

Closing the North/South divide takes more than good intentions

The North/South divide is never far from the political and economic agenda. Levelling up, the Northern Powerhouse, infrastructure spending, big bang investments: these are just a few of the ways it's been talked about this year.

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Whilst I do think the North/South divide is a big problem and one that needs solving urgently, the solution in my eyes is a lot simpler than many might think. We don't need shiny reports, more committees or big promises – the one thing the North hasn't been missing is great ideas and well-thought-out plans. What's really going to bridge the gap is small, consistent steps forwards.

I believe there are three things that will get the Northern Economy firing on all cylinders again.

Ditching the stereotypes

The North/South divide comes as much from a cultural problem as an economic one. It's easy to fall back on stereotypes about the North; a former industrial heartland on an inescapable path to decline, a stereotype that is then reflected back in the plans and policies put forward to support our region. The reality is very different – not least because each town and city has its own expertise, history and challenges that are rarely acknowledged or understood.

We need to stop thinking about the North as one generic region with a single set of challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a good example. The impact on Manchester, with bigger tech and media scenes, has been very different to the impact on York or Liverpool, both of which have repositioned themselves over the past few decades as tourist cities.

Make investment accessible

If you're going to talk about investment schemes, then you need to make sure that cash is working its way through the economy. From the nature of the conversation, you might think the North/South divide is a problem that can be solved with infrastructure alone. Infrastructure is, of course, important, but the type of programmes that are discussed rarely help small businesses and entrepreneurs. The firms that win infrastructure contracts are naturally bigger companies.

Schemes to boost jobs, help startups or unlock new investment will always be welcomed by businesses, but they need to be easy to access and reflect the way in which businesses actually function today.

Time and time again, I hear from businesses that the toughest stage of growth is the move from zero employees to one employee. Yet, many schemes and funding opportunities require a minimum number of employees as part of the eligibility criteria. That completely misses the huge number of businesses who would be able to turbo-charge their growth if they were given help to get onto the ladder.

Retain talent with work-life balance and career opportunities

Our region is home to top research universities, thousands of students and small businesses in need of talent. We need to connect the dots between each of these ideas and keep the talent we help to train.

The past year has really put work-life balance into perspective for a lot of people. It's shown that you can do most jobs remotely (at least part of the time) and maybe London doesn't have to be the go-to-choice for post-graduate opportunities.

This could also help small businesses – who traditionally have to compete with big graduate schemes for talent – stand out. They're nimble, people-focused and able to deliver, rather than just promise, better ways of working.

Less talk, more action

If we really want the UK's economic map to look different in ten years' time, we need action to make that happen. We can't go back to an old way of doing things, and as we move out of lockdown, we need to reshuffle our economy to make it more resilient.

The focus should be on grass roots, small businesses and community as the priority. Big spending and infrastructure projects are a bonus, but it's the regular, small steps that'll carry us forward and bridge the North/South divide.

Michael Edwards is founder of *The Northern Affinity*, a collaboration of dynamic Northern businesses powering growth and development. Founded by Michael in 2019, the business aims to bring together likeminded people and provide a platform to connect, collaborate and

share expertise.

Article by Michael Edwards