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ROUNDTABLE

Laying the foundations for a brighter future

Setting a blueprint for fresh prosperity



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Words by Peter Anderson

Photography by Matt Taylor

ROUNDTABLE

From housing and transport infrastructure to innovative regeneration projects and the green energy revolution, the built environment sector is primed to play a fundamental role in shaping the North East's future. So too will the north of the region's landmark £4.2 billion devolution deal, which, when combined with metro mayoral powers already in force across Tees Valley, provides great scope to create a fairer, greener and more connected North East.

Here, in a high-level roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside JK Property Consultants LLP, business leaders explore how private and public sector collaboration can drive regeneration and stimulate economic growth.

What is the present picture across the region's built environment sector?

Devolution and flagship projects such as Blackstone's planned £10 billion artificial intelligence data centre in Cambois, near Blyth, have provided renewed hope the region is finding its feet following years of austerity and previous Westminster failures to truly deliver on Northern Powerhouse and 'levelling-up' slogans.

Such cautious optimism was echoed by Kevan Carrick, co-founder of JK Property Consultants LLP, who said: "We've got a lot of opportunities in the region.

"But we are very exposed to the national and global economy, and we really need to find ways of attracting the private sector to invest and work in close partnership with the public sector."

Alasdair Greig, director of Newcastle-based investment house Northstar Ventures, highlighted the importance of attracting funding and investment to unlocking growth goals.

He said: "The North East offers an untapped opportunity as a venture capital industry; it's still pretty nascent.

"When you look at the value creation

that's happened from investment activities being built on the back of infrastructure and universities' activities, we're only just scratching the surface of what's possible."

Richard Podd, senior tax partner at accountancy firm PwC, which operates a Newcastle office, added: "We have received an awful lot of private equity funding into the region, and there is a real appetite to invest.

"Yet, we are probably slightly behind where we would like to be in terms of public sector and private sector collaboration."

With Kim McGuinness taking the reins as North East mayor and a £4.2 billion devolution deal now in place, what strategies does the North East Combined Authority need to employ to capitalise on current momentum and create sustainable growth opportunities?

With the election of Kim McGuinness as North East mayor and boss of the newly-created North East Combined Authority has come refreshed optimism around the region's economic and social ambitions.

Central to the regeneration body's blueprint is its local growth plan, which officials say will set out a ten-year strategy to "turbocharge" the region.



"With a bit of creativity and a clearer strategy, the North East offers genuine opportunity"

Vicki Mordue,
Biodiverse Consulting director



And Rob Hamilton, assistant director of innovation strategy at the combined authority, said he was keen to hear from businesses to get their input into the best way forward.

He said: “We’ve got a new mayor, who is incredibly ambitious for the region, and who comes with an overriding message about creating opportunities for all.

“What I try to champion is building coalitions across sectors, because we need our money to work much, much harder.”

As the North East positions itself at the forefront of the UK’s green energy transition, what steps should be taken to maximise the region’s expertise in the renewables sphere?

Vicki Mordue, director of Northumberland-based environmental consultancy Biodiverse Consulting, pointed to the largely untapped advantages the North East enjoys around biodiversity and sustainability.

She said: “The region is rich in space and land capacity, so a lot of the issues that renewables traditionally bumps up against – such as nimbyism – are less applicable.

“With a bit of creativity and a clearer strategy, the North East offers genuine opportunity.”

What barriers are holding back regeneration? And how can they be overcome?

Roundtable members were universal the present planning process isn’t fit for purpose.

Jennifer Welch, co-founder and partner of JK Property Consultants LLP, said: “The one thing that dogs the planning service is litigation, and the huge cost and delay that’s incurred in dealing with it.

“That is an area which could really accelerate growth and remove a block.”

Amandeep Dhillon, a senior associate at Newcastle-based law firm Hay & Kilner, added:

“There seems to be a lot of third-party interests which are causing issues.

“If sufficient due diligence has not been carried out, it can really frustrate developments and push them back.”

Members also acknowledged how local authorities often lack the requisite resource to avoid procedural delays.

Ross Markwell, director of business development at Bowburn-headquartered construction firm Esh Group, who also sits as a regional chair for the Civil Engineering Contractors Association, said: “The resource and skill set within local authorities isn’t what it once was due to cuts.

“We’ve got to find a more consistent model; a one or two-week delay of an application getting off someone’s desk could be two to six months’ delay of a job hitting a site.”

Alastair Willis, planning director at Lichfields’ Newcastle office, said: “Go back 20 years and we were literally submitting a red line boundary with an outline planning application.

“But now we’ve got a long list of reports, and there is no longer enough time to consider them, nor the staff to look at those reports.”

How can improvements to the North East’s transport infrastructure enhance connectivity and support the region’s development goals?

For a region that gave the world rail travel, its present infrastructure has left many communities feeling isolated and abandoned by a lack of available and affordable public transport.

Phil Redman, area director at management, engineering and development consultancy Mott MacDonald, said: “Talent is classless but opportunity isn’t.

“We’ve got talent in communities that can’t access opportunity because there’s no credible way for them to get from A to B.

“We must change that.”



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Phil Redman,
Mott MacDonald area director



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