

N

LIZZIE CARROLL

HAUS

David Land, Andy Radcliffe, Kim McGuinness, George Musson and Victoria Brown, Jonathan Carter, Danielle Croce, Will Halford, Frans Calje, Emma Gaudern, Dale Smith, Sam Spoons, Simon Ruck, Dr Christian Marston



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14



Feature

Haus

36

Bdaily

National business news website Bdaily is now part of multi-channel media publisher NET's growing stable. Here, Pete Mallon, NET's creative and managing director, talks about the company's acquisition of the trusted news provider and its significance within wider changes across the NET organisation.

22

Talking Point

As Labour rolls out its Employment Rights Bill, which aims to increase flexibility and allow staff to 'switch off' beyond standard hours by breaking a 'culture of presenteeism', the working world has entered another fresh chapter. But is it the right move? Does home and hybrid working bolster productivity and loyalty, or should employees be spending more time in the office?



Feature

Esh Group

56



Feature

The Auckland Project

44

Out of office

In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Emma Gaudern, co-founder and managing director of EMG Solicitors, about her passion for beekeeping.

70



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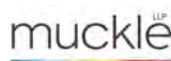
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WELCOME TO ISSUE 467

Editor's word

As the North East embarks on an era of significant political change, Steven Hugill highlights how the theme of transformation continues through this issue ...



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of N magazine.

Change has truly arrived.

The very last leaves are clinging to tree branches, the temperatures are dipping, the nights are growing ever more longer. Welcome to another winter...

Transformation runs through this issue too, though it comes with a little more warmth.

From individual transitions to organisational restructures and administrative revolution, this edition is a colourful illustration of the region's ever-evolving commercial landscape.

We begin with Lizzie Carroll, founder and chief executive of Scandi interior and children's brand distributor Haus.

Formerly a senior manager with technology firm Accenture, Lizzie rebooted her career as the pandemic struck, pivoting from electronic advances to entrepreneurship.

Having begun the endeavour surrounded by boxes in her spare room, today Haus is housed in a spacious emporium.

The packaging piles remain, but the company has spread far and wide.

Now the exclusive UK distributor of numerous household names, its retail list spans more than 500 operators including revered stores Fenwick and John Lewis.

And with plans in place to further extend its portfolio in 2025, Lizzie reveals Haus is primed to remain a home for growth in the years to come.

David Land is another who's more than accustomed to change.

From accelerating the fortunes of Newton Aycliffe-based car parts maker Gestamp Tallent to helping found the nearby UTC South Durham – which is moulding the manufacturing workers of tomorrow – co-founding

business support operator IA Growth and chairing the Engineering and Manufacturing Network, his CV screams transformation.

And he's now utilising those experiences as interim chief executive of the Auckland Project, the Jonathan Ruffer-led regeneration charity that is writing new chapters in Bishop Auckland's future by leaning on storied tales of the past.

Augmenting the town's historic Palace – once a major seat of national power – with the Faith Museum that contains nearly 300 artefacts and objects from across the world, the Spanish Gallery, the Mining Art Gallery, Auckland Tower and the dramatic live Kynren show that depicts England over the centuries, the project has made great ground.

And David, a proud son of Bishop Auckland who hails from mining stock, is fully intent on maintaining the momentum, with a blueprint in place to build visitor numbers yet further, across both local and national audiences.

Change is reflected too in our special built environment-themed supplement.

Harnessing the transformative powers promised by the north of the region's headline devolution deal, it looks at the measures needed to deliver watershed economic and social advances.

Featuring an exclusive column from North East mayor Kim McGuinness, it also includes growing Jesmond firm Musson Brown Architects and an extended interview with Andy Radcliffe, boss of Esh Group, the Bowburn-headquartered contractor that is restoring the Tyne Bridge to its former glory.

In addition, a high-level roundtable discussion highlights the bricks and mortar developments, skills improvements, transport infrastructure advances and funding relationships needed to really drive positive change.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Steven

A FRESH DIRECTION OF TRAVEL



Pictured, back row, from left to right, are Colin Young, business journalist; Pete Mallon, creative and managing director; Pete Anderson, Bdaily digital content manager; Steven Hugill, NET editor-in-chief; Sian Anderson, digital marketing consultant; and Andrew Lowe, filmographer
Seated, from left to right, are Sarah Law, partnerships and marketing manager; John Duns, business development director; and Kate Hewison, Content and marketing manager

National business news website Bdaily is now part of multi-channel media publisher NET's growing stable. Here, Pete Mallon, NET's creative and managing director, talks about the company's acquisition of the trusted news provider and its significance within wider changes across the NET organisation.

The North East is undergoing significant transformation. And so is Bdaily.

As the region unites at the foothills of devolution change, the national business news website has embarked on its own fresh direction of travel.

Acquired by multi-platform publisher NET over the summer, Bdaily has been revitalised,

its refreshed website now replete with a host of new features and columnists.

For all the change, though, some things remain the same.

Bdaily is continuing to provide the latest business news and updates from the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and London, as well as the stories that matter from across the rest of the UK.

It is continuing to service clients' PR campaigns through a reinvigorated offer that elevates businesses to the commercial sector's leaders and high-level decision-makers.

So too are its trusted and valued daily bulletin emails being distributed to its 45,000-plus national subscriber community.

And it is doing all of this through a unique model that ensures at least 40 per cent of coverage is independent (without charge) content.

Furthermore, as part of NET – whose channels include the recently rebranded N magazine – Bdaily is now part of the North East's largest B2B media network, one whose influence, integrity and reach is highly respected by readers, partners and advertisers alike.

NET works independently, has an authoritative voice and is committed to helping every individual and organisation succeed through quality, creative and transparent coverage that combines compelling journalism with striking photography and forward-thinking design.

With a new North East mayor and headline investment and job creation plans matched by great national political change, our region is a rapidly evolving place.

And with Bdaily now part of our stable, we'll continue to lead the charge on covering the stories that matter.



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SPOTLIGHT LIGHT

Divide and conquer?

By Steven Hugill



From Labour's budget to the North East's rail heritage and the need for a refreshed skills blueprint to meet green energy ambitions, Steven Hugill analyses some of the stories impacting the region's news agenda.

A time for harmony

Sir Keir Starmer has never been shy in nailing his footballing colours to Arsenal's mast.

So he should, therefore, be more than familiar with the club's historic Latin motto.

Victoria Concordia Crescit – victory grows out of harmony – was the watchword for years, a constant across various changing crests.

One wonders if it crossed his mind when Chancellor Rachel Reeves delivered her budget of no little division.

It should have done.

To govern, of course, is to cause electorate fragmentation. It comes with the territory.

But with opinion polls showing an (inevitable) slide in public sentiment, backbencher Mike Amesbury suspended for an alleged street assault and Louise Haigh jerking starboard over P&O when all around Starmer's cabinet pointed portside, the first real mini fissure of the Labour administration has been exposed.

And the Chancellor's budget has only crowbarred it wider.

As fiscal programmes go, it was, to put it mildly, brave.

Described as a safety blanket for an economy repeatedly torched by Conservative ministers and measures, the sight of chief firelighter Liz Truss carping in its immediate aftermath worked to add some credibility.

But it was nevertheless a daring move for a party that has waited so long to regain power.

Attention spans these days rarely extend to the next episode of the latest Netflix drama, never mind a full term in political office.

And in a world where things have felt tough financially for a long time, delivering a budget that effectively told people to expect more of the same for a while yet, hardly screamed 'vote winner'.

But here we are.

And for Labour, what happens next is crucial, even at such an early juncture in its reign.

With public trust so delicate, it needs to see the seeds it has planted grow quickly.

Furthermore, the party mustn't let itself become another iteration of the regime it has replaced.

After the shambles of recent years, the UK simply cannot afford any further splintering of priorities and personalities, nor any further division on directives and decisions.

Like the fans who had Arsenal's harmony motto inked into their flesh years ago, Sir Keir must ensure concord remains a constant throughout the weeks and months ahead, to ensure the promises of yesterday are delivered in earnest tomorrow.

Keep rail promises

There were some bright spots for the region in the budget, not least confirmation of a previous Tory pledge to hand over £25 million to help remediate former Wearside shipyard land to create the 8000-job Crown Works Studios film and television hub.

Equally welcome was a commitment to pump cash into the country's electric vehicle sector – an industry where our corner of the UK continues to make notable advances – and the North East Combined Authority's eligibility for integrated funding settlements from 2026/2027, a move that paves the way for the north of the region's historic devolution deal to sing even louder.

But there was also disappointment around the scrapping of plans to dual the A1 in Northumberland.

And there was no mention, either, of Hitachi's train building factory in Newton Aycliffe, County Durham.

When the £82 million plant opened in 2015, the site hummed with activity, with East Coast and Great Western rolling stock projects complemented by Scottish and East Midlands trains.

The company's order book, though, has since slowed, the previous Government's decision to hold off on triggering an extension of West Coast work a notable spoke in an increasingly complex larger wheel.

Labour spent the first half of 2024 telling all who would listen the problem was more than resolvable, and deputy prime minister Angela Rayner told the Commons in late October the party was "in close contact with Hitachi to secure a sustainable future for Newton Aycliffe".

For the sake of the company, the hundreds of staff it employs and

its sprawling supply chain, that contact must be translated into tangible change – and quickly.

To lose Hitachi would be a catastrophic blow to the region's business sector.

But it would also be incredibly embarrassing to see a train builder, based just a stop or two from the genesis of global rail travel, shunted into the sidings.

A refreshed skills platform

Redcar's former steelworks site has been a lot of things to a lot of people.

It's now about to become something else.

With plans for a £4 billion Net Zero Teesside carbon capture, utilisation and storage plant recently rubberstamped by the Government, a landscape once home to red hot iron and white hot steel is about to join the green revolution.

Pledging to deliver 1000 jobs, the venture is one of huge promise.

But its potential will only be fully realised if action is taken now to ensure sufficient talent is in place to feed the development with the staff it needs.

For too long, a disconnect has existed between education and industry, where one feels like the other isn't holding up its end of the bargain.

With this venture, we have a chance to categorically repair that fracture.

To make it – and future similar endeavours – a success, we need a training pipeline free of blockages and kinks, one where education providers and industry coalesce seamlessly, and where the Government plays its part with meaningful funding and support mechanisms.



BIG QUESTION

With headline devolution deal promises across the north of the region matched by regeneration pledges in Tees Valley and a number of additional high-profile investments, the North East's business sector heads into 2025 with a renewed sense of confidence and anticipation. How do you feel as we prepare to turn the calendar on a fresh year? Where is the region leading the way, and where does further action need to be taken to secure growth and prosperity?

By Steven Hugill



Join the discussion

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



Jonathan Carter
Director

186 Property Solutions

As 2025 approaches, optimism is growing in the North East's commercial sector, particularly within Teesside.

We are seeing increased demand for the refurbishment and regeneration of commercial properties, signalling confidence in the region's future.

Despite concerns about the economy, real investment and development are evident.

Devolution deals and regeneration pledges are crucial, providing the financial support needed to revitalise the region.

Teesside is at the forefront of growth, with significant investments in green technology, advanced manufacturing and logistics driving new opportunities.

To fully realise such potential, continued investment in infrastructure, particularly transport and digital connectivity, is essential.

Focusing on technology, innovation and skills development will ensure local communities gain maximum benefit.

Additionally, repurposing under-utilised commercial spaces to meet current market needs will help reduce vacancy rates and optimise property use.

The North East is on a promising path, and by prioritising infrastructure, workforce development and efficient property utilisation, it is well positioned for long-term growth and prosperity.



Will Halford
Managing director

Boniplas

The devolution deals and regeneration pledges signal a commitment from both local and national governments to bolster economic growth, empower local leadership and facilitate investment.

The current Government needs to commit to the devolution deals, allowing greater control over budgets and decision-making at a local level.

With a distinct need for urban regeneration and support for some of the former mining villages through social housing developments and opportunities for business growth, local organisations could be an integral part of the procurement process.

While there is headline news about high-profile investments, as an SME, we would like to see more targeted support and a reduction in the administrative burden to enhance further growth.

The region has a flourishing education system, from universities to high-achieving schools, but introducing further costs without understanding the impact of the existing system could hamper skills development.

Continued focus on skills, infrastructure, economic diversification and community involvement will be key to transforming the region's potential into sustainable outcomes.



Danielle Croce
Commercial director

Intasite

There is an exhilarating sense of optimism for the North East, particularly on Teesside.

The transformation is not just about infrastructure; it's about creating a thriving ecosystem that encourages innovation and opportunity.

We're witnessing a continued transition from heavy industry to a diverse range of sectors including green energy, aerospace and digital technology.

This is generating high-quality local jobs and attracting significant international investment, which is creating a collective community spirit – a feeling that we're all part of something monumental.

However, we must also focus on areas that require further attention to ensure sustained growth and prosperity.

We must strengthen our talent pipeline by equipping our workforce with the skills necessary for the jobs of the future.

Additionally, promoting collaboration between sectors will amplify our impact and drive innovation.

It's important to harness this renewed confidence to attract investment but also cultivate an inclusive environment.

Teesside's transformation can serve as a paragon of industrial renewal and economic growth, inspiring other regions to embrace change.



Frans Calje
Chief executive

PD Ports

The opportunities in offshore wind, green and blue hydrogen and sustainable fuels are within our grasp.

There is already a lot of offshore activity in Teesside – Able UK at Seaton Port, EDF Energy operating out of Hartlepool and the SeAH Wind monopile development opening next year.

The Government's recent support for Net Zero Teesside, to progress carbon capture, is welcomed and can support the UK's future energy security.

Put together, it positions Teesside as a national centre of excellence for the energy transition.

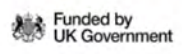
Government support is key, and here at PD Ports we are lobbying for targeted investment in the maritime sector, a focus on skills and for clarity of policy around the energy transition.

We want action and forward thinking from Westminster to finally kick-start major projects.

Keir Starmer visited Teesport to announce £1.8 billion funding for port infrastructure projects – but we need to understand and influence how that will be deployed and trickle down the supply chain.

There is great momentum going into 2025, which we must harness through collaboration.






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Words by Colin Young
Photography by Mark Slater

For Lizzie Carroll, work is child's play. Literally. As founder and chief executive of Haus, the Newcastle-based business that works with brands providing youngsters with smiles and stimulation, every day is a fun day. Here, the former Accenture senior manager, who oversaw transformative IT projects at the global operator, tells Colin Young about her own career reboot, which saw her launch Haus at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Now a trusted supplier to parents far and wide, and a well-known source too for Scandi interiors, Lizzie talks about the firm's inception, its relaxed culture and its plans for future growth.





The Haus is quiet today.

Normally, this sunlit office, hidden away behind the railway line in Gosforth, is a hive of activity and noise; dogs, cats, kids – it’s an inclusive affair.

Today is an optional work from home Friday.

So the emporium of high-quality children’s toys, clothes and accessories – which please the eye, adorn the offices and beg to be touched, felt and played with – is silent.

Beside the office where we chat sit an enormous pig and cow, both the size of a hippo, but dormant and docile, and infinitely more cuddly and playful.

Then there are high-end lampshades, bowls and cups among shelves on the first floor.

And there are rules. But not many.

Haus founder Lizzie Carroll likes it that way.

“It’s a dream come true – I love it here,” she says.

Lizzie adds: “The brands that work with us – and their products – are amazing, and we’ve got a brilliant team too.

“It’s a fun place to be; we’re all interested in each other’s lives, we support each other with things like flexible arrangements, and there’s always someone’s animal in here too.

“We had Orla the Golden Retriever puppy in yesterday, only five-months-old, and sometimes you’d see Biscuits, my big fat ginger cat, mooching around somewhere or sleeping on the sofa.”

Biscuits missed the photoshoot.

Lizzie says: “I come from a corporate background, and when you’re in a big organisation, and working with lots of different clients, there is a lot of structure and a nervousness to impress.

“It wasn’t an environment where I felt comfortable being myself.

“I always felt I was a little bit different, that I was hiding my personality and conforming to a standard.

“I didn’t want that here.

“That comes with growing up, self-acceptance after going on my own personal journey and being proud to be who I am and encouraging people to be the same.

“I wanted to make sure the company had values of kindness, fun, inclusivity and creativity; I wanted it to feel like a lovely place to work, where everyone can be themselves.

“Nici and I are relaxed and open; there are no airs and graces, we have fun and can be professional at the same time.

“We have a great relationship with our suppliers and love it when they visit us; we are relaxed, honest and open with them about what is going well and what isn’t.

“That level of trust helps us be successful and work together.”

Lizzie launched Haus in 2019 at the start of the pandemic, quickly establishing the company as an exclusive UK distributor for Scandi interiors and children’s brands.

She quickly signed up OYOY Living Design, Little Dutch and Wildride.

In the last 18 months, the number of retailers has risen to more than 500, and includes Fenwick and John Lewis.

This year, revenue hit £6 million.

With expansion comes recruitment, and the appointment of the aforementioned Nici Civico as chief operating officer in July 2020 has, says Lizzie, elevated the business.



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Welcome to the Haus of Fun.
The first thing that strikes you on entering Haus HQ is how bright and relaxing the place is. It looks like a great place to work - and there was no one there! But there is a giant cuddly pig and cow in the middle of the office floor...

- Colin Young

She has been the main driver behind the company's move to its own warehouses and has played a huge part too in defining its culture and ethics.

Lizzie says: "This is a nice little office, my kids go to school nearby, I live in Gosforth and I love having the business here."

Educated at Gosforth Central, Middle and High Schools, Lizzie left the region for Sheffield Hallam University.

The real journey to Haus began after she returned to the North East and joined Accenture in Newcastle.

She says: "I came out of university and got a good job and I enjoyed it there," she says of her time in the corporate world.

Lizzie adds: "I felt grateful because it was a good salary, and I worked my way up from doing data entry to senior manager, overseeing the delivery of huge IT implementation projects until I went on maternity leave."

Lizzie had Sonny in 2015, took a year off, and started to form the idea of setting up a company specialising in Scandinavian-inspired toys with a previous work colleague.

When she gave birth to Bella in 2018, Lizzie took additional maternity time to spend with her two children.

This allowed her to solidify her entrepreneurial ideas with a friend.

She says: "We would spend hours on the phone daily, supporting each other in the highs and lows of motherhood and brainstorming at the same time.

"We landed on taking some money and shares we had from Accenture, buying loads of stock and selling it to retailers.

"It was a very overnight decision.

"We started off with some American brands, and it was always the agreement that I would run it.

"We were under the delusion that it would be three days a week, and it would look after itself.

"We got the European rights at that point and I rang every retailer in the UK, sent out millions of emails, got the stock out and then we went to Denmark and signed with OYOY - a brand I'd always loved - and they used us as their distributor.

FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE



LIZZIE CARROLL





“I spent about a week, working day and night to build a Shopify store to sell to wholesale, and it just took off.

“We went into lockdown in March, and I’d just signed up to do Little Dutch; it went crazy.

“The demand was wild, and I employed someone to come and help me, and we moved into an office in Hault’s Yard, in Newcastle.

“Then, I was out for drinks in Wylam Brewery, when they’d just eased some of the COVID-19 restrictions, and I bumped into Nici, who was looking for a change.

“I said, ‘come and help me’.

“She’s got such a good logistical and practical background – from running pubs, etc – and she came in straightaway.

“Before we knew it, we were in Baker’s Yard.

“It started as one warehouse and we’ve slowly taken over five units and kept adding to the team.”

It is now five years since Lizzie sat in her spare room at the height of lockdown surrounded by boxes.

The warehouse and office at Baker’s Yard are almost full to the brim, although Christmas orders will take huge swathes of it before the end of the year.

It is a happy Haus.

And although quiet on the surface today, it is just at the start of a thrilling adventure, with Lizzie keen to bring all her team along for the journey.

And, of course, she’ll do it her way.

She adds: “We’ve slowed it down a bit and taken less risk with stock.

“It took a while to get that under control but we’re now back on top of it, and are going into a good Christmas.

“We’re still a young business with a small team doing great things.

“Going into 2025, we’re looking at taking on some new brands.

“We’re excited to bring more beautiful products into the UK and introduce brands to our flourishing team and expansive retailer network.

“We can always tell when we want to work with someone – it’s about mutual values and having a connection.

“We are an extension of the brands we work with; it’s important we understand one another to get the best successes.”

Lizzie says: “We’ve just had our fifth anniversary, we’re coming into a busy Christmas period and we’ll all be pulling together.

“I still get excited about new products, new brands and working with the team.

“I feel lucky every day.”





2024 Client Trends Report

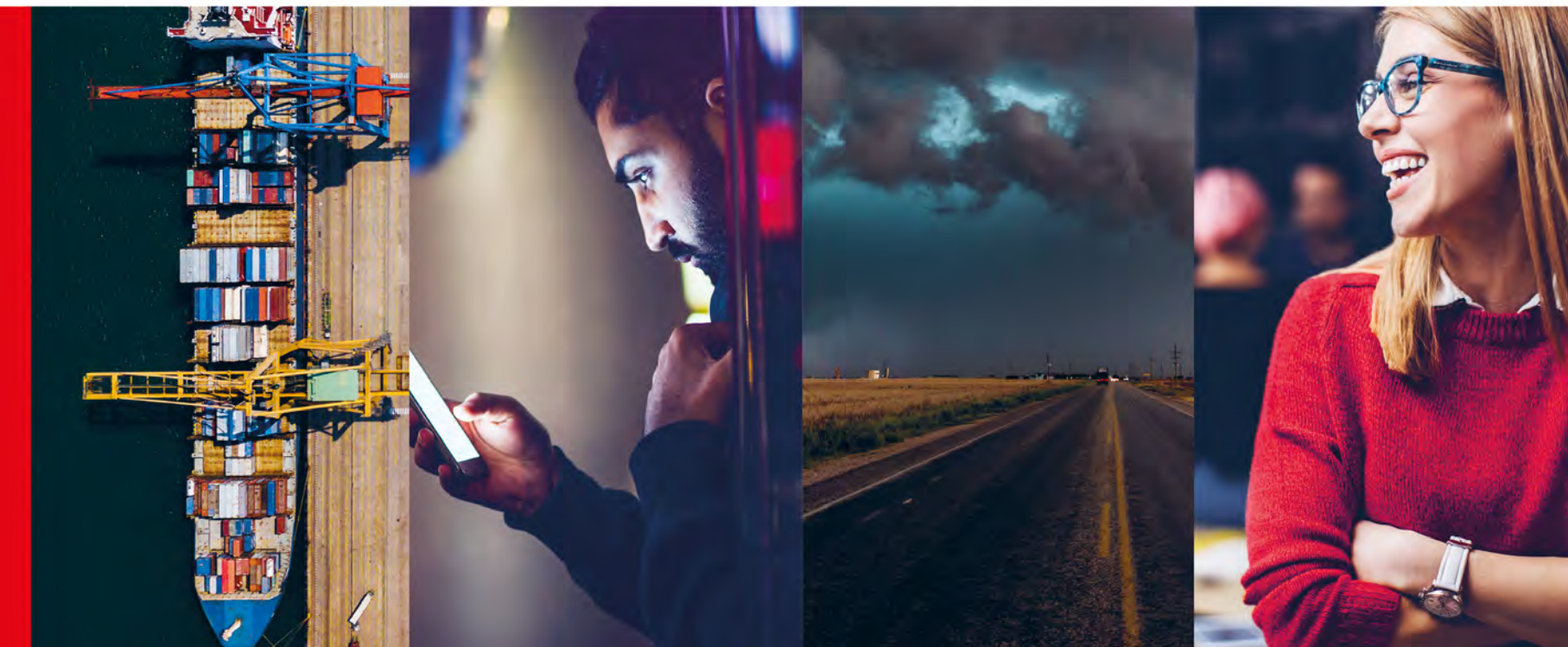
Clients face a volatile world, one in which making Better Decisions will give them a critical edge.

Aon's newly released 2024 Client Trends Report addresses four megatrends shaping the future of risk and the workforce.

Discover strategies to prepare in our 2024 Client Trends Report

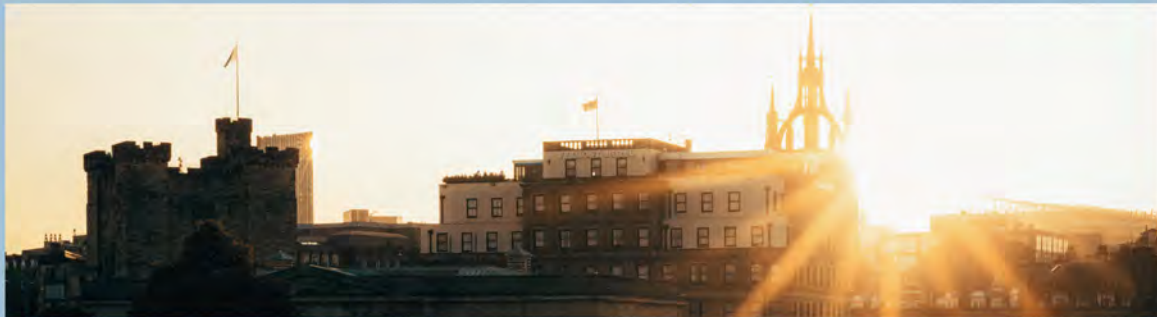


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A tailored approach to cybersecurity

ITPS

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ITPS does exactly what it says on the tin – intelligent technology, practical solutions. With tailored services to meet the evolving needs of companies, the IT firm offers everything from private cloud hosting to comprehensive cybersecurity capabilities. And as of July this year, its mission has been strengthened by Mark Richardson, ITPS' new director of consulting. Here, Mark, who has more than 20 years' experience, including a decade in the cloud sector, sits down with Kate Hewison to discuss ITPS' innovative approach to cloud security and his role in driving the firm's success.

As businesses increasingly rely on digital technologies, robust and secure IT services are imperative for smooth operations.

For Chester-le-Street-based ITPS, providing a tailored, personalised solution is equally as important.

"We're big fans of finding the right type of solution for the problem," says Mark Richardson, ITPS' director of consulting.

He says: "The way we envisage protecting our clients is through a pragmatic, measured approach that gives them the right amount of security for their needs.

"We won't offer a platinum-plated, expensive security capability to an organisation that doesn't need it.

"Security is a complex topic – we tailor our approach to security for the needs and wants of that business, and we do so on a sliding scale of maturity.

"We align our approach to industry standard frameworks, making it easy to understand and measure against.

"Think of it as bronze, silver, gold and platinum levels of security."

After spending six years at global IT consultancy Capgemini, where he was chief technology officer and chief architect, Mark joined ITPS in July.

Alongside a background in complex systems integration – tackling some of the biggest IT challenges out there – Mark has a decade of experience deploying large-scale cloud solutions for international private and public sector organisations.

Businesses of all sizes are increasingly turning to cloud solutions for greater scalability, efficiency and cost savings.

Globally, the cloud computing market is expected to exceed \$1 trillion by 2028, showing interest in cloud adoption is continuing to surge.

Despite the rapid growth of the industry, though, ITPS remains committed to offering tailored services that meet the unique needs of each client, ensuring the personal touch is never lost.

Mark says: "Cloud means a lot of different things, depending on who you're talking to.

"Everyone knows by now that 'cloud' is just a term for someone else's computer – whether it is in a private datacentre such as our ITPS hosting location in the UK, a hyperscaler such as Azure, AWS or Google, or in a software-as-a-service provider's own datacentre.

"For ITPS, when we think about cloud, it's all about choosing the right cloud, or combinations of cloud, for a client's organisation.

"There is no one cloud that is necessarily right for everybody.

"That might mean putting customers' IT workloads into one single cloud, or it might be multi-cloud, leveraging the best combination of solutions for a client's needs."



The complexities of technical jargon can often be difficult to grasp. Buzzwords, information overload and the rapid pace of technological change can make it difficult for businesses to clearly identify their actual IT support needs.

For Mark and ITPS, bridging this gap is essential, to ensure business leaders not only understand the IT landscape but can then make informed decisions that align with their goals.

He says: “Since IT can be complex and confusing, we explain technology capabilities to our clients in easy to understand business language.

“We start off with what the organisation wants to achieve and how we can mitigate the risks it faces.

“Our clients care about the outcome their organisation is providing – that is where their time and energy should be focused – so we take the complexity out, allowing clients to do what they do best without worrying about their IT.”

When it comes to protecting your business, even the most straightforward security practices can have a huge impact.

Understanding common vulnerabilities and covering the basics are essential processes in ensuring businesses remain secure.

Mark says: “Some of the most common vulnerabilities are things like simple passwords.

“Believe it or not, there are still a lot of people who use their pet’s name or a family member’s name.

“We recommend things like multi-factor authentication as an extra layer of protection, in case your username and password is leaked, as well as proactive threat monitoring, alerting and automated remediation.

“Those are some of the basics and don’t require a lot of complex implementation and management from a technology perspective.

“Doing the basics well goes a very long way to mitigating a lot of risk.”

Looking to the future, Mark and ITPS believe it’s crucial to continue matching products and services with the changing needs of businesses.

He says: “My short-term priorities are making sure our products and capabilities are aligned to client needs, because those are always evolving.



“The longer term priority is going to be consistently making sure we continue to do that, so we stay aligned to client’s needs and keep up with market trends.

“One of the things my team is focused on is making sure we have a technology roadmap for every client, so we can see where they are going over the next five years, helping grow their cloud security capability at a rate that’s right for their organisation and affordable too.

“It’s not just about being a responsive or reactive partner – it’s about being a proactive, forward-thinking and innovative partner.”



ITPS

For more information about ITPS and the services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article, email enquiries@itps.co.uk or call 0191 442 8300.

Culture and service at the heart of growing law firm

Hay & Kilner

www.hay-kilner.co.uk

LinkedIn: Hay & Kilner

Jonathan Waters is managing partner of Newcastle-based law firm Hay & Kilner, and partner in the corporate mergers and acquisitions team. With an impressive career at the firm spanning more than 26 years, he began as a trainee solicitor, before becoming managing partner in 2016. Here, he tells N magazine about his role, his vision for the business and why its people, clients and values remain at the core of what it stands for.



Jonathan Waters, Hay & Kilner managing partner

It's hard to believe Hay & Kilner has been in the region for almost 80 years, having originally started life as a post-war practice founded by Rowland Hay and Wilf Kilner in 1946.

The full-service law firm, based at The Lumen, in Newcastle, continues to go from strength-to-strength, with a growing team of more than 130 offering a range of commercial and private client services.

Jonathan Waters, managing partner, says: "We are incredibly proud of our longstanding legacy as one of the region's most reputable law firms.

"And while our values of being passionate, relatable, engaging and excelling in all we do for our clients still reside, we have evolved over the decades to become a progressive and dynamic firm too.

"We know that to move forward into the next 80 years also requires a clear vision, commitment to change and investment in our people, processes, service delivery, brand and infrastructure.

"And it's a real privilege to help steer that ship, playing both a strategic and people-focused role, helping Hay & Kilner continue to be both a great place to work and do business with.

"We have a strong reputation in the market, and I think one of the areas that helps us stand out is our relatability and informality of approach.

"We take time to really understand our clients, are easy to engage with and our full-service offering is something they hugely value too.

"Leadership remains a key part of my role, which has presented some wonderful opportunities to be involved in many areas of the business, from people development, marketing, recruitment, our office move and so many more.

“We know that to move forward into the next 80 years also requires a clear vision, commitment to change and investment in our people, processes, service delivery, brand and infrastructure”

“But I’d say one of the most rewarding areas for me is being involved in the training and development of our junior lawyers.

“It’s something I’ve always been incredibly invested in, having been given the same support during my 26 years with the firm.

“Hay & Kilner is a great place for ambitious people to work, and we are very engaged in all levels of career development.

“I’m genuinely proud to work with such wonderful and talented people every day, and to see them thrive and progress in their legal careers.”

Building a strong, supportive and friendly culture at Hay & Kilner also remains a key focus for the business.

Jonathan adds: “One of the best things about Hay & Kilner, and what personally attracted me to the firm all those years ago, was its family feel.

“There is a real sense of community, collaboration and genuine friendship across our teams.

“This is reinforced by our values, which we embed across the firm and through our quarterly brand value awards, where team members are rewarded for upholding what we stand for.”

Jonathan says his key focus as managing partner is to support the firm’s growth as it embarks on an exciting period of expansion, which will see it continue to innovate and embrace change and new processes that will aid client services while remaining true to its brand.

He says: “Our strapline is ‘here for you’, and that is something that resonates across our entire business.

“We are here for our people and clients.

“But we know to do that successfully that we need consistency and change.

“We need to look outward, but have an inward eye too, embracing new ideas and looking at many things including our processes.

“The advancement of technology and AI is arguably one of the greatest challenges facing the profession in the years ahead, though it is also a significant opportunity.”

It’s not all work for Jonathan, however.

When he isn’t at the helm of a busy law firm, he enjoys spending time with his young family, being in the great outdoors and his role as trustee of the Chronicle Sunshine Fund.

He says: “I’m certainly no Monty Don.

“But when I’m not in the office, there’s nothing better than being in the outdoors, whether that’s in the garden or allotment.

“My dad was a very keen gardener, and my green fingers may also come from my grandfather, who, despite being a busy farmer, always had time for his rose garden.

“In another life, I may well have been a garden designer – the opportunity to create a Chelsea show garden is a particular dream of mine.

“Aside from life outdoors, I’m very proud of my role as trustee of the Chronicle Sunshine Fund; it’s amazing to be involved with a great team that makes such a difference to the lives of young people and their families.”

Asked of the future at Hay & Kilner, he adds: “It’s about moving forward, and being a firm where people love working and one that clients love working with.”



Hay & Kilner
For more information about Hay & Kilner and the services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 232 8345.

Finding the right balance

As Labour rolls out its Employment Rights Bill, which aims to increase flexibility and allow staff to ‘switch off’ beyond standard hours by breaking a ‘culture of presenteeism’, the working world has entered another fresh chapter. But is it the right move? Does home and hybrid working bolster productivity and loyalty, or should employees be spending more time in the office?



Sam Spoons
Founder and director
Talenthheads

Don't fear giving staff greater wiggle room

The workplace has evolved at breathtaking pace since the pandemic, and hybrid working has been one of the best steps in that evolution.

Flexibility has been a benefit to employees, who enjoy a far richer work/life balance – and it can also benefit employers.

Giving staff more wiggle room shouldn't be feared.

Embracing flexible working enhances your workplace culture, which can help with recruiting and retaining the very best individuals.

Research backs this up, with team members statistically more likely to refer family and friends to a business with a good culture.

And it isn't like flexible working is a rare offering.

Most British businesses now offer it in some form, shape or size.

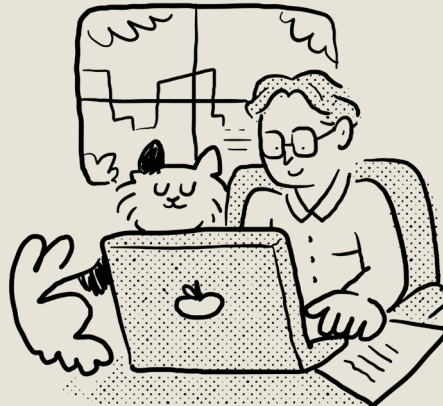
So even before these Government proposals, it was here to stay – and so it should be.

It expands a business' talent pool, opening it to candidates living further away or seeking a hybrid model, and to those that might not have been able to apply due to commitments in their personal lives.

At Talenthheads, we've always embraced flexible working.

I've witnessed first-hand the enormous benefits it brings to my team's culture, in terms of productivity, energy, engagement and happiness.

Gone are the days of missing big family moments because of non-urgent work commitments.



Staff no longer spend hours stuck in traffic, or spend Sunday night with that sinking feeling in their stomachs, arriving for work tired from the rush-hour commute.

They are fresh, engaged – and crucially – more willing to be flexible with their employer in return.

We have recently expanded and now have two offices – in Morpeth and County Durham – which have proven to be fantastic for meetings, brainstorming and team building.

Our workplace culture has undoubtedly benefited from ending the expectation of presenteeism that was once ingrained within business.

The proof is in the pudding; we've grown year-on-year and, in 2023, our flexible workforce helped us deliver record turnover.

Remote work, flexible hours and the ability to impact schedules are major factors when considering job satisfaction, increased productivity, lower staff turnover and team happiness.

And Britain's rapidly-evolving business landscape insists on cultivating an inclusive culture and a flexible and engaged workforce.

These new measures will benefit everyone and, like flexible working, should be embraced rather than feared.



Simon Ruck
Managing director
MAC International

On-site relations are crucial to innovation

We believe in the value of on-site working because the nature of manufacturing and engineering thrives on collaboration, hands-on problem-solving and face-to-face communication.

While hybrid working is beneficial in some sectors, there's an undeniable collaborative spirit when a team occupies the same physical space.

Innovation happens more organically when you're not waiting for the next Zoom call or email, and are instead engaged in real-time, spontaneous discussions.

From a leadership perspective, being in the workplace allows me to gain a better sense of team dynamics and morale, and there's also something to be said about the structure and focus that comes with being physically present.

Additionally, for younger team members, the office is where they can observe, learn and develop essential skills that are difficult to pick up remotely.

The opportunity for mentorship and feedback is invaluable.

Equally, older members can learn just as much from our younger colleagues.

The energy, fresh perspectives and digital

fluency that younger members bring often sparks innovation.

This exchange of knowledge between generations creates a dynamic learning environment that benefits everyone and strengthens cohesion.

Undoubtedly, there are always roles within companies that lend themselves to flexible working.

As manufacturers, we must be slightly more disciplined in our working culture.

The ability to visit our customers daily is vital in delivering tailored solutions.

We do, however, enable our engineers to work flexibly, with job and task management being fully automated.

Experienced field engineers will often start and finish days to suit their own requirements, subject to work being carried out to meet customers' timescales.

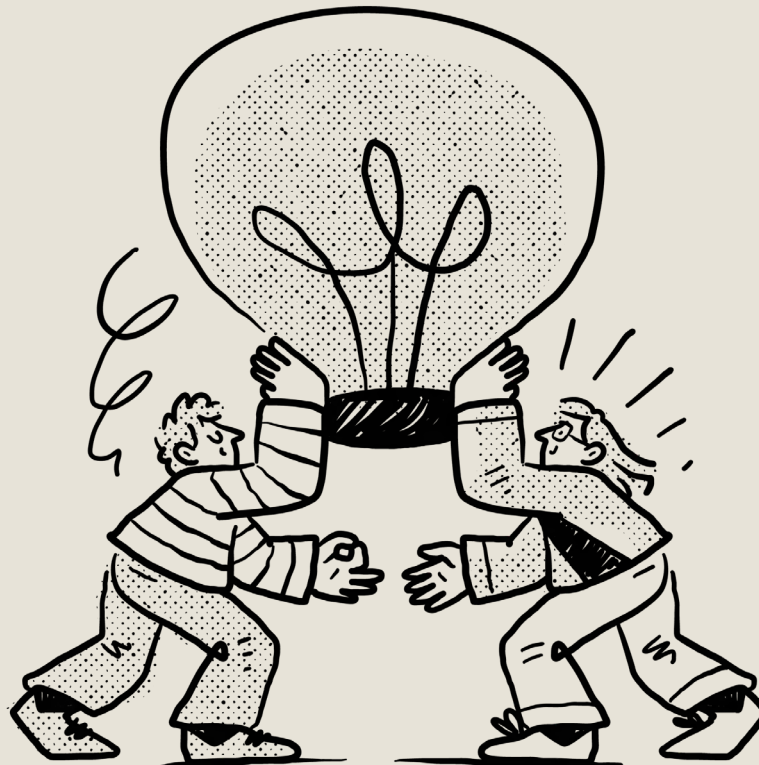
Ultimately, while flexibility is important, we shouldn't lose sight of the productivity and camaraderie created by spending time together.

It's about finding a balance, but for many businesses like ours, on-site is where we're at our best.



Join the discussion

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





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Building a stronger future



Hello and welcome to a special built environment supplement, writes N magazine editor Steven Hugill.

Things are changing across the North East.

With a historic north of the region devolution deal matched by ongoing metro mayoral-led advances in Teesside and the pledges of a new Westminster regime, the region has a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to fashion lasting transformation.

And nowhere is the potential more palpable than across the built environment sector, where headline vows to catalyse housebuilding and wider infrastructural projects provide refreshed optimism for a new era of economic and social prosperity.

This supplement channels that positivity, featuring individuals and businesses at the heart of change.

Writing exclusively for this publication, North East mayor Kim McGuinness lays out her blueprint to create opportunities for all.

Her commitment is predicated upon flagship housing and transport investments she says will help “tackle child poverty and connect people to the jobs, training and cultural offer across the North East”.

Those opportunities will exist across both sides of the River Tyne, the sight of which Bowburn-headquartered Esh Group knows only too well from its ongoing work to restore the famous crossing above the waterway.

We sit down with Andy Radcliffe, the construction business’ chief executive, to hear

about its progress on the Tyne Bridge and how operational changes have primed the firm to leave an indelible mark on a local icon while delivering a much larger impression on the wider construction sector.

Elsewhere, a high-level roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside JK Property Consultants LLP assesses the built environment sector in detail.

Analysing recent headline investments against the backdrop of fast-moving market dynamics such as the infrastructure needed to capitalise on the green energy revolution, participants also underline the need for greater public and private sector collaboration, better transport networks and a rewriting of the planning system.

We maintain the theme of collaboration with Alex Kirkup, of public affairs agency Stephenson Mohl Group, who talks about the importance of businesses understanding and utilising the public affairs landscape to help achieve their aims.

And we close with a feature on husband and wife team George Musson and Victoria Brown, of Musson Brown Architects.

Boasting a portfolio of luxury developments and industry awards, the business is renowned for delivering tomorrow’s designs today, with its increasingly national exposure leaving it geared for further growth beyond its North East postcode.

I hope you enjoy this supplement.

Steven

From brownfield to beautiful: delivering change for people and places

Elected on a raft of pledges to create new opportunities for the north of the region's populace, North East mayor Kim McGuinness tells N magazine about her blueprint to bolster the area's built environment, revealing groundworks are already well underway to rebuild crucial housing stock numbers and accelerate transport connectivity.

I stood to be North East mayor on a manifesto to create real opportunity for people in our region.

I promised to create good quality, affordable homes, tackle child poverty and build the infrastructure of opportunity, with each powered by a transport network that works for everyone.

As mayor, I won't sit back and let villages and towns be overlooked, or let land sit idle while social waiting lists for homes grow longer and families are locked out of the housing they desperately need.

And we've been fast off the mark.

Already, in my first six months in office, we've approved investment in major housing and regeneration projects at Riverside Sunderland and Horden, in County Durham.

We've backed investment to begin site clearance at Forth Yards, in Newcastle, a flagship scheme led by Newcastle City Council and Homes England.

They are down payments on my ambition to build the affordable homes families in the region desperately need, and turn brownfield sites into beautiful places people can be proud of.

We'll build homes local people need, and create thriving communities with shops, green spaces and transport links, rather than vast identikit estates that are miles away from work and public transport.

We signed a strategic place partnership with Homes England to allow us to work together for the long term, to unlock new homes and regeneration for places that have been overlooked for too long.

I'm working with Homes England and ministers to understand how we can increase the number of social and council homes – genuinely affordable to local people – as part of their investments.

That means we will need further powers and resources at a local level to deliver our ambition for the North East.

However, we know homes on their own are not enough, and too often we see housing built without the infrastructure, amenities and services people need to find work, get around our region and improve their lives.

We are investing more than £170 million for bus improvements to infrastructure, services and affordable fares across the region, while pushing ahead with plans to take our buses back into public control.

We'll bring places back onto the public transport network for the first time in a generation, by re-opening the Leamside Line and extending the Metro to Washington.

It's these kinds of investments that can transform our region, not just by making it easier to get around, but using transport to join up investment in homes and jobs around stations and employment sites.

It's about building the infrastructure of opportunity – one which will tackle child poverty and connect people to the jobs, training and cultural offer we're creating across the North East.

This is not just about the physical and visible regeneration of our places.

It's about how we make sure our investment delivers renewal and opportunity for people too.

That way, people will feel the benefit of devolution and the opportunities we're creating – making a brighter future for our great North East.

KIM MCGUINNIS



ESS

Building bridges to a brighter future

Words by Colin Young

Photography by Jamie Haslam

Shrouded by scaffolding and preserved by protective sheeting, the iconic Tyne Bridge is undergoing major restoration work led by Bowburn-headquartered Esh Group. Here, Colin Young speaks to Andy Radcliffe, chief executive of the privately-owned construction business, to learn more about its revitalisation of the globally-renowned crossing, and how an operational restructure leaves the contractor primed for future growth.

www.eshgroup.co.uk
[LinkedIn: Esh Group](#)

The Tyne Bridge.

Newcastle's iconic landmark; Geordies' bridge of honour.

An engineering and construction masterpiece that took almost three years to construct a century ago, it still stretches proudly across the River Tyne to this day.

From a distance, the famous arch remains the glorious symbol of the Toon, gleaming green in the sunshine.

But get closer, and you can see the rust and decay that has taken hold over many years since previous major repair works were carried out.

Inclement weather, constant traffic and protected birds have left their marks on the Grade II-listed structure, which was first crossed by the King and Queen's horse-drawn carriage on October 10, 1928.

Look closer still – as experts have been doing for months – and the sheer scale of repairing and repainting the globally-recognised creation becomes even more evident.

So, for the next four years, the bridge will be under cover, under repair and under the careful

watch of Esh Group.

Overseeing it all, along with a team of industry experts, is Andy Radcliffe, chief executive of the Bowburn-headquartered company.

Today, his site visit takes an unfamiliar route, arriving at the Gateshead-side tower on foot down Shore Road, where he is greeted by project manager Gareth Dawson and his team.

They are heading up to the scaffolding and tarpaulin that covers the listed structure.

Working in cramped conditions over layers of scaffolding, the team are grit blasting years of previous paint coatings, repairing damaged steelwork and re-applying the crossing's distinguishable green.

Andy has seen enough on previous visits to know there are long days and nights ahead for the Esh team, as they tackle one of the region's most challenging restoration projects.

He tells N magazine: "It was always going to be a journey of discovery.

"The initial stages of this job were to get inside the bridge and understand the extent of the repairs required.

“The designers of the structural work get a broad view during their investigations, but that is done on a sample basis and we only really get the true picture once we get into the structure.

“And it varies.

“There are sections which aren’t in bad condition.

“But there are others where standing water has led to a lot of corrosion.

“One of the challenges with the bridge is that the structure can’t take the weight of scaffolding across the entire span, so the scaffold solution will be installed in more than 20 phases.

“Eventually, on the bridge, there will be an encased tunnel for people to walk and drive through.

“While more than 139,000 litres of paint will be used – enough to fill 850 beer barrels – there are also more than 1000 repairs to be undertaken.

“The list is huge; it’s far more than ‘just a lick of paint’.”

And the bridge is more than just another project, another catalogue of jobs to identify and rectify.

For Esh Group, and Andy too, it is something far greater.

The mammoth programme of works is symbolic of how far the construction firm – whose origins lie just a few miles away in County Durham mining heartland – has come.

A lot has changed since the 1970s when one of its founding companies, Lumsden & Carroll Civil Engineering, was established in the pit village of Esh Winning.

Today, with a number of mergers and acquisitions having since bolstered operations, Esh Group is a 750-strong employer, the Tyne Bridge a headline order book scheme and a source of great pride for its local workforce.

It would too, says Andy, have brought great delight to its former chief executive Brian Manning.

A little more than seven years ago, before his retirement, Brian appointed Andy, then the group’s chief financial officer, as his successor.

Sadly, the enigmatic Brian passed during the transition period.

Andy says: “I imagine Brian would have been so proud of Esh’s name being linked with the restoration of an icon like the Tyne Bridge.

“He was an immense character and a very clever man, who drove Esh from very humble beginnings to the size of the business we are today – with turnover approaching £300 million per year.

“When he handed over to me and the team, he was going to take on a chair’s role, but he sadly passed away very quickly.

“I felt in a little bit of a lonely place to start with, but I think Brian saw in me a strategic thinker who could visualise the next stage of the business, and go ahead and execute on it.

“We needed a longer term vision, and that’s exactly what the team and I set about creating.”

The immediate task was to restructure the company, reducing 20 divisions down to four: civil engineering, affordable housing, commercial build and Homes by Esh, the latter a private housebuilding division that is primed to nearly double its number of live developments in the North East this year.

The leaner and simpler portfolio centres on work for local authorities, utility and environmental companies, registered affordable housing providers and the private housing sector.

And its reach is extensive.

Esh’s live catalogue includes work alongside Karbon Homes to deliver the first phase of 750 affordable properties at Seaham Garden Village and the creation of more than 500 affordable units across three Teesside sites for Thirteen Group.

In Stockton, the firm’s civil engineering teams



are working with council bosses to transform the town's high street from a retail hub into a sprawling waterfront urban park.

The contractor has also secured a place on five capital delivery frameworks with Northumbrian Water Group and the Environment Agency.

Andy says: "We set about a very forensic analysis to understand the market, how different segments behave, how we wanted to participate in those segments and then set about designing a business model to do that.

"There were some difficult decisions and some choppy waters.

"It took more than three years, and it's been hard.

"It has only been possible due to the skill and dedication of our senior team, and the vast array of talented people we have in the business.

"We also didn't expect a global pandemic to be thrown into the mix, nor the ensuing inflationary environment, which has been brutal over the last couple of years.

"But we have navigated them impeccably, and got our business into the strongest position it has been in for many, many years."

A turning point in the firm's restructure was securing phase three of the Sunderland Strategic Transport Corridor, with the £42.5 million scheme marking the largest job in the company's history.

Andy says: "Since that project, we have delivered a number of others that give us the credentials to pursue and deliver bigger contracts.

"Targeting these contracts allows us to attract strong supportive supply chains and recruit and retain 'Grade A' talent."

The post-COVID-19 years haven't been kind to the construction industry, but Esh Group – which works across the North East, Teesside and Yorkshire and the Humber – remains debt-free and reported pre-tax profits of £3.1 million last year, up from £2 million in 2022.

While turnover remained at £261 million, improvements in both its contracting and development performance resulted in a 50 per cent increase in pre-tax profits, and it now boasts the largest forward order book – more than £1.6 billion – in its history.

Andy says: "We understand how each part of our portfolio of businesses behaves over the long term.

"For example, we've got the private housing segment that follows the expected demand curve of that market, and we've got the public sector-oriented space that will, arguably, be counter cyclical to that.

"And then you've got the utilities business and the environment business that follow a consistent and reliable demand profile, no



matter what the broader economy is doing.

"Understanding how those revenue streams behave was a key part of designing the business to be in those spaces – taking out the big peaks and troughs that single focus construction businesses can endure, and aligning to segments of the market where the client and contract environment shares risk and reward in a fair and sustainable way."

The contractor's focus, though, extends beyond the site.

As a socially responsible firm, it works hard to create impact within the communities surrounding its construction projects.

Andy says: "What is powerful for me is what we leave behind; the legacies that remain after a project is complete.

"When it comes to social housing, we're not just building houses, which is an important part of regenerating a community, we're also delivering social value.

"We employ apprentices, which can set them on a different path, providing jobs, work experience and life skills – our award-winning social value programmes really do have the power to change lives for the better.

"One of the biggest issues facing the industry is a skills shortage, and we're driving the agenda there, working with North East further education colleges and the North East Institute of Technology.

"We're all working at the coal-face to ensure we've got the right people coming through the industry to deliver what we need, and we're actively looking to bring more people in through our established programmes.

"We've set the agenda for the skills we need.

"There's a whole range of roles that are

attractive in construction, and part of our job is to go into schools and colleges and show the vast array of opportunities in the industry, with some of them at the very leading edge of digital and technological advancements."

He adds: "As a business, we've been on a journey of change over recent years, coming out the other side with determination, strength and a solid outlook.

"And we are perfectly positioned to take the Tyne Bridge on its own restoration journey.

"Like Esh Group, it will come out the other side stronger and ready to face the future.

"And the future for Esh Group promises to be very exciting."



A guiding hand through the Westminster maze

www.stephenson-mohl.co.uk
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To an outsider, the UK political landscape can be a labyrinth, full of twists, turns and frustrating dead-ends. Providing a map to help private sector businesses and organisations navigate those corridors of power, though, is leading public affairs agency Stephenson Mohl Group. With a new Westminster office having opened its doors, here Alex Kirkup, senior public affairs manager, explains the significance of being close to the seat of power and why local councils are just as important as mayors and ministers.

Politics impacts on every area of life, whether at home or in business.

From parking charges and business rates to determining the fate of major building and infrastructure projects, politicians at all levels – from parish hall to the hallowed halls of Westminster – can make or break any project.

To succeed, businesses of all sizes, and all sectors, must engage with politicians at all levels, says Alex Kirkup, senior public affairs manager at Stephenson Mohl Group.

The public affairs agency, founded in Newcastle seven years ago by managing director Mark Stephenson, has won wide acclaim for its work with clients across the North East and beyond, helping them navigate and assess the political landscape.

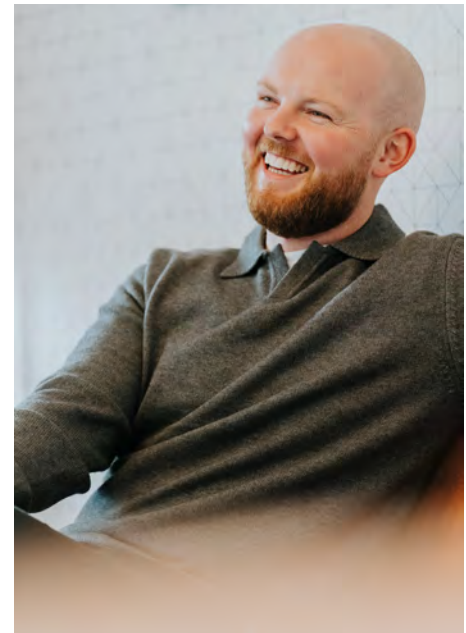
And with a new Westminster office having opened its doors in late October, Stephenson Mohl Group is taking the initiative to build relationships at the heart of the Government.

“This is a natural step for us,” says Alex, who joined the company in January.

He adds: “We offer expertise of politics and policy at a local and regional level but, by having a Westminster office, we are utilising that experience and knowledge to have a national impact on policymakers.”

While Westminster is home to the Government, there are also many other influential organisations in the capital – an opportunity for Stephenson Mohl Group’s team to make connections and tap into national campaigns, driving engagement and understanding about regional issues facing clients.

Working with firms across housebuilding, advanced manufacturing, education, health and renewable energy, the collective expertise of its team – which includes former North East Chamber of Commerce policy expert Mark, head of communications Rebecca Johnson, public affairs managers Georgia Jamieson and Joseph Mckenna, and head of government



relations Simon Henig – means Stephenson Mohl Group is building a formidable reputation.

With a new Government in power, and the North East Combined Authority starting to find its feet, engaging across all levels of the political spectrum has never been more important.

Alex says: “Politics is not something you can opt out of.

“If you don’t speak to power about the challenges you face, or the opportunities you have to grow, someone else will be talking about them instead.

“It can feel like you’re in the wilderness, but that’s where a public affairs company like ours can provide a business with a map of how to navigate the political space they need to operate in, and be a trusted guide throughout.”

Alex points to the new Government’s manifesto, which announced a national mission for growth.

He says: “Developers behind projects such as housing and wind and solar power can see the opportunity to help the Government, but they’re also aware of the clear limitations that can delay or stop projects from progressing, such as issues with planning policy and investment gaps.”

The 2024 election was striking not only for the scale of Labour’s victory, but also the size of the new intake of first-time MPs – the highest since 1945.

Alex says: “From the conversations we’ve been having, there is a lot of optimism out there at the moment.

“We have a group of ministers in power now who, by and large, have not been in government before.

“They are in listening mode, so now is a great time to engage.”

Another change in the political landscape

this year was the formation of the North East Combined Authority, which saw power devolved to an organisation covering seven local authorities in the north of the region under directly-elected mayor Kim McGuinness.

Alex says: “Devolution is seen as an exciting new opportunity for the North East.

“Everyone wants to understand what the mayor and the combined authority mean for them, and to build relationships with the organisation.

“But it’s important to understand that not everything is devolved to the combined authority – a lot remains with local authorities, and they are still very, very important to business, developers and investors, as are MPs.

“For us, it’s about making sure organisations have the best information – and the best assessment of that information – so they know who exactly to speak to about their particular case to help them succeed.”



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.



Laying the foundations for a brighter future

Setting a blueprint for fresh prosperity

Words by Peter Anderson

Photography by Matt Taylor

ROUNDTABLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When you look at the value creation

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

Vicki Mordue,
Biodiverse Consulting director



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We must change that.”



“Talent is classless but opportunity isn’t; we’ve got talent in communities that can’t access opportunity because there’s no credible way for them to get from A to B”

Phil Redman,
Mott MacDonald area director



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

QA

Built Environment

From idea to enriching design

With a portfolio boasting multiple luxury schemes and several awards signifying its industry prowess, Musson Brown Architects is moving forward with great momentum. Here, directors George Musson and Victoria Brown tell Steven Hugill about the Jesmond-based business' foundations, its commitment to quality and plans for growth.



By Steven Hugill

Tell us a little about Musson Brown Architects. How and when was the practice founded, and what are its specialist areas of focus?

George: It was founded when the practice I was a partner in went through a transitional phase; our long-term plan to take that practice in a new direction was accelerated by the pandemic.

Victoria and I saw this as the perfect opportunity to launch our own practice and retain our existing team.

Our core focus is residential work for private clients, with a specialism in the restoration of period properties and construction of one-off homes.

From onboarding industry experts to project managing the entire build, we craft spaces that enhance everyday life.

Our heart lies in creating luxury homes for private clients and re-inventing complex sites for discerning developers.

As well as company co-founders, you're also husband and wife. How does that add to the myriad dynamics that come with running a business?

Victoria: We each bring complementing strengths that create balance and diversity.

Rather than clashing with one another, our different roles enrich our service offering and broaden our reach.

Along with our different experiences, interests and skills, George and I surround ourselves with an exceptional team of architects and designers.

Their support is instrumental in enabling us to create designs that enrich the everyday and mould seamlessly with clients' lifestyles.

Outside of work, we have a young family, and our practice gives us the flexibility to juggle these commitments.

The practice carries a strapline of being 'small enough that every project matters, but large enough to deliver'. How is that vow reflected across each venture it undertakes?

George: The size of our practice is incredibly important.

It means we remain personally involved in every commission while maintaining the capacity to execute large-scale, complex builds.

We believe in providing a tailored service to each client, taking the time to understand their priorities and ambitions, and truly immersing ourselves in the spaces we create.

Meeting regularly, we explore a range of design options, and through a considered process of continual refinement, we craft a space that is the very best it can be.

From concept to completion, we act as a client's primary contact, creating a seamless and stress-free experience not typically associated with renovation and building work.

The business has received several accolades, including a recent Lord Mayor's award for a Tyneside courtyard home. What does such recognition say about the quality of its service delivery?

Victoria: It was a pleasure to receive the Newcastle Lord Mayor's Design Award again, which recognises architecture that has made an exceptional contribution to the city.

Ultimately, our accolades reflect the strong relationships we maintain within our team, with our clients and with our network of consultants.

Fundamentally, the key to our award-winning approach is our desire to know the people behind the project – we listen to our clients, understand their aspirations and translate them into enriching designs.

We are fortunate enough to work with some fantastic people, who are excited to explore new ideas and willing to push their boundaries.

Without them, we couldn't do what we do.

While boasting a portfolio of North East projects, the practice also counts work in places such as York. Are there plans in place to expand further across the UK?

George: We are proud to be based in the North East; with a rich architectural history and a strong sense of community, people feel proud to call our region home.

However, while the mainstay of our business is Newcastle and Northumberland, we are increasingly spreading our wings further afield.

This work comes exclusively from referrals and repeat clients, and has led us to undertake projects from London to North Yorkshire.

Like so many businesses today, we don't need a permanent physical presence in these locations

to offer an exceptional service.

Many of our clients have international bases or travel extensively, so we are well accustomed to remote working and are keen to develop and invest in our Newcastle base.

Like so many industries, the architectural sector has not been without challenges, with economic uncertainty, staff shortages and a rise in building costs and sustainability demands weighing on day-to-day operations. How have you navigated such obstacles?

Victoria: The key to navigating these challenges has been remaining flexible.

We enjoyed great growth during the post-lockdown boom, as clients came to us with a renewed enthusiasm for their homes.

By maintaining an adaptable approach, we have been able to move with the market, follow new opportunities and respond quickly to clients' requirements.

Sustainability remains a core part of our service offering.

For us, it involves considering the immediate environment and property history, facilitating low running costs and creating designs that stand the test of time.

Although rising costs are notoriously difficult to manage, they ultimately mean transparency is essential.

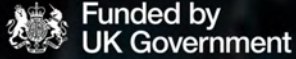
We have found clients appreciate our honesty and integrity, as well as our respect for their budget.

What are your short and longer term goals for the practice?

George: In the immediate future, we are focused on nurturing our talented team, investing in their training and working together to execute exceptional architectural designs.

Over the longer term, we look forward to organically growing the practice to enhance our service offering, while remaining true to our personal approach.

Our practice will always centre around our clients, and we will remain committed to delivering projects where our uncompromising attention to detail is paramount.



RESTORING AN ICON



#NotJustALickOfPaint
TYNEBRIDGE.ORG

Flooring the competition

Karpet Mills

www.karpetmills.co.uk
Instagram: karpetmills

Time and tastes may have changed since Karpet Mills was established nearly 150 years ago, but the company's core ethics will never alter. And with demand as strong as ever, director Joel Dickinson tells Colin Young the carpet and flooring expert hasn't time to start planning anniversary celebrations just yet.

Established in 1878, initially as a furniture maker that branched into carpets and flooring, Karpet Mills has showrooms across the region.

But despite its impending 150-year anniversary, director Joel Dickinson, the sixth generation of the family to oversee the company, says it isn't resting on its laurels.

He says: "We're edging closer to the big landmark, and it will be exciting.

"But I want to make sure the business is running properly, rather than taking my eye off the ball."

The company has sailed through recent choppy waters and battled inflation and housing sector difficulties that have seen off some big flooring retailers.

And as the busy Christmas period and 2025 approaches, Joel is in optimistic mood.

"It looks like an exciting year ahead," he says, speaking from Karpet Mills' Hexham head office.

He adds: "We've had an incredible 2024, given the headwinds in the wider economy; it really has been a case of survival of the fittest.

"Our big customer base, from our history, has really paid dividends in terms of our figures and market position.

"And I'm looking to really make sure we remain as competitive as we can in 2025; over the last two or three years we've been investing an awful lot of energy and focus on sourcing high volumes of the best products to navigate through the difficulties.

"We've got this real foundation of core products; nobody can buy them better than we can, and we pass those savings to customers.

"That's been one of the biggest driving forces behind the success we've had, and that's

definitely going to continue growing in 2025 when we've got some very exciting projects already in the programme.

"And I'm very much an advocate of the positive stuff happening in the North East too.

"I'm North East born and bred, and when you see what we have to offer, it's great for the whole region.

"With hard work, determination, well-trained staff and the people we've got in the North East, there should be a lot of positivity for the future."

As well as customers looking to improve their homes, Karpet Mills has a large commercial division that deals with hotels, local authority buildings, dental surgeries, care homes, schools, churches and offices.

And while it has evolved since John Dickinson opened its first store, the business' core ethics, says Joel, will never change.

He says: "We know how the North of England works and what customers want, and we offer an old fashioned service, with the best pricing and showrooms to suit the modern day.

"We respect each and every customer in what they want and need, and give them the right advice for each project, rather than giving a quick answer that suits the bottom line.

"We have plenty of experience, and that is translated into how we train our staff and the ethos throughout the business.

"We focus on making sure we get people the right products, whether they be shorter or medium-term solutions, or something that's going to last them a lifetime.

"We give them information, let them make a choice and try to guide them in the right way so they'll be happy long-term – and come back to us.



"We're seeing a lot more customers changing the decor and styles in rooms on a much more regular basis; people want to follow the latest in vogue designs, fashions and colours, and are prepared to spend a little bit less.

"The pace of life is faster now and, as a business, we've reacted to that.

"The fact we've managed to evolve, grow and move with the times and climate has got us to where we are.

"And those fundamentals will never change."



Karpet Mills

With branches in Kingston Park, Gateshead, Hetton-le-Hole, Hexham and Benton, which include Designer Flooring showrooms at Kingston Park and Hexham, Karpet Mills is the number one provider of carpets and floorings in the region.

To find out more about how its styles and flooring offers could meet your budget, visit www.karpetmills.co.uk

OUT



Emma Gaudern
co-founder & managing director
www.emgsolicitors.com

In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Emma Gaudern, co-founder and managing director of EMG Solicitors, about her passion for beekeeping.

You complement your role as EMG Solicitors' managing director with a passion for beekeeping. What attracted you to the apicultural world?

My great-uncle Oliver used to keep bees when I was a child, and I still remember going with him and my dad to where they were kept on the moor to check them.

It was something I wanted to pursue for a long time.

I was spurred on when it became clear that bees as pollinators were under threat; that gave me the momentum to order my hive.

I think we should all take steps where we can to protect and support our environment.

There is a lot to consider when setting up as a beekeeper, not least the purchasing of a colony, hives and protective equipment. Is it an expensive hobby to found?

Like so many hobbies, it can be as expensive as you want to make it.

I bought a starter kit of a hive, basic tools and a suit for about £250.

Then, my first nucleus colony – a queen plus about 10,000 workers – cost another £120; I bought that from a local beekeeper.

Doing an initial course is a must to learn the basics, which is maybe another £100.

So, it's not cheap to start, but once you're underway, it doesn't have to be expensive to keep going.

There are lots of things you can do to make it cheaper if you're handy – I have seen all sorts of homemade hives.

Bees aren't that picky about where they live

– if they were, they would never swarm – so homemade can work just fine.

How do you source bees? What are the rules and regulations around buying colonies – and do you need to factor in the North East climate when choosing which species to tend to?

You can buy a queen and six workers (just enough to keep her alive in transit) online for about £50.

But a full hive in the summer has 40,000 to 50,000 bees in it, so six or seven won't get you far!

It's usual to buy a nucleus of about 10,000 bees.

Local beekeeping associations are the best place to source a nucleus.

I haven't known there to be any regulations around who you buy from or sell to, but I think if you undertake it as a business, there must be some form of regulation around it.

This summer, I was trying to sell a couple of my colonies because I had too many and was struggling to cope.

I put an advert on Facebook Marketplace but, after about two weeks, got a stern warning that I should take it down or I'd be suspended for trading 'livestock'.

I was horrified, as I hadn't considered that at all.

It is certainly colder in the North East, and some breeds of bees are hardier than others.

It is not recommended to buy queens from abroad; if she is from a warmer climate, she may not fare as well over here.

OFF

We are also asked to consider closely the risk associated with bringing in any pests and diseases from buying queens abroad, which may not be present in the UK bee population and which can spread very quickly among such a mobile insect.

What does a typical week look like for a beekeeper?

It depends on the season.

In the months of winter, it's pretty easy.

You open the hive as little as possible, as the bees are trying to keep warm.

It is more about making sure they have enough food and keeping them snuggled up with insulation.

In the swarm months of May to July, you need to check the hive weekly, which can take around 30 minutes per hive.

You also need to allow an hour in total for dealing with getting set up and packed away, as well as dealing with unforeseen circumstances.

I got caught out this summer thinking I would make a quick check of a hive before going out for Sunday lunch.

I had missed an inspection the week before, so when I opened up I had eight maturing queen cells that were hatching out before my eyes and into my hand.

That sounds exciting, but it's actually just worrying because you know by then that you have already lost half your hive to a swarm and unless you take appropriate action, your hive could be queenless, which is the worst news, as they depend on the queen to keep laying eggs.

That was a very flustering day.

How many times have you been stung – is the threat now just an occupational hazard?

I have probably been stung about 15 times in four years, so I don't consider that to be too bad.

They are a lot gentler than a wasp sting, so it's an irritation rather than a pain.

I got stung on the ear this year, which gave me a cauliflower ear for a few days, and was super-itchy.

That came from just having too many hives in the garden – the bees were unhappy at how busy it was and were trying to sting us regularly. Even my dog got stung!

I trimmed it down from four hives to one, and we are managing to live in harmony together again.

Are there any crossovers between your job and pastime? Do skills from one help influence the other in any way?

You can draw all sorts of parallels around bees working as a team and everyone having their role to play, but I think that's like every organisation.

Being a beekeeper teaches you patience.

Bees do their own thing, and you have to work around them and learn how to create and maintain balance.

They are good lessons for any leader.

Any beekeeper will tell you that there are lots of opportunities to make mistakes, and we just keep trying to learn and improve, and I think I have finally come to terms with the knowledge that this is the same thing as running a business.

I definitely don't get being a beekeeper or a chief executive right every day of the week, but as long as you admit that, try to understand why and work to do it better next time, then you're moving forwards, which is all any of us can do.

OOFFICE

Giving back to their roots

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As one of the North East's largest charitable organisations, with an ethos of philanthropy at its heart, the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland brings together generous individuals and businesses in support of charities across the region. With the launch of a new campaign to encourage people with links to the North East to 'give back' to their roots, the foundation's chief philanthropy officer John Hollingsworth explains how the organisation can make it simple to do some good.

"The great use of life is to spend it for something that will outlast it."

Philanthropy, as summed up by philosopher William James, has long been a cornerstone of charitable giving, the desire of generous people to give back to their community.

The Community Foundation has philanthropy at its very heart, working with generous individuals, families and businesses to direct donations to deserving people, places and organisations around the North East.

Formed 35 years ago, the Community Foundation has links with charities across Tyne and Wear and Northumberland, providing consistent support through a successful endowment model, which sees its invested assets stand at almost £100 million.



Last year, the foundation awarded £8.4 million in grants to more than 600 organisations across the region, often focusing on smaller charities and grassroots community organisations.

John Hollingsworth, the foundation's chief philanthropy officer, says the organisation carries out in-depth research to ensure funds are targeted most effectively, with its Vital Signs report published every few years.

He says: "The endowment model we operate provides a degree of stability for local organisations – it's a sustainable source of support for the region.

"We support all kinds of different causes because it's often led by the particular interests of each donor.



“Wherever possible, we want to work with a donor to understand their charitable aims and help them deliver that ambition.

“Our team has unrivalled expertise and experience across the region as to where different organisations are having a particular impact, so whatever a donor’s interest – young people or the environment, for example – we can get them linked in with the organisation that can best suit.”

Historically, donors have been based within the region, but a new funding initiative, dubbed North East Roots, aims to attract new donors with links to the region that have gone on to find success elsewhere.

North East Roots will have a focus on social mobility for young people and encourage those taking part to give their professional expertise to support the development of projects in the region.

Among the early supporters is Magnus Willis, who was born in Newcastle and has been involved with the Community Foundation for many years through a fund set up by his father Peter.

Despite living in London for 35 years, Magnus still has strong links to the North East.

He says: “The North East Roots Fund is great for people who have left the region who may want to give something back to the area but don’t know how to go about that.

“The team at the foundation know what the region needs and the people that can deliver it – it’s a neat logic.

“When you are far away, you are understandably less sure that you’re doing the right thing, but the Community Foundation will listen to what you want to achieve and help you direct that in the best way possible.”

John adds: “We believe there’s a lot of people out there who have strong connections to the region but would benefit from a vehicle such as

ours to give back financially, or in kind with time and expertise.

“We can help people to enjoy the fun and fulfilling part of charitable giving, where you’re fully involved in making decisions about where your money goes, with far less of the admin and hassle that comes with managing an independent trust or foundation.”

A new donor to the Community Foundation through North East Roots is Sunderland-born Steve Wooler, who left at 18 for university and built a successful career in engineering consulting.

Backed by his business BWB Consulting, which specialises in urban redevelopment projects, Steve is keen to offer his time, as well as financial donations, to worthy causes.

He says: “I want to help the region fulfil its potential.

“Sunderland, in particular, is going through a renaissance; I’m so pleased to see the investment there and long may it continue.

“If Sunderland, Newcastle and the rest of the region can put its parochial fights to one side and come together, there’s a very clear story to tell investors, and that’s where I think I can put my experience to good use.

“Instead of being a lone voice whistling in the wind, being part of North East Roots provides a vehicle for making a difference in whatever way you choose, working directly with local community groups and charities.”

John adds: “Expats want to see the region be more competitive, and see young people have the opportunities that we had as young people ourselves.

“There is a very clear purpose and reason behind the foundation being as focused as it can be on social mobility.

“I hope that will be a unifying theme for expats who care about the region.”

Pictured above, from left to right, are Su Legg, Michelle Hardie and Lisa Cappleman

Pictured left, the philanthropy team, part of a 24-strong Community Foundation staff. Pictured, from left to right, are John Hollingsworth, Su Legg, Michelle Hardie, Lisa Cappleman, Ross Wilson and Elaine Holdsworth



Community Foundation
To find out more about the Community Foundation, its work and how you could support North East Roots, visit the website or contact the email address at the top of this article.

ROUNDTABLE

How can the North East capitalise on devolution?

Creating a blueprint for success across the north of the region's political landscape

Growth. It's a word you will hear Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer use many times in a speech or interview. Our North East mayors may not use it with the same frequency but they know that attracting investment and creating jobs are crucial for the region's prosperity. Here, in the latest of a series of executive-level roundtable discussions held by NET alongside Fairstone, the UK's fastest-growing wealth advisory firm, regional business leaders look at the commercial and economic landscape and talk about the challenges and barriers facing the region.

Words by Brian Aitken

Photography by Angela Carrington

With two regional mayors now in post, as well as a new prime minister, how do you think we stand as a region?

"I see two very different things going on," said Paul McEldon, chief executive of the North East Business and Innovation Centre.

He said: "Tees Valley is very much big business – big, shiny new buildings, big inward investment, big infrastructure-type projects and more of a trickle-down effect.

"I get the feeling North East mayor Kim McGuinness is talking about a bottom-up approach, a lot more about poverty, a lot more about social effect – not a lot about business and where the interventions might be coming."

Lee Hartley, chief executive of event host Fairstone, said: "You see all the PR around



gigafactories, but there are brilliant businesses in the North East already, and we're not shouting about them.

"If we want to create prosperity, it'll be driven by proper businesses doing proper things, giving people careers, not just jobs."

Does the North East have the right funding options and the right kind of business support?

Craig Huntingdon, a scale-up partner at RTC North, which helps businesses innovate, compete and grow, said it is a mixed picture.

He said business support can be inefficient and difficult to navigate, with significant overlap, blackspots and duplication across the region.

He said: "It is often heavily biased towards outputs and not necessarily outcomes; if it was more outcome oriented – 'Have they made investment? Have they grown and invested in people?' – then I think that would hold our feet to the fire in terms of the support offered."

The picture is not much brighter when it comes to venture capital.

David Alproovich, chief operating officer of family office investment company Middleton Enterprises, added: "Go back to 2010 to 2015, you had five or six venture capital firms who all had capital available, and that leveraged a lot of private investment.

"With losing some of the support from Europe, and then the Northern Powerhouse Fund, you end up with big pools of money that are carved out into small niches.

"It's very disjointed."

Robin Cordy, managing director of tech business Metalitix, said: “Getting investment isn’t just about getting the money, it’s about getting an investor that’s going to be a partner too.

“If your funding options are limited, and you’ve only got one or two choices, it doesn’t necessarily help you.”

Can the North East Combined Authority help the charity sector?

John Hollingsworth, chief philanthropy officer at the Community Foundation, said the combined authority must promote civic participation and help rebuild trust between communities and local government.

He said: “The hope I’ve got for the combined authority is trying to, wherever we can, find co-ordination of different types of funding.

“Ideally, finding some agreed set of priorities and interventions, so that local government funding can get behind business funding and philanthropic money to have a compounding effect.”

What are the barriers to growth in the North East economy?

Roundtable members identified several issues including red tape, funding confusion, decisions being made at the wrong level, poor transport links and the need to create a regional identity that attracts investment and talent.

John Devitt, chief executive at occupational health provider Recovery4Life, called for greater co-ordination around funding.

He said: “We’ve been caught in that trap.

“You have a conversation, and explain what you’re trying to do, and you’re told, ‘that sounds great but, no, we’re not the right people’.

“It just weighs you down.”

Josh Tate, operations director at Tyne & Wear-based subcontractor Washington Metalworks, highlighted difficulties around the business’ factory extension plans.

He said: “We were stuck in the planning permission cycle with Gateshead Council for 18 months.

“That completely knocked back our growth plans, and you wonder what our competitors across Europe were doing in that time.

“It feels like we’re operating with shackles on, and other countries certainly aren’t.”

What does regional success look like for you and your people?

Fiona Whitehurst, associate dean engagement and place at Newcastle University Business School, raised the importance of giving students a glimpse of business life.

She said: “I would love to make sure all students in the university get to see how fantastic the business base is in the region, because I don’t think we shout out about it enough.

“They might still want to go to London or Manchester, but we want them to know they’re always welcome back and they will have opportunities.”

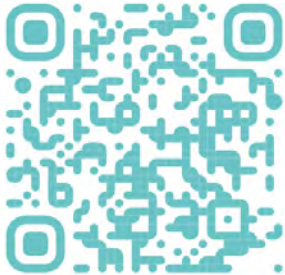


This article is an abridged version of the full roundtable discussion, which you can read by visiting www.nettimesmagazine.co.uk

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5



www.hostandstay.co.uk

LinkedIn: Host & Stay

Dale Smith is founder and chief executive of holiday let management firm Host & Stay, which recently secured £10.5 million support from Growth Partner to fuel expansion plans. Here, he tells Steven Hugill about the significance of the backing - which has already enabled the firm to secure takeover deals for Norfolk Holiday Properties, Airhost For You, Guest Homes and Hartland Property Management - the global blueprint it will allow the east Cleveland-based operator to push forward and the values of strong mentorship that continue to help him steer the company's progress.

MINUTES

WITH DALE SMITH

By Steven Hugill

Congratulations on the £10.5 million Growth Partner investment. How will the backing be harnessed to drive further growth across Host & Stay?

The investment is a pivotal milestone.

We plan to use this backing to accelerate our growth strategy, which includes enhancing our technology, expanding our portfolio of managed properties and continuing to acquire property management businesses nationwide through our buy-and-build strategy.

The investment will also help us scale our operational infrastructure, which is crucial to supporting our long-term vision of becoming one of the leading short-term rental operators in the UK and, within time, overseas.

We have an outstanding team and, with the new support and investment from Growth Partner, we're one step closer to achieving our mission of redefining industry standards, enhancing guest experiences and providing ease of management with unmatched services and yields to property owners.

Upon announcing the support, you said it would help Host & Stay become "one of the world's best short-term rental operators". With that in mind, should we expect to see recent domestic acquisitions matched by international expansion in the near future?

While domestic acquisitions are a key part of our growth strategy, international expansion is certainly something we're considering as part of our long-term plan.

Right now, we're focused on strengthening our position in the UK market, but the ultimate goal is to take the Host & Stay brand beyond the UK.

The recent investment gives us the resources

and confidence to explore opportunities abroad when the time is right.

The investment represents a significant step forward for Host & Stay, which celebrates its sixth anniversary in December. Has the business exceeded growth targets or is it tracking the course set out in your initial blueprint?

Host & Stay has consistently outperformed our expectations in terms of growth.

Since launching in 2018, we've grown from a local family business, with a handful of properties, to managing more than 1500 holiday lets across the UK.

While we had ambitious targets from the start, the demand for high-quality, professionally managed short-term rentals has exceeded even our optimistic forecasts.

Our trajectory is certainly in line with, if not ahead of, the original blueprint.

Growth Partner is the brainchild of ex-Newcastle Royal Grammar School pupil and HomeServe co-founder Richard Harpin. Having such a renowned entrepreneur validate your business model must fill you with great confidence?

Absolutely! Richard's backing through Growth Partner is a huge validation of our business model.

His success in building HomeServe into a FTSE 250 company demonstrates his deep understanding of what it takes to grow a business sustainably.

Having Richard and the team at Growth Partner believe in our vision gives us incredible confidence as we continue to scale Host & Stay.

The UK holiday market has boomed in recent years, with the impact of events such as COVID-19 and financial constraints caused by higher living costs encouraging more people to explore Britain. How do you see that momentum continuing as we head into 2025 and beyond?

The COVID-19 pandemic and other economic factors have made staycations more appealing.

We expect this momentum to continue into 2025 and beyond, as more people appreciate the value, convenience and flexibility of domestic travel.

Additionally, with growing trends toward sustainable tourism and the rise of digital nomads, we believe there will be sustained demand for short-term rentals across the UK.

Prior to launching Host & Stay, your career included time with car sales firm Peter Vardy Limited, in Scotland, where you became a board director at just 25. You've spoken previously about the impact of that role, not least the nurturing you received from the company's eponymous founder. Just how influential was that time, and how has it helped shape your oversight of Host & Stay?

My time at Peter Vardy was incredibly formative for my career.

Peter was a mentor, and the values he instilled in me – customer centricity, attention to detail and the importance of building a strong team – have been integral to how I run Host & Stay.

Becoming a board director at a young age gave me the confidence and leadership skills to take calculated risks and scale a business, which has been instrumental to Host & Stay's success.

The power of three

Muckle LLP

www.muckle-llp.com
LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

Leading regional law firm Muckle LLP has reported record-breaking financial results for the third consecutive year. Here, Jason Wainwright, managing partner, reflects on this success and lays out the firm’s plans for the future.

Muckle has announced another year of outstanding performance.

The firm achieved its third consecutive year of record-breaking turnover and profit, reporting a turnover of just over £17 million, a solid 4.5 per cent increase, and a profit of more than £4.2 million, an 11 per cent increase, for the financial year.

Managing partner Jason Wainwright credits the firm’s continued success to an open, people-focused culture, a successful strategic regional growth plan, a steadfast commitment to clients and acting as a force for good in its communities.

Key growth areas

Key areas of growth during 2023/2024 included agricultural, rural estates and private client services, up by 11 per cent.

Corporate achieved record-breaking turnover with 11 per cent growth.

Dispute resolution was up by a remarkable 24 per cent, with employment growing by 21 per cent.

The firm also secured several regional and national public sector appointments, including its re-appointment to the NEPO panel and new appointments to the North West Legal Consortium and Pagabo national framework for academy services.

It also continued investing in key practice areas such as its dispute resolution, construction, sports, education and charity teams.

Despite inflationary pressures and significant investments in these areas, the firm successfully increased profit by just under 11 per cent, maintaining its commitment to sustainable and responsible growth.



Pictured, Jason Wainwright, Muckle LLP managing partner



Pictured, from left to right, are Anthony Evans, Muckle LLP partner and head of corporate finance, and Jason Wainwright, Muckle LLP managing partner

“The continued growth across all sectors of our business is testament to the dedication of our excellent team and the strength of our client relationships”

A commitment to responsibility

As a B Corp Certified™ firm, Muckle continues to prioritise its social and environmental impact.

Through its Community Fund, managed by the Tyne and Wear Community Foundation, the firm proudly donated £33,060 in grants to community initiatives this year, reflecting its ongoing dedication to corporate responsibility.

Charities such as Clean Slate Solutions, in Teesside, and Carlisle Key, in Cumbria, have benefited from its financial and business support.

Firm-wide volunteering has increased further, with Muckle employees doing everything from packing food parcels at the Newcastle Foodbank to supporting charities in pro bono work – three of its solicitors recently featured on the Pro-Bono Recognition List 2024.

Jason says: “We are incredibly proud of our results this year.

“The continued growth across all sectors of our business is testament to the dedication of our excellent team and the strength of our client relationships.

“Despite economic challenges, we’ve been able to invest in our people and services, ensuring

we remain at the forefront of the legal industry in the North East and Cumbria, and have been able to increase our investment in our local communities, driving real, positive change.

“This year’s financial results demonstrate the success of our strategic investments and long-term planning.

“Maintaining strong financial health ensures stability for our clients and people as we continue to grow in 2025 and beyond.”

Looking ahead to 2025

With turnover already 16 per cent ahead of last year’s figures, Muckle is poised for another strong growth year in 2025.

The firm remains committed to investing in its people and local communities, and providing market-leading outcomes to clients across the region and beyond.

Muckle recently announced Jason will step down as managing partner on March 31, 2025, with Anthony Evans assuming the role from April 1.

This planned transition comes at a time of great success for the firm, with strong financial results and a strategic vision for continued growth.



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

Cyber firm's growth ambitions boosted by Venture Sunderland Fund

Northstar Ventures

www.northstarventures.co.uk

LinkedIn: Northstar Ventures UK

Northstar Ventures has ignited its new Venture Sunderland Fund, leading a £625,000 investment round into FAT32, a company making exciting changes in the regulatory tech industry.

The words compliance and innovation are rarely found in the same sentence.

However, FAT32 is transforming cybersecurity compliance from a lengthy chore into an effortless process, with potential cost savings of up to 70 per cent.

Customers using its flagship OneClickComply® innovation can complete compliance tasks up to 20 times faster than the traditional method of calling in costly external consultants, with the software automating the implementation of major cyber and data security protocols.

FAT32 is offering customers compliance in days rather than months, and in a much more cost-effective way.

The UK cybersecurity market was estimated at £11 billion in 2023, and is expected to almost double to £20 billion by 2029, with growth being driven by increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks and regulatory interventions.

Cybersecurity is becoming a board level matter in many organisations, with the consequences of a breach or non-compliance being substantial.

The founding team of Connor Greig, Conor Sizeland and David Warren share a passion for emerging technologies, and have used their collective experience in software engineering and cybersecurity to create a trailblazing solution.

The founding team are supported by chair Kelvin Harrison, former chair of Sunderland-based Clixifix, and advisor Jamie Whitcombe-Jones.

Northstar Ventures' investment comprises £350,000 from the Venture Sunderland Fund and £200,000 from the North East Innovation Fund, supported by the European Regional Development Fund, alongside angel investors.

The funds will aid development of this ground-breaking software and support the expansion of the team.

The company has ambitious aims to generate highly-skilled jobs in Sunderland, adding to the growth of the cybersecurity cluster in the wider region.

Connor, FAT32 co-founder, says: "We are delighted to be the first investment from the

“Cybersecurity is a pressing challenge that affects us all, and keeping on top of it is increasingly difficult due to the ever-evolving threat landscape”

It examines customers' current processes against major compliance standards such as Cyber Essentials, ISO 27001 and GDPR, highlights any areas in which they are deficient, and then offers a highly innovative automated implementation process to resolve any issues.

It is compatible with most major software providers including AWS, Google Cloud and Azure, and provides a clear audit trail for third parties, helping to take the headache out of year end.



Pictured, from left to right, are Conor Sizeland, FAT32 co-founder and chief technology officer; Kelvin Harrison, FAT32 chair; Tom O'Neill, Northstar Ventures investment manager; Connor Greig, FAT32 co-founder and chief executive; and David Warren, FAT32 co-founder and chief commercial officer



Northstar Ventures
For more information about Northstar Ventures, its different 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.

Venture Sunderland Fund
The Venture Sunderland Fund has been established to invest in companies that will catalyse the economic growth and prosperity of Sunderland.

It is primarily focused on businesses in technology, advanced manufacturing and green industries, which are focused on growth and creating high-quality, well-paid jobs in the city region. Visit the website at the top of this article for more information.

Venture Sunderland Fund.

"We are truly passionate about levelling-up the North East by creating skilled digital jobs in the region, and are thrilled to be working with Northstar Ventures to do just that.

"Cybersecurity is a pressing challenge that affects us all, and keeping on top of it is increasingly difficult due to the ever-evolving threat landscape.

"That's why we have automated cybersecurity compliance to make it easy and affordable for all businesses.

"Our platform is the first to combine continuous monitoring with automated remediation.

"We highlight non-compliance issues and fix them automatically, helping companies navigate their compliance journey within a

click, with no cyber experience required."

Tom O'Neill, investment manager at Northstar Ventures, adds: "We are very pleased to complete our investment in FAT32.

"This is the first investment from the Venture Sunderland Fund, which has been designed to provide funding for high-potential businesses seeking to start up or grow in the city.

"The FAT32 founding team is impressive and has developed a leading solution to a major problem in the cybersecurity sector, which many business owners will be able to empathise with.

"We are excited to join the company on the next stage of its journey, and look forward to working with them to grow the business at scale."

A close-up portrait of an elderly man with white hair and blue eyes, wearing a dark jacket over a light-colored shirt. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a wooden structure.

DAVID LAND

Getting it right for future generations

The Auckland Project

Slowly but surely, brick by brick, building by building, Jonathan Ruffer's vision for Bishop Auckland is coming to life. The philanthropist wants the town to thrive. And with the Auckland Project, he's doing all he can to make that happen. As the town, and its glorious past, comes back to life, Colin Young meets the project's new interim chief executive David Land to learn about the latest plans to maintain Bishop Auckland's resurgence.

Words by Colin Young

Photography by Michael Sreenan

A team of Durham University archaeologists carefully chip away at the soil in a small pit just behind the gates at Auckland Palace.

It's a temporary excavation, in front of the ornate building that has been the seat of the Prince Bishops since medieval times, and is still home to the Archbishop of Durham's offices.

And with each gentle stroke of a brush, or sharp tap with the hammerstone, more and more secrets and trinkets are revealing themselves.

As if to prove the point, two small boys walk towards the three foot deep squash court-sized hole in the grass with their dad.

"Come here, lads," says John, one of the team of eager diggers among the ruins.

He stands, showing off two large damp patches on the knees of his waterproofs, holding a small object in the palm of his hand.

"Can I show you what we've just found?", he asks.

Encouraged by their dad, who takes one of his sons' plastic toys, they approach the pit and the bearded man.

He hands over a dark cylindrical object.

"This is a medieval pot handle," says John to the two young lads, who are absolutely mesmerised.

He adds: "Stephen over there has just dug that up this minute, and we'll send that off to the laboratory for tests. But we think it's probably from 1215 to 1550."

He's looking at the dad now.

He says: "That's been buried under the ground for 500 to 800 years – you're the second and third people to ever hold it in that time."

Reluctantly, the treasure leaves the lads' small paws and is handed back to John before being bagged and labelled for testing.

Meanwhile, on the other side of Bishop

Auckland, a mile from the Palace, dust flies across Kingsway Square, the new green space and car park, with its electric charge points and recycled benches.

Not far down the road, groundwork has started on a new bus station, which is expected to open in time for Christmas 2025.

The changes in the 11 years since Jonathan Ruffer landed in Bishop Auckland are remarkable.

And the work has only just started.

Jonathan is the leading investment banker and art collector, now in his 70s, who, when he discovered the 12 paintings by Spanish master Francisco de Zurbarán were being sold by the Church of England, bought the lot.

In fact, he bought the castle and grounds to match.

The paintings, featuring Jacob and his 12 sons, weren't going anywhere.

They'd been in the palace since 1756, when they were acquired by Bishop Trevor, so Jonathan donated more than £15 million to restore the Bishop's Palace and has opened it to the public and hundreds of willing volunteers, many of whom had never set foot in the place.

And since the formation of the Auckland Project, the transformation of the town has continued apace.

It is unrecognisable.

The story of the Palace is one of faith and power, so he built the Faith Museum, based on the history of Christianity and faith in Britain, seamlessly blending a golden tithe barn-shaped building into the walls of the Palace.

The Faith Museum has nearly 300 artefacts and objects from museums and galleries across the world, designed to test your understanding and knowledge of faith, religion and worship and its influences on our lives throughout the ages, as well as today.



I've always had a soft spot for Bishop Auckland. And since philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer's arrival, the town has become a must-visit destination - and you really can't do it all in a day. There is a lot of work to be done to bring in the tourists, but The Auckland Project has made some great strides.

- Colin Young

Jonathan's donations founded and built the Spanish Gallery, a glass-fronted building on the market square that was opened by King Charles and Queen Letizia of Spain two years ago, and contains works by the likes of El Greco, Murillo and Juan Bautista Maino.

It has already earned worldwide recognition.

Across the road stands the Mining Art Gallery, where the works of local artists Norman Cornish and Tom McGuinness are displayed, and Auckland Tower, the wooden viewing platform offering a panorama of the town and all the project is trying to create.

From here, you can see the Deer Park and Walled Garden, waiting to be explored and adored.

Jonathan also donated the money to create Kynren, the dramatic 90-minute show depicting the epic tale of England, which brings in sell-out 8000 crowds from across the country every night throughout the summer months.

David Land is the Auckland Project's latest chief executive and is less than a month into the role to 'commercialise' the town and its many unique attractions.

Born and bred in Bishop Auckland, David has taken over as interim chief executive of The Auckland Project from Edward Perry, and is now the regeneration charity's representative on the Stronger Town board, after standing down as chair.

"It came completely out of left field," David tells N magazine.

He says: "But I said yes straight away.

"I think I've got that energy and infectious activity and a commercial brain.

"I'm not about the curatorial - other people here are far more qualified than me for that, including Jonathan - I'm here to bring everything together.

"Bishop Auckland is very lucky to have Jonathan; if you started this from scratch, you couldn't dream of finding someone like him.

"But stately homes and museums across the country need charitable donations and we're no different, so we've got other events to generate revenue that can help subsidise the amazing art we've got.

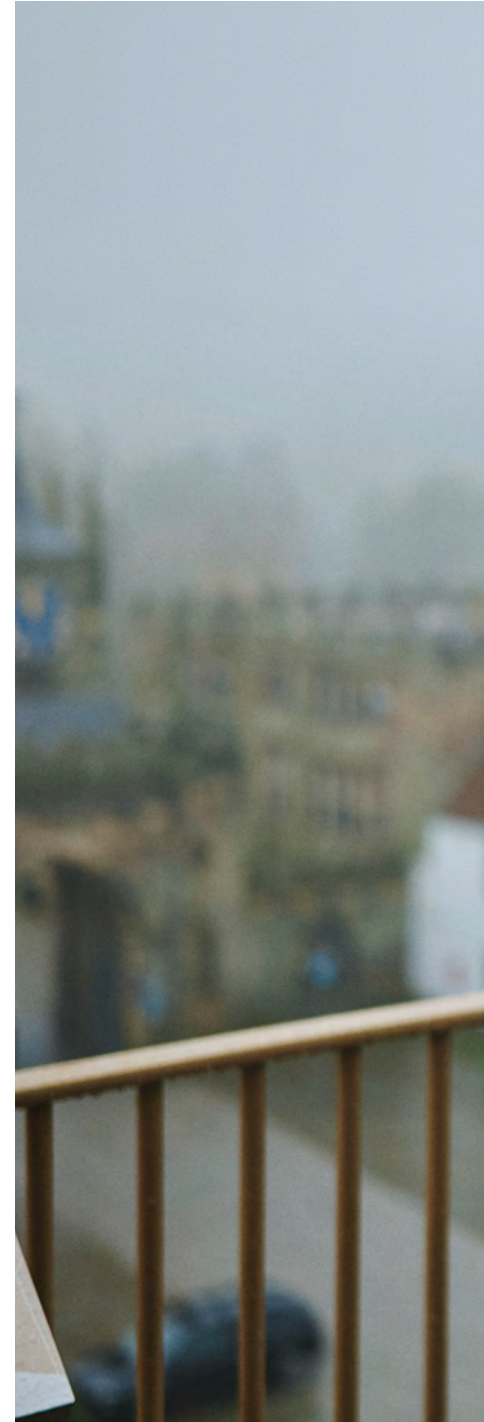
"I think Jonathan would say he's still not finished, he's about halfway through, and while we don't know what it's going to look like, we do know it's going to be transformational and impactful and will help the community.

"He's that type of philanthropic visionary.

"He needs to get that team right - and he wanted somebody with a bit of commercial nous - and that's why I've come in.

"It's about protecting his investment and shaping the legacy he leaves, and putting something in place that is sustainable year-on-year.

"We wouldn't get a quarter of the grants in without his money; we wouldn't have got the £33 million from Stronger Towns, for example, if it hadn't been for Jonathan putting his money in too because it's bang for buck and any grant has to be matched.





THE AUCK



“He’s put in something like £200 million, and that was costing £50,000 a day, which is just not sustainable, so how do we maximise the revenues through visitors and make this an attractive place to come?”

“People think nothing of a day out to the Lakes, or spending a couple of hours in Tynemouth or Bamburgh; so why not attract visitors to Bishop Auckland and make this a destination?”

Among David’s first tasks was overseeing various events in the town and Palace grounds, such as the Pumpkin Forest, which hosted thousands during the darker hours of October to trek into the trees and seek out 600 hand-carved pumpkins.

Buoyed by the success of Kynren, this will become an annual event, having attracted more than 13,000 visitors this year.

They’re hoping for similar success in December too, making Bishop Auckland a ‘Christmas Town’, with AGLow, a dazzling light show through the gardens and grounds, which runs to New Year’s Eve, and the Santa Express, which chugs along the Weardale Railway to Stanhope and back.

This is one of the Auckland Project’s latest initiatives, and the Weardale Railway will, in time, provide a link from Bishop Auckland to Killhope Lead Mining Museum, and hopefully seasonal steam trains.

There are also fast-moving plans to build a 70-bedroom hotel in Market Square, supplementing a new banqueting suite and restaurant, in addition to the latest STACK complex and its street food offerings, and make Kingsway’s mile of potential more attractive.

David is Bishop Auckland through and through.

A local lad, his grandad was a miner who wouldn’t let his kids go down the pits.

David started his education in Coundon, just outside Bishop Auckland, before becoming an apprentice at Darlington engine maker Cummins.

LAND

PROJECT



“We have some real gems here; we just need to tell everyone else and get them to visit and stay - and I’m convinced they will”

He moved on to business development director and plant director roles at car parts maker Tallent, in Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, expanding the company globally and helping increase turnover from £8 million to £200 million before it was sold to current owner Gestamp.

He’s a Newcastle United fan – he makes the occasional trip to see Bishop Auckland Football Club at Heritage Park – helped found UTC South Durham, co-founded IA Growth, chairs the Engineering and Manufacturing Network and is a University of Sunderland governor.

Despite all of those commitments, though, he couldn’t turn down the opportunity to help his home town.

On the wall of his office, around the corner from the Palace gates, is a whiteboard.

David takes his red and blue marker pens and draws a crude map of the North East, with Bishop Auckland at its centre – just as it was about 900 years ago.

He’s done this many times.

As he scribbles squares and circles round the epicentre, the numbers and the targets get bigger.

He says: “25,000 in Bishop Auckland, South West Durham has 200,000, the North East Local Enterprise Partnership area has 2.2 million.

“The whole North,” he says, drawing a huge circle, “has 15.5 million.”

Get the tourists in from those areas and it will

make the Auckland Project sustainable, and no doubt worthwhile.

He knows it’s a mammoth task. And he cannot wait.

He says: “There are three parts to this.

“One, this is my home town; two, I have this vision after working with Stronger Towns; and three, we have Jonathan.

“We have the key ingredients for a successful cake; it’s the perfect opportunity for the 100-plus people involved in the Auckland Project and the 500-plus volunteers and, on top of that, there are more than 1000 volunteers at Kynren.

“It’s about the community and working together, getting it right for future generations of this town.

“I want to gel them together and galvanise the organisation, making sure we are all pushing in the same direction, marketing the town so we can sell these great attractions to the millions of visitors.

“What will Bishop Auckland look like in 2030?

“We don’t know, but if we have a vision of what we’re trying to do, and put plans in place – and I’m not saying it’s going to be easy – it will be easier to put all the pieces of the jigsaw together.

“We have some real gems here; Jonathan has ensured that.

“We just need to tell everyone else and get them to visit and stay.

“And I’m convinced they will.”

LAST WORD

Closing this edition of N magazine, Dr Christian Marston, co-founder and chief operating officer of Altilium, talks about the company's plans to create a Teesside-based electric vehicle battery recycling factory. Spotlighting the value of recent grant funding to the project's progress, he also tells Steven Hugill of the urgency needed to drive forward sustainable motoring and how Government policy pledges represent a welcome commitment to delivering a green revolution.

Dr Christian Marston

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The funding will help deliver a new feasibility study on Altilium's planned Teesside factory, which would recycle elements from spent electric vehicle battery waste into key components for new batteries. What will the study assess, and – if its findings are positive – when could we see construction begin?

The study is all about de-risking the scale-up of our technology and supporting the investment decision for one of the largest green infrastructure projects in the UK.

We've already done a lot of engineering work for the design of the plant, and we've identified a number of potential locations in Teesside.

The region has a world-leading chemical industry, and electric vehicle battery recycling is essentially large-scale chemical processing.

We want to tap into this skilled workforce and know-how, to help position the North East as a leader in the energy transition.

The new study will focus on key aspects such as site selection, environmental impact and the technical viability of scaling up battery recycling operations.

One of the challenges is building the recycling capacity at the largest scale for the economics to work.

For the Teesside plant, we're talking about processing 150,000 batteries per year and supplying 30,000 tonnes of cathode active materials back into the UK battery industry.

So, the capital expenditure for this kind of infrastructure is very big.

The study is going to examine these economic considerations, including project costs, potential partnerships and financial returns.

We want to complete within nine to ten months, get steel in the ground and start creating highly-skilled green jobs, possibly as early as the end of 2025, pending securing the required permits.

The proposed factory has been described as the UK's largest plant of its kind. What impact would it have on creating a more sustainable motoring sector?

By building a plant at this scale, we're significantly enhancing the UK's ability to recycle end-of-life batteries, which means we can close

the loop in the life cycle and make electric vehicles even greener.

To get to net-zero, we need to electrify the grid and transport.

This is going to require large volumes of critical minerals, such as lithium and nickel.

Currently, the UK is dependent on the global market for these raw materials, with China dominating supply chains.

Our aim is to give the UK a domestic, sustainable and low-carbon source of these critical materials.

Our recycling process can recover 95 per cent of the cathode metals, including lithium, from spent battery waste, which reduces the need for virgin raw materials and lowers the environmental footprint of electric vehicles.

By keeping these raw materials in the UK, we're reducing reliance on imported materials, providing industrial resilience and supporting the broader shift towards low-carbon transport.

Critically, the facility will help attract battery manufacturers to the UK, supporting the automotive industry.

It will also enable UK car manufacturers to comply with new EU battery regulations that include strict targets for the recycling and recovery of critical metals.

The funding boost comes against the backdrop of a Labour vow to restore a ban on sales of petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030. Does that commitment provide you with confidence that the UK's sustainability drive is moving in the right direction?

That commitment really reinforces the urgency of transitioning to electric vehicles.

It provides clear direction and policy stability, which is essential for long-term investments in sustainable technologies like battery recycling.

If you look at the wider context of the Government's industrial strategy, the new National Wealth Fund and Labour's ambitions to make the UK a clean energy superpower, it gives us confidence the UK is serious about its sustainability goals, and that companies like Altilium can play a pivotal role in supporting the clean energy future.



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