

N

ROBIN CORDY

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A blueprint to super-charge North East growth

With the North East Combined Authority comes a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver watershed economic, social and cultural change. To help unlock that potential, N magazine publisher NET, working alongside Sunderland-headquartered national wealth management firm Fairstone, has created a white paper that sets out a bold blueprint to transform the region into a national and global powerhouse.

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Bringing opportunity home

The region's increasing status as a commercial and cultural hotbed took centre stage during the Community Foundation North East Homecoming Summit, which brought together natives and members of the area's diaspora to explore its exciting opportunities. Here, Peter Anderson reflects on the ceremony – part of a wider programme of events – which outlined how the region can build on its economic and cultural strengths to create new pathways for generations to come.

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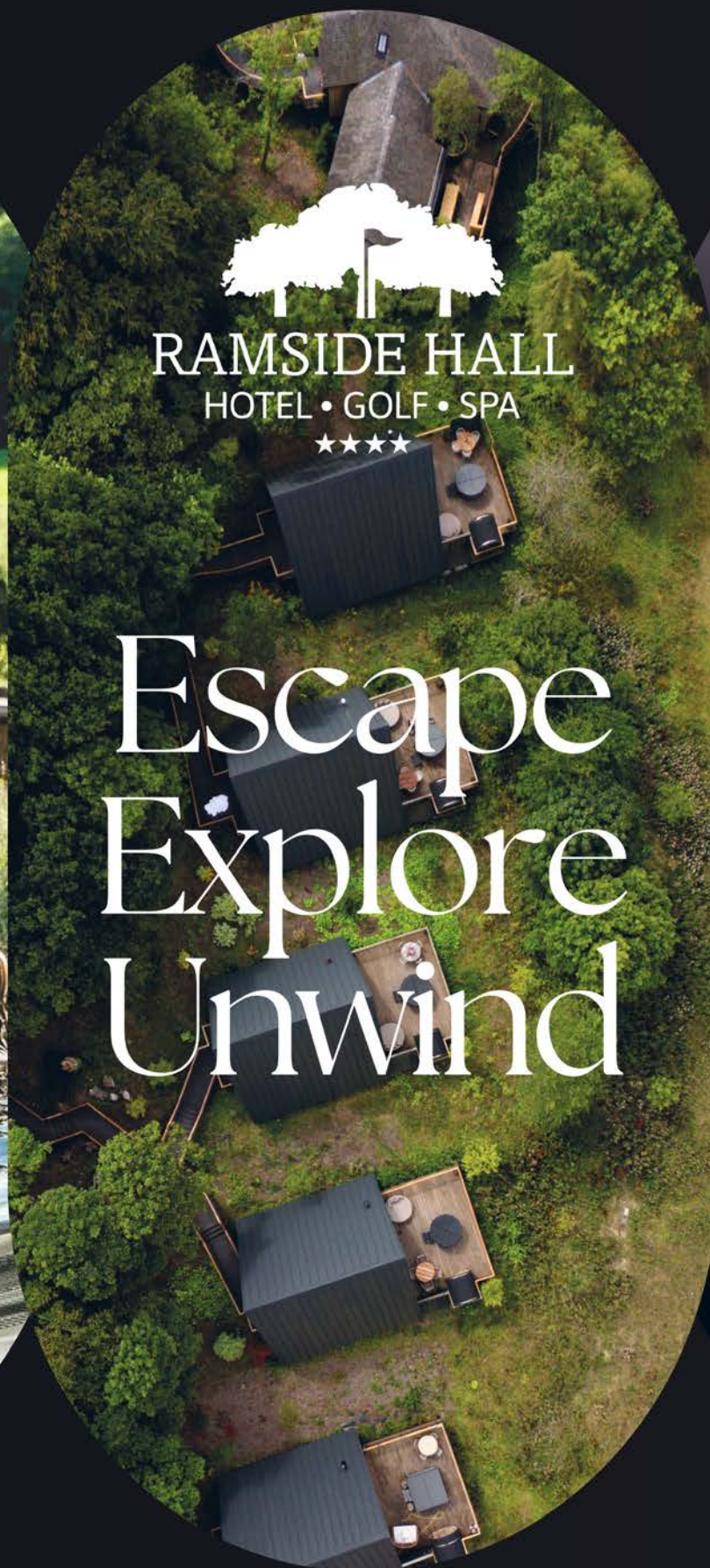
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WELCOME TO ISSUE 474

Editor's Word

With a new year comes great opportunity for change, and nowhere is that more reflected than across the North East, where headline devolution deals provide major potential for lasting transformation. And N magazine publisher NET is at the heart of moves to turbocharge that revolution. Here, NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill highlights some of the measures the multi-platform house of brands has taken – and continues to execute – to help create a more prosperous and successful North East...



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of N magazine.

And welcome to 2026.

With the twinkling lights bound and boxed, the last pine needles vacuumed away and the snow-effect spray washed from the windows, attention turns to unpacking the coming 12 months and the opportunities that lie ahead for the North East.

And what prospects they represent.

With two devolution deals now in full operation across the north and south of the region, 2026 is a moment to catalyse real change.

And to help spur that transformation, we at NET – the multi-platform publisher behind this very magazine – are continuing to take proactive measures to help shape a future the North East deserves.

As a business deeply embedded in the North East, we have championed the region for years, celebrating its entrepreneurs and its many commercial success stories.

But we're also not afraid to cast an analytical eye across the legislative landscape and lobby for an even stronger North East.

We're not idly standing aside, waiting for change to come; we're fully invested in making it happen.

To that end, I had the privilege late last year of authoring a landmark white paper that sets a number of headline action points for the North East Combined Authority.

Titled *Raising the bar: A blueprint to supercharge North East growth*, the document was created using the insight of nearly 50 senior North East commercial sector figures from roundtable discussions hosted alongside national wealth management firm Fairstone.

From measures to boost business investment, to improved transport links, strengthened skills pathways, rewriting the region's narrative and more, the white paper sets out clear goals to catalyse watershed change.

And it has been warmly received by North East Combined Authority bosses, who we look forward to working with in the months ahead to see its priorities translated into meaningful action.

You can read more about the white paper on pages 12-14.

That, though, is not all.

As the white paper was being unveiled, the NET team and I returned to London to deliver the second instalment of our flagship investment campaign VISION 31 to City audiences.

Born in the post-pandemic period to supercharge the region's presence as an attractive base for commercial operators to put down meaningful roots, the venture has grown substantially, with panel discussions replacing an original roundtable format.

And the latest London event (on pages 16-19) only strengthened the campaign's underlying message, with bosses from organisations including PD Ports, QTS, Northumbria University, the British Esports Federation, Opencast and MMC Research highlighting the North East's fertile ground as a place to flourish across both domestic and global markets.

I'm delighted to confirm VISION 31 will return in 2026, with plans in place to expand its impact even further.

We're not standing still; the North East has a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine its economic, social and cultural landscapes, and we at NET are committed to ensuring that happens.

Someone else who shows no sign of slowing down is our cover star Robin Cordy.

As chief commercial officer at data solutions firm Seriös Group, he's playing a pivotal role in shaping the company's next phase of growth.

Having discovered the North East during his university years, the keen surfer now proudly calls the region home.

And while the area's coastal waters may be unpredictable, he tells us why both the region – and in turn Seriös Group – are perfectly positioned to continue riding the waves of success.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Steven



A BLUEPRINT TO SUPERCHARGE NORTH EAST GROWTH



With the North East Combined Authority comes a once-in-a-generation opportunity to deliver watershed economic, social and cultural change. To help unlock that potential, N magazine publisher NET, working alongside Sunderland-headquartered national wealth management firm Fairstone, has created a white paper that sets out a bold blueprint to transform the region into a national and global powerhouse.

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The North East is entering an exciting new era. And N magazine publisher NET has created a blueprint to help turbocharge its momentum.

Working alongside national wealth management firm Fairstone, NET has crafted a landmark white paper to help the region fully capitalise on its headline devolution powers.

The creation of the North East Combined Authority represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine the region's economic, social and cultural landscapes.

And to truly seize that moment, NET – which also oversees UK-wide business news website Bdaily – has published *Raising the bar: A blueprint to supercharge North East growth*.

The document – which has been officially presented to the North East Combined Authority – sets out clear goals to catalyse watershed change, from measures to boost business investment and improve transport links, to policy around strengthening skills pathways and rewriting the region's narrative.

Founded upon six high-level roundtable discussions featuring nearly 50 senior North East commercial sector figures, the document provides a detailed, business-led agenda focused on transforming the region into a national and global powerhouse.

Headline white paper action points include:

- The creation of an investment ladder to provide early-stage, scale-up and mature businesses with easier access to capital
- Greater support for existing standout businesses, rapidly-scaling SMEs and university spin-outs, and a renewed focus on high-value employment over job volume

- Strengthened ties between industry and education to equip learners with skills for the jobs of tomorrow
- Transport improvements to bolster inter-regional, domestic and global connectivity
- A refreshed commercial narrative that showcases the North East's investment opportunities domestically and internationally

John Duns, NET business development director, says: "We're delighted to unveil the white paper, which has been crafted over many months using the knowledge, insight and expertise of North East business leaders.

"It speaks clearly and candidly to policymakers, investors and organisations alike, providing target-driven goals the region can achieve.

"It was a pleasure to present the document to the North East Combined Authority.

"Through its clearly defined development strategies, this white paper can help drive tangible growth for decades to come."

Lee Hartley, Fairstone founder and deputy chair, says: "The North East has arrived at a pivotal moment.

"Devolution represents an incredible opportunity to create a region that thrives locally while competing on wider domestic and global stages.

"But to realise that potential, we must be bold and brave, combining a refreshed identity with considered investment, skills and infrastructure strategies that lay a platform for long-term growth.

"This white paper presents a clear roadmap to translate opportunity into measurable economic impact."



Phil Witcherley, North East Combined Authority executive director of economy, innovation and culture – who officially received the white paper in a ceremony at the organisation's Newcastle base – adds: “North East mayor Kim McGuinness’ ambitious North East Local Growth Plan was built through input from hundreds of businesses both big and small.

“That engagement will continue as we deliver on our plan, so it is just brilliant to see NET and Fairstone playing their own big part in the conversation by bringing together these powerful roundtables.

“We look forward to reading the white paper in detail.

“At first look, though, I am glad to say it reflects some of the workstreams we are already delivering on, such as taking our global investment pitch to a new level and investing £1.85 billion to create the world-class transport networks that help business thrive.

“It is really welcome to see the new investment model proposed in the white paper, which holds great promise to complement our new £70 million North East Fund.

“We have set this up to provide early-stage businesses and those seeking to scale with access to capital that might otherwise be challenging in our region.

“We aim for this to generate £350 million in total investment from other funds, supporting 470

businesses and creating 2300 new jobs.”

In conjunction with the white paper, NET and Fairstone have launched a survey that allows business leaders and entrepreneurs from across the North East to play their part in shaping the region's devolution agenda.

Featuring questions focused on investment and expansion goals, responses will provide an informed picture of the North East's funding landscape, and where devolution can be harnessed to strengthen capital opportunities over years to come.

The white paper will be officially showcased at an invite-only dinner in Newcastle next year, where guests will hear about latest policy developments.

Steven Huggill, NET editor-in-chief, who authored the white paper, adds: “It was a privilege to write this document, which carries real potential to help drive a step-change in the North East's fortunes.

“Having taken part in the roundtables that shaped its development, I witnessed the pride, passion and collective determination to harness devolution as a force for lasting, positive change.

“That conviction runs through every page.

“I'm delighted the white paper is now in the hands of the North East Combined Authority, and look forward to working with regional leaders to see its headline priorities translated into meaningful action.”

Pictured, from left to right, are John Duns, NET business development director; Phil Witcherley, North East Combined Authority director of economy, innovation and culture; Lee Hartley, Fairstone founder and deputy chair; and Steven Huggill, NET editor-in-chief and white paper author

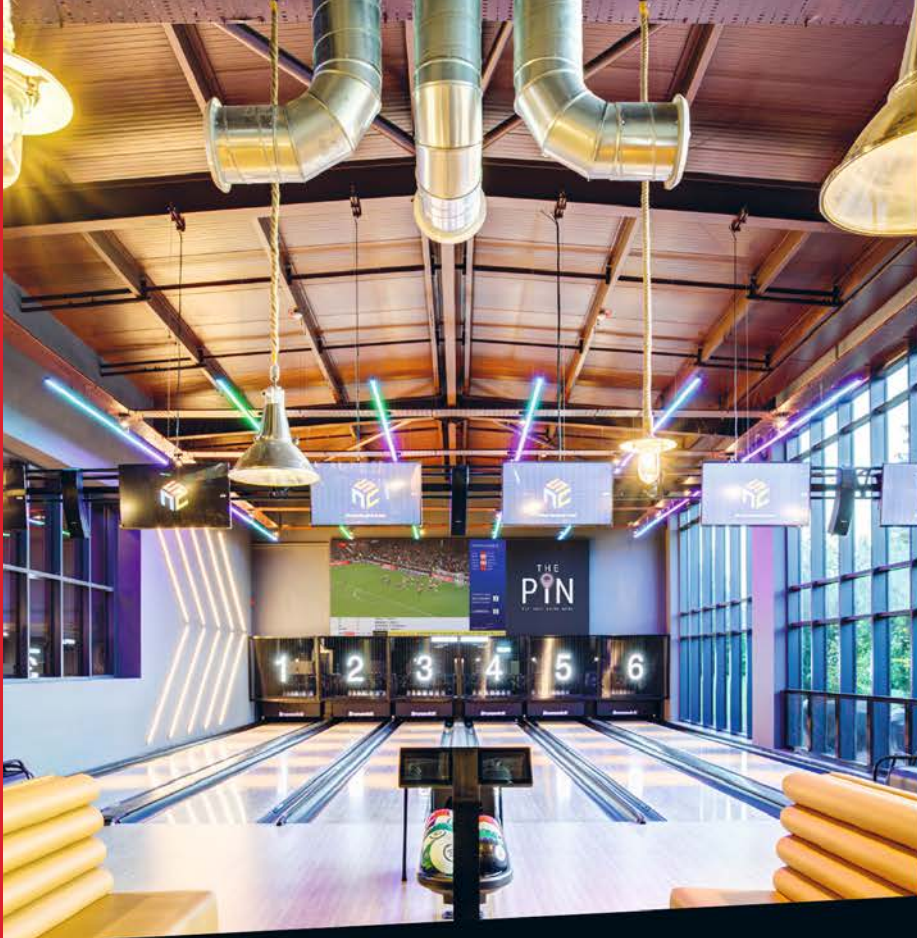


Devolution white paper

You can download a copy of *Raising the bar: A blueprint to supercharge North East growth* by visiting Bdaily's Knowledge Hub at www.bdaily.co.uk/knowledge-hub

Alternatively, email white paper author and NET editor-in-chief Steven Huggill at steven@netimesmagazine.co.uk to secure a printed copy of the document.





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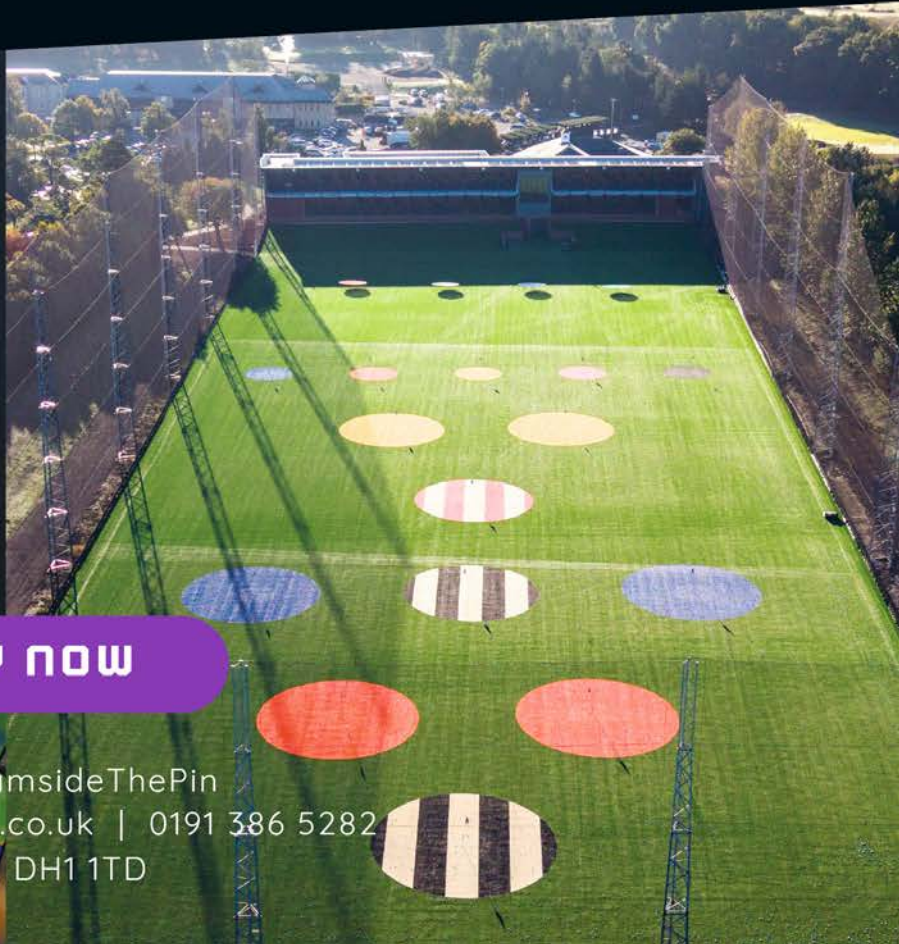
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Change is sweeping across the North East, and NET's VISION 31 campaign is helping drive further momentum. Through a second high-profile London summit, featuring regional businesses and sector leaders, NET's flagship regeneration programme showcased the North East to the City and beyond, highlighting the game-changing advances it is hothousing, the highly-skilled workers it is nurturing and the transformative projects it is leading to deliver a sustainable future for all. Here, Peter Anderson highlights the key points from the event.

The North East is brimming with “infectious positivity” and “endless opportunities” within a uniquely supportive business ecosystem.

That was the overriding message from multi-platform publisher NET's headline VISION 31 London summit.

The event marked the latest chapter in NET's mission to showcase and amplify the region's economic regeneration, innovation and investment potential to the City.

Hosted by NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill, the summit attracted nearly 100 guests to Aon's Leadenhall Building headquarters to hear how the North East is redefining itself and boldly stepping into a future that will be defined by green energy, digital innovation and the UK's newest AI Growth Zone.

Following a welcome address from Newcastle-born former Sony Interactive Entertainment president and chief executive Jim Ryan, the event's first panel discussion – Shaping the Future: The Power of the North East – explored how the region has evolved into a thriving commercial landscape, driven by a close-knit business community, strong sector clusters and a growing sense of shared ambition.

The discussion ranged from the region's position as the UK's only net-exporter to rapid advances in offshore wind, high-speed data infrastructure and the rise of the space sector.

Tom Lawson, chief executive of Newcastle-based tech firm Opencast, said the North East is “far better set up for the future than many realise”, with high-speed internet connections and the emerging hyperscale data centre in Cambois, near Blyth.

He also highlighted the depth of the region's digital ecosystem, from Government tech

centres to major private sector employers, which has created a pool of people with “outside levels of experience” delivering national-scale projects.

He added: “You don't have to be in London to deliver major programmes; we've proven we can do it from the North East.”

Tom found support from Natasha McDonough, founder and chief executive of Sunderland-based MMC Research, and vice president of the North East Chamber of Commerce.

Originally from London, Natasha moved to the North East 17 years ago, and told guests it had quickly become “home in every way”.

She said: “Every time I travelled north, I just had a better feeling – the coast, the people, the pace of life.

“You walk into an event in the North East and you'll find professional services, engineering,

manufacturing and tech all in the same room.

“It's a genuinely collective ecosystem wherein everyone wants you to do well.”

Sarah Glendinning, director of business partnerships at Northumbria University, highlighted its involvement in the £50 million North East Space Skills and Technology Centre (NESST), which is being delivered in partnership with the UK Space Agency and Lockheed Martin.

She said: “NESST is a £50 million vote of confidence in the region and the space sector.

Tom Lawson, Opencast chief executive, second left, makes a point during the London-based VISION 31 event. He is joined by, from left to right, Sarah Glendinning, Northumbria University director of business partnerships; Natasha McDonough, MMC Research founder and chief executive; and Frans Calje, PD Ports chief executive





“The North East is already at the heart of this growth, with 81 companies operating directly in space and an even larger ecosystem around them.

“We used to build ships on the Tyne. Now we’re building spaceships.”

The pace of progress was reinforced by Frans Caljé, chief executive at Teesport operator PD Ports.

Like Natasha, he moved to the North East 17 years ago and said the change at Teesport has been “off the scale”, adding the industrial landscape has been transformed by rapid advances driven by the energy transition, manufacturing growth and new infrastructure.

He said: “If you’d told me back then that the area would look the way it does today, I’d never have believed it.”

The second panel – Investing in the North East: A Launchpad for Success – focused on why the region is becoming a magnet for large-scale investment, from its designation as an AI Growth Zone to the rise of globally connected clusters in e-sports, digital infrastructure and advanced manufacturing.

Andy Lawson, director of pre-development at QTS, spoke about the recently-announced North East AI Growth Zone and QTS’ £10 billion data centre in Cambois, near Blyth, which will position the North East as one of Europe’s largest data centre hubs.

He said: “It’s not very often you come across a site with the characteristics of Cambois...sites like this are few and far between on a global level.”

He added the North East’s new AI Growth Zone “puts the region on the map internationally”, offering faster grid connections, potential energy cost reductions and a direct line to the Government.

In a similar vein, Dave Martin, senior vice president of the British Esports Federation,

provided an insight into the reasons why the organisation chose to make Sunderland its home.

He highlighted its planned 15,000sq ft gaming and esports arena next to Sunderland AFC’s Stadium of Light, which will feature a 200-seat theatre and a 17-metre-wide LED screen, and is set to host the Esports World Cup and Olympic Esports Games.

Praising Sunderland City Council’s ambition, he said: “It took me about 20 minutes to know where the city was going.

“Everyone we met understood the opportunity – and they got after it.

“There’s an energy and positivity in the region that’s hard to find elsewhere.”

His point was reiterated by Peter Snaith, partner at international law firm Womble Bond Dickinson, which has bases in Newcastle and Stockton, who highlighted the North East’s global reach and deepening international connectivity.

He said: “Little old Newcastle is still the biggest office in our entire UK-US network.

“And the region’s clusters bring business leaders around the same table.

“People share their experiences, their opportunities, challenges and genuinely want each other to succeed.”

Jen Hartley, assistant director of capital investment and growth at Newcastle City Council, said the North East’s defining strengths lie in its connectivity, its culture and its openness.

She added: “You become part of a family. People embrace you. People want to see you do well.

“And investors are always blown away by the splash they make when they arrive.

“When people come to the North East, they can’t believe the welcome they get.”

“You don’t have to be in London to deliver major programmes; we’ve proven we can do it from the North East”

THE NET 250 RETURNS TO SHOWCASE REGION'S ELITE

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The NET 250 will return this 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 return with a new headline partner and a host of fresh award categories.

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

The North East's premier celebration of business excellence will return in 2026 to once again shine a spotlight on the region's most dynamic and successful companies.

And N magazine publisher and event organiser NET is delighted to reveal national professional services firm Knights as the headline partner for the showpiece ceremony.

Celebrating the organisations driving financial growth while innovating in an exciting new era of devolution, The 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 NET 250 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 – which is also backed by award partners including S&W, Hill Dickinson and PwC – 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.

Those accolades will include honours for the top company in the North East, as well as fresh awards for the highest new entrant and the highest climber.

The 2026 ceremony will also feature the judges' select award, a new honour that will celebrate an organisation's financial successes, as well as its wider impact.

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

"Last year 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.

"We're also thrilled to have Knights join us as headline partner.

"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.

"The NET 250 builds on that commitment."

Kenton Bazeley, Knights' client services director, adds: "Partnering with The NET 250 is a statement of intent for us in the North East.

"Our teams in Newcastle and Teesside are

growing, backed by our unrivalled nationwide team of professionals.

"Such a prestigious event is a great place for us to forge even closer ties with our region's businesses.

"We're really looking forward to celebrating those at the forefront of our vibrant and creative business community.

"It promises to be a great event."

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

She says: "We are delighted to continue our partnership, 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 on this event.

"PwC is 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 celebrate regional success stories and put North East businesses on the map."



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

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



SPOT LIGHT

**Black, white and
all shades of chaos**

By Steven Hugill





As the 2026 calendar year begins to play out before us, Steven Hugill looks at Labour's time in power and why – after a tumultuous period of U-turns, policy backlash and headline leaks – a measured and pragmatic approach is long overdue.

There are very few things that bring your mortality into sharper focus than your children.

Now, let me quickly state here that what you're about to read isn't the result of some near-death experience, nor a misty-eyed post-Christmas epiphany.

I'm talking about how youngsters, all doe-eyed and innocent, can fell you with a single blow.

'What was it like in the olden days, Daddy?', came the question one afternoon, delivered with all the subtlety of an axe rapping into a great oak tree.

Well, for a start, social media slop didn't stain society, every second celebrity didn't have a banal podcast and influencers very definitely weren't a thing.

Oh, and the cartoons were much better. Well, some of the time.

Of course, I didn't say any of that.

No, I played along, telling my six-year-old daughter we all lived in a black and white world, inside black and white houses where we wore black and white clothes and ate black and white sprinkles on our very definitely vanilla ice cream.

That was sufficient. She giggled, said something about the olden days again and wandered off to lead a make-believe play club with her younger brother.

But it did get me thinking.

Just what was life like in my younger years, in the days of being blissfully unaware of Father Time and his slow, but inexorable, shuffle in my direction?

Well, for a start, the politics was no less confusing.

For early life, read trying to understand the principal parties and their policies.

Fast-forward to the present day, and I'm still grappling with the principal parties and their policies.

I am, if you hadn't guessed, getting around to discussing Labour and its 18 months or so in power.

Oh, boy.

Arguably, Labour's biggest mistake – worse than its sustained slipshod strategy – was to project from the outset, and then continue intoning, that all of the country's ills could be healed at a relative stroke.

I mean, I know you were keen to get cracking guys, but someone in HQ must surely have seen that replacing the revolving Conservative Omnishambles with the commissioning of another rolling 24-hour fiasco was hardly a solid move.

And yet they still waved it past the pilot stage, in a world where every word is scattered and skewed across social media, and every move is examined, micro-examined and couriered to Diamond Light Source HQ by a red-faced right-wing press.

The chaos the party is labouring (pun intended) to deal with goes way back, of course, beyond David Cameron's shambolic decision to let the country anywhere near Brexit and the shiny tin hat put on things by Boris Johnson and his latter day replacements.

Elected on a tide of unfiltered political relief, Labour had the opportunity to deliver watershed change.

Instead, thanks to headline policy U-turns, a head-scratching national insurance increase, embarrassing budget leaks and more, it's been a washout.

I interviewed Sir Keir on a Comms 101 trip to a Sunderland bottling factory in the months before the last election.

As you might imagine, he was on the front foot, bombastically extolling Labour's plans for the country when it finally had the opportunity to crowbar the Tories from power.

Amid the clanking of machinery and the heavy sighs of a PR advisor as a broadcast journalist ignored calls to cut, Sir Keir told me he was "a person who wanted to fix things" and that his regime would end the short-termism that has plagued the UK's political system for so long.

The fact the party has arguably had more

success in overseas relations than domestic politics tells its own story on the success of that quest.

The fixer needs to fix things. And fast.

Sir Keir is never shy of telling everyone he's an Arsenal fan, one who remembers the pragmatic days of George Graham, where doing the basics was so chiselled into the place it was practically a part of the grand Marble Hall in the club's old Highbury stadium.

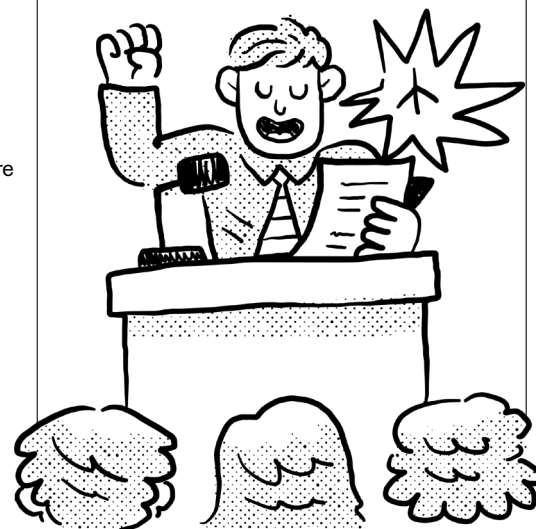
And the country – and its populace – needs it.

As 2026 gets underway, let's do the basics properly and create simple clear lines and contrasts that even a six-year-old could understand.

Let us have a Government that sets an agenda, rather than reacts to the latest calamity.

Because if we don't, we'll merely continue to lurch from mess to counter mess and, in all probability, open the door wide for Reform to govern the country.

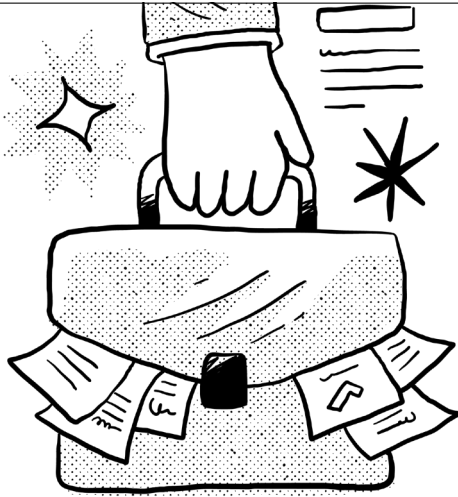
And it's a black and white truth that we don't need that technicolor catastrophe.



BIG QUESTION

Another rollercoaster political year ended with the Government's Autumn Budget, where Chancellor Rachel Reeves unveiled headline tax and pension changes, pledged fresh support for business, promised major transport and infrastructure investment and vowed to scrap the two-child benefit cap. The Chancellor said the policies will "strengthen Britain's economic foundations and set the course for a secure future for the country". But does the blueprint go far enough to tackle the challenges ahead?

By Steven Hugill



Join the discussion

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



Rhiannon Bearn
Deputy chief executive

North East Chamber of Commerce

The Chancellor attempted a delicate balancing act, but while many of our members will welcome the decision not to introduce further taxes on business, the capping of salary sacrifice on pensions will increase costs for some employers.

There will also be understandable caution about the significant tax burden now placed on households and consumers.

The Chancellor was right to scrap the two-child benefit cap.

Our members have long argued it is one of the most powerful levers available to tackle the unacceptable rates of child poverty across our region and to support more parents into sustained and meaningful employment.

Confirmation of the £13 billion of flexible funding devolved for skills, infrastructure and business support to seven mayoral strategic authorities, including the North East Combined Authority, directly delivers our call for devolution to unlock North East growth and productivity.

We also welcome the announcement of £16 million for a new STEM Centre in Darlington, and further commitments on planning and development, including funding for Newcastle's Forth Banks scheme.

There is cause for guarded optimism, but what matters now is how measures play out in practice.



Paul Butler
Chief executive

North East Automotive Alliance

We welcome the Government's continued commitment to UK manufacturing competitiveness through measures such as the industrial strategy, DRIVE35 and extended grants for electric vehicles and charging infrastructure.

However, we share industry concerns over certain fiscal measures announced in the budget, which risk undermining progress at a critical stage in the sector's electrification journey.

The introduction of a pay-per-mile tax on electric vehicles from 2028, alongside existing road taxes, sends a mixed message to consumers and could slow electric vehicle adoption.

There are positive elements, though.

The removal of premium car bands from the Mobility scheme could encourage greater adoption of British-built vehicles, such as those produced by Nissan in Sunderland.

Additionally, the delay to changes in employee car ownership schemes avoids penalising automotive workers who purchase the very vehicles they produce.

However, the scheme's planned scrapping further down the line poses a significant risk to new car registrations and could put thousands of manufacturing jobs in jeopardy.

Rather than policies that risk suppressing demand, we need initiatives that stimulate consumer confidence, accelerate infrastructure rollout and safeguard supply chain jobs.



Stephen Patterson
Chief executive

NE1 Ltd

There was no shot in the arm for businesses or the economy from a budget that takes more from the wages of working people and adds to the financial pressures on companies.

With no tax cuts for working people, and a freeze on income tax thresholds for the next three years, there will be less disposable income and salary to spend.

This doesn't bode well for the towns and city centres still reeling from last year's budget, and there was no respite thanks to additional burdens placed on businesses with the minimum wage increase.

This puts extra pressure on sectors like retail and hospitality, which are already struggling under significant pressure.

On average in the UK, one pub closes every day. Closer to home in Newcastle, 16 hospitality venues have closed since the last budget.

With the last two budgets, the Government has chosen to take more than £70 billion out of the economy, meaning times are going to be tight for businesses, and finding the money for investment and growth is going to be difficult.



Aman Chahal
Chief executive

TaperedPlus

While the budget presents ongoing challenges for SMEs, from rising inflation to added employment costs, there were some positive measures that will make a difference to businesses like ours.

One of the most welcome is the decision to fully fund apprenticeships for under-25s in small and medium-sized companies.

Skills shortages are one of the biggest barriers to growth in the construction sector, and giving SMEs the ability to bring young people into the industry – without the financial burden – will support recruitment and long-term workforce development.

Of course, wider pressures remain.

The cap on salary sacrifice pensions adds new complexity, and there were missed opportunities to support innovation, digital adoption and decarbonisation.

I would also have liked to have seen more investment in our schools and hospitals, and a cohesive push towards growing, improving and maintaining our building stock.

Overall, while I recognise the wider economic pressures the Chancellor is facing, this budget leaves businesses carrying more of the burden.

Squaring the circle

Maven Capital Partners

www.mavencp.com

LinkedIn: Maven Capital Partners

www.coachwithfitr.com

LinkedIn: FITR

An entrepreneur's journey from the first spark of an idea to a fully-fledged product is never straightforward, but with the right backing – and occasionally some tough love – anything is possible. Here, Durham University graduate Leon Cassidy, founder and chief executive of fitness technology platform FITR, tells N magazine how he has come full circle with a milestone £1.5 million investment from the North East office of national private equity and venture capital firm Maven Capital Partners, which will be used to fuel growth plans.

"I'm the type of person who likes to keep moving forward – I don't look back. I just want to know how we can put our foot down and really drive forward".

Leon Cassidy is full of energy and ideas, a tech entrepreneur whose platform FITR is used worldwide by fitness coaches to deliver online training programmes to clients.

With the spark of an idea grown from his love of CrossFit and desire to create a like-minded community to share training tips and programmes, FITR – launched in 2019 – has grown into a global platform with hundreds of thousands of users each week.

And his ambition to make FITR a world-leading platform for fitness trainers has just received a significant boost.

Late last year, FITR secured £1.5 million funding from private equity and venture capital firm Maven Capital Partners.

For Leon, the deal is more than a financial milestone, it's a personal one, bringing him full circle back to his early academic and career roots in Newcastle.

He says: "I began my professional life here, so to come back and work with Maven on this next stage is incredible.

"From the first conversation, their enthusiasm was clear.

"They understood what we're building and the potential of the market."

The investment process was led by Michael Vassallo, partner at Maven's North East offices in Newcastle and Durham, and supported by investment manager Rebecca Minchella, who worked closely with Leon throughout.

Leon says: "Both Michael and Rebecca were fantastic.

"They were positive from the outset and really understood what we're trying to achieve.

"Their support and insight will be invaluable as we grow."

FITR was born from Leon's passion for fitness and his entrepreneurial instincts.

Growing up in Cambridge, he was inspired by his tech entrepreneur father, who taught him the importance of understanding the numbers behind any business.

That advice led Leon to Durham University and then into accountancy, qualifying with KPMG in Newcastle before moving into corporate finance at UNW, spending three years working in the shadows of St James' Park.

He says: "Working in auditing at KPMG gave me a good grounding in the profession, and I loved the experience at UNW.

"I learned so much, but I always knew I wanted to create something of my own."

Around that time, Leon discovered CrossFit.

He says: "I fell in love with it.

"I wanted to find out as much as I could, but Instagram was still basic then – there was no real community.

"That was the seed of the idea that would become FITR; how could I create a platform for coaches and clients to connect?"

The first version of FITR, though, didn't go as planned.

"We launched, but it just didn't work", admits Leon.

However, a turning point came during a conversation with a Ukrainian developer, who advised him to scrap everything and start again.

Leon says: "It was brutal – there were lots of tears shed that day, I had put everything I had into that first version of the app.

"But it was the best decision I ever made for the business.

"We could start with a blank piece of paper and not try to force square pegs into round holes anymore."

The relaunched FITR had a new focus, adopting a store front approach where coaches could package training programmes like products: easy to buy and easy to use, with a fully automated payment and client management system behind the scenes.

The app was further developed after Leon connected with Steven Fawcett, a high-profile UK CrossFit Games athlete, who became a key partner in shaping the platform.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic.

Leon says: "Suddenly, every coach needed an online solution.



“I think we were one of the few businesses in the country that was in the right place at the right time.”

The pandemic accelerated adoption of online training and changed perceptions in the community: online coaching was no longer a compromise but a complement to in-person training.

FITR quickly grew beyond its CrossFit roots, attracting personal trainers, swimming coaches, gym chains and even sports brands.

High-profile collaborations, including an app powered by FITR for CrossFit legend Matt O’Keefe – “the Messi or Ronaldo of the CrossFit world,” says Leon – cemented its reputation.

Today, the company employs 16 staff, supported by its long-standing Ukrainian app development team.

Leon says: “Everything we’ve earned has gone back into the product.

“And with Maven’s backing, we can accelerate development, bring in a senior leadership team at HQ and invest in marketing to reach more coaches globally.”

He adds: “When we first started out, people thought online training was basically just on-demand videos.

“It’s not. It’s about creating accountability.

“I don’t need one-to-one with a trainer, but still want to know I’m doing it properly each time, that there’s an ongoing structure to my training and I’m building on it day by day, rather than doing something random and not progressing.”

Operating in a global digital health coaching industry tipped to reach \$13.8 billion this year, Leon says his team has built a platform with significant scalability.

He uses his accountancy and corporate finance background to make sure the business is on a secure footing with prudent projections, and was gratified when an independent report prepared for Maven confirmed his plans were on the right track.

For Leon, the focus is firmly on the future.

He says: “I’m the platform’s biggest critic – it’s never perfect. But that’s what drives us.

“This investment gives us the freedom to keep improving, to keep acquiring coaches and the expert support from Maven to do it sustainably.

“Coaches now see online and in-person training as complementary.

“Our job is to make the online side as simple and effective as possible.

“How do we do more, to build on what we have?

“This investment is the start of that journey.”

Rebecca Minchella, Maven investment manager, with Leon Cassidy, FITR founder and chief executive

Picture: Andrew Lowe



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 up 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.

A bold new approach to place-shaping

Karbon Homes

www.karbonhomes.co.uk

LinkedIn: Karbon Homes

Once at the heart of North East industry, Stanley has seen better days. It's had its share of bad press in the last year, but locals have hit back, showing the pride, belief and hope that has long pumped through the veins of the place. And as a local organisation on a mission to build strong and sustainable places for its communities, housing association Karbon Homes is working with community partners and the council to galvanise the town and lead the charge for change. Here, Colin Young speaks to Victoria Keen, Karbon's place partnership strategic lead, to find out more.



Main pictures: Jamie Haslam

Perched on a hilltop between Consett and Chester-le-Street lies Stanley, once a thriving town at the heart of North East industry and innovation.

But the last couple of decades have not been kind.

Shaped, developed and peopled by coal, steel and hard graft for more than a century, the once prosperous town has suffered a tough period of gradual decline.

But, with the support of local housing association Karbon Homes, Stanley is fighting back.

Karbon, which owns and manages one in four homes in the town, is targeting its resources at initiatives and projects that help deliver positive change.

Working in partnership with the community, it is developing a sophisticated understanding of the town, in order to help tackle its biggest challenges at the root.

"There's a real sense of pride, identity and community in the town, and people have told us they feel there's so much potential here," says Victoria Keen, Karbon's place partnership strategic lead.

She adds: "But there are many challenges too, and we want to play our part in helping Stanley tackle them to boost the prosperity of residents.

"And as a housing association and an anchor institution in the community, I believe we're well placed to help address these challenges.

"We're used to thinking outside the box, and

given our strong links with customers, we're ideally placed to lead on a bold new approach."

With a footprint that covers around 34,000 homes across the North East and Yorkshire, Karbon Homes' work in Stanley is part of its 'Fair Foundations' approach to place-shaping, with the aim of tackling the challenges communities face to make long-lasting changes and support growth.

Victoria says: "Stanley is one of two impact areas where we're concentrating our resources, the other being the Byker estate in the east end of Newcastle.

"These places have strong identities, strong communities, a strong sense of belonging and a pride that has perhaps taken a bit of a battering in recent years.

"We knew we wanted to focus on places where there were higher levels of deprivation and health inequality, but also where there is a strong community spirit and where we're best placed to make a difference due to our high concentration of housing stock in the area.

"We already offer some fantastic customer and community support services, but a lot of the work we were doing was supporting people in crisis.

"This new approach looks at what we can do in the longer term that is offering a new conceptual approach to place, built on an area's strengths and supporting sustainable economic prosperity.

"The priority has been to listen to residents, and to engage with local councils, businesses, charities and community groups.

"Change and transformation needs a collective."

And there is surely no greater demonstration that Karbon is listening than the purchase of the blighted Stanley Board School on Front Street that laid unused and derelict for more than 30 years.

A symbol of Stanley's decline has been removed and in its place will surely come hope, pride and prosperity.



Victoria Keen, Karbon Homes' place partnership strategic lead

Victoria says: “The community told us the high street was somewhere they wanted to see more investment.

“It used to be thriving, with good services and plenty of shops.

“It was a good place to live and work, and supported good quality of life, but that has declined, particularly in the last ten to 15 years.

“The biggest symbol of that decline was some of the larger buildings, which the residents saw as being left to go to rack and ruin, mostly by absentee landlords.

“They wanted us to do something about it.

“After in-depth consultation and engagement, and the creation of an action plan, the first intervention – and probably the bravest – was the purchase of the school site.

“This is a huge step in us helping to rejuvenate the high street.

“We’re still exploring a number of possible options for the site, but we’re confident its redevelopment will be a springboard for Stanley’s town centre revival.”

Karbon’s ambitions for improving the town stem from the top of the organisation.

Chief executive Paul Fiddaman is a proud Stanley man, a former Tanfield School pupil who understands the complexities of the town’s

history and has a desire to shape its future more positively.

And while considering the future of the former school site, Victoria and her team have been implementing a number of other projects to further boost the vibrancy of Front Street, which include engaging with local artists and schools to design fresh shopfront shutters, and sponsoring regular food markets to help drive footfall.

Victoria adds: “We know we can’t revive the town alone, so we set up the Stanley Stakeholder Reference Group with more than 120 individuals that represent in excess of 60 organisations including the county council, town council, local charities, Durham University and Beamish Museum.

“We’re keen to work with partners who have a vested interest in Stanley and who are open to collaboration.

“I think that’s the positive thing about our place-shaping approach; we’ve shown we can do more if we focus our investment together, rather than working in silos.

“I’ve come to really love the place and the people.

“It’s not without its challenges, but Stanley has so much to offer and hopefully a bright future ahead.”



Karbon Homes

For more information about Karbon Homes and the services and support it provides, visit the website at the top of this article.

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Bottling up success

Scaleup North East

www.scaleupnortheast.co.uk

LinkedIn: RTC North

www.ipac.co.uk

LinkedIn: iPac Packaging Innovations



Scaleup North East

To be eligible for Scaleup North East support, companies should be:

- Businesses, including start-ups, which are scaling or can demonstrate significant growth potential
- Based in the areas of Northumberland, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Newcastle-upon-Tyne or the Gateshead Metropolitan Borough

Ideally in the following sectors, although others will be considered:

- Digital and technology
- Health and life sciences
- Low carbon and green growth
- Creative industries
- Advanced manufacturing

The following sectors are not eligible for support:

- Agriculture
- Fishery and aquaculture
- Banking
- Insurance
- Firms should ideally demonstrate a growth rate of 20 per cent over two previous years, or high growth potential, demonstrating growth of above ten per cent and forecasting future growth of at least ten per cent, with increase in employment

For more information, visit www.scaleupnortheast.co.uk

Scaleup North East is delivered by RTC North and funded by the Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The programme is led by the North East Combined Authority, covering the seven local authority areas of County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Sunderland and Northumberland.

Business growth demands clarity, resilience and the right people beside you. For Jonny Catto, managing director of Gateshead-based iPac Packaging Innovations, the Scaleup North East programme – and the guidance of partner Tony Brooks – delivered exactly that, helping accelerate the company's expansion in a highly competitive sector. Here, Jonny speaks to Peter Anderson about the company's rapid growth, its sustainability-led approach and the difference Tony's guidance has made.

When the 60,000 competitors in last year's Great North Run reached the first drink station, it's unlikely many of them spared a thought for the plastic water bottles in their hands.

Fresh from the thrill of crossing the Tyne Bridge, most were settling into their rhythm and certainly not thinking about whether those bottles would ever be recycled.

But one runner could have traced their journey precisely.

Among the mass of participants was Jonny Catto, managing director of iPac Packaging Innovations, whose headquarters sit just a stone's throw from the famous route on Gateshead's Albany Road.

For Jonny, the discarded bottles weren't waste. They were raw material.



In the days following the race, hundreds of thousands of bottles entered a North East-wide recycling loop before being thermoformed into food packaging at iPac's Gateshead plant – a collaboration between iPac, The Great Run Company, South Tyneside Council and Premier Waste.

It was a live demonstration of circularity in action, showing that so-called problem plastic can, with the right systems and right mindset, become something valuable again.

In many ways, the project encapsulated everything iPac stands for: a North East manufacturing ethos, a commitment to sustainability grounded in engineering rather than sentiment, and a belief that innovation must be practical, measurable and rooted in reality.

A few months later, walking the factory floor with Jonny as trays glide off the production lines, it becomes even clearer how iPac has grown from a ten-person start-up with £500,000 turnover in 2017 to a 100-staff strong manufacturer generating more than £24 million today.

Yet when the firm, which produces thermoformed packaging for the food and pharmaceutical industries, was founded in 2016, Jonny – who had left London and a successful career at Deloitte to return to his native North East and start a family – knew he was entering what he describes as a “mature, very competitive industry” dominated by large international groups.

But with the support of his father-in-law Harry Reed – a thermoforming veteran with more than 40 years' experience – the business quickly found its footing.

Jonny says: “People ask us what our USP is, and it's not rocket science.

“Our differentiators have always been customer focus, quality, quick turnaround, quick decision-making and flexibility.

“And as soon as we got a foot in the door, clients saw the difference straightaway.”

As Jonny shows us examples of iPac’s pots, tubs and trays, it’s easy to see why the firm’s reputation for quality is so strong.

He says: “A lot of the industry is very low margin, so people buy the cheapest input materials.

“We try and compete in a different way – through in-house efficiency.

“We run a lean, super-efficient site, so we don’t have to use cheap, low-quality material.”

And that commitment extends beyond the product.

Jonny says: “Your mentality on the shop floor makes a difference.

“We’re not a minimum wage employer, and that matters.

“When you’ve got a good team environment, people actually care about their job – and they look after your quality for you.”

Another key differentiator is iPac’s commitment to genuine, engineering-led sustainability.

From the outset, the firm has used recycled PET made from bottle flake, designing products to be as lightweight, recyclable and contamination-free as possible.

And iPac’s focus on clear mono-PET and removal of pads and laminates has also helped it stand apart.

Jonny says: “From day one, our approach was ‘design to recycle’ – how can we make products as lightweight as possible and get out anything that contaminates?

“Our industry is very circular, and I don’t think people appreciate that.

“The main material we use is bottle flake, recycled plastic bottles, and pretty much every bit of development we do has a sustainability angle.”

For Jonny, who became managing director in 2020 after starting out as finance director, his greatest strength has always been his willingness to take calculated risks alongside an ability to pivot when needed.

That flexible mindset has driven iPac’s expansion.

In 2023, the firm opened a second site in Tanfield, in County Durham, while a new 10,000sq ft extension at its Gateshead base has further strengthened operational resilience.

And with plans to bring extrusion in-house, install new thermoforming lines and continue investing at scale, iPac’s growth shows no signs of slowing.

Jonny says: “The next big step is vertical integration – bringing more of the process in-house.

“We currently buy in all of our sheet, but we’ll soon be able to extrude it ourselves directly from bottle flake.

“New thermoforming lines will give us another jump in capability too.

“It all forms part of a £10 million investment programme over the next 18 months, and extrusion alone will mean employing around 15 new people.”

Jonny is quick to credit the support he has received along the way, particularly from the Scaleup North East programme, which connects founders with experienced partners to help shape growth plans.

For Jonny, the chance to work with Tony Brooks – who built a two-person engineering firm into a multi-million-pound operation – has proved “transformative”.

He describes Tony as the ideal “sounding board” and a “source of accountability”.

Jonny says: “Tony understood our business and flagged things he thought we could benefit from.”

A standout example was Tony directing iPac to a Made Smarter grant, which funded a full warehouse management system.



Jonny says: “We previously had a very manual, Excel-based system that was creaking at the seams.

“We were handling a couple of thousand pallets a week – you can’t manage that on a spreadsheet – and the new system has been an absolute game-changer.”

Just as valuable, Jonny says, have been Tony’s industry introductions.

He adds: “Whether it’s one of his colleagues at RTC North, who’s better suited to a particular challenge, or someone from his wider network, Tony always seems to know someone who can help.

“He’s been there and done it; he’s built and scaled a business, so being able to bounce things off him is invaluable.

“It has proven massively beneficial for us.”



The UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund proactively supports mission-delivery: pushing power out to communities everywhere, with a specific focus to helping kickstart economic growth and promoting opportunities in all parts of the UK.

The Government’s Autumn Budget announced a further £900 million of funding for local investment by March 2026, with a transition year administered throughout the former North of Tyne region by the North East Combined Authority.

For more information, visit www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus



RTC North

RTC North is a leading provider of business support and innovation services, working with organisations to unlock their potential and achieve sustainable growth. With a wealth of expertise and a commitment to excellence, RTC North empowers businesses to overcome challenges, embrace opportunities and drive success in a rapidly evolving marketplace.

Community champions

Muckle LLP

www.muckle-llp.com

LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

Career opportunities are not spread equally across the country, with the North East being one of the lowest-performing regions in terms of social mobility. But regional businesses can make a huge difference, and local commercial law firm Muckle LLP is striving to do so.



Hugh Welch, Muckle LLP senior partner and head of the firm's ESG programme

Making an impact

For local commercial law firm Muckle LLP, improving opportunities for all is a priority.

As the first law firm in the North East and Cumbria to achieve B Corp certification for its commitment to using 'business as a force for good', the firm has long championed the importance of breaking down barriers to opportunity.

Hugh Welch, senior partner and head of the firm's ESG work, thinks businesses have a vital part to play.

He says: "While individuals and the education system have an important role to play, businesses are in arguably one of the most powerful positions to make a difference.

"We recognise that as a profitable law firm, we're in an extremely privileged position – but we're also in a position to use that privilege to make a difference.

"For many years, our focus has been on four key areas: supporting young people, overcoming disadvantage, improving social mobility and supporting causes close to the hearts of our people.

"It is so important to us to not only improve social mobility in the legal sector, but to improve it for our whole region, regardless of sector.

"To do this, we adopt a multi-faceted approach, through a range of recruitment strategies, events, charitable grants and volunteering, to name but a few."

From classroom to career

For a sector like law, which is still seen as an 'it's not what you know, it's who you know' kind of industry, improving social mobility is easier said than done.

Hugh says: "The majority of professional services, which include the legal sector, still seem to be slightly elitist and out of reach for young people who lack the same connections as their peers."

The North East boasts a high number of

Social mobility links an individual's professional status with that of their background or circumstances.

For example, if someone from a working-class background has a professional job, they are said to have achieved a high level of upwards social mobility.

While this sounds great in theory, these opportunities are still very dependent on where you live, with research from the Sutton Trust painting a stark picture of the regional divide.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, while all of the top 20 constituencies found to have high levels of social mobility are in London, some of the lowest-performing constituencies are in the North East, with Newcastle's West End being the lowest-ranked area in England.

So, what can we do about it?

Pictures: Mike Smith Photography



Lauryn Hellewell is the latest Muckle solicitor to qualify through the North East Solicitor Apprenticeship scheme

professional services workers, with more than 38,000 people employed in the sector.

However, a lack of upward social mobility means able young people are being left behind.

Hugh says recruitment is key to bridging the gap.

He adds: “By adopting more inclusive hiring processes and focusing on educating the next generation, businesses can ensure their talent pools are based on potential, not background, ultimately helping increase social mobility.”

To help narrow the divide, Muckle co-founded the North East Apprenticeship Scheme in 2017, which helps young people gain a law degree.

Muckle currently has eight solicitor apprentices, and three have qualified so far.

However, businesses don't need to create their own apprenticeship schemes to make a difference.

Hugh says: “There are lots of charitable organisations championing greater social mobility that organisations can partner with.

“For example, this year Muckle has started working with Inspiration for All, a charity that links business leaders and school leaders via mentoring partnerships.”

Muckle has also revamped its Inspiring Careers programme for 2025 to focus more on high-

achieving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The firm, along with programme partner Mortal Fools, will work with several schools with a high percentage of free school meals.

This impactful programme aims to raise aspirations, build confidence and equip young people with the practical skills they need to succeed in any future career.

Heart of the community

For Hugh, recruitment should be part of an organisation's overall social mobility strategy.

He says: “While recruitment creates pathways for disadvantaged individuals to access opportunities they previously thought unattainable, it's important for businesses to work with charities that support social mobility.

“In doing so, charities can expand their services, reach more people and make even more of a difference.”

Since 2002, Muckle has donated one per cent of its profits each year to the Muckle Fund at the Community Foundation, and has supported a range of charitable organisations.

And with the firm becoming more profitable each year, Hugh says this support continues to grow.

He adds: “We have supported various charities

based in the North East with grant funding totalling £44,950 in the last year alone, and are exploring opportunities to support more charities that focus on social mobility with grants.

“We'd welcome any charities that work to improve social mobility in our region to apply for a grant via our Muckle Fund at the Community Foundation, so we can support even more young people in advancing their careers.”



Muckle LLP

To learn more about Muckle and its social mobility strategy, visit the website at the top of this article.

RIDING



As ambitious tech pacesetter Seriös Group continues to make waves nationally, surf-loving chief commercial officer Robin Cordy's focus is firmly fixed on rapid growth and reputation-enhancing partnerships. Here, the Newcastle University graduate tells Simon Rushworth how he's found the ideal place to strike the perfect work-life balance, combining his passion for family time, food and music with a key role communicating the transformative power of data.



WAVE

www.seriosgroup.com
LinkedIn: Seriös Group

These days, the beard's just a little too tidy and the hair too carefully clipped, but look beneath the surface, by digging into his past, and it's easy to imagine a 20-something Robin Cordy as an achingly cool hybrid of Point Break-era Keanu Reeves and the godfather of grunge Kurt Cobain.

During his early days on Tyneside, the politics student with a passion for technology always seemed to be riding a wave or writing a riff.

A creative soul with a sense of adventure, Nirvana fan Robin was the embodiment of frontman Cobain's 'teen spirit' as he embraced the very best of North East living.

Whether launching himself into the North Sea at Tynemouth's Longsands or launching into an alternative rock anthem at Newcastle's Cluny, the fun-loving adrenaline junkie had found his home from home.

"One of my passions in life is surfing," says Robin, before revealing, rather ruefully, that trips to the coast are becoming less frequent given his family commitments (including caring for a new puppy) and ambitions to grow Seriös Group.

He says: "I'd done a bit in Australia and became a member of the surf club at university.

"I ended up becoming president in my third year.





“I love to surf, but it’s quite an inconvenient hobby.

“We do get really good waves in this part of the world, but they’re not consistent.

“In the winter, you’ve got limited daylight hours, so you’ve got to get down to the coast as soon as you know the conditions are good — and that could be on a Saturday lunchtime, five in the morning on a Monday or late on a Thursday afternoon.

“It’s pretty frustrating!”

In search of the right wave at the right time, Robin’s booked a long overdue trip to Morocco in February.

He says: “There’ll definitely be waves and it’ll definitely be warm.

“And there’s no better way to switch off.”

Indeed, when Robin needed a brief career break he turned to his trusty surfboard and toured the hidden islands of the Maldives.

He says: “It sounds luxurious, but it really wasn’t.

“We lived on a boat and it was pretty basic.

“But the surfing was incredible. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Robin returned from that trip refreshed and reinvigorated, but by no means ready for another permanent role.

He says: “I was waiting for a full-time opportunity that really excited me but, at the same time, I started picking up consultancy projects here and there.

“I had several interesting conversations with people who said ‘oh, we need a bit of help with this, or we could really use your experience on that’.

“Quite quickly, I had enough work to set myself up as a consultant, helping tech-enabled businesses to grow faster.

“That’s when I met Lee (Rorison, founder and chief executive of Seriös Group) for the first time, and we hit it off straight away.”

Robin describes his fledgling working relationship with Seriös Group as ‘a mutual try before you buy’ arrangement.

It suited both parties and the benefits were clear.

He says: “I got to know the business and understood it was something I wanted to be a part of.

“The people at Seriös Group got to know me, and there came a point where I had a couple of contracts finishing at the same time as Lee was looking to bolster the management team.

“I took the decision to jump in with both feet.”

As chief commercial officer, Robin oversees business development, sales, marketing, client management and a raft of other strategic functions.

He joined Seriös Group as the firm moved into an exciting scale-up phase, and feels the sky’s the limit for the Newcastle-based data solutions leader.

He says: “Lee’s got the enthusiasm and the clarity of vision, and he knows how to execute as well.

“That’s reflected in every aspect of the business.

“I like that we’re building a management team for scale.

“The majority of the senior people we have brought in come from bigger businesses and bring a wealth of experience.

“We’re at 65 people now, but we’ve got the management team in place that can get us to 200 or 250 quite quickly.”







Seriös Group's roster is seriously impressive: Bank of Ireland, Tombola, True Potential, JLL and Sunderland AFC offer a snapshot of the calibre of clients that work alongside the Hoults Yard-helmed business to unlock game-changing data.

"It's become clear there are so many companies out there who need what we do," says Robin, who rose through the ranks at digital agency TH_NK and digital construction platform firm NBS prior to meeting Lee and the Seriös Group team.

He adds: "The first time I saw our client book, I was blown away.

"But we're only just getting started.

"We're investing heavily in our brand and we're growing our sales and marketing team to complement that.

"Our story is a really strong one; we're very different in the way that we do things.

"We provide data solutions; we help clients organise and manage data so they can use it as a strategic asset, be that through advanced analytics or to power artificial intelligence.

"Most organisations have lots of data, but often can't really utilise it.

"Data is the fuel for artificial intelligence – without clean data, you can't really take advantage of artificial intelligence.

"We've found our niche in a fast-growing sector and, after establishing a UK-wide imprint, we're starting to work with international clients.

"We're looking to get to 250 people and £25 million in turnover in the next three to five years."

The scope of Seriös Group's ambition is clear but Robin is keen to point out the North East will always provide the 'springboard for growth'.

And that unwavering commitment to a region and a business community that continues to punch above its weight is personal as much as it is professional.

"From the day I moved into my student accommodation, I've always felt like this was the perfect place to live," admits a son of the East Midlands, who loves nothing more than escaping to Amble, enjoying a beach walk with the family and finishing off with a couple of pints and a plate of fresh seafood.

He adds: "You've got the city life and the coast not far away. It's such a friendly environment.

"It's easy to get around and see people.

"There's a lot packed into a relatively small space.

"There were quite a few mates from school who started university at the same time as me in Newcastle, so it quickly felt like my home.

"When I ended up coming back again a few years later, it was easy to settle back in.

"The quality of life has always been so good up here."

Whether throwing himself into a six-year stint as a board member and non-executive director at BALTIC, or experiencing 'the most Geordie day ever' at one of Sam Fender's sold-out St James' Park concerts, Robin is all in with the region he proudly calls home.

He says: "I played in a few different bands with mates during and after university.

"I played at all the best venues in town. I ticked off The Cluny, Head of Steam and upstairs at NX (formerly the Academy).

"We didn't really do covers – it was all our own stuff. You'd probably describe it as grungy rock.

"We may not have been the best musically, but we always put on a good show!

"I think I was 12 when I started to play the guitar.

"I'd listen to Nirvana in my bedroom, then rewind the tape for hours until I nailed all the different riffs and licks.

"I don't get to enough gigs these days but, like everyone else in Newcastle, I



did catch Sam Fender at St James' Park.

"I say this as a guitarist and a musician: he's a phenomenal guitarist and a brilliant songwriter who's got mass appeal.

"The stadium shows were epic."

Robin may have missed out on a Fender-like rise to the rock and roll summit but, 20 years after securing his first role as a media analyst, the career communicator has positioned himself as the perfect conduit between tech-minded colleagues and those they're seeking to reach.

He says: "I was meant to study information systems at university.

"I thought I wanted to be a techie, but quite soon I realised I wasn't cut out for it.

"My politics degree taught me to articulate, reason and write well.

"I still wanted to work in tech, but I'm just not a techie, if that makes sense!?"

"I knew I had a lot of skills across 'digital' – as it was called in those days – and I knew the sector was going to keep on exploding.

"I didn't necessarily know where I would fit in, but I knew I would be part of it.

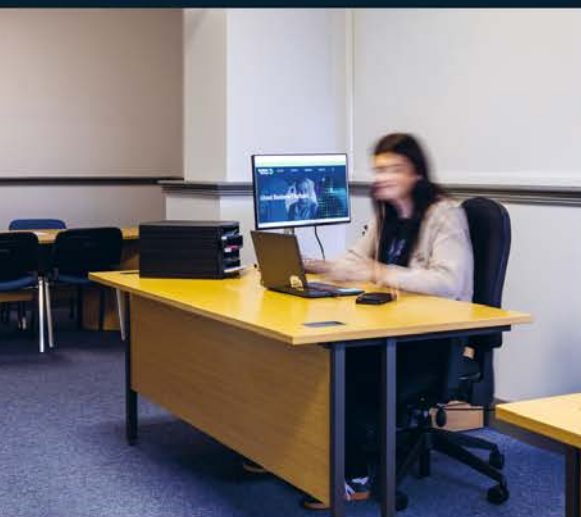
"Today, you've got roles like content creator and social media co-ordinator that didn't exist back then, but you could see those roles were going to emerge – even though you couldn't say exactly how."

Little wonder the one-time surf club president signs off by admitting: "I just wanted to ride the wave and see where it would take me."



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A burgeoning cultural hotbed

The North East's cultural scene received a major boost late last year when St James' Park was confirmed as a host stadium for Euro 2028 matches and BBC Radio 1 revealed Sunderland as the latest venue for its flagship Big Weekend festival this coming May. Add in Newcastle's delivery of the Mercury Prize ceremony – the first time held outside London – the MOBO Awards, the Women's Rugby World Cup kicking off on Wearside and the potential hosting of 2035 Women's Football World Cup games across Newcastle and Sunderland, and it's clear the region is on a roll. Just how strong is the North East's cultural offer, and how can it continue to fuel local pride while positioning the region as a hub for investment and opportunity?



Councillor Michael Mordey
Leader
Sunderland City Council

The best is still to come

It has been an absolutely incredible year for events in the North East, and the momentum is showing no signs of slowing.

The hosting of the opening match of the Women's Rugby World Cup saw Sunderland shine on the world stage and welcome visitors from across the globe.

For many of them, it was their first time visiting the region.

Early forecasts predict the event boosted the local economy by £20 million, and I have no doubt this success gave BBC chiefs confidence that Sunderland is a city that knows how to put on a fantastic show.

So much so, they're giving us the opportunity to do that when Sunderland plays host to BBC Radio 1's Big Weekend – one of the UK's largest and most popular music festivals – next year.

The event will provide yet another multi-million-pound boost to our economy and provide opportunities for local people and businesses, with tens of thousands in attendance and millions tuning in to witness the spectacle.

It also represents another opportunity to step forward and showcase the very best of our ambitious, brilliantly vibrant, wonderfully

diverse and transforming city.

I can still remember when we hosted the Big Weekend in 2005; Foo Fighters and Black Eyed Peas were the headliners, and people were queueing overnight in the city centre to try and get tickets.

It was a real spectacle, and next year's event will only reinforce Sunderland and the wider region's growing reputation as a fantastic events destination.

But it doesn't stop there.

We are proud to be part of the FA's ambitious bid to bring the Women's FIFA World Cup to the UK in 2035.

If successful, and if we are chosen as a host city, it will represent a truly historic event for Sunderland, attracting further investment while delivering many long-term social and economic benefits.

The entire region has made huge strides when it comes to providing an unrivalled cultural offer, and with North East mayor Kim McGuinness recently announcing a new £25 million fund to turbocharge the region's creative sector, I have every confidence the best could still be yet to come.



Jim Mawdsley

Principal advisor for events and culture
Newcastle City Council

An engine powering inclusive economic growth

The North East is enjoying a cultural moment that feels both hard-earned and a long time coming.

Newcastle sits at the heart of this transformation, from hosting the MOBO Awards in February to welcoming the Mercury Prize in October.

I had the privilege of working with the British Phonographic Industry, Generator and the North East Combined Authority to bring the Mercury Prize to Newcastle, and never in our wildest dreams could we have hoped for such a successful night for the city.

At a time when cities and regions across the UK are looking to participate in the national cultural conversation, the North East is leading it.

You just have to look at Sunderland hosting BBC Radio 1's Big Weekend – which will be enjoyed by 40,000 regional ticket holders and millions of listeners throughout the UK next May – and the council's successful bid with Newcastle United to host Euro 2028 fixtures in Newcastle.

We also mustn't forget our pitch alongside Sunderland to host the 2035 Women's FIFA World Cup to see how our collective efforts are driving perceptions of the

destination as a stage for world-class entertainment and experiences.

But why does this matter beyond the headlines? How does culture help deliver the regeneration and growth that our communities need?

Major events don't just fill stadiums and hotel rooms. They shift perceptions.

They generate good vibes that ripple far beyond football fans and festivalgoers, influencing not just visitors but also investors, business owners and workers.

This is the power of profile.

A football club like Newcastle United isn't just a sporting institution; it's a global brand that draws eyes to the city every week, creating moments that people all over the world can be part of.

We know these moments can act as investment signals, triggering the animal spirits that can move markets in either direction.

Culture makes people believe in a place, and once you have that belief, investment and growth will follow.

The challenge now is to sustain this momentum.

That means thinking strategically about how cultural events connect to broader economic goals.

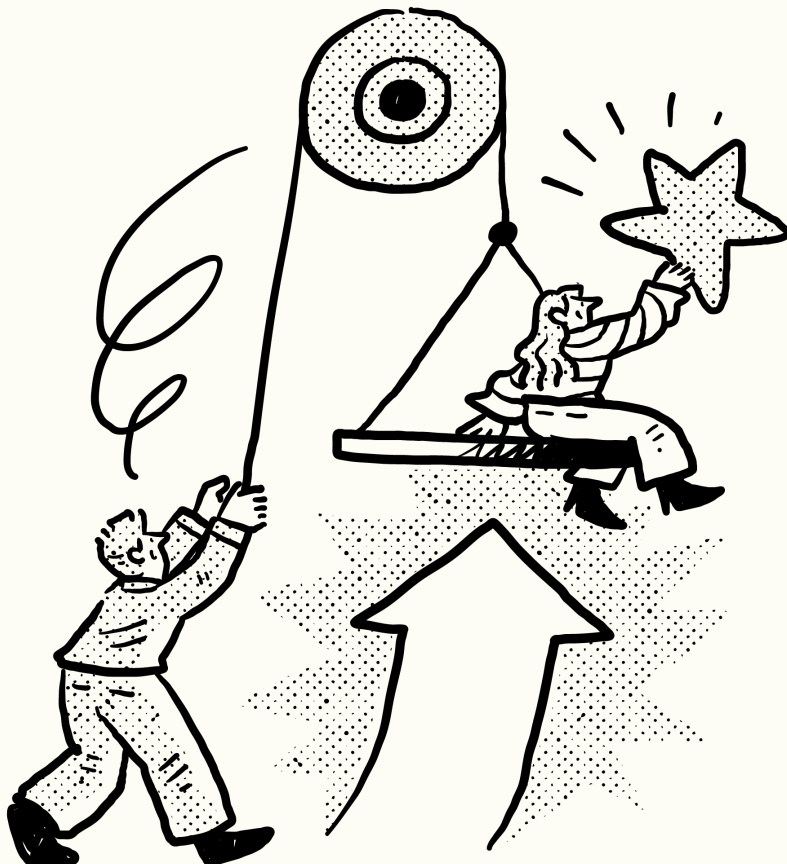
It's not enough to host; we need to build lasting legacies and grow our own events such as the recently-launched Enchanted City and Novum Summer Festival.

Every festival should be a platform for showcasing local artists and venues, a catalyst for delivering our own events and shining a spotlight on our fantastic grassroots music scene.

Every event should be an opportunity to tell the story of our people through community partnerships that turn temporary buzz into lasting benefit.

Ultimately, pride and prosperity are intertwined.

The North East's cultural offer can be the engine that powers not just good times, but inclusive economic growth.



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Mapping the future of intelligence

Wubbleyou

www.wubbleyou.co.uk

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Crowd Threat

www.crowdthreat.com

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Built on decades of intelligence experience and shaped through close collaboration, Crowd Threat is an ambitious attempt to change how global risk is understood. Created by former military intelligence operator Michael McCabe and brought to life with the support of technology company Wubbleyou, the platform challenges traditional intelligence models by decentralising how threats are identified. Here, Michael and Wubbleyou managing director Mark Renney speak to Peter Anderson about the thinking behind Crowd Threat, its scalability and the partnership that brought it to life.

Napoleon Bonaparte once observed that “war is 90 per cent information”.

Regarded as one of history’s greatest military strategists, the French emperor built his reputation on speed, foresight and an exceptional grasp of local intelligence, using information to outmanoeuvre opponents long before battles were decided in the field.

Yet, ironically, it was also the fragility of intelligence that proved his undoing at Waterloo, where flawed assumptions and delayed reports proved as decisive as Wellington’s forces.

It is a lesson well understood by Michael McCabe.

A former military intelligence operator turned technology founder, Michael has spent his career grappling with the consequences of incomplete, delayed or biased information – from operational deployments to building Durham-based Intelligence Fusion, which he grew into a global threat intelligence platform before its acquisition by Sigma7 in 2022.

That experience now underpins the creation of Crowd Threat, which seeks to rethink how global situational awareness is built in an increasingly complex world.

With the help of Newcastle-based technology company Wubbleyou and its managing director Mark Renney, Michael has translated that vision into a live, crowd-powered platform that combines real-time reporting from local contributors around the world.

Put simply, Crowd Threat has been designed to be something far more ambitious than a traditional threat intelligence tool.

Michael says: “An obvious problem in threat intelligence is that the world is a very big place.

“Everyone knows about the major events because they’re on the news, but what gets missed are the thousands of local and emerging threats that never make the headlines.

“Much of today’s intelligence is produced by small, centralised teams, often based in the West, attempting to monitor an increasingly complex and fast-moving world.

“You’ve got analysts sat thousands of miles away trying to interpret what’s happening, often without the language, the culture or the local context – and that creates gaps.”

Crowd Threat has been built to fill those spaces.

The platform provides a real-time global map of incidents, powered by a network of contributors who report what they see as it happens.

Michael says: “The idea is simple.

“You give local people an easy way to report threats, you verify that information, and you reward speed and accuracy, with people paid for each threat reported.

Crowd Threat’s origins can be traced back to Michael’s time serving with the British Army and work in the private security sector during deployments in Iraq, where he was responsible for gathering, analysing and disseminating intelligence in complex and fast-moving environments.

He says: “We were reading local media, talking to Iraqis and sharing information in informal Skype chats.

“And I remember thinking, ‘why isn’t something like this global?’

“Why can’t you tap into a network of people around the world and make sense of events as they unfolded, in real time?”

Contributors are guided through an onboarding and training process, supported by artificial intelligence-assisted tools that help structure reports and categorise incidents, before each submission is verified by human analysts.

Michael adds: “Small, centralised teams just can’t scale to the volume of threats that exist globally.

“But a trusted crowd can – and it brings cultural fluency that analyst-only models miss.

“If you want to understand events properly, you need insight from those who live it every day.

“That’s how you capture nuance, context and early signals.”

For Mark, that clarity of purpose was key to the involvement of Northumbria University spin-out Wubbleyou, which specialises in building custom technology products, artificial intelligence solutions and digital platforms for scaling businesses and public sector organisations.

He says: “What excited us was how clearly Michael articulated the problem.

“This wasn’t about building another dashboard, it was about translating deep expertise into a product that people actually want to use.”

And while Crowd Threat is still very much in its nascent stages, having only launched in November, its longer-term potential lies in the way it has been designed to scale.

The platform has already attracted a growing number of contributors submitting hundreds of verified threats, providing early evidence the model can sustain volume and quality.



Michael McCabe, Crowd Threat founder



Mark Renney, Wubbleyou managing director

Pictures: Andrew Lowe

And rather than relying on ever-expanding analyst teams, Crowd Threat is designed to grow organically.

Michael says: “We don’t have to increase the verification team in line with the size of the crowd.

“You build trust over time, you introduce different levels of checking and you let the system scale naturally while maintaining quality.”

Crucially, the platform is also being developed to be far more than a visual map of incidents.

Over time, the data it generates will be used by organisations as a live input into their own decision-making, whether for security planning, risk management or operational forecasting.

And as the platform grows, its value compounds.

More contributors mean broader coverage, faster reporting and richer data, creating a living, constantly updating picture of global risk.

For Michael, that scale unlocks something far bigger than situational awareness alone.

He says: “Once you have that data at scale, you can start to see patterns, trends and make predictions.

“That’s when it becomes transformational.”

For Mark, a critical element in Wubbleyou’s

involvement was the opportunity to support a North East business with genuine global disruptive potential.

Having met at PLATFORM – the monthly Wubbleyou-sponsored event for ambitious North East business owners – the pair quickly discovered a shared outlook.

For Wubbleyou, it meant working alongside Michael as a partner, rather than a supplier, shaping product strategy, user experience, technical architecture and providing challenge and restraint where needed.

Mark says: “We’re good at creating the right kind of tension.

“There’s always more you could build, but we focus on the 20 per cent that delivers 80 per cent of the value.

“You test that first, learn from it and then decide what’s worth building next.”

As a non-technical founder, Michael says the guidance has proved invaluable.

He says: “I know what I want to achieve with technology, but I don’t pretend to know the best way to do it.

“Mark and his team helped ground the vision, making sure we built something that worked and that people would actually use, and that we could prove before scaling.”

Their partnership is also firmly shaped by place.

Both see Crowd Threat as an example of what can emerge from the North East – a region rich in technical talent and boasting a collaborative business culture, but one that is often too modest about its achievements.

A Northumbria University alumnus, Mark has grown Wubbleyou since 2009 and has become a vocal advocate for developing regional tech capability.

He says: “We don’t shout loudly enough about what’s happening here.

“But if we want better jobs and to keep talented people in the region, we need more companies like this.”

Michael adds: “I could build this anywhere.

“But this is home, and there’s no reason you can’t build something with real scale and ambition in the North East.”



Wubbleyou and Crowd Threat

For more information about Wubbleyou and Crowd Threat, visit the websites at the top of this article.

Built on decades of intelligence experience and shaped through close collaboration, Crowd Threat is an ambitious attempt to change how global risk is understood. Created by former military intelligence operator Michael McCabe and brought to life with the support of technology company Wubbleyou, the platform challenges traditional intelligence models by decentralising how threats are identified. Here, Michael and Wubbleyou managing director Mark Renney speak to Peter Anderson about the thinking behind Crowd Threat, its scalability and the partnership that brought it to life.



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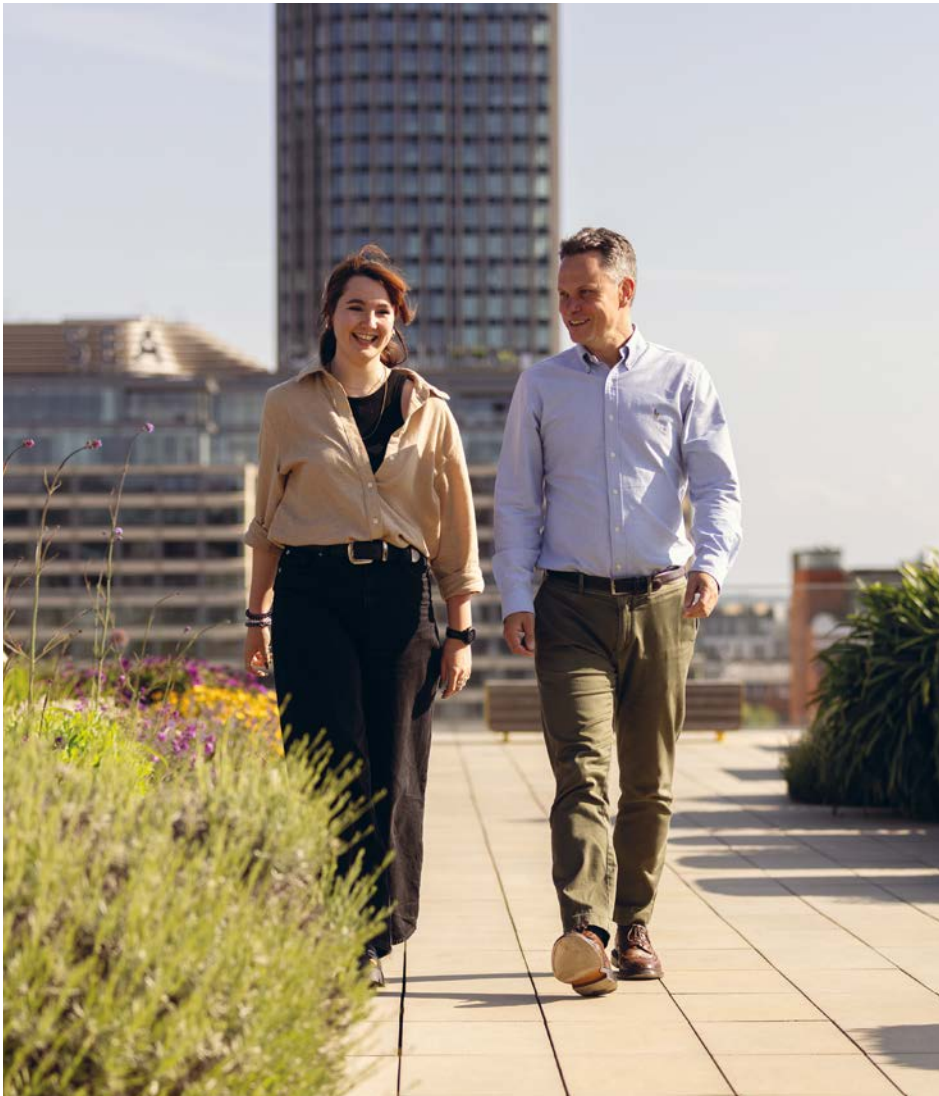
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Every student should have the opportunity to realise their ambitions, no matter their background. Northumbria University is committed to equipping the next generation of professionals with the skills and talent they need to thrive. Its immersive, hands-on educational programmes provide students with real-life experiences, which it develops by working closely with industry partners. Here, N magazine explores its growing relationship with Hachette UK and New Writing North.



Building pathways into publishing: A collaborative approach

Launched in 2022, Northumbria University's one-year master's degree in publishing is designed and delivered in collaboration with Hachette UK – the UK's second largest publishing group – and New Writing North, a leading charity dedicated to supporting the development of creative writing and reading in the North of England.

The unique programme gives students the opportunity to take part in a work placement with Hachette UK, enabling them to apply their learning in a real-life context, gain valuable experience and enhance their knowledge of publishing and the wider writing industries.

Since 2012, Northumbria University has worked with New Writing North to contribute to culture, practice-led research and development in the region and beyond.

With the added support of Hachette UK, it is now able to expand and strengthen this work even further.

This partnership will continue to strengthen as Northumbria University and New Writing North work together to open a physical centre for writing and publishing in Newcastle over the next few years.

Richard Kitson, Hachette UK deputy chief executive, says: "Working closely with Northumbria University has been an incredibly positive part of our Changing the Story initiative, which is our commitment to the vital work of diversity, equity and inclusion, to ensure we include all voices, perspectives and ideas in our partnerships, people and publishing.

"Right from the start, along with New



Writing North, we wanted to revolutionise the publishing master's degree by including practical, hands-on experience, access to industry experts and an understanding of how publishing works.

"We want every student to complete the course ready for employment in our industry."

Will Mackie, New Writing North programme leader – MA publishing, adds: "We are delighted to partner with Hachette UK and Northumbria University on an exciting and creatively inventive master's programme.

"The presence of Hachette's specialist staff alongside Northumbria University's academic expertise makes for a unique and rewarding learning environment.

"New Writing North curates and delivers an original module where we share the benefits of more of our own expertise.

"Every element of this course aligns with New Writing North's long-term commitment to developing, diversifying and nurturing talent in our region, and more widely in the UK's publishing and writing sectors."

From education to employment: Victoria Howard's journey to Hachette UK

When Victoria began her master's degree in publishing in 2022, she never imagined how far the journey would take her.

As the first recipient of the Hachette UK scholarship, she not only completed a successful work placement with the global publisher, but is now a full-time member of staff.

With a background in English language and linguistics, Victoria's path to publishing was shaped by a deep love of books and a desire to

return to the North East, a place that felt like home.

Now working full-time in Hachette UK's rights department, Victoria aims to help decentralise the publishing industry by making it more accessible beyond London.

Through the opening of national branches, educational partnerships and professional networks, she hopes opportunities will open up for people from a wider range of backgrounds and locations across the country.

Rights executive Victoria says: "When I started the work placement and met my amazing key contact in Hachette, she went above and beyond.

"She put in a lot of time, effort and care to make sure I met everybody that I needed to meet, and that I made the most out of my time spent on the course and during the placement."

Dan Monnery, Northumbria University pro-vice chancellor – external affairs, adds: "We are pursuing an ambitious new chapter in collaboration with New Writing North to establish the Centre for Writing in Newcastle.

"This dynamic space will bring the creative industries together with education, skills and research to help build an inclusive economy and drive social mobility.

"It will provide better opportunities for individuals from the region to engage with writing and publishing.

"We're proud to share Hachette UK has renewed and expanded its support to Northumbria University's students, increasing its scholarship commitment to support more students each year."



Northumbria University

Northumbria University partners with alumni, businesses and charitable supporters to provide a range of financial initiatives, mental health and wellbeing services, and community-based projects to make participation and progression in higher education more achievable for academically talented students, regardless of their social or economic circumstances.

To find out more and support its work, email james.wilkinson@northumbria.ac.uk



EXPORTABLE ROUNDTABLE

Exporting a region to the world

The North East's crucial role in global trade

From its three great rivers to its six globally-connected ports, the North East's towns and cities have long had their identities forged, and their industries built, on water. The landscape along the River Tyne may have changed, but the region's proud maritime legacy endures. At the heart of it all is Tyneside-headquartered global marine insurer NorthStandard, which provides protection and indemnity cover for one-in-five commercial ocean-going vessels. Here, in an exclusive roundtable discussion hosted by NorthStandard alongside N magazine publisher NET, bosses from maritime, trade, policy and academic organisations explore the North East's role in international commerce.

Where does the North East stand in today's international trade landscape?

For centuries, the North East's fortunes have been tied to trade.

From Sunderland's shipyards, once the busiest in the world, to the coal and steel that left the Tyne and Tees for markets across the globe, the region has long looked outward.

Today, that legacy endures in a new form.

The North East remains one of the UK's most export-intensive regions, and while recent figures show a small goods trade deficit, the region continues to outperform most others across the country.

However, Michael Dickinson, North East Chamber of Commerce international trade development and delivery manager, said that while the opportunities are substantial, only a relatively small number of local businesses are engaging globally.

He said: "We have around 5400 exporters and 5900 importers, exporting roughly £15 billion and importing £18 billion.

"Many businesses think trading internationally is too complex or too costly, or simply don't know where to start.

"We could be doing a lot more as a region."

Michael found support from Jen Hartley, assistant director of capital investment and growth at Newcastle City Council, who highlighted the region's overreliance on a small number of large investors and exporters.

She said: "The North East has punched above its weight in attracting major foreign direct investment projects – we've had consecutive years ranking highest outside London for jobs created by new foreign investment.

"But that success rests on a handful of companies.

"If we were to lose one of those big companies, then our trade levels would plummet.

"The challenge is how we get more SMEs to adopt an international trade mentality.

"How do we break down barriers to entry, help them deliver effective market strategies and look beyond our borders to the US, as well as to nearby European partners?"

Matt Beeton, Port of Tyne chief executive, added: "From a port perspective, basic trade – imports and exports across the UK – is stable.

"However, with the momentum gained from devolution and new opportunities on our doorstep, there are lots of reasons to be optimistic.

"Investor confidence may be low generally across the UK, but investors engaging with the North East – and with the port specifically – want to invest."

Where are the North East's key opportunities to boost trade and exporting potential?

From digital and professional services firms, to a new AI Growth Zone, QTS' £10 billion data centre in Cambois, creative moves and space sector innovation, the North East is drawing

“If we start talking about the North East as a single, powerful collective, we’ll stand a much better chance of competing nationally and globally”

Peter Snaith

Womble Bond Dickinson partner and manufacturing sector group head



much international interest and investment.

But, as in the region’s past, the key to unlocking future prosperity will also lie at sea.

From the Blyth-based Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult to Equinor, Van Oord and Ørsted’s marshalling, operations and maintenance bases at Port of Tyne, and SeAH Wind’s £900 million wind turbine monopile making plant at Teesworks, the transition to net-zero has created an opportunity for the region to lead from the front.

Phil Witcherley, executive director for economy, innovation and culture at the North East Combined Authority, said: “With the advantages of the North Sea over the Celtic Sea, Dogger Bank and assets such as the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult, it’s clear we have significant assets.

“When people think of offshore wind, they usually think of North East Scotland or the Humber.

“But if you look at Port of Tyne or Port of Blyth, the scale of activity and the opportunities are even greater.”

However, Paul Jennings, managing director at NorthStandard, highlighted challenges faced by investors, noting that while shipowners support fuel transition, regulatory uncertainty and long-asset lifecycles often prevent them from committing to new solutions.

He said: “The problem is that an investment in a ship is 25 to 30 years.

“And shipowners, even though they believe in

the fuel transition, have no idea what fuel those ships will have, or what will be available in the future.

“While I fully back the North East’s push into the clean energy space, we have to be realistic about what’s happening globally.”

Dr Fiona Whitehurst, associate dean for engagement and place at Newcastle University Business School, who is also a member of the Global Underwater Hub’s North Advisory Group, pointed to the scale of opportunity that lies within renewable energy and the wider supply chain.

She said: “The subsea sector has traditionally been associated with oil and gas, but technology and expertise are now being applied across a range of industries, including offshore wind.

“Companies such as Baker Hughes, TechnipFMC, Osbit, JDR Cables and SMD already serve a wide range of global markets, including Europe, the US, Middle East and South America.

“These firms have always been at the forefront of innovation – in cables, trenchers, remotely operated vehicles and all the equipment that sits on the seabed – and that same technology will underpin the next generation of renewable energy projects.”

Jen, speaking after North Shields musician Sam Fender won the Mercury Prize on home soil – pointed to the North East’s strides across a range of other industries.

She said: “It’s about creating a lasting legacy.

“From TV, film and screen to the Northern Centre for Writing and the new Warner Studio in Newcastle, these are industries where we can grow talent locally, support the creative supply chain and show the world the North East is creating the next generation of ideas and technology.

“We need to take all the companies doing amazing things and put them into a narrative that allows people to see the North East is leading the way.”

What are the key barriers holding the region back?

Roundtable members identified perennial barriers preventing the North East from realising its economic potential.

Erin Henwood, international policy manager at business organisation CBI, said: “North East firms face higher borrowing costs than those in London and the South East, and they have access to more limited investment.

“Productivity is low, the labour market is tight, economic inactivity is high and there is the wider issue of fragile trade links.

“However, the problems are solvable.

“If we harness emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and equip people with the right skills, the North East has a real chance to thrive.”

The sentiment was shared by Fiona, who works closely with the Scaleup Institute.



“If we harness emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and equip people with the right skills, the North East has a real chance to thrive”

Erin Henwood
CBI international policy manager

She cited the success of the Venture Connect and ScaleUp Britain event at Port of Tyne, which was co-hosted with the London Stock Exchange and the ScaleUp Institute.

She said: “Our spin-outs and high-tech start-ups, the ones that could really grow and scale, are underfunded.

“Events like ScaleUp Britain show what’s possible – innovative companies pitching ideas, making connections and accessing the right networks.

“These businesses are incredibly talented, but they need funding, support and a platform to be seen.”

Matt reinforced the same point.

He said: “We launched the Venture Connect programme because so many strong small companies were struggling to attract investors to scale.

“The feedback from investors has been fantastic, but it also underlines the challenge – we’re not drawing enough investors to the North East and we need to do more to bring them here.”

Roundtable members also stressed the need to align education with new industries, ensuring the skills needed for emerging sectors are taught and nurtured locally.

While Michael praised universities and colleges for their facilities and support, he pointed towards a significant disconnect at secondary and primary school level.

He said: “Colleges and universities in the region are doing incredible work, but there’s a large gap from secondary schools.

“What students are being taught often isn’t fit for purpose, and many teachers lack work experience in the industries we are trying to grow.

“That gap starts even earlier in primary

school, where children rarely get to see the opportunities that exist locally.

“We need to plan for the future and build awareness and skills from the very start, so young people can see what they could achieve in the North East, rather than falling into jobs later on.”

Mike Salthouse, head of external affairs at NorthStandard, said: “I go into schools as part of our Inspiring the Future initiative.

“Children often don’t want to hear about the world of industry or shipping – they just want mock interviews.

“That’s a lost opportunity to show what exciting careers exist, whether in insurance, professional services or beyond.”

How can the North East raise its profile to attract talent, investment and businesses, while breaking down entrenched stereotypes?

The North East has never been short of talent or ambition, but it has often struggled to tell its story.

Roundtable members said while other regions consistently broadcast their successes, the North East often underplays its strengths.

Peter Snaith, partner at Newcastle and Teesside-based international law firm Womble Bond Dickinson and head of the firm’s manufacturing sector group, said the region remains guilty of clinging to a romanticised past.

He said: “We still badge ourselves as the industrial north – but we haven’t been that for a very long time.

“People still think of big, blue-collar jobs, but the North East is full of innovation, services and future-facing industries.

“If we start talking about the North East as a single, powerful collective, we’ll stand a much better chance of competing nationally and globally.”



“With the momentum gained from devolution and new opportunities on our doorstep, there are lots of reasons to be optimistic”

Matt Beeton
Port of Tyne chief executive



This is an abridged version of the full roundtable discussion, which you can read by visiting N magazine’s sister publication Bdaily at www.bdaily.co.uk



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5



MINUTES

WITH JOSEPH GARCIA

www.greatnorthairambulance.co.uk | LinkedIn: Great North Air Ambulance Service

Joseph Garcia is chief executive of the Great North Air Ambulance Service, the helicopter emergency medical response organisation based at Urray Nook, near Darlington. Here, he tells Steven Hugill more about the work of its intrepid team in often challenging environments, its Operation SOS campaign to fund new aircraft and the incredible value of public support on day-to-day operations.

Tell us a little about the Great North Air Ambulance Service and its overarching mission.

At its heart, the Great North Air Ambulance Service (GNAAS) exists to bring hospital-level critical care to people who desperately need it, wherever they are.

We cover vast rural landscapes, major cities and everything in between, responding to some of the North's most serious medical and trauma emergencies.

Our mission is simple: to save lives and improve patient outcomes across the region.

But we can only do that because people choose to support us. Every mission is powered by public and corporate generosity.

As you say, the charity's response zone covers some of the most remote and rural landscapes in the UK. What are the biggest challenges crews face when answering emergency calls – and how do they overcome them?

The geography can be brutal.

Incidents often happen miles from the nearest road, in poor weather, across difficult terrain or in fading light.

Our helicopter gets us close, but sometimes crews still have to hike, climb or work with mountain rescue and coastguard teams to reach a patient.

It's demanding work, but our teams excel in these environments through outstanding training and experience.

Supporting us means helping to keep people safe in the landscapes we all love.

Such operations are not cheap to deliver. To that end, the charity launched Operation SOS: Secure Our Service late last year to raise £2.5 million for a third helicopter. How vital will that be to the charity's future?

Operation SOS is essential to our resilience.

A third helicopter gives us the ability to maintain full coverage when one aircraft is undergoing extended engineering work, and it builds the capacity we need to respond to growing demand, particularly in tourist hotspots where visitor numbers continue to rise.

Most importantly, it means more lives saved.

Supporting Operation SOS is one of the most direct ways to help secure our future.

The emergency medical response world continues to evolve quickly. How is innovation transforming how the charity delivers services?

Innovation is central to our future.

We're moving towards a modern Airbus H145 fleet, which offers improved safety, efficiency and capability, and we're delivering advanced clinical interventions that were once only possible in a hospital environment.

We will also be exploring tools like night vision imaging systems, when we become operational with our replacement aircraft, to enhance safety in low-light conditions.

And behind each of these innovations is public support.

When people donate, sponsor or partner with us, they're not just keeping helicopters flying, they're funding the next generation of life-saving care.

You've spent more than 35 years working in and around the NHS and ambulance sector. How are you bringing that experience to benefit the Great North Air Ambulance Service?

My experience across multiple ambulance trusts has shown me the power of great leadership, strong clinical governance and sustainable long-term planning.

At the Great North Air Ambulance Service, I'm applying that to strengthen our partnership with the NHS system, in particular the ambulance services, to deepen our clinical excellence and build a secure financial and aviation future, ensuring we are a trusted partner to the NHS across the North.

The public places enormous trust in us and their support is being used responsibly, strategically and with the patient at the centre of every decision.

Your teams operate in highly pressured, life-or-death situations. How do you protect staff wellbeing and build resilience?

Our crews see things that most people never will, and they carry that responsibility with incredible professionalism and compassion.

But the emotional toll is real.

We've invested in wellbeing programmes such as peer-led support in trauma risk management, reflective practice, confidential peer support with mental first aiders and access to psychological services.

We're also honest with each other: we check in, we talk openly and we create space for decompression after difficult jobs.

Culture matters. A supportive, connected, psychologically safe and compassionate team is the strongest protection against burnout.

My leadership team and I are absolutely committed to prioritising wellbeing just as much as operational excellence.

This resilience is only possible because we're a connected and supportive organisation.

Community backing plays a huge role too.

Every message of thanks, every fundraiser and every donation genuinely lifts morale.

What are your ambitions for the Great North Air Ambulance Service over the coming years?

Our ambition is to secure a genuinely sustainable, world-leading helicopter emergency medical service for the North – one that is financially resilient, clinically outstanding and operationally ready for the challenges of the next decade.

That means completing our move to a modern fleet, expanding our training and education capability, and building deeper partnerships with industry and the NHS.

It also means growing the fundraising base that makes all of this possible.

Ultimately, I want every person in our region – resident, visitor or worker – to know that if the worst happens, the very best care in the country will come to them.

That's the standard we hold ourselves to every single day.

And everyone can play a part in that journey.

Whether through supporting Operation SOS, volunteering or simply learning more about what we do, every contribution strengthens the service that thousands of people may one day rely on.



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A conduit to unlocking growth

NEL Fund Managers

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Access to finance is a crucial component of any small and medium-sized business' growth plan. And helping make the case for institutional investors to engage with this underserved part of the market is NEL Fund Managers. Here, chief executive Paul Scott speaks to Peter Anderson about the funding gap, NEL's enhanced capabilities and the organisation's ambition to unlock capital for firms to expand across the North.



NEL Fund Managers has strengthened its team in recent months with a number of arrivals including investment executives Michael Williams and Rachael Munro, and head of investments James Katirai

For many small and medium-sized companies, scaling can feel like climbing a ladder with missing financial rungs.

Yet for Paul Scott, the situation also presents an opportunity.

And as chief executive of Gateshead-headquartered NEL Fund Managers, he and his team are ideally positioned to address it.

He says: "Our external research and ongoing conversations with businesses have demonstrated that there is a sustained gap in financing requirements for ambitious, growing SMEs.

"The funding options tend to be bank funding or private equity.

"But if businesses need something in the middle, it becomes a real challenge."

Bank finance is still valuable, he says, but is often "more formulaic and volume-driven" because of banks' business models and regulatory requirements.

And while a wave of direct lenders entered the market following the 2008 financial crisis, they too have largely moved out of reach for many SMEs.

Paul says: "The direct lenders that were involved ten to 15 years ago have all migrated upmarket.

"They're now defining mid-market companies as those generating between £20 million and £50 million EBITDA.

"Then there are some players focused on what we call the lower mid-market, but they're typically looking at businesses generating between £10 million and £20 million EBITDA.

"There's a huge swathe of companies that aren't being served by flexible capital."

For NEL, the gap lies with profitable SMEs that sit above existing public sector interventions and mainstream private capital.

Paul says: "We see the short-term market opportunity as businesses generating turnover of £20 to £25 million, but the market gap extends beyond that.

"Interventions like the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund are a great catalyst; however, the programme caps out investment at £2 million for debt-led propositions.

"There's definitely an opportunity to provide finance for a cohort of businesses that have bespoke financing requirements between £2 million and £10 million that cannot be met from traditional funding sources or financing options that are currently available."

Alongside the clear market need, Paul sees "significant opportunity" for pension funds and other long-term investors to step in.

He says: "We need to continue to demonstrate



Paul Scott, NEL Fund Managers' chief executive



Rachael Munro, NEL Fund Managers' investment executive

it is an attractive thing for institutional investors to do.

"We've proven you can deliver attractive returns and impact in the SME space through our partnership with British Business Bank, and there's huge potential to expand this into larger businesses working with institutional investors.

"If you look at where the innovation is, where the job creation is, it is often in the SME space."

However, Paul says the landscape is regularly affected by a misconception of risk.

He says: "Institutional investors may perceive that because they're smaller businesses and less diversified, it presents a more challenging risk profile for investing, so they don't want to invest there as part of their asset allocation.

"But it's more nuanced than that.

"There's a huge population of SMEs which in turn provides an opportunity to be selective and to work with the best businesses that have strong value propositions and high-quality management teams that can scale their business.

"With innovative propositions, SMEs can often out-compete larger incumbents, their agility helps with resilience and they are

often less exposed to macro factors that can create headwinds such as exchange rates, international supply chains or tariffs.

"If you then factor in that transactions typically carry lower leverage, with strong documentation and the opportunity to conduct high-quality diligence – not always apparent now in the mid-to-large cap market due to competitive pressures – you begin to appreciate how there is more downside protection than initially thought.

"Align this with our proactive approach to portfolio management, which further mitigates risk and drives value creation, and you can begin to see how we are delivering impressive risk adjusted returns for investors."

With the funding gap so clear, NEL has been steadily building capacity and capability to help bridge it.

Over the past 18 months, Paul has overseen a significant evolution, which has strengthened NEL's team, sharpened its value proposition and laid the foundations for a more ambitious future.

At its heart is a strengthened investment team.

Alongside long-standing team members, new hires such as investment executives Michael Williams and Rachael Munro, as well as head

of investments James Katirai, have added significant firepower.

And as NEL looks to the future with increased funds under management, there will be opportunities to create more high-quality jobs in the region.

Paul says: "We've continued to refine our investment processes, improve our value proposition and, while I may be a little biased, I don't think there's a team as experienced in the private credit space regionally.

"There is more than 200 years' investment experience, and we've seen everything from the dot com bubble through to the financial crisis, European debt crisis, Brexit, COVID-19, energy price spikes, interest rate hikes and the latest geopolitical challenges.

"We've also operated right across the deal-size spectrum, both in the UK and internationally.

"We've got ex-bankers, people who've worked in private equity, corporate finance and audit.

"It means we can bring the right support to help any business grow – there's not much we haven't seen.

"And we're much more engaged from a value creation perspective too.



James Katirai, NEL Fund Managers' head of investments



Michael Williams, NEL Fund Managers' investment executive

"We sit with management teams to work through things like franchise development, digital transformation or how to build an effective board.

"We've now got the breadth of expertise to make that support meaningful and also tap into our extensive panel of experienced advisors."

While helping solve access to finance challenges, selectivity also remains central to NEL's approach.

Paul says: "We're conscious we're investing capital on behalf of British Business Bank, so we want to be good custodians but also generate a good return and deliver impact."

That approach is reflected in the performance of NEL's work through the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II, through which it has supported a wide spectrum of North East firms.

With its Stockton office now bringing the team closer to Teesside businesses, activity has accelerated over the past year, underpinning a particularly strong period for the organisation.

Paul says: "We're north of 45 investments, and they're all performing well.

"They're providing investors with attractive returns, and the way we structure the capital gives businesses the headroom to grow."

And Paul says the momentum is feeding through on every front.

He adds: "It'll be a record year for deployment. And in terms of portfolio performance, it's the best it has ever been."

The significance runs deeper than the numbers, though.

A fully performing portfolio, strong investor returns and disciplined origination point to something more important: NEL has built a platform ready to be leveraged, enabling the organisation to broaden its reach across the wider North.

And as the only private, direct-lending alternative finance provider headquartered in the North East, NEL sees its regional anchoring as a genuine point of difference.

Paul says: "I can probably count on the fingers of one hand the number of investment managers that are headquartered outside London and focused on delivering flexible capital, particularly in this segment.

"And we're the only one in the North East.

"A strong NEL is only going to build more resilience into the region's finance ecosystem.

"We're anchored here and not susceptible to

fluid capital flows or strategic decisions from outside the region, which creates stability, impact and has a multiplier effect."

It is a position that chimes with the ambitions of the region's two combined authorities, as deeper devolution places renewed emphasis on accelerating growth, backing innovation and driving high-value job creation.

Paul adds: "There's a real opportunity for combined authorities, institutional investors and someone like NEL to bring it all together and be the route to market for SMEs.

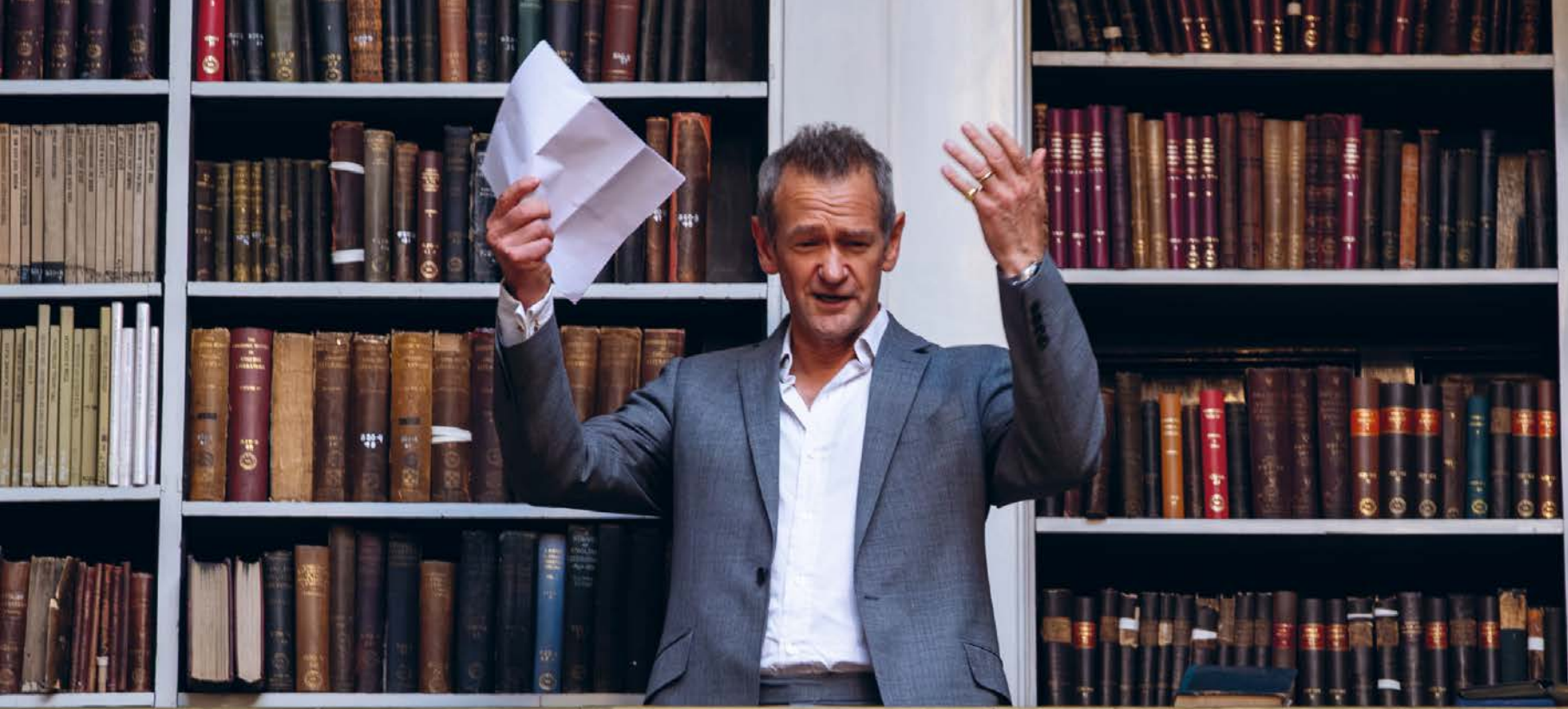
"The opportunity is hiding in plain sight.

"It just needs someone to unlock it – and that is what we aim to do."



NEL Fund Managers

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



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Out of office

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OFFICE



In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Sheldon Cockburn, head of operations at Northallerton, Stockton and Guisborough-based car dealership Simon Bailes Peugeot, about his passion for endurance pursuits, pushing through the pain barrier to represent Team GB and the punishing peaks he continues to pursue.

www.simonbailes.co.uk

When you're not helping drive Simon Bailes' progress as the company's head of operations, you're conquering Ironman triathlons and ultra-marathon challenges. What sparked your passion for endurance competition?

A comment from my wife gave me a wake-up call about my fitness.

She asked me if I was out of breath after putting my socks on – and I was!

I started running the next day, and I couldn't make it more than 100 metres without gasping for air.

I'd previously bumped into a friend, who was shocked to see how much weight I'd gained after years of losing touch.

I remembered him telling me he was competing in Ironman triathlons: a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a 26.2-mile marathon.

I thought he was mad. However, before I knew it, I'd lost five stone in five months and had signed up for my first triathlon.

I then increased the race distances and, three months later, I found myself signing up for Ironman Lanzarote, which I'd been told was the most difficult of all the Ironman events.

Your event CV is extensive, with five Ironman contests forming just part of a much larger résumé. Is there one contest that stands out as having pushed you to your limits?

I've competed in five Ironman competitions and more than 100 other challenges and events.

The one that really stands out as pushing me to my limit was a non-stop, 110-mile run along the entire Cleveland Way, which I completed in less than 30 hours.

I was physically and mentally exhausted, sleep deprived and aching everywhere, but I was determined to finish.

I attempted it again a year later, and things were going well until I started suffering with dehydration and struggled to walk in a straight line at around 68 miles.

I spotted two bears fighting in the woods as I came down a hill – except I didn't. I was totally hallucinating.

My friend and support runner made me call it a day.

The thing I'm most proud of is representing Team GB triathlon, which I did in 2015 in Madrid for the European Championships, and in Ottawa in 2013 for the World Championships, where I ranked 11th in the world.

Not bad for someone who was knackered going up the stairs a few years earlier!

How do you balance your career with event training without burning out, and what does a typical week look like?

I'm at work from 8am until 6pm during the week, and train four times a week in a fairly structured fashion.

I use the same energy gel sachets I would use in a race and I take in the right amount of carbs to prevent me running out of fuel.

The time I spend training really helps me to unwind and recharge, and although I'm still thinking about work, I do so in an entirely different way.

The change of environment, and having something else going on, helps me think about things in a bigger way.

I regularly head into the office the next day energised and ready to tackle whatever issue was troubling us the day before.

What tests you more – the intensity of a competition or the months of grinding preparation?

The day of a competition is the culmination of a lot of hard work, and is about implementing everything you've practiced and perfected for 20 hours a week for months beforehand.

You constantly push yourself to the brink during training, so you know your limits and do better each time.

When it comes to the day of a competition, you go out there knowing you can do it, and

the sense of achievement when you cross the finish line is unparalleled.

It makes every sore morning worth it.

The parallels between sporting and business success are very close, with one often informing the other. Are there any lessons from endurance sport that help shape your day job?

During my first Ironman in Lanzarote, there was a lot of uphill cycling.

The thing that kept me going was knowing that the downhill section was going to be much easier, and that I could enjoy the beautiful views on the descent.

It was stunning, and made the hard work of getting to the summit worth every painful pedal revolution.

The uphill is always a challenge, but you have to persevere.

Once you've accomplished the toughest part – found the solution, fixed the problem, dealt with the issue – you can take a moment to enjoy your success.

Is there an event or feat of endurance you'd really like to complete before you hang up your triathlon suit?

I plan to keep going until I can't anymore!

I've not taken part in a triathlon for a while, and I would really like to complete Ironman Lanzarote again.

I've completed Ironman Wales three times, so I think I'm done there.

I plan to run Wainwright's Coast to Coast route between St Bees, in Cumbria, and Robin Hood's Bay, in North Yorkshire, at some point in the next few months, which will be my longest run yet at almost 200 miles.

My ultimate goal, which I'd like to complete when I'm 55 in a few years, is the Montane Spine race.

It's a gruelling 268-mile run held in January over the Pennines with lots of snow!

Bringing opportunity home

Community Foundation North East

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LinkedIn: Community Foundation North East

The region's increasing status as a commercial and cultural hotbed took centre stage during the Community Foundation North East Homecoming Summit, which brought together natives and members of the area's diaspora to explore its exciting opportunities. Here, Peter Anderson reflects on the ceremony – part of a wider programme of events – which outlined how the region can build on its economic and cultural strengths to create new pathways for generations to come.

Pride, passion and possibility were the order of the day at the Community Foundation's first-ever Homecoming Summit.

Featuring more than 100 North Easterners, adopted Geordies and returning expats, the event brought together the region's global diaspora and the leaders shaping its next chapter.

Held in the Great Hall of Northumbria University's Grade II-listed Sutherland Building, the ceremony built on Homecoming events in Blyth and Sunderland, which aimed to strengthen ties between those who care deeply about the region – wherever they now live – and the organisations working to expand opportunity for young people and their families.

It also highlighted the North East Roots Fund, founded to mobilise philanthropic giving, professional expertise and global networks to create a thriving, competitive and opportunity-rich region.

Sponsored by Newcastle Building Society, Develop North, Northumbrian Water, Arts Council England, Naylor's Gavin Black, Sir James Knott Trust and The Watson Family Charitable Trust – and delivered in partnership with N magazine publisher NET – the summit explored how expats and regional leaders can work together to attract investment, amplify the region's story and bring opportunity home.

It featured two panel discussions – hosted by NET and Bdaily editor-in-chief Steven Huggill – which examined how the North East can harness its growing network, build on its cultural and economic strengths and create new pathways of opportunity for generations to come.

The first panel, titled *Bringing Opportunity Home: inward investment, global reach and inclusive economic development*, explored how the region has evolved into a thriving commercial landscape, driven by a close-knit business community, rapidly strengthening industry clusters and a renewed confidence about its future trajectory.

Audience members heard from Phil Witcherley, director of economy, innovation and culture at the North East Combined Authority; Paul Jennings, managing director of global marine insurer NorthStandard; Jackie Fitzgerald, residential asset manager at Develop North and founder of Homes or Houses; and Nick

Harrison, chief executive of social mobility charity Sutton Trust.

Panellists highlighted how the North East's industrial heritage is helping power its next phase of growth – from clean energy and offshore wind to the recently announced £30 billion AI Growth Zone, advanced manufacturing and space – and how the region's global networks can act as a powerful bridge for investment, talent and advocacy.

The discussion ranged from the opportunities unlocked by devolution and the new local growth plan to the rising interest from international investors, the role of transport and innovation in driving progress, and the urgent





need to address educational inequalities so young people can access the jobs of the future.

Jackie said: “For years, I pitched my heart out about the North East to anyone who would listen, and now people are finally waking up to it.

“The story is so simple now – the opportunity is so strong.

“Investors can see exactly what’s happening here, and the speed of change is incredible.

“It’s an unbelievably exciting time for the region.”

The second panel, titled *Culture as a Bridge to Opportunity: Highlighting the North East’s creative industries and considering our regional brand*, examined how the region’s culture, inimitable storytelling and rapidly expanding creative landscape can help drive economic regeneration.

“For years, I pitched my heart out about the North East to anyone who would listen, and now people are finally waking up to it”



The discussion brought together Alison Gwynn, chief executive of North East Screen; Malcolm Gerrie, television executive and film producer, who produced *The Tube* in Newcastle during the 1980s; Magnus Willis, founder of marketing consultancy Sparkler; Claire Malcolm, chief executive of New Writing North; and Roisin Currie, chief executive of Newcastle-founded national bakery chain Greggs.

Focusing on the North East’s flourishing screen and creative sectors, the panellists emphasised the critical role of culture as a soft power to project the region’s identity, draw investment, support talent retention and open doors for young people.

The panellists explored the surge in film and television production, the transformative potential of new studio facilities across



the region, the importance of literacy and storytelling to regional pride, and the need for a clearer, more confident narrative about what the North East stands for.

“The North East Roots Fund is already helping build pathways for younger generations to the emerging opportunities of the region”

Alison said: “Devolution is letting us take control of our own destiny, and gives us the opportunity to show what we can do.

“Less than five years ago, less television was made in this region than anywhere else in the UK – less than half a per cent – which meant

people either had to leave or give up on their dreams.

“But by working together with partners like the BBC and building the skills, companies and support the industry needs, we’ve grown the sector by 131 per cent, and 2026 is set to be our busiest year.”

Roisin added: “Greggs is successful because it was born and raised in the North East.

“We could never become a London PLC; we would lose the heart of who we are.

“The grit, the hard work and the no-nonsense humbleness of this region shaped the business, but so did its ambition – that real belief in what people here can do.”

The celebrations continued into the evening at Newcastle’s Boiler Shop, where the Homecoming Awards and Showcase brought together rising and established North East talent, with special awards presented by North East mayor Kim McGuinness.

John Hollingsworth, Community Foundation North East chief philanthropy and development officer, added: “The North East Roots Fund is already helping build pathways for younger generations by improving access to the emerging opportunities of the region.

“Homecoming was all about taking the reach and impact of that initiative to a new level by expanding our network in the UK and overseas and bringing more opportunity home.”


Pictured, from left to right, are panellists Nick Harrison, Jackie Fitzgerald, Paul Jennings and Phil Witcherley



Community Foundation North East

To find out more about Community Foundation North East, its work and how you could support the North East Roots Fund, visit the website or contact the email address at the top of this article.

This is an abridged version of the full event report, which you can read by visiting the Bdaily website at www.bdaily.co.uk



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Bin the Wipe – How a simple message sparked a national movement

Northumbrian Water Group

www.nwl.co.uk

www.nwl.co.uk/binthewipe

LinkedIn: NWG (Northumbrian Water Group)

Northumbrian Water Group's award-winning Bin the Wipe campaign has gone from regional venture to national acclaim, capturing the attention of households, environmental groups, the Government and even primetime BBC television cameras. Here, the organisation tells N magazine about the endeavour and why, despite great progress having been made, it won't stop in its quest to ensure wet wipes are disposed of in the correct manner.

When Northumbrian Water launched its Bin the Wipe campaign in early 2020, the aim was simple: tackle one of the most important and persistent problems in the wastewater network – wet wipes flushed down toilets.

They are a convenient thing to have on hand, whether it's to remove your make-up, wipe your child's chocolate-covered face or for cleaning.

But flushing them can soon become a nightmare.

Often marketed as flushable, wipes do not break down like toilet paper.

Instead, they accumulate in pipes, causing blockages that lead to sewer flooding, environmental damage and costly repairs.

Figures show wipes account for more than 60 per cent of sewer blockages in the North East, costing the UK water industry around £200 million annually to clear and causing

untold problems for customers and the environment.

Six years ago, Northumbrian Water's teams came up with the idea for a campaign to change how wastewater works, a regional initiative to really change customer behaviour through education and engagement.

The message was clear. Bin the Wipe.

And the idea was straightforward.

Teams would visit hotspot areas, where blockages were a problem, and monitor sewer networks for wipes.

In the process, they came up with some innovative man-made tools, devised through careful trial and error using prototypes of spiked tools.

Eventually, they created the Porcupine, Barbarian and Goliath, which can trace wipes back to their source.

Supported by integrated marketing and social media campaigns, as well as partnerships with housing associations and community events, the campaign snowballed into something that quickly became well-known and supported across the region.

In the areas targeted by the teams, where work was introduced and trialled, the number of wet wipe-related blockages, internal flooding and external flooding reduced by more than 50 per cent.

News of these incredible results travelled across the water industry and, in 2023, Water UK adopted the initiative as a national campaign.

This expansion brought that one simple message to millions more households across the country, bringing behaviour change at scale and reaching 41 million on social media alone.

By the end of 2024, Northumbrian Water's own campaign had reached hundreds of thousands of households and gained praise from



Television presenter Matt Allwright speaks to Northumbrian Water operatives about its work to rid waterways of wet wipes for a feature on BBC favourite The One Show

customers and environmental groups.

Its success earned industry recognition too, including the Best Long-Term Campaign Award at the CIPR Excellence Awards.

The hard work carried on to educate the people of the North East, while even harder work was underway behind the scenes.

Engagement with customers, partners and stakeholders impacted real change, and the campaign eventually impacted policy.

In November 2025, the Government announced a ban on the sale of wet wipes containing plastic, which is set to come into force by spring 2027.

This new legislation, which falls under environmental protection regulations, received overwhelming public support and aims to reduce plastic pollution in rivers and seas by tackling the root cause of sewer blockages.

Under the new law, retailers will face fines for selling wipes containing plastic, with exemptions for medical use and certain business applications.

Manufacturers are being encouraged to switch to biodegradable alternatives, such as cotton or bamboo.

Still, the message remains the same. No wipes should be flushed.

In December, Northumbrian Water's homegrown campaign was thrust into the national spotlight when it featured on BBC One family favourite The One Show.

Filmed in Darlington, the segment showcased Northumbrian Water's innovative approach to tackling blockages.

Viewers watched as local sewage maintenance operatives Emily and Mark demonstrated the vital nature of their work.

The programme also highlighted Pipebot Patrol, the world's first autonomous sewer robot



capable of inspecting miles of pipeline over a 30-day period and preventing blockages before they occur.

Simon Cyhanko, head of wastewater networks, also featured on the show, and spoke about how he has seen the campaign grow from an idea on a page to the national stage.

He says: "It's amazing to see how our campaign has rocketed over the years, but it's not without the hard work and dedication of our team.

"Bin the Wipe really shows how a focused, behaviour-change initiative can deliver tangible environmental benefits and literally change the law.

"This is a real combination of community engagement, technological innovation and strategic communications, and this new legislation will help protect our beloved waterways for generations to come."

As the UK prepares for the 2027 ban on wipes containing plastic, the message remains as relevant as ever. Bin the Wipe, don't flush it.

Small changes in daily habits can make a

big difference, preventing sewer blockages, protecting homes and safeguarding rivers and seas.

This campaign, which started off small using man-made inventions and a team of 12, has grown into something making a countrywide difference.

It has helped change legislation and is helping reduce the devastating impacts of sewer flooding, not only in this region but across the country, improving service for Northumbrian Water's customers and making a positive difference to the environment.



Northumbrian Water
To find out more about the Bin the Wipe campaign, visit the websites at the top of this article.

Investing in the North East



NORTH EAST
Chamber of Commerce

www.necc.co.uk

LinkedIn: North East Chamber of Commerce

www.metrobankonline.co.uk

LinkedIn: Metro Bank (UK)

Collaboration is key to the success of any venture. So too is a strong financial bedrock. And through its alliance with the North East Chamber of Commerce, Metro Bank – which recently expanded into the region with a Team Valley branch opening – is building new relationships to support personal and business clients' economic goals. Here, Kristi Capaldi-Brown, Metro Bank local director – North East, tells Steven Hugill about its move into the region, its commitment to customer service and the benefits of its North East Chamber of Commerce membership.

Tell us a little about Metro Bank and its core objectives.

Metro Bank provides corporate, commercial, SME banking and specialist mortgage lending, alongside retail and private banking services.

We opened our doors in the summer of 2010, and were the first high street bank to open in the UK in more than 100 years.

Since then, we've built a business that is providing meaningful competition against larger incumbents and offering a compelling alternative for small business and commercial customers.

Our approach to banking is centred on our colleagues and building relationships with our customers and communities, through what we refer to as 'relationship banking'.

In practice, this means we pride ourselves on delivering personable service to every customer, no matter how they interact with us, whether they're a business, commercial, retail or private banking customer.

Our established relationship banking model, alongside our focus on localness, informs everything we do and the decisions we make.

How important is the North East to Metro Bank, and what does its commitment to the region look like in practice?

Gateshead marks our first store in the North East, giving us a vital physical presence to

“Our approach to banking is centred on our colleagues and building relationships with our customers and communities, through what we refer to as relationship banking”

strengthen our relationships with business and retail customers across the region.

It builds on months of outreach work my team have been conducting with the business community in the North East.

Across every region we serve, we put a desire to support local prosperity at the heart of what we do, and we are thrilled to bring this commitment to the North East.

For us, supporting local businesses is more than just an intent, it's a core part of how we operate.

Recently, we partnered with Dipping Donuts, a fantastic Newcastle-based donut vendor







“We view our entry into the North East as an exciting opportunity for growth, and believe our Gateshead store is just the beginning of establishing a strong physical presence in the region”

and one of our SME customers, to supply the opening of our Gateshead store.

We're excited to champion and collaborate with many more North East businesses, regardless of size, as we continue to invest, expand and put down deeper roots across the region.

In a competitive financial landscape, what sets Metro Bank apart for businesses and individuals in the North East?

We believe our unwavering commitment to building authentic, long-lasting relationships with every customer sets us apart.

We deliver this through our network of 78 stores, UK-based contact centres and convenient digital channels, including internet banking and our mobile app.

We also provide relationship-driven services to all business customers, whether you're a new start-up or a large corporate organisation.

Every business customer at our Gateshead store will have access to our dedicated local business managers, who serve as personal points of contact and can provide tailored guidance on how our banking services can help drive their business' growth.

As a new Enterprise-level North East Chamber of Commerce member, how do you see this enhanced partnership supporting Metro Bank's growth ambitions in the region?

Our Enterprise membership has been a vital move for us as we've expanded into the region, and has already provided an essential platform for raising our profile and connecting with local businesses.

Face-to-face engagement is at the heart of our culture, and this partnership gives us the perfect opportunity to build relationships with the region's business community.

We've met a diverse range of North East businesses at Chamber events, and have partnered with the North East Chamber of Commerce to host a half-day seminar for local charities on financial management and strengthening cash flow.

What aspects of the North East Chamber of Commerce's vision for the region resonated most with Metro Bank?

We were incredibly excited to see the North East Chamber of Commerce publish its Unlocking the North East Economy 2025–2027 plan in the Autumn, which offers a clear vision for regional growth.

What resonates most with us is its focus on high streets and local businesses as the heart of the community.

Crucially, the plan also highlights the importance to SMEs of having access to essential services like banking they can genuinely rely on, and we hope our commitment to delivering locally focused banking, as well as our physical presence in the region through our new Gateshead store, can help make this a reality.

What are you hoping to gain from North East Chamber of Commerce membership, and how do you see it supporting Metro Bank's business goals moving forward?

We view our entry into the North East as an exciting opportunity for growth, and believe our Gateshead store is just the beginning of establishing a strong physical presence in the region.

As we work to expand and deepen our roots within the local business community, we see our Chamber membership as an invaluable resource, helping us increase visibility, build lasting relationships and accelerate our growth across the North East.

LAST WORD

Closing this edition of N magazine, Toni Rhodes, newly-appointed chief executive at Education Partnership North East, sets out her blueprint for sustained success, highlights the potential of headline multi-million-pound investments and emphasises the value of the Sunderland College, Northumberland College and Hartlepool Sixth Form College operator's industrial partnerships in nurturing the workers of tomorrow.

www.educationpartnershipne.ac.uk

LinkedIn: Education Partnership North East

Congratulations on your new role. What are your key priorities and ambitions as chief executive, and how do you hope to shape the future of Education Partnership North East?

I'm incredibly proud to have been appointed chief executive.

I'd firstly like to express my sincere thanks to Ellen Thinnesen for her outstanding leadership and transformative contribution to the group.

Ellen has been an inspirational driving force, and I wish her every success in her new role as Further Education Commissioner.

Looking ahead, my key priorities are focused on delivering our strategic plan, which runs to 2030, and ensuring our colleges continue to unlock potential, create opportunities and transform lives through outstanding education, skills and training.

Our ambitions include strengthening our curriculum, so it remains innovative, future-focused, shaped by our learners and responsive to the needs of employers; deepening our partnerships with communities, industry, schools, universities and civic leaders; and ensuring that everyone – regardless of background – has access to high-quality education, exceptional support and real pathways into skilled employment.

Our colleges play a vital role at the heart of our communities, and I'm looking forward to working with our dedicated and passionate colleagues and partners to build on our successes.

Your appointment comes at an exciting time, with Education Partnership North East's recently opened Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy, in Sunderland, set to be complemented by a £54 million Northumberland College Ashington campus later this year. What impact will these flagship investments have on students' learning and outcomes?

These changemaking investments will have a transformative impact on our students' learning and future opportunities.

The Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy is already providing learners with access to new facilities, modern methods of construction and real industry environments, as well as close collaboration with partners including Northumbria University, Gentoo, Velux and Ambion Heating, ensuring they gain the advanced technical skills and knowledge employers' demand.

Our trailblazing Ashington campus will take this even further, offering

exceptional, future-focused spaces across the engineering, construction, health sciences, digital and creative sectors, special educational needs and disabilities and much more.

This campus represents one of the most significant educational investments in Northumberland in decades, and it will make a major contribution to the regeneration of Ashington, bringing footfall, opportunity and increased pride to the town.

Together, these investments will enhance outcomes, open new career pathways and ensure learners of all ages benefit from high-quality education that strengthens communities and drives regional growth.

A disconnect between education and industry has long been cited by employers as a key factor in skills gaps. But Education Partnership North East has made – and continues to make – great strides in strengthening relationships with commercial operators. How will that continue under your leadership, and are there any fresh initiatives you're keen to introduce?

Strengthening the relationship between education and industry will always remain a top priority.

We have made significant progress in recent years, and are committed to building on that momentum to ensure our curriculum and teaching remain closely aligned with employers' evolving needs.

We will continue to work with businesses on co-designing programmes, expanding industry placements and ensuring learners gain the technical expertise, behaviours and real-world experience that translate directly into employment.

There will also be an increased focus on our place-based approach, removing barriers to education for those who are currently not in employment, education or training.

Our goal is for employers to see us as an education provider and a true partner in regional growth and talent development.





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