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Teesside 'leads the way in the North for innovation', new study finds

16:15 29 MAY 2015 BY MIKE BLACKBURN

New Government minister James Wharton said findings are evidence Teesside was 'at the heart of the Northern Powerhouse economy'

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Northern Powerhouse Minister James Wharton MP visits the new Visualsoft premises

Teesside is among the country's best performing areas for innovation, according to an independent new report - and the best in the north.

A major academic study by university-based group The Enterprise Research Centre (ERC) has drawn up a new map revealing the "innovation geography of the UK" - with Teesside featuring prominently.

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Northern Powerhouse Minister, [James Wharton](#) hailed the new report as evidence Teesside was securing its place "at the heart of the Northern Powerhouse economy".

The report by the ERC says: "Tees Valley is the best performing of the northern local economic areas."

The area is also in the top ten in the overall table which ranks local economic areas by innovation - coming 7th out of 42 areas and ranking way above London and Manchester.

The pattern which emerges suggests the UK's innovation heartland is centred on an arc from Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough through the South-East Midlands to Oxfordshire and West along the M4 corridor.

But the report adds: "Generally levels of innovative activity are lower in more northern and peripheral areas with some notable exceptions such as the Tees Valley."

High levels of "more radical innovation activity" were also reported in the North-east and Teesside.

In the field of research and development "Tees Valley again stands out as an area in which the proportion of R&D firms is relatively high", say the ERC.

Teesside was also rated second top in the country for innovation in manufacturing or business processes.



Mr Wharton, MP for Stockton South, said the report showed that "Teesside is leading the way".

He said: "When we gained control over our own development five years ago some said we could not make it work.

"The progress we have seen and studies like this show that we are not only making it work but it is working well.

"We are securing our place at the heart of the Northern Powerhouse economy."

Mr Wharton's confidence in the growing economic prowess of the region was backed up this week by his boss, Middlesbrough-born Secretary of State Greg Clark.

Mr Clark told the Gazette he believes Teesside is currently enjoying a renaissance, and said: "I think the wind is with Teesside at the moment. There's a real sense of momentum, it's reflected in the economic progress, and I think that pays dividends."

Nigel Perry, CEO Centre for Process Innovation and chair of the Tees Valley Unimted (the Tees Valley Local Enterprise Partnership) EP Innovation Leadership Group said: "Innovation sits at the heart of economic growth and Tees Valley boasts nationally significant innovation assets particularly in relation to advanced manufacturing, industrial biotechnology, biologics and subsea engineering – all of which offer fantastic

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opportunities to generate significant economic growth for the area and the whole of the UK.

"Only by creating new products and processes and exploring new technology solutions can we grow our business base, export our expertise and provide new jobs for our residents."

The ERC was established in 2013 as a focal point internationally for research, knowledge and expertise on SME (small and medium-sized enterprises) growth and entrepreneurship.

It is a partnership between five business schools at the Universities of Warwick, Aston, Imperial College, Strathclyde and Birmingham.

The one area highlighted for improvement on Teesside by the report is collaboration between businesses and organisations.

On the findings of its new report, the ERC says: "For the first time this provides a clear "geography of innovation" for the UK highlighting areas of strength and weaker performance.

"Firms' ability to innovate successfully plays an important role in their ability to sustain growth and competitiveness.

"For local areas this means that the more innovative are local companies the stronger the prospects for growth."

A Teesside success story

One firm at the forefront of innovation on Teesside is Stockton e-Commerce firm Visualsoft.

Crowned company of the year at the Teesside heat of The Gazette's North East Business Awards 2015, the firm provides website design and tailored online marketing services to more than 850 clients.

The company has developed a series of e-commerce platforms with a growing army of online retailers.

Following a surge in growth, Visualsoft is set to move into a 30,000 sq ft building on Teesdale Business Park Stockton.

The firm, which employs almost 200 people across the UK, has ambitions to further strengthen its position in the industry by acquiring companies that complement the brand's existing core products and services.

The company expects to double the size of its workforce in the next few years.

After visiting Visualsoft this week, Northern Powerhouse Minister James Wharton said: "Visualsoft is a great example of the dynamic and innovative companies that are making a positive impact that will help the area make a valuable contribution to the development of a Northern Powerhouse."

Dean Benson, Visualsoft chief executive officer, said: "We are really excited about our growth plans, which include moving to new premises that have the potential to accommodate a bigger workforce.

"It was a great privilege to show the minister how far we have come since we started out as an online training venture 16 years ago, and what our plans are for future growth."

Stephen Catchpole, managing director of TVU, the Local Enterprise Partnership for Tees Valley, said: "James Wharton's visit has allowed us to showcase the type of go-ahead, ambitious companies that are making a positive economic impact on the area."



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