BondBryan:Fairhursts

in partnership with UK Cities & Partners

Roundtable Summary

From Strategy to Site: delivering the places where innovation happens

On Wednesday 20 May, BondBryan:Fairhursts, in partnership with UK Cities & Partners, hosted a private lunchtime roundtable at UKREiiF in Leeds, bringing together senior leaders from local government, investment management, innovation districts and strategic delivery to address a central question: how do we move innovation-led development from strategy into the ground?

Chaired by Dominic Curran, Head of Communications at Real Estate:UK; the new trade body formed from the merger of the British Property Federation, the Association of Real Estate Funds and the Investment Property Forum; the session drew on direct experience across advanced manufacturing, defence, life sciences, deep tech and science parks, spanning cities from Liverpool and Sheffield to Stevenage and Cambridge.

The discussion spanned three core questions: what conditions make places genuinely investment-ready for innovation-led sectors; how public-private collaboration can be made to work at the pace and scale required; and what role well-designed environments and connected ecosystems play in attracting institutional capital.

Unlocking innovation-led growth

At the heart of the discussion was a shared recognition that place quality, housing, skills and governance are not peripheral to the innovation economy, they are its foundations.

Attendees stressed that housing is a precondition, not an afterthought. If workers cannot access decent, aspirational homes near an innovation district, the district risks becoming a commuter destination rather than a genuine community. The gap between earnings in high-tech sectors and local housing costs is a real constraint on talent retention.

The discussion highlighted the critical role of further education and skills pipelines tailored to actual employer need. One compelling example: the argument that won a major inward investment to the South West was a commitment from local FE colleges to mirror a company's production line in their training programmes, with a ready-made, trained workforce on day one.

On governance, devolution and the mayoral model were broadly welcomed as a structural improvement. The UK is becoming more like successful European regional economies, with mayors who have genuine power, clear sector strategies, and the ability to join up place, university and capital. Combined authorities are inherently accountable for delivering high-value jobs in ways that district councils are not.

UKREiiF THE UK's REAL ESTATE INVESTMENT & INFRASTRUCTURE FORUM

BondBryan:Fairhursts

in partnership with UK Cities & Partners

Roundtable Summary

Insights and case studies

Institutional investors are actively looking to deploy more capital into UK regional markets, but need credible exit strategies, viable project pipelines, and evidence that local authorities can use planning levers, land value, net internal area, Section 106, pragmatically through economic cycles, not just in good times.

Sheffield's Innovation Spine offered a live case study: the first three months were spent getting all public sector partners to agree their shared objectives in writing, clarifying roles before anything else. That foundation is now enabling a pivot from evidence-gathering to specific investment propositions.

Liverpool's Knowledge Quarter demonstrated the value of an independent delivery vehicle, owned by universities and the city but operating commercially, as the structural innovation that made development possible without political distortion.

Innovation space is often over-designed for occupiers who don't yet exist. A more graduated approach, quality environments at accessible price points, would deepen occupier pipelines and improve the investment case for growing SMEs and spinouts.

The session closed with a shared call to action: to present innovation places in investment language, returns, duration, exit, and to build the connective infrastructure of narrative, vehicles and relationships that makes regional UK legible to global capital.

Questions Discussed

1. What are the critical conditions required for innovation-led sectors to grow, and how can these assets anchor wider economic growth, attract talent and create compelling, investable propositions?
2. What does effective collaboration between the public and private sector look like when delivering complex, innovation-focused developments — and how can better coordination across funding, planning and skills unlock productivity?
3. What role do well-designed environments and placemaking play in enabling innovation ecosystems, and how do we move beyond standalone developments to create joined-up ecosystems that attract institutional capital at scale?

Takeaways

Based on the discussion, the five most important things places can do to attract and sustain innovation-led investment are:

1. Put place before product

- Housing, schools, transport and community infrastructure are preconditions for innovation investment
- Close the gap between sector earnings and housing costs to retain talent
- Design communities, not just campuses

2. Build the skills pipeline from the ground up

- Align FE and HE provision directly to employer production lines
- Keep skills provision physically close to the communities it serves
- Make skills strategy part of the investment pitch, not an afterthought

3. Demonstrate track record, not just vision

- Show investors evidence of delivering projects through up and down cycles
- Use planning levers, land value, Section 106, net internal area, pragmatically

Roundtable Summary

- Flexibility on viability when needed is a sign of competence, not weakness

4. Clarify governance before seeking capital

- Get all public sector partners to agree shared objectives in writing first
- Consider independent delivery vehicles for complex multi-stakeholder sites
- Create a single, consistent interface for investors and businesses

5. Match specification to actual demand

- Avoid over-specifying innovation space for occupiers who don't yet exist
- A quality environment that is full beats a flagship building that is half-empty
- Use the built environment as a branding tool to attract talent and signal ambition

Key Quotes

Gus Wiseman, Patrizia, on what investors look for:

"Trust is based on track record. Places that have used the levers available to them, through political cycles and economic cycles, those are the places worth doing business with. As simple as that."

Dave Wells, Stevenage Borough Council, on housing:

"You've got to have the housing offer to back that up. If people don't feel they've got the housing choices and aspirational housing, it's hard to make them stay — and you end up with a business area with a completely different community from the people who live nearby."

Charlotte Thompson, Sheffield Innovation Spine, on starting collaboration:

"The first thing we did was get all the partners to understand where the shared objectives were between them, and make them write that down. We reminded ourselves of what each of our roles are in making that happen."

Mark Adey, BondBryan:Fairhursts, on specification:

"A slightly less spectacular building that's full is better than an impressive one that's half empty. You can create a genuine sense of place without pitching it at the very top of the market."

Barbara Spicer CBE, Sciontec / Knowledge Quarter Liverpool, on independent governance:

"The key decision at Sciontec was to recognise that any delivery vehicle owned by multiple shareholders is always going to face vested interests. We chose to go with an independent structure; recognising those shareholder voices but not being captured by them. That is what allowed us to make genuine commercial decisions in service of the whole Knowledge Quarter, not just individual partners."

Nykki Rogers, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority, on the need for data integration:

"Well-designed environments and placemaking must be informed by integrated data on people, places and industries, ensuring that development occurs where businesses can access talent, infrastructure and markets. Without this holistic approach, there is a risk of creating developments in locations that are poorly connected or misaligned with future demand. Moving beyond isolated projects to joined-up ecosystems therefore requires coordinated planning across housing, transport, skills and economic development, creating places that are attractive to both innovators and institutional investors seeking long-term, scalable opportunities."

BondBryan:Fairhursts

in partnership with

UK Cities & Partners

Roundtable Summary

Guestlist

Dominic Curran (Chair)
Head of Communications, Real Estate:UK

Mark Adey
Director, BondBryan:Fairhursts

Jon Rigby
Director, BondBryan:Fairhursts

Nykki Rogers
International Trade, Investment & Innovation Manager, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority

Gus Wiseman
Director UK Products, Patrizia

Charlotte Thompson
Project Director, Sheffield Innovation Spine / Sheffield Technology Parks

Abbie Miladinovic
Strategic Lead, Investment Zone, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority

Barbara Spicer CBE
Chair, Sciontec / Knowledge Quarter Liverpool

Dave Wells
Director of Regeneration, Stevenage Borough Council

Sam Potts
Partner, Building Surveying, Bidwells LLP

For further information, please contact:

Sian Tunstill

Head of Marketing and Business Growth

s.tunstill@bondbryan.co.uk

About the hosts

BondBryan:Fairhursts

BondBryan:Fairhursts is the specialist division of Bond Bryan dedicated to the design and delivery of environments that enable innovation. Working across science, research, advanced manufacturing, defence, health and higher education, the practice creates places where people, ideas and investment come together to drive growth.

From specialist facilities to innovation districts and complex campuses, BondBryan:Fairhursts combines technical expertise with sector insight to help clients deliver places that support discovery, collaboration and long-term economic value.

UK Cities & Partners

UK Cities & Partners (UKCAP) is the UK's national platform for promoting city-region investment opportunities to global investors. It delivers the UK Investment Pavilion at EXPO REAL as the country's unified presence at Europe's leading real estate and infrastructure investment forum, bringing together the UK's most forward-looking cities, regions and private sector partners.