



CASE STUDY: The Heath Business and Technical Park, Runcorn, Cheshire 2000-2019

The Assignment

When chemicals giant ICI announced the closure of its polymers division based at The Heath in Runcorn, Cheshire, in 2000 with the loss of 1,600 jobs it was seen as the death knell for Runcorn, as ICI was the town's biggest employer and was a vital resource for numerous other business suppliers across the region.

The loss of so many jobs and associated key skills would have devastating consequences for the north-west economy and the local/regional community.



SOG, a company created by former ICI employees and local businessman John Lewis (who in 2010 became Managing Director and majority shareholder), was launched with the vision of purchasing the buildings – consisting of research & development laboratories, offices and corporate facilities – and transforming them from a single-occupancy corporate site into a sustainable regional asset.

The concept was to turn the darkest of employment news into an inspiring opportunity that led to the creation of one of the UK's leading and award-winning business and technical parks.

The Solution

SOG's 'Project Phoenix' ultimately provided space and services for a multitude of businesses of all sizes across over 20 business sectors, but with a particular focus on science.

A key element of SOG's approach was not only to purchase the real estate through a traditional bank loan, but to take on scores of skilled ICI employees under TUPE (honouring their pension plan) to create a park which uniquely offered its residents access to highly-specialist technical support.



SOG offers far more than a traditional property landlord. The enticing recipe of superb facilities plus outstanding technical support from skills including precision engineering, laboratory design and build, health & safety and much more set SOG apart from its competitors.

Today, The Heath provides nearly 300,000 sq. ft. of serviced office and laboratory space plus additional on-site services and facilities to more than 120 businesses employing over 1,800 people, more than in the halcyon days of ICI.

SOG has invested millions of pounds in upgrading and developing The Heath – and it has all been achieved without any public subsidies.



Facilities originally built in the 1960s have been upgraded by SOG's specialist team of technicians, to meet existing requirements. Some old buildings have been demolished with SOG building new, ultra-modern replacements.

Now SOG plans to further transform the site to meet the challenges of the 21st century by creating Heath Park – with a vision to turn the location into a fantastic, sustainable, futuristic environment where people can work, live and play.

As a direct result of its success in Runcorn, SOG offers regeneration consultancy advice to large organisations considering downsizing or closing sites, through its Fusion regeneration process.

The Challenge

One of SOG's biggest challenges was fighting to establish its unique business model through private funding while its competitors at neighbouring science parks benefited from huge multi-million pound subsidies from Government bodies and institutions.

Although the 1960s-style buildings require constant specialist maintenance, the sophisticated infrastructure, particularly within laboratory buildings, make them extremely valuable assets with the flexibility of being adapted to meet the requirements of a range of different sciences.



However, other parts of the site require a complete overhaul to keep pace with environmental challenges which is why SOG is now seeking support from investors to finance the next stage of The Heath's amazing journey.

SOG's proposals revolve round turning the site into a state-of-the-art mixed-use development comprising employment, housing, leisure and community assets. This will complement the existing, thriving and diverse economy while placing sustainability at the heart of everything, with the goal of creating a totally carbon-free environment.

The Verdict

SOG's business model at The Heath has been hailed as a template for regeneration by senior political figures including Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, William Hague, Ken Clarke, Lord Sainsbury, Lord Heseltine, Steven Norris and successive Science Ministers.

Tony Blair, former Prime Minister: "SOG have a template for regeneration that should be replicated across the UK":

William Hague, former Foreign Secretary: "I think SOG really is an inspiring story of how business can be developed and how science and skills can be kept together."

Lord Sainsbury, former Science & Innovation Minister: "I am enormously impressed. I had heard this was a very good example of taking a facility and changing it into a new kind of operation but it is one of the best examples I know of regeneration of this kind."

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester: "In the past we have seen big companies leave, so many of these sites have become housing or retail and the expertise has broken down and got lost. Here, we have kept it and actually there's a vibrant industrial base housing lots of companies which are on the way up and it's fantastic to see. The figure that I will take away is over 2,000 patents have been achieved here since ICI left. That tells a really powerful story."

Steve Norris, former Conservative Minister: "The Heath offers a wide-ranging infrastructure, which means that small businesses can use large business facilities that would normally be outside of their reach. Superb laboratory facilities for whatever scale, high-quality meeting rooms and conference facilities plus a whole host of other important support services mean The Heath is ideal when growing your business."

Kenneth Clarke, former Conservative Minister: "I am bound to be impressed because it is an amazing transformation from the days when it was ICI's headquarters. The businesses I have seen are the kinds of businesses that I think are going to be the economy of the next few decades."

