

## Equality Impact Assessment: Proposed removal of business support to local businesses and the Business Liaison Team

<b>Officer responsible for completing EIA: Business Liaison Officer</b>	<b>Manager responsible for EIA: Beverley Kuchar</b>
<b>Strategic Director responsible for EIA: Beverley Kuchar</b>	<b>Date last updated: 22 January 2024</b>

### 1. Introduction

This Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) seeks to identify impacts and effect of this proposal with the aim of assessing whether it would have a disparate impact on persons with a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. As part of this assessment, consideration will be given to ways in which any such impact can be avoided or mitigated, any negative impacts arising from this proposal will be assessed and where this could be reduced in their impact this will be noted in the attached action plan. The Council also recognises that it may not completely remove all negative impacts.

The purpose is to provide impartial information to assist in the decision-making process and inform rather than determine policy. The objective is not to make the decision but to assist decision makers through the provision of relevant information. This Equality Impact Assessment seeks to identify the impacts and effects on local businesses and specific groups from this proposal, and to detail any mitigating actions that will be put into place.

The Council faces a critical financial shortfall owing to its historic investment strategy which has resulted in unaffordable borrowing, inadequate steps to repay that borrowing and high values of irrecoverable loans.

To address these severe financial challenges the Council must make significant saving alongside taking steps to 'live within its means' in the future.

Widespread reductions and changes to public-facing services, alongside reducing management and internal costs, have been set out in the Council's [Medium Term Financial Strategy](#).

The Council is no longer able to support the Business Liaison Function, which is a discretionary service within the Place directorate. Staff resources are being reviewed accordingly, which will result in a £313,000 saving year on year. The savings proposals for the Business Liaison Team will be achieved through greater pooling of resources with partner organisations and redundancies.

Working with Surrey County Council is key in moving forward. Surrey County Council has also launched a new Careers Hub, a single service covering all of Surrey, who will work with all the county's secondary schools, special schools and colleges with the aim of ensuring every young person can find their best next step. Surrey County Council is engaging in discussions with Government on a Level 2 County Deal, which will support businesses across the whole of the county. A regional business support brand will be launched in April 2024, supporting local businesses in the boroughs.

Funding of £50,000 from the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), has been earmarked to establish an independent 'Place Board' for Woking, which will work collaboratively to attract inward investment and support local businesses.

## **2. Impact on services**

### **Direct engagement with businesses**

Woking Works has had a 'finger on the pulse' of the local economy via its annual business survey. Frequent engagement with businesses to date has also helped the team to be proactive since before the pandemic. Actions included face-to-face meetings with new businesses relocating to Woking and visiting established businesses within the villages, business parks and town centre. The borough's business, resident and visitor communities have also had the benefit of collaborative and networking opportunities between key businesses, partners and stakeholders, which the team has been instrumental in developing, for both sponsorship and in-kind support of events and services.

### **Specialised business advice clinics**

Businesses have sought help and advice from the Woking Works service, which will now be provided via the private sector at a direct cost to individuals, which may be a barrier to them seeking advice and impact their growth. Partnerships with Woking Chamber, Surrey County Council, and the Federation of Small Businesses will be key in providing future support to the business community across the county.

### **Marketing and promotion**

Since the economic crisis of 2008, when the Council reintroduced an Economic Development function within its services, and highlighted during and after the pandemic, and in the more recent cost-of-living crisis, the support most requested by local businesses was an opportunity to promote their goods and services more widely. This has been delivered to date via the Woking Works monthly newsletter, and ad hoc marketing and promotion.

### **E-communications**

At present the Woking Works website provides information from central Government about grants, as well as support, resources, and funding opportunities for businesses. These functions and related communications will either stop or need to be taken up by other service areas within the Council.

### **Destination Woking/ inward investment**

Business Liaison officers support initial contact with the Council from businesses and organisations looking to relocate to the Borough, by providing a point of contact which can directly help businesses make the case for choosing Woking via up-to-date stats and information. However, the Council's Place Branding project will help develop Woking's offer to businesses, investors and visitors.

### **Start up support**

The Start Up Woking scheme, including free business advice clinics, has been in place for around 10 years. New businesses will have to seek support from private sector organisations, which could prove to be a barrier to business setting up in the Borough. Partnerships with Woking Chamber, Surrey County Council, and the Federation of Small Businesses will be key in providing future support to the business community across the county. Support for starting a business is also available via the Prince's Trust.

### **Skills and careers support**

Officers have supported schools by being the liaison point between the businesses and education providers, ensuring work experience opportunities are created and widely offered. Schools and colleges may find it harder to engage with the business community and find opportunities for the future workforce in Woking. Surrey County Council may provide some support in future for educational organisations across the county. The Prince's Trust is there to support young people to gain experience, skills, training and confidence to help them get into work.

### **Delivery of the Economic Development Action Plan (EDAP) and Economic Development Strategy (EDS)**

Business Liaison has been instrumental in producing and helping to deliver the EDAP and EDS. The economy of the Borough is paramount, and this work is vital to develop the Borough's prosperity and growth. Through the EDAP and EDS the Council has an important role in creating and enabling opportunities for growth that are coordinated and managed.

### **Business retention support**

The Council's aspiration to retain and grow businesses would need to be managed externally by another body with appropriate knowledge and expertise.

The Business Liaison team represents a combined 75 years' worth of relevant knowledge across all the business areas, including key partners, local cultural organisations, stakeholders, colleges and secondary schools, local businesses across the borough, and other local authorities.

### **Working for Woking seminar**

Annually, the Business Liaison Team engages with the business community, by preparing and organising the Working for Woking business consultation. Its aim is to consult with local businesses formally about the National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), which The Council also uses this opportunity to inform the business community about the Council's financial position and its intended removal of the business support service (Business Liaison and Woking Works).

In October, the Working for Woking business seminar was followed by the Woking Means Business exhibition, at Woking Leisure Centre. The seminar was presented by the Council's CEO, Julie Fisher, and the Leader of the Council, Cllr Ann-Marie Barker. It was clarified during the event that partnerships with Woking Chamber, Surrey County Council, and the Federation of Small Businesses will be key in providing future support to the business community.

## **3. Engagement and consultation**

The Council has carried out public engagement on all proposed savings to ensure a balanced budget for the 2024/25 financial year.

The first phase of the engagement took place in summer 2023. Residents and businesses had the opportunity to have their say on how to tackle the budget shortfall. This is what they had to say about the economic impact. [Help shape the future of discretionary council services | Woking Community Forum](#).

### How should the Council tackle its budget shortfall?

How to tackle the shortfall	%
Find another organisation to deliver the discretionary service	32
Charge users more for discretionary services	20
Other (please specify)	20
Reduce discretionary services provided or funded	16
Increase Council Tax for everyone	10
Stop providing or funding discretionary services	4

32% of the sample mentioned that the Council should find another organisation to deliver discretionary services. Business support is a discretionary and therefore the Council does not legally have to deliver this service.

The second phase of the public engagement took place between 2 October and 12 November.

Residents and businesses had another opportunity to scrutinise the proposed savings and have their say. This included a range of options for finding further budget savings, such as increasing Council tax and making changes to the way services are delivered, which may mean reducing or withdrawing services, or indeed making revised charges or working with partner organisations.

[View the outcome of the public consultation](#), which will be reported to Council in January 2024 and a full Council decision on 8 February 2024.

### Staff consultation

The Phase 1 Consultation period ran from 24 July to 6 September. The Business Liaison Team has been directly affected by losing its team manager, who left the Council at the end of December 2023.

The Phase 2 Staff Consultation began on 22 November and will run to 10 January 2024. All remaining employees in the Business Liaison Team are involved in the Phase 2 Consultation and at risk of redundancy.

		Positive impact?			Negative impact?	No specific impact	<b>What will the impact be? If the impact is negative how can it be mitigated? (action)</b>  This section needs to be completed as evidence of what the positive impact is or what actions are being taken to mitigate any negative impacts
		Eliminate discrimination	Advance equality	Good relations			
<b>Gender</b>	Men					X	
	Women					X	
<b>Gender reassignment</b>						X	
<b>Race</b>	White					X	
	Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups					X	
	Asian/Asian British					X	
	Black/African/Caribbean/Black British					X	
	Gypsies / travellers					X	
	Other ethnic group					X	
<b>Disability</b>	Physical					X	
	Sensory					X	
	Learning Difficulties					X	
	Mental Health					X	Support for organisations in Woking have been signposted to external resources i.e. Catalyst, National Mind and private organisations.

<b>Sexual orientation</b>	Lesbian, gay men, bisexual					X	
<b>Age</b>	Older people (50+)					X	

Woking Borough Council – Equality Impact Assessment	Younger people (16 - 25)				X	<p>Woking Works signposts skills and training support, including free digital training, apprenticeship advice and the Steps2Work programme as well as support from The Prince's Trust for young people (age 16-25). For employers, we provide information on partner initiatives such as LSIP (Local Skills Improvement Plan), Numeracy and 'green skills'.</p> <p><b>Inspiring the future workforce</b> The objective of this initiative is to connect local businesses with schools and colleges, to support them with the following opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work experience.</li> <li>• Mock interviews.</li> <li>• National careers week.</li> <li>• Expert speakers (for example, to support BTech in Business).</li> <li>• The Brooklands Innovation Academy, Pinewood Futures Festival, etc.</li> <li>• Support for careers advisors at schools/colleges.</li> </ul> <p><b>The Careers Hub</b> A single service covering all of Surrey, will work with all the county's secondary schools, special schools and colleges with the aim of ensuring every young person can find their best next step. A team of dedicated Enterprise Coordinators will offer expert support to education providers in promoting possible employment options to the county's future workforce. This includes apprenticeships, degree courses and careers in growing and emerging sectors, such as green, cyber security and creative industries. The Careers Hub will also work closely with employers in all sectors across the county, developing encounters with businesses and workplace experiences which will improve employment outcomes for young people. <a href="https://surreycc.gov.uk/cabinet-reports/careers-provision-final-report">Cabinet Report - Surrey Careers Provision-final report.pdf (surreycc.gov.uk)</a></p> <p><b>Steps2Work</b> Steps to Work is a programme supported by Woking Borough Council and designed to equip 18- to 25-year-olds at particular risk of unemployment, with the tools they need to find a job that is suitable for them and which they can sustain. This project is funded by DWP and will end in March 2024.</p> <p><b>DWP</b> We have also partnered with Jobcentre Plus to help reduce the number of local Universal Credit claimants by promoting employment opportunities. We have also assisted in sector recruitment projects, specifically in the Care, Hospitality, and Digital sectors.</p> <p><b>Woking Job Board</b> The board will no longer exist. Other educational colleges nearby do offer these courses, we only supported the promotion of these courses. DWP will continue to support specific sectors.</p>
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<b>Religion or belief</b>	Faith groups					X	
<b>Pregnancy and maternity</b>						X	
<b>Marriage and civil partnership</b>						X	
<b>Socio-economic background</b>						X	
<b>Carers</b>						X	

### Generalised negative impacts

- Woking has a thriving business community. This community will be impacted and may need to find new networking opportunities to stay in touch with the local business community. There are many networking opportunities in Surrey and Woking Works will be able to signpost to these groups.
- Local businesses will be signposted to other organisations. Some of these operate on a membership basis and this may deter some businesses from joining.
- There will be little communication with businesses about local business intelligence.

### Possible mitigation factors

List of local networking opportunities local businesses will be signposted to:

- Business Buzz Surrey meetings
- Business Buzz (Guildford)
- Connect Surrey (Guildford)
- Connect Surrey (Woking)
- Federation of Small Businesses (Surrey)
- Get Connected (Guildford)
- Guildford Entrepreneur Networking
- LinkedIn Local (Guildford)
- Networking (Woking)

- Network My Club (Surrey Cricket Club)
- Omni Local Business Network (Guildford)
- Real Learning (Woking)
- Ribbons Network (Guildford)
- Ribbons Network (Woking)
- Surrey Event Professionals
- Surrey Chambers of Commerce
- Surrey Charity Network
- Woking Chamber of Commerce

In future local businesses will be signposted to seek direct support and advice from:

- [Woking Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Surrey Chamber of Commerce](#)
- [Federation of Small businesses.](#)
- [Woking Asian Business Forum](#)
- [Woking Community Foundation](#) – Assisting in the liaison with and promotion of the WCF to potential benefactors.
- [Enterprise M3](#) – Now part of SCC, aligning economic development with SCC and the LEP.
- [Surrey County Council Business Support](#) –The county has funds for a county-wide growth hub from the UKSPF fund from 2024/2025 and other grants for economic development.

### Action plan

Actions identified from EIA	Target completion date	Responsible officer	Comments
Liaise with Woking Chamber of Commerce to inform them of the impact of removing business support and how they can support local businesses.	31 March 2024	Beverley Kuchar	Conversations have started and will be ongoing. Identify a Council staff member to attend Woking Chamber of commerce (Executive) monthly meetings.
The Council's Place Branding project will help develop Woking's offer to businesses, investors and visitors. A Woking Place Board will be put in place by WBC so that the business community itself is	Summer of 2024	Beverley Kuchar	An external company Pavement is working closely with a WBC team to put this in place.

<p>enabled to take on more.</p> <p>The UKSPF (a central pillar of the UK Government's Levelling Up agenda) includes £50,000 fund priming for the Woking Place Board (which is what happens in other authorities without Economic Development functions) in partnership with the business community.</p>			
<p>Liaise with Surrey Chamber of Commerce to inform them of the impact on local businesses and how they can continue to support local businesses.</p>	31 March 2024	Beverley Kuchar	<p>Conversations have started and will be ongoing. Identify a Council staff member to have a monthly meeting with Surrey Chamber of Commerce.</p>
<p>Liaise with Surrey County Council to continue conversations of how the Careers hub and Future Skills Hub for young people will be promoted and benefit Woking schools and colleges.</p>	<p>Careers hub has launched. A regional business support brand will be launched early spring.</p>	Beverley Kuchar	<p>A new Careers Hub is set to inspire and prepare young people across the whole county for the world of work. The Careers Hub, a single service covering all of Surrey, will work with all the county's secondary schools, special schools and colleges with the aim of ensuring every young person can find their best next step.</p> <p>A team of dedicated Enterprise Coordinators will offer expert support to education providers in promoting possible employment options to the county's future workforce. This includes apprenticeships, degree courses and careers in growing and emerging sectors, such as green, cyber security and creative industries.</p> <p>The Careers Hub will also work closely with employers in all sectors across the county, developing encounters with businesses and workplace experiences which will improve employment outcomes for young people.</p>

			<p>The new Surrey-wide service went live last month (September) and brings together two separate Careers Hub services which have been operating independently within the county. Schools and colleges in East Surrey have been supported by Coast to Capital Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) since 2015 while Enterprise M3 LEP ran the service in West Surrey.</p> <p><a href="https://surreycc.gov.uk/cabinet-reports/cabinet-report-surrey-careers-provision-final-report.pdf">Cabinet Report - Surrey Careers Provision- final report.pdf (surreycc.gov.uk)</a></p>
<p>Liaise with Surrey County Council to continue conversations of how the Surrey Growth Hub can support local businesses as a result of the County Deal.</p>	<p>A regional business support brand will be launched early spring.</p>	<p>Beverley Kuchar</p>	<p>Following the Chancellor's announcement in the Autumn Statement regarding the extension of devolution and further County Deals, Surrey County Council is engaging in discussions with Government on a Level 2 County Deal.</p> <p>The proposed County Deal will see the devolution of the following functions to Surrey:</p> <p><b>Strategic role in delivering services</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Host for Government functions best delivered at a strategic level involving more than one local authority e.g. Local Nature Recovery Strategies.</li> <li>• Opportunity to pool services at a strategic level.</li> <li>• Opportunity to adopt innovative local proposals to deliver action on climate change and the UK's Net Zero targets.</li> </ul> <p><b>Supporting local businesses</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) functions including hosting strategic business voice. A regional business support brand is being launched 1 April 2024.</li> </ul> <p><b>Local control of sustainable transport</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to introduce bus franchising.</li> </ul>

			<b>Investment spending</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UK Shared Prosperity Fund planning and delivery at a strategic level (w.e.f. April 2025: District and Borough Councils will individually have control until then).</li> </ul> <b>Giving adults the skills for the labour market</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Devolution of Adult Education functions and the core Adult Education budget.</li> <li>Providing input into Local Skills Improvement plans.</li> </ul> <b>Local control of infrastructure decisions</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Homes England compulsory purchase powers (held concurrently).</li> </ul>
Inform The Federation of Small businesses on the impact of local businesses by the removal of the business support team.	31 March 2024	Business Liaison Team	
Create a holding page on the Woking Works website and signpost local businesses to other resources and organisations for support. Removal of website and Woking Works Social Media platforms,	31 March 2024	Business Liaison Team and Marketing and Communications Team	
Support the Woking Chamber of Commerce by transferring information from the Woking Works website to the Woking Chamber website.	31 March 2024	Business Liaison Team	The process has started. Continue until service is stopped.
Communicate with all local businesses in the Woking Works directory and inform them of the impact and signpost to alternative organisations for support.	31 March 2024	Business Liaison Team	Conversations with Beverley Kuchar to ensure local businesses are aware of changes in the service and support.
The Council needs to consult with local businesses formally about the National Non-Domestic Rates	Annually	Beverley Kuchar	Continues as an annual statutory function, but need to be confirmed who will take on this role. Could also be done as a letter to all Business Rate payers.

(NNDR), and also uses this opportunity to inform the business community about the Council's financial position. This will need to continue in future.			
Review EIA	Six months' time	EqlA Officer or Head of Service	Review as part of service and budgets.

### Sign off

<b>LEGAL SERVICES:</b> Completed	<b>DATE: 8 January 2024</b>
<b>STRATEGIC DIRECTOR:</b> Completed	<b>DATE: 22 January 2024</b>
<b>REVIEW PANEL MEMBER:</b> Completed	<b>DATE: 4 January 2024</b>

### For information only: Working in partnership

#### Private sector

Business Liaison has delivered on a significant amount of its objectives through its Woking Works partnership with the private sector. Partners have included NatWest Bank, the FSB, and Enterprise M3 LEP (now part of SCC), alongside local specialists in social media, marketing, employment law, and IT. Business Liaison Officers have also worked with key organisations on a variety of event delivery and sponsorship, including the setting up of the International Trade Forum.

#### Partner organisations

In future local businesses will be signposted to seek direct support and advice from.

- Woking Chamber of Commerce
- Surrey Chamber of Commerce
- Woking Asian Business Forum
- Federation of Small businesses
- Surrey County Council's Economy and Growth team
- Surrey's Boroughs and Districts

The Council has a seat on the Executive Committee of Woking Chamber and attend its monthly networking event. A nominated Cllr (Economic Development) will be on the Executive of the Woking Chamber.

These organisations primarily offer support to their own members. With no business liaison support activity, there is nowhere for these organisations to signpost businesses unless they pay to be members and even then, some are not able to provide in depth support. Part of their selling point to their members are the great connections to the Council, but this could be lost as they do not have links to all the different departments of the Council. There will be little communications with them about local business intelligence.

### **Visitor economy**

Support for the visitor economy has been provided through partnership with the Visit Surrey CIC (Community Interest Company). Local organisations and businesses can still use Visit Surrey and promote their business or event.

The Celebrate Woking project has stopped due to the current financial position of the Council. The Marketing and Communication team at Woking Borough Council is still promoting local community events via the Celebrate Woking website.

### **Marketing and promotion**

A key function of the team is to share information under its Woking Works and sub-brands with the business and resident communities. We promote Woking businesses and share their news stories through the following activities:

- Weekly Woking Works social media posts.
- Monthly Woking Works newsletters.
- Periodic e-shots on request, supporting and promoting partner events and information.

In addition, we advised business owners how to create and manage social media assets, content, and campaigns.

Local Businesses will have to take responsibility for their own marketing and promotion in future.

### **Other**

Other strategies led by Business Liaison Team include the Council's Digital Strategy (Head of Transformation and Digital) and the Public Realm Usage Policy (Commercialisation Team) will now be allocated to other teams within the Council.