

N

ROUNDTABLE

CREATING INFRASTRUCTURE OF OPPORTUNITY
- BUILDING A BETTER TOMORROW

NET

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Creating the infrastructure of opportunity

Building a better tomorrow

One need only travel across the Redheugh Bridge or the new Wear Footbridge to witness the scale of transformation sweeping across the North East. From the £950 million Forth Yards scheme and Riverside Sunderland's ambitious redevelopment of the former Vaux brewery site to the opening of Stockton's Waterfront Urban Park, the region is undergoing one of the most significant periods of regeneration in its recent history, fuelled by devolution and backed by billions of pounds of public and private investment.

Yet while the cranes on the skyline point to progress, the built environment sector faces a series of significant challenges. An ageing workforce, persistent skills shortages, rapidly evolving technologies, net-zero ambitions and ever-increasing demand for new homes and infrastructure are placing unprecedented pressure on the industry.

At the same time, employers, educators and professional bodies are grappling with how best to attract, develop and retain the talent needed to turn that ambition into reality.

Here, in a roundtable discussion hosted by Northumbria University alongside N magazine publisher NET, senior figures from industry, education and regional organisations explore how greater collaboration could lay foundations for a proposed North East Built Environment Futures Alliance – a regional forum that builds on the considerable strengths already present across the North East, connecting existing initiatives, expertise and partnerships to create the conditions for a more coordinated and responsive education system.

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

What are the biggest challenges facing the North East's built environment sector?

The Government's pledge to "get Britain building again" has placed construction firmly at the centre of its economic agenda.

Alongside plans to deliver 1.5 million new homes in England by the end of this Parliament, ministers have promised to accelerate infrastructure investment, reform the planning system and unlock growth through regeneration and development.

Yet after years of political volatility, a constant revolving door in Westminster and successive shifts in policy direction, the sector continues to contend with uncertainty alongside long-standing workforce and skills challenges.

Against that backdrop, roundtable members examined the structural challenges facing the sector and considered whether the industry's greatest obstacle is not a lack of opportunity, but rather its ability to organise, develop and connect the people needed to deliver it.

For Mark Gardham, sector director at building and infrastructure company Sir Robert McAlpine, many of the sector's challenges stem from a lack of confidence.

He said: "The visibility of the pipeline has been one of the biggest challenges throughout my career.

"Businesses are far more willing to invest in people, skills and innovation when they have confidence that work is coming – but too many projects continue to be delayed because the economic conditions simply aren't there."

The sentiment was echoed by Mark Thompson, principal and managing director at Ryder Architecture, the Newcastle-headquartered employee-owned practice behind major regeneration and placemaking projects such as The Spark at Newcastle Helix, who suggested political consistency is just as important as financial investment.

He added: "One of the biggest frustrations for the industry has been the constant change in direction.

"Businesses need stability.

"Whether it's apprenticeships, procurement or skills policy, businesses need a stable framework they can plan around."

However, participants agreed uncertainty alone does not explain the scale of the challenge.

They argued the construction sector's fragmented structure, dominated by thousands of predominantly small businesses, often limits investment in innovation, research and workforce development, while making collaboration far more difficult.

Professor Paul Jones, professor of architecture at Northumbria University, said: "Around 95 per cent of construction companies employ fewer than five people.

"That creates a very fragmented industry.

"Until we address that structural challenge, many of the issues we're discussing will remain."

Roundtable members also highlighted the pace of change facing the sector.

Alongside delivering more homes and infrastructure, employers are preparing for digital transformation, modern methods of construction, net-zero requirements and the growing influence of artificial intelligence.

For Leanne Nicholson, digital adoption manager at global engineering and infrastructure consultancy Mott MacDonald, the challenge extends beyond simply recruiting more people into the industry.

She said: "We need to build a workforce that's adaptable, digitally confident and ready for changing technologies, artificial intelligence and new ways of working.

"Continuous learning, collaboration and innovation are becoming just as important as technical expertise."

However, participants questioned whether the industry is doing enough, not only to attract the next generation, but to retain them too.

While colleges and universities continue to recruit students to construction-related courses, too many fail to complete their training or ultimately pursue careers elsewhere.

And with competition for talent intensifying across every sector, roundtable members argued the industry must become easier to navigate and that more needs to be done to communicate the breadth of careers available, as well as challenging outdated perceptions.

Simon Cassells, account manager at CBRE Global Workplace Solutions, which works with Northumbria University to manage and maintain its campus estate, said: "Why would a young person today choose construction?



"Sometimes, it's not about creating entirely new degree programmes, but offering smaller courses, CPD and lifelong learning opportunities that respond much more quickly to industry needs"

Professor Niraj Thurairajah
Professor in built environment
Northumbria University





Dr Susan Dawson, Northumbria University associate professor, educational partnerships lead, chats to Ryan Doyle, Building Design Northern director of operations, ahead of the built environment roundtable



“There’s already a huge amount of good work taking place across the region; we need to share what works and make it easier for employers, colleges and universities to work together, rather than duplicating effort”

Rebecca Storey
Regional construction skills director
North East Construction Technical Excellence College

“Unless we can answer that question with confidence, we’re always going to struggle to attract the people we need.

“We have to recognise that careers don’t have to follow a single path.

“There are opportunities to move between construction, maintenance and other parts of the built environment that we perhaps don’t talk about enough.”

That point was reinforced by Stuart Miller, director at Civil Engineering Contractors Association (North East).

He added: “One of the biggest barriers is that the industry can be difficult to navigate.

“Opportunities often aren’t visible, the language can be impenetrable and too many careers remain hidden from the people we’re trying to attract.

“Construction has an incredible story to tell – we need to do a better job of telling it.”

Why does the disconnect between education and industry still exist – and how can it be bridged?

The construction sector has long wrestled with the challenge of attracting and retaining enough skilled people.

Yet as the Construction Industry Training Board’s Industry Picture 2026 report makes clear, the sector’s greatest challenge is no longer simply recruiting more workers, but better connecting workforce planning, education, training and employer demand to meet future need.

That diagnosis resonated strongly with roundtable members, who argued the challenge is not a lack of activity, but a lack of alignment.

For Dr Susan Dawson, associate professor, educational partnerships lead at Northumbria University, the conversation needs to move beyond talking about skills shortages and focus on creating a system that supports the region’s long-term workforce ambitions.

She said: “We have employers who want to work with education and examples of partnerships that work incredibly well, but we’re not yet connecting those successes or making them easy to access.

“It’s about creating a system that’s simpler, more collaborative and aligned with what the region actually needs.”

That view was reiterated by Rebecca Storey, regional construction skills director at North East Construction Technical Excellence College, the training centre led by Sunderland College and based at the Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy in the Riverside Sunderland regeneration development.

The greater challenge, she suggested, is ensuring education providers receive clear and consistent guidance from industry about the skills employers will need in the years ahead.

Rebecca said: “Education responds when industry tells us what’s needed.

“We’ve invested in new equipment, developed new courses and adapted provision before, but we need confidence that demand is there.

“Sometimes the message from industry is clear, but just as often different parts of the sector are asking for different things, which makes it difficult to plan with certainty.”

From a higher education perspective, Professor Niraj Thurairajah, professor in built environment at Northumbria University, said uncertainty presents similar challenges.

He said: “We need a better understanding of where the demand is going to come from.

“Sometimes, it’s not about creating entirely new degree programmes, but offering smaller courses, CPD and lifelong learning opportunities that respond much more quickly to industry needs.

“To do that, education and industry have to plan together, rather than in isolation.”

Roundtable members agreed employers have an equally important role to play in shaping future talent by helping influence curricula, offering meaningful work experience and exposing students to careers across the built environment.

Greg Humphreyson, associate director at Sunderland-headquartered multi-disciplinary construction consultancy Identity Consult, said: “Employers have a responsibility to play a much more active role in education.

“Whether that’s through guest lectures, helping shape courses or engaging directly with students, we can produce more rounded professionals by bringing real-world experience into the classroom.”

Greg went on to highlight the value of meaningful work placements, suggesting they provide students with a far better understanding of the profession than can be gained through formal education alone.

He added: “The earlier we can expose students to the realities of the profession, the better prepared they’ll be when they graduate.

“At the same time, it gives employers the opportunity to build relationships with future talent, identify potential recruits and help shape the workforce the industry will need in the years ahead.”

For Ryan Doyle, director of operations at Building Design Northern, the Sunderland and Ulverston-based architectural and engineering practice behind Sheepfolds Stables and the award-winning restoration of Simpson Street School, greater collaboration is already beginning to demonstrate its value.

Drawing on Building Design Northern’s experience of hosting T-Level students, Ryan said: “We’ve found T-Level placements incredibly valuable because students get to experience different parts of the business, rather than seeing just one profession.

“That exposure helps them understand what’s possible, identify where their interests lie and often opens their eyes to career opportunities they didn’t know existed.”

How can the North East build a more connected built environment ecosystem?

The North East’s devolution deal has handed the region greater influence over economic development, investment and skills than at any point in its recent history.

Coupled with significant regeneration programmes and the Government’s ambition to accelerate housebuilding and infrastructure delivery, devolution presents what many participants described as a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the North East to shape its own built environment workforce.

However, while examples of successful collaboration exist across the region, roundtable members suggested much of that activity remains confined to individual organisations, projects and initiatives, with the discussion turning to how those efforts could be better connected.

Mark Thompson said success will depend on organisations thinking beyond their own immediate needs and embracing a more collaborative approach.

He said: “We’ve been given a real opportunity through devolution, and we have to seize it.

“We’re still educating people in silos, but we’re constructing buildings in very different ways.

“If we’re training people, we’re training them for the industry, not just for one company, and that requires a much more joined-up approach.”

Prof Jones added: “The built environment touches almost every aspect of our lives, yet we rarely present it that way.

“We should be helping young people understand the whole ecosystem and creating a stronger foundation that connects education, industry and the region’s long-term ambitions.”

Participants agreed achieving that vision does not necessarily require new organisations or entirely new initiatives.

Nicola Komzolik-Nawn, senior social sustainability manager at construction and infrastructure company BAM UK & Ireland, said: “There is already some fantastic work happening across the North East, but too often we’re working in parallel, rather than together.

“If we can bring those conversations together, share ideas and learn from one another, we’ll have a far greater impact than if every

organisation continues trying to solve the same challenges independently.”

Prof Thurairajah added: “If education, industry and regional partners are sharing knowledge and actively planning together, we’re far better placed to respond to future demand and create opportunities that benefit the whole sector.”

What practical steps are needed to turn collaboration into coordinated action?

While roundtable members broadly agreed on the challenges facing the sector, there was equal consensus the North East does not need another talking shop.

Instead, attention turned to the practical actions, partnerships and leadership needed to ensure the proposed North East Built Environment Futures Alliance becomes a catalyst for translating shared ambition into measurable impact.

For Mark Gardham, that means resisting the temptation to tackle every challenge at once.

He argued the Alliance should instead focus on identifying a small number of achievable priorities capable of demonstrating tangible progress, while building confidence among partners.

He said: “We don’t need to solve everything overnight.

“If we can identify a handful of workstreams, bring together the right people and demonstrate real progress, that creates momentum.

“If we position construction as one of the driving forces behind ‘North East PLC’, people will begin to understand the role the sector plays in generating economic growth.”

Rebecca argued the foundations for a more connected sector already exist, with the challenge now to bring them together more effectively.

She said: “There’s already a huge amount of good work taking place across the region.

“We need to share what works and make it easier for employers, colleges and universities to work together, rather than duplicating effort.”

Nicola said: “We’ve got an opportunity to create something that’s genuinely collaborative, but we have to keep the momentum going.

“By sharing ideas, learning from one another and presenting a more consistent message, we can achieve far more together than we ever could individually.”

Dr Dawson added: “We’ve already got many of the right people around the table and a genuine willingness to work together.

“The challenge now is to keep building those relationships, connect the fantastic work that’s already happening and create something that delivers real value for industry, education and the next generation.”



Greg Humphreyson, Identity Consult associate director, chats to Leanne Nicholson, Mott MacDonald digital adoption manager