

## **What is happening with Degree Level / NVQ Level 4 Performance in Devon, notably within Torridge?**

Historically, Devon has slightly trailed the UK average on achievement of a degree level qualifications (NVQ Level 4), when compared to the national average, with around 39.9% of the adult working population holding a Level 4 compared to 43% in 2021.

The reasons for the differential are diverse and interrelated, from the mixture of jobs available and sectors concentrated within Devon's economy (which tend to focus on technical and vocational posts at Level 3 in many areas), proximity to a major urban centre, the lack of higher education provision in some rural and coastal areas, cultural issues around the added value of learning and progression, particularly amongst adults already in work and some employers; and the relatively older demographic across the County, with an outward migration of younger people with higher level skills in some areas.

The gap however in Devon as a whole is not large in comparison to other areas of the Country, and actually fluctuates year on year dependent on migration and economic activity rates. In 2017 for example, the rate was 3% higher than the national average, with the COVID period then reducing the level as older degree educated workers leaving the market. This is a relatively typical profile for a County area over the past 18 months, and Devon actually performs better on average than other comparator areas national. In context, whilst Wiltshire and Gloucestershire perform slightly better between due to their proximity to Bristol (around 45%), Somerset, Dorset, Cornwall, Swindon and Torbay each trail the County. More widely, other notable County areas with similar economic geographies perform far worse, including Norfolk (33%), Suffolk (36.5%), Lincolnshire (33%), Kent (38%) and Lancashire (35.9%).

As highlighted by members however, there are stark differentials within Devon that reflect differences in its economic geography. South Hams, Exeter, East Devon and West Devon for example each perform in line with or above the national average, whilst North Devon and Mid Devon perform slightly below in an average year. In part this relates their relative position compared to an urban economy (Exeter and Plymouth), with urban centres traditionally acting as hubs for higher level skills and their workforce.

The outliers within the County are Teignbridge (31.9%) and Torridge (21.9%). In the case of Teignbridge, its performance is heavily influenced by its proximity to Torbay and linkages to the bay's economy. The Torbay area is amongst the worst performing urban centres in the Country in terms of the economy at present, in part as it has a lower skilled economic mix centred around tourism and service sector occupations. Whilst work is ongoing with Torbay Council, South Devon College and

local employers around improving this mix, enhancing skills levels and generating new employment takes significant time to play through.

In the case of Torridge, its particularly low performance at degree level reflects a suite of wider economic challenges within the district around its economic mix, population make up and geography. The district's rurality is amongst the most pronounced in the UK (i.e. physical distance from major services and urban centres, relative reliance on agriculture and tourism as a core employer), with the top 4 sectors within the district by value being crop farming, restaurant and food sales, holiday lets and construction. No manufacturing or higher value activity was within the top 15 sectors in 2021, and the district is often identified as amongst the most vulnerable in the Country in terms of economic mix. As such, its skills profile tends towards Level 3 and below, with a focus on technical and service sector roles. Whilst there are some concentrations of higher-level skilled staff in the Bideford area and far south / east of the District (often commuting to Exeter), the majority of the area is typified by a more traditional agricultural mix that favours intermediate skills.

As such, Torridge is recognised as being an area of specific need in terms of support for its economic mix and skills diversity. The County Council is already working closely with a range of partners in Northern Devon around the issues flagged, including PETROC, Torridge District, local schools and wider employers and business representative groups around approaches to enhance local economic value. This includes joint work around developments at Appledore, emerging projects with the University of Exeter and Plymouth on provision, work with schools through our Careers Hub programme, specific support around agritech skills, and direct delivery of adult education provision within Holsworthy and Bideford to act as a step on point for training and learning.

As set out however, the picture around skills performance and relative attainment is complex across the County. As such, Economy Officers would be happy to go through the detail at a future session if of interest to members.

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