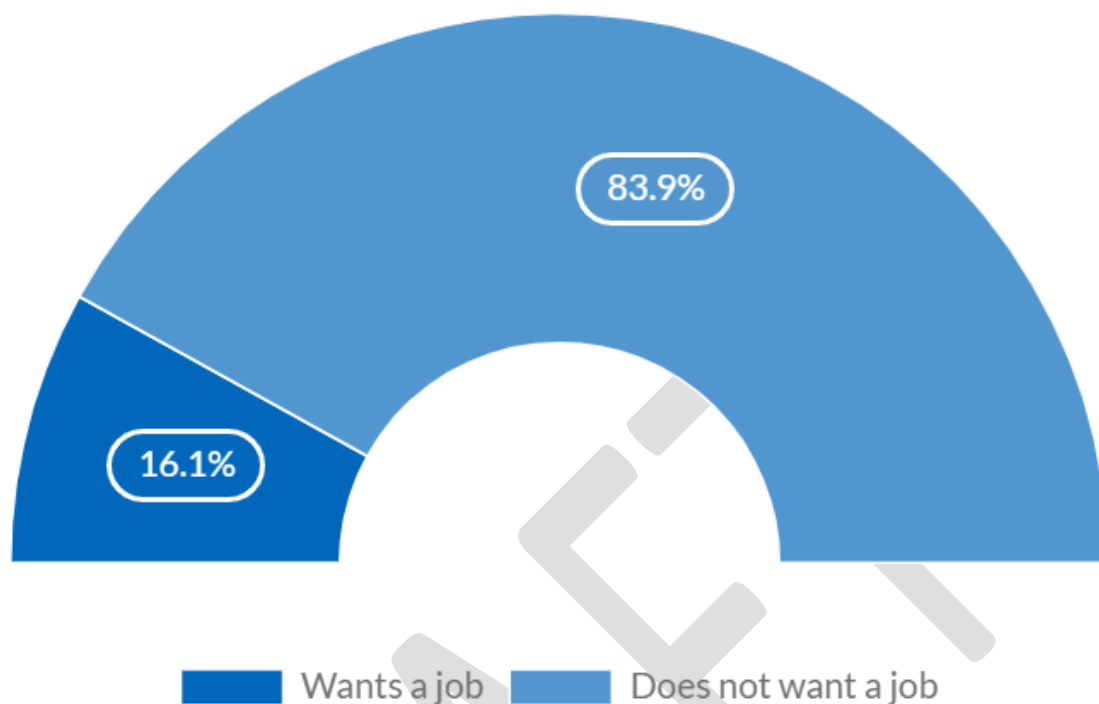
Family/Home' and individuals who are 'Retired'. Looking at the 'Students' group, Wokingham Borough Council's figure of 27.8% is roughly in line with both the Berkshire average at 28.4%, as well as the average for the South East at 27.3%. In terms of the 'Looking After Family/Home, Wokingham's 26.6% is similar to the Berkshire average of 25.8%; but significantly higher than the South East figure of 18.8%.

However, the main reason for economic inactivity which sets Wokingham apart from both Berkshire and the South East is the 'Retired' population, with Wokingham's figure of 25.4% being significantly higher than both the Berkshire and South East comparison areas, with 15.8% and 16.4% respectively. This high number of retirees affects Wokingham's negatively affects Wokingham's overall GVA as many of those who are economically inactive in Wokingham due to having retired (possibly early) will have taken with them valuable skills acquired over their careers which can no longer be passed down to less experience colleagues, creating the potential for a 'brain drain' effect.

**Reason for economic inactivity for Wokingham (2023 Dec) - Annual Population Survey**



**Economically inactive who want a job for Wokingham (2023 Dec) - Annual Population Survey**



### People, work and wellbeing scorecard

Indicator	Key metric	Summary of current state	Priorities
Population change	Number and percentage of people in the 25-49 age group	According to the latest 2021 Census data, the population of Wokingham was 178,169, an increase of over 21,000 or almost 14% since the prior decade. This increase makes Wokingham the fastest growing local authority in Berkshire between 2011-21.	Make certain that the strong skills profile of residents is maintained and continues to improve, being cognisant of the Borough's ageing population and projected decline in numbers of young workers. Also ensure that our young workers with lower levels of qualifications are supported into good jobs.
Qualifications and skills	Percentage of working age population	Wokingham's working age population is	Given Wokingham's strength in this metric,



	qualified at NVQ level 3+ and NVQ level 4+	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.	no immediate action is required other than to continue to monitor these figures to ensure they remain high and to continue working with education providers, to upgrade skills through apprenticeships, traineeships and other schemes.
Employment	Numbers and percentage of people in employment	There were 82,900 people in employment between January-December 2023 – a 2.81% decrease from 85,300 in January-December 2021	Monitor employment figures to assess whether they're trending back upwards and ensure we're working with any large local employers who are showing intentions to leave the Borough, with a view to understanding why.
	Numbers and percentage of people in employment in the knowledge economy	The industrial groups which saw the biggest increases in employment (in percentage terms) between 2017-2021 were 'Finance and Insurance' (+56.3%), 'Public Administration and Defence' (+50%) and 'Manufacturing' (28.6%). At the opposite end of the spectrum, 'Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing' (-14.3%), 'Information and Communication' (-13.3%) and 'Arts, Entertainment, Recreation and Other Services' (-12.5%) were the industrial groups which saw the biggest decline	Monitor employment in knowledge economy and knowledge economy sub sectors, work with large employers and SMEs to understand skills need and provide more business support.
Employment specialisms	Location quotient by broad industrial group	Wokingham significantly over indexes in	As above

		<p>'Information and Communication' businesses at a rate of 2.75 times the South East average. It also has a positive location quotient for the broad industrial groups of 'Wholesale' (1.72), 'Professional, Scientific and Technical' (1.6), 'Mining, Quarrying and Utilities' (1.43), 'Education' (1.33) and 'Business Administration and Support Services' (1.15).</p>	
Occupations	Employment percentages by broad occupational group	<p>Wokingham is broadly in line with the figures for both Berkshire as a whole as well as the South East, however the Borough significantly over-indexes in both 'Professional Occupations' as well as 'Associate Professional Occupations', which is indicative of our strong knowledge economy.</p>	As above
Earnings	Percentage difference between resident and workplace wages	<p>When compared to the averages for both Berkshire and the South East over the period of 2018-22, Wokingham has seen far less of an increase in gross median weekly pay for those who work here. The increase of 3.3% has been circa one fifth of that seen in Berkshire and the South East.</p>	Work to support local employers to recruit locally and upskill their employees – potentially consider incentivising businesses to do so?
Wealth, health and wellbeing	Several metrics including GDHI	The GDHI of Wokingham increased	Monitor these measures throughout

	(General Disposable Household Income), employment rate, life expectancy and wellbeing survey responses	by 5.59% between 2016 and 2020, a lower rate of increase than the averages for both Berkshire and the South East, however, housing affordability is low. Employment rates remain high, health and wellbeing survey responses are in line with comparator areas.	the life of the document and assess them against the next release of Census data when in 2031.
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## Wokingham: place, infrastructure and connectivity

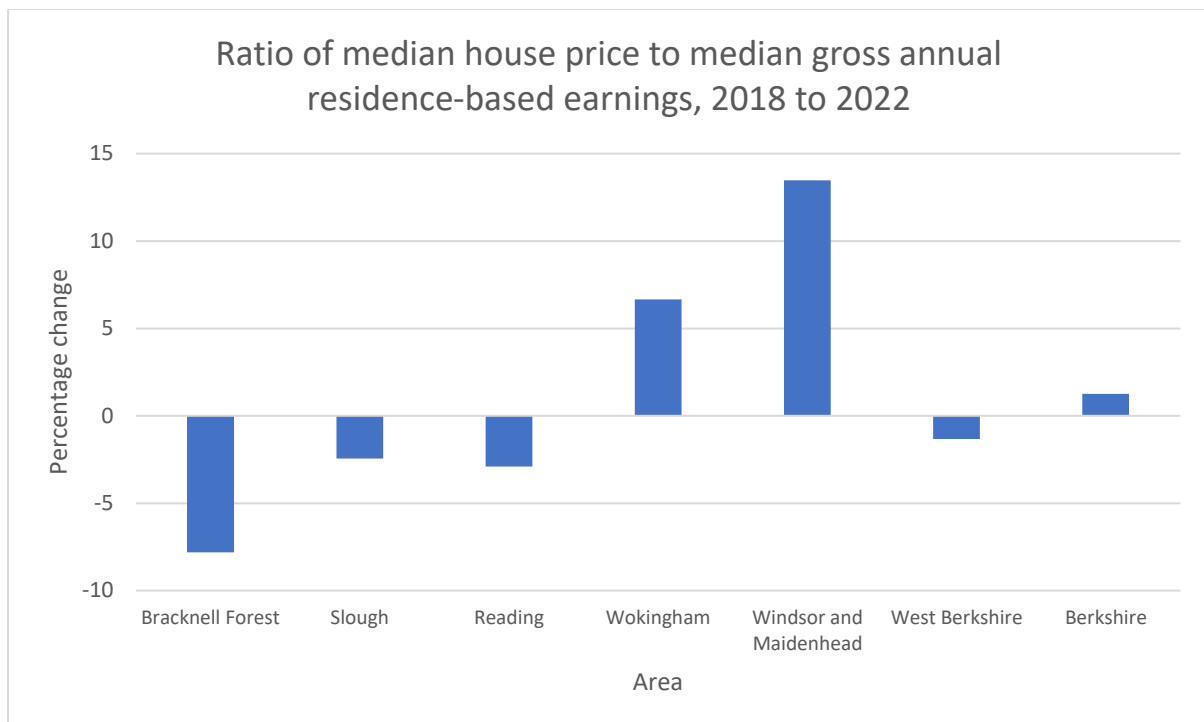
### Place, infrastructure and connectivity assessment

#### Employment space

TBC

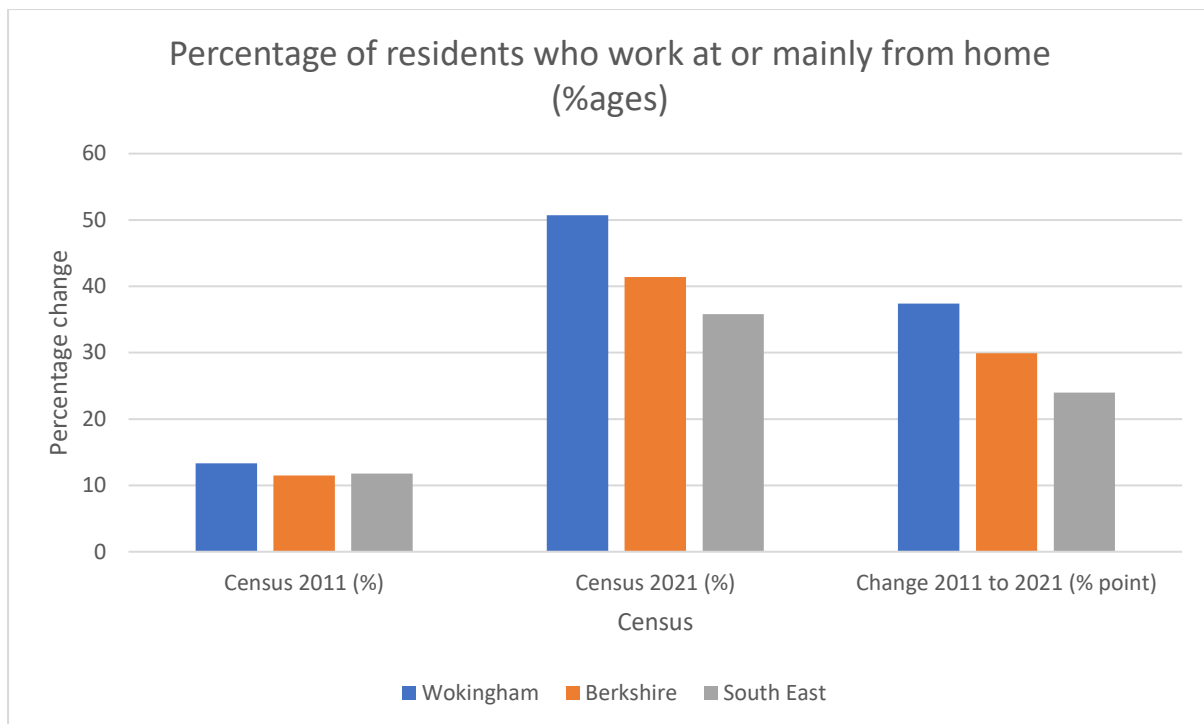
#### Housing

The Council has over **2500** affordable homes within its stock, with Registered Providers owning over **4500** affordable homes in the Borough. In Wokingham, the population size has increased by 15.0%, from around 154,400 in 2011 to **177,500** in 2021. This is higher than the overall increase for England (6.6%) where the population grew by nearly 3.5 million to 56,489,800 (and Southeast (7.5%). As of 2021, Wokingham is the 28th most densely populated of the South East's 64 local authority areas (Census 2021). Between 2011 to 2021, it is estimated that Wokingham saw a **11.1%** increase in the population aged between 15-64 and a **28.2%** increase in the population aged 65+. (Census 2021). The population is expected to grow by **8.9%** (14,867) by 2028 from 2018 (ONS 2020). The average price of a home in the Borough is **£511,505** compared to a national average of **£292,882** (UK House Price Index, Aug 2023). Those on the Council's Housing Register identified as being in priority housing need (Band 1-3) stands at **606** households (September 2023). In terms of the ratio between the median house price and median gross annual residence-based earnings, Wokingham saw the second highest decrease in housing affordability between 2018-22, only behind Windsor and Maidenhead.



### Working patterns

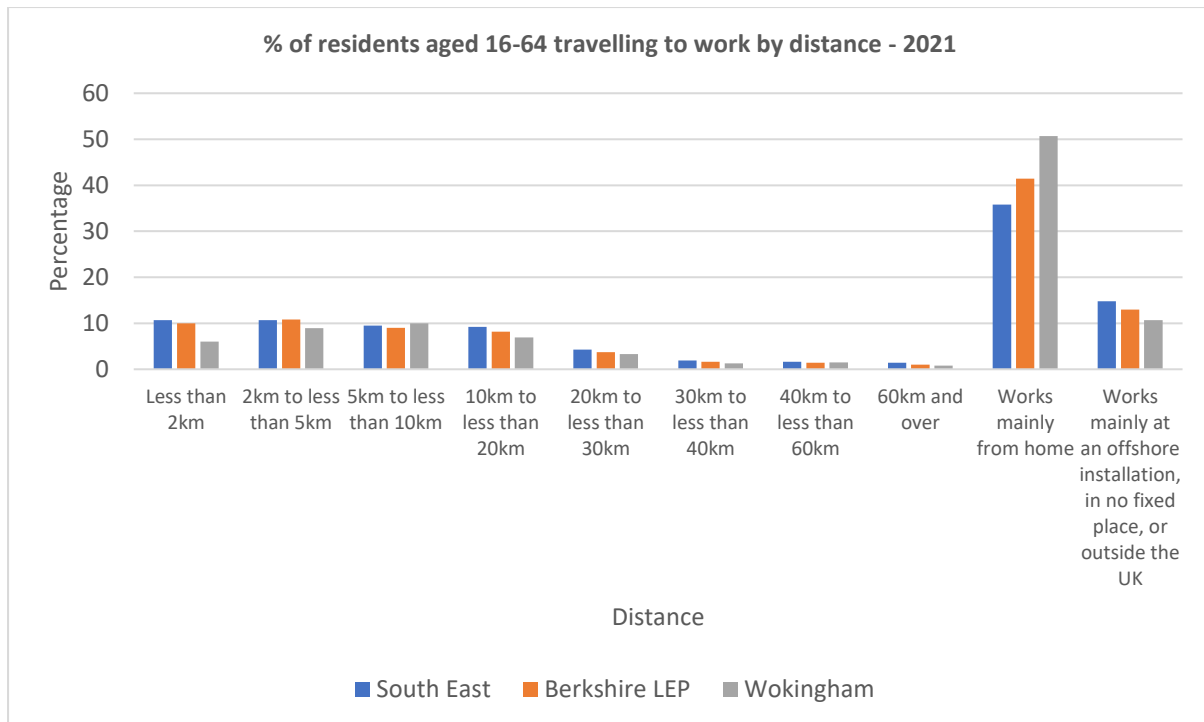
Wokingham has seen the largest increase across Berkshire in people reporting that they work from home, from 13.3% in 2011 to 50.7% in 2021. However, because this is Census 2021 data which was conducted during the pandemic, many people who reported that they worked from home may have been doing so only temporarily, thereby skewing the figures across the board to be higher than actuality. Nevertheless, some trends are apparent; Wokingham had a higher percentage of individuals working from home in both 2011 and in 2021 when compared to the averages for Berkshire and the South East. This is likely to be due to Wokingham having more jobs within its industrial mix that can be done remotely than the comparator areas.



## Travel to work

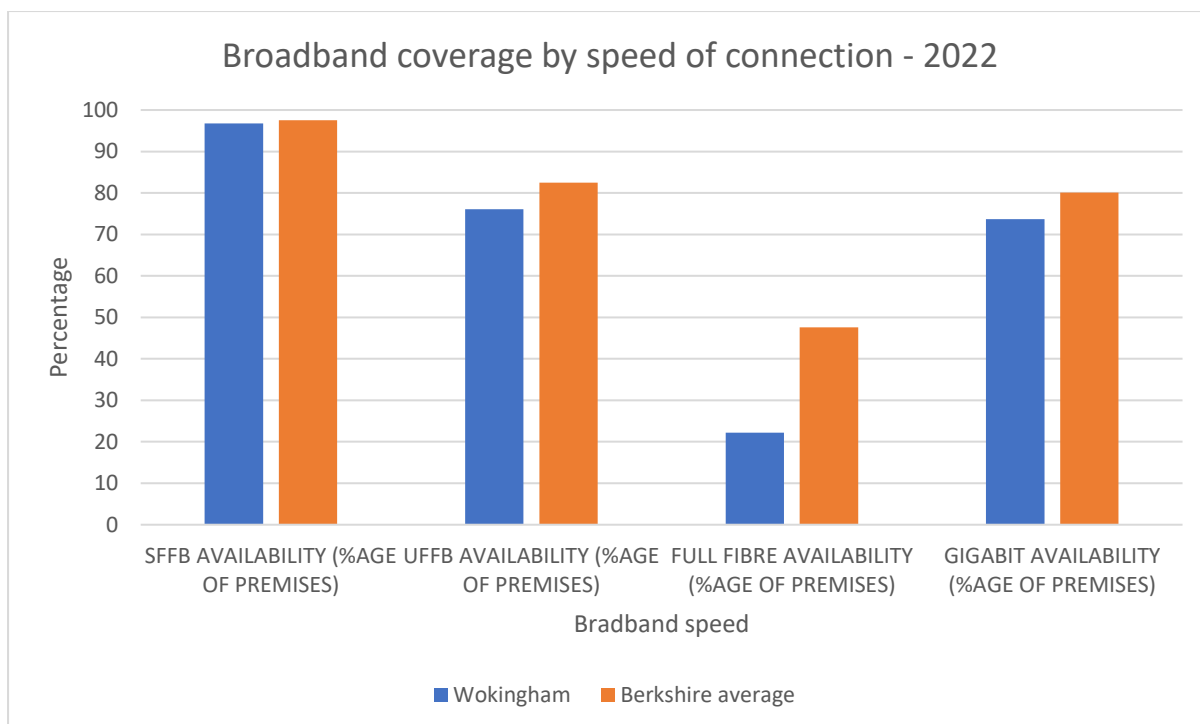
The distance that Wokingham residents travel to work is an important metric, as it is one of the factors that contributes to the area being an attractive place, not only for people to live, but also for businesses to base themselves. As per the latest data, in 2021 the most common distance for Wokingham 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 Wokingham as slightly less attractive in terms of average time residents have to spend commuting.

It should be noted however that despite the most common distance residents travel to work being higher in Wokingham than both the Berkshire and South East averages, the percentage of those who don't commute, i.e., work from home, is also higher with almost 51% claiming they worked from home in 2021 – the highest percentage in Berkshire.

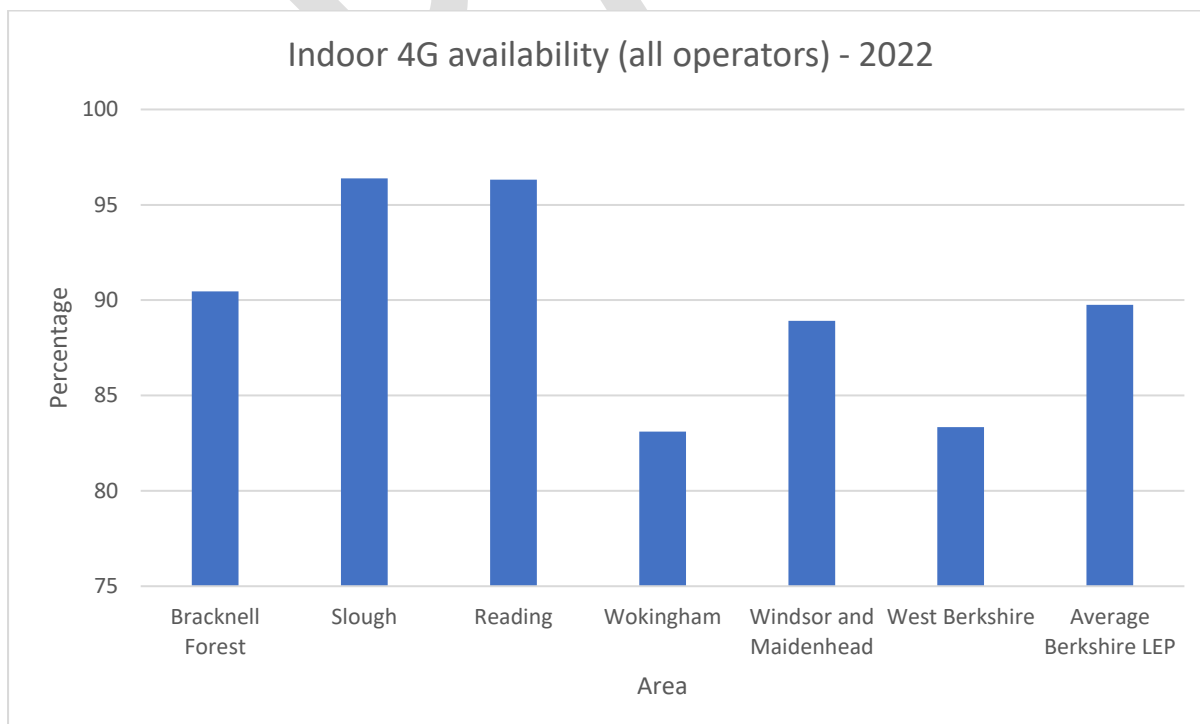


### IT and communications connectivity

On broadband connectivity, Wokingham performs very well and is in line with the Berkshire average – this being one of the main draws of both Wokingham and the wider region as a great place for businesses to operate. The latest figures outline the Borough as having 96.8% of SFFB coverage, 76.1% UFFB coverage, 22.2% full fibre coverage and 73.7% gigabit coverage. Of these, the only outlier when compared against other Berkshire Local Authorities is that of our full fibre coverage, which is significantly lower. This is offset by the high levels of superior gigabit coverage, but is still something the Borough should look to address going forward.

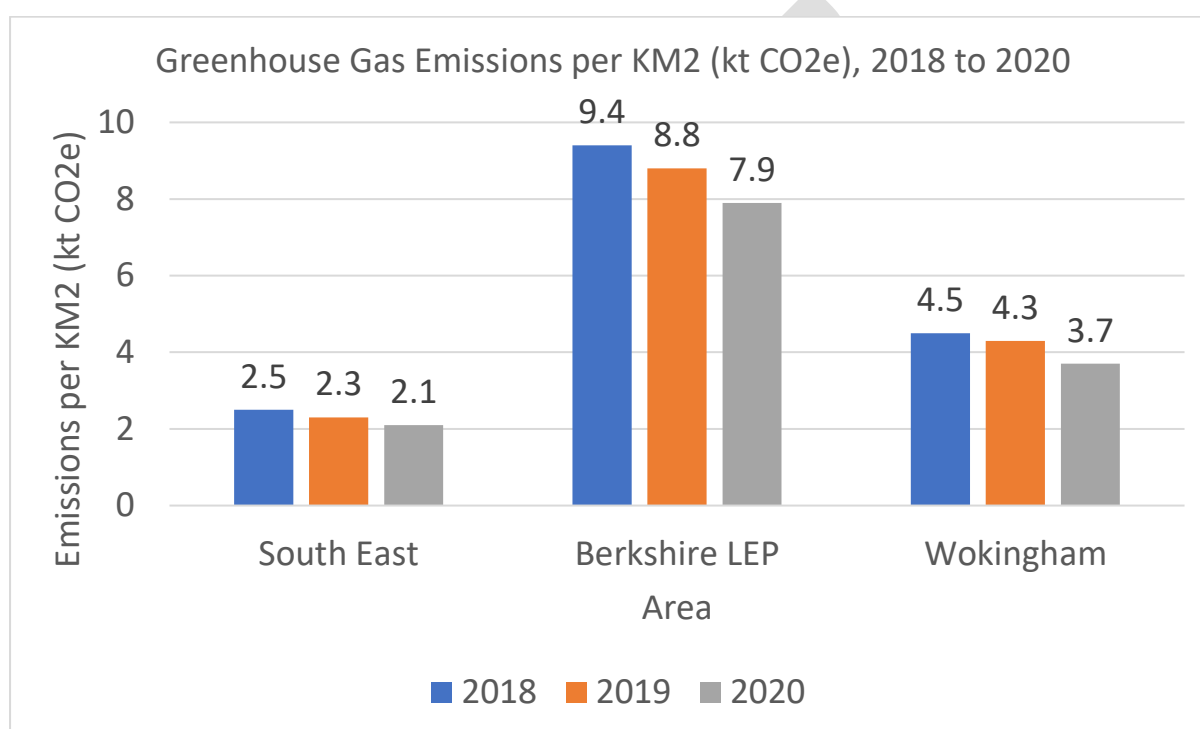


Looking at mobile connectivity, Wokingham Borough has the lowest indoor 4G availability (across all operators) in Berkshire at 83.1% according to the latest figures. More positively, outdoor 4G availability (across all operators) is 99.5% and above for all Berkshire Local Authorities, including Wokingham.



## Environmental sustainability

Wokingham has recorded decreasing greenhouse gas emissions year on year (2017-2021). The emissions are lower than the Berkshire average (7.9), but greater than the average for the Southeast (2.1). It will be important to monitor these figures going forward and continue to focus on measures to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Some examples of such measures would be to include further financing of EV charging points to encourage the use of hybrid/electric vehicles within the area – continuing the positive work the Borough has already done, having installed 230 accessible active Electric Vehicle (EV) sockets around Wokingham to date. It will also be important to promote the use of public transport and encouraging modal shift e.g. to cycling and rail travel.



## Place, infrastructure and connectivity scorecard

Indicator	Key metric	Summary of current state	Priorities
Employment space			
Housing	Affordability ratio between resident earnings and average house price	In terms of the ratio between the median house price and median gross annual residence-based earnings, Wokingham saw the second highest decrease in housing affordability	Continue to promote Wokingham as an excellent location to live, learn, work, grow and do business while acknowledging the low levels of housing affordability within the Borough. Continue



		between 2018-22, only behind Windsor and Maidenhead.	to work with the Housing and Planning teams to ensure more affordable housing is being built – both to retain residents who were born in the borough, but also to attract skilled workers from outside.
Working patterns	Office/hybrid/remote working rates	Wokingham has seen the largest increase across Berkshire in people reporting that they work from home, from 13.3% in 2011 to 50.7% in 2021. However, because this is Census 2021 data which was conducted during the pandemic, many people who reported that they worked from home may have been doing so only temporarily, thereby skewing the figures across the board to be higher than actuality.	Look to promote recruiting locally for businesses within our Borough. Also, assess the need/desire for rentable by the hour office space/flexible hotdesking, for those working from home in Wokingham.
Travel to work	Percentage of residents travelling to work by distance	The most common distance for Wokingham 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 Wokingham as slightly less attractive in terms of average time residents have to spend commuting.	As above
IT and communications connectivity	Broadband and 4G/5G availability rate	Wokingham has 96.8% of SFFB coverage, 76.1% UFFB coverage, 22.2% full fibre	Continue to maintain the strong IT/comms infrastructure of Wokingham (including

		coverage and 73.7% gigabit coverage. In terms of mobile connectivity, Wokingham Borough has the lowest indoor 4G availability (across all operators) in Berkshire at 83.1% according to the latest figures.	working with the DIG) and promote this aspect to potential incoming businesses/investors.
Environmental sustainability	Kt CO2e per Km2	Wokingham has recorded decreasing greenhouse gas emissions year on year (2017-2021). The emissions are lower than the Berkshire average (7.9), but greater than the average for the Southeast (2.1).	Work with the climate change team to further encourage environmental sustainability throughout the borough.

## Wokingham: small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades

### Small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades assessment

While Wokingham Borough has four main Town Centres, those being Wokingham Town Centre, Woodley Town Centre, Twyford Parish Centre and Earley Town Centre, it boasts an array of smaller towns and districts as well as local centres and shopping parades which are of great importance to our residents. This section of the strategy will focus on these areas, while the forthcoming Town Centre Strategy will analyse our larger Town Centres in greater detail.

Just like our Town Centres, the function of smaller districts, local centres and shopping parades in the UK has changed significantly over the last few decades, with Wokingham being no exception. With the face of Town Centres moving towards providing a more 'experiential' offering rather than the primary focus being retail, a shift in strategic thinking from a placemaking perspective is required. Whether a similar line of thinking is required for our smaller parades of shops is something which should also be explored, but we must also not lose sight of the essential services which these smaller areas provide, and how the 'ease of access' factor appears to be remain important to our residents (even if the offering is less diverse), given that the businesses are broadly receiving enough

patronage to remain trading. Local parades have traditionally provided local services for local customers. They are considered to be of cumulative strategic importance as elements of the overall retail network in maintaining local access and supporting environmental sustainability and equity aims within Wokingham. The Borough has a significant number of small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades, these are outlined below, complete with the number of shops at each location:

#### **Small towns and districts:**

- Arborfield Green District Centre – 18 shops, 1 pub and 1 supermarket
- Shinfield Road District Centre – 10 shops, 1 pub and 1 supermarket
- Winnersh Centre – 22 shops and 1 supermarket

#### **Local centres:**

- Crowthorne Station, Dukes Ride, Crowthorne – 13 shops
- Greenwood Road, Crowthorne – 3 shops and 1 supermarket
- Maiden Place, Earley – 10 shops and 1 supermarket
- Silverdale Road, Earley – 8 shops and 1 supermarket
- Shepherds Hill, Earley and Woodley – 12 shops, 1 pub and 1 supermarket
- California Crossroads, Finchampstead North – 10 shops, 1 pub and 1 supermarket
- School Green, Shinfield – 8 shops, 1 pub and 2 supermarkets
- Basingstoke Road near the junction for Beech Hill Road, Spencers Wood – 13 shops and 1 pub
- Basingstoke Road, Three Mile Cross – as above
- Wargrave High Street, Wargrave – 6 shops and 1 pub
- Ashridge Road, Wokingham – 5 shops and 1 supermarket
- Clifton Road/Emmbrook Road, Wokingham – 4 shops and 1 pub
- Bean Oak Road, Wokingham – 3 shops
- Rances Lane, Wokingham – 6 shops
- Howlett Grove, Wokingham – 1 supermarket
- Beechey Place, Wokingham – 1 supermarket
- Woosehill Centre, Wokingham – 3 shops and 1 supermarket
- Woosehill Lane, Wokingham – 5 shops
- Brecon Road, Woodley – 3 shops
- Coppice Road, Woodley – 3 shops
- Loddon Vale, Woodley – 13 shops

Typically, our local shopping parades include, amongst others: small supermarkets, newsagents, post offices, pharmacies, takeaways/cafés and laundrettes. While not specifically shops, many of these parades also have, or are in very close proximity to, pubs and sit-in restaurants. The offerings across all our parades can be categorised in the following manner:

- **Convenience** - the provision of everyday essential items, including food, drinks, newspapers, medicine and confectionary.
- **Specialty** - the provision of items not obtained on a frequent basis. These include clothing, footwear, household and recreational goods.

- **Service** - the provision of a service for example, hairdresser, dry cleaning, solicitor, mini cab, insurance, doctor and estate agent.
- **Catering** - public houses, restaurants, takeaways and cafes.

The borough has a large number of parades, which vary in size and the number of shops available. The primary function of local shopping parades is to provide for the day-to-day needs of residents, and to supplement the facilities available in other large shopping centres and journeys that would often be made without the use of a car. Local parades are of particular benefit to the elderly and to those people without the use of a car who cannot easily reach the larger centres. The loss of these shops could result in hardship and inconvenience to borough residents. Thus, it is important that our local parades are maintained to ensure that the less mobile members of the community have access to a range of shops.

A 2023 study into home-working, commissioned by Wokingham Borough Council found that “over 67% of Wokingham Borough survey respondents reported that they work more from home since the pandemic, with only 23% reporting that they work the same as pre-pandemic. This shift in working patterns is a result of factors such as health concerns, technological advancements, and evolving employer policies. These included that digital transformation of the workplace and tech disruption will continue to impact on business models, which means that hybrid working is here to stay.” With this understood, smaller local shopping areas (and the strategic direction of them at Council level) will need to adapt to reflect this change, given that a premium has been placed on creating these areas to be where people can comfortably interact and partake in leisure activities.

In addition to this, online retail has posed (and continues to pose) significant challenges for such areas, due to bricks and mortar stores often being unable to match the prices of the same goods were they to be bought online. The problem this presents for our smaller shopping parades is two-fold. Firstly, traditional retail offerings such as clothes shops struggle to open/remain open in these smaller parades due to the cheaper online prices, leading to online shopping being the default option – something which does not suit all consumers. As a result of this, many of these smaller districts and local centres are populated by so called ‘internet proof’ business offerings, leading to an abundance of cafés, restaurants and barbers etc. With that said, part of the Borough Council’s role must remain being to support businesses in these parades in providing their more conventional retail offerings (as well as our business community as a whole), given that there is a demand for our residents to be able to shop locally, and access key services without having to travel to one of our larger Town Centres.

Another noteworthy point is that, since the country’s emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic, small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades such as those in Wokingham Borough fared better than larger town centres across the country. According to Research by the High Streets Task Force, “100% of district centres and 65% of town centres have seen a recovery in footfall; whereas 61% of regional centres and 70% of major cities have seen their footfall reduced. This means that, as people work from home, they are more likely to visit their local parades of shops, instead of

wandering down to bigger cities or centres of employment” – something which has very clearly been a boon for our smaller shopping areas.

While footfall to small towns and districts within the Borough appears to be back to (or at least strongly trending back towards pre-pandemic levels) there is still the impact of the recent increases in cost of living to be considered. According to the latest data from the ONS, households are facing higher costs in the goods and services they usually buy. “The Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers’ housing costs (CPIH) rose by 3.0% in the 12 months to April 2024, down from 3.8% in the 12 months to March. Falling gas and electricity prices resulted in the largest downward contributions to the monthly change in both CPIH and CPI annual rates, while the largest, partially offsetting, upward contribution came from motor fuels, with prices rising this year but falling a year ago.” While cost of living as still increased overall, CPIH rising by 3.0% in the year to April 2024 is a significantly slower rise than the 7.8% increase in the year into April 2023 (one year prior). In essence, the burden of increased living costs is lower now (not just in Wokingham but in the UK as a whole) than it was two years ago; which may allow for those in the higher income deciles to free up a greater portion of their income which can contribute to the survival of our smaller shopping parades.

This is especially important as, notwithstanding the cost-of-living increase, nationally, “there has been a shift to increased spending in local independent retailers in recent years. This trend could see a growth in local, independent businesses that bring small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades a unique retail offering to counter generic online shopping and out-of-town retail parks. Local shopping areas that are authentic, human, and unique are likely to fare better with Generation Z consumers, who are committed to environmental protection and supporting local industry.”

## Small towns and districts, local centres and shopping parades scorecard

Indicator	Key metric	Summary of current state	Priorities
Urban planning	Number of vacant retail units throughout the borough, scores for cleanliness and safety in our forthcoming Town Centre Survey	Wokingham Borough Council is currently producing an updated Local Plan, this updated Economic Development Strategy and the first iteration of a Town Centre Strategy – all of which will investigate (through different lenses) avenues for improving footfall,	Finalise referenced strategies and then establish working groups to establish a plan of potential actions. These may include things such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Exploring how vacant retail can be turned into opportunities for innovation.</li> <li>- Ensuring our local centres are</li> </ul>

		localised spending and the overall prosperity of the Borough.	<p>as accessible as possible, not just to those who live in the immediate area.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continue to work to ensure that not just our major town, but our shopping parades are clean and safe, thereby hopefully attracting more visitors and improving the Borough's overall quality of Place.</li> </ul>
Community Engagement	Number of meaningful business engagements	Numerous consultation have already taken place with representatives from both our Executive and the local business community, with a view to understanding what the needs of our businesses are and how the Council can best work with the to improve Wokingham in all aspects of Place.	Continue to engage with our executive and local business community through networking sessions, focus groups and surveys to ensure we have a constantly refreshing picture of the needs of our businesses. This will be important for any future strategy work.
Tailored business support	Number of businesses in local centres supported through Council run/collaborator programmes	The Council has provided tailored business support for a number of small town and district local centres, a key recent example of which being assisting businesses at California Crossroads where members of the Economic Development made numerous site visits, communicated	Continue to be proactive rather than reactive in providing tailored business support wherever possible, specifically to small businesses in the Borough, many of which will be based in smaller shopping parades. Such support could include workshops on digital transformation, e-commerce adoption, online marketing

		developments with the businesses and offered support and guidance on how to apply both for business rates revaluation and also for hardship relief.	strategies, and customer engagement; and could potentially be run in tandem with the Berkshire Growth Hub.
Digital infrastructure	Number of businesses in local centres supported through Council run/collaborator programmes related to improving online presence.	Working closely with both the Berkshire Growth Hub and the Federation for Small Businesses, we have both signposted businesses to these organisations as well as run events in partnership with them, where small businesses are able to receive free advice on social media and marketing strategies amongst other aspects of business.	Targeted initiatives to help local retail and hospitality businesses establish or improve their online presence may allow them to reach a wider audience. This includes user-friendly websites, online ordering systems, and active social media profiles. Consider providing local grants or partnerships with tech firms to aid this transition.