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Evolution of next generation Science Parks and Innovation Centres comes under close scrutiny during seminar at Chesterford Research Park

Commercial property and development experts among the audience at the one-day conference organised by Carter Jonas

Over 100 delegates ranging from property and development experts to representatives from regional development agencies and national associations gathered at Chesterford Research Park on Tuesday for a one day seminar to discuss maximising returns from next generation science parks and innovation centres.

The seminar, organised by Carter Jonas' specialist technology team and supported by the UK Science Park Association (UKSPA) was chaired by Walter Herriot OBE, a consultant to Carter Jonas and who, having been an integral part of the development of the Cambridge Phenomenon in 1985 and Managing Director of St John's Innovation Centre for over 18 years, was ideally placed moderate the event.

Nick Hood, Partner and Head of the Technology Team at Carter Jonas opened proceedings with a review of Science Park clusters throughout the UK, giving insight into current funding streams and stressing the need to build on existing expertise in centres of excellence. Evidence gathering to support the importance of Enterprise Hubs and the need for more performance data to substantiate further investment in Science Parks, particularly by the private sector was also raised as an urgent requirement. Despite technology being recognised as the growth engine of the UK economy, investment into Science Parks by the private sector is still minimal.

Presentations by David Gill, Director, St John's Innovation Centre, Sally Ann Forsyth, Director of Colworth Science Park and David Hardman, Managing Director of Birmingham Science Park, Aston followed, giving delegates a 360 degree view of Science Park and Innovation Centre development from an academic, commercial, and local authority perspective respectively.

An international perspective was given by Tim Minshall, Snr Lecturer at Cambridge University, who tabled the view that 'open innovation' – the in and out licensing of IP, in-sourcing of products (eg co-branding) and technology spin outs can potentially support strong cluster development, rather than dilute it.

Chris Green, Chief Executive, SQW Group who currently run 14 innovation centres in England and one in Saudi Arabia drew on his company's experience to give delegates a flavour of the commercial management aspect - the challenge in this area being how continually to improve the offer for tenants, by including additional services such as business advice and/or mentoring and signposting to complementary external specialists whilst remaining profitable for the owners.

Rebecca Graham of IPD and Chris Perkins, Director of Fund Management, PRUPIM followed with overviews of the UK institutional investment environment - their advice being that the development of measurement indices for Science Parks is essential to widening investor appeal. Currently only one-third of 1% of the investment environment is made up of Science Parks but where the specialist knowledge of tenant companies occupying these spaces can drive outperformance they see this area as a potentially growing sub sector for the investor.

A panel discussion, chaired by Walter Herriot rounded off the day, allowing delegates to air their own views on the subjects raised and further question the speakers on the broader issues associated with the further development of Science Parks and Innovation Centres in the UK.

In summary Mr Herriot highlighted the fact that there seems to be no single template for the creation of Science Parks or for the running of Innovation Centres as the recurring theme of the day. What must be taken into account however is that connectivity and partnering is key, as is the creation of a space that allows for and actively encourages innovation. He commented: "The UK has a very strong entrepreneurial spirit and Cambridge is an excellent example of what can be achieved with the right funding, right location and right mix of people. However, rather than resting on our laurels, in the future we must look to further develop the value of innovation by creating environments in which collaboration and interaction are supported and expected".

Chesterford Research Park is itself a thriving community made up of innovative, world-class R&D companies. Looking to expand on the success of the Park to date, the joint venture partners, Aviva Investors and Churchmanor Estates Company Plc are pushing development plans forward to increase the facilities available to new occupiers. Planning permission has been granted on both the Robinson Laboratory and the Science Village development and the joint venture partners remain keen to push these projects forward during the coming months.

Representing the ultimate in flexible design, the Robinson Laboratory will provide two separate wings of laboratory space, linked by an elegant atrium designed to house an impressive reception area and a versatile range of meeting rooms. As always at Chesterford significant thought has also been given to the external finish of the building, with sympathetic landscaping of the immediate area adding to the overall aesthetic.

The Science Village is similarly forward thinking in design. The low energy building will allow for flexible use as R&D offices and/or laboratory suites. Catering for companies at all stages of their life-cycle, the Village will offer one suite of 28,000 sq ft and a further 16 smaller suites ranging from 1,510 sq ft to 1,965 sq ft.

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NOTE TO EDITOR

Chesterford Research Park is being developed as a 250 acre low density scheme to provide high quality accommodation in an attractive environment for science and technology based companies of all sizes. To date, more than 215,000 sq ft of laboratory and R&D space has been let and occupied or is reaching practical completion. Further phases of construction will extend the development to approximately 600,000 sq ft (56,500 sq m). The park is being developed as a joint venture between Aviva Investors and The Churchmanor Estates Company Plc. www.chesterfordresearchpark.com

Carter Jonas' technology team is widely regarded as one of the leading property consultants in the science park sector. Based in Cambridge, Europe's most concentrated centre of research and development, the Team offers a full range of specialist advice to landlords, occupiers, investors and developers of science parks and research & development (R&D) buildings across the UK. www.carterjonas.co.uk