‘A great working environment for companies to come’

Discovery Park, Kent

With radical changes to where and how innovation takes place over this past decade, Alex Bell explores how ecosystems across the South East are coming together to drive economic growth

“It’s burgeoning. It’s thriving. So much so that the South East has now spread to the South West.” Martino Picardo is discussing the rise and rise of innovation districts and the knowledge economy.

And he should know. Picardo brings insights from more than 20 years of experience in the pharmaceutical and biotechnology sector.

Now chair of Discovery Park in Kent, one of the UK’s leading science parks, Picardo describes a crucial factor behind the continual growth of science and innovation parks.

“We are all learning from each other,” he says. “I think we’ve all realised very early on, particularly in the incubation side of things, that we don’t compete. It’s only when you start to look for tenancy from bigger companies that the competition happens.

“Unfortunately, we’ve not had too much inward investment, not many European, American, Indian or Chinese companies, but one or two have come through. Discovery Park, for example, with Pfizer stepping out. A lot of their space has recently been taken by a Chinese contract development manufacturing organisation.

“It’s just evidence of a more robust industry that started with a lot of public funds that’s moved into commercial. They don’t make the money out of the incubation, they make it out of bigger tenants, selling whole floors and whole buildings to larger companies who sign up for ten-year leases.”

DISCOVERY PARK, KENT

- 220-acre science & technology park
- 1.6 million sq ft of labs, offices and manufacturing space
- 160-plus businesses
- 3,500-plus people employed on site
- One of six Life Sciences Opportunity Zones in the UK
- £324m annual GVA contribution to the economy

Previously, as Picardo points out, it was all about innovation and science and converting research into viable commercial products and patient benefit. “Now people can see the value of building these larger companies out of university spin-outs,” he says.

Picardo also answers a question on what success looks like for an innovation park.

“The best science parks focus on one of two models,” he adds. “You either entirely focus on one area, like Stevenage, which is all about cell and gene therapies, or you become mixed-use.

“We’re 220 acres at Discovery Park. You need a car to get around. Remember this housed more than 8,000 Pfizer people.

“We’ve got our own water treatment plant, energy source through biomass – it’s almost like a little village in itself.

“Ultimately, you’re trying to create a great working environment for companies to come. More importantly, for companies’ founders, wives and kids to go to, with good jobs and good schools nearby that have a decent quality of life, and of course the quality of the spaces being second to none.

“It’s also not about competing with London. We should be the overspill.”

MEET THE COMPANY TACKLING VAPING IN SCHOOLS

Simon Hassett and his wife, Jean, launched VapeGuardian in October 2022, addressing the issue of vaping in schools.

VapeGuardian’s system detects vaping with accuracy, alerts staff and is used by more than 400 schools in the UK and Ireland.

The company is preparing to close a Series A investment round to fuel international growth and currently has a team of nine focusing on customer service and software development.

Chief executive Hassett says being awarded a place on Southampton Science Park’s Catalyst business accelerator programme in 2023 was a significant moment for the fledgling company.

“The Catalyst programme helped us hone in on our holistic solution and learn more about the scale of business,” he says.

“We’d never really considered investment, but we’re currently about to close our Series A investment round, which will help us move into new markets and new countries.

“In these respects the Catalyst was great for us. It can be quite a lonely journey being a founder, so it’s nice to go to these things and sit in a room with people who are going through similar struggles. Not only do you get that, you get introduced to people who can help and who’ve done it before. It made things easier and was a big benefit.”

Simon and Jean Hassett, of VapeGuardian

Looking to the future, Hassett says: “We also serve schools in another 13 countries around the world. We just added in THC detection with 100 per cent reliability.”

THC is the hallucinogenic part of marijuana, which has become popular with kids putting it in their vapes in schools.

“We’re doing a Series A to fuel our international expansion because this isn’t by any means exclusive to the UK,” he adds. “This problem with underage vaping in schools is universal. We plan to move into new spaces. We’ve started to work with a number of leisure places – a simple way to put it is where kids go when they’re not in school.”

The company is currently working on a ten-month roadmap to go into aviation and has a tentative contract with easyJet and Lufthansa. Hassett says: “Vape detectors, despite what they tell you at the start of the flight, don’t exist on planes. We’ll be the first one in the air but to get this hardware adapted for aviation is a really long, expensive process.

“Our model is that we’re going to keep things as close to cost as possible for education, because that’s a real problem,” says Hassett. “We want to do what we can to make sure we don’t have a generation of addicts through the next 20 years by protecting kids in schools and making it as affordable as possible. Commercially, we’re going to make our money from the private sector.”

TECHNOLOGY PARK OF THE FUTURE

The comprehensive five-phase masterplan for the regeneration of Langstone Park is well under way. Strategically located at Havant’s A27 Junction, Langstone provides easy access to Portsmouth, Southampton and London.

Having been acquired in 2020 by global investment manager, Alberta Investment Management Corporation (AIMCo), on behalf of some of its clients, and leading UK asset manager and developer XLB, transformation of the south coast hub is expected to last until at least 2030.

XLB’s Stephen Wormald tells *Insider* what the future holds for the 480,000 sq ft of flexible workspace suitable for R&D, warehouse, laboratories, offices and data centres.

“We are hoping to be on site for phase two at the end of this year or early January 2025,” says Wormald. “We have an ultimate masterplan but you have to be flexible in terms of occupiers and who wants to stay, who wants to go, who’s upsizing, who’s downsizing.

“Havant isn’t a huge market so you can’t just flood 680,000 sq ft of space onto the market. Going through a phased redevelopment is quite a good way of doing it.

“Ultimately, we’ve refurbished the main entrance to the park, done a full signage package and landscaping. It’s a smart environment to be in and the new units are fresh and ahead of the market in terms of ESG [environmental, social and governance], being operationally net zero carbon.”

Earlier this summer Apollo Fire, a specialist manufacturer of fire detection and alarm devices, took the 40,429 sq ft Unit 3 on a ten-year lease.

Apollo is part of London Stock Exchange-listed Halma PLC, a global group of life-saving technology companies that provide innovative products and services.

Other recent occupiers include global marketing and engagement agency MCI, Morson Talent and multi-disciplinary contracting business Enerveo.

XLB also recently revealed it exchanged on the purchase of Cody Technology Park – a 400-acre centre for aerospace and defence technologies in the UK – with Tristan Capital Partners.

“Like Langstone, that is very exciting,” says Wormald. “At Langstone the key thing for us is providing very flexible units. We could just do logistics in them but we are very focused on a vision of occupiers with employees who are carrying out more technical, manufacturing-type businesses, which then creates that sense of life in the park and a unique sort of ecosystem. You’ve then got an environment which has all the ESG credentials. We are talking to others in precision work serving the maritime, defence and automotive industries around Portsmouth. It’s almost like the technology park of the future really.”

Langstone Park, Havant