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ROUNDTABLE

A RAPIDLY CHANGING LANDSCAPE: DELIVERING A NEW INDUSTRIAL AND
ECONOMIC FUTURE FOR SOUTH EAST NORTHUMBERLAND



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Words by Brian Aitken

Photography by Pawel Gajek (The Bigger Picture Agency)

There's a vibrancy around South East Northumberland, an area alive to the sound of regeneration thanks to a thriving energy park, the re-opening of the Northumberland Line, a major new college campus, increasing offshore engineering developments and the prospect of a world-leading artificial intelligence data centre. Here, in an exclusive roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside Bernicia, Port of Blyth and Education Partnership North East, business leaders discuss development across the region over the past 12 months, the challenges and opportunities faced by organisations and what is in store across the coming year.

Much has happened in South East Northumberland over the past year. What have been the standout moments, and how are they changing the area for the better?

Pointing to the Port of Blyth-based Energy Central Learning Hub, which has been created to nurture workers to power the UK's sustainability drive, Andrew Mowbray, director of projects at property investment and development business Advance Northumberland, said the area is in a "really exciting" place.

He added: "It's all about the long-term view that was taken many years ago, which has resulted in all of these things coming together now.

"We've got activity in the centre of Blyth, and we're about to start the demolition of Wansbeck Square in time, hopefully, for the Northumberland Line opening.

"And then we have the Ashington Portland Park cinema coming soon."

John Hildreth, head of economic growth at Business Northumberland – the new business support service for Northumberland County Council – highlighted the impact of the recently-developed Northumberland Energy Park, which neighbours Port of Blyth, at Cambois, and has already attracted subsea cable maker JDR.

He said: "JDR represents £130 million of investment and 171 new jobs for the area, with plans to grow further.

"Then there's phase two of the energy park, with SSE Renewables having submitted an application for an onshore converter station.

"The opportunity to drive economic growth from clean power is very much part of the energy park's message to the market.

"One of the most significant things to happen, though, is the £10 billion investment by Blackstone QTS in an artificial intelligence data centre at Cambois."

"Construction jobs will be created, but there will be spin-offs too, in terms of the education perspective and how we bleed that opportunity into businesses across the county and region," said John, who added the data centre deal will deliver £110 million for Northumberland County Council to invest in the area.

John Johnston, chief executive at Ashington-headquartered housing association Bernicia, pointed to the optimism delivered by the election of Kim McGuinness as North East mayor and subsequent formation of the North East Combined Authority.

He said: "I think we're all very positive around that, and are seeing a lot of collaboration in the region.

"In terms of housing, the determination is there to build more homes at a time of massive need, but also to work smarter together, collaborating on things like major stock improvements and retrofit."

Amid the positivity, are there any issues or challenges that need to be overcome?

Richard Hogg, founder and chief executive of STEM-focused specialist recruitment and outsourced talent services partner Jackson Hogg, issued caution about the skills market.

He said: "We need thousands more people coming into the engineering sector, right across the board.

"Many of our clients are paying us for very niche, experienced senior engineers and principals, who can design and create things.

"But, because of a scarcity of talent, what they used to pay £40,000 for, they're now paying £70,000-plus for – and that's massive.

"That's where you start to become uncompetitive on the global scene."

One organisation doing something about the situation is Port of Blyth.

With the number of people employed in offshore wind expected to grow from 32,000 to 150,000 by 2030, it has worked with partners to create the Energy Central Campus, which includes the Energy Central Learning Hub.

And not only is its training division, known as Port Training Services, the biggest provider of apprenticeships in ports – training 100 people at a time on behalf of all UK ports – it launched a carousel degree apprenticeship in response to the way companies in the subsea sector were recruiting.

Alasdair Kerr, the port's commercial director, said: "It's a really good experience.

"Participants do six months at each company, and they're 100 per cent guaranteed a job at the end of it."

Ellen Thinnesen, chief executive of Education Partnership North East, which runs six college campuses across the region – including a soon-to-open Ashington-based Northumberland College campus – took the discussion further.

Spotlighting the creation of Skills England, which has been founded to take on the powers and responsibilities of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, she expressed optimism of its impact on the learning environment.

Referencing its first report, she said: "It sets out the three aspects of the skills challenge.

"One: Skills mismatch - A disconnect between the skills sought by employers and those possessed by individuals.

"Two: Skills shortage - When difficulties in recruiting for a given job are due to the demand for particular skills exceeding supply in the labour market.

"Three: Skills gap - When employers consider their current workforce to have either the wrong type of skill, or level of skills, to those required to do the job.

"Some sectors in the region are not skills forecasting well enough.

"My experience, from working with some of the large employers across this region and others, is that many do not have workforce strategies in place for the longer term, particularly in relation to the technological skills needed as we head towards 2035."

Richard added: "The message overall for any young person with an appetite to do STEM-related work is that they're almost guaranteed employment at the end of it.

"There is such demand coming through from all these sectors – they don't need to worry about getting work."

Staying with skills, what does the existing relationship between industry and education look like?

Mark Davies, assistant vice principal at Blyth-based Bede Academy, said the relationship is good, pointing to the support from employers for the courses it is delivering at the Energy Central development.



Pictured, above, Ellen Thinnesen, Education Partnership North East chief executive

Below, Richard Hogg, Jackson Hogg founder and chief executive



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Mark Davies,
Bede Academy assistant vice principal

“We must drive an economic skills strategy, but we need to anchor everything to systemic change, because only then will we drive the difference needed”

Ellen Thinnesen,
Education Partnership North East
chief executive

“I’d like a clear policy platform and funding certainty around social housing to release capacity to build more of the social homes the region needs”

John Johnston,
Bernicia chief executive



Alasdair Kerr, Port of Blyth's commercial director, makes a point during the roundtable discussion

He said: “Work placements on T-levels are 45 days over two years.

“That’s a huge commitment from employers, but we’re already seeing, after just one block of placements, how successful it has been.

“With that employer support, young people’s life chances just grow and grow because they can visualise where they are going to end up.

“Far too many of our young people are encouraged to go to university, which isn’t necessarily the right pathway for them.

“As a result, they often leave the area with the qualification they’ve got because, historically, there may not have been something for them on the doorstep.

“I think a lot of young people are seeing all of this regeneration, all of the new employers come into the area, and we’re getting to a point where students want to stay because they can see there are real life chances for them here.”

Mark found support from Ellen.

She said: “I’m seeing some amazing things in the region.

“Co-production, co-design and co-delivery between industry and education is probably the strongest I’ve ever seen it, and I’m beginning to see the barriers being broken down between colleges and some universities, and certainly wider skills providers in the system.”

There was a lot of interest around the table in Sunderland College’s 14 to 16-year-old pilot scheme with Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, Nissan and Gentoo, which has been shared with the Department for Education and North East Combined Authority.

The programme involves partnerships with academy trusts and sees the college deliver technical education from the age of 14, with

employers’ expectations of a young person’s employability built into its framework.

Ellen added: “We’re just about to finish the second year of the Nissan Academy; these 14-year-olds will leave with their school qualifications, a technical qualification in engineering (typically achieved post-16) and Nissan informed skills.

“We also have guaranteed routes through to apprenticeship with Gentoo and Nissan.

“The whole strategy the college is deploying is to work with schools, with children as young as seven or eight, and then start formal delivery at 14, bringing the technical competencies and the softer skills that are so important to be able to function as an active citizen in the workplace and society.”

Where do soft skills and employability sit in the training and skills agenda?

Sarah Lawson, operations director at Longbenton-based fire alarm panel, evacuation alert and emergency lighting maker Advanced Electronics, said the company has a problem with recruitment, with many young people not work-ready.

She said: “We’ve got an ageing workforce, and it is difficult trying to backfill roles.

“We’re just not seeing people wanting to come in and sit on a production line.

“But we’ve got all the positives – a good package, job stability and everything else.

“People are talking about lots of great things going on.

“Where I’m sitting, it doesn’t feel like that’s happening to us.

“We look for apprentices. We’ve looked

at different ways of doing it, but the unemployability of some of the people that we’re seeing means they just come through and drop out.”

Ellen stressed the situation is “going to get more complex”.

She said: “All of the data forecasting nationally indicates the distribution of jobs will be significantly impacted into the future by global trends such as an ageing population and a growth in young people over the next decade reaching the labour market.

“So, shifting the whole skills strategy is critical to that.”

John Johnston said personal development and support were important to Bernicia, not just for young people but for helping older people re-enter the workplace.

Highlighting his role as vice-chair of the North East Housing Partnership, which brings together the region’s social housing providers, he said: “Through that endeavour, we are delivering lots of employability initiatives, dealing with what is holding people back from re-skilling or re-entering the workplace.

“It is based around a person-centred approach, looking at confidence, communication and any other issues adding to long-term unemployment, or holding people back from re-entering the workplace, including mental illness and disability.”

Mark pointed out COVID-19’s impact on youngsters’ soft skills development, citing lower attendance levels and the highest ever numbers of safeguarding and welfare concerns since lockdown.

He said: “There are three or four year groups of students in the secondary system, or just starting to come out of it, that have missed opportunities to develop their communication

skills, do any form of public speaking or be involved in group work during year seven, eight and nine.

‘And these soft skills are more important, by and large, than the technical skills we want our young people to have.’

How big a difference will the opening of the Northumberland Line make to the area?

The consensus was that the opening of the line would not be a solution in itself, but is nevertheless much needed because of current shortcomings across the public transport system.

Alasdair said: ‘We’ve been trying for a year to recruit a graduate to come and work in our finance department.

‘There are some great students coming out of Newcastle, but trying to get them to come to Blyth is difficult.

‘It’s only 20 minutes in the car, but it’s three buses, and they think it’s a different part of the world.

‘I think the Northumberland Line will make the situation better.’

Mark highlighted the experiences of students who went on placement a few months ago, including some who had to travel to Wallsend.

He said: ‘I hadn’t realised quite how bad it was.

‘They were travelling for pretty much two-and-a half-hours, sometimes three hours a day, with the erratic nature of bus certainty.’

Sarah added: ‘Public transport is a problem.

‘We used to be based in Cramlington and are now in Newcastle, so we’ve got a lot of people coming from South East Northumberland into our factory on a daily basis.

‘We want to offer flexible work packages but, because of shift patterns, I’m not in the position where we could just work to everyone’s individual needs.

‘And we really struggle with that because of the lack of transport that’s available.

‘If we’re ever looking for a collaborative approach, it must be on transport.’

John Johnston said: ‘We’ve got to make sure the North East Combined Authority, working with local authorities, has the funding and influence to develop an integrated transport system that both works and is something people can afford.’

He added the combined authority must also use its influence with the Government to make funding available for significant infrastructure improvements to transport links that include the A1 and Cramlington’s Moor Farm roundabout, and for the mooted reopening of the 21-mile Leamside Line between Tursdale, in County Durham, and Pelaw, in Gateshead.

John Hildreth added: ‘Transport now falls

under one remit – the combined authority.

‘I’m confident there will be a more co-ordinated approach in terms of transport management, whether it be road, rail or bus.’

Do you think devolution will improve the co-ordination between the public and private sectors?

Andrew said: ‘I’m hopeful we’ll get more simplified access to funding through devolution.

‘Northumberland County Council, with Advance Northumberland’s support, has been successful in securing Government funding over the last five or six years, but you end up in this fight with the whole country.

‘Everyone is spending lots of money to develop schemes to a certain stage – sometimes up to £60,000 to £70,000 is invested in a project which may or may not make the cut at Government level.

‘It would be better if that is funnelled through the North East and distributed in a much better way, with a lot less wastage in the application process.’

Alasdair added: ‘We’ve tried to take a different tack with it.

‘When they were pulling together a devolution deal, we thought if seven local authorities can get on without too much fighting, then maybe the ports need to get on better as well.

‘So, we’ve put in a devolution deal.

‘It’s still early stages for the principle of a green super port – it is ourselves, Tyne, Sunderland and Newcastle International Airport.

‘It’s driven by the ports and supported by the combined authority.

‘We’ll still be competitive, but as a joint entity, we’ve got a stronger offering.’

What are the measures needed to provide further progress across South East Northumberland over the next year?

John Johnston cautioned the area must be careful not to ‘lose the opportunities of today by planning for tomorrow’.

He said: ‘We mustn’t think and operate in isolation.

‘The new Ashington college will be on site and the train line will be open, and I’d like a clear policy platform and funding certainty around social housing to release capacity to build more of the social homes the region needs.’

Andrew called for continued collaboration to ensure projects are brought to suitable fruition.

He said: ‘Over the next 12 months, as a result of the hard work over the past few years, we’ll see so much come out of the ground, be handed over and opened.’

Ellen said the region must be very clear on its plans to address systemic challenges.

She said: ‘One in five children in the North East live in deep poverty, with one in ten living in deeper poverty and seven out of ten living in households with no economic resilience.

‘We must drive an economic skills strategy, but we need to anchor everything to systemic change, because only then will we drive the difference needed.’

Sarah echoed the call for clarity.

She said: ‘A clear vision for the North East would be really good, and we must also really work on shrugging off some of the things we kind of revel in – things like the region’s reputation for a good night out.

‘We must make sure we can interact with Westminster and really drive the agenda, rather than feeling it’s happening to us, or we’re not fully engaged in the process.’

Mark said it was incumbent the area maintains a groundswell of positivity.

He said: ‘We’ve started something, and I look forward to seeing university students coming back to Blyth, not waving them goodbye at the end of sixth form and never seeing them again.

‘I look forward to engineering students and health students going out into sectors where there’s real need and accessing opportunities across the North East.’

John Hildreth added: ‘By this time next year, I hope to be getting on the train and heading to Bebside or Ashington, to see the new college, or to go and watch something at the new cinema in Blyth.

‘You can already see the impact the Energy Central Campus is having, in terms of students using Blyth town centre, and I hope we can replicate that with the new Ashington college.

‘A really big opportunity, though, is the new hyperscale data centre, because a series of ten data centres in one location isn’t something we’ve seen anywhere else in the world.’



Sarah Lawson, Advanced Electronics’ operations director, makes a point during the roundtable discussion