

Continuing our drive to influence business-critical policy matters in the North

Business North update meeting 12 October 2016

October saw more than 60 business leaders from across the North convene at KPMG in Leeds to discuss the key Northern Powerhouse business themes of transport and skills – specifically education.

The room of business leaders, who have pledged to engage with Business North in the months since its February launch, was full of enthusiasm for the topics and for influencing changes that stand to improve the outcomes of doing business from a Northern base, for the benefit of the regional and national economy.

After an introduction from Ed Cox, in which he called for a greater focus on skills and education, viewpoints and data were shared by Sarah Green, CBI director, on the organisation's current 'Unlocking Regional Growth' analysis. While this is shared in detail elsewhere, one stand out fact for me was that GCSE results have the strongest correlation to regional productivity. Concerning then, that the recent Ofsted annual report found a growing North/South divide in secondary education performance.

Peter Simpson director, N8 Research Partnership spoke of the scale of, and priorities for, the research intensive universities in the North, highlighting the strength of this part of the economy and shared his view that an innovation plan for the North is needed.

John Cridland Chair of Transport for the North (TfN) was introduced by Anthony Hatton of Peel Land & Property. John's speech was insightful and impassioned about the organisation's role and agenda. He discussed progress with its Northern Transport Strategy, as well as the findings of the Independent Economic Review. He outlined his commitment to improving transport in order to enable people to take up the best opportunities once they have the aspiration to do so. He touched on the role of investment in transport to leverage further investment and updated the room that TfN will have costed proposals for priorities by early 2017, finishing with a call for business to speak up.

So, it was fitting that the next agenda item was the launch of the Business North Call for Evidence on transport and connectivity, being co-ordinated by the IPPR North to influence transport planning in 2017 by drawing together evidence of the economy's potential.

You can link to the Call for Evidence form [here](#). Please do complete it on behalf of your organisation ahead of the 12 December deadline in order to play your part in highlighting the economic impact that could be achieved by improvements.

Group discussions then turned to the priorities for the Business North meeting with the Andrew Jones, Transport Minister, taking place late October. A summary of this meeting, led by George Beveridge, Director, Amec Foster Wheeler, and Chair, Cumbria LEP is shared separately.

The subject of education was introduced by Phil Jones, President and CEO, Northern Powergrid who named it the number one issue in the North, albeit a very long term one.

Paul Drechsler, President, CBI and Chair, Teach First, led a conversation with Sir Nick Weller, CEO, Dixons Academies, and lead author of review on Northern schools, and Tom Riordan, CEO, Leeds City Council. This focused on the education and skills challenge in the North, the role Academies are playing and the opportunities for business people to make an impact in the education sector.

Nick advised the room that multi academy trusts are the future of education in the North as dictated by government policy. He acknowledged that significant government and private sector funding has been behind the improvement of educational performance in London but that there are nonetheless reasons for Northern providers to look to London for learnings on how this has been achieved.

Tom Riordan spoke of a need for transformation in the sector and greater coalition between public, private and voluntary organisations, anchoring schools in their local communities with stronger links between them and businesses.

Ways for business people to become more involved, particularly in academies, were shared, with the single most valuable role being governance. A business perspective and experience is valued by those leading academies as their roles now see them making commercial decisions such as those about assets and spending. For example, M&A professionals could offer insight to a CEO seeking synergies after a merger of academies. Guidance on the use of reserves would also be valuable to some.

The meeting was left to consider whether there could be a role for Business North in facilitating the engagement between schools and business.

Again, many thanks to all of you who spoke at and contributed to the meeting, which shared a good deal of food for thought, of which this brief summary can only share a taster.

Chris Hearld, Chair, Business North and Regional Chair, KPMG in the North