

Business Engagement - Report to the Oxford Economic Growth Steering Group – December 2014

Purpose of this report:

This paper reports on recent business engagement led by Cllr Bob Price and Richard Venables and the key issues being raised by businesses and employers

Summary findings and recommendations:

1. Findings point to three key issues and challenges highlighted by businesses and key employers – housing (availability and affordability), transport (access to the workplace and inadequate public transport provision at the business and science park, parking and movement of goods and services) and skills (on a variety of levels from school leavers to professionally qualified). They all impact on recruitment and staff retention, housing of staff (and impact on in-commuting) and the potential sustainability and growth of businesses in and around Oxford.
2. Some businesses have stated that a “tipping point” exists where the challenges facing businesses will be so great that the business will consider leaving Oxford. Worryingly, some have had internal discussions about this and whilst that point hasn’t yet been reached it is possible that it may be reached. There is a real risk that unless we address some of the challenges that businesses face we will lose businesses and jobs in the city and county. We must find a way to better anchor some businesses into the Oxford economy and city culture
3. Engagement with the Local Enterprise Partnership and the need for a stronger business voice similar to the Cambridge Ahead model has been identified as a need by businesses
4. Bob Price and Richard Venables (supported by the City Council’s Economic Development Team and others) will continue to engage with businesses and report on themes and findings and will work to improve the business voice in Oxford

Introduction

Cllr Bob Price (Leader of Oxford City Council and member of the LEP) and Richard Venables (Oxford business representative on the LEP) have been engaging with businesses to explore the challenges and issues they face in and around Oxford so that we build a picture of how the City Council, the LEP and other organisations in the public sector might be better able to support the sustainability and growth of existing and new businesses in and around Oxford

In the last twelve months there have been three strands to this engagement:

- Business Leaders Roundtable
- 1:1 meetings with businesses and meetings with business groups
- Events - Business Breakfast and Business in Oxford 2014

1. Business Leaders Roundtable

On the 14th October the business leaders who met in March 2014 re-convened – the key issues for discussion were transport and Oxford growth (housing and employment sites). A copy of the thoughts and contributions from the discussion is attached as appendix one for information which includes a list of organisations represented (representing some of the largest employers in Oxford). The paper details five key areas that were discussed:

- The Oxford Welcome - For Oxford to compete as a visitor destination on the world stage we need to improve the “welcome and sense of arrival” in the city centre. Experience Oxfordshire will work with others to deliver a blueprint for a world class Oxford Welcome.
- Transport – update on transport plans for the city and a commitment to consult with all around the table on the Oxford Transport Strategy and recognition that the city is a victim of its own success in securing funding for the current and near future infrastructure projects
- Oxford Growth – presentation on the [Oxford Growth Strategy](#) and recognition for housing and employment site growth in a planned, developed and structured way alongside transport and infrastructure. Employers are asked to articulate priorities and preferences. The LEP can take the lead and press the districts (using the business majority) to act and support the growth of Oxford and Oxfordshire.
- The role of the Local Enterprise Partnership - greater private sector and business engagement is key – and exploration of new innovative ways to achieve this / make this successful and meaningful engagement where we learn the needs of businesses and how they run and how we can support them. Articulate much better about what the LEP is doing and why - both with private sector (and large public sector bodies) and the population of Oxfordshire.
- Next Steps – the group will re-convene in the spring to receive an update and comment on the Oxford Transport Strategy and the Oxford Growth Strategy and to review where we are and what we need to do to move Oxford forward and formulate the best outcome for Oxford and Oxfordshire.

2. 1:1 Business Meetings and Business/Network Groups

Cllr Bob Price and/or members of the City Council’s Economic Development Team have met with a number of businesses this year. These include:

- Blake Morgan
- BMW MINI Plant
- Carter Jonas
- Centrica
- Critchleys
- Harley Davidson
- Kingerlee
- Nominet
- Oxfam
- Oxford Product Design
- Peter Brett Associates
- Ridge and Partners
- Sharp Laboratories
- Trip Advisor
- Unicol
- Unipart

In addition we have met with business network and groups including the ProOxford Group, Oxford Academic Health Sciences Network, Oxfordshire Social Entrepreneurship Partnership and the Oxford University Knowledge Exchange Network.

Key themes that have emerged from discussions are:

- Impact of housing availability and affordability
 - on recruitment and retention of staff, particularly as staff mature and look to settle down – high prices drive them away from Oxford and result in either in-commuting or them securing employment elsewhere
 - some businesses are recruiting from a London pool and have had to create or expand London offices to part locate staff who can't afford to relocate to Oxford
- Transport in and around the city
 - particularly relating to public transport and accessibility to both the Oxford Business Park and Oxford Science Park
 - Limited car parking provision on Oxford Business Park and Oxford Science Park is a problem for some businesses and restricts growth potential and may even result in loss of growth and loss of jobs
 - the impact of the recent road works on Southern Bypass and concerns about impact resulting from future works
 - one business on the Science Park is running its own private bus service to ensure that staff can get into the office from the city centre (that way they are better placed to manage the impact of delays)
 - the proposed use of the Cowley branch line to passenger trains has been welcomed by all on the Business and Science parks – this can't happen soon enough for some
- Skills
 - Most businesses have good links with universities, but surprisingly some don't and where appropriate we have offered to make introductions
 - A number of businesses require strong language skills and find a good pool in Oxford
 - In some professional services the graduate pool has shrunk and this, alongside the perceived upturn has seen greater churn of staff resulting in salaries needing to be increased to compete with the Reading market which in turn is competing with the London market
 - Links to schools vary and, with some of the larger businesses strongly involved in local schools projects but others having no involvement. The same applies to apprenticeships
 - Some businesses express difficulties in getting young people who are "ready for the workplace"
- In-commuting
 - Linked to the housing issues outlined above are the numbers of staff who are commuting in to work from within the Country and much wider areas (London, Birmingham, Bristol are frequently mentioned) and the strain this puts on transport infrastructure, parking and delays in staff getting to work and the impact this has on the business and the work life balance and morale of staff (who are commuting for many hours each week).

- City Centre Location
 - Businesses in the city centre value being in the city centre and as they grow wish to stay in the city centre. However currently there is limited space available and some issues around quality of space as outlined by a business looking to move into the city centre
- Tipping Point
 - Some of the challenges facing businesses outlined above have led us to ask if there is a “tipping point” at which the challenges are so great that the business will consider leaving Oxford. Worryingly, some of our largest and fastest growing businesses have said that they have had internal discussions and whilst that point hasn’t yet been reached it is possible that it may be reached. Some of the businesses we have met have significant growth potential and we must do all we can to ensure that growth is realised in Oxford / Oxfordshire. There is a real risk that unless we address some of the challenges that businesses face we will lose businesses and jobs in the city and county. We must find a way to better anchor some businesses into the Oxford economy and city culture

Actions that are being taken forward:

- ProOxford Group reconvening in early 2015 to be consulted on the Oxford Transport Strategy
- Working with businesses on the Business and Science Parks for group meetings to discuss issues and be a forum for consultation on the Oxford Transport Strategy with County Council colleagues
- The City Council Economic Development Team together with Planning Officers and County Council Transport Team met with a business on the Business Park to discuss their operational transport problems particularly around lack of on-site parking. As a follow on it is understood that there will be a wider discussion on the transport, accessibility and car parking issues on the Oxford Business Park that will be chaired by Nigel Tipple (Director of the Local Enterprise Partnership). Those invited will include a range of individual companies; Goodmans (Management Company of Business Park); Bus operators; and perhaps the University / Hospitals Trust; together with representatives from the County Council’s Transport Team. This will provide useful evidence to feed into the consultation on the Oxford Transport Strategy
- County Council colleagues specialising in Public Transport are liaising with bus companies to discuss improvements to the frequency of bus services that serve the Oxford Business Park
- City Council Planning Officers are also in discussions with businesses about potential short term parking solutions and also liaising with the site owners
- We will continue to engage with businesses in the coming months and have highlighted a number of target businesses and are also in discussion with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) about a jointly promoted meeting with FSB members

3. Events

In April 2014 the first *Business in Oxford* event was held at the Said Business School with over 200 businesses represented. The focus was to engage, inform and inspire local businesses. Business in Oxford 2015 will be held on 30th June 2015 at the Said Business

School and will again be co-ordinated and run by B4. Richard Rosser will be updating the group on Business in Oxford 2015.

Spinning out of discussions at the Oxford Economic Growth Steering Group and in partnership with Venturefest we are working on a week of events branded as *Oxford Business Festival* which will commence with Business in Oxford 2015 on 30th June and conclude with Venturefest on 8th July 2015. Lynn Sheppard and Richard Rosser will update the group about plans.

The City Council together with the County Council and the Local Enterprise Partnership jointly hold some Business Breakfast events during the year. This year they have been very well attended with around sixty people in total and have provided an excellent forum for the public sector to collectively engage with local businesses and companies on important issues that directly affect the local economy. The themes have included 'The Low-Carbon Economy – What it means for business'; and recently the future spending priorities of the Local Authorities and the strategic long-term vision for the Local Enterprise Partnership.

4. Future Plans for Business Engagement

As outlined above we will continue with 1:1 business meetings, meetings with business groups and networks and events.

In addition, Richard Venables is preparing a paper on improved business engagement through the Local Enterprise Partnership and the creation of a business voice that might have the same impact that the [Cambridge Ahead](#) group has had in Cambridge. We will support Richard in any way we can.

There is also an opportunity emerging through the City Council for a business survey being commissioned with Ipsos MORI and we would welcome involvement and participation from members of the Oxford Economic Growth Steering Group in ensuring that we focus and target the survey in the best way to guarantee useful data and real value.

SJ (Dec 2014)

APPENDIX ONE

Thoughts and contributions from the Leaders Roundtable on 13th October 2014

The Oxford Welcome:

- For Oxford to compete as a visitor destination on the world stage we need to improve the “welcome and sense of arrival” in the city centre.
- This is an important quality of life issue for residents as well as visitors.
- Experience Oxfordshire will work with others to deliver a blueprint for a world class Oxford Welcome early in the new year.

Transport:

- We were challenged to explore what more can be done to work with employees to change perception, incentivise, educate and support alternative modes of transport through travel planning.
- We discussed how the wider business community could own this and for there to be the will to help to implement it rather than focus on the consequence of change and that change being unpalatable.
- If businesses are to be asked to pay towards the transport infrastructure we need to enable / encourage the private sector to find solutions that can be marketed elsewhere. This links to the Smart City work already being led by City, County, universities and LEP.
- Need to recognise that in Oxford some of the biggest employers are public sector (including health and education) and we need to be aware of the needs of all sectors and their customers (e.g. the hospitals).
- It was noted that Oxford is a victim of its own success – more funding coming in for road / transport projects results in greater disruption.
- It was agreed that there is an open door for transport planners to talk to all businesses represented at the meeting.

Oxford Growth:

- A successful economy has led to serious problems; the challenge is how future growth is planned, developed and structured – housing, infrastructure, employment sites. Employers are asked to articulate priorities and preferences.
- There is an agreed need to break out of the ‘politics’ and get business support and business leadership on the need for the growth of Oxford as outlined in the presentation, including green belt review and urban extensions.
- Business voice in Cambridge is joined up and forceful. How can we replicate that in Oxford / Oxfordshire and win the argument with the rural district councils and agree a common way forward for growth around Oxford? There is an appetite and keenness for businesses to play a role in getting the district councils to act – we need to find a way to do this that works for all.
- The Cambridge Ahead group has no local government representation but local government (and central Government) responds to the lead provided by business. In

Oxford, business can take us to a different space and different debate if there is a major expression from business.

- City Deal led to a clear strategy – we have a “proto-framework” on which to build following an agreed strategy on growth, what follows is infrastructure and housing. *Oxfordshire Innovation Engine* report referenced fragmentation – use existing structures and resources rather than setting up more business voices.
- There are numerous networks in Oxfordshire but there has never been an overarching voice; the LEP should pull them together.
- Networks work because people come together, people meet – a common agenda / issue. If local government doesn't hear from business it's either because business doesn't care or, more likely, business and local government is not having an informed conversation.
- More innovation required in engaging with business. It seems that the same approach is used each time and gets the same poor result (Einstein - Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results).
- A deep frustration with the political process is felt by many.

The role of the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP):

- The LEP can take the lead in developing the proto-framework and press the districts (using the business majority) to act and support the growth of Oxford and Oxfordshire.
- Greater private sector and business engagement is key – and exploration of new innovative ways to achieve this / make this successful and meaningful engagement where we learn the needs of businesses and how they run and how we can support them.
- Find the hooks for national and international investment.
- Articulate much better about what the LEP is doing and why - both with private sector (and large public sector bodies) and the population of Oxfordshire.
- Use existing reports, research and data to make the balanced case e.g. Oxford Futures Report by Oxford Civic Society.

Next Steps:

- Over the next few months the work of the Growth Board (chaired and managed by West Oxfordshire District Council) and the Local Plan enquiries for Cherwell and Vale will clarify housing plans. This, together with the election approaching in May 2015 and the clearer picture on possible devolution and likely impact and changes / opportunities for LEPs suggests that a further meeting of the Group in the Spring (March 2015) would be a good time to review where we are and what we need to do to move Oxford forward and formulate the best outcome for Oxford and Oxfordshire.
- All present are encouraged to liaise with Richard Venables in his capacity as Oxford business representative on the LEP about how we should be linking with the LEP. In addition those present are encouraged to meet with the LEP Chief Executive, Nigel Tipple, and make the case for Oxford growth.

- It was agreed that any pressure that can be exerted by business on national and local politicians will help – including contact with PM (bearing in mind he’s also a local MP) as well as Ministers, MPs and Leaders of local authorities. Also pressure and lobbying that can be exerted by business on the LEP will help (through Chair, Board Members and Chief Executive).
- The group felt that there may be merit in creating a forum for businesses to talk to the District Councils collectively and make the case of Oxford growth.

Cllr Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council

Sebastian Johnson, Principal Economic Development Officer, Oxford City Council

October 2014

Organisations represented at the Leaders Roundtable:

- *Centrica plc*
- *Experience Oxfordshire*
- *Four Pillars Hotels Group*
- *Kingerlee Ltd*
- *Land Securities*
- *MINI Plant Oxford*
- *Oxfam*
- *Oxford Brookes University*
- *Oxford City Council*
- *Oxford Town Team*
- *Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust*
- *Oxfordshire Business First Group*
- *Oxfordshire County Council*
- *Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership*
- *ProOxford Group*
- *Unipart Group Ltd*
- *University of Oxford*
- *VSL and Partners*