

Steel support vital in levelling up agenda as foundation industry could 'make or break grand plans'

Steel could help make or break the government's "post-Brexit passion for levelling-up", business leaders in Scunthorpe have heard.

While the foundation industry that lights up the town sits behind so much of the infrastructure that will help 'build back better' a stern warning over the impact the continuing energy crisis could have was also heeded.

Dr Ian Kelly, chief executive of Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce said a single decision in China to respond to elevated gas prices could kill off the hopes of prosperity eloquently set out by Baroness Redfern, the former council leader.

Read more: [Town deal pilot authority chief backs levelling-up call for devolved infrastructure budgets](#)

Addressing an open debate he hosted, and mindful of support sought in the sector, Dr Kelly said: "The whole agenda for levelling up could be blown away if industry left. If British Steel closed on a decision in China, after ploughing £1.2 billion of investment in – for which there is much to be applauded.

"With these gas prices and an international market, you could understand why a Scunthorpe plant for a Chinese company could be lost in an instant – affecting this community more than any government could do."

There has been no suggestion of it happening, with the company announcing its huge Net Zero roadmap in the grip of the rush on prices, albeit with a strong call for government support when it comes to policy.

Underlining the infrastructure requirements of the “big task”, Baroness Redfern said: “Many have steel at the heart. Heavy industry has challenges facing them, namely the high energy price issue, but steel provides many skilled, high paid jobs outside the South East and measures to support will deliver against the levelling up agenda. It is one of the most powerful tools for the government, to help build schools, hospitals, wind farms, carbon capture infrastructure.



Levelling up debate participants at the Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce event at San Pietro in Scunthorpe, from left, Neville Reyner CBE; Peter Thorpe, North Lincolnshire Council chief executive; Phil Jones, Chamber president; Baroness Redfern and Dr Ian Kelly, Chamber chief executive.

(Image: Reach Plc)

“We must maximise the opportunities for UK producers, to

maximise the UK's economic growth and contribute to a meaningful levelling up of the UK.

“For the UK green industrial revolution to mean anything, surely it is about manufacturing and to decarbonise here, in steel, is a big part of the viability of the region.

“Talking up this region will produce results, it will flourish right on our doorstep, and I hope the levelling up agenda will allow the business support to help communities in every corner of the UK, and deliver business confidence in the future. It is going to be a big task.”

New chief executive of North Lincolnshire Council, had described the area as “fertile ground” for the agenda, from Lincolnshire Lakes housing to the Able Marine Energy Park development, backed big this summer with multiple inward investors coming in.

“It is really a hot topic everywhere I go,” Baroness Redfern continued, underlining skills alignment to industry as key too.

“It is about growing the private sector, making sure we are spreading economic and social opportunities more evenly.

“It is laudable and has to be a priority for every government to support prosperity around the UK. With a freeport in this region, hopefully we can contribute to developing those much needed 250,000 green jobs.”



Neville Reyner CBE, speaking to an audience as president of the British Chambers of Commerce, back in 2009.

(Image: BPM)

Green technology cluster focus

Neville Reyner CBE, former president of the British Chambers of Commerce, was guest of honour at the event, and he urged the Humber to concentrate on becoming a green technology cluster.

Well on the road, as The Waterline Summit will outline this week, he said it was vital to set a direction and be in it for the long haul.

Having lived in Burnley, the Home Counties and now Lincolnshire, the one time apprentice electrician is acutely aware of the need for more parity.

“I suspect levelling up is more to do with living standards, and that is directly proportional to levelling up

productivity,” he said.

“Setting a direction and keeping to it is something I have preached. Something for this area in terms of setting a direction is the creation of a green technology cluster – it can be driven by universities and colleges.

“You’ve got to establish a brand in the area and how you sell it will go a long way to levelling up.”

Many will point to the Energy Estuary and the Humber’s freeport role as a gateway to Europe.

“Infrastructure is one of the key levelling up things we have to consider and skills mobility is a levelling up issue,” Mr Reyner said.

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"I started as an electrician in Burnley, and I moved south as there was a cluster of US and Japanese companies. They were there purely because of Heathrow Airport.

"Why isn't Manchester equal to Heathrow? Rail should run from the Humber to Manchester Airport."

That service was lost in the pandemic timetable, and [looks set to go completely under new plans](#).

Manchester links are a source of irritation for the Chamber, campaigning hard for [electrification between Hull and Selby](#) too.

Dr Ian Kelly, chief executive, said: "With the greatest respect, Transport for the North feels like Transport for the North West.

"We are likely to get worse services going forward, stopping services through to Hull, and the loss of the direct link from Cleethorpes to the airport."

More upbeat about North-South than East-West, he said: "Things are now getting better for [Hull Trains](#), it is building back up again, and on the South Bank we are hopeful that in 2023 it [the direct route to London via Lincoln] will come to pass, and we hope businesses and politicians are on the same page.

"If we get behind, working together and keep the Humber as part of whatever political solution we have, as a functional economic unit where relevant, it will be excellent.

“We have seen Able and ABP working together, [pulling together the freeport bid](#), a classic example of getting it right, not wrong.

“If we keep taking these steps levelling up can still be a great success for our area, rather than not, and we hope that is the case.”

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