

TWO MILLION JOBS

How businesses play a crucial role in helping people from welfare into work

by Nick Tyrone

Foreword by Georgiana Bristol & Matthew Elliott

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Georgiana
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Matthew
Elliott

A photograph of three people standing outdoors. On the left is a man in a black polo shirt and dark trousers. In the center is a woman in a red top and black trousers. On the right is a woman in a yellow top and black and white striped trousers, leaning against a large rainbow flag. In the background is a dark brick building with 'Sheffield Technology Parks' written on it.



The Jobs Foundation is a registered charity (1202928) which champions the role of business as a force for good, particularly the crucial role companies play giving people a step up in life by providing jobs and training opportunities.

We want to have a practical impact on the ground, by helping business leaders do even more for their local communities, by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and best practice on employing and training people from less privileged backgrounds.

In parallel, we want to have a policy impact by creating a business environment which allows companies to thrive. We hope our advocacy programme will bring about a real change in the way policy makers view business and the crucial social and economic value businesses contribute to society.

To achieve this, we are building a coalition of business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the country to join our Business Council, to act as the driving force and delivery engine for our ambitions.



Nick Tyrone is a journalist, author, researcher and Senior Policy Adviser at the Jobs Foundation. He has published several books, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as having written for most mainstream news outlets in the UK, most frequently and prominently in *The Spectator*. He was also the Executive Director of CentreForum, the liberal think tank most noted for publishing the Orange Book, as well as Director General of the Red Tape Initiative.



Rahil Ahmad is a photographer who is much in demand amongst politicians, members of the royal family, business people, authors and public intellectuals. He has photographed King Charles, the Dalai Lama, Rishi Sunak and Jordan Peterson, amongst many others. He is also a former barrister and radio journalist.



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PEMBROKESHIRE

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SHEFFIELD

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Matthew Elliott and Georgiana Bristol are standing outdoors in front of a city skyline. Matthew, on the left, is wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie. Georgiana, on the right, is wearing a black blazer over a blue and red patterned top. They are both smiling at the camera.

Matthew Elliott and Georgiana Bristol

Foreword

The origins of the Jobs Foundation go back to a conversation in 2020, when the two of us talked about the crucial role that businesses play in giving people a step up in life, through jobs and training. We kept circling back to this subject and in 2022 we took the plunge and set up the Jobs Foundation, complete with a logo that incorporates a subtle nod to the ladder of opportunity that businesses provide. We were granted charitable status in spring 2023 and launched later that year.

Fast forward to autumn 2024 and jobs are front and centre in the policy debate. Journalists such as Fraser Nelson spotted before many others the growth of worklessness post-Covid, but it was not an issue focused on in Westminster and Whitehall, until recently. Now, the new Labour Government has an explicit objective of increasing the employment rate of the UK from 75% to 80%, by helping two million people move from welfare into work, through a combination of welfare reform and bringing together job centres and the careers service.

This objective is laudable and should have been focused on by the previous Conservative Government. But missing from the current policy debate is the crucial role that businesses play in the process,

by creating and providing the jobs to be filled. That is why Two Million Jobs is such a groundbreaking piece of research. Led by our Senior Policy Adviser, Nick Tyrone, our team have spoken to literally hundreds of business leaders, employees, apprentices, and wider stakeholders to build a detailed picture of the crucial role that businesses play to get people from welfare into work.

This report seeks to connect the government's welcome plan to bring two million more people into the workforce over the coming parliament, with the practical reality of achieving that goal. Increasing the employment rate of the UK will only happen with the active support of businesses up and down the country, and by inculcating a business environment where they are able to thrive.

It is businesses and entrepreneurs that provide 80% of the jobs in our economy. They are the ones who will be creating most of these two million jobs. To achieve this objective, as well as needing a pool of skilled and motivated prospective employees, there also need to be employers creating high-quality, well-paid jobs for people to fill, which is why the government was right to emphasise the importance of economic growth and wealth creation in their manifesto.

In all four areas of the country which *Two Million Jobs* focused on, the local business community plays an important role in poverty alleviation and social mobility. That is the clear message from our foundational research project. Which is why the Jobs Foundation will now be advancing this important work in two ways.

In 2025, we want to spend more time examining the companies leading the way in getting people from welfare into work. Many businesses do this ordinarily, without giving it a second thought. Others have set up specific schemes to give people from less advantaged backgrounds a step up in life. We want to collate that best practice, so that other companies, both within our Business Council network and beyond, can learn from them. This will enable them to replicate these schemes without going through the process of trial and error.

In 2026, we want to set up an Accreditation Scheme, to recognise businesses who are shining examples of using jobs and training to better people's lives. This recognition will act as both an incentive for businesses to do even more and an encouragement for other businesses to get involved. We hope it will act as an accelerator to help the government in their objective of getting two million people into work, helping people thrive and boosting the country's prosperity.

The Jobs Foundation was born from the basic proposition that business is a force for good in society. We know that the more businesses employ and train people and pay tax into the public purse, the more people, particularly individuals and families in hardship, are given the opportunity to improve their lives. As such, businesses should be celebrated for their role in supporting society, something that has been forgotten in recent years.



Lord Elliott of Mickle Fell
President of the Jobs Foundation

We need businesses and the growth they generate to maintain our prosperity, especially in these times where the cost of living has dramatically increased, impacting the poorest the hardest. When good businesses succeed, everyone benefits, whether that be through increased employment, the supply of innovative new products and technologies, or the tax revenue that funds our vital public services.

Businesses need to be set free. Cherished. Nurtured. And recognised as a force for good. As Winston Churchill said:

“Some people regard private enterprise as a predatory tiger to be shot. Others look on it as a cow they can milk. Not enough people see it as a healthy horse pulling a sturdy wagon.”

This report was not written by someone sitting behind a desk in London. It was shaped entirely by the conversations of a whole team of people with business owners, CEOs, apprentices, key institutional and other community figures, as well as jobseekers themselves. What follows is a true, grassroots snapshot of jobs and business in Britain in 2024. And the key to getting two million people into work.



Nick Tyrone in Sheffield



Georgiana Bristol
CEO of the Jobs Foundation

Executive Summary



Hospitality students at Pembrokeshire College

Great Britain is a great country. This report demonstrates that fact, many times over. It was created by listening to the people across England and Wales who make things happen, day in and day out. This country has the talent and the determination to continue being special – but there are ways to make it even greater. This report contains the most relevant lessons learned, gleaned from discussions with hundreds of businesses and other organisations across Great Britain, both on how best to lift people out of poverty, but also the conditions businesses require to thrive. The report focuses on four areas: a city, a town, a coastal community, and a rural community.

Chapter 1 - Sheffield: Forging steel and embracing tech (see page 16) takes a deep dive into a British city through the lens of jobs and business. It was picked as an area of study for several reasons, one being it has got less attention than other cities that are relatively near to it, most notably Manchester and Leeds, and so there were more stories to be unearthed there. The city also has two large universities and an impressive technology sector, combined with large concentrations of both wealth and poverty,

and therefore had much to offer to the study we have undertaken.

This chapter delves into the positive things going on in the city in terms of entrepreneurship and employment, but also examines the challenges faced by the area. While Sheffield has an impressive level of business activity going on within its boundaries, so too does it have a lot of deprivation – and, of course, the problems that come with that. What we have attempted to do here is demonstrate how those problems are being overcome by the best hiring practices of many of the businesses within the city, as well as how those best practices can be used to ameliorate the challenges that Sheffield faces.

We also examine the key role played by the city's institutions in creating jobs and eliminating poverty through employment. The two universities are central to this, but just as important are programmes like Ascend, a project directly designed to lead the most socio-economically deprived individuals into work and out of poverty. While business is at the forefront of this process, these institutions are of immeasurable help.

Chapter 2 - Loughborough: Looking to the future

(see page 44) takes a deep dive into a British town through the lens of jobs and business. It was chosen due to several factors. One is that it is geographically in the middle of the country, as well as tending to trend in the centre of most economic measures, such as median salary. It is Middle England, both theoretically and literally. Another is that the town has a host of large employers, combined with a university and a thriving SME culture, which makes it stand out as a place to both understand what drives towns in Britain and what holds them back, as well as looking at what part institutions play in that equation.

The final reason for looking at Loughborough is that it is a classic “swing seat”, the type of constituency that goes to the election victors. The town’s vote is always up for grabs. It is a Labour seat after the 2024 general election – with the town’s new MP, Jeevun Sadher, being interviewed in this chapter – just as it was between 1997 and 2010, going Conservative for all the years the Tories were in government.

Chapter 3 - Hartlepool: The coalface of change (see page 68) takes a deep dive into a seaside town with comparisons made with

two other coastal communities, Cromer and Redcar. Hartlepool was an interesting area of study due to the long history of the town, some of the atypical aspects of it as a coastal community (while still facing several of the most common issues facing towns by the sea in Britain), and its political context. Having been a Labour seat essentially since 1964 (when it was known as “The Hartlepoons”), the Conservative party won the seat in the 2021 by-election – yet it is once again a Labour-held constituency. Redcar, which is only 12 miles away, offers an interesting insight into the similarities and differences we see there as compared to Hartlepool, in addition to being politically interesting in and of itself: It is one of the few seats in Britain to have had a Labour, Lib Dem and Tory MP within the last 20 years.

Cromer was chosen as a comparator because, while it is very geographically removed from Hartlepool and Redcar, many of the problems it faces are similar. One of the themes of this chapter is that coastal towns should not be simply roped into whatever area of the country they sit in, be it the North East of England or East of England, but rather should be considered within a “coastal communities” context, which brings a unique set of challenges.



Chapter 4 - Pembrokeshire: The cutting edge of Britain (see page 92)

looks at the most southwesterly corner of Wales, a county that is a rural community while also being coastal, surrounded, as it is, on three sides by sea. It is a beautiful place with a thriving tourism sector, containing within it one of the most important ports in Britain and featuring a still vital agricultural sector. It is also a place filled with pockets of poverty and a region which is badly served by transportation infrastructure, with both trains and roads in and out of the county being inadequate.

This chapter examines: the oil and gas sector through the lens of Valero, one of Pembrokeshire's biggest and most important employers; the tourism sector, via the seaside town of Saundersfoot; and the agricultural sector, with interviews with representatives of two of the county's numerous dairy farms being detailed. This chapter also looks at the village of Lawrenny, one that is being revitalised, bringing in new denizens and businesses alike. There is also a delve into Pembrokeshire College, a vital institution that trains the leaders of tomorrow in all the sectors covered in this chapter.

The best way to get people out of welfare is to get them into work. What we have done

throughout this report is ask employers, large and small, across Great Britain, in cities, towns and rural areas, how this can best be done. This is covered in detail in **Chapter 5 - Lessons on helping people from welfare into work** (see page 120), but here are the headline findings:

5a. People from socio-economically deprived background have specific needs for entering the workforce

Those who grew up in socio-economic deprivation have barriers to employment that do not exist for people who were raised in households higher up the wealth ladder. An important aspect to this is that it is likely they have not been raised around people who are successfully in employment. This often effects them in three main ways:

- They don't learn how to be a successfully employed person first-hand.
- They miss out on gaining the confidence that comes from knowing what being a success in a vocation looks like.
- They aren't connected to anyone in the world of work who can help them find a job.





A worker at Evolution Power Tools in Sheffield

5b. Post-secondary institutions play a large role in helping get people out of poverty and into work

Places like the Further Education (FE) and Sixth Form colleges in Hartlepool are not only training people of all ages and helping them find apprenticeships and other employment opportunities, but also running an impromptu public transport service and helping feed the students as well (see page 78). Given the socio-economic background of so many of those who attend the institution, the FE college in Hartlepool focuses its attention on things like behaviour, attitude and confidence – understanding what the students’ backgrounds will not have naturally provided for them, but nonetheless remains vital to obtaining and then staying in employment.

5c. Coastal communities have a specific set of concerns

We need to think about how coastal communities are different to every other part of the UK. Somewhere like Cromer has way more in common with Hartlepool than it has with towns in Norfolk, 10 miles inland from it. The government needs to start looking at coastal communities as a portion of the United Kingdom in their own right, separate from the surrounding territories they reside within. The needs of these kinds of communities need to be thought of as a unit.

We learned a great deal from speaking to people in Hartlepool, Redcar and Cromer (as well as a few other seaside towns dotted around the country, outside the scope of this report). The intention is to have dialogues with businesses in other coastal communities, as part of our next phase of activity, into 2025 and beyond.



Josh at the Ascend Programme

5d. The interconnectedness of institutions is vital

A big element that helps create prosperity and, with it, gets people out of welfare and into work, is when an area has a decent mix of SMEs and larger companies, varying the employment field to a favourable extent. Take Pembrokeshire, that there are so many entrepreneurs there is greatly to the county's credit (see page 92). While there are several large employers in the region, such as Valero, who play a vital role, the SMEs are the beating heart of the place.

The links between institutions, employers and employees are a key element of any region's prosperity – and by extension, its ability to get people from lower socio-economic backgrounds into work.

5e. Young people face specific challenges in terms of entering the workforce

Hiring young people from any socio-economic background can be a challenge for a lot of employers, mostly due to distinct cultural differences between them and older generations. While some younger people can struggle with work culture in general, a lot of them are both very adaptable and naturally entrepreneurial. If employers can look past the surface, they could find some employees for life (or at least, the long-term). In fact, some of the challenges young people face and the issues those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds suffer under are often very similar in nature, usually made all the worse for people who fit into both categories. This is why many of the solutions for getting people from deprived backgrounds into work map neatly onto how to get more young people into meaningful employment. All the participants at the Sheffield roundtable agreed on this (see page 38).

5f. Businesses play a hugely important role, even without specific schemes

In terms of best practice, once employees are in the job and embedded in the culture of the company, we found three things that were applicable in every location and every sector across the country:

- A friendly culture where people want to work is vital. Making the office a nice place to come in to, filled with people who get on and like being in a team with one another, is a huge part of retaining staff.
- Active team building is key as well. Offering rewards for hard work which also revolve around bringing the staff closer together can be an important staff retention tool.
- Probably most important of all, creating methods of advancement that are transparent and easy to grasp, while making internal promotion a big part of the company's culture. If people understand that by staying and working hard for the organisation they will be rewarded with more money and status, most of them will stick around. On the flipside, if they see their colleagues either staying in the same job forever or the best and brightest moving on while people are constantly installed into positions of power from outside of the organisation, then high attrition will likely follow.

5g. Apprenticeships can play a vital role in helping get people into work

The importance of apprenticeships, in terms of organisations finding the staff they require and how they can often be the best way to get and keep young talent, was continually stressed by all participants – including as a way of getting the poorest applicants into work. It was generally agreed that apprenticeship schemes are best when:

- The bureaucracy involved in them is kept to a minimum.
- The scheme in some way makes it easier to take on riskier hires. Being able to take risks often leads to people from deprived backgrounds being given employment they might otherwise not have received.



Jane Reed, Campus Principal at Hartlepool Sixth Form College



William Bateman, Curriculum Area Manager, Pembrokeshire College, with a student and Nick Tyrone

What's clear from the research is that there are few easy solutions. If there were more, someone surely would have enacted them already. However, there are answers out there. This is covered in detail in **Chapter 6 - Findings on the policy conditions businesses need to thrive** (see page 132), but here is a brief overview of the findings:

6a. The climate for business isn't positive enough. We need to see business people as the "good guys" once again

The most common thing heard when travelling across Great Britain, speaking to business people, be they CEOs of large companies or one-man band entrepreneurs, is that the climate for doing business in this country is not positive enough. "It's like we're not seen as the good guys anymore," one person said to us.

This is important in both policy terms as well as culturally ("vibes" as one might put it these days). On the policy front, many businesses complain about there being not nearly enough clearly pro-business policies to point to. When George Osborne was chancellor, there was at least a feeling of policies moving in the right

direction to help businesses out – a reduction in corporation tax, for instance. In the latter part of the Conservative Party's most recent period in office, many business people across the country felt that this positive attitude towards business had been missing. From our conversations during and after the general election, people were heartened that the Labour Party placed an emphasis on the importance of wealth creation and economic growth in their plans. But they are now beginning to have concerns about whether this will be reflected in the legislative agenda.

6b. Across the country, transport infrastructure is a long way from good enough

A common complaint from business people is that transportation infrastructure is not up to scratch. Whether they are travelling locally by train – Sheffield to Manchester takes as long by rail as either city to London – taking local transport in their area, such as the bus service not being ideal, or the poor state of some of the main roads, businesses in Britain feel increasingly marred by an inability to get around. This has negative effects for their employees, potential investors, and getting their goods from one place to another.

6c. Good connectivity between government policy, local institutions, and businesses – as well as connectivity between large and small enterprises – is a key component for a thriving economy

Businesses do not exist in isolation. Beyond their need to have customers and employees, enterprises large and small need elements that are external to them to work at an optimal level. That could be regulatory. Or it could be post-secondary institutions there to train staff being present or not. Or it could be the level of taxation being appropriate.

This is why institutions are vital to businesses. A good example of this, evident throughout this report, is the connection between post-secondary educational institutions and businesses, large and small. So many colleges, for example, act as training academies for local employers – and so many apprenticeships would not exist without this connection between colleges and businesses, big and fledgling.



6d. Businesses are happy with employment laws that provide protection for employees – but worry about regulation that would stifle more risky hires

All the businesses we spoke to care about their employees very deeply. Contrary to a commonly rolled out narrative, most employers are perfectly happy with the employment rights currently held by British workers. Yet they are concerned about those rights becoming more restrictive in a way that will cause them to make fewer hires – and, worse than that, cause companies to make much fewer risky hires, those being the ones that take people out of poverty most regularly.

Of particular concern would be a policy of giving everyone full employment rights on day one of the job. Allowing employers a probation period, where they are allowed to try people out, gives them the leeway to take chances. Probation periods are vital for jobs continuing to be a route out of poverty in Great Britain. It is the poorest in society who will suffer the most if employment rights become too restrictive for companies.



The Access Group, Loughborough

6e. Businesses would like apprenticeships to be easier to use and for there to be more incentives to hire apprentices

Apprenticeships are widely used across the UK – every business we spoke to beyond a certain size had used them at some point. They can be a great way for young people and those with little or no experience in a sector to enter a new profession. Therefore, they are a great route out of poverty and into employment.

Yet every business we interviewed of a similar size also said they found using the apprenticeship levy overly bureaucratic. Smaller companies without a dedicated HR team (where this function would be carried out by a COO, or a COO's assistant), found the levy difficult to navigate in terms of paperwork and rules. Apprenticeships should be encouraged by rewarding firms that use them and making it as straightforward to employ apprentices as possible, while obviously still screening out anyone trying to misuse the system. It needs to be less bureaucratic.

6f. Businesses would like green targets and incentives to be clear and certain

Most British businesses, large and small, accept the idea of Britain transitioning to green energy over a reasonable period. What they don't like are the goalposts constantly shifting. The lack of clarity leads to the idea that the deadlines imposed for steps towards a green transition are hazy or perhaps even downright false, simply to be ignored in most cases.

The green transition, if done correctly, can mostly be done by the private sector. A good case in point is one already detailed in this report, Teesworks near Redcar ([see page 84](#)). This is a huge initiative that is going to create tens of thousands of jobs in an area that desperately needs them, all while creating vast amounts of clean energy. And it is almost entirely powered by the private sector.



Work on one of Pembrokeshire's many windfarms



Andres Urena, Loughborough-based entrepreneur

6g. Businesses in Britain need better access to homegrown funding

It was remarkable hearing so many tales of success from British businesses across the country. Yet getting to the part about where they spoke about how they got their initial capital often had the same disillusioning close. Over and over again, when speaking to the entrepreneurs who populate this report, we heard the same basic story: they looked for capital in Britain; they were either turned down cold, or offered a sum of money which would have been insufficient to do their project justice; they then hopped on a plane to America to find investment, and then found it quickly, either in the amount asked for, or an even greater sum (see page 36). Figuring out how to fix this will be difficult, but we certainly need to consider how we build a better, more entrepreneur-friendly investment culture in Great Britain.

Chapter seven, the final portion of the report, concludes with an affirmation that Britain's best days are ahead of her, not behind. If businesses are given the correct conditions to thrive, they will drive growth and take millions of people out of poverty. This report is simply the start of something – in 2025 and beyond, the Jobs Foundation will expand on our research, delving deeper into best practice when it comes to

businesses taking people from welfare into work. We'll also be examining in deeper detail the conditions businesses need to grow and flourish.

"When I was a kid, we learned about and celebrated people like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You know, people who built things. We don't have that culture anymore," Adrian Lort-Phillips said.

That's the crux of everything. We need to reward and encourage the doers in our society. Britain needs to reward hard work and determination. That's the way towards growth. That's the way out of poverty for our poorest citizens. That's the way back towards the greatness this country always has deep within itself. We hope you enjoy reading this report – and look out for us deepening what is laid out here in greater detail in the Jobs Foundation's research in 2025 and beyond.

"When I was a kid, we learned about and celebrated people like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You know, people who built things. We don't have that culture anymore."

Sheffield

Forging steel and embracing tech

A **city case study** for how businesses assist mobility by providing jobs and training

“Unemployment is both a curse and a waste. There is nothing more important to both the national economy and civil society than having people in stable and rewarding jobs. Manufacturing still has a key role in providing these, and I congratulate the Jobs Foundation in recognising and promoting private enterprise as the essential element in resisting and turning the otherwise adverse tide of decline.”

Sir Andrew Cook

Owner and Chairman of William Cook Holdings

Sheffield



About Sheffield

- A city in the North of England, 167 miles from London, 38 miles east of Manchester, 36 miles south of Leeds. Part of the county of South Yorkshire.
- Population, city proper: 602,000, metropolitan area: 746,000 (both as of the end of 2023).
- It is the ninth largest city in England by metropolitan area.
- Sheffield has two large, historic football clubs in Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday, who have won five top flight championships between them and seven FA Cups.
- The city is still famous for its massive steelworks, which dominated the economy of the city from the middle of the 19th century until the late 20th century (and remains influential in the city to this day).
- Sheffield's largest employer is the Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, employing around 16,000.¹ The largest private employer is SIG UK, a supplier of insulation and interiors, with 10,000 employees in the city.²
- In terms of ethnic diversity, the city is 84% white (81% white British), 8% Asian and 3.6% black.³ This compares with 80.6% white (74.4% white British), 9.3% Asian and 4% black as figures for the UK as a whole (London, which is heavily ethnically diverse, tends to skew these figures nationally).⁴



Sheffield Hallam University



Barry Bloomer, Group CEO, Evolution Power Tools

1. <https://successatschool.org/advice/applying-for-jobs/starting-your-career-in-sheffield/1208> (accessed 18/03/24)

2. <https://www.insidermedia.com/news/yorkshire/113630-#:~:text=Construction%20giant%20SIG%20UK%20continues,the%20first%20time%20this%20year> (accessed 18/03/24)

3. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-cities/sheffield-population> (accessed 19/03/24)

4. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity/national-and-regional-populations/population-of-england-and-wales/latest/> (accessed 18/03/24)



Sheffield Town Hall

- Gross median weekly pay is £541 in Sheffield, which compares to £682 median across Great Britain.⁵
- According to the Joseph Roundtree Trust, 33% of children in Sheffield are growing up in poverty.⁶ This compares to 29% nationally. 4.4% of people between 16 and 64 claim out of work benefits in Sheffield, compared with 4% nationally.⁷
- 38% of the Sheffield workforce have a degree, which ranks the city 4th amongst core cities.⁸
- As of the time of writing, Sheffield City Council is run by a Labour-Lib Dem-Green coalition, made up of 30 Labour councillors, 28 Lib Dems and 14 Greens, facing an opposition of 10 independents and one Tory councillor.
- The council has bounced between being Labour controlled to Lib Dem-led to no overall control back and forth for the last 50 years.
- Despite this, most of the Westminster constituencies are solid Labour seats, the exception being Sheffield Hallam which was Tory through most of the 20th century before being lost to the Lib Dems in 1997 (Richard Allan was the MP, until Nick Clegg took over in 2005), finally becoming a Labour seat in 2017.

5. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/subnationalindicatorsexplorer/2022-01-06#E08000019> (accessed 18/03/24)

6. JRRT Annual 2024 Poverty Report (<https://www.jrf.org.uk/uk-poverty-2024-the-essential-guide-to-understanding-poverty-in-the-uk>) (accessed 09/04/24)

7. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E08000019/#> (accessed 12/04/24)

8. <https://www.welcometosheffield.co.uk/business/move-your-business-here/why-here/#:~:text=A%20significant%20workforce&text=900%2C000%20are%20aged%20between%2016,highest%20amongst%20the%20core%20cities>. (accessed 18/03/24)

Brian's story

20

“We’ve seen it all. A number of recessions, we’ve had to cut back now and again. But we’re still here.”

When Brian Reece was 27 years of age, he was made redundant from his job. This was in 1980, when there was a recession raging across Britain that hit places like Sheffield particularly hard. He was left with what looked to be a bleak future, judging from the landscape around him. Brian decided to be positive instead - he and some of his friends became entrepreneurs.

“We rescued a small, six-employee strong cutting tool manufacturer that was dead on its knees. Over the next 15 years, we turned that business, which had around 20 clients when we bought it, into a business that had over 800. We ran that business for 30 years.”

The manufacturer in question made cutting tools for aircraft for the first decade of its existence. Then in 1990, the First Gulf War happened. While on one hand it created demand for the product they were making, the market became flooded with competitors, which perversely crowded them out of their own patch.



Brian Reece, on the right, with a member of his team

“I discovered this business that was making medical instruments and it seemed worth looking into. We figured there was a partnership available there for what was a new product for us.”

“That’s when I first saw the hip replacements we would end up making. It had 12 parts at the time and, over the next few weeks, we figured out a way to make it only six for the same functionality. We got what was pretty much an immediate £300k worth of business as a result.”

Soon enough, manufacturing precision medical equipment became the overwhelming bulk of Brian's business. With that in mind, he started Sheffield Precision Medical in 2010, an outfit that strictly deals in those kinds of products. Like it had been in 1980, this was another buyout of a business that wasn't doing well at the time.



Aneesa





Nick Tyrone

Since then, Brian has been through a lot of ups and downs. “We’ve seen it all. A number of recessions, we’ve had to cut back now and again. But we’re still here.” Sheffield Precision Medical currently employs over 20 staff in an office in Brightside, a largely industrial area just northeast of Sheffield city centre. “Hiring a bunch of guys really quickly is very difficult because there is a shortage of high-end skills. We are always training new people with an eye to the future. You’ve really got to train your own. You’ve got to grow your own.”

There are many people on apprenticeships working on Brian’s factory floor. Such as Aneesa, who grew up locally and had been on the job for four months when I met her. She was studying at the UTC Academy Trust, a vocational college in Sheffield, before coming to Sheffield Precision Medical as an apprentice.

“I started in laser marking, then I moved onto other machines. I’ve learned a lot in a short period of time,” she told me. Comparing what she was doing at the college with her work on the job, Aneesa described it as: “Much more technical, much more in-depth. That’s what I wanted it to be before I started here.”

There are people working for Brian who are now in their 40s and 50s, having been with him since they were in their teens. There are people coming to work for firms like Sheffield Precision Medical not only as their first job, but often as the first job someone in their immediate family has had for decades - or in some cases, the first job in the family at all. Apprenticeships can take people out of both extreme poverty and generations of being part of a non-working class.

“We are always training new people with an eye to the future. You’ve really got to train your own. You’ve got to grow your own.”

Viewed from Brightside, one can see that things are changing in Sheffield in the 2020s, as they are in all British cities, as fresh economic opportunities and perils transform the business landscape. In Sheffield, this involves tremendous crossover between the new and old; the way in which modern technology can help more traditional parts of the economy stay competitive. Sheffield Precision Medical is a prime example.

“The way to stave off being outdone for customers from places like China is to stay ahead of the game technology wise,” Brian told me. “If you can stay up to date, there’s your advantage.”

That’s the crux of this story: the way that the older portions of the economy, like manufacturing, gain from being in proximity to and even taking things from newer, tech-oriented companies. Also, the way those two worlds collide in the best imaginable fashion, creating and protecting jobs along the way, helping to take people out of poverty and into the workforce.

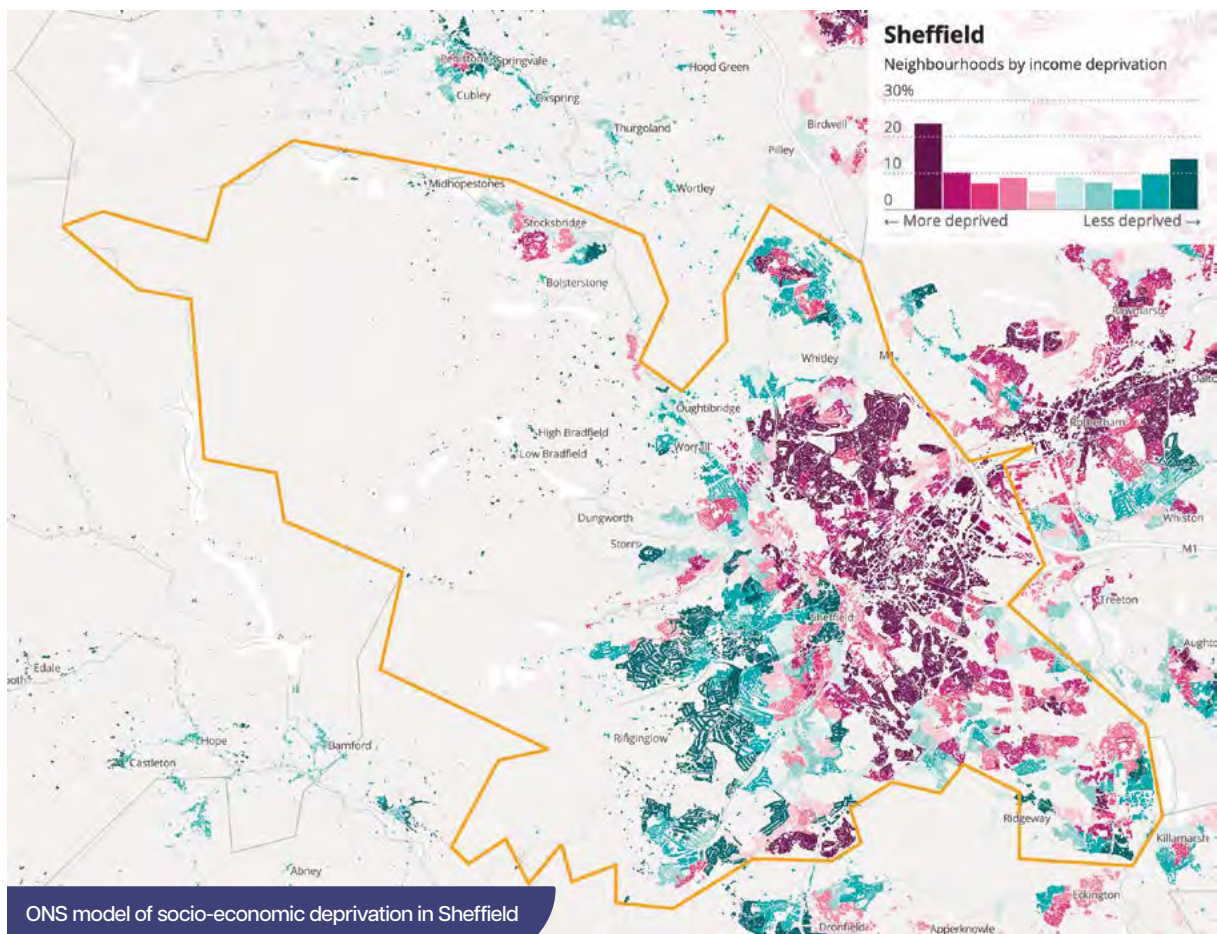
Public sector vs private enterprise

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There are currently few British cities that economically rely on the public sector to the degree that Sheffield does. Healthcare, education and public administration collectively account for around 89,500 jobs across the city - equivalent to around a third of Sheffield's economy.⁹ As a comparison, Birmingham has only 21% of its working population employed in the public sector.¹⁰

As of the end of 2021, private sector employment as a percentage of national employment was 82.5% across Great Britain.¹¹

As one would expect, given its oversized public sector, Sheffield's private sector was significantly smaller than the national average. Between 1995 and 2008, the number of jobs in Sheffield increased by 22%.¹² However, of these new jobs, more than half were government funded. Looked at from afar, this might be a trend that looks set to continue, the continued large-scale creation of public sector jobs in Sheffield, probably at the expense of private sector growth.¹³ Yet the trajectory of the city seems very different when viewed at close quarters.



9. KADA Research and ekosgen (2022) – accessed 26/02/24
10. Birmingham City Council (2023) – accessed 23/02/24
11. Office For National Statistics (2023) – accessed 26/02/24

12. Centre for Cities (2011) – accessed 26/02/24
13. Official Census and Labour Market Statistics (2023) – accessed 22/03/24

I met with over two dozen organisations during my research, from small business owners in sectors traditional to Sheffield, to small tech start ups run by ambitious people in their 20s, to local councillors, to heads of large charities.

That isn't to say that Sheffield doesn't face poverty related issues. 15,795 people were on out of work benefits in the city as of the end of 2023.¹⁴ Further, the city is socio-economically split, with the western portion of the city being remarkably well-off – while the eastern parts of Sheffield contain large pockets of poverty. In the chart on the preceding page, blue areas are the wealthy regions of the city (the darker the blue, the greater the wealth), with the orange/beige portions being of median prosperity – and the red areas are economically deprived (the darker the red, the more seriously deprived the area). In the picture below, you can see this east-west split alarmingly easily, pretty much at first glance.¹⁵ The reason for this is mostly historical – the west of the city, close to the Peak District, has always been seen as more desirable, and that continues to this day. It is interesting how much the history of a city continues to make its mark.

I met with over two dozen organisations in the city during my research, from small business owners in sectors traditional to Sheffield, to small tech start ups run by ambitious people in their 20s, to local councillors, to heads of large charities.

Many of the things I heard over the course of all those interviews were contradictory, as you would expect across such a large spread of people and organisations. For instance, many complained that the council wasn't doing enough and should do more for the city, while not being particularly specific about what exactly should be done.

I found disagreement even in the way Sheffield should be sold to the world. One of the ways the city likes to present itself is as the “Outdoor City”; to sell the proximity of the Peak District and how easy it is to escape from the city and into nature, in a way that isn't true of most British conurbations. Others feel this is too middle-class an image and doesn't get to the heart of what is great about the place. They feel instead Sheffield should be sold as a city of villages, trading on the fact that while urban in feel and draw, Sheffield is also an easy place to get to know everyone you need to know. While older parts of the economy and the newer portions can live together in a symbiotic relationship, sometimes it doesn't feel that way – there can be a clash of cultures.

Yet perhaps the biggest disagreement I came across during my time in Sheffield was the role of the two universities in the life and economy of the city – and with that, the role of post-secondary institutions in the future of Sheffield and Britain as a whole.

14. ONS, Employment, unemployment and economic inactivity in Sheffield <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E08000019/> (accessed 15/02/24)

15. Chart courtesy of the ONS, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/E08000019> (accessed 15/02/24)

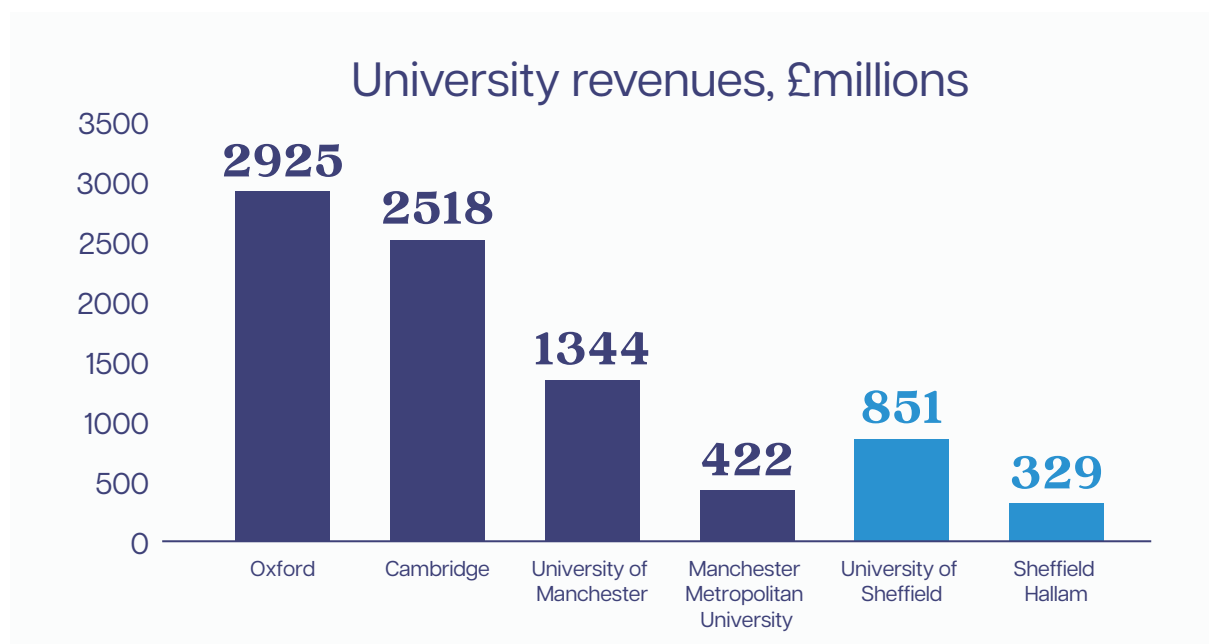
Two universities

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The University of Sheffield officially began life in 1905, when it was given a royal charter to be a university by King Edward VII. However, its roots go back further, at least to 1828 and the establishment of the Sheffield Medical School.¹⁶ In terms of revenue size, the University of Sheffield is about one-third as big as either Oxford or Cambridge (both of those universities take in around £2.5 to £3 billion a year – the University of Sheffield's 2022/23 revenue was £851 million.)¹⁷ The university has a reputation for producing great engineering research. In addition to collaboration with MIT and Harvard on such things, the university also has partnerships with scores of businesses, the largest amongst them being Rolls Royce, Siemens, Boeing, Airbus and BAE.



“The kids coming through now, people who are 18–21, who’ve never had a part-time job, they are real hustlers. That’s the latest generation’s thing, this kind of iterative hustle.”



¹⁶. <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk, annual report section> – accessed 16/02/24

¹⁷. <https://www.cam.ac.uk as well as https://www.ox.ac.uk, both have annual reports> – accessed 16/02/24

The emergence of the city's other university, Sheffield Hallam University, has been slightly more piecemeal. The Sheffield School of Design started in 1843 near the current main campus, and its evolution into other things eventually flowered into Sheffield Hallam as it exists today. The university currently has the original campus in Broomhall, just west of the centre of Sheffield, and a campus right by the city's main railway station.¹⁸ It has much smaller revenues than the University of Sheffield, with £329 million of income in 2022/23,¹⁹ so a little under half the size in revenue terms, than its inner-city rival.

The discussions I had with businesses in the city regarding both Sheffield universities and indeed, post-secondary education in general, involved two distinct takes on this subject, mirroring the national conversation. One side felt that the last 5 to 10 years' worth of graduates tended to be undermotivated and not ready for the world of work. I heard anecdotes of new employees spending half an hour on Facebook when they were supposed to be on a shift, or calling in first thing in the morning to say they were taking a holiday.

Other business owners told me the exact opposite. "The kids coming through now, people who are 18-21, who've never had a part-time job, they are real hustlers," Tom Wolfenden, CEO of Sheffield

Technology Parks, told me. "They'll see '50% off this tin of biscuits' online, buy the tin, then put them on Amazon for £5 more per item. It's still cheaper than normal for the consumer and the kids make £50 by doing that. That's the latest generation's thing, this kind of iterative hustle."

The two sides of this dichotomy can be broken down as one group arguing that universities have become bastions of "wokeness", more concerned with focusing on foreign students than serving the homegrown population, versus those saying universities provide an invaluable economic boost to local economies that could not easily be provided another way. In other words, more universities, please.

What I saw in Sheffield myself was how powerful a university or set of post-secondary institutions can be to a place. A big thing the two universities do for Sheffield is import talent that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. I spoke to so many business owners who grew up elsewhere, came to Sheffield to study, and then stayed and started a business in the city. Ben Widdows is from Bristol originally; Tom Milton, who I highlight later in this report, was raised in West London. Bringing in talent and job creators is a vital function the universities clearly play in Sheffield.



18. <https://www.shu.ac.uk> – accessed 16/02/24

19. <https://www.shu.ac.uk/finance-directorate/financial-statements> - accessed 16/02/24



Sheffield Workstation, an independent cinema, café bar and creative workspace

Yes, the universities have problems they need to deal with. For instance, the issue of there being too much focus on foreign students at the expense of the needs of locals is a real one. Yet this is simply a funding issue. The universities rely heavily on foreign students for revenue, to have enough money to keep themselves going. If we want universities, not just in Sheffield but across the country, to focus much more on homegrown students, then we're going to have to find a new funding model. Post-secondary institutions will require more government funding – or, failing that, a move to a much higher fee system, more like the US, which would carry huge political problems.

Another huge thing that the universities do for Sheffield is help create businesses directly. Particularly in the technology sector, spin outs – in the case we're discussing here, businesses that are started on campus with direct university help which then become fully fledged businesses of their own – are a vital function that the institutions support. But they need another layer to make this transition work. As it happens, the city has the Sheffield Technology Parks, where the big companies of the future start on the next phase of their journey.

What I saw in Sheffield myself was how powerful a university or set of post-secondary institutions can be to a place. A big thing the two universities do for Sheffield is import talent that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain.



Sheffield Cathedral



Sheffield Hallam, city campus

Case study: Ben Widdows and GWD

Good With Devices (GWD) is 20 years old. Ben and his business partner took it over in 2015, in a management buyout – another example of a solid Sheffield business rising from the ashes of a failing one. They spent the first few years of their existence doing mostly research and development, supported by government grants. By 2018, they had a new product, the contactless Donation Station, ready to go.

This is a digital machine that makes collecting donations easy for their clients, which are museums, churches and other charitable organisations. They have a staff of around 20 people at present.

“Our work culture is friendly, based on mutual respect and a desire to do the best for our charity customers. We celebrate the things that make us different. Our talents and skills, our interests and approach to solving problems. We’re all working for a common cause.”

“I think the rewards of having a good culture in places of employment aren’t talked about enough. We’re on a journey to help increase funds for good causes and the only way to do that is with a great team who are enjoying the journey as well.”





"I feel that lifelong learning is such an important thing. Particularly given the fact that our whole business revolves around socially driven projects. Diversity of thought and belief are welcome within the team and our current staff already reflect that. Our ambitions are based on healthy growth, through smart thinking, rather than harder effort. Work-life balance is so important."

The quotes from Ben above felt like more than boilerplate DEI or PR gloss; the company does have a real family vibe to it. Speaking to employees, many of whom have been there for years and have grown up locally, it did feel like a nice place to come to work every day.

GWD is a fantastic example of a profit-making enterprise being able to provide a greater societal good. Although it exists as a business and not a charity, it creates the tools for non-profit organisations to expand on the good work that they do.

"I want GWD to be successful, but I also want it to be a great place to work," says Ben. "I think the rewards of having a good culture in places of employment aren't talked about enough. We're on a journey to help increase funds for good causes and the only way to do that is with a great team who are enjoying the journey as well."



The Ascend Programme

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Ben Woollard

Ben Woollard, a southerner, founded an initiative called Ascend in Sheffield, due to the pressing needs there. Ascend, part of the charity “Together for Sheffield”, is dedicated to lifting individuals out of extreme poverty by providing pathways to employment. In addition to this impactful work, Ben is involved in various social good projects across the UK, ensuring communities thrive and improve.

Ben spoke about one man named Reece, someone who was living in his car when Ben first met him. Reece couldn't get a job because he couldn't wash or change his clothes, so Ascend provided him with what he needed and then got him a 2 week placement on a construction site. 18 months later, Reece is leading a whole building team. Ben describes Ascend as “hunting for gold in unlikely places in our beautiful city”.

I met Ben and his partner in Ascend, Josh, at the Hope Centre on Bernard Road, just outside the city centre, a place that acts as their HQ. There we spoke to a range of people currently on the programme, all of them from severely socio-economically deprived backgrounds, about their experiences. There was Lauren, who is now in a good job doing event planning.

“We big each other up,” she told me. “When one of us would get an interview, the rest of us would be like: ‘Text the WhatsApp group before you do it and then after.’ You had this massive level of support.”

This is the major thing the Ascend Programme gives to the young people on it – a sense of community and reinforcement that had been missing in their lives to that point. So much of getting kids from deprived background into the workplace is teaching them the fundamentals. How to dress for an interview, how to navigate one once you are in front of a prospective employer – these things sound basic to someone from a background where all of that would have been obvious. It's a totally different story for a person who grew up in a family where no one has had a job for generations. If you come from a household where no one worked, understanding how to behave in the workplace can be next to impossible for many.

“We're seeing the high social value of eating together, learning when we have a need, so we create that training hub space where they are given volunteer hours to get job experience,” Josh said.





Ascend works with a collection of companies in the city, and also with the Jobs Centre, the latter feeding them those who might be on their caseload as “difficult to place in employment” for whatever reason. Word-of-mouth is important as well – Ascend is always looking for new candidates. The programme has had about 150 people come through it, and about 75% of those who are taken on get a job. At any given time, Ascend will have up to 50 on the programme.

“It was so much about team building,” Lauren said, smiling. “It was that rhythm, that change every week, was so important. We had that level of control over what we were doing that gave us confidence.”

The most important thing to understand about something like the Ascend Programme is that these are the poorest of the poorest kids. This is “Benefits Britain”. If we want to turn things around, these are the people on the coalface of that effort. In fact, what Ascend does is the most perfect distillation of that mission statement I came across in my travels across Great Britain. The key is to see the link between what Ascend does and where we’re about to go next – the traditional Sheffield industries (mostly steel related) and the emerging jobs of the future in the tech sector. We need to give everyone in Sheffield hope for the future – to get them to see that if they work hard and apply themselves, the sky is the limit.





Case study: William Cook Cast Products

Just northeast of Sheffield city centre, on Parkway Avenue, are the offices of William Cook, a company that's been working in the city for almost two centuries. They are a great example of how traditional steel companies in the area have had to adapt to survive with the 21st century.

"The core of the business is steel casting of safety-critical parts. The customer gives us a drawing and specification of what they want. We then make a pattern, create a mould, take scrap metal, melt it down in a furnace, then add different metals into it as required. That molten mixture is then poured into the mould we've created. After its cooled, the casting goes through finishing and testing before being ready for the customer."

The lower-end parts of the steel market have moved onto China, India, elsewhere, while the remaining steel industry in the UK is built around two things: The first is being able to maintain incredibly high standards, which partly comes from being technologically advanced; The second is that things made for national defence reasons, like nuclear submarines, the UK government only wants to give to a British-based contractor – like William Cook – for reasons of security.

"Our parts go into nuclear submarines. So, the specifications are incredible. The metal grades and quality control procedures are stringent and the testing requirements are exacting. There is a lot of front-end planning going into the castings, then a lot of back-end testing as well."

There are around 175 employees at any given time at the Sheffield plant, from across all areas of the city.

"We have everyone from the bloke off the street with very few qualifications, up to people on degree apprenticeships. Although heavy industry can be difficult to entice degree candidates in to."

A lot of the people who come into the company that stick around for a career's length of time will start at William Cook at a young age, learning what they need to on the job.

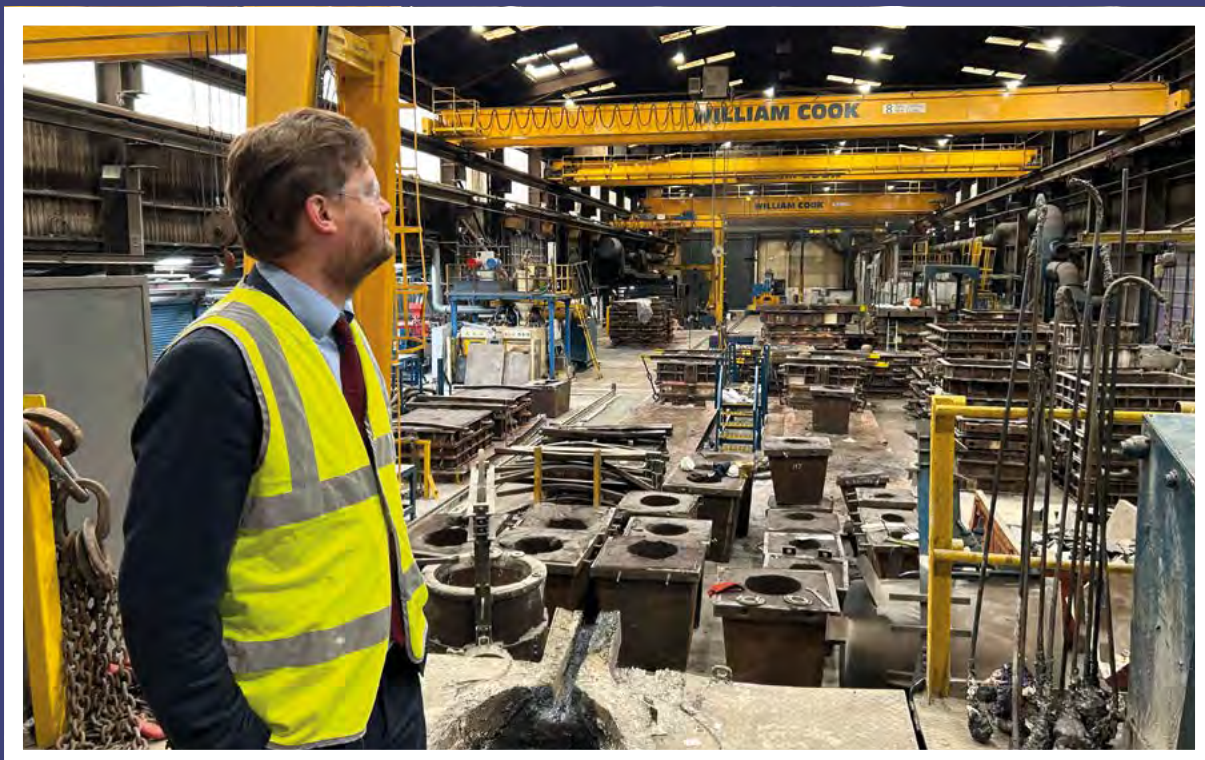
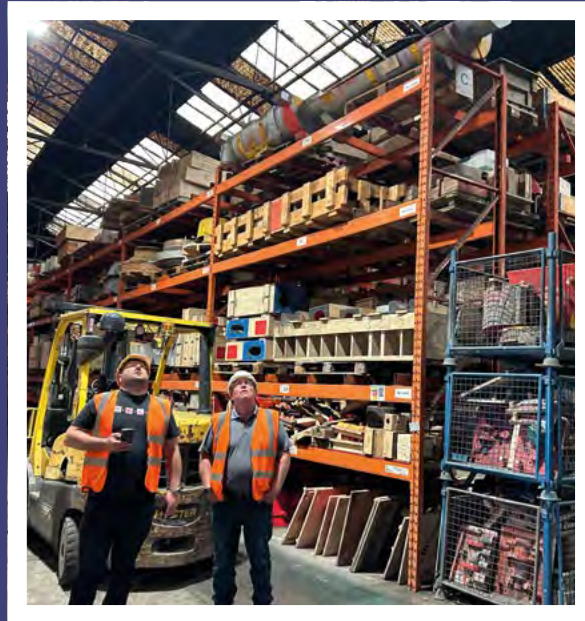
"A significant proportion are low to semi-skilled. Many shop floor jobs don't require any qualifications, but learn what is needed 'on the job'. There are a lot of people in that bracket of the business. Those people, with a bit of overtime, can make around £30k a year....if you haven't achieved academic qualifications having come

from a background where such qualifications aren't actively encouraged while at school, these are very good jobs."

It is in more traditional industries like steel that people who are from socio-economically deprived backgrounds and have little in the way of qualifications can still make a living. There is, of course, worry for the future. By definition, the lower-skilled jobs of today are the ones that might easily become the automated jobs of the future. For now though, these sorts of jobs are perhaps the greatest route out of poverty for people in Sheffield.

William Cook is looking to expand and are optimistic about the future. There are sites now in Leeds, Chesterfield, County Durham, and elsewhere. They are spending around £8 million a year on capital investment across the group, around £4 million of that in Sheffield in the last year – they've recently built a £2 million X-Ray facility, needed to check the most high-tech jobs are perfectly up to scratch. Meanwhile, William Cook remains a gateway from poverty into a meaningful career for many in Sheffield.

"Those who show aptitude and desire, we'll always bring them up, bring them through. Plenty of opportunity for those who want to work hard."



A photograph of three people standing in front of a brick building. On the left is a man in a black polo shirt. In the center is a woman in a red top. On the right is a woman in a yellow sweater and glasses, with a rainbow flag visible behind her. The title 'Sheffield Technology Parks' is overlaid in large white text.

Sheffield Technology Parks

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The city's technology firms attracted over half a billion pounds in venture capital in 2022, with the 2023 figure expected to be in a similar range. Sheffield is also home to one of the North of England's rare tech companies with a valuation over a billion dollars, ITM Power. The city is adding tech jobs quickly as well. According to CBRE's 2022 UK Tech Cities report, Sheffield has more than 14,750 people working in the tech sector, which is up 49% since 2015.²⁰ A lot of this comes down to the value added by the city's foremost tech institutions.

Tom Wolfenden is the CEO of Sheffield Technology Parks, a large building on Arundel Street, right by Sheffield Hallam's City campus. It acts as not only an office but an all-round incubator for tech start-ups in Sheffield, housing around 20 or so businesses at any given time.

Sheffield Technology Parks began life in 1988. It was part of the late-Thatcher era push to try and

shift economies like Sheffield away from what were seen at the time as the industries of the past and towards the future. Almost always, the founders of the companies involved are graduates from one of the two universities, and/or the founders are working with academics at those institutions to develop their ideas and bring them to market.

The Parks also run an inward investment programme which is designed to soft land people into the city to see if Sheffield is where they want to be. For instance, a few years ago they had an organisation called Jellyfish move up from London and into the Technology Parks' offices. The firm creates animations for Netflix programmes and feature films. They employed six to eight high-end graphic animators to work at the office in the Tech Parks. Jellyfish were able to get their start in Sheffield through this and, after finding it suited them, got some office space of their own. This kind of support directly created jobs in the creative sector in Sheffield where they otherwise wouldn't exist.

“There is still a culture, a hangover, 40 years on, from being a big, industrialised, unionised workforce – the mentality that you should keep your head down, work hard and you might get a company car in five years; if you stay in your lane, you’ll be fine. You were never asked to be entrepreneurial when you were working in the coalmines, you were never asked to be entrepreneurial in the steel works.”

20. All figures in this section come from the “South Yorkshire Tech 100” report produced by Team Sy, <https://weareteamsy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/The-South-Yorkshire-Tech-100-Nov22.pdf> (accessed 16/02/24)

Both cultures involve variations on “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” – yet they are versions which are very, very different in practice. The outcome for cities like Sheffield, looking 20 years into the future, rests on resolving the tension between these two visions of work and life.

Of course, challenges remain. Tom told me the story of one of the entrepreneurs that the Sheffield Technology Parks has incubated. This individual had what was obviously a scalable business, but devoting himself to it would have required leaving his stable IT job behind. “His parents, his wife, all his mates were saying, ‘What the hell are you doing? You’re on 50k a year, you’ve got a nice house, why do you want to risk all that? Think of everything that could go wrong!’ Four years later and he’s just exited his business, setting his young family up for life and creating a dozen careers for his employees.”

Tom summarised the issue at hand for me, the one perfectly illustrated by the dilemma faced by this man who took a chance by leaving his £50k-a-year IT job and had it pay off.

“There is still a culture, a hangover, 40 years on, from being a big, industrialised, unionised workforce – the mentality that you should keep your head down, work hard and you might

get a company car in five years; if you stay in your lane, you’ll be fine. You were never asked to be entrepreneurial when you were working in the coal mines, you were never asked to be entrepreneurial in the steel works.”

It was the clearest example I encountered during my time in Sheffield of this clash of the old culture, which revolves around working hard, keeping your head down, and “good things will come”, versus the new culture of having to be entrepreneurial, do it all yourself from the ground up. If you have to go to America or wherever for seed funding, that’s just what you do.

Both cultures involve variations on “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” – yet they are versions which are very, very different in practice. The outcome for cities like Sheffield, looking 20 years into the future, rests on resolving the tension between these two visions of work and life.



Tom Wolfenden



Case study: Tom Milton and Amodo Design

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I met Tom Milton in a café on Arundel Street called Mow's Coffee. It's a nice coffee shop, like something you might expect to find in London's Soho or New York's East Village. It's also right across the road from the Sheffield Technology Parks.

Tom runs a small startup business called Amodo Design. It won Sheffield Start Up of the Year for 2023.

"Around this time last year, I decided I wanted to start my own thing. I wanted to work on biosecurity. With my co-founder Andy, we did some research into respiratory protection for pandemics, such as Covid, and found that the

world is still not protected enough from these risks. With that in mind, Amodo Design was started as a sector agnostic design consultancy, with us going full-time in early 2023."

In the engineering world, consultancies are not like they are in management or politics, where they would mainly be providing strategy, speaking to those making things about how to navigate the media and the government. No, consultancies in the tech space are the ones creating in the real world the products which have been invented elsewhere, by academics or otherwise, with the consultancy physically making the item and transferring it to the client. As the consultant, you are essentially outsourced designers.



"We're also working with SMEs in the city to help them design products. We find they often know their customers inside out and have excellent product ideas, but struggle to attract and then manage engineering teams."



Having engineering consultancies like Amodo Design in a city like Sheffield does more than just create jobs in the tech sector, and certainly has more positive ramifications than just the jobs created for employees of the firm. Their economic impact is felt across multiple sectors. In Cambridge, the engineering design consultancies are central to the origin story of the 'Silicon Fen'. Employing thousands of engineers in the city, they both attract work from international companies and create spinout companies. Evidence to a UK parliamentary review on research commercialisation suggested the top four Cambridge consultancies had produced more jobs in their spinouts than the entirety of Cambridge University. Amodo Design hopes to kickstart the same effect in Sheffield.

"We have worked with six University of Sheffield academic groups and spinouts in our first year. Many of these projects wouldn't have happened

without an engineering consultancy. The teams didn't have access to the technical engineering skills to make the products."

"We're also working with SMEs in the city to help them design products. We find they often know their customers inside out and have excellent product ideas, but struggle to attract and then manage engineering teams. They wouldn't be able to create new products without a consultancy like Amodo Design."

In other words, the tech consultancies allow other sectors of the economy to innovate. Or put another way, they help create jobs in places where poverty exists in greater numbers than in the backgrounds of those who study engineering at the University of Sheffield. Or to put it an even simpler way: For the older parts of the Sheffield economy to continue to exist, they need the newer, more technologically advanced portions of it to succeed.

The roundtable

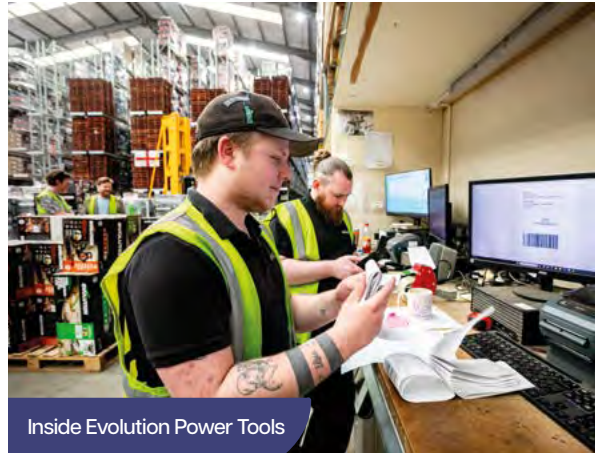
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“We’ve been here in Sheffield for 32 years. Started the business in my mum and dad’s single garage about 300 yards away on a housing estate. About 150 people work across the business now. We have offices in Chicago, Shanghai, Poland and France. Last year, the American operation surpassed the European operations. I feel like we’re almost an American company now! But we’re very proud of Sheffield’s heritage.”

Matthew Gavins has run Evolution Power Tools since he was in his late teens. It has been his life’s work. He has watched it grow from that little hustle in his parents’ garage on an estate, to being a global business.

Matthew, with the help of Ben Woollard, helped to put together a roundtable on behalf of this project, at the Evolution Power Tools offices in Holbrook, a largely industrial area to the southeast of the city centre, right before the Rother Valley begins.

“Actually love them. Care for them as if they were part of your family. Businesses have a duty of care – and if more businesses understood this, they’d keep their staff through thick and thin. I remember when I told that to our board of directors, they thought I’d gone mad. But it’s true. That’s the secret.”



Inside Evolution Power Tools



The meeting brought together a dozen local business owners, a cross-section of Sheffield's economy. There was Tribosonics, a small tech company which provides industrial sensing solutions for its clients – while also maintaining a third of its workforce at any given time as apprentices. In fact, they take on kids in the 16 to 18 age range in preference to recent university graduates, as they see that as a better long-term investment.

Other attendees were: Sheffield Digital, a trade association for digital businesses in the city; Page 1 Recruitment, a specialist agency focused on the tech sector; Peak Edge Academy Trust, a set of mostly primary schools in Sheffield; Mobile Power, a company looking to replace petrol with solar power in Africa. This final company takes engineers, mostly graduates from the University of Sheffield, and gets them designing new battery solutions to try and lift millions of Africans out of energy poverty. It's important to note that Mobile Solutions are not a charity – they are a profit-making company, another prime example of how private enterprise can often do good in the world.

Then there was Sam Evans, the head of the S6 foodbank. He also works with teenagers who are in a bad situation, usually through being faced with extreme poverty. Throughout his stories about the kids he has helped, it was the little details that shone through, such as someone getting their driver's license after a long struggle, that little thing opening up a host of employment opportunities for the teenager in question.

“We’ve got kids turning up who are non-verbal or who have American accents because they’ve learned to speak from Tik Tok or YouTube.”

Over the course of an hour and a half, we had a wide-ranging discussion about living and working in Sheffield, the training and apprenticeship programmes run by these companies, and what these business owners are optimistic about. As well as what they fear about the near future.



The main points raised were:

Apprenticeships:

- The importance of apprenticeships - in terms of organisations finding the staff they require and how they can often be the best way to get and keep young talent - was continually stressed by all participants. It was agreed around the table that apprenticeship schemes are best when a). the bureaucracy involved in them is kept to a minimum and b). the scheme in some way makes it easier to take on riskier hires. Being able to take risks often leads to people from deprived backgrounds being given employment they might otherwise not have received. "There are some good programmes out there, but they seem to be changed all the time, or made harder to access."
- There was confusion around how and when the apprenticeship levy could or could not be used. Many talked about schemes they wanted to action, but weren't sure about the rules and bureaucracy in terms of using the levy to fund them. "The paperwork can sometimes make the whole thing not worth it."

Best practice for hiring and retaining staff:

- A lot was discussed about the importance of making the workplace a great place to come to in terms of retaining talent, made more important since Covid and the work from home trend was introduced. "You have to make work a nice place to come to if you want the staff to come to the office these days."
- I asked the roundtable participants how they keep their staff. How do you avoid losing the talent you have nurtured for so long? How do you retain someone who was born into extreme poverty who, mostly through your training, now possesses the skills they need to compete on the open market? "Love them," Matthew told the group. "Actually love them. Care for them as if they were part of your family. Businesses have a duty of care – and if more businesses understood this, they'd keep their staff through thick and thin. I remember when I told that to our board of directors, they thought I'd gone mad. But it's true. That's the secret."
- It was stressed that you have to look beyond the basic, traditional interview to understand where people's strengths lie. "We've had people come in and give terrible interviews from an old-fashioned standpoint. But then we gave them a try and saw that once in their element, they could really shine. We've had people who are geniuses at customer service who we would have passed on if we only took into account their ability to answer interview questions reasonably well."

Those were the mostly optimistic ideas talked about. These were the fears:

The economy:

- There are worries around a recession and what that could bring, particularly given how hard Sheffield has been hit by economic downturns in the past. “Things are going all right at the moment. But a major shock would be tricky to navigate.”
- The ever-present decline of the manufacturing sector was discussed. A worry about competition from China. Caution about Britain’s place in the world, and Sheffield’s place in Britain. “The world is a scary place at the moment and looks to be getting more frightening by the day.”
- High numbers of unemployment, still, amongst the white working-classes (or non-working class, as the case may be) of Sheffield. This seems to have been made worse by the pandemic period. “We’ve got kids turning up who are non-verbal or who have American accents because they’ve learned to speak from Tik Tok or YouTube.”

Politics:

- The impact of the elections this year, not just in the UK or even in America, but all around the world. “It all seems so uncertain. You don’t know what any combination of results might mean for your business.”

Transportation infrastructure:

- Sheffield feels very connected to London – but not the rest of the North. A Crossrail across the North of England is badly needed. Worth noting that on the current network, it takes almost as long to get to London from Sheffield, 167 miles away, by rail as it does to get from Sheffield to Manchester, a mere 38 miles away. “The next government has to make it easier to get round the country. Has to.”



Nick Tyrone, in conversation

What do businesses in Sheffield want?

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There was a lot of annoyance expressed at the poor connectivity of Britain as a whole and then of the North of England specifically. Although at the close of the last section, I mentioned the desire for a northern Crossrail, one that preferably runs from Liverpool to Hull, hitting all the major conurbations in between, there was also a general irritation about the northern leg of HS2 being cancelled. Even in Sheffield, which would not even have been a stop, it was constantly dropped into conversation.

As one business owner, particularly inflamed about it, told me: “It could only be a completely unhinged Tory party that could go to a rail station that was shut down in the 60s, in central Manchester, and announce to the North, in the North, that they’re not building the train line to the North anymore! Did no one say, maybe that’s not the right place to do it?”

On the other hand, a lot of businesses also mentioned their biggest apprehension regarding an incoming Labour government, which is that an uptick in employment rights could become a burden on making any sort of risky hires – which again, are so often either young people without experience, or those individuals who have been unemployed for a long time. In other words, there is a fear that a change in employment rights could affect the ability of companies to take people out of poverty and into the workforce.

Businesses in Sheffield use apprenticeships widely, but wish that the rules around what is applicable to the levy were a lot clearer. The city also needs to build more – although, to be fair, this is a nationwide problem. There is a scarcity of upmarket housing in or near the city centre, and many businesses feel that this hurts direct foreign investment opportunities.

Lessons on best hiring practice and bringing people out of poverty

Hiring young people can be a challenge for a lot of employers, mostly due to distinct cultural differences between them and older generations. While some younger people can struggle with work culture in general, a lot of them are both very adaptable and naturally entrepreneurial. If employers can look past surface flaws, they could unearth some gems.

This is particularly true when speaking about young people who grew up in poverty. They can be unsure of themselves in unfamiliar social situations and underdeveloped in terms of professional behaviours, often due to not being exposed to them within their family setting. Best practice in terms of hiring young people almost certainly involves some sort of objective testing of prospective employees and/or situation trialling to get people past the difficult first impression caused by being placed in an environment they are unprepared for, such as a formal interview.

As many employers throughout this report have said already, hiring people at an early stage in their careers and training them in the company’s way of doing things, immersing them in the specific culture of an organisation, can be beneficial for businesses – and indeed, for young people looking for a break, particularly ones from impoverished backgrounds.

We do need to think from an educational standpoint about how we deal with children being increasingly raised online. Again, this tends to be at least anecdotally worse for poorer kids. Having parents who are present, particularly reading to their children on a regular basis, is of great benefit to them – this tendency is more prevalent the higher up the socio-economic ladder the parents are. Poorer children are more statistically likely to miss out on these advantages.²¹

21. The Book Trust did a study in 2023 showing that 23% of parents from low income background do not read to their children before the child’s first birthday – sadly, this number appears to decline in fairly linear way the higher the socio-economic background of the parents (<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/news/news-2023/almost-a-quarter-of-children-from-low-income-families-missing-out-on-the-benefits-of-reading-in-their-first-year/>)

Final thoughts

I'm glad we picked Sheffield as an area of study. While I'm sure Manchester, Leeds, Birmingham or Nottingham would have presented me with a lot of interesting stories to tell, there is something about Sheffield which lends itself well to the study of the connection between jobs and poverty alleviation, as well as the challenges and opportunities facing British cities in the 2020s and beyond.

Most reports produced by think tanks largely revolve around desk research, often done in central London. Particularly in an age of Zoom meetings, places in the UK are often written about - and having policy prescriptions created for them - without the author ever having set foot there. This report is different. I repeatedly went to Sheffield to speak to people on the ground, to meet with those detailed in this report face-to-face. We started from the idea that in order to begin to understand somewhere, you have to have been there.

There is a lot to be positive about in the city. Sheffield is a place that has a credible path towards expanding the sectors of the future, two good universities and a technical college, not to mention an impressive and burgeoning technology sector. Yes, it also has huge pockets of disparity and the social problems that come with that. Like every city in Britain, Sheffield will have to innovate its way to success. The secret appears to be the way that the newer, technology-based economy can intersect with the older, more traditional parts of the market.

The people of Sheffield seem up for the challenge. As Brian Reece told me: "I'm not going to be around forever. But somebody is. The company will go on, people will be working here. And for me, it's about people at the end of the day. The profit comes first, of course, because otherwise, you've got no people. But it's still about the people who you work with, who work for you, who build the business beside you."

Sheffield is a place that has a credible path towards expanding the sectors of the future, two good universities and a technical college, not to mention an impressive and burgeoning technology sector.

2

Loughborough Looking to the future

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A town case study for why institutions and connections matter

“Building a world-class team starts within. By investing in apprenticeships, graduates, and programmes that nurture local and diverse talent, we’re not just fuelling our double-digit organic growth — we’re fostering the future of our industry. This commitment extends to our community, as we actively support charities that align with our values. This focus on talent development and social responsibility positions us to be the UK’s leading tech employer, where innovation thrives alongside a culture of inclusion and purpose.”

Jon Jorgenson

Chief Sales Officer, The Access Group

Loughborough



About Loughborough

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- A town in the East Midlands of England, 114 miles north of London, 12 miles north of Leicester, 16 miles south of Nottingham, and 20 miles southeast of Derby. Part of the county of Leicestershire.
- Population: 65,000.
- It is the second largest place by population in Leicestershire, with Leicester being the largest city in the county.
- Loughborough is famous for being a centre for sport, with many famous sporting organisations based in the town, the most well-known being the England and Wales Cricket Board's National Cricket Performance Centre.
- The town's largest employer is Loughborough University, with 3,600 members of staff²², and Access Group is in amongst a group of the largest private employers.
- In terms of ethnic diversity, the town is 76.2% white, with a large Asian population at 15.7%.²³
- Average salary for someone in full-time work in Loughborough is £35,689 per annum²⁴, which compares to £34,900 UK wide.²⁵
- The percentage of children living in poverty in Charnwood Borough Council, where Loughborough is located, is 15.7%, compared with 15.3% nationwide.²⁶



22. Loughborough facts and figures (<https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/wwwwlboroacuk/content/planningteam/documents/factsandfigures/F&F%202020-21.pdf>) (Accessed 28/03/24)

23. https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/eastmidlands/leicestershire/E63002317__loughborough/ (Accessed 28/03/24)

24. [https://www.salaryexpert.com/salary/area/united-kingdom/loughborough#:~:text=%C2%A335%2C689%20\(GBP\)%2Fyr&text=The%20average%20salary%20for%20jobs,of%20%C2%A317%20\(GBP\).](https://www.salaryexpert.com/salary/area/united-kingdom/loughborough#:~:text=%C2%A335%2C689%20(GBP)%2Fyr&text=The%20average%20salary%20for%20jobs,of%20%C2%A317%20(GBP).) (Accessed 28/03/24)

25. ONS figures, Q1 2024 (Accessed 22/04/24)

26. <https://www.lsr-online.org/uploads/charnwood-17.pdf?v=1704275129> (Accessed 22/04/24)

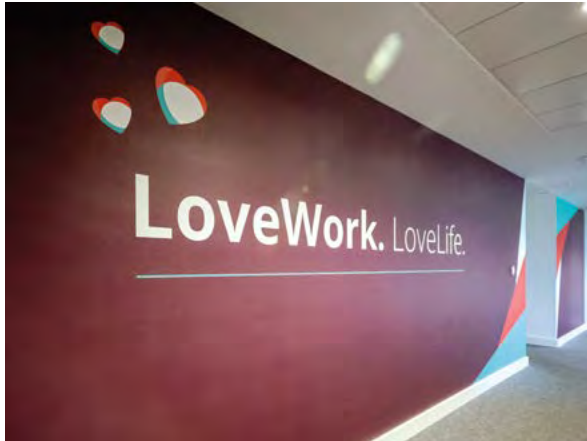


- The percentage of people in employment in Charnwood in 2022/23 is 78.6%, as compared to 75.7% across the United Kingdom as a whole.²⁷
- As of the time of writing, Charnwood Borough Council, which runs Loughborough locally, has 23 Conservative councillors, 20 Labour, 8 Green and one independent, meaning the council is under no overall control. The current leader is Jewel Miah, a Labour councillor.
- Loughborough is a classic swing seat at Westminster level. It was held by Labour between 1945 and 1979, went Tory during the Thatcher-Major era, returning to Labour in 1997, before being won back by the Conservatives in 2010. At the 2024 general election, Jeevun Sandher became Labour MP with a 4,960 majority.

27. Ibid.

Love work. Love life.

48



Ben Whitehead

"I didn't know what I wanted to do at the time," George told me. "I knew I didn't want to go to uni. I had no idea about what Access did when I first joined. I had to learn on the job, quickly." George is a senior sales developer at the Access Group in Loughborough. He made six-million-pounds-worth of sales, himself, last year – and hopes for ten million this year.

The Access Group has over 100,000 customers, more than 10,000 employees, and has offices around the globe, from Ireland to Malaysia. It is one of the largest software companies in the world and turns over close to a billion pounds a year. And it was founded in the English Midlands, just 33 years ago.

It is also a company that takes employee happiness and retention seriously. I was shown around their Loughborough headquarters on a rainy morning by Ben Whitehead, who is the Global Early Careers Head at the company – someone who himself started at Access Group, as a young sales trainee.

"Training and culture are key to everything we do here. Keeping the best staff is crucial to our success, here and elsewhere."

The company runs a programme for people at Loughborough College – a nine-week bloc, working at Access Group HQ, to see if the organisation is a fit for them and vice versa. After graduating from college, these prospective employees will be hired as apprentices, where they'll stay for 18 months, before being hired as permanent staff members. If they stay with the company for the next five years, they would be expected to lead their own team, either in sales or a technical department.

Access Group are proud of their low attrition rates, crediting the internal culture for allowing the company to retain a high number of staff. Ben told me that across the Loughborough office, only 8% of hires leave within the first year. Part of this will be down to the culture, which keeps the employees close to one another – but another aspect of this will no doubt be down to the policy of internal promotions, powered by constant expansion of the business, particularly as it gives Loughborough HQ employees the chance to work internationally and gain invaluable experience.

I would go further: Access Group is a good case study of employer best practice in several areas, outlining three distinct components that lead to attracting and then retaining the best talent within an organisation:

- A friendly culture where people want to work is vital. Making the office a nice place to come in to, filled with people who get on and like being in a team with one another, is a huge part of retaining staff.
- Active team building is key as well. Offering rewards for hard work which also revolve around bringing the staff closer together can be an important staff retention tool.
- Probably most important of all, create methods of advancement that are transparent and clear and further, make internal promotion a big part of the company's culture. If people understand that by staying and working hard for the organisation they will be rewarded with more money and status, most of them will stick around. On the flipside, if they see their colleagues either staying in the same job forever or the best and brightest moving on while people are constantly installed into positions of power from outside of the organisation, then high attrition will likely follow.

“Training and culture are key to everything we do here. Keeping the best staff is crucial to our success, here and elsewhere.”



The company culture at Access works positively in other ways. The Access Group Foundation, set up in 2021, is a good example of private enterprise giving back to a community. The charity, which is funded by the company but acts independently, gave away £1.41 million in grants and other awards in 2023.²⁸

The headquarters of the Access Group is located at the far west end of the Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park (LUSEP), in sight of the M1. The park is a large area comprising several different buildings, housing many different types of organisations. It contributes a lot to the local economy – the Access Group may be the largest single employer there, but the stories of the others tell us a lot about not only Loughborough, but towns like it throughout Great Britain.



28. <https://theaccessgroupfoundation.com/annual-reports/annual-report-2023/statistics/>

Loughborough: The town and the university

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“It looks like you’ll need a boat to get across that, son.”

This was what I heard in my left ear as I stood in front of a large puddle in Queen’s Park, the large plot of green that sits in the centre of Loughborough. It had been uttered by a woman who herself was wondering how to navigate the newly formed body of water in front of us both. Like most English towns, Loughborough is a mixture of the prosaic and the surprisingly beautiful. Queen’s Park looked nice, even drenched in February rain.

Exiting the park onto Granby Street and then Cattlemarket and Market Street, one can see the contrasts that affect every English town of a similar size. Some businesses look like they’re doing well, some look like they’re hanging on, and inevitably, a few empty shop fronts are present. There is a market in the centre of town that’s been in the same spot for 800 years and it seemed bustling the days I was there.

Loughborough has a surprising variety of businesses in terms of sector. Here’s an analysis of the most represented portions of the town’s economy: 16% of enterprises in the town are professional, scientific and technical; construction accounts for 12% of businesses; retail 8%; arts, entertainment, recreation & other services 8%; accommodation and food 7%. If you do the maths there, you’ll see that still only constitutes just over 50% of the local economy, so sector differentiation only increases from there.

The town also has an impressively large number of SMEs. There are 3,650 different businesses in Loughborough (within the parliamentary constituency), and 2,700 of them have four employees or less. It’s a town of entrepreneurs trying to start something, many of whom are graduates of the town’s largest post-secondary institution.²⁹

29. All the data for this section comes from:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/activitysizeandlocation/datasets/ukbusinessactivitysizeandlocation>

Yet the thing I found most interesting about Loughborough University is the degree of outreach into the town around it, and further, its work in coordinating with partner organisations to deliver on its goals.

Loughborough University was founded as the Loughborough Technical Institute in 1909, being given a Royal Charter to become a university in 1966. Its campus is just west of the town centre and has a lot of distinct features, including the Bastard Gates (named after William Bastard, who was chair of the university when it was built in 1932). Loughborough University focuses on two major things: one is sport, particularly sports science and sports tech; the other is climate change/net zero. By focusing on the university's – and by extension, the town's – strengths, the institution has been able to claim a decent degree of expertise and cache in these areas.

Loughborough University's revenues for the financial year 2022/23 were £379.1 million³⁰, making it around the size of Sheffield Hallam income-wise (or about one sixth the size of either Oxford or Cambridge by the same measure). Yet it feels larger, like it punches above its weight. That will be partially because it's located in a town that it to some extent dominates, but it's more than that – Loughborough University knows its strengths and leans into them well.

Yet the thing I found most interesting about Loughborough University is the degree of outreach into the town around it, and further, its work in coordinating with partner organisations to deliver on its goals: helping support local businesses and aiding job seekers in finding employment.



30. Loughborough University's annual report 2022/23, <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/services/finance/downloads/financialstatements/Financial-Statements-2022-23.pdf>

A robust network

Pete Hitchings is the Incubation Manager in the Research and Innovation Office of Loughborough University. A big part of his job is to know everyone in town and to keep a lot of plates spinning at once. I instantly liked Pete when I met him. I knew through him I'd meet everyone I needed to for this section of the report – and that prediction was more than borne out, as the following will reveal.

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Pete is originally from Leicester and worked at the university there before coming to Loughborough. “At Leicester University, I interacted with local networks in support of entrepreneurs across the region, on things like the UK Space Incubator network, as well as the University of Leicester Innovation Hub.”

He'd been at the university of Loughborough for four and a half years when I spoke to him.

“I came to work at Loughborough University because I could see there was a robust network that existed across the East Midlands, and Loughborough seemed like somewhere I could come and join up that network a little. So, I came in and started to work on the same principles I'd learned in Leicester: good incubation support for early stage businesses, whatever the sector; leaning on the strategic strength of the university to build clusters around people doing interesting things.”

We met at the SportPark, a building that is less than a 10-minute walk away from Access Group HQ, on the same Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park estate (LUSEP). SportPark houses lots of sport-related organisations, such as Sport England, UK Anti-Doping, and Aquatics GB. After a brief chat there, we wandered over to the Holywell Building, another five-minute walk closer to the centre of Loughborough, a place that acts as an incubation hub for new startups. While not all the entrepreneurs in the hub are Loughborough students/graduates, a lot of them are.



Pete Hitchings

“I came to work at Loughborough University because I could see there was a robust network that existed across the east Midlands, and Loughborough seemed like somewhere I could come and join up that network a little.”

As soon as I stepped into the incubation hub, I could sense the buzz. I was introduced to a score of SMEs: Sirius Transformation, a small consultancy firm, built around helping manufacturing businesses to improve productivity whilst meeting regulations, run by a Loughborough University graduate and his business partner; The Inside Edge People, a coaching business run by an ex-Army officer for organisations expanding from being small to medium-sized; an angel-backed startup called Nestwork, created by a recent graduate named Samuel Ola, whose purpose is to help students secure jobs through peer-to-peer learning, by way of improving CVs, helping to discover job opportunities, and prepare for interviews.

Expected turnover for most of these businesses was in the £100 to 200k range per year. Over time, some of these startups will succeed, others won't be so lucky. But just seeing the level of entrepreneurship in Loughborough, particularly amongst young, recent graduates, was inspiring.

I asked the founders in the hub about doing business in Loughborough. In particular, how they would sell the place to someone looking to set up their own enterprise in the town.

"The most important thing is the people and the space," said Tom, who has set up a company called Tzuka, which makes earbuds that are waterproof, impact-proof and can store their own data, so you can use them without a phone or computer. "Access to grants is good around here as well. What's amazing is that I didn't even know this place existed until I came here for uni."

I then asked who had gone to university in the town – and every single entrepreneur put their hand up.

"Being in the middle of the UK is a big plus," Tom said. "Connectivity to London as well. Although, having said that, there is so much manufacturing of hardware in the Midlands, that's another advantage to being here over anywhere in the south."



Pete Hitchings, his colleague Olamide Johnson, and Nick Tyrone at the incubator



Andres Urena

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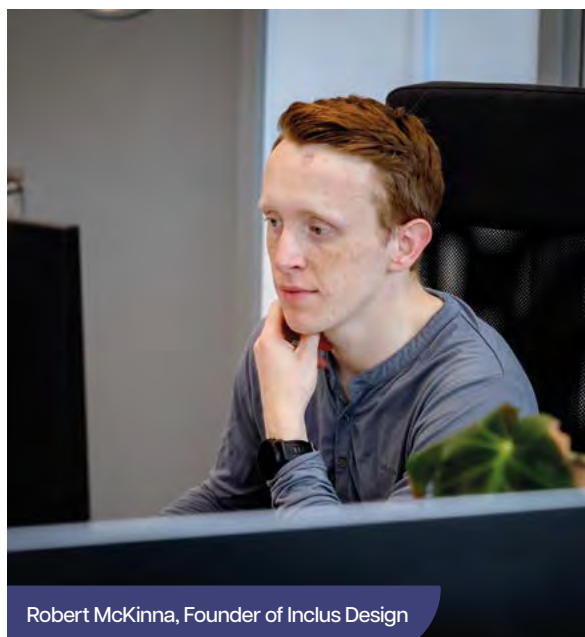
Not that there aren't challenges to doing business in Loughborough, although most of them are UK-wide issues, faced by most businesses across the country.

"This time next month, I shall be in Hong Kong getting hold of the final product," Tom said. I noted the foreign manufacturing location - he shrugged and then explained. "Scaling up in the UK is very difficult. The factory in Hong Kong can make 500,000 units a week. While in the UK, going over 10,000 would be difficult."

I felt a huge sense of community within the incubation hub. Everyone seemed to know each other well and it rubbed against the idea we sometimes have of entrepreneurship as a lonely venture. That's why innovation hubs are so vital: they allow people, particularly young individuals, to start businesses in an environment in which so many of the contacts they will require will be a desk space away, while also giving them a cohort to bounce ideas off. A gang who are on the same journey as they are.

While what ultimately powers the incubation hub in the Holywell Building on the LUSEP estate are the ideas and efforts of the entrepreneurs who do their work there, it wouldn't exist without Loughborough University. Although the hub welcomes entrepreneurs who are not Loughborough graduates, the university unquestionably acts as a major pipeline for new talent. And that's where the key role universities play in local economies comes into play. Loughborough University has developed a "Loughborough Enterprise Network", designed to build enterprise skills and generate new businesses, jobs, innovation and growth across the region. This includes support which helps local entrepreneurs who are not involved in the university at all, even as alumni.

One of the things I found again and again as I travelled across England and Wales – and this most definitely applies to Loughborough – is how important universities are in ways I hadn't considered before.



Robert McKinna, Founder of Inklus Design

One of the things I found again and again as I travelled across England and Wales – and this most definitely applies to Loughborough – is how important universities are in ways I hadn't considered before. One is in a "levelling up" sense – they disperse talent all over the country, bringing people to a town they had never been to before, where they then stay and start a business, bringing money as well as new jobs. Another way in which universities are so valuable to local economies is that they often establish and/or support incubation hubs, like the one in the Holywell Building, which allow graduates to become entrepreneurs in a space that supports them. They also provide a network these fledgling businesses wouldn't otherwise have if they tried to do it all by themselves, as well as small levels of financial support, even if it's just free or reduced office rent. Within the debate about universities, how we fund them, and the role they play in society, their value to private enterprise is not talked about nearly enough.

Yes, there are things universities could do better. Not all of them network or support budding entrepreneurs in the same way Loughborough manages to. But that's an argument for improving the way universities get better, not why fewer universities should exist.





Case study:

ExpHand Prosthetics

“The impact that the right prosthesis can have on a young life can be immense – both from a practical standpoint and an emotional one.”

ExpHand is a Loughborough based startup that makes three different prosthetic products, all with an interesting twist. They can grow with someone's body. Using 3D printers, the company designs and manufactures the prosthetic limbs themselves, creating a business that could positively impact the lives of thousands of people.

“We can manufacture on the go, on demand. You can order from anywhere in the world, so long as you've got a plug socket,” says Kate Allan, the founder and CEO of the company. She went to

Loughborough University and moved straight from graduating to starting the business, setting up shop in the Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park.

When I interviewed Kate, her company was carrying out a trial of products in Kenya, with a view to officially launching everything in the summer of 2024. Their goal is to change the landscape for prosthetics so that they are both affordable and adjustable.

It's taken four years to get to where the company is now, ready for a global launch. Getting the hardware to where it needs to be, testing it, making sure it all works. But for Kate, it's all been worth it.

“The impact that the right prosthesis can have on a young life can be immense – both from a practical standpoint and an emotional one. To have available a product that can adapt to a young person's growing body, forgoing the need to constantly be having to both change

prosthetics as well as never having them fit entirely properly, will change thousands of people's lives for the better."

"Our prosthetics can be made in lots of fun colour combinations, so they become an extension of your child's personality, not just a medical device. Most prosthetics on the market today are expensive, but we have a way of making them less pricey. The secret is manufacturing in-house, so we can provide the customer with something high-quality that is also affordable."

Short-term turnover for ExpHand will depend on the markets they can get into over the next couple of years. The UK will ultimately be a minor market for them, but it will initially be key, given the company is located in Loughborough. They'll be looking to sell 200 units in Britain in the first year. The much larger markets for ExpHand are places like Kenya and Tanzania, where they could be doing hundreds of sales a month within the next couple of years.

Of all the companies I've interviewed across the country, ExpHand is perhaps the best example I've encountered yet of a private enterprise providing a societal good. It seeks to make life better for disabled people, with a particular focus on some of the poorer areas of the world, all while creating jobs in the geographic centre of England.



The Careers and Enterprise Hub

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“We didn’t want our logos too front and centre on the face of the Careers and Enterprise Hub, because we didn’t want people to feel this place is just for students. It’s designed in such a way as to be open to everyone.”

After Pete Hitchings had introduced me to all the hub entrepreneurs in the Holywell Building, I sat down with Dr Kathryn North, the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor of Climate Change and Net Zero at Loughborough University. She talked me through what the university is doing on environmental issues, which involves a huge amount of working with local businesses.

“I think it’s about making the best of what we’ve got here, at the university and in the town,” Dr North said. “It’s about bridging the gaps and making something that can be talked about, attract investment into.” A good, recent example of this is investment made by the East Midlands Freeport into helping accelerate the translation of zero carbon research.

The bridging Dr North mentioned involves putting together businesses working in the net-zero space with the academics doing research that can power innovation in the sector, and then bringing both groups into contact with the investors who might be interested in the enterprises that come out of such a nexus of talent.

Of course, it’s also about how to transfer jobs in the current energy sector to ones that will exist in a greener economy.

“It’s not like you need a whole new work force to run a net-zero world,” Dr North said. “The skills are already there.”

Pete and I then walked yet closer to the centre of town, stopping into Loughborough College where we met with Laura Shepherd, Director of Strategic Partnerships and External Relationships. I talked to her about my conversation with Dr North.

“What’s so important in the discussion about net zero, and particularly about using hydrogen, is the social mobility aspect. The move to other fuels does not have to eliminate jobs. We’ll need to upskill people, of course, but we’ll still need people to run large energy facilities,” she said. Laura told me this during our walk to the Careers & Enterprise Hub, which sits in the very centre of Loughborough, overlooking the market near Swan Street. This is a joint venture between many different funders, including Charnwood Borough Council and the Town Deal Fund, and run by the university and the college. As a case study for how two such educational institutions in close proximity can work well together, Loughborough seems a great example of good practice.

“We didn’t want our logos too front and centre on the face of the Careers and Enterprise Hub because we didn’t want people to feel this place is just for students, Pete said. “It’s designed in such a way as to be open to everyone.”

“There’s also a big social mobility angle – how we enable the work we’re doing to benefit the widest possible group of people within the community.”

This space is about taking the expertise and equipment from both the university and the college and giving people attending either – or, importantly, neither – access to these valuable resources. Part of the mission is about helping people not in post-secondary to gain the skills they need to get better jobs – and in a lot of cases, get a job that will take them out of poverty.

“A big thing we do is engage with industry. We ask them what sort of skills do they think they’ll need in five years’ time, so we can build that into what we’re doing,” Laura said, adding: “We want the curriculum of the college to reflect what skills are going to be useful to graduates, now and in the future.”

My final meeting of the day was with Rachel Quinn, who is the Executive Director of the East Midlands Institute of Technology. This is one of 21 Institutes of Technology (IoT) across the country that have been created by the government to map STEM-related education to local needs.

“We’re more HE (Higher Education) focused than some of the other IoTs around the country,” Rachel told me. “But what we’re really about is creating a buzz around skills and training. There’s also a big social mobility angle – how we enable the work we’re doing to benefit the widest possible group of people within the community.”



Shrada Sonal, a Loughborough based entrepreneur



The East Midlands Institute of Technology works closely with Loughborough University and the college to deliver on its remit. It acts as a recruiter for post-secondary institutions, a provider of education itself, and then as a go-between for those places of higher learning, the students/prospective employees, and employers in the area. They offer careers advice to graduates in addition to helping them directly with things like gaining apprenticeships. And, as Rachel described, one of the things at the heart of the whole thing is social mobility – getting people from deprived backgrounds into higher paid work – in particular, in industries the country is striving to grow.

“A big thing we do is engage with industry. We ask them what sort of skills do you think you’ll need in five years’ time, so we can build that into what we’re doing.”

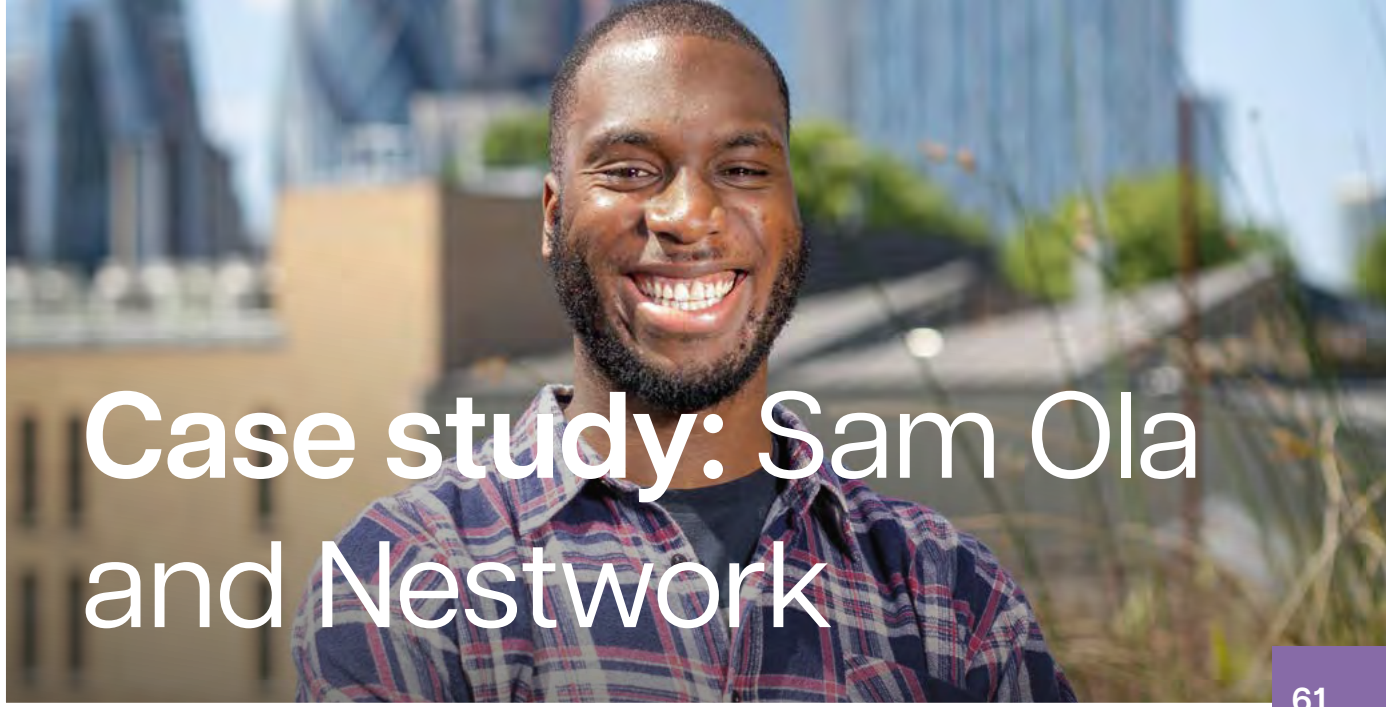
At the end of the day with Pete, my head was spinning a little. I had spoken to over 30 businesses and other organisations in town and was wowed by the connectiveness of everything I had seen. The way all these different entities are working together to support local entrepreneurs and indeed, businesses of all sizes, while trying to train and/or reskill people for the jobs of the future was deeply impressive to me.

The SportPark felt a long way away and a long time ago. In a good way – I’d learned a massive amount about the town, its economy, and its people in a matter of hours. Pete closed the day with a great anecdote that strangely summarised it all for me.

“A few years ago, we had a programme that brought 20 American business people to Loughborough for a career retreat. It was an opportunity for us to host and to let them see the place, get a feel for it. We took the chance

to showcase Loughborough – our small town in the heart of the UK – and they loved it, promising to share their experience with people back home. I wish we did something like that again; I want to show people from outside the region and the UK that we have something special here, but it’s hard to get the budget for that sort of thing. You feel like those sorts of left field ideas are the ones that often have impact; just putting people together and seeing what happens.”





Case study: Sam Ola and Nestwork

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Nestwork is an SME that began life in December 2021 with Samuel Ola and his three co-founders, Flynn Duggan, Pobor Eruesegbefe and Som E-Agwuegbo deciding to take the plunge.

“Being university students ourselves, we saw how often it is that young people don’t get past the first stage of a job application. We felt that having a service that was affordable and easy to use to help people either get on the employment ladder or to obtain better, higher paid employment was filling a much-needed gap.”

They officially launched the company in September 2023.

Their CV assistant analyses job descriptions and then looks at your CV in order to identify missing skills. It then gives you actionable recommendations to improve your offer to potential employers. They also have a Match tool where you simply describe your ideal job in a sentence, from which Nestwork will match you with the most suitable roles that you can swipe through.

Behind-The-Offer has articles which provide step-by-step breakdowns of how other students and graduates succeeded in their applications to different companies and roles. Each BTO is highly specific and provides the client with tailored insights. There are 100+ Behind-The-Offer posts from top companies across a range of industries, with new posts being added frequently.

Nestwork also offers content that can help young people discover what it’s really like to work in a specific job and ask questions directly to current employees, research for applications, make confident career decisions, or connect with employees to learn about a company.

“Our goal is to help people find the job they want and hopefully transform their lives. A job is so vital to people’s sense of self and worth, beyond simply the importance of a pay packet. We’re hoping to build a successful company and change a lot of people’s lives for the better along the way.”

“Being university students ourselves, we saw how often it is that young people don’t get past the first stage of a job application. We felt that having a service that was affordable and easy to use to help people either get on the employment ladder or to obtain better, higher paid employment was filling a much-needed gap.”

Loughborough as a swing seat

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When I spoke to Jeevun Sandher, he was the Labour party candidate, hoping to win Loughborough whenever the general election was to take place. Now, of course, he is the MP for the town.

Every business owner I spoke to had nothing but kind words to say about Jeevun Sandher. As one person put it: “Jeevun seems solid enough. Shame about Jane (the Tory MP at the time) – she’s great but she’s almost certainly going to lose because of the national party and all that.”

“My priority is to bring green investment to Loughborough. That will create jobs and boost the local economy. The town has huge pluses, particularly around hydrogen, that I want to be taken greater advantage of than is happening at the moment.”

I met Jeevun in a café called Esquire Coffee on the High Street, right in the centre of town. It’s a nice place that would not feel in any way out of place in London or Manchester. Jeevun is from Luton originally, but like so many of the entrepreneurs I had already met, came to Loughborough to study at the university.

“My priority is to bring green investment to Loughborough. That will create jobs and boost the local economy. The town has huge pluses,

particularly around hydrogen, that I want to be taken greater advantage of than is happening at the moment.”

He talked about GB Energy, Labour’s plan for a publicly owned, green energy company. It promises to save people money on their energy bills, deliver 100% clean energy in Britain by 2030, all while creating thousands of jobs across the country and securing the UK’s energy security and independence in a scary world. I have to admire the ambition, while wondering if such a lofty set of goals is actually deliverable in the way Labour is setting out. Time will obviously tell.

I asked Jeevun about skills, training and apprenticeships in Loughborough. He was unsurprisingly critical of the situation Labour have inherited.

“The skills policy has been a failure. Meanwhile, the apprenticeship levy is very inflexible, meaning companies are not sufficiently incentivised to bring new people on. This is in addition to businesses putting off large investments at the moment, which trickles down to investing in people. We need growth in order to create an environment in which businesses are hiring again.”

Now that Jeevun Sandher is Loughborough’s MP, it will be interesting to see how Loughborough changes and indeed, if Sandher and his party’s lofty green goals come together. Net zero doesn’t have to mean bigger government; businesses are going to be doing a lot of the heavy lifting. There are jobs in hydrogen to be found in Loughborough, that much seems clear.



Jeevun Sandher, MP for Loughborough



Loughborough town centre



Case study:

The Bug Factory

“No one is going to buy this just as a form of altruism. For something like this to work, companies need to see a positive effect on the bottom line.”

On a farm a few miles outside of Loughborough sits the Bug Factory, a site mostly given over to the research and development of an idea that could be both economically and environmentally valuable, if all the pieces come together.

It is the brainchild of Thomas Constant, who grew up in Brighton but came to study at Loughborough University, which is where he established his first contact with the town. Yet another young person whose talent has been dispersed around the country via the university system.

At present the Bug Factory is based on a small farm in Leicestershire which houses black soldier flies and their larvae. The latter are currently sold as part of a mealworm kit to pet stores across the UK, US, EU and Australia.

Owners of reptiles, birds and fish can buy them to create an endless supply of food for their animals. The company sells around £100k worth of kits per year at present. It has recently won a Leicestershire Innovation Award for innovation in food and drink.

“The great thing is, black soldier flies will eat pretty much anything,” Tom said. “That’s crucial to how we want to expand. We’re currently looking into the most cost-effective way to breed black soldier flies on a mass scale.” It should be noted here that the black soldier flies are completely harmless to human beings. They don’t sting and aren’t even interested in people; I walked through a haze of them, and they completely ignored me for the most part.

The next phase in the Bug Factory plan is much more ambitious than mealworm kits. That will be built around re-creating the ecosystem established on the farm outside of Loughborough at factory sites across the UK and then around the world. This will involve building places where the black soldier flies and their larvae will live and consume the waste products from food and drink manufacturing. An example of where this could work would be a brewery, which produces lots of consumable waste.

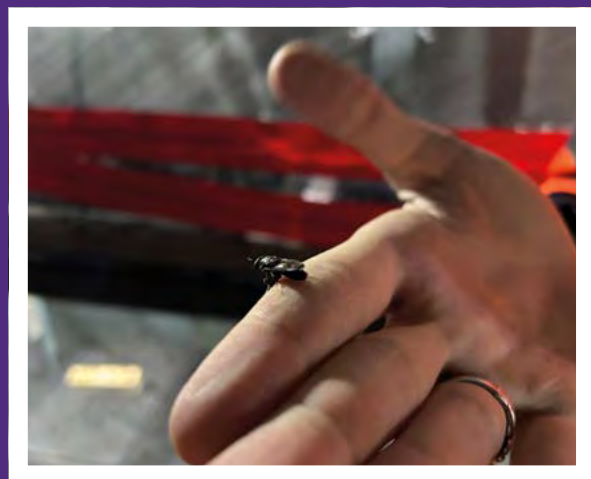
The first “product” is the waste disposal. A brewery gets rid of around 75% of their waste, directly selling it as agricultural feed anyhow. But the remaining 25% currently must be taken to a landfill, at a cost to the brewery. The Bug Factory would look to slash that cost by having the insects consume the waste on site, which would then create a constant stream of mealworms that could be sold on as animal feed.

The environmental upside of this process would be obvious, in that it should substantially reduce waste that goes to landfill. Getting the economics of it right is the key, however. It must be cheaper for companies to get rid of their waste the Bug Factory way. The mealworm also has to be cheaper feed than other forms of animal food.

Tom understands this completely. When I visited his farm site, he talked constantly about making the numbers add up.

“No one is going to buy this just as a form of altruism. For something like this to work, companies need to see a positive effect on the bottom line.”

My general takeaway from seeing Tom’s set up is that if his current plan doesn’t quite come together, he’ll pivot and find a new use for his insects. I think he’s on to something in seeing a future in which bugs will be used to reduce waste. I also feel certain those breakthroughs are going to come via a private enterprise as opposed to any government-led intervention.



What do businesses in Loughborough want?

Given the town is at the forefront of the green sector in the UK, around hydrogen production in particular, businesses in Loughborough would like clearer green targets from the Westminster government that do not move and that everyone can take as being set in stone. If the targets feel like they won't slide, it is easier for companies in the sector to get investment – particularly somewhere relatively small in the grand scheme of things, like Loughborough. If the future is spelled out plainly, the investment terrain becomes easier to predict, making venture capital and other forms of financing easier to come by.

Loughborough businesses also want the new Labour government to be clearly pro-business, something a lot of people in the town (and elsewhere in the UK, to be fair) feel has been a long time coming. This is partly policy

based – lower corporation tax, or at least, lower corporation tax for companies below a certain size – but, to some extent, it's much more vibes based. There is a feeling in places like Loughborough, which isn't particularly rich or poor, big or small, that central government in the United Kingdom has not cared about business, and perhaps even been openly disdainful of private enterprise, for some time now, whether that has any genuine substance or not.

There is also a concern about the current trajectory of funding for universities, given how central the university in Loughborough is to the town's economy. Even those business people who have no connection to the university whatsoever fear anything negative happening to the institution, given how important it is to the connective tissue of the town.

Lessons on best hiring practice and bringing people out of poverty

To summarise the lessons on best practice gained from the Access Group:

- Create a friendly culture where people want to come to work.
- Be active in building a team and keeping them together.
- A company must create methods of advancement that are transparent and further, make internal promotion a big part of the company's culture.

The Access Group also has a lot of good practice on bringing people out of poverty, not only in hiring people from deprived socio-economic groups, but in the charitable work their Access Foundation undertakes. One of the big things they focus on is what they term "bridging the digital divide". This is about giving people from disadvantaged backgrounds access to the internet, to cellular data, to

phones, to technology that is either crucial to helping them get and stay in employment or, at the very least, having access to tech that will greatly help them get into a job and keep it.

The Access Foundation also gives out university scholarships, which are mainly built around helping the student with things like laptops and other technological materials they will need to study effectively.

This is private enterprise creating societal good above and beyond simply providing good jobs for their employees. While charitable work can come from all quarters, it's important to remember how much a lot of larger businesses give back to the communities around them. So much of the narrative surrounding larger companies these days is either about them being money grabbing, soulless vampires, or woke ideologues. And yet the real picture is that they contribute to society in ways that would be hard to replace if those businesses did not exist.

Final thoughts

Ryan had just come back from Timișoara, Romania, where he had been helping to set up a new Access Group office. Just as the company started in Loughborough, so they continue when they expand into other places – not into Bucharest or anywhere near it, but to a town in the far west of Romania, near the Serbian border. When I ask Ryan how they manage to keep the culture they value so highly intact when expanding into new countries, his response is intriguing.

“That’s why I went down there myself,” Ryan told me. “We need our people from Loughborough there in order to make sure the culture gets instilled from day one. It’s key to everything.”

*“Loughborough is home.
You always miss home.”*

I joked to him about how he probably wanted to stay down there given the weather was terrible in the Midlands at the time (as alluded to already, it rained the whole time I was there).

“No, no. Loughborough is home. You always miss home.”

Towns in Britain deserve more space in the national conversation. Not just for the challenges that they face and what they need or don’t need from government, but for what they offer to the national economy. Towns need to be discussed for all the good things that are happening in them right now. Coming to terms with the challenges Britain faces is vital; but just as important is figuring out all the things to be positive about as a country. We don’t do that enough. And we definitely don’t do that enough for places like Loughborough, that have things to teach the rest of the country.



Ryan

3

Hartlepool

The coalface of change

A **wider coastal town study** of how ambition can replace poverty, including Cromer and Redcar

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“Hartlepool is a unique and special town that displays potential as it moves into its next stage of growth and development, including community cohesion, local productivity and sustainable growth. With innovative and relevant academic and technical career routes for diverse communities, there is a strong hope that we will see the fruits of our labour, in the training and retaining of our young people, as the foundations for essential future careers within Hartlepool and the wider region.”

Jane Reed

Campus Principal, Hartlepool Sixth Form College

Hartlepool



REDCAR

CROMER

About Hartlepool

- A town on the coast of the Northeast of England, 35 miles south of Newcastle upon Tyne, 13 miles north of Middlesbrough. Despite being only 12 miles apart from each other across the Tees estuary, Hartlepool and Redcar are a pain to get between, requiring a car journey going into and out of Middlesbrough (unless one were to try and swim for it).
- Historically part of County Durham, now officially part of the Tees Valley Combined Authority.
- Population: 88,000.³¹
- The town was founded in the 7th century. It was a fishing village for a long time before becoming a major port, transporting a great deal of coal from the surrounding region coming into Hartlepool and then out to the rest of the world.
- Hartlepool nuclear power station, actually located south of Seaton Carew, is the largest employer of the town's population.
- 96.6% of Hartlepudlians are white, 1.6% are Asian, and 0.5% are black.³²
- As of September 2023, 69.7% of people aged 16 to 64 are employed in the town. This is compared with a national employment rate for the same cohort of close to 75%.³³
- Hartlepool is one of the most deprived areas of Britain. Over 60% of Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in Hartlepool are in the top 20% most deprived in England in terms of Employment, Health Deprivation, and Disability.³⁴



Christ Church, Hartlepool



Nick Tyrone



31. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6604194f91a320001a82b094/Hartlepool.pdf> (Accessed 14/05/24)

32. Ibid

33. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E06000001/#> (Accessed 14/05/24)

34. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6604194f91a320001a82b094/Hartlepool.pdf> (Accessed 14/05/24)



Lynn Street, near Hartlepool rail station

- Almost a quarter of adults in Hartlepool have no formal qualifications of any kind.³⁵ The national figure for the UK is 18%.
- The town had a Conservative MP, Jill Mortimer, after the infamous May 2021 by-election. Jill won by almost 7,000 votes, despite the area having had a Labour MP since 1964. The area now has a Labour MP once again.
- Although Hartlepool borough has been mostly Labour controlled at local level for a long time, it had been under no overall control for five years before a strong Labour showing in the 2024 local elections won the council for them.
- The town's dalliance with its own elected mayor was short-lived and strange. It was won three times in a row by Stuart Drummond, who ran in the guise of H'Angus the Monkey, Hartlepool United FC's mascot. He beat out the Labour candidate narrowly in 2002, by a huge majority in 2005, and then narrowly again in 2009, before the post was abolished via a referendum.



A Gazelle helicopter, Hartlepool FE College

35. <https://www.hartlepoolmail.co.uk/education/the-number-of-hartlepool-adults-with-no-formal-qualifications-is-revealed-3984468> (Accessed 14/05/24)

Harrison's story

"With Hartlepool, it's a place where you're either going to it or you're not going to it. You don't really drive through Hartlepool. So, you're either here or you're not."

These words struck me as oddly profound as they were spoken by Harrison Smith, a young man who runs his own financial consultancy business out of an old mansion house in the south end of town.

"The vast majority of my business, I don't really do it in Hartlepool, despite being based round here. Maybe 20% of my client base is local."

Despite only being in his mid-20's, Harrison has led an interesting life already. He was an academy player for Hartlepool United, which led to a scholarship to play soccer in America, where he attended Francis Marion University in South Carolina. Despite his post-secondary education in the States, Harrison was eager to

return to his hometown once his studies were complete. Although he did play football at a semi-professional level in Alabama after he graduated, it didn't take him long to return to Hartlepool, which he did in 2018.

"I had another job lined up in the States. But I'd had enough. I wanted to come home."

I asked him why he felt so strongly about returning to his hometown. He shook his head and thought for a moment before replying.

"Hartlepool people – we get taken away, but we always get drawn back here. It's very rare that you leave and you leave for good."

His first job upon coming back to Britain was at an ALDI supermarket, entering the job through a graduate scheme they were running at the time. "It was 60 to 70-hour weeks, running different stores. It was a lot to take on. I also figured out that retail wasn't for me. I suppose that job put me in the economically fortunate enough position to be able to take a step back and ask myself what I really wanted to do with my life."

It turns out the pandemic had an odd upside for Harrison as well.



Harrison Smith



Greenbank, where Harrison runs his business

“Covid also strangely helped. Gave me some time to reflect and take stock of things.”

He became a development manager for an insurance company at that stage. It was during lockdown, so he still had a great deal of time on his own to think. That’s how he “stumbled”, as Harrison himself puts it, into his current role as his own boss. He has been a financial advisor on his own terms since July 2021, with a client list of around 100 people.

“The vast majority of my business, I don’t really do it in Hartlepool, despite being based round here. Maybe 20% of my client base is local.”

This is an interesting aspect of Harrison’s work - that despite being based in Hartlepool, so much of his business comes from elsewhere in England. This is both a reflection of the new, digital economy – to some extent, you can be anywhere these days – and the fact that Hartlepool remains too economically deprived to provide many customers for a business such as Harrison’s consultancy.



“You’re either here, or you’re not.”

Being solid in his work life, Harrison has space now to help those less fortunate than himself through charity work.

“I recently did a golf day for a local charity. Reached out to them November time last year to see if I could do anything. We got to chatting and I suggested a golf day as they hadn’t held one actually in the town, and I had a few ideas around how to do it effectively. I went ahead with it and we got a great turnout. We’re talking about doing it as a yearly thing now.”

I had recently been to a few coastal towns in East Anglia – Cromer, Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft – and I told Harrison that a lot of the problems I had seen in those places, I could see in Hartlepool as well. He smiled in recognition.

“Most coastal towns in England are just a mirror image of each other. Hartlepool is getting a little more infrastructure these days, to be fair. I mean, if you’d been here 15 years ago, it would have looked completely different. Having said that, the people of Hartlepool are the people of Hartlepool.”

He then grinned at me before repeating the sentiment expressed earlier.

“You’re either here, or you’re not.”



Hartlepool and the wider coastal communities issue

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When you get off the train at Hartlepool and exit the station, you soon find yourself on Church Street, a road with pubs, restaurants and shops. At least, that's what there is occasionally; the first place you come upon when entering Church Street from Station Approach is Sorrento Pizzeria, a no longer extant establishment that has several of its windows smashed in. Sadly, it is not the only space on Church Street that is currently vacant.

Hartlepool is an old place. An abbey was built here in 640 by Hieu, an Irish nun who had settled in Northeast England.

I headed to the marina, north of the station, immediately after I arrived in town. I saw potential there, with nice cars dotting the car park in front of the yacht club, although one gets the distinct sense that the owners of those vehicles – both the automobiles and the boats – are out of towners, people with nice houses in rural County Durham who come to Hartlepool strictly to make use of this particular patch of water.

Hartlepool is an old place. An abbey was built there in 640 by Hieu, an Irish nun who had settled

in Northeast England. The abbey no longer exists, but St Hilda's church rests in its place, a large building that was built upon and around the abbey over the decades, with its most modern features being erected in the 20th century. Yet for most of its existence, Hartlepool has been somewhat of a backwater. At the dawn of the 19th century, the town had less than 1,000 inhabitants.³⁶

The industrial revolution changed the place a lot. For a start, it became two places, with the new town of West Hartlepool being established. The old port and the new town merged to become modern day Hartlepool in 1967. Locals told me again and again that the two towns still have very separate cultures and it's still easy to see where the break between them lies more than 50 years post-merger; although, I must confess, walking around the town for several days, the borders between the two places never seemed obvious to me.

In the mid-19th century, Hartlepool became a reasonable-sized industrial port, shipping coal that had been mined from villages inland. Like a lot of towns in the North of England during the 1980s, the death of nationalised coal hurt Hartlepool a great deal. Today, it's an economically deprived place, which is obvious in the statistics and on the ground. Around 30% of adults in the town are economically inactive, compared to around 21% across Great Britain.³⁷ £35k is the median salary in the UK; it's almost ten thousand pounds lower in Hartlepool.³⁸ Child poverty stats are also grim in the town.

36. <https://www.thisishartlepool.co.uk/history> (Accessed 23/04/24)

37. <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157059/report.aspx#tabeinact> (Accessed 23/04/24)

38. <https://www.payscale.com/research/UK/Location=Hartlepool-England%3A-Cleveland/Salary> (Accessed 23/04/24)

Like a lot of towns in the North of England during the 1980s, the death of nationalised coal hurt Hartlepool a great deal. Today, it's an economically deprived place and that's obvious in the statistics and on the ground.

All of this should be seen through the lens of England's larger coastal communities' problem. Although in some ways Hartlepool is atypical of many towns by the sea in Britain – it doesn't have a pier or a promenade and was never a tourist destination – it shares many of the same problems that blight other coastal communities.





Case study: Cromer

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"I was born here, raised here, went to school here, never left here...still here."

This was said by Sam Grout, the owner and operator of the Old Rock Shop Bistro, a restaurant in the centre of the town of Cromer, which rests on the northern coast of Norfolk. The "still here" was said slightly sardonically, earning him assorted giggles around the room. He was part of a group of business people who had gathered at the Cliftonville Hotel, a Cromer institution that sits above the beach, a short walk from the town's pier.

Sam talked to me about his recruitment process. "We hire pretty much exclusively local people. My typical new employee will be a person who grew up in the town." The bistro even had one of its staff go onto the Master Chef programme at one point a few years ago – although he sadly didn't do very well, according to those around the table. "I think he needed his ego trimmed a little," one of the roundtable participants said with a cheeky grin, reminding me that in a small town, everyone knows each other.

I was extremely impressed with the story of how Sam came to run the Old Rock Shop. He worked there under the previous owner for a few years, essentially becoming the de facto manager of the place, before buying the owner out – using his own money, all at the age of 21. I asked him what he does to keep hold of his staff once he's hired them.

"We try hard to look after them. We give them opportunities for progression. Hospitality is one of the main areas which you can thrive in around here."

"We try hard to look after them. We give them opportunities for progression. Hospitality is one of the main areas which you can thrive in round here."

Other business people gathered at the table that day in Cromer told a slightly different story, talking about their problems in finding and retaining employees. A lot of it had to do with seasonality – the need to flex the size of your staff dependent on the time of year. Deb Lewis, the Events & Bookings Manager at the Cliftonville, put it starkly.

"Young people in Cromer can go to Norwich and earn more money. So, it's tough recruiting young people in this area. If you have the ethos that you want to develop your young staff for bigger roles in the future, that's really difficult. As soon as they're 18, so many of them, they'll go to Norwich or London."

“You can go through a whole recruitment process, interview someone a couple of times, get to the point where you think you’ve found someone who’s right for the job, you offer it to them...and they ghost you.”

“You can go through a whole recruitment process, interview someone a couple of times, get to the point where you think you’ve found someone who’s right for the job, you offer it to them...and they ghost you.”

She gave one specific example that put it into perspective for me.

“In 2017, I was working on Cromer Pier, and we did a sort of speed hiring event. All the employers were looking for different things, so we were trying to match the people we had coming for jobs up with the right companies. Over 100 people turned up to that. That event was repeated in 2021.... and we had 15 turn up.”

I asked if perhaps Covid had something to do with that. Everyone around the table agreed that the pandemic had hit the town hard. In fact, this was something I often found in my travels: The smaller the community, the more it was still trying to recover from the effects of the pandemic.

Another issue that was brought up a few times was the lack of immigrants coming to the area. No young people coming in combined with no immigrants means that finding suitable employees at a wage level the businesses in Cromer can afford to pay is a constant challenge.

The town is one of the oldest communities by median age in the country, with the constituency it is in, North Norfolk, having the highest median age in England.³⁹ This is an issue for coastal



communities around the UK, but it is acutely felt in Cromer, where the demand for young people is not met with enough supply.

But there are a lot of reasons to be optimistic, despite these challenges. Sam has just bought and opened a new business down the road from the bistro – a café called the West Street Deli. He beamed as he talked about what he felt was a bright future for the town he has called home for his entire life.

“The sense of community here is huge. You see it in people who were born and raised here, leave for a bit to do something else – but then come back when they’re a little bit older. When they want to settle down and raise a family, they come back to where they were raised.”

Deb Lewis told me the Cliftonville Hotel was finishing its exterior renovations this year, having done the interior overhaul a few years ago.

“We’re trying to turn the Cliftonville into less of just a hotel and into a venue for everything – a casual drink, a big event like a wedding. It’s going really well. The weddings market is gathering pace now particularly. North Norfolk is underserved in the wedding venue market. The seafront is a big draw. Exciting days ahead.”

39. From <https://www.edp24.co.uk/news/20744991.norfolk-constituency-officially-oldest-country/>, backed up by ONS statistics (Accessed 11/04/24)

Gary Riches and Jane Reed



Gary Riches



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I arrived at Hartlepool College of Further Education (FE) fifteen minutes early. I wanted to hang back and wait until the appointed hour before going inside, so as not to seem overly keen, but a stiff breeze was being felt, coming from the unseen sea and the cars whizzing by on the A689, so I decided to duck for cover indoors. Waiting for me already was Gary Riches, the Vice Principal at the College, with a smile and a handshake. We sat down in the coffee shop area near the front of the building and began our chat.

Gary was born and raised in Hartlepool. In fact, he grew up in one of the town's more deprived areas.

"I started working here in 2012. Before that, I was an electrical engineer. My wife is a teacher and we had a three-year-old daughter at the time – and we just found out we were expecting twins. So, I thought, I'd quite like to get into teaching to

have a better work/life balance, although working in FE is demanding."

It was a wonderfully self-effacing explanation for why Gary works at the college, but it didn't take me long to figure out that this guy does what he does for a living because he deeply cares about his students and the FE's role within the community.

The college does a lot for Hartlepool, filling a tremendously large series of gaps the best it can. It offers post-16 education to those in their mid to late teens, with around 1,200 students in this age range. It also caters for around 2,400 adult learners, as well as offering 1,100 apprenticeships at companies dotted around the Northeast. The College also has around 450 students following high quality technical higher education programmes. This is where one of the key challenges Hartlepool faces comes into play.

"We get £2.51 a day from the government to feed each of the 16 to 18-year-olds on bursary. Often times, that's the only meal they'll get that day. So, what we do is, we bump that up out of our own coffers, subsidising the meals out of our surplus, because it will allow those students to have both lunch and a dinner. It's usually only a sandwich, but to these kids, it's a whole other meal they wouldn't get otherwise."

“Because public transport is so dire, we send a minibus to collect people to bring them from their workplaces in the morning.” These minibuses are hired by the college to get people from their place of employment to the centre of town where the college is located, as there is no way they could get there otherwise. This policy doesn’t just apply to those on apprenticeships either.”

“This is their future,” Gary said with passion. “It’s even to the point where the principal of the college has been out in his car, picking students up so they can sit exams. It’s not something we want to shout about, obviously, but the public transport needs to be better.”

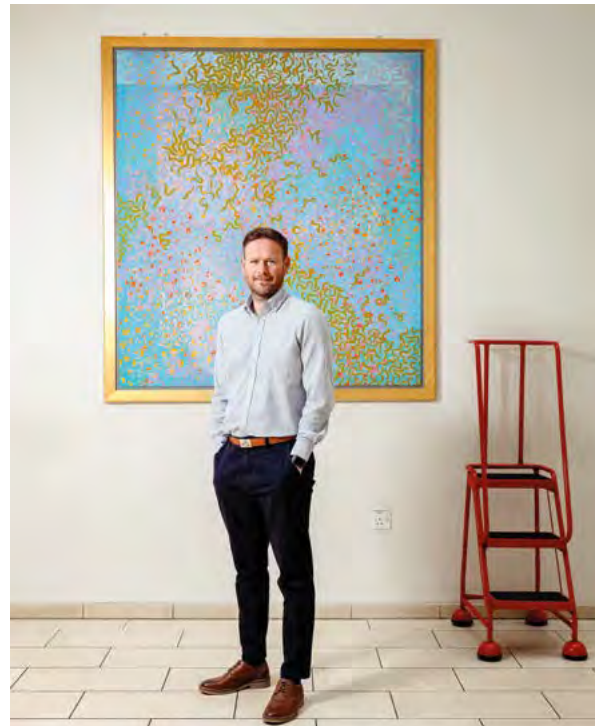
This goes hand in hand with the levels of deprivation in the area. Gary told me that around 95% of the 16 to 18-year-old students at the FE college will qualify for a bursary, in other words, free school meals.

“We get £2.51 a day from the government to feed each of the 16 to 18-year-olds on bursary. Often times, that’s the only meal they’ll get that day. So, what we do is, we bump that up out of our own coffers, subsidising the meals out of our surplus, because it will allow those students to have both lunch and a dinner. It’s usually only a sandwich, but to these kids, it’s a whole other meal they wouldn’t get otherwise.”

“Some, sadly, have been known to take the sandwich we give them home to share with their family members, because that’s the only meal the whole household is getting. So, that’s the levels of deprivation we’re facing. That’s the here and now within the college.”

It puts into perspective the need for jobs to take people out of poverty – and how difficult joining all the dots can be, as well as the role played by institutions like the Hartlepool College of Further Education.

“We’ve got a council ward just there, about 100 yards away, that’s one of the most deprived areas in the country. Then we’ve got another council ward, just the other side of the town centre, with the highest levels of domestic abuse in the country... that’s where a lot of our students will come from.”



That said, the College does amazing things. Its main campus is a £53m stylishly designed building in the heart of the town. It has also recently spent £3m refurbishing its fabrication and welding facilities, which is probably one of the best facilities of its kind in the North of England. More recently, it has been deemed “Outstanding” by Ofsted for apprenticeship provision⁴⁰, something of which Gary is immensely proud. It is one of only 13 apprenticeship providers to earn this accolade throughout the country, and one of only five FE colleges to be considered an “Outstanding” provider of apprenticeships.⁴¹ What makes Gary even more proud of this achievement is that he himself was a former apprentice at the college.

“I was a student here, started in 2000 on an engineering course. Was fortunate enough to get an apprenticeship as well. I stayed on in night school, always through here, until I went to Teesside University.”

What Gary considers of the utmost importance to what the college provides, particularly given the socio-economic background of so many of the students, is focusing on things like behaviour, attitude and confidence. Understanding what the students’ backgrounds will not have naturally provided for them, that nonetheless remains vital to obtaining and then staying in employment.



Jane Reed

“We have five student behaviours that we model. We base it on the mnemonic, HARTS. Hardworking. Ambitious. Resilient. Thankful. Self-regulating. We want them to have manners, make them understand the social element of succeeding in life.”

South down the A689 from the FE college, hanging a right at the roundabout onto Stockton Road and then further west along Blakelock Gardens, brings me to Hartlepool Sixth Form College, where another set of people trying to figure out what they want to do with their lives are studying. There I spoke with Jane Reed, the Campus Principal of the school.

Jane is originally from Sunderland, coming to Hartlepool and the sixth form college two and a half years ago. She told me about how pleasant she found settling into the town had been.

“The community is fantastic. When I came here, I wasn’t just welcomed into the normal stuff I would have expected – what was unique is that people reached out in an informal basis, one on one, to welcome me here in such an amazing way. You don’t have to be here long. It has a really strong voluntary sector. It’s buzzing in that respect. People who really care.”

40. <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50224455> (Accessed 01/05/24)

41. <https://www.hartlepoolmail.co.uk/news/people/hartlepool-college-of-further-education-earns-apprentices-elite-expert-status-from-department-for-education-4481884> (Accessed 01/05/24)

Despite the sixth form college only being a 20-minute walk away from the FE college, it feels like it's in a different town, one not quite as badly blighted by poverty. Jane told me that when she arrived at the school, there was a bit of an idea that the sixth form was thought of as a place for the more academically minded, with the FE college being where you learn to take up a trade. Just as Gary is fighting to get the FE college's academic courses to be seen as being on a par with the vocational qualifications it offers, Jane is going the other way.

"When I arrived, it was my intention to make it a much more inclusive college. If anyone wanted to study here, why should we not let them?" Jane asked.

She was clear that she did not want the college to suffer academically, and that it should definitely still be a place where people who want to go onto a Russell Group university can do so, but that it would also cater more broadly to the community's needs.

Like so many other people in the town, Jane praised the people of Hartlepool, their resilience, their ability to stick together in the face of adversity – while recognising some of the reasons the town is struggling at the same time.

"It hasn't quite got its identity right yet," Jane told me. "There's a lot of deprivation, as you know. It's not quite good enough in selling itself yet. It's such a unique town in terms of what it's got. But Hartlepool doesn't boast about itself. It should."

Jane was quick to stress that although the FE college and her own institution have moved closer to one another in terms of mission statement, they weren't in competition with each other. My sense is that Hartlepool certainly has enough room for two colleges; indeed, these two institutions are absolutely vital to the town. Calling them oases in a desert seems an extremely harsh analogy – but not an entirely inaccurate one either.

They are both key in terms of taking people, particularly young people, out of poverty – often in Hartlepool, extreme poverty – and getting them into work. Not only are the education and the apprenticeships these institutions offer vital, so are the minibuses and the sandwiches.

What Gary considers of the utmost importance to what the college provides, particularly given the socio-economic background of so many of the students, is focusing on things like behaviour, attitude and confidence – understanding what the students' backgrounds will not have naturally provided for them that nonetheless remains vital to obtaining and then staying in employment.





“We don’t want people having to travel in and out of town, preferably, particularly given most of our employees are working 15 to 20 hours a week.”

The BIS is a building which sits on Whitby Street, a five-minute walk from the train station. It stands out as a decent looking structure in what, even by Hartlepool standards, is a pretty run-down area.

“It’s all due for an overhaul,” one of the Hartlepool councillors I met told me about the BIS’s surroundings. “Town’s fund and levelling up funds are part of that. The whole area will be redesigned and rebuilt.”

I was there for a roundtable event with local businesses, talking about what they do, how they are finding business at the moment, as well as trying to discover any best practice they employ in terms of hiring and training staff.

It was an eclectic bunch that gathered in Room Two of the BIS that Tuesday morning. There was Alan Teather, who runs his own quilting business; Jamie Shires, who has a pizza place called Stupid Good; Jonathan Graham from Optimisation Solutions, a company that provides support to existing and startup businesses; Kevin Boffy who runs a tech company; Joann Smith from Bespoke Bears; and Troy Handisides, who has his own energy consultancy.



“We are always looking for a saviour here. Even when one never arrives, we keep hoping.”

The main points raised were:

Hiring staff and apprenticeships:

- The website Indeed.co.uk is used by most employers in the town as their preferred method of recruitment. (“Works great, I only use that website, really. We have tried other avenues... but come back to Indeed.”)
- Almost everyone they hire lives in Hartlepool, almost all of them born and raised there. (“We don’t want people having to travel in and out of town, preferably, particularly given most of our employees are working 15 to 20 hours a week.”)
- Retaining staff is a challenge. (“A lot of people drift from job to job round here.”)
- Apprenticeships are seen as a challenge, as well as risky to use. (“You can spend time finding apprentices only for them to turn up to the job and find that it’s not something they really want to do after all.”)

Hartlepool:

- People are proud of the place and love it, but are worried about its future. Things feel like they are getting worse, not better. (“We are always looking for a saviour here. Even when one never arrives, we keep hoping.”)
- The state of public transportation was brought up as a huge issue. It makes everything about doing business in the town more difficult. (“People can’t get to the jobs. Whether it’s people in Hartlepool trying to get to Middlesbrough or Redcar or Sunderland for a job, or people from outside trying to get in to work here, the lack of the transport makes it extremely difficult.”)
- The feeling that the odds are stacked against the town and that no one outside of it really feels like it needs the attention it clearly does, even within devolved institutions, nags at most business owners in Hartlepool. (“It feels like the money and jobs go elsewhere in the region. It sometimes feels like Hartlepool lacks a voice, getting the things the town needs.”)



Of all the roundtables I have hosted across the country, this one felt the bleakest. Yet there were green shoots of hope here still. Kevin Boffy’s firm employs scores of local people and has no plans to relocate, despite Kevin’s clear irritation at what he feels is the neglect Hartlepool receives from all levels of government. The sense of community and pride in Hartlepool still shone through the discussion, from all the participants. There are entrepreneurs here, battling on and making a go of it, even in difficult conditions. The question is how we encourage more people in places like Hartlepool to create jobs in the area – and how we support the job creators already there.

Case study: Redcar



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“The complete anchor for the town for a longtime was the steelworks. You can make the mistake that people in Redcar have an attachment to steel or any other specific industry. It’s the sense of purpose those jobs brought with them. That was the connection. That was what was taken away.”

The seaside town of Redcar is only 12 miles away from Hartlepool as the crow flies, yet it takes more than half an hour to drive between the two towns. The only way to do it is to go into Middlesbrough and out again. Redcar and Hartlepool are separated by the mouth of the Tees River; despite talking for many years about building a tunnel or a bridge across the estuary, there is still no direct route between the two towns.

When I arrived in Redcar, it was a sunny day. I got myself a lemon top, the ice cream for which the town is famous, and loved it enough to get several more during my stay. Yet walking through the centre of Redcar, one can feel the poverty that’s embedded in the place – the closed-up shops on the high street, the lack of name brands being a depressing sign of deprivation (Redcar recently lost its M&S).

I was taken on a tour of the town and the surrounding area by Harland Deer who works for the council. On the day of our rendezvous, it was sadly chucking it down in biblical fashion – however, Harland dealt with it expertly and still managed to put me in front of a range of local business owners.

I met Liz and Holly, a mother and daughter team who run Blonde Creative, a brand strategy consultancy. When I asked about their client base, the answer interested me as it echoed a lot of what I’d heard from companies in Hartlepool.

“It’s a mixed bag, to be honest. We do have local clients, although the majority are spread out across the UK. We also have US clients, Swiss clients.”

In a sense, it's a wonder of the current age that you can have a business in a small coastal town and yet serve clients thousands of miles away. It will be interesting to see how this dynamic plays its part in regeneration of more deprived areas across Britain.

I also spoke to Ryan, the part owner and MD of the local football club, Redcar Athletic.

"The complete anchor for the town for a longtime was the steelworks. You can make the mistake that people in Redcar have an attachment to steel or any other specific industry. It's the sense of purpose those jobs brought with them. That was the connection. That was what was taken away."

This neatly brings us to the biggest game in town, which is Teesworks. It is a massive (4,500 acre) site, where the old steelworks were located, before they shut down permanently in 2015. In its place, one of the largest green energy hubs in the world is being built. It has already brought hundreds of jobs back to the area and will create tens of thousands of jobs by the time it is complete. Despite this, there has been some controversy around Teesworks, although most of it seems to be built on politics of the pettiest type.

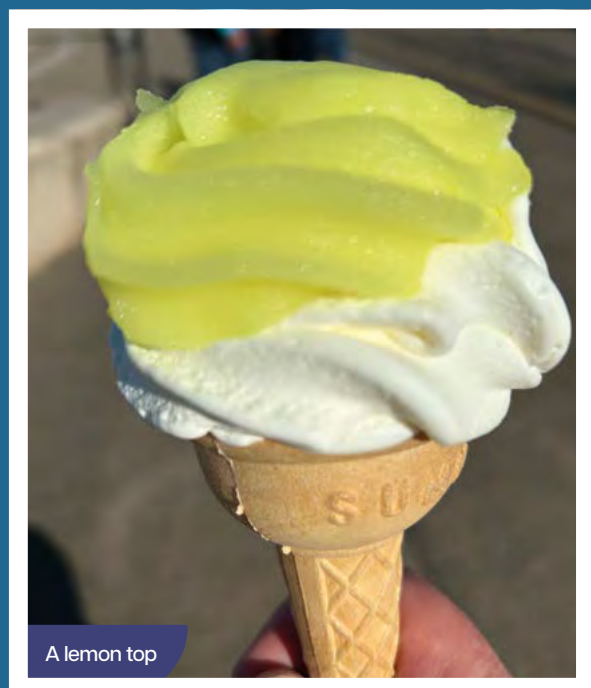
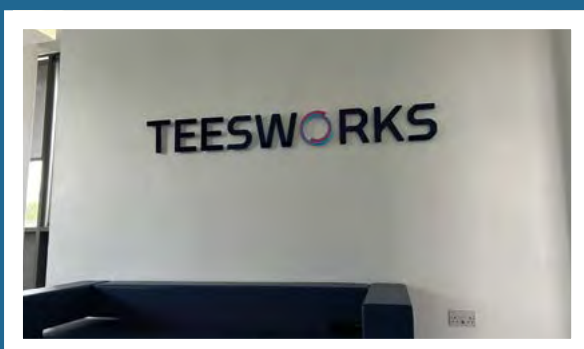
The land was in public hands until it was bought for £15 million by a private company, Teesworks Ltd, with the stipulation being that 10% of the profits made on the site would come back to the public purse in perpetuity. This seems like a good deal all round: a site that was going to sit there for who knows how long is instead being developed, not only into something that will create jobs and wealth in the region but will also be a huge creator of clean energy. In addition,

it will be a constant source of public funding for the region, with large amounts of the money received from their share of the company being put into regeneration.

The problem for some appears to be built around Teesworks being a private, profit-making enterprise, instead of a public body. You have a local council that is largely Labour run, up against the Tory Teeside mayor, Ben Houchen, someone who has staked a lot personally on Teesworks being a success.

Houchen won re-election as mayor this year, and Teesworks had a lot to do with that. Most people in the area know it's a winner and will create scores of local jobs. To those who decry it being in private hands, I would say the following: One, it almost certainly took the innovation you can only get in the private sector to unleash the value of what Teesworks has in store. Two, if you want the green energy revolution to happen, people in the private sector are going to have to see the profit in it. That's its only genuine chance of success. The people running Teesworks becoming wealthy from it should be something for environmentalists to cheer on.

When I went to Teesworks myself, I was blown away by what I witnessed. The site is one of the most impressive things I saw in all my travels around the country for this project. Martin



“We had the likes of Balfour Betty, other multinationals saying, ‘Okay, we’ll come back in 18 months and if you’ve built the quay, then we’ll talk. And when they returned a year and a half later to find the brand new quay sitting there, they understood that we meant business.”

Corney, one of the directors of Teesworks Ltd and a man who works daily on site, showed me around. Amongst the massive warehouses and work buildings being created (many the size of several football pitches), there was also a manmade quay along the riverbank. The mouth of the Tees was too rough for large boats to come in and out of the site, so they built a massive quay in 18 months.

“We had the likes of Balfour Beatty, other multinationals saying, ‘Okay, we’ll come back in 18 months and if you’ve built the quay, then we’ll talk,’” Martin Corney told me when he took me on the site tour. “And when they returned a year and a half later to find the brand-new quay sitting there, they understood that we meant business.”

Teesworks couldn’t have happened without government support. Yet it also would never be what it will become without the private sector getting involved. Public-private cooperation in creating jobs and industry can be incredibly powerful when they combine properly. I’ve never seen a more substantive, real-world example of that than what I saw with my own eyes at Teesworks. The development of a dead site to create not only tens of thousands of jobs in an area that desperately needs them, but a massive amount of green energy as well, should be celebrated by everyone. It is win-win all round.



Redcar Beacon



Simon Corbett and Orangebox Training

“I want staff to go to bed on Sunday night quite looking forward to coming to work on a Monday morning.”

Simon Corbett wanted to be a policeman when he was a boy. His father was a cop and very early on he decided to follow in his old man's footsteps. “I remember being at primary school knowing that if I couldn't be a footballer,” Simon said, “I'd be in the police force.”

Unfortunately, the qualifications he left comprehensive school with were not enough to join the police. Undeterred, he went to sixth form college – the same institution now run by Jane Reed – to re-sit some exams. Even then, he needed further job experience. After working in retail and at a bank, Simon finally got a role within the Durham police. There he stayed for six years in uniform. “When I watch police programmes now, they put a smile on my face. I like to reminisce about those days.”

He knew being a uniformed cop wasn't what he wanted to do forever. “I've always got a fire burning in my belly. No matter what, I'm impatient,” he told me. “I'm always looking for the next thing.” He joined the headquarters' surveillance team. This was the start of his undercover career.

He wanted to move onto the National Crime Squad (as it was known then; it's now the National Crime Agency) in Liverpool. Only 2% of applicants from local forces get hired – but Simon made it. He then spent many years as an undercover policeman, working all over the world, infiltrating crime gangs.



Simon Corbett



Sami, Orangebox



Orangebox managerial team

Eight years ago, he wanted out of that lifestyle. That's when he started Orangebox, a training company with an office on Hartlepool Marina.

"I've been working since I was 16 and I'm 50 now. I've learned a lot about bad work environments and good work environments. About the importance of teamwork and leadership. Loyalty and hard work. As I've got older, I just want to make a difference."

Orangebox Training Solutions runs a wide range of employment training courses for local people, in the process being another key institution providing a route into employment and out of poverty.

"I want staff to go to bed on Sunday night quite looking forward to coming to work on a Monday morning. Where they are going to have this feel good factor, feel part of a team, feel valued – but also feel great that we're helping out learners' lives. We work with unemployed people who are looking for a chance. Unemployed people are genuinely looking for work – so we work hard to get good employers offering good jobs to give them a chance."

Orangebook trains around 4,000 people a year, and Simon told me that around 75% of those who come onto a course with them go on to find gainful employment.

"We are making a massive difference to people's lives. What about that 25% that don't get a job right away through us? We don't give up on them either. We keep working with them. We'll find other opportunities, or we'll retrain them in something else. For those who want the help, we will help them."



Hartlepool Marina



Nick Tyrone and Simon Corbett

What do businesses in Hartlepool want?

I've never been anywhere in England that needs infrastructure investment as badly as Hartlepool – and given most of the country is crying out for infrastructure investment, that's a bold statement. Particularly transport infrastructure of every conceivable stripe. I didn't see a bus the entire time I was in Hartlepool, which amid all the local complaints about their scarcity, seemed notable. I heard endless stories from people at all levels of society about how getting in and out of the town via public transport is a nightmare. Given the existence of huge employers like Teesworks in Redcar, this is a massive problem that holds back so many Hartlepudlians.

Most businesses in the town feel like Hartlepool gets less attention and care than other places within Teesside. They feel “left behind” in the most core sense imaginable. Talented people want to stay in – or even return to, like Harrison Smith did – Hartlepool, but feel like conditions are pushing against them.

Mostly, businesses in Hartlepool are looking for someone and/or something to save the place. Everyone feels that while there are plenty of great entrepreneurs and people working in the public sector in town who are dedicated, it is going to take a lot more than what they currently have to turn the place around.

Lessons on best hiring practice and bringing people out of poverty

It is impossible to overstate how important places like the FE college and Orangebox Training Solutions are to a place like Hartlepool. Parallel to something like Ascend in Sheffield, Orangebox is taking people out of unemployment and poverty and giving them the new start they need; while post-secondary institutions like the FE and Sixth Form colleges are not only training up people of all ages, and helping them find apprenticeships and other employment opportunities, but running an impromptu public transport service and helping feed the students as well. It is scary to imagine how much worse the plight of a place like Hartlepool would be without their presence.

Much more attention needs to be placed on coastal communities and how they are different to every other part of the UK. Somewhere like Cromer has way more in common with Hartlepool than it has with towns in Norfolk 10 miles inland from it. I think we need a “Minister for Coastal Communities”, although which department this would sit within presents immediate difficulty (perhaps we need a “Secretary of State for Coastal Communities”). However this is done, the UK government needs to start looking at coastal communities as a portion of the United Kingdom in their own right, separate from the surrounding territories they reside within.

Final thoughts



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It was the final thing that happened to me in Hartlepool that I feel summarises my experiences in the town. At the railway café, inside the station, I ordered a ham sandwich and a cup of tea. After I had done so, I noticed that the café only took cash, no cards. I panicked a little and looked in my pockets for all the change I had. The sandwich and tea came to £4.80, and I only had £4 on me, having spent the rest of the cash I had on a lousy kebab the previous evening.

"I'm so sorry about this," I said, 'But it turns out I don't have enough for both the sandwich and the tea. Don't worry about the tea then.'

"No, no," she said. "Just give me the four pound and you can have the tea."

As she said this, a look of immeasurable charity appeared across her face. She'd seen it all before, many times. Someone a little short of the price of a cup of tea. It's what keeps places like Hartlepool together, these little acts of kindness. Even to someone like me who didn't really need it, having foolishly wasted my remaining cash on an inedible kebab.



Despite persisting for decades, the UK's coastal communities problem can be solved. We simply need to look at it in the right way. Hartlepool, Redcar, Cromer and many more places like them are bursting with talent. It's just that not enough people care to look for it. As someone once said, you're either there, or you're not.

4

Pembrokeshire

The cutting edge of Britain

A **rural case study** of how a plan for the future can change the fortunes of a whole county

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“Pembrokeshire is a county of close-knit communities. It is a real privilege to live in a place with such an incredible history and Pembroke Refinery is a huge part of that. Pembroke Refinery gave me the opportunity to better myself and gave me the platform to grow and succeed. The refinery continues to invest in new talent, by upskilling, training and ensuring that we diversify to meet the needs of the everchanging world. I am proud to be from Pembrokeshire and proud to work at Pembroke Refinery.”

Matthew Williams

Valero Apprentice



Pembrokeshire

About Pembrokeshire

- A county that comprises the far southwestern tip of Wales, the eastern border being around 45 miles west of Swansea.
- Population of the county as a whole: 123,400.⁴²
- Haverfordwest is the county seat. Its population is 12,000.⁴³
- Pembrokeshire is a major centre for tourism, with around seven million visits in 2019, bringing in £590 million in revenue for the area, supporting almost 10,000 full-time jobs. Although these figures were subsequently hit by Covid, there is hope in the county of returning to and perhaps bettering those figures in 2024.⁴⁴
- Pembrokeshire has a large number of entrepreneurs, with 14% of the workforce self-employed, up against 8.5% across the whole of Wales.⁴⁵
- Pembrokeshire Council is the largest employer in the county, with 6,100 staff, although this is at least partly due to the preponderance of SMEs.⁴⁶
- The average salary for someone working in Pembrokeshire is £31,694,⁴⁷ which is lower than the UK average of £34,900.
- Nonetheless, Pembrokeshire has a huge level of child poverty. Nearly a quarter of kids in the county are growing up in deprivation, as opposed to around 15% across the whole of Great Britain.⁴⁸
- Employment in the county overall sits at 73.6%, slightly under the national average.⁴⁹
- Pembrokeshire County Council has 60 representatives: 11 Conservatives, 10 Labour, 2 Plaid Cymru, 2 Lib Dems – and 35 independents (18 are “not affiliated” to any political grouping, while 17 sit together as the “Independent Group”).⁵⁰
- Although the county used to sit geographically evenly across two Westminster constituencies – Preseli Pembrokeshire and Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire – after the redrawing of the constituencies for the 2024 general election, most of the county is now in the seat of Mid and South Pembrokeshire, which returned a Labour MP with a majority of 1,878.

42. 2021 ONS census, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/W06000009/> (Accessed 06/06/24)

43. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censuspopulationchange/W06000009/> (Accessed 06/06/24)

44. <https://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/cscorporatestrategy202328/cspembsincontext#:~:text=In%202019%20the%20Pembrokeshire%20tourism,jobs%20and%20101%2C341%20bed%20spaces.> (Accessed 06/06/24)

45. Ibid

46. <https://newsroom.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/about/about-us#:~:text=The%20Council%20is%20the%20biggest,%3A%20Working%20together%2C%20improving%20lives.> (Accessed 06/06/24)

47. <https://totalpopulation.co.uk/authority/pembrokeshire> (Accessed 06/06/24)

48. <https://www.tenby-today.co.uk/news/nearly-a-quarter-of-pembrokeshire-children-living-in-poverty-674886> (Accessed 06/06/24)

49. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/W06000009/#inactivity> (Accessed 06/06/24)

50. <https://mgenglish.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/mgMemberIndex.aspx?FN=PARTY&VW=LIST&PIC=0&LLL=0> (Accessed 06/06/24)



Nick Tyrone



Morning in Haverfordwest

Valero and the refinery



Pembroke refinery, overhead

Pembroke Refinery opened in 1964, one of several oil and gas refineries to be built on the Milford Haven Waterway during the 1960s and 1970s. The Labour MP at the time, a political maverick named Desmond Donnelly, described the development of the oil and gas sector as “the rebirth of Pembrokeshire”, something that was expected to create huge numbers of jobs in a region that badly needed them.

I headed there on a cold day in late winter to find a place that was immediately impressive. The site of the refinery is huge, taking up a large chunk of the peninsula directly across from the Port of Milford Haven. While the economics of the Pembroke refinery are interesting, the role it plays in training and hiring local people is even more intriguing.

“The Refinery supports hundreds of highly-skilled, well-paid jobs in Pembrokeshire and across Southwest Wales,” said Will James,



Pembroke refinery from across the estuary

“The Refinery supports hundreds of highly-skilled, well-paid jobs in Pembrokeshire and across Southwest Wales. In particular, we significantly invest in the next generation of workers, with opportunities through world-class apprenticeship and student bursary schemes.”

The local economy also has a number of highly skilled SMEs that are a vital to local industry, with a symbiosis between larger companies like Valero engaged with supply-chain firms that employ hundreds and sometimes thousands of people.

Valero's Manager of Public and Government Affairs. "In particular, we significantly invest in the next generation of workers, with opportunities through world-class apprenticeship and student bursary schemes."

The training programmes for refinery recruits are remarkable. They cut across all parts of the business, from the most technical positions to the purely backroom and operational jobs. They involve some time on site at the refinery, combined with a huge amount of training at the nearby Pembrokeshire College.

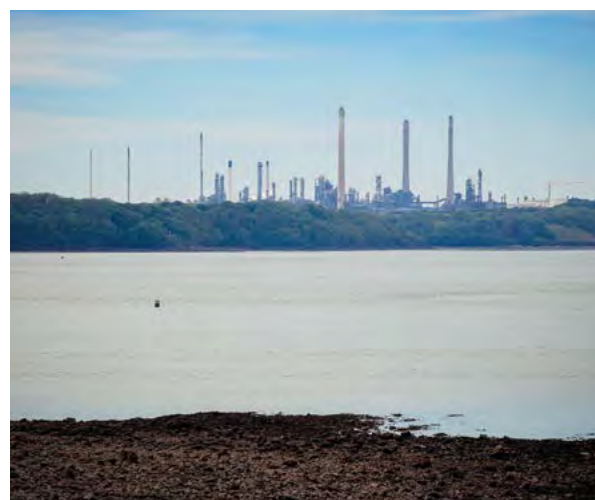
"Every year, a new cohort of apprentices are recruited from the local Pembrokeshire community," Will continued, emphasising the local focus of the refinery. "Balancing their studies at Pembrokeshire College in Haverfordwest alongside working on site, these apprentices gain incredibly valuable skills in operations, maintenance, instrumentation and electrical engineering that will last a lifetime. The student bursary scheme sees undergraduates from top UK universities earn as they learn during summer holidays and get a full year of employment, with the specialisation in chemical and mechanical engineering.

The energy industry in Pembrokeshire has changed markedly in the last 60 years and promises to transform even more in the future. Yet the skills to be found amongst the refinery's employees and trainees are those that will still be needed in the decades ahead: In-depth industrial expertise across engineering, electronics, chemistry, mechanics, operations and maintenance. With their understanding of the local community, the refinery offers opportunities for both school leavers and those mid-career looking to upskill, giving them a chance to earn good wages without having to move away from the area.

The local economy also has a number of highly skilled SMEs that are a vital to local industry, with a symbiosis between larger companies like Valero engaged with supply-chain firms that employ a large chunk of the Pembrokeshire population. As we look to a future where we increasingly balance emissions reductions, energy security, and meaningful jobs across the economy, that emphasis on the connections between large employers like Valero, SMEs close by, and the larger, wider community shouldn't be minimised in terms of importance.



Workers at Pembroke refinery





Chemistry at Pembroke College

Pembroke College

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On the outskirts of Haverfordwest, just off the Merlin's Bridge roundabout, sits Pembroke College. Although it was only established in 1990, it's difficult to imagine the region without it now. It provides secondary and post-secondary education to students between the ages of 16 and 19, while also offering invaluable Further Education courses to older students. On top of all that, there are the apprenticeships the college provides and facilitates. Larger companies like Valero see the college as an important partner, their main provider of quality training.

I was taken around the campus by William Bateman, the Curriculum Area Manager for Mechanical and Marine Engineering, and Arwyn Williams, Head of Faculty for Engineering, Computing and Higher Education.

The college is larger in size and scope than I had imagined prior to my visit. "We've had a lot of work done recently. We've spent around £14 million on the infrastructure here," Will said. Yet for all the money that the college has put into developing itself, as in many other parts of the

country, the external infrastructure in their area lets them down.

"Every morning, several buses turn up from around the county, bringing students in," Arwyn told me. Like in Hartlepool, the college has had to become a transport provider on top of everything else it does, in order to fulfil their remit to the desired level. Where possible, the college tries to cover these costs – as well

It's in the provision of these apprenticeships that Pembroke college really shines, particularly when it comes to training people in skills like welding, which are vital to nearby companies.



Will Bateman and Arwyn Williams

“Most of our provision is in engineering, construction and health. That’s where the jobs are for the students after they graduate.”





as giving the students real world commercial experience – by running portions of what they do as a business. For instance, the salons, there to train hairdressing students, are run as commercial enterprises.

The college has 13,000 students in total. That's 2,000 full-time (mostly people aged 16 to 19), around 5,000 students in part-time studies (and the part-timers can be all sorts of ages, but tend to be people changing careers). Then the college has around 6,000 people doing apprenticeships – almost half of those studying at any given time. It's in the provision of these apprenticeships that Pembrokeshire College really shines, particularly when it comes to training people in skills like welding, which are vital to nearby companies, such as Valero. Students study at the college on some days, and then work on site for their employers the rest of the week, allowing them to use their training in a real-world environment.



Tomas, student union

Given the levels of poverty in this part of Wales, the college and the employers who use it to train their employees of the future are doing a huge amount to create jobs, as well as to take people out of poverty via employment. Just as in Hartlepool, this is the one route out of generations of unemployment and deprivation for thousands of people, through the link between institutions like Pembrokeshire College and employers like Valero.

“Most of our provision is in engineering, construction and health,” William told me. “That’s where the jobs are for the students after they graduate.”

My tour of the college built up to the big moment at the end, when Arwyn showed me a large drawing outlining the planned future of not only the college but, in some ways, Pembrokeshire as a whole. It details how the expansion of wind energy will be put into overdrive in Cardigan Bay and the Celtic Sea.

“The artist drew this live, in the meeting we were having on it all,” Arwyn said with pride. The plans are big – a power cable between Wales and Ireland, the installation of hundreds of new wind turbines, and the creation of the infrastructure needed to store huge amounts of energy. Most of this will be created by the private companies - but many of their employees will be trained at Pembrokeshire College.



Debbie, a teacher at Pembrokeshire College



Hospitality students at Pembroke College



A map of Pembrokeshire's ambitious energy plans

Pembrokeshire overview

Although Celts have lived for over two millennia in the area known as Pembrokeshire, the part of Wales that juts out in the south-west, forming the far corner of Cardigan Bay, it got its current identity shortly after the Battle of Hastings and the arrival of the Normans. Henry VII was born in Pembroke Castle in 1457. The area was notable in the English Civil War as heavily supporting the Roundheads vs the rest of Wales being almost entirely Cavalier. In World War II, the area around Milford Haven became militarily important.

These events stand out in the history of a county mostly known as a peaceful idyll; a part of Britain removed from the rest of it. As such, apart from its economy being based on shipping and agriculture, as well as oil and gas because of the refinery, tourism has played a large part in its history, as well as being important in the present. Surrounded by the sea on three sides, the county is undoubtedly beautiful.

There are no motorways in Pembrokeshire – the M4 terminates at the Port Abraham Services in Carmarthenshire (which has a Costa but charges for parking, something to note if you're ever stopping there for a quick loo break). This feeds into the soul of the place, an almost mystical, unspoiled land out of time (which is a big reason why it is popular with tourists). Yet it is also a large drawback in many respects – the county is particularly badly served by the train system, even compared to the rest of Wales, which is very badly connected by rail compared to anywhere in England. To get to Haverfordwest from London on the train, you have to change at Salisbury, then change again at Newport, then change again at Carmarthen. The journey takes between seven and eight and a half hours in total, and you have to hope you don't miss your connections along the way, some of which are terribly infrequent. Haverfordwest is 244 miles from London – for a reasonable comparison, Newcastle upon Tyne is 290 miles away from the capital, yet you can get

Pembrokeshire is particularly badly served by the train system, even compared to the rest of Wales which is very badly connected by rail as compared to England.





there in about three hours via rail from London, without having to change and with a service every half an hour, all day long.

Despite the influx of visitors in the spring and summer months, Pembrokeshire is also reasonably poor compared to a lot of the rest of the country. It has one of the highest child poverty rates in Wales, a nation which contains a lot of child poverty all round. 36.2% of kids were living in poverty in Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire in 2020/21⁵¹, versus 27% UK-wide⁵². The reality behind the beauty and remote wonder of the place is harsh at times.

Yet there is a huge amount to be hopeful about in this corner of Wales. The connections between agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and shipping are encouraging – the building blocks for a great future in Pembrokeshire are clearly there. The challenges cannot be dismissed, however.



Despite the influx of visitors in the spring and summer months, Pembrokeshire is also reasonably poor compared to a lot of the rest of the country. It has one of the highest child poverty rates in Wales, a nation which contains a lot of child poverty.

51. <https://www.pavs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Addressing-Poverty-Research-Report.pdf> (Accessed 15/04/24)

52. https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Local-child-poverty-indicators-report-2022_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 15/04/24)



Roger Lewis

Case study:

Poyerston Farm

Poyerston farm is a 650-acre dairy farm that sits about 10 miles east of Pembroke Dock. It milks around 350 cows at any given time, with “autumn calving” employed, where the next generation of cattle is born September through November. The farm is owned by Roger Lewis.

“It’s a family farm. We’ve been here for 31 years,” Roger said. “My mum and dad purchased it in 1993, just as I was about to go to university. My father had his own farm about five miles from here at the time but wanted a bigger farm and so we bought this place. It’s been a steady expansion since then, always investing in infrastructure to get it to where it is now.”

Spring should be the most productive season for a farm like Poyerston, but it’s been tough with the bad weather this year. Roger sells all his milk to a nearby co-operative, something which I discovered is a common arrangement now throughout the Pembrokeshire dairy industry.

“We’re very much focused on trying to produce milk from homegrown feed. But obviously, there are some things we can’t get in this country, proteins being the classic one. Soya is the best quality protein we can feed to the cows and most of it is imported. But we use it as sparingly as possible. We locally source as much as we can.”

“It was one of those moments that have changed the business. Reduced the time it took to milk the cows, but also provided a better environment for the cows as well. They are so much calmer, they each have their own space. It has improved production immensely.”



The farm installed a new automated milking parlour in 2018. Roger was emphatic about the positive influence of this innovation.

“It was one of those moments that has changed the business. Reduced the time it took to milk the cows, but also provided a better environment for the cows as well. They are so much calmer; they each have their own space. It has improved production immensely. In the first 12 months, we noticed such an upturn in production. Part of it is just the cows having to stand around less of the time.”

Roger employs two farm hands at present, but that’s mostly to give him time to spend on expanding the business in various ways - the milking parlour can be run by one person.

“I’ve got two great guys with me now. We’ve got a settled workforce, which is a far cry from how it’s been in the past when it’s been quite a challenge not just to find good people, but to find people.”

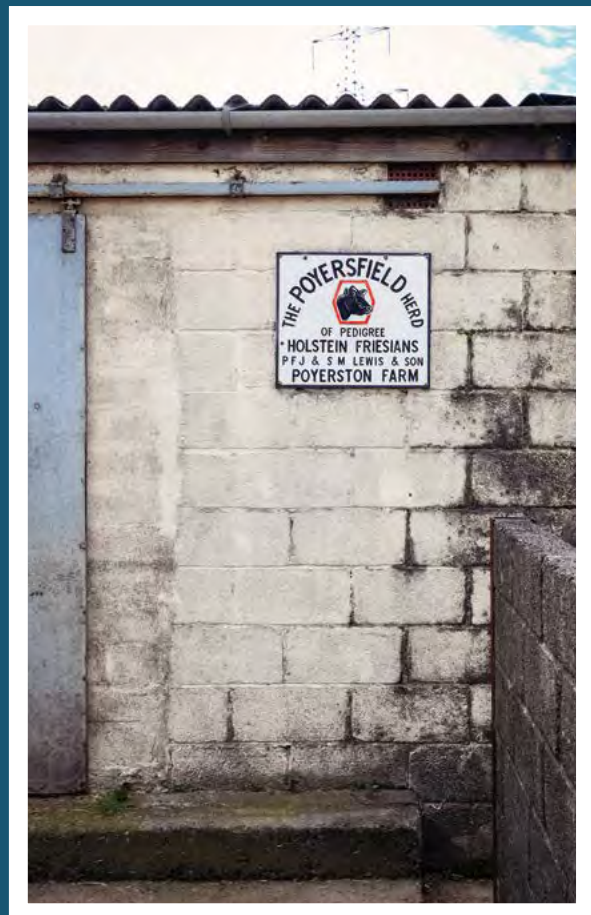
Roger has two daughters, both of whom are finishing school soon. They are looking to go away for post-secondary education, one to university, one to agricultural college. Roger hopes one or both will return to the farm eventually to keep it going – but the agricultural sector in Wales faces huge challenges and Roger was straight up with me about them.

“We’ve built up a good business, but it’s hard work. Profit is a dirty word in most industries but in farming, it’s a really dirty word. That unfortunately goes against us when we’re trying to attract people into the industry, particularly the next generation. Ultimately, food producers are vital to the future of Wales and the UK as a whole.”

“Farms often get tagged with this ‘unsustainable’ tag and its completely unfair. Nature is our friend; it’s part of our business. If we abuse it, we’re not successful, so why would we do that?”

On February 28, 2024, thousands of farmers protested in Cardiff outside of the Senedd, objecting to the Welsh government’s new subsidy plans. Under the proposals, farms in Wales would need to dedicate at least 10% of their land to trees and 10% to wildlife habitat. For some farms, this will be easy and in fact, they already do; for many others, who need to farm their land intensively, this is next to impossible. As a result of the protests, the Welsh government have shelved the plans until 2026. However, this just means the question of farm subsidies in Wales has been kicked into the long grass. On May 14th, the week after I interviewed Roger, there was another protest by farmers in Cardiff.

“Farms often get tagged with this ‘unsustainable’ tag and its completely unfair. Nature is our friend; it’s part of our business. If we abuse it, we’re not successful, so why would we do that? The reality is, over the last 10 years the sector has seen massive efficiency breakthroughs. We’re sourcing less stuff from around the world and getting it locally. We’re reducing our carbon footprint all the time. I don’t feel that food producers get enough credit for that.”





Case study: Ted Sangster and Saundersfoot

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Although the development of the Port of Milford Haven is a huge step in Pembrokeshire's ever expanding tourism sector, it is far from the traditional heart of tourism in the county. St David's has long been a huge attraction; numerous portions of the coastline are a draw in and of themselves as well. But a lot of the tourism trade in the county has been focused and will continue to be centred on the area around Tenby and Saundersfoot, both picturesque towns on the south coast.

Saundersfoot is also, like Pembroke Dock, a trust port. I spoke to Ted Sangster, who used to be the Chief Executive of the Milford Haven Port Authority, but now lives in Saundersfoot and is involved with the port there as Vice Chancellor, about tourism in the area. I mentioned staying in the St Bride's hotel in Saundersfoot on one of my visits to Pembrokeshire.

"Until last week that hotel was owned by one of my fellow chancellors of the port, Andrew Evans," Ted told me. "It was announced last week that he has sold it to Milford Haven Port Authority."

This was interesting news in many respects – one being that the port is looking to expand beyond its immediate area into tourism and hospitality throughout Pembrokeshire. Another is that, as tourism expands in the county, hotels run by individuals or partnerships may be bought up by larger enterprises. Ted was CEO of the Port Authority when they started to branch out into tourism, as opposed to just being a commercial port. He's looking to bring the same lessons from that experience to Saundersfoot.

"We've put in place a series of sequential developments with the aim of turning around the harbour from a car park with views of the sea, to being a harbour at the heart of our local community."



Crabs for sale in Saundersfoot

“We’ve put in place a series of sequential developments with the aim of turning around the harbour from a car park with views of the sea, to being a harbour at the heart of our local community.”

There have been an impressive group of developments in Saundersfoot over the last few years, with many more to come. The aim is to bolster the local economy and increase the tourism trade, all while retaining the character that makes places like Saundersfoot so pleasant to visit in the first place. Yet like the agricultural sector, tourism is affected by seasonality. One part of the year must fund the rest. Ted thinks this can be overcome in Saundersfoot, however.

“We want to develop ourselves into an all-year round, all-weather tourist attraction,” Ted said. “We’ve built a replica of the type of vessel that used to sail out of the harbour. Close by to that, we have a museum dedicated to the maritime history of the town. There are also now large spaces for events that we’re developing.”

Tourism is worth around £600 million to the Pembrokeshire economy.⁵³ It’s an indelible part of what the county does well. But part of the future of the place revolves around the people who live there – and those who choose to move to Pembrokeshire from elsewhere in the country.



Ted Sangster



53. <https://www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk/cscorporatestrategy202328/cspembsincontext#:~:text=In%202019%20the%20Pembrokeshire%20tourism,jobs%20and%20101%2C341%20bed%20spaces>. (Accessed 29.06.24)



Pembroke Dock

Pembroke Dock and the Port of Milford Haven

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On the banks of the River Cleddau, just before the waterway spills into Milford Haven, sits Pembroke Dock. The dock itself and the “new town” that was built around it with the same name, both began life in 1814. Boats were constructed there in the 19th and 20th century, but the space now acts as a commercial port, both for goods coming in and out, and a commercial, public ferry service to Rosslare, Ireland.



Nick Tyrone with Tom Sawyer and Anna Malloy

“We are a trust port. What that means is that we have no shareholders; we own ourselves. While we can compete for government funding, we receive no funding from government as a matter of course. The fact that we have no shareholders means we can reinvest our surplus into the business, into our people, into our community.”



Vidette Swales, Tom Sawyer and Anna Malloy

Pembroke Dock is run by the Milford Haven Port Authority, which sits across the water on the north banks of the Cleddau estuary. I met with the CEO of the dock, Tom Sawyer, alongside Anna Malloy, the port's Communications and Marketing Director, and Vidette Swales, the HR Director, on a glorious spring day.

"We are a trust port," Tom said. "What that means is that we have no shareholders; we own ourselves. While we can compete for government funding, we receive no money from government as a matter of course. The fact that we have no shareholders means we can reinvest our surplus into the business, into our people, into our community."



Tom Sawyer

Tom sees the activity of the greater Milford Haven Port (which includes Pembroke Dock) centring around three areas:

01. The moving of the large ships in and out of the port. This provides 65-70% of the organisation's revenue. This is the port's primary function, at least for the time being.
02. On the north side of the waterway, in Milford Haven, sits a marina. There, a transformation is underway, becoming a greater and greater attraction to visitors each year. A hotel, a score of restaurants, shops and other businesses are dotted around the waterfront.
03. The growth and development of Pembroke Dock, both the port and the town around it. The main project is to turn this into a green energy hub, mostly powered by the big wind farms in the Celtic Sea. Plans for this are well underway already.

"This is a multi-generational business," Tom told me. "Our remit is to hand it on to the next generation in better shape than we inherited it."

Of course, the first of those three aspects of the port remains, for now, the most crucial.

“At its core, our purpose is to safely and effectively operate the western energy gateway to the United Kingdom.”

The job of moving large ships, mostly containing bulk liquids which are hydrocarbon based, is a big one. But Tom sees the vision of the port, particularly looking to the future, being broader than that.

“We have, if you like, two supporting campaigns. One is around our people, making sure they are capable, supported and motivated. Every business will tell you that people are their most important function, but I think it’s clear to us that they genuinely are. We have highly skilled individuals, working in difficult conditions on board the ships, side by side with people who are overseeing a critical piece of national infrastructure, both in terms of our energy security and the vulnerability of the United Kingdom.”

The other supporting campaign is based around bolstering the community of Pembroke Dock, the town itself. It is the poorest area of Pembrokeshire, with 61.1% of households being labelled by the 2021 census as socio-economically deprived.⁵³ However, in the 2011 census, the town had 67% of its citizens living in deprivation, so it is at least heading in the right direction.⁵⁴ The port is at the heart of bringing the community out of poverty, both through the community funding it provides, but more importantly than that, via hiring and training local individuals.

Wanting to work at the port is a huge aspiration for many young people in the surrounding area. Pembroke Dock employs around 200 people (with the greater Milford Haven port, including Pembroke Dock, having around 700 employees).

“Port jobs are great jobs. Typically, 40% higher paid than the average across the UK, never mind the local area,” Tom said. “A young lady just got a maternity cover job, and she told me recently that when she went home and told her parents that



she’d got the role, they welled up. She said it was the proudest moment of her life.”

The marina at Milford Haven deserves another mention here - over 70 businesses rest on the waterfront. They range from the locally owned and operated, like Dilly’s Chocolates and The Fish Plaice; to large corporate entities, such as Tesco and Boots; to public and culture amenities, such as the library and a theatre. It is impressive what the port has managed to do with relatively little resource; it is punching above its weight.

“There is a huge amount of expectation placed upon us. Yet we are a relatively small organisation. You know, when we are looking to win a freeport bid, there are only five or six people involved in that, beginning to end. It’s an absolute joy to do all that, but you can feel like you have a huge responsibility to bear.”

“A young lady just got a maternity cover job, and she told me recently that when she went home and told her parents that she’d got the role, they welled up. She said it was the proudest moment of her life.”

54. <https://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/23104595-figures-show-pembrokeshires-least-deprived-areas/> (Accessed 16/05/24)

55. Ibid

Adrian Lort-Phillips and the village of Lawrenny

Lawrenny is a small village on a peninsula in the estuary of the river Cleddau, close to where the Black Mixen Pool forms, a place which is the meeting of the Cresswell and the Carew rivers. If that sounds like a mythical space where Vikings or ancient Normans might have congregated, you're not wrong – Pembroke Castle, which has stood since the 11th century, is a mere 20 minutes away by car. If you get the view over the estuary on a clear day, just past the old church of St Caradoc, as I was lucky enough to, it is breathtaking. It feels like the word “bucolic” rendered as an image by AI.

I met Adrian Lort-Phillips in the village. His family has owned a large amount of the land in and around Lawrenny for centuries. It was thankfully

on a beautiful day, made more notable by it being the first truly fine weather of the year to that point.

“My father took over the village from his father in the 1970s. He was inheriting a place my grandfather had never really wanted, him having been a professional soldier. It was just something that was in the family. When my dad took it over, you had maybe 30 or 40 people still here. It was a place that felt like it had lost its purpose.”

His father set about restoring large portions of the town to make it a more liveable space. “A community like this didn’t register on any regional development plan,” Adrian said. “So, he had to do it himself.”

“The number of businesses that are here is extraordinary,” Adrian said. “You have people in the village, doing what they love, and then they, in turn, become part of the dynamic of why the place works.”



Adrian Lort-Phillips

Adrian is carrying on the work of his father, overseeing the development of a host of new houses and workspaces in the village, building over parts of it that had become derelict, including the old family farm. A festival was mere weeks away when I was there – The Big Retreat, which is like a music, well-being and intellectual gathering, all rolled into one. Adrian was expecting around 3,000 visitors in total over the course of the festival's run.

There are around 140 inhabitants in Lawrenny now, between three to four times the size of the place when Adrian's father took it over.

"The number of businesses that are here is extraordinary," Adrian said. "You have people in the village, doing what they love, and then they, in turn, become part of the dynamic of why the place works."

Of the dozen or so businesses currently operating in the village, there are software game developers, designer businesses, landscaping services, tree surgeons, bakers, and solicitors. The village finds new residents and businesses largely through word of mouth. I asked Adrian what the ultimate plans are for Lawrenny.

"What we are aiming for is double the population at least, which means doubling the number of houses. We'd like a centrepiece, a centre square, which we don't have now, bringing it all together."

When I ask him if he plans to stay in Lawrenny for the rest of his life, he unhesitatingly says "yes". He wants his kids to go away for a while – but ultimately come back to Lawrenny to have their kids too. As I have found again and again in my travels, attachment to a place runs deep.

What I found in Lawrenny was a fascinating approach to rural life. While it's still about attachment to the land and a love of open space and beautiful views, it is also about expansion, growth and accepting the 21st century. If we want to create a Britain in which everyone has a place that works for them – and, indeed, has a job to go to if they need and want one – we need to think about how places like rural Wales rediscover or at least redefine their purpose in a way that works both socially and economically.

"When I was a kid, we learned about and celebrated people like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You know, people who built things. We don't have that culture anymore."

Adrian feels like the current government in Wales is not helpful to this mission.

"The issue we have in Wales is a government and civil service that is heavily grounded in the southeast of Wales and the industrial past of Wales. What that means is, the way they absorb information is wrong. They don't step outside of their area to find out. Places like this are so critical because they have a role to play in the future of Wales. I am worried about how rural and coastal economies are overlooked and misunderstood."

Adrian then added: "I don't even know where to start with Britain as a whole, because it's such a shitshow."

After a laugh, he complemented the Jobs Foundation's project while also making a point about the importance of business and entrepreneurship.

"The way you're travelling around doing what you're doing, you'll see things for what they are. And of course, you'll see poverty and what causes it, but we can also say without doubt we'd be in a lot worse a situation if it wasn't for the energy of people doing shit because they enjoy doing shit."

We closed on Adrian lamenting how he feels – and I happen to agree with him on this – that we've got away from a culture that celebrates the "doers" in society. Those who build things, start new businesses, who ultimately are the job creators.

"When I was a kid, we learned about and celebrated people like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You know, people who built things. We don't have that culture anymore."



Nick Tyrone and Adrian Lort-Phillips



Accommodation for the Big Retreat



A view of the Black Mixen Pool

Case study: Owen and his automated dairy farm



Owen Lort-Phillips and Nick Tyrone

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Just down the road from Lawrenny sits a dairy farm run by Adrian's brother, Owen, up on Rose Hill. It's small as dairy farms in Pembrokeshire go – 135 head of cattle – but significant in that it confirmed for me the direction this portion of the agricultural industry across the UK is going in, which is as automated as technology allows. Even Poyerton Farm has a small group of hands who aid Roger in the collection of milk – Owen runs his farm almost entirely by himself.

"Watch the robot," Owen said, pointing to a large unit that comes down the line in front of the cows at timed intervals. The farm used to be more varied in terms of its output, but it now focuses solely on producing milk.

"I did grow crops for sale. Barley, wheat. But times have changed a bit now. Crops simply weren't profitable. Skills were on the wane as people retired. Energy prices didn't help. So, I scrapped my grain drier a few years ago and had a bit of a shift of focus."

"There was no Welsh organic brand when we first started the Calon Wen brand in the late 90s. There was a gap in the market."



Automation in dairy farming

“It’s an endless cycle. If you’ve got young children, you’ll appreciate it. You’re either cleaning them up or cleaning up after them. Cows are the same, they’re like fifteen-hundred-and-fifty kilo children. They will wind you up for fun.”

All the milk Owen’s farm produces is used by a co-operative called Calon Wen, of which Owen is a director. Calon Wen sells all types of dairy products – milk, cheese, butter – both online and as wholesale from a depot outside Carmarthen. They have experimented with different things over the years, trying frozen goods as an example, but have settled into a steady group of products.

“There was no Welsh organic brand when we first started the Calon Wen brand in the late 90s. There was a gap in the market.”

While the robots take up most of the work, dairy farming is still exhausting.

“It’s an endless cycle. If you’ve got young children, you’ll appreciate it. You’re either cleaning them up or cleaning up after them. Cows are the same, they’re like fifteen-hundred-and-fifty kilo children. They will wind you up for fun.”

The robots on the farm are impressive, however. An arm containing four milkers extends toward the cow’s udders, lasers being used for them to latch perfectly. Once on, the process begins – and Owen can measure the amount of milk being extracted in real time.

In terms of jobs, it isn’t difficult to see that the future will contain fewer and fewer jobs in the agricultural sector. More things will become automated meaning the jobs will continue to thin out. How that affects rural communities needs to be addressed and considered in a more thorough manner than it is at present, both in Cardiff and Westminster.

For now, we can marvel at a one-man farm that manages to extract the milk from 135 cows each and every day.

“When I first got my robots, people around here told me: ‘You can’t milk cows with a bloody robot’. Turns out you can.”



Owen Lort-Phillips





Sam Kurtz

On my way out to Pembrokeshire during one of my visits, I stopped in Cardiff to speak to Samuel Kurtz, the Conservative member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire in the Senedd. He's a young man, who has only been an elected member of the Welsh Parliament since 2021. While Haverfordwest is not in his constituency, the oil refinery, Pembroke Dock, Lawrenny, and Poyerston Farm, all reside within its borders.

"Pembrokeshire is unique in that it's got heavy industry, rural coastal communities, agriculture dependent communities... it's its own petri dish looking into how jobs, prosperity and routes out of poverty work," Sam told me when we sat together in the Senedd building, overlooking Cardiff Bay. I told Sam that I had interviewed a few dairy farmers in the county, but that those meetings had been difficult to pin down.

"It's been a very tough winter for farmers," Sam said. "I think their patience has been stretched in several ways."

Sam grew up on a farm in the county himself and is very close to all the issues affecting farmers in Pembrokeshire. "I'm a farmer's son, as opposed to a farmer," he said early on in our discussion, and that felt like important context. Sam studied politics at the University of the West of England, Bristol, looking to become a journalist. But politics called to him. I asked him about the biggest problems facing Welsh farmers and particularly those in Pembrokeshire.

"Farmers feel under the cosh. There is potentially a lack of understanding amongst the general public as to the effort put into food production. The relationships between farmers, supply chains, and supermarkets are under strain, particularly with milk being used as a loss leader by many large stores now."

"Leaving the EU meant that for the first time, Wales had to have its own agriculture policy. What we have now is called the Sustainable Farming Scheme. That's caused a lot of anguish. Reversing 40 years of policy to do something very different has caused a lot of anxiety amongst farmers who aren't happy with a lot of aspects of the new scheme."

This was further to what Roger at Poyerton Farm had told me – that agricultural policy in Wales is causing a lot of problems for rural communities across the country.

“Farmers feel under the cosh,” Sam continued. “There is potentially a lack of understanding amongst the general public as to the effort put into food production. The relationships between farmers, supply chains, and supermarkets are under strain, particularly with milk being used as a loss leader by many large stores now. The farmers are the ones who pay the price for that. Farmers also feel like the work that they do isn’t acknowledged in Welsh government policy.’

It feels like there will be more farmers’ protests in Cardiff, like the one Roger told me about, in years to come. Sam agrees.

“Why won’t the policymakers stand with the farmers? If you want a healthy economy in Wales, you need a healthy agricultural sector. If it dies, Wales will lose so many young people, and families as well, which means losing the young Welsh people of the future.”

Pembrokeshire is facing the same problem that is affecting not only rural communities in Britain, but coastal communities even more so. An aging population which needs more and more social carers and burdens the NHS to a greater degree, pared with a lack of young people to not only look after the elderly, but to do all the rest of the jobs that keep the country moving.

This is how everything connects – without a thriving agricultural sector, so many families leave the area. This causes a dearth of young people, which feeds into the college; and from there into employers like the Valero refinery, who will struggle to find the staff they require; to Milford Haven and Pembroke Dock, who need young people to work there and use the facilities; to the hotels of Saundersfoot where again, without young staff or families coming to stay. The whole thing dies in two directions at once. Without young people to do the jobs, everything becomes increasingly difficult.

My chat with Sam ended on a positive note. He is proud of his patch of Wales and certain that the problems outlined above can be overcome.

“If we’re talking about food production, there are very few places that are as efficient as we are. We should be embracing new technologies. That’s where the future is for agriculture in Wales.”



“If we’re talking about food production, there are very few places that are as efficient as we are. We should be embracing new technologies. That’s where the future is for agriculture in Wales.”



What do businesses in Pembrokeshire want?

Different sectors have diverging wants and needs compared to others within Pembrokeshire. The agricultural sector feels particularly neglected by local, devolved and national governments, with anger about post-Brexit funding arrangements being either overly specific and limiting, or simply not being available.

Yet the problems here are intertwined. They mostly come back to keeping young people in the area so that the economy can continue to grow. This will take foresight by the devolved government in Cardiff, as well as by businesses in the county. At present, the latter seems to be there, with the former still catching up.

As is the case in so many parts of Britain, new transportation infrastructure is badly needed.

Train travel between Swansea or Port Talbot and the county is poorly provided and the car is king in Pembrokeshire as a result. Travelling to different parts of Pembrokeshire by rail is a nightmare – there are only a handful of services that run between Haverfordwest and St David's each weekday, as an example. The road system should be reviewed as well, as parts of the county aren't as well served as they could be.

A lot of sectors that fill a large role in the Pembrokeshire economy – agriculture and tourism are top of mind – are seasonal. While what Saundersfoot is doing to make itself a year-round tourist destination is encouraging, it would be great if so much of the economy of the county wasn't hurt every year by the inevitable changing of seasons.

Lessons on best hiring practice and bringing people out of poverty

One of the things Pembrokeshire does well is get a decent mix of SMEs and larger companies, varying the employment field to a favourable extent. That there are so many entrepreneurs there is to the county's credit. While there are several large employers, such as Valero, who play a vital role, the SMEs are the beating heart of the place. And given the socio-economic make up of Pembrokeshire, they are vital for bringing people out of poverty by giving them a job.

The links between institutions, employers and employees are strong and highly functional in the county. The way that Valero and Pembrokeshire College interact to train up local people and get

them into skilled jobs is one great example of this. As has been detailed elsewhere across this report, the links between institutions and getting the balance right there, is crucial to maximising job creation.

But there is still a great deal of poverty in Pembrokeshire. While the plans to overcome the seasonality that affects almost all its prominent sectors are in the mix, there is still work to be done. Hopefully places like Lawrenny point to the future of Pembrokeshire – skilled people from other parts of Britain moving to the county in search of a quieter, more scenic life, bringing with them skills and entrepreneurial zeal.

Final thoughts

My principal memories of Pembrokeshire, weeks and months after going there, is of beautiful landscapes and coastline, set against the backdrop of a type of rural poverty that seems alien to those of us who have spent most of our lives in very urban environments. Despite this, Pembrokeshire has a great deal going for it. The county is a naturally beautiful place that should attract even more tourists than it does – in fact, the only thing probably

stopping that is the poor transportation infrastructure it has.

While several of the issues I discovered in Pembrokeshire were particular to either rural communities as a whole or Pembrokeshire specifically, many more of them are things that affect businesses across the UK. The next step in this process is how we solve those problems, nationwide.



Nick Tyrone



Haverfordwest



5

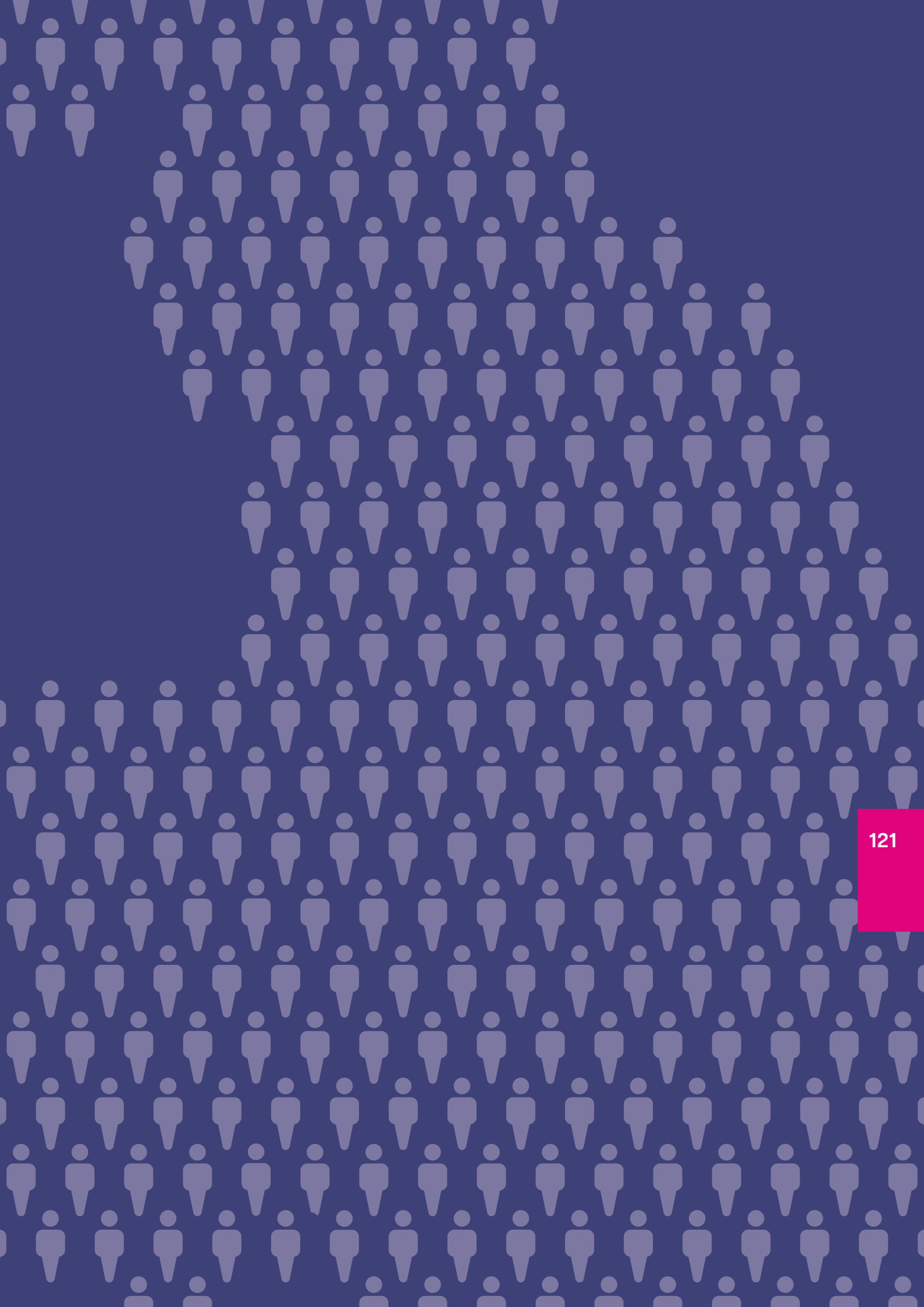
Lessons on helping people from welfare into work

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“Love them. Actually love them. Care for them as if they were part of your family. Businesses have a duty of care – and if more businesses understood this, they’d keep their staff through thick and thin. I remember, when I told that to our board of directors, they thought I’d gone mad. But it’s true. That’s the secret.”

Matthew Gavins

Owner of Evolution Power Tools





Pete Hitchings, Incubator Manager, Loughborough University, and Nick Tyrone

Lessons on helping people from welfare into work

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The best way to help people out of poverty – out of a life of living hand to mouth, reliant on others for the basics – is for them to find meaningful employment. Over 70% of those who move into employment leave poverty behind. Securing a full-time salaried job reduces the risk of falling into poverty by 90%⁵⁶.

Who provides these jobs? Businesses. By creating work which brings people out of poverty, offering training to help people fulfil their potential, and funding public sector jobs

by paying taxes, businesses are an essential vehicle for alleviating deprivation. Without new businesses being created, new jobs will be far fewer, while existing businesses are the greatest means for creating more employment.

The best way to get people out of welfare is to get them into work. What we have done throughout this report is ask employers, large and small, across Great Britain, in cities, towns and rural areas, how this can best be done. What follows is a summary of the findings, in seven points:

56. The Social Metrics Commission, 2020

5a. People from socio-economically deprived backgrounds have specific needs when entering the workforce

5b. Post-secondary institutions, like universities and further education colleges, play a large role in helping get people out of poverty and into work

5c. Coastal communities have a specific set of concerns

5d. The interconnectedness of institutions is vital

5e. Young people face specific challenges in terms of entering the workforce

5f. Businesses play a hugely important role, even without specific schemes

5g. Apprenticeships can play a vital role in helping get people into work



Elaborating on each of these points in turn:

5a. People from socio-economically deprived backgrounds have specific needs when entering the workforce

Those who grew up in socio-economic deprivation have barriers to employment that do not exist for people who were raised in households higher up the wealth ladder. An important aspect to this is that it is likely they have not been raised around people who are successfully in employment, and this often affects them in three main ways:

- They don't learn how to be a successfully employed person first-hand.
- They miss out on gaining the confidence that comes from knowing what being a success in a vocation looks like.
- They aren't connected to anyone in the world of work who can help them find a job.

The first point is perhaps the hardest one to overcome, even though it is a psychological barrier, as opposed to a practical one. Many of those from more socio-economically well-off settings would be surprised if they could truly understand how growing up poor and in neighbourhoods filled with people in similar economic circumstances affects a person's worldview. Without getting heavily into a nature versus nurture argument, one's setting during childhood has a profound effect on every person. Sadly, failure begets failure and success leads to success, particularly because success involves skills that need to be learned. The earlier, the better.

Programmes detailed in this report, most notably the Ascend Programme in Sheffield (see page 30), are designed to help people from this kind of background overcome these difficulties. What Ascend seeks to achieve is giving those from deprived backgrounds a sense of community and reinforcement that had been missing in their lives to that point. So much of getting kids from

deprived backgrounds into the workplace is teaching them the fundamentals. How to dress for an interview, how to navigate one once you are in front of a prospective employer – these things sound basic to someone from a background where all of that would have been obvious, yet it's a totally different story for a person who grew up in a family where no one has had a job for generations. If you come from a home where no one worked, understanding how to behave in the workplace can be next to impossible for many. That's why it was so reassuring to find out that programmes like Ascend not only exist, but help around 75% of the people who enter them.

It was also a pleasure to discover these sorts of programmes in so many other places covered by this report. For instance, Orangebox Training Solutions, a private enterprise working to get people from poorer backgrounds into work, is doing great things in Hartlepool (see page 87). Like Ascend in Sheffield, Orangebox is taking people out of unemployment and poverty and giving them the start they need. Orangebox trains around 4,000 people a year, with around 75% of those who come onto a course with them going on to find gainful employment – a similar success story to Ascend.

The Jobs Foundation learned from programmes like these just how important it is to help those from more deprived backgrounds learn what is needed to get and keep a job. Further, we discovered how teaching these basics, things that people higher up the socio-economic ladder will have absorbed at an early age, can be the difference between being on welfare and being in work. It's so much about helping those from backgrounds lower down the socio-economic ladder gain the basic skills they will need to get that vital first job.

We will be exploring these sorts of programmes and the way they are helping people get into jobs in more depth, working with Robert Halfon and HR professionals, in the coming year. We want to understand how more of these programmes might be established – and how the principles they espouse can be utilised more broadly to create employment.



Gary Riches, Vice-Principal, Hartlepool FE College and Nick Tyrone examine a Gazelle

5b. Post-secondary institutions, like universities and further education colleges, play a large role in helping get people out of poverty and into work

Places like the Further Education and Sixth Form colleges in Hartlepool are not only training up people of all ages and helping them find apprenticeships and other employment opportunities, but running an impromptu public transport service and helping feed the students as well (see page 78). Given the socio-economic background of so many of those who attend the institution, what the FE college in Hartlepool focuses so much attention on are things like behaviour, attitude and confidence – understanding what the students’ backgrounds will not have naturally provided for them, but nonetheless remain vital to obtaining and then staying in employment. Gary Riches, the FE college’s Vice Principle, bases his programme on the mnemonic, HARTS: Hardworking, Ambitious,

Resilient, Thankful, Self-regulating. It’s about wanting the students to have manners, making them understand the social element of succeeding in life. It’s about recognising that those are the key things people from a lower socio-economic background will need to get out of the cycle of welfare and poverty and into the world of work and prosperity. Given how important the FE college is in terms of getting people into work, it is easy to imagine how much worse the plight of a place like Hartlepool would be without its presence.

Speaking to employers in Sheffield, we discovered the important role the two universities play in creating jobs there – most notably by bringing entrepreneurs to the city. In interviewing people at Loughborough’s university and college (see page 46), Hartlepool’s two colleges, as well as Pembrokeshire College, we learned a great deal about how these institutions can play a vital role in getting people out of welfare and into work. The Jobs Foundation will interview individuals at other post-secondary organisations in our next phase of research.

5c. Coastal communities have a specific set of concerns

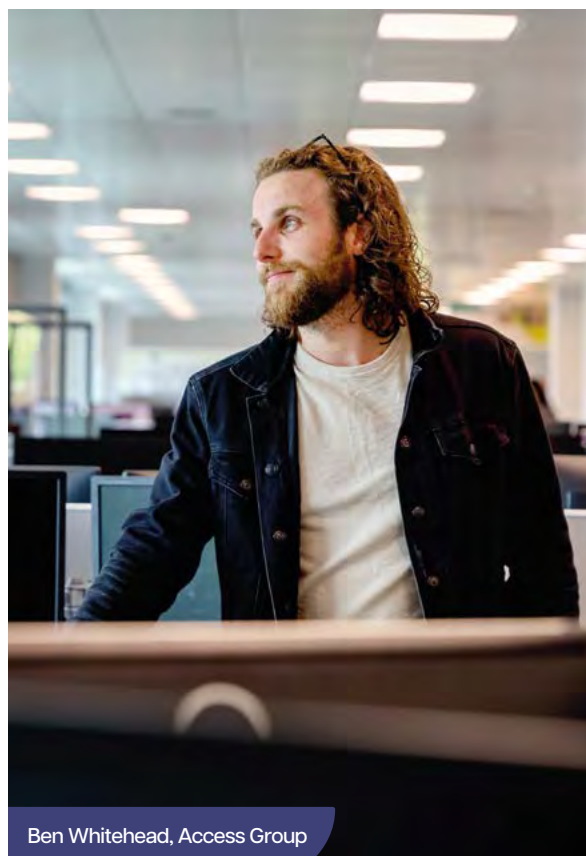
We need to think about how coastal communities are different to every other part of the UK. Somewhere like Cromer has way more in common with Hartlepool than it has with towns in Norfolk 10 miles inland from it. The UK government needs to start looking at coastal communities as a portion of the country in their own right, separate from the surrounding territories they reside within. The needs of these kinds of communities need to be thought of as a unit.

We learned a great deal from speaking to people in Hartlepool, Redcar and Cromer (as well as a few other seaside towns dotted around the country, outside the scope of this report). The intention is to have dialogues with businesses in other coastal communities, as part of our next phase of activity, into 2025 and beyond.

5d. The interconnectedness of institutions is vital

A big element that helps create prosperity and, with it, gets people out of welfare and into work, is when an area has a decent mix of SMEs and larger companies, varying the employment field to a favourable extent. Take Pembrokeshire, covered at length earlier in this report – that there are so many entrepreneurs there is greatly to the county's credit (see page 92). While there are several large employers in the region, such as Valero, who play a vital role, the SMEs are the beating heart of the place. And given the socio-economic make up of Pembrokeshire, they are vital for bringing people out of poverty by giving them a job. It's a clear piece of this puzzle: While we need larger companies to expand and create new jobs, we also need more companies, more entrepreneurs, more people working for themselves. New companies will create new jobs along the way.

The links between institutions, employers and employees are a key element in any region's prosperity and, by extension, an important part of its ability to get people from lower socio-economic backgrounds into work. For instance, the way that Valero and Pembrokeshire College interact to train up local people and get them



Ben Whitehead, Access Group

into skilled jobs is one great example of this (see page 98). There are many examples of these connections in the other areas covered in this report – in Loughborough, we saw the way the university and the college interact with both each other and the business sector in the town in a way that was highly functional and is no doubt one of the reasons that Loughborough punches a little over its weight. That Loughborough University has a highly successful business incubator, allowing new graduates a safety net and community to become entrepreneurs, is amazing.

As has been detailed across this report, the links between institutions and businesses, getting the balance right there, is crucial to maximising job creation. In each location, we learned that, when correctly managed and handled, institutions are a key link in terms of creating jobs. The interconnection between them and local businesses can provide a huge boost in terms of those businesses succeeding – or, at the very least, create an environment in which entrepreneurs can more easily prosper. We will be looking at the way connections between institutions and businesses can be maximised to create jobs in more detail in 2025, when we move onto the next phase of our research.



A group of people who have graduated from the Ascend Programme, who are now in full-time employment

5e. Young people face specific challenges in terms of entering the workforce

Hiring young people from any socio-economic background can be a challenge for a lot of employers, mostly due to distinct cultural differences between them and older generations. While some younger people can struggle with work culture in general, a lot of them are both very adaptable and naturally entrepreneurial. If employers can look past the surface, they could unearth some employees for life (or at least the long-term). In fact, some of the challenges young people face and the issues those from socio-economically deprived backgrounds suffer under are often very similar in nature, usually made all the worse for people who fit into both categories. This is why many of the solutions for getting people from deprived backgrounds into work map neatly onto how to get more young people into meaningful employment.

Best practice in terms of hiring both young people and those living in poverty almost certainly involves some sort of objective testing of prospective employees and/or situation trialling to get people past the difficult first impression caused by being placed in an environment they are unprepared for, such as a formal interview. This is one of the big reasons why restrictive hiring practices, such as giving people full rights on day one of employment, could be so corrosive. It takes away the organisation's ability to take a chance on someone who they might see as a risky hire. People who have been out of the job market for a while or have never had a job before will be considered in this category. If we want to get people out welfare and into work, we need to

give employers the flexibility to make these sorts of hires – or they will simply not happen.

As many employers throughout this report have said already, hiring people at an early stage in their careers and training them in the company's way of doing things, immersing them in the specific culture of an organisation, can be hugely beneficial for businesses – and indeed, for young people looking for a break, particularly ones from impoverished backgrounds. There is a synergy there that works out well for everyone, when all the other factors are in line. All the participants at the Sheffield roundtable agreed on this ([see page 38](#)).

We do need to think from an educational standpoint about how we deal with children being increasingly raised online. Again, this tends to be at least anecdotally worse for poorer kids. Having parents who are present, particularly reading to their children on a regular basis, is of great benefit to them – this tendency is more prevalent the higher up the socio-economic ladder the parents are. Poorer children are statistically more likely to miss out on these advantages.

The unique challenges faced by young people, particularly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, is one the Jobs Foundation is keen to explore further in our 2025 research programme. We learned from all employers in each location, but particularly some of the bigger companies we spoke to in Sheffield and Loughborough, that not only do a unique set of challenges exist when hiring young people, but also that if you overcome them, you can end up with a great employee for several decades. This applies as well, as mentioned, to those from deprived backgrounds. They will often be thankful to the company that gives them a chance – and reward that organisation over many years of service.

5f. Businesses play a hugely important role, even without specific schemes

In terms of best practice, once employees are in the job and embedded in the culture of the company, we found three things that were applicable in every location and every sector across the country:

- A friendly culture where people want to work is vital. Making the office a nice place to come in to, filled with people who get on and like being in a team with one another, is a huge part of retaining staff.
- Active team building is key as well. Offering rewards for hard work which also revolve around bringing the staff closer together can be an important staff retention tool.
- Probably most important of all, creating methods of advancement that are transparent and easy to grasp, while making internal promotion a big part of the company's culture. If people understand that by staying and working hard for the organisation they will be rewarded with more money and status, most of them will stick around. On the flipside, if they see their colleagues either staying in the same job forever or the best and brightest moving on while people are constantly installed into positions of power from outside of the organisation, then high attrition will likely follow.

In the interviews we conducted with companies that had a large number of employees (over a 100, say), a lot was discussed about the importance of making the workplace a great place to come to, in terms of retaining talent. This was made even more important after Covid when the work from home trend was introduced. When I asked the roundtable participants in Sheffield how they keep their staff – how they avoid losing the talent they have nurtured for so long – I was told:

“Love them. Actually love them. Care for them as if they were part of your family. Businesses have a duty of care – and if more businesses understood this, they'd keep their staff through thick and thin. I remember, when I told that to our board of directors, they thought I'd gone mad. But it's true. That's the secret.”

Best practice also extends to what organisations do outside of their day-to-day business. We saw this with employers like Access Group in Loughborough (see page 48), where they are working on things like “bridging the digital divide”, a programme to give people from disadvantaged backgrounds access to the internet, to cellular data, to phones, to technology that is either crucial to helping them get and stay in employment or at the very least, having access to tech that will greatly help them get into a job and keep it. We also saw some employers giving out university scholarships – or even small one-man bands like Harrison Smith in Hartlepool, trying to help his community by organising charity sports events himself (see page 72).

The more businesses can give to their communities in this way, the better it reflects on business as a societal good. Some entrepreneurs and CEOs may respond to this point by saying: “We already do a huge amount by providing jobs for people, by being the ones who fund public services through what we do. Why should we have to do more than that?” This isn't a bad point. Yet in a relatively anti-business environment like the one we find ourselves in politically, anything businesses can do to hammer home the point that business is a societal good will be to their benefit, as well as the benefit of their employees - and thus to the benefit of society as a whole. So much of the narrative surrounding larger companies these days is either about them being money grabbing, soulless vampires, or woke ideologues. And yet the real picture is that they contribute in ways to society that would be hard to replace if those businesses did not exist. They need to keep up the good work on this front.

We learned a lot of the best practice points above from the biggest employers we spoke to: Access Group in Loughborough, Valero in Pembrokeshire, Evolution Power Tools in Sheffield. We will be looking to speak to more large employers in all parts of the country and learning more about best practice in terms of hiring, training and retaining staff in the next phase of our research in 2025.

5g. Apprenticeships can play a vital role in helping get people into work

The importance of apprenticeships, in terms of organisations finding the staff they require and how they can often be the best way to get and keep young talent, was continually stressed by all participants – including as a way of getting the poorest applicants into work. It was generally agreed that apprenticeship schemes are best when:

- The bureaucracy involved in them is kept to a minimum.
- The scheme in some way makes it easier to take on riskier hires. As mentioned already – but this is so important a point, it requires reiterating – being able to take risks often leads to people from deprived backgrounds being given employment they might otherwise not have received.

Whether apprenticeships are used or not, training is a big focus of every company beyond ten employees. Many companies run their own training programmes – this is probably the best way of providing employees with the skills a particular company requires, since it can be tailored exactly to the organisation's needs. However, this is not going to be cost effective for most companies, particularly SMEs. This is when working with local colleges and universities becomes so vital. As we learned in Pembrokeshire, colleges will often tailor their courses to the needs of large local employers. The more businesses can work with these institutions to provide the skills they need, the better. Likewise, the more colleges can tailor their coursework to the direct needs of large local employers, the better.

Hospitality students at Pembrokeshire College



Final conclusions on bringing people from welfare into work

What is clear, more than anything else gleaned from the hundreds of interviews conducted with companies across the four regional locations, is that jobs are the best route out of poverty and business is a societal good. Going into 2025, the Jobs Foundation vows to use the resources and tools that we have built to begin to execute our charitable mission, to help businesses do more to move people from poverty into prosperity, by providing jobs and training opportunities.

Executing our mission rests on two key planks:

- **Having a practical impact** on the ground, through sharing knowledge and best practice examples, to give businesses the tools to employ more people and generate more opportunities; and
- **Having a policy impact**, so that regulations, taxation, and the wider policy environment are shaped to allow businesses to thrive.

Basically, we want to take the findings of this report a step further, engaging with business directly even more. We want to discover at greater depth their hopes and fears, as well as learn more about what best practice in employment entails – and then help recognise that best practice. We want to help businesses create more jobs, lift more people out of poverty, and do further good for society. This report is a call to arms for businesses to help create a better Britain. This report is just the start of what the Jobs Foundation aims to achieve.

The next chapter looks at what the businesses we spoke to across Great Britain told us about the conditions they are seeking to thrive – what are the main issues faced by enterprise in this country? These are our initial findings.



Workers at Evolution Power Tools in Sheffield



Adrian Lort-Phillips, Lawrenny



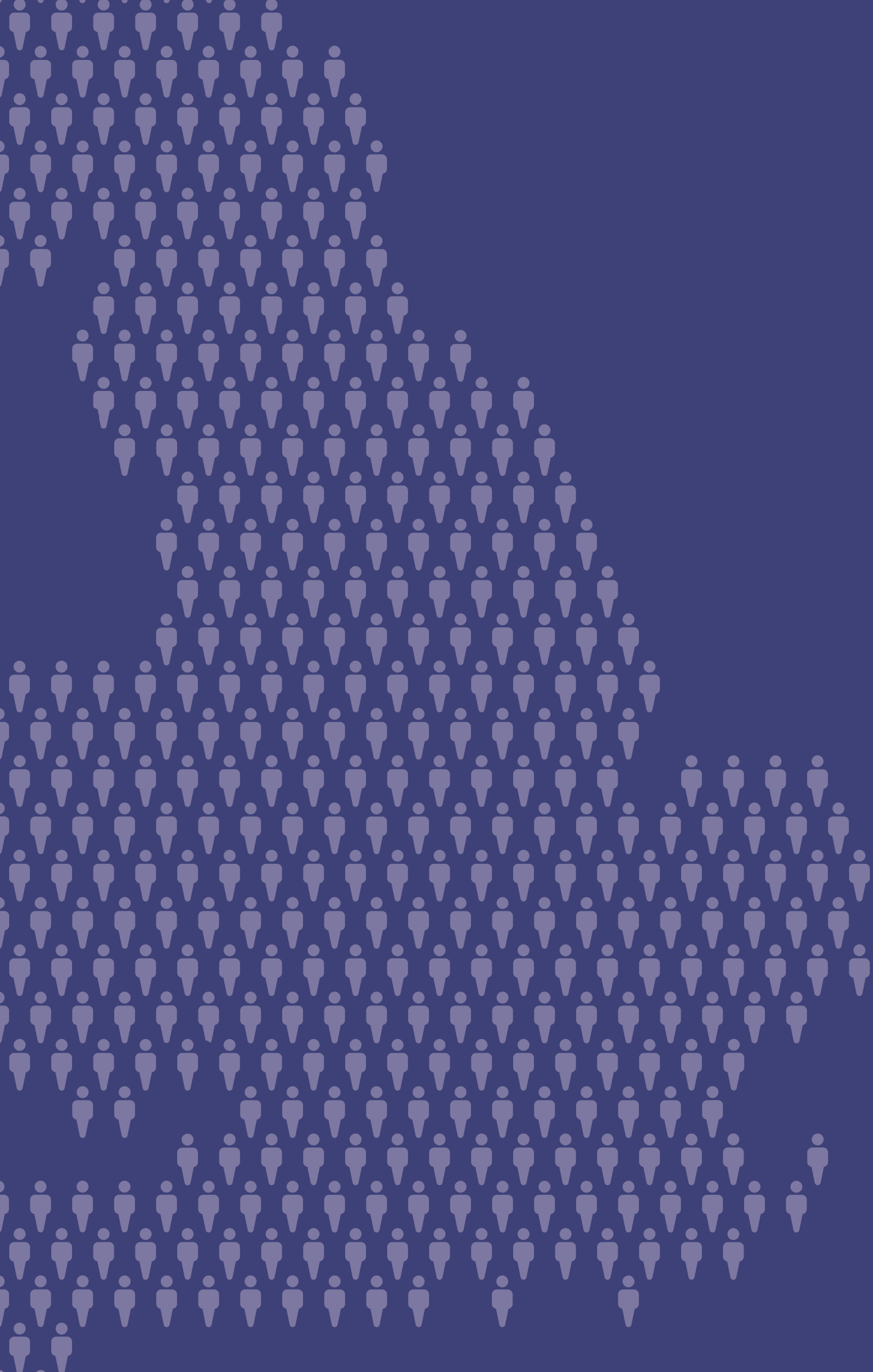
Nick Tyrone and Jane Reed, Campus Principal, Hartlepool Sixth Form College

6

Findings on the policy conditions businesses need to thrive

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The most common thing heard when travelling across Great Britain, speaking to business people, be they CEOs of large companies or one-man band entrepreneurs, is that the climate for doing business in this country is not positive enough. “It’s like we’re not seen as the good guys anymore,” one person said to us.





Engineering students at Pembroke College

Findings on the policy conditions businesses need to thrive

Travelling across Great Britain in the first half of 2024, it was invigorating to meet so many great business people and community leaders, doing their best for the places they live in. Yet it was also heartbreaking to see the way in which so many businesses in Britain are being failed by a system which has broken down in too many ways and in too many places, constantly stunting the growth which should otherwise be present. This country has the brains, the talent, and the determination, but we are failing in several key areas. Britain has what it takes to confidently stride into the future – but it is important to identify the problems and then fix them. Government and business will each play a key role in this.

These solutions were derived from interviewing hundreds of business leaders, CEOs,

entrepreneurs, community leaders, and jobseekers across Great Britain. These ideas were not arrived at via desk research in London, but rather, from on the ground research across four regions of the UK, and from conversations with the hundreds of entrepreneurs who have joined the Jobs Foundation's Business Council.

What's clear from the research is that there are few easy solutions. If there were more, someone surely would have enacted them already. However, there are answers out there. What follows are the seven main issues that businesses across the country are facing; the problems that affect almost all enterprises in the UK, big and small, that we came across while interviewing people for this project:

- 6a. The climate for business isn't positive enough. We need to see business people as the "good guys" once again
- 6b. Transport infrastructure, across the country, is far from good enough
- 6c. Good connectivity between government policy, local institutions, and businesses – as well as connectivity between large and small enterprises – is a key component for a thriving economy
- 6d. Businesses are happy with employment laws that provide protection for employees – but worry about regulation that would stifle more risky hires
- 6e. Businesses would like apprenticeships to be easier to use and for there to be more incentives to hire apprentices
- 6f. Businesses would like green targets and incentives to be clear and certain
- 6g. Businesses in Britain need better access to UK funding



Josh from the Ascend Programme



William Bateman, Curriculum Area Manager, Pembrokeshire College

Elaborating on each of these points in turn:

6a. The climate for business isn't positive enough. We need to see business people as the "good guys" once again

The most common thing heard when travelling across Great Britain, speaking to business people, be they CEOs of large companies or one-man band entrepreneurs, is that the climate for doing business in this country is not positive enough. "It's like we're not seen as the good guys anymore," one person said to us.

This is important in both policy terms as well as culturally ("vibes", as one might put it these days). On the policy front, many businesses complain about there being not nearly enough clearly pro-business policies to point to. When George Osborne was chancellor, there was at least a feeling of policies moving in the right direction to help businesses out – a reduction in

corporation tax, for instance. In the latter part of the Conservative Party's most recent period in office, many business people across the country felt that this positive attitude towards business had been missing. From our conversations, during and after the general election, people were heartened that the Labour Party placed an emphasis on the importance of wealth creation and economic growth in their plans. But they are now beginning to have concerns about whether this will be reflected in the legislative agenda.

In terms of culture, most business people feel like there needs to be much more pro-enterprise vibes from both the media and Westminster. There is a feeling that if the political class and the mainstream media framed the business community as the heroes as opposed to the villains - or, at least, not vital to society in the way that they clearly are – this would go a long way to transforming the business climate of the United Kingdom. We need to publicly praise businesses. We need to single out the doers in society for what they create⁵⁷.

⁵⁷. The president of the Jobs Foundation, Matthew Elliott, elaborated on this point in a speech given to the Legatum Institute in November 2023 ("In praise of business").

6b. Transport infrastructure, across the country, is far from good enough

A common complaint from business people is that transport infrastructure is not up to scratch. Whether that be around travelling locally by train – Sheffield to Manchester takes as long by rail as either city to London – local transport in their area, such as the bus service not being ideal, or the poor state of some of the main roads, businesses in Britain feel increasingly marred by an inability to get around. This has negative effects for their employees, potential investors, and getting their goods from one place to another.

There was great anger about the shutting down of the Birmingham to Manchester leg of HS2 for instance, even though none of the places where we interviewed people would have had a station on the line (see page 41). Some took it as an abandonment of the North, others as a deeper problem – that the UK simply cannot provide for itself the infrastructure it requires. “We can’t even

build a railway line any more,” was a common refrain. Another said, “I was against HS2, but once we got started on the project and spent so much money on it, it should have gone ahead.”

This is a huge task for the incoming government. Parts of the country covered in this report, particularly Pembrokeshire, seem decades behind the rest of Europe in terms of transport infrastructure. Something needs to be done. Saying that, there is a huge concern about where the money is going to come from now to pay for such large-scale projects. This is unfortunate, given that if this problem was fixed or least greatly ameliorated, it would have a profound effect on growth. Every single business person interviewed for this project, in every location, agreed with that statement.

One could argue that Britain desperately needs all kinds of infrastructure – much better cellular networks, for instance. But the business people we spoke to felt that it was transportation infrastructure that is desperately needed more than any other kind, if growth is the priority.



Ben Whitehead, Access Group, and Nick Tyrone



Vidette Swales, Pembroke Dock

6c. Good connectivity between government policy, local institutions, and businesses – as well as connectivity between large and small enterprises – is a key component for a thriving economy

Businesses do not exist in isolation. Beyond their need to have customers and employees, enterprises large and small need elements that are external to them to work at an optimal level. That could be regulatory. Or it could be post-secondary institutions there to train staff being present or not. Or it could be the level of taxation being appropriate.

This is why institutions are vital to business. A good example of this, evident throughout this report, is the connection between post-secondary educational institutions and businesses, large and small. So many colleges, for example, act as training academies for local employers – and so many apprenticeships would not exist without this connection between colleges and businesses, big and fledgling.

One can complain about universities being obsessed with fashionably left-wing politics of the moment, but to take that and then write off these institutions as lost for all time is irresponsible. If you think universities and other post-secondary places of study are not adequate as they currently stand, or are failing in some key respect, that should be the clarion call to try and fix the problems that exist, not write off post-secondary education in Britain. Not least of all because it is something this country is genuinely world class at providing. We should play to our strengths as much as possible – again, a common refrain from so many business people dotted around the country.

Universities are important to the economy. Colleges are absolutely vital as well. We need more of them, not less, and almost every business person we spoke to in researching this report agreed with that. Places where the flow between local businesses and post-secondary institutions runs well and are highly functional also tend to be the areas of greatest prosperity in this country. When they break down, socio-economic deprivation tends to be more prevalent. When business and local institutions work well with each other, it can become the bedrock of a thriving economy. Let's learn more from this trend.

6d. Businesses are happy with employment laws that provide protection for employees – but worry about regulation that would stifle more risky hires

All the businesses we spoke to care about their employees very deeply. Contrary to a commonly rolled out narrative, most employers are perfectly happy with the employment rights currently held by British workers. Yet they are concerned about those rights becoming more restrictive in a way that will cause them to make fewer hires - and, worse than that, cause companies to make much fewer risky hires, those being the ones that take people out of poverty most regularly.

Of particular concern would be a policy of giving everyone full employment rights on day one of the job. Allowing employers a probation period, where they are allowed to try people out, gives them the leeway to take chances. For instance, we heard from many employers that a lot of young people who apply for positions can often perform poorly in a traditional interview. Yet so many companies mentioned that often it is people who performed poorly in the job interview but had a certain spark of something about them, causing the organisation to take a chance on them, who turned into their best employees. Yet they could only have given them a job because the organisation had the ability to walk away a few weeks later if needs be. Probation periods allow companies to take chances on people, and that is absolutely vital for jobs continuing to be a route out of poverty in Great Britain. It is the poorest in society who will suffer the most if employment rights become too restrictive.

This applies as well to people who have a spotty CV, or a criminal record, or even just those who need a little bit more support when they start at a job. Workers' rights need to always be a balance of stopping people from being exploited by unscrupulous employers and allowing companies some leeway in terms of shaping their workforce. Getting this balance correct is crucial.



Arwyn Williams, Head of Faculty for Engineering, Computing and Higher Education, Pembroke College





Graduates of the Ascend Programme in Sheffield

6e. Businesses would like apprenticeships to be easier to use and for there to be more incentives to hire apprentices

Apprenticeships are widely used across the UK – every business we spoke to beyond a certain size had used them at some point. They can be a great way for young people and those with little or no experience in a sector, to enter a new profession. Therefore, they are a great route out of poverty and into employment.

Yet every business we interviewed of a similar size also said they found using the apprenticeship levy overly bureaucratic. Smaller companies without a dedicated HR team (where this function would be carried out by a COO, or a COO's assistant), found the levy difficult to navigate in terms of paperwork and rules as well. Apprenticeships should be encouraged by rewarding firms that use them better and making it as straightforward to employ apprentices as possible, while obviously still screening out anyone trying to misuse the system. It needs to be less bureaucratic.

Some of the problems detailed here are systematic or would take years if not decades to fix and would cost a great deal of public money. This is one of the clear exceptions to that – apprenticeships should be relatively easy and cheap to fix. Doing so would create thousands of new apprentices across the country. If a British government had the will to do so, this would be a huge win for businesses across the UK and for those looking for a route out of poverty via employment.

6f. Businesses would like green targets and incentives to be clear and certain

Most British businesses, large and small, accept the idea of Britain transitioning to green energy over a reasonable period. What they don't like are the goalposts constantly shifting. The lack of clarity leads to the idea that the deadlines imposed for steps towards a green transition are hazy or perhaps even downright false, simply to be ignored in most cases.

The green transition, if done correctly, can mostly be done by the private sector. "If the transition to net zero were taken seriously by a British government, with targets set in stone, this would encourage investment from business. I mean, it should bring with it jobs and growth," said one business person we interviewed. Much of the political right seems stuck on the idea of net zero being bad in and of itself, while a chunk of the political left sees socialism as the only means of getting to net zero. The fact is, for the green transition to have any chance of being a success, there will have to be profit involved for the private sector.

Thankfully, we can already point to examples of this in Britain. A good case in point is one already detailed in this report, Teesworks near Redcar ([see page 84](#)). This is a huge initiative that is going to create tens of thousands of jobs in an area that desperately needs them, all while creating vast amounts of clean energy. And it is almost entirely powered by the private sector. "Once people can see there is money to be made with it, that's when the mood changes with the net zero," said one of our interviewees.

6g. Businesses in Britain need better access to UK funding

It was remarkable hearing so many tales of success from British businesses across the country. Yet getting to the part about where they spoke about how they got their initial capital often had the same disillusioning close. Over and over again, when speaking to the entrepreneurs who populate this report, we heard the same basic story: they looked for capital in Britain; they were either turned down cold, or offered a sum of money which would have been insufficient to do their project justice; they then hopped on a plane to America to find investment; and then found it quickly, either in the amount asked for, or an even greater sum (see page 36).

Figuring out how to fix this will be difficult, but we certainly need to consider how we build a better, more entrepreneur-friendly style investment culture in Great Britain. While we constantly admired the entrepreneurs we met during my travels for the chutzpah they displayed in going to America and coming away with the venture capital required to start their projects, often times gaining sums in the millions of pounds, it shouldn't be necessary. This decline has happened since the financial crisis and was not reversed during the Conservative Party's period in office. Perhaps it will be a centre-left government that will fix it. But one way or another, this situation must be addressed.

Those were the seven main points of commonality that we discovered in our discussions with hundreds of business people and community leaders across the UK. But there were also other concerns dotted across the landscape we encountered:

- **Universities:** There is a concern about the current trajectory of funding for universities, given how central these institutions are to the areas that have them. Even those business people who have no connection to a university whatsoever fear for anything negative happening to the institutions close by. Figuring out a way to keep universities and other post-secondary institutions properly funded is a concern spread across many sectors of the economy.

- **Left-behind areas:** Most businesses in more deprived towns such as Hartlepool feel they get less attention and care than other places around the country – and even within their own region. They feel “left behind” in the most core sense imaginable (see page 82). Talented people want to stay in – or even return to, like Harrison Smith did – Hartlepool, Redcar, Cromer or Haverfordwest, but often feel like conditions are pushing against them. If they do return, they often feel as if they are having to fight a more uphill battle than should be necessary. If we want “local champions” such as these to continue doing what they do, we need to understand how to better support them. Businesses in Hartlepool and other more deprived areas are often looking for someone and/or something to save the place. Everyone feels that while there are plenty of great entrepreneurs and people working in the public sector in town who are dedicated, it is going to take a lot more than what they currently have to turn their areas around economically.
- **Agriculture:** Farmers are not happy with the current arrangements on agricultural subsidies (see page 116). Beyond that, rural areas face systemic problems. An aging population which requires more social carers and burdens the NHS, without enough young people to not only look after the elderly, but to do all the rest of the jobs that keep the region economically moving. The dearth of young people feeds into the colleges, and from there onto large employers who will struggle to find the staff they require. It is a vicious cycle that all poorer areas of the country struggle to break – but is particularly acute for rural communities.

Having put forth those challenges, we close this section by returning to the positives. There are so many people doing great things across this fantastic country right now. Big companies investing in the future, smaller enterprises growing at head-spinning rates, young people starting their first business. People from socio-economically deprived backgrounds getting the opportunities they need, often breaking out of a cycle of generational poverty to find a new life with a career. Things can and will get better – if businesses have the right policy environment to thrive.

7

Afterword

Afterword



Nick Tyrone

I love Great Britain. Over the course of my travels across the country, from the Northeast of England to the Pembrokeshire coast, this was the conclusion that hit me most often and conclusively. I love the faded grandeur of English seaside towns. I love the industriousness of the core cities. I love the way that even in the hardest-hit areas, a laugh or a smile is always there to be had. I love the beauty of the Welsh countryside and the rolling hills of North Yorkshire. I love the way Britain finds a way to re-invent itself at regular intervals, demonstrating the genius of its people, again and again.

This is why it was invigorating to see the best of Britain at work, speaking as I did to hundreds of local business owners, influencers at crucial institutions, and self-employed individuals across several months in early 2024. I heard many inspiring stories along the way. It was a joy to behold, particularly seeing young people with their own businesses forging ahead and, even more impressively, they were all outside of London and the Home Counties.

I truly believe that Britain's days are ahead of her, not behind. If businesses are given the correct conditions to thrive, they will drive growth and take millions of people currently in poverty out of it. This report is simply the start of something. – In 2025 and beyond, the Jobs Foundation will expand on our research, delving deeper into best practice when it comes to businesses taking people from welfare into work. We'll also be examining in deeper detail the conditions businesses need to grow and flourish.

The Jobs Foundation is a charity that believes that jobs are the best route out of poverty and that business is a societal good. That these ideas are true was demonstrated to me time and again – in every part of the country, with every person I spoke to along the way.

There are so many people doing great things across this fantastic country right now. But the challenges remain. I am still struck by a quote from Adrian Lort-Phillips, someone I interviewed in my travels who is rebuilding the village he inherited from his father in Wales (see page 111), putting up new houses and spaces for businesses. “When I was a kid, we learned about and celebrated people like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You know, people who built things. We don’t have that culture anymore.”

“When I was a kid, we learned about and celebrated people like Isambard Kingdom Brunel. You know, people who built things. We don’t have that culture anymore.”

That’s the crux of everything. We need to reward and encourage the doers in our society. Britain needs to reward hard work and determination. That’s the way towards growth. That’s the way out of poverty for our poorest citizens. That’s the way back towards the greatness this country always has deep within itself. I know we can do it.

Acknowledgements

These are the organisations spoken to for this report, without whom it would not have been possible:

Sheffield	Loughborough	Hartlepool	Pembrokeshire
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Ask 4	ACT Medical	Blonde Ambition	Lawrenny Estates
Ascend Programme	The Bug Factory	Cliftonville Hotel	Milford Haven Port Authority
Atomising Systems	Charnwood Borough Council	Emerald Associates	Pembroke Dock
BHP	Chase Labs	Evolution XR	Pembrokeshire
Evolution Power Tools	Chesterton House Financial	Harrison Smith	Agricultural Society
Food and Community Trust	Dikoda	Hartlepool Borough Council	Pembrokeshire College
Good Work	East Midlands Institute of Technology	Hartlepool College of Further Education	Pembrokeshire County Council
Gripple	Endeavours Adventures	Hartlepool Sixth Form College	Poyerston Farm
GWD	Everywhere Tech	Host & Stay	Saundersfoot Port
Iceotope Technologies	ExpHand Prosthetics	JMI Editorial	St Bride's Hotel
Lab Logic	Gumbo	Merchants' Place	The office of Samuel Kurtz
Leviat	Inclus	Northern Utility Solutions	Valero
Millgate	Inside Edge People	Old Rock Shop Bistro	Visit Wales
Mobile Power	Kasai	Optimisation Solutions	
Page 1 Recruitment	Loughborough College	Orangebox Training Solutions	
Parexel	Loughborough University	Poppyland	
Peak Edge Academy Trust	MotiMe	Redcar Athletic FC	
Pricecheck	Nestwork	Redcar and Cleveland Council	
Redemption Media	Previsco	Stupid Good	
S6 Food Bank	Proc System Automation	Teesworks	
Sheffield City Council	Rewire Fitness	West Street Deli	
Sheffield Digital	SE-LF Care Boxes		
Sheffield Precision Medical	Sirius Transformation		
Sheffield Technology Parks	SportPark		
Special Quality Alloys	The Athlete Place		
Swann-Morton	The office of Jane Hunt		
Together for Sheffield	The office of Jeevun		
Tribosonics	Sandher		
Unicorn	Tzuka		
Biotechnologies			
William Cook Cast Products			

Join us

A message from our CEO, Georgiana Bristol

"We are building a coalition of business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the country; all uniting behind the message that a successful society requires successful businesses.

We want to help business leaders do even more to help their local communities, by sharing best practice about employing and training people from less privileged backgrounds and demonstrating that business is a force for good. We also want to hear evidence and practical examples from business about what policy changes they require in order to thrive and do even more good across society. To do this, we need your support by joining our Business Council.

Membership of our Business Council is free, voluntary, and private, and comes with no formal obligations or requirements.

As a member, you'll be invited to our events where we host speakers from the worlds of business, politics, the third sector and the media. This gives members the opportunity to hear from exciting figures and meet with like-minded individuals working in business. You'll receive regular updates through our newsletter, and you'll also be able to feed into our research programme. Finally, we love to publicise success stories from our Business Council members across our networks and highlight examples of great work.

We'd love you to be part of our journey."



For any questions, please get in contact with Georgiana at 02034751382 or georgiana@thejobsfoundation.com

To join, scan the QR code





"It was great to read about so many young entrepreneurs, starting their first businesses - particularly reading the Loughborough chapter, where my own business flourished many years ago. We need more people to start their own businesses in Britain and this report shows both how it can be done and the value of new enterprise to society. It's clear the work of the Jobs Foundation is extremely important."

Dr Nik Kotecha OBE, Founder and Chairman, RandalSun Capital



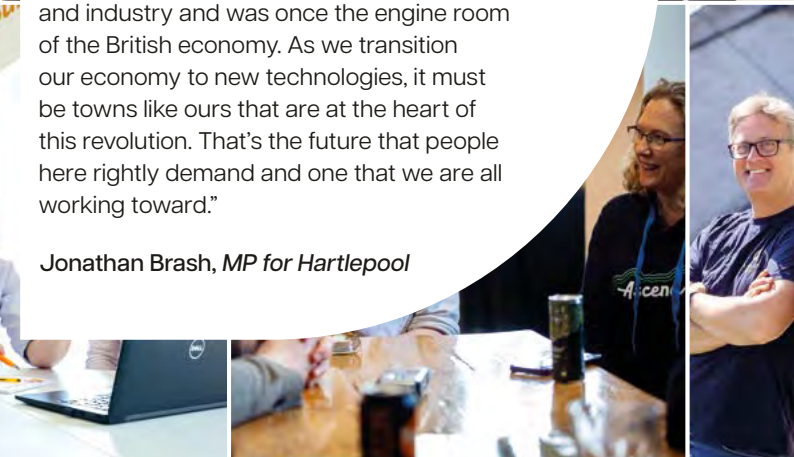
"Seeing a think tank report talking about the massive economic benefit universities provide locally, regionally and nationally is refreshing. UK universities underpin growth, support businesses to adopt new knowledge and technology and deliver the entrepreneurs and high-level skills our economy needs now and for the jobs of the future."

Vivienne Stern, CEO of Universities UK



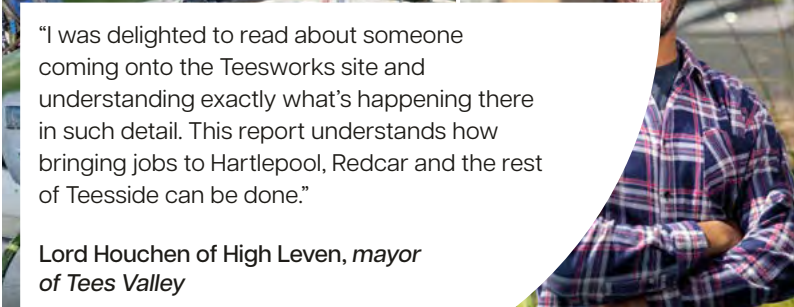
"Hartlepool has a proud history of innovation and industry and was once the engine room of the British economy. As we transition our economy to new technologies, it must be towns like ours that are at the heart of this revolution. That's the future that people here rightly demand and one that we are all working toward."

Jonathan Brash, MP for Hartlepool



"I was delighted to read about someone coming onto the Teesworks site and understanding exactly what's happening there in such detail. This report understands how bringing jobs to Hartlepool, Redcar and the rest of Teesside can be done."

Lord Houchen of High Leven, mayor of Tees Valley



"This report brilliantly examines the way getting people from welfare into work is a massive part of getting social mobility in Britain right - how a job is the best route out of poverty. By examining how both businesses and government can create the right environment for more jobs to be created, this report is a valuable part of the discussion."

Neil O'Brien, MP for Harborough, Oadby & Wigston and former minister



"As a person who works with ex-offenders, I was pleased to see a report looking to get hard-to-place people into work. Nick Tyrone does a very good job in reporting the facts on the ground and in revealing the energy and commitment in place that so many SMEs demonstrate. I look forward to the next phase of the Jobs Foundation's work."

Colin Crooks MBE

