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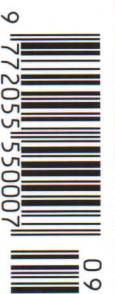
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Another month another airport: Blackpool from the air with the Airport and Enterprise Zone in the foreground. This aerial picture courtesy of the Lancashire Local Enterprise Partnership.

The UK's Most-Needed Enterprise Zone

By Andrew Harris



It is a town of contradictions. It has world-famous attractions, has a culture and history of enterprise and should be an economic powerhouse for the north. Yet it has too much unemployment, too many jobs which are poorly paid or seasonal or both and the governmental Joint Strategic Needs Assessment revealed that male and female residents have the lowest life expectancy of any town in the country - and residents are healthy and disability-free for a smaller proportion of their lives.

In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis Dean Acheson – the former US Secretary of State – lamented that Britain had ‘lost an empire and not yet found a role’. Likewise, Blackpool has lost much of its long-stay traditional tourism but failed to find an alternative. With a similar problem the Isle of Man turned to an offshore finance role – an option not available to Blackpool. Hopes of wealth from a casino trickling down to help local people faded when the casino prospect moved elsewhere and died.

So what is to be done? Blackpool cannot live by tourism alone. The need is to kick-start alternative and well-paid employment with an initiative which can be a catalyst for growth. The other 44 Enterprise Zones tend to support existing activity. From the 1st April last year Blackpool has had an Enterprise Zone designed to encourage new activity to complement tourism. So what is it, what does it offer and is it working?

The Blackpool Airport Enterprise Zone covers 144 hectares - about 345 acres – of the land between Squires Gate Lane and the main 10/28 runway of the airport eastwards to Common Edge Road. This includes the Blackpool Business Park, Squires Gate Industrial Estate, Sycamore Trading Estate and developable sites within the airport perimeter north of the main runway. The Retail Park is excluded. The Enterprise Zone initiative is managed by the clumsily-worded Blackpool, Fylde & Wyre Economic Development Company – why on earth didn't they call it Fylde Coast Enterprise for short –

which is a partnership of the public and private sectors. The Enterprise Zone is their flagship project yet they are based in Blackpool Borough Council's offices at Bickerstaffe Square in the town centre. Their head of enterprise & investment is Rob Green who is supported by the Council's new Growth and Prosperity Team – and a seconded group estates officer. The aims of the company are to promote economic opportunity, attract new investment, create employment opportunities and diversify the local economy. Just what is needed.

BFWEDC – an unpronounceable acronym – is not well resourced but promotes the Enterprise Zone with vigour. Your columnist is left with the uncomfortable feeling that the prospect of Blackpool escaping its deprivation is left to just two people who struggle at times to meet their commitments and respond promptly to emails and phone calls as well. Fortunately great support is provided by the Lancashire Local Enterprise Partnership, Marketing Lancashire and the new Lancashire





The Enterprise Zone is successful and congested. There is a need to re-phase the exit traffic lights and/or provide another route

Advanced Manufacturing & Energy Cluster – aka as LAMEC – which will promote all 4 Enterprise Zones in Lancashire overseas.

Apart from help and advice the Enterprise Zone promotes development and jobs in three ways:

- A range of sites are available within the zone. 9 are available immediately and 3 of these are divisible. A further 2 much larger sites will be available later. Many of these are privately owned with commercial property agents acting. Foremost amongst these is Preston-based Robert Pinkus & Co. For details visit www.pinkus.co.uk or telephone 01772 769000.

- Business Rates Relief of up to £55,000 a year is available to new and qualifying businesses for five years but only within the part of the zone coloured blue – see the plan. This is based

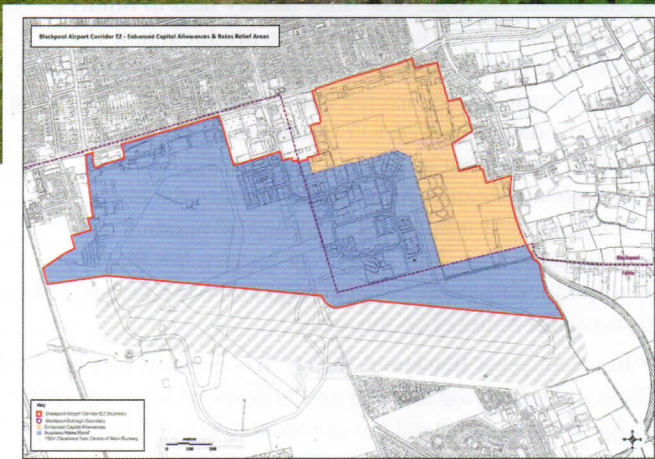
on the number of new jobs created and the operating sector of the business. Target sectors are advanced manufacturing, aviation, creative and digital industries, energy plus food & drink manufacturing although other sectors will be considered. Although new inward investment to the Fylde Coast is the primary target firms from this area wishing to relocate to the Enterprise Zone will be considered for a full or partial award if a significant number of new jobs will result and they cannot grow where they are. Business Rates Relief will be available up to the 31st March 2012 with qualifying companies potentially receiving this benefit until 2027.

- Enhanced Capital Allowances is available to qualifying companies investing in fixed plant and equipment but excluding buildings and portable items such as cars or computers. This permits 100% of qualifying expenditure up to 125 million euros to be set against tax in a single year rather than the normal arrangement over a number of years. This benefit is only available within the part of the zone coloured tangerine on the plan. Sadly, Business Rates Relief and Enhanced Capital Allowances are mutually exclusive; a company cannot receive both.

Is it working? Interestingly, Robert Pinkus & Co partner Danny Pinkus comments on the past, present and future: “Enterprise Zone status has had a stimulating effect on development prospects within the EZ boundary. New office and industrial projects are already resulting and we are receiving an encouraging number of enquiries about buying or renting space. We hope that this investment will culminate in airport-related and multi-use developments to create new attractions for the airport, visitors and local people alike.”

After one year – in April 2017 – BFWEDC could report

The Skyways Commercial Campus provides a mix of office and industrial space within the Enterprise Zone



The blue and brown areas which qualify for different benefits: see the text

that the Zone had attracted 28 new companies hosting 480 new jobs. The plan is to add an extra 2,500 jobs over the next 24 years. But could the zone achieve greater progress to help Blackpool become more successful? There are 4 reasons to be optimistic –

- The attraction of new companies will continue. The financial incentives are considerable but only for such new ventures;
- Indigenous growth complements new arrivals. The first private business to be welcomed into the Enterprise Zone was Force Technology. Managing Director Steve Williams explains “We made the right choice basing our company in Blackpool’s Enterprise Zone. When we moved into our premises there were only 3 of us. Now we have grown to 17 staff. By next year we predict that Force Technology will be employing over 30 staff and we are delighted with the quality of the local



New and existing buildings are available to rent or buy in the Zone. Transaction House offers an unusual combination of office and storage space



The new Lancashire Energy HQ which opens in September this year.



Danielle & Keith recall the 1940s in Hangar 42. Picture courtesy of John Coombes



The old terminal building has been replaced by this



Blackpool Airport still has a vital role in servicing rigs in the Irish Sea

workforce.” He concluded “We would highly recommend businesses to locate in Blackpool. It’s a winner.”

- Major new attractions are game-changers and exciting as evidenced by three existing and potential prospects –

- The Lancashire Energy HQ This is a new £9.8m purpose-built facility which will open in September this year. Developed by Blackpool & Fylde College and co-funded by Lancashire Local Enterprise Partnership it aims to deliver the next generation of engineers and technicians relevant to nuclear, tidal, wave and wind technologies which are at the forefront of energy development. This should be a boost for future employment and the 80 energy sector businesses already in our region.

- Hangar 42. This displays replica Spitfire and Hurricane fighters and is already a major attraction for many. There are monthly open days and plans to develop Hangar 42 into a full-blown Fylde Coast Museum of Aviation and Aircraft Manufacturing. Chairman John Coombes explains “The project would have been impossible without the help of the team at Blackpool Airport and I hope that subject to our fundraising plans we can look towards returning an operational wartime aircraft to what was RAF Squires Gate in the future.” An exciting project.

- The Other Big One. The huge factory next to Squires Gate Lane was famous for the wartime production of the twin-engined Wellington bombers designed by Barnes Wallace who also invented the bouncing bomb used to such devastating effect by the dambusters of 617 Squadron in 1943. It is about 1.2 million square feet in size and is currently an eyesore but with great potential. Any scheme to relive the history of this building could result in an attraction of national and international appeal. This may never happen but Blackpool built a spectacular tower 123 years ago and has a history of big and successful ventures on this scale.

- In recent years Blackpool Airport has declined to a facility for light aircraft, flying training and helicopters servicing Irish Sea rigs. Despite this it still has potential to grow in a niche market. An imminent sale of the airport as a going concern is rumoured and hopes are high that the new owner will invest and grow the business. New and exciting opportunities await.

If Blackpool can retain the best of modern tourism and diversify with new forms of employment and attractions it can break out of the vicious circle of low wages and poor health. If anywhere can do it Blackpool can.

Andrew Harris – www.



andrewharris.co.uk – gratefully acknowledges the help provided by Rob Green of BFWEDC, Danny Pinkus of Robert Pinkus & Co, Steve Williams of Force Technology, John Coombes of Hangar 42 and Stephanie McEvoe of Blackpool & Fylde College in the preparation

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