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Oxfordshire Business Summit 2025 Impact Report

Action to Stimulate Growth



Research
England

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Foreword from Richard Rosser

B4 was proud to launch the inaugural Oxfordshire Business Summit (OBS2025) in May at the iconic Blenheim Palace — a fitting location for a bold new conversation about the future of business in our region.

OBS2025 brought together over 100 of Oxfordshire’s most ambitious leaders, innovators, entrepreneurs, and changemakers to explore what future success looks like in an era of rapid change. With the theme “Connect, Collaborate and Innovate for Future Success,” the day featured a dynamic programme of keynotes, panels, roundtables, and networking opportunities, all designed to spark new ideas, partnerships, and solutions.

Attendees engaged in rich discussions on critical topics such as digital transformation, sustainability, skills, inclusive leadership, and economic growth, reflecting both local priorities and global challenges. What made OBS2025 unique was its focus on cross-sector collaboration, drawing insight from business, academia, policy, and community sectors alike.

This Impact Report, produced by Gold Sponsors Oxford Brookes University, captures the key themes, outcomes, and actions emerging from the summit - and sets the stage for what comes next.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Dominic Hare and the team at Blenheim for their exceptional hospitality, to Oxford Brookes for producing this report and supporting with an outstanding hospitality student team, and to our sponsors, speakers, delegates, and partners. Special thanks go to the B4 events team led by Tina Rosser, and to our brilliant Steering Group whose vision and support helped bring OBS2025 to life.

We now set our sights on OBS2026 which will take place on 15th May 2026 at Blenheim Palace. Please get in touch to find out more or visit: www.oxfordshirebusinesssummit.com



RICHARD ROSSER
CEO, B4





Foreword from Professor Joe Tah

Businesses today are facing some of the biggest challenges we’ve seen in decades. From the urgent need to act sustainably and responsibly, to the fast-changing influence of AI, and the uncertainty of shifting government policies - no sector is untouched. The pace of change is fast, and the expectations are even faster.

That’s why events like the Oxfordshire Business Summit matter so much. They give us a space to pause, reflect, and share ideas. More importantly, they help us connect - across sectors, industries, and roles - to find ways to collaborate and move forward together.

At Oxford Brookes University, we believe universities have a key role to play in this. We’re not just about research and theory - we offer practical support through facilities, labs, and knowledge

that’s designed to make a real-world impact. Our Enterprise Support team works closely with startups, spinouts, and growing businesses, helping turn ideas into action. And with the help of our partners, we create opportunities for students to apply their learning to live business challenges - through placements, internships, and joint projects.

In today’s world, the relationship between education and enterprise isn’t optional - it’s essential. And when we get that relationship right, the benefits are huge: for businesses, for students, and for our wider economy and society.

Thank you to everyone who took part in the Summit. Let’s keep the momentum going.



PROFESSOR JOSEPH H. M. TAH
Pro Vice-Chancellor,
Research and
Innovation at Oxford
Brookes University



LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Devolution dilemmas: what steps can local authorities take to instil business confidence and unlock infrastructure?



Session Chair:

- Sebastian Johnson, Director of Ecosystem – Harwell Campus and ARC Oxford

Session Speakers:

- Martin Reeves, CEO, Oxfordshire County Council
- Caroline Green, CEO, Oxford City Council



Session Overview

This session focused on the future of local governance in Oxfordshire, especially in light of potential devolution plans and the upcoming white paper on regional powers. With the region poised to become a key UK economic “supercluster,” local leaders discussed how better infrastructure, stronger collaboration, and more decision-making power at a local level could unlock growth and build public confidence.

Key Takeaways:

- Devolution brings opportunity: Giving more powers and funding to local authorities can help unlock business growth and improve services.
- Clarity is needed: Local government must work together now to prepare for possible changes, including a shift to a single-tier authority.
- Infrastructure is key: Investment in projects like the Cowley branch line would benefit not just business, but also housing and communities.
- Trust is high: Local authorities are the most trusted part of government - but they must clearly communicate their purpose and progress.

- Strategic voice matters: Devolution must help Oxfordshire speak with a strong, united voice to advocate for investment and growth.

Actions & Reflections:

- Build cross-council collaboration now to prepare for a streamlined, single authority structure.
- Develop a strong regional narrative to attract national investment and build public trust.
- Push for infrastructure with social impact, ensuring it supports both business and communities.
- Act quickly to seize the moment — economic resilience depends on confident, timely decisions.

“Local government can’t deliver this alone — we need collaboration, community voices, and a shared vision for Oxfordshire’s future.”

Sebastian Johnson, Director of Ecosystem, Harwell Campus and ARC Oxford

THE FUTURE OF WORK

How must we evolve alongside technological change?

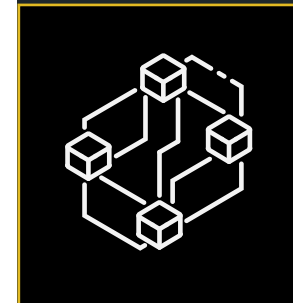


Session Chair:

- Frank Nigriello, Chairman, B4

Session Speakers:

- Dr Laura Gilbert CBE, Senior Director of AI at the Tony Blair Institute, Visiting Professor in Practice at LSE
- Will Hutton, President, Academy of Social Sciences and Co Chair of The Purposeful Company



Top concerns about AI in the industry:

- 74% cited Data Privacy & Security
- 31% pointed to Impact on the Workforce



Session Overview

This session explored the rapidly changing landscape of work, from the rise of AI to the importance of purpose in business. Speakers focused on the UK's unique entrepreneurial strengths, the need to retain and scale home-grown businesses, and how technology - especially AI - can help or hinder our future depending on how we use it.

Key Takeaways:

- The UK has enormous entrepreneurial potential, with Oxfordshire and Cambridge-shire home to one of the world's top startup and scale-up ecosystems.
- Scaling is still a challenge - many companies are forced to seek funding abroad after early-stage support dries up.
- Mission matters - purpose-led companies attract more committed staff and are more likely to succeed, especially in times of uncertainty.
- AI is here to stay - and ignoring it could be more dangerous than misusing it. The key is smart, ethical integration.

- Efficiency isn't everything - tech should improve the services we value, not make life more demanding.

Actions & Reflections:

- Invest in purpose: Leaders should define a mission that motivates, not just monetises.
- Support scale-ups: Ensure funding and policy support doesn't stop at the startup phase.
- Use AI wisely: Equip decision-makers with genuine understanding of the technology.
- Build with balance: Aim for a society that values quality of life - not just output.

"Instead of racing towards perfection, we should focus on building the society we actually want."

Dr Laura Gilbert CBE, Senior Director of AI at the Tony Blair Institute, Visiting Professor in Practice at LSE

BEYOND THE BOTTOM LINE

A conscious approach to business. Exploring Oxfordshire's legacy as a hub of innovation and responsible commerce, alongside the historical significance of Blenheim Palace as a renowned landed estate.



Session Speakers:

- Liz Nicholson, MD, Nicholsons
- Dominic Hare, CEO, Blenheim Palace



Emerging Trend in Oxfordshire's Commercial Property Market:

- 24% of delegates expect a rise in ESG-Compliant Buildings

Session Overview

Beyond the Bottom Line explored the evolving role of landed estates like Blenheim Palace in shaping a sustainable and socially responsible future, highlighting its ongoing partnership with Nicholsons.

The session looked at how heritage, innovation, and environmental stewardship are being woven into long-term economic, social, and ecological goals – not just for today, but for generations to come.

Key Takeaways:

- Blenheim Palace's legacy mindset supports bold, future-facing investment in sustainability.
- Nicholsons, a local landscape design firm, is helping the Palace achieve significant environmental and social goals.
- Nicholsons balances commercial viability with ambitious environmental ethics.
- The '10 Goals to 2027' include economic, educational, housing, and cultural commitments.
- From afforestation to green energy, Blenheim aims to be a net generator of green energy.

- Nicholsons' work addresses soil degradation, flooding risk, biodiversity loss, and mental wellbeing through green design.
- Apprenticeship collaboration supports young people and skills growth across both organisations.

Actions & Reflections:

- Long-standing institutions can lead the sustainability agenda by leveraging their stability and public influence.
- Mistakes, like unexpected emissions from land use, are part of the learning process – adaptability is key.
- Visitor-related carbon remains a major challenge, but behavioural change and offsetting show progress.
- The partnership illustrates how heritage and innovation can work hand-in-hand for the greater good.

“Caring for the planet, if done correctly, need not come at the expense of your profit margin.”

Liz Nicholson, MD, Nicholsons

DRIVING ECONOMIC GROWTH IN OXFORDSHIRE

Uniting political perspectives and overcoming challenges for global success.



Session Speakers:

- Sarah Haywood, Managing Director, Advanced Oxford
- Katy Tuncer, Leadership Coach & Speaker, Horizon 37
- Nigel Tipple, Chief Executive, Enterprise Oxfordshire



72%

Delegates rate the current business climate in Oxfordshire as Good-Excellent



Session Overview

Driving Economic Growth in Oxfordshire explored national and regional dynamics shaping economic development in a changing political landscape. With uncertainty following a change in government, the session unpacked Oxfordshire's unique position as a hub of innovation and productivity - and the critical role the private sector must play in ensuring growth is inclusive, sustainable, and future-ready.

Key Takeaways:

- Economic growth is the UK government's top priority, but progress remains slow due to inflation, global instability, and market conditions.
- Oxfordshire is a consistent net contributor to the UK economy, with particular strength in science, technology, and innovation.
- The English Devolution Bill will reshape local governance, giving Oxford more autonomy but also aligning it with national priorities.
- The Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor and Oxford Growth Commission are platforms for influencing future development.
- Oxford University's Strategic Innovation Taskforce will act as a convenor for innovation-led regional growth.
- True success hinges not just on scale but on values, resilience, and long-term benefit to people and place.

Actions & Reflections:

- Engage proactively with the Oxford Growth Commission and Oxford-Cambridge Arc to shape priorities.
- Make use of support from organisations like Enterprise Oxfordshire to scale innovation and upskill the workforce.
- Participate in regional debates on infrastructure, housing, and planning to ensure the private sector's voice is heard.
- Leverage Oxfordshire's strengths in science and tech to align with national goals of becoming a global science superpower.
- Economic growth remains a contested term - regional strategies must align growth with sustainability, inclusion, and community impact.
- Local businesses need clarity on how national policies and devolved powers will affect planning, housing, and regulation.
- Dialogue between sectors (government, education, private industry) is essential for building a shared vision.
- Success in Oxfordshire will depend on our ability to hold space for innovation and preserve quality of life for all residents.

“Being able to represent the private sector in debate, and having our say in Oxfordshire's future economic growth, will be invaluable for future-proofing our efforts.”

Nigel Tipple, Chief Executive, Enterprise Oxfordshire

CATALYSING GROWTH IN OXFORDSHIRE

Unpacking major investment and developments and the vital role of placemaking. What's happening in the City Centre, Oxford North, Oxford-Cambridge arc, new homes and key leisure projects.



Session Chair:

- Patrick Whetter, Partner, Head of Real Estate Oxford, Freeths

Session Speakers:

- Tom Bridgman, Deputy Chief Executive - Place, Oxford City Council
- Victoria Collett, Development Director, Thomas White Oxford – Oxford North
- Ashley Maltman, Head of Planning, Pye homes
- Hayley Beer-Gamage, CEO, Experience Oxfordshire
- Dominic Hare, CEO, Blenheim Palace



The biggest challenges delegates currently reported when navigating Oxfordshire's commercial property landscape

- 24% Shortage of available space
- 21% Lack of future-proof infrastructure
- 17% High rental or purchase price
- 17% Planning delays or complexities

Session Overview

This session explored Oxfordshire's future growth through new housing, infrastructure investment, regeneration of the city centre, and the power of tourism. It emphasised the need for collaborative planning, creative placemaking and long-term thinking to unlock the region's potential and ensure growth benefits local people.

Key Takeaways:

- Oxford's growth must feel relevant, inclusive and community-driven to gain support.
- Major housing targets far outpace current capacity, calling for innovative solutions and cooperation.
- Revitalising the city centre is critical for resilience, business growth and quality of life.
- Infrastructure improvements (e.g., transport, sewage, energy) are urgent and essential.
- Tourism drives 40,000 jobs - but success depends on longer stays and higher visitor spend.

Actions & Reflections:

- Strategic collaboration is vital across government, business and institutions to meet infrastructure and housing needs.
- Planning must be agile - balancing long-term ambitions with short-term feasibility in areas like housing, development and transport.
- The city centre should become a lived-in destination, not just a commercial space; placemaking must prioritise locals as much as visitors.
- Tourism should be reframed as an enabler of shared prosperity, not a burden - targeting quality over quantity and reinvesting benefits locally.
- Devolution could unlock smarter growth, with joined-up thinking across boundaries and a clearer roadmap for sustainable change.

"To unlock Oxfordshire's growth, we must go beyond space-making and commit to placemaking - bold, relevant, and rooted in what our communities need."

Tom Bridgman, Deputy Chief Executive - Place, Oxford City Council

WE HAVE A FUTURE TALENT PROBLEM

How can we move fast by identifying skill gaps, training, upskilling and coaching for inclusive growth?



Session Chair:

- Tom Storey, Founder, Storey Consulting

Session Speakers:

- Emma Coles, Partnership Manager, Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership
- Jacqui Canton, Principal & Chief Executive, Abingdon & Witney College
- Dr Paul Jackson, Principal Lecturer in Information Systems, Analytics and Operations, Oxford Brookes University
- Lisa Lloyd, Chartered Psychologist and Psychotherapist, It's Time for Change



Session Overview

This session explored the pressing issue of future talent shortages in Oxfordshire and how inclusive skills development is key to sustainable regional growth. The conversation focused on how universities, further education (FE) colleges, businesses, and community organisations can collaborate to identify skills gaps, support training, and empower residents to contribute meaningfully to the local economy.

Key Takeaways:

- Growth must benefit all communities, especially in a region with such stark inequalities as Oxfordshire.
- FE colleges are crucial, as they deliver year-round, tailored, practical training that meets business needs and supports individual development.
- Partnerships like Oxford North and Careys show how targeted training changes lives and fosters social mobility.
- Businesses must embrace people-focused strategies, including apprenticeships, inclusive recruitment, and internal upskilling.
- Human, values-driven leadership better meets the expectations of modern workforces and supports retention.

Actions & Reflections:

- Invest in local partnerships that widen access to training and career opportunities, particularly for underrepresented groups.
- Recognise the strategic value of further education in delivering workforce-ready skills year-round.
- Embed inclusive recruitment practices, such as anonymised applications and alternative entry routes like apprenticeships.
- Encourage businesses to align people strategies with long-term growth goals, focusing on internal mobility, mentoring, and retention.
- Redefine leadership culture - modern workforces respond best to empathetic, purpose-driven management styles.
- Support leaders with training that fosters vulnerability, adaptability, and a clear sense of mission.

"The population will be far more supportive of growth if they can see it actually affecting them."

Emma Coles, Partnership Manager, Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership

COLLABORATING WITH UNIVERSITIES TO DRIVE INNOVATION

*Partnering with universities sparks innovation.
How can we collaborate to develop new ideas and technologies?*



Watch this session:

Session Chair:

- Sarah Haywood, Managing Director, Advanced Oxford

Session Speakers:

- Dr Matthew Hogan, Innovate UK
- Professor Rajat Gupta, Oxford Brookes
- Dr Paul Jackson, Brookes Business School
- Dominic Hare, CEO, Blenheim Palace

85%

Success rate and rising, Knowledge Transfer Partnerships are a brilliant way for organisations to solve complex puzzles.

Session Overview

This session explored how deeper collaboration between universities and businesses can be a powerful catalyst for innovation and inclusive economic growth. From formal Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTPs) to flexible student projects and joint research, universities offer practical expertise, fresh ideas, and credibility to businesses seeking a competitive edge in a fast-evolving marketplace.

Key Takeaways:

- Growth must benefit all communities, especially Oxfordshire is already one of the UK's most innovative regions, but cross-sector collaboration is underutilised.
- KTPs offer a structured, high-impact way for businesses to embed academic expertise and develop internal capabilities.
- Universities are more than just research hubs—they can be strategic partners, offering fresh talent, impartial advice, and access to cutting-edge developments.
- Administrative hurdles exist, but proactive engagement with university innovation teams can unlock significant value.
- Even short-term student projects can inject new thinking and energy into businesses at minimal cost.

Actions & Reflections:

- Consider entering a KTP to address a specific business challenge - particularly beneficial for SMEs with limited R&D capacity.

- Explore informal or low-cost collaboration options like student placements, dissertation partnerships, or postgraduate consultancy.
- Recognise universities as innovation ecosystems - accessing them early means gaining competitive advantage before ideas become widely available.
- Use university relationships not only for technical problem-solving, but also to build credibility and trust when moving towards commercialisation.
- Don't be deterred by perceived bureaucracy - seek support from university innovation teams (like Oxford Brookes' Directorate of Research, Innovation & Enterprise) who can guide you to the right contacts.
- Encourage leadership within businesses to actively pursue partnerships and treat universities as collaborators, not just educators.

“Lots of organisations just don't realise what help is out there, or that those challenges are something academic expertise can dig them out of.”

Dr Paul Jackson, Brookes Business School

A Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) connects businesses with academic expertise by embedding a graduate into the company to deliver an innovation project, supported by academic supervision and co-funded by Innovate UK.

Find out more:

www.brookes.ac.uk/engage-and-innovate/knowledge-transfer-partnerships

ENVISIONING TOMORROW

The transformative impact of accelerated AI on our world.



Session Chair:

- Will Richmond-Coggan, Partner, Head of AI & Data Privacy at Freeths Oxford

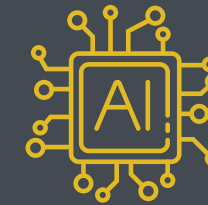
Session Speakers:

- Richard Boon, CEO and Co-Founder of OH SIX Agency
- Chris Dryden, COO / CCO, The Face Recognition Company



Why delegates use AI at work:

41% Efficiency
33% Productivity



Session Overview

This session explored the rapid rise of artificial intelligence and its implications for businesses, creativity, sustainability, and responsibility. It positioned AI not as a threat, but as a powerful tool - if used with intention and care - that can enhance efficiency, unlock creativity, and enable more responsible innovation. Presenters emphasised the importance of understanding AI's capabilities and limitations and using it to solve real problems rather than adopting it blindly.

Key Takeaways:

- AI is a tool, not a threat. Most users will not build AI tools but should understand how to use them effectively and ethically.
- The best AI use starts with a business need, not with the technology itself.
- AI won't replace jobs outright, but people using AI might replace those who don't.
- AI can enhance creativity, not erase it - especially when used with human context and emotional intelligence.
- AI has environmental costs, but also presents new opportunities to balance and offset its impact.

- Transparency and understanding data privacy are essential to ethical AI use.

Actions & Reflections:

- AI is no different from previous tech revolutions - it's about adaptation.
- Don't adopt tools for novelty; use them where they solve problems.
- Upskill teams to understand AI tools relevant to your industry.
- Set clear policies for responsible AI use and data handling.
- Explore hybrid working models where human creativity is augmented by AI.
- Monitor AI's environmental impact and consider offset strategies.
- Stay informed about emerging regulations and ethical standards.

"AI won't take your job. But someone using AI might."

Richard Boon, CEO & Co-founder, OH SIX Agency

THE ART OF THE POSSIBLE

*Automotive and aviation brands leading the charge in future mobility at Bicester Motion.
How Oxfordshire is leading the way and what more we can do to collaborate and innovate.*



Session Chair:

- Amanda Stretton, British Race Car Driver and TV Broadcaster

Session Speakers:

- Daniel Geoghegan, Chief Executive Officer, Bicester Motion
- Peter Schroder, Technical Director, Zero
- Hugh Chambers, Chief Executive Officer, Motorsport UK



Session Overview

This session highlighted how Oxfordshire - and Bicester Motion in particular - is at the forefront of sustainable mobility innovation. It showcased how the region's motorsport heritage, skilled workforce, and collaborative culture are powering advancements in electric vehicles, synthetic fuels, and STEM outreach. The panel made the case for the motorsport industry as a serious player in the net zero transition, not just a sport or luxury pursuit, and called for stronger national support and policy direction to scale up alternative fuel technologies.

Key Takeaways:

- With its talent pipelines, university partnerships and motorsport heritage, Oxfordshire is uniquely placed to innovate in sustainable transport.
- Success stories, like the Formula One battery project, show the value of multidisciplinary teamwork and rapid prototyping.
- Companies like Zero Petroleum are creating drop-in carbon-neutral fuels that work in existing petrol engines, with no infrastructure overhaul needed.
- Initiatives like Girls on Track are already shifting perceptions of motorsport and engineering careers among young girls.

- Industry leaders want more nuanced government policy around sustainable fuels, not just a blanket push for EVs, which aren't yet viable at scale.
- Far from frivolous, the UK motorsport industry supports 40,000 jobs and contributes £10bn to GDP.

Actions & Reflections:

- Help shift public and policy perceptions of the industry from 'niche sport' to vital sustainability partner.
- Support programmes that widen access to motorsport careers, particularly for underrepresented groups.
- Learn from the Bicester Motion cluster model—collaboration accelerates progress.
- Engage with policymakers to recognise the potential of synthetic fuels alongside EVs in net-zero strategies.
- Use events like Scramble to educate and inspire the public about the industry's sustainable future.

"Motorsport has always been a driver of innovation - from seatbelts to synthetic fuels. We must keep shouting about its value to society."

Amanda Stretton, British Race Car Driver & TV Broadcaster



A Chairman's Perspective on the Oxfordshire Business Summit 2025

As I reflect on the discussions and insights shared at the Oxfordshire Business Summit 2025, I am struck by the clarity of vision and the urgency of action that emerged from the speakers and from the conversations with delegates. The summit brought together over 100 business leaders, academics, and policymakers under the theme "Connect, Collaborate and Innovate for Future Success," and what transpired was a blueprint for our region's economic transformation.

For the small and medium-sized enterprises that form the backbone of Oxfordshire's economy, the presentations at Blenheim Palace were practical road maps for navigating an increasingly complex business landscape. The themes that emerged speak directly to the challenges and opportunities that business leaders face daily, from the skilled labour shortages that 36% of our delegates identified as their primary concern, to the transformative potential of artificial intelligence that promises to reshape how we work, create, and compete.

The Oxfordshire Business Summit 2025 has provided us with a clear view of the opportunities and challenges ahead. The themes that emerged—collaboration, inclusive

growth, strategic technology adoption, infrastructure development, sustainability, and leadership evolution—form a coherent framework for understanding the forces shaping our regional economy.

For Oxfordshire's SMEs, these insights translate into practical imperatives. The businesses that thrive in the coming years will be those that embrace collaboration, invest in their people, adopt technology strategically, and contribute to the kind of inclusive, sustainable growth that builds long-term community support.

The conversations at Blenheim Palace have ended, but the real work begins now in preparation for the Oxfordshire Business summit in May 2026. It begins with each business leader taking personal responsibility for his or her part in Oxfordshire's economic future, and it continues with the collaborative spirit that made the summit a catalyst for change and a 'first step' for many organisations. Together, we have the opportunity to build an economy that is prosperous, inclusive, sustainable, and resilient. The choice, and the responsibility, is ours.



FRANK NIGRIELLO
Chairman, B4 National & Co-chair Earth Trust



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BECOME AN OBS2026 SPONSOR

Following the success of OBS2025, we're now inviting forward-thinking organisations to sponsor OBS2026. Align your brand with Oxfordshire's most dynamic business event and help shape a stronger, smarter future for our region.



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The Directorate of Research, Innovation and Enterprise

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