



BANBURY BUSINESSES SPEAK UP: A ROOM FULL OF REALITY, RESILIENCE AND RESOLVE

Local leaders meet MP Sean Woodcock to confront the challenges facing SMEs, and push for meaningful change.

Just after 8 am on Friday, 10 April, as coffee cups warmed hands and conversations gathered pace at Bloxham Mill Workspaces, a cross-section of Banbury's business community came together with a clear intention: to be heard.

Chaired by Lisa-Marie Mallier, Vice Chair of the Banbury Chamber of Commerce, the roundtable brought together leaders from recruitment, finance, education, law, insurance, accountancy, workspace, and local enterprise. Joining them was Banbury's MP, Sean Woodcock, for what would become a candid and, at times, deeply personal conversation.

Each participant brought a different perspective, but a shared concern: how do we build a sustainable future for Banbury's businesses and workforce?

“WE’RE IN SURVIVAL MODE”: SMES UNDER PRESSURE

The conversation opened with a theme that resonated across sectors – growth is no longer a given.

Julie Purvis, representing the recruitment sector, articulated what many were feeling: businesses want to hire, but the risks feel too high. Rising costs, from National

Insurance to business rates is forcing hesitation. That sentiment was echoed around the table. Simon Smith, as both Managing Partner at Wellers and Finance Director for the Chamber, spoke candidly about the economics of employment: when the cost of hiring rises, businesses inevitably recruit less.



For some, like Paul Fuller, Managing Director of AMS Insurance, the response has been to adapt rather than expand, turning to digital systems instead of hiring staff. Similarly, Catherine Wahlberg of Alsters Kelley highlighted how the legal sector is increasingly exploring artificial intelligence (AI) and automation - not as innovation alone, but as a necessity.

Lisa-Marie Mallier brought it closer to home: even as a growing business owner, she has consciously chosen not to hire - opting instead for an associate model and AI tools. "There is no incentive for me to employ," she explained, a statement that captured the mood in the room.

A WORKFORCE AT RISK: "ARE WE LOSING A GENERATION?"

As the discussion moved toward skills and education, the tone shifted from frustration to concern. Andy Slater, representing further education, highlighted a growing disconnect between what employers need

and what the system delivers. It's not qualifications that are lacking, he explained, but fundamental skills: communication, resilience, and readiness for work.

This was reinforced by multiple voices. Alexandra Rae of Wise Investments shared a personal perspective as a parent, describing a generation struggling to find direction in an education system that, in her words, "is not fit for purpose."

"WE RISK CREATING A LOST GENERATION IF UNCERTAINTY CONTINUES—YOUNG PEOPLE ARE STRUGGLING TO FIND DIRECTION IN AN EVER-CHANGING LANDSCAPE."

Employers around the table agreed. Young people are often overlooked, not because of ability, but because businesses feel they cannot take the risk. Apprenticeships, once seen as a solution, were described as overly complex and inaccessible for SMEs.

The result? A worrying cycle: fewer opportunities, fewer skills gained, and a generation at risk of being left behind.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: CONFIDENCE, CLARITY AND LONG-TERM THINKING

If there was one thread running through the morning, it was uncertainty. From pensions and taxation to investment policy, Alexandra Rae described a landscape so complex and changeable that many people are simply opting to do nothing - delaying decisions that will have long-term consequences.

This lack of confidence isn't just affecting individuals. As Derek Hettenbach pointed

out, businesses are stuck in “survival mode,” unable to plan, invest or grow with certainty.

And in a place like Banbury, part of Cherwell District, home to over 150,000 residents and a growing economy, this matters. With significant housing expansion and a strong SME base, the area has potential. But without confidence, those potential risks are unrealised.

SYSTEMS UNDER STRAIN: FROM LEGAL AID TO INFRASTRUCTURE

Beyond growth and workforce challenges, the roundtable exposed deeper structural issues.

In the legal sector, Julie McGarrigle and Catherine Wahlberg painted a stark picture: civil legal aid rates have not increased in over 30 years. For firms like theirs, this will soon no longer be sustainable. With few legal aid providers currently based in Banbury, access to justice is becoming a real concern.

Simon Smith drew parallels with other underfunded systems, while Andy Slater raised concerns about youth provision and the lack of safe spaces and opportunities for young people in the local area.



Infrastructure, too, came under scrutiny. Paul Fuller highlighted the real cost of deteriorating roads – not just inconvenience, but rising insurance claims and premiums. Others around the table shared similar frustrations, with potholes becoming a symbol of wider systemic inefficiencies.

A COMMUNITY THAT CARES, AND SPEAKS UP

Despite the challenges, what stood out most was not frustration, but engagement. This was not a room of businesses looking to complain. It was a room looking for solutions.



From John Staley’s reflections on long-term economic direction, to Emma McGregor’s insights from the workspace community, to Paul Cook’s perspective as a local business owner keen to engage, every voice added depth to the conversation.

Even as discussions became robust, they remained constructive. There was recognition that change is complex, but also a clear message: businesses must be part of the conversation.

THE ROLE OF THE CHAMBER: REPRESENTING BANBURY'S VOICE

As the session ended, Lisa-Marie Mallier brought the room back to a simple but powerful question: what is the one message to take back to Westminster?

The answers varied, but the themes were consistent:

- The need for long-term, stable policy
- Greater support for SMEs and workforce development
- Urgent attention to legal aid and public services
- And above all, a focus on enabling growth, not constraining it

This is where the Banbury Chamber of Commerce plays its most important role.

The Chamber brings together voices from across the local economy and ensures they are heard at the highest levels, acting as a bridge between business and decision-makers.

LOOKING AHEAD

Banbury is a town with ambition, resilience and opportunity. But as this roundtable made clear, unlocking that potential requires more than optimism - it requires collaboration, clarity and confidence.

The conversation at Bloxham Mill was just one morning. But its impact lies in what happens next.

Because when local businesses speak with one voice, they don't just highlight challenges -they help shape solutions.

PARTICIPATING MEMBERS:

Chamber Chair Derek Hettenbach (Renowables), Julie Purvis (Cameo Consultancy), Alexandra Rae (Wise Investments), Simon Smith (Wellers Accountants), Emma McGregor (Bloxham Mill Workspaces), Julie McGarrigle and Catherine Wahlberg (Alsters Kelley Solicitors), John Staley (IT Teacher Ltd), Paul Fuller (AMS Insurance), Andy Slater (Activate Learning / Banbury Sixth Form College), and Paul Cook (Hair Concepts Banbury).



WANT TO BE PART OF THE CONVERSATION?

Join the Banbury Chamber of Commerce and help shape the future of local business. Visit www.banburychamber.com to learn more, or head to our website for upcoming events.