

Golden opportunity

Insider's breakfast event debated whether the North West should compete or collaborate with the original golden triangle of Oxford, Cambridge and London

Partners in the developing Cheshire Science Corridor outlined their vision to create a "new golden triangle" in the North West last year, linking science, technology and innovation within Cheshire, Manchester and Liverpool. The area, they said, has scope to rival London, Oxford and Cambridge.

At Insider's event, on 25 September at Alderley Park, speakers discussed the viability of a new golden triangle and how it should be promoted to attract further investment. "The northern golden triangle is marketable on an international stage," said Julian Cobley, managing director of the Skills & Growth Company (Cheshire East).

Among its assets is Alderley Park. The former AstraZeneca site has been a bio hub for the past four years. The site is expanding further with the Glasshouse set to open next year. The 150,000 sq ft building will cater for high-tech businesses.

Alderley Park's managing director Chris Doherty said he had already received interest from gaming, app and health tech companies. He said: "We like the interplay between tech and life science. There is a lot coming through in that area – apps for Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. This part of the world has a lot of tech companies, we'd like to make the most of them and agglomerate them in our new tech centre."

For Cobley, success will mean the North West pulling together in a compelling way: "This is about complementary offers. There is something here for everybody, depending on the size of business. If you want a rural campus, that could be an offer from Cheshire. There's an offer from Manchester and Liverpool, and though they are distinctly different we should



Colin Sinclair

present them as one, giving people choice. We need find a way to get a consistent message out to the international market."

Colin Sinclair, chief executive at the Knowledge Quarter Liverpool, added: "If we're going to be globally competitive for inward investment we need a bigger proposition. Investors want scale."

His advice was for each player within the new golden triangle to focus on a world-class strength – such as infectious disease in Liverpool, for example. "Our mantra at the Knowledge Quarter is 'disruptive collaboration'. Let's make positive noise, change perceptions and change the market. If we can do that the scale is exciting. The government needs good news now and this could be a good story to balance GVA and improve the economy in the north."

There will be times when the north will need to bid for national investment, said Sinclair: "Where we have to compete, we should. But most of the time we should collaborate so that when these government bids

Speakers

Chris Doherty
 managing director,
 Alderley Park

Peter Simpson
 chief scientific officer,
 Medicines Discovery
 Catapult

Colin Sinclair
 chief executive,
 Knowledge Quarter
 Liverpool

Mark Street-Docherty
 chief executive,
 Elucigene
 Diagnostics

Ruth Roberts
 director and co-founder,
 ApconiX

Julian Cobley
 managing director, Skills
 & Growth Company
 (Cheshire East)

Cliff Kirby
 chief executive,
 NeedleSmart



Julian Cobley



Chris Doherty

[come through] one of us on the Manchester, Cheshire, or Liverpool axis wins it and the investment comes here."

Among the latest developments in Liverpool, he said, was the Digital Innovation Factory, which secured £5m funding from the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Single Investment Fund. Over ten years the economic boost to the city region is an estimated £44.5m.

The lower cost of living in the north may also make the new golden triangle potentially more appealing, compared with the south. Doherty said: "We get more interest now from folks in the South East who can't expand. Here there is a great opportunity for north-shoring."

Beyond Brexit

With the European Medicines Agency (EMA) set to relocate from London to Amsterdam in 2019, Brexit was a recurring topic at the

HEADLINE SPONSOR



SPONSORED BY



Ruth Roberts



Mark Street-Docherty

event. Ruth Roberts, a director and co-founder at nonclinical safety company ApconiX, said the move would impact on the sector.

She explained that in the past ten years, 70 per cent of medicines registered in Europe went through the UK agency. "We don't know what's going to happen. The worst it could be is that the UK becomes completely separate and if you want to register a drug in the UK, it would have no relevance anywhere else in the world. If a UK-based company wants to register a medicine in Europe they will go to Germany or elsewhere and we will be left out of the innovation loop. It's not the commercial thing that concerns me, it's being at the cutting edge of innovation. We're there now, but after Brexit I am fearful we won't be. I am also optimistic, because I am sure we will find a way. Right now I don't know how that will work."

She had already experienced the effect of the UK's imminent exit from the European Union on her business. "We've just gone through a round of recruitment and one of the top candidates was from the European Union," she said. "We couldn't offer him certainty about what would happen after Brexit, so he decided it was too much of risk."



Peter Simpson



Cliff Kirby
 chief executive, NeedleSmart

NeedleSmart is a product that destroys a hypodermic needle at the point of use. It also gathers data on where the needle was used and the drugs admin-

istered. Cliff Kirby is on the verge of launching the product having raised £9m in funding.

He said: "When I had the idea, it was a bit like *Dragons' Den*. I went in to ask for an amount of money and they said 'we're prepared to give you this much in return for X amount of the company'. That would have been a lose-lose result, he said. After building a working cashflow using his corporate background, Kirby took the idea to London because he wasn't meeting the right investors in the north. "A lot of the investment capital in this area has always been institutional funding whereas 80 per cent of my investors are through EIS [Enterprise Investment Scheme]."

Kirby added: "We have 18 feasibility trials about to start, a CE mark due to us at the end of October and have international sales lined up. We're already talking to Chinese partners."

Mark Street-Docherty, chief executive of Manchester-based molecular diagnostics company Elucigene Diagnostics, said that although the business was growing, uncertainty had stalled some plans. "Sixty-five per cent of our revenue comes from Europe," he said. "We have a distribution model but we have critical mass in some countries

where it doesn't make sense to have a distributor anymore. Will we be able to directly supply through Europe as we do now? If we need an authorised representative, that will change our plans."

A hard Brexit, he added, could result in Elucigene operating a European base alongside its Manchester site. The company may also delay decisions about an investor exit until there is more clarity about what Brexit means to the business.

Peter Simpson, chief scientific officer at the Medicines Discovery Catapult, took the approach that there are some things we can influence and some we can't. "We need to focus on what we can do. We need to make the case to the government that innovation is our way forward for the UK. The government hopefully does recognise that future opportunities in digital health, tech and life sciences require them to be a player with the private sector."

Simpson believed a Manchester-Cheshire-Liverpool partnership should complement the existing golden triangle. "We should be proud of what we are and not look enviously over our shoulder at Cambridge and Oxford. We should see them as an asset we can tap into and benefit from."

The Medicines Discovery Catapult is already doing this. In September it announced that together with Cambridge-based Optibrium and Intellegens it had secured a grant from Innovate UK to fund a £1m project. The aim is to harness the power of artificial intelligence.

He reiterated: "It's important that people recognise what you can and can't do. Manchester is known for advances in two-dimensional materials, for its health data strengths and its digital strengths. Liverpool has put a huge amount of effort into materials innovation and infectious disease; Cheshire is a hub of drug discovery. In the life sciences space, each of us is part of a puzzle. So as long as everybody recognises what they are good at and not good at they can see a compelling reason to work together." ■