

Draft notes of the Oxford Economic Growth Steering Group Meeting

Venue: Town Hall, Oxford City Council

Date: 11th June 2015

Attendees:

Cllr Bob Price, Oxford City Council (Chair)
Richard Venables, ProOxford Group and VSL & Partners (Vice Chair)
Anne Gwinnett, Oxford Brookes University
Robert Hetherington, Oxfordshire LEP
Sebastian Johnson, Oxford Strategic Partnership
Richard Rosser, The In Oxford Group / B4
Anne Augustine, Low Carbon Hub and Network Navigator OxLEP
David Hawes, Federation of Small Businesses
Tom Morris, Oxford City Council
Richard Byard, Oxfordshire County Council
Nick Scott-Ram, Oxford Academic Health Science Network
Llewelyn Morgan, Oxfordshire County Council
Hayley Beer-Gamage, Experience Oxfordshire
Terry Watts, City of Oxford College

1. Welcome and apologies

Cllr. Bob Price as chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies of absence were received from:

Dr Phil Clare, University of Oxford
Helen Brind, City of Oxford College
Jonathan Riggall, Peter Brett Associates
Lynn Shepherd, Chair of Venturefest
Laurie-Jane Taylor, City Centre Manager (City / County Councils)
Simon Cox, Centrica

2. Minutes of the last meeting and matters arising

The notes of the last meeting which had already been circulated were agreed with no amendments made. There was then an update on the work being undertaken both on the Visitor Welcome and the Town Team. A brief summary of the key points is set out below:

Visitor Welcome: Matt Peachey explained that there was a need for some further detailed discussions to take place with some of the key transport providers concerned with rail, bus and taxi operators. Cllr. Bob Price mentioned that Land Securities at Westgate were preparing some 'badging' / 'Branding' that they were working on to send a positive message

that Oxford is both welcoming and open for business. So any future branding needs to be consistent with this overall approach. Hayley Beer-Gamage said that Visit Oxfordshire considered that this was very important for the city and would work with the City Council and partners to develop the idea and branding and encourage other service providers such as hotel and restaurant operators to develop the proposition.

Town Team: Sebastian Johnson reported that the Oxford Town Team Partnership has recently visited cities such as Bath and Reading to explore how Business Improvement Districts (BID's) have been successfully developed. Discussions and training organised by a leading BID consultant has taken place with key members of the Town Team to make them aware of the challenges ahead both in terms of resources and timing. Richard Venables said that the BID's Team were meeting next Tuesday to discuss the project further. Linked to the Westgate, Cllr. Bob Price reported that Land Securities (Westgate) hope to have 50% of the tenants for the site signed up by the end of the year.

3. Business Survey 2015

Nicola Moss from Ipsos MORI provided a presentation of the findings of a recent telephone survey of SME's in Oxford and the immediate surrounding area. The survey comprised interviews of 386 SME's, which represented almost 10% of the total population of companies in the area. The survey sought to better understand the following:

- Priorities when locating in Oxford;
- Characteristics of their supply chain;
- Growth ambitions; and
- Barriers to recruitment and retention of staff.

The presentation set out the main findings of the survey in relation to each of these key areas of interest.

Note: The Executive Summary and the Full Report are available on the City Council's website at http://www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decB/Economic_Profile_of_Oxford_occw.htm.

Questions:

There then followed some questions and a discussion arising from each. These are some of the issues explored as follows:

Key problems identified: It was interesting that the evidence from the survey matched the anecdotal discussions that the Leader and Economic Development Team has had with local companies. Both had identified the key problems in Oxford to be affordability particularly lack of affordable housing; transport congestion and skills.

Comparison with other cities: Nicola Moss (MORI) confirmed that due to the precise nature of the questions it was difficult to make any meaningful direct comparison with similar cities. Although from the survey of Oxford residents also undertaken it was possible to compare the results with a similar but unknown city. This showed the scale of the problems in Oxford with Affordable living being score 46% by Oxford residents as opposed to 19% in the 'comparator Council'; whilst traffic congestion was of concern to 62% of Oxford residents but in the case of residents in the 'comparator Council' it was only of concern to 15% of residents.

International dimension: The survey highlighted the importance of Oxford's relationship to the international market with 40% of companies interviewed having customers based overseas. This finding supports the views of some companies met recently such as TripAdvisor and Harley Davidson who confirmed that the international language skills present in the Oxford labour market was a significant reason for locating in the city.

Flexible working hours: The survey found that some 82% of all companies interviewed had flexible working hours and 48% supported working from home. The subsequent discussion suggested that these practices were now widespread and to a degree reflected problems encountered in Oxford around traffic congestion and housing issues. It was cheaper for people to live outside the city and commute in as necessary but also to work from home as well.

Skills: David Hawes (FSB) said that in his view there was a 'skills gap' between the pace of technology moving faster than skills programmes / training. Richard Byard considered that the 'tight' labour market in Oxford is a symptom of a highly successful economy but there are programmes (Oxfordshire Business Support) and funding sources (ESIF and LGF) that are being used to target opportunities for improving the skills / training offer. Terry Watts (City of Oxford College) confirmed that the funding arrangements for educational providers is changing apace and there will be a need for further education colleges to work more closely with business to meet their skills needs. There is a need to engage more with young people to make them aware of the opportunities more business volunteers would be welcome. Interesting that high professional managers jobs are still difficult to fill, which to a degree reflects problems in attracting staff from other places such as London. So the problem of both attracting and retaining staff continues to be a real issue that needs to be tackled head-on (Anne Gwinnett)

Actions

- To ensure that these issues of particular importance to the SME's in Oxford and the surrounding hinterland are taken on board by the Economic Growth Strategy Action Plan;

- The Executive Summary and the Full Report on the Oxford Business Survey is put on the City Council’s website with links to the Oxford Strategic Partnership website. All members of the Steering Group will be provided with a direct link to these reports;
- The presentation of the key headlines of the Business Survey will be provided by Nicola Moss (MORI) to the OSP Board at the OSP meeting on 9th July.

4. Economic Growth Strategy – Action Plan

The Economic Development Manager (Matt Peachey) summarised how the refresh of the Action Plan is proposed to be taken forward and sought comments on its themes and direction of travel.

The refresh of the Action Plan was important to assess the progress made in working with partners to deliver the Economic Growth Strategy. Since the approval of the Strategy considerable work has been undertaken with key partner organisations through the City Deal, Strategic Economic Plan (SEP), Strategic Residential Land Availability Assessment (sub-region), Oxfordshire Engine for Growth Report, the Local Transport Plan (LTP4) and development of Smart Oxford vision and strategy. The local economy has made a positive recovery from the recession and is now showing signs of over-heating with a ‘tight labour market’, a shortage of office space in the City and an acute shortage of housing together with ‘affordability’ issues. But despite these challenges ahead the City-region has shown that it is the leading LEP in the country in terms of innovation. All these factors together provide the context for the re-focusing of the Action Plan. The original 11 elements of the Economic Growth Strategy have now been consolidated into 10 key areas of focus. These now comprise the following:

1. Deliver regeneration and employment sites that will support technology and knowledge based economic growth linked to our sector strengths and the global connections of Oxford’s Universities.
2. Effective business engagement and support for Oxford’s business voice
3. Develop a holistic city centre strategy, building upon the on-going ‘strengthening the city centre retail offer’
4. Expanding the value of Oxford’s tourism across the region
5. Continuing to improve education and skills attainment to support future economic growth opportunities
6. Increasing the annual rate of housing development in locations which are easily accessible to the city centre and other main employment areas by cycle, bus, and rail
7. Ensuring continuing investment in broadband, mobile infrastructure and new Smart Oxford initiatives for the benefit of all who live, work and visit the city
8. Achieving the opportunities presented by sustainable economic growth.
9. Investing in the physical and transport infrastructure to enable economic growth
10. Working in partnership to meet the growth and devolution opportunities for the city and wider region.

Comments from Group

Low Carbon: This should be continued to be seen as a key priority in a range of areas such as housing (construction methods), transport (innovative solutions), and accelerate commercial applications from research and development coming out of the Universities (Anne Augustine)

Partnership working: The importance of partnership working with neighbouring authorities, LEP, Universities and private sector remains the key to success in driving forward economic growth and delivering the housing, employment and associated transport for the city-region. The co-sponsored LEP, OSP and Oxford Civic Society event “The Oxford Sustainable Future Symposium” on 29th July will be exploring these issues (Anne Gwinnett)

Health sector: The Action Plan could be even more ambitious since Oxford is recognised nationally as the number one centre in the country for clinical excellence. The opportunities to take advantage of this position represent the ‘chance of a lifetime’ the city needs to make sure it positively responds. London companies can only grow so much, so if Oxford can provide the ‘grow-on’ space there are significant prospects for economic growth (Nick Scott-Ram). There are a number of major development sites coming forward in the near future that will provide space for the health sector and research and development these include Churchill, Northern Gateway, Oxpens, Osney Mead and Wheatley Campus (Cllr. Bob Price).

Energy Grid Capacity: Whilst there is major development planned for the future both in the City and surrounding districts such as Bicester Eco-Town there are potential infrastructure issues that are already causing problems at the moment. It appears that there are significant local ‘grid capacity’ issues that need to be resolved (Anne Augustine)

Actions

- The full Action Plan needs to be amended as necessary and then circulated as an early paper prior to the next meeting in September to allow the Group to consider in detail; (Economic Development Team)
- To seek further advice on the Energy Grid capacity issue and raise the matter with the LEP and Growth Board to make sure that solutions are explored and taken forward as a matter of urgency; (Anne Augustine, Economic Development Team and Bob Price)

5. Business Engagement

Business in Oxford 2015 and Oxfordshire Business Festival Week: Richard Rosser (B4) provided an update on the B4 event taking place on 30th June 2015, which opens the Festival. The take-up is already very good but there is still some capacity available so anyone wishing to attend or wanting to extend free invitations should contact Richard. The programme comprises a good range of presentations from some excellent speakers. The Oxfordshire Business Festival Week includes some 14 events in total the details of which were circulated to the group, the programme is also available on the Business festival

website at <http://www.oxfordshirebusinessfestival.com/>. The Festival concludes on the 8th July with Venturefest.

Oxford Business Voice: Richard Venables reported that more businesses have been contacted about taking forward the concept of an 'Oxford Business Voice', which will build on the successful Bucks 'model'. David Hawes (FSB) confirmed that this had been very successful in Bucks and offered his support to the development of an Oxford Business Voice.

6. LEP Update

Robert Hetherington explained that the LEP are focused on delivery, which had two key aspects. Firstly the delivery of contracts on the City Deal and the existing Local Growth Fund allocations to drive forward projects and programmes. The second aspect of delivery actively being pursued by the LEP is looking to the future and planning the delivery of contracts associated with the European Structural Investment Fund. The LEP are also awaiting decisions from Government about the allocation of the next round of the Local Growth Fund. The call for projects has resulted in the submission of 34 bids totalling £1.5bn and including a significant representation from the private sector which is most welcome. Robert confirmed that the LEP are formally a limited company which provides greater autonomy, flexibility and a measure of independence

7. Next meetings

The next meeting will be held on the Wednesday **16th September 2015** from 2.00pm – 4.00pm. The venue will be confirmed nearer the time but any offers for hosting are welcome.

Other meeting dates in 2015 are as follows:

- Thurs 10th Dec 2015, 10.00-12.00