

Levelling up research shows transport and skills as top priorities

October 21, 2022



Levelling up is high on the agenda at the moment, so new research from Atkins, published this week, has come at an appropriate time.

The report, delivered by [Atkins](#) and [Northern Powerhouse Partnership](#), in collaboration with [Durham University](#), explores attitudes to levelling up from senior decision makers, officials and councillors in the North of England. It researched four specific areas in the North of England: Teesside, West Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region and an area described as “the M6 Corridor”, taking in Carlisle in the North and Crewe further South.

It shines a light on the issues and challenges that people have with ‘levelling up’. From a dislike of the very phrase (preferring ‘regional rebalancing’) to the need to focus on people within communities as well as simply redeveloping places. The research also shows that while appetite for ‘levelling up’ itself dropped off, the principle behind it still demands support.

Priorities

The research found that transport and skills are seen as the top priority now and in the future for local decision makers in the North. The Net Zero challenge is seen by many people as important but difficult to deliver in the short term, as the cost-of-living crisis takes priority.

Interestingly, no single issue was found to dominate. Seven separate areas were selected by at least a quarter of decision-makers as one of their top challenges for their region. Of these, skills and the future workforce is most commonly selected (45%), with 18% selecting it as their top challenge. Inequalities (38%), health and wellbeing (35%) and transport (35%) are also frequently selected as current challenges.

Levelling up people

Many talked about the need to 'level up people' and the role of business was seen as huge in helping to deliver real change. Addressing inequalities was seen by a significant number as one of the key drivers for that change, and the research concluded that "whole communities need to be invested in if rebalancing is to be achieved."

Atkins states their agreement with this. They note that whilst investment in physical infrastructure such as improved transport links or a college can be at the heart of change within a community, simply building impressive infrastructure cannot be enough in the context of regional rebalancing.

Richard Robinson, Atkins UK and Europe CEO, said: "Improving transport links and systems helps unlock economic opportunity by improving the connection between growing and struggling economic hubs. With infrastructure we help create better and more efficient places for people to live and work in, mindful of the impact the built environment can have on social behaviours, health and well-being. And as a major employer we offer an extensive apprenticeship programme for young people, recently welcoming 170 apprentices, our largest number ever."

The role of businesses

The research found that businesses clearly have a huge role to play in rebalancing the country.

The findings reveal that respondents noted that there was "a huge role for business and the private sector in regional rebalancing", however, whilst essential funding and facilitation must still come from central government, they recognise that "long term gains (especially in productivity and the creation of jobs) should come from the private sector".

The report notes that there is a high degree of confidence that businesses will deliver and 95% of respondents believed that "private businesses are key to achieving planned infrastructure projects."

Kieran Fernandes, Durham University Business School, said: "Regional rebalancing has been a long-held aspiration of consecutive UK governments and a long-held need for the North of England. The research, which has been inspired by the government's recent Levelling-Up agenda, is timely, informative, and impactful.

“It is timely because it comes at a moment where there is increased attention to the inequalities between the economies and living standards of the North and the South. It is informative because it illustrates where these differences lie and what the region’s key decision makers think about them. Finally, it is impactful because it provides clear and unequivocal evidence of the urgent need for investment in the region’s physical and digital infrastructure as a medium for bridging inequalities and enhancing economic and social progress.”

Henri Murison, chief executive of the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, said: “Bringing together the North’s civic and business leaders as the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, we know the role of Atkins and the wider business community is critical for the North. The continued commitment of all our members is a unique commitment to work collectively for the betterment of the North; the economic and social value they create as businesses can and should change our places for the better, and for good.

“As we look forward to the future, listening to the opinions of the leadership of local government in the North is a valuable reminder that the Northern Powerhouse is still relevant to them – just as it is to northern business leaders. In fact, those who lead our places in the Tees Valley, through West Yorkshire to Liverpool City Region and up the M6 felt more favourably in embracing it than the term ‘levelling up’.”

[You can read the report in full here.](#)