

Thames Valley Growth Conference 14th May 2025

"Thank you for taking the time to join us today, Hope you got a sense of the work that is underway, our efforts as a Chamber, and feel better connected and energised.

Reflecting on the day, the challenges to growth trip of the tongue, rising costs, global uncertainty, tariffs and the hangover from BREXIT and the pandemic.

The more relevant question perhaps is how to grow when the growing gets tough.

But as unlikely as it seems, businesses in this region can not only thrive amid economic uncertainty - they can seize the opportunity to transform for sustained growth.

It is my prerogative to be glass half full, talking to any business when the decision of whether to invest, to hire, to step into a new market is in the balance, we have encourage you to be bold. Confidence grows confidence, activity grows activity. Performance is not linear, there and

ups and downs. If we hunker down, we are lost – we will find new business and opportunities.

The tone of today was one of the reality rather than political sentiment, and that reflects our independent nature, and that in our 75 years we have seen ideas and organisation to drive economic growth come and go. We have been here to focus on the basics, how to keep business moving, and the practicalities around that and showcasing our incredible business community. I think we can take away from today, just why the current economic environment shouldn't dissuade us as leaders. Making plans for growth may seem like an audacious undertaking today— but over the last 10 years we have proved as a business community our resilience

The upshot? Working together leaders of business, universities, health care trusts, exporters, we do genuinely have the chance to turn slowdown into renewal, but we know that some of the indicators on our regions risk register are flashing and we should not be complacent.

I imagine the region 10 years from now and I want the opportunities that I enjoyed to be available for the next generation – for my children who are trying make sense of the opportunities that are available for their future. The world feels more complicated for them than it was for me.

No growth talk would be complete without mentioning Heathrow to which our economic success has been inextricably linked. The expansion of Heathrow really matters to the continued success of the Thames Valley, as does providing better access, we have been consistently championing for the delivery of Western Rail to Heathrow for well over ten years – this is a 6km link between T5 and the western mainline just outside of Slough and when it is completed it will bring 14 million people quicker rail access to the airport, and reduce the need for thousands of car journeys each year.

Any new trade deal for the UK, and especially the tongue twister CPTTP which is with 10 countries across the indo pacific regions, will only be brought to life by businesses being able to access and readily ship goods

to these markets through the UK's largest port for goods which is Heathrow.

In terms of getting the basics right, we have to get more businesses exporting. Our International Trade customers enjoy greater growth and have better survival rates initiatives over the years. Helping to facilitate trade has been one of our key support strategies for businesses large and small across the Thames Valley for decades and that is the same across the worldwide accredited chamber network.

This year we are using our connections with Osaka Chamber of Commerce to help businesses to explore the 4th largest economy in the world Japan and a long-standing UK trade partner. In September you are invited to join a trade mission to the World Expo in Kansai focused on promoting our technology and sustainability sectors. If you are interested, there are already new commercial opportunities being developed as a result – do talk to my colleagues.

With big engineering projects, and remarkable house building targets set by Government comes the need to ensure people have the right skills in

engineering, construction and we must champion these industries as aspirational and rewarding.

Together the Chamber is providing the connections between educators and business to help identify and match the supply and demand of skills for tomorrow's workforce. I want to thank everyone that has supported the Local Skills Improvement Plans, these are going to continue to play a fundamental role to deal with some of the long standing issues that we have heard today but also continue to be an instrument to help colleges and training providers organize themselves to bid for new, much needed, if not limited funding in the future.

Businesses I speak to believe that the Chamber has a key role to play in the future of work, and I know we can do more. More opportunities for engagement through our unique local network, more regional representation through our policy work, and using our experience to facilitate trade - greater global opportunities.

We have stepped up our policy activity to help put the Thames Valley on the map and bring together the civic and business leaders to help

ensure our future competitiveness of the Thames Valley which is a £125 Billion economy and a powerhouse for the UK.

We have been working with MPs across Berkshire, Buckinghamshire Oxfordshire and Swindon, to help set up an all-party parliamentary group for the Thames Valley. This will help represent your voice but also the needs of the regional economy to Government and shows there is a recognition that working together cross party and across the wider region will bring benefits.

I have been in the privileged position over last 10 years as CEO to meet a huge variety of businesses. Our Chamber have helped to land some of the biggest investments in the region, like Moderna (from the very earliest stages of their global site finding to helping secure their Harwell facility) and Lonza Biologics (we helped secure further investment as part of relocation from Slough to Thames Valley Park).

In the Creative Industries (High End TV and Film), we assisted Amazon with their investment/acquisition of Bray Studios. For Shinfield Studios – we played an influential role to secure Commonwealth Asset

Management's investment and site finding before landing at the University of Reading.

In Digital Technology, we are part of a cross Government working group on Data Centres (inc. developing papers to inform the critical national infrastructure policy announcement and supporting local authorities on DC benefits and their importance to national infrastructure).

It has been extraordinary to work with you to navigate through the challenges and celebrate the wins.

I close by inviting you to an opportunity to join in showcasing and to be part of the wins. Our Thames Valley Business Awards are a bell weather for the state of the region – delighted to say there is no slow down in the achievements to shout about this year.

To close, a special thanks to our hosts Syngenta, to our sponsors Knights and Buckinghamshire New University. To colleagues that have brought to life an idea today, and all the speakers on the important topics of people and skills, the role that technology will play in shaping

our future of work and how we see the prospects for the region in ten years' time.