

Draft Economic Growth Strategy - Responses from businesses through ProOxford

At the Steering Group meeting held on 20th December 2012, Richard Venables noted that a limited number of responses to the consultation had been received from business and offered to circulate the Strategy to contacts in the ProOxford Group for comment.

Richard included his own comments and the following three additional comments were received in January 2013

1. Comment from Richard Venables, Director, VSL and Partners

On the whole I think the report is extremely interesting reading and well researched.

A Holistic View

Economic development does not observe political boundaries. Oxfordshire needs a single economic strategy whilst at the same time I understand and applaud the City Council's efforts. I believe there needs to be a review of the Green Belt and locations such as Grenoble Road in South Oxfordshire and Begbroke and Langford Lane in Kidlington offer great locations for business development and economic growth.

Transportation

Whilst this is at no 10 in the list almost every business I speak to has some complaint about the Oxford transport system. We are not unique as a region but the A40 and Peartree interchange is in desperate need of change. The Chiltern Evergreen 3 project which will provide a new train service from Oxford directly to Marylebone will be a catalyst for growth. There is to be a new parkway station at Water Eaton to the north of the city and south of Kidlington. This could provide an excellent opportunity for economic growth but is surrounded by Green Belt and is probably too late to look at changing this to Peartree but it just looks at such a missed opportunity.

Private Sector Development

The new economic growth will be led by the private sector. It is highly unlikely that any new speculative office or industrial development will occur within the next 24 months until business confidence returns. This will however be a strategy for the mid to long term.

Inward investment vs Existing businesses

I have always found that Oxford is a place that grows businesses rather than attracts new business. I do not want to shun new business but history tells me we have a strong homegrown supply of businesses who we should prioritise.

Land Supply

Land supply in Oxford is extremely limited and the only major site for new development will be northern gateway and potentially the Oxpens area. Unless Oxford is prepared to radically change its Green Belt policy then larger development opportunities have to focus outside the city boundaries such as towards Kidlington or South Oxfordshire.

Retail

Oxford is in desperate need of a retail makeover and is the embarrassing poor cousin to Reading, Milton Keynes, Cheltenham and Bicester Village. The Westgate Centre can significantly enhance the appeal of Oxford but parking and transportation need to be looked at at the same time. I know traffic management is being looked at on the St Frideswide Square area and really needs to be fast tracked to keep city centre traffic moving.

Oxford v Cambridge

I often feel comparison between the two areas is misjudged and that Oxford is an intrinsic part of Oxfordshire. If you match Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire together you have two very contrasting areas where Oxfordshire shows a huge diversity of business types and business numbers.

2. Comment from Robert Kirtland, Managing Director, Critchleys

I largely agree [with Richard's comments]. In addition to your points I would highlight:

- I. Planning policies to provide more city centre quality office space, Macclesfield House is due to be lost, a vibrant city centre needs people working in it.
- II. Planning policies to support development of the Universities as the engine of economic growth in the city, student numbers are effectively capped by government so they don't need to worry about expansion, but we do need to develop both Universities buildings and environments to maintain their attraction to students

3. Comment from David William, Director, Meeson Williams Ltd

- I. Oxford city's economic function cannot be considered separately from Oxfordshire as a whole. The city is undoubtedly the intellectual engine driving innovation and economic growth in the County.
- II. In my experience, only companies with a clear operational need to be in the city will locate there. Usually this would be linkage to the Universities or labour supply. Oxford is a small city and the heritage must be protected.
- III. The Strategies listed are far reaching and comprehensive, but my concern is the ability to achieve these. Some of these issues have been discussed for years (if not decades) and with funding limitations I would suggest a policy of progress by

‘marginal gain’ by making rapid small beneficial changes which collectively add to up a great deal. The main danger to Oxford(shire) is being left behind on the global economic stage.

- IV. I have attached our latest Oxfordshire Market Review, which analyses commercial property supply and demand. In short, Oxfordshire (like many Counties) is running short of commercial units which are fit for purpose. For example, there is very limited supply of science/laboratory units. Property is one only element and needs to be considered alongside transport, housing, schools, broadband, etc. Again, ‘marginal gain’ is the likely course of action until major developments come on stream and encouragement and support should be given to refurbishment and modernisation of buildings to suit modern requirements.
- V. I have expressed my view in the past that Oxfordshire could take a lead on creating a single web portal for information on the County. Most business relocations are local, but the county does need to attract inward investment and it is surprising how difficult it is to find information using the web. If you are based overseas, for example, you do not have the knowledge (or desire) to research everything, and I have done this exercise for other locations including Cambridge. The web portal could have brief core information and then links to private and public sector ‘partners’ such as schools, town websites, residential and commercial property agents, etc.

4. Comment from Steve Clarke, James Cowper LLP

Steve Clarke forwarded a copy of the report *“Oxford v Cambridge Technology Survey: Which city provides the best environment for technology businesses”* produced by PEM Technology, Kreston International and James Cowper.

An extract from the conclusions of the report read:

“Our survey revealed there may be room for strengthening these existing regional advantages for both Oxford and Cambridge. Specifically by further developing the commercial approach and success of University knowledge transfer - whether it be on a business support basis or in graduates’ commercial skills. However, lifestyle costs and regional infrastructure development may cause barriers to attracting desired highly skilled professionals to meet recruitment demand.

During the recessionary period ahead, technology clusters and regional leaders must pay special attention to the development and migration of quality staff– specifically the retention and production of skilled and professional staff.”

The report is attached as appendix 1.

5. Comment from John Cole on behalf of Morgan Cole LLP

I remain firmly of the view that the strengthening of the city's retail offering (by an early and successful re-development of the Westgate and the parking and transport links to it) is the most important thing to be done in the short term. I think this will have a beneficial effect on tourism, and therefore spend in Oxford, as well as improving Oxford as the place to which new businesses can be brought. I think that should then lead to a review of the transport infrastructure and, who knows, a rather more innovative solution to the very difficult transport issues that affect the city.

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