

City of whispering windows attracts 21st century pioneers

Nick Wyke looks at the cutting edge companies that have set up shop

IN HULL the windows whisper. No, it is not a line from a Philip Larkin poem. It is a high-tech invention from one of the city's most innovative companies, FeONIC, the audio technology specialists.

The company's Whispering Window product uses smart technology to convert any flat surface such as a table or a window into a loudspeaker. It allows window shoppers to hear sounds and messages and has been installed successfully in the UK by retailers including John Lewis, Marks & Spencer and Lunn Poly. The reported results indicate sales increases of up to 40 per cent with similar rises in shopper numbers.

If the chairman, Brenda Hopkins, gets her way then soon a little piece of Hull (made in China) will be used in a lot more technology and communications devices. Hopkins, who heads a small team of handpicked Hull University electronics and physics graduates, says: "Our technology has caught people's imagination. We aim to miniaturise it and sell it globally in as many products as possible."

A recent deal with Sinbon, a Taiwanese company, could soon make FeONIC a major player in the international

audio technology market. For Hopkins, Hull has much to offer. "It offers value for money for businesses. It is also a creative city and its university provides a good source of bright graduates and engineers. Our aim is to build on the success of companies such as Kingston Communications and put Hull on the map."

Hull was already on the map of Greg Dyke, the BBC's former director-general, when he was seeking a site for a new state-of-the-art regional television centre. Why? Because, as he told John Prescott, the Deputy Prime Minister and an MP for Hull, the city was five years ahead of anywhere else in terms of communications.

The BBC Centre has become the corporation's most successful TV centre in the UK. Its £25 million Connecting Locally project has seen more than 80,000 people make use of the "Open Centre" facilities since it opened in April last year. On a typical weekday morning, the brightly coloured foyer is buzzing with young people surfing the internet, and retired folk diligently improving their computer skills on one of a number of courses run in conjunction with a city college. Locals can

sip cappuccino at the in-house café and rub shoulders with the presenters. "The people of Hull were vociferous about the BBC coming to their city and a real cross section are using the multi-media centre," Helen Thomas, the BBC's head of regional and local programmes in East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, says.

The BBC revolution in Hull is one of many examples of the city establishing itself in a region where it is all too often overlooked in favour of York, Leeds and Manchester. Today the BBC's regional daily news output is no longer broadcast from Leeds but from Hull city centre, giving viewers a more locally focused service.

"Hull is a well-kept secret. It is a determined and straightforward city with ambitions to grow. I hope some of our projects will help to showcase that vision and contribute to a growing community," Thomas says.

Working in partnership with Kingston Communica-

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tions, a world leader in the digital revolution, the BBC in Hull has also pioneered a content on demand trial for viewers to measure how programmes perform when the viewer is able to choose what to watch and when to watch it. In addition, the corporation is working in partnership with learning organisations and more than 40 schools in Hull to test the use of video-rich digital content in classrooms. Both teachers and pupils now use and create video content to teach and learn from.

By moving to this part of the North, the BBC followed in the footsteps of the Press Association (PA) who first moved their television listings department to the medieval market town of Howden in East Yorkshire in 1991. Today more than 600 people work for PA at its 36,000 sq ft modern operations centre. Yorkshire Forward, the government-backed regional development agency, calculates that PA's investment is worth £8.5 million each year to the local economy, and that 250 other jobs in the region depend upon the company's presence in the town.

John Spencer, managing editor of PA, says: "Expansion

has been possible from a lower and more competitive cost base. We already had a thriving business in the town and recognised the quality of locally based staff and the talented young journalists and production staff emerging from the universities and colleges in the region."

According to a Royal Mail survey, Hull was the second fastest growing area for business in the UK in 2003. Given the city's pioneering role in digital and broadband technology this is not surprising.

Recent arrivals joining the likes of well-established blue chip companies, such as Smith and Nephew Wound Management, whose healthcare products are sold worldwide, include Nippon Gohsei, Japan's oldest chemical company, and the Swedish bank Handelsbanken, which has been operating in Hull since last July.

Ask the leaders of these companies why Hull works so well for their business and they will invariably mention cost-effectiveness, a skilled and stable workforce, affordable quality of life and good transport links that enable you to make an early morning business meeting in London.