

Business Roundtable with Rt Hon John Hayes MP 20 April 2018

Meeting Note

This note has been structured around the 5 Industrial Strategy foundations (ideas, people, infrastructure, business environment and place) rather than in the order in which the points noted were actually raised. However, there are inevitably some points which relate to more than one foundation e.g. some of the challenges which are attributed to people and skills are a product of the place and its perceived attractiveness.

Ideas

Partners in the area are using R&D to focus on key priorities in agri-food/agri-tech and aligned industries to ensure that local businesses can be world leaders. Local facilities include e.g. the National Centre for Food Manufacturing which is a fantastic resource for local business. Engineering and robotics are part of the vision for the future shared by local partners.

People and skills

Automation will increasingly mean the disappearance of low-skill jobs.

It is a challenge to attract people with the right high-level skills into the area, or even to recruit them to courses which will produce those skills. The area has great schools but young talent often chooses to leave the area reporting a lack of vibrancy outside the work environment, and insufficient entertainment opportunities. Boston College has secured capital funding to develop a manufacturing and technology centre, but needs to be able to afford to run and recruit to such courses.

The area needs to **better align skills with business needs and career opportunities**. This is beginning to happen but business representatives noted a continuing disconnect between the skills which businesses say they need, and the opportunities training providers are offering. Providers need to be more responsive to business needs and the Department of Education needs to be more closely involved with skills.

Infrastructure

The district is pro-growth and the recently successful Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) bid for the Spalding Western Relief Road (SWRR) will unlock land for 4,000 houses.

The potential for a rail hub has been much discussed previously, but has probably passed.

The potential to extend the M11 animated the discussion, but it was noted that this is unlikely to happen. There was consensus, however, around the need to improve connections to the A1 and specifically to **plan and lobby for improvements (part-dualling) to the A16, A17 and A47**. The current "pinchpoint" approach was regarded as generally appropriate (with the Hardwick roundabout noted as a priority) given the absence of funding for complete dualling.

Regarding power, the disconnect between supply and demand in our energy market was noted, along with the need to end restrictions on developing speculative supply capacity. Amongst those

present, power supply and capacity was not reported to be a problem "as long as you can pay the money" required for a connection. The anticipated increase in electric cars was noted as a game-changer on the demand side, however.

Public transport was generally noted to be poor with connections to Kings Cross via Peterborough and weekend/evening services linking Spalding Town Centre to just about anywhere mentioned as particularly problematic.

Mobile phone and broadband cold spots still persist. Addressing this should be treated as top priority.

Business Environment

We need to support small businesses as well as larger employers e.g. through action on business rates which has a disproportionate effect on small business.

The FEZ presents a real opportunity to develop and enhance the local business environment.

Place

Participants discussed the need to identify the USP of South Lincolnshire and build on it – but a note of caution was sounded about focusing too much on food and agriculture. There is lots of **broader manufacturing and engineering** across the area. Failure to promote this wider offer may be part of why the area is not generally perceived as attractive

This is traditionally a low skill/low wage area, with the ambition to transform into a high skill/high wage environment. There is a pattern, however, of failing/dying market towns and the poor retail offer makes place-marketing a real challenge. **Town centres need re-imagining and we perhaps need to consider the quality of the housing offer. Could an enhanced housing offer play a role in attracting the skilled workforce which the area needs?**

Anecdotally it was noted that migration to South Lincs in the recent past has been driven by relatively cheap housing pulling in people from further south. However, low interest rates currently mean that people working in or near more expensive housing markets in the east and south east of England are better able to afford to remain in those areas. As interest rates increase, perceptions of the attractiveness of South Lincolnshire may improve again.

We have perhaps been too narrowly focused on single issues. **If we could develop a consensus around a single vision/single challenge we would be in a better position to resource and deliver it.**