

4.

Making Didcot a place for  
business

There are a wide range of successful businesses in Didcot, from local shops to international technology companies. This chapter sets out proposals to strengthen those already in the area and attract further investment.

# 4. Making Didcot a place for business

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## 4.1.1 Didcot as a Garden Town

As a Garden Town of the 21st century, Didcot is seeking to build on its economic strengths and address those weaknesses that currently constrain or limit economic growth in the town. Didcot's garden town status is expected to accelerate the delivery of both housing and economic development – much of which is already planned.

It is clear that Didcot has a significant role to play as part of the Science Vale, not only in providing a location where jobs in technology and complementary sectors can be based, but also by better fulfilling its strategic economic, social and cultural role(s) as a town centre for the surrounding area.

To achieve those aspirations, Didcot Garden Town will need to develop a number of key features over the coming years. These key features will include:

- Diverse jobs suitable for a range of skill-sets and in locations that are accessible by foot, bike, and/or reliable and frequent public transport services
- Different types and sizes of business premises that are suitable for firms across different sectors of the economy
- High speed broadband connectivity and advanced ICT infrastructure that enables home-working and also the use of technology to enhance everyday life through 'smart' solutions
- Support for small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs)
- Ensuring that residents are able to derive maximum benefit from the opportunities available in the town and surrounding area through education, skills and training programmes



Milton Park bus © MEPC

This chapter of the Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan has been prepared based on desk-top research, analysis of a range of data sources, a review of policy and evidence based documents, input from stakeholders and feedback from public consultation events. It is structured as follows:

- Didcot's current economic role and characteristics
- Economic policy objectives for the town as set out in current and emerging policy
- How the Garden Town Masterplan, which sits behind this Delivery Plan, will enable those objectives to be met

The garden town masterplan takes account of Didcot's future economic growth and seeks to ensure increases in jobs and commercial activity in the town can be accommodated without comprising other aspirations of the garden town vision.

In summary, the masterplan response to economic growth and development

comprises the following facets:

- Promoting trend-based employment growth based on projections from the councils' policy and evidence base documents
- Enabling above – trend growth in science/ technology sectors (principally through the 'commercialisation of science') – based on the requirements of the garden town bid document (2015)
- Town centre enhancement and expansion – part of a programme of place-making initiatives that will aim to improve the quality of life in Didcot and make the area a place where people choose to come and live, work and visit
- Planned housing growth (c.15,000 homes) which will stimulate demand for employment generating floorspace creating sustainable localised job opportunities

The chapter will then set out an approach to skills and training delivery within the garden town and identify a number of recommendations that will help to ensure Didcot maximises its economic potential.

## 4.1.2 Didcot's economic profile today

Didcot benefits from a number of characteristics that provide an excellent basis for increasing the town's role within the Science Vale. These characteristics also provide a good platform to allow the town to establish itself as a destination in its own right, rather than as a place that people tend to pass through on their way to somewhere else.

Figure 4.1 shows how Didcot compares to other settlements with a similar size of working age population. Didcot scores well in relation to economic activity rate and employment rates but the proportion of higher-skilled/higher value jobs based in the town could be improved.

The latest Indices of multiple deprivation (2015) which measure deprivation by combining a number of indicators including a range of social, economic and housing issues to give a single 'ranking' show that parts of Didcot are within the 30% most deprived areas of England. A particular driver of deprivation in Didcot appears to be the education, skills and training domain which measures 'the lack of attainment and skills in the local population' (Department for Communities and Local Government, *The English Indices of Deprivation* 2015).

At present, Didcot is not fulfilling the role it has the potential to play - sitting as it does at the heart of a prosperous region and close to science clusters of international significance. Despite being the largest town in South Oxfordshire, Didcot does not yet have the social and economic function that might be expected of a town of its size and strategic location. Its historic association with logistics and transport activities and the power station means

### Didcot economic comparison

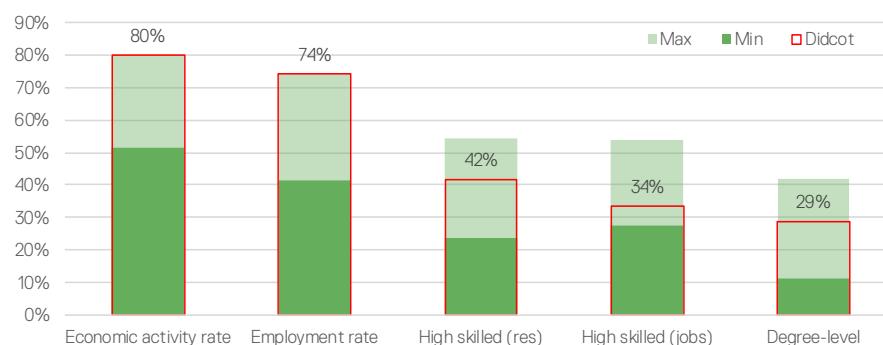


Figure 4.1 - Didcot economic profile summary

it can often be overlooked in favour of other locations nearby – Oxford, Reading and Abingdon for retail and leisure, and out-of-town business parks for commercial activity. These are aspects that the garden town vision and masterplan seeks to address and change.

Further information about Didcot's social and economic baseline is provided in appendix D social and economic baseline.

### Didcot's Economy

The growth of Didcot around a major transport hub means that manufacturing and transport/ logistics functions currently account for a significant proportion of jobs in Didcot. There is twice the concentration of transport/ storage sector jobs in Didcot compared to the average for Oxfordshire as a whole. Other significant sector concentrations in Didcot include publishing and scientific research and development. This indicates that Didcot's economic profile is diversifying from its historic economic base and the influence of the Science Vale on the town is growing.

The town has historically had strong connections to motor-racing as the Williams Grand Prix Engineering

team was founded in a former carpet warehouse building there during the 1970s. Agriculture plays a significant role in the economy of the surrounding area. The military presence in the town, which was established during the First World War, continues at Vauxhall Barracks, although the Ministry of Defence announced recently that the Barracks would close in 2028. Didcot A Power Station has now been decommissioned and parts of the building have started to be demolished. Contrary to public announcements in 2014, Didcot B Power Station is expected to continue to be an energy production facility post 2023.

Whilst retail employment accounts for a significant number of jobs in the town, this sector has contracted in recent years and there is recognition in the councils' local plans evidence base documents that Didcot suffers from leakage of expenditure to other centres such as Oxford, Reading, Bicester and Abingdon in terms of retail and leisure. The town has seen some significant investment in retail floorspace through the completion of Orchard Centre phase one and it will be important for phase two of the project, which is under construction, to provide opportunities for Didcot to claw back expenditure by encouraging a range of retailers to locate in the town.



Milton Park © MEPC

In considering Didcot’s economic base, it is also important to recognise its location at the heart of, and relationship with, the Science Vale. Didcot is effectively a ‘gateway’ to the Science Vale given the number of strategic routes that converge in the town.

The concentration of science-focused activity within the Science Vale is predominantly at Harwell Campus and Culham Science Centre – both former RAF bases. Milton Park is another key hub of economic activity located to the west of the town just beyond the main urban area of Didcot. Milton Park and Harwell Campus have enterprise zone designations within them (the Science Vale Oxford Enterprise

Zone was designated in 2012) and a further enterprise zone (Didcot Growth Accelerator Enterprise Zone) was identified in 2016 comprising several sites within the garden town masterplan boundary.

Didcot’s Labour Market

Oxfordshire has remarkably strong economic characteristics compared to the rest of the country, with high rates of economic activity and employment, high skill levels, qualifications and incomes across the county. Didcot’s residents share many of these characteristics but, at a local level, the town faces some challenges including:

- The town itself does not support

enough jobs. As a result, there is a significant outward flow of residents, many of whom work locally in high skilled sectors

- The jobs that are supported in the town are generally lower skilled and lower paid (service sector, elementary and process jobs)

The balance of jobs and homes in Didcot is an aspect that has required careful consideration in the context of the emerging garden town masterplan. At present, the town is a ‘net exporter’ of people during the working day. This is shown on Figure 4.2.

Didcot’s skills balance



Figure 4.2 - Didcot’s skills balance



A significant proportion of workers currently leave the town's core to work at Milton Park, Harwell Campus, Culham Science Centre and Abingdon. Although these travel to work patterns represent relatively local dispersal, it still means that around 5,000 working age residents leave Didcot each day to go to their place of work. Over half of the net out-flow is in management, professional and technical roles. There are two potential reasons for this, reflecting the challenges above - low job density and low representation of higher skilled jobs in the town - which means that significant numbers of people - and predominantly higher skilled people - have to travel to their place of work. Whilst this is partly a natural consequence of Didcot's location - close to other towns and areas of employment (including the science campuses) - it does create implications on the movement network within and to and from the town.

It should be noted that these figures are based on the existing urban area of Didcot. New areas of housing - including at Great Western Park and Valley Park - will bring additional working age residents closer to key areas of job growth. These schemes are also likely to generate employment opportunities within their local district centres. Collectively, this should help to reduce outflows from the town.

There are also other challenges that need to be addressed. For example, there are problems relating to the recruitment of workers. This is a region-wide issue which is perpetuated to a certain degree by the area being a victim of its own success. High employment rates mean there is a limited pool of available employees for companies to recruit from when setting up or expanding their business in the area.

There are also difficulties in retaining young working age professionals in the area. This is a particular concern for Didcot and, anecdotally, from discussions with stakeholders and consultation feedback from members of the public, the reasons for people choosing to leave the area include: lack of good quality affordable housing, poor connectivity to employment hubs, and limited town centre offer.

### Didcot's strategic location

One of the key advantages that Didcot has over many other towns is its strategic location. It is a well-established interchange on the Great Western Railway main line and close to the strategic road network (A34 and M4). This infrastructure provides relatively quick connections to London, Birmingham and other towns and cities (such as Oxford, Reading and Bristol), and to Heathrow and Birmingham Airports. There is recognition, however, that transport infrastructure serving Didcot requires investment in order to future-proof it to meet expected housing and economic growth in the area.

### Economic benchmarking – how does Didcot compare?

In order to get a better understanding of Didcot's economic potential particularly in the context of the future housing and employment growth, a benchmarking exercise has been undertaken to see how the town's economic characteristics compare against other towns and cities of a similar size across the UK. The key criterion of comparators used was that they have a similar sized working age population to that which Didcot is anticipated to have in the future once the 15,000 homes planned for the town

are built (i.e. a range between 30,000 and 50,000 working-age residents after the planned 15,000 homes are occupied). This exercise did not take into account any wider role of the towns and cities used as comparators and, therefore, the conclusions should be treated as broad indicators of Didcot's future direction of travel rather than as specific policy objectives. The key findings of this exercise are:

- Didcot's resident workforce has a comparatively high economic activity rate, and high employment rate – this reflects the fact that residents are generally higher skilled than average and better qualified
- However, Didcot performs comparatively less well in terms of its job density i.e. the number of jobs per working age resident population – this creates an imbalance which could impact on quality of life and sustainability
- Jobs that are located in Didcot tend to be in lower-value sectors. This means that higher-skilled workers will commute out of the town (or choose not to locate in Didcot at all) and the base from which business rates are derived (and which help to fund a range of community services) is narrower than it could be)



## Harwell Campus

The science base that established itself at Harwell in the 1940s was largely driven by medical and nuclear/atomic research. Since that time Harwell has grown and diversified. The focus of the hub is now on 'Big Science' which centres on innovation and research linked to five key areas:

- Space and satellite Applications
- Life sciences and healthcare
- Big data and supercomputing
- Energy and environment
- Advanced engineering and materials

The Harwell Campus comprises approximately 710 acres and the companies based there employ over 5,000 people. There are ambitions for the campus to continue to grow to make Harwell one of the largest and most influential science and innovation campuses in the world. There are plans for a future 36 acre expansion of the campus that could deliver one million sqft of labs, offices and technical accommodation. Current occupiers of space at the campus include: Science and Technology Facilities Council, Satellite Applications Catapult, Diamond Light Source, Research Complex at Harwell,

Medical Research Council Harwell, The European Centre for Space Applications and Telecommunications and the UK Space Agency to name but a few. The campus also has strong links with several universities, multinational organisations and government departments. A significant proportion of potential development land at Harwell Campus is within the Science Vale Oxford Enterprise Zone. This means that businesses wishing to base themselves there can benefit from business rates discounts, super-fast broadband and a simplified planning process.

## Culham Science Centre

Culham Science Centre provides another hub within the Science Vale. It had its beginnings in the late 1950s/ early 1960s when the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) identified Culham as a suitable site for the construction of a brand new purpose-built laboratory for plasma physics and fusion research. This research programme continues

today through Culham Centre for Fusion Energy to create clean sustainable energy sources for the future. More recently, UKAEA has expanded activity at Culham Science Centre in bespoke new buildings on-site: Materials Research Facility and Remote Applications in Challenging Environments. Autonomous vehicles and

space rockets are just some of the projects that are being progressed at Culham Science Centre. Other facilities on-site include: conference centre, lecture theatre, restaurant, shop, café, nursery, and an innovation centre.

## Milton Park

Milton Park is a business park located to the west of Didcot town centre and the station. It sits within the Vale of White Horse District Council and covers approximately 250 acres. Since the site was sold by the Ministry of Defense in the 1970s and was subsequently sold to MEPC in 1985, it has grown into one of the largest mixed use business estates in Europe and is home to a wide range of companies leading the way in the high-tech, innovative, research and design industries.

It is also home to a growing life science sector. Milton Park is owned and managed by MEPC and is home to approximately 9,000 people who are based at 250 companies. As well as high quality employment floorspace, the business park provides a range of amenities on-site including a health and fitness centre, a business lounge, café, restaurant, nursery, post office, convenience stores, pharmacy and, visiting 'street-food' vendors every Thursday. There are still development

opportunities at Milton Park. The majority of these comprise sites that are designated under the Science Vale Oxford Enterprise Zone or the Didcot Growth Accelerator Enterprise Zone. Enterprise Zone Status means that businesses wishing to locate at Milton Park can benefit from business rate discounts super-fast broadband and a simplified planning process.

## 4.1.3 Enterprise zones

The Science Vale UK enterprise zones welcome innovators of all sizes, with 216 hectares of development opportunities for science and technology businesses.

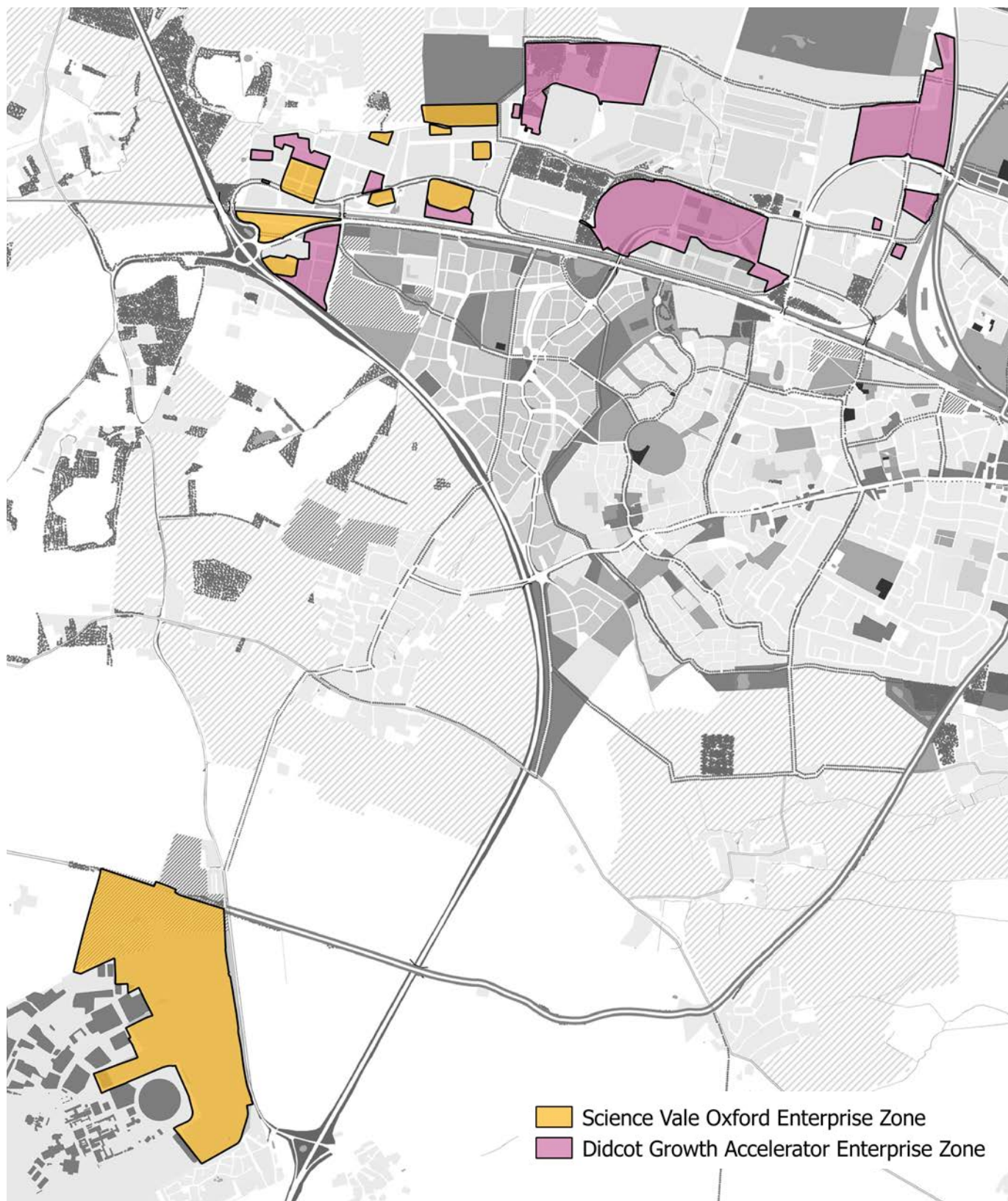


Figure 4.3 - Enterprise zones - Science Vale Oxford in orange & Didcot Growth Accelerator in pink

Enterprise zones exist to stimulate growth, where businesses can receive advice, incentives, potentially expedited planning and support that encourage firms to grow. There are two enterprise zones, Science Vale Oxford and Didcot Growth Accelerator. Supported by expertise and entrepreneurialism these zones have the potential to generate 20,000 new jobs by 2031. The areas that make up the zones are shown in figure 4.3.

#### Science Vale Oxford Enterprise Zone: Harwell Campus

The Science Vale Oxford enterprise zone occupies 93 hectares, one-third of the 710-acre Harwell Campus, adjacent to the world famous Rutherford Appleton Laboratory & Diamond Light Source, the UK national synchrotron. Harwell is already home to 200 businesses employing over 5,500 people. Its industry clusters – space and satellite applications, life sciences and healthcare, big data and supercomputing, energy and environment, and advanced engineering and materials – are driven by the expertise that comes from hosting five of the UK's leading big-science facilities.

#### Science Vale Oxford Enterprise Zone: Milton Park

Milton Park is a business park to the north-west of Didcot. The Science Vale Oxford enterprise zone occupies nine development sites in the park amounting to 21 hectares. It is home to a cluster of over 300 businesses, principally in the pharma, bio, medical & life sciences sectors employing 9,000 people. Collaboration and interaction are actively encouraged

in Milton Park. Here, cutting-edge science and technology occupiers, excellent transport links, outstanding amenities, and a stunning natural landscape combine to create a happy, thriving community.

#### Didcot Growth Accelerator Enterprise Zone

The Didcot Growth Accelerator consists of five locations to the north of Didcot and a further six extension sites in Milton Park.

- **D-Tech:** a 23-hectare (56-acre) site capable of providing 950,000 sq ft of hi-tech offices, laboratories, and manufacturing facilities – and 2,000 new jobs
- **Southmead Park:** three sites totalling 3.5 hectares (8 acres). It includes, the Meridian Didcot Business Village, a 2.5 hectare (6.5 acre) site which will provide 150,000 sq. ft. of space for offices, laboratories, and manufacturing, and create 200 jobs
- **Milton Interchange:** an 8-hectare (20-acre) site right next to the A34 Milton Interchange
- **Didcot A:** 35-hectares (86-acres) of the former Didcot A power station suitable for mixed-use business and industrial development. It includes offices, light industry, storage, and distribution
- **Giant Didcot Distribution Park:** a 25-hectare (62-acre) site, adjacent to the Didcot B power station, offering warehousing facilities for a range of businesses including

those looking for a multi-use site to incorporate offices and laboratories

- **Milton Park Growth Accelerator:** 7-hectares (17-acres) within the hugely popular Milton Park

With the potential for 3.25million sq ft of new business space and more than 8,500 jobs, the Didcot Growth Accelerator will make a major contribution to the prosperity of the southern Oxfordshire community.



## 4.1.4 Economic priorities for didcot

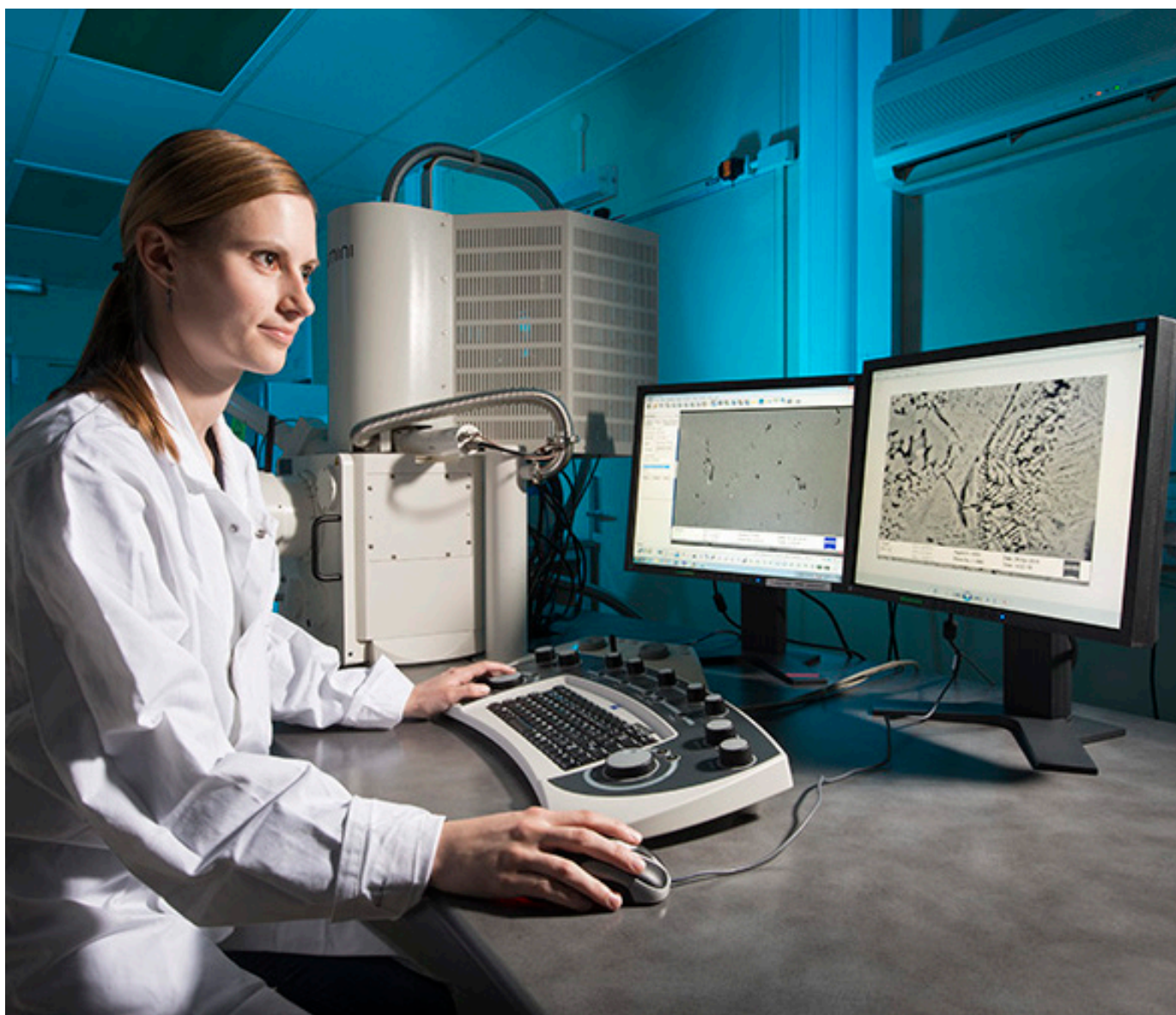
The councils and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) have identified policy objectives that have helped to define and set parameters for the garden town masterplan. They have also sought to ensure there is sufficient flexibility for a plan that covers a 15 year period.

There are different elements to policy guiding economic development in Didcot. In the first instance, there is the need for the town to meet

projected 'trend' levels of growth as identified in the Employment Land Reviews undertaken to inform the local plans of both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils. South Oxfordshire's Local Plan 2032 (Preferred Options, June 2016) reflects the findings of the Employment Land Review (2015) which identifies a need for a further 15,000sqm of office floorspace in central Didcot. This would be equivalent to approximately 1,200 jobs based on standard job densities

applied to office floorspace.

This represents an opportunity to broaden and improve Didcot and the Science Vale's office floorspace offering to ensure appropriate accommodation is available for businesses across a range of sectors and sizes (including SMEs). This offer could be based not just in the town centre but also, on a smaller scale, within the local centres expected to come forward as part of the strategic housing sites around



Didcot (e.g. Great Western Park, Valley Park and North-East Didcot). The desire to support SME activity across the districts has been another policy priority. The district councils have commissioned a study to inform a new business and innovation SME Strategy for the district council areas to identify measures which could help to support the SME community. This strategy has not yet been finalised but early conclusions emerging from it include ensuring that a range of flexible space is available in the right places – very much in line with the general approach to office provision in the town. Other recommendations from the report are considered later in this chapter.

Another key component of the economic strategy for the area is the objective to promote the growth of the science sector at the science hubs of Harwell Campus and Culham Science Centre and support economic growth at the enterprise zone at Milton Park. This continues to be a priority for the OxLEP through its Strategic Economic Plan and for the district councils' areas. The Didcot Garden Town bid document prepared by both district councils set out a 15 year target for delivering 20,000 jobs across Didcot and the wider Science Vale. These 20,000 jobs were specifically expected to be accommodated through growth in science-sector businesses in the area.

There is an aspiration for Didcot to play a greater role in the Science Vale, creating an environment which promotes synergies between the academic, public and private sector stakeholders. There is, therefore, an opportunity for Didcot to deliver a share of those 20,000 jobs. The intention is that those jobs will be in sectors related to the 'commercialisation of science'. In spatial terms, it is expected

that this growth could be delivered in the sites comprising the two enterprise zones within the town and where new businesses are already starting to choose to locate.

The ambitions outlined above align closely to central government policy as indicated in the recent Green Paper – Building our Industrial Strategy (January 2017). The vision of the strategy is to 'support, strengthen and develop our different industries and to get all parts of the country firing on all cylinders'. This vision is based on 'ten pillars' including: investing in science, research and innovation, developing skills, upgrading infrastructure, supporting businesses to start and grow, improving procurement, cultivating world-leading sectors, and creating the right institutions to bring together sectors and places.

Underpinning the ability of the town to succeed in growing its office presence and in building a complementary science and technology sector offer for the Science Vale, is the ability of the town to attract people to come and live, do business, and to visit. This requires more than just providing suitable business premises. It is about creating a high quality environment within which sit other facilities – the restaurants, bars, pubs, shops, hotels, cultural attractions. This will encourage people to spend time and money in a place.

Therefore, cross-cutting policy themes of relevance to improving quality of life in Didcot include increasing the range and quality of the housing offer, enhancing and strengthening green infrastructure, public spaces and links to the surrounding countryside, enhancing routes both within the town itself and between the town and key

destinations in the local area, giving people a choice of transport modes for their journey and providing a vibrant town centre which caters for the needs of residents, workers and visitors.

## 4.1.5 Masterplan response

Didcot Garden Town, as articulated by this delivery plan document and the masterplan, seeks to build on the councils' ambitions for the town and the Science Vale as a whole and strengthen the town's economic base. Ultimately, the economic offer of Didcot Garden Town will take a number of forms. This will ensure the town is able to offer something for everyone and meet a variety of different needs. The way in which the Masterplan responds spatially to the different facets of the economic narrative is set out below.

### Delivering office floorspace

A number of opportunity sites have been identified within the masterplan that could deliver office floorspace through mixed use development. These sites are predominantly in locations close to the town centre and Didcot Station although there may be a case for smaller-scale office floorspace to

be provided as part of some of the strategic extensions to the town e.g. within Great Western Park, North East Didcot and Valley Park.

The Station Gateway (also known as Gateway South) site has the potential to accommodate new commercial premises. This site could play a particularly significant role not only in bringing forward additional employment floorspace but also in providing a high quality development close to a key 'arrival' point into Didcot i.e. Didcot station. It will be important in creating positive first impressions of the town.

Office floorspace can take a variety of forms ranging from large-scale purpose-built serviced premises to more informal, flexible spaces potentially interspersed with other uses. In line with the principles of a garden town, the availability of different

types of office floorspace to meet the needs of businesses at different stages of their life-cycle will be critical to the sustainability of Didcot as an economic hub.

A proportion of this floorspace could take the form of flexible, responsive and easy-to-access space for small local businesses and residents looking for local workspace. This could add to the active environment and daytime population of the development encouraging meetings and linked trips, entrepreneurship and investment. Innovative forms of office space may include: start-up space; short-term incubator space; flexible SME space; 'second home' style accommodation; hot-desking space for entrepreneurs, and include shared facilities and meeting rooms for both business and community use. This is supported by the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council Business and Innovation SME Strategy.





## Growth in science/ technology sectors

As has previously been set out in this chapter the Didcot Garden Town masterplan covers a number of formally designated enterprise zones including parts of the Science Vale Oxford Enterprise Zone and the Didcot Growth Accelerator Enterprise Zone. These areas will be fundamental in enabling Didcot to accommodate a share of the 20,000 high-tech jobs envisaged for the Science Vale as a whole in the garden town bid document (2015). These jobs will create a 'step change' in employment growth in the town and will also help to increase the job density of the town in the context of significant population and housing growth.

These jobs will require a mix of sites and floorspace types, with a degree of flexibility built in. New commercial development should be encouraged

to house a suite of facilities including hybrid elements of office, lab, industrialisation & production areas, mixtures of clean-tech and prototyping as well as some heavy manufacturing industrial space and an element of high-bay warehousing. It is anticipated that this range of provision would attract target occupiers with a particular focus on commercialising science activities.

Occupiers are already being identified as candidates to be located in the Didcot Growth Accelerator Enterprise Zone.

Whilst Milton Park is well established, there are still sites within it that are yet to be delivered. The park has become increasingly dense since it first started being developed so it is envisaged that this location could still provide significant additional areas of employment-generating floorspace

which will be suitable for a range of occupiers including those involved in science and related areas.

It should be noted that much of Milton Park is within both the Science Vale's enterprise zones. Milton Park is also covered by a Local Development Order (LDO) designation and the councils are currently in the process of designating part of the Didcot Growth Accelerator enterprise zone as a LDO.

LDOs and a positive planning system are expected to prove a major attractor for business to Didcot's enterprise zones. Ultimately, there is an aspiration to create a network of world class research and high-tech institutions where companies cluster and connect with start-ups and there are 'spins-off' benefits for businesses elsewhere in local procurement and supply chains.





## Town centre regeneration and enhancement

The garden town masterplan has a strong focus on enabling Didcot to strengthen its cultural and leisure role in the wider area. This is part of a range of features intended to boost the quality of life and to play a 'place-making' role as a central focal point for new and existing communities to come together.

The baseline analysis undertaken as part of the work behind the delivery plan and the feedback received from stakeholders all point to the need for

Didcot to do better at fulfilling its role as a key service centre within the Science Vale and for there to be improvements in the general appearance of the town centre and its 'visibility' from Didcot Station. The town needs to become more widely recognised as a place to visit and spend time in rather than pass through en route to somewhere else within the Science Vale and beyond. Whilst the Orchard Centre phase two project is expected to deliver the retail floorspace that is required to meet the needs of the growing population, there is recognition that a modern town centre is about so much more than shopping. Successful town centres

tend to be those which are able to provide enjoyment, creativity, learning, and opportunities for socialising, culture and health and well-being.

As such, the masterplan identifies opportunities to expand the town centre further to enable it to accommodate a wider variety of uses. The Rich's Sidings site is earmarked to accommodate mixed use development which will not only add vital 'critical mass' to potential customer base of the town centre through its residential floorspace, it will also provide an opportunity for additional retail, leisure

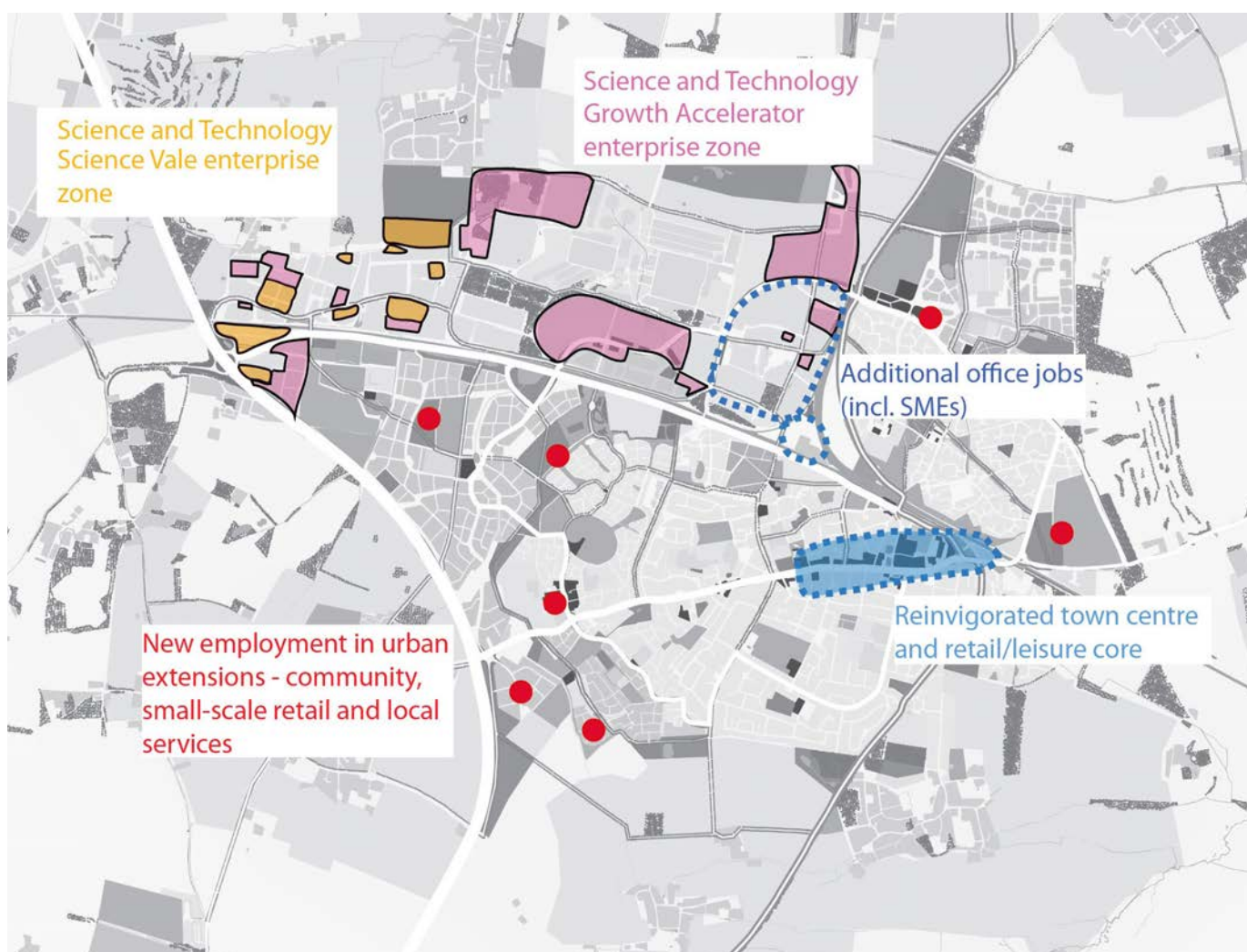


Figure 4.4 - Spatial distribution of economic growth

and/ or office premises to reinforce the scale of the town centre. There will also be opportunities to introduce uses that support a broader visitor economy offer.

The masterplan also promotes improvements to Broadway including the general environs of the street but also in creating a public open space which could be used for events and festivals. Animating Broadway will require interventions that go beyond physical improvements. It will also require proactive partnership working between the councils and key stakeholders to manage and curate the area.

### Housing growth and ancillary employment

The masterplan takes into account the c.15,000 new homes that are expected to be built in Didcot by 2031 of which 9,600 have already received planning permission. New housing, as well as providing the homes for additional working age people to live in (thereby increasing the labour pool available for employers to recruit staff from), will itself create jobs. These jobs will be generated through both the spending of new households on goods and services and the demand of the new population for a variety of services.

A number of these sites are of a significant size and as such proposals for their development include non-residential uses such as small-scale retail, education and community facilities. A proportion of the jobs expected to be generated as a result of new homes are likely to be based within those local centres. These jobs will be vital in providing opportunities for employment in close proximity to where people live. However the

masterplan also recognises that it is vital these new communities do not 'turn their back' on Didcot's main town centre. The new routes and links within the town are intended to encourage movement between these neighbourhoods and the more strategic and broader range of facilities provided by the town centre.

A detailed review of the permitted and planned development across Didcot as part of the masterplan work has identified that where 'local' and 'neighbourhood' centres are included within proposals, there is a focus for the floorspace within them to be predominantly geared towards retail and recreational facilities. Whilst this fits with the need to ensure there can be adequate facilities and services to meet the everyday needs of the resident population, the Council will need to consider whether there might be benefit in encouraging developers to include a space for business within those centres to serve the needs of people who wish to access flexible office space close to home. This is an emerging theme from the councils' Business and Innovation SME Strategy.

Figure 4.4 shows the potential spatial distribution of future economic growth across the garden town. Pink and yellow areas denote sites within the Science Vale's enterprise zones; blue areas denote potential locations for future office growth and red denotes the broad location of new local district centres much are planned to support the needs of the new residents brought to the area by new housing developments.

## 4.1.6 Non-physical interventions

The physical manifestation of the masterplan over the coming years must be supplemented by 'softer' interventions in order to fulfil the vision and the key principles that underpin the Didcot Garden Town. These activities could be undertaken by a range of different parties, but can be led by the local authority (or governance body established to oversee the development of the garden town).

There are interventions that could be made in relation to each of the four key components of the economic strategy for Didcot and these are explained below.

The provision of new office floorspace, including suitable premises for SMEs, would benefit from a greater level of support for local businesses across Didcot as a whole. This could include a far greater role for organisations such as the Didcot Chamber of Commerce and Didcot First to develop networks and support business events, in partnership with the district councils' business support networks.

Among the findings of South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils' Business and Innovation SME Strategy includes the need to:

- Improve on-line search capabilities for vacant commercial property
- Improve and facilitate information dissemination and signposting of services and support
- Improve roll-out/ coverage of super-fast broadband
- Fostering and creating relationships between education and skills providers and the local business community
- Improve the quality, frequency and accessibility of public transport services.

In addition, there is a council objective to support local SMEs by helping them to win business and contracts from the public sector and from larger companies. This could be achieved by initiating a local supplier development programme targeted specifically at SMEs involving activities such as 'meet the buyer' fairs and workshops designed to provide SMEs with the skills and knowledge needed to bid for work from larger companies in the locality.

For the science sector to continue to thrive, and for the area to be a place of choice for business, there must be a labour force capable of undertaking the work required by employers. This is an issue that was raised on numerous occasions during stakeholder interviews and public consultation events.

The new workers brought to the area by the increased supply of housing will only provide part of the solution. There will also be a need for there to be a much stronger and clearer role for education and training providers to provide people with the skills they require to access the employment opportunities available in the area. It is also vital that Didcot provides an employment offer that goes beyond the world of science and technology.

There are a number of organisations which are already active in promoting and providing skills, training, apprenticeships and work experience in the area – in particular, OxLEP (Oxfordshire Skills Board, Opportunities to Inspire – O2i, and Oxfordshire Apprenticeships), Abingdon and Witney College, Job Centre Plus, UTC Oxfordshire, Activate Learning, Didcot Girls School, St Birinus School, Aureus School and also initiatives such as

South Oxfordshire Food and Education Academy (SOFEA) and other charitable and volunteer organisations. The links that these organisations and bodies have with businesses in the local and wider area should be nurtured and expanded further.

### Community Employment Plans

CEPs are employer-led initiatives relating to both the construction phase of developments and the end-user phase of large commercial development. They are intended to include measures to promote apprenticeships and training schemes, local procurement, and links with schools and colleges. A number of CEPs are already in place across Oxfordshire and more are in the pipeline. Local councils will have a key role to play in ensuring CEPs are implemented and in providing developers with the contacts and knowledge they need to prepare those plans.

It is vital that developers/ promoters of new development – whether it be housing or employment floorspace – are made aware of existing networks and encouraged to become part of and contribute to them as early as possible in the process. One way in which this could happen is through CEPs which OxLEP is promoting through local plan processes in order to provide local planning authorities with the ability to request these from developers of sites above certain thresholds. The district councils' economic development teams are already working with OxLEP to ensure that these plans are integrated



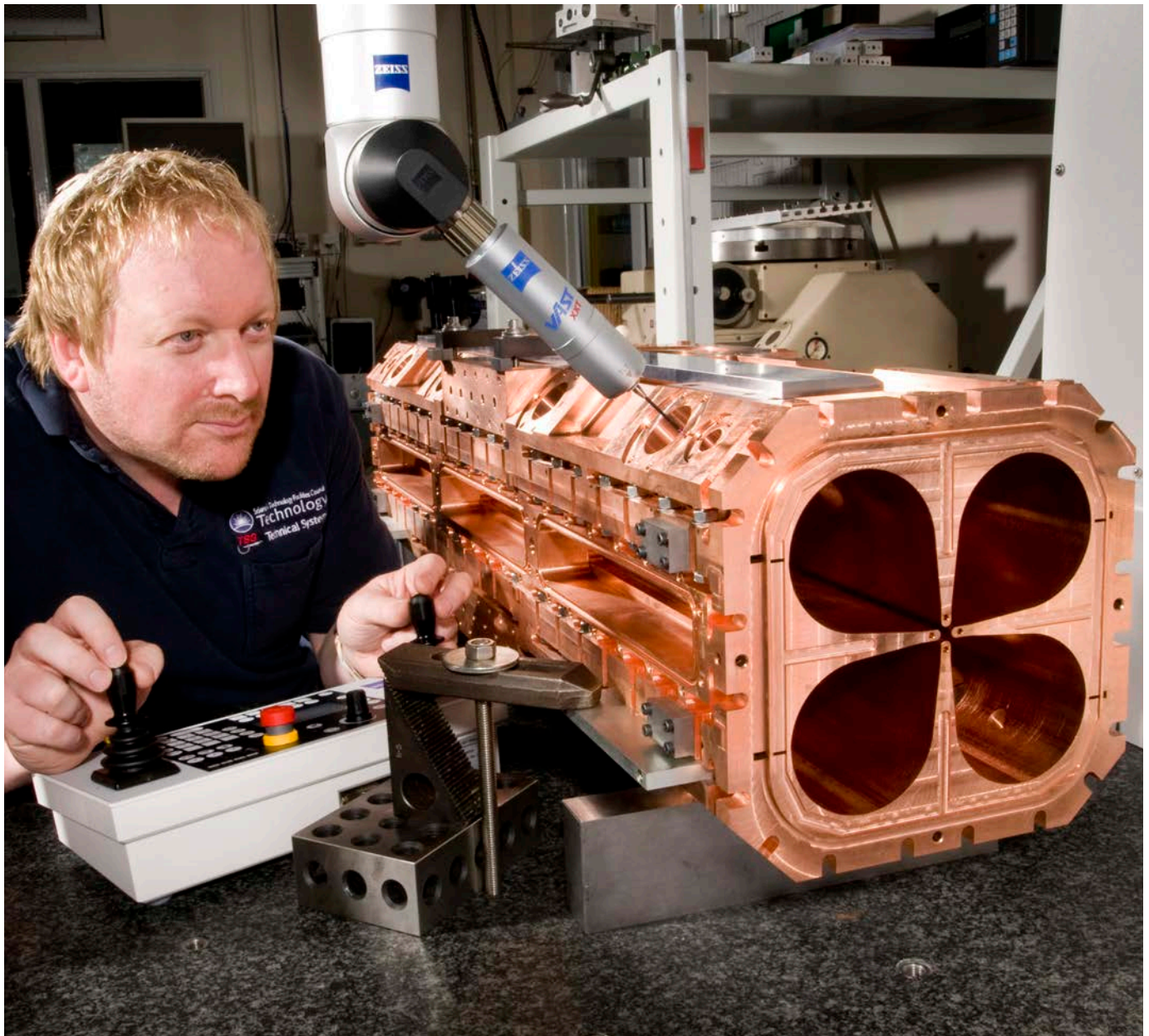
as a requirement through the councils' planning process going forward.

Plans to reinvigorate Didcot's town centre will also need to go beyond physical enhancements – in terms of expanding the centre, strengthening the role of Broadway, and improvements to public spaces. The introduction of a wider range of retailers to the town centre (including independent

retailers) is likely to also require careful town centre management and curation by the council and/ or other partner stakeholders. This may entail identification of temporary/ pop-up uses to animate vacant shops, subsidised rents, and events to raise the profile of the town and what it has to offer. There must also be support for existing retailers. As part of this process, the council will consider the

potential to introduce a centre manager role to Didcot.

Finally, it must be recognised that social enterprises are playing an increasing role in creating employment and training opportunities. Programmes and projects should therefore be developed to encourage the future development of this sector within the garden town.



## 4.1.7 The strategy to support cutting edge business

The Science Vale is a global destination for science and innovation, home to start-ups, SMEs, national and international companies. The area is particularly renowned for the development of technologies related to energy, high performance engineering, biotechnology and medical instruments. Not only is the science sector an important part of the local economy, it is something the town can be proud of.

There is excellent support in the garden town for cutting edge firms in the enterprise zones, which play an integral role in supporting the commercialisation and roll-out of new

### Industries include

- Life sciences cluster
- Cells and gene therapy
- Oncology
- Sensors
- Digital technology
- Satellite applications
- Autonomous vehicles
- Robotics
- Performance engineering
- Nuclear fusion
- Synthetic materials

technologies by offering firms a range of benefits. These benefits include business rates discounts, super-fast broadband and simplified planning. The garden town plan will further support innovative organisations by better connecting the enterprise zones to the town and wider world. With these improved links, it will be easier for people in the science parks and those working on the campuses to spend time in the town centre.

Links to education establishments are important, UTC Oxfordshire,

Abingdon and Witney College and other science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) providers, work closely with established science and engineering businesses ensuring a skilled labour force in the area. The garden town will look to build further links.

The garden town project will also directly support the commercialisation of new technologies in Didcot, ensuring that residents are the first to benefit from the latest technology being developed next door. Many tech innovators are already engaging with the garden town team, as is discussed further in chapter 7.1.

Alongside supporting innovative firms, the garden town will ensure residents benefit from them. Connecting schools and colleges with tech firms will open science up to students. Through partnerships and apprenticeships local people will get the opportunity to gain skills for careers in STEM, which will also provide the Science Vale with a local workforce.

The following projects are key to how the garden town will deliver in this area.

### Connectivity

The 'Garden Line' will connect Harwell Campus to Culham Science Centre via Didcot Station and town centre. This will initially be a cycling route, potentially upgradable to accommodate driverless vehicles, making it easier for employees and international visitors to get between these key locations.

### Housing

New build to rent housing, including smaller units, will be developed to meet the needs of a growing workforce.

Build to rent will provide a range of lease options and features such as communal lounges and laundry areas. This compelling offer will incentivise people to move to Didcot and address the lack of one bed homes in the area.

### Science centre

A science centre is proposed as a means of showcasing the innovations taking place in Science Vale. A site has yet to be identified for this project, since identifying a suitable site will form part of the study that is needed to validate the feasibility of this idea. Ideally, the science centre will act as a conference space that is also capable of hosting permanent exhibits from organisations in the Science Vale. These exhibitions will advertise the great work that goes on in the Science Vale to investors and be an attraction for residents and visitors alike. The space could be used as one of the venues for the science and arts festival.

### Education partnerships

Links between local education establishments and private companies in Didcot will be improved, allowing local students to gain skills in STEM. This will provide opportunities for local people and ensure companies in the Science Vale can find local workers with the skills they need.

### Commercialisation partnerships

The garden town team will partner with firms to implement future solutions commercially where they have real benefits for residents. This will provide an opportunity for firms to test their solutions on an achievable town scale, whilst offering Didcot residents the benefits of emerging technology first.



### Local supplier development programme

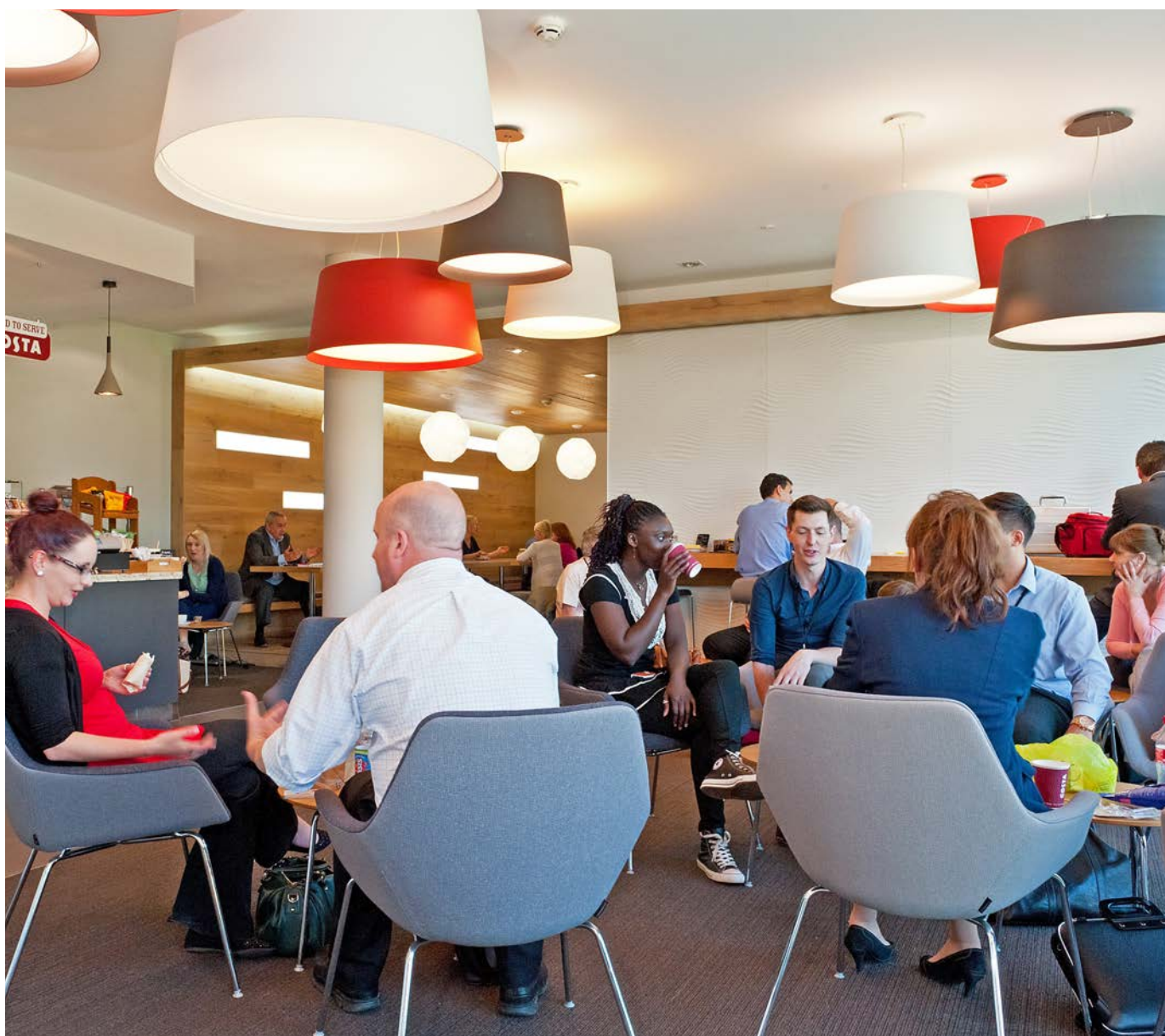
A number of organised events including 'meet the buyer' fairs and workshops to provide SMEs with the skills and knowledge needed to bid for work from larger companies in the locality. This will help SMEs win business from the public sector and larger companies, which will provide significant opportunity for growth.

### Strategic alliances

Alliances are being formed with partner companies in the fields of energy, travel, housing to encourage the adoption of the latest solutions in a co-ordinated way. This is discussed further in chapter 7.

### Science Vale marketing campaign

A campaign has been launched to raise the profile of the Science Vale both nationally and internationally.



Business lounge © MEPC

## 4.1.8 Conclusions and recommendations

The economic success of Didcot will be one of the most important factors in ensuring the future prosperity and sustainability of the town. To achieve that and to secure the investment needed to meet the targets set for growth, the town needs to be able to demonstrate that it can offer the quality of life that will attract employers and employees to it. High quality and varied employment space may only be part of that offer. It needs to be part of a 'package' that provides both employers and their workforce with a great strategic location for business, excellent local links between homes and employment hubs that encourage movement by foot or by bike, a high quality and green environment that encourages healthy lifestyles, and a vibrant and active town centre that provides an offer to people of different age ranges and social groups.

The economic proposals for the Didcot Garden Town seek to build on

existing local planning and economic policy and align with the national level policy direction in terms of industry development. However, over the longer term there are ambitious plans for the future economy of Didcot and these will take a number of forms including promotion of the commercialisation of science, meeting trend demand for office floorspace, including an attractive offer for SMEs, town centre regeneration, and viable local centres which provide supplementary services to Didcot town centre without compromising its role and success.

Underpinning these elements will be a range of interventions that will help the physical elements of the masterplan to mesh together into that coherent 'package'. These interventions will be driven by South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils or future governance body for the garden town in partnership with local organisations, businesses and stakeholders.

### Recommendations

- Implementation of recommendations from South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils' Business and Innovation SME Strategy
- Councils to consider successful town centre regeneration schemes and adopt best practice from those examples to encourage new occupiers/ retailers to Didcot town centre, even if on a temporary/ pop-up/ meantime basis.
- Councils to continue to broker and facilitate investment by business into Didcot.
- Councils to explore the potential to introduce the role of a town centre manager for Didcot in order to drive forward the masterplan proposals to regenerate and revitalise the town centre.
- Continuation of the marketing campaign recently launched to market Didcot Garden Town as part of the wider Science Vale.

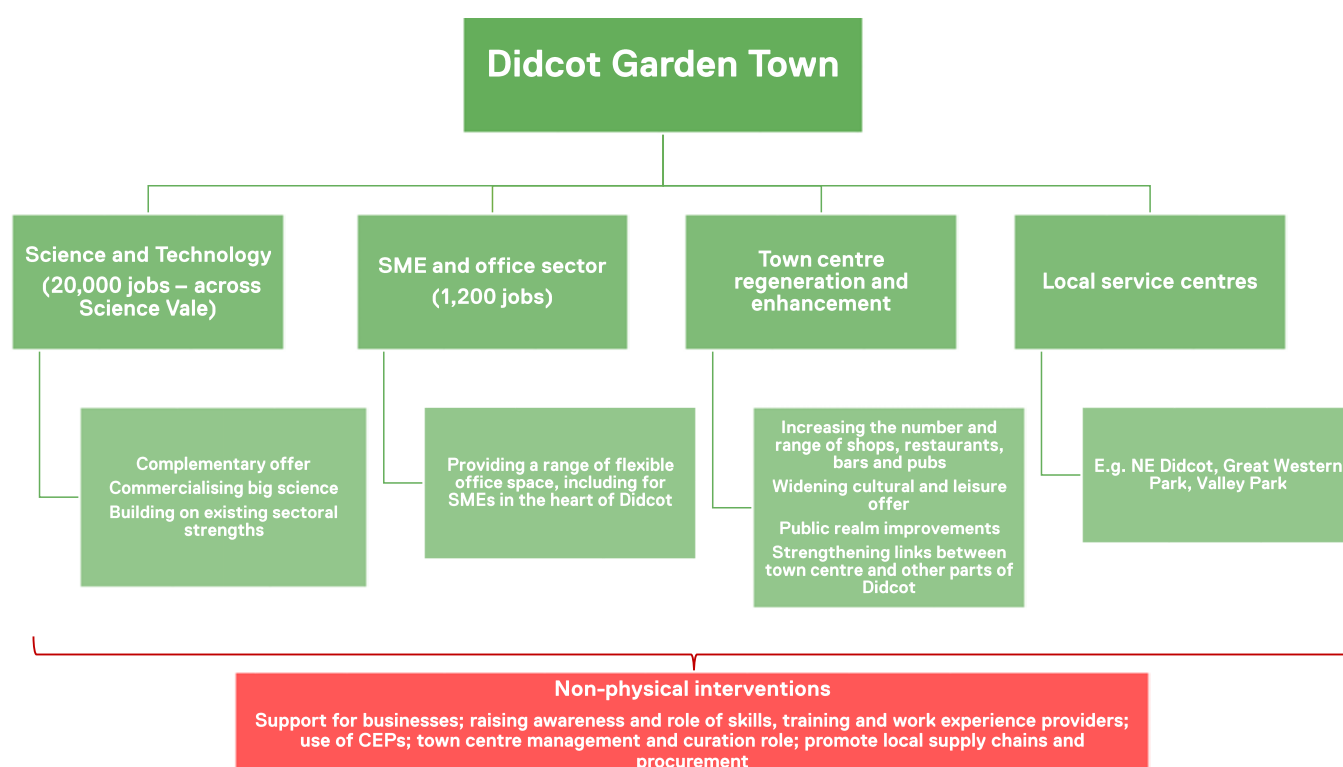


Figure 4.5 - Key components of Didcot's economic strategy





