

Business Forum Report

Produced for Bradford on Avon Town Council



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1 Introduction

Bradford on Avon Town Council commissioned Cognisant Research ('Cognisant') to conduct a face-to-face consultation event with local businesses, in order to better understand their priorities for economic development in the town. The Business Forum event also provided an opportunity to speak with businesses who had participated in an online survey Cognisant had produced, earlier this year.

This report sets out the feedback gathered from the business forum, which considered four key questions:

- Why did you choose to open a business in Bradford of Avon?
- What are you doing / would like to do, to develop your business in the Town?
- What could be done by a collective of businesses to improve what the Town has to offer to local people and tourists?
- What could other organisations, including the Town Council, do to improve the appeal of the Town for businesses?

Participants were also provided with an opportunity to raise any other issues which they felt were not covered by the questions listed above.

1.1 Bradford on Avon

Bradford-on-Avon is a market town in Wiltshire. Located between Bath and the county town, Trowbridge, it's economic offer also competes with Melksham, with its large selection of supermarkets and Devizes and Frome with their well-established markets.

The 2021 Census records the towns population as 10,400, of which 52.9% are economically active, below the England average at 57.4%. However, the town does include a high number of residents working from home, at 44.7% of the working population, compared with 31.5% across England. The towns population is well educated, with 49% of residents possessing a qualification at Level 4 or above¹, compared to an average across England of 33.9%. More information from the 2021 Census is available in Appendix 1.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels>

2 Management Summary

Participants chose to open a business in Bradford-on-Avon predominantly due to local knowledge and in many cases, based on the fact that they already lived in the town and knew the area. Another key factor was the attraction of the cultural heritage of the town and surrounding area including Bath.

Proactively engaging with the local business community was identified as the most common activity business representatives were doing in order to develop their business within the town whilst at the same time diversifying product and service offerings.

Whilst businesses were already identifying collectively, managing and sustaining a collective of businesses was identified as a key challenge to re-establishing a representative group in the town.

The central theme for improving Bradford-on-Avon for businesses focussed on promoting the town and generating footfall. Events were seen as central to this, although these events needed to be complementary to local businesses.

In terms of specific suggestions that could support economic development within the town, the key theme is the promotion of information, advice and guidance.

3 Methodology

Working in partnership with Bradford-on-Avon Town Council, Cognisant developed a Business Forum event, designed to engage local business leaders in a qualitative discussion concerning economic development issues in the town, considering what organisations like the Town Council and Wiltshire Council, can do to support business growth. The event format and topics for discussion were agreed with the Town Council and Cognisant produced additional material, made available at the event, summarising recent local and national research related to business confidence and economic regeneration.

Cognisant conducted face-to-face discussions with seven business representatives, at St Margaret's Hall on July 18th 2023, between 4pm and 7.30pm. The participants spoken to included representatives from fashion retail, wellness, finance and architecture businesses. Following the event one further interview was undertaken with a business person unable to engage with Cognisant at the Forum.

Additional feedback was also supplied by the Swindon and Wiltshire LEP Growth Hub, who attended the event to promote their business support offering to the Forum participants and reported discussions with six different businesses. In total, twelve businesses attended the event.

4 Results

This report summarises the face-to-face conversations held with participants at the Forum, structured against the four topic areas set out below:

- Why did you choose to open a business in Bradford on Avon?
- What are you doing / would like to do, to develop your business in the Town?
- What could be done by a collective of businesses to improve what the Town has to offer to local people and tourists?
- What could other organisations, including the Town Council, do to improve the appeal of the Town for businesses?

4.1 Why Locate in Bradford on Avon

Most business representatives attending the Forum were already residents of Bradford-on-Avon and in some cases had family ties to the area, before establishing their business in the town, although there were examples of people relocating to the area.

The cultural heritage of the area, including Bath, was also identified as a compelling reason for people wanting to work and live in the town. Participants frequently expressed their pride in the town, whether they had originated from the area or not.

Local knowledge about the existing business offering, gaps in the market or opportunities created by working in synergy with existing businesses were also given as reasons for setting up a business in the town.

4.2 Developing your Business in Bradford on Avon

Proactively engaging with the local business community was identified as the most common activity business representatives were doing, in order to develop their business within the town.

Given the challenging economic circumstances of the last few years, the importance of evolving the business, specifically diversifying product and service offerings, was also seen as critical for survival and growth.

In line with national research, there was also a recognition of the importance of customer service and building a shopping experience that was based on more than simply the products on the shelves.

4.3 A Collective of Businesses Improving the Town

Managing and sustaining a collective of businesses was identified as a key challenge to re-establishing a representative group in the town. Whilst it was hoped that a new generation of younger business people would possess the enthusiasm and creativity needed to drive the business community forward, in reality it was more likely that the responsibility would fall to older, possibly semi-retired businesspeople, who would have the time to maintain a group. There was a recognition that businesspeople with young families find it hard to dedicate time outside their immediate working and family life.

During the discussions it was interesting to hear how businesses were already identifying collectively, with the Silver Street community given as one example of this. The “collective” approach was also seen as a strength of the Casia workspace offering that has now closed, with one participant describing the venue as “another Town Hall”, providing a hub for the business community to engage together.

As set out in section 4.2, collaborative working was identified as an opportunity to develop businesses within the town, particularly through opportunities for businesses to supply each other. There was a recognition that this can be challenging when businesses are in direct competition with each other, although even with these businesses there is a collective benefit that comes from promoting the town, which was why there was so much support for more events to be organised to bring people into Bradford on Avon.

4.4 What could other organisations do to improve the Town

The central theme for improving Bradford on Avon for businesses focussed on promoting the town and generating footfall. Events were seen as central to this, although these events needed to be complementary to local businesses.

Organisations seeking to support and promote the business community needed to talk up Bradford on Avon. The challenges the town faces with traffic congestion are well documented and there was a concern expressed by some participants that constant negativity concerning the traffic situation could prove counter-productive for business, driving residents and tourists away from the town.

However, promoting local businesses wasn't just about promoting town centre businesses, one participant wanted to see the business community as a whole recognised, not just tourism and retail. The Creative Industries in particular were highlighted, with one participant wanting to see more done to recognise this growing community. A definition of businesses operating in the Creative Industries can be found in Appendix 2.

The historic built environment around the town centre is clearly a limiting factor, concerning what can be done to relieve congestion and improve pedestrian access. One participant wanted to see the Town Council undertake a comprehensive

assessment of how vehicular and pedestrian access can be improved. If the community understand what's possible, even if it can only be achieved at significant cost, then that will set realistic expectations about how the town's challenges can be addressed. It was felt that at present, much of the commentary around these challenges is ill-informed and unrealistic, which creates additional problems with managing the expectations of both the public and the local business community.

Concerns were also expressed about the closure of the Bear Pub and the decision to turn it into flats. One participant felt Wiltshire Council's planning system could be more effectively used to safeguard against the conversion of business and retail units to residential space, whilst another felt that introducing residential property into the centre of the town might help create footfall for the nighttime economy, as the town was notoriously quiet after dark.

Looking specifically at what the Town Council can do, one participant suggested that a representative could be made responsible for business liaison. Information services were also discussed, including a workspace directory for businesses interested in locating in the town, providing them with details about what was available, at what cost and identifying the relevant landlord. It was also suggested that businesses would benefit from information and signposting services, specifically in relation to grants to support businesses improve their shopfronts.

Generally, participants wanted to see greater promotion of the town, with more events aimed at increasing footfall. Promoting these events and the facilities available within the town was considered essential, with additional suggestions concerning improved bus services that could support the drive to increase footfall, rather a dedicated service, reportedly, taking residents out of the town to visit Devizes market.

5 Conclusion

The business representatives attending the Forum expressed a great deal of pride and positivity towards Bradford-on-Avon as a town and were keen to see this sense of optimism projected, particularly at this time of economic hardship and uncertainty.

Partnership working, be it as a collective of businesses or working with organisations like the Town Council, was a common theme articulated by participants. However, there was also a recognition that whilst businesses can work collaboratively, there can be tension between those in competition with each other. Whilst the mood was generally positive, the potential for collaborative working could easily be undermined by clashes of personality and outlook.

This underlying tension presented itself most clearly around the issue of re-establishing a business representative group in the town. Long standing members of the business community had seen such groups come and go in the past and were sceptical about whether revisiting this project wouldn't result in another collapse. In terms of optimism,

the point was made by one participant that if some positive change could be achieved, no matter how small, it would demonstrate to the business community that their collective efforts could make a difference and that would encourage others to get involved. Indeed, there was a recognition by some participants that the Town Councils primary responsibility is to precept paying residents, with Wiltshire Council challenged to do more to support those from whom they receive business rates.

In terms of specific suggestions that could support economic development within the town, the key theme is the promotion of information, advice and guidance. The following suggestions came from the Forum discussions and have been expressed in the sub sections below as next steps the Town Council may wish to consider.

Promotion and Marketing

Events to increase footfall, whether they are organised by a collective of businesses or the Town Council, must continue, with a variety of new innovative events planned for the future. The Town Council is developing a diary of all events, not just those organised by the Town Council, making this information available to the public, online.

Businesses could be promoted in a “shopping mall” format, highlighting the variety of different services and retailers across the town. Figure 1 shows the existing signage used to promote town centre businesses. In the future the Town Council may wish to consider the style of sign adopted in Minehead, Figure 2, that lists and groups the different types of businesses.

Figure 1



Figure 2



There is an “Explore BOA” website², which currently provides an online directory of businesses, but the content needs to be updated and consideration given to how this facility can be maintained and publicised in the future. Indeed, marketing the town is another area where the Town Council could work in partnership with the business community, targeting how resources are currently used to promote the town in regional centres such as Bath and Bristol and at key locations including Bristol Airport and across the mainline train network.

Suppliers Service

Building on the theme of collaboration and partnership working, a rejuvenated Explore BOA website could promote what local businesses have to offer each other, as well as the public. Such a platform would enable businesses to highlight their product and/or service offerings and encourage other local businesses needing their services to use them, potentially at a preferential rate.

Information Advice and Guidance

All businesses require support and guidance and whilst this isn't the responsibility of the Town Council, they are a visible presence in the town and in a key position to signpost businesses to relevant support agencies. Working with partners such as:

- Wiltshire Council
- Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- Swindon & Wiltshire Growth Hub
- SWLEP Rural Economy Sector Group
- The Enterprise Network

The Town Council could organise events promoting good practice in business planning, accountancy, HR, marketing and other areas of interest. As well as providing useful content for the business community, such events would bring business people together, providing the environment for a business group to start. Such events would also highlight where the responsibility for business support in Wiltshire actually lies.

Property Directory

To encourage existing business to grow and new businesses to relocate, the Town Council could undertake an audit of all property with a business use and document available units, including information on rent, size and landlord.

Whilst landlords and developers could be encouraged to advertise through this service, the Town Council could undertake an annual review of all business property, including that currently available, as a measure of the economic climate in the town.

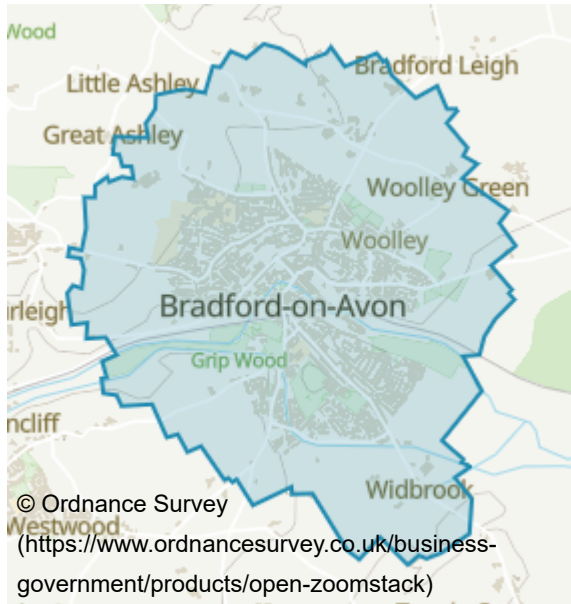
² <https://www.bradfordonavon.co.uk/local-shops-and-businesses/>

In conclusion, one of the key drivers for businesses to come together is to offer a collective voice to the Town Council, rather than the fractured informal dialogue that has happened in the recent past. It is clear from the Forum that the business community has a voice and that future dialogue with the Town Council will only be strengthened if that voice can demonstrate it represents the views of a collective, rather than individual, business people.

Appendix 1

Bradford-on-Avon

Area map



Population

10,400

people

56,490,000 people in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 people

Number of households

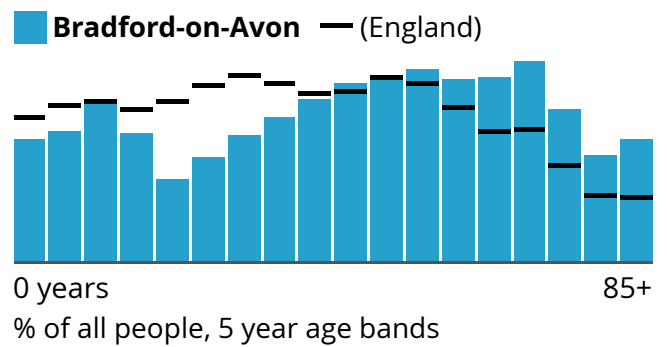
4,800

households

23,436,100 households in England

Rounded to the nearest 100 households

Age profile



Household deprivation

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

Household is not deprived in any dimension
55.2% (48.4%)



Household is deprived in one dimension
32.0% (33.5%)



Household is deprived in two dimensions
10.6% (14.2%)



Household is deprived in three dimensions
2.1% (3.7%)



Household is deprived in four dimensions
0.1% (0.2%)



% of all households

Number of bedrooms

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

1 bedroom **9.9%** (11.6%)



2 bedrooms **21.6%** (27.3%)



3 bedrooms **42.3%** (40.0%)



4 or more bedrooms **26.1%** (21.1%)



% of all households

Distance travelled to work

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

Less than 10km **25.6%** (35.4%)



10km to less than 30km **12.7%** (14.4%)



30km and over **6.7%** (4.3%)



Works mainly from home **44.7%** (31.5%)



Other **10.3%** (14.5%)



% of people aged 16 years and over in employment

Method of travel to workplace

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

Work mainly at or from home **44.7%** (31.5%)



Underground, metro, light rail, tram **0.1%** (1.9%)



Train **2.0%** (2.0%)



Bus, minibus or coach **0.9%** (4.3%)



Taxi **0.1%** (0.7%)



Motorcycle, scooter or moped **0.2%** (0.5%)



Driving a car or van **38.8%** (44.5%)



Passenger in a car or van **2.7%** (3.9%)



Bicycle **1.8%** (2.1%)



On foot **7.9%** (7.6%)



Other method of travel to work **0.8%** (1.0%)



% of people aged 16 years and over in employment

Economic activity status

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

Economically active: In employment
52.9% (57.4%)



Economically active: Unemployed **2.3%** (3.5%)



Economically inactive **44.7%** (39.1%)



% of people aged 16 years and over

Occupation

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

1. Managers, directors and senior officials
15.6% (12.9%)



2. Professional occupations **30.4%** (20.3%)



3. Associate professional and technical occupations **14.9%** (13.3%)



4. Administrative and secretarial occupations
7.4% (9.3%)



5. Skilled trades occupations **8.4%** (10.2%)



6. Caring, leisure and other service occupations
7.7% (9.3%)



7. Sales and customer service occupations
5.4% (7.5%)



8. Process, plant and machine operatives
3.6% (6.9%)



9. Elementary occupations **6.6%** (10.5%)



% of people aged 16 years and over in employment

Hours per week worked

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

Part-time: 15 hours or less worked
12.6% (10.3%)



Part-time: 16 to 30 hours worked **21.8%** (19.5%)



Full-time: 31 to 48 hours worked **54.8%** (59.1%)



Full-time: 49 or more hours worked
10.8% (11.1%)



% of people aged 16 years and over in employment

Highest level of qualification

Bradford-on-Avon (England)

No qualifications **11.2%** (18.1%)



Level 1, 2 or 3 qualifications **32.9%** (39.9%)



Apprenticeship **4.1%** (5.3%)



Level 4 qualifications and above **49.0%** (33.9%)



Other qualifications **2.8%** (2.8%)



% of people aged 16 years and over

Source: Office for National Statistics - Census 2021

The UK's Creative Industries



WHAT ARE THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES?



Advertising and Marketing



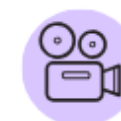
Architecture



Crafts



Design (product, graphic, fashion)



Film, TV, video, animation, VFX/SFX, radio & photography



IT, video games, software and computer services ('creative tech')



Museums, galleries, libraries and heritage



Music, performing and visual arts



Publishing