

**SBC Environment and Economy Select Committee
Business & Technology Centre
Some observations and questions by Jim Brown**

In addition to some of the thoughts expressed at our earlier meetings I wonder if we can formalise some of the ideas expressed at or inspired by the visit to BTC on Tuesday 7th July. Mine include:

Incubator

Beforehand I had been given a completely wrong impression. I thought the whole, or certainly most, of the BTC was an incubator centre. I was shocked to find that only about 4% (check my facts) of the spaces is devoted to start ups businesses.

Thus is the incubator area big enough? Is the BTC overwhelmed by demand for that space, perhaps having to turn people away, or is it actively going out to recruit newcomers.

For us does the small incubator area actually meet SBC's ambitions for the BTC when the Council supported the establishment of the centre and then its expansion.

Peter Cabon, Wenta discussed the demand for start up incubator space at the site visit on Monday 6th July. He described demand as varied with clear peaks and troughs, desk space available on a 24 hour basis which meant there were very few occasions when hot desking space was completely full. In his opinion, the amount of space provided just about right with very few times the space underused or not being able to meet the demands of clients.

Promotion

I asked about brand recognition. How visible is the Business & Technology Centre to the general population in Stevenage or at least potential clients? How do people know about the BTC? Is it word of mouth which is fine up to a point but may restrict recruitment to a fairly small circle of those "in the know." Again touches on recruitment from Stevenage and from elsewhere (see below).

Could / should there be incentives, including differential charges, for clients from Stevenage?

Not sure how brand recognition and awareness of the BTC is tested. Please advise and we can respond accordingly.

Profile of People

This could include where do clients come from and if they employee others where do they come from (two datasets). That would help us to understand how much the BTC is benefiting people from Stevenage and also get some of the travel issues into context.

Other profile information could, of course, include age, disability and the other characteristics. From our look around the clients and employees did not appear to be very diverse. It would be interesting to know how many are quite young and going straight into business and how many are people investing, say, redundancy packages to try to make a fresh start.

I suggest that with all the profile information we need to be able to distinguish between those in the incubator area; those elsewhere in the centre; clients and those employed by clients.

The current tender specification had no specific requirement to recruit clients from the Stevenage area and whilst we can capture some information based on client address details, employee details including key equality information may not necessarily be captured by the BTC. This may be captured in the next tender specification but it would be difficult to retrospectively require the BTC to capture address/equality information within this contract. We will however make a request for address details and equality information and provide what we can for the scoping report.

Profile of Businesses

For example what proportion are businesses that want to occupy a desk all the time from “9 to 5;” what proportion need a base but actually go out most of the time to do their business elsewhere. Can we get a breakdown e.g. accountants, designers? I don't think there were any companies actually making things. There did seem to be some fairly large organisations e.g. Mouchel with multiple offices.

How many companies / businesses have been in the incubator area for less than three months; less than six months; less than a year; more than a year?

How many companies / businesses have been in the rest of the centre for less than six months; less than a year; more than a year; more than three years?

How many businesses have moved onto other locations within Stevenage in the last five and ten years?

Could we have the company sustainability / survival rates based on the usual definition (so comparisons can be made) as well as using Wenta's definition.

Have any businesses been asked to leave due to non payment of rents or for other reasons?

It is unlikely this information is captured by the BTC and if there is a requirement to capture desk usage, this is likely to incur an additional cost.

Business profile information has been provided by separate cover.

Business churn information captured and provided by separate cover.

Business survival rate information captured and provided by separate cover.

Will follow up with Wenta issue re. non-payment.

Green Travel Plan

The BTC publicity brochure says “BTC operates a comprehensive Green Travel Plan” what what is it and how effective is it.

I pointed out to one of the staff that the location map gives a misleading impression and could put some people off walking or cycling to the centre:

The town centre is labelled in the wrong place making it look much further from the BTC (it is placed to the east of the swimming pool). The walking and cycling routes, which are shorter, from the railway station are not shown.

If the brochure is anything to go by there is a lot of emphasis on car travel but little on alternatives.

So, say, there are very frequent trains to London and easy rail access to places like Cambridge, Peterborough, Leeds, York and Edinburgh. A cycleway goes right past their entrance – I walked up it to get to the meeting. There is a bus stop close to Bessemer Drive.

Interesting. Large numbers of people working at other locations on Gunnels Wood Road walk into the town centre for their lunch. It's not that far.

Enquiring about their green travel plan is made more relevant considering we were being lobbied about car park places.

Will follow up with Wenta Green travel plans.

Status of BTC and Wenta

I got the impression that Wenta are a company limited by guarantee and IPS (Industrial Provident Society). Could we please get the precise details in any final report please? Do we know if there are any formal links with Watford Council? Could Wenta or indeed the BTC be described as a local authority or local authority influenced company? How do people get to be on the board of Wenta and the BTC?

We are probing the benefits to Stevenage and SBC from our involvement in the BTC but what are our risks (financial)?

Will get details from Wenta on their formal structure and this will be provided in the final report. In addition, will clarify links with Watford Council and relationship/influence of the local authority.

We need to be mindful Wenta are a service provider with a time limited contract. If there is a desire for the council to develop more formal links with Wenta, we would need to review how

future tenders are written to ensure policy and process for the appointment of a work space provider follows full due diligence.

I will speak to Peter Stanley regarding the board (if it exists) of the BTC and how board members are recruited.

Will include risk assessment responses as part of future risk assessment.

Future Talent

This needs to be widened a bit. North Hertfordshire College has a special academy status with one secondary school in Stevenage. What about the others?

Witnesses

An incubator client as well as a major area client.

Other Possibilities

The Lambeth idea is good and should be followed through. Could be very interesting and in a diverse area. However it's very much big city, big local authority.

There are many other additional possibilities e.g. Cambridge, Harlow, Luton, Stirling.

Please clarify if visits are required to these locations.

Officers may be able to advise on some better web links but here are a few:

<http://www.ukbusinessangelsassociation.org.uk/member/St%20Johns%20Innovation%20Centre>

<http://www.nwes.org.uk/premises/business-centres/harlow-enterprise-hub>

<http://www.myincubator.co.uk/my-incubator-luton>

<http://www.officespacestirling.co.uk/stirling-business-centre.html>

<http://my.stirling.gov.uk/services/business-and-trade/advice-and-support-for-businesses/support-for-businesses-grants-and-awards?theme=MyStirling>

Jim Brown
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