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# REPORT

## Question Time – EEDA and the GCP in the Hot Seat

Dr Chris Thomas

Director, Milton Contact Ltd.,

17<sup>th</sup> July, 2006

### Executive Summary

“Contributing to the economic development of Greater Cambridge”, held at New Hall, Cambridge on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2006 by the GCP and EEDA was a successful event in the form of a Question time. It permitted business and community leaders to see how the organisations were faring and where their future visions lay by direct questioning of the panel. Key threads of the event were Infrastructure, Business growth and Development and Social inclusion.



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Executive Summary .....	2
EEDA and GCP preamble.....	2
Question time .....	3
The Tangled Weave of Infrastructure.....	4
The Cambridge Model – doomed to be small? .....	4
Greater Cambridge's Social Skills.....	5
The Panel's performance .....	6
And how was it for you?.....	6
Useful contacts/links:.....	7

### Executive Summary

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### EEDA and GCP preamble

In a bold move, EEDA (The East of England Development Agency) and the GCP (Greater Cambridge Partnership) opened themselves to public account by Cambridgeshire businesses at the meeting entitled “Contributing to the economic development of Greater Cambridge”, held at New Hall, Cambridge on 17<sup>th</sup> July, 2006. Most of the 77 originally registered delegates arrived for registration and networking in the searing heat of a July morning before escaping into the welcome air conditioned interior of the New Hall Buckingham House conference room. The

meeting was chaired by Mike Carver of EERA (East of England Regional Assembly) who rapidly handed over to David Marlow, the Chief Executive of EEDA.

David gave a runaway train ride overview of the economic status and success of our region; A GVA (gross value added) per head of £17419 for our region compared with the average £15 564 for East Anglia, 80 percent employment and a below average 10% of the employment population without qualifications. He went on to outline the eight key delivery areas for the region of which EEDA focussed on four core projects; 1) Business Support, 2) Enterprise hubs, 3) Regional Renaissance and 4) Investing in communities. By this time, the pace of the presentation had accelerated to such a degree that further figures passed in a blur – but it all sounded very positive!

Nigel Brown, Chairman of the GCP gave a brief introduction to the Greater Cambridge Partnership, outlining its sphere of influence as the 25 mile radius surrounding Cambridge, covering 8 districts. Highlights were the appointment of an International Relationships manager for the region, involvement with Enterprise hubs and Investing in local Communities. The GCP was also looking at the impact of the Olympics on the regions and contributing to the debate on Unitary Authorities.

## **Question time**

Mike Carver then chaired the Question Time with David Marlow (EEDA), Sheila Childerhouse (EEDA) and Martin Garratt (GCP) in the hot seats.

With some foresight, the meeting had selected 12 questions prepared in advance by members of the audience to respond to, covering a representative gamut of concerns and issues for the Greater Cambridge area and these were followed by free questions from the floor.

From my perspective, there were three key threads arising from the questions and the responses; Infrastructure development and its inextricable link with government, How the Cambridge Model should adapt in the future, and social/community issues.

### ***The Tangled Weave of Infrastructure***

James Buxton of Bidwells raised the vexed question of funding for existing development projects in the region, ably supported by John Bridge, Cambridgeshire Chamber's of Commerce, raising doubts about funding guarantees for the road infrastructure plans. This region has been designated for a massive increase in population and housing and, with Cambridge at the threefold junction of major transport arteries, the only way to avoid failure is to guarantee that these developments not only happen in a coordinated manner but actually take place at all.

The sobering message from the panel was that continued lobbying was required to ensure that these changes continued to receive the promised funding and did take place in the best of Greater Cambridge's interest. Ironically the region had to demonstrate that it was successful at coordinating transport, housing and transport infrastructure to pressure for, maintain and attract continuing central government funding and support.

The situation was further hampered by the delays in changes in local government, with existing authorities unsure of whether and when unitary authorities would be implemented. Furthermore, local and district councils were overloaded with the work presented by the proposed changes. The GCP and Cambridgeshire Horizons were therefore key to providing the coordination needed across local government and business with EEDA adding its lobbying voice.

### ***The Cambridge Model – doomed to be small?***

A pointed comment by Nicholas Miles of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc referred a study by the city of Boston, considering its own development, that the Cambridge Model with its hubs of SME (small to medium sized enterprise) hi-tech developments was not necessarily the best way forward. One of the key features of our region is that companies start up, develop to a certain size and then tend to be bought up or migrate elsewhere. Martin Garratt has long been fighting for retention and growth in this area and was able to recount one success story where a local company, rather than going down the licensing route with a £3m business plan, outsourced its manufacturing locally and is now reassessing its business plan at £70m.

However, the feeling was expressed from several sources that we needed to attract substantially larger enterprises into the region and provide for them. This would encourage more local companies to stay and grow and, as seen by the previous example, provide a knock on effect beneficial to other businesses and the economy of the region as a whole. This fits in neatly as a final step to the existing support given to local businesses from incubating and nurturing start-ups to providing physical, financial and networking enterprise-hubs for further development. Attracting and retaining larger companies should be one of EEDA's priorities. Which in turn brings us back to infrastructure.....!

There was also a feeling in the audience and with the panel, that the Development in R&D should be defined more broadly and assigned greater importance in the region.

### ***Greater Cambridge's Social Skills***

The third thread concerned the social element. This started off with the business related question by Andrew Cogan of cover on how EEDA fitted in with skills provision. A particularly pertinent question with the Business Link Services having a new specification and being organised regionally, though there was promise of local contacts. There was a preferred bidder and we await the results. However, EEDA made it clear that it was not a main funder, rather a facilitator organisation. EEDA did support the occasional small demonstration project.

Jane Birch of the CLA also highlighted rural concerns in terms of food and farming, an area hopefully tackled in future EEDA planning. A considerable area of East Anglia is agricultural and the past years have been ones of economic hardship for the farming community. Having a plant biotech background, I also see a need to reconnect the Plant Biotech skill centres in our region with the agricultural sector, whether looking at new crops or opportunities such as bio fuels. It may just be a matter of re-establishing links with existing networks and communities.

Social inclusion was also important for disadvantaged and minority groups within the area, including back to work programmes for those recovering from mental health problems, something that afflicts most individuals at some time in their lives. Sheila on

the panel reaffirmed EEDA's role in working with key players on these issues, but also emphasised the need for the Public Sector to lead by good example.

## **The Panel's performance**

It takes a measure of courage and confidence in your organisation's abilities to host an event where questions from the audience form the main event. The roles reflected the respective panellists interest and expertise: David Marlow gave the broader EEDA perspective with an eye to the political as well as economic dimensions of a topic; Sheila Childerhouse, had a particular interest in social and agricultural issues and gave straightforward responses that demonstrated her empathy and involvement in these parts of EEDA's work; Martin Garrat reflected the proactive co-coordinator role adopted by the GCP, coming up with practical examples to demonstrate a point, ensuring that relevant individuals on a particular issue were brought together or new issues for the GCPs attention were noted for follow up. Mike Carver judiciously provided a minimal input for an event that was obviously running successfully by itself.

The GovSpeak to Plain English ratio was mercifully low, only rising on the odd occasion where the panel could not think of a suitable response. Overall, I think the panel came across as competent, informative and in tune with the audience!

## **And how was it for you?**

This was a well organised event at a good Cambridge location (with Parking!) and congratulations go to the GCP, Suzy Howes Event Management, New Hall and the caterers who provided an excellent buffet for the networking afterwards. We were left with the impression that Business has capable partners in GCP and EEDA to represent, assist and ensure the continued success of our region.

***Continued overleaf with useful contacts and link***

## **Useful contacts/links:**

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**East of England Development Agency (EEDA)**

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**East of England Regional Assembly (EERA)**

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