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HEART AND HOME

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CREDITS

HEAD OFFICE

Salvus House, Aykley Heads,
Durham City, DH1 5TS

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CONTACT:

@NETimesmagazine
www.netimesmagazine.co.uk

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Editor
Steven Hugill
steven@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Bdaily digital content manager
Pete Anderson
peter.a@bdaily.co.uk

Business development director
John Duns
T: 07920 152 523
john@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Creative & managing director
Peter Mallon
T: 07590 064 800
pete@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Partnership & marketing manager
Sarah Law
sarah@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Digital marketing consultant
Sian Anderson
sian@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Campaign operations co-ordinator
Kirbie Bestford
kirbie@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Event managers
Lesley Hampson
lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Dawn Owens
dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Finance manager
Jill Brown
jill@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Filmography
Andrew Lowe
andrew@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Paul Geist
paul.geist.photo@gmail.com

Photography in this issue:
Andrew Lowe
andrew@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Mike Sreenan
www.michaelsreenan.com

Jason Thompson; Lauren Peters;
Krzysztof Furgala; Pawel Gajek
www.thisisthebiggerpicture.co.uk

Steve Brock
www.stevebrockphotography.co.uk

Additional writers in this issue:
Vicki Henderson
Simon Rushworth

Contributors:
Graham Melroy
Elaine Stroud
Duncan Hedley
Matt Bratton
Stephen Patterson
Paul Blake
Alison McGee
Laura Sillars
Michelle Sheekey
Gordon MacPherson

Designed by:
Ryan Errington
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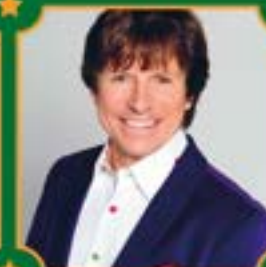
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WELCOME TO ISSUE 477

Editor's Word

From consoles to community, people and positive change resonate throughout this edition of N magazine. Here, Steven Hugill reflects on the power of embracing opportunity, challenging assumptions and using success to make a difference...



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of N magazine.

Somewhere in my garage, hidden beneath enough dust to potentially qualify as an archaeological find, is an old PlayStation.

It hasn't worked for years; a rainy day project that remains ignored despite every passing shower.

Stacked beside it are a number of plastic game cases. Some are better than others.

Before titles such as Grand Theft Auto, Red Dead Redemption and Call of Duty became mainstream marathon challenges, that pile was topped by games like Brian Lara Cricket.

Released in the late 1990s, it felt, for all its hugely pixelated graphics, like a game beyond its time, certainly on the cricketing front.

It was also made much better by its glitches: fielders defying logic and geometry; suspiciously swear-y dubbed crowd noises; commentator Sir Geoffrey Boycott pronouncing certain countries' names with a wince-inducing colonial accent.

There was comfort in the mayhem, though; mastering the six-hitting button while batting was huge fun, and scoring 1000 runs in a couple of hours made England's present-day, slog-happy mob look positively pedestrian.

It's why one of the long-read features in this edition strikes a real chord with me.

Newcastle native Jim Ryan joined the fledgling PlayStation gaming venture as international finance officer before, over three decades, helping transform it from market greenhorn to major powerhouse.

From initially jostling for position with established heavyweights Sega and Nintendo, the brand became a billion dollar business, with

tens of millions of players complemented by a growing presence in film, television and digital services.

Like any good game, though, Jim's story wasn't without challenge.

As COVID-19 enveloped the world, Jim and PlayStation fought arguably their biggest battle – launching its fifth headline console as the world shut down – with the Royal Grammar School alumnus leading global operations spanning California, Tokyo and Europe from his London dining room table.

That the venture proceeded – and succeeded – says everything about Jim and his approach to life.

And today, he's harnessing that same spirit to help others move up a level or two.

Having retired in 2024, Jim is now a Royal Grammar School governor and a trustee of Newcastle United Foundation, the club's charitable arm that supports thousands across the region through education, employability and community programmes.

His career may have crossed the globe but, as he says on pages 36 to 43, he couldn't be happier bringing his game back to his beloved North East.

Such deep affection for the region carries into our second long-read feature with cover stars George Musson and Victoria Brown.

Today, they are co-founders of Jesmond-based Musson Brown Architects, whose portfolio includes work on family homes, period renovations, school conversions, commercial developments and coastal properties.

But despite celebrating the venture's fifth anniversary, the couple admit they didn't initially see their long-term futures in the North East.

However, thanks to a house that quickly became a home, and the strong community feel of Newcastle and the wider region, George and Victoria have put down deep roots.

Theirs is a story of passion and people: architecture might be about bricks and mortar, but the grout that holds everything together is a commitment to the people whose lives and properties they are changing.

You can read more on pages 78 to 85.

Finally, this edition includes a report of our recent NET 250 ceremony, which recognised the region's top 250 businesses by turnover.

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 crowned a number of special category winners.

If you haven't seen it already, you can access the full NET 250 list by visiting N magazine's sister website Bdaily.

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

Here at NET, the multi-platform publisher behind N magazine, we've long prided ourselves on 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

NET 250 SHINES SPOTLIGHT ON REGION'S ELITE

www.bdaily.co.uk/net250login

LinkedIn: N magazine | Bdaily

The North East's most dynamic and successful businesses have been honoured at a special ceremony. Standout performers across a range of categories were showcased at the NET 250 awards event, which attracted hundreds of guests to Hilton Newcastle Gateshead. Celebrating the region's top 250 organisations by turnover, the spectacle was delivered by N magazine publisher NET alongside Newcastle University Business School and international accounting and professional services firm PwC.

The North East's best-performing businesses have been honoured at a special ceremony.

Organisations from across the region were celebrated at NET 250.

Attracting hundreds of guests to Hilton Newcastle Gateshead, the event – delivered alongside headline partner Knights – showcased standout operators from the Scottish Borders to North Yorkshire.

Compiled using publicly-available data – from Companies House accounts and business websites – NET 250 ranked organisations by turnover through research conducted by Newcastle University Business School and verified by international accounting and professional services firm PwC.

Returning after last year's successful launch, the ceremony included a number of new categories and also commended organisations and individuals making a difference beyond businesses' balance sheets.

Nissan Motor Manufacturing UK Ltd – Sunderland Plant, which recently revealed it was in talks to make Chery-branded vehicles at its Wearside factory, picked up two accolades.

The car maker was named Number One Company in the North East and Number One Company in the North East Mayoral Strategic

Authority (formerly the North East Combined Authority) Area after recording £6.63 billion turnover.

Stockton, Guisborough and Northallerton-based car dealership Simon Bailes Peugeot was named Fastest Growing Company, on the back of £104.01 million turnover, with Middlesbrough-headquartered national operator Cleveland Cable Company taking away the Top Family-Owned Company prize with turnover of £515.55 million.

The Highest New Entrant category was won by global intelligence and software firm Hubexo, which includes Newcastle-based NBS, with turnover of £121.45 million.

Newcastle Building Society picked up the Top 50 Breakthrough title, after seeing turnover rise from £259.90 million to £335.70 million.

The Giving Award – in partnership with Community Foundation North East – was won by Newcastle-headquartered national bakery chain Greggs, with Bellway and Esh Group highly commended.

The Number One Company in the Tees Valley Combined Authority Area honour was won by vehicle rental firm ZIGUP, which includes Darlington-based Northgate Vehicle Hire, for turnover of £1.81 billion.

The Top Privately Owned Company accolade went to Go-Ahead Group, which recorded turnover of £3.56 billion, with forecourt operator Penny Petroleum securing the Highest Climber honour after turnover of £183.62 million saw it rise more than 100 places to 79th in the 2026 list.

The inaugural NET 250 Champion Award – delivered alongside headline partner Knights – celebrated an organisation's financial successes and its wider market and community impact.

The accolade was won by Newcastle-based British Engines, with judges hailing its longstanding apprenticeship programme, which has supported more than 1000 people into work since the mid-1960s.

The century-old company, which employs about 1200 staff across 12 countries and includes Bishop Auckland-based Stephenson Gobin and South Shields' Rotary Power, was also praised for “creating skilled jobs, driving innovation and keeping the region at the heart of British industry”.

And Dame Irene Hays, owner and chair of Sunderland-headquartered Hays Travel, received the special recognition award.

Founded by Dame Irene's late husband John in a shop in Seaham's Church Street in 1980, Hays Travel has grown to become the UK's largest independent travel agency, operating more than 500 stores nationwide.

Dame Irene, who was born in Newcastle and raised in Ashington, charted the business' expansion alongside John, overseeing market moves that included the headline acquisition of hundreds of Thomas Cook stores in 2019 that saved more than 2000 jobs.

More recently, the firm – which employs hundreds of staff at its North East head office – has grown with deals for operators including Spear Travels Group and Polka Dot Travel, which has branches across Cheshire, Shropshire and North Wales.

Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief, who hosted the NET 250 event, says: “As a multi-platform publisher rooted in the North East, we've long served as an authoritative voice for regional enterprise, championing ambition and inspiring future success.

“NET 250 extends that mission, and it was a pleasure to once again celebrate the North East's fantastic business community.

“Our region's commercial landscape is rich with organisations that are delivering not just great services but the innovations of tomorrow.

“Congratulations to all NET 250 category winners, and to every company that made it onto the list – their achievements are a credit to the skilled teams, innovative spirit and resilient mindset that define the North East's business culture.”



Pictured, clockwise from top: Representatives from NET 250 award-winning companies celebrate their successes with Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief, back, far left; John Hollingsworth, Community Foundation North East chief philanthropy and development officer; Steven Hugill interviews Dame Irene Hays; Elaine Stroud, Entrepreneurs' Forum chief executive



THE 2026 NET 250 CATEGORY WINNERS:

Number One Company in the North East, in partnership with Womble Bond Dickinson

Nissan Motor Manufacturing UK Ltd – Sunderland Plant: Turnover £6.63 billion

Fastest Growing Company, in partnership with Hill Dickinson LLP

Simon Bailes Peugeot: Turnover £104.01 million

Top Family-Owned Company, in partnership with Maven Capital Partners

Cleveland Cable Company: Turnover £515.55 million

Highest New Entrant, in partnership with Entrepreneurs' Forum

Hubexo: Turnover £121.45 million

Top 50 Breakthrough, in partnership with FRP Corporate Finance

Newcastle Building Society: Turnover £335.70 million

Number One Company in the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (formerly the North East Combined Authority) Area in partnership with MotivaIt

Nissan Motor Manufacturing UK Ltd – Sunderland Plant: Turnover £6.63 billion

The Giving Back Award, in partnership with Community Foundation North East

Greggs (Highly commended: Bellway | Esh Group)

Number One Company in the Tees Valley Combined Authority Area, in partnership with Jackson Hogg

ZIGUP: Turnover £1.81 billion

Top Privately Owned Company, in partnership with S&W

Go-Ahead Group: Turnover £3.56 billion

Highest Climber, in partnership with Raymond James Monument

Penny Petroleum: Turnover £183.62 million

NET 250 Champion Award, in partnership with Knights

British Engines

Special Recognition Award, in partnership with PwC

Dame Irene Hays, Hays Travel owner and chair



Pictured, from top, clockwise, Lindi Teate, Hubexo chief people and corporate services officer, picks up the firm's NET 250 award from Elaine Stroud, Entrepreneurs' Forum chief executive; Andrew Haigh, Newcastle Building Society chief executive, with FRP Corporate Finance partner Abu Ali; Tom Pollard, Hill Dickinson partner and head of the regional corporate team in the North East, with Simon Bailes Peugeot; and Kenton Bazaley, Knights' regional client services director.



Pictured, above, Rebecca Minchella, investment manager at award sponsor Maven Capital Partners, unveils a NET 250 category winner

Below, NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill



NET 250 – The research process

Every organisation that appears in the 2026 NET 250 list does so through reference to its name, location, sector and turnover.

Several factors were considered during data analysis and final reporting:

- Companies are included where they had a registered office address in the North East during the reporting period; regional divisions or manufacturing bases are not included
- Subsidiaries are listed where they demonstrate major decision-making authority within the region
- Companies with a registered North East address, but that had no obvious presence following analysis of accounts and websites, are not included
- Where turnover was reported in different currencies, it has been converted using the exchange rate at the reporting year-end date
- Where firms have changed accounting dates, and a turnover figure covers more or less than a 12-month period, turnover is prorated

- Accounts must have been submitted to Companies House (or equivalent) by January 31, 2026 to be considered for this year's NET 250

Research into the 2026 NET 250 list was led by Aidan Beck, Newcastle University Business School accounting lecturer, alongside students Raichal Joju Panakkal, Fabin Manu, Carly Martin, Will Lawson and Armel Konan. The research process was supported by Dr Fiona Whitehurst, Newcastle University Business School associate dean – engagement and place, and verified by a team from international accounting and professional services firm PwC, led by North East market senior partner Richard Podd.



NET 250

To access the 2026 NET 250 list, visit the website at the top of this article. Alternatively, if you would like a printed copy of NET 250, email NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill at steven@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Carnival-themed night crowns North East HR&D leaders

North East HR&D Awards

www.northeasthrdwards.co.uk

LinkedIn: North East HR&D Awards

The North East HR&D Awards returned in June to once again celebrate the sector's amazing individuals and organisations. Delivered by N magazine publisher NET alongside North East Work & Talent, the ceremony showcased standout achievements across a wide range of categories.

They're making all the right moves!

The stars of the North East's HR and learning and development world have been honoured at a fun-filled carnival-themed event.

An audience of 450 packed into The Fed, in Gateshead, for the 2026 North East HR&D Awards.

And on an evening featuring samba rhythms, revelry and recognition across 12 hotly-contested categories, Newcastle International Airport secured the HR&D team of the year title, which was awarded in partnership with Womble Bond Dickinson.

Further award winners included:

- Excellence in Reward & Benefits, in partnership with North East Work & Talent – Percy Hedley Foundation
- Excellence in Supporting Armed Forces Talent, in partnership with Esh Group – Northumbrian Water
- Excellence in Organisational & People Development, in partnership with Believe Housing – Stadler Rail Service UK
- Excellence in Health & Wellbeing, in partnership with NPH Group – CF Fertilisers UK Ltd
- Excellence in People & Technology, in partnership with Motivait – Ringtons
- Excellence through Positive Impact, in partnership with Castle Peak Group – Northumbria University
- Excellence in Talent Attraction & Employer Brand, in partnership with Jackson Hogg – The Inn Collection Group
- Excellence in SME People Practices, in partnership with Recovery4Life – Clifford James
- Excellence in Leadership Development, in partnership with Hill Dickinson – Senstronics Ltd
- Excellence in Apprenticeships, in partnership with TDR Training Ltd – KAEFER UK&I
- Excellence in Equality, Diversity & Inclusion, in partnership with Northumbrian Water – Darlington Building Society

Awards were judged by members of the North East Work & Talent advisory board, which reflects a cross-section of expertise and experience from regional organisations.

The annual spectacle was once again delivered alongside N magazine publisher NET, whose house of brands also includes national business website Bdaily and the NET 250 ceremony.

Pete Mallon, NET creative and managing director, says: "It was a pleasure to be part of this wonderful ceremony again and to celebrate the incredible work carried out by individuals and organisations across the North East's HR and learning and development landscape.

"The vibrant carnival atmosphere provided a fitting backdrop to an evening showcasing some of the very best talent and innovation in the sector."

Elouise Leonard-Cross and Sarah Carnegie, North East Work & Talent advisory board joint chairs, add: "The breadth of talent and achievement across the North East's HR and learning and development profession continues to impress.

"This event was another powerful reminder of our region's exceptional people and organisations, which are shaping the future of work and talent.

"The North East Work & Talent advisory board is proud to have collaborated once again with NET, and we look forward to the 2027 ceremony."

The evening – which featured festivities including a giant paperchain challenge and a samba or salsa dancing contest – raised £3100 for event partner Community Foundation North East's North East Women and Girls Fund.

Award category partners included Believe Housing, Castle Peak Group, Esh Group, Hill Dickinson, Jackson Hogg, Motivait, North East Work & Talent, Northumbrian Water, NPH Group, Recovery4Life, TDR Training and Womble Bond Dickinson.

Motivait was the evening's digital engagement partner, with its North East HR&D Awards platform helping people make connections and share views throughout the night.

Shrewd HR was the evening's photobooth partner, with film partner Square One Law assessing the ever-evolving dynamics of human relationships and technology in the workplace.



POWERING YOUR MESSAGE

www.bdaily.co.uk

LinkedIn: Bdaily

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

We're all busy.

Emails. Meetings. Conference calls. Strategy sessions. Contract pitches. Project updates. Deadlines.

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Relief then for digital business news platform Bdaily.

By partnering with the UK-wide website, you can put your brand at the heart of the national conversation.

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And you'll be in good company.

Acquired by multi-platform publisher NET in 2024, the influence of Bdaily – which earlier this year secured investment from Maven Capital Partners through the Finance Durham Fund to fuel national expansion plans – continues to grow rapidly.

Relied upon by commercial sector leaders across the UK for news updates, Bdaily has already attracted more than three million page views in the calendar year, with those numbers boosted by the site's highest-ever six-figure audience in May.

Central to that demand is Bdaily's email bulletin service, which is used by about 55,000 subscribers every week.

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

Furthermore, Bdaily content is read every day by more than 19,500 LinkedIn followers – a number that has more than tripled since NET's Bdaily acquisition – with stories shared between countless peer groups across the network.

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

Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief, says: "With its extensive coverage, refined editorial voice and range of new platforms, Bdaily is delivering content that continues to resonate

with an increasing national audience.

"And by harnessing Bdaily's commercial offer – which includes partnership packages, website advertising, email marketing, event promotion and more – you can add your brand to that conversation.

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

Bdaily

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

Alternatively, to learn more about how Bdaily can support your PR and commercial goals, email Sarah Law, Bdaily partnership and marketing manager, at sarah@bdaily.co.uk



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

B

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Business stars take centre stage at awards celebration

North East Chamber of Commerce

www.necc.co.uk

LinkedIn: North East Chamber of Commerce

A number of North East organisations and individuals were honoured at the North East Chamber of Commerce's Business Awards. Held at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, the evening attracted hundreds of guests, with organisations celebrated for their successes across areas including community engagement, innovation, sustainability and international growth.

The North East's business community has been celebrated at an awards ceremony.

A host of organisations and individuals were championed at the North East Chamber of Commerce's Business Awards.

Hosted at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, and supported by headline sponsor Bernicia, the event welcomed more than 350 guests to honour the businesses and people making a significant impact through community engagement, innovation, sustainability and international growth.

Awards were presented across 12 categories, with CrowdHouse Energy taking home the business of the year award, sponsored by Square One, and the small business of the year award (regional), sponsored by Intuit.

Judges praised Newcastle-based solar power provider CrowdHouse Energy for its strong growth and commercial success, as well as the business' commitment to sustainability.

Richard Blackwell, co-founder and chief executive, said: "To receive both awards is overwhelming.

"We never expected this, and we are incredibly grateful to the judges and the wider business community for this recognition.

"You only achieve something like this because

of the people around you.

"Our team, our customers, our partners and the support we have received across the North East have all played a huge part in our journey.

"Having experienced business in other parts of the country, the warmth, collaboration and willingness of people here to help each other succeed is something that stands out.

"We are incredibly proud to be part of that community and honoured to receive this recognition."

The larger business of the year (regional) award went to Ramside Hall Hotel, Golf & Spa, which was recognised for its success amid sector adversity and its regional impact as a leading North East staycation destination.

Eldon Square was highly commended.

Other winners included:

Regional category winners:

AV Dawson – Community business of the year (Media Cultured, highly commended)

Andrew Broadbent (New College Durham) – Business leader of the year

Coffee Design – Customer excellence business of the year

Meg Hardiman (Community Foundation North East) – Rising star

National category winners:

Esh Group – Green innovation business of the year

William Hackett – International trade business of the year

North East Escapes – Start up and grow business of the year

Care Messenger Holdings – Digital and technology business of the year

Osbit Ltd – People and work business of the year

John Johnston, chief executive at North East social housing organisation Bernicia, said: "We are proud to sponsor the awards again and celebrate the outstanding businesses that make this region so special.

"The stories shared throughout the evening showed real passion, vision and courage.

"In challenging times, North East businesses continue to create jobs, support communities and create opportunities that help people and places take the next step, unlocking the full potential of the North East."

Winners of the national categories will represent the region as finalists at the British Chambers of Commerce Awards later this year.

The evening was hosted by North East advocate Charlie Charlton and featured live performances by Royal Beats and Northern Daughters by ISG, as well as students from Gateshead College.

The North East Chamber Business Awards were supported by category sponsors including Intuit, Newcastle College, Society Matters CIC, Big Purple Group, Lumo, Gateshead College, PD Ports, Walker Filtration, Sage, North East Cyber Resilience Centre, Northumbrian Water and Square One.

The Chamber's next major event is the Inspiring Women in Business Awards, taking place on November 27 2026 at Newcastle Civic Centre.



North East Chamber of Commerce

To learn more about the North East Chamber of Commerce and how its member-based services could support your organisation, visit the website at the top of this article.



Pictured, above right, Meg Hardiman, of Community Foundation North East, celebrates her Rising Star Award with colleagues; below, event host Charlie Charlton; bottom, John Johnston, Bernicia chief executive



Pictured, above, CrowdHouse Energy team members celebrate its small business of the year award - the firm also picked up the business of the year accolade

Below, Coffee Design colleagues celebrate its customer excellence award with Richard Salkeld, of award sponsor Lumo, left, and host Charlie Charlton, right



CREATING LASTING CULTURAL CHANGE

In today's evolving employment landscape, organisational culture is an increasingly important driver of long-term success. From fostering trust and ensuring people feel heard, to creating environments where employees feel valued and safe, culture is central to shaping performance. The topic was explored at Northumbria University's recent Culture in Conversation event, which gathered senior sector leaders to discuss how businesses can create workplaces that deliver sustainable success.

www.northumbria.ac.uk [LinkedIn: Northumbria University](#)

Success is rarely achieved in isolation.

More often than not, it is shaped by the environments and cultures around us.

And in an increasingly complex and high-pressure world, the organisations that actively shape their cultures – rather than leave them to chance – are the ones more likely to succeed.

That ethos sat at the heart of a recent Northumbria University event, which was supported by N magazine publisher NET.

Held at the university's £100 million City Campus East, the summit – titled Culture in Conversation – gathered senior HR and organisational development leaders to explore what it takes to build fair, high-performing organisations.

Following an introduction from Professor Matthew Brannan, head of Northumbria University's Newcastle Business School, audience members heard from Matt Beeton, chief executive at Port of Tyne; Joanne Davidson, deputy director of workforce, organisational effectiveness and learning at Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust; and Charlotte Cumiskey, organisational development manager at Northumbria University.

Across the speeches, a clear message emerged: positive organisational cultures are not defined by statements or strategy documents, but rather by everyday behaviours, trust and the ability for people to feel heard, valued and safe.

Matt spoke about leading change at Port

of Tyne since becoming chief executive in 2019, starting with a focus on bridging the gap between senior leadership and the wider workforce, and then resetting the organisation's culture from the ground up.

He said: "We set about levelling the playing field and creating values that related to everyone.

"For 12 months, we had everybody in rooms deciding what that really meant; how they should be spoken to, how respect should be shown and how they should engage with one another.

"They were setting the rules for themselves, and those values became the benchmark of everything we do."

That cultural reset underpinned the launch of Tyne 2050, a long-term strategy shaped directly by all employees.

Matt said: "We got everybody into smaller groups and said, 'what do you want this port to be over the next 30 years?'

"They were really ambitious, especially when it came to technology."

Matt said the impact has been "astonishing", with the team delivering strong results despite a challenging global backdrop.

He added: "We have created an environment in which our creative people can be creative, our hard workers can work hard and feel valued, and our amazing people can be amazing.

"If you can glue all of that together, and you've got people with a passion who want to make

it work, you've got a business that is going to move forward."

Joanne spoke about embedding a restorative and "just learning" culture at Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, centred on continuous reflection, adaptation and openness.

She explained that while the organisation's Strategy for Perfect Care, introduced in 2013, set out ambitious goals to improve standards, it did not initially achieve the success that had been anticipated.

That realisation, she said, prompted a shift away from traditional and often punitive approaches to managing incidents and mistakes, with a fresh focus on fostering an environment where employees felt supported to speak openly, reflect and learn.

She said: "In a system that's inherent with risk, things will not always go as expected.

"So we respond with care and emotional support, and then say, 'what should we do now and what are we learning?'"

Central to this shift was a sustained programme of engagement across the organisation, helping to create a culture of belonging where people felt listened to, valued and part of the change.

Joanne added: "It wouldn't be me or my colleagues proposing a set of values or behaviours; it was our colleagues saying, 'we've seen this, we've lived it, it's real!'"

That approach has since been embedded across the organisation, from leadership development through to day-to-day practice.



Joanne added: "If you're a manager in Mersey Care, a restorative and just culture is now blueprinted in your induction; it runs right through everything we do."

Charlotte focused on how organisations can build a culture of psychological safety, drawing on her experience of supporting leadership development at Northumbria University.

She said: "Psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of the team that it is safe for interpersonal risk taking.

"The highest performing teams often make the most errors because they are in environments where it's safe to speak up about the errors they are making and to correct them without fear."



Charlotte stressed this kind of culture does not emerge through top-down initiatives, but rather through consistent behaviours, shaped by everyday actions.

She said: "Cultures don't shift through grand organisational gestures; it's the sum of thousands of moments."

Pointing to Northumbria University's five-day Leadership Development Programme, Charlotte outlined how it is embedding these principles in practice through an intensive course designed to build trust, openness and reflection.

She said: "We intentionally try and create moments of psychological safety throughout the week before we even talk about it explicitly."

From 360-degree feedback to peer support and open reflection, the programme encourages leaders to embrace vulnerability and build stronger connections within their teams.



Charlotte added: "You can't always change organisational culture, but you can change the climate around you.

"You can change the experience of the people that you work with, through the meetings you facilitate, through the interactions you have and through the relationships you build."



The event additionally featured breakout sessions, led by Joanne, alongside Debra Almond, Daniel Skinner and Matthew Theobald, from Vandewiele UK, who explored growth within a high-performance engineering SME, and Northumbria University's Professor Gavin Oxburgh, who focused on the principles of effective communication.



Northumbria University
For more information about Northumbria University's leadership and management courses, visit www.northumbria.ac.uk/business-services/education-and-training/leadership-and-management/



Delegates take part in Northumbria University's Culture in Conversation event
Above, Matt Beeton, Port of Tyne chief executive speaks at the event
Left, John Duns, NET business development director, introduces the event

'IT'S OUR TIME FOR INVESTMENT'

www.netimesmagazine.co.uk

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NET's headline investment campaign VISION 31 held its second panel discussion event of the year at North East Technology Park, in Sedgefield, County Durham, earlier in the summer, 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, Peter Anderson highlights some of the event's key takeaways.

AON


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LLOYDS BANK


Northumbria
University
NEWCASTLE

The North East has every reason to “be as ambitious as possible”, with world-leading innovation, major investment and transformative developments creating a powerful platform for future growth.

Those were the principal themes of N magazine publisher NET’s latest VISION 31 summit.

Held at North East Technology Park (NETPark) in Sedgefield, County Durham, more than 70 guests defied a heatwave to hear how the region stands ready to capitalise on great opportunity by strengthening collaboration, developing future skills, attracting investment and presenting a more confident, unified voice to the outside world.

Featuring two panel discussions, hosted by NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill, the consensus was clear: the North East has a “unique proposition” and every reason to be ambitious.

The first panel – *The Region Shaping Tomorrow: The Power of the North East* – explored how businesses, public sector partners and cultural organisations are helping shape the region’s future through investment, innovation and collaboration.

Panellists shared examples of growth and ambition across manufacturing, technology, business support and culture, while also addressing the challenges that remain, from access to funding and skills shortages to the need to better promote the North East’s latent strengths and create opportunities for the next generation.

Audience members heard from Tania Cooper, managing director of Steel Benders UK and chair of the North East STEM Foundation; Kerry Walker, managing director of Business Durham; Sharon Lane, managing director of Tees Components; Ross Linnett, founder and chief executive of Recite Me; and Julia Handelman-Smith, programme director of Into the Light.



Panellist Michelle Glendinning, head of human resources at Amazon, makes a point at the VISION 31 event, watched by Lloyds’ Gary Chapman



Kerry, who is overseeing the continued growth of NETPark, said the site’s evolution over the last two decades demonstrates what can be achieved through long-term collaboration and investment.

Reflecting on the transformation of the ex-Winterton Hospital site into a nationally significant innovation district, which includes telecoms technology firm Filtronic and radiation detection company Kromek, she said: “NETPark is where research, innovation, industry and commercialisation come together.

“This isn’t just a Durham asset – it’s a regional and national asset that gives businesses the infrastructure they need to grow.

“The North East is a place that simply gets things done.

“We’ve got the right conditions and the right environment for businesses to start, scale, invest and, more importantly, stay in the region.”

That message was echoed by Ross, whose Gateshead-based technology company Recite Me has grown from a North East start-up into a global leader in digital accessibility, providing website and language support tools used by thousands of organisations worldwide to make online content more inclusive.

Reflecting on his company’s investment journey, Ross said the region was increasingly attracting the attention of major investors.

Citing his experiences of working with BGF to secure multi-million-pound backing, he said: “When we started dealing with BGF, they didn’t have a presence in the North East.

“But very quickly, one of the conversations we had was, ‘I didn’t realise how much was going on in the North East – we need an office here’.

“You don’t have to be in London to be successful.

“The North East is a fantastic place to grow a business, but you’ve got to believe you can do it.”

Tania, who leads Hartlepool-based Steel Benders UK – an engineering firm that has grown from a family business into an international supplier serving sectors including offshore energy, defence and infrastructure – reflected on the company’s recent £20 million investment in a new 40,000sq ft manufacturing facility at the former Caparo site.



She said: "It's an investment in our team and future generations.

"It gives us the space to grow, improve the way we work and install the new machinery we've already invested in."

Tania added the project would not have been possible without support from the Tees Valley Combined Authority's Investment Fund.

She said: "It's easy to fund the machinery – it's much harder to fund the building – but that support gave us the opportunity to invest."

Drawing on Tees Components' more than 60-year manufacturing heritage, Sharon reflected on how continual investment and innovation had enabled the family business to evolve from a traditional subcontract machine shop into a globally recognised precision engineering company.

She said: "The simpler engineering has gone overseas, so we've invested heavily in technology, equipment and skills to specialise in high-risk, complex engineering."

Sharon also argued the region must do more to celebrate its manufacturing strengths.

She added: "We're leading in areas such as clean energy, biosciences and advanced manufacturing – I just don't think that's widely known."

Attention then turned to the region's skills agenda following Alan Milburn's recent

review into rising numbers of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET).

Speaking as chair of the North East STEM Foundation, Tania said: "I don't see skills as an educational problem or a Government problem – I see it as an industry problem because we're the users of those skills.

"We've got to open our doors, invite young people in, provide work experience and create opportunities."

Sharon agreed, describing work experience and apprenticeships as some of the most effective ways of engaging young people.

She added: "I've got brilliant people in our machine shop who came to us on work experience when they were 14.

"When we're organising conferences and events, let's invite apprentices and students too."

The discussion also highlighted the important role the creative sector plays in shaping the North East's identity, attracting talent and supporting long-term economic growth.

Julia, who leads Into the Light – a programme helping grow County Durham's creative economy while celebrating the region's cultural strengths – argued culture lies at the heart of thriving communities and successful places.



She said: "Culture is the beating heart of our communities; it's the connective tissue that draws all of this together."

"But we need the same long-termism that some of our industries have to be truly successful.

"It can take decades – even generations – for these things to grow."

The second panel – *The North East: Open for Business* – featured insights from Michelle Glendinning, head of human resources at Amazon; Dean Cook, managing director of Arlington Real Estate; and Gary Chapman, co-head North region and director, industrials and infrastructure, Lloyds Banking Group.

Gary reflected on Lloyds' recent announcement to make more than £1 billion of finance available to North East businesses while helping establish the North East Ports Investment Taskforce, saying the region is uniquely placed to lead the UK's green energy transition.

He said: "Some of the largest green energy infrastructure projects in the UK are happening here, which is really exciting."

Pointing to Lloyds' partnership with the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority and the Office for Investment, he added: "We're trying to say to anyone coming into the region that the North East is absolutely open for business.

"There's about £50 billion worth of investment over the next ten years, and the North East is well placed to capitalise on that."

Dean, whose Spennymoor-based Arlington Real Estate is working alongside Homes England to deliver the one million sq ft West Hartford Park employment hub near Cramlington, said strong partnerships between the public and private sectors were giving developers the confidence to invest in the region.

Reflecting on the scheme, which is expected to create more than 2000 jobs, he said: "One of the things the North East does really well is partnerships.

"We work closely with Homes England, the two combined authorities and local authorities, and those relationships give us the confidence to invest and bring forward projects of this scale.



Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief, right, discusses the region's investment potential with panellists Tania Cooper, Sharon Lane, Julia Handelman-Smith, Kerry Walker and Ross Linnett

"We are a region of opportunity.

"We have the infrastructure, we have the land, we have the opportunity and we have great people.

"We need to take advantage of that."

The conversation also echoed the first panel's focus on skills, with Michelle arguing the North East's greatest competitive advantage lies with its people.

Drawing on Amazon's extensive presence across the North East, where it operates fulfilment centres in Gateshead, Stockton, Durham and Darlington alongside a delivery station in Washington, Michelle said the company's continued investment had been underpinned by access to a highly skilled workforce and a strong talent pipeline, fuelled by the region's five universities.

She said: "The North East is a fantastic place to grow a business.

"We've got access to education and we've got lots of routes into talent.

"But we've got to keep investing in people at every stage of their careers.

"Whether that's apprenticeships, graduate opportunities or helping people return to work, businesses have a real responsibility to create those pathways."

Gary added: "It's our time for investment.

"We've got major institutions, investors and the Government all looking seriously at the North East.

"But we must promote ourselves because this region has everything it needs to succeed."



VISION 31

The next VISION 31 event will take place in London in November. To register your interest for a seat in the audience, contact NET event managers Dawn Owens and Lesley Hampson at dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk or 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

SPOT LIGHT

Running out of road

By Steven Hugill



N

With Labour lurching from collapsing sentiment to a leadership crisis, Steven Hugill looks at the fallout from Sir Keir Starmer's resignation and whether the party can repair a reputation left torn and frayed by damaging U-turns and policy reversals.

"We have a well-thought-through plan, which will be felt in the living standards, jobs and skills we need for the North East.

"It will also help fix infrastructure and transport; the Prime Minister tried to pull a fast one, and everyone in the North East called him out – and rightfully so."

No, not the words of Labour White Knight Andy Burnham, but Sir Keir Starmer, who spoke to this very publication nearly three years ago.

Ah, hindsight.

Time has a beautiful habit of turning political campaigning rhetoric into an awkward mirror.

And right now, Labour is staring at a pretty grisly reflection.

It should, of course, never have reached this stage.

Having been elected following the Conservative Party's sixth-gear disappearance over a political cliff, Labour has somehow managed to turn an open road into a bewildering stretch of U-turns, switchbacks and roadblocks that goes far beyond the realm of any Wacky Races sketch.

In trying to be Peter Perfect, Sir Keir ended up coming across more like Dick Dastardly.

Now, to be fair, the outgoing Prime Minister is a perfectly personable character.

Even amid the usual Comms 101 buzz-phrases drilled into him during his car journey to meet N magazine, his desire to deliver a positive difference felt genuine.

But standing in a Sunderland bottling factory, with machines whirring and soft drinks fizzing, I couldn't help but feel his performance just felt a little... flat.

This, by the way, isn't the beginning of an argument for a return to Boris Johnson-style politics.

I'll die a happy man if I never see a British Prime Minister in deliberately stupid Hawaiian shorts and woolly hat, or one that engages in repeatedly contrived, over-the-top circus-style chaos for the cameras.

And then there's Brexit. But I'll leave that cherry-on-the-top folly for another time.

No, the political waters couldn't have parted wider to let the Red Sea flow through – and still



Labour has managed to founder.

Latest figures do point towards some progress.

Between the second quarter of 2024 and the first of 2026, OECD data suggests the UK economy grew by 2.3 per cent – faster than the rest of the G7, apart from the US.

The uptick comes with a pretty large caveat, though, not least the Iranian conflict and the wider economic uncertainty it threatens to unleash.

Net migration numbers and NHS waiting lists are also shown to have edged downwards, which point to grains of improvement.

But modern politics isn't judged on spreadsheets alone.

In a world where a post on the tinder-dry plains of X and Facebook can ignite a raging inferno in minutes, and where the desperation of the right-wing press continues to stretch beyond once accepted boundaries, perception stands on par with – and regularly goes beyond – performance.

Sir Keir never mastered perception; he had a story, but he just couldn't tell it.

As this edition of N magazine went to print, it seemed inevitable Burnham would be tasked with writing Labour's future chapters.

And what a sub-editing job that will require.

So long feted as the mayor overseeing Manchester's inexorable rise to England's unofficial second city, he's become accustomed to upbeat sentiment outnumbering the criticism.

A Northern-focused Prime Minister also bodes well for a North East already controlling significant elements of its destiny through devolution, and his plan to create a so-called 'Number 10 in the North' – by moving parts of his role to the former Cottonopolis – speaks of a welcome refocus away from the hothouse of the capital.

But if Burnham does inherit the pen, he won't be writing on a blank page.

Whatever goodwill Labour enjoyed on entering office has long been squandered.

A politician who has built much of his reputation on authenticity and communication may be better equipped to reconnect with voters, but his charisma alone won't fill potholes, lower waiting lists further or ease the everyday pressures facing households.

Time may yet prove Burnham the right man for the job.

But after so many false starts, diversions and U-turns, there is precious little room left for error.

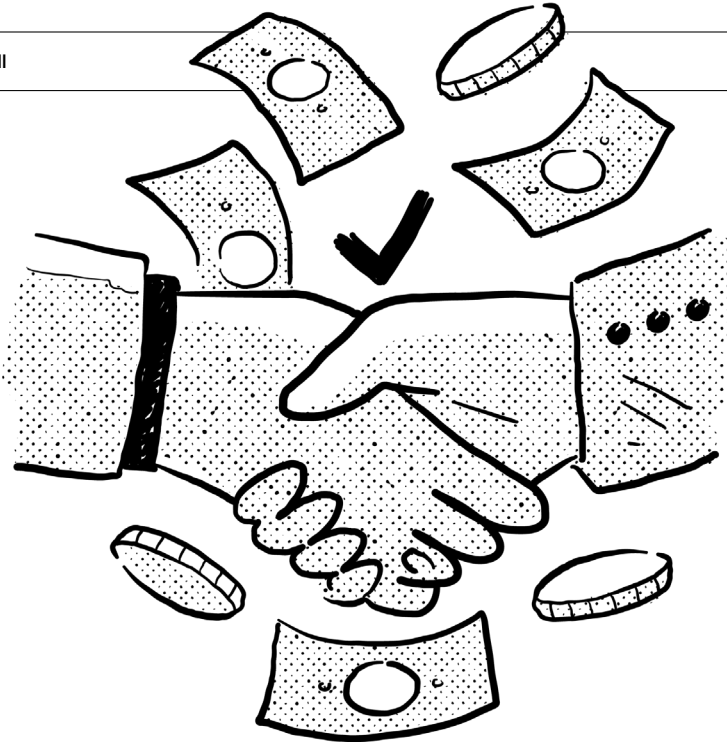
The road ahead remains open.

The question now is whether Labour can learn to drive on it.

BIG QUESTION

With the UK having struck a trade deal with six Gulf states including Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, the Government says the country is set for an annual £580 million export tariff boost. Does the agreement represent meaningful progress, or is the UK's long-term trading success still chiefly dependent on deeper ties with Europe?

By Steven Hugill



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Join the discussion

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



Graham Melroy
Director

T12 Engineering

Any deal that makes it easier to do business internationally is a good thing.

Places like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are investing huge amounts into infrastructure, energy and industrial projects, and there's no doubt UK engineering firms will have a part to play.

For businesses in the North East, especially those working in engineering, manufacturing and technical services, those markets offer real opportunities for growth.

British engineering is well respected, and if trade barriers come down, this can only help companies looking to compete overseas.

That said, we must also be realistic.

Europe is still our nearest and biggest trading partner, and for many businesses it remains absolutely vital.

A lot of supply chains, customers and long-standing relationships are tied into European markets, and that's not going to change overnight.

I don't think it's a case of choosing between Europe or the Gulf states; for regions like the North East, both are important for long-term industrial growth.

We just need to make sure it's as straightforward as possible for businesses to trade overseas because the UK needs to be building strong trading relationships wherever there's opportunity – whether that's in Belgium, Bulgaria, Bahrain or Brazil.



Elaine Stroud
Chief executive

Entrepreneurs' Forum

Anything that removes barriers for entrepreneurial businesses to reach new markets is progress.

The Gulf is an important, fast-growing market, so removing tariffs will make it easier for some businesses to find new customers.

It also sends a positive signal to entrepreneurs that territories perhaps seen as too difficult to break into are worth a fresh look.

For North East businesses, regular flights to Dubai give us a valuable gateway into the region.

However, there are no direct flights to Qatar or Saudi Arabia, and long-haul business development remains expensive.

Market entry takes time and usually involves repeated visits, relationship building and due diligence before any meaningful revenue is earned.

At a time when the cost of doing business is already eating into margins, entrepreneurs will need to be disciplined about whether an opportunity justifies that upfront investment.

Europe remains our nearest major market and is still hugely important for trade in both goods and services, despite the increasing red tape.

Ultimately, we need the Gulf and Europe.

If we want more businesses to scale through export, we need practical, low-friction trade that makes it easier for businesses to find and sell to new customers wherever they are.



Duncan Hedley
Managing director

Berger Closures

Our main export markets are the US, Sweden and Ireland.

However, we are always monitoring the global landscape to see how things are developing and what deals may impact our sales pipeline.

It is critical that we are able to remain competitive with our European counterparts, and that's not easy in the current climate.

As things stand, the overall picture remains unclear due to a number of factors – mainly fluctuating import tariffs, rising shipping costs and the price of raw materials.

Each has a big impact on our bottom line.

There is no doubt that trading conditions remain challenging, however, there are signs the market is steadying.

Yet while things are getting better – which is great for any business that imports and exports across Europe – there remains a lot of red tape to cut through, which is proving to be a real hindrance.

This is where the Government needs to be stronger.

If a better trade deal could be struck, as has been achieved with the six Gulf states, it could bring a huge boost to our economy, and would give manufacturers confidence that the Government is doing everything it can to support us.



Matt Bratton
Regional director – North East,
Tees Valley and Cumbria

CBI

The Gulf agreement is good news and should be treated as meaningful progress.

For firms across the North East, it opens up real opportunities in markets with serious investment capacity and ambitious plans for diversification.

Our region has strengths the Gulf needs: clean energy, advanced manufacturing, engineering, digital, infrastructure, education and professional services.

The test now is whether the Government turns the deal into practical support for exporters, rather than just a headline figure.

Businesses need clear guidance, strong market insight and a joined-up approach between the Government, trade bodies and firms.

And, crucially, this cannot become a false choice between the Gulf and Europe – the UK must do both.

New global partnerships matter, especially as protectionism rises.

But Europe remains our closest and most important trading relationship.

The EU-UK reset is a major step forward, but only if it cuts real costs, reduces friction and gives firms confidence to invest.

This deal is a positive step.

But long-term trading success will depend on a twin-track approach: building new global markets, while making trade with Europe easier, cleaner and more predictable.

Seeing the benefits of the bigger picture

S&W

www.swgroup.com

LinkedIn: S&W Group

Accountancy and advisory firm S&W recently strengthened its North East presence with the addition of Peppercorn Tax. The move brought private client tax specialists Emma Glover, Kelly Morgan and their team into S&W's Queen's Lane Newcastle office, expanding its expertise in succession, inheritance tax and wealth planning. Here, partner Emma speaks to Peter Anderson about the move to S&W, the benefits of joining a national firm and how her team is helping clients navigate an increasingly complex tax landscape.



Emma Glover, S&W partner

In HBO's critically-acclaimed TV series *Succession*, the children of media magnate Logan Roy grapple with the consequences of a family patriarch unwilling to relinquish control of his business or influence.

Amid the inevitable sibling rivalry, personal manoeuvring and constant jockeying for position, two things quickly become apparent: succession and inheritance can often prove deeply complex and divisive.

Furthermore, without clear, forward-thinking planning, the fallout can be financially and emotionally damaging.

And while most family businesses are thankfully far removed from the dysfunction and Shakespearean levels of betrayal exhibited by the Roy family, the underlying tensions are often surprisingly familiar.

These are issues Emma Glover, partner at accountancy and advisory firm S&W, encounters regularly through her work advising individuals, families, landowners and business owners on everything from inheritance tax and succession planning to trusts and intergenerational wealth transfer.

Emma helps families and businesses navigate not only tax complexities, but the personal dynamics and competing interests that can emerge around wealth and succession.

For Emma and S&W's wider private client team, the work centres on helping people plan for the future as they navigate an increasingly complex tax landscape.

She adds: "We look at people's wealth, what their plans are and try to look into the future.

"It's a little like looking into a crystal ball.

"The tax landscape changes constantly, so part of our role is to help clients anticipate what's coming next, rather than reacting after the fact."

That forward-looking approach spans inheritance tax planning, capital gains tax planning and succession advice for high-net-worth individuals, entrepreneurs, family businesses and landowners across the North East and beyond.

Increasingly, says Emma, that advice is becoming more important as tax rules evolve and long-standing reliefs become less advantageous.

She adds: "We do a lot of work for farmers and landowners.

"They face a lot of tax complexities, but almost all of them are solvable if they get the right advice."

That is particularly true in the North East, where significant wealth is often tied up in land, farming businesses and family-owned enterprises passed down through generations.

Much of the team's work focuses on helping families preserve wealth and structure matters in a way that protects future generations, whether through trusts, gifting strategies or broader succession planning.

That role also demands constant vigilance, with Emma highlighting upcoming changes to inheritance tax on pensions as one of the biggest shifts facing clients.

She says: "A lot more people will benefit from taking advice about that who may never have needed tax advice before.

"Previously, pension pots could often pass to children without inheritance tax – so this is going to change the conversation for a lot of families.

"These kinds of changes are exactly why keeping ahead of the rules and planning early is so important."

Pictures by Lauren Peters (The Bigger Picture Agency)



And while every client situation is different, Emma is clear many issues can be addressed through proactive and carefully structured advice.

She says: “Good tax advice is worth taking; in 99 per cent of cases it pays for itself.”

For Emma, the value of specialist advice is something she understands not only from working with clients, but from building her own business.

Last year, Peppercorn Tax – the specialist advisory firm Emma founded alongside fellow director Kelly Morgan – was acquired by S&W as part of the firm’s continued expansion across the North East.

Emma and Kelly established Peppercorn nearly nine years ago, growing the business from a specialist tax practice into an eight-person advisory firm serving clients across the region.

She says: “We started from scratch.

“At the beginning, we did tax advice and tax returns, but over time we expanded because we were turning work away.”

That growth ultimately led Emma, Kelly and their colleagues to seek a larger platform that could provide broader resources and deeper specialist support for clients.

Having known S&W’s regional managing partner Donna Bulmer and her team for years,

Emma says she was confident the move would provide both the cultural fit and expertise Peppercorn had been looking for.

She adds: “We were looking for greater resources to help service our clients.

“We thought it would be a really good match, and that has turned out to be the case.”

The move saw Emma, Kelly and six colleagues relocate into S&W’s Queen’s Lane Newcastle office, forming part of a wider expansion strategy for the region.

It is a decision, Emma says, that has broadened the team’s capabilities and the level of support it can offer clients.

She says: “There’s a great depth of knowledge here.

“There are some really brilliant tax experts in very niche areas, and not necessarily just in Newcastle – they could be anywhere in the country.”

That national network has significantly expanded the team’s ability to collaborate, solve increasingly complex client issues and access specialist expertise that may previously have been out of reach for a smaller independent firm.

Emma adds: “The horizons have expanded greatly.

“What we do is fundamentally problem solving, so having that depth of expertise around you is incredibly valuable.”

The move has also allowed Emma and Kelly to focus more heavily on advisory work, while benefiting from the infrastructure and support that comes with being part of a larger national firm.

But despite the increased scale, Emma says the values and relationship-led approach underpinning the team’s work remain unchanged.

She adds: “The fundamentals are the same.

“It’s still about helping people, building relationships and giving clients the best possible advice.”



S&W

For more information about S&W and how its expert private client tax services could support your circumstances, visit the website at the top of this article or email emma.glover@swgroup.com

Capitalising on every growth opportunity

NEL Fund Managers

www.nel.co.uk

LinkedIn: NEL Fund Managers

A key ingredient in any small and medium-sized business' growth plan is access to finance. And for NEL Fund Managers' chief executive Paul Scott, North East businesses have never been in a better position to attract investment as a bullish region shifts towards a brave new era of collaboration and coordinated growth. Here, Simon Rushworth speaks to the Team Valley-headquartered organisation's boss to find out more.

When it comes to managing multi-million-pound funds and driving transformative investment, Paul Scott requires no introduction.

NEL Fund Managers' chief executive cut his teeth closing major international deals in London's financial heartland before going on to lead Bahrain's expansive sovereign wealth fund investment activities.

An enviable reputation for delivering transformation and growth precedes him.

Nevertheless, Paul always imagined himself helping growing businesses much closer to home.

Ashington-born and fiercely proud of his North East roots, he frequently manifested a move back to where it all began.

Perhaps that's why the passion pours forth as he maps out a robust future for ambitious regional businesses – with Team Valley-headquartered NEL Fund Managers acting as a laser-focused catalyst for progress.

He says: "I'm heavily invested in the idea of place-based impact and how that can be married with large-scale investor appetite."

Paul's experience gives him a rare vantage point: an intimate knowledge of how large institutional pools of capital think, what they need from fund managers and, crucially, what has historically held them back from deploying into regional opportunities.

He adds: "We're seeing an influx of large-scale infrastructure projects across the North East right now, such as the recently-announced data centre in Northumberland, the airport expansion, port redevelopment, creation of investment zones and Teesworks' regeneration, to name just a few.

"Executed in the right way, that brings an obvious economic multiplier effect across the foundational economy, as well as high-growth sectors.

"But if we're really going to capitalise on that effect, embed regional growth and make our economy resilient, then we must support the supply chains into these big projects and provide opportunities for regional SMEs to participate.

"To really capture any long-term growth, we need to lay the groundwork for that place-based impact.

"We need to ensure the rewards linked to these big projects aren't all going to international suppliers.

"And we need to put the North East's SMEs in a position where they're ready to capitalise on every opportunity by making sure they have the right finance and strategic support to participate and thrive.

"By doing all of this, we're facilitating that place-based impact.

"We're driving the regional economic growth that delivers high-quality jobs and long-term confidence."

It feels like the stars have aligned for SMEs across the region seeking to scale at pace and prove their worth as key players in the wider economy.

Paul and NEL Fund Managers are perfectly positioned to source capital investment and offer expert guidance to SMEs.

At the same time, the North East is embracing a new era of collaboration and cooperation.

He says: "The emergence of the region's

combined authorities has been key.

"It has facilitated more relevant local and regional strategic growth plans, and proved that devolved powers can make a real difference.

"Tied to the growing influence of the combined authorities is a new era of cooperation – perhaps more so than I've seen in the past.

"It's encouraging, for instance, to see North East mayor Kim McGuinness chairing The Great North and bringing the regions together to unlock jobs, opportunity and prosperity.

"The rationale is there to collaborate more closely and to work as one to drive investment and growth.

"The businesses we work with don't stop at a county boundary or a political boundary.

"I'm seeing greater cooperation when it comes to helping those businesses thrive."

Significantly, NEL's support extends far beyond traditional investment.

Paul is justifiably proud of his firm's 'More Than Capital' mantra – an approach that arms SMEs with the knowledge required to scale with confidence.

He says: "Our message is that, 'we can invest in your business, but we can do so much more too'.

"We work with a range of sector specialists; we can tap into a network of experienced NEDs.

"We can help businesses build infrastructure, so the wheels don't come off when they scale.

"On top of that, we've got contacts throughout the UK and internationally.

"We regularly run roundtables with portfolio companies because what we're finding is

“We can help businesses build infrastructure, so the wheels don’t come off when they scale”

that, almost irrespective of sector, a lot of the challenges facing businesses are the same.

“As an example, we host roundtables on digital transformation in artificial intelligence.

“From an entrepreneur’s perspective, we cut through the froth and look at the practical, day-to-day benefits and pitfalls.

“We ask, ‘how can you use artificial intelligence effectively without burning through a ton of cash or wasting a lot of time?’

“It’s another way for SMEs to drive productivity.”

In circling back to the idea of place-based impact, Paul concedes institutional investors have traditionally shied away from investing in the regions and the clusters of smaller businesses pivotal to sustainable growth in part due to the perception of risk and the smaller allocation size when their portfolios run into tens of billions.

However, he argues SMEs are an increasingly attractive asset class.

Paul says: “It’s a good place for capital to be deployed.

“Done in the right way, it can drive innovation, job creation, place-based impact and deliver attractive investor returns.

“Investor appetite now appears to be there, however, LGPS pooling is absorbing a lot of bandwidth.

“What investors need is a credible partner, embedded in that ecosystem, with relationships, regional intelligence and the proven ability to deploy.

“That’s what we’ve been able to demonstrate, time and time again.”



So what does the future hold for Paul and the NEL team?

He says: “We’ve invested ahead of plan into some fantastic businesses, and the portfolio is in great shape; as a result, we’ve just been allocated an extra £21.5 million to invest, which doubles the fund size targeting that segment of the market.

“You’ve got to demonstrate you can invest at the right rate in high-quality businesses and have a good portfolio return.

“We’ve demonstrated both.

“It helps validate our absolute belief that there are investable opportunities right across our region.

“If managed effectively, it can deliver transformational regional growth that is sustainable, build high-performing portfolios for investors at scale and build resilience into the financial ecosystem through supporting regionally headquartered players like NEL.

“I want NEL to not just participate in what comes next, but help define it.”

Paul Scott, NEL Fund Managers’ chief executive
Picture: Krzysztof Furgala
(The Bigger Picture Agency)



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

GAME



CHA

JIM RYAN



ANGER

Newcastle-born Jim Ryan played a pivotal role in PlayStation's rise from ambitious challenger to global entertainment powerhouse. Across three decades, he helped transform the brand into a dominant force in a sector once ruled by rivals Sega and Nintendo, with his own meteoric ascent culminating in his appointment as Sony Interactive Entertainment president and chief executive. Yet despite leading an international operation spanning California, Tokyo and London, the ex-Royal Grammar School Newcastle pupil never lost sight of the region that shaped him. Here, he talks to Peter Anderson about the values that underpinned his success, steering the launch of the blockbuster PlayStation 5 console during a global pandemic and why retirement has brought him back home.





Words by Peter Anderson
Photography by Andrew Lowe



JIM RYAN

Back in 1994, Britain was in the midst of a cultural renaissance.

Oasis burst onto the music scene with *Definitely Maybe*; Kevin Keegan's swashbuckling *Entertainers* side secured Newcastle United's highest top-flight finish since 1927; the newly-opened Channel Tunnel promised stronger European ties and the National Lottery launched to great fanfare.

While the nation was embracing its new era of optimism, a Japanese electronics giant was preparing for another kind of awakening.

Eyeing a place in the home video games market, it was set to launch the PlayStation.

Few could have foreseen the revolution it was about to spark.

In the same year, Newcastle-raised Jim Ryan, whose career had already taken him to Ford Motor Company, Amstrad and Oracle Corporation, joined the fledgling venture as international finance officer.

Over the next three decades, both would exceed even their most ambitious expectations as, much like the soundtrack to the era, things would soon go supersonic.

Yet when Jim joined Sony, PlayStation was very much "the new kid on the block", entering a fiercely competitive market with no guarantee

of success and everything still to prove.

He says: "People look at PlayStation now and assume it was always going to be successful, but back then we were the renegades, taking on some very established competitors."

Jim joined Sony just a year before the launch of the original PlayStation in Europe, and found himself tasked with building a brand from the ground up.

He says: "There were about 20 people in the UK and nothing across continental Europe.

"My job was to create the infrastructure – find offices, hire people and build teams.

"We were starting from scratch."

The challenge was considerable.

At the time, the video games market was dominated by established players Sega and Nintendo, whose flagship characters Sonic the Hedgehog and Mario had become cultural icons among a generation of young gamers.

Sony, by contrast, was attempting to break into an industry where it had no track record and little credibility.

Yet PlayStation arrived at precisely the right moment.

While rivals continued to rely on cartridge-

based systems, Sony embraced CD-ROM technology, allowing developers to create larger, more cinematic games with richer soundtracks, voice acting and increasingly sophisticated graphics.

Just as importantly, the company deliberately targeted an older audience, positioning gaming not simply as a pastime for children but as a mainstream form of entertainment for teenagers and young adults.

Jim says: “The technology was different, but so was the attitude.

“It felt fresh. It felt contemporary.”

Sony also attracted some of the industry’s most talented developers, resulting in a catalogue of games that helped redefine what a console could be.

Titles such as Ridge Racer, Tekken, Metal Gear Solid, Resident Evil and Tomb Raider, the latter led by heroine Lara Croft, showcased the system’s capabilities and offered experiences unlike anything many players had encountered before.

Jim says: “When Tomb Raider arrived, we got a real sense that something special was happening.

“It’s difficult to explain now just how huge that game was.

“The same was true of Resident Evil; those games felt completely different.”

As PlayStation’s popularity grew, so too did Jim’s responsibilities.

Having helped establish Sony’s European operation, he found himself at the centre of the company’s international expansion, taking the brand into new markets where video gaming was still in its infancy, before becoming president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe in 2011.

Spain proved one of PlayStation’s greatest success stories.

Jim recalls how the console became so ubiquitous that many people used the word PlayStation as shorthand for video games themselves.

The same pattern would repeat elsewhere as PlayStation expanded across Europe and beyond, gradually eclipsing its rivals and transforming gaming from a niche hobby into a mainstream global industry.

In countries such as Saudi Arabia, where video games were one of the few widely accessible forms of entertainment, PlayStation and titles such as football game FIFA attracted vast audiences.

Jim says: “We were finding success in places where there wasn’t much of a gaming culture.





“PEOPLE LOOK AT PLAYSTATION NOW AND ASSUME IT WAS ALWAYS GOING TO BE SUCCESSFUL, BUT BACK THEN WE WERE THE RENEGADES, TAKING ON SOME VERY ESTABLISHED COMPETITORS”

“We were building something that was becoming much bigger than any of us had ever imagined.”

While rivals often relied on a handful of signature franchises, Jim believes PlayStation’s success came from its ability to continually reinvent itself.

He says: “With PlayStation, there always tended to be one or two defining games for each generation.

“For the original PlayStation, it was games like Resident Evil and Tomb Raider, then Grand Theft Auto became huge on PlayStation 2.

“After that, FIFA and Call of Duty just kept getting bigger and bigger.”

Alongside blockbuster third-party titles, Sony increasingly invested in its own studios, creating a portfolio of exclusive games that helped define each new console generation.

Jim says: “We were making these wonderful single-player experiences like Uncharted, The Last of Us and Ghost of Tsushima.

“They became what I used to think of as tent poles for the platform – games that would come along for each generation and really define what PlayStation was all about.”

By the late 2010s, PlayStation had become far more than a games console.

It was one of the world’s most recognisable entertainment brands, with tens of millions of players across the globe and a growing

presence in film, television and digital services.

In 2019, Jim was appointed president and chief executive of Sony Interactive Entertainment, becoming head of the global PlayStation business and taking responsibility for a company employing 12,000 people and generating billions of dollars in revenue.

Yet within months of taking on what he describes as “the best job in the world”, he would face the greatest challenge of his career.

The launch of the PlayStation 5 had always been a monumental undertaking. And then the COVID-19 pandemic brought the world to a standstill.

Jim says: “It was the biggest product launch in Sony’s history.

“It was always going to be hugely complicated and then, suddenly, everything closed.”

Factories in China shut their doors, engineers were unable to access production sites, retail stores closed and developers were forced to work remotely.

Jim was left to lead a global operation from his dining room table in London, coordinating teams across California, Tokyo and Europe.

He adds: “I had to project this picture of calm and confidence, telling everyone we were going to be fine.

“Then I’d finish the call, sit down and think, ‘I have no idea how we’re going to do this.’”

Despite the disruption, though, the launch went ahead.

The PlayStation 5 arrived in November 2020 and quickly became one of the fastest-selling consoles in Sony's history, with more than 75 million units sold worldwide.

It's a feat Jim regards as the defining achievement of his career.

He says: "Pulling that off during the pandemic was extraordinary; it was easily the most difficult thing we've ever done."

Jim retired in 2024, ending a 30-year career that had taken him from helping establish PlayStation's European operation to leading one of the world's most successful entertainment businesses.

Yet despite overseeing multiple console generations and helping transform PlayStation into a global phenomenon, he remains characteristically modest about his contribution.

He says: "I'm incredibly proud to have been associated with the brand.

"But it was always a team effort.

"We started with nothing and built something remarkable.

"To have played a small part in that is something that will stay with me forever."

If launching the PlayStation represented the culmination of Jim's professional career, retirement has provided an opportunity to reconnect with the place where it all began.

Born and raised in Newcastle, and educated at the city's Royal Grammar School, he credits both with instilling many of the qualities that would underpin his success.

He says: "The region instilled resilience; the school taught me curiosity and drive.

"Those are qualities I've carried with me throughout my career, and ones that have helped me through some very challenging moments."

In 2024, he became a governor at Royal Grammar School, based in Newcastle's Jesmond suburb, and is helping to shape its future while also sharing lessons from a career spent at the forefront of one of the world's most successful technology businesses.

He says: "People my age often haven't got a clue what I did, which is absolutely fine.

"But younger people know PlayStation, and if that helps me talk to them about working hard, being honest and showing humility, then that's a good thing."

His retirement gift to himself was equally telling: two season tickets at Newcastle United.

A lifelong supporter, Jim has not missed a home match since stepping down from Sony, and he has also become a trustee of Newcastle United Foundation, helping guide

an organisation that supports thousands of people across the region through education, employability and community programmes.

Earlier this year, he joined fellow fundraisers on a gruelling trek to the summit of Mount Toubkal in Morocco's Atlas Mountains, helping raise money for the charity's work while undertaking what he describes as one of the toughest physical challenges of his life.

He adds: "People talk about giving something back, and it can sound like a cliché.

"But clichés usually have a kernel of truth in them.

"It's lovely to be involved with organisations that do so much good in very different ways."

And while much has changed since his childhood in the North East, Jim believes the region's defining qualities remain the same.

He says: "The region has reinvented itself.

"It's moved on from the legacy industries and found new opportunities.

"But the people are exactly as I remember them.

"There's a friendliness, a warmth and a respect for others that I've always associated with the North East.

"I've travelled all over the world and I've never found anywhere quite like it."

That optimism extends to the region's growing technology, gaming and esports sectors.

From Ubisoft Reflections in Newcastle and Double Eleven in Middlesbrough, to the British Esports National Performance Campus in Sunderland, Jim sees significant potential for the North East to establish itself as a major player in the digital economy.

Factor in the rise of remote and distributed working, coupled with the North East's universities, talent base and quality of life, and it means the next generation may no longer need to leave the region to pursue careers in gaming and technology.

Jim says: "I'm really heartened by what's happening.

"As you build centres of excellence, people spin out, create their own businesses and the whole thing starts to snowball.

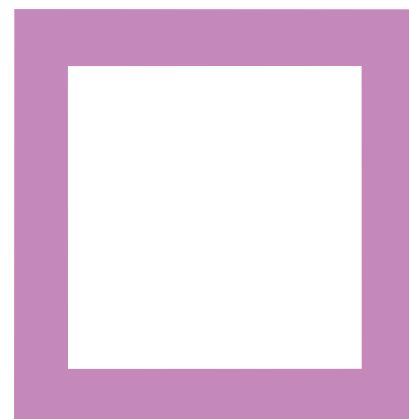
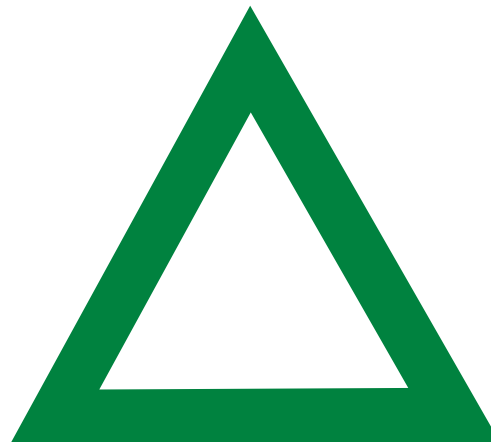
"You create an environment where talent wants to stay, where people can build careers and where new companies can emerge.

"There's a huge opportunity.

"For aspiring entrepreneurs and developers of today, my advice is simple: do your best.

"Sometimes your best is enough and sometimes it isn't, but don't leave anything on the table.

"And, most importantly, enjoy yourself."



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Rethinking HR – why outsourcing might be the answer for SMEs

Jackson Hogg

www.jacksonhogg.com

info@jacksonhogg.com

As people challenges become more complex, the law gets tougher and resources stretch, outsourcing HR is becoming a smarter, more flexible option for SMEs. Here, Lauren Bathan, director of HR Partnership at STEM recruitment and HR services specialist Jackson Hogg, speaks to N magazine about why borrowing expertise could provide an edge for North East businesses.



“SMEs are being squeezed in all directions – it’s a perfect storm.

“For many SMEs, the issue is that although they are small, they still have a workforce with all the challenges that brings, but they are not big enough to have the resources that can absorb those challenges.”

That assessment from Lauren Bathan, director of HR Partnership at Jackson Hogg, goes straight to the heart of a decision many SMEs are facing – whether to keep managing HR in-house or bring in specialist support that can do more while easing strain on the business.

Best known for its specialist STEM recruitment, Jackson Hogg has evolved into a broader recruitment and HR services business, with offices in Newcastle, Teesside and Leeds.

Its HR Partnership service has grown steadily over seven years, building a loyal customer base that accesses expert support without the cost and commitment of an internal people function.

Lauren says: “Clients come to us because Jackson Hogg is their trusted partner and we can offer technical expertise across different parts of our business.

“Whether you employ one person or 1000, you are still a workplace and an employer, and there are certain responsibilities and requirements that go with that.

“We know HR in some SMEs is an add-on to the responsibilities of someone in finance, legal or operations, and they just do their best.

“But in the modern workplace, that just doesn’t cut it anymore; the landscape is too complex for informal HR functions.”

With employment law evolving, expectations rising and employees better informed than ever,

Lauren Bathan, Jackson Hogg director of HR Partnership

Picture: Pawel Gajek (The Bigger Picture Agency)

“We know HR in some SMEs is an add-on to the responsibilities of someone in finance, legal or operations, and they just do their best - but in the modern workplace, that just doesn’t cut it anymore; the landscape is too complex for informal HR functions”

the gap between informal HR and best practice is widening.

Against that backdrop, SMEs have a decision to make – invest in an in-house HR professional or outsource and access a broader set of expertise through a partner.

Lauren says: “Navigating people challenges will only get more difficult and only bring greater risks, be they financial, the time lost managing issues and reputationally.

“HR is a technical discipline, but most places will recruit, rather than borrow an expert.

“Through our HR Partnership service, clients can access a team with a range of specialisms and work with the right person in the right situation.”

Doing so also tackles one of the biggest decisions facing an SME hiring in-house.

Lauren says: “You need to decide whether your HR person will provide the more admin-based side of HR services, or whether they’ll have a more strategic role.

“Either way, there will likely be a gap at the operational level or in longer-term workforce planning.

“Our service means both aspects are covered, and done so in a way that is as close to having an in-house HR expert as possible.”

Outsourcing to Jackson Hogg also means accessing a team with a ready-made network of experts to lean on, as well as ongoing training to keep them up to date with changing laws and regulations.

Lauren says: “A partnership with Jackson Hogg means an SME can use specialists without having to recruit, train or retain an HR person or have that function in their overheads.

“HR continues to go through an evolution from the old ideas of ‘personnel’ to now being a strategic people function.

“Some businesses look at HR from a compliance point of view and might take a more light touch approach, while others want someone to give them a future focus.

“We can be all of those things for an SME.

“For many of our clients, the support we provide effectively means having their own in-house HR person, supplied by Jackson Hogg.

“Others engage with our HR services on projects – there is freedom to choose and build a partnership that suits their needs and budget.”

However, Lauren acknowledges that outsourcing a key function like HR can feel like a big step for some organisations.

She says: “It’s a leap of faith.

“It’s a big thing to bring in someone from the outside and give them access to all the most sensitive parts of your business.

“It feels like a risk, but the bigger risk is not to engage with HR in the first place.”

She adds: “I have empathy for organisations that think, because they’ve never been caught up in a dispute with an employee, that they must be doing something right.

“In truth, it’s more likely than ever that something is coming down the track.”

For Lauren and Jackson Hogg, the answer to that leap of faith lies in relationships built on trust and shared understanding.

She says: “We’re very big on values at Jackson Hogg – we want to work with customers as partners.

“The best HR people are the ones who can

demonstrate genuine business acumen – they understand how the business operates and what that means for its people.

“Jackson Hogg’s USP is bespoke partnerships; it is people at the end of the phone when you need them.”

And in the current climate, such support is vital – no matter the size of the business.

Lauren adds: “We want to encourage business owners to explore their options and make sure they have the right HR support behind them when they have a people problem.

“For some, working with our HR Partnership service might be a chance to be proactive and create people opportunities.

“I want to help SMEs explore the alternatives and consider whether outsourcing could improve and protect their business.”



Jackson Hogg

To find out more about Jackson Hogg and its HR Partnership provision, visit the website or contact the email address at the top of this article.

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Inspire Philanthropy • **Invest** in Communities • **Influence** Change

Shifting the dial on women-led business growth

The Whole Point

www.thewholepoint.co.uk

LinkedIn: The Whole Point

The North East is home to a wealth of ambitious women-led businesses – yet many continue to see their growth ambitions stymied by a funding landscape slanted towards male-led organisations. The Whole Point, however, is working to shift the investment dial and channel more capital into high-growth, women-led businesses in the region. Here, members of its Newcastle board tell N magazine why closing the funding gap has the potential to transform the region's commercial landscape.

Nearly a fifth of Newcastle businesses are women-led, but only 6.7 per cent of investment funding flows their way¹.

The Whole Point's Newcastle board, led by chair Debra Leeves and vice-chair Nina Walton, has made it its mission to increase the funding share women-led businesses in Newcastle receive and inspire more women to set up and scale.

The Whole Point is a UK-wide, Government-aligned initiative focused on increasing the flow of capital to high-growth, women-led businesses.

Backed by Lloyds and working alongside data partner The Data City, The Whole Point moves beyond performative allyship and well-intentioned gestures, focusing instead on data, ecosystems and collective action to drive meaningful economic change.

The opportunity is huge.

In 2019, the Rose Review² found closing the funding gap for women-led businesses could add £250 billion to the UK economy – that

figure rises to more than £310 billion if adjusted for inflation.

Zandra Moore, The Whole Point's co-founder, says: "I've been in too many rooms where there has been lots of nice talking.

"We need to act.

"If we close the funding gap, that's more money for the economy and more money for jobs, so everybody wins."

The Whole Point's Newcastle board hosted its launch party in The Biscuit Factory's stunning Garden Room, with support from event sponsors Lloyds, Perspective Financial Group, Square One Law and The Biscuit Factory.

More than 100 leaders, investors, connectors and allies were treated to motivating opening remarks from Zandra and a lively panel discussion between Debra, Nina and fellow Newcastle board members Michelle Jones, Joanne Lant and Maxine Fox.

Their ambition is clear: to help more high-growth, women-led businesses scale.

The objective will be measured by increasing the capital invested into Newcastle's high-growth, women-led businesses by five per cent, while attracting new funds into the region.

Since its May launch event, the Newcastle board has been busy organising new initiatives and events to connect with female leaders at high-growth businesses in the region.

It is also working hard to boost visibility with banks and North East fundraising decision-makers.

The region has no shortage of female talent, tenacity and commercial potential.

But change is required across the funding system to get women-led businesses the capital they deserve.

On a national level, women-led businesses outperform other businesses on average turnover growth, revenue per pound invested, job creation, social responsibility and more.

Imagine what could be achieved if that impact could scale.

The Whole Point also operates regional boards in Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds and Liverpool, so that funding, data and decision-making for high-growth, women-led businesses reaches beyond London.

Each board has delivered tailored programming responsive to its local ecosystem, and new members are always welcome.



The Whole Point Newcastle board, with co-founder Zandra Moore; Alex Beardsley, national community and operations lead; chair Debra Leeves; and vice-chair Nina Walton



The Whole Point

For more information on The Whole Point, and to find out how you can join its ecosystem to offer your support to the UK's women-led businesses, as well as the country's wider economy, visit the website at the top of this article.



1 – Information taken from The Data City analysis; April 2026

2 – Landmark review sparks action to boost number of female entrepreneurs; www.gov.uk, March 2019

Beyond the Games: Creating a sporting and social legacy

With the Government exploring a North of England bid to host a future Olympic and Paralympic Games in the 2040s, hopes have been raised that the North East could play a prominent role in delivering the global sporting spectacles. What opportunities could the events create for the region, and how might hosting duties help drive inward investment, regeneration and long-term economic and cultural growth?



Stephen Patterson
Chief executive
NE1 Ltd

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity

The prospect of the North of England hosting an Olympic and Paralympic Games is monumental.

Events of this global scale and significance represent a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

The Games would be transformational for Newcastle, the region and the whole of the North, and would deliver benefits for generations to come.



We all remember 2012 and the impact the London Olympics had; imagine that energy, investment, pride and history being created and enjoyed in our region.

Economically, hosting the Olympics would be a game-changer.

Welcoming millions of international visitors and a whole village of world-class athletes would give a financial boost.

With the world's attention, we'd have an exceptional platform to showcase everything Newcastle, the region and the whole of the North of England has to offer.

We know major events boost local economies, but the Olympics would take it to another level.

Even before the Olympic torch makes its way to the North, the real and lasting value will be in the investment and legacy of the Olympics built into the assets created to deliver a successful Games.

History shows successful bids are accompanied by improvements to transport infrastructure, public spaces, housing, digital connectivity and sporting facilities.

Our reputation for successfully delivering major events would be written into history, and with significant infrastructure improvements and new and improved venues, we'd be in a fantastic position for other major events and global conferences to follow.

The North would be firmly on the global map as a worthy destination for future tourism and business investment, and a more attractive place for residents, visitors and investors.

Championing this bid for the Games has already started, with the mayors of eight combined authorities now working together to shape the vision.

We have ample time to plan.

The key is setting our sights on the legacy we want to create and making it our mission from the outset.

That way, we will create opportunities that benefit generations to come through long-term inward investment and regeneration.

Success will be measured not just by Great Britain's medal tally but in the lasting impact and legacy the Games leave behind, and in the global reputation we build for the North.



Paul Blake
Managing director
Newcastle Eagles

A powerful catalyst for investment

Hosting the Olympic Games would represent a transformative moment, not only for the region but for the UK as a whole.

Looking back to London 2012 and the wave of positivity those Games generated, it would be amazing for the whole of the North to have the chance to relive that experience.

The opportunity goes far beyond sport; it is about redefining how the North is perceived globally and unlocking long-term economic and social value.

The Olympics would act as a powerful catalyst for inward investment.

Major global events draw attention from international investors, infrastructure partners and commercial sponsors.

For the North, this exposure could accelerate long-awaited investment into transport, digital infrastructure and urban regeneration.

Cities like Newcastle, Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester already have strong foundations, but the Games would provide the impetus to fast-track development, creating an environment far

more attractive to global businesses.

Equally important is the profiling of the North East on the global stage.

The region has always been rich in culture, innovation and sporting heritage.

Hosting the Olympics would challenge that narrative, showcasing the North as a destination capable of delivering world-class events.

This repositioning would have lasting benefits for tourism, infrastructure and international trade, ensuring the legacy extends far beyond the closing ceremony.

From a basketball perspective, the impact could be profound.

Basketball is one of the world's fastest-growing sports, and the Olympics represent its pinnacle.

A Northern-based Games would continue to raise the profile of the sport in the UK, particularly in regions where participation is already strong but underfunded.

At Newcastle Eagles, we see first-hand the

appetite for basketball among young people.

The Games could inspire a new generation while justifying increased investment in grassroots facilities, elite pathways and professional clubs.

Economically, the ripple effect would be substantial.

Job creation across construction, hospitality and the creative industries would provide a significant boost, particularly in areas that have faced industrial decline.

Small and medium-sized enterprises would benefit from procurement opportunities, while local communities would see improved public spaces and amenities.

Ultimately, a 2040s Olympic Games is not just about hosting a sporting event – it is about long-term transformation.

It offers a platform to elevate the North's global standing, attract sustained investment and grow sports like basketball into major contributors to the economy and community wellbeing.



Alison McGee
Group chief operating officer, Durata
Chief executive, Thornaby Football Club

Inspiring the next generation

A North of England Olympic and Paralympic Games would provide a global platform to showcase a region that combines world-class engineering, logistics and construction expertise with communities ready to benefit from transformational investment and a lasting sporting legacy.

The North East already has the foundations to play a significant role in delivering the Games.

From the industrial heritage of the River Tees to large-scale regeneration projects across Teesside and the wider North East, it has demonstrated its ability to attract investment and deliver transformational development.

With the skills, infrastructure and ambition

needed to host major events, the area is well placed to create facilities that would benefit local communities long after the closing ceremony.

The opportunity extends far beyond sport.

Major events have a proven track record of driving regeneration and inward investment, with London 2012 helping to transform East London and contributing billions to the UK economy through trade and investment opportunities.

A North of England Games could accelerate similar growth, creating jobs, attracting businesses and raising the North East's international profile.

For communities across Teesside, the social impact could be just as important.

Several neighbourhoods remain among the most deprived in England, making investment in grassroots sport and community facilities essential.

At Thornaby Football Club, we see first-hand the power of sport to change lives, with teams ranging from under-six to over-40s categories alongside thriving men's and women's sections.

Seeing elite athletes compete on our doorstep would inspire the next generation.

As the saying goes, you can't be what you can't see.

A North of England Games could create opportunities, aspirations and a sense of pride that endures for decades.



FROM AMBITION TO ACTION: UNLOCKING THE NORTH EAST ECONOMY



Having launched its Unlocking the North East Economy policy plan nearly a year ago to catalyse fresh growth across the region, the North East Chamber of Commerce is set to host a conference mini-series to shape the next phase of the blueprint's delivery. Here, John McCabe, the business membership organisation's chief executive, tells Steven Hugill about the progress made to date and why collaboration remains crucial to building a stronger and more prosperous region.

This summer marks nearly a year since the North East Chamber of Commerce launched its Unlocking the North East Economy policy plan, which sets out a number of priorities to drive growth and build a more inclusive region. Tell us more about the strategy and the progress made so far.

When we launched Unlocking the North East Economy last September, we set out a two-year policy plan shaped by one clear purpose: to create a practical, business-led framework for sustainable growth.

It was not designed as a wish list, or a document to sit on a shelf, but as a plan rooted in the realities our members face every day.

One year on, this mission feels more important than ever.

Creating and sustaining high-value jobs across the North East sits at the heart of the plan. What practical steps are needed to turn that ambition into reality, and where are you seeing momentum build?

The North East has enormous strengths.

We are home to world-class businesses, universities, ports, cultural assets and industrial clusters.

We have a proud heritage in making, exporting and innovating, alongside emerging strengths in clean energy, advanced manufacturing, digital technology, life sciences, professional services and the creative economy.

But potential alone is not enough.

For too long, the region has faced gaps in productivity, skills, transport connectivity, health outcomes and investment.

Businesses continue to operate in a challenging environment, shaped by rising costs, workforce

pressures, global uncertainty and the need to adapt quickly to new technology.

That is why our policy plan focused on the conditions businesses need to grow: people, infrastructure, business growth, international trade, net-zero and place.

These issues are deeply connected.

A business cannot grow without the right people. People cannot access opportunity without good transport. Investment depends on confidence, connectivity and a clear sense of place.

And the transition to a greener economy will only succeed if it works for businesses, workers and communities.

Over the past year, we have used the plan to shape our engagement with local, regional and national decision-makers.

Through our Quarterly Economic Survey, policy forums and direct engagement with members, we have gathered evidence from businesses across the region and used it to speak clearly about what the North East needs and what our businesses can contribute.

Evidence from our members informs our work on growth, skills, trade, infrastructure, industrial strategy and devolution.

We have responded to major policy announcements, represented the region in conversations with the Government and worked with partners to make sure North East businesses are heard.

But influence is not just about responding to policy; it is also about shaping what comes next.

Skills and inclusive employment are additional

central pillars of the blueprint, alongside calls for Apprenticeship Levy reform. How can the region ensure it is developing the talent pipeline businesses will need in the years ahead?

Our work through the Local Skills Improvement Plans has helped put employers at the centre of the conversation.

Across the North of Tyne and Tees Valley, we have worked with thousands of businesses, colleges, training providers and partners to better understand the skills needs of the region.

The message from employers is clear: businesses need technical skills, but they also need communication, adaptability, confidence and digital capability.

They need a system that responds to real labour market demand and gives more people access to good-quality work.

We continue to make the case for stronger links between business and education, more flexible training routes and practical support to help people enter, stay and progress in employment.

The plan also highlights the importance of vibrant high streets and cultural destinations, stronger transport links and capitalising on net-zero opportunities. How important are those issues to the North East's future economic success?

We have continued to highlight the importance of transport, digital connectivity and energy as foundations for growth.

Better connectivity is about access to opportunity.

It affects whether someone can reach a job, whether a business can recruit from a wider





John McCabe, North East Chamber of Commerce chief executive



labour market and whether places across the region can attract investment.

The same applies to energy.

The North East has a major opportunity to lead the green industrial transition, but businesses need that transition to be practical and affordable.

Net-zero must go hand in hand with energy security, competitiveness and supply chain growth.

On trade, we have continued to support businesses looking beyond the region and the UK.

The North East has always been an outward-looking region.

We make things the world needs, and our businesses have the ambition to grow in international markets.

Through our international trade work, events and member support, we are helping firms access practical advice, navigate complexity and build confidence.

On place, we have continued to argue economic growth depends on strong, confident and connected communities.

The North East's cities, towns, coastal hubs, countryside and cultural institutions are major assets.

They shape how people see us and how we see ourselves.

Quality of life is increasingly an economic advantage.

People want to work in places offering opportunity, community, culture and a good standard of living.

That gives the North East a real strength, but growth must reach more communities and create lasting value.

Collaboration with the Government, communities and business – including the Chamber's near 2000-strong membership network – is a recurring theme throughout the blueprint. How critical are partnerships to delivering the plan's ambitions, and where have relationships already delivered progress?

One theme stands out across all

of our work: delivery depends on partnership.

No single organisation can unlock the North East economy on its own.

Progress depends on business, the Government, education, local authorities, civic institutions and communities working together with shared purpose.

The Chamber's role is to bring those voices together.

We represent businesses of every size and sector, across every part of the North East.

We hear directly from employers about what is helping them grow and what is holding them back.

Our job is to bring the region's voice into the room and make sure decisions are shaped by real business experience.

There are reasons to be confident.

Devolution gives the region new tools.

Our universities and colleges are deepening their links with industry.

Businesses continue to show resilience and ambition.

Major opportunities in clean energy, advanced manufacturing, digital, trade, culture and regeneration are within reach.

But confidence must be matched by action.

If the North East is to fulfil its potential, we need sustained investment, better connectivity, a stronger skills system and a policy environment giving businesses confidence to plan for the long term.

The plan will be supported by a conference mini-series across September and October – titled Unlocking the North East Economy: From Ambition to Action – which will focus on themes including workforce development, technology, inward investment, trade, connectivity and devolution. How will those events – and the conversations they spark – help accelerate the plan's goals?

The first year has been about establishing the plan, building evidence and strengthening the

business voice behind it.

The next stage must be about maintaining momentum and turning shared ambition into practical progress.

That is also why, one year on from the launch of the policy plan, the Chamber is bringing together business leaders, policymakers and partners through a three-part conference mini-series in September and October.

The series will explore how the plan's ambitions are being translated into action, moving beyond strategy to focus on practical delivery, regional insight and examples of organisations already driving change.

The first event, at Teesside University's Digital Life Centre, in Middlesbrough, will focus on people, jobs, productivity and artificial intelligence.

The second, at The Culture House, in Sunderland, will explore trade, devolution and the North East's global future.

The final event, at The Glasshouse International Centre for Music, in Gateshead, will look at place, culture, investment and growth.

Each event will provide space for businesses, partners and policymakers to share what is working, challenge thinking and ask what more needs to happen next.

Unlocking the North East Economy is not only about growth on a spreadsheet.

It is about creating a stronger, fairer and more confident region.

One where businesses can invest and grow, people can build good careers, places thrive and the North East plays a leading role in the economy of the future.



North East Chamber of Commerce

For more information about the North East Chamber of Commerce's conference mini-series, visit the [website at the top of this article](#) or follow its social media channels.

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TASTE OF THE
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2025

The rise of the move-in ready office

Parker Knights

www.parkerknights.co.uk

www.pioneer-re.com

LinkedIn: Parker Knights | Pioneer Real Estate

In an ever-changing commercial and economic landscape, demand for workplaces that meet business needs has never been more acute. A significant element in that evolving environment is speculatively fully fitted office space, which significantly reduces fit-out costs and avoids lengthy downtime. Here, Michael Downey, founder of Newcastle-based office real estate agency Parker Knights, and Elliot Burkeman, founder of London-based national real estate investment, development and asset management firm Pioneer Real Estate, assess why speculatively fully fitted office space makes financial sense and why more occupiers should consider the model in growth strategies.

Michael: What does speculatively fully fitted office space mean?

Elliott: It means the landlord has fully fitted out the office before a tenant is in place, at their own cost and risk. The space is move-in ready and is designed, furnished, connected and complete.

Michael: Why do landlords fit out office suites before securing a tenant?

Elliott: Occupiers today, particularly SMEs and growing businesses, don't want to spend six months and significant capital getting a space ready before they can use it.

They want to see what they're getting, make a decision and move into a space.

By delivering a fitted product, landlords reduce void periods, increase the number of potential occupiers and offer something genuinely competitive in a market where quality matters as much as location and price.

Michael: Have you seen occupier demand change in recent years to drive this approach?

Elliott: The shift to hybrid working has fundamentally changed what businesses need from offices.

Headcounts are more fluid and there is far less appetite to commit significant capital to a fit-out when the future feels uncertain.

A lot of businesses want flexibility, speed and

quality without the financial exposure, which speculatively fully fitted office space provides.

Michael: What are the main advantages for a tenant moving into a pre-fitted office?

Elliott: Simplicity.

The moment heads of terms are agreed, the tenant knows exactly what they're getting, from layout and furniture to infrastructure.

There is no procurement process, no contractor to manage and no decisions to make under pressure.

A traditional fit-out typically takes four to six months at a minimum; a fitted suite reduces that to a number of weeks.

Michael: Is a fitted office more expensive than a traditional lease?

Elliott: The headline rent is typically slightly higher than an unfitted equivalent.

However, once design, construction, furniture and project management costs are factored in, the fitted option often compares favourably.

Michael: Are speculatively fully fitted offices designed with flexibility in mind?

Elliott: They have to be.

We're designing for an occupier we haven't met yet, which means the space needs to work for a wide range of businesses and working styles.

At the Newcastle-based West One office building, we create modular layouts that can



accommodate open-plan working, enclosed meeting rooms and quiet focus areas, as well as kitchen and social space.

Michael: What types of occupier benefit most from fitted office space?

Elliott: SMEs and scale-ups are the most natural fit.

We also see strong demand from international businesses entering the UK market, which don't want the complexity of procuring a fit-out from overseas.

Michael: How does fitted office space compare to serviced offices or co-working spaces?

Elliott: Serviced offices offer maximum flexibility but come at a cost premium, limited privacy and little scope for brand identity.

Co-working suits individuals and very small teams, but becomes unwieldy at scale.

A fitted suite on a conventional lease gives an occupier its own front door, its own environment and a lease term that provides stability.

Michael: What advice would you give to occupiers considering this type of space?

Elliott: Look past the headline rent and assess what you would spend on a fit-out, how long it would take and the risks it would carry.

Then compare that honestly against a fitted suite.

There is value in certainty. In business, time and predictability are worth more than most people price them.



Parker Knights

For more information about Parker Knights and the services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article.

This is an abridged version of a longer article, which you can read by visiting N magazine's sister publication Bdaily at www.bdaily.co.uk

Transforming lives through affordable warmth

Warmworks

www.warmworks.co.uk

LinkedIn: Warmworks

With fuel prices set to rise this summer, thousands of families are already nervously looking at their winter budgets. Leading the way in tackling fuel poverty is Warmworks, a specialist organisation working in partnership with the Government, councils and contractors to deliver upgrades to the UK's energy inefficient housing stock. Here, chief executive Ross Armstrong talks to N magazine about the company's expansion into the North East, the push for meaningful strategy around fuel poverty and why a letter from Coco the schnauzer made his day.

For a growing number of UK households, putting the heating on isn't a matter of flicking a switch – it's a considered choice.

Millions of people are already preparing for another winter in homes they can't afford to heat, confined to one room or rationing the heating to a couple of hours a day.

Ross Armstrong has spent more than two decades listening to the stories of families living with the strain of trying to stay warm.

As chief executive of Warmworks, the Scotland-headquartered organisation managing the roll out of publicly-funded warm home schemes, he can already see the pressure building, with energy costs rising by 13 per cent in July and forecast to rise again in September.

He says: "I've found people don't identify with the idea of fuel poverty, even when it's happening to them, so I think of it now in terms



of affordable warmth.

"When you can't afford to be warm in your home, it's not just the physical consequences of not being warm or living with damp, it's the mental stress that's building too."

That focus on affordable warmth sits at the heart of Warmworks' ethos.

Set up in 2015 as a joint venture between the Energy Saving Trust, Changeworks and Sureserve, the organisation delivers Government-funded programmes designed to tackle fuel poverty by improving homes' energy efficiency.

Founded on a mix of social purpose and delivery capability, it took on larger energy firms to secure a £7 million contract with the Scottish Government in 2015.

But there was a problem.

Ross says: "They won the bid, but nothing existed outside the documentation they put together.

"The whole thing had to be up and running, working with the public and spending the money, within four months."

Newcastle-based Ross, who was already established in the sector, soon received a call for help to mobilise the business.

He says: "I said I'd give them six months, as it didn't seem feasible to live in Newcastle and work in Scotland over the long-term.

"That was 11 years ago, and I'm still here.

"I know the East Coast Main Line between Newcastle and Edinburgh like the back of my hand.

"It's become an extension of my office; I'm on first name terms with some of the crews!"

Starting with 40 employees, Warmworks has grown into a £100 million business with more than 180 staff in five offices, delivering energy

efficiency programmes across Scotland, England and Wales.

Households in need are referred to Warmworks for help and, after assessing what changes will make the biggest difference to the individual property – from insulation and central heating upgrades to solar panels – the company manages installation, supporting the customer throughout the process.

Ross says: “Not everyone can go out, find trusted tradespeople and navigate the system.

“We exist to help the people who can’t, or won’t, go through that process themselves.”

Warmworks’ largest contract outside Scotland is with Newcastle City Council, where a multi-year partnership is seeing energy efficiency upgrades rolled out at scale.

More broadly, Warmworks’ Newcastle office, in St James’ Gate, is engaging with councils and partners across the North East looking to improve housing stock and reduce residents’ bills.

That expansion extends into regional strategy, with Ross a member of the North East Strategic Mayoral Authority’s Warm Homes Taskforce, which is helping to shape funding and delivery of energy efficiency improvement schemes across the region.

He says: “It’s really important work to help shape the strategy, and we’re pleased mayor McGuinness has made the issue one of her priorities.

“We’re proud to play a big part in that mission.”

Warmworks uses local contractors wherever it operates, with clear expectations around quality and conduct.

Ross says: “At the end of the day, we’re sending people into a vulnerable person’s home.

“We hold ourselves to the same standards; it’s deliberately stringent and something I make no apology for.”



Ross Armstrong, Warmworks chief executive
Pictures: Andrew Lowe

Warmworks has supported more than 50,000 households to date, but Ross says it’s the individual stories that mean the most.

He adds: “I had a letter from a lady in Glasgow, with a picture of her little dog, Coco the schnauzer, because she wanted me to know what it meant to her to be warm in her home.

“That’s what it’s all about.”

Closer to home, Ross met a Newcastle couple who proudly showed him their 60th anniversary card from the King before telling him what a difference Warmworks had made to their lives.

He says: “They could only previously afford to heat one room in their home; they can now afford to heat the whole house and live comfortably.

“It transformed their lives.”

However, for all the progress and pride, Ross admits he rather fell into the sector.

After graduating from Durham University and still deciding what to do, he took a temporary job for a business similar to Warmworks.

He says: “Listening to the lengths some people went to stay warm made a big impression on me.

“I wanted to do something meaningful and know I was making a difference.”

More than 20 years on, having risen to the top with Warmworks, Ross is blunt about the scale of the issue.

He says: “It’s a national social crisis, we need to be very clear on that.

“People are living in environments they can’t afford to heat or live in comfortably.”

The Government recently announced £15 billion funding through the Warm Homes Plan to replicate established schemes in Scotland and Wales.

And Ross is pleased to see a national strategy, though he does have a warning for Westminster.

He says: “Now isn’t the time for fiddling around the edges or running pilots of ten to 20 homes; we need to get cracking.

“The work of our team over the last 11 years has proved this type of programme works - and works at scale.

“If we get lost in talking shops, that’s not going to keep an old lady warm in a flat in Elswick.

“We need to make this happen.”



Warmworks
To learn more about Warmworks and the services and support it provides, visit the website at the top of this article.

Providing clarity in a complex HR landscape

Shrewd HR

www.shrewd-hr.co.uk

LinkedIn: Shrewd HR

In an era of shifting employment rights, regulatory change and accelerating workplace transformation, effective HR has become a strategic necessity. Helping organisations navigate that increasingly complex landscape is Chester-le-Street-based Shrewd HR. Here, founder and managing director Martin Potts tells Steven Hugill about the firm's tailored support, its balanced approach to clients' individual needs and why it is primed for future growth.

Another of Martin Potts' sentences is punctuated by the clatter of broken stumps and shrieking fielders.

Durham Women are toiling.

Despite the hurried counsel of coaches and their prevailing team-mate, batters are departing Chester-le-Street's striped broad sward with frantic regularity.

For Martin, though, watching through open patio doors on a top-floor office overlooking Durham's Riverside ground, it's all remarkably fitting.

As founder and managing director of Shrewd HR, he's more than accustomed to finding measured solutions to complex challenges.

Launched at the height of the pandemic in July 2020, the business operates across the entire HR spectrum.

Spanning Government policy changes, recruitment and restructures, the company additionally guides clients through areas including performance management, workplace culture, grievance and discrimination matters, and – ever more increasingly – the implementation and utilisation of technology.

Its work is anchored by operational pillars that are tailored to organisations' size and growth blueprints.

Its flexible HR Solutions arm – aimed primarily at SMEs – provides day-to-day support across areas including employee relations, absence management, compliance and policy development.

It is augmented by monthly retainer packages – branded as Core, Spark, Pulse, Edge and

Elevate – which provide scalable assistance from recruitment and people management through to cultural development, board representation and fractional HR director services.

For organisations facing greater strategic challenges, the firm's HR Consultancy Services arm delivers senior-level expertise across areas including people strategy, workforce planning and leadership development, while HR Projects supports larger and multinational businesses on initiatives including department restructuring and technology introduction.

The final pillar is employment law support, which provides guidance on matters ranging

from legal interpretation and settlement agreements to tribunal risk management and complex employee relations cases.

“Our broad range of services suit clients' evolving needs whatever their size,” says Martin.

He adds: “We come without bias; we look at a business' structure from an objective perspective.

“Businesses can sometimes look at HR and just see a cost, but our advice provides far greater added value.

“HR is not a black and white landscape; it comes with a lot of grey areas that require a



Martin Potts, Shrewd HR founder and managing director
Pictures: Andrew Lowe



balanced view to ensure the right decision is taken for each organisation.”

Central to such delivery, says Martin, is the expertise of Shrewd HR’s seven-strong team, which understands not only the nuances and complexities of clients’ operations, but the wider implications of HR policy decisions – conversations that often require honesty, challenge and careful judgement.

He says: “Our role is to advise, guide and support – we are not there to tell.

“A lot of business owners have either invented a product or founded their company to deliver a service; they are not HR experts, and our role is to hold their hand and clearly outline processes.

“We ask clients what success looks like in a situation, but we always identify potential risks and ramifications too, while presenting other options for consideration.

“We take the right decision based on every case,” says Martin of the business, which is the official HR partner of Durham County Cricket Club, Newcastle Eagles, Durham Women Football Club and Durham-based True Padel.

He adds: “We are there to protect businesses, but we do so by treating people in the right way.

“Equally crucial is the building of long-term relationships with clients; by working with them and having conversations, we are often able to tackle a potential issue before it has arisen.

“And that element of our support is evolving.

“Through the relationships we’ve built, I’m increasingly supporting chief executives, acting as a sounding board for them to bounce ideas around ahead of internal discussion.

“That is a niche – and valuable – offer.”

Such close connections, says Martin, are significant as businesses grapple with Government policy changes and technological advances, with the latter, through artificial intelligence, arming employees with an ever greater understanding of their rights and obligations.

Amid such a labyrinthine landscape, Shrewd HR operates like a compass, pointing clients in a forward direction while ensuring technology adoption coalesces with compliance and culture.

He says: “The Employment Rights Act has brought an incredible amount of information and change around areas such as sexual harassment, discrimination and flexible working.

“It has created a lot of noise, and it’s so important businesses take a calm and calculated view.

“Clients need to understand the measures to put in place now, and what needs to be on their radar in the future.

“And we deliver that support,” says Martin of Shrewd HR, which additionally provides twice-yearly employment law update events

every March and September, as well as training sessions to boost managers’ people and HR process skills.

He adds: “Through our employment law service, which is led by employment law and HR advisor Stan Heslop, we help clients know exactly where they stand.

“Stan comes with great experience from the North East Law Centre, where he supports employees, so he is able to look through two lenses and provide greater support across areas such as discrimination.

“That is so important because these changes are coming amid the rise of new technology.

“Through impending policy changes like the reduction in the unfair dismissal claims qualifying period to six months, people are more protected than ever.

“Their access to information has similarly never been greater.

“Our role with clients is to help unravel situations that may arise, while also helping them harness digital tools in a safe and positive way.

“HR consultancy has always revolved around compliance and policies, and while that remains the case, it is now set against things like artificial intelligence.

“And businesses must embrace it.

“That extends to having the correct protocols in place, so that if an organisation uses artificial intelligence to support procedure delivery, it is done so in the right way and is legally sound too.”

Outside the office, Durham Women have steadied, the prevailing two batters’ change of strategy having extended the team’s total beyond the century mark.

And with its own foundations firmly set, Martin says Shrewd HR is similarly primed to build over coming years.

He adds: “The vast majority of our work remains via word of mouth.

“That speaks volumes for the quality of service we provide, but we’re now looking to expand further.

“The team is supporting clients across numerous platforms, which is allowing me to work more strategically on business development and drive further growth.

“These are exciting times.”



Shrewd HR
To learn more about Shrewd HR and the services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article.

Backing Tees Valley's next chapter

Muckle LLP

www.muckle-llp.com

LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

As Tees Valley's commercial and cultural landscapes continue to evolve, law firm Muckle LLP is playing a crucial role in maintaining the area's momentum. Here, the B Corp-certified firm reflects on the impact of a recent office opening, a headline airport partnership and its ongoing commitment to the communities it serves.



Adam Aston, Muckle head of construction, with Rachel List, a partner in the law firm's real estate team

Tees Valley is undergoing one of the most significant periods of economic transformation in its recent history.

Across clean energy, advanced manufacturing, digital technologies and large-scale regeneration, the area is attracting investment at a scale that is reshaping both its economy and its future ambitions.

As businesses expand and new opportunities emerge, demand is growing for professional advisers who understand the pace of change taking place.

Against this backdrop, Muckle LLP is continuing to grow its presence in Tees Valley.

Having worked with organisations across the region for decades, the firm recently opened a permanent base at Stockton's Boaz House, and has grown a dedicated local team made up entirely of Teessiders.

For Muckle, though, the move is more than just an office opening; it represents a strengthening of its commitment to the region through investment in people, property and long-term partnerships with businesses.

Nowhere is that clearer than in Muckle's work with Teesside International Airport, one of the region's most important economic assets.

The firm's real estate and construction teams recently advised on the airport's £7 million Hangar 362 development for Draken.

The project is expected to create up to 50 skilled jobs while supporting Ministry of Defence training contracts, highlighting the airport's important role in Tees Valley's economic growth.

Rachel List, partner in the firm's real estate team, says the Draken hangar development is a great example of the kind of high-value projects Muckle is supporting across Tees Valley.

She says: "These developments involve a number of moving parts, from real estate and construction through to commercial agreements, so clients increasingly need advisers who can provide joined-up, wraparound support.

"One of Muckle's strengths is the breadth of



Pictured, from left to right, on site at Teesside International Airport's Hangar 362 development, are Muckle's Kieran Wootton, Rachel List and Bri Cheng, Phil Lishman, Teesside International Airport construction director, and Muckle's Adam Aston

expertise we bring together across the firm.

“By working collaboratively across our specialist teams, we’re able to support projects like this from multiple angles and help clients move forward with confidence.

“It’s incredibly rewarding to be involved in developments that are not only important for our clients, but also deliver long-term economic benefits for the wider region.”

Victoria Ashby, head of property and development at Teesside International Airport, says having advisers with a strong understanding of the region made a real difference throughout the project.

She says: “It’s been a real team effort to bring this development to life.

“Muckle understood what this project meant for the airport and the wider Tees Valley economy too.

“Its support helped us move forward with confidence and deliver something that will create skilled jobs, generate additional revenue for the airport and strengthen our role in driving growth across the region.”

Adam Aston, Muckle head of construction, says projects like Hangar 362 reflect the wider momentum building across Tees Valley.

He adds: “There’s a real sense of ambition and opportunity across the region.

“The scale of investment and regeneration taking place is creating long-term growth, and we’re proud to support businesses like Teesside International Airport in helping shape that future.”

Muckle’s involvement across the region extends well beyond one sector or project.

The firm works with organisations including Middlesbrough Development Corporation, PD Ports, Great North Air Ambulance Service and Wilton Universal Group, while also maintaining strong relationships with Tees Valley Combined Authority.

The firm was also appointed to the legal panel for the £20 million Teesside Flexible Investment Fund, managed by FW Capital, which supports economic development across Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Stockton and Redcar and Cleveland.

Importantly, Muckle is also committed to investing back into the communities where it works.

In the past year alone, the firm has provided more than £27,000 in grant funding to Tees Valley charities.

One organisation benefiting from that support

is Clean Slate Solutions, where Muckle senior partner Hugh Welch has served as a trustee since 2023.

The firm has provided £16,000 in funding to the charity to date.

It reflects the wider approach Muckle is taking across Tees Valley, building long-term relationships, supporting local organisations and investing in the region’s future.

As Tees Valley’s growth story continues, Muckle’s ambition is clear: to grow alongside the businesses and communities it has supported for years, while helping the region realise its full potential.



Muckle LLP

To learn more about Muckle, its Tees Valley-based support and its status as a B Corp organisation, visit the website at the top of this article.

Driving higher standards

The Northumberland Golf Club

www.thengc.co.uk

LinkedIn: Northumberland Golf Club

The Northumberland Golf Club is preparing to welcome back the DP World Tour Qualifying School this September. The return of the tournament – which will see players from around the world descend on the region – represents another milestone in the club’s resurgence under general manager James Thomas, who is helping restore Northumberland’s standing as one of the most respected golf courses in the North of England. Here, James speaks to Peter Anderson about the significance of the event, the club’s growing membership and the evolution of its corporate offer.

The billionaire US investor Warren Buffett once observed that “it takes 20 years to build a reputation, but only five minutes to ruin it”.

Known as the ‘Oracle of Omaha’, Buffett built his career on patience, discipline and a relentless focus on long-term value, transforming Berkshire Hathaway into one of the world’s most admired companies.

It is a philosophy that resonates strongly with James Thomas, general manager of The Northumberland Golf Club.

Methodical in his approach and a firm believer in the importance of presentation, James has spent the past three years raising standards across one of the North East’s most historic and iconic clubs.

He recognises that excellence is built through consistency at every touchpoint – from the welcome visitors receive to the quality of the course, clubhouse and facilities.

Such focus on the granular detail helped bring the DP World Tour Qualifying School to Northumberland in 2025, making the club one of just ten venues worldwide to host the event.

And after exceeding expectations, Northumberland earned a three-year agreement that will see the event remain on the club’s calendar until at least 2028.

As James and the club prepare for the event’s return between September 7 and 11, he is determined to leave no stone unturned in delivering the best possible experience for players, officials, members and spectators alike.

He says: “We were incredibly pleased with how the week went last year.

“The DP World Tour operates to exceptionally

high standards and every aspect of the event is scrutinised.

“To come through that process and secure a long-term agreement was a tremendous achievement for everyone involved.”

Drawing players from across Europe, North America, Australasia and Asia, the tournament represents a significant undertaking.

Yet despite that complexity, feedback from players and officials last year was overwhelmingly positive.

True to his pursuit of excellence, however, James believes there is always room for improvement.

Following a detailed debrief involving staff, volunteers and DP World Tour officials, the club has identified a series of marginal gains ahead of this year’s event.

Some are almost imperceptible. Others are more visible.

A new fescue-based chipping green – replacing an artificial practice area – is now fully operational, providing competitors with an enhanced short-game facility, while further improvements to the driving range are underway ahead of September.

Inside the clubhouse, the team is building up for one of the busiest weeks in the Northumberland calendar, seeking to bring



Pictured, from left to right, are Graeme Storm, tournament director; James Thomas, The Northumberland Golf Club general manager; Mike Stewart, DP World Tour Qualifying School director; and Peter McLane, The Northumberland Golf Club chair



the players an even friendlier Northumberland welcome through the introduction of national dishes inspired by their home countries.

James says: “Our head chef has embraced the idea and we’re taking it even further, with a broader range of international dishes on offer throughout the week.”

The event also inspired remarkable support from the club’s members.

A total of 63 volunteers helped support the tournament – the highest number the DP World Tour had ever received from a host venue – assisting with everything from registration and marshalling to ball spotting and spectator management.

James adds: “The enthusiasm from the membership was incredible.

“It showed what this event means to the club; people wanted to be involved and help make it a success.”

This year, the club is also taking a more proactive approach to promoting the event, encouraging golfers and non-golfers alike to attend the free-to-spectate tournament.

For James, it represents a rare opportunity to experience one of the region’s premier courses while watching aspiring professionals compete for a place on the DP World Tour.

He adds: “We want as many people as possible to come and experience the event, whether they’re golfers or not.

“You don’t have to play the game to enjoy something like this.”

More broadly, James believes the tournament’s significance extends far beyond a single week in September.

As well as attracting players, caddies and visitors from around the world, it has raised Northumberland’s profile within the game and reinforced its credentials as a venue capable of hosting elite championship golf.

James says: “It’s tremendous for the club, Newcastle and the wider North East.

“We’ve now welcomed championships from the R&A, England Golf and the DP World Tour, and there won’t be many clubs in the country that can say they’ve hosted events from all three bodies.

“It has helped put Northumberland Golf Club firmly back on the global golfing map.

“That recognition is hugely important because it demonstrates what the club is capable of hosting and where we want to be in the future.”

Such progress has also been reflected in the club’s membership numbers, with Northumberland now operating close to full capacity and preparing to introduce a waiting list.

For James, though, the milestone is about more than numbers; it is further evidence that the foundations laid over the past three years are beginning to bear fruit.

He adds: “We expect to reach full membership by September.

“It’s a strong endorsement of the direction we’re travelling in and shows that you don’t

need to compromise your standards to attract members.

“It’s been driven by improvements to the course, investing in the facilities and creating an experience that people genuinely want to be part of.”

The same principles are also shaping the club’s corporate membership strategy, where Northumberland is focused on attracting the right partners, rather than simply increasing numbers.

Having introduced greater structure and consistency to the corporate membership offering, James, alongside Tim Weightman, Northumberland’s commercial director, is looking to build relationships with a small number of like-minded businesses that share the club’s values and view membership as a long-term investment.

James says: “We’ve brought much more clarity and discipline to the corporate offer over the last few years.

“Today, we have clearly defined silver and gold memberships, and we’re looking at introducing a new platinum tier aimed at businesses seeking a more exclusive experience.

“The objective isn’t simply to recruit more corporate partners; it is about finding the right businesses.

“What is particularly encouraging is that a number of business leaders who first came to Northumberland through corporate memberships have since become full members in their own right.”

And as James looks to the future, his focus remains on building a club that honours its heritage while continuing to raise standards on and off the course.

He adds: “Over the next three to five years, I want to see the club recognised nationally and internationally as a venue capable of hosting the very best championships.

“We will continue investing in the course, facilities and the member experience, while building on the relationships we’ve developed with organisations such as the R&A, England Golf and the DP World Tour.

“Our vision is simple: to make Northumberland one of the finest private members’ golf clubs in the North of England.”



The Northumberland Golf Club

For more information about The Northumberland Golf Club, the DP World Tour event, memberships and how to book a round of golf, visit the website at the top of this article.

5



MINUTES

As Middlesbrough prepares to welcome the Turner Prize, the spotlight is set to shine brightly on Teesside's cultural scene. One of Britain's premier art celebrations, the event will take place at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) from September. Here, Laura Sillars, director of the venue, which sits within Teesside University's wider estate, tells Steven Hugill why the landmark occasion represents far more than an exhibition, the incredible legacy it stands to leave and its importance ahead of the gallery's 20th anniversary.

WITH LAURA SILLARS

www.mima.art | Instagram: mimauseful

While much of the region was easing into summer holiday mode, you and your team were putting the final touches to the biggest contemporary art event in Middlesbrough's history. What does hosting the Turner Prize mean for the town and wider North East?

Hosting the Turner Prize is a magnificent moment for Middlesbrough and the wider North East.

It is the world's most important contemporary art prize and the biggest contemporary art event to be staged in the town.

It is also the first Turner Prize to be hosted within a university context.

The artist list announcement has already generated several hundred global news stories with commentators reflecting on the cultural impact of hosting it within a university setting.

Such a major event acts as a catalyst to reshape narratives.

Many are suddenly realising Middlesbrough is the fastest-growing tech hub in the country.

A new story is emerging of our locally grown cultural confidence, creativity and ambition.

That is what art can do. It's massive.

Our 'Turner on Tees' programme extends activity beyond the gallery walls into schools, communities, young people and numerous brilliant partner galleries.

This is a very Teesside trope: start where you stand and then dream big.

What impact could the Turner Prize have on artists and the wider creative community in Middlesbrough and across the region?

Our vibrant cultural ecology is gearing into action.

On the September opening weekend, more than 100 artists from across the North East will present their work in venues across the town as part of the Middlesbrough Art Week.

Events of this scale create opportunity for networking, commissioning, partnerships and new collaborations.

They also strengthen confidence within the existing creative ecology, helping artists and organisations feel connected to something larger.

They change what people believe is possible.

Young people can begin to imagine creative futures for themselves without feeling they need

to leave the region to achieve them.

Beyond the headlines and visitor numbers, what would a meaningful long-term legacy from the Turner Prize look like for Middlesbrough and the North East?

We want to become the next UK City of Culture, for which Middlesbrough is now in the running.

People keep asking me if I'm surprised we have won the opportunity to take care of one of the nation's cultural jewels.

I'm not surprised; I know how fantastic the creative community is here.

Middlesbrough will do a fabulous job of embracing the Turner Prize.

Beyond that, we are particularly focused on young people.

Through the programme, we aim to work with every school in the region, ensuring the Turner Prize creates tangible opportunities for learning and participation.

Legacy is about sustaining momentum, and we have a tremendous cultural programme that stretches into the next decade.

Middlesbrough's hosting of the Turner Prize continues a broader shift away from London-centric cultural events, a move that was last year reinforced by Newcastle's staging of the MOBO Awards and Mercury Prize. To what extent could Teesside's moment in the spotlight help further reshape perceptions about where contemporary art belongs in the UK?

There is a significant national shift underway.

Contemporary culture does not belong exclusively to the metropolitan centres, and there is a growing recognition that some of the most interesting cultural conversations in the UK are happening outside London.

We've always been early adopters: from Charlie Chaplin to one of the UK's earliest Bauhaus exhibitions and Ella Fitzgerald – Middlesbrough has an extraordinary cultural heritage.

Digital culture has already decentralised creativity, enabling ideas, artists and movements to emerge from distinct places and reach global audiences.

We are now seeing that institutional attention beginning to reflect that reality.

And Teesside's role is important.

It demonstrates contemporary art can – and

should – be rooted in different places, shaped by local identities, histories and communities.

Turner's work focused on periods of profound change, from the industrial revolution to maritime technology. In an age shaped by artificial intelligence and social media, what conversations do you hope the exhibition will spark around art, identity, place and regeneration?

Turner worked through periods of profound change including industrialisation, technological development and shifts in how people experienced the world.

That feels remarkably contemporary.

Today, we are living through another period of transformation.

Questions around identity, image-making, truth and public life are becoming increasingly complex and urgent.

Teesside is a particularly resonant place for these discussions.

Its industrial heritage sits alongside a future-facing ambition around digital innovation and creativity.

We hope to create spaces where people can come together to explore what these changes mean for identity, place and for how communities evolve.

The Turner Prize will also shine a national spotlight on MIMA ahead of its 20th anniversary next year. How significant a chapter is the event for the gallery at this stage in its story?

This is a major milestone for MIMA.

Hosting the Turner Prize is a strong endorsement of the gallery's national standing, its curatorial expertise and its role within both the cultural sector and Teesside University.

As we approach our 20th anniversary in 2027, it feels like a moment of recognition and momentum.

For MIMA, the Turner Prize feels less like an arrival point and more like an acceleration point.

It creates new opportunities to deepen partnerships, expand our reach and continue shaping an ambitious cultural future for Middlesbrough and the wider region.

Ultimately, it reflects not only how far MIMA has come, but the confidence and ambition of a place increasingly shaping the UK's cultural conversation.

A weekend of joyful chaos and community celebration

NOVUM Summer Festival

www.novumnewcastle.com

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

From giant dominoes to bird raves, a silent disco inside a light installation, massive bubbles and much, much more, NOVUM Summer Festival is set to bring fun, colour, creativity and no little joy to Newcastle city centre in August. Here, organisers reveal more about the spectacular event and how the itinerary will include something for everyone.



What on Earth is happening in Newcastle this summer...?

Quite a lot, actually!

This August, Newcastle city centre is getting a giant domino run, a bird rave, a silent disco through the streets, giant swings, massive bubbles, dancing on giant moving blocks and enough free activities to fill an entire weekend.

Welcome to NOVUM Summer Festival.

From August 7-9, the city centre will become one giant playground as #NOVUM26 takes over with three days of performance, music, creativity, colour, joyful chaos and community celebrations.

NOVUM Summer Festival is a bold, multi-artform summer event.

You might accidentally walk into a brass band, colour in a giant artwork, dance through the city wearing headphones, discover a hidden installation inside an old building or find yourself watching hundreds of people lie underneath a giant parachute.

Most of it is free. Most of it is outdoors. And all of it is designed to surprise you and entertain.

Expect loads of fun and creative stuff presented by regional, national and international artists.

Newcastle city centre as a stage

The city centre will become the stage, the gallery, the dancefloor and the playground.

You'll discover – and stumble upon – performers in the streets, installations in forgotten spaces, music around corners and opportunities to join in, make something, dance, play or simply stop and stare.

At the heart of the festival is a packed programme of free outdoor performance.

Internationally acclaimed company Motionhouse brings BLOCK, a breathtaking spectacle where dancers and acrobats perform on and around 20 giant moving blocks in a jaw-dropping combination of circus, movement and engineering.

Spanish street percussion company Possê arrives with drums, dance and infectious energy, while North East artists Lizzie Klotz and Luca Rutherford present Fabric of Us, an uplifting performance featuring movement, music and one enormous white parachute.

Elsewhere, mysterious travellers wander the city in Kamchàtka, playful rebels spread chaos in TRUTH!, Curious Arts brings the joy of Wheelie Proud, and roaming bands soundtrack the city centre.

And yes, there really is a bird rave. Think 90s club rave meets giant birds.

Play is serious business

NOVUM is built around one simple idea: cities should be fun!



At Newcastle Civic Centre, Playing Out invites families to do exactly that.

Expect mud kitchens, giant swings, den building, face painting, bubbles, games, theatre and the chance to become an inventor for the day with Little Inventors.

Visitors can help create a giant collaborative artwork in Colour Outside the Lines, build paper cities, make flowers, join artist-led workshops and get stuck into creative activities throughout the weekend.

There will also be a dedicated space for teenagers, alongside performances and experiences across Northern Stage, Monument, Northumberland Street and Great North Museum: Hancock.

Drop in. Stay for ten minutes. Stay all day.

Play a bit. Make a bit. Watch a bit. Dance a bit.

It's your city. It's your weekend. It's your festival.

See the city differently

NOVUM invites all to look at Newcastle again.

A Room In Bloom transforms the High Bridge Works gallery into a giant floral landscape filled with fresh flowers and paper art.

You Are Here: NOVUM invites audiences to explore the city through headphones and sound, while The Secret Parade uncovers hidden stories, medieval Newcastle and forgotten corners of the city.

Throughout the weekend, colourful 'Instagrammable' installations, audio experiences and playful interventions will pop up across the city centre.

One last thing

On Sunday afternoon, thousands of breeze blocks will begin falling across Newcastle city centre as a massive domino run.

Dominoes Newcastle, created by internationally acclaimed artists Station House Opera, will see a giant chain reaction travel through the city centre in one extraordinary moving artwork.

It's the headline finale of the festival.

Built by hundreds of volunteers and witnessed by thousands of people, it promises to be one of the North East's most ambitious public art events.

And it feels exactly right for a festival that believes cities should surprise us, and occasionally make us stop in the street and say, 'what on earth is going on over there?'



NOVUM Summer Festival

NOVUM Summer Festival takes place across Newcastle city centre from August 7-9. Most events are free. Further programme announcements will follow across July. For more information, visit the website at the top of this article.



Northumbria
University
NEWCASTLE



WATCH NOW

**"WE ARE REMOVING
BARRIERS TO HIGHER
EDUCATION."**

HIGHER EDUCATION WITHOUT BARRIERS

Learning with purpose beyond the classroom

Northumbria University

www.northumbria.ac.uk

LinkedIn: Northumbria University

In a fast-moving commercial world, access to talent with the ideas of tomorrow has never been more valuable. And helping develop that next generation of innovators is Northumbria University. Through ventures such as The Business Clinic and a scholarship programme delivered alongside the Chloe and Liam Together Forever Trust, the education provider is forging partnerships that are boosting business progress while equipping students with experience, skills and confidence to build successful careers. Here, N magazine looks at the impact of the university's real-world approach to education.

Real-world experience doesn't just enhance a student's education; it transforms it.

At Northumbria University, learning happens beyond the lecture theatre, through facilities such as The Business Clinic and Student Law Office, where learners work alongside organisations, charities and communities to address genuine challenges that shape their careers and deliver real impact.

That commitment is brought to life through partnerships with organisations across the region, including a special collaboration with the Chloe and Liam Together Forever Trust.

Students in the boardroom

The Business Clinic has delivered 870 consultancy projects involving more than 3500 students since it was founded in 2013.

Organisations of all sizes – from local SMEs to multinationals – receive pro-bono consultancy support, while students gain the real-world experience that sets them apart as graduates.

Dr Ed Cottam, The Business Clinic director, says: "The clinic gives students an experience that no classroom alone can replicate.

"Working with a real client on a real challenge builds the kind of confidence and commercial awareness that employers notice immediately.

"We are proud to work with organisations that understand the value of that exchange."

Honouring a legacy

On May 22 2017, Liam Curry, 19, a Northumbria University sport and exercise science student, and his 17-year-old partner Chloe Rutherford tragically lost their lives at the Ariana Grande concert at the Manchester Arena.

Their families established the Chloe and Liam Together Forever Trust in their memory, driven by a determination to honour the couple through their passion for sport and performance.

That mission has found a natural home at Northumbria University.

Through the Chloe and Liam Together Forever Trust Scholarship, young people from the North East receive support on the costs that can stand between them and their potential, from auditions and coaching qualifications to equipment and travel expenses.

This year's recipient Tom Gwilym is studying an MSc in sport performance and analysis, gaining valuable experience as a performance analysis intern at Newcastle United Football Club's academy.

The collaboration, though, runs deeper.

Students at The Business Clinic are delivering free consultancy on website development, digital marketing and fundraising, while students from the School of Design, Arts and Creative Industries are creating branded clothing to raise the charity's profile.

Richard Clark, trust chair and Northumbria University graduate, says: "The scholarship is a fitting legacy, bonding the charity with the university at which Liam was a successful student.

"It holds a very special personal significance for me as a graduate too.

"Students are also bringing fresh perspectives and thinking to the genuine challenges we face as a charity through their consultancy work."

Richard is part of the university's Alumni Mentoring Programme, bringing his experience as a director at Barclays Private Bank directly to students who could one day follow in his footsteps.

Dan Monnery, Northumbria University pro vice-chancellor for external affairs, adds: "The generosity of partners like Richard, who give their time, expertise and support, makes this kind of collaboration so powerful.

"Experiential learning is central to the university's ambition to power an inclusive economy, and the depth of this partnership – from scholarships, student consultancy and alumni mentoring – is testament to that.

"There is so much more we can achieve together, and we welcome organisations and supporters across the region to be part of that journey."



Richard Clark, trust chair and Northumbria University graduate, pictured next to a Liam Curry and Chloe Rutherford commemorative bench



Northumbria University

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

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

OUT



OF

In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to life coach Michelle Sheekey, who, when not supporting clients through her eponymous Stockton-on-Tees-based business, can often be found in the garden. Here, Michelle reveals how time spent with her tomato-growing grandad sowed the seeds for a lifelong passion, the satisfaction she continues to take from transforming a weed-filled plot into an entertaining space and the lessons in patience and perseverance that gardening has brought to her working life.

www.michellesheekey.co.uk
LinkedIn: Michelle Sheekey

When you're not supporting individuals and corporate clients to unlock growth and performance, you can often be found whiling away hours in the garden. How did your green-fingered passion first take root?

My grandad was a passionate gardener, and I spent many happy hours with him in his greenhouse planting flower seeds and growing tomatoes – and he enjoyed escaping from my nana!

He always insisted that if I tickled the plants with a rabbit's foot and chatted to them, they'd grow better.

Whether that was true or not, I'm not sure. But he always grew beautiful tomatoes.

More than anything, I remember the sense of calm and contentment he found there.

Watching tiny seeds flourish into flowers felt magical, and that feeling has stayed with me throughout my life.

Is there a particular gardening project that makes you especially proud?

My current garden. When I moved in, it was completely overgrown, full of weeds and unruly plants and trees.

Over the past seven years, I've transformed it into my own happy place that's perfect for relaxing and entertaining.

If budget, time and space were no object, what would your dream horticultural undertaking look like?

It would be a lovely large garden with dedicated spaces for different outdoor pursuits – a pool, cooking facilities, a vegetable-growing area, peaceful seating around fire pits and plenty of room for entertaining.

At the very heart of it would be a huge table where family and friends could gather to eat, chat and just enjoy each other's company.

More than anything, it would be a place where we could all just relax and be ourselves.

The parallels between personal pursuits and professional success are very close, with one often informing the other. Are there any lessons from the care, concentration and patience demanded by gardening that carry into your coaching career?

Absolutely. Gardening is so similar to business: you have to put in the work, follow a process and be patient.

Growth takes time and effort, and results don't happen overnight.

Be it plants or people, you need to nurture them and there are no quick fixes, but the results can really be worth it.

Your route into coaching was far from traditional, with time at law firms and a national media company sandwiched between a spell as a nanny in Beverly Hills. Do any lessons from those worlds still help shape your approach today?

The biggest lesson is having the courage to change direction when something no longer fulfils you.

What I'd tell anyone is that it's never too late to choose a different path, but it's important to have a plan if you do.

Expect the unexpected, look for the lessons and just enjoy the journey.

Your CV also includes founding Thornaby-based independent nursery school The Montessori People and serving as a director at business support organisation Grey Lab. How do those roles influence the way you approach your other ventures?

I always start with the end goal and work backwards, planning for as many eventualities as possible – both positive and negative.

I also constantly ask myself, 'would I be happy receiving that service, or being treated that way?'

My personal standards are high, and if something isn't good enough for me, it isn't good enough for anyone else.

OOFFICE

Space conference highlights region's powerhouse potential

Space North East England

www.spacenortheastengland.com

LinkedIn: Space North East England

The North East's credentials as a space sector powerhouse were thrust into the spotlight at a recent event, which celebrated successes and set the scene for future opportunities. Here, N magazine looks back at the North East Space Conference 2026 and how innovation, collaboration and ambition can propel the region to even greater heights.



North East mayor Kim McGuinness

The North East Space Conference 2026 demonstrated the growing strength and ambition of the region's space sector.

Bringing together more than 350 delegates from industry, academia, government and the investment community, it explored future opportunities for growth, collaboration and inward investment.

The conference highlighted the increasingly important role the sector is playing in driving innovation, attracting investment and creating high-value jobs across the region.

Hosted by Space North East England at Durham's Radisson Blu Hotel, the conference focused on a clear ambition: converting the North East's growing reputation for innovation

into increased national and international investment.

While the region's space sector has developed steadily over the past decade, this year's event reflected growing confidence that the North East is now positioned to play a much larger role in the UK's space economy.

North East mayor Kim McGuinness, who opened the sell-out event, reinforced the scale of the opportunity facing the region and challenged both established space businesses and organisations from adjacent sectors to consider the role they can play in shaping the industry's future.

She said: "It's so clear to me that Durham and the wider region have to play a major role in space – the sector already employs more than 5000 people and is worth £1.75 billion to the region's economy.

"Those outside the sector should consider whether their innovations could be used in space, while those already in space need to help make the argument that the North East must be at the centre of progress in space in this country.

"We have never lacked ambition in the North East, and have a heritage of being a manufacturing powerhouse.

"For some, space might not be the natural next step, but for us in the North East, with our innovations, ambitions and workforce, the path ahead is obvious."

Delegates heard from leading organisations including the UK Space Agency, European Space Agency, Lockheed Martin, Airbus, Seraphim Space and Telespazio, alongside businesses already driving innovation across the region.

A key theme throughout the conference was the strength of the North East's wider industrial ecosystem and the opportunities this creates for businesses both within and beyond the traditional space sector.



Pictured, from left to right, are event sponsors and partners Frazer Christie, Airbus; John Bone, Space Leadership Group; Ben Shaw, Lockheed Martin; Tom Justice, Muckle LLP; Andrew Husband, Durham County Council; Lisa Mullen, Space North East England; Kerry Walker, Business Durham; and Dave Moody, Northumbria University

As space technologies become increasingly important to communications, defence, manufacturing and environmental monitoring, opportunities are emerging for companies with capabilities that can be applied across multiple markets.

Discussions highlighted how businesses operating in advanced manufacturing, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, engineering and defence can diversify into the rapidly growing space economy.

The conference also highlighted the significant supply chain opportunities emerging across the sector.

Lockheed Martin's £100 million proposal to build a UK satellite manufacturing facility at Sedgefield's NETPark demonstrates growing confidence in the capability of regions such as the North East to support globally significant space activity.

The region is well positioned to capitalise on this growth thanks to its concentration of advanced manufacturing and technology businesses, supported by world-class research and skills assets.

Organisations including Durham University's Space Research Centre, Northumbria University's North East Space Skills and Technology Centre and New College Durham's North East Institute of Technology are helping

develop the talent and innovation pipeline required to support future demand.

Growing links between the space and defence sectors were another key talking point.

As satellite technologies become increasingly important to national security and resilient communications, collaboration between the two sectors continues to strengthen.

County Durham is already home to a number of companies operating across both markets, including NETPark-based businesses such as Filtronic, Kromek, RED Scientific and Graphene Composites.

Their expertise in advanced materials, semiconductors, communications and defence technologies aligns closely with future space sector requirements.

Alongside innovation and skills, the conference reinforced the North East's wider proposition for new businesses moving to the region.

Businesses can access specialist facilities, connect to strong digital connectivity, a highly skilled workforce and, importantly, the space required to grow and scale.

Lisa Mullen, cluster director for Space North East England, says: "The North East has established a strong reputation for collaboration, innovation and manufacturing excellence.

"This year's conference demonstrated the growing interest from investors and industry leaders who recognise the opportunities our region offers."

The conference reinforced a clear message: the North East's space sector is no longer an emerging opportunity.

The North East's space sector continues to grow through collaboration between businesses, universities, investors and public sector partners.

And it is becoming an increasingly important contributor to the UK's space ambitions and a compelling destination for investment, innovation and growth.



Space North East England

To learn more about the organisations driving the North East's growth in the space sector, upcoming events, funding opportunities and the support available to businesses looking to enter or expand within the sector, visit the website at the top of this article.

There for the little moments that matter

Northumbrian Water Group

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 years to come. Here, Jennie Collingwood, the organisation's head of corporate affairs, highlights a crucial element of the venture – The Big Impact campaign – which is focused on providing the highest levels of support for domestic and commercial customers across the region.

From that first cup of tea in the morning, to a shower at the end of a long day, water plays a quiet – but essential – role in everyday life.

For 2.7 million people across the North East, it's something so familiar that it's often taken for granted.

But behind the scenes, keeping our safe and reliable water flowing 24/7 takes long-term planning, continuous investment and round-the-clock care, supporting not just households, but businesses, communities and the wider regional economy too.

And across the region, that investment is happening at scale.

Northumbrian Water is now into the second year of the most ambitious five-year investment programme in its history – a £2.6 billion upgrade plan designed to strengthen essential infrastructure, enhance water quality and support the environment for the future.

This work forms part of wider national investment in the industry, with Water UK's The Big Upgrade campaign highlighting the scale of investment taking place across the country and starting in the North East.

Building on that momentum, Northumbrian Water's new campaign, The Big Impact, brings the story closer to home, focusing on what that investment means for customers across the region.

Here, Jennie Collingwood, Northumbrian Water's head of corporate affairs, reveals more about The Big Impact, and why customers are at the heart of the venture.

What is the aim of The Big Impact campaign?

There's nothing more fundamental to life than water, and here in the North East we're very fortunate that we can turn on the tap without

really thinking about it.

However, we recognise expectations of the water industry are higher than they've ever been.

Customers want to understand what's being done, why it matters and, importantly, what it means for them in their daily lives.

Rather than focusing solely on individual investment projects, we wanted to create a campaign that would help customers connect

that long-term work taking place behind the scenes with the things they rely on every day.

So, whether that's doing the washing up after a Sunday dinner or taking a walk along the river, it's those little, everyday moments that count.

Our customers are at the heart of everything we do at Northumbrian Water, and The Big Impact is about showing we're there for them, supporting their everyday lives, no matter how big or how small that moment is.



Jennie Collingwood, Northumbrian Water's head of corporate affairs

“Our teams work hard every day to provide reliable and high-quality services, supporting customers who may need extra help and doing the right thing for the communities we serve”

An artist's impression of Northumbrian Water's marketing activity around The Big Upgrade campaign



What does putting customers at the heart of what you do mean in practice?

It's about being there whenever our customers need us, and in a way that works for them.

Whether that's through our financial support, our priority services or just making sure we respond quickly and effectively when something goes wrong.

The campaign gives us an opportunity to show more of those real, everyday moments of support that sit behind the headlines.

In May, we were ranked number one in the industry for customer satisfaction and experience for the second year running by our regulator Ofwat.

It's something we're incredibly proud of, and we never take accolades like that for granted.

But what matters to us most is what that feels like for customers.

What role do colleagues play in delivering that customer experience?

Our teams work hard every day to provide reliable and high-quality services, supporting customers who may need extra help and doing the right thing for the communities we serve.

The vast majority of our colleagues are customers too – they live in the North East, they raise their families here and care deeply about the service we provide to communities across our operating areas.

That connection really matters to us, and you can see it in the way our teams deliver for customers every day.

How do you know this approach is working for customers?

We listen to customers in lots of different ways every day – through the feedback they give us directly, the interactions they have with our teams and through independent research that gives us a clear picture of how we're performing.

That insight is important, because it tells us what matters most to people.

Customers don't just want to know what's

being done, they want to understand why it matters and how it affects their daily lives.

That is particularly important at a time when the water sector is under greater scrutiny, and where building and maintaining trust has never been more important.

We are different from the vast majority of the water industry, and we like to think our customers recognise that.

In fact, customers in the North East rated us as the most trusted water and sewerage company in England and Wales.

We're really proud of the latest results from the Consumer Council for Water, which showed our customers also rated us highly for our performance in areas like fairness and affordability, as well as the care we show to them.

As the campaign develops, what does success look like for you?

We see those results as setting the standard for the service customers should continue to expect.

They are also something we have a responsibility to keep building on.

We want people to feel they can rely on us, that they're supported when it matters and that they understand the value of the service we provide.

But it's also about continuing to listen, learn and improve, because expectations will keep changing.

And so will we.

As a business famed for innovation, in a region even more famous for ingenuity, we'll continue to do just that.



Northumbrian Water

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

HEART AND HOME

www.mussonbrown.co.uk

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



For George Musson and Victoria Brown, co-founders of Musson Brown Architects, the best projects aren't defined by budgets or accolades, but by the people behind them. Here, as the firm marks five years in business, the husband-and-wife team speak to Sian Anderson, reflecting on trust, growth and building a practice founded on human relationships.

The projects George Musson and Victoria Brown remember most aren't necessarily the grandest ones.

Nor are they always the most architecturally ambitious.

Instead, one of the first stories the founders of Musson Brown Architects tell is about two childhood sweethearts who spent years admiring the same house in the North East and dreaming of making it their own.

Years later, when the property came onto the market, they knocked on the door, agreed a price and began a journey that would turn into a Jesmond-based practice.

That journey is about a house, but it is also about people, which perhaps explains everything you need to know about Musson Brown Architects.

Five years after launching the practice, that distinction remains central to everything George and Victoria do.

Indeed, their website's mantra is, 'we believe good work comes from being good to work with'.

Throughout our conversation marking the practice's fifth anniversary, one theme surfaces time and again: architecture begins and ends with people.

George says: "We're not very architect-y architects.

"We like the more human side of it."

Victoria adds: "That's what makes it rewarding for us.

"It's more about the people that are going to live there than the building itself."

The approach has seen Musson Brown work on everything from family homes and period renovations to school conversions, commercial developments and award-winning coastal properties.





Words by Sian Anderson
Photography by Mike Sreenan



GEORGE
MUSSON

Yet despite the variety of projects, George and Victoria always return to the same starting point: understanding the people who will ultimately use the space.

Victoria says: "A really lovely project is one that delivers the brief exactly as the client needs and wants, and that they're really happy at the end."

The practice was born from a moment of change.

In 2020, as George's previous firm underwent a period of transition and the world grappled with the uncertainty of the pandemic, the couple saw an opportunity to create something of their own.

Launching an architectural practice as the world came to a standstill might not have seemed the most obvious move, but for George and Victoria it offered the chance to build a business around the values that mattered most to them, while retaining the team they had worked alongside for years.

Five years on, that leap of faith has evolved into an award-winning practice working across residential and commercial sectors, yet the principles underpinning it remain remarkably unchanged.

Perhaps that philosophy is one reason they have found such a natural home in the North East.

The couple attended Newcastle University, live in Gosforth and run their practice from Jesmond's Clayton Road.

But neither are born-and-bred northerners.

Indeed, in the early days of their relationship, the plan was never to stay long-term.

George says: "We bought a flat and thought we'd move on, but now it feels like we're quite firmly rooted here.

"As a city, Newcastle feels very comfortable, almost like a village.

"You bump into the same faces."

Victoria is quick to agree, pointing to the city's unique layout and accessibility.

She adds: "It's quite unusual for the suburbs to be so tight to the city, to wander in and have everything on your doorstep."

Their affection for the region is reflected in the projects they choose to work on.

Many are embedded in the communities they now call home.

We meet at Victorian Towers, in Gosforth, a landmark residential project that has journeyed alongside the practice for five years and is finally nearing completion, with the building's new owners expected to move in next autumn.

Standing in the shell of the building, with views stretching across Gosforth, it's easy to see why the project has become a defining chapter in the practice's first five years.



Once complete, it will bring a prominent local landmark back into residential use, blending heritage, craftsmanship and contemporary living.

Like many of the practice's projects, Victorian Towers has required patience, collaboration and a clear division of responsibilities – something that comes naturally to the married couple.

Victoria says: "The key to us working together is the fact we do different things.

"We have different roles and different strengths."

Their process begins with conversation, rather than drawings.

The early client meetings are an exercise in listening, allowing people to talk through how they live, work and use a space before any design takes shape.

Victoria adds: "You ask clients to talk and you just listen; you start picking things up."

It is an approach that has earned the practice not only loyal clients, but industry recognition too.

Most recently, the firm received the 2026 Royal Institute of British Architects North East Award for a residential project.

George says: "I think clients like it when they've spent three or four years of their life investing in a project to see it recognised."

Yet awards tell only part of the story.

The practice's most significant growth has come not through accolades, but through relationships.



VICTORIA
BROWN

The thread running through it all is people.

Whether designing a forever home or a company headquarters, George and Victoria are less interested in the building itself than the lives, ambitions and stories it is designed to support.

And that human-centred approach is increasingly taking Musson Brown beyond the family home and into the commercial world.

Having trusted Musson Brown with their homes, many of their clients have asked the duo to help shape their offices, developments and business premises too.

George says: "People like the way we work and they like the client relationships."

"From that, we've developed into the commercial world but with the personal touch, which fits for us."

Victoria adds: "The skills you need working on a high-end residential project – attention to detail, delivery and service – are a real strength of ours."

Despite expanding into new sectors, the couple remain deeply connected to the region that helped shape their careers and their practice.

Asked to name the North East's most inspiring architecture, their answers are telling.

George points not to a single building but the wider landscape.

He says: "It's what's on the Northumberland coastline or what you see when you walk down Newcastle's Grey Street."

"It's a beautiful city."

Victoria, meanwhile, points to Newcastle Civic Centre, admiring a building whose striking design has stood the test of time and remains as relevant today as when it was first conceived.

She adds: "It was quite cutting-edge at that time; there are still things we were taught at university in terms of your lines of sight and use of spaces."



"From an architectural perspective, it's very successful."

When the couple muse over the next five years, awards and acclaim aren't the first thing that comes to mind.

George says: "We want to be recognised for the service we offer and the way we approach projects."

"I don't think we have any desire to be a huge practice or huge studio."

Victoria, meanwhile, is motivated by the opportunity to tackle projects that challenge and inspire.

She adds: "We want to have work that's really interesting."

Their office feels entirely in keeping with the practice's ethos.

Tucked away among a quietly charming stretch of independent businesses, from interior shops and wellness studios to neighbourhood cafes and characterful storefronts, it feels less like a place of work and more like an extension of the community.

Inside, ideas move around a communal table that houses the firm's eight-strong team, shifting from conversation to concept and, more often than not, back again when a familiar client walks through the door with something new in mind.

Five years in, the foundations of the practice remain remarkably simple: listen carefully, work collaboratively and remember that every building begins with a person.

And at its heart are two childhood sweethearts and the house they'd always hoped would be their home one day.

LAST

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Closing this edition of N magazine, Gordon MacPherson, chief executive of Sunderland-based training and compliance management software firm Workprove, reflects on the potential of a recent office move, the impact of a major brand refresh and the business' future ambitions in a world dominated by technological and digital innovation.

Congratulations on the recent office move. How will the company's expanded base in Doxford Works, on Doxford International Business Park, support its next phase of growth?

Moving to Doxford International Business Park marks a genuinely exciting chapter for us, for a lot of personal, as well as commercial, reasons.

The vast majority of our team are Sunderland born-and-bred, as is the leadership group.

This city means a great deal to us.

The transport links at Doxford Works are excellent, and the site also offers important flexibility; as we scale, we have the ability to take on additional office space within Doxford Works, rather than face the disruption of relocating again.

That kind of room to grow, without having to uproot the team, is genuinely valuable.

The new space also gives us the environment we need to attract talent, collaborate effectively and continue building something of which we're very proud.

This isn't just a bigger office; it is a long-term home for Workprove in the city we care about most.

The headquarters investment builds on a rebrand, with Workprove evolving from Moralbox. What prompted the change, and how is the new identity helping shape the firm's future direction?

Moralbox served us well in our early years, but as the business matured, we recognised the name

no longer captured everything we do, nor the direction we were heading.

Workprove is a much clearer expression of our purpose: it is about helping organisations prove their people are trained, competent and compliant.

The new identity has given the team a renewed sense of clarity around what we stand for and how we communicate that to the market.

Paired with the new headquarters, it sends a clear signal: Workprove is growing with intent.

As workplaces become increasingly influenced by technology and digital innovation, how well positioned is Workprove to meet the training demands of employers and employees across future years?

Very well positioned – and our story as a business demonstrates that.

My background is in health and safety, and my co-founder John Dunnill brings deep software development expertise.

That combination has always been our edge.

We're not a tech company that stumbled into training compliance management, nor a training provider that bolted on some software.

We built Workprove from the ground up with both worlds in mind, and the result is a product that genuinely works for the people using it every day.

We've also made a deliberate choice to focus where we know we can add the most value – construction and manufacturing.

These are complex, high-risk industries with real compliance demands, and we understand their nuances in a way that a generalist platform can't.

That specialism matters to clients.

A great example of that thinking in action is our Workpass app, which tracks certification at the individual employee level.

Workers can carry their qualifications with them

wherever they go – whether they're moving between sites, contractors or employers.

In industries where proving training on the spot can be the difference between someone working safely or not at all, that is a genuinely powerful capability.

We're also actively embracing artificial intelligence; it isn't a buzzword, but a practical tool for improving our platform.

The world of work is changing rapidly, and the regulatory expectations around workforce competence are becoming ever more demanding.

Workprove is built to move with that, and with the right team, the right focus and the right technology behind us, I'm confident we're exactly where we need to be.



WORD

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