

Tim Smith
Chief Executive
Thames Valley Berkshire LEP
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Dear Tim,

Thank you for offering West Berkshire District Council the opportunity to comment on the draft Berkshire Local Industrial Strategy Framework Document.

As you know, West Berkshire is currently in the process of refreshing its Local Plan to 2036 and is also developing resultant strategies such as its refreshed Economic Development Strategy, Housing Strategy and Cultural Strategy, among others. As such, the timetable of the BLIS Framework Document aligns well with our own.

Having become familiar with the Government's Industrial Strategy, we have sought to ensure that any strategic policy making takes into account the priorities it contains. This means that, by design, the majority of our own output will mirror your own and that the previously professed themes of the BLIS are already relatively well integrated into West Berkshire District Council's policy framework.

In response to the specific questions outlined in your consultation document, West Berkshire District Council feels as follows:

2.1: Is the overarching purpose of the BLIS clear?

We feel that the overarching purpose of the BLIS is clear, including the three locally-defined imperatives, and understand the LEP's role in its delivery. The composition of the local economy is explained well and Berkshire's unique challenges and opportunities are articulated accurately.

The final West Berkshire 2036 Vision was published earlier this year and one of its recurring themes was the need to foster inclusive growth given polarisation in certain parts of the region. We are therefore pleased to see that the LEP agrees with the importance of this issue and has identified it as a clear area for action.

Similarly, in our draft Economic Development Strategy, which is due out to consultation shortly, we recognise the importance of place-making and working harder to explain what exactly the district, and the wider region, has to offer. As such, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate in this regard as we feel this is particularly vital to our commercial centres.

2.2: Is this purpose addressed through the chapters that follow?

We feel that work done to date reflects closely on the identified challenges but feel that this has not been done in its entirety. We are confident, however, that the additional work alluded to on page 2 will serve to address this.

4.1: Do the “Foundations of Productivity” help explain the nature of economic performance across Berkshire?

We feel that the importance of productivity is well articulated and that this is clearly defined in relation to Berkshire, both as an area close to London and as one which has distinct opportunities and challenges.

We have used the foundations of productivity- with the exception of ‘Ideas’, which we felt was too nebulous- as the basis for our own Economic Development Strategy as we believe that they accurately reflect the policy areas in need of attention.

4.2: Are there other factors/issues that ought to be considered given the purposes of the BLIS?

It may be the case that ‘Place’ as a theme requires a more thorough narrative within this chapter because, as alluded to in our earlier comments, place making is a particular challenge for Berkshire, especially given its proximity to London.

5.1: Is the summary assessment a fair one? Does it capture the principal challenges that Berkshire is facing?

From the perspective of Berkshire’s local authorities, challenges in adult social care are likely to be the focus of most activity which will, inevitably, have a bearing on policy decisions in other areas. The issue of an ageing society is highlighted in the introduction to Chapter 5 but its importance does not come out clearly enough in Table 1. We feel that this should be addressed carefully given its overarching importance.

With respect to the retention of young people, we agree very strongly that this is an issue that has to be distilled. In saying this, we feel that Table 1 doesn’t make the links between culture, leisure and affordable housing clear enough with respect to this issue, which may require some attention.

We are not necessarily in agreement with the reference to congestion, although appreciate that West Berkshire District Council’s view in this regard may be contrary to that of the other Berkshire local authorities.

We agree with the other issues mentioned and look forward to contributing further to action plans around these.

6.1: Chapter 6 begins with a Vision. Do you support it?

We support the Vision, which aligns closely with our own.

6.2: Chapter 6 sets out a huge agenda for action under five distinct Priorities. Within this, what do you consider to be the most important Priority(ies) in seeking to achieve the Vision?

We agree with the identified priorities and would be loath to say that any one should be given precedence over any other. To do so would suggest that they are in some way mutually exclusive, which evidently they are not.

6.3: Moving down a layer, what do you consider to be the most important potential actions under each Priority, taking each in turn:

• Priority 1: Enhancing productivity within Berkshire's enterprises

Providing access to growth finance and having adequate site provision will inevitably have the largest bearing on this priority. So too will access to digital infrastructure, which is something we in West Berkshire have worked particularly hard to promote, including through our leadership of the Superfast Berkshire project.

• Priority 2: Ecosystems which are maturing and evolving and extend beyond Berkshire

We feel that the identified need for cross-border relationships and the development of institutional anchors will be particularly important in order to fulfil this priority.

• Priority 3: International trade, connections, collaborations and investments

Harnessing the benefits of Berkshire's strategic location in relation to Heathrow is clearly the most important factor underneath this priority. This will necessitate work to improve and maintain the integrity of the strategic highways network within Berkshire as well as links to neighbouring areas.

Place making will also be key in this regard as we seek to promote Berkshire as a favourable location in which international firms can establish and grow their businesses.

• Priority 4: Vibrant places and a supportive infrastructure

Clear, cohesive and dynamic spatial planning will be important in the delivery of this, as will the provision of a full range of land and premises for all types of enterprise. Of course, it is likely that in order to supply this, significant cross-local authority cooperation will be necessary.

• Priority 5: Making Berkshire an inclusive area where aspirations can be realised

As perhaps the most challenging of the priorities, working flexibly will be very important. It may also be worth mentioning the role that supported housing is likely to have with respect to inclusivity as the challenges of wholly independent living can negate the ability of some individuals to access work.

We note that there is scant detail about environmental issues as well as our collective desire to move towards a carbon neutral economy. Through our involvement in the BLIS Task and Finish Group, however, we are aware that TVBLEP has done significant work on a stand-alone Energy Strategy. We understand that this will be considered by the TVBLEP Board imminently and we will be following its progress closely to ensure that it reflects our own ambitions with respect to climate change.

6.4: Currently, actions under each Priority are set out in headline and indicative terms only. How might you/your organisation contribute to their development over the summer and their delivery thereafter?

The role of local authorities in the development of work to date has been well-defined and I would expect this to continue throughout the process.

As mentioned at length above, our own current and developing strategies align closely with the aims of this BLIS and it is likely that many of our action plans we be able to be integrated with your own in some way.

6.5: Currently, many people who live in Berkshire are not really benefitting from the area's economic vibrancy. What more should be done to help improve their life chances?

This is an incredibly challenging question and one that West Berkshire District Council is currently working to address through the West Berkshire 2036 Vision and its resultant strategies. As this stage, it is too early to give a definitive answer but I am confident that the West Berkshire community is committed to developing a comprehensive suite of actions in order to do so in the coming years.

In conclusion, it is clear that the aims laid out in this framework align very closely with those we have stated in our own work and that this, in turn, aligns with the government's professed aims to create sustainable growth nationally. I would therefore be most grateful if you would ensure that the views of West Berkshire, as well as its support for the stated aims of the BLIS, are reflected in the outcome of your consultation.

Should you require further information, do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Carter
Chief Executive