

NORTHERN

# INSIGHT

October 2025

Issue 117



## Looking Good: A fresh take on Sales, Marketing and Events

business | community | technology | media | built environment | education | arts | leisure | health

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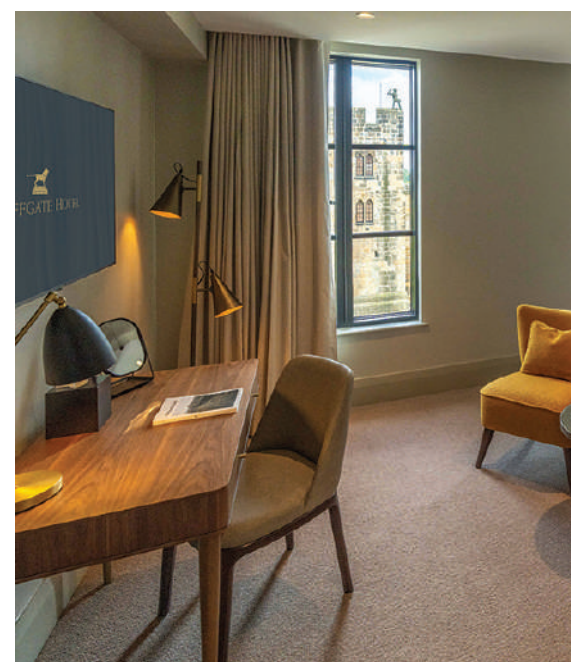
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# FOREWORD

## Welcome to the October issue of Northern Insight

Autumn has well and truly arrived — the nights are drawing in, the air feels fresher, and the colours across our region are nothing short of spectacular. It's the perfect time of year to pause, reflect, and look ahead with renewed energy.

This month's magazine is packed with inspiring stories from across the North East. We shine a spotlight on local businesses making waves, share insights from leaders driving positive change, and celebrate the creativity and resilience that continue to define our region.

October is often seen as a season of transition, but it's also a season of opportunity. Whether it's new ventures, fresh ideas, or simply taking the time to reconnect with community, there's plenty to feel optimistic about.

So, pour yourself a coffee, get cosy, and enjoy this issue. I hope the people and stories within these pages spark your curiosity and leave you feeling proud of everything the North East has to offer.

*Here's to an inspiring autumn ahead.*

*Thank you to all concerned  
for your continued support.  
Till next month...*

*Michael Grahamslaw, Publisher*  
michael@northern-insight.co.uk



### Edition Sponsors





## Tapping into the future of plumbing excellence

**Ignite Gas Training, established in 2016 by Brett and Emma Garrick, has been at the forefront of providing high-quality training for the gas sector. From newcomers to the industry to those looking to upskill or change careers, the company has supported individuals and organisations across the spectrum—from small sole traders to large housing associations and local authorities.**

Now, in its second year of operation, Ignite Gas Training has expanded its facilities in North Shields to include a state-of-the-art plumbing training centre. This new centre is designed to meet the demand for skilled plumbers, not only for traditional plumbing but also for the installation and maintenance of renewable energy systems like heat pumps, solar thermal, and other high-tech heating systems.

Brett, who co-runs the business with his wife, Emma, emphasises the importance of practical, hands-on training: “We’re moving beyond the traditional systems of the past. Now, plumbers need to work with more complex systems. Our training bays are equipped with the latest technology, so students can get real experience in systems like hybrid and air source heat pumps. This is what the industry needs now, and we’re proud to provide it.”



## ABCA Systems expands portfolio

**ABCA Systems, a leading provider of fire protection, security, and communications systems based in North Tyneside, is delighted to announce the acquisition of RAAM Construction, a well-established provider of fire protection, construction, maintenance, and repair services.**

Headquartered in Enfield, North London, RAAM Construction has been operating for nearly 19 years, delivering specialist services to commercial and public sector clients across London and the South East. The company is widely respected for its work in passive fire protection, general building works, planned maintenance, responsive repairs, and refurbishment projects, supporting sectors including social housing, education, healthcare, and local government.

This strategic acquisition strengthens ABCA Systems’ position as a national leader in integrated fire and security solutions, while significantly enhancing its geographic reach and service offering in the South of England.

RAAM Construction will continue to operate under the ABCA Systems umbrella, with its leadership and skilled workforce remaining in place to ensure service continuity and long-term growth.

## Terry de Havilland’s iconic design inspires one-off Aston Martin ‘Winehouse’ tribute

**Guests and fans of the iconic fashion brand Terry de Havilland witnessed a stunning one-off reveal recently at Gateshead’s BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, when a special-edition Aston Martin went on display.**

The iconic British car brand has been designed and painted in the style of the legendary Zap Pow shoe – famously worn by another iconic British brand – Amy Winehouse – on her 2007 international tour. The reveal wowed guests at the 50th celebration of Terry de Havilland’s fearless fashion design.

The one-of-a-kind Aston Martin takes its inspiration directly from the Zap Pow Mule, a towering stiletto design hand-painted in vibrant yellow leather with bold pop art cartoon detailing. Just as the shoe challenged convention, the car embodies the same defiance, transforming an automotive icon into a statement piece of art inspired by one of Britain’s most loved singers.

Only three Zap Pow heels were ever produced, with one bespoke pair created especially for Winehouse’s Coachella performance and one original on display alongside the Aston Martin. In the same way, only the single Zap Pow Aston Martin exists — making it one of the rarest collaborations ever produced under the Terry de Havilland name.



The Aston Martin reveal was the centrepiece of a glittering evening that saw models showcase archive and contemporary Terry de Havilland designs. Proceeds from the evening will support Newcastle United Foundation, the official charity partner, whose work improves the lives of communities across the North East.

“This Aston Martin is a true one-off – a fusion of timeless British craftsmanship and our own unique bold British brand and design,” said Darren Spurling, Managing Director at Terry de Havilland. “We are delighted to celebrate with friends on such a special night and thank all our partners for supporting this momentous occasion.”

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## New cultural venue opens its doors in South Shields

A group of local entrepreneurs have launched an exciting new cultural space in the heart of South Shields, transforming a historic building into a hub for creativity, performance and community events.

Ignition at The Venue, on Stanhope Street, is the brainchild of Tyne and Wear Creative Culture CIC, a newly formed non-profit founded by Jill Butler, Samantha Pritchard, and Claire Harland, alongside experienced hospitality operator Paul Neary.

Housed in the former Tinkersmiths and Boilershop buildings, the venue aims to give artists, musicians, comedians and performers a platform to develop and showcase their work.

The building, formerly the Royal Assembly Halls, an 18th-century music hall turned picture house and popular nightclub, has been reborn as a flexible venue hosting a diverse cultural programme.

Central to the venue is 'The Loft', a small-stage performance and workshop space that community groups, charities, and CICs can use free of charge. Larger areas accommodate live music, theatre, comedy, markets, and more.

A key focus is on giving opportunities to young and emerging talent, from musicians and comedians to visual artists, sound engineers and set designers.

Rather than outsourcing work to large commercial companies, the team is collaborating with students from Newcastle University and local creatives to design and help operate the venue.

The aim is to create a platform where people can develop their skills, gain experience and showcase their work in a professional setting.



## Sophia Stovall appointed Chief Executive of Tyne Rivers Trust at pivotal 20-year milestone

Tyne Rivers Trust has appointed Sophia Stovall as its new Chief Executive Officer, signalling a bold new chapter for the charity as it looks ahead to the next decade of protecting and celebrating the River Tyne.

Sophia stepped into this exciting role on 1 September. She joins Tyne Rivers Trust from her previous role as Head of Development Operations at English Heritage. Her career spans influential roles at renowned cultural institutions such as The Glasshouse, Durham Cathedral, and North East Museums, complemented by non-executive board positions, strategic advisory work and contributions to tourism and heritage organisations across the region.

"The River Tyne is so much more than a watercourse," said Sophia. "It's history, community, economy, wellbeing and identity – the constant at the heart of our region. My mission is to help more people understand its power and potential. After 20 years of great work, we are entering a new era where protecting and enjoying our river matters more than ever."

Professor Richard Kirk, Chair of Tyne Rivers Trust, said, "We are delighted to welcome Sophia as our CEO and into our TRT family. Under her leadership we will build on our past achievements – protecting endangered species, reducing pollution and flood risk and mitigating climate change. Sophia will bring a new perspective and dynamic to the team and we are excited to begin working together, for the benefit of the Tyne Rivers, wildlife and all who live and work here."



## IMH triples the size of its headquarters as it gears up for growth

Middlesbrough-based hydraulic engineering firm, Industrial and Marine Hydraulics (IMH), has completed a major site move with the purchase of new premises, tripling its operational space.

The move aligns with the company's commitment to nurturing the next generation of engineering talent and investing in people to compete on the world stage.

IMH's new facility is located on Skippers Lane Industrial Estate, on the edge of the new Teesworks site, and it boasts 22,000 sq ft of space.

The site will enable the company to secure larger and more complex projects while maintaining its essential service work, including hydraulic system outages and the expansion of its hire fleet operations.

Boasting overhead crane and lifting capabilities, capable of lifting up to 12 tonnes the facility will enable IMH to manage larger prefabrication projects in-house. This will reduce costs for clients and streamline operations, offering a more efficient service that benefits both customers and the business. Also on site are extensive workshop areas and a modern office space.

IMH has been preparing for this expansion over the last 18 months by strengthening its workforce and nurturing new talent through a series of key appointments and internal promotions.

James Griffiths, Managing Director at IMH, said: "Our new premises are a game changer for us. The additional space, modernised workshops, and enhanced capabilities will allow us to progress our sustainability ambitions, take on bigger projects and improve project turnaround times."

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## 2025 Entrepreneurial Awards

The 2025 Entrepreneurial Awards lit up Hilton Newcastle Gateshead on Thursday 18th September as we raised a glass to the trailblazers, pioneers and innovators who are shaping the North East.

Delivered by the Entrepreneurs' Forum, the night celebrated ambition, resilience and brilliance in every form – recognising entrepreneurs at every stage of the journey, from One to Watch through to Lifetime Achievement. It was an evening of big wins, bigger cheers and stories that capture the energy and impact of our region's entrepreneurs.

The occasion was proudly supported by UMi, RTC North, House Seven, Ward Hadaway, SHINE and Maven Capital Partners, and hosted by returning Forum favourite Jo Darby.









# Nick Able

*From Newcastle to the World Stage and Back Again.*

**Stepping into Nick Able's office, visitors are met with a striking sight - a state-of-the-art mixing desk dominating the room, hundreds of books lining the shelves, covering business, spirituality, music, self-help, and even UFOs.**

**Concert posters, newspaper clippings, and eclectic memorabilia scattered throughout, giving the space the unmistakable vibe of a personal man cave—part creative hub, part showcase of a life lived fully and diversely.**

For more than two decades, the Newcastle-born musician has lived a life shaped by music, travel, and unexpected turns. His journey has taken him from a teenage obsession with the guitar to performing on some of the world's most prestigious stages — and now to creating new spaces for sound and wellness and even sustainability.

Nick's earliest memory of music isn't of playing, but of longing. At just eight years old, wandering past a guitar shop window in Newcastle's Central Arcade, he felt an immediate pull to the instrument. "I didn't come from a musical family," he recalls, "but something about the guitar just connected with me." After years of persistence, he finally got his first guitar at 13. From that moment, he was hooked. His teenage years were consumed by practice, study, and an unshakable dedication to music. By his late teens, Nick's fascination with sound stretched far beyond the guitar. A chance encounter with a sitar sparked his curiosity for Indian music.

In 2003, Nick moved to India to study under legendary sitar maestro Ravi Shankar.

"Through a few emails and a lot of persistence, I was invited to live and learn at his home in New Delhi," Nick explains. "It wasn't just about the music, but about the discipline, culture, and immersion." Within weeks of arriving, he found himself on stage in Mumbai, performing alongside Shankar and his daughter Anoushka — a surreal initiation into a new world.

That experience launched a career that took Nick across the globe. He performed in iconic venues such as the Royal Albert Hall, Carnegie Hall, the Sydney Opera House, and the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. He was part of international tours that saw him share stages with orchestras, crossover ensembles, and world-renowned soloists, often blending Indian classical traditions with Western styles.

For twenty years, Nick was closely associated with the Shankar family, performing with Ravi until his death and then continuing to tour internationally with Anoushka Shankar. "It was an incredible apprenticeship," he says. "I was often in the background, playing tanpura or adding texture, but it gave me a front-row seat to see how the very top level of the music business operates."

That insight proved invaluable. Alongside performing, Nick began to explore the business side of music. He co-founded an online guitar education platform with Andy James, guitarist of metal band Five Finger Death Punch and the site became one of the leading destinations for online guitar tuition before he sold it to LickLibrary.com, the world's largest guitar education website. Nick also collaborated on digital projects with jazz virtuoso Frank Gambale and worked with broadcaster Alan Robson on his digital platform, Robson's World.

But the touring lifestyle and constant work eventually took their toll. After years of chasing deadlines and living on the road, Nick hit a difficult period. "I was in a dark place for a few years," he admits. "I stopped writing and performing my own music. I lost touch with that part of myself." It was during this time that he turned inward, using music as a tool for healing. Sound baths, yoga studio performances, retreats and meditative projects allowed him to reconnect with his craft in a gentler, more personal way.

Yet music isn't Nick's only focus. He has also turned his entrepreneurial energy toward Project Container, an initiative to transform shipping containers into bespoke luxury holiday homes in Northumberland and beyond. "At first, I just thought about getting a cabin in the woods for myself," he laughs. "Then I thought, why not make it into a business?" Though still in development, the project reflects Nick's drive to build ventures that balance creativity, sustainability, and lifestyle.

Looking back, Nick reflects on the way music has carried him through every chapter — the triumphs as well as the challenges. He has composed for film, collaborated with musicians across genres from jazz to pop, and performed for audiences in every corner of the globe. And yet, what matters most to him now isn't fame or recognition, but connection.

From a boy staring at guitars in a shop window to a man shaping soundscapes that heal, Nick Able's story is proof that music doesn't just entertain — it transforms.

Nick will release his first solo album in early 2026.

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



# The Big Interview

Nick Able

“

*...something  
about the guitar  
just connected  
with me...*



## Cover Story

# Looking Good – a fresh take on Sales, Marketing and Events

We talk a lot about how brilliantly we work with our customers (and we do!). And we are genuinely incredibly proud to work with our partner businesses, and watching them go from strength to strength during our time together gives the entire team a real buzz.



**Over the past ten years, Just Williams has worked with a huge variety of organisations, across multiple sectors and we've been able to see them grow and evolve and ultimately thrive. The one thing they had in common (behind an exceptional sales and marketing partner, of course...) is that they didn't stand still. They didn't stop to sit on their laurels and they were able to take a look at themselves and respond to their markets and people.**

Well, that's exactly what we have done here at Just Williams too.

The eagle-eyed amongst you may have already seen our 'brand refresh' take its final form as The SME Agency, and this is something that we have come to after much reflection about what we are and what we do. We offer a huge variety of solutions, services, events, and experiences in the sales, marketing and event spaces – but we also operate most closely with businesses within the SME realm too. So, refreshing our look and messaging to reflect that just felt right.

We have recently launched a beautiful new website that we feel best reflects the changes we have made – ensuring our key messages of using business as a force for good, and helping businesses thrive are front and centre. It's light, bright design reflects our brand position of offering clear objectives, effective thinking and creative space and that splash of colour – well, that's our humanity and personality shining through too.





At Just Williams, we know and acknowledge the myriad of businesses offering sales and marketing support – but what we do is different. We give you clear, tangible results all the while maintaining your brand's integrity and legacy too. We love what we do, our new look is reflective of that mood – we hope you like it too. Also, as a BCorp – we've incorporated more of our story, our purpose and mission to be able to highlight our journey and our impact across communities in the hope that we can lobby for more leaders to use their business as a force for good.

The Just Williams Sales Academy has been welcomed home into the main Just Williams brand too, so whereas before, our training arm operated as a standalone business, helping more than five and half thousand professionals learn or develop their sales skills – now we have brought the entire experience into one place, one spot to find exceptional training for your people as well as solutions to help your business thrive. It just makes sense, right?

Going forward, we have put together an incredible line up of events, roundtables, workshops and more to help even more businesses experience the JW way of working, and to help connect people in new and exciting ways; ultimately helping their business, or networks grow. You can find a full list of these events on the next page and I really hope to see you sign up!

Coming up first however, is the return of our annual conference!

On Thursday 23rd October, Just Williams is taking up residence in the stunning Wynyard Hall for The SME Conference. A full day's event, filled with incredible speakers, motivational moments and so much more – we can't wait, it's getting closer. The SME Conference is our new look to our historical 'Sales, Service, Success' events, which were exceptional and always received such incredible feedback.

Looking back on our new messaging and our intelligence from our markets, this year's event will put heavier focus on the Sales, Marketing and Events scopes, offering a new, fresh look on the markets, their challenges and of course – ways to ignite that spark for professionals across the North!

Running a business is never 'easy' and challenges come in many forms. Whilst many industries face a difficult period, and some become displaced – what we have learned from our refresh journey is that even the challenges can be successes, too. We faced a rapidly evolving marketplace, saturated with new and existing offerings and the rise of AI proving a real talking point too. We were able to stop, take stock, reevaluate and evolve and even though we were perhaps in the enviable position of doing that from a place of stability – it was still a challenge.

I hope you'll agree that our new look and feel is a great start to the next decade of Just Williams and I look forward to seeing you join us as we move forward together – as The SME Agency.

[justwilliams.co.uk](http://justwilliams.co.uk)







At Just Williams, we host a variety of events crafted for professionals, across all backgrounds, looking to learn, connect, or be inspired. Secure your place online today:



Event	Date	Time	Location
Walk and Talk with Red Balloons	13th October 2025	12:00pm-1:00pm	Fusion Hive, TS18 2NB
Sales and Marketing Clinic	15th October 2025	2:00pm-4:00pm	NatWest Accelerator, NE4 5BZ
Sales and Marketing Clinic	17th October 2025	9:00am-11:00am	Teesside University, TS1 3BX
Responsible Business Roundtable	17th October 2025	2:00pm-4:00pm	Fusion Hive, TS18 2NB
The SME Conference	23rd October 2025	8:30am-4:00pm	Wynyard Hall, TS22 5NF
Sales and Marketing Strategy Workshop	5th November 2025	9:00am-1:00pm	NatWest Accelerator, NE4 5BZ
Walk and Talk with Red Balloons	10th November 2025	12:00pm-1:00pm	Fusion Hive, TS18 2NB
Founder Fables Roundtable	14th November 2025	10:00am-12:00pm	TBC
Sales Process Webinar	8th December 2025	9:00am-10:00am	Online
Business as a Force for Good Workshop	2nd December 2025	2:00pm-4:00pm	NatWest Accelerator, NE4 5BZ
High Performing Teams Roundtable	4th December 2025	10:00am-12:00pm	TBC
Walk and Talk with Red Balloons	8th December 2025	12:00pm-1:00pm	Fusion Hive, TS18 2NB
LinkedIn Masterclass Webinar	8th December 2025	9:00am-10:00am	Online







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# UNUSUAL SEASONAL ACTIVITY



Seasonal trends in the housing market have been a little unusual this year, where the typically quieter months of July and August have seen plenty of activity from buyers looking at a multitude of price points. However, stock levels continue to remain relatively low but the properties that have been coming onto the market have seen strong demand, thereby creating competition with multiple viewings and offers.

The market priced between £400,000 - £600,000 continues to be highly competitive, with suburban properties in particular attracting multiple buyers, where Best & Final scenarios are still a common outcome. Properties priced between £700,000 - £1 Million have seen a robust amount of activity over the last few months, with solid buyer interest and well presented homes moving at a healthy pace. Whilst a more selective market, homes above £1 Million are still receiving good demand, particularly for those that offer space, lifestyle benefits and are in good locations.

We are also seeing excellent levels of interest from First Time Buyers on properties at the more affordable price point

in the market, such as homes in Fawdon and Kenton where we have had an extensive amount of viewings and received multiple offers, before finally selling well over their asking prices.

There is some uncertainty on the horizon with the upcoming Autumn Budget due at the end of November, with whispers surrounding a shake up to Stamp Duty (SDLT), and as a result a handful of clients are choosing to hold off until there is clarity on this. However, this hasn't dampened overall demand at most of our price points and we continue to see motivated buyers actively looking to move, so September and October is a great time to sell for the pre-Christmas rush.

I'd be delighted to speak with previous, existing or future clients about their property needs - whether you're considering selling, buying, or simply needing advice on maximising the value of your home.

**Harry Young**  
**0191 213 0033**  
**[harry.young@sandersonyoung.co.uk](mailto:harry.young@sandersonyoung.co.uk)**





## *Melrose House* *La Sagesse, Jesmond*

This superb purpose built luxury apartment is ideally located to the second floor of Melrose House in the prestigious modern development of La Sagesse. The immaculately presented property offers close to 2000 sq ft of internal space with an impressive open plan living/dining and kitchen space with a mezzanine floor, wonderful views towards Jesmond Dene, a secure allocated parking space and beautiful communal gardens. Tenure: Leasehold. Council Tax Band: F.



2 2 2 C

**Price Guide:**  
£585,000



**Emma Doran**  
**0191 213 0033**  
emma.doran@sandersonyoung.co.uk





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## *Toft Hall* *Kirkheaton, Northumberland*

Set in the heart of Northumberland's stunning countryside, Toft Hall is a magnificent period farmhouse offering the epitome of fine country living. Blending heritage charm and modern efficiency, this exceptional property also includes a detached one bed cottage, a cloistered courtyard, triple garage and an array of stone barns/workshops with development potential, set in circa 5 acres of landscaped gardens and paddocks. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax Band: G.



5 5 6 C

**Price Guide:**  
Offers over £1.6 Million



**Ashleigh Sundin**  
**0191 223 3500**  
ashleigh.sundin@sandersonyoung.co.uk







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## *North Road Chester le Street*

This substantial detached contemporary home boasts an extremely high specification finish throughout. The stunning property has undergone a full renovation in more recent years and has been further upgraded by the current owner to now offer versatile accommodation in excess of 3100 sq ft. Externally, electronic gates lead to an extended driveway providing parking, whilst to the rear is a private garden with raised terrace. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax Band: G.



5 2 5 D

**Price Guide:**  
Offers over £800,000



**Julie Summerbell**  
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## *The Grove* Gosforth

This fabulous Georgian mid terraced family home offers stylish and elegant accommodation over three floors and has a number of impressive architectural features reflecting the period of its construction. Completely refurbished by the current owners, the impeccably presented Grade II Listed stone built property is set back from The Grove and has fabulous lawned gardens to the front and rear as well as off street parking.

Tenure: Freehold. Council. Tax Band: G.



4 3 1 D

**Price Guide:**  
Offers over £1.2 Million



**Ashleigh Sundin**  
0191 223 3500  
ashleigh.sundin@sandersonyoung.co.uk







## Oasis Cup raises £12,500 for homelessness charity

Almost 150 players from local businesses took part in this year's Oasis Cup, a football tournament at Gateshead International Stadium which raised £12,500 for local charity Oasis Community Housing.

Teams from Amazon MME and Komatsu UK played in a challenging final, with Amazon's warehouse team taking home the Oasis Cup. Calum Johnston from Amazon was named Player of the Tournament. While the light-hearted Smelly Sock Trophy went to Eldon Square. Volunteers from Cushman and Wakefield and the NHS Business Services Authority helped make the day a success, alongside sponsors Bowmer + Kirkland.

Oasis Community Housing's CEO Sarah Lister said: "As a local charity, we can only provide the crisis services and flexible support for people facing homelessness that we do, thanks to the incredible support of our business community."







Craig Firth with Sarah Wharrier

## Quora Group partners with CMYK to deliver IT Services

Quora Group partnered with CMYK Business Technology earlier this year, to deliver Managed IT Services to their two sites across the North East.

**Founded in 2005, Quora Group's pedigree was quickly established delivering technical mechanical services to a broad spectrum of clients.**

Based in North Tyneside, Quora Group are now a leading provider of mechanical, electrical, and plumbing services across the entire UK. Serving a wide range of businesses and large public sector organisations including the NHS and local councils, Quora Group are committed to delivering exceptional solutions tailored to fit their clients' specific needs.

Quora Group have a proven track record of delivering an extensive range of facilities management services to the public and private sectors. As an agile and flexible company, they can provide a full FM service to your business, hospital, care home or school. In addition, they can work

for contractors as part of a wider team.

As a highly accredited business that focuses on customer service and with an enviable reputation, Quora Group were looking for a new Managed IT Partner with similar credentials to improve service levels, as the business continues to expand both its team and client base.

Craig Firth, Managing Director at Quora Group commented: "A safe, robust and reliable IT infrastructure is key to the smooth running of the business and so in February 2025 we were pleased to place our trust in CMYK to provide our Managed IT Services. We were impressed by their professionalism and expertise, and we felt they had the right credentials, local support and infrastructure to become our strategic partner as our business continues to grow. The onboarding process with CMYK was

efficient and the service they provide to our staff is exceptional. The CMYK team have worked hard to quickly get to know our business and any issues that do arise with our IT infrastructure are dealt with quickly and efficiently."

CMYK supports all of Quora Groups IT Infrastructure and provides services including IT Helpdesk, Business as Usual Support, Microsoft 365 Support, Cloud Back-Up, Anti-virus Software, IT Consultancy and Cyber Essentials accreditations. CMYK also supply and support all IT hardware to Quora Group, helping to streamline the process for new staff onboards and ensuring equipment is delivered to staff securely, quickly and efficiently.

Sarah Wharrier, Director at CMYK commented: "We are thrilled to have partnered with Quora Group earlier this year. Their commitment to excellence aligns perfectly with our values at CMYK. Together, we have built a robust and reliable IT infrastructure that supports Quora Group's growth and success. It's been a pleasure to work with the Quora team so far, and we look forward to continuing this positive partnership for years to come."

[www.cmyk-digital.co.uk](http://www.cmyk-digital.co.uk)  
[www.quora-group.com](http://www.quora-group.com)





## NEL fuels growth of female-led Simplified Operations with NPIF II funding

North Shields/Newcastle – Female-led consultancy Simplified Operations has secured a significant investment from NPIF II – NEL Smaller Loans, which is managed by NEL Fund Managers as part of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II).

The funding will support the business to launch a first-of-its-kind Operations Academy aimed at transforming operational leadership in small and growing businesses. It will enable Simplified Operations to expand beyond its core consulting services by delivering scalable training at a wider level, particularly to businesses without in-house capacity to develop operations leadership.

Founded by Helen Butler, a seasoned operations consultant with over 20 years of experience in business transformation, Simplified Operations helps owner-led companies build scalable, self-managing businesses. The consultancy supports founders by embedding the structure, systems, and leadership capability needed to step away from day-to-day operations and focus on strategic growth.

The Operations Academy is a structured, practical learning platform designed for operations managers and directors. It will equip them with the tools, training, and support to lead confidently, drive performance, and implement scalable systems. The NPIF II investment from NEL is enabling the development of course content, platform build, and the go-to-market rollout.

The Academy addresses a critical gap in the SME ecosystem, where operational leaders are often under-supported, despite playing a pivotal role in business growth. Helen Butler commented: "NEL's support has come at exactly the right time. It's given us the backing to scale our impact and bring a much-needed resource to the market - one that will strengthen operational leadership and help businesses grow without everything falling back on the owner."



## Anglo Scottish Asset Finance supports Artech Lighting in strategic acquisition with Close Brothers Broker Solutions

Anglo Scottish Asset Finance, in collaboration with funding partner Close Brothers Broker Solutions, has successfully supported Artech Lighting Ltd in the acquisition of the trade and assets of Powerlite Fitzgerald Ltd.

The deal, structured as a Hire Purchase with the option of ownership, will enable Artech Lighting to significantly reduce manufacturing costs, while expanding its capabilities and product offering. The acquisition is set to strengthen both brands as independent entities that will now work collaboratively, sharing resources and opening new markets.

Artech Lighting was founded in 2013, and in 2018, with the appointment of current Managing Director and majority shareholder Stuart Hylton, the company entered a new phase of growth. With a background in electrical engineering and a stellar reputation in the lighting sector, Stuart returned to the UK after a successful stint in Dubai and has since positioned Artech as a major force in commercial LED lighting.

Under Stuart's leadership, Artech has grown into a team of 50 full-time staff specialising in bespoke lighting solutions for commercial construction projects. Their client base includes several blue-chip companies and recent high-profile projects in London, Edinburgh, and Abu Dhabi. Operating from a 160,000 sq ft facility at Meadowfield Industrial Estate in Durham, which it shares with Apex Cables, Artech continues to build its reputation for innovation and reliability.

The opportunity to acquire Powerlite Fitzgerald came about when its owner, Nick Robinson, took the difficult decision to retire. Wanting to ensure the legacy of the business, Nick approached the Artech team—confident in their ability to carry the brand forward with integrity and vision.

Powerlite Fitzgerald will continue to operate as a separate entity, with a primary focus on wholesale operations within the UK, while Artech will maintain its strength in global commercial construction markets. The synergy between the two businesses is expected to create new opportunities and potentially extend Powerlite's reach into international markets. Dean Cowley, Anglo Scottish Asset Finance, played a key role in facilitating the transaction. Having previously worked with Apex Cables Ltd and connected through mutual personal ties with Artech's team, Dean was well-positioned to understand the strategic value of the acquisition.

Jessica Pooley, Broker Development Manager at Close Brothers Broker Solutions, provided the financial backing for the deal. She commented: "We're delighted to support Artech Lighting in this exciting phase of growth. The acquisition of Powerlite Fitzgerald is a smart, forward-thinking move that enhances both businesses and strengthens their market position."

Stuart Hylton, Managing Director of Artech Lighting, added: "This acquisition is not only a major milestone for Artech but also a positive development for Powerlite Fitzgerald's legacy. We are thrilled to build on our strengths and continue expanding into new markets with Close Brothers Broker Solutions and Anglo Scottish Asset Finance by our side."

The acquisition is expected to further boost Artech Lighting's profitability and enhance its position as a market leader in innovative lighting solutions.



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Many owner-managed businesses stay stuck in the day-to-day. They react to problems instead of planning for opportunities. By adopting a bigger business mindset, you can break that cycle and put yourself on a stronger path to growth.

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Bigger businesses are not built around one person doing everything. If you are caught up in every invoice, email and minor decision, you are holding growth back. Create time to work on the business, not just in it.

### 2. Delegate and trust

Choose one task you currently do that someone else could handle and hand it over. It might be bookkeeping, admin or chasing payments. Delegation is not a cost, it is an investment in freeing your time to focus on the work that drives growth.

### 3. Plan further ahead

Small businesses often think in weeks. Larger ones think in years. Start by setting 12-month goals, then break them into quarterly actions. A clear roadmap makes decisions easier and keeps you moving forward.

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## Clive Owen LLP retains prestigious workplace accreditations

Clive Owen LLP has once again demonstrated its commitment to colleague wellbeing and engagement by retaining its Great Place to Work® (GPTW) Certification™ and being named as one of the UK's Best Workplaces in Consulting & Professional Services™ for the second consecutive year.

The independent accountancy firm, with offices in Darlington, York, Durham, Middlesbrough, and Newcastle, has been recognised for its outstanding workplace culture, with 87% of colleagues agreeing that Clive Owen LLP is a great place to work, which is well above the 65% threshold required for certification. The recognition is based on validated, anonymous employee feedback and assessed using GPTW's rigorous, data-driven For All™ methodology, which evaluates workplace culture across credibility, respect, fairness, and camaraderie.

In addition to retaining its GPTW Certification™, Clive Owen LLP was named among the UK's Best Workplaces in Consulting & Professional Services™ in the Small & Medium category.

The Best Workplaces in Consulting & Professional Services™ list is created using the anonymous feedback from employees working in the industry about their workplace experience.

Great Place To Work® UK administered its research-backed Trust Index® employee survey and analysed the responses of UK-based consulting and professional services employees to determine the Best Workplaces™ list. The surveys asked employees to comment on how their company supports their work-life balance, sense of fulfilment, job satisfaction, psychological safety and financial security. Evaluations also included an assessment of how well the organisation was able to deliver consistency of their employee experience across all departments and seniority levels.



## RG welcomes six new trainees

Ryecroft Glenton (RG), the North of England-based independent advisory firm, has welcomed six new trainees to its Newcastle office, further strengthening its commitment to investing in future talent.

The new cohort includes five graduates beginning their Institute of Chartered Accountants (ACA) training contracts and one school leaver who has embarked on the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) qualification.

They will be working across RG's Audit and Assurance, Tax, and Accounts and Business Services departments.

Joining the Audit and Assurance team are Charles Downs and James Samples. Charles, a Business Management graduate from the University of Glasgow, and James, who studied Accounting and Finance at Newcastle University, will both train towards their ACA qualification.

In RG's Tax departments, Patrick Cooper and Jessica de Sousa have joined as trainees working towards a joint ACA and Chartered Tax Adviser (CTA) qualification. Patrick studied Economics at the University of Glasgow, while Jessica completed her Economics and Finance degree at Newcastle University.

The Accounts and Business Services team has been bolstered by Lara Driver and Alfie Allen. Lara, who studied Accounting, Business Finance and Management at the University of York, is training for her ACA qualification. Alfie has joined as an Accounting Technician trainee, having recently completed sixth form where he studied Business, Maths and Sport.

Peter Glenton, Partner at Ryecroft Glenton, said: "We are delighted to welcome this talented group of trainees to RG. Each of them has shown real ambition to build their career with us, and they represent the next generation of advisers who will continue to deliver the high-quality service our clients expect."



## Azalea Wealth Management launches from Hartlepool's Innovation Centre

Azalea Wealth Management, a new financial planning practice, has officially launched its operations from the Innovation Centre in Hartlepool.

And the firm's founder, Harrison Smith, who is Hartlepool-born with extensive experience in the financial industry, wants to ensure everyone feels comfortable talking about money when planning for the future, whether on Teesside or beyond.

Harrison, 29, has spent the past few years representing Emerald Associates, from his previous base in Greenbank, Hartlepool.

The initial team at Azalea - which is an appointed representative of and represents only St James's Place Wealth Management - will consist of three people, with Harrison leading the expert advisory services.

Harrison said: "I wanted to deliver a service that I can be proud of and put my name above. I have accumulated years of experience in the industry, and now I have the freedom to take this business in the direction I feel people deserve."

"Our goal is to further our clients' financial planning, which hopefully will become obvious from day one. If we can move someone or a business closer to where they are aspiring to be, then that is our job done."

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# RMT Accountants extending Hexham investment with double appointment



L-R: RMT Accountants & Business Advisors' new Hexham recruits Andrew Harrison and Sharon Swaddle with managing director Stephen Slater

**RMT Accountants & Business Advisors is extending its investment in West Northumberland by bringing in two well-known local recruits to its new Hexham town centre office.**

**Andrew Harrison and Sharon Swaddle have moved to RMT as a senior manager and office administrator respectively.**

Originally from the Tynedale town, Andrew brings well over a decade's experience to his new role. He began his accountancy career in Newcastle, gaining his professional qualifications with the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) before moving to a Hexham practice in 2016.

He has since worked with a wide range of local businesses helping them manage all aspects of their finances and operations, as well as across the wider North East.

Sharon has worked in a range of accountancy roles in Hexham for the last

35 years, beginning as a receptionist before subsequently taking on office management, book-keeping and tax return duties.

RMT has opened a new second office on Gilesgate in Hexham as it looks to further increase its West Northumberland client base.

It is retaining its existing offices at Hexham Mart and is expecting to create further new roles in the town in the coming months.

Andrew Harrison says: "My knowledge of this area and the relationships I've built here have been central to my career development so far.

"Choosing to join a firm that values these relationships as much as I do and also has the resources required to meet clients' every need was an easy decision for me to make.

"The business culture and career opportunities that RMT offers were also very appealing and I'm excited to play a part in building the firm's presence in West Northumberland and beyond."

RMT moved into the Tyne Valley in 2023 with the acquisition of rural and agricultural sector specialist McCowie & Co, and already acts for a wide range of agricultural, farming and contracting businesses in the North East, Scotland

and North Yorkshire, as well as local SMEs across a range of other business sectors.

Stephen Slater, managing director at RMT Accountants, adds: "Andrew and Sharon are both well-known and respected professionals within the Tynedale business community and we're very pleased to be adding them to our team.

"We believe it's important for us to be an integral part of the community that we're serving and to have a first-hand understanding of the opportunities, challenges and issues facing local business owners and managers which our experts can help them address.

"Hexham and the surrounding areas are central to RMT's overall business plans, and our continuing investment in people, property and resources reflects the commitment we have to the region."

Established in 1954, RMT Accountants & Business Advisors provides the full range of financial and business advisory services through its specialist accountancy, tax, medical and healthcare, corporate finance and restructuring teams, and is part of the Sumer Group, the UK's fastest-growing accountancy firm.

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RMT Accountants & Business Advisors managing director Stephen Slater (left) with the firm's new head of corporate finance, Michael McCulloch

## Michael McCulloch takes the corporate finance reins at RMT Accountants

RMT Accountants & Business Advisors has appointed experienced deals adviser Michael McCulloch as its new head of corporate finance.

**Michael brings almost two decades' experience of leading and delivering complex transactions to his new role, and will also contribute his wider insight as he joins RMT's board of directors.**

A qualified FCA, he is leading RMT's drive to enhance its corporate finance advisory service for owner-managed and growth-stage businesses.

We spoke to Michael about joining RMT, the North East corporate finance market and his ambitions for the future.

### **What was behind your move to RMT?**

"RMT is in a really exciting phase of growth. The firm is focused on making significant strategic investments in its people, technology and services, and it's that ambition that really appealed to me.

"Taking responsibility for developing and leading RMT's corporate finance business is a huge opportunity for me - but it's not just about leading transactions, it's about shaping its wider strategic direction.

"Being invited to join the board was also a big attraction. It means I'll be able to influence how the wider firm evolves, and aligning that strategy across the business

will be incredibly powerful, particularly with the backing of the Sumer Group."

### **You've worked on transactions of every shape and size. What's the most rewarding part of that work?**

"Without a doubt, it's the impact deals have on the people I have worked with. Behind every set of financials are business owners making life-changing decisions, families navigating succession and employees whose livelihoods often depend on the outcome of the transactions we advise on.

"I often find that business owners are not purely interested in maximising their financial return - there's real emotion tied into protecting the legacy of the business and ensuring continuity for the workforce they've built.

"The human side of advisory work is often overlooked, but it's what makes it so meaningful."

### **What are your immediate plans for the corporate finance team?**

"The first step is to set a clear direction for how we build our corporate finance offering and how we can deliver it to a broader cross-section of the market. We

already work with ambitious clients who are actively looking to grow their business or wanting to realise an exit, but there's scope to do so much more.

"I'm building a team with the breadth of experience required to advise on deals that meet the needs of local businesses, and focused on creating an environment where talented advisers want to join, develop and stay, and are recognised for the work they deliver in a business that supports them to achieve outstanding results.

"Ultimately, I want RMT to be seen not just as dealmakers, but as the long-term partner who helps owners navigate risk and approach decisive moments with confidence."

### **What's your take on the state of the current North East deals market?**

"The mood is positive. People want to get deals done, and the capital to support them is available in the region. That combination should create real momentum and I'm excited to see how activity builds through the rest of the year.

"RMT is in a great position to take advantage of the opportunities this presents and we're already busy working on a range of live mandates across multiple sectors."

Established in 1954, RMT Accountants & Business Advisors provides the full range of financial and business advisory services through its specialist accountancy, tax, medical and healthcare, corporate finance and restructuring teams, and is part of the Sumer Group, the UK's fastest-growing accountancy firm.

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Brendan O'Grady

## Develop North PLC completes £1.2m funding for boutique hotel conversion

Develop North PLC, the investment fund managed by Newcastle-based Tier One Capital, has provided £1.2 million in development funding to support the conversion of a Georgian townhouse in Edinburgh into a new, high-end hotel.

**The investment fund, which is listed on the London Stock Exchange, provides flexible finance solutions to credible professionals and businesses across North of England and Scotland.**

Since its inception in 2017, the London Stock Exchange-listed investment company has deployed more than £80.0 million in capital to support 39 projects, creating over 12,000 jobs and helping deliver a gross development value in excess of £275 million.

The latest project sees 3 John's Place, a former early 19th-century property in Leith, transformed into a 16-bedroom boutique hotel operated by Archibald Hotel Collection Ltd, a growing family-run hospitality business with a portfolio that includes an existing hotel in Edinburgh and two in the North of England.

Brendan O'Grady, Fund Manager at Tier One, added: "We are committed to supporting professional businesses with ambitions to deliver high-quality, sustainable development projects, and this scheme in Edinburgh is a great example that benefits the local economy and enhances the visitor experience.

"Our investment reflects the strength of the Archibald Hotel Collection team and the potential of this location, and we look forward to seeing the hotel being enjoyed by its guest over the next eighteen months."

Caroline Claydon, Director at Archibald Hotel Collection, said: "We're proud to be contributing to the continued regeneration of Leith with a contemporary hotel that respects the area's heritage while introducing a modern, tech-enabled guest experience. The support from Develop

North is enabling us to complete this project with confidence and flexibility, and we're delighted to have welcomed our first guests."

Tier One Capital Ltd is the investment adviser and fund manager for the London Stock Exchange main market listed Develop North PLC.

Develop North PLC's objective is to provide investment solutions to professional, credible and capable businesses in the North of England and Scotland, whilst simultaneously generating attractive returns for investors.

As a Public Limited Company (PLC), Develop North PLC has the financial strength, credibility and professionalism expected of a business listed on the London Stock Exchange, while also offering the flexibility, creativity and common sense of an approachable, local business.

Tier One also specialises in financial planning and savings advice, investment management and fund management for senior executives, investors, entrepreneurs, business owners, professional partners and high net-worth individuals.

[www.developnorth.co.uk](http://www.developnorth.co.uk)  
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“

*...The key is  
communication,  
with both clients  
and colleagues...*

Glen Small



# Accountant of the month...

## Glen Small

*VAT & Indirect Tax Director at Johnston Carmichael.*

Based in Johnston Carmichael's Newcastle office, Glen Small is a CIOT award-winning Chartered Tax Adviser with over a decade of experience in VAT and Indirect Tax.

**After training and qualifying with the Big 4, Glen joined Johnston Carmichael in 2022, where he advises a wide range of clients on pragmatic, commercially driven VAT solutions. His work has helped businesses recover VAT, reduce irrecoverable costs, and structure their operations to mitigate tax and duty liabilities.**

**What inspired you to become an Accountant, and what path did you take to get here?**

It may surprise some readers, but I'm not actually an accountant by training. I originally studied law at Northumbria University and worked in the student law office. After graduating, I joined Lloyds Banking Group arranging financial products for clients. My career turned towards tax when I applied to Deloitte for a Corporation Tax role, but during the process, I was told (perhaps as a compliment, perhaps not!) that I was a 'VAT person'. That set me on the path I've followed ever since, later joining PwC, qualifying as a Chartered Tax Adviser, and building my career in VAT before moving to Johnston Carmichael.

**What are the most common financial mistakes individuals and businesses make?**

In terms of VAT, a frequent pitfall is assuming that complex tax reliefs can be applied with minimal checking. These reliefs often come with detailed and sometimes subjective rules, and they're a regular focus for HMRC. The safest approach is to look at each case carefully, rather than applying a blanket assumption.

**How has technology changed the accounting profession, and what tools do you rely on most?**

In our VAT team at Johnston Carmichael, we use AI to analyse case law decisions more quickly and accurately. Of course, it still requires the oversight of experienced advisers, but it significantly reduces the time needed to digest precedent case law. This benefits clients directly, as we can either pass on time savings or spend more time offering valuable insights.

**What advice would you give to small business owners looking to improve their financial health?**

From a VAT lens, it's worth reviewing historical VAT filings to see if errors have led to overpayments. Common examples include applying the standard rate of VAT where a reduced rate applied, or even double-counting sales transactions in ledgers. In many cases, businesses can reclaim VAT from HMRC. Some advisers offer this work on a 'no-win, no-fee' basis, which can make it a low-risk opportunity to improve financial health.

**How do you help clients navigate tax planning and ensure compliance with regulations?**

I'm not always a fan of blanket 'VAT health checks', as they can sometimes feel like using a sledgehammer to crack a walnut.

Instead, I recommend sitting down with our team for an hour to talk through business activities and how VAT interacts with them. Often that's enough to highlight areas of risk or opportunity, and from there we can take a more tailored approach.

**What are the biggest financial trends or challenges businesses should prepare for in the coming years?**

The big one is HMRC's new approach to interest and penalties on VAT errors. Previously, liabilities often stopped at the VAT error itself. Now, penalties and interest are being pursued much more actively. That makes robust systems, controls and software more important than ever.

**What qualities make a great Accountant, and how do you build strong client relationships?**

Curiosity. Taking the time to really understand how financial rules apply to a client's specific situation is the only way to deliver first-class advice. Problems tend to arise when advisers jump too quickly to a generic answer or simply tell clients what they want to hear.

**How do you handle the pressure of working with tight deadlines and complex financial issues?**

I think this is a skill learned over time. The key is communication, with both clients and colleagues. Heavy workloads are often the result of being good at what you do, so it's important not to see them as a punishment. By regularly reassessing deadlines and keeping people informed, bottlenecks can usually be resolved with the support of those around you.

**What's one piece of financial advice you think everyone should follow?**

Recognise the difference between cost and value. Cutting corners for the sake of a small saving can easily result in much bigger losses later. Spend money wisely and take advice when the stakes are high.

**What do you enjoy most about being an Accountant, and what keeps you motivated in your profession?**

As much as I enjoy VAT legislation and case law, what really motivates me is helping people. Whether it's supporting businesses to achieve their financial goals, reducing their risks, or mentoring colleagues to develop and progress in their careers, the reward is in making a real difference.

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L-R: Keith Charlton FW Capital and Jonathan Morgan MITS Inspection

## NPIF II funding drives fast growth for Middlesbrough engineering firm

Middlesbrough-based business MITS Inspection is focused on accelerating its growth after receiving a £300K funding boost.

**The investment, from NPIF II – FW Capital Debt Finance, which is managed by FW Capital as part of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II), is helping MITS Inspection to broaden its range of services and meet new contract wins.**

MITS Inspection is part of the MITS Group, which was founded by Director Jonathan Morgan in 2019. Today the business employs 11 staff with additional support from sub contractors. The MITS Group recently located to a 20,000 sq ft premises which integrates all areas of the business; MITS Inspection, MITS Rope Access and MITS Engineering. The new site also contains two purpose-built industrial radiography enclosure bays that provide customers with X-Ray and/or Gamma Ray tests on steel and pipework to detect any defects.

MITS Group started out as an inspection and testing services company and has since expanded to offer a comprehensive range of engineering testing services including Non Destructive Testing (NDT)

and advanced NDT welding inspection and Rope Access. The teams at MITS Inspection are experts in the field of Non-Destructive Testing of welds and work with a wide range of clients to ensure their assets meet the industry's highest standards and compliance.

Jonathan Morgan, Director at MITS Inspection said: "The funding is helping our cash flow needs, which is allowing us to take on new contracts and identify new opportunities with increased confidence. We currently work across the UK and are aiming to expand into global markets having recently taken on some significant high profile new contracts. The funding is also giving us the freedom to look at adding a senior manager to our team.

"We've been pleased to work with FW Capital. Their support feels like a big pat on the back that we're doing the right thing as a business and gives us the confidence to expand. It's massively assisted us."

Keith Charlton, Deputy Fund Manager at FW Capital said: "This is a great opportunity to support an ambitious,

growing business in the region. We've been impressed by how the MITS Group has widened its services and through the creation of the new radiography enclosure, they are expanding the capabilities of the MITS Inspection team and winning further new business in the UK. It's also great to hear about their aspirations to work with new global markets and I look forward to hearing about their further successes."

The £660m Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II) covers the entire North of England and provides loans from £25k to £2m and equity investment up to £5m to help a range of small and medium sized businesses to start up, scale up or stay ahead.

The Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II aims to build on the success of the initial fund, with the purpose of driving sustainable economic growth by supporting innovation and creating local opportunity for new and growing businesses across the North of England.

The Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II will increase the supply and diversity of early-stage finance for the North's smaller businesses, providing funds to firms that might otherwise not receive investment and help to break down barriers in access to finance.

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Glen Small

## Failure to prevent fraud: Building the new foundations of construction

*By Glen Small, VAT & Indirect Tax Director, Johnston Carmichael.*

The construction and property sector now face a new blueprint for accountability. The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023 (ECCTA) has made ‘failure to prevent fraud’ a corporate offence, shifting the burden from chasing wrongdoers retroactively to proving you stopped them in the first place.

**It's part of a bigger legislative shift, joining the ranks of ‘failure to prevent bribery’ and ‘failure to prevent tax evasion’, that holds businesses directly accountable for economic crime committed by anyone acting for them, unless they can prove they had the right safeguards in place.**

And ‘anyone’ really does mean anyone – employees, agents, subcontractors, suppliers. In a sector built on multi-tiered supply chains and joint ventures, that means the risk doesn't stop at your front door. It permeates every contract, into every site cabin, and through every spreadsheet in your network.

For large contractors, that creates a liability that could be triggered anywhere in the supply chain. For smaller firms, it's a different kind of pressure. Without

demonstrable anti-fraud measures, you risk being cut from lucrative contracts before the tender stage.

Fraud here isn't just a forged invoice or a stolen payment. It includes bid rigging, procurement collusion, payroll fraud, VAT evasion and creative manipulation of contract variations. And the ECCTA's message is blunt: if it could have been prevented, it should have been prevented. That shifts compliance from being a back-office checkbox exercise to a board-level accountability issue. It's no longer enough for leadership to know there's a policy in place; they'll need to prove they actively enforce it.

The government's message is clear: lead from the front and make anti-fraud culture impossible to miss. Know your risks – every

project, every supplier, every department – and tackle them with procedures that work in the real world, not just on paper. Push your scrutiny further down the supply chain, and keep your defences sharp with constant training, updates, and stress-testing. In short, make compliance a living, breathing part of your business, not a dusty file in a drawer.

These aren't just legal hoops; they're operational guardrails. They protect your eligibility for public sector work, defend your margins, and give clients and investors confidence you're a safe pair of hands.

While headlines often highlight unlimited fines and potential criminal convictions, there is also a constructive opportunity for firms who act early. By putting the right measures in place now, businesses can strengthen their reputation, reassure clients and partners, and demonstrate resilience in a sector where trust and reliability are fundamental.

Implementing an anti-fraud framework is not an overnight exercise. It requires careful planning, from risk assessments and supply chain reviews to contractual updates and staff training. Approached methodically, these steps provide a solid foundation for long-term compliance. Delay may force firms into hurried decisions that risk undermining both compliance and efficiency.

The firms that get this right won't just pass the legal test – they'll set the standard for an industry that builds not just structures, but reputations worth keeping.

[johnstoncarmichael.com](http://johnstoncarmichael.com)





Barry Speker OBE

## Comment

By Barry Speker OBE

**President Trump's high profile and unprecedented second state visit to Britain last month proceeded as well as could reasonably have been expected.**

**It was clearly important to receive the 'full works' at Windsor Castle - the carriages, the troops, state banquet, hand polished cutlery, the pipes, Red Arrows and special time with the King and Queen and the Prince and Princess of Wales.**

No doubt President Trump's Scottish mother Mary Anne MacLeod, from the Hebrides and a staunch royalist, would have been very proud.



That all the pomp and ceremony should have been within the protected confines of Windsor Castle, was justifiable on safety grounds in view of the attacks on the President and the recent assassination of his supporter Charlie Kirk. It also avoided confrontation on the streets of London with the rent a mob anti-Trump protesters - a conglomeration of Extraction Rebellion, CND, Southall Black Sisters, Greenpeace and Jeremy Corbyn. It also avoided unwelcome publicity for much insulting, foul-mouthed and threatening abuse.

Recognition by the US of our 'special relationship, and the preferential tariff deal as well as significant investment in and jobs for the UK were all pluses. Rubbishing our net zero agenda and plans for renewables will inspire much debate, as Ed Milliband chokes on another bacon sandwich.

Reticence on all sides avoided embarrassing mention of Jeffrey Epstein, Lord Mandelson, Princes Andrew or Harry.

Keir Starmer will be free to hail the visit as a great achievement despite lack of agreement on Ukraine, Gaza and North Sea fossil fuels. For the President he will languish in the memories of the spectacle, fanfare and adulation.

The return of Champions League football to St James Park on September 18 was a great occasion. Wor Flags had the ground festooned with black, white and gold. The atmosphere was electric and the noise deafening. The visit of Spanish Champions Barcelona revived memories of the 1997 clash when Tino Asprilla scored a hat trick and Newcastle won 3-2.

This time, after missing early chances, Newcastle succumbed 2-1 thanks to two goals from loanee Marcus Rashford, with England manager Thomas Tuchel watching.

For Newcastle it is necessary to beware of unrealistic expectations. There are many more Champions League games to enjoy and achieve success.

The expression 'as dead as a dodo' may itself become extinct. The plump and

flightless dodo disappeared from the forests of Mauritius, its sole remaining habitat in the 17th century, due to hungry sailors and voracious rats.

A Texas company, Colossal Biosciences, has announced a breakthrough in efforts to resurrect the species by using pigeon primordial germ cells (PGCs) from which a new lineage of dodo-like creatures could be fashioned.

This has shades of Jurassic Park and the recreation of dinosaurs from historic DNA. Colossal plan to create thousands of dodos. What next? The return of the woolly mammoth?

The Last Night at the Proms was a landmark occasion, not only being trumpeter Alison Balsom's farewell performance, the 50th anniversary of Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody with full orchestra and chorus, as well as the inimitable Bill Bailey featuring Leroy Anderson's orchestral miniature 'The Typewriter'.

This Last Night enabled the vast throng to celebrate the music as well as the unashamed traditions of Union flag waving and singing of the national favourites Land of Hope and Glory, Jerusalem and Rule Britannia. The mealy-mouthed politically correct brigade failed to prevent their inclusion on grounds of jingoism and the alleged glorification of colonialism and slavery.

The performance was not soured by waving of other flags (although there were EU stars on display) or infecting the occasion with political diatribes or bloodthirsty chants. This was a celebration of wonderful music to be enjoyed by all in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

A recommendation to read in autumn- The Traitors Circle, the latest from Jonathan Freedland. This is a spellbinding and true account of those who conspired against Hitler and of the insider who was intent on frustrating the plot.

**[barryspeker@hotmail.com](mailto:barryspeker@hotmail.com)**







“

*...What stood out to me about UNW is the calibre of its people...*

L-R: Alastair Wilson with Andrew Fitton



## UNW strengthens specialist tax team with double partner appointment

In response to continued demand for its specialist tax services, Newcastle-based independent chartered accountancy and business advisory firm UNW has appointed two of the North East's most respected tax professionals as Partners.

**Alastair Wilson and Andrew Fitton, both well-known in the North East business community, have joined UNW, bringing with them more than 50 years' combined experience advising businesses across the region.**

Alastair, who joins as Corporate Tax Partner, trained at a Big Four firm and has since held senior roles at both national and independent practices – most notably building and leading the tax department at a large regional firm.

He has worked with businesses of all sizes – from ambitious owner-managed companies to listed groups – and is known for delivering clear, commercial advice. His expertise spans group structuring, M&A, tax-efficient fundraising, staff incentives, and unlocking value through R&D and capital allowances. Over the years, Alastair has helped North East businesses claim more than £100 million in R&D tax credits.

Andrew also joins UNW as Corporate Tax Partner following his role as National Lead for Large Corporate Tax at a UK-wide accountancy firm. He previously spent 25 years with the Big Four, including 21 years at PwC. During this time, he specialised in corporate tax for large and international businesses, with a particular focus on the taxation of debt, derivatives, and foreign exchange. His career at PwC also included leading the tax practice in East Yorkshire and Lincolnshire, as well as a secondment as Head of Tax for Virgin Money plc.

At UNW, they join one of the region's largest specialist tax teams, which includes private client, employment taxes, and VAT experts alongside a corporate tax team serving a diverse range of sectors and business types.

Speaking of his motivations for joining UNW, Alastair said: "I've known UNW for a long time and have always been impressed by the way the firm operates. There's a real sense of focus and clarity – it's independent, agile, and committed to doing great work for clients. That really appealed to me.

"It's also a place where people are given the freedom to do their best work and to support others to do the same. The chance to join a team of this quality, with the scope to make a real impact, was a big draw. I'm looking forward to being part of a team that shares those values and to helping take the tax offering even further."

Andrew added: "What stood out to me about UNW is the calibre of its people. I've worked with a number of the tax team before and have always admired their expertise and reputation. More recently, I've also been struck by the quality and enthusiasm of those at earlier stages of their careers. The firm has invested in talent and resources to make sure clients get the level of service they deserve – technically excellent, thoughtful, and engaging. I'm excited to be part of that and to play my role in the firm's future growth."

Steve Lant, Tax Partner at UNW, commented: "We're delighted to welcome Alastair and Andrew to the firm. They are both proven performers with a real depth of expertise and experience. In addition, they are both good people committed to delivering for clients and developing our people. We already had a very strong tax team, Alastair and Andrew have made it even stronger."

[unw.co.uk](http://unw.co.uk)



# THE SOCIAL CO.





# The Finance Durham Fund backs social media specialists The Social Co.

Maven Capital Partners has invested a six-figure funding package in The Social Co through the Finance Durham Fund, established by Durham County Council and overseen by Business Durham.

**The Social Co has an award-winning team of social media experts and creatives and will use the funding to expand the team and accelerate its expansion strategy across the wider group. SOCO Group delivers high-level social media marketing campaigns to brands operating in the UK with an international footprint, providing all services in-house through an integrated setup.**

Based in Durham, and run by entrepreneurs Kane Haig and James Ogilvie, SOCO has grown to a team of 40 staff based at its Durham office. The business delivers its comprehensive range of services for its impressive and growing client base, across a range of sectors, from fashion and apparel to sports and financial services. SOCO already supports a number of well-known brands including Newcastle United Football Club, Hays Travel & Monument bank. SOCO's strong reputation is built on its ability to create high-impact campaigns across major platforms such as Meta, TikTok, Pinterest, Snapchat and X.

The UK advertising market continues to demonstrate strong momentum, with total spend forecast to exceed £40 billion this year (Advertising Association/ WARC Expenditure Report). Social media continues to influence a substantial and growing proportion of consumer purchasing decisions. SOCO utilises its strong creative capabilities to deliver campaigns for exciting, high growth brands who are looking to increase their brand visibility and engagement.

The investment from the Maven-managed Finance Durham Fund will support the next phase of SOCO's growth, enabling the team to expand its sales capabilities to help continue to expand its client base, and build on the strong momentum the business has established both in the North East and further afield.

Kane Haig, Co-founder of The Social Co, said: "Securing this investment marks a pivotal moment for The Social Co. and our wider group. We're incredibly excited about the opportunities it creates for us to accelerate growth, expand our capabilities and deliver even greater value to our clients. This funding gives us the platform to scale faster than ever before, and the next few years will be transformative for both ourselves and our clients. We would like to thank Maven and Business Durham for their support and are already seeing great benefits from working closely with them to help us achieve our goals."

Rebecca MacDermid, Investment Manager at Maven, said: "SOCO is a great example of an ambitious North East business with real creative flair and commercial drive. Kane and James have built an impressive agency that's delivering outstanding work for big-name clients and is continuing to attract opportunities on a global scale. This



funding will help them grow further and strengthen the team as they look to secure more long-term contracts and expand their client base. We look forward to working with them to help drive the business forward."

Cllr Joe Quinn, Durham County Council cabinet member for Resources, Investments and Assets, said: "We're delighted that Finance Durham is supporting The Social Co to continue their growth here in Durham. With their award-winning team of social media experts and creatives, they represent the kind of innovative, ambitious business we want to see thrive in our county. Supporting companies like The Social Co demonstrates our dedication to driving Durham's economic growth—by empowering local businesses, opening up new opportunities for our residents, and positioning the county as the premier destination for business in the North East."

***Maven is one of the UK's most active private equity investors and has a track record of identifying and nurturing technology-driven businesses. If you are looking at private equity as a solution to fund future growth we would love to hear from you.***

***Find out more at [mavencp.com](https://mavencp.com)***



# Investing in finding the right Senior Leadership Team: A strategic imperative

Strong leadership is one of the most powerful factors of a successful charitable organisation. So why wouldn't you invest in finding the right people?

**In fact, it is that crucial to a charity's make-up that surely it should be listed as a definitive strategy that's part of a charity's governance structure. Here Peter Neal, founder of Experience Bank Group, talks through the pitfalls of not doing it right, and his favourite tips to do it really well.**

In the charitable sector, where resources are often limited, expectations are high, and missions are critical, assembling the right senior leadership team is not a luxury - it's a necessity. Investing the time, resources, and attention needed to recruit and retain high-calibre leaders pays dividends in performance, resilience, and social impact.

Your senior leadership team (SLT), comprising roles like the CEO, COO, CFO, Director of Fundraising, and Director of Programmes, should be the engine room of any charity. These individuals shape strategy, lead culture, supervise resources, and drive operational excellence. It's clear that having the right people in these roles creates:

**Strategic clarity:** A capable SLT aligns the organisation's vision with day-to-day decision-making.

**Organisational stability:** Experienced leaders can navigate complexity, manage risk, and lead through change.

**Team cohesion and culture:** Leadership sets the tone for staff engagement, inclusivity, and performance - there will be more on this soon from me in a separate article.

**Fundraising and external credibility:** Funders, partners, and regulators are more likely to support organisations they trust are being led well.

## The risks of underinvestment

Many charities face pressure to cut costs in leadership recruitment or rely on networks



Peter Neal

and goodwill to fill senior roles. While well-intentioned, this approach often leads to:

**Mismatched Hires:** Candidates who lack the right experience, values, or cultural fit can cause disruption.

**High Turnover:** A poor match leads to attrition, which drains resources and morale.

**Missed Opportunities:** Without strong leaders, organisations may fail to innovate or grow.

**Reputational Damage:** Wrong decisions and poor management at the senior level will undermine both public and funder trust, and employee satisfaction.

## What does "Investing" in the right team look like?

### 1. Clarity Before Recruitment

Invest in the front-end of the hiring process. This includes:

- Clearly defining the role's scope and expectations.
- Mapping out how the position contributes to organisational goals.
- Understanding what leadership qualities are needed for the next phase of growth.

### 2. Professional recruitment support

Use experienced search firms or recruitment consultants who understand the charity sector, particularly for roles like Trustee, Chair, CEO or Finance Director. These professionals should help:

- Identify and reach diverse candidates.
- Screen rigorously for skills and values alignment.
- Ensure fair, equitable hiring practices.

### 3. Competitive offerings

Attracting top talent means offering more than just a salary. While many leaders choose the sector for its mission, your offer

should also include:

- Clear purpose and impact.
- Opportunities for professional development.
- A healthy, inclusive working environment.
- Flexibility and work-life balance.

### 4. Inclusive and equitable hiring practices

The best teams are diverse in background, experience, and perspective. Investing in inclusive recruitment means:

- Advertising roles widely and accessibly.
- Using unbiased assessment methods.
- Removing barriers to entry for underrepresented groups.

This isn't just about equity—it directly improves decision-making and innovation.

### 5. Board oversight and involvement

The board has a critical role in setting the tone for senior hiring. Trustees should:

- Ensure proper governance and risk management around recruitment.
- Offer support and challenge to senior leaders.
- Model the values and standards they expect from staff leadership.

Finding the right senior leadership team is one of the most consequential decisions any charity will make. The stakes are high: lives, communities, and causes depend on strong leadership. Investing in this process through planning, recruitment, onboarding, and ongoing support is not only a strategic choice; it's a moral responsibility. When you invest in leadership, you invest in the future of your mission.

**If this all makes sense to you and you need support in your next senior hire, then do get in touch**  
[peter@theexperiencebank.co.uk](mailto:peter@theexperiencebank.co.uk)  
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Andrew Marsh



# Struggling in your role as a NED or Trustee?

In today's fast-moving business and social impact landscape, the role of Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) and trustees has never been more complex or more critical.

**Expectations are high: boards are tasked with providing strategic insight, robust governance, and independent oversight, all while navigating uncertain economic conditions, digital transformation, and growing demands around sustainability and stakeholder accountability.**

Many people take on the role with the best intentions, a whole host of skills, experience and knowledge to share – but then feel out of their depth and struggle with the responsibility. For individuals holding these positions feeling like this, it can often be a lonely place – responsibility is heavy, outlets for confidential discussion and development are few.

This is precisely why the Experience Bank peer groups facilitated, managed and mentored by Andrew Marsh are such a valuable resource. The three groups provide NEDs and trustees with a safe, structured, and insightful environment in which to share challenges, explore solutions, and strengthen their contribution at board level.

Andrew said: “Serving as a NED or trustee can feel like stepping into the unknown. Issues such as cyber risk, ESG reporting, cultural change, or stakeholder engagement are constantly evolving. Organisations and companies with boards should look for NEDs and Trustees who invest in their own development in the role, as it shows they are keen to add value in the right way. Through open exchange, participants in this level of ‘training’ develop confidence in their judgement and resilience in the face of complexity. This strengthens their ability to ask the right questions, hold executives to account, and provide the independent oversight that organisations depend on.”

## A Safe Space for Honest Conversations

One of the greatest challenges faced by NEDs and trustees is finding a peer-to-peer sounding board. Executive leaders can lean on colleagues and management teams, but non-executives are often isolated in their roles. They are expected to be both supportive and challenging, strategic yet detached, and the line is not always easy to walk.

Experience Bank Group's peer sessions, create a safe and confidential space where these pressures can be explored openly. Here, NEDs and Trustees discuss the dilemmas they face without fear of judgement, reputational risk, or conflict of interest. That freedom fosters honesty, and only with honesty comes real learning.

## Experienced Facilitation That Unlocks Value

Andrew Marsh brings deep experience, as someone who has worked extensively with boards and leadership teams across many sectors. His approach balances structure with flexibility: discussions are guided to remain purposeful, yet members are free to explore issues most pressing to them.

He said: “I always aim to ensure that the sessions don't become abstract debates or mere networking opportunities. Instead, they're dynamic, practical, focused on helping members translate insights into action. Participants leave with fresh perspectives and tangible tools to apply to their boardroom.”

Another strength of the Experience Bank Group lies in the member's diversity. Trustees and NEDs come from different sectors—corporate, charitable, public, and private—bringing varied professional and personal experiences. This breadth of perspective enriches conversation. And as a collective we focus on how NEDs and Trustees can create economic, sustainable value.

A trustee in the charity sector might, for example, gain new approaches to digital fundraising from a NED in a technology



company. A corporate NED might learn from the governance rigour typical of not-for-profits. These cross-pollinations spark creativity and innovation, helping members to avoid insular thinking. Sharing thoughts, knowledge, experience and fears is extremely bonding meaning the conversations often carry on between individuals outside of the set sessions.

## Expanding Networks with Purpose

Networking is often transactional. These peer groups reframe it as relational. Because members meet regularly, trust develops and relationships deepen. The result is not just a larger contact list, but a network of peers who genuinely support and champion one another. Opportunities flow naturally—whether that's introductions to future board roles, collaborations between organisations, or informal mentoring.

## A Commitment to Continuous Growth

Ultimately, joining Experience Bank Group is about professional growth and impact. For NEDs and trustees who recognise their role isn't static and the boardroom environment continues to evolve, these peer groups provide an ongoing commitment to learning. One member shared: “Members sharpen their skills, broaden their horizons, and enhance contribution. The benefit is twofold: I've grown personally, and my boards has become stronger, more effective, and better equipped for the future. It gave me confidence to take on my first Trustee role, knowing I had in-depth support in my role, strategy, governance, finance, risk appetite and decision making.”

## Conclusion

Being a NED or trustee is a privilege and a profound responsibility. Those who take the role seriously understand that they must invest in their own development as much as they do in the organisations they serve. Antonia Brindle, who has been a cohort member for three years supporting her NED and Trustee activity, said: “These peer groups offer the rare combination of confidentiality, expertise, and peer support that makes development in my roles enjoyable. For any NED or Trustee seeking to strengthen their impact, this is not just an opportunity worth considering – it is one you shouldn't miss out on.”

***There is a limited amount of cohort spaces currently available so if this sounds like something you personally should be involved in, or that you want your NEDs/Trustees to be part of, contact Andrew on [andrew@marshbusinesstransformations.co.uk](mailto:andrew@marshbusinesstransformations.co.uk)***





## Sunderland legal firm set for move

**One of Sunderland's longest-established legal firms is gearing up for growth, with a move to The Beam, in the heart of the city's transforming Riverside.**

Founded in 1948, Richard Reed Solicitors has grown to a team of over 40 legal professionals and support staff. The firm has been based in Frederick Street for nearly 80 years but has been on the hunt for modern office space to house its expanding team. Having sold its premises, the company –

which offers legal advice for all aspects of personal and business life – is now set to move into its new space following the completion of the fit-out of their new office, by the end of the year.

The Beam, a 60,000 sq ft Grade A office – the first to rise from the ground at Riverside Sunderland – represented the perfect location for the firm. The business will be taking a lease of 5,012 sq ft of office space, joining the likes of Ocado, North East Screen, Apexon and Asset55 who are already based in the building.

The move is a significant step for Richard Reed, which recently undertook a rebrand to modernise its look, underlining the business' evolution under the ownership of Managing Director Sarah Reid and director Phil Moir.

Sarah said: "We are proudly Sunderland based, so this move to The Beam allows us to stay in the city we were established in, in a space we can be proud to welcome our clients – right at the heart of Riverside Sunderland.

"The whole area is transforming, and we were focused on finding a space in this part of the city, where the business could thrive in an environment that reflects the modern, dynamic business we are today."



## Swinburne Maddison appoints Craig Foot as Head of Residential Conveyancing

**One of the North East's leading law firms, Swinburne Maddison has announced the appointment of Craig Foot as Managing Associate and Head of Residential Conveyancing, further strengthening its property offering and leadership team.**

Craig brings over 17 years of experience in residential property law, having handled thousands of transactions across the North East and beyond.

Jonathan Moreland, Managing Partner, commented: "We're very pleased to welcome Craig to Swinburne Maddison. His depth of experience and leadership expertise make him a perfect fit for the role, and we're confident that under his guidance, the Residential Conveyancing team will continue to deliver the high standards of service our clients expect."

Craig began his legal career as a conveyancing assistant after graduating with an LLB (Hons) from Nottingham Trent University in 2007. His career has included senior roles at a prominent North East law firm, where he progressed to team leader and assistant operations manager.

At Swinburne Maddison, Craig leads the Residential Conveyancing department, supporting clients with a wide range of property transactions, bringing expertise working with property investors, both individuals and companies, helping them expand and manage their portfolios with confidence.

## New solicitors and apprenticeship first at Square One Law

**The future is bright at a northern law firm, as Square One celebrates the appointments of two newly qualified solicitors and the success of its first paralegal apprentice.**

Declan Fahey and Dominka Cudak both joined the firm in 2023 as trainee solicitors. Kyle Taylor, who completed a paralegal apprenticeship, is now embarked on his journey to becoming a solicitor.

Declan, who studied MLaw at Northumbria University and has been involved in a wide range of corporate transactions during his training contract, has qualified into the firm's Corporate team.

Dominka qualifies into the firm's Commercial Litigation and Dispute Resolution team. Having also studied MLaw at Northumbria University, she's supported on commercial disputes throughout her time as a trainee and will continue to advise clients on complex litigations.



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Ryan Bannon

## Building on strong foundations

At Mincoffs Solicitors, the real estate team's strength lies in their ability to adapt, offering clear advice whether the project is straightforward or highly complex.

Whether helping investors grow a property portfolio, assisting a leading hospitality brand in securing a new location or advising on a bridging finance transaction, the department's skillset spans the full range of commercial property matters.



While there are numerous specialisms across the team, their varied knowledge gives them in-depth insight into the transactions they work on, regardless of its type or industry.

Approaching each matter with an open mind and a depth of experience across the board, it is not uncommon for the team to spot a potential complication where others may not.

This attitude complements the diverse range of work that the team work on, including for developers, occupiers, landlord and tenant work and real estate investment.

The department has more than doubled in size over the last decade under the leadership of partner and head of the team, Ryan Bannon.

Working alongside partner Malcolm Wood, associate solicitors Claire Catterson, Keith Ravenhill, Leanne Kettlewell and Hannah Rolfe, solicitor Joshua Carr and real estate executive Ashley Mullen, the team boasts more than 110 years' of combined experience.

Working on a wide range of property transactions, which could come from any sector, the team collaborate with experts across the firm to deliver a holistic service where required.

This could involve drawing on the experience of colleagues in the corporate, commercial or licensing and gaming departments to ensure clients are fully informed at the point they need to make a decision.

The team take pride in, and are commended for, their efforts in going above and beyond to understand the needs of their clients and their businesses.

Matters will always be overseen by one of the real estate team, giving clients a clear relationship contact and the reassurance that someone who knows their circumstances is at the helm of their transaction.

"It has always been important that everyone in the team has a wide enough skillset to take on whatever real estate matter a client may bring to them," said Ryan.

"Within the team there are particular areas of expertise, but not to the exclusion of anything else.

"I think, ultimately, that is what makes us such a dedicated team and why clients continue to instruct us as their business needs evolve and grow."

Further recruitment and growth is planned for the department in the near future, particularly as the team expands on specialisms such as residential investment – overseen by Claire Catterson.

However, growth from within the team is just as important as its external recruitment efforts, with several paralegals within the department pursuing further study or taking up training contracts at the firm.

"We have a talented team who are committed to delivering work of the highest standard for our clients," said Ryan. "Whether it's a one-off transaction or a relationship that's spanned decades, we pride ourselves on providing trusted advice and support.

"In recent years the department has grown significantly, and it's important that we continue to look ahead in strengthening the areas of expertise where we've built a strong reputation.

"As the real estate arm of the firm develops, our focus remains on combining steady growth with the same level of care and professionalism our clients have always relied on."

**For trusted advice on any area of commercial real estate, contact partner and head of the team, Ryan Bannon, on [rbannon@mincoffs.co.uk](mailto:rbannon@mincoffs.co.uk) or call the office on 0191 281 6151.**

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Leanne Kettlewell



Keith Ravenhill



Claire Catterson



Malcolm Wood





“

*...it's important  
to listen, show  
empathy, and  
give clear,  
honest advice...*

Sara Devennie



# Solicitor of the Month...

## Sara Devennie

CLR Law

### What inspired you to pursue a career in law, and what path did you take to become a Solicitor?

I've always been fascinated by rules and I've a natural instinct for problem-solving. Law seemed like the perfect mix of logic, structure, and helping people find fair solutions.

After completing my degree in Law and my LPC (Legal Practice Course), I completed my training contract. I found my seat in the Employment department fascinating, so qualified into the Employment Department and the rest is history.

### What are the most common legal issues people seek advice on, and how do you help them?

I work with both employers and employees, which gives me a well-rounded view of what's going on in the workplace.

For employees, I advise a lot of neurodivergent individuals - especially around disability discrimination and employers failing to make reasonable adjustments.

With businesses, I often help employers navigate the same challenges, but from a practical and legal perspective. Most genuinely want to support their staff but struggle to balance that with business needs.

### How has the legal profession changed in recent years, and what trends do you see emerging?

The legal profession has changed a lot because of new technology and changes in how people work. Tools like AI for research help lawyers work faster and cheaper. Clients want clearer costs and quicker results, so law firms are changing how they do business.

### What are the biggest misconceptions people have about solicitors and the legal system?

That solicitors are expensive or only needed when something goes wrong. In reality, we help with many everyday things, like starting a business or general advice on relationships in the workplace.

At CLR Law we offer value based pricing and fixed fees to make the advice more accessible and affordable.

### What advice would you give to someone facing a legal dispute for the first time?

Don't panic - get proper legal advice early. Speak to a qualified solicitor who can explain your rights, options, and what to expect. Stay calm and gather all relevant evidence to help your case. In many cases, disputes can be settled without going to court, through negotiation or mediation.

We offer mediation at CLR Law. As well as a solicitor, I am a qualified and accredited civil, commercial and workplace mediator so can offer mediation as a way to avoid the legal process.

### How do you handle the emotional and ethical challenges of your job?

Handling the emotional and ethical challenges of being a solicitor means staying professional, calm, and focused, even in tough situations. Clients, understandably, are often stressed or upset, but it's important to listen, show empathy, and give clear, honest advice.

If something feels wrong, I don't ignore it - I talk it through. Doing the right thing and helping people through difficult times makes the job rewarding.

### What impact has technology had on the legal industry, and how do you see it evolving?

Technology has made the legal industry faster, more efficient, and more accessible. Tasks like legal research, document drafting, and case management can now be done quicker. Clients can get updates and advice more easily through emails, video calls, and online portals.

While tech won't replace solicitors, it will change how they work.

### What are the key qualities that make a great Solicitor?

A great solicitor needs strong legal knowledge, but also needs to be a good listener and show empathy. Clients often come to you during stressful or emotional times, so it's important to understand how they feel and support them.

Clear communication is key - explaining things in simple terms and keeping clients informed. Honesty, reliability, and attention to detail also matter, so clients can trust you to handle their case properly.

### How do you balance client advocacy with legal ethics and professional responsibility?

Balancing client advocacy with legal ethics means doing everything you can to support your client while always following the law and professional rules. It's about being honest, fair, and respectful.

### What is the most rewarding part of being a Solicitor, and what keeps you motivated?

The most rewarding part of being a solicitor is helping people through difficult times and making a real difference in their lives.

What keeps me motivated is seeing the positive impact my support and advice can have. Every case is different, so there's always something new to learn or a challenge to overcome.

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



Kathryn Boyd of Muckle (second left) on farm visit with the Country Trust

## Why you should consider legacy gifting in your Will

Many charities rely on gifts in Wills. Without them, much of the vital work they undertake wouldn't be possible.

**The Legacy Gifting Report 2025 estimated that the value of legacy gifting to charities in 2024 was £4.5bn. However, other research finds that approximately one in six UK adults do not know that they can leave gifts of money or items to charities in their Wills.**

**But why should you consider leaving a gift to charity in your Will, and how would you approach it?**

**The team at leading regional law firm Muckle LLP explain more.**

According to Cancer Research UK, almost one-third of adults have not updated their Wills in the past five years, while about one in three adults aged over 55 have not reviewed their Wills for at least half a decade. Keeping your Will updated is just good housekeeping. Time moves so quickly, and family dynamics and

finances are swept along, muddled up and reformed with the rush of time. Often, you too will have changed as a person since you last looked at your Will.

### **Make a difference to charities**

The most significant benefit of legacy gifting is impact. Your gift could benefit others outside of your immediate family. What's more, choosing a charity that aligns with your personal beliefs or business ethos is a great way to ensure that those areas that are so important to you in life can continue to thrive after you've gone.

The Country Trust, a charity that connects school children with working farms to discover how food is grown and produced, is working hard to build connections with the farming sector, an industry that naturally aligns with its own values.





Charlotte Patterson-Ryan of Muckle (right) on farm visit with the Country Trust

Sue Thompson, fundraising coordinator in the North East, says because of the nature of the work they do, many of their gifts come from donors in the farming sector: "We teach children about farming, not just about how food is produced but also about career opportunities so our ethos really aligns with protecting the future of the industry and that appeals to landowners and farmers when considering legacy gifts."

Not all of us are natural philanthropists. Making a Will is a very personal thing, and so thinking outside of our immediate family and sphere doesn't necessarily come naturally to us.

Sometimes, a little prompt or explanation of how to gift to charity can open up a whole new perspective.

#### **Reduce your tax burden**

Donations to registered charities are not subject to inheritance tax, which means that leaving a gift to charity in your Will can lower the tax owed on the rest of your estate. This way, you can support a cause you care about while reducing the tax burden for your other beneficiaries.

It's a great way to benefit both your family and the charities you want to help. In addition, if you leave 10% of your estate to charity then you could qualify for a reduced rate of inheritance tax.

#### **The importance of having a Will**

Anyone with the resources is free to leave money to a charity. However, legacy disputes can and do happen. If you wish to leave a gift to a charity and want to minimise the risk of a legacy failing, the best course of action is to formally have a Will – simply notifying family or friends of your wishes is unlikely to work in practice.

As you'd expect, all of the above can be quite tricky to coordinate, which is when a solicitor can support you. Whilst it is not a legal requirement to have your Will drawn up by a solicitor, it is highly advised that you do so!

***To talk to a solicitor about a Will, or for any other estate planning matters, please contact our private client team on 0191 211 7777.***

***To find out more about The Country Trust, visit: [countrytrust.org.uk](https://countrytrust.org.uk)***



# What does Angela Rayner's resignation mean for new employment rights and for employers?

Paul McGowan, Managing Partner at specialist employment lawyer at Collingwood Legal, examines this question.

**The press has had a field day reporting on Angela Rayner's personal affairs and tax arrangements following disclosure of information that suggested she failed to pay the appropriate tax on a property she purchased.**

She has since resigned, following a finding that she breached strict ministerial rules which placed a duty on her to meet the "highest possible standards of proper conduct".

As part of Labour's election campaign and manifesto commitments they have pledged to make numerous changes to employment law rights including banning fire and rehire, increasing union rights and day 1 sick pay and unfair dismissal rights for all employees.

Ms Rayner has been a key driver for the Employment Rights Bill (ERB). She was vocal in her support for workers and committed to "make work pay". There remains divided opinion on the benefits of ERB between the unions, who reflect and campaign for the workers it represents, and the business/employer sector, a majority of whom fear that the introduction of numerous new employment rights under the ERB will deter economic growth and will impact on employers' willingness to recruit in what is already a challenging economic climate where businesses are struggling to adjust to the impact of national minimum wage increases and increases in Employer NI costs.

With unemployment rising, there is reported concern in the business community that the ERB may exacerbate this further, in turn contributing further to economic instability. However, unions

are focused on minimising the impact of Ms Rayner's resignation, by responding promptly and publicly to urge the government not to 'water down' the ERB. In response, it has been reported that the new Business Secretary, Peter Kyle, has reassured unions that there will be no impact on the ERB. Further, Bridget Phillipson, the favourite to become the new Deputy PM (at the time of preparing this article) has also said the ERB will be delivered "in full". Given the ERB was a significant part of Labour's election campaign, the fact it is quite far progressed in its passage through Parliament and the Labour Party's needs for the support of the trade union movement, it may be difficult for Labour to appear to renege on or seek to significantly change key elements of the ERB at this late stage, not least at a point where there is a media spotlight on the party.

With economic challenges and the Labour government proving unpopular (and ranking 15% behind Reform in a poll for the i Paper from late August) the question may be whether the government will follow through with all of its planned changes to employment law to keep to its manifesto pledges and to appease the trade unions

or, will it reflect and change its approach recognising the risk of further reducing growth and to appease the business community?

From our perspective as employment lawyers, we have, so far, seen a government committed to follow through with its pledge to fundamentally change and increase employment rights. The government's own economic analysis suggests that the ERB will introduce a direct cost to UK businesses of up to £8 billion. Once enacted, the economic impact of the ERB will be better determined.

One point is already clear, employers need to be informed and prepared for what will be required of them to comply with a raft of new employment rights.

As expert employment lawyers, we have been reviewing this subject closely and carefully and can assist employers with how best to navigate the enactment of the ERB whilst also balancing other key business objectives.

***We are regularly updating our clients on developments and if this is of interest, please register for our updates through our website: [www.collingwoodlegal.com](http://www.collingwoodlegal.com)***



Paul McGowan





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**Kidd and Spoor Solicitors Charity Golf Day**

Kidd and Spoor Solicitors had the pleasure of sponsoring the charity golf day at Tynemouth Golf Club in support of Northumbria Palliative Care.

This is an annual event and each year seems to surpass the previous year in terms of funds raised and the number of golfers attending.

This year a full field of eighty ladies played and thoroughly enjoyed the day despite the inclement weather. A huge thank you must go to Jane Henderson who organised the day and to Tynemouth Golf club staff and members for their huge welcome and generous hospitality.







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# Why Shareholders and Partnership Agreements Matter

10 Points to consider before drafting a shareholder or partnership agreement.

**Shareholder and Partnership Agreements are essential legal documents that define the structure and governance of a business. While companies and partnerships differ slightly in form, the principles guiding their agreements are largely similar. These documents help establish how shareholders or partners interact with each other and the business, and they play a crucial role in preventing and resolving disputes.**

Without clear provisions, disagreements can occur whether about decision-making, ownership changes, or exits and can escalate and be costly to the business. Therefore, it is important to carefully consider what to include in these agreements to ensure smooth operations and protect all parties involved.

## 1. Shareholders Agreements Are Not Articles of Association

Whilst both documents may cover similar topics, Articles of Association are public and legally required under the Companies Act 2006. In contrast, a Shareholders Agreement is a private document that offers more flexibility and confidentiality.

## 2. Agreements Can Be Amended

Although these agreements are ideally drafted to be comprehensive from the outset, they can include provisions that allow for future amendment, especially if there are structural or ownership changes.

## 3. Articles of Association Usually Take Precedence (with Expectations)

Every limited company in England and Wales is required to have articles of association. Shareholders agreements, while sharing similar content, do not have this legal requirement. Company articles tend to build upon the relevant conditions of the Companies Act. However, a shareholder agreement can include any provisions. Typically, Articles take precedence over all other documents pertaining to a Company. An exception to this rule is when the relevant agreement includes a "supremacy clause".

## 4. Handling Breaches of Agreement

If an individual or corporate party violates provisions within a shareholder's or partnership agreement such as restrictive covenants, this would constitute a breach of the agreement. A well-drafted agreement would allow other parties the right to bring forward a claim against the defying party. This would consist of an outline of



Jess Fenwick

how breaches are to be dealt with, such as transfer of their interest, financial remedy and even removal of the party from the agreement and thus involvement within the business.

## 5. Minority Protection

Those holding a minority share can have limited control over company/partnership decisions. An effective agreement can ensure that critical decisions require the approval of all shareholders/partners. Such decisions may include issuing new shares, appointing or removing directors or changing main business operations. Additionally, a "tag-along" provision can mandate that if majority shareholders receive an offer for their interest, the same offer must be extended to all shareholders/partners. This will allow the minority shareholder/partner to also benefit from the sale equally.

## 6. Majority Protection

Majority shareholders/partners are expected to have the greatest level of control over the business. These parties may then worry about lack of control in the events which require unanimous approval such as sale of the company. An example protection can be that of drag along provisions which stipulate that upon a sale by majority interest-holders, minority interest-holders will also be sold on the conditions as any the other seller.

## 7. Post Exit Provisions

A party selling all of their shares and exiting the business can pose a risk to the company or partnership due to the knowledge and access to client base. Therefore, typically

leaver provisions are used stipulating the restrictions imposed on existing parties. This can include time restraints from contacting any clients and employees which can typically range from 12- 24 months and can also extend to working within the same industry.

## 8. Deadlocks and Disputes

Disputes between shareholders/partners, such as disagreements over business strategy, can lead to deadlock, halting progress. Agreements should include mechanisms like mediation, arbitration, or buy-out options to resolve such impasses.

## 9. New Shareholders or Partners

The agreement should clearly define the process for adding new shareholders/partners, including approval requirements, share allocation, and responsibilities. This protects existing members and ensures transparency.

## 10. Death of Shareholder

There should be adequate provisions upon the death of a shareholder/partner. This will vary for all businesses, however for example remaining parties may wish not to lose control within the business by shares passing to the bereaved relatives. Options to deal with this may include automatic share transfers, buy-back rights, or rights of first refusal. This helps maintain business continuity and prevent disputes with heirs or third parties.

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Dominic Elsworth

## Who owns AI-generated content?

**Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) platforms are advancing rapidly, particularly in creative fields. It is now remarkably easy to use tools such as ChatGPT to produce images, text, videos, and even music or sound recordings. This convenience brings significant questions around intellectual property (IP) and ownership—specifically, whether AI-generated content can be protected by copyright at all.**

In the UK, the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (CDPA) states that the copyright for “computer-generated” works belongs to person who made the necessary arrangements for its creation. This provision, written decades before the rise of modern generative AI, is now being tested in ways the original lawmakers could not have anticipated. Determining the rightful owner is far from straightforward. Is it the developer who built the AI model? The user who inputs the prompts? Or the copyright holder of material used to train the AI?

Originality adds another layer of complexity. Under the CDPA, a work is eligible for copyright protection only if it is original. Case law defines originality as “the author’s own intellectual creation.” It is challenging to see how an entirely AI-generated work could meet that standard.

Beyond authorship, there is the issue of training data. Many AI models have been trained on material protected by copyright, such as books, images, and music which have been scraped from the internet without permission. This has sparked growing pressure from media companies, artists, and publishers for clearer rules.

For UK creators using AI, the safest approach is to use platforms with clear IP policies, document your creative contribution, and keep records of prompts, drafts, and edits to demonstrate human authorship.

Until the courts or lawmakers step in, ownership of AI-generated content in the UK will remain a legally grey—and commercially uncertain—area.

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Nadine Walton



Duncan Cathie

## Funding Inheritance Tax: A matter of options and trust

By Nadine Walton and Duncan Cathie, Brodies LLP.

**Huge changes were announced to Agricultural Relief (AR) and Business Relief (BR) from Inheritance Tax (IHT) in the October 2024 budget. They are due to take full effect on 6 April 2026.**

**Ahead of that deadline, it is critical that farmers and owners of any businesses, plan ahead. The need to review wills, consider lifetime succession planning (and indeed pre-sale planning) becomes more pressing as that deadline approaches.**

There will however be other, more practical implications of the changes, which have received less attention. One of these is the problem of funding the tax upon death of a business owner.

### **An existing problem, only bigger**

Where an individual is in business with others (for example, as a shareholder in a company), the value of their shares will often be left to family members upon death. The surviving shareholders must therefore pay the family (or, really, 'the estate') for the deceased's shares, if the family has no interest in staying involved.

If surviving shareholders or company funds don't allow this, problems can result. The family may have to wait for payment, and financial stability of the business may be compromised.

HMRC has now taken the problem up a notch.

### **Funding HMRC's bill**

For decades, unlimited relief from IHT has been granted on trading businesses, on the basis that such a payment may lead to their break-up given the sums involved.

From 6 April 2026, that will change, and relief will be limited. For the first time in a generation, business interests which exceed £1m on death will face 20% IHT (above that £1m threshold). This is true whatever 'form' the interest takes (e.g., a partnership share, or shares in a company). The first instalment of tax must be paid within six months following the month of death, to prevent interest accruing at eye-watering rates. That applies even where there has been no "transaction", and where those who have inherited the business interest have no means of raising the required funds.

The potential for conflict between the family and the remaining business owners will inevitably increase. The new pressure of paying HMRC within a short timeframe is liable to cause additional stress on both sides; and potentially irreparable damage to the business.

### **The solution**

Where business owners do not want to

pass the business interest itself to the next generation, the sensible step is to agree to:

- (i) take out life insurance, equal to the value of their business interest, payable upon death; and
- (ii) place the policy in trust for the benefit of the remaining business owners.

This will provide funds to quickly pay the value due to the deceased's estate, without impact upon the business. The family can settle the IHT on time and the business isn't vulnerable to interference from third parties who aren't working in it.

The importance of properly drafted contractual terms and trusts in this arrangement cannot be understated.

### **Cross-option agreement**

Where this arrangement is put in place, a contract must be drawn, obliging all the business owners to retain a life insurance policy of appropriate value. The agreement will provide for the mechanism for sale of the deceased's business interest by his/her estate, to the remaining owners or in such other way as is agreed. The provisions must be drafted extremely carefully. Without proper structure of each party's 'option', eligibility for even partial relief from IHT on the business interest will be compromised.

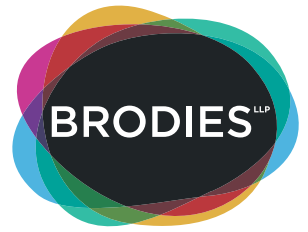
### **Trust**

Settling each policy into a well-drafted trust at inception is key. A trust structure prevents IHT on the policy funds, and properly controls who receives them. It therefore protects both your business legacy, and those who matter most.

***Nadine specialises in trust, estate and tax planning for individuals while Duncan advises businesses and the individuals within them on their governance arrangements, succession planning and cross option agreements.***

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## West Rainton youngsters out in the open air on Durham Area Youth residential trips

Durham Area Youth used a £1,600 grant from the Banks Group to fund an overnight trip to the Moor House Adventure Centre near West Rainton for a dozen local children aged from 12 to 14 years.

The trip included a range of different activities, including high ropes, crate stacking and shelter building, while it also gave participants the chance to learn new teambuilding, cookery and fire safety skills.

Plans are now being made for a further overnight residential stay at the TCR Hub in Barnard Castle for 16 local young people, which will also be funded by the Banks grant and which will include outdoor activities such as pond dipping, canoeing, orienteering and tent building.

Durham Area Youth provides a range of services through the year to young people aged 6-18 years in the areas of Pitington,



Shadforth, Sherburn Hill, Sherburn Village, West Rainton, Great Lumley and Bournmoor, and works with around 300 young people every week. It aims to encourage them to develop social and lifelong skills.

## Theatre Hullabaloo visitors going outside to play with new family facilities

A pioneering Darlington children's theatre is improving new outdoor play opportunities for local families with the help of a four-figure grant from a regional employer.

Theatre Hullabaloo is renovating an underused outside area at its Borough Road premises into a play space which will include new equipment and resources to encourage imaginative play.

Space to Imagine is a creative play area designed with children and families at its heart, and features cosy wooden dens, wooden blocks, natural resources and an



outdoor nursery mud and water kitchen, with endless opportunities for imagination to grow.

The project is being funded through a £1,988 grant from the County Durham-headquartered Banks Group and complements the permanent indoor creative play space and the temporary play installations that Theatre Hullabaloo has been running in disadvantaged communities around the area for the last two years.

Theatre Hullabaloo, which is the only specialist children's theatre outside London, was specifically created to be an inspiring place to play and learn for children and families, and welcomes around 25,000 visitors every year.

Alongside the different theatre shows that it hosts, it runs a range of themed community events and activities for children, many of which are free to help ensure the venue remains accessible to everyone.

## Disabled golf charity celebrates winning big at the UChangeLives Golf Day 2025

A team dedicated to raising awareness for disabled golf is celebrating a major victory after winning the second annual UChangeLives Golf Day at Seaton Carew Golf Club.

The AGD Disabled Golf Development team not only took home the top prize - a week-long golf holiday in Northern Ireland - but also secured significant financial support for their cause.

The event, which raised more than £30,000 for The PFC Trust and North-East STEM Foundation, provided a powerful platform for AGD to share its mission.

The team, composed of founders Andrew Gardiner and Dave Stocks, ambassador Alan Hartley and golfer Barry Waring, moved the hearts of attendees, who collectively donated an additional £11,000 to AGD's efforts.



Barry, a former Royal Marine and armed policeman, was deeply touched by the generosity.

He lives with FMD, a progressive neurological condition that affects his movement, but it has not hindered his talent on the course.

Despite playing with 30-year-old clubs, he consistently maintains an impressive two-handicap and has his eyes set on even bigger prizes.

Andrew, a former World No 1 disabled golfer himself, said: "We set up the charity to fund ourselves to try to give the likes of Barry a good start next year. We saw that talent and wanted to give him the opportunity to chase the world No 1 title."



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## Breaking barriers

Sporting Wallsend opens UK's first Busy School to re-engaged youth.

**A powerful new education initiative is launching in the North East as Sporting Wallsend teams up with international social enterprise The BUSY Group to open the UK's first BUSY School — a pioneering alternative education model designed to re-engage young people who are struggling in mainstream education.**

This bold partnership brings together the deep-rooted community legacy of Wallsend Boys Club — renowned globally for producing footballing legends and transforming lives through sport — with the proven educational expertise of The BUSY Group, which has delivered successful alternative learning pathways for over 15 years in Australia and New Zealand.

Starting this Autumn, Key Stage 4 students (aged 14–16) who are at risk of falling out of mainstream education will be offered a bespoke two-day-a-week programme, based at the Sporting Wallsend community hub. The BUSY School model combines vocational learning with trauma-informed mentoring, individual wellbeing support,

and practical qualifications — all tailored to meet each learner's needs and potential.

"This is about more than just education. It's about rebuilding confidence, sparking purpose, and creating real pathways into employment, training or further education. We're proud to be launching this initiative with such an iconic and trusted organisation as Sporting Wallsend," said John Welch, Director of Education from The BUSY Group.

The curriculum will focus on vocational exploration, including qualifications aligned to local employment opportunities, and enrichment activities like the FA-accredited Playmaker Award — connecting students directly to the club's sporting roots. The programme is further strengthened by wraparound health and wellbeing support from Health2Employment (H2E), part of the BUSY Group UK, and local support from respected community partners Family Gateway and Power Through Sport.

With school absence rates at historic highs and over 15,000 UK pupils now in alternative provision — a number that rose by more than 20% in the past year alone

— the need for responsive, meaningful education alternatives has never been greater.

John Percival, General Manager at Wallsend Boys Club commented: "We're seeing a growing number of young people who are simply not thriving in traditional school environments. Through this model, we're offering a lifeline — a way for them to reconnect with their education, their community, and their future. We have a track record when it comes to helping young people believe in themselves.

We're urging Local Authorities, schools, PRU's, community figures and education advisors to contact us for more information about this brilliant new initiative."

The programme which launches this Autumn, marks the start of an ambitious long-term vision. Future plans include developing a two-year post-16 vocational pathway, helping young people aged 16–19 successfully bridge the gap between education and employment.

This collaboration represents a powerful blend of global expertise and local heart. The BUSY Group's innovative model meets the trusted community ethos of Wallsend Boys Club, whose motto "More Than Football" reflects their unwavering commitment to transforming young lives — both on and off the pitch.

**For more information contact:**  
**John Percival, General Manager, WBC:**  
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## Plans unveiled for £30m Sir Bobby Robson Foundation funded Cancer Institute

Plans have been unveiled for the proposed Sir Bobby Robson Institute, a £30m cancer research and treatment facility next to the Northern Centre for Cancer Care at the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle.

Construction is being funded by The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation, part of Newcastle Hospitals Charity, and for the first time images and detailed plans of the proposed building are now available.

Part of Newcastle Hospitals, the proposed institute would pioneer more ground-breaking innovation in cancer treatment and would significantly increase the number of clinical trials available for patients across the North East, north Cumbria and North Yorkshire.

Plans have been submitted this week and, if planning permission is granted, construction is scheduled to begin in spring next year, with the opening planned in 2028.

A hugely significant £20m has already been raised by Sir Bobby Robson Foundation supporters that will be used to fund the project and a fundraising campaign is set to be launched to raise the final £10m needed.

Sir Bobby's son, Mark Robson, is one of 122 Sir Bobby Robson Foundation fundraisers currently preparing for Sunday's Great North Run and he thinks plans for the new institute will be putting a spring in everyone's step.

Mark says: "I'm looking forward to joining all the Foundation runners on Sunday and I'm sure, for every one of us, news about these plans being submitted will motivate us all the way to South Shields."

"The Sir Bobby Robson Institute is only a possibility because of all the fundraising that's come before and everyone involved with Dad's Foundation is thrilled we can now share the exciting plans for the institute."

"If we're successful, it would be a gamechanger in terms of cancer research and treatment in this region."

The new institute would bring together the current Sir Bobby Robson Cancer Trials Research Centre at the Northern Centre for Cancer Care and the hospital's cancer and blood disorders (oncology and haematology) research team.

While its catchment area would cover around 3.5million people living locally, the work there could benefit cancer patients around the globe.



## Teesside Hospice sees 16.4% increase in referrals

Middlesbrough-based Teesside Hospice has seen a 16.4% increase in referrals in just 12 months.

The hospice, which is located on Northgate Road, currently provides care for around 3,000 people in the Tees Valley. Between April 2024 and April 2025, demand grew significantly across all services, with over 1,800 referrals made towards its 10-bed In-Patient Unit, bereavement counselling service, Wellbeing Centre and Lymphoedema Clinic.

The increase comes as the hospice launches its new strategy, which refines its key goals for the next three years.

CEO Mike Thornicroft said: "We expect that this number of referrals will only continue to grow over the coming years due to the UK's ageing population, and so the launch of our new strategy means we can anticipate and respond to the needs of people with life limiting illnesses and their families."

"We've been putting a lot of thought into our future and our key objectives across the hospice and while we've always been working towards these goals in many ways, they've been refined with each of our core teams so that we all have a clear vision in mind as we move forwards."

The hospice is now focusing on its four core objectives: everyone matters and to hold people at its core; reach more people by developing services; aim for excellence in all the hospice does; and be the charity of choice for donors, staff and volunteers.

And the organisation is geared up to expand its offering to ensure it can continue to meet this increased demand – but it can only do so with the continued support of the community.

"Under these new objectives, we want to keep growing so that we have more capacity and ability to support the growing number of people who need us," Mike continued.

"But as the need for our services rises so do our operational costs, and it currently costs around £18,500 each day to run the hospice. Less than 30% is funded through statutory sources, so we really do depend on the support of donors and fundraisers."

"We're here for everyone across Teesside and we're not going anywhere, but we need the help of the community more than ever. As well as meeting the needs of the growing number of people requiring our services, we're also growing our offering to ensure we can reach even more people."

"Our vision is to ensure local people get the very best care at end of life – and as our referrals and service use grows, so does our drive for reaching and maintaining this goal."



## WORLD HOMELESS DAY, 10<sup>TH</sup> OCTOBER

CHANGING LIVES

The number of people estimated to be sleeping rough on a single night in the North East last autumn was 4,667. This has risen for the third year in a row, increasing 20% since 2023.

Whether you're a local business, school, community group or individual, there are so many ways you can support our life changing work across the region, from fundraising and volunteering, to simply helping us spread the word. Scan the QR code and help us make a difference this World Homelessness Day.





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**The Bubble Foundation** is the charity connected to Ward 3 at The Great North Children's' Hospital. Supporting children with life threatening immune deficiencies. Restoring immune systems, rebuilding lives.

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# Charity of the month...



## Oasis Community Housing

A homelessness charity delivering crisis services and supported accommodation for men, women and young people across the North East and South East England. Here, Northern Insights speaks with their Corporate Partnerships Manager, Sophie Barker.

### Why was the charity formed?

Oasis Community Housing was formed in 1984 by a group of young Christians living in Gateshead, who were shocked by the levels of homelessness they were seeing and wanted to do something to help. They raised enough money to buy a house, which gave a home to five young women. Today we support around 1,300 men, women and young people, but our mission remains the same: to reignite hope and a future for everyone facing homelessness.



L-R: Sophie Barker with Rev Canon Kate Bottley, Iain Nairns MBE and Nick Salisbury



### Which area do you cover?

We work across the North East, including Gateshead, South Tyneside and Sunderland, as well as having projects across Southwark, south London.

### What type of fundraising events do you have?

We run an incredible mix of charity events each year. Coming up, our 'Giving a Home' Launch at The Alchemist (23 October) is a relaxed event, offering a great way to find out more about how you could get involved in our Christmas appeal.

Back by popular demand, is Gingerbread Street – our gingerbread building competition where businesses help us create a tiny confectionary community. Because solving homelessness is about more than just a roof overhead. Gingerbread Street is now open for entries, with tickets available for an exclusive after-hours unveiling of the exhibition at The Biscuit Factory on 2 December.

A highlight is always our annual Black and Gold Ball; it's a really special evening, where we thank our amazing corporate partners and present our Shared Value Awards. We also love our challenge events. This year's Great North Runners were phenomenal, and our Oasis Cup five-a-side football tournament remains a great team-building day for local businesses.

### Who are your trustees and patrons?

Our board of trustees bring experience from social, political and community backgrounds. They play a valued, active role in guiding the charity, ensuring we achieve the greatest impact for people facing homelessness.

We're also very proud to have the BBC's The Reverend Canon Kate Bottley as a Patron. Her commitment and generosity are invaluable in helping to raise awareness of our life-changing work.

### What have been your proudest moments so far?

I've been volunteering for Oasis Community Housing for years, but I'm really proud to have joined the staff team in May this year. I've already been so inspired by the dedication of colleagues, our volunteers, supporters and corporate partners, and their shared goal to help others find a place to call home.

I heard one young woman, who used to live in one of our projects, say, "Whenever I think of love, I think of Oasis. They gave me a foundation, and a hope to be where I am today." She now runs her own business. Oasis' work really is life changing. It's a real privilege to be part of a charity that walks alongside people in their toughest moments, helping them rediscover hope and rebuild their future.



### What are you currently working on?

We're about to launch our Giving a Home Christmas appeal. Our services are reporting rising numbers of people coming through our doors, so we really need as many people as possible to get involved, to make a tangible difference for someone facing homelessness this winter.

### What does the future hold?

Sadly, homelessness is on the rise. And so is the level of need. We know 96% of people have suffered trauma such as child neglect, abuse, addiction or bereavement on their journey into homelessness.

Yet we remain hopeful - with a new CEO soon to be announced, who will lead the charity through our next chapter. As a team, we are also exploring fresh ideas for events, partnerships and fundraising initiatives to help evolve and expand our work, driven by the belief that everyone deserves a home and hope for a future.

### How can people get involved?

There are many so ways to get involved! Our Giving a Home appeal offers fantastic partnership opportunities for businesses – and we're excited to be involved with Big Give Week again, meaning every single donation will be doubled between 2 and 9 December.

Or you could 'purchase a plot' to build on Gingerbread Street, sign up to amplify our appeal by becoming a Giving a Home Hero or host a Christmas Jumper Day at work. We'd love to hear from you!

### For more information, visit our website:

[www.oasiscommunityhousing.org/workplace](http://www.oasiscommunityhousing.org/workplace) or contact Sophie directly at [Sophie.Barker@oasiscommunityhousing.org](mailto:Sophie.Barker@oasiscommunityhousing.org)





# Living in a bubble

The Bubble Foundation supports children with life threatening immune disorders. They are based on Ward 3 at the Great North Children's Hospital in Newcastle. Children are admitted to the ward for a bone marrow or stem cell transplant.



Harriett Platt, 10, was a patient on the 'bubble' unit

**Whilst on the ward they live in isolation, with a parent or carer, in a protective 'bubble' to keep them safe from infection, often for many months. It's tough. We aim to give every young superhero the best chance of recovery and we hope to make life a little easier for families navigating the trauma of a poorly child.**

They're often going through a long and complex treatment. We strongly believe in the power of play, so we provide toys, activities and games, which are safe for them. We provide comfort and support to families on the ward, and we fund cutting-edge research, which has wide-reaching impacts far beyond our "bubble", continuing to improve survival rates and give little lives around the world the chance to thrive.

In September the charity launched a new website, logo and resources for families, with a party hosted at St James's Park.

Among those attending was Sophie from Swansea, whose son Jasper, 7, was treated on Ward 3 for a life-threatening condition – Activated PI3K Delta Syndrome (APDS). APDS affects the immune system, leaving it vulnerable to infections. Jasper's dad was identified as a suitable stem cell donor, and Jasper continues to make a positive recovery.

Sophie said: "We spent five months in Newcastle while Jasper had his treatment. Being away from our family in Swansea was really tough, and living on the 'Bubble' unit was an experience that's hard to put into words. What made a huge difference was the support we had through the charity. They make families like ours, feel less isolated, and these new resources will mean even more caregivers can find comfort and strength when they need it most."

Also attending was Helen and her daughter Harriett, who was diagnosed with Severe Combined Immunodeficiency (SCID) as a baby. After months staying on Ward 3, Harriett underwent a ground-breaking second transplant which saved her life.

Helen said: "The care, dedication and research supported by the Bubble Foundation quite literally saved Harriett's life. We spent 11 months away from home in Newcastle and without a re-transplant for a severe liver complication, Harriett would almost certainly have died.

Now 10 years old, Harriett said: "I don't remember much from when I was little, but I love hearing my story and knowing how many people helped me. I just want other children to get the same chance I did."

## Charity of the Year – Newcastle-Gateshead Run 2026 – Sponsorship Opportunity

We are thrilled to be the Charity of the Year for the Newcastle-Gateshead Marathon, Half Marathon, and 10k on 3rd May 2026. This iconic race, now in its fourth year, takes in Gateshead Millennium Bridge, Sage Gateshead, BAL TIC, Tyne Bridge, Swing Bridge finishing in Gateshead International Stadium.

This is a fantastic opportunity to raise awareness and vital funds for the Bubble Foundation. To gain the maximum benefit that we can from the event we are seeking a corporate partner (or partners) to help cover the £5,000 partnership cost, in full or in part.

## Partner with Purpose

If you can help, your business will be prominently associated with the event and its communications. Your logo will be on the charity race t-shirts and you will receive some free race places. Join us in championing children with life-threatening immune conditions and making a powerful impact in 2026. Get in touch to discuss the options.

**Joy Dyson, Fundraising Manager**  
[bubble.foundation@nhs.net](mailto:bubble.foundation@nhs.net)  
 07760 393187

[www.bubblefoundation.org.uk](http://www.bubblefoundation.org.uk)





Jasper with Ward 3 Staff during his stay



# Turning Teesside Purple to provide better end of life care

A local hospice is calling on businesses across the region to help turn Teesside purple in support of the care it provides.

**Teesside Hospice is launching its first Turning Teesside Purple event this November, inviting workplaces to join its team in wearing purple and raising money to provide compassionate care for those facing a terminal illness in Teesside.**

The hospice, which is located in Linthorpe, Middlesbrough, supports over 3,000 people across the Tees Valley each year, offering services for patients and families through its In-Patient Unit, Wellbeing Centre, Lymphoedema Clinic and bereavement counselling sessions.

It costs around £6.5 million annually to run these services, and Teesside Hospice receives less than 30% of this amount in statutory funding, meaning it relies on fundraising events and donations to fulfil its promise of ensuring the people of Teesside have access to better end of life care.

Turning Teesside Purple is the latest launch in its events calendar and will take place on Friday 21st November.

Community and Events Manager Tilly Roberts said: "Whether it's a pair of socks, a bold shirt, or a full head-to-toe look, by swapping your usual workwear for purple you can raise vital funds for our hospice. It's a really fun way for businesses to do something good for a local cause."

The hospice is asking each person to donate £1 to take part and consider other ways to raise money on the day, through bake sales, blind cards, donation tins or games and quizzes.

Participating workplaces will receive a Turning Teesside Purple pack, filled with ideas, posters and tips for fundraising.



The team are also on hand to answer any of your questions and support your event, and will be handing out prizes for the best purple outfits on the day.

Tilly continued: "We're always aiming to offer fun, easy and accessible ways for people and businesses to get involved in fundraising, and Turning Teesside Purple is the perfect feel-good event.

If your workplace can raise even £50, you could pay for a 2-hour bereavement counselling session, helping young people and adults navigate loss and grief. Or with £100, you can fund 4 hours of specialist care on our In-Patient Unit, allowing us to offer patients care, comfort and dignity while coping with a life-limiting illness.

We saw a 16.4% increase in our referrals from April 2024-March 2025, and statutory funding simply doesn't keep up with that growing demand. According to Marie Curie's reports, 1 in 4 people are dying

without access to proper end of life care – we need to change that.

We're growing our services and reaching more people than ever so that we can achieve this vision, but we can't do that without the help of the community supporting us.

Every penny makes a difference to our cause. Let's turn Teesside – and beyond – purple and support better end of life care together."

**To find out more about Teesside Hospice and register for Turning Teesside Purple, visit [www.teessidehospice.org/events/turning-teesside-purple](http://www.teessidehospice.org/events/turning-teesside-purple)**



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# People *Doing* Good...

## Mindfulness takes root in Leazes Park

Mindful Therapies, led by Rachel Jones Wild and Mark Sidney, celebrated the relaunch of their Creative Wellbeing Project with a vibrant, community-focused event in the heart of Newcastle's Leazes Park – marking "Love Parks Week" in style.

Held at the Mindful Garden, tucked behind the Tower Café, the free event welcomed participants of all ages to explore mindfulness through creativity, connection, and nature. From mindful gardening and hands-on arts and crafts to a cooking session and shared lunch, the day provided a meaningful opportunity to unwind, reconnect, and nourish both body and mind.

The Creative Wellbeing Project, delivered by Mindful Therapies (the trading name of Mindfulness Based Therapies C.I.C.), is generously supported by the National Lottery. The initiative offers regular, accessible sessions focused on mindfulness through creative practices such as gardening, art, and mindful cooking.

"It was beautiful to see people coming together in nature to share



creativity, food, and a sense of calm," said Rachel Jones Wild. "Leazes Park has become a real haven for our community, and we're thrilled to relaunch the Creative Wellbeing Project in such a special place."

Mindful Therapies are at British India House, 15 Carlisle Square, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 6UF. [www.mindfultherapies.org.uk](http://www.mindfultherapies.org.uk)



## £500k project brings schools and families closer than ever

Wallsend is set for a major boost after the Wallsend Children's Community was awarded an incredible £499,901 from the National Lottery Community Fund. The money will fund a brand-new five-year project designed to bring schools and families closer together – recognising parents as lifelong educators and strengthening community support for local children.

Co-designed with local parents and carers, the project will focus on building stronger connections between families, schools and the wider community, creating a real sense of belonging and shared purpose. It marks a cultural shift towards greater inclusion, where parents and children are seen as active partners in shaping their learning journey.

With 17 schools and over 11,500 children aged 0–19 in the area, the project has the potential to make a lasting, long-term impact.

The Wallsend Children's Community already works alongside schools, families and local organisations to listen to community voices, use data and evidence, and design services that better reflect local needs.

Paula McCormack, Chief Executive of Wallsend Children's Community, said: "Wallsend has a strong tradition of working together. For instance, Wallsend schools have been meeting every term for over a decade to help the children of Wallsend. The Wallsend Children's Community has also been teaming up with local parents for the past six years. This fund will help us create a network for parents across Wallsend schools, bringing the skills, knowledge and care of both parents and schools together in the principle of a Village Raising Children together."

## Northumberland Freemason takes on 200-mile ultramarathon challenge for Alzheimer's Research

A Northumberland Freemason and seasoned ultramarathon runner, Guy Smith of Gosforth, has done his toughest challenge yet – running 200 miles to every Masonic Centre across the Province of Northumberland – to raise vital funds for Alzheimer's Research UK and he did it in just four days!

Guy, well-known among his peers for combining his love of Freemasonry with endurance running, set off from Berwick Masonic Hall immediately after attending a lodge meeting there. Dressed in his running kit, he began a four-day journey visiting each centre in turn, following a zig-zag route down the Northumberland coast, through North Tyneside, along the Tyne Valley, and finally finishing at Haltwhistle.

"I'd mapped it at around 197 miles, but with fatigue, navigation challenges, and the inevitable detours, it broke the 200-mile mark," said Guy. "I was running through day and night, grabbing power naps but it's been worthwhile."



His mission had a deeply personal motivation. In January, Guy lost his mother to Alzheimer's, a disease that affects nearly one million people in the UK.

"Mum touched so many lives and losing her so quickly to Alzheimer's was devastating. Anyone who has witnessed it knows how cruel it is," said Guy. "That's why I've chosen Alzheimer's Research UK as the beneficiary of this challenge."





Sam Hook

RJM Photography

## Why direction is better than speed

Autumn is the perfect time to pause, plan, and refocus to give your business direction, clarity, and momentum for the months ahead.

**As summer draws to a close and we step into the colder months, there's often a feeling of fresh energy and new beginnings. Diaries start to fill up again, and businesses regain momentum after the quieter months.**

For many business owners, autumn can feel like a second 'New Year' and a great time to reset, refocus, and plan.

But before diving headfirst into the busyness of day-to-day operations, it's worth pausing for a moment to reflect and remember direction is better than speed.

So many business owners get caught up working in their business that it can leave little time or energy to step back and ask the bigger questions:

- Where is my business heading?
- Is my time aligned with my long-term goals?
- What opportunities are there available for me right now?
- What do I need to change?

Working on your business means creating the space to reflect, review, and plan strategically. It's about lifting your head above the day-to-day to see the bigger picture and clarify your direction to ensure that all the effort you're putting in is moving you where you want to go.

Think of it like setting out on a car journey. You could be driving at full speed, but if you haven't put your Sat Nav on, you may end up miles away from where you intended. A little time spent reviewing your route makes every mile more purposeful.

### The benefits of stepping back

When you deliberately carve out time to work on your business, a few things happen:

- **Clarity** – You rediscover what matters most and where you want to go.
- **Focus** – You identify priorities and stop wasting energy on distractions.
- **Confidence** – With a plan in place, you feel more certain about decisions.
- **Momentum** – Ironically, slowing down to think often accelerates progress later.

### Creating space to think differently

To give business owners space for this process, I run 'Work on your business' sessions to give you the opportunity to gain perspective and leave with a clear, practical strategy and action points.

Whether you're a solo business owner who wants to refine your vision, or a team leader aiming to align your team around shared goals, these sessions create the structure and accountability to move forward with confidence.

### Your autumn challenge

This month, before your diary fills up completely, block out just half a day to think about your business. Ask yourself:

- What's working well?
- What's not working well?
- What's draining my time and energy?
- What do I want to achieve by December?

Remember—direction is better than speed. When you're clear about where you're heading, every action becomes more purposeful.

### Why work with me?

With 25+ years' experience in running a range of companies including a PR and marketing firm and restaurant chain, I combine my business and coaching experience to help you get the best from these sessions.

I'm also the Expert Coach in Residence for the North East BIPC, Northumberland Small Business Service and Northumbria University's Business Start-up Incubator and help entrepreneurs across the region to develop and grow their businesses.

### Work on your business sessions

If you'd like help creating clarity for your business, please get in touch. You can opt for a half or full day session to step back, reflect, and leave with a clear vision, direction, and action plan. It could be the most productive time you spend this season.

**Sam Hook**

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*"We laugh together, we comfort one another. It's absolutely amazing."* A Whitley Bay resident.

Our Wallsend home has been specifically designed to enhance the lives of people living with dementia, with specially-trained staff seeing to our residents' specific needs. The home provides residents with lots of independence, features spacious grounds - including a special reminiscence area - and even has a hair salon, cafe, library and pub!

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● [www.eothenhomes.org.uk](http://www.eothenhomes.org.uk)

● 0191 281 9100



# The future of work: Building skills to thrive

Last month I spoke about the rise of the frontier firm and the human skills we need to nurture to lead teams of agents and humans. Yet, across my clients and industry, I see dissonance.

**Some are leaning back from AI, others are leaning in and running with it. Firms are hiring less, changing who they hire, and actively considering where technology can replace human effort – a move toward agentification.**

Recently, a senior leader told me, “I reckon 80% of what we do now will be replaced by AI in 3 years.” I tend to agree, but we must acknowledge how this lands. Some people are excited, seeing potential and new ways of working. Others are fearful, worried that the skills and identity they’ve invested so much in will vanish, leaving them jobless and irrelevant.

Having people in this space of fear isn’t helpful. Our brains crave safety and security, and when we lack it, the limbic system, our fight, flight, or freeze mechanism takes over, catastrophising the future. In this state, people become paralysed, make rash decisions, or retreat into denial; the opposite of what’s needed.

But what if there was a third way? The world isn’t binary. What if, instead of losing people to AI, we harnessed and developed the human skills that enable them to thrive? This will mean reskilling, exploring roles we may not have imagined, and accepting that adaptation is non-negotiable.

Let’s remember we’ve been here before. The 20’s is the decade of change in the last four centuries from a technological perspective. Electricity, motor and jet engines revolutionised the 1920s; enabling manufacturing at scale, automation, the five day working week, and a whole host of new industries. AI will do the same – we adapted then, we can again – so let’s start learning some lessons, and getting ahead of the curve.



Annabel Graham

The World Economic Forum report from 2025, cites the following skills as being those most needed as we move into the AI enabled world of work 2030:

- **Analytical thinking** – to enable interpretation of data and work strategically
- **Resilience, flexibility & agility** – to withstand change and pivot
- **Creative thinking** - 4th most essential, and rising in importance
- **Leadership & social influence** - Critical for collaboration at every level

How then are you working with these core skills, and building them into your employee and leadership development offering. People won’t acquire them by magic, and you can’t buy them all in.

Ask yourself:

- Is your 3-5 year strategy just a bunch of numbers, or is there a robust people plan that has been created future-back that will enable you to deliver that future growth and trajectory?
- How are you building these skills into your workforce development plan?
- Are you building your succession plan

and enabling your leaders with coaching skills to develop their people, and thinking about the roles you’ll need in the future rather than the ones you need now?

How do we bring people on the journey? Enable them to swap disciplines, build capability and capacity and make sure they are skills ready.

This isn’t a “nice to have.” It’s basic strategic planning. Recruiting only for the structure you have today won’t get you to where you want to be in five years. As Marshall Goldsmith reminds us, “*what got you here won’t get you there.*”

Having the people, capabilities and structure to be future ready has to start now. It should have started long ago, but the next best place to start if it hasn’t, is now. What are you waiting for?

**Annabel is an Executive and Team Coach, Leadership Facilitator and Coach Supervisor. If you would value a thinking space to put this all in place, why not reach out to Annabel for a chat via LinkedIn, [annabel@successfultraining.co.uk](mailto:annabel@successfultraining.co.uk), or visit [www.successfultraining.co.uk](http://www.successfultraining.co.uk)**





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# The Recruiter

*In the latest of this popular series of features, Michael Grahamslaw spoke to...*

## Ashleigh Wright

*Managing Director, Westray Recruitment Group.*

### **What inspired you to pursue a career in Recruitment?**

I don't think I was ever inspired but from the age of 16 I started working at Westray in my school half terms as well as any free periods I had whilst in sixth form. As I didn't get the grades needed to go to University I joined the business full time and quickly realised I really enjoyed working and the independence it gave me.

After a very enjoyable 17 years, within a variety of roles, I took over from my Mum Maureen as Managing Director in 2024.

### **What qualities do you look for when building your own team?**

I made a conscious decision early on not to recruit anyone already working within the industry. I much prefer to train, mould and develop people and they must have a spark, show passion and have a real willingness to learn.

### **How do you personally define success for your business and for yourself as a leader?**

Success for me is defined by having a happy team who are energised and fulfilled in their roles. I am constantly looking to reinvest back into the business and give them continued opportunities. It is equally important to have satisfied clients and candidates also.

### **What has been your proudest achievement as Managing Director so far?**

We have recently won a £2 million contract which I'm very proud of and details of which we will unveil in due course. It was also immensely satisfying for my Mum to let me takeover. As a single mother with three children she started the business from scratch and it was a huge thing for her to step back.

### **What do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities shaping the recruitment industry in the North East?**

The last few months have been very tough with companies seeing rises in National Insurance and the national living wage. This has led to some companies

cutting staff. However this has given us the chance to work ever closer with our clients (some of whom have been within us for 25 years) and embed ourselves within their business.

### **Where do you see the business in three to five years?**

The obvious thing to say is that we'd like further growth and scale. However most importantly I'd like to continue to do what we are doing successfully now but even better. Simplistic but true!

### **How do you ensure your firm stands out in a competitive recruitment market?**

We really try to make ourselves visible and are active members of organisations such as NOF and The Entrepreneurs Forum. We also do a lot of our own marketing and client events and benefit regularly from referrals.

### **Who are your Heroes and Mentors?**

Naturally my Mum who shaped me as a leader. Also the simply brilliant Dr David Cliff, an incredible man who has coached me both personally and professionally throughout my career.

### **What advice would you give to your 18 year old self?**

Study harder for your A Levels! I always wanted to be a social worker but as previously mentioned, I didn't get the required grades to get in to Uni. That being said, I absolutely love my career and couldn't see me doing anything differently now.

### **How do you like to unwind?**

I am a trustee of Newcastle Dog and Cat Shelter and Impact Family Services, both fantastic charities which I have a real connection to. I love walking my two dogs which gives me good exercise and time for reflection. Football and holidays are a real passion also.

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



“

*...Study  
harder  
for your  
A Levels!...*





## The curtain rises: Newcastle welcomes Hotel Gotham

In October, the lights go up on Hotel Gotham Newcastle, the city's newest five-star address and a venue already sparking whispers of glamour, decadence, and A-list allure.

**Inviting guests into a world where art-deco grandeur meets modern boutique luxury and housed in the transformed 1920s fire station on Pilgrim Street, Gotham is a brand that doesn't do subtle. Manchester's outpost has long been a magnet for celebrities from Robbie Williams to Jennifer Hudson, and now it's Newcastle's turn to take center stage.**

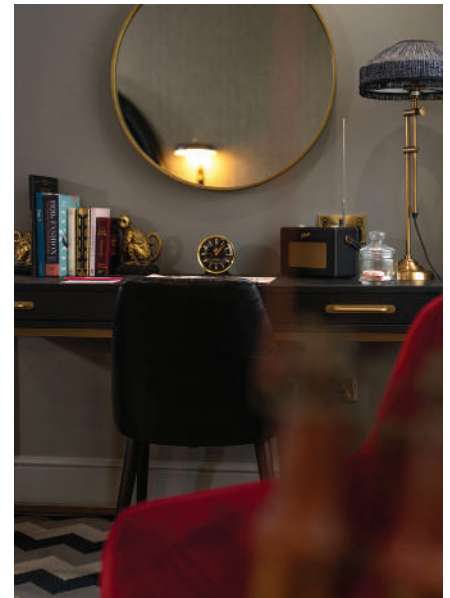
This isn't just another luxury hotel opening. It's a statement. A landmark in our city's ongoing evolution from industrial powerhouse to cultural capital, and a reminder that Newcastle can hold its own on the global hospitality map.

Step inside Hotel Gotham and you'll find the kind of opulence that feels purpose-built for drama. Fifty-seven lavish bedrooms. Velvet-lined corridors. A restaurant and bar that welcomes both guests and locals - and, hidden away like a whispered secret, Club Brass - the private members' club that promises a guest list of tastemakers and changemakers.

Club Brass is also where business might just start to look a little different in the North East. Beyond the velvet booths and signature cocktails lies a more practical perk: corporate memberships, designed for nearby businesses looking for a space to meet, entertain, and impress. Think refined, creative, and quietly spectacular.. For companies seeking something with a little more flair, Hotel Gotham also offers corporate room rates, giving business travellers and local firms a five-star alternative for client stays, team retreats, or leadership offsites - where the Wi-Fi comes with a side of wow-factor.

Hotel Gotham itself calls it "a show about to begin," and that's exactly what it feels like: Newcastle debuting a new role as the backdrop for a more cosmopolitan, more daring story.

Every great performance needs a leading act. In Hotel Gotham Newcastle, that role belongs to David Kennedy, one of the North East's most celebrated chefs. With over



40 years' experience, from fine dining to regional landmarks like Brasserie Black Door, Kennedy is now set to direct the culinary experience at Siren, Gotham's signature restaurant.

Expect menus that are seasonal, sustainable, and emotionally resonant. Dishes that sing of North Shields' seafood and the rolling pastures of Northumberland. Plates that don't just satisfy, but connect - to place, to heritage, and to the people producing our food. In a world that sometimes prizes presentation over substance, that feels like the kind of culinary artistry that Newcastle deserves - and a welcome addition to other North East dining institutions.

What excites me most about Hotel Gotham's arrival isn't just the grandeur, the mystique, the unabashed indulgence or the celebrity sparkle. It's what it signals for Newcastle, for the North East. A city confident enough to embrace the theatrical. A city willing to demand the kind of experiences once reserved for London or Manchester.

Luxury here in the North East isn't about exclusion. It's about ambition. About saying Newcastle is a stage worthy of world-class performances - in food, in hospitality, in culture.

In October, the curtain rises. The question is, are you ready to take your seat?

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





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Sue Parkinson, North East Enterprise Agencies Ltd (NEEAL) and Paul McEldon, North East BIC

## Turning Dreams into Enterprises

Nearly 700 start-ups spark growth across the North East.

**The entrepreneurial spirit is thriving in the North East, as almost 700 residents took the leap to launch their own business over the past year, thanks to the support of a powerful regional partnership.**

A collective of 15 enterprise support organisations – including the North East BIC and coordinated by North East Enterprise Agencies Ltd (NEEAL) – has been working tirelessly to nurture ambition across the North East Combined Authority (NECA) area. Together, they've helped hundreds of people transform bright ideas into thriving enterprises, forecasting an impressive £42m in first-year turnover and drawing nearly £7m in personal investment.

What makes this wave of start-ups particularly remarkable is its diversity. More than half of the new businesses were founded by women, well above the national average of 19%. A further 15% were set up by people living with disabilities or long-term health challenges, while 7% were launched by entrepreneurs from Black and minority ethnic communities.

Paul McEldon OBE, Chief Executive of the North East BIC and Chair of NEEAL, says the results underline the strength



Isobel and Natasha Hair, Inspire Studios

of collaboration: "This is a fantastic example of how partnership working can make business support more accessible and impactful for everyone. By bringing together organisations from Berwick to Barnard Castle, we've been able to provide tailored, face-to-face guidance to people in communities right across the region – and the results speak for themselves."

At the heart of this initiative is a network of over 50 experienced business advisers, each offering hands-on expertise to guide budding entrepreneurs through every stage of their journey. The programme, supported by investment from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF), is designed to make enterprise an option for anyone with drive and determination, regardless of background.

### Case Study: Inspire Studios, Sunderland

Among the hundreds of success stories is Inspire Studios, a community dance school launched by Sunderland sisters Natasha and Isobel Hair. Lifelong dance enthusiasts, the pair turned their passion into a thriving business after spotting the perfect city-centre space for their dream studio.

Supported by the Enterprising Sunderland programme, they worked closely with North East BIC adviser Hina Joshi to bring their vision to life. The studio now offers

an inclusive timetable – from baby ballet and tap to adult classes, private lessons and acro sessions – welcoming people of all ages and abilities.

"The support we've received from the BIC has been nothing short of incredible," said Isobel. "As first-time business owners, we had the enthusiasm but no idea where to start with the business side. Thanks to their guidance, we've turned our dream into a fully operating dance school."

For Natasha, the venture carries extra meaning. "2023 was a really difficult year for myself as I suffered a serious illness. So, when the opportunity arose to open our own studio, we jumped at the chance. It sparked the beginning of Inspire Studios, something we've dreamed of for as long as I can remember."

### Looking Ahead

The consortium's work proves that targeted, person-centred support can encourage more people to seize the opportunity of self-employment.

Paul McEldon is optimistic about what lies ahead: "Over the past 12 months we've shown that, with the right support, the North East can be a place where everyone feels empowered to start and grow a business. Whether you're a recent graduate, someone changing career, or a person with an idea you've nurtured for years, there's advice and expertise available locally to help make that vision a reality."

*Enterprising Sunderland is funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.*

**To find out more about the support available, visit [www.ne-bic.co.uk](http://www.ne-bic.co.uk)**



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## Work where dogs are part of the team

At Hoult's Yard, we're proud to be one of Newcastle's most dog friendly workspaces.

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Dr David Cliff

## Closing the Circle

Dr David Cliff explores the impact of poor succession planning on business.

**We don't like to think about it. We took the risks, developed the vision, built the business. We may not have had a meteoric growth that drew headlines, but we poured years of hard work, sincerity, and endeavour into creating something real. We employed people, scaled up, initiated change, always wrestling with that elusive question: When is it enough?**

Meteoric or modest, all businesses eventually face the same challenge: change. One of the most profound changes is the moment when the originators – the progenitors of the enterprise – decide to move on.

Many companies are started with an entrepreneurial intent to sell. But more often, the business is deeply personal. It reflects the founder's passions, skills, and a desire to uniquely shape their field.

The reality is that, after years – often decades – of committed effort, the time comes to move on. Sometimes it's a matter of health or retirement. Perhaps it's a longing to do something different – to pursue other ambitions. I've seen many businesses whose founders have multiple, unfulfilled agendas for decades.

Age and retirement issues are profound psychological transitions. At a certain

point, one has to acknowledge – however reluctantly – that there are fewer days ahead than behind. Physical decline may play a part, but so too does a waning sense of excitement for the familiar stimuli that once fueled entrepreneurial fires within.

Succession planning is closely tied to our existential awareness. We don't like to think about endings, so we push them out of sight. Our aversion to endings can mean succession plans are vague or nonexistent. Businesses can be left legally, structurally, and managerially unprepared for the day the founder steps away.

Founders tend to create businesses in their own image. Leadership styles, decision-making processes, and cultural norms are shaped by their personality and values. This makes transition doubly difficult: no successor will lead in exactly the same way.

For any organisation to thrive, it needs more robust, standardised systems of governance and management than was so on the founder's watch. That means formalising processes, clarifying responsibilities, and embedding operational standards long before successors are named. Ideally this involves culture change, resilience structuring, positioning talent, incentivization and communication to markets.

When succession is handled through an external sale or merger, founders may be asked to remain in a diminished role but with confused leadership identities – which can be damaging for all.

It is remarkable how many capable business owners neglect the personal side of succession planning. Without such provisions, transitions can become hurried, ill-conceived, and laden with unintended consequences. A poorly planned exit can sour what might otherwise have been a deeply fulfilling achievement.

For my clients, succession is a recurring agenda item. If they don't raise it, I do periodically. The emotions tied to endings are powerful. They can get swept under the carpet, creating unspoken blocks to practical preparation. Whether those blocks are structural, transactional, organisational, or purely personal, the effect is the same: the future becomes harder to navigate when it 'arrives'.

At Gedanken, we work with business owners to approach succession with sensitivity, realism, and foresight. We aim for outcomes that are genuinely win-win – allowing founders to step away with dignity and clarity, and ensuring those who remain have the structures, culture, and confidence to thrive.

We are always open for a thoughtful conversation on this subject. You may be surprised how much difference such a discussion can make.

**[gedanken.co.uk](http://gedanken.co.uk)**





Dr David Cliff

At Gedanken, we encourage leaders and entrepreneurs to think differently, it is not only about “thinking outside the box” but asking what the box is itself? Who built it? Why and whether it serves us well? We partner with leaders in organisations large and small who are serious about making meaningful change, grounded in vision, responsibility and great results.

***Book a 45-minute, no-obligation conversation where we guarantee at the very least you will take away some valuable insights.***



# Gedanken

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# Why Biodiversity should be on every business's radar

Environmental impact is becoming increasingly important for organisations looking to improve the efficiency of their business and reduce waste and costs.

**One aspect of environmental impact which still remains relatively unclear to businesses is biodiversity.**

However, biodiversity is rapidly becoming a business imperative. From legislative shifts like Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) to the growing power of green prescribing, protecting and enhancing nature is now interwoven with business sustainability, wellbeing, and even bottom lines.

**What is Biodiversity and why should you care?**

Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth and underpins everything we depend on: food, clean water, air quality, and climate regulation. Yet it's in crisis. Globally, wildlife populations have plummeted by nearly 70% since baselines were established in 1970, and the UK sits as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

Businesses are both impacted by and are contributors to biodiversity loss. Whether you're a landowner, supplier, builder, retailer, or office-based service, your operations rely on functioning ecosystems in one way or another.

**Speaking with Biodiverse Consulting**

One organisation leading the way in placing biodiversity at the heart of environmental action is Biodiverse Consulting. Their mission is to ensure that infrastructure and development projects meet compliance standards, as well as actively contributing to nature's recovery.

Founder and MD, Vicki Mordue, said, "We've reached a point where biodiversity can no longer be treated as an afterthought. It's an environmental issue with business implications affecting risk, reputation, and resilience. We help organisations see biodiversity not as a constraint, but as an opportunity to lead, innovate and create lasting value for both people and planet. We genuinely believe businesses and biodiversity go hand in hand."



Jo Holmes

**Enter Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)**

BNG is now a legal requirement in England for most major new developments. Developers must leave the natural environment in a better state than they found it, ensuring a 10% biodiversity uplift through on- or off-site habitat creation.

Landowners, local authorities, ecologists, and corporate land managers are now being asked to demonstrate biodiversity improvements, often creating new revenue streams or risks for those who aren't prepared. Businesses can seize this as an opportunity to show leadership, partner with developers, and embed biodiversity into their environmental reporting.

Speaking about BNG, Vicki shared: "BNG is more than a policy, it's a mindset shift. It challenges us to think beyond compliance and ask how development can actively restore nature. When done well, it's not just good for biodiversity, it's good for communities, climate resilience, and long-term business strategy."

**The Business Benefits of Boosting Biodiversity**

Here are just a few ways engaging with biodiversity can connect to your commercial goals:

**Access to funding and contracts:** projects that enhance nature score well in social value assessments.

**Employee engagement and retention:** nature-based initiatives are a fantastic way to

involve staff in sustainability and wellbeing programmes.

**Customer and stakeholder trust:** biodiversity projects show tangible, place-based impact to consumers who want to support businesses that tread lightly on the planet.

**Climate resilience:** green infrastructure like living roofs or hedgerows help manage flood risk, reduce urban heat, and support pollinators, and future proof your business.

You don't need acres of land or a big budget. Start with simple steps like planting native wildflowers, shrubs or trees; or collaborate with wildlife trusts, conservation charities or local nature organisations.

Environmental accreditation frameworks like Investors in the Environment (iE) can help you identify nature-based actions relevant to your business, track impact, incorporate them into your environmental strategy, and ultimately receive recognition for your efforts.

Biodiversity isn't just a nature issue; it's a business one. By protecting and enhancing the ecosystems around us, we strengthen our communities, support our staff, and secure the natural foundations of our economy.

**Want to get started on your biodiversity journey or learn how iE can help?**  
Visit [genee.org.uk](https://www.genee.org.uk) or send us an email [jo@genee.org.uk](mailto:jo@genee.org.uk), or contact Vicki at [vicki.mordue@biodiverseconsulting.co.uk](mailto:vicki.mordue@biodiverseconsulting.co.uk)



# How the North East can attract and retain the next generation of talent



The North East has long been known for its proud industrial heritage, strong communities and resilience in the face of economic change.

Today, as new sectors such as renewable energy, digital technology, life sciences and advanced manufacturing continue to grow in the region, there is a pressing challenge facing employers: how to attract and retain the next generation of talent.

## What young professionals are looking for

Generation Z – those born from the late 1990s onwards – now make up a significant part of the workforce. Their priorities differ from those of previous generations. While salary is still important, research shows that younger employees place a premium on:

- **Flexibility:** A survey of over 3,000 UK workers shows that 46 per cent of Gen Z (age 16 to 24) consider flexitime among the most important aspects when applying for a job. More than three quarters say choice around when and where they work is vital.
- **Work life balance:** Nearly 70 per cent of Gen Z believe generating a good work life balance is more or equally important as a good salary.
- **Personal growth and development:** Young workers want clear pathways to learn new skills and to progress.

● **Values and purpose:** Companies that align with environmental and social values stand out.

## The North East advantage

The region already has much to offer. Housing and living costs are lower than many parts of the UK. For example the average house price in the North East is around £161,389, well below the national average of about £268,000.

Universities in Newcastle, Durham, Sunderland, Teesside and Northumbria produce highly skilled graduates every year many of whom would prefer to stay in the region if the right opportunities are available. In fact, the North East retains around 79.1 per cent of its masters graduates within their home region after leaving university.

Across the region more than 1,100 new companies were founded by staff and graduates of the North East's universities between 2014 and 2023 creating over 4,000 jobs in 2022-23. Graduates make up around 57 per cent of the workforce in the region.

## Bridging the gap between talent and opportunity

The challenge is ensuring these opportunities exist, and that businesses know how to position themselves to appeal to the next generation. For many employers, that means:

- **Rethinking recruitment messaging:** Highlighting flexibility, culture, and progression in job descriptions and interviews, not just pay and duties.
- **Investing in training and apprenticeships:** Creating pathways that

allow young people to learn, grow, and progress locally, without feeling they must leave the region for better opportunities.

● **Strengthening employer branding:** Showcasing values around sustainability, diversity, and social impact to resonate with younger workers.

## Retaining talent in the region

Retention is as important as attraction. Employers who listen to younger employees offer feedback cycles regular reviews progression paths and wellbeing initiatives rival those in more expensive regions. Mentorship programmes strong internal culture and transparent communication help build loyalty.

## A collaborative effort

At the end of the day retaining the next generation of talent in the North East will require collaboration between businesses universities local government and recruitment partners. Aligning opportunities with the aspirations of young professionals the region can ensure its growth sectors have the workforce they need to thrive.

At Collaborative Search, we see first-hand both the ambitions of the North East's emerging talent pool and the needs of employers who want to build sustainable teams. The opportunity is here for the region to lead the way in creating workplaces that not only attract young talent but keep it here helping the North East continue its story of resilience innovation and growth.

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



# Events are crucial for Newcastle's competitive edge and international prestige

*By Ben Whitfield, Director of Communications at NE1 Ltd*

**What a whirlwind summer. Newcastle has put on another amazing show for the more than 600,000 visitors who enjoyed a packed programme of major events at venues and locations across the city. From sport and music to culture and family-friendly activities, the range of events matched the impressive scale of what was delivered.**

**As part of NE1's tremendously popular Summer in the City programme, which itself attracted over 200,000 visitors this year, the scale of the activities and the growing appetite for events in the city still amazes me. And Newcastle has capacity and a healthy desire to grow the calendar still further with more events across more locations.**

As we start this month, we have a rare opportunity in the NE1 calendar to review what has been achieved and plan for the future. We are using this time to consider how to attract more events to the city, how we shape the calendar to complement existing events, and how to plug any gaps in the programme.

One thing is certain: we can be immensely proud of what has been achieved to date. Most recently, the city rolled out the red carpet and extended the annual warm Geordie welcome to the 60,000 runners who took part in this year's Great North Run as well as more than 10,000 young people and their families who ran the Junior and Mini Great North Run events. It's one of the most incredible weekends in the events calendar and showcases Newcastle to the world. Its passion, its people, and its generosity are all on display, and history is continually made when we host the world's largest half-marathon. The Great North Run weekend exemplifies the scale of Newcastle's ambitions and demonstrates that we can rival any city in hosting world-class events.

Sporting highlights like this, NE1's Dragon Boat racing on the Tyne, and the high-octane Red Bull Tyne Ride, brought the curtain down on Newcastle's packed summer schedule and from a sporting perspective, the next few months are also looking healthy. With Newcastle back in the Champions League, there will be an influx of European visitors for the four games at St. James' Park, and we know Newcastle will put on a great show to welcome visitors from across the continent.

Music also played a major part in attracting crowds and energising the city this summer with shows at St. James' Park, Exhibition Park, the Town Moor, and many other performance venues.

Sam Fender's sell-out homecoming gigs showed just how exceptional St. James' Park is for hosting events, whether sporting or musical. Its location in the heart of the city plays to our strengths. With top-class retail, hospitality, and leisure venues nearby, concert-goers can make a day, a night, a weekend, or even a whole week out of attending a show, delivering a multi-million pound boost to local businesses.

A stone's throw from the stadium lie Exhibition Park and the Town Moor. These open-air spaces are primed to host more festivals and gigs, having entertained major events this summer. Fontaines D.C., Lost Minds, and the Come Together festival were hugely successful events, with several sell-out nights, while long-standing cultural events like Mela and Pride returned to the city's streets drawing large crowds and achieving great success. These events, along with the Carabao Cup celebrations, turned the national and international spotlight on Newcastle, demonstrating its capacity to host open-air events to rival other UK cities and highlighting its impressive calendar of major happenings.

Music's role in this year's events calendar is notable and the success of the events this summer will be key to attracting more high-profile events in the future. Newcastle is already making its mark nationally, attracting glittering ceremonies like the MOBOs and the Mercury Music Prize for their first forays outside of London.

And, in another exciting move, a partnership between Generator Studios and the Glasshouse International Centre for Music is launching "Newcastle Gateshead Music City" to transform the region into a major hub for the music industry. Building on the region's musical talent, the partnership will create jobs, and drive tourism and investment. The ultimate aim is to gain UNESCO City of Music status alongside Liverpool, Belfast and Glasgow.

At NE1, we are constantly on the lookout for new events and opportunities. Our efforts around Christmas and New Year are prime examples of how we strive to make Newcastle the best in class.

In an increasingly competitive market where major cities compete for festive fun seekers, we have extended our Christmas offer and brought more seasonal fun into the heart of the city. Last year's dramatic increase in visitor numbers and positive feedback are clear signs that we are striking the right chord.

Events reflect Newcastle's ambition, creativity and capacity to deliver. They're powerful tools to increase visitor numbers, boost business and raise our cultural profile. As we look ahead to 2026 and beyond, we remain committed to curating an events calendar that entertains and elevates Newcastle's reputation as a world-class destination, whatever you're visiting for.

[www.newcastlene1ltd.com](http://www.newcastlene1ltd.com)





*Ben Whitfield*



# Profit with Purpose

By Kerrey Baker,  
Managing Director, Shared Interest.

In the world of business, the pursuit of profit has long been seen as the primary, if not the sole, objective.

**At Shared Interest, we take a different view; our primary objective is to empower people in remote and disadvantaged communities to engage in trade and sustain their livelihood. We put people at the centre of every decision we make. Shared Interest is deep rooted in Fair Trade Principles and reaching the smaller more marginalised groups who have no other access to financial support.**

The majority of our lending is to producer groups, who face huge challenges and uncertainty, the impact of climate change and inequalities in the global economic system make it a very difficult landscape to operate in.

At the heart of our organisation is a community of members united by a shared goal of investing in a fairer world. Our members provide the capital to enable us to lend, and they do so with very little expectation of a financial return on investment. Any profit we make is reinvested through the lending cycle.

Profit with purpose isn't about sacrificing financial gains for a good cause. It's about recognising that long-term profitability is intrinsically linked to the well-being of our communities and our planet. It's a holistic approach that views financial success as a consequence of creating value - for members, customers, employees, and society as a whole. Embracing this philosophy isn't just the right thing to do; it's the smart way to build a resilient and successful business, and we have a 35 year heritage to back that up.

Companies with a strong sense of purpose often attract and retain top talent. Employees, particularly younger generations, are increasingly seeking work that aligns with their values. When a company's mission goes beyond the bottom line, it fosters a more engaged and motivated workforce, leading to increased productivity and innovation.

It is thanks to the dedication of our teams, volunteers, members and donors that we are able to make trade justice a reality for many communities.

**Because when finance is fair, everyone benefits. Invest in change at [www.shared-interest.com](http://www.shared-interest.com)**



Kerrey Baker



# Divide & Conquer

The phrase “Divide et impera” - divide and conquer - was popularised by the Romans and has echoed through history as a ruthless but effective strategy.

**From empires to politics, it has been used to weaken opposition by setting people against one another. It's a tactic that exploits difference rather than celebrating it.**

Sadly, when I look at our great nation, and even closer to home here in our region, I see worrying signs of this very same approach creeping back into our daily lives. We live in a time when we are constantly encouraged to pick sides. Where nuance is dismissed. Where it seems you can no longer hold complementary views without being judged or labelled. Too often it is presented as either/or, black or white, Islam or Christianity, left or right.

My own journey has shown me the damage this polarisation can do. Growing up in Newcastle, I witnessed both the strength of community and the sting of division. I used to believe complaints about racism and discrimination were exaggerated, until lived experience and the stories of those around me made it impossible to ignore. These divides cut deep, and the consequences are not abstract. They affect livelihoods, opportunities, and wellbeing.

But there is another way. Now more than ever, we need inclusion by default. Not as a buzzword or a box-ticking exercise, but as a genuine commitment to valuing every person, every community, every contribution.

That's why I am so proud of what we've built through Asian Business Connexions (ABC). For nearly two decades, we have celebrated all communities, recognising the significant and sustained contributions of individuals and organisations often overlooked. On 9th October we will gather again for the ABC Awards, not just to applaud the headline successes, but to shine a light on the people behind the scenes who make a difference every day.



Ammar Mirza CBE

It is both a privilege and a joy to see so many people and organisations platformed through ABC. From small charities working quietly to transform lives, to entrepreneurs breaking barriers, to unsung heroes whose kindness changes communities. These are the stories that show what happens when we come together rather than allow ourselves to be divided.

The call to action is clear. We cannot allow ourselves to be conquered by division, or swayed by the noise of headline-grabbing views and statements designed to pit us against each other. We must resist the temptation of tribalism, and instead recognise that our differences are strengths, our diversity is an asset, and our unity is our power.

So let us return to where we began. Divide and conquer may have built empires in the past. But if we want to build a better future, here in the North East and across the UK, we must choose a different path: one of communication, collaboration, and

celebration. The Power of 3 methodology that I established whilst the proud visiting Professor of Innovation and Enterprise at Newcastle University back in 2015. An approach that has never been more needed.

For nearly two decades, ABC has shown what is possible when people unite across divides. That spirit is our greatest strength.

We cannot allow ourselves to be broken apart. We must rise above the noise, lift each other higher, and build bridges where others would build walls.

Not divided. Not conquered. Together — stronger, prouder, unstoppable.

**Ammar Mirza CBE is Chair & Founder of Asian Business Connexions, Executive Chair of the AmmarM Group, Honorary Colonel of 101 Regiment RA and holds various positions across the public and private sectors with a deep interest in Inclusion, Innovation and Internationalisation.**



# The Best of North East Asian Enterprise: Introducing This Year's ABC Award Finalists



Sarat Pediredla  
CEO Hedgehog Lab



Aman Chahal  
CEO, TaperedPlus



Saira Usman  
Founder, Usmaira Ltd



Cllr Ehtesham Haque  
First Muslim Mayor



Dalvir Singh Bajwa  
Consultant  
Dermatologist



Dr Shaz Wahid  
Executive Medical  
Director



Cllr Aaron Roy  
Hartlepool First BAME  
Councillor



Iqra Shahzadi  
Military Nurse  
British Army



Dr Birju Bartoli  
Chief Exec of  
Northumbria  
Healthcare NHS FT



Elswick Community  
Pool and Gym -  
Rashida Ahmed



Professor Muzlifah  
Haniffa  
Professor of  
Dermatology &  
Immunology



Dr Meenakshi  
Choudhary  
Consultant  
Gynaecologist



Brewin  
Dolphin

**abc** AWARDS  
2025

THE GREAT NORTH EAST CELEBRATION

We continue our journey of celebrating inclusion in the North East with the support of our esteemed partners, sponsors, attendees, and phenomenal finalists.





Pakistani Association  
North East



Shinu Yohannan  
Principal Engineer



Rishi Hohli  
Senior Legal Services  
Manager



Autopark UK  
Used Car Trader



Shummi Shah  
Founder, Muslim  
Women North East



Dhillon's Desserts



Shamin Ali  
Partner & Solicitor, Tilly  
Bailey & Irvine



Raul Kholi  
Professional  
Comedian



Bryonn Architecture  
Limited



Jerry Arneja  
Area Director, HSBC  
SME Business Banking



Mohammed Miah  
Associate Director,  
Chartered  
Accountant



Harshada Kadam  
Dental Practice



Sofia Barton  
Visual Artist



Brewin  
Dolphin



We invite you all to join us in honouring extraordinary individuals and their remarkable achievements, right here in the North East.

We would also like to say a big thank you to all of our sponsors and supporters for the ABC Awards 2025.

To find out more, or to be a part of the ABC Awards, visit: [www.abconnexions.org](http://www.abconnexions.org) or contact [inclusion@abconnexions.org](mailto:inclusion@abconnexions.org)





# INDIA–UK FTA SUMMIT

## India Summit at ISS Airview: A New Era of Trade and Inclusive Growth

We opened the doors to history at the UK's first dedicated International Trade Centre here at ISS Airview, as we hosted the India–UK FTA Summit.

The first day began with a moving blessing ceremony led by **Pandit Ji Gautam Balkrishna**, joined by The North East Combined Authority **Mayor Kim McGuinness**, who officially blessed the building. This was more than symbolism, it was a statement that the North East is ready to be a launchpad for global trade.



Mayor McGuinness set out a bold vision on how inclusive growth, climate action, and international trade can work hand in hand to create opportunity.

We heard from **Vishakha Yaduvanshi, Consul General of India**, our own '**JM**' **Meenu Malhotra DL (HCGI)**, **Ammar Mirza CBE** and **Sharon Kaur Jandu OBE** alongside regional and national leaders, reinforcing the strength of the India–UK corridor. Together, we explored how government, business, and academia can align to encourage, enable, and empower more and better trade.



For more than 20 years, we've been building government and ground-level relationships globally. ISS Airview & ISS Freeports is the culmination of that journey: a platform where we can practically deliver on Foreign Trade Agreements, help UK businesses scale globally, and provide inward investors with a soft landing into the UK market.

This is about more than trade. It's about inclusive innovation, collaboration, and shaping the North East as a gateway to the world.

If you're ready to grow globally, join our upcoming Trade Missions and be part of our Growing Global Community. Together, we can connect ambition with opportunity and deliver on the promise of the India-UK FTA and beyond!



## The North East is no longer just watching the global stage – we are shaping it.



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## Sunderland's bids prepare for the future

**Sunderland's Business Improvement Districts have appointed its first Head of Business Services, to ensure the fast-developing organisation is prepared for its future growth.**

The addition of a Seafront BID earlier this year, operated alongside the long-standing City Centre BID which has also increased its reach and now includes the Sheepfolds, meant that the organisation needed to create new roles necessary to deal with

the ever-increasing workload and its ambitious future plans.

And that has led to the appointment of former marketing and events manager, Roberta Redecke, as Head of Business Services.

The new senior leadership role will see Roberta continue to work alongside CEO Sharon Appleby but with a range of new responsibilities.

Along with developing operational plans, Roberta will be involved in income generation strategies, contribute to the general strategic direction of the BID along with working and strengthening relationships with levy payers and key stakeholders in the city and represent the BIDs at both local and national levels.

Roberta has worked with the BID since 2016, first joining as a Marketing and Communications Intern. Over the years she has been involved in a whole range of initiatives and events and will now bring all of her experience and knowledge to the new role. "I am very excited to continue to play an integral part in helping the BID reach its full potential," said Roberta.



## Key appointment bolsters Mincoffs' Commercial Services Team

**A strategic senior appointment has strengthened the offering at a leading North East corporate and commercial law firm.**

Mincoffs Solicitors, based in Newcastle, has welcomed associate solicitor Chris Bowen to its commercial services team.

Chris brings more than a decade of experience to the role, with a breadth of expertise across the spectrum of commercial law, including commercial contracts, software technology and data protection.

Originally from Carlisle, Chris qualified at a leading Northern firm and went on to gain further experience at the UK offices of two international law firms, along with spending time in the legal services team at a Big Four accounting firm.

He has worked with a broad range of clients, including private sector, public sector and charities, and has advised businesses ranging from start-ups to multi-national corporations.

"Mincoffs has a strong reputation and an impressive client base," said Chris, "so I was delighted when the opportunity arose to join the team.

"Beyond the variety and calibre of the legal work the team advise on, I was also drawn to the culture at the firm and the opportunities for professional development.

"Everyone has been incredibly welcoming and I look forward to working closely with the rest of the team on a variety of commercial services matters."

Antony Hall, partner and head of commercial services, said: "Chris is an excellent commercial solicitor and we are thrilled to welcome him to the team.

"With a wide range of experience gained both in private practice and in-house, he brings valuable insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by businesses of all sizes.

"This appointment strengthens our commercial offering at the firm and I have no doubt Chris will be an asset to our clients and to the wider team."



## ACEDA's new appointment ignites new Fire Division in Newcastle

**Teesside-based ACEDA has taken a significant step in its ambitious expansion strategy with the opening of a new Newcastle office and the launch of its dedicated Fire division. To drive this next phase of growth and build the company's service capability across the UK, ACEDA has appointed Chris Pattinson as Chief Revenue Officer.**

Chris said: "ACEDA has an incredible track record in delivering high-quality projects for major clients across the UK. With our new Newcastle office, the launch of our Fire Division, and our BAFE accreditation, we're perfectly positioned to expand our service offering, enter new sectors, and build long-term partnerships with clients. My focus will be on accelerating our growth trajectory and delivering a significant increase in recurring revenue over the coming years."

The new Newcastle office will act as a base for ACEDA's growing North East team, while the BAFE-accredited Fire Division means the company can now provide fully compliant fire detection and alarm services — covering design, installation, commissioning, and maintenance — alongside its existing Security, Electrical, and Network Infrastructure work.



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# In conversation with...

## Michael Dobson

Founder, Sapphire HR.

### What were your career ambitions growing up?

Certainly, not to work in HR. It would have been something in sport if I'm honest - football (goalkeeper for Newcastle United), then cricketer. As I got slightly older/more realistic a Sport Psychologist or Sports Journalist. Eventually opting for the Sport Psychology Route at University (first time round).

### Tell us about your current role?

I'm the Founder of Sapphire HR, a small but growing consultancy that supports SMEs with HR services. My role is a bit of everything—sales, finance, marketing, and of course, HR consulting. I still get involved in complex or unusual casework, which keeps things interesting. When you're dealing with people, no two days are ever truly the same.

### What is your proudest business achievement?

Surviving the pandemic was a huge milestone, especially as a young business. But more recently, doubling our revenue in the last 12 months has been a highlight.

### How has your industry changed in the last decade?

It's changed massively. The pandemic reshaped how businesses think about People Management, and now we're on the brink of the biggest employment law changes since 1996. The pace of change has been relentless, but it's also opened up opportunities to do things differently.

### What are you currently working on?

We're focused on scaling Sapphire HR to offer cost-effective solutions to SMEs across the UK. There's a lot happening behind the scenes, but the goal is to grow sustainably while keeping our service personal and practical.

We're also assisting businesses across the North East through the Better People Management Fund which offers eligible business in the North of Tyne Combined Authority Area up to 12 hours fully funded HR support.



Michael Dobson

### Tell us about the clients you work with.

We mainly support businesses with 1–250 employees. While we work nationwide, we've got a strong client base in the North East, which is where our roots are.

### What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

Don't overcomplicate things. We try to convey that in everything we do at Sapphire if we can explain a complicated process to someone using real-life examples or language then we're doing something right.

### What has been your biggest challenge?

I once completed a Marathon in under four hours, and completing exposure therapy for a specific phobia of snakes which were both mentally challenging.

### Who are your heroes inside and outside of business?

Difficult one within business as try to do our own thing and not compare ourselves to other too much. Outside of it - it'll be sport related and, in a year, where

Newcastle won there first trophy for 70 years it's probably hard to look past that.

### How do you unwind outside of work?

Bit of an ongoing theme here with Sport but long-distance running etc, football, cricket and I've got my Season Ticket at Newcastle which fills most weekends.

Usually found at gigs during the Summer (we'll always try and get to Glastonbury, tickets permitting). 'Murphy' our Spoodle who's a lot more Springer than Poodle takes up the rest of our spare time.

### Favourite Book and/or Boxset?

Me and my friends have always been huge fans of the *Simpsons* since we were kids to the point it's a little bit sad. Non-Fiction wise I think *The Chimp Paradox* by Steve Peters is brilliant in explaining basics of Psychology and how the brain works. Non-Fiction I'd probably go with something I've not read in years but I'd love to re-read the *Lord of the Rings* books if I had the time.

[www.sapphire-hr.co.uk](http://www.sapphire-hr.co.uk)



# Castle Peak Group - Recruitment done the right way

And that way is officially a winning way. Diversity and inclusivity...it's not lip service...just good business practice on the way to business success.



James and Angela Carss

## That's been the philosophy behind everything that James Carss does.

You'll have heard of James. He's one of the region's most respected Executive Search Recruitment experts, and he believes in recruitment being done the right way...and that way is to make sure senior appointments reflect a company's customers, community and workforce.

In the space of under twelve months, his company... Castle Peak Group ...has been making headlines. In fact, they've been so successful that they've been recognised as one of the best start-up companies in the UK.

They've won the award for Professional Services Start-Up of the Year at the National Start-Up Awards. This is an incredible achievement because thousands of companies enter.

The Start-Up of the Year Awards came from the founders of The Great British Entrepreneur Awards and the Fast Growth 50 Index and is an award series championing and celebrating the best and brightest start-ups from across the UK.

"I'm thrilled to win this award because it proves that the way we go about recruitment is the way for companies to be successful," said James. "Real change in recruitment must start at the top. That means shaking up traditional executive and boardroom norms and making leadership more inclusive and forward-thinking. Too often, boards don't reflect the people they employ or the communities they serve. My goal is to challenge that - to push for leadership teams that represent society, not just a tick box exercise. It's about making sure inclusion isn't just a buzzword, but something that's genuinely embedded in the way organisations operate.

"As well as providing equality of opportunity, having a more diverse board has also been shown to improve business operations. This improvement comes from the greater range of perspectives and deeper understanding that a diverse board can offer. By challenging pre-existing stereotypes about how a board member should look and sound, I believe I am helping organisations to provide a better service to their communities, as well as ensuring everyone gets access to the opportunities they deserve."

And, as we said at the start, this is not just lip service because Castle Peak Group has shown that their way of doing recruitment is a successful way. For example...

75% of Castle Peak Group placements were tended against by large, established recruiters.

When it comes to executive level placements, James and his team had a 100% fulfilment rate. The industry average is 77%.

67% of placements and 53% of shortlists, came from under-represented groups.

And bearing in mind that companies like to have senior vacancies filled as quickly as possible, Castle Peak Group completed the majority of their shortlists in under three weeks and invariably in the region of just a fortnight. The industry standard is around six weeks.

In other words, if you have a business which employs people, you need to take note of the success that Castle Peak Group has achieved by doing recruitment the right way.

"I'm not suggesting that you can make changes to a company overnight," adds James "It takes time, but the ideal way to do this is by ensuring the people at the top of the business...the leaders, the influencers, the people that your workforce and customers look up to...are diversified."

So, if you are expecting to need boardroom and executive appointments, look at your own workforce, look at your customer base and look at your local community. Does your board reflect those three groups? If it doesn't, you've got a problem because your business is being affected.

And as their success at the National Start-Up Awards has shown, Castle Peak Group can help transform your business. They're winners.

**For more information, you can contact James Carss by calling 07802 531040 or emailing [info@castlepeak-group.com](mailto:info@castlepeak-group.com)**

**You'll also find out more details by logging on to [www.castlepeak-group.com](http://www.castlepeak-group.com)**







James Carss





Diane MacTavish

## Diane MacTavish expands HR support across the North East

In a move that underscores her commitment to supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Diane MacTavish – owner of HR Dept Newcastle North, North Tyneside and Northumberland - is expanding her footprint to include HR Dept Durham and Newcastle South.

**The newly unified territory will operate under the banner of HR Dept Newcastle, Durham and Northumberland North and will offer even more businesses access to Diane's tailored, practical and personal HR expertise.**

For years, Diane has been a trusted partner to SMEs across the North East, delivering the kind of hands-on HR support typically reserved for large corporations with in-house teams. Her approach is personal, rooted in a deep understanding of the

local business landscape and the unique challenges faced by employers in the region.

"Expanding into Durham and Newcastle South is a natural progression, and I am looking forward to meeting and working with our new clients and looking to build on our growing client base by welcoming more new clients," Diane explains. "It means more business owners can benefit from proactive, affordable HR support that helps them manage risk, navigate complex legislation and build stronger, more resilient teams."

The expansion comes at a time when many SMEs are grappling with economic uncertainty, the incoming Employment Rights Bill and the increasing difficulties of attracting and retaining talent. Diane's services are designed to alleviate these pressures, offering everything from day-to-day HR advice to strategic guidance in a cost-effective way.

What sets Diane apart is her commitment to local, bespoke support. Rather than offering generic solutions, she and her team take the time to understand each client's business, culture and goals. Whether it's a family-run shop in Northumberland or a fast-growing tech firm in Newcastle, Diane ensures that every HR solution is tailored to fit.

Her clients span a wide range of industries, from manufacturing and retail to healthcare and not-for-profit organisations. This diversity has equipped Diane with a broad perspective and the ability to respond to the evolving needs of different sectors. She's known not just

for her expertise, but for her accessibility and genuine care for the businesses she supports.

"Most SMEs don't need a full-time HR department," Diane notes. "But they do need someone they can trust to help them handle sensitive issues, stay compliant and create a positive working environment. That's where we come in."

The newly expanded HR Dept Newcastle, Durham and Northumberland North will continue to offer core services such as:

- HR advice line for day-to-day queries
- Employment contracts and handbooks
- Recruitment and onboarding support
- Absence and performance management
- Disciplinary and grievance procedures
- Redundancy and restructuring guidance
- Management Training and coaching
- HR audits and information systems
- HR strategy and initiatives

Diane's growth also reflects the strength of the HR Dept network - a nationwide organisation providing outsourced HR services to SMEs across the UK. As part of this network, Diane combines local insight with national resources, ensuring her clients benefit from best-in-class support.

Her expansion is more than a business milestone; it's a celebration of the region's entrepreneurial spirit. By extending her services to Durham and Newcastle South, Diane is helping more businesses thrive, one tailored HR solution at a time.

**For more information, you can get in touch with Diane on 0191 283 8732 or email [diane.mactavish@hrdept.co.uk](mailto:diane.mactavish@hrdept.co.uk)**



# In 'The Great Game of Business', Jack Stack claims that there are really only two crucial factors in business

"The only way to be secure is to make money and generate cash, everything else is a means to that end," he wrote.

## There are two big lessons here.

First, making a profit and generating cash are not the same.

Every business leader needs to intimately understand the distinction and be continuously mindful of it.

Secondly, Jack isn't saying business is purely about money—that's a naive assertion.

But whether you're running a big company or a not-for-profit charity, the role's ultimately far easier if you are making money and generating cash than if you are not.

The truth is you can survive for quite a long time in business without making a profit. But no access to cash is fatal.

I know this from personal experience.

Back in the day I ran a significant business at a loss for almost a full year.

On paper, we were failing.

Yet the group that owned us (ironically, a bank!) was full of praise.

Why?

Because although we were losing money, we were generating cash.

And I've also seen the opposite: businesses with healthy profits suddenly failing because of a lack of cash.

Most founders don't start their business to become accountants.

However, as Warren Buffet states: "If you don't understand the language of business, finance, and accountancy, then you can't play the game of business."

If you can't speak that language, make sure you've got a good translator by your side.



Ian Kinnery

## Apply for one of 20 free coaching sessions

Over the last 20 years, I've coached a lot of founders and business leaders who felt trapped by what they'd built.

They started out with fire and energy and ended up in a kind of prison. One where the business eats their time, their confidence, and sometimes their sense of self.

To mark my milestone of helping and guiding business owners and founders I am opening 20 hours of my time for 20 one-hour coaching sessions - free of charge, one per person - for founders, leaders or decision-makers who are ready to take a proper look at how they lead and where they're heading.

This is for those who've built something with their name on the door, their savings in the bank, and their identity wrapped up in the outcome. The ones who can't switch off at night. The ones who second-guess every decision. The ones who feel trapped

by a business they were supposed to love.

I've been there and I almost didn't come out the other side.

Here's the thing - the problem is always one of two things. You're doing something you shouldn't be, or you're not doing something you should be. Either way, we can get to it, together.

A few things before you apply:

- This is a proper coaching session, not a chat.
- You'll need to bring a live challenge or ambition to the table.
- I'll read every application personally. Applying doesn't guarantee a place.
- There's no pitch. If we work together again, great. If not, no hard feelings.
- It's one hour. But if we use it right, it could change how you lead.

**Apply now for one of the 20 sessions, by visiting: [kinnery.co.uk/20onehour](http://kinnery.co.uk/20onehour)**



# Hiring for attitude, training for skill - Can it work in Accountancy?

With Practice Accountants increasingly hard to find, Bryony Gibson, director of Bryony Gibson Consulting, explores whether it's time to rethink your recruitment strategy and hire for potential as well as perfection.



Accountancy firms are facing a recruitment challenge. With experienced and qualified candidates in short supply, the competition for top talent is intense. And it seems that relying solely on traditional criteria - ACA or ACCA qualification, years of post-qualified experience, and a polished CV - is no longer enough. Perhaps the answer lies in a rethink of your approach. Could it be time to consider hiring for attitude, then investing in training for skills?

## The Limits of Traditional Hiring

For years, firms have filtered candidates with strict boundaries on what they deem acceptable qualifications and experience. While guaranteeing technical knowledge, in a challenging market, you risk closing the door to capable people who may not tick every box but have the drive and aptitude to succeed. With experienced candidates scarce, clinging to rigid criteria can stunt growth and leave firms under-resourced.

## Identifying Future Talent

Hiring for potential doesn't mean lowering the bar. It means recognising qualities that suggest someone can grow into a high-performing professional. Curiosity, resilience, emotional intelligence, commercial awareness, and a willingness to learn often matter more than the years of experience someone has on their CV. In fact, many of the best accountants I work with have begun their careers part-qualified, but they excelled because they had the right mindset and support.

## Assessing Potential

How do you identify the right traits and spot a rising star? Scenario-based questions, problem-solving exercises, and values-led discussions are great ways to reveal adaptability and gather insight into someone's mindset. Asking candidates how they've overcome challenges, learned new skills, or navigated change will give you a powerful understanding of their growth potential.

## Invest in Training

Hiring for attitude only works if it's backed by a genuine commitment to offer training and mentoring support. Structured programmes, shadowing, and regular feedback will help candidates to develop the technical skills they need, while embedding them in the firm's culture. But this is not so much about rules and compliance; rather, it is about coaching to develop the right skills, better judgment, client interaction, and commercial acumen.

## Practical Steps

Some easy steps you can take to prepare for a new approach include:

- Revise job specs to prioritise traits and potential, not just experience.
- Update interview plans to include scenarios, case studies, and values-driven questions.

- Strengthen your onboarding programme, assigning mentors, providing clear progression paths, and building in regular feedback sessions for your team.

- Engage the wider organisation with the concept so you can create a culture where staff support new hires and value the long-term benefits of developing people.

Chasing the "perfect CV" might have worked when talent was plentiful, but in today's market, it risks long-term frustration. By broadening your criteria, you can attract a wider pool of candidates, nurture future leaders, and build loyalty. In a market where salaries are rising and experienced hires are scarce, hiring for attitude and training for skill isn't just an alternative; it's a strategic advantage.

Accountancy will always be a technical profession, and technical skills can be taught. But attitude, potential, and mindset are innate. Across the North East, firms are already proving this in practice, with candidates who may not be traditionally "perfect" thriving once given the right support. These hires not only deliver results but also bring fresh perspectives, creativity, and long-term loyalty.

The firms that succeed in today's recruitment market will be those willing to rethink how they hire, invest in people, and grow talent from within.

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# Wright Residential: Taking the headache out of Property Management – Now in Sunderland

Managing rental properties can be a rewarding investment – but for many landlords, the day-to-day reality often feels more like a headache. From chasing rent and handling maintenance calls, to keeping up with ever-changing legislation, the demands can quickly pile up. That's where Wright Residential steps in.

With years of experience supporting landlords across the North East, Wright Residential specialises in taking the stress out of property management. Whether you own a single flat or an extensive portfolio, their tailored services ensure your investments are well-looked-after while you enjoy peace of mind.

## A Complete Service for Landlords

Wright Residential offers a full suite of property management solutions, including:

- **Tenant sourcing & vetting** – finding reliable tenants through careful checks.
- **Rent collection & financial management** – ensuring your income is consistent and secure.
- **Property maintenance & inspections** – keeping your assets in top condition.
- **Compliance & legal guidance** – helping landlords stay on the right side of regulations.

By combining high standards of care with a personalised approach, Wright Residential delivers the reassurance landlords need, without the hassle.

## Expanding to Sunderland

In response to growing demand, Wright Residential is now proud to extend its services to Sunderland and the surrounding areas. This expansion means more landlords can benefit from their trusted



expertise and flexible support, whether they're seasoned investors or just starting out.

"Our goal has always been simple," says the Wright Residential team. "We want landlords to feel confident that their properties are in safe hands. By managing the details – big and small – we give our clients the freedom to focus on the bigger picture."

If you're a landlord in Sunderland or beyond and want to remove the stress from property management, Wright Residential is ready to help.

**Call: 0191 240 1818, [www.wrightresidential.co.uk](http://www.wrightresidential.co.uk)**

**Email: [catherine@wrightresidential.co.uk](mailto:catherine@wrightresidential.co.uk)**

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# THE ULTRAMAPGLOBAL SERIES

“Each month, the UltramapGlobal newsletter – ‘UltramapGlobal Stories’ – is emailed to 750 readers. The open rate is always high, and the database continues to grow steadily. Here’s an insight, via a small selection of recent stories, into how we communicate directly to inboxes.

## This issue: COMMUNICATION

### WELCOME CELTIC

The Celtic Interconnector will be a new 500km+ subsea HVDC power cable linking France to Ireland. It will be the world’s longest XLPE interconnector.

An important power cable, work has just begun on installing Celtic and UltramapGlobal have been commissioned to protect the development phases and all aspects of cable installation for up to three years until Celtic is up and running.

UltramapGlobal will continue to offer 24/7, 365 protect Celtic once it is operational, too.

### WE SEE MORE (AND MORE!)

For a long time now, our messaging has included the line, ‘Better Informed – Means Better Protected.’ This simple little phrase shines a light on the fact that we are covering more of the world’s seas, in more detail, all the time.

As we move into the second half of 2025, UltramapGlobal’s ability to access data about any number of vessel movements, in literally any part of the world, in real time, is upgrading – again. We’re even faster now. And the detail keeps on getting better, too.

This deeper, broader intelligence means that the already impressive protection percentages are likely to rise even higher. Well – those that are not already at 100 percent, of course!

100 percent of UltramapGlobal customers see fewer cable strikes once they become a customer. And almost 60 percent of UltramapGlobal customers experience no cable strikes at all.

### EASTERN GREEN LINK 2 SEABED SURVEYS

From the middle of 2025, surveys will start to support the development of the Eastern Green Link 2 (EGL2) subsea cable route, near East Riding of Yorkshire shoreline. A barge containing an on-board laboratory will be jacked up close to Fraisthorpe, visible from the beach and coastal paths.

*“Collecting detailed information about the marine seabed, early, is crucial to ensuring the safe, timely and responsible installation of the subsea cable. At every step, our teams are committed to applying specialist knowledge and working in close collaboration with partners to deliver EGL2 – a key milestone in the UK’s journey towards clean, secure energy.” said Simone Casali, Offshore Project Manager for Prysmian.*

### 99.9 PERCENT OF OCEAN FLOOR UNKNOWN

It’s estimated that we humans have seen only 0.001 percent of the World’s deep seas, leaving most of our planet a mystery. Despite covering 66 percent of Earth’s surface, deep oceans are largely unexplored. Researchers from the Ocean Discovery League say that expanding deep-sea exploration is vital to understanding and managing these marine habitats.

*“As we face accelerated threats to the deep ocean—from climate change to potential mining and resource exploitation—this limited exploration of such a vast region becomes a critical problem” said Dr. Katy Croff Bell, President of Ocean Discovery League.*

*We need a much better understanding of the deep ocean’s ecosystems and processes to make informed decisions about resource management and conservation.”*

Find out more at [www.ultramapglobal.com](http://www.ultramapglobal.com)

PATIENCE | RESILIENCE | COMMUNICATION | TRAVEL | TEAM | CONSISTENCY | NUMBERS





*Martin Connelly*  
Co-Founder & Commercial Director



# Outdoors is easy

“I get zero pushback from business leaders when I suggest being outside means accelerated, distraction-free thinking. And better decision making. That’s a given.”

“But getting outside. That’s hard, isn’t it? Well - no. Not at all.  
Outdoors is easy. Here’s how...”

“I suppose it’s my own fault.” explains Jane.

“I love walking, and I love the countryside. So, people mostly see me in photographs next to, say, Hadrian’s Wall. Rambling. Chatting with clients one-on-one. Or on my monthly business leaders networking events: Fresh Perspective Tread Walks.”

“No wonder some business leaders think all I’m advocating is walking boots, waterproofs and Kendal Mint Cake. But that’s just not true. The ‘outdoors’ that I am recommending can be very, very different. And easy to access.”

## Outdoors is Easy

Jane Fisher, via her Fresh Perspectives NE brand, provides executive-level Strategic Leadership coaching and consultancy to business leaders across the North of England. Mostly outdoors, and mostly within just a few minutes of their own offices.

“Newcastle. Sunderland. Durham. Gateshead. Darlington. All these great cities in the North East have brilliant outdoor spaces, which I’m exploring. And identifying. By mapping and understanding what’s where – outdoors – helps me get business leaders and their teams outdoors. Easily.” says Jane.

“So, no matter where a business is, we can get to wonderful outdoor spaces and get to work, fast.”

**“Our great North East cities all have brilliant outdoor spaces. We get outside. And get to work. Fast!”**

## Fresh Perspectives NE

Jane’s Fresh Perspectives brand is quickly becoming a North East of England movement, recognised for helping the best business leaders and their teams, to get outside more. This new outdoor environment really does help them - with Jane at their side - to think more clearly and make better strategic decisions.

Furthermore, opportunities that get lost in the clutter of a busy, samey and distracting office environment are seen more easily - and seized upon. The ‘Outdoor Habit’ is indeed transformative.

## The Fresh Perspective 90-Day Challenge

Quarter 4 of 2025, sees Jane launch The Fresh Perspective 90-Day Challenge.

It’s a limited space, business community-driven initiative designed to fast-track a select few North East businesses towards developing the Outdoors Habit.

“Many of the world’s most progressive businesses - brands we know, are getting outdoors already. And I believe that within the next 5 to 10 years, all forward-looking businesses will spend at least 20 percent of their working week outdoors. Habitually,” highlights Jane.

“That’s why I’ve developed the Fresh Perspective 90-Day Challenge. So that business leaders here in the North East can explore, right now, how getting outside more, feels for them and their teams - with ease.”

**To find out more about Fresh Perspectives NE, and the 90-Day Challenge, contact Jane: [hello@fpne.co.uk](mailto:hello@fpne.co.uk) 07837 024 374 or visit the website [www.fpne.co.uk](http://www.fpne.co.uk)**

Jane Fisher



# NorthStandard strengthens ties to its North East maritime heritage and welcomes future leaders



NorthStandard Vice Chair Nicolas Hadjioannou, Chair Cesare d'Amico, Managing Directors Jeremy Grose and Paul Jennings, and Kate Gillespie, Head of NorthStandard Academy, pictured with cadets and staff from South Shields Marine School

**NorthStandard, one of the world's leading marine insurers, has reaffirmed its commitment to both its global membership and the North East's proud maritime heritage by hosting its international board meeting at its Newcastle headquarters.**

**To mark the occasion, the company welcomed cadets from South Shields Marine School – a gesture aimed at inspiring and empowering the next generation of maritime leaders.**

Headquartered on Newcastle's Quayside and with heritage spanning over 160 years, the organisation employs over 300 people locally and more than 700 globally across 13 countries, making it one of the region's largest and most internationally connected employers.

Chaired by Cesare d'Amico, CEO of d'Amico Societa di Navigazione SpA, with Nicolas Hadjioannou, CEO of Cymona Shipping Management SAM and Executive Chairman of Alassia Newships Management serving as a Vice Chair, NorthStandard's board brings together 16 directors from around the world, including leading international shipowners.

The North East has long played a central role in shaping the global maritime industry, with the region's shipowners pioneering the mutual insurance model that laid the foundations for today's P&I

clubs. NorthStandard continues to leverage this local maritime heritage and talent while scaling its international ambitions responsibly.

Paul Jennings, Managing Director of NorthStandard, said: "Having our largest UK headquarter office strategically located in Newcastle pays homage to a proud maritime legacy, while highlighting the North East's ongoing role as a leading global marine hub. We are proud to bring our board together here to the Quayside, where part of our story began."

As part of the board meeting programme, NorthStandard also welcomed cadets from South Shields Marine School to its Quayside headquarters. The cadets took part in a day filled with workshops on the role of P&I associations, the concept of mutual underwriting, and the support these clubs provide to shipowners and seafarers. They also met with NorthStandard staff, many of whom were former seafarers, to learn about career progression opportunities.

Jeremy Grose, Managing Director of NorthStandard, said: "Engaging with young

professionals is vital to the future of our industry.

As we look to tackle challenges such as skill gaps, decarbonisation and digitalisation, it is inspiring to see the next generation of seafarers taking such an active interest in the role of mutual insurance and the global maritime community."

The visit concluded with a Q&A session with NorthStandard's Chair and Vice Chair, offering cadets valuable insight into the future of maritime insurance and the opportunities ahead for the next generation.

Simon Ashton, Principal of South Shields Marine School, said: "We would like to thank the staff at NorthStandard for inviting us to discover and learn more about the valuable work they do for the wider maritime industry. For our cadets, the world of maritime insurance is a valuable part of their studies, and the knowledge and guidance they have received will benefit them in their future when working at sea."

NorthStandard's Chair, Cesare d'Amico, said: "It was an honour to hold our board meeting in Newcastle, a city that has played such an important role in maritime history and continues to drive innovation today – and there is no better way to celebrate this than by fostering the next generation of industry talent."

[north-standard.com](http://north-standard.com)





## Durham Business Club Showcase shines at Hardwick Hall

DBC members gathered, where business met with brilliance in the stunning Coleman Suite of Hardwick Hall Hotel.

The event was proudly sponsored by TC Harlands Accountants, who gave an insightful presentation about their services and support for local businesses.

To close, members took part in a fun activity, describing Durham Business Club in just three words, the top words stood loud and clear: Friendly, Welcoming, Fun, Supportive. These descriptors are a true testament to the values we hold dear and will be transformed into a striking wall mural at our HQ at Portland House, Belmont.



Describe Durham Business Club in three words?





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# Embracing neurodiversity at work: Why inclusion matters more than ever

By Kathryn Rodgers, face2faceHR.

Neurodiversity at work isn't a challenge to be managed, but an opportunity to be embraced. Kathryn Rodgers from face2faceHR shares practical steps for building truly inclusive organisations.

**In recent years, conversations about diversity and inclusion in the workplace have broadened beyond gender, race, and age. Increasingly, businesses are recognising the importance of neurodiversity — the natural variation in how people think, learn, and process information. This includes conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and others.**

At face2faceHR, I'm seeing more and more clients raising questions around this area — and rightly so. Neurodiversity isn't just an HR "buzzword"; it's about people, potential, and performance.

## What is neurodiversity?

Put simply, neurodiversity acknowledges that no two brains are the same. Just as we value diversity in culture and background, we should also value diversity in thought. Some employees may be exceptional at spotting patterns, thinking creatively, or paying attention to detail, while others may excel in problem-solving or innovation.

When workplaces fail to recognise or accommodate neurodiverse employees, they risk overlooking these strengths. Worse still, employees may feel misunderstood, excluded, or unsupported.

## Why it matters for employers

A neuroinclusive approach isn't just the "right thing to do" — it makes good business sense. Research shows that diverse teams perform better, make faster decisions, and are more innovative. Employers who embrace neurodiversity benefit from:

- **Access to untapped talent:** Many neurodiverse individuals are underemployed despite having huge potential.
- **Improved retention:** Creating a supportive environment reduces turnover and builds loyalty.
- **Enhanced reputation:** Clients and candidates increasingly expect organisations to demonstrate meaningful inclusion.

With skills shortages across many sectors, businesses simply cannot afford to miss out on this pool of talent.

## Practical steps to support neurodiversity at work

The good news is, many adjustments are simple, low-cost, and benefit all staff — not just neurodiverse colleagues. Here are some key considerations:

### Awareness and training

Managers and colleagues need to understand what neurodiversity is (and isn't). Training sessions or awareness campaigns can help challenge misconceptions and reduce stigma.

## Recruitment practices

Standard interview processes can disadvantage neurodiverse candidates. Consider offering alternative assessments, providing interview questions in advance, or allowing candidates to demonstrate skills in practical ways.

## Workplace adjustments

Small changes, like offering noise-cancelling headphones, flexible working arrangements, or clear written instructions, can make a huge difference.

## Clear communication

Neurodiverse colleagues may prefer structured communication — for example, breaking down tasks into steps or following up meetings with written notes.

## Inclusive culture

True inclusion goes beyond policies. It's about creating an environment where employees feel comfortable sharing their needs without fear of judgement.

## Where to start

If you're an employer feeling unsure about how to approach neurodiversity, start small. Speak to your teams. Review your policies. Identify areas where simple changes could improve accessibility. And remember — it's okay to seek advice.

At face2faceHR, we work with clients every day who want to do better but don't always know where to begin. My message is simple: you don't need to have all the answers to get started. What matters is a willingness to listen, learn, and adapt.

## The bigger picture

Ultimately, embracing neurodiversity is about more than compliance or tick-box exercises. It's about recognising the value of different perspectives and building workplaces where everyone can thrive.

As businesses across the North East continue to innovate and grow, those who prioritise neuroinclusive practices will not only support their people but also strengthen their competitive edge.

After all, diversity of thought drives creativity, and creativity drives progress.

**Kathryn Rodgers, face2faceHR Newcastle**  
[www.face2faceHR.com](http://www.face2faceHR.com) | 07946 330 025





*Kathryn Rodgers*



# For-profits are inherently good for society!

With Kind Currency I was constantly asked if we were a charity. In transitioning into Keepl Social I am frequently asked, is it impact driven like Kind Currency.

**Kind Currency wasn't a charity, and Keepl Social, like Kind Currency, is very much purpose-led.**

**Profit! Often seen as negative.**

For a long time now, anti-profit beliefs have overshadowed the societal benefits of profit.

There's a huge difference between a for-profit business that is harmful to society and businesses that are profit-led that provide significant societal benefits.

For some reason we've been led to believe profit is a direct conflict with social responsibility.

It's been a subject we have discussed at length in the social sector, and whilst there's very mixed views, I ask 'why can't a for-profit be classed as a socially-driven organisation?'

My personal view, it can be, a commercial business can be both profit-led and purpose-driven. And their impact can be as effective as a not-for-profit.

For-profits are inherently good for society.

Many for-profits deliver incredible social impact such as Patagonia, and on home ground we have organisations such as Story Contracting providing incredible social impact through their commitment to ensuring the value they deliver has lasting outcomes.

Profit-led organisations that place social value as a genuine priority, create good quality and fair employment, ensure fairness across their supply chain and embed ethical sustainable solutions across the business. Profit drives positive change, innovation, and growth, all creating societal advancements. They support communities and economies to thrive, and deliver further social value through added-value activity such as staff volunteering, and cycle to work schemes.

Fundamentally, without for-profits where would society be?

Profit enables effective and efficient social value.



Michelle Jones

And I am mindful that there's good and bad on both sides of the fence! Whilst we point the finger at for-profits, we can't deny the corruption in the third sector. So, shouldn't we be judging all organisations on their actions, and their positive contribution to society rather than their legal structure?

Challenging organisations that are harmful to society is essential but encouraging a more inclusive understanding of what a social organisation is, would support this challenge.

The third sector is struggling, small local businesses are struggling, and I wonder if anti-profit beliefs are adding a complication? Should we be encouraging the third sector to think more commercially to sustain their services?

Keepl Social is a for-profit-for-good organisation; we are impact by design.

Social Value is at the core of our business. Our service enables effective and efficient social value. We are committed to democratising digitisation, making

our service inclusive and accessible for all users. We are developing products to support and sustain third sector organisations. We are enabling businesses at all levels to ensure impact meets those most in need to achieve lasting outcomes. We enable, support and protect all businesses from the large corporates to the sole trader to the grassroots community group. And our aim is to use profits for social good.

Our commercial ambition enables our social impact aspirations, we can't do one without the other.

In an era where times are difficult, grants are scarce, and donations are in decline, profit-led activity is essential, for all, to protect the vital services we need in society. Doing good!

Whether that is for-profit or not-for-profit, it's the impact of actions that matters most.

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





## A thriving business community

"It's been a fantastic summer for North Tyneside Business Forum, with members enjoying events like our Summer Social at Longsands Apres, a warm Welcome Coffee Morning at Sands of Tyne, and a behind-the-scenes tour of the Tyne Tunnels.

Looking ahead, Chair Angela Tuplin and Rachel Laffey joined the press launch of Whitley Bay Playhouse's pantomime Beauty and the Beast – and there's plenty more to come!

Membership is free and packed with benefits, including networking opportunities, business insights, and exclusive events.

Join us and be part of our thriving business community."

[www.northtynesidebusinessforum.org.uk](http://www.northtynesidebusinessforum.org.uk)







## Mission Christmas 2025

1 in 3 children in the North East are living in poverty. For many of these families, there is a harsh reality of deciding whether to heat their homes this winter or put food on the table. So when Christmas arrives, it's simply seen as a luxury that they cannot afford.

This is where local charity Cash for Kids step in to make sure every child can believe in the magic of Christmas. Cash for Kids is dedicated to improving the lives of disadvantaged children and young people across the North East, from the moment they're born up to and including the age of 18.

Mission Christmas will launch on Monday, 17th November with one very simple aim – to ensure every child wakes up to a present from Santa on Christmas Day. In 2024, thanks to the generosity of the North East, Mission Christmas provided gifts for over 42,000 local children. Cash for Kids will be aiming to support a similar number this year. The campaign has grown over the years and relies on a small army of supporters to make the magic happen throughout November and December.







There are many ways for businesses and individuals to get involved with Mission Christmas:

**1. Donate gifts** – Cash for Kids accept new and unwrapped gift donations for all ages from birth up to and including 18 years of age. These can be dropped off at any local B&M store from 17th November onwards. They will be collected and taken to Mission Christmas HQ in Washington to be sorted and distributed to beneficiaries.

**2. Donate cash or fundraise** – Cash donations are a vital part of Mission Christmas. During the appeal, the charity often struggles to receive donations for certain age ranges such as babies and those aged 9+. With cash donations, they can purchase large quantities of stock at discounted prices by working with retail partners such as Amazon. Any funds which aren't spent will be used in the New Year as part of their 'Cost of Living' grants to support families with basic essentials during the winter. Companies can help by making a one-off donation or by getting involved with some festive fundraising, such as Christmas Jumper Day or donating employees' last hour of pay before the holidays.

*"Mum was in tears, she said that she had never experienced such kindness towards her children, and that I have no idea how this had made her feel, the gesture has 'restored her faith in humanity' thank you, thank you, thank you."*



**3. Buy a gift online** – Mission Christmas has a specific wish list set up with Amazon. Items on this list have been carefully chosen by the charity to help them fulfil applications and will be delivered directly to Mission Christmas HQ, often the next day which is invaluable to the team. This is a great way to support the appeal and is ideal for those who are housebound or prefer to shop online.

**4. Spread the word** – The success of Mission Christmas is largely down to as many people knowing about it as possible! You can help Cash for Kids by posting about the appeal if you're getting involved or by sharing their social media content (@cashforkidsne).

**5. Come to Laffs4Kids!** Local comedian Jason Cook started Laffs4Kids in 2015 and the show sees a host of well known comedy stars perform at the ultimate feel-good festive night out, all in aid of Mission Christmas. Audience members buy a ticket and bring a gift along on the night. It's taking place this year on Sunday, 14th December at the Utilita Arena in Newcastle and tickets are on sale now. Please note that it is an adult only show and not for the easily offended!

So, there are many ways to get behind the Mission Christmas appeal and make a difference this Christmas for thousands of North East children.

**To find out more, you can contact the Cash for Kids team by emailing [northeast@cashforkids.org.uk](mailto:northeast@cashforkids.org.uk) or by searching 'Mission Christmas' online from November.**





## North East creative learning charity secures over £200k funding

Kavli Trust to invest in young people's mental health and wellbeing.



**A North East creative learning charity has secured a six-figure investment from the foundation of a multinational brand to support children and young people with their mental health and wellbeing.**

Award-winning theatre, drama and creative learning charity Mortal Fools has secured funding of NOK3,000,000 - approximately £215,000 - from Kavli Trust, the foundation arm of the parent company of popular cheese brand, Primula, to develop its high-impact work supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Mortal Fools have developed a range of creative projects as new and pioneering alternative responses to tackling the mounting children's mental health crisis in the UK, including increasing referrals being made for young people to statutory services and anxiety-based conditions continuing to rise year-on-year.

The funding from Kavli Trust aligns with the growing UK policy recognition of creative health as a vital tool to tackle this challenge, including the establishment of a Creative Health All Party Parliamentary Group last year.





This is the second investment that Mortal Fools has received from Kavli Trust, who prioritise supporting projects that enhance children and young people's mental health and wellbeing as part of their global approach to supporting the furtherance of human rights. This ongoing support will enable Mortal Fools to further develop three areas of their work:

MELVA Digital - an award-winning creative digital programme that improves key stage 2 children's mental health knowledge and practical self-management techniques through multi-media storytelling and has already reached 11,000 young people in 130 educational settings.

This new funding will support the addition of an illustrated novel to the programme for 2025-26 and new resources for key stage 1, its expansion across the Northeast region and using the programme and its data as a powerful advocacy tool to lobby for policy change and further investment.

The development of their Wellbeing Practice Guide & Evaluation Toolkit into an online digital programme, accessible to users across the UK. The programme is structured to the ratified PERMA™ Framework for Mental Wellbeing and is designed to guide settings working with young people to plan, monitor and measure their work in ways that enhance the wellbeing of participants and generate tangible wellbeing impact data.

This ongoing commitment will also support the furtherance of Mortal Fools' expertise in the field of Creative Health, with a particular focus on work in co-creation and applied interventions e.g. in schools to support transition and prevent absenteeism.

The funding will also support the development of Mortal Fools' national profile and reputation as a leader in the field of Creative Health for children and young people.

Kiz Crosbie, Artistic Director and CEO at Mortal Fools, commented: "We continue to be deeply grateful for Kavli Trust's ongoing commitment to our work.

"The team really take the time to get to know the organisations, the people and the projects they support, and together we are able to bring about enormously positive outcomes for the children and young people involved. We look forward to many more years of fruitful collaboration with them."

Ingrid Paasche, General Manager at Kavli Trust, added: "Mortal Fools demonstrates how culture can nurture mental health, wellbeing and lasting opportunities for young people. Kavli Trust is proud to give back to the community where our values are created."

[www.mortalfools.org.uk](http://www.mortalfools.org.uk)







British Engines Simonside Site

## Driving green industry forward

SCJ Renewables, British Engines, and Catapult Champion Solar Innovation in the North East.

**The North East is rapidly emerging as a national leader in engineering and renewable innovation, particularly in solar technology, thanks to pioneering efforts from SCJ Renewables and its regional partners.**

This momentum is highlighted by recent milestones that are shaping the region's transition to a low-carbon economy.

### SCJ Renewables and British Engines: Smarter solar operations

A major step forward has been achieved at the Simonside, South Shields site of the British Engines Group, through its BEL Engineered Solutions division, where SCJ Renewables has introduced its first-ever Operation & Maintenance Care Package (O&MCP) as an integral part of a 1.5MWp solar PV installation. Housed within a fully equipped 20ft container, SCJ Renewables' O&MCP acts as the nerve centre for the solar system's long-term reliability and operational efficiency.

"We knew this was a big undertaking," said Les Cordial, Facilities Manager at the Simonside facility. "But the way SCJ approached it with professionalism, flexibility, and a real understanding of our operational needs made it seamless. We were able to continue production with minimal disruption, which was key for us." "The project will be completed on time and within budget, despite the complexity of integrating the solar infrastructure into an active manufacturing site. The system is expected to significantly reduce the Simonside Site's carbon footprint, aligning with the British Engines Group's broader sustainability goals."

This innovative care package reflects SCJ Renewables' commitment to practical and resilient asset management. It comprises comprehensive as-built drawings, detailed test results, equipment manuals, a stock of spare PV modules, mounting components, cables, and essential consumables. Equipped with these resources, on-site maintenance teams can respond swiftly to issues, minimising downtime and protecting the system's long-term value. Beyond its technology, SCJ Renewables places great importance on collaboration with regional suppliers and local innovators. This approach not only fortifies the North East supply chain but also supports skilled jobs and ensures investment remains embedded within the community.

### Solar innovation at Blyth's Catapult

Further north, in Blyth, SCJ Renewables

has recently completed work on the Offshore Renewable Energy Catapult's new Technology Development Centre. Partnering with local manufacturer Solar Capture Technologies, SCJ Renewables installed PV modules made in Northumberland, underscoring the strength and capability of the region's green energy supply chain.

Attention to detail is clear in SCJ Renewables' delivery, featuring built-in hatches and walkways designed for convenient maintenance, thoughtfully addressing site-specific challenges such as local wildlife. By tapping into homegrown expertise and supporting Northumberland's dynamic supply network, SCJ Renewables and its partners are fostering resilience and unlocking new opportunities within the renewables sector.

### Empowering the region through solar leadership

SCJ Renewables is dedicated to harnessing regional talent and innovation, diversifying the local economy, and accelerating the North East's journey to net zero. Their work delivers more than environmental progress; it boosts employment and helps build a lasting regional legacy.

The North East is not just preparing for a clean energy future, it's actively constructing it, solar panel by solar panel, with SCJ Renewables and its partners leading the charge for sustainable, long-term regional benefit.

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



# Sarah McKenna HR Recruitment moves to new home at North East BIC and launches Recruitment Review

**Specialist HR recruitment consultancy Sarah McKenna HR Recruitment has moved into a new base at the North East BIC, marking an exciting new stage for the business.**

Founded eight years ago by Sarah McKenna, the consultancy has become known across the North East and Yorkshire for its personal, honest, and high-quality service. With a reputation built on referrals from clients and candidates who value the support they receive, the business places HR professionals at every level and ensures cultural fit is always front and centre.

Now, alongside its established recruitment services, the firm is launching a new offer: the Recruitment Review.

Sarah explained: "Recruitment has always been my thing – I love matching the right HR professionals to the right businesses. But over the years, I've also seen how much HR teams and hiring managers struggle with the process itself. They want to improve things but simply don't have the time or tools. The Recruitment Review changes that."

What makes this service refreshing is that it's not about encouraging greater reliance on agencies – it's about giving organisations the framework, clarity, and accountability to strengthen their own recruitment processes.



Sarah added: "Recruitment is often pushed to the bottom of the to-do list when other priorities take over, but the reality is it should be the number one priority. Without the right people in the right roles, businesses can't serve their customers properly. Attraction and retention is without doubt the biggest challenge for many of my clients. The Recruitment Review ensures they're doing their very best at every stage – promoting roles, showcasing their brand, and creating a positive candidate experience that benefits everyone."

The Recruitment Review is a practical, affordable audit designed to give time-stretched HR teams the confidence and clarity to run better recruitment in-house.

It looks at the full candidate journey – from job adverts and interviews through to onboarding – and provides tailored advice and tools to:

- Attract high-quality candidates faster
- Build confidence in structured, fair interviews
- Showcase employer brand and values at every stage
- Deliver thoughtful onboarding that boosts retention
- Reduce reliance on external agencies

The consultancy's move to a new unit at the BIC's riverside location reflects its ambitions to keep growing and innovating. Alongside the Recruitment Review, Sarah plans to expand her popular HR leadership roundtables beyond the North East to include Yorkshire, grow her network of associates, and create new spaces for HR professionals and talent communities to connect.

Sarah said: "Moving to the BIC feels like the reset we didn't know we needed. The support and community here are fantastic – there's such a positive energy about the place, and it already feels like the right home for our next chapter."

[sarahmckennahr.co.uk](http://sarahmckennahr.co.uk)



**SARAH McKENNA**  
HR RECRUITMENT

## Specialist HR Recruitment

- Recruiting HR professionals at all levels
- Focused on culture fit and long-term success
- Trusted, personable, and honest approach

“What resonates with us about Sarah McKenna HR Recruitment's core values is their unwavering commitment to excellence, integrity, and personalised service.”

Contact: [sarahmckennahr.co.uk](http://sarahmckennahr.co.uk) | [sarah@sarahmckennahr.co.uk](mailto:sarah@sarahmckennahr.co.uk)



# The overlooked leadership skill transforming North East teams

In today's fast-paced, always-on working world, leadership teams are under more pressure than ever.

**As meetings fill calendars and priorities compete for attention, it's easy for even the most experienced leaders to feel stretched - constantly busy, yet not always effective.**

But for a growing number of North East organisations, a subtle shift is making a big difference: facilitation.

"Facilitation isn't just a meeting technique," says Scott Smith, Director at People Spark Solutions. "It's about creating the space and structure for people to think clearly, work collaboratively, and make better decisions together."

It's a skill more businesses are starting to appreciate - not just for away days or big strategic sessions, but as an essential part of how leadership works day to day.

## What facilitation really is — and why it matters

At its heart, facilitation is about focus. It's the ability to guide a group through complex conversations, manage competing perspectives, and keep everyone moving towards shared outcomes.

"In a typical leadership meeting, the loudest voices often dominate, and the quieter - but equally valuable - insights can get lost," says Scott. "A skilled facilitator holds the space so that everyone is heard, and ideas can be tested in a safe, constructive way."

People Spark Solutions, based in the North East, works with organisations across the region to design and facilitate sessions that bring clarity, alignment and - crucially - action.

From strategy reviews and cultural change programmes to team development and leadership away days, the common thread is simple: giving teams time to step back, think differently, and move forward with purpose.

## Helping leaders do what they can't always do alone

The benefits of facilitation go far beyond making meetings run more smoothly. It can help organisations tackle some of their biggest challenges - from breaking down silos to managing change more effectively.

People Spark has seen this first-hand. In one recent project, the team worked with a local charity undergoing significant transformation. Emotions were high, and uncertainty was creating tension across teams.

"Our role was to help the leadership team hold



Scott Smith

space for honest conversation," explains Scott. "We used facilitation to support reflection, manage emotion, and help the group reach clarity - together. It wasn't easy, but by the end of the session there was a real sense of alignment and shared purpose."

In other cases, the impact is less dramatic but no less valuable. Leadership and team away days, for example, are often dismissed as 'soft' or purely social - but with the right design, they can be powerful drivers of progress.

"Away days are an opportunity to reconnect with purpose, explore values, and check in on how people are actually feeling," says Scott. "We've had team members share insights in those sessions that completely reshaped how a business approached a project. Those moments matter."

## Space, structure, and the spark that moves things forward

At its core, facilitation is about creating space - something most teams lack.

"Organisations don't usually have a shortage of ideas," says Scott. "What they lack is the

right space to explore those ideas, challenge assumptions, and decide what to do next. That's where facilitation comes in."

At People Spark, that means combining psychological insight with practical tools - making sure that sessions aren't just engaging, but useful.

"Our approach is never off-the-shelf," adds Scott. "We take time to understand the organisation's context, then design sessions that are thoughtful, inclusive, and outcomes-focused. We're not there to impress - we're there to help people get stuff done."

"It's not about us having the answers. It's about creating the conditions for the answers to emerge from the people who know the business best - the team themselves."

So, next time your team gets together, ask yourself - will it be just another meeting, or could it be something more?

**To find out how facilitation could support your organisation, contact [hello@peoplesparksolutions.co.uk](mailto:hello@peoplesparksolutions.co.uk)**



# AI isn't just a trend.

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## Accenture throws weight behind North East tech awards

Global tech giant Accenture has been named as the headline sponsor of this year's North East tech awards.

Now in its twelfth year, the Dynamites are the North East's annual tech awards, bringing together people and businesses from across the industry to celebrate all that is great about the sector.

Taking place on Thursday, 20 November at Newcastle Civic Hall, this year's glittering awards ceremony will comprise 14 categories celebrating the rising stars, high achievers and innovators who are driving the industry forward.

Accenture, which employs over 1,400 people in the North East, works with organisations of all shapes and sizes to help them embrace digital transformation and partnered with the awards to help 'shine a light on the region's tech ecosystem'.

Alec Berry, Managing Director at Accenture Newcastle, said: "The North East's tech sector has long punched above its weight when it comes to innovating and developing the digital solutions of tomorrow, and we've witnessed this first-hand."

David Darlington, Associate Director at Accenture Newcastle, added: "This is why events such as the Dynamites are so important. They're a great way of bringing people together from across the sector to shine a light on the region's growing tech community and champion its many successes. It's always a fantastic evening and we can't wait to join everyone in November to celebrate."

## Managed IT provider adds rugby star to team

A managed IT, communications and connectivity business based in Norton has welcomed a new addition to the team, in the form of Newcastle Falcons player, Jacob Oliver.

Coming from an entrepreneurial family background, Jacob joins Lucid Technology Solutions as Business Development Manager, tasked specifically with growing the company's cyber security service area.

Following an education at Barnard Castle School, Jacob has worked in private equity and for a contract furniture business, while also playing rugby as hooker for Newcastle Falcons and England age groups.

Jacob said: "Rugby instilled in me copious amounts of skills that are transferable into sales. Lucid is a great business that has a genuine customer-first approach and my decision to join was made easy when meeting Paul and getting to know him and his leadership."



## North East Businesses primed for AI revolution

Business leaders from across the North East have a golden opportunity to leverage the growing influence of agentic AI and realise the region's rich potential.

That's the compelling message coming out of CiberAI's inaugural AI summit — hosted by tech titan Herb Kim at the Newcastle Helix.

Power brokers and deal makers heard a handpicked panel of industry experts debate the pros and cons of agentic AI.

And in a week that up to £30bn of investment was earmarked for a brace of regional AI growth zones, CiberAI founder and CEO Mac McEldon painted a picture of opportunity and optimism.

"There's a reason I came home to the North East," explained the former Deloitte director and career consultant.

"This part of the world has always had the potential to embrace change and grasp opportunities. That's why I helmed CiberAI in my home city of Sunderland.

"We'd heard rumours that the growth zones were going to happen — it feels great to be here right now, standing on the cusp of something truly transformative."

McEldon and Thinking Digital founder and TEDx trailblazer Kim were joined by AI specialist, innovation consultant and the founder of Idea Junkies, Laura Richards, and experienced data scientist Mac Misiura.



Jacob's first priority is to promote the new systems that Lucid is putting in place to support businesses with cyber security, with a specific focus on legal and financial firms.

Paul Alsop, MD of Lucid said: "Jacob already has a great understanding of how to 'open doors' as it were, and has come in all fired up with the perfect attitude towards supporting us in growing the business. As a big rugby fan myself, I could see immediately that he transfers that drive on the pitch to his drive work-wise, and we're already seeing results. In his first week alone he secured some incredible contracts and that's purely down to his dedication and hard work."



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# Running a business in India wasn't exactly on my career bingo card



**Yet 25 years in, here we are. Just 11 months after launching The Resolved Group in Hartlepool, we've already expanded internationally.**

**Our second office is in Ahmedabad, which is India's sixth biggest city. It allows us to provide 24/7 support to our increasingly global client base.**

Scaling a business is never straightforward, but operating two offices 4,500 miles apart brings unique challenges. It's rewarding but not risk free.

A 2023 survey revealed that 70 per cent of UK SMEs abandoned plans for international expansion, often citing a lack of infrastructure or available talent.

That's why we know we've backed a winner by branching into India.

The country is dripping with tech talent.

There are five million software engineers alone, which for context, is more than the entire population of Sydney.

But talent alone isn't enough. I've learned that to succeed, your culture must be mirrored throughout the business.

Your workforce—whether in North East England or North West India—must share the same values and vision.

That takes a lot of effort and consistent communication, along with the right leaders to drive it home.

Our team in India are not a source of "cheap labour."

We pay around three times the local average wage because we want the best talent, not the lowest cost.

And we invest in their growth and wellbeing, offering flexibility and recognising achievements.

When people feel valued, they buy in—and buy-in is what turns a good team into a great one.

And we know we have a great team, as they've been crucial in delivering fantastic results for the business both at home and abroad.

Since the start of 2025, international leads are up 185 per cent. More than a third of all enquiries now come from abroad, especially the USA, Asia and the Middle East.

A big driver is our unique approach.

Instead of expensive rebuilds, we fix existing systems—even if we didn't build them ourselves.

That can be around 80 per cent cheaper for our clients – and if there is one thing in business that knows no borders, it's saving money!

But none of that would be possible without the right culture, and the right people.

Expanding internationally isn't a quick fix. It takes time, energy, and a long-term mindset.

These are my top tips for growing a business abroad:

- Get your systems straight from the start. Clear workflows, clear briefs, and one place where everything lives. Begin with a small, tight-knit team, and only scale once you know the model holds up.
  - Culture travels (or at least, it should). Set the non-negotiables like quality and deadlines but allow space for local ways of working. Trust the local leadership team to add that nuance, while making sure your core values remain consistent across the board.
  - Keep the communication rhythm steady. Write things down, record the tricky stuff and stick to routines—stuff like daily stand-ups and regular reviews.
  - **Remember:** Leaders set the tone, regardless of the location. It's about showing by example how you want things done. Trust and accountability flow from the top.
  - And above all, look after your people! Pay properly, as you would at home – recruit for talent, rather than value. Offer flexibility and recognition, along with a chance to grow. They shouldn't feel their location is a ceiling for their career.
- Expanding abroad isn't for everyone. But if you combine great talent with strong systems and shared values it can be a game-changer for your business.

[resolvedgroup.co.uk](https://resolvedgroup.co.uk)



# Talking Tech and Digital...

In the latest of this popular series of features Northern Insight spoke to...

## David O'Connell

Managing Director at Advantex Network Solutions Ltd.

### Did you always envisage a career in Technology?

Not at all, I actually started as an electrician. After taking my Cisco exams at college, I moved into data communications with Conex about 30 years ago. Since then, the last three decades have flown by and it is a career change I have never regretted.

### Tell us about the business and your team?

My brother Steve and I both worked long 9-12 hour shifts at Conex and realised we should put such effort into our own company and make a go of it on our own.

We'd even been told in our annual appraisals that we'd never leave the installations team and achieve our objective of working in the office. Needless to say this fuelled our desire to work for ourselves.

Initially we were just two lads in Sunderland with a van handling cabling but we quickly gained a footing with IP CCTV cameras before moving more into IP based systems. This gave us the springboard to fully enter the IT sector handling cyber security, hosted voice systems and dealing in internet connectivity.

We adapted a consultative approach which proved to be very powerful and has led historically to a high client retention rate.

One of the early highlights was dealing with USA bases across Europe which initially came via an enquiry from our website.

Steve retired in January and I took over as Managing Director with a fantastic 70 strong team of staff.

### What are your short, medium and long term plans for the business?

For short we have had a period of consolidation since Steve's departure. Medium term we are looking at continued growth with a longer term goal to attain a £20 million turnover. After 23 years I love the industry more than ever and am looking forward to the future with great optimism.

### What tips would you give someone starting a career in the IT industry?

Retain an endless thirst for knowledge and display perseverance, tenacity and a willing attitude.

### What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

Surround yourself with good people and don't be afraid to employ someone better than you.

### Who are your Heroes and Mentors?

I really admire the RAF flying ace Douglas Bader who achieved amazing success despite amputation of both his legs after a 1931 air crash, proof you can do anything if you want it enough.

### What are you currently working on?

We currently have a number of exciting projects. These include working with two clients in the MOD space and gaining security clearance to handle sensitive MOD documents.

We are also bidding for a multi-million-pound project at the old ITV studios in London, while working on one of the UK's largest battery plants and the world's largest monopile factory of its kind.

We are also actively involved in the Government's Connect the Classroom programme, which funds high-speed connectivity upgrades for schools.

### What sets you apart from your competitors?

We are the North East's only single-source technology integrator, offering a broad spectrum of solutions and a customer-first, consultative approach.

### What item of technology would you be lost without?

Lately, I'd say our AI platforms. The insights and efficiencies they give us are game changing - whether it's analytics in the industrial space or smarter ways of working. Without them, we'd really struggle to keep pace with the direction the industry is moving.

### How do you like to unwind?

I love to read and I'm an old gamer, so a couple of hours on the X box is a good release at the weekend.

My wife and I also love to travel and spend time in our motorhome in the Lakes and up in beautiful Bamburgh.

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“

*...don't be  
afraid to employ  
someone better  
than you...*

David O'Connell





“

*...Data grounds  
our work,  
creativity  
elevates it...*

Dan Summerill,



# Data meets design: Creating experiences that truly connect

*By Dan Summerill, UX Lead at Leighton*

As designers, we all love those sparks of creativity, the moments when ideas feel fresh and full of possibility. But that spark is only part of the picture.

**Data can provide direction, giving us confidence that our solutions tackle real problems for real people. When creativity and data work together, design becomes not just effective, but purposeful and meaningful.**

## Why Data Matters in Design

Design is often seen as instinctive, guided by empathy and inspiration. And while that spark is crucial, intuition alone can sometimes miss the mark. Data gives us a clearer picture of user needs, taking the guesswork out of design decisions.

Think of it like navigating a new city. You could wander the streets and hope to stumble across something good, or you could use local knowledge to find your way. In UX, data plays that guiding role, showing us where users struggle, what they engage with, and most importantly, where the opportunities lie.

With data our choices aren't just hopeful guesses, they're grounded in evidence.

## Data as a Confidence Builder

Anyone who's been in a design review knows how quickly discussions can spiral into opinion versus opinion. Data helps to cut through that noise. Usability testing, analytics, and session recordings don't just inform design decisions; they back them up.

Take e-commerce as an example, if 40% of users abandon checkout at the payment stage, we instantly know where to focus our attention. If heat maps show people skipping a call-to-action, it's not a matter of taste, it's a design problem we can look to solve.

Data gives us confidence that our refinements aren't just subjective tweaks but real improvements. And just as importantly, it helps bring teams together. Developers, marketers, and stakeholders can all rally around the same insights, making collaboration sharper and more focused.

## Avoiding the Data Trap

Of course, leaning too heavily on data has its downsides. Numbers rarely tell the full story. Grouping users into categories, for instance, can be misleading. Two people who look identical on paper, might behave or interact in completely opposite ways.

That's where creativity, empathy, and intuition step in. While data can reveal what's happening, creativity helps us ask why and imagine better ways forward. Great design isn't just about fixing problems; it's about delighting users, anticipating needs, and sparking moments of joy. And those leaps often come from ideas that don't yet exist in the data yet.

The goal isn't to choose between data and creativity, but to find the balance. Let creativity lead early exploration, and let data refine, validate, and evolve it into something stronger.

## A Process Grounded in Evidence

Designers today have no shortage of tools to generate insight and shape outcomes, both quantitative and qualitative. Interviews, surveys and direct feedback give us the why, revealing motivations and frustrations. Analytics, heat maps, session recordings and A/B tests give us the what and the how, showing us patterns in behaviour.

Together, they create a bigger picture that allows us to explore creatively, test rigorously, and evolve iteratively. And the payoff is clear: IBM found that catching usability issues early can be up to six times cheaper than fixing them after launch. Proof that embedding data into the design process isn't just effective, it's efficient.

## Lessons from Spotify

Spotify is a great real-world example of data-driven design in action. By analysing listening habits and behaviours, the platform creates personalised playlists like Discover Weekly, Release Radar and Daily Mixes. These features don't just boost engagement, they make users feel seen and understood – a masterclass in blending data science with creative UX, turning what could have been a cold algorithm into something that feels personal.

## Looking Ahead

The future of UX will only make this balance more important. With AI and machine learning, data analysis is moving toward real-time personalisation, creating experiences that adapt to each user's context. Imagine a website that reshapes itself depending on who's visiting.

But even in this data-rich future, creativity remains essential. Algorithms can predict behaviour, but designers bring the human touch, ensuring experiences aren't just efficient but meaningful.

As usability expert Jakob Nielsen reminds us: "Even the tiniest amount of empirical facts (say, observing 2 users) vastly improves the probability of making correct UI design decisions." Add creativity to that foundation, and we're equipped to design not just functional products, but experiences that resonate.

## The Takeaway

Data grounds our work, creativity elevates it. Together, they help UX designers move beyond guesswork, creating solutions that are not only usable, but truly impactful. In a world where digital products compete for every click, that balance is what makes design matter.

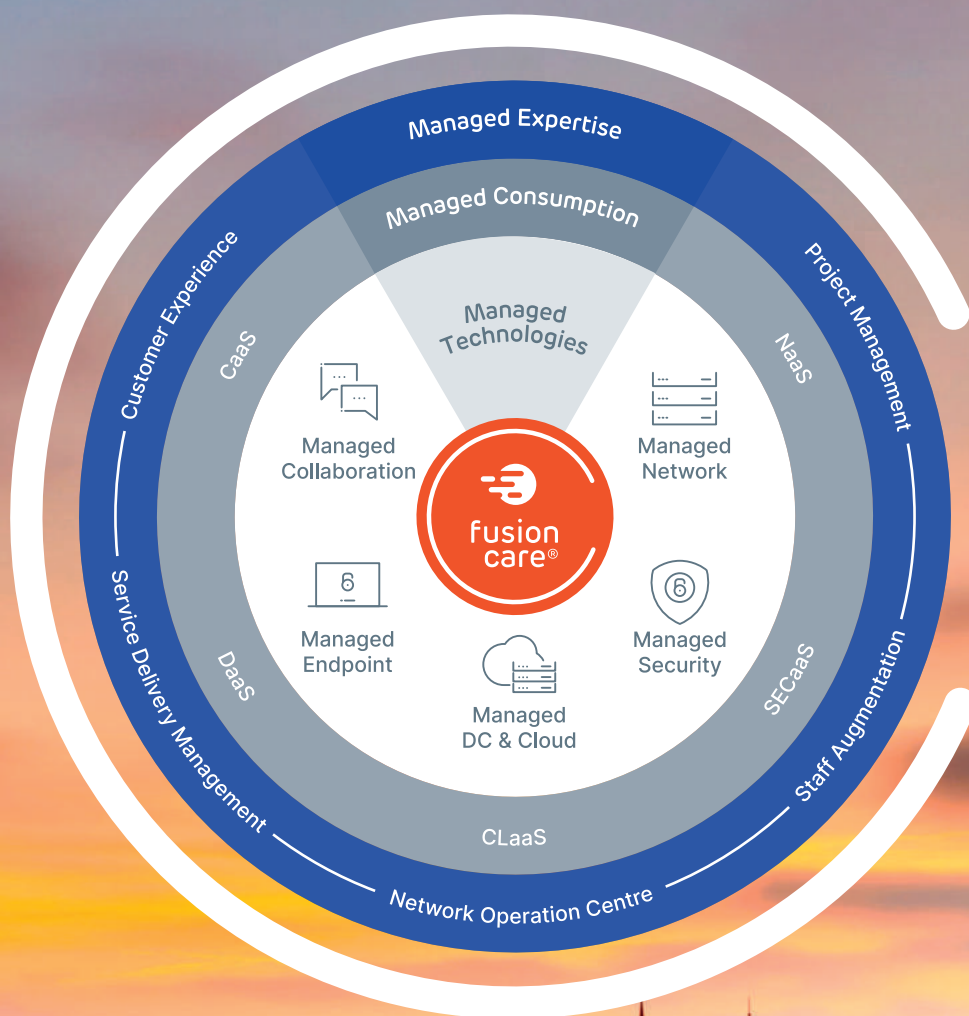
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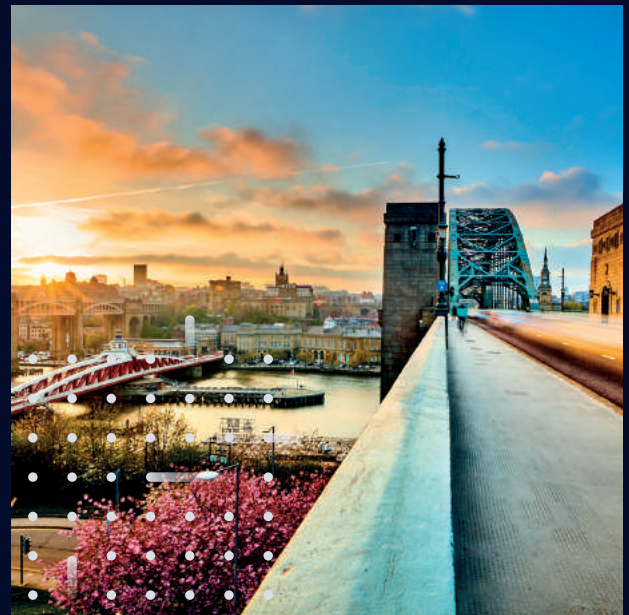
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## How print management software transforms the modern workplace

Printing is one of those business processes that many organisations take for granted. Yet for companies of all sizes, the cost of unmanaged printing—from wasted paper and toner to downtime and security risks—can be significant.

**Without visibility, it's impossible to know where inefficiencies lie or how much is being lost each month. This is where print management software comes in.**

By introducing a centralised system to monitor, track, and control printing across your organisation, you can cut costs, improve efficiency, and gain peace of mind that your information is secure.

### What is print management software?

At its simplest, print management software sits between your users and your printers, monitoring and controlling all print activity. Instead of sending jobs directly to devices, users send them through the software, which applies rules, logs usage, and makes sure the right document prints in the right way.







Solutions like PaperCut or MyQ—offered by SOS Group—take this a step further with advanced features. For example, Follow-Me Printing lets users release jobs securely at any authorised printer, preventing sensitive information from being left unattended. Detailed reporting shows exactly who prints what, while quotas and rules ensure responsible use of resources.

### **The financial benefits of print management**

For many organisations, the biggest impact of print management software is the immediate reduction in costs. Without proper management, employees often print in colour when black-and-white would suffice, print single-sided instead of double-sided, or even use company printers for personal documents.

Print management software allows businesses to set sensible rules, such as defaulting to duplex or restricting colour printing to specific departments. By cutting waste, companies can save on paper, toner, and energy bills.

Automated toner replenishment, predictive maintenance, and better fleet visibility ensure that devices remain cost-effective and reliable.

### **Improved security for sensitive data**

People often overlook printers and multifunction devices in cybersecurity, even though they frequently connect to networks, email systems, and cloud platforms. This makes them potential entry points for unauthorised access.

Print management software helps reduce this risk by holding documents in a secure queue until the authorised user authenticates at the device. Users can authenticate via card, PIN, or login, which ensures that confidential information never ends up in the wrong hands.

For businesses in regulated sectors such as education, healthcare, or financial services, this functionality supports compliance while also improving everyday security. As part of our wider Managed Print Services, SOS Group configures security settings properly and keeps them up to date.

### **Boosting productivity across the office**

Anyone who has lost time due to print queues, paper jams, or devices running out of toner knows how disruptive these issues can be. Print management software reduces downtime by routing jobs intelligently, balancing workloads across multiple devices, and automatically replenishing supplies.

This means employees can print where and when they need to, without unnecessary delays. IT teams also benefit from fewer service calls, allowing them to focus on higher-value tasks.

### **Supporting sustainability goals**

Sustainability is no longer an optional extra for businesses—it's a priority. Unnecessary printing wastes natural resources, generates CO2, and adds to landfill waste. Print management software helps reduce an organisation's environmental footprint by preventing overprinting and encouraging greener practices such as duplex printing.

SOS Group takes sustainability a step further by pairing print management software with energy-efficient solutions like Epson Heat-Free Technology. By consuming less energy and producing fewer consumables than traditional laser devices, Epson's technology significantly lowers the environmental impact of office printing.

### **Why work with SOS Group?**

At SOS Group, we understand that every business has unique printing needs. That's why we offer tailored print management solutions built around trusted technology like PaperCut or MyQ. From installation and integration through to ongoing support, we make the process straightforward and effective.

We combine Print Management Software with our full range of copy, print, and scan solutions to provide a complete service that reduces costs, improves efficiency, and supports sustainability.

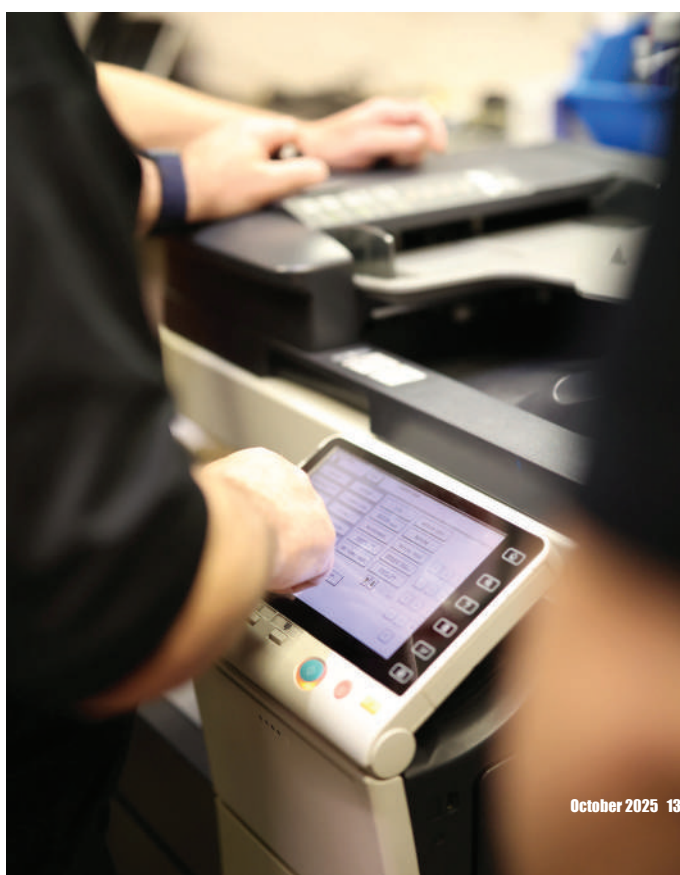
Whether you're a small business looking for greater visibility or a large organisation needing strict security controls, SOS Group can deliver a solution that works for you.

Partnering with SOS Group ensures you get not just the software, but a full-service solution backed by years of expertise. If you're ready to make your printing smarter, more secure, and more sustainable, explore our Print Management Solutions or contact our team today.

At SOS Group, we go beyond simply supplying office technology—we deliver solutions that truly make a difference for your business.

***If you're ready to transform your office with cutting-edge technology and exceptional support, let SOS Group be your trusted partner.***

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## Secret to success found in the North East

**A leading foreign affairs advisor to a series of US Presidents, the UK government, and US National Security Council, has cracked the secret to success.**

Dr Fiona Hill, the daughter of a coal miner and midwife, is no stranger to success

herself - the former White House aide and Senior Fellow at Washington DC's Brookings Institution is considered one of the world's top experts on Russia and Putin.

Born in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, Hill launches her new short podcast series, *Forged in the North*, at this year's Durham Book Festival in October.

Her guests include the music icon Sting, Yale historian Paul Kennedy, author Lee Hall (Billy Elliot), screenwriter Peter Straughan (Wolf Hall/Conclave), North East Mayor Kim McGuinness, Dragon Den's entrepreneur Sara Davies, Brendan Foster, who founded the Great North Run, and Paralympian Tanni Grey-Thompson.

Fiona Hill said: "The idea behind it was inspired by my memoir, *There is Nothing for you Here*, about how growing up in County Durham and how the social fabric of North East life in the 80's supported my ambitions in education, travel and social mobility."

## Support group deepens its Wearside roots

**A popular support group has opened its first dedicated office as it seeks to expand its offering and reach out to more businesses and people across Wearside.**

Not A Statistic CIC, which hosts support sessions for people in County Durham and Sunderland suffering from poor mental health, has opened a new head office at Houghton's Old Rectory.

The move will provide it with the space required for its two directors - Shane Knox and Ruth Haynes - to work under one roof and have their own dedicated workspace.

It will also support the setting up of Not a Design Agency, a new creative agency providing design, web design and development and brand development to small business owners and charities which will help generate revenue to support their wider community efforts.

Shane said: "After facing my own mental health challenges and seeing so many others fall through the cracks of an overstretched system, I realised there was a need for something different - something human, accessible, and rooted in real understanding.

"That's where Not A Statistic Northeast CIC was born. I wanted to create a space where people could feel heard, not judged; supported, not fixed. A space that says, 'you matter'."

"To date, we have delivered over 1,000 hours of free, peer-led mental health support, creating safe spaces for people to talk, connect, and feel understood.

"We've grown from a single idea into a movement - with three weekly support groups now running across Sunderland, Houghton-le-Spring, and Washington.

"But we also knew that to keep that support going, we needed sustainability and that's how Not A Design Agency came to life.

"It gave us a way to fund our mission while helping other CICs, start-ups, and socially minded businesses grow their impact too and the new office will be key to ensuring we can do just that."

The new office will also enable the recruitment of two interns from the University of Sunderland. One will work with Not a Design Agency to provide web development and design and the other will provide research and support on behalf of Not A Statistic CIC.



## Leeds agency expands global reach

**ThinkOTB has celebrated a major international client win in the same week it was officially presented with a prestigious King's Award for Enterprise for International Trade.**

The Leeds-based innovation and marketing agency received the award in recognition of its outstanding international growth, following on from its previous success with the Queen's Award for Enterprise in 2020.

ThinkOTB has also announced its appointment as creative partner to Croda Pharma, the pharmaceutical division of Croda International Plc - a global leader in specialty chemicals and sustainable solutions.

Croda Pharma develops and supplies high-performance excipients, vaccine adjuvants, and lipid systems to pharmaceutical and life science companies worldwide. As Croda Pharma enters a pivotal stage of global growth and brand evolution, ThinkOTB will provide strategic and creative services to support its teams across Europe, the US, and Asia Pacific. This will include brand positioning, creative campaigns, digital and print design, motion and film, social media, and content development - with the aim of building unified marketing communications that resonate globally while respecting local market nuances.

Jo Waddington, director of ThinkOTB, said: "Croda Pharma sought a partner capable of transforming complex scientific and technical content into clear, engaging storytelling for diverse international audiences. We are delighted to be extending our international portfolio and to be working as an extension of Croda Pharma's in-house marketing team."

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# ALEX COURTNEY on Content That Connects.

Bonded is the digital and media agency that prioritises connection. Join us as we connect with a different member of the team each month to get their take on all things digital media.

**Alex Courtney, Senior Content Manager at BONDED reflects on the beginning of his journey at the agency, ins and outs of his specialism and what connection means to him.**



**ALEX COURTNEY**  
Senior Content Manager

## Q: Introduce yourself, your role and what brought you to BONDED

**Alex:** Hi everyone! I'm Alex, Senior Content Manager at Bonded. My role revolves around planning, creating, and delivering content that helps our clients stand out online, through engaging landing pages and guide-led content. I work closely with our clients to ensure their message reaches the right audience in the right way.

Before joining Bonded I took a year out to reassess how I felt about the industry. After around nine or so months, I knew I wanted to jump back in, but the place had to be right. When I came across Bonded, I could tell this was an agency doing things in a way that resonated with me. After chatting with some of the Directors, it became obvious that connection and culture were more than "buzzwords", they were central to how Bonded operated.

## Q: What are some key areas of your specialism that people do not know much about?

**Alex:** Great question! When I say I work in content, most people assume I'm either solely a copywriter or that I run social media accounts. And while writing is definitely part of the job, it's much broader than that.

The real aim of what I do is to help businesses connect meaningfully with their audience. That might mean positioning them as industry experts, crafting messaging that shows they truly understand their customers, or simply giving them a voice that feels human, not robotic or AI-generated.

**"My role is to be the link between a brand and the people it wants to reach."**

## Q: Are there any upcoming developments in your specialism that you are excited about?

**Alex:** Absolutely. I'm excited to see how Google's new AI Mode is going to reshape the search landscape. Essentially, it's Google's latest innovation and one they're clearly investing heavily in. You may have already noticed it by the time this is published as it's being rolled out in the UK as we speak.

From a content perspective, it's a big shift. We now need to think about how to create content that not only ranks well, but also create it in a way that suits this new, fast-delivery format where answers need to be short, direct, and clear from the outset.

## Q: What does connection mean to you?

**Alex:** Connection in a business setting is everything. It creates that "all for one and one for all" energy that agencies need to thrive.

During my break from the industry, one of the things I missed most was being part of a tight-knit team. Agency life can be tough, and it's not for everyone, especially if the culture isn't aligned.

Since joining, I've genuinely felt like I've landed in a place where everyone is incredibly nice, helpful, and valued. I'm very excited to help grow our offering and see where we can take it next.

**BONDED**

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## Marriott Communications CEO launches Uncut - A new podcast exploring the real stories behind building something that matters

Marriott Communications is delighted to announce the launch of Uncut, a new podcast hosted by the agency's CEO, Samuel Marriott-Dowding.

Uncut offers raw and unfiltered conversations with founders, creatives, and visionaries who are shaping culture and business in brave and bold new ways. Each episode goes beyond the polished highlight reels to uncover the messy middle of identity, visibility, growth, and vulnerability.

The debut episode features Jay George, founder of Beyond the Boy, a fashion label rooted in self-expression. Jay shares the story behind his brand, exploring the healing power of fashion, the balance between creativity and commerce, and the courage to resist diluting his vision in a world that encourages us to shrink.

Samuel said: "The most powerful stories are never the neat, polished ones - they're the honest, unfiltered journeys of building something that matters. This podcast is about giving those stories space, so others can find inspiration, resonance, and courage in them."

New episodes will be released monthly, featuring diverse voices from across industries and communities across the UK and Europe.



## Happy hour comes to Radio Northumberland

Husband-and-wife acting duo Vanessa and Paul Dunn, from near Rothbury, are bringing laughter to the airwaves with their comedy sketch show Happy Hour, now broadcasting on Radio Northumberland.

The show has had a long and colourful journey. Originally launched on another radio station more than a decade ago, it later evolved into a podcast during the COVID years. Now in its third incarnation, Happy Hour has found a new home on Radio Northumberland, where it airs every Sunday at 7pm.

Described by the pair as "a sketch comedy broadcast with added stuff and nonsense", the show blends pre-recorded sketches with live features from the studio. Listeners can expect everything from witty skits with guest actors to playful quizzes, silly games, and the occasional "terrible joke" that has already become a regular feature.

"We all need a good laugh now more than ever," says Paul. "Radio Northumberland is a real community station, and we're delighted to be part of it, bringing our brand of humour to local listeners."

The station is now looking for a local business to sponsor Happy Hour by bringing a smile to each of the station's listeners.

Both seasoned performers, Vanessa and Paul met at drama school more than 30 years ago and have worked extensively in comedy and theatre ever since. Their credits include sketch work for Sunday for Sammy, appearances at the Edinburgh Fringe, and roles in popular North East productions.

Alongside Happy Hour, the couple are currently starring in the hit touring play Dirty Dusting, written by Ed Waugh and Trevor Wood. The comedy follows three office cleaners who, facing redundancy, stumble into running a phone chat line with hilarious consequences. Local dates include:

Tyne Theatre, Newcastle - 1 October

Darlington Hippodrome - 14 October

Middlesbrough Theatre - 16 October

[www.radionorthumberland.com](http://www.radionorthumberland.com) and DAB

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# Phonetic Digital out and about: Local events & client wins

From food festivals and community events to our own team challenges and client milestones, this season has been all about finding the right balance between work and play.

We started summer the right way, by heading down to Sunderland's Food Festival and relaxing in the sun. Supporting the local community is something we're always up for, so when the city put on such an exciting event like this, we had to get involved.

The city was almost at full capacity towards the end of the summer too. From the Red Roses' incredible 69-7 victory over the USA to the opening of The Keel Crossing, the city was alive with energy.

The sense of community, the atmosphere and the progress happening here is something we'll never get tired of shouting about. Whether it's supporting clients, cheering on big wins, or simply enjoying everything happening on our doorstep, this summer has been a great one.

Summer can sometimes be a slower time of year for some of our clients, but for Darlington College it's the exact opposite. Enrolment season is one of the busiest and most important times in their calendar, with thousands of students signing up and getting ready to start their courses.

We're always trying to go above and beyond for our clients, tailoring our services to support their needs best. For Darlington College, our support has gone beyond just building and refreshing their website.

We've worked on everything from site speed, SEO and performance improvements to making sure Google Analytics and Tag Manager



Our team at the Sunderland Food Festival

are set up properly. And when enrolment day came around, our team member Matthew was there on the ground, offering technical support to help keep things running smoothly.

Behind all of our hard work and summer fun our focus remains the same: delivering digital solutions that actually make a difference for our clients.

As we head into autumn, we know many businesses are looking at creating a fresh new set of goals.

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# Beyond the Metrics: The real impact of brand look and feel



When people revisit their brand, the focus often lands on numbers like awareness stats, engagement rates and conversion goals. But the real impact of brand identity reaches much further than the data.

**A strong brand shapes how you show up, how your team feels and how others respond to you. These are the quieter drivers of growth. They don't appear in your analytics, but they influence almost everything else.**

#### **A brand that feels like you**

Your brand should reflect who you are, what you do, how you act and what sets you apart. When those qualities are clear, whether it's innovation, trust, energy or creativity, people connect with you more easily and remember you for the right reasons.

It's worth stepping back and asking if your brand truly gives the impression you want it to. Would someone new to your business understand what makes you different?

#### **Confidence in every conversation**

When your brand feels aligned with your values and the quality of your work, you naturally show up with more confidence. Whether you're pitching to investors, sharing your site with partners or speaking at events, you know your identity backs you up.

That confidence changes how people see you. It signals professionalism, credibility and clarity, qualities people look for when deciding who to trust.

#### **A stronger sense of pride**

Brand identity also plays a big role internally. When your team feels proud of the brand they represent, it boosts morale, strengthens loyalty and builds momentum. People talk about the business differently when they believe in how it's presented. They feel more motivated to contribute and more connected to the purpose behind their work.

#### **A first impression that opens doors**

For many people, your brand is the first thing they'll see. Before anyone reads a word of copy, they've already formed a sense of your credibility and value.

That initial impression matters, especially in high-stakes moments like investment pitches or client meetings. A consistent, confident identity helps you be taken seriously from the start.

#### **Recognition that lasts**

A great brand doesn't just make a strong first impression. It helps you stay front of mind. When your logo, tone, colours and style all work together, they create something recognisable. You become easier to recall and easier to recommend.

In sectors where businesses often look and sound the same, a distinct brand is what sets you apart for all the right reasons.

#### **The power behind the numbers**

Pride, confidence and recognition won't show up in your dashboard. But they shape the results you care about. They affect who talks about your work, who decides to work with you and how loyal they feel once they do.

You might not be able to track those qualities with metrics, but you'll see them in the conversations you're invited into, the referrals you receive and the opportunities that come your way.

#### **Ready to elevate your brand?**

If your identity no longer reflects who you are today or where you're going next, we can help.

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“

*...The future will  
belong to those  
who are bold  
enough to show up  
as themselves...*



# Marketing and Media Matters

This month Northern Insight talks to...

## Lauren McWilliams

Brand Photographer & Strategist

### Did you always envisage a career in the Marketing and Media Industry?

No. I always knew I wanted to work with people, my ambition was to become a probation officer. After four years at university and nearly six years working within the Criminal Justice System and hostels, marketing and media weren't even on my radar. Looking back, it makes sense, my work has always been about people, stories, and creating impact, and now I get to do that in a completely different way.

### What has been your career path so far?

After leaving my last job in a local hostel, I launched my first business, focusing on photography. Over the past six years, it's evolved into a full blend of visibility strategy, and content creation. In the past year, I've co-authored a best-selling book, been a Great British Entrepreneur Awards finalist again, and launched my second business, Elara Community & Events Ltd, with my incredible friend Christina Lord a space for professional and entrepreneurial women to connect, learn, grow and collaborate something we felt was missing from the North East.

### What have been the biggest challenges you've faced so far?

Learning to back myself. In the early days, fear and doubt crept in a lot! Worrying what people would think or whether I was "enough." The moment I owned my bold, rebellious approach, everything changed. Now, balancing two businesses is its own challenge, but it's proof I'm building the life I once dreamed about. Everything I have learned and do I share with my clients to help them find their own version of their bold, rebellious self.

### Who do you respect most in your industry?

Anyone who dares to do it their way, the people who don't wait for permission, who take risks, and who show up consistently even when it's uncomfortable. Awards are wonderful, but everyday courage and creativity inspire me the most. It's more about the results and impact they are making.

### Which fictional media character can you most relate to?

Definitely Midge Maisel from *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*. She dreams big, breaks barriers, and despite everything stacked against her, she knows she'll make it happen and she does. I love her confidence, humour, and unapologetic boldness. If you haven't seen it go watch it, you won't regret it!

### What is your greatest strength?

Seeing the bigger picture. I can take someone's story, personality, and vision and translate it into a strategy that actually feels good and delivers results. One of my clients came to me for photography, saying she hated having her photo taken within six months of working together she not only started showing up with her photos online but owned her own voice and started doing some modelling, something she would never have dreamed of doing before but felt so much more confident and excited to say yes to new opportunities.

I love seeing some really step into their best version of themselves and cheering them as they do.

### What is your biggest weakness?

Trying to do everything myself. I'm learning to outsource and trust others so I can focus on the work that creates the most impact.

### What has been your proudest achievement?

Being a GBEA finalist, co-authoring a best-selling book, and launching Elara are huge highlights. But honestly, I'm proudest of creating businesses that empower people to dream bigger and take bold action.

### What are your future career aspirations?

To keep growing my impact. I want to expand my photography and strategy work, grow Elara into something transformative, and create retreats and events that bring people together in powerful ways.

### What is the best piece of business advice you've been given?

"Don't wait until it's perfect, just start." Every big step I've taken started with a slightly scary, imperfect decision, and that's where the magic happens in my opinion.

### How do you see your industry evolving in the next 10 years?

We'll keep moving toward story-led, authentic content over polished, curated perfection. The future will belong to those who are bold enough to show up as themselves. Especially as AI grows I think the need for real will grow too.

### How do you like to unwind?

Sea dipping, going on an adventure in the campervan just being outside it helps me fully switch off and recharge.

[laurenmcwilliams.co.uk](http://laurenmcwilliams.co.uk)



# ANYWAY

# COUNT

That equation began with Desantis, after playing occasional pickup games with friends, suggesting to Dorji in 2014 that they arrange an informal game of baseball for Thutun's youth.

"Out of the blue, Allen was like, 'Hey, I think we should play some baseball,'" Dorji says. "I was like, 'You speak your mind.'"

Desantis had noted how the Bhutanese could recall specific sporting moments, despite many occurring long before they'd had access to the internet. "I'd be told stories of Michael Jordan games that they had remembered, and everyone seemed to be fans of the Chicago Bulls. I was amazed at how well people could remember specific games in such fine detail that I had no memory of."

He discovered that these games had long been situated on television. "I was surprised to find from YouTube that they were watching an actual game of baseball. That was a surprise across the community. The next year, we went to America's favorite pastime, and we were excited to see the community. The next year, we went to America's favorite pastime, and we were excited to see the community. The next year, we went to America's favorite pastime, and we were excited to see the community."

"I began to share it like my father did," Dorji says. "I began to share it like my father did."

Desantis posted on Facebook advertising a first one-week baseball camp in the capital of Thimphu, home to 20% of Bhutan's population.

The camp had been late adaption of the internet, but when it came to social media, the Bhutanese were quick to catch up. Communication wouldn't be a problem. Instead, Desantis' challenges would be more subtle.

Unlike his childhood in the States, there was no diamond in the backyard. And Bhutanese kids were not likely to have a baseball bat or a baseball glove. "How are we going to play with practically no equipment?" And where are we going to play? Dorji asks, remembering the recurring questions the players' baseball journey.

"When you're playing in mountain, you have winding valleys with high peaks. So space is a limiting factor, especially in the capital. Finding locations was a challenge. Dorji leveraged contacts at the athletics distance from most of Thimphu's schools. They found a small amount of equipment they felt would suffice for the modest turnout expected. "If you build it, they will come" is a regularly quoted line from the seminal baseball movie *Field of Dreams*, but unlike Kevin Costner, Desantis and Dorji found that they didn't need to lay a single base. To the kids of Bhutan, the vision was enough. They arrived in their droves. Around 60 on the first day, 80 the next, and by the end of the week there were over 100 rookie ball



With average elevations of 10,000 feet, the mountains are a constant reminder of the country's high altitude.



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*Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker*



# Red Roses in the Spotlight!

**SASS media supports Francesca Johnson-Harding's call for women's rugby in the North East to take centre stage.**

**At SASS media Ltd, we've been supporting Francesca Johnson-Harding, assistant director of rugby at the North East Women's XV rugby union team, to encourage businesses to sponsor the sport in the region.**

Women's rugby came home to the North East when the opening game of the women's Rugby World Cup was played at the Stadium of Light in Sunderland, to great fanfare.

Francesca is determined that this should not be a fleeting visit for women's rugby in the region - but the sport is in dire straits and needs more investment.

Francesca is calling on local businesses and organisations - who risk seeing a brain drain from the region if women and girls have to move out of the area to pursue further study or jobs at the same time as their rugby career - to invest in female rugby players.

The Women's Rugby World Cup has come hot on the heels of the success of football's Lionesses, proving that there is an appetite for female representation in sport - and Francesca is taking the opportunity to put the spotlight on women's rugby in the North East.

The fact we do not have a Premiership rugby women's team in the North East is having an enormous impact on young women, their families and the local economy, as those progressing in the sport move outside of the area to play for Premiership clubs.

But Francesca hopes to be part of a movement that will see the return of women's Premiership rugby in the region.

Francesca says: "If we can get businesses in the region to realise there is an opportunity to be part of a movement to create a platform for female rugby players in the North East we could create a unique opportunity that would be priceless for the dozens of women and girls who are becoming part of a brain drain from the North East, because they have to leave their local area to play for better clubs.

"At the same time, we could create something truly special for new fans of the women's game in the region."

Recent events for the North East Women's XV have been a huge success and have made inroads into highlighting the plight of female rugby players in the region.

A Military Vs Cancer event at the Newcastle Falcons ground and some other women's matches, one of which raised £1,000, offer a glimmer of hope.

In the grand scheme of world sport, a thousand pounds sounds like a pittance, but for Francesca it meant the difference between a very small profit to be invested back into the women's game - or a personal pain in the pocket.



With this in mind, is she flogging a dead horse? Francesca doesn't think so, which is why she continues to bang the drum for women's rugby in the North East, which has wider benefits for the women's game as a whole across the country.

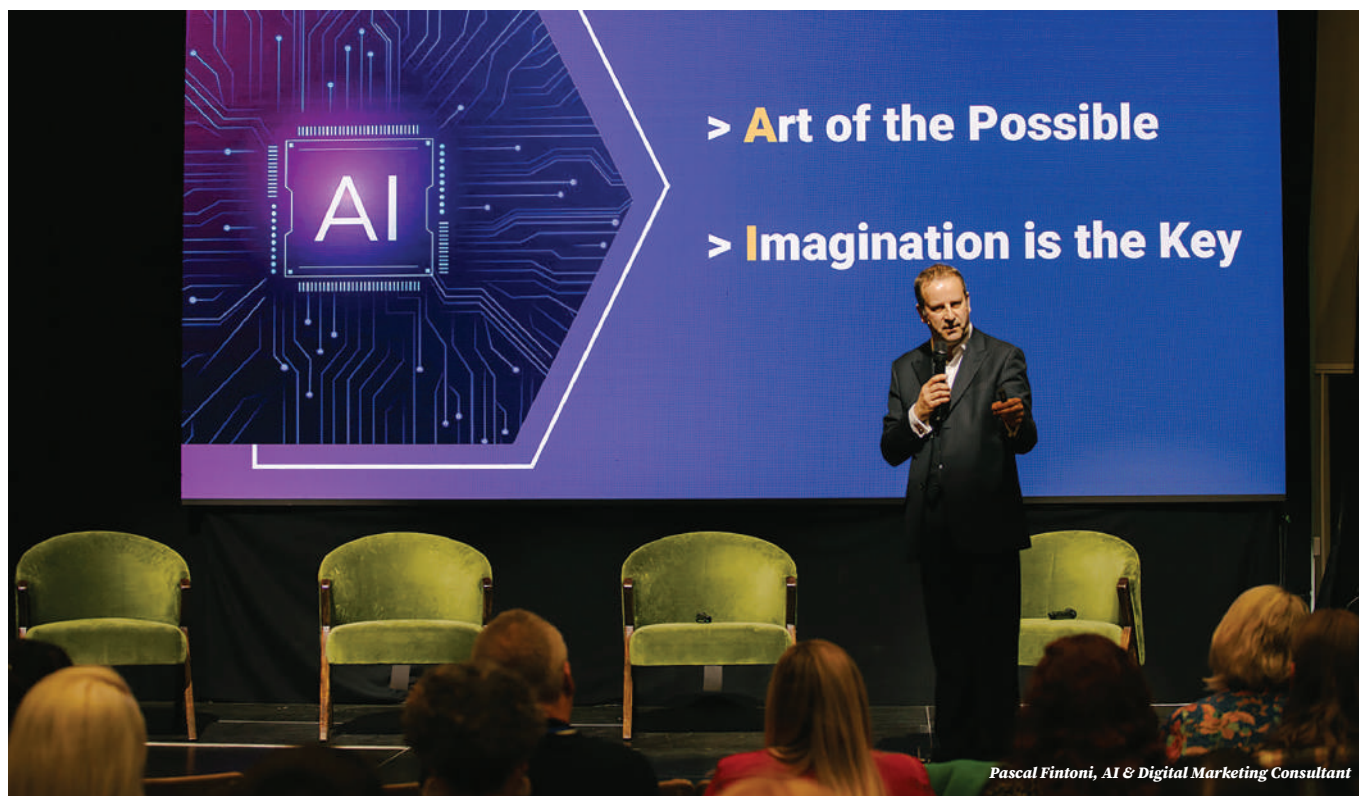
Francesca says: "We need to ensure the North East's hosting of the women's rugby world cup creates a lasting legacy for the women's game in our region.

"Now is the time to back women's sport, following on from the success of football's Lionesses and rugby's Red Roses.

"I would urge any businesses interested in sponsoring women's rugby in the region to get in touch."

***You can email Francesca at [cescaj@icloud.com](mailto:cescaj@icloud.com) or Sarah Walker at [sarah.walker@sassmedialtd.co.uk](mailto:sarah.walker@sassmedialtd.co.uk) if you are interested in sponsoring female rugby players in the region or would be interested in attending a networking lunch in support of women's sport in the region, which is planned for 2026.***





Pascal Fintoni, AI & Digital Marketing Consultant

# The Power of Imagination

What if AI became a teammate and not a threat?

**I must confess, after decades in digital marketing (slightly over three to be exact!), I've witnessed the arrival of many tech solutions that promised to change how we work for the better.**

Yet none have sparked quite the mix of excitement and apprehension as Artificial Intelligence.

And yet, the key to successfully introducing AI in our businesses lies not in complex technical understanding, but in something far more fundamental: imagination.

Imagination allows us to reframe AI from an ominous replacement to what it truly should be: your most capable collaborative partner.

When working with clients, I invite them to think of it as hiring two distinct types of assistants, each with their own capability and personality:

## Meet your Rookie Assistant

Your Rookie Assistant is enthusiastic, detail-oriented, and is ideal for those time-consuming tasks that often bog down your day. This digital colleague helps with research, conducting more detailed and deeper investigations than typical Google searches could ever achieve. Need content adapted and revisited? Your

Rookie Assistant handles rewriting with ease, changing style, length, format, and tone of voice to match different audiences perfectly.

Perhaps most impressively, this assistant excels at repurposing content, seamlessly converting information between different formats. For example, transforming text to visuals, visuals to audio, audio to infographics.

Think of your Rookie Assistant as focusing on more admin-centric tasks, this essential engine that keeps your business running smoothly.

## Enter your Consultant Assistant

Your Consultant Assistant operates at a higher strategic level, bringing years of expertise to more complex challenges. This digital advisor critiques documentation with fresh eyes, providing valuable second opinions, especially when dealing with large volumes of information that might overwhelm human analysis.

Need to implement new processes? Your Consultant Assistant deconstruct new ways of working into manageable stages, and importantly, it coaches how these should be executed. I have found it to be so useful for intricate analysis and planning, and it has a remarkable ability to break things down completely before building them up again, stronger and more efficient.

Finally, by far the most appealing aspect (which is why I kept it last), this assistant creates content from scratch based on your inventive prompts and briefs, encouraging you to be more daring and find ways to stand out from the crowd.

Think of your Consultant Assistant as your strategic thinking partner, the experienced

advisor who supports your business decision-making.

## The imagination factor

Here's where imagination becomes crucial: instead of asking "Will AI replace me?", start wondering "How will my AI assistants help me achieve what I've always envisioned?"

Suddenly, those ambitious projects you've shelved due to resource constraints become achievable. That comprehensive market research you've postponed? Your Rookie Assistant handles it. The strategic planning session you've been dreading? Your Consultant Assistant facilitates it.

For me, the businesses who approach introducing AI the right way aren't necessarily the most technically advanced. They're the ones whose leaders imagined new possibilities and embraced AI as collaborative partners rather than competitive threats.

## Getting started

Review your typical month and select one repetitive task that consumes too much of your time. Introduce your first AI assistant here, then gradually expand as you discover new collaborative opportunities.

Open your mind to possibilities and increase your team of digital assistants by going beyond ChatGPT. Try out these large language models: Claude.ai, Meta.ai, NotebookLM by Google, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, Perplexity.ai, Quora Poe.

## To your success!

**You can contact Pascal directly on 07801 729 741 or via [pascal@pascalfintoni.com](mailto:pascal@pascalfintoni.com)**





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## ...Tricks or Treats?..

It's October and tradition has it that the spirits will be out on Halloween and everyone will be trick or treating. Keith Newman asked some of his RADAR members to tell us "what's the best "treat" you've been able to deliver to your customers or employees?"



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The team at Radio Northumberland are looking for your ghost and supernatural stories not just at Halloween but all year round for the Phantom Frequencies Show and Podcast. Everyone has a spooky story to tell and often the best stories are those that happen to ordinary people. So if you have seen a ghost, had a weird coincidence or experienced anything paranormal send an email to [requests@radionorthumberland.com](mailto:requests@radionorthumberland.com)



When it comes to technology, there are a lot of Tricksters out there who like to take advantage of individuals and businesses who aren't digitally confident and not just the cyber criminals either! At AskMrsWatson.com we call them the 'KNOWLEDGE HOGS'. The best 'treat' I've been able to give my members is that moment of relief when something that felt overwhelming suddenly becomes clear and manageable and they can rest easy knowing that I have their back whether it's learning more about their technology or supporting them with data protection compliance. I love seeing the weight lift off their shoulders when they realise there's a simple way forward, tailored just for them. That spark of confidence and ease is the sweetest reward for both of us."

**Kate Watson,**  
[www.askmrswatson.com](http://www.askmrswatson.com)



As a PR company, what we give our clients is the space to shine. We help them tell their story in a way that feels authentic and connects with the people who matter most. Sometimes that's through media coverage, sometimes it's community connections, and sometimes it's simply helping them find the right words when they need them most. We give our clients reassurance, support, and fresh ideas — a partner who's cheering them on and helping their voice be heard. At the heart of it, we give them confidence in their story and the chance to share it with pride.

**Keith Newman,**  
[www.highlightspr.co.uk](http://www.highlightspr.co.uk)





As a travel agent, I've spent years helping families create magical Disney memories, but nothing compared to experiencing it myself with my daughters at Mickey's Not-So-Scary Halloween Party in Florida. Seeing their eyes light up as we wandered through the park, surrounded by glowing pumpkins, friendly ghosts, and trick-or-treat trails, was unforgettable. We danced along with the Boo-to-You Parade, met their favourite characters in their Halloween costumes, and enjoyed the rides with shorter lines. It was the perfect mix of Disney magic and spooky fun—an evening we'll all treasure forever. If you'd like to know more, pop in to see us in the centre of Whitley Bay.

**John Dixon,**  
Destinations by John [www.dbyg.co.uk](http://www.dbyg.co.uk)



Through Creative Heritage Studios, we deliver workshops and public engagement sessions to young people. Some of the young people we work with are neurodivergent creatives. I am neurodivergent, and so is my son. That is why I have started working with young people who have a similar lived experience. We offer locally made treats for the sessions we conduct with young people, ranging from brownies, cakes and bakes to sausage rolls. Working with small local businesses is something I am passionate about, as it helps the local economy and highlights businesses that our participants may never have heard of before. So the treat is not only enjoyed by participants but also has a positive social and economic impact.

**Corinne Lewis-Ward,**  
[www.creativeheritagestudios.co.uk](http://www.creativeheritagestudios.co.uk)

*Last month our RADAR members appeared on BBC TV, BBC Radio, Local TV and many magazines and newspapers. To find out more about the benefits of becoming a RADAR member, contact [keith@highlightspr.co.uk](mailto:keith@highlightspr.co.uk) or call Keith on 07814 397951.*

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# My weekend...

## Steve Brock

Professional photographer  
with a speciality in event,  
PR and commercial  
photography.

Here he tells us how he spends his weekends...

### Do you ever have to work weekends?

Yes, weekend work is a large part of a Freelance Photographers life, especially during the Summer months where there are tons of events on in the North East. Preparing for this, I had a look at my calendar, and I've had one clear weekend since June and fortunately the work will continue until the end of September before an autumn lull, then the winter events kick in.

### Are most weekends the same?

Not at all. In addition to outdoor events, I cover a lot of corporate events/functions and have recently covered military services, music festivals, functions at Northumberland Plate, the Hoppings, corporate awards, Pride, a County show, a number of community events, a couple of PR shoots, the Mela, the Great North Run and so it goes on. Variety is the spice of life as they say and it certainly in my job.

### Do you find it hard to switch off?

Unfortunately, yes. There are another five days in the week and again, I'm always doing something work related. Whether it be actual shoots, research/planning, admin or the dreaded late-night editing, I do find it hard to completely switch off but I do try.

### What do you do at a weekend which you can't fit in through the week?

The boring stuff really. Household chores, shopping etc but invariably, I'll be at the computer at some point, either editing or invoicing if there's been a busy week.

### Morning exercise or a recovery lie in?

I hate mornings! My life is governed by other people's diaries and If I have a busy day, I could be editing until the small hours. So, if there's an opportunity, I'll hit the snooze button as many times as I can. My brain tells me to get up and go to the gym but the body doesn't listen.



Steve Brock

### Big night out or a night in the house?

Nowadays, generally, a quiet night in bingeing TV if I get the chance (just watched the brilliant I Fought the Law) but given the chance I like nights out watching bands and having a couple of shandy's. Big nights out must be well planned as my powers of recovery aren't what they used to be and I have to be mindful of working the next day.

### How important is the weekend to you?

I do look forward to my weekends as even though I might be working one day, I'll hopefully still have some quality down time to chill and recharge my batteries, rather than the camera ones.

### What's the best thing about weekends?

Hopefully being all caught up and having time to catch up with family, friends and go wherever life takes me.

### Do you watch or play sport at a weekend?

My days of playing sports are well past me now. I'm a good watcher though. I'm a long-time season ticket holder at the Toon and

try not to miss a home game. My second spectator sport is/was Speedway. I say was, as I've supported Newcastle Diamond since I was nine but sadly the Diamonds folded a few years back but I do travel around the northern part of the country with friends to see meetings. I do miss the Diamonds as I took photographs there from 1989 until they closed in 2022. Other local sports do appeal and I've occasional fitted an occasional wrestling night in as they're good fun.

### Of a weekend, you'll usually find me most happy..?

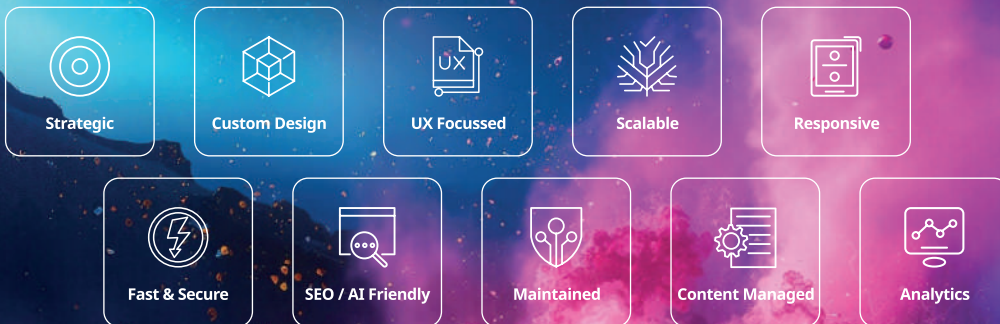
Speaking with family or better still travelling to see them. Out for a bit of breakfast with the lads, putting the world to rights in our Last of the Summer Wine moments and taking in some fresh air on a decent walk. Heading to St James for a game. I'm happy working too as I love my job as I'm a bit of a talker and I meet some fascinating folk on my travels.

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NORTHERN

# INSIGHT

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## Silverstone wins nationwide contract surveying student accommodation

A private student accommodation provider has appointed Silverstone Building Consultancy to carry out pre-acquisition building surveys on an extensive portfolio of student properties

located across the UK.

The portfolio includes a mix of purpose-built and converted student blocks, as well as HMO's, in the heavily student populated cities of Bath, Bristol, Exeter, Liverpool, Manchester and York.

Nine surveyors from Silverstone have worked on the major contract so far - with a further 15 surveys planned to be completed this autumn on properties in Bristol, Liverpool and York.

The surveys evaluate current condition, identify any significant issues and likely costs required for remedial works, as well as providing reinstatement cost assessments (RCAs) for insurance purposes.

Senior building surveyor at Silverstone Building Consultancy, Ross Haggie, said: "It's a great contract to work on and has been a real team effort so far - involving surveyors based at all of our three offices in London, Leeds and Newcastle. The client is benefitting from consistent surveys across their portfolio which will prove incredibly valuable."

## Eye Hospital comes into focus

Residents are starting to get a better glimpse of how Sunderland's new Eye Hospital will look, as work progresses on the final external works of this new city centre building.

Scaffolding that is currently concealing the building's shell has started to be removed from the distinctive building, giving passers by the chance to see the building's exterior for the first time. As the development closes in on completion - due for Spring 2026 - work will now ramp up on the hospital's interior, and ground works will begin on the surrounding landscape next month.

Contractor Kier, instructed by developer Sunderland City Council, will move its focus onto the Eye Hospital's internal fit-out, paving the way for South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust to take possession of the building and get it ready to welcome its first patients in Summer 2026.

Councillor Kevin Johnston, portfolio holder for Housing, Regeneration and Business at Sunderland City Council, said: "As the scaffolding is removed from the Eye Hospital, residents and visitors to the city will begin to get a sense of how this important new building will look when it is complete."



"The whole skyline in Riverside Sunderland is transformed, with Maker & Faber now complete, Vaux Housing progressing rapidly, Culture House closing in on completion, and - of course - our stunning new Keel Crossing bringing both sides of the river together. The scale and rate of change is phenomenal, and it will be great to see - for the first time - this nationally renowned facility, an Eye Hospital that will deliver often life-changing care to people from across the country."

Ken Bremner MBE is Chief Executive of South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust. He said: "We are very excited for the big reveal and are looking forward to people seeing what it will look like for the first time."



## BDN celebrates newly qualified architects' success

Huge congratulations to BDN's latest, newly qualified architects, Adam Lennox and Aaron Fitzakerly, who have successfully completed their RIBA Part III exams.

Adam and Aaron have studied together side by side on the Architect Degree Apprenticeship programme at Northumbria University, balancing four days each week in practice and one day at university, all while working towards a Master's degree and their Part III examinations over a four-year period.

As well as studying together, Adam (Building Design Northern - BDN) and Aaron (Fitz Architects) are also now working alongside each other following the successful integration of Fitz Architects into BDN to provide an all-encompassing, full service 'one-stop-shop' capability to clients. Adam and Aaron are just two of many employees starting out on their career journeys that BDN has supported through professional training, development and investment. The architecture, civil and structural engineering and project management practice, which has offices in the North East and North West of England, is now working closely with regional universities to encourage the next generation of architects into the industry and create new opportunities for emerging talent.

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L-R: Eleanor Robson with Stuart Miller, director of CECA North East, Vikki Munro, personal assistant at CECA North East and Kate Lloyd, civil engineering manager for CECA national

## CECA North East hosts year-long student placement

New College Durham student, Eleanor Robson, is gaining first-hand experience in industry thanks to a year-long T Level placement with the Civil Engineering Contractors Association (CECA) North East.

**The placement reflects the industry body's commitment to supporting young talent and providing meaningful opportunities that go beyond the classroom.**

CECA North East is the regional division of the Civil Engineering Contractors Association, the leading industry body representing civil engineering contractors across the UK. It supports companies that deliver vital infrastructure in sectors such as transport, utilities and energy. CECA North East provides advocacy, training and networking opportunities for its members and works closely with industry partners to promote skills, safety and sustainable growth in the sector.

Eleanor, 17, from Chester-le-Street, is studying Business Administration and Management at New College Durham. She will spend one day each week at CECA North East, alongside three full days and one-half day at college, as part of her T Level course. The qualification requires students to complete 315 hours of industry

placement alongside their academic studies.

The placement was facilitated by Claire Etherington, work placement coordinator at New College Durham. Claire accompanied Eleanor to the in-person interview with CECA North East, a new experience for Eleanor after her first-year placement had been conducted online.

Eleanor Robson, said: "When I first heard about CECA, I thought civil engineering was just building sites like those my dad works on. I started researching, met the team and quickly realised there is a lot more to the industry and that CECA connect with every part of it. The interview left me feeling excited and motivated."

Eleanor, who has several planned events and meetings to attend as part of her placement, has already taken on a leading role in CECA North East's College Bursary Programme. Working closely with Stuart Miller, she is helping shape how the scheme is delivered. She has

reviewed past applications made by college students across the North East and made recommendations to improve the quality and depth of this year's responses.

Stuart Miller, director, CECA North East, said: "Eleanor has hit the ground running. She is not just observing but is helping to run a key initiative and is already making a real contribution to the work we do. We believe in giving young people genuine opportunities to get involved and grow their skills and Eleanor is doing just that."

As part of the College Bursary Programme, Eleanor is helping shortlist candidates from five colleges alongside CECA's Foundation Group. Finalists will be interviewed by the group and the winners will be announced at a regional awards ceremony, with each receiving a £500 bursary.

With plans to go to university and pursue a career in human resources, her placement is already giving her valuable insight into how people management works in a highly regulated and safety-focused sector.

Eleanor, added: "It has been great to learn how HR works in a sector like this. I have been able to reach out to CECA members in HR roles and understand more about what they do. Stuart has really encouraged me to take advantage of every opportunity. It is nice to be trusted to run something important rather than just do the odd task here and there. I already feel like I am building skills that will help me in my career."

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





Neil Turner

## Taxing Times for construction

By Neil Turner, Director,  
Howarth Litchfield.

We are all waiting with excitement (or is that trepidation?) for the budget on 26th of November when Chancellor, Rachel Reeves will make a series of decisions on the economy and changes to taxation.

**So, what will she do? Well, there has been much guessing and commentary so I thought I would add my thoughts from a building and architecture perspective. I will start by saying I don't envy her and her team as they attempt to balance the books!**

Within the North East, construction remains a key element of the regional economy and it is vital that we encourage this sector to prosper and grow.

My suggestions, if asked, would be that the Government does not add any further financial burden to the challenges of building. Throughout my career I have seen enough alterations to the planning systems, building control and ever demanding environmental and sustainability requirements. Worthy as they all are, they simply add time, cost and pressure to the process of designing, procuring and building any project.

I would also incentivise environmental design, so that energy performance is rewarded, not sneered at. Carbon zero has

become a negative among many current politicians. We clearly need a balance of fossil and renewable energy generation. Let's offer incentives, such as reduced taxation to clients who invest in buildings that use less energy. Many of my clients want to reduce energy but the investment is high due to upfront capital expenditure, so let's provide a financial incentive for them to do so.

At the other end of the scale many listed buildings are older and use more energy, so help for this area of business should be different. Owners of these buildings face higher costs with specialist contractors and limited specific (often expensive) materials, so a 20% VAT bill only penalises owners that try to do the right thing. A reduction in VAT would help on repairs, maintenance and re-adaptation.

Our tax laws are now so complicated and cumbersome if you consider that a new build is zero rated whilst someone renovating must pay 20%, with sliding scales of 5% for certain renewables. A simplification would assist, but I can't see this coming along.

Build costs rose after the pandemic and although they have stabilised, the plateau is at a higher level. The increased cost of construction projects including recent NI increases for staff only add to the pressures on tender prices. Most clients need to be philosophical, brave and committed

when they receive their contracting tender prices, which are often more than they envisaged.

I am still busy with some great, committed clients, but we are having to work harder than ever to drive down the cost whilst achieving the brief.

I have read that Stamp Duty Land Tax (stamp duty) may be altered - the cost increases over recent years have certainly affected the ability of people to move up (and down) the housing ladder. More movement means more work for architects, surveyors and builders at the smaller end of the build chain. Rumours persist of a replacement stamp duty in the form of a wealth tax for properties over £500k value - less significant perhaps here in the north east than the south. I cannot see how this will help the housing market and doesn't encourage aspiration or desire to build great architecture.



Lastly, but by no means least, I would like to see a reduction in VAT on domestic energy bills from 5% to zero, as this would help everyone. The lowest income houses in the country spend a larger proportion on energy - so this measure would help those the greatest.

So, we will wait and see what happens. This budget looks set to shape our immediate future in the construction sector and wider society - for better or worse.

**Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield can be contacted on 0191 384 9470 or email [n.turner@hlpuk.com](mailto:n.turner@hlpuk.com) [www.howarthlitchfield.com](http://www.howarthlitchfield.com)**





# Community engagement a critical part of Tyne Coast College's relocation project

Hebburn-based, Castle, has launched a community and stakeholder engagement programme in its role as main contractor for the relocation of South Tyneside College and South Shields Marine School, part of Tyne Coast College.

**The £95m project is a partnership between Tyne Coast College and South Tyneside Council. It is being funded by Tyne Coast College, the North East Combined Authority, the Department for Education (DfE) and UK Government.**

With the college moving from Westoe Village to South Shields town centre, both the college and Castle are committed to forging strong relationships with stakeholders and local communities. From September, in partnership with South Tyneside College, Castle will engage with a number of schools that have established links with the college, to offer site visits, work experience and in-school presentations to highlight the varied career paths that construction can offer.

The project will create a 15,000 sq. metre campus on King Street. It will include the repair and upgrade of the listed building on Barrington Street, the conversion of the former BT building into student accommodation and the development of units within the Readhead area to create additional dedicated college facilities.

As the project progresses, Castle and the college, will invite stakeholders, careers leaders, construction students, heads of secondary schools, community groups and businesses to meet key personnel associated with the build.

The company has a specialist stakeholder and engagement team in place and a dedicated website which will contain a range of information including regular updates on construction milestones and details on road closures or diversions during the contract period.

The website will also signpost ways for local companies to supply services to the project and job roles that become available



Back row (left to right) Simon Ashton, principal at South Shields Marine School with Chris Meadowcroft, operations director, Castle. Foreground: David Gardner, assistant principal at Tyne Coast College

throughout the course of the development. There will also be updates on meetings with local groups, residents and businesses and details of donations by Castle to local charities and worthy causes linked to the project. The college website will also host a dedicated area for those wanting to be kept up to date on the project and college offer.

Andrew Dawson, managing director at Castle, said: "The relocation of South Tyneside College and South Shields Marine School will bring huge benefits to the borough and wider region. We also understand that the project will be of huge interest to a vast range of people in the borough, regionally, nationally and, in terms of the marine school, internationally.

"We have put a very strong emphasis on community and stakeholder engagement and have appointed a dedicated team who will build relationships and ensure a regular flow of communication. We look forward to sharing news and updates during the course of the project as we deliver an outstanding facility that will play a key role in shaping the futures of so many people in South Tyneside and beyond."

Dr Lindsey Whiterod CBE, Chief Executive, Tyne Coast College, said: "We are looking

forward to embarking on a programme of events and activities as part of the community engagement programme and are excited by the opportunities it will offer those who live and work in South Tyneside and the wider region.

"Our vision for the new campus will reshape education in South Tyneside and we are passionate in ensuring that the people of the borough are part of that journey from the very beginning."

Councillor Margaret Meling, Lead Member for Economic Growth and Transport on South Tyneside Council said: "This project represents a major investment in the future of South Tyneside and it's vital that local people are at the heart of it.

"From creating opportunities for young people to explore careers in construction, to supporting local businesses and investing in community initiatives, this is about more than bricks and mortar. It's about giving back and making sure the benefits of the development are felt far and wide."

**The community engagement website is [www.castlecommunity.co.uk](http://www.castlecommunity.co.uk)**



# The Dream Designer

*GR Design Studios and Ray Watkin – bringing your dreams to life.*

Anyone who's tried designing a new room layout or, for the more ambitious, a house extension, knows what sort of minefield can quickly be revealed.

**It's even more treacherous if you are trying to design something which affects your business. Get it wrong and it could turn out to be very expensive...in every sense of the term because it will have cost to make some alterations and it could cost if business is affected.**

Which is where Ray Watkin at GR Design Studios comes in because he can make your dreams come true and, perhaps more importantly, stops you from making some very expensive mistakes.

"I must admit that I've seen some disasters in my time where people have instructed a builder or joiner to do something which has failed miserably," said Ray. "I've now been designing interior spaces small and large since 2008. It can vary from a living room or ensuite bathroom, all the way up to a complete house.

"We're also increasingly busy working on commercial properties where time can be critical. If we're working on something like a restaurant design, this will invariably, at some point, require the restaurant to close...either partially or fully. The same applies to an office because any sort of disruption can have a negative impact. Time is of the essence.

"So what tends to happen, both with commercial and residential designing, is that I speak to the client and get an idea of what they're hoping to achieve. This is the point where my experience in designing comes into play because I can either suggest something different or prevent the client making a major mistake."

The snag with trying to do a spot of designing on your own is that, unless you are an expert, you won't really understand what's fully involved. You are probably unaware of new trends and new techniques which can often improve your original ideas and help with costs.

And it's not just about bricks and mortar. What about furniture, lighting, décor, budget and timescales?

To help with that, GR Design Studios has a visualisation service where they allow you to walk through your dream design. It has 360-degree views in high resolution. It allows the client to see exactly what will happen and what the result will be and ensure they know everything before spending any money. You'll be given a rough estimate of the overall cost.

"Clients often have a rough idea but don't really know what they want. This is where my experience counts because I can push them out of their comfort zone. People don't realise what's possible. I can turn a bad idea into a brilliant idea.

"Before we put wheels into motion, we do the design, work out the supply requirement and monitor the build. We consider everything and deliver everything.

Remember, nearly every job has a lot of moving parts...designers, architects, builders, glaziers, carpet fitters, decorators...we use trusted contractors to take a project from a blank canvas to the finished article. The client can get on with their lives or their business."

So, are you considering making changes to your home or commercial property? Do you know what you want but haven't a clue how to make it a reality?

The best idea is to speak to Ray Watkin at GR Design Studios. He'll have a chat with you...get a feel for what you want to achieve...and provide you with a design to make your dreams come true. Ray will have seen hundreds of design jobs...he could have a brilliant idea which you'd never considered.

**Contact Ray at GR Design Studios in Newcastle on 0191 597 5633...email him at [ray@gr-studios.com](mailto:ray@gr-studios.com) or contact via the company's tremendous website where you'll also see what he's been up to.**

**[www.gr-studios.com](http://www.gr-studios.com)**











## BUYER BEE-AWARE

A leading North East builder – currently celebrating bumper sales – has launched a three-year strategy to make its developments as habitable for wildlife as they for humans...

**For several years, the slogan Be Kind has adorned everything from T-shirts to fridge magnets, but one of the region's developers has given it a literal...and practical...twist.**

Because Miller Homes North East is making sure that every home it builds has the welfare of birds, bees and other wildlife at heart – and has launched a new strategy outing the environment front and centre.

Miller Homes' Sustainability Strategy is part of a roadmap towards meeting its target of net zero across the whole organisation by 2045.

And the company believes working in harmony with nature is integral in ensuring its homes become the foundation for fully sustainable communities.

Its commitment starts with site selection, with habitat protection built into planning from the earliest stages.





Although planning requirements now routinely include provisions such as bat and insect bricks, Miller Homes provides a range of additional features within its developments.

These include nesting bricks for endangered bird species, providing access routes for hedgehogs and using surface water drainage ponds to create habitats for insects, amphibians and other wildlife.

Along with protecting wildlife, the Sustainability Strategy informs decisions on everything, from materials used in constructing and equipping new homes, to access and the use of locally sourced labour and energy efficient utilities.

Research by the Zero Carbon Hub and the NHBC Foundation has established that new build homes are more than 50 per cent more energy efficient than renovated older properties.

The electricity supply in place, when each new home is handed over to its owner, comes from at least 90 per cent renewables.

And low energy or LED lighting is installed to reduce electricity consumption and dual flush toilets and aerated showers help homeowners minimise water use.

On site, the company uses electricity only from suppliers that draw on at least 90 per cent renewable sources and, where possible, uses local contractors and tradesmen, to support the community.

Integration with services and amenities is essential and 86 per cent of Miller's current homes are within 500 metres of a public transport node.

Miller Homes are built using only sustainably grown timber, while kitchens are fully certified to Forestry Stewardship Council standards.

And the company also recycles 70 per cent of its construction waste - diverting a remarkable 98 per cent of it from landfill; in 2024, its programme to protect resources actually reduced waste by more than a tonne for every home it built.

"At Miller Homes, we're not just building houses, we're creating the foundations of sustainable communities designed to thrive for generations," said Lauren Angus, sales director at Miller Homes North East.

"Working in harmony with the natural environment and following

the science on protecting the future brings benefits for our customers, the community and ourselves."

Miller Homes North East's eye for detail and commitment to the bigger picture - for wildlife as well as home buyers - has reaped significant rewards as the company - which has 10 active developments across the region - recently saw a surge in sales.

It has already sold 95 per cent of its 2025 stock with fewer than 20 homes left to sell before the close of the year - and some sites now completely sold out.

The developer puts this down to a variety of factors, including its buyer initiatives.

A range of deposit-based schemes is available for everyone from first time buyers to families, while Miller will also step in to sell the existing properties of those looking to downsize.

For current homeowners who are looking to make a move but are reluctant to face the, often stressful, task of selling their existing home, Miller's Part Exchange and Assisted Move schemes are designed to make the process as easy as possible.

In addition, an Own New Rate Reducer - which is a mortgage offering lower monthly payments for the initial period - allows buyers to reduce their interest rate while still owning 100% of their property.

And, if required, the housebuilder will purchase their home through its Part Exchange scheme, sparing customers the need to find a buyer and covering the cost of estate agent and advertising fees.

"It is also the case that buyers are increasingly appreciating well designed homes," said Lauren.

"Miller is known for combining traditional styling features with the spacious, light and flexible interiors that modern buyers expect and for building homes to a very high standard - and that reputation is undoubtedly serving us well."

***For more information about Miller Homes developments across the region, visit [www.millerhomes.co.uk/locations/north-east-of-england.aspx](http://www.millerhomes.co.uk/locations/north-east-of-england.aspx)***





# Banks Homes brings in North East design expertise for super-luxury Symeon Manor



Aisling Ramshaw, head of sales and marketing at Banks Homes, with Rachel Redpath of Furnish Property Staging at Symeon Manor in Durham City

**Housebuilder Banks Homes has called on North East interior design expertise to put the finishing touches to one of the region's most desirable new homes.**

**Banks has appointed Furnish Property Staging to create a detailed design specification for the super-luxury, six-bedroomed Symeon Manor, which sits on the southern edge of Durham City.**

The Manor sits at the centre of Banks' prestigious Mount Oswald site, and comes with a substantial private landscaped garden, a spacious three car garage, an open plan kitchen and dining area, a study and a home cinema space.

The Symeon Manor staging includes furniture from Vaunt Design and Gallery

Interiors, statement artworks from Greenlily Art and accessories from Fauxquet, Rowen Homes and the Suffolk Nest.

Founded by lawyer-turned-designer Rachel Redpath, Furnish Property Staging delivers bespoke furnishing designs for investors, developers and homeowners across the North East which help to provide inspiration for how properties might be tailored by potential buyers to their personal tastes.

The North Tyneside-based designer previously worked on one of the properties in Banks Homes' adjacent Symeon Court development, which comprises eight other luxury homes, all but one of which have now been sold.

Rachel Redpath says: "Symeon Manor is an absolutely exceptional property with a great deal of versatile space and provides a unique canvas which it's been a joy to work with.

"We want people to fall more and more in love with the property as they're exploring each different part of it and to be able to visualise how they might put their own individual stamp on each room design.

"Banks Homes' commitment to quality shines through everywhere you look at Symeon Manor and it's going to make a magnificent forever home for whoever is

lucky enough to get to call it theirs."

Each of Symeon Manor's bedrooms features a contemporary en suite bathroom, with the master bedroom having a walk-in dressing room and a large south-facing terrace, while the kitchen has been created by specialist designers Omega and features a range of Miele appliances.

Aisling Ramshaw, head of sales and marketing at Banks Homes, adds: "Symeon Manor is a truly outstanding luxury home and we're so excited to be almost ready to share it with everyone.

"Rachel's vision for Symeon Manor has been brought to life in wonderful detail, with the high-quality fixtures and fittings that we specified for the property being beautifully complemented by the excellence of her design work.

"Banks Homes' guiding principle is to create new homes that will enrich their owners' lives, with style offered as standard, and we've more than lived up to this at Symeon Manor."

**Viewings of Symeon Manor are available by appointment only. For further information on Symeon Manor, and on Banks Homes' growing portfolio of residential developments across the North East and Yorkshire, please visit [www.bankshomes.co.uk](http://www.bankshomes.co.uk)**



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## New student accommodation and Asda convenience store set for Durham's Mount Oswald development

Plans for dozens of new student apartments and a new convenience store at the prestigious Mount Oswald site in Durham City are set to move forward after they received unanimous backing from the members of Durham County Council's planning committee.

**North East employer the Banks Group has worked with leading supermarket Asda to develop plans for a 3,000 sq ft Asda Express convenience store on The Drive, opposite South College and close to the Howlands Park & Ride, which is the retailer's first store within Durham City.**

The plans also included purpose-built student accommodation above the retail space, which has been designed by Newcastle-headquartered GRADONARCHITECTURE and includes a mixture of 93 studio apartments and shared flats.

A planning application was submitted by Banks Property to the County Council late last year – and now, after it received a recommendation for approval from the Council's expert planning officers, the Council's planning committee has now been minded to approve it.

John Ruddick, principal development manager at Banks Property, says: "The new student accommodation at Mount Oswald

will help to meet a clear local need and will also help to reduce the pressure on the local housing market that is coming from properties being converted into houses of multiple occupation for students to use.

"We always envisaged this part of the Mount Oswald site as being perfect for retail use and had a lot of interest in it from many of the UK's best-known retailers.

"Asda showed real enthusiasm for opening their first Durham City store at the Mount Oswald site from the off and we're extremely pleased to be working with such a well-known and respected brand."

The Banks Group has been progressing its comprehensive development proposals for Mount Oswald since they were first approved by Durham County Council over a decade ago.

Banks' dedicated regional housebuilding company, Banks Homes, has recently completed work on nine luxury homes in the centre of the Mount Oswald site which

comprise Durham City's most exclusive residential development, Symeon Court.

More than £4.2million will have been allocated by Banks to pay for substantial improvements for the local community by the time of the overall development's completion.

These include improvements to local highways, contributions to the construction of a new community building at Lowes Barns and the provision of additional classrooms at two local schools, St Oswald's Church of England and Durham St Margaret's Primary.

Graham McDarby, managing director at GRADONARCHITECTURE, said: "We are proud to be playing a key role on the Mount Oswald site. Currently working with Banks on several projects, this project showcases our architecture and experience in this sector and demonstrates our commitment to the region and our North East heritage, in addition to the range of diverse overseas projects we are currently working on.

"This plot responds positively to the adopted Mount Oswald Durham Masterplan and provides a strong, high-quality gateway to the overall development, despite challenging topographical and ecological factors.

"With over 16 years of industry experience in a range of sectors, the last few years have proved challenging for many businesses, including our own. This project has been in the making for over three years and it is now extremely satisfying to see it coming to fruition, testament to the resilience of our own business and that of Banks. We now look forward to seeing the project become reality on site."

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





**Michael Richardson**  
**20 Questions for**  
**20 Years**

“ Sometimes, the  
only way forward  
is through!

## Question 3 of 20

Each issue, founder Michael Richardson answers one of 20 questions, exploring 20 eventful years of ups, downs and more, at the Northeast of England headquartered ACT Group.

### What's been the hardest year for ACT Group? And why?

“Covid was hard. But you know what? Something that helped me through it was thinking back to year one. ACT's first year was brutal!

“I left my job in 2006 to start ACT. I'm an ambitious guy. I work hard. And I thought that some of my ideas would put me ahead of the competition – including my previous employer. Clearly, because of what happened next, my previous employer thought that I might do well, too!

“Without going into too much detail, stories were told – about me. Stories that negatively affected relationships with suppliers and customers and, believe it or not... it got even worse than that!

“Some stories positioned me, wrongly of course, the wrong side of the law. A resulting police investigation lasted months. That was so hard. Because me and my family were on the wrong end of a he-said-she-said. It was stressful. And I don't mind admitting, tearful.

“Eventually, dust settled, the stories were seen for what they actually were, and the chapter concluded. It was hard not to be bitter. But, of course, sometimes, the only way forward is through! So on we went. And here we are twenty years later. Thankfully!

**Next Time:** How we measure how we're doing. 'Us' v 'them'.

## Irresistibly Interesting Stories for Engineers, Creatives, Designers & Makers

### WORLD'S SMALLEST METAL RUBIK'S CUBE

Created in 2024 for the 50th anniversary of the 3D puzzle. It's teeny!

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/worlds-smallest-metal-rubiks-cube/>

### TIMELESS ENGINEERING MEETS HIGH END WATCHMAKING

Hypercar Bugatti and high-end watchmaker Jacob & Co have joined forces.

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/timeless-engineering-meets-high-end-watchmaking/>

### BEST CYCLING MULTITOOLS UNDER £100

Cyclist.co.uk has created a roundup of some of the best pocket bike multi tools of 2025. All are under £100 so ideal for a Christmas (eek!) gift.

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/best-cycling-multitools-under-100/>

### PRODUCT SPOTLIGHT: VG4 & VG7

These tools are both extremely high-performing and competitively priced for the UK market.

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/product-spotlight-vg4-vg7/>

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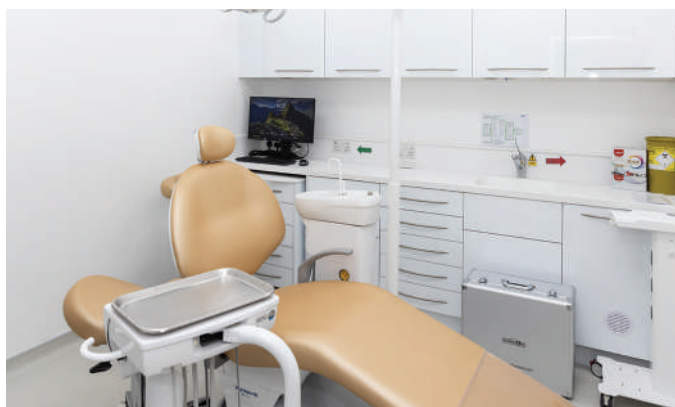




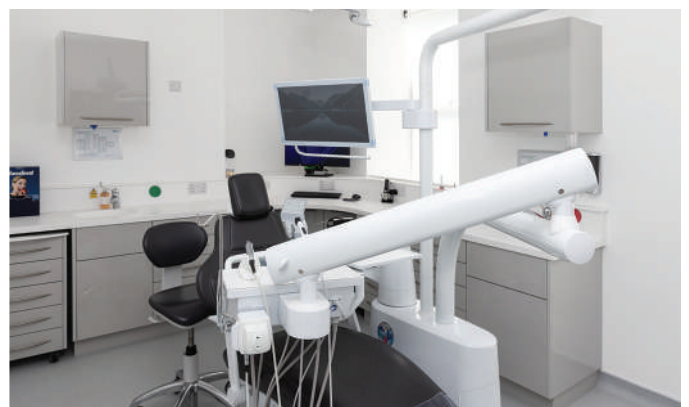
## Elite Smile Studio Launch

Company chairman Brian Dickinson recently attended the official opening of the new Elite Smile Studio on Gosforth High Street. "This is the first time in our 50 year history that we have been involved in this type of work and I am proud of the end product which our staff have turned out."

Owner Nitam Narkhede said "We're extremely pleased with the work carried out by WDL on our new dental practice. They were professional, efficient, and delivered high-quality results on time. Communication was clear throughout, and they handled challenges with great expertise. Their attention to detail and commitment ensured our vision became reality. Highly recommended for any commercial project!"











## Luxury Living in the Heart of Hexham

Dickinson Apartments offer timeless elegance and modern comfort.

Nestled in the heart of Hexham's historic market town, Dickinson Apartments are quickly becoming a sought-after address for those seeking luxury living in an exceptional location. This elegant development offers a collection of stylish one to three-bedroom residences, perfectly positioned for those who value heritage charm, cultural richness, and contemporary comfort.







Set within a striking traditional stone-built structure, Dickinson Apartments capture the best of both worlds, preserving timeless architectural character while embracing modern interior design. Residents are welcomed by a bright central atrium, where natural light floods the space, creating an inviting ambiance. A traditional staircase with graceful balustrading adds to the building's historic charm, while the inclusion of a lift ensures accessibility for all residents.

Inside each apartment, attention to detail is paramount. Open-plan living areas are designed to feel spacious, airy, and bright, creating an environment that is both refined and comfortable. Bespoke kitchens feature premium integrated appliances and high-end finishes, offering sleek functionality that complements the overall aesthetic. Generously proportioned bedrooms and luxury bathrooms continue the theme of thoughtful design, blending comfort with sophistication.

One of the standout features of Dickinson Apartments is the stunning view of Hexham Abbey - a daily reminder of the area's rich heritage. Located just steps away from boutique shops, independent cafés, and cultural landmarks, residents enjoy the charm of a thriving market town while being immersed in a peaceful and picturesque setting.

Hexham itself has long been one of Northumberland's most desirable places to live. With its historic architecture, vibrant town centre, and easy access to the surrounding countryside, it's no surprise that the area is attracting discerning buyers looking for a balanced lifestyle. Excellent transport links connect Hexham to Newcastle and beyond, making it an ideal base for commuters or those who enjoy regular city visits without sacrificing the tranquillity of rural living.

The growing popularity of Hexham's town centre as a luxury living destination can be attributed to this unique combination of convenience, culture, and comfort. Whether it's enjoying a weekend stroll through the nearby parks, exploring the local art scene, or simply relaxing at a local café with views of the Abbey, the lifestyle on offer is one of ease, elegance, and enrichment.

Dickinson Apartments exemplify this appeal, offering high-spec homes in a character-rich setting. For those seeking a residence that's both timeless and contemporary, in a town that continues to flourish, Hexham is proving to be the perfect place to call home.

***Dickinson Apartments are being exclusively marketed by youngsRPS Residential.***

***For further information visit [www.youngsrps.com](http://www.youngsrps.com) or call youngsRPS Hexham on 01434 608980.***



*Some images have been digitally staged using AI to help illustrate the potential of the space. These enhancements are for visualisation purposes only and should not be taken as an exact representation of the property's current condition or furnishings.*





# Protect your team and stay compliant

## The Business Case for PAT Testing.

### Why legal safety obligations matter – and how DRA PAT Testing makes it simple

In most offices, the kettle in the kitchen or the extension lead under a desk barely gets a second thought. Yet these everyday appliances can quietly develop faults over time, posing serious risks to people and property.

Portable Appliance Testing (PAT Testing) is one of the easiest, most effective ways to reduce that risk – and it plays a key role in meeting your legal obligations as an employer.

For Richard Ayre, founder of DRA PAT Testing, it's about more than compliance. "We don't just test appliances – we give people peace of mind," he says.

### Why it's a Legal Priority

There's no single law that demands PAT Testing, but the Electricity at Work Regulations 1989, the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and PUWER 1998 all require employers to ensure electrical equipment is safe and maintained.

Failing to do so can lead to fines, prosecution, invalidated insurance – and, most importantly, the risk of injury or worse to your team.

That's why PAT Testing is recognised by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and the insurance industry as the most effective way to demonstrate compliance.

### From Banking to Business Owner

Before starting DRA PAT Testing in 2009, Richard spent 10 years in banking. He retrained, built the business from his home in Seaham, and moved operations to Wallsend in 2011. Today, with an office in North Shields, DRA is the largest PAT Testing company in the North East, with a team of five engineers, office staff, and a client base of more than 1,500 organisations.

They've tested over 1.5 million appliances – from computers and printers to industrial machinery – for clients including Centre for Life, Durham Police, Nexus, Beacon of Light, Frank Recruitment Group, and many more.

Richard still enjoys working directly with small businesses. "SMEs often don't have a dedicated health and safety manager. I like being that extra resource – giving practical advice, not just ticking a box." His knowledge goes beyond electrical testing, covering fire prevention and other workplace safety measures, and he has a network of trusted contacts to recommend when needed.

### Why choose DRA PAT Testing

Working with DRA means:

- Testing arranged to suit your working hours.
- Minimal disruption to your day.
- Clear reports and asset registers for your records.
- Only the testing you need – no unnecessary costs.

They also provide Fixed Wiring Inspections (EICR) and Emergency Lighting Inspections for a complete electrical safety package.

Richard's personal ethos runs through the business: "We make sure your electrical equipment is safe – and we make the process as easy as possible for you."

### How often should you test?

For low-risk workplaces like offices, annual PAT Testing is generally considered best practice. The frequency should be based on a risk assessment, considering:

- The type of equipment.
- How often it's used.
- The environment it operates in.
- Any history of faults or issues.

DRA can help you assess this and create a tailored schedule that keeps you compliant without over-testing.

### The bottom line

Electrical safety isn't just a legal requirement – it's about protecting your people, avoiding costly downtime, and showing that you take workplace safety seriously.

By partnering with DRA PAT Testing, you get a team that's highly experienced, friendly, and focused on keeping your workplace safe – without unnecessary hassle or expense.

### Contact DRA PAT Testing Today

Website: [www.draelectricals.co.uk](http://www.draelectricals.co.uk)

Email: [info@draelectricals.co.uk](mailto:info@draelectricals.co.uk)

Phone: 0191 666 1009 / 07778 416850

**DRA PAT Testing – The North East's trusted name in electrical safety.**





## Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust celebrates above average GCSEs success

Five North East schools are celebrating starting the new academic year having secured above average GCSE results as well as fantastic A Level grades.

Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust has 25 primary schools and five secondary schools with four sixth form provisions across Sunderland, East Durham and South Tyneside.

The Trust's secondary schools include St Aidan's Catholic Academy and St Anthony's Girls' Catholic Academy, both in Sunderland, St Bede's Catholic School & Byron Sixth Form in Peterlee, St Joseph's Catholic Academy in Hebburn, and St Wilfrid's RC College in South Shields. Each secondary has its own Sixth Form provision with St Aidan's and St Anthony's having a joint Sixth Form.

The schools' combined GCSE results were 73% grades 9-4, compared to the national average of 64.9%.

St Bede's Catholic School & Byron Sixth Form headteacher Frances Cessford said: "Despite the challenges posed by RAAC, the resilience shown by both staff and students is truly commendable. It's inspiring to see our students reaping the rewards of their great work."

St Wilfrid's RC College headteacher Catherine Lennox said: "Our fantastic pupils continue to shine! Their excellent results are a testament to their attitude, resilience, and months of hard work."

St Aidan's Catholic Academy headteacher Anne-Marie Whitten said: "These results are not merely grades; they are a clear reflection of the unwavering dedication and hard work of our pupils, supported by the tireless commitment of our staff. More than that, they are passports to the future, opening doors to higher education and fulfilling career pathways for each and every one of our pupils."

St Anthony's Girls' Catholic Academy headteacher Mrs Marie Lanaghan said, "We are thrilled with our GCSE results this year which once again are well above national averages. These grades are the result of the hard work and determination of our students, and the support and encouragement from our team of dedicated staff. There have been some outstanding individual results with many students achieving grades 7 – 9 in all subjects."

St Joseph's Catholic Academy headteacher James Crowe said "We are immensely proud of the students and their achievements - not only those who achieved a large number of top grades, but also those who have worked tremendously hard to overcome personal challenges and achieve their own goal. All these successes show that with hard work and commitment, every single student at St Joseph's can excel."

The Trust is also celebrating excellent A level results. At St Joseph's Sixth Form, a quarter of all A level students achieved A or A\*, or their equivalent, while those studying BTECs achieved a 100% pass rate with an average grade of Distinction. Numerous students celebrating their A level results at Byron Sixth Form in Peterlee



have gone on to continue their studies at renowned institutions such as Oxford and Durham Universities. At St Wilfrid's Sixth Form, over half of all A level grades were grade B or above and the majority of young people on vocational courses achieved Distinctions. And at St Aidan's and St Anthony's Catholic Sixth Form, they celebrated exceptional results across the board – 25% of all qualifications were at the top grades of A\*-A/Distinction\*-Distinction and 44% achieved A\*-B grades.

### Sixth Form Open Evenings

**St Aidan's & St Anthony's Catholic Sixth Form, Sunderland –**  
Tuesday 14th October, 5.30 -7.30pm

**St Bede's & Byron Sixth Form, Peterlee (SR8 1DE) –**  
Thursday 9th October, 6.00 – 8.00pm

**St Joseph's Catholic Academy, Hebburn (NE31 2ET) –**  
Thursday 13th November, 5.30 -7.30pm

**St Wilfrid's RC College, South Shields (NE34 0QA) –**  
Monday 13th October, 5.00 - 6.30pm

Find out more about the schools and BCCET at [www.bccet.org.uk](http://www.bccet.org.uk)





# 150 years of putting girls first

*How Newcastle High School Pioneered Girls' Education*

With a 150-year legacy of putting girls first, it's no surprise that NHSG continues to be a trailblazer for girls' education in the North East - empowering the next generation of ambitious young women to make their mark on the world.



**Our alumnae have always been trailblazers. Ella Bryant was the first woman to graduate from Durham University in 1892, Chief Wren Wendy Vernon Brown, OBE (and Head Girl) was instrumental in leading the Royal Navy to become the first military service to open main combat roles to women.**

BAFTA Award-winning producer Ruth Caleb, OBE, became the first female Head of Drama at the BBC, while Yolande Heslop-Harrison was among the first women to receive the Royal Society's Darwin Medal for her botanical research that led to the establishment of the Millennium Seed Bank.

Today, Professor Ruth Plummer MBE continues this legacy, leading groundbreaking cancer research that is transforming patient treatment in the UK and across the world.

These world-shaping women were, and are, able to make a profound difference thanks to educational reform for girls - something NHSG has championed since its foundation in 1876. At that time, girls faced limited opportunities and those who received some schooling were educated only at home, primarily prepared for marriage. In fact, the thinking of the time considered educating girls to be unnecessary and even dangerous.

Our school helped change that story. Established in Gateshead as part of the newly formed Girls' Day School Trust, its very foundation was a bold statement of intent: to open doors for girls and provide them with the same high-quality academic education as boys. From the outset, NHSG played a pivotal role in transforming society by equipping girls with the knowledge, skills and confidence to demand



greater political and social rights and to break through barriers that once held them back.

Today, as a proud member of the Girls' Day School Trust, NHSG continues that pioneering mission. For 150 years, we have been at the forefront of girls' education in the North East - empowering pupils aged 3 to 18 to thrive in a world that still needs female trailblazers. As society faces new challenges and opportunities in the 21st century, we ensure our pupils are not only prepared to meet them but to lead with confidence, creativity, and purpose.

Our history is more than a record - it's a story of courage, perseverance, and resilience. As we celebrate 150 years, we are delving into our archives to help our pupils appreciate their place within this extraordinary legacy and inspire them to carry it forward. By raising awareness of our history, we reaffirm our commitment to equality for women. The vision and values of our past inform our future, ensuring NHSG remains a driving force for female empowerment and a testament to the transformative power of education.

What makes us truly unique is that in a world that doesn't always put girls first, our school does. We did so 150 years ago and we continue to do so today and for good. The strength of our school ethos and spirit lives in every girl at NHSG today, where ambition is nurtured, potential is unlocked, and confidence is built. Every day, our pupils are encouraged to think boldly, act courageously, and shape the world with knowledge, compassion, and resilience.

Choosing NHSG means giving your daughter access to this legacy of excellence and a future without limits.

***Find out more at our Open Mornings – Senior and Sixth Form, Saturday 8th November and Nursery and Juniors, Saturday 22nd November.***

***Register here: [www.newcastlehigh.gdst.net](http://www.newcastlehigh.gdst.net)***





# A legacy of learning, a future of opportunity

By Geoffrey Stanford, Headmaster, RGS Newcastle.

As Headmaster of the Royal Grammar School (RGS), Newcastle, I am frequently asked what sets our school apart. The answer lies not only in our academic results or historic reputation but in the transformative impact we have on the lives of both our pupils and the wider North East community.

**Education, at its best, is transformational. At RGS, we see this every day, whether it is a Year 7 pupil discovering a passion for science in our labs, a Sixth Former leading a community partnerships initiative, or a student with special educational needs thriving in a supportive and ambitious environment. Our pupils' transformative RGS journeys are countless and compelling. We do not just teach subjects - we shape futures.**

This is why RGS is worth the investment. In a time when families are rightly scrutinising the value of independent education, we stand firm in our belief that what we offer is not just excellent but essential. Our commitment goes beyond exam results. We invest in character, resilience, and curiosity. We nurture leadership, creativity, and compassion. And we do so with a deep sense of responsibility to every child who walks through our doors - because at RGS, every student is known as an individual, nurtured with care, and empowered to unlock their full potential.

Of course, we are proud of our academic achievements. Our results consistently place us among the top schools nationally.



More significantly, we are in the top 10 percent of schools in the country for adding value at A-Level - meaning our students outperform peers of similar ability elsewhere. At GCSE, we are again in the top 1 percent nationally for value added, a testament to the quality of teaching and support across the school.

In a recent analysis by The Telegraph, RGS was the only school in the North East recognised for providing excellent value for money at both GCSE and A-Level. This recognition is particularly meaningful in a region where educational challenges are acute - from funding pressures to rising SEND needs and attainment gaps. The region faces some of the most severe educational disparities in the country, yet RGS continues to buck the trend.

This is not by chance. It is the result of strategic investment in staff, facilities, and support systems. It is the product of a culture that refuses to settle for "good enough" and instead strives for excellence in all things. It is also a reflection of our belief that every child, regardless of background or ability, deserves the opportunity to flourish.

Here at RGS we have made inclusion a priority. We are particularly proud of our work with pupils who have special educational needs and disabilities. Our Learning Support team works tirelessly to ensure that barriers are removed and students are given the tools and confidence to thrive. The results speak for themselves - not just in grades but in confidence, independence, and wellbeing.

This year, as we celebrate our Quincentenary, we also mark a milestone in our bursary programme. We now support 100 students on transformational



bursaries - young people whose lives are being changed through access to an RGS education. Since the foundation of our bursary campaign just over twenty years ago, hundreds of students have benefited. This is not just charity - it is a mission. We are committed to being a school for Newcastle and the North East, not just a school that happens to be in Newcastle.

So yes, RGS is worth the investment. More importantly, however, it is an investment in people - in young minds, in future leaders, in the kind of society we all want to build. In a time of uncertainty, we offer clarity. In a region facing challenges, we offer hope. And in every classroom, corridor, and conversation, we offer the chance to change a life.

That, I believe, is something truly worth celebrating in our 500th year. I warmly invite prospective families to join us for our Open Morning on Saturday 15th November 2025, from 9.30am to 12.30pm. You will be able to discover first hand why there's more to life at RGS Junior School, Senior School and Sixth Form, and to be part of a milestone moment in our school's remarkable journey.

[www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk/admissions](http://www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk/admissions)







RGS  
NEWCASTLE

FROM  
MOMENTS  
TO SHARE

TO  
TEACHERS  
WHO CARE



THERE'S MORE  
TO LIFE **AT RGS**

JOIN US FOR OUR  
**OPEN MORNING**

SATURDAY 15<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER  
9.30 AM - 12.30PM

REGISTER NOW FOR OUR 2026 ADMISSIONS  
[www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk](http://www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk)



**Royal Grammar School Newcastle**  
Celebrating 500 years, 1525 - 2025  
*Fully funded places available*





“

*...We've always  
prided ourselves on  
being a nurturing,  
inclusive school...*

Graeme Hallam



# A new chapter begins

*An interview with Mr Graeme Hallam, Head of Newcastle School for Boys.*

**In April 2025, Graeme Hallam stepped into his new role as Head of Newcastle School for Boys, marking the beginning of a transformative era for the school and its co-educational future.**

**Having served as Deputy Head and then Head of Seniors, Mr Hallam was already a familiar and respected figure within the school community. Just two months into his headship, the school announced a bold and exciting change: from September 2026, it would become The Newcastle School, welcoming girls into the Junior School and Sixth Form, and expanding co-education to Years 7–11 by September 2027.**

We sat down with Mr Hallam to discuss this landmark transition, the vision behind it, and what lies ahead for The Newcastle School.

**Graeme, congratulations on your appointment. What inspired the decision to transition to a co-educational model?**

Thank you. The decision to become co-educational is something that we have been looking at as a school for some years now. It was driven by a desire to reflect the evolving needs of families and the wider community. We've always prided ourselves on being a nurturing, inclusive school, and opening our doors to girls allows us to extend that ethos. It's about offering the same high-quality education and pastoral care to all children, regardless of gender, and creating a more dynamic, balanced learning environment.

**What will make The Newcastle School unique in this new chapter?**

Our size and philosophy are key. We're intentionally small, which means every pupil is known and understood as an individual. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach. That won't change. You already see a high level of adaptive teaching and learning in our classrooms, allowing us to adapt to how each individual learns best. This will continue to be of great benefit to our pupils; both boys and girls.

What will evolve is the richness of our community. We'll continue to offer a through-school experience from Early Years to Sixth Form, with small class sizes, expert teaching, and a broad co-curricular programme. From our extensive clubs programme to international travel and high-level sporting or artistic opportunities, we provide opportunities you'd expect from a much larger school, but within a close-knit, supportive setting.

**What are you most excited about as the school becomes co-ed?**

I'm excited about the energy and diversity this change will bring. Welcoming girls into our Junior School and Sixth Form in 2026, and then into the full Senior School in 2027, will enhance every aspect of school life, from classroom discussions to sports teams and performing arts. It's a chance to build a truly inclusive community where every child can thrive, explore their interests, and develop the character traits we value: community, integrity, resilience, courage, empathy and leadership.

**How will the school ensure a smooth transition for pupils and families?**

We've planned this carefully. We're already engaging with our families to help them understand what life at The Newcastle School will look like and we shall continue to do so throughout.

Our strong pastoral framework, and phased introduction of co-education mean that pupils will feel safe, seen, and supported from day one. We will be listening to pupil voice and addressing any questions or concerns they have directly. We're also investing in staff training and facilities to ensure the highest standards of teaching and care.

For our new joiners, our admissions process is supportive and personal. We will be working closely with families to make our open days and assessment days a positive experience for all. We've been really pleased by the level of interest we have already received from girls.

**What does success look like for The Newcastle School in the coming years?**

Success will be seeing our pupils - boys and girls - flourish academically, socially, and personally. It's about maintaining our excellent outcomes, continuing to send students onto the best pathway for them, whether onto top universities, apprenticeships sports careers or business, and seeing them grow into confident, compassionate young adults. But it's also about the everyday moments; pupils feeling happy, supported, and making the most of every opportunity given to them at the school. If we can achieve that, then we've succeeded.

**Finally, what message would you like to share with prospective families?**

The Newcastle School will be more than a place of learning, it's a community. Whether your child is joining us in Early Years or Sixth Form, they'll be known, valued, and challenged to reach their own individual potential. We're proud of our heritage and excited for our future. I warmly invite families to visit us, meet our staff and pupils, and discover what makes our school so special.

**To learn more about admissions and open events, visit [newcastleschool.co.uk](http://newcastleschool.co.uk)**

**The school will be hosting assessment days for the Junior School on Friday 17th October and for Year 7 and Sixth Form on Saturday 17th January. Applications into other years groups are also welcomed.**



# First boys welcomed back into Durham High School



The new starters at Durham High School include the first boys in a generation.

The headmistress of a County Durham independent school and her staff have been delighted to welcome the first boys in a generation back into their Pre Prep and Prep departments in an historic move for the school.

school received an 'Excellent' inspection in its latest report from the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) in which it praised the active role the school plays in its local community and the excellent quality of its pupils' personal development.

**Excited youngsters joined their new classmates as they began their educational journeys at Durham High School (DHS), in Durham City, which is renowned for its excellent academic results, outstanding pastoral care and warm community.**

The school, which is currently the Sunday Times's Independent Secondary School of the Year North East, announced it was accepting boys into the Pre Prep and Prep departments in April, with the Senior School becoming co-educational from September 2026.

DHS is owned and operated by Durham Education Limited, part of the Galaxy Global Education Group (GGEG), which

has secured its financial future and seen investment in enhanced facilities and new mini buses for the 141-year-old school.

Michelle Hill, Headmistress at Durham High School, said: "It's been wonderful to see the excitement on all our new pupils' faces, and we're particularly delighted to see the boys settling into their new classrooms as we move towards becoming fully co-educational.

"It's a new era and while we gently welcome our new additions, our values, academic excellence and strong pastoral support remain resolutely the same at our beloved school. We have a bright future ahead at Durham High."

As well as its Sunday Times accolade, the

***For more information and for a look around the school, families can join other prospective parents at Durham High's Open Morning on October 4 by contacting [admissions@dhsfg.org.uk](mailto:admissions@dhsfg.org.uk)***





# NPS

Est 1885


# Newcastle Preparatory School


Newcastle Preparatory School, 6 Eslington Road, Jesmond NE2 4RH  
[www.newcastleprepschool.org.uk](http://www.newcastleprepschool.org.uk)


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 Vibrant and engaging co-educational curriculum for children aged 3-11

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 Bespoke facilities and incredible extra-curricular opportunities

 Small class sizes and dedicated, specialist staff

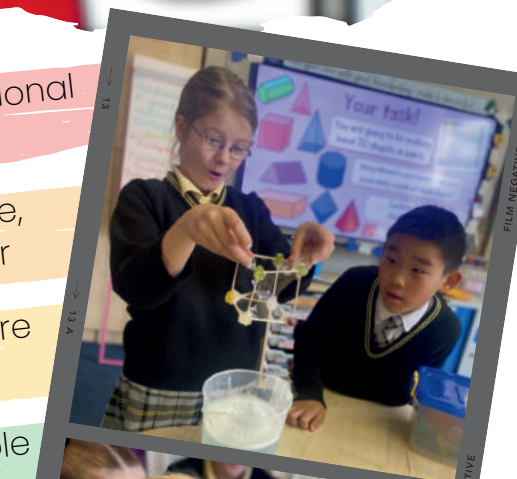
 140 years of outstanding pupil achievement

## OPEN MORNING

Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> October  
10am - 12 noon

**All welcome!**

  
Funded,  
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Will Scott

## The Power of Embracing Change

*By Will Scott, Principal at Dame Allan's Schools.*

As Greek philosopher Heraclitus aptly stated, 'There is nothing permanent except change'. I am sure this will ring true for many local business leaders, and this is something we are embracing at Dame Allan's, particularly in the last few months.

**As we enter a new academic year, and with recruitment well underway for next September's cohort of pupils, we are preparing to go fully co-educational for the first time in our 300-year-history in September 2026. It is a notable change for us, but an exciting one.**

Our separate Boys' and Girls' Schools were in place for 40 years and served us well, but we believe it is time to move forward with a dynamic approach that best reflects modern society. As one of the only independent schools in the region that educates boys and girls from ages 3 - 18, this means that our Senior School will join the structure of our already co-educational Junior School and Sixth Form.

Coping with change and developing resilience are hugely important skills that hold people in good stead during their adult years, through personal and career pivots, and the general ups-and-downs of life. We believe this resilience is something that can be nurtured from a young age, as part of our well-rounded approach to education. It is inevitable that pupils' school lives will change each year as they adapt to new teachers, new subjects, or even just new uniforms (something we see a lot in our Year One boys and girls, as they get used to wearing their more formal blazers!). Learning to manage and even thrive with changing circumstances is important.



Heidi



We do very much understand that change can be challenging for some young people, so our pupils are supported throughout their time with us by our exceptional teaching staff and pastoral support team. They always have someone to talk to if they do need a helping hand. We offer dedicated wellbeing spaces, expert counsellors, and even the services of our beloved school therapy dogs, Heidi and Poppy!

We have also been sure to include our pupils in the transition phase of our change to co-education, and our School Council has come up with some wonderful ideas to help our boys and girls integrate.

Within a school, and in fact, I would venture in any business, change cannot be avoided. Every year we welcome a new cohort of fresh-faced pupils through our doors, as well as bid a fond farewell to those leaving our Sixth Form for university, degree apprenticeships, or as they go off to explore the world. It is something to be embraced, and we like to think of moments of change as a valuable period of reflection - how can we move forward whilst bringing along the very best of Dame Allan's with us?

It is true that academic outcomes remain a central measure of our work; the schools are coming back to the new academic year fresh off the back of a very successful summer, which saw the best A Level results for more than 20 years, and a quarter of GCSE exams achieving Grade 9. But the wider impact of a Dame Allan's education lies in how we shape character, values, curiosity, and the habits of mind that endure long after the final exam.

Change will always come, but I believe it is how we handle it, and embrace it, that matters in the end.

***For more information or to arrange a visit to Dame Allan's Schools, please contact the Head of Admissions on 0191 275 0608 or visit [www.dameallans.co.uk](http://www.dameallans.co.uk)***







## Mowden reaches final of Independent School Awards

Mowden Hall School in Northumberland is delighted to have been named one of six finalists in the Independent Prep School of the Year category at the Independent Schools of the Year 2025 Awards.

As the independent school sector's leading awards programme, the awards celebrate the benefits of an independent school education and highlight the innovative, caring, and life-enhancing experiences pupils enjoy. This year saw a record number of nominations, with judges praising schools for their resilience and commitment to nurturing future global citizens.







Headteacher of Mowden Hall School, Phil Sturt, expressed his pride at reaching the final six: “We are absolutely thrilled to be announced as a finalist in the Independent Schools of the Year Awards. Mowden is a place where childhood is celebrated, learning is inspiring, and character education thrives.

Our dedicated staff work tirelessly to create a nurturing, creative environment where children feel at home and have the time, space, and encouragement to thrive. This recognition is a wonderful reflection of their commitment and of the special community we have built here.”

The winners of the Independent Schools of the Year 2025 awards will be announced at a ceremony at The Law Society in London on Tuesday 14th October.

#### **New Northumberland Nursery opens to families**

Mowden Hall School in Northumberland is delighted to have opened the doors to The Nest, a new nursery provision for two year-olds.

This initiative builds on the success of the school’s existing Early Years provision, which welcomes children in the term in which they turn three years old.

The new provision is available for 50 weeks of the year, offering greater flexibility and continuity of care for families until children transition into our Reception after they turn four years old.

Mowden Hall School’s headteacher, Mr. Phil Sturt, expressed his enthusiasm for the development. He said, “We are thrilled to have extended our outstanding EYFS offering to even younger children. Providing a nurturing and stimulating environment from the age of two gives our pupils the very best start to their Mowden educational journey. The new nursery is a vibrant space where children can explore, discover, and develop a lifelong love of learning.

The Nest was developed over the summer to create a modern, purpose-built space featuring a range of high-quality facilities, including a sleep room, messy room, classroom, dining room, and kitchen. The nursery opens directly onto the newly refurbished Pre-Prep playground, which also benefited from a major transformation during the summer.

Kirsten Knight, Head of Pre-Prep at Mowden Hall School, added: “Opening a nursery for two year-olds in a school will provide a strong foundation for lifelong learning, social development, and emotional well-being. Early education fosters curiosity, confidence, and key skills that will set our children up for success into Pre-Prep and onto the rest of their Mowden school journey.

**For more information or to book an individual tour, please call 01661 842147 or email... [admissions@mowdenhall.org.uk](mailto:admissions@mowdenhall.org.uk)**





# Durham Sixth Form Centre open event - Thursday 23rd October, 2025

Durham Sixth Form Centre is a large post-16 provider based in an enviable Durham city centre location on the banks of the River Wear. We are a diverse and vibrant community of over 1800 students, who have enrolled with us from nearly eighty different secondary schools in County Durham and further afield. Students enjoy access to a wide range of courses, specialist facilities and an award-winning careers team in an Ofsted graded 'Outstanding' school.

With over 30 A levels and a large variety of vocational qualifications, we have one of the broadest curriculum offers in the area. Our courses are delivered and led by specialist staff, who have expertise in working with 16 to 19 year-olds and, as our results testify, we have an excellent track record of academic success. We also offer a wide range of extra opportunities in order to develop our students' skills and talents.

In our A level and other academic qualifications this summer we achieved a 99.5% pass rate and an average grade



B, with two thirds of the grades awarded being impressive A\*-B grades. We enjoyed similarly outstanding success in vocational subjects with over 90% of the grades awarded being the very highest Distinction\*- Distinction grades.

We are pleased to have maintained our track record of excellent results especially against the backdrop of the higher grade boundaries widely reported in the press. Jo Lain, Principal, commented: "Our results are testament to the aspirations and determination of our students who have worked hard to achieve fabulous examination outcomes, and behind the statistics are exceptional stories of personal success."

The vast majority of our students progress to university, whilst others achieve

places on highly sought-after school leaver programmes and higher-level apprenticeships, and others enter into employment. Our careers team continues to play an instrumental role in this success.

We would strongly encourage you to visit our next Open Event on Thursday 23rd October, 4.30pm-7.30pm, so that you can discover first-hand why so many young people choose Durham Sixth Form Centre as their first-choice place of post-16 study. Please contact Mrs Sidra Bruce, Student Recruitment Manager, for further information via [recruitment@durhamsixthformcentre.org.uk](mailto:recruitment@durhamsixthformcentre.org.uk)

**We look forward to welcoming you to Durham Sixth Form Centre in the near future. T:0191 383 0708 W:[durhamsixthformcentre.org.uk](http://durhamsixthformcentre.org.uk)**

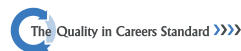


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## Folk legends Billy Mitchell and Bob Fox launch national tour in Blyth

Two of the North East's finest musicians, Billy Mitchell and Bob Fox, will join forces once again this autumn for a brand-new show, *From the Horse's Mouth*, which kicks off at Blyth Phoenix Theatre on Thursday 16th October 2025.

The tour will bring together songs and stories from three of their most celebrated projects – *The Lindisfarne Story*, *War Horse*, and *The Pitmen Poets* – weaving music, memories and North East heritage into one unforgettable performance.

Billy Mitchell joined Newcastle's favourite sons Lindisfarne in 1996, touring to critical acclaim in the UK and USA and recording albums including *Here Comes the Neighbourhood* and *Promenade*. Since Lindisfarne's retirement in 2003, Billy has enjoyed a thriving solo career, producing acclaimed albums such as *The Devil's Ground*, forming the Billy Mitchell Band, and collaborating with Bob Fox on the much-loved *Five Star B&B* and *Back on City Road*.

A tireless performer, Billy co-founded *The Pitmen Poets* with Bob Fox in 2010, celebrating the culture and heritage of North East mining communities, and has been central to *The Lindisfarne Story*, which continues to delight audiences across the UK. He is also a regular highlight of the hugely popular *Sunday for Sammy* concerts, sharing the stage with legends such as Brian Johnson, Mark Knopfler, Jimmy Nail, and Jill Halfpenny.

Bob Fox, one of the great voices of British folk music, began his career in 1975 and has since worked with some of the most respected names in the folk scene. In 2011, he reached new audiences worldwide when he became *The Songman* in the acclaimed National Theatre production of *War Horse*, a role that brought his warm vocals and storytelling talents to international acclaim.



## MAMMA MIA!

The full casting has been announced for the sensational feel-good musical *MAMMA MIA!* which stops off at Newcastle Theatre Royal on Wed 11 - Sat 28 Feb 2026 during a new UK tour.

Jenn Griffin (Donna Sheridan), Ashleigh Jones (Alternate Donna Sheridan), Rosie Glossop (Rosie), Sarah Earnshaw (Tanya), Luke Jasztal (Sam Carmichael), Richard Meek (Harry Bright), Mark Goldthorp (Bill Austin), Lydia Hunt (Sophie Sheridan), Joe Grundy (Sky), Bibi Jay (Ali), Eve Parsons (Lisa), Joseph Vella (Pepper), Ethan Casey-Clothier (Eddie) and William Hazell (Father Alexander) lead the cast.

Further casting includes Brook Blackford-Jenkins, James Brice, Aled Davies, Rebecca Donnelly, Ryan Ebbrell, Erin-Sophie Halliday, Marisa Harris, Natorii Illidge, Jay Jobarteh, Sarah McFarlane, Jacob Morrish, Rachel Oates, Megan Speirs, Cameron Sutherland, Richard Vorster and Maisy Wignall complete the cast.

From West End to global phenomenon, *MAMMA MIA!* is Judy Craymer's ingenious vision of staging the story-telling magic of ABBA's timeless songs with a sunny, funny tale of a mother, a daughter and three possible dads unfolding on a Greek island idyll.

Judy Craymer, Creator and Producer of *MAMMA MIA!*, said, "I'm delighted to announce this 2025 UK tour cast of *MAMMA MIA!* and excited for them to step into these roles. Our much-loved musical tells the story of a mother, a daughter and three possible dads, inspired by ABBA's irresistible hits. We can't wait for audiences across the country to escape to our Greek island idyll and have the time of their lives!"



## South Shields author comes out of the shadows by updating book to help cancer patients

John Walker Pattison was diagnosed with stage 4 lymphoma at just 18, at a time when survival rates were low and patient rights barely recognised, John's life was changed overnight.

Born in South Shields, John left school at 17 with few qualifications and fewer prospects. Life was about working in the shipyards and following space-rock legends Hawkwind around the UK. But underneath the surface, something wasn't right. He was exhausted, rapidly losing weight, and repeatedly told by doctors he was just "depressed." The truth was far more serious. After collapsing at work, a battery of tests revealed he had cancer—something his doctors and parents initially tried to keep from him.

That betrayal of trust—however well-meaning—marked a turning point. John faced years of intense chemotherapy and radiotherapy, relapsing four times before finally being told there was nothing more that could be done. Yet a final course of palliative chemotherapy triggered a remarkable, unexplained remission. When the doctor told him, "You're clear," John describes the moment as the emotional equivalent of winning the lottery. It's a moment he still relives with deep gratitude.

John returned to education as an adult, gaining the qualifications he'd missed in his youth. He trained as a nurse, and his career soared and ultimately became a Senior Clinical Nurse Specialist in Cancer Services in South Tyneside, the very place where his own diagnosis had first been made.

Despite facing yet another cancer diagnosis later in life—caused by the effects of early treatment—John continues to live with purpose and gratitude. His memoir *Shadow of a Survivor* is now available.

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## Autumn once more

*By Mary Ann Rogers.*

After what has been the warmest, driest, sunniest summer that I can remember, and by all accounts it's officially the warmest summer on record, Autumn has arrived like a door slamming closed.

**As an outdoors person, who spends all her free time either walking in the hills, cycling, horse riding or swimming in the lakes and rivers of Northumberland, it's taking time to adjust!**

Shorter, colder days, less light, chillier water and a lot of rain makes such a change from a summer when plans could be made for a walk, a bike ride, a swim, a picnic or barbecue which would actually take place!

It's been a very busy few months of exhibiting and dealing with the sales and enquiries from 'Home & Gift' buyers festival, We have been sending paintings, prints, gifts and cards to some far flung places such as Malta, Minnesota and Maryport.







It's important to have some late summer excursions to look forward to with Fifey and also my swimming and hiking friend, Michelle. A few years ago, Fifey and I visited St Mary's Loch, near Selkirk, as it looked to me like a nice place to swim. It was. Fifey accompanied me in the canoe, and a gorgeous swim whetted my appetite for more. An idea to swim the entire length of the loch niggled away, and was finally realised at the end of August. I towed our old caravan up to Tibbie Shiel camping site which is located right next to St Mary's Loch, set it up, then, despite it being a dreary, drizzly uninspiring day, Michelle and I decided to just set off for a swim, with no definite goal. We took our drybag/towfloats which carried our phone, clothes, shoes, sandwiches and a warm drink.

Stopping only once to read a sign saying 'People die in reservoirs', we reached the end of the loch after about two and a half hours, with plenty of swim left in us, but as a non-wetsuit swimmer, I was beginning to get cold and we got out of the lake. A mercifully short and prickly foray through thick undergrowth to locate the lakeside track which we would walk back along ensued. Once dry, changed and fuelled by our sandwiches, we walked back to the caravan triumphant, with some fabulous views of the lake since Michelle's mapreading skills do not match her swimming ability, and we veered far from the lakeside path and had to double back, or end up in Moffat.

Subsequent short trips to the lake district followed, climbing Blencathra, Catbells, Haystacks and swimming in Derwentwater, Crummock as well as a few tarns have all been wonderful, enjoying the lake district in September, with fewer visitors than during the summer.

A herd of bullocks have been in the field next to my studio all summer, frequently staring at me as I work. My walks and bike rides are always through fields of cattle, and they have once again worked their way into my artist's heart, and I've been painting them recently, along with white geese, as I visited a farm recently where a flock of geese headed over to intimidate me and they ended up being painted!

One plus side, autumn is a great time for painting, and the distractions of summer are just a memory. Wonderful light, ever changing colours and departing migratory birds fill the sky, while rain has filled the burns and rivers, which are ready for the return of the salmon to their spawning grounds high up near the source of the river Rede. We have been looking out for the salmon leaping up the waterfalls nearby, but it's possibly a few weeks too early. Something to look forward to.

**Mary Ann Rogers Gallery, West Woodburn, Hexham NE48 2SE**  
**Open Tues, Thurs, Fri 10-4 • Sundays 2-5 • 07967 550772**  
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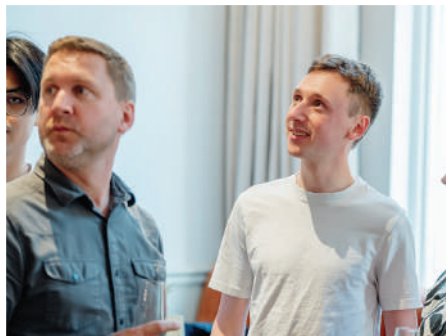
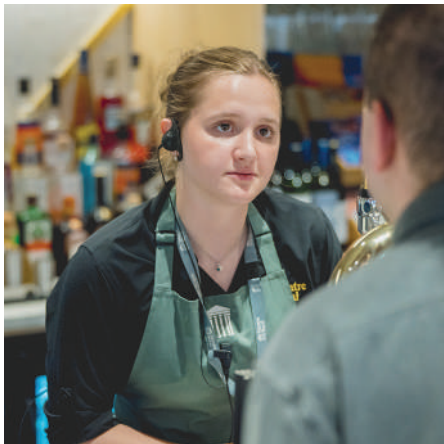
## Newcastle Theatre Royal celebrated the launch of The Green Room, its new bar and social space on Market Street

Central to the theatre's strategy to be open to more people, more of the time, the venue offers a stylish setting for both theatregoers and the wider public.

With luxurious interiors, bespoke artwork and a vibrant drinks list, The Green Room is also available for private hire. No longer just a building that springs to life when the curtain rises, the Theatre Royal is evolving into a day-to-night destination where heritage, hospitality and culture meet.









# My weekend

## Alexander Millar

Artist

### Do you ever have to work weekends?

I've worked practically every weekend since I started painting. If I'm not in the gallery, I'll be painting something or sitting in a cafe somewhere drawing one of my lovely Gadgies.

### Are most weekends the same?

My weekends tend to merge into weekdays so it's hard to tell them apart.

When I used to be on tour with my work when I was with my publisher in Birmingham I would have at least three months of the year visiting around 60 galleries in that time.

To quote a lovely Glasgow expression "Ma heid wiz like mince".

### Do you find it hard to switch off?

If I'm ever out somewhere that's a beautiful place to visit I'm constantly looking at the views pondering how I would paint it, I look at the world through a picture frame.

If I ever sit down and have a chat with someone usually when I'm drawing in a cafe, they'll inevitably tell me their life story. While they're saying words I'm seeing pictures which is actually a good way to get ideas to paint so I'm never short of ideas.

### What do you do at a weekend which you can't fit in through the week?

My partner is an artist also and has a stand at Tynemouth Market so I try to go down sometimes to see her, keep her company and help her pack up. While I'm there it's always fun to be able to have a walk around and see all the other artists work and watch all the human fruitery that wanders around there. It can be really entertaining.

### Morning exercise or a recovery lie in?

My gorgeous partner Jojo is a keep fit fan and encourages me to join her in Calisthenics workout which I usually do and it constantly surprises me how strenuous lifting your leg up a million times can be.

### A big night out or a night in the house?

Throughout my career in the lovely world of art I've done as many big night outs as



Alexander Millar

I would ever want so the chance to have a night in the house with Jojo is time I really treasure.

### Do you watch or play sport at a weekend?

If I ever watch sport it's usually to do with football and Newcastle Utd. I rarely watch a whole game from beginning to end as I always think I'll jinx the result.

### Where do you like to eat out at a weekend?

There's tons of fabulous places to dine out in Jesmond. I've recently got into cooking all manner of different meals.

I love watching Rick Stein and also Keith Floyd and catching up on their past programmes however I became vegan and drifted into being a vegetarian so that alone presents a challenge in itself to be able to make a dish that's tasty but a tray of roasted veggies with a range of seasonings on top is a delight to the tastebuds.

### How important is the weekend to you?

I was brought up in a strict doomsday death cult, so I was forever looking to the future as Armageddon was just around the corner. Nowadays I've come to realise the importance of living in the now. A great line from *Kung Fu Panda* is "Stop thinking about the past.. it's history ..stop thinking about the future... it's a mystery... concentrate on the moment it's a gift.. that's why they call it the present."

### What's the best thing about weekends?

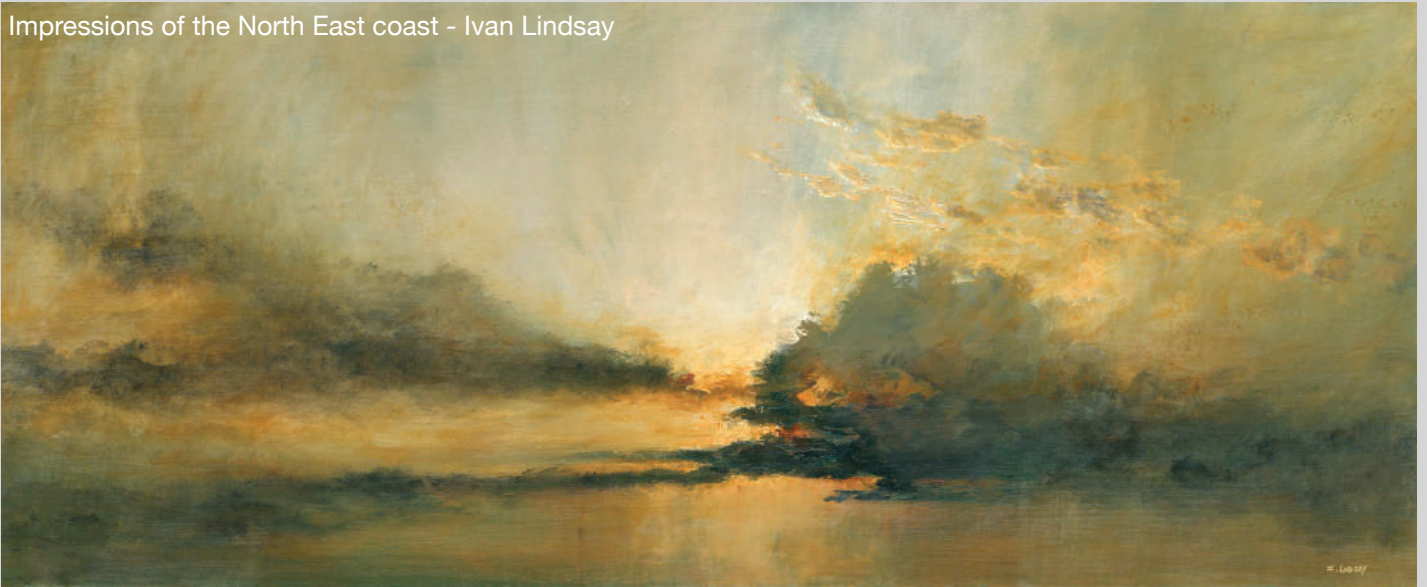
I guess the best things about the weekends is that everyone is in a more relaxed frame of mind and generally in a happy mood which is good for everyone as it raises the vibration around the area.

**Alexander Millar has a gallery in Glasgow and his website is...**  
[www.alexandermillar.com](http://www.alexandermillar.com)



# Blagdon Gallery

Impressions of the North East coast - Ivan Lindsay



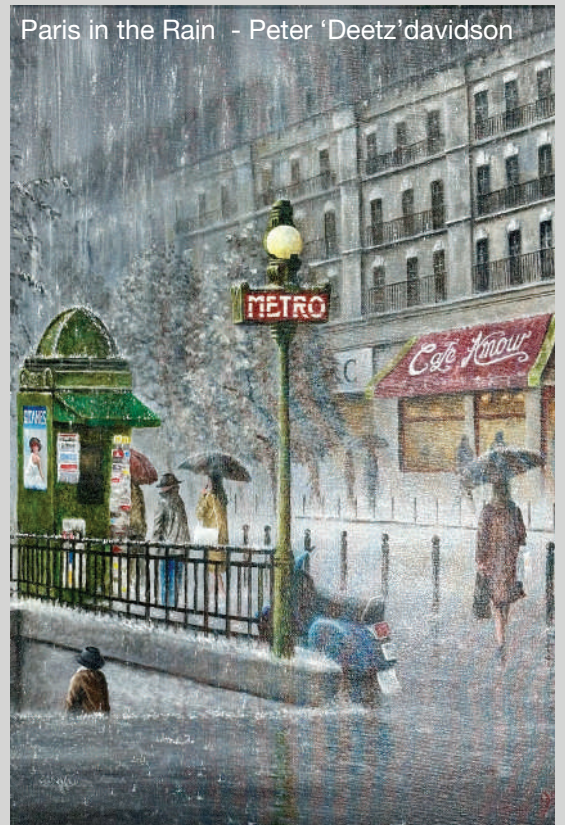
Wave Monolith - Richard Glass



Home Again -  
David Holliday



Paris in the Rain - Peter 'Deetz' Davidson



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## Diary of a GM...



*Jane Napper, Sales and Revenue Manager, arranged the walk with the Lumley team*

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## Chicago: The not-so- Windy City

By Stuart Forster

Glorious summer sunshine dominated the weather during my week in Chicago. Even the sole cool day of drizzle and cloud had barely a hint of a breeze.

**I learnt that the 'Windy City' nickname was won because of blustering, big-talking politicians back in the 1800s.**

Yet 8 October 1871 was a gusty day. When a blaze broke out in a barn in the city's southwest, the flames quickly raged far and wide, burning out of control for three days. The Great Chicago Fire destroyed well over 17,000 buildings and displaced more than 90,000 people but is credited with opening opportunities to utilise innovative construction techniques during the rebuild.

The world's first skyscraper – the Home Insurance Building, designed by William Le Baron Jenney – was built in the centre of the city in the 1880s. Many more followed, helping Chicago win a reputation as an architectural hub. With interactive maps and engaging displays, the Chicago Architecture Center (CAC) conveys its urban evolution.

After a morning of sightseeing by foot along the Riverwalk, I appreciated taking a seat on the deck of a Shoreline Sightseeing boat for a detail-packed 75-minute Architecture River Cruise. The guide pointed out highlights such as 115 North Riverside, which tapers out from a narrow base; the St Regis Chicago, the world's tallest building designed by a female architect; and the Wrigley Building – built as the headquarters of the chewing gum company in the early 1920s.



The Wrigley Building stands on the Magnificent Mile, the stretch of Michigan Avenue between the Chicago River and Lake Shore Drive, which is renowned for its chic shopping. Near its lakeshore end, the tilting observation deck of the 360 CHICAGO building offers views from more than 1,000 feet above street level. Across town, the Skydeck on the 103rd storey of Willis Tower is also an ideal spot for appreciating the city's layout.

To better understand sporting passions, I headed to Wrigley Field, the baseball stadium which has been the home of the Chicago Cubs since 1916. Remarkably, seating is also erected on top of buildings behind the 'bleacher' stand, where vocal fans view the action.

Eating and drinking are part of the gameday experience, and as I went to top my snack, a Cubs fan informed me: "We don't put ketchup on our hot dogs in Chicago." Mustard, pickles, relish, tomatoes and onions can be liberally applied but ketchup is most definitely not a thing.

Canvassing advice on where to go to try the best Chicago-style pizza, I noted that the name of Pequod's came up numerous

times. Giordano's and Gino's also received mentions, but the idea of deep-dish pizza with a caramelised crust drew me to the Lincoln Park neighbourhood for a satisfying meal accompanied by a couple of pints of hazy IPA. Riding the 'L', as the elevated rail service is known, gave views of the city under a golden sky as I rattled back to my hotel after dining.

That proved an unexpected highlight. So too did a chance visit to the Millennium Park the following evening. My research pointed me to attractions such as the Field Museum, the Adler Planetarium and the Art Institute of Chicago, and all proved well worth visiting. But a little serendipity helps make a trip truly memorable. I stumbled onto one of the free concerts in the Millennium Park Summer Music Series and had the pleasure of attending a Grant Park Symphony Orchestra performance at the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion. I'd been toying with an evening at the House of Blues but that would have to wait. Sometimes travel is about embracing the moment.

### Travel information

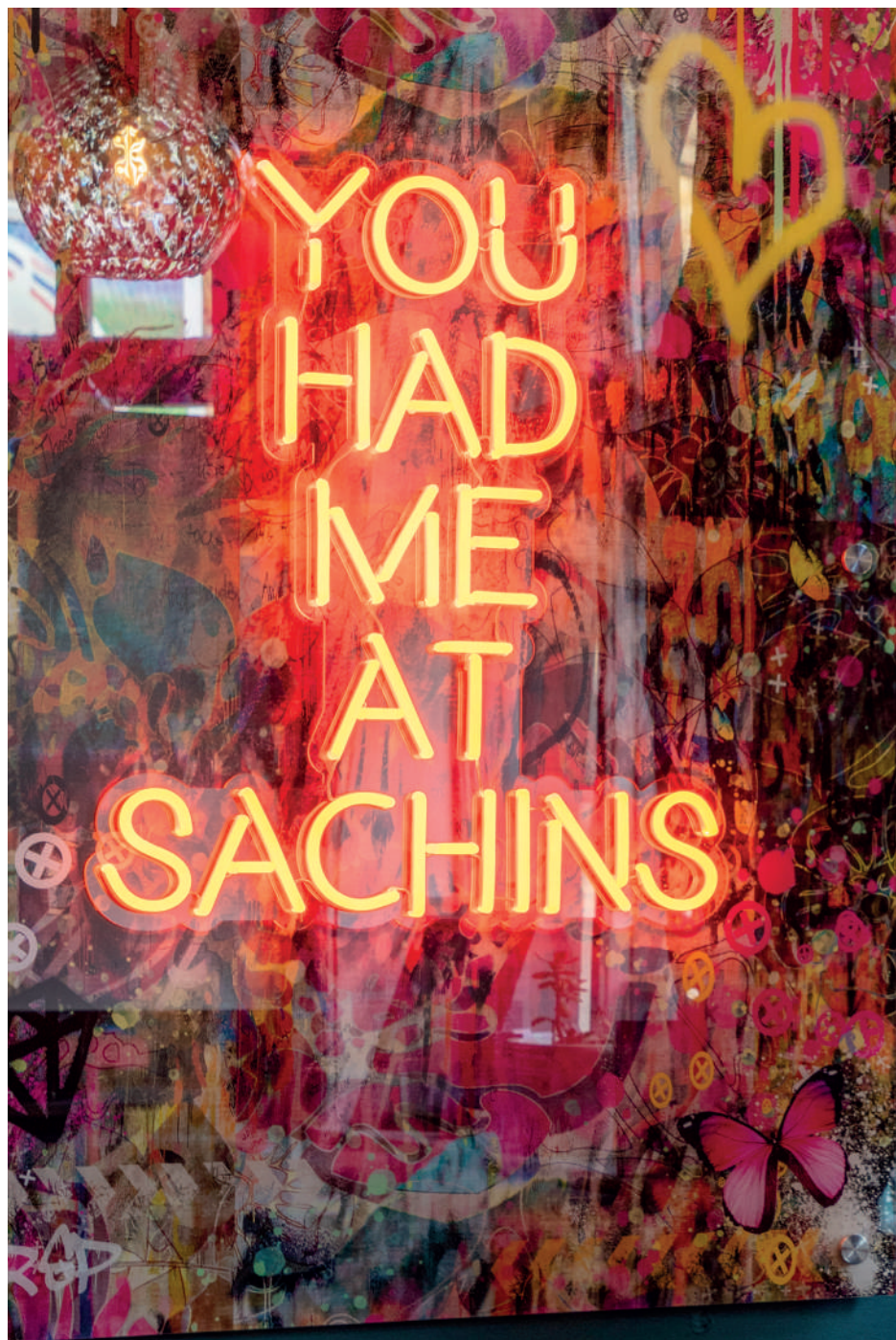
From Newcastle, travel options to Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD) include KLM via Amsterdam Schiphol, Aer Lingus via Dublin and British Airways via London Heathrow.

Chicago Transit Authority's Blue Line trains run between O'Hare and downtown, costing \$5 and taking approximately 45 minutes.

The Chicago CityPASS ([citypass.com](http://citypass.com)) is valid for nine days and offers a way of visiting five major attractions while saving money on regular entry prices.

The Palmer House, a Hilton Hotel ([palmerhousehiltonhotel.com](http://palmerhousehiltonhotel.com)), is a characterful place to stay with an elegant lobby bar. Its kitchen is where the brownie was first made.





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## What is Luxury?

It's a question I was recently asked on a webinar: what is luxury? The truth is, there isn't a single answer.

**For some, it's the car they drive, the watch on their wrist, or the latest handbag. For others, it's being seen at the newest "must-visit" bar or restaurant, soaking up the admiring glances of those who think they're doing alright. For many, it's about celebrating the success they've worked so hard for.**

But when it comes to travel, luxury takes on a very different meaning.

### Travel and the tradition of luxury

From the golden age of the Orient Express to the timeless elegance of Raffles Hotel, travel has always carried a touch of luxury. For years, experiences like hot air balloon rides over the Serengeti felt almost mythical—something we only glimpsed in documentaries or coffee table books.

Today, times have changed. Travel has become more accessible, and those once-unattainable dreams now feel within reach. Whether it's a bucket list adventure, a honeymoon, an anniversary, or finally seeing elephants or polar bears in the wild, what was once reserved for a select few has become an experience many of us can aspire to.

### Luxury beyond the price tag

Luxury doesn't always need to be grand, flashy, or expensive.

For some, it's simply time—being away with the people who matter most. It might be watching the sun melt into the horizon in Santorini, or pausing to take in Hawaii's golden sunset on Oahu. It's the joy of switching off, leaving the diary behind, and deciding whether today is a day for the pool, the beach, or a new book.

Sometimes, luxury is as simple as watching your children splash in the pool without a care in the world.

### The personal touch

For me, luxury is also about individuality. A trip designed around you—your tastes, your pace, your quirks. It might be staying in a hotel you've always dreamed of, or experiencing the indulgence of turning left when you board the plane and being treated like royalty. It's about escaping the guidebook itinerary and discovering a version of travel that feels effortless, meaningful, and completely personal.

### A shared desire

I believe we all crave a little luxury in our lives. Sometimes it's extravagant—a once-in-a-lifetime trip to see a Wonder of the World. Other times it's as simple as finding the perfect rooftop bar with the perfect view, cocktail in hand, and the people you love beside you.

### In the end, luxury isn't defined by price or prestige—it's defined by you.

So let me ask: what's your luxury? Whether it's a bucket list adventure, a celebration, or just the joy of slowing down, I'd love to help you find it. After all, creating those seamless, unforgettable, luxury-filled memories is what I do.

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*...We're proud to  
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Stuart Lloyd



# The hotel that's ditching plastic and pouring support into Durham

The Radisson Blu Durham is setting new standards for sustainability and community with a range of environmental and social initiatives aimed at reducing waste, supporting local causes and opening its doors to more community activity.

**Radisson Blu Durham is the first Radisson hotel in the UK to introduce access to a refillable cold drinking water system across guest bedrooms and meeting spaces. The project, developed in partnership with Culligan UK, replaces an estimated 8,000-9,000 500ml plastic bottles per month.**

The investment which sees sensor activated, touch free filtered drinking water refill stations available on each floor is saving on bottled water purchases and reducing the amount of waste handled by housekeeping.

The hotel has already removed other single-use plastics in line with legislation and is now working toward a goal of zero waste to landfill by 2026. In addition, the carbon footprint of every meeting and event held on-site is automatically offset.

Radisson Blu General Manager Stuart Lloyd said: "We're proud to be leading the way in sustainable hospitality in Durham.

"Our ongoing refurbishment gave us the opportunity to rethink how we operate. Being a responsible business isn't just about the environment. It's about supporting our local community too. Whether that's working with charities like St Cuthbert's Hospice or hosting prom nights and business events, we want the hotel to be a resource for the city and the wider region."

The hotel, which recently completed the second stage of a £5million refurbishment project and holds a Silver Green Tourism Award also aims to achieve zero waste to landfill and progress to Gold status in the Green Tourism Scheme.

As the largest hotel in County Durham, Radisson Blu Durham is active in supporting local causes and events. A regular supporter of the St Cuthbert's Hospice the hotel has recently donated an event for Durham Rotary, including food, wine and entertainment for 250 people in support of the hospice, in its newly refurbished events space.

Kay Carrick, Development Team Manager at St Cuthbert's Hospice, said: "We are honoured to have such a long-standing partnership with the Radisson Blu Durham. Their support has been wide-ranging.

From sponsoring our Great North Run vests, which in turn helped our runners raise around £45,000, to donating their newly refurbished events space for the forthcoming Rotary dinner.

"That generosity means that every penny from ticket sales will directly support patient care, with the potential to raise over £15,000 in a single evening. Earlier this year, when we faced the difficult decision to cancel events due to staff cuts and rising costs, the Radisson team stepped in and made sure our 'Evening with Peter Beardsley' could still go ahead and raise much-needed funds.

"Between these events alone we are hopeful of generating over £25,000. Enough to cover more than 10 full days of hospice care. Partnerships like this are a lifeline for St Cuthbert's and we are incredibly grateful to the Radisson for always going the extra mile for local people and families."

The hotel also provides ongoing support for Durham Women's FC, including discounts for season ticket holders and has a long-standing involvement with Durham Dash, Durham City Run, Durham Works youth employability programme and hosts an annual complimentary showcase for local businesses in partnership with Durham Business Group.

As part of its future investment plans, Radisson Blu Durham will continue working with local charities, deepen its sustainability commitments and increase its role as a hub for family, corporate and community events.

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



Stuart Lloyd with Kay Carrick





## Harry's steals the show

By Michael Grahmslaw

There's a reassuring familiarity about Harry's. The Grey Street Bar & Brasserie has long been part of the fabric of the city.

**It's place much-loved place that doesn't need to shout for attention but earns it with polished service, a menu balancing comfort and flair and a lively atmosphere that feels like Newcastle's answer to West End sophistication.**

Speaking of theatre, it's also obviously very well located for a pre-show meal.

For my daughter Holly and I, it proved the perfect curtain-raiser for a night out at the Theatre Royal, where the Book of Mormon promised irreverence and belly laughs. Harry's, by contrast, offered an easy elegance.

We arrived early evening, greeted by the hum of conversation and the clink of cocktail glasses — the kind of ambient buzz that suggests a place well-loved by locals and those visiting the city for the first time.

Generational differences soon became apparent as Holly surveyed an extensive cocktail menu while yours truly kicked back with an excellent pint of Vitamin G. Fortunately, Harry's is a place which caters to all tastes.

The full à la carte menu, places an

emphasis on feel-good Italian American fayre with some global nods.

Think fresh pasta, bicycle-wheel pizzas hand-stretched to order and steaks, sourced locally that are reliably excellent. Chunky chips meanwhile deserve their own standing ovation.

Harry's offers good value with a specials set menu; two courses are available for £18.50 with three for £21.95.

This caught Holly's eye as she kicked off with a sumptuous bruschetta, enlivened with garlic, chilli and an artful slick of olive oil.

I also set sail for sunnier climes with the steamed mussels in a devilish arrabiata sauce – mobbed up with a fat hunk of ciabatta.

Following on, Holly picked another from the specials board; the lamb cutlet with seasonal vegetables, mashed potato and pan jus.

Star of the show was the King Prawn Francesco. Plump prawns, cooked in a rich Cognac cream sauce with shallots and Dijon mustard, sat atop a bed of wild rice. The sweetness of the prawns played beautifully against the warmth of the Cognac and the gentle heat of the mustard.

In other words, a real crowd-pleaser.

As we headed into the early evening air, the Theatre Royal just a few strides away, I couldn't help but feel grateful for places like Harry's – good food, a better mood, and an experience that lingers long after the plates are cleared.

Harry's shines in the pre-theatre spotlight.

**For more information, visit [www.harrysbarnewcastle.com](http://www.harrysbarnewcastle.com)**







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## Escape to the Country

By Michael Grahamslaw

Set in the heart of Alnwick and mere steps from the iconic Alnwick Castle—famed for its cinematic ties to Harry Potter—the newly opened Bailiffgate Hotel is already being mooted as one of Northumberland's most exciting launches in recent times.

**Housed within the beautifully restored Duchess School, this luxury hotel is a real regal retreat, blending heritage charm with contemporary elegance.**

For any fans of Northumberland (and let's face it, who wouldn't be?) it offers guests a luxurious base from which to explore all the region has to offer.

I was invited to experience the Bailiffgate by General Manager Bernard Bloodworth, a pillar of the North East hotel scene and fittingly, a former pupil of the very school which is now the Bailiffgate.

His warm welcome set the tone for a stay that was as memorable as it was indulgent.

Arriving on a late-Summer Sunday afternoon, my wife Lisa and I parked with ease in the spacious grounds and were soon struck by the grandeur of the building's Georgian architecture.



Passing a lively courtyard filled with al fresco diners enjoying brunch and afternoon tea, we entered the reception area—a space at once both stately and inviting. The staff greeted us with genuine warmth, and we were swiftly shown to the super-deluxe, Hulne Park Suite.

The suite was a picture in understated luxury. Plush furnishings, a calming colour palette, and various mod cons created a haven of comfort and serenity.

With 48 individually styled rooms, the Bailiffgate has clearly invested in making each stay feel personal and indulgent. Views of the surrounding countryside added to the sense of escape, while the elegant bathroom offered our own, mini spa-like retreat after a day of exploring.

Alnwick's town centre, with its cobbled streets and independent shops, is just a short stroll away, and after a gentle wander we returned to prepare for dinner.

A sharpener in the hotel's 'Commissioner's Bar' was the perfect way to ease into the evening. With its cosy fireplace and curated selection of wines, cocktails, and local spirits, the bar exudes a relaxed charm that invites good times and conversation.

Dinner was served in the Motte and Bailey restaurant, helmed by Executive Chef Paul Blakey. His menu is a celebration of Northumberland's seasonal bounty, and each dish reflects a commitment to quality and creativity alike.

Lisa kicked off with a deep-fried spring onion and potato cake, paired with wild mushrooms and a Char Siu sauce—a neat fusion of textures and flavours, complemented by a crisp glass of Sicilian white wine.



I opted for the pickled mackerel, served with baby beets, fennel salad, and golden raisins. The dish was vibrant and well-balanced, and paired nicely with the remainder of a robust gin and tonic from the bar!

For mains, the herb-buttered chicken breast with peppercorn sauce proved a comforting classic for Lisa, while my fillet steak from the grill section was cooked to perfection and accompanied by a velvety glass of Malbec.

Service throughout was attentive yet unobtrusive, and the restaurant buzzed with a palpable energy. The Bailiffgate is clearly making its mark with locals and visitors alike.

After a restful night's sleep in our sumptuous suite, we enjoyed a hearty Northumbrian breakfast before reluctantly checking out.

The hotel's breakfast offering is no afterthought: locally sourced ingredients and generous portions ensured we left well-fuelled for the week ahead.

The Bailiffgate Hotel is more than just a place to stay— but a destination venue in its own right. With its blend of history, comfort, and culinary excellence, it offers a compelling reason to return time and again.

Whether you're seeking a romantic getaway, a base for exploring Northumberland, or simply a taste of true five-star luxury, the Bailiffgate delivers on all fronts.

**For more information, visit [bailiffgatehotel.com](http://bailiffgatehotel.com)**





# A dream comes true as the city takes centre stage



What started as a pipe dream in 2022 became reality recently for The City of Newcastle Golf Club when they hosted the England Women's Champion Club tournament.

**"We've been working to get this event for three years but all the effort has been completely worthwhile," said Louise Lewis who led the club's organising team. "It's been absolutely fantastic."**

Bishops Stortford Ladies may have left Tyneside with the English Women's Champion Club Trophy on board but a host of other teams will have headed south with great memories of their weekend at The City.

Compliments were flying from all quarters embracing a tricky course, excellent greens and a fine welcome from enthusiastic hosts.

This was only the third year that the event had been staged and was certainly a fine opportunity for the club to make its mark on the national game.

The champion teams from twenty five counties teed off on a course which had been adapted for a 5,727 yard, par 73 challenge with the best two scores from three to count over two rounds. Royal Ashdown Forest claimed the prize for longest drive - by car, that is - with a 660 mile round trip.

England Golf had taken over the course for four days to provide time for setting up, a practice round and two days for competition.

The City's Greens team, led by Craig Parkinson, clearly made the course challenging with only two clubs finishing over par in single figures.

England Golf Tournament Director Lewis Goodwin was full of praise for how the

event had turned out. "It's been very successful" he declared. "We've had great feedback on how Greenkeeper Craig set up the course with interesting pin positions. The greens were excellent, with the speed perfect for this level of golf."

"The greatest compliments, though, were for the terrific welcome all the players received, how well they were treated and looked after."

It was certainly an occasion when the clubhouse, refurbished so dramatically in 2019, looked at its best with its flexible social spaces working impressively well. Full credit to all the hospitality team, led by Mike Allsopp, who were kept very busy ensuring players, supporters and volunteers were catered for with a special Championship menu.

Leading the club's merry band of volunteers was Tournament Co-ordinator, Director Louise Lewis who set the standard for enthusiasm.

"We were honoured to host the 3rd England Golf Women's Champion Club competition. It is even more special as our Women's section is celebrating its Centenary this year. We are delighted that so many teams have travelled so far to compete, hopefully raising the profile of golf in the North East of England."

"Our staff and volunteers have worked extremely hard to ensure the competition is an experience the players will remember."

"Big thanks also to the whole club membership. We didn't get one word of complaint about taking over the course for four days. It was great to know we had so much support behind us."

"We feel we've helped put our club on the England golf map."

Bishops Stortford from Hertfordshire lifted the trophy with a total of 293 for their best two scores over two days. They were six shots clear of North Hants who's runners-up status was reward for another 600 mile plus round trip.

The Herts team had maintained their overnight lead of 1 over par. Haley Yerxa



entered scores of 75 and 70 racking up 4 birdies and an eagle on the second, and final, day contributing to the only under par score by any team.

Hexham represented Northumberland and finished a commendable 10th, with Durham's South Moor one place behind them.

Fern Snailham, General Manager, praised the City community who had pulled together to create an event to remember for many people, players, supporters, staff and volunteers alike.

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“

*...I regularly smile when a client tells me that meditation has changed their life...*



# In conversation with...

## Craig Robinson

*Meditation Teacher (DipBSOM), Clear Mind Meditation*

### What were your career ambitions growing up?

In the good old days where you were allowed in the cockpit of a plane as a kid, I was always in awe of the pilots, controlling these amazing machines through the sky and holding the safety of hundreds of passengers in your hands. So from an early age I wanted to be an airline pilot. My poor eyesight meant it wasn't meant to be.

### What attracted you to the world of meditation?

I stumbled upon it! In the early 2000's I was working in a high pressured B2B sales role with high targets, deadlines and a culture of 'work hard play hard'. I was earning well, driving a nice car and wearing expensive suits. I didn't realise it at the time but I was stressed, heading towards burnout on a regular basis and I was placing my 'happiness' somewhere in the distant future. A good friend dragged me along to a meditation class in 2007 and my mind was blown. That one class changed my life and I was hooked from that day onwards. I still continued in my sales career, no longer working crazy hours, being more productive and going about life with a more balanced and regulated mind. Meditation was an absolute game changer.

### What is your proudest business achievement?

I regularly smile when a client tells me that meditation has changed their life.

### How has your industry changed in the last decade?

If you look at how our world has changed in the last 100 years in terms of technological advancement, our comfort of living, entertainment etc we have 'grown' significantly, however our happiness has not. In fact rates of stress, anxiety, depression and general unhappiness are increasing. Particularly in the last decade there has been a boom in people turning to holistic methods to improve their happiness, therefore the wellness industry is certainly growing, becoming more accessible, understood and an important part of peoples lives.

### What are you currently working on?

A project which I am currently working on is to help an amazing charity **Everyturn** with their next Wellness day, I will be delivering a session to their management team on stress. This will be focussed on understanding stress, becoming aware of stress and learning methods of reducing and removing stress via mindfulness and meditation. I am also in training to become a Sound Healer, using frequencies of sound for healing, relaxation and inner exploration.

### Tell us about the clients you work with?

I teach regular meditation classes in the North East on a group basis and a 1-2-1 basis. I also work with businesses and charities offering regular meditation sessions and wellness days. My clients completely vary, but there tends to be a similar theme of people simply needing to slow down, breathe and de-stress.

### What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

Through my sales career I attended countless sales training courses learning methods for handling sales cycles, closing business, elevator pitches etc. However I always thought that authenticity was more important than anything. People buy from people. One day a client of mine, told me that being yourself is the most important thing. I've carried this with me ever since and its transferrable into any industry, job role and life itself.

### What has been your biggest challenge?

I speak to businesses fairly regularly and although they almost always appreciate and promote employee wellbeing, there is usually little to no budget assigned. Coming from a corporate background myself and appreciating the importance of wellness in the workplace it can be a challenge actually bringing this to the table in a corporate environment.

### Who are your heroes inside and outside of business?

Mo Gawdat springs to mind. I admire how from his 'successful' career being CBO at Google X and ticking the 'success' boxes of wealth, status and gaining expensive shiny objects he realised these 'things' simply don't make us happy. Especially so when he lost his son, the last straw for realising we can't expect the world to make us happy. So he took a complete new trajectory and is now leading an amazing project on happiness (making 1 billion people happy), is a best selling author and key influential speaker on finding true happiness, not from the world, but from ourselves.

### How do you unwind outside of work?

Every morning I have my own uninterrupted time, for stretching, meditation, reflection and journaling. This is my favourite time of the day and has become my routine. It sets me up for whatever the day brings. I also love to unwind doing anything in nature, walking, climbing even sitting on the beach with a flask and feeling gratitude for being alive.

### Favourite Books and/or Boxset?

1) *The Power of Now* - Eckhart Tolle. This book is my bible, it is all about living in the now. When we can truly do this, all of our problems completely disappear.

2) *1Q84* - Haruki Murakami - If you want to get lost in a world of fantasy and mystery with parallel worlds and mind bending fiction this is your book.

Boxset - It has to be the *US Office*.

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



# World Menopause Day

Why businesses can't afford to ignore Menopause.

Every October, World Menopause Day (18th) shines a light on an issue that affects half the population but is still too often overlooked in the workplace. With more than 3.5 million women over 50 currently in work in the UK, menopause is no longer a "personal matter" – it's a pressing business issue.

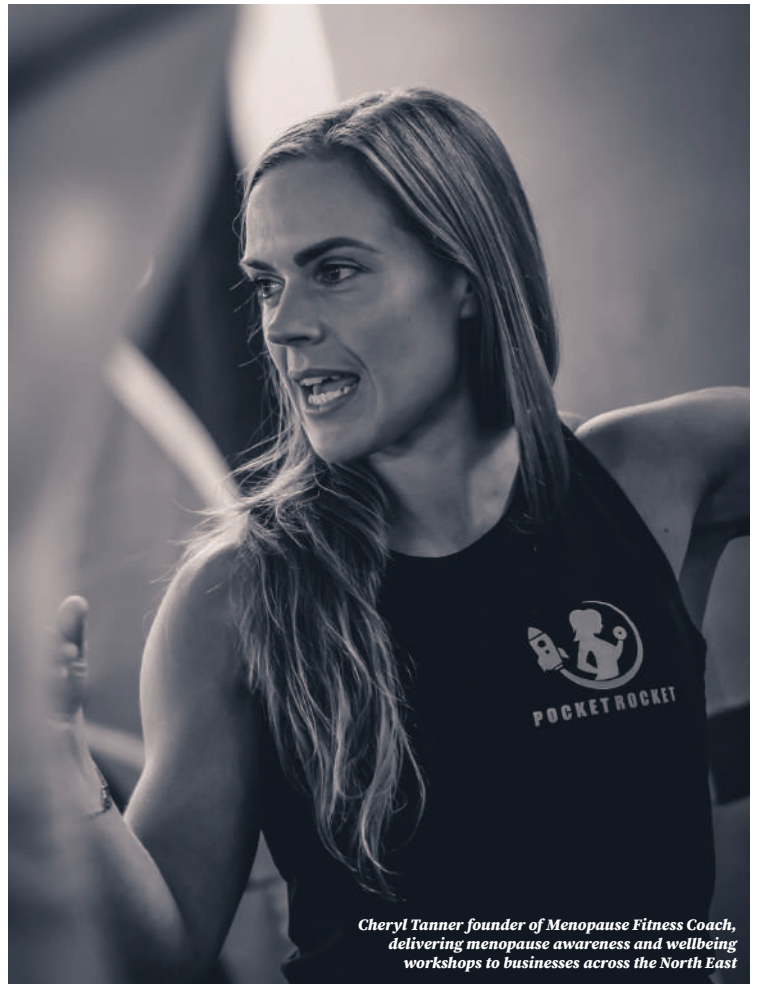
Forward-thinking organisations like the NHS and NatWest have already recognised the impact. The NHS has introduced menopause guidance to better support its 1.3 million staff, while NatWest has rolled out policies and training across its network, ensuring employees and managers feel equipped to handle conversations with confidence. These initiatives not only improve staff wellbeing but also reduce absenteeism and turnover – saving businesses money while boosting productivity and morale.

The reality is clear: ignoring menopause costs businesses talent, experience, and reputation. Creating supportive policies and fostering open dialogue is not just the right thing to do – it's a commercial advantage.

This World Menopause Day, we're offering a free workplace consultation to help businesses raise awareness, put simple practices in place, and create a culture where women can thrive.

Because when businesses support menopause, everyone benefits.

[cheryltannerpt.co.uk](http://cheryltannerpt.co.uk)



Cheryl Tanner founder of Menopause Fitness Coach, delivering menopause awareness and wellbeing workshops to businesses across the North East

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## Stuck in a rut?

It is very easy to fall into a rut when it comes to exercise.

**Most of you will know the familiar script of 'I will start tomorrow' or 'I'm too tired'. Before long, tomorrow turns into next week, next week becomes next month, and the routine of putting it off becomes the habit itself.**

While skipping a workout or a walk now and then may seem harmless, the bigger danger lies in the belief that poor health will never happen to you. Unfortunately, ignoring your body often leads to consequences that arrive later, sometimes when it is too late to undo the damage.

### The it won't happen to me trap

Human beings are skilled at convincing themselves that they are the exception. We see friends or family members struggling with weight gain, diabetes, or low energy and think that will never be me. But the truth is our bodies do not make exceptions. A sedentary lifestyle increases the risks of heart disease, obesity, depression and certain cancers. Often the changes are

so gradual that they go unnoticed until they begin to interfere with everyday life. Climbing stairs feels tougher, energy levels drop, or sleep becomes more restless. By ignoring these early warning signs, we trade temporary comfort for long term health challenges.

### How to break out of the rut

The good news is that turning things around does not require a complete overnight lifestyle change. The first step is to reframe the way we think about movement and health. Here are some tips on how to become more motivated:

### Start small and stay consistent

A healthy lifestyle does not begin with extreme workouts. Begin with something manageable, like a 10-minute walk or a short stretching routine in the morning. Small steps will build momentum and momentum leads to long term habits.

### Make exercise enjoyable

Instead of seeing exercise as a chore, tie it to things you already enjoy. Listen to a favourite podcast only while walking, or meet a friend for a weekly fitness class. By linking movement to pleasure any resistance begins to fade.

### Set clear and achievable goals

Broad goals such as I want to get fit often lack power. Instead, set measurable targets like running 5 kilometres without stopping, completing 20 press ups, or losing a specific amount of weight. Reaching these goals provides a sense of achievement that keeps motivation alive.

### Think about the bigger picture

Look at the long term benefits of staying active. Imagine being able to play with your children or grandchildren without running out of breath or enjoying going travelling later in life with the energy to do the things you want to do. These future rewards can be huge.

### The transformation effect

When exercise becomes part of everyday life, the benefits reach way beyond physical health. In the short term, regular activity improves mood, boosts energy, and encourages better sleep. Over the long term, it lowers the risk of chronic diseases, strengthens bones and joints, and improves overall quality of life. But maybe the greatest benefit is regaining that sense of control over your health rather than leaving it to chance.

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

## David's Summing Up

**Your health is not built in a single workout, but in the consistent choices you make each day. By starting small and making activity enjoyable anyone can escape the rut and create a healthier, more fulfilling future.**





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# Places to go...Bamber Bridge



October being Black History Month, it is appropriate to record my visit to Bamber Bridge in Lancashire, having read about the outbreak of racial violence in June 1943 between the racially segregated black troops of the 1511th Quartermaster Truck Regiment and the all white 234th US Military Police Company.



**At this stage of the Second World War, increasing numbers of American troops were based in Great Britain in the build-up to D-Day. The 1511th were based at Adams Hall, officially known as Air Force Station 569. Only one of the large huts is still visible, which is the home of 2376 (Bamber Bridge) Air Cadets on Mounsey Street, pictured.**

Unlike many places I recommend, I doubt this one will appeal widely. Bamber Bridge was on the main A6 London to Carlisle road. Bypassed postwar by a dual carriageway and, in December 1958 the new M6 Preston bypass opened. It's not a pretty village, and the most significant building is the thatched pub on the south side of the settlement, known as the Ye Olde Hob Inn. Looking rather like something from the Cotswolds, the pub serves excellent food and was very busy even on a Tuesday mid-afternoon.

To get there, I used the train from Chester-le-Street to York, changing on to the Blackpool service and changing to the local service at Blackburn. The off-peak return with a railcard is £70.50 which is fairly steep, there being no Advance Purchase tickets on the little used flow from Chester-le-Street to Bamber Bridge. Split ticketing should give a fare about £40 return, and if you wish you can go in a big circle out via Carlisle/Preston and back Blackburn/York or vice versa.

My first call was at the library, north of the railway line. I found in the local history section more archival material on the Battle. For an easily accessible treatment of the Battle, see the Wikipedia page which is quite detailed. I passed the old Police Station, built in 1882, which is now a pub by the name of the Pump and Truncheon. Here the unarmed local police gave shelter to inhabitants of the village who were not able to get home when the shooting began. Black troops were very welcome at the pubs in Bamber Bridge. For a start they had money, chewing gum and nylons. The publicans treated the American soldiers well as they were good for business, and when the US commanders tried to implement a segregation policy, the publicans responded by erecting signs saying "Black Troops Only". The local people were very happy to drink with the black soldiers, and being treated as equals was a new experience for them.

Race riots in Detroit the previous week had tensions running high with the US Military Police and after an altercation in the Ye Olde Hob Inn, one soldier was killed and

seven injured in a gun battle which went on through the night. Although 32 soldiers were convicted of mutiny, the sentences were reduced after General Eaker considered that the officers were weak and MP's provocative. The story inspired a recent film *The Railway Children Return*.

I found walking the streets where violence and segregation of the US forces played out in a Lancashire village very sobering. There was no need to stay the night – a few hours is all you need. Next to the station where the signal cabin was threatening to fall on to the track, there's a massive Meccano-like contraption keeping the thing upright. Opposite, acting as an ideal café for the station, is the Taste of Turkey, for a coffee before the train pulls in.

**[alexnelson@nationalrail.com](mailto:alexnelson@nationalrail.com),  
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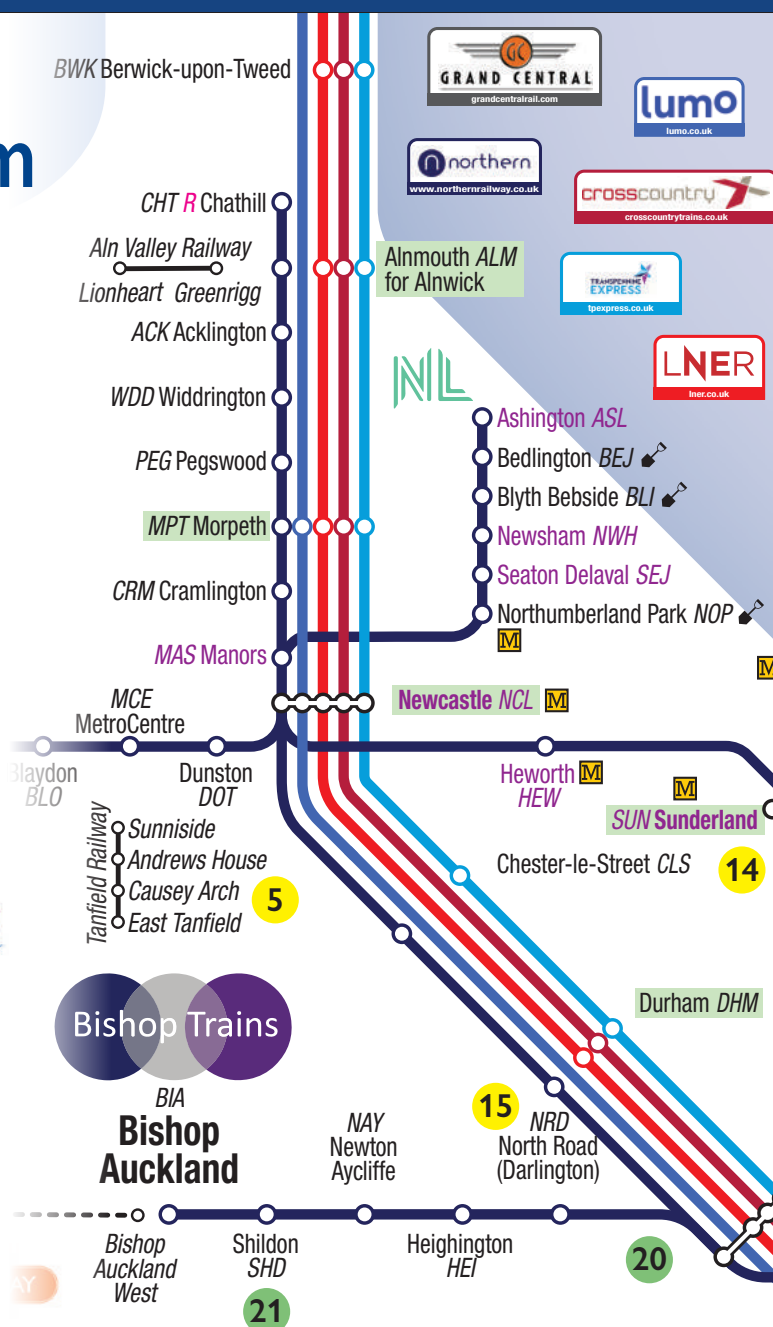
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