

# N



**ANNA HEDWORTH**

# THE HEART OF HOSPITALITY

Kimberley Turner, Mark South, Chris Kelsey, Martin Gannon, Stuart Miller, Mike Clark,  
Mark Simpson, Andrew Robson, Elaine Irving, Mark Stephenson, Stewart Stewart





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WELCOME TO ISSUE 475

# Editor's Word

**In a world of fleeting fashion and fugacious fads, this edition of N magazine celebrates real change. Here, Steven Hugill explores the power of bold moves...**



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of N magazine.

If, like me, you eschew the annual folly of new year's resolutions, you'll know that they rarely, if ever, reach this point of the year.

You'll also recognise that change means more than a date circled in red pen on a freshly-opened calendar.

Real change is about meaningful, deeper shifts that reshape direction and deliver fulfilment, rather than diaries chock-full of whimsical pursuits.

Nowhere is that spirit more explicit than in our feature with Anna Hedworth, founder of the Newcastle-based Cook House, Wren and Long Friday hospitality ventures.

Inspiration, as is its wont, arrives in all kinds; in the case of then architect Anna, it came via two shipping containers in need of fresh impetus.

Tasked with transforming the sizeable structures into event space, she did what all good entrepreneurs do; she thought outside the (steel) box and bequeathed new life to the cargo carriers as home to her burgeoning entertaining endeavour.

Today, the containers have become but one chapter in a much larger story where casual dining restaurant Cook House, nestled on Ouseburn's Foundry Lane, is joined by neighbouring bar Wren and Jesmond-based drinks and dining venue Long Friday.

Anna's story is one where passion meets pragmatism, where great cuisine bumps into old-fashioned craft.

For two years, she ran Cook House as a one-woman band, from the cooking to the pot washing, using the internet to bulk up her wider business knowledge in the fleeting moments away from the kitchen.

Today, with those foundations laid, her three-pronged portfolio continues to grow.

And while a further venue is off the menu for the time being, Anna tells us she has plenty more ideas bubbling away on the back burner, not least exploring food as a creative medium in its own right, which could see a slice of the dramatic installations so familiar across Europe make their way to the North East.

Change permeates the second extended feature article in this edition too, wherein Kimberley Turner and Mark South – the recently unveiled co-chief executives of Middlesbrough-based independent games studio and publisher Double Eleven – reveal their blueprint to reaffirm the company's position at the pinnacle of the global computing pyramid.

Their appointments followed founder Lee Hutchinson's move to become chair of parent company Pneuma Group in its full capacity.

Yet while they are familiar with the business, both speak unequivocally of their promotions being far from automatic cheat codes to success.

Operating in a world synonymous with levels, the duo say Double Eleven's future will continue moving upwards by tracking the same path it has walked for years, one that has earned it a standout reputation for excellence alongside some of the world's largest titles.

Because real growth – be it via steel containers or computer consoles – comes not from shortcuts or snap changes, but from bold ideas and the courage to play the long game.

Meaningful change is additionally highlighted by the return of our VISION 31 campaign.

Founded in the post-pandemic months as a catalyst for fresh North East growth and prosperity, our flagship investment event will take place in Newcastle, County Durham and London across 2026.

You can read more about the campaign and its objectives on pages 12 and 13.

And change is the topic of this edition's Spotlight column too, wherein we explore the political personnel merry-go-round and the continuing battle to level the funding playing field.

The latter is particularly prevalent for the North East, given its strong female founder community.

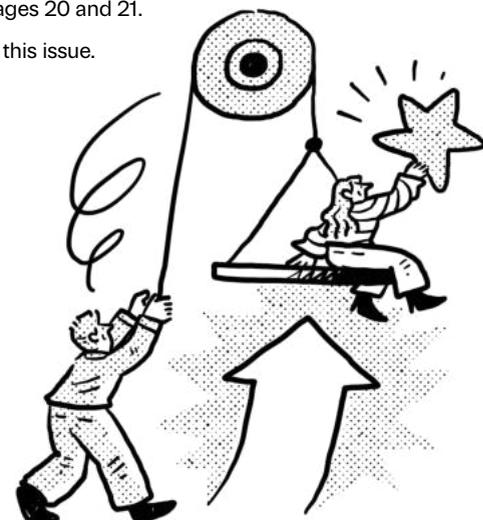
N magazine's sister publication Bdaily was invited to an exclusive roundtable with Chancellor Rachel Reeves earlier this year, where the topic of funding - or lack of - for female founders was discussed in detail.

Here at N magazine, we have always been a huge advocate of female leaders, and will continue to add our weight behind the campaign to ensure more are given the chance to flourish.

Read more on pages 20 and 21.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Steven



# DRIVING A NEW ERA OF OPPORTUNITY

[www.netimesmagazine.co.uk](http://www.netimesmagazine.co.uk)

LinkedIn: North East Times

**NET's headline investment campaign VISION 31 is back. Building on successful 2025 events, which included summits in Sunderland, Middlesbrough and a headline London conference, VISION 31 will once again highlight the North East's innovative spirit, thriving commercial sectors and investment potential. Here, NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill reveals more about the campaign's return and how it will illuminate the North East's dynamic business landscape, connect investors with ambitious companies and reinforce the region's status as a leading destination for growth and opportunity.**

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NET's flagship investment campaign is back.

VISION 31 will return in March with a Newcastle summit poised to spotlight the North East as an engine of opportunity.

Building on hugely successful London, Sunderland and Middlesbrough conventions last year, the event will illuminate the North East's role at the forefront of moves to deliver tomorrow's world today.

Held at The Great Hall, at Northumbria University, on Wednesday, March 25, the Newcastle event will feature founders and business leaders whose ventures have flourished from the North East, while showcasing too the region's plentiful investable qualities.

It will be followed by a summer conference in County Durham before a return to London where, for the past two years, VISION 31 has showcased the North East's commercial landscape to senior City figures and investment houses.

Highlighting the mayoral-led regeneration bodies driving watershed economic and social change, the ground-breaking manufacturers, pioneering green energy and digital moves, headline cultural developments, pulsing healthcare and life sciences ecosystem and a flourishing professional services landscape, VISION 31 celebrates a region moving forward at pace.

The campaign was conceived in the immediate post-pandemic period by NET alongside Newcastle-based investment house Northstar Ventures to bolster investment into the region, with several initial roundtable discussions helping create a blueprint for change.



Panellist Kirsten Donkin, Double Eleven head of communications, speaks at the Middlesbrough VISION 31 event held last summer



The Middlesbrough VISION 31 event, held at AV Dawson, on the banks of the River Tees last summer, attracted scores of guests

John Duns, NET business development director, says: "We're delighted to be continuing the VISION 31 campaign across 2026.

"VISION 31 is all about highlighting the North East's enormous potential and the bold businesses driving its growth.

"The North East has arguably never been more dynamic, and VISION 31 gives senior figures a front-row seat to the innovation, ambition and resilience that defines our region.

"From trailblazing manufacturers to leading digital and green energy initiatives, the North East is bursting with opportunity, and we're excited to build on that momentum and demonstrate to investors why the region is worth backing."

NET is proudly working with a number of North East organisations to deliver VISION 31, which include Aon, Grand Central, Lloyds Banking Group and Northumbria University.



Elaine Stroud, Entrepreneurs' Forum chief executive, makes a point during a panel discussion at the Middlesbrough-based VISION 31 event last summer



Guests watch on during a panel discussion at the Sunderland VISION 31 event held last spring



Dr Arnab Basu, Kromek Group chief executive, makes a point during 2024's VISION 31 London event. He is watched by Rob Hamilton, North East Combined Authority head of economic strategy and innovation



#### VISION 31

For more information about VISION 31, how your business could support the campaign and further details on its 2026 events, contact John Duns, NET business development director, at [john@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:john@netimesmagazine.co.uk)

# North East HR&D Awards return to celebrate region's stars

## North East HR&D Awards

[www.northeasthrdwards.co.uk](http://www.northeasthrdwards.co.uk)

LinkedIn: North East HR&D Awards

**The North East HR&D Awards will return in June to champion the organisations and people professionals making a real difference across the region's HR and learning and development community.**



The North East HR&D Awards are back!

Celebrating the outstanding organisations and people professionals across our region, the showpiece ceremony will take place at The Fed, in Gateshead, on Thursday, June 11.

With a diverse range of award categories, the event – now in its 18th year – will again shine a spotlight on the stars of the HR and learning and development community.

Following 2025's out of this world space-themed spectacle, the stage is set for another unforgettable evening.

Pete Mallon, creative and managing director of N magazine publisher NET, which delivers the North East HR&D Awards alongside the North East Work & Talent advisory board, says: "We can't wait for this year's event.

"As an independent media organisation committed to highlighting the inspiring stories of those shaping change in our region, the ceremony is a perfect match for us and a real highlight in our calendar.

"The 2025 event was a very enjoyable occasion, and we're working hard behind the scenes to create another memorable event."

The 2026 North East HR&D Awards will be judged by members of the North East Work & Talent advisory board, who reflect a cross-section of expertise and experience from organisations across the region.

Elouise Leonard-Cross and Sarah Carnegie, North East Work & Talent advisory board joint chairs, say: "We are delighted to renew our partnership with leading multi-platform publisher NET to deliver the 2026 North East HR&D Awards.

"Last year's event was a truly unforgettable occasion, with many incredible tales of skill and

success on show, and the 2026 celebration promises to be just as memorable.

"With 12 categories recognising the breadth and variety of the contribution of the people profession, we encourage organisations to share their excellent practices, to celebrate their people and showcase our fantastic region."

The 2026 North East HR&D Awards are proudly supported by a number of partners, which include NPH Group, Northumbrian Water, Jackson Hogg, Esh Group, Castle Peak Group, Recovery4Life and Hill Dickinson.



### North East HR&D Awards

**For more information about partnership opportunities or to reserve a table for the evening, contact Lesley Hampson by emailing [lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk) or call 07748 908058.**

**Alternatively, email Dawn Owens at [dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk) or call 07789 666437.**

**To submit an award nomination, visit the website at the top of this article. Entries close at 5pm on Thursday, April 2.**

[www.northeasthrdwards.co.uk](http://www.northeasthrdwards.co.uk)

# Celebrating excellent people practices

**HR&D**  
North East Awards



Thursday  
June 11  
2026

The Fed,  
Gateshead



# THE NET 250 RETURNS TO SHOWCASE REGION'S ELITE

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

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

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

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

Showcasing 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 showpiece ceremony celebrated the region's software developers, builders, manufacturers, subsea operators, professional services firms, transport businesses, process sector companies, trade hubs and more that are delivering tomorrow's successes today.

And the 2026 event – which counts Newcastle

and Stockton-on-Tees-based national legal and professional services firm Knights as its headline partner – will build on that, with a number of new and exciting award categories set to be unveiled to recognise more organisations from Northumberland to Teesside.

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

"Last year's ceremony was a huge success, with incredible interest in The NET 250 list.

"We're very excited to be returning with a bigger and better programme.

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

"The NET 250 builds on that commitment."

Accolades at the event – which is additionally backed by partners including PwC, S&W, Hill Dickinson and Community Foundation North East – 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 ceremony will also feature the judges' select award, which will celebrate an organisation's financial successes, as well as its wider impact on the region.

Dr Fiona Whitehurst, Newcastle University Business School associate dean for engagement and place, says the education provider 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.

"And it has been exciting for this year's team to research new categories for the 2026 event."

Richard Podd, PwC North East market senior partner, says: "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."

Kenton Bazeley, Knights' regional 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."



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](mailto:dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk) or call 07789 666437.

Alternatively, email fellow NET event manager Lesley Hampson at [lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk) or call 07748 908058.





# FROM INBOX TO INFLUENCE

[www.bdaily.co.uk](http://www.bdaily.co.uk)  
LinkedIn: Bdaily

**Business news website Bdaily continues to broaden its national reach, with ever-increasing numbers of commercial sector leaders trusting its content to stay abreast of the latest headlines. And with such an audience, the platform can keep your brand at the heart of the national conversation too. Here, Steven Hugill, editor-in-chief at Bdaily publisher NET, highlights how the digital platform’s commercial portfolio can help your organisation make an impact that counts.**

The business world is relentless.

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And you’ll be in good company.

Acquired by multi-platform publisher NET in 2024, Bdaily has undergone significant growth, with commercial sector leaders across the UK increasingly trusting the website for their news updates.

As this edition of N magazine went to print, Bdaily had already attracted one million page views since the turn of 2026, with its daily email bulletin subscriber list standing at 65,000-plus names.

Hitting North East inboxes five times a week, the service also includes twice-weekly Yorkshire updates and a nationally-focused Wednesday round-up – with plans in place to expand coverage to further regions.

Furthermore, Bdaily content is read every day by 17,000 LinkedIn followers – a number that has tripled since NET’s Bdaily acquisition – with stories shared between countless peer groups across the network.

By engaging with Bdaily’s commercial offer, you will gain unparalleled reach to an engaged audience of influential decision-makers across the UK, helping you and your brand forge new connections, clients and coverage that drives real results.

Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief, says: “With its extensive coverage, refined editorial voice and range of new platforms, Bdaily is delivering content that continues to resonate with an increasing national audience.

“And by harnessing Bdaily’s commercial offer – which includes partnership packages, website

advertising, email marketing, event promotion and more – you can add your brand to that conversation.

“Our audience trusts Bdaily for insight, analysis and updates that help shape the business landscape, and by engaging with our commercial opportunities, you and your company can reach the right people at the right time – and make an impact that counts.”

### **Bdaily**

**Find out how you can take advantage of Bdaily’s commercial packages by scanning the QR code on the opposite page.**

**Alternatively, to learn more about how Bdaily can support your PR and commercial goals, email Sarah Law, Bdaily partnerships and marketing manager, at [sarah@bdaily.co.uk](mailto:sarah@bdaily.co.uk)**



Pictured, back row, from left to right, are Colin Young, business journalist; Pete Mallon, creative and managing director; Pete Anderson, Bdaily digital content manager; Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief; Sian Anderson, digital marketing consultant; and Andrew Lowe, filmographer. Seated, from left to right, are John Duns, business development director; and Sarah Law, partnerships and marketing manager

**B**

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# SPOT LIGHT

**Don't leave  
us waiting at  
the platform**

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By Steven Hugill

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## From headline transport policy to recycled political personnel and the ongoing battle to provide the region's female founders with capital to thrive, Steven Hugill looks at some of the stories shaping the North East's news agenda.

### Don't let rail revival plan hit the buffers again

Ever feel like we've been here before?

No, I'm not referring to another interminable winter, nor the latest reputational squall engulfing the monarchy.

I'm talking instead about the nagging scepticism I'm struggling to shake around the Government's latest commitment to rail travel, specifically the revival of a much-discussed North East route.

When ministers unveiled the latest chapter in the protracted Northern Powerhouse Rail programme at the beginning of the year, they did so with a promise to advance a business case assessing the rebirth of the Leamside Line.

Hit by Beeching cuts and left idle following the departure of freight trains since the early 1990s, campaigners have long called for the 21-mile route – between Tursdale, in County Durham, and Pelaw, in Gateshead – to be reopened.

Doing so, they say, would catalyse plans to extend the existing Tyne and Wear Metro light rail system while providing much-needed additional capacity to ease congestion on the busy East Coast Main Line.

Set amid wider multi-billion-pound plans to create a new Liverpool-to-Manchester line and upgrade Yorkshire routes and stations, ministers add the combined North of England venture will add £40 billion a year to the UK economy and end “years of dither and delay”.

Which sounds incredibly positive.

But then I remember we've been here before, not least when Conservative policy pledged to bring the Leamside Line back to life – before shunting it into the sidings again in a chaotic 24 hours during the party's dying embers.

As a region marked as a mere footnote in the original HS2 blueprint, our rail network has, for too long, sat waiting at the buffers.

Reviving the Leamside Line wouldn't represent a complete panacea, but it would restore vital passenger links and free up the flagship London-to-Edinburgh connection that cuts through our region.

It would also benefit the 120,000-plus people living along its corridor, including the 70,000 or so residents of Washington who would benefit

from a Metro extension.

And there is a precedent to follow. Ministers need only look at the Northumberland Line, itself reopened after a 60-year-plus hiatus.

Returning rail services between Newcastle and Ashington – with new stations along the way – officials say conductors have already clocked more than one million passenger journeys since its renaissance.

The time for recycled commitments has passed.

If Labour is serious about venturing where previous regimes merely dithered, we need to hear less talk and more the sound of trains echoing along the Leamside Line's tracks again.

### Seeding a more sustainable future

Speaking of being stuck on a loop, are there any back-of-the-shelf Tories left for Nigel Farage to sweep into his Westminster wheely-bin?

Now, don't get me wrong.

Shifting Robert Jenrick and Suella Braverman from the husk of the Conservative party represents a wonderful act of benevolence, not just for Tory benches but the wider British public too.

Yet throwing them across the floor to Reform, and thereby retaining the stench of past-it politicians, is another thing entirely.

I know Nigel likes to play the part of anti-climate change champion, but there's only so much landfill politics even he can sift through before the wheely-bin begins to properly stink.

With the UK's political landscape decomposing from years of Tory decay and subsequent Labour putrefaction, sowing the system with the same old failed seeds isn't going to deliver the harvest we so desperately need.

To truly deliver the change the country is crying out for, we must systematically turn over the soil and create a parliamentary plot whose future is fuelled by fresh ideas, rather than a compost heap of yesterday's leftovers.

### We must back our female founders

The rotavating of the political scene outlined above must include a greater focus on the country's female business leaders – specifically those at the coal face of venture creation.

The North East is a hotbed of entrepreneurial women, whose endeavours resonate across the UK and beyond.

Yet their success continues to be stymied by persistent growth hurdles, none more pressing than the challenge of accessing the funding needed to truly catalyse their ambitions.

This topic was the subject of conversation at an exclusive roundtable event held at Darlington Economic Campus at the beginning of the year, and I had the privilege of attending the invite-only discussion to cover the outcomes for N magazine's sister publication Bdaily.

It was a bittersweet occasion.

On one hand, I was able to hear about fantastic businesses operating across a diverse cross-section of industries that are creating jobs and adding to the region's economy.

Yet on the other, I heard not for the first time how female founders are being held back by a fractured support ecosystem.

From a gender-imbalanced funding environment, to a lack of risk towards female-founded ventures, struggles to access talent, balancing work with parenthood and knowledge gaps around capital programmes, the message was unequivocal: it's time to level the landscape.

Acknowledging founders' frustrations “loud and clear”, the Chancellor pledged to “continue championing the issue” during her time in office.

And we at N magazine will hold her – and the Government – to that promise.

I'm extremely proud this publication has long supported our region's female business leaders.

Where others may make token plays, our commitment is deep-rooted; we know the impact of female founders and bosses on the region, its jobs market and its economy.

They can't – and shouldn't – be ignored.

We will continue championing their cause.

It's now time for the Government to follow suit.

### Reviving the Leamside Line:

- The Big Question – see pages 22 and 23.

# BIG QUESTION

**The Government began the year with a multi-billion-pound pledge to transform rail travel across the North of England. Unveiled under the Northern Powerhouse Rail banner, the blueprint includes a commitment to take forward a business case for reviving the mothballed Leamside Line between Tursdale, near Ferryhill, and Pelaw, in Gateshead, which campaigners say would help extend the Metro light railway to Washington and reduce East Coast Main Line congestion. Ministers say the headline venture – which also includes Yorkshire and North West route and station improvements – will “make a real difference to millions of lives”. Do the plans mark a genuine turning point for rail travel in the region, or are you worried they will hit the buffers?**

By Steven Hugill



**Mike Clark**  
Development director

**Dysart Developments**

Reopening a redundant railway line just because it's there doesn't mean it's the best thing to do strategically.

The Northumberland Line is a perfect example of 'build-it-and-they-will-come' without considering how transport, regeneration, economic, planning and housing strategy needed to be changed.

Reopening the Leamside Line is probably a good thing, and experts will have produced an economic case to prove it.

Inevitably, it will benefit people, communities and the local economy.

But will the right infrastructure be incorporated?

Before the Conservatives destroyed regional structures, we had an integrated regional strategy to direct investment and development.

This initiative feels like it'll be done because it's cheaper and quicker than a new route or alternative infrastructure.

But will it be the best use of public money?

A return to an integrated regional strategy, developed by the North East Combined Authority, prioritising regional investment and mitigating local authority parochialism, may be a way of ensuring future investment achieves the greatest impact.

The other problem is that it's more investment in the central corridor.

It won't make it any easier for people living in the west, north west or south west of Durham to access employment, or encourage investment in employment in those areas.



**Join the discussion**

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





**Chris Kelsey**  
Public affairs manager

**North East Chamber of Commerce**

The announcement is genuinely encouraging and reflects long-standing calls from businesses across the North East for meaningful investment in rail infrastructure.

The potential restoration of the Leamside Line is particularly significant.

It offers a practical solution to congestion on the East Coast Main Line, opens up the opportunity to extend the Metro to Washington and strengthens connectivity across County Durham, Wearside and Tyneside.

The economic case is clear.

Better rail links support growth by attracting investment, creating jobs and unlocking new housing.

They also make the region more competitive by helping businesses reach markets, customers and talent more easily.

Improved connectivity also benefits everyday life, enabling people to travel more efficiently to work, education and training, strengthening links between communities across the North East and beyond.

However, ambition alone is not enough.

We have seen major infrastructure announcements in the past that have not been matched by delivery.

Businesses will be looking for clear timescales, sustained funding and a firm commitment to turn a business case into construction.

If the Government follows through at speed, this could mark a genuine turning point for rail travel in the North.

Without that momentum, though, there is a real risk it becomes another missed opportunity.



**Councillor Martin Gannon**  
Cabinet member for transport

**North East Combined Authority**

The Government's commitment to working with us on a new rail line for County Durham, along the former Leamside Line alignment, marks a major endorsement of North East mayor Kim McGuinness' rail plans.

This is a pivotal moment, which gives us the backing we need to deliver this project for people in the North East, aligned to the Northern Powerhouse Rail programme.

We know rail changes lives, and we know we can deliver big infrastructure projects with confidence.

We've seen from the Northumberland Line just how transformational rail is for local people and there is a real appetite for more – well over a million passengers have used it to date, which is great to see.

And there's already a huge amount of work going on behind the scenes.

We're well underway with the critical planning work needed to extend the Metro to Washington – along the northern section of the Leamside Line – and we are working on a detailed business case for the section from Washington to Ferryhill, in County Durham.

As well as boosting local connectivity, the new rail line would deliver major national benefits by acting as a diversionary route for the East Coast Main Line.

This would allow for more frequent services and end delays on our national rail link, finally making the East Coast Main Line fit for purpose.



**Stuart Miller**  
Director

**Civil Engineering Contractors Association (North East)**

The Civil Engineering Contractors Association represents the contractors ready to deliver this infrastructure, and while we welcome the Government's multi-billion-pound pledge, our perspective is one of cautious optimism.

The commitment to the Leamside Line and the wider Northern Powerhouse Rail blueprint is a significant step towards addressing chronic underinvestment in the North.

If delivered, these projects will alleviate East Coast Main Line congestion and provide the regional connectivity essential for economic growth.

However, the industry has seen blueprints hit the buffers before due to shifting political priorities and budget constraints.

For this to be a genuine turning point, our members need pipeline certainty; consistency in funding to keep specialised workforces employed; swift and fair procurement; moving from business cases to shovels in the ground without protracted delays; and strategic integration to ensure regional projects like the Washington Metro extension align with national upgrades.

We don't just need headlines, we need a sustained, decades-long commitment to infrastructure investment.

The region is ready to build.

We now need the Government to maintain its momentum to ensure these plans don't become another missed opportunity.

# Helping future leaders find their voice



[www.necc.co.uk](http://www.necc.co.uk)

LinkedIn: North East Chamber of Commerce

[www.gateshead.ac.uk](http://www.gateshead.ac.uk)

LinkedIn: Gateshead College

**Employers across the North East are increasingly flagging concerns that too many people are entering the workplace without the confidence and communication skills needed to progress. For Nadine Hudspeth, director of brand and learner experience at Gateshead College, that challenge has helped shape the Future Leaders Programme, a new initiative delivered alongside the North East Chamber of Commerce. Here, Nadine speaks to Peter Anderson about the thinking behind the venture, the skills it is seeking to develop and its ambition to build a confident, connected pipeline of future leaders for the region.**

From WhatsApp groups and Teams calls to emails, DMs and social media feeds, modern life offers more ways to communicate than ever before.

For many people, digital platforms have become the default – and often the only – way we connect, whether at work, at home or somewhere in between, as conversations arrive in a constant stream of pings, pop-ups and push notifications.

Yet the irony of this hyper-connected world is that we often seem worse than ever at communicating with one another.

We can juggle multiple group chats and scroll through fatuous TikTok videos and Instagram feeds, yet hesitate when it comes to picking up the phone and avoid, at all costs, the unscripted realities of face-to-face conversation.

With our heads down, earbuds in and attention fixed on screens, genuine human interaction is increasingly fleeting, as eye contact, tone and emotional nuance have been replaced by soundbites, shorthand and the occasional passive-aggressive full stop.

The impact of this shift – accelerated by the pandemic and prolonged periods of isolation – is now being felt in workplaces across the region.

Employers are reporting growing gaps in communication, confidence and presence among early-career professionals, not as abstract concerns but as everyday challenges affecting how people interact with colleagues and customers alike.

These issues were brought into sharp focus through Government-backed Local Skills

Improvement Plans (LSIPs).

As part of the North East Chamber of Commerce's engagement with businesses, more than 3500 employers highlighted an urgent need for stronger verbal communication and professional confidence, citing a decline in people's ability to engage in workplace conversations or manage client interactions.

For Nadine Hudspeth, director of brand and learner experience at Gateshead College, those findings resonate deeply.

Having spent much of her career building networks, developing talent and championing confidence as a skill in its own right, she understands that communication is not simply about what is said, but how people feel empowered to say it.

It is this belief in connection, self-awareness and helping people realise their potential that underpins her approach – and sits at the heart of the Future Leaders Programme.

Nadine, who is coordinating the programme with Erin Newey, North East Chamber of Commerce strategic partnerships manager, says: "I've worked with the Chamber for many years and have benefited from what it's given me – professional development, building a network and relationships that have genuinely helped me do my job better.

"You realise being part of the Chamber isn't just about what you can do in your own organisation.

"It's about what you can do beyond that, by working with others and how you can start making a difference outside the walls of your company."





The idea behind the programme was also driven by a familiar pattern.

Nadine says: “You often go to events and see the same brilliant people who consistently show up and contribute.

“So you start asking, ‘how can we also create an opportunity for emerging leaders – the people coming through with new perspectives and ideas?’

“When the same individuals are working hard on the same priorities, it’s a real strength, but it also shows how important it is to bring in different voices to enrich the conversation and it’s always interesting to shake things up.

She adds: “The Future Leaders Programme is about identifying that next generation early and creating the conditions for them to step forward.

“For me, it’s always been important to create real opportunities for people to develop and grow, not in a forced or formal way, but by giving them the space, support and confidence to realise what they’re capable of.

“That’s why we’ve designed the programme as a supportive environment where people can build confidence, learn practical skills and connect with others.

“Hopefully, they’ll leave the sessions feeling fired up, having had the chance to practice some of their new skills with people they feel comfortable with.”

Nadine says the programme reflects the wider shifts in how people learn, work and interact – many of which were accelerated by the pandemic.

She says: “We really saw the impact of isolation through COVID-19 on students and staff.

“We’ve seen it in confidence, in mental health and wellbeing, and in how comfortable people feel speaking up.”

That understanding has shaped Gateshead College’s approach to skills development more broadly, with a focus on creating the right conditions for people to succeed in different ways.

Nadine says: “Not everyone will want to contribute in the same way.

“So how do you design learning differently, create safer spaces and not assume someone isn’t engaged just because they contribute differently?”

At the heart of that approach is what Nadine describes as the college’s longstanding “employment edge” ethos – the belief that success at work requires far more than qualifications alone.

She says: “You need character, confidence and resilience.

“You need the chance to network, to meet employers, to understand what’s out there and to develop the belief to step into opportunities when they arise.”



The Future Leaders Programme, she says, sits firmly within that thinking, responding directly to employer feedback while recognising that people's journeys into confidence and leadership are rarely linear.

Nadine says: "Everyone's path is different.

"But if we can be more curious, more human and create the right opportunities, people have a much better chance of realising their capabilities."

The programme, which is partly funded by Tees Valley and North of Tyne LSIP, is structured around three core networking events delivered across the year, each combining professional development with peer connection.

Every session brings together an inspiring speaker, a bite-sized learning element and time to build relationships, with participants also able to deepen their learning through smaller, full-day workshops delivered by Gateshead College.

The focus throughout is on foundational leadership skills – including emotional intelligence, personal brand and communication – with an emphasis on practising those skills, not just hearing about them.

For Nadine, the structure is deliberate.

She says: "You get the chance to build a network, be inspired and learn something.

"This is not about sitting back and being talked at.

"We want people to feel they've got agency in it – to roll their sleeves up, take part and come with a clear sense of what they want to get out of it.

"It's got to be dynamic and energetic."

And for Nadine, the end goal is not simply a successful programme, but the beginnings of something that lasts.

In the immediate term, she hopes to see a cohort complete the programme together and take real pride in being part of its first chapter.

But the ambition stretches far beyond certificates or completion.

Nadine hopes participants will carry their experiences with them into new roles, promotions and opportunities, while continuing to draw on the connections they have made.

She adds: "I'd love to think someone is going for a promotion or an interview and saying, 'I'm really proud to have been part of Future Leaders'.

"Not just because of what it gave them during

the programme, but because of what they're doing now – who they're working with and what they're helping make happen."

Ultimately, Nadine hopes the programme will help establish a recognised and trusted Future Leaders community, one that grows with each cohort and helps strengthen the region over time.

She adds: "If we can create a confident, connected community of people, who realise they've got something to contribute, that's when really good things start to happen."



#### **Future Leaders Programme**

Delivered by the North East Chamber of Commerce alongside Gateshead College, the programme is aimed at early-career professionals. It delivers practical development support in communication, confidence and emotional intelligence through high-profile networking events and optional full-day workshops delivered by Gateshead College.

For more information, visit the websites at the top of this article.

# A distinctive approach to success

## Knights

www.knightsplc.com

LinkedIn: Knights

**In a competitive commercial landscape, differentiation drives success. Just ask Knights. Where many peers continue to operate with a traditional hierarchical model, the national legal and professional services firm's progress is spearheaded by a flat, team-based structure, which boosts collaboration and delivers faster, higher-quality client support. Here, regional client services director Kenton Bazeley tells Steven Hugill how the Newcastle and Stockton-on-Tees-based firm's unique framework is strengthening its presence across the North East.**



Pictured left and below, Knights staff chat at an open-plan meeting area in its Newcastle office

A raindrop breaks against a glass window, sending splintered streaks racing down a seventh-floor pane.

Below, a colour wheel of seemingly autonomous umbrellas weaves along an otherwise empty pavement, as vehicles' headlights paint pale white and red ribbons along the Tyne Bridge.

Winter has returned for another play across Newcastle.

Inside the city's Bank House commercial high-rise, however, the melancholy is replaced by something else altogether.

Conversations carry across rows of desks, teams move seamlessly between one another and stool-perched colleagues chat at an open-plan meeting space.

Where outside feels fragmented and fleeting, the inside hums with collaboration and cohesion.

And it's entirely by design.

Just as yellow-jacketed, hard hat-wearing construction workers snake through the skeletal frame of the partially-completed 1 Pilgrim Place office building yards away – its dividing walls yet to be installed – so does Knights' team operate with a similarly fluid structure.

"The way we work is genuinely different from

everyone else; there is no other law firm in the country that does it this way," Kenton Bazeley, regional client services director at the national legal and professional services firm, tells N magazine.

He says: "In a traditional law firm model, a department is led by a partner who works with a team to support clients on a target-driven basis.

"But we don't have targets; instead, we operate collaboratively through a team-based culture wherein colleagues work together, rather than compete against each other.

"It's an anti-silo approach, a flat corporate structure that thrives on an entrepreneurial spirit, rather than heads of teams.

"Ultimately, it means colleagues have time to do a job properly and deliver high-quality services to clients more quickly.

"There is nobody in the North East providing the same level or depth of service."

And in a world increasingly dominated by technology, where client relations continue to migrate from physical discussions to digital conversations, Kenton says Knights' approach is delivering a distinctively reassuring human touch to its 10,000-plus national client portfolio.

He says: "We are the UK's largest regional professional services firm with £200 million-



Pictures: Andrew Lowe



plus revenue – and a fundamental element of our success and growth is our premium client service.

“A key driver is our commitment to speaking to people and building relationships.

“Our structure means colleagues have sufficient time to pick up the phone to a client, which is very relevant in today’s world.

“They might not be able to solve a problem immediately, but they are speaking to a client, rather than simply sending an email,” says Kenton, who oversees operations across Knights’ Newcastle, Stockton-on-Tees and York bases that sit within a wider 32-strong national office suite.

He adds: “But our culture benefits our colleagues too.

“A traditional model can sometimes foster a feeling among teams that they don’t have time to interact with colleagues because they’ve got targets to hit.

“However, because our approach is completely different, they have much more time to collaborate.

“Furthermore, when we recruit a team member, we often then take on their friend or colleague because of the environment we’ve created,” says Kenton, who spent his formative years in Northamptonshire before moving to the North East in 2008 after attending law school in York.

The ethos is borne out in no little evidence.

A significant number of staff list time at regional forerunners St James’ Square and Archers Law – the Newcastle and Stockton-on-Tees-based firms acquired by Knights in recent years.

Where attrition could have been high following such deals, Kenton says Knights’ culture instead helped retain colleagues who continue, alongside later additions, to drive the firm forward.

And with their experience of the region’s commercial and geographical nuances, he says Knights – which is headline partner of The NET 250, N magazine publisher NET’s sought-

after list of the region’s top 250 businesses by turnover – has great scope to further bolster its market presence.

Kenton says: “Both offices are different, and both are growing.

“The Newcastle office sits in a large conurbation, which offers huge potential for growth, and by being located in Bank House, it is right in the middle of the regeneration of the city.

“Teesside is another strong office.

“Owing to the different specialisms we provide, there aren’t many law firms in the south of the region that can do what we do.”

He adds: “A lot of people in the Newcastle and Stockton-on-Tees offices have worked there for years – and that is a major factor in the quality and depth of service we provide.

“Those colleagues know the region and have the local clients and relationships.

“Nothing has changed other than the name above the door.

“We’re still the same people; we just do things in a different way.”



**Knights**

**Knights was founded more than 250 years ago in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire. Over the last decade, it has grown to become the largest legal and professional services business focused on providing great service in every region of the country. Knights’ expert services cover areas including banking, business tax, corporate, commercial, employment, real estate and residential property, and sectors such as energy, finance, healthcare, industry and technology.**

**It operates from more than 30 offices across the UK, with its footprint boosted last year by the acquisition of South East-based IBB Law LLP alongside the opening of a Cardiff office. It also completed deals for Essex’s Birkett Long and Kent and Sussex-based Rix & Kay Solicitors LLP.**

**To learn more about Knights, its services and the sectors it supports, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0344 371 2562.**

# Powering a new energy future

## Maven Capital Partners

www.mavencp.com

LinkedIn: Maven Capital Partners

## Power Roll Ltd

www.powerroll.solar

LinkedIn: Power Roll Ltd

Where miners once cleaved coal, flexible solar film maker Power Roll is cutting a fresh path to deliver the energy of tomorrow. Backed by significant investment from organisations including the North East office of national private equity and venture capital firm Maven Capital Partners, the East Durham-based business is pressing ahead with global growth plans. Here, Steven Hugill meets chief executive Neil Spann to find out more.



The past is never far from the present at Power Roll.

Just metres from the ultra-precision of its advanced manufacturing factory, a black-and-white still of Murton Colliery and an aerial map of Hawthorn Combined Mine hang in stark juxtaposition.

Shadows and light. Heritage and horizon.

The framed images, though, extend much further than simple soot-streaked nostalgia.

Based on the footprint of the former Hawthorn complex, where hefting miners stirred and huge conveyors whirred, the Murton-based flexible solar film maker is leading a clean dawn from black gold foundations.

“Our mission is to generate clean energy from the sun on any surface, anywhere in the world,” says chief executive Neil Spann, the

vision amplified by a huge kaleidoscopic graffiti cityscape sweeping across a passing internal wall.

He adds: “We are pioneering game-changing technology; we are the only company in the world doing this.”

The step-change, just like the firm’s base on Jade Business Park, is rooted in East Durham.

When Seaham native, Oxford University physicist and company founder Dr John Topping explored applying the same vacuum coating techniques used to retain freshness inside crisp packets and sandwich wedges to solar modules, it marked not just the genesis of Power Roll but a radical new approach to manufacturing across the photovoltaic sector.

Neil says: “John developed an expertise in roll-to-roll vacuum coating, which uses a high-speed, low-cost manufacturing process.

“It led him to look at adapting the process to make low-cost solar film.

“It was a simple – yet brilliant – idea, and backed by our director Ian McLeod and former chair Drew Johnson, it paved the way for us to develop a new way of making solar power affordable and accessible to all.”

That inclusiveness, says Neil, is predicated upon the pliability of its film, the paucity of environmentally-damaging materials and the potential of perovskite ink in its technology.

He says: “A standard silicon solar panel is heavy and typically features a sandwich-style design with photoactive material fitted inside electrodes.

“However, they require a lot of carbon to make and many are produced using the rare earth material indium tin oxide.

“We’ve turned the traditional solar panel ‘sandwich’ on its side, to form microgrooves that look like a channel.

“Using processes from the packaging and holographic industry, we create micro-metre wide solar cells and have entirely eliminated indium tin oxide.

“We also use perovskite; many companies globally are working on perovskite solar, but we are the only one using microstructures to create perovskite solar cells.”

And the opportunities provided by such innovation, says Neil, are multifarious.

He says: “Our cells are less likely to be affected by dust and bird droppings than standard silicon solar panels because they are smaller and electrically isolated, and our microgrooves perform better at different angles too.”

“Silicon modules are typically angled at around 35 degrees and South East-orientated, but their performance changes markedly when fitted vertically or laid flat.

“Our microgrooves work across a wider range of angles, opening up the building envelope.

“Crucially, the sun can also get into the bottom of the groove, which means a single cell can generate energy almost equally on both sides.

“That bifaciality is completely unique and helps catch light bouncing off the ground too.”

With such a distinctive offer, Neil says Power Roll – which employs about 30 staff – is primed to play a central role in meeting rising global energy needs, specifically in the spaces beyond the large solar farms and commercial rooftops already dominated by Far East manufacturers.

Neil says: “One in four commercial buildings globally, such as factories, schools and hospitals, aren’t suitable for silicon solar because of weight restrictions, roof shapes or partial shading from things like chimneys.



“That retrofit market represents a really strong opportunity – a study shows it could make up as much as 12 billion square metres of roof space globally.

“We’re also well placed to add solar film to the side of buildings, and our technology could help replace diesel generators by powering water pumps in the agrivoltaics market.

“It has great potential to be used on car ports and across off-grid solutions like pop-up solar panel tents too, helping power refrigeration needs, phone charging and internet use in remote villages.”

To reach such a stage has required time and no little capital.

The firm has raised £35 million from supporters including family office funds, Innovate UK and Newcastle and Durham-based private equity and venture capital firm Maven Capital Partners.

The latter has provided multi-million-pound support over a number of years through flagship financial vehicles including the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II, Business Durham’s Finance Durham Fund and the North East Development Capital Fund.

And with such backing, Neil says Power Roll is ready to unfurl a blueprint focused on creating a distributed manufacturing model from its North East heartland to the seven continents.

Neil says: “Maven has been a really positive supporter, with its capital allowing us to fund research and development, build products and protect our intellectual property.

“With those foundations, our ambition is to have a North East factory making film for the UK

market that will springboard to global plants where partners make and distribute solar film in their chosen geographies.”

He adds: “We are at the next inflection point.

“We’re coming out of the development stage, getting the film into the world where it belongs and seeing it create the electricity that is needed.

“The next two years are going to be very exciting.”



#### **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.**



**MOVING  
TO  
A  
NEW  
LEVEL**



As an independent games studio and publisher helping deliver some of the world's largest titles, Double Eleven knows all about unlocking new missions. It too, though, is charting a new course to success. Having appointed co-chief executives Kimberley Turner and Mark South late last year, the Middlesbrough-based operator is rolling out a blueprint to reaffirm its position at the pinnacle of the global gaming pyramid. Here, Colin Young speaks to Kimberley and Mark to learn more about the company's foundations, its growth plans and how it will continue satisfying gamers' appetites for challenge across the globe.

If you've visited Middlesbrough recently, then chances are you'll have seen Double Eleven's grand headquarters.

Also known as the Boho X building, it towers over the town's Boho Zone development.

And it includes a new addition to Teesside's skyline – a striking Egyptian symbol, known as the Eye of Horus, which has been carefully chosen to keep a watchful eye and offer protection, health and prosperity over all its surveys.

Inside the building, every centimetre of every floor has been meticulously considered to create a workspace like no other.

Six storeys high, the 70,000 sq ft studio has been built with creativity and wellbeing at its heart.

There is a gamers' paradise with nearly 10,000 plants and advanced air and water filtration.

There is a subsidised ground floor market hall with a 24/7 gym, rooftop terrace and a 200-seater auditorium and classroom, the latter planned to support community initiatives and local youngsters on their career journeys.

Most of Double Eleven's UK team has been based here since March 2024.

A further 80 staff are based out of the company's growing Kuala Lumpur studio.

"This place is close to my heart," says co-chief executive Mark South, who led on the development plans for its Middlesbrough headquarters.

He adds: "We spent about three years designing the fit-out; it was all-consuming, but so worthwhile.

"We are building for the future, and our ambition was always to build a workplace experience for our people that was second-to-none.

"I remember the first time I got to come into the building when it was finished, and it was a real moment.

"I almost didn't want to leave," says Mark, who was appointed to his present role alongside Kimberley Turner late last year after founder – and Kimberley's brother – Lee Hutchinson stepped up to fulfil the role of chair at Double Eleven parent company Pneuma Group in its full capacity.

Having outgrown its first offices in the same area, Double Eleven was looking across the entire region for a new home before then Middlesbrough mayor Andy Preston intervened.

Co-chief executive Kimberley says: "Over time in our original Boho One offices, we'd moved into one room, then taken another and another and another.

"Whenever anything became free, we took it.

"We had most of the building and one at the

back of here too, but it was never going to be enough."

Mark adds: "We always wanted to be in Teesside, it was part of our journey from the start through our connection with Teesside University.

"But there was nothing that matched our growing needs or long-term vision.

"We also didn't really want to ask our people to commute.

"And then Andy came along and said, 'we're creating this building – it could be right for you.'

"He made the introductions and wanted to help us find an office here," says Canada-raised founding chief operating officer Mark, who undertook postgraduate studies at Durham University.

He adds: "We did a good deal, it was ours before it was built and we committed a six-figure investment to transform what was an empty shell into a new Teesside landmark – a space which exemplifies our continued investment in our people and culture."

Kimberley, the firm's former chief financial officer and commercial director, says: "If we were going to do it, like everything we do, we had to do it properly.

"We were never going to do half a job. That's not the Double Eleven way.

"Moving into this building was a really big spade in the ground moment for us."

You can see Double Eleven's original offices in Boho One from Kimberley and Mark's fifth-floor office. In fact, you can see most of Teesside and beyond.

Today, it is a multi-million-pound business, but it began in a humble Durham bedroom.

Kimberley and brother Lee were regular gamers as youngsters in Belmont, on the outskirts of Durham City.

Lee developed his passion at Teesside University, turned it into good jobs in the industry, earned some money and set up his own company, which turned over £50 million last year.

"My mam always told Lee he should get a role in a more conventional industry," says Kimberley.

"He proved her wrong."

Double Eleven goes beyond commercial success, though, with its achievements underpinned by a strong sense of purpose.

Kimberley says: "We always wanted to create an environment which allowed people to follow their dreams and deliver their passion in making great games without having to sacrifice time spent with family and friends, or having to relocate to a major city – like Lee had to at the beginning.

# DOUBLE



“A good work/life balance wasn’t something you typically saw in the games industry, and we were determined to do things differently.”

Lee founded Double Eleven in 2009, taking up residence in Middlesbrough a year later and initially asked his chartered accountant sister to run the books in her spare time before officially joining the company from Hargreaves Services.

Since those early days, the company has grown from a small independent studio into an internationally-respected developer and publisher, which partners with the likes of Rockstar Games, Mojang Studios, Bethesda Game Studios and Obsidian Entertainment to re-imagine, re-create and re-think renowned titles for console, PC and mobile users.

It supports and maintains vast, complex multi-player games, like Fallout 76, as a core co-development partner, contributing significantly to new expansions, seasons and technical updates.

It manages the entire live service for Rust Console Edition, rolling out new content and nurturing a vast community of hundreds of thousands of players across the world.

Furthermore, it has helped bring massive franchises to new platforms, including the successful porting of the original Red Dead Redemption to Xbox Series X|S, PS5 and Switch 2 in collaboration with Rockstar Games, and the launch of titles like RimWorld Console Edition and Grounded on various platforms.

Kimberley says: “We moved to Middlesbrough in 2010; it was me, Lee, another programmer and an IT guy.

“We also had a couple of people that worked remotely from Leeds.

“The plan was just to be a video games developer and work on some good games.

“I think we surpassed that quite a long time ago.

“We started with a director’s loan and have gone through three significant stages of growth, where we’ve either adapted or changed shape.

“That has cemented the size of the company and the revenue we generate.

“When we started, if we got some work, we’d do the job, finish the job, hand it back and then be looking for the next job.

“However, the landscape is now very different.”

Kimberley adds: “The way video games are built and played has changed – they go on forever.

“There is no end to a lot of them.

“We’ve built teams who are still working on games they were working on in 2018.

“We’re on a different path now.





**“PEOPLE COME  
TO US BECAUSE WE  
HOLD OURSELVES  
TO THE HIGHEST  
STANDARDS:  
THERE IS NO  
SHORTCUT TO  
SUCCESS – YOU  
HAVE TO DO A  
GOOD JOB.  
AND THAT IS  
WHAT WE DO”**

Kimberley Turner

Mark South

# “WE HAVE A GREAT PORTFOLIO OF KICK-ASS TITLES AND IPs THAT HAVE PRIME SERIES ATTACHED TO THEM”

“We have spent 16 years quietly committed to delivering excellence for our partners, which has earned us the reputation we carry today.

“Over the years, we have continued to secure big games, big titles, big IPs that exist in the world, and we get to work on all of that in Middlesbrough, as well as our studio in Kuala Lumpur.

“We want to do more, and we’re putting all our efforts into building on what we’ve already created.”

Mark adds: “The trust our partners place in us hasn’t been earned overnight, and we are never complacent when it comes to the value of those relationships.

“We evolve with their needs while growing our teams as new work comes in.

“Quality, consistency and continuous reflection is central to the strength of our partnerships and the long-term health of our business.”

Central to all of Double Eleven’s successes and achievements, says Kimberley, is an unrelenting confidence that continues to drive it forward.

She says: “We’ve always believed we would find success.

“We’ve worked extremely hard, always made the right decisions together, always tried to look after people and never made decisions that have put jobs at risk.

“It has been a wonderful journey, and there is so much more to come.

“It has definitely surpassed everybody’s expectations.

“Even Lee, with his beautiful mind, could never have imagined we’d be where we are.

“We have a great portfolio of kick-ass titles and IPs that have prime series attached to them; I still have to pinch myself sometimes that this is

where we are today.

“These big IPs are why I feel so grateful to be where we are; everything we did from the beginning led to the next big thing and the next big thing.

“Having so many amazing titles in our armoury is what is keeping us in a strong position.”

And with those new games comes a new chapter for Double Eleven.

Mark says: “We’re not immune to what is happening in the industry; many companies have closed studios, but we’ve weathered the storm really well.

“We should be really proud of that.

“We’ve always taken a long-term view, especially with respect to risk, and that has put us in good stead.

“Our structures are the strongest we’ve ever had.

“But we’re never complacent: there is always more to do.

“We have some really talented people at senior leadership and product direction level; we have heavyweight talent in the business.”

He adds: “Our goal was always to take on work and over-deliver.

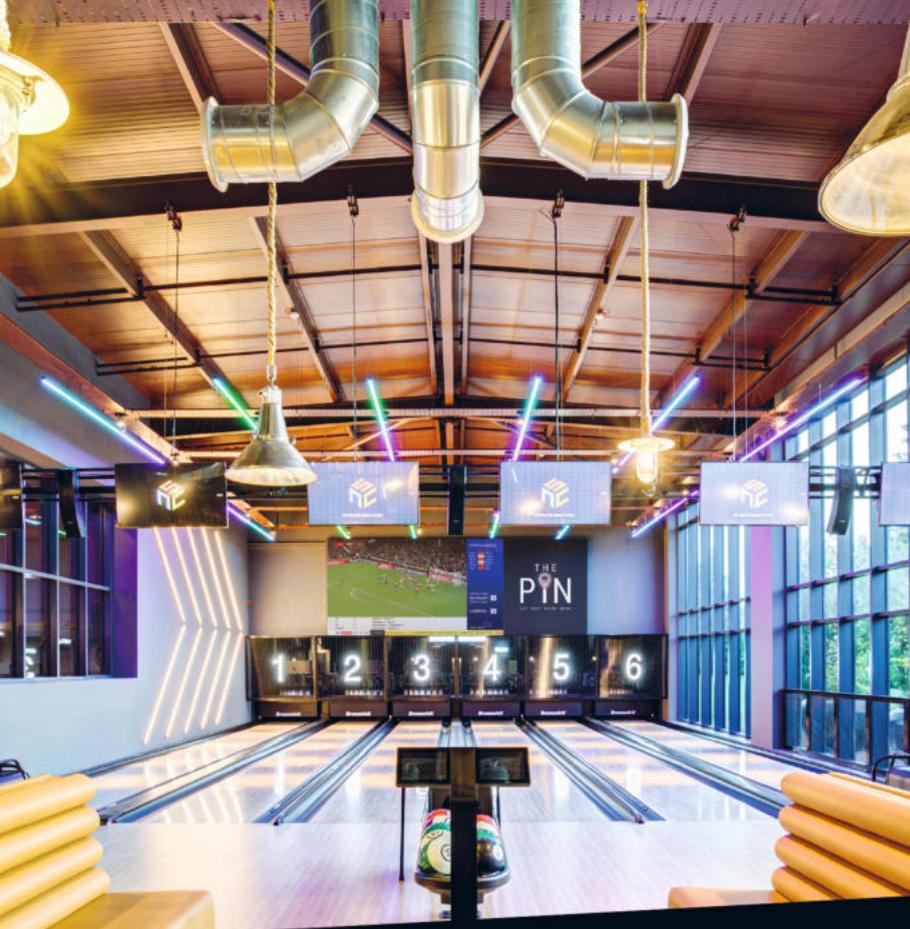
“And people continue to come to us because we hold ourselves to the highest of standards, and our partners entrust us to deliver their vision.

“That trust is something we hold dear.

“We constantly seek excellence in our delivery and focus on building long-term relationships that make some of the best games in the world.

“There is no shortcut to success.

“You have to do a good job – and that is what we do.”



# THE PIN

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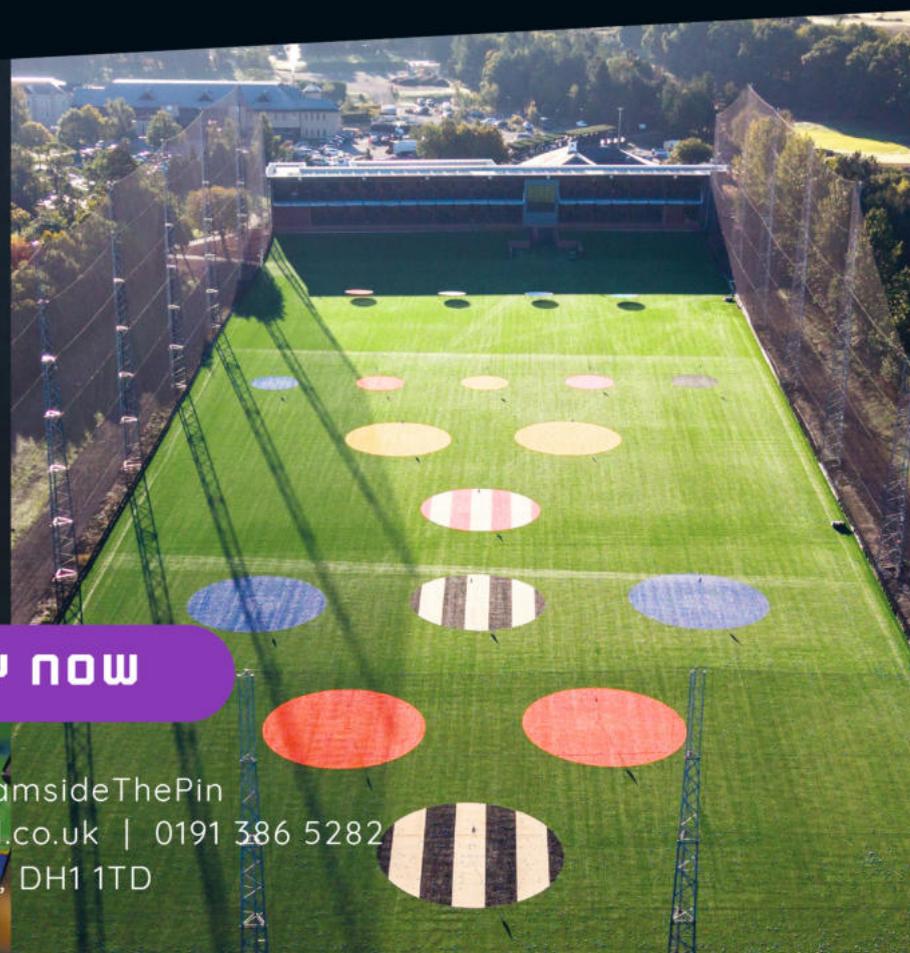
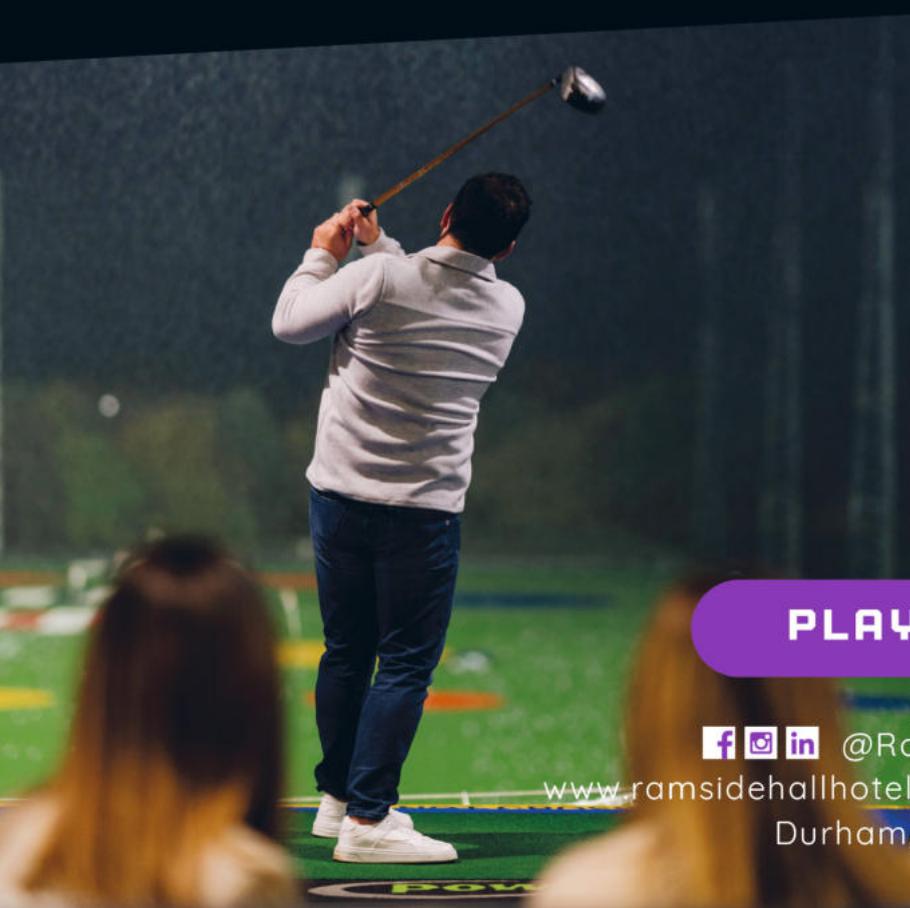
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# Stronger together

## Ward Hadaway

www.wardhadaway.com

LinkedIn: Ward Hadaway

**When Ward Hadaway merged with Teesside law firm The Endeavour Partnership, it created one of the largest independent law firms in the North East. And the mutual benefits were immediately clear. Here, more than six months on, Simon Rushworth heads to Stockton to catch up with the heads of the firm's Newcastle and Teesside offices, and is met with a dynamic team that is stronger together.**

From Teesside. In Teesside. For Teesside.

Lee Bramley still takes great pride in the catch-all tagline that he and colleagues coined ahead of last year's Teesside Charity Ball.

No wonder.

Spend time in the company of the executive partner of Ward Hadaway's new Teesside office and it's difficult to picture a more passionate advocate for a region on the rise.

A lifelong supporter of Middlesbrough Football Club and a proactive pillar of the local business community, Lee's commitment to the place he calls home is unwavering.

Nevertheless, his is not an insular outlook.

Far from it.

As far as Lee's concerned, a longstanding love for Teesside and an appreciation of the wider North East's influence and potential are, by no means, mutually exclusive.

It's why the decision to merge The Endeavour Partnership with Ward Hadaway was the obvious move.

"We formed a 'best friend' relationship long before we made the partnership official," says Lee, reflecting on the groundbreaking deal between the two legal firms that was confirmed last July.

He adds: "Endeavour and Ward Hadaway got to know each other for a couple of years before the merger was agreed, and it was the perfect dry run.

"There were positive meetings between partners and we worked on successful projects together.

"It quickly became clear there was a close cultural fit.

"We shared the same values, the same vision and the same ambition.

**"We formed a 'best friend' relationship long before we made the partnership official"**

"Suddenly Endeavour, as was, could offer a broader range of practice areas and access extended networks and opportunities."



Pictures: Jamie Haslam

Lee Bramley, executive partner of Ward Hadaway's Teesside office



Nick Gholkar, executive partner of Ward Hadaway's Newcastle office

Ward Hadaway, meanwhile, was able to lay down tangible, visible roots in a region that always felt like the next natural fit for a firm with bases in Newcastle, Leeds, Manchester and Birmingham.

“We really liked the business of Endeavour, their people and the way in which they did things,” says Nick Gholkar, executive partner of Ward Hadaway’s Newcastle office.

He says: “We’d admired them from afar, and admired them when we worked together.

“As part of our growth plans – and to tap into the investment and the deals that are happening on Teesside right now – we were looking for the right opportunity in this part of the world.

“We wanted to find a firm with an established track record that was trusted by the people of Teesside.

“Trust and reputation aren’t earned overnight – you can’t just stick a badge on the door and expect people to walk right in.

“By joining together with Lee and his team, we gained instant impact and credibility, and we were able to start key conversations more quickly.

“It was important to Ward Hadaway that we partnered with a well-established Teesside firm that shared the same ethos, the same drive and the same ambition.”

Nick and Lee clearly get along.

Sat alongside each other at Ward Hadaway’s Teesdale Business Park base, a stone’s throw from Stockton town centre, two kindred spirits are more like friends than colleagues – finishing one another’s sentences and pre-empting key points and shared opinions.

Talk frequently turns to family time (both men are busy fathers); downtime (Nick likes to run and Lee’s new passion is padel); and portrait time (neither is looking forward to their N magazine photoshoot).

“I’ve met more than 100 people at Ward Hadaway now, and I can honestly say I like them all,” says Lee.

“Ask me how I feel about the merger now, and I’d do it all again.

“That’s got to be a good sign.”

Both Nick and Lee agree a forward-thinking partnership between two of the North East’s leading law firms mirrors a brave new era

of collaboration within a region historically reluctant to pool its considerable resources.

Nick, who also sits as deputy chair of the property and development member organisation Developing Consensus, says: “If you look at the North East Combined Authority and the Tees Valley Combined Authority, and the collaborative approach they take, that has to be the way forward.

**“Trust and reputation aren’t earned overnight – you can’t just stick a badge on the door and expect people to walk right in”**

Lee Bramley, executive partner of Ward Hadaway's Teesside office, left, with Nick Gholkar, executive partner of the firm's Newcastle office



“As a region, we’re much stronger when we do things collectively and when we work for the wider benefit of the North East.

“There are so many opportunities for investment in our places and in our people if we can find ways of working together.”

Lee points to two compelling examples of how Endeavour’s decision to strengthen ties with Ward Hadaway has paid off.

He says: “We’re in a position to grow, adapt and offer new and existing clients a greater range of core services and a greater level of expertise.

“I could give you plenty of examples of how the merger has worked in our favour.

## “When we were looking at a merger, we wanted a partner who shared our values and Endeavour ticked every box”

“For example, we had a trainee lawyer who wanted to be a banking lawyer.

“Endeavour didn’t do banking because we just didn’t have enough work, but Ward Hadaway has a banking team.

“That lawyer now works on Teesside as a banking lawyer for Ward Hadaway.

“Without the merger, he’d have left.

“That would have been a job lost, a career lost and a talented individual lost to Teesside.

“We’ve also just announced the appointment of the first construction lawyer to work out of this office.

“That’s possible because Ward Hadaway already boasts a strong construction team that’s in a position to integrate a Teesside-based member.

“So we are saving – and creating – jobs for Teesside.”

Nick adds: “A few years ago, we did some work to drill down on Ward Hadaway’s values and we came up with three key words: straightforward, respectful and ambitious.

“I see the work Lee and the team at our Teesside office are doing, and our values are visible day in, day out.

“When we were looking at a merger, we wanted a partner who shared our values and Endeavour ticked every box.

“Our Teesside office is a fantastic example

of Ward Hadaway reinforcing its reputation regionwide.

“As a result of this union, between our Newcastle and Teesside offices we now have more than 400 people based in the North East.

“This scale and breadth enables our people to build fulfilling careers, while remaining in this great region.

“Meanwhile, whatever their professional and personal needs, our clients can be assured of an exceptional legal service on their doorstep.”



### Ward Hadaway

To learn more about Ward Hadaway, its merger with The Endeavour Partnership and how the move has significantly broadened its market offer, visit the website at the top of this article.



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# Partners in unlocking growth

## Scaleup North East

[www.scaleupnortheast.co.uk](http://www.scaleupnortheast.co.uk)

LinkedIn: RTC North



### 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](http://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.

Scaling a business is rarely straightforward. For hundreds of founders, the Scaleup North East programme, delivered by RTC North, has provided the experience, insight and perspective needed to overcome barriers and drive sustainable growth. Here, programme manager Graham Stafford and partners Craig Huntingdon and Tony Brooks speak to Peter Anderson about its impact and how its tailored, hands-on support helps business leaders challenge assumptions, shift mindsets and realise what is truly possible.

Built on the former Newcastle Brown Ale brewery site, the Helix development stands as one of the region's most visible statements of reinvention – a place where industrial heritage has given way to research, enterprise and new possibility.

At its heart stands a building that immediately commands attention.

With its distinctive diagrid façade and angular glass frontage, The Catalyst has emerged as the district's showcase for innovation.

It is a building conceived to spark collaboration, accelerate ambition and turn potential into progress.

Rather fittingly, it is also home to one of RTC North's two regional offices.

Much like the building that houses it, the organisation exists to catalyse change,



Pictured, from left to right, are Graham Stafford, Tony Brooks and Craig Huntingdon

providing a platform to help high-growth businesses reach their next stage.

Through its delivery of the Scaleup North East programme, RTC North connects founders with partners who have lived the journey themselves – entrepreneurs who built companies from scratch, scaled them through difficult inflection points and, in many cases, exited successfully.

The result is tailored, one-to-one support that diagnoses barriers to growth, challenges assumptions and helps companies leap to the next level.

Scaleup North East was established more than seven years ago to increase the density of firms across the region capable of expanding their own turnover and workforce, while strengthening the wider economy around them.

Graham Stafford, programme manager, says: "Scale-ups are a small percentage of the SME community, but they drive a huge amount of job creation and economic momentum.

"The more of them you have, the stronger the region becomes.

"The North East is the fastest growing region in the country in terms of scale-up density.

"You'd like to think that's at least in part down to the seven years we've been delivering this programme."

For Graham, Scaleup North East's impact reaches far beyond individual balance sheets.

He says: "Businesses support communities – it's not just about pounds and pence.

"Businesses employ people, train people and give people purpose."

By helping firms reach and sustain high-growth status, the programme creates a wider ripple effect across the regional economy.

Graham adds: “Scaleup North East isn’t just about gradually making a business – or even the economy – bigger.

“It’s about equipping them to operate successfully at a higher level.”

The programme’s longevity and success are rooted in the strength and expertise of its partners Craig Huntingdon, Tony Brooks, Steve Bell and Mark Harrison.

Graham says: “The people who deliver Scaleup have been there and done it.

“They’ve built businesses, grown them, got the T-shirt and the scars to prove it.

“It is a very practical programme that is grounded in real-world experience.”

And that practicality matters, says Graham, because growth is rarely smooth.

He adds: “Scaling isn’t linear; it happens in steps.

“Moving from self-employment to employing a team demands one mindset; transitioning from a £7 million business to a £15 million operation demands another entirely.

“You can be brilliant at running a business at one level, but the leap to the next stage requires different skills and structures, and a new way of thinking too.”

And this is where the acumen and experience of partners such as Craig and Tony comes to the fore.

Craig, who globally scaled a wall covering manufacturer following a management buyout in his early 20s before going on to become a trading director at Aldi, says much of the work begins with unpicking assumptions.

He says: “Very often, when we start working with a business, they’ve bumped up against a barrier.

“Part of our job is to work out what it is.

“Quite often, it’s not what the business thinks it is – they’re looking at the symptom, rather than the cause.”

That diagnostic phase is often the most important – and the most revealing – in the programme’s support provision.

And rather than forcing companies through a prescribed model, the programme adapts to the business in front of it.

Craig adds: “It could be consulting, coaching or mentoring.

“Sometimes, it’s helping shape a commercial strategy or being that external sounding board before a senior meeting.



“I’m not aware of another programme with that level of flexibility.”

Crucially, the support offered is sector agnostic.

Between them, the partners have worked with scores of firms, from handbag makers and artisan food producers to swimming lesson providers, advanced manufacturers, packaging specialists and engineering businesses.

Tony, who grew a two-person engineering firm into a multi-million-pound operation, says building trust is fundamental.

He says: “Our relationship is one-to-one with the owner or senior leader – it’s confidential.

“They need to be able to say, ‘I’m struggling with this’ or ‘I’ve never done this before’.”

Often, Tony adds, the role is less about providing answers and more about providing accountability.

He says: “Sometimes, they just need someone to challenge them, to sense-check what they’re doing and to make sure they follow through on what they said they were going to do.”

For both partners, a recurring theme in the North East is changing mindsets and boosting confidence.

Craig says: “There are brilliant businesses here, but there is often a preference to keep it local and keep it safe.

“Businesses need to believe they can operate on a national or international stage.

“Once you build that confidence, scaling becomes much easier.”

Looking ahead, the programme’s success will continue to be measured in tangible outcomes

– jobs created, roles safeguarded and growth delivered – but, as Graham makes clear, the impact will keep on running deeper.

He says: “We report on numbers, but the real measure is the difference the programme makes to the businesses we support.

“That’s what public investment is meant to achieve.”

For Tony, the motivation has only intensified over time.

He adds: “I love being part of the programme.

“It’s about giving back and helping the region grow.

“I wish I’d had something like this when I was growing my own business.

“If we can help people make better decisions, think bigger and build something stronger in the North East, then that is success.”



### 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](http://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.

# North East strengthens its place in the global space race

## Business Durham

[www.businessdurham.co.uk](http://www.businessdurham.co.uk)

[www.spacenortheastengland.com](http://www.spacenortheastengland.com)

LinkedIn: Business Durham

**From County Durham to Florida's Space Coast, the North East is playing an increasingly important role in the global space sector. Here, Business Durham looks at recent trade missions on either side of the Atlantic, the work of Space North East England and major investments that leave the region poised to boldly go to new frontiers.**

From the launchpads of Florida's Space Coast to leading facilities across the North East of England, international collaboration is helping accelerate growth in the region's space sector.

A recent mission to the US – followed by a return visit from partners in Florida – has strengthened transatlantic relationships and set the stage for the North East Space Conference 2026 in June.

Earlier this year, experts, entrepreneurs, innovators and scientists representing Space North East England travelled to Orlando for Florida Commercial Space Week, flying the flag for a region whose space economy continues to expand in both capability and ambition.

The delegation – which included representatives from Durham, Newcastle and

Northumbria universities alongside North East companies MSP and NEL Technologies – took part in a packed programme of meetings, site visits and events designed to build connections, attract investment and showcase regional strengths.

Led by Space North East England, the visit placed the region's innovators at the heart of one of the world's most dynamic space ecosystems.

Beginning at the University of Central Florida, discussions explored collaboration across industry, academia and innovation, reflecting the same partnership-driven approach that underpins the North East's growing cluster.

The delegation then travelled to Florida's renowned Space Coast, meeting organisations including Space Florida to explore opportunities for collaboration and market development.

A tour of NASA's Kennedy Space Center provided a powerful reminder of the scale and ambition of the global space industry, with delegates witnessing the Space Launch System rocket on the launchpad as preparations continued for the Artemis II mission – an inspiring moment that underscored the importance of international cooperation in advancing space exploration.

The final days were spent at SpaceCom 2026, where delegates pitched their products and services, connected with potential partners and reinforced the North East's reputation as a centre for innovation across satellite technologies, advanced materials, data analytics and engineering.

Building on the relationships established in the US, the North East recently welcomed colleagues from Space Florida for a return visit.

The visit, led by Space North East England and delivered by Business Durham on behalf of regional partners, showcased the breadth of the region's capabilities across research, innovation and industry.



The programme included stops at 3S Northumbria and Northumbria University, where discussions focused on research and the development of the North East Space Skills and Technology Centre, followed by a tour of the new facility that will enhance the UK's capabilities in satellite testing and space engineering.

## “Led by Space North East England, the visit placed the region’s innovators at the heart of one of the world’s most dynamic space ecosystems”

At NETPark, the delegation met companies from across the Space North East England cluster during a working lunch, hearing first-hand about the innovative technologies and ambitions shaping the region's space sector.

The visit also highlighted Durham University's Space Research Centre and included a tour of the Centre for Advanced Instrumentation, demonstrating world-leading expertise in optics and instrumentation.

The day concluded with a visit to Filtronic's new facility – a strong example of how advanced manufacturing and space capability are scaling in the North East.

International engagement of this kind plays a crucial role in building meaningful partnerships, attracting investment and positioning the region



as a globally connected space cluster.

It also reinforces the message that the North East is open for collaboration, offering world-class research, innovative businesses and a supportive ecosystem for growth.

These connections will come into sharper focus at the North East Space Conference 2026, which will bring together regional, national and international delegates to explore opportunities across the space economy.

The event will provide a platform to share insight, spark new partnerships and showcase the region's strengths, while continuing conversations started in Florida and the North East.

As the space sector continues to evolve at pace, the journey from Florida to the North East – and back again – highlights the power of collaboration in driving innovation and unlocking new opportunities.

With global partnerships deepening and excitement building ahead of June, the region is well positioned to turn international engagement into lasting impact, ensuring the North East remains firmly on the map as a destination for space innovation.



**Business Durham**  
To find out more about Business Durham and how it could support your organisation, visit the website at the top of this article.

To learn more about Space North East England, visit [www.spacenortheastengland.com](http://www.spacenortheastengland.com)

# Shaping a stronger skills landscape

The skills landscape remains dogged by fragmentation, with commercial organisations having long highlighted mismatches between education, careers advice and employer needs. Against the backdrop of the Government's recent post-16 education and skills white paper – and March's National Careers Week and British Science Week that shone a spotlight on future talent – how do you view the UK's skills environment? Where are existing measures working, and where does action need to be taken to better align time in the classroom with the realities of modern industry?

## Less box-ticking and more real work



**Andy Robson**  
Managing director  
A Squared Engineering

From where I sit in maritime and offshore engineering, the UK skills environment isn't moving in the right direction fast enough and we need a shake-up.

We're trying to deliver increasingly complex work – offshore wind and port infrastructure, vessel modifications, heavy lifts, structural assessments and digital engineering – using advanced simulation.

But the pipeline of young people coming into STEM and into traditional industries like ours isn't keeping pace.

We already have to pull certain skills from overseas to resource projects.

If we don't act now, we risk hitting a point where the UK simply can't design and deliver the infrastructure it is planning.

The mismatch isn't just technical content; it's about relevance and visibility too.

Too many young people don't see engineering as being for them, or they don't see it at all.

The industry is still perceived as male-dominated and stuck in the past, and we're not

great at marketing in channels young people actually engage with – careers fairs and well-meaning advice only goes so far.

Engineering has to look like what it really is: tech-led, creative, collaborative and genuinely exciting.

National Careers Week and British Science Week are useful spotlights, but only if employers show up with real stories, role models and practical routes that can be explored.

The most effective initiatives are the ones that put students into real workplaces.

T Levels are a strong example.

As part of the course, students complete a 45-day placement in a real business, which is enough time for them to contribute meaningfully and feel they belong.

Employers can access equipment via the employer support fund if they host students, but many either don't know it exists or assume placements are a hassle.

At A Squared Engineering, we take T Level students and host post-GCSE pupils, and we also do outreach for primary age children.

It's refreshing talking to young people; they bring new ideas and perspectives, and we treat them as valued team members from day one.

The Government's post-16 education and skills white paper recognises the need to close

skills gaps and align provision with economic demand.

But the important step is delivery: we need simpler pathways, stronger employer-education partnerships and a more modern, joined-up way of connecting the right people to the right opportunities.

If we really want to encourage new talent into industry, we need less box-ticking and far more real exposure, real role models and real work.





**Professor Mark Simpson**  
Deputy vice-chancellor;  
Vice-chancellor and chief  
executive designate  
Teesside University

## A joined-up approach to success

The debate surrounding the UK's skills landscape is not new, but it has rarely felt more urgent.

For too long, employers have highlighted a persistent mismatch between what education provides and what industry requires.

The challenge is not a lack of talent, ambition or opportunity. It is fragmentation.

Pathways to employment can be disconnected, with sectors evolving at a pace the traditional education model was never designed to match.

At Teesside University, we have been reshaping our approach for several years to address this disconnect head-on.

Central to that effort is our Education 4.0 framework, which reimagines teaching and learning for a world shaped by artificial intelligence, automation and continuous change.

This initiative places technology at the heart of learning, with students developing adaptability, digital fluency and complex problem-solving skills that will define the future workforce no matter the sector.

Industry repeatedly tells us technical knowledge alone is no longer enough.

Employers want graduates who can collaborate and communicate to make an immediate impact in the workplace.

To meet that need, we place real emphasis on transferable core skills, embedding enterprise and innovation across our programmes.

Our marketing clinic, law clinic and similar applied learning environments give students direct experience of working with real clients, building confidence and capability long before they enter full-time employment.

But universities cannot act in isolation.

The skills system works best when schools, colleges, higher education and employers operate as partners, rather than in silos.

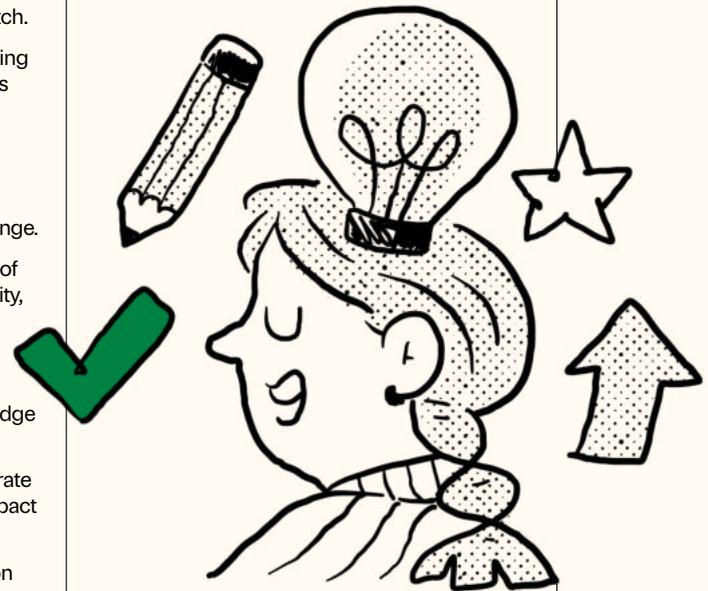
That principle underpins our Teesside University College Partnership, which brings together further education providers across the region to create a seamless, high-quality pathway from post-16 study into higher level skills.

Our involvement in Universities for North East England strengthens this ecosystem further, enabling the region's five higher education institutions to collaborate with employers on shared skills priorities and ensure learners gain

the competencies industry genuinely needs.

Crucially, a truly effective skills system must also be inclusive.

At Teesside University, where 85 per cent of our learners experience some form of barrier to accessing, succeeding in or progressing from university, we are committed to ensuring people from every background can access and thrive within higher education.



To this end, we have developed a comprehensive plan with interventions including bursaries and scholarships, schools outreach and specialist support for students, to ensure all learners can reach their potential.

Social mobility can never be an addendum to the skills conversation; it is at its heart.

A modern economy cannot prosper if whole communities are left behind.

The UK's skills environment is improving, but meaningful progress demands sustained collaboration, responsive policy and a shared willingness to challenge outdated assumptions.

By embracing innovation, strengthening partnerships and keeping learners at the centre, we can build a system that not only meets today's needs but anticipates tomorrow's; creating opportunity, driving productivity and ensuring our region continues to thrive.



Join the discussion

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



# Building from the ground up

## Hill Dickinson

www.hilldickinson.com

LinkedIn: Hill Dickinson

Inside Newcastle's Portland House, directly opposite the city's Laing Art Gallery, leading international commercial law firm Hill Dickinson is laying the foundations for long-term success in the North East. Here, the firm tells N magazine about its expansion into the region, its growing team and its ambitious outlook for the future.



Tom Pollard, Hill Dickinson partner and head of corporate North East

Hill Dickinson, which operates across the UK and internationally, opened its Newcastle office in 2022 with a seven-strong health team.

Since then, its growth trajectory has risen rapidly.

Today, with a headcount approaching 30, the office has broadened its offering significantly, extending into additional service areas and becoming a strategically important part of Hill Dickinson's national footprint.

A pivotal moment in that evolution came last May with the establishment of a new corporate team.

Led by partner Tom Pollard and supported by legal director Liam Stubbs and senior associate Nicole Axon, the team brought together individuals with deep regional experience and an established working relationship, having worked together, as a team, for many years.

The team – which has been further strengthened by the appointment of paralegal Keje Gilgiler – joined Hill Dickinson with a clear purpose: to build upon the team's existing reputation and continue to deliver the best possible legal advice and experience, which has been enhanced by the scale, networks and resources of an international law firm.

That ambition is already taking hold.

The team is well known within the business, investor and professional communities across the North East and beyond, advising on a wide variety of regional, national and international transactions since their arrival in May last year.

Its client base reflects the strength and diversity of the North East's economy, spanning ambitious owner-managed businesses, private equity funds, family offices, management teams and high-net-worth investors.

For Tom, the opportunity to establish and grow a corporate team in the North East, as well as



Pictured, from left to right, are Tom Pollard, Hill Dickinson partner and head of corporate North East; Kele Gligler, paralegal, corporate; Liam Stubbs, legal director, corporate; and Nicole Axon, senior associate, corporate

expand the Newcastle office to provide a wide range of legal services locally to the business and investor community, was one of the main attractions of joining Hill Dickinson.

The firm's North East ambition also fully aligns with the direction of its national business services group, which has expanded in recent years through targeted lateral hires and investment in sector specific expertise.

The growth of the wider business services group in the North East is moving at pace, with the recent appointment of Paul Scope to lead the region's employment team set to be complemented by further well-known, respected and experienced lateral hires in the coming months.

The team is clear about the North East's unique appeal: it is home to a vibrant, creative and resilient business and investor community, and is a place where longstanding entrepreneurial spirit meets renewed investor interest.

It is also a region where ambition is not just welcomed but expected, and where clients value advisers who combine local understanding with a global outlook.

Hill Dickinson, with its international network and growing regional presence, sees itself as well positioned to meet that need.

The Newcastle office's growth sits within a wider story: Hill Dickinson's commitment to regional expansion through strategic investment.

The firm has made similar moves across the UK, where targeted hiring has helped establish highly successful teams capable of competing in mature markets.

The Newcastle office was established with that same playbook in mind: recruit experienced senior lawyers, build a multi-disciplinary offering, embed the firm into the local market and deliver a service that feels both regionally attuned and globally informed.

Hill Dickinson aims to play its part in reshaping the North East's professional landscape, offering clients a genuine alternative in a market long dominated by established regional players, with a firm that's rooted in the North East but with international reach and expertise.

The firm's corporate team brings a sense of shared mission, determination and collective experience shaped over many years working together.

Looking ahead, Hill Dickinson's vision for the North East is undeniably ambitious.

The firm sees long-term potential for the region, given the continually evolving, buoyant and ambitious economic landscape.

The Newcastle office's growth – both in headcount and service breadth – is already mirroring the trajectory seen in other regional bases where Hill Dickinson has invested deeply.

In just a few years, the Newcastle office has moved from a small specialist team to a growing, multi-service base with a standout corporate practice.

With strong leadership, expanding capability and continued investment in senior lateral hires, Hill Dickinson is building from the ground up.

The firm's presence looks set to become an increasingly prominent part of the North East's legal market.

**“The team is known for balancing commercial pragmatism with technical strength and delivering its service in a calm and effective manner – qualities increasingly valued in a fast moving corporate environment”**



**Hill Dickinson**  
To learn more about Hill Dickinson and the legal services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 823 0530.

# Conscious uncoupling – how to part ways with your business

## S&W

www.swgroup.com

LinkedIn: S&W Group

**Selling a business is a big step for an owner, with many potential pitfalls along the way. Accountancy and advisory firm S&W has helped many business owners find their path. Here, following the launch of a dedicated business exit guide, Chris Hird, corporate finance director at the firm's Newcastle office, sits down with N magazine to reveal how early planning, practical preparations and expert valuations are helping owners across the North East achieve better business exits.**



Pictures: Andrew Lowe

When Hollywood pair Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin announced their “conscious uncoupling” back in 2014, the phrase was widely mocked.

But it struck a chord.

The idea that the end of a relationship doesn't have to be chaotic or damaging, and instead can be handled thoughtfully and fairly, with the future in mind, is one that translates well to the world of business exits.

For many business owners, selling up is not just a financial transaction. It's the end point of years – sometimes decades – of hard work, risk and personal investment.

And, as Chris Hird, corporate finance director at accountancy and advisory firm S&W, points out, it is something too many owners start thinking about far too late.

He says: “It often comes as a surprise to people just how much work and preparation goes into selling a business if you want to maximise value.”

With that lack of knowledge in mind, national operator S&W – which has offices in Newcastle's Collingwood Street and Queens Lane – published a business exit guide late last year.

Acting as a step-by-step guide, it provides owners with insight into everything they should be thinking about before they put their company on the market.

Chris says: “The key thing people need to consider is planning. If you want the best outcome, you really need to be thinking three to five years ahead.

“That gives you time to consider tax implications, to make early moves to maximise allowances and to shape the business into something that's attractive to buyers.”

Unsurprisingly, tax is a major consideration in any exit strategy.

Business asset disposal relief currently sits at 14 per cent, rising to 18 per cent on the first £1 million of lifetime gains from April 6, 2026.

Just as important, though, is getting the



business itself ready.

Chris says: “If you want your business to be as profitable as possible, you need to remove unnecessary expenditure and get your house in order ahead of due diligence.

“There are lots of things a buyer is going to look at, and a lot of value in a deal can be lost during that process.

“If there’s a hidden liability, they’ll adjust the price to reflect that.

“Contracts need to be locked in, staffing arrangements need to be clear and any potential issues must be dealt with early.

“That’s how you protect value.”

The S&W business exit guide also addresses a reality many owner-managers are reluctant to face: that they may be too entwined with their own business to walk away.

Chris says: “In reality, if someone wants to retire at 65, they should be making their exit plan at 60, especially where they are an owner-manager holding all the knowledge in their head and managing all the key relationships.

“Buyers are wary of that.”

Chris recommends building a strong senior management team well ahead of any sale.

He says: “It’s a critical step. Without it, as far as the buyer is concerned, that transition away from the owner becomes riskier – and risk depresses value.

“You need to start uncoupling yourself from the business long before you actually exit.”

That is where Chris and the corporate finance team at S&W come in.

They support clients buying and selling businesses, and raising funds to develop them, guiding them through each stage of what can be an emotional and complex process.

He says: “We’ll talk to them about how best to sell, what we think a realistic value for their business is and who might buy it.

“We identify potential buyers, check their appetite and resources, and help structure the sale in the most tax-efficient way.”

From there, the team collates offers and helps the seller decide which one best suits their circumstances.

Chris says: “It’s not always about the headline number.

“If someone is 75, an offer with a five-year deferral probably isn’t right for them. But if a seller is 40 and an offer involves staying on for five years in return for a much better financial outcome, that might be worth serious consideration.”

The S&W corporate finance team supports negotiations, drafts heads of terms and works alongside legal teams through due diligence, helping sellers field questions and deal with issues as they arise.

While based in Newcastle, the team has no geographical limits.

It has helped with recent deals completed in East Anglia and Birmingham, with clients spanning Scotland down to the M62 cities.

Business exits take many forms, from management buyouts, buy-ins, private equity backing and passing a business to the next generation, with S&W’s team there to support every kind.

Chris adds: “Each route has different dynamics, but it’s ultimately about the same thing: moving a business from one owner to another in the right way.

“Sometimes, it can be about handing on a legacy, and other times it can be about getting the best possible deal and moving on.

“Whatever the aim, our job is to help people achieve it and to make sure that, when the time comes to part ways with their business, they do so consciously, confidently and on their own terms.”



**S&W**

**For more information about S&W and how its expert services could support your business exit plans, visit the website at the top of this article or email [chris.hird@swgroup.com](mailto:chris.hird@swgroup.com)**

**To download S&W’s business exit guide, visit [www.swgroup.com/insights-events/resources/selling-your-business/](http://www.swgroup.com/insights-events/resources/selling-your-business/)**

# NAVIGATING THE GREEN ENERGY TRANSITION

## The North East's role in sustainable change

**In 1866, while living in exile in Guernsey, the French romantic writer Victor Hugo captured the fierce resistance to the advent of steam power. In *Toilers of the Sea*, he wrote: “The savants rejected steamboats as impossible; the priests anathematised them as impious...Fulton was a new incarnation of Lucifer”. It would take much of the nineteenth century for steam to prove its worth, as doubts over reliability, cost and fuel supply lingered. Today, despite Government net-zero targets and policymakers heralding a green energy revolution, similar questions are being asked once again. Here, in the second of an exclusive roundtable series hosted by global marine insurer NorthStandard alongside N magazine publisher NET, regional leaders examine how the maritime sector is navigating the transition to greener energy.**

### **What steps are being taken to enable a safe and commercially viable energy transition – and where can progress be made?**

From the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult in Blyth to the Tyne Clean Energy Park at Port of Tyne and Net Zero Teesside Power at Teesworks, the North East has pinned its colours firmly to the green energy mast.

Against that backdrop, roundtable members outlined the practical steps already being taken to support decarbonisation, as well as the action required to turn intent into delivery.

Kate Kwiatkowska, head of sustainability at Tyneside-headquartered NorthStandard – which provides protection and indemnity cover for one-in-five commercial ocean-going vessels across the globe – said efficiency gains across existing fleets can deliver immediate emission reductions.

She said: “Through initiatives like the Blue Visby Consortium, sailing at more efficient speeds and arriving just in time for berth availability can make a real difference.”

Thomas Wildsmith, head of commercial at the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult, added: “If we can operate more reliably and plan maintenance more intelligently, we can significantly cut offshore hours, costs and emissions over the full life of a project.”

Brendan Hayward, joint managing director at offshore wind engineering firm Osbit, which last year opened a Port of Blyth base, highlighted

how engineering design is already delivering tangible commercial and environmental gains.

He said: “The biggest impact we can have is through the equipment we design and deliver.

“In some cases, we’ve saved around 60 days of vessel time offshore on a single project, which has a huge effect on cost, risk and sustainability.”

Derek Christie, government affairs – Scotland and UK sites representative at Siemens Energy, added: “Customers are asking for reduced vessel time, shorter installation windows and safer operations.

“In offshore wind, particularly floating wind, we’re now seeing solutions that can fundamentally change how projects are delivered.”

Ross Lowrie, head of clean energy and environment at the North East Combined Authority, said: “Success for the North East looks like busy ports, good jobs and vibrant industries – with around 25,000 new green jobs alongside the 25,000 that already exist.

“And those jobs won’t all be offshore wind technicians.

“A green job could be in manufacturing, logistics, fuels or professional services.”

Dr Sarah Green, chief executive at NewcastleGateshead Initiative, added: “The North East has the highest concentration of energy-related companies of any English region, so we start from a position of real strength.

“The task now is making sure that story cuts through nationally and internationally.”



### What operational, regulatory and safety barriers are holding maritime decarbonisation back?

In 2015, when 195 parties, including the US and China, signed the landmark Paris Agreement, decarbonisation appeared an existential necessity.

A decade on, and concerns around cost, competitiveness and energy security – compounded by political volatility and global economic uncertainty – have begun to erode that consensus.

Helen Barden, director of external affairs at NorthStandard, said: “The industry knows it needs to decarbonise, but we still don’t have the right global framework in place to drive that transition.

“Without clear rules from the International Maritime Organization, it becomes very difficult for shipowners to make long-term investment decisions.”

Sophie Pollard, partner at international law firm Hill Dickinson, whose office portfolio includes a Newcastle base, highlighted the switch to alternative fuels.

She said: “Regulation gives shipowners, insurers and investors confidence over which fuels are likely to lead the transition.

“We need regions and governments to invest in infrastructure that allows these fuels to be used at scale.”

Ed Davies, chief strategy officer at NorthStandard, said: “Shipping has adapted before – from sail to coal to diesel – but at each of those points, the economics made sense and the supply was known.

“This time, the technology is still emerging, the supply chains aren’t established and the economics don’t yet drive the transition in the same way.”

Chris Kelsey, public affairs manager at the North East Chamber of Commerce, added: “The elephant in the room is that international shipping emissions don’t sit neatly on national net-zero balance sheets.

“Without that global alignment, it’s very difficult to justify the scale of investment needed in new vessels and fuel infrastructure.”



**“Without clear rules from the International Maritime Organization, it becomes very difficult for shipowners to make long-term investment decisions”**

**Helen Barden**  
NorthStandard director of external affairs

### How do we build the financial and skills capacity needed to make the maritime energy transition commercially viable?

Momentum behind the region’s green energy ambitions was underscored just days before the roundtable, when the signing of the North East Ports Partnership was complemented by a £15 million announcement to deliver green energy training centres in Blyth and Wallsend.

Highlighting skills, Ross said: “We often focus on 16 to 18-year-olds, but we need to be talking to ten-year-olds because the people who will deliver this transition are still in school.”

Thomas said: “One of the biggest opportunities is understanding what roles we’ll need in five to ten years’ time, and working with education providers to build the right skills in the right places.”

Helen emphasised the need to better align risk, finance and insurance with the realities of maritime decarbonisation.

She said: “These new fuels present new risks, and without the right global liability framework in place, it becomes very difficult to price that risk in a way that is commercial and competitive.”

Sophie pointed to wider challenges around perception.

She added: “If we were better at extolling the virtues of working across the maritime sector, we’d attract more people and see greater confidence and investment.”

### What will success look like for the North East by 2030 and 2040?

Kate said: “It’s about having the port infrastructure in place to open up green corridors and seeing net-zero vessels calling in the North East.”

Chris said: “Success is the North East leading the charge in greener maritime, with the region known internationally for clean, sustainable energy, rather than just traditional offshore activity.”

Sarah added: “I want businesses here that have sufficient gravitas to attract talent from anywhere in the world, with the pull and magnetism to inspire real pride in what the region is achieving.”

**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](http://www.bdaily.co.uk)**



# ROUNDTABLE

# Making service the priority

## Jackson Hogg

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**In a competitive market, a firm's quality of standards and reputation often win out over flashy marketing and rhetoric. And choosing to put customer experience at the heart of its operations is specialist recruitment and outsourced HR services provider Jackson Hogg, with a commitment to raising standards and building long-term relationships. Here, Joel Brown, director of talent partnership, tells N magazine how it is striving to deliver world-class levels of service.**

"Customer service is not a department, it's everyone's job."

So argues American business consultant Ken Blanchard in *The One Minute Manager*, the multi-million-copy-selling book that espouses the importance of putting the customer first.

For specialist recruitment and outsourced HR services provider Jackson Hogg, the philosophy isn't just a line in a management textbook.

It's at the very centre of the company's long-term strategy.

Service – for both customers and candidates – is the number one priority across the business, with performance measured on an almost hourly basis.

**"It's about how you treat people; we want to build long-term relationships, rather than hunt for short-term gains for both customers and clients"**

"Exceptional service has always been at the heart of our approach," says Joel Brown, director of talent partnership.

He adds: "But in the last 12 to 18 months, we've made it a non-negotiable priority.

"We're really doubling down and putting it at the centre of our business strategy.

"Our aim isn't just to be good, it's to offer world-class levels of service for every client and every candidate, every time."

Recruitment, as with any professional services sector, can be a crowded and noisy market, with strong competition for customers and candidates.

But with a dedication to customer service, staff at Jackson Hogg's offices in Wallsend, Billingham and Leeds build long-term relationships with clients that are based on trust, consistency and transparency.

Joel says: "We see customer service as our differentiator in the market – the thing that people know us for.

"There's a lot of competition and firms pushing to be seen and heard.

"It's about how you treat people; we want to build long-term relationships, rather than hunt for short-term gains for both customers and clients.

"One thing we've heard repeatedly is that people value honesty over perfection.

"Sometimes we don't have the best news for someone, but we make a point of being open and honest about the outcome and why it reached that point.

"It's about integrity, and it's what people remember about their dealings with us."

To monitor performance, Jackson Hogg has adopted the Net Promoter Score (NPS) as its key measurement of customer and candidate satisfaction.

Its latest score stands at +82, up from +75 when it first started using the metric several years ago, with any score above +70 classed as delivering a world-class level of service.

Joel says: "We are very proud of our score, but it's not just a marketing tool.

"We see it more as a management tool to help us continually reach better levels of service.

"It's all about driving improvement, acting as a feedback loop to do so.

"We want to know what we do well, and how we can do more of it."



Joel Brown, Jackson Hogg director of talent partnership

To carry out accurate and impartial measurements of its performance, the company invested in specialist software Talents Analytics.

It automates feedback survey prompts to clients and candidates after each meaningful interaction with a member of Jackson Hogg's staff, and immediately analyses the results to provide continuous feedback.

Joel says: "Customer feedback is embedded in our operations.

**“One thing we’ve heard repeatedly is that people value honesty over perfection”**

“The data is used to calculate our NPS, offering a quantifiable way to understand how we’re performing.

“It offers us almost real-time proof points of our performance and external feedback, so we’re constantly on top of our performance levels.”

With NPS scores now incentivised within

the business and treated as a performance measure for individual staff, the company is feeding customer service data into its business development and training plans.

Joel says: “It’s easy in recruitment to focus on speed, volume or placement numbers.

“Those metrics matter, of course, but they don’t tell you if someone felt valued.

“When someone feels valued, the long-term partnership becomes stronger.”

For customers and clients, the benefits of Jackson Hogg’s customer-first strategy can be seen through better communication, faster response times and recruitment processes that aim to be personal, rather than transactional.

Candidates and clients are given clear expectations from the outset about timescales and potential outcomes, with the firm’s specialist consultants given accountability for the actions they take.

Joel adds: “Clients tell us they appreciate how closely we work with them, that we don’t ghost them or leave them in the dark.

“These things sound simple but, in a fast-paced industry, those personal updates often don’t happen.

“That’s why we’ve built our reputation around them.”



### Jackson Hogg

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

5 Minutes with

# 5



# MINUTES

**WITH MARK STEPHENSON**

[www.stephenson-mohl.co.uk](http://www.stephenson-mohl.co.uk) | LinkedIn: Stephenson-Mohl Group

## Mark Stephenson is founder and managing director of Newcastle and Westminster-based public affairs consultancy Stephenson-Mohl Group. Here, he tells Steven Hugill more about its work to provide businesses with a louder voice, the impact of strong collaboration and the company's central role within the country's evolving energy landscape.

### Tell us a little about Stephenson-Mohl Group and its overarching mission.

We exist to give businesses a voice, not just so they are heard, but so they are genuinely listened to.

Too often, decisions are made about businesses without them ever being part of the conversation, and our job is to change that.

We help clients influence the political, policy and regulatory processes that shape the markets in which they operate.

We sit in the space between business and government, helping organisations get clarity, influence and the chance to shape decisions that matter to them.

### Strong public consultation is a crucial component in shaping successful projects. How does Stephenson-Mohl Group ensure engagement is positive and productive?

We draw on experience you don't often find gathered in one place.

Between us, we have spent decades inside politics, policy and public bodies, and we understand how communities think, react and respond to change.

Our approach is very collaborative.

We work closely with local leaders, community groups and stakeholders, which helps us spot challenges early, shape conversations constructively and make sure engagement is meaningful, rather than a formality.

Good consultation comes down to listening properly and being open with people, and that is how we work.

### From wind farms to solar projects and beyond, the green energy sector is expanding at pace. As firms race to meet sustainability goals, how is Stephenson-Mohl Group helping clients seize opportunities in the transition to a low-carbon future?

Energy is central to what we do.

Collectively, we have supported around 4.5GW of renewable and low-carbon projects, and we run the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Grid Networks, so we understand both the policy detail and the politics around it.

The North East is one of the most energy-intensive regions in the UK on a per capita basis, but that also means it has huge potential.

Our role is to help clients understand that landscape clearly, spotting opportunities,

engaging decision-makers, guiding projects through planning and bringing communities with them.

It is not just a growth area for our business, it is a real chance for the region to lead the country.

### Achieving commercial ambitions while meeting social and environmental responsibilities represents a fine balancing act. How is Stephenson-Mohl Group helping clients deliver projects that are economically viable and ethically and environmentally sound?

We help clients build that balance from the start.

That means understanding the policy backdrop, anticipating issues, explaining long-term value clearly and making sure benefits are visible.

Because we understand how decisions are made in boardrooms, in council chambers and in Westminster, we can guide clients through the whole journey.

The result is stronger projects, fewer surprises and outcomes that feel fair for everyone involved.

### The North East's two headline devolution deals are continuing to reshape local decision-making, with greater powers transferring from Westminster to regional leaders. How can businesses make the most of the watershed governance change, and where do you see the most exciting opportunities?

We are still at the beginning of this new phase.

Spatial plans, long-term investment priorities and new powers are only just emerging, but the scale of the opportunity is clear.

Simon Henig, our head of government affairs, leads this area for us.

Simon has chaired a combined authority and been deeply involved in constitutional change to enable devolution.

This means we are in a strong position to help businesses understand how devolution will work in practice, what will change, where influence sits and how to engage well.

The biggest opportunities lie in transport, energy, skills and place-making.

With the right engagement, businesses can help shape investment priorities and unlock development potential.

We see devolution as a platform for long-term confidence, but it depends on businesses being active in the conversation.

### Stephenson-Mohl Group combines a Newcastle office with a Westminster base. What influence is the capital site having on operations?

We see our London office as an extension of the work we already do in the regions.

For us, the capital site works a little like an embassy for northern businesses.

It allows us to champion their priorities clearly, meet policymakers at short notice and keep pace with what is changing in real-time.

By having a foot in both places, we can bridge the gap between the regions and Westminster, so national decisions better reflect the needs and ambitions of the businesses we represent.

### Your CV includes time at the North East Chamber of Commerce. How are those experiences informing your approach at Stephenson-Mohl Group?

My time at the Chamber gave me a clear sense of what matters to the region.

Fifteen years ago, we were talking about Seaton Burn, Dogger Bank and East Coast Main Line improvements, and those issues continue to shape our economic future.

That understanding helps enormously in working out where the region is heading and what businesses need.

It also taught me that no sector works alone.

Our manufacturers rely on our energy sector, which relies on our infrastructure, which relies on our developers.

When sectors align, the region's voice is stronger.

That mindset of collaboration, rather than silos, is central to how we work at Stephenson-Mohl Group.

### What are your ambitions for Stephenson-Mohl Group across the coming years?

We want to become one of the UK's leading strategic communications agencies, not just in size but in reputation and impact too.

We are growing quickly, but with a strong focus on quality, regional roots and real value for clients.

We are a team that understands policy, understands people and gives businesses a genuine voice in the decisions that matter most.

# Trusted advice, built for life: Supporting high-net-worth clients across the North East

## Hay & Kilner

[www.hay-kilner.co.uk](http://www.hay-kilner.co.uk)

LinkedIn: Hay & Kilner

Instagram: hay\_kilner

**Claire Simmons, partner at Newcastle-based law firm Hay & Kilner, explores how long-term relationships and teamwork sit at the heart of effective legal advice for high-net-worth clients.**



Claire Simmons, partner at Newcastle-based law firm Hay & Kilner

In the North East, many individuals and families have spent years building not only wealth, but businesses, property portfolios and legacies they hope will endure for generations.

With that comes the need for legal advice that is thoughtful, discreet and underpinned by a genuinely collaborative approach.

High-net-worth clients often come to us at pivotal moments in their lives: planning for the future, investing in property, navigating family change or dealing with complex estate and succession matters.

What they value most is not just technical excellence, but the reassurance that they have a trusted team around them that understands the bigger picture.

Our private client work sits at the heart of this support.

From wills and trusts to estate planning, succession advice and estate administration, our aim is to help clients protect their assets and ensure their wishes are carried out clearly and tax-efficiently.

Many of our clients have complex family structures, business interests or overseas assets, and they need advice that reflects that intricacy.

We take the time to understand what matters to them, not just today, but over the long-term.

Property is another key area where we regularly advise high-net-worth individuals across the region.

Whether clients are acquiring residential or investment property, managing established portfolios or exploring development opportunities, our property specialists dealing with commercial property, rural property and residential property work closely with colleagues across the firm to ensure transactions are smooth, strategic and aligned with wider financial and family considerations.



**“Strong team at all levels who are a pleasure to work with; they tailor their advice and service to you and your requirements, not the one-size-fits-all approach you see from many firms”**

**- Legal 500 client feedback**

Hay & Kilner partner Claire Simmons, centre, works alongside a talented team that includes Alice Clewes, Joanne Milne, Emma Richmond, Lauren Hall and Sophie Miller

Family law is often the most sensitive area of all.

Relationship breakdowns can be particularly challenging where significant assets, businesses or inherited wealth are involved.

Our family team is experienced in advising on divorce, financial settlements and arrangements for children, and always works with discretion, pragmatism and sensitivity.

Just as importantly, we work proactively with clients on pre and post-nuptial agreements to help protect wealth and provide clarity for the future.

What truly differentiates Hay & Kilner is the way our teams work together.

As a full-service law firm, we draw on expertise across private client, property, family, corporate and tax disciplines to create a seamless service that reflects the realities of clients’ lives.

Matters are handled collaboratively, ensuring advice is consistent, joined-up and grounded in a deep understanding of each client’s circumstances.

Clients are supported by one trusted firm, rather than being passed between advisers or external providers.

This approach reflects our belief in building longstanding relationships, rather than

providing transactional advice.

The majority of our work comes from our strong introducer networks, returning clients, personal recommendations and cross-referrals within the firm.

Many clients have worked with us for decades, returning at key stages of their lives and introducing the next generation to Hay & Kilner.

At the heart of the firm’s continued success is a highly-experienced private client team, which has exceptionally strong levels of retention, ensuring continuity, trust and deep understanding over time.

Clients benefit from working with lawyers who take the time to truly get to know them and their families, building relationships that often span generations.

Each member of the private client team brings their own expertise, insight and energy, with the team united by a shared commitment to delivering thoughtful, tailored advice.

This dedication ensures clients are supported by a consistent team that understands their personal circumstances, priorities and long-term goals.

The Hay & Kilner way is about more than legal advice.

We are a modern, progressive full-service law firm that combines technical expertise with a refreshing and personable approach.

We speak your language, explaining complex issues clearly and supporting you through the legal process when it matters most.

With more than 80 years of experience, we are proud to have built a strong reputation across the North East for high-quality legal services and outstanding client care.

For our high-net-worth clients, that means confidence, clarity and continuity at every step.



**Hay & Kilner**

**For more information about Hay & Kilner and its support for high-net-worth clients, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 232 8345.**

# Celebrating excellence: TDR Trust showcases North East talent

## TDR Training

www.tdrtraining.co.uk

LinkedIn: TDR Training & Trust

**With a history dating back more than 140 years, TDR Training is woven into the fabric of the North East's education landscape. And its latest TDR Trust annual awards ceremony only further highlighted its importance to the region's industrial sector. Here, Li Xue, chief executive of the North Tyneside-based apprenticeship and HNC course provider, reflects on the showpiece evening and the organisation's place at the heart of nurturing the North East's engineering, manufacturing, science and business stars of tomorrow.**

TDR Trust's annual awards evening once again brought together apprentices, employers, families and partners from across the North East to celebrate exceptional achievement in science, engineering and manufacturing.

The 2025 ceremony highlighted the region's brightest emerging talent and the employers whose support continues to strengthen the local skills pipeline.

**“Our awards evening is a celebration of the partnerships that make skills development in the North East so strong”**

The awards ceremony recognised apprentices who have demonstrated outstanding commitment, technical skill and personal growth across engineering, science and professional disciplines.

Categories included Engineering Apprentice of the Year; Science Apprentice of the Year; and Rising Star; while there were additional special commendations for leadership, resilience and contribution to the wider community.

The celebration reflected TDR Training's commitment to nurturing ambition, innovation and long-term career success.

Employers from sectors including advanced manufacturing, renewables, aerospace, chemical processing and engineering joined the event, sharing stories of how TDR apprentices are contributing fresh ideas, technical capability and long-term value within their organisations.

Li Xue, TDR chief executive, praised the achievements showcased on the night.

She says: “Our awards evening is a celebration of the partnerships that make skills development in the North East so strong.

“We are incredibly proud of our apprentices and grateful to our employers for their continued trust and support.”

TDR Training's 2026 awards evening will take place on Thursday, October 15, with the organisation set to once again come together to celebrate the region's next generation of STEM talent.



## TDR Training

**For more information about TDR Training, its curriculum, trust model and annual awards ceremony, visit the website at the top of this article.**





NORTH EAST  
Chamber of Commerce

# WE ARE NORTH EAST BUSINESS

From every start up story and scale up journey, to the business leaders and the international explorers, we **ARE** North East business.

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# OUT



# OF

**In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Elaine Irving, managing director at Gateshead-based Extension Recruitment, about her passion for cold water swimming, learning about the lure of icy dawn dips, swapping orderly leisure centre lanes for undulating open seas and transferring the resilience forged from battling biting temperatures back to the workplace.**

[www.extensionrecruitment.com](http://www.extensionrecruitment.com)  
LinkedIn: Extension Recruitment Ltd

**When you're not supporting employers to build their teams of tomorrow, you can be found cold water swimming in the North Sea. What sparked your passion for such a challenging outdoor pursuit?**

My love for the water goes way back, long before I realised cold water swimming would become such a defining part of my life.

I've always been a regular swimmer, starting most mornings at my local pool to clear my head and set myself up for the working day.

However, during lockdown in 2020, a few women from my gym kept talking about their early morning dips at the coast.

I was intrigued.

I've always felt naturally drawn to water – someone once told me it's because I'm a Cancerian, a water sign.

Whether that's true or not, being in the ocean has always felt like a calm, centred place for me.

So, I decided to give it a go, and I was hooked from that first dip.

What started as curiosity quickly became a passion, and I can now proudly say I've earned my badge as a fully committed cold water swimmer.

**With its moody waters and biting temperatures, the North Sea is far from a forgiving place. What are the toughest conditions you've faced, and how do you summon the courage to take the plunge on a freezing winter's morning?**

There have been mornings so cold that the sand has been covered in tiny ice particles, crunching under our feet as we walk towards the sea.

Those are the kind of days where your robe barely keeps the wind out and you question all your life choices as you wade in.

But then you remember why you're there.

For me, it's the people I swim with – our little tribe that has grown over the years.

We share stories, routines and laughter.

And there is nothing quite as motivating as knowing there's a warm coffee and hearty breakfast waiting for you once you've braved the waves.

Challenging conditions demand focus, but they often give something back.

You come out calmer, clearer and occasionally with moments you never expect.

One morning at Seaburn, for example, a family of dolphins surfaced and swam alongside us.

That's something I won't forget.

**Cold water swimming is the very antithesis of the calm local leisure centre and its orderly pool lanes. What preparation or training did you need to undertake before heading into open water to build your strength, confidence and resilience?**

My years of pool swimming definitely gave me a good foundation, but open water is a different world.

There are no lane ropes, lifeguards or a warm-up. It's just you, the tide and the elements.

I eased myself in slowly, literally and figuratively, learning how my body responded to cold shock, understanding tides and currents, and, most importantly, going with experienced swimmers who guided me through those early sessions.

Over time, your resilience builds naturally. Your breathing regulates, your confidence grows and you discover your mind is often stronger than you think.

**Have you ever taken part in competitions, or is cold water swimming purely recreational?**

It's mostly about joy, headspace and connection, but I have taken part in the Great North Swim a couple of times in Lake Windermere, which was an

incredible experience.

I also love open water swims in lakes like Sweethope Loughs, Bolam Lake and the Lake District.

Wasdale and Grasmere are particular favourites.

**The parallels between personal pursuits and professional success are very close, with one often informing the other. Are there any lessons from cold water swimming that help shape your day job?**

Absolutely – and more than I ever expected.

Cold water swimming teaches you resilience, clarity of thought, how to be calm under pressure and the ability to commit when something feels uncomfortable.

Those qualities are invaluable when you're running a business like Extension Recruitment, where we specialise in finding talent for engineering and manufacturing organisations.

These industries are fast-moving, technical and constantly evolving, and being a strong leader requires clear decision making, emotional balance and adaptability.

Cold water swimming keeps me focused and energised.

It's my mental reset, and it helps me show up as the best version of myself for my team, clients and candidates.

**Beyond the North Sea, is there a body of water you'd like to swim before you decide to hang up your wetsuit and goggles?**

I dream of swimming in Iceland.

Not the warm holiday version, but the dramatic, elemental experience: geothermal seawater, icy air, volcanic landscapes and the feeling the ocean is never fully tamed.

Swimming while snow falls, with the North Atlantic raging nearby, feels like the ultimate contrast – wild, uplifting and quietly euphoric.

# OFFICE

# Leading by example

## Community Foundation North East

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LinkedIn: Community Foundation North East

**Author, coach and renowned public speaker Michael Heppell has spent a lifetime helping people around the world reach their potential. Now, as chair of Community Foundation North East's new North East Roots Ambassadors, he's turning that focus homewards – with a £1 million goal and a belief that the region's best stories are still to be told. Here, he sits down with N magazine to reveal more.**

**“We know there are many people out there with a passion for their North East roots, and our aim is to turn that passion into action on the ground”**

**John Hollingsworth, Community Foundation North East chief philanthropy and development officer**



Pictures: Andrew Lowe

Michael Heppell is a man on a mission. And he wants you to come along too.

The mission is typically ambitious for a man who regularly hits the global bestseller charts with his personal development and business books.

As chair of the new North East Roots Ambassadors, recently launched by the Community Foundation North East, Michael aims to help raise £1 million for the foundation, while simultaneously building a network of 100 people willing to give time, expertise and support.

The venture represents the next phase of the existing North East Roots programme, which aims to attract new donors to the foundation with links to the region, but who may have gone on to find success elsewhere.

The latest iteration takes that idea one step further by working with people who have found success in their field and have a local link, whether that's the place they were born, where they were educated or where they work.

The message is simple: if the North East helped make you who you are, there's an opportunity to give something back.

And Consett-born Michael is well placed to lead that conversation.

He left school at 15 fully expecting to follow in family footsteps.

Roofing was the family trade and, for a while, it was his too.

“I regretted it pretty much straightaway,” says Michael, laughing.

He adds: “I wasn't cut out for it.”

But the seven years he spent on the roofs mattered more than he realised at the time.

He completed an apprenticeship, learned a trade and, most importantly, learned how to work with people.

His dad Bill was a master of his craft – so respected that roofing product manufacturers asked him to write their manuals.

Michael says: “He taught me that if you're going to do something, do it brilliantly.”

That lesson has never left him.

Alongside roofing, Michael was always volunteering, particularly through the Boys' Brigade.

That commitment led him, unexpectedly, to the 1990 National Garden Festival in Gateshead – an event that attracted more than three million visitors.

Allan Percival, a Boys' Brigade field officer, saw potential in Michael and pushed him into organising the festival's charity centre.

When Michael protested that he was “just a roofer”, Allan encouraged him to ask his dad for a year off.

Michael says: “My dad gave his blessing and told me I was going to find what I really wanted to do with my life.

“He was absolutely right.”

The experience opened the door to youth work and community fundraising, with Michael eventually becoming the founding director of the County Durham Community Foundation.

It also sparked his interest in the workings of the charity sector and personal development – why do some people and organisations thrive and others struggle?

In 1998, he started his own business, focusing on personal development.

After a tough start, the business grew in

**“The fund has generated more than £400,000 to date, and we’ve built a brilliant network of expats and supporters from a wide range of backgrounds”**

John Hollingsworth, Community Foundation North East chief philanthropy and development officer, left, and Michael Heppell, North East Roots Ambassadors chair



partnership with his wife Christine.

They set themselves a bold goal: to positively influence one million lives.

Michael says: “We had a dream to achieve through our work.

“We had no idea how we were going to do it, but that’s what we wanted to do.”

Around the same time, Michael wrote his first book, a guide to personal development called *How to Be Brilliant*.

He says: “Let me tell you, if my mam and two others had bought it, I’d have been thrilled.

“I just wanted to see my name on the cover of a book!”

Instead, it went straight into the top-ten business books and stayed there for more than two years, later being published worldwide in 20 languages.

Nine more books, a successful coaching career – including working with high-profile names including Davina McCall and Sara Cox – and hundreds of public speaking slots later, he has hit his million lives target alongside Christine.

And now he has a different ambition.

He says: “I’ve reached what I call the third phase of my life.

“What Christine and I do is great – but we wanted to do something more concentrated, particularly for the North East.”

For the past 20 years, the pair have channelled their charitable support for the region through their own fund with Community Foundation North East, supporting individuals and organisations from arts scholarships and refugee groups to the Gap Project, which helped women leave the sex industry.

Michael says: “Our fund is deliberately broad.

“The aim is simply to give people brilliant opportunities.”

Having made an estimated 50 grants over 20 years, he’s a strong supporter of the Community Foundation’s model.

He says: “We’re busy people.

“The team at the foundation bring us well-researched options for us to choose where we channel support, do all the checks and then come back to show us exactly what the grant achieved.

“We trust them completely.”

It was that trust – and admiration for the foundation’s professionalism and long-term approach – that led Michael to ask how he could do more.

The answer was the North East Roots Ambassadors.

With its three aims – to raise £1 million, recruit 100 ambassadors and ask each of them to build bridges and share their story – Michael hopes to build a cohort who can offer their expertise, influence and time to improving lives across the region.

He says: “The people we’re talking to are busy.

“So for most ambassadors, what we’re asking for is about one day a year.

“That feels achievable but still meaningful.”

Ambassadors might make a donation and host an event, help open doors, offer professional expertise to the voluntary sector or simply use their profile to shine a light on the foundation’s work.

And diversity is key.

Michael says: “Not everyone will be a multi-millionaire business executive, and we wouldn’t want that.

**“The Community Foundation is focused on achieving lasting impact in our local communities”**

“Life experience matters.”

A series of short films will tell some ambassadors’ stories – where they grew up, how the region shaped them and what they went on to do – creating a powerful collective narrative about the North East at its best.

Michael says: “Inspiration matters. As a region, we’re still too good at talking ourselves down.

“This is about lifting people up and turning that inspiration into practical support for communities.”

It’s an ambitious mission.

But with Michael at the helm, anything is possible.

And you’re all invited to come along for the ride.



**Community Foundation North East**

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

# Earn, learn, lead: The women redefining career pathways

## Northumbria University

[www.northumbria.ac.uk](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk)

[www.northumbria.ac.uk/apprenticeships](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/apprenticeships)

LinkedIn: Northumbria University

**As the world marks International Women's Day, Northumbria University is celebrating the women breaking barriers, challenging stereotypes and building successful careers in traditionally male-dominated industries through its higher and degree apprenticeship programmes.**

Across the North East, women are using apprenticeships to gain qualifications, confidence and career momentum while earning and learning at the same time.

From civil engineering to quantity surveying, these programmes are opening doors to industries that have historically lacked gender diversity.

While females account for just 17 per cent of those studying ABE-related apprenticeships nationally (EngineeringUK), Northumbria is bucking the trend, with 27 per cent of its ABE apprentices being female.

One such success story is Isabelle Hewitt, now a senior quantity surveyor at Esh Group.

Isabelle began her degree apprenticeship with Northumbria University in 2017 and graduated in 2022.

Since then, she has achieved multiple promotions and now mentors trainees entering the industry.

She says: "Degree apprenticeships provide a foundation of knowledge that opens doors to opportunities.

"Being able to apply what you learn directly in the workplace builds confidence and accelerates career progression."

Employers are also seeing clear benefits.

Beth Swainston, training manager at Bowburn-headquartered Esh Group, says: "Degree apprentices bring up-to-date academic knowledge, enthusiasm and a strong work ethic.

"Apprentices add value from an early stage and often go on to mentor others, strengthening our workforce in the long term."

Another inspiring example is Amelia Bewick, a civil engineering degree apprentice at Northumbria University and now assistant cost manager at Turner & Townsend.

After completing her A-levels and feeling uncertain about a traditional university route, Amelia discovered degree apprenticeships as a way to gain qualifications while earning.

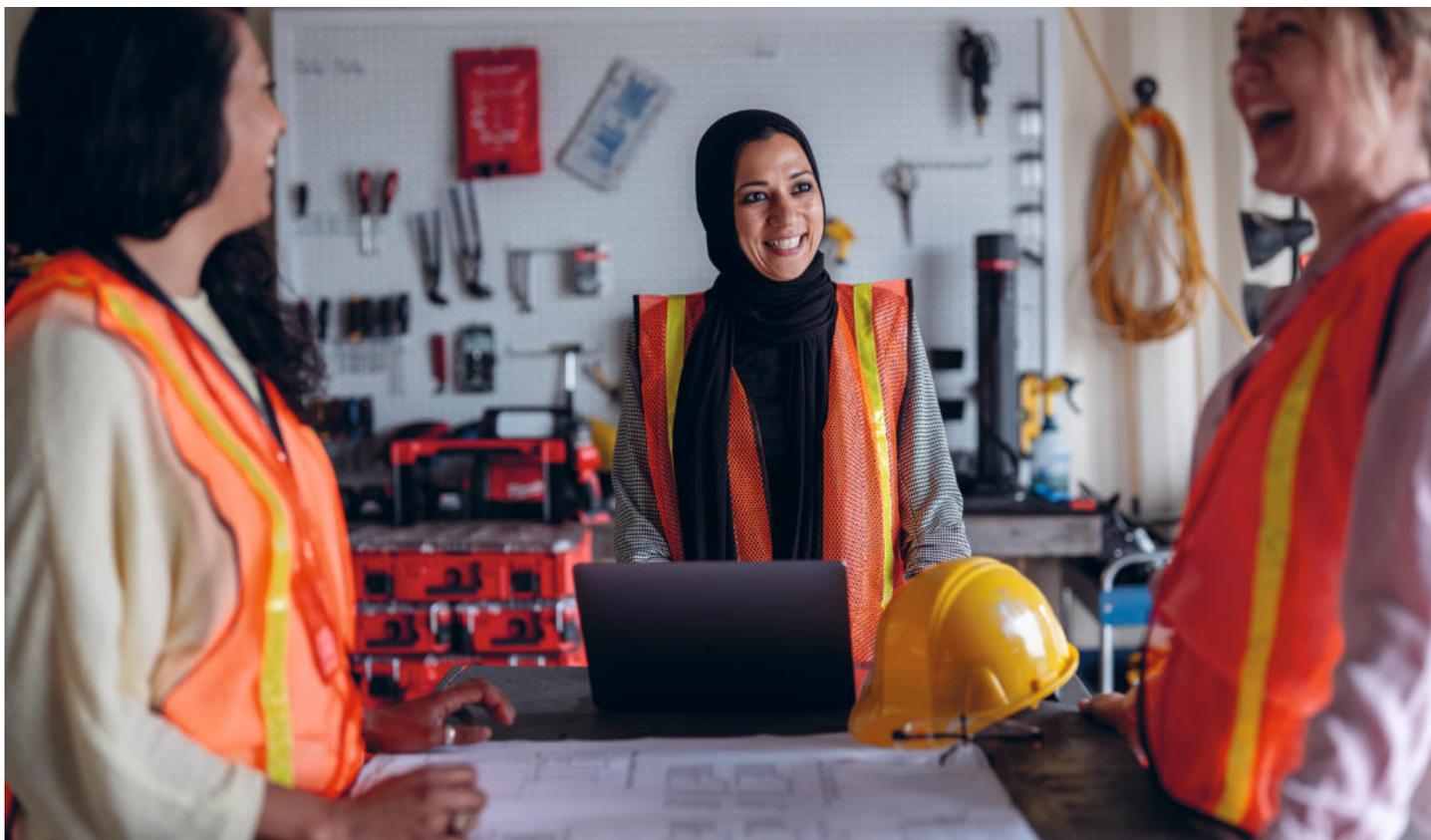
Since starting her programme, she has worked on major infrastructure projects including water treatment works and procurement programmes, gaining hands-on experience alongside academic study in structural analysis, geotechnics and transportation design.

She says: "These experiences have boosted my confidence and professional skills.

"I've been trusted with real responsibility, and I can see a clear pathway for my career."

The Government's recent commitment to expanding apprenticeship and T-Level placements reflects the same ambitions championed by Northumbria University





through its involvement in the Reinvention campaign, led by Ryder Architecture.

The initiative calls for a more collaborative, inclusive and skills-led approach to educating the future built environment workforce.

**“Over ten years, Northumbria University has trained 4019 apprentices and worked with 672 employers”**

By strengthening alignment between educators and employers, this model embeds practical, interdisciplinary learning while widening access to professional careers priorities closely linked to national goals around productivity, social mobility and economic growth.

Northumbria University is also deepening its regional impact through alliances with organisations including Education Partnership North East, with the relationship supporting initiatives that are creating clearer pathways from post-16 education into industry.

The university is also working with the newly-announced North East Construction Technical Excellence College as the only university partner collaborating directly with further education providers in this space.

Through this partnership, Northumbria is helping to raise the standard of teaching across the construction and housing sectors - working directly with educators to ensure that real industry expertise is reflected in the classroom, and that training keeps pace with the demands of a rapidly changing built environment.

International Women’s Day also marks a major milestone for Northumbria University as it celebrates ten years of delivering higher and degree apprenticeships that are transforming careers, strengthening organisations and building the workforce of tomorrow.

Over the past decade, the university has worked closely with employers to deliver flexible, high-quality programmes across a wide range of sectors.

These programmes enable learners to gain full undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications while developing practical workplace skills.

As Northumbria celebrates ten years of apprenticeship excellence, it is inviting employers and prospective learners to explore real-life case studies demonstrating the impact of apprenticeships on workforce development, staff retention and long-term career progression.



**Northumbria University**  
Applications for September 2026 are now open and must be submitted by June 30.

To learn more about Northumbria University’s higher and degree apprenticeships, visit the websites at the top of this article or call 0191 215 6300.

# Shaping the future of the North East

## Northumbrian Water Group

[www.nwl.co.uk](http://www.nwl.co.uk)

LinkedIn: NWG (Northumbrian Water Group)

**Northumbrian Water Group is embarking on a multi-billion-pound infrastructure improvement programme focused on securing supplies for generations to come. Here, the organisation highlights some of the measures it is taking to strengthen services for millions across the region, which include significant use of technology to boost response times and deliver greater efficiency.**

Northumbrian Water Group is nearing the end of the first year of its most ambitious five-year investment programme in its history – a £2.6 billion upgrade plan designed to strengthen essential infrastructure, boost the regional economy and drive a greener future for the North East.

Stretching across the water company’s entire operating area, from north Northumberland to North Yorkshire, the programme of improvements is set to benefit almost every community served by the company.

Its critical systems are relied on around the clock by nearly three million people across the North East.

But with more extreme weather, ageing assets and growing demand placing increasing pressure on its networks, the need for long-term resilience has never been clearer.

Running from 2025 to 2030, the vast investment programme includes nearly 800 individual projects, ranging from water main renewals and installing revolutionary smarter sewer systems, to enhancing and future-proofing water and wastewater treatment works.

These upgrades are designed not just to fix today’s challenges, but to prepare the region and its future generations for the realities of a changing climate.

Many of the improvements are already underway.

In Northumberland, a £1.7 million scheme to replace 15 kilometres of water mains in Belsay began late last year, securing better water quality and reliability for customers.

Later this year, work will begin on a £6 million infrastructure investment in Newcastle, aimed at reducing storm overflow discharges and upgrading the local sewerage infrastructure to protect water quality in Ouseburn and surrounding areas.

These projects respond directly to what customers told the company matters most to them – cleaner rivers and coastlines, fewer sewer spills, reduced flooding risk and a water system that can withstand extreme weather events.

Beyond improving essential services, the investment will also deliver a significant economic boost for the region.

The programme is expected to generate around £5.7 billion of economic benefit for the North East and support thousands of jobs across its supply chain.

And for every £1 the company invests, around 60 pence will stay within the region, strengthening local businesses and supporting long-term regional growth.

William Bessa-Simons, Northumbrian Water head of capital delivery, says: “This is





investment on a scale the North East has never seen from us before, and every project is about securing a better environment and better services for our customers.

“From reducing storm overflow spills to improving our treatment works, the environmental impact will be transformative.”

Alistair Tawn, Northumbrian Water head of integrated delivery services, adds: “We’re building networks that can cope with heavier rainfall, hotter summers, colder winters and growing demand, all while protecting our beautiful North East coastlines, rivers and habitats for generations to come.”

To fund these improvements, Northumbrian Water’s shareholders are increasing their investment, and customers’ bills will also change.

From April 2026, the average household bill is expected to rise by around six per cent – equivalent to about £30 per year.

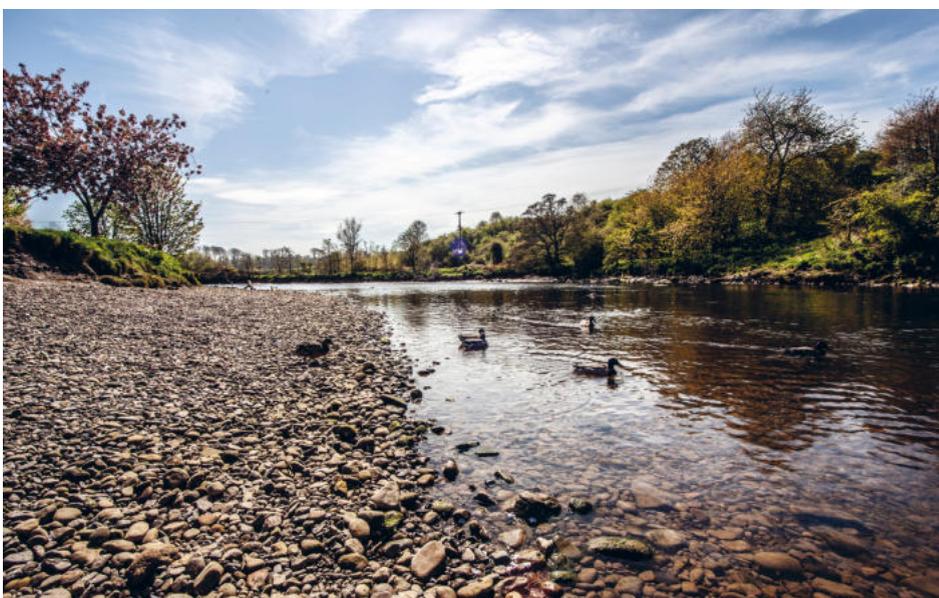
Even after the change, though, Northumbrian Water’s bills will remain among the lowest combined water and wastewater bills in the country.

However, the company recognises any rise will be concerning for customers, and it has created a £100 million financial support package, including £20 million from shareholders, to make sure help is available for anyone who needs it.

The support ranges from low-income discounts to payment breaks and tailored payment plans.

In 2025 alone, more than 100,000 customers received support with their bills, and the company expects to expand this significantly during this investment period.

Louise Hunter, Northumbrian Water director of customer and corporate services, says: “We know any increase in bills is a worry, and we don’t take that lightly.



“That’s why we’ve got more than £100 million worth of support available for customers.

“If you’re concerned, please reach out and we’ll work with you to find the right solution.”

With the first wave of projects already underway, the next few years will be about making visible progress on the ground.

From major construction schemes to smaller community level upgrades, customers right across the region will start to see the benefits taking shape in real-time.

Innovation will play a major role too.

Smarter sensors, digital modelling and advanced monitoring systems across water and sewer networks will help teams spot issues earlier, respond faster and deliver more efficient services.

These technologies will sit alongside the physical upgrades to create the most resilient and environmentally responsible network the North East has ever had.

And while the scale of work is significant, so too is the company’s commitment to supporting customers through change, to invest in the communities it serves and to secure a stronger, greener future for everyone who calls this region home.



**Northumbrian Water**  
To find out more about Northumbrian Water and its major infrastructure investment work, visit the website at the top of this article.

For more information about accessing bill payment support, visit [www.nwl.co.uk/bill-help](http://www.nwl.co.uk/bill-help) or register an account at [www.nwl.co.uk/register](http://www.nwl.co.uk/register)

# Taken for granted

**Muckle LLP**

www.muckle-llp.com  
 LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

**Grant giving has been a focal point of Muckle LLP's corporate giving strategy for years, but the firm is committed to doing even more to help its local communities. Here, to coincide with B Corp Month, the B Corp-certified law firm tells N magazine about its approach and how thinking a little more strategically can make an even greater impact.**

**“Being certified as a B Corp business has given us a clear framework of how we can continue to improve and make meaningful progress; it’s a reminder that responsible business is an ongoing commitment, and one that becomes even more powerful when shared with like-minded organisations”**

**Charitable giving in the UK**

A 2025 report by the Charities Aid Foundation found the state of corporate grant giving in the UK is mixed.

While North East businesses are the most generous when it comes to charitable donations, with 41 per cent of local businesses being more likely to support charities than those from elsewhere, more than 75 per cent of British businesses did not support charities at all in the last year.

The same research suggests that if all of the FTSE 100 businesses gave at least one per cent of their pre-tax profits to charity, the sector could receive an extra £3 billion in funding.

**Giving is good**

One of the businesses supporting the charitable sector is Muckle LLP.

Through its Muckle Fund, which is managed by Community Foundation North East, the firm has donated one per cent of its profits every year since 2002.

In that time, the firm has awarded 745 grants totalling £721,000 to charities, community groups and not-for-profit organisations.

Hugh Welch, Muckle senior partner and head of the firm’s ESG strategy, says: “We’ve given one per cent of our profits to charitable causes for years – not because we have to, but because we think it’s the right thing to do.

“We are very fortunate to be in a position where we’re able to give financially and support our local community.”

**How would a business start?**

With more than 170,000 (and counting) charities in the UK, it can be tricky to decide which charities to support.

Anthony Evans, Muckle managing partner, suggests considering what’s important to your business and supporting charities that align with your core values.

He says: “For many years, we have focused our grant giving on charities operating in three key areas chosen in consultation with our people.

“These are supporting young people, overcoming disadvantage and improving social mobility.

“Where possible, we also aim to prioritise supporting smaller charities based in the North East and Cumbria, the main geographical areas that we work in.”

**Consider regular giving**

Ask any charitable organisation, and it will tell you that regular and consistent giving is preferred over one-off donations.

This is because it provides a more predictable income stream, allowing charities to plan further ahead and ensure every penny is put to the best possible use.

What’s more, if the giving is unrestricted – meaning charities can choose exactly what to use the funding for – they can make the best use of those funds.

For Muckle, this regular giving takes the form of ‘follow-on funding’.

One of the charities that has seen the impact of that is the Country Trust, a national education charity that connects children from areas of high disadvantage with the land.

Since Muckle’s first donation of £500 in 2019, the charity has received nearly £20,000 worth of grants over the last three years.

But the firm hasn’t stopped giving ad hoc grants.



Hugh says: “In the earlier years of our Muckle Fund, we mainly made smaller, one-off grants.

“Now, alongside our follow-on funding initiative, we still make ad hoc grants in response to funding requests from our people.

“For example, we’ve given Mortal Fools – a local theatre, drama and creative learning charity – grants totalling £9800 from 2023 to 2025 following an initial grant request from one of our people.

“We also offer boost funding if a colleague is raising money for charity through activities such as sponsored walks.”

**Think about alternative support**

It’s not just financial support that businesses can offer charities; giving time is another powerful way to help.

For Muckle, this takes three forms: volunteering, taking on trustee roles and providing pro bono (free) legal advice.

Anthony credits grant giving as the foundation for many of these opportunities.

He says: “Our grant giving has helped us connect with so many organisations.

“What starts as a one-off grant often develops into a long-term relationship between Muckle and the charitable organisation, which creates even more opportunities for us to support.

“We are especially proud to have increased our total firm volunteering time to 1616 hours in the last year – an increase of six per cent – and are looking to further build on this in the coming years.”

**B-ing better**

Any strategy is, by nature, a work in progress, and corporate giving is no different.

Hugh believes that becoming part of the B Corp movement can give businesses all the tools needed for continuous improvement.

He adds: “Being certified as a B Corp business has given us a clear framework of how we can continue to improve and make meaningful progress.

“It’s a reminder that responsible business is an ongoing commitment, and one that becomes even more powerful when shared with like-minded organisations.”

Anthony Evans, Muckle LLP managing partner, left, with Hugh Welch, the firm’s senior partner and head of ESG strategy Picture: Mike Smith Photography



**Muckle LLP**  
 To learn more about Muckle, its B Corp status and its charitable giving commitments, visit the website at the top of this article.



# THE HEART OF HOSPITALITY

**Known for creating spaces where people gather and linger, Anna Hedworth has become a quietly influential figure in the North East hospitality sector. Here, the Cook House, Long Friday and Wren founder tells Sian Anderson how architecture, community and a people-first approach have shaped her business decisions, and why her focus is firmly on refinement, rather than rapid expansion.**

W R E N



WREN

Bar Open

Wed-Thur 4pm-Late

Fri-Sun 1pm-Late





In ancient mythology, Hestia was the goddess of hearth and home.

She was the fire at the centre, the constant people gathered around.

Her flame represented warmth, welcome and stability.

That same quiet power runs through Cook House, Long Friday and Wren founder Anna Hedworth's work.

At the heart of everything she builds is a deep belief in hospitality as an act of gathering: creating spaces where people feel part of something shared.

It's a comparison that feels surprisingly apt for someone who has built a career around feeding people, rather than feeding an ego.

With no formal culinary training, she has forged a collective of local dining spots on every food lover's must-visit list.

Anna's warmth and passion shine through as she talks about her restaurants, her team and the North East.

"Restaurants are the place where life happens, where conversations are heard, romance sparks and people gather," she says.

It's a form of hospitality that has everything to do with consistency and tending to the details that make people feel welcome and looked after.

In that sense, Anna's work recalls an older idea of hospitality, one centred not on spectacle but on warmth and continuity.

She says: "Hospitality is about consistency, about showing up every day and getting the details right."

Hospitality, though, wasn't where Anna's career began.

After seven years of hard graft and training, she started work as an architect in the early 2000s.

She says: "I just didn't love it.

"In one role, I was tasked with designing a pair of shipping containers on Ouse Street as an events space.

"I'd been hosting supper clubs and informal dinners for a while at various venues around the North East, and the thought occurred to me that I should set up a permanent home in the containers."

After some reflection, Anna followed her gut, handed in her notice and asked for a year's

rental on the containers.

From that decision, Cook House 1.0 was born in 2014.

Anna says: "Cook House started because it felt like the right scale for learning.

"The containers were manageable and I could understand every part of it."

For two years, Anna ran Cook House as a one-woman band, from the cooking to the washing up and the admin that comes with such an endeavour.

She says: "There's nothing the internet can't teach you, so when the business side of things didn't come as easy as the cooking, I taught myself how to do it."

When a space on Foundry Lane became available – coincidentally the same space where Anna had worked while with an architectural practice a few years earlier – she went for it.

And she's been there ever since, as Cook House 2.0.

Anna's architectural training wasn't for nothing, though; her sense of use and creating the right feel runs through all of her spaces.

She says: "The architectural mindset never really leaves you.

"Architecture teaches you restraint; you can't just keep adding things, every decision has a knock-on effect.

"A restaurant is a designed environment.

"It's not just about the food, it's about how everything works together.

"I'm always thinking about flow, about how people move through a space, how it wears over time and how it functions day-to-day, rather than just how it looks.

"You're controlling an environment; the aim is to make people feel comfortable without them having to think about it."

Ouseburn became Anna's home-from-home long before it became the trendy hub it is today.

The community rallied round, Anna built a small team around her – many of whom remain in position – and people were happy to pass on knowledge and help with recommendations.

Anna says: "Ouseburn has always felt like a place where people build things slowly and properly.

**“EACH VENUE DOES A DIFFERENT JOB: COOK HOUSE IS VERY FOOD-LED; LONG FRIDAY IS MORE SOCIAL; AND WREN EXTENDS THE EXPERIENCE AS A BAR WITH SNACKS”**

**- ANNA HEDWORTH**







**“RESTAURANTS ARE THE PLACE WHERE LIFE HAPPENS, WHERE CONVERSATIONS ARE HEARD, ROMANCE SPARKS AND PEOPLE GATHER”**

“There’s a real sense of belonging here.”

Anna added Long Friday, in Jesmond, in 2021, bringing relaxed neighbourhood drinks and dining, before opening Wren in November, a new space designed by her partner and architect Adrian Philpotts, which sits next door to Cook House.

She says: “Each venue does a different job: Cook House is very food-led; Long Friday is more social; and Wren extends the experience as a bar with snacks.

“Each place came from listening – to the business, to the team and to the customers.

“Some of the most important work I do now isn’t creative, it’s about listening.

“The team shapes the venues as much as I do.”

Creating the right team took time, while the process also taught Anna the importance of delegation.

Learning to trust the right people, in the right roles, with real autonomy, didn’t happen immediately.

She says: “The businesses only work because of the people in them; they are the starting point for everything.”

As food prices continue to rise and with a VAT reduction remaining off the table for the foreseeable future, hospitality is an unforgiving place.

Rather than shying away, though, Anna has embraced the reality of conditions, formulating growth plans in the process.

She says: “There is no point pretending hospitality isn’t hard right now.

“Margins are tight and the pressure is constant, but that doesn’t mean you hollow everything out.

“For me, the future is about refinement, rather than expansion.

“Making things better is often harder than making them bigger.

“Growth doesn’t always mean more sites; it sometimes means calmer systems, better days and a more resilient business.

“I want the work to support my life, not consume it.

“That feels like success to me.”

With plans for a large wine fair at Cook House in 2026, her new book *Service* recently hitting shelves and three venues to run, Anna certainly won’t be short of things to keep her busy.

And while another venue might be off the menu for now, Anna has acquired more than a taste for exploring food as a creative medium in its own right.

## “A RESTAURANT IS A DESIGNED ENVIRONMENT; IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT THE FOOD, IT’S ABOUT HOW EVERYTHING WORKS TOGETHER”

Drawing on her background in architectural design, she is continuing to foster an interest in large-scale, immersive projects where food intersects with art.

She says: “I’m interested in food as an installation.

“People are doing really interesting things in places like Berlin and Paris – things like food sculptures, architectural jellies – which really excite me.”

It’s an idea rooted in originality, restraint and a clear sense of what’s currently missing in the North East.

Anna adds: “I don’t think anyone is doing anything around food meeting art in the region at scale.

“I’ve always focused on what we can bring to the North East that isn’t already here.”

Bringing people together across the North East sits at the heart of everything Anna does.

Hosting and creating spaces to gather is the foundation on which all her ventures rest.

And that, hand-in-hand with the North East’s natural affability, feels like a recipe for success.

# LAST WORD



www.novapangaea.com  
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**Closing this edition of N magazine, Stewart Stewart, chief executive at Wilton-based Nova Pangaea Technologies, reflects on his recent appointment as the cleantech firm's boss, its huge potential in the sustainable aviation fuel sector and how he is channelling experiences working at the forefront of the decarbonisation sector to drive the business' long-term success.**

**Congratulations on your new role. What attracted you to Nova Pangaea Technologies, and what are your key priorities and ambitions as chief executive?**

There were two things that stood out about Nova Pangaea Technologies: its potential to make a real climate impact and the fact it had already gained commercial traction.

Firstly, it is unique in that the sustainable aviation fuel produced is genuinely carbon negative – so more carbon is removed from the atmosphere than is emitted across the lifecycle.

That makes it two to three times more valuable to an airline than alternative fuels, and a potent factor if aviation is to decarbonise at scale.

Secondly, and just as importantly, is the strength of our partners.

Having International Airlines Group, the parent company of British Airways, as both an investor and a committed buyer of the fuel is a powerful validation of the technology.

It shows airlines want and need this solution.

As chief executive, I am laser-focused on delivering our first commercial plant and proving it can be operated at scale.

From there, the ambition is to drive down the cost of sustainable aviation fuel, so airlines can realistically reach net-zero by 2050.

**The company's portfolio includes the Government-supported Project Speedbird venture, which is backed by the aforementioned International Airlines Group, British Airways and LanzaJet, and is working to produce sustainable aviation fuel in the UK. How significant is the programme's potential, and what could it mean for the aviation sector in years to come?**

For aviation to achieve net-zero, we need to be able to produce sufficient supplies of sustainable aviation fuel at an affordable price.

Our technology enables us to use waste biomass, such as the leftovers from sawmills and wheat straw, so there is no competition from food crops.

The biomass is used to create bioethanol, which is then converted into sustainable aviation fuel and a co-product called biochar that sequesters carbon.

The first plants will be in the UK.

We are working with LanzaJet, which will convert the bioethanol into sustainable aviation fuel, and with British Airways as the customer.

Project Speedbird will generate hundreds of jobs at multiple sites and produce 90,000 tonnes of sustainable aviation fuel each year, annually saving 500,000 tonnes of CO2 emissions – the equivalent of more than 50,000 domestic flights.

The ambition is to deploy our made-in-the-UK technology internationally to increase the supply of sustainable aviation fuel and help the air travel sector reduce its climate impact.

**Your CV boasts years of cleantech sector experience, with time at New York-based investment bank Javelin Capital adding to executive leadership roles at BayoTech, Concord Blue Energy and a senior advisory position at London-based Ikigai Energy, where you guided UK infrastructure owners on decarbonisation plans. How will you harness the knowledge gained from those posts to shape your approach at Nova Pangaea Technologies?**

My career has given me a very practical view of what it takes to turn good climate ideas into investable, scalable businesses.

My time at Javelin Capital taught me how investors and strategic buyers really assess risk and returns, and that discipline is essential in capital-intensive sectors like sustainable fuels.

My roles at BayoTech and Concord Blue Energy reinforced the importance of operational execution – building teams and scaling technologies in the real world, not just on paper.

Ikigai Energy sharpened my understanding of how to structure projects that actually get financed and built.

At Nova Pangaea Technologies, I'm bringing all of that together.

The goal is to build a company that delivers at scale, earns the confidence of partners and investors, and accelerates the deployment of genuinely net-carbon-negative sustainable aviation fuel.





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