

Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery



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Introduction

Our aim is for Woking to be a premier global business location and an excellent place to live and to work with first class leisure and cultural amenities.

Woking's location at the heart of one of the fastest growing economic areas outside London, its entrepreneurial businesses, highly qualified and skilled people, exceptional communications and business-friendly reputation have driven outstanding economic performance in recent years. The number of businesses in Woking increased by a record 25% between 2010 and 2017¹. The local economy is innovative and technological; concentrations of Motor Vehicles, Information Technology, Pharmaceuticals and Aerospace companies offer high quality jobs and are creating an increasingly knowledge-intensive economy. The workforce is highly-skilled, well-qualified, young, diverse and dynamic.

As we come through the pandemic, the national economic outlook is positive and forecasts for UK economic growth are averaging 6.8% in 2021². There have however been far reaching changes in the way people live and work including: the growth in home working and hybrid home/office working, an accelerated increase in on-line shopping, a greater focus on home and family, increased levels of outdoor exercise and appreciation of nature as well as the rise of staycations. All these changes will affect the context in which local economic development takes place, bring opportunities as well as challenges and have an impact on how local authorities operate and our economic development strategy.



¹ [Woking Economic Development Strategy 2017-22](#)

² [Comparison of independent forecasts for the UK economy HM Treasury June 2021](#)

The purpose of this document

The current Economic Development Strategy for Woking runs from 2017-2022³ and is due to be updated in 2022. Although our aims broadly remain the same, the impact of the pandemic means we have to do many things differently. We have produced this Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery to get the economy back on course as quickly as possible, address the immediate challenges and make the most of emerging opportunities.

The fit with other key strategies and plans

This Economic Development Action Plan supports key strategies and plans we have already published including: the Core Strategy⁴, the Economic Development Strategy for Woking 2017-2022, The Framework for Recovery⁵ and the new 2021-2022 Corporate Plan⁶.

It will also complement three key strategies under development:

1. The **Woking Town Centre Masterplan** will provide the overall vision for the Town Centre and how it will look. It will focus on the built environment, including housing, green spaces and office/business and other built facilities and physical infrastructure, including transport and communications.
2. The **Five Year Plan** will follow the direction set by the Corporate Plan 2021-2022 and encompass strategies for a healthy, inclusive and engaged community, an enterprising, vibrant and sustainable economy and an innovative, proactive and effective council.
3. The **Digital Strategy** will aim to deliver super high connectivity and digital infrastructure as a means of driving prosperity and sustainable growth while empowering citizens to access opportunities.

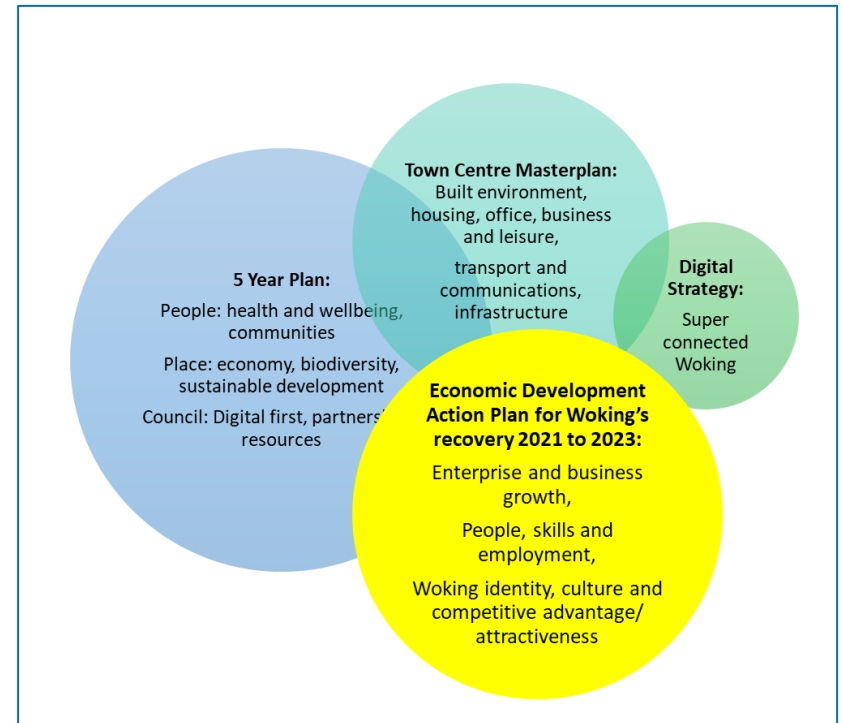


Figure 1: How the Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's Recovery 2021 to 2023 fits with the key strategies and plans currently in development

³ [Woking Economic Development Strategy 2017-22](#)

⁴ [Woking Core Strategy](#)

⁵ [Post-Covid Recovery Framework](#)

⁶ [Woking Corporate Strategy 2021/2022](#)

Our approach

In producing this Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery, we have brought together:

- The aims and relevant actions in the Economic Development Strategy 2017-2022⁷, the Core Strategy⁸, The Framework for Recovery⁹ and the new 2021-2022 Corporate Plan¹⁰.
- The emerging direction of the 5 year plan, Woking Town Centre Masterplan and Digital Strategy currently in development
- The results of our analysis of the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic summarised later in this document
- The results of our recent consultation on the priorities for our Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery

All the strategies and plans that have been reflected in this Action Plan bring benefits to business and the economy and prioritise sustainable economic growth. We are also currently implementing the Recovery Framework from the pandemic which focuses on the Borough's commercial centres and the challenges they face due to the Covid-19 pandemic. It aims to support micro businesses and SMEs and attract residents, visitors and workers back into the centres using the linear, four-stage framework in the diagram below.



Figure 2: The 4 stages of recovery from the pandemic

Source: Framework for Recovery Woking Borough Council/ Matthews Associates

The Framework for Recovery, proposed a number of aims with tightly focused actions under each stage, many of which have now been completed for the first two stages. The aims for the recovery and transformation stages remain highly relevant to this action plan and have been incorporated as appropriate.

We have also reflected the current guidance from Government to make sure that as much as possible of what we are intending to do is eligible for national funding. For example, we aim to utilise as much support as possible from the current Welcome Back Fund to put in place additional measures to create and promote a safe environment for local trade and tourism, particularly in high streets as businesses reopen, and to prepare to access the forthcoming UK Shared Prosperity Fund for wider regeneration and economic development.

We have already made considerable progress including accessing Welcome Back Fund resources to further enhance the public realm, introducing additional safety precautions, such as screens separating outside diners, additional cycle racks and other measures to make the environment cleaner and more accessible. We have used the Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) to support businesses that have been severely impacted through advice and support and we are planning a Woking Means Business exhibition and a careers fair for early 2022.

None of this can be achieved without the support and active involvement of our partners, so our approach includes making sure that we engage them in delivering the actions in this plan.

⁷ [Woking Economic Development Strategy 2017-22](#)

⁸ [Woking Core Strategy](#)

⁹ [Post-Covid Recovery Framework](#)

¹⁰ [Woking Corporate Strategy 2021/2022](#)

Timescale and scope

There is still great uncertainty over how strong and sustained the recovery will be, even assuming that there is no resurgence of the pandemic. Much will depend on how strong consumer spending is after the initial post-lockdown period and how well businesses and individuals cope with the ending of government support and borrowing and debt accrued during the pandemic.

This Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's Recovery is a post-pandemic interim plan to take us from the current Economic Development Strategy period to when the new Economic Development Strategy is developed and published.

The Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery comprises six key priorities:

- **Priority 1: Focus on business:** enabling greater growth and productivity
- **Priority 2: Build on our people and skills advantages:** supporting our people's skills and employability, so they can make the most of economic opportunities
- **Priority 3: Future proofing our Borough's town and village centres :** making sure our town and village commercial centres and high streets are resilient and flexible to maintain our competitive advantages
- **Priority 4: Woking the place to be:** ongoing investment and transformation, digitally connected Woking, green and healthy Woking
- **Priority 5: Destination Woking:** developing Woking's identity, culture and desirability as a location for businesses and people
- **Priority 6: Woking, centre of culture:** Building on our cultural and leisure assets to enhance our offer



Figure 3: The six priorities of the Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's Recovery 2021-2022

The Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's Recovery **does not include**, community support, health and social care and housing which are the domain of other key strategies and plans.

Woking economic context

Woking's proximity to London, its excellent transport links including access to the national motorway network and the main international ports on the south coast, its skilled workforce and its range of business premises and housing have all helped to support Woking's exceptional economic growth, prior to the pandemic.

The Economic Development Strategy 2017-2022¹¹ noted that Woking had been successful in attracting many high tech and knowledge-based businesses, due, in no small part, to its location at the heart of the two major growth corridors in the South East which run north-south from London to Southampton and west-east along the M25. Woking's business base grew by a quarter between 2010 and 2016, from 3,950 to 4920, a much higher rate of growth than in Surrey or the South East as a whole. Prior to the pandemic, Woking was particularly successful at growing medium sized businesses and did well on business creation and survival. The presence of a growing knowledge economy was also a significant strength in Woking's pre-pandemic economy with notable businesses in Motor Vehicles, Computer Programming, Pharmaceuticals and Aerospace. Sectoral strengths also included clusters of businesses in Oil and Gas, Financial Services, Advanced Engineering and Environmental Technologies.

A further strength of the pre-pandemic economy and labour market in Woking highlighted in the 2017 Economic Development Strategy was the highly qualified and skilled workforce with a high percentage of workers employed in the top occupational groups. The ethnic diversity, entrepreneurialism and

relative youth of the local workforce were all found to be areas where Woking had a significant advantage in 2017.

Looking to the future, the Economic Development Strategy 2017-2022 expected Woking to capitalise on its locational and other advantages and substantial investment in regeneration to grasp new global opportunities. Recently, the impact of the global pandemic has called these expectations into question and its effects at national and local level are summarised in the next sections.



*Figure 4: Space Office Development Woking
Scott Brownrigg Architects*

¹¹ [Woking Economic Development Strategy 2017-22](#)

Covid-19 pandemic impact: national analysis:

The magnitude of the recession caused by the pandemic is unprecedented in modern times; the UK's economy shrunk by 25% in two months between February and April 2020. However, the country adapted well after the initial shock and the most recent report from the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee¹² states that UK GDP is expected to have risen by 5% in 2021 Q2, leaving it around 4% below its pre-pandemic level, still a significant reduction but not on the scale of the initial shock¹³.

The services sector is the biggest contributor to growth, and hospitality and advertising were two of the main contributors to the growth in services in June 2021 as businesses reopened. Recent "growth" could more accurately be termed "rebound effects" after the recession, rather than new growth, but the relative resilience of the economy in the face of the pandemic has led to upgrades in forecasts in 2021.

The Bank of England expects GDP to grow by about 3% in Quarter 3 of 2021. It points to unemployment of 4.8% in May, just 1% higher than at the end of 2019 as well as a strong housing market and private sector pay growth of 7% higher than a year earlier in the three months to May 2021¹⁴. The OBR estimates this will result in a level of GDP 3% lower than it would have been without the pandemic.

Retail sales for the three months to June 2021 were 12.2% higher than in the previous three months¹⁵ although summer 2021 footfall figures indicate a 20%

drop on 2019 and the labour market has continued to show signs of recovery since the end of 2020¹⁶. The number of employees increased by 356,000 in June 2021 to 28.9 million while wages also continue to grow. Employers are increasingly confident; according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD)¹⁷ many are expecting to increase recruitment and pay.

However, some sectors have been affected more than others and the travel, tourism and hospitality businesses have been among the worst affected. Many businesses have seen a decline in revenues but their fixed costs remain. Unless businesses have significant cash reserves, the next few months are likely to be extremely testing as Government support comes to an end. The reduction in revenues that many businesses have experienced has resulted in large declines in business investment which remains weak. The British Retail Consortium recently commented that, although the industry continued to see strong sales, growth has started to slow. Online sales remain strong but non-food stores reported a fall of 1.7% in sales volumes in June 2021 when compared with May 2021, driven by falls in household goods stores, such as furniture stores¹⁸. The vacancy rate is continuing to rise and high streets everywhere have suffered¹⁹.

Although household saving has increased during lockdown and may result in a sustained increase in consumer expenditure, the less affluent have tended to take on more debt²⁰. Additionally, many people have re-evaluated their priorities during the lockdowns and may not return to previous shopping and some leisure habits. We have taken account of these factors and considered how they may affect Woking's recovery in developing this Action Plan.

¹² [August 2021 Monetary Policy Report Bank of England](#)

¹³ [Monthly GDP series ONS](#)

¹⁴ [August 2021 Monetary Policy Report Bank of England](#)

¹⁵ [Retail Sales Great Britain ONS June 2021](#)

¹⁶ [Labour Market Overview UK July 2021 ONS](#)

¹⁷ [Labour Market Outlook Spring 2021 CIPD](#)

¹⁸ [Retail industry bulletin June 2021 ONS](#)

¹⁹ [Retail Sales Monitor July 2021 British Retail Consortium](#)

²⁰ [Coronavirus: impact on household debt and savings July 2021 House of Commons](#)

Covid-19 pandemic impact: Woking analysis

We have examined Woking's performance on selected key indicators since the last economic assessment was carried out in 2016 for the Economic Development Strategy 2017-2022. The purpose of the recent analysis is to identify any early warning signs of negative local impact from the pandemic on Woking's economy and labour market, so that we can design the most effective interventions in this short-term Action Plan.

The key indicators we have used to carry out our impact analysis are summarised in Table 1. They have been reduced significantly from the list of indicators and metrics used in the economic assessment in 2016 to focus on those areas where the pandemic has had an immediate and measurable impact, relevant to the timescale of the Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery 2021-2022.

| Theme | Key indicators for update |
|--|---|
| Economic dynamism | Growth in the business base |
| | New business creation per head of population |
| | Survival rates |
| | Knowledge economy as a % age of total businesses |
| Economic strength | High value sectors and clusters, location quotients |
| | Growth companies |
| | GVA and GVA per job |
| Workforce skills and employment | Qualifications |
| | Knowledge economy employment |
| | Earnings |
| | Employment and unemployment |

Table 1: Themes and indicators used for the Woking analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. NB: Data is most up to date available as at August 2021.

Key points from the Covid-19 pandemic impact analysis:

On the whole, Woking's economy has withstood the effects of the pandemic well:

- New business creation slowed in 2017 and 2018 but picked up in 2019 and is now almost back to pre-pandemic levels
- Growth in the business population has slowed during the pandemic but is still higher than that of Surrey
- The knowledge economy remains strong in Woking and the economy has a number of high-value specialisms
- The workforce is exceptionally highly qualified and is continuing to outperform Surrey and the South East

Some areas where the economy and labour market has shown less resilience are:

- Productivity: Gross Value Added per job is better than that of the South East but significantly lower than that of Surrey and is growing at a slower rate
- Wages are higher in Woking than in the South East but below those of Surrey
- There are some signs of sectoral change to a less knowledge intensive economy
- Unemployment, measured by the Claimant Count, has risen by over 400% during the pandemic and does not appear to be coming down particularly quickly, (although there appear to be several hundred vacancies in Woking alone)
- Self-employment, historically high in Woking, has fallen sharply in the last year but there are still 3,100 people claiming under the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) which will end soon.

The impact on Woking's economy

New business creation

New business creation might be expected to take a downward trend in difficult economic conditions. In Woking this has indeed been the case following the UK's departure from the EU. However, the rate of new business creation measured by number of new businesses per 10,000 population picked up again in spite of the lockdowns, although not quite back to its 2016 levels.

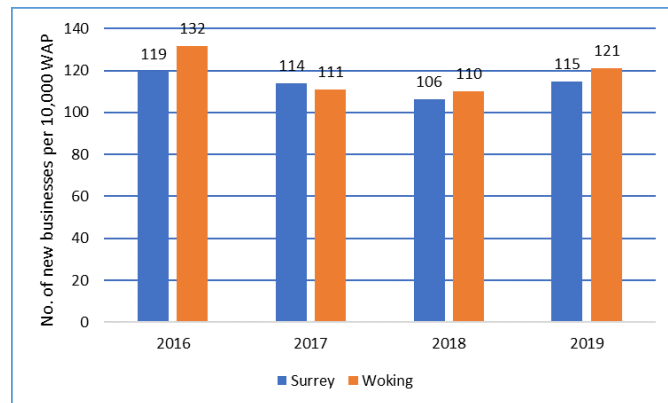


Figure 5: Number of new businesses per 10,000 working age population in Woking and Surrey from 2016 to 2019
Source: ONS UK Business demography

Growth in the business population

Woking's business population has continued to grow during the pandemic, although at a much slower rate than the previous period, 2010 to 2016, when it grew by an impressive 25%. Since 2016, it has grown by 8.33% or 410 businesses.

This is still higher than Surrey where the rate of growth in the business population was just 3.4% in the same period.

In Woking, the majority of the recent growth in the business population was in the retail sector with 190 new businesses, including 105 new businesses between 2019 and 2020, bucking the trend of retail decline and probably due to the significant investment in the town centre including Victoria Place.

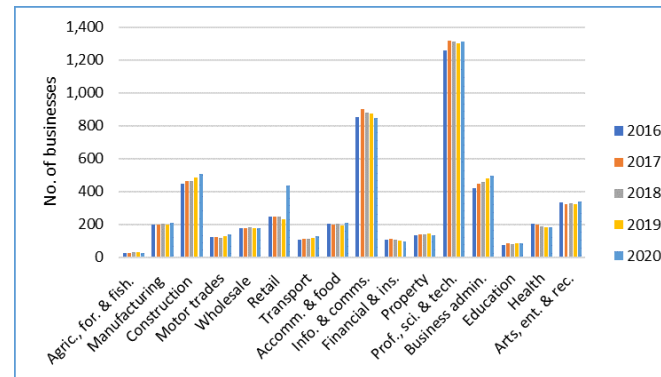


Figure 6: Change in the business population in Woking 2016 to 2020
Source: ONS UK business counts (enterprises)

High growth companies

A very small number of companies create most of the growth. The definition of high growth used by ONS and OECD is those companies that have seen 20% increase in turnover or employment for three consecutive years. Using the employment growth measure, Woking has tended to outperform Surrey, but since 2017 fell below the South East, recovering in 2019. (Fig 7). The impact of Brexit and the pandemic on high growth businesses will be seen in future data releases covering 2020 onwards.

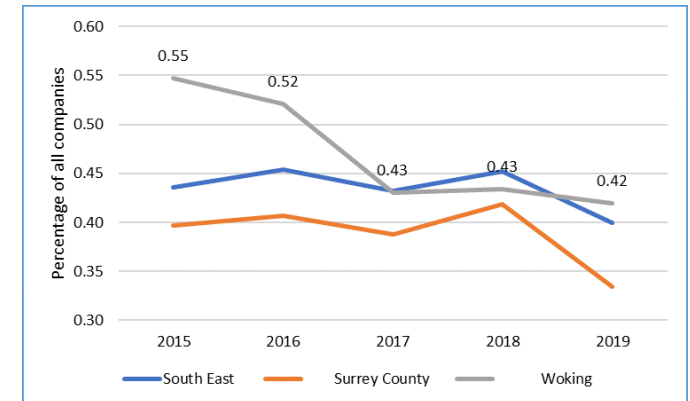


Figure 7: Growth companies as a percentage of all businesses in Woking, Surrey and the South East 2016 to 2020
Source: ONS UK Business size and demography

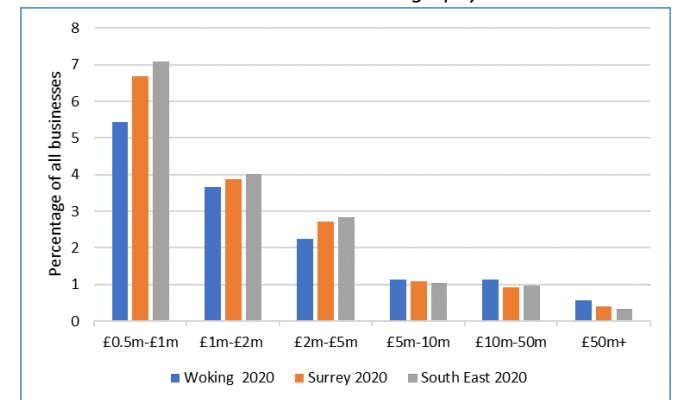


Figure 8: Percentage of businesses in each turnover bracket £0.5m and above in Woking, Surrey and the south east in 2020
Source: ONS UK Business Counts (enterprises)

In relation to turnover, the crucial bracket for growth companies tends to be the £2m to £5m where Woking has fewer businesses. Although large companies are well represented in Woking, the next generation of high growth companies may need nurturing, post pandemic.

Woking's knowledge economy, sectors and clusters

The knowledge economy is important for creating high value jobs and above average growth and greater resistance to economic shocks such as the pandemic and the UK's departure from the EU. Woking's knowledge economy continues to outperform that of Surrey's, although there has been a slight decline from 2017 to 19.



Figure 9: Knowledge economy businesses as a percentage of total in Woking and Surrey 2016 to 2020. ONS KE definition
Source: ONS UK business counts (registered enterprises)

Location quotients are a way of measuring specialisation in local economies and identify concentrations of employment relative to the wider economy. Any number greater than 1 is regarded as a specialism. Woking's economy has a relatively high number of specialisms compared to the South East region, the two largest being *Manufacture of Motor Vehicles* due to the presence of McLaren and the *Creative Arts & Entertainment* sector. *Advertising & Market Research* and *Computer Programming* are also important specialisms.

| | Woking %age of jobs | S. East %age of jobs | Woking LQ |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| 29 : Manufacture of motor vehicles, etc. | 4.8 | 0.4 | 12.00 |
| 90 : Creative, arts & entertainment activities | 1.1 | 0.2 | 5.50 |
| 73 : Advertising and market research | 2.7 | 0.6 | 4.50 |
| 62 : Computer programming, consultancy & related activities | 9.6 | 3.8 | 2.53 |
| 93 : Sports activities & amusement & rec. activities | 3.7 | 1.7 | 2.18 |
| 71 : Architectural & engineer; technical testing & analysis | 3.2 | 1.8 | 1.78 |
| 27 : Manufacture of electrical equipment | 0.5 | 0.3 | 1.67 |
| 94 : Activities of membership organisations | 1.5 | 0.9 | 1.67 |
| 96 : Other personal service activities | 2.1 | 1.3 | 1.62 |
| 26 : Manufacture of computer, electronic and optical products | 1.1 | 0.7 | 1.57 |
| 28 : Manufacture of machinery and equipment n.e.c. | 0.7 | 0.5 | 1.40 |
| 88 : Social work activities | 3.7 | 2.8 | 1.32 |
| 69 : Legal and accounting activities | 2.1 | 1.7 | 1.24 |
| 56 : Food and beverage service | 7.4 | 6.2 | 1.19 |
| 43 : Specialised construction | 3.2 | 2.8 | 1.14 |
| 70 : Activities of head offices; management consultancy | 3.2 | 2.8 | 1.14 |

Table 2: Location quotients of industries in which Woking has a specialism compared to the South East region
Source: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey 2019 (workplace based)

Productivity

In relation to productivity measured by Gross Value Added (GVA) per job, Woking outperforms the South East region but does relatively less well than Surrey. GVA per job has continued to grow in all Surrey's productivity seems to have grown at a faster rate and particularly West Surrey's growth of nearly 23% between 2010 and 2019 compared to Woking's growth of 13% in the same period.

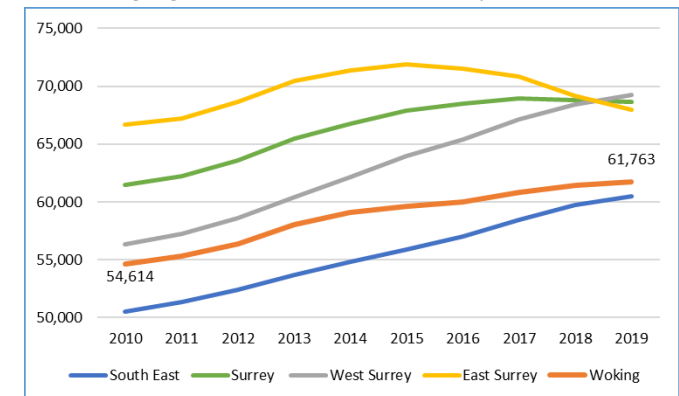


Figure 10: Gross Value Added (GVA) per job in the South East, East and West Surrey and Woking 2010 to 2019
Source: ONS regional productivity statistics (Nominal, smoothed)

It is not clear why this should be the case, since Woking has a relatively knowledge intensive economy and has strengths in *Manufacturing* which is generally a higher productivity sector. On the other hand, Woking has relatively high concentrations of businesses in *Retail, Arts, Entertainment & Recreation* and *Accommodation & Food* which all tend towards lower productivity per job while Surrey has higher concentrations of jobs in *Finance & Insurance* which is a high productivity industry

The impact of the pandemic on Woking's labour market

Over 60% of Woking's working age population is qualified to degree level (NVQ4) or above, compared to 53.3% in Surrey and just 44.9% in the South East region.

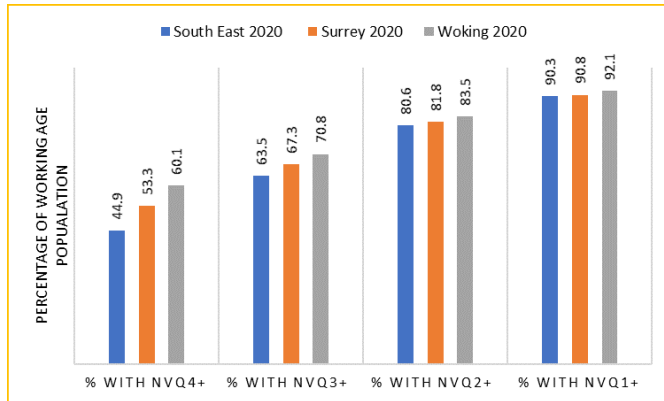


Figure 11: Percentage of working age population qualified at each level in South East, Surrey and Woking in December 2020
Source: ONS Annual Population Survey (residence based)

Woking residents are better qualified at each level and qualification levels have risen since 2016, the date of the last economic assessment.

| | SE 2016 | Surrey 2016 | Woking 2016 |
|-------|---------|-------------|-------------|
| NVQ4+ | 41.4 | 47.7 | 51.3 |
| NVQ3+ | 60.3 | 64.7 | 71.5 |
| NVQ2+ | 77.5 | 80.3 | 86.0 |
| NVQ1+ | 88.8 | 89.2 | 89.7 |

Table 3 Percentage of working age population qualified at each level in South East, Surrey and Woking in December 2016
Source: ONS Annual Population Survey (residence based)

Woking has higher percentages of people employed in *Professional, Scientific & Technical, Retail, Information & Communications, Arts, Entertainment & Recreation*

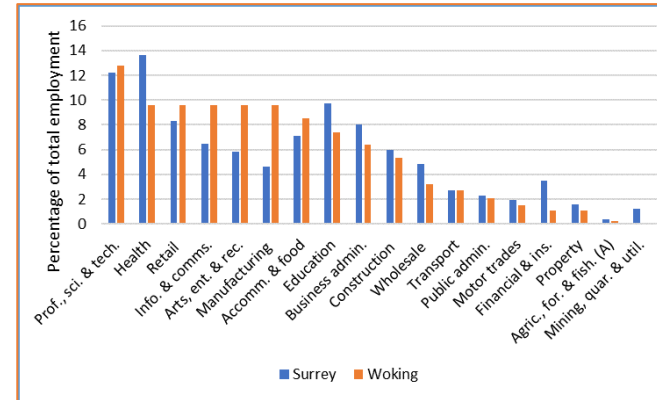


Figure 12: Employment by sector in Woking and Surrey in 2019
Source: ONS Business Register & Employment Survey
Woking has higher percentages of people employed in *Professional, Scientific & Technical, Retail, Information & Communications, Arts, Entertainment & Recreation* and *Manufacturing* than Surrey and lower percentages in *Health, Education and Business Administration*.
Since 2016, there have been increased shares of jobs in *Manufacturing, Construction, Accommodation & Food, and Arts, Entertainment & Recreation* in Woking.

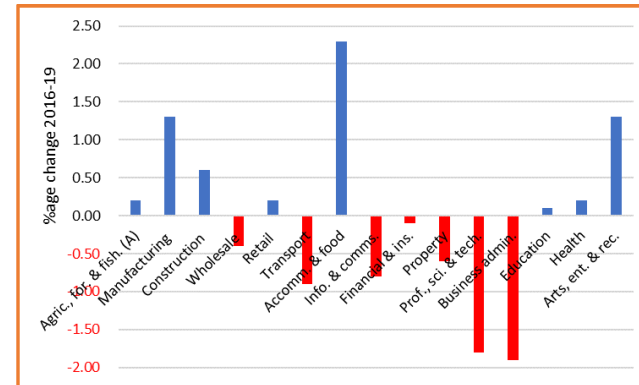


Figure 13: Sectoral change in employment in Woking 2016-2019
Source: ONS Business Register & Employment Survey

Knowledge-based employment is higher in Woking compared to both Surrey and the South East and has risen as a percentage of total employment since 2016 whereas in Surrey and the South East it has fallen slightly.

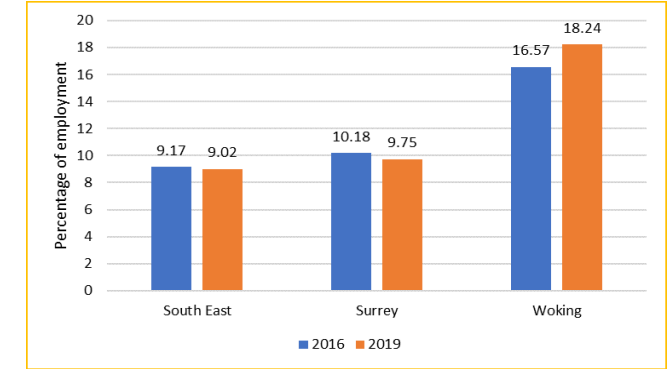


Figure 14: Knowledge economy employment as a percentage of total in Woking, Surrey and the South East 2016 to 2019
Source: ONS Business Register and Employment Survey

Wages in Woking, though higher than the South East region, tend to be lower than in Surrey as a whole.

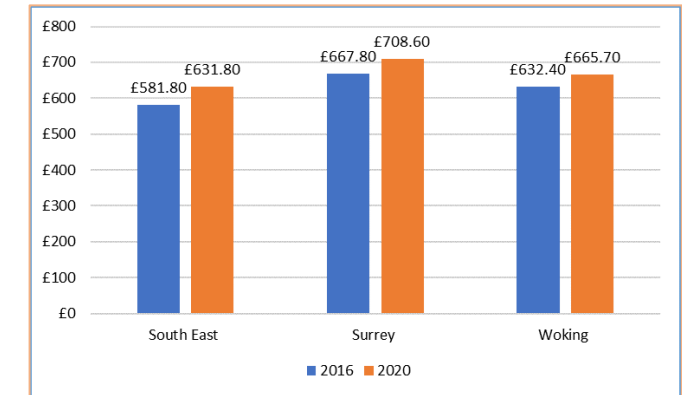


Figure 15: Median gross weekly wages in the South East, Surrey and Woking in 2016 and 2020
Source: ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings

The Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's Recovery

The median gross weekly wage variance vs. Surrey can be partially attributed to the number of employees in lower paid sectors such as retail, service and hospitality.

Woking has an employment rate which has historically been higher than that of Surrey or the South East but during the two years of the pandemic it has fallen by nearly six percentage points from 86.2% in 2018 to 80.6% in 2020, a fall of 1,800 people in employment.

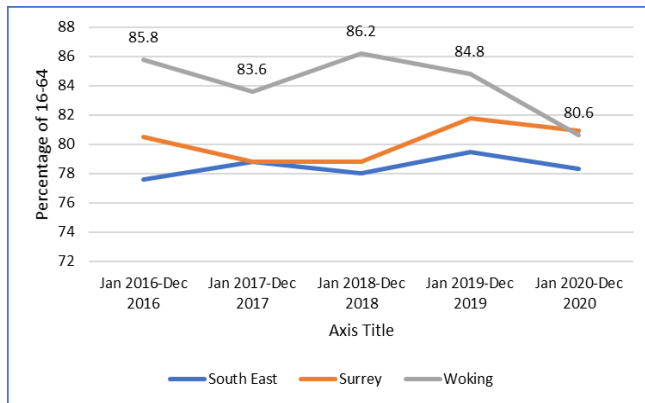


Figure 16: Employment rate of working age population in South East, Surrey and Woking from 2016 to 2020

Source: ONS Annual Population Survey

Official unemployment data for Woking is incomplete. However, the Claimant Count shows a substantial increase during the course of the pandemic. This represents a rise of 1,820 in the Claimant Count or over 400% more claimants since June 2018. The numbers have fallen slightly between June 2020 and June 2021 again as the economy reopens.

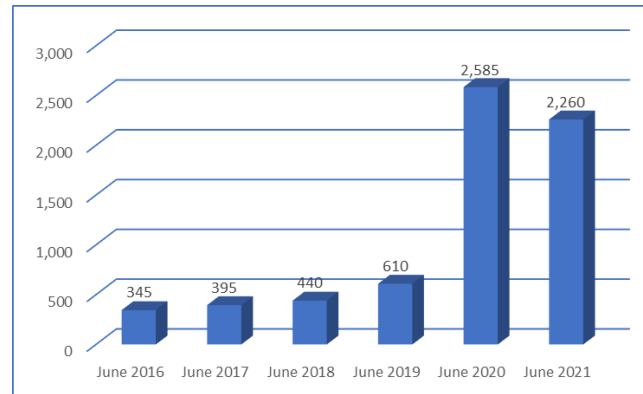


Figure 17: Claimant Count numbers in Woking from June 2016 to June 2021

Source: ONS Claimant Count Data

Woking has historically had a higher than average self-employment rate, consistent with its dynamic, fast growth economy. However, the self-employment rate has fluctuated markedly during the course of the pandemic, first of all rising rapidly to over 16% of the working age population in 2019 and then falling sharply in 2020 to 9.4%, below the rate of both Surrey and the South East.

In the latest figures from the Self Employed Income Support Scheme, June 2021, there were 3,100 people claiming support, an estimated take up rate of 57%, higher than that of Surrey or the South East.

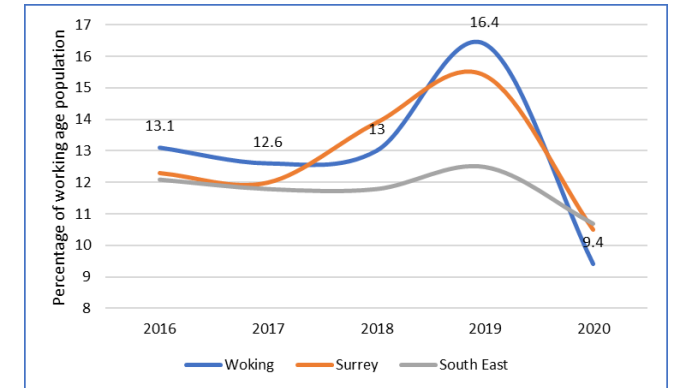


Figure 18: Self-employment rate of the working age population in Woking < Surrey and the South East 2016 to 2020

Source: ONS Annual Population Survey

There were 3,420 employees furloughed in Woking on 14th June or 7.27% of the workforce which is a significant reduction from the height of lockdown and should enable a reasonably smooth transition when the CJRS comes to an end in September 2021.

Economic Development Action Plan:

Where we are now:

We have made significant progress in combatting the effects of the pandemic. During the pandemic, the focus was on directly impacted sectors: retail, hospitality and leisure. Under our Recovery Framework we provided a wide range of business support both directly and through Woking Works, as well as helping businesses access government support, providing advice and help with a range of issues (see boxout opposite).



As we move forward, we need to broaden our focus to the economy as a whole. This Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's recovery will be wider than just the directly impacted sectors, recognising that the economic effects of the pandemic have been felt across all industries.

Through our consultation and analysis we have identified the immediate challenges to our businesses and our people's livelihoods. Although Woking has shown remarkable resilience to the crisis, there are areas where we can help by focusing our efforts and working with our partners.

Woking Borough Council: listening and delivering

During the pandemic, we wanted to know what would be most useful in helping businesses to survive, we carried out a number of business surveys to find out. We delivered a range of well-attended webinars on topics requested by businesses, including: re-engagement with customers after lockdown, digital skills, employment law, return to work advice, resilience of businesses, IT security, organisational well-being of staff, marketing and social media workshops

Woking Borough Council also:

- Gave 4,831 grants worth £26,366,340 to businesses during the pandemic
- Had over 650 interactions with businesses including one-to-one support with business advisers and support for strategy, business plans and marketing as well as start-up support
- Directly contacted business owners and business managers on the high streets and villages across Woking Borough with advice and support
- Contacted individuals with specific needs, such as office space requirements and provided advice on grant applications or other government initiatives.
- Supported the #WeAreWoking campaign, to encourage customers back onto the high street and to 'shop local'.
- Invested in our High Streets and commercial areas with multiple Covid secure measures such as providing free sanitiser, public awareness signage and an enhanced cleaning regime.
- We worked with both local and county Chambers of Commerce to ensure key information was disseminated to Borough businesses

Where we want to get to

We will know our economy is getting back on track by achieving the following key metrics:

- Business growth rate of 15% in 5 years with a base year of 2021
- Business creation rate back to pre-pandemic levels
- GVA per job to match that of Surrey by 2025
- Claimant Count back to pre-pandemic levels by 2023
- Increase in jobs density
- Increase in working population
- Footfall as an indicator of spend

How we will get there

We will monitor delivery of the actions in the following tables and report on progress every six months. We have done this successfully with both the current Economic Development Strategy and the Framework for Recovery and it has enabled us to make a real difference as the evaluations show.

The Action Plan will be a living document. We will respond flexibly to changes in circumstances, adding to, or changing the actions, as required. We will do this in consultation with our partners and with businesses.

| | |
|---|--|
|  | <p>Priority 1: Focus on business</p> |
|  | <p>Priority 2: Build on our people and skills advantages</p> |
|  | <p>Priority 3: Future proofing our Borough's town and village centres</p> |
|  | <p>Priority 4: Woking, the place to be</p> |
|  | <p>Priority 5: Destination Woking</p> |
|  | <p>Priority 6: Woking, centre of culture</p> |

Priority 1: Focus on business



A growing and successful business population is vital to the future of Woking and the prosperity of its people. We are cautiously optimistic that we will avoid a severe long-term recession. Nevertheless, not all businesses will come out unscathed. We will do whatever we can to help Woking businesses recover and succeed in the post-pandemic environment. Although change is unsettling, it provides opportunities to do things differently. Some businesses do even better after an economic downturn than they did before and those that start up during a recession can be more resilient. We want to make sure as many Woking businesses as possible are in this category.

Woking has an impressive track record on new business creation and our knowledge-intensive economy has many strengths. Leading companies in high value sectors choose to locate in Woking with its superb connections, highly skilled workforce, range of affordable premises and quality of life. They include McLaren in **automotive**, Capgemini in **financial services**, Nuvias in **technology distribution**, Cubica in **artificial intelligence and robotics R&D** and a range of petrochemical and pharmaceuticals organisations.

In common with most local economies in the South East which tend to be heavily knowledge based, the **professional, scientific & technical** sector is the largest in Woking by number and percentage of businesses with nearly a quarter of businesses.

| | Number | %age |
|---|--------------|------------|
| Professional, Scientific & Technical | 1,310 | 24.62 |
| Information & Communications (Technology). | 850 | 15.98 |
| Construction | 505 | 9.49 |
| Business administration | 495 | 9.30 |
| Retail | 435 | 8.18 |
| Arts, entertainment and recreation | 340 | 6.39 |
| Manufacturing | 210 | 3.95 |
| Accommodation & food | 210 | 3.95 |
| Health | 180 | 3.38 |
| Wholesale | 175 | 3.29 |
| Motor trades | 140 | 2.63 |
| Property | 135 | 2.54 |
| Transport | 130 | 2.44 |
| Financial & insurance | 95 | 1.79 |
| Education | 85 | 1.60 |
| Agriculture Forestry and Fishing | 25 | 0.47 |
| Column Total | 5,320 | 100 |

Table 4: Businesses in Woking in 2020 by number and percentage of the total

Source: ONS UK business counts (enterprises)

Where Woking differs is in the size of its technology sector which is a key strength in Woking's economic base and comprises 850 businesses, 16% of the business base. In Surrey, construction is the second largest sector and technology is third with just over 12%.

The technology sector is crucial for the future development of high-value jobs in the knowledge economy and in other technology-intensive industries. For example, there are signs that there is a cluster of Film and TV production companies locating in Woking; according to ONS, there are now 85 Woking companies in this sector linked to the rapid expansion of nearby Shepperton and Longcross studios, where Netflix and Pinewood are rapidly expanding their UK operations as part of a UK wide growth in this sector. This sector is highly dependent on digital technology and the availability of technology skills and knowledge.

Construction is the third largest sector in terms of number of businesses in Woking making up just under 9.5% of the business base and is followed by business administration, retail and arts, recreation and entertainment.

Across most of Woking's key sectors, their ability to embrace and exploit digital technology and innovation will underpin their future viability and growth. To this end Woking's support for, and investment in, digital infrastructure, plus the forthcoming digital strategy will be critical in sustaining future local growth.

Key points from our Covid impact analysis, surveys and consultation

- New business creation rates are nearly back to pre-Covid levels
- Woking's business population showed exceptional growth prior to the pandemic. It has continued to grow though at a reduced rate.
- Micros and SMEs are facing particular challenges as we emerge from the pandemic. For example, home based and hybrid working are changing businesses' digital infrastructure, office and real estate needs.
- Those with high borrowing are at risk as Government support comes to an end and rate and rent arrears fall due.
- Mental health may be an issue, with business owners and management being under long-term pressure.
- Medium and larger companies are experiencing skills and labour shortages as well as difficulties with global supply chains.
- The relatively large knowledge economy and the presence of high value sectors and clusters are among Woking's economic strengths and should be nurtured.
- The number of high growth and very high growth companies may have decreased in Woking during the pandemic.
- Productivity measured by Gross Value Added per job is lower in Woking than in Surrey as a whole. Supporting the knowledge economy and exporters, who generally show higher productivity, may help to address this.

Priority 1: Focus on Business: Action Plan

| Priority 1: Focus on business | | Timescale | Lead team | Key partners |
|--|--|-------------------|------------------------|--|
| Action Area: | | | | |
| FoB 1: New business starts: <i>Rationale: new businesses can respond flexibly to the changing context, exploit new opportunities and are vital to growth</i> | Monitor rates of new business creation | Six monthly | Business Liaison | Woking Works, Innovate UK, central government |
| | Continue to support Start up Woking's free advice and help | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Signpost new businesses to Start up Woking | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Support a new 'Green Tech' incubator accelerator for the tech sector | | Business Liaison | |
| FoB 2: Micros and SMEs <i>Rationale: Micro and SMEs provide a large share of local employment and are vital for future growth</i> | Provide business events, "Adapt and survive" webinars and podcasts on business strategy, marketing, customer service and other topics with expert contributors | Rolling programme | Business Liaison | Woking Works, EM3 Growth Hub, Woking & Surrey Chambers |
| | Advice clinics, one to one and one to many as above | As above | Business Liaison | |
| | Referral to EM3 Growth Hub and other business support services | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Set up peer-to-peer online network to share experience of opening up | By December 21 | Business Liaison | |
| | Encourage membership of Woking Works | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Via the masterplan investigate local hubs and 'WeWork' type options to provide flexible work and meeting space | Early 2022 | Business Liaison / CLT | |
| FoB 3: Major employers <i>Rationale: Woking is fortunate in having a higher than average presence of large employers; it is important to retain and support them</i> | Continue to monitor major employers and engage with them to understand concerns and help to retain them in the Borough e.g. through business breakfasts | Ongoing | Business Liaison / CLT | Surrey Chambers, sector networks |
| | Engage large and medium size businesses in "recruit local", "support local" and "buy local" procurement initiatives to embed them in the local economy | Ongoing | Business Liaison / CLT | |
| | Engage with and assist the Borough's medium and larger businesses with support for resilience planning and adaptation to change e.g. through the availability of flexible space within the Borough | Ongoing | Business Liaison / CLT | |

| Priority 1: Focus on business Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead team | Key partners |
|--|---|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| FoB 4: High value sectors and clusters: <i>Rationale: Woking's economy is relatively rich in knowledge-intensive sectors such as technology which are important for future high value, high skills employment</i> | Research, map and monitor key sectors, clusters and supply chains where Woking has an advantage e.g. Technology, Automotive, Film &TV | Map by January 22 and then ongoing | Business Liaison | University of Surrey, NESTA, Innovate UK, Surrey Technology Centre, Catapults |
| | Investigate Woking's largest 10 sectors and/or those with a high location quotient, e.g. Technology, automotive, Film and TV and evaluate demand for business-led sector where there is need and demand | Spring 22 | Business Liaison | |
| | Engage with FE & HE and other partners to support key sectors | Ongoing | Business Liaison / CLT | |
| FoB 5: Export and internationalisation. <i>Rationale: as the impact of the UK's departure from the EU continues to unfold, ensuring that Woking maintains its strong international outlook will be key</i> | Map and signpost to the business support for exporters that is available | | Business Liaison | DIT, Woking Works, EM3 Growth Hub, Woking & Surrey Chambers, export agents and services |
| | Promote export success stories, particularly companies finding new markets outside EU | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Set up new exporters' club working with Woking and Surrey Chambers and Woking Works | January 22 | Business Liaison | |
| FoB 6: Business engagement <i>Rationale: Continuing to consult and engage in dialogue is vital if our actions are to be relevant to businesses in the new post pandemic context.</i> | Continue to survey businesses regularly to identify concerns and new challenges and gather feedback on our action plan | Six monthly | Business Liaison | Woking Chamber of Commerce, Surrey Chambers, EM3 Growth Hub, Woking Works, Woking Asian Business Forum |
| | Implement the Digital Strategy to create a progressive digital platform to transform Woking into a digitally smart borough and help businesses to get the most out of the opportunities around digital | Ongoing | Business Liaison / Digital team (TBC) | |
| | Engage with businesses in the sectors that were most affected by shutdown to identify concerns and help those struggling to reopen e.g. Accommodation & Food, Arts, Culture & Recreation, Retail | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |

Priority 2: Build on our people and skills advantages



Skills are central to the success of high value, knowledge-intensive companies and often a key factor in their locational decisions. 60% of Woking's working age population is qualified to degree level or above compared to 53% in Surrey as a whole²¹, giving Woking a major competitive advantage.

Woking has a notably higher percentage of its workers employed in the knowledge economy, higher rates of self-employment and a younger working age population than Surrey and the South East. However, recruiting skilled workers was a challenge for employers even before the pandemic, as many highly skilled workers commute out of the Borough, taking advantage of the short commute times to London with its higher wages. As reflected nationally Woking has also lost many EU workers which underpinned many of the service related businesses within the Borough.

Increased skills and labour shortages as well as high frictional unemployment are emerging as we come out of the pandemic and matching employment demand with the available workforce will be a priority. Going forward, Woking's skilled and qualified people will need to keep their skills and qualifications up to date while those who lack higher level skills risk being left behind and may require retraining. Education and training providers will need to align their offer with the current and future needs of employers.

²¹ Source: ONS Annual Population Survey 2020

People and Skills: key points from our Covid impact analysis, surveys and consultation

- Woking now has over 60% of its working age population qualified to degree level and above, an increase of 8.8% since 2016. Woking has maintained its lead over Surrey and Sussex on workforce qualifications at all levels.
- Woking has a significantly higher percentage of jobs in the knowledge-economy and the proportion of these has increased since 2016.
- However, median wages tend to be lower in Woking than in Surrey as a whole and this may be due to Woking's higher percentages of workers in lower paid sectors such as Retail, Arts, Entertainment & Recreation and Accommodation & Food. As these sectors have received the greatest Government support, jobs may be at risk when this ends and rent arrears and other liabilities fall due.
- The proportion of jobs in Manufacturing, Construction, Retail, Accommodation & Food as well as Arts, Entertainment & Recreation appears to have risen since before the pandemic, (although the data for 2020 is not yet available so it remains to be seen whether this is a longer term trend).
- The loss of EU workers is impacting on many sectors especially service and hospitality businesses.
- Woking's historically high employment rate has fallen significantly during the pandemic and unemployment, measured by the Claimant Count.

Priority 2: Build on our people and skills advantages: Action Plan

| Priority 2: Build on our people and skills advantages Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|---|---|-----------|-------------------------------|---|
| BoPSA 1: Understand business's skills and employment needs: <i>Rationale: skills and labour shortages are emerging and vacancies are rising rapidly. Enabling local people to access opportunities requires understanding of business needs</i> | Engage with employers and feedback their concerns regarding skills gaps and shortages to DWP, EM3 and Surrey County Council highlighting hard to fill vacancies, skills gaps and shortages. Work with schools and colleges to highlight opportunities for young people. | May 2022 | Business Liaison | DWP, Woking Asian Business Forum, Surrey Chambers, Woking Hospitality Alliance, colleges, training providers and schools |
| | Consult with sector networks e.g. Woking Hospitality Alliance (see also FoB 4) and help to develop skills initiatives to enable rapid recovery. OK feed into fed cap across the board support for getting back into work Jobs Board | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| BoPSA 2: Support local employment for local people <i>Rationale: Local employment reduces commuting and has mental and physical benefits as well as reducing carbon emissions.</i> | Continue to promote Woking Jobs Board to support local employment and help local people to access local jobs | Ongoing | Business Liaison | Employers, DWP, Woking Works, Surrey Chambers |
| | Develop a strategy to promote "recruit local", "work local" and "buy local" initiatives to employers and local workers (See also FoB 3) highlighting economic, social and environmental benefits | Dec 21 | Business Liaison/ Marcomms | |
| | Help employers with managing home working and flexible/hybrid working through providing online advice and webinars | Oct 21 | Business Liaison | |
| BoPSA 3: Support workforce and skills development for the knowledge economy. <i>Rationale: Enabling local people to take advantage</i> | Working with learning and training providers, develop digital skills support for local people so that they can take advantage of the opportunities created by the implementation of the Digital Strategy | Summer 22 | Business Liaison | Learning and training providers, Surrey Chambers, Woking Skills Forum, sector networks, HEIs, Gordon Murray Academy, technology |
| | Promote and encourage careers and Apprenticeships in knowledge-based industries for young people e.g. working in the Technology automotive, film and TV sectors | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |

| Priority 2: Build on our people and skills advantages Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|--|---|--------------------------|------------------|--|
| <i>of Woking's opportunities and better paid jobs, reducing the need for out-commuting and helping to support the knowledge economy. There are currently gaps in provision at local level</i> | Encourage greater HE presence in the Borough to improve skills and learning offer. Create enhanced links with HE providers, local or further afield e.g. London, promote Borough to host an HE campus. Liaison with FE providers within Borough as to ability to expand into HE provision. | Ongoing | CLT | campus at Windlesham , Woking Works |
| BoPSA 4: Support new skills for local people to match demand <i>Rationale: the economy and labour market are changing rapidly</i> | Analyse local vacancy data and identify areas of emerging shortages e.g. customer service, marketing, social media management, and provide information on line as well as signposting to training Provide free webinars on subjects where there is a gap in local provision e.g. digital | January 2022 and ongoing | Business Liaison | Learning and Skills providers, recruitment companies, Woking Works |
| BoPSA 5: Support people who are at risk of unemployment/hardship, ending of SEISS/CJRS as a result of the pandemic <i>Rationale: Unemployment has risen sharply, people employed in the sectors which were shut down and the self-employed may be at risk as the Government support comes to an end</i> | Work with partners to identify additional support measures for newly unemployed e.g. help with local employment, podcasts and webinars Focus and signpost to business support for self-employed as SEISS comes to an end. | Ongoing | Business Liaison | JCP, DWP, Woking Works, EM3 Growth Hub, |

Priority 3: Future proofing our Borough's town and village centres



Even before the pandemic, high streets and town centres were changing as the switch to online retail and digital services gathered pace. Nevertheless, on-line sales still account for only 26.7% of all sales and shopping and major centres as well as local village centres will continue to thrive, if they provide what people want.

Our strategy is to capitalise on both the regional importance of Woking's town centre, following our significant investment, and our village centre assets with their distinctive local identities, to future-proof them and provide the best of both worlds to businesses, residents and visitors. The Town Centre Masterplan on which we are consulting on will set out the vision for the Woking's commercial, retail, leisure and cultural centre, how it will look and operate to create the successful regional centre of the future. Currently, Woking has over 80,000 sq.m of retail floorspace, making it the second largest shopping centre in Surrey after Guildford. We have invested over £650m in Victoria Place helping to create up to 1,000 jobs, providing 432 new apartments, attracting a new Hilton Hotel and mixed use commercial space. A new restaurant quarter around Commercial Way adds to the attraction; there was growth in retail businesses and jobs in Woking in the last year during one of the most challenging times in the history of the industry.

To complement this investment in the town centre, we will support our multiple village centres, each with its own individual character which offer unique independent retail experiences, as well as local services and valued community hubs, increasingly valued and utilised during the pandemic.

Future proofing: key points from our Covid impact analysis, surveys and consultation

We will build on our opportunities to continue to refine and redefine our offer to provide more of what local people want. The answer is clear: people want more variety, more leisure opportunities, more independent shops, restaurants, bars and coffee shops, more green space and greater pedestrianisation, as well as fewer empty shops/void units. We are in a strong position to provide this across the Borough, having the major leisure, leisure and cultural asset that of the regionally important Town Centre and our equally important village centres. The Council is in a strong position to build on its competitive advantages as a major retail, commercial and leisure destination through responding to changes in demand, including .

- Online is here to stay: Encouraging our smaller businesses in the town and village centres to have an on-line as well as a physical presence, making the most of the digital opportunities of our Digital Strategy
- Clean and contactless: Helping retail and other people-facing businesses to move to smart technology, e.g. app based scanning, which is safer and more efficient
- All-round experience: Encouraging niche and specialist retailers and services in our town and village centres to offer a wider range of opportunities, not just shopping
- Bringing residents back in: continuing to find opportunities for increasing town centre living as a way of bringing more people back into the town and village centres
- From push to pull: helping smaller businesses to cope with the growing power of the consumer to research and shop anywhere at any time; differentiation will be key

Priority 3: Future proofing our Borough's town and village centres: Action Plan

| Priority 3: Future proofing our Borough's town and village centres Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|---|---|--------------|---------------------------|--|
| FPoB 1: Maintain and build on Woking town centre's position as a first class commercial, leisure, cultural and retail centre <i>Rationale: The major investment in Woking centre has given it the critical mass and extended offer to survive and grow as a magnet for visitors, businesses and residents.</i> | Implementing the Masterplan to future-proof Woking town centre as a regionally important retail, commercial, leisure and cultural destination that offers what businesses and people want | 2022 onwards | Business Liaison | Woking Works, Woking Chamber, Woking Asian Business Forum. FSB |
| | Celebrating and supporting the opening of the Victoria Place development to provide an even stronger retail, hotel, leisure and living offer | 2022 | Business Liaison/ Estates | |
| | Identifying further opportunities for encouraging town centre living | Ongoing | Planning Policy/ Housing | |
| FPoB 2: Future-proof our village centres and support their unique identities as retail and service community hubs: <i>Rationale: People value their local community and village centres and their use reduces road congestion and pollution</i> | Supporting the niche identities of the local village communities with their individual retail and service offers, for example Two Ducks in St John's, Noel's Farm Shop in Sutton Green and La Ficelle in West Byfleet | Ongoing | Business Liaison | Woking Works, Woking Chamber, Woking Asian Business Forum, community groups and associations |
| | Supporting smaller village businesses to adapt to change through consultation and engagement, highlighting key trends and seeking their input into the Masterplan and other strategies | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |

| Priority 3: Future proofing our Borough's town and village centres Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|--|--|------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <p>FPoB: 3: Use our flexibilities to support a relevant, fit-for-purpose, post-pandemic Borough with the right mix of retail, living culture, leisure and commercial opportunities, including smaller businesses and independents.</p> <p><i>Rationale: The move from "just shopping" to seeking a wider experience by consumers will mean that the places that do this will succeed, while conventional high streets continue to decline. Services need to be in the right places and accessible to local communities</i></p> | Review the wider Borough as a fit-for-purpose, relevant, post-Covid multi-service destination and identify gaps. Identify whether there is enough flexible space and shared space to respond to future needs e.g. shared service units working with partners to fill gaps in services, health services in places that need them. | Spring 2022 | Estates/ Business Liaison/CLT | <p>Woking Works, Woking and Surrey Chambers, Woking Asian Business Forum. FSB, Community Groups, NHS and other service providers</p> |
| | Monitoring what is available from retail, hospitality, food and drink, culture and leisure businesses across the Borough and encouraging new businesses and services to enhance the wider offer | Ongoing | Estates/ Business Liaison | |
| | Supporting the conversion of extra retail capacity to studios and maker spaces for artists, crafts and creative businesses e.g. film production | January 2022 | Estates/ Business Liaison | |
| | Support providing pop-up shops and services in temporarily empty premises to encourage new independent retailers to enter the market | January 2022 | Estates/ Business Liaison | |
| | Supporting temporary or permanent community uses for underutilised retail space, within agreed affordability and viability parameters e.g. Bare + Fair in Peacocks. | January 2022 | Estates/ Business Liaison | |
| | Considering the relocation of local authority-funded services into the town centres and giving preference to local and community businesses to deliver them. | January 2022 | Estates/ Business Liaison | |
| | Considering the relocation of local authority-funded services into the town centres and giving preference to local and community businesses to deliver them. | January 2022 | Estates/ Business Liaison | |
| | Implement the Digital Strategy so that technology is supporting small businesses in village centre e.g. through encouraging take up of gigabit connectivity and utilisation of smart technology | January 2022 | Business Liaison | |
| Support local business digital online profile/ability to trade online via initiatives such as support for 'mytown shops' ²² | Ongoing | Business Liaison | | |

²² [Mytown shops Woking](#)

Priority 4: Woking, the place to be



Woking must continue to evolve and develop so that our economy can grow and our people have access to high quality jobs. But it is not just about the economy; Woking has to be a desirable place for people to want to live, visit and work here. The future is changing; more hybrid working, i.e. partly at home and partly in the office, a greater focus on leisure,

health and well-being, the continued rise of on-line shopping, increased pressure to move to net zero carbon and forecast decline in the population, will all mean developing Woking differently.

Forward-looking plans are resulting in a range of exciting new developments. In central Woking, the landmark new Victoria Place is providing new flats, a hotel and shops as well as car parking while major improvements to infrastructure and public realm include:

- Advanced digital infrastructure providing free wi-fi in the town centre a gigabit-capable network for businesses to underpin future green growth and aspirations to bring 5G into the town in the future.
- A new public plaza outside Duke's Court with a green wall, and restaurant with green roof
- A new pedestrian public plaza outside railway station as part of a programme of wider railway station improvements
- Reconfiguration of the High Street to a one-way bus lane and a widened pedestrian footpath, incorporating a contra-flow cycle lane
- The Victoria Arch scheme, a four-year project to demolish buildings located in 'The Triangle', highway widening, an enhanced traffic management system and replacement of Victoria Arch Railway Bridge. This ambitious scheme, using the Housing Infrastructure Fund, will unlock additional housing capacity for 13 identified development sites within Woking.

Woking, the place to be: key points from our Covid impact analysis, surveys and consultation

The Five Year Plan will follow the direction set by the current Corporate Plan 2021/22 and encompass strategies for a healthy, inclusive and engaged community, an enterprising, vibrant and sustainable economy and an innovative, proactive and effective council.

The Masterplan will set out the vision for how Woking will look and function in the future - a superb place for living and working with a strong sense of community, cultural experience and a quality of life that lead the region.

The Digital Strategy will support the Masterplan, enabling everyone to access state of the art information and communications technology.

Building on the success of the multi-million pound regeneration project to transform the centre of Sheerwater into a thriving, sustainable community including 1,200 energy efficient new homes, a new leisure centre, sports pitches, play areas, community hub as well as improved open spaces with pocket parks, enhanced woodland and more trees.

Continue to develop and implement plans for our villages to be more viable and sustainable, building on the renewed focus on local shopping and services achieved during the pandemic.

Priorities from the consultation include more affordable housing, more pedestrianisation and faster progress to decarbonisation

Green and healthy Woking

77% of people in the UK say that the pandemic will change their behaviour permanently, with a new focus on enjoying simple pleasures (40%), friends and family (33%) and re-evaluating life priorities (28%) while 40% have used outside spaces more.²³ The pandemic has resulted in increases in exercise levels, usage of public green spaces and an increased appreciation of nature as a source of wellbeing²⁴.

Woking was recently dubbed “Wondrous Woking” when it came top of the UK Vitality Index in 2021²⁵, not only scoring highly on the dynamism of its economy, wage growth and commercial investment, but also scoring particularly strongly on health and environment with low levels of cardiovascular mortality and high scores for life satisfaction. Woking also scored well in the internationally recognised Legatum Institute, 2021 UK Prosperity Index²⁶, placed 4th out of 379 local authority areas vs. 5th in 2020 and 13th in 2011.

Our healthy living record is good. Life expectancy for both males and females is above that of Surrey and the South East. We are committed to building on our achievements to promote active lifestyles and healthy living and to reducing the carbon footprint of our communities and our Borough.

Our target is to reduce carbon emissions by 80% by 2050. The council’s climate change and sustainability strategy, [Woking 2050](#), includes actions to achieve the target under four themes: Home is where the heart is, in the workplace, Getting around and the great outdoors.

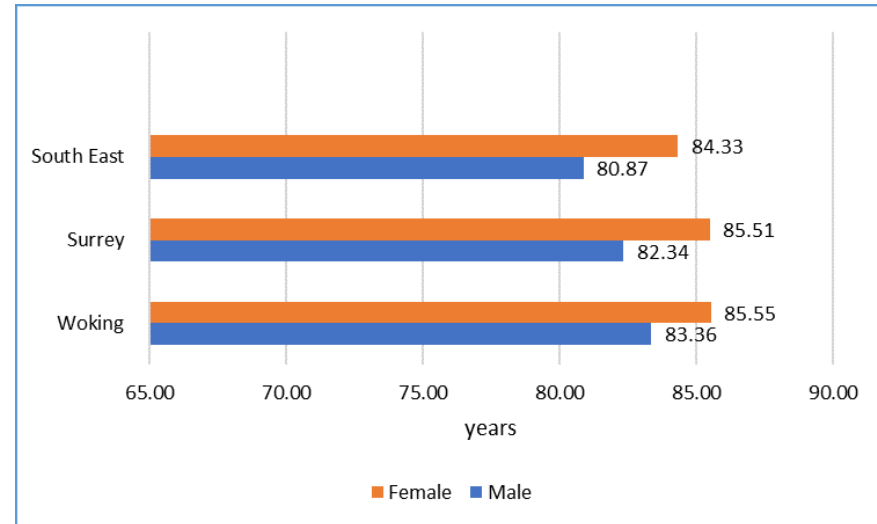


Figure 18: Life expectancy for males and females born 2017 to 19 in Woking, Surrey and the South East

Source: ONS Life expectancy data

We will continue to monitor these actions and make changes to achieve the goal of creating a place that:

- protects and enhances our rich natural environment
- uses resources wisely and conserves biodiversity
- develops the built environment in a sustainable way
- meets local needs and enables the local economy to prosper
- recognises, prepares and adapts to the socio-economic, environmental and demographic changes that the future will bring.

²³ [The National Lottery Community Fund December 2020](#)

²⁴ [How has lockdown changed our relationship with nature? ONS June 2021](#)

²⁵ [Lambert Smith Hampton - Vitality Index 2021](#)

²⁶ [Legatum Institute 2021 UK Prosperity Index](#)

Priority 4: Woking, the place to be: Action Plan

| Priority 4: Woking, the place to be Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|--|--|--------------|------------------|--|
| WtP 1: Continuing the physical transformation of future-facing Woking <i>Rationale: Woking must continue to build on investment to maintain competitive advantage as a regional centre</i> | Develop, fund and implement the Masterplan for Woking town to provide a clear deliverable vision for the future | 2022 | CLT | EM3, Surrey County Council |
| | In parallel with the above continue to develop plans for the future of the villages in consultation with their local communities. | 2023 | CLT | |
| | Continue to Invest in more green space and trees and a better public realm in terms of design, quality and ability to access by all | 2022 | CLT | |
| | Identify opportunities for more pedestrianisation and pedestrian prioritisation across the Borough | 2022 | CLT | |
| | Utilise the Council's ownership of property, infrastructure and sites in the Borough to provide more of what people and businesses need | Dec 2021 | CLT | |
| WtP 2: Digital transformation to become a superbly well-connected Woking Borough <i>Rationale: High digital connectivity is increasingly important as a factor in competitiveness and sustainable economic growth.</i> | Continue to support both the Council's, Government and private investment in digital infrastructure (Full Fibre/5G) and to tackle 'not-spots' and areas of poor connectivity | 2022 | CLT | Woking and Surrey Chambers, EM3 Hub, Surrey County Council, BDUK/DCMS, private providers/ISPs, Mobile Network Operators. |
| | Finalise and implement the Digital Strategy to create a super-connected Woking Borough through Fibre to the Premises (FTTP) infrastructure and the Digital Centre of Excellence | 2022 | Business Liaison | |
| | Monitor usage and encourage take-up and application of digital capacity by businesses and encourage the technology sector to locate in Woking to take advantage of the opportunity | 2022 onwards | Business Liaison | |
| | Support digital inclusion for all, including accessibility to Council and other public services | Ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Remain cognisant of potential digital poverty across geographic, age, gender, ethnicity and socio-economic groups, work with partners to address and mitigate digital poverty across the Borough | 2022 | CLT | |

| Priority 4: Woking, the place to be Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|--|--|-------------|---|--|
| <p>WtP 3: Green and healthy Woking <i>Rationale: Combatting climate change is becoming increasingly urgent. Lower carbon living brings mental and physical health benefits, as well as being good for the environment.</i></p> | Continue to monitor and implement the Woking 2050 strategy and related strategies, increasing the pace when necessary | Ongoing | Green Infrastructure Team (GI) | EM3 Growth Hub, Surrey County Council, Woking Works, Department of Energy and Climate Change, Department for Transport, TfSE, Woodland Trust, National Trust |
| | Identify creative opportunities for providing more green space in the Town Centre for example, on top of and between buildings, podium and pocket parks, to attract people in, reduce CO ² and provide a more user-friendly urban environment | Spring 2022 | Planning Policy/CLT | |
| | Provide more business support to help businesses to move their operation to net zero more quickly | Ongoing | Green Infrastructure / Business Liaison | |
| | Provide more support for residents & businesses move to net zero carbon more quickly through promoting government support for greener energy | Ongoing | Green Infrastructure / Business Liaison | |
| | Identify more opportunities for active travel provision for cyclists and walkers to get around Woking, including accessible infrastructure and the provision of secure cycle parking facilities | Ongoing | Woking Integrated Transport | |
| | Accelerate the introduction of dedicated secure parking and charging points for e-vehicles and e-bikes within the Council's estate | Ongoing | Parking Services | |
| | Liaise with external partners to maximise the provision of charging points for e-vehicles across the wider Borough, utilising Government funding, and commercial support when available | Ongoing | Parking Services | |
| | Work with partners to protect and enhance our rich natural environment | Ongoing | Town Centre /Green Infrastructure | |

Priority 5: Destination Woking



Woking offers excellent communications including rail from London journey times of 25 minutes, easy access to the national motorway network and the main airports and journey times of around an hour to the southern ports. An extensive range of commercial premises at competitive prices is on offer including town centre offices, modern business parks such as Genesis, Orchard and Woking Business Park, retail and warehousing stock.

Woking's advantages for foreign and domestic inward investors also include a relatively young and diverse, highly skilled local population, extensive cultural and leisure facilities and a high quality of life. As a result, we have a higher than average number of global companies choosing to locate here and a growing business population which is strongly knowledge and technology intensive.

Nevertheless, we cannot become complacent; in an increasingly competitive market with global inward investment levels falling after the pandemic²⁷ and the strength of the recovery still uncertain in the UK, Woking will need to work harder to continue to attract inward investment. It seems likely that there will be lower demand for commercial premises, that the demand that there is will be more specific and require more flexible space and that there will be increased competition between areas for a lower number of inwardly investing companies.

During 2020, the office market in the South East weakened during lockdown as might be expected, but, in Quarter 2 2021, it has bounced back with almost

²⁷ [Foreign Direct Investment Statistics December 2020 House of Commons](#)

double the activity of a year ago. Against the backdrop of “work from home” restrictions this clearly demonstrates that the office is still vital for many businesses according to Avison Young²⁸.

RICS also reports a strong upturn in the demand for industrial space at the end of Q2 2021 as the economy picks up again²⁹, although demand for retail is less buoyant. Bringing visitors back into our town will help the retail sector as well as the wider visitor economy. Our forthcoming Town Centre Masterplan will take these trends into account and through its vision for Woking, create a town centre environment that will attract investment to respond to the post pandemic local economic, environmental and social conditions. A bold ‘sales and marketing’ strategy and action plan is therefore needed to effectively ‘sell’ Woking as a local, regional, national and international business destination.

Woking, the place to be: key points from our Covid impact analysis, surveys and consultation

- Proactively marketing Woking to inward investors, highlighting our many strengths and competitive advantages.
- Aggressively ‘selling’ the advantages of locating to Woking against comparatively high-cost locations such as central London
- Retaining the businesses we have through active liaison
- Attracting visitors to revitalise the visitor & retail economy
- Encouraging residents to use their town centre
- Proactively promoting and managing commercial space

²⁸ [SE offices Q2 2021 Avison Young](#)

²⁹ [Commercial Property Survey Q2 2021 RICS](#)

Priority 5: Destination Woking: Action Plan

| Priority 5: Destination Woking Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|---|--|-------------|------------------------------------|--|
| DW 1: Create a new identity and sense of place to match the vision for Woking <i>Rationale: The image of Woking does not yet reflect all that the Borough has to offer to inward investors, businesses, residents and visitors</i> | Develop and promote Woking's distinctive identity as the most go-to, go-ahead Borough in Surrey with the best quality of life e.g. through communications and marketing campaigns, events, printed and social media, online presence and recruitment of Woking advocates/ambassadors. Local initiative such as art competitions and additional public art, physical place markers, celebration of Woking's heritage and identifiers. | Spring 2022 | Marcomms /Business Liaison Estates | Visit Surrey, DIT, Invest in Surrey, Universities, Surrey Chambers |
| | Focus on business advantages such as range of premises, quality of place, skills availability, excellent communications and connections to London & SE. Pricing differential against competing destinations in/nearer London. | ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Focus on USPs for visitors such as range of retail, services, arts, culture, events, outdoor space, access to countryside, large public spaces and superior accessibility on foot and by cycle and rail | ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| | Focus on what is good about living in Woking for residents , healthy lifestyles, sense of community, range education, choice of housing, green spaces | ongoing | Business Liaison | |
| DW 2: Actively market Woking to inward investors <i>Rationale: Inward investment levels are likely to continue to fall and there will be increased competition from other areas</i> | Develop and produce a detailed sales and marketing plan with improved articulation of Woking's offer with up-to-date facts and figures, including our premises, workforce, support facilities, cultural and leisure offer and our gigabit capable IT infrastructure, potentially funded by the new Masterplan | Spring 2022 | Marcomms/ Business Liaison Estates | DIT, Invest in Surrey, Universities, Surrey Chambers |
| | Utilise the above sales and marketing plan for the Borough, supported by a dedicated proactive sales and marketing function to effectively 'sell' Woking as a local, regional, national and international destination. | Spring 2022 | Marcomms/ Business Liaison Estates | |
| | Investigate innovative and cost effective routes to market to increase the profile of Woking to potential investors e.g. targeted advertising | | | |
| | Work with the Department of International Trade and Invest in Surrey to make sure Woking is at the forefront of their teams' preferred destinations | Spring 2022 | Business Liaison | |
| | Establish and maintain a presence at domestic and international trade fairs for inward investors, once these open up again, such as MIPIM UK | Spring 2022 | Business Liaison | |

| Priority 5: Destination Woking Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|--|---|---------------|--------------------------|---|
| | Set up a fast track service including a rapid response team to make sure any inward investment enquiries are dealt with immediately and efficiently | Spring 2022 | Business Liaison/Estates | |
| | Resource fast track inward investment service with additional officer capacity and marketing collateral funded by the Masterplan budget | Spring 2022 | BLT/Planning Policy | |
| | Utilise political contacts such as local MPs to help promote the Borough via events locally within Borough and in Parliament. | Spring 2022 | Business Liaison | |
| DW 3: Build commitment of existing businesses and retain in Woking <i>Rationale: It is more cost effective and easier to retain existing businesses than attract new ones. Most of the office growth in Woking has been through expansion</i> | Map medium and larger businesses and prioritise the ones that are most important to keep e.g. expansion potential, exporters, large employers, knowledge businesses etc. Potentially purchase datasets such as mnAI ³⁰ to provide data and evidence to underpin Destination Woking service | December 2021 | Business Liaison | Commercial agents, landowners, Surrey Chambers, DIT, EM3 LEP, Surrey County Council |
| | Actively engage and liaise with priority businesses and encourage dialogue to understand their needs and respond flexibly e.g. planning advice, recruitment help, challenges impacting on their ability to remain in Borough | ongoing | BLT | |
| | Liaise with commercial agents and landowners regularly and understand what is happening in the market, current trends and challenges. Monitor competitor location activity and initiatives to ensure Woking's offer is current and relevant to rapidly changing market dynamics. | ongoing | BLT | |
| | Promote available commercial space to contacts in companies with expansion potential, or need to reformat space to accommodate business development | Ongoing | BLT | |

³⁰ [mnAI website](#)

Priority 6: Woking, centre of leisure, sport and culture



People have re-evaluated their priorities due to the pandemic. 77% of people in the UK say that it will change their behaviour permanently, with a new focus on enjoying simple pleasures (40%), friends and family (33%) and re-evaluating life priorities (28%) while 40% of people report having used outside spaces more.³¹ It points to a greater focus on quality of life, leisure and wellbeing for many.

The effects of the pandemic are likely to include more home working and hybrid home/office working which, along with the re-evaluation of people's priorities, will drive up demand for cultural, sport and leisure facilities and services.

Woking has an outstanding leisure, sport and cultural offer including the renowned Lightbox, the WWF Living Planet Centre, and the New Victoria Theatre, one of the largest outside London. The new restaurant quarter offers a range of eating and drinking experiences, while modern experiential shopping will continue to provide a retail offer to draw people into the town.

Greenspace in Woking includes walks along the canal and Woking Park while there are many nearby attractions including the Royal Horticultural Society at Wisley and the Surrey Hills AONB just a few miles to the south of the Borough. Woking Borough is predominantly Green Belt, although additional 'greening' of the town centre should be an aspiration to include in its future regeneration.

³¹ [The National Lottery Community Fund December 2020](#)

Nationally the Arts and Culture sector is an important contributor to the economy. In 2019 arts and culture generated £10.47 billion for the UK economy and provided an estimated 226,000 jobs. However, the sector has been severely impacted by the pandemic: in the fourth quarter of 2020 arts and culture economic output was 46% below the previous year having seen only limited recovery since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020³².

In Woking, the Arts Culture & Recreation sector accounts for 340 businesses or 6.48% of the total and provides 4,500 jobs or 9.6% of total employment, meaning it is important for employment and the local economy as well as its amenity and value to the wider community.

Business events such as Woking Means Business also bring people into Woking and benefit the local economy, underpinning our credentials as a business event and conference location, which have potential to grow further as new high-quality conference, exhibition and meeting space when the new Hilton Hotel is open.

Our priorities are to:

- Support Arts and Culture in Woking, including support for a programme of events and festivals to attract people to the Borough
- Promote Woking as a centre of culture as an integral part of its unique identity, encouraging as many residents as possible to patronise Arts and Culture in Woking
- Encourage businesses to engage with Arts and Culture e.g. through sponsorship and support
- Develop Woking as a regional destination for conferences, meetings and events, such as corporate launches, awards ceremonies, conferences

³² [Covid 19 and the Arts & Culture Sector, March 21, House of Commons research](#)

Priority 6: Woking, centre of centre of leisure, sport and culture: Action Plan

| Priority 6: Woking Centre of Culture Action Area: | Key actions | Timescale | Lead Team | Key partners |
|---|--|-------------|----------------------|--|
| <p>WCoC 1: Support Leisure, Arts and Culture in Woking</p> <p><i>Rationale: Arts and Cultural organisations have been severely impacted by the pandemic and often do not have cash reserves. There is funding but they lack resources to access it.</i></p> | Continue to support the 'Celebrate Woking' initiative post hiatus to promote culture, arts and diversity across the wider Borough. | Summer 2022 | Business Liaison | ACE, New Victoria Theatre, Woking Works, Surrey Chambers |
| | Continue to support wider leisure arts and culture across the Borough through the initiatives identified within Leisure Strategy, Cultural Strategy and Action Plan, Public Art Strategy, Playing Pitch and Outdoor Sports Facilities Strategy and forthcoming five-year plan. | Ongoing | CLT | |
| <p>WCoC 2: Support the events programme in Woking:</p> <p><i>Rationale: events will help A&C organisations to open up and recover</i></p> | Continue to support the organisers who develop and run the wide variety of cultural and arts events across the Borough. Assist in 'matchmaking' possible business sponsors and supporters with appropriate events. Maintain a 'watching brief' for events ability to drive footfall into the town and village centres. | | | |
| | Once open support the key venues ability to attract new conferences, meeting and events to Woking such as awards ceremonies and product launches. | Nov 2021 | Business Liaison | Woking Chamber |
| | Run business events such as Woking Means Business and Woking Careers Fair | Spring 2022 | Business Liaison | |
| | Encourage A&C organisations to take on running of events, attracting financial support such as sponsorship and local patronage. | 2022 | Leisure Services | |
| <p>WCoC 3: Business engagement with Arts and Culture</p> <p><i>Rationale: Good for business, helps them to reach audiences and good for arts and culture</i></p> | Encourage businesses to engage more with Arts and Cultural organisations e.g. through sponsorship, free events and awards, purchasing public art, artist in residence schemes etc. | Autumn 2022 | BLT/Leisure Services | ACE, DCMS |

Conclusion:



This Economic Development Action Plan for Woking's Recovery has been developed to dovetail with the pre-pandemic Economic Development Strategy, reflect the current Core Strategy and prepare the ground for the forthcoming Five-Year-Plan and the Woking Masterplan. It clearly sets out the evidence base as available in August 2021, identifies six thematic priorities, each with their own set of monitorable and measurable actions to be undertaken in the short-medium term.

We cannot at this time predict whether there will be future variants of the covid-19 virus, additional restrictions and even lockdowns. The global pandemic has thrown the best made strategies, plans and forecasts into disarray. We have however at the time of writing (August 2021) seen the UK starting to recover from the impact of the pandemic at an accelerated rate ahead of forecasts and expectations. The impact of the removal of government support is yet to be seen, as is the impact of the estimated £300bn of government debt accrued from April 2020 to April 2021. Accountants EY estimate that British businesses will have accrued over £61bn of debt by the end of 2021. Latent debt such as unpaid or deferred rent payments to landlords was estimated by the Financial Times in May 2021 at over £6bn, a figure some smaller landlords feel is underreported, especially across SME businesses. It is these unprecedented levels of public and private indebtedness which has the potential to undermine the national recovery should they continue to worsen or crystallise into punitive levels of taxation or commercial bankruptcies.

Woking as the most recent economic evidence shows is well-placed to recover, it has significant locational advantages, a strong business base and highly skilled population. The post-covid changes in people's attitudes towards work/life

balance, may end up supporting Woking's continued growth, as highly skilled and experienced workers choose to work locally rather than out commuting. The demand for employees in light of the absence of EU workers may pull local people into regular work that would have previously been underutilised or on living on state benefits. Even though still expensive, Woking's house prices are comparatively better value than most neighbouring authority areas, yet public services and access to education remain generally good.

Independent indices such as the Lambert Smith Hampton Vitality Index and Legatum Institute UK Prosperity Index both place Woking in enviably high ranking positions, at first and fourth respectively. Recognising the significant investment already made in the Borough and potential for future growth and prosperity. The core town centre is undergoing considerable regeneration with new commercial, retail and residential space coming on stream as we write, with additional investment in both local centres and neighbourhoods.

The pandemic did temporarily stall and slow down Woking's regeneration and development, however it quickly planned and initiated a raft of immediate actions to combat the impacts of covid-19 and is now firmly on the road to recovery, proactively addressing challenges and seeking out new opportunities that the post-pandemic economy offers. The actions identified within this plan will help Woking progress towards a sustainable, prosperous future. Growing and attracting businesses in fast developing sectors such as green technologies, IT & digital and creative industries including film and TV production. Having exemplary digital infrastructure will underpin the future for both Borough businesses and residents alike. Its well-qualified workforce able to adapt to more flexible working patterns will provide the labour to support local businesses as they take advantage of new opportunities as they emerge.