

A man with short brown hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt and a dark vest, is seated and speaking. He has his hands raised in a gesturing motion. A name tag is visible on his vest. The background is a simple indoor setting with a wooden wall and a white door.

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ROUNDTABLE

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Creating a blueprint for success across the north
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As North East mayor Kim McGuinness continues to introduce policy to shape the north of the region's £4.2 billion devolution future, attention intensifies on the measures required to catalyse significant economic and social progress.

Here, in the fifth of a series of executive-level roundtable discussions held by N magazine publisher NET 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.

Words by Steven Hugill

Photography by Angela Carrington
(The Bigger Picture Agency)



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

How can the north of the region fully capitalise on its devolved powers?

For as long as discussions about North East devolution have echoed through the region's corridors and council chambers, so too have calls rung out for officials to look westward for inspiration.

Sir Howard Bernstein, Sir Richard Leese and Andy Burnham, long credited as the architects of Manchester's transformation from 'Cottonopolis' to a thriving advanced manufacturing and technology hub, remain frequently cited as figures for emulation.

However, Lee Hartley, founder and chief executive of event host Fairstone, the UK's fastest-growing wealth advisory firm, said: "We must fight the battle on the ground on which we know we can win.

"We shouldn't mimic Manchester, but we can mimic its scale of ambition."

Stephen Hall, senior office partner at international professional services firm Deloitte's Newcastle office, added: "Manchester is a different proposition.

"Ben Houchen has had a big impact on Teesside, through the Tees Valley Combined Authority, and there are fantastic opportunities for Kim McGuinness to do the same in the north of the region."

If transplanting Manchester's model onto the North East is unfeasible, what template should the region's regeneration bosses use to maximise the opportunities afforded by devolution?

Charlie Hoults, boss of fourth-generation,

Newcastle-based business village Hoults Yard, said: "If you spread the jam too thinly, you don't get anywhere.

"Rather than trying to make the North East another Silicon Valley, we must bring our unique DNA crystals together.

"We know artificial intelligence research isn't going to happen here, so let's bet on the things with which we can win."

A fundamental element of any growth programme is a robust transport system. But is the North East's travel network sufficiently strong enough to help drive prosperity?

Despite being the birthplace of rail travel and home to the UK's largest car making plant, the North East's transport network remains something of a paradox.

And roundtable members warned that until its road, rail and air network is sufficiently strengthened, the North East will fail to fully grasp its commercial potential.

Stephanie Marshall, a digital transformation lead at Darlington-founded, global project management and cost consultancy firm Turner & Townsend, called for a prioritisation of civil projects to lay foundations for better connections.

She said: "People sometimes like to see buildings rising from the ground, but a lot of the things we need will be buried underground.

"We need better infrastructure – things like highways work and rail improvements – which will make the region both easier to travel to and better to navigate.

“And we need businesses to come together and have a voice on what is needed.”

A strong skills base is equally crucial to any commercial blueprint. What is the present picture across the learning landscape, and how can the region’s devolved powers be used to help create a stronger talent pipeline?

As the world continues to shift to a more sustainable future, the demand for a workforce equipped with skills to match the pace of change has never been more critical.

And Richard Bradley, who recently switched from managing director to executive chair at Dyer Engineering, which runs sites in Annfield Plain and Harelaw, near Stanley, County Durham, called for a closer relationship between businesses, educators and combined authority officials.

He said: “Skills is one of the biggest challenges for manufacturers, and we need to be involved in conversations to help identify a strategy that makes the sector a viable employment opportunity.

“A lot of people still think, ‘it’s a factory, it’s dirty and it isn’t much fun’.

“But that isn’t the reality, and we need to work with the North East Combined Authority to highlight that.”

Jonny Catto, managing director of Gateshead and Tanfield Lea-based thermoformed food packaging maker iPac, added: “The

manufacturing sector’s reputation as a career choice has gone downhill. A lot of younger people now want to work in other industries like tech.

“We need to get school-leavers looking at manufacturing as a good opportunity.”

How important a role can devolution play in helping attract greater investment to the region?

Central to any business’ success is the pairing of market-leading ideas and services with a similarly strong and sustainable approach to recruitment.

Equally crucial is finance.

And roundtable members advocated an “investment ladder” between early-stage, scale-up and mature businesses, which they said would provide easier access to capital.

Becky Crow, head of projects at Newcastle-based life sciences firm LightOx, which is developing light-activated treatment for early-stage mouth cancers and a light-based, antimicrobial treatment for wounds, said: “Success through devolution would include a vibrant life sciences community.

“At present, there aren’t enough adequate laboratory facilities and spin-out companies are struggling to find space.

“But a funding ladder would help start-ups find property to grow in the region, rather than moving elsewhere.”



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iPac managing director**



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