

# IN

# Simon Rowland

*Delivering opportunities and supporting growth*





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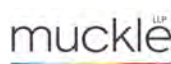
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WELCOME TO ISSUE 468

# Editor's word

**With a new year comes great opportunity for change. Here, Steven Hugill explores the theme in relation to the North East's growth ambitions while highlighting its presence throughout this issue...**



Hello and welcome to the latest edition of N magazine and, indeed, to a new year.

With the festive decorations once again stowed into the farthest corner of the loft and the final traces of snow-effect spray wiped from windows, attention turns to unpacking the coming 12 months and the opportunities that lie ahead for the North East.

If 2024 was a year of laying foundations, then 2025 is a time to build.

A year that closed with a second headline devolution deal gathering increasing momentum, significant industrial investments and important transport improvements all provide a solid base from which to construct a thriving North East.

We have the toolkit and then some; we just need to ensure we properly follow the construction manual.

Success will come from a collaborative build, one where the public and private sectors better coalesce, where business and education form stronger bonds to nurture tomorrow's workforce, and where innovation and sustainability form the crux of growth strategies.

By combining our strengths, our skills and our spirit, we can create the change that delivers the North East we need and want.

And here at N magazine, we're playing our part to accelerate the process.

Late last year, we took our flagship VISION 31 campaign – which aims to lay a platform for growth into the next decade – to London, where City investment bosses met North East business leaders in a conference that showcased the region's rich potential.

The event (which you can read more about on pages 18 to 21) was a huge success, and built on scores of roundtable and panel discussions we've hosted over previous years that have helped set blueprints for meaningful economic and social change.

And that commitment will continue throughout 2025 and beyond, with many more events scheduled across the region. We'll be announcing our full calendar in due course, but please get in touch for more information.

Change too permeates this edition of the magazine.

Where once biplane enthusiasts used its building to take flight from Newcastle's Town Moor, today Hii Club is helping people reach new heights in fitness and wellbeing from its Gosforth headquarters.

And with a Leeds expansion well underway, we speak to co-founders Josh Rose, Steph Barlow and Lloyd Riddell, to learn more about the physical change they are helping members achieve while overseeing the venture's own evolution.

We also chat to Simon Rowland, the newly-appointed head of Womble Bond Dickinson's Newcastle office.

With more than 20 years' experience with the law firm, he talks about the honour he feels in taking on the top role and embedding the lessons he's learned over that time into his tenureship.

He also speaks about how Womble Bond Dickinson will continue supporting the region's growth agenda, not least through its devolution deals – the North East Combined Authority, he says, represents the "biggest opportunity in a generation" – while playing a central role in the firm's transatlantic operations.

And we sit down – and raise a glass – with Ben Cleary, founder of Full Circle Brew Co.

Born into the Lanchester Group business, whose portfolio includes Lanchester Wines and contract wine bottler Greencroft Bottling, his career has, literally, gone full circle, returning to the world of beer.

Despite having only recently celebrated its fifth anniversary, his Full Circle Brew Co venture has made great strides.

Its achievements already include supermarket listings, export deals and an airport partnership, with the creation of a wedding venue complemented by further charity and industry collaborations.

And with plans mapped out for new beers, and health and wellbeing drives, across 2025 and beyond, its progress shows no sign of slowing.

I hope you enjoy this issue.

**Steven**



# A TIME OF GREAT TRANSFORMATION

**Following a year of significant transformation, multi-channel publisher NET is rolling out plans to further strengthen its market offer. Here, Steven Hugill, NET and Bdaily editor-in-chief, talks about the meaning behind the brand refresh, its steadfast commitment to independent journalism and the rising influence of its high-profile events portfolio.**

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Welcome to the beginning of a new year – a time for fresh perspectives and bold ambitions.

2025 means change here at NET too, though our transformation began months before the first annual planners were hitting shelves.

Over the past 12 months, the team and I have significantly refreshed our independent multi-platform publishing offer.

Where once we were North East Times, today we are NET.

An umbrella term for a house of print and digital brands, our new title reflects our regional roots while emphasising our national aspirations.

The change is showcased in this very publication, our flagship print magazine, which carries a new name, striking masthead and design palette that embodies our forward-looking ethos.

The transformation also includes our N website, N magazine's digital twin, which provides uniquely curated articles that peer beyond the headlines to spotlight the people and businesses driving change across the North East.

It covers too Bdaily, the national business news website we added to the NET stable in mid-2024.

Melding the latest commercial sector headlines with new and original features to audiences that include a 50,000-strong national subscriber community, it also services clients' PR campaigns.

Some things, though, haven't changed.

This magazine may have a new name, but it retains the authoritative and analytical voice – delivered through compelling independent journalism, striking photography and forward-thinking design – that has become so synonymous with its pages.

So too remains our commitment to helping individuals and organisations succeed, to championing the North East and to being a catalyst for positive change.

And that will be supported in 2025 and beyond by our high-level events portfolio.

Delivered through our NET Presents division, we will continue to explore trending topics via roundtable and panel discussions that develop actionable plans for meaningful economic and social transformation.

Such influence was highlighted at the recent London-based VISION 31 *Why the North East?* event, which you can read more about on pages 18 to 21.

Attracting close to 100 guests, both North East businesspeople and City-based financial sector personnel, the flagship summit – the latest step in VISION 31's mission to lay a platform for growth into the next decade – showcased the broadness of our reach across multiple industry sectors, the richness of our network and our ability to instigate conversation capable of actioning tangible change.

And that will endure in 2025, with another London-based VISION 31 conference set to be complemented by events in Sunderland and Tees Valley.

Elsewhere, a suite of sector-specific roundtables and panel discussions will take place across the year, covering areas including skills, funding and investment, green energy, the built environment and tech and life science.

They will be accompanied by the return of the North East HR&D Awards, which will once again highlight the amazing organisations and people working across HR, learning and development and related specialisms.

Set for June 5, the ceremony, which last year attracted a near 40 per cent rise in award submissions – in what was NET's debut in delivering the showpiece – promises to be another special evening.

But that's not all.

I'm delighted to reveal we'll be adding another high-profile event to our NET stable this year.

We're still working through the final details, which limits what I can say, but I can confirm we are collaborating with cross-sector partners to shine a spotlight on the growth journeys and success stories of businesses across the North East.

Look out for its grand unveiling in the early part of 2025.

This, and our many other endeavours listed above, all point to another year of championing the North East and driving growth through inspiring stories, bold initiatives and transformative events.

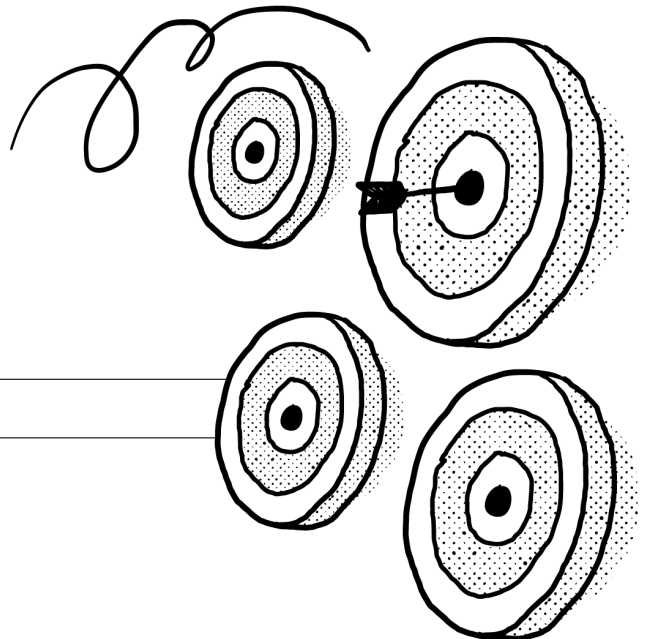
Here's to another year of success.



# SPOT LIGHT

## Time to U-turn on emissions targets

By Steven Hugill







**From Nissan's warning about Government emissions targets to politics by algorithm and Jaguar's rebrand, Steven Hugill analyses some of the stories impacting the news agenda.**

### Strains, trains and automobiles

In a room on the top floor of Sunderland's new City Hall building, a wooden map spreads out across a large table top.

Split in half by the winding River Wear and dotted with bright green foliage, the miniature scene presents a faithful reflection of the city's undulations, buildings and landmarks.

From the Stadium of Light to Mackie's Corner, the Empire and the commercial and residential structures that have sprouted from the Riverside Sunderland venture on the old Vaux brewery site, the city is neatly depicted in scale form.

Beyond its centre, though, the topography is somewhat more unsteady.

Nissan – so long the bastion of Wearside's employment scene – is on a rocky road.

Already grappling with falling sales in China and the US, which have put 9000 international jobs on the line, European bosses say Westminster emissions targets – that have already seen rivals Vauxhall and Ford announce cuts – “risk undermining” its case for making cars in the UK.

We have, of course, been here before. Remember the post-Brexit Downing Street talks between the Japanese firm and ministers in 2016 that provided assurances for its future on Sunderland soil?

Well, here we are again. And, once more, we need a similarly positive outcome.

Nissan's Wearside plant is an economic colossus, employing about 6000 staff directly and supporting thousands more roles across a vast supply chain that includes many North East operators.

It is also a capital for electric vehicle production, having made the all-green Leaf hatchback for more than a decade, prowess that convinced bosses to produce carbon-free versions of its best-selling Qashqai and Juke models on the same site.

So to see it close, or become a shadow of its present self, is a prospect not worthy of consideration.

Speaking to N magazine before Christmas, Chancellor Rachel Reeves said talks have taken place, and will continue to be added to ministers' diaries in 2025.

Confirming a review into the Conservative-founded emissions blueprint – which presently demands 100 per cent of new car sales be carbon-free models by 2035 – she promised Westminster's new regime is committed to “not making it any harder to produce cars in this country”.

And there should be no excuses.

Labour's cabinet includes Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds and Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, who both hail from the same parish as Nissan, so know full well the impact the company has made on the region since its arrival in the mid-1980s.

Having secured some positive PR in the weeks before the festive period, by fulfilling a pre-election pledge to help deliver new work for ailing Newton Aycliffe-based trainbuilder Hitachi, Labour's lens must remain on the North East.

That deal secured about 700 direct posts, kept suppliers on track and saved face for the pocket of the UK that gave the world rail travel.

Nissan, though, would be seismic.

Which is why we need action, and quickly, to avoid any potential of it disappearing in the rearview mirror.

### Here's Donny...

Here we go, then. Another bout of Donald Trump.

And, in this case, Elon Musk, who's swapped hawking his jumped-up Johnny Cab robotaxi for time flogging politics by algorithm.

In a way, it's a pretty seamless move; after all, both are underpinned by dedicated faith in the outlandish.

And what better way to warm up for helping orchestrate Trump's second stanza than using his X platform to get involved in a bit of UK politics?

Jumping on a petition launched by a Tory-voting pub landlord – who sought to oust Labour having woke one morning in a grump with the Prime Minister – Musk was all over the story, musing ‘interesting’ and ‘wow’ on posts that pushed the campaign along the increasingly weird corridors of his X social media vacuum.

Was it, though? Really?

I mean, Labour is doing a fine job in ceding its election gains, but a Westminster regime upsetting members of the electorate is hardly new.

And, of course, a petition for a new ballot isn't how the system works.

Space X's boss must have been busy looking skywards when that lesson was doled out, as he presumably was when Boris Johnson and his successors were cackhandedly running the country...

Not that it mattered to Elon, of course.

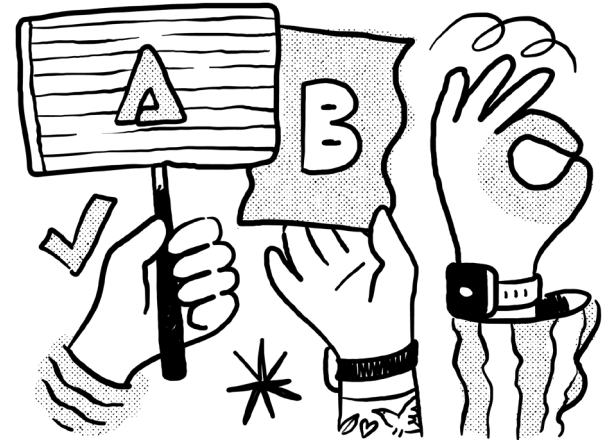
He got his clicks and his platform's followers got to shout into a few populist echo chambers for a while.

Fake news? Only when it suits...

### Rebrand rumpus

Returning to the automotive sector, and whatever your take on Jaguar's recent rebrand, you have to at least tip your hat to the company's marketing team.

To create such furore and interest in the brand when you don't have a physical car to look at, never mind drive, is quite an achievement.



Like seemingly everything these days, the famous marque's refresh – which came complete with a new font and a video of nonplussed models in vivid reds, pinks and yellows – incurred a binary reaction, including a barb from dear old Elon.

The true test will come when the fluff and fanciness is replaced by reality, when Jaguar's new all-electric offer hits the forecourts in earnest.

But in a world where the cost of producing electric models remains higher than conventional alternatives, and where the infrastructure needed to charge models continues to play catch-up, there are no guarantees sales will fly.

And if they don't, then that would say more about the state of the UK's economy and its green transport landscape than it would any impact caused by figures in bright clothing and a lower case typeface.

# WHY THE NORTH EAST?

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**Change is sweeping across the North East, and NET's VISION 31 campaign is helping drive further momentum. Through a high-profile London summit, featuring regional businesses and sector leaders, NET's flagship regeneration programme showcased the North East to the City and beyond, highlighting the game-changing advances it is hothousing, the highly-skilled workers it is nurturing and the transformative projects it is leading to deliver a sustainable future for all. Here, Kate Hewison highlights the key takeaways from the event.**

The North East is a fantastic place to do business, with incredible ingenuity and a talented workforce with the skills to deliver tomorrow's advances today.

That was the overwhelming message from N and Bdaily publisher NET's *Why the North East?* London summit.

The latest chapter in the multi-platform media company's flagship VISION 31 campaign – which aims to amplify the North East's position at the forefront of pioneering change – the event featured expert insight and opinion from business leaders across a number of sectors.

Taking place at event partner Aon's London headquarters, based in the iconic Leadenhall Building at the heart of the capital's financial district, nearly 100 attendees heard about the growing interest and commitment to the North East's vision for the future.

The morning – hosted by NET and Bdaily editor-in-chief Steven Hugill – included two insightful panel discussions, question and answer sessions and networking.

And the message was loud, clear and unanimous; the North East is brimming with talent, the people are like no other and the overheads are significantly less than other regions in the UK.

The first panel, titled *The Power of the North East*, discussed the transformation of the region into a thriving commercial landscape.

Audience members heard from Jeremy Middleton, founder and chief executive of Middleton Enterprises; Lee Hartley, founder and chief executive of Fairstone Group; Judith McMinn, founder and chief executive of Rezon; Alison Gwynn, chief executive of North East Screen; and Stewart Dickson, chief executive of Weardale Lithium.

With 80 acquisitions and £70 billion in client assets, Fairstone chief executive Lee highlighted three specific aspects where the North East has helped the Sunderland-headquartered financial advisory firm grow – early-stage capital investment, graduates

from North East universities and lower cost premises.

Judith – who founded Rezon, which creates protective headwear for sport – discussed why she chose to build her business in the North East.

She said: "There was really no logic to be in County Durham as a start-up, but there was a passion and a support network that made it very possible.

"One of the things not so well known is how much support is being poured into early-stage start-ups, for people to craft their ideas."

She added: "There is a plethora of investment opportunities, because there has been so much effort and work put in to helping start-ups and early-stage founders be very clear about what their business is.

"That is one of the reasons why we have scaled."

The North East is experiencing rapid growth in the creative sector, thanks to significant investment and local authority support.

Referencing the impending £450 million Crown Works Studios, in Sunderland, Alison said: "The TV industry is worth billions annually, but less than half a per cent of content was made in the North East.

"If you had a passion, were talented and wanted to work in that creative sector, unless you got a job on Vera, you absolutely had to leave the region – and that is criminal."

She added: "Now, the North East is the fastest-growing region for the screen sector in the UK.

"That means we can work together, collaborate, cross borders and fix problems."

For Stewart – who unveiled 125-job factory plans at Weardale Lithium last year – the region's collaborative spirit was one of the fundamental attractions.

He said: "I view the historical legacy of the

North East as an inherent advantage, but it is often spun the other way around.

"It is in the North East's DNA to work hard, do tough things and be innovative.

"Across the five universities in the North East, we're pleased to be working with at least three on a regular basis.

"We hope to be one of those innovative companies that is retaining high-quality students trained in the North East, and keep them in the North East with high paying jobs."

The £4.2 billion north of the region devolution deal and appointment of North East mayor Kim McGuinness presents a significant opportunity to reshape its economic future.

However, Jeremy said the potential benefits of devolution depend on effective implementation.

He said: "Devolving spending doesn't necessarily change anything unless it's spent better.

"It requires great leadership, a focus on a limited number of big ideas and winning the support of all stakeholders to deliver on those ideas."

He said that by empowering the region to make targeted investments, devolution can help attract and support businesses.

Jeremy added: "If we get more businesses, we will get more jobs.

"And if we get more jobs, people will build the buildings – it needs to be that way around."

Lee highlighted the need for investment in skills.

He said: "If you look at jobs as a proxy for latent profitability and latent value creation, 5500 jobs are there now, ready and waiting for skilled labour – if they can find people with the right skills.

"One of the key things through the devolution





Pictured, top left, panellists speak in the second discussion, top, right, Graham Robb makes a point during the VISION 31 event and bottom left, panellists speak during the first discussion

deal is putting the right amount of funding and investment into creating the skills that businesses need, rather than just generic things.”

The next panel – Striving for Success: Supercharging Growth in an Era of Devolution – included insight from Dr Arnab Basu, chief executive of Kromek Group; Gary Chapman, director of industrials and infrastructure, head of North East region, CIC, at Lloyds Banking Group; Graham Robb, founder and senior partner of Recognition PR; Rob Hamilton, assistant director, strategy and innovation at the North East Combined Authority; and Natasha Boulding, chief executive and co-founder of Low Carbon Materials.

This discussion again highlighted the North East’s economic potential following the north of the region’s devolution deal.

Echoing the previous panel’s consensus that devolved funds need to be utilised differently, Rob said: “In terms of adult skills, what we’ve been able to do is transform where that funding goes to.

“We’re aligning skills funding to the opportunities within the region in terms of sectors, particularly around the low-carbon economy.”

Noting the combined authority needs to work alongside the private sector, he added: “We see ourselves as being responsible for progressing the opportunities within the region.

“It doesn’t matter who’s got the powers or the funding because, ultimately, we can’t do very much ourselves.

“We have to work in partnership with the private sector to deliver those opportunities.”

The region’s cost advantages, innovative spirit and supportive ecosystem, including initiatives like Sedgefield-based science and technology hub NETPark and the Northern Accelerator programme, were praised.

Dr Basu, whose firm has been headquartered at NETPark since its 2004 opening, said: “The collaboration and partnership with NETPark has been an absolutely pivotal piece for the growth and development of Kromek.

“NETPark in those days was a vision – there were two buildings, five cars in the car park, and us and a few other people.

“Today, if you come to NETPark, it’s a thriving community of technology businesses with high paid jobs.”

Natasha said Low Carbon Materials, a Durham University spin-out, wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t

for Northern Accelerator, the collaborative programme between the region’s universities that helps spur academic ideas into real-world organisations.

The climate tech company – an Earthshot Prize finalist – has received an array of funding, including recent £3 million investment from venture capitalists.

She said: “We’ve been supported by so many different organisations; we are a direct result of the support we have received from the region.

“I feel very privileged to be based somewhere where people genuinely want to help, and you’re only one connection away from someone that can help.

“I think we should harness that identity a bit more.”

On the topic of collaboration and support, Graham highlighted the importance of helping owner-managed businesses grow and thrive.

He said: “If you look at the business population index, there are around 1500-plus businesses per 10,000 of population in London.

“Nationally, the average is 900 businesses per 10,000 population.

“But in the North East, it’s just over 500.”

He added: “In Teesside, Ben Houchen and Siobhan McArdle are developing initiatives that help these owner-managed businesses grow and thrive.

“It’s not just being done at the macro level; it’s been done at the SME level as well.

“That is something that is fundamentally important to growing our economy – we want new and lasting businesses.

“We want to look back and create the businesses of the 22nd century.”

The panellists highlighted the region’s unique position in renewable energy and net-zero initiatives, coupled with its lower operating costs, which make it an attractive investment destination.

They said that with passionate leadership and robust infrastructure, the North East is well positioned to be a leading destination for investment and growth.

Gary said: “If you look at Lloyds’ business confidence survey, the North East is actually the most confident region, and by some distance.

“That’s partly to do with devolution, but I think it’s partly to do with the major investment that we’re seeing, particularly in renewable energy.”



# Budget 'has laid a platform for growth'

**With Labour's autumn Budget having delivered significant revision of the UK's financial landscape, the country is primed for a fresh era of growth. That was the verdict of economic expert Roger Martin-Fagg during a special event hosted by NET and Vistage UK, wherein he also called on firms to include the insight of Gen Z and Gen Alpha staff into their future strategies. Kate Hewison reports.**

[www.vistage.co.uk](http://www.vistage.co.uk)  
[www.cascade.co.uk](http://www.cascade.co.uk)  
[www.monument.raymondjames.uk.com](http://www.monument.raymondjames.uk.com)

Pictures: The Bigger Picture Agency

The UK's financial landscape is set for five years of growth, a renowned behavioural economist has claimed.

Roger Martin-Fagg told North East business leaders Labour "is already on the way" to delivering change, with the party's recent Budget promising to spur notable advances across the next half decade.

During a special NET and Vistage UK event, he also warned the UK's primary economic challenge in the coming years will not be financial resources, but effective leadership of the younger generation and increased productivity.

Speaking to scores of attendees at PROTO, in Gateshead, Roger said Chancellor Rachel Reeves' fiscal blueprint was the best red box unveiling he'd seen in a long time.

He said: "I want you to think of your business and assume that over the last seven years, the managing director has changed five times – how would the business be doing? Badly.

"Now, assume that the senior managers were in post for an average of eight months – so not only has the chief executive changed, but the people who have got the brain to understand how the business actually works move to another business after eight months.

"Then a new senior person comes in and, of course, they're still trying to work out what to do.

"This is the UK plc – this is the Conservative game-playing legacy.

"This is why our infrastructure is bust; this is why planning hasn't been changed; this is why nothing has been done.

"Rachel Reeves has promised to change it, and she is already on the way."

The event – delivered by NET and Vistage UK



alongside partners Cascade Cash Management and Raymond James, Monument – also focused on tax rises, the increased minimum wage threshold and businesses' higher National Insurance contributions.

Roger said: “The minimum wage is up, and part of that is going to be covered by inflation; hopefully, a bigger part of it is going to be covered by productivity gains.

“It’s good for growth – yes, it’s a pain if you own a business – but if you want to get the whole system moving, you’ve got to adjust to that.”

Referring to the rise in National Insurance contributions, he added: “If you look at Rachel Reeves’ tax measures, they are designed to increase her income to cover the rise in current spending.

“And that increase in current spending is mostly due to healthcare and pensions.

“She’s only raising National Insurance to cover the bill of the elderly.

“The problem with Britain is that over the last 14 years we haven’t taxed enough to get public services up to scratch – and yet we haven’t reduced taxes enough either.”

A central takeaway from the event was the importance of nurturing those entering the workforce – what Roger referred to as the ‘producers,’ such as Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

He said: “Our labour supply is going to shrink over the next ten years, which means the taxpayer, when it comes to workers, is going to shrink.

“Once you hit 70, you’re taking more out of the public purse than you’re putting in.

“They are going to have to find ways of taxing the 70-plus – and that’s what the capital gains movement is about.”

He added: “The only way we’re going to get

growth is if Gen Z and Gen Alpha increase their productivity.

“The fundamental issue for me is behavioural.

“Gen Z is 25 per cent of the global workforce, and Gen Alphas will be coming into the workforce over the next five years.

“They are wired completely differently to us, and the only way we’re going to get growth is to understand and find out which buttons to press to get the best out of them.

“If you’ve got a business and you don’t have a Gen Alpha attending your strategy session, you’re making a mistake.”

The event concluded with a panel discussion, wherein Roger was joined by Dr Emma Black, chief executive and co-founder of Cascade Cash Management, and Gary Fawcett, branch principal at wealth manager Raymond James, Monument.

Dr Black echoed the importance of understanding the workings of the next generation, saying society must look beyond stereotypes around artificial intelligence and younger people’s reluctance to pick up the phone.

She said: “It’s not a one-size-fits-all approach.

“We’ve got an opportunity to recognise the strengths in our team; everybody wants to interact in a different way.”

Gary acknowledged a silver lining in the uncertain economic climate.

He said: “I’m an eternal optimist, so I genuinely think we’re in a good place in the UK and the global economy.

“Building blocks are there, interest rates are coming down and inflation is much more under control.

“Good businesses will get stronger.”



# BIG QUESTION



**As Donald Trump returns to the White House, attention shifts to his legislative blueprint and its potential impact on international relations. With mooted import taxes and uncertainty around foreign policy, how do you feel about his second term in office? Are you worried about any impact on the UK's trading relationship with the US, or will America's 47th president deliver positive change?**

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By Steven Hugill

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**John Elliott**  
Chair

**Ebac**

Trump's economic plans hold a lot of merit.

He would be right in imposing tariffs, and we should maybe learn some lessons from his boldness.

Both the US and the UK need to foster investment and trade within their own borders, and look to re-address trade balances.

This should not be limited to services, and should include tangible products that people actually use.

By making imports comparable in price to British-made goods, you support manufacturing here, just like Trump wants to do in the US.

And I'm not talking economic theory; I have skin in the game.

My company does around ten per cent of its business in the US.

We account for nearly half of all industrial dehumidifiers sold in the US, so would need to navigate any tariff changes Trump introduces.

But if there is a favourable agreement with the UK, as has been suggested, it would be great for both economies.

While there are valid concerns about market turmoil and potential cost increases, I'm actually very optimistic.

Manufacturing in the UK or the US won't be safeguarded if it is competing against cheap imports from countries with lower overheads and lower quality thresholds.

What you need is something that drives your own manufacturing sector forward.



**Matthew Robertson**  
Director

**Jackson Hogg**

Donald Trump's return to the White House brings renewed focus on international trade and economic policy.

While potential import taxes and shifts in foreign relations create some uncertainty, they also offer opportunities for UK and US businesses to adapt and innovate.

With the UK election, budget and US election concluded, organisations now have greater clarity to plan for the future.

After a subdued back-end to 2024 – marked by limited talent movement and slower growth – US companies are now accelerating recruitment plans for early 2025.

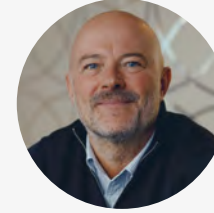
Growth is firmly back on the strategic roadmap, with businesses placing a strong emphasis on attracting new skills in areas such as artificial intelligence, emerging markets and fostering diverse talent pools.

Confidence is high in the US, with more professionals seeking new roles and businesses adapting quickly to evolving demands.

By contrast, the UK feels slightly behind in matching this momentum.

However, this creates a window for organisations to learn from US confidence and focus on becoming more agile and resilient.

Businesses that prioritise a combination of adaptability, a skilled workforce and the strategic integration of artificial intelligence will be well-positioned to compete.



**Simon Rowland**  
Newcastle office head

**Womble Bond Dickinson**

Donald Trump's election success has stirred a mix of apprehension and cautious optimism regarding the UK's trading relationship with the US.

His proposed tariffs on imports, particularly from China and Mexico, have sparked fears of potential trade wars and economic downturns.

Yet, some experts argue the UK's economic growth might only see a minor dip of 0.2 per cent, suggesting there remains room for UK businesses to flourish through exporting.

The renowned special relationship between the US and the UK could be pivotal in alleviating the adverse effects of these tariffs.

Trump's business savvy, and his grasp of international trade dynamics, might provide unexpected advantages for UK enterprises.

Moreover, the chance of the UK being exempted from certain tariffs, or even benefiting from trade redirected away from China and Mexico, presents intriguing opportunities for growth.

While uncertainties around Trump's foreign policy persist, the UK's solid position in global supply chains and its thriving service industry could help navigate these challenges.

Ultimately, Trump's second term may usher in both hurdles and prospects for the UK's trading ties with the US.

• **Delivering opportunities and supporting growth** – read more about Simon's plans as Womble Bond Dickinson's newly-appointed Newcastle office head on pages 30 to 37.

# Growth and giving back at the heart of successful year at EMG

**EMG Solicitors**

www.emgsolicitors.com  
 LinkedIn: EMG Solicitors

**Following a landmark year of growth capped by becoming a Certified B Corporation™ law firm, EMG Solicitors is beginning 2025 with great confidence. Here, chief executive Emma Gaudern looks back on a strong 12 months, and explains how the firm will continue providing clients with market-leading service while supporting the communities it serves.**

2024 has been a landmark year for award-winning Certified B Corporation™ law firm EMG Solicitors.

Marking ten years since the company was founded by chief executive Emma Gaudern and director and head of Court of Protection – property and affairs Jemma Morland, EMG Solicitors has grown to 173 employees working across five offices in the North in Durham, Newcastle, Darlington, Penrith and Manchester.

Committed to supporting local communities and keeping clients at the very heart of its work, EMG Solicitors’ values of co-operation, kindness, courage, excellence and integrity have defined its ten-year journey.

Delivering ‘The EMG Way’ remains the focus as the company looks ahead to its next ten years.

**Supporting client and colleague growth**

Growing its practice and investing in its people remains a key priority for EMG Solicitors, and in 2024 the firm welcomed 29 new colleagues.

In March, the firm continued to expand its Court of Protection offering with the appointment of Reading-based director Rebecca Sparrow.

In October, director Deborah Jude joined the firm following 23 years at Womble Bond Dickinson.

Deborah’s role sees her taking on a hybrid position, supporting both the Court of Protection and private client teams.

Emma says: “The people at EMG Solicitors really are our greatest asset.

“I’m so proud we’ve built a team that shares our vision and ethos, and who genuinely care about the clients we work with every day.

“Continuing to grow our talented team, and investing in their professional development, will be a key priority for us as we embark on the next ten years.”

**Celebrating awards success**

Reflecting the talent, expertise and professionalism of the team at EMG Solicitors, as well as its pledge to have a positive impact on the environment and society, resulted in the law firm being credited with several accolades in 2024.

In May, the company was awarded the prestigious B Corp status in recognition of



Emma Gaudern, EMG Solicitors chief executive, left, with Jemma Morland, the firm’s director and head of Court of Protection – property and affairs



its commitment to meeting high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability, and balancing profit with purpose.

EMG Solicitors was also included in The Times and Sunday Times UK list of 100 Best Places to Work 2024, an accolade independently assessed from colleague questionnaires.

Additionally, EMG Solicitors was named Private Client Firm of the Year at the Legal 500 Northern Powerhouse Awards 2024; was highly ranked in the Chambers and Partners UK Legal Guide for Court of Protection and Property and Affairs; and secured Continuing Excellence status of the Better Health at Work Award for maintaining high standards in promoting health and wellbeing in the workplace and encouraging healthy lifestyles.

#### **Giving back to the community**

As a law firm founded on the principle of supporting the communities it serves, the company has continued to use its business skills and charitable giving to help a wide range of charities and voluntary organisations in the North.

Through its EMG Community Fund – which is managed by Point North (formerly County Durham Community Foundation) – the company continues to donate five per cent of its profits in the form of charitable grants, supporting local organisations including Newcastle Women's Aid, Durham City Youth Project and the Walk & Talk Trust.

The law firm also continued its decade-long partnership with Headway – the brain injury association – through its annual WonderLAN Ball.

Its most recent sold-out event raised an

impressive £40,000, bringing the total amount raised by EMG Solicitors for Headway and its Look Ahead North weekend to more than £140,000.

Emma says: “Because of our firm’s specialism in Court of Protection, a core part of our work is supporting brain injury survivors and their families with a range of legal matters.

“As such, we’re incredibly proud to continue our support for Headway and its outstanding work to improve life after brain injury.”

#### **Looking ahead to the next ten years of EMG Solicitors**

Throughout 2024, EMG Solicitors reflected on its ten-year journey and its commitment to delivering outstanding client services and support for both its people and local communities.

The #ImagineALawFirm campaign, which is available to watch on emgsolicitors.com, captured personal insights from the senior leadership team and celebrated the firm’s five values that provide the building blocks for how it supports clients, protects assets and changes lives.

Emma adds: “It’s been incredibly rewarding to look back and see how far we’ve come as a law firm, but also how we’ve created a fantastic culture of like-minded people who want to provide the very best possible service to our clients and make a positive impact on people’s lives.

“In 2025, we’re looking forward to growing our practice, excelling in the work we deliver for our clients and continuing to live the values that we feel have made EMG Solicitors the law firm that it is today.”

**“Continuing to grow our talented team, and investing in their professional development, will be a key priority for us as we embark on the next ten years”**



#### **EMG Solicitors**

**For more information about EMG Solicitors, the legal services it provides and the community support it delivers, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 500 6989.**





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# FEBRUARY 2025

Feature



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Photography by Mike Sreenan

## Delivering opportunities and supporting growth

*Simon  
Rowland*

**As the new head of Womble Bond Dickinson's Newcastle office, Simon Rowland is shaping plans to drive future success. Here, he tells Steven Hugill about his key priorities, the transformative opportunities afforded by the region's landmark devolution deals, the global significance of the firm's North East operations and the enduring importance of personal connections in the legal profession.**



**Congratulations on your appointment. With more than 20 years' experience with the firm, you must be delighted to take this next step.**

I am. It is a real honour and privilege to have the backing and trust of our board and the Newcastle partners but, most importantly, the support of the whole office in taking up the role.

I hope I can live up to their expectations.

The Newcastle office is the biggest by headcount in the firm by some margin, including the US, so the office head role is an important one within our business.

There is also an equally important external element to the role, representing the firm within our region.

**You have succeeded Nigel Emmerson, who led the firm through a prolonged expansion phase that included a move to a flagship office in The Spark, on Newcastle's Helix site. With those foundations to build upon, what are your key priorities in your new role, and how do you plan to achieve them?**

Nigel has done a fantastic job over the last four years or so, not only in managing our move to The Spark but also in raising our profile in the region with a number of key partner organisations.

As a firm, we are as committed to the region as ever, and my plan is to continue that work and reaffirm that commitment.

These are exciting times for the region, and we want to be front and centre in delivering opportunities and growth with our clients, partners and key contacts in both the public and private sector.

I also want to see us continue the work we have been doing in making Womble Bond Dickinson a fantastic place to work and build a career, so I will be continuing to support our responsible business initiatives, our networks and our work in the wider community.

I very much see my role as encouraging, empowering and supporting our people at all levels as they grow; they are the true ambassadors for the firm, not me.

**Your appointment coincides with sweeping change across the North East, as two mayoral-led devolution deals refresh market sentiment and spur great investment potential. How excited are you about the region's new era, and how is Womble Bond Dickinson – with its offices in Newcastle and Teesside – placed to help the area capitalise on the opportunities afforded by its Westminster power transfer?**





The creation of the North East Combined Authority is a huge opportunity for the region – the biggest in a generation – and the growth and social change that can, and must, be delivered will be transformational.

The growth and change that is already being delivered by the Tees Valley Combined Authority shows the way.

With our commitment and footprint in both authorities, we'd like to see a truly wider North East vision, with collaboration between all parts of the wider region to deliver growth.

What we need is focus on key sectors where the opportunities are the greatest for the whole region, offshore wind and energy being obvious ones.

As a firm, we have already been involved in some of the biggest projects to date.

On a personal note, I'm very proud to be part of the great team delivering Steel River Quay on the Tees.

With our longstanding and wide regional networks, we also see our role as a facilitator, bringing clients and contacts together.

**You bring significant experience to the head of office role, having been a partner since 2005 and overseen its construction and engineering team for several years. As a leader, how important is collaboration and creating a sense of shared purpose across your teams? And how will you continue that in your new position?**

Collaboration and creating a sense of shared purpose are absolutely critical to our success.

Throughout my time with Womble Bond Dickinson, I have witnessed first-hand the power of a united team working towards common goals.

As a leader, I believe in an open-door policy, encouraging open communication and the sharing of ideas across all levels.

It's essential to foster an environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute.

As office head, I will continue to prioritise these principles, ensuring we maintain a culture of collaboration, innovation and mutual respect.

By doing so, we can harness the collective strengths of our team, driving the firm forward and achieving great things together.



**“The creation of the North East Combined Authority is a huge opportunity for the region... the growth and change already being delivered by the Tees Valley Combined Authority shows the way”**

Feature



Feature

# Simon Rowland

**Womble Bond Dickinson's reach extends far beyond the North East, with further UK bases complemented by a raft of US offices. How will the firm's Newcastle site continue to contribute to its broader international strategy?**

Our Newcastle office is a pivotal component of our international strategy.

This was highlighted by our hosting of the latest edition in our Transatlantic Lawyers Network programme at The Spark.

That programme is a prime example of our commitment to cross-border collaboration, providing clients with seamless, integrated legal services on both sides of the Atlantic.

This network enables us to leverage the diverse expertise and resources within our UK and US offices, offering unparalleled support for complex, multi-jurisdictional matters.

A recent testament to this collaborative approach is the Global Energy Transition Outlook report, which saw our UK and US teams work together to provide comprehensive insights and solutions for clients navigating the evolving energy sector.

This project highlights our ability to adapt to global market changes while maintaining the firm's established reputation for excellence.

**The world is an ever-changing place, with sector shifts augmented by fluid client demands. How will you balance maintaining Womble Bond Dickinson's established reputation while innovating and adapting to market changes?**

We know balancing our reputation with the need to innovate and adapt is a challenge, but it's one we're totally up for.

Our legacy is all about excellence, integrity and client trust.

To keep this going strong, we need to stick to these values while embracing change and always looking for ways to get better.

Innovation comes from really understanding what our clients need as they evolve and spotting market trends before they happen.

By investing in tech, boosting our digital skills and encouraging creativity and flexibility in our teams, we can bring forward-thinking solutions that hit the mark.

And let's not forget, personal relationships are at the heart of what we do.

Building and nurturing these connections, listening to our clients and tailoring our services to suit them ensures we remain their go-to advisors, committed to exceptional service even as we find new ways to add value.

It's all about finding that sweet spot – honouring our past while boldly stepping into the future.

By blending innovation with our traditions of excellence, we can keep thriving and leading in the legal industry, adapting to changes while holding on to the trust and respect we've earned.

The Newcastle office will be a key player in these efforts, contributing to our international strategy by fostering strong client relationships and driving innovative solutions across our global network.

Our dedication to collaboration ensures we stay at the forefront of the legal industry, ready to tackle the challenges and seize the opportunities of an ever-changing world.

**“It's all about finding that sweet spot – honouring our past while boldly stepping into the future”**

# Shaping 2025: Building Northumberland's future workforce together

## Connect Northumberland

[www.connectnorthumberland.org](http://www.connectnorthumberland.org)

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**At Connect Northumberland's recent Annual Employer Gathering, 40 local employers, educators and community partners came together to explore how to build a stronger, more capable workforce in the county under the theme 'Making Northumberland a Better Place to Live and Work – Today and Tomorrow.'**

During the event, there was a genuine sense of belonging in the room, which was particularly notable given the number of new faces and organisations in attendance.

This positive atmosphere was reflected in the open and constructive discussions that took place at each table, highlighting the community's shared commitment to driving meaningful change.

One of the key reflections from the event was the importance of ensuring Connect Northumberland remains focused on employer-driven needs.

This means designing future bite-sized training offers based on employer feedback, while also considering the innovative workplace interventions businesses plan to implement over the next three years.



Pictures: Pawel Gajek (The Bigger Picture Agency)

Additionally, Lightning Talks, which continue to be a popular feature, could be further developed to provide more practical, solution-based content tailored to employers' specific challenges.

Another valuable insight was the recognition that many examples of best practice within the community often remain hidden unless prompted through conversation.

The event centred on addressing Northumberland's unique workforce development challenges, particularly those linked to its geography and demographics.

By fostering employer collaboration and ensuring workforce development is guided by local needs and community voices, Connect Northumberland aims to create a more resilient and dynamic employer community.

Event manager Zoe Maylam opened and closed proceedings, with directors Caroline Theobald and Ian Ritchey sharing Connect Northumberland's vision, mission and impact.

Chief executive Liz Mayes presented plans for the future, and sought feedback from attendees to inform the next phase of the initiative.

Event host Mark Brassell, chief executive of Alnwick Garden, talked about how it values people as the heart of the organisation.

Keynote speaker John Barnes, executive headteacher of Seaton Valley Federation, inspired the room with a thought-provoking address on how to retain young people in the county and build a thriving future workforce.

He reflected on the region's recruitment challenges, education/workplace links and the mental health struggles facing young people post-COVID-19.

He also highlighted how transport barriers and work experience gaps continue to affect schools and employers.

His call for employer/school partnerships and apprenticeship expansion resonated strongly

with the audience.

His speech helped set the stage for engaging discussions on how to turn ideas into action for the benefit of Northumberland's economy and its communities.

### Two key questions explored by employers

During roundtable discussions, employers shared valuable insights in response to two core questions:

#### What do you think needs to be done to retain and attract young people, especially from further or higher education?

##### Key themes from employer feedback:

- **Promoting Northumberland as a career destination:** Employers discussed how branding Northumberland as a destination with great career opportunities and lifestyle benefits could help attract and retain talent. They emphasised the importance of marketing Northumberland as an exciting place to work and live, similar to how major companies like Tesla or Google build employer brands.
- **Shared apprenticeships and graduate schemes:** Many employers supported the idea of shared apprenticeships or graduate schemes, where businesses collaborate to develop talent pipelines.
- **Interactive career awareness in schools:** Employers highlighted the need to engage students as early as Year 7 through site visits, career expos and employer speed-networking sessions to showcase job opportunities in the region. There was also interest in the use of technology to provide 'virtual visits' and support schools career advice with digital resources.
- **Transport and housing support:** Improving transport infrastructure, affordable housing and even exploring support for driving lessons or e-bike funding were raised as critical barriers to young people entering the workforce.
- **Early awareness campaigns:** Participants emphasised raising awareness of local careers early by embedding employer talks into schools and running engaging social media campaigns aimed at young people.

#### What do you think needs to be built on our existing offer?

##### Key themes from employer feedback:

- **Accreditation and certification:** There was broad support for exploring formal accreditation for programmes like Connect Northumberland's mini exec-MBA and Management Essentials, though some employers had mixed views on how accreditation might impact programme flexibility and accessibility.
- **Expanded digital offerings:** Employers were keen to see more targeted technical training, such as modules on data integration, artificial



intelligence applications, project management and digital forensics.

- **Bite-sized and flexible courses:** Shorter, flexible courses that are easier to commit to were seen as valuable, particularly for time-constrained businesses.
- **Alumni engagement and mentoring:** Employers supported building a stronger alumni network, where past participants could mentor, teach and engage with current programme participants, helping to share best practices across businesses.
- **Leadership and interpersonal skills:** Suggestions for future modules included intergenerational understanding, reverse mentoring, public speaking coaching and health and wellbeing training.
- **Employer/school collaboration:** Employers suggested closer links with schools through work experience placements, curriculum-linked projects and interactive industry showcases where young people can engage directly with employers.

#### Additional insights for future consideration

During discussions, employers also highlighted key themes that extended beyond the two main questions.

##### They included:

- **Support for the economically inactive:** Employers stressed the need for more entry-level job pathways, supported internships and apprenticeships tailored for economically inactive individuals and those with special educational needs and disabilities.
- **Sector-specific partnerships:** Businesses expressed interest in co-designing training programmes with colleges and universities, to ensure the curriculum reflects the skills employers need.

- **Work experience checklists and simple processes:** To streamline employer/school collaborations, companies suggested developing placement checklists and clear guidelines on offering work experience.
- **Data-driven decisions:** Employers encouraged using data to measure the impact of Connect Northumberland's initiatives and tracking milestones over time.
- **Building a collective employer voice:** The group agreed on the importance of shared advocacy and visibility for Northumberland's employers, ensuring their collective voice is heard by regional and national stakeholders.

#### Reflections for 2025

Connect Northumberland is reflecting on the insights from this event and exploring ideas for how the network can make an even greater impact in 2025.

The valuable input gathered will help shape future discussions with employers, education partners and policymakers, ensuring Northumberland's workforce development initiatives remain collaborative, data-driven and community-focused.



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

# Granting opportunity

## Muckle LLP

www.muckle-llp.com

LinkedIn: Muckle LLP

**A charitable fund established by law firm Muckle LLP more than two decades ago has surpassed £700,000 in grants, with donations benefiting several charities across the North East and Cumbria.**

The Muckle Fund, run in association with the Community Foundation, was set up in 2002 as a way for Muckle to give back to people, communities and good causes across the North of England.

Since then, it has awarded 737 grants totalling £713,679 to charities, community groups and not-for-profit organisations across the North East.

In 2023, Muckle became the first law firm in the North East to be awarded a B Corporation® certificate, joining a global community of organisations using business as a force for good.

Muckle gives one per cent of its annual profits to the fund, which supports charities and organisations that help young people, tackle disadvantage, improve social mobility and champion causes close to the heart of Muckle and its people.



Muckle LLP's Kathryn Boyd, pictured during a farm visit with the Country Trust

Teesside-based Clean Slate Solutions is one of those charities, receiving £11,000 in much-needed funding from the firm at a time when demand for the charity's services is at an all-time high.

It works to support people with past convictions into employment – an innovative approach to reducing re-offending in the region.

Statistics show 77 per cent of the people Clean Slate places into employment remain in their roles for more than three months, and 97 per cent of those it supports avoid re-entering the courtroom.

Richard Brice, Clean Slate Solutions' founder, says: "Muckle has been such a significant partner on our journey while establishing our charity over the last few years.

"The impact of this provision has enabled us to support 45 men and women into secure employment via our network of socially invested employers."

Over the last two years, Muckle has helped Cumbrian charity Carlisle Key with donations totalling £9500.



Pictured, from left to right, are Carlisle Key volunteer Selena Abdula and homeless prevention manager Stephen Harkins, with Muckle LLP's Georgia Sproat, Tim Boardman and Sara Worsick



Pictured, from left to right, are David A Kerfoot, Clean Slate Solutions' patron; Hugh Welch, Muckle LLP senior partner; Tracey Brittain, Cleveland OPCC policy, partnerships and delivery manager; and Dr Warren Harrison, Clean Slate Solutions' chair of trustees



The charity works to support young people in Carlisle with housing, household essentials, utilities and food — basic needs made challenging by the cost-of-living crisis.

Steven Harkins, Carlisle Key's homeless prevention manager, says: "When young people move into social housing, they move into an empty shell, adding more stress to someone who is already vulnerable.

"Muckle's funding has been used to support them with furniture, as well as utilities, to help them get on their feet; it goes a long way to keep the everyday manageable for these young people."

The Country Trust has received £9100 in grants to help fund farm trips for North East children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The charity supports children who, through circumstance, face greater barriers to accessing green space and healthy food, and experience higher rates of obesity and physical and mental health issues.

Sue Thompson, the charity's farm discovery co-ordinator, says: "We have developed a great relationship with Muckle.

"It's not only the financial support that is so important, but the enthusiasm of the wider team, many of whom use their volunteering days to don a pair of wellies and come out on the farms to help with visits, providing additional help for the hundreds of disadvantaged primary school children we work with.

"We are also indebted to the ambassadorship of so many at Muckle, who have introduced us to other valuable supporters and championed our cause with professional partners and clients alike."

Two grants totalling £8000 have been awarded

to Bedlington-based all-girls' classroom provision charity Choysez.

The charity works with young women throughout Northumberland, aged between nine and 16, with individually designed programmes helping them gain nationally-recognised qualifications and boost their self-esteem.

Chris Conroy, Choysez centre manager, says: "We work with some of the most vulnerable young women in Northumberland.

"The care and support we can give relies upon regular donations such as the grant from Muckle.

"A regular donation allows us to plan so much further ahead, and ensures we get extra value from the donation and more support for those who need it.

"This allows us to stretch every pound from the donation and is very much appreciated."

Hugh Welch, Muckle's senior partner, adds: "Since the fund was set up more than 20 years ago, we have worked closely with numerous charities and organisations.

"They all provide vital and valuable services across the region, and we are proud to support their incredible work.

"We celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Community Fund two years ago.

"Since then, we have continued to reach new milestones, expanding our efforts and deepening our partnerships with charities and organisations that make a real difference.

"As a firm, we remain dedicated to supporting their missions and making a positive impact on the community around us."



#### **Muckle LLP**

To find out more about Muckle's community work, as well as the range of legal services it provides, visit the website at the top of this article or call 0191 211 7777.

# Building strong foundations



[www.eshgroup.co.uk](http://www.eshgroup.co.uk)  
[www.eshgroup.co.uk/land-led-development](http://www.eshgroup.co.uk/land-led-development)  
 LinkedIn: Esh Group

**With the Government having unveiled a blueprint to deliver 1.5 million new homes – including a significant number of affordable developments – the UK’s housing landscape stands at the point of watershed change. And primed to play a central role in overseeing the transformation is Esh Construction, whose leading land-led offer is already bolstering affordable property stock numbers across the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber. Here, Laura Devaney, Esh Construction’s land and partnerships director, tells Colin Young about its land-led expertise, the headline projects it has helped deliver and the substantial impact these can have on residents’ wellbeing.**

The blow-up Grinches have been deflated and packed away.

The outdoor lights and artificial trees have been similarly boxed up.

There isn’t even the slightest trace of the white spray that decorated windows with fake snow scenes.

For a number of the residents on the Seaside Lane estate, in Easington, east Durham, the props marked another Christmas of ritual and tradition, of celebration and cheer.

Not all customs were observed, though.

For many on the estate, the 2024 festive period meant Christmas in the surrounds of a new home, one based a short stroll from Seaton Holme, the famous spot where Alice Liddell lived with her grandfather, the Rector of Easington, and where they met author Charles Dodgson, who would go on to write Alice in Wonderland.

young professionals and families by delivering a mix of affordable rent and rent-to-buy properties.

Seaside Lane, though, is much more than an addendum of a famous book.

Delivered on behalf of fellow North East organisation believe housing, the 96-home scheme is a flagship example of Esh Construction’s leading land-led offer, which is helping drive higher numbers of much-needed affordable housing across the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber.

Working alongside land agents, landowners, local authorities and registered social housing providers, the Bowburn-headquartered firm’s bespoke land-led solution is built around collaboration and transparency, lending itself to partners playing to their strengths and alleviating workloads for providers.

The land-led approach sees Esh take the lead on land purchase and tendering, weighing up site technicalities and constraints and bringing in dedicated estimating, technical and construction resources that enable registered providers to focus on the viability of the development around location, rent and sales.

In addition to Seaside Lane, the Homes England Investment Partner – a status that allows Esh to access capital grants on behalf of its clients – counts a number of completed land-led schemes in its portfolio.

They include the 17-home and eight-flat social rent Roman Avenue venture, in Byker, Newcastle, which was delivered on behalf of Karbon Homes and supported by funding from the Homes England Affordable Housing Programme.

**“Making that difference is one of the driving forces for us at Esh Construction, because everyone should have a roof over their head”**

It may not be as magical as Alice’s fantastical adventures nearly 150 years ago, but – through Seaside Lane – Esh Construction has paved the way for new dreams and dream homes for



Photography by Jamie Haslam



Further developments include the £3.7 million Leeds-based Bodmin Road project that has provided 32 affordable homes alongside Yorkshire Housing, and the Highfield Road scheme, in Doncaster, which, alongside Housing 21 and Together Housing Group, has created 56 affordable homes, 12 bungalows and a three-storey retirement living building.

And for Laura Devaney, Esh Construction's land and partnerships director, the impact is more than tangible.

She can still recall her first visits to Seaside Lane – which was once the home of Easington & District Working Men's Club – in 2018.

She still has the before-and-after photos on her phone and, as she poses for updated pictures by the sustainable urban drainage system basin in the centre of the estate, she recalls the photo opportunities of Seaside Lane past; breaking the soil, seeing the designs come to life and observing residents settling into, in some cases, their first homes.

"I remember coming here when it started, during COVID-19, getting a picture taken with Tom from believe housing with our PPE on, and keeping our distance," says Laura, who has been with Esh for close to 14 years and, since graduating from Northumbria University, has always worked in the affordable housing sector.

She says: "When I drove here today, I had a bit of an 'oh my God' moment, in terms of realising just what we have developed with Seaside Lane and the difference it is making to the people who live on the estate.

"I always think that when you walk around the new streets, you wouldn't think it was affordable housing; you would think it is market-led because the architectural design has been well thought out and has delivered homes that are really appealing.

"And making that difference is one of the driving forces for us at Esh Construction, because everyone should have a roof over their head."

Laura adds: "We are fortunate to work with housing providers that are invested in improving the affordable housing offer, and it's great to be in a position where we are giving people aspirations they didn't previously think were available to them.

"You meet people after they move in who say, 'I'm warm, I can afford to put my heating on,' and they tell us it's different to where they lived before.

"That then affects their mental wellbeing and whole outlook on life for the better."

New land-led schemes on the horizon include a £20 million extra care development in Sunderland, and 53 apartments for retirement

living at a derelict library on Gateshead's Sunderland Road.

A further development in Jarrow has received planning permission for 50 new affordable homes in partnership with Karbon Homes, with several schemes across Yorkshire also featuring in Esh's affordable housing order book.

Laura says: "Once we completed a couple of smaller schemes after first developing the land-led solution, we saw real opportunity where we could match our clients' needs.

"A key ingredient to land-led success comes in the clarity clients receive from the outset.

"With technical reviews carried out long before the planning application is rubber stamped, there are no surprises for registered providers when schemes near completion dates.

"From the very beginning of the land-led process there is transparency, from the landowner through to the architects, the engineers and the registered provider.

"It is not only the client who benefits, but also the communities in which the developments are delivered."

Community has been the core driver for Esh since one of its founding companies, Lumsden & Carroll, was formed in the early 1970s, and that remains true in the present day.

Laura says: "Social value really is in the Esh Construction DNA.

"It has been at our core for more than 50 years, and even though different initiatives and programmes have evolved, that ethos has remained, even in really tough economic times."

And with Labour having unleashed plans to build 1.5 million homes – a good proportion of them affordable properties – over the course of the current parliament, Laura says Esh Construction's land-led offer means it is more than well placed to support the blueprint.

She says: "The Government has already identified a need for housing, in particular affordable housing.

"We have the biggest order book we've ever had and a strong pipeline in our land-led offer.

"It's pleasing to work alongside a core group of people in the North East who are very, very passionate about the region's housing stock.

"Between the clients and partners we deal with on a regular basis, there are more voices than ever lobbying at Government level, particularly around the affordable housing programme.

"Collectively, we can be confident that a change is coming and that is a big driver for us.

"The spring will bring a new dawn."

**"I always think that when you walk around the new streets, you wouldn't think it was affordable housing"**



For more information about Esh Construction and to learn more about its land-led offer, visit the websites at the top of this article.

# Adapting to a changing landscape

**From farmers' protests to business growth warnings, the Government's autumn Budget has stirred plentiful reaction. Labour says its blueprint will provide crucial blocks to help rebuild an economy left damaged by a series of short-lived Conservative regimes. But is it making the right moves? Will the party's fiscal formula lay the foundations it says the country needs, or is Westminster's latest administration focusing on the wrong areas?**



**Graham Melroy**  
Business development director  
T12 Engineering

## We need more than political slogans

Raising employers' National Insurance contributions and the National Minimum Wage directly conflicts with Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall's stated goal to "get Britain working".

The measures, while well-intentioned, risk placing undue strain on businesses already grappling with economic uncertainty.

The CBI's warning that nearly two-thirds of firms may cut jobs or halt recruitment should not be ignored – policies must empower businesses to grow, not burden them further.

Moreover, the persistent narrative of a UK skills gap is oversimplified and increasingly outdated.

The reality is not a shortage of skilled individuals, but a disconnect in how those skills are accessed and deployed.

In 2023, 48 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds held tertiary degrees, a remarkable leap from 30 per cent in 2000.

Yet, as an engineering firm keen to nurture talent, we find it challenging to connect with job-ready graduates.



Universities, often skewed toward partnerships with large corporations, overlook the vast potential within SMEs – a bias that stifles not only the development of young professionals, but also the growth of small businesses.

This is particularly felt in the engineering sector, which serves as the backbone of the

UK economy, with approximately 6.3 million individuals (20 per cent of the UK workforce) in engineering and technology roles in 2023.

To truly address worklessness and bolster the economy, we need more than political slogans.

Labour's fiscal formula must foster collaboration between universities, SMEs and policymakers.

Universities should actively engage with smaller firms, providing graduates with diverse opportunities while supporting local economies.

Policymakers, in turn, must ensure their strategies do not inadvertently shut out the very businesses they aim to support.

Ultimately, rebuilding the economy demands pragmatic and inclusive approaches that prioritise genuine collaboration and equitable access to opportunities.

Without this, Labour's promises risk becoming another chapter of missed opportunity.



**Angela Carney**  
Managing director  
Carney Consultancy

President  
Northern Counties  
Builders Federation

## We must build with Westminster

One area that particularly stood out for me is the plan to tackle economic inactivity and boost employment.

The statistics are stark, with 2.8 million out of work due to long-term sickness and one in eight young people neither in education nor employment.

The £240 million investment to address these issues, along with a national jobs and careers service and local leadership from mayors and councils, is a much-needed step toward providing opportunities and reducing inactivity.

For the construction sector, the Government's emphasis on Skills England is a welcome initiative.

As the industry faces a growing skills shortage, with many experienced workers approaching retirement, attracting young talent is critical.

The focus on boosting skills and training could help bridge this gap, by showcasing construction as an exciting and rewarding career choice.

We must highlight the range of career opportunities available within the sector – from project management to skilled trades – and work to make the industry more inclusive, encouraging diversity and ensuring people from all demographics feel welcomed.

This is a long overdue and critical focus, and

I'm hopeful it will help transform the public perception of construction, making it a more attractive path for the next generation.

While policies like these are crucial, I also believe success comes down to mindset.

As business owners, we face constant challenges, but the ones who thrive are those with a growth mindset and the belief that we can always learn, adapt and improve.

The Government can provide tools, but we must build with them.

In the end, regimes come and go.

It's up to each of us to decide: Will we push for growth, or will we choose to stay where we are?

The Government's policies, especially around employment and tackling inactivity, are positive, but they can only go so far.

What makes or breaks many businesses is the mindset of leaders and whether they can embrace change and be unrelenting in their mission to grow.

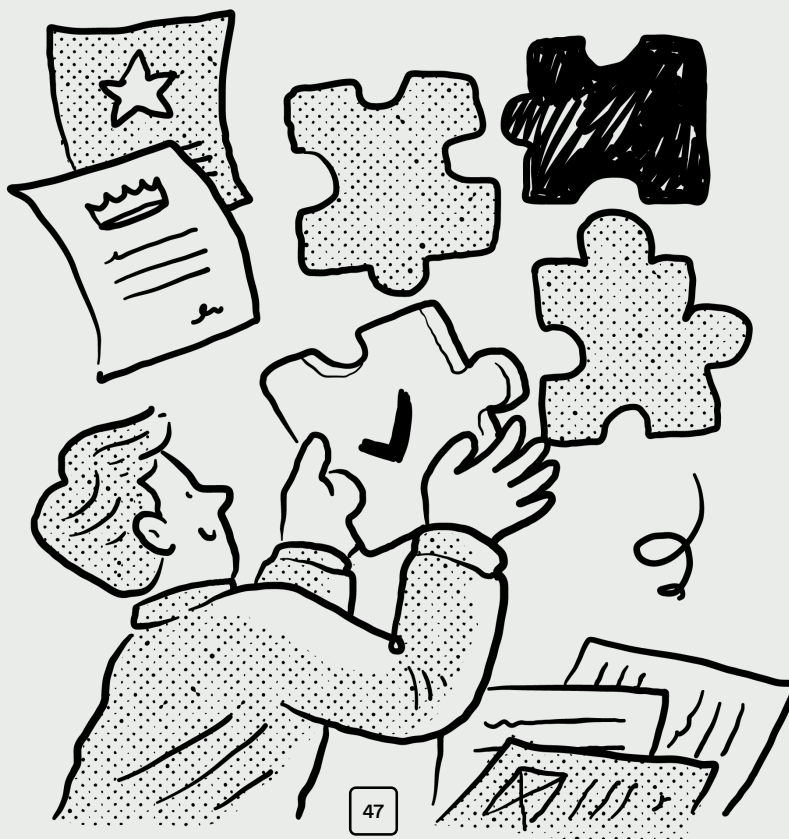
Only time will tell if Labour's strategy has a positive impact but, one thing is certain, business moves faster than policies.

Together, we can find solutions to complex issues that threaten the economy via knowledge transfer and collaboration between sectors and wider industry.



Join the discussion

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



# Nurturing a healthy life sciences ecosystem

## Northstar Ventures

www.northstarventures.co.uk

LinkedIn: Northstar Ventures UK

**The North East's life sciences sector is thriving, with university spin-outs and established market players combining to create tomorrow's advances today. And catalysing their progress is Northstar Ventures. Here, Alex Buchan, an investment director at the firm, tells N magazine about how its significant financial backing is helping to grow an ever richer development ecosystem that is delivering change on the global stage.**

The North East has long been a furnace of innovation, invention running threadlike through its DNA.

And that ingenious spirit is no more apparent than across the life sciences sector, where nascent university spin-outs meld with more established market players to drive next-generation therapies.

Helping to power their progress is Northstar Ventures.

Through a series of substantial financial investments, the Newcastle-based firm is empowering an expanding network of businesses to reach crucial development milestones and deliver vital solutions to global challenges.

Those companies include Newcastle University spin-out Newcells Biotech, which is using biological modelling to improve drug discovery and reduce reliance on animal testing.

The investment firm's portfolio also includes Nanoverly, whose nanorobotic platform provides a simple but effective method to detect specific nucleic acid sequences at extremely low levels without the need for specialist equipment.

It applies this to improving how delivery of advanced RNA-based therapies is measured in target tissues to the ultimate benefit of patients with genetic diseases and cancer.

The company has raised three rounds of investment over the last three years, all of which Northstar has led.

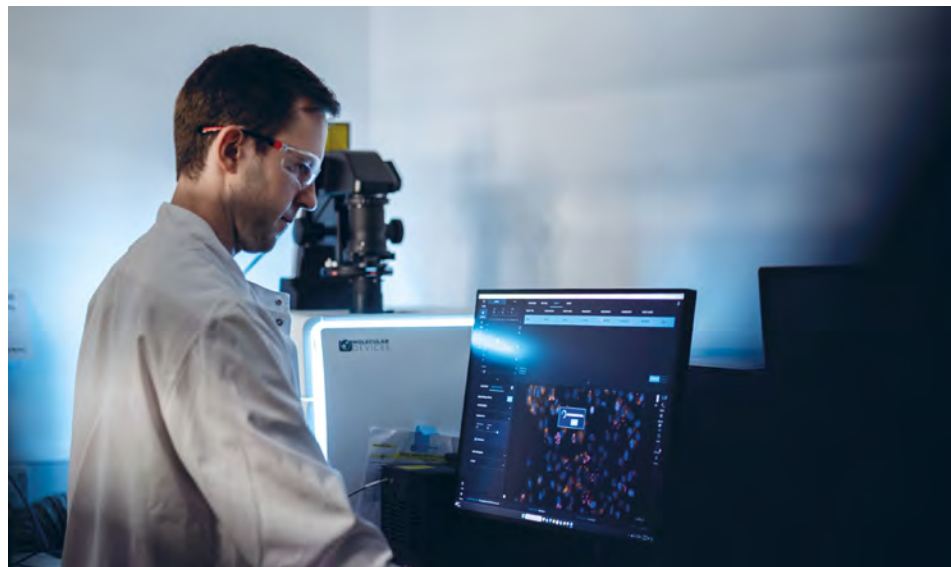
Northstar Ventures' portfolio additionally comprises fellow Newcastle University ventures NunaBio, which is a world leader in the manufacture of custom DNA sequences, and MarraBio, which is developing technology to produce bioactive protein alternatives economically at scale.

Both are breaking existing paradigms of their industries.

Add to the equation backing for LightOx, which has created a light-activated oral gel to target mouth cancer, and Northstar Ventures' impact is even more profound.

And the organisation, says investment director Alex Buchan, is firmly focused on cultivating an ever more fertile field for company growth.

He says: "We have a very strong life sciences sector in the North East, particularly around



Northstar Ventures has supported Newcells Biotech, which is using biological modelling to improve drug discovery and reduce reliance on animal testing





areas such as synthetic biology, biological modelling and cancer therapeutics.

“Work around digital health continues to develop, and we have the Newcastle-based National Institute for Health Research Innovation Observatory too, which is horizon scanning the new drugs and devices coming to market.

“There is a lot going on, and the landscape is beginning to coalesce.

“But what it needs is continuous investment – and that is what we are providing.”

That commitment was emphasised in December, when Northstar Ventures backed Newcells Biotech in a £1.2 million capital raise.

Aimed at expanding its global client base, Newcells Biotech says the cash will drive an “ambitious commercial strategy” that will “further build its customer base and seek new partnerships with companies with complementary products to enhance its offer across key international markets”.

The funding round has also helped the firm, which operates from The Biosphere, on Newcastle’s Helix science and technology

hub, appoint pharma sector veteran Dr Mark Carnegie-Brown as its board chair.

Alex says: “Companies such as Newcells Biotech are North East firms, but they have a global outlook.

“They are building on the world-class research taking place in the region’s universities and are increasingly working with customers internationally.

“And our backing is helping them to continue that.”

He adds: “We are trying to build an ecosystem in the region that makes a difference across the life sciences sector.

“To do that takes high-quality people and high-quality ideas.

“It also takes time and investment.

“The North East is a great place to do business, and we want to attract more people, more ideas and more companies to the region, to further boost its life sciences sector.

“And through our investments, we are helping make that happen.”

Northstar Ventures’ investment portfolio includes backing for LightOx, which has created a light-activated oral gel to target mouth cancer



Northstar Ventures’ investment portfolio includes backing for Nanover, whose nanorobot platform detects illnesses including prostate cancer and liver disease



### Northstar Ventures

For more information about Northstar Ventures, its different funds and how they could invest in your business’ growth or you could invest in those funds, visit the website at the top of this article.

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



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# The Great Office Reset: Balancing flexibility and collaboration

## Space Group

www.spaceworks.info

LinkedIn: Space Group | Spaceworks

**As demands of the office continue to shift in the post-COVID-19 employment landscape, Rob Charlton, chief executive of Newcastle-based Space Group, stresses the importance of workplace versatility, using the example of the Spaceworks hub to highlight the mental and physical health benefits of good design.**

Back in 2020, the humble office faced its biggest interrogation to date, as businesses grappled with the challenges of a global pandemic.

Nearly five years on, new disruptions have emerged, prompting business leaders across the world to ask: What does an office space in 2025 look like?

The modern office is once again at a crossroads, shaped by rapid technological advancements and evolving employee expectations.

As companies re-imagine their strategies, they are tasked with balancing the flexibility demanded by a hybrid workforce with the need to boost creativity and collaboration within shared spaces.

Hybrid and remote working have revolutionised how companies view their physical spaces.

The days of rigid desk assignments are giving way to environments designed for fluidity.

Hot-desking, private pods and collaborative zones are now staples of forward-thinking office design.

Locally, Spaceworks exemplifies this trend by offering versatile solutions that cater to diverse professional needs.

We now understand, more than ever, that workplace design has a profound impact on both mental and physical health.

From access to natural light to ergonomic furniture, every detail contributes to employee wellbeing.

Offices that prioritise these elements notice reduced stress and increased productivity, creating environments of comfort and support in

the spaces where we spend much of our lives.

Innovations such as biophilic design, which integrates natural elements into workspaces, and the inclusion of wellness amenities further underscore this growing focus on health and harmony in the workplace.

Spaceworks, in Gosforth, incorporates these principles, promoting environments that enhance both wellbeing and a work/life balance.

As environmental consciousness grows, so does the demand for more sustainable workspaces.

Energy-efficient buildings, resource-conscious designs and waste reduction are now standard expectations.

As a certified B Corporation®, Spaceworks' commitment to sustainability reflects this movement, blending environmental responsibility with business practicality.

Most recently, artificial intelligence, automation and smart technologies have been adding to the workplace's evolution.

From intuitive meeting room set-ups to office digital twin technology, these innovations enrich operational efficiency and employee engagement.

Spaceworks exemplifies this progression by seamlessly integrating these cutting-edge advancements, ensuring its workspaces stay ahead in a dynamic landscape.

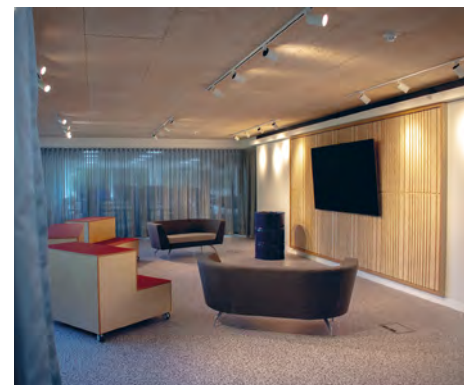
### What next for workspaces?

To stay ahead, businesses must critically assess their workspace needs and invest in environments that reflect modern priorities.

Locally, solutions like those offered by Spaceworks provide a bridge between flexibility and functionality, setting a benchmark for the future of work.

The question isn't whether offices will change – they already have.

The challenge lies in ensuring these changes benefit both employees and businesses, crafting spaces where creativity thrives and connections grow.



### Spaceworks

**Based in Gosforth, Newcastle, Spaceworks provides flexible workspace solutions. For more information about its approach to redefining workspaces, visit the website at the top of this article.**

# Driving technological transformation in the North East

## Business Durham

[www.northeasttechnologypark.com](http://www.northeasttechnologypark.com)

[www.businessdurham.co.uk](http://www.businessdurham.co.uk)

@\_BusinessDurham

**Based in County Durham, the North East Technology Park (NETPark) is a hub of innovation, driving advancements across industries and supporting economic growth. Over the past 20 years, NETPark has demonstrated the power of vision and collaboration, becoming one of the UK's leading science and technology hubs. With a £100 million expansion underway and its role as a catalyst for pioneering advancements in sectors such as space technology, advanced manufacturing and clean energy, NETPark continues to shine as a driving force for regional and global progress.**

### A vision realised

Two decades ago, the decision to allocate land for a science park in County Durham was met with ambition and a forward-thinking mindset.

NETPark is home to more than 40 innovative companies, employing in excess of 700 people and driving regional economic growth.

It has brought together a unique combination of academic excellence, industry expertise and a thriving business community to create an unparalleled ecosystem for innovation.

Councillor Amanda Hopgood, leader of Durham County Council, says: "Twenty years ago, when the council took the bold decision to allocate land to establish a science park in County Durham, the vision was for NETPark to become a global hub for engineering, science and technology-based companies.

"It has certainly achieved that, and the county is reaping the benefits now as NETPark's success has brought hundreds of higher-skilled, high-value jobs."

### Milestones and future growth

This year marks a major milestone with the completion of NETPark's £100 million Phase 3 expansion.

Opening in 2025, the development adds 285,000sq ft of advanced facilities, including laboratories, offices and production spaces.

This new chapter will enable NETPark to attract more businesses, create up to 1250 on-site jobs and support an additional 2200 roles across supply chains.

Among the first to benefit from this growth is Filtronic, a specialist in radio frequency and microwave technologies.

The company, already a NETPark tenant, is doubling its operational footprint with a custom-built headquarters in the new development.

This expansion supports its growing partnership with SpaceX, supplying critical components for the Starlink satellite constellation.

Michael Tyerman, Filtronic's chief financial officer, says: "We opted to stay at NETPark due to its modern infrastructure, the presence of innovative and like-minded companies and the flexibility it provides for scaling our operations.

"The new facility expands our manufacturing and office space, as well as upgrading test facilities.

"It will support the continued development of our leading-edge products and enable us to scale capacity to meet growing customer demand."

Filtronic's move to phase three unlocks more than 17,000sq ft of existing laboratory and office space to support new and smaller businesses joining NETPark's supportive community - nurturing the next generation of businesses in key regional sectors.



### A hub for innovation across industries

NETPark has established itself as a hub for businesses driving advancements across a range of sectors.

From space technology to sustainable energy, the park's tenants are tackling some of the most pressing challenges of our time.

Companies at NETPark drive advancements in telecommunications, clean energy, photonics and advanced materials, supported by cutting-edge facilities and a collaborative environment.

Companies pioneer next-generation satellite communication systems, advanced energy storage materials and photonic technologies that improve safety and efficiency.

This diversity underscores NETPark's role as a hub for transformative technologies that impact industries globally.

### The power of collaboration

A cornerstone of NETPark's success lies in its collaborative ecosystem.

Partnerships with Durham University and innovation centres like CPI accelerate product development and commercialisation.

The park also offers a flexible approach to space, enabling businesses to scale operations without disruption, from incubator units to larger standalone facilities.

NETPark's expansion reflects its commitment to evolving with the needs of its tenants.

The new facilities will cater to industries ranging from biosciences to clean energy, ensuring companies have the tools they need to grow and thrive.

### Regional impact and global reach

The impact of NETPark extends beyond its immediate community.

With excellent connectivity to regional hubs and global markets, the park has become a magnet for national and international investment.

It plays a pivotal role in the North East Investment Zone, which aims to drive economic growth and create thousands of high-skilled jobs.

Kim McGuinness, North East mayor, says: "As a combined authority, we are investing in NETPark through our investment zone, building amazing new lab and production spaces for businesses to grow and adding over £600 million to the North East's economy.

"From semiconductors to the next generation in space technology, we can create a very bright future for NETPark, County Durham and our great North East."

As NETPark prepares for its next phase, its role as a cornerstone of innovation and growth in the North East remains steadfast.

With a commitment to nurturing cutting-edge technologies, fostering collaboration and creating high-value jobs, NETPark is more than a science park – it is a symbol of what is possible when vision meets determination.



### NETPark

To find out more about NETPark, visit the websites at the top of this article or call 01740 625250.



Pictured, from left to right, are Michael Tyerman, Filtronic chief financial officer; Kim McGuinness, North East mayor; Janet Todd, Business Durham's NETPark phase 3 project director; and councillor Amanda Hoppgood, leader of Durham County Council.



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# Hi Club





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**A new gym with a spin has opened in a familiar building in Gosforth. And it is proving very popular. The emphasis at Hii Club is a relaxing, sociable meeting place, with a coffee shop at the front and every exercise machine you could wish for in the back. As Colin Young discovers, when he meets the young trio in charge, there is more to Hii than meets the eye.**

Words by Colin Young

Photography by Ben Benoiel





“It was one of those moments when you don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” says Lloyd.

He adds: “I feel more confident now I’ve been down – and got a lot of stuff done – and it’s starting to look like this place when we were at that stage here.

“I know where we’re at, and it will be open in time.

“I came back from holiday and Steph wants this done, Josh wants that done, so I’m on catch-up jobs now.

“We’ve still got tonnes to do here, and that could be on for another year.

“I like everything done perfectly, but we’ll get there.”

Our location is Hii Club Gosforth.

Founded by the three friends, it is a bright and breezy cafe overlooking the Town Moor at the front, gym through its black doors to the back, and a Pilates studio and changing rooms upstairs.

The building has had many uses over the years, once as an air hangar for local biplane enthusiasts to take off from the Town Moor, and most recently as Dukes Moor Garage.

Josh Rose’s brain and thumbs are in constant overdrive.

When he’s not answering a question or involved in a conversation, he’s tapping into his phone.

His friends and colleagues say it’s normal.

And today he can be forgiven – Hii is saying Hi to Leeds.

The latest venture – the Hii Grind city centre coffee house – is a week from opening.

But there are still staff to hire, baristas to train, a bakery to source, a back kitchen to finish and signage to put up.

It would be all hands to the pump if co-founders Josh and Steph Barlow weren’t 100-plus miles away at Hii HQ in Gosforth.

So they’ve sent Lloyd Riddell, the third member of the management team – ‘Mr Practical’ – and he’s keeping in touch constantly by phone.

As he explains later, arriving at the tail-end of the interview and photoshoot, the day in Leeds has had its successes – and setbacks.

The staff roster is increasing, he’s found a flat to live in for a few weeks, the coffee supplier is in place, but a glass panel at the front of the premises smashed as the new signage was being erected.



Its conversion, a “nod to its history”, has sandblasted a breath of fresh air and energy into the place and given it a new lease of life.

And it’s still not finished, with plans to add ice baths and saunas on the first floor.

“When we found the site, it was ten years’ worth of energy going into one project,” says Hull-born Josh, who studied in Newcastle and developed an events company in the city with Lloyd.

He adds: “I saw it in the window, called the landlord straight away, and met him here.

“And he was already getting hounded with calls.

“I was like, ‘let’s do a deal. What do you want?’

“Just as we were about to leave, I asked to look upstairs and said, ‘if you wait until January, we’ll take the whole building’.

“He shook my hand and honoured his word.”

Building on the regulars of popular club runs from the nearby Jam Jar he used to own, Hii had an expectant audience.

And it has taken the area by storm.

Josh says: “I’ve always been pretty obsessed

with fitness; I’ve raced, done ultra marathons and travelled around, and have picked up ideas along the way.

“I lived in London for five years, and did pretty much every single fitness class.

“I had memberships everywhere and I hammered it; every deal, every 21-day trial, because it is expensive.

“I knew Steph had the fitness side covered; she had a real following, and people would always be interested in where she went.

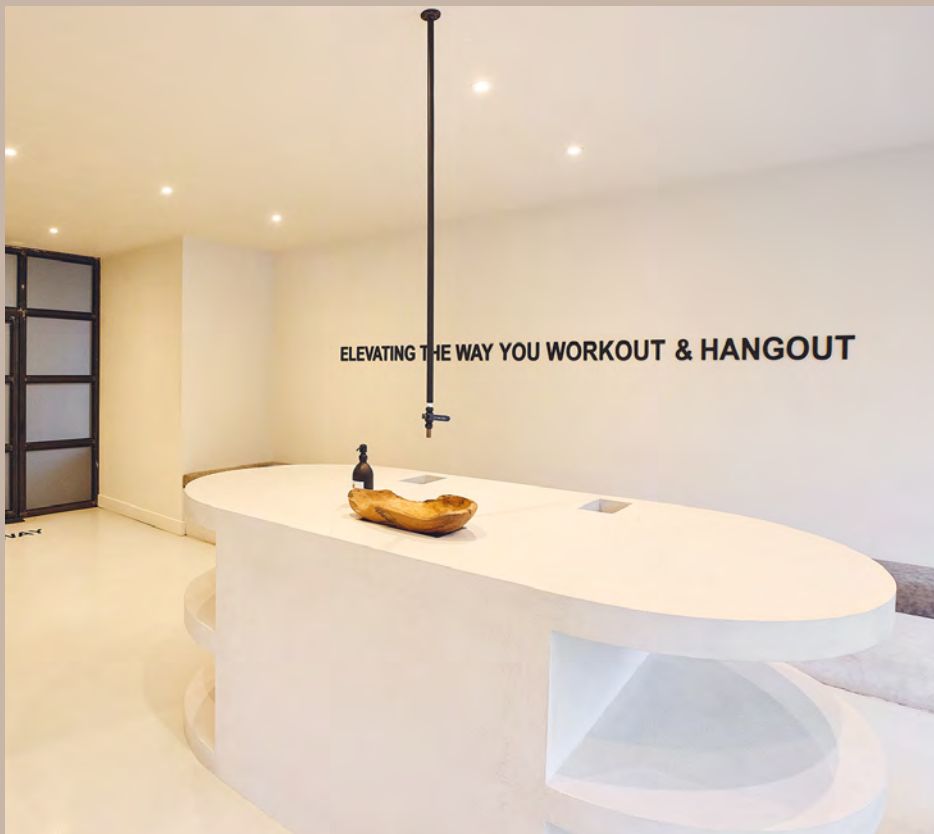
“I’ve got a track record with business, we talked about it and we just clicked.

“We had the same vision of somewhere that feels more like a hotel reception than a gym, a bright and breezy fitness club, with everything under one roof and a real sense of community.”

He adds: “I’m also obsessed with coffee shops.

“Lloyd worked for years in Australia in coffee shops, so we have some expertise there, and we’ve taken elements of our favourite types of spaces and put it under one roof.

“We’ve taken what we like and what we know works, and have added it all together in Newcastle.



“They don’t have a space like this in London.

“I knew there was a bit of a gap in Newcastle, and in the north generally, which is dominated by one or two companies.

“We wanted to do our own take on what we thought would work.

“It doesn’t feel like a gym when you come in, it is relaxed, and if you want to come in for a coffee, that’s fine.

“But the training is the best you can get anywhere, and if you’re a member here, we cover everything you need with work-outs and group training with like-minded people.

“And then you can grab a coffee afterwards.

“Hanging out and socialising here is almost like a work-out, and certainly as good mentally.”

As if to prove the point, rocky road has just been added to the Hii menu, alongside the protein shakes, avocado on toast and homemade health bars.

The stylish welcoming cafe is an important asset to Steph, a well-known personal trainer, who wanted to create an environment very different from other gyms in the area.

She claims the credit for the name – although who came up with the number of i’s is open to

N

**Banana breads, tuna melts, turmeric lattes... This is my kind of gym.**

**Steph, Josh and Lloyd wanted to create a place where you can chill, and don't feel intimidated when you walk through the doors.**

**They've worked hard at it. And they've succeeded.**

- Colin Young

debate, it seems – but Hii represents being high on life, or coffee, and the rush of endorphins after exercise.

And it is much more than a gym, which is deliberately absent from the Hii brand.

Steph says: “There’s nothing like this in Newcastle.

“We’re the first people to do it here, and that felt important.

“Essentially, the concept is community, connection, health, fitness and an aesthetic space.

“You get everything you need.

“It was important, starting with a blank canvas, to create the place we would want to join and go to again and again.

“Everything is centred on staff training and the product, and we work closely together on everything; the brand, the marketing, it all comes from us.

“We’re very protective of the brand; we’ve got really strict guidelines in place.

“There are others who’ve tried to do something similar, not the whole package but maybe one or two elements.

“The difference with us, though, is it isn’t just about the product, it’s an awareness of the staff, front of house, attention to detail – things like calling people by their first names.

“We treat it like a boutique hotel.

“And it needed to be somewhere where we could build a community.

“All of the spaces are designed to hang out.

“Connecting through fitness is also quite rewarding – we’ve already seen people making friends.

“I was talking to two people in the cafe last week, who are always together on the treadmill.

“They met here, which is so good to see.”

After a successful launch in Leeds, the Hii team is now prepared for the traditional new year intake of fresh members seeking to keep to resolutions.

There is more to Hii than meets the eye.

And Josh aims to keep it that way.

He adds: “I don’t think we’d be able to grow if we were just sitting back all the time, saying well done.

“It’s our first year and we’re learning.

“We’ve elevated the gym, and it’s a good thing for the area.

“But other gyms are elevating because we’re leading the way, and if we sit back, they’ll catch up.

“January is always a busy month, and there are all kinds of things that are going to start happening from then onwards.

“It is going to be exciting.”





# Navigating the post-Budget landscape

## Perspective Financial Group

www.pfgl.co.uk

@perspectivefgl

**With the Government's recent Budget having reset the economic dial for many across the UK, Ian Wilkinson, managing director at Chartered financial advisor Perspective (North East), tells N magazine about some of the headline changes and the seminal points for consideration to best manage your assets across 2025 and beyond.**



Ian Wilkinson, managing director at Chartered financial advisor Perspective (North East)

With a new Government has come a refreshed financial blueprint.

From capital gains and inheritance tax changes to pension asset and business and agricultural relief adjustments, the economic environment has been significantly rewritten.

Given their breadth and scope, the updates will take some time to be fully appreciated.

But with close support, like that offered by the expert advisory team at Perspective (North East), you will be able to navigate your way through the modifications.

### Capital gains tax

One of the biggest announcements in the Budget came around capital gains tax, with the landscape shifting significantly.

The lower rate for non-residential properties has risen from ten per cent to 18 per cent, with residential capital gains tax rates remaining unchanged at 18 per cent and 24 per cent.

Combined with the dramatic reduction in the annual capital gains tax allowance – from £12,300 in April 2023 to just £3000 this year – the impact is clear.

Consequently, projections suggest 570,000 people will pay capital gains tax in 2024/2025, with 260,000 liable for the first time.

Elsewhere, the capital gains tax rate payable under Business Asset Disposal Relief will increase from ten per cent to 14 per cent from April 6 2025, and to 18 per cent from April 6 2026.

### Points to consider:

- Using tax-efficient vehicles, such as ISAs and pensions, can protect against future capital gains tax



**“In short, there is a lot to consider, with some of the changes potentially requiring some re-planning of your existing arrangements.**

**And we are here to help”**

- Over time, the benefits of ISAs, for example, can be considerable, with the average ISA for over-65s now exceeding £60,000 in value

#### **Pension assets**

There was a significant announcement regarding a change in the tax treatment of pension assets upon death.

From April 2027, defined contribution pension pots will be included as part of your estate and, therefore, potentially liable to inheritance tax.

In the 2027/2028 tax year, the Office for Budget Responsibility estimates 38,500 estates will pay, on average, £34,000 in additional inheritance tax due to holding pension assets.

#### **Points to consider:**

- This change will significantly impact how everyday living costs are funded in retirement
- The challenge will be to find a balance between pension and non-pension income while maintaining sufficient funding for the rest of your life

#### **Inheritance tax**

The inheritance tax threshold has remained static since 2009, with the limit frozen at £325,000, and this was recently extended to 2030.

Adjusted for inflation, the threshold would today stand at more than £500,000.

While the additional £175,000 residence allowance offers some relief for direct descendants, it doesn't help everyone.

With the average UK home now valued at £366,000, many estates are at risk of exceeding the threshold when combined with investments, pensions and other assets.

One of the main headlines was the announcement that business relief and agricultural relief will be reformed from April 2026.

For deaths prior to April 6 2026, there will be no change.

After April 2026, the first £1 million of combined business and agricultural assets will continue to get 100 per cent relief.

The Government may also decide to restrict the transfer of tax relief between spouses and partners, though full details are yet to be confirmed.

Assets in excess of £1 million will get 50 per cent relief and be taxed at an effective rate of 20 per cent.

Business relief on AIM shares will be reduced from 100 per cent to 50 per cent, and be taxed at an effective rate of 20 per cent, but there is no upper limit to the amount an individual can invest into AIM-listed shares while qualifying for 50 per cent relief.

In addition, the stamp duty land tax surcharge for second homes has increased from three per cent to five per cent.

#### **Your next steps**

In short, there is a lot to consider, with some of the changes potentially requiring some re-planning of your existing arrangements.

And we are here to help.

Our expert teams across our national office portfolio – which includes bases in Newcastle, Darlington, Stockton, Hexham and Harrogate, North Yorkshire – will support you every step of the way, providing advice and guidance that is tailored to best manage your assets.



**Perspective Financial Group**  
Operating from more than 40 bases across the UK, which include Perspective (North East) sites in Newcastle, Darlington, Stockton, Hexham and Harrogate, North Yorkshire, Perspective Financial Group's local offices provide financial planning advice with client relationships that endure, on average, for more than 26 years and often span four generations of a family.

To find out more about its services, how it could support your needs in the post-Budget landscape and for office contact information, visit the website at the top of this article.

# Closer connections: The power of personalised customer support

## Northumbrian Water Group

[www.nwl.co.uk/](http://www.nwl.co.uk/)

@nwater\_care

**With a career spanning almost three decades, including much time working with customers to provide close payment support, Mark Wilkinson is more than familiar with the impact water firms have on everyday lives. Here, Northumbrian Water Group's head of income, reveals how he is using past experiences to ensure customers receive the best service – at the right price.**



Mark Wilkinson, Northumbrian Water Group's head of income

Meet Mark Wilkinson, Northumbrian Water Group's head of income.

Having worked in the water industry for almost 30 years, he has seen unprecedented change in the sector, with his career having taken him from Essex to Durham, Johannesburg and back to Durham again.

Mark started at Essex and Suffolk Water in 1995 after graduating with an economics degree from Portsmouth University.

He initially worked in debt recovery, talking to customers on the phone all day, a role he took temporarily before moving to work on customer billing complaints.

He says: "Working directly with our customers gave me a real understanding of those struggling to pay their bills, and how we could help them without judgement, listening carefully and helping as much as we could."

The merger of Essex and Suffolk Water and Northumbrian Water saw Mark relocate to Durham and take financial control of the customer directorate, along with income and debt.

Around the same time, Mark had the opportunity to work on two projects in Johannesburg, resulting in setting the first prices for the newly-formed Johannesburg Water.

Once back in the North East, he became a qualified accountant, and began spending more time focusing on customer debt and looking at Northumbrian Water Group's billing and collections process.

Mark's economics, finance and customer

background meant he focused on the longer term benefits of sustainability, rather than short-term cash collection.

He says: "In a monopoly situation, longer term strategies make more sense financially.

"Building relationships with customers who are struggling to pay, by having meaningful conversations, even in very difficult situations, leads to the best customer service."

**"Building relationships with customers, by having meaningful conversations, even in very difficult situations, leads to the best customer service"**

The water company has been among the top water firms for customer satisfaction and trust consistently for nine years, something it is always looking to improve to become the best in the UK.

Northumbrian Water Group was the first water company to partner with Stepchange, the debt advice agency, by guaranteeing to abide by its customer payment recommendation, no matter what that was.

Mark says: "This partnership showed each customer had a different story.

"Yes, there were often some similarities, but for each one, the set of circumstances that had led them to that point were subtly different."

He adds: "We often talk about putting ourselves in customers' shoes, but how easy is that to do in reality?"

"How many of us have actually had similar experiences?"

"When you listen to a customer talking to someone independently, the perspective is different to having a direct conversation.

"You notice different things, you pick up tone, you actually listen carefully to the words and what a customer focuses on in the conversation, and often you realise the judgement you might have applied to the situation is based on your experience, not theirs."

Over the years, Northumbrian Water Group has embarked on many different campaigns and partnerships with a number of local and national operators, always with the principle that these organisations are the ones customers trust and turn to for help.

Mark says: "More recently, the focus has been proactive identification of eligible customers for support.

"We've set up data sharing with the Department for Work and Pensions, housing associations and local authorities to help us find customers needing support."

The water company offers a range of support for customers including flexible payment plans, low income discounts, bill cap schemes and even payment breaks if there has been a sudden or unexpected change in a customer's circumstances.

There is also a priority services register, which ensures support for those who may need additional help.

North East customers pay the lowest water and wastewater bills in England.

This follows the biggest price reduction in the sector of 18 per cent, which was made in 2020.

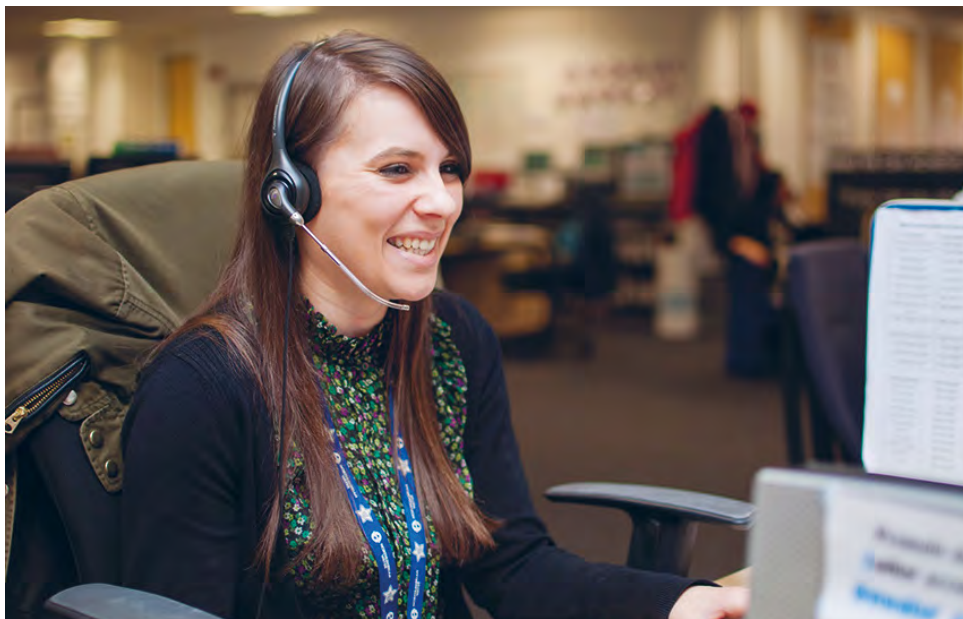
The funds raised by any future increased water bills will only be used to fund improvements to regional water systems, with the water company stating if these improvements aren't delivered, bills will automatically be reduced.

**"When you listen to a customer talking to someone independently, the perspective is different to having a direct conversation"**

In more recent years, Mark has gone on to lead the debt teams and set up the affordability team.

He adds: "The water industry today is unrecognisable from the sector I joined almost 30 years ago, but our customers remain at the heart of what we deliver.

"Our current plans will see the number of households we are supporting with social tariffs double by 2030 to almost 300,000 as we eliminate water poverty, making sure no customer will need to spend more than five per cent of their income on water and wastewater bills."



**Northumbrian Water Group**  
For more information about Northumbrian Water Group, and the provider's wider work across the North East, visit the website at the top of this article.

To check if you might be eligible for financial support, visit [www.nwl.co.uk/services/extra-support/financial-support/](http://www.nwl.co.uk/services/extra-support/financial-support/)

# ROUNDTABLE

## A RAPIDLY CHANGING LANDSCAPE: DELIVERING A NEW INDUSTRIAL AND ECONOMIC FUTURE FOR SOUTH EAST NORTHUMBERLAND

Words by Brian Aitken

Photography by Pawel Gajek (The Bigger Picture Agency)

**There's a vibrancy around South East Northumberland, an area alive to the sound of regeneration thanks to a thriving energy park, the re-opening of the Northumberland Line, a major new college campus, increasing offshore engineering developments and the prospect of a world-leading artificial intelligence data centre. Here, in an exclusive roundtable discussion hosted by NET alongside Bernicia, Port of Blyth and Education Partnership North East, business leaders discuss development across the region over the past 12 months, the challenges and opportunities faced by organisations and what is in store across the coming year.**

**Much has happened in South East Northumberland over the past year. What have been the standout moments, and how are they changing the area for the better?**

Pointing to the Port of Blyth-based Energy Central Learning Hub, which has been created to nurture workers to power the UK's sustainability drive, Andrew Mowbray, director of projects at property investment and development business Advance Northumberland, said the area is in a "really exciting" place.

He added: "It's all about the long-term view that was taken many years ago, which has resulted in all of these things coming together now.

"We've got activity in the centre of Blyth, and we're about to start the demolition of Wansbeck Square in time, hopefully, for the Northumberland Line opening.

"And then we have the Ashington Portland Park cinema coming soon."

John Hildreth, head of economic growth at Business Northumberland – the new business support service for Northumberland County Council – highlighted the impact of the recently-developed Northumberland Energy Park, which neighbours Port of Blyth, at Cambois, and has already attracted subsea cable maker JDR.

He said: "JDR represents £130 million of investment and 171 new jobs for the area, with plans to grow further.

"Then there's phase two of the energy park, with SSE Renewables having submitted an application for an onshore converter station.

"The opportunity to drive economic growth from clean power is very much part of the energy park's message to the market.

"One of the most significant things to happen, though, is the £10 billion investment by Blackstone QTS in an artificial intelligence data centre at Cambois."

"Construction jobs will be created, but there will be spin-offs too, in terms of the education perspective and how we bleed that opportunity into businesses across the county and region," said John, who added the data centre deal will deliver £110 million for Northumberland County Council to invest in the area.

John Johnston, chief executive at Ashington-headquartered housing association Bernicia, pointed to the optimism delivered by the election of Kim McGuinness as North East mayor and subsequent formation of the North East Combined Authority.

He said: "I think we're all very positive around that, and are seeing a lot of collaboration in the region.

"In terms of housing, the determination is there to build more homes at a time of massive need, but also to work smarter together, collaborating on things like major stock improvements and retrofit."

**Amid the positivity, are there any issues or challenges that need to be overcome?**

Richard Hogg, founder and chief executive of STEM-focused specialist recruitment and outsourced talent services partner Jackson Hogg, issued caution about the skills market.

He said: “We need thousands more people coming into the engineering sector, right across the board.

“Many of our clients are paying us for very niche, experienced senior engineers and principals, who can design and create things.

“But, because of a scarcity of talent, what they used to pay £40,000 for, they’re now paying £70,000-plus for – and that’s massive.

“That’s where you start to become uncompetitive on the global scene.”

One organisation doing something about the situation is Port of Blyth.

With the number of people employed in offshore wind expected to grow from 32,000 to 150,000 by 2030, it has worked with partners to create the Energy Central Campus, which includes the Energy Central Learning Hub.

And not only is its training division, known as Port Training Services, the biggest provider of apprenticeships in ports – training 100 people at a time on behalf of all UK ports – it launched a carousel degree apprenticeship in response to the way companies in the subsea sector were recruiting.

Alasdair Kerr, the port’s commercial director, said: “It’s a really good experience.

“Participants do six months at each company, and they’re 100 per cent guaranteed a job at the end of it.”

Ellen Thinnesen, chief executive of Education Partnership North East, which runs six college campuses across the region – including a soon-to-open Ashington-based Northumberland College campus – took the discussion further.

Spotlighting the creation of Skills England, which has been founded to take on the powers and responsibilities of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, she expressed optimism of its impact on the learning environment.

Referencing its first report, she said: “It sets out the three aspects of the skills challenge.

“One: Skills mismatch - A disconnect between the skills sought by employers and those possessed by individuals.

“Two: Skills shortage - When difficulties in recruiting for a given job are due to the demand for particular skills exceeding supply in the labour market.

“Three: Skills gap - When employers consider their current workforce to have either the wrong type of skill, or level of skills, to those required to do the job.

“Some sectors in the region are not skills forecasting well enough.

“My experience, from working with some of the large employers across this region and others, is that many do not have workforce strategies in place for the longer term, particularly in relation to the technological skills needed as we head towards 2035.”

Richard added: “The message overall for any young person with an appetite to do STEM-related work is that they’re almost guaranteed employment at the end of it.

“There is such demand coming through from all these sectors – they don’t need to worry about getting work.”

**Staying with skills, what does the existing relationship between industry and education look like?**

Mark Davies, assistant vice principal at Blyth-based Bede Academy, said the relationship is good, pointing to the support from employers for the courses it is delivering at the Energy Central development.



Pictured, above, Ellen Thinnesen, Education Partnership North East chief executive



Below, Richard Hogg, Jackson Hogg founder and chief executive



**“I think a lot of young people are seeing the regeneration and we’re getting to a point where students want to stay because they can see there are real life chances for them”**

**Mark Davies,**  
Bede Academy assistant vice principal

**“We must drive an economic skills strategy, but we need to anchor everything to systemic change, because only then will we drive the difference needed”**

**Ellen Thinnesen,  
Education Partnership North East  
chief executive**

**“I’d like a clear policy platform and funding certainty around social housing to release capacity to build more of the social homes the region needs”**

**John Johnston,  
Bernicia chief executive**



Alasdair Kerr, Port of Blyth’s commercial director, makes a point during the roundtable discussion

He said: “Work placements on T-levels are 45 days over two years.

“That’s a huge commitment from employers, but we’re already seeing, after just one block of placements, how successful it has been.

“With that employer support, young people’s life chances just grow and grow because they can visualise where they are going to end up.

“Far too many of our young people are encouraged to go to university, which isn’t necessarily the right pathway for them.

“As a result, they often leave the area with the qualification they’ve got because, historically, there may not have been something for them on the doorstep.

“I think a lot of young people are seeing all of this regeneration, all of the new employers come into the area, and we’re getting to a point where students want to stay because they can see there are real life chances for them here.”

Mark found support from Ellen.

She said: “I’m seeing some amazing things in the region.

“Co-production, co-design and co-delivery between industry and education is probably the strongest I’ve ever seen it, and I’m beginning to see the barriers being broken down between colleges and some universities, and certainly wider skills providers in the system.”

There was a lot of interest around the table in Sunderland College’s 14 to 16-year-old pilot scheme with Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, Nissan and Gentoo, which has been shared with the Department for Education and North East Combined Authority.

The programme involves partnerships with academy trusts and sees the college deliver technical education from the age of 14, with

employers’ expectations of a young person’s employability built into its framework.

Ellen added: “We’re just about to finish the second year of the Nissan Academy; these 14-year-olds will leave with their school qualifications, a technical qualification in engineering (typically achieved post-16) and Nissan informed skills.

“We also have guaranteed routes through to apprenticeship with Gentoo and Nissan.

“The whole strategy the college is deploying is to work with schools, with children as young as seven or eight, and then start formal delivery at 14, bringing the technical competencies and the softer skills that are so important to be able to function as an active citizen in the workplace and society.”

**Where do soft skills and employability sit in the training and skills agenda?**

Sarah Lawson, operations director at Longbenton-based fire alarm panel, evacuation alert and emergency lighting maker Advanced Electronics, said the company has a problem with recruitment, with many young people not work-ready.

She said: “We’ve got an ageing workforce, and it is difficult trying to backfill roles.

“We’re just not seeing people wanting to come in and sit on a production line.

“But we’ve got all the positives – a good package, job stability and everything else.

“People are talking about lots of great things going on.

“Where I’m sitting, it doesn’t feel like that’s happening to us.

“We look for apprentices. We’ve looked

at different ways of doing it, but the unemployability of some of the people that we’re seeing means they just come through and drop out.”

Ellen stressed the situation is “going to get more complex”.

She said: “All of the data forecasting nationally indicates the distribution of jobs will be significantly impacted into the future by global trends such as an ageing population and a growth in young people over the next decade reaching the labour market.

“So, shifting the whole skills strategy is critical to that.”

John Johnston said personal development and support were important to Bernicia, not just for young people but for helping older people re-enter the workplace.

Highlighting his role as vice-chair of the North East Housing Partnership, which brings together the region’s social housing providers, he said: “Through that endeavour, we are delivering lots of employability initiatives, dealing with what is holding people back from re-skilling or re-entering the workplace.

“It is based around a person-centred approach, looking at confidence, communication and any other issues adding to long-term unemployment, or holding people back from re-entering the workplace, including mental illness and disability.”

Mark pointed out COVID-19’s impact on youngsters’ soft skills development, citing lower attendance levels and the highest ever numbers of safeguarding and welfare concerns since lockdown.

He said: “There are three or four year groups of students in the secondary system, or just starting to come out of it, that have missed opportunities to develop their communication

skills, do any form of public speaking or be involved in group work during year seven, eight and nine.

‘And these soft skills are more important, by and large, than the technical skills we want our young people to have.’

**How big a difference will the opening of the Northumberland Line make to the area?**

The consensus was that the opening of the line would not be a solution in itself, but is nevertheless much needed because of current shortcomings across the public transport system.

Alasdair said: ‘We’ve been trying for a year to recruit a graduate to come and work in our finance department.

‘There are some great students coming out of Newcastle, but trying to get them to come to Blyth is difficult.

‘It’s only 20 minutes in the car, but it’s three buses, and they think it’s a different part of the world.

‘I think the Northumberland Line will make the situation better.’

Mark highlighted the experiences of students who went on placement a few months ago, including some who had to travel to Wallsend.

He said: ‘I hadn’t realised quite how bad it was.

‘They were travelling for pretty much two-and-a-half-hours, sometimes three hours a day, with the erratic nature of bus certainty.’

Sarah added: ‘Public transport is a problem.

‘We used to be based in Cramlington and are now in Newcastle, so we’ve got a lot of people coming from South East Northumberland into our factory on a daily basis.

‘We want to offer flexible work packages but, because of shift patterns, I’m not in the position where we could just work to everyone’s individual needs.

‘And we really struggle with that because of the lack of transport that’s available.

‘If we’re ever looking for a collaborative approach, it must be on transport.’

John Johnston said: ‘We’ve got to make sure the North East Combined Authority, working with local authorities, has the funding and influence to develop an integrated transport system that both works and is something people can afford.’

He added the combined authority must also use its influence with the Government to make funding available for significant infrastructure improvements to transport links that include the A1 and Cramlington’s Moor Farm roundabout, and for the mooted reopening of the 21-mile Leamside Line between Tursdale, in County Durham, and Pelaw, in Gateshead.

John Hildreth added: ‘Transport now falls

under one remit – the combined authority.

‘I’m confident there will be a more co-ordinated approach in terms of transport management, whether it be road, rail or bus.’

**Do you think devolution will improve the co-ordination between the public and private sectors?**

Andrew said: ‘I’m hopeful we’ll get more simplified access to funding through devolution.

‘Northumberland County Council, with Advance Northumberland’s support, has been successful in securing Government funding over the last five or six years, but you end up in this fight with the whole country.

‘Everyone is spending lots of money to develop schemes to a certain stage – sometimes up to £60,000 to £70,000 is invested in a project which may or may not make the cut at Government level.

‘It would be better if that is funnelled through the North East and distributed in a much better way, with a lot less wastage in the application process.’

Alasdair added: ‘We’ve tried to take a different tack with it.

‘When they were pulling together a devolution deal, we thought if seven local authorities can get on without too much fighting, then maybe the ports need to get on better as well.

‘So, we’ve put in a devolution deal.

‘It’s still early stages for the principle of a green super port – it is ourselves, Tyne, Sunderland and Newcastle International Airport.

‘It’s driven by the ports and supported by the combined authority.

‘We’ll still be competitive, but as a joint entity, we’ve got a stronger offering.’

**What are the measures needed to provide further progress across South East Northumberland over the next year?**

John Johnston cautioned the area must be careful not to ‘lose the opportunities of today by planning for tomorrow’.

He said: ‘We mustn’t think and operate in isolation.

‘The new Ashington college will be on site and the train line will be open, and I’d like a clear policy platform and funding certainty around social housing to release capacity to build more of the social homes the region needs.’

Andrew called for continued collaboration to ensure projects are brought to suitable fruition.

He said: ‘Over the next 12 months, as a result of the hard work over the past few years, we’ll see so much come out of the ground, be handed over and opened.’

Ellen said the region must be very clear on its plans to address systemic challenges.

She said: ‘One in five children in the North East live in deep poverty, with one in ten living in deeper poverty and seven out of ten living in households with no economic resilience.

‘We must drive an economic skills strategy, but we need to anchor everything to systemic change, because only then will we drive the difference needed.’

Sarah echoed the call for clarity.

She said: ‘A clear vision for the North East would be really good, and we must also really work on shrugging off some of the things we kind of revel in – things like the region’s reputation for a good night out.

‘We must make sure we can interact with Westminster and really drive the agenda, rather than feeling it’s happening to us, or we’re not fully engaged in the process.’

Mark said it was incumbent the area maintains a groundswell of positivity.

He said: ‘We’ve started something, and I look forward to seeing university students coming back to Blyth, not waving them goodbye at the end of sixth form and never seeing them again.

‘I look forward to engineering students and health students going out into sectors where there’s real need and accessing opportunities across the North East.’

John Hildreth added: ‘By this time next year, I hope to be getting on the train and heading to Bebside or Ashington, to see the new college, or to go and watch something at the new cinema in Blyth.

‘You can already see the impact the Energy Central Campus is having, in terms of students using Blyth town centre, and I hope we can replicate that with the new Ashington college.

‘A really big opportunity, though, is the new hyperscale data centre, because a series of ten data centres in one location isn’t something we’ve seen anywhere else in the world.’



Sarah Lawson, Advanced Electronics’ operations director, makes a point during the roundtable discussion

# Creating a great place to work at growing law firm

## Hay & Kilner

www.hay-kilner.co.uk

LinkedIn: Hay & Kilner

Instagram: @hay\_kilner

**With a history dating back almost 80 years, Newcastle-based law firm Hay & Kilner is stitched into the fabric of the North East's business community. And it is building on its legacy with new moves that are laying foundations for success across decades to come. Here, managing partner Jonathan Waters tells N magazine about its open culture, its commitment to inclusivity and the support it is providing for the local community.**

Combining North East heritage with a modern edge, Hay & Kilner is a fast-growing and multi award-winning law firm putting its people, clients and values at the core of everything it does.

The full service legal firm started life as a post-war practice founded by Rowland Hay and Wilf Kilner in 1946.

Fast forward almost 80 years and Hay & Kilner, based at The Lumen, part of Newcastle's flagship future city development, continues to go from strength to strength, with a growing team of more than 130 offering a range of commercial and private client services.

Experts in respective fields, its team prides itself on a personable approach, creating a great place to work and always going the extra mile for clients.

Hay & Kilner aims high as a firm, which is reflected in the culture and attitude of its team.

The firm has created an environment where everyone, no matter who they are or what they do, feels supported in their roles and can be the best versions of themselves.

Caring leaders have fostered an environment where everyone has a purpose, can contribute new ideas and has access to resources they need to thrive within the organisation.

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

"Our focus on our people and client service is something that resonates across our entire business, alongside our core values of being engaging, relatable, dynamic, passionate and supportive.







“We are also proud of our impressive retention rates, which means we are doing something right.

“I can personally vouch for that, having been with the firm for more than 26 years.

“I started my career as a trainee solicitor and progressed through the business, and I genuinely wouldn’t have wanted to have been anywhere else.

“It’s wonderful so many of our colleagues say the same too.”

**Investment in talent and creating a ‘family feel’**

Flexible working, an open and honest culture and strong team spirit are the most valuable offerings provided by the firm, according to team feedback, as well as its competitive remuneration packages.

The firm also prides itself on a down to earth and supportive approach to clients and colleagues, a commitment to promoting equality and diversity, and policies that fully support working parents and carers.

Jonathan adds: “Our people truly are our biggest strength and most valuable asset, and we are fully invested in providing an open, inclusive and engaging working environment.

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

“I’m proud it still feels the same today, and new recruits often comment on it.”

**Loyalty and longevity key to success**

The firm is also proud that many of its team who started their careers with Hay & Kilner have

continued with the business.

Retention remains high, with its longest serving colleague having been with the firm for more than 48 years, and two colleagues having celebrated their 25th and 20th anniversaries this year.

**Giving back to the local community and creating a sustainable working environment**

Doing good business isn’t just about financial success.

Hay & Kilner is proud of its North East roots and commitment to giving back to the local community.

From support for the Great North Air Ambulance Service, the firm’s charity of the year, to mentoring schemes, sponsorships and time off for volunteering, giving back is something the whole team enjoys.

Sustainability is firmly on the agenda too.

In addition to its offices being built to BREEAM Excellence standards, the team is going even further, partnering with environmental charity Urban Green Newcastle to plant 750 trees in parks around Newcastle to improve green spaces as part of the city’s net-zero aspirations.

And 2025 promises to be another exciting year for the firm, as it continues its commitment to growth, supporting its people and clients in the way it knows best.

Central to this will be its ongoing commitment to being a place where people enjoy working, one that embraces new processes and technology to support client services, and invests in the right talent to maintain its longstanding legacy as one of the region’s most reputable law firms.



**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.**

# 5



[www.wearelim.com](http://www.wearelim.com)

Instagram: [weare\\_lim](https://www.instagram.com/weare_lim)

**Ellie Chapman is founder and creative director of Darlington-based visualisation studio Lim, which is known for working with high-profile, global brands. Here, Ellie speaks to Kate Hewison about Lim's journey, the power of visual storytelling and how her North East roots have influenced her entrepreneurial path.**

# MINUTES

## WITH ELLIE CHAPMAN

By Kate Hewison

**You are the founder and creative director of Lim, which carries the title of a visualisation studio. What does the business do, and how does it bring creative concepts to life?**

Lim is a studio of creative thinkers that helps companies get stuff done by visualising what they talk about.

We do everything from graphic recording and live scribing events, to developing a story map and graphic facilitation with businesses.

Through drawing what people say, we support people in having their ideas heard, propel decisions to be made, spark imagination and bring groups together.

**You founded Lim at just 30-years-old, and are already working with major global brands like Mars, Coca-Cola and Google. What inspired you to start the studio, and how did you gain such high-profile clients?**

Before I started Lim, I was a freelance graphic recorder for seven years.

Over those years, I saw and understood the power of working visually, and I believe everyone should work in a visual way.

My dream was to combine my experience in both business and visualisation to create a unique brand that could serve global business leaders. Lim was born.

Working with some of the biggest brands in the world is down to a combination of things.

When I was freelance, I spent a lot of time building up my client base.

I firmly believe you're only as good as your last gig, so I put a massive emphasis on this and spent time nurturing those relationships.

The Facilitation Partnership Limited is our parent company, which looks after two brands: TFP – which is a team of meeting facilitators – and Lim.

Because of this, we had a fast start to working

with some high-profile clients.

**How do you help businesses clarify their vision and goals?**

Working with teams to create communication visuals is key.

When a team comes to us wanting to visualise their new strategy, we focus on the storytelling to be shared in the visual, which allows the team to clarify things further by seeing what they look and feel like.

It means a team can get an extra layer of detail down.

Often, just by seeing words on a page, it deepens understanding and helps all voices be heard, so a business is aligned on achieving its vision.

**As a North East-based entrepreneur, how has the region influenced your journey?**

There's such a brilliant network of people in the North East.

I love being part of a creative community

where you can share thoughts and ideas, listen to experts in their field and meet like-minded people.

I recently spoke at DesignTalks and Ladies Wine and Design, where there were rooms full of creatives wanting to connect and inspire each other.

Outside of work, I'm a competitive triathlete, and I've had some of my most inspiring conversations with people I've met on my bike while cycling around Northumberland.

**What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly young women, looking to make their mark in the creative and technology industries?**

Be open to giving things a go, and learn what works well and what doesn't.

Have the courage to ask for what you want and need; the worst someone can do is say no.

Leverage the power of connections and nurture your relationships.

It's all out there waiting for you.



# The importance of knowing your worth

## Jackson Hogg

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**In a competitive recruitment market, pitching your salary package at the right level can be the key to landing the perfect candidate. But how do you know if what you're offering hits the right notes? Helping provide the answers is recruitment and talent specialist Jackson Hogg, thanks to the launch of its latest Salary Guides, which offer insight and data on the North East recruitment landscape. Here, chief executive Richard Hogg and director Fern Couchman tell N magazine why knowledge is power for both businesses and individuals.**

As a nation, we Brits are known for being reserved and modest about many aspects of our lives, with discussions about salaries being one of the great taboo subjects.

But if nobody is discussing their salary, how do people know they're being paid their worth?

And how do business owners know the packages offered to prospective employees are competitive?

On hand to provide quality – and qualitative – data from across the North East business spectrum is recruitment, HR and training services specialist Jackson Hogg.

Its latest annual Salary Guides shine a spotlight on the firm's key sectors – engineering, commercial, finance, construction and civil, manufacturing, operations and supply chain, tech, HR and business support – with the latest salary data and expert insight into the health of each area.

Richard Hogg, chief executive and founder of the business, which has offices in Wallsend, Billingham and Leeds, said: "We are the biggest STEM recruitment company in the North East, so it stands to reason we are best placed to offer insight into those sectors.

"Our priority is to ensure clients are competitive and successful in their recruitment endeavours, and one of the best ways we can help them is by letting them know what the market looks like.

"By the very nature of our business we have access to a lot of data, including salary data, for the whole of the north of England.

"Using the guides, clients can benchmark the salaries they offer on a broad basis.

"They are also an opportunity for individuals to check their own package is up to scratch."

As well as salary data, each guide provides an update on the health of each sector's recruitment scene and the key events, investments and outside influences that are shaping decisions in the new year.

Jackson Hogg director Fern Couchman, who leads the senior management team and operations across Newcastle and Teesside, says the Salary Guides act as a litmus test as to how



Fern Couchman, Jackson Hogg director



Richard Hogg, Jackson Hogg founder and chief executive

competitive businesses are in their respective sector.

She says: “The Salary Guides are our most popular white paper of the year.

“People like to keep their finger on the pulse of the market, and we are in a unique situation as specialists in key STEM sectors in the region.

“That means we are exposed to a lot of live information on a day-to-day basis.

“Each guide is full of qualitative data, but that data is backed up by expert insight from across our team, looking at what’s happened in the past year and what projects have been going on in the region, and how they have impacted salaries and jobs.

“There is also expert insight on niche elements within a specific sector where there are new developments.

“The renewables sector within engineering, for example, is a hot area right now.”

Although the guides offer a useful starting point for businesses and individuals alike who want to know more about salary levels in their sector, Jackson Hogg encourages any firm looking to build a hiring strategy to engage with its sector specialists.

Clients and individuals looking to take the next step in their recruitment journey can work with Jackson Hogg’s team to access deeper, targeted analysis on specific elements and roles in a sector, allowing firms to benchmark against national competition.

The guides also offer an overview of the broader state of recruitment across the North East as we enter 2025.

Richard says: “We no longer have a situation where salaries are going through the roof to attract people.

“The focus at this time is more on the culture of the business and the benefits that businesses can offer to people.

“By that we mean benefits that are out of the ordinary, like enhanced parental leave, private healthcare or working from anywhere – beaches in Santorini included.

“The October Budget, particularly the rise in National Insurance payments, meant many businesses paused to take stock and understand the impact on their recruitment plans.

“But, as we enter 2025, we are seeing green shoots and opportunities opening up across sectors.”



**Jackson Hogg**  
To find out more about Jackson Hogg’s Salary Guides, visit [www.jacksonhogg.com/insights](http://www.jacksonhogg.com/insights)

To learn more about the firm’s wider suite of specialist recruitment and outsourced talent services support, visit the website at the top of this article.

# There's no place like home

## Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland

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**Providing support for charities and grassroots organisations across the North East, the Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland matches donors and philanthropists with special causes close to their hearts. With its new campaign – North East Roots Fund – the foundation is focusing on those who have moved away from the region, but still feel the tug of home. Here, two of the founding members of North East Roots, businessmen Magnus Willis and Steve Wooler, explain their involvement in the fund and their hopes for its success.**

The Community Foundation Tyne & Wear and Northumberland has links across the North East, and has supported hundreds of charities, community groups and grassroots organisations across its 35-year history.

With the majority of its supporters based in the region, the charity has a strong endowment model that sees its invested assets stand at almost £100 million, providing a steady source of support for dozens of organisations each year.

A new giving initiative – the North East Roots Fund – aims to spread its net a little wider, encouraging those with childhood or family links to the region, who have gone on to find success elsewhere, to become supporters of the foundation, not only financially but with their time and expertise too.

John Hollingsworth, chief philanthropy officer, says: “We are looking to build a network of people who want to give back to the region, both financially and non-financially.

“There is a whole diaspora of people born and raised in the region who have gone out into the world and found success – their stories and influence can be really inspiring to people here in the North East.

“We want to tell positive, inspiring stories and to celebrate the region and its broader accomplishments.”

### Magnus Willis

Newcastle born and raised, Magnus has a long history with the Community Foundation through his father Peter, who set up a charitable fund with the organisation some 20 years ago in the family name.

Despite living in London for 35 years, Magnus has retained strong links with the city – including his beloved Newcastle United – and is keen to see the Community Foundation flourish by widening its reach around the UK and beyond.

Following a successful career in brand strategy and market research, which included work for clients such as Google, eBay and Facebook, Magnus has strengthened his links with the Community Foundation in recent years and was a founding supporter of the North East Roots Fund.

He says: “I’ve been a big fan of the foundation and its work for a long time – they’ve helped me to give back to the North East, despite living so far away.

“As a result, I was happy to get involved in the North East Roots Fund, and help others get involved in the same way.

“I’ve gone along with the people at the Community Foundation to visit charities that benefit from the Willis Charitable Fund, which is a great chance to see it in action.

“I think the initiative has enormous potential.

“There are lots of people who left the North East and made good.



Magnus Willis, whose links to the Community Foundation date back to a charitable fund founded by his father Peter

“The region hasn’t had the riches lavished on it that other areas of the country get, so for some it may be a case of helping to right a few wrongs and wanting to give back and support the region with what it needs to flourish.

“With the fund being relatively new, we’ve only scratched the surface, and our initial efforts have been quite London focused.

“Think what it could achieve if we reach out to North East diaspora based elsewhere in the UK, or even Australia and the US.

“It’s early days, but there is a lot to play for.”

#### Steve Wooler

With a successful career in engineering consultancy having seen him work on some of the biggest urban regeneration projects in the UK, businessman Steve Wooler is hoping his expertise, as well as his financial support, can have an impact on the North East Roots Fund.

Having stepped back as chief executive of BWB Consulting, which he was instrumental in establishing in Nottingham, and now has offices in Birmingham, London, Manchester and Leeds, Steve is keen to do more to support young people in STEM-based careers.

He says: “I’ve been very fortunate in having had a successful and very fulfilling career.

“At its heart, North East Roots is about tapping into the network of people that understand how investment and regeneration works and overcoming the often significant blockers to investment.

“I’ve done a lot of work over the years to get young people into careers in construction and to pursue education in STEM subject areas.

“And I feel that if we can build a network of successful people, they can encourage and inspire young people by telling stories about their careers and explaining about sectors like construction and engineering that offer good careers but don’t get much positive coverage.



Sunderland-born Steve Wooler is aiming to help more young people into STEM-based careers through the North East Roots Fund

“I was born in Sunderland, and left at 18 to go to university and ‘escape’.

“Sunderland in 1978 was really down on its luck; most of its heavy industry was being closed.

“But it’s now undergoing a remarkable renaissance, which I’m delighted to see.

“I haven’t lived in the North East for many years, but I want to help the region fulfil its potential by working with like-minded people.

“And a vehicle like the Community Foundation is the perfect way to do that.”



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

# OUT OF

In the latest instalment of a series exploring businesspeople's lives beyond the workplace, Steven Hugill speaks to Zoey Phillips, Court of Protection solicitor at Hay & Kilner, about combining a career in the legal sector with a passion for fire eating.

**Zoey Phillips**  
Court of Protection solicitor



**You complement your role as a Court of Protection solicitor with fire eating. What inspired you to pick up your torches?**

I've always been interested in performance arts.

As a child, I was fascinated by circus performers and would often spend time outside trying to emulate particular acts I'd seen.

I love trying new things, and have had my fair share of hobbies over the years, including figure skating, dancing, cheerleading and skydiving.

Having an interesting hobby is an excellent way to decompress after a particularly busy week at work, and I've met some wonderful people through these activities.

**Learning to become a fire eater must be fraught with difficulty – what were the techniques you needed to master from the outset?**

The most important technique is breath control, making sure you don't accidentally inhale the flame into your lungs.

It can be a challenge at first to do this alongside the performance aspect.

When making it look effortless, timing is essential.

**Working with naked flame presents no little amount of jeopardy. Have you had any injuries or mishaps along the way, and are such incidents deemed accepted hazards?**

As a licensed solo skydiver with more than 100 jumps under my belt, I'm not put off by a little risk.

However, as with most things, appropriate actions can be taken to mitigate unnecessary risk when fire eating, such as being aware of the wind direction if performing outside and not wearing particularly flammable clothing.

I will, though, admit to accidentally burning off a few strands of hair as a beginner – it is always advisable to have a damp towel or fire extinguisher nearby just in case.

I work with paraffin fuel, which burns at a relatively low temperature, so that helps minimise the risk of burns.

Paraffin has quite a high flash point (the temperature at which it will ignite from a naked flame) and needs

to be soaked into the wick on the prop before it will ignite.

So, contrary to popular belief, flames used by fire performers are a rather manageable temperature for a few minutes.

The effect is a 'warm' flame, as opposed to 'hot'.

If the flame reaches a temperature that is too high, it can be extinguished and relit.

**What reaction do you get from audiences, and do you have a signature trick that gets people cheering?**

People tend to absolutely love it, particularly at night when the flames are really vibrant.

I've recently been experimenting with using spinning props alongside lycopodium powder, which dramatically increases the size of a prop's flame and makes for stunning visuals.

This gets a fantastic response.

**Being a fire eater must make for a fantastic conversation starter in your professional role too – what kind of response does it spark among your peers?**

It is certainly something different!

The response can vary; some people would be interested to give it a go, and others would be happy to stay in the audience.

It makes for a great conversation starter and opens up discussions with people into other exciting areas, which is great for breaking the ice in professional settings.

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

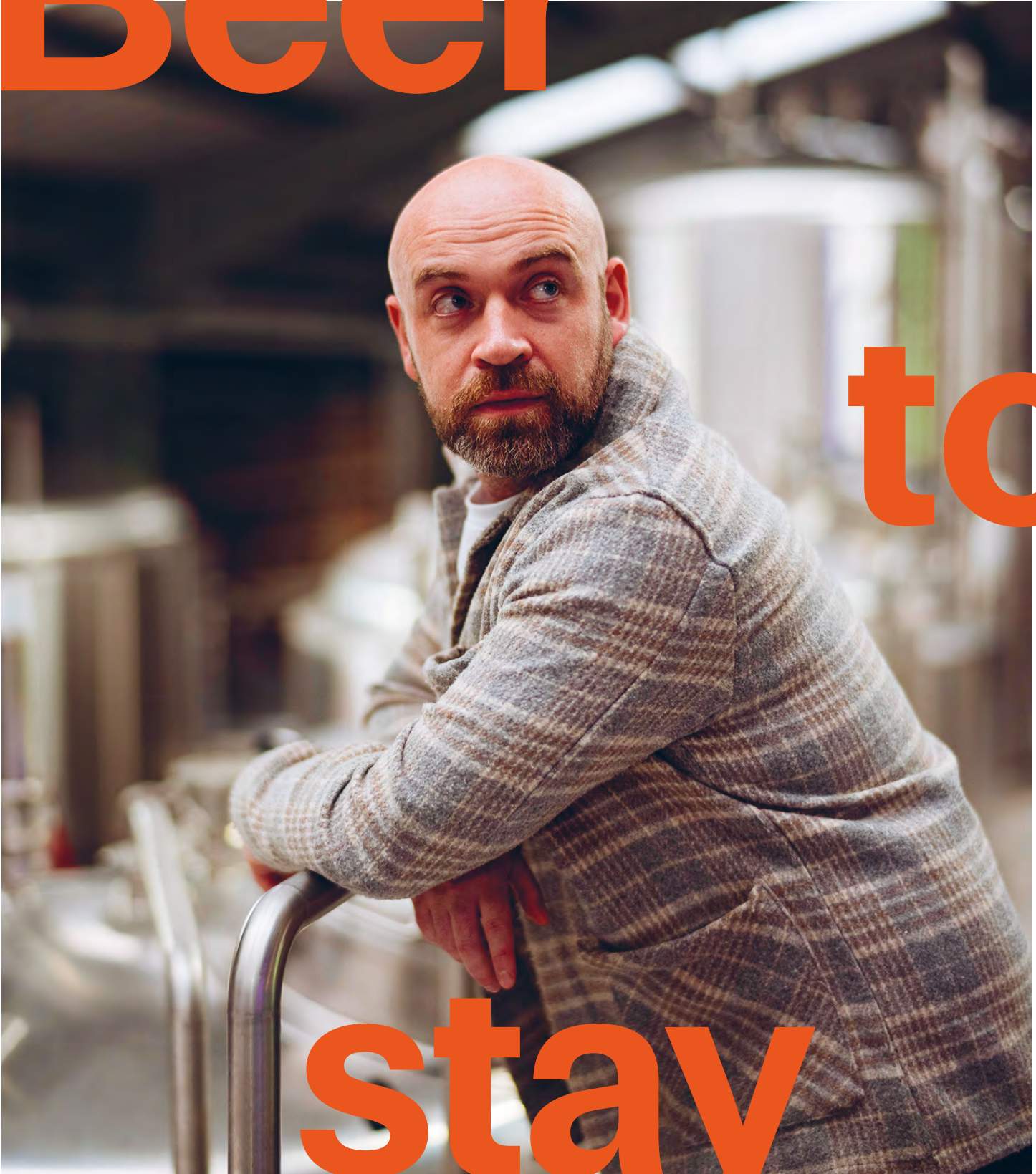
I think putting yourself out of your comfort zone is important, both personally and professionally, as it helps you discover and develop new strengths and skills.

The biggest thing I've gained from my pastimes is confidence, which naturally translates into professional settings too.

Working with fire requires patience and the ability to monitor and respond to risks, both of which are helpful skills for a solicitor.

OFFICE

# Beer



# to

# stay

# Full Circle Brew Co



**Full Circle Brew Co has just celebrated its fifth anniversary. And it is going at full pelt. From supermarket listings to a wedding venue, exports into ten countries, a flagship airport deal and collaborations with The OddBalls Foundation charity, local metal band Rituals and businesses Hoi Polloi and Deep North, the company is moving forward at great pace. Here, Colin Young sits down with founder Ben Cleary to learn more about the business' growth story and how it is planning to boost its progress yet further.**

There was always a pretty good chance Ben Cleary would work in the drinks industry – and not just because of his obvious love of beer and wine.

His parents Tony and Veronica are the owners of Lanchester Wines and the wider Lanchester Group.

Now in their 70s, they're still driving a business that will next year celebrate its 45th anniversary, and remains one of the leading lights in the sector.

Prior to that, his grandparents were just as well-known figures in the pub world, across the North East and North West.

The name of Ben's craft brewery – Full Circle Brew Co – is a nod to that family history.

He says: "I've come back to beer, and essentially pubs, so it's gone full circle as a family.

"But the other version is more of a promise, which is the sustainability side of things.

"That has always been important to me and our parent company The Lanchester Group.

"This is just the beginning of carbon-neutral, I believe, and we've tried to reflect that and stay ahead."

Full Circle Brew Co is based in Newcastle's Hoults Yard, which stands within peering distance of the Tyne Bridge.

It has developed into a cove of drums and vessels producing more than one million pints a year, with a nitrogen generator that has reduced overall CO2 usage by 83 per cent and a team of dedicated brewers who've worked hard on efficiencies to increase yields by 25 per cent.

Ben is also constantly looking at ways to re-use yeast and grain, developing ideas around protein bars, briquettes and animal feed.

He says: "We put sustainable practices in place when we started, and we're continually aiming to become greener every year and target net-zero in the near future.

"Lanchester Group is super sustainable.

"The headquarters, at Annfield Plain, have wind turbines, they've just completed a new custom-built facility for Greencroft Bottling with three megawatts of solar power across the roof, and they've developed this incredible system that pulls geothermally heated water from mineworks below two of the group's warehouses in Gateshead, which then heats the warehouses and puts the water back into the same mineworks.







“It’s very impressive.

“We’re the first commercial business to do that, and Gateshead Council has since done the same thing.

“But we don’t want to jump on and benefit from those sustainability links, because while we’re the same company, we have always wanted to do it for ourselves.

“And that’s a key thing for me.

“I know it’s going to be a big driver for the future; supermarkets will increasingly need to see operators having those sustainability credentials.

“We’re ready for that.

“We work with decarbonisation software, that links to our brewing system, which allows us to see our overall CO<sub>2</sub> usage – people driving to work, how many staff, how our system works, the lot.

“It’s quite an in-depth system, but it shows where we’re going and proves our promise.

“We’ve already had a big reduction in CO<sub>2</sub>/e per litre produced by economies of scale, and increased efficiencies across the board along with our nitrogen generator.

“It is a great piece of kit.”

After studying business management at Leeds University, Ben worked briefly for Majestic Wines and then Lanchester Wines, becoming a regional manager.

But he always had the entrepreneurial spirit to open his own business.

Initially, he set up his own store in a disused Morgan garage near the family home and business, concentrating on wine, spirits and beer.

He called it The Pip Stop.

“No one understood the name,” he laughs.

Alex Redpath, who had trained in commercial brewing at Brewlab, in Sunderland, became not only a regular customer but a home brewer capable of concocting better products than the professionals.

And so a friendship, and a partnership, was born.

Ben says: “It was about ten years ago, and the boom was taking place, so I was buying and selling more beer.

“Wine was a big passion for me, but it faded, and beer became the thing I wanted to do.

“Lanchester Wines had reps on the road and Greencroft Bottling had engineers and expertise in production, and it seemed like a match made in heaven to set up the beer division in the business.

“Then we found the right person in Alex; his sample beers he shared with me were fantastic – they were better than the stuff I was selling.

“Alex was offered a job with another brewery at the same time, which was well established.

“I was concerned he’d go with them, but he liked the vision I’d set out and we managed to secure his signature.

“We set him up with a 100-litre kit in a cold little warehouse in Annfield Plain for a year.

“He produced lots of different iterations, sold it through our mini-bar, and we tested designs and tastes on our customers.

“Then we got to the point where we said, ‘this is our core range, we’re ready to go’, and we invested in finding a site.”

N

If you've sipped a hazy indie IPA, admired the can design and appreciated the unique taste of the ale, as well as the real passion and craftsmanship behind it, then Full Circle Brew Co is the place for you.

Here's where the magic happens. And it's fascinating.

- Colin Young

Ben is the front of the brewery, and often the ideas man – 'mostly stupid ones', he admits – whether it is flavours, recycling ideas or new product development.

He says: "I try and run the brewery in the most democratic way possible.

"The majority of our decision making is voted on, and I have a team I trust, which is of utmost importance.

"When I go to festivals, people quite often ask, 'Where's Alex?'

"And I'm fine with that. The quality of his beers resonates with people.

"Many things will have set this business apart but, ultimately, the pillar stone is the beer quality.

"Alex and his team focus on quality and efficiencies, and I'm in charge of export sales, running the business and the creativity side.

"We never stand still; we're always seeking further improvement, otherwise you'll never grow in this highly competitive market."

The team moved into Hoult's Yard in 2019, which coincided with the lockdown-inspired explosion of home deliveries.

At first, there were three products: Repeater IPA, Hoop American Pale Ale and Looper, a 6.4 per cent IPA with citra, mosaic and cashmere hops.

There are now two to four seasonal beers coming out of the yard a month.





In addition, there are pizza nights, run clubs and weddings planned well into next year, with specially-brewed unique beers for couples as part of the package.

Looper is the flagship brew, Ben says, “the one we’re fiercely protective of”, and it is also a global award-winner.

The Society of Independent Brewers named Looper best national keg IPA twice in the last three years and its sibling Dooper its best national double IPA, with Full Circle Brew Co celebrated as the best independent craft brewery web shop.

Looper has also won gold at the Asia Beer Awards and FHA Beer Awards.

There are now 22 employees at Full Circle Brew Co, and all of the names, tastes, can designs and ideas are discussed between them.

Ben says: “You need to produce something new and exciting, something unique for the craft beer market, and we’ve scheduled about 12 months’ worth of seasonal beers for next year, doing two a month.

“We’ve done the styles and Alex will work out the cost for me.

“We build the names and the designs, to try and get ahead of ourselves.

“We do everything in-house, always a nod to the North East, and we’re very proud of our designs, and the constant diagonal in the logo.

“Our customers have always identified with that.

“Jordan, our marketing manager, does a lot of our designs, and we also have a group designer, who does the more crypto science stuff.

“But we all get together to come up with names and designs – some of which make no sense whatsoever.

“It’s a really fun part of the process.”

Year six promises to be one of continued development and expansion for the business, including the development of non-alcoholic options and building on the success of its partnership with the OddBalls Foundation charity and its messaging around regular checks for testicular cancer.

It became the first independent brewer for several years to launch in Newcastle International Airport – there are five Full Circle products across two bars – and it is exporting to ten countries.

The company is also becoming a serious player in supermarkets, recently confirming a listing for its Butterfly Effect Hazy IPA in more than 200 Sainsbury’s stores, which will increase to 376 in January.

Northern Tesco stores stock the Stardust Hazy Pale and Magic Eye IPA, while Asda is launching its very first own label series with Full Circle Brew Co in January.

It has also won a listing in Stonegate pubs and



six beers are available across the North East, with a national listing with Mitchells & Butlers through a collaboration brew – Hippy Jungle – with the OddBalls Foundation.

Ben adds: “I’m very happy where we’ve got to.

“I see us as one of the best breweries in the North East and with the growth nationally, which was our key goal for the year, we have managed to get everyone who drinks craft beer to recognise our brand.

“It is very competitive and very crowded, but we have that national presence; supermarkets are interested and taking notice.

“Furthermore, we want to look at promoting a more balanced lifestyle over the coming year.

“We have a run club on a Thursday with 60 people, which has become a bit of a beast – in a good way – and that is going to be a huge part of our future and story.

“We believe in drinking in moderation and balancing this with a healthy lifestyle.

“And we are going to conduct numerous external events in 2025 to offer exciting activities to promote this with our new, Full Circle Balance off-shoot brand.

“The first will be in January, with a DIP Club in the sea in Tynemouth alongside the release of our very first Cold Double IPA.

“The idea is to go for a dip with a cold DIPA.”



# LAST WORD

Closing this edition of N magazine, Rich Himsworth, chief executive at digital firm Salesfire, reflects on the company's recent £2.75 million fundraising, highlighting how it will fuel the Middlesbrough-based company's growth. Spotlighting the unrelenting rise of artificial intelligence, he also tells Steven Hugill about the importance of combining technology with human interaction and why Teesside is the perfect location to further expand Salesfire's market footprint.

[www.salesfire.co.uk](http://www.salesfire.co.uk)  
LinkedIn: Salesfire

**Congratulations on your £2.75 million funding boost, which you received from NPIF II – Mercia Equity Finance. How will the backing fuel Salesfire's growth ambitions?**

We're always looking for ways to grow and expand, and with this funding boost, we can access resources that will allow us to deepen our product offering and develop even more advanced tools for online retailers.

The funding will enable us to continue with the development of our new e-commerce solution Salesfire AI.

This technology enables e-commerce brands to identify more of their anonymous website visitors, facilitating more accurate retargeting and helping boost their online sales.

Over the next two years, we plan to create more than 20 jobs, taking our total number of employees from 65 to more than 80.

These will be primarily developer roles, allowing us to continue building revolutionary technology for the e-commerce industry.

Our vision is to push the boundaries of artificial intelligence to become a globally known name in the e-commerce tech space, helping brands across the UK and US scale and succeed.

**As technology continues to advance, so does the use of artificial intelligence across everyday society. Much has been made of the technology replacing human interaction, but how do you view the dynamic?**

Like with any new technology, I think it's normal that artificial intelligence is receiving some pushback as people get used to how it fits into their lives.

However, we understand the value of real human relationships and, therefore, I believe artificial intelligence should work alongside humans to enhance their interactions, rather than replace them completely.

Artificial intelligence can provide opportunities to smaller businesses that would otherwise not be accessible.

Our Salesfire AI technology, for example, allows SMEs to provide a level of personalisation to their customers that was once only available to large corporations such as Amazon.

For enterprise businesses, artificial intelligence can automate manual tasks that would normally be time-intensive for marketers, freeing up more time to focus on getting creative with their e-commerce strategies.

That can only be a good thing.

**Salesfire is headquartered in Middlesbrough, which has earned great reputé as a digital hub thanks to a strong educational ecosystem led by Teesside University and other providers. How has being based in the town supported the company's growth, and how will it aid your expansion blueprint?**

Being in Middlesbrough has been a key factor in our growth journey.

It's thanks to the wealth of local talent offered by the area that we have been able to bring our ambitious ideas to life.

The town's transport links have also been fundamental in supporting our office-first culture which, despite being unusual for a business in the tech industry, has directly contributed to the level of innovation we have been able to achieve.

We are all still continuously learning, and working in the office promotes the sharing of knowledge and encourages creativity, allowing us to continue advancing our products.

We are also surrounded by so many inspirational local businesses, and seeing other Teesside-based companies thrive is really motivational, pushing us to aim even higher.





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