

N



KATE ROSE

TUTTI

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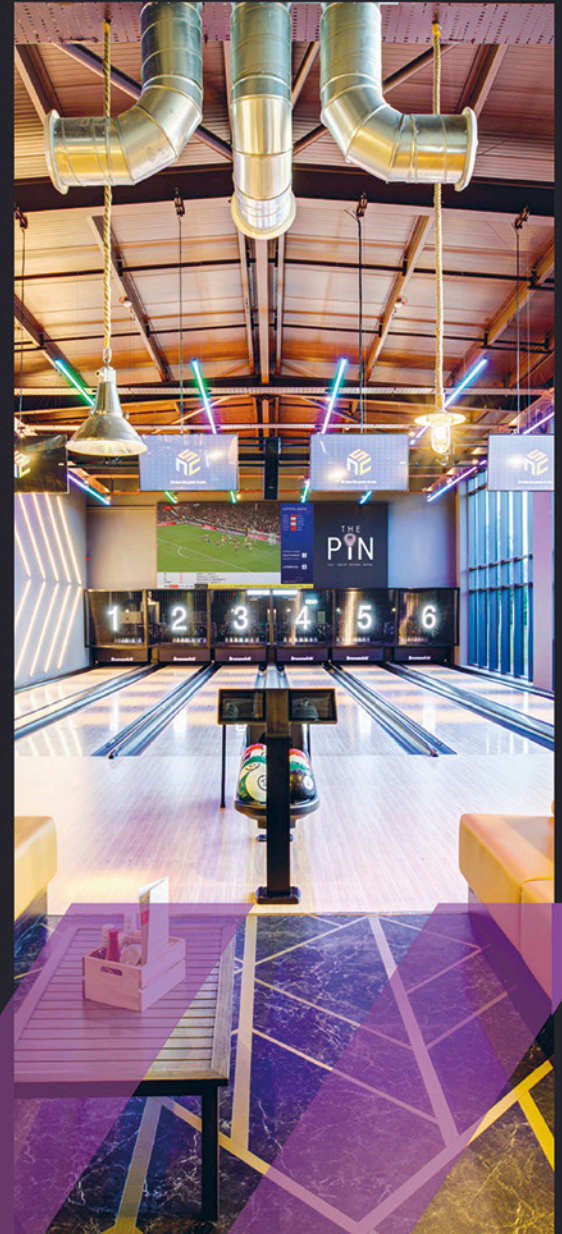
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After a bruising year defined by policy U-turns and leadership upheaval, the Autumn Budget represents a moment of truth for the Government. What measures must Chancellor Rachel Reeves include in the headline late November fiscal blueprint to convince businesses, markets and voters that Labour still has a credible plan for growth?

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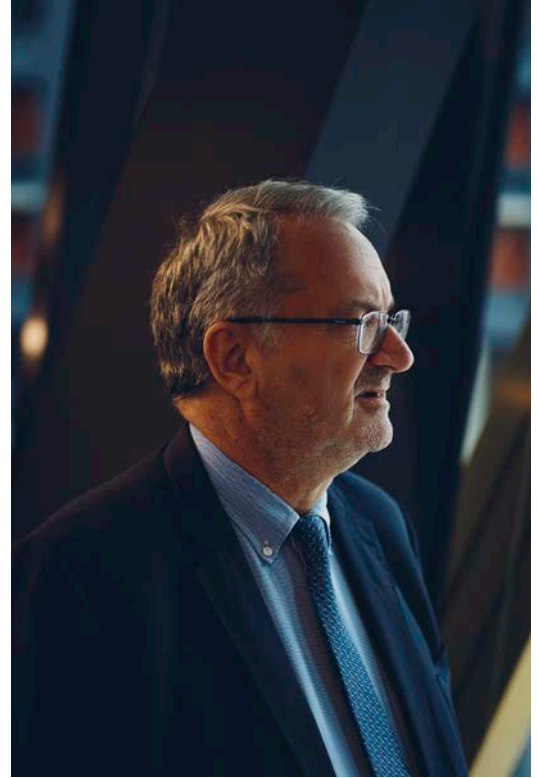
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Jo Vinton-Bullwinkel is operations director of Tees Maritime, the private sector initiative working to deliver watershed change across the area's maritime industry.

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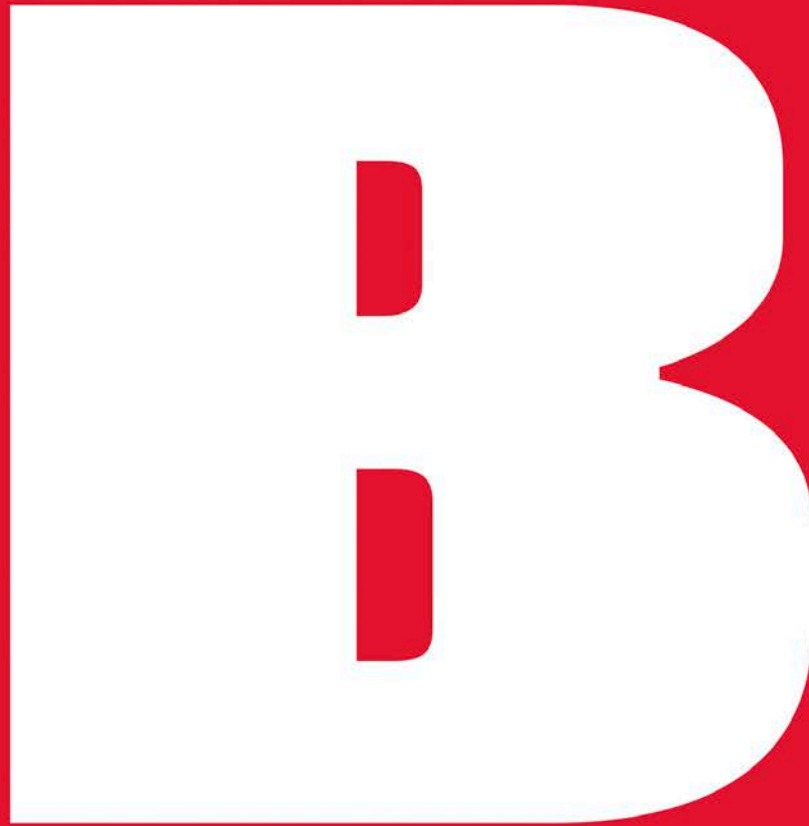
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WELCOME TO ISSUE 473

The North East is the place we call home, but it means so much more besides too, says Steven Hugill, with this edition highlighting how its social, cultural and geographical pull is fuelling commercial endeavours across countries and continents to great success...



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of **N** magazine.

Who are we without home, without the pulse of the place that shaped our very self?

Who are we without the chorus of our ever-moving cities, the contours of our coastline and countryside, and the familiar faces and fleeting strangers who weave the rhythm of our days?

Put simply, who are we without the North East?

I found myself asking such philosophical questions while compiling this very issue, since its principal feature interviews highlight the region's standing as a nurturing ground for visionaries and creatives.

It starts with our cover star Kate Rose, whose Tutti fashion brand – its ranges inspired by numerous regional factors, not least the flotsam and jetsam washed up along North East beaches – continues to make increasing waves across the international retail scene.

Kate's venture began at school, in the hands-on confines of the design and technology classroom, where her fondness for tactility could thrive.

It became a reality years later in her parents' conservatory, where she melded the textures of sea glass, shells and rocks found on beach strolls with the effortless glamour of Milan's

style set to craft a range of jewellery pieces.

Two decades on, and her endeavour continues to grow stronger, with the North East remaining at its heart.

Earlier this year, Kate opened Tutti's first physical store in North Shields' Harbour House.

Formerly a house clearance base, the creative hub has not only marked the realisation of a lifelong dream, but provided the necessary space to reprocess Kate's business blueprint, which includes pressing on with American and Australasian growth plans to augment existing partnerships with luxury retailers Fenwick, John Lewis, Macy's and Nordstrom.

But, as Kate says, wherever Tutti goes, it will always have the North East at its core.

The region is similarly woven into the fabric of Antony Jones' story.

Brought up in Surrey's leafy suburbs and earmarked as a Greek scholar, the North East wasn't originally destined to gain even a footnote's reference in his narrative.

And then fate intervened.

Travelling north as an 18-year-old to visit a friend studying at Newcastle University, Antony's story arc took a complete turn following a few Sunday evening drinks in a Jesmond pub.

The beer and the bonhomie played a part, but Antony discovered something much deeper that evening – he found his place in the world.

After badgering Newcastle University's admissions team until he was accepted to study politics, he surfed sofas until a kind-hearted couple – who found him stranded in the rain – invited him into their home for dinner.

The couple then helped him find lodgings in Seaton Sluice, on the Northumberland coast, from where Antony scavenged driftwood to fuel a little stove for warmth and sustenance.

From there, his love of the region grew only stronger, and, decades later, when the student had become a successful businessman, and the opportunity to shift his Motivait business – which helps organisations engage with customers and inspires loyalty – to Newcastle in 2020, it was a chance he couldn't ignore.

Today, the company continues to grow on the Tyne – alongside bases in Madrid and Porto – serving more than 50 million users across the globe.

And, as Antony tells this publication, it is perfectly positioned to maintain its expansion – with the North East infused into its every move.

After all, home is where the heart is.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Steven



TURNING THE PAGE: NET'S NEXT CHAPTER OF GROWTH

www.netimesmagazine.co.uk

LinkedIn: N magazine

NET – the multi-platform publisher behind N magazine – is celebrating its tenth anniversary. Here, founder and creative and managing director Pete Mallon reflects on the business' beginnings, its evolution into a multi-channel house of brands and its plans for national expansion over the next decade.

November marks a decade since you launched NET with the aim of redefining the North East's publishing landscape. What was the spark of inspiration that set the venture in motion?

I wouldn't say there was a single spark; it was more a lifelong ambition.

I was surrounded by creativity and entrepreneurship from an early age.

Watching my dad run successful design studios in Newcastle and Birmingham, I was immersed in that world from the beginning.

His offices were full of energy – there was a pool table in the garage beneath the studio (which was unheard of in the late 1980s and early 1990s), music playing, the buzz of creativity, the smell of Pantone markers and strong aftershave, and a team of incredibly talented commercial artists.

It never felt like work; it was a place of fun, expression and innovation.

That atmosphere made me realise it was the kind of creative environment I wanted to build for myself one day.

A good friend, Vera Powles from WeRiseStudio, once told me I had manifested my business model.

Looking back, I think she's right.

I had always aspired to become a publisher, and my time specialising in newspaper design and infographics, as well as my experience at The Times' Style Magazine, really cemented that goal.

Even while working full-time as a designer, I spent my lunch breaks and evenings developing business plans, vision boards, brand ideas and commercial strategies for what would eventually become my own publishing company.

I wanted to create a brand that truly reflected myself and the business community I was part of – something that didn't exist at the time.

So, if there was a spark, it was really a combination of opportunity and timing.

When the original limited company went into insolvency, I was already in discussions with two investors about launching a new publishing venture.

I had a business plan that had been evolving for years, and that foundation turned aspiration into reality.

What were the early years like? How did you introduce a new media endeavour into a market already filled with established contemporaries?

In the beginning, the media landscape was dominated by traditional regional business sections and advertising-heavy publications, often referred to as 'ad mags'.

These offered little editorial credibility, creativity or transparency – an old boss once described their editorial pages as simply "filler between the ads."

From day one, our 2015 team understood we needed to create something different,

something people would genuinely want to read.

We aimed to produce a magazine that wasn't overwhelmed with adverts, but instead focused on relevant, high-quality editorial content backed by a strong brand identity.

We set our production standards at an international level – design and photography became central to defining the brand's aesthetic, while premium print quality ensured the publication was something readers would keep and display, rather than discard.

The goal was to build a brand that readers and advertisers alike would be proud to align with.

Editorial integrity was, and remains, essential to our success.

At least 40 per cent of our content is independently sourced and curated by our team.

We also prioritise targeted distribution, avoiding waste by ensuring the magazine reaches the right audiences, not empty shops or unsuitable homes.

Hiring a digital marketing manager in 2015 was another pivotal move.

Expanding our digital presence allowed us to reach far beyond the limits of print distribution and build a wider, more engaged audience.

Investing into digital marketing has significantly benefited us ten years later.

As you say, NET is built on a commitment to



meld compelling writing with striking imagery and photography. How has that philosophy shaped the business' identity over the years?

Collaborating with a wide range of creative professionals has continually pushed us beyond the expectations of a typical regional business publication.

People outside the North East often react with surprise, saying, "I've never seen anything like this – please launch one in my city."

From our first editor Alison Cowie, to our current editor-in-chief Steven Huggill, we've stayed true to telling genuine, independent stories about North East business leaders and their successes, something still uncommon in B2B media.

This unwavering commitment to authentic storytelling has helped cement our reputation as one of the most influential B2B brands in the region over the past decade.

Steven is supported by business journalist Colin Young and Bdaily's digital journalist Peter Anderson, who share the same values and commitment to high editorial standards.

The business has grown from a predominantly

magazine-led endeavour into a multi-platform house of brands publisher over recent years. How proud are you of its evolution?

I'm incredibly proud of how the business has evolved, especially following the pandemic.

Not only did we survive a very challenging period, but we emerged stronger and expanded into a national media brand through our acquisition of Bdaily.

From the very beginning, our ambition was to grow beyond the region.

We began moving in that direction in 2019, but the pandemic halted our national momentum.

The acquisition of Bdaily has revived and accelerated that vision, giving us the platform to take what we've built with NET in the North East and scale it across the country.

Key appointments, including Sian Anderson and Sarah Law – both with extensive marketing and media expertise – have significantly strengthened our marketing capabilities, benefiting both our brands and our clients.

Combined with a growing events calendar, we've built a comprehensive B2B ecosystem

that is unmatched in the region.

That calendar includes the VISION 31 investment campaign, which continues to lead efforts to supercharge North East industrial and economic growth over the next decade.

It also includes the NET 250 awards ceremony – which celebrates the region's top growing businesses – the North East HR&D Awards and a suite of high-level roundtable discussions that work to drive tangible change across the region.

What are your ambitions for the next decade with NET?

Our ambition is to scale both the NET and Bdaily brands nationally, replicating the success we've built in the North East.

This growth will span all platforms – digital, social, film, print, events and email – ensuring multiple touchpoints for both readers and advertisers.

By expanding our presence across these mediums, we'll continue to strengthen our national footprint, build on our 60,000-plus email subscribers and further increase our rapidly growing digital reach.

THE NET 250 RETURNS TO SHOWCASE REGION'S ELITE

www.bdaily.co.uk/net250login
[LinkedIn: N magazine](#)

The NET 250 will return next year to once again spotlight the North East's most dynamic and successful organisations. Revealing the region's top 250 businesses by turnover, the event – set to take place in a new venue – will also include a host of new award categories.

The NET 250 is back – and bigger and bolder than ever.

The North East's premier celebration of business excellence will return next year to once again shine a spotlight on the region's most dynamic and successful companies.

Showcasing the organisations driving financial growth while innovating in an exciting new era of devolution, NET 250 – compiled from Companies House accounts and business websites – will reveal the North East's top 250 firms by turnover.

Those organisations – researched in partnership with Newcastle University Business School and verified by PwC – will be unveiled at an exclusive breakfast event on Thursday, May 14 at Hilton Newcastle Gateshead, between 8.30am and 11.30am.

Launched last year at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, the showpiece ceremony celebrated the region's software developers, builders, manufacturers, subsea operators, professional services firms, transport businesses, process sector companies, trade

hubs and more that are delivering tomorrow's successes today.

And the 2026 event will build on that, with a number of new and exciting award categories set to be unveiled to recognise more organisations from Northumberland to Teesside.

Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief and NET 250 ceremony host, says: "We're delighted to be delivering the event once again.

"Last year's ceremony was a huge success, with incredible interest in the NET 250 list, and we're very excited to be returning with a bigger and better programme.

"As a multi-platform publisher deeply embedded in the North East, we have championed the region for years, celebrating its entrepreneurs and commercial success stories while casting an analytical eye across the legislative landscape to advocate further positive change.

"NET 250 builds on that commitment."

NET 250 offers a number of exclusive sponsorship opportunities to help your business gain visibility alongside the region's top 250 organisations.

And by joining NET 250, you too can position your brand at the forefront of innovation, growth and success, reaching new audiences across NET's flagship platforms.

Steven adds: "NET 250 will help your business grow across – and beyond – the North East.

"Through extensive coverage across N magazine, its sister N website and our national daily business news platform Bdaily, NET 250 will showcase your organisation to new audiences across the UK."

Dr Fiona Whitehurst, Newcastle University Business School's associate dean for engagement and place, says it is thrilled to be working on NET 250 again.

She says: "We are delighted to continue our partnership with NET on NET 250, as it reflects our shared commitment to championing the North East's business landscape.

"Last year's event was spectacular, and we were delighted our students, under close academic supervision, played an integral part in the research.

"We have lined up an excellent team of students to succeed last year's team, and we're excited they will be researching some new categories for the 2026 event."

Richard Podd, PwC North East market senior partner, adds: "It is an absolute pleasure to be working with NET and Newcastle University Business School again.

"PwC are incredibly proud of our heritage in the region and the variety of businesses we have supported over the years.

"This event is an opportunity for the whole business community to participate in and celebrate regional success stories, and put North East business on the map."



NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill, right, interviews Nissan's European manufacturing controller Steve Tiffin at The NET 250 ceremony earlier this year, where the car maker was crowned the North East's number one company



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For more information about NET 250 sponsorship packages, and to buy your ticket for the May breakfast event, contact NET event manager Dawn Owens at dawn@nettimesmagazine.co.uk or call 07789 666437.

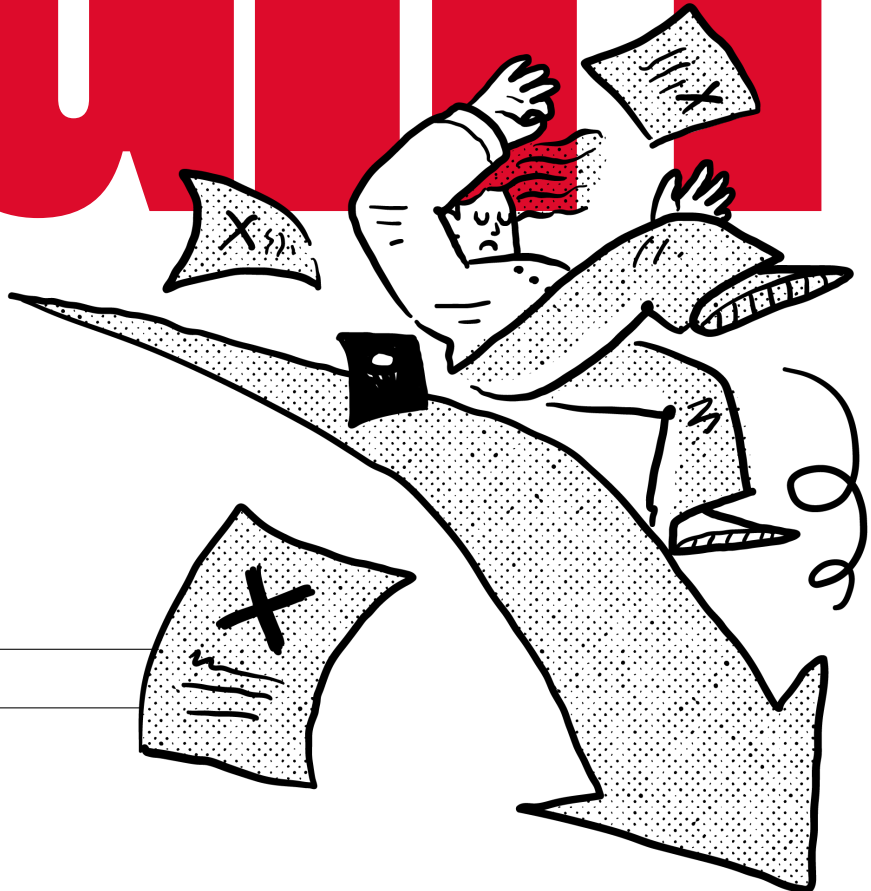
Alternatively, email fellow NET event manager Lesley Hampson at lesley@nettimesmagazine.co.uk or call 07748 908058.



SPOT LIGHT

Kick division into touch

By Steven Hugill





From further fall-out in the argument about what it takes to be a true patriot, to the impact on the North East of stalled shipping sustainability plans, Steven Hugill looks at some of the stories affecting the region's news agenda.

Standing up for what unites

Remember that spoof tale a decade ago that claimed the world's population of Garys was destined to disappear by 2050?

'Welcome to a Zero Gary Future', it warned, as parents spiked the Norman-derived name for spear in favour of cooler alternatives.

It was a satirical stunt, but like the best parodies, it carried just enough grains of truth.

Gary has been in decline for decades – the name that is, rather than the health of the last remaining Gary in your postcode. He's just fine. I think.

And a quick glance at latest official statistics shows it's still nowhere near the top 100 boys' names in England and Wales.

If only there were a way to rekindle the Gary flame...

What we need is a saviour, someone to hoist a flag (no, not that type) for the greyed-out Garys and ghosted Gazs.

And in a world intent on tipping itself upside down on a daily basis, who better to right things and cut through the technicolour swirl of life and its political, economic and cultural strokes with black-and-white clarity than a Gary?

It would make even Lazarus envious.

But who to play the protagonist, the purveyor of this plotline, you ask?

How about an ex-footballer (no, not that one), someone who knows all about the blood, sweat and tears needed to succeed?

Someone who isn't afraid to tell it like it is, who will stand up and do what's right for the great and good of our land and its people?

I refer, of course, to Gary Neville and his run-in with Britain's new legion of standard bearers.

When the full-back-turned-pundit-turned-podcaster-turned-football-club-owner-turned-property-developer took down a union flag from one of his building sites – calling on 'angry white middle-aged men' to give it a rest – it stirred up a storm akin to one of Sir Alex Ferguson's infamous hairdryer rants he experienced during his days in the Manchester United changing room.

In seconds, Neville was pilloried, panned and

patronised across social media, the patriots of his fire returning with a blaze of their own.

Now, Neville is no paragon of virtue.

He's happily promoted – and continues to endorse – a footballing world that includes clubs and competitions backed by owners and regimes whose human rights records make – at best – for uncomfortable reading.

He is a contradiction; a dissonant figure; a paradox. He is an angry white, middle-aged man.

His singling of 'angry white middle-aged men' was sweeping, and he should have contextualised it with censure of acts and attitudes across the whole political spectrum.

But he was on to something with this.

Don't mix politics with sport, goes the old phrase, usually uttered by people who chant politically-motivated songs on the terraces for 90 minutes every Saturday afternoon, and then cheer on England surrounded by flags that celebrate the division caused by military triumph.

It's where we find ourselves today.

For too long, a swell has risen – predominantly caused by a social media cesspit – that anyone is allowed an opinion. As long as it's the same as the person whistling the tune.

And as long as division is allowed to run unchecked across the country, and the definition of a so-called 'true patriot' continues to be skewed, we will remain all the more poorer for it.

Neville is far from perfect, and his outburst means he won't be bringing Gary back to the top of the baby name list any time soon.

But his point – that a nation riven by pettiness, grievance and tribalism is no nation at all – came from a place of good.

True patriotism isn't about cable-tying a union flag to a lamppost, or spraying the St George's Cross on a pavement telephony cabinet.

It's about listening and standing up for what unites, rather than what divides.

Chart a course for shipping success

Back to the drawing board, then.

Just when it seemed the world was set for a landmark deal to cut shipping emissions, Donald

Trump did what Donald Trump does, and swiped the blueprint in a tariff-fuelled tantrum.

Now, you might think it was just another power trip by a megalomaniac keen to maintain his crusade on the ongoing 'wakening' of society.

And, of course, it was.

But the abandonment of moves to make shipping the world's first industry to adopt internationally-mandated emissions targets meant something else, something far more important to the North East than Trump's posturing.

We are an island nation, and our region's coastline was born – and continues to be nourished by – overseas trade.

Our ports, from Teesside up to Northumberland, are crucial cogs in the global trade wheel, supporting the transportation of goods that shape our every day.

They are also hubs for industry, not least the drive towards greater sustainability, providing safe havens to plan, project manage and progress the offshore wind farms and greener alternatives set to power our tomorrow.

Our region too is home to NorthStandard, the Newcastle-headquartered global marine insurer that protects nearly one in five of the world's ocean-going vessels.

The waves caused by Trump's infantile stamping will reverberate here, all while the need for further sustainability measures swells ever higher.

To wait another year – as was indicated as N magazine went to print – would be too long.

The uncertainty, the cost and the risk will only continue to add up.

And those sums won't be abstract numbers on a global ledger; there is more than a danger they will represent potential jobs paused and investments stalled.

Our ports, businesses and people are ready to chart a sustainable course.

But they need political will to truly set sail.

BIG QUESTION

After a bruising year defined by policy U-turns and leadership upheaval, the Autumn Budget represents a moment of truth for the Government. What measures must Chancellor Rachel Reeves include in the headline late November fiscal blueprint to convince businesses, markets and voters that Labour still has a credible plan for growth?

By Steven Hugill



Simon Rowland
Partner

**Newcastle office head
Womble Bond Dickinson**

To restore confidence in the North East, the Chancellor must deliver a robust, regionally focused growth plan that directly addresses both the long-standing challenges and the emerging opportunities unique to the region.

Central to this plan should be a bold commitment to infrastructure investment.

Building on the North East's proud industrial legacy, the Government must prioritise the development of modern transport networks and ultra-fast digital connectivity.

Upgrading rail links, roads and broadband will attract new businesses and help existing ones flourish.

Targeted support for local industries must also be at the heart of the Chancellor's approach.

Tailored incentives for key sectors such as advanced manufacturing, green energy and technology will protect existing jobs and create new, high-quality roles, ensuring sustainable and inclusive growth.

Fostering a vibrant culture of innovation and entrepreneurship will be essential for the North East's future prosperity too.

If the Government puts more money into research and development, and offers new grants and support for start-ups, it can boost business activity and make the region a leader in innovation.

By focusing on transformative infrastructure projects, tailored industrial support and a thriving innovation ecosystem, the Chancellor can demonstrate a compelling vision for the North East – restoring trust among businesses and voters, and driving meaningful economic revival.



Join the discussion

Scan the QR code to the right to visit our LinkedIn page and add your thoughts to the conversation.





Elaine Stroud
Chief executive

Entrepreneurs' Forum

Entrepreneurs need to believe the Government has their backs.

This gives them the confidence to go out there and build businesses, create jobs and renew Britain.

Our research shows nearly two-thirds of members believe current policies are having a negative impact on their business performance.

The Chancellor must use her Autumn Budget to announce reforms that make founders feel appreciated and encouraged to take the necessary personal risk to scale their businesses.

Incentives which make it beneficial to grow headcount would be widely welcomed.

Not surprisingly, our members are calling for a reversal of the hike in national insurance and ask for no further large increases to the national minimum wage.

Entrepreneurs in the North East are keen to employ young people, and are looking for better incentives to take on unskilled workers and give them a first step on the career ladder.

Furthermore, our family businesses are calling for the Government to reconsider reforms to inheritance tax.

Without a rethink, there is a risk family businesses may cease to exist if tax liabilities are required to be paid in cash.

The Chancellor must do much more to make founders feel valued, and a good start would be to reduce the tax burden for owner-managed businesses.



Andy Rothwell
Co-director

North East Commercial

One of the biggest challenges facing the commercial property sector is business rates.

The rising cost of business rates on empty spaces is a real noose around our neck and makes speculative developments and purchases a risk.

When a business development is full, it is financially viable.

But if you lose a few tenants and those full suites become empty, all of a sudden the picture is very different.

I would love to see the Government look at this, as it is something that is impacting the build and availability of high-quality commercial office and industrial space.

In more general terms, I think more needs to be done to help people back into work.

It seems there is still a huge disparity between the very wealthy and those at the bottom end of the spectrum.

Some of this is down to sector growth.

The sectors likely to employ wealthier people are technology and artificial intelligence-driven, whereas the more accessible industries like manufacturing are really suffering.

It's a tough time and people have lost confidence in the Government.

All eyes will be on the budget to see what measures will be introduced to stimulate growth and give businesses the confidence that things are going to get better.



Kiran Fothergill
Director

Pickerings Lifts

Chair
Jobs Foundation North East Business Council

After a turbulent year, this budget must prove the Government is serious about growth – and that means supporting business.

An understanding that the economy only thrives on business confidence and a supportive enterprise landscape must be fundamental to the Chancellor's approach.

The last budget showed what happens when policy pulls in the wrong direction.

If Rachel Reeves wants to demonstrate Labour has a credible plan for growth, reversing the increase in employers' national insurance contributions – or at the very least introducing targeted reliefs – must be top of the agenda.

The Jobs Foundation's budget submission sets out an evidence-based approach – a national insurance holiday for firms that hire from long-term unemployment.

The proposal includes a North East pilot in year one, where inactivity is highest.

Even under conservative assumptions, it would be cost-neutral, with welfare savings and new tax receipts offsetting the cost.

True growth doesn't come from higher taxes; it comes from unleashing enterprise and providing firms with confidence to invest, hire and innovate.

It also comes from tackling public sector inefficiency with the same discipline expected of business.

If the Chancellor wants to show Labour understands the economy it governs, this budget must focus on enabling, rather than constraining, the people who create jobs, drive productivity and deliver prosperity: Britain's businesses.

From the Tyne to the world

NorthStandard

www.north-standard.com

LinkedIn: NorthStandard

From Europe to America, Asia and Australasia, Newcastle-headquartered marine insurer NorthStandard operates at the helm of the global seafaring sector. Formed through the merger of North P&I Club and The Standard Club two years ago, the organisation protects nearly one in five of the world's ocean-going vessels – all while remaining firmly anchored to its North East roots. Here, chair Cesare d'Amico and managing director Paul Jennings tell Steven Huggill why the region will always be central to its international ambitions.

From collier brigs hauling black gold to goliath vessels forged in roaring shipyards, the River Tyne's global industrial past needs little introduction.

Today, its waters flow to a much quieter rhythm: the coal carriers long vanished, the mighty commercial and naval fleets surviving only in sepia photographs and flickering film reels.

Yet while the great ships no longer grace the Tyne, the industrious spirit that hummed along its banks during their creation nevertheless endures.

Central to such is NorthStandard, the Newcastle-headquartered global marine insurer that is upholding the region's storied maritime past while charting new courses for international seafaring trade.

Led by a 300-plus-staff office overlooking the Tyne's tidal waters, it insures nearly one in five of the world's ocean-going vessels through a portfolio that includes protection and indemnity, hull and machinery, and freight, demurrage and defence cover.

And all of it remains underwritten by a proud North East lineage tracing back more than 165 years to the North of England Iron Steam Ship Protecting Association that latterly became North P&I Club.

Today, NorthStandard – formed through the 2023 merger of North P&I Club and The Standard Club – employs more than 700 people across 13 countries, and recorded poolable mutual tonnage of nearly 270 million gross tonnes in its last reporting year.

For all its global presence, though, NorthStandard chair Cesare d'Amico says the firm will always remain anchored to its North East home.

He says: "The merger between North P&I Club and The Standard Club has created a unique powerhouse in marine insurance, blending tradition with forward-thinking approaches to risk, claims and customer engagement – all while expanding our reach worldwide.

"But we will never lose sight of the enormous role the North East has played in shaping the maritime industry and helping it thrive over the centuries.

"We are very proud of NorthStandard's heritage; North East shipowners were forming clubs to share their liabilities as early as the 1830s, and we're honoured to continue that legacy."

Such history, adds managing director Paul Jennings, permeates NorthStandard's expertise, marking its global services with the same assiduousness that once thrummed through Newcastle's docks and yards.

He says: "The North East is deeply ingrained in our culture.

"The region is more than just a location: it is a community that shapes how we serve our members worldwide."

"Having our largest UK headquarters office in Newcastle pays homage to our proud legacy in the region, while highlighting the North East as a leading global marine hub," says Paul, who works alongside fellow managing director Jeremy Grose.

He adds: "The impact of the North East extends to our people too.

"We have strong employee retention rates, with many of our team members, both in the North East and across the globe, having been with us for decades.

"Their loyalty and deep expertise are invaluable assets that continue to strengthen our business.

"We combine that local expertise with an international outlook, delivering flexibility, trustworthiness and a uniquely grounded perspective to clients."

And in an ever-changing maritime landscape – where geopolitical instability, sustainable fuel commitments, regulatory changes, cybersecurity threats and crew safety and wellbeing measures continue to stir commercial waters – such dependability, says shipowner Cesare, is invaluable.

He says: "Our people are our biggest strength when supporting members to overcome these obstacles.

"We have an unmatched depth and breadth of expertise; members have 24/7 access to skilled assistance.

"We work with members to solve their problems, and we're investing in innovation, commissioning research projects and working closely with industry bodies to further strengthen our provision.

"This is reflected in our external affairs function, which we established to build collaborative relationships and engage directly with policymakers to raise shipping industry interests



Paul Jennings, NorthStandard managing director, left, with chair Cesare d'Amico



Pictured, from left to right, are NorthStandard managing director Jeremy Grose; chair Cesare d'Amico; vice-chair Nicolas Hadjioannou; and managing director Paul Jennings



NorthStandard vice-chair Nicolas Hadjioannou, chair Cesare d'Amico, managing directors Jeremy Grose and Paul Jennings, and Kate Gillespie, head of NorthStandard Academy, meet cadets and staff from South Shields Marine School

in the development of local, national and international regulation.”

The firm is building on those foundations through skills and community initiatives that are driving staff retention higher while inspiring the next generation of maritime sector personnel and strengthening social impact.

Highlighting the NorthStandard Academy, which provides specialised training and educational pathways through practical learning, Cesare says: “Young professionals are critical to the future of our industry.

“They will play an important role in adapting to evolving challenges like decarbonisation and digitalisation, and sustaining maritime insurance innovation over the longer term.

“But for younger generations to shape the industry, we must ensure there is a resilient and sustainable sector in place.

“We are investing in apprenticeship programmes, the NorthStandard Academy, mentoring and partnerships with local maritime schools to create clear career pathways and entry points.

“Our goal is to inspire and equip young talent to carry forward our heritage while driving transformation, by fostering an inclusive culture that encourages curiosity, learning and empowerment.”

Emphasising NorthStandard’s partnerships, which include strong ties with institutions such as South Shields Marine School, Paul adds: “We are dedicated to developing a diverse and inclusive workforce in the North East.

“We invest in our people to ensure their continuous personal, professional and technical development, and help employees with menopause support, carers leave and fertility leave too.

“We supplement that with work alongside local causes that mean something to staff, through corporate volunteering, charitable grants and community partnerships.

“We previously carried out a beach clean at Tynemouth and, earlier this year, sponsored the release of 1000 lobsters, via the Whitby Lobster Hatchery, to help protect the long-term commercial sustainability of the local fishing industry.

“Additionally, we work with charity partners including Greggs Foundation, the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, St Oswald’s Hospice and NGAGE North East.”

And with such foundations in place, Paul says NorthStandard is well positioned to grow globally over the next decade and beyond – all with the North East at its heart.

He adds: “We aim to accelerate innovation through investment in advanced risk modelling, data analytics and ESG-aligned insurance solutions that anticipate the evolving needs of maritime businesses.

“And by fostering strong local and global partnerships alongside sustainable practices, we will build a resilient business that honours our heritage and takes on tomorrow together.”



NorthStandard

For more information about NorthStandard and the insurance services it provides, which include the Sunderland Marine division that covers fishing, coastal and specialist vessels, as well as aquaculture and angling lakes, visit the website at the top of this article.

Foundations for the future

First Mortgage

www.firstmortgage.co.uk

LinkedIn: First Mortgage

Climbing the property ladder remains one of life's most significant journeys. And helping people move from rung to rung is First Mortgage North East, whose fee-free model has supported thousands to fulfil their property dreams. Here, Steven Hugill talks to commercial director Phil McGuire about the multi-award-winning firm's growth journey, its national expansion blueprint and steadfast community focus.



Phil McGuire, First Mortgage North East commercial director

Phil McGuire opens a document on his laptop, the touchpad's faint click drowned by a hammer drill's rattling staccato beat.

Beside him, cellophane-sheathed picture frames lean against freshly painted white walls as, down a stone-carpeted staircase flecked by remnant building dust, a furniture delivery van's engine idles at the front door.

First Mortgage North East has a new home.

For a business founded to help others lay down property roots, it makes for more than a poetic scene.

But its new two-storey surrounds, in Team Valley's Marquis Court, extend far beyond the metaphorical.

The building work has transformed an empty shell into a nationally focused telephony hub, which will act as a digital twin to First Mortgage North East's Newcastle, Sunderland, Gateshead and Chester-le-Street high street branches.

The venture will employ up to 35 staff across areas including mortgage advice, customer care and lead distribution.

A step beyond its North East heartland, it also represents, says commercial director Phil, a business leaning into ever-increasing technological demand.

He says: "We still firmly believe in our high street model, because many people still want a physical base to speak to someone.

"But the world has evolved since the pandemic.

"Prior to COVID-19, virtually 100 per cent of client appointments were face-to-face.

"Now, around 60 per cent of customer relationships are conducted through Teams or Zoom calls.

"The digital client hub means we can continue servicing customers in the region, as well as many more across the UK, offering channel of choice.

"But it doesn't mean we're forgetting our past," says Phil of the business, which already employs 75 staff, including 32 advisors.

He adds: "We're very proud of our North East roots, and our commitment to clients won't change.

"We will remain an independent broker, providing a one-stop mortgage shop for the home-buying journey.

"The digital hub will add to that, providing more of the tailored services for which we're known," says Phil of the business, which boasts more than 29,000 five-star national Trustpilot reviews and 3200 five-star Google appraisals for its North East branches.

Its digital hub will be supported by a new academy, which will nurture the staff of tomorrow from January 2026.

Delivering Certificate in Mortgage Advice and Practice (CeMAP) level one, two and three training from national coach – and Future in Finance founder – Charlotte Hemmingway, the academy will be augmented by internal guidance from Phil, Ben and the wider team.

Phil says: "We offer customers the best service in the UK.

Pictures: Jamie Haslam



“That is driven by our experience and our employees’ skills, for which a number have picked up awards.

“They include a mortgage advisor who joined us from Nissan’s production line, who has worked hard and become one of the UK’s best advisors – he’s won five awards this year alone.”

“We take a lot of pleasure from seeing staff grow, and if we can replicate that on a larger scale through the academy, we will only move further forward,” adds Phil of the business, which recently picked up the Financial Reporter Protection Broker of the Year title.

It was also named L&G Mortgage Club Awards’ Best Broker Firm for Tech Innovation, honoured with a What Mortgage Awards’ Best Broker Customer Service accolade, and recently recognised as Top Mortgage Employer 2025 by Mortgage Introducer.

And yet it could all have been so very different.

Established in 2007 as M&R Financial Management by Phil alongside executive director Ben Riley, the firm quickly found itself at the mercy of the financial crash.

Having cut their mortgage sector teeth with Northern Rock, the pair branched into estate agency – Phil via Bellway Financial Services before switching to Rook Matthews Sayer – becoming CeMAP qualified in the process.

And then, in their mid-20s, only weeks after going self-employed to fuel their entrepreneurial endeavour, the economy came crashing down.

Three mortgage networks – Prestbury, Home of Choice and Burns Anderson-Honister Capital – joined to provide system, marketing and operational support – tumbled into administration.

In response, the duo switched to a directly authorised business model.

From there, the shifting sands began to steady and M&R Financial Management grew, opening its first office in Gateshead in 2010.

Phil says: “That decision proved a real saving grace.

“We put in an application five months before our last network went into administration – the authorisation had taken about six months.

“It is a significant part of why the business is here today.”

Their resilience was soon further rewarded in serendipitous circumstances, when a colleague’s departure to Scotland-based First Mortgage Direct paved the way for expansion plans.

Following conversations with managing director – now chief executive – Ian McGrail about its flagship fee-free model, M&R Financial Management became a franchise of the operator in 2013, switching to First Mortgage North East with a workforce of six.

Phil says: “There was a lot of common ground.

“Like us, they aspired to offer a best-in-market proposition to consumers – and they were free.

“Most brokers charge fees, but First Mortgage proudly never has.

“The model meant the business grew far more rapidly than the average broker.

“It was the right collaboration at the right time.”

With those strengthened footings, the business opened a high street base in the shadows of Newcastle Cathedral in 2014, and extended its



Gateshead hub by taking on the colloquially known Billy’s Bargains DIY store in 2016.

In the same year, turnover broke £1 million for the first time.

Just months later, in 2017, it moved into Sunderland and Chester-le-Street, and, by 2019, had expanded its Newcastle hub, with the office set to be extended again by the end of this year.

Then came another poignant collaboration.

Having switched back to a network model, the company secured investment from London Stock Exchange-listed MAB in 2021, a “significant” moment, says Phil, which continues to catalyse year-on-year growth.

Since its headline backing, written business and mortgage lending have both doubled, with the number of mortgages supported passing the 5000 mark in 2024, the same year it tripled the size of its Chester-le-Street office.

The partnership has also boosted First Mortgage North East’s community ties, which include raising nearly £100,000 for causes including Pelton-based children’s charity Heel & Toe – for which Phil and Ben are ambassadors.

It is also a passionate advocate for grassroots sport, backing organisations including Whickham Football Club, Golf Club and Cricket Club.

Phil adds: “To continue our journey of helping people, we needed a partner that was right for us – and MAB is that partner.

“We’ve put solid foundations in place; we have the right people and the right products, we’re doing things the right way and we’re giving back to the North East.

“We are proud to be the UK’s most trusted advisory firm.

“We are the best in the business.”



First Mortgage North East

For more information about First Mortgage North East and how its brokerage services could help you, visit the website at the top of this article. To learn more about employment opportunities at the firm, email joinourteam@firstmortgage.co.uk



Investing in regional growth

For more than three decades, NEL Fund Managers has helped small and medium-sized businesses across the North East turn ambition into growth. Having recently refined its brand and sharpened its focus to deliver more responsive, partnership-led funding, the organisation is enjoying a record period of investment across a diverse range of sectors. Here, chief executive Paul Scott talks to Peter Anderson about the organisation's evolution, expanding reach and future ambitions.

www.nel.co.uk

LinkedIn: NEL Fund Managers

The North East has long been celebrated for its entrepreneurial drive and innovations that have shaped the world.

From the railway pioneers and industrial titans of yesteryear to today's leaders in advanced manufacturing, digital technologies and those driving the transition to a green economy, the region has consistently been a hotbed of ingenuity and transformative enterprise.

Latest figures from NatWest and Beahurst's New Startup Index show the North East is the UK's fastest-growing region for start-up activity.

And yet, for many of these fledgling companies, scaling their ambitions is far easier said than done.

Despite the vibrancy of the local innovation ecosystem, access to funding – or even knowing where to turn for it – often remains the biggest barrier to growth.

One organisation seeking to change that is Gateshead-headquartered NEL Fund Managers.

For more than 30 years, NEL has played a pivotal role in providing alternative finance to growing North East businesses, successfully managed 17 investment funds, supported more than 1000 companies and helped create thousands of jobs along the way.

And for Ashington-born chief executive Paul Scott, who joined NEL as chief investment officer in 2022 before taking up the chief executive role last December – bringing with him extensive experience in direct lending, corporate finance and private equity across Europe and latterly leading Bahrain's sovereign wealth fund investment activities globally – the chance to help North East entrepreneurs unlock their potential was a real draw.

He says: "I'm originally from Ashington – my dad was a miner – so the North East is very much home for me.

"I've spent most of my career working in London and internationally in banking and finance, but the pull to come back and help grow the region's business ecosystem was strong.

"What drew me to NEL was its focus on growth and impact.

"For NEL, it's not just about providing investment, it's about helping companies build confidence, capability and a platform for future success.

"And there's a lot happening in the region right now.

"You can feel the momentum building, and the chance to be part of that – to help grow something meaningful and lasting while supporting the broader North East economy – makes it a really exciting time to be back."

Since returning to the North East, Paul has been instrumental in reshaping NEL, overseeing a brand refresh, bolstering the investment team, strengthening its board and refining operations to ensure the organisation continues to meet the needs of growing SMEs.

The refreshed brand – complete with a new logo, website and communications strategy – represents more than just a visual update.

It also signals a clearer enhanced value proposition: that NEL is a forward-looking, regionally-rooted fund manager that combines deep local knowledge with a philosophy of offering 'more than capital' through flexible, solutions-based investing and a hands-on value add approach, delivered with speed and decisiveness.

Supporting this renewed focus, Paul has reshaped the board with the appointments of Judith Hartley – the former chief executive of British Business Bank commercial subsidiary British Business Investments – and Trevor Castledine, chief commercial officer at LGPS Central.

They have joined NEL as non-executive directors, further strengthening the organisation's strategic capability and widening its reach with regional and national investors.

Paul says: "NEL has gone through quite a transformation over the last couple of years, from the way we invest to the way we position ourselves.

"We've worked hard to make the business more visible, more professional and more proactive.

"Our value proposition is pretty straightforward: we offer flexible, growth-focused finance for SMEs.

"We take the time to understand each business, diving into their model and structuring something that works for them, rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

"It's not just about deploying capital anymore.

"We sit with management teams, help them plan growth, think about exit strategies and

even explore areas like digital transformation or artificial intelligence – practical support that businesses can use – and we do this throughout the life of our relationship, not just up front.

"It's great to see the changes we've made coming through in our results, with excellent portfolio performance and investor returns.

"We also recently won an industry award for the second year in a row, which was wonderful recognition from our peer group.

"Being regionally based is also key.

"It's great to see national players set up offices in the North East to help build the ecosystem, but it's not without risk.

"I've been around long enough to see cycles of office openings and closures that can be driven by fluid capital flows or strategy shift from businesses headquartered in London and elsewhere."

Paul adds: "We're the only private, direct-lending alternative finance provider headquartered in the North East, and that proximity matters.

"It means we can get close to businesses, we understand the region and we can act fast – speed and deliverability are critical for SMEs executing in real time."

This approach is exemplified by the breadth and quality of firms NEL has supported through its management of British Business Bank's Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II), including the NPIF II – NEL Smaller Loans Fund and NPIF II – NEL Debt Finance Fund.

These funds provide investments from £25,000 to £2 million, helping a wide variety of businesses scale and achieve their growth potential.

With more than 150 SMEs now in its portfolio, and having opened an office in Stockton to bring its team closer to Teesside companies, NEL is enjoying a record period of investment.

From cocktail bars and distilleries to tech consultancies, professional services firms and low-carbon enterprises, its portfolio spans a wide spectrum of industries and locations across the North East.

Paul cites Newcastle-based technology consultancy Solution Performance Group (SPG), which recently secured the largest contract in its history with the University of Southampton, and Stockton-based infrastructure integrity testing firm Southern Asset Management, which has expanded into new markets – both of which received follow-on





investments from NEL – as examples of how the firm provides finance, guidance and confidence.

He says: “SPG is a perfect example of how investment, combined with practical support, can unlock new opportunities and enable a business to scale successfully.

“We’ve worked with them over a couple of years, providing follow-on funding that helped them secure a major digital transformation contract with the University of Southampton.

“It demonstrates how a North East business, armed with innovation and ambition, can take on projects of national significance – and how the right investment partner can back them to deliver.”

He adds: “It’s the same story with Southern Asset Management.

“They’ve taken on new contracts, recruited more people and are developing greener solutions as they move into onshore wind turbine testing and rail sectors.

“That’s exactly what these funds are designed to do – provide ambitious firms with the backing they need to grow, diversify and create real impact across the region.”

And as he looks ahead, Paul is focused on sustaining the momentum NEL has built while broadening its impact both geographically and in the scale of its investments.

With many SMEs still underserved and mainstream lenders and existing investment managers increasingly focused on national or mid-market businesses, there is a clear gap for

flexible private credit solutions that complement public sector funding.

With strong performance and the foundations laid, NEL is exploring the establishment of a new debt fund that would sit above existing public interventions, to provide SME finance that delivers both impact and strong investor returns.

Over time, Paul sees potential to scale this model across the wider north, building a regionally-headquartered private credit firm that competes nationally while staying true to its roots.

That in itself creates impact and high quality employment opportunities for the region.

He says: “It’s taken hard work, but we’re beginning to see the flywheel turn.

“It’s now about keeping that energy going and using it to reach more businesses across the North.

“There’s a huge swathe of ambitious businesses sitting below the radar of traditional lenders, or where existing providers cannot provide the bespoke structures businesses need – and that’s where we see the opportunity – to provide the right kind of capital, structured in the right way, to help them scale.”

He adds: “We’ve shown what can be achieved with targeted, flexible investment.

“The next step is scaling that approach, broadening our investor base and increasing the size and scope of what we can deliver.”

Words by Peter Anderson

Pictures by Pawel Gajek

(The Bigger Picture Agency)



NEL Fund Managers

For more information about NEL Fund Managers and the support it provides, visit the website at the top of this article.

BUILT TO LAST

www.tuttiandco.com
Instagram: tuttiandco

T U

After more than two decades building her North East lifestyle brand Tutti from a kitchen table to international recognition in stockists such as Fenwick, John Lewis, Macy's and Nordstrom, founder and creative director Kate Rose has come full circle with the opening of the brand's first concept store and studio at North Shields' Harbour House. Designed as a space where creativity, community and calm converge, it marks a new chapter for the brand – and for Kate herself. Here, Sian Anderson sits down with Kate to talk inspiration, brand evolution and the quiet strength behind Tutti's next phase.





KATE



ROSE

We've all picked up a piece of sea glass, a shell or an interesting rock on a beach walk and marvelled at its simple beauty.

For Kate Rose, founder and creative director of Tutti, the design-led jewellery brand based in North Shields, she took this moment of wonder much, much further.

What started with a simple walk on the North East coast has led to a creative journey that now sees Kate heading up a lifestyle brand stocked in luxury retailers including Fenwick, John Lewis, Macy's and Nordstrom.

Kate knew from a young age she wanted to run her own business.

Tutti's story, though, didn't begin with a business plan as such; it started with a young woman's decision to stay true to her home, act on her instincts and keep things practical.

Kate says: "I'd always said I was going to have my own business.

"My favourite days at school were when we did design and technology – those were the days I felt most alive.

"When I left university, I wanted to stay in the North East, but 21 years ago there wasn't a huge amount of creative opportunity up here.

"So, I thought, 'I'm going to do it myself and create the job I want'.

"I had no commitments and no mortgage, so I figured I might as well give it a go."

Her first 'warehouse' was her parents' conservatory, so operations had to start small.

Kate says: "Jewellery came from a deliberate decision; it was something I could do from home while still living with mum and dad.

"I'd always loved fashion, so it was ideal, and there was no sizing, small products and manageable stock levels; it was just what I needed at the time."

Like many great ideas, Kate needed a little distance to see her dream clearly.

A shopping trip to Milan left her bubbling with ideas, enthusiasm to get started and a name, with Tutti translated as 'everyone' from Italian.

She says: "I was really inspired by the Italian women; they were classic and stylish, though not overdone.

"They wore a white shirt; a gorgeous necklace; a pair of beautiful brogues.



“That was the inspiration I needed to create really gorgeous, classic and wearable accessories.”

Younger Kate didn’t wait around.

She travelled in May and had launched the brand by November.

She says: “Would I do it again? I don’t know. I was young and full of energy.

“I had this driving force to create the job I really wanted.

“Of course, the truth for all business owners is that you don’t ever really get that job.

“As soon as you start a business, you have to do everything – I became accountant, warehouse manager and designer from day one.”

Her first grant was a small cheque from the Prince’s Trust.

As Tutti has evolved, though, it has been

entirely self-funded.

Kate adds: “I’ve never taken funding – everything has been self-funded and re-invested.

“That’s given us control and integrity.”

Spend five minutes with Kate and you’ll understand why that was important to her.

She’s poised and perfectly put together, warm and smiley, but with a clear inner strength and determined nature.

That strength is further bolstered by the North East, which has played a huge role in shaping Tutti, with Kate’s regional roots helping her make more decisive decisions.

She says: “I nearly took a job down south, but I couldn’t face leaving the North East.

“In hindsight, that decision shaped so much.

“The North East is everything about what we do – the pebble I pick up on a dog walk or the photograph of waves crashing in.

“That all feeds into the texture and form of the jewellery.

“And, of course, the people are a crucial factor too.

“There were some trickier elements about being in the North East, though.

“I remember going down to my first trade shows in London, and people would ask where I was from and then act as if nothing existed up north.

“They’d even ask if I could get deliveries!”

Her initial northern stockists also became an important part of the Tutti story.

The Art Café, in Corbridge, near Hexham, was one of the first to order Kate’s designs.

Kate adds: “Kay (Allinson-Cooke, owner of The Art Café) was an amazing supporter and mentor.

“She stocked my first designs and it grew organically from there.”

Like most successful endeavours, though, it took a touch of luck as well as talent.

And Kate’s came in the form of Andrew Dixon, then executive director of Arts Council England.

She says: “He spoke about me on BBC Radio.

“And then I got people ringing to ask if they could stock us.

“It was never really the plan to go down a more wholesale route, but it’s just the way it happened.

“Family members were really against me having a shop, because they felt it would mean being tied to a till seven days a week.

“Instead, we went on this completely different journey and into a wholesale business, which has been amazing for building the brand.



"But it was never the plan.

"Looking back, I wasn't ready for the store – until now."

Kate and her Tutti team are now making themselves at home in Harbour House, the dynamic creative hub and co-working space in North Shields.

She says: "I waited 21 years for the right space.

"When Harbour House came along, I knew instantly – even when it was still a building site.

"It's more than just a space to us, it's a community.

"If I need photos of our new designs, for example, I can just pop upstairs."

The move to Harbour House coincided with the brand's 20-year anniversary.

Kate's first visit to the Little Bedford Street base was to suss it out for a birthday event.

That never happened, and she instead found a space she adored that would enable her lifelong dream of having her own store come to life.

She says: "It just felt like the right time.

"We've been in business for two decades; we can finally shout about it now."

The concept store launch also came with an unintentional full rebrand.

Kate says: "The move to Harbour House allowed us to develop our first capsule clothing collection, and I wanted it to have a brand mark.

"I went back to our original designers and told them more about where I am now in life – more confident and self-assured – and that I wanted that reflected in the brand.

"They created the new TT brand mark, and it was spot on.

"But it didn't fit with the old Tutti branding, so we then had to relook at that.

"I'm so glad we did; I feel like the brand was never fully me until now.

"This version captures every essence of what I wanted Tutti to be.

"It's about being unapologetically feminine – confident but calm, strong but serene."

When Tutti was launched, it set out as a quiet rebellion against throwaway fashion.

The Edit, Tutti's new clothing range, brings that full circle.

Kate worked with designer Amy Whitfield to create a blend of classic capsule wardrobe and core items that nod to trends but would still fit in your collection for years.

She says: "The white shirt, the perfect knit and the blazer are our cornerstones – those are the timeless pieces every wardrobe needs."

The range is currently only available in store.

Customers can come along for the full experience – from the curated store to a glimpse into the design world in the studio space next door, and even the 10/10 changing room (perfect lighting, soft colours and a wonderfully flattering mirror).

Kate says: "It's exclusive, so people can try things on, get personal service and feedback – that helps us grow the collection in the right direction."

And it also helps Kate share her love of Harbour House with customers.

She says: "You can buy flowers from Muscari next door, head upstairs to We Rise wellness studio, pop over the corridor for coffee at Northern Rye and round off your visit with lunch at Uncommon.

"I wanted our first store to feel like an experience, and within Harbour House, you can get that from us and other fantastic local brands."

From pebbles and skylines to texture – Kate's eye for detail is always on high alert.

She says: "Every single piece is thought through; each one comes from a moment in time."



Emphasising the point, the inspiration for one of Tutti's spring summer 2025 collections came from an old door on a Spanish island.

Kate says: "I saw this gorgeous door just outside Ibiza Old Town – the textures were so beautiful.

"I took photos, sent them to the factory and they became moulds for our spring collection.

"We're design-led, rather than trend-led.

"Each piece should have a classic element with a twist – something that lasts season after season."

As a young female founder in the early 2000s, Kate's unwavering energy was also met with challenges.

She says: "I've learned a lot about myself over 20 years: resilience, patience and the need to sometimes let go.

"It can be a lonely place. You make the decisions, you take the risks and you live with the consequences.

"I've always been quietly confident – getting on with it, rather than shouting about it – but with conviction underneath.

"When I started, business meetings were all men, and I felt out of my comfort zone.

"Now, though, there are so many women-led businesses in the North East – it's amazing to see."

In a year of change and growth, another important step was taken by Kate with the appointment of Helen Williamson as fractional managing director.

Helen's CV speaks for itself, with senior roles at Whistles and Hobbs.

A recent move back to the North East, and a chance meeting over dinner, led to her joining the Tutti team.

Kate says: "Bringing Helen in was about me realising I can't do it all; the business is now bigger than just me."

And the move means Kate might just get the job she always wanted.

She adds: "After 21 years, I'm finally getting to focus on design and creative direction, while Helen handles strategy.

"The next five years are about strategic growth – more stores, but only where it feels right – and expansion overseas, especially into the US, New Zealand and Australia.

"We've just rolled out to Macy's and Nordstrom in America.

"That's huge for us."



www.tuttiandco.com
Instagram: tuttiandco



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Turning insight into action

MMC Research

www.mmc.agency

LinkedIn: MMC Research

From understanding what drives customer decisions to consulting with key stakeholders, market research agency MMC Research has spent ten years helping organisations make confident, evidence-based choices. Founded by Natasha McDonough and supported by director of research and operations Vicki Shouksmith, the agency blends insight with recommendations to help guide a growing list of clients across the North East and beyond. Here, Peter Anderson speaks to Natasha and Vicki about what makes the firm's approach unique, their flexible workplace culture and what the future holds for the agency.



Natasha McDonough, MMC Research
founder and managing director

The Newcastle Lit & Phil has borne witness to many an invention, idea and exchange of thought.

From Stephenson's Geordie lamp to Swan's light bulb, the Lit & Phil has not only been a place of enlightenment and learning, but also a forum where ideas and theories have been tested, challenged and refined.

Today, research agency MMC carries forward that same spirit of inquiry, helping organisations and businesses make more confident, evidence-based decisions.

Operating from the North East BIC, in Sunderland, and the Stamp Exchange opposite the Lit & Phil in central Newcastle, the agency, which this year marks its tenth anniversary, is guided by values of curiosity, connection and clarity.

For founder and managing director Natasha McDonough, and director of research and operations Vicki Shouksmith, these principles not only encapsulate MMC's ethos but reflect their respective strengths.

Alongside an experienced team, they have shaped an approach that stands out in the market.

Natasha says: "We've always said what we do isn't just about gathering data – it's about helping businesses make better, faster and more confident decisions.

"Since COVID-19, the appetite for research has changed.

"During the pandemic, people wanted to listen more – to their customers, their teams, their communities. And that's carried through.

"There's a realisation now that good research isn't a nice-to-have but what keeps a business moving in the right direction."

She adds: "Vicki and I balance each other perfectly.

"My background is in marketing, so I'm more qualitative, big-picture and behaviour-focused, whereas Vicki is the analytical, data-driven brain behind our work.

"It's that blend that makes MMC unique."

Vicki says: "Natasha brings the context and creativity, and I make sure the analysis is accurate and actionable.

"Together, we turn insight into decisions that businesses can trust."

And for Vicki, this is where MMC's real strength lies: not merely in conducting rigorous market research, but turning findings into clear, actionable blueprints.

She says: "People still think of market research as someone with a clipboard, but that's so far from what we do.

"Our work gives clients the clarity to act – whether that's launching a new product or rethinking their strategy entirely.

"What makes us different is that we don't just hand over a report, we help clients understand what to do with the insight.

"We'll literally sit down with them and say, 'here are ten things you can take away and act on right now.'"

It is this approach that has won MMC a burgeoning list of clients, including a host of public organisations such as the North East Combined Authority, Durham Police and Crime Commissioner and Gentoo, and a growing number of private businesses from fast-growth tech firms to established national brands.

MMC's work with Gosforth-based online residential auctioneer iamproperty exemplifies its approach.

By delivering a full 360-degree view of the market – from interviewing estate agents and solicitors to surveying homebuyers – MMC has helped the firm, which announced record

Pictures: Andrew Lowe



Vicki Shouksmith, MMC Research's director of research and operations

revenue earlier this year, to make strategic decisions at every stage of its growth.

Vicki says: "Our work with iamproperty is a great example of how insight can underpin a fast-growing business.

"They've used us for every big decision – product launches, acquisitions, even naming new products.

"It's so rewarding to see our findings being used in board-level decisions that drive real change."

Another aspect that sets MMC apart is its stakeholder perception studies, in which the agency gathers detailed feedback from a company's key audiences, often revealing fresh insight and hidden opportunities.

Natasha, citing the example of Berwick-based Simpsons Malt, explains how MMC's research uncovered what mattered most to customers.

She says: "Through surveys and interviews, we discovered that consistency of product was the key selling point – more so than their history or brand story.

"That insight shaped the website copy and messaging across their communications."

With such trusted and consistent quality research, it is no surprise MMC's services are in

increasing demand.

Yet while Natasha and Vicki are open to growth – and a new London base, along with a team member in Manchester, is now providing scope to operate nationally – they are determined to expand thoughtfully.

Central to this is protecting their flexible, nomadic working culture, which allows the team to adapt to clients' needs while maintaining the close-knit, collaborative environment that has become MMC's hallmark.

Vicki says: "We've always believed growth shouldn't come at the expense of our culture.

"Expansion isn't about moving fast; it's about doing it in a way that keeps our values intact and ensures every client gets the same level of insight and service."

Natasha adds: "We've built a culture that's flexible, family-friendly and supportive.

"We're a team of working parents, and that's shaped the way we work – we trust each other to get the job done and to live life at the same time.

"It isn't about growing for the sake of it."

And for Natasha, who is also vice president of the North East Chamber of Commerce and a

board member of The Foundation of Light, it is vital MMC stays rooted in the North East.

She says: "Our heart and operations will remain firmly in the North East.

"London's important because it connects the North East to national opportunities.

"I'm a Londoner originally, so it's lovely to build that bridge, but the North East has shaped who we are as a business.

"It's where we've built our team, our culture and our approach, and it's important we continue to give back and support the region moving forward.

"Ten years in, we're proud of what we have achieved and even more excited for what's ahead."



MMC Research

To find out more about MMC Research, its approach and how it is helping organisations and businesses make more informed decisions, visit the website at the top of this article.

Opening doors to STEM: Esh Construction's quiet contribution to regional skills

Esh Group

www.eshgroup.co.uk

LinkedIn: Esh Group

The North East has a proud industrial heritage and a future that's increasingly shaped by science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Earlier this year, the North East STEM Foundation welcomed a major Government initiative to create 120,000 new training opportunities, including 30,000 additional apprenticeships, and the North East Combined Authority is seeking to bridge a skills gap in STEM sectors.



Darush Dodds, Esh Group's director of corporate affairs

With deep roots in the region, Esh Construction has quietly become a leader in STEM education support, reaching nearly 20,000 young people over the past decade.

It has also earned a status of being a contractor that delivers not just building infrastructure, but futures too.

For Darush Dodds, director of corporate affairs, the company's commitment to education is embedded in its core values, and he is proud of how Esh's work with primary schools enables children to imagine their futures from the earliest stages of their education.

He says: "Our Constructing Local strategy – evolving from our experiences in the education sector over a 15-year period – is built on changing perceptions, raising aspirations and

making people more employable for whatever job route they plan to go into in the future."

Esh's journey into STEM outreach began in 2015, when the team spotted an opportunity to do things differently.

Darush says: "Despite having a broad offering in the education space, we saw the potential to do more – to be trailblazers – by creating a programme that was different to anything we'd seen previously, but which upheld key education principles.

"That was, in a way, induced by the ever-changing procurement landscape and the social value it delivers."

The answer lay in primary education – an area where employer engagement was notably limited.

With teachers wanting learning outcomes that construction could help deliver, Esh explored ways to bring the industry into the classroom.

From building brick walls to teach dexterity, to using site activities to teach maths and geography, the possibilities were endless.

The result was Esh's Get into STEM programme, a hands-on interactive classroom session and activity kit designed to introduce children to the world of construction.

Darush says: "While the kit has changed to include foam bricks, measuring equipment and personal protective equipment, the real magic comes through the engaging storytelling, which gets youngsters on their feet and acting out potential future roles."

Teachers quickly expressed value in the initiative, with the programme growing rapidly to include a two-week loan model, which allowed teachers to integrate the kits into lessons and play.

While measuring the long-term impact of such programmes is notoriously difficult, Esh is clear about the value its work brings, and it has received several accolades.

These include Business in the Community's National Business Education Partnership

Pictures: Jamie Haslam



“If we want to inspire the next generation, we must show them what’s possible”

Award, the National STEM Ambassador Network’s Programme of the Year and the Queen’s Award for Enterprise for Promoting Opportunity and Social Mobility.

Fast forward ten years and Esh’s STEM kits – delivered by colleagues from an education or training background – have reached almost 20,000 young people, with feedback from teachers and pupils driving continuous improvement.

Esh has visited 413 schools in that period, delivering 481 sessions, with 5148 students engaged in the last academic year alone.

For Esh, supporting STEM education isn’t a bolt-on – the business benefits are clear.

Delivering high quality education outreach brings the business closer to the communities it serves and supports the development of its future workforce.

Collaboration with the North East Combined Authority’s North East Ambition programme has seen 3000 additional students develop a wider understanding of STEM-related construction careers through Get into STEM.

Looking ahead, Esh is ambitious about the next five years.

Darush adds: “The North East is undergoing rapid transformation, where opportunity is abundant and evolving.

“But we need to take more businesses into the classroom, from early years through to post-16 education, because visibility matters.”

Beyond inspiring early years pupils, Esh backs up its Get into STEM programme with Construction in the Curriculum and Building My Skills programmes for key stage three and four students.

Providing targeted workshops built around construction roles, Esh strives to ensure teenagers remain engaged as they progress through the education system and into the working world.

Darush says: “If we want to inspire the next generation, we must show them what’s possible.

“We must demystify industry, humanise roles and make career pathways tangible.”

Ultimately, Esh’s aim is to change perceptions and make construction an attractive career route.

Darush says: “Our job as a regional business, regardless of the sector we work in or are passionate about, is to help educators prepare the future workforce.

“But if we can’t influence young people within our sector and the knowledge we hold, then we can’t ask them to change their aspirations either.

“We must show them what’s out there, regardless of their age, because you can’t be what you can’t see.”

In a region where half a million people are not working but could be, Esh’s education offer is a small but vital part of a much bigger picture.

Esh Construction stands out as a contractor that’s inspiring future talent and championing the next generation of construction professionals.

Darush adds: “We’re raising aspirations and improving employment prospects.

“And I’m really proud of that.”



Esh Construction

To find out more about Esh Construction and its STEM outreach work, visit the website at the top of this article.

EMG Solicitors continues to champion charitable giving across the North

EMG Solicitors

www.emgsolicitors.com

LinkedIn: EMG Solicitors

Driven by kindness, integrity and service excellence, B Corp accredited EMG Solicitors is proud to be setting a new standard for social impact and charitable giving in the legal profession.

A recent report published by the Charities Aid Foundation found businesses in the North East are the likeliest in the UK to donate to charity.

Award-winning law firm EMG Solicitors, which is headquartered in the North – and has offices across the UK in Durham, Darlington, Newcastle, Penrith, Manchester and Reading – has been supporting charities, voluntary organisations and community groups in the region for more than a decade.

Ensuring the positive impact of its work is felt across the communities it serves has been central to EMG's values since the company was founded in 2014.

Today, EMG Solicitors plays an important role in the local community: helping to raise aspirations, improve quality of life, deliver social mobility and instil pride in the local area.

Claire Hewitt is head of business development and leads the social impact team at the firm.

She says: "As the company has grown, so has the reach and impact of our charitable work.

"Every new office that has opened has created opportunities to work with local charities and give something back to the communities we serve.

"Owing to the sectors we work in, from Court of Protection to family and mental health law, we see first-hand the life-changing work charities deliver.

"We want to ensure more people benefit from that support, and that charities continue to have the resources they need to make a difference.

"We also want our clients to know that by using us they are helping to do good in our communities."

EMG Charitable Fund

One of EMG Solicitors' most significant philanthropic ventures was the launch of its own charitable fund in 2019.

Managed by Point North (formerly County Durham Community Foundation), EMG donates five per cent of its profits in the form



Pictured is EMG Solicitors' social impact team during its community visit to The Allotment Project with Point North

Pictured, from left to right, are Luke Griggs, Headway chief executive; Jemma Morland, EMG Solicitors' director and head of Court of Protection property and affairs; and Emma Gaudern, EMG Solicitors' chief executive

of charitable grants; recently supporting local organisations including Owl Tree Café, in Kenton; Durham Agency Against Crime; and The Allotment Project, in Waterhouses, County Durham.

To date, the EMG Community Fund has awarded more than £73,000 in charitable grants, supporting in excess of 32,000 people across the North.

In 2023, EMG Solicitors also became a corporate member of Cumbria Community Foundation, further extending its charitable giving into the North West by supporting its Winter Warmth Appeal.

Another recent beneficiary is Baton of Hope in Cumbria, a charity aiming to lead the conversation around becoming a zero-suicide society.

Durham Fringe Festival

Earlier this year, EMG Solicitors lent its support to the Durham Fringe Festival by helping young people from Durham Area Youth to volunteer at, and attend, the event.

All participants said they would recommend volunteering at the Fringe Festival, and some of the top benefits of volunteering included socialising, meeting new people and being an active member of the community.

WonderLAN Ball

As one of the leading Court of Protection teams in the country with more than 81 specialists, EMG Solicitors has proudly supported Headway - the brain injury association, for the past decade.

The firm's annual WonderLAN Ball, which takes place on November 13 this year, has raised £140,000 for Headway and the brain injury survivors it supports.

Thanks to EMG's fundraising, every year nearly 100 brain injury survivors and their family members, carers and volunteers are able to enjoy a fun-filled activity weekend at the Calvert Trust, in Kielder, as part of Headway's LAN



(Look Ahead North) weekend.

B Corp accreditation

In April 2024, EMG Solicitors became the second law firm in the North East to be awarded B Corp status – an accreditation that focuses on a company's environmental, social and governance performance and public transparency.

The new social impact team at EMG, which looks after its community partnerships, was formed to more closely align with the standards adopted by B Corp to measure impact and performance.

In its latest impact report, EMG Solicitors highlighted some of the work it has done with charities and community groups to improve lives for local people.

Activities included donating 290 Easter eggs to food banks across the North, delivering a mentoring programme for young neurodiverse students within the Witherslack Group, and hosting a clothing donation station in its Gosforth office on behalf of the charity Smart Works Newcastle, which supports and helps women back into the workplace.

Looking to the future

As EMG Solicitors continues to grow and open new offices across the North and beyond,

charitable giving will remain a core part of its values.

The law firm's commitment to helping local communities thrive is something that continues to set it apart.

Claire adds: "When clients come to us for legal support, they're not only benefiting from expert care and advice, but they're also helping the communities where they live and work.

"Their trust in us helps us make a real difference in the places we all call home.

"And it's that sense of purpose that inspires our amazing colleagues every day."



EMG Solicitors

For more information about EMG Solicitors, the legal services it provides and the community support it delivers, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 500 6989.

Cracking the code to skills change

Recruitment challenges can risk short-circuiting even the strongest growth plans. So when global technology firm Sage found itself in need of reshaping its approach to talent development, it turned to Gateshead College. The solution was the eight-week Skills Bootcamps in Digital course, which complements online tuition with significant face-to-face support, and guarantees participants an interview at its conclusion. Colin Young spent a day at Sage – meeting Ronnie Peet, the company’s global director of data and customer data platform delivery; Monika Sharma, Gateshead College’s curriculum leader; and ex-chef-turned-Sage employee Jamie Nichol – to find out more.

Words by Colin Young

Photography by Andrew Lowe



www.gateshead.ac.uk/skills-bootcamps

Jamie Nichol began training as a chef the day after he left school at 16.

Starting as an apprentice in a pub near Beamish, County Durham, he worked his way up from veg cutter to secure a job in the restaurant at the Sage in Gateshead, before becoming head chef in a renowned Northumberland pub.

Six years ago, at the age of 26, after the pub had been put up for sale, and increasingly drained by the notorious demands and long hours of the hospitality industry, Jamie started looking for a fresh career.

The turning point was signing up for an eight-week Gateshead College digital training bootcamp programme.

Jamie, from Stanley, says: "I was good friends with the boss at the pub, because we worked together every day, and when he said he was selling up and leaving, I knew it was the right time to get out and train in something else.

"I'd always been quite interested in computers, and got obsessed with building them up and wanting to know how they worked, so I signed up for a computer course, firstly to progress on to university.

"That's when I found out about the bootcamps; working on the software development aspect was perfect for me.

"It was very intense, and a lot of really hard work, but it was the best thing I've ever done."

He embraced his software development studies and walked into the many open doors of opportunity at Sage's three huge office blocks on Cobalt Business Park, near Wallsend.

After his interview, he was offered a job, along with two other highly-rated and motivated Gateshead students.

Now 30, he is an associate developer in the software development team.

Sage, with a global office estate boasting in excess of 40 bases, has been transforming the North East's economic landscape for more than 40 years as a leader in accounting, financial, HR and payroll technology.

And the company, whose network of nearly 13,000 jobs across the globe stem from its North Tyneside base, has altered its recruitment strategy to create better routes into sustainable careers in STEM – moving beyond purely graduate-level roles to provide more opportunities for people to stay and work in the North East.

Central to that shift are Gateshead College's bootcamps, with Ronnie Peet, the firm's global director of data and customer data platform delivery, reserving special praise for Monika Sharma, the education provider's curriculum leader.

He says: "We know that if Monika recommends them, they're going to be good.



Ronnie Peet, Sage global director of data and customer data platform delivery

"We don't have to spend loads of time on interviews and searching through job boards.

"You have a trusted seal of approval, so you know when people join, they're going to be good," says Ronnie, who has worked for Sage for more than 15 years.

He adds: "It didn't take long to realise there's a myth in the North East that there aren't many IT jobs – companies aren't great at advertising the jobs out there.

"And I was staggered to find out about the barriers women see in IT.

"We've totally changed our recruitment advert and more people are interested.

"What Jamie did was a brave move.

"It's a huge step to throw it all up in the air, learn something different and see how the chips come down.

"But the college will always be there to help,

and through its courses – including the bootcamps – you can learn sought-after skills, make the right career decisions and earn good salaries."

The Skills Bootcamps in Digital course was initially set up by Gateshead College through the Government's Skills for Life campaign, and continues to develop with North East Combined Authority funding to retrain and upskill adults in industries with employee shortages.

An integral part of the digital bootcamp, and its success, has been the partnership between the college and industry, with Sage at the forefront, providing opportunities and filling vacancies.

And thanks to Monika, the partnership continues to evolve.

Originating from Kent, Monika made her own significant career change, having previously worked in theatre at venues including Sunderland Empire and Gala Durham.



She's eager, in this hands-on role, to stem the brain drain from the region, and is passionate about creating better opportunities for everyone in STEM.

She says: "The bootcamps are a way of quickly upskilling people, from completely different backgrounds and who have no digital experience, allowing them to make that pivot and get them into new and completely different careers.

"And for parents, or people with caring responsibilities, the courses allow them to be a little bit more flexible with the change of working styles.

"Plus, there's employability guidance, because not everyone is necessarily ready for the workplace.

"There are jobs available, but there's a real recruitment problem because so many jobs are still asking for five or ten years' experience.

"Everyone talks about a skills gap, but what we've found is that there isn't a skills gap at all.

"It's not necessarily a case of taking a graduate with ten years' experience, but getting people into these roles early and nurturing them.

"What we're trying to show, especially through the model we've worked on with Sage, is how a changing of the mindset can help firms become more open to recruiting people with less experience, but who still have the skills they need.

"We have learners, we can upskill them and we can get them ready for the workplace.

"If you take someone early in their career, it creates a sense of loyalty towards that organisation and they stay for the long term, developing more skills over time.

"Ronnie and I are both neuro-divergent and we're passionate about increasing the diversity of the workforce in terms of gender and ethnic background, but also people who are neuro-divergent, supporting them into the workplace and making sure it's somewhere they can go."

The bootcamps are held three times each year – the next course is in January – and in addition to the day-and-a-half online learning over eight weeks, the college also provides support on employability through trainer/assessor Chelsea Kirchner.

Monika says: "It is intense. I don't sugarcoat it. They're called bootcamps for a reason.

"But learners get wraparound support every step of the way.

"We know it's very hard for people to change what they've always done, so our courses are designed with the intention of going into work,

rather than further training.

"University isn't for everyone.

"It's not about flicking a switch and saying, 'you're not a chef anymore, you are now working in digital'.

"It's more about what a person can bring from their old job to this new career, and how they can use those transferable skills to be successful in the workplace."

Monika adds: "Chelsea is absolutely incredible in bringing the students out of their shells and talking about resilience.

"She thinks about all the challenges they have in their lives, and how they can use that moving forward.

"That's possibly one of the most valuable parts of the programme because digital is a little bit different to other industries in the way it's managed, the agile methodologies and the project work."



Jamie Nichol, associate developer in Sage's software development team

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A new era for North East innovation

The North East is poised to play a central role in the UK's artificial intelligence revolution through the £30 billion AI Growth Zone announced in early autumn. At the venture's core is Stargate UK — a transatlantic collaboration between Nscale, OpenAI and NVIDIA designed to accelerate technology adoption from Newcastle's Cobalt Park — and QTS' planned £10 billion data centre in Cambois, near Blyth. What does this headline wave of investment say about the region's place in the global digital landscape, and how will it write a new chapter in the North East's storied industrial legacy?

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Join the discussion

Scan the QR code below to visit our LinkedIn page and add your thoughts to the conversation.





Jon Holden
Lead for cyber and fintech
CyberNorth

A region shining in the cyber world

The North East has always been a region that builds things that genuinely matter; it's in our DNA.

We went from the power of the shipyards and steelworks to the innovation of software, and we're now building the future with artificial intelligence.

We don't just sit around and talk about innovation here: we get on with it.

The announcements – the AI Growth Zone, the huge investments from players like Nscale, OpenAI, NVIDIA and QTS – are proof of that spirit.

They are also proof that the rest of the world is finally seeing what we've known all along: the North East has the talent, the space and the spirit to drive this next industrial revolution.

This is our moment.

But let's be absolutely clear: none of this works without cyber.

You can't build trust in artificial intelligence, or resilience into data, without rock-solid security at its core.

Cyber is what makes the whole thing real, safe and scalable.

And that's where our region already shines.

We've quietly built one of the UK's strongest cyber communities – we're skilled, collaborative and fiercely proud of our roots.

This isn't just about some new tech, it's about our legacy.

It's about taking the same fire and determination that built the greatest ships and steel structures, and focusing it on building a secure and intelligent future.

I couldn't be prouder to see the North East leading the charge, and doing so in our way: bold, secure and built to last.



Mac McEldon
Founder and chief executive
CiberAI

Leading the next industrial revolution

I recently quoted NVIDIA founder and chief executive Jensen Huang at an event: "Agentic artificial intelligence is the automation of automation – the single most powerful force of our time."

I firmly stand by that statement.

I also spoke about how the UK – and by extension the North East – is in a 'Goldilocks position' for artificial intelligence: the right mix of talent, research, industry and infrastructure at precisely the right time.

The announcement of the £30 billion AI Growth Zone, along with projects such as Stargate UK and QTS' £10 billion data centre in Cambois, validates that position and accelerates our momentum.

These developments are not just about infrastructure or economics, they are about regional, global and human potential.

The North East is rapidly securing a front and centre place within the world's artificial intelligence future.

Why? Because it has qualities that are both rare and sought after globally:

- Access to abundant low-carbon energy, which is crucial for sustainable high-performance computing
- A network of world-class universities producing fundamental research and a steady stream of talent
- An existing tech ecosystem already strong in robotics, advanced manufacturing and space technologies

The direct impact of these investments – new infrastructure, data centres and jobs – is significant.

But the indirect benefits could also include:

- **Tech business concentration and clustering:** With greater focus on the North East, we will not only see infrastructure investment, but the rapid growth of artificial intelligence-driven businesses, from start-ups to scale-ups and multinationals setting up regional bases and fixing a spotlight on our region not seen since the industrial age
- **Global exposure and credibility:** As international attention turns to the North East, our region becomes a showcase of what responsible, large-scale artificial intelligence adoption can look like
- **Talent attraction and skills development:** Initiatives such as the OpenAI Academy – with its ambition to upskill 7.5 million UK workers by 2030 – will disproportionately benefit regions where the infrastructure, partnerships and opportunities already exist, and the North East will not only retain more graduates but attract skilled workers nationally and internationally
- **Innovation culture:** The North East has a proud industrial heritage built on coal, steam, steel and shipbuilding, but we are writing a new chapter – defined by data, algorithms and agentic automation – which will drive a culture of artificial intelligence and shape industries as diverse as healthcare, law, logistics, financial services and advanced manufacturing

This is, in every sense, the next industrial revolution.

But unlike the age of steam and steel, it is powered by intelligence, automation and collaboration between human creativity and machine capability.

Transcending the transactional

FRP Corporate Finance

www.frpadvisor.com/what-we-do/corporate-finance/

LinkedIn: FRP Corporate Finance

www.bustonmaughan.co.uk

LinkedIn: Buston & Maughan Group

Business success is predicated upon many factors, not least a trusted support network and a good deal of persistence. Mick Buston is more than familiar with both. When seeking investment to expand social housing regeneration firm Buston & Maughan across the UK, he turned to FRP Corporate Finance partner Abu Ali. And after years of meticulous searching for the right partner, the relationship has delivered backing from Foresight Group. Here, Mick tells Steven Hugill how the funding will drive the organisation's growth plans and how Abu's guidance will continue to extend far beyond the transactional.

Sometimes, a little patience can make all the difference.

So too can good advice.

Just ask Mick Buston.

Keen to find financial backing to expand part-eponymous social housing regeneration services provider Buston & Maughan beyond its North East heartland, he spent seven years searching for a partner that understood the business' commercial and cultural composition.

There were offers along the way – some more than tempting – but under the wise counsel of Abu Ali, partner at business advisory firm FRP Corporate Finance, Mick held firm.

That was until Abu introduced him to regional private equity and infrastructure investment manager Foresight Group.

Its approach immediately resonated with Mick's philosophy for the 20-year-old County Durham-headquartered firm's future.

With its backing – provided via the Foresight

North East Fund, supported by £18 million from Durham County Council's Pension Fund – Willington-based Buston & Maughan, which specialises in heating installation, boiler and gas repairs, void works and bathroom and kitchen refurbishments, is now rolling out Yorkshire and North West expansion plans.

Central to the blueprint is a doubling of the company's revenue and its existing 11,500-plus property service portfolio – which covers 11 housing associations providing homes from Berwick down to Loftus, in east Cleveland, and across to County Durham market town Barnard Castle – over the next two years.

Those ambitions will be reached by Foresight Group's support to strengthen Buston & Maughan's senior leadership team, introduce greater procurement efficiency and boost talent development and apprenticeship programmes.

It will also help launch carbon reduction strategies and fuel the firm's ability to install more sustainability-focused apparatus such as solar panels and air source heat pumps across clients' properties.

Pictured, from left to right, are Tavia Sparks, Foresight Group investment director; James Cockburn, FRP Corporate Finance executive; Mick Buston, Buston & Maughan co-founder and chief executive; Mick Maughan, Buston & Maughan co-founder; and Abu Ali, FRP Corporate Finance partner



Pictures: Jamie Haslam

Co-founder and chief executive Mick, who runs the 90-plus-staff business alongside fellow former gas engineer Mick Maughan, says: "I wanted financial backing to open up a larger picture for the business.

"My ultimate goal is to leave a legacy; I want to hand part of the company to my children.

"But I also want to create a hub in the North East that will create jobs and support the supply chain in this region."

While the power of perseverance was pivotal to the deal's realisation, so too was a relationship that transcended the transactional, with Mick and Abu fostering a personal connection that went far beyond just commercial considerations.

Mick says: "I've had a lot of offers over the years, but Abu has advised me not to go with them.

"He could have easily pitched me deals, but he knew what I was looking for and that I was in no rush.

"It's taken some time to get to this point, and we've become very good friends along the way.

"When he recommended I speak to Foresight Group, it felt like the right move.

"Not only does it represent a very good fit morally for Buston & Maughan, but it understands what we're trying to achieve too.

"Plus, the investment is coming from a local fund, which means a lot."

For Abu, who leads FRP Corporate Finance's Newcastle office alongside fellow partner Phil Williams, the promise of homegrown capital engendering further economic growth in the region was a fundamental factor in the deal.

He says: "The guys have built a great business, which will become a national brand, and one of the key reasons we selected Foresight Group to support its growth plans was that it has raised local money.

"The two Micks are very proud County Durham lads, and by using the County Durham Pension



Fund it means that even when Buston & Maughan becomes a national business, it will always retain its home region focus.

"That is important to the business, and it's also important to me.

"I'm passionate about doing the right thing, and I too want to leave a legacy that benefits the people and businesses of the North East."

Such heritage, says Mick, will run deep thanks to Foresight Group's backing, with Buston & Maughan's expansion primed to reverberate – in the first instance – across the North East and its many supply chain partners.

And central to it all will remain Abu's valued counsel.

Mick says: "This investment will be good for our customers and everyone we work with.

"As well as creating jobs in the hub area, our supply chain will grow as we grow, because we'll be buying more materials and using more sub-contractors.

"It will have a massive effect on the region.

"And Abu will continue to support us as we move forward, helping us identify potential acquisitions in Yorkshire and the North West that align with our models.

"I've got no plans to stop growing."



Buston & Maughan
For more information about Buston & Maughan and its work across the social housing sector, visit the website at the top of this article.

FRP Corporate Finance
For more information about FRP Corporate Finance and the services it provides, visit the website and LinkedIn page at the top of this article.

Driving innovation and growth in the North East defence sector

Business Durham

www.businessdurham.co.uk

www.northeasttechnologypark.com

LinkedIn: Business Durham

NETPark's status as a home for innovation has been strengthened further by the arrival of RED Scientific, whose operational digital wargaming platform is helping shape high-level defence strategy. Here, managing director Marc Brûlé-Walker and Business Durham managing director Sarah Slaven highlight the firm's technological prowess and the important role Sedgefield-based NETPark is playing in its growth story.



Marc Brûlé-Walker, RED Scientific managing director, pictured outside NETPark's Plexus business hub

RED Scientific (RED) recently expanded into the North East Technology Park (NETPark) in Sedgefield, a move that strengthens the company's commitment to advancing regional defence and security innovation.

RED's operational digital wargaming platform is helping shape high-level defence strategy, supporting mission rehearsal, logistics planning and staff officer training at the Ministry of Defence and NATO.

These aren't games for entertainment, they are evidence-based simulations rooted in mathematical modelling, operational analysis and data science.

RED's platform draws on the study of more than 160 historical conflicts, using the analysis to generate realistic and testable scenarios.

Established more than 35 years ago, RED has evolved into a trusted defence and security consultancy, delivering projects across digital engineering, systems integration and supportability and safety assessments.

The company is a supplier across key Ministry of Defence frameworks and works in collaboration with prime contractors.

RED's decision to open a base at NETPark marks a strategic step in its national growth.

Marc Brûlé-Walker, managing director, says: "NETPark offers more than just office space – it offers the strategic environment we seek, combining technical infrastructure with the credibility to host high-level defence and security engagements."

The move has already proven invaluable.

RED has hosted secure and high-profile meetings on site that have included clients normally embedded in the South West.

The NETPark office also supports RED's broader mission to grow defence and security capability in the North East.



RED Scientific has expanded into NETPark, in Sedgefield, County Durham

Marc is chair of the North East Regional Defence and Security Cluster (NERDSC), a volunteer-led network of more than 140 organisations working to increase regional representation in the UK defence and security sector.

He says: “The North East has world-class capability, but less than one per cent of the workforce here is employed in defence and security.

“There is huge potential to change that.

“NETPark plays a key role, not just as a base for companies like ours, but as a magnet for collaboration and innovation.”

Collaboration is at the heart of RED’s operating model.

The company delivers many of its contracts in partnership with academia and other specialist organisations, often acting as a prime contractor to build ‘rainbow teams’ for complex challenges.

Looking ahead, RED is also exploring how its

defence expertise could support other sectors requiring a robust scientific approach to decision making, such as the UK energy sector.

As a member of NOF, a national business development organisation in the energy sector, RED is undertaking a feasibility study into how its modelling and risk analysis capabilities could support resilience and planning in the production and distribution of renewable energy.

With a skilled hybrid workforce, strong defence credentials and a growing regional footprint, RED’s presence at NETPark is part of a long-term strategy focused on innovation, collaboration and value creation.

Sarah Slaven, Business Durham managing director, says: “It’s great to welcome RED to NETPark, where it is carrying out ground-breaking work in defence and security innovation.

“As the organisation that manages NETPark, Business Durham is pleased to support RED’s efforts in building the North East’s defence sector.

“We provide a platform for growth, offering not just world-class facilities but tailored business support to tenants.

“NETPark is proud to help RED and other businesses drive innovation, create opportunities and contribute to the wider development of the sector in the North East.”



NETPark

To find out more about how NETPark can support your business’ growth and innovation plans, visit the websites at the top of this article.

To learn more about RED Scientific, visit www.red-scientific.co.uk

Balancing technology with the human touch

Jackson Hogg

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The rise of artificial intelligence continues to reshape recruitment and HR practices, with many companies using digital tools to streamline employment processes in the name of efficiency. But adopting such an approach carries inherent risk, not least the potential loss of emotional understanding and practical nuance that pre-programmed machines cannot yet replicate. Here, Lauren Bathan, associate director – HR Partnership at specialist recruitment and outsourced HR services provider Jackson Hogg, tells Steven Hugill why maintaining balance remains essential to effective operations.

ChatGPT. Copilot. Gemini. Claude.

Short words. And shorthand.

Just like searching the internet has become intuitively prefixed by the Google neologism, so too has the harnessing of artificial intelligence's power taken on a verb-like quality.

In business, where efficiency provides a foundation stone for evolution, the platform names have quickly become widely accepted parlance for productivity.

Throughout boardrooms and across shopfloors, technology is becoming an ever more defining priority in process and performance.

From customer service support to marketing messaging, workflow management and more, artificial intelligence is rooted in the routine.

It is also increasingly trusted to oversee HR functions and manage recruitment campaigns, with the latter led by pre-programmed systems that scrutinise CVs and, in increasing numbers of cases, vet prospective employees during the interview process.

But the shift, says Lauren Bathan, associate director – HR Partnership at specialist recruitment and outsourced HR services firm Jackson Hogg, leaves many businesses risking becoming lost in translation.

The phraseology may be fresher, and the algorithms might be ever-advancing, but much of the language around recruitment and HR remains fundamentally the same: the human factor remains crucial to operations.

"We can't pretend artificial intelligence won't

have an impact on our chosen career path, or the path of our employers," says Lauren, who oversees Newcastle, Billingham and Leeds-based Jackson Hogg's HR Partnership provision, which delivers tailored support to catalyse clients' growth, nurture talent streams and empower positive cultures.

She says: "Businesses run on data, and if artificial intelligence tools can better compile and adopt that data, then HR departments should be open to its use.

"Administrative tasks like handling documents, where content is largely static, could be supported by an artificial intelligence programme, particularly those where time is of the essence – like drafting and issuing offers of employment.

"People expect an efficient and modern interface, but these could perhaps include a function that allows for the addition of a personal message, to deliver a human touch to the machine-led function.

"Companies could also use technology to create a digital version of their employee handbook.

"This would allow users to ask routine employment questions and receive a natural language response, much the same as asking their HR representative, but on matters that require information, rather than advice, for example, procedural and administrative steps to take following an absence.

"All of this would free up HR time for the real value-adding stuff.

"But businesses are also places where emotions play a significant part in day-to-day operations.

"Artificial intelligence is a machine, but employees aren't – technology isn't able to identify and understand if a member of staff isn't feeling themselves in the same way their human boss would."

"There is an underlying need for empathy and human connection in the workplace, and that is where a HR department – and the people in its team – comes into its own," says Lauren, who has helped numerous Jackson Hogg clients across the science, manufacturing, engineering and technology sectors strengthen HR frameworks.

She adds: "Artificial intelligence presents a unique opportunity for the profession.

"We're seeing some sceptics, some trailblazers and some who see this as disruption manifested.

"But there is also a lot to be said about getting the basics right, which principally include retaining good employee relations.

"If a business wants to strip everything back to be very efficient, is that going to suit operations, or might it erode some of their values?

"People have a psychological contract with their employer; many don't expect their relationship to be outsourced to an avatar.

"People want – and expect – to deal with people.

"Is an artificial intelligence avatar going to sit down and listen to an employee's grievance or



Lauren Bathen, Jackson Hogg
associate director - HR Partnership

chair a disciplinary hearing?

“Could an artificial intelligence avatar deliver equity, diversity and inclusion training?”

“Employees, ultimately, are customers too, and businesses should treat them as such when thinking about bringing in new tools aimed at delivering greater efficiency.

“Because when people feel good, they do good work – and businesses are better places for that.”

Similarly, when organisations are rolling out recruitment plans, Lauren says they must do so with a nuanced approach, wherein artificial intelligence supports a venture, rather than explicitly leads the process.

Prioritising the latter, she says, risks removing important context from decision-making and raises potential for roles to become increasingly boxed by rigid boundaries and defined by keyword-led searches.

She says: “Artificial intelligence is seen by many companies as a way to boost efficiency.

“But the opposite argument is that using an avatar to interview someone, for example, risks creating a false economy because it doesn’t capture the nuance or human judgement that people bring to the process.

“It also risks sending a damaging message about where humans in a business are willing to spend their time, if they’re not choosing new staff.

“Furthermore, we know from research that the people who code the artificial intelligence tools

used to sift CVs and interview people still tend to be tech-focused people, rather than HR experts.

“If we are using systems without knowing the formula or settings in the background, that creates concerns over unconscious bias – there needs to be transparency in seeing the working out.

“Recruitment consultants, like HR departments, are crucial pieces in the employment puzzle and the nuance that comes with designing a job.

“Artificial intelligence is, as the name suggests, artificial; it doesn’t have personality, and the logic and emotion of a human still best draws out whether a person is a suitable candidate for a job.”

And such personal insight, says Lauren, will remain the bedrock of Jackson Hogg’s provision, which she says will continue to deliver understanding, discretion and empathy across the recruitment and HR process.

She adds: “We’re real people that create long-term relationships with clients and candidates.

“And that is crucial for businesses because people are still an organisation’s competitive advantage – why surrender that prerogative and influence to a machine?

“Recruitment and HR are still best delivered by people for people, and our people will continue to drive this business – and the many client relationships we have – forward.

“The human in human resources will always remain our competitive advantage.”



Jackson Hogg

To find out more about Jackson Hogg and its suite of specialist recruitment and outsourced talent services support – including its HR Partnerships – visit the website or contact the email address at the top of this article.



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ROUNDTABLE

From coalfields to data fields

Delivering a new industrial and economic future for South East Northumberland

From a £10 billion data centre development to world-leading offshore energy innovation, multi-million-pound education investments, town centre transformations and a railway revival, South East Northumberland is alive to the sound of regeneration. Here, in an exclusive roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside Northumberland County Council, Port of Blyth and Northumberland College at Blyth's Energy Central Learning Hub, business leaders discuss the area's progress and assess the moves needed to secure future success.

Words by Steven Hugill

Photography by Charlotte Beeckmans
(The Bigger Picture Agency)

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This is an abridged version of the full roundtable discussion, which you can read by visiting www.netimesmagazine.co.uk

South East Northumberland is undergoing watershed transformation, with headline developments redefining its industrial, economic and social identity. How is the region placed as it heads towards a fresh calendar year?

Winds of change are sweeping through South East Northumberland.

Where colossal coalfields and roaring iron and steel mills once fuelled historic change, the small pocket of England's most northerly county today stands at the forefront of a fresh industrial revolution.

From a headline-grabbing £10 billion data centre development to world-leading offshore energy innovation, the £95 million Energising Blyth programme, multi-million-pound education investments, flagship town centre regeneration projects and a momentous rail renaissance, the area is ready to propel a powerful new era of growth.

Sarah McMillan, Northumberland County Council's director of economic development and growth, said the area is tracking an upward trajectory.

She said: "This really feels like an optimistic time for South East Northumberland.

"Through programmes such as Energising Blyth – which recently delivered the Market Pavilion cinema and events space – our plans are rooted in opportunity."

The region's commercial landscape will soon be augmented by QTS' £10 billion Cambois-based data centre development. How transformative will that investment be to South East Northumberland's future?

When Britishvolt's plans to create a 3000-job electric vehicle battery-making plant in Cambois foundered, it left dark clouds hanging

over the seaside village.

The melancholic feel, though, has lifted, with technology firm QTS embarking on a £10 billion endeavour to create a ten-building data centre campus on a 250-acre plot.

And with earthworks having officially begun in October, roundtable members were unequivocal in the venture's potential for South East Northumberland and the wider North East.

Andy Lawson, director of pre-development at QTS, which operates as a portfolio company within private equity firm Blackstone, said: "It is a really exciting project, especially for the legacy a £10 billion investment will leave.

"Years from now, people will still be thinking about the opportunities and benefits that continue to arise from such a level of investment."

That impact stands to be augmented by the campus' place within the recently-unveiled North East AI Growth Zone.

In it, QTS' development stands to supplement work by technology firm Nscale alongside OpenAI and NVIDIA to create Stargate UK to develop a platform to boost British artificial intelligence adoption alongside computer chip production at Newcastle's Cobalt Park.

Thomas Wildsmith, head of commercial at Blyth-based Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) Catapult, which works with industry partners to test and develop green technologies, said AI Growth Zone status affords "huge innovation opportunities".

He said: "The AI Growth Zone could also help with attracting further inward investment.

"It provides a beacon to say, 'come and work with us – look at the sectors we're supporting, and the employers and innovators already here'".



“The new Northumberland College campus will feed the skills pipeline with what employers need; we must scale such delivery to help SMEs in South East Northumberland access the talent they need”

Iain Nixon,
Education Partnership North East vice
principal for partnerships and business
solutions

How will QTS’ data centre investment complement South East Northumberland’s wider growth story?

Subsea power line maker JDR’s soon-to-open £100 million-plus plant close to Blyth Estuary will, say bosses, complement an existing Hartlepool site by expanding the business’ product range in the rapidly-growing global renewable energy market.

Hailing its potential, Martin Lawlor, Port of Blyth chief executive, said: “The factory will operate as the first high-voltage cable maker in the UK, which is not just exciting for South East Northumberland, but exciting for UK PLC too.”

He said the development could be supported by the expansion of the port’s four-berth strong Battleship Wharf terminal, which is used to support wind farm and offshore decommissioning projects, and also highlighted the West Hartford development, which stands close to the port and offers up to one million square foot of commercial space.

A strong skills base is crucial to any commercial blueprint. What measures need to be taken to ensure South East Northumberland has a workforce pipeline to compete nationally and globally?

Jeff Hope, UK and Ireland manufacturing director at Ashington-based paint maker AkzoNobel, urged greater collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Citing measures taken by the Dulux manufacturer to strengthen its skills base, he said: “We need to create learning environments that support industry.

“The education sector can’t do it alone: the private sector must be more involved.

“We have spent the last ten years working with the education sector – from primary schools to universities – to understand how it is working.

“And we are now one of the few businesses with no skills gaps.”

How can such initiatives be scaled to ensure small and medium-sized enterprises across South East Northumberland can secure the talent needed to meet growth goals?

From iced drink maker Polar Krush to electronics manufacturer Arian EMS, lighting firm Raytec and healthcare product maker Viveca, Ashington’s Wansbeck Business Park boasts a diverse commercial scene.

And its portfolio will soon expand further, with work progressing at pace on a £54 million Northumberland College campus.

Overseen by Education Partnership North East, and set to be completed in late 2026, it will nurture students across a range of sectors including electrical and mechanical engineering, robotics and automation, civil engineering and groundworks, automotive and green transport, and housing and modern construction.

Iain Nixon, the education provider’s vice principal for partnerships and business solutions, said: “The Ashington development will feed the skills pipeline with what employers need.

“And we must scale such delivery to help SMEs in South East Northumberland, which are so critical to the economy, access the talent they need.”

How important are transport improvements, such as the reopening of the Northumberland Line, to the area’s growth ambitions?

Lost for more than 60 years following Beeching’s swingeing cuts, the Northumberland Line has revived passenger services between Ashington and Newcastle.

Richard Hogg, founder and chief executive of Newcastle-based recruitment and outsourced HR services provider Jackson Hogg, added: “There was a time when we couldn’t get top graduates to leave Newcastle and come to Blyth or Cramlington.

“But that isn’t the case any longer – the new line is a real game-changer.”



“This really feels like an optimistic time for South East Northumberland, and through programmes such as Energising Blyth, our plans are rooted in opportunity”

Sarah McMillan,
Northumberland County Council director
of economic development and growth

Muckle achieves record-breaking financial growth for fourth consecutive year

Muckle LLP

www.muckle-llp.com

LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

Leading commercial law firm Muckle LLP is continuing to move forward at pace, having secured its fourth consecutive year of financial growth. Here, the B Corp accredited firm, which has offices in Newcastle, Penrith and Stockton, tells N magazine about its progress – and why it is primed for further success.

Anthony Evans, Muckle LLP managing partner



Leading commercial law firm Muckle LLP is proud to announce another excellent financial year.

For the fourth consecutive year, turnover has improved, reaching more than £19 million, which represents a 12 per cent increase and a profit of more than £5 million.

In addition to being the fourth consecutive increase in the firm's turnover, it is the third time in four years the firm has achieved double-digit growth.

Key growth areas

Muckle has experienced growth across all teams in the business.

The firm's investment plans executed in previous years have begun to pay off, with the highest increases in its agriculture, rural estates and private client team (27 per cent) – where much of which has been growth in the team in Cumbria – in its construction team (20 per cent) and in its national debt recovery practice (17 per cent).

With its successful appointment to several

“Our financial performance also reflects our great culture, the investments we have made and our long-term strategy”

public and third-sector panels in the 2024 financial year, Muckle has also continued to grow its public sector work and its sports, education and charities team (16 per cent).

People progression

Muckle's success is down to its investment in recruiting, engaging and developing the best people.

In the year, the firm added nine colleagues to be a 200-plus-strong firm, and made a number of promotions across its disputes, commercial and corporate teams.

The firm's internal succession plan has continued to be a key factor in its success.

Muckle promoted four partners to equity partner on April 1, and appointed Anthony Evans as managing partner.

Anthony, previously head of corporate finance, has taken over from Jason Wainwright, who leaves a strong business and leadership team, as well as a legacy of sustainable business growth within an award-winning culture and workplace.



Muckle LLP's team celebrates its B Corp accreditation

A force for good

Following its B Corp accreditation, Muckle continues to deliver its strategy to be a “force for good for its people and communities”.

It has made grants of £46,000 to more than 30 charities, a 39 per cent increase from last year.

This includes repeat, impactful donations to Teesside’s Clean Slate Solutions and Carlisle Key, in Cumbria.

The firm has also continued to expand its reach with new grants to Choyzez and The Country Trust, which operate in Northumberland.

Volunteering is a key element of Muckle’s community strategy; all of its people have two paid volunteering days a year to support local causes.

Engagement in volunteering has increased year-on-year, examples of which include litter

picking in local parks, painting, helping young people and food bank donations.

Strong performance

Managing partner Anthony says: “We are delighted with how we’ve done over the last year.

“We have a fantastic and engaged team, in addition to having great clients.

“Our financial performance also reflects our great culture, the investments we have made and our long-term strategy.

“By having a well-communicated vision and five-year plan, we have been able to set clear goals, which our team has done a fantastic job in achieving.

“By ensuring we grow sustainably, keeping to our culture and values, we will be successful for our clients, team and our communities.

“It’s an exciting time for the firm, as we are now

in the last year of our current five-year plan, and just about to launch our plan for the next five years.”

The future’s bright...

The year ahead is poised to be one of significant investment and further growth, and it is already off to a strong start, with growth in turnover and people.



Muckle LLP

To learn more about Muckle and how its expert services could help you, visit the website at the top of this article.

Fashioning a stronger future

Maven Capital Partners

www.mavencp.com

LinkedIn: Maven Capital Partners

www.dyer.co.uk

LinkedIn: Dyer

What's in a name? Well, in the case of SST Group, quite a lot. Formed earlier this year, the business is built on the principles of being Smarter, Stronger, Together. Backed by £1.625 million investment from private equity and venture capital firm Maven Capital Partners, the County Durham-based operator – which includes Dyer Engineering – has already completed its first acquisition and is gearing up for further growth. Here Colin Young speaks to chief executive Richard Bradley, non-executive director Paul Mankin and Dyer managing director Adam Leggett to find out more.



Smarter, Stronger, Together.

Those are the guiding principles of SST Group, the endeavour formed by the directors of one of the largest engineering companies in County Durham, thanks to £1.625 million investment from private equity and venture capital firm Maven Capital Partners.

The parent group of Dyer, which employs nearly 200 staff at its Annfield Plain and Harelaw sites, SST Group is overseen by chief executive Richard Bradley.

Standing at the helm of the engineering business for 15 years, Richard has overseen the expansion and development of the company, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2027.

The story behind the new name is one he likes to tell.

The short and long versions involve one of the key questions asked by Sir Steve Redgrave and his crew members as they embarked on winning multiple Olympic golds decades ago.

Richard says: “The whole concept of being smarter, stronger and together is very close to our hearts.

“We’ve put a lot of blood, sweat and tears into this business over the years; it’s been a long journey to get here.”

The story of Dyer is also one Richard likes to tell.

SST Group emerged from funding secured from the Northern Powerhouse Investment

Fund II and the Finance Durham Fund, which are managed by Maven Capital Partners.

And the backing has already borne fruit.

Earlier this year, SST Group bought Washington-based metal cutting and fabrication firm Q-Laser, which includes additional workshops in Hebburn and Middlesbrough, and bosses are keen to add further names to its portfolio and build on Dyer’s legacy.

That business was founded in Annfield Plain in 1977 by John Dyer, to service the needs of farmers and the local mining industry.

The company survived the steel sector’s collapse, and when John’s son Paul joined the business in the 1990s, it expanded, earning headline contracts with the likes of Darlington-based heavy-duty engine maker Cummins.

After joining, Richard and business partner Graeme Parkins completed a management buy-out in 2013, and secured a first tranche of Maven funding in 2019 to accelerate growth plans.

That blueprint was stymied by the pandemic, but the backing, says Richard, nevertheless provided foundations from which to expand.

He says: “COVID-19 fundamentally derailed a lot of businesses plans.

“But it allowed us to invest heavily in people and new equipment, and gave us the resilience to come through that period.

“Our journey would have been impossible without that money.”

One of those new people was Dyer’s managing director Adam Leggett, who joined from British Engines.

He made an immediate impact, implementing updated working practices and purchasing £1 million-plus milling machines, on which he started his own career.

Today, every component and piece of metal on the vast factory floor is accounted for.

Pictures: Andrew Lowe



“The whole concept of being smarter, stronger and together is very close to our hearts”

Pictured, from left to right, are Richard Bradley, SST Group chief executive; Adam Leggett, Dyer managing director; and Paul Mankin, SST Group non-executive director

Every spark and drop of water has a purpose.

And there is a real sense of pride emanating from a workforce of mixed age, with plenty of young faces, thanks to award-winning partnerships with local colleges.

Nine out of ten of Dyer’s 192 employees live within ten miles of the huge workshop on Harelaw Industrial Estate, once an abandoned trailer-making unit.

The plan is for New College Durham, partnering with Consett and Stanley academies, to supply at least ten per cent of the workforce through its apprenticeship scheme.

Maven’s investment also included introductions and support to help Dyer bring on board chair Owen McFarlane and later attract leading North East corporate financier Paul Mankin to the role of non-executive director.

Richard says: “Paul’s expertise and calm, analytical mind are so valuable.

“He understands the map we’re looking at and the pitfalls too.”

Paul, whose CV includes senior roles at PwC and UNW, says: “If you can work for the likes of Cummins, you know what you’re doing.

“This is a really good and innovative business.

“Metal fabrication is a highly-valued traditional trade, within which Dyer is at the higher end, thanks to the systems, IT and equipment it employs.

“It has exposure to interesting sectors, good heritage and qualifications in defence, where you can see some real organic growth opportunities.

“It is well positioned in a number of markets, and if we continue to find the right acquisitions, we can add value by bringing in the SST philosophy.

“There is significant potential.”

Adam adds: “Smarter, Stronger, Together is about constant improvement.

“We put meaning behind each of the principles, but it’s about being more innovative, about protecting the business financially, keeping that strong financial engine and working together with our people.

“It can be a very cyclical industry, so the group strategy evolved to create a complementary suite of engineering businesses where we could choose the sectors and the type of cycles that we’re in and balance them out, so the group is better protected for growth.

“We all bought into the principle that we could grow a group of companies much more successfully and much better for our people, while protecting the legacy of Dyer and now Q-Laser.

“We want those guiding principles to flow down and be part of any companies that join the group.”



Maven Capital Partners

For more information about Maven and its portfolio of business support, visit the website at the top of this article.

The £660 million Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II covers the North of England and provides loans from £25,000 to £2 million, as well as equity investment up to £5 million, to help a range of small and medium-sized businesses start up, scale and stay ahead.

The Finance Durham Fund is part of Business Durham’s strategy to deliver economic growth across County Durham. It provides flexible equity, debt or mezzanine funding packages from £150,000 to £2 million for early-stage and established businesses, investing across all sectors.

5 Minutes with

5



MINUTES

WITH JO VINTON-BULLWINKEL

www.teesmaritime.com | LinkedIn: Tees Maritime

Jo Vinton-Bullwinkel is operations director of Tees Maritime, the private sector initiative working to deliver watershed change across the area's maritime industry. Here, she tells Steven Hugill more about the venture's pride in extending Teesside's industrial legacy, the power of collaboration and the importance of charting career courses for generations to come.

Tell us a little about Tees Maritime and its overarching mission

Tees Maritime was founded earlier this year by industry leaders from local maritime businesses, with support from the Department for Transport and Maritime UK.

The idea was simple: give Teesside's maritime community a single and united voice.

Our job is to strengthen the ecosystem, connecting business, education and the Government so that investment, innovation and skills flow together.

We're not chasing growth targets or ticking trade boxes; what drives this is pride – in the river, the people and the graft that built this place.

The Tees built the ships, the steel and the livelihoods that carried Britain's economy, and our job is to make sure that sense of purpose doesn't fade.

As you say, Teesside has a rich marine heritage. How is Tees Maritime helping lay foundations for the area to thrive across future generations?

Not long ago, almost everyone you knew worked in one of two industries – steel or chemical – which were generational roles yours the day you were born.

So it's fantastic to see SeAH Wind building big things from steel again, for example.

That sense of regional pride and identity matters; it reminds people this place still makes things that move the world.

We're an island nation. Everything we build, trade, import or export depends on people and skills in the maritime industry.

It's the great enabler of growth, yet too often it's been hidden in plain sight.

Too much of our talent leaves because they don't realise what's on their own doorstep, and we're determined to change that.

So far, we've launched a range of education and skills programmes, from primary schools to college students and the youth board.

The goal is simple: to help young people see where they fit, and to show them the river isn't just part of the landscape, it's part of their future.

With major investors such as SeAH Wind anchoring themselves on Teesside, how is Tees Maritime harnessing that momentum?

The arrival of SeAH Wind has put Teesside firmly back on the global map.

They've recently joined the cluster and are supporting the Freeport Futures programme we'll be running with Middlesbrough College from November onwards.

When a company of that scale commits here, it sends a clear message about the region's capability and ambition.

Our job is to make sure that momentum lands locally – that SeAH Wind can find Teesside suppliers, that schools understand what kinds of jobs will exist and that the skills pipeline meets the opportunities being created.

We've now got everyone from AV Dawson and PD Ports to Sembcorp, British Steel and Casper Shipping in membership, along with the likes of Middlesbrough College, Ward Hadaway and Clean Slate Solutions.

That mix of operators, service providers and educators is exactly what a healthy cluster should look like – joined up, ambitious and proud of the place it calls home.

Tees Maritime hosted the North East Coastal Powerhouse Summit 2025 in early November. What does that event say about its influence?

The summit is our flagship event – 120 delegates, two panels and a room full of the people who make things happen.

We heard from SeAH Wind, PD Ports, AV Dawson, Tees Valley Combined Authority, NZIIC, the Royal Navy and the Northern Powerhouse Partnership, alongside Government and industry leaders from across the UK.

The fact those conversations are being led from Teesside says a lot about how far we've come.

For too long, decisions about the coast were made inland.

The summit brings the focus back to where the work actually happens – at the ports, on the river and in the yards.

The region's coastal and industrial strength gives us an edge in national growth, trade and decarbonisation.

But we must shout about it.

Tees Maritime is part of the Maritime UK Cluster Network. How significant is that alliance?

It's important. We're working closely with the Government to help them connect trade, skills and industry policy with the sectors that actually deliver them.

Maritime underpins everything from clean

energy and construction to logistics and exports.

So, if policy overlooks us, it overlooks trade itself.

Our job is to make sure that doesn't happen.

Being part of the cluster network means we're in the room when national decisions are made and also lets us share what works here with other regions.

For example, we've submitted a proposal to Skills England and the Department for Education to make maritime the UK's next foundation apprenticeship, written in Teesside for national rollout.

How important is collaboration with local industry, education and the Government to Tees Maritime's long-term success?

Without collaboration, there is no cluster.

We're funded by the Department for Transport until March 2026, after which we'll be entirely membership funded.

The first half of the year has been about proving what's possible when the region comes together.

The next is about legacy.

We're already working with Tees Valley Combined Authority and others to explore ways of keeping that momentum going, making sure projects around skills, education and opportunity don't lose pace when the initial funding ends.

For me, it's about keeping local talent here and making sure Teesside leads the country in what comes next.

Collaboration is how we do that.

What are your ambitions for Tees Maritime over the coming years?

Tees Maritime has already shown what can happen when industry takes ownership of its future.

But if we want that impact to last, we need everyone who believes in this region to play their part.

Membership isn't about meetings and logos, it's about keeping this work going together.

The maritime industry has always been the backbone of Teesside.

It deserves the same ambition and respect as any growth sector.

If we can keep giving industry a voice, giving young people a reason to stay and reminding everyone what this river still makes possible, then we'll have done something worth passing on.

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Water resilience in a changing climate

Northumbrian Water Group

www.nwl.co.uk/

LinkedIn: NWG (Northumbrian Water Group)

With the soaring summer temperatures came dramatically reduced water stocks and a number of hosepipe bans across the UK. But amid the scarcity, Northumbrian Water took proactive steps that both cared for the environment and continued to deliver clean water for customers. Here, the firm reveals more about the measures it took – and continues to implement – to manage supplies for everyone’s benefit.

2025 has been a real watershed year.

With only 327 millimetres of rain between January and August, it’s the third driest year on record.

It has left water stocks lower than usual and put a lot of pressure on the region’s natural resources.

But Northumbrian Water hasn’t sat back and watched; it has acted and shown that you can care for the environment and continue to deliver clean, tasty water at the same time.

The North East managed to get through the summer without a hosepipe ban, thanks to the careful and continuous monitoring of water stocks, using experts within Northumbrian Water, and their years of experience, to proactively manage supplies and make sure everyone had the water they needed.

Investing in resilience and innovation

When the prolonged dry weather started in April, Northumbrian Water moved quickly.

In the first half of 2025, it repaired 45 per cent more leaks than the same period last year.

That’s a big jump and shows how serious it is about saving every drop.

But it isn’t just about fixing leaks – Northumbrian Water is putting more than £4.5 billion into the region’s water and wastewater infrastructure over the next five years.

The goal? To make sure the North East’s water system is ready for whatever the future throws at it.

Bluespaces: Making water environments better for everyone

The relationship between water quality and the environment is obvious, so alongside the big investments in infrastructure, Northumbrian Water is also celebrating the success of its Bluespaces programme.

Since 2020, more than £500,000 has been invested into 59 projects, working with partners to improve nearly 250 kilometres of rivers, lakes, wetlands and coastlines.

These places are vital for wildlife and offer great opportunities for recreation, learning and wellbeing.

Bluespaces isn’t just about the environment, it’s about creating places where people and nature can both thrive.

Highlights include:

- Planting more than 17,500 trees to boost biodiversity and help the climate, including 3500 along the Skerne Bridleway and 1433 at Derwent Reservoir (with help from Durham Wildlife Trust)
- Around 11,700 people taking part in 447 events, with volunteers putting in more than 4000 days on activities including





litter picking and bank repairs at places like Bishop Auckland Cemetery and Low Staindrop Field House Farm

- Improved accessibility, with 80 new benches, seats and signs installed, and 67 new features to help fish move through waterways

Working together for a sustainable future

Despite all these achievements, Northumbrian Water knows it can't do everything alone.

The company is calling on customers – especially businesses – to get involved.

Even small changes, like tweaking irrigation schedules or switching to water-efficient appliances, can make a big difference when lots of people take such action.

It's easy to forget the hot, dry summer now that autumn's here, but the signs of climate change are everywhere: cracked ground, low rivers and yellow grass.

That's why Northumbrian Water is urging everyone to adopt smarter water habits.

But reservoir levels are still low, and with every month in 2025 so far being drier than average, we need a lot more rain to get things back to normal.

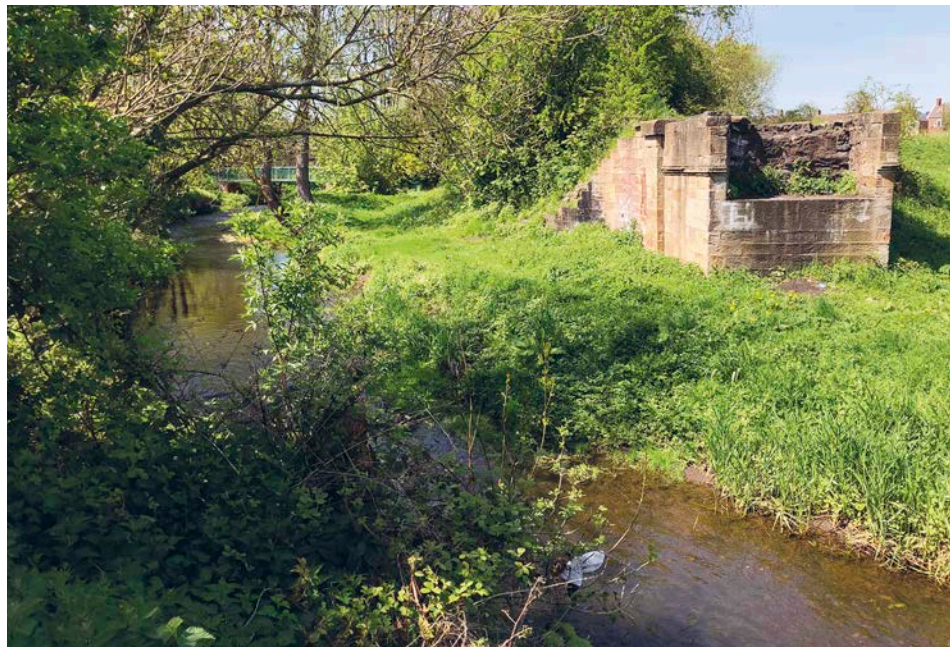
Kieran Ingram, water director, says: "We're known in the North East for our iconic rivers and reservoirs, and it's important we do all we can to keep the environment as it should be.

"Every drop of water saved at home or at work is a drop that stays in the environment where it belongs."

There's a lot of talk about saving energy, but water efficiency sometimes gets overlooked.

After this year's long, hot summer and lack of rain, it's taking longer for the environment to bounce back.

If customers save water where they can, it helps the environment and saves money on bills too.



Smart meters are another tool in the fight for sustainability.

They give real-time data on water use, helping people see their habits and make better choices.

With demand rising as the population grows, apps now let users track their water use daily, weekly or monthly, making it easier to hit sustainability goals.

A shared responsibility

Water scarcity isn't just a future problem, it's happening now.

Business leaders have a unique chance to make a difference by making water stewardship part of their company culture.

Whether it's investing in smart tech, getting employees involved or working with suppliers, the private sector can play a big role in protecting water for the future.



Northumbrian Water Group

For more information about Northumbrian Water Group, including its environmental priorities, visit the website at the top of this article.

To learn more about smart water meters for businesses, visit www.nwl.co.uk/business/smart-water-meters/

Resolving real estate disputes and managing risk

Hay & Kilner

www.hay-kilner.co.uk

LinkedIn: Hay & Kilner

Instagram: hay_kilner

Hay & Kilner's property litigation team is well-known for providing services to businesses across the North East. Here, Amandeep Dhillon, senior associate in the Newcastle and Wallsend-based law firm's property litigation team, tells N magazine about its full-service offer, the importance of securing advice at the earliest opportunity and the value of building long-term relationships.



Pictured, from left to right, are Kati Savtsenko, Amandeep Dhillon, Julie Adams and Guy Barr

Hay & Kilner's leading property litigation team supports businesses across the North East.

Whether you're a landlord, tenant, developer or investor, legal disputes over property can be disruptive, stressful and expensive.

When they arise, timely and clear-headed legal advice can make all the difference.

Hay & Kilner's property litigation team is now one of the largest and most experienced in the North East, helping businesses across the region navigate a wide spectrum of real estate disputes, from lease issues and service charges, to development conflicts and enforcement of rights.

"Disputes over property can escalate quickly," says Amandeep Dhillon, senior associate in Hay & Kilner's property litigation team.

He adds: "Getting advice early, before issues become entrenched, can save you significant time, cost and stress.

"It's one of the most important things a business can do."

With deep expertise in commercial property litigation and an up-to-date awareness of the property market, Hay & Kilner's team delivers pragmatic, commercially driven advice tailored to each client's circumstances.

The firm's approach prioritises early resolution, but where litigation is unavoidable, clients can be confident in a team with extensive experience in courts and tribunals.

Amandeep says: "We work hard to resolve disputes efficiently and outside of court where appropriate.

"But when litigation is the only path forward, our clients know we have the knowledge and courtroom experience to protect their interests effectively."

A full-service offering

As a full-service firm, Hay & Kilner's property litigation team also works closely with its commercial, rural and residential property teams to offer a seamless, joined-up service.

At the heart of the firm's continued success is a genuine sense of teamwork.

Each member of the property litigation team - Julie Adams (senior associate); Kati Savtsenko (paralegal); Beth Donaldson (associate); Guy Barr (senior associate); Rachel Armstrong (solicitor); and Tom Whitfield (partner) - brings their own expertise, insight and energy, contributing to a culture where collaboration and shared purpose drive exceptional results for clients.

This integrated approach ensures disputes are resolved in tandem with ongoing transactions,



lease negotiations or post-litigation steps, such as the enforcement of court orders.

The team advises on a wide range of issues, including:

- Lease terms and enforcement
- Landlord and tenant relationships
- Lease renewal or termination
- Service charges and dilapidations
- Easements and enforcement of covenants
- Boundary issues, adverse possession and trespass
- Squatter removal
- Rights of way, light and air
- Tenant and landlord insolvency
- Rent reviews
- Development and sale contract disputes
- Nuisance claims
- Active portfolio management
- Enforcing security

“Getting advice early, before issues become entrenched, can save you significant time, cost and stress”

Trusted by a diverse client base

Amandeep's clients include national retailers, investment funds, pension schemes, public sector bodies, charities, developers, housing associations and agricultural landowners.

His work includes advising on property portfolio management, restrictive covenant enforcement, development constraints and risk mitigation strategies.

He says: “One of the most rewarding aspects of my role is seeing the tangible impact of our work — sometimes in buildings or sites I pass every day.

“Property law is complex, but solving real-world problems for clients that I've built long-term relationships with is what makes this job so satisfying.”

Expert advice: What to do if you're facing a property dispute

For businesses or individuals facing a property-related dispute for the first time, Amandeep offers the following practical advice:

- **Get advice early:** The earlier you act, the more options you have
- **Be open with your advisers:** Full disclosure allows your legal team to prepare more effectively
- **Keep clear records:** Emails, letters, contracts and timelines are critical – the more organised your evidence, the stronger your position

Amandeep Dhillon, Hay & Kilner property litigation team senior associate



Hay & Kilner

Hay & Kilner's property litigation team remains a trusted partner for clients across the North East and beyond, combining legal excellence with commercial insight and a practical, client-focused approach.

For more information, contact Hay & Kilner's property litigation team using the website at the top of this article or by calling 0191 232 8345.

OUT OF



www.kinnery.co.uk

In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Ian Kinnery, founder of eponymous business coaching firm Kinnery, about his passion for padel and how the fast-growing sport is enhancing his mental, physical and social wellbeing.

When you're not supporting entrepreneurs to scale their business ventures, you can be found on the padel court. What drew you to the sport?

My partner Sandy is an active sportswoman, and has been playing padel at quite a high standard for a number of years.

She thought it was something we could perhaps do together – or she just wanted to embarrass me and force me to get fitter...

I used to play a lot of squash at a reasonable level, but that was a long time ago.

Padel is one of the fastest-growing sports in the world, with players across the globe increasingly picking up rackets for the first time. What makes the game so appealing?

It is fun and not overly physical, so is suitable for oldies.

It is relatively compact, so courts can be built in places that would surprise you – I play in a converted barn, for example.

Most courts can be booked online via an app, so it is easy and convenient to do, and there aren't any stuffy dress codes or club committees to negotiate.

We have found it very easy to book a court when on holiday, and new courts are springing up everywhere.

The parallels between sporting and business success are very close, with one often informing the other. Are there any lessons from padel that shape your business coaching techniques?

There are many parallels, some of which can be overplayed, but I am enjoying learning and developing new skills.

I also appreciate the frustration of having to start at the bottom, and

it is good to be reminded that learning something new is hard, and that knowing what to do is different from being able to do it well and consistently.

All in all, it's quite a humbling experience.

Business coaching is an intense process covering numerous entrepreneurial issues. How does padel help you find a balance and recharge?

Both coaching and business are intense and all-consuming, so it is important to have things that require our full concentration.

It is more than a simple distraction.

It forces my attention away from the day job, and it is also interesting to be the coachee for a change.

Padel has a strong social side, as well as a competitive element. Do you play to connect with people, or is it an opportunity to challenge yourself and push your physical limits?

At the moment, I am still a novice, so I don't feel like committing to the social aspect beyond my learning circle.

But the challenge is massively good fun.

If you could step on court and play doubles with any famous figure – in either business or sport – who would it be and why?

Dr Kate Hayes, author of *How to Win* and the England women's football team's head of performance psychology.

I think teams and businesses have a massive overlap, and I'm fascinated by how she gets the team to be so effective and so gracious, both in victory and defeat.

OFFICE

A trusted partner on the business journey

S&W Group

www.swgroup.com

LinkedIn: S&W Group

The route to business success is rarely linear. From policy revisions to market shifts and economic fluctuations, the path is not without challenge. Amid the uncertainty, though, accountancy and advisory firm S&W is helping organisations find direction, with its expert teams navigating clients through complexity towards sustainable growth. Here, the firm's recently appointed audit partner Chris Vaulks tells Steven Hugill about S&W's ambitions, the value of its people-first approach and its commitment to seeing the North East thrive.



Pictures by Andrew Lowe

Newcastle's High Level Bridge is seldom silent, the rumble of multi-liveried rolling stock providing a near-constant bassline to the city's wider symphony.

Accountancy and advisory firm S&W, from its offices tucked among the greenery above the Quayside, enjoys an exclusive vantage point of the daily performance.

Today, though, the line stands idle, a red signal light piercing a leaden sky as an orange-jacketed worker, hard hat bobbing above the crossing's ornate parapets, inspects the rails.

It's all very fitting.

Business – like life – is a journey, its route often punctuated by delays, diversions and the occasional unexpected stop.

S&W, though, through market-leading audit, tax, advisory and business outsourcing services, helps remove such obstacles, its trusted team steering organisations toward their destinations with clarity and confidence.

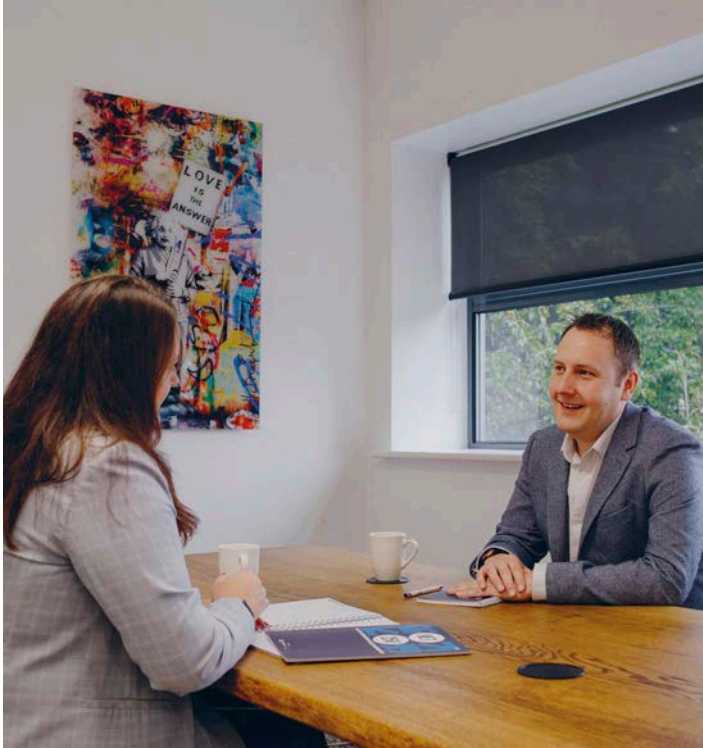
A golden thread throughout is the firm's deep geographical and sector-specific knowledge, which tailors support to clients' unique needs, from the countryside of Northumberland down to the heavy industry of Teesside and across Cumbria's multi-faceted economy.

"We want to be the go-to professional services firm for dynamic businesses and private clients with complex needs," says audit partner Chris Vaulks, who joined S&W from KPMG in late summer.

He says: "Our local knowledge and personal touch are very powerful parts of our offering.

"The North East and Cumbria represents a big and unique geography, with varied businesses and high-growth sectors like technology, energy and advanced manufacturing.

"And our Newcastle-based team really understands the region," says County Durham-born Chris, who is drawing on 18 years' experience of supporting large and complex



mid-market businesses, including FTSE and AIM-quoted organisations, across the North to help S&W serve more firms of similar standing in sectors such as technology, construction, manufacturing and retail.

He adds: “Relationships are the foundation of our business.

“We spend a lot of time with clients on site and value regular face-to-face meetings.

“Those close relationships are built on trust and really help us understand and support organisations to make the right judgements at each step of their journey.

“As a team, we are exceptionally motivated and driven to help clients, and that consistency translates into the very best service.”

A big proposition

Such provision, he says, is augmented by S&W’s national network of 16 offices, which includes a second Newcastle base in the city’s Collingwood Street and delivers wider support encompassing the entire advisory spectrum.

Crucially, it also builds on the regional legacy of S&W’s forebear Haines Watts, which the business acquired shortly before launching as an independent practice in early 2025 after formally separating from Evelyn Partners with Apax Partners’ backing.

Chris says: “We have a fantastic team here in the North East, which can be supplemented with specialists from outside the region.

“That is an important point of difference, because being part of a large national firm strengthens our ability to offer clients a full suite of services, and allows us to support more complex and geographically diverse set-ups, including international group structures.

“Businesses are facing complex scenarios, and they want to work with one trusted advisor across audit, assurance, tax and advisory services.

“We represent that joined up and collaborative partner.

“We also have a brilliant foundation on which to build, thanks to the work of Haines Watts, the relationships the team developed and the clients it supported.

“With the investment following S&W’s acquisition, we can now supercharge the Newcastle office and provide clients with an ever-broader range of services.

“The team has very quickly integrated and adopted S&W’s methodologies, values and ways of working, which means clients are receiving the best support.

“It is an incredibly powerful proposition.”

The human touch, says Chris – whose KPMG tenure included spells in its audit technical group and ESG assurance team – will be supplemented by a continued embracing of digital means to strengthen client services.

He says: “A fundamental part of our mission is to ensure clients remain up to date with changes

to the regulatory and accounting landscapes, and to provide insights into controls, governance and process improvements as their business grows.

“Audit and assurance is an important part of that.

“It is much more than a compliance exercise, and we are constantly exploring how we can evolve our offer to deliver the best for clients using technology.

“Through artificial intelligence, automation and data analytics, we can make the auditing process more efficient but also provide clients with valuable, fresh data insights around their transaction flows, processes and controls.”

He adds: “We have a clear vision and an overwhelming sense of ambition to build on our strong foundations.

“With a passion for the region, we’re committed to seeing North East businesses thrive.”



S&W

For more information about S&W and how its expert services could help your business, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 269 9960.

New event brings magic of the cosmos to city

Newcastle City Council

www.enchanted-city.co.uk

A spectacular new arts display is set to light up Newcastle in December, with a number of installations primed to celebrate the universe in all its glory. Here, N magazine highlights what to look out for during the colourful event.

This December, an unmissable event will bring the magic of the universe to Newcastle for four days in an after-dark experience where art, performance and cosmic wonder collide.

Tickets are on sale for Enchanted City: From City Streets To Cosmic Skies, which will take place each evening from 4.30pm on Northumbria University's City Campus, from Thursday, December 11, to Sunday, December 14.

The event, part of Newcastle's Christmas, is the first of its kind in the city and will invite would-be stargazers to be dazzled by showstopping interactive installations, out-of-this-world projections, light art and live performances inspired by galaxies near and far.

Visitors will be welcomed to go on a family-friendly voyage of discovery through stunning artwork, dazzling light shows and gravity-defying sculptures created and developed by regional, national and international artists.

Mind and Matter, by Limbic Cinema, will bring a blend of light, sound and science to the event in a projection spectacle that celebrates the beauty of the cosmos.

Internationally-acclaimed artistic duo Studio McGuire will present *Ascendance*, a dazzling piece where a life-size astronaut drifts through a magical reimagining of space among butterflies, flowers and dreamlike images to a haunting soundscape composed by Spesh Maloney.

Newcastle's Moving Parts Arts will bring two large illuminated puppets, inspired by 18th century astronomers, to life in the form of *Starmongers* by Judith Hope.

The figures, created in collaboration with local community groups, will wander through the event, with visitors invited to place reflective treasures into baskets hoisted up towards the night's sky.

By And Now will see Ellison Place's Walled Garden transformed into an immersive fire garden, capturing the wonder of space through firelight, sound and cosmic imagery, and *Horoscope Hotel* by Amy Lord, working with Northumbria University students, will invite visitors to explore astrology through a series of 12 uniquely decorated doors throughout the event, each representing a zodiac sign.

North East-based globally renowned artists Studio Vertigo will bring a duo of installations to the event.

Constellations will feature sculptures of a Supernova alongside three smaller novas brought alive by dynamic lighting, while *Moon* is a visually



Picture: &Now



Picture: Stephen Newby

arresting installation reimagining the moon as a symbol of feminine mystique and a site of future possibility using 3D projections.

Newcastle arts group Unfolding Theatre will encourage visitors to reflect on the emotional and cultural 'space junk' they carry with them through their participatory installation *Clear The Way*, in which participants will be invited to write down thoughts they wish to leave behind and scrunch them into paper 'stars'.

World-famous artist Novak, who has worked with the likes of Calvin Harris, illuminated stages at Glastonbury and Coachella, and been part of Durham's Lumiere festival, will also be bringing their unique brand of innovative light artistry to the event.

As well as the stunning artworks on display, visitors will be able to enjoy a variety of delicious food and drink underneath the glittering night sky at the beginning and end of their journey through the event, with a range of vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options available.

The event will also spark imaginations of all ages with a series of artist-led creative workshops, where visitors can make their own art inspired by the wonders of the universe.

Participants will be able to get hands-on and create their very own cosmos-inspired artwork, taking a piece of Enchanted City home with them.

Tickets are priced at £12.50 for adults and £7.50 for children aged three and over, with under-threes going free.

With timed entry slots available every 15 minutes from 4.30pm until 8pm, visitors are encouraged to book early to ensure they can see all of the installations and activities on offer.

Relaxed sessions are also available at 4pm on Friday and Saturday for those looking for a quieter experience.

Enchanted City is a new annual event delivered by Newcastle City Council, funded by Newcastle City Council and North East Combined Authority, and part of Newcastle's Christmas.

Councillor Abdul Samad, cabinet member for culture, music and arts at Newcastle City Council, says: "As Newcastle's Christmas continues to expand, I am delighted we are bringing another incredible event to the city to ensure there is a whole range of activities for everyone to enjoy.

"Enchanted City will bring thousands of people to the city centre, to experience something unique and magical together during the festive season.

"In addition to a programme full of regional, national and international artists and talent, several Newcastle community groups and arts students will collaborate with artists to help create some of the installations, ensuring

Newcastle's creativity is at the heart of the event."

Dan Monnery, pro vice-chancellor for external affairs at Northumbria University, added: "We're delighted to partner with Newcastle City Council and host the Enchanted City at our City Campus for its inaugural year.

"Northumbria University is deeply embedded in the cultural life of the North East, partnering with many of the fantastic organisations that support it.

"This is an important new cultural event for the region, and we look forward to welcoming families and visitors to our campus to see some fantastic creative performances and installations."



Enchanted City

For more information about Enchanted City and to buy tickets for the event, visit the website at the top of this article.

A people-first approach to global growth

Test Driven Solutions

www.testdrivensolutions.co.uk

LinkedIn: Test Driven Solutions Ltd

Founded five years ago, software consultancy Test Driven Solutions continues to go from strength to strength. Here, founder and chief executive Sam Clark tells N magazine about the Newcastle-based firm's growth journey, its Scottish and Latin American expansion plans and the potential afforded by the appointment of a new experienced senior leadership team.

North East technology consultancy Test Driven Solutions (TDS) is celebrating a period of exceptional growth and success as it continues its expansion across the UK and internationally, with a new office opening in Edinburgh early next year and plans underway to launch a base in Latin America in 2026.

Founded in 2020 by Sam Clark, TDS has rapidly established itself as one of the UK's fastest-growing software consultancies, specialising in software development, testing, platform engineering and user-centred design.

Since its first revenue five years ago, the company has grown from a six-figure start-up to an eight-figure global business, reflecting exceptional year-on-year growth and rapid international expansion – all built on organic, self-funded growth.

This growth has been driven by the company's quality-first approach, high technical standards and a culture that puts people at the heart of everything it does.

What began as a one-person start-up has grown

into a global business of more than 160 people, with offices in Newcastle, Poland and Canada.

Together, these teams provide around-the-clock support, helping TDS deliver leading solutions for clients across financial services, the public sector and beyond.

As part of its next stage of growth, TDS has introduced a senior leadership team with several key appointments joining the company over the past few months:

- David McAvelia, chief revenue officer – brings more than two decades' experience in recruitment, software consultancy and a focus on developing commercial strategies and new market opportunities
- Andy Thompson, chief of staff – a seasoned HR and operations leader with 25 years' experience in high-growth technology businesses, he is focused on scaling sustainably while preserving TDS' unique culture
- Adrian Pollard, financial director – a finance expert with more than 20 years' experience in strategic financial planning and systems integration, he is supporting growth and long-term stability plans
- Jack Reed, head of technology services – one of TDS' longest-serving leaders, he is helping shape the company's technical strategy and ensure innovation remains at the forefront of delivery

These appointments reflect TDS' commitment to strengthening its foundations while pursuing ambitious expansion plans.

The upcoming Edinburgh office will build on the company's strong presence in the North and Scotland, supporting new and existing clients while creating new opportunities for local talent.

The planned Latin America base will further extend TDS' international footprint, offering clients global delivery capabilities.

Looking ahead, TDS plans to continue growing its team and expanding its global presence, exploring new markets and industries while





Pictured, from left to right, are Test Driven Solutions' senior leadership team Adrian Pollard, Jack Reed, Sam Clark, Andy Thompson and David McAvelia

building on the strong foundations that have driven its success to date.

The company's long-term goal is to be recognised as the UK's go-to consultancy for organisations seeking high-calibre, technically excellent software delivery teams, while maintaining the culture and values that have been central to its success.

Founder and chief executive Sam says: "My goal was to build a consultancy that truly cared about its people, one where quality, culture and collaboration came first.

"The growth we've achieved over the past five years has been incredible, but it's been built on our values and our people.

"As we enter this next phase of expansion, I'm proud to welcome our new leadership team, who bring the experience, insight and drive needed to take TDS to the next level, while staying true to who we are.

"The opening of our Edinburgh office and our expansion into Latin America mark an exciting new chapter in our journey, and I'm confident the best is yet to come."

The new leadership team shares that vision and enthusiasm.

Together, they bring a wealth of experience across technology, finance, operations and commercial growth, each focused on strengthening TDS' position as a trusted partner for clients and a great place to work.

Their collective priorities include expanding the company's service offering, embedding innovation through artificial intelligence and emerging technologies, enhancing operational excellence, and ensuring TDS continues to grow sustainably without losing the culture and authenticity that define it.

With this blend of strategic insight and shared purpose, the leadership team is united in driving TDS to becoming one of the UK's leading consultancies for quality-driven technology solutions.

A core part of TDS' people-first approach is its commitment to nurturing talent and inclusivity.

The company's graduate scheme gives recruits hands-on experience across development, testing and DevOps before specialising in one area, creating a clear career progression pathway.

TDS also champions neurodiversity and individuality in the workplace, a value that's

especially close to founder Sam, who was diagnosed with autism a few years ago and has made it his mission to ensure every employee can thrive in an open and supportive environment.

With nominations for Technology Business of the Year at the Lloyds Banking Group 2025 Business Awards, TDS' momentum shows no sign of slowing.

The company continues to focus on sustainable, people-first growth, offering clients exceptional service through its team of highly-skilled consultants, and creating an environment where local talent thrives.



Test Driven Solutions
For more information about Test Driven Solutions and the services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article.



Building connections that last

Connection has always been at the heart of everything Antony Jones does – from his Newcastle University days to building a business that helps organisations engage with customers and inspires loyalty. Since relocating Motivait to Newcastle in 2020, he has firmly established the company in the region while continuing to reach millions of users worldwide. Here, Peter Anderson talks to Antony and his team about how they blend creativity, psychology and technology to create meaningful connections and the culture that drives their success.

The American academic and podcaster Brené Brown, when discussing human interaction, said: “Connection is why we’re here; it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives”.

And yet, in an age of mass consumerism, endless scrolling and a bombardment of notifications and digital distractions, the chance to truly capture attention – let alone forge a genuine connection – has become increasingly rare.

We live in a world that celebrates clicks, likes and instant gratification, though we often overlook what makes relationships, whether personal or professional, truly meaningful.

One company working to change that is Motivait – a digital engagement specialist using creativity, psychology and technology to build relationships that go beyond the transactional.

Founded by Newcastle University alumnus Antony Jones, Motivait helps organisations connect more deeply with their audiences through immersive loyalty programmes, gamified experiences and digital solutions that inspire action and sustain trust.

With teams based in Newcastle, Madrid and Porto, the company, which develops digital engagement solutions that annually reach more than 50 million active users globally, is proving that connection, when designed with care and purpose, can still cut through the noise.

And for Antony, whose instant bonhomie and kindness shine through from the moment you meet him, Motivait is very much a reflection of his personal belief that business should be built on trust, empathy and human connection – values that have shaped both his career and the culture he has fostered.

He says: “The main reason I started Motivait was to create something that genuinely helps organisations connect with people – not just to deliver a digital solution or build a business to sell.

“It’s about understanding what motivates people emotionally, not just through simple rewards.

“If you focus on people first, everything else – engagement, loyalty, results – naturally follows.

“We help organisations build relationships that go beyond transactions; we design loyalty programmes, gamified experiences and digital solutions that don’t just capture attention but spark emotional engagement and cultivate lasting connections.”

It becomes clear, when talking to the rest of the team, that such values are far from abstract ideals; they are lived, daily realities, embraced and embodied by everyone at Motivait in the way they collaborate, problem-solve and support one another.

Client services consultant Millie Probert, who joined Motivait after graduating from Newcastle University, says: “From day one, I felt trusted and supported.

“Even as a graduate with little experience, I’ve been given opportunities I never imagined – from going to Madrid to running projects and lecturing at Newcastle University Business School.

“Antony’s approach is infectious.

“He believes in people, sees their potential and creates an environment where you can speak openly – even if you disagree with him, you can say it and feel heard.”

Millie’s views are echoed by Shrijan Tiwari, a fellow Newcastle University graduate and front-end software developer, who adds: “Even as a new starter, you quickly realise it’s okay to make mistakes – everyone’s open to sharing knowledge and we all help each other out.

“The main reason I joined Motivait was Antony.

“From our very first meeting, his openness and friendliness really struck a chord with me.

Antony Jones

“I’d never met a chief executive who shared so much about the company and made me feel immediately part of it.”

Motivait focuses its solutions in four sectors with engagement challenges – customer loyalty, employee engagement, community and education and learning – each designed to help organisations reach and resonate with people in ways that drive participation and deliver measurable results.

This is exemplified by its work with Tendam, one of the world’s largest fashion retailers and Motivait’s first client.

Working together for nearly a decade, Motivait has designed, developed and manages a customer engagement and loyalty platform that now supports more than 30 million members across Tendam’s portfolio of 12 different brands, integrating in-store, mobile and online experiences through personalised rewards and real-time interactions.

Antony says: “Tendam was our first customer back in 2017, when we were still a tiny team with a big idea.

“Today, we’re supporting their loyalty programmes in real-time across multiple brands, channels and countries, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

“Tendam took a chance on us, and in many ways, we have been able to grow alongside them.

“The best part of the story has been to see how their loyalty clubs now underpin their growth and business performance.”

The other remarkable thing about Motivait is that not one of its Newcastle-based team is originally from the city.

Yet their shared pride in their adopted home is palpable – they speak of its creativity, friendliness and sense of possibility with real affection.

Software developer Will Kent, who hails from Ireland, says: “I fell in love with Newcastle from the moment I arrived at university.

“The city completely captured me; it’s vibrant, friendly and full of opportunities.

“There’s something about the energy and creativity of the place that really inspires you.”

For Antony, that connection to Newcastle runs deep.

Brought up in leafy Surrey and initially earmarked as a Greek scholar, an 18-year-old Antony travelled north to visit a friend who was studying at Newcastle University.

After a few drinks in a Jesmond pub on a Sunday night, he realised he had found his place.

Determined to make it happen, Antony badgered the admissions team until he was accepted to study politics – and then faced the next challenge: finding somewhere to live.

After several weeks of sofa-hopping and false starts, fate intervened.

One rainy evening, again in Jesmond, an elderly couple took pity on the stranded student, inviting him into their house, splitting their dinner and helping him find lodgings in Seaton Sluice, on the Northumberland coast.

That small act of kindness, rooted in the warmth and generosity of the North East, has stayed with Antony ever since.



“From the moment I arrived in the North East, I immediately felt at home – there was something about the energy here and the determination that made me want to be part of it”

He says: “From the moment I arrived in the North East, I immediately felt at home.

“The people, the city, the region – it just clicked for me.

“There was something about the energy here and the determination that made me want to be part of it.

“And that generosity I experienced – an elderly couple taking a stranger in and helping me find my footing – just taught me something about the North East and the importance of human connection.

“Even in a region that has challenges, is quite isolated and at the time faced huge unemployment, there is a spirit about the place I quickly fell in love with.”

Antony’s experience of student life in Newcastle was far from the norm.

Not only did he have to commute from the coast each day and scavenge driftwood from the beach to fuel his little stove, but he also threw himself into community projects, working with the local Labour Party in Byker and later serving as student union president during a sabbatical year.

Through these experiences, he developed an appreciation of life across the North East, while his determination to immerse himself in his

surroundings and his interest in community engagement is something that has stayed with him ever since.

He says: “My time at university opened my eyes to inequality, and I saw that when people are given opportunity, they normally bloom.

“It’s a lesson I try to apply at Motivait.

“We often take on people who are younger or less experienced than the role might naturally require, but we find that they grow into it and excel.

“I have always believed that leadership is about removing obstacles and creating a space where individual and collective talent, energy and commitment can flourish.”

After graduating, Antony, who was awarded an honorary fellowship by the university in 2007, enjoyed a successful career across Europe in the IT sector, ranging from entrepreneurial start-ups to leading major multinationals including Fujitsu Siemens.

Yet he always had a burning desire to launch his own business, and perhaps his defining trait – evident as a student and still shaping his approach today – is his willingness to trust his instincts and take, what he calls, “informed gambles”.

It was this that led him, without institutional funding, to found Motivait in 2015, invest his own savings into developing its core technology platform over the next two years, and then relocate the company's UK head office, from the South East to Newcastle in 2020 during the pandemic – a decision he acknowledges was “somewhat risky”.

Five years on, with Motivait firmly established within the Newcastle Helix development, it's clear Antony's decision has been more than vindicated.

He says: “I've always believed that if you focus on people, trust your instincts and are absolutely committed, the rest tends to fall into place.

“That mindset has guided every decision, from founding Motivait to relocating the business here.

“Moving to Newcastle was a big step, but it's allowed us to create a company that's genuinely connected to the region and its community.”

Risk-taking, it seems, runs in Antony's blood.

He is a grandson of the legendary Spanish writer and journalist Manuel Chaves Nogales, who used the power of his pen to oppose political extremism in all its guises during the 1920s and 1930s through to his untimely death in 1944.

His convictions ultimately forced him to flee Madrid in 1936, and when the Wehrmacht swept through the Ardennes in 1940, he had to leave Paris and his family behind with nothing but a suitcase and typewriter to avoid capture by the Gestapo.

Chaves Nogales' career was defined by courage, human values and curiosity: he famously greeted Ruth Elder, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic, on her arrival and travelled to Russia and across Europe in the 1920s and early 1930s at great personal risk.

It is evident Antony is imbued with that same spirit of adventure.

And as he looks to the future, his focus remains on sustainable growth, client impact and nurturing the talented team he has built to date.

He says: “When we created Motivait, we gave ourselves an initial ten-year horizon.

“Our aim has always been to deliver real value to clients and not just chase targets.

“Growth follows when you focus on the right behaviours, delivering real benefit and having great people.

“Our recurring revenue is currently over 80 per cent of turnover, giving us the foundation to make long-term commitments – to clients, the team and our strategy.

“I am sure unexpected opportunities will come along, with technology moving at pace, but we won't lose sight of what truly matters – human connection.

“Our future is about creating the right environment for the outstanding people we have, to thrive and contribute their best – for our business, our clients and the communities we work with.

“If we get that right, I am confident that everything else will follow.”





LAST WORD

Closing this edition of N magazine, Nat Edington, chief executive at Sedgefield-based radio frequency parts maker Filtronic, reflects on the firm's spate of headline global contract successes, the continued value of its NETPark home and how the business is planning to maintain its growth trajectory across 2026 and beyond.

www.filtronic.com
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The business has enjoyed a bumper period of success, with headline multi-million-pound supply deals to support the Elon Musk-backed SpaceX interstellar venture complemented by partnerships with Leonardo and Airbus Defence and Space. What do those agreements say about Filtronic's market prowess, and how will they accelerate the firm's growth ambitions?

It's been an incredible period for us, and those agreements really show the strength of Filtronic's reputation on the global stage.

Winning design and supply deals with organisations like SpaceX, Leonardo and Airbus Defence and Space is testament to the trust they place in our people, technology and ability to deliver at scale.

These aren't short-term projects either, they're partnerships that give us a platform to grow further and invest in innovation, which critical markets like space and defence demand.

It's also great to see a company headquartered in the North East showing it can tackle some of the most exciting and complex engineering challenges in the world.

We hope it inspires the next generation of engineers.

Filtronic has operated from NETPark, in Sedgefield, County Durham, for a number of years, and is now primed to expand into a larger hub on the science and technology estate. How important has NETPark been to the company's recent achievements, and what impact will the new site have on operations in the years ahead?

NETPark has been a huge part of our story.

Being surrounded by other innovative businesses and in proximity to universities like Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria and Teesside has given us access to great talent, strong research links and the kind of facilities we've needed.

Our new, custom-built headquarters base at NETPark is the next step.

It will more than double our footprint and give us room to scale, while staying rooted in the North East.

With the planned £100 million investment to expand the NETPark estate and create thousands of jobs, it's an exciting time to be part of this community.

For Filtronic, it means more space and more collaboration for the next phase of growth.

In a world where geopolitical uncertainty continues to be matched by soaring technological demand, how is Filtronic positioning itself to stay ahead and lead this rapidly evolving landscape?

The pace of change is relentless, whether it's the demand for secure communications, the growth of low Earth orbit satellites or the need for resilient defence systems.

Our job is to anticipate those shifts and ensure we're ready with solutions that make a real difference.

That means doubling down on research and investment, investing in skills and building the capability to deliver complex technologies, such as solutions based on gallium nitride, a semiconductor that is driving a paradigm shift in high-frequency power.

However, it's not just about the technology. It's what it enables too.

For instance, we've recently developed new solutions for Q/V-band satellite communications, enabling faster, more efficient and more secure networks for space and defence.

This could be a game-changer for multi-orbit connectivity.

Here, flexibility and scalability are key.

We're small enough to stay agile but experienced enough to take on major programmes, and by keeping production in the UK, we are helping safeguard supply chains and supporting domestic sovereignty.

That combination is what sets Filtronic apart and allows us to lead in today's landscape.



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