



Loughborough

Looking to the future

PART 2

A town case study for why institutions and connections matter

by Nick Tyrone

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About the author: Nick Tyrone is a journalist, author, researcher and Senior Policy Adviser at the Jobs Foundation. He has published several books, both fiction and non-fiction, as well as having written for most mainstream news outlets in the UK, most frequently and prominently in *The Spectator*. He was also the Executive Director of CentreForum, the liberal think tank most noted for publishing the Orange Book, as well as Director General of the Red Tape Initiative.

Foreword

The origins of the Jobs Foundation go back to a conversation in 2020, when the two of us talked about the crucial role that businesses play in giving people a step up in life, through jobs and training. We kept circling back to this subject, and in 2022, we realised that there was a need for a charity that distilled the best practice from companies who excel at getting people from disadvantaged backgrounds into work, so companies who wish to introduce dedicated schemes to do this, can do so without going through the process of trial and error. The Jobs Foundation was granted charitable status in 2023 and launched later that year. This report is the second instalment of our foundational research, which will be published in full later this year, and will guide us as we grow the charity over the coming years.

When we first began working on the Jobs Foundation, very few people were aware of the crucial need for a charity that helps get people into work. Fast forward to 2024, and it is front and centre of the policy debate. But missing so far has been the crucial role of business to make this happen, by creating and providing jobs, which is why Nick Tyrone’s report, which looks at the role that businesses play in their local communities, is so groundbreaking.

Loughborough: looking to the future is the second in a series of reports that will examine the role of employment as a means of helping people escape from poverty, alongside looking at business as a societal good. It takes a deep dive into a British town through

the lens of jobs and business – the town in question being the East Midlands town of Loughborough. It was chosen due to several factors. One is that it is a classic “swing seat”, the type of constituency that goes to the election victors. The town’s vote is always up for grabs.

The second reason we chose the town as an area of study is that it is geographically in the middle of the country, as well as tending to trend in the centre of most economic measures, such as median salary. It is Middle England, both theoretically and literally. The final reason for looking at Loughborough is that it has a host of large employers, combined with a university and a thriving SME culture which makes it stand out as a place to both understand what drives towns in Britain (and conversely, what holds them back), as well as looking at what part institutions play in that equation.

Our next report will focus on a coastal community, with an in-depth look at Hartlepool. This will include sections on Cromer and Redcar for comparisons, homing in on the problems that are common to all of Britain’s coastal communities. This will be followed by a report on the rural economy through the lens of a particular county, Pembrokeshire. Our core belief is that successful societies require successful businesses, and this foundational research will assist us in our journey to support businesses to do even more good for their local communities in future.

Lord Elliott of Mickle Fell
President of the Jobs Foundation

Georgiana Bristol
CEO of the Jobs Foundation

About Loughborough

- A town in the East Midlands of England, 114 miles north of London, 12 miles north of Leicester, 16 miles south of Nottingham, and 20 miles southeast of Derby. Part of the county of Leicestershire.
- Population, 65,000.
- It is the second largest place by population in Leicestershire, with Leicester being the largest city in the county.
- Loughborough is famous for being a centre for sport, with many famous sporting organisations based in the town, the most well-known being the England and Wales Cricket Board's National Cricket Performance Centre.
- The town's largest employer is Loughborough University, with 3,600 members of staff¹, and Access Group is in amongst a group of the largest private employers.
- In terms of ethnic diversity, the town is 76.2% white, with a large Asian population at 15.7%.²
- Average salary for someone in full time work in Loughborough is £35,689 per annum³, which compares to £34,900 UK wide.⁴
- The percentage of children living in poverty in Charnwood Borough Council, where Loughborough is located, is 15.7%, compared with 15.3% nationwide.⁵



- The percentage of people in employment in Charnwood in 2022/23 is 78.6%, as compared to 75.7% across the United Kingdom as a whole.⁶
- As of the time of writing, Charnwood Borough Council, which runs Loughborough locally, has 23 Conservative councillors, 20 Labour, 8 Green and one independent, meaning the council is under no overall control. The current leader is Jewel Miah, a Labour councillor.

- Loughborough is a classic swing seat at Westminster level. It was held by Labour between 1945 and 1979, Tory during the Thatcher-Major era, returning to Labour in 1997 before being won back by the Conservatives in 2010. At the 2024 general election, Jeevun Sandher became Labour MP with a 4,960 majority.

1. Loughborough facts and figures (<https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/wwilboroacuk/content/planningteam/documents/factsandfigures/F&F%202020-21.pdf>) (Accessed 28/03/24)

2. https://www.citypopulation.de/en/uk/eastmidlands/leicestershire/E63002317___loughborough/ (Accessed 28/03/24)

3. [https://www.salaryexpert.com/salary/area/united-kingdom/loughborough#:~:text=%C2%A335%2C689%20\(GBP\)%2Fyr&text=The%20average%20salary%20for%20jobs,of%20%C2%A317%20\(GBP\).](https://www.salaryexpert.com/salary/area/united-kingdom/loughborough#:~:text=%C2%A335%2C689%20(GBP)%2Fyr&text=The%20average%20salary%20for%20jobs,of%20%C2%A317%20(GBP).) (Accessed 28/03/24)

4. ONS figures, Q1 2024 (Accessed 22/04/24)

5. <https://www.lsr-online.org/uploads/charnwood-17.pdf?v=1704275129> (Accessed 22/04/24)

6. Ibid.

Love work. Love life.



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“I didn’t know what I wanted to do at the time,’ George told me. “I knew I didn’t want to go to uni. I had no idea about what Access did when I first joined. I had to learn on the job, quickly.” George is a senior sales developer at the Access Group in Loughborough. He made six million pounds worth of sales, himself, last year – and hopes for ten million this year.

The Access Group has over 100,000 customers, more than 10,000 employees and has offices across the globe, from Ireland to Malaysia. It is one of the largest software companies in the world and turns over close to a billion pounds a year. And it was founded in the English Midlands, just 33 years ago.

It is also a company that takes employee happiness and retention seriously. I was shown around their Loughborough headquarters on a rainy morning by Ben Whitehead, who is the Global Early Careers Head at the company – someone who himself started at Access Group as a young sales trainee.

“Training and culture are key to everything we do here. Keeping the best staff is crucial to our success, here and elsewhere.”



Ben Whitehead

The company runs a programme for people at Loughborough College – a nine-week bloc, working at Access Group HQ, to see if the organisation is a fit for them and vice versa. After graduating from college, these prospective employees will be hired as apprentices, where they’ll stay for 18 months, before being hired as permanent staff members. If they stay with the company for the next five years, they would be expected to lead their own team, either in sales or a technical department.

Access Group are proud of their low attrition rates, crediting the internal culture for allowing the company to retain a high number of staff. Ben told me that across the Loughborough office, only 8% of hires leave within the first year. Part of this will be down to the culture, which keeps the employees close to one another – but another aspect of this will no doubt be down to the policy of internal promotions, powered by constant expansion of the business, particularly as it gives Loughborough HQ employees the chance to work internationally and gain invaluable experience.

I would go further: Access Group is a good case study of employer best practice in several areas, outlining three distinct components that lead to attracting and then retaining the best talent within an organisation:

- A friendly culture where people want to work is vital. Making the office a nice place to come in to, filled with people who get on and like being in a team with one another, is a huge part of retaining staff.
- Active team building is key as well. Offering rewards for hard work which also revolve around bringing the staff closer together can be an important staff retention tool.
- Probably most important of all, create methods of advancement that are transparent and clear and further, make internal promotion a big part of the company’s culture. If people understand that by staying and working hard for the organisation they will be rewarded with more money and status, most of them will stick around. On the flipside, if they see their colleagues either staying in the same job forever or the best and brightest moving on while people are constantly installed into positions of power from outside of the organisation, then high attrition will likely follow.

“Training and culture are key to everything we do here. Keeping the best staff is crucial to our success, here and elsewhere.”



George



The company culture at Access works positively in other ways. The Access Group Foundation, set up in 2021, is a good example of private enterprise giving back to a community. The charity, which is funded by the company but acts independently, gave away £1.41 million in grants and other awards in 2023.⁷

The headquarters of the Access Group is located at the far west end of the Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park (LUSEP), in sight of the M1. The park is a large area comprising several different buildings, housing many different types of organisations. It contributes a lot to the local economy – the Access Group may be the largest single employer there, but the stories of the others tell us a lot about not only Loughborough, but towns like it throughout Great Britain.



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7. <https://theaccessgroupfoundation.com/annual-reports/annual-report-2023/statistics/>

Loughborough: The town and the university



“It looks like you’ll need a boat to get across that, son.”

This was what I heard in my left ear as I stood in front of a large puddle in Queen’s Park, the large plot of green that sits in the centre of Loughborough. It had been uttered by a woman who herself was wondering how to navigate the newly formed body of water in front of us both. Like most English towns, Loughborough is a mixture of the prosaic and the surprisingly beautiful. Queen’s Park looked nice, even drenched in February rain.

Exiting the park onto Granby Street and then Cattlemarket and Market Street, one can see the contrasts that affect every English town of a similar size. Some businesses look like they’re doing well, some look like they’re hanging on, and inevitably, a few empty shop fronts are present. There is a market in the centre of town that’s been in the same spot for 800 years and it seemed bustling the days I was there.

Loughborough has a surprising variety of businesses in terms of sector. Here’s an analysis of the most represented portions of the town’s economy: 16% of enterprises in the town are professional, scientific and technical; construction accounts for 12% of businesses; retail 8%; arts, entertainment, recreation & other services 8%; accommodation and food 7%. If you do the maths there, you’ll see that still only constitutes just over 50% of the local economy, so sector differentiation only increases from there.

The town also has an impressively large number of SMEs. There are 3,650 different businesses in Loughborough (within the parliamentary constituency), and 2,700 of them have four employees or less. It’s a town of entrepreneurs trying to start something, many of whom are graduates of the town’s largest post-secondary institution.⁸

Yet the thing I found most interesting about Loughborough University is the degree of outreach into the town around it, and further, its work in coordinating with partner organisations to deliver on its goals.

Loughborough University was founded as the Loughborough Technical Institute in 1909, being given a Royal Charter to become a university in 1966. Its campus is just west of the town centre and has a lot of distinct features, including the Bastard Gates (named after William Bastard, who was chair of the university when it was built in 1932). Loughborough University focuses on two major things: one is sport, particularly sports science and sports tech; the other is climate change/net zero. By focusing on the university’s – and by extension, the town’s – strengths, the institution has been able to claim a decent degree of expertise and cache in these areas.

Loughborough University’s revenues for the financial year 2022/23 were £379.1 million⁹, making it around the size of Sheffield Hallam income-wise (or about one sixth the size of either Oxford or Cambridge by the same measure). Yet it feels larger, like it punches above its weight. That will be partially because it’s located in a town that it to some extent dominates, but it’s more than that – Loughborough University knows its strengths and leans into them well.

Yet the thing I found most interesting about Loughborough University is the degree of outreach into the town around it, and further, its work in coordinating with partner organisations to deliver on its goals: helping support local businesses and aiding job seekers in finding employment.



8. All the data for this section comes from: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/business/activitysizeandlocation/datasets/ukbusinessactivitysizeandlocation>

9. Loughborough University’s annual report 2022/23, <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/media/media/services/finance/downloads/financialstatements/Financial-Statements-2022-23.pdf>

A robust network, part one

"I came to work at Loughborough University because I could see there was a robust network that existed across the east Midlands, and Loughborough seemed like somewhere I could come and join up that network a little."



Pete Hitchings

Pete Hitchings is the Incubation Manager in the Research and Innovation Office of Loughborough University. A big part of his job is to know everyone in town and to keep a lot of plates spinning at once. I instantly liked Pete when I met him. I knew through him I'd meet everyone I needed to for this section of the report – and that prediction was more than borne out, as the following will reveal.

Pete is originally from Leicester and worked at the university there before coming to Loughborough. "At Leicester University, I interacted with local networks in support of entrepreneurs across the region, on things like the UK Space Incubator network, as well as the University of Leicester Innovation Hub."

He'd been at the university of Loughborough for four and a half years when I spoke to him.

"I came to work at Loughborough University because I could see there was a robust network

that existed across the East Midlands, and Loughborough seemed like somewhere I could come and join up that network a little. So, I came in and started to work on the same principles I'd learned in Leicester: good incubation support for early stage businesses, whatever the sector; leaning on the strategic strength of the university to build clusters around people doing interesting things."

We met at the SportPark, a building that is less than a ten-minute walk away from Access Group HQ, on the same Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park estate (LUSEP). SportPark houses lots of sport related organisations, such as Sport England, UK Anti-Doping and Aquatics GB. After a brief chat there, we wandered over to the Holywell Building, another five-minute walk closer to the centre of Loughborough, a place that acts as an incubation hub for new start ups. While not all the entrepreneurs in the hub are Loughborough students/graduates, a lot of them are.

As soon as I stepped into the incubation hub, I could sense the buzz. I was introduced to a score of SMEs: Sirius Transformation, a small consultancy firm built around helping manufacturing businesses to improve productivity whilst meeting regulations, run by a Loughborough University graduate and his business partner; The Inside Edge People, a coaching business run by an ex-Army officer for organisations expanding from being small to medium sized; an angel-backed start up called Nestwork, created by a recent graduate named Samuel Ola, whose purpose is to help students secure jobs through peer-to-peer learning, by way of improving CVs, helping to discover job opportunities, and prepare for interviews.

Expected turnover for most of these businesses was in the £100 to 200k range per year. Over time, some of these start-ups will succeed, others won't be so lucky. But just seeing the level of entrepreneurship in Loughborough, particularly amongst young, recent graduates, was inspiring.

I asked the founders in the hub about doing business in Loughborough; in particular, how they would sell the place to someone looking to set up their own enterprise in the town.

"The most important thing is the people and the space," said Tom, a guy who has set up a company called Tzuka, which makes earbuds that are waterproof, impact proof and can store their own data, so you can use them without a phone or computer. "Access to grants is good around here as well. What's amazing is that I didn't even know this place existed until I came here for uni."

I then asked who had gone to university in the town – and every single entrepreneur put their hand up.

"Being in the middle of the UK is a big plus," Tom said. "Connectivity to London as well; although, having said that, there is so much manufacturing of hardware in the Midlands, that's another advantage to being here over anywhere in the south."





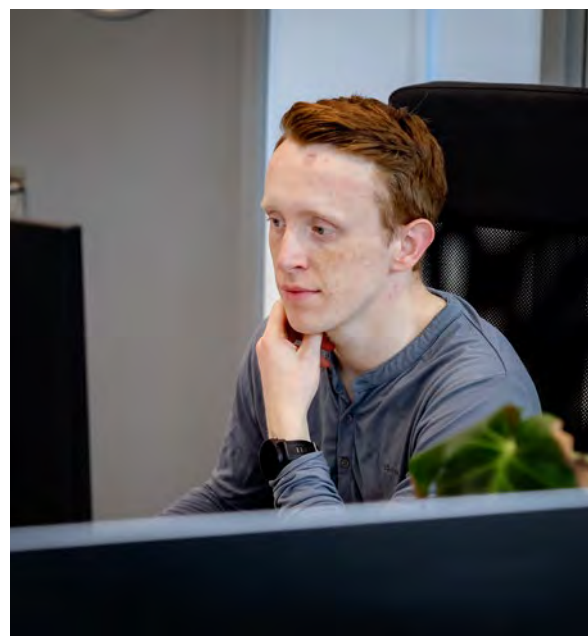
Not that there aren't challenges to doing business in Loughborough, although most of them are UK-wide issues, faced by most businesses across the country.

"This time next month, I shall be in Hong Kong getting hold of the final product," Tom said. I noted the foreign manufacturing location - he shrugged and then explained. "Scaling up in the UK is very difficult. The factory in Hong Kong can make 500,000 units a week. While in the UK, going over 10,000 would be difficult."

I felt a huge sense of community within the incubation hub. Everyone seemed to know each other well and it rubbed against the idea we sometimes have of entrepreneurship as a lonely venture. That's why innovation hubs are so vital: they allow people, particularly young individuals, to start businesses in an environment in which so many of the contacts they will require will be a desk space away, while also giving them a cohort to bounce ideas off; a gang who are on the same journey as they are.

While what ultimately powers the incubation hub in the Holywell Building on the LUSEP estate are the ideas and efforts of the entrepreneurs who do their work there, it wouldn't exist without Loughborough University. Although the hub welcomes entrepreneurs who are not Loughborough graduates, the university unquestionably acts as a major pipeline for new talent. And that's where the key role universities play in local economies comes into play. Loughborough University has developed a "Loughborough Enterprise Network", designed to build enterprise skills and generate new businesses, jobs, innovation and growth across the region. This includes support which helps local entrepreneurs who are not involved in the university at all, even as alumni.

One of the things I found again and again as I travelled across England and Wales – and this most definitely applies to Loughborough – is how important universities are in ways I hadn't considered before.



One of the things I found again and again as I travelled across England and Wales – and this most definitely applies to Loughborough – is how important universities are in ways I hadn't considered before. One is in a "levelling up" sense – they disperse talent all over the country, bringing people to a town they had never been to before, where they then stay and start a business, bringing money to the place as well as new jobs. Another way in which universities are so valuable to local economies is that they often establish and/or support incubation hubs, like the one in the Holywell Building, which allow graduates to become entrepreneurs in a space that supports them. They also provide a network these fledgling businesses wouldn't otherwise have if they tried to do it all by themselves, as well as small levels of financial support, even if it's just free or reduced office rent. Within the debate about universities, how we fund them and the role they play in society, their value to private enterprise is not talked about nearly enough.

Yes, there are things universities could do better. Not all of them network or support budding entrepreneurs in the same way Loughborough manages to. But that's an argument for improving the way universities get better, not why fewer universities should exist.



Case study: ExpHand Prosthetics

“The impact that the right prosthesis can have on a young life can be immense – both from a practical standpoint and an emotional one.”

ExpHand is a Loughborough based start-up that makes three different prosthetic products, all with an interesting twist: they can grow with someone's body. Using 3D printers, the company designs and manufactures the prosthetic limbs themselves, creating a business that could positively impact the lives of thousands of people.

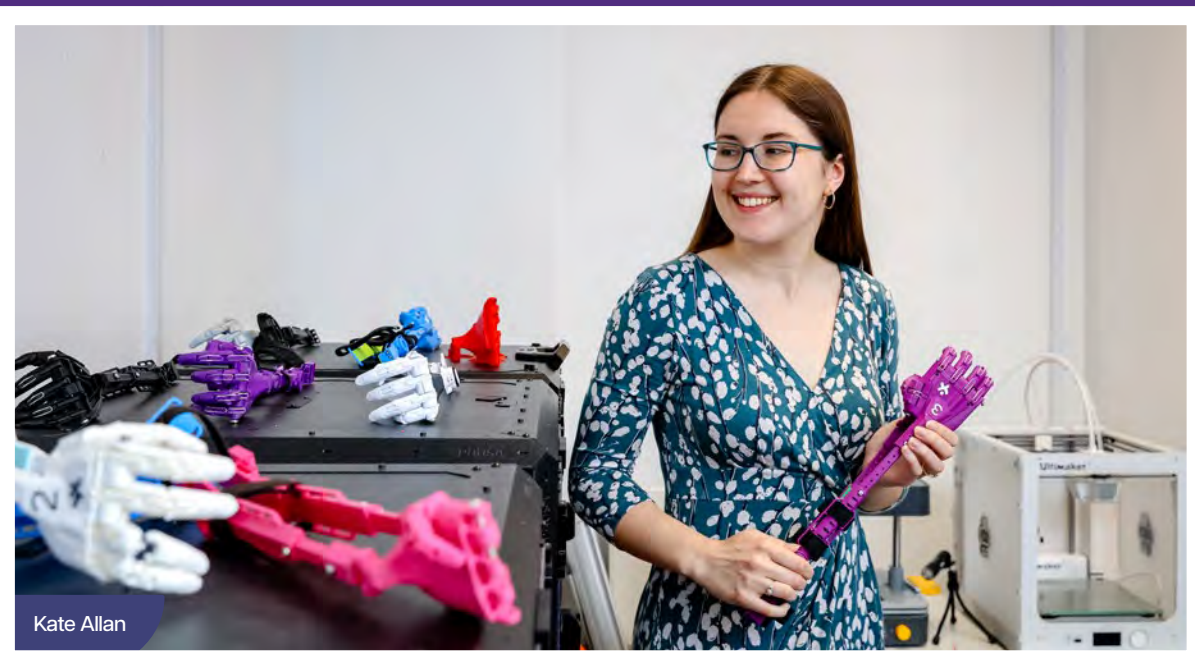
“We can manufacture on the go, on demand. You can order from anywhere in the world, so long as you've got a plug socket”, says Kate Allan, the founder and CEO of the company. She went to

Loughborough University and moved straight from graduating to starting the business, setting up shop in the Loughborough University Science and Enterprise Park.

When I interviewed Kate, her company was carrying out a trial of products in Kenya, with a view to officially launching everything in the summer of 2024. Their goal is to change the landscape for prosthetics so that they are both affordable and adjustable.

It's taken four years to get to where the company is now, ready for a global launch. Getting the hardware to where it needs to be, testing it, making sure it all works. But for Kate, it's all been worth it.

“The impact that the right prosthesis can have on a young life can be immense – both from a practical standpoint and an emotional one. To have available a product that can adapt to a young person's growing body, forgoing the need to constantly be having to both change



Kate Allan

prosthetics as well as never having them fit entirely properly, will change thousands of people's lives for the better.

“Our prosthetics can be made in lots of fun colour combinations, so they become an extension of your child's personality, not simply just a medical device. Most prosthetics on the market today are expensive, but we have a way of making them less pricey. The secret is manufacturing in-house, so we can provide the customer with something high-quality that is also affordable.”

Short term turnover for ExpHand will depend on the markets they can get into over the next couple of years. The UK will ultimately be a minor market for them, but it will initially be key given the company is located in Loughborough. They'll be looking to sell 200 units in Britain in the first year. The much larger markets for ExpHand are places like Kenya and Tanzania, where they could be doing hundreds of sales a month within the next couple of years.

Of all the companies I've interviewed across the country, ExpHand is perhaps the best example I've encountered yet of a private enterprise providing a societal good. It seeks to make life better for disabled people, with a particular focus on some of the poorer areas of the world, all while creating jobs in the geographic centre of England.



A robust network, part two

“We didn’t want our logos too front and centre on the face of the Careers and Enterprise Hub because we didn’t want people to feel this place is just for students. It’s designed in such a way as to be open to everyone.”

After Pete Hitchings had introduced me to all the hub entrepreneurs in the Holywell Building, I sat down with Dr Kathryn North, the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor of Climate Change and Net Zero at Loughborough University. She talked me through what the university is doing on environmental issues, which involves a huge amount of working with local businesses.

“I think it’s about making the best of what we’ve got here, at the university and in the town,” Dr North said. “It’s about bridging the gaps and making something that can be talked about, attract investment into.” A good, recent example of this is investment made by the East Midlands Freeport into helping accelerate the translation of zero carbon research.

The bridging Dr North mentioned involves putting together businesses working in the net zero space with the academics doing research that can power innovation in the sector, and then bringing both groups into contact with the investors who might be interested in the enterprises that come out of such a nexus of talent.

Of course, it’s also about how to transfer jobs in the current energy sector to ones that will exist in a greener economy.

“It’s not like you need a whole new work force to run a net zero world,” Dr North said. “The skills are already there.”

Pete and I then walked yet closer to the centre of town, stopping into Loughborough College where we met with Laura Shepherd, Director of Strategic Partnerships and External Relationships there. I talked to her about my conversation with Dr North.

“What’s so important in the discussion about net zero, and particularly about using hydrogen, is the social mobility aspect. The move to other fuels does not have to eliminate jobs. We’ll need to upskill people, of course, but we’ll still need people to run large energy facilities,” she said. Laura told me this during our walk to the Careers & Enterprise Hub, which sits in the very centre of Loughborough, overlooking the market near Swan Street. This is a joint venture between many different funders, including Charnwood Borough Council and the Town Deal Fund, and run by the university and the college. As a case study for how two such educational institutions in close proximity can work well together, Loughborough seems a great example of good practice.

“We didn’t want our logos too front and centre on the face of the Careers and Enterprise Hub because we didn’t want people to feel this place is just for students, Pete said. “It’s designed in such a way as to be open to everyone.”

“There’s also a big social mobility angle – how we enable the work we’re doing to benefit the widest possible group of people within the community.”

This space is about taking the expertise and equipment from both the university and the college and giving people attending either – or, importantly, neither – access to these valuable resources. Part of the mission is about helping people not in post-secondary to gain the skills they need to get better jobs – and in a lot of cases, get a job that will take them out of poverty.

“A big thing we do is engage with industry. We ask them what sort of skills do they think they’ll need in five years’ time, so we can build that into what we’re doing”, Laura said, adding: “We want the curriculum of the college to reflect what skills are going to be useful to graduates, now and in the future.”

My final meeting of the day was with Rachel Quinn, who is the Executive Director of the East Midlands Institute of Technology. This is one of 21 Institutes of Technology (IoT) across the country that have been created by the government to map STEM related education to local needs.

“We’re more HE (Higher Education) focused than some of the other IoTs around the country,” Rachel told me. “But what we’re really about is creating a buzz around skills and training. There’s also a big social mobility angle – how we enable the work we’re doing to benefit the widest possible group of people within the community.”



The East Midlands Institute of Technology works closely with Loughborough University and the college to deliver on its remit. It acts as both a recruiter for post-secondary institutions, a provider of education itself, and then as a go between for those places of higher learning, the students/prospective employees, and employers in the area. They offer careers advice to graduates in addition to helping them directly with things like gaining apprenticeships. And as Rachel described, one of the things at the heart of the whole thing is social mobility – getting people from deprived backgrounds into higher paid work – in particularly, in industries the country is striving to grow.

“A big thing we do is engage with industry. We ask them what sort of skills do you think you’ll need in five years’ time, so we can build that into what we’re doing.”

At the end of the day with Pete, my head was spinning a little. I had spoken to over 30 businesses and other organisations in town and was wowed by the connectiveness of everything I had seen. The way all these different entities are working together to support local entrepreneurs and indeed, businesses of all sizes, while trying to train and/or reskill people for the jobs of the future was deeply impressive to me.

The SportPark felt a long way away and a long time ago. In a good way – I’d learned a massive amount about the town, its economy, and its people in a matter of hours. Pete closed the day with a great anecdote that strangely summarised it all for me.

“A few years ago, we had a programme that brought twenty American businesspeople to Loughborough for a career retreat. It was an opportunity for us to host and to let them see the place, get a feel for it. We took the chance

to showcase Loughborough – our small town in the heart of the UK – and they loved it, promising to share their experience with people back home. I wish we did something like that again; I want to show people from outside the region, and the UK that we have something special here, but it’s hard to get the budget for that sort of thing. You feel like those sorts of left field ideas are the ones that often have impact; just putting people together and seeing what happens.”



Tom from Tzuka



Case study: Sam Ola and Nestwork

Nestwork is an SME that began life in December 2021 with Samuel Ola and his three co-founders, Flynn Duggan, Pobor Eruesegbefe and Som E-Agwuegbo, deciding to take the plunge.

“Being university students ourselves, we saw how often it is that young people don’t get past the first stage of a job application. We felt that having a service that was affordable and easy to use to help people either get on the employment ladder or to obtain better, higher paid employment was filling a much-needed gap.”

They officially launched the company in September 2023.

Their CV assistant analyses job descriptions and then looks at your CV in order to identify missing skills. It then gives you actionable recommendations to improve your offer to potential employers. They also have a Match tool where you simply describe your ideal job in a sentence, from which Nestwork will match you with the most suitable roles that you can swipe through.

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Behind-The-Offer has articles which provide step-by-step breakdowns of how other students and graduates succeeded in their applications to different companies and roles. Each BTO is highly specific and provides the client with tailored insights. There are 100+ Behind-the-Offer posts from top companies across a range of industries, with new posts being added frequently.

Nestwork also offers content that can help young people discover what it’s really like to work in a specific job and ask questions directly to current employees, research for applications, make confident career decisions, or connect with employees to learn about a company.

“Our goal is to help people find the job they want and hopefully transform their lives. A job is so vital to people’s sense of self and worth, beyond simply the importance of a pay packet. We’re hoping to build a successful company and change a lot of people’s lives for the better along the way.”

Loughborough as a swing seat

When I spoke to Jeevun Sandher, he was the Labour party candidate, hoping to win Loughborough whenever the general election was to take place. Now, of course, he is the MP for the town.

Every business owner I spoke to had nothing but kind words to say about Jeevun Sandher. As one businessperson put it, “Jeevun seems solid enough. Shame about Jane (the Tory MP at the time) – she’s great but she’s almost certainly going to lose because of the national party and all that.”

“My priority is to bring green investment to Loughborough. That will create jobs and boost the local economy. The town has huge pluses, particularly around hydrogen, that I want to be taken greater advantage of than is happening at the moment.”

I met Jeevun in a café called Esquire Coffee on High Street, right in the centre of town. It’s a nice place that would not feel in any way out of place in London or Manchester. Jeevun is from Luton originally but like so many of the entrepreneurs I had already met, came to Loughborough to study at the university.

“My priority is to bring green investment to Loughborough. That will create jobs and boost the local economy. The town has huge pluses,

particularly around hydrogen, that I want to be taken greater advantage of than is happening at the moment.”

He talked about GB Energy, Labour’s plan for a publicly owned, green energy company. It promises to save people money on their energy bills, deliver 100% clean energy in Britain by 2030, all while creating thousands of jobs across the country and securing the UK’s energy security and independence in a scary world. I have to admire the ambition, while wondering if such a lofty set of goals is actually deliverable in the way Labour is setting out. Time will obviously tell.

I asked Jeevun about skills, training and apprenticeships in Loughborough. He was unsurprisingly critical of the situation Labour have inherited.

“The skills policy has been a failure. Meanwhile, the apprenticeship levy is very inflexible, meaning companies are not sufficiently incentivised to bring new people on. This is in addition to businesses putting off large investments at the moment, which trickles down to investing in people. We need growth in order to create an environment in which businesses are hiring again.”

Now that Jeevun Sandher is Loughborough’s MP, it will be interesting to see how Loughborough changes and indeed, if Sandher and his party’s lofty green goals come together. Net zero doesn’t have to mean bigger government; businesses are going to be doing a lot of the heavy lifting. There are jobs in hydrogen to be found in Loughborough, that much seems clear.



Jeevun Sandher, MP for Loughborough



Case study: The Bug Factory

“No one is going to buy this just as a form altruism. For something like this to work, companies need to see a positive effect on the bottom line.”

On a farm a few miles outside of Loughborough sits the Bug Factory, a site mostly given over to the research and development of an idea that could be both economically and environmentally valuable, if all the pieces come together.

It is the brainchild of Thomas Constant, who grew up in Brighton but came to study at Loughborough University, which is where he established his first contact with the town. Yet another young person whose talent has been dispersed around the country via the university system.

At present the Bug Factory is based on a small farm in Leicestershire which houses black soldier flies and their larvae. The latter are currently sold as part of a mealworm kit to pet stores across the UK, US, EU and Australia.

Owners of reptiles, birds and fish can buy them to create an endless supply of food for their animals. The company sells around £100k worth of kits per year at present. It has recently won a Leicestershire Innovation Award for innovation in food and drink.

“The great thing is, black soldier flies will eat pretty much anything,” Tom said. “That’s crucial to how we want to expand. We’re currently looking into the most cost-effective way to breed black soldier flies on a mass scale.” It should be noted here that the black soldier flies are completely harmless to human beings. They don’t sting and aren’t even interested in people; I walked through a haze of them, and they completely ignored me for the most part.

The next phase in the Bug Factory plan is much more ambitious than mealworm kits. That will be built around re-creating the ecosystem established on the farm outside of Loughborough at factory sites across the UK and then around the world. This will involve building places where the black soldier flies and their larvae will live and consume the waste products from food and drink manufacturing. An example of where this could work would be a brewery, which produces lots of consumable waste.

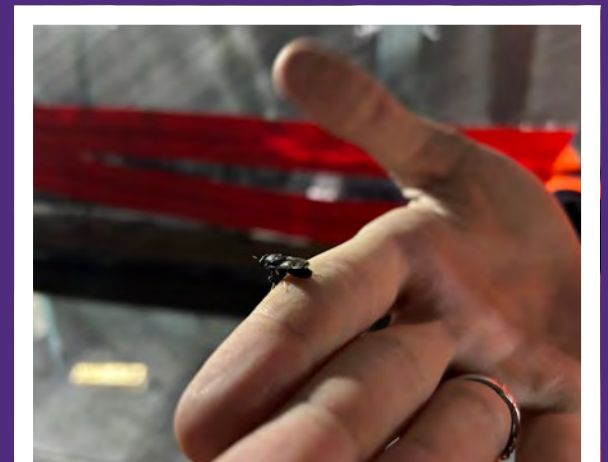
The first “product” is the waste disposal. A brewery gets rid of around 75% of their waste directly selling it as agricultural feed anyhow, but the remaining 25% currently must be taken to a landfill, at a cost to the brewery. The Bug Factory would look to slash that cost by having the insects consume the waste on site, which would then create a constant stream of mealworms that could be sold on as animal feed.

The environmental upside of this process would be obvious in that it should substantially reduce waste that goes to landfill. Getting the economics of it right is the key, however. It must be cheaper for companies to get rid of their waste the Bug Factory way; also, the mealworm has to be cheaper as feed than other forms of animal food.

Tom understands this completely. When I visited his farm site, he talked constantly about making the numbers add up.

“No one is going to buy this just as a form of altruism. For something like this to work, companies need to see a positive effect on the bottom line.”

My general take away from seeing Tom’s set up is that if his current plan doesn’t quite come together, he’ll pivot and find a new use for his insects. I think he’s on to something in seeing a future in which bugs will be used to reduce waste. I also feel certain those breakthroughs are going to come via a private enterprise as opposed to any government led intervention.



What do businesses in Loughborough want?

Given the town is at the forefront of the green sector in the UK, around hydrogen production in particular, businesses in Loughborough would like clearer green targets from the Westminster government that do not move and that everyone can take as being set in stone. If the targets feel like they won't slide, it is easier for companies in the sector to get investment – particularly somewhere relatively small in the grand scheme of things like Loughborough. If the future is spelled out plainly, the investment terrain becomes easier to predict, making venture capital and other forms of financing easier to come by.

Loughborough businesses also want the new Labour government to be clearly pro-business, something a lot of people in the town (and elsewhere in the UK, to be fair) feel has been a long time in coming. This is partly policy

based – lower corporation tax, or at least, lower corporation tax for companies below a certain size – but to some extent, it's much more vibes based. There is a feeling in places like Loughborough, which isn't particularly rich or poor, big or small, that central government in the United Kingdom has not cared about business, and perhaps even been openly disdainful of private enterprise, for some time now, whether that has any genuine substance or not.

There is also a concern about the current trajectory of funding for universities, given how central the university in Loughborough is to the town's economy. Even those businesspeople who have no connection to the university whatsoever fear for anything negative happening to the institution, given how important it is to the connective tissue of the town.

Lessons on best hiring practice and bringing people out of poverty

To summarise the lessons on best practice gained from the Access Group:

- 01. Create a friendly culture where people want to come to work.
- 02. Be active in building a team and keeping them together.
- 03. A company must create methods of advancement that are transparent and clear and further, make internal promotion a big part of the company's culture.

The Access Group also has a lot of good practice on bringing people out of poverty, not only in hiring people from deprived socio-economic groups, but in the charitable work their Access Foundation undertakes. One of the big things they focus on is what they term "bridging the digital divide". This is about giving people from disadvantaged backgrounds access to the internet, to cellular data, to

phones, to technology that is either crucial to helping them get and stay in employment or at the very least, having access to tech that will greatly help them get into a job and keep it.

The Access Foundation also gives out university scholarships, which are mainly built around helping the student with things like laptops and other technological materials they will need to effectively study.

This is private enterprise creating societal good above and beyond simply providing good jobs for their employees. While charitable work can come from all quarters, it's important to remember how much a lot of larger businesses give back to the communities around them. So much of the narrative surrounding larger companies these days is either about them being money grabbing, soulless vampires, or woke ideologues, and yet the real picture is that they contribute in ways to society that would be hard to replace if those businesses did not exist.

Final thoughts

Ryan had just come back from Timișoara, Romania, where he had been helping to set up a new Access Group office. Just as the company started in Loughborough, so they continue when they expand into other places – not into Bucharest or anywhere near it, but to a town in the far west of Romania, near the Serbian border. When I ask Ryan how they manage to keep the culture they value so highly intact when expanding into new countries, his response is intriguing.

"That's why I went down there myself," Ryan told me. "We need our people from Loughborough there in order to make sure the culture gets instilled from day one. It's key to everything."

"Loughborough is home. You always miss home."

I joked to him about how he probably wanted to stay down there given the weather was terrible in the Midlands at the time (as alluded to already, it rained the whole time I was there).

"No, no. Loughborough is home. You always miss home."

Towns in Britain deserve more space in the national conversation. Not just for the challenges that they face and what they need or don't need from government, but for what they offer to the national economy. Towns need to be discussed for all the good things that are happening in them right now. Coming to terms with the challenges Britain faces is vital; but just as important is figuring out all the things to be positive about as a country. We don't do that enough. And we definitely don't do that enough about places like Loughborough that have things to teach the rest of the country.



Ryan

Acknowledgements

These are the Loughborough based organisations contacted for this report, without whom it would not have been possible

1284 Ltd	Kasai
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ACT Medical	Loughborough University
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Chase Labs	Previsco
Chesterton House Financial	Proc System Automation
Dikoda	Rewire Fitness
East Midlands Institute of Technology	SE-LF Care Boxes
Endeavours Adventures	Sirius Transformation
Everywhere Tech	SportPark
ExpHand Prosthetics	The Athlete Place
Gumbo	The office of Jane Hunt
Inclus	The office of Jeevun Sandher
Inside Edge People	Tzuka



The Jobs Foundation is a registered charity (1202928) which champions the role of business as a force for good, particularly the crucial role companies play giving people a step up in life by providing jobs and training opportunities.

We want to have a practical impact on the ground, by helping business leaders do even more for their local communities, by providing them with the tools, knowledge, and best practice on employing and training people from less privileged backgrounds.

In parallel, we want to have a policy impact by creating a business environment which allows companies to thrive. We hope our advocacy programme will bring about a real change in the way policy makers view business and the crucial social and economic value businesses contribute to society.

To achieve this, we are building a coalition of business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the country to join our Business Council, to act as the driving force and delivery engine for our ambitions.

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4th floor, 33 Cannon Street, London, EC4M 5SB
www.thejobsfoundation.com
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“Building a world-class team starts within. By investing in apprenticeships, graduates, and programs that nurture local and diverse talent, we’re not just fuelling our double-digit organic growth — we’re fostering the future of our industry. This commitment extends to our community, as we actively support charities that align with our values. This focus on talent development and social responsibility positions us to be the UK’s leading tech employer, where innovation thrives alongside a culture of inclusion and purpose.”

Jon Jorgenson

Chief Sales Officer, The Access Group

