

N

THE POWER AND THE GLORY



Carole O'Neil, David Bruce, Ally Thompson-Nietosvuori and Alex Nietosvuori, Tracy Harrison, Jason Oakes, Dr Rebecca Ashcroft, Marianne O'Sullivan, Marianne Locatori, Simon Wilkinson, Rory McKeand, Tania Cooper, Dr Sharon Grant



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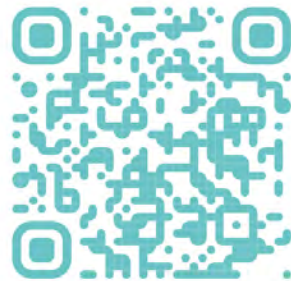
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Roundtable

A strong skills base is the cornerstone of any commercial success. But not all youngsters excel in the traditional learning environment, with many left without sufficient aspiration, confidence and emotional intelligence to pursue personal and professional growth. Here, in a roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside Newcastle Rugby Foundation and Barnard Castle School, education leaders and senior industry figures assess the current landscape, setting out a number of objectives – including harnessing the power of sport – to help youngsters thrive, regardless of their background.

Growth

With a new magazine design complemented by a high-profile acquisition and wider operational changes, NET is writing a new chapter in its history. Here, Pete Mallon, the multi-platform publisher's creative and managing director, talks about its transformation, which will take the company from regional operator to national organisation.

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Out of office

In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Simon Wilkinson, Wilkinsons Landscapes managing director, about his love of painting, which covers both canvas creations and model gaming pieces.

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0.09 PROTO, Baltic Business Quarter, Abbot's Hill, Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, NE8 3DF
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CIRCULATION:

To confirm our circulation please contact Andrew Dunn, Buxton Press, email: andrewdunn@buxtonpress.com

To amend your mailing address or remove yourself from our mailing list contact
kate@netimesmagazine.co.uk

CONTACT:

@NETimesmagazine
www.netimesmagazine.co.uk

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ADVERTISING CHARGES:

There is a £25 charge for every set of amendments, following the first initial set of amendments, which is free of charge for adverts designed by North East Times Magazine Ltd.

CANCELLATIONS:

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EDITORIAL:

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PRINT:

N is printed by Buxton Press Limited, the multi award-winning printer based in Buxton, Derbyshire, which specialises in the sheetfed lithographic printing of magazines, brochures and programmes.

N is produced using vegetable-based inks combined with advanced innovative chemical-free plate and Heidelberg press technology and is printed on paper sourced from well-managed, sustainable forests.



Buxton Press is certified to ISO14001 and ISO9001 Standards, holds FSC® and PEFC Chain of Custody certification, offers Carbon Balancing via The World Land Trust and is currently working towards becoming a Carbon Balanced Printer.



@2024 Published by North East Times Magazine Ltd.

Editor
Steven Hugill
steven@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Business journalist
Colin Young
T: 07808 974 533
colin@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Digital content manager
Kate Hewison
kate@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Business development director
John Duns
T: 07920 152 523
john@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Creative & managing director
Peter Mallon
T: 07590 064 800
pete@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Partnership & marketing manager
Sarah Law
sarah@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Digital marketing consultant
Sian Anderson
sian@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Finance manager
Jill Brown
jill@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Filmography
Andrew Lowe
andrew@netimesmagazine.co.uk

Paul Geist
paul.geist.photo@gmail.com

Photography in this issue:
Ben Benoliel
www.benbenoliel.com

Pawel Gajek
Kate Buckingham
www.thisisthebigpicture.co.uk

Jamie Haslam
www.roamwithus.co.uk

Contributors:
Tracy Harrison
Jason Oakes
Dr Rebecca Ashcroft
Marianne O'Sullivan
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WELCOME TO ISSUE 466

Editor's word

With this publication – and the wider NET business – having undergone recent watershed change, Steven Hugill explains the reasons behind the redesign and why, despite the transformation, some things will remain the same...



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of the magazine.

That'll be summer gone, then.

As I type, an autumn breeze is getting to work on the trees beyond my office window, bending branches and levering leaves – some sporting early specks of orange and brown – in myriad directions, blowing away the last vestiges of another stuttering season.

Metaphorically speaking, those winds of change have passed through this publication too.

For so long North East Times Magazine, this edition represents the first under a new monicker – N.

The change, which has been complemented by a thorough redesign and refreshing of the publication, is part of a wider evolution of the business that reflects our growth ambitions.

Where once we were North East Times, today we are NET, which stands as the parent company of a house of brands that contains N and sister operator Bdaily, the national digital news business we bought earlier this year.

The premise is simple.

As a brand, we have become the North East's most established and authoritative voice for business, providing insight and analysis that champions our region while advocating moves to fashion further achievement.

But the commercial world is bigger than the North East, and far more accessible too, and we see great opportunity to expand nationally, with our new operational model fundamental in helping us do so (see pages 14 and 15 for more about our changes).

It doesn't mean, however, that we will be any less committed to the region we call home.

The publication may look cosmetically different, but it's very essence remains the same.

We will continue to amplify the North East, its business community and the opportunities set to materialise from the north of the region's headline

£4.2 billion Westminster power grab.

We will continue showcasing the success stories and the colourful careers of individuals driving positive change across our area.

We will continue searching for solutions to problems impacting our region's growth.

We will continue lobbying those in power to give the North East the opportunities it needs and deserves to truly thrive.

Each and all of those commitments are reflected in this issue.

For colourful careers, read Cundall managing partner and cover star Carole O'Neil, who – at the time of writing – was due to head to South Africa in October, to represent England in the Commonwealth Powerlifting Federation Championships.

Read too David Bruce, who gave up a sun-kissed career in the higher echelons of the US' Major League Soccer franchise to apply his knowledge and experience for the good of hometown club Sunderland AFC.

For solutions, read our two roundtable features.

The first – alongside Newcastle Rugby Foundation and Barnard Castle School – creates a blueprint to repair the existing skills fracture between industry and employment, while the second – alongside wealth advisory firm Fairstone – sees sector leaders analyse the opportunities afforded by the region's devolution deal and the actions needed to turn them into reality.

For lobbying, read the Spotlight feature on pages 18 and 19, which urges Labour to decisively hack away at some of the roots from which the summer's sickening riots sprouted, and read too the Talking Point and Big Question platforms that set out important goals for Westminster's new regime.

Change has arrived. But what we stand for remains the same.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Steven

STANDING AT THE FOOTHILLS OF GREAT CHANGE





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The only constant is change, and this is amplified in the world of publishing. Following the recent acquisition of well-respected national news platform Bdaily, the team behind NET is embracing an exciting new chapter. Here, Pete Mallon, NET's creative and managing director, talks about its evolution, a commitment to independent journalism and why change brings opportunity for growth.

“Collectively through all NET channels, our influence, integrity and reach will be amplified significantly across the UK – and, as partners and advertisers, so will your messaging”

The North East is changing – and so are we.

As the region unites at the foothills of great devolution change, we too are setting our compass for a new journey.

It has been almost a decade since the team relaunched North East Times in 2015 and, ever since, we have celebrated the region's incredible business landscape through compelling journalism, striking photography and forward-thinking design.

We have become an established and authoritative voice for business in the North East, and our commitment to quality, creativity and transparency has built a hugely supportive network of readers, partners and advocates.

I am incredibly proud of this and the team, both past and present, who have played a part in our journey so far.

But we all know the only constant is change, and the acquisition of Bdaily marks an exciting opportunity for NET to grow, working with national partners to maximise impact.

With that in mind, the time has come for us to go further and build on our sturdy foundations – and issue 466 marks the first step in doing so.

I have always been passionate about print, design and publishing – and that remains the same

In 2015, we set out to challenge the benchmark of regional print, and we did this again in 2021, with the relaunch of the publication with a new design and specification.

You will, I'm sure, have noticed the publication no longer carries the masthead of North East Times Magazine; instead, you're reading N.

N provides a new design identity and a new way to showcase the North East business community to a wider national audience.

However, I want to assure you it doesn't mean we're any less committed to our region.

Our focus is stronger than ever to amplify the North East, its business community and the opportunities set to materialise from the north of the region's headline £4.2 billion devolution deal.

We see great opportunity to shout about the region to new audiences and help regional organisations expand while applying our

expertise to business ideas, analysis and conversation across the UK's business landscape.

To deliver such, we have reconfigured our model slightly.

NET is now the parent company to a house of brands including N and Bdaily – the national digital news business, which complements a dedicated North East focus with similar coverage across areas including Yorkshire and London – as part of the portfolio.

This structure retains our regional heritage while allowing for each brand to have its own identity, values and strategy.

N will continue servicing regional marketing campaigns across print, digital and events channels, and will retain its commitment to delivering at least 40 per cent independent (without charge) coverage across all platforms.

The latter is a proposition provided by no other similar media channel in the North East, and is one we're very proud of.

Bdaily will continue to service clients' PR campaigns across its digital platform and 50,000-strong email subscriber list nationally.

But, with the addition of at least 40 per cent independent content from the NET editorial team, its integrity, credibility and authority will be significantly bolstered.

It all means that, collectively through all NET channels, our influence, integrity and reach will be amplified significantly across the UK – and, as partners and advertisers, so will your messaging.

We are the North East's largest B2B media network, which exists to support and showcase the incredible business stories in the region.

We work independently, which means we have our own voice and have no conflicts of exclusivity with clients or businesses; we're here to help every individual and organisation succeed.

As always, I'm really open to hearing any ideas on what more we could be doing to support you, so please get in touch.

I can only hope for another decade of exciting change!

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SPOTLIGHT LIGHT

Don't mistake protests for a passing summer storm

PEACE



By Steven Hugill



From the rioters that filled the streets of towns and cities across the UK, to the Conservative leadership race and a landmark moment for Teesside International Airport, Steven Hugill analyses some of the stories impacting the region's news agenda.

Taking back a country – one bath bomb at a time

How far would you go for some naff plastic shoes, a bag of hive-inducing bath bombs and a lukewarm bottle of milkshake?

Well, if you're a good patriot, it seems, all the way to prison.

After all, what better way to display your partisan tendencies, and help regain control of your country's borders, than a spot of opportunistic thievery?

'We've made good ground Tommy; all the Crocs have gone, we've wiped out Lush's Watermelon Slice charity soap – you know, the one that's helping pay for kids' mental health services in Palestine – and there's plenty of Friij going spare too...'

Facetiousness aside, the looting was but a ridiculous subplot to an altogether deeper story.

When the army of agitators marched upon Southport and Sunderland, Hartlepool and Hull, Middlesbrough and Manchester, Darlington and Dorset and the many other places in between, they did so not with full stomachs but heads crammed with narratives left to stew too long on the social media stove.

There go the wheelie bins; there goes a carer's vehicle; there arc bottles and bricks through the evening sky; there go the windows of a hotel housing asylum seekers – and all because the internet fed a line the country is overrun with wrong 'uns.

For too long, our online platforms have operated as lawless states, outbacks of obscenity where gatekeeping stands tantamount to placing a door in an empty field, allowing users to ingest wildly inaccurate information, chew for a while and belch out a few more falsehoods.

In the time it takes to smash a Greggs' window and pilfer a portion of pasties, a distorted reality – fuelled by fallacies and fabrication – has seeped into algorithms and is stirring the minds of young and old.

To seek good from such a summer of chaos sounds rather incongruous, but if the bedlam helps deliver swift revision of the Online Safety Act and similar associated deterrents – arming authorities with sharper teeth to bite harder those that choose to publish hate and half-truths – then some progress will at least have been made.

Having said all that, it would be wrong to lay the riots solely at the door of social media companies and lethargic online policing.

Because, for all its toxicity, not every protestor was whipped into a frenzy by a Facebook post or message on X about immigration.

For many others, the travelling circus was an opportunity to kick back at those in power and vent at a country splintered by economic malaise, at towns left hollow by industrial demise, at rising social housing lists, at rapidly disappearing community services and at a healthcare system stretched to breaking point.

And the Government must heed their warning.

The prison sentences doled out to rioters point to a new regime keen on making a statement, but that action must be matched by a commitment to reducing the wealth inequalities and social imbalances that continue to sink deeper into the UK's towns and cities.

After years of shambolic Westminster governance, the country's disparities are more marked than ever.

And ignoring them – or dismissing them as simply the consequences of a social media front – will only lead to more violent storms.

The value of strong opposition

Speaking of heavy weather, as you read this, the Conservative party will be midway through its leadership contest.

And if the standard of candidates' campaigning logos are anything to go by – most of the slogans resemble Clip Art creations of yore – then we're all in for a long, and not necessarily exciting, ride.

I mean, it's hardly too much of a surprise given those left behind are the bin-end faces of a party that soured faster than a particularly cheap plonk.

But one of those discount dregs is going to win.

And whoever it proves to be must hit the ground running, not just for the sake of their party but for British democracy too – we need only look back to the superciliousness and sneering complacency that grew across Tory benches during Jeremy Corbyn's feeble reign to see the importance of a strong opposition.

Of course, much will depend on the direction of travel taken by the next leader, and how serious they are at matters beyond STOP THE BOATS rhetoric and popping the Reform bubble.

They could choose to pick up where the party

left off at July's election, or – if they're truly serious about rebuilding its status as a viable polling option – they could put down the Farage pin and instead opt to needle Labour.

Doing so would not only help dig foundations to rebuild the Tories' reputation, but also direct much-needed accountability towards a Government with such a huge majority.

And the latter, whatever the colour of your party rosette, is something we should all support.

Moving in the right direction

A few years ago, to walk into Teesside International Airport – or Durham Tees Valley Airport, to use its then (geographically nonsensical) name – felt like disappearing into a void.

With departure boards barren of anything but shuttles to Amsterdam and Aberdeen, a section of car park given over to motorhome storage and plans to sell land for housing, the site was a world away from its 2006 pomp, when nearly a million passengers walked through its doors.

Public spats between frustrated campaigners and then operator Peel only added further fractures to a broken reputation, while gaffes like booking a bagpiper to welcome (short-lived) Scottish airline flights – only to leave him standing in a car park because he hadn't brought his passport – added a further layer of embarrassment to proceedings.

Things, though, are beginning to change.

Over the summer, the site's new bosses – who have revamped its terminal, attracted new European holiday flights, welcomed a breaker and aircraft painter as tenants and are building a new business park – were cheering a first profit in more than a decade, with earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation of £308,555 on annual revenues of £14.5 million in the year to March 2023.

In black and white, it represents a modest sum, yet in the context of what went before, it's a noteworthy achievement.

The numbers, though, are important for the wider region too, because if the North East is to truly capitalise on its twin-mayor devolved future, then it must show the world it is open for business.

And having both Teesside and Newcastle International Airport providing viable connectivity points would certainly do that.

Challenges remain – Teesside used its profit announcement to flag a likely dip in passenger numbers due to supply chain and new aircraft delays – so any talk of a full renaissance would be far too premature.

The airport still has a long way to go before it fully takes off again.

But some of the turbulence is seemingly beginning to ease.

BIG QUESTION

Having unveiled a raft of pledges – led by headline housebuilding and rail nationalisation commitments – in the King’s Speech, Sir Keir Starmer says he has laid the foundations to “get Britain building” again. What do you make of the blueprint – will it catalyse fresh prosperity, or has Westminster’s new regime failed to address some key issues?

By Steven Hugill



Join the discussion

Scan the QR code below to visit our LinkedIn page and add your thoughts to the conversation.



Tracy Harrison
Chief executive

Northern Housing Consortium

The Government’s focus on housing is good news for Northerners; a safe, secure home provides a foundation to build your life upon.

The proposals to build more homes, including desperately needed social rent homes, are especially welcome, given there are 76,000 people in the North East on housing waiting lists.

We’re pleased the Government is taking a brownfield-first approach; there’s enough brownfield land in the North to build up to 320,000 homes.

Transforming this land will help regenerate communities.

However, if the Government wants to deliver its ambitions, there will also have to be new legislation and policy change.

The signs are encouraging, given it has promised investment in social and affordable housing as part of the next spending review.

But building new homes is not the only way to boost the economy.

Our research has found investment in making homes warmer and more sustainable would kickstart the green economy in the North, potentially creating 77,000 green jobs over the next ten years.

And we will continue to talk to the Government about the changes needed to make sure everyone in the North can benefit from a warm, safe, good quality affordable home in a great community.



Jason Oakes
Sales director

0800 Repair & Oakes Energy

The initiatives unveiled reflect Labour's commendable intention to address the issues facing our nation.

We now need these pledges turned into long-term commitments in the form of sustainable contracts, so industry can recruit, train and prepare resources to deliver.

The blueprint sets a promising foundation, and planning reform has the potential to address the housing shortage and unlock opportunity for more housebuilding.

However, the plan shouldn't stop there; a cohesive strategy that includes collaboration across various sectors is crucial to fully realising the country's potential.

The establishment of Great British Energy is a positive step and, with the national wealth fund bill, represents an opportunity to potentially channel significant investment towards a net-zero future.

Solar panels and heat pumps are not only a clean source of energy, but in abundance will positively impact people's affordability to decarbonise.

However, funding our way to net-zero will only take us so far.

Great British Energy presents a unique opportunity to educate the public about the benefits of renewable technologies.

For success, a concerted effort is needed to raise awareness about the long-term economic and environmental benefits of renewables, to foster a broader societal move towards sustainable energy.



Dr Rebecca Ashcroft
Head

Red House School

We understand the Government's goal to increase funding for education.

However, the introduction of VAT on school fees could have significant repercussions for our community and for the wider sector too.

This policy may limit access to independent education, making it more challenging for families who already make considerable financial sacrifices for their children's education.

Independent schools make many positive contributions to the broader educational landscape and local community, such as providing specialised and bespoke educational experiences and relieving pressure on state school systems.

Our priority is to maintain the excellent standard of education and pastoral care that our pupils receive.

We are committed to engaging with policymakers to discuss the potential impact of this proposal, and to advocate for solutions that ensure fair and equitable access to quality education for all families.

We are committed to open dialogue with the Government and stakeholders, to explore balanced approaches that support educational diversity and equity.



Marianne O'Sullivan
Policy manager

North East Chamber of Commerce

Creating the conditions for growth was one of the Chamber's key asks during the election.

The Government's proposed focus on planning reform is very welcome, as planning delays are a key barrier for our businesses looking to invest and deliver growth.

Reforms to support housing will unlock investment and activity, but we will need to ensure we have the people and skills in place in the planning and construction sectors to support this growth.

With high levels of child poverty in the region, we also need to ensure there is affordable housing and council housing in place to ensure that local growth is inclusive.

We know poor local transport is a key barrier to growth, and we welcome a focus on transport, energy and digital infrastructure.

There is a key role for devolution, with mayors able to develop local growth plans that will shape the national industrial strategy.

There is also an opportunity to highlight our region's role as an enabler of national growth and deliverer of the net-zero transition.



THE POWER

AND THE GLORY

CAROLE O'NEIL

By Colin Young

Photography by Ben Benoiel

It's not just the day job as Cundall's managing partner that takes Carole O'Neil across the world. From its formation in Newcastle nearly 50 years ago, the multi-disciplinary engineering and design consultancy has expanded into 27 offices and 1200 staff. And Carole knows them all. Cundall, still based in the city, delivers sustainable engineering and design solutions from those centres of excellence, and is committed to ensuring all its projects are net-zero carbon enabled by 2030, with Carole part of a wide-ranging senior team determined to meet the ambitious target. This year, though, she will also represent England in the Commonwealth Powerlifting Federation Championships, in South Africa. Here, during a break in her preparations, she tells Colin Young how the sport has transformed her life and her career.

It's just seven years since Carole O'Neil first tried powerlifting at her local gym in Newcastle, having identified the sport as a fun and different way to keep fit.

Within weeks, she had entered her first competition, in Ashington, and, in October this year, will head to South Africa to represent England at the Commonwealth Powerlifting Federation Championships.

It's a story of incredible passion and progress – and a little amusement too.

She says: "I remember, during that first competition, standing in the queue to weigh in with about 30 other women.

"I got chatting to the lady in front and said, 'have you competed before? Is it your first time?'

"And she said, 'Oh, no. I've done a few,'" laughs Carole.

She adds: "It wasn't until a couple of years later I found out this woman was Sue Hollands, an absolute legend of the sport, who was a multiple international athlete and multiple record holder.

"I was mortified.

"But they were all so lovely on the day.

"I'd made a mistake on my lift, on account of not knowing the rules, and the technical controller took me to one side and told me where I'd gone wrong and how to put it right.

"I had moments where I thought, 'what am I thinking?', but I like a challenge and powerlifting takes you out of your comfort zone.

"And it becomes very addictive too because it is very measurable."

Carole's belt is testament to the sport's captivation; marked in black felt tip on its red lining are a series of numbers, each one denoting a progress landmark.

And it's an obsession she takes into her work.

She says: "You get more and more interested in the data, particularly when you're a bit of a data geek anyway.

"You can get drawn into it and start thinking, 'if I tweak this, what would it do to that metric?'

"I'm a bit obsessive about writing things down. And I'm a pedant.

"I've got training diaries that go back years; I'm old school, I log my training in a book – I've got a physical diary – and I write down every session.

"It's quite nice to look back on."

Carole adds: "As you gain strength, you can see your numbers going up – mine went up quite steeply at first – and then, as you get a bit more experienced, you tend to hit a bit of a plateau and it gets harder and harder to put numbers on.

"I finally hit a number in the gym recently on my bench press that I've been chasing for two years.

"We go up in two-and-a-half kilogram increments on the weight, and I'd bench pressed 85 kilos in competition many, many times.

"I'd attempted 87-and-a-half in competition on five different occasions, but failed every time.

"Finally, though, I got it, and got it easily, and that's what happens with this sport.

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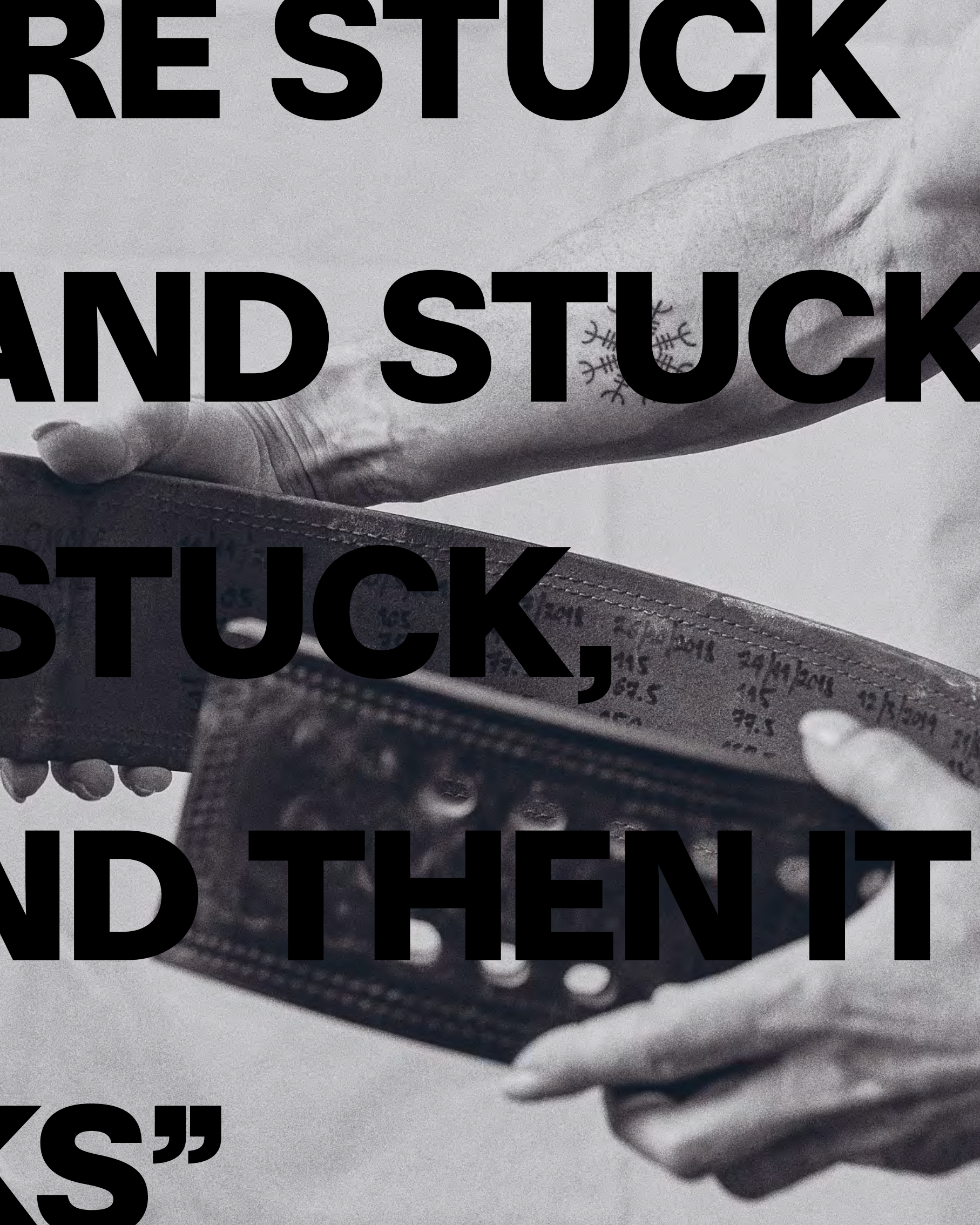
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I love meeting sports stars, hearing their back stories, their journeys, sacrifices and commitments, the setbacks that have driven them to success and how they prepare for big games or championships. Carole O'Neil is one of those people. Just seven years after first trying powerlifting in her local gym in Newcastle, she will represent England at the Commonwealth Powerlifting Federation Championships, in South Africa, in October. The fact Carole is managing partner at Cundall makes her story even more fascinating.

Colin Young



**“THERE
WAS A LOT
OF SOUL
SEARCHING”**



“You’re stuck and stuck and stuck, and then it clicks, and then the numbers go up again for a period, until you hit another plateau.”

“I’ve got a brilliant, technical, physical coach, I have a nutrition coach and I’ve done some work over the years with a mindset coach, which has made a real difference.”

“I used to get really bad nerves on competition day, which would get in the way of performance.”

“So, I did a bit of work with Kay Woodburn, of Gritty People Athletes, just to help me get my head straight.”

“And now, I just think this is meant to be fun.”

“I’ve got enough stress at work, so I do this for fun – I rock up on competition days and just have a whale of a time.”

Carole’s powerlifting experiences are a marked contrast to her days at Darlington-based all-girl boarding school Polam Hall, and her time studying for a law degree at Oxford University, which led to work at a North East legal firm.

She says: “I dreamed of being a lawyer when I was a little girl. But I went to work in HR.”

She joined Cundall in 2007 and, under the tutelage of David Dryden, joined the global management board, becoming a partner and chartered director through the Institute of Directors.

She was appointed managing partner two years ago.

Her new role gives her the remit to expand and extend the One Cundall philosophy – to create a culture to encourage and retain talent – and build collaborative and connected teams.

And Carole says she owes much of her progress at Cundall to powerlifting.

She says: “It’s been huge; some of the challenges I’ve tackled at work, I probably would never have tackled if I hadn’t done this.”

“Powerlifting gives you confidence and resilience to know you can do difficult things.”

“If you can put 130 kilos on your back and squat, you know you can pretty much handle anything.”

We’re sitting on benches in the car park outside the Darlington-based North East Strength Culture gym, away from the background music and the clangs and clunks of weights she is set to effortlessly lift for photographer Ben Benoliel.

Underneath the Cundall tracksuit top – the official Team England uniform had yet to arrive – there is no sign of the ‘game face’, the ripped arms or the taut, rippled frame aiming and training for gold.

Only when she emerges in her “horrible singlet sausage suit”, from the changing room at the back of the gym, does her appearance change.

Alongside her time in the gym, Carole trains in the garage of her home near Newcastle, the equipment built and purchased with husband Andy during COVID-19 lockdowns.

It’s in this oasis of exercise and experimentation that she refines her craft ahead of the next competition, which, in the past, have come courtesy of Cundall.

She says: “I spent six months on assignment with Cundall in Australia.”

“I called the Australian powerlifting body and asked if I could compete in their nationals, got permission, flew into Sydney, picked up a hire car, drove up the coast to a place called Swansea and competed.”

“And it was brilliant; it was such a good way of meeting people in a new country, and I made some really good friends who I’m still in touch with.”

“Some of these opportunities with Cundall have cropped up after I’ve started doing powerlifting, and the managing partner election was not a decision I took lightly.”

“It was a big decision in terms of my career, the contribution I wanted to make to the business, and the time I would be spending away from my husband and the dog.”

“There was a lot of soul searching, and I think having that confidence from powerlifting probably swung things.”

“It was also quite a departure for the business because it is the first time we’ve had someone who hasn’t come through that client-facing, project delivery route in the managing partner role.”

“I’ve been here 17 years, and if you’d said to me then I’d still be here and be managing partner, I’d have laughed at you.”

“As a business, we’ve got 27 offices globally now, but we’re really committed to preserving and protecting the culture of the business; we don’t want to be another big corporate.”



Cundall has made its mark in projects across the globe, from solar panels in the North East to sustainable masterplans in the Middle East.

It has worked on transforming Newcastle’s Farrell Centre into a new centre for architecture, the city’s Bank House into an attractive new office destination and turned the Duchess of Northumberland’s Lilidorei vision at Alnwick Gardens into one of the largest play structures in the world.

And further projects in Manchester – Eden with its largest living wall – and West Coventry Academy – a net-zero school – are setting a benchmark for an ambitious net-zero target.

Carole says: “We’ve got a lot happening; we have some brilliant clients and some really exciting projects.

“We’re doing some really impactful work in the sustainability space and, with all of the challenges of climate change and the urgency around it, it’s an exciting time for our industry.

“We have a huge impact on the environment, and that can be a really positive impact if we get it right.

“One of the brilliant things about my role is that people take me out to their projects all over the world.

“They want to show me what they’re doing and I love it because it brings things to life; I see all of the great things our people are doing – and we’re doing some really great stuff.”

For now, though, attention is on the Commonwealth Powerlifting Federation Championships, and preparation for Carole’s individual and team events, with structured training in place to reduce intensity and let the body shed fatigue so it is in prime condition.

It’s a complex programme, influenced by her online nutrition coach Pia, whose company Fiercely Fueled Nutrition is based in Johannesburg; they will meet for the first time in the flesh at the games.

Carole says: “I took the decision about a year ago to drop a weight class to the 76s, because I’d always competed as a fairly light 84-kilo lifter.

“And with Pia’s brilliant guidance, I’ve managed to do that.

“I’ve dropped about six kilos in body weight, but I’ve actually got stronger – which isn’t normally the direction of travel – but she’s a magician.

“And I’m excited because she’s a lifter as well, so she’s going to be competing at the Commonwealths too, and I can’t wait to meet her for the first time in person.

“She’s pulled a little team of ten people together, and we’re all going off on safari for a few days after we’ve finished competing.”

Carole adds: “It’s sport, so you never know.

“But I’m in with a decent shot at a medal in the bench press, and I would hope to get points for the team on the full power and possibly a podium place.

“We’ll find out.”

15/06/2024

140

82.5

175

(397.5)

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The ties that bind to find talent

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Jackson Hogg's Talent Partnerships are all about delivery. Developed by the STEM recruitment expert to work alongside and inside businesses of all shapes and sizes, the partnerships take away the time, finances and management associated with specialised hiring. Here, Colin Young speaks to Sara Walker, managing talent partner at Jackson Hogg, and Joy Toner, chief people officer at Billingham-based industrial technology company Tracerco, to learn more about how the collaboration is delivering great results.

Sometimes, partnerships just work.

Whether it's small or large organisations, two entrepreneurs with an insatiable appetite to progress together, the maverick and the modest sidekick or two feuding musical brothers about to embark on a potentially messy multi-million-pound world tour – collaboration makes things happen.

There are times when co-operation leverages a pair's unique strengths to create a combination of expertise, skills, experience and networks that help tackle challenges more effectively.

In the case of the industrial technology specialist Tracerco and STEM recruitment expert Jackson Hogg, their alliance – under the official monicker of a Talent Partnership – has proved so successful that their 12-month trial period has just been extended by a further two years.

And both parties are delighted.



Pictured, Joy Toner, chief people officer at Tracerco

When she joined Billingham-headquartered Tracerco as chief people officer two years ago, Joy Toner was handed the task of restructuring the company's people services, including recruitment and HR across 20 countries worldwide.

And, after building on an existing relationship with Jackson Hogg, the last year has been spent developing the Talent Partnership agreement, which is driving Tracerco's global recruitment.

Joy has been working in HR for more than 20 years, with roles in the financial, pharmaceutical, health and legal sectors complemented by a short spell with Amazon.

For her, the collaboration with Jackson Hogg was a 'no-brainer'.

She says: "The option existed to hire an in-house recruitment person on the permanent staff into my team, who'd be responsible for all recruitment globally and source the best candidates, regardless of location.

"But it's very difficult, when you look at the different specialisms of the business in STEM, to find an individual experienced in all those disciplines.

"And it becomes even more difficult when you add the global complexities, not only in terms of supporting all the disciplines and specialisms, but doing so on a global scale.

"Growth is heavily dependent on attracting and retaining the right talent, and we already had links with Jackson Hogg, through its deep industry knowledge and extensive network, so the Talent Partnership was a no-brainer as there was existing trust and confidence in its team, as well as the affinity we'd built."

Sara Walker, managing talent partner at Jackson Hogg, who works out of the recruitment firm's Billingham office, is Jackson Hogg's eyes and ears at Tracerco, and is on site at least three days a week.

She says: "Through my role, I understand what is going on within the business and can have conversations I wouldn't be able to if I was remote or not here regularly.

“We need to be able to pick up the phone, speak to our specialists and say, ‘this is what the culture is like, and this is what you can expect’.

“You’re basically the eyes and ears of everything, aiming for the best outcome.

“It’s about managing expectations and making sure everybody has the best experience – and I think we’ve done that at Tracerco.”

The aim is to deliver the Jackson Hogg Talent Partnership, which started with an initial audit of Tracerco’s recruitment processes that subsequently offered suggestions and improvements to the quality and speed of hire and cost reductions.

And through its focused partnership, Jackson Hogg, which also has offices in Newcastle and Leeds, has cut Tracerco’s average recruitment time from more than 100 days to 30.

Joy says: “The confidence that comes with having someone that provides such close support, and really leverages relationships, is amazing.

“There is always room for us to learn more about each other’s businesses and the way that we do things, but it was an obvious choice to go with the Talent Partnership arrangement.



Jackson Hogg
To find out more about how a Talent Partnership could benefit your business, or to learn about Jackson Hogg’s wider suite of specialist recruitment and outsourced talent services support, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 580 0495.

“And it’s one I don’t regret.

“It’s the work ethic too; we have synergies in terms of values, the way we like to treat our people and how we conduct ourselves.

“We’re aligned in our values, and I genuinely think there’s a candid nature to the relationship, built on trust, whereby we can be really honest with one another, which is where you get the best out of a relationship.

“I’ve dabbled with recruitment over the years, and had a lot of experience with it, but I’m by no means a specialist, and we didn’t have that within our team.

“And having somebody who so often understands what we need before we need it, and can suggest that, is really beneficial.

“We’re a very fast-paced business, with little time to really strategise, and Sara just hit the ground running.

“When she joined, she saw where she needed to link in with team members at different stages of the employee life cycle, and identified the improvements we needed to make.

“That’s what we needed; somebody who was the ready-made article, who came in and delivered from the start.”

No stopping the momentum



Perspective Financial Group

www.pfgl.co.uk

@perspectivefgl

Having already completed 11 takeovers in 2024, Perspective Financial Group is carrying great momentum into the latter part of the year. And thanks to backing from investor Charlesbank Capital Partners, its impetus is only set to continue. Here, Ian Wilkinson, the company's chief executive, talks about its growth plans as well as its commitment to charity, which saw the business donate £12,000 to good causes at its recent annual conference.

National financial planning and wealth management advisory firm Perspective Financial Group has unveiled further growth plans following a number of acquisitions.

The company says it continues to "see significant opportunity in a busy market" having already completed 11 takeovers in 2024.

The deals come after Perspective was earlier this year backed by Charlesbank Capital Partners, a move it expects will help the company double in size within two years and treble staff numbers to at least 1500.

The agreements include four client books from Perspective's self-employed adviser base and mean the business, which has offices in Newcastle, Darlington, Hexham and Harrogate, North Yorkshire, has now made 89 acquisitions since its founding 16 years ago.

Highlighting its growth ambitions, Ian Wilkinson, Perspective chief executive, says: "We are delighted to remain highly active in the acquisitions space and build upon our longstanding reputation as an attractive home for client-centric vendors.

"We added a further office - in September - in Dore, near Sheffield, and acquired a business in Egham, Surrey, whose clients will, predominantly, be served by our existing nearby office in Chesham, Buckinghamshire.

"We continue to see significant opportunity for acquisitions in a busy market, and expect to maintain this trajectory of acquisitions for the rest of the year and beyond.

"Encouragingly, we are seeing a combination of larger and smaller acquisitions in our pipeline, which remains as strong as ever.

"With our client-centric approach and strong values, plus our increasing

scale through investment from Charlesbank, we offer well-run independent financial advisory businesses the best possible home for them and their clients when they are ready to sell.

“Our clients – including our vendors’ clients – are already benefiting from this scale through our ability to continually drive down total costs to our clients, therefore delivering better value for money.”

Meanwhile, the firm, whose 40-strong office portfolio includes sites across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, reiterated its support for the areas it serves by donating £12,000 to a number of charities.

Staff – who deliver more than 3500 hours of hands-on support to charities and community projects each year – selected seven causes to support at the company’s annual conference, held in Birmingham, with board members generously personally matching Perspective’s initial donation to reach the £12,000 figure.

The charities included Cancer Research UK, Alzheimer’s Society, Dementia UK and Muscular Dystrophy UK.

Dementia UK received £1000, which will be used to support the work of a specialist dementia nurse – known as an admiral nurse – that helps those with dementia live independently for longer.

Hilda Hayo, Dementia UK chief executive, says:

“Our nurses are here to help people when they need it most; they have the time to listen and the knowledge to solve problems.

“For families affected by dementia, they can be a lifeline; they help give them strength to cope with the bad days and the energy to enjoy the good days.”

Hailing the impact of Perspective’s support, a Muscular Dystrophy UK spokesperson, adds: “With this help, we are able to fund ground-breaking research and life-changing support for people living with muscle wasting and weakening conditions.

“Together, we are changing the future.”

The Scout Association, Midlands Air Ambulance and The Movement Centre, in Shropshire, also received financial support.

Outlining Perspective’s commitment to the voluntary sector, Ian adds: “I strongly believe that giving back to charities and communities is a key part of what makes us a successful group.

“I’m proud of how well our 550 staff actively engage with the communities around them.

“I think it works both ways – our six values include doing the right thing, always delivering and teamwork.

“These are just as important within our business as for the communities and charities that we support.”



Perspective Financial Group

Operating from 40 bases across the UK, including sites in Newcastle, Darlington, Hexham and Harrogate, North Yorkshire, Perspective’s local offices provide financial planning advice with client relationships that endure, on average, for more than 26 years and often span four generations in a family.

To find out more about its services and for office contact information, visit the website at the top of this article.

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With Christmas just around the corner, where better for your company to celebrate the festive period than the North East's most iconic venue, Spanish City?

Throughout Christmas, Spanish City comes alive with festive magic. From its 40ft Christmas tree and enchanting decorations, to its calendar full of unmissable events, the multi-award-winning venue is the perfect place to bring together all of your colleagues.

Its lineup includes festive dining at Trenchers restaurant, Festive Tribute Nights and Christmas party nights - all of which are perfect for festive celebrations with your team.

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FIND OUT MORE



Can the North East seize the political moment?

Stephenson-Mohl Group

www.stephenson-mohl.co.uk

@Stephenson-Mohl Group

With sweeping change in Westminster matched by a landmark devolution deal across the north of the region, the political landscape is rapidly evolving. Here, Mark Stephenson, managing director of Stephenson-Mohl Group, the North's leading public affairs agency, assesses the changes and highlights the measures needed to ensure the North East fulfils its potential.

This bumper year of elections has felt like a political marathon.

Decisive change has arrived in Westminster, and with the election of a new mayor in Kim McGuinness, the North East should not shy away from self-reflection.

Where are we today? And where do we want to be in the future?

First, let's think of sectors; housebuilding, renewables, defence, advanced manufacturing and services.

Where do our economic fortunes lie this century?

Second, let's look at systems.

Government is changing and devolving.

A deeper relationship between business and the state is emerging. Our industries face a disrupting artificial intelligence revolution.

How will we respond?

Third, let's examine our regional offer.

What is our elevator pitch to the world?

How would we characterise our growth story in recent decades, and what will the next 30 years look like?

Sweeping political change in the UK is rare, so it should spark reflection, then action. In a world where global capital and nation states have a renewed interest in investing in the UK, we must project a fresh image of the North East if we are to be attractive.

To Einstein, repeating the same thing while expecting different results was the definition of insanity.

So, what might we do differently to deliver the transformational change in northern communities that has eluded decision-makers for decades?

Genuine influence in the corridors of power requires us to harness our strengths.

We must champion our leading universities, our manufacturing, energy and emerging industrial clusters, and our reputation as 'grafters'.

We mustn't shy from speaking as one voice to secure the interventions in infrastructure and skills needed to unlock growth.

If we cultivate a new generation of ambitious businesses and if we, as industry and citizens, work hand in glove with devolved government on these priorities, then the North East can take back control of its destiny over the 21st Century.

Inside the M25, the North East economy has too often been viewed as a problem to solve, rather than an opportunity to grasp.

Our potential is enormous.

But our focus must be sharpened and old mistakes avoided.

This is a unique political moment and every political, business and community leader in the North East should rise to it.



Stephenson-Mohl Group

To find out more about Stephenson-Mohl Group's support, and how it could help your business, visit the website or contact the email address at the top of this article.



ROUNDTABLE

RAISING RESILIENCE: GIVING THE YOUNGER GENERATION A SPORTING CHANCE OF SUCCESS

A strong skills base is the cornerstone of any commercial success. But not all youngsters excel in the traditional learning environment, with many left without sufficient aspiration, confidence and emotional intelligence to pursue personal and professional growth. Here, in a roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside Newcastle Rugby Foundation and Barnard Castle School, education leaders and senior industry figures assess the current landscape, setting out a number of objectives – including harnessing the power of sport – to help youngsters thrive, regardless of their background.

What is the present picture across the region's skills environment?

The Great British summer.

A time for family holidays, adventures with friends, ice cream by the seaside, cricket – and examination results.

As sure as the warmer months roll around, so too do anxious youngsters converge on school halls to pick up grade sheets distilling the multiple shades of their learning journeys into black and white finality.

But this custom, said Tony Jackson, outgoing headmaster at Teesdale-based independent education provider Barnard Castle School, has had its time.

He said: “Children are being assessed by Victorian methods that say they have to attain a certain number to access the next stage.

“They are told, at ten-years-old, that passing a test is what matters in life – but that couldn’t be further away from the truth.

“These children are going to be working in a multiple-career world, half of which haven’t even been invented yet, so we need to do things differently.

“We need to develop character in children from four-years-old and upwards, to increase their confidence and build empathy, communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills.”

Tony found support from David Van der Velde, a programme manager at the Living Wage Foundation, which encourages employers to pay salaries and pensions compatible with the cost of living.

Calling for greater classroom freedoms, he said: “The standardisation of testing and the centralisation of the inspection regime takes away the power of teachers to be human.

“It’s like specifying a member of a rugby team to make 17 passes during a game and another to make three runs; we must trust teachers to teach.”

Kay Charlton, North East group senior partnership manager at the Department for Work and Pensions, agreed, urging a replotting of the careers map.

She added: “A lot of people don’t understand the employer landscape in their community.

“Teachers should make children more aware of choice, and we need to encourage young people to identify what they are good at and then follow that pathway.

“That would really help change mindsets.”

How is this disconnect affecting learners’ access to employment?

Businesses are nothing without people, their ideas and insights just as crucial as the cogs

that keep conveyor belts turning.

But, cautioned John Johnston, chief executive of Ashington-headquartered housing association Bernicia, the continued focus on headline attainment levels means the region's collective production line is operating below full capacity.

He said: "You can't get on a trade apprenticeship in a college without having a level four qualification in maths and English.

"That means, particularly in some of our most deprived communities, where children don't have an academic background, they are being excluded from some traditional skilled routes."

Furthermore, John warned of a vicious circle, with the confidence-sapping effect of such frameworks continuing to be exacerbated by the legacy of the coronavirus pandemic.

He said: "Employers are struggling with newcomers – the COVID-19 generation, if you will – because those people are finding general, day-to-day communication skills difficult and have equally low aspirations."

Chris Ord, who manages the Newcastle City Council-led Work and Thrive Partnership, which provides leadership and strategic direction for employment and skills priorities across the metropolitan borough, concurred.

He said: "The single biggest thing we're dealing with is a lack of confidence and associated mental health issues.

"Many young people are a long way from an apprenticeship or a job; we have to build their confidence and get them to entry-level status to create pathways to employers."

How can education and industry better coalesce to create positive change?

Highlighting Bernicia's apprenticeship scheme, which has nurtured more than 70 young people across the past 12 years, John called for a more proactive alliance between educators and employers.

He said: "Everyone can apply for an apprenticeship with us, and because we have good relations with colleges, they take our apprentices even if they don't have the required levels of maths and English.

"We twin track them in the first year, to provide additional support, and we do lots of events in the lead up to applications opening too, such as helping youngsters write CVs and take part in mock interviews."

Kay, who liaises with Department for Work and Pensions partners and employers to move people closer to recruitment, called for organisations to reconsider their hiring and induction processes.

She said: "A lot of young people presently don't see themselves fitting into the world of work.

"Part of that is down to the language on a job advert; if a young person can't understand it, or they can't see themselves in that organisation, then they simply won't apply.

"Furthermore, if you put a young person in an environment with experienced adults, there is a real possibility they will shy away.

"But if you give them a one-to-one situation that allows for open conversation, their skills and capabilities will come out far better."

Melanie Magee, head of Newcastle Rugby Foundation, the charitable arm of Gallagher Premiership rugby union side Newcastle Falcons, advocated greater use of technology to help youngsters navigate the employment route.



Pictured, above, Tony Underwood, pioneer of Newcastle Rugby Foundation's Rugby+ Futures programme, makes a point during the roundtable discussion

Below, Mark Eadle, head professional at roundtable host venue Jesmond Dene Real Tennis Club, who provided guests with a brief history of the sport ahead of the discussion



"We must build as employers from inside out; we must think more closely about how we support those entering the workplace to become much more adaptable and see opportunities differently"

Lysa Morrison, LMA Training & Consultancy founder, and Newcastle Rugby Foundation Rugby+ Futures programme co-author



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

Kay Charlton, right, provides insight during the roundtable discussion at Jesmond Dene Real Tennis Club. She is watched by Lysa Morrison

Opposite page, from left to right, Melanie Magee, head of Newcastle Rugby Foundation; John Oates, who works in business development at Newcastle Rugby Foundation; and Alesh K Jose, founder of Cricketqube

“Employers are struggling with newcomers – the COVID-19 generation, if you will – because those people are finding general, day-to-day communication skills difficult and have equally low aspirations”

John Johnston,
Bernicia chief executive



She said: “We’re trialling having people do their covering letter by video, and it is proving quite successful because it removes the need to write things down and fill out boxes.”

What other measures could be adopted to further raise youngsters’ confidence and resilience while also increasing their employment potential?

Chris, who previously held a role at the now disbanded Learning and Skills Council, which planned and funded further education in England, noted the importance of mentorship.

He said: “Having someone that can help an individual – who isn’t in education, employment or training – navigate complexities and build their confidence is such a good thing.

“It’s about providing a hook, where you don’t even talk about employment at the beginning, but build their confidence and help them on their journey, picking them up when they fall.

“Such a model, though, requires a lot of long-term investment.”

Acknowledging the financial requirements, Lysa Morrison, founder of LMA Training & Consultancy, whose extensive portfolio includes devising health, housing and social care strategies for the Welsh Government, said: “We must build as employers from inside out.

“We must think more closely about how we support those entering the workplace to become much more adaptable and see opportunities differently.

“How do we teach employees to pass on the message to apprentices to take care of themselves? How do we create an environment that encourages each other to give caring feedback?”

Carole Loader, co-founder and director of

Newcastle-based Mesma, whose software helps education and employment support providers manage quality assurance processes, agreed, citing previous moves by Mesma to bolster its team.

She said: “We went through a few years of bringing in experienced developers, but then elected to support our own apprentices.

“We used an outsourced development company to help with technical support and provided pastoral support around that.

“We were very honest, saying to our apprentices we wanted to be part of their wider journey, that we would give them confidence and help them move forward with their careers.

“And, as a result, we’ve got two really passionate individuals.”

David acknowledged the positivity of such moves, but additionally called for companies to increase financial commitments.

He added: “We have some of the highest rates of child poverty in the North East.

“And poverty is sticky; if someone grows up in child poverty, it’s much more likely their children and their grandchildren will do so too.

“Some organisations are doing great work, in terms of spending time and resource to help alleviate the impact.

“But, at the same time, they’re not paying staff a living wage, so in effect are also creating poverty.”

How important are experiences beyond the education landscape to youngsters’ development?

Think of the learning environment, and it doesn’t take too long to conjure images of white-walled classrooms, lines of desks and

heavy textbooks.

For many, though, such regimentation and routine is the very antithesis of their creative want.

In its stead, roundtable members highlighted the importance of cultivating relationships and experiences beyond learning providers’ gates, with Carole providing tangible evidence.

She said: “When my son was a child, he would go into the garage and pull things apart and put them back together.

“He studied an engineering apprenticeship and, in only a few years, has secured a job with a world-class Formula One team.”

Could sport help better foster such experiences? Are there lessons from team play that could be harnessed to help boost confidence and resilience?

Tucked away in YouTube’s vast vortex is a Pizza Hut advertisement extolling the company’s new stuffed crust range.

In it, sitting on a dressing room bench, the now late New Zealander Jonah Lomu – fresh from his four-try demolition of England in a 1995 Rugby World Cup semi-final – stares intently at an unseen television screen.

Next to him, Tony Underwood, who lined up against Lomu in that same game, asks to share the feast, a request Lomu meets with a forearm to his on-field adversary’s face in the act of allowing him to ‘smell’ his takeaway treat.

Picking himself up, injured nose and all, former Barnard Castle School pupil Tony whistles for brother – and fellow England international – Rory and their mum Annie, who bursts through the door, tackles Lomu and shares a slice with her boys.

It's all a bit of fun, but delve a little deeper and the scene carries a more serious message.

For stuffed crust, read a craving for new opportunities. For Rory and Annie, read strong support mechanisms. For Tony's wherewithal to get back to his feet, read resilience.

And today, as the pioneer of Newcastle Rugby Foundation's Rugby+ Futures programme, the former British and Irish Lions player is helping instil such hardiness into the next generation.

Co-authored by Lysa and former Olympic swimmer Chris Cook, the Electricity North East-sponsored project has already supported scores of secondary school and college youngsters across the region through interactive activities and group discussions focused on increasing emotional intelligence, self-awareness and self-belief.

"Sport is one way of building resilience because you're constantly slaving to score but very regularly don't," said former Falcons player Tony, who became a commercial airline pilot in his days after rugby.

He added: "Anything that brings people together and provides the ability for them to try things and build resilience is only a positive."

Tony was backed by Alesh K Jose, founder of Newcastle-based Cricketqube.

Harnessing the summer game's basics, the venture delivers social and physical support to people from three-years-old to 104, including a number who have special educational needs and others that suffer from Parkinson's, Alzheimer's and dementia.

And thread-like through its very being, said Northumbria University graduate Alesh, is resilience.

He said: "Some children might miss the ball when batting, or fail to bowl as they wanted to, and, after two or three goes, will walk away.

"But those who have played sports want to keep going.

"Similarly, sport plays a really important part in improving eye contact and communication skills."

Furthermore, said Alesh, sport has the power to create role models for youngsters, which Cricketqube facilitates through its family backyard classes.

Crafted from a project led by Dr Faatihah Niyi-Odumosu, of the University of West of England, and developed through sessions with Indian, Pakistani, Ghanaian, Nigerian and West Indian families, the programme is now supporting black and South Asian communities in Newcastle's West End alongside the city's council.

Alesh added: "Families are able to play together and, on some occasions, you see children teaching their parents, which is a real confidence builder.

"Then, after the cricket, there is food and a chance to chat, which allows youngsters to see parents and grandparents, the most senior people in their community, in a different light and their status as role models."

Melanie concurred, using Newcastle Rugby Foundation's team to spotlight the benefits of non-physical activities.

She added: "We have 16 staff but only four teach rugby; the rest oversee other programmes.

"We also have 50 volunteers who've never touched a rugby ball, yet they still get as much out of being part of a team and being part of a sporting family."

However, Lysa and John Oates, who works in a business development role with Newcastle Rugby Foundation, issued some caution, calling for greater equity in programme delivery and the spreading of sport's power to other mediums.

Lysa said: "While sport teaches us how to fail and work as a team, gender remains an

important caveat in the conversation.

"If we're going to use sport as a vehicle to teach emotional intelligence from a very young age, we've got to ensure it is delivered through an inclusive approach."

John added: "Sport is limited because of the number of people that can engage; it is only part of the solution.

"We have to use the ethos of sport to develop skills and confidence across a much wider area."

So, how can we definitively move the dial and increase confidence and resilience in youngsters?

Reiterating his call for a refreshing of the education sector and its priorities, Tony Jackson put forward a three-pronged approach.

He said: "The buzzword is resilience, and the key way to develop that is to encourage children to fail.

"Failing comfortably is part of the learning process, but we don't have that because, from the top down, we have a culture where individuals have to reach a certain point.

"We need to look at the impact our education system delivers, change enterprise's mindset about attainment levels and tap into our business network to increase support."

Tony Underwood added: "A character-led education is so important.

"It's a superpower, and exactly what chief executives want and need to see in people.

"If we give youngsters the aspiration to believe, to have confidence and to understand what relationship building can do, we will supercharge them to do some incredible things."



Pioneered by Newcastle Falcons ambassador Tony Underwood and co-authored by acclaimed coach Lysa Morrison alongside former double Olympian Chris Cook, the Futures programme is an innovative new emotional intelligence education initiative delivered in the community by Newcastle Rugby Foundation.

Like-minded organisations keen to help drive the project forward should contact Melanie Magee, head of foundation, by emailing melanie.magee@newcastlefalcons.co.uk or calling 07764 933310.



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Bridging the skills gap

With a new academic year comes optimism and a refreshed focus on the workers of tomorrow. But an ongoing disconnect between education and industry, warn many sector leaders, is depriving organisations of the suitably trained talent they need to thrive. Why have the two worlds become detached, and what action must be taken to strengthen the pathway from classroom to career?

Tackling tomorrow's challenges with confidence and capability



Tania Cooper
Chair - North East STEM Foundation
Managing director - Steel Benders UK

With the dawn of a new academic year, we find ourselves infused with optimism and with a renewed focus on shaping the workforce of tomorrow.

However, a persistent gap between education and industry is stifling the supply of adequately trained talent that organisations desperately need to flourish.

As the managing director at Steel Benders UK, I see first-hand the necessity of cultivating skills – such as critical thinking, communication and teamwork – from an early age to satisfy future industry demands.

This is why I am honoured to also serve as the chair of the North East STEM Foundation.

Its mission is clear: to provide every young person, regardless of their background, with access to high-quality STEM education in a modern environment supported by employers.

By nurturing highly-skilled and innovative workers, and connecting them with businesses, we aim to secure the future of both local industries and the broader economy.

We accomplish this through outreach programmes, removing financial barriers to STEM education and creating top-tier learning environments at crucial educational stages.

One of the most impactful ways to prepare students for successful careers is by offering

more opportunities for practical experience in real-world work settings.

Steel Benders UK's facilities at Cochranes Wharf, in Middlesbrough, and Brenda Road, in Hartlepool, serve as prime examples of how industry can play a pivotal role in education.

Many educational institutions stand to gain immensely from stronger partnerships with industry.

Bridging the communication gap through initiatives like regular dialogue, joint research projects and apprenticeships is essential for aligning educational outcomes with industry needs.

By integrating work experience into curricula and continually updating educational content to mirror the latest industry trends and technologies, we can equip students with the practical skills and knowledge they require to excel in the workforce.

And we urge companies in the North East to join us in this endeavour.

Together, we can cultivate a robust pipeline of talent, which is ready to meet the evolving demands of our industries.

Collaboration is key to shaping the future of our workforce, and ensuring our region remains competitive and innovative.

Let's seize this opportunity to work together and secure a bright future for both our young people and our industries.

By doing so, we will create a thriving, forward-thinking community that can tackle the challenges of tomorrow with confidence and capability.

Enhancing the pathway from classroom to career



Dr Sharon Grant
Director - North East Institute
of Technology



Join the discussion

Scan the QR code below to visit our LinkedIn page and add your thoughts to the conversation.



The disconnect between education and industry remains a significant challenge, with organisations sometimes feeling hindered from accessing the trained talent they require to thrive.

This gap arises from several factors, including the education system's traditional focus on theory and critical thinking over the practical skills and experience valued by industry.

Graduates are often academically knowledgeable but not necessarily work-ready, lacking in-demand skills such as communication, teamwork and adaptability.

Emerging fields like artificial intelligence, data science and green technologies are often under-represented in traditional curricula.

It can be cumbersome for educational establishments to update curriculum content due to bureaucratic processes, resource, time and funding constraints.

However, shorter, modular courses are helping by offering a more flexible approach to upskilling and reskilling the existing workforce with a rich source of ready talent.

Regular industry input into educational programmes is crucial, ensuring curricula reflects current trends, skills and competencies, keeping education relevant to job market demands.

Concerns over time commitment, productivity loss, resource constraints and uncertainty about how to initiate collaboration make engagement challenging.

Initiatives like the National Institutes of Technology, supported by the Gatsby Foundation, have been established to provide regional central contacts.

Ongoing professional development for teachers and careers advisers is essential to ensure they are equipped with up-to-date regional/national

labour market information, enabling them to guide students towards careers that align with industry needs, creating a seamless transition from education to employment.

Curriculum modernisation at all levels, from primary and secondary schools to higher education, and strengthening partnerships between businesses and educational institutions, are actionable solutions.

Employer-education engagement can take various forms: input into curriculum design, providing traineeships, apprenticeship programmes, mentoring learners, delivering masterclasses, supporting STEM events, career talks, participating in industry-education advisory boards and volunteering as an enterprise advisor or STEM ambassador.

A number of large and small companies in the North East are already committed to developing the future workforce.

For example, the North East Institute of Technology (NEIoT) has well-supported advanced manufacturing and engineering, and construction and built environment employer-education advisory boards.

These collaborations have resulted in the development of high-quality retrofit courses, specialised modules that address local skills needs and the establishment of a digital ambassador programme.

Such initiatives highlight how industry and education can bridge the disconnect, enhancing mutual understanding and productivity.

The Prime Minister and Education Secretary have announced Skills England to boost national skills, create opportunities and kickstart economic growth by uniting central and local government, businesses and educational institutions to aid recruitment and a more responsive, collaborative skills system.

Bridging the education-industry gap requires a unified effort from all stakeholders, including parents, carers and students, to enhance the pathway from classroom to career and meet ever-evolving industry requirements.

Powering Sunderland's renaissance

Northstar Ventures

www.northstarventures.co.uk

LinkedIn: Northstar Ventures UK

With headline investment delivering watershed change across its commercial and creative sectors, Sunderland is undergoing a momentous industrial and social renaissance. And adding further momentum to the pace of its transformation is Northstar Ventures, which has launched the Venture Sunderland Fund to catalyse start-up and scale-up growth. Here, Alasdair Greig and Naomi Allen Seales highlight its great potential, emphasising the fund's capacity to bolster companies' global growth ambitions while strengthening recruitment plans and amplifying regional prosperity.

Sunderland is a city on the move.

Once renowned for bustling shipyards and cradle-to-grave pitmen, landmark investment and invention are today replacing its sepia-toned past with a vivid technicolour future.

From Nissan's record-breaking car manufacturing plant to a thriving digital ecosystem, a cultural sector renaissance and a momentous £450 million film and television production hub, Sunderland is evolving at pace.

And adding further thrust to its momentum is Northstar Ventures, which is launching the Venture Sunderland Fund, a venture capital fund dedicated to catalysing growth across the city's start-up and scale-up business landscape.

The fund presently has £15 million to invest, but Northstar Ventures has ambitions to increase that sum over the next year, to deepen the fund's impact and enable other investors to take advantage of the significant returns it is targeting. For high net worth investors, this includes the opportunity to take advantage of the generous tax benefits of the Enterprise Investment Scheme.

Focused on nurturing a new cluster of high-growth companies operating in industries such as advanced manufacturing, sustainability, technology and the creative sector, it will act as a springboard for ambitious businesses, driving closer collaboration between regional stakeholders to help firms grow internationally while bolstering the city's economy and jobs market.

The fund will build on Sunderland's existing industrial strengths, notably its status as a leader of the green revolution, where Port of Sunderland's support for the creation of the North Sea-based Dogger Bank Wind Farm is matched by Nissan's £1 billion EV36Zero project, alongside AESC that is bolstering electric vehicle battery production on Wearside.

It will also add impetus to a creative sector buoyed by the National Esports Performance Campus, which is hothousing the competitive video gamers of tomorrow, and the imminent arrival of FulwellCain Studios' 8450-job Crown



Works Studios, which will see Sunderland share a stage with some of the world's largest film and television productions.

Furthermore, it will support digital transformation plans to make Sunderland a smart city, and build on the work of the Education Partnership North East-led Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy, which promises to harness the next generation of workers with the skills needed to create the greener properties of the future when it opens in 2025.

Alasdair Greig, Northstar Ventures director, says: "Venture capital is a crucial ingredient for driving growth and prosperity in Sunderland.

"It will help accelerate the growth of start-up and scale-up businesses and generate the high-quality jobs needed to transform our economy, providing local people with new career paths, higher income potential and the chance to be part of innovative and dynamic global industries.

“The exciting and diverse opportunities the Venture Sunderland Fund will provide will benefit not only Sunderland but the whole of the North East.

“Sunderland is founded on game-changing ideas, knowledge to put them into practice and a capacity for sheer hard work – three of the qualities we seek in the teams we back.

“We look forward to working with this innovative business community as it drives the city forward.”

Naomi Allen Seales, Northstar Ventures investment manager, adds: “Sunderland is a city close to our hearts.

“Innovation and industry, culture and creativity are all part of the picture, bringing a vibrancy to one of the jewels in the North East’s crown.

“The city is transforming and, here at Northstar Ventures, we are proud to play our part in that process.”

Having operated in the North East for more than

20 years, Northstar Ventures is a prosperity driver.

Its £100 million-plus investments into regional start-ups, spin-outs and more established businesses – across areas such as clean technology and healthy ageing – have helped catalyse great job and wealth creation across the region.

Its investment track record includes a number of high-value exits, which were added to earlier this year when Houghton-le-Spring construction sector management software firm Clixifix was bought by Norway’s SmartCraft ASA.

The deal, which has created SmartCraft’s UK headquarters, secured substantial investment into Wearside, with the company committing to recruitment and product development in the region.

The Venture Sunderland Fund has been designed to build on this success.

Pictured, left, Naomi Allen Seales, Northstar Ventures investment manager

Pictured, below, from left to right, are members of Northstar Ventures’ investment team. From left, Naomi Allen Seales, investment manager; Tom O’Neill, investment manager; Ian Richards, director; Alex Buchan, investment director; and Alasdair Greig, director



Northstar Ventures

For more information about the Venture Sunderland Fund, Northstar Ventures’ other funds and how they could help your business’ growth, visit the website at the top of this article.

Northstar Ventures is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.



No retain, no gain: Why employee retention is important to business success



Muckle LLP

www.muckle-llp.com

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They say good help is hard to find, but what if you're looking in the wrong place? Businesses can be too focused on attracting new employees to the detriment of nurturing their existing talent. And considering it can cost between six to nine months' salary to find, onboard and train a new employee, should businesses start looking closer to home?

For Muckle LLP, this is a given.

As a leading law firm for business, its people are its product.

Here, corporate partners Philip Clare, Matthew Walsh and Stephanie Brown – who all began as trainees at the firm – discuss how their experiences at Muckle have shaped their careers.

Philip, who qualified in 2005 before making partner in 2013, has three main reasons for staying.

He says: "It's a combination of a great team, great clients and great

career development opportunities.

"There is a real focus on working with individuals to support progression in a way that suits them, whether that is through training, opportunities to do work that excites them or simply being trusted to work independently."

Matthew agrees, crediting the work and trust as key factors.

He says: "Part of the appeal was doing good quality work in the corporate team, and being given as much responsibility as I was ready for.

"Project work is hard and can be all-consuming, but it is so rewarding to be part of the team that pushes the deal over the line."

Stephanie, the newest corporate partner – having been promoted this year after qualifying in 2017 – adds: "I had an idea of what I wanted to achieve, and the firm supported me with that.

"Everyone at Muckle is looked at as being on their own path; we try and personalise everyone's career journey based on their skills alongside business needs."

Engaged people equals engaged clients

Staff retention also impacts clients.

Having the same people who know clients' businesses inside out creates consistency and familiarity, which helps create the trusted adviser role so many service businesses strive for.

Matthew says: "So much of what we do is about building relationships and understanding multiple perspectives, which includes project advisers – such as corporate finance or tax advisers – as well as clients."

Stephanie says: "My favourite thing about my job is feeling like I've really made a difference in supporting clients through a transaction; building relationships and trust is really important for that.

"There can be a lot of emotions involved, particularly if it's a family business."

Philip adds: "We've built great relationships with our long-term clients.

"Seeing both new and long-term clients through their growth journey is very rewarding, and part of how we can achieve these great results is through having a close team relationship."

Moving on up

Philip thinks creating and nurturing opportunities is key to people retention.

He says: "We're a massive believer in internal mobility; if you are good at what you do, you will progress here.

"Seven of our current partners started their careers here as trainees, and dozens more associates and solicitors have done the same.

"I have been greatly helped over my career, and I'm now in a position where I can return the favour and help develop the next generation of legal talent."

Stephanie, who is the lead of Muckle's graduate recruitment team, says: "There's a high level of trust at management level, and they genuinely want to develop people.

"You know you're never going to be held back and that you'll be allowed to develop into a role over time.

"And I really enjoy training the junior lawyers;

I came through that process not so long ago and can remember what it was like."

Matthew adds: "As a Muckle trainee, I was supported every step of the way to becoming partner.

"I was given responsibility from the start and really trusted.

"We recognise that well-trained, engaged and trusted people will grow into much better lawyers.

"For me, organisations must provide a pathway for progression, as well as help their people see their contributions are being valued."

More than just a job

Your organisation's culture is also key to people retention.

And having worked at Muckle for more than 20 years, Philip has seen a lot of cultural change.

He says: "We've worked hard over the years to create the values and culture we have now, and that takes a long time to become embedded."

Matthew says: "We've prioritised a culture that supports our communities, most recently with the push for B Corp™ accreditation.

"It's so important we hire and retain people who share those same values to ensure the business keeps going in the right direction."

Stephanie adds: "The feedback we hear is that when people join Muckle, they feel like the culture is actually there.

"However, nobody is complacent about culture, and there is always work to be done to improve."

As well as its trainee programme, Muckle is a founding member of the North East Apprenticeship Scheme (NESA), a six-year endeavour that supports apprentices to get work experience and a law degree before qualifying as a solicitor without university debt.

Muckle's first solicitor apprentice qualified in 2023, coincidentally into the corporate team, maintaining its tradition of retaining talent.

"We've prioritised a culture that supports our communities, most recently with the push for B Corp™ accreditation"

Pictured, from left to right, are Muckle LLP's Philip Clare, Matthew Walsh and Stephanie Brown

Picture: Mike Smith



Muckle LLP

To find out more about the culture at Muckle LLP, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 211 7777.



2024 Client Trends Report

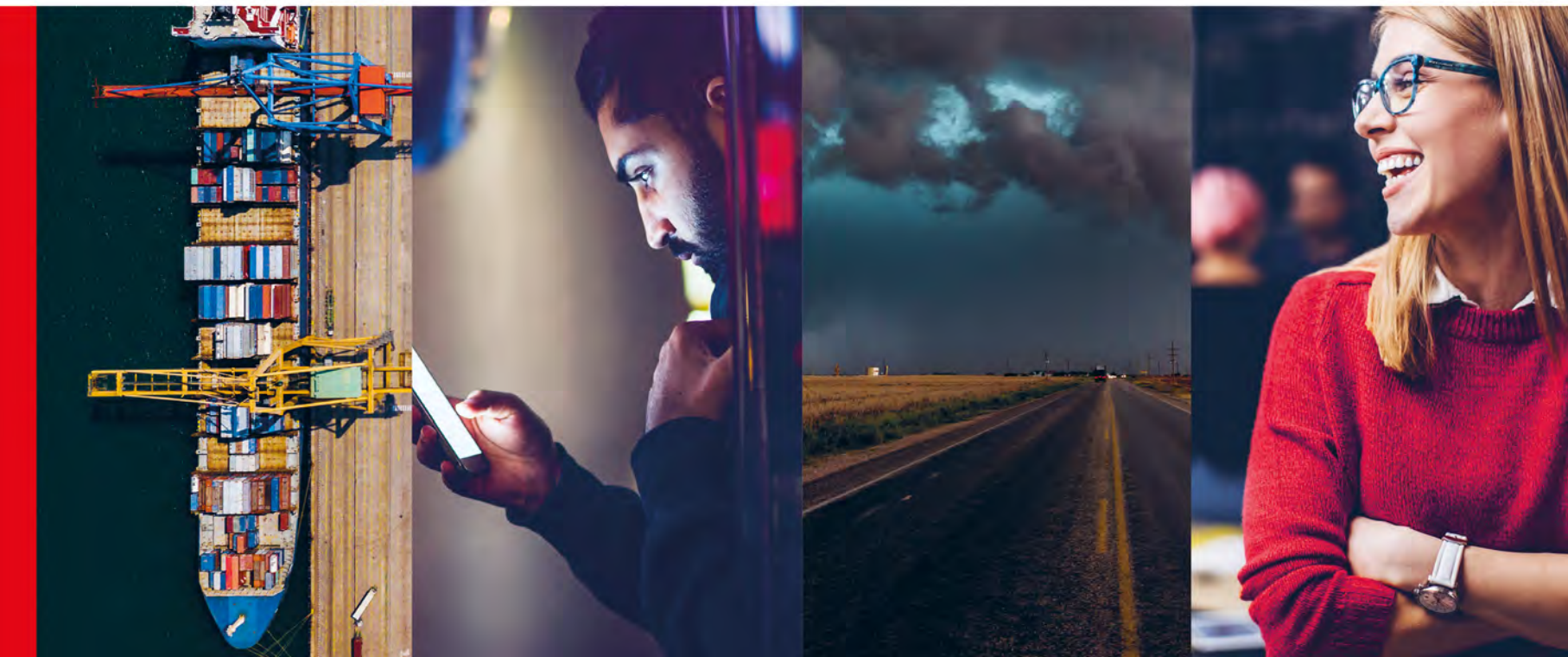
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By Kate Hewison

Marianne Locatori is chief executive of Newcastle Theatre Royal. Here, she tells Kate Hewison about her role, the historic venue's commitment to driving watershed social and cultural change and the work being undertaken to bring new productions to the Grade-I listed building's famous stage.

What does a typical day look like as chief executive of Newcastle Theatre Royal?

There is no such thing as a typical day for me!

Each week brings a new production, so I begin by welcoming the touring show's company manager, attending the first performance and hosting the cast and company afterwards.

Newcastle Theatre Royal is an independent, not-for-profit charitable trust, so a significant portion of my time is dedicated to managing relationships with our stakeholders and supporters. Ensuring we keep on track to fulfil our strategic plan and deliver our charitable objectives also occupies much of my time.

I lead on the creative programme here, so my day might involve meeting producers and scheduling future shows (I'm currently programming shows two to three years in advance).

When I'm not at the theatre, regular visits to London ensure I can assess potential touring

shows and meet up with West End producers to discuss future collaborations.

You're passionate about the life-changing potential of arts and culture. How can regional institutions like Newcastle Theatre Royal act as catalysts for social and cultural change?

Regional theatres like ours are vital for providing cultural and creative opportunities to local communities.

We bring world-class, large-scale theatre to the region; we bring audiences together, so they can enjoy the very best theatre on their doorstep.

Beyond performances, our creative engagement programme includes people of all ages and abilities, and we're passionate about theatre's potential to enhance wellbeing through performing arts projects, fostering belonging and making a meaningful impact on communities.

MINUTES

WITH MARIANNE LOCATORI

As part of this, a focus for us is ensuring talent development opportunities in the creative sector are made available here in the North East.

The theatre industry has faced many hurdles in recent years. How can regional theatres remain resilient and adaptable in the face of unforeseen challenges?

Since the pandemic, we have had to adapt our business model to focus on financial, operational and workforce resilience.

We are very fortunate to have a loyal audience at Newcastle Theatre Royal – which we are very grateful for – but, as an independent, not-for-profit organisation, without regular funding, ticket sales remain the core foundation of our financial stability.

Improving resilience comes from adapting our operations and diversifying income streams by seeking new revenue from hospitality, commercial operations, fundraising and grants, to support our creative engagement programme.

Reduced cultural education in schools means many young people don't realise the breadth of opportunities available to them in the creative industries.

Improving access to feed the talent and workforce pipeline for the theatre sector is essential.

The current renewed focus on cultural education is promising, but it requires sustained investment and is a key element of our creative engagement programme.

What are some key lessons you've learned throughout your career that you can share with the next generation?

The journey to artistic success can sometimes be messy and difficult; it's never linear and is always unpredictable.

To succeed, you have to be adaptable, flexible and enjoy finding creative solutions to the most unusual scenarios.

I've always viewed working in theatre as a vocation.

In my experience, people with the most successful careers in theatre never start from a position of financial gain, fame or profile; to succeed, you need to find that generosity of spirit and the passion about creativity and culture that drives you.

And always be curious; understanding the different skills required across a multitude of roles will stand you in good stead.

Finally, see as much theatre as possible!

I have seen virtually every show, every week, in every theatre I have worked in (for the last 25 years). The more you see, the better your knowledge and expertise.

What are your long-term goals for the theatre, and how do you plan to achieve them?

Our vision is to create a love of theatre that lasts a lifetime.

We have an ambitious creative programme, both on and off stage, and we're building on the success of this to collaborate with partners and expand our reach and impact across the region while supporting the creative community of the North East to develop and bring new and exciting collaborations to the stage.

Our landmark theatre is in the heart of Newcastle, and we want our building to be open to more people, more of the time.

We're looking at how we can use all the space in our Grade I-listed building over the coming years to achieve this.

Can you share any upcoming shows or events that you're particularly excited about?

Earlier this year, we announced our first co-production in more than a decade, *Pride and Prejudice** (*sort of), and, hot on its heels, announced another – *Gerry & Sewell*.

*Pride & Prejudice** (*sort of) (between Thursday, September 19 and Saturday, September 28) returns after its 2023 sold-out run, which received five-star reviews and standing ovations, while local success story *Gerry & Sewell* (Wednesday, October 2 to Saturday, October 5), represents an example of how rich our region is in storytelling.

Ensuring these narratives are represented in our programme, and performed on our stage, is incredibly important to me.

Auditions for both productions took place at the theatre earlier in the year, supporting our ongoing ambition to firmly position Newcastle Theatre Royal at the forefront of cultural creativity and talent development in the region.

A huge amount of work has been undertaken by the team to bring the productions to life on our stage, and I can't wait for our audiences to see the final performances.

Connect Northumberland unites employers to enhance local workforce and youth opportunities

Connect Northumberland

www.connectnorthumberland.org

Liz@connectnorthumberland.org

The Connect Northumberland employer alliance is ramping up activities to help the county transition to a successful post-coal economy. Here, in a roundtable discussion with industry leaders, it plots the next steps for skills development.

Providing greater employment choice for Northumberland's young people and economically inactive individuals

Having spent the last year offering leadership development support to 175 individuals from more than 30 employers, Connect Northumberland is now working on designing two pilot projects to support workforce and student aspirations.

The first, aimed at accelerating Newcastle United Foundation's work on employability in the region, will involve employers in the Connect Northumberland alliance working with schools.

The second, also alongside the Foundation, will provide employability support for those who are economically inactive.

At a roundtable, held at Hirst Welfare Centre, in Ashington, which is home to Newcastle United Foundation's latest hub, multi-sector employer leaders came together to discuss and co-design two programmes being delivered by the Foundation in the autumn.

The intervention was informed by research that shows Northumberland faces a major challenge from the migration of young people, with a 20 per cent shortfall in the available workforce augmented by 10,000 economically inactive individuals who say they want to work.

The discussion was opened by Steve Beharall, chief executive of Newcastle United Foundation, who stressed the importance of working with the Connect Northumberland employer base to strengthen the Foundation's work – and its impact – in Northumberland.

He added: "Our Futures programme has been running for four years, during which time we have engaged with more than 200 employers annually and seen 10,000 young people aged between 11 and 15 access the programme.

"The success rate for supporting young people into employment is 86 per cent, and we're excited to accelerate this through collaboration with Connect Northumberland."

Will the two programmes help cross-sector working?

There was widespread agreement among employers – who represented

the public, private and voluntary sectors – that these programmes built on the cross-sector awareness and knowledge the leadership programmes had started.

Participants also highlighted the issue of geography.

Marianne Whitfield, director of development at MSP, said: "The thrust of this should be location, rather than working cross-sector.

"Is there any point in doing something if the people can't easily get to the jobs?"

Employers highlighted the need to cluster employers together based on location, and prioritise solving transport costs.

Kevin Haddrick, head of corporate social responsibility at Bernicia, which has helped fund the Ashington hub, said: "These pilots will work.

"They're building on, and accelerating, the work that's already being done; we know it works, we just need more employers to get involved."

Rochelle Gonsalves, senior practitioner – widening participation, at Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust, said: "The trust is committed to raising aspirations and widening access to opportunities across the communities we serve.

"Our people are at the heart of everything we do, and we want to have a workforce representative of our community while building a healthy talent pipeline.

"The two pilot projects by Connect Northumberland and Newcastle United Football Club align seamlessly to our Community Promise, the trust's pledge to focus on five themes – employment, education, economy, environment and inequalities – to improve people's lives and have an even larger impact for everyone who lives and works in the area and wider region."

Are the pilot programmes missing anything, and are there any barriers to participation?

Timescales were noted as one of the greatest barriers to getting involved, as was successful engagement with schools.

Brian Palmer, chair of Connect Northumberland and founder of Tharsus, said: "A priority is for us to really understand the barriers preventing schools engagement."

David Lambert, managing director of Raytec, added: "I run one of the region's most successful start-ups of the last 20 years, but I haven't been approached by one school.



Pictured, left, Liz Mayes, Connect Northumberland chief executive

Pictured, below, members of the Connect Northumberland roundtable take part in an exercise during the day

“The other problem is that we have real issues retaining talented individuals who are in their 30s.”

This was given added importance when placed against the backdrop of big brand names’ ease at attracting multiple applications compared to the struggles of smaller companies.

The apprenticeship example, said participants, proves the appetite young people have for work, with the group discussing sharing talent across employers through measures such as aggregating apprenticeships.

Warick Stephenson, associate principal at Northumberland College, added: “It is important this programme has fair access for young people across the county and is inclusive not exclusive”.

The discussion then turned to school engagement activity and how schools would find out about the programme, with Newcastle United Foundation sharing how it has already worked with more than 200 schools.

Members were also told the pilots were not happening in isolation, with Connect Northumberland having strong support from Northumberland County Council and playing an active role in the emergent County Partnership.

How can the Connect Northumberland team help reduce barriers and support Northumberland’s employers?

Marianne said: “Keep doing what you are doing

– keep promoting and bringing more employers into the community.

“The more employers present at events means more knowledge sharing.”

The group also said the involvement of more start-ups and SMEs would be beneficial.

Stephen Byard, principal research fellow at Quotient Sciences, added: “There is potential for this group to define a new tomorrow, to help retain skilled employees as well as offering opportunities to the wider community.”



Connect Northumberland
For more information about the work of Connect Northumberland, and how your business could become a part of its network, contact chief executive Liz Mayes using the email address at the top of this article.



Transforming brands, transforming business

Transform

www.transformingbrands.co.uk
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Business growth is predicated upon many things, not least a robust marketing and brand strategy. For many scaling companies, though, actioning such – while mastering everyday challenges – represents a tough proposition. Relief then for the unique brand transformation programme Transform, which has been developed to give businesses the opportunity to maximise their potential, realign their marketing and create something truly special. Here, N speaks to co-founders Sarah McCrady and Nina Walton to find out more.

“Do you know what, I think you two should meet – you’d really get on!”, so said the mutual friend who first introduced Sarah McCrady and Nina Walton.

Ten years later, alongside their budding friendship, the unique brand transformation programme the two marketing experts have developed is in constant demand.

And you only have to meet Sarah and Nina to instantly understand why.

Both share an infectious enthusiasm for solving brand and marketing problems, and ping ideas off one another, sometimes even finishing each other’s sentences.

With more than 50 years of brand, marketing and communications experience between them, the duo had a clear vision to create something new with Transform, which is a unique rebrand programme that digs deep and really gets under the skin of businesses that take part.

Its holistic approach brings words, design and marketing strategy under one umbrella, propelling organisations forward with such force that it has been described as Berocca for business.

As well as being collectively positive and

upbeat, though, the two business partners are also focused and determined.

Nina says: “We tell all our clients, ‘you didn’t come this far, to only come this far’, and we tell ourselves that too.

“It’s our ‘why’ and the reason we’re all about moving clients’ businesses forward and ensuring they achieve their full potential.”

This simple mantra fuelled Sarah and Nina’s vision, which is all about helping scaling businesses move to the next level.

Sarah says: “So many business owners come to us saying they feel there is a problem, but they can’t quite put their finger on what it is or how to fix it.

“They tell us they’ve lost confidence, or feel their brand and marketing is failing to reflect who they are or keep pace with their ambitions.”

Nina nods enthusiastically.

She says: “When you’ve gone through Transform, you not only understand your brand better, but you understand your business better too.”

Transform asks business owners telling questions and uses the answers they provide to gradually uncover their – often elusive – brand essence.

Sarah says: “Clients tell us Transform is actually quite an enlightening and cathartic experience, because it allows them to get everything out there and take stock.

“It provides long-term results, helping to futureproof clients’ businesses, and it makes the path ahead so much clearer.”

Nina adds: “What Transform really does is help clients become ‘unstuck’; it makes them feel confident and empowered, so they can move forward with clarity.





“They get excited because, all of a sudden, they can clearly see the road ahead, and, with their new toolkit of creative assets, are then able to take their business to the next level.”

Sarah and Nina say the Transform programme and the other retained services they offer help realign businesses with their goals, customers and true brand identity, which allows them to discover a new sense of authenticity, gravitas and confidence.

Many of the company’s clients stay with them after the Transform programme finishes, moving on to monthly retainers for ongoing design, PR, content and marketing support.

Sarah says: “Brand and marketing services can sometimes be seen as ‘a nice to have’ and the fluffy side of business.

“But our Transform programme digs deeper to garner the best long-term results, combining a full discovery stage.

“This really is the silver bullet part that informs all our creative thinking and outputs, guiding the magic that Transform delivers so well.

“What we love most is simply helping businesses be the best versions of themselves, for them to really succeed and for us to become a valuable extension of their wider team.”

Nina adds: “Getting feedback from clients who describe Transform as a ‘total gamechanger’ and ‘something you won’t regret’ makes us incredibly proud.

“We’ve had some amazing pinch-me moments and the privilege of working with some fantastic businesses and entrepreneurs.

“We genuinely love what we do.”

The duo, who have an office on Osborne Road, in Jesmond, also work with a team of experienced associates – or ‘Transform Partners’ – to deliver their range of services, which includes copywriters, creatives and brand strategists.

Sarah says: “We are proud to partner with a number of amazingly talented professionals, and our plan is to bring more skilled associates in, to collaborate with, as Transform continues to grow.”

Nina adds: “And we are pretty sector agnostic too.

“Even though we have a lot of experience in interiors and professional services, it’s mostly scaling and ambitious businesses that are our real sweet spot.”

Are you ready to Transform?

Pictured, above, from left to right, are Transform partners Sarah McCrady and Nina Walton



Transform
For more information about Transform and how it could help your business, scan the QR code below.



Working together for the sum of all parts

Scaleup North East

www.gms-uk.com
www.scaleupnortheast.co.uk

Already a leading worldwide supplier, and at the heart of technological advances and development, Prudhoe-based engineering firm GMS sought to expand its global network further. To do so, it tapped into the support provided by the Scaleup North East programme. Here, managing director Andrew Wood tells Colin Young about the difference the RTC North-delivered venture has made.

Photography by Jamie Haslam, ROAM

GMS has come a long way since its inception more than 25 years ago.

Having been established in founder Owen Ingram's spare bedroom in Prudhoe, the engineered solutions firm is now a global operator.

Walk the first floor of its headquarters, on the Low Prudhoe Industrial Estate, and its growth is spelled out on the wall, eight striking blue arrows pointing to every continent like a blue firework.

So too is it reflected in the large glass and wood cabinet that stands in managing director Andrew Wood's office.

All of its 16 square cases are full with the different components, parts and pieces at the heart of GMS; from the arm of a unit that fires clay pigeons to castings, forgings and all levels of pressed and machined parts used in agriculture, automotive and construction equipment.

During N's visit, a container-load arrives from China at GMS' storage and despatch area, beside the main offices where the majority of its 23 staff are based, including Morgan, a quality technician whose university course is being funded by the company.

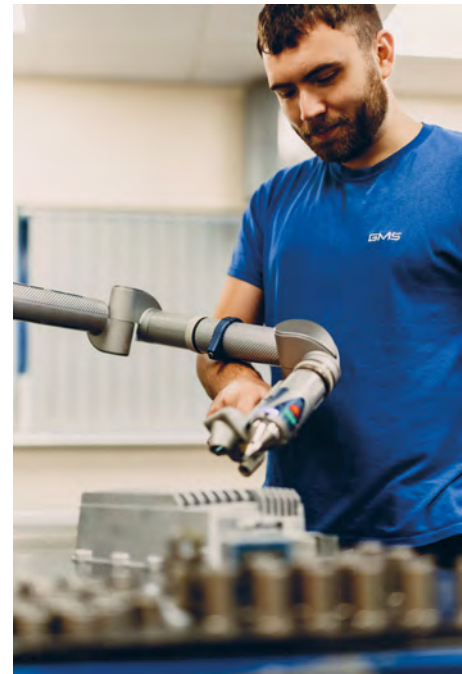
GMS supports a range of international and UK clients, which operate in some of the leading industrial sectors including construction equipment, automotive, agricultural machinery and rail.

And Andrew and his team are aiming to keep adding to its list, as well as its cabinet and the blue arrows on its map.

He says: "Working with these businesses, some of which are household names, we presently supply more than five million parts annually within the UK, and exports cover 25 per cent of the business to India, Australia, Latin America and most of Europe.

"We're on a journey.

"Historically, we've been involved in the traditional industries, but we must remain



current and have added new sectors to our portfolio, which include customers involved with electric vehicles and technologies that will assist with nuclear power.

"And we've achieved strong results in recent times in the rail sector, which is having a new lease of life.

"Having been in business for 26 years, we're planning to be around for at least the next 26, working with customers in supporting their business through engineering and technological development.

"We have the advantage, as a supply chain management company, of working with some world-class manufacturers across processes such as casting, forging, pressing, machining and a wide range of plastics.

"That has enabled us to prosper, and given us the platform and opportunity to work with some world-class customers."

Pictured, right, Morgan Bainbridge, GMS quality technician

Opposite page, Andrew Wood, GMS managing director



“Angelina’s impact was very effective; she helped us clarify directives with succinct objectives and timescales for growth”

Scaleup North East Companies should be:

- Businesses, including start-ups, which are scaling or can demonstrate significant growth potential
- Based in the areas of Northumberland, North and South Tyneside, Newcastle-upon-Tyne or the Gateshead Metropolitan Borough
- Ideally in the following sectors, although others will be considered:
 - Digital and technology
 - Health and life sciences
 - Low carbon and green growth
 - Creative industries
 - Advanced manufacturing
- The following sectors are not eligible for support:
 - Agriculture
 - Fishery and aquaculture
 - Banking
 - Insurance
- Firms must demonstrate a growth rate of 20 per cent over two previous years, or high growth potential, demonstrating growth of above ten per cent and forecasting future growth of at least ten per cent, with increase in employment

For more information, visit www.scaleupnortheast.co.uk

Looking to the future, despite its impressive expansion, when Owen recently stepped back from day-to-day involvement, Andrew sought to define a future structure and strategy to enable the business to broaden its ambitions.

After an extensive search, he turned to RTC North, specifically the Scaleup North East programme, which matches owners’ growth ambitions with the knowledge, expertise and insight of entrepreneurial partners.

He was teamed with Angelina Bell, an executive business coach and dedicated Scaleup North East partner, who visited GMS’ site to meet Andrew and his team.

From day one, Angelina made a positive impression on the business and Andrew certainly feels her presence has helped senior staff members Jason Snowball, James King, Arran Ingram and Dan Ingram, who cover engineering, operations, sales and finance between them.

Andrew says: “When Angelina came in, she worked with the senior team to help develop the criteria and objectives that would assist in facilitating the growth we aspired to.

“The four members of the senior team and I initially concentrated on the key aspects of our business that were fundamental to our future success.

“Angelina helped us focus on our future strategy, which, although remaining involved in the day-to-day, encouraged us to lift our heads above the parapet and begin looking at levels of success we could achieve.

“Angelina’s impact was very effective, and she quickly engaged with the team to support each company department and senior team member to begin the process of working as a collective with common goals.

“She helped us clarify directives with succinct objectives and timescales for growth.

“Angelina came with a different pair of eyes, she challenged our way of thinking and encouraged us to be positive with our outlook, even in slow market conditions.



“This optimism was balanced with realism, but the process has been invaluable in terms of how we approach new and existing opportunities.”

Andrew adds: “When you have operated within the same market sectors for many years, you can easily become a slave to their ways.

“But this thought process was – and will continue to be – challenged as we move forward.

“We’ve been working with RTC North for nine months and have a clear set of objectives as a group.

“We’re fortunate to have a very strong team that has broad experience of many facets of supply chain management in respect to engineered components.

“GMS’ roots are robust and long reaching, which can be seen through our very low turnover of staff; that is testament to the environment in which we work.

“Being part of the Scaleup North East programme has been a very enjoyable experience for all of us, and I’m sure it will have lasting impact on the growth and development we are trying to achieve.”

SCALEUP
NORTH EAST

Gateshead
Council


South Tyneside Council



Pictured, far left, Angelina Bell, Scaleup North East partner

Left, Andrew Wood, GMS managing director

The Scaleup North East programme is funded by the Government through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, with the North East Combined Authority acting as lead organisation and RTC North operating as delivery partner. The North East Combined Authority is a partnership of seven local authorities covering County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, North and South Tyneside, Northumberland and Sunderland, and is led by mayor Kim McGuinness.

The UK Shared Prosperity Fund aims to improve pride in place and increase life chances across the UK, investing in communities and place, supporting local business, people and skills.

For more information, visit: www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-shared-prosperity-fund-prospectus

RTC North

RTC North is a leading provider of business support and innovation services, working with organisations to unlock their potential and achieve sustainable growth. With a wealth of expertise and a commitment to excellence, RTC North empowers businesses to overcome challenges, embrace opportunities and drive success in a rapidly evolving marketplace.



GMS

For more information about GMS, visit the website at the top of this article or call 01661 836900.



HOME

ALLY THOMPSON-NIETOSVUORI AND ALEX NIETOSVUORI

By Kate Hewison

From a headline collaboration with Fenwick to a new endeavour alongside Close House and further ventures between, Restaurant Hjem is bringing its revered combination of Northumberland produce and Scandinavian cooking to ever-increasing numbers of palettes across the region. Here, Ally Thompson-Nietosvuori, who runs the Wall-based, Michelin-starred restaurant with partner and Swedish chef Alex, tells Kate Hewison about its inception, its meticulously prepared menus and its plans for future growth.

COMFORTS

What was the concept behind Restaurant Hjem?

We both always wanted our own restaurant, ideally with rooms, so we could build a substantial wine cellar.

With Alex being from Sweden and I from the North East, it was always going to be a blend of the two.

We spent a lot of time looking at different sites but when the site in Wall was offered to us, it seemed like a no brainer.

My parents lived five minutes down the road, and the backdrop to the restaurant is beautiful.

Hjem was very much an evolution of the combination of our respective backgrounds – Swedish cooking, Northumbrian produce and hospitality.

How do the cultural and culinary traditions of Sweden and Northumberland complement each other in your dishes?

Swedish culinary traditions are thought to generally lean towards a much lighter style of dish: lots of cured, pickled and fermented fish.

While this is true, as a country it is very varied, and the traditions are very different as you move from the South to the North – much like the UK.

Alex's hometown is on a similar latitude to Northumberland, so climate and seasonality of produce are similar in both countries.

They have a rich tradition of hunting, foraging and fishing, which isn't too dissimilar to Northumberland either.

We have so much in common, which made it easy for Alex to move here.

He still needs to go to Ikea to get his liquorice and lingonberry jam fix every now and then, but there are a lot of similarities that made Northumberland's produce complement Alex's cooking so easily.

What kind of journey do you hope to take your guests on with your tasting menu, and is there a specific process when curating it?

Hjem means home, and we want our guests to feel at home from the minute they walk through the door.

There are too many stuffy restaurants in the world that you feel intimidated to walk in to.

We want guests to walk in and feel comfortable.

We have a great team, which does this seamlessly; it's sometimes an overfamiliar joke, but our team are always willing to go out of their way to put our guests at ease.

The tasting menu starts with a selection of small 'snacks' or canapes that come quite quickly.

As we progress through the menu, the dishes get more substantial but, hopefully, not too heavy.

All those dishes can creep up on you, and we really don't want anyone to feel uncomfortably full.

We finish with our fika serving – anyone who has been to Sweden will know fika is very important. It's basically coffee and cake with friends.

Alex writes the menu with what is in season as his main guide.

He spends a good part of his week on the phone to suppliers finding out what they have ready to harvest, or out foraging for mushrooms and other local wild herbs.

It's then about trying different dishes, which we taste as a team, and deciding if – or how – it will fit on the menu.

The menu has to flow; it doesn't matter how good a dish is – if it doesn't feel like the right fit, it won't end up on the menu.

“Hjem was very much an evolution of the combination of our respective backgrounds – Swedish cooking, Northumbrian produce and hospitality”







You recently collaborated with Fenwick. Can you tell us more about that?

Fenwick is a Northern institution and a family business.

While we can't say we are an institution, we are an independently-run family business that shares a lot of values with Fenwick.

Alex has created a menu that draws upon his Scandinavian background but is much more accessible than our tasting menu at Hjem.

You could come for a glass of wine and a couple of snacks, or a full five-course menu.

The setting is relaxed and, obviously in a department store, the vibe is quite different to Hjem in Wall.

The quality of produce is the same though.

We inherited a new team when we opened, so there was a lot of training involved, but it has been a fantastic experience.

It has always been a passion of mine to see individuals enjoying the hospitality industry and seeing it as a career, rather than just a summer job.

We have loved being part of the Fenwick store, getting to know all the characters around the shop and spending more time in the centre of Newcastle.

Feedback from guests has been great, and we are really chuffed to have been extended until the end of the year, so we can experience Fenwick Christmas from behind the scenes.

In what ways do sustainability and ethical sourcing play a role in Restaurant Hjem's operations?

Ethical sourcing and sustainability will always be at the forefront of our minds when creating menus.

We will be the first to admit there are restaurants out there that are managing the difficult task of sustainability better than we are, but we are always conscious of what we can do better.

What is your proudest achievement?

Convincing a Swede to move to the North East!

Outside of that, the Michelin star we were awarded in 2021, and it being the first for Northumberland, was a very proud moment.

In honesty, though, we are both very proud when we have a guest who dines in our restaurant and leaves with a big smile on their face.

We had a lot of naysayers in the beginning, who said nobody would come to a tiny village outside of Hexham for their dinner.

Every person that comes through our door reminds us to be proud of our achievements.



Alex has put together a new autumn menu, and then a special festive menu will kick off once the Northumberland Street lights are switched on and the Fenwick Christmas window is unveiled.

“Ethical sourcing and sustainability will always be at the forefront of our minds when creating menus”



We also have plans for an event with Fenwick to celebrate a proper traditional Scandinavian Christmas.

Are there any upcoming projects or collaborations in the pipeline?

Our next big adventure will be our new project in the grounds of Close House.

Restaurant Freyja will be a new building behind the internationally-recognised golf course, with a kitchen, lounge and 12 guest rooms.

Most excitingly, we have a Georgian Walled Garden, built in 1779, which, together with Hexhamshire Organics, we plan to get all our produce from.

We are working to get the land certified organic at the moment, planting an orchard and building raised beds for fruit and vegetables.

As Bob, from Hexhamshire Organics, says, we want to turn food miles into food minutes.

Freyja was the Norse goddess of love and abundance, so we hope to have a garden full of love, care and an abundance of produce that Alex can cook with.

We hope to open in late 2025 but, as with all big building plans, we are not getting ahead of ourselves.

Beyond Freyja, Alex, at the time of writing, was preparing to head to Hong Kong, to cook with a restaurant called Test Kitchen, during a week residency.

We have dinners throughout the diary in collaboration with other North East institutions, but I am not sure how much more I can say about them just yet.

We also have a few school trips, to talk about the importance of fresh produce and home cooking, which will hopefully inspire some young individuals to see the hospitality industry might be for them.

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ROUNDTABLE

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."



Pictured, 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

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.”

HICSA: Revolutionising modern housing and North East skills

Education Partnership North East

www.sunderlandcollege.ac.uk/hicsa

LinkedIn: [sunderlandcollege](https://www.linkedin.com/company/sunderlandcollege)

In spring 2025, a ground-breaking training base will open its doors, transforming the North East's housing landscape and equipping the region with the tools and talent to build a vibrant future. Here, Ellen Thinnesen, chief executive of Education Partnership North East (EPNE), and several development partners reveal more about the venture and its impending impact on the region's skills landscape.

HICSA will be located in Riverside Sunderland, one of the UK's most ambitious regeneration projects



The Housing Innovation and Construction Skills Academy (HICSA), led by Sunderland College (part of EPNE) in partnership with Sunderland City Council, the Ministry of Building Innovation and Education (MOBIE), Gentoo and Bishop Chadwick Education Trust (BCCET), will become a beacon of opportunity, innovation, sustainability and collaboration.

A vision for modern housing

HICSA will focus on industry relevant skills provision including traditional craft, advanced construction and low carbon technologies aligned to an ambitious built environment strategy.

Ellen Thinnesen, EPNE chief executive, says: "As a unique industry skills gateway, HICSA will deliver in all areas of the technical skills curriculum pertinent to the construction industries of today and tomorrow.

"In addition, strategy will also include training in areas such as project management, techniques to solve construction problems, digital engineering, data management, building design, surveying, planning and site safety."

HICSA will create careers, contribute to Sunderland's socio-economic growth and

environmental sustainability, and futureproof the city's infrastructure.

Peter McIntyre, executive director of city development at Sunderland City Council, says: "HICSA is a key part of an ambitious housing and built environment ecosystem – an enabler that will support us to build more high-quality homes, while creating opportunities for local people.

"HICSA is integrated into Sunderland's multi-billion-pound regeneration, which, over the course of the next decade, will see the city completely reinvent itself."

Empowering the community and social mobility

For many, HICSA represents a pathway to new career opportunities, offering a range of technical qualifications, training courses and apprenticeships.

Iain Nixon, EPNE's vice principal of partnerships and commercial, says: "HICSA has been carefully designed to facilitate a mixed delivery model, connecting industry and skills providers from across the education landscape.

"We are keen to hear from independent training providers that may wish to explore potential for joining our strategic collaboration."

Training the workforce of tomorrow

HICSA's curriculum skills strategy is being shaped by industry with a clear focus on housing and commercial infrastructure.

The Gentoo Skills Academy is an innovative skills partnership bridging the gap between education and the world of work.

Twenty-two pupils aged between 14 and 16 from St Wilfrid's RC College, part of BCCET, will study a technical construction qualification alongside their GCSEs.

On completion, academy graduates will be offered guaranteed interviews for a T Level at Sunderland College or an apprenticeship with

Gentoo, preparing them for an exciting career in the industry.

Louise Bassett, Gentoo chief executive, says: “We are delighted to launch the Gentoo Skills Academy to help inspire the workforce of the future and address skills shortages in construction.

“We can’t wait to welcome the students to the Academy and continue our partnership with Sunderland College, particularly when the Academy moves into HICSA.”

Brendan Tapping, BCCET chief executive, adds: “This is an exciting opportunity, providing an in-depth understanding of the trades required in the modern housing industry.

“It will provide our students with an advantage as they begin their career journeys in a competitive jobs market, allowing them to be the best version of themselves.”

MOBIE is working closely with Sunderland College to deliver an interactive programme of challenges to engage and inspire local school pupils.

Founded by Sunderland-born architect and television presenter George Clarke, MOBIE inspires young people to revolutionise the way they think about homes and define how they want to live now and in the future.

Supporting a sustainable future

One of the most exciting features of HICSA is a focus on sustainable and energy-efficient building practices, training the next generation of workers in the techniques and technologies that will define the homes of tomorrow.

A collaborative effort

Sunderland City Council and Sunderland College have worked closely to bring HICSA's vision to life, alongside Brims Construction, which is making the project a reality.

Meanwhile, North East leaders are working to shape a robust curriculum.

Professor Graham Wynn, pro-vice chancellor (education) at Northumbria University, says: “We look forward to working closely with Sunderland College and ensuring our university is contributing to education and research in building design, digital construction, sustainable technologies and modern construction methods.

“Our partnership will bring substantial benefits to our region and beyond, forging visible pathways between HICSA and Northumbria University, equipping the sector with the essential skills and innovative knowledge needed to meet future challenges.”



HICSA

For more information about HICSA and to explore potential partnership opportunities, visit the website at the top of this article.

Out of office

OUT OF OFFICE

SIMON WILKINSON



In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Simon Wilkinson, Wilkinsons Landscapes managing director, about his love of painting, which covers both canvas creations and model gaming pieces.

You complement your role as managing director with a passion for painting. What was the spark that made you pick up a brush?

I'd always enjoyed art at school, though I wouldn't have said I was amazing.

Since I was very young, I've enjoyed painting models, which, because of their scale, gave me a lot of dexterity with a brush and an eye for detail.

One day, I was bored at home, and I didn't have any new models to paint, so I decided to try a different medium – and loved it.

You like to paint landscapes. What is it about that discipline you so enjoy?

When you're painting models, you have to consider how to use tones and shades to create more realistic texture, shadows and depth.

With landscapes, it's the same; I'm interested in how the effect of light and different types can change the feeling a viewer gets from a piece.

Introducing different shades over layers of paint can change how the land falls, and as a landscaper I am always observing and considering the history of a landscape – what happened to make it look the way it does and how people and the elements have made an impact.

By its very nature as a garden landscaping business, Wilkinsons has creativity at its core. Are there any crossovers between your job and pastime? Do skills from one help influence the other?

Absolutely. In both circumstances, I am aiming to create something well composed, with textures and colours that will make the person looking at it feel one way or another.

I am making decisions about what to add or remove, whether it's on a canvas or in a garden.

When I visit a garden, I am not just looking at its potential, I am asking myself why things are growing a certain way in a certain place; what is going on beneath the surface?

I look at a garden as a canvas, with layers building on one another to create something pleasing to the eye.

My horticultural knowledge means I understand the plants that form many of my landscapes better than most.

Take trees, for example. Most people will do a bit of brown for a trunk and some vague splotches for greenery.

But I recognise the tree variety, how the trunk, branches and stems are formed, and the shape and tonality of the leaves.

I know what makes each plant different and unique, and can make subtle changes to differentiate between them.

You also like to paint small sculptures used in model gaming. How did that begin, and how do the skills required compare to those needed for landscape creations?

When I was young and went shopping with my mum, I would always beg her to take me to the gaming model shops to look at the pieces.

I must have been quite persistent – or annoying – because one day, she let me stay there and watch people play and paint their models while she whizzed around the supermarket.

I was amazed by the care taken to get the detail right and was hooked.

You've had some of your work displayed. That must have been a tremendous thrill?

One of my favourite paintings is a grayscale piece of the old Redcar Blast Furnace, with a young lad and his dog running along the sands.

I worked from a few different reference pictures of the structure, different angles along the beachhead and in different lights.

It's now hanging in the Infant Hercules pub, in Middlesbrough, surrounded by memorabilia and photographs from the heyday of steelmaking in Teesside.

I am probably prouder of that than if it was hanging in a fancy London gallery, because it's being appreciated by people from Teesside who know the meaning and history behind it, and have probably walked along that very stretch of beach.

What advice would you give to anyone looking to take up painting as a hobby?

Don't rush, consider what you're doing and why, and – most importantly – enjoy it. You're painting for nobody except yourself.

Don't get stressed, either; trying new mediums and techniques can be frustrating, and some are harder to get the hang of than others.

And don't be afraid to make mistakes; sometimes you need to know what not to do, so you can know what to do.

Putting the personal into property services

EMG Solicitors

www.emgsolicitors.com

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With recent B Corp™ status adding to outstanding client reviews and a string of industry accolades, EMG Solicitors is moving forward at pace. A key factor in its momentum is the law firm's commitment to the personal touch, which permeates across its entire service delivery. Here, Richard Swinbank, director and head of residential conveyancing, highlights the impact of its tailored approach and the importance of its national property team to future growth plans.

EMG Solicitors has been on a journey of growth over the last few years, with a 153-strong team and a portfolio of five offices across the North, including Durham, Newcastle, Darlington, Penrith and Manchester.

The company, which was recently awarded B Corp™ status, provides a range of services in areas such as wills, trusts and probate, family and mediation, dispute resolution, education, residential conveyancing, commercial property and Court of Protection.

The residential conveyancing team, which is led by Richard Swinbank, is enjoying the benefit of recent growth, with its reputation in the property market continuing to precede it.

The department of 24 colleagues proudly supports clients across the UK with the buying, selling and refinancing of properties.

But it's the business' supportive culture and deep-rooted values – which include its commitment to the 'EMG Way' of supporting clients – that can be credited with helping drive its growth.

So too can the service excellence and residential conveyancing team's success, with the department receiving outstanding client reviews of 4.8 out of five on the Review Solicitors platform and a regular stream of customer referrals.

Richard, director and head of residential conveyancing, says: "We really do have an incredible team at EMG who, day in and day out, go above and beyond for clients.

"We take a very human approach and like to think we know what clients want.

"We really listen to them to understand their requirements and, most importantly, we stay in touch and keep them up to date.

"One thing we really pride ourselves on is our ability to build rapport with clients, taking the time to really get to know them as people and individuals.

"We know our clients have busy lives, so we make sure we are there for them whenever and

wherever they need us.

"We're always at the end of the phone and pride ourselves on providing a friendly, transparent and reliable service, with people and service excellence at the very heart of everything we do.

"We are honest and friendly, and listen to clients' individual requirements and aspirations; we understand everyone is different, as are their circumstances and needs."

Richard adds: "We are so lucky to have a fantastic, experienced team in all areas of residential conveyancing, and a thriving client base across the UK too.

"EMG is a great place to work, which really shines through in the way we deliver our services.

"And with much of our work coming via referrals and recommendations, it shows we are doing something right."

EMG's commitment to service excellence is closely linked to its values of co-operation, courage, integrity, kindness and excellence.

The company has also successfully won a string of recent honours, including the Better Health at Work Continuing Excellence Award, and was listed in The Times and Sunday Times UK 100 Best Places to Work 2024.

And with the business' longstanding commitment to community giving, through its very own EMG charitable fund, it's not hard to see why colleagues remain loyal to the firm and what it stands for.

Richard adds: "Having worked for EMG for almost nine years, it's amazing to see how far the business has come.

"This is largely down to our wonderful leadership team and managing director Emma Gaudern, with their incredible vision and support empowering us to be the best we can be while driving change where needed.

"Our team can genuinely say they enjoy coming to work each and every day, and that is a credit to the culture here.



Watch EMG Solicitors' Imagine A Law Firm video here



“Our values really do permeate through every part of the business, from our recruitment process to our people, policies and procedures.

“In our department, we demonstrate these values through excellent communication, compassion, being responsive, doing the right thing, having the courage to challenge where needed on behalf of clients and, of course, providing an outstanding level of service.”

So, what next for the residential conveyancing team?

“World domination!”, jokes Richard.

He adds: “Seriously, our aim is to continue to

grow, improve and learn and, first and foremost, to always be there for clients in the best possible way.

“One of the biggest motivators for the team and I will continue to be the amazing feedback we receive from clients.

“We feel very privileged to work with great people every day and, as clichéd as it sounds, help make their dreams and aspirations come true.

“Buying and selling properties often marks significant and pivotal points in people’s lives, and it’s a real privilege to be part of their journey.”



EMG Solicitors
For more information about EMG Solicitors, its residential conveyancing team and its wider service provision, which includes wills, trusts and probate, family and mediation, dispute resolution, education, commercial property and Court of Protection, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 500 6989.



Ad Gefrin celebrates Lammas with launch of limited release casks

Ad Gefrin

www.adgefrin.co.uk/memberships

Email: sharon@adgefrin.co.uk

As the season of Lammas continues, Ad Gefrin Anglo-Saxon Museum and Distillery is celebrating the occasion with the release of exclusive casks to its Corenkyn founding membership.

Pictured, below, left, Jan Dale, Ad Gefrin's first Corenkyn member - and now cask owner

Below, right, George Farr, one of Ad Gefrin's farmers, admires his Corenkyn wall plaque

Pictures: Sally Ann Norman



A “Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun” or – with any luck – an ‘Indian summer’, whichever way it falls, the month of September is one of the most beautiful in Northumberland.

The landscape, sweeping from the coastline up to the Cheviot Hills, is regularly bathed in a low golden light under a big sky – just as it has been for centuries.

In Anglo-Saxon times, some 1400 years ago, this was the heart of the season of Lammas, which ran from late July to early November.

Coinciding with the start of the harvest, it is named after the festival hlafmæsse (Lammas) from the Old English word hlaf (loaf or bread), and mæsse (mass or festival) – so, literally, the loaf or bread festival.

Lammas was therefore named for the first fruits of the harvest, the staples of Anglo-Saxon farming; wheat, barley and rye.

The first breads made from these new harvests would be blessed, and then celebrated in a great feast.



For those who know The Lord of the Rings, written by J.R.R. Tolkien – who was a scholar of Old English – you may recognise he used this blessed bread as the basis for the Lembas bread eaten by the elves and given to the hobbits.

One can only imagine the carousing and feasting that would have taken place in the original Great Hall of the royal summer palace discovered at the foot of Yeavinger Bell, which is the inspiration behind Ad Gefrin.

Large plates of breads and the first bounty of the land would have been served, alongside plentiful beers and meads, and thanks given for the harvests to come over the months ahead.

As with all feasts in the hall, the stage would be set for hospitality and gift giving, alongside celebrations, storytelling and debate.

Fast forward to the 21st century, and it is the barley harvest that is celebrated most at Ad Gefrin Anglo-Saxon Museum and Distillery.

Some of the finest malting barley in Europe is grown in Northumberland and the Tweed Valley, and with its own special crop coming from five local farmers who grow exclusively for the attraction, Ad Gefrin's barley is then taken to another family-run business – Simpsons Malt, in Berwick-upon-Tweed – to be malted.

Simpsons is the largest maltsters in the UK, renowned for supplying exceptional malted grain to the beer and whisky industry around the world.

Add in pure Cheviot water, and Ad Gefrin's first Northumbrian English Single Malt whisky couldn't have a better provenance when it becomes ready from 2026 onwards.

To mark the occasion of the harvest, and following on from the success of 2023, Ad Gefrin launched the season of Lammas with its second release of exclusive casks for sale and a party for its Corenkyn founding membership.

Only Ad Gefrin's Corenkyn are eligible to buy casks, but they were keen to bring along friends to share in the celebrations.

Alongside additional ex-oloroso sherry and ex-bourbon casks, which proved so popular last year, a limited number of ex-cognac and ex-armagnac casks have been made available.

The ex-cognac casks are 225l barriques, which have been used to hold cognac for a minimum of two years, and will provide dry sweet and spicy notes and a light golden hue to the spirit.

The ex-armagnac casks are 200l American standard barrels, from which you can expect a lovely colour with notes of vanilla, caramel and stone fruits with peppery and spicy tones.

Little wonder these exclusive cask sales are proving very attractive, and many were snapped up on the first night of launch at the Lammas event.

Corenkyn comes from the Old English for 'chosen' and 'family', and members certainly feel they have been welcomed into the heart of everything that Ad Gefrin creates and does.

However, as with all founding membership schemes, it must close sometime, and Ad Gefrin is closing Corenkyn to new members at the end of this year.

There are a wide range of benefits, many of them lifelong, but for whisky lovers, investors, passionate Northumbrians and those celebrating major milestones, buying their own cask has become a highlight.

With the membership closing soon, the exclusive access to casks has added a certain urgency for any still considering signing up.



Ad Gefrin

For more information about Ad Gefrin memberships, visit the website at the top of this article. To enquire about memberships and casks, contact the email address also at the top of this article.

Pictured, guests celebrate Lammas at Ad Gefrin
Picture: Sean Elliott Photography



Reference 1: Keats, John (1820) To Autumn

Raising resilience in the online world

Melius

www.meliuscyber.com

LinkedIn: Melius Cyber

When Newcastle-based independent designer clothing retailer Jules B was hit by a \$100,000 ransomware attack, it turned to Melius Cyber to strengthen its defences. Here, Julian Blades, Jules B's co-founder, and Steve Cowie, Melius Cyber's non-executive director, highlight the impact of its partnership and the importance of robust online protection.

The business world is a challenging place.

From volatile financial markets to rising costs, supply chain setbacks, shifting consumer sentiment and skills shortages, the list of demands placed upon bosses grows longer with each passing day.

Throw in the increasing threat of cyber criminals, whose attacks are tipped to cost the global economy as much as \$10.5 trillion every year by 2025, and the burden becomes greater still.

Relief then for Newcastle-based Melius Cyber, which arms SMEs with cost-effective online defence mechanisms that constantly monitor systems to thwart hackers' assaults and ensure business continuity in the event of a breach.

And in an environment where statistics show 60 per cent of small businesses fold within half a year of being caught in online criminals'



crosshairs – and where hackers exploited CrowdStrike's headline outage and stole AT&T Wireless customer call and text data across the summer – its support has never been more important.

Just ask Jules B.

The multi award-winning independent designer clothing retailer was hit by a \$100,000 ransomware attack a year ago, which caused great reputational and financial damage.

Although hackers failed to compromise customer data, the raid nevertheless cost the Newcastle-headquartered operator two weeks' turnover and caused further economic strain when insurers disputed its claim for the impact caused.

Spurred by a desire to foil future such incidents,





the company turned to Melius Cyber to implement a comprehensive defence strategy.

That move saw it adopt the Melius CyberSafe subscription service, which provides continuous penetration testing and vulnerability scanning to identify and address potential security weaknesses across a business' online footprint.

And with an advanced anti-ransomware system now complementing enhanced levels of anti-virus and anti-malware protection, and further URL and web filtering, its online barricades are now reinforced to repel future assaults.

Highlighting the value of its partnership, Julian Blades, who founded Jules B 40 years ago with wife Rhona, says: "The attack was a wake-up call; Melius Cyber's expertise has been invaluable in fortifying our digital defences.

"It's CyberSafe subscription and vulnerability scanning services have given us peace of mind and allowed us to focus on what we do

best – delivering exceptional fashion to our customers."

Steve Cowie, Melius Cyber non-executive director, says "Our work with Jules B was testament to the importance of cybersecurity in the retail sector.

"Our partnership has enhanced its security posture, strengthening its defences against future attacks, and has improved threat detection and response capabilities, ensuring quicker identification and mitigation of threats.

"Furthermore, it has delivered increased digital confidence, meaning Jules B can focus on its core business activities without constant fear of cyber threats, while reassuring customers of its commitment to safeguarding personal information.

"Our tailored solutions have not only addressed its immediate security concerns, but also positioned it for long-term digital resilience."

Pictured, above, from left to right, are Steve Cowie, non-executive director at Melius Cyber, and Julian Blades, co-founder of Jules B



Melius

For more information about Melius Cyber, its CyberSafe subscription service and how it could help your business fortify its online presence, visit the website at the top of this article or contact 0191 249 3003.

RETURN OF



DAVID BRUCE

THE MACKEM

David Bruce has had a busy summer. A new head coach, fresh contracts for star players, a stadium makeover, a boardroom restructure and a historic kit launch mean Sunderland AFC's new chief business officer has had little time to draw breath. Not that he'd have had it any other way. A dyed-in-the-wool Black Cats supporter, he left behind a life as chief marketing officer of the US' Major League Soccer enterprise – where he helped expand the league, create a unique broadcast deal and welcome Argentine superstar Lionel Messi – for a new hometown adventure. Here, the sports business expert, who was primed to help plan the US, Canada and Mexico-based 2026 World Cup before answering Sunderland AFC's call, tells Colin Young about his journey from Seaburn to the Big Apple and back again, and how he aims to help the club return to the big time.

By Colin Young

Photography by Ben Benoliel



“A Seaburn lad,” says David Bruce looking back on his life.

Educated at Monkwearmouth School, the same as former England women's international Jill Scott, he attended Sunderland College, winning a national A-levels award in business studies, before heading to Northumbria University.

By his own admission, however, David didn't apply himself to his course, emerging with a business studies degree but also a fair bit of uncertainty.

Out of that indecision, though, grew a burning desire to give it a go in the US, and so began a love affair across the Atlantic.

He got an internship with Citibank, in New York, through the Lord Mountbatten Internship Program – but the role wasn't quite to his taste.

He says: “It was mostly IT projects – I hated it.

“I lived in New Jersey, commuted through New York and worked in Queens, but quickly realised I wasn't cut out to be a banker.

“There was something creative in my mind, trying to push and do things a little differently.

“You can't really do that in banking – unless you want to bring down world markets, right...?”

N

Football does funny things to us. Just ask David Bruce. He'd rigorously pursued a career in American sports, became a major figure in the creation and rise of the MLS and was destined for a front row seat in the organising of the 2026 World Cup, whose finals will be hosted by the States, Canada and Mexico. His last two MLS deals secured Apple TV as exclusive global broadcast partner and Argentine superstar Lionel Messi. But David's a Sunderland fan. And when owner Kyril Louis-Dreyfus came calling, he couldn't turn him – or Sunderland – down.
Colin Young



Thanks to football, the one-time Sunderland under-16s goalkeeper met parents of the young players he was coaching in Westchester who had some very good connections, and he soon landed a job with global branding consultant Wolff Olins.

He says: “Two months into the job, the managing partner of the firm gave me a book on the Olympics and said, ‘you’re my sports guy – you were hired because you’re a normal person.’

“Everyone else in the strategy teams is an Oxford or Cambridge grad. But working-class people buy brands and you’re that person, so that’s the reason you’re on the team’.

“I guess it was a compliment?!

“I became an Olympic expert, learning everything about the Games.

“I was part of the pitch team which won the London 2012 Olympics, and I spent 18 months on it.”

After the success of London 2012, David went to work for the firm in Dubai, using his time and salary to fund an MBA at the University of Oregon, which stands adjacent to Nike’s US base.

He says: “If you can learn the American sports business way of doing it, you can work anywhere in the world.

“Nike was basically founded out of the university, so I thought, ‘this is a brilliant place for me to be.’

“I went from living in Dubai, with a 40-metre pool in the apartment my

company put me in, to living underneath my landlord’s basement in some crusty part of Oregon.

“But it was good for me; I just needed to focus on the study.”

While doing so, he sent a “random email” to Jim Allaker, the head of sportswear brand Umbro, which had been recently bought by Nike to relaunch the New York Cosmos.

Within weeks, he was working for the company.

David says: “Teams, leagues and events didn’t really do this idea of brand and commercial very well at the time, especially in England.

“I started to write about that and speak to people, and my name got on the radar of someone in Major League Soccer (MLS) who reached out and said, ‘we’re looking to appoint someone for a pretty senior marketing position at the league – would you be interested?’

“It was exactly what I wanted to do.”

After the interviews, MLS commissioner Don Garber personally intervened to appoint David, and he set about transforming the game in the States.

He says: “I wanted the game to be successful; I coached kids who were lost to the game of football, because they were going to high school and weren’t going to play anymore because they could play basketball, baseball or American football.

“I was very fortunate. I met the league during its maturation; it was 17 teams then – when I left it was 30.

“When I started, teams were getting sold for \$10 to \$15 million; when I left, San Diego sold for \$500 million.

“The league was ripe to do some of the things I thought a sports entity should do, in terms of how we thought differently, how we tried to build something that was about obsessing over the fan and creating personalities at clubs, the clubs that fans will become attracted to.

“You don’t want someone to become emotionally excited by a league, you want someone to become emotionally excited by a club, because that’s where the passion points are and that’s where you fall in love.

“And it had to start by making brilliant clubs.

“My view was, ‘flip it, create a league that’s like a label, almost like a record label, like Motown, and then build your Stevie Wonder, build your Diana Ross, build your Michael Jackson.’

“That was the kind of language we talked in.

“We had to build these personalities at the local level, otherwise nobody would ever care about the league.”

There is a huge difference between working to create something under the MLS banner and working for a club that has been at the heart of a city like Sunderland for more than a century.

But for all that divide, when the opportunity presented itself for David to do just that, he jumped at the prospect.

Like many families, the Bruces have been Sunderland fanatics for several generations.

But supporters – and they’re not alone in this – have been, says David, “unloved for too long”.

He aims to change that.

“I wanted to feel the burn of being at a club every day, sitting in a stadium at the weekend and thinking, ‘I had something to do with this’”, says David.

He adds: “Sunderland fans should have the best service.”

He’s sitting at a table two floors above Sunderland’s new club shop in Black Cat House.

He’s been here since 7am, helping to unpack the latest delivery of Hummel kits.

This is the third drop and a fourth has already been ordered. A fifth is probably not too far away.

The shirts barely settle on their hangers in the store, created by new retail partner Fanatics, before being whisked away.

Demand for the home and away retro looks, with chevron sleeves and nods to the 1990s, has been unprecedented, with overnight sleepers and fans queuing around the Stadium of Light to get their hands on a shirt providing old school flashbacks.

The new shirts were David’s first task as chief brand and commercial officer, after he was persuaded by Sunderland chair and majority

stakeholder Kyril Louis-Dreyfus to quit his MLS role and help transform his hometown club.

it didn’t take long for the man who played a key part in creating 13 new MLS teams, a unique broadcast deal with Apple TV and the signing of Lionel Messi to head back to Wearside.

He says: “You can’t dictate when a particular club comes calling, but Sunderland is my team and, apart from my family, probably the thing I love most.

“All I wanted to do my whole life was play for the club; it was all I thought about until I was 16.

“It’s a magical club with the most potential of any out there because of the incredible fanbase, and what the football club means to the region.”

His beloved Sunderland, however, suffered prior to his arrival, with Premier League relegation followed by time in League One.

Now, though, with the club back in the Championship and looking upwards again, the appeal of helping transform its fortunes was too good to refuse, the lure made even more attractive by the investment across the city to rejuvenate its commercial and cultural scenes.

David says: “I came back for three things: the fans, the owner and the city.

“I’ve never known a council be so focus-driven and have such phenomenal vision about making Sunderland a modern and progressive city.

“We can take that, inject it into what we’re doing and create a better football club.

“Conversely, we can shine a light on the amazing things going on in the city, so our fanbase can understand the work of council chief executive Patrick Melia and his team.

“For us to take our club to the next level, it’s about working hand-in-hand with the city and its stakeholders.

“You’ve got young kids who dream about being a footballer.

“Now the same thing can happen around other opportunities in the city; we’re creating a place that is going to be full of potential.

“It will be a city that can drive agendas around digital, sustainability, creativity and culture with the £450 million Crown Works Studios, which will be this generation’s Nissan moment.

“We’ll have makers and creators in our city working on things that will travel the world with ‘Made in Sunderland’ on it. That’s phenomenal.

“The football club is going to be right at the heart of telling that story.”

Opportunity, though, is rarely too far from challenge, the latter something David was faced with before he even officially became part of the club’s hierarchy.

He says: “When Kyril offered me the job, he said, ‘we’ve decided to cancel our contract with Nike and Just Sports, so I need you to bring a technical partner in’.







“I was still five weeks away from joining but he said, ‘you better start now, otherwise we won’t have a technical partner for 2024/2025’”.

Hunting for a shirt deal before he’d even booked one-way flights for Sunderland, David used a familiar North East mantra to land his number one target Hummel.

He says: “My wife kept asking why I was getting up at five in the morning, but I needed to work European hours, to figure out this new technical partner deal and hit the ground running the minute I walked in the door.

“I had pretty good contacts; I’d worked with Adidas for a long time at the MLS, I had the background with Nike and Umbro, and I knew people in the technical and sports brand space.

“The only one I didn’t know was anyone at Hummel.

“So I sent a blind LinkedIn message to Hummel and said, ‘you don’t know me, but I know you – and I definitely know your brand. I’d love to talk about a potential partnership with Sunderland’.

“My mam always said, ‘shy bairns get nowt’, and I thought I’d probably get nothing.

“But, overnight, I was put in touch with the chief operating officer in Denmark and the chief executive in the UK.

“Two weeks later, I was here for a wedding and met Hummel’s UK chief executive outside this very office.

“I said, ‘I’m going to work in that building soon, but I can’t let you in because I haven’t got a swiipe’.

“Someone had to come and let us in, and I took them around the stadium as if I was working at the club – I hadn’t even had the tour myself.

“Hummel took a total punt, trusted me so we could build up a head of steam so, when I came into position, we could start the contracts, stand the deal up and ensure it was right financially too.”

The bigger the brand, the blander the kit, and Sunderland’s have often been a different version



“MY MAM ALWAYS SAID, ‘SHY BAIRNS GET NOWT’, AND I THOUGHT I’D PROBABLY GET NOTHING”



of other teams' unimaginative designs.

The partnership with Hummel, though, complete with slick online marketing campaign, gave Sunderland and David ownership of the home, away and third shirt designs.

The result are striking creations, which come complete with clever details such as the River Wear and shipbuilding images, ships down the red stripes and the Stadium of Light's co-ordinates.

David says: "Because the storytelling was so detailed, the brief was so good and the first designs were really good – as we pressure tested and refined them – we knew we'd put something out the fans would really love.

"My only worry was it would land hard for a certain era and certain age.

"If you look back on Hummel, it was a time of brilliant kits, nice memories, beating Newcastle in the rain, getting to the play-off final and getting to the FA Cup Final.

"But it still wasn't an era you could describe as absolute success.

"Yet the volume of fans waiting 12 hours before the store opened took us by surprise.

"The hardest thing in football is time; we don't have time.

"People don't give you time but what we've done with Hummel in 11 months, to have a fully custom product in store, is unheard of; it's miraculous, in fact.

"Our new retail partner Fanatics are best in class, and were really excited about Hummel and what they could bring.

"Our retail business is going to be three times the size of what it was probably 18 months ago.

"It's an incredible change, but we have a passionate fan base desperate to be serviced the right way and desperate to have a proper product."

David's last MLS task was to launch Lionel Messi's arrival at David Beckham's Inter Miami franchise.

He left a week after the Argentine legend made his debut.

David says: "I was working on two deals before I left; the first was bringing in Apple TV as global broadcast partner – the only league to sell to one partner – and the second was trying to bring the greatest football person brand into MLS.

"We were asking ourselves, 'how do we go to the next level?'"

"Well, if a star like Messi's available, and you can add gasoline to the fire, as the Americans would like to say, that's how.

"Messi is Messi; he's a once-in-a-generation star, who transcends the sport in a way nobody else does.

"And he would look great with chevrons down his sleeves, wouldn't he...?"

LAST WORD



Closing this edition of N, Rory McKeand, chief executive of Technology Services Group (TSG), highlights the business' recent management buyout, which he tells Steven Hugill will bolster client support and lay the foundations for both greater financial success and new jobs at the Team Valley-headquartered Microsoft Solutions partner.

Rory McKeand

www.tsg.com

[LinkedIn: TSG](#)

Congratulations on the management buyout. Can you tell us a little about the factors behind the move?

It was a natural cycle across two fronts.

David Stonehouse, who founded TSG with Sir Graham Wylie in 2003, and later became executive chair, was looking to retire at the end of a five-year plan.

Alongside that, we had formed an ambitious management team that was ready to take the company forward, and were seeking investment to do so.

The transaction – completed with multi-million-pound investment from Pictet Alternative Advisors – represents fantastic news for all associated with TSG.

The announcement came with stated ambitions to “accelerate organic growth and seek opportunities for future strategic acquisitions”. How will you roll out such plans?

We're focused on building our capabilities.

We already provide a lot of value-added services; our TSG Academy, for example, which we launched last year to support clients' teams learning and development around the technologies we provide, is now working with more than 2000 learners from more than 380

clients, and has capacity to accommodate 100,000 learners.

It is a great example of how we really understand the market.

Through a mixture of online and in-person events, we provide solutions – like highlighting the many benefits of Microsoft 365 operations – that provide clients with better value for money through predictable spend and return on investment.

And we have another dozen value-added services we're looking at introducing following the buyout.

Furthermore, we're looking for smaller – but high-quality – businesses that provide managed services or are Microsoft Solutions partners, where we can offer a really good home for people and clients.

The deal will also increase both employment and turnover.

We have a four-year plan through which we hope to increase headcount from its current 260 mark to more than 400 nationally – including our North East headquarters, where we have around 60 people – and take turnover from about £40 million to more than £100 million.

A unique factor in that growth will be our new employee benefit trust, which means every

employee is now a shareholder of TSG.

We are the only Microsoft Solutions partner to operate such a model, and it means everyone has a sense of ownership, which will make a big difference going forward.

The technological world is constantly evolving. What do you anticipate as being the next big change across the digital landscape – and how is TSG placed to support its delivery?

There is a significant gap at the moment between the speed of innovation and the speed of adoption.

We've structured ourselves to help companies increase implementation through our training and customer success models.

Clients have to be careful with their budgets, they need a return on investment, and we're very well placed to help them do that.

We also have well established client success models, with our client success managers providing valuable user adoption support.

Thanks to our status as a trusted advisor, and our string of existing and planned value-added services, we are in a very strong position.



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