



The Shakespeare North Playhouse

BE NOT AFRAID OF GREATNESS

Knowsley is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country but its revival is also one of the most dramatic, from a new Shakespeare theatre to world-leading manufacturers, the area is making a comeback and it's no holds Bard



SIMON KEEGAN

Knowsley is a diverse borough. It includes the historic Prescot, the traditionally unloved Kirkby and industrial Halewood.

Dale Milburn, Knowsley Council's executive director (regeneration and economic development) says the borough is taking control of its own destiny since external support was removed.

He tells *Insider*: "We used to be extremely well funded by government but then austerity hit and that funding stopped. We are the second most deprived borough in the country. We took the view that we needed to be self-sufficient and embarked on a journey of growth. We did our local plan in 2016."

Its strategy includes the council taking ownership of deprived town centres, releasing green belt land for property developers, supporting business and making the most of the visitor economy.

Milburn says: "We have a wide regen programme from across the whole of the borough, from Kirkby in the north to Halewood in the south. It's a journey we embarked on in around 2014. There wasn't much housebuilding going on in the borough then and we released a number of sites. We had a number of old school sites that were surplus so we released those for

housing. Now we have every housebuilder you can imagine in the borough. In the last four of five years, we've seen 4,000 new homes built."

One of the housing providers is Livv Housing which supplies affordable housing. Gentrification isn't on the cards for Kirkby and Huyton.

Livv Housing group chief executive Leann Hearne says: "We have spent



"We are increasing the number of new homes and the move towards zero carbon."

Leann Hearne
Livv Housing

the last three years working on getting compliant with our social housing regulator so we are at the highest standard which we have now achieved.

"We have chosen to invest in our properties. We have invested £75m over the last three years. It's a huge undertaking. We are increasing the number of new homes and the move towards zero carbon. Our target is 300 homes a year and we are talking to the local authority about how we can regenerate areas.

"They are all focused around affordability, affordable homes to rent, shared ownership, rent to buy, different models who may not be able to afford a mortgage. That's our focus."

Insider visits Knowsley Council at its offices in Huyton which is also due a facelift. Milburn says: "We have a seven-acre redevelopment opportunity which we have a new vision for. It will be commercial offices with a new HQ for the council. But also bringing in residential to bolster that footfall."

Devolution has helped Knowsley start to find its feet, but the money freed up for the Liverpool City Region is a drop in the ocean next to the money Knowsley has lost, says Milburn. He adds: "In the first ten years of austerity, 2010-2020, we lost more than £100m. Per head of population, we were the hardest-hit borough in the

country. The devolution deal gives us £30m over 30 years which is useful, but it doesn't compare with what we lost."

Kirkby kiss of life

Kirkby was largely populated from the early 1960s after the Liverpool slum clearances, sending residents to Kirkby and Skelmersdale. The towns still bear their 1960s image. Now the council has taken ownership of Kirkby town centre in a bid to regenerate it. Milburn says: "We have been trying to regenerate Kirkby town centre for many years, originally pitching for Everton's new stadium. We bought the town centre. It was owned by St Modwen, which had been looking at regeneration but retail fell out of favour.

"We did the library, the market and the thought was the private sector would come in and deliver retail. There hadn't been a supermarket in Kirkby town centre for decades. Morrisons was identified as the supermarket operator and the new store opened last year.

"That has followed with other stores and has transformed the town centre. The second phase will be cinema and leisure. We have just appointed Morgan Sindall to bring that forward. Then housing is planned and a train station. The former Kirkby stadium has also been secured for affordable housing."

Furthermore, Liverpool Football Club has invested in Kirkby with the establishment of its academy.

Hale and pace

It may be known for its automotive industries, but now Halewood is becoming recognised for international dining.

Milburn says: "In Halewood we didn't have a restaurant in the town centre, so again we've intervened. It was a 1960s town centre. So we brought in a programme whereby we will grant fund new shop fronts to premises if the businesses themselves will invest in the interior.

"A Turkish restaurant opened, then a Spanish, along with a Greek, an Italian and a steakhouse. We've gone from not having a restaurant to a whole array – sometimes you struggle to get a seat."

Knowsley has hosted giants like Jaguar Land Rover, Ford, Matalan and QVC and Milburn says the strength of the industrial sector continues to dominate.

He says: "We are also seeing industrial premises that have been converted into offices, and because of the strength of the industrial market, the owners are actually looking to put them back to industrial space. We are made up of a number of

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Dale Milburn
Knowsley Council

townships and they all have their own identities. In Kirkby it's industrial and commercial. We have released land in the east of Halewood, and again that's 1,300 homes which are being delivered by Belway, Miller and Redrow."

Infrastructure is still a challenge, however. Milburn says: "We are a long thin north-south borough but all the communication links are east to west. Kirkby looks to Liverpool, Prescot looks to St Helens. So one of the main public transport priorities is the Green Bus Corridor from St Helens to Liverpool."

The county also plans to integrate the appeal of its famous safari park. Milburn says: "People come from far and wide, but then go straight home so we are trying to capture some of those visitors."

A rose by any other name

The Shakespeare North Playhouse is set to open in Prescot in July. It pays tribute to the Bard's connections with the area and the Elizabethan playhouse that once stood there. It is expected to boost the visitor economy, especially with American and Asian tourists, and has already boosted the area with new pubs and restaurants.

Milburn says: "Shakespeare was part of Lord Strange's Men [an Elizabethan playing company or troupe later known as the Earl of Derby's Men]. They performed in Prescot and some say some of his work was penned in Knowsley. It's the Shakespearean Triangle – the Globe, Stratford and Prescot."

It is being built on a historical precedent – a playhouse was built there in 1593. Milburn adds: "It's been a catalyst for the town. It's a timber frame theatre in the round, all traditional crafts and dowel pegs, lit by candlelight, it's absolutely stunning. It's another reason to come to the city region."

On top of that, this year is Knowsley's year as the Liverpool City Region's Borough of Culture, a year-long programme of events and a draw for local businesses.

Knowsley Made Smarter

Knowsley has a rich industrial heritage and continues to capitalise on its prime location in between two powerhouse cities with ports, airports and the regional motorway network, to manufacture and distribute products around the world. For the last three years Made Smarter, the

Livv Housing Group's The Watchfactory in Prescot



movement helping SMEs join the Industry 4.0 revolution, has worked with hundreds of businesses, including 56 from Knowsley and St Helens, to help them introduce digital tools and technologies to help boost productivity and growth.

Made Smarter has also supported 11 SMEs in Knowsley and St Helens with more than £350,000 of funding towards projects which introduce industrial digital technologies such as data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), augmented reality (AR), industrial internet of things (IIoT), additive manufacturing and robotics. These include Beverston Engineering, a Prescot manufacturer of components for safety critical industries such as aerospace, and Blends, one of the UK's leading manufacturers of specialist food ingredients.

These investments, valued at almost £1.2m after private investment, are being deployed to solve a range of business challenges resulting in improved productivity and revenue, increased exports and job creation, new skills among the workforce, enhanced integration with supply chains, new markets and products and reduced environmental impact. These investments are forecast to deliver an additional £11.9m in gross value added (GVA) for the regional economy over the next three years.

CASE STUDY

Potter Space

■ Potter Space operates a 21-acre business park in Knowsley at the heart of one of the largest industrial sites of its kind in Europe, with the major advantage of incorporating a rail freight facility. This rail terminal is already key to the operations of SUEZ, which operates a large recycling and recovery facility on the site, and it has the potential to benefit many other local businesses under Potter Space's latest development proposals.

The company is currently drawing up plans to extend the park's rail connectivity which would enable Knowsley businesses to switch their freight transport from road to rail – a move which could help them improve the sustainability of their operations.

By developing the site's sidings to increase capacity, Potter Space will provide a green transport infrastructure that enhances the appeal of Knowsley as a prime industrial location, supporting new employment opportunities as a result.

Ideally located for the M62 and M57, Potter Space Knowsley has additional appeal for businesses which are exporting given its location within the Liverpool City Region Freeport. The rail terminal is classed as a 'customs zone', meaning that businesses based at the site can benefit from simplified customs procedures and no payable tariffs.

Jason Rockett, managing director of Potter Space, says: "By increasing the capacity of our rail facility we can help take hundreds of lorries off the road every year, which would benefit both the local community and UK as a whole."

CASE STUDY

MPE

■ Based on Knowsley Business Park, MPE produces EMC/EMP filters and capacitors, that means devices which block out electronic interference. The company was founded in 1925 – although its roots go back even further. It exports around the world, supplying military projects and

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Dale Milburn
Knowsley Council

Beverston Engineering



government agencies with its products on the very cutting edge of technology.

Producing bespoke designs, it has more than 20,000 designs. As *Insider* visits the Knowsley factory it is something of a Tardis. Unassuming from the outside, but like being in a Ministry of Defence facility inside with its special rooms that block out electrical interference and noise.

Members of Make UK, MPE has been privately owned by the board of directors since 2002. With a continued growth throughout the past 20 years, MPE is now a multimillion-pound turnover company and employs in excess of 60 staff.

CASE STUDY

Tratos

■ Italian-owned Tratos is built differently to other cable manufacturers – its mission is to create jobs in deprived or disadvantaged areas and in the UK it chose Knowsley. It won a Queen's Award for Enterprise: Innovation. And the innovation is continuous.

Director Neil Ancell tells *Insider*: "In a year we produce enough cable to go twice round the Earth."

He explains the structure and history of the firm: "The company is headquartered in Pieve, Italy. It's a family business. Before the Second World War it was started by the current owner Maurizio Bragagni's great-grandfather. It just manufactured copper conductors. When the war broke



MPE technology is part of the HMS Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier



MPE supplies the largest test chamber in Korea

out they had to leave Italy and went to Argentina. Eventually they came back and started the Tratos business. There weren't any jobs in the region after the war, so the core mission is to create jobs.

"We have five factories in Italy. About ten years ago they came to the UK. At the time I was managing director at North West Cables. I met Maurizio at a function and the idea developed of him buying a factory in the UK. A few years later it came to fruition. One of the reasons for buying the factory here was, it was an area of large unemployment. And a lot of smaller cable companies got swallowed up by larger companies in Europe which closed them down through rationalisation within their organisations."

Since the acquisition there's been a lot of investment in machinery. Ancell says: "We are the major supplier to most of the utility companies in the UK, both from cables manufactured onsite here, to medium voltage cables manufactured in Italy."

Tratos is active across infrastructure sectors, from energy through to mass transit. It is a partner within the worldwide ITER nuclear fusion project. The company supplied special HV cable for the development of the beam accelerator for ITER, a 35-country project designed to harness fusion power for limitless carbon-free energy. ITER is the world's biggest magnetic confinement plasma physics experiment, and it is set to replicate the sun's energy for a renewable green energy source.

Ancell says: "We supply the energy companies with thousands and thousands of metres of cables per year. We supply

the aerospace sector and have supplied some of the cables that go in space rockets. We are at the forefront of the world's technology. If you aren't, you fall behind. One of our key features is that we can compete in these areas, because our products are so wide."

Its total turnover in Europe is around £140m. "In the UK we are looking to turnover about £28m," says Ancell, adding: "We have a lot of ambition to scale and grow but that was stifled a little over the effects Covid and Brexit had on the industry. We are one of the few businesses that worked all the way through lockdown because we were supplying essential services."

The company caps the salaries of its board members, and it does not pay shareholder dividends. Instead, it reinvests profits into creating new technologies – and taking cable to the next level.



Insider editor Simon Keegan with Tratos director Neil Ancell

Ancell says: "We now also have to be conscious of the need to recycle. Most of the cable products we make can be recycled. You can strip them back to the bare copper which can be used for electronics. Our factories are very low users of energy."

Tratos has partnered Spanish standards organisation Aenor to help build the technology to allow companies to measure, and so manage their individual carbon footprints, and is a key player in a number of UK CO₂ initiatives. Tratos Italian cable manufacturing is powered by its own hydroelectricity.

The skills gap is a challenge, but Ancell says once employees are onboard they find it rewarding. He says: "We've increased the labour force by 25 per cent but one of the difficulties in the North of England is attracting people to work in what is not a sexy industry."

"It's hard work but the rewards are there. I've been in the cable industry for 55 years. I started at Greengate Cables in Trafford Park as a bonus clerk working out bonuses for shop floor workers. From that I worked my way up to becoming managing director."

Reflecting on his time in the industry, he says: "The technology is very advanced, but the basics haven't changed. Cable manufacture is basically twisting metals – copper, aluminium – together, covering them, twisting them again, putting various chemicals and barriers on them."

"There's nothing you can think of that doesn't have cables. Without cables, you wouldn't have society at all. No lights, no power, it's an integral part of everything." ■