



Basingstoke
and Deane

Basingstoke and Deane Business Symposium



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Intro

On the 10th of November 2022, business leaders from the Basingstoke and Deane district gathered at the Hampshire Court Hotel in Basingstoke to discuss the current state and future hopes and ambitions for the area.

The symposium marked the conclusion of the Basingstoke and Deane Business Festival, which was funded by the Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, supported by Business South and hosted by Evolve. The festival, run over two phases in summer and autumn, saw more than 100 businesses attend ten events.

The symposium brought together five sectors from Basingstoke and Deane, and a spokesperson for each:

- Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction - Gary Livingstone, MD at LG Motion Ltd
- Professional Services - Jack Gardener, Partner at Phillips Law
- Creative & Digital - Polly Buckland, MD at The Typeface Group
- People & Skills - Sally-Ann Hall-Jones, CEO at Reality HR
- Science & Technology - Steve Hathaway, Founder at Dijital Technologies Ltd

Each sector came together as a group to discuss the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities of their respective sectors.

This document serves as a summary of the opinions expressed at the meeting, and is not backed by evidence or data.

Councillor Simon Minas-Bound, Leader of Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council, was also in attendance. His summary concludes this report.



Engineering, Manufacturing & Construction

Strengths

Basingstoke is a very beautiful place to live—there's great countryside within five or ten minutes from the town centre—and we believe there are big opportunities to be better than we are. There's a good digital technology base and we're generally a wealthy area. And a lot of the business leaders within Basingstoke have been born here, so there's a very strong community. And, ultimately, I think we are supported by what appears to be an ambitious council.

“We believe there are big opportunities to be better than we are.”

Weaknesses

The biggest criticism is how grubby Basingstoke looks when you're approaching it from the roads—there's a lot of litter lying around on access roads and estates.

And though, as stated above, the council comes across as ambitious and supportive, there seems to be no obvious masterplan from it. There is also the issue of poor start-up building stock for new and emerging businesses, and this has a detrimental affect on the growth of local talent. There is also a lack of affordable premises for microbusinesses.

The night time economy is very poor and there is a lack of sports and events; there is simply not a lot for the younger generations to do here. It's vital that this is addressed not only so that youngsters can stay engaged with the town,



but actually stay here. Along these same lines, there is a general disconnect with schools and education, and it appears large stakeholders within the town have no Basingstoke interests, and this can prohibit development.

Another weakness is that Basingstoke seems to be designed for the car. The public transport links and options are very poor, and trying to get into the town centre is very difficult. There is also poor infrastructure—houses are going up before the rest of the infrastructure can support the people.

Threats

General government agendas—we know the Basingstoke council can't control everything. There is zero unemployment in Basingstoke, so attracting new talent for emerging businesses can be very difficult. Additional investment from other towns and nearby cities is a threat if Basingstoke doesn't keep up. There's a skills mismatch between the skills that Basingstoke has, and the skills that businesses want. And there's a general perception of Basingstoke - it is always much maligned, and though we don't necessarily agree with it, changing these perceptions is something that needs to be looked at.

There is an ongoing potential wealth gap in Basingstoke. And a significant threat is council changes in fear of progress, i.e. making easy decisions rather than right ones. Ultimately, we feel there simply isn't enough being done/ provided for to keep talent here. There needs to be an obvious structure of progression and places individuals can move onto as they develop.

Opportunities

We can improve our education options. We can definitely develop the science & technology hubs within the area. Our leisure and sports facilities should be improved. Ultimately we should be striving to simply be better than we already are. And if we're looking for some quick wins, a general litter-picking on the entry to Basingstoke will make quite a big difference to the area.

In summary, we want people to take more pride and responsibility for the area. That's not something that can happen overnight but there should be more pride about Basingstoke. It is a great place to live and grow up and keep our businesses going.



Professional Services

Strengths

One phrase that came out of our discussion was that Basingstoke is “dynamic and cutting edge.” And we feel like this is an important thing to start with. So it’s clear there’s a sense of exciting opportunity in Basingstoke.

Professional services businesses need a thriving community to exist, and actually Basingstoke is pretty good with this, but there could be more done to create a stronger sense of community and being part of the town.

“How do we get people to stay in Basingstoke, and why should they stay?”

Weaknesses

A major weakness - and this seems to be across all businesses - is retention. We’re in a difficult position simply because of where we sit geographically. And Covid has made this harder because before, someone might have accepted a five-day commute to London for the higher pay, but now that most people are either working from home full-time or only going in twice a week, it has changed things quite dramatically. So the question is, “How do we get people to stay in Basingstoke, and why should they stay?”

There’s a lot of information out there from the council for business owners, but a lot of it is quite difficult to understand.

We also think that Basingstoke suffers from this idea that the schools here aren’t that good, and we need to change this perception by emphasising that it is not the case.

“There is not enough skills development,
particularly in low skills.”



Threats

There is not enough skills development, particularly in low skills, and this presents a threat towards business' ability to grow and thrive for future generations. And we think the council should take the lead on this because it will make a significant difference on whether our children and grandchildren choose to stay in the area.

Opportunities

It would be good for the council to present some case studies of successful businesses in Basingstoke, as well as do more to promote the area in general. And this is quite a long-term campaign around why Basingstoke is a good place to work and live.



Creative & Digital

Strengths

There are a lot of amazing businesses in Basingstoke, and they are going to be accountable for doing their due diligence on their supply chain and I think there is going to be a lot more focus on buying local. So, I think a campaign around something like 'Buy Basingstoke' would be great.

We know for sure that there is a lot of creative & digital talent in Basingstoke and yet big businesses are still insisting on London agencies!

“I think a campaign around something like ‘Buy Basingstoke’ would be great.”

Weaknesses

A major weakness is that there is no creative or digital home for businesses in Basingstoke. We no longer have an innovation centre, and we don't have conference facilities, nor the nightlife and infrastructure around them to support it. So, if we're not careful, we're going to end up talking in a vacuum because we're not inviting people in - it's not a business destination for businesses that aren't based here.

Skills are a huge challenge, but my team also has a large number of screenshots of really bad job descriptions! For example, someone was getting offered £25,000 to be an SEO expert, a web admin, a social media paid ad expert and content creator - that's four different job roles. We think this sort of attitude is a huge, huge threat to our industry because there's a lack of understanding amongst decision makers and leadership teams of what creative and digital actually means, and how much it costs.



They're not getting their budgets right and their expectations are very skewed. And this is why there are complaints about not being able to recruit. There is a lot of education that needs to happen around this issue, and that might be something the council can help with.

Threats

Our threats are going to be the same as everyone's - financial landscape, energy crisis, skills and talent. We think the pandemic suppressed some of the digital apprenticeships and/or some of the qualifications at local colleges were suppressed, so we're going to see the impact of that down the line.

Another threat is the disparity between education and real-life application of those skills in the workplace. For example, some modules are still teaching the coding language Python, which is not what most companies are looking for when bringing on new developers. Changes in third-party data represents another threat because it means that cost per click on paid advertising - i.e. through Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram - will go through the roof, and there are probably a lot of local SME's that use that function as their sole lead source. So we think there's education that needs to happen around this.

Opportunities

We discussed have a creative hub or a creative and digital clinic for small businesses, whereby some of the people in the borough can impart information in a way that can be used by SMEs. The smaller microbusinesses and retailers, and food and drink outlets that are independent simply don't have the budget required to pay for some of the opportunity that's out there in creative & digital. So it ends up being a race to the bottom of what's the cheapest price I can get, but if you pay £3,000 for an app and you really need a £14,000 app, you've wasted your money. Again, it's a lack of understanding that you get what you pay for, and we wonder if there could be a pot of money somewhere to match-fund creative initiatives for these microbusinesses in the borough, and to allow them access to the creative & digital opportunity that is out there.

“Independent (businesses) simply don't have the budget required to pay for some of the opportunity that's out there in creative & digital.”



“We should be looking at our future employees rather than just standing there complaining that we can’t find anyone to fill roles.”

We didn’t even touch on Web3 as an opportunity, because people don’t have Web1 and Web2 down yet. Web3 is a huge opportunity, but there’s so much education that needs to happen for that to be utilised.

Another opportunity comes from businesses adjusting their recruitment strategies. We need to better understand that we should be looking at our future employees rather than just standing there complaining that we can’t find anyone to fill roles. Not only are our job descriptions bad, we’re tapping into a pool where we can’t possibly pay what those people want.

As a business owner, a challenge within this opportunity is that we’re so busy because of all of the threats that we don’t have the time, energy or infrastructure in place to support an apprentice within our business; and we couldn’t, in good conscience, bring an apprentice in and then ask them to be a self-starter! We wonder if there could be some sort of function where Basingstoke and Deane Council could support businesses that want to start using apprentices for the first time, and help them build that infrastructure within their business. This might already exist, but we don’t know about it, which comes onto another weakness or opportunity, whichever way you want to look at it.



People & Skills

Strengths

A really big strength is connectivity and infrastructure - it is easy to get to London via the road and rail network. We also think there's a good diversity of industries, from international corporates all the way to microbusinesses and SMEs, and this, combined with the town's entrepreneurial spirit, presents a huge opportunity.

Colleges are a great strength. Recent results from Queen Mary's College (QMC) showed that 90 percent of students got their first choice of university.

“There is a great disparity between the employers and the education establishment.”

Weaknesses

There's a real skills shortage. We've already talked about the low level of unemployment in Basingstoke, but there is a true skills shortage and that is more pronounced in some sectors, such as professional services.

We feel there is a real lack of aspiration within certain populations and demographics and geographical areas of the town. We need to look at that, particularly on the back of our low unemployment.

There is a great disparity between the employers and the education establishments, which leads to a lack of understanding and connection.

There's a shortage of accommodation and a lack of hotels for business use. This contributes to slowness of recovery within the hospitality sector.



Cost of living and housing—it's not cheap to live in Basingstoke. However, if you look at London periphery then it's probably cost effective, but it is a consideration particularly if you move further west.

There is a lack of investment in ongoing training.

Threats

There's a lack of job security, but that's not necessarily specific to Basingstoke; it's a much wider threat. Again, retention is a weakness and a threat.

Recruitment—there's a lack of a good pool of recruitment and a lack of commitment from those in the pool and a lack of talent. If you put all of these in the mix, it's very challenging for an employer to find the right people as well as keep them.

There is a threat to general mental health and wellbeing, too, and this has a significant impact on people's desire to work and contribute.

Opportunities

Though we are well connected to London, transport within Basingstoke is absolutely awful. If you're trying to get from one side of the city to the other, it is really difficult! The shuttle bus from Basing View is no longer operating, and Basing View is one of the main business centres of the town, and now you can't get in and out very easily. That needs some consideration.

University provision—there's very little linkage between universities in the south and Basingstoke; there is a real opportunity to build something to solve that and drive aspiration in the universities.

In terms of retention of next generation talent, we're really good at what we do at QMC and Basingstoke College of Technology. However, graduates then go off to university and they're not coming back here to work. There are all sorts of brilliant things about living and working in Basingstoke, but we just don't shout about it enough.

The town is very entrepreneurial, but we lack support for microbusinesses in particular. And there's an opportunity there to centralise career fairs and hubs and make it clear to schools and colleges what kinds of opportunities there are.



Science & Technology

Strengths

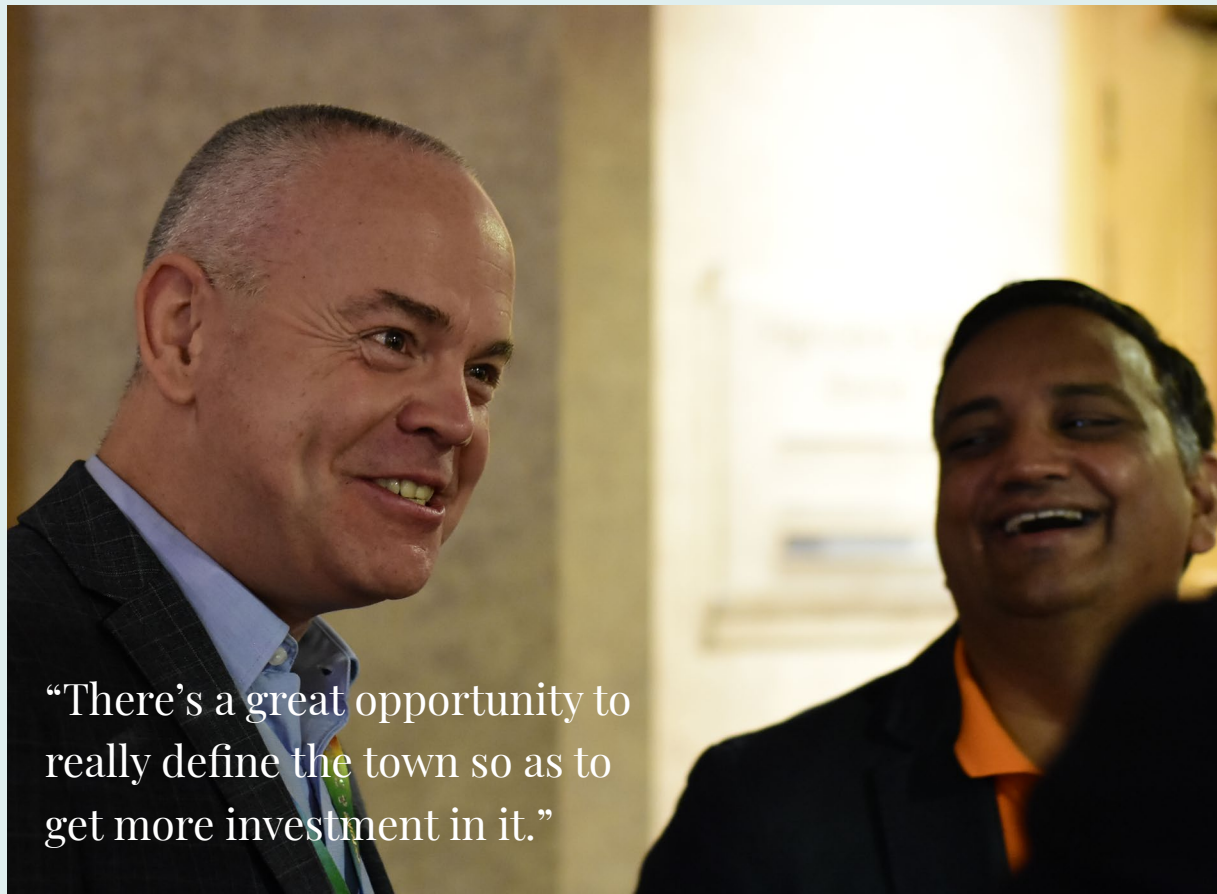
The consensus from the group is that Basingstoke is a great place to work, and it's got a great history of innovation. Some great companies have been here, and even though some have departed, there is still a massive amount of good going on but that never really goes outside of Basingstoke, or we simply don't know about it.

As mentioned in other groups, communication and transport links, airports, connectivity to London—these are great strengths because it helps to attract businesses to the town.

Weaknesses

There is a lack of visibility from the council outside the town. There is also a lack of collaboration between universities. There is not enough cooperation between organisations in the town. So we should be using what we have internally to develop Basingstoke for the greater good.

“We should be using what we have internally to develop Basingstoke for the greater good.”



“There’s a great opportunity to really define the town so as to get more investment in it.”

Threats

Lack of agility, i.e., the council's ability to move and decide what need to be done, to be developed. This lack of agility spills over into the time it takes to harness new technologies for the greater good of the town.

Lack of accommodation, which has been mentioned by almost all the other sectors.

There is a lack of identity. What does Basingstoke represent? What is its identity outside Basingstoke? Indeed, what is the identity of Basingstoke inside Basingstoke? We know we have brilliant things here, but how do you encapsulate that when you talk to people outside the town or are trying to draw businesses into it?

Skills shortage is another that has been mentioned by the other sectors.

Opportunities

As mentioned, Basingstoke is a great place to work, and it's got a great history, but we feel the council doesn't capitalise on this enough. There's a great opportunity to really define the town so as to get more investment in it.

How can we galvanise all the talent within the thousands of businesses here for the greater good of the council? One of the ways is symposiums like this one. They present a very valuable opportunity to get people together.

Another way of getting people together is through a technology hub, and a conference centre of some sort where we can organise conferences and events to communicate with each other, but also to bring people in from the outside so they can see the opportunities here.

Statement from Councillor Simon Minas-Bound

Leader of Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council

I'm very positive and optimistic about the area, but I also think very critically about what the council can do better and differently, rather than spending too much time patting ourselves on the back.

Our new council plan is very focused on answering some very simple questions, and those questions are to help us achieve some very simple things. All the research we've done tells us that Basingstoke and Deane is a very happy and prosperous place. And as custodians of the place, we, the council, see it as our job to ensure that we remain that happy and prosperous place.

What this means for me is to ask our business leaders, residents and visitors—how can we help? Because we don't do that, you do that. You make sure it's happy, you make sure it's prosperous; you do it, business start-ups do it, residents do it, your employees do it and our offices do it, and we do it in a very collaborative way.

I have been very encouraged by the candid thoughts put forward by the groups. It gives us a much better idea about where we're at and what we can do to help. We encourage consultation—we're about to put our new council plan out for consultation, so do engage with that; it's a very powerful tool for us to ensure that we're doing the right thing, rather than just hearing from a minority that's saying things very loudly.

We should be really proud to live and work in Basingstoke and Deane. The term 'Powerhouse of the South' is perhaps overused, but actually Basingstoke and Deane is one of those core places for the economy. And it's our businesses that drive all of that, and so we need to make sure that we work together collaboratively to keep driving it.

“I have been very encouraged by the candid thoughts put forward by the groups. It gives us a much better idea about where we're at and what we can do to help.”

This document will form part of the evidence base that the council and partners use to shape future planning, policies and strategies.



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