

# The role of Teesside University in Levelling Up

Appendix: Focus Group Report

**Authors:** Ed Dorrell, Director – Public First  
*Date: 18th May 2022*



*“I’m very proud to be from the area. I think so many things have happened lately to really elevate us”*

## Context and background

This report is the appendix to a wider study of Teesside University’s impact on levelling up. It focuses on the findings from our focus group study with people living in Hartlepool, Darlington, Stockton-on-Tees, Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland.

Public First carried out five online focus groups over an eight-week period in January, February and March in a spread of the towns of the Tees Valley.

The groups were recruited to reflect the socio-economic reality of the area that we were investigating. We also worked to ensure the voting patterns of our participants were reflective of the most recent general election. Finally, we filtered out any participants who were connected to the higher education sector in any way.

**Group One:** Participant, from Stockton-on-Tees, Redcar & Cleveland and Darlington, two of which had attended Teesside University

**Group Two:** Participants from Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees, four of which had attended and were graduates of Teesside University

**Group Three:** Participants from working class backgrounds from Hartlepool who had not attended university

**Group Four:** Young working class participants who had not attended university, living in Hartlepool, Redcar & Cleveland, Middlesbrough and Darlington

Group Five: Participants from working class backgrounds who had not attended university, currently living in Hartlepool, Stockton-on Tees, Darlington and Middlesbrough

Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and Company Partners of the Market Research Society, whose rules and guidelines we adhere to. For more information, please visit our website: [www.publicfirst.co.uk](http://www.publicfirst.co.uk)

## Headline findings

1. **The people of Teesside are optimistic about the economic outlook of the region.** Time and again they volunteered how hopeful they were about the future of the Tees Valley and how it had turned a corner. This was intimately tied up in a knowledge of recent industrial decline too.
2. **Support for Teesside University as an anchor institution is widespread.** People are, in general, proud of its presence in the region – and believe it is high quality. A very high proportion of our participants knew people who had attended – and who had benefited from being there.
3. **Local student recruitment is hugely welcome.** Participants were especially keen to talk about – unprompted – a sense that the university's presence arrests a brain drain of potential graduates leaving the area and then not coming back.
4. **The university is hugely respected as a trainer of public sector professionals.** Its role in training nurses, midwives and teachers is a very real source of civic pride – and is seen as very tangible evidence of its impact.
5. **Similarly, its direct economic impact – both as a local employer and through the impact of its students – is widely understood and supported.** People understand how important it is to specifically the economy of Middlesbrough's town centre.
6. **However, the economic impact of the universities research and business support is not well known at all – and is hard to understand.** Despite extensive outreach into the business community, despite huge support for start ups and local employers, participants had essentially never heard of it.
7. **Once explained, the idea that this contribution should be better communicated to the wider community is very welcome.** Indeed, participants actively encouraged the idea – they want to know more – and were even slightly frustrated that they didn't
8. **Despite the positive economic outlook, levelling up is not well understood as a concept.** There is a reasonable level of recognition of the term, but most participants were significantly knowledge-poor on the details.
9. **But when prompted, normal people embrace the idea that the university should play a big part in levelling up.** Participants instinctively understood that the future success of the university is intimately tied to the future success of the region.

## In depth

### 1. The people of Teesside are optimistic about the economic outlook of the region.

Participants were clear that the Tees Valley had turned a corner

*"There is a bit of snobbery about Teesside. I just don't understand it myself at all, why anybody would look down on it or see it as any different? I'm very proud to be from the area. I think so many things have happened lately to really elevate us."* – **40 year old female social media coordinator from Darlington**

*"You've got, GMT, I think it's called, where they're going to be building the wind turbines and they're going to be building actual wind turbines on the Teesside port, which are going to be shipped off to the North Sea, back down to the south, the coast. You've got BP who are investing into the hydrogen and this net zero campaign, COP26, where they came together. People see it as a very, very exciting opportunity for the town."* **24 year old male junior project manager from Middlesbrough & Teesside University graduate**

*"I'd say I'm probably optimistic at the minute just because, I don't know if you've ever seen on LinkedIn, the mayor is sharing a lot of new industry that's being brought into the area, obviously, on the old Tees works and stuff."* **27 year old male electrical engineer from Redcar & Cleveland**

Knowledge of recent industrial decline was extensive, and participants wanted to believe it was being reversed. Optimism was very welcome.

*"Teesside was going down for years and I think recently it is starting to get back. Obviously, Teesside Airport's starting to become more popular, more flights are going from there. Obviously, the port in Middlesbrough as well. That just started becoming a more popular use of bringing stuff into the country. I know that in Redcar, they've lost all the steelworks, but I do think they had new jobs as well, as well as losing them. So, I would say it is on the up, yes, when you think about it."* **24 year old male car valter from Stockton-on-Tees**

*"I know that a few years ago we lost the steel plant and ICI. That was a big hit to the town, to Middlesbrough especially because that's what made our town. We are a working-class town, we are starting to get those things back, and that will be really our town's economy, especially for jobs."* **27 year old female from Stockton-on-Tees**

**2. Support for Teesside University as an anchor institution is widespread.** People are, in general, proud of its presence in the region – and believe it is high quality. A very high proportion of our participants knew people who had attended – and who had benefited from being there.

*“When you’ve been voted worst town and worst place to live in the country and then you’re getting accolades about the university it just all boosts your area up a little bit more.”* **28 year old male rolling stock engineer from Middlesbrough**

*“When I go into Middlesbrough. It is a centre, focal point. Everyone knows it. Everyone knows it’s there,”* **29 year old female mechanical engineer from Darlington**

*“The actual outlay of the curriculum and the standard of care they have towards the learners...the support that they offer online, it’s all there.”* **38 year old male father of one from Stockton-on-Tees**

*“I’ve got a lot of friends that have been at Teesside University, stuck through it, qualified and gone to be nurses and absolutely loved it. I’ve got another friend that went and did a law degree there at night school and qualified and ended up being a solicitor and has done some really good cases and stuff.”* **22 year old female from Hartlepool**

*“Yes, I think it’s massive that they have the university, to be honest. I think, if you took that away, Middlesbrough would basically just be Stockton.”* **24 year old male car valter from Stockton-on-Tees**

*“it’s a big central point when you go into town. It brings a lot of students from all over the country. People who want to do specific courses will come to Teesside University for the better ones if they’re the best in the area for those courses. For our area, for a little town with a university like Teesside, I’d say it’s definitely a positive for it being there.”* **28 year old male rolling stock engineer from Middlesbrough**

There was a very strong sense that the university had improved substantially in recent years too.

*“I would say that Teesside University’s image has improved over the last decade or so. Maybe 15–20 years ago it was looked down upon...but I think the image they put across now and the way people view them now, you’d be happy to go to it in your area, you’re not having to look further afield.”* **38 year old mum of two from Darlington**

*“I have friends and family that have been and it seems to be growing like year on year really. I know we’ve just had a new arts building, I think it’s a big art building, built. There seems to be different sections, large sections, to the university.”* **27 year old female from Stockton on Tees**

*“I think it has definitely improved. It’s definitely somewhere I would consider going to study.”* – **40 year old female social media coordinator from Darlington**

**3. Local student recruitment is hugely welcome.** Participants were especially keen to talk about – unprompted – a sense that the university's presence arrests a brain drain of potential graduates leaving the area and then not coming back.

*"I don't see where you are going to get 6,000 people a year from outside the area unless that facility is there"* **33 year old male full time carer from Stockton on Tees**

*"It would be a positive feature to make them want to stay because if you are upskilling an individual, then surely you want that person to stay in the area to be able to introduce those skills."* **38 year old Secondary School Teacher living in Stockton-on-Tees**

*"It's a primary focus for Teesside University for when you finish your degree to get you into employment."* **24 year old male junior project manager from Middlesbrough & Teesside University graduate**

*"It also means that people who are from the area and live in the area don't have to move away for courses because it might put some people off if we didn't have the university and they had to move to Newcastle or even commute to Newcastle for university. It might put people off actually going and starting university, which means they would never go. It's definitely a plus having one local"* **27 year old female from Stockton on Tees**

*"I think maybe for people in the Darlo and Teesside area. actually it would be missed because then they'd have to travel to Newcastle or somewhere to go to university. Yes, I think that's about it really."* **23 year old female mental health support worker from Darlington**

*"I think it's better for having it. Obviously, people that have got kids don't have to travel to far and they can actually go back home to their family and stuff like that."* **23 year old female accountancy trainee from Redcar & Cleveland**

But fees do loom large – as do the professional destinations of the university's graduates.

*"Well, my cousin she qualified, but she still finds it hard now to get actually a decent career in what she studied. Obviously, you get yourself in debt I know you only have to pay a certain amount after you earn a certain amount, but you just think, I don't know, she's been doing that for five years and then she still can't get the job she wants."* **21 year old stay at home mum from Redcar & Cleveland**

*"The fees aren't cheap. I think it's something like £9,000 a year or something. Whatever it is. You're sometimes getting yourself in debt, especially if you're living there as well. About £60,000 and then you're doing a job that you didn't even study at university. That's not the same for everyone. I've got people who have done stuff at university and they've gone on to get a decent job with it as well, but as I said, the majority of people who I know that have gone to study at university and they're not doing anything that they've studied,"* **24 year old male car valter from Stockton-on-Tees**

**4. The university is hugely respected as a trainer of public sector and health professionals.** Its role in training nurses, midwives and teachers is a very real source of civic pride – and is seen as very tangible evidence of its impact.

*“Teesside University is well known because there are a lot of students use it for nursing and things like that, which then, obviously, leads to more jobs in the hospitals across Tees, Durham, Sunderland, Newcastle areas. They’ll come from far and wide to go to Teesside University”* **38 year old female administrator from Hartlepool**

*“Yes, obviously the courses that are run there, so there are a lot of nursing courses there. They do a lot of courses for helping people with social care and things like that, so social workers, things like that. It’s developing people into those types of jobs, so it’s bringing in people that are going to go into working in the area in those types of fields, so it’s helping with the NHS and things like that.”* **48 year old female insurance adviser from Hartlepool**

Even participants with no personal connection to the university were quick to connect those healthcare workers trained on campus with those they met in hospitals.

*“It’s very important because there’s a shortage of nurses at the minute. So, if we can get local people trained up, who are then going to go and work in James Cook or North Tees as nurses, rather than coming into the area, training up and then moving back out.”* **27 year old female from Stockton on Tees**

**5. Similarly, its direct economic impact – both as a local employer and through the impact of its students – is widely understood and supported.** People understand how important it is to specifically the economy of Middlesbrough’s town centre.

*“A lot of people in the town centre are either people who work in the town centre or people who are at college or university, rather than people visiting the town.”* **26 year old female customer services manager from Stockton-on-Tees**

*“It’s massive. It brings a lot of people into Teesside, a lot of students are spending in Teesside, accommodation in Teesside, eating in Teesside.”* **45 year old male working in trading standards from Middlesbrough.**

*“Yes, I do think it’s important to the economy. There are quite a lot of students who have come from far and wide. There are a lot of students from abroad there. I know that there have been flats developed in Thornaby for student accommodation. There have been a lot of properties built around the area near there just to accommodate the students. There are quite a lot of Chinese students over there, so it is bringing people in from far and wide and hopefully they’ll study there, get jobs in the area and possibly stay. It is bringing in that extra economy to the shops and restaurants and everything around that area as well.”* **48 year old female insurance adviser from Hartlepool**

Participants also understood the vast scale of local employment and job dependency represented by the university.

*"Probably one of the sole biggest employers in the area, I would say. I can't think of many companies in the area, in Middlesbrough or Teesside, that would employ, as a chain, maybe more than 5,000 people with caterers and cleaners and things like that, not just faculty members. I'd say that's quite a high employer value for the area."* **28 year old male rolling stock engineer from Middlesbrough**

*"It's a massive network of staff...for Middlesbrough it is a big employer. If it wasn't here, it would be very notably missed."* **44 year old male working for a housing association, from Middlesbrough**

**6. However, the economic impact of the universities research and business support is not well known at all – and is hard to understand.** Despite extensive outreach into the business community, despite huge support for start ups and local employers, participants had essentially never heard of it.

*"You wouldn't really think of the university as putting that much money in because I think, unless you really stop and think about it, you don't really think of it as a business as such, but obviously it is."* **38 year old female administrator from Hartlepool**

*"In our area, I don't think investing in universities in science would be of benefit to our area. I think maybe investing in more areas of engineering would be more beneficial. So, universities investing in engineering and growth that way"* **48 year old female insurance adviser from Hartlepool**

**7. Once explained, the idea that this contribution should be better communicated to the wider community is very welcome.** Indeed, participants actively encouraged the idea – they want to know more – and were even slightly frustrated that they didn't

*"It's not something that I'm aware of, but I don't think I'm overly surprised that it's happening. One thing I would say is I think they maybe need to publicise that that is happening because, just like I wasn't aware, there'll be a lot of other people who aren't aware of it too."* **29 year old female mechanical engineer from Darlington**

*"I don't think I've ever thought negatively about the university, but you've made that light bulb go off and think actually, yes, the university does play a big part in supporting us in many ways. Yes, you've brought that to the front of my mind now and just made me just have a bit of gratitude for the fact that we do have a university close by."* **37 year female old food process operator from Hartlepool**

Participants certainly wanted to know more about what was on offer – and to offer their own advice:

*"Teesside University could maybe help on a community level too. Maybe providing information or doing some research that might help people who want to set up social enterprises or community interest companies. If they've got an understanding of some of the issues that particular areas and towns-, I imagine, in the universities, they've got*

access to databases and they've got research to be able to pull out research and be able to help them anyway." **29 year old female mechanical engineer from Darlington**

"It starts off as a cycle that takes just one opportunity of a business to invest in the area and then the university, as we were saying earlier, could tailor courses to get people educated in those things. Then the company can say, "Right, in two years' time, we're going to have x amount of managerial roles or project managers or engineers or technicians." It could work in that way, like a cycle of, once businesses start investing in the area, the university could support by basically recruiting and offering apprenticeships and things like that for people." **28 year old male rolling stock engineer from Middlesbrough**

#### **8. Despite the positive economic outlook, levelling up is not well understood as a concept.**

There is a reasonable level of recognition of the term, but most participants were significantly knowledge-poor on the details.

"I've heard of it, but I don't really know much about it, personally, to be able to answer any questions on it." **38 year old female administrator from Hartlepool**

"I think it's a bit about trying to level the north with the south. I think that's my knowledge of it." **25 year old female waitress from Stockton-on-Tees**

"We're playing catch up. It's unfair to call it levelling up" " **45 year old male working in trading standards from Middlesbrough**

"Is it trying to bring the north up to scratch, like the high street and infrastructure and other things up to the same level, areas? Is that right?" **37 year female old food process operator from Hartlepool**

#### **9. But when prompted, normal people embrace the idea that the university should play a big part in levelling up.**

Participants instinctively understood that the future success of the university is intimately tied to the future success of the region.

"There's an awful lot going on and you can see this area becoming a place that is taking a lead in the green revolution. It would make absolute common sense for Teesside University to be involved in some way shape or form. If they're not, they are certainly missing a trick." **38 year old Secondary School Teacher living in Stockton-on-Tees**

"If you're creating more jobs for more professional people and you're trying to improve the area, I don't necessarily agree with what I'm saying, but, on paper, it seems like it's the right thing to do for the university." **28 year old male rolling stock engineer from Middlesbrough.**

"What I was mentioning earlier about this Freeport opening, about net zero happening around Teesside, they're going to be looking for local people to be working at these places because it's to save the employers a lot of money. So, they're going to be dipping into the university, they're going to be looking at these students, they're going to be weighing it up and seeing if it will be the best option. So yes, Teesside being

*there, Teesside University, it's going to give people that opportunity to be the first at hand for this employment." "It's a primary focus for Teesside University for when you finish your degree to get you into employment." **24 year old male junior project manager from Middlesbrough & Teesside University graduate.***