

Scrutiny Sub-Committee for Building a Strong Economy

12th June 2006



Visit to Netpark

Report of the Head of Overview and Scrutiny

Purpose of Report

1. To explain that a group of Members of the Economy Scrutiny Sub-Committee visited Netpark on the 8th May 2006.

Background

2. Following a request from Members, arrangements were made for members of the Economy Scrutiny Sub-Committee to visit Netpark at Sedgefield.
3. Stewart Watkins, Managing Director of the County Durham Development Company, explained the history of Netpark. He mentioned the dramatic change in the economy in County Durham in recent years. Much heavy engineering and manufacturing had been affected by globalisation. There was a general move to the south and the east in the world economy based on labour costs.
4. Stewart explained the Research Triangle Park at North Carolina which provided a vision for Netpark in County Durham. This was a major high-tech business park covering approximately 8,000 acres and employing about 40,000 people.
5. Netpark currently had seven tenants. It was high profile and, with its connections to the local universities, had been successful in attracting potential market leader companies which were being established. There were long-term plans for significant expansion at Netpark. The next phase of development over the next five years would be particularly important but significant external funding would be required.
6. The opportunity was taken to view the units occupied by Farfield Photonics/Neo Sensors and a number of units occupied by Durham Scientific Crystals Limited. These businesses occupied the incubator units for a period of three years with the longer-term aim of setting up major units on the Netpark site.

7. The need to have a strong communication plan to sell Netpark was raised by Members. There was also a need to have good connections with local schools and colleges. Jill Field, Innovation Team Manager from County Durham Development Company, explained that a communications strategy with young people in particular was being pursued. There was a clear aim to raise entrepreneurial ambition and aspirations. They were also working closely with the Learning and Skills Council.
8. The importance of making sure that the Netpark development was sustainable on a long-term basis was raised. The impact of globalisation had been particularly significant in County Durham in relation to heavy engineering and the same considerations were still applicable to ensure that Netpark provided a long-term economic benefit for County Durham. The development of "Science City" in Newcastle would be a new feature in the future and it was important that Netpark should be seen to be a significant part of the 'high-tech' industry in the North East.
9. There is an open invitation for Members to visit again in the future. The importance of keeping the image of Netpark high profile is recognised.

Recommendation

10. You are asked to note this information.

Contact: Ian Mackenzie Tel: 0191 383 3506

List of Members attending:

Councillors Armstrong, Carr, Cordon, Meir and Pye.