

# N

# ROUNDTABLE

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on devolution?**

**Creating a blueprint for success across the north of  
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## How can the North East capitalise on devolution? Creating a blueprint for success across the north of the region's new political landscape.

**With Kim McGuinness now leading the north of the region's headline £4.2 billion devolution era, focus continues to intensify on the measures needed to catalyse landmark economic and social change.**

**Here, in the third of a series of executive-level roundtable discussions held by N alongside Fairstone, the UK's fastest-growing wealth advisory firm, business leaders set a template for mayor McGuinness and the North East Combined Authority to create lasting prosperity.**

**What does the mayoral-led North East Combined Authority mean for the north of the region?**

With its exposed lights, utilitarian façade and the symbolism of its links to the area's train pioneers, Newcastle College's Rail and Civil Engineering Academy should have been the perfect spot to announce Westminster's latest hands-on approach to regional power sharing.

If only.

Rather than synchronising local authorities, the 2015 photocall instead splintered the power landscape from County Durham to Northumberland.

But with Labour's Kim McGuinness now installed as North East mayor, Darush Dodds, corporate affairs director at Bowburn-headquartered construction, civil engineering and housebuilding firm Esh Group, pointed towards a "real opportunity to drive the region forward".

He added: "We have the engine of the Government in our region, we have the fuel to power it – through devolution cash – and we have hands on the wheel to steer in the right direction."

Stephen Patterson, chief executive of NE1, the business improvement district company for Newcastle city centre, called for the political shift to engender a "tactical" push on high-ticket projects.

Referencing the £350 million, Sage-branded 12,500-seat arena and sister exhibition and conference space planned for Gateshead

Quayside, which has stalled in recent months, he said: "With potential to provide a million additional visitors to the region every year, it would deliver a return as soon as it was built."

**Against such a fractured past, how important is a clear identity to the region's devolved future?**

The North East cleaved a quarter of all Britain's coal in 1913. Sunderland's shipyards were once responsible for making a quarter of the UK's seagoing vessels.

And sleepy Shildon, nestled between Bishop Auckland and Newton Aycliffe, in County Durham, was the spot where, nearly 200 years ago, the world's first steam-powered public railway turned its first wheels.

But if the region is to capitalise on devolution, roundtable members said it must cultivate a more modern identity.

Paul Butler, chief executive of the North East Automotive Alliance, the cluster organisation that champions the region as a capital for vehicular advances, said: "Devolution provides a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get things right, not least to create and project common messages."



Picture, below, Kirsty Wells, chair of Cramlington-headquartered Merit, makes a point during the discussion

Right, Caroline Anderson, head of marketing at event host Fairstone, listens to Alasdair MacDonald, chief executive of Tekmar Group. Also pictured are, from left to right, Richard Hogg, Aman Chahal, Darush Dodds and Alex Buchan



**“We have the engine of the Government in our region, we have the fuel to power it – through devolution cash – and we have hands on the wheel to steer in the right direction”**

Darush Dodds, Esh Group corporate affairs director



This article is an abridged version of the full roundtable discussion, which you can read by visiting [www.netimesmagazine.co.uk](http://www.netimesmagazine.co.uk)

The findings and discussion points from the roundtable series will be collated to create a Fairstone-sponsored white paper, which will recommend steps to catalyse the region's growth agenda. It will be published early next year.

#### How could such refreshed representation help the region's commercial sector?

Lee Hartley, chief executive of event host Fairstone, the UK's fastest-growing wealth advisory firm, said access to financial support streams was crucial and called for a concerted marketing campaign – not too dissimilar to those of former regional development agency One North East – to amplify organisations' voices.

He said: “One North East had a bit of sizzle about it, and there's certainly something to be said about resurrecting that kind of messaging to showcase our ambition.”

Alex Buchan, an investment director at Newcastle-based venture capital firm Northstar Ventures, added: “The investment opportunity is huge, but we need to go out and sell it.”

#### Can devolution play a part in helping attract greater funding to the region?

With Britain now on its fifth Westminster leader in eight years, it's hardly surprising the business community continues to look to the Commons with anxious eyes.

And its gaze will only be eased, said Kirsty Wells, chair of Cramlington-headquartered off-site construction and digitalised manufacturing firm Merit, by re-focusing strategy to help planning and investment across the longer term.

She said: “We need more resilience and real clarity around where we are creating productivity – which we stick to – so the capital can come in.”

Alasdair MacDonald, chief executive of Newton Aycliffe-based marine engineering firm

Tekmar Group, appealed for a restructuring of funding streams. He said: “We need to create a pool of experts to provide support; they exist, but the dispersed nature of the sector means it is problematic to access them.”

#### How important is a quality and sustained housing supply to the region's future success?

If the region is to grow, said roundtable members, then moves to refresh its identity and bolster companies' growth ambitions must be matched by a concerted focus on property supply and upgrade.

Aman Chahal, co-founder and chief executive of Stockton-headquartered flat roof design and insulation firm TaperedPlus, added: “The vast majority of Westminster spend sits between Birmingham and London, but devolution provides a great opportunity for more to come to the North East.”

#### How can the region's business community support mayor McGuinness and the combined authority to deliver positive change?

While elected with a raft of manifesto promises, roundtable members advocated the creation of a business support body to help inform mayor McGuinness' commercial sector focus.

Richard Hogg, founder and chief executive of Newcastle, Billingham and Leeds-based specialist recruitment and outsourced talent services partner Jackson Hogg, said: “I'd love to be in a region where there is an industrial strategy led by people in business, who really understand sector growth and know how to deliver it.”