

What West Country business leaders want from the General Election 2024

Business leaders in the West of England have called for greater devolution, major transport improvements and support to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) ahead of the General Election.

Business West, the membership support organisation and regional chamber of commerce, has set out a 10-point plan outlining what it would like to see implemented by the next government.

As political parties race to gain the backing of companies before the election on July 4, business chiefs in the West Country remain concerned about the uncertainty facing the UK economy and [labour shortages in the region](#).

Phil Smith, managing director at Business West, said: “We understand what our local businesses need from the next government. Our region has seen a real lack of investment in skills and dealing with core issues, such as transportation and housing.

“Tackling these issues, most of which are interlinked, requires serious investment that lasts beyond just one political cycle. Businesses need this to plan and play their vital role in job creation.”

Business West is calling for long-term initiatives, which it believes will help the region’s economy and businesses and communities thrive.

These are the 10 areas it would like the next government to address:

Transport



A train waiting on a platform at Bristol Temple Meads station
(Image: Andrew Matthews/PA Wire)

We urgently need to address transport connectivity in our region. This is not just a 'transport' issue; it is fundamental to improving economic growth, social mobility, cohesion and achieving net zero targets.

It is an issue we know our local businesses, and communities, feel extremely passionate about.

Areas with well-connected transport routes tend to have higher productivity. But our region's weakness in transport is not only a drag on current and future economic growth, it also a serious obstacle to delivering for our worse-off citizens and on our region's economic inequalities.

A failure to build a full transport system has been felt hardest in our areas of deprivation for whom lack of transport infrastructure and provision cuts away the ability to access opportunities to learn, work or grow a business. We need urgent, significant, investment in public transport.

Planning for new homes and businesses



New homes being built
(Image: Rui Vieira/PA Wire)

The people who live, learn and work in our region need housing. Whilst our region is an attractive place to live due to its large cultural offering and access to green and blue spaces, residents are facing unaffordable house prices and rental fees.

We cannot understate the housing crisis's huge impact on the ability to attract and retain talent in our region. This is also creating wider pressures for businesses who are looking

to start, grow and invest. Less land available means fewer premises and increased price pressures. In a drive to create more homes we must not overlook the need to plan for employment land too.

We require long-term strategic planning to help overcome the significant challenges of our region: space for our future homes, for businesses to grow and the transport, energy and other infrastructure needed to support this growth in a sustainable way.

At present our planning system is slow and stifling economic development. It is too expensive and stops us planning across local authority boundaries. This hampers attempts to tackle our housing crisis and create new jobs and businesses.

Skills



Aero engineer and apprentice working on a helicopter
(Image: Getty Images/iStockphoto)

We need enhanced investment in education in order to address the skills-gap and drive social mobility in our region; not just for young learners, but lifelong learners too.

We need government programmes, and further education, to be more closely aligned to business needs, for today and the medium-to-long term. This also relates to the issue of apprenticeship standards. Existing standards are overwhelmingly designed by large companies to support their requirements. We need to see more support for SMEs, which represent over 99.7% of the South West's business population.

For the under 16s, they need better careers education in school, so they are aware of the full spectrum of opportunities available to them. This should include emerging and growth areas like clean energy and Artificial Intelligence.

Foreign direct investment



View of Bristol from the air
(Image: Simon Galloway)

Our region's prosperity depends on attracting future investment from both domestic and international companies in new growth sectors. This will create the jobs, technologies and tax revenue needed to sustain our economy and public services.

The UK's record on inward investment and growth has been weak in recent years, yet our region has the potential to be the home of our future firms and clusters. Both Swindon and Wiltshire, and the West of England have performed well at attracting key investors, even at points of economic downturn.

Our region is an attractive place to relocate to, has highly skilled people, diverse firms with innovative products, good connections to international and domestic markets and outstanding universities.

It needs to be easier to allocate and protect strategic

employment sites for future FDI opportunities.

International trade



Containers at Bristol Port
(Image: Bristol Port)

Trade is a vital way for the UK to earn income, and spur business growth to allow innovative firms to scale and grow through larger market opportunities. Companies that export are more profitable and more innovative than non-exporters, and they grow faster.

Our region has historically had a good track record for export and trade. We need greater regional support to identify and access international markets in a way that supports local sectors and regional strengths, including more market-focused engagement and support brokering deals and buying relationships, beyond trade missions.

We also need better local SME support to help firms overcome barriers and inertia to start trading overseas and do so properly. This requires business intelligence, and private sector aligned support.

Devolution and governance



Houses and hills towards the Larkhall area of Bath

(Image: PAUL GILLIS / paulgillisphoto.com)

Despite our region's many strengths, it has struggled to make the most of benefits and opportunities brought by devolution and most recently the 'levelling up' agenda.

Our region is geographically, demographically, and politically diverse, and this has resulted in a lack of a cohesive vision, ambition and leadership on the direction of transformation and change. This is most notable in the West of England Combined Authority area.

We need greater unity across local authorities, and a regional strategic plan. That plan must include the ambitious, and joined-up, delivery of new homes, jobs and infrastructure across local authority boundaries.

Greater devolution in areas such as housing, jobs and infrastructure, alongside appropriate resourcing, and a collaborative and constructive devolved culture, will help make this region a better place to live, learn and work.

Innovation



Engine Shed in Bristol
(Image: Western Daily Press)

Our region is home to 15 universities, and educates over 180,000 students. This helps drive UK innovation. Greater regional funding would further boost innovation within our region.

A revised approach is needed to attract investment into start-ups and scale-ups, given the decline in venture capital post-Covid and investor caution. Support measures should include tax incentives, R&D grants, and enhanced accelerator programmes.

We look forward to reform of the UK Pension Funds so that they can invest in these early-stage businesses. The Government and private sector players should collaboratively develop and execute R&D strategies, ensuring they align to business needs. This collaboration is vital to create competitive, globally relevant technology and products.

Net zero and green growth



The view south across the Hinkley Point C
(Image: EDF Energy)

We support a consistent long-term plan for reducing carbon, supporting green industry and infrastructure. This will require private and public investment and be based on a consistent approach with cross party-political support.

Our region currently has among the least clean sources of energy supply in the UK, especially during peak times. However, our region has the potential to be a leader in green energy supply through solar, wind, hydrogen, tidal, and nuclear power generation. Our grid connectivity is hindering this.

We need improved transparency about grid capacity at a national, and local, level. We need greater investment to improve delivery times for new power capacity and connections. This is essential for meeting net zero targets. Without it, the implications for decarbonising energy, manufacturing and transport are huge.

We urgently need investment to support a modal shift towards greener forms of transport, and the ways in which we heat our buildings, as well as more support for SMEs to decarbonise. This is fundamental to achieving aspirations for a sustainable economy.

Diversity equality and inclusion



The team at Babbasa, which was established to support young people from ethnic minority and low-income backgrounds
(Image: Business Live)

We need increased support for employers to engage with inclusion in their workforce, and support for the third sector. We need to ensure the latter has the funds available to amplify the work they are already doing to break down barriers. We need support for companies to unlock the value of prospective talent that is currently excluded.

Bristol is the 7th worst of 348 districts in England and Wales for black and ethnic minority communities to live and thrive, with 41 areas in the most deprived 10% in England, and an ethnic employment gap which is twice the national average. Yet, 86% of employers acknowledge that they know they don't recruit inclusively. Many of our other communities suffer from long standing deprivation and economic exclusion.

Ultimately, economic inclusion is connected to so many other areas of importance. We can't have a just transition, or close the skills gap, without making the full use of the talent of all our people.

Artificial intelligence (AI)



A humanoid robot
(Image: Getty Images)

The business community requires urgent and effective support to leverage AI, and other disruptive technologies to their best advantage. Transfer of AI technology expertise into UK workplaces is going to play a huge role in improving the UK's workplace productivity.

We need to remain competitive on the world stage amidst growing and highly productive global competition, and to establish centres of excellence in emerging technology.

For education and our workforce of the future, we need the 11+ education system to have a greater focus on computer science skills. We also need the greater provision for reskilling people currently working in industries at high risk of disruption.

With nearly half of UK businesses without plans to use AI internally due to barriers in knowledge and budget, support for innovative SMEs to invest in this game-changing technology is going to be important under the next government.

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