

NORTHERN

INSIGHT

November 2025

Issue 118



Bonded Agency
Standing Up For Connection In A Disconnected World

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Foreword

FOREWORD

Welcome to the November issue of Northern Insight

As the year draws to a close, November offers us a moment to pause, reflect and look ahead. The autumn colours fade into winter tones, and across the North East, there's a tangible sense of renewal — of businesses setting ambitious goals, communities preparing for the festive season, and individuals celebrating achievements hard-won over the past year.

In this issue, we shine a spotlight on the resilience, creativity and collaboration that continue to define our region. From forward-thinking entrepreneurs driving innovation to community leaders making a difference, the stories within these pages remind us why the North East remains such a dynamic place to live and work.

As ever, Northern Insight continues to champion the people and organisations that make our region exceptional — those who inspire progress, nurture talent and contribute to a shared vision of prosperity.

Whether you're winding down from a busy quarter, gearing up for new ventures, or simply taking stock before the festive rush, we hope this issue offers insight, inspiration and a renewed appreciation for all that's happening across our vibrant region.

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

Michael Gramsław, Publisher
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Kip McGrath expands in the North East

An experienced teacher who has already helped almost 3,000 children across Gateshead and Chester-Le-Street is expanding her successful Kip McGrath Education Centres into Washington, Tyne and Wear.

Carol Milne, a former science teacher and head of year, left the classroom in 2015 to set up her first Kip McGrath Education Centre in Gateshead East. Since opening the doors in March 2016, she has gone on to launch a second centre in Chester-Le-Street in 2021 and now, five years later, is opening her third in Washington. The new hub will be based at Washington Library, making high-quality tuition even more accessible for local families.

Carol discovered Kip McGrath in 2015, having taken voluntary redundancy from St Joseph's College in South Tyneside. Using her redundancy money, she invested in the franchise and has since built a thriving business employing 30 staff. What started as Carol teaching and managing everything alone has grown into a strong organisation with fully qualified teachers and support staff across three sites.

All tuition is delivered by fully qualified, DBS-checked teachers, using a traditional curriculum approach tailored to each child's ability level. The focus is not only on closing knowledge gaps, but also on building confidence, independence and resilience.

Successful fifth year for North East business week

North East business leaders have hailed the success of a popular business event, with over 1,000 people attending sessions across Sunderland.

Sunderland Business Week, which returned for a fifth year, ran from October 13 – 17, with headline speakers including Radio 1's Jamie Laing - co-founder of gourmet confectionery brand Candy Kittens; Team GB legend Colin Jackson; and social media pioneer Alex Partridge. The trio took part in fire-side chats, discussing their lives and careers at SunFest on Thursday, October 16.

The week-long event, which was previously called Sunderland Business Festival, included expert presentations, panel discussions, sofa chats, networking, workshops and more.

Councillor Kevin Johnston, Portfolio Holder for Housing, Regeneration and Business for Sunderland City Council, the event's headline sponsor, said: "Sunderland Business Week really shone a spotlight on our transforming city to a business audience from across the region and showcased the many ways in which Sunderland is positively contributing to the regional and national



Parkers Chauffeurs partners with Pneuma Group

Parkers Chauffeurs, the North East-born executive transport business based near Newcastle International Airport, has officially been acquired by Teesside-based Pneuma Group, forming the foundation of the group's newly launched Pneuma Automotive division.

Founded by Laurence Beck, originally from Consett and now living in Florida, Parkers Chauffeurs has been part of his entrepreneurial journey since 2019.

They operate with 14 permanent staff, supported by an extensive network of trusted drivers and have a unique, scalable model that means the business can supply dozens – even hundreds – of vehicles on demand for major events and clients, making it one of the most adaptable and reliable names in the industry.

"Parkers have always been about more than just getting people from A to B – it's about creating a seamless, reassuring, first-class experience that reflects the warmth, hospitality, and high standards of our region. With Pneuma Group's backing, we now have the platform to take those values and showcase them globally," said Laurence.

For Pneuma Group, the acquisition represents the launch of Pneuma Automotive, the organisation's fourth divisional pillar alongside Property, Hospitality, and Games. For Parkers' clients, nothing changes in its day-to-day running. The same team, vehicles, and standards remain.



economy too. It was a real celebration of Sunderland, business and entrepreneurialism."

The week was organised by Sunderland Business Partnership, a collective of organisations – large and small – all with an interest in the city's development, creating opportunities for members to collaborate and grow, which in turn helps Sunderland to be a more dynamic destination for business.

Rob Lawson OBE, chair of Sunderland Business Partnership, said: "We are delighted to have been able to deliver another successful Business Week in Sunderland, which showcased what a brilliant, dynamic place the city is for enterprise."

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Sunderland man wins Higher Apprentice of the Year

John Elliott - an Access Training apprentice and engineer at Pyrocel - impressed the judges by doubling the capacity of his employer's installations department, increasing revenue by 30%, and excelling in a management position usually held by someone double his age.

After completing A Levels at St Robert of Newminster Sixth Form in Washington, John came to Gateshead-based Access Training as a shy, underconfident 18-year-old with a natural ability in maths and engineering, and a desire to earn while he learned.

He embarked on a Level 3 Apprentice Fire Alarm Installer course and was placed with Newcastle-based fire and security provider, Pyrocel. He was the first in his class to complete the apprenticeship in just 2.5 years and then enrolled on a Level 4 Project Management Apprenticeship with Access Training where he said he "discovered a passion for organisation and problem-solving."

John has seen rapid career progression including two promotions and a 60% pay increase since starting with Pyrocel where he is now a project engineer overseeing a team of installers and £2.4m worth of projects annually.

John said of his award win: "I am feeling very proud. When I began my apprenticeship, I was reserved and lacked confidence but with the support from Access Training and my employer, my apprenticeship has changed my life and I'm passionate about showing others where apprenticeships can lead.

"My long-term ambition is to progress into senior leadership and contribute to my company's continued growth."

John will now go on to the national final of the National Apprenticeship Awards in London on November 26 at The Royal Lancaster hotel.



Strategic acquisition propels Orangebox Training

Orangebox Training Solutions, the Hartlepool-based firm renowned for guiding thousands of learners into employment, has been acquired by Coniston Peak in a strategic deal.

This move is designed to build on Orangebox's fantastic culture and strengthen business opportunities across the UK with significant investment planned.

This goal will be significantly boosted by joining the group that includes Workpays, a Midlands-based training provider acquired by Coniston Peak in 2021, allowing the combined entities to maximise opportunities.

The deal aims to ensure the longevity

of the business and its current workforce of around 60 staff. Orangebox's founder and CEO Simon Corbett will remain at the helm to lead the next phase of expansion alongside Coniston Peak's leadership.

Simon said: "What started with no staff, no clients, and just an idea, has grown into something I'm truly proud of - a business that's made a real difference to people's lives.

"This next chapter is about collaboration, shared purpose and growth. By combining our two successful organisations, we share one common goal in making a difference for people, our staff, learners, partners and clients.

"Together, we can strengthen our business and dramatically increase the number of learners we help into employment."



Vertu named Automotive Retailer of the Year

North East-based Vertu Motors plc has cemented its position as one of the UK's leading automotive retailers after taking home three accolades at the prestigious Autotrader Retailer Awards 2025, including the coveted Retailer of the Year title.

With its head office in Gateshead, Vertu Motors plc is one of the region's major employers, with more than

1,800 colleagues across the North East, and is the largest UK business based in the region.

In addition to being named overall winner, the Group was recognised for its outstanding customer service and innovation, winning the data-led Customer Experience Award and also winning Innovation of the Year for its digital payment platform, Vertu Pay.

The Customer Experience Award was awarded for the exceptional performance and commitment of colleagues across the Group, who work to consistently deliver an amazing customer experience.

Robert Forrester, Chief Executive of Vertu Motors plc, said: "We are absolutely delighted to be recognised with three awards at the 2025 Autotrader Retailer Awards, including the prestigious Retailer of the Year title.

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STANDING UP FOR CONNECTION IN A DISCONNECTED WORLD

How Bonded Agency's Social Purpose Strategy Is Driving Real Human Connection Where It's Needed Most

In today's world, "connection" often brings to mind Wi-Fi bars or how many people follow us online. The deeper kind of connection, the sort that builds trust and helps people understand one another, can seem tougher to find than ever. At Bonded Agency, connection is more than a buzzword. It's a guiding principle for how we work, how we support our people, and how we contribute to our region. Now, we're finding ways to make sure our values reach beyond the boardroom and into the communities around us

Why Social Purpose Matters Now

Connection runs through everything we do at Bonded, from how our clients and their audiences engage, to how we build our own teams. But when we started developing our social purpose strategy, we knew we wanted to do more than just pick a charity from the top down. We wanted our social impact work to reflect the real concerns of our staff, not just our leadership team.

Working closely with Hannah Underwood, a respected social impact advisor, we opened the conversation across the entire agency. Through research, debate, and honest discussion, we explored which issues truly resonated with our people and our brand values. After plenty of dialogue, one theme emerged clearly: loneliness, especially among young people.

“Youth loneliness is one of the biggest challenges facing our region’s young people today”

- David McCreedy, CEO at Youth Focus North East



The data made the urgency clear. According to the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, a striking 72% of people aged 16–25 report that loneliness harms their mental health. Here's a generation that has grown up surrounded by digital platforms, yet so many are missing out on meaningful social bonds. For us at Bonded, this felt like exactly the right place to focus our efforts. After all, genuine human contact isn't just important - it is the most effective answer to disconnection.

From Insight To Action

We selected Youth Focus North East as our charity partner because they're the main organisation supporting young people experiencing loneliness across our region. Over a three-year period through their Belong Collective initiative, they've reached 7,918 young people through targeted resources in hotspot areas, creating vital opportunities for connection, learning, and growth. Through high-quality youth work, they provide safe spaces where young people can be heard, build relationships, develop new skills, and strengthen their support networks. By joining forces with them, we can make a real difference together.

To kickstart our support, we launched the Route 72 Challenge in September, setting ourselves a £1,000 fundraising target. The challenge saw our team collectively cover 170 miles during the month, matching the length of the UK's Route 72 cycle path. Team members aimed for just over 10,000 steps per day (equivalent to about 5 miles), with everyone contributing to a shared fundraising platform rather than individual sponsorship drives.

The challenge culminated with our participation in the Dragon Boat Race on September 26th, bringing together our fundraising efforts and team spirit on the River Tyne. This creative effort raised both funds and awareness for Youth Focus North East and marked the beginning of a lasting partnership. As Youth Focus North East emphasises, tackling youth loneliness requires genuine collaboration and meaningful relationships – partnerships that go beyond fundraising to build connections, share expertise, and unite people around a shared purpose. Bonded is committed to bringing our skills, networks, and knowledge into play - not just our donations.



Business Benefits Of Social Purpose

Social purpose isn't only about doing the right thing for others. It has helped us build a stronger culture at Bonded Agency. Team engagement has risen, we've uncovered fresh ideas, and the work we do together now feels more significant. We keep track of these changes, using both data and honest feedback from our people.

We have seen that when businesses nurture real connection, everyone wins. That means happier employees, more creative campaigns, and deeper relationships with our clients. For instance, our staff turnover is just 5% over more than three years, much lower than industry averages. Putting people first is always good for business.

A Call To Action

We're not claiming to have all the answers, but we do know it's possible for businesses to make a real difference, even if it's just in their own communities. At Bonded Agency, we are working hard to foster connection through our daily work, through the charities we support, and through the way we look after one another.

Businesses across the North East understand the value of community. In times of uncertainty, that sense of togetherness matters more than ever. It doesn't have to mean tackling youth loneliness; it could be volunteering, building partnerships with local groups, or simply making workplaces where real connections flourish.

Let's connect, for real.

bondedagency.com



How Lumo tore up the rulebook on rail and built something entirely new

Starting with no HR department, no legacy systems and no inherited baggage, Lumo has built a people-first culture from the ground up. People and Culture Manager Lindsay Gauntlett explains how a clean slate became the company's greatest strength...

When Lindsay Gauntlett joined Lumo in January 2021, she was one of just a handful of employees. There was no HR department, no ready-made playbook, and certainly no inherited way of doing things. And it turned out to be the company's superpower in building the company's famed inclusive culture.

"We were literally building everything from scratch in real time," she recalls. "And it's the best thing that could have happened because it came with no baggage. We were all in it together. We just wanted to be open and inclusive. Everybody felt heard, everybody felt valued and what we built has persevered."

It was a far cry from her previous role in private healthcare, which she'd taken after being made redundant when her children were small. "I wasn't even looking to move," she admits. "I scrolled past the job a few times, but something about it stuck with me. It was the chance to build something new. And we did."

Importing fresh DNA

In a sector where tradition and hierarchy run deep, Lumo deliberately set out to be different. During Covid, when hospitality and airlines were hit hard, Gauntlett turned to those industries for talent. What could have been an accident of circumstance became a strategic advantage, allowing Lumo to tap into a workforce where customer-centric service comes naturally and diversity is the norm. The result has been a culture - and a customer experience - that has helped give Lumo a clear USP in a sector often weighed down by its own ways of doing things.

"That really shaped what the customer experience looks like on board," she explains. "And it's probably helped shape the diversity within Lumo too."

For someone who describes herself as "down-to-earth and family orientated," that people-first instinct comes naturally. And it fits right in Lumo, which has been dubbed by Modern Railways as one 'big blue family'.

"I've been with my husband for 25 years, I've got two kids, a dog, and my idea of heaven is walking in the countryside or, one day, retiring to a villa in Greece with goats," she laughs. "So building something where people feel supported and happy felt obvious to me."

Today, passengers notice the difference in the way colleagues interact with them on Lumo's services up and down the East Coast Mainline - and soon to be on the West Coast Mainline. But internally, it has also set the tone for how people work together. New recruits go through a "culture interview" with Gauntlett and the Service Delivery Director before they even start. It's a two-way conversation about values, expectations, and whether the fast-paced environment is right for them, Lindsay explains. "It's about making sure people know what they're coming into," she says. "And it's helped keep our turnover low, because everyone's clear on what Lumo is about from day one."

And it's not just the colleagues that benefit. Passengers are responding too - the company landed a 96% overall satisfaction rating last year in the Customer Insight Survey, commissioned by the open access operator, and led by The TAS Partnership transport consultancy working with market research specialists MRFR.

Lumo's culture mission has also seen it awarded the Clear Assured Bronze Standard, a globally-recognised standard that's awarded to businesses which can demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity and diversity. As of last year, 95% of Lumo's operational workforce has come through the Newcastle-based business's apprentice programme in partnership with Train'd Up. And in the past three years, 29 females have completed the training compared to 27 males breaking all sorts of industry clichés.

Flat, open, and all-in together

But for Gauntlett, Lumo's culture isn't about an award in a cabinet - it's the lived day to day and in every policy she and her small team put together. Lumo's head offices in Newcastle were designed to bring train crew and office colleagues together, avoiding the silos common across the industry where train crew and back office functions can be separated by miles. The management team is deliberately lean, and access to senior leaders is direct.

"There's no hierarchy here," she says. "If someone's got an issue, they'll just pop in to see the Service Delivery Director or Managing Director. People aren't scared to do that."

That openness extends to mucking in when needed. Every contract includes the expectation that colleagues can act as ambassadors in times of disruption, whatever their day job. Gauntlett herself has found that spirit in action more than once

“

*...Everybody felt
heard, everybody
felt valued...*

Lindsay Gauntlett



- including an Easter when she was spotted trundling boxes of mini eggs through Newcastle station for customers.

"You find yourself in bizarre situations," she laughs. "But nobody says 'that's not my job.' We just get on and do it. Everyone has each other's backs and that pays it all forward."

Work-life balance has become one of the pillars of Lumo's culture too. Annual leave must be taken in-year - there's no option to roll it over - to make sure people properly switch off. Flexibility is agreed case by case, rather than being bound by rigid policy.

"If you're happy at home, you're happy at work. They affect each other, don't they?" says Gauntlett. "We don't have hard and fast rules. People manage their own workloads, and we support them when they need it."

She admits she keeps a watchful eye on colleagues' wellbeing. "If I see someone online late at night, the first thing I'll do is message them: why are you working at this hour? That kind of check-in makes a difference."

Perhaps the most striking part of Gauntlett's philosophy is her determination to prove HR can be more than a corporate shield. "I think people might be surprised by how much I care," she says. "People think HR is just there to protect the business. Of course we do protect the business, but the way I see it, we do that by doing the right thing by people."

It's a conviction shaped by hard lessons. Early in her career, she was pressured by a manager to dismiss someone against her

better judgement. "I did it, but it still affects me to this day," she says. "It taught me never to be put in that position again - and now I'll always challenge something if it doesn't feel right."

Five years on from launch, Lumo has grown from 20 people to more than 115 on the East Coast, with a new team building up on the West Coast Mainline as Lumo's parent company FirstGroup launches services from Glasgow to London next year. For Gauntlett, the culture that has emerged is the company's most valuable asset — and one that sets it apart from the rest of the industry.

"I've never worked anywhere as supportive as Lumo," she says. "If I'm struggling, there's always someone ready to help. And it's not just me who feels that way — people are protective of this place, because they've helped build it."

It's that sense of ownership, she says, that makes the hard graft worthwhile. "It was tough in the beginning — really tough. I questioned what I was doing more than once. But when you see people proud of being part of Lumo, that's when you know it was worth it."

In an industry often criticised for being slow to adapt, Lumo has shown what's possible when a new operator starts with a blank page and puts people at the centre. As Gauntlett puts it simply: "It always comes back to one question: what's the right thing to do by people?"

www.lumo.co.uk



Lumo serves up exclusive opportunity for North East businesses during British Food Fortnight



Leading North-East based rail operator Lumo has announced that it's giving local food and drink suppliers a unique opportunity to showcase their products in Westminster.

The exciting event, which will take place in March, has been announced on the annual British Food Fortnight, a celebration of the diverse and delicious food that Britain produces.

The initiative is being organised in partnership with Food & Drink North East, with local businesses encouraged to contact the organisation with why they'd like to be part of it. It's an opportunity for them to gain valuable insights into expanding their businesses, while bringing their products to a brand new audience in the capital.

Lumo is a proud supporter of the local communities it serves, particularly local businesses. The operator runs 100% electric train services between Edinburgh, Newcastle, London and, from December, Glasgow Queen Street. Customers can sip on delicious Newcastle-brewed Donzoko Train Beer during their journeys, or tuck into a tasty locally made Ringtons Ginger Snap Biscuit.

Sharon Hodgson MP, Member of Parliament for Washington and Gateshead South, has pledged her support for the

event: "This is a fantastic initiative which I'm sure will prove to be very valuable for our many talented local businesses here in the North East. It's great to see a successful company like Lumo, who are based in Newcastle, promoting other local businesses. I'm looking forward to being a part of this event and meeting some amazing local people and helping to promote the food and drink industry in our region."

Richard Salkeld, Head of Communications & Partnerships at Lumo, said: "British Food Fortnight provides a timely platform to highlight our commitment to regional partnerships and sustainable growth. As we look ahead to expand our network with new routes, we're focused on strengthening Lumo's role as a champion of local enterprise and innovation. This initiative not only supports talented producers across the North East but also reflects our ambition to deliver a distinctive, high-quality experience for customers onboard."

Rhiannon Bearn, Deputy Chief Executive at the North East Chamber of Commerce,

said: "This initiative is a brilliant way to showcase the strength and diversity of our region's food and drink sector. Taking these fantastic local businesses to Westminster raises their profile and provides a valuable platform to grow, collaborate and reach new audiences.

"It's fantastic to see Lumo and Food & Drink North East working together to champion local businesses and open up new opportunities."

A number of local businesses have already been confirmed for the event, including Northumberland-based whisky and gin distillery Ad Gefrin, Davenport's Chocolates in Gateshead, Doddington Dairy in Northumberland, Hummingbird Drinks in Northumberland and Northumberland Coffee.

Lumo's powerful partnerships with local communities have been recognised at the prestigious Corporate Engagement Awards, with the operator recently winning a number of titles. Lumo also recently achieved the ServiceMark Accreditation from the Institute of Customer Service, a prestigious national benchmark that recognises organisations that have outstanding customer service and are striving for continuous improvement.

www.lumo.co.uk



Willi's raises a glass with Jesmond Wine Company

Willi's Café in Jesmond swapped its signature brunch buzz for after-hours sipping as it transformed into a wine bar for one night only.

Hosted by owner Rod Davies, the event welcomed a host of North East business friends and supporters for a wine-tasting soirée in partnership with Jesmond Wine Company.

The evening's pourings included a crisp English Sparkling, a classic red Bordeaux, and a bold Californian red — each selected to intrigue the palates of Willi's swanky suburbanite clientele.

Guests mingled over generous sharing boards piled high with continental meats and artisan cheeses, creating a backdrop for relaxed conversation and connection.

The event underlined Willi's reputation as a hub for business networking in the region, proving it's as comfortable hosting high-end tastings as it is serving up eggs benedict.

We'll drink to that!







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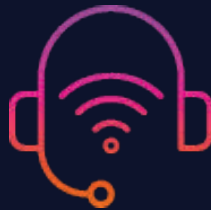
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The property market remains active, particularly in our £850,000 to £1.5 Million price bracket, where we are gaining good instructions in our core areas of Gosforth and Jesmond, and a strong level of enquiries from buyers who are looking for those 'forever' homes and downsizers who are wanting to be closer to amenities.

This level of the market often represents a sweet spot: properties are aspirational yet still within reach for many buyers in strong financial positions. As a result, we are seeing competitive activity, multiple viewings, and in some cases, swift offers being made once the right home becomes available.

We have gained some good instructions and sales on unique properties, one in particular that stands out for me is the largest detached home on Graham Park Road— a truly special sale!

The market in Northumberland, in particular the Tyne Valley, has continued to be strong, where we have recently had multiple instructions, on both a low key and full marketing basis, of homes in the sought after village of Corbridge, where there is always a strong demand!

Where we have seen a struggle is in those upper price points, with buyer confidence dipping and people not wanting to invest at these higher levels. I am confident that once the Autumn budget has passed, we will see a calm and confidence return.

At the same time, we are continuing to use our 'rare' way of selling and sticking with the good old fashioned way of doing things - regular phone calls, face-to-face updates and a hands-on approach to ensure that we help vendors achieve their best price and that buyers find their dream home.

It may seem outdated in 2025, but I find a good telephone call or meeting in person builds a much stronger relationship with my clients!

I have, however, taken the leap into the digital world and signed up to Instagram and whilst it may take me some time to learn the ropes on this, please do follow me on [@ashleigh_rare_property](https://www.instagram.com/ashleigh_rare_property) to see all things 'rare!' and the special properties that we sell.

My team and I are always here to assist you in the selling or buying of your home and we aim to give you the best advice and guidance that we can. Please do not hesitate to contact **0191 223 3500** or email me on ashleigh.sundin@sandersonyoung.co.uk.

Here's to looking forward to a great start to 2026!

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Ashleigh Sundin
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The Grove Gosforth

Ideally located in a popular area of Gosforth is this fabulous Georgian mid terraced family home. The Grade II listed property, built in stone, is set back from The Grove and has fabulous lawned gardens to the front and rear, and offers stylish accommodation over three floors. Impressive architectural features reflect the period of its construction whilst being refurbished by the current owners.

Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band G.



4 3 1 D

Price Guide:
Offers Over £1.2 Million



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Price Guide:
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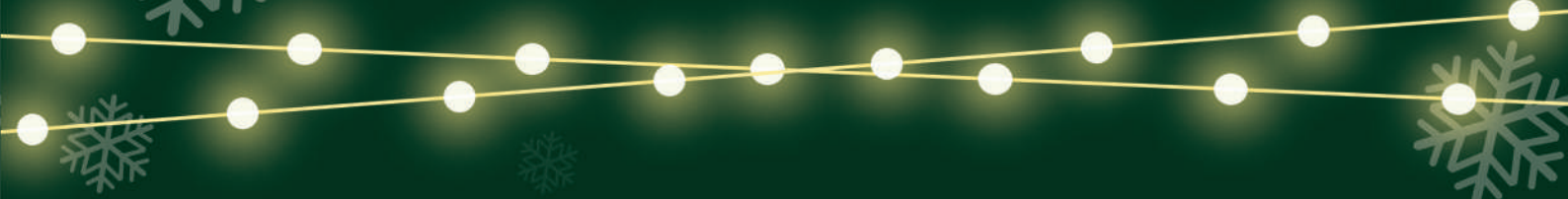


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AND SOMETHING MAGICAL JUST HAPPENS?"*

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Linda Farish

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Are you getting the best from your Training Investment?



Do you know how much time and money your business invests in training each year? More importantly, do you know if it's actually making a difference?

Training is one of the most valuable investments a business can make. It builds skills, confidence and capability, helping people grow with the business and preparing them to become the leaders of tomorrow. Yet many SMEs still take a reactive approach — training when problems arise, rather than starting with a clear view of what's really needed.

When done well, training is about unlocking potential, not just about fixing gaps.

Why training matters

For SMEs, where resources and career pathways can be limited compared to larger organisations, developing your own talent is often the smartest move you can make. Attracting new people is getting tougher, and today's candidates — especially younger generations — are looking for more than just pay. They are seeking opportunities to learn and progress.

If your team doesn't see you investing in their development, they may not see a long-term future with you. When they do, engagement, productivity and retention all improve.

The starting point: Identifying training needs

Before booking any course or workshop, it's worth asking: *what problem are we trying to solve?*

Perhaps bids aren't landing because your team can't demonstrate key capabilities. Maybe you've introduced a new system that staff need support to use effectively. Or your growth plans mean developing the next tier of managers to lead the business forward.

Identifying training needs accurately allows you to be proactive, plan ahead and make sure development aligns with your wider business goals.

How to identify training needs

Start by looking at the skills your business needs now and in the future, and compare them with those you already have. Involve your people — ask where they feel confident, where they'd like to grow, and what would help them perform better.

At 360 Growth Partners, we often begin by helping leaders clarify their future goals, map out the capabilities needed to achieve

them, and identify any gaps. From there, we shape practical development plans that blend technical training, leadership programmes and targeted coaching.

Making training count

Once the needs are clear, you can target your investment more effectively — whether that's job-specific training, leadership development or mentoring for individuals. Focused training delivers better results, helps manage costs and builds lasting capability.

Training is an integral part of a bigger plan for your people and your business — one that strengthens culture, supports succession planning and creates confident, capable teams.

Where to start

We've supported several clients to take this approach: identifying what their future organisation needs to look like, developing the skills to match and building strong leaders along the way.

If you'd like to explore how we can help your business do the same — from identifying training needs to delivering tailored development and coaching — get in touch at start@360growthpartners.co.uk.

Because when you invest in your people, you invest in your future.

www.360growthpartners.co.uk



Milestone year continues for finance firm with Senior Leadership Appointments

Award-winning North East commercial finance specialist CCBS Group has strengthened its leadership team with two senior appointments, marking another key milestone in a landmark year for the business.

Following its 10th anniversary in 2024 and a successful management buyout earlier this year, the firm has appointed Andrew Welton as Relationship Development Director and Carly Dove as Director of Business Performance. These strategic hires reinforce CCBS Group's commitment to delivering exceptional client service and funding support across the region. Both roles are designed to support continued growth and build on the strong foundations established over the past decade. The focus will be on deepening funder relationships, identifying new opportunities, and ensuring seamless delivery for clients.

Newcastle Theatre Royal announces recruitment of new trustees to strengthen board leadership

Newcastle Theatre Royal Trust, the charity that runs Newcastle Theatre Royal, has welcomed three new Trustees to its board. The appointments have been made following an open recruitment campaign for individuals to support and guide the growth of the theatre and the implementation of its strategic plan.

As an independent arts charity that doesn't receive regular government or local authority funding, ensuring financial resilience is key to protecting its long-term future. The new Trustees bring experience in business, finance, and fundraising to support what we already do with trusts & foundations, private individuals, as well as corporate supporters. In addition, the new board members will contribute using their experience from the wider third sector including education, the creative industries, accessibility, and sustainability.

They are Carolyn Ramsbotham, Patricia Alexander and Alison Currie. Patricia and Alison will join the Finance and General Purposes Committee.

Marianne Locatori, Newcastle Theatre Royal's Chief Executive, said: "I'm delighted to welcome the three new Trustees. Carolyn, Patricia and Alison's expertise and passion will be invaluable to help shape the future of the theatre and support the successful delivery of our mission and strategy. I look forward to us benefiting from their expertise, insight and enthusiasm going forward."

They join a committed and ambitious board of trustees who support the theatre's executive and staff team. The board is made up of: Nick Swales OBE, DL (Chair) Ray Mills (Vice Chair); Julie Blackie; Lorna Edwards; Dr Ben Fletcher-Watson; Scott Holland; Alison Jones; and Andrew Roberts.

Nick Swales, Chair of Trustees, Newcastle Theatre Royal, said: "Following a successful recovery from the devastating impact of the covid pandemic, the theatre's Board of Trustees and Executive team designed a new strategy. This includes continuing to provide an exciting and varied programme on stage as well as increasing our social and community impact as a charity.

"Recruiting these new trustees with their individual skill sets, to the Board as others retire, will ensure we have the right balance of knowledge and experience to deliver the next phase of the strategy. I very much look forward to working with all three new trustees. The Board will continue to recruit to ensure that as the charity's needs evolve the skills and experience of the trustee membership are appropriate."

FW Capital commits to future talent with a new intern appointment

Fund manager FW Capital is welcoming a new wave of talent as it continues to bring investment support to SMEs across the North East.

Lloyd Hall has secured the firm's first internship, which is part of FW Capital's strategy to develop future talent. This is a significant move for the firm and strengthens its existing Career Path programme, which delivers a structured approach for staff to gain relevant experience for future career progression.

Lloyd Hall joins the North East team and will be based in the Newcastle office. He will work across key departments across the firm, with a strong focus on understanding the investment Funds that FW Capital manages. Lloyd is the first intern intake from FW Capital and he will work with colleagues across the region that will support him through mentorship, structured training activities and client interaction.

Lindsey McMenamin, Portfolio Manager at FW Capital said: "At FW Capital we truly believe our team to be our greatest asset and we're excited to welcome Lloyd to the team. We know how important



investing in our team is and we're always looking to recruit new talent that we can nurture and develop. We're committed to helping trainees shape their future career, providing them with real life experience and opportunities for learning."

Lloyd Hall, FW Capital added: "I'm looking forward to working with the team at FW Capital, gaining invaluable knowledge and experience. This is a fantastic opportunity to develop both personally and professionally."

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INTERESTING TIMES

The Finance Newsletter You Actually Want To Read | NORTHERN INSIGHT VERSION

"Business leaders get trapped inside their own business far too often. Let's change that."

ONE SUBJECT | THREE TIPS



Most business owners chase turnover. But margin is where the magic happens. A few small percentage points can make the difference between just covering costs and building a business that funds real freedom.

Here's how to protect and improve your profit margin without working longer hours or taking bigger risks..

1. Price with confidence, not apology

If you're delivering great work, stop feeling guilty about charging for it. Review your pricing once a year at minimum. Even small price increases often go unnoticed but have an outsized impact on profit. You don't need to be the cheapest. You need to be the best value.

2. Protect profit before chasing growth

Adding more clients or projects doesn't automatically add profit. In fact, it can stretch resources and increase costs. Check your gross margin first. If it's not healthy, fix that before scaling. Growth only helps if every new pound of revenue adds something to the bottom line.

3. Know your breakeven number

Too few business owners can answer the question: "How much do we need to sell this month to break even?" Once you know that figure, decisions get easier, whether it's hiring, investing, or saying no to unprofitable work. It's a simple number that brings huge clarity.

Profit isn't luck. It's habit, discipline, and focus. The margins matter, because they buy you choice..

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INTERESTING QUOTE



A business that isn't profitable isn't a business – it's a hobby.

Mike Michalowicz

JUST ONE THING

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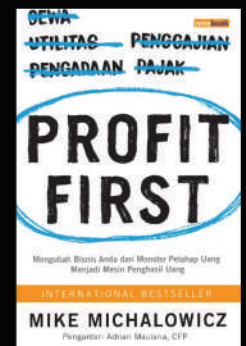
Look at your pricing from the client's perspective. Would you pay what you're charging, knowing the value you deliver? If the answer's yes, increase it slightly. You've earned it.

HAVE A READ

Profit First. Mike Michalowicz.

A thought-provoking take on small business finance that's gained a lot of attention recently. The idea is simple: pay yourself first, then run your business on what remains. It challenges the traditional "sales minus expenses" mindset and forces you to think about profit as a priority, not an afterthought

£15(ish) online. **Mark Melville**



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Cartmell Shepherd recognised in prestigious legal rankings

Cartmell Shepherd Solicitors has been recognised for the outstanding achievements of its agriculture and Wills, probate and inheritance departments.

The Chambers UK Legal Guide 2026, has ranked the firm's agriculture team as one of the best in the country for the sixth consecutive year.

This recognition comes just a few weeks after the team also retained its Band 1 rating in the Legal 500 professional legal rankings.

Directors Mark Jackson, Jonathan Carroll and Katherine Pretswell-Walker were named in both the Legal 500 and the Chambers Guide, which cited the team's "excellent knowledge across multiple areas of work, which means they are able to handle most cases."

Mark commented: "Maintaining our tier one ranking for the sixth year in a row is testament to the dedication and expertise of our team, who continue to work hard to deliver for clients."

We're proud to be home to one of the biggest agriculture teams in the North of England, capable of supporting clients with a wide range of complex matters from property transactions to renewable energy projects.

Underpinning our success is a commitment to training and development, as demonstrated by our trainee solicitor and solicitor apprenticeship programmes, which have nurtured many of the agricultural specialists on our team.

Last month, we celebrated Sam Fawcett qualifying as a solicitor after two years training with us and welcomed our newest trainee Abbie Heywood to the department.

By investing in our people, we've been able to grow the team while maintaining the standard of excellence our clients expect."

Cartmell Shepherd's agriculture team is joined in the Legal 500 rankings by its Wills, probate and inheritance department who were recognised for their expertise in the Personal, Tax, Trusts and Probate category.



Johnston Carmichael strengthens Newcastle team ahead of major reporting changes

Leading UK accountancy and business advisory firm Johnston Carmichael has strengthened its growing Newcastle team with the appointment of Stuart Duckenfield as Financial Reporting Advisory (FRA) Assistant Manager, enhancing the firm's expertise in the region as businesses prepare for significant financial reporting changes.

Stuart began his career with Holeys Chartered Accountants in Harrogate before relocating to the North East in 2019, spending six years at RSM Newcastle advising small and medium-sized businesses across multiple sectors. Drawn by Johnston Carmichael's strong culture and innovative vision, he joins the firm to collaborate with larger clients on complex financial reporting matters.

His appointment comes as businesses prepare for major FRS 102 changes, effective 1st January 2026, the most significant revision to UK GAAP since its introduction. Stuart will be the local point of contact for organisations navigating new requirements around lease accounting and revenue recognition.

Stuart said: "I've always found it rewarding to support businesses through their growth journey. At Johnston Carmichael, I'm excited to build strong relationships across the North East and help clients adapt and thrive as these changes take effect."

Paul Shields, Partner and Head of the Newcastle office, added: "We are delighted to welcome Stuart to the team. The upcoming FRS 102 revisions are extensive, and early preparation

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Directors urged to act now ahead of new company ID rules

By Laura Weir, Associate Director at RMT Accountants & Business Advisors Ltd.

In recent years, there has been a clear shift towards greater transparency around who owns and controls UK businesses, as regulators work to reduce the risk of fraud and misuse.

That focus will intensify this November, when new identity verification rules come into force, placing fresh responsibilities on company directors.

The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act (ECCTA) is new

legislation introduced by the government to improve corporate transparency and reduce fraud within UK businesses. It requires company directors to take proactive steps to ensure ongoing compliance.

At present, businesses are required to submit an annual return to Companies House, providing key information about their structure and ownership.

However, from 18 November 2025, all company directors, persons with significant control (PSCs), and anyone involved in setting up, running, owning, or controlling a company will be required to verify their identity with Companies House each year.

They will also need to confirm that their purpose is lawful both upon incorporation and within their annual confirmation statement.

The Registrar of Companies will have enhanced powers to query these statements and remove any false or inaccurate information from the register.

A new system of financial penalties for non-compliance with identity verification and filing requirements will also be introduced as part of the legislation. Fines will be tiered based on the severity of the offence or the company's previous reporting record.

Penalties will start at £250 for minor offences and £500 for serious offences, rising to £1,500 or £2,000 for repeat offenders.

Laura Weir, associate director at RMT Accountants & Business Advisors, says: "The ECCTA is designed to reform the role of Companies House and strengthen transparency across UK businesses, giving it a greater part to play in both tackling economic crime and supporting growth.

"From a day-to-day business administration perspective, these changes mean all businesses must take proactive steps to ensure they remain compliant, with the new penalties providing a clear incentive to do so.

"We're encouraging our clients to get ahead of the new requirements now, before they become mandatory, to avoid last-minute pressure and potential delays in updating company records."

If you would like further information on the new company verification process, or if you're unsure how these changes will affect your business, please contact RMT Accountants & Business Advisors at advice@r-m-t.co.uk or call 0191 256 9500.

Robson Laidler expands talent pipeline with new trainees

Accountancy firm Robson Laidler has expanded its team with the appointment of eight new trainees who will embark on the firm's training academy, working within the business alongside professional study.

Together they will be based across Robson Laidler's Newcastle and Durham and Teesside offices, working in departments including audit, healthcare accounting, business accounts, business advisory and tax.

The Robson Laidler training academy offers apprentices a fully funded structured learning programme, personal development and study time, support from a dedicated mentor and a recognised accountancy qualification through the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW).

The new accounts assistants are; Molly Williams, Anya Russell, Nevaeh Barnes, Zara Grand, William Grundy, Ethan Haslem, Darcy O'Neil, and Harry Petterson.

The appointments bring the total number of Robson Laidler staff to 131, with a total of 42 staff training towards professional qualifications.

Robson Laidler co-managing director Amy Park said: "We're proud to be supporting local young people as they take their first steps into the working world, and it's been great to see how last year's apprentices are growing through our training academy. We are investing heavily in the future of our business and the profession in our region."

New accounts assistant Nevaeh Barnes said: "After attending the RL open evening, I realised apprenticeships are such a great option - you gain real experience, get qualified, and avoid the burden of



New Robson Laidler trainees (left to right) Molly Williams, Anya Russell, Darcy O'Neil, Harry Petterson, Nevaeh Barnes, William Grundy, Zara Grand and Ethan Haslem

university fees and student debt. The support here at RL has been amazing."

Robson Laidler won Independent Firm of the Year at this year's North East Accountancy Awards and has been listed in the Sunday Times Best Places to work for two consecutive years driven by its commitment to staff development, wellbeing, and workplace culture. The firm offers its staff professional and soft skills training, a Four Day Working Week, a confidential Employee Assistance Programme and long-service recognition.

www.robson-laidler.co.uk

Prosper drives New Build Development Framework with key appointment



Procurement experts Prosper has appointed Laura Balaam Wiseman as a Procurement and Contracts Manager to help deliver its New Build Framework.

Laura joins the organisation from Sunderland social landlord Gentoo where she was Head of Delivery - a role she held for five and a half years.

Her social housing and new build experience will be valuable as she will be responsible for supporting public sector partners to access and deliver Prosper's New Build Development Framework.

The new 4-year multi-supplier framework was launched in July with 22 firms appointed across the whole of England and Wales. The framework delivers a range of construction works and associated services including design. The scope of works include new build, refurbishment and renovations, extensions and improvements to housing, commercial buildings, community and civic buildings, education establishments and health care buildings.

Rod Brasington, CEO of Prosper, said: "Laura is a fantastic appointment and brings with her a wealth of social housing new build knowledge, skills and experience we need to help us deliver our new framework. I'm really looking forward to working with her and know she will be a great asset to the team."

prosper.uk.com

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Effective team communication

How to bridge the gap between finance and operations.

In many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), finance and operations often function in silos: one is focused on the numbers, and the other on day-to-day delivery. But if the business is to truly thrive, these two core functions must work in harmony.

Bridging the communication gap between finance and operations can unlock better decision-making, increase efficiency, and drive alignment with business goals. Here's how to do it well.

Align finance and operations

At its core, strong communication between finance and operations ensures that everyone is pulling in the same direction.

Operational decisions, whether they are related to staffing, production, supply chains, or something else entirely all have financial implications.

If the two departments aren't on the same page, you'll risk going over budget, misallocating your resources, and missing your targets entirely.

Fostering regular dialogue between the two teams is the only way to ensure that operational strategies are grounded in financial reality. Your finance teams can help interpret data and forecast outcomes,

while your operations teams can provide critical insight into on-the-ground challenges and opportunities. Together, they can form a more accurate picture of your business's performance and help you tackle obstacles cleverly and with more confidence.

Consider finance as a strategic partner

You may need to change how you view your finance function. Rather than seeing finance purely as a back-office compliance role, you should be recognising it as a way of supporting your plans for growth.

Remember, your finance teams can offer more than just reports. They can provide insights that shape your strategy, better manage risk, and drive increased profitability.

Schedule regular financial updates

One practical way to bridge the finance-operations gap is by introducing regular communication cycles.

Monthly or bi-weekly financial update meetings can keep you and your department heads informed of the company's financial position, allowing for timely adjustments and much more proactive management decisions.

These sessions should go beyond dry financial statements. Focus on tracking key performance indicators (KPIs), defining trends, and exploring how financial results relate to operational activities.

Encouraging questions and open dialogue will make sure all teams feel engaged and accountable, too.

Train non-financial staff

Consider providing financial literacy training to non-finance staff. Operational

managers don't need to become accountants, but they should understand basic concepts such as profit margins, cash flow, and budgeting. This empowers them to make informed decisions and engage more meaningfully in financial discussions.

Simple workshops or short e-learning modules can demystify finance and build confidence across the business. When more team members understand the numbers, it naturally improves the quality of cross-functional communication and helps to keep everyone working towards the same outcome.

Use technology to support your vision

With the right technology, everyone from the sales staff to the boardroom execs can get the financial information they need, precisely when they need it.

Shared dashboards, such as those built in tools like Xero or Power BI, offer real-time visibility into financial and operational metrics. Collaboration platforms like Slack, Microsoft Teams or Asana can further streamline communication and make updates accessible to everyone.

By aligning goals, fostering mutual understanding, and leveraging the right tools and processes, you really can turn these traditionally separate functions into a united force.

If you need help boosting inter-team communications or improving your staff's understanding of your financial position, contact me, Mark Brown at L4 Financial.

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Develop North PLC launches new growth strategy



L-R: Jackie Fitzgerald (Homes & Houses Ltd), Fergus Trim (Broadoak Asset Management), John Newlands (Develop North), Ian McElroy (Tier One Capital) and John Seager (Broadoak Asset Management)

North East investment company Develop North PLC, managed by Newcastle-based fund management specialists, Tier One Capital, has announced proposals to provide increased access to real estate investment opportunities in the North East of England and significantly expand its financial support for businesses, housing and regeneration projects across the region.

The proposed investment policy will focus on three deployment strategies: real estate lending, as well as commercial and residential real estate investment, all with a strong regional focus. The changes reflect a growing demand for flexible, locally informed capital that can accelerate economic growth and support community infrastructure.

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 3,200 jobs and helping deliver a gross development value in excess of £275 million.

As part of the proposals, Develop North is exploring a potential fundraise to accelerate the company's growth and provide investors with a platform to capitalise on the strong tailwinds currently benefitting the opportunity-rich North East.

The company's expanded investment policy will enable Develop North to:

- Provide real estate loans to support

housebuilding and commercial development.

- Invest in and upgrade commercial real estate assets to attract tenants and drive regeneration.
- Secure residential real estate through freehold or leasehold and to provide capacity and support to supported housing providers.

The proposed investment policy complements the investment opportunities created by the devolution agreement in May 2024 (formalised between central UK Government and the North East Mayoral Combined Authority), releasing an expected £1.4bn of investment into the region.

Supporting Tier One in managing Develop North in its next phase of growth is a highly experienced, locally embedded asset management team, including residential acquisitions and leasing specialists Homes or Houses, and commercial property investment experts Broadoak Asset Management.

The enlarged asset management team will bring deep regional insight and sector expertise, enabling Develop North to identify and execute high-quality investments that align with market opportunities and community needs.

John Newlands, Chairman of Develop North, said: "The North East is on the cusp of transformational growth, and the private sector has a vital role to play in supporting that momentum."

"With devolution and investment frameworks now in place, the North East and Tees Valley Combined Authorities are making the region more investable than ever. As a trusted investment partner, Develop North is well-placed to ensure that the investment opportunity of the North East is open to everyone."

Ian McElroy, Chief Executive of Tier One Capital, added: "There is a growing expectation that institutional investors, including Local Government Pension Schemes, will support investment into UK regions with real economic potential. We are witnessing the start of some real momentum in this process, with a number of globally recognised investment firms now allocating capital to the North East. With two proactive and positive metro mayors in place with strong devolution settlements, the North East is seeing increased attention from policymakers and the market alike."

www.tieronecapital.co.uk
www.developnorth.co.uk

1,100 new jobs as Merchant Park Development reaches major milestone



L-R: Chris Dixon FW Capital, Michael Chicken Merchant Park, Kim McGuinness North East Mayor, Geoff Hunton Merchant Park and Adrian Goodall, Merchant Park

Over 1,100 new jobs are being created in Newton Aycliffe as Merchant Park announces the completion of its first 53,993 sq. ft warehouse development.

This significant boost for the region was welcomed by North East Mayor Kim McGuinness who toured the site on Millennium Way and met with the development team to discuss the opportunities this brings for local people and businesses.

Kim McGuinness, North East Mayor said: "Small and medium-sized businesses are the beating heart of our economy. As Mayor, I'm determined to help them grow, create thousands of new jobs, and deliver real opportunities for people across our region.

"Developments like Merchant Park show what's possible when we invest in our local business community and back their ambition. This new site is already bringing high-quality jobs to the area, with even more to come as the project expands."

Mayor Kim was also pleased to see energy-efficient technology, such as heat pumps, roof mounted PV and EV charging supporting the region's net zero ambitions.

Merchant Park is a 65-acre development at Aycliffe Business Park, home to the 30-acre Hitachi Rail Europe train manufacturing facility, one of the largest inward investment manufacturing developments in recent years. The new warehouse is the first of three units, with infrastructure work underway for further premises of 89,000 sq. ft and 126,000 sq. ft, ensuring continued job creation and economic growth.

A seven-figure senior debt package from FW Capital, backed by the North East Combined Authority (North East CA), has supported the project's delivery. The North East CA has also provided incentives to bridge the financial viability gap for the first phase, including infrastructure for the next two units.

The Mayor's visit was an opportunity to meet the development team, including Adrian Goodall, Michael Chicken and Geoff Hunton, as well as contractors Hall Construction and Helm Consulting, whose local workforce completed the project ahead of schedule. Property enquiries are being handled by CBRE and Connect Property North East.

Adrian Goodall, Director at Merchant Park Developments, said: "Everything ground to a halt post Covid, and we needed a funding boost to assist the completion of this project. The backing of FW Capital and the North East CA has enabled us to fast-track delivery of the first unit. Thanks also go to the work of everyone on site, especially the team at Hall Construction whose

commitment to the job has allowed the project to be completed ahead of schedule. Welcoming Kim to look around the site and talk to the people involved has been great and we thank her for her time."

Chris Dixon, Fund Manager at FW Capital, added: "Watching developments come to fruition is a very satisfying part of the job. The team at Merchant Park Developments has impressed us with their vision and focus to bring Unit 1 to completion.

With excellent road links and quality commercial warehouse and office space, it's a great location for any business looking to be based out of the North East."

Geoff Hunton Merchant Park Developments said: "The completion of Unit 1 at Merchant Park comes at opportune time because it's the 10th anniversary of Hitachi's rail's factory opening which was completed by Merchant Anglo Property Holdings. This all coincides with national celebrations marking 200 years since the birth of the modern railway."

The North East Commercial Property Investment Fund is a £35 million fund supporting new and refurbished commercial projects, aiming to create 5,600 jobs and develop 140,000 sq. m of commercial space across the region.

If you want to find out how we can support your business please email info@fwcapital.co.uk or visit our website www.fwcapital.co.uk

Accountant of the month

This month Northern Insight spoke to...

Steven Tuckwell

Owner, 1st Cloud Accountants.

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

From being a paperboy, to working fruit markets on cold mornings to selling Christmas Trees whilst still at school, the work ethic has always been in me. This led me to be fascinated by how businesses work with the stories behind them and how to make money. At 16 I left school and started on a YTS scheme in an accountants and was ACCA qualified by the time I was 22 years old. I started my own practice when aged 28 and over the years I've built 1st Cloud Accountants into a firm that's all about combining expert advice with a down-to-earth, approachable style. We opened a second office around 10 years ago in South Shields and in September 2025, we've expanded by purchasing JC Accountants, which has helped strengthen our presence and services even further in the North East area.

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

One of the biggest mistakes I see is people waiting too long to ask for advice. Many try to handle everything themselves until problems start to snowball. Another is not planning ahead for tax or cash flow — both are crucial for stability and growth. Getting the right systems and advice in place early makes a huge difference.

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

Technology has transformed everything. I was an early adopter of technology and build and maintain our own on premises servers. Technology has made accounting faster, more accurate, and much more collaborative. Our servers combined with cloud software lets clients and accountants see the same information in real time, which helps us make better decisions together. At 1st Cloud, we are fully embracing AI tools as they allow us to deliver proactive advice rather than just historical reports.

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

Don't be afraid to seek guidance early, and make sure you really understand your numbers. Set aside time each month to review your figures, not just at year end. And build a relationship with an accountant who's genuinely interested in your journey. Our philosophy is to provide full services for clients from Birth to Exit, meaning we're there at every stage of their journey, from the first registration of a business or tax return to sale planning, or IHT planning.

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

We take a proactive approach. Rather than just filing returns, we help clients structure their businesses efficiently and stay one step ahead of deadlines. Every business is unique, so we tailor our advice to fit their circumstances. We also make compliance as stress-free as possible by using digital systems to keep everything organised and transparent.

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

I think automation, digital reporting, and AI-driven insights will continue to reshape how we work. At the same time, economic uncertainty means cash flow and adaptability are more important than ever. Businesses that plan well and invest in solid financial systems will be the ones that thrive. At 1st Cloud, we're focused on helping client's future-proof their operations for exactly that reason. Uncertainty in the economy doesn't drive growth but being adaptable and knowing your figures does.

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

A great accountant listens first. Understanding what matters most to each client and their goals, pressures, and motivations is key. I also believe in being approachable and friendly and don't hide behind jargon or formality. Many of our clients see us as part of their team, which is exactly how we like it.

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

Organisation and teamwork. We've built a strong team culture at 1st Cloud, where everyone supports each other to deliver great results for the clients. When things get hectic (which they often are with the never ending list of deadlines) it's about staying calm, prioritising, and remembering that every challenge is solvable with the right plan and right team.

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

Keep your records in good order and don't underestimate the power of regular financial reviews. Knowing your numbers gives you control, confidence, and clarity and that leads to better decisions in business and in life.

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

It's incredibly rewarding to see clients succeed whether that's a new start-up getting off the ground or a long-established business planning its next chapter. I'm proud of how 1st Cloud has grown, our strong brand reputation, and our continued community involvement including the full naming rights of South Shields FC football ground and supporting many charity events. Looking ahead, I'm excited about future collaborations with stakeholder, expanding our brand reach and continuing to grow the business while keeping our personal, client-focused approach at the heart of everything we do.

www.1stcloudaccountants.co.uk



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*...Every business
is unique, so
we tailor our
advice to fit their
circumstances...*

Steven Tuckwell

Kingsmere Finance Directors continues to grow and support businesses with their financial health



L-R: Graham Palmer, Catherine Earl, Barry Goddard

Following another successful year, Kingsmere Finance Directors is again adding to its expert team with three new highly experienced Finance Directors, Catherine Earl, Barry Goddard, and Graham Palmer, each bringing a wealth of expertise to support clients across a wide range of business sectors and sizes.



Geoff Maclauchlan, Managing Director

Building on experience

As a result of the ongoing and increasing appetite for part-time, or 'fractional' Financial Directors, Kingsmere is enjoying a continued period of growth with the addition of three experienced financial professionals, bolstering an already six-strong team and bringing the headcount to 9.

Catherine, a results-driven finance director with a strong record in fundraising, acquisitions and divestments across both owner-managed and private equity-backed organisations, brings with her a breadth of experience in supporting leadership teams in preparing for sale, securing investment for growth, and providing strategic CFO coverage.

Barry is a CIMA-qualified finance professional, joining Kingsmere following more than 15 years in senior roles supporting businesses through high-growth and pre-investment stages, with extensive experience in housing, PR & marketing and engineering sectors.

Graham's experience spans corporate finance, M&A, and financial modelling, having led companies through significant growth and sale processes, including one completed in just five and a half weeks. His expertise in growth and exit strategies, raising finance, and Board governance adds further strategic depth to the Kingsmere team.

Managing Director, Geoff Maclauchlan, commented on Kingsmere's growing

headcount: "Each of our new team members brings something unique – real-world experience, practical insight and commercial understanding that only comes from having been there themselves. Kingsmere's strength lies in this collective expertise, which allows us to support businesses of every size with exactly the level of financial management they need."

The value of experienced financial leadership

Kingsmere continues to demonstrate why fractional or outsourced finance directors have become such a vital resource for business owners navigating increasingly complex and unpredictable environments.

Geoff explains that many businesses, regardless of their size, don't necessarily require a full-time Finance Director but need expert guidance to manage cash flow, build resilience and plan effectively for the future. "Every business needs good financial management," he says. "The challenge for many is having timely and accurate information to make sound decisions. That's where we come in."

Fractional FDs can work flexibly with clients on a retained or project basis, scaling their involvement to meet changing needs and budgets. From preparing a business for sale to supporting funding rounds, managing cash flow, or building robust management information systems, the Kingsmere model is designed to be practical, cost-effective and fully tailored.

More than numbers

Kingsmere's success and, in turn it's benefit to its clients, is the team's emphasis on partnership and perspective. Their role goes beyond producing reports and forecasts; they are commercially intelligent, experienced advisers who act as sounding boards for sometimes isolated business owners and leadership teams who may have few trusted people to confide in.

As Geoff notes, "For many business owners, it can be a lonely place at the top. Having someone impartial who understands both the numbers and the realities of business life can make all the difference."

This supportive, commercially minded approach enables clients to gain clarity, reduce stress, and focus on what they do best: running and growing their business.

A growing team for a growing market

The addition of Catherine, Barry and Graham represents another milestone for Kingsmere as demand for fractional financial leadership continues to rise. With clients ranging from start-ups to £40 million-turnover companies, Kingsmere's breadth of experience provides a scalable model that delivers both financial precision and strategic insight.

Geoff concludes: "Whether a business needs hands-on cashflow management or strategic Board-level guidance, our aim is always the same: to give owners confidence, clarity, and control over their financial future."

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

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Maven backs high-tech space communications firm aXenic with £500,000 investment

aXenic, a leading manufacturer of advanced optical modulators used in satellite communications, has secured a £500,000 investment to support its continued growth following global demand for its technology.

The funding includes £250,000 from NPIF II – Maven Equity Finance as part of the British Business Bank's Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II and £250,000 from the Finance Durham Fund established by Durham County Council and overseen by Business Durham, both managed by Maven Capital Partners.

Based at the North East Technology Park (NETPark) in Durham since its spin-out from a NASDAQ-listed components manufacturer in 2015, aXenic has seen strong demand for its technology grow to the point where its current facility has reached full capacity. The capital injection will allow the business to scale its infrastructure and operations, embark on a recruitment drive and allow aXenic to invest in equipment and stock to meet growing demand from new and existing customers as it expands its reach.

aXenic develops and supplies complex electronic components that enable high-speed optical communication in space. Its technology is used in Low Earth Orbit (LEO) satellite constellations and aerospace applications, with current customers including major European satellite and aerospace manufacturers as well as international space agencies and emerging players in the global satellite communications market.

Stephen Clements, CEO at aXenic, said: "Working closely with our wide range of satellite customers, aXenic has been able to build a global reputation for its unique technology, built on decades of world leading engineering expertise within the company. Having reached the point where capacity, equipment and working space is limiting our ability to grow further, we are delighted to have closed this finance round with Maven to support our next stage of growth in the optical satellite communication market. We are seeing huge demand for our strategically important devices and this funding provides scope for us to grow, along with the emerging market for the use of optics in space, to bring the equivalent improvement in bandwidth that fibre-optics has brought to the terrestrial communication market."

Michael Dickens, Investment Manager at Maven, said: "aXenic has developed a globally competitive product with clear relevance to the fast-growing satellite communications market. With impressive traction across leading satellite and aerospace players, and a base at one of the UK's leading science parks, the business is well positioned to capitalise on the rapid expansion of space-based connectivity. We're pleased to support Stephen and the team as they enter this next phase of growth."

Cllr Joe Quinn, Durham County Council cabinet member for Resources, Investments and Assets, said: "It's fantastic to see Finance Durham supporting aXenic in their continued growth at NETPark, one of our county's priority innovation



sites. Their expansion reflects our ambition to supercharge County Durham's economy by backing pioneering companies, creating high-quality jobs, and strengthening our reputation as the best place in the North East to do business. By fostering the success of businesses like aXenic, we're not only supporting enterprise today but also helping to deliver the skills, opportunities, and investment that will drive our economy forward for years to come."

Sarah Newbould, Senior Investment Manager at the British Business Bank said: "We are proud to support aXenic as it continues to grow and innovate from its base in the North East. This investment will help strengthen the region's reputation as a hub for advanced technology and create new opportunities in the local economy. It's exactly the type of ambitious business we want to see thrive through the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund, and we wish the team every success as they scale up."

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



“

*...this funding
provides scope
for us to grow...*

Stephen Clements

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Much loved pet charity in prime position thanks to Experience Bank Group

Newcastle Dog and Cat Shelter is celebrating after attracting some serious talent to its board after working closely with Experience Bank Group.

The charity which helps animals that are lost, unwanted, neglected, abused and abandoned. They reunite lost animals with their owners and find loving homes for those that find themselves with nowhere to live.

Chris Bray, CEO of the shelter in Benton, said: "The chair of our board had announced their intent to step away from the board, which left us with an opportunity to think strategically about what we needed in our next chair. Our existing board, whilst committed and passionate, was made up of people in their first trustee role and understandably no-one wanted to step up into the chair position.

"We realised we needed an experienced chair, who could manage the board, steer the new trustees, have vision for the shelter and take the senior operational team through a growth period. This seemed a big ask, until we met Peter Neal, founder of Experience Bank Group."

Ashleigh Wright, MD of Westray Recruitment, had recently joined the board and through her place on the peer groups for NEDs and Trustees had met Peter previously. She had no hesitation in recommending him to the rest of the board.



Richard Kirk

Ashleigh said: "We engaged Peter to look for our new chair and he also found us a fabulous new trustee during the process too. We are delighted to announce that Richard Kirk is joining the board as chair, and our latest trustee is Helen Cowpen."

The charity said they found the way Peter got under the skin of the organisation and its needs, to create a recruitment pack that would attract the right people was impressive.

They also complimented his process of whittling down applications to only present those who were both qualified and had the right personality.

Ashleigh continued: "Peter has a good listening ear, and he wanted to know all about the culture, leadership, vision and is very astute, doesn't ask a silly question. He was fully understanding, got our weak spots, no condescension but was mindful of the limitations of the charity. His communication was excellent, he kept us

to date, on who interviewing, pipeline and honest updates – we are delighted with the results!"

Richard Kirk, the new chair, is well known for his role at Tyne Rivers Trust and Helen Cowpen brings her experience as a chief people officer to the board as trustee.

Richard said: "It is an exciting time to join the team at Newcastle Cat and Dog Shelter and I am looking forward to steering the team through its next phase of growth!"

Peter concluded: "It was a joy to work with such a fabulous charity and I couldn't be happier with the result. As part of the process, I have also helped the board to have a succession planning strategy, so they won't be having to ever hire in haste."

If your charity needs a breath of fresh air, then do get in touch with Peter on peter@theexperiencebank.co.uk

Bridging the AI Skills Gap

How SMEs can avoid Implementation Failures in Finance.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly shifted from futuristic concept to practical tool, and it's no longer just the domain of large corporates. Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly exploring how AI could transform their finance function. From automating reporting and improving forecasting accuracy to enhancing strategic decision-making, AI offers the potential to make finance teams leaner, more accurate, and more forward-looking.

But too often, AI projects fail to deliver the benefits promised. Research shows the problem isn't the technology itself, but the lack of skills and expertise needed to make it work in practice. For SMEs - where resources and budgets are limited - this skills gap can be particularly acute.

Understanding the AI Skills Gap

The skills gap refers to the mismatch between the expertise needed to implement AI and the capability available within a business. In finance, this often means:

- Weaknesses in data management, reconciliation, and system integration.
- Limited experience handling large datasets.
- A lack of knowledge about AI tools and their practical application.

Finance teams are highly skilled in their professional domain, but if AI is deployed without clear objectives or the right foundations, the outcome can be technology that looks impressive but adds little real value, or worse, projects that stall completely.

Why SMEs struggle more than large corporates

Large organisations typically have in-house IT and data specialists who can lead AI initiatives. SMEs rarely have that luxury. Finance directors and owners are expected to keep pace with new technology while also managing everyday responsibilities.

Scale also presents challenges. Smaller businesses may not generate the same volume of financial data as corporates, which can limit how effectively AI tools are trained. Off-the-shelf solutions exist, but they still require careful integration.



Dan Cooper

Without expertise, SMEs risk either over-investing in tools they cannot use, or under-investing and missing opportunities.

Practical steps to bridge the gap

SME finance teams MUST approach AI implementation as a structured process rather than a one-off project.

1. Start with clear objectives.

AI should solve real finance problems, not be introduced for its own sake. Pinpoint areas where it can add measurable value.

2. Begin with pilot projects.

A small-scale pilot helps test technology, refine workflows, and build team confidence without the risks of full-scale transformation.

3. Upskill finance teams.

Finance professionals don't need to become data scientists, but upskilling in data analysis and AI basics is essential.

4. Bring in external support.

Outsourced finance directors or specialist advisors can guide tool selection, oversee integration, and ensure projects deliver measurable results.

5. Strengthen data governance.

AI is only as good as the data it analyses. If data capture and reconciliations are weak, AI outputs will be unreliable. SMEs should review finance processes to ensure clean, consistent data and factor in compliance and ethical considerations from the outset.

The human element

A common misconception is that AI replaces finance professionals. In reality, AI is most powerful when it supports, not substitutes, human judgment.

AI can process large volumes of data and spot patterns that would otherwise remain hidden. But it is finance leaders and their teams who interpret those insights, challenge assumptions, and translate them into actions that support growth.

By automating repetitive tasks, AI helps free a business to focus on higher-value work: advising management, shaping strategic plans, and improving decision-making. The real value lies not in the algorithms themselves but in how people use them.

The road ahead

For SMEs, adopting AI in finance, or other parts of the business, is no longer a question of if but when. The challenge lies in ensuring that adoption is sustainable, cost-effective, and delivers genuine benefits.

The skills gap is real, but it need not be a barrier. With clear objectives, pilot projects, investment in team capability, and the right external support, SMEs can harness AI effectively and position their finance function as a strategic engine for growth.

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Vistage National Conference – The quality of your thoughts, dictate the quality of your life!

This month a number of the region's business leaders attended a national conference that saw outstanding speakers and the bringing together 500 of some of the best business brains in the UK.

The Vistage UK Annual Conference was open to Vistage chairs, members, guest and potential members of a CEO level. Hosted by Brad Waldron and aptly named CEO Connect, the North East was represented by ten of our leaders from a range of industries including shopfitting, hygiene services, charities, shopfitting, software, digital and more.

Vistage chair for the North East and Northumberland, Andrew Marsh, accompanied some of his members to the event in Birmingham which also included an evening dinner complete with awards hosted by James Nesbitt. He said:

"Events like this really highlight the benefits of Vistage members. Free for members to attend, the room allowed for networking with 500 like-minded individuals, which is incredible. As pointed out to the audience by Rob Ristagno, Vistage President of International Operations, the UK members are part of a 45000+ membership worldwide, who through the My Vistage App are connected and able to support each other."

The conference opened with Lorraine McDonnell, entrepreneur and motivational speaker, who led the room in a manifestation meditation. Her powerful session heralded World Mental Health Day, showing how leaders under pressure can build mental resilience, optimise performance, maintain clarity, and operate at peak capacity. She left the room with the thought that "The quality of your thoughts, dictate the quality of your life."

Next to the stage was a North East favourite Sara Davies who shared her life and career journey saying she felt that Vistage was a safe space to share and be vulnerable. She shared honest, practical advice from her career, teaching us how to lead effectively, nurture talent, diversify ourselves and our businesses, and take bold steps in our entrepreneurial journeys.

Following a networking lunch, the delegates returned to the main room to hear from Rebecca Drew, who unveiled a new Vistage member benefit called Vistage Strategy. The organisation prides itself on listening to its' members and 90% of members had expressed that needed more support in strategic planning.

Tim Peak, British astronaut and test pilot, brought the daytime conference to a memorable end with his story telling of adventures most can only dream about. He revealed lessons from space exploration, demonstrating how exceptional leadership, teamwork, and decisive thinking under pressure translate to business success. The challenges and decision-making hints and tips were well received as Tim got a standing ovation from the room, who were moved by the images and words which he shared.

Quotes from members who attended included:

"The quality of speakers was immense – the lessons taken away immeasurable!"

"Wow! What a day! Inspired, motivated and excited to learn! Listened to Crafting Giants honest story of overcoming challenge, to flying in space with Tim Peake and I even won a little prize! #CEOconnect25."

"CEO Connect 2025 has officially set a new standard. From groundbreaking insights to next-level networking, every moment was inspiring."

Words from Vistage about the day were invaluable, sharing insights from Vistage's local and global communities, highlighting how leaders worldwide are connecting, learning, and growing together.

In conclusion, Rebecca Drew said: "A heartfelt thank you to everyone who attended and made CEO Connect 2025 truly unforgettable. If you missed it, you missed something extraordinary – but don't worry, we're already counting down to CEO Connect 2026."

This event is just one of the many benefits that Vistage members enjoy on top being part of a regional peer group which meets monthly, a combined peer group session quarterly and a monthly 1-2-1 mentoring session. There is a combined what's app group, social events and much more.

If you think you are ready to take your small or medium sized company or charity to the next level, then get in touch with andrew.marsh@vistagechair.co.uk





Andrew Marsh



Nationally recognised Family Lawyer Scott Halliday joins Sintons as Partner

Sintons is delighted to announce that Scott Halliday, a highly regarded and multi-award-winning family lawyer, has been appointed as a partner and the new head of the firm's family law team. Scott brings with him extensive experience in resolving complex financial issues upon divorce and sensitive cases involving children. He is described as a force of nature who leaves no stone unturned in a recent edition of Chambers and Partners.

Christopher Welch, Sintons managing partner, praised the new appointment. "Scott is known nationally for his strategic approach, commercial awareness, and the empathy he shows when managing family law cases," Christopher said. "Our family law department handles a wide range of cases, to include divorce and separation, financial matters, issues in relation to children, together with providing services to resolve cases away from the Court forum where that is possible. It's essential that we have someone of Scott's calibre at the helm, and I'm confident his appointment will strengthen our position as a leading family law practice."

Cartmell Shepherd Solicitors announces promotions in Private Client department

Cartmell Shepherd Solicitors has announced a new round of promotions within its specialist Wills, Probate and Inheritance team.

Reflecting the firm's ongoing commitment to staff development, Megan Wilkinson has been promoted to Senior Associate Solicitor, while Claire Ackerlay is promoted to Associate Private Client Executive.

Cartmell Shepherd's Private Client department is regarded as one of the largest and strongest in the region offering services including Will drafting, powers of attorney, succession planning, estate and trusts administration, and court of protection matters.

As Senior Associate, in addition to advising clients, Megan will continue in a leadership capacity, mentoring colleagues, chairing meetings, and monitoring staff wellbeing.

Megan said, "The promotion enables me to focus on supporting our trainees and more junior staff to develop their skills. Probate is an increasingly complex area of law and there's more pressure on clients than ever



before. I look forward to working with the team to help our clients plan for their futures.

Claire Ackerlay joined Cartmell Shepherd in 2022 and brings fifteen years' experience in wills, probate, and trust matters.

Claire is based at the firm's Cockermouth office which opened six years ago. Since joining the office, Claire has been instrumental in growing the business through networking and community engagement.

Alongside her role, Claire is studying for her Law Degree through Cartmell Shepherd's Solicitor Apprentice Scheme. She is expected to graduate with distinction next year.

The promotion to Associate reflects Claire's contribution to the firm's growth in West Cumbria and her own professional development.

Newcastle law firm shines once again in this year's Legal 500

Newcastle law firm Burnetts Solicitors LLP has excelled in The Legal 500 UK Solicitors 2026 Rankings – the leading guide to law firms and solicitors in the UK – with a total of 10 recommended practice areas, eight lawyers listed as Leading Individuals, four Next Generation Partners and five Leading Associates.

Legal 500 rankings reflect the result of months of extensive analysis by Legal 500's research team, which conducts thousands of interviews with private practice lawyers and reads through tens of thousands of submissions in order to select the very best lawyers and law firms in the UK.



Burnetts, had five of its departments achieve top tier rankings in the guide: Corporate and Commercial, Dispute Resolution, Personal Injury and Clinical Negligence, Agriculture and Estates and Commercial Property.

Nick Gutteridge, Managing Partner at Burnetts said: "I'm so proud to be part of the Burnetts team – our people take great pride in their work – and this is all reflected in this year's Legal 500 results."

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Meet the people behind the scenes taking care of you

Amie Callan

Amie Callan is head of operations and partner at Jacksons. She loves nothing more than spending time with her beautiful little boy Arthur, three, and husband, Andrew. He does all the cooking, something Amie “hates!” Watching reality TV is her guilty pleasure - always with a nice cup of tea and chocolate!



What's the best thing about being a Mum?

Unconditional love and just the joy of watching your child learn, grow and develop. It's been life changing and has given me more balance. I'm still very work driven, but I want to be there for his every milestone too!

What do you love about the current age/stage your little one is at?

Arthur is changing all the time – almost daily. It's amazing to watch, I love hearing him say new words and watching him learn new activities.

What are your top tips for juggling a career with motherhood?

Flexibility is key and I mean that from both sides – not wavering on whatever you've committed to, whether at work or home. Jacksons is an extremely flexible business and I'm lucky to have a supportive network, including my husband and parents.

What's the best family holiday you've ever been on?

We've just been on our first holiday abroad as a family to Paris, with five days at Disneyland and the remainder of the week in Paris. We were there for Arthur's birthday and it was amazing – but I can see why we've never done that before! We did over 20,000 steps a day - sometimes carrying Arthur and all his things!

Who is your parenting inspiration and why?

My parents because I've got very fond memories of growing up and them helping me become who I am today. I always go to them if I want any advice on anything to do with Arthur.

What does a typical day look like in your role – or is it not so typical?

Absolutely anything can happen every day. Priorities change continuously and whatever I intend to do on a given day rarely happens – but that's probably one of the things I love most.

What's one misconception people have about working in a law firm?

People think it's stuffy and old fashioned and assume you will see everybody in suits, set in their ways, but it's refreshing working at Jacksons because it's not like that at all.

How do you handle the pressure when things get intense?

I feel like I thrive on pressure and that's when I work at my best. Pressure is about staying calm, communicating well and managing people's expectations

What's been a career-defining moment for you so far?

It was a big achievement getting my ACCA [accountancy] qualification but at Jacksons, making partner and, shortly after, equity partner, have been huge defining moments for me, especially as a non-legal professional.

Which TV programme gets the legal profession totally right – or wrong?

I used to love watching Ally McBeal – which gets it totally wrong!

Coffee, tea or something else?

Tea – and plenty of it! Obviously, chocolate doesn't go amiss either!

If you had to choose a different career, what would it be?

I love watching shows like ER and Grey's Anatomy, so maybe a doctor!

What advice would you give someone wanting to join the legal industry?

Believe in yourself – and don't dismiss non-traditional routes like apprenticeships. That was my career path.

What's a talent you have that people may be surprised to find out?

I can ski!

If you had a free week and unlimited budget, what would you do first?

I would go on a big shopping spree and maybe try to squeeze in a trip to Vegas.

What's your favourite hidden gem in your local area?

Raby Castle. We absolutely love going there and have been there countless weekends, chasing Arthur around the Plotter's Forest and climbing slides!

Mincoffs appoints head of culture and people



Head of culture and people,
Aoife Owens

A leading North East law firm has announced the creation of a senior management position to facilitate its ambitious plans for growth and innovation.

Newcastle-based Mincoffs Solicitors has appointed Aoife Owens as its head of culture and people – a new role at the firm which will sit within the wider practice management team.

Aoife, whose appointment also expands the existing HR department, will lead on recruitment, people strategy, talent development, and wellbeing and culture in her role.

Prior to joining the firm, Aoife gained a decade of experience in both recruitment and HR, spending eight years at a specialist recruitment agency.

During this time, she played an intrinsic

part in building and developing the HR and culture function of the business as it grew from a team of eight to an agency with more than 100 employees.

The move to a law firm provides a full-circle moment for Aoife who, alongside a level 7 advanced diploma in human resources management from the CIPD, also holds a law degree and completed the LPC during her time at university.

Aoife said: “I’m excited to be joining as head of culture and people in this new role that underlines the firm’s commitment to putting its people first.

“I can’t wait to build on the strong foundations already in place and to help shape a people journey that supports colleagues to feel valued, supported and able to do their best work.

“I’m really looking forward to working alongside such a talented team and contributing to the firm’s future.”

Senior partner Paul Hughes said: “We continue to be committed to investing in our people as the firm expands and we are

delighted to be introducing this new role within the practice management team.

“Aoife’s proven experience and passion for people and culture is evident to anyone who meets her, and we look forward to working closely with her as we implement her ideas into the wider strategy.

“With her background in recruitment, HR and law, I have no doubt Aoife will be a great fit at Mincoffs and help us enhance our culture, streamline our recruitment processes and achieve the next stage of our growth trajectory.”

Mincoffs Solicitors has provided expert legal services and advice across the North East and beyond for more than 75 years.

Alongside corporate and commercial services, the firm’s offering includes commercial real estate, dispute resolution, employment law, licensing and gaming, residential conveyancing, family law and wills, probate and trusts.

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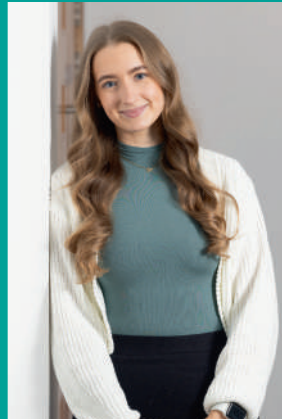
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Anna Ramsden



Sara Devennie

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Solicitor of the month...

David Low

Partner, Swinburne Maddison LLP.

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

At school, I was advised to pursue either Law or Medicine due to strong academic results. Being squeamish ruled out Medicine, so Law became the natural choice. I discovered my passion during my Law degree at the University of Leeds, followed by the Legal Practice Course in York.

Like many, securing a Training Contract was tough, I took a year out to travel and work aboard Cunard Cruise Liners before joining Swinburne Maddison LLP in Litigation, where I've stayed ever since.

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

We deal with a huge variety of disputes, from private individuals and corporate clients including property, contracts, commercial disputes, harassment or defamation. The most frequent issues I receive involve property rights, such as boundary disputes and Landlord and Tenant matters.

My philosophy has always been to understand the client's goals at the outset and mapping out a legal and practical route to achieve them, often working with experts like Surveyors to provide clear, comprehensive advice.

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

A common misconception is that Solicitors only care about their own fees. While it's true that private legal services can be expensive, the profession is full of hardworking, diligent and passionate lawyers who consistently go above and beyond for their clients. This commitment isn't limited to those offering Legal Aid or pro bono support, it's evident across the entire profession. Working in law, especially in Litigation, can be highly stressful, but Solicitors genuinely care about the people they represent.

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

Take advice early and keep things in proportion. Delaying legal help often complicates matters. Focus on your end goal and try to remove emotion from decisions. A good lawyer helps you stay objective and make informed choices throughout the process.

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

The emotional challenges of the job are numerous. While switching off and maintaining work-life balance is important, having a supportive team you can speak openly

with is essential. Sharing challenges with colleagues who understand the pressures makes a real difference.

Ethical challenges are less common due to the profession's strict regulations, but when they do arise, I'm fortunate to have a close-knit Dispute Resolution Team to discuss matters with and consider different perspectives.

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

Technology has changed how we work, communicate and interact with the courts. Tools like digital dictation, AI, and online portals are now standard. It is pretty much impossible to contribute meaningfully within the profession if you are not keeping up with technological advances.

In terms of the future evolution, the court system still needs significant investment to modernise and meet current demands.

What are the key qualities that make a great Solicitor?

In my opinion, the key qualities that make a great Solicitor are these three skills - communication, emotional intelligence, and analytical thinking. These ensure that clients feel heard, understood and well-supported while their case is handled with technical expertise.

Clients want someone they can trust and relate to, so even the most academically gifted lawyer will struggle to deliver great service without strong communication and relationship-building skills.

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

The most rewarding part of being a Solicitor is undoubtedly helping clients achieve their goals and receiving a simple thank you at the end of a case. The most challenging and emotive matters often bring the greatest satisfaction.

Litigation is inherently uncertain, and while we can't offer guarantees, we use our experience and expertise to guide clients toward the best possible outcome. Clients rarely seek out Litigators unless there's a problem, but I'm a problem solver and that's what motivates me every day.

swinburnemaddison.co.uk

“

*...understand the
client's goals at
the outset...*

David Low

Muckle LLP appoints six aspiring lawyers

North East law firm Muckle LLP is proud to welcome a new cohort of five trainee solicitors and one solicitor apprentice. The firm now has a total of 19 aspiring lawyers taking the next step in their careers.



L-R: Rebecca Watson, Hannah Hunt, Thalia Agoglossakis Foley, Ella Chandler, Anthony Evans, Jason Sinclair, Abi Chorlton Wilson

Over the course of their two-year training contracts, trainees Abi Chorlton Wilson, Hannah Hunt, Jason Sinclair, Rebecca Watson and Thalia Agoglossakis Foley will gain valuable experience across four teams.

Ella Chandler, the firm's newest solicitor apprentice, will work with various teams over six years of training whilst studying part-time.

Hannah, Thalia and Rebecca attended university in the North East, while Jason and Abi studied at the University of Leeds and Edinburgh University, respectively, before returning to Newcastle. Ella joins the firm after completing her A-Levels at Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College. The trainees successfully completed

Muckle's vacation scheme before securing training contracts, whilst Ella had undertaken work experience at the firm before becoming a solicitor apprentice through the North East Solicitor Apprenticeship (NESA) scheme.

The next generation of legal advisers

Abi completed the MLaw course after studying art history at Edinburgh University. She joins Muckle's corporate team.

She is already feeling like part of the team: "Here, the values are lived and the teams are incredibly friendly. Everyone has been so welcoming and there is so much to get involved in outside of legal work, such as the netball and running teams."

Fellow MLaw graduate Rebecca takes her

first seat in the firm's real estate team. She looks forward to the vast opportunities available at Muckle: "Being able to move around and gain experience in different areas of law is really exciting. I'm really looking forward to the varied range of work and discovering which area of law I enjoy most."

Jason completed the SQE1 and SQE2 exams at the University of Law and joins Abi in our corporate team. Jason already feels a sense of belonging at Muckle and believes the firm's values align with his own.

He says: "The firm is extremely values-driven, people at all levels and across all departments have been open to getting to know me and have shown genuine care towards me as an individual and a professional."



her SQE1 and SQE2 exams at the University of Law. She is taking her first seat in Muckle's sports, education and charities team.

Muckle's supportive, encouraging approach was immediately clear to Thalia: "Not only does Muckle have an impressive breadth of work available across the firm, but the kindness and supportive nature of all the teams here really stands out. Since joining, I've felt comfortable and supported at every stage."

After completing her A levels this summer, Ella joins Abi and Jason in our corporate team. She wanted to become a lawyer from a young age, favouring corporate and commercial law.

She also credits Muckle's commitment to making its people feel valued and respected: "I got to know Muckle through work experience before joining through the NESA scheme and felt welcome straight away. I was so glad that I could pursue the apprenticeship route into law and gain valuable hands-on experience at Muckle."

A people-first culture

Anthony Evans, managing partner at Muckle, said: "I'm delighted to welcome our newest trainees and apprentice to Muckle; they are a fantastic group."

"Training and developing the next generation of lawyers and offering opportunities for everyone in the business to develop their careers is something we are passionate about; it is key to our future success. I am excited to see how Abi, Ella, Hannah, Jason, Rebecca and Thalia progress their careers."

The firm is dedicated to career progression for its trainees and apprentices, and has most recently celebrated the qualification of three trainees, including Jordon Goodman (pictured below).

Learn more about Muckle's values and recruitment opportunities by visiting www.muckle-llp.com

Hannah is from Darlington and completed an undergraduate history degree before completing her SQE1 and SQE2 exams at The University of Law. She joins Muckle's construction team.

Aside from her genuine love of the North East, Hannah was drawn to Muckle for its dedication to ESG: "I was so impressed by Muckle's focus on giving back, and I'm so pleased there are so many opportunities to get involved in Muckle's community work through volunteering and pro bono. I'm looking forward to diving in headfirst and learning as much as I can from different people across the firm."

Thalia originally studied history at Durham University before switching to law. She spent one year doing a GDL conversion course at Northumbria before completing



L-R: Philip Clare, head of corporate finance, with Jordon Goodman, who recently qualified into the corporate team.

Legal 500 names Collingwood Legal as region's 'go to' employment law firm

North East law firm Collingwood Legal has been picked out as “the go-to adviser for employers and senior executives across the North” in the latest rankings from legal industry bible, The Legal 500.

The specialist Newcastle-based practice has retained its position as a Tier One employment law firm and one of just two in the sector to be highlighted for its outstanding client satisfaction standards, which are judged on the publication's detailed survey of client service and experience.

The team's work on “complex, high-value matters, frequently advising on TUPE, collective consultations and whistleblowing claims” is spotlighted, along with its “expertise in equality, diversity and discrimination law.”

Collingwood Legal's founder and managing partner Paul McGowan is picked out as “leading the team with standout knowledge of TUPE and whistleblowing issues,” while partner Jane Sinnamon and senior associate Charlotte McBride are both recognised for their “handling complex tribunal litigation.”

The new ratings follow Paul McGowan being named as The Legal 500's employment lawyer of the year at their 2025 Northern Powerhouse Awards.

Founded in 2010, Collingwood Legal is a relationship-based practice with a ten-strong team which offers the full range of employment law services, including advice and training for employers on



Paul McGowan

how to deal with developing workplace issues, such as the Employment Rights Bill that is currently making its way through Parliament.

It works with a number of well-known public and private sector organisations both within and outside the North East, and has particular expertise in the education, health and manufacturing.

Paul McGowan says: “Our Legal 500 ranking is a testament to the hard work, personal dedication and legal expertise of our whole team, and to be highlighted once again as leading the way in the region is something of which we're all very proud.

“It's especially pleasing to see so many members of our team receiving personal recognition, including Jordan Bruce and

Roland Fairlamb featuring in the guide with the firm for the first time.

“Our focus is always on providing clients with high quality services which help make their operations more efficient and effective, which makes having our client satisfaction ratings recognised as among the best in the business especially satisfying.

“There are always new rules and regulations coming into force which impact on the ways in which businesses operate, and we will continue to drive the standards for providing advice and guidance to employers on the best ways to apply them to their operations.”

collingwoodlegal.com



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Wills, TikToks & Trust issues

Let's be honest—talking about Wills and Lasting Powers of Attorney (LPAs) isn't exactly the stuff of viral TikToks or lunch time banter. But maybe it should be!

We live in a world where we spend hours curating playlists, meticulously planning holidays and choosing the perfect oat milk flat white. Yet when it comes to planning our legacy—what happens to our possessions, our children, our pets, our digital lives—we tend to ghost the conversation entirely.

The Myth of Immortality

Most of us operate under the illusion that we have loads of time. "I'll sort my will when I'm older," we say. But here's the thing: life doesn't come with a warning label. And neither does death.

Creating a Will isn't about being morbid—it's about being mindful. And it's not just for the grey-haired or the mega-rich. It's for anyone who wants to make sure their wishes are respected, their loved ones protected, and their legacy preserved.

What happens if you don't?

Let's paint a picture. You've got a prized vinyl collection, a rescue dog named Bowie, and a savings account that's finally looking respectable. Without a will, the law decides who gets what. That could mean your estranged cousin ends up with Bowie and your records. Nightmare!

Intestacy rules in the UK are rigid and impersonal. They don't care about your friendships, your chosen family, or your Spotify playlists. A will gives you control. It's your voice when you're not around to speak.

LPAs: Your life admin superpower

Lasting Powers of Attorney are like giving someone trusted the keys to your life admin dashboard. If you're ever unable to make decisions due to illness, accident, or a coma, your LPA steps in.

There are two types: one for health and welfare, and one for property and financial affairs. Think of them as your emergency backup plans. And no, they're not just for retirees. They're for anyone who wants to avoid chaos and confusion in a crisis.



Faraz Manzur

The TikTok Generation's Legacy

Younger people are redefining what legacy means. It's not just about houses and heirlooms—it's about digital assets, sustainability, and personal values.

Who gets what when you are gone? Your jewellery? Your social media? Your blog? Your cat? These are real questions. And they deserve real answers.

Wills and LPAs allow you to protect what matters most—whether that's your online presence, your ethical choices, or your beloved pet.

Trust issues?

Trusts aren't just for the super wealthy. They're tools that can help you manage your assets, protect vulnerable beneficiaries, and even reduce inheritance tax. They're like the Swiss Army knife of estate planning—versatile, practical, and surprisingly cool once you get to know them.

Make it easy

At Sweeney Miller Law, we believe that planning for the future should be empowering, not overwhelming. Our Wills, Trusts and Probate team is here to guide you through the process with clarity, compassion, and maybe even a few laughs.

We're not here to scare you into action—we're here to help you take control. Because adulting isn't just about paying bills and buying insurance. It's about making choices that reflect who you are and what you care about.

So go ahead—write your will, set up your LPA, and show the world that you've got your legacy sorted. It's the most rebellious thing you can do in a world that tells you to live like there's no tomorrow.

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**Sweeney Miller Law's
Late Summer Drinks
at the Flower Café**

The Commercial team at Sweeney Miller Law's Newcastle office welcomed clients and connections to a relaxed Late Summer Drinks evening at Jesmond's stunning new Flower Café.

With tropical props and a theme of "Hanging on to Summer," the event was a vibrant celebration of sunshine and good company. Guests enjoyed drinks, canapes, conversation, and a chance to connect in a beautiful setting. Thank you to everyone who joined us.

www.sweeneymiller.co.uk





Dominic Elsworth

Using your trade mark matters

Registration of trade marks is a powerful first step in protecting your brands. Registration gives you the exclusive right to use your trade marks in connection with your goods and services, but those rights must be actively maintained.

Most jurisdictions require that trade marks are put to genuine use within a set time period following registration, typically a five year period. Failure to do so can expose the registration to a revocation action, meaning that third parties can apply to have your registration cancelled.

Genuine trade mark use needs to be real, consistent use in the marketplace, in relation to the goods and/or services for which the mark was registered. The trade mark should appear on product labels, packaging, advertising and marketing materials in a way that clearly identifies it as your brand.

Proof of use can also be essential during trade mark renewal. Trade marks are typically renewed every ten years and some countries, such as the United States, require evidence of use to be submitted with the renewal application. Collecting this evidence regularly, such as sales records, copies of advertisements and product photographs, can make the renewal process much smoother.

Brexit added an extra layer of complexity for brand owners. When the UK left the EU, EU trade marks (EUTMs) no longer covered the UK. To preserve protection, the UK Intellectual Property Office automatically created comparable UK trade marks for existing EU trade mark registrations on 1 January 2021, at no cost to trade mark owners. However, these new UK registrations become vulnerable to non-use challenges from 1 January 2026, so businesses should ensure they are used in the UK before the end of 2025 to keep them secure. The reverse is also true for EUTMs - use in the UK no longer constitutes 'use in the EU' for the purposes of maintaining EUTM registrations.

In short, registration of trade marks is just the beginning. Using and documenting their use ensures you retain control of these valuable assets.

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Equity at the core: How Hay & Kilner is shaping the future of legal workplaces

At Hay & Kilner, one of the North East's leading independent law firms, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) isn't just a strategy, it's a lived reality.

With a 77% female workforce, 56% female representation at Partner level, and a predominantly female management board (60%), the firm is breaking legal industry norms and setting new standards for inclusive leadership.

This commitment has not gone unnoticed. Hay & Kilner has been shortlisted for two prestigious awards:

- UK Employer of the Year in the Investors in People Awards
- Most Inspiring Employer in the North East Chamber of Commerce Inspiring Women in Business Awards

These shortlists are a powerful acknowledgment of the supportive, inclusive, and high-performing environment we strive to foster every day. They also shine a light on the importance we place on professional development, wellbeing, and creating opportunities for everyone across the firm to thrive, both personally and professionally.

The EDI strategy is led by Sarah Furness, Ruth Fell, and Georgia Whitfield who as a small team working closely together can provide quick and sharp focus and have maximum impact.

A progressive culture grounded in people

Operating for nearly 80 years, Hay & Kilner serves a wide range of commercial and private clients, offering full-service legal expertise with a distinctly down-to-earth style. But what truly sets the firm apart is its people-first culture. It's an environment where employees thrive, and diversity is

actively championed.

"Empowering people isn't just a policy, it's embedded in our culture," says Sarah Furness, Partner "We want to create a space where every colleague can succeed, no matter their background, identity, or life journey."

Industry-leading gender representation

The firm's gender balance is impressive. While the national average for female Partners stands at just 23% (SRA data), Hay & Kilner boasts 56%, including two new female Partners in 2025.

There's no 'glass ceiling' here. Transparent promotion criteria, mentoring schemes, and SMART and strategy led objective-based reviews ensure equal access to career progression. We also recognise that our supportive male allies have a role to play in ensuring women at Hay & Kilner reach their potential.

Policies that reflect real lives

Hay & Kilner recognises that genuine inclusion means supporting employees through all stages of life. Enhanced family leave policies for maternity, paternity, adoption, and assisted conception are informed by employee feedback, as is the newly introduced baby loss policy, offering support through difficult times.

A menopause awareness programme, completed by managers, has normalised open conversations and ensured that women feel supported throughout their careers.

Training for inclusive leadership

Mandatory EDI and sexual harassment training reinforces a zero-tolerance approach to discrimination. Managers also receive development in performance management, delegation, and supportive conversations, equipping them to lead with empathy.

The firm's evolving three-year EDI strategy includes neurodiversity awareness and training, celebrating cultural differences and different religions and allyship training.

Work-life balance that works

A 60/40 hybrid working model, flexible working options and the recently introduced three additional days of annual leave reflect a workplace where wellbeing is prioritised. These benefits are particularly valued by those employees who balance their careers alongside caregiving responsibilities.

The firm's Silver Investors in People accreditation underpins its commitment to trust, purpose, and continuous feedback, creating an environment where employees are listened to and appreciated.

External impact and role models

Inclusion at Hay & Kilner extends beyond the office. Partner Leigh Ferguson, a spinal cord injury survivor, is a powerful voice for disability inclusion. Partner Lauren Hall co-chairs the Newcastle Women Lawyers Division, supporting professional women across the region and co-chairs our Employee Wellbeing Committee. Associate Bethany Herbertson leads the firm's involvement with CSR and the Social Mobility Foundation, mentoring students from less advantaged backgrounds while Georgia Whitfield sits on the Law Society's national LGBTQ+ committee.

In a sector where gender inequality and rigid cultures have historically prevailed, Hay & Kilner stands out. These award shortlistings are not just accolades, they reflect a deep, enduring commitment to equity at the core of everything the firm does.

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And that's reassuring to know.

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**Winn Group
Annual Golf Day**

Winn Group hosted their annual golf day at Close House Golf Club in early October.

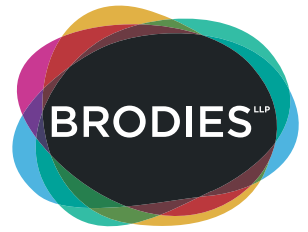
Welcoming a range of businesses to the autumnal event, 64 golfers took part in a friendly, but still competitive, spirit on a day that raised significant funds for charity.

With £2,190 fundraised and donated to the company's current chosen charity of the year, the Rainbow Trust, the event was a great success, with plans already being put in place for its renewal next year.

A major event in the Winn Group calendar, its popularity reflects their continuing success as a claims management company and insurance business outsourcing provider, and proud representative of the North East.



Photography credit: George Davidson



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CHUF unveils new strategy to shape the future of heart care

The Children's Heart Unit Fund (Chuf) has launched a bold new strategy that will guide the charity's next decade of support for children and families living with heart conditions across the North of England.

Developed through extensive consultation with Heart Heroes, families, medics, stakeholders, and Chuf's dedicated board, the strategy focuses on three key pillars: Holistic Care, Lifelong Support, and Innovation.

Each pillar reflects Chuf's commitment to supporting children and families not just as patients, but as people – ensuring they receive emotional, practical, and clinical support through every stage of life.

Chair of the Board of Trustees at Chuf, Ivan Hollingsworth, said: "At Chuf, we've always stood beside Heart Heroes and their families through every beat, every battle, and every breakthrough. This new strategy builds on that legacy and sets out a clear, ambitious vision for the future. It's a promise to listen, to collaborate, and to stand beside every Heart Hero for life."

The strategy reinforces Chuf's role as a trusted partner to the NHS, funding vital equipment, emotional wellbeing research, and innovative services that sit beyond NHS capacity, all designed to make a lasting difference for Heart Heroes and their families.



The People's Kitchen Marks 40 Years of Food, Friendship and Community

This year marks the 40th anniversary of The People's Kitchen, a Newcastle-based charity that began with a simple but powerful act of kindness. This milestone is being celebrated all year and was marked with a special meal served inside the Kitchen itself, for businesses, sponsors and volunteers who support the charity's work with disadvantaged people across the region.

In true People's Kitchen style, the format was the same as it is for the charity's "friends": a hearty three-course meal of homemade soup, lamb hotpot or vegetarian curry and apple crumble prepared by the volunteers and served with the most important ingredients of all, friendship and hope. The event was sponsored by Womble Bond Dickinson who also paid for all the food served on the night

Guest of honour was Alison "Ailie" Goddard, daughter of founder Alison Kay, who travelled from her home in the West Midlands to attend. She was joined by her son Richard and grandson Charlie (16), who came from Wark in Northumberland, to see at first-hand the enduring legacy Alison left when she founded The Kitchen in 1985.

Alison began by walking Newcastle's streets with flasks of homemade soup, determined to offer warmth and dignity to those experiencing homelessness. Today, The People's Kitchen serves around 300 meals every day of the year, powered by a team of around 300 volunteers.

The People's Kitchen receives no government funding, relying entirely on public donations, corporate support and volunteers. Yet, thanks to the dedication of its community, it continues to operate every single day of the year.

To learn more or to donate, visit www.justgiving.com/campaign/peopleskitchen2025

Community Transport moves fast with Hay & Kilner's support

Hay & Kilner has advised Community Transport, a leading charity providing accessible transport services for elderly, disabled, and community groups, on the successful letting of its new premises. Community Transport also offers a service diverting unwanted furniture from landfill under their "CT Furniture" service.

CT Furniture offers a mix of new and pre-

loved items at affordable prices, supporting local people to furnish their homes without falling into debt. Since 1964, Community Transport has been committed to creating a better everyday life for local people.

The deal was completed in under a month from instructions, allowing the charity to get a head start on preparing its new Gateshead base.

The transaction was handled by Georgia Whitfield, an Associate in Hay & Kilner's commercial property team, and assisted by trainee solicitor Maryam Ahmed.

"We're delighted to have supported Community Transport in securing their



new premises," said Georgia Whitfield. "The charity has played a vital role in the region for over 60 years, and we're proud to have helped facilitate a deal that allows them to expand their important work in the community."



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A hole lot of fun at NE Youth's annual golf day

NE Youth Corporate Golf day was a wash out last year so this year everyone was raring to go!

NE Youth raised vital funds and awareness to support young people across the North East. Over the last nine decades the charity has supported over 1 million young people!

CEO at NE Youth commented: "Another great event to celebrate our 90th Anniversary! Huge thanks to everyone who took part and all of our sponsors. The financial landscape is tough for all charities at the moment so we are very grateful for everyone's support. All money raised will go towards making a difference to young people's lives and helping so many to realise their potential."

17 teams took to the stunning Prince Bishops course at Ramside Hall in a shotgun start, with five challenge holes and a champagne bottle putting challenge after the 18th to keep things interesting!

Many of the teams have been taking part and supporting NE Youth for many years- its a great way to invest in young people and have a day off work!!

It was a glorious day in Durham, the sun was shining, the sky was blue & everyone brought their A game... six people even beat the pro on the challenge hole!

After all the birdies, pars (and some missed putts!!) everyone gathered in the clubhouse for a well-earned meal, drinks and the prize giving.

OneTwoOne Accounts claimed the top spot, with medals presented by the generous sponsors: Fair Way, ID Card Processing, Magnetic Mortgage Solutions, S&W and Progressive Legal Solutions.

If you want to take part in next years NE Youth's Corporate Golf Day or support any of NE Youth's events contact: jon@neyouth.org.uk





Story Homes raises over £20,000 from regional golf days for local Air Ambulance charities

Story Homes is proud to announce that an incredible £20,658 has been raised for its 2025/26 charity partners, the Great North Air Ambulance Service (GNAAS) and the North West Air Ambulance Charity (NWAA), following three successful corporate golf days.

The events took place across Cumbria, the North East, and the North West, bringing together subcontractors, partners, and employees who entered teams to take part in a Texas Scramble competition format. Each team contributed an entry fee to the charity in return for hole sponsorship, while a host of prizes were kindly donated for raffles - with all proceeds going directly to support the life-saving work of GNAAS and NWAA.

Prizes were awarded to the winning teams, as well as for the 'nearest to the pin' and 'longest drive' competitions. Thanks to the generosity and enthusiasm of Story Homes' business partners and supporters, the golf days were once again a fantastic success - raising thousands of pounds for the company's chosen charities.



Young West Rainton musicians to get new school practice room

Talented young musicians from a County Durham primary school are set to get even more chances to practice and play with the installation of their own dedicated band room

West Rainton Primary School set up a steel band two years ago to give pupils the chance to learn a new musical instrument and enjoy making music together.

Its steel pans are currently stored in a side room off the school hall, meaning they have to be taken out and packed away at the start of every practice session, which shortens the amount of time available for the pupils to play.

But now, plans to install a new modular building into the school playground in which they will be permanently set up and available for pupils to play whenever they want are moving forward, with an £8,000 grant from regional employer the Banks Group's Banks Community Fund taking the school past its £40,000 fundraising target.

Northumberland FA and GoCardless kick off major new partnership

Northumberland FA has partnered with global payments leader GoCardless, which will see the company become the official naming partner of St Peter's Sports Hub and support community football inclusion programmes across Newcastle Northumberland and North Tyneside.

As part of the deal, GoCardless has secured the naming rights to St Peter's Sports Hub, which will now proudly be known as the GoCardless St Peter's Sports Hub.

St Peter's is a new £4.5m facility which opened in March. Located on the Coast Road in North Tyneside, it features a supersize 3G pitch and pavilion and will welcome thousands of players, coaches and spectators annually.

GoCardless will also become the official sponsor of the Northumberland FA Inclusion Pathway and the NFA Community Fund, helping to ensure that football is an accessible, inclusive, and supportive game for everyone.



The partnership reflects a shared commitment to community, inclusion, and innovation. GoCardless' support will directly contribute to expanding opportunities for underrepresented groups in football.

Existing projects include the Ability Counts League which provides competitive opportunities for adults with learning difficulties; and Your Move which welcomes young people aged 13-17 who are managing long-term or acute health conditions that may make participating in traditional football environments more difficult.

NFA's Community Fund aims to keep people playing football despite financial or other barriers - for example providing boots for children whose families are facing hardship; sports goggles for visually impaired players or access to mental health support.

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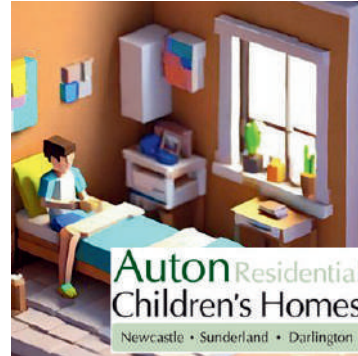


Gingerbread Street is kindly sponsored by: **LOVELL**

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 **CEO Sleepout**

Thank you to everyone who has taken part in our 2025 sleepouts.



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Charity of the Month



CHUF

When a child is born with a heart condition, every moment matters.

For over four decades, Chuf (Children's Heart Unit Fund) has stood beside children and families across the North East and North Cumbria, making sure no Heart Hero or their family faces that journey alone.

Why was the charity formed?

Chuf was founded by parents and clinicians at the Freeman Hospital in Newcastle in the early 1980s with one powerful goal – to make life better for children and families facing congenital and acquired heart disease. What began as a small group raising funds for lifesaving equipment has grown into a regional lifeline, offering practical, emotional, and lifelong support to thousands of families.

Today, Chuf's vision is simple but profound: to inspire hope and enable every Heart Hero to reach their full potential. Whether it's funding cutting-edge medical equipment, supporting pioneering research, or ensuring families have a place to rest during hospital stays with all of the essentials they need, Chuf makes every heartbeat count.

Which area do you cover?

While Chuf's roots are in Newcastle's Freeman Hospital – home to one of the UK's leading paediatric cardiac centres – their reach now spans the entire North East and Cumbria network of hospitals. From the tiniest babies in neonatal units to adults living with congenital heart conditions, Chuf's impact touches lives across the region and those from across the UK receiving care in specialists North East and Cumbria hospital units.

In 2024/25 alone, Chuf committed £890,000 to projects and initiatives that bring comfort, care, and innovation to heart families. From providing over 5,500 meals to parents staying close to their child's bedside to funding new echocardiography machines that transform diagnosis and treatment, their presence is felt in every ward and waiting room.

What type of fundraising events do you do?

Fundraising for Chuf takes many forms, from skydives and golf days, to corporate challenges and gala dinners. Each event celebrates the incredible strength of the Heart Hero community and the generosity of those who rally behind them.

Chuf's Changemakers programme is a growing network of compassionate corporate supporters who are helping to shape the future of cardiac care. Businesses across the region raise funds, take on volunteer time, and champion Chuf's mission.

Corporate supporters are encouraged to get creative, aligning fundraising with their business culture, whether through team challenges, customer campaigns, or payroll giving.

Who are your trustees and patrons?

Chuf is guided by a dedicated board of trustees with professional expertise spanning healthcare, business, and community leadership. The charity is also proud to be supported by long-term patrons and ambassadors who use their platforms to raise awareness of congenital heart disease and celebrate the courage of Heart Heroes.

Behind every initiative is a small but passionate team led by Charlotte Campbell, Director of Fundraising & Operations, supported by specialists in corporate partnerships, events, and community fundraising.

What have been your proudest moments so far?

Some of Chuf's proudest moments come not from figures, but from the difference they make every day. Over the past year, Chuf has funded music therapy to help children express themselves, provided emergency grants and accommodation for families, supported the UK's first Specialist Neonatal Physiotherapist on a cardiac unit, and launched the Wave of Love remembrance event to honour Heart Heroes who are no longer with us. Each achievement reflects Chuf's enduring commitment to care, comfort, and hope.

What are you currently working on?

Chuf's current focus is on deepening its impact across three strategic pillars:

Holistic Care – supporting the whole family, not just the patient, through initiatives like meal vouchers, washbags for emergency admissions, and the continuation of vCreate, a video messaging platform that keeps parents connected to their child's care.

Lifelong Support – ensuring that Heart Heroes are supported through every stage of life, from childhood into adulthood.

Innovation – funding pioneering medical equipment and research that go beyond NHS resources, helping medics deliver world-class care.

What does the future hold?

The future for Chuf is one of growth, advocacy, and connection. With a new long-term strategy in place, the charity is working to expand support across every hospital in the North East and Cumbria, broaden psychological wellbeing services, and continue investing in life-changing innovation.

As Charlotte Campbell explains: "This strategy isn't just about funding care – it's about standing shoulder to shoulder with families for life. Our Heart Heroes deserve not just to survive, but to thrive."

How do you get involved?

There are countless ways to make a difference. You can donate, fundraise, volunteer, or join as a corporate Changemaker to help drive lasting impact for heart families in your community.

For businesses, becoming a Chuf Changemaker is an opportunity to align your brand with purpose. From sponsorship and staff challenges to payroll giving and event hosting, there's a place for every company to contribute to Chuf's mission.

A standout example is JT Dove, one of Chuf's longest-standing corporate partners, who recently celebrated raising an incredible £250,000 to support children and families living with heart conditions. Their ongoing commitment shows the power of business in transforming lives and demonstrates what can be achieved when local companies put heart into their community.

Learn more and get involved at www.chuf.org.uk



People *Doing* Good...

Freemasons' £3,000 gift opens new windows on the world for Cadets

The Wallsend Sea Cadets (TS Comus) have received a generous £3,000 donation from Northumberland Freemasons to help replace the ageing windows at their headquarters.

Chairman Craig Warkman explained how the grant has made a real difference to the unit's historic home: "We applied to the Freemasons for a grant to go towards some replacement windows, and they very kindly awarded us £3,000," said Craig. "The building has been home to the Sea Cadets for the past 45 years, and the windows were the originals installed when it was first converted. They were in a serious state of disrepair, with problems retaining heat and keeping the building energy-efficient, so replacement was essential."

Representing Northumberland Freemasons, Norman West said supporting organisations like the Sea Cadets is at the heart of their charitable mission: "Part of the funding we award twice a year goes to helping community groups, particularly those supporting young



people," said Norman. "We're always delighted when our grants can make a real difference to organisations like the Sea Cadets, who do such valuable work in developing the next generation."

Maritime Volunteer Service appoints New Chair



The Maritime Volunteer Service (MVS) is delighted to announce the appointment of Susan Hawker as its new Chair. Susan brings to the role over 30 years of expertise in international trade and

maritime law, combining a distinguished academic career with consultancy, training, and mediation work across the global shipping industry.

A non-practising barrister, Susan holds a Master's in Law from the London School of Economics and is a Centre for Effective Dispute Resolution (CEDR) -accredited mediator. Her professional background spans both academic leadership and hands-on industry training, including senior teaching positions at the University of Notre Dame (London Law Centre), Solent University's Warsash Maritime School, and HST Akademie in Hamburg.

In her new role as Chair of the MVS, Susan hopes to bring a dynamic and forward-looking approach: "My professional life has always been rooted in shipping and trade. I believe I can help strengthen the MVS as a unified and forward-thinking organisation, while raising its profile within the wider maritime community. This is about supporting volunteers, promoting opportunities, and helping the organisation thrive. I'm very much looking forward to contributing to that journey."

North East generosity powers 'Feed a Friend for a Fiver' Christmas Appeal

The People's Kitchen, a Newcastle-based charity supporting homeless and vulnerable people across the North East, is celebrating its 40th year by launching its much-loved Christmas initiative, Feed a Friend for a Fiver.

For just £5, donors can provide a hot festive meal, companionship, and essential support for someone who would otherwise go without this Christmas. The campaign is about more than just food, it's also about friendship. And because the charity is run entirely by volunteers, every penny raised goes directly to supporting people in need. Any funds not used during the festive season will help provide meals throughout the year ahead.

"Feed a Friend for a Fiver is more than just a meal - it's about showing people that they are not forgotten, especially at Christmas. Every donation helps us to fight hunger and loneliness in our city and across the North East. As we mark 40 years of service, we're reminded that none of this would be possible without the kindness of our supporters and the dedication of our volunteers," said Maggie Pavlou, Trustee of The People's Kitchen.



Run entirely by volunteers, The People's Kitchen serves around 300 hot meals a day, 365 days a year. For more information, visit www.peopleskitchen.co.uk/

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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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Contact Laura Jane Forbes

T: 0191 466 1428

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Sam Hook

Play to your strengths and watch your business thrive

In business, we often focus on the weaknesses that hold us back. But what if the key to success lies in recognising and leveraging the strengths you already have?

As an accredited Strengthscope® practitioner and business coach, I work with entrepreneurs, managers, and teams to help them unlock their natural strengths, boosting performance, resilience, and motivation.

Understanding strengths

Strengthscope® is a psychometric tool designed to help individuals identify their unique set of strengths, the qualities that energise them and enable them to perform at their best. It goes beyond skills and competencies, focusing instead on what gives them energy and drives them forward. When people work in line with their strengths, they're more confident, more productive, and perform better.

Avoiding strength overuse

Like any powerful tool, a strength can be overused. For example, if you're naturally detail-focused, that strength can be invaluable in quality control or planning. But if overused, it can tip into perfectionism, slowing down progress. By being aware of these potential 'overdrive' risks, you can balance your strengths more effectively and lean into them when they serve you and know when to step back when they start to hinder progress.

Harnessing 'bubbling under' strengths

Strengthscope® also identifies 'bubbling under' strengths which are those qualities that aren't part of your daily toolkit but still energise you when used. For example, you may have a bubbling under strength in creativity, which doesn't come into play in your current role but could be tapped into when brainstorming new products or marketing ideas. By recognising and drawing on these bubbling under strengths, you can add fresh energy and innovation to your work.

Managing your drainers

Equally important is understanding your 'drainers.' These are tasks or situations that you may be good at but that sap your energy, no matter how capable you are at handling them. For example, managing conflict might leave you feeling exhausted, or repetitive admin work drains your focus. Identifying these drainers means you can plan around them—delegating where possible, finding systems to ease the load, or simply being mindful to schedule recovery time after tackling them.

Applying strengths at every level

Whether you're a sole trader, a leader, or

managing a team, understanding strengths can transform the way you work.

- Sole traders can use their top strengths to build confidence, focus on their unique value, and outsource the tasks that drain them.
- Leaders and managers can gain awareness of how their strengths impact others in a positive and negative way and can change or adapt their approach to inspire their teams more effectively.
- Teams can benefit from mapping strengths collectively. When you see how strengths combine, complement, or sometimes clash, you can create a more collaborative and energised workplace where people perform at their best.

The bottom line

Strengthscope® isn't about identifying or fixing weaknesses, it's about building on what already energises you. By understanding how to maximise your strengths, avoid overuse, draw on bubbling under qualities, and manage your drainers, you can achieve greater success, resilience, and fulfilment in business.

Whether you're running your own business, leading a team, climbing the career ladder or considering which career would best suit you, strengths-based coaching is a powerful tool to get the best out of yourself and those around you.

If you'd like to book a coaching session to discover your strengths, please get in touch.

Sam Hook
Business Coach and Accredited
Strengthscope® Practitioner
Uniquethinking.co.uk



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Navigating Personal Transition

Over the past two years, I've had countless conversations with leaders about their future. It often begins with: "I've got one more role in me," "I've got ten years left," or "I'm not sure what's next."

What starts as a career conversation often evolves into something deeper; an exploration of life path, identity, and purpose.

This reflection can happen at any stage, but it's most common during life transitions: children leaving home, caring for or losing elderly parents, illness, relationship changes, redundancy, menopause. And yes, I see this just as much in men as in women; it's not gender specific.

After decades of investing in our careers, we may find ourselves feeling uncomfortable in the coat we've worn for years. The role that once defined us no longer fits. We feel disconnected, uncertain, or simply changed. This is a natural phase, a sign we're entering a new chapter.

Life mirrors our career more than we realise, and we rarely talk about it holistically. Richard Barrett, a thought leader in values-based leadership, outlines seven stages of psychological development from birth to 60+. Each stage brings a different motivator:

- **Childhood (0–24):** These three stages are about surviving and growing as youngsters. We need love, acceptance and belonging from our family, and recognition as individuals for what we bring as we grow to early adulthood.
 - **Middle years (25–49):** In the first part of this period we seek independence, freedom and autonomy, and to be recognised as ourselves. Towards the latter stage it's about Integrity, becoming more fully who we are and finding meaning and purpose
 - **Later years (50–60+):** These final two stages move us to integrating and giving back. Finding our real purpose where we can make a contribution and serve others.
- So it's no surprise that our focus and motivation evolve. What mattered in our



Annabel Graham

30s may not matter now. The identity we built may no longer serve us. The question becomes: how do we navigate this transition well? Bar getting yourself a coach, who can act as the objective sounding board to enable you to explore this, I'd also advise you to reflect on the following.

1. Identify your vision of the future

- Think beyond job titles. Where are you living? What's your lifestyle? Who are you with? How do you feel? What's your home like?
- Are you working full-time, part-time, from home, or in an office? What are you doing, and with whom? How much are you earning? Yes, we'll have that uncomfortable conversation—because without clarity on finances, how can you plan the next step? A financial plan alongside a life and career plan is essential.
- What are your hobbies? Who do you spend time with? What do you want freedom for—and freedom from?

2. Decide what's important now.

- Consider all aspects of your life—work, family, hobbies, friends, community,

faith, personal development, fitness. Every person's list will differ.

- Rank your satisfaction in each on a scale of 1–10.
- Then ask: which of these are part of your future vision? What needs attention now to create the balance you want?

3. Map out a path from current to future state.

Once you know where you're heading, you can start creating a plan. That might mean staying in your current role while finding fulfilment elsewhere, or making one or two shifts to reach your vision. What matters is knowing your direction and taking steps toward it.

And don't do it alone. Bring those who matter into the conversation—it impacts them too. And dream big. Future you will thank you for it!

Annabel is an Executive and Team Coach, Leadership Facilitator and Coach Supervisor. If you would value a thinking space to explore transition, why not reach out to Annabel for a chat via LinkedIn, annabel@successfultraining.co.uk, or visit www.successfultraining.co.uk

The Top Ten for your mentoring success

Mentoring is a long-term relationship, it's not an overnight fix it solution, its valuable time together as a mentee and a mentor to plan, develop, progress, reflect and review.

1. Connectivity – as a first step make sure you and your mentor fit, match, connect.

2. Contract & commit – agree timings, dates, session length and location so that you are 110% committed.

3. Clear expectations – what would you really like to achieve through mentoring, where do you need to focus your energy and efforts to encourage growth and development?

4. Communications – talk openly and honestly to your mentor throughout.

5. Conversations – have conversations with lots of questions, so that you can create clarity, build confidence and find your own options.

6. Challenges – welcome the challenging thought processes you may find yourself faced with, this is only to open up new ways of thinking, new perspectives and new progress.

7. Champion proactivity - which topic do you need to discuss and why, feel free to offer up some suggestions to your mentor who can then plan for the session so that your time is super valuable together.

8. Channel ownership – take absolute responsibility for what you would like to achieve following your mentoring sessions and most importantly adopt a growth mindset.

9. Check your progress – shift your objectives to keep them aligned with your overall personal and professional goals.



Hayley Ramm

10. Collect feedback – yes it can be uncomfortable, yes it can be a little awkward, but with feedback you can reflect review, develop and shine.

I'm Hayley and I'm a Business Mentor, Membership with the Association of Business Mentors, and Business Owner of The Efficient Elephant. I love to ask questions! I ask lots of questions but only to help you find YOUR answers, YOUR way, for YOUR business.

Business mentoring brings confidence, calmness, choices and clarity and I would welcome the opportunity to be your mentor.

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...Over time, you develop a real instinct for what makes a great match...

Sarah McKenna

The Recruiter

*In the latest of this popular series of features
Graham Courtney spoke to...*

Sarah McKenna

Owner of Sarah McKenna HR Recruitment.

Right people. Right company. Right role.

Any business is only as good as its people, which is why Sarah McKenna HR is trusted by businesses to connect them with HR talent who not only have the right skills but truly fit their culture.

And now, Sarah is launching a new service designed to help businesses take control of their own recruitment process - creating a framework that represents their culture and brand.

Many of you reading this will have an HR department managing your hiring, or perhaps it's something you oversee yourself. Either way, you'll know that a great CV doesn't always mean a great fit. It's about reading beyond the CV.

That's exactly what Sarah and her team do at Sarah McKenna HR.

"I've spent over 15 years in HR recruitment and have supported hundreds of businesses with their hiring," says Sarah. "Over time, you develop a real instinct for what makes a great match and it's never just about ticking boxes. The right person has to align with the culture and values of the business. It works both ways too: the role and company must be right for the candidate. If either side isn't the right fit, it's not sustainable and that costs time, money, and morale."

Spend five minutes with Sarah and you'll quickly see how passionate she is about what she does. Recruitment isn't just a job to her; she knows every placement has a ripple effect on people and businesses alike. Getting it right really matters.

That's why she and her team go beyond matching skills to ensure every candidate they recommend can thrive within their new environment.

And it's this commitment to long-term success that's inspired Sarah's new Recruitment Review service - a practical, strategic way to help businesses strengthen how they recruit and retain talent.

"Over the past few years, many organisations have restructured or reduced headcount, leaving teams stretched and recruitment often rushed," explains Sarah. "When a vacancy arises, there's pressure to fill it quickly. But that's when mistakes happen, because the wrong hire can be costly."

"Our Recruitment Review helps prevent that. We work with businesses to understand their current process, identify what's working, and pinpoint areas to improve - whether that's spotting internal talent ready to progress or refining how roles are advertised and managed."

"We help leaders and HR teams build a recruitment approach that feels consistent, inclusive, and aligned with their culture."

"That's what our Recruitment Review is all about, helping businesses create a smoother, fairer, and more human recruitment process. It's about having clarity and structure at every stage, so hiring decisions are confident, consistent, and focused on long-term fit rather than short-term fixes."

Interested? You should be - because a Recruitment Review can transform how your business attracts, selects, and retains great people. It's practical support that makes a measurable difference to your team and your bottom line.

The best next step is to have a chat with Sarah.

Because every business really is only as good as its people.

**sarah@sarahmckennahr.co.uk
07947 756842**



*L-R: Sarah McKenna and Winnie
with Natalie Louicia Ball and Ging*



Preferred Partners Relaunch

Facilitating partnerships, creating connections, and building collaboration.

In September, the Preferred Partners network entered a new chapter with a dynamic relaunch event at Middlesbrough Golf Club, uniting a diverse mix of ambitious businesses under a shared commitment to growth, innovation, and meaningful connection.

The event brought together forward-thinking organisations from across the region, each contributing unique expertise and energy to a network that continues to redefine what business collaboration can achieve. The atmosphere was one of optimism and drive, a clear reflection of the shared vision to facilitate partnerships, create connections, and build collaboration.

The morning offered an invaluable opportunity for partners to reconnect, reintroduce their organisations, and highlight the skills, successes, and innovations shaping their industries.

Short presentations from each business showcased the depth and breadth of talent within the network and inspired new conversations about shared challenges, potential collaborations, and future opportunities.

To ensure the network's continued growth and long-term value, Preferred Partners has transitioned to a paid membership model, a move designed to strengthen engagement and sustain the partnerships already established. We're delighted to share that more than 20 members have already joined, with further interest building rapidly. The overwhelming success of our relaunch roundtable, our most well-attended to date, highlights the appetite for authentic engagement and

underlines the network's evolution into a truly future-ready community.

Our new model also reinforces our commitment to giving back. Through membership contributions, we've already raised £1,050 for our charity partner, the MFC Foundation, with more to come as the network grows. This partnership embodies the ethos of Preferred Partners, using business as a force for good and creating impact that extends beyond the boardroom.

Since its inception, the Preferred Partners network has facilitated over £35 million in business, a testament to the power of collaboration and shared ambition. The relaunch marks an exciting new era, with a full calendar of events ahead to foster knowledge exchange, spark new partnerships, and amplify collective success.

A heartfelt thank you to all who attended and contributed to the relaunch. Together, we're building more than connections, we're shaping a community of forward-looking businesses, united by a vision to collaborate, innovate, and make lasting impact.

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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
Sales and Marketing Strategy Workshop	5th November 2025	9:00am-1:00pm	Fusion Hive, TS18 2NB
Walk and Talk with Red Balloons	10th November 2025	12:00pm-1:00pm	Fusion Hive, TS18 2NB
The SME Workshop	5th November 2025	9:00am-1:00pm	NatWest Accelerator, NE4 5BZ
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



Driving innovation and growth in the NE Defence Sector



RED Scientific (RED) has recently expanded into the North East Technology Park (NETPark) in Sedgefield, a move that strengthens the company's commitment to advancing regional defence and security innovation.

RED's operational digital wargaming platform is helping shape high-level defence strategy—supporting mission rehearsal, logistics planning and staff officer training at the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) and NATO.

These aren't games for entertainment—they are cutting edge, evidence-based simulations rooted in mathematical modelling, operational analysis and data science. RED's digital wargame platform draws on the study of over 160 historical conflicts, using this analysis to generate realistic, testable scenarios.

Established over 35 years ago, RED Scientific has evolved into a trusted defence and security consultancy, delivering projects across digital engineering, systems integration and supportability and safety assessments. The company is a supplier across key MOD frameworks and works in collaboration with prime contractors.

RED's decision to open a northern base at NETPark marks a strategic step in its national growth. "NETPark offers more than just office space," says Marc. "NETPark offers the strategic environment sought by RED Scientific - combining technical infrastructure with the credibility to host high-level defence and security engagements."

The move has already proven invaluable. RED has hosted secure, high-profile meetings on site, including with clients normally embedded in the South West.

The NETPark office also supports RED Scientific's broader mission to grow defence and security capability in the North East. Marc is Chair of the North East Regional Defence and Security Cluster (NERDSC) - a volunteer-led network of over 140 organisations working to increase regional representation in the UK defence & security sector.

"The North East has world-class capability, but less than 1% of the workforce here is employed in defence and security," he explains. "There's huge potential to change that. NETPark plays a key role - not just as a base for companies like ours, but as a magnet for collaboration and innovation."

Collaboration is at the heart of RED's operating model. The company delivers many of its contracts in partnership with academia and other specialist organisations, often acting as a prime contractor to build bespoke 'rainbow teams' for complex challenges.

Looking ahead, RED is also exploring how its defence expertise could support other sectors requiring a robust scientific approach to decision making, such as the UK energy sector. As a member of NOF, a national business development organisation in the energy sector, RED is undertaking a feasibility study into how its modelling and risk analysis capabilities

could support resilience and planning in the production and distribution of renewable energy.

With a skilled hybrid workforce, strong defence credentials and a growing regional footprint, RED Scientific's presence at NETPark is part of a long-term strategy focused on innovation, collaboration and value creation.

Welcoming RED Scientific to NETPark, Sarah Slaven, Managing Director of Business Durham, said: 'It's great to welcome RED Scientific to NETPark, where they are doing groundbreaking work in defence and security innovation. As the organisation that manages NETPark, Business Durham is pleased to support RED's efforts in building the North East's defence sector. We provide a platform for growth, offering not just world-class facilities but also tailored business support to our tenants. NETPark is proud to help RED and other businesses drive innovation, create opportunities, and contribute to the wider development of the sector in the North East.'

Find out more about RED Scientific here: red-scientific.co.uk

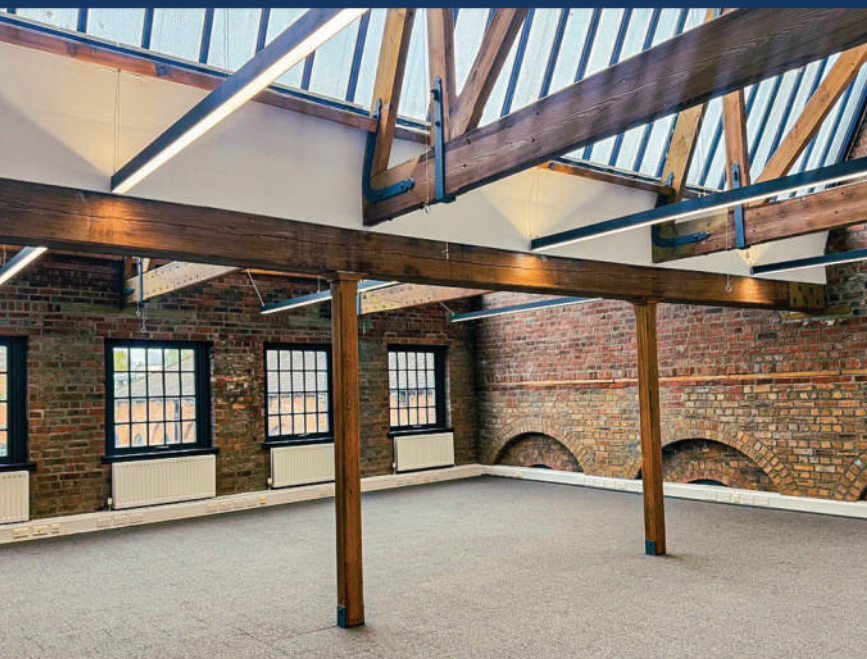
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Dr David Cliff

What crisis?

Dr David Cliff reflects upon how our obsession with expression has left us more disconnected than ever.

Mental health problems are now so common they are constantly referred to in the news. Every major event is reported through the prism of emotion. The journalist's first question is no longer what happened but how did you feel when it did? We have moved from fact to feeling as our dominant form of meaning.

Therapy culture and social media have joined forces to make public disclosure the new virtue. We are urged to “share,” “open up,” “express,” yet our emotional fluency has become a spectacle. The vaccine debates and endless waves of intersectional outrage online show how easily emotion now shapes public truth.

How experience is framed matters. It can enlighten, misinform and evoke fear and hatred. Evolution made us alert to danger, so bad news attracts attention. Good news feels like a distraction from our programmed vigilance. But our chronic focus on threat is exhausting; it feeds anxiety while posing as realism. Mental health has also become

professionalised. Informal care — the neighbourly ear or family conversation — has given way to referral and liability. We increasingly outsource empathy to experts. Society has become a crowd of spectators watching its own distress, eager to comment but hesitant to connect.

In this climate, success replaces meaning. The market defines value, and those who live quietly or modestly are cast as underachievers. Social media magnifies the hierarchy. It was meant to connect us; instead, it isolates, radicalises, and rewards performative outrage. The screen, not the self, increasingly decides who we are.

Technology both enables and impoverishes us. Young people fluent in texting may struggle with conversation. Many workplaces report staff unwilling to call clients — safer to email than risk a human exchange. The very tools that promise connection drain our capacity for presence. Freedom of speech is narrowing too. Ordinary opinions can now attract legal or social punishment, while real crime may receive less police attention. People censor themselves not from civility but fear of having an opinion that will offend or prompt threat. The paradoxical result is an expressive society that quietly represses the individual.

Children are raised on tablets and influencers proffer guidance from charisma instead of character. They learn that confidence sells better than competence.

Those who profit from this attention economy shape identity as entertainment. Meanwhile, technological change races ahead. Artificial intelligence, once futuristic, now reorganises work within months. Whole professions are being redefined. The few who master these systems gain extraordinary power; the rest are left attending catch-up seminars. Economic evolution has become revolution.

As the Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis observes, we are sliding toward ‘techno-feudalism’. Data is the new land; our attention, the rent. We volunteer our privacy and time to platforms that shape our desires and feed our fears. The reward is belonging — the punishment, obscurity.

So we scroll, post, and perform. We fear missing out more than losing ourselves. We fear the opinions of others even more (FOPO). In chasing connection, we have lost community; in expressing everything, we have said almost nothing.

The real crisis isn't only mental health — it's existential. We have become so busy articulating feelings that we've forgotten how to feel them, so obsessed with connection that we've forgotten how to relate.

What crisis? Ours. The one we no longer have time to notice.

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

Contact us through our website:
www.gedanken.co.uk or
email: admin@gedanken.co.uk

Carbon Accounting with SmartCarbon

Turning data into impact for North East businesses.

From clients and suppliers to investors, stakeholders want to know: what is your organisation's carbon impact?

Organisations are increasingly being asked for carbon data by suppliers, customers, and investors. For example, larger organisations such as NHS trusts are requesting that their suppliers provide carbon footprint data and details of Net Zero commitments. Businesses that calculate their footprint demonstrate responsibility, strengthen relationships, and improve their ability to compete in procurement processes.

Understanding your carbon footprint isn't just about compliance, it's about creating a more efficient, resilient organisation. Measuring emissions across all scopes, direct (Scope 1), energy-related (Scope 2), and supply chain or indirect (Scope 3), provides a comprehensive view of your environmental impact and highlights opportunities for improvement. It is also a vital component of your clients own NetZero plan, and your own decarbonisation plan directly impacts that of your clients.

From data to insight with SmartCarbon

Tracking emissions across all scopes can seem complex, but SmartCarbon, a North East-based carbon emissions consultancy and reporting platform, makes it straightforward. Genee Consulting has partnered with SmartCarbon on multiple projects to help organisations capture accurate data and transform it into actionable insights.

Managing Director of SmartCarbon, Lee Jackson, said "we've worked closely with Genee over recent years and helped many organisations to understand their carbon footprint as part of their wider environmental impact. Through this measurement we are then able to use the data to put in place meaningful decarbonisation plans that support regional and national Net Zero commitments"

By using SmartCarbon, businesses can measure emissions from energy use, transport, materials, and supply chains, providing a complete picture



Jo Holmes

of their carbon footprint. This ensures organisations can satisfy requests from customers, including NHS trusts, while also complying with reporting requirements.

Creating resource-efficient organisations

Carbon accounting is not just a reporting exercise, it's a tool for operational improvement. Analysing footprint data allows businesses to identify areas for improvement, reduce waste, and improve resource efficiency. For example, optimising energy consumption, streamlining transport, or reducing material use can lower both emissions and costs.

These insights support smarter decision-making, helping organisations prioritise initiatives that deliver the greatest environmental and financial impact. In practice, embracing carbon accounting creates a leaner, more sustainable operation that benefits the bottom line as well as reducing impact on the planet.

Integrating with Investors in the Environment (iIE)

Genee Consulting delivers Investors in the Environment (iIE), a nationally recognised environmental accreditation scheme, which provides the tools, templates and expertise to support your organisation to develop a holistic, and

applicable environmental management system. When paired with SmartCarbon, it forms a holistic system where data drives continuous improvement. While SmartCarbon provides detailed carbon insights, iIE helps embed sustainability into everyday operations, ensuring measurable action follows the numbers, driving both resource and cost reductions.

The bottom line

Calculating your carbon footprint across all scopes is now a strategic advantage. Organisations that embrace carbon accounting, with tools like SmartCarbon and Investors in the Environment, gain transparency, improve resource efficiency, and identify cost-saving opportunities.

By turning carbon data into actionable insights, businesses can enhance operational performance, strengthen customer relationships, and create long-term value, for the organisation, the community, and the environment.

For support in tracking and reporting your organisation's emissions, contact SmartCarbon at l.jackson@smartcarboncalculator.com. To build this into a wider environmental management system which drives reductions, contact Genee at jo@genee.org.uk



Building resilient teams in uncertain times: Lessons from global hiring trends

In today's climate, resilience has become one of the most valuable traits a business can possess. From fluctuating markets to shifting technologies and changing workforce expectations, organisations everywhere are being tested.

Nowhere is this more true than in the North East of England, where many businesses are balancing ambitious growth plans with the realities of global uncertainty.

Yet amid the challenges, one consistent theme has emerged from international markets: the most successful companies are not just reacting, they are proactively building resilience through their people.

Resilience starts with the right talent strategy

Across global recruitment markets, there is a clear shift away from hiring purely for technical ability and towards hiring for adaptability, problem solving and cultural fit. Businesses are increasingly looking for individuals who can evolve with change, not just survive it.

For employers in the North East, this mindset is especially relevant. The region's economy is diversifying, from advanced manufacturing and clean energy to digital innovation, and with that comes a need for agile teams who can move across disciplines and adapt to new technologies.

Rather than focusing solely on immediate vacancies, forward thinking employers are taking a longer term view. They are identifying transferable skills, investing in upskilling, and creating career pathways that help people grow within the business. This approach builds loyalty and capability

at the same time, two qualities that define resilience.

Learning from global best practice

Internationally, several trends are shaping how businesses are building stronger and more resilient teams.

● Cross training and multi skilled roles:

In many global markets, companies are deliberately hiring people who can operate across functions, reducing dependency on any single skill set.

● Leadership development at every

level: Rather than focusing only on senior leadership, resilient organisations are training managers and team leads to make decisions and drive engagement on the ground.

● Employee wellbeing and mental

health: Global employers are recognising that resilience is not just operational, it is personal. Supporting mental health, flexible working, and work life balance has proven to reduce burnout and staff turnover.

For North East businesses, adopting some of these global best practices does not require large budgets. It starts with culture: encouraging open communication, recognising effort, and empowering employees to take ownership of their roles.

Resilience through diversity

One of the most important lessons from

international hiring is the value of diverse teams. Bringing together people with different backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives helps organisations innovate and solve problems under pressure.

In the North East, diversity in recruitment can also mean looking beyond traditional boundaries. That may include attracting global talent, offering flexible roles that appeal to candidates outside the region, or partnering with universities to develop local graduates into globally minded professionals.

Looking ahead

The North East has a proud reputation for its strong work ethic, collaboration, and innovation, qualities that naturally lend themselves to resilience. But in a fast changing global economy, resilience must now be built deliberately into every hiring and people strategy.

Businesses that prioritise adaptability, continuous learning, and employee wellbeing will not only withstand uncertainty, they will emerge stronger.

And as global hiring trends show, building resilience through people is not simply about surviving the next challenge. It is about creating teams ready to thrive, whatever comes next.

About Collaborative Search

Based in the North East and operating internationally, Collaborative Search partners with organisations to identify, attract and retain the talent needed to drive growth and innovation. By combining a global reach with a deep understanding of local markets, we help businesses build the teams that shape the future.

If you would like a non-committal discussion about your own talent strategy, reach out to us at contact@collaborativesrch.com or visit www.collaborativesrch.com to learn more about how we can help.

Time for the Government to step up and offer a period of stability for businesses

*By Stephen Patterson, Chief Executive of NE1 Ltd,
the Business Improvement District company for Newcastle city centre.*

**The past year has been challenging for many businesses;
there's no way to sugarcoat it.**

Rachel Reeves' first budget landed with a thud, even after being heavily trailed in the media beforehand, sending shockwaves through the business community. Difficult times followed for many, both in the immediate aftermath of the Treasury announcement and in the run-up to the new financial year, with all its proposed tax changes.

In April 2025, businesses faced the triple tax whammy of an increase in the national minimum wage, a rise in employers' National Insurance Contributions, and a cut in business rates relief. These tax increases struck hard, coming as they did at the end of a run of global challenges, including the energy price hikes caused by the war in Ukraine and the ongoing struggle to regain stability after the Covid crisis.

It was no coincidence or surprise that between January and April this year, Newcastle saw the untimely demise of several prominent hospitality businesses that fell victim to these pressures.

Thankfully, the worst appears to be over, and the city's economy has stabilised. There are even some positive signs of recovery. Spending figures for August and September in the city were cautiously encouraging, revealing that Newcastle is in a healthier economic shape than other comparable UK cities and has been performing up to 12% better than the UK benchmark in recent months.

It is a testament to the hard work and ingenuity of our city centre businesses, especially those in the hospitality and leisure sectors, that they have managed to steady their own ships. Using creativity and a deep knowledge of their businesses, they have tightened their belts and made the best of a bad situation. We are blessed in Newcastle with a host of long-established, independent businesses, especially in our much-envied hospitality scene. They are not afraid of hard work and are adept at pivoting, adjusting their businesses to deal with whatever is thrown at them.

Navigating these turbulent times has taken great fortitude – but businesses have exhausted their reserves. Now what they need and the city needs is a period of stability and economic certainty.

With the next Budget looming, we are calling on the Government to avoid any more sweeping changes and not to place an even higher burden on customers or businesses.

It is crucial that this autumn, the Chancellor delivers stability alongside some well-targeted support, particularly for those industries that have borne the

brunt of recent challenges. Hospitality, retail and leisure are the backbone of our cities and communities. They need meaningful help to ensure that they are not merely surviving, but are thriving. These sectors are among the nation's largest employers, and supporting them is essential to safeguard jobs and drive economic recovery and growth.

We have two main asks of the Government: firstly, to reduce VAT for the hospitality sector. The UK is one of the only places in Europe to charge the same rate of VAT for hospitality as other sectors, and it is crippling the industry. Cutting VAT would send a clear signal that the government supports the hospitality industry and would boost business confidence. Businesses could then decide whether to pass on the VAT savings to customers in the form of lower prices or retain more of the income from sales to boost cash flow, which would provide a much-needed lifeline at a time when margins are razor-thin. A permanent VAT reduction could also protect thousands of jobs and encourage long-term investment.

Business Rates relief for all retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, the cornerstone of our high streets, is our second key recommendation.

A business rates review, coupled with a proposed 'super-tax' on properties with a rateable value of £500,000 or more, is rumoured to be in the chancellor's red box. These proposals are fuelling great uncertainty among businesses and prompting warnings that large retailers, especially those much-loved staples of the high street, would be adversely affected by these proposed changes, with disastrous consequences. Store closures, hundreds of job losses and ultimately higher prices for customers would be the inevitable result of hikes in business rates for large high street tenants. The loss of these major anchor tenants would have a domino effect, leading to more vacant units and a further decline in UK city centre high streets. By contrast, extending business rates relief to all hospitality, leisure and retail businesses regardless of their size or rateable value would provide much-needed support, helping these sectors to thrive. Reducing tax burdens would also encourage investment and expansion.

Businesses have done all they can to weather the recent economic storms. They now need Government support to move forward, restore economic stability and lay the foundations for future growth and expansion.

www.newcastlene1ltd.com



Stephen Patterson

The value of fairness

By Kerrey Baker,
Managing Director, Shared Interest.

In recent months, I have written about the importance of aligning profit with purpose, and the impact that ethical investment can have when guided by values.

This month, I want to focus on one of those values in more detail – fairness – and how it shapes every part of our work at Shared Interest.

Fairness is a word often used in business – in pricing, in pay, in partnerships. But what does it really mean when it comes to finance? In our case, it means making decisions that serve both the people we invest in and the people who invest in us. It means ensuring that money is used not just to grow wealth, but to build equity – the kind that creates opportunity for those who need it most.

We work with fair trade organisations across the world – businesses that are often excluded from traditional finance because they operate in rural areas, lack collateral, or work in sectors deemed too risky. But these are the very businesses that hold communities together. They provide jobs, support women's leadership, and ensure producers receive fair prices for their goods. Without access to finance, many of them would be unable to trade – not because they are not viable, but because the system is not fair.

Shared Interest exists to change that. Based in Newcastle, we use investment from individuals across the UK to offer fair finance to organisations that need it most. Our lending is built on long-term

relationships, not short-term gain – and always aims to support trade on terms that empower producers.

This could mean helping a cocoa co-operative in Ivory Coast pay farmers on time or supporting a women-led honey business in Kenya to buy equipment and expand. It could mean providing funds in local currency to reduce exchange rate losses or offering flexible repayment terms when harvests are delayed by climate change.

Fairness also applies to our investors. Our members choose to accept a modest return so that their money can be used

to help others thrive. In return, we offer transparency, regular reporting, and the reassurance that their investment is creating genuine, measurable impact.

Fair finance is not just a nice idea – it is a necessary one. In an unequal global economy, it offers a practical way to shift power, support dignity, and make trade work for everyone involved.

Because when finance is fair, everyone benefits.

Invest in change at
www.shared-interest.com



Kerrey Baker



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abc AWARDS 2025

THE GREAT NORTH EAST CELEBRATION

The ABC Awards is more than just a celebration of success; it's about recognising those who are leading the way in business excellence, community leadership, and inclusion.



Since its inception, the awards have spotlighted the exceptional individuals and organisations transforming the North East and Tees Valley.



For more information, visit:
www.abconnexions.org



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Connecting, Supporting, and Promoting – Together.

Distinguished guests, partners, finalists, friends, and family
This feature celebrates something truly extraordinary – us.
Not just as individuals. Not just as communities.
But as one connected, compassionate, and courageous
collective. Because when the world feels divided, we must
choose to come together.

Recently, as news broke of a peace agreement between
Israel and Gaza, a moment many thought impossible, I was
reminded of something my late mother used to say:
“When people stop fighting, they start listening. And when
they start listening, they start healing.” And that, in essence,
is what Asian Business Connexions (ABC) has stood for over
nearly two decades, bringing people together, helping them
listen, understand, and heal. ABC was never just an
organisation. It is, and always will be, a movement. A not for
profit social enterprise born in the heart of the North East,
fuelled by passion and purpose, driven by the belief that
inclusion is not an initiative, it is the default.

We have supported thousands of individuals and
organisations to connect, support, and promote one
another, because inclusion is not just about fairness, it is
about progress. And in a world that so often seeks to divide
and conquer, we choose to unite and empower. Our work
reaches into schools, communities, boardrooms, and global
corridors, from Newcastle to Riyadh, Teesside to Turkey, and
beyond. Through initiatives like ISS Airview and ISS Freeports,
we are connecting the North East to the world.

We are not just talking about levelling up, we are living it.
And it is happening because of people, people like you.
Every finalist, every partner, every supporter of ABC
represents what is best about us: resilience, creativity,
collaboration. You are the heartbeat of inclusion and
innovation. We also honour those who protect and serve us.
To my own regiment, 101 Royal Artillery, the North East
Reserve Forces and Cadets, and Army HQ North, thank you
for your service, courage, and sacrifice. You remind us that
unity is not a slogan, it is a daily act of duty and dedication.

As a trustee of Together TV, I have also seen how
storytelling can bring people together, how community
television can ignite national change, one conversation,
one story, one connection at a time.
This is what ABC is all about, connection.

And in the spirit of that connection, allow me to share the Power
of Three: Communicate. Collaborate. Celebrate.

Communicate because misunderstanding creates distance, but
conversations build bridges.

Through our platforms and channels, we now connect with over
two million individuals, engaging, informing, and inspiring
people every single day. That is two million conversations about
inclusion, opportunity, innovation, and kindness. Two million
chances to replace stereotypes with stories, and prejudice with
perspective. When we communicate openly and honestly, we
do not just share information, we create transformation.

Collaborate because the best ideas emerge when we sit around
the same table, not opposite it.

Over the past year, we have facilitated unique and exciting
partnerships designed to improve the health, wealth, and
happiness of our region. Take Louise from HWI, one of our key
sponsors, working with Padocare and the outstanding Okare.
Together, they are transforming the way care is delivered, in
care settings and in people's homes, by using the power of
innovation to improve wellbeing, dignity, and independence.
That is collaboration in action. Different people, different
sectors, one shared purpose, making life better for others.

Celebrate because too often we are so busy working, worrying,
and waiting for the next challenge that we forget to recognise
how far we have already come.

And that is what the ABC Awards are all about, celebrating you.
Every small step, every big leap, every unseen act of kindness.
Celebrating a region that does not just dream about inclusion, it
delivers it. We celebrate our team, Amit, Elizabeth, Steven and
everyone behind the scenes making the magic happen.

We celebrate our extended business family, Jalf, Sharon, Atif,
Umar, Tommy, Sandeep, Alan, Phil, and Chris, all driven by value
and purpose. We celebrate our sponsors, especially RBC, who
choose to support a not for profit that reinvests every penny
into purpose. And of course, I celebrate my amazing wife, my
strength, my anchor, my sanity, reminding me that love,
patience, and humour can overcome anything.
This feature, much like the awards themselves, is more than a
celebration.

It is a reminder of what we can achieve when we replace
division with dialogue, fear with faith, and competition with
compassion. The peace announced in the Middle East reminds
us that even the deepest wounds can heal when people choose
to talk instead of fight. Let that be our inspiration, that we too, in
our workplaces, communities, and daily lives, can build peace,
prosperity, and progress through understanding. As you turn
these pages, you will discover stories of resilience, innovation,
and impact that prove inclusion is not a slogan, it is our
strength.

Together, we communicate with honesty, collaborate with
humility, and celebrate with humanity. Because when we do, we
do not just change our communities, we change the world. As
the great Dr Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “We may have all
come on different ships, but we are in the same boat now.”

So let us make that boat unsinkable.

ABC PATRON AWARD

Meenu Malhotra DL (HCGI)

Group Chairman of Malhotra Group PLC and Honorary Consul of India, Meenu drives business growth, UK-India relations, and community development through visionary leadership.

The ABC Patron Award, presented for the first time in 2025, recognises individuals whose leadership, generosity, and dedication have significantly advanced ABConnexions' mission to connect, support, and promote the region's diverse business community.



Simone Roche MBE Chairman's Award

Founder of Northern Power Women, Simone champions gender equality and inclusive leadership, empowering women across the North to thrive through visibility, connection, and collaboration.



Sam Spoors Chairman's Award

Founder of Talentheads, Sam transforms recruitment by embedding within businesses to build a people first, long term hiring strategies that drive sustainable growth and culture.





Rishi Kohli Professional Award

Rishi Kohli is Senior Legal Services Manager at Norton Rose Fulbright, leading a team of 50 and advising on corporate, banking, and dispute matters. He champions social mobility, inclusion, and talent development in the North East, mentoring graduates and highlighting local opportunities, while serving on educational boards and raising the region's professional profile.



Jerry Arneja Professional Award

Jerry Arneja is Area Director at HSBC SME Business Banking, leading a team supporting SMEs across the North East and Humber. With 24 years in banking, he champions D&I, mentors colleagues, and drives the UK/India trade corridor. Jerry combines commercial expertise with community impact, supporting local businesses and fostering inclusive leadership across the region.



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Dr Meenakshi Choudhary
Health & Life Science Award

Dr. Meenakshi Choudhary is a consultant gynaecologist and senior specialist in reproductive medicine at Newcastle Fertility Centre. A clinical leader and researcher, she heads pioneering egg and mitochondrial donor programmes, advancing ethical fertility care and reproductive science. She is widely recognised for her patient centred approach and national leadership in women's health.



Sarat Pediredla
Business Award

Sarat Pediredla, CEO and co-founder of Hedgehog Lab, has built a global digital consultancy rooted in people first values. From pioneering mobile app development to leading major growth investments and acquisitions, he champions innovation and authentic leadership. A proud North East entrepreneur, Sarat's journey reflects resilience, inclusivity, and the belief that technology can create lasting impact.

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Shummi Shah
3rd Sector Award

Shummi Shah is the founder of Muslim Women North East (MWNE), a community group dedicated to creating safe, empowering spaces for Muslim women. From grassroots activism to initiatives like the Sunrise Club and Qur'an Journaling, she champions wellbeing, education, and belonging. Her work continues to inspire women across the North East and beyond.



Dhillon's Desserts
Independent Award

Dhillon's Desserts was founded by its owner at just sixteen, growing from a teenage dream into a thriving multi location dessert business. Known for creativity, resilience, and innovation, the brand blends quality, affordability, and social media savvy, while empowering others, including mentoring family members to launch their own ventures.

INTERNATIONALISATION

ISS provides soft-landing services for inward investors and launchpads for UK scaleups — enabling frictionless global growth through live trade corridors, in-country intelligence, and cultural alignment.

INVESTMENT

Led by Atif Malik, ISS Freeports is attracting sovereign wealth funds and corporate capital, mobilising over £200m for logistics, life sciences, and business hospitality — driving both ROI and regional regeneration.

INNOVATION

ISS integrates innovation across biotech, AI, aviation, and green fuels — powered by IP-protected frameworks like Yohlar™. A true sandbox for scalable transformation.

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globally with
ISS**



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launchpad for
Scale-Ups.**

PEOPLE

A global community of founders, mentors, and experts — connecting through strategic networking, peer learning, and investor introductions.

PLACE

Headquartered at Newcastle International Airport, with hubs in Teesside, Riyadh, and Bengaluru — our 10,000 sq ft state-of-the-art centres combine premium workspace with world-class support

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Dr Birju Bartoli Public Sector Award

Dr Birju Bartoli became Chief Executive of Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust in January 2024, after over two decades rising through the organisation. With a PhD in cancer research from Newcastle University, she has led major projects including the UK's first Specialist Emergency Care Hospital. She also champions inclusion as Race Equality Board Champion and chairs the Trust's Organ Donation Committee.



Cllr Aaron Roy Public Sector Award

Cllr Aaron Roy is Hartlepool's first Non-White BAME councillor, a registered nurse, and founder of Mariners United Sporting Club CIC. Through football, Kabaddi, and community programmes, he empowers youth, fosters inclusion, and unites communities. His initiatives, including the UK's first Tri-Nations Kabaddi Cup, showcase sport as a tool for cohesion, opportunity, and cultural pride.



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**Raul Kohli
Tommy Sandhu
Award***

An award winning comedian from Newcastle upon Tyne, Raul Kohli's sharp, politically charged comedy explores culture, class, and identity, earning acclaim across the UK and beyond.

**Collected by Raul's Parents*



**LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT
AWARD**

Shamshad Iqbal Malik

Founder of the Angelou Centre, Shamshad has dedicated her life to empowering women, advancing equality, and standing against honour-based violence — a true advocate for change.



**Newcastle Mela
Peoples Choice Award**

Newcastle Mela is a vibrant, family-friendly celebration of South Asian culture, held each August Bank Holiday in Exhibition Park.

Showcasing music, dance, art, and food from across Pakistani, Bengali, Indian and other cultures, it brings communities together.



IBD AWARD: CULTURAL

Recognising organisations that bring people together through culture, heritage, and shared experiences.



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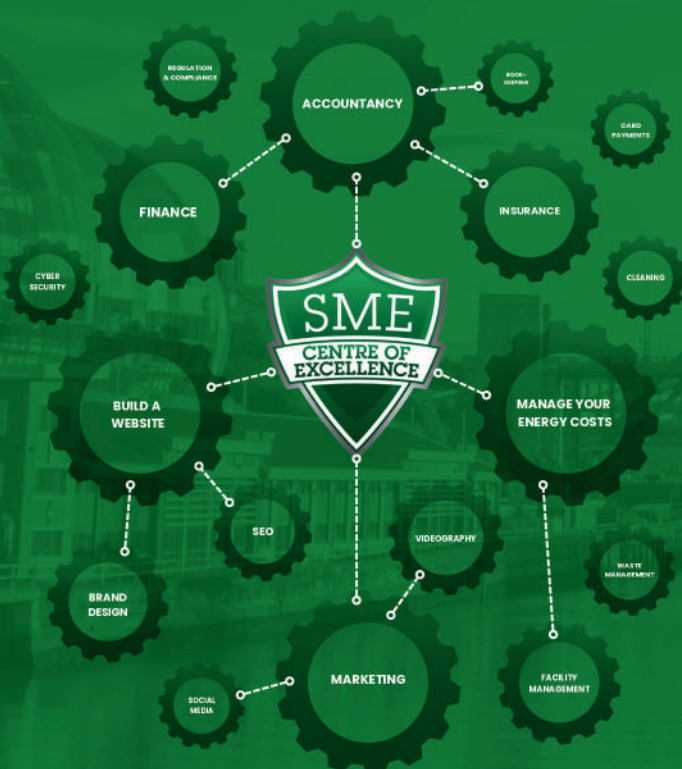
IBD AWARD: COMMUNITY INCLUSION

Community Inclusion –
Mela Movement
A Mela is a festival
celebrating South
Asian culture, bringing
together people of all
backgrounds through
music, food, and art.



IBD AWARD: CORPORATE

Honouring businesses
that embed inclusion
into their values,
operations, and
leadership.



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FAR ACCOUNTANCY
TRAINING

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- Celebrate success and promote your brand at the region's most prestigious event.



Contact us for further information:

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BOOK YOUR TABLE!

Be part of a night that celebrates purpose, progress, and people.

Whether entertaining clients or connecting with peers, your table at the ABC Awards 2026 promises an inspiring and unforgettable experience.





L-R: Ryan Elliott, Assoc CIPD, Michael Dobson, FCIPD and Ashley Gray, MCIPD

A survival guide – The Office Christmas Party

By Michael Dobson
Founder, Sapphire HR.

November means that many organisations are currently planning for the annual office Christmas party, the mix of high spirits and free-flowing alcohol can sometimes lead to HR headaches.

If you are organising this year's soirée, fear not! We have created a comprehensive guide to ensure your office Christmas party goes off without a hitch.

Setting the tone: Behaviour and alcohol policies

First things first, it is crucial to set clear guidelines for behaviour. Remind your staff that the office Christmas party is an extension of the workplace, meaning all company codes of conduct apply. Exercise caution when it comes to an open bar. While it is generous to provide free drinks, offering a variety of non-alcoholic options is equally important.

Harassment

Unfortunately one topic which re-occurs for Christmas parties is conduct and sexual harassment, which can be both verbal and physical. This can even include commenting on someone's clothing or appearance.

Given the presence of alcohol and the misconception that the party does not count as "work", some people can forget themselves and at times behave highly inappropriately, particularly if tensions that have been simmering during the year finally come to the fore, with inhibitions lowered because of alcohol.

It would be a good idea for the employer to set out well ahead of time to all employees that Christmas parties are an extension of the workplace, regardless of where they occur. This would require conduct to be kept the same as it would be in the workplace, a clear reminder of what is and is not acceptable behaviour and consequences which could occur such as disciplinary action potentially leading to dismissal for the most serious of offences.

The Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 placed a legal obligation on employers to take "reasonable steps" to prevent their employees from experiencing sexual harassment. Under the 2023 Act, the Employment Tribunal can now increase compensation awards for sexual harassment claims by up to 25% if it finds:

- sexual harassment has taken place; and
- the employer failed to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment.

You should refer to your risk assessment on preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.

Social media

In today's digital age, social media can turn festivities into a PR nightmare if not managed properly. Establish firm guidelines about what can and cannot be shared online. Now would be an excellent opportunity to remind everyone of the company's social media policy.

Inclusivity matters

When planning entertainment, think about inclusivity. Consider the diverse backgrounds and beliefs of your employees. Choose activities that cater to a broad audience, ensuring everyone can participate comfortably.

Managing absences

If your event falls on a weekday, be transparent about expectations for the following workday.

Consider flexible work hours or a later start time to accommodate those who might need a bit of extra rest.

Top Tips for Success:

- 1. Clear communication:** Provide explicit guidelines on expected behaviour, emphasising the professional nature of the event.
- 2. Travel arrangements:** Encourage attendees to plan their journeys home in advance, perhaps even arranging pre-booked taxis for their convenience.
- 3. Diverse refreshments:** Ensure a range of beverages, including non-alcoholic options, to cater to all preferences.
- 4. Social media policies:** Reiterate the rules about social media usage during and after the event.
- 5. Inclusive entertainment:** Choose activities that are inclusive and respectful of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.
- 6. Respect attendance choice:** Make it known that attendance is optional, understanding that personal beliefs or prior commitments might prevent some employees from attending.

www.sapphire-hr.co.uk
0330 124 3732



Gillespie Recruitment proudly hosted Small but Impactful: How small businesses can support charities

This inspiring morning of networking shone a spotlight on how local businesses can drive meaningful change through small, powerful actions.

With guest speaker Catherine Marchant from Impact Family Services sharing her expert insights, attendees left motivated, connected, and ready to make a difference. A truly uplifting event celebrating purpose, community, and collaboration!



Learning to let go

When I talk to business owners about why they started, freedom is usually in the mix.

Freedom to do things their way. Freedom to choose how they spend their time. Freedom to build something that gives them more options in life, not fewer.

But what I often see is the very opposite.

Instead of freedom, the business becomes a cage. Every decision needs their sign-off. Every problem comes back to them. They carry the weight of it all in their heads – the vision, the detail, the responsibility. Stepping away, even for a short while, feels impossible.

This is the paradox of control. The more tightly you hold on, the less freedom you create.

I was reminded of this earlier this year when I took on a personal challenge to climb Kilimanjaro. It wasn't something I'd ever pictured myself doing, and I actually went into it with plenty of doubts. What surprised me most was how little the climb was about sheer determination or forcing my way through (although resilience did play a part!).

It was about letting go.

I had to trust the guides who knew the mountain better than I ever could. I had to accept the pace, even when it felt painfully slow. And I had to lean on the team around me when the altitude made every step harder.

If I'd tried to control every aspect – the route, the timing, the outcome – I doubt I'd have made it. Letting go wasn't a weakness. It was the only way forward.

And it's exactly the same in business.

We tell ourselves that holding on keeps us safe. That if we stay across every detail, nothing can go wrong. But truthfully, businesses are stronger when they aren't dependent on one person. When systems carry the load, when teams know what



Helen Butler

they're responsible for, when decisions don't all flow through one pair of hands.

That's where freedom comes from. Not in walking away completely, but in knowing you could if you wanted to. In knowing the business would keep moving, clients would still be served, and your team would know what to do without you there every minute.

I meet so many owners at this crossroads. They've built something impressive, but it relies completely on them. Growth feels too heavy, standing still feels frustrating, and stepping back feels impossible.

The solution isn't to work harder or hold

tighter. It's to redefine control. It isn't about being across everything – it's having the right systems and people in place so the business can run without you.

That's what creates choice. And choice is what most people were looking for all along when they started.

If you're ready to stop being the default decision-maker and start building a more resilient operation, get in touch and let us share how we can support your journey.

hello@simplifiedoperations.co.uk
www.simplifiedoperations.co.uk

Is your business compliant with harassment laws?



Diane Mactavish

October marked the first anniversary of the enhanced laws protecting workers against harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace.

The ones where you have a duty to take reasonable steps to prevent it; with further penalties where harassment occurs and your preventative measures are found wanting.

Recent analysis of Acas call data in the first six months of this year (so shortly after the introduction of the Worker Protection Act), found that they had risen from 4,001 to 5,583 when compared to the same period the year before. It is not clear yet how this is translating into employment tribunal rulings – it is too early.

The forthcoming and expansive Employment Rights Bill is set to make the obligations on employers more onerous still.

Harassment and sexual harassment law in 2025

The law change in October 2024 required you to anticipate when sexual harassment (or any harassment) might occur and take reasonable steps to prevent it. If it occurs anyway, you should take further steps to prevent it from happening again. Before a claim can be made against you

for your preventative duties, harassment or sexual harassment must have occurred and your employee brought a claim in an employment tribunal.

If they are successful, the judge will automatically assess whether you are guilty of also failing to take reasonable preventative steps. If they adjudicate that you were, then they can uplift the compensation by up to 25%.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) can also directly enforce this law.

What further changes will happen?

As you probably know, the Employment Rights Bill is wide-ranging. It is being implemented in different stages over three years, starting in 2025. The measures pertinent to this topic will mainly be introduced in 2026. They are as follows:

- From April 2026, reporting sexual harassment will be explicitly included within whistleblowing legislation.
- From October 2026, the word “ALL” is being added to the preventative requirement – “All reasonable steps to prevent workplace sexual harassment.”
- From October 2026, your liability will be extended to include third party harassment and sexual harassment.
- The use of NDAs will be restricted so that they cannot prevent workers from disclosing harassment or discrimination. A date has not been set for this.

By adding the word “ALL” to the preventative requirement, it beefs up what is expected. But there is currently no

definition of what reasonable steps should be. This may be addressed in the future after consultation.

What should you be doing now?

Having a harassment and sexual harassment policy is a must. It sets out what acceptable behaviour is in black and white and gives you the framework to investigate and discipline where necessary. Any tribunal judge would take a dim view where this was not present.

Keeping a risk assessment on file and demonstrable employee training on the subject are good, proactive ideas too. Training can educate employees in how to behave, how to respond as a victim and how to intervene as a witness or manager.

Depending on the nature of your business, visible signs saying that harassment and sexual harassment are not acceptable may be appropriate too – particularly in public facing businesses such as in hospitality.

To get ready for third-party liability, all the above should be reviewed to ensure it reflects this upcoming change. More specifically you might look at putting harassment clauses into contracts with suppliers to further protect against third-party liability.

If your business needs support managing the changes to harassment rules, we can help.

Contact The HR Dept Durham, Newcastle & Northumberland North on 0191 2838 732 or diane.mactavish@hrdept.co.uk to discuss it further.

A relevant warning

The futurist Alvin Toffler once wrote: 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn'.

In a world as fast-moving as ours, that warning feels more relevant than ever.

If you're not moving forward, the world is moving past you - at speed.

The best leaders know this instinctively. They are relentless learners, constantly developing and encouraging themselves and others.

MIT senior lecturer Peter Senge explored this idea in his influential book *The Fifth Discipline*, which introduced the concept of the learning organisation.

Almost four decades later, the message has only grown in importance.

Imagine if your business had a genuine culture of learning where every person, at every level, was deliberately and consistently developing. Where each week, your team turned up slightly better than the week prior.

When that happens, magic occurs. People begin to push themselves and each other to grow.

The whole organisation starts to feel different. Energy builds. Confidence grows. And results are achieved.

Creating that kind of culture doesn't require big budgets or complicated programmes.

One of my clients started with a simple book club, where a small group read a relevant business title and met to discuss what they'd learned and how it might apply to their work.

The idea caught on.

Soon there were four or five book clubs running across the business. This was an engineering firm, and the enthusiasm even spread to the shop floor.



Ian Kinnery

Another company introduced a weekly 'lunch and learn,' where staff gathered to watch a short video or listen to a talk from an expert on a leadership topic.

One made their Amazon account available for anyone who wanted to buy educational books. Another paid for access to an online learning platform for all employees.

No one was made to participate, but there was a clear expectation that everyone was

responsible for their own growth.

And those who chose not to engage quickly realised they might be left behind when promotion opportunities arose.

None of this is hard or expensive to do. But the benefits of building a true learning organisation are immense.

So, what are you going to do about it?

www.kinnery.co.uk

The Great Skills Mismatch

Bryony Gibson, director of Bryony Gibson Consulting, looks at why the North East has thousands of jobs going spare and thousands of people looking for work, but the two can't seem to find each other.

In recruitment, we often hear people, including myself, talking about the impact the cost-of-living has on the job market. It's that, or people's desire to work remotely, or the pace of change AI drives.

They are important issues, but there's also another problem quietly sitting behind them. One that might be the biggest challenge we face in the North East. We have a major skills mismatch.

The fact is that what employers want and what candidates offer doesn't align, and it's only getting worse. In the North East, almost 60% of job vacancies are classified "hard to fill". In more than a third of those, employers say it's down to "a lack of the right skills or experience".

It's the same across the UK, where roughly 33% of vacancies are deemed "skills shortages". So it's not that there aren't jobs. Or that there aren't people. It's that we've built an environment where the two don't match.

In my world of practice accountancy, this plays out daily. Firms are desperate for talent, but can't take just anyone. Entry is largely based on technical experience, but once through the door, it's the softer skills that make the difference. Work placements and early career experiences can be invaluable, giving people exposure to real situations that help build competence and confidence. Firms need the right qualifications, but also people who can communicate effectively, are tech-savvy, and can build client relationships. What I see is that the problem isn't always ability, it's readiness. And it's not unique to accounting.

What's going wrong?

Partly, it's how we prepare people for work. Education and training still focus on exams



and theory, when employers want people who can solve problems, think on their feet, and cope with the complexity of the real world.

The recent Government changes to apprenticeship funding will make things even harder. The Level 7 apprenticeship is the route to ACA and ACCA qualifications and is now only funded for under-21s. That means graduates and career changers are no longer eligible for support, leaving firms to shoulder the full cost. Unsurprisingly, many can't afford it. It's a short-sighted policy that risks cutting off a vital pipeline of future accountants, right when we need them most.

There's also a growing gap in expectations. Candidates value flexibility, balance, and purpose more than ever, but not every business has caught up. Those who keep rigid hours, outdated progression paths, and company cultures that don't move with the times inevitably lose good people.

What needs to change

There's no single fix, but there are a few things that I believe could make a difference:

Open up more pathways in - apprenticeships, trainee schemes, and work placements offer people a chance to build experience, not just qualifications. Companies need to embrace this more.

Keep skills current - employers can't expect recruits to come ready-made and continuously upskill themselves. Investment in training has to be part of the deal.

Update perceptions - we need to talk more honestly about what modern jobs look like. When the perception hasn't caught up with the way a role has evolved, people misunderstand what it entails, and that keeps potential talent away.

Final thought

The "Great Skills Mismatch" isn't just about hiring headaches. It's about missed opportunities for businesses, people, and, especially, for places like the North East that have so much untapped potential.

There's no shortage of ambition here, but we can't fix the skills gap until we fix how people get the skills. Until we match what people can do, want to do, and what employers need, we'll keep missing opportunities that are right in front of us.

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An independent accountancy practice with a strong reputation is seeking a Senior Manager to aid the Partners on complex advisory projects for SME, high-net-worth individuals and family businesses. Managing projects end-to-end, mentoring team members, and ensuring exceptional client service. Qualified professionals (CTA/ACA) with advisory experience are invited to apply. The role offers flexibility and exposure to really diverse client portfolio with the chance to shape team growth and your own career trajectory. **Hybrid.**

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A large, ambitious accountancy firm is seeking an Inheritance Tax Specialist to join its expanding private client team. You'll provide comprehensive IHT advice to high-net-worth clients, manage complex planning assignments, and work closely with Partners on trusts, estates, and succession strategies. CTA or ACA-qualified professionals with 3-5 years' private client experience is required. The role offers exposure to high-profile clients, and the chance to develop your expertise in a growing, collaborative firm. **Office based.**

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To express your interest in a vacancy, or for a confidential discussion, contact Bryony Gibson, Bryony Gibson Consulting, on 0191 375 9983 or visit BryonyGibson.com/Vacancies

THE ULTRAMAPGLOBAL SERIES

“We are excited to share that UltramapGlobal has joined forces with Abingdon Software Group, a London-based global software company that specialises in helping to grow mission-critical technology businesses.”

SPECIAL EDITION

For our customers and partners, this is an exciting new chapter. With Abingdon's backing, we now have the resources and reach to strengthen our products, accelerate innovation, and grow with the evolving needs of the subsea industry.

At the same time, continuity remains at the core. Our founders, Martin Connelly and Andrew Desforges, are still at the helm, and our global team continues to provide the same trusted service and expertise that customers rely on.

What this means for our customers

Continuity of leadership and service: the same founders and team you know will keep supporting you every day.

Stronger products and innovation: Abingdon's investment allows us to accelerate development, add new features, and push the boundaries of subsea monitoring.

Long-term security. With a permanent home inside Abingdon, our customers can count on UltramapGlobal being here for the long run.

Global growth. With new resources, we are expanding our international presence and ensuring more subsea assets are protected around the world.

“Our mission has not changed, but our ability to deliver on it has just taken a big step forward.”

A word from Martin

“This is a very exciting new chapter for UltramapGlobal,” said Martin Connelly, Co-Founder and CEO. “Our mission remains the same, but with Abingdon's support we now have the investment and resources to take it further. Customers can be confident that the same team is here to support them, while we also accelerate innovation and strengthen the way we protect critical infrastructure around the world.”

Why Abingdon is backing UltramapGlobal

“UltramapGlobal is exactly the kind of missioncritical software company we look to partner with,” said Asheque Shams, Founder and Group CEO of Abingdon Software Group. “Its role in protecting the world's subsea infrastructure is vital, and we are committed to providing the long-term backing that will help the team expand their impact globally.”

Why this matters now

Subsea infrastructure is the invisible backbone of the modern world. As recent events have shown, these assets are increasingly at risk and under scrutiny.

With Abingdon's support, UltramapGlobal is better positioned than ever to help our customers safeguard critical infrastructure, meet evolving regulations, and protect global connectivity.

Looking ahead

This is not about things staying the same. It is about getting stronger. Our mission has not changed, but our ability to deliver on it has just taken a big step forward. We are excited about what is ahead, and we look forward to sharing new developments with you soon.

Find out more at www.ultramapglobal.com

SPECIAL EDITION | SPECIAL EDITION | SPECIAL EDITION | SPECIAL EDITION | SPECIAL EDITION



*Martin Connelly
Co-Founder & CEO*

Outdoors: The Leadership Performance Tool

“The world glorifies hustle. But the smartest leaders know that time for thinking and reflection drives real performance.”

“I see it every week,” says Jane, smiling.

“Leaders working harder. Non-stop days, cluttered with interruptions, firefighting and noise. The constant pressure draining focus and judgement. But the fix isn’t another meeting; it’s a change of environment.”

For Jane Fisher, founder of Fresh Perspectives North East, the outdoors isn’t a perk, it’s a leadership performance tool.

“Getting outdoors enhances how we think, plan and collaborate,” she explains. “Yet it remains one of the most underused, proven performance tools we have.”

The Leadership Problem

Leadership capacity is stretched. Recent surveys reveal more than half of business leaders feel overworked or burnt out, many considering stepping back or changing direction. Global insights echo this, with senior executives citing decision fatigue and shrinking headspace as barriers to performance.

“Leaders are operating in a constricted environment of persistent stress,” Jane observes, “still having to make those critical decisions. Yet you can’t think clearly in such captivity.”

“You can’t think clearly in captivity.”

The Science of Stepping Outside

“I’m a scientist at heart,” laughs Jane, “which matters, because everything I advocate is backed by evidence.

“For example, strategic rest isn’t downtime, it’s a strategic advantage. The brain’s default mode network - the part that joins ideas, fuels creativity and supports good decisions, switches on when we pause and step away.”

And stepping outdoors is one of the quickest ways to activate the system.

“Even 10–30 minutes a day outdoors, barely 2% of your time, can lift clarity, focus and mood, while lowering stress – all boosting performance.” she adds. “Build that habit, and the gains compound. That’s not indulgence – that’s investment!”

Better Judgement, Sharper Strategy

“When I take leaders outside, the shift is visible,” Jane says. “Shoulders drop, breathing slows, reactions give way to reflection and exploration. Within minutes, clarity and ideas appear.”

This is leadership in motion - turning movement into strategic momentum and business results.

“It’s not about slowing down,” she adds. “It’s about speeding up the right way. Getting outdoors strips away distraction, stimulates innovative thinking and resets fatigue to sharpen judgements and strengthen strategies.”

Make Outdoors a Habit

Jane’s advice? “Stop waiting for the big away day! Use small steps daily: take a short strategy walk, a call on the move, a step outside before big decisions. For habit is where performance builds.”

And that’s the rationale behind The Fresh Perspective 90-Day Challenge, a business-led initiative helping North East leaders develop an Outdoors Habit.

“Many of the world’s most progressive businesses – brands we know, are getting outdoors already,” highlights Jane, “And I believe that within the next 5 to 10 years, all forward-thinking businesses will spend at least 20 percent of their working week outdoors. Habitually.”

To find out more about Fresh Perspectives NE, and the 90-Day Challenge, contact Jane: 07837 024 374, hello@fpne.co.uk or visit the website www.fpne.co.uk

Jane Fisher

Surrounded by idiots? Or just people who think differently?

By Accelerator Coaching Ltd.

“Treat others as they want to be treated – not as you would want to be treated.”

If you've ever sat in a meeting thinking, “Why don't they get it?” – you're not alone.

Communication is the single most important skill in leadership, yet it's the one most of us assume we've mastered.

The truth is, good communication isn't just about being clear – it's about connecting. It's about understanding how others think, feel and process the world, and flexing your style to meet them halfway.

At Accelerator Coaching, we believe communication is the golden thread of great leadership. It's what builds trust, drives collaboration, and helps people thrive – even when conversations feel uncomfortable.

When good intentions miss the mark

Back in our corporate days in national newspaper sales, we learned this lesson the hard way.

We'd spent weeks rallying the team for a new CRM launch – lively meetings, creative ideas, plenty of energy and enthusiasm. We were confident everyone was onboard.

Launch day came... and a few people went quiet. They weren't being difficult; they were simply uncomfortable. They were the calm, methodical team members who needed time, clarity and a one-to-one conversation before change felt safe.

At the time, we didn't have the language for it. Later, through *behavioural profiling*, it all clicked. These colleagues had a more “Green” communication style – steady, loyal and thoughtful. They wanted to know why the change mattered and how it would work before diving in.

If we'd understood that earlier, we'd have taken a completely different approach – one that met their needs, not just ours.

The Language of Human Behaviour

Whether you call it **DISC**, **Insights**, or **C-Me**, these frameworks all point to the same truth: people communicate differently.

Some are fast-paced and direct. Others are reflective and relational. None of these are right or wrong – they're just *different*.



At Accelerator Coaching, our brand colour is **yellow** – it represents warmth, optimism and connection, which sit at the heart of everything we do.

Our founder, Tess, naturally leans Yellow-Red: energetic, enthusiastic and driven. But our wider coaching team blends every colour – analytical Blues, supportive Greens, dynamic Reds and sunny Yellows – because real success comes from embracing diversity, not flattening it.

We use DISC as one of several tools alongside coaching, Gallup Strengths, and the **RocheMartin Emotional Capital Report (ECR)**, which explores emotional intelligence. Combined, these tools help leaders see both the science and the emotion behind how people communicate – and why they sometimes don't.

Why communication is a Leadership Superpower

Strong communication isn't about who talks the most; it's about who listens best.

It's about reading the room, asking before assuming, and knowing when to energise, when to explain, and when to simply hold space.

When leaders adapt their approach, something shifts:

- Teams feel heard and understood.
- Conflict turns into curiosity.
- Collaboration becomes smoother, faster, and more human.

Communication isn't one-size-fits-all.

But when you understand the people around you – their pace, their needs, their motivators – you stop managing and start leading.

The Takeaway

Next time you feel surrounded by “idiots”, take a breath. You're probably surrounded by people who think, feel and communicate differently – and that's where your biggest leadership potential lies.

At Accelerator Coaching, we accelerate leaders and teams uncover those differences and use them as superpowers – because when communication flows, everything else follows.

About Accelerator Coaching

Accelerator Coaching Ltd enables leaders and teams in the UK to communicate with confidence, manage emotions effectively, and perform with purpose using a coaching-led programme.

Founder Teresa (“Tess”) Peters, an **EMCC Senior Practitioner Coach**, **Emotional Intelligence Expert (RocheMartin ECR)**, and **Accredited Emotions Practitioner**, together with our team blends coaching psychology, DISC, and Strengths-based development to drive meaningful, measurable change.

ignite@acceleratorcoaching.co.uk
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Durham Business Club - Castle, Clues, and Corporate Chaos

There are few venues more captivating than Lumley Castle, where history meets mystery amidst its ancient walls.

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DBC members were challenged to navigate shifting alliances, uncover hidden motives, and work together under pressure. The game may be over, we didn't all live to tell the tale but the connections - and a few secrets remain.



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Probation Periods: Why employers need to get ahead now

By Kathryn Rodgers, face2faceHR.

Hiring a new employee always carries some risk. No matter how rigorous your recruitment process, it's often not until someone is in the role that you truly know if they're the right fit. That's why probation periods are so valuable — for both employer and employee.

Probation allows for a defined period — typically three to six months — to assess performance, culture fit, and conduct before confirming permanent employment. When well-managed, it helps employers make confident hiring decisions while supporting new starters to succeed.

Why use a probation period?

Although employees currently need two years' service to claim unfair dismissal, probation periods still serve an important purpose.

They:

- Allow for shorter notice periods during the early weeks
- Encourage clearer performance monitoring
- Help set structured expectations from the start
- Provide a clearer route for early exit if needed

This phase also prompts managers to give more active feedback, rather than waiting for problems to build up over time.

What to Include in Contracts

A strong probation clause should set out:

- The length of the probation period
- Notice periods during and after probation
- Whether standard performance or disciplinary processes apply
- The right to extend probation, and in what circumstances
- That probation must be confirmed in writing when successfully passed

Some businesses also delay certain non-

statutory benefits — like enhanced sick pay or bonuses — until probation is passed, as long as statutory entitlements are still met.

Supporting performance during probation

Even though employees on probation can't claim ordinary unfair dismissal, they still have protection against discrimination, whistleblowing retaliation, or automatic unfair dismissal.

To minimise risk, treat probation as a supportive and documented process. Good practice includes:

- Setting clear goals and expectations
- Holding review meetings (e.g. monthly or at key points)
- Offering training or mentoring if needed
- Documenting performance feedback and support given

Not only does this help underperformers improve — it protects your business if dismissal becomes necessary.

When probation isn't working

If things aren't going to plan, you don't have to wait until the end of the period to act. But make sure you've raised concerns, offered support, and kept records.

If the employee still doesn't meet expectations, follow a simple and fair process:

- Invite them to a probation review meeting in writing
- Share your concerns and explain dismissal is being considered
- Allow them to bring a companion
- Hold the meeting, listen to their response, and adjourn before making your decision



Kathryn Rodgers

- Confirm everything in writing and document the process

Extensions can be useful in cases of absence or borderline performance — but they must be justified and communicated clearly, especially where health or disability is involved. Mismanaging this could lead to claims of unfair treatment.

Looking ahead: Probation may soon become law

The government plans to replace the two-year unfair dismissal qualifying period with a formal statutory probation period (called an "initial period of employment"). The likely length? Nine months, followed by a longer notice period. While the change isn't due before 2027, employers should start preparing now.

That means reviewing:

- Whether managers are holding probation reviews on time
- If performance issues are being documented
- Whether new starters are getting the support they need
- If managers are trained to manage performance effectively

Final tip

Encourage managers to schedule and stick to reviews, reschedule if needed, and keep a clear paper trail. A probation period should be more than just a tick-box — it's your chance to build strong foundations and avoid future problems.

face2facehr.com



Jen Tait

Empathy in Action

Supporting customers in vulnerable circumstances.

Every one of us will face vulnerability at some point in our lives. It might be due to financial stress, ill health, bereavement, or simply the pressures of modern life. When it happens, we rely on the understanding and compassion of others, including the companies we interact with.

For organisations, recognising and responding to vulnerability isn't just about compliance or customer satisfaction. It's about humanity, and it starts with equipping teams with the human skills that make meaningful support possible.

Why it matters

According to the UK's Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), over 50% of UK adults, around 27 million people, display one or more characteristics of vulnerability. That's more than half of the customer base for many organisations. For businesses, this

means that almost every interaction has the potential to involve someone who needs extra care or understanding.

Customers in vulnerable situations often need more time, patience and empathy. A rushed or insensitive response can not only damage trust but also cause real emotional harm. By contrast, when an employee listens, communicates clearly and shows understanding, it can transform a stressful interaction into a supportive experience.

That's why Vulnerable Customer Training is so vital. It helps employees recognise signs of vulnerability, which are not always visible, and gives them the confidence to respond appropriately. These skills go beyond processes and policies; they are rooted in empathy, emotional intelligence and active listening.

The human skills connection

Human skills are the foundation of effective customer care. Training that focuses on empathy, awareness and communication enables employees to adapt their approach, use sensitive language and create a safe environment for customers to share what they're going through.

In fact, research from Deloitte found that organisations prioritising empathy in customer service achieve up to 20% higher

customer satisfaction and retention rates. Beyond numbers, this translates into stronger relationships, loyalty and brand trust.

A business and human imperative

Investing in vulnerable customer training is both good business and good practice. It reduces complaints, builds loyalty and enhances reputation. But above all, it ensures that when customers need support the most, they find it in a compassionate human being, not a process.

Because ultimately, the way we treat our most vulnerable customers says everything about who we are, not just as an organisation, but as people.

About the Author

Jen Tait is the founder of Rise Learning Group, a specialist training provider helping organisations enhance empathy, communication and inclusion through tailored learning programmes. Their flagship course, Supporting Vulnerable Customers, empowers teams to deliver compassionate, confident service when it matters most.

www.riselearninggroup.com

Why social value matters for SMEs

In today's rapidly evolving and challenging business landscape, success is no longer measured by profit alone.

Increasingly, stakeholders, from customers to investors, expect companies to deliver social value alongside financial returns. For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in particular, embedding social value into their business models is not just a matter of ethics or compliance, it's a strategic necessity for long-term sustainability and growth.

Social value results in winning contracts and tenders

Public and private sector procurement is increasingly being shaped by social value requirements. In the UK, where the Social Value Act applies, government and large corporate buyers assess a bidder's social impact as part of their decision-making process. We are seeing an increase in the weighting of social value within bids and contracts, a step towards your social impact being as important as the products and service you deliver.

The strong emphasis on social value requirements in contracts enables those that deliver genuine, targeted and effective social value with a real competitive edge.

Social value builds trust and loyalty

SMEs often operate in tight-knit communities where word-of-mouth, reputation, and relationships are vital. A business that shows it genuinely cares about its local community, employees, and the environment are more likely to gain client and customer trust and loyalty.

Clients and customers today are socially conscious; many actively seek out businesses that align with their values. When an SME commits to social value, it builds a brand story that resonates, which can translate into repeat clients, customers and referrals.

Social value attracts and retains talent

Today's workforce, particularly younger generations, prioritise purpose alongside pay. They want to work for organisations that are making a difference. SMEs that demonstrate social responsibility often enjoy higher employee satisfaction, lower turnover, and can attract top-tier talent,



even if they can't always offer the highest salaries.

Social value drives innovation and resilience

Solving social and environmental challenges often sparks innovation. Whether it's developing sustainable packaging, designing inclusive products, creating accessible employment, or rethinking energy usage, SMEs that consider social value are more likely to innovate and future-proof their businesses.

Moreover, businesses that focus on the long-term good of their stakeholders are naturally more resilient. They tend to have stronger relationships, higher engagement, and better risk management. All of which help weather economic downturns and market changes.

Social value supports access to funding and investment

Impact investing and social value-based criteria in funding applications is on the rise, with investors and funders increasingly seeking ventures that generate positive social and environmental outcomes. SMEs with a clear social value

proposition may have access to new pools of funding, including grants, impact funds, and ethical lenders and investors.

Social value is no longer a 'nice to have'. It's a business imperative. For SMEs, it offers a pathway to greater competitiveness, resilience, and relevance in a purpose-driven economy. By embedding social value at the heart of their operations, SMEs don't just do good, they do well.

Ultimately, the businesses that thrive will be those that understand that success isn't just measured in pounds, but in people, planet, and purpose.

But, I appreciate how challenging it currently is for SMEs, who are the backbone of our economy, and understand that supporting them to deliver effective and efficient social value is a key priority. As much as they need to deliver social value, it shouldn't be detrimental to their operational delivery, which is why making it simple and easy for them to deliver and demonstrate their impact is essential. Essential for them and for our economy and communities.

www.keepsocial.com



Chair Angela Tuplin with North Tyneside Council's Funding and Enterprise Manager Fay Hodgson

Annual North Tyneside Business Awards

Finalists announced for the 28th Annual North Tyneside Business Awards celebrating Local Business Excellence.

The North Tyneside Business Forum is delighted to unveil the finalists for the 28th Annual North Tyneside Business Awards. These prestigious awards recognise and celebrate the remarkable contributions made by local businesses to the economy, reaffirming North Tyneside as a vibrant centre of business excellence.

The awards, organised by the North Tyneside Business Forum, will take place on Thursday, 20th November at the Village Hotel, Cobalt Park, North Tyneside. The glittering event will be hosted by Voiceover Artist, TV and Radio Presenter Ingrid Hagemann.

Chair of the Forum, Angela Tuplin, said: "The North Tyneside Business Forum are proud champions of businesses in the Borough, providing support, events and networking opportunities to businesses of all sizes, supporting growth and prosperity for all. Recently, Cobalt Business Park has been named as part of an AI Growth Zone in the North East, set to generate more than 5,000 new jobs and attract up to £30 billion in private investment, providing a real opportunity for our members to become part of this growing sector and supply chain.

The North Tyneside Business Awards are an opportunity to celebrate the resilience, creativity and innovation shown by our local businesses. Each year we are inspired by the dedication and achievements of those who contribute so much to our economy and communities. Congratulations to all the finalists – they are an outstanding example of the talent and determination that makes North Tyneside such a fantastic place to do business."

Businesses had the opportunity to enter any of five categories, with all category winners automatically considered for the coveted title of "North Tyneside Business of the Year." Winners in each category will receive a certificate, prize, and trophy, along with substantial recognition and publicity.

The following businesses have been selected as finalists:

New Business

Elemental Occupational Therapy
NUSA Studio
Tyneside Community Store CIC

Retail & Service Provider

Kore+
Bestford Insurance
Specsavers North Shields

Technology Innovation

Cybit
Durhamlane
The Unite Group

Heart of the Business

Barry Irving - Above & Beyond
Painting & Decorating
Tara Warren - Bash Academy
Kathryn Meadows - Nicholsons Butchers

The Green Award

Buy the Kilo
The Chocolate Smiths
RLM Windows

In addition to these categories, the public will vote for the "Heart of the Community Award," recognising businesses that actively support their local community. Previous winners have demonstrated exceptional commitment to local initiatives, employment of residents, outstanding customer service, and going the extra mile to be at the heart of their communities.

This year's nominees for the Heart of the Community Award

Turnbulls Funeral Directors
Cheryl Tanner Menopause Coach
Tyneside Community Store CIC.

This year's awards are proudly sponsored by: The Banks Group, The Exchange 1856, Elevate, The Beacon Centre.

Action on Climate Change, Verkada, Ormston Drylining, TyneMet College, Buston & Maughan, NE Display Ltd and SocialPlus. The awards are conducted in partnership with North Tyneside Council.

Additional sponsorship packages are available - please contact: business.forum@northtyneside.gov.uk 0191 643 6000.

The North Tyneside Business Forum is led by a management group of local business representatives and supports members through networking, events, and growth opportunities.

Membership is free and open to any business with a trading address in North Tyneside. The Forum is supported by, but independent of, North Tyneside Council.

The Forum is FREE to join and is for any business with a trading address in North Tyneside.

northtynesidebusinessforum.org.uk

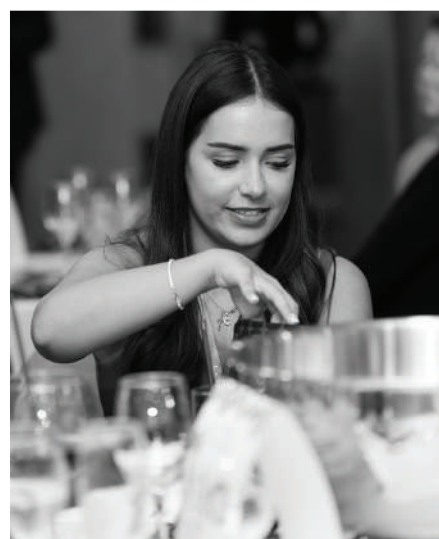


Central Employment stages an annual networking day at Newcastle Racecourse

This year saw over 150 people attending their event...the biggest number so far, bringing together business contacts from across the region.

It's a chance for businesses to connect and strengthen partnerships, something Central Employment values deeply.

"Five years ago, we decided that it would be a great idea to allow senior players from the businesses we work with, to get together for an enjoyable day and give them the opportunity for some networking. It's been a huge success, which is reflected by the number of businesses who were represented at our latest race day".





Central Employment – not your normal recruitment agency

From finding suitable candidates to providing induction and training, they do it all.



L-R: William Palmer, Paul Ponton, Steve Hart, Mark Trett

Established in 1979 and proudly independent, Central Employment has grown to become one of the North East's most respected agencies, delivering tailored recruitment and training services to businesses and jobseekers alike.

Ten years ago, a management buyout marked the beginning of an exciting new chapter for the business. Since then, the company has achieved remarkable growth and transformation.

The new board ranks as one of the most experienced leadership teams in the recruitment business, Managing Director Paul Ponton, Training Director Steve Hart, Financial Director Will Palmer, and Operations Director Mark Trett. Add all their recruitment experience together and you'll have well over 100 years of know-how, which of course is great news for all clients and candidates. It also means the rest of the Central Employment team always have someone to turn to if a tricky situation arises. All four directors have been there...done it.

"Our leadership team's longevity in recruitment and finance means we've developed a blueprint for success that filters through every level of our business," said Operations Director Mark Trett. "Clients can expect the same meticulous attention to detail and customer care from every consultant they work with, not just one individual."

"We pride ourselves on our end-to-end service. For businesses needing temporary staff, we handle everything...from recruitment and training to onsite induction. This means our clients can rely on a ready-to-work team, even at short notice. We don't just fill vacancies...we build careers. Our team takes time to understand each candidate's potential and places them in roles where they can excel."

No square pegs in round holes.

Central Employment is growing rapidly; such has been their success in recent years. Profits have soared and the company's recruitment team continues to expand.

Since the buyout in 2015, Central Employment has marked a series of significant milestones that have shaped its growth and success. The company expanded its footprint

by opening a new branch in Middlesbrough, strengthening its presence across Teesside, and upgrading its Newcastle headquarters to the state-of-the-art Portland House. They launched a dedicated training division to deliver tailored induction and skills development programs, while also building a robust permanent recruitment team, to complement its thriving temporary staffing solutions. Alongside these service enhancements, the team has grown substantially, welcoming new talent to strengthen expertise and client support. Consistent year-on-year profitability has underscored this progress.

“Our journey over the past decade has been nothing short of incredible,” said Financial Director Will Palmer. “We’ve invested heavily in our people, our infrastructure, and our services to ensure we remain the go-to partner for recruitment and training in the North East.”

Central Employment’s success isn’t just measured in numbers; it’s also about relationships.

The company knows that it has a key role to play in the North East business community, which is why they are always keen to mix a bit of business with pleasure. It’s amazing how much business can be done when people are enjoying themselves.

Which is why Central Employment stages an annual networking day at Newcastle Racecourse. This year saw over 150 people attending their event...the biggest number so far, bringing together business contacts from across the region. It’s a chance for businesses to connect and

strengthen partnerships, something Central Employment values deeply.

“We work with hundreds of companies both here in the region and nationally,” added Managing Director Paul Ponton. “Central Employment used to mainly concentrate its recruitment expertise in the temporary industrial and manufacturing sectors, but we’re now seeing significant expansion in permanent recruitment services. Our team brings a breadth of expertise in a multitude of sectors including finance, digital and professional services. This adaptability ensures clients benefit from a broad talent pool and candidates have access to a wide variety of opportunities.

As Central Employment celebrates this milestone, its focus remains firmly on the future, continuing to innovate, expand, and support the region’s workforce needs.

Interested? You should be, because their track record is second to none. For businesses seeking reliable recruitment and training solutions, or for individuals looking to advance their careers, Central Employment is the number one choice.

Discover how Central Employment can help you achieve your workforce goals.

For more information, visit Central Employment’s website, where you’ll find information about what they can do for you as well as additional contact details.



Social+ Golf Day raises over £6,000 for The Charlie and Carter Foundation at Wearside Golf Club

Social+ is delighted to announce that this year's Golf Day at Wearside Golf Club raised an incredible £6,000, thanks to the generosity and support of local businesses, sponsors, and participants.

The event brought together golfers from across the North East for a fantastic day of sport, networking, and fundraising — all in support of The Charlie and Carter Foundation.

After a close competition, the PGS LAW team, led by Gavin Teasdale, took home the winner's trophy.

"We're absolutely thrilled with the success of this year's event," said Laura Jane Forbes, Charity Fundraising and Events Manager at The Charlie and Carter Foundation "The generosity shown by everyone involved truly highlights the amazing community spirit we have here in the North East. We can't thank our sponsors, players, and volunteers enough."

Special thanks go to Wearside Golf Club for hosting the day, to all our tee sponsors, and to the many volunteers — including Andrea Holman from WorkerBee, Shelley and Chris from Virgin Money, and Lorraine Sykes from The Unite Group — whose hard work made the event possible.

The event was beautifully captured by photographer Gavin Forster.

Finally, Social+ extends heartfelt thanks to The Unite Group and the Social+ team for their tireless efforts in organising a fantastic day.

The event's success has already inspired plans for next year's Golf Day, with Social+ inviting local businesses and supporters to join the fun once again, please email

Laura at Laura@ccfemail.co.uk for more information.

Tee Sponsors 2025:

- WorkerBee • Social+ NE
- PGS LAW LLP • NE Networking
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- Adept Communications and Technology • Gary Marsh
- Richard Reed Solicitors
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Castle Peak Group...not your ordinary executive search company

When it comes executive search companies, Castle Peak Group does things differently. They ask questions that other recruitment firms don't consider.

Why?

Because Castle Peak Group offers a new approach to leadership acquisition. They study the background to every company they deal with and then ask one seriously important question.

How diverse are they?

Once Castle Peak Group has got the answer, they'll then search for an ideal candidate...someone who can ensure that the board of directors or senior managers are diverse and help the business to become more inclusive.

Castle Peak Group was founded two years ago by James Carss. A lot of you will know him because James has been on the recruitment scene long enough to be called a veteran and has a reputation second to none.

"If there's one thing that counts the most in recruitment, it's experience," said James. "I've spent close to 25 years working in executive recruitment and have seen how firms operate both here in the UK and in countries like the USA, China and Hong Kong. During that time I've realised companies are missing out on potential growth in terms of sales and profits because, in many cases, their leadership does not reflect either their workforce or their customer base...or both.

"Consequently, when I returned to Newcastle, I made it something of a mission to ensure that firms became more diverse and inclusive in terms of their leadership. The crazy thing is that research shows when a firm has a mixed and varied board of directors, executives and decision makes, it will invariably flourish....so why not ensure when new appointments are made that they fit in what can be a hugely successful framework. Okay, it's not going to happen overnight, but this is something that needs to be considered every time a senior vacancy becomes available. Diverse boards and leadership teams make better decisions, and when executives make better decisions, the company will make more money. Simple."

Your first step to do recruitment the right way is to contact James and his team at Castle Peak Group do.

They study your business and find someone who will not only be ideal for the job but also help you evolve in the right way.

That's why Castle Peak Group is different from other recruitment agencies. They are diversity-driven.

"The North East of England has tended to lag behind the rest of the UK in terms of diverse leadership teams...,but we're missing a trick. All you need to do is look around your local town or city and see how the population has changed. Society is becoming more and more diverse so companies should also follow the same trend. Firms need to focus their executive recruitment not only on ability but also on ethnicity, neurodiversity, race, disability, and sexual orientation. Don't just go for the quick fix...think more long term."

And that is precisely what Castle Peak Group will help you achieve.

And if you fancy delving into James Carss extensive recruitment experience.... contact his company and you most certainly will because James deals with all new assignments. He'll guide you by the hand to do recruitment the right way.

Oh...and they're obviously seriously good at what they do because they're award winners. They won a gong for Professional Services Start-Up of the Year at the National Start-Up Awards. The awards were founded by the folk behind The Great British Entrepreneur Awards and the Fast Growth 50 Index and champions the best and brightest start-ups from across the UK.

Interested in what Castle Peak Group can do for you? You should be.

For more information, you can contact James Carss by calling 07802 531040 or emailing info@castlepeak-group.com

You'll also find out more details by logging on to www.castlepeak-group.com



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...one thing that counts the most in recruitment, it's experience...

James Carss



Agilico launches new Wellbeing Hub to mark ten years of the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Agilico, a leader in workplace technology with circa 500 colleagues and 14,000 customers across the country, recently launched a new Wellbeing Hub to underline its commitment to the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

The Agilico Wellbeing Hub, a dedicated colleague resource, went live on the same day and is designed to strengthen work-life balance and support colleagues' wellness at every level.

Available to all staff, the hub will be a dedicated space for ideas, resources, events and support. It will feature practical guidance on topics such as healthy routines, behaviour change and maintaining work-life balance, alongside tips from recognised wellbeing experts.

The hub will also promote awareness days and national health campaigns, giving colleagues opportunities to connect with wider initiatives. Importantly, it will be brought to life by Agilico's own wellbeing champions – colleagues who help embed positive practices into daily culture across Agilico.

By focusing on both everyday challenges and long-term wellbeing, the hub aims to make wellness a natural part of working life rather than an add-on. Whether through advice on creating lasting habits, reminders of upcoming awareness events, or stories of success from across the business, the platform is designed to enlighten colleagues, inspiring them to make differences to help improve their lives inside and outside of work.

The timing of the launch was deliberate – The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) were first adopted by all UN member states a decade ago in 2015, providing a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.

Among the SDGs, several relate closely to the purpose of the Wellbeing Hub initiative. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) highlight the link between wellness, community and economy. Agilico's Wellbeing Hub embodies these principles in practice, aligning a global agenda with meaningful action at workplace level.



Shortlists revealed for North East Tech Awards

Over a dozen businesses, employees and entrepreneurs from across the North East are among the finalists of the region's annual tech awards.

Now in its twelfth year, the Dynamites Awards brings together people and businesses from across the industry to celebrate all that is great about the tech sector.

Organised by the not-for-profit tech sector membership organisation, Dynamo North East C.I.C., the awards recognise outstanding companies, organisations, and individuals driving innovation and growth across the industry.

Accenture is the headline sponsor for the 2025 Dynamites Awards, and this year's shortlist features an impressive mix of businesses and organisations, from innovative SMEs to some of the region's largest employers with significant technology teams.

The winners will be announced at a glittering awards ceremony on Thursday, 20th November 2025, held once again in the Banqueting Suite at Newcastle Civic Centre. The evening will be hosted by comedian and Mock the Week favourite, Gary Delaney.

Dr David Dunn, CEO of Dynamo North East C.I.C., said: "The Dynamites is a real celebration of the incredible innovation, creativity and talent within the region's tech sector."

"Each year the awards get more and more competitive, and this shortlist demonstrates many of the incredibly talented individuals and organisations we are fortunate to have here in the North East of England."

"We're proud to showcase all of their achievements and to recognise those who are making such a positive impact on our economy and communities. It should be a fantastic night for everyone involved, and a huge thanks to our Dynamo members, sponsors and stakeholders for allowing us to deliver various impactful events like this."



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Building a legacy

Paul Callaghan's impact on the North East Tech Sector

Paul Callaghan is a transformative leader who has shaped the North East's technology sector for over three decades. As co-founder of the Leighton Group and the visionary behind Sunderland Software City, he has created globally successful tech businesses while driving collaboration, skills, and innovation across the region.

Paul – who has recently been shortlisted for the Tech Leader category in the 2025 Dynamites Awards – is a tireless advocate, mentor, and champion of entrepreneurship. Paul's passion and influence have made him a driving force behind the North East tech sector – building new businesses, seeding new ventures and championing education, culture and economic growth in the region.

Here, he reflects on his career so far, his proudest achievements, and what makes the North East so special.

You've achieved a lot in your career Paul – can you tell us how you got started?

I grew up in Sunderland in the 1960s, at a time when the region was vibrant but also heavily reliant on traditional industries. By the late 1980s, when the internet was beginning to emerge, I could see that it had the potential to change everything.

In 1992, I co-founded Leighton with my brother, Gerard. At the time, businesses had very little understanding of what the internet could do for them and that's where Leighton came in. We built some of the region's earliest websites, teaching companies how to get online and offering digital training.

A few years later, in 1995, we launched DomainNames.com. This was long before search engines became dominant, so having the right domain name was critical. The business grew quickly and became one of Europe's largest domain registrars. When it was sold to US NASDAQ 100 company – VeriSign – in 2000, it not only gave me valuable international experience but also provided the capital and credibility to back further ventures when I returned to the North East.

Through the 2000s and 2010s, Leighton evolved into what became the Leighton Group. We incubated and spun out a series of software businesses that went on to achieve international success. Among them were 4Projects, a global construction collaboration platform; Communicator, one of the UK's first SaaS email marketing tools; WorkCast, a virtual events platform; and SaleCycle, a behavioural marketing business recognised worldwide. Each of these created jobs here in the North East, but just as importantly, they created a new generation of entrepreneurs and business leaders. That ecosystem effect – seeing people I worked with go on to build their own successful careers – has been one of the most rewarding parts of my journey.



Tell us more about Leighton today.

Leighton today is a very different business than the one we started over 30 years ago. It has matured into a leading software consultancy specialising in AWS and it works with some of the biggest names in the UK including British Airways, Greggs, Hays Travel and Atom Bank.

In 2025 we hit record revenues and were recognised in the ORESA Growth Index as one of the UK's Top 100 Fastest Growing Businesses. That's a huge source of pride for me because it shows that a company founded here, and still headquartered here, can compete at the very top level nationally.

But, what I'm most proud of is the culture we've built. Some of our colleagues have been with us for over 20 years, which tells you something about the environment we've created. Leighton has always been about putting people first, providing opportunities, developing talent and showing that you can have a fulfilling tech career without leaving the North East. It's something we do well and will hopefully continue to do for years to come.

We know you've done a lot outside of your day-to-day roles, can you tell us a bit about those?

From early on, I realised that running a business and growing an economy aren't separate things. If you want companies to thrive, you need the right infrastructure, networks, and support systems around them. That's why I've always given my time to initiatives beyond my own ventures.



“

*...Leighton today
is a very
different business
than the one we
started over
30 years ago...*

Paul Callaghan, CBE, Chairman of the Leighton Group



L-R: Paul Callaghan, Gerard Callaghan and James Bunting at Leighton's 30th birthday

I was a founding director of the Entrepreneurs' Forum and later became Chair of Business Link North East, then Chair of One North East, the regional development agency. I also chaired RTC North, helping support innovation in STEM.

In 2007, I was heavily involved in the creation of Sunderland Software City – a project I'm particularly proud of. At that time, Sunderland was still grappling with the decline of its traditional industries, and we believed that software could be a foundation for economic renewal. We secured investment, built partnerships, and persuaded people to believe in our vision of Sunderland as a digital hub. Today, Sunderland Software City stands as proof of what can be achieved when you combine ambition with collaboration.

Nationally, I also served as Chair of Chairs for England's Regional Development Agencies and was a Commissioner for the Northern Economic Futures Commission. More locally, I chaired the Sunderland Economic Leadership Board and the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative. All of these roles gave me the chance to champion the region, attract investment, ensuring the North East has a strong national voice in digital policy.

You have spent a lot of time championing access to education, can you tell us why that's so important to you?

For me, education is absolutely fundamental. If you want a strong economy, you need a skilled workforce and that means aligning education with industry.

I was Chair of the University of Sunderland for over a decade, which gave me a platform to ensure that what students were learning translated into real career opportunities. I was also the Founding Chair and Lead Sponsor of Red House Academy and later a Trustee of the Northern Education Trust. Each of these roles gave me the chance to influence how education connects to employment, particularly in digital industries.

I've always believed that for the region to thrive, we need three things: a thriving economy, strong education, and a vibrant culture. Those three pillars reinforce each other. Education provides the talent, the economy provides the opportunities, and culture makes the region somewhere people want to live and stay.

That's why I've also invested time in cultural initiatives. I've chaired Live Theatre, the Sunderland MAC Trust and the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative, supporting arts and community projects that enrich lives here in the North East. If you want to attract the best people to work in tech here, they need to see the region as a place that's not just about jobs, but about quality of life.

You've achieved so much in your 30-year career, what stands out the most for you?

There have been so many highlights, but a few really stand out. Building Leighton from scratch into one of the region's longest established and most successful technology businesses is something I'll always be proud of. Seeing it



thrive more than three decades later, still growing and still innovating, gives me real satisfaction.

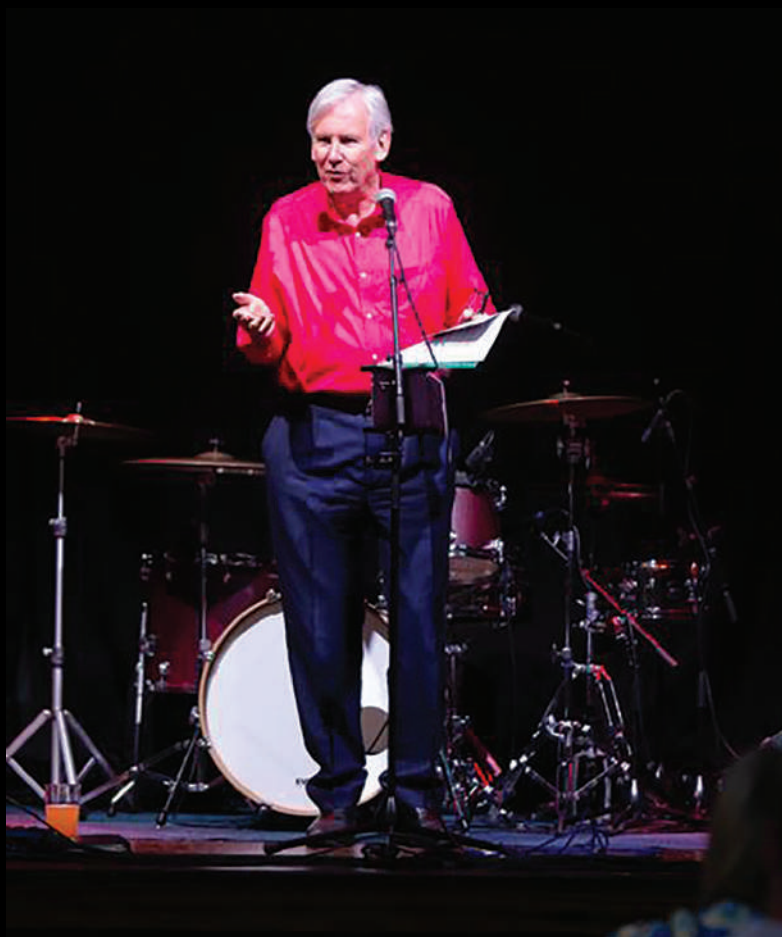
Equally, the spinouts we nurtured – 4Projects, Communicator, WorkCast, and SaleCycle – have gone on to become international businesses that employ hundreds of people and act as flagships for North East tech. Knowing that they all started here, and that we played a part in their journeys, is immensely rewarding.

The creation of Sunderland Software City was another defining moment. At a time when people doubted whether Sunderland could reinvent itself, we built an ecosystem that proved it could. Today it's a thriving hub for start-ups and digital innovation, and that's something that will endure far beyond my own career.

On a personal note, being awarded a CBE in 2012 for Services to the North East, and receiving lifetime achievement awards from both the Entrepreneurs' Forum and the North East Business Awards, were very humbling moments. But the real reward has been the people I've worked with and the connections I've made with colleagues, partners, and entrepreneurs. Those people have continued to inspire me every step of the way.

So why the North East – what makes it special to you?

For me, the North East is home. It's where I grew up, where my family is, and where I wanted to build businesses that would make a difference. In fact, Leighton was named after the street I grew up on and it's a reminder that no matter how far we've grown, our roots are firmly here.



What makes the region special is its people. There's a resilience, a creativity, and a willingness to collaborate that you don't always find elsewhere. Our universities and colleges provide a pipeline of talent and our business community works together in a way that's unique.

The North East has given me the opportunities to succeed, and in return, I've always felt a responsibility to anchor my businesses here, to keep jobs and investment in the region and to advocate nationally for its strengths. I believe the future is incredibly bright. We've got the talent, the infrastructure and the ambition to make the North East one of the UK's leading tech regions.

www.leighton.com



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*...Be curious!
There is no such
thing as a stupid
question...*

Nicola Johns

Talking Tech and Digital

In the latest of this popular series of features Northern Insight spoke to...

Nicola Johns

CEO, ITPS.

Did you always envisage a career in the world of Technology?

I started my career as a trainee Accountant working in Practice, qualifying at the age of 22. I enjoyed visiting the many clients I would see regularly, and I have always been commercially minded. I took the leap in 2011, when I left the world of working in Practice, and joined ITPS as Finance Manager.

I progressed to Finance Director and then CFO. I have been fortunate to undertake a broader role as CFO, working closely with our customers and driving the business forward. It's something I'm passionate about, and the role of CEO was a natural next step. I'm excited to lead ITPS through its next phase of growth.

What tips would you give to someone looking to work in the industry?

Be curious! There is no such thing as a stupid question, keep learning, communicate and listen. Hands on experience is invaluable, apprenticeships and graduate programmes offer a great entry into the world of Tech.

Tell us about the most exciting project your currently working on?

We are excited to be working on a large Private Virtual Data Centre (PVDC) project for a business to consolidate and integrate acquisitions into one platform. A real-world challenge for many businesses is the spiralling cost of public cloud charges; they can be unpredictable and CFO's are uneasy when it comes to forecasting the charges. We solve this problem by re-patriating workloads into our private cloud platform and can offer full geo-resiliency for the most business-critical services.

Tell us about your team?

I've been fortunate enough to inherit a team of great people who are a combination of people I've worked with for a long time, and others who are newer to the business, with more to join over the coming months. For me, working towards a clear goal together and seeing people continuously develop within a great culture is how I'd like all the teams in our business to operate.

What are your long term plans for the business?

We are finalising our business plan for FY26-FY28 as we speak!

I aim to position our business as the relevant, authentic and innovative partner of choice for our customers and channel partners alike.

We will be investing across the next 12 months in talent, innovation, partnerships and data, whilst continuing to have a strong focus on our client needs.

Whats your favourite piece of technology?

It's hard to choose just one, but I'm particularly proud of the technology we are using for our Security Operations Centre.

Having a finance background helped me to immediately see the value in the investment we have made in our SOC platform and team. Using AI and automation we can contain threats within minutes rather than hours. We are fully 24/7 so our clients can sleep well knowing that there are always eyes on glass protecting their environment.

The effect on a business of a cyber attack can be devastating and can even lead to failure of that business. Every second counts, with our innovative SOC (Security Operations Centre) and MDR (Managed Detection and Response) services, business interruption is minimised, ensuring that financial loss, business reputation and emotional damage, are all minimised.

Do you have any heroes or mentors?

From a business perspective, I have always admired Hans Snook. He built the "Orange" mobile brand back in 1994 that was hugely ahead of its time. He forged a culture of pride and ensured that every team member became an ambassador, creating 70% brand awareness with a logo that was nothing like the fruit. He was one of the first tech leaders to talk about business outcomes before technical specification and he led in a calm and authentic manner; listening was key for him.

During my career, one person who was a great mentor is someone who I reported to very briefly. This person always had the time to stop and answer a question, even though I knew they were super busy. I would like to think that I have taken some of that kindness and support into my own way of working.

What's your fondest career memory?

My fondest career memory happened just eight weeks ago, when my appointment as CEO was announced to the ITPS team. The reaction was one of overwhelming love and support and I have been blown away by all the messages I have received. There was no feeling like it, being able to lead the company you have loved and believed in for 15 years is really something.

Whats the best piece of business advice you've received?

Always know your audience and listen more than you speak. Take the time to research and keep learning.

When not working how do you like to relax?

I love to travel, city breaks are my favourite. I prefer a short break with lots of good food, wine and sights to see.

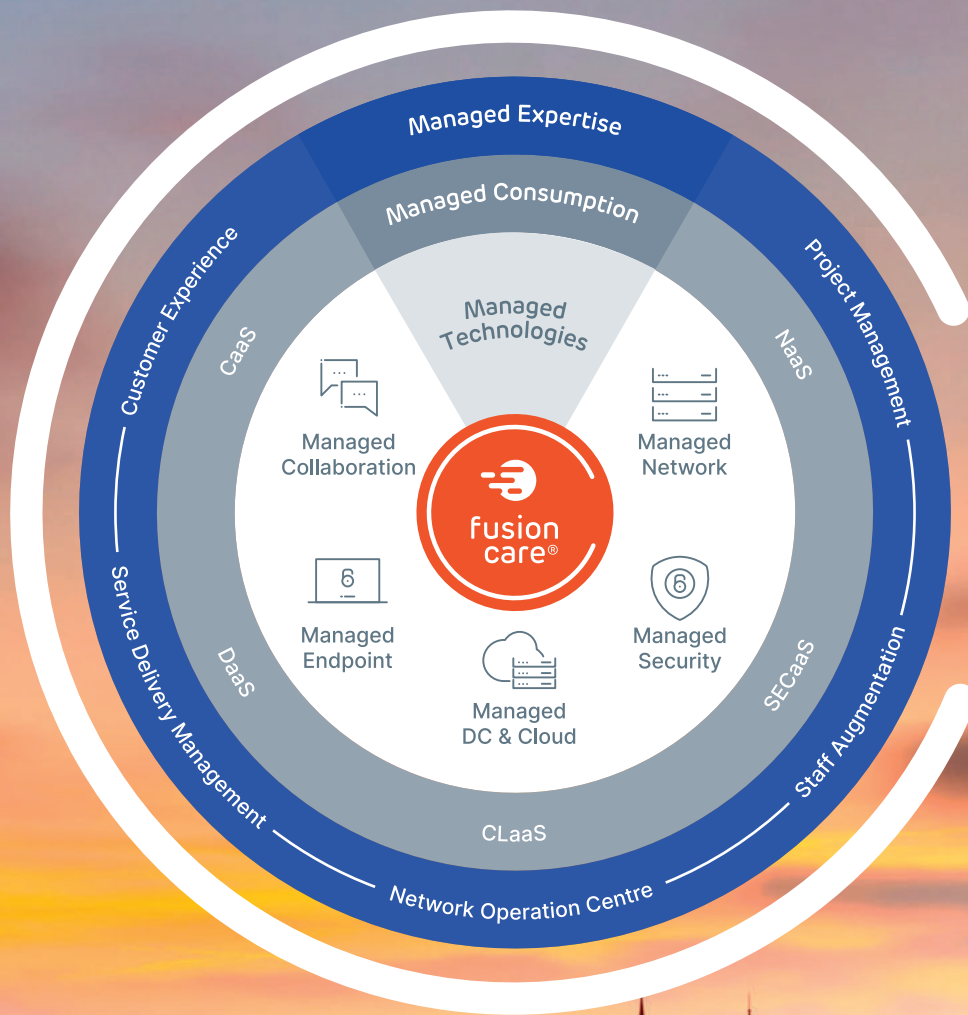
Watching something on TV that takes little brain power with a glass of wine is my way of switching off.

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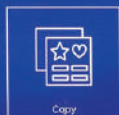
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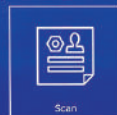
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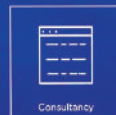
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Andrew Skelton

Medals for all at the largest ever Reason To Disability Triathlon!

An enthusiastic group of 63 children and adults with disabilities recently took part in what was the largest ever Reason To Disability Triathlon in Hexham.

The competitors, aged from 8-years-old to adult, have a wide variety of disabilities and were able to complete a traditional triathlon by swimming, running and cycling with support and specially adapted equipment.



Sponsored by Gateshead-based office technology company, SOS Group, and organised by triathletes, Jo Shallcross and Tracey Sample, this very special triathlon was the first of its kind in the UK and began with only a handful of entrants.

Now in its 11th year, it continues to grow in popularity and this was the largest event to date with participants drawn from across the region to the Wentworth Leisure Centre.

The participants were joined by CBBC's 'Danny & Mick' star and performer, Danny Adams, who is all long-time supporter and Paralympian Lyndon Longhorne, from Crook, the first ever quad amputee to complete an Ironman distance event.

Jo Shallcross was first inspired to organise a triathlon tailored to the individual needs of its entrants after seeing a child with disabilities enjoying the event in Hawaii.



L-R: Elijah Parsons with Paralympian Lyndon Longhorne

Some of the children who have enjoyed taking part over the years are adults now and, after a successful trial run, Jo and Tracey opened the Reason To Triathlon to older entrants two years ago.

Jo says: "We began with less than 10 entrants and over the years, we've grown hugely thanks to wonderful support.

"In fact, the more we grow, the more help we need and everyone, including our sponsors SOS Group, really roll their sleeves up and get stuck in. And to have Danny and Lyndon here created such a buzz for everyone.

"Tracey and I have to pinch ourselves sometimes to see how many people are involved now!

"It's just the most fantastic day. Friendships have formed and grown around it. All day long there are smiles and an amazing sense of achievement as the triathletes have the opportunity to push themselves and earn a medal. They should all be very proud of themselves."

Sarah Nicholson from Catton, aged 17, has Down's syndrome and is a pupil at Hexham Priory School.

This was her first triathlon and her parents, Calum Nicholson and Lindsay McCulloch, enjoyed the day as much as she did.

Lindsay says: "Sarah's had an amazing day, we all have! It's been wonderful to see so many friends and to make some new friends, too.

"This was Sarah's first ever triathlon and, even though she's very active and regularly plays cricket and does dancing and trampolining, it was a big thing for her to undertake.

"The swimming element was especially challenging for her, but trying something a little out of your comfort zone can be a really positive thing.

"I think all the triathletes felt a sense of achievement when they received their medals and for us, as a family, it's been a very special day."

Event sponsors, SOS Group, provide digital office equipment services for businesses from startups to multi nationals.

The company also supports people and organisations making a positive difference to local communities within the North East and takes a hands on role in organising the triathlon.



Sarah Nicholson with Danny Adams

Andrew Skelton, an SOS Group Director, says: "We're incredibly proud to be part of this event and every year it gets better and better.

"Jo and Tracey do a marvellous job, as do all the marshals and support team. Nobody even batted an eyelid this year when Jo insisted we all dress up as Minions!

"It's an absolute joy to see the achievement when the triathletes complete each activity and the support they give each other is wonderful. Everyone comes away from the day feeling inspired."

Established in 2002, SOS Group is an award-winning office technology company facilitating business requirements across all sectors.

Based on the Team Valley and specialising in providing copy, print, scan solutions, the company has grown into an SME that counts multinationals within its established client base and the company helps deliver internationally significant sporting and political party events.

Its own growth was achieved by creating successful, long-term client relationships and each of the company's directors has a passion to help others do the same, working closely with small businesses and supporting start-ups as they grow.

For more information, please visit www.sosgroup-ltd.co.uk



Jo Shallcross with Paralympian Lyndon Longhorne



Pascal Fintoni

Putting people before platforms

A call to lead responsibly in the age of AI.

Like so many of you, I've watched the North East achieve monumental recognition over the past couple of months, as the region was officially crowned an "AI Growth Zone."

With an impressive £30 billion investment package and the promise of thousands of new jobs, plans for vast new data centres, cutting-edge research at universities, and the impending arrival of global tech players, the excitement here is tangible.

Clearly AI is now woven into the fabric of local business and education, with universities reworking curricula and companies exploring ways to get ahead.

As the region is becoming the UK's go-to place for AI innovation and opportunity, if you're a small business owner, this is the time to get involved. And trust me, getting involved is essential for all of us!

Ethical AI starts with people

I've been thinking a lot about our involvement with AI, and how we should learn from the past and not let the tech companies make all decisions on our behalf.

Importantly, how do we ensure that we all adopt AI ethically, with a human-centred and commercially viable approach?

I'm delighted to share that I've been working with fellow AI adoption experts Mitali Deypurkaystha and Dr Yulia Dzenkovska on a practical framework. A people-first pledge to guide us in balancing profitability with responsibility and trust.

We are calling it the *Human-First Responsible AI Pledge*®.

It's a call to leaders to adopt ethical AI with humanity at its core, grounded in the UK's leading frameworks, that benefits everyone:

H for Human-Centred

1. Put people first, ensuring AI strengthens trust, wellbeing and inclusion.
2. Lead a forward-thinking culture of inventive and imaginative use of AI.

U for Uncompromising Safety

3. Build AI systems that are safe, reliable and aligned with human values.
4. Pause or stop any AI that poses intolerable risks to people or society.

M for Measured & Fair

5. Test and monitor AI to reduce bias, harm and unintended risks.

6. Protect privacy and uphold the highest standards of data security.

A for Accountable & Transparent

7. Be transparent about when and how AI is used, including clear labelling of AI-generated content.

8. Train and empower our teams to use AI responsibly, question its outputs and be accountable for decisions that affect lives.

N for Neighbourhood & Community

9. Share AI knowledge and resources with our communities, helping ensure no group is left behind in the AI transition.

10. Strengthen the wider ecosystem for AI, by supporting high-quality, bias-free data, clear governance and resilience against misinformation.

This pledge is there to affirm our responsibility to adopt AI ethically, transparently, and inclusively in the North East. Together, we can shape an AI future that uplifts people, empowers businesses, and leaves no community behind.

And as we look to the future, that commitment becomes even more vital.

2026 will be a landmark year for AI progress in the UK, and the North East has an extraordinary opportunity to lead responsibly.

With the upcoming UK AI Act, the launch of the Stargate UK infrastructure, and major national events like the AI Vision to Value Conference and AI & Big Data Expo Global, innovation will accelerate at a pace we've never seen before. But amid the breakthroughs, we must ensure people remain at the heart of this transformation.

Now is the moment for business owners, team leaders, and professionals across our region to unite behind the *Human-First Responsible AI Pledge*® and commit to ethical, transparent, and inclusive AI adoption.

By putting people before platforms, the North East can not only power Britain's AI future but shape it with humanity, purpose, and trust.

For more information about the AI Pledge and how to get involved contact Pascal Fintoni pascal@pascalfintoni.com





Mobile first and channel ubiquity

Why it's time to rethink how you sell online.

Mobile tech has changed everything - particularly how we shop. No longer do we set aside hours to browse online or brave the elements to hit the high street.

We order plugs when queueing for our latte at Costa and do our supermarket shop while half-watching Netflix in bed.

Two years ago, 70 per cent of our shopping was done on mobile. That figure will have almost certainly rocketed since then.

The reality of e-commerce is that it is 'mobile first', a term which, until just a few years back, meant your website didn't crash on a small screen.

How that's changed.

Now it means designing your entire digital experience around how people really behave.

Shoppers no longer want to land on a website and stay there. They expect to be able to hop around various platforms - be it apps, sites or social - smoothly and without any hiccups.

I call this 'channel ubiquity': being everywhere your customers are but in one smooth, joined-up experience.

So how do you achieve it?

Speed matters

If your website takes longer to load than

it does to sip that latte you ordered earlier while plug shopping, you've lost the sale.

Every extra millisecond you make a customer wait is a conversion killer.

Think fast images, zero lag and smooth transitions.

The modern shopper has a shrinking attention span and wants instant results, and if you can't give them that, then they'll simply scroll to your competitors.

The best systems are engineered for the real world. They are fast, resilient, and ready for patchy connections and short attention spans.

Make buying simple

The checkout page can be a graveyard for your sales.

Just ask yourself this: How many times have you come to pay online, only to be asked to fill in a form longer than your self-assessment?!

Or even worse, create an account with a fiddly password you'll never remember.

As their names suggest - Apple Pay, Google Pay and PayPal - all pay to use. They make checkout easy.

Fewer steps = more sales.

Connect everything

Shoppers may first spot your product on Instagram, add it to the site's wish list, and then eventually buy it on your app.

That's great, but if your systems don't talk to each other, their experience falls apart. This is where composable commerce comes in.

That sounds fancy, but it's a way of saying your data and platforms should sync up

behind the scenes so that customers can always pick up where they left off.

Make it personal...

...but don't make it creepy.

We already all feel like we are being listened to on our devices, so don't turn this into digital surveillance.

A gentle reminder about what they've left in their basket is not only fine, but sensible as it could easily nudge up your sales.

Think of this as a shop assistant: A good one will ensure you have what you need, but won't pester you around the store.

Keep testing

Your platforms all differ, and what might fly on your app might flop on your website.

Try, test and tinker.

Small, consistent improvements often outperform big overhauls.

At Resolved, this approach has fuelled our own growth.

We've supported businesses globally to revitalise their existing e-commerce platforms, not by building shiny new platforms, but by turbo-charging what was already there.

And we know that mobile matters. As the stats show, it is now firmly the beating heart of retail.

But if your systems don't reflect that, you'll fall behind.

However, if you can get your systems singing from the same hymn sheet, and ensure they are fast, easy and consistent - you'll turn browsers into buyers.

resolvedgroup.co.uk

Why your website must be secure and up to date in 2026

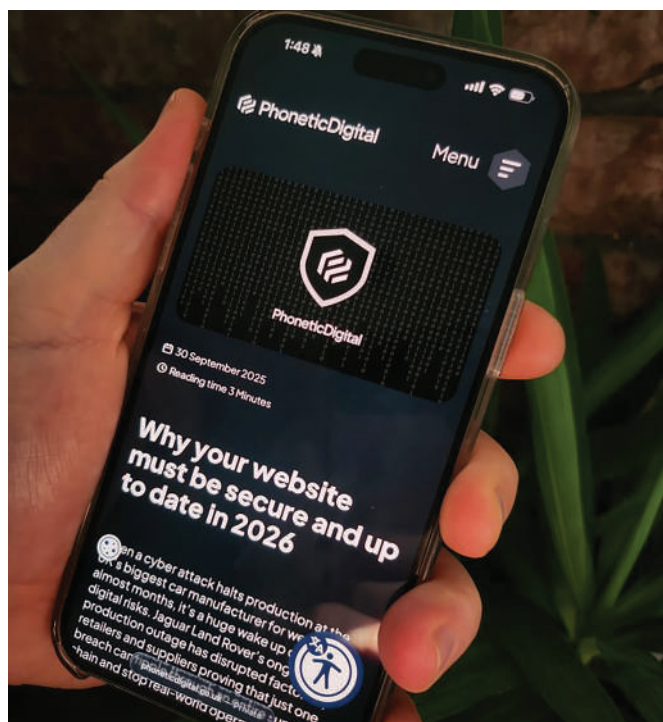
When a cyber attack halts production at the UK's biggest car manufacturer for weeks, now almost months, it's a huge wake-up call to digital risks. Jaguar Land Rover's ongoing production outage has disrupted factories, retailers and suppliers proving that just one breach can ripple through an entire supply chain and stop real-world operations in their tracks.

Public institutions haven't been spared either. The British Library's ransomware attack started with a single weak control, with hackers breaking through the library's virtual private network that allowed employees to access its network from any location. This spiralled into the possession of stolen data, like employees' passport scans and work contracts and led to months of disruption and costly recovery work. The Library and the UK Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) later published lessons so others could avoid the same mistakes.

For senior leaders across further and higher education, local and mayoral authorities, councils, public bodies and professional services, this is not a new issue. Your website is often your most visible service and when it's left neglected it becomes a convenient backdoor into all your more sensitive digital systems.

Even the celebs aren't safe! Jeremy Clarkson's pub The Farmer's Dog was subject to a cyber attack, with £27,000 being stolen through his accounting systems. The hackers went unnoticed at first as there were no obvious signs on how they got in. This example highlights just how important good cyber security procedures are. No one is safe from a cyber attack, whether you're a public figure or small business owner just starting up.

Security isn't something you set up once and forget about, it can't just be left to run, it needs constant care. That means updates are scheduled, not left to chance. Backups aren't just stored, they're tested rigorously to make sure they actually work. Monitoring and



maintaining your security should become part of your routine, making it an ongoing process.

If you're not sure about your websites security systems or want to talk about maintaining your site get in touch at hello@phoneticdigital.co.uk



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Powerhouse PR partnership formed to Champion NEIFF 2025

Marriott Communications and CgPR recently announced a strategic partnership to deliver an ambitious PR campaign for this year's North East International Film Festival (NEIFF) 2025.

The collaboration brought together two complementary agencies with a shared passion for impactful storytelling, cultural engagement, and strategic communications. Together, Marriott Communications and CgPR spearheaded all UK and international press activity for the festival - driving national media coverage, industry engagement, and cultural visibility for one of the North East's fastest-growing film festivals.

"This partnership represented the perfect meeting of minds," said Samuel Marriott-Dowding, Founder & CEO of Marriott Communications. "Chrissie brings a wealth of film PR experience and exceptional industry relationships, while our agency brings a fresh, creative and strategic approach to cultural storytelling. Together, we were excited to shine a national and international spotlight on NEIFF."

"I was thrilled to join forces with Samuel and his team for this year's festival," added Chrissie Pringle, Founder of CgPR. "The North East has a vibrant and growing film industry, and NEIFF has quickly become a key platform for both emerging and established filmmakers."

The partnership signalled NEIFF's ambition to elevate its media presence ahead of the 2025 edition, with a focus on broadcast placements, national features, industry trade coverage, and dynamic digital storytelling across platforms.

North East International Film Festival 2025 took place 20-26 October, with screenings, industry events, and red-carpet premieres across the North East.



Fausto Coffee launches website with help of Sunderland Agency

Sunderland-based design agency Kenfolk has unveiled the first website for Fausto Coffee, a popular fixture on Roker's seafront.

The launch follows just months after the coffee shop marked its 10th anniversary, celebrating a decade as a go-to destination for coastal coffee in Sunderland.

The new website showcases Fausto's full menu, news and events, as well as its brand story. Louise Curtis-Robertson, Director of Fausto Coffee, said: "We have been blown away by the work done by the Kenfolk team. It's everything we've always wanted - it represents us so well."

"By creating a website, we wanted to shout about the things we've achieved at Fausto and the exciting things the future holds for our team."

Founded in 2020, Kenfolk specialises in doing great work for great people and supporting businesses with brand, graphic design and web design.

Ross Palmer, Creative Director of Kenfolk, said: "When we met with Louise and Helen, the vision was clear from the start. We wanted to create a website that encapsulates the great vibes and raw charm that keeps locals coming back for more - and it does just that. "I've admired Fausto for a long time and it was a privilege to work with their team to make their vision come to life."

The project was a collaboration, with Kenfolk handling design, photography and copywriting in house, and our web development partners, Phonetic Digital building the site.

Kenfolk work with clients across Sunderland and the North East, helping position them as leaders in their fields. www.faustocoffee.co.uk

Creative Growth at JUMP:

New hires and office space take agency to next level

Creative agency JUMP has opened its new headquarters at Carliol Studios, marking a major step in the company's growth and continued investment in the region.

After 17 years at Milburn House, the move reflects JUMP's evolution and ambition. The agency has also expanded its team with four new recruits, strengthening capacity across design, development and marketing.

The new Carliol Studios base follows a six-week refurbishment, creating a modern, collaborative environment that supports flexible working and future expansion.

Rob Brown, Founder and Managing Director at JUMP, said: "Carliol Studios represents more than a new address. It's a commitment to Newcastle, to our team, and to our clients. Every element of the new space has been designed around creativity, wellbeing, and growth. The move reflects where we are as a business and where we're heading."

JUMP continues to work with clients from a range of industries, including education, manufacturing, technology and lifestyle, delivering brand, digital and marketing solutions across the UK and beyond.

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Siren Films release new film about sustainability

Siren Films have been making documentaries and films about child development for over 40 years. Last month they launched their new short film about sustainability.

The short explores sustainability in the early years and challenges us to think differently about how we live, consume, and care for our planet. The staff and children at The Grove Nursery were instrumental in demonstrating how, even at a young age, children can learn about their world and become eco conscious.

Whether you're working in a nursery, children's centre, reception class, local authority or supporting early years education in any capacity – this film is designed to support you in encouraging a more sustainable mindset. To watch the short film sign up for a FREE 7 day trial to Siren Films Early Years video library: www.sirenfilms.co.uk/membership/?plan=25663



Managing Director role created for the next chapter of Gardiner Richardson

Jen Hallam has been appointed to the role of Managing Director at strategic brand communications agency, Gardiner Richardson. The role has been created to continue the agency's development as Co-founder, Lucy Gardiner, retires from her role. Jen will work alongside Darren Richardson, Co-founder and Creative Director, and Matt Forster, Strategic Communications Director, as the leadership team of the business.

Founded in 1998, Gardiner Richardson is a strategic brand communications agency based in Generator Studios, Newcastle. It provides brand communications for clients such as EGGER, Akzonobel, Fresh & Balance, Muckle, Dicksons, Northumbria

University, RIBA, Newcastle Airport & Newcastle City Council's Grainger Market.

Jen joined Gardiner Richardson in 2022 as Business Development Director. She was previously an Associate Director at Tangerine Communications in Manchester and prior to that worked at Citypress. The newly created role will see Jen lead on the strategic direction of the business. She said: "I'm looking forward to working with Darren, Matt and our brilliant team as part of this next exciting chapter.

"We have developed expertise to create brands and deliver strategic communications campaigns, not many agencies can offer that breadth of knowledge and experience. In these times of change, we are increasingly sought out by businesses seeking clarity. We provide that through strategic thinking, creative ideas, and clear communication, enabling organisations to navigate and thrive in the rapidly evolving business landscape."

Lucy commented: "I've lived and breathed Gardiner Richardson for 27 years, and this is the right moment personally and professionally to retire from the role.

"I'm proud of the business that myself and Darren first set up in 1998, and this is the right time for the business to start a new chapter with a Managing Director role.

I've worked closely with Jen for the last 3 years and I know she's got the ideal mix of commercial and industry experience to take the business from strength to strength. I'm looking forward to seeing the business take on this next chapter."

Darren Richardson, Co-founder and Creative Director at Gardiner Richardson, concluded: "Through our 27-year history, we have continuously evolved and adapted to the changing landscape, developing our services and integrating new technology and theory into our practice. We thrive on our curiosity to explore the new, while remaining true to our considered strategic thinking and depth of relationships.

"The role of MD in our business is a perfect evolution to set us up for future success. Jen's prior agency experience and commercial knowledge will allow us to drive the business forward, and I'm excited for the next chapter."

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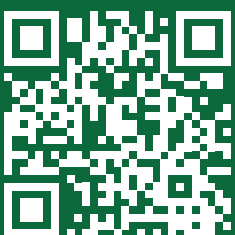
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Marketing and Media Matters

In the latest of this popular series of features we spoke to...

Dave Head

Founder, Northern Design & Digital Marketing.

Did you always envisage a career in the Marketing and Media Industry?

Yes I did. I've been obsessed with colouring in since I was a young lad. I thought I'd be a designer, and for a while I was, but design's always been tied to marketing, so one thing naturally led to the other. Then I discovered the tech side of the business and that got me hooked. Digital Marketing became my thing. All of it. Strategy, content, the lot. One of my old bosses once said, "If you can't dazzle them with diamonds, baffle them with bullshit." That line has stuck with me for years.

How did your career kick off?

Straight out of university I landed a great job as the sole Designer for CitizenM Hotels. That took me to Amsterdam which changed everything. I learned so much over there. I worked on everything from quirky guerilla campaigns to sleek email sequences, and designed anything you can imagine – even shower caps. When I moved back to the UK, I actually struggled more than I expected. The Dutch are brutally honest, and over here, that same directness was perceived as being rude. It took me a little while to find the right balance.

What's been the biggest challenge?

Staying seen. When you're running your own business, wearing all the hats, delivering the work and building your name at the same time, it's a lot. Being visible while keeping up the quality and consistency is a difficult job.

Who are your Heroes and Mentors?

Rory Sutherland's marketing brain is unreal and Riley Brown is doing clever things with AI. But truthfully? My mam and dad. They were a real business driving force together. While my mam ran her design business for 25 years, working with brands like Nissan, Bentley and Jaguar Land Rover, my dad was right there alongside her. Together they built a mini property empire on top of it all. They grafted hard, built something real and showed me what it means to run a business with heart and ambition. Watching them both work as a team made a massive impact on me.

What fictional character can you relate to?

When I was young I was very like Dennis the Menace from the Beano comic. Full of beans and always up to something. These days I've calmed down, but there's still a spark of cheek and a need to push buttons now and then.

What is your greatest strength?

I'm always looking for a smarter way. I can't stand hearing "that's just how we've always done it." No it isn't. There's always a better way. That drive to improve and keep things interesting is what keeps me going.

And your biggest weakness?

Taking on too much. I'm into everything – web, design, photography, email, PPC, you name it. I love it all and I want to be involved in it all. Sometimes that spreads me a little too thinly. However being a jack-of-all-trades has its perks. I can jump into any part of a project and actually make it better. The full saying goes, "Jack of all trades, master of none, but often times better than master of one" – and that sums me up perfectly. I'd rather know enough to get stuck in and make a difference across the board than be boxed into just one thing.

What has been your proudest achievement?

Outside of raising my son, which is hands down number one, I'd say a freelance project where I helped design for genetically modified mosquitoes. It played a part in reducing malaria and it still blows my mind to this day.

Where do you want to go next?

I want to grow NORTHERN into a full service agency, built on good people doing good work for other good people. I still want to get the crayons out daily and I'm certainly not aiming to run a massive corporate beast. I just want to keep helping businesses I believe in, doing creative work that gets real results.

What's the best advice you've ever had?

"If you can't dazzle with diamonds, baffle with bullshit" will always be up there, but "shy bairns get nowt" is the one I live by. Ask the question. Send the message. Make the move. Being polite doesn't mean being passive.

Where do you think your industry is heading?

AI is going to keep shaking things up. And I'm here for it. It's not about replacing people, it's about getting rid of the dull, repetitive tasks we all hate. It gives me more time to be creative and strategic, and that's where the real value is.

How do you unwind?

I climb. It keeps me grounded and gives my brain a break. And I won't lie, there's the odd late-night doomscroll on the sofa. That's marketing life, right?

northerndigital.uk

“

*...shy bairns
get nowt...*

Dave Head



How Unique Magazines is inspiring
the next generation.

We also introduced students to what we offer locally in Newcastle. Our Mag Room is filled with hundreds of titles from around the world, a space designed to inspire projects, essays, and creative thinking. Our Mag Lounge provides a calm, welcoming environment for anyone needing a quiet place to study or simply recharge, surrounded by creativity.





Students left our stand with magazines, merch, and bookmarks, but also with something far more meaningful: a sense of encouragement. Starting university can feel overwhelming, and knowing there's a supportive, creative community nearby can make all the difference.

Our involvement in Freshers' events marks another step in our ongoing commitment to nurture the next generation of readers, designers, and makers. We're passionate about connecting people with print, not just as readers but as future creators.

And we're not stopping there. November marks our Student Publishing Event at Tapyard Studios, where we'll bring together local publishers, designers, and students for an evening of talks, Q&As, and networking. It's all part of our mission to keep creativity flowing and to show how print continues to evolve and inspire the next generation.

At Unique Magazines, we believe change is an opportunity, whether it's a new season, a new course, or a new idea. Through every transition, print remains a constant source of inspiration.

We're challenging the narrative that print is dead by keeping it alive through pop-ups, Freshers' events, and real human conversations. Meeting students from across all courses and hearing about their goals and ambitions was genuinely inspiring, a reminder that curiosity and creativity are thriving.

A huge thank you to Hartlepool College of Further Education, Teesside University, Sunderland University, and Northumbria University for welcoming us onto your campuses and giving us the opportunity to connect with your students.

You can catch us at various pop-ups throughout the year, including regular slots at Teesside University, as we continue spreading the word about print, creativity, and community.

Because print isn't fading, it's evolving. And at Unique Magazines, we're proud to be part of the movement keeping it alive.



Instagram: @uniquemagazines Facebook: Unique Magazines LinkedIn: Unique Magazines

Our Blog: www.themagazineclub.co.uk

uniquemagazines.co.uk

SASS media directors join the board of NetWORK NotWORK CIC

NetWORK NotWORK is a community interest company (CIC) based in Wynyard founded by Michael and Kat Carruthers. Their networking group has recently expanded to add a seventh venue in the North East. SASS media co-directors Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker joined the board of directors as the CIC's PR directors in the summer.



L-R: Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker



A networking group, which was founded in Teesside to make networking “more fun”, promote business growth and to create an empowered intergenerational community, has launched a seventh venue in Redcar.

NetWORK NotWORK CIC was started in January 2024 as the brainchild of business owners and husband-and-wife team Michael and Kat Carruthers, who wanted to start up a networking group which was “more fun”, but also supported the community.

“We wanted networking to feel like ‘not working’ which is why we came up with the name, NetWORK NotWORK,” explains Kat.

“NetWORK NotWORK is a community initiative that has a friendly, informal, fun and educational approach to support socio-economic development. Our social mindset aims to support the physical and mental wellbeing of its members by creating supportive connections in the community.”

NetWORK NotWORK, which was originally launched in Wynyard Business Park at NetWORK’s headquarters, has evolved to venues in several local authority areas in the North East, including Stockton (The Globe), Hartlepool (The Black Olive), Darlington (Majestic Theatre), Newcastle (The Maldron Hotel), Sunderland (Sheepfolds Stables), and Durham (Radisson Blu Hotel).

And, in September, NetWORK NotWORK launched its Redcar venue at The Regent Cinema, with a Middlesbrough venue coming soon.

“The launch of Redcar’s NetWORK NotWORK event was a huge success,” adds Kat.

“We have established a great presence across the North-east and it was great to see so many new faces and familiar ones in Redcar.”

NetWORK NotWORK is also extremely committed to its younger members and provides a series of programmes, including ‘Level Up! Navigating your way to WORK with NetWORK NotWORK’, supporting individuals not in employment, education or training (NEET), and ‘Ignite XP’, supporting children and young adults from eight to 24, as well as a creative media programme, ‘Junior Journalism’, to give pupils opportunities to explore the world of work, develop vital skills and build their confidence.

“At NWNW we believe that every child and young person deserves the chance to thrive, no matter their background,” says Kat.

This year, the CIC has also strengthened its board of directors, which now includes Kat and Michael Carruthers, as managing director and operations director respectively, who also run CARRO Studio, HUGO Bea Ltd, Wynyard Property Rentals Ltd and Wynyard Commercial Property Rentals Ltd; Andrew Coxon, as people, culture and learning director, who is managing director of Coxon Business Partners; Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker, as PR directors, who are also co-directors of SASS media Ltd; Jon Hocker,

as learning innovations director, who is the founder and CEO of The eLearning Group Ltd; Stephen Hume, as finance director, who is also director of finance at the Raczy Group; David Porter, as marketing director, who is also the founder and director of Surge; Geeta Sharma, as policy and public engagement director, who is a local implementation lead; and Rylie Sweeney, as youth director, who is a government and policy advisor for education and youth. The CIC’s partners include legal support from Adeel Bashir, of Nouveau Law, and HR support from Sophie Dodgson, of Beesure HR.

“When we were asked to join the board of NetWORK NotWORK, we could see how ambitious and committed Kat and Michael are to making a real difference in the North East in lots of different ways – from initiatives designed to inspire children and young people to learn enterprise skills to providing a free, accessible and inclusive networking community,” says Sarah Dale, co-director of SASS media.

Funding for Junior Journalism is provided by Larch, Thirteen, Asda Foundation and Miller Homes, and Ignite XP! is funded by Believe Housing and Dogger Bank Wind Farm.

Find out more about NetWORK NotWORK at www.networknotwork.co.uk and for more information on SASS media, visit www.sassmedialtd.co.uk





What investors really want to see in your pitch deck

When you're preparing to raise investment, your pitch deck is often the first chance an investor has to understand who you are and what you're about. But with so much advice out there, many founders end up overcomplicating the story.

The best decks keep things simple. They combine a clear narrative with confident structure and design, making it easy to see scalability, ambition and credibility from the first meeting.

Start with the story, not the slides

Every strong deck starts with a clear story. Before you think about visuals, write down what you want people to understand: the problem you're solving, why it matters now and why you're the team to do it.

Investors back ideas that solve real problems. Show you understand your market and let data support your story, not dominate it.

If someone outside your sector can explain what you do after one read-through, you're on the right track.

Structure that earns attention

Nobody wants to sift through endless slides to work out why your business matters. A clear structure helps investors grasp

the essentials quickly and focus on the opportunity.

Lead with the why, not the what. Outline the problem, your solution, the market potential and traction so far, then close with your vision and ask. Each slide should do one job well and move the story forward.

Short, active headlines help too. "Our market is expanding fast" tells the reader far more than "Market opportunity."

Show credibility without overloading detail

Investors are looking for evidence of progress, not walls of text or technical deep dives. Focus on stats that show momentum: early results, partnerships, pilots or product milestones.

Swap buzzwords for results and make your progress easy to grasp in seconds. A single clear chart or timeline often says more than a paragraph of explanation.

Design that reflects confidence

The way your deck looks sets the tone from the start. Make sure it reflects a brand that's professional, ambitious, and investor-ready.

Good design gives your story credibility. Clean layouts, consistent visuals and thoughtful use of colour all signal attention to detail. When the design feels polished and cohesive, it tells investors you take your business seriously and know how to present it.

What investors actually care about

Founders often try to say too much. Cramming in every detail or technical explanation often makes it harder to follow.

A clear, focused deck shows you know what matters. It proves you can prioritise information, cut through complexity and guide people to the key takeaways.

A pitch deck that performs does more than tell a story - it shows that you understand how to communicate at scale. When every slide feels intentional and consistent, investors see a founder who knows where they're heading and why it matters.

Ready to refine your pitch?

If you're preparing to raise investment and want a deck that reflects your ambition, we can help. We work with founders to build investor-ready stories and designs that turn clarity into confidence.

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..All in a good cause..

Highlights PR's Keith Newman asked some of his RADAR members to tell us what good causes they support.



As an artist, I was thrilled to be selected for the St Oswald's Shaun the Sheep sculpture trail. It was such a joy to paint my design, which was called Club Tropicana. And I was so happy that Club Tropicana made over £5000 for this worthwhile charity that "provides expert, dignified and compassionate care for everyone, of all ages, who are living with a progressive, life-limiting condition, and their families and carers too." Keith Pattinson Estate Agents successfully bid for the Club Tropicana sculpture at the charity auction and displayed it in pride of place at their head office. I was so honoured to meet Caroline Pattinson once the sculpture was installed in its forever home.

It is very exciting to hear that St Oswald's has announced the next sculpture trail will feature the iconic Beatrix Potter character, Peter Rabbit. I have a design in mind, but there is no guarantee that it will be picked. Regardless, I will love seeing what wonderful creations will be produced by the amazing artists that are involved, many of whom are from the North East, while also celebrating the crucial funds that will be raised for such a worthwhile cause.

Corinne Lewis Ward, www.powderbutterfly.com



AskMrsWatson.com proudly supports St Oswald's Hospice, a local charity that provides outstanding care, compassion, and support to patients with life-limiting conditions and their families. St Oswald's is one of the main charities that AskMrsWatson supports because of the incredible difference they make in the community offering comfort, dignity, and specialist care when it's needed most. I find supporting them really rewarding, devoting my time and regular small donations to play my part with many other supporters to help ensure this vital service continues to touch lives across the North East.

Kate Watson, www.askmrswatson.com

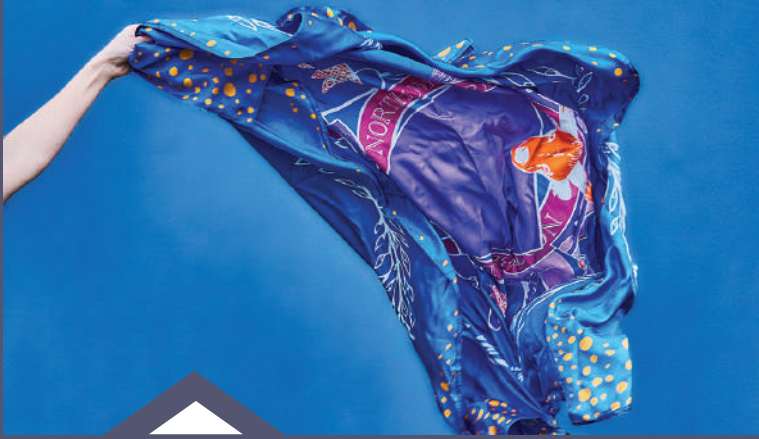


At Ridgetek, we're proud to support charitable organisations that make a real difference in our community.

Recently, we sponsored goodie bags for runners taking part in the Great North Run, in support of Wecan — a community-based organisation in Hexham that serves the South West Northumberland area, supporting children, young people and adults with additional needs. This charity holds a special place in our hearts, as Peter's son has additional needs and has directly benefited from their incredible work.

Cancer has touched all our lives in some way, which is why Ridgetek also supports FACT (Fighting All Cancers Together) — a Gateshead-based charity offering vital care and assistance to those affected by cancer and their families. Last Christmas, the Ridgetek team spent a day helping prepare vegetables for the charity's festive meal, bringing a little extra warmth to the holiday season.

Rutva Patel, www.ridgetek.co.uk



Creative Heritage Studios CiC offers a bespoke design service for clients with a difference, it's called Antiques of the Future. As founder and designer, I have a passion for creating beautiful corporate gifts, awards and murals for my clients. But I am also committed to supporting the community that I'm part of. Recently diagnosed with ADHD and autism, I have pledged to take 20% of the profits from this work to support the next generation of neurodivergent creatives.

We currently have two exciting commissions for clients through the Antiques of the Future design service. The projects are under wraps, but they will showcase the exceptional quality of work that we are building a reputation for. The most exciting part of this is that our fund to support the next generation of neurodivergent creatives is growing. Which means we will be able to commission new artworks at the beginning of 2026. If you would like to commission corporate gifts, awards or a mural that has a purpose and positive social impact, we would love to hear from you.

Corinne Lewis Ward, www.creativeheritagestudios.co.uk



I support a lot of good causes as I think it is important to give back. I'm currently donating my time and expertise free to the Sunday for Sammy Trust. It's a great charity and I'm looking forward to seeing their next show at Newcastle Utilita Arena on 15th February. www.utilitaarena.co.uk/events/detail/sunday-for-sammy

Keith Newman, www.highlightspr.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 or call Keith on 07814 397951.

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Lauren Regan

Director, *wearemole.com*

What inspired you to start your business?

I've always loved where I'm from and wanted to help organisations tell their stories and show that the North isn't just a great place to live, it's a brilliant place to build, create, and thrive. Growing up here, I wanted to show that you can build a fulfilling career in the North East and celebrate the businesses that are changing the world right on our doorstep.

What challenges did you face in the early stages?

Going from being part of a big, energetic team to that first quiet morning on my own was daunting. I missed bouncing ideas around but was lucky to have a network of people who believed in what I was building.

What sets your business apart from competitors in your industry?

The North East has an incredible creative community where collaboration beats competition. I do think MOLE's strength lies in curiosity and an ability to craft stories that real people care about. Clients value the honesty, flexibility, and the fact that there is genuine care about their success.

How do you define success?

When someone talks about a campaign I've worked on without realising it's a client of mine - that's success. I want to create work people connect with, not just consume and seeing clients grow, win awards, or make an impact because of something we've built together makes me incredibly proud.

What strategies have you found most effective for growing your business?

Being a good person to work with. It sounds simple, but people want



Lauren Regan

to work with those who listen, deliver, and show an interest in what their ambitions are, not just the day to day. Most of MOLE's growth has come through word of mouth and strong relationships which I'm very grateful for.

How do you stay ahead of industry trends and adapt to market changes?

By being endlessly curious. I read, ask questions, and look outside my own sector, creativity thrives on connection.

What's next for your business?

The North East will always be home, but I'm excited to be inspired by new people and places, and to share where the North East is leading the way when it comes to creative problem solving.

wearemole.com

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Performance For Sales and The Spark Labs join forces to light up the SME marketing process

North-east based Performance For Sales is proud to announce that Darlington creative agency The Spark Labs has officially joined their growing client base. This exciting partnership marks the beginning of a collaborative journey which will enhance The Spark Labs' service offering as they help clients learn the fundamentals of marketing, build their own effective marketing strategies, and grow with ongoing support.

Performance For Sales offers licenses to train and mentor SMEs in The Marketing Performance Framework®, which offers a new, visual way to streamline the marketing process, giving SMEs the tools they need to turn marketing into a machine that ignites commercial success.

As Performance For Sales' latest training partner, The Spark Labs get access to cutting-edge training and tech which they can then use to deliver high-impact workshops, mentoring and support.

The Spark Labs Creative Director and Managing Director, Jo Spottiswood said: "At The Spark Labs, we believe in harnessing creativity and deep strategic insight to drive measurable results. Partnering with Performance For Sales marks an important step for us. It's about unlocking new revenue potential, refining our commercial approach, and empowering our clients with the tools they need to drive success. Together, we're poised to redefine what performance-driven growth looks like."

Performance For Sales' owner, Mags Bradshaw commented: "We're absolutely thrilled to welcome The Spark Labs as our latest training partner. Their energy, creativity, and passion for marketing will be a huge asset to SMEs across the North-East. By combining Jo's inspiring leadership and creative vision with a focus on developing commercially driven, motivated teams, The Spark Labs is set to make a real impact. With this next evolution of their offering,



L-R: Jo Spottiswood with R Mags Bradshaw

Jo is shaping The Spark Labs into a truly formidable force in the regional marketing landscape."

This partnership represents a shared commitment to helping SMEs thrive through smarter, more strategic marketing. With The Spark Labs now equipped to deliver The Marketing Performance Framework®, both teams are excited to see the impact this will have on the region's business community—empowering organisations to market with purpose, scale with confidence, and grow with consistency.

To contact Jo about an upcoming workshop and add a spark to your offering, you can visit thesparklabs.co.uk/marketing-lab/marketing-training

If you are interested in joining Performance For Sales' growing network of training providers, you can register your interest at: www.performanceforsales.co.uk/contact



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Culture Club

Carol Milne

Carol runs Kip McGrath Education Centres in Gateshead East, Chester-le-Street, and Washington providing professional tuition in English, reading, spelling and maths for children aged 5–18.

Here she tells us about her taste in music, art and culture.

Who is your favourite author and why?

Jodi Picoult

She usually writes about moral dilemmas, family dynamics, and emotional conflicts. Her characters often face impossible choices, which makes the stories thought-provoking and relatable. She tackles tough topics — like medical ethics, race, justice, and grief — in a way that's accessible and human. You might appreciate how she brings awareness to these issues without being preachy.

What would be your three Desert Island Discs?

Sweet Child in Time - Deep Purple

My Way - Frank Sinatra

Don't Stop - Fleetwood Mac

Who is your favourite film star and why?

I don't really have one but I do enjoy a good movie.

What are your top three films? Tell me about them.

The Green Mile

The story is deeply moving, exploring themes of compassion, injustice, and redemption. John Coffey's character especially evokes strong empathy. Plus, the powerful acting of Tom Hanks and Michael Clarke Duncan.

Titanic

The love story between Jack and Rose is timeless. It's passionate, tragic, and set against the backdrop of a real historical event, which makes it even more compelling. The sinking of the Titanic is one of the most dramatic maritime disasters in history and really captures my interest.



Carol Milne

In Time

I've always been drawn to dystopian fiction — stories that challenge our perception of society and the systems we live in. One film that left a lasting impression on me is *In Time*. The idea that your lifespan could be used as currency — that every second of your life is literally bought, sold, or stolen — is both thought-provoking and quietly terrifying. It's a concept that forces you to reflect on the value of time, inequality, and what it truly means to live."

Which poem left a lasting impression on you?

Let Me Go - Christina Rossetti

When I come to the end of the road

And the sun has set for me

I want no rites in a gloom filled room

Why cry for a soul set free?

Miss me a little, but not for long

And not with your head bowed low

Remember the love that once we shared

Miss me, but let me go.

For this is a journey we all must take

And each must go alone.

It's all part of the master plan

A step on the road to home.

When you are lonely and sick at heart

Go to the friends we know.

Laugh at all the things we used to do

Miss me, but let me go.

This was a poem I read at both my uncle's and mum's funeral, as they both had expressed they wanted to go.

What box sets have you enjoyed?

The Handmaid's Tale, *Virgin River*

I Fought the Law, *One Night*, *After the Party*

Who is your favourite artist or performer?

Fleetwood Mac

What is your favourite venue?

Small venues. I like the Glasshouse. I don't like large arenas. I love watching local bands in a pub setting.

Which musical instrument do you particularly enjoy?

I don't play any musical instruments, but I've always been drawn to the piano — both the idea of playing it and the beauty of its sound. That said, the instrument that truly captivates me is the saxophone; I absolutely love listening to its rich, soulful tones.

From the world of Arts and Culture who would be your ideal dinner party guests?

Gloria Estefan, Stevie Nicks, David Bowie, George Orwell, Banksy.

Contact Kip McGrath
gatesheadeast@kipmcgrath.co.uk



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Polar NE moves into prison sector with 'game changing' HMP Stirling project

The Middlesbrough-based company, Polar NE, has completed a "game-changing" project at HMP Stirling. The £85m site is the first new women's prison in Scotland in a generation, and the project is Polar's first within the UK prison estate.

"HMP Stirling is a flagship project and we are proud to have played our part," said James Hill, Managing Director of Polar NE.

"Our innovative products are designed to prevent self-harm and save lives, and their use here shows the difference they can make in an environment where safety must always come first.

"We see this as a major step into a market where we know our industry-leading expertise can really help."

And the need for help has never been greater, with Government statistics revealing that prison deaths are rising.

There were 401 deaths in custody in the 12 months leading up to June 2025 – more than one a day – a 30 per cent year-on-year rise. Tragically, over a fifth of those were self-inflicted. Additionally, self-harm rates in both male and female prisons are at their highest level since records began in 2004, with charities repeatedly warning that too many inmates are at risk of taking their own lives.

To help slow the tide, Polar NE supplied and installed 120 Humber Two Secure windows – the company's most popular window solution – along with additional Trent Secure fixed units at the new state-of-the-art prison.

The windows boost both security and independence for up to 100 women at the 'Scandinavian-style' HMP Stirling. The prison has already won a raft of awards for its trailblazing style, whilst being hailed as a blueprint for modern custodial design.

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



Story Homes supports Longhoughton Rangers U13s with local sponsorship

Local housebuilder Story Homes is delighted to announce its sponsorship of Longhoughton Rangers U13s football team, providing brand-new match shirts for the young players.

This partnership highlights Story Homes' ongoing commitment to supporting grassroots sports and local communities. The team is located just a short distance from its Riverbrook Gardens development – which has recently released its final phase for sale – and will now benefit from high-quality match shirts that help the team look and feel part of a united squad on the pitch.

Kye Bradley, Sales Director for Story Homes North East, said: "We're thrilled to sponsor Longhoughton Rangers U13s match shirts. Football is a brilliant way for young people to develop teamwork, confidence, and a sense of community, and we're proud to support the team this season. We hope the new shirts give the players a sense of pride and motivation every time they step onto the pitch."

Lewis Jackson, Coach of Longhoughton Rangers U13s, added: "We're very grateful to Story Homes for sponsoring our match shirts. The new kits look fantastic, and having the backing of a respected local company is hugely motivating for our players. This support will make a real difference to the team and helps our young footballers feel proud to represent Longhoughton Rangers."

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."





Neil Turner

What is quality in Architecture?

*By Neil Turner, Director,
Howarth Litchfield.*

One of the most difficult questions in architecture is how to define quality and how do you measure this quality.

To many people, quality is what the building looks like, or the materials chosen for its construction. At university and beyond, architects will look to judge, debate and review the success of a building design in purely academic design terms.

But I think the answer is more complex than that. Quality of a design is of course about the designer's skills and ability to create a three-dimensional form. It is also about how it functions and works for a client; history has examples of beautiful buildings that fail in the task of performance.

Can a building that is poorly detailed or leaks in wet weather really be defined as high quality? I can think of examples, even recent listed examples in the North East, which have leaked since the day they opened.

In running a busy practice, we work across many sectors involving different scales,

challenges and a huge variety of client briefs. We discuss what a client wants, their budgets and sustainability requirements; but assessing the quality can be overlooked. A larger budget doesn't necessarily guarantee greater quality.

When people choose cars, I think quality is higher on the agenda than in architecture. These days virtually every car can travel at 70mph and is reliable, warm and safe. However, customers choose a BMW over a Skoda because of the perception of quality when in fact both will perform equally well. In such cases, the image, impact and perception of quality is just as important as the real quality.

So, taking the car analogy back to architectural quality - the design is vital in delivering looks, style and appearance, but the quality is equally in the service, guidance and help.

Architecture is often about building a 'one off prototype', unlike a car. So, the quality that comes from your architect is about getting the building to function and flow, ensuring its design is appropriate for its setting and maximising its orientation in terms of views and sunlight. It doesn't matter if it's a house, a surgery or factory - there are always key qualities to achieve.

So, in architecture some commissions are about the visual appearance, some about the impact of the development, but a great many are about its functionality and performance in operation.

I have already touched upon the areas of service and help. This is where a good architect is vital in the success of a project. There is no substitute for experience and knowledge, working alongside skill and



talent. Employing the right architect to help you is key - I have written this many times - but it's so true.

Quality in architecture, like a car or a bespoke piece of furniture, is more than design - it's the materials, the thought, its fitness for purpose and longevity.

Quality, in whatever definition it is used in architecture is complex and multi-faceted. So, a quality building can be an industrial shed as much as a civic building. Its value lies in how a client responds to it and uses the building as much as how others simply view that building.

Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield can be contacted on 0191 384 9470 or email n.turner@hlpuk.com or www.howarthlitchfield.com

South African construction manager rebuilds career at True North Construction

After leaving a successful career in South Africa, 48-year-old Johan Sadler, has rebuilt his career from the ground up in the UK, thanks to the training and support provided by Newcastle-based, True North Construction.

Since joining the company in 2024, Johan has completed a Level 2 NVQ in Construction Operations, earned his dumper truck licence and is to start Level 3 training to qualify him in a site supervisor role.

Founded in 2019, True North Construction has earned a strong reputation for delivering bespoke residential builds, high-end refurbishments and certified Passivhaus homes. Its reputation for quality, sustainability and attention to detail has helped drive expansion into new commercial sectors, including hospitality, healthcare, education and workplace fit-outs.

Originally from Petersburg in South Africa's Northern Province, Johan spent many years working as a site manager, overseeing construction projects and leading teams. In December 2023, he made the life-changing decision to move to Howden, in Newcastle, with his wife, Tracy, a recruitment specialist. The move came after the passing of Johan's parents and a desire to be closer to Tracy's family in the North East.

Though Johan arrived with considerable experience, he quickly discovered that working in the UK construction industry required meeting new standards and



certifications. A major challenge was obtaining his CSCS card – the Construction Skills Certification Scheme card that proves workers have the necessary health and safety training to operate on UK building sites. Without this card, it's difficult for any construction professional to find work.

Johan, said: "Getting the CSCS card was the first hurdle. Even with my years of experience as a site manager back home, I wasn't able to start working here until I had it. Once obtained, I posted my CV on LinkedIn and hoped someone would notice."

David Roberts, director at True North Construction, saw Johan's profile and reached out to him. In May 2024, Johan joined the company as a labourer.

Johan, said: "Even though I'd managed construction sites before, the systems and regulations here are different.

"Thankfully, David and the team believed in me and continue to invest in my development. What I like most about the

company is that they're human. I'm not just a number; they genuinely care about their employees and want us to succeed and progress."

David Roberts, director, True North Construction, said: "Johan had the right experience and the right attitude from day one. We recognised his skills and potential immediately but understood there was a gap between his South African qualifications and the UK construction standards.

"Our role has been to support him through that transition by providing ongoing, tailored training and practical opportunities to build up his qualifications so he can get back to working as a site manager.

"At True North Construction, we're committed to investing in people who want to grow and develop their careers. It's not just about filling roles, it's about building a team that's skilled, motivated and ready to meet the future challenges of the industry."



Bamburgh Walled Gardens

Narro Associates expands Newcastle Office with move to The Cluny Works

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Narro Associates, a leading structural and civil engineering consultancy renowned for its expertise in conservation and sustainable engineering, is pleased to announce the relocation of its Newcastle office to a larger premises in The Cluny Works, located in the heart of the Ouseburn area.



Tynemouth House project



Ben Adam



Jenn Hogarth



Dominic Echlin

This move reflects Narro's continued growth and increasing demand for its specialist services across the North East. The new space will support the expanding team and strengthen collaboration with architects and developers throughout the region.

The team recently celebrated the completion of Tynemouth House, an award-winning residential scheme delivered in collaboration with Mawson Kerr Architects, showcasing innovative design and engineering excellence.

For the Northumberland Estate, the team has undertaken a series of conservation surveys and repair schemes, including work on the historically significant former Alnwick railway station, contributing to the preservation and adaptive reuse of key heritage assets.

Narro also recently provided structural and civil engineering design for the redevelopment of Bamburgh Castle's historic Walled Garden, introducing a new café and changing space. The team delivered sensitive and sustainable engineering solutions that respected the garden's heritage while providing contemporary functionality.

These projects reflect the Newcastle team's commitment to quality, sustainability, and the sensitive integration of new and old, reinforcing Narro's reputation as a leader in both contemporary and conservation engineering.

Ben Adam, Managing Director of Narro Associates, said: "We're delighted to be moving into The Cluny Works. This new space reflects the growth of our Newcastle team and our commitment to the North East. Ouseburn is a fantastic creative and cultural hub and being based here will strengthen our relationships with local architects and developers. Our expertise in conservation and sustainable engineering is particularly well-suited to the area's rich architectural heritage, and we're excited about the opportunities ahead."

The Newcastle expansion follows the recent opening of Narro's first London studio, further enhancing the consultancy's size, reach, and ability to deliver thoughtful, elegant, and environmentally responsible engineering solutions across the UK.

For more information about Narro and its services, please visit www.narroassociates.com

Leading housebuilders sign up for major Newcastle residential development

Hundreds of new homes are set to be delivered at one of North East England's biggest new residential developments after three housebuilders signed up to take the project forward.



North East development firm Banks Property, supported by independent North East property consultants and land agent youngsRPS, secured outline planning permission for the Kingston Village site last year, which will see over 800 new family homes being built on a 49-hectare site to the north west of Newcastle, including around 120 affordable homes.

Since then, Banks Property and youngsRPS have been working to identify the housebuilders that will deliver Kingston Village – and now, Miller Homes, Stonebridge Homes and Banks Homes have all signed up to the project.

The three housebuilders will also build the affordable homes element of the project before a registered social housing provider takes them on.

The Kingston Village development, which was allocated for housing in the 2015 Newcastle & Gateshead Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan, will also feature a range of important community assets, including a new primary school, a local shop and cafe, allotments, a village green and substantial amounts of public open space.

L-R: Ryan Lincoln, Regional Managing Director, Miller Homes; Mark Dickinson, Development Director, Banks Property; Graeme Bruce, Managing Director, youngsRPS; and Steve Errington, Managing Director, Stonebridge

It will see a £178m investment being made in the North East economy, with hundreds of people being employed both in building the new homes and in the development's supply chain.

A wide range of contract tenders will be made available to regional suppliers through the project's construction period.

A network of public footpaths and cycle ways, including links to the Newcastle Great Park and other nearby communities, will also be put in place, while a ten per cent Biodiversity Net Gain will be delivered through the project and significant improvements will be made to the local road network, public transport links and wildlife habitats.

Full details of all aspects of the scheme are now being finalised, with infrastructure work scheduled to start on site early next year. The first new homes are then expected to be available for sale in 2027.

Russ Hall, managing director at Banks Property and Banks Homes, says: "Our vision is for Kingston Village to be an outstanding, vibrant community which will integrate successfully into the west of Newcastle.

"Confirming the housebuilders who will help to create Kingston Village is a major milestone in its development, with the new assets that will be delivered alongside their homes being central to the creation of this inclusive, sustainable new community.

"The importance of increasing the UK's supply of high-quality homes, both to ensure people have the housing options they need in the places they want to live and to support the wider UK economy's future growth, has never been clearer, and we're proud to be part of a project that will have a significant impact on Newcastle and the wider North East in this respect.

"When Graeme Bruce at youngsRPS first identified the site's potential and introduced it to us, it sparked a collaboration which has since secured planning permission, attracted leading

housebuilders and paved the way for one of the region's most important housing schemes."

Graeme Bruce, managing director at youngsRPS, adds: "This is arguably the biggest single residential land sale in the North East in recent times. The sheer scale of the site, coupled with the intense interest it generated from both local and national developers, underlines its significance.

"Bringing this project to completion has been the largest development sale I've handled in my career and one of the most professionally rewarding."

Ryan Lincoln, regional managing director at Miller Homes, said: "This represents one of the most significant and sought-after development opportunities in the North East and we're proud to be part of the select group of developers to deliver it.

"Set in a fantastic location, it will offer an exceptional place to call home - combining high-quality housing alongside well designed local facilities, supporting the creation of a vibrant and sustainable new community."

Steve Errington, managing director at Stonebridge Homes, adds: "Kingston Village is the largest project in Stonebridge Homes' history, and we are proud to be delivering 354 of its new homes. Like in all our work, our focus will be on building premium, sustainable communities that will stand the test of time.

"By combining good design and energy-efficient infrastructure, we're creating homes that are environmentally responsible and part of a place where families can truly belong. We're excited to bring this landmark development to life for Newcastle and the wider region."

For further information on the Kingston Village development, please visit www.banksgroup.co.uk/projects/kingston-village

Twelve years in the making: How persistence and vision delivered a landmark deal

From identifying a promising site to brokering one of the region's biggest residential land deals, youngsRPS managing director Graeme Bruce explains how Kingston Village became a model for long-term regional development.

For Graeme Bruce, Managing Director of youngsRPS, the completion of the Kingston Village land sale marks the culmination of more than twelve years of determination, local insight and strategic collaboration.

Graeme first recognised the potential of the 49-hectare site to the west of Newcastle over a decade ago. What began as an early concept has, through years of discussion, negotiation and planning, evolved into one of the North East's most significant residential developments — a scheme that will now deliver hundreds of new homes for the region.

Reflecting on the project, Graeme said: "It was my initial dream to lot the site up for sale, but that would have been too complex given the scale of infrastructure required. I'm delighted that the purchase has been split between three independent builders, giving homebuyers a wider choice within the same development."

Working closely with Banks Property, led by Mark Dickinson and Gillian Reed, Graeme and the team at youngsRPS guided the site from early feasibility through to completion of the land



Graeme Bruce

sale. Their involvement spanned identifying the site's potential, securing promotion agreements, and navigating the intricacies of large-scale planning and delivery.

"Seeing Kingston Village reach this stage after so many years of work is incredibly rewarding," Graeme added. "It's been a complex and challenging process at times, but ultimately one that showcases what long-term vision, trust and collaboration between partners can achieve."

For Graeme, Kingston Village represents more than a professional success — it's a testament to perseverance, partnership and belief in the North East's potential. The development will bring hundreds of new homes, employment opportunities and investment to the region, standing as proof of what regional expertise and collaboration can deliver.

Esh Construction steps up to tackle North East housing need



Esh Construction has reached a key milestone in the delivery of a £12.4 million retirement living development at Sunderland Road in Gateshead

With the North East facing a pressing need for high-quality, affordable housing, contractors and registered providers are being challenged to deliver sustainable solutions that meet the needs of diverse communities.

Esh Construction is rising to that challenge, playing a pivotal role in addressing the region's housing shortage through a series of transformative developments.

Creating vibrant homes for over-55s

Esh Construction has reached a significant milestone in the delivery of a £12.4 million retirement living development in Gateshead, with work now underway after the contractor secured the land.

Located on Sunderland Road, the project – brought forward through Esh's land-led solution – is being delivered in partnership with Housing 21 and will transform the site of a former disused library, which closed in 2017, into a vibrant community for residents aged 55+. The Clarke Chapman Court scheme will feature 43 apartments and 12 bungalows.

Laura Devaney, Land & Partnerships Director at Esh Construction, said: "This development is a great example of how collaboration and perseverance can deliver real value to communities. From the start, we recognised the potential of the site – not just to regenerate a disused area, but to create a place where older people can live independently with the support they need. "It has taken five years to reach this stage which is testament to strong partnerships, problem-solving, and a shared commitment to bringing the development to fruition. We're proud to be working alongside Housing 21 and our project partners to bring this vision to life for Gateshead."



Esh is now working on more than 200 affordable homes at County Durham's first 'garden village' on the outskirts of Seaham in partnership with Karbon Homes

Affordable living meets environmental ambition

More than 200 affordable homes are now under construction at County Durham's first 'garden village' on the outskirts of Seaham.

Working in partnership with affordable housing developer Karbon Homes, Esh commenced work on the first phase of the 750 new affordable homes scheme at Seaham Garden Village in Spring 2024. The homes on the 78-hectare garden village, located on the A182 going into Seaham, will utilise one of the UK's first large-scale mine water heat projects.

In phase one 72 homes have been built to roof height, while phases two and three will see 84 and 57 homes respectively, built across the development.

Mark Binns, Operations Director at Esh Construction, said: "We're proud of the progress we have made on site since we broke ground 12 months ago. Working closely with Karbon Homes we are not just constructing houses but developing a forward-thinking and community-focused development."

Another phase of Seaham Garden Village has taken a step forward, with plans for 211 supported housing apartments now submitted for approval. The specialist

accommodation will include a 118-unit extra care scheme and two supported housing apartment blocks for over 55s.

Delivering homes through strong partnerships

Esh Construction has been appointed by Thirteen Group to deliver 96 new affordable homes in Sunderland.

The £23 million Amberley & Harrogate scheme will include 75 two, three and four-bedroom houses and 21 two-bedroom bungalows, which will all be available for affordable rent.

The development is supported by a £1.9 million contribution from the North East Combined Authority's Brownfield Housing Fund. Esh's Chief Executive, Andy Radcliffe, said: "We are thrilled to build on our successful collaboration and valued partnership with Thirteen Group by securing this latest contract award.

"Alongside the delivery of much-needed affordable homes, we will engage within the local community by providing local employment, apprentice training and procurement opportunities to support the next generation into their future careers."

To find out more about Esh Construction, visit www.eshgroup.co.uk

The Renters' Rights Bill: What every landlord needs to know

As the Renters' Rights Bill moves closer to becoming law, landlords across the UK should prepare for some of the most significant changes to the private rented sector in recent years. The Bill, which returned to the House of Lords on 14th October 2025 for further consideration, is expected to receive Royal Assent shortly after.

Once enacted, the Renters' Rights Act will bring several key reforms that will alter the way landlords manage tenancies. Among the most notable changes are:

- The end of fixed-term Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs), replaced by Periodic Assured Tenancies.
- Tenants will be required to give two months' notice before leaving a property.
- New restrictions on Section 8 grounds, with some not applicable during the first 12 months of a new tenancy.
- Landlords must provide two months' notice to increase rent under the revised Section 13(2) rules.
- The introduction of a Private Rented Sector Database and the Landlord Ombudsman, both designed to improve accountability and transparency within the industry.

These updates are intended to create a fairer and more consistent rental market, but they will also demand that landlords stay informed and compliant with the new legal requirements.

At Wright Residential, we understand how complex legislative change can be. Our experienced team is closely monitoring the Bill's progress and will provide clear, practical guidance once the final provisions are confirmed.

If you're unsure how these reforms might impact your properties or portfolio, we're here to help you navigate the transition with confidence and peace of mind.

Contact Wright Residential.

For advice or support, call 0191 240 1818 or email catherine@wrightresidential.co.uk



Keith Stewart, new Managing Partner at Naylor Gavin Black

North East property consultancy appoints new managing partner

North East based property consultancy, Naylor Gavin Black, has appointed a new managing partner to spearhead a new era at the 40-strong business which is celebrating an expanding client base and increased turnover.

Keith Stewart, who heads-up the industrial agency team, takes over from Angus White who has led the business for the last six years.

Angus will continue as a partner at Naylor Gavin Black, focusing on property and asset management & consultancy – a role he has done for the past 25 years.

Keith commented: "A succession plan regarding the managing partner position and business has been in the works for some time. It's an honour to take up this new role. It carries a lot of responsibility and prospects, and I'm excited for the future.

"I'd like to thank Angus who has led the practice to a strong position - and the whole team for their hard work to get us where we are today.

"The business is going through a lot of progressive changes currently. Our office move last year was a catalyst for planning ahead for our future and we have a new ambitious three-year business plan in place."

The firm, based at One Strawberry Place in Newcastle city centre, provides the full range of commercial real estate services to clients including Buccleuch, Cleveland Cable Company, UK Land Estates, Newcastle International Airport and Aviva – working across the whole of the UK.

Naylor Gavin Black is a member of the Commercial Property Network - a collective of privately owned commercial property firms which span the UK - giving the firm a presence in every UK region.

www.naylorsgavinblack.co.uk

How will a ban on upward-only rent reviews affect you?

By Emily Seager, Lease Advisory Partner at Knight Frank, Newcastle.

The government's proposal to ban upward-only rent reviews in commercial leases aims to make rents more responsive to market conditions and rebalance the landlord-tenant dynamic.

However, its implications for landlords, tenants, and investors are far-reaching and complex.

How things stand

Upward-only rent reviews, linked to open market rents, have long defined commercial leases across England and Wales. They guarantee that rent will never fall during the lease term, even if market conditions weaken.

For landlords, especially institutional investors such as pension funds and REITs, this provides predictable income, supports valuations, and reassures lenders.

For tenants, however, it can mean paying above-market rents during downturns, reducing flexibility and increasing financial pressure.

The proposal and timings

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill is at committee stage. There's still time for amendments and we're months away from achieving Royal Assent but upward-only rent reviews look set to disappear in England and Wales.

The ban would apply to most commercial leases under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, including retail, offices, industrial, hospitality and not-for-profit sectors. It will only impact new leases granted after the legislation comes into force and will not affect existing leases.

What's being banned

The legislation targets any clause preventing rent from falling - whether tied to open market value, turnover, or indexation.

Anti-avoidance provisions will override attempts to sidestep the rules, such as side agreements or rent floors. Compliant clauses must allow rent to move both up and down in line with market evidence or agreed formulas. Stepped uplifts and caps will still be permitted, with further clarification expected through secondary legislation.



Emily Seager

Implications for tenants

For occupiers, the change could bring several benefits:

- **Flexibility:** Rents may now fall during downturns, offering relief when trading conditions weaken.
- **Transparency:** Leases could become simpler, with fewer one-sided clauses.
- **Negotiating power:** Tenants could be in a stronger position as a key point of leverage for landlords is removed.

However, landlords will likely adjust by seeking higher starting rents, fewer incentives, or shorter lease terms to offset potential income volatility.

Implications for landlords and investors

Landlords face the greatest challenge: the loss of income certainty. Rental streams could fluctuate, affecting valuations and loan security. Pension funds and long-term investors may view such assets as less attractive without guaranteed rent floors.

Likely market responses include:

- A shift to stepped or index-linked rents (without collar) allowing rents to track inflation.
- Shorter leases, though this risks higher turnover and void costs.
- Higher starting rents and reduced upfront incentives.
- More conservative lending and valuations as banks factor in rental volatility.
- A two-tier market emerging between old "up-only" and new "up/down" leases, complicating valuations.

Practical considerations

The impact will vary by sector. The retail market - already accustomed to turnover rents and shorter leases - may see limited disruption with a reform to business rates far more pressing.

Office and industrial/logistics markets are

likely to see a widening gap between prime and secondary stock, particularly as greater uncertainty around income predictability will increase the threshold at which development becomes viable - likely leading to reduced supply in the medium term (which may drive higher rental growth for new, high quality stock).

A period of uncertainty is likely meaning lease negotiations may stall while parties await clarity, while others may rush to complete deals before the ban takes effect - creating short-term market distortions.

Strategic actions

For landlords and investors:

- Review portfolios for exposure to upward-only leases and be proactive with tenants.
- Engage early with lenders to discuss potential financing impacts.
- Explore compliant rent models such as stepped, turnover-based, or hybrid structures.

For tenants:

- Review lease expiry and renewal timelines to decide whether to delay negotiations.
- Factor possible rent review changes into budgeting.
- Consider index-linked reviews or shorter cycles to align with business planning.

Conclusion

The commercial property market will adapt to the ban on upward-only rent reviews, as seen in other countries, but the transition will bring short-term disruption.

Businesses should use the coming months to plan strategically - review lease portfolios, seek expert advice, and prepare for negotiations under a new framework that could fundamentally reshape the leasing landscape in England and Wales.

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Getting around

I guess that the majority of readers of Northern Insight live in an urban environment – in the city including the suburbs, or one of our larger towns such as Morpeth, Alnwick or Sunderland or maybe at the coastal trio of Tynemouth, Cullercoats and Whitley Bay.

We are actually quite lucky in having a decent road system – the A1 and A19 north to south, and the A69, A184 and A1058 east to west, and several other dual carriageways as well as other fast roads. We can reach London in less than three hours and buses and the Metros are, when they are running, a boon to commuters. We are still waiting for Stadler to get the rest of the new Metro cars into service to improve reliability and quality of service, but at least the convenient route is in place.



Or is it? I am a member of the Metro Facebook page and another member said the Metro was not fit for service because it served an old economy – citing in particular the shipyards. When I was young however, the local “Tyneside Loop” had two major differences to the system we enjoy today. Firstly, the main junction of the service is now Monument, right in Newcastle City Centre, not half a mile south at Central Station, and this has brought



Philip Bowe

the service to the businesses of Newcastle as well as Sunderland. Soon hopefully (soon being a relative word) it will connect Washington to our City Centres. But in the meantime the second part of the loop, the Riverside line, was closed 54 years ago. This really was a line for the Tyneside shipyards – although it would have also been useful for me as then there was a station within easy walking distance of St Peter’s Basin.

Like the chicken and egg - should transport go to home and work centres or do home and work centres go to transport? If we analyse the situation in my lifetime, I would say, the demand built the transport but before then did transport build the demand? In London John Betjeman coined the phrase “Metro Land” - do not we have our own Metro Land (albeit based on the Metro system) it isn’t too many generations ago that Gosforth, Benton, Monkseaton, Boldon and Pelaw were rural or semi-rural

settlements, often based around mine workings, but their growth came with the introduction of the railways, which of course is a Geordie invention, thanks to George Stephenson.

I believe we should capitalise on our public transport system. Catch a Metro from Sunderland to Newcastle and you won’t be far from the sea to open countryside to each City Centre, catch one from Newcastle to the Coast via Four Lane Ends then before you see the sea you will pass, at least speed, past corn and rape fields. Many people do drive into the City Centre and other hubs, but not all the cars do any more than move a parking bay from outside at home to outside of work. We need people in all town centres to keep them alive, but if we can just get our public transport better, we will do this so much more successfully.

www.bivbowes.com



Banks Homes turns to local interiors experts for show home design at The Cornfields in Yarm

Housebuilder Banks Homes has brought in local interior design experts to help create one of the show homes at its first residential site in the Tees Valley.

The County Durham-headquartered developer has chosen Yarm-based designers Cocoon & Bauer to work on the Hawthorne show home at its new Cornfields site, which sits on the southern edge of the town.

Cocoon & Bauer is working with the Banks Homes team to finalise the colour schemes, furniture, furnishings and fabrics within the four-bedroom detached property, which is one of two show homes at The Cornfields that are scheduled to open their doors Friday 28th November.

A customer experience centre has now opened at the site, with the first homes expected to be ready for buyers to move into around the end of the year.

Based on Yarm High Street, Cocoon & Bauer works across the residential, commercial and hospitality sectors, delivering bespoke property designs for private and commercial clients across the North East and beyond.

Casey Hall, interior designer at Cocoon

& Bauer, says: “Our aim was to create an inspiring design flowing right through the property that allows potential homebuyers to visualise themselves living at The Cornfields and to see how they might adapt these high quality, modern homes to their own requirements.

“It’s an amazing project for us to be working on with the Banks Homes team and having it right on our doorstep makes it extra special.”

Banks Homes has started work on building up to 109 high quality family homes at The Cornfields, which will include a total of 11 different property designs that range from three to five bedrooms.

All the properties will be fitted with smart heating systems, air source heat pumps and electric vehicle car charging points, while a number of the house types will also come with underfloor heating.

Aisling Ramshaw, head of sales and marketing at Banks Homes, says: “Banks Homes creates sustainable, future-proofed

homes that provide style as standard and support healthier, happier lives for the families living in them.

“Our mission is to bring together striking design, future-proof sustainability and desirable locations to create a new blueprint for contemporary living.

“The Cocoon & Bauer team has taken these principals and created a brilliant design for our Hawthorne show home at The Cornfields that accentuates everything that the property has to offer and will help to enhance the emotional connection that homebuyers make with it when they first visit.

“The Cornfields is just a ten-minute walk from the centre of the historic market town of Yarm, one of the region’s most beautiful and sought-after places to live, and we know there’s going to be a huge amount of demand for the new homes that we’re now building.”

New homes are now available at The Cornfields in Yarm from £325,950. For further information, please visit www.bankshomes.co.uk/developments/the-cornfields or call 0191 378 6205.

For further information on Banks Homes’ growing portfolio of residential developments across the North East and Yorkshire, which includes Cathedral Meadows at West Rainton, The Pastures in Hambleton near Selby and the super-luxury Symeon Manor in Durham City, please visit www.bankshomes.co.uk



L-R: Mike Moody, managing director at Classic Masonry with son, Michael Moody

Celebrating Geordie Pride for over 60 years

Nearly 60 years since his father was first commissioned to provide carvings for the historic banqueting wall at Newcastle Civic Centre, Mike Moody, managing director of Classic Masonry, has continued the family tradition.

The connection with the Civic Centre dates to its opening in 1968, when Mike's father, Terry, and a colleague, meticulously carved more than 26,000 letters and numbers onto the wall to honour the city's most distinguished citizens and historic figures.

Opened by King Olav V of Norway, Newcastle Civic Centre is a landmark of modernist architecture and civic pride. Designed by city architect, George Kenyon, the building replaced the old Victorian Town Hall and quickly became the heart of Newcastle's local government.

Classic Masonry is a specialist in stonemasonry and architectural precast concrete, based in North Tyneside with Mike and Paul Bennett, senior stonemason, carrying out the precise lettering on the most recent project.

With over thirty years of experience across all sectors of the construction industry, the company offers a comprehensive range of services, including design

development, stone sourcing and selection, cutting, profiling, carving and fabrication. It undertakes both new build masonry construction and restoration and conservation projects, which include cleaning, decontamination and facade consolidation. Its expertise spans both modern and historic environments.

Mike Moody, managing director, Classic Masonry, said: "It is a real privilege to continue a family tradition that stretches back decades and to contribute to something so deeply embedded in Newcastle's history. This project holds specific meaning for me, as my father carved many of the original inscriptions on the Civic Centre's walls. To now follow him and add to that legacy is something of which I am incredibly proud. My son, Michael, is carrying on the legacy, also, working in the business as an associate director, heading up our design department.

"It is not just about craftsmanship, it's about honouring the legacy of those who

have shaped the city, helped it prosper and added to the Geordie pride. We are honoured to uphold the standards set by those before us and to continue Classic Masonry's role in marking Newcastle's historic milestones."

Cllr Karen Kilgour, Leader of Newcastle City Council, said: "The walls of the Civic Centre's Banqueting Hall are steeped in history, forever recognising many of our city's most distinguished residents who all helped shape Newcastle into what it is today.

"Classic Masonry has been a central character in the stories our history continues to tell, having made the first inscriptions during the Civic Centre's construction and continuing to do so for decades since.

"My own father's name, as a former Lord Mayor of Newcastle, is among the many notable figures to be inscribed there, and it always gives me an enormous sense of personal pride to see him represented there alongside so many who have played such important roles on behalf of our great city.

"It's fantastic to see such a skilled, traditional craft continuing to be carried out today. As one Geordie following in her father's footsteps to another, I'd like to congratulate and thank Mike and all at Classic Masonry for their valued contributions to Newcastle over so many years."

classicmasonry.co.uk



L-R: Dan Matthews - Associate Surveyor, Richard Garland - Managing Partner, Simon Heydecke - Partner

One year on

GFW marks milestone year of opportunity, evolution and team growth.

Leading property consultancy GFW (formerly George F. White) marks a pivotal year of growth, with six key new hires alongside significant client and partnership growth.

Since unveiling its new brand identity and vision in 2024, GFW has strengthened its expertise and expanded its team with strategic appointment and internal promotions across key areas of the business, creating fresh opportunities for clients and partners alike, amidst a challenging economic climate.

Among the six recruits was Partner Simon Heydecke who joined earlier in the year from Greggs PLC, bringing over 15 years of expertise in commercial property and strategic asset management, and Associate Surveyor and RICS Registered Valuer Dan Matthews, whose expertise further strengthens GFW's valuation services.

Reflecting on his time at GFW, Simon said: "Joining GFW has been really exciting from

the start. Everyone on the team brings incredible expertise and a collaborative spirit, which is helping us create real opportunities, not just for our clients, but for each other as well. We've got big plans for the rest of this year and into 2026, with plenty of exciting projects and opportunities on the horizon."

Internally, GFW continues to invest in training and development to ensure its people are equipped to meet rising demand across key sectors, including farm business management, strategic land promotion, property management and planning.

Reflecting on the past year, Richard Garland, Managing Partner said: "When we rebranded as GFW last year, our aim was to refresh our brand to reflect who we are today, keeping a nod to our heritage but showcasing the breadth of expertise we offer and our forward-looking approach. A year on, we're proud to say we've achieved exactly that.

"This has been a year of opportunity and resilience. We've widened our team, strengthened our services, and built on trusted relationships that are opening doors to projects of regional and national significance. The economic backdrop may be challenging, but our depth of expertise means we are well placed to help clients navigate uncertainty and unlock growth."

Over the last 12 months GFW has supported rural clients through changes to grants, subsidies and tax legislation, leading to strong demand for valuation and succession planning services. Commercially, the practice has expanded its property management offering, grown its commercial client portfolio and set up more integrated management services for improved efficiency and service. For development clients, GFW has been at the forefront of a number of nationally significant developments, including strategic land promotion of all scales up to garden village schemes and energy and data schemes of significant scale, all which have drawn on in house planning and masterplanning support, reflecting the renewed ambition for development across the North East and wider UK.

Richard added: "The next 12 months will be a fascinating period politically and economically. We have deliberately invested in the areas of our team where we see opportunity in the market and as a result, we are uniquely placed to help clients deliver complex and multi-disciplinary projects of increasing regional and national significance. We're excited to play our part in the region's ambitious growth story."

gfwllp.co.uk

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Parker inspires the next generation at STEM Event

Parker Hannifin, a global leader in motion and control technologies, has helped to kickstart an interest in manufacturing and engineering careers in North East students at the recent STEMFest event.

STEM Ambassadors from Parker's Birtley

and Gateshead UK sites exhibited at the three-day STEMFest event at Vertu Motors Arena, Newcastle, 7th – 9th October.

Parker's STEM Ambassadors, who are drawn from departments across the company, including engineering, finance and HR, led students through a number of activities which showcased filtration processes and the benefits of single-use technology.

Richard Purdy, Project Engineer and STEM ambassador at Parker said: "Once again I'm heartened by the inquisitive nature of the students that attended STEMFest. Their enthusiasm was matched by the STEM Ambassadors in attendance who, like me, were able to engage them with a wide range of activities. It was especially beneficial to have our apprentices on the stand who were able to share their recent experiences."

Students, who ranged from 9-13 as well as those studying GCSEs had the opportunity to discover how Parker's technology and product portfolio is used across a wide range of industries, including manufacturing, energy, process, biopharmaceutical and food and beverage.



Gate 7 joins Prime Minister on first major trade mission to India

Harry Wickham, Managing Director of global decal manufacturer, Gate 7, recently joined the Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Business Secretary Peter Kyle, and prominent CEOs, entrepreneurs, university vice-chancellors and cultural leaders on a trade mission to Mumbai. The 125-strong delegation marked the largest ever Government trade mission to India.

Founded in Gateshead, Gate 7 is a leader in designing and manufacturing decals for vehicles, plant and machinery and the business has grown its international presence with a manufacturing facility in the U.S. and more recently a manufacturing facility in India.

Harry Wickham commented "I was incredibly honoured to be part of this historic trade mission and hear firsthand how the government is planning to grow its trade with India to help British businesses and people.

"As a business who has made a significant investment in India with the opening of our Pune facility, we are excited to see how the new trade deal will help us to unlock new opportunities, break down barriers and drive growth."

This year marks Gate 7's 25th year in business and the company is continuing to grow in international markets.

Horizon Works energises marketing for Make UK Defence members

UK SMEs have been given additional support in entering the defence sector, through industrial marketing specialist Horizon Works.

The Blyth-based company is a partner in the Make UK Defence Fit For Defence programme, a bespoke business improvement initiative for organisations in the defence sector.

Through the programme, Horizon Works delivers free marketing healthchecks for Make UK Defence members, giving them a fresh perspective on their brands, content, websites, social media, SEO, PR and assets. It has helped SMEs to reshape their marketing for the defence industry, and supported businesses in improving their communications for engagement with primes and the manufacturing supply chain.

Samantha Vassallo, Managing Director of Horizon Works, said: "With a renewed focus on building sovereign capability and the Government committing to boosting MOD spending with SMEs directly,



manufacturing and engineering SMEs have a major opportunity to integrate into the UK's defence supply chains.

"The Fit for Defence programme is playing a key role in helping companies seize this opportunity and we're proud to be part of this initiative."

Make UK Defence is a member-owned defence trade association, part of Make UK – the manufacturers' organisation. It champions and supports the UK's defence supply chain.

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Richard Ayre

Keeping offices safe, one plug at a time

By Richard Ayre, DRA PAT Testing

Before I became an electrical safety specialist, I spent a decade working in offices — dealing with the same buzzing phones, coffee breaks, and tight deadlines as most office teams.

So when I moved into the world of Electrical Equipment Testing (PAT testing), it felt natural that offices would become my specialist area. After all, I know firsthand how important it is to keep your workplace running smoothly — and safely.

Over the past 15+ years, I've learned that testing office equipment isn't as simple as plugging in to a tester and ticking a box. Computers, monitors, and other sensitive electronics need careful handling and proper shutdown procedures. The last thing you want is for your computer's motherboard to go "pop" because someone pulled the plug too quickly.

That's where experience really matters. At DRA PAT Testing, we've refined our methods to make the process as smooth and disruption-free as possible. My team and I know how to work efficiently in busy

office environments — ensuring everything is tested thoroughly without interrupting your workflow. We even have an ex-IT engineer on our team, adding another layer of expertise to what we do.

Respecting your workspace

Two things office managers often dread during PAT testing are:

1. Engineers who unplug equipment without warning.
2. Servers being accidentally shut down.

We never do that. Before we touch a single plug, we check every screen. If a user is still logged in, we'll consult with you before shutting anything down. Even if the computer isn't logged in, we always power it down correctly, not just yank the lead out. Once testing is complete, we'll plug everything back in, power it up, and make sure it's all working as it should.

Servers, of course, are another matter entirely. These are the beating heart of many offices, and shutting them down incorrectly can be catastrophic. We never power off a server ourselves — that must always be done by your IT professional. Instead, we'll work with you to find the best solution, whether that's visual inspection, thermal imaging, or testing during planned maintenance.

Working around you

We understand that downtime costs money. That's why we offer flexible scheduling to suit your business. Most of our office clients choose to have PAT testing done during the working day, and in most cases, it causes no more disruption than a coffee break. We've tested equipment in hospitals, police

stations, and call centres — all while staff carried on with their work.

If daytime testing isn't ideal, we're happy to arrange evening or weekend visits. Whatever works best for you, we'll make it happen.

No shocks – financial or electrical

One of the biggest surprises for office managers comes when it's time to count up the number of items that need testing. Many assume a "desk" equals one or two items — a computer and a monitor. But when you include all the leads, adapters, and extensions, that single desk might actually have six or more items to test. Multiply that across an office, and your estimate of 200 items could quickly become 800.

That's why I prefer to visit in person before quoting. A quick site visit means I can see exactly what's involved, explain the process, and make sure you have a clear understanding of what the job entails. No unexpected costs, no surprises — just straightforward, honest service.

Let's keep your office safe

PAT testing doesn't have to be a headache. With the right experience and approach, it can be simple, efficient, and hassle-free. So when you're ready to arrange your office PAT testing, why not give me a call? I'd be happy to pop in, have a chat, and see how we can keep your workplace safe — without disrupting your day.

Contact DRA PAT Testing
0191 666 1009 | 07778 416 850
www.draelectricals.co.uk



Michael Richardson
20 Questions for
20 Years

Question 4 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.

How do we measure how we're doing?

"There's a lot to be said for gut feeling. But I like data too. Tracking progress. So here are some numbers. So 'we' can compare ourselves to 'them'. And, if they like, so 'they' can compare themselves to 'us'. After all, someone's got to be Number One!

- o 4 branches across 3 countries.
- o 6-vehicle logistics team. I won't outsource reliability.
- o 3 million+ individual stock items.
- o 5 people in front-line customer services.
- o 6 people in outbound technical support.
- o Double-figure percentage annual turnover growth.
- o Customer-retention percentages increase annually. Our first 3 customers, from 2006, are still customers today.
- o Vending machine installations increase annually.
- o On-site stockholding increases by volume and value annually.
- o Multi-channel access growth is a reality. Physical catalogue. Phone. Drop-in. Appointment. Hand-delivery. E-commerce. And even me turning up at 1am in the morning to hand deliver a single mission-critical cutting tool. (Yes, I was tired!)

"And one of our latest software developments even measures - in pounds and pence - the cost saving to the client of getting the right tool, faster, every time, from ACT. We don't just say we make a difference. Customers can see it, too."

“ We have our own logistics team at ACT.

I won't outsource reliability.

Next Time: Progress. What are we aiming for in 2026?

Irresistibly Interesting Stories for Engineers, Creatives, Designers & Makers

WALKING INTO POSSIBILITY

Have you visited ACT Group Hub yet? In Gateshead? It's an eye opener (and a mind opener).

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/walk-into-possibility/>

ENGINEERING TRIVIA. ARE YOU A WORLD CLASS ENGINEER?

Can you can get them all correct? 144 'water cooler' questions on engineering.

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/engineering-trivia-are-you-a-world-class-engineer/>

BEST ENGINEERING COMPANIES?

Written just last month, by Brooke Becher, here are over 50 of the world's best engineering companies. Do you agree?

<https://www.my-act.co.uk/act-news/best-engineering-companies/>

TV SHOW FOR ENGINEERS?

On Reddit, somebody asked, 'What do you think a tv show about engineers would look like? 600 answers later...

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Could you become a teacher?

Teach First BCCET SCITT applications are now open.



Bobbi Bowman

When 22-year-old Bobbi Bowman decided she wanted to train as a teacher, she knew exactly which school she wanted to learn her vocation – the very primary school she herself attended as a child.

"I wanted to become a teacher because I wanted to inspire other people the same way I was when I was at school," explains Bobbi, a graduate from Durham University with a degree in business management.

Bobbi stayed in touch with the teachers at St Godric's Catholic Primary School in Wheatley Hill and volunteered a day a week before starting the Teach First SCITT programme with Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust in September.

"I have always loved working with children; I just love being around children," she says.

"Because I was already volunteering with a BCCET school, it felt natural to do my teacher training with the Trust. I'm feeling very nervous and excited. My first impressions of the programme have been brilliant; it is so well organised. Even though I knew the teachers at the school, I didn't know many other people at the Trust, but everybody has been lovely."

Bobbi is in good company as 100% of last year's trainees secured teaching roles at the end of their training. BCCET has 25 primary schools and five secondary schools across East Durham, South Tyneside and Sunderland. Trainee teachers receive one-to-one support from experienced mentors, hands-on experience and high-quality training.

The course is not only designed for recent graduates like Bobbi. Alex Dyssell, 33, previously worked as an English teacher in South Korea for several years before starting the Teach First BCCET programme in September at St Matthew's Catholic Primary School in Jarrow.

Chloe Harvey, 26, has a Master's in music and is a trainee secondary school teacher at St Anthony's Girls' Catholic Academy in Sunderland.

She has wanted to become a teacher since she first picked up a musical instrument 19 years ago when she was in Year 3 and met an inspirational violin teacher who first introduced her to music.

"From that point, there was a fire lit in me, and I absolutely loved it and the more that I engaged in music, the more I wanted to pursue this and give other people that feeling," she says.

"When I did my research on teacher training programmes, I looked at different educational trusts and I loved BCCET's values and the aspirations that the Trust has for its students regardless of their background or ability."

Applications are now open for September 2026. Courses are available in Primary 4-11, Primary 3-7 and Secondary in Maths, English, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, History, Geography, RE, Music, PE and MFL.

To be eligible to apply, you will need: an undergraduate degree or equivalent, to demonstrate significant knowledge in the subject you are applying to teach (either through your degree qualification, A Levels or relevant experience), and Grade 4 (C) or above in English and maths GCSEs or equivalent qualification.

To teach primary, you will also need Grade 4 (C) or above in science GCSE.

For more information about the Teach First BCCET programme, visit Teach First/SCITT | Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust or email teach@bccet.org.uk



Chloe Harvey



Alex Dyssell



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*- Independent Schools Inspectorate,
September 2025*

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RGS Newcastle, in our own words

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instils our students with life skills and
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But what truly makes life at RGS so special?
In their own words, our RGS leaders share
what sets our community apart (for our
students and families):



Mr Miller

“What makes RGS special is the deep sense of belonging that runs through the school, fuelled by strong values shared by families, staff and children. The Superpowers in the Junior School and the four pillars in the Senior School have allowed a significant focus on character development, emotional regulation and the joy of education.

“I think there has often been a misunderstanding about academic success and pastoral care – that a school offers one or the other – but the RGS has proved that it's possible to be both highly caring and highly ambitious in the classroom. When you then add the huge and varied co-curricular programme, you have the reason why RGS is so special – an all-round education.” - Mr Miller, Head of RGS Junior School.



Mr Stanford

“As both a current parent and Headmaster, I believe what truly sets RGS apart is not only its academic excellence, but the warmth and inclusivity that define its community. It is this unique combination that makes RGS a genuinely exceptional school.

“Visitors consistently remark on the genuine welcome they receive - a reflection of the school's strong sense of belonging and care. Diversity and inclusion are not just values at RGS; they are lived experiences. We celebrate individuality and ensure that every student, regardless of background or need, feels seen, supported, and empowered.

“While RGS is rightly known for its outstanding academic results, what is particularly impressive is that these achievements place the school in the top 1% nationally when compared to students of similar ability elsewhere. This includes students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), highlighting our commitment to tailored support and high expectations for all.

“Beyond the classroom, RGS offers an extraordinary breadth of cocurricular opportunities. From music and drama to sport, debating, coding, or outdoor pursuits, every student can find something that excites and inspires them. This rich variety of activities ensures that learning at RGS is not only rigorous but also joyful and fulfilling, preparing students to thrive both in school and far beyond.” - Mr Stanford, Headmaster of RGS Newcastle.



Miss Enevoldson

“Sixth Form at RGS is about preparing students for life - not just academically, but personally and socially. The dedicated Sixth Form Team work hard to ensure that every student develops independence, leadership, and a strong sense of community.

“Students are encouraged to explore their passions - whether through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, CCF, music, drama, or student-led societies. Everyone finds their niche, and the school brings out the best in each individual. They're challenged, supported, and inspired to push themselves academically and personally.

“What makes RGS special for me is the personalised support which enables students to thrive. From tailored UCAS guidance and academic clinics to mentoring, wellbeing initiatives and a diverse co-curricular programme. Nothing is off limits; RGS Sixth Form is about broadening horizons, building confidence, and creating lasting memories.” - Miss Enevoldson, Head of RGS Sixth Form.

**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
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remarkable journey as we celebrate our
500th anniversary.**

www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk/admissions



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The building blocks of future leaders

Written by Geoff Laidler, Head of Dame Allan's Junior School.

As the Head of a Junior School, educating boys and girls from ages 3 - 11, my days are often filled with the sounds of laughter in the playground, phonics lessons, and of exuberant amateur brass players during a music lesson.

However, underneath this cheerful cacophony are many deliberate threads, which all come together to help shape our young people into the leaders of tomorrow.

Emotional Awareness and Empathy

As well as working their way through the curriculum, focusing on their literacy, numeracy, languages, and much more, from their first moments in school I see firsthand how teaching can begin to embed important values in our young people. One of the big things we work on at Dame Allan's is ensuring every child feels happy and confident through our specialist pastoral care offering. With access to a dedicated wellbeing area - The Cosy Snug - plus counsellors, wellbeing assemblies, staff trained as mental health first aiders, and accessible mental health quiz software, Zumos, pupils grasp from a young age that understanding their emotions and the emotions of others is a key part of life. Not only does this build self-awareness, but crucially it embeds a strong sense of empathy - vital for any well-rounded young person making their way in an increasingly divided world.



Geoff Laidler



Yes, you can be a Mentor

Leadership and mentoring skills are directly taught at Dame Allan's at an early age. There are lots of opportunities to get involved, such as our Digital Leaders Programme, which empowers pupils to develop their own tech skills and volunteer as peer mentors to teach younger pupils how to be more digitally savvy.

Our Buddy Scheme too is another way that our pupils can take on some additional responsibility. Year 5 pupils 'buddy' up with Reception pupils to show them the ropes in the outdoor play space, to enjoy sessions playing and reading together, and even take trips out of school. Seeing pupils learn to take the lead and support their younger buddy is so rewarding, and offers them a fantastic chance to act as a role model and trusted friend.

Try, try, try again

When looking at inspiring and nurturing the next generation, we must also consider the importance of helping pupils discover their passions, develop resilience, and enhance their social skills. All of this and more are developed via our thriving co-curricular programme, where Junior School pupils can choose from more than fifty activities each week - from football and dance, to Nature Club, Art Club, choir, and more. These clubs instil a need for timekeeping and organisation, offer the chance to mix with pupils they may not meet in their lessons, and help our young people to develop the resilience to keep trying if they find that they can't score that winning penalty on the first try!

Additionally, our co-curricular programme helps to instil a sense of community in our pupils, something that is increasingly valuable in a world that can be quite insular. For example, our pupils in the choir sing at hospitals and local care homes, whilst our GECO club carries out litter picks and plants gardens onsite for our whole community to enjoy.

When we think about what makes a successful leader, I'd argue that these traits of empathy, confidence, resilience, and community-mindedness will hold any leader in good stead. And, if we can encourage those values in Junior School - alongside the usual fun of playground fresh air, budding friendships, and school lunch smiles - we can be sure that the next generation will be in good hands.

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





National spotlight shines on Northumberland prep school

A rural prep school near Newcastle has won a prestigious national award.

Mowden Hall School in Stocksfield, Northumberland, is delighted to have been named Independent Prep School of the Year at the Independent Schools of the Year 2025 Awards.

As the independent school sector's leading awards programme, the awards celebrate the transformative 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.

The winners were announced at a ceremony at The Law Society in London on Tuesday 14 October. When announcing the award, the judges commended Mowden Hall for its strong commitment to outdoor learning, academic breadth, and the nurturing of confident, curious, and kind young people.

Headteacher Phil Sturt said: "We are absolutely thrilled and deeply honoured to receive this national recognition. For a school in rural Northumberland to be named Independent Prep School of the Year is a tremendous achievement and a real testament to the passion and

dedication of our entire community. I would like to thank our outstanding staff, our wonderful pupils, and our supportive parents, whose belief in what we do makes Mowden Hall such a special place. This award reflects the spirit, energy, and care that defines our school every single day."

Set within 52 acres of beautiful Northumberland countryside, Mowden Hall School combines a strong academic foundation with a rich programme of co-curricular opportunities. With its caring ethos, emphasis on creativity, and commitment to helping children enjoy childhood to the fullest, the school offers an education that truly goes beyond the classroom.

This national accolade shines a light on a thriving North East school community that continues to inspire, innovate, and nurture future generations.

www.mowdenhall.org.uk





Isla Odd

Prestigious scholarship award for Mowden pupil

A talented Year 8 pupil from Mowden Hall School has been recognised with a major scholarship honour.

Isla Odd has been awarded the Michael Palin All-Rounder Scholarship at Shrewsbury School, one of the UK's leading independent schools.

Founded in 1552, Shrewsbury School has a long tradition of recognising exceptional talent through its scholarship programme. The All-Rounder Scholarship celebrates pupils who demonstrate outstanding aptitude in two specialist areas, chosen from Sport, Music, Drama, and either Art or Design Technology. Isla, whose chosen specialisms were Sport and Music, impressed throughout a rigorous selection process and was chosen from hundreds of applicants across the country.

Headteacher Phil Sturt said: "We are absolutely delighted for Isla. This is a wonderful and well-deserved achievement."

"The Michael Palin Scholarship is awarded to pupils who not only excel in their chosen areas but also embody enthusiasm and a love of learning - qualities that Isla shows every day. We are immensely proud of her, and I know the whole Mowden Hall community will join me in congratulating her on this outstanding success."

Scholarship competitions are highly competitive, demanding commitment, resilience, and courage. Simply taking part is an achievement in itself, and all Mowden Hall's Year 8 scholars are to be commended for their effort and determination this year.

www.mowdenhall.org.uk



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Argyle House School celebrates glowing ISI Inspection Report



Argyle House School in Thornhill Park, Sunderland, is proud to announce the outstanding results of its recent Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) inspection, which took place in early September.

The inspection, a rigorous review of all aspects of school life including leadership, teaching, pastoral care, and safeguarding, confirmed that the school met every required standard.

This achievement comes as Argyle House recently celebrated 140 years of educational excellence in Sunderland, reinforcing its legacy as the city's only independent school and a cornerstone of the local community.

The ISI report highlights the school's commitment to high-quality education and its nurturing, inclusive environment. Inspectors praised the strong relationships between staff and pupils, noting that "Staff know the pupils well and are quick to offer consistent and effective support. As a result, pupils develop self-esteem and confidence."

Early Years provision was singled out for particular commendation, with inspectors stating: "Leaders in the Early Years provide an interesting and stimulating curriculum. Children are encouraged to learn, play and

form positive relationships. They develop respect, kindness and confidence."

The report also recognised the school's emphasis on moral and social development, stating: "Pupils learn about equality and respecting people's rights to make individual choices. As a result, they are well prepared for life in British society."

Older pupils impressed inspectors with their maturity and readiness for the future. "The curriculum helps pupils to develop and extend their knowledge and understanding so that they are prepared effectively for the next stage of their education," the report noted.

Leadership and governance were also praised, with inspectors acknowledging that, "Governors provide effective oversight of school policies and the work of leaders and staff," and that they "assure themselves that leaders have appropriate knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities carefully and effectively."

The school's culture of kindness and inclusion was another highlight, with inspectors observing that "Pupils learn to be morally responsible and tolerant towards others," and that "Pupils are provided with opportunities to provide help and service to others within the school community."

Headteacher John Sample expressed his pride in the report, saying, "This inspection outcome is a testament to the dedication of our staff, the enthusiasm of our pupils, and the support of our families and governors. It reflects the spirit of Argyle House, a place where every child is valued and supported to thrive. As Sunderland's only independent school, we are proud to have served this community for 140 years and remain committed to delivering an exceptional education for generations to come."

The full ISI report is available on the Argyle House School website.

Families are invited to visit the school's open morning on 26th November at 9.30am, or meet with Head on Friday 28th November at 9.30am. Email admissions@argylehouseschool.co.uk to book.

www.argylehouseschool.co.uk



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Hendrika takes Comedy Accolade

Laugh Lines and Glory: New Comedy Talent Crowned at 'A Sketch for Sammy'

The search for the North East's next big comedy writer has found its champion! The Sunday for Sammy comedy scriptwriting competition, A Sketch for Sammy, has officially crowned a new recipient of the Ian La Frenais Award — and the laughs were loud and proud.

"We were thrilled to bring back A Sketch for Sammy as part of our mission to uncover and support fresh comedy talent," said Ray Laidlaw, producer of the legendary Sunday for Sammy shows, which will once again storm Newcastle's Utilita Arena on 15th February 2026.

Presented by the mischievously marvellous Kelly Rickard and Cal Halbert, the evening served up a full buffet of brand-new sketches, stand-up, and songs. The audience feasted on local humour — from the lovingly absurd to the gloriously daft — as emerging writers took their turn in the comedy spotlight alongside some familiar funny faces.

This year's final featured original sketches, each with its own take on life in the North East. The night was rounded off with extra comedy chaos from Your Aunt Fanny and Metroland, plus music from Western Quay, all cheerfully held together by hosts Cal and Kelly, whose quick-fire banter kept the laughter rolling from start to finish.

Hendrika Segura Bigg from Heaton, whose brilliantly awkward and side-splitting look at Peeping Toms took the top spot, delighting both the judges and the audience.

The laughter continues when the next full-scale Sunday for Sammy show hits the Utilita Arena on Saturday 15th February 2026.

www.utilitaarena.co.uk/events/detail/sunday-for-sammy



Iconic 80s movie comes to the stage

Producers Naoya Kinoshita, Kumiko Yoshii, John Gore and Kenny Wax are delighted to announce the UK premiere production of **THE KARATE KID – THE MUSICAL** will embark on a major UK Tour next spring, prior to the West End and Broadway. Written by Robert Mark Kamen, screenwriter of the original 1984 movie that launched a 40-year strong global franchise, with music and lyrics by Drew Gasparini, **THE KARATE KID – THE MUSICAL** will visit Sunderland Empire from Tuesday 14 - Saturday 18 July 2026.

The original Karate Kid blockbuster starring Ralph Macchio as Daniel LaRusso and Pat Morita as Mr Miyagi enjoyed spectacular box office success and wide critical acclaim, with Morita receiving an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor. The movie fast became a cultural phenomenon, launching a major global franchise that has included three movie sequels, a 2012 remake starring Jaden Smith and Jackie Chan and the popular Netflix series Cobra Kai (2018 – 2025). This year saw the release of the sixth movie, Karate Kid: Legends starring Jackie Chan and Ralph Macchio. **THE KARATE KID – THE MUSICAL** received its world premiere in St. Louis, USA in 2022, playing to sold out houses with rave reviews from audiences and critics alike.

Bringing the original, now legendary 1984 film to life on stage, this heart-felt coming of age story is reimagined through movement, music, and raw, energetic storytelling. At its heart is the powerful bond between Daniel LaRusso and Mr. Miyagi, who teaches that karate isn't about fighting, it's about balance, dignity, and respect.

A Tony Award-winning design team transform iconic cinematic moments into an emotionally charged, kinetic stage experience. Honouring the roots of the timeless story, this musical celebrates resilience, mentorship, and the quiet strength that bridges generations. Destiny is in your hands – wax on – wax off.

The Beatles arrive at The Glasshouse

On Sunday 23 November, audiences at The Glasshouse can take their seats on the legendary stage of Sage One for an out-of-this-world listening experience: **Afternoon Tea and Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band – The Beatles.**

This is a first at The Glasshouse: a full album playback paired with afternoon tea, served in the same space where countless world-renowned artists have performed.

Guests will enjoy tasty scones, sandwiches and pastries, accompanied by tea, coffee or a glass of fizz. With world-class acoustics and lighting, this listening session presents a rare opportunity to experience Sgt. Pepper in a setting designed to elevate every sonic detail.

A kaleidoscope of sound, colour and experimentation, The Beatles' eighth UK album pushed boundaries like never before, experimenting with rock, psychedelia, classical, Indian influences and music hall vibes. Capturing the spirit of the 1967 Summer of Love, it remains endlessly inventive and feels like stepping into a magical time warp.

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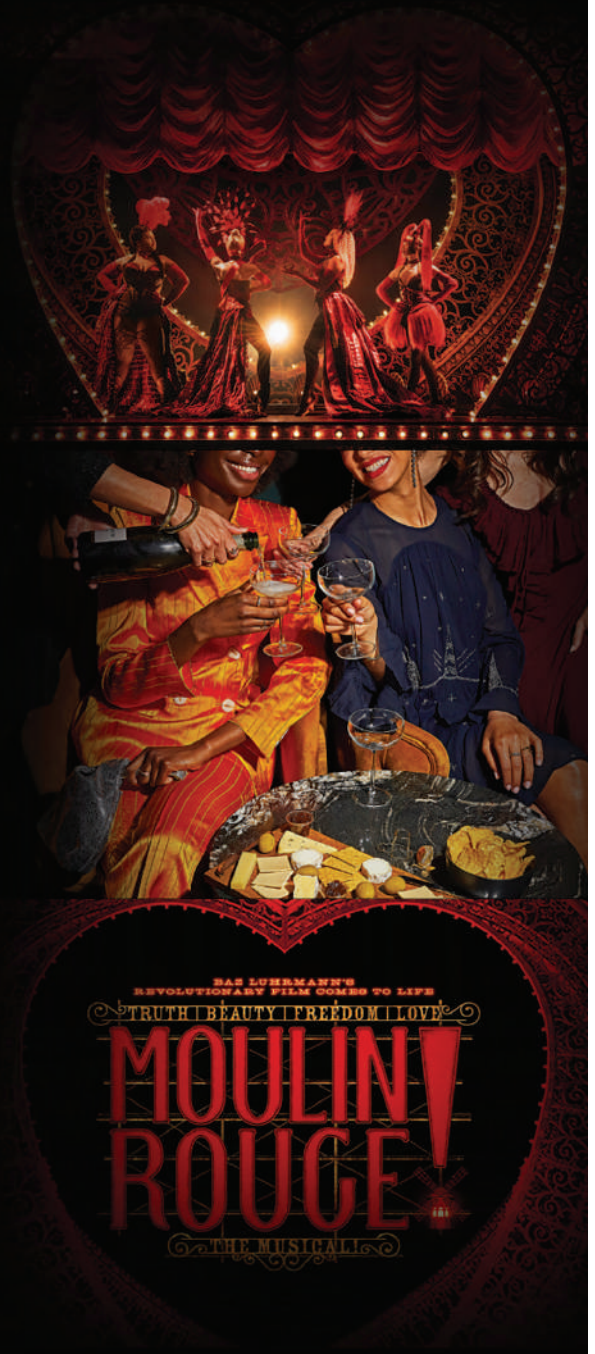
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10th birthday for Project A

*By Phil Hoffmann,
Creative Development Producer at
Newcastle Theatre Royal.*

On the 21st of September 2025, Project A, Newcastle Theatre Royal's professional acting course, hit double figures, turning the ripe old age of 10.

Sitting here thinking about the actors, writers, dancers, directors, facilitators, stage managers and creators that have graduated from the course, I am left with a sense of great pride in them and all they have gone on to achieve: The acting jobs they have won, the work they have created and the legacy they continue to forge as they travel through their creative careers and endeavours.

We started the Project A course to give

young people living in the North East of England the opportunity to train as actors. To offer high-quality tuition at an affordable cost. That they might carve out careers here in the region, feeding and strengthening the creative sector with the exceptional talent that the North East undoubtedly has. The graduates of the course have gone on to do so much more than we ever could have hoped.

Ten years ago, actor training was increasingly beyond the reach of many young people, regardless of talent or ambition. Investment in the storytellers of tomorrow is crucial, across all of our regions and communities. For all of our futures. Giving audiences the opportunity to watch, be mesmerised, entertained and challenged by great art produced, regardless of geography or background. These opportunities were becoming less available, and we wanted to address that.

The course started thanks to the generous support of the Barbour Foundation. Since then, we have come a very long way, and our alumni students have travelled even further. Flying far and wide regionally, nationally and across the globe for acting jobs and to continue their training at some of the most prestigious actor training institutions in the world.

They have performed professionally in every theatre in the North East. On stages across the country (including London's West End), as well as in Europe, America and New Zealand. They have appeared in films and television series that have won Oscars, Baftas and Golden Globes. They have become commissioned writers, choreographers, facilitators, and some of them, parents. In being who they are, they have waved the North East flag high and championed the region in the best way possible. demonstrating the enormous talent that comes from here across multiple artistic genres.

I am smiling now as I sit here remembering all the many successes.

Project A is constantly evolving, the course responding to changing times in our industry and our world. We have overcome many bumps in the road, facing each challenge with trademark Theatre Royal creativity and can-do attitude. The pandemic saw us deliver two years training online when necessary, nurturing the ensemble in isolation when we worked in our bubble in person and producing a major production on film with the young actors spread all over the North of England, to name but one example.

The training road map for actors is developing as well, focusing on a more accelerated format. We are currently adapting to allow our students more professional performance opportunities whilst training with us. You will always learn faster with the motivation of a first night to aim for!

The future here in the North East is looking bright for the creative industries, with the commitment of our new combined authority to support its development and the creation of a world class workforce. My hopes for the future are that Project A will be an intrinsic part of nurturing the next generation of writers, creators, performers and cultural ambassadors, to help lead the way in this industry for decades to come.

Well done to all the Project A alumni for everything you have achieved! We are proud to celebrate you. It is always a great pleasure to see you perform in the shows I go to, and the TV and films I watch, with the odd Christmas advert thrown in to boot.

Raise a glass to Project A at 10. May there be many more years to come. Cheers.

www.theatreroyal.co.uk





Calm before the storm

By Mary Ann Rogers.

As autumn brings a chill to the air, we headed off to Dumfries and Galloway with the e-bikes for a few days holiday before all hell breaks loose as Christmas approaches.

Characterized by an unusually large crop of tree seeds such as nuts and acorns, 2025 is indeed a mast year. We didn't need to be reminded of this as we cycled round the south west of Scotland, the sound of acorns falling onto the road, even occasionally our heads, plus the carpet of beech mast and acorns on the roads and paths we cycled over clearly indicated an extraordinarily high volume of nuts.

For once, a trip away which didn't involve a delivery of paintings, prints or anything work-related, made a nice change. This is just as well, since we ended up having to take the Honda Jazz, which came into my possession after my mother's death. Imagine packing two e-bikes, swimming and cycling kit plus clothes etc for five days, also two bags of logs for the log stove (not used as the place was boiling) plus coats, wellies and our own duvets and pillowcases (we're fussy that way) plus a bag of basic food into a little hatchback. Once everything was out of the car we didn't drive again until the day we left for home. The constantly changing scene at the Solway takes a lot of getting used to.

The sea disappears for hours and hours then races in, where it looks so pretty, and swimming, sailing, fishing etc is all possible, then out it goes again leaving vast areas of shining wet muddy sand for many hours. This raises so many questions, including how people managed to fish from boats. I discovered that Haaf net fishing is a thing in the Solway. Fishermen use huge structures like the things people scoop chips out of the fat in a chippy, but a hundred times bigger. They waded out into the shallow water as the tide comes in and standing chest deep, use these to trap the salmon as they head upriver. Sadly we didn't get a chance to watch the Haaf fishermen.

We cycled, hiked and swam until every part of my body ached and it was time for home.

It's always lovely to get home, especially when there are unfinished paintings to get on with, plus ideas for new ones itching to get out. The colours of the landscape and the trees are quite beautiful at this time of year. Bracken which has turned gold, grass which has deepened in colour, heather now dark and white grass all create a tapestry which has inspired the tweed industry which reflects the autumn colours so perfectly.

As we head into the busiest time of the year, with Christmas fairs, open weekends and online orders filling the days, it's to stop and observe the small changes in this little part on Northumberland every day and cherish every moment.

Mary Ann Rogers Christmas open weekends: Sat 28th, Sun 29th November also Sat 6th, Sun 7th December and Sat 13th & Sun 14th December 10-5. Mulled wine, mince pies and good cheer!

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Americana and Pre-Columbian culture on Route 66 in Illinois

By Stuart Forster

When it comes to epic road trips, America's Route 66 is arguably the world's most famous.

Roadside attractions, museums and signage have been receiving upgrades ahead of the historic highway's centenary in 2026. That means there's no time like the present to plan a journey on 'the Mother Road'.

That term became popular after John Steinbeck used it in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Telling the story of the Joad family's westward journey along Route 66 during the Great Depression, his novel conveys a sense of the hope it offered.

Billy Troup's much-covered song, written in 1946, encouraged people to "get their kicks" on Route 66. The hit further popularised the appeal of driving the 2,448-mile highway between Chicago and Santa Monica.

Unlike today's multi-lane highways, Route 66 had just one lane in each direction when it opened in 1926. An example of that can be seen at Carpenter Park in Springfield, Illinois. Running through towns and cities, the road helped connect communities and supported livelihoods. It was dubbed 'The Main Street of America'.

Over time, the famous highway's route fluctuated as new sections of road were laid and older alignments bypassed. Cutting journey times for long-distance journeys, multi-lane interstates grew in popularity and Route 66 was decommissioned as a highway in 1985.

Nonetheless, the iconic status of the historic route means that the idea of driving on Route 66 remains aspirational for many travellers. Three weeks is typically the recommended duration for a driving holiday along the entire route. Yet

as someone who enjoys pausing frequently to take photographs, I'd prefer far longer, so decided to experience only the 301 miles within Illinois over a week.

Less really can mean more while travelling. A well-planned itinerary – with numerous highlights along the way – allowed plenty of time to chomp on regional delicacies, including a battered cozy dog, a tenderloin sandwich at the Ariston Café in Litchfield and an ice cream cookie sandwich from Uptown Scoops in Collinsville.

With my flight home booked from Chicago, it made sense to hop southwest to St Louis and then drive back towards my departure point – but at nothing near the speeds of well over 300 miles per hour that the drag racers record at the World Wide Technology Raceway in Madison.

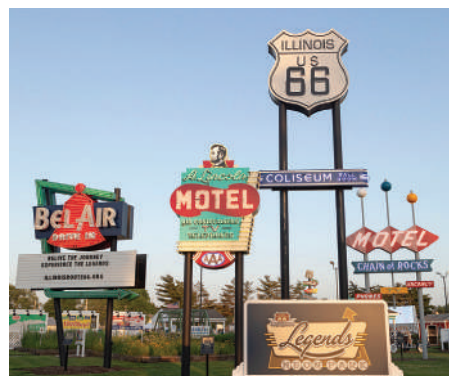
Not all of the highlights along the way were automotive-related or opportunities to embrace 20th-century Americana. Remarkably, the city that occupied what is today Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, in Collinsville, was more populous than London during its heyday – around the year 1100. It is the site of the biggest pre-Columbian earthwork in the Americas. The vast pyramid stands more than 30 metres high and is known as Monks Mound.

West End Service Station in Edwardsville dates from the 1920s and is one of the few remaining stations from that era where drivers refuelled and had opportunities to consult with mechanics. With restored, gleaming red Texaco pumps and period signage, the station hosts a compact museum that tells the story of the historic highway's significance for the local community.

Fibreglass figures standing 20-ft tall were designed to attract motorists' attention, typically indicating the services of businesses through items they held. Known as 'Muffler Men', various examples can be seen along Route 66, including outside of the Pink Elephant Mall in Livingston, whose mid-century ice cream parlour leads into a store packed with pre-loved Americana.

My final stop before Chicago was Old Joliet Prison – out of choice, not necessity – for a guided tour of the correctional facility that featured in the opening scenes of *The Blues Brothers* film.

Easy to follow and enjoy, Route 66 is a well-travelled way that offers insights into the Americas of both yesterday and today.



Travel information

St Louis (STL) is an 85-minute United Airlines flight from Chicago O'Hare International Airport (ORD), which can be reached flying with KLM via Amsterdam Schiphol, Aer Lingus via Dublin and British Airways via London Heathrow.

Visit illinoisroute66.org to discover more about Route 66 in Illinois.

Illinois Office of Tourism (enjoyillinois.com) outlines things to do and see in 'the Prairie State'.

The U.S. National Park Service (nps.gov/subjects/travelroute66/index.htm) has information about the heritage of Route 66.

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Duo revive tradition with beer that puts people first

Electrician Anthony Sewell and gas engineer Scott Borthwick forged successful careers in construction before deciding to take on an additional new challenge together. When the opportunity came to buy a small local brewery, the friends seized it – and relaunched with a philosophy rooted in patience, tradition, and doing things the right way.

Their flagship product, Baylin Lager, is a crisp, clean lager named after their brewery manager James Baylin. Unlike mass-market lagers which can be produced in under a week, Baylin is fermented naturally for three weeks or more. The result is a full-flavoured lager that drinkers describe as “how lager used to taste.”

For Anthony and Scott, the brewery is about more than just beer. Their guiding principle is simple: quality first, no shortcuts. That means: No chemicals added to speed up the process – just water, malt, hops and yeast. Patience over profit, allowing the beer to ferment naturally until it's ready.

“Every business we've run has taught us the same lesson – you've got to do things properly,” said Anthony. “Cut corners, and it comes back to bite you. We'd rather take our time, keep control, and know that every pint we serve is something we're proud of.”



Launch of exciting new spanish tapas bar concept in the North East

The team behind renowned Tomahawk Steakhouse and RIO Brazilian Steakhouse, celebrated for their exceptional dining experiences, are expanding their culinary portfolio with the launch of an innovative new Spanish restaurant concept in the North East.

The fresh new standalone venture, La Terraza will bring authentic Spanish flavours and vibrant dining culture to Yarm's thriving food scene. La Terraza will take over the unused upper floor of the Tomahawk Steakhouse in the town, transforming the space into a bold new tapas concept.

Building on the success and reputation of the Tomahawk Steakhouse chain Tom Sturman, Director and Co-Founder at Tomahawk Steakhouse is excited to introduce the new concept that embraces the spirit of Spain through a carefully curated menu of traditional tapas, signature lunch and dinner dishes, a Spanish led wine list, Sangria and expertly crafted cocktails, with free-flowing Tapas every Sunday from 12-4pm.

Tom Sturman, Co-Founder, La Terraza said: “We are excited to introduce this fresh new concept to Yarm that celebrates the art of tapas while maintaining the quality and service Tomahawk guests expect. Our new Spanish restaurant concept will bring a warm, edgy, and effortlessly cool dining destination to the town.”

Hickory's Smokehouse announce plans to open in Gateshead

The team behind Hickory's Smokehouse, the UK's most beloved Southern-style BBQ restaurants and neighbourhood bars, are thrilled to announce plans to open their second smokehouse in the North East early next year.

Speaking about the opening, Hickory's Managing Director John Welsh said: “We are so excited to be heading to Gateshead - it's an area that's been on our wishlist for a while now, and we're over the moon to finally be planning our first smokehouse in the town and our first in the wonderful county of Tyne & Wear.”

“We'll be spending plenty of time getting to know the area and our ambition is to create something really special. We can't wait to become part of the local community for many years to come. Across all our restaurants we love working with schools, charities, grassroots sports teams and community groups - and Gateshead will be no different.”

The team at Gold Medal have been informed of the exciting plans for the venue. Alongside a significant investment in the new smokehouse and neighbourhood bar, Hickory's will be creating



around 100 new jobs and will be actively recruiting for passionate chefs, servers, bartenders and managers, while also supporting current team members.

Gold Medal is set to close in February 2026 and reopen as Hickory's Smokehouse in Spring 2026.

The team are now busy putting the final touches to their plans and can't wait to share more details early next year.



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Grape Expectations

By Michael Grahmslaw

As regular readers will know, I am partial to a glass or two of vino. I was therefore thrilled to read of the opening of Veeno Durham on the City's Riverwalks.

The wine bar and kitchen captures the magic of Italy's aperitivo culture, offering authentic Italian wines paired with café-sized plates and sharing platters.

Veeno champions wines from small-scale, independent producers while Spuntini boards are also imported from specialist Italian artisan suppliers.

Having visited Sicily this Summer, my wife Lisa and I were immediately transported to happier (and sunnier times).

Lisa, who has developed a palate sharper than mine and a healthy scepticism of anything described as "authentic" had reservations. But, I'm pleased to report, Veeno passed the test.

On a crisp Sunday afternoon, we ventured in, lured by the promise of wine, warmth and a menu that promises a taste of la dolce vita.

What followed was a meal that felt less like dining out and more like being welcomed into someone's home—albeit one with impeccable taste and access to a top vineyard in Marsala.

Fittingly, the atmosphere was relaxed and inviting. Exposed brick, rustic wood, soft lighting, and a wine wall that could double as a passport to Sicily.

From the moment we arrived, we were looked after with genuine warmth—none more so than by our waiter Kieran, who struck the perfect balance between attentive and relaxed.

Friendly without being fussy, he guided us through the menu with the kind of quiet confidence that makes you trust every recommendation and we were certainly made to feel welcome during the final drops of my ever-extending 'birthday month'.

Sounds of chatter and glass-clinking pervade the air while some hearty Italian aromas really got the digestive juices flowing.

Under starter's orders, we began with the Grande Sharing Platter, a winning spread of cured meats, cheeses, olives and bruschetta.

It arrived like a Mediterranean care package—truffle salami, speck, Parmigiano, gorgonzola, and a balsamic glaze that really tied the flavours together.

Lisa declared the bruschetta the "best we've had since Summer."

Following on, I opted for the Paccheri all'Arabiata—a bold, fiery tomato sauce clinging to chunky, al dente pasta. It packed just the right amount of heat to make me reach for my wine, incidentally, an excellent bottle of Grillo much like the ones we enjoyed on our travels.

Lisa chose the Tagliatelle ai Funghi, a silky swirl of pasta with earthy mushrooms and a whisper of garlic. She was quiet for a moment, which is always a good sign.

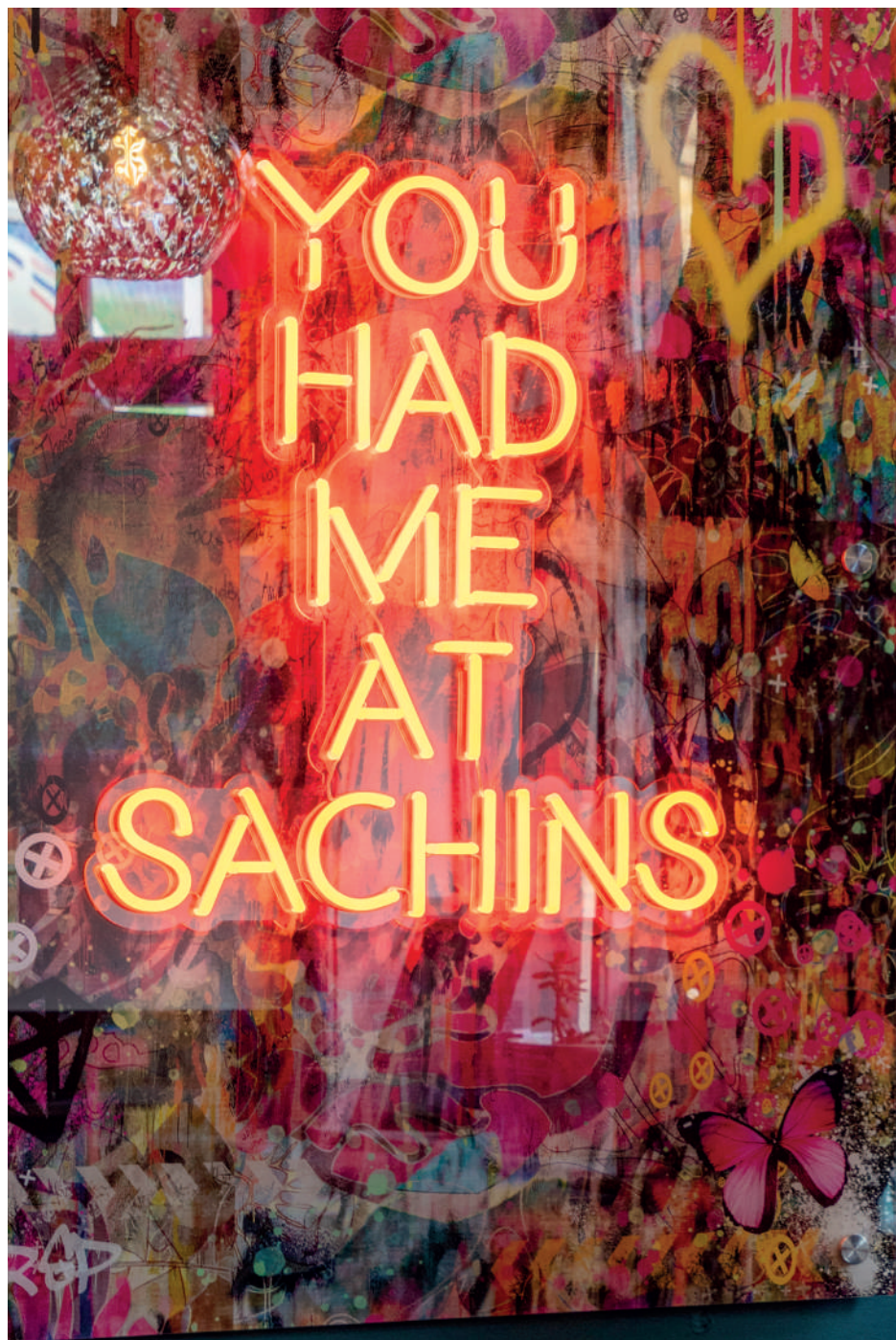


After a meal this good, dessert was always going to be on the cards. Lisa enjoyed the Cannoli Siciliani; crisp pastry shells filled with traditional sweet ricotta. The Tiramisu was textbook—light, boozy, and layered like a good novel.

In a city where dining options are increasingly polished, Veeno offers something relaxed and personal while its wine list will impress even the most seasoned oenophile.

It's a hot ticket to Sicily – minus the passport.

For more information, visit www.veenobars.com/veeno-durham



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Diary of a GM



Jeff Hodgson

Budget Support for Hospitality

By Jeff Hodgson, General Manager, Lumley Castle

As we look towards the upcoming Budget, it's clear that the hospitality sector faces another challenging period. Hotels, restaurants and venues like ours are at the centre of local economies, but rising costs continue to erode already tight margins.

Nationally, hospitality supports around 2.6 million jobs – over 7% of the UK workforce – and contributes more than £62 billion to the economy.

Yet since the last Budget, our sector has lost more than 84,000 jobs, and operating costs show little sign of easing. Energy bills, wages and business rates remain some of the biggest pressures. Even with hotel occupancy levels averaging 76–82%, profitability is being squeezed.

At a recent meeting of the North East Hoteliers Association, these challenges were front and centre of our discussions. It made me reflect on just how important the upcoming Budget will be in shaping the future of our businesses, our teams, and the communities we serve.

If we are to protect jobs and safeguard community assets, government support in this Budget will be vital. Key measures could include:

Business rates reform, extending and increasing relief for hospitality businesses.

Employer National Insurance support, reducing the cost burden of recruitment. VAT reform, to bring the UK more in line with European competitors.

Incentives for investment, particularly in energy efficiency and sustainability.

At Lumley Castle, and across the sector, we are committed to doing our part by improving efficiency, investing in our teams, and continuing to deliver exceptional guest experiences. But long-term resilience requires a fair partnership between business and government.

Hospitality is not only about service and tourism – it's about sustaining jobs, driving growth and anchoring local communities. With the right decisions in the upcoming Budget, we can secure a stronger future for our sector and the places we serve.

www.lumleycastle.com



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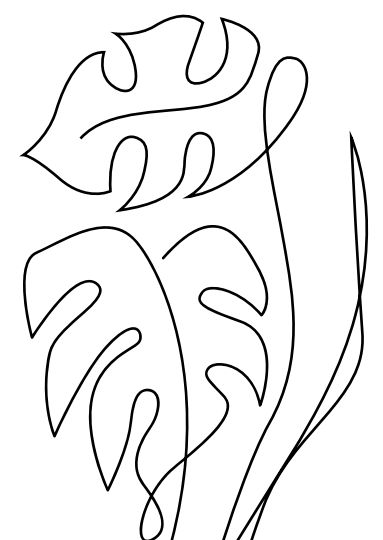


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From Mumbai to Newcastle – The street food pioneers

Dabbawal...bringing the taste of India to Tyneside and launching the delights of street food.



Most of you reading this will at some time have been to an Indian restaurant. It's very easy to flick through a menu and order a particular type of chicken, lamb, seafood, or vegetarian dish without realising that you are delving into India's culinary culture.

Dabbawal in Newcastle is widely recognised as one of the first restaurants in the UK to bring the energy and flavour of Indian street food to the dining table — inspiring a wave of others to follow.

You have a choice of two Dabbawal restaurants Newcastle. One is on Brentwood Mews in Jesmond, while the other is the original Dabbawal restaurant which opened in 2008 on High Bridge in the centre of Newcastle.

The history of Dabbawal food...hence the name of the restaurants in Newcastle...is fascinating. In the bustling streets of India, food is much more than just a meal; it's an experience. It's a culinary tradition that captures the essence of local life. From small, unassuming stalls to elaborate carts on busy street corners, Dabbawal food is an integral part of India's diverse street food culture.

It all started with men cycling around Mumbai delivering freshly made, home-cooked food to thousands of office workers, students and families. Don't confuse this with the sort of delivery folk you see cycling around our cities... the Dabbawalas have been perfecting this incredible system for over a century, carrying meals cooked from recipes passed down through generations. The name "Dabbawal" takes its inspiration from them and from the dabbas, or tiffin boxes, they deliver.

Whether it's enjoying a warm meal after a long day's work or indulging in a snack with friends, Dabbawal food brings people together. Each region of India offers unique variations, ingredients, and preparation methods. For example, a Dabbawal food stall in Mumbai may focus on the city's signature dishes, while one in Delhi could offer its own local delicacies.





And it is this street food culture which has been captured by the Dabbawal restaurants in Newcastle for nearly 20 years

Such has been the success of the food and the way it is presented at Dabbawal, that it was named as the UK's Best Casual Dining Restaurant at the British Curry Awards four times...quite an accolade.

It's fair to say that Dabbawal has led a revolution in casual dining, introducing the UK to its unique take on traditional Indian street food and chaats, tapas-style grazing dishes, classic plates and street combos served in its buzzing kitchens. The interiors are very traditional mixing vintage tiles and timbers with corrugated iron, bamboo, big colours and open kitchens. It's a fabulous setting and always leaves a lasting impression...there's nothing else like it. The restaurants are filled with the aroma of freshly ground spices sizzling in pans, heated over open fires. Just like with the Dabbawals in Mumbai, the Newcastle restaurants use recipes which have been passed through generations. Food preparation involves the same time-consuming methods used throughout history. This is food made the old way...the right way.

As with all street food, dining at Dabbawal isn't fussy. You can expect a relaxed experience with food arriving as it's cooked. Their small plates are ideal for sharing while cultured combinations and big eats can be enjoyed individually. The Dabbawal speciality is a traditional and explosive Bombay Bomb – a twist on the classic Dahi Puri. The Bhel Puri always gets people talking. Whatever you choose, you can be sure every dish would feel at home on even the most cultivated Indian dining table.

Dabbawal are incredibly proud to have started the street food movement in Newcastle— long before it became the nationwide craze it is today, reflecting their forward-thinking spirit.

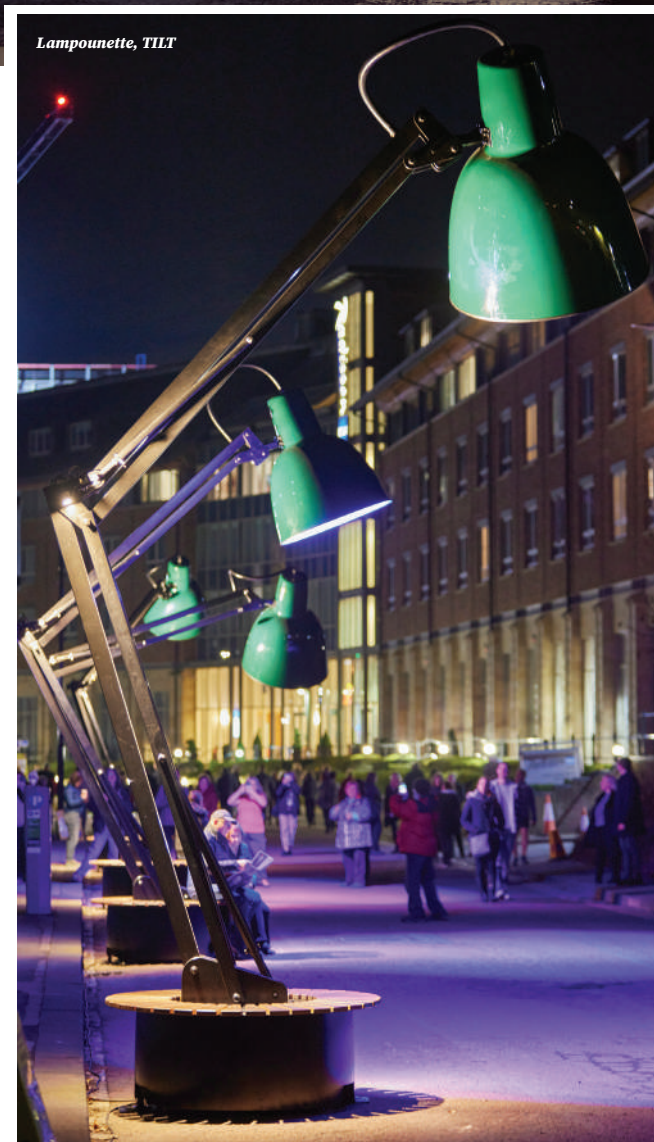
Fancy sampling some pioneering Indian street food? Go to Dabbawal in Jesmond or Dabbawal on High Bridge, Newcastle. Immerse yourself in some Indian street culture and discover how a North East restaurant started the street food craze which swept across the UK.

dabbawal.com





Stuart Lloyd



Lampounette, TILT

The business of culture

Why corporate partnerships matter to Durham's future.

As Durham prepares to glow once again under the lights of Lumiere 2025, Stuart Lloyd, General Manager at Radisson Blu Durham reflects on how a decade-long partnership with Artichoke helped illuminate not just the city's November nights, but its visitor economy, community connections and corporate identity.

A cultural event that sparked a legacy

Few events captured the spirit of Durham quite like Lumiere, the UK's largest light art event. Produced by Artichoke, commissioned by Durham County Council and supported using funding from Arts Council England, it has drawn more than 1.3 million visitors since 2009 and generated over £43 million in economic impact for the region.

For Radisson Blu Durham, situated on banks of the Wear, in the heart of the city, the event represents more than a tourism boost. It's a partnership that brings together hospitality, culture and purpose and one which showed how local businesses can play an active role in the region's creative and economic regeneration going forward.

"Hosting Lumiere has been about more than accommodation, it's about being part of the creative heartbeat that powers Durham, during those unforgettable November nights. And we're proud to have been part of it," says Stuart Lloyd, General Manager at Radisson Blu Durham.

A template for corporate hospitality partnership

The collaboration goes back to the very first Lumiere in 2009. Every two years, the hotel becomes a logistical hub for the event, accommodating over a hundred technicians, artists and organisers as they prepare installations across the city.

In addition to being the official accommodation partner for thousands of new and returning visitors to the event, the hotel also hosts the Sponsor's Preview Night. An exclusive event that thanks local and national backers from across the business community from Prima Cheese and Durham University, New College Durham, Swinburne Maddison to host of trusts and foundations who support the event's learning and participation work, including Point North and the Gillian Dickinson Trust. An opportunity to network, share and celebrate the city.

"It's a great example of how cultural events bring public, private and creative sectors together," adds Lloyd.

Investing in infrastructure for the future

As part of a £5 million refurbishment, Radisson Blu Durham's conference and event facilities have been redesigned to meet growing demand from both cultural and corporate clients.

The Auger Suite, which hosts the Lumiere Sponsor's Supper, now offers advanced AV technology, including InstaShare connectivity and reconfigurable layouts that make it ideal for hybrid events, workshops and creative showcases.

"Our refurbished spaces are about flexibility," Lloyd explains. "They can transform from boardroom to gala dinner, from business summit to arts reception. This perfectly reflects Durham's evolving identity as a city where culture and commerce work together."

Beyond the event: year-round impact

While Lumiere will light up three nights this November, the partnership's benefits have and will endure year-round. The event has contributed to stronger local recognition, new client relationships and repeat business from visitors who first discovered the city during the festival.



Pre-event Coffee



Watchtower, Ron Haselden



Auger Suite



Heron, Jon Voss

Durham's hospitality sector has benefited from the increased national profile that Lumiere has brought. Data from Durham County Council shows sustained visitor growth and a broader range of business tourism since the festival began.

Speaking about the partnership Artichoke's Development Director Ma'ayan Plane said: "Radisson Blu stands out because they truly feel like part of the Lumiere family. Their team understands the festival's scale and spirit, and they go above and beyond to make every guest, artist, and visitor feel welcome. They bring energy, professionalism, and a genuine commitment to everyone staying at the hotel during Lumiere. Their involvement is heartfelt, it's clear they care about Lumiere and what it brings to Durham as much as we do."

Shared values: sustainability and community

Both organisations have shared a strong sustainability ethos. Artichoke works with A Greener Festival to measure and reduce carbon impact, while Radisson Blu Durham continues to embed sustainability into its operations from Culligan refillable water systems throughout guest areas and plastic-free meeting amenities to locally sourced menu items and smart energy management.

"It's about leaving a positive mark on the city, environmentally, socially and culturally," says Lloyd.

Lighting the way forward

As Durham continues to develop its cultural and business offer, the Radisson Blu-Artichoke partnership offers a model for how local business can align commercial success with civic pride.

The Radisson Blu Durham's role as a civic venue has grown beyond Lumiere. Each year, it provides meeting space for the Durham Miners' Gala organisers and hosts major trade union gatherings, including GMB and USDAW conferences.

"We've become a natural home for the city's large-scale events," Lloyd explains. "Whether it's a cultural festival or a community celebration, we're proud to provide the space, the hospitality and the infrastructure bringing the organiser's vision to life in a way that helps Durham shine."

radissonbludurham.com



L-R: Paolo Franchi, founder of Sanco & Jonathan Armitage, investment executive at NEL Fund Managers

Sanco fires up Newcastle food scene with NPIF II – NEL investment

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK - Sanco, a Newcastle-based Neapolitan pizza dining experience, has secured a strategic 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).

Founded by Newcastle local Paolo Franchi, Sanco will bring an innovative and authentic Italian dining concept to the city, serving hand-crafted pizzas baked in a traditional wood-fired oven.

Its unique 'pizza roulette' invites guests to switch on a table light to receive surprise slices of freshly made pizza and switch it off when they're done. The concept offers a fresh take on casual dining, designed to reduce food waste and create a memorable and sociable experience around quality food.

The funding, led by Investment Executive Jonathan Armitage, will support the launch of the restaurant, which is set to open next week. Rooted in authentic Italian techniques, bold flavours and sustainability, customers can expect traditional pizzas, with ingredients imported from Italy and served in a vibrant, welcoming setting.

Jonathan Armitage, investment executive at NEL Fund Managers, commented: "NEL is building a track record of supporting fantastic businesses and brands in the

leisure and hospitality sector across the North East. We're absolutely delighted to add Sanco to our portfolio.

"Paolo brings a wealth of knowledge, experience and professionalism to the business and it was a pleasure to work with him. We're excited to see this new concept fully launched in a city recently crowned as best in the UK for food and drink and we look forward to seeing the business go on to be a great success."

Paolo Franchi, founder of Sanco, expressed: "It was an absolute pleasure dealing with Jonathan and the NEL team. I received invaluable support and guidance throughout the entire process, particularly the due diligence stage. It was fantastic to see how genuinely passionate the team was about my business, and I can't wait to launch and see what we achieve.

"Being a local lad starting up a business in the city I love means everything to me. I'm so glad to have taken this step and explored what was possible with NEL and NPIF II funding. I'd encourage anyone in a similar

position to investigate the support that's out there."

Sarah Newbould, senior investment manager at the British Business Bank, said: "NPIF II is committed to backing innovative ventures like Sanco. Paolo has created a sustainable, fresh and boundary-pushing dining experience that redefines the norm and reduces food waste. We're excited to see Sanco launch and can't wait to see what they go on to achieve."

The £660m Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIFII) 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 purpose of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II is to drive 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.

NEL Fund Managers are also managing the NPIF II – NEL Debt Finance which offers Debt Finance from £100,000 to £2m to established businesses looking to realise their growth potential.

For more information about NEL, please visit www.nel.co.uk or contact the investment team on 0345 369 7007.

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Ember: Sunderland's culinary firestarter

When Ember opened its doors at Sheepfolds Stables a year ago, few could have predicted just how much heat it would bring to Sunderland's culinary scene.

In a city better known for its football chants and shipbuilding heritage than boundary-pushing gastronomy, Ember has quietly – and then not so quietly – flipped the script.

Ember opened its doors with quiet confidence and bold ambition. Tucked inside one of the city's most exciting regeneration projects, it promised to do something different: not just serve exceptional food, but tell stories through flavour.

2025 was their 'Tour of the World' - a culinary odyssey that challenged their chefs to recreate dishes exactly as they'd be found in their home countries. The results were daring, delicious, and often unexpected. Some menus surprised. All impressed. Along the way, Ember earned a coveted place in the Good Food Guide, cementing its reputation as one of the North East's most compelling dining destinations.

When speaking with the team at Ember,

they said: "We have just celebrated a huge milestone at Ember: one year at Sheepfolds. What a ride it's been!

2025 was our Tour of the World, with menus that pushed our chefs to recreate dishes as you would find them in their home countries. Some were wild, all were unforgettable. We also got into the Good Food Guide which is an incredible achievement and we are incredibly proud. December will be our grand finale - a showcase of this year's favourites, plus a Christmas dinner that's already making us hungry.

As for 2026 we are keeping it under wraps for now, but it will be something you won't expect to find in Sunderland and very much Ember, pushing boundaries as far as we can."

For me, Ember is more than a restaurant. It's a statement of intent and a sign that the North East's culinary evolution isn't limited to the bigger cities. It represents a new cultural rhythm for Sunderland - one that values creativity, ambition and world-class experiences without losing its sense of place. Its home, Sheepfolds, has become a canvas for reinvention: industrial heritage repurposed into a hub for culture, dining, and nightlife. In that setting, Ember shines as a kind of culinary theatre - immersive, surprising, and deeply rooted in storytelling.

This December, Ember will stage its grand finale, but the real intrigue lies in what comes next. 2026 remains under wraps, but the team hints at something wholly unexpected - another bold chapter in this city's unfolding story.

Sunderland may not have been on every foodie's map before - but Ember is making sure it will be.

theember.co.uk





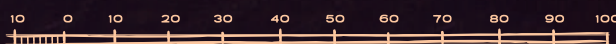
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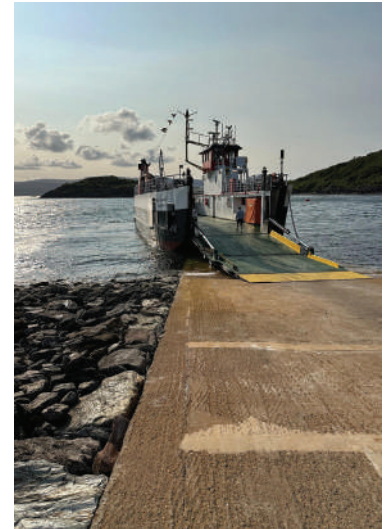


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 MICHELIN RECOMMENDED  AA ROSETTE AWARD * TASTE OF THE NORTH EAST WINNER

Places to go...Dunoon



Unusually for this column, I am writing a “Part Two” to tell the rest of my three night stay in Dunoon, but also to reflect on the “nearly zero carbon” nature of my journeys in this long-running series which in some magazines goes back to 2003.

Each time I travel, I usually go by train and occasionally by bus, these being vehicles which will make the journey anyway, whether I am travelling on them or not. Accordingly, if I am riding on a train the extra fuel cost (in electricity or diesel) to move my 100kg is tiny, whereas if I take a car real carbon is emitted to move not only my weight, plus any passengers, and the weight of the vehicle itself. In terms of real carbon emissions, going by bus or train is hugely more beneficial.

I had spent Saturday out in Inverary and the Mull of Kintyre and returning on the last ferry from Tarbert to Portavadie. The hourly ferry was a good deal more frequent than the bus, but the bus – even at 1900 Saturday – was well used with local people making the journey between villages. On the Sunday morning I took a taxi (my mode of last resort) to the outskirts of town to join the congregation of the Episcopal (Anglican) church, where the minister is Rev David Rushton, formerly of St Chad's College, Durham. Unfortunately he was out of town. After a rousing family service, I was given a lift into the town by two members of the congregation, and ended up at the Argyll Hotel where I was staying.

Options were rather limited for Sunday afternoon. First choice, even though rain was forecast, was Benmore, a branch of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. I had passed it the previous day on the way up to Inverary and was looking forward to seeing their Giant Redwoods and special gardens featuring plants from Chile and Bhutan. Their leaflet referred to a shuttle bus from Dunoon to the gardens, seven miles north. I phoned several times for details, but no answer, and I wondered why they could not just give fuller details in the leaflet or on the website.

Despite its pleasures, a wet Sunday afternoon stuck in Dunoon itself did not appeal. I decided to repeat my experience of using a mobile bus ticket, for the £7.40 Dunoon/Cowal 24 Hour Area. There's only one bus, route 489, out of the depot on a Sunday, which runs between Ardentinnny and Toward (yes, towards Toward!) which is a single shift for one driver. It serves all the coastal communities on the Cowal peninsula, and offered the chance to visit Blairmore and Innellan with fine coastal views. There was also the opportunity to look inland to see the fine Victorian and Edwardian houses built

for families who did well out of the industrialisation of the River Clyde.

Whilst I would not particularly recommend an afternoon shuttling between the villages, I had a very good afternoon tea at Blairmore and a walk on the pier and the beach, and a pootle around the village of Innellan with a textbook style public toilet and waiting facility, pictured. The 24 Hour area ticket was, of course, still valid on the following morning. Caledonian MacBrayne don't operate at certain times to allow for crew rest periods, so I was able to use my bus ticket to reach Hunters Quay where the competing Western Ferries service sails to McInroy's Point, Gourock. A short bus ride into Gourock station had me quickly on the train to Glasgow and onward to Carlisle and home.

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Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle join forces with Radio Northumberland

Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle are teaming up with community broadcaster Radio Northumberland to provide listeners with regular up-to-date information and advice about health and social care services across both locations.

The new partnership aims to help local people better understand and access the care and support available to them, while also giving them a platform to share their experiences and influence how services are delivered in the future.

Yvonne Probert, Chief Executive Officer of Tell Us North CIC, the organisation that manages both Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle, said: "We're delighted to be working with Radio Northumberland to reach even more people who use services in Newcastle and Gateshead. This collaboration will help



ensure that everyone has access to trusted information about local health and care services, and that their voices are heard when it comes to shaping the support they need."

Keith Newman, Director of Radio Northumberland, added: "As a community radio station, we're passionate about connecting people and sharing stories that make a real difference. This partnership allows us to provide our listeners with valuable, reliable information on topics that directly affect their wellbeing."

Regular features and interviews will be broadcast on Radio Northumberland, which is based in New Hartley and serves listeners across the North East and beyond.



Turning 'Disabled' to 'Enabled'

"Turning 'disabled' to 'enabled' is more than a statement. It's a mindset that produces positive outcomes," says John McDonald, Tynemouth based Disability Consultant and Founder of Eagles Wings Consultancy, who brings over 20 years of experience within the healthcare sector to his mission of promoting disability inclusion.

John's journey is both personal and professional. In 2016, he was diagnosed with bowel cancer and hydrocephalus (fluid on the brain). Though treatments addressed both conditions, complications during brain surgery left him with lasting deficits, including fatigue and balance issues.

"Despite the challenges, I've developed coping strategies that allow me to lead a meaningful life both professionally and personally," John explains. "My experience has deepened my understanding of the real barriers people face—not just physical ones, but social and attitudinal too."

Motivated by his experiences, John founded Eagles Wings Consultancy to help bridge the gap between organisations and individuals living with disabilities, neurological conditions, or invisible illnesses. The consultancy offers expert advice, training, and practical strategies to foster more inclusive workplaces.

"Many companies already have policies and procedures in place, but there's often room for improvement," John says. "Sometimes it's not about expensive structural adaptations—it's about supportive attitudes, flexibility, and open communication."



Tyneside Doctor leads new effort to deliver frontline ambulances to Ukraine

Dr. Anatoliy Telpov, an Emergency Department doctor at South Tyneside District Hospital, has teamed up with local boxing clubs and FSNE Medical Group to send two frontline ambulance vehicles and a 17-seat minibus to Ukraine.

"This project focuses on getting evacuation vehicles directly to frontline brigades and hospitals," said Dr. Telpov. "The aim is to create an efficient chain so that wounded soldiers can be quickly evacuated and reach medical care faster."

The latest delivery includes a fully equipped frontline ambulance destined for a military hospital, a Land Rover 4x4 ambulance going to a frontline brigade

and a 17-seat minibus provided by Empire School of Boxing in Blyth, which will be used to move personnel and supplies near the front line.

FSNE Medical, led by Craig and Melissa Douglas, have donated the two ambulance vehicles. The company previously supported Dr. Telpov's efforts by funding earlier deliveries and vehicle costs.

"This will be the third and fourth vehicle we've donated," said Craig Douglas, Director of FSN Medical. The ambulance is a full NHS-spec vehicle with all the essential equipment, and the Land Rover 4x4 will help reach patients in hard-to-access areas."

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The Holistic Self-Care Kit Company Launches

Helping people slow down, heal, and reconnect.

An innovative self-care offering has officially been launched by a disabled mum, bringing solutions to people in need of wellbeing boosts where more prescriptive methods do not work or are not on offer.

Featuring handmade self-care kits the company is supporting stress relief, restful sleep, emotional balance, and everyday wellbeing – all in one small box.

Founded by Allison Rose-Mannall, The Holistic Self-Care Kit Company was born from her own journey of healing. After years of juggling the pressures of modern life, Allison experienced the toll of burnout and anxiety firsthand. What started as her personal search for grounding practices and natural tools to support her wellbeing eventually grew into a passion for sharing those same practices with others.

“All too often, self-care is treated like an indulgence, something you ‘fit in’ if you have the time,” said Allison. “But for me, it became my lifeline. When I was at my lowest, small rituals – breathing with an affirmation card, rolling on a calming oil blend, holding a crystal during meditation – gave me moments of peace I desperately needed. I created The Holistic Self-Care Kit Company so that others wouldn’t feel alone in those moments of overwhelm. These kits are like a gentle reminder: you are worthy of care.”

Each kit is lovingly assembled in Norwich and designed to be more than a product – they’re tools for building sustainable self-care habits. Popular offerings include:

- **Roller blends** such as “Overworked, Underslept, & Out of Fcks™”, created to soothe the nervous system and support sleep.



Allison Rose-Mannall

- **Children’s kits**, like the “Calm Bubble Kit”, made to help kids discover calming rituals of their own.
- **Targeted blends** such as “Ouch! The Blend” (Pain without Pills relief), designed for natural pain relief; and “Winter Mood Magic” – an uplifting blend for SAD and Winter Blues.
- **Gift Kits** for teachers, Halloween and Christmas are also available.

Allison’s latest release is an innovative solution for women experiencing menopause – Hormones and Hellfire including a cooling calm roller blend and Hot Mess Rescue Kit is designed to settle hormonal chaos.

Beyond their function, the products carry Allison’s values: they’re vegan, cruelty-free, eco-conscious, and handmade with intention.

For Allison, this company is not just about wellness products – it’s about building a community where people feel supported, empowered, and seen. “Every affirmation card I tuck into a box, every crystal I

choose – it’s a way of sending love and care out into the world. I want each person who opens a kit to feel held.”

The kits are available to purchase on theholisticselfcarekitcompany.com/collections/all

Look for The Holistic Self-Care Company on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook too for hints tips and a community to support you whatever your challenge!

About The Holistic Self-Care Kit Company

Based in Norwich, UK, The Holistic Self-Care Kit Company crafts natural, handmade wellness kits filled with essential oils, crystals, roller blends, affirmation cards and more. Created by founder Allison Rose-Mannall following her own journey through burnout and healing, the company exists to make self-care simple, accessible, and meaningful for adults and children alike. All products are vegan, cruelty-free, and sustainably packaged.

theholisticselfcarekitcompany.com



A rebellious response to the return of 90s diet culture

As fitness culture slips back toward the restrictive, body-focused messaging of the 90s and 00s, Body Image Fitness (BIF) is breaking the mould with the opening of its new bright and unapologetically colourful studio gym in Heaton, Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Founded by Kim Stacey, described by *The Telegraph* as a “fitness guru reshaping how we see our bodies”, Body Image Fitness offers a weight-neutral, non-diet approach to movement that prioritises strength, confidence, and community over aesthetics or numbers on a scale.

“It feels like diet culture is trying to make a comeback, more so than ever,” says Kim Stacey, Founder of Body Image Fitness. “You can see it in the language, the ‘body

transformation’ trends, even the gym aesthetics. But we’re not here to shrink ourselves or dim our light, we’re here to move, feel powerful, and take up space.”

The new studio is a rebellious response to the intimidating black, industrial-style gyms that dominate the industry. Instead, the space bursts with colour, warmth, and joy, featuring pink and blue dumbbells, pastel weights, pink-speckled flooring, and a proudly displayed Pride flag as a

statement of inclusion and celebration.

“Our space is designed to feel safe, joyful, and vibrant,” Stacey adds. “We want people to walk in and think, this feels different. Because it is.”

Every class at Body Image Fitness is built around inclusivity and empowerment. With small-group personal training, boxing, yoga, and beginners’ weightlifting courses, instructors are trained in trauma-informed, neurodiverse-friendly, and body-positive coaching, ensuring everyone feels welcome, no matter their background, size, or ability.

As the fitness world once again flirts with diet culture nostalgia, Body Image Fitness stands out as a joyful rebellion, a space where movement is about empowerment, community, and colour.

For further information visit the website: www.bodyimagefitness.com

Body Image Fitness Studio Gym opened in October 2025 in Heaton, Newcastle Upon Tyne.





The Fine Line: Expectations, trends, and ethics in Aesthetics

By Hannah Dodds, Founder of Self Medical Aesthetics.

The world of aesthetics is evolving. For too long, it's been seen through a lens of vanity, filters, and unrealistic trends.

But a quiet shift is happening; patients now seek integrity, professionalism, and trust, and for me, that's where the true value of aesthetic medicine lies

Unfortunately, this transformation is taking place in a climate of unregulated practice and inconsistent education. With few legal safeguards around who can deliver aesthetic treatments in the UK, patients are often left vulnerable, unsure who to trust or where to turn.

According to Save Face's 2025 Non-Surgical Complaints and Complications Report, thousands of patients continue to experience adverse outcomes each year, with the majority linked to unregistered, non-medical providers. This highlights the urgent need for stronger standards, better education, and accountability across the industry.

At Self Medical Aesthetics, we believe aesthetic medicine should never be about perfection. It's about confidence, education, and empowerment. My professional journey began in the NHS over a decade ago as a Registered Nurse at Sunderland Royal Hospital, later progressing to a Public Health Specialist Nurse in the community, where patient safety and safeguarding were at the heart of every decision. That ethos now forms the foundation of everything we do in

clinic. Our ethos is simple: we put patients first.

An ethical approach to aesthetics starts long before the treatment room. It's about honest consultation, realistic outcomes, and transparency. Every patient deserves to be fully informed, respected, and given space to make decisions without pressure or judgment.

Whether it's anti-wrinkle injections, skin boosters, or regenerative treatments, my aim is not to enhance beauty, it's to build confidence and guide patients toward treatments that are medically suitable for their individual needs.

In recent years, we've seen a welcome shift in attitudes. Patients are more discerning, practitioners are becoming more accountable, and conversations around safety are louder than ever. In 2025, the UK Government reaffirmed its plans to introduce a national licensing scheme for non-surgical cosmetic procedures, aimed at improving patient safety and ensuring only appropriately qualified practitioners perform higher-risk treatments (Aesthetics

Journal, 2025; GOV.UK, 2025). While consultation and legislation are still ongoing, it's clear that regulation is no longer optional, it's essential.

As practitioners, we must balance innovation with responsibility. The rise of regenerative treatments and advanced skin therapies offers exciting opportunities, but clinical evidence and patient safety must remain our foundation. Progress is only meaningful when it's grounded in ethics. Running a clinic in this environment also means leading by example, showing that medical aesthetics can be compassionate, professional, and empowering.

Sadly, the lack of regulation and the ease of access to low-quality training courses have created a space where unqualified individuals can legally perform medical procedures.

This not only confuses patients but also challenges ethical practitioners to uphold higher standards in an increasingly unregulated environment.

At Self Medical Aesthetics, we choose the opposite: to educate, to protect, and to raise the bar. We refer when needed, we prioritise safety over sales, and we hold our integrity, even when it means saying "no."

Over the coming months, this column will explore the evolving world of aesthetic medicine, from ethics and education to innovation, entrepreneurship, and patient wellbeing. My aim is to open conversations that inspire confidence, deepen understanding, and highlight the professionalism behind safe, evidence-based practice.

www.selfmedicaesthetics.com

On the Tee Box - City of Newcastle Golf Club



Location

Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne - conveniently situated just off the Great North Road, with easy access from the A1 and surrounding areas. The course enjoys a peaceful parkland setting on the edge of the city.

Setting

A parkland course offering a challenging and enjoyable layout for golfers of all abilities. Immaculately maintained fairways and greens combine with tree-lined vistas to make every round memorable.

Length of Course

Men's: 6,444 yards | Ladies': 5,474 yards

Facilities

- 18-hole parkland course in excellent condition year-round
- Practice area, short-game area, and putting green
- Fully stocked Pro Shop with PGA professional coaching by Professional Steven McKenna and Assistant Professional Alex Dixon
- Modern clubhouse with restaurant, bar, and function suites
- Bar and restaurant open to the public, serving quality food and drinks in a welcoming setting
- Visitor golf parties and society bookings warmly welcomed
- Event and room hire for events, celebrations, and corporate occasions
- Buggies and trolleys available for hire
- Regular social events for members, guests and visitors

Longest Hole

15th Hole - 521 yards

A true test of distance and accuracy. A well-placed tee shot opens up a demanding approach to a protected green on this long par 5.

Toughest Hole

16th Hole

A challenging par 4 that rewards precision from tee to green. With trees framing the fairway, par here is always hard-earned.

Signature Hole

14th Hole - "Wee Gem"

A beautifully designed short par 3 that lives up to its name. Precise club selection is key on this stunning and memorable hole.

Course Record

Phil Ridden - 61

Competitions

With five competitions each week, City of Newcastle offers a full calendar of events - including mixed competitions, men's and women's fixtures, and seniors' matches.

Membership

A variety of membership categories are available to suit all golfers.

Full details and prices can be found on the club's website.

www.cityofnewcastlegolfclub.com

Fern Snailham: Redefining success at City of Newcastle Golf Club

Bold leadership and fresh thinking are transforming one of the North East's most respected golf clubs.

When Fern Snailham became General and Commercial Manager at City of Newcastle Golf Club in October 2024, she brought fresh energy and business acumen to one of the region's most respected clubs. Less than a year later, she's been named among the top three finalists for the GCMA Newcomer of the Year 2025 awards, recognised nationally for her leadership and transformative results.

"Fern Snailham isn't just managing a golf club - she's redefining what leadership in golf looks like."

Driving change with purpose

A former Entrepreneur of the Year award winner, Fern brought a proven record of innovation and commercial success. Though new to golf, her entrepreneurial mindset has driven a modern approach focused on growth, member engagement, and long-term sustainability.

Under her leadership, the club has been revitalised, hospitality enhanced, partnerships strengthened, and operations modernised.

Fern is defining a new era of club leadership - driven by creativity, inclusivity, and the ambition to shape what's next.

The GCMA Award winners will be announced on Monday 17th November 2025.

www.cityofnewcastlegolfclub.com

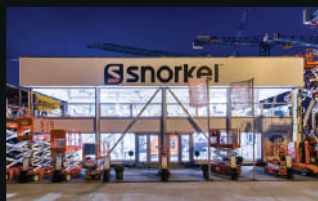


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Finding calm in a world that won't slow down

By Craig from Clear Mind Meditation.

Hello! I'm Craig, founder of Clear Mind Meditation, and I'm delighted to be writing a monthly column for Northern Insight. Each month, I'll share practical tools and insights from the world of meditation and wellness - designed to help you live with more clarity, calm, and resilience.

Let's begin with a question: why is it so hard to feel calm?

The answer lies in our nervous system. Most of us are stuck in "fight or flight" - the body's ancient stress response. To understand why, let's rewind 50,000 years to our hunter-gatherer ancestors. Life was simple, but dangerous. Imagine you are faced with a sabre-toothed tiger, the body would respond instantly: heart racing, muscles tensing, adrenaline and cortisol flooding the system. Once the threat passed, the body would return to baseline.

Back then, this stress response activated maybe 1-5 times per week. Today? It's triggered 20-50 times per day. Not by predators, but by deadlines, traffic, financial pressure, and the constant hum of digital noise. Our bodies react as if we're under threat - but we rarely get to "fight" or "flee." Instead, we stay stuck in tension, dysregulating our nervous system and affecting sleep, focus, and overall wellbeing.

So how do we shift out of this state?

Meditation is one of the most effective tools we have. Start with just 10 minutes a day, ideally in the morning. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and rest your awareness on the breath. When thoughts arise - as they will, gently let them dissolve and return to the breath. With patience and consistency, you'll begin to notice your triggers, regulate your responses, and find a sense of inner stillness.



One technique I love is Black and White Breathing. Take a deep breath in and imagine white, warm light filling your body - bringing peace and calm. Hold for a few seconds. As you exhale, picture thick black smoke leaving your body, releasing tension, stress, or anything you're ready to let go of. You can use this on the spot (say, stuck in traffic or before a big meeting) or as part of a deeper meditation practice.

In a world that rarely pauses, these small rituals can really help us reconnect with our true inner essence, of stillness and peace.

Be kind to yourself, see you next month....Craig.

Stress & resilience for high-performing teams

Avoiding burnout before Christmas

As the year draws to a close, workloads rise, deadlines loom, and energy often dips. For many teams, November becomes the perfect storm, long hours, festive pressures, and the mental fatigue that comes from pushing hard all year.

But high performance doesn't have to mean high stress. In fact, the most successful teams are those who know when to pause, reset, and recharge. Building resilience isn't about working harder, it's about working smarter and recovering better.

I'm Cheryl, a menopause wellness and workplace strength coach. Through my work with organisations like the NHS and NatWest, I've seen how simple mindset shifts and movement-based strategies can completely transform energy, focus, and morale, especially in the run-up to Christmas.

3 simple ways to boost resilience at work:

Move often: Just 5-10 minutes of movement can reduce stress hormones and improve focus. Encourage stretch breaks or walking meetings.

Check in, don't check out: Regular, honest team conversations about workload help prevent silent burnout.



Recover with intention: Quality rest, hydration, and boundaries are not luxuries, they're performance tools.

As we head into one of the busiest times of the year, take a moment to invest in your team's wellbeing. A small step now can prevent burnout and boost productivity when it matters most.

Book your "Resilience Reset" workshop before the January rush

Let's help your team finish the year strong and start the next one even stronger.

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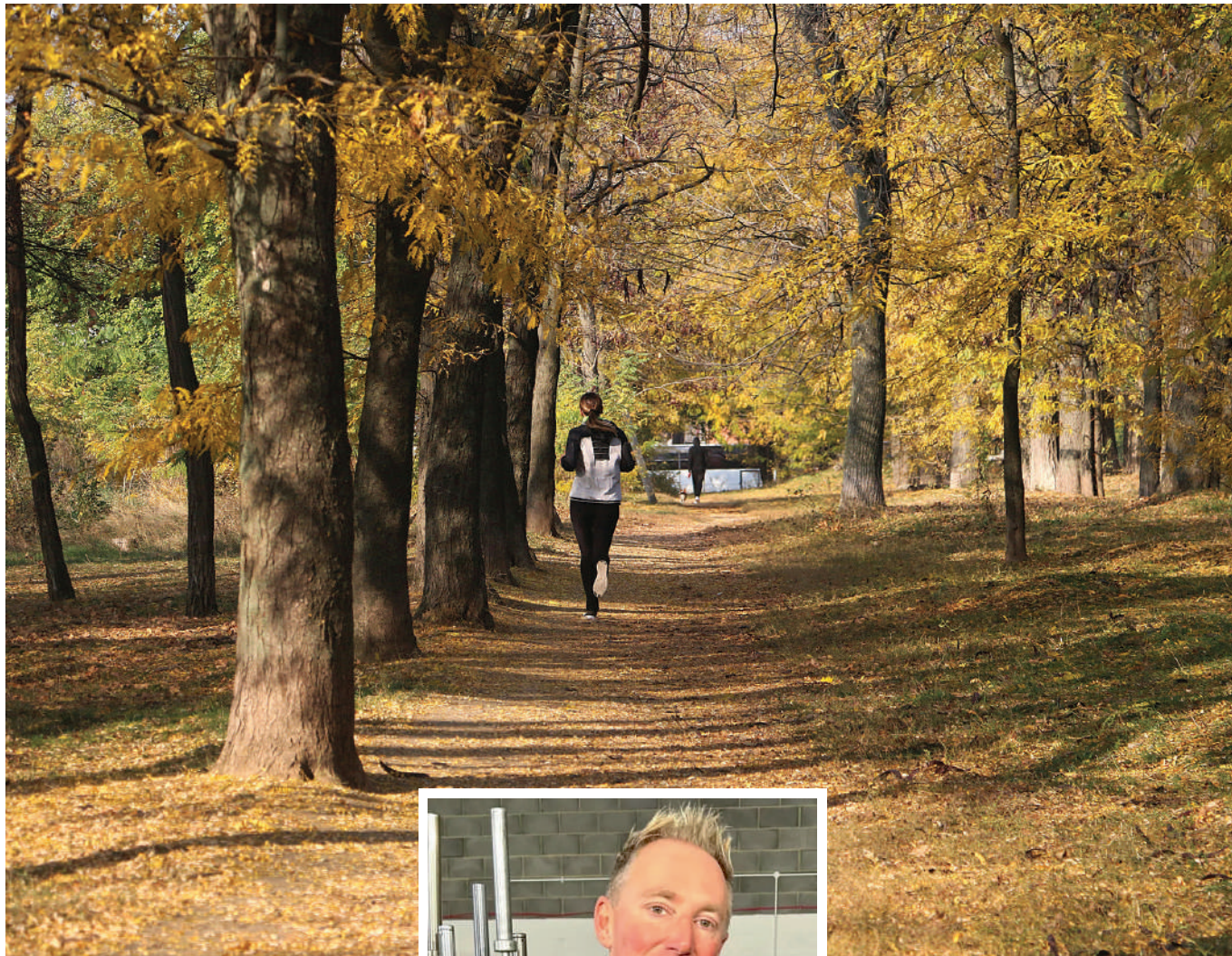
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The Seasonal Effect

Just because the nights are drawing in doesn't mean it's time to overindulge and hide beneath bigger, bulkier clothes.

Waiting until next year to make a change won't get you anywhere. If you want to reach and maintain a healthy weight, you need lasting lifestyle changes ongoing, rather than seasonal efforts.

The reality is worrying, obesity rates are at an all-time high, especially here in the North East. One in three children now leaves primary school overweight, a shocking statistic that reflects how unhealthy habits have been passed down through generations. Things won't improve until we take personal responsibility for ourselves and for our children. The earlier we act, the more chance we have of breaking this cycle and building healthier, happier lifestyles.

The good news is positive change doesn't



David Fairlamb

have to be drastic. Often it's about making small, consistent choices that soon become new habits. These changes may seem minor at first, but together they build momentum and create a powerful long term impact on both your body and mind.

Here are a few of my tips:

- Take the stairs instead of the lift whenever possible.
- Swap white bread, pasta, and rice for whole grain alternatives.
- Add extra protein instead of extra carbs, protein keeps you fuller for longer and is lower in calories.
- Eat fruit instead of drinking it. Smoothies can pack in far more calories than you'd normally eat whole.

- Be honest about those small treats with tea or coffee, cut them back or cut them out.
- Make your own lunch. Shop bought so called healthy options are often high in fat or sugar. Preparing your own ensures you know what's going into your body.
- Drink more water, especially before meals, to help prevent overeating.
- Use a smaller plate, your brain will think you've had a bigger meal than you actually have.
- Watch your sugar intake. 4g equals 1 teaspoon. Adults should aim for no more than 28g per day. Check labels and cut back where you can.

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David's Summing Up

Small, daily changes add up. Stick with them over weeks, months, and years, and the results can be life-changing. Not only will you feel better physically, but your energy levels, sleep quality, and confidence will also improve.



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Barry Speker OBE

Comment

By Barry Speker OBE

Too much attention can be paid to opinion polls when there may be four years until the next general election.

However, recent polls make alarming reading for both of the (currently) major parties, suggesting stated voting intentions indicate that Reform could win over 400 seats.

Reform is said to attract centre and right of centre voters from Labour and Conservatives. Hence the Labour conference aimed at decrying Reform and its leader.

Now it is suggested the bigger threat to Labour is from the Green Party, attracting left-wing voters, disillusioned by Labour's claimed shift to the right on welfare, migration and transgender rights, and the Greens' extreme views on Gaza. They now have 126,000 members, which is more than the Tories. Some of their policies attracting Labour voters include nationalising gas and electric companies, a strident wealth tax and banning domestic flights between British airports if travelling by train takes less than three hours.

It won't be long before the new extreme leftie Jeremy Corbyn party, as yet with neither a name nor an identity, jumps into bed with the Greens.

Against this background, the Chancellor will be struggling to devise an impending budget which is acceptable to her party and avoiding further serious damage to public

finances, the cost of living and the prospect of growth. There is a massive hole in the national finances (the blame for which can no longer be placed on the previous government). How will the budget on November 26 deal with this?

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research postures that the shortfall is now £50 billion. This is deeply uncomfortable in the context of Rachel Reeves' previous budget, which unleashed on the UK no less than £40 billion in tax rises, largely but not solely focussed on businesses and high earners. The raising of national insurance on employers, abolition of non-dom status, increase in capital gains tax and increased stamp duty on second homes have all had serious and in some cases unintended consequences. Rather than 'fixing' the economy, they have seriously damaged it.

Increased taxation has shaken business confidence, discouraged recruitment and increased the thousands fleeing the country to avoid a punitive tax regime.

How will the Chancellor demonstrate a pro-growth agenda? From where will she produce the extra revenue?

It is predicted that the target is the 'better off' (who don't see themselves as better off or having the so-called 'broad shoulders'). Ideas include capital gains tax on sales of higher value main residences, cutting the cash ISA allowance and the tax-free pension lump sum.

Such measures will cause pain to the asset-rich but cash poor, discourage pension saving, paralyse the housing market and increase rents. More unintended consequences?

A night of joy for Newcastle United defeating Benfica 3-0 in the Champions League. What a great atmosphere, and a nostalgic tribute by Worflags to hero and former manager Joe Harvey.

The banning of Maccabi Tel Aviv football fans from attending their team's match with Aston Villa, sparked understandable outrage as an act of antisemitism.

Birmingham MP Ayoub Khan and Jeremy Corbyn had petitioned for the ban, falsely alleging that the fans are 'violent' and 'hooligans'. The petition showed the real purpose was a political attack on Israel in

relation to Gaza - but no reference made to or condemnation of Hamas.

The investigation of violence at a 2024 match in Amsterdam between Ajax and Maccabi Tel Aviv, found there had been a planned premeditated attack by several hundred Arabs and Muslims which they called a "Jew-Hunt". The Khan-Corbyn petition misrepresented the truth of what happened.

Although the PM and other political leaders have called out the Birmingham ban as wrong and said they were working to reverse it, the clear picture was that the police in Birmingham claimed they were unable to keep the away supporters safe from violent attack by people in Birmingham.

To their credit Maccabi Tel Aviv then announced that they would not take an allocation of any tickets for the match in order to protect their fans but expressed the hope that in the future, it would be possible safely to engage in sporting events in Birmingham without the risk of violent attacks.

The message is that Britain's second largest city is not safe for Israeli Jews. The murderous attack against Jews on 2nd October at a synagogue in Manchester makes that message wider and even more troubling.

A more reassuring recent picture was of Countdown's mathematician extraordinaire, Rachel Riley being granted the freedom of the City of London. The citation declared that this was 'in recognition of her antisemitism campaigning and her Holocaust education work'.

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