

# Northern Skills Network

Levelling Up White Paper | NSN Response



The Board of the Northern Skills Network (NSN), which represent over 350 education & skills providers across the North of England welcome the launch of the Government's Levelling up White Paper and support its ambition to ensure that no region or community is left behind.

The NSN and the regional skills networks that make up the partnership are committed to ensuring the challenge & opportunity raised within the white paper can be effectively fulfilled and we welcome the recognition that while talent is spread equally across our country, opportunity is not. Levelling up is a mission to challenge, and change, that unfairness. Levelling up means giving everyone the opportunity to flourish. Whilst we support the Government's Levelling up white paper and its missions, we also must establish how as regional networks, a pan-northern partnership and our individual members we can work to ensure the paper becomes reality and position FE & Skills to be a key driver in its success.

Across the North we are inherently aware of the critical need to improve productivity, boost economic growth, encourage innovation, create good jobs, enhance educational attainment, and renovate the social and cultural fabric of our northern regions to ensure equality in our nation's opportunity & success. Whilst we fully support the ambition and will be an ally to its actions and activities, we also must highlight that skills development could and should be a much higher priority within the paper and across government departments working together if we ever want to witness true equality across our country. This includes equal access to funding from public & private sector skills organisations and better, informed knowledge of the

unique needs and potential across the different regions within the North. Levelling up will continue to show gaps in equality considering the ongoing energy crisis and increasing living costs so the white paper missions and our collective responses must ensure we take this into account across all sectors including FE & Skills.

We are also clear in the need to better align skills, education & health and identify place-based investment in ensuring these services can be accessed by all who require them. The economic prize from levelling up is potentially enormous. If underperforming places were levelled up towards the UK average, unlocking their potential, this could boost aggregate UK GDP by tens of billions of pounds each year. Levelling up skills, health, education and wellbeing would deliver similarly sized benefits – A clear NSN priority is to keep a keen eye on the Government's action in this area and we will work with our regional networks to be a key partner in bringing this ambition to life.

We support the investment of £3.8bn in skills planned by 2024-25 and a Lifetime Skills Guarantee in England, enabling 11m adults to gain an A Level or equivalent qualification for free, as well as a new UK-wide adult numeracy programme and skills bootcamps; but we must ensure access to funding these opportunities is equally spread across public & private sector training organisations if we truly want to ensure no community is left behind.

The Levelling Up mission for skills states *“By 2030, the number of people successfully completing high-quality skills training will have significantly increased in every area of the UK. In England, this will lead to 200,000 more people successfully completing high-quality skills training annually, driven by 80,000 more people completing courses in the lowest skilled areas”*. The NSN are keen to work on this agenda but also understand what the definition of high-quality skills training means and how the spread of this mission is reflected across the North.

The NSN reads with interest the Government's ambition to support a UK National Academy which will be free and made available online to support the work of schools up and down the country. It will allow students to acquire additional advanced knowledge and skills, offering even more opportunities for every child to thrive. How

will schools develop & deliver these additional opportunities? Where will the skills needs be derived from and how will schools better align their curriculum offer to the existing skills system and providers? These are all questions & areas we will raise in our discussions with Departments when discussing the levelling up agenda.

The members of the NSN regional networks are primed & perfectly positioned to support the continued recognition of gaining great employer involvement in skills programmes and we already work with the local skills improvement plan pilot areas to gain valuable insights into the current thinking around this. Our request to support this area of levelling up is to ensure local & national colleagues recognise the real face of the skills system, which is far greater than only handful of college & university institutions in local areas. It includes a vast array of high quality, responsive & flexible independent training providers, as well as community and voluntary providers. Through the wide membership based across the North including ITP, FE, HE, Adult & Community learning and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector, members already will continue an increased focus on supporting local businesses and introducing skills provision to match local labour market need and support those furthest from the labour market.

The investment in 55 new Education Investment Areas (EIAs) in places where educational attainment is currently weakest is an approach supported by the NSN Board, however we would like to see this expanded to include greater involvement of post-16 education as well as schools to ensure we see greater support for and investment in youth opportunities & pathways that lead to employment, business skills needs and more vocational & technical education.

In summary the Northern Skills Network welcomes the ambition & missions highlighted in the Levelling Up White Paper, and will work to ensure the places, people & businesses we support across the North respond to and benefit from the policy and practice set out. We aim to be a key influencer and partner to White Paper developments, and we have a schedule of meetings & communications with stakeholders planned to make sure our NSN members' voices are included, and an emphasis on the importance of skills is firmly 'on the table'.

Our initial recommendations for Government on the White Paper include ensuring –

- Greater engagement with FE & Skills networks across the North to gain valuable insights to local & regional levelling up needs
- Improved Links with school & FE & Skills providers to ensure a robust skills curriculum can be offered across compulsory & post-16 education
- Better understanding on the impacts of Covid on post-16 education and how this has & will continue to have an affect on levelling up & social mobility
- Further awareness of the importance of all FE & Skills providers & learning at level 2 & below on establishing solid ground for levelling up and equality for all

**Written by Alex Miles, MD, Yorkshire Learning Providers – Co-Chair of Northern Skills Network on behalf of the NSN Board.**