Interview: Roger Marsh – Chair, Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership



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With four out of the five NHS bodies, Leeds City Region is strongly anchored in the British life sciences ecosystem. Chair of Leeds City Region Enterprise Partnership, Roger Marsh OBE, highlights what else makes the region special: its great talent, dedication to discovery and ability to build bridges between academia and business.

What are some of the key facts around the potential of Leeds City Region?

In the UK, Leeds City Region is the largest regional economy outside of London and the South-East, producing a fifth of the whole “Northern Powerhouse” economy and home to three million people. It has a diverse economy with particular strengths in healthcare and life sciences and financial services, where it is recognised as the leading location outside of London.

The region also has a strength in manufacturing, with the highest number of employees active in manufacturing in the UK. Our domination in this industry however does not rely on original equipment manufacturers (OEMs), but on manufacturing within the supply chain.

Away from industry, the region has a strong knowledge base, boasting nine universities, which produce 15,000 STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) graduates annually, more than anywhere in the country outside of London. The challenge this has caused in the past, is to provide opportunities here for these young men and women after they leave university. Therefore as a region, we are thrilled that we have been able revert a trend that saw graduate

talent move away to find work. We have transformed our brain-drain into a brain-gain – retaining 53 per cent of the graduates our universities create. In addition to this our quality of life offer has seen a “boomerang” trend, with over 70 per cent of the people originally from the region returning.

As a result of this education infrastructure and talent pool, in 2018, we believe we can guarantee companies that if they locate in our City Region, they will find the talent they require. This is how we convinced global brands such as Sky to choose Leeds for an office focused on developing new technology, which employs around 1,000 people.

What is the importance of life sciences to the economy of the Leeds City Region?

Life sciences is one of our region’s key sectors and one in which we have a number of strengths, for instance four of the five NHS bodies are actually headquartered in Leeds, including NHS Digital and NHS England. Our strength is historically due to the high concentration of universities here many of which have a strong research focus and together cover the entire medical field and produce spin out innovative businesses such as Tissue Regenix. In particular we have world leading capabilities in health informatics and medical technologies.

Another reason for the strength of our life sciences industry is Leeds Teaching Hospital NHS Trust, one of the largest teaching hospitals in Europe, which is a national centre for specialist treatment, a world renowned biomedical research facility and a leading clinical trials research unit.

Our focus around medical technologies, devices and health informatics has led to a strong concentration of digital health jobs, with nearly 25 per cent of the NHS jobs in the digital sector are based here; and the largest concentration of medical device companies in the UK.

Ultimately we want to grow our life sciences sector. We believe that our region can meet many of the requirements of any life sciences companies looking to enter or expand in the UK market – offering them the right talent, facilities and infrastructure complemented by the strong research capabilities of our universities.

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Can you tell us more about the life sciences initiatives currently under way in Leeds city region?

One part of our work in life sciences is focused on building bridges bringing together partners to achieve the extraordinary. For example, Nexus at the University of Leeds is a GBP 40 million project, it will be available to SMEs and act as a gateway to research and innovation at the

University. Couple this with the University of Huddersfield's 3M Buckley Innovation Centre and other projects such as the Digital Health Enterprise Zone, hosted by the University of Bradford and you can see how we're focused on the future of the life sciences industry and integrating digital technologies into this sector.

The other focus is the future, and in our vision of it, connecting the dots and building bridges is key. The innovation district that we are trying to develop in the North-West of Leeds. It will bring together academia, the hospitals, and public sector to create a cluster which researchers and companies will be able to engage with easily. We hope that through this ecosystem, businesses will be able to find the opportunity and to scale up. This answers one of the challenges that we face—one I think is true of the UK generally—that despite having a lot of businesses, not many of them grow to over 250 employees.

These projects though are just the beginning and using Nexus as an example, we plan to one day have a Nexus 2, 3 and 4. What these initiatives also offer is a multi-disciplinary dimension which highlights our commitment to the future, as we believe that the solutions to tomorrow's life science challenges won't come just from the life science sector. These ideas and spaces breaks down artificial barriers and asks the question, "what is needed to answer meet this challenge and how can we scale a home-grown life sciences business up to global significance?" Often, the science is not the part that lacks, but rather the business model, the training, the marketing.

When it comes to telling the world about Leeds City Region's potential, how do you go about that?

People are often amazed at what happens in the region but over recent years we've raised our game at telling our story. Nationally, we work with the Department for International Trade (DIT), which coordinates and supports national trade and investment missions. In addition to this we work hard to create engaging content that showcases the region's potential and directly engage with foreign countries that we have connections with. For instance in China we have a strong relationship with them as a result of our connections through our universities, civic relationships (Leeds is twinned with Hangzhou) and as a result of that we now have an economic relationship and are expanding our areas of collaboration.

What concerns of potential foreign investors do you encounter most frequently?

The main concerns we have to address are access to talent and the pace of realization of investments. Our approach to these is to have an open and honest dialogue, which allows us to address most concerns. I think that one factor increasingly attracting foreign direct investors to our

region is our approach, in 2017/18 we were the third most attractive region in the UK for foreign direct investment. In 2013 we were 15th. This transformation is a result of a “can-do, will-do” attitude. We will always address concerns head on and ask ourselves how we can make it happen and how we can support or add value to potential investors.

The other looming challenge is Brexit, and we cannot be complacent about its potential impacts. However, we have the confidence that we will be able to grow from this challenge as well. One key challenge will be how to continue to foster collaborations with our key partners in Europe.

However, circumstances will force us to look beyond political alignment as it will no longer be secured. I remain confident that we will overcome Brexit-related challenges. It is in the interest of major pharmaceutical companies in Europe to be in the UK market with their products and it is in our interest that they are here too.

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Where do you see competition coming from?

There are two faces to competition, there is healthy competition and meaningful collaboration. We strive to foster healthy competition within our clustering efforts, but only when coupled with meaningful collaboration. To date this has been successful as evidenced by the fact that our region still produces nearly ten per cent of the medical technologies patents that are registered in the UK.

By ensuring we live this principle on a daily basis, we will be able to maintain a growth that I describe as “one plus one equals three.” This is crucial if we are to deliver extraordinary growth which will result in a self-sufficient regional economy and provide the opportunity to address our major social challenges. In order to achieve this objective the focus has to go well beyond individual companies or organisations and focus on the whole system. By addressing this challenge we will achieve an increase in productivity and appetite for innovation.

The more competition arises, the better opportunities for collaboration are created. As a region we try to work with London to preserve businesses in the UK. If we end up benefiting another region, we can rejoice in having supported our country. If a business wants to move and the only way to preserve it is to bring it from London to Leeds, we should not hesitate.

I think we have a compelling argument to put forward to any life sciences businesses, looking towards and beyond the UK in terms of opportunities and expanding their footprint. We have the capability, the talent, a concentration of universities, the space to build state-of-the-art facilities, the distribution network, and fantastic physical and digital connectivity, which is all supported by a

great quality of life.

Would you like to share a final message on what makes Leeds City Region the perfect spot for life sciences investment?

We have a long history of success in the field of medical technology devices and in health thematic fields. It boasts great talent and a strong business base which includes four out of the five NHS bodies, Covance part of LabCorp, and De Puy – part of Johnson & Johnson – which has its World Research Centre here. In addition the region is home to one of the largest teaching hospitals in Europe and globally recognised research facilities that are working to address the health challenges of the 21st Century. At the same time it offers a quality of life that is unrivalled by other parts of the UK. However most of all, we don't stand still, innovation is part of our core DNA. As such we are ready to invent, innovate, implement and adopt tomorrow's technology. Put simply, you would be letting yourself down if you did not come and have a look.

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