

# N

YOLANDA BROWN

# SOUL CONNECTION

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Phil Douglas, Deb Ions, David Beattie, Praveen Karadiguddi



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WELCOME TO ISSUE 476

# Editor's Word

**From culture to commerce, confidence sits at the heart of this edition of N magazine. Here, Steven Hugill reflects on the power of conviction in shifting perspectives and delivering lasting change...**



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of N magazine.

Sometimes, it's the smallest gestures that carry the greatest weight.

Take my daughter's recent gymnastics training class.

After three-and-a-half hours of bars, beam work and bridges, she emerged with a chest full of brightly coloured stickers – each one adorned with a short motivational phrase – eager to transfer the haul from her leotard to an increasingly dog-eared scrapbook.

Now, while I accept any seven-year-old's love for an adhesive badge is a passion that knows no bounds, it nevertheless got me thinking during the drive home.

Confidence is such a huge part of our everyday lives.

From our professional careers to our education, our personal lives, our families and even a Saturday afternoon sports class, understanding who we are – and believing in what we do – makes an incredible difference.

I raise the point because, for too long in our region, we carried a meekness that downplayed our achievements and, by association, served to stifle our ambitions.

We are, as a collective, thankfully loosening those self-effacing shackles, but it sometimes still takes an outside voice for us to truly understand our worth.

Take the Mercury Prize.

When the annual album celebration decamped to Newcastle last year – in the process leaving behind its traditional London postcode for the first time – it felt like the music world had slapped a huge 'you are amazing' sticker across the North East and its cultural scene.

That North Shields singer-songwriter Sam Fender secured the top honour only added a further galvanising gold star to proceedings.

Building on Newcastle's hosting of the MOBO Awards, the Mercury Prize was a huge moment for the North East.

And it will be repeated in October, with the show set to return to Newcastle's Utilita Arena.

For this edition's cover star Yolanda Brown – who played a key role in the decision to uproot the awards night hundreds of miles from its three-and-a-half decade capital home – the Mercury Prize's arrival represented a huge endorsement for the region.

Broadcast across BBC platforms and reaching a global audience of 1.6 billion, with headline acts complemented by a successful fringe programme, Yolanda says the event has provided the North East with a confidence that can stimulate greater successes to come.

Read more from the award-winning saxophonist, composer and broadcaster on pages 34 to 42.

Confidence – and shedding our submissive streak – is integral to a white paper produced by N magazine publisher NET late last year, which was celebrated at a full-to-capacity dinner in late March.

A blueprint to supercharge growth across the North East Combined Authority's Northumberland-to-County Durham footprint, it advocates watershed changes across areas including access to capital, transport and infrastructure, skills and branding.

The latter is underpinned by confidence, with the white paper challenging bosses at the combined authority – who were presented with the document in late 2025 – to create a refreshed narrative for the region that leads with conviction.

You can read more about the white paper on pages 14 to 16.

Confidence runs like a golden thread through our second long-read feature with Abi and Tom Reid, founders of Whitley Bay-based hair product firm Merwave.

The decision to found a business is never without its difficulties, even more so when you decide to launch an endeavour during a global pandemic.

But, frustrated by existing treatments' inability to tame her wavy – not curly – hair, that's exactly what the married couple did.

Today, the business is taking increasing strides forward, with a recent Boots deal and plans to expand further into Europe complemented by an ever-growing community of consumers.

You can read more about Merwave's growth story on pages 76 to 84.

Finally, I'm delighted to write that this edition includes the latest iteration of our NET 250 listing, which is this year brought to you alongside headline partner Knights.

Researched in partnership with Newcastle University Business School and verified by global professional services firm PwC – using publicly-available data from Companies House accounts and business websites – NET 250 recognises the region's top 250 businesses by turnover.

Head to the middle of this magazine for a special pull-out booklet containing the full list and a number of award winners.

NET 250, though, is more than just a league table.

At NET, we've long prided ourselves as being an authoritative voice that champions – with reasoned argument – the North East's business landscape and the measures needed to drive greater success.

And NET 250 builds on that, providing not just a directory of companies, but the organisations and sectors leading the way in creating lasting change and the many investable opportunities therein.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

**Steven**

# **BDAILY SECURES SIX-FIGURE INVESTMENT TO FUEL NATIONAL EXPANSION**



Pictured, John Duns, NET business development director; Durham County Council Councillor Joe Quinn; Rebecca Minchella, Maven investment manager; and Pete Mallon, NET creative and managing director

**Digital business-to-business publisher Bdaily is set for national expansion after landing six-figure support. The online news platform – part of N magazine publisher NET’s wider house of brands – has secured investment from Maven Capital Partners through the Finance Durham Fund, established by Durham County Council and overseen by Business Durham.**



Digital media business Bdaily is set to expand nationally after securing six-figure investment from Maven Capital Partners through the Finance Durham Fund, established by Durham County Council and overseen by Business Durham.

The investment will accelerate a UK-wide growth strategy, which will see Bdaily strengthen its presence across multiple regions.

It will also see the publisher – which sits within multi-platform media group NET’s wider house of brands – expand its workforce and move to a soon-to-be-announced office in Aykley Heads, as part of the Durham Innovation District.

Founded in the North East nearly 20 years ago, Bdaily was acquired by NET in 2024.

Its experienced journalism team publishes high-quality, multi-sector news stories, feature articles and thought leadership editorials to a national audience that includes a 55,000-plus-strong email subscriber community.

That focus is complemented by client self-publishing campaigns, which allow more businesses to utilise Bdaily’s platform and reach in a unique way.

The investment will also boost Bdaily’s support – delivered through marketing experts and events professionals – for NET’s wider high-level campaign agenda, which includes the North East-focused VISION 31 investment summit and the recent publication of a white paper focused on supercharging devolution opportunities in the region.

Pete Mallon, NET managing and creative director, said: “We’re delighted to have secured this investment, which will allow us to deliver a step-change in Bdaily coverage across the UK.

“This backing will supercharge what we do best – high-quality and engaging business journalism, distinctive design and photography and impactful executive-level events – and take it to more regions, more audiences and more partners.

“With Maven’s backing, we’re well placed to accelerate our growth and build Bdaily into a truly national publishing brand.”

John Duns, NET business development director, said: “This is very good news for regional business across the UK.

“For some years now, the level of regional business-to-business news, information and opinion has been in decline and this has made it harder for companies and organisations to get messages out to chosen markets.

“This investment will allow Bdaily to help these businesses in a meaningful way, while also supporting economic growth.”

Rebecca Minchella, Maven Capital Partners investment manager, said: “Bdaily offers a clear differentiator of high-quality business-to-business journalism delivered by its rapidly expanding digital presence.

“The opportunity for it is huge and, coupled with the expertise developed from the success of NET, the team is well placed to expand Bdaily nationally while continuing to protect the editorial quality that underpins the strength of the brand.”

Councillor Joe Quinn, Durham County Council’s cabinet member for planning, investment and assets, added: “This investment is a clear signal of Durham’s growing influence as a driver of regional economic leadership.

“Through initiatives like the Finance Durham Fund, we are not only supporting ambitious businesses to scale, but also attracting organisations that will strengthen our economy and extend our reach far beyond the North East.

“Bdaily’s expansion demonstrates the confidence that innovative, high-growth companies have in the support, infrastructure and opportunities available here.

“By backing businesses with national ambitions, we are reinforcing Durham’s position at the forefront of investment, innovation and sustainable growth across the region.”

The Finance Durham Fund is part of Durham County Council’s strategy to deliver economic growth across Durham by supporting local ambitious and entrepreneurial businesses that need access to the funding they require to grow.

The Fund provides flexible equity, debt or mezzanine funding packages from £150,000 to £2 million for early-stage and established businesses, investing across all sectors.

It is available to companies which are based in, or relocating to, the county at the time the investment or loan is made.

# NORTH EAST 'MUST GRASP OPPORTUNITY' TO TRULY DELIVER DEVOLUTION PROMISE

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**NET officially unveiled its headline devolution white paper – aimed at supercharging economic growth from Northumberland to County Durham – at a full-to-capacity dinner. Scores of guests heard about the document's key pillars, which include boosting access to investment, improving transport connectivity, strengthening skills pathways and reshaping the region's narrative across the North East Combined Authority's footprint. Here, Peter Anderson highlights some of the key points raised during the high-profile event.**

The North East “mustn't be meek” and should instead “seize the opportunity” presented by a “once-in-a-lifetime” devolution deal.

That was the defining call from N magazine publisher NET's headline devolution dinner.

Based upon six high-level roundtable discussions, the event showcased the NET-authored white paper – *Raising the bar: A blueprint to supercharge North East growth* – which sets out a business-led agenda to catalyse the region's economic potential.



Steven Hugill, NET and Bdaily editor-in-chief, right, leads the white paper panel discussion

Pictures: Andrew Lowe

From boosting access to capital and improving transport connectivity to strengthening skills pathways and reshaping the region's narrative, the document outlines a series of targeted actions designed to accelerate long-term growth across the North East Combined Authority's Northumberland-to-County Durham footprint.

And to highlight its key pillars, the invite-only dinner – held at Jesmond Dene House and hosted by NET and Bdaily editor-in-chief Steven Hugill – gathered 80 of the region's business leaders and policymakers.

Guests heard from panellists including Lee Hartley, co-founder and chief executive of Castrius Capital Partners, who acted as roundtable host and helped shape the white paper.

He said: “When you look at what Manchester has done with devolution, they've grasped the opportunity.

“They're not meek – and we can't be either.

“This is about creating a business strategy, built by business for the North East, and getting on with delivering it.

“If we do even half of it really well, we'll be in a completely different place in ten to 15 years' time,” said Lee, who previously founded Sunderland-headquartered national wealth management firm Fairstone.

Highlighting difficulties around access to capital, he also stressed the white paper's proposed Northern Growth Ladder.

He added: “Each rung of the ladder is designed for a different stage of growth, from early-stage businesses right through to those looking to scale significantly.

“We're relatively well served up to around £3 million or £4 million, but beyond that there's a real gap.



Pictured, from left to right, are white paper panel discussion members Lee Hartley, Darush Dodds, Fozia Saleem, David Blair and Matt Charman

“We want to be able to support businesses looking for £5 million through to £500 million.

“If we can bring together the right investors, the right networks and the right businesses, we can accelerate growth very quickly.”

Fellow panellist David Blair, co-founder and chief executive of Newcastle and London-based executive search and recruitment firm Blair West, emphasised the point further.

He said: “Capital doesn’t need to sit in the region – it’s there and it’s accessible – as long as there are clear paths to it.

“The biggest obstacle is knowledge, in terms of businesses understanding what funding is out there, what it looks like and how they access it.”

He added: “The early-stage funding environment in the North East has been strong for a long time, and that’s something we should recognise.

“But the opportunity is there now to build on that and create something much bigger.”

Fozia Saleem, chief executive of Magnitude Biosciences, which is based at NETPark, in Sedgfield, County Durham, highlighted how infrastructure remains a significant barrier to growth, particularly when it comes to attracting and retaining talent.

She said: “We’re based at NETPark, and while it works for mid-career hires, connectivity is a real issue for graduates.

“I’ve lost people because they simply couldn’t get there using public transport.

“If we’re investing in business parks and



creating jobs, but people can’t access them, that becomes a real challenge for businesses trying to grow.”

Darush Dodds, director of corporate affairs and

social value at Bowburn-headquartered Esh Group, focused on the importance of skills in underpinning the region’s long-term growth.

He said: “You can have all the capital in the world, but if you don’t have good people with the right skills, it doesn’t work.

“There is some really good practice out there, with businesses working closely with education providers to make sure what’s being taught is relevant.

“But if we’re going to be everything we can be as a region, we need to do a lot more.

“Every young person leaving school should understand the opportunities on their doorstep and feel inspired.

“And if we can better support SMEs to take on apprentices and develop talent, that’s where we’ll really unlock growth.”

Fozia also acknowledged the white paper’s desire to create a fresh narrative for the North East that dispels outdated stereotypes and showcases its presence as a leading place to build businesses and careers.

She added: “We’ve got fantastic technology, a strong STEM base and a great manufacturing heritage.



John Duns, NET business development director, addresses audience members at the white paper dinner

“The opportunity is there to bring that together and build a clear identity as a place where innovation thrives.”

Lee added: “We’ve got a massive branding issue – and we’re not helping ourselves.

“People still have an outdated view of the North East, and that’s something we need to change.

“We need to be clearer about what we’re great at and shout about it.

“It’s a fantastic place to live and a fantastic place to grow a business – we’ve got lower costs, a great lifestyle and a strong talent pool.”

Fellow panellist Matt Charman, co-founder of London-based Northcote Equity, drew comparisons with Manchester to emphasise the importance of confidence in delivering that new narrative.

He added: “There’s a real confidence in places like Manchester – sometimes even an arrogance about how good their businesses are.

“But that attitude feeds through the whole ecosystem and helps it grow.

“That sense of belief is something the North East can replicate – because it has all the ingredients.”

Rob Hamilton, North East Combined Authority assistant director for economic strategy and innovation, who attended the dinner, welcomed the white paper’s ambition and called for a co-ordinated effort to deliver meaningful change.

He said: “It’s brilliant to see this level of ambition and to have so many people championing the region and the work that’s been done.

“We need to build that coalition across the public and private sectors to turn these ideas into reality and break down barriers.

“There are real opportunities ahead in areas like clean energy and innovation, and we need to grasp them.

“But above all, it comes down to confidence – everyone has a role to play in backing the region and driving growth.”



**You can download the white paper, along with reports from all six roundtable discussions, by visiting Bdaily’s Knowledge Hub via the website at the top of this article.**

**Alternatively, if you would like a printed copy of the white paper, email N magazine editor Steven Hugill at [steven@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:steven@netimesmagazine.co.uk)**

# DEVOLUTION

**B**

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# 'A SERIOUS PLACE TO DO BUSINESS AND INVEST'

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NET's headline investment campaign VISION 31 held its first panel discussion event of the year at Northumbria University in March, where scores of guests heard from business founders and sector leaders about the North East's innovative spirit, its game-changing advances and its significant investment potential. Here, Pete Anderson highlights some of the event's key takeaways.

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The North East is brimming with opportunity, innovation and ambition, and is a “great place to do business”.

However, to fully realise its potential, it must overcome internal divisions, avoid “self-sabotage” and present a clearer, more unified voice to the outside world.

Those were the principal themes of N magazine publisher NET’s latest VISION 31 event, which was held in the historic Great Hall of Northumbria University’s Sutherland Building.

Supported by Aon, Northumbria University, Lloyds Banking Group and rail operator Grand Central, the event marked the latest chapter in NET’s long-term mission to champion and elevate the region’s people, businesses and transformative projects.

Hosted by NET and Bdaily editor-in-chief Steven Hugill, more than 80 attendees gathered to hear how the North East is delivering growth across a range of sectors, while also addressing the barriers that continue to limit its visibility and progress.

The first panel discussion – *A foundation for success: The power of the North East* – explored how the region is nurturing high-growth businesses.

Audience members heard from Dr Andrew Kinewell, chief executive and founder of Kinewell Energy; Kelly M Whitfield, founder and chief executive of KLIK SaaS; Alasdair Greig, chief executive of Northstar Ventures; and Kate Rose, founder and creative director at TUTTI.

Andrew pointed to the cleantech firm’s recent growth – which includes securing £750,000 from Mercia Ventures – as proof that North East businesses can expand and compete on a global stage.

He also highlighted the opportunity on the region’s doorstep, pointing to the potential for billions of pounds of investment in offshore wind, while emphasising the importance of collaboration across the sector.

Andrew said: “There’s up to £100 billion worth of investment that could be built out along the North East coastline – we need to grab that opportunity.”

Alasdair, who moved to the North East from Cambridge more than 20 years ago, and has been at the forefront of the region’s investment landscape through his role at Newcastle and



Sunderland-based investment house Northstar Ventures, reflected on how far the region has come.

He said: “Twenty years ago, there was very little in terms of angel investment or venture capital in the North East.

“But what we’ve done as a region is turn that narrative into real opportunity – the North East is now a great place to invest.”

Kelly challenged the long-held perception that businesses need to be based in London to succeed.

Highlighting KLIK SaaS, which provides a platform that allows organisations to manage multiple websites and digital estates in one place, she added: “We raised £300,000 at a £6 million valuation pre-revenue, in exchange for just five per cent equity – try doing that in London.”

However, Kelly stressed her experience is not universal, particularly for first-time founders and female entrepreneurs, highlighting a stark imbalance in access to funding.

She added: “Less than two per cent of UK investment goes to female-led businesses – and that hasn’t changed for a decade.”

Kate, who founded North Shields-based designed jewellery brand TUTTI more than 20 years ago, spoke about building a business rooted in the region.

She said: “My roots are here, my family was here, so I decided to create the job I wanted.

“We’ve grown organically over the last 22 years, completely self-funded, and we’re still standing on our own two feet.”

However, while she described the North East as a “really supportive place to do business”, she too highlighted ongoing challenges around access to funding.

The second panel discussion – *Investing in the North East: A springboard for growth* – included insight from Kenton Bazeley, partner at Newcastle and Stockton-on-Tees-based legal and professional services firm Knights; and James Beard, chief executive of Newcastle-based Neptune North.

It also featured Marc Brûlé-Walker, managing director at RED Scientific, which operates a base at Sedgefield’s NETPark; and Alison Gwynn, chief executive at North East Screen.

Kenton highlighted the scale of investment taking place across the region and the importance of fully committing to it.

He said: “There’s a massive amount of investment in this region, and we wanted to be part of building something here – not just dipping a toe in the water.”

James explained why global tech consultancy Neptune North – a joint venture between Oliver Wyman and Rokos Capital Management – chose to set up in Newcastle in 2024, with its headquarters at the city’s Bank House.



He said: “They could have done it anywhere in the country, but having already shown what was possible here – with Oliver Wyman establishing a data and analytics team in Newcastle back in 2018 – it was the natural place from which to grow.”

James also pointed to how it has grown to around 150 employees in less than two years, with the majority based in the North East, combining local graduate talent with experienced hires relocating to the region.

Marc explained RED Scientific’s NETPark expansion – the firm has another base in Hampshire – was driven by strategic and personal factors.

They included, he said, access to a strong talent pipeline, proximity to key clients and the opportunity to support the region’s growing defence and security sector, as well as his own desire to return to the North East.

Alison – who took part in VISION 31’s inaugural London summit in 2024 – provided an update on the expansion of the North East’s creative industry following the recent announcement of £104 million investment from North East mayor Kim McGuinness to help unlock a new Gateshead Quays arena site and Sunderland’s Crown Works Studios.

She said: “For decades, the North East was barely on the map for film and TV production, but that has shifted significantly in the last few years.

“We’ve got everything – world-class locations, incredible talent and a collaborative way of working – and that’s why the North East is now a serious place to do business and invest.”



#### VISION 31

The next VISION 31 event will take place in County Durham later this summer. To register your interest for a seat in the audience, contact NET event managers Dawn Owens and Lesley Hampson at [dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk) or [lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk)

For more information about VISION 31 and how your business could support the campaign, 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 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 represent a cross-section of expertise and experience from organisations across the region.

As this edition of N magazine went to print, judges were poring over scores of award nominations.

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, TDR Training, Motivait, Hill Dickinson, Jackson Hogg, Esh Group, Castle Peak Group and Recovery4Life.



### North East HR&D Awards

**For more information about tickets and how 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.**

[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



# SPOT LIGHT

**Big promises.  
Bigger question marks**

By Steven Hugill



N

## With OpenAI's grand Stargate plan on hold, Steven Hugill looks at the fallout from the announcement, assessing where it leaves the North East and the questions it raises about the UK's investment pitch.

I've reached a point in life where my inquisitive side is increasingly manifesting itself as grumpiness.

My frown lines are growing deeper, I'm in danger of wearing a thumb-and-forefinger pinch point at the top of my nose and I'm getting perilously close to tutting out loud in public.

In my defence, journalism requires a level of cynicism. And, after 16 years or more, that cynicism has accumulated somewhat.

But in recent months, the questioning has expanded further, often to the most trivial of topics.

Did Donald Trump really just compare himself to Abraham Lincoln?

Why do people clap when a plane lands?

Surely Donald Trump really didn't just say that?

Are all Premier League footballers just a bunch of con artists and mercenaries?

Why do supermarket checkouts always need staff approval?

Hang on, did Donald Trump start a war in an attempt to secure a Nobel Peace Prize?

Who actually enjoys sparkling water?

Was the Stargate UK project a serious play, or more of an appeasing sideshow aimed at helping preserve UK-US diplomacy?

See what I mean?

There is a serious point to my huffing and puffing, however, and that is OpenAI's decision to halt its multi-billion-pound North East data centre development.

Announced in a blaze of publicity – not least by a Government in desperate need of a commercial sector coup – it hit the ice in April amid regulatory and energy cost concerns.

When it was unveiled last year, officials said the "historic" move would create thousands of jobs, with OpenAI partnering with Nscale and NVIDIA to boost British artificial intelligence adoption.

Part of a planned wider £30 billion AI Growth Zone in the region – which includes Blackstone QTS' £10 billion data centre in Cambois, near



Blyth, that is still progressing – ministers said it would increase productivity across sectors including manufacturing, healthcare and energy, with Nscale primed to make computer chips at Newcastle's Cobalt Park business hub for use by OpenAI.

And then the air left the balloon.

OpenAI says it still sees "huge potential for the UK's artificial intelligence future", and will "continue to explore Stargate UK and move forward when the right conditions enable long-term infrastructure investment".

Hope remains that those investigations lead to reigniting the venture because the economic impact would be transformational.

But, of course, the hiatus raises further questions.

What message does this send to other global investors weighing up the UK?

Is Britain genuinely competitive when it comes to energy costs and infrastructure, or are we telling ourselves a comforting story?

And those questions don't exist in a vacuum.

They land at a time when the Government's relationship with business feels, at best, uncertain, when Sir Keir Starmer continues to shuffle uncomfortably around the Peter Mandelson shambles, and when – at the time of writing – local elections were predicted to leave

Labour in need of a trip to A&E.

And they matter for the North East too.

As a region, our business landscape is a resilient place – much like the people who keep it ticking over.

We have fantastic manufacturers, engineers, technology firms and cross-industry collaborations working on the ideas of tomorrow.

And OpenAI's hesitancy hasn't brought the shutters down.

Indeed, Lockheed Martin's vision to land an £85 million satellite factory at Sedgefield's NETPark – in addition to its support for the £50 million North East Space Skills and Technology Centre at Northumbria University alongside the UK Space Agency – is proof of our region's attraction.

But none of that means we can afford to shrug off these moments.

Because investment decisions like this don't just appear and disappear in isolation; they shape perceptions and perceptions shape reality.

If the UK wants to be seen as a serious home for the industries of the future, it must offer consistency, clarity and credibility.

Otherwise, the questions will remain.

# BIG QUESTION

**After the tremors caused by previous fiscal announcements, the Chancellor's relatively shock-free Spring Statement was welcomed with relief by many businesses. But with a volatile geopolitical landscape weighing heavily on UK economic confidence, where should Rachel Reeves focus her policy priorities – and what groundwork should the country's financial chief begin laying ahead of her Autumn Statement later this year?**

By Steven Hugill



**Join the discussion**

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



**Tony Earnshaw**  
Chief executive

**UK Commercial Group**

The Chancellor's Spring Statement was notable less for what it announced and more for what it didn't.

After a period of fiscal shocks and policy reversals, a degree of stability is something businesses genuinely welcome.

However, by the time it was delivered, parts of the statement already felt out of date.

Much of the Office for Budget Responsibility's analysis underpinning it was based on January forecasts, which meant it did not fully capture the fast-moving geopolitical situation in the Middle East, the inflationary pressures building across global markets, or what contingency planning might look like if conditions deteriorate.

Rachel Reeves should now focus on three priorities.

First, businesses need a clearer long-term framework for taxation and investment incentives.

Companies can cope with difficult conditions, but uncertainty around policy direction makes it far harder to commit capital or plan for growth.

Second, the Government must double down on productivity.

Investment in infrastructure, skills and digital capability is essential, alongside planning and regulatory systems that support development, rather than delay it.

Finally, the groundwork for the Autumn Statement should start immediately.

Businesses want to see a credible strategy that reflects current economic realities, includes realistic inflation assumptions and sets out how the Government will respond if global volatility intensifies in the months ahead.



**Darren Davidson**  
UK vice president

### Siemens Energy

The Government's Clean Power 2030 Action Plan, launched at our offshore wind blade factory in Hull, gave the energy sector an important commitment to deliver investment and jobs.

The Chancellor's Autumn Statement, together with the next annual energy auction rounds, needs to keep building on this.

We're living in a time when there is more focus than ever on energy security and prices.

The supply chain needs consistency. It needs a reliable and rolling pipeline.

Siemens Energy's 7000-strong UK team is proud to contribute to the UK's Clean Power 2030 ambition.

Facilities like our site in Newcastle play a critical role in delivering the UK's energy transition – from grid technologies and offshore wind, to hydrogen, gas and service.

At the end of last year, we opened our new digital grid panel build site in Newcastle.

It's a tangible step in strengthening the UK's clean energy supply chain and preparing the grid for the scale of change ahead.

It is also about capability and careers.

We've committed £2 million to expand production on site and created 65 jobs, with apprentices and new recruits already bringing energy and ideas into the factory and our training centre.

The control and protection panels we build here will help modernise the grid and improve reliability for customers, supporting the UK's transition to clean power.



**Rhiannon Bearne**  
Deputy chief executive

### North East Chamber of Commerce

This is a concerning time for businesses across the North East.

After a positive start to the year, with business confidence edging up as inflation edged down, the conflict in the Middle East has buffeted the region's businesses and employers once again.

In such a dynamic environment, it's vital Government policy remains responsive and agile.

Ahead of the Autumn Statement, there are actions the Chancellor and her team can take now.

Keeping a close eye on the impact of employment rights changes, and any unintended consequences or costs for businesses, will be key.

As will sustained work on skills.

The economic inactivity agenda is still a major opportunity to get more people working and healthier, so strengthening the national policy framework to drive more devolved work should continue.

Rather than holding our collective breath until the autumn, we at the Chamber will be working on what businesses, employers and partners can do now to make small, positive differences.

We'll be taking a look at our financial wellbeing package and sharing new resources with members.

We'll be testing sentiment through surveys and local conversations, and we'll be talking to local, regional and national governments in real time, to make sure we don't wait until the autumn to make a difference now.



**Robert Webster**  
Managing director

### Future Vision Group

As a relatively new business, we're looking for some stability from the UK and global economy, as what is happening in the Middle East is having a real impact on import and transport costs and times.

For example, the outdoor weatherproof televisions we have purchased from our supplier in China would have, in the past, been shipped by sea or air.

But because of the rising fuel costs and port delays, we have decided to transport by rail, which significantly reduces shipping times but costs up to four times as much as sea freight.

While we appreciate the Government can't change policies and introduce support just for Future Vision Group, it would be good to see some additional support given to those companies that are being hit by rising costs as a result of the Iranian conflict.

I have also been watching with interest what funding programmes are being announced to stimulate the country's enterprise culture and nurture business growth.

While finance is available in the form of loans and equity investments, there aren't as many grants on offer.

The economic climate remains tough for businesses.

However, I do think we've become much more resilient and stoic.

Growth continues, and with extra support, such as the availability of grants, it would be at a much faster rate.

# Providing the foundations for brighter futures

[www.bernicia.com](http://www.bernicia.com)  
LinkedIn: Bernicia Group



John Johnston, chief executive of North East housing association Bernicia, is a passionate and lifelong advocate for affordable social accommodation and its proven track record in helping create opportunities and transforming communities. And with the Ashington-headquartered operator – whose estate stretches from Northumberland to Teesside – recently unveiling a five-year corporate strategy pledging a £400 million investment into properties and neighbourhoods, that commitment is set to scale up significantly. Here, Simon Rushworth meets John and is bowled over by the Northumberland born-and-bred boss’ embodiment of the ‘Bernicia effect’.

‘By positively impacting one life at a time, we can strengthen communities and help unlock the potential of the North East.’

As an opening statement, it’s compelling stuff.

But there’s more: Bernicia’s bold new corporate strategy sets out as it means to go on.

Built around the ‘Bernicia effect’ – a laudable construct with opportunity at its heart – it’s a dynamic document that doubles up as an inspiring manifesto for social mobility, community engagement, effective collaboration and burning ambition.

It’s not your typical corporate-focused rallying call.

Then again, John Johnston’s not your typical chief executive.

During a 38-year career with Bernicia, the former housing officer has been privy to every aspect of a diverse business that continues to push the boundaries in social housing.

The face – and voice – of Bernicia understands better than most the foundational value of a settled home.

He says: “Everyone now recognises that secure

housing is one of the most important and fundamental building blocks for a good life.

“It leads to a happy and healthy life – a safe, warm and affordable home contributes massively to people’s quality of life and their life chances.

“People with good homes go on to have more fulfilling lives, secure better jobs and access better opportunities.

“They pay more taxes and they’re healthier – there’s less of an impact on the NHS and social care, and so they reduce the overall welfare bill.

“A good home makes everything else possible.”

John spent his formative years in the Northumberland towns of Ashington and Newbiggin.

He was distanced from privilege and opportunity, but was perfectly placed to hone the work ethic that has always informed a proven approach to business.

He tells N magazine: “People tell me I grew up in an area suffering from relative poverty and deprivation.



"I never felt that way. I felt loved. I felt supported. I had a great childhood.

"I made some great friends who I still keep in touch with today.

"I learned my work ethic because of – not in spite of – those circumstances.

"But what I want to make sure is that those kids who are growing up now across Northumberland and the North East have the same opportunities as everybody else in the UK.

"I know that sometimes the world can be a challenge if you don't believe you belong.

"My childhood made me resilient. I've got an in-built drive to try to help people.

"And the one thing I'll say to the next generation is never think that anybody's better than you.

"They're not. It's an illusion.

"When you get to know them, you'll find out that they're no better than you after all!"

Hardship, of course, can play a significant part in driving the inferiority complex John's determined to debunk.

He promises Bernicia – whose housing stock spans Berwick to Redcar – is committed to helping reverse the region's alarming levels of child poverty.

That starts, he says, with building the affordable

housing required to slash waiting lists and counter debilitating homelessness.

He says: "Picture children living in temporary accommodation and not having the friendships or that social interaction I had.

"Imagine kids not having a place where they can do their homework and not knowing whether they can put down roots or even go to school.

"The North East has got some of the highest levels of poverty.

"A third of our children grow up in poverty, which breaks my heart.

"And if we can make a change – working with partner housing associations, local authorities and the North East's combined authorities – and help break that cycle, then that's what we're here for."

Collaboration is a key tenet of the 'Bernicia effect'.

Developing a progressive approach alongside the North East Combined Authority and the Tees Valley Combined Authority is a central strand of Bernicia's corporate strategy, and John is a big believer in strength in numbers.

He says: "Working with the combined authorities to align things like transport, education and skills, job creation and health provision, with where we're going to build the new homes, is vital.

"There's a famous saying that if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go further, go together.

"A big strength of our new five-year strategy – and where we are as an organisation now – is that we collaborate.

"That means working with strategic partners such as Homes England, the combined authorities and our local authority partners, but also as a team of housing providers.

"We have the North East Housing Partnership, which is 20 housing providers across the region working together.

"I've just taken over as the chair of that organisation, and it's a fantastic example of how, as a sector, we can be stronger together.

"We launched our new prospectus in April.

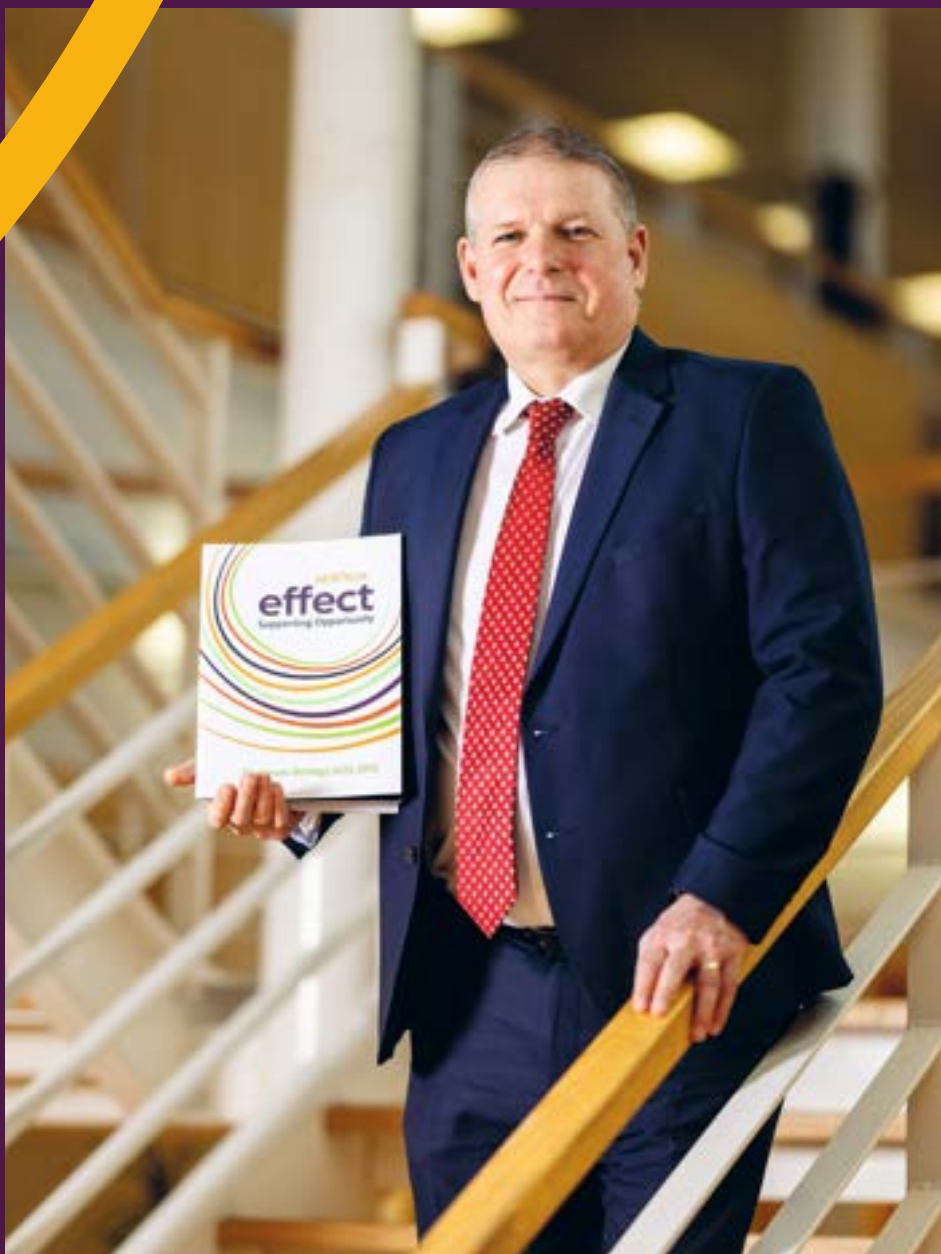
"It talks about development and regeneration, and how we're going to step up the supply of new homes in the region by working together.

"It describes homes where people can thrive and live better lives.

"That taps into employability, aspiration and confidence.

"We also talk about trying to tackle loneliness and isolation.

"And there's an emphasis on quality homes and investment."



“We are also committed to providing homes and services for all, including for those that require some additional support at a key stage in their life journey.”

John adds: “The North East Housing Partnership is a great example of how, as a region, we understand how we can make meaningful progress.

“We get it and we get on.

“The needs of our fellow North Easterners transcend any sense of ego or individual ambition.

“We put that to one side a long time ago; it’s not about John Johnston or Bernicia.

“It’s about what can we do in partnership with the combined authorities to transform our region’s prospects and opportunities.”

Bernicia has pledged to invest £400 million

into North East homes, neighbourhoods and communities between now and 2031.

Crucially, John and his colleagues want the people at the heart of those communities to become key stakeholders in an ambitious five-year plan – controlling their own futures and fuelling fresh ambition.

But what does that look like in practice?

A reskill, upskill and redeploy project supports military service personnel and their families by offering training and employment opportunities.

Meanwhile, its care leavers programme balances skills development and training alongside person-centred support.

Bernicia’s estate-based community hubs and learning hives deliver skills programmes, while partnerships with the Northern Learning Trust,

local employers, the voluntary sector and education providers prepare tenants for work.

John is particularly proud of an apprenticeship programme that boasts a 90 per cent-plus retention rate, which is far above the national average.

He says: “By September this year, five per cent of our staff will be apprentices.

“We have 660 employees, and we’ll have 33 or 34 apprentices.

“One in six of our staff started out as apprentices here.

“It’s something we take great pride in: watching talented people move into full employment and progress through the business is special.

“We offer a wide range of apprenticeships to the local community.

“Our trades centre trains all disciplines, including joiners, plumbers and gas fitters, but across the wider business we give people starts in housing and estate management, finance, computing, IT, people services, learning and development, recruitment, compliance and health and safety.

“Our success is built on not only providing the apprentices with the technical skills they need, but by giving them pastoral support.

“A fair chunk of our apprentices will be Bernicia tenants and most of them live in our communities.”

From Berwick to Redcar, the Bernicia effect is taking effect.

Thousands of people across scores of communities are benefiting from investment in homes, the delivery of value-for-money services and collaborations focused on supporting opportunity across the North East.

John adds: “I firmly believe there is as much potential in this region as anywhere else in the country.

“And I’m convinced that safe, secure, affordable homes are the first step towards unlocking that potential.”



### **Bernicia**

**For more information about Bernicia, its corporate strategy and its commitment to seeing the communities it serves thrive, visit the website at the top of this article.**

# From firm foundations to future growth

## Business Durham

www.businessdurham.co.uk

LinkedIn: Business Durham

Having recently taken over as Business Durham managing director, Kerry Walker is setting out plans to build on the organisation's firm foundations. Here, she tells Steven Hugill about the Durham County Council business support service's backing for companies of all sizes, its provision of platforms for next-generation innovation to thrive and the major investments primed to position Durham – and the wider North East – for lasting success.



Pictures: Jamie Haslam

Kerry Walker strides beneath the darkened chiselled letters and numbers of a Victorian sandstone plaque.

At a set of green double doors, she turns right into a grey-blue walkway, continuing on below a rearing lion in a hand-painted crest of the former Crook County Junior School.

Once alive to the sounds of strictness and shuffling feet, the rural Durham building's labyrinthine corridors today lead the way to an altogether different kind of study.

In high-ceilinged former classrooms, start-up and scaling enterprises are training for growth under the tuition of Business Durham.

The desks and slate boards may have long departed, but the ethos of nurturing potential and laying foundations for long-term success still runs deeply through what is now Crook Business Centre.

"We are a guiding hand and a listening voice," says Kerry, now sitting inside a teaching space-turned-boardroom.

She adds: "We ensure businesses get the right support at the right time in the right way by building long-term relationships.

"We equip organisations for growth, helping position them so that when opportunities arise – be they support programmes, funding initiatives or supply chain and trade prospects – they are well placed to access them."

Solid foundations are equally integral to Kerry's blueprint for the future of Business Durham, the Durham County Council business support service she began leading at the start of April, having switched from the role of business growth director to succeed the retiring Sarah Slaven.

She says: "Business Durham has fantastic foundations; it has a committed team that delivers the best service for businesses and communities.

"Our fundamentals are right, and we made them stronger recently by rolling out a hub-and-spoke-style distributed delivery service, which places business support and property teams within their local geographies to bring services closer to organisations.

"But we are committed to strengthening our offer yet further to remain fit for the future."

That forward-planning approach, says Kerry, will be supported by Business Durham's bricks-and-mortar estate that provides homes for organisations stretching from multinational operators to nascent SMEs.

Alongside Crook Business Centre, its portfolio includes Aykley Heads' Salvus House; Jade Business Park, in Seaham and Rookhope Business Centre, near Stanhope.

The organisation also works closely with partners on key strategic sites such as Forrest Park in Newton Aycliffe – set to welcome a 250-job DPD warehouse – and Connect at Integra 61, in Bowburn, supporting their development and promotion as significant employment and investment locations for County Durham.

Its portfolio additionally includes Sedgefield's North East Technology Park (NETPark), which boasts tenants such as product development support organisation CPI and SpaceX radio frequency parts supplier Filtronic – and could soon house a proposed £85 million Lockheed Martin satellite factory.

Kerry says: "We work with organisations of all shapes and sizes, as well as businesses looking to invest in the area, and our property portfolio delivers ecosystems where they can flourish.

"NETPark, for example, provides a unique, nurturing environment for like-minded individuals and companies, with incubation and scale-up space complemented by large-scale production capacity.

"It is also home to a Space Enterprise Lab and includes the Compound Semiconductor Applications Catapult and the Satellite Applications Catapult.

"They are two fantastic national centres of excellence operating from the North East," adds Kerry, who joined Business Durham two years ago after a 20-year career in economic development at Gateshead Council.

The collaborative culture to which she refers extends to Business Durham's leading role in regional cluster organisations that position the wider North East at the forefront of national moves in the space and advanced material electronics sectors.

She says: "Partnership is embedded in everything we do.

"The region's industrial heritage provided foundations that have been transformed into modern technology, and we built upon them a number of years ago by identifying emerging sector clusters."

That work created Space North East England – which is funded by the UK Space Agency and counts the region's five universities and North East Combined Authority as partners – and North East Advanced Material Electronics.

Kerry says: "These are not solely Durham clusters; we are leading them on behalf of the North East, and they're important because they



represent significant opportunities for existing businesses, those looking to pivot to adjacent sectors and organisations seeking to invest into the region.

"Our inclusive economic strategy takes that further, with a commitment to create jobs at all levels across the varying communities we serve.

"Crucial to that are our partnerships with Durham University and our local colleges.

"They are helping upskill residents and students living in and around the cities, towns and villages we oversee, so they can take on roles and aspire to move into the high-value jobs that are being created."

A good number of those positions, says Kerry, could soon be based within the Durham Innovation District.

Planned for a ribbon of land that links the city's existing County Hall site with the nearby Aykley Heads commercial hub and the East Coast Main Line, the multi-million-pound venture promises to deliver 4000 jobs in fresh office and commercial space.

Overseen by a new Durham Mayoral Development Zone, and led by Durham County Council, Durham University and regeneration partner Muse, the endeavour is set to raze the 1960s Brutalist building next year.

Further plans include switching the Durham City Incubator business support programme from Salvus House to the Durham Innovation District, and the creation of a Durham University 'supercomputer' data centre at Aykley Heads,

which officials say would provide exceptionally fast data processing and complex calculations.

Kerry says: "It's another fantastic example of the value of our partnerships.

"By working with the wider council and the private sector, we're accelerating the creation of a business district in the heart of the city.

"It will have a transformational economic impact on Durham and the wider region, and we're actively seeking businesses to join our thriving community."

She adds: "We're on the cusp of something really exciting.

"Durham is truly open for business – open for businesses and open to collaboration to deliver true value for the county.

"I want Durham to become the location of choice for people to start a business, grow a business and invest.

"And with our solid foundations matched by our visionary approach, we're well on our way to achieving that goal."



#### **Business Durham**

**To learn more about Business Durham and how its support programmes could boost your organisation's progress, visit the website at the top of this article.**

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Feature

# Yolanda

**SOUL CONNECTION**

# Brown

Award-winning saxophonist, composer and broadcaster YolanDa Brown's love affair with Newcastle was forged on the terraces of St James' Park. And her personal connection with the city has since evolved into something much bigger. As chair of the British Phonographic Industry, she helped bring the Mercury Prize to Tyneside last year – a moment that showcased the North East on the global stage. Here, she talks to Peter Anderson about her enduring connection to Newcastle, her enormous pride in being awarded the Freedom of the City and how she hopes to build on that relationship in the years ahead.

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

Instagram: [yolandabrown](https://www.instagram.com/yolandabrown)

After receiving the Mercury Prize at a packed Utilita Arena, and declaring the North East “the best region in the world”, an emotional Sam Fender spoke of how Newcastle had “always been in an isolated bubble” from the music industry.

His words encapsulated why the moment felt so significant, not just for him, but for a region long brimming with talent yet so often overlooked.

But while the North Shields singer-songwriter had to leave the North East to pursue his dreams, the purpose of bringing the Mercury Prize to Newcastle was to ensure the next generation would no longer have to make such a move.

For double MOBO Award-winning saxophonist and broadcaster YolanDa Brown, who was instrumental in the decision to take the award outside London as chair of the British Phonographic Industry, the shift was not only about enhancing the Prize’s impact, but also about bringing it to a city she has come to know and love.

She says: “Music crosses boundaries.

“It’s not just made in London – especially for the Mercury Prize, where the albums we’re celebrating are coming from all over the UK.

“So why does it only have to remain in London?”

As part of the leadership team behind both the BRIT Awards and the Mercury Prize, YolanDa had long believed the time was right to reimagine how such events could better reflect the breadth of talent across the country.

She adds: “It just felt like the Mercury Prize needed that refresh, that pep... and when I was in Newcastle, you could see the infrastructure was already in place and there was a real willingness and appetite to make it happen.”

That ambition is now beginning to take shape across the wider industry.

With the MOBO Awards also hosted in Newcastle in 2025 and the BRIT Awards heading to Manchester in 2026, there is a growing sense that the UK’s biggest music events are no longer confined to the capital.

YolanDa says: “The regions are showing just

how important they are – not just for developing the next generation of music makers, but for hosting these events and showcasing them to the rest of the world.”

Working in partnership with Newcastle City Council, the North East Combined Authority and regional music development agency Generator, the 2025 Mercury Prize became the first in its history to be staged outside London since its inception in 1992.

For YolanDa, the success of the event was captured in the atmosphere inside the arena on the night.

She says: “I was so proud to be looking around at all the people who had bought tickets.

“No two genres were the same – you had folk, indie, experimental... and you could have heard a pin drop.

“People were just there to embrace the music.

“It was such a beautiful night.”

Broadcast across BBC platforms and reaching a global audience of around 1.6 billion, the awards not only showcased the best of British and Irish music, but also placed Newcastle firmly on the international stage.

Yet it was the activity beyond the arena that perhaps best captured its spirit.

A week-long fringe programme, delivered by Generator, extended the impact across the region, with live performances, workshops, industry panels and community events engaging thousands of people and providing opportunities for emerging artists and young audiences alike.

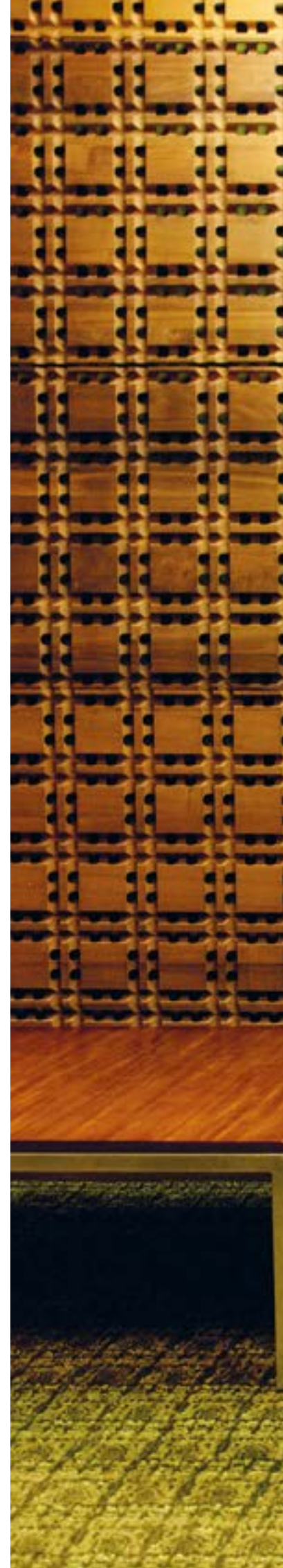
From the Mini Mercury Choir, which saw dozens of children take part in workshops before coming together to perform Sam Fender’s ‘People Watching’, to industry-led sessions designed to inspire the next generation, the programme ensured the Prize reached far beyond its traditional audience.

YolanDa says: “Everybody I spoke to said, ‘I can’t believe in my lifetime I’m seeing the Mercury Prize come to Newcastle’.

“And you think, actually, this is exactly why it should be here.

Words by Peter Anderson

Photography by Ben Benoliel







Award-winning saxophonist, composer and broadcaster Yolanda Brown



“There’s so much talent, so much passion.

“And now there’s a platform for it.”

The results were tangible.

The event generated more than £1.4 million for the regional economy, supported jobs and attracted thousands of visitors.

For Yolanda, though, the Mercury Prize’s true success lies in something less measurable.

She says: “None of it felt tokenistic. It was real.

“And you can still feel the effects months later.

“That’s when you know something has worked – when it continues to live on in the city.”

Yolanda’s ties to Newcastle run much deeper than music, rooted in a long-standing love for the city’s football club.

That connection began through her husband

# AWARDA



and music manager Adetokunbo ‘T’ Oyelola, whose lifelong passion for the Magpies would ultimately become Yolanda’s own.

She says: “My husband has so much passion for the club, for the story – it’s in his blood.”

T’s connection to Newcastle United stretches back to childhood, when, after moving from Nigeria to North London, he was introduced to English football in the way so many young fans are – by being asked who he supported.

While others gravitated towards the capital’s clubs, T was instead drawn to Newcastle.

Yolanda adds: “He watched Arsenal, he watched Tottenham, and then he saw a Newcastle match.

“They lost horribly, but he saw the support, he read about the story and he just felt it was his spirit animal.”



# WINNING

That passion would become a defining part of their relationship.

Introduced to the club through T, Yolanda's own connection quickly deepened, with regular trips from London to St James' Park becoming a feature of their lives.

She says: "We used to go up for games all the time.

"Those became our date weekends – watching the match, being right there with the team.

"And I was sold from the first time I heard 'Local Hero' – a saxophone solo ringing out around the stadium... I mean, are you kidding me? That was it."

And, as any Toon supporter will tell you, that sense of belonging has never been about results.

Yolanda adds: "It was much more than the game.

"It's the club, the people, the history, the feeling.

"You feel part of something truly special."

Nearly two decades on, that sense of belonging has only grown stronger, with Yolanda now a proud patron of the Newcastle United Foundation, the charitable arm of the club, which engages and inspires more than 70,000 people across the North East each year.

She says: "I've seen first-hand the extraordinary reach and impact it has.

"It just feels right to be working with them."

Her role has already seen her bring a slice of Tyneside to the capital.

At her London venue Soul Mama, Yolanda recently hosted a fundraising event for the Newcastle United Foundation, welcoming special guests including former Magpies' striker Shola Ameobi and chief executive David Hodgkinson.

She adds: “To be in our own venue, hosting this thing for Newcastle, with so many Geordie fans there – it really felt like being home away from home.”

The event brought together supporters from across London, many with deep-rooted connections to the North East, reinforcing the club’s far-reaching community and cultural pull.

And for Yolanda, that connection is now firmly a family affair.

With daughters Jemima and Adelphi both proudly wearing the black and white, the passion has been passed down to the next generation.

She adds: “They’ve both got their kits, they love watching the games and they’re living it with us.”

That same spirit of connection is something Yolanda is now channelling into her own venture.

Soul Mama, the live music and dining concept she co-founded with her husband, blends world-class performance with food inspired by mamas from around the globe, creating a space where audiences can experience everything from jazz and soul to gospel and reggae under one roof.

Having launched the concept at The Gantry hotel in Stratford in 2024, the pair are now expanding, with new venues opening in Islington and at Westfield Stratford City as part of an ambitious growth plan backed by a £1 million crowdfunding campaign.

Yolanda says: “We want to cement ourselves as a great place for music and food.

“You can have Katherine Jenkins, Mica Paris or the Syd Lawrence Orchestra – it’s a space where it can all come together under one roof.”

While the immediate focus is on establishing the brand in the capital, Yolanda is clear that her long-term vision stretches further north.

She adds: “There’s no doubt in our minds that Soul Mama will be in Newcastle in the coming years.

“We’ve been having lots of meetings over the past year, and we’re getting closer to announcing a location.”

For Yolanda, the concept is as much about platform as it is place – creating opportunities for artists to perform and audiences to connect.

She adds: “Artists want to play all over the country and across the world.

“If we can build a multi-venue platform that supports that, then we can bring them to Newcastle.

“That’s the dream.”

Given the city’s growing reputation for its food and music scenes, it is a prospect she believes is a natural fit.



Yolanda says: “There are already so many great venues and amazing restaurants in the city; it’s about bringing that together.

“We want to create a place where people can come for great food, experience incredible music and feel part of something.”

In recognition of her enduring passion for Newcastle, as well as her role in bringing the Mercury Prize to Tyneside, Yolanda was recently awarded the Honorary Freedom of the City of Newcastle – becoming the first black woman to receive the accolade.

Formally presented during an International Women’s Day event at the Civic Centre, Yolanda followed in the footsteps of footballing royalty Sir Bobby Robson, Alan Shearer and Eddie Howe, as well as global figures such as Nelson Mandela and Stevie Wonder, in receiving the city’s highest civic honour.

She says: “It’s surreal.

“I’m honoured, really chuffed.

“I said on the day that this is just the start of a beautiful partnership.

“I’ve had a connection with the city for many years, but to really drive change and create opportunities, it begins here.”

And that sense of momentum is already being felt.

The Mercury Prize will return to Newcastle later this year, taking over the Utilita Arena and the wider region, as the city once again steps back into the spotlight.

For Yolanda, it represents another opportunity to strengthen what has already been created.

She says: “We’re so glad to be back.

“It’s going to be bigger, it’s going to be better – and the fringe event is going to grow as well.”

With awareness now firmly established, Yolanda believes the next chapter will be defined not just by scale, but by participation.

She adds: “Now people know what it looks like, what it feels like, you’ll see so many more people getting involved.

“That’s what it’s about – letting the city make the most of the moment.”

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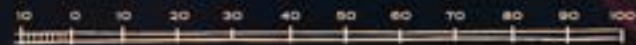
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# On track for the future

## Nexus

[www.nexus.org.uk](http://www.nexus.org.uk)

LinkedIn: Nexus

**Behind every journey on the Tyne and Wear Metro is a workforce trained to operate in a complex, highly regulated environment. At Nexus, developing that workforce means more than just training for today – it's about planning ahead and building a strong pipeline of talent. Here, Maureen Askew, head of learning at the transport provider, speaks to Peter Anderson about training, apprenticeships and developing a workforce fit for the future.**



Maureen Askew, Nexus head of learning

Pictures: Andrew Lowe

When Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the Tyne and Wear Metro in 1981, it marked what was described at the time as a “rapid transport system revolution” for Tyneside.

More than four decades on and that prediction has undoubtedly held true.

Operated by Nexus, the transport provider for Tyne and Wear, the system has grown from its original 44 stations to 60, now carrying around 35 to 40 million passengers a year – the equivalent of more than 100,000 journeys every day.

With the rollout of the new electric Class 555 trains replacing the original ageing Class 599 Metrocars, alongside major infrastructure projects such as the £24 million North Shields ferry landing, Nexus is at the forefront of delivering North East mayor Kim McGuinness’ ambition to build a “world-class public transport network” for the region.

Behind that operation is a workforce of around 1200 people, spanning drivers, engineers and frontline customer service staff, to name just a few roles.

Maintaining that level of service – safely, efficiently and in line with evolving regulation – requires continuous training, development and careful planning.

At the heart of that effort is the £8.4 million Nexus Learning Centre in South Shields.

Designed to replicate real-world conditions, it comes complete with a mock Metro station, platform infrastructure, 70-metre training track and driver simulator, where employees at every stage of their careers are equipped with skills to support the current system and its future growth.

For Maureen Askew, Nexus’ head of learning, the centre is as much about building confidence as it is competence.

She says: “This has given us the ability to train people in an environment that feels real, but without the pressure of being out on the live system.

“You can make mistakes, you can learn and you can build confidence before you are in a situation where it really matters.”

That real-world approach is embedded across the site, where more than 500 courses cover

engineering, infrastructure, operations and customer service.

A key focus in recent months has been driver conversion training, particularly as Nexus introduced its new fleet of electric trains.

Maureen says: “All of our existing drivers have undergone conversion training, which has been a huge programme in itself.

“The simulator has been a big part of that; it gives drivers a highly realistic experience of the new trains before they’re out on the rail network.”

Alongside retraining existing staff, Nexus is also building capacity for the future, with a new cohort of drivers – including 16 additional recruits – currently progressing through the recruitment programme, with training planned to commence in May 2026.

Training, however, does not stop once someone is qualified.

Maureen says: “People don’t come to the Learning Centre once.

“They come back for refresher training, re-certification and to keep up with changes, because the industry doesn’t stand still.”

From frontline customer service advisors to highly specialised engineering teams, the centre plays a key role in ensuring staff are not only trained, but fully prepared to operate safely and effectively across a complex, regulated transport system.

Maureen adds: “It’s about making sure people are ready and confident in what they’re doing every day.

“And that consistency is critical, because the standards we’re working to are so high.”

While the Learning Centre supports today’s workforce, apprenticeships are building what comes next.

And for Maureen, that starts with a clear philosophy.

She says: “We call it ‘grow your own’.

“We’ve got people who have been with Nexus for a long time across a range of roles, and we’re starting to see that natural turnover.

“We can’t wait until those gaps appear – we have to plan ahead.”

That long-term approach underpins Nexus’ apprenticeship programme, which is broad and carefully targeted, and covers areas such as engineering, HR, marketing and project management, while adapting each year to reflect the organisation’s evolving needs.

It is also closely tied to how Nexus uses its apprenticeship levy, ensuring funding is invested strategically to bring new talent into the organisation while supporting the development of existing employees.

Maureen says: “We’re always looking at the



projects coming up, the skills we need and where the risks are.

“That shapes the programme each year.”

The philosophy has included a renewed focus on engineering to support future demand, particularly a major signalling upgrade that will modernise how train movements are controlled across the network.

Maureen adds: “These roles take years to develop.

“You’re looking at four-year programmes in some cases, so you’ve got to forecast what you’re going to need and start building that pipeline early.”

In total, Nexus has 27 live apprentices, with a further cohort due to start later this year, selected from around 500 applicants through a rigorous process.

For Maureen, though, technical ability is only part of the equation.

She says: “You can teach someone the skills, but what you’re really looking for is how they approach things – their attitude, their willingness to learn and how they work with others.”

Structured work experience placements are also helping to build awareness earlier, giving young people hands-on insight into careers at Nexus.

Maureen adds: “It’s about opening people’s eyes to opportunities.

“For many, it’s their first real experience of the workplace, and that can be the start of their journey with us.

“It helps them see the careers that are right on their doorstep, and what they could be part of.”

Nexus has a strong track record for developing apprentices through the organisation and wider industry.

Stuart Clarke began his career at Nexus in the late 1990s as an electrical apprentice, and now holds the role of infrastructure director, while Paul Patrick and Neil Blagburn went on to hold senior director roles at Stadler and on the Northumberland Line, respectively.

Taken together, the approach is clear: futureproofing at Nexus is as much about people as it is infrastructure.

By investing in skills and creating pathways for progression, the organisation is building a workforce ready to evolve alongside the network it supports.

Maureen adds: “We invest a lot in our people because they’re central to everything we do.

“It’s not just about bringing people in; it’s about supporting them, developing them and helping them build a future with us.

“That will sustain the organisation into the future.”



**Nexus**  
For more information about Nexus, its services and its training programmes, visit the website at the top of this article.

# A long-term commitment to service improvement

## Northumbrian Water Group

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

LinkedIn: NWG (Northumbrian Water Group)

**Northumbrian Water Group is rolling out a multi-billion-pound infrastructure improvement programme focused on securing supplies for generations to come. Here, the organisation reveals more about the venture – known as The Big Upgrade – and tells N magazine how it will result in fewer leaks, fewer pollution incidents, more resilient supplies and healthier rivers.**

There aren't many things that are more fundamental to life than water.

Turn on the tap and out it comes. Push a button and flush it away.

We seldom think twice about it.

But it is something that is absolutely essential to modern life and the economy around us.

It supports households, communities, industry and agriculture alike.

It flows through the Tyne, the Wear, the Tees and is part of the North East's very fabric.

From healthcare to food production, hospitality to manufacturing and everything in between, reliable water and wastewater services are essential for growth and success.

Yet much of the pipework nestled deep underground, transporting millions of litres of water a day, was built many decades ago.

And as the population multiplies, demand for water surges and weather patterns become more unpredictable, it is vital for networks to become more resilient to futureproof ageing assets and Victorian-style infrastructure.

Now, a new campaign branded The Big Upgrade is set to make waves when it comes to completely transforming the water industry and improving service for customers and businesses in the North East.

Fronted locally by Northumbrian Water, and amplified nationally by Water UK, the campaign will highlight the most significant transformation made in generations, with the country's water infrastructure getting a full facelift, building resilience and supporting economic growth along the way.

The nationwide campaign will bring visibility and coherence to the massive investments the sector is making, demonstrating to customers that national investment translates into real local improvements.

For Northumbrian Water, this involves a huge £4.5 billion investment in environmental improvements, network upgrades and new treatment works between 2025 and 2030, to make services the best they can be for the people and businesses of the North East.

The Big Upgrade is about turning national ambition into visible, local progress, taking it from a countrywide campaign to real change on the ground in our streets.

Streets like the ones that run alongside the iconic Ouseburn, where £6 million improvements to the wastewater network are being carried out to reduce the use of storm overflows in Tyneside.





In County Durham, a £26.9 million programme is being carried out to upgrade three sewage treatment works, as well as a further £44.1 million investment in storm overflows.

In Middlesbrough, 23 kilometres of water mains are being replaced as part of a £5 million investment in water quality that will protect supplies for 2600 homes and businesses in the area.

And in Berwick, a £175 million project is taking place to strengthen the sewer network and construct sustainable drainage – improving the environment for the communities who love where they live.

For the North East, this means fewer leaks, fewer pollution incidents, more resilient supplies and healthier rivers.

For businesses, it means stronger reliability and confidence that critical infrastructure can support future growth.

For the economy, it represents a significant investment in the resilience of the region.

Northumbrian Water is on track to help to create 3000 jobs per year through its supply chain and add £5.7 billion to the North East economy through the use of local suppliers.

Already, around 60 pence of every £1 spent by the company goes back into the regions it serves.

Delivering such an ambitious plan requires skilled engineers, project managers, scientists, digital specialists and operational teams – supporting thousands of jobs and further employment across the supply chain.

At a regional level, it also stimulates innovation and contributes to further regeneration, as well as to the delivery of the wider ambitions of the region, supporting the North East Combined Authority's ten-year Local Growth Plan, which seeks to create tens of thousands of jobs, raise productivity and living standards, and close the gap with the rest of the UK.

The Big Upgrade will put transparency at the forefront, showing exactly what goes into these huge changes.

Both the national and the local campaign will span outdoor advertising, digital channels, local engagement and on-site information, so that household customers, businesses and stakeholders are being shown not just what is happening, but why it matters and how it benefits them.

Water UK's central website provides clear, accessible information on how water and wastewater systems work, alongside regional links to local projects and updates, which will help to demystify the world of capital investment and demonstrate the value of every pound invested.

Jennie Collingwood, Northumbrian Water's head of corporate affairs, says: "This campaign represents an exciting opportunity to talk to customers and businesses about the investments we are making in the region, which are our biggest and most ambitious yet.

"Through The Big Upgrade, we are explaining our decisions openly, sharing progress and being honest about the challenges the sector faces.

"We have listened to our customers, and we are taking accountability and strengthening our essential services.

"This is not a short-term campaign; it is a long-term commitment to service improvement.

"Its success will be measured not only in pounds invested, but in outcomes delivered – from cleaner rivers, more resilient networks, reduced leakage, improved customer service and infrastructure fit for a changing climate.

"It is a shared national effort, delivered locally, and designed to serve today's needs and those of generations to come.

"And we couldn't be prouder to be leading all of this for the North East."



**Northumbrian Water Group**  
To find out more about Northumbrian Water and The Big Upgrade, visit the website at the top of this article.

Scan the QR code to learn about projects at a hyper-local level in your area.



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# Law firm invests in future with senior appointment

## Hill Dickinson

www.hilldickinson.com

LinkedIn: Hill Dickinson

**Leading international commercial law firm Hill Dickinson has strengthened its team with the arrival of Paul Scope to drive forward the delivery of a dedicated employment law service. Here, Paul tells N magazine about his personal and professional lives, and why he's delighted to be playing a role in Hill Dickinson's future growth plans.**

Paul Scope recently joined law firm Hill Dickinson to launch a dedicated employment law offering for clients in the North East and beyond.

His appointment reflects the firm's continued investment in the North East, with the Newcastle office growing sustainably since its 2022 launch.

Originally established with a seven-strong health team, the Newcastle office has welcomed marine, private client and corporate teams during the last 24 months.

Now with nearly 30 people, the introduction of an employment team further reinforces the office's position as an increasingly significant full-service legal hub in the North East, which aligns with the firm's wider national growth strategy across its UK regional offices.

### Tell us a little bit about yourself...

I've worked as a lawyer for more than 25 years,

mostly with a regional firm based in Newcastle.

I've also worked in-house in London; I think that's where I get my commerciality from.

I live in Whitley Bay, right on the beach, with my wife and two kids, aged 17 and 15.

My spare time mostly operates around football – watching or coaching.

### What are the proudest moments of your career/personal life so far?

Personally, it's been watching my kids grow into confident young adults.

At work, it was being named Employment Lawyer of the Year at the Legal 500 Northern Powerhouse Awards a couple of years ago.

Hill Dickinson has just won Firm of the Year at the 2026 awards.

### What brought you to Hill Dickinson?

I was really impressed with the firm's ambition and growth strategy across the UK, but specifically the plan to grow our business services group in the North East into a market-leading team.

Culture was really important to me, and everyone I met was a positive advert for the firm – and that is still true a few months in.

### What is your favourite thing to do to unwind after a busy week?

Watch Newcastle United, go to a nice restaurant, coach my under-15 football team and watch TV.

I used to play golf and cycle, but not so much anymore.

### What was the last thing that inspired you?

My children – wanting to be better for their benefit.

### Has a book, podcast, seminar or training course had a big impact on your life?

Roger Federer has a video where he talks about how many points he lost in all the games he won.

Even he lost nearly half of all points played.

A point is just a point; move on to the next one and put it behind you.

I've shown it to the kids I coach to teach them about resilience.

### If you could have dinner with one person – dead or alive – who would it be?

Dinner with my dad one last time.

### What is your dream travel destination?

My favourite place is New York, but my dream destination is Rio.

### What is your favourite meal?

A Sunday roast with the family.

### If you weren't a lawyer, what would you be?

I'd be running an ice cream parlour on the beach, with a bike repair workshop out the back. And I'd possibly have a football coaching role on the side.

### And finally, what's your favourite song?

Bitter Sweet Symphony by The Verve, or All These Things That I've Done by The Killers.



## 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.



Tom Pollard, Hill Dickinson partner and head of corporate North East, left, with Paul Scope, employment partner

# Why corporate allyship must go beyond the logo

A staple of the commercial campaigning calendar for many years, Pride has placed the LGBTQIA+ community at the centre of corporate change. Yet in the midst of Donald Trump's attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion, Mark Zuckerberg's calls for more 'masculine energy' and reports suggesting some of Britain's biggest businesses are rowing back on Pride support, attitudes appear to be shifting.

Ahead of July's Newcastle Pride weekend event, how would you assess the present state of corporate backing for LGBTQIA+ inclusion? Where is support truly meaningful, and where must action replace performative gestures?

## Solidarity, belonging and safety



**Phil Douglas**  
Chief executive  
Curious Arts - Newcastle Pride  
& Hartlepool Pride

Corporate attitudes to Pride feel as though they are at a fork in the road.

On one side, there are businesses that are standing by their values, those that understand that supporting Pride is not about a logo change in June or a single public gesture, but rather that it is about backing LGBTQIA+ staff, customers and communities in ways that are visible, meaningful and consistent.

Some are even leaning in further, recognising that at a time of increased hostility and uncertainty, public support matters more.

On the other side, there is a noticeable hesitancy.

In some cases, support has reduced or disappeared altogether.

In others, organisations still want to be involved, but in quieter, less public ways.

They may still believe in the values behind Pride, but they are feeling nervous about

backlash, stakeholder pressure or shifting political winds.

This creates a more complicated picture than simply saying some businesses are abandoning Pride altogether, but it does reveal something important: for many, allyship has become conditional.

That matters, because Pride is not just a celebration.

It is a visible act of solidarity, belonging and safety.

For LGBTQIA+ people, seeing trusted employers, local institutions and major brands show up publicly can send a powerful message – that you are welcome here, and you matter as part of this community and economy.

When that support becomes more discreet, more hesitant or more transactional, people notice.

Communities notice too.

Politics changes and corporate trends come and go, but LGBTQIA+ people are not a seasonal audience; they are your workforce, your customers, your future leaders and your next generation of talent.

If a business only supports inclusion when it feels easy or risk-free, that says a great deal about how deeply those values are really held.

There is also a practical reality.

For many Pride organisations, charity-led cultural events and grassroots groups, corporate support is not an optional extra – it can be the difference between ambition and survival.

When one business chooses to step forward boldly, it often creates a domino effect that gives others confidence to do the same.

That kind of visible leadership really matters for organisations like ours.

The real question is not whether some corporates are stepping back, but whether others are prepared to step forward.

For businesses in the North East, this is an opportunity.

Pride support should not be seen as a communications risk to be managed, but as part of building the kind of region people want to live in, work in and invest in.

A thriving economy needs more than jobs: it needs culture, belonging and social confidence.

It needs people to feel they can build a full life here; that is what is going to futureproof our region.

The businesses that understand that and lead with their values will stand out now, and will still matter long after the current political weather has passed.

# Stepping forward with intent



**Deb Ions**  
Marketing director  
Square One Law

When support disappears under pressure, it shows it wasn't real to begin with.

The current conversation (or lack thereof) around LGBTQIA+ inclusion feels like a genuine inflection point.

For many years, Pride has been a visible driver of corporate engagement, but that visibility now appears to be fading.

Even the more performative signals of support – rainbow logos, campaigns and public endorsements – are quietly receding.

Set against a backdrop of shifting global rhetoric and organisations scaling back their commitments, there is a clear cooling of corporate support in this space.

That is disappointing, but perhaps more revealing than anything else.

It raises a fair question about how much of that support was truly values-driven, and how much of it was simply for show.

This is where the distinction between performative and meaningful support becomes critical.

Performative allyship is often reactive and campaign-led. It is visible in the moment, but lacks depth.

Meaningful support, by contrast, is embedded.

It shows up in policies, in culture and in consistent decision-making, regardless of external pressure.

Earlier this year, at the Pride Action North Awards, I spoke about allyship in action – the idea that being an ally only really matters when there is real commitment to make a difference to people's lives.

That message feels even more relevant now.

If this moment shows anything, it is that we need more organisations to step forward with intent.

For Square One, the push back we're seeing doesn't alter our approach, it reinforces it.

Allyship has never been about ticking boxes or external validation; it's about consistent, values-led action.

That belief is grounded in our values and our culture.

It hasn't happened by accident.

It has been shaped over time by leadership that has consistently pushed for more than surface-level commitment.

Inclusion has never been treated as a box-ticking exercise.

That has meant having honest conversations, standing alongside marginalised communities and taking action – not just when it is easy or popular, but when it is the right thing to do.

It also means recognising the human impact.

Allyship is not a nice extra.

It is the difference between someone feeling safe or invisible, between speaking up or staying silent, between wondering if they belong or knowing that they do.

Action must replace performative gestures.

It is not enough to signal support; businesses must demonstrate it through what they do and the positions they are prepared to take.

Consistency and courage are key.

At Square One, that starts internally.

It is about ensuring LGBTQIA+ colleagues feel safe, supported and able to be themselves every day.

But it also extends beyond our own offices.

As a commercial law firm, we recognise the influence we have in shaping conversations within our networks.

That means advocating for inclusive practices, supporting and partnering with organisations aligned with our values, and contributing to meaningful and impactful change.

The organisations that will stand apart are those that continue to show up openly, consistently and with intent.

Not because it is expected, but because it reflects who they are.



Join the discussion

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



# How CHASE venture is breaking down barriers

**Northumbria University**

www.northumbria.ac.uk  
 LinkedIn: Northumbria University

**There are research centres that produce papers, and there are research centres that change lives. The Centre for Health and Social Equity – CHASE – at Northumbria University was built to be the latter, and is spearheading work to bring organisations together and break down barriers across the region. Here, Professor Allan Kellehear, one of the centre’s lead directors, tells N magazine about CHASE’s social justice mission and how some of the partnerships it has founded are making a real difference in Gateshead.**

The inequalities that define life chances in this region are the product of decades of underinvestment and the uneven distribution of national resources.

From poor health outcomes, constrained social mobility and communities cut off from opportunity – CHASE exists to do something about them.

CHASE is an exciting new innovation; it is a research centre like no other.

It brings together solutions-focused researchers from across several disciplines – nurses, engineers, social workers, policy influencers, public health practitioners, business academics and more – who are united by a single conviction: that we all deserve better, and that we will all benefit from a healthy, prosperous, caring society that leaves no-one behind.

With three key areas of focus, we work to address the social determinants of health and wellbeing; build community capacity and resilience; and enable equitable access to health and social care.

We do this through bringing our multi-skilled team of experts together to form partnerships with NHS trusts, local authorities, businesses and third sector organisations.

**Supporting those reaching the end-of-life**

As a researcher specialising in end-of-life care, I see first-hand where we can improve support, educate, inform and create partnerships that improve lives.

The Compassionate Gateshead project began with a sobering observation that there was a major gap for people living with, or caring for, those with life-limiting illnesses in the town, as well as those grieving a loss.



Author Ann Cleeves speaks at the launch of the Festival of Compassion in Gateshead

**“As a community palliative care consultant, I see how low death literacy and discomfort discussing death shape experiences of dying, loss and grief”**

Dr Elizabeth Woods, palliative care doctor and programme leader

When people living in these circumstances were not in direct contact with professionals, they had little practical support.

That gap needed to be closed.

Through CHASE, we have brought together Gateshead Council, NHS palliative care



The Gateshead Energy Centre, on the town's Quarryfield Road

doctors, community organisations, charities, artists and writers to create social infrastructure where there had been almost none.

This infrastructure has included better transport, better communication about death and dying, better understanding and better services.

A Festival of Compassion brought these vital conversations into focus to support and educate our communities, our schools and our workplaces.

**Heating our homes more sustainably**

Another example of research benefiting the Gateshead community and the wider environment comes from our work with local authorities and housing organisations to ensure decisions about people's homes are also understood as decisions about health and wellbeing.



Professor Allan Kellehear

**“Working with Northumbria University is giving Gateshead Council a unique opportunity to address one of the most critical challenges in energy transition: social acceptance”**

Matthew Jordison, Gateshead Council energy operations team leader

When Gateshead Council wanted to connect social housing residents to its mine water district heat network – a first-of-its-kind

expansion in England – the challenge was never purely technical.

The council needed to ensure residents fully understood why the work was important, and that they would engage with – and adopt – this new way of heating their homes.

Through behavioural science research, we listened carefully to what residents needed long before the installation process even began, and our recommendations shaped how work could - and should - be done.

The result was that every household identified as being suitable for the pilot programme agreed to connect to this new heat network.

The residents felt engaged, informed and were eager to utilise this new technology.

**Improving lives across the North East**

Both examples powerfully demonstrate the impact we can have when we work with our communities and listen to their needs.

This is the emotional work that CHASE does. It is woven through our DNA.

Through CHASE, Northumbria University is providing a practical tool that businesses, local government and third sector organisations can use to address social equity issues

and improve economic and community development.

The North East is a region of extraordinary people.

We have already made a real difference to the lives of people in Gateshead, and we are looking forward to doing more.

The practical wisdom we are developing here can – and will – be rolled out across the region to bring civic improvement and benefit for our communities.



**Northumbria University**  
To find out more about the Centre for Health and Social Equity, and to learn how your business could help widen impact and value across the North East, email Professor Allan Kellehear, lead director, at [allan.kellehear@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:allan.kellehear@northumbria.ac.uk)

Alternatively, visit [www.northumbria.ac.uk/chase](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/chase)

# Shaping the future of rural Northumberland

**Delivering a new industrial and economic future for England's northernmost county**

**From Berwick to Blyth and Haltwhistle to Kielder, Northumberland's rural economy is rooted in land, yet increasingly shaped by innovation, collaboration and enterprise. Here, in an exclusive roundtable discussion held at Brocksbushes Farm Shop – hosted by N magazine publisher NET alongside Northumberland County Council, GFW and Lycetts – business leaders and policymakers examine where England's most sparsely populated county stands in 2026, and whether policy and investment are keeping pace with the county's economic potential.**

Words by Peter Anderson

## **Where does rural Northumberland stand in 2026 – and is policy keeping pace?**

From globally exporting timber processors and distilleries to family farms, tourism operators and micro-enterprises rooted in scattered communities, Northumberland's economic diversity is both a defining strength and an ongoing challenge.

Bringing coherence to such an eclectic mix is no small task, but it is a role Business Northumberland is seeking to play.

Through programmes such as the Northumberland Small Business Service, the Farming Advisory Service and rural growth initiatives backed by the North East Combined Authority, it provides a gateway to funding, advice and support.

Sarah McMillan, director of economic development and growth at Northumberland County Council, said: "Our economic strategy recognises the importance of our rural economy and rural communities.

"It builds on a strong evidence base about how that economy works – and on the investment we've already made."

Among those programmes, Sarah highlighted the Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal – a ten-year programme bringing sustained capital investment into rural towns and cultural assets on both sides of the border.

Reflecting on the £17 million Environment, Rural and Coastal Investment Plan, led by Northumberland County Council and agreed by the North East Combined Authority in

2024, Rosie Thomas, director of business development at Northumberland National Park, praised what she described as a genuinely collaborative process.

She said: "You can sit in consultations and feel like someone else is holding the pen.

"With this one, though, it genuinely felt like the pen was jointly held."

The theme of adaptation was highlighted by Barbara Huddart, managing director at Glendale PR and head of marketing at Bedmax.

The Detchant-based manufacturer supplies bedding products to the equestrian and racing industries, but has diversified beyond traditional wood shavings into straw pellets and biomass fuel products in recent years.

She said: "Export has grown hugely, and we now supply into Europe, Australia and Asia.

"Opportunities are growing, but the market is changing – and we have to change with it."

In a county home to vast swathes of productive woodland, forestry remains a key pillar of the rural economy.

However, Max McLaughlan, forestry director and head of wood purchasing at EGGER UK – which employs more than 600 people at its Hexham plant – said the sector faces mounting structural pressures.

Referencing a 15 per cent reduction in productive forest in England over the past decade, Max added: "We are eroding our own capacity at a time when global demand for

**ROUNDTABLE**



**“Opportunities are growing, but the market is changing – and we have to change with it”**

**Barbara Huddart**

Bedmax head of marketing and Glendale PR managing director



Harry Dickinson, Brocksbushes director

timber is set to quadruple over the next 50 years.

“If we’re not growing more of what we need here, we’re exposing ourselves to risk.”

Neil Harrison, co-founder and director of Alnwick-headquartered Reheat, said the region must take a more integrated view of how forestry assets are used, particularly in the transition to low-carbon heat.

Neil said: “If supply chains are to work in the long-term, we need to be planting the right trees today.”

**What does successful diversification look like – and how can rural businesses build resilient, year-round enterprises?**

On a former haulage yard stands the £16 million Ad Gefrin Anglo-Saxon Museum and Whisky Distillery.

Operating as a visitor attraction and premium spirits business, it sits at the intersection of tourism and manufacturing.

Eileen said: “We’ve built a beautiful building, but more importantly we’ve built a brand.

“And that brand allows us to sell Northumberland to the world.”

Brocksbushes has charted its own path of diversification.

Originally a 1970s agricultural contracting operation, the Dickinson family moved into soft fruit production before developing a seasonal pick-your-own enterprise, which later expanded into a farm shop and café.

More recently, the business has invested in retail, hospitality and a play barn to create a more year-round operation.

Director Harry Dickinson said: “Fruit in the summer was our core business, but the rest of the year was a bit of a rollercoaster.

“We always felt we were missing something all year round, particularly for families.”

Shona Ferguson, property manager at Cramlington-headquartered Fergusons Blyth group, highlighted another form of diversification.

While the business is widely associated with trucks and logistics, she explained Fergusons has also built a substantial commercial property portfolio.

However, she added: “There are challenges around business rates and awareness of funding support.

“If you want to move into new areas – whether that’s tourism or other commercial uses – there are hurdles to get over.”

This point was emphasised by Elliot Taylor, partner and farm business consultant at GFW.

He said: “Around 74 per cent of farmers now report some form of diversified income.

“But in many cases, only around 17 per cent of total turnover actually comes from those activities.”

That growing complexity was echoed by Simon Aitken, divisional director and head of the Newcastle office at Lycetts.



**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)**

He said: “For many clients, their original DNA is agriculture.

“But diversification is taking them firmly into a commercial space; that changes the risk profile completely.”

**Can technology drive a step-change in rural productivity?**

With the North East preparing for the £30 billion AI Growth Zone centred on the Cambois data centre campus, the region is positioning itself at the forefront of a new wave of digital capability.

However, roundtable members said the key question is how digital tools translate into tangible productivity gains across land-based industries and rural supply chains.

Elliot suggested that while artificial intelligence is already reshaping sectors such as professional services, it could also drive innovation across agriculture and land-based industries.

But he also warned sustained investment would be essential if rural businesses are to adopt emerging technologies, pointing to schemes such as the Government’s Farming Equipment and Technology Fund, which supports investment in productivity, animal welfare and slurry management equipment.

He added: “People don’t invest in technology once and then stop.

“If those types of schemes disappear, momentum could quickly stall.”

Max pointed to the realities facing manufacturers in rural areas, arguing technological progress must be matched by means to support it.

He said: “When you look at things like net-zero



and the transition to electric vehicles across supply chains, the infrastructure simply isn’t there once you move away from the main transport corridors.

“You have to ask whether businesses will invest in things like electric trucks if the charging capacity just isn’t available.”

Responding to those challenges, Sarah said the council is keen to ensure emerging digital capabilities are accessible to businesses across the county.

She added: “For rural businesses, digital and artificial intelligence adoption has the potential to transform how they operate and grow.

“Through initiatives such as our showcase events, we’re bringing companies together to share ideas and see where new technologies can genuinely add value.

“It won’t solve everything – but it does open up opportunities that simply weren’t there before.”

**“Many clients’ original DNA is agriculture, but diversification is taking them firmly into a commercial space; that changes the risk profile completely”**

**Simon Aitken**

Lycetts divisional director and Newcastle office head



Shona Ferguson, Fergusons Blyth group property manager



**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)**



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# Why data beats assumptions - building insight into every decision

## MMC Research

[www.mmc.agency](http://www.mmc.agency)

LinkedIn: MMC Research

## iamproperty

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

LinkedIn: iamproperty

**From product launches to acquisitions, Gosforth-based property tech organisation iamproperty has embedded customer insight across its business thanks to a long-running partnership with MMC Research. Here, the Sunderland-based strategic research firm's Natasha McDonough and Vicki Shouksmith team up with iamproperty's Michele Gettins to explain what happens when businesses stop guessing and start asking questions.**



Natasha McDonough, MMC Research founder and chief executive

“It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data.”

Arthur Conan Doyle's famous Sherlock Holmes line may predate today's technology, but it could still easily apply to the perils of making decisions in the modern boardroom.

For Newcastle-headquartered property technology firm iamproperty, it neatly sums up how the business moved away from making decisions based on instinct and assumption, and towards structured, independent insight based on real customer experience.

That shift has been shaped through a long term partnership with MMC Research, the Sunderland-based specialist research and insight agency founded by Natasha McDonough.

Through methodologies led by director of research and operations Vicki Shouksmith, the company provides independent customer research and insight, helping organisations understand what their customers think, need and value – and why.

The relationship between iamproperty – which provides an ecosystem of digital solutions including modern property auctions to UK estate agents – and MMC Research began in 2019 with work on a Net Promoter Score project.

“At that time, we had little to no proactive insight work with estate agents or consumers,” says iamproperty's chief marketing officer Michele Gettins.

She adds: “There was a real need in the business to understand how our estate agents viewed their relationship with us and the services we provided to them.”

The success of the initial feedback programme laid the foundations for iamproperty to take a more structured approach to customer research and insight, with data now informing operational and strategic decisions at all levels of the business.

A major project for MMC involved testing a new product idea before launch, combining feedback from estate agents, consumers and solicitors to understand how the concept would



Pictures: Andrew Lowe

Pictured, from left to right, are Vicki Shouksmith, MMC Research director of research and operations; Natasha McDonough, MMC Research founder and chief executive; and Michele Gettins, iamproperty chief marketing officer

land across iamproperty's whole market.

Vicki says: "The breadth of the results meant their marketing team went into the product launch really well informed that it would work.

"They also had real clarity on how it needed to be positioned in the market."

Michele adds: "It really showed that if you do the insights work up front, and understand how your product is going to be received, you launch from a good position."

As one of the fastest-growing property tech companies in the UK – it now works with some 7000 estate agency branches and employs more than 700 people nationwide from its headquarters in Gosforth – iamproperty's use of insights data has become increasingly strategic, particularly for acquisitions.

In recent years, MMC has supported iamproperty's purchase of three other businesses, carrying out independent customer research as part of the due diligence process.

Vicki says: "What Michele needed at that stage were open and honest discussions with customers of the businesses they were looking to acquire.

"That meant surveys and conversations that allowed us to say, 'this is a good proposition, customers like the product', but also highlight where they'd expect improvements.

"It gave them a strong base to start with their new acquisition; they knew where to make changes from day one."

Michele adds: "It was a core part of our due diligence.

"It was a big investment for the company; while a new acquisition needs to fit strategically,

it also has to fit with the level of customer experience we're committed to providing to our existing base.

"If MMC had found any red flags or deal breakers with customers, we would have made different decisions.

"The work we've done with MMC has given us confidence that we can make the right decisions at the right time."

A key strength of the partnership is that the insight gathered by MMC is instantly understood and useable across iamproperty's team, including at board level.

That understanding extends into marketing and thought leadership.

MMC now works alongside iamproperty's marketing agency O, contributing insight to campaigns and where O supports iamproperty to produce large scale reports on market sentiment.

That includes *The Real eState of It*, iamproperty's first industry report examining the estate agency market, which brings together perspectives from agents and consumers.

Michele says: "It's full of practical insight – real changes that agents can actually make to remain successful.

"It's the first time we've done a full state of the nation report for the sector but, given the strength of our position in the market and the support we have from MMC, we're confident to put it out there."

Natasha adds: "The key thing about what we do is that we work with nuance – what does the data actually mean?

"Research is key for any business if it wants to

make confident, informed decisions, but you can only do that if you understand exactly what it's telling you.

"I always say – a survey will tell you what people think, but a conversation will tell you why."

At iamproperty, insights are now fundamental to how the business operates.

Michele says: "There are no strategic decisions made in this business without being backed by insights data, usually supported by MMC.

"It helps us understand the market context we are operating in, read the terrain and discover opportunities for growth.

"For a business to be successful, it needs to understand its customers – I couldn't do my job and make the decisions I do without the continuous insight I have from our customers and our customers' customers.

"The insight data makes us more agile and more knowledgeable.

"Our execution is ingrained in insights, meaning we take the right approach from day one.

"If a business isn't utilising customer insights and research in some shape or form, it could be missing opportunities to be more successful."



### MMC Research

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

# Learning without limits for 150 years

## Newcastle High School for Girls

[www.newcastlehigh.gdst.net](http://www.newcastlehigh.gdst.net)

LinkedIn: Newcastle High School for Girls

Marking its 150th anniversary this year, Newcastle High School for Girls has long championed the power of an all-girl education. Here, head Amanda Hardie speaks to N magazine about the school's culture, the importance of giving girls the space and confidence to speak their minds, and its role in preparing young women for the careers – and leadership roles – of the future.



150 years ago, the idea that girls should receive the same sort of education as boys was as strange as the thought that man would one day walk on the moon.

Founded to challenge that idea and prepare girls to take their place in the world, the independent girls' school today known as Newcastle High School for Girls still proudly honours that original aim.

While the educational landscape for girls has transformed dramatically over 150 years, the school remains committed to a clear belief: that an all-girl environment continues to matter.

"Our ethos is very simple," says head Amanda Hardie.

"Our girls can learn without limits and become the person they want to be."

That girls-first ethos is reflected in the school's stated aim to empower girls to be leaders, trailblazers and world shapers, and its determination for each of its pupils to develop learning characteristics that include being courageous, confident, curious and collaborative, which will stay with them into adult life.

Amanda says: "Our school levels the playing field for girls, enabling pupils to step into life with self-belief, leadership skills and the confidence to succeed, whatever path they choose."

Joining the school as a newly qualified teacher in 1997, Amanda has spent almost 30 years working at Newcastle High School for Girls, and was appointed head three years ago.

After a comprehensive, co-educational school education herself, she was immediately won over by the power of the all-girl offer at Newcastle High School for Girls.

She says: "I couldn't believe an environment existed that was so empowering for girls.

"I'm deeply passionate about what we deliver and about the lives we can change.

"At its core, the school's role is to help each pupil develop character, as well as academic ability.

"I say to the girls all the time: be the best version of you."

Newcastle High School for Girls was formed in 2014 through the merger of Church High School and Central Newcastle High School, founded in 1885 and 1876, respectively.

Part of the national Girls' Day School Trust organisation, Newcastle High School for Girls welcomes pupils from across the region, including Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Hexham, Corbridge, Durham and Sunderland, with a fleet of buses making school life workable for busy families.

With smaller class sizes, staff at Newcastle



Pictures: Andrew Lowe

Amanda Hardie, Newcastle High School for Girls' head



High School for Girls can treat each girl as an individual, offering encouragement to follow their interests and passions.

Amanda says: "That sense of being seen, supported and celebrated is fundamental to building confidence in girls.

"In an all-girl environment, pupils are more likely to take intellectual risks, to be inventive and to speak up and share their thoughts.

"It creates a confidence that allows them to be more successful in the working world."

Amanda draws comparisons with mixed-sex classrooms, where boys can dominate discussion and girls may hold back or moderate their behaviour.

She says: "Our girls have the space to participate fully, without judgement, in lessons and across co-curricular activities.

"Many girls and their parents, who are making the move to our all-girl environment, share how they had once enjoyed sport or STEM clubs, only to drop out after feeling out of place or experiencing negative comments within a co-educational environment.

"Here, everything is open to the girls and designed specifically for them; they can follow their interests and passions without worrying about how they are perceived."

The school has a record of strong academic outcomes for its pupils, with learners more likely to take STEM subjects at GCSE and A-level than seen in the co-educational system, something Amanda believes is due to the lack of stereotypes or judgement.

But success is about more than just grades.

Amanda adds: "It's about giving girls a space to be who they are, to speak up and be confident – the chance to be leaders."

The focus on leadership begins early, with programmes starting in junior school that encourage girls to use their voice – whether through charity initiatives, environmental action or shaping what happens in their classrooms.

Amanda says: "Their voice is important to us and they know that.

"It gives them a sense that they matter and that they are valued.

"The more the girls experience leadership and realise they are good at it, the more they take that mindset forward with them.

"It's about confidence and opportunity."

Looking ahead, the school is placing growing emphasis on ensuring pupils are prepared for future careers in a rapidly changing economy.

Since becoming head, Amanda has built links with employers, investors and universities to better understand emerging skills needs.

Partnerships with companies including Sage have helped shape an understanding of future pathways in technology such as cybersecurity.

The school is also working closely with universities to address significant gender gaps in applications for some technical courses.

Amanda says: "By working on those imbalances early, we aim to ensure our pupils have both the skills and the confidence to enter fields where women remain underrepresented, if that's what they choose."

Alongside its forward-looking approach, the school holds a deep pride in its past and the success of its alumnae.

As the school marks its 150th year, that heritage will be celebrated through a programme of events, culminating in a major gathering in

September that will bring together alumnae, current pupils and families.

Amanda speaks warmly of the alumnae community, many of whom still contribute to school life by returning to share their experiences, offering current pupils real examples of career stories and the challenges they have faced.

From pilots, doctors and vets to roles with the British Fashion Council and McLaren F1, the range of careers is broad and deliberately visible.

Amanda says: "It's powerful for the girls to hear from someone who once sat in the same place they are sitting now.

"Our job is to make sure they are ready to grasp those opportunities by giving our girls a voice, a sense of self-esteem and confidence, and the space to share ideas, challenge each other and take risks among their peers.

"We are very proud to be an all-girl school."



#### **Newcastle High School for Girls**

**For more information about Newcastle High School for Girls, its curriculum and its culture, visit the website at the top of this article.**



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# 5 MINUTES

**WITH... DAVID BEATTIE**

[www.rountoncoffee.co.uk](http://www.rountoncoffee.co.uk) | Instagram: rountoncoffeeroasters



**David Beattie is founder of Rounton Coffee, the roasting business operating out of a former granary in East Rounton, close to North Yorkshire's border with Teesside. Here, he tells Steven Hugill about the trip that launched the business, swapping chemical engineering for finding the right coffee formula and the company's commitment to improving communities and environments globally.**

**Tell us a little about Rounton Coffee and its origins.**

Rounton Coffee started in 2013 after I visited Sumatra.

The experience of seeing coffee grown and roasted really blew my mind.

Once I returned home, I wanted to carve out a career in coffee, so we started selling our roasted coffee on local farmers' markets – at that point, we had little more than a desire to share great coffee with like-minded people.

Over time, we created a customer base that really appreciated what we were doing.

We moved into our East Rounton roastery and the business has grown to a level where we can look forward instead of looking backwards.

We now pack approximately 2000 bags of coffee each week, while our subscription service is attracting roughly 100 new customers each month.

The only investment we have ever made has been the energy to get this far.

And our core belief has never changed: sourcing responsibly, roasting with passion and keeping the relationships with suppliers as the beating heart of the business.

**Coffee wasn't your first career. How did you transition from chemical engineer to coffee roaster, and were there any crossover skills you were able to harness that made the shift easier?**

I took a huge leap of faith into an industry I knew nothing about.

I had good intentions and a huge desire to succeed, but what I didn't realise is how much my previous roles in the chemical industry had taught me.

Coffee roasting is a relatively simple process, using similar equipment and instrumentation that I was used to in the chemical sector, so that part of the process was relatively straightforward.

Working in highly structured environments quietly teaches you a lot – how to manage effectively, troubleshoot problems, navigate complex situations, drive progress and continuously improve.

That learning is what really shaped and motivated me.

**Founding and growing a business is never without its challenges. What were the biggest hurdles you had to overcome during the firm's formative years, and how are you now navigating the growth barriers that come with a more established operation?**

Like any business, we're constantly navigating obstacles; there are some you can see coming and plan for, and there are others that emerge unexpectedly.

I tend to think about our journey in phases.

The first phase was very much about survival.

Tracy (Beattie-Lee – accounts and business mentor) and I had no other source of income, so making the business work wasn't optional – it was essential.

We worked relentlessly to build something viable and sustainable – a business that could stand on its own.

That phase lasted around five years and laid the foundations for everything that has followed.

Today, the challenges are different.

I'm fortunate to have a strong team around me who understand what we're trying to build and take real ownership of their roles.

Rather than having a single boss, I now see myself as being accountable to many – our customers, our suppliers and our team.

Navigating growth now is less about survival and more about balance.

**The business' progress was boosted recently by a £150,000 machinery investment, which has significantly increased roasting capacity. How is that helping lay foundations for the next stage of the company's expansion?**

When you remove inefficiencies, improve quality and build resilience, growth tends to follow naturally.

But that isn't the primary driver.

That distinction matters to us, because we want the business to be sustainable and here for the long term, rather than chasing growth for its own sake.

That said, the investment in our coffee roaster has been genuinely transformative.

It has significantly improved consistency and quality, and has given us the capacity to operate with far more confidence.

Jamie, our head of coffee, is now roasting up to a tonne of coffee per day, which, for a business that started on a farmers' market, represents a huge step-change.

From a practical standpoint, it means we're able to support areas of the business that are naturally growing, such as subscriptions, without putting strain on production or compromising standards.

Business is like whack-a-mole; you fix one issue, then another bottleneck is exposed.

But we see that as a healthy process; each improvement gives us clearer sight of where to focus next.

**The business' potential is borne out in numerous customer agreements, not least a partnership in the Outer Hebrides. What does that deal say about the brand's appeal – and just how far can Rounton Coffee travel?**

One of the great things about food and drink is that its appeal is inherently universal.

Securing a wholesale partner in the Outer Hebrides is a great example of how far word-of-mouth can travel when the product and service are right.

Our subscription customers are now spread right across Britain.

That said, our heart remains in the North East and North Yorkshire.

Those regions are still core to who we are and how we operate.

Ultimately, distance is never the deciding factor. It is quality.

We're not interested in becoming bigger at the expense of standards.

**From backing the North York Moors Trust to engaging with youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds across Teesside, community sits at the heart of the business. Why does supporting the local area and its people mean so much?**

Our region has faced significant challenges over a long period of time, and hasn't always been given the support it deserves.

That creates a responsibility – particularly for businesses – to contribute positively to the communities and environments they benefit from.

We believe that if you take from a place, whether through people, resources or infrastructure, you have a duty to give back.

For us, that means supporting projects both close to home and further afield, which we can see, feel and genuinely engage with.

That might look like planting an orchard at the Hole of Horcum, in the North York Moors National Park, or supporting a tree nursery in Uganda.

Ultimately, success for us isn't just commercial; it is measured by the positive difference we can make to the places and people connected to the business.

**What are your ambitions for Rounton Coffee over the coming years?**

Our ambition is simple: to keep sourcing, roasting and selling great coffee, and to continue playing our small part in creating a better future for people and the planet.

What matters most to me is that Rounton Coffee continues to be a force for good.

We're proud to be a 1% for the Planet member, but my ambition is to go beyond that and embed purpose into how we operate, rather than just how we donate.

If, in the years ahead, people think of us as a company that genuinely cares and acts on those values, I'll consider that a real success.

# New appointments boost law firm's Teesside presence

**Muckle LLP**

www.muckle-llp.com  
 LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

Muckle LLP has bolstered its Teesside office with two appointments. Here, the B Corp-certified firm tells N magazine how its new arrivals have strengthened its delivery of specialist legal expertise across real estate and corporate disciplines, and leave it primed to enjoy further success.

**“Joining Muckle seemed like the natural next step in my career, and being part of the firm’s growth in Teesside is really exciting; I am already feeling settled into life at Muckle – everyone has been so welcoming”**

Samantha Alderton, Muckle LLP  
 real estate associate solicitor

Leading law firm for businesses Muckle LLP is continuing to invest in the best legal talent Teesside has to offer by growing its real estate and corporate team.

The firm’s new appointments, Oliver Hebdon and Samantha Alderton, form part of a more extensive investment in Teesside, following increased demand for specialist legal expertise from businesses operating in and around the area.

**A strong regional presence**

Muckle has been embedded in the Teesside community for several years, providing the full spectrum of legal services to clients such as Wilton Universal Group and Teesside International Airport.

As part of the firm’s five-year strategic plan, Muckle aims for its Teesside and Cumbria offices to contribute 15 per cent of the firm’s overall revenue by 2031.

As a purpose-led, B Corp-accredited firm, Muckle is also committed to using business as a force for good.

The firm has actively supported communities in Teesside, providing charities including Middlesbrough-based Clean Slate Solutions with wraparound support such as grant funding, volunteering and pro bono advice.

**Strengthening two award-winning teams**

Joining the corporate team is partner Oliver, with associate Samantha strengthening the firm’s real estate team.

Both are based in Teesside, providing an excellent legal service to clients throughout the region and beyond.

Stockton-on-Tees-based Samantha is

supporting head of real estate Gail Bennett, partner Rachel List and the wider team on a range of real estate legal matters.

Samantha says: “I was drawn to real estate law because of the transactional element of it; every transaction is unique.

“I get to know our clients and their businesses on a deeper level, which is really important.”

She advises clients on various property-related legal matters, including landlord and tenant, sales and acquisitions, secured lending and development.

**“I love the fast-paced nature of corporate law; Muckle’s combination of genuine local knowledge, complex transaction experience and the firm’s strong national reputation will be a real asset to Teesside”**

Oliver Hebdon, Muckle LLP corporate partner

Samantha has already received a warm welcome from the firm and is looking forward to her new chapter.



She adds: “Joining Muckle seemed like the natural next step in my career, and being part of the firm’s growth in Teesside is really exciting.

“I am already feeling settled into life at Muckle; everyone has been so welcoming.”

**Developing and retaining exceptional talent**

As part of the firm’s top-tier ranked corporate team, Oliver will be leading on M&A activity and supporting the acquisitive growth and succession planning of businesses in Teesside and beyond.

He says: “I love the fast-paced nature of corporate law; Muckle’s combination of genuine local knowledge, complex transaction experience and the firm’s strong national reputation will be a real asset to Teesside.”

“When the opportunity came to join Muckle and further develop the firm’s presence in Teesside, I knew it represented a very unique prospect.

“Muckle’s shared values and its ability to develop and retain exceptional people really stand out.

“It’s a firm where people can build long-lasting

careers that have a meaningful impact, and that is reflected in its culture and the commitment its clients and wider community experience too.”

**The right expertise**

Leah Duffield, private client partner and lead Teesside partner, is pleased to be expanding the Teesside team.

She says: “Building a strong foundation of people and capabilities is integral to Muckle’s growth in Teesside, so we’re focused on bringing in the right people with the right expertise that will help this office thrive.

“I am delighted to welcome Sam and Oliver to Muckle.

“Both bring exceptional knowledge of their legal areas and the wider Teesside region, which will undoubtedly play a key role as we continue to grow our client base in the area.

“I joined Muckle in March last year as the first to be based in Teesside, and I am proud of the team’s growth in such a short period of time.

“I am looking forward to seeing what the future holds as we continue to expand.”

Pictured, from left to right, are Muckle LLP Teesside team members Jack Reynolds, Leah Duffield, Rachel List, Samantha Alderton, Claire Rance and Oliver Hebdon



**Muckle LLP**  
 To learn more about Muckle, its Teesside-based legal support and its B Corp status, visit the website at the top of this article.

# Pioneering a new era of cancer treatment



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

LinkedIn: North East Chamber of Commerce

[www.sirbobbyrobsonfoundation.org.uk](http://www.sirbobbyrobsonfoundation.org.uk)

Facebook: Sir Bobby Robson Foundation

**With ground having been officially broken to create The Sir Bobby Robson Institute, the North East stands ready to lead a step-change in cancer treatment. Set to operate as part of Newcastle Hospitals on the Freeman Hospital site - and funded by The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation, part of Newcastle Hospitals Charity - the £30 million venture will allow specialist teams to significantly increase work that will help patients across the North East and beyond. Here, Sir Bobby's son Mark, chair of The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation, and Professor Ruth Plummer, director of the Sir Bobby Robson Cancer Trials Research Centre, tell N magazine about the institute's significance, its global potential and their pride in continuing the former England, Barcelona and Newcastle United manager's great legacy.**

## **Tell us about The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation and its core mission.**

Professor Plummer says: "Clinical trials of experimental drugs need specialist units and equipment, so we can safely work out the correct dose and evaluate if new treatments work to help make them available to all patients as quickly as possible.

"Sir Bobby knew this, and he wanted to be part of it.

"He was on a clinical trial in 2008 when we were trying to raise £500,000 to equip a new cancer trials unit at the Freeman Hospital.

"Amazingly, Sir Bobby and Lady Elsie offered to launch a foundation to help us, and we raised the money we needed in something like six or seven weeks.

"Our core mission then, as now, is to find more effective ways to detect and treat cancer.

"Sir Bobby was incredibly passionate about that.

"When we opened the original clinical trials unit in 2009, we named it the Sir Bobby Robson Cancer Trials Research Centre.

"He was able to officially open it and was very proud."

**Working alongside Newcastle Hospitals and funded by The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation, construction on The Sir Bobby Robson Institute has begun – a £30 million research facility set to serve patients from 2028 onwards. How significant will the venture be in shaping the future of cancer research and treatment?**

Professor Plummer says: "Since we opened the original trials unit, demand for cancer clinical trials – locally and globally – has grown.

"We're now at the point where space limitations mean our ability to offer as many trials as we would like is restricted.

"Frustratingly, the team cannot accept some research programmes offered.

"At Newcastle Hospitals, we have the specialist expertise and experience required to do more, and the new institute will make a huge difference in allowing us to offer more access to trials for patients.

"It will give people a chance to try an innovative treatment that could work for them, while also being part of something bigger, in terms of developing new cancer treatments.

"It feels incredible that construction has begun on the new institute; we've been working towards this for so many years and it's now becoming real.

"We'll be able to offer more options to patients – the kind of vital opportunities when people are running out of choices.

"The three-storey facility will bring together the team from the current Sir Bobby Robson Cancer Trials Research Centre alongside the cancer and blood disorders (oncology and haematology) research team.

"This means Newcastle's specialist cancer research teams will be able to pioneer more ground-breaking innovation in cancer treatment, through running a higher number of complex and larger trials.





An artist's impression of the £30 million Sir Bobby Robson Institute

“While the institute’s catchment area will cover around 3.5 million people living in the North East, North Cumbria and North Yorkshire, the work carried out there could benefit people around the globe.”

**Fundraising for The Sir Bobby Robson Institute has already passed the £26.5 million mark, with activity ramping up to secure the remaining £3.5 million. What will that next phase involve, and how can individuals and organisations add their support?**

Mark says: “We began our fundraising with £20 million already raised by our foundation’s long-standing supporters and fundraisers, which is phenomenal.

“All those coffee mornings, sponsored runs and heartfelt donations helped us get here, and we can’t thank everyone who has helped enough.

“The region’s business community, including our very long-term supporter Newcastle Building Society, has backed us enthusiastically and, over the past few months, a group of incredible founding donors have come forward to help us reach £26.5 million, including

an amazing £2 million from The Barbour Foundation.

“Every penny donated and any support offered is making a difference, and I’d urge any business, organisation or individual to contact us if they think they can contribute in any way.”

**What impact has The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation already had on patients and families, and are there any stories that particularly stand out?**

Professor Plummer says: “Every patient we treat is part of what Sir Bobby called his last and greatest team.

“In fact, we have patients who choose to undertake trials knowing from the outset that it may not improve their situation, but they know it could help other people coming after them.

“Sir Bobby knew that too, and described these people as selfless – I think that’s a perfect description.

“I hope Sir Bobby would be pleased with our ongoing work. It wouldn’t have been possible without his great commitment and the support



Professor Ruth Plummer and Mark Robson

of The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation.

“He was one of the first patients to receive treatment at the current clinical trials centre and he was very engaged with the process.

“Like all our patients, he understood the importance of clinical trials, both for him and for others.”

**Newcastle Hospitals Charity is a North East Chamber of Commerce partner member; how has its alliance with the business organisation supported its goals, and how is it continuing to drive future ambitions?**

Mark says: “Our partnership with the North East Chamber of Commerce reflects a shared belief that strong communities and strong economies go hand-in-hand.

“By working together, we’re able to connect the business community with a once-in-a-generation project that will deliver lasting benefits for patients and families across the region, while also supporting the Chamber’s ambition for a healthier and happier workforce.

“Through this reciprocal partnership, we’re

providing opportunities for businesses to engage with truly meaningful philanthropy, colleague engagement initiatives and community impact, while contributing to policy priorities that recognise the link between health, wellbeing and regional growth.

“In turn, the Chamber’s network, insight and advocacy plays a vital role in helping us build momentum, reach new supporters and realise our future ambitions.”

**Sir Bobby Robson remains a globally revered figure thanks to his footballing and philanthropic legacy. What does it mean to be continuing your father’s work?**

Mark says: “Deep down, I wish Dad was here to see all this happening.

“I’m very glad Mum is because building this new institute is a great thing, especially for the people we’ll be able to help.

“I know Dad would applaud our ambition because he knew how it felt to hear a cancer diagnosis – in fact, he heard that terrible news five times.

“Research matters to the cancer patients who will come to the new institute from across this region to receive treatment that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

“And it matters to the cancer patients of the future, both here and across the world.

“We have to keep moving forward and be hopeful in the face of a disease that affects us all one way or another.

“That was the legacy Dad wanted to leave.”



#### **The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation**

For more information about The Sir Bobby Robson Institute campaign, visit the website at the top of this article or click on [www.sirbobbysgreatestteam.co.uk](http://www.sirbobbysgreatestteam.co.uk)

To enquire about fundraising for The Sir Bobby Robson Institute, contact Kate Bradley via email at [kate.bradley14@nhs.net](mailto:kate.bradley14@nhs.net) or call 0191 213 7235.

# Plotting the right course forward

## The Northumberland Golf Club

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

LinkedIn: Northumberland Golf Club

**Steeped in history and defined by its architectural pedigree, The Northumberland Golf Club has long been regarded as one of the region's most respected courses. But in a changing landscape, preserving that status requires more than heritage alone. Here, general manager James Thomas speaks to Peter Anderson about modernisation, sustainability and his ambition to re-establish the club among the finest in the North of England.**



**James Thomas**  
General manager  
The Northumberland Golf Club

There is a framed photograph in the clubhouse at The Northumberland Golf Club of the then Prince of Wales lining up a putt on the 18th green in 1933.

Prior to the abdication crisis that would define his reign, the future Edward VIII's decision to travel to Newcastle to play a course associated with Heaton-born 'King of Swing' James Douglas Edgar underlines just how highly regarded the club has long been.

Opened in 1896 and set within the woodland of High Gosforth Park, weaving in and out of Newcastle Racecourse, the layout has built a reputation over more than a century for its strategic challenge and championship credentials.

Today, that legacy is being carefully preserved as the club looks to evolve.

Leading that next chapter is general manager James Thomas, who was appointed in 2023 and has outlined a strategy to strengthen the club's position by balancing investment, commercial growth and modernisation with the heritage that has long defined it.

Central to the approach is a clear philosophy around the course.

James says: "The challenge is understanding how the golf course was originally designed.

"Over time, individual ideas and standards change the playability of the golf course, and a course can lose its architectural hallmarks.

"Our job is to bring it back to its original character, ensure it stands up to the modern golfer, and to promote and preserve the principles that make British courses some of the best to play in the world."

For James, modernisation is not about imposing change, but about restoring intent.

That balance is particularly important at Northumberland, where the course was shaped by two of golf's most influential

architects – Harry Colt and James Braid – whose work helped define the principles of course design during the sport's formative years.

In recent years, the club has also worked with internationally renowned architect Mackenzie & Ebert to develop a long-term masterplan, providing a framework to guide improvements while respecting the course's original identity.

James adds: "We reviewed what had been done, what hadn't and started to implement those changes.

"It is important to get back to the original features and making sure the course plays as it was designed to."

James, who is also a PGA professional and was previously general manager at Harrogate's Oakdale Golf Club – where he played a central role in transforming its fortunes – has been implementing a number of changes off the golf course to lay the foundations for future success.

On arrival at Northumberland, he found a club that, despite its storied history, faced some structural and operational challenges.

James says: "Northumberland was a sleeping giant; it had all the pieces of the jigsaw required to build something truly special."

What followed was a comprehensive reset, with governance tightened, trading improved and clearer roles and accountability introduced across the business, supported by a detailed member survey to help shape a defined direction.

Alongside this came significant investment across the course and facilities.

James adds: "It started with understanding and defining our direction, and putting the right structure in place, making sure people understood their roles and responsibilities.

"We have made a lot of tangible



enhancements, including a new reception, improvements to the driving range and swing studio, greens drainage, redesigned bunkers, a new practice putting green and chipping green.

“It’s about raising standards across the board.”

A new head chef has also been recruited to elevate the clubhouse offering.

“He has been a tremendous addition to our high-performing team,” says James.

He adds: “The quality of food he can produce is exceptional – it’s not something you’d typically associate with a golf club.”

Not all the changes, however, were straightforward.

The amalgamation of the men’s and ladies’ clubs – seen as essential to modernising the club and unlocking future opportunities – proved a complex and sensitive process.

James adds: “It was absolutely the right thing to do.

“The club was already on this journey when I arrived, and I complemented the amalgamation process through to completion.

“It was a significant milestone in the club’s history.”

Beyond structural and cultural change, the focus is also on long-term sustainability.

From exploring alternative grass species to anticipating tighter environmental regulation, the aim is to ensure the club is well equipped to adapt to future challenges.

James says: “A pivotal part of my role is

focusing on what the game of golf, and the club, will look like in 20 years’ time.

“There are going to be significant challenges around water use in the near future.

“We’re moving towards finer grasses that are more resilient – it’s about making sure the course is sustainable for the long-term.”

These changes have seen the club strengthen its profitability, with membership growing and a renewed sense of momentum.

James adds: “Last year, we recorded a profit, strengthened our cash flow, recruited more than 100 new members and saw strong retention at the turn of the membership year.

“That tells us we’re moving in the right direction.”

The club – which once hosted the Women’s British Open in 1981 and also served as a venue for R&A regional qualifying for The Open Championship – has also attracted a number of high-profile events in the past two years, which have elevated its profile and helped signal its ambitions for the future.

These include the Northumberland Professional Golf Championship & Pro-Am, launched in 2024, and a DP World Tour qualifying event last September – one of just 13 held globally – marking the first time such a tournament has been staged in the North East.

James says: “The aim was to put Northumberland firmly back on the map.

“Securing the DP World Tour qualifying event was a big step forward for us.

“We focused on delivering the best possible

experience for the players and DP World Tour officials, and, as a result, we’ve now agreed a three-year contract, which is a fantastic milestone for the club.”

And as he looks to the future, James’ focus is on building a club that honours its past while delivering an experience that keeps members and visitors coming back.

He adds: “It’s about creating an experience that exceeds expectation.

“From the arrival at the club to the greeting, quality of the course, the clubhouse, the staff and the facilities – it’s the small details that will help differentiate us from other clubs.

“And there’s every ambition and plan to host bigger events and be recognised on the global golfing map – that’s where we’re heading.”



**The Northumberland Golf Club**  
**For more information about The Northumberland Golf Club and to learn about memberships and how to book a round of golf, visit the website at the top of this article.**

# Unlocking university expertise to drive regional innovation

**Arrow**

[www.arrowinnovation.org.uk](http://www.arrowinnovation.org.uk)

**A collaboration between regional universities is helping North East organisations turn ideas into commercial and innovation opportunities by connecting them with expertise and specialist facilities. Here, N magazine looks at the programme's progress and highlights the advances it has helped deliver.**

Roxana Montazerian, ROXID founder and chief executive, with Chris Angus, head of business support and Arrow programme manager at Newcastle University

Since 2018, the Arrow programme has helped more than 300 regional businesses connect with university expertise and facilities.

This support has helped them develop innovative new products, technologies and services, boosting the regional economy along the way.

Estelle Blanks, Newcastle University director of business development and enterprise, says: "Arrow simplifies the process for businesses to access universities.

"It enables organisations to test-drive collaboration with universities, helping them access the expertise and facilities needed to bring innovative ideas to life."

#### **What is Arrow?**

Arrow is a gateway for North East businesses, charities and entrepreneurs to access world-class facilities and university expertise.

Through Arrow, organisations work with dedicated innovation practitioners who help shape targeted projects and connect them with relevant academic specialists from Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria and Sunderland

universities, along with wider regional networks.

It breaks down barriers, offering unique support and advice, and allows companies to try the relationship to ensure a good fit.

#### **How does Arrow support business?**

The Arrow programme provides a range of support to help businesses grow, equipping them with the tools they need to succeed on their innovation journeys.

Through Arrow, businesses work with dedicated innovation practitioners that help shape tailored projects and connect them with relevant academic specialists.

This support may include help with research and development, proof of concept and validation, specialist data science expertise or access to research facilities and equipment.

#### **What organisations has Arrow supported?**

Wallsend-based subsea engineering firm Walker Subsea is one of many Arrow success stories.

It collaborated with Arrow at Northumbria University to improve the thermal management and safety of an underwater battery pack, identifying suitable coolant options and potential suppliers.

Vahid Walker, founder of Walker Subsea Engineering, says: "Arrow has been instrumental in helping us refine our underwater battery technology.

"Northumbria University's expertise in fluid chemistry gave us insights we wouldn't otherwise have been able to access.

"Beyond technical support, the connections and networking opportunities have been invaluable.

"This project has opened doors for continued collaboration, and we look forward to working with the university on future innovations."

Entrepreneur Andrew Turner worked with Arrow experts at the University of Sunderland to develop a device capable of travelling through water networks and capturing operational data, using computational modelling to explore



possible design concepts.

Andrew, founder of Andrew Turner Inventions, says: "The expertise provided by Arrow was incredibly valuable.

"Its specialised knowledge helped solve a very niche problem, and the support exceeded my expectations.

"I would highly recommend Arrow to anyone needing targeted academic expertise to advance their innovation."

Heritage technology start-up ROXID partnered with Arrow specialists at the National Innovation Centre for Data at Newcastle University to develop artificial intelligence tools that automate the collection and analysis of heritage site information.

Roxana Montazerian, ROXID founder and chief executive, says: "The project helped us understand the potential of artificial intelligence in our field and connected us with world-class experts.

"Their support was instrumental in shaping our digital application and securing further funding and investment."

Arrow researchers at Durham University informed the development of EU-compliant coloured gels for Durham-based Intelligent Gels.

Matt Wilson, Intelligent Gels' managing director, adds: "Arrow gave us the tools to tackle a complex problem head-on.

"Its approach has not only advanced our product development, but also strengthened our partnership with Durham University."

**What has Arrow achieved so far?**

More than 300 businesses have already benefited from the programme through access to research, university experts or facilities to accelerate product development, and access to wider networks, long-term collaborators and collaborative bids.



Matt Wilson, managing director, Intelligent Gels

**Why are universities supporting regional businesses?**

Through its support for North East enterprises, Arrow has stimulated innovation across the whole region, bolstering growth and employment.

Arrow's impact lies in making innovation more accessible, enabling North East businesses to build capability, invest in long-term innovation and shape their own growth trajectories.

Over time, this more inclusive approach to innovation will help strengthen the region's business base and support more resilient, innovation-led growth.

Jenny Taylor, Northumbria University executive

director of research and innovation services, says: "The North East is full of brilliant businesses doing really exciting things.

"And by supporting them on the delivery of their innovation projects, we enable them to grow, deliver jobs, enjoy economic success and help retain talent in the region."

**Who is eligible?**

Organisations, individuals and businesses from across the region looking to take a new or innovative product or service to market are eligible to work on a fully-funded innovation project with Arrow.

Thanks to renewed funding from the North East Combined Authority, organisations in Gateshead, Wearside and South Tyneside can now join those in Newcastle, Northumberland, North Tyneside and County Durham in accessing Arrow.

Richard Baker, Durham University director of economic development and commercialisation, adds: "It's fantastic news that Arrow will be able to work with businesses to support their innovation projects across the entire North East Combined Authority area."



Dr Gareth Crapper, Arrow senior innovation associate at Northumbria University, left, with Vahid Walker, founder of Walker Subsea Engineering



**Arrow**

**To learn how Arrow could help your organisation innovate, and to get in touch, visit the website at the top of this article.**

**ABI REID**

# SHoRE

**MERWAVE**.co.uk



**TOM REID**

**THING**

**Born from lockdown experimentation and shaped by life on the North East coast, Whitley Bay-based Merwave is redefining how women see – and wear – their natural hair. Here, as the brand scales into nationwide retail and launches a new campaign championing real women, founders Abi and Tom Reid speak to Sian Anderson about building a business that is as much about identity as it is about product.**

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

Instagram: [merwaveofficial](https://www.instagram.com/merwaveofficial)

Words by Sian Anderson

Photography by Samantha Orton Photography

**MERWAVE**

Abi Reid didn't set out to start a business – she just wanted her hair to behave.

She says: "My hair always looked frizzy.

"I was ordering every product off the internet – it was arriving every day – and it still just looked rubbish."

Spurred on by lockdown in 2020, Abi stepped away from daily blow-drying and let her hair do its natural thing.

With frustrating results.

Eventually, she realised her hair wasn't straight or curly – it was wavy.

And that helped Abi realise that none of the products she'd tried were right.

She says: "All types of curly hair are put into one group – whether it's curly, coily or wavy – and it just didn't make sense.

"That's like saying everyone should wear the same make-up shade; it just doesn't work.

"Once I realised I had waves, I knew I needed a product that was less heavy than those for curls.

"I just wanted someone to say, 'here's the product, and here's how you use it'".

But nobody did.

Abi realised there was a gap in the market and, alongside husband Tom, decided to create the product themselves.

Merwave was born.

As was baby number two.

Abi says: "It was 2020 – the same year we fell pregnant with our second child.

"As it turned out, we grew a baby and a brand at the same time."

The couple had a great skill set between them; Abi had worked in marketing and Tom in e-commerce.

They found their supplier and made a start.

Tom says: "We told them exactly what we wanted, and then it was just trial and error: there were loads of samples coming over.

"It was a process of tweaks and refinements until Abi was happy that her waves looked wonderful."

From the beginning, the idea wasn't just about the product, it was about perspective and the journey hair can go on, with the North East coast having always played a part in the Whitley Bay-based brand's identity.

Abi says: "The seafront is at the bottom of my parents' street – it's just part of my life.

"We do pull on that – beach waves, Merwave – it all links back."

Budget in the early days meant product marketing came organically.

The couple leaned into instinct over polish, with Abi filming videos of herself and stopping strangers in the street to talk about their hair.

Tom says: "We couldn't just spend £400 here or £400 there, so Abi ended up doing most of the videos.





“To begin with, the feed looked very much like a personal account, and I think that worked.”

“The street interviews were the ones that really allowed us to scale.”

Abi adds: “I would literally go up to random people and ask them if they thought they might have wavy hair.”

It clearly resonated, and the Merwave community grew and grew, to the point it has become central to how the brand evolves.

From the early days, Abi and Tom were sending samples to their most engaged customers, gathering feedback and refining products in real time.

Tom says: “Our top customers are always really involved and give us honest feedback, so we can continue to tweak new products to make sure they work for them.”

And that same community is now involved with their new campaign: The Awakening.

Abi and Tom gathered 20 of their community at Harbour House, in North Shields, for a photoshoot, with the idea of showing off real waves and how natural and great they can look.

Abi says: “The whole purpose is to push the message that you might have secret waves.”

“It’s about helping people recognise what’s already there, embrace it and feel confident.”

That evolution is reflected in a recent rebrand, which shifts towards something more considered and tactile.

Abi adds: “We wanted it to feel beautiful and simple; something that would appeal universally.”

Inspired by the sea glass collected by their young son, and shaped by their coastal surroundings, the new design is led by soft tones and fluid forms.



Tom adds: “It’s timeless – it won’t feel outdated.”

“We live by the coast – the sea, the colours, even the sea glass in our house – it’s not branding, it’s our life.”

With a clear proposition and a more considered design, the brand secured a listing with Boots after identifying a gap on the national retailer’s shelves.

Tom says: “We went into Boots, looked at the shelf and thought, ‘there’s nothing here for wavy hair’.

“So we showed them what was missing.”

“It was sort of a ‘wavy hair goes here arrow’, and it worked.”

“We had a meeting within a month.”

Alongside UK retail growth, the brand is looking further afield.

**ABI REID**



**TOM REID**

# “WE LIVE BY THE COAST – THE SEA, THE COLOURS, EVEN THE SEA GLASS IN OUR HOUSE – IT’S NOT BRANDING, IT’S OUR LIFE”

With a European fulfilment base in the Netherlands, Merwave is preparing to expand into new markets – beginning with a launch in the country before rolling out more widely.

Behind that growth, the couple’s working dynamic has remained deliberately informal.

They don’t sit side-by-side all day.

Instead, they carve out their own spaces: Abi often films content from home, with Tom operating from a co-working space.

The real conversations happen elsewhere, with car journeys the place where board meetings are held, ideas are tested and decisions are made.

However, as the business has grown, so too has come the need for structure.

Through the Scaleup North East programme, the couple have been working with adviser Craig Huntingdon, who scaled a wall covering manufacturer globally following a management buyout in his early 20s before going on to become an Aldi trading director.

With those experiences, Craig has brought an external perspective to what was previously a largely instinct-led venture.

Tom says: “Craig is like a voice of reason.

“He’ll challenge you – ‘have you thought about this, this, this?’ – and that’s invaluable.”

It’s part of a broader shift from start-up to something more considered.

Tom adds: “If someone’s already built a £25 million business, you want to learn from that.

“Otherwise, you’re just making it up as you go along.”

While Merwave now reaches far beyond the region, its North East roots remain central to how it operates.

Abi says: “Everyone knows everyone here.

“Once you start to meet people, they’re really willing to connect with you – there’s not much gatekeeping.”

That sense of Northern openness comes with its own contrasts.

**“WE WENT INTO BOOTS,  
LOOKED AT THE  
SHELF AND THOUGHT,  
‘THERE’S NOTHING  
HERE FOR WAVY HAIR’  
– WE SHOWED THEM  
WHAT WAS MISSING,  
AND HAD A MEETING  
WITHIN A MONTH”**



Abi adds: “There are fewer people doing what you’re doing here, which makes the community feel tighter and the connections more meaningful.”

It was something brought into sharp focus during a recent visit to Downing Street, where 50 female founders from across the region, including Abi, gathered in London.

She says: “It was amazing.

“It made me think how strong the North East community is, and how much more we could do by bringing people together back home.”

For a brand that began with a bathroom routine and a handful of samples, the pace of growth has been quietly transformative.

From retail expansion to a campaign built on real women, Merwave is entering a new phase.

For Abi and Tom, these are exciting times for the brand from the Bay, but the focus remains the same: build carefully, stay close to the customer and keep things simple.

What began as a personal discovery is now reaching far beyond the bathroom mirror, with Boots stores nationwide and European expansion lifting Merwave to a bigger stage.

Abi adds: “There’s a lot more we want to do.

“We’re just getting started.”

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# LAST

**Closing this edition of N magazine, Praveen Karadiguddi, chief executive of Newcastle-based Scrumconnect, reflects on the digital firm's recent £38.8 million HM Revenue & Customs deal, the jobs it promises to create and the North East's pivotal role in the London-headquartered company's growth.**

[www.scrumconnect.com](http://www.scrumconnect.com)  
 LinkedIn: [Scrumconnect Consulting](#)

**Congratulations on the recent £38.8 million Government contract. What does securing such a high-profile deal say about Scrumconnect's capabilities and its position in the marketplace?**

It's another validation of the work we've been doing for many years, and the technical capability we bring to the table.

We already support 16 of the Government's top 75 digital services, and our focus has always been on delivering high-quality outcomes for customers in tightly regulated sectors.

This deal demonstrates the level of confidence that exists in the market, and reflects the reputation we've built around partnership, delivery reliability and long-term service quality.

**A key spin-off from the contract is a commitment to create at least 70 jobs across the business' Newcastle and London hubs alongside the founding of a third operational base. How will those additional staff and the new office bolster the firm's progress?**

We're fortunate to have an established testing and quality assurance practice that is led by Seymour Pattison, a talented quality assurance professional and Newcastle native.

Seymour's team supports several clients, including the Department for Education and the Ministry of Justice, and we're now hiring an initial 70 additional practitioners to join that team.

This isn't about us scaling our headcount; we're looking for the best, most energetic quality assurance talent, who will help us further strengthen our capability and give us even greater depth in our skills and approaches.

We are in an exciting growth phase, so we are also exploring a new tech delivery centre to add to our locations in Newcastle and London.

This will create greater career opportunities for our people, while also giving us more flexibility in how we structure delivery as demand increases.

**The business has been based in Newcastle's Portland House since 2024 following a £40 million investment into the region. What attracted the business to the North East, and how will its team continue to support the firm's growth plans?**

The North East has been a brilliant place for us to grow because it combines the right mix of clients, talent and community.

We've been able to work with forward-thinking clients that are open to collaboration and innovation.

That local demand has given us opportunities to prove our value and build lasting partnerships.

The wider tech community thrives here too.

There's a strong network of meet-ups, events and

collaborations where people share openly and generously with each other.

We have been proud to contribute towards this, most recently through an artificial intelligence in practice event that brought together leaders, practitioners and students to explore what comes next.

We also have big plans for the upcoming TechNExt festival.

The North East is welcoming, straightforward and supportive, and we love being a part of it.



# WORD

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