

Following on from last month's focus on the West Country, **Mike Hale** puts optical opportunities in East Anglia under the microscope

East Anglia is possibly the most ill-defined region in the UK. While the counties of Norfolk and Suffolk make up its undisputed heartland, the question remains whether these are joined by Cambridgeshire and Essex. By most reckonings they are included and certainly all four constituent counties are unified from an optical recruitment perspective.

The region, while impacted by many of the same negative factors as the West Country, does benefit from the presence of Anglia Ruskin University,



The Broads: 125 miles of waterways and a National Park since 1988

Escape to the country

which has campuses in Cambridge and Chelmsford, and is one of the eight universities in the UK to offer a degree in optometry. East Anglia is also close enough to London for regular visits. Despite this, many practices still have difficulties recruiting staff for the more far-flung areas in the region.

Broadening your horizons

'Recruiting candidates to East Anglia is historically challenging,' comments Richard Lonsdale, managing director of the Open Recruitment Group. 'Isolated geographical locations can detract from otherwise excellent career opportunities offered by our clients.'

But candidates willing to locate to East Anglia can be rewarded with improved job prospects and career paths, while also benefiting from the socio-economic advantages.

Areas of outstanding natural beauty abound in East Anglia with the Broads, which are predominantly located in Norfolk but also extend into Suffolk, enjoying National Park status since 1988. The Broads are a network of interconnected rivers and lakes that provide over 125 miles of navigable waterways. Meanwhile, the north Norfolk coastline from Cromer to Hunstanton is generally held to be one of the most beautiful stretches of littoral land in the UK, with picturesque seaside towns including Wells-next-the-Sea and coastal paths

offering great walking opportunities.

'It's a region of real contrasts, beautiful rural villages only minutes from towns with history and character,' comments Anthony Bahadur, optometrist director of Specsavers in Braintree, Essex. 'The roads, rail and air networks are brilliant. Where else could you choose either to live in London and commute just an hour to work or to live in the country but be able to get into London for an evening out or a day's shopping?'

Bahadur qualified in September 2000 and worked as a full-time optometrist in Specsavers Opticians in Hastings before joining Braintree as a joint venture director in 2005. 'It's definitely been a good decision; with two years as a full-time staff optometrist you can really broaden

your understanding of how a modern practice works, identify areas where you need to enhance your skills, and at the same time develop confidence and experience in your clinical skills.'

Bahadur stresses how being flexible regarding locating to find the right job benefited him. 'A colleague who had become the director of a nearby joint venture gave me some great advice. He said to cast the net far and wide, when looking for opportunities. If you are too prescriptive when you start looking, you could miss that dream business opportunity by just a few miles, and let's face it, when you are in your early 20s you really haven't seen all the places that could meet your needs.'

'So I considered any part of UK, and when the opportunity in the Anglia region was suggested I put my assumptions aside and took a closer look. I was really impressed by what I found. If rural life is what you want when you get home, picturesque villages, coastline and countryside are all on your doorstep. But the range of sports and other activities on offer are fantastic. Residents are demanding, so services and quality of life is good.'

Although moving to a new area of the UK can be demanding, Bahadur found connections could be made with a proactive attitude and is now reaping the rewards of personal and professional success. 'When I moved to the area I built up a social network



Chris and Ceri Thompson: better quality of life

Recruitment

through joining the local football team and gym. I think a work-life balance is important to being a good director.

'I know that many optometrists qualify and then want to move back to their home town because they want to be close to family, but for me I think the benefits of looking further afield are so much greater, I would advise anyone not to discount areas like this before they have tried them. My business is doing well, I have a great team working for me – and I've just got married. I'd recommend life as an optometrist in Anglia to anyone!'

Chris Thompson, a 32-year-old dispensing optician from Chelmsford, located to Sudbury, Suffolk, when it became apparent that franchising opportunities in London were limited due to long waiting lists.

'The option of relocating to the country was attractive as I felt that my wife Ceri and I would have a better quality of life,' says Thompson. 'There were many benefits to moving away from a busy city. Property prices were better meaning we were able to get a lot more for our money. With plans to start a family we were glad to be able to afford a place with a bigger garden, find excellent schools with smaller class sizes, as well as less traffic and pollution.'



Rex Features

Cromer on the north Norfolk coast is one of the most beautiful littoral stretches in the UK

Affordable property prices are a key draw for the region. Across East Anglia, excluding Essex, the average cost of a property is £199,634, and Cambridgeshire (£230,648), followed by Suffolk (£199,668) and Norfolk (£187,036). The average price (£239,851) in Essex reflects its proximity to London but is still very affordable compared to the capital (£371,983).

Thompson worked closely with Dollond & Aitchison to establish a suitable location that fulfilled his criteria and also offered excellent potential for a new business. After considering various locations they settled upon Sudbury, opening a D&A franchise there in December 2006, as it

offered everything they were looking for. It also meant they would be able to easily travel to London to visit friends and family.

In addition, the commute to work reduced to 10 minutes and they now feel they have a better quality of life.

'We have become involved with the local community attending fetes and events in and around the town. Our neighbours are great and moved to Sudbury for similar reasons. The local community welcomed us and the only noise that wakes us up in the morning is the dawn chorus of songbirds.'

'Overall, the quality of life is now much better here and a lot less stressful and we are looking forward to the arrival of our first this December.' ●

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