

centre's £107m Bridge Street Quarter. Omega – where the latest plans for the 446-acre South site are before planners – is also a powerful asset. The £160m Warrington Waterfront will unlock 200 acres of land for office and residential.

The experts' view

Swinney says "A good and cost-effective location and it always does well, with a relatively skilled workforce, good connections, and some higher-paid research jobs among a relatively skilled workforce. But the town still needs to think about skills levels, and we see a split between a successful out-of-town and a poorly performing town centre."

Bedford says "Warrington is well located and has a cost advantage over Manchester, but it hasn't yet been able to grow its town centre business offer, and there is a slight danger that businesses will be turned off by out-of-town offices."

2 Stockport

Stockport, already affluent, is close enough to Manchester city centre to feel some of its red-hot glow. It also has excellent transport links and a vast indigenous business community employing 121,000 people. Muse's £145m Stockport Exchange development is providing new office space around the railway station – a second phase starts on site this year – and a new link road from the A6 to Manchester airport will improve international connections.

Mike Horner, regional director at Muse, says: "Stockport has strong leadership, it is close to the desirable commuter territory in Cheshire, the residential market is strong, and its geographical position is strong. It's a satellite of Manchester, yes, but strong enough to deliver more than trend growth. Leadership plus good geography equals change and investment."

The experts' view

Swinney says "Stockport's fortunes are hitched to Manchester, just as the outer London boroughs are hitched to the City and West End. It's ideal commuter territory, and could see some airport spin-off, but Manchester city centre is the main place for jobs and growing output."

Bedford says "Stockport has an in-town offer, and an out-of-town offer, and a diverse business base including its own professionals in law, accountancy, and so on. It's well placed."

3 Crewe

Crewe will be booming any day now, says Cheshire East council's hyper-enthusiastic leader, Michael Jones.

Hopes are high that the town will pip Stoke-on-Trent to become a major junction on the HS2 high-speed rail line, while indigenous businesses such as Rolls-Royce and Bentley are riding the auto-industry boom. The council is attempting to resolve long-term town centre problems – it recently splashed £6m to acquire the former Modus retail site at Royal Arcade/Delamere Place in a deal with Redefine International.

Jones says: "We've got the connectivity, the infrastructure, and we're the gateway to the northern powerhouse. We're already doing well – unemployment is below 1%, down from 5.8% three years ago, and we've got the potential to create a growth zone out to Stoke and to Middlewich, where we could see a freight terminal and a new business park around junction 18 of the M6."

The experts' view

Swinney says "I doubt HS2 will drive growth because Crewe is already a major rail hub with an excellent station, and that hasn't had so much impact."

Bedford says "Crewe gets a big thumbs-up. In addition to the road and rail, it has strong routes to growth through local firms like Rolls-Royce and Bentley."

4 Burnley

A wild card, some might think. But think again. Burnley ranked in the UK's top 10 for growth in private-sector jobs in 2014, and Experian says it has the best growth prospects in Lancashire. A new rail link to Manchester will yoke the town into the Northern Powerhouse. Council leader Mark Townsend says: "We've got universities we didn't have before, we're sorting transport to bring the markets closer to Burnley, and improving links to Manchester is a no-brainer, which has to boost the local economy. We are growing our skills base and stopping it draining away to the big cities."

Vision Park – located next to the college campus – is a big hope. The 45,000 sq ft first phase is completing next summer, with an innovation centre to follow. It will total 100,000 sq ft. Bob Tattrie, managing partner at Trebor Developments, says: "Burnley is improving partly because Manchester is improving, but it has its own strengths."

The experts' view

Swinney says "The outlook is tough for Burnley. There's a low skills profile – it ranks 52 out of 64 towns we monitor on skills and qualifications, so the challenge is to improve that. Proximity to Manchester is a real plus, but improvement could take a long time."

Bedford says "Burnley is already doing very well. It is attracting a lot of aerospace jobs – the former Michelin site has been turned into the 84-acre Burnley Aerospace Suppliers Park."



Cheshire East council has acquired Crewe's Royal Arcade site and plans a leisure-based development



The 45,000 sq ft first phase of Burnley's Vision Park is completing next summer

5 Lancaster

The port of Heysham, a new link road between Heysham port and the motorway network that will be completed in 2016, and the nuclear industry could all combine to give Lancaster boom town status. But links to Manchester definitely will not, says Andrew Dobson, Lancaster council's chief regeneration officer.

Dobson explains: "Our growth will come from off-shore energy in Morecambe Bay, which could deliver 4,000 jobs in the next five years, nuclear power and the defence industries, and National Grid infrastructure. We have around 70 acres of employment land around the port."

Reviving the town's stalled housing market is also a priority. Brownfield sites had not been popular – but they are now back in, says Dobson. Chief among them is PJ Livesey Group's conversion of the Lancaster Moor asylum into 180 homes. Local agents said there was no market for apartments in this location, but Livesey ignored them and followed its instincts. The project also unlocked the wider 30-acre site.

The experts' view

Swinney says "Strong rail link, but I worry it will be like Preston, which has strong employment growth but relatively low average wages and low skills."

Bedford says "I wouldn't pick it as a boom town. It needs a clear definition of what it is going to be famous for if it is to be competitive. I think Whitehaven might benefit more from nuclear than Lancaster."

*all placings according to EG



PJ Livesey Group has converted the Lancaster Moor asylum into 180 homes