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## WHY THE NORTH EAST?

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# COLLABORATION IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

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**Change is sweeping across the North East, and NET's VISION 31 campaign is helping drive the momentum. In the latest high-profile event of the regeneration programme, held in The Staiths building on AV Dawson's sprawling Middlesbrough base, businesses and sector leaders highlighted the game-changing advances the region is hothousing, the highly-skilled workers it is nurturing and the transformative projects it is leading to deliver a sustainable future for all. Here, Pete Anderson highlights the event's key takeaways.**

The North East is a hotbed of innovation, enterprise and game-changing industrial advances, with the talent, businesses and ambition to be genuinely world-leading.

But to realise that potential, it must shed its cloak of modesty and bridge internal divides.

That was the overriding message from multi-platform publisher NET's latest VISION 31 event, which gathered business leaders and industry experts at AV Dawson, on the banks of

the River Tees, in Middlesbrough.

More than 60 guests gathered to hear about some of the Tees Valley's most dynamic businesses and the transformational projects that are driving economic regeneration and creating jobs across the region.

Powered by headline partner Womble Bond Dickinson and backed by additional partners Jackson Hogg, North East BIC, Aon, Lloyds Banking Group and Recognition PR, the event spotlighted the people, businesses and developments that are succeeding in the Tees Valley and how, through greater collaboration, bolder messaging and better promotion, the wider North East could unlock investment opportunities and fully seize the possibilities presented by devolution.

Two panel discussions – chaired by N magazine and Bdaily editor-in-chief Steven Hugill – reflected the recurring theme of the two previous VISION 31 events in London and Sunderland: The North East's uniqueness lies in its people, their industriousness, passion and inimitable spirit.

The first panel, titled *The North East: An Engine of Opportunity*, showcased business figures who have expanded beyond the Tees Valley to

enjoy national and global success.

Audience members heard from Keith Russell, commercial director – conservancy at PD Ports; Kirsten Donkin, head of communications at games developer Double Eleven; Richard Hogg, founder and chief executive of STEM recruitment firm Jackson Hogg; Alison McGee, quality director at critical power infrastructure and modular data centre firm Durata; and Kiran Fothergill, company director at Pickering's Lifts.

Although panellists came from diverse backgrounds and sectors, they shared an evident pride in being based in the North East.

However, they also acknowledged the region can often be too reticent when promoting itself and lack a unified front.

Keith said: "We need to be bolder.

"Instead of getting caught up in headlines and soundbites, we should look deeper to understand the truth behind the chaos and half-truths we often hear from central and local Government.

"We have powerful platforms and initiatives in the North East that can help us cut through the noise and make sure the real issues are heard and addressed."

Kirsten agreed, adding: “One of the great strengths of Teesside is our ability to collaborate and champion each other.

“Yes, we get on and roll our sleeves up, but I think we have, in the last five to eight years, been better at shouting from the rooftops and saying, ‘look at all the fantastic things happening here’.

“But we need a much more joined-up approach across the region, and we need to invest more by making public affairs and stakeholder engagement part of our communication strategy.

“If we do this as a region, with clear plans and consistent effort, we can better influence Government decisions that impact us all.”

The second panel – *The North East: Where Investment Delivers Impact* – included insight from Arif Mushtaq, managing director at Ashbrookes Group; David Jack, chief revenue officer at SeAH Wind; Peter Snaith, partner at Womble Bond Dickinson; Phil Forster, managing director at Teesside International Airport; and Elaine Stroud, chief executive of the Entrepreneurs’ Forum.

The discussion focused on some of the headline projects happening across the Tees Valley, including the transformation of Teesside International Airport since returning to public ownership in 2019 and SeAH Wind’s new wind turbine monopile manufacturing plant at the Teesworks site, which is set to create up to 750 direct jobs.

Speaking about the reasons why SeAH Wind invested in Teesside, David said: “We talk about location, location, location – and for offshore wind, that means scale, deepwater access and large manufacturing capability.

“You hear this saying about ‘bringing the mountain to Mohammed’, but that’s not



Pictures: Andrew Lowe

possible in our world.

“We actually have to go to the mountain.

“There was no perfect location, but Teesside was as close as we could possibly find.”

He added the £114 million investment in the Steel River Quay on the south bank of the River Tees, which was purpose-built for the offshore wind sector, proved to be a “key driver” in SeAH’s decision to choose the Tees Valley.

He added: “That really was the pull.

“We needed something new that was fit for our industry and would enable us to bring in the scale of vessels our industry demands, which few other locations can support.”

Other panellists agreed these regeneration projects must act as catalysts for further investment and job creation, but barriers remain – especially around messaging and education.

Peter highlighted Teesside’s unique strengths – from scale and space to a diverse industrial base – but said these advantages are often hidden in plain sight.

He said: “Teesside is the best place to make things and move things, but could most people tell you what’s actually here?

“There’s a whole ecosystem of opportunity, but too often people cannot see the scale of opportunity on their doorstep.

“This also translates to education, because most teachers don’t know what’s here either.

“And if young people can’t see the breadth of careers available across the maritime and manufacturing sectors, they won’t know those opportunities exist.

“Fundamentally, we need to do a better job of promoting the region, because from the outside world people don’t know what’s happening on Teesside – and even the people of Teesside don’t really know.”

Arif reiterated the same point, highlighting the challenge of attracting investment.

He said: “We need to do a much better job of telling people about the great things that are happening here.

“If we can bring in people who believe in long-term growth, they’ll not only benefit from what the area offers – they’ll contribute to it and help drive it forward.”

Elaine said raising awareness through storytelling will be key to inspiring future generations.

She added: “Founder-led businesses are absolutely critical to the economy.

“They fire up the bellies of the next generation because they show what’s possible – real people from the same streets building something of their own.

“If we can amplify those stories properly, through case studies and better messaging,

we can inspire more people to follow in their footsteps.”

**The next VISION 31 event will take place in London in November.**

**To register your interest, contact NET events managers Lesley Hampson and Dawn Owens at [lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:lesley@netimesmagazine.co.uk) or [dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk](mailto:dawn@netimesmagazine.co.uk)**



Pictured, above, Kirsten Donkin, Double Eleven head of communications, makes a point during the VISION 31 event

Top, NET editor-in-chief Steven Hugill chairs a VISION 31 panel discussion

Left, guests gather ahead of the VISION 31 event, which took place in the heart of Teesside’s industrial sector at AV Dawson



**This is an abridged version of the full event report, which you can read on the Bdaily website by visiting [www.bdaily.co.uk](http://www.bdaily.co.uk)**