

Powerhouse Perspective From Katy Moss

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Author - Stephen Farrell



In the latest instalment of Insider's Q&A series on the Northern Powerhouse, Katy Moss, managing director of Trent Refractories and non-executive board director at Made in Britain, discusses what the initiative means to her, the need to support the UK's foundation industries, and the importance of a collective strategy covering for the whole of the North.

What does the Northern Powerhouse mean to you?

The Northern Powerhouse is a means of putting the North back on the map in a positive light rather than with the historic grubby references of the past. We get things done in the North - including over a quarter of the UK's manufacturing - and I think it is important that the region is recognised.

Nine years have passed since the phrase 'Northern Powerhouse' was first coined. Has enough happened since then?

It takes time for things like this to gather pace, and also for perceptions to change. When we are looking for investment in a particular area, companies have to get the right feeling about the place, see that it is up and coming and then they start to think about getting on the bandwagon and putting an investment into their strategy. This all happens before the plunge is taken. We are just starting to see the pace gather now, so further pushes with transport links or incentives would be well timed.

How is the appointment of metro mayors starting to help the initiative?

Hopefully they will have a positive impact, although sometimes I get concerned that there are too many titles and not enough people with actual understanding of what needs to change and making change happen. My belief is that we need industry people to drive efficiency and change.

What needs to be done to help the North recover from the Covid-19 outbreak?

We have to make sure people are getting back into work and getting through the backlog. Nationally, we need to be thinking outside the box as to how we can achieve this.

What is the single main issue you would like to see dominate the Northern Powerhouse agenda?

Levelling up for the foundation industries, for sure. There has been a lot of focus on advanced manufacturing, but if we look after the basics - glass, cement, steel, ceramics and such - we will also be able to continue to make everything we need here. These industries have been depleted so much by international competition and we are in danger of losing our basic infrastructure, leading to needing to import even more than we already do. This would go against the UK's Net Zero agenda and its defence strategy, so we need to ensure we look after these important industries and help them progress.

Is there enough collaboration between towns and cities across the North?

Nowhere near enough. I think the Northern Powerhouse does demonstrate a common strategy, which is what's needed, but we all need to work together more to make our area a better place. I believe we need a collective strategy that is 'cross party' and where we all work together, all the time - a step change in how we progress before we are left behind. This way more open, honest and transparent discussions could happen without people being worried about being 'voted out' or the 'agenda' changing.

How would the success of the Northern Powerhouse agenda benefit your business?

I think it would have a positive impact in terms of the 'soft power' element of the business. When you associate the term Northern Powerhouse with a business based in the North, people's perception is you are a company that 'gets things done' - this can only be a good thing. Further, when these companies are successful, other businesses that use similar products and services should also thrive as a result. Another positive impact would be through development of local skills to help reduce labour shortages and inspire the younger generation as well.