

Business Leader's Discussion, 3rd March 2014

Purpose of this Paper:

- To report on the thoughts and contributions for the Business Leader's discussion held on 3rd March 2014
- To update on next steps to reconvene the group in October 2014

1. Thoughts and contributions from the Business Leader's discussion on March 3rd 2014

Skills and Recruitment:

- The City Council initiative to establish close partnerships between businesses and schools was strongly endorsed. Smaller businesses could be encouraged to work together in a partnership arrangement if they were not able to take on the involvement as a single business. These partnerships could also work with teachers to influence and contribute to the syllabus and teaching programmes, and seek to inspire young people with career aspirations through structured careers advice.
- Service sector employers felt that the sector was suffering from the belief that employment in e.g. retail and hospitality was low skill and temporary rather than providing rewarding careers; partnerships with schools would help to dispel that image and allow career opportunities to be explained and discussed.
- Schools had lost their careers services and were focused exclusively on delivering the curriculum. Many had little idea as to the range of opportunities outside further education, such as apprenticeships or practical training. Ensuring effective close links between business and schools is essential.
- Many employers are actively seeking to recruit from outside the local labour catchment. Staff are being recruited from the Midlands and the rest of Europe with higher levels of skills and motivation. In addition, older staff are seen as having a stronger commitment to employers.
- Raising the educational attainment of all local state schools to the national average within a set period, and then taking this to above average was seen as a necessary step.
- Schools are now finding great difficulty in recruiting and retaining high quality teachers and senior leaders because of the lack of affordable housing. This is leading to a high turnover of staff which is affecting attainment. The City Council is funding a senior staff shared equity housing scheme, but more needs to be done.

Employment Growth and Inward Investment:

- Growth and inward investment is hampered by some key factors: very high housing costs, lack of suitable sites and premises, restrictions on parking and

poor transport infrastructure. The perceived low quality of maintained secondary education was also identified as a significant problem in some instances.

- Housing costs are impacting on recruitment in all but the highest employment grades, and improved rail links with London will reinforce house price growth.
- There is a shortage of sites and premises for firms to expand or locate in the city. City centre offices are in short supply and are under pressure from competing uses. As an example a hotel group has purchased an office building for hotel redevelopment near the Westgate redevelopment. The Northern Gateway and Oxpens developments are seen as important opportunities. There are also potential opportunities at Osney Mead and to improve the established employment areas in the south and east of the city. Improved connectivity and public transport are essential to support this, and the potential for investment in the Eastern Arc transport programme and a potential station on the Cowley branch line were emphasised.
- In the visitor economy, inward investment is hampered by some key aspects of the visitor experience: poor standards of customer service from some public facing outlets, and poor visitor information and facilities at the park and ride sites, city car parks and the rail station.

Infrastructure:

- Housing costs and the availability of suitable housing in reasonably close proximity to key workplaces, especially in the east and south east of the city are key problems.
- The need for comprehensive transport strategies for the city centre and Headington were emphasised. Elements of the strategies would need to be ambitious rather than incremental. For example a direct link from A40 to the JR Hospital would provide significant relief on the local road network.
- Lack of public transport links that connect locations around the outskirts of the city rather than simply the hub and spoke system that dominates currently.
- A business based in one of the business parks in the south east of the city cannot use their office to the full because there is not enough parking, staff live at a distance and there are no adequate public transport links.
- Congestion at peak periods on the ring road and the A34 and A40 - and the peak periods being very lengthy.
- Improved management of existing bus and parking resources through information and IT could increase effective capacity.
- Improved broadband is vital for all businesses – especially for tourists and small businesses in the creative and cultural sectors.
- Flooding and the infrastructure requirements were raised. The general sense was that business was unlikely to contribute funding directly to flood infrastructure.

Demographic Changes:

- School/business links are seen as the key to ensuring that the workforce of the next 25 years is enabled to develop its skills in the best way possible for local employment opportunities.
- The expected levels of in migration (from within and outside the UK) means that more houses must be provided in the city area and extensions.

Links with the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP):

- The larger employers would welcome regular (bi-annual?) 121 meetings with the LEP.
- For SME's a web based forum or format would be helpful to allow businesses to engage without having to commit to meetings.
- In general, forum meetings, bringing together groups of Oxford employers such as those present on this occasion to discuss the direction of the Oxford and Oxfordshire economy with LEP officers and Board members would be valuable. An attraction of these meetings for SME's is the opportunity to network and sell. Opportunities to grow/promote business are well supported.

2. Next Steps

The group will be reconvening in October 2014 so that we can report on progress and discuss how the issues that we identified as priorities are developing and being addressed.

Cllr Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council
David Edwards, Executive Director, Oxford City Council
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