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ROUNDTABLE

Delivering a new industrial and economic future
for South East Northumberland



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From coalfields to data fields

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From a £10 billion data centre development to world-leading offshore energy innovation, multi-million-pound education investments, town centre transformations and a railway revival, South East Northumberland is alive to the sound of regeneration. Here, in an exclusive roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside Northumberland County Council, Port of Blyth and Northumberland College at Blyth's Energy Central Learning Hub, business leaders discuss the area's progress and assess the moves needed to secure future success.

Words by Steven Huggill

Photography by Charlotte Beeckmans
(The Bigger Picture Agency)

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This is an abridged version of the full roundtable discussion, which you can read by visiting www.netimesmagazine.co.uk

South East Northumberland is undergoing watershed transformation, with headline developments redefining its industrial, economic and social identity. How is the region placed as it heads towards a fresh calendar year?

Winds of change are sweeping through South East Northumberland.

Where colossal coalfields and roaring iron and steel mills once fuelled historic change, the small pocket of England's most northerly county today stands at the forefront of a fresh industrial revolution.

From a headline-grabbing £10 billion data centre development to world-leading offshore energy innovation, the £95 million Energising Blyth programme, multi-million-pound education investments, flagship town centre regeneration projects and a momentous rail renaissance, the area is ready to propel a powerful new era of growth.

Sarah McMillan, Northumberland County Council's director of economic development and growth, said the area is tracking an upward trajectory.

She said: "This really feels like an optimistic time for South East Northumberland.

"Through programmes such as Energising Blyth – which recently delivered the Market Pavilion cinema and events space – our plans are rooted in opportunity."

The region's commercial landscape will soon be augmented by QTS' £10 billion Cambois-based data centre development. How transformative will that investment be to South East Northumberland's future?

When Britishvolt's plans to create a 3000-job electric vehicle battery-making plant in Cambois foundered, it left dark clouds hanging

over the seaside village.

The melancholic feel, though, has lifted, with technology firm QTS embarking on a £10 billion endeavour to create a ten-building data centre campus on a 250-acre plot.

And with earthworks having officially begun in October, roundtable members were unequivocal in the venture's potential for South East Northumberland and the wider North East.

Andy Lawson, director of pre-development at QTS, which operates as a portfolio company within private equity firm Blackstone, said: "It is a really exciting project, especially for the legacy a £10 billion investment will leave.

"Years from now, people will still be thinking about the opportunities and benefits that continue to arise from such a level of investment."

That impact stands to be augmented by the campus' place within the recently-unveiled North East AI Growth Zone.

In it, QTS' development stands to supplement work by technology firm Nscale alongside OpenAI and NVIDIA to create Stargate UK to develop a platform to boost British artificial intelligence adoption alongside computer chip production at Newcastle's Cobalt Park.

Thomas Wildsmith, head of commercial at Blyth-based Offshore Renewable Energy (ORE) Catapult, which works with industry partners to test and develop green technologies, said AI Growth Zone status affords "huge innovation opportunities".

He said: "The AI Growth Zone could also help with attracting further inward investment.

"It provides a beacon to say, 'come and work with us – look at the sectors we're supporting, and the employers and innovators already here'".



“The new Northumberland College campus will feed the skills pipeline with what employers need; we must scale such delivery to help SMEs in South East Northumberland access the talent they need”

Iain Nixon,
Education Partnership North East vice
principal for partnerships and business
solutions

How will QTS’ data centre investment complement South East Northumberland’s wider growth story?

Subsea power line maker JDR’s soon-to-open £100 million-plus plant close to Blyth Estuary will, say bosses, complement an existing Hartlepool site by expanding the business’ product range in the rapidly-growing global renewable energy market.

Hailing its potential, Martin Lawlor, Port of Blyth chief executive, said: “The factory will operate as the first high-voltage cable maker in the UK, which is not just exciting for South East Northumberland, but exciting for UK PLC too.”

He said the development could be supported by the expansion of the port’s four-berth strong Battleship Wharf terminal, which is used to support wind farm and offshore decommissioning projects, and also highlighted the West Hartford development, which stands close to the port and offers up to one million square foot of commercial space.

A strong skills base is crucial to any commercial blueprint. What measures need to be taken to ensure South East Northumberland has a workforce pipeline to compete nationally and globally?

Jeff Hope, UK and Ireland manufacturing director at Ashington-based paint maker AkzoNobel, urged greater collaboration between the public and private sectors.

Citing measures taken by the Dulux manufacturer to strengthen its skills base, he said: “We need to create learning environments that support industry.

“The education sector can’t do it alone: the private sector must be more involved.

“We have spent the last ten years working with the education sector – from primary schools to universities – to understand how it is working.

“And we are now one of the few businesses with no skills gaps.”

How can such initiatives be scaled to ensure small and medium-sized enterprises across South East Northumberland can secure the talent needed to meet growth goals?

From iced drink maker Polar Krush to electronics manufacturer Arian EMS, lighting firm Raytec and healthcare product maker Viveca, Ashington’s Wansbeck Business Park boasts a diverse commercial scene.

And its portfolio will soon expand further, with work progressing at pace on a £54 million Northumberland College campus.

Overseen by Education Partnership North East, and set to be completed in late 2026, it will nurture students across a range of sectors including electrical and mechanical engineering, robotics and automation, civil engineering and groundworks, automotive and green transport, and housing and modern construction.

Iain Nixon, the education provider’s vice principal for partnerships and business solutions, said: “The Ashington development will feed the skills pipeline with what employers need.

“And we must scale such delivery to help SMEs in South East Northumberland, which are so critical to the economy, access the talent they need.”

How important are transport improvements, such as the reopening of the Northumberland Line, to the area’s growth ambitions?

Lost for more than 60 years following Beeching’s swingeing cuts, the Northumberland Line has revived passenger services between Ashington and Newcastle.

Richard Hogg, founder and chief executive of Newcastle-based recruitment and outsourced HR services provider Jackson Hogg, added: “There was a time when we couldn’t get top graduates to leave Newcastle and come to Blyth or Cramlington.

“But that isn’t the case any longer – the new line is a real game-changer.”



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