

NORTHERN

INSIGHT

February 2026

Issue 120



**Professional Stays. Personal Touch.
Week2Week Serviced Apartments**

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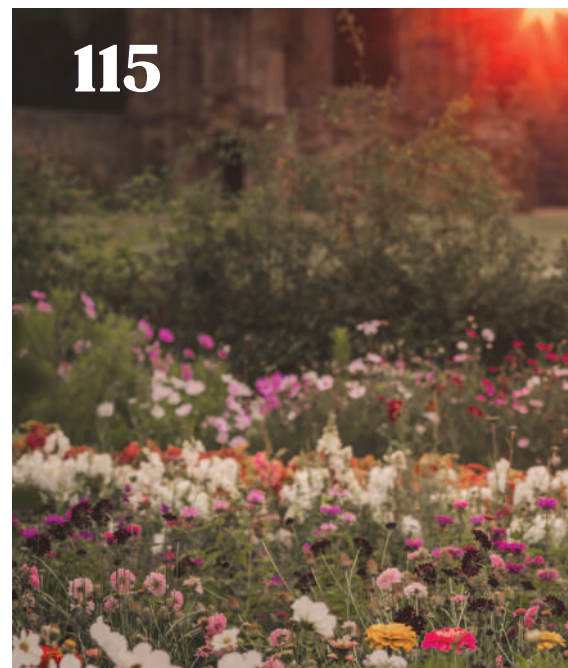
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Northern Insight Magazine

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Foreword

Welcome to the February issue of Northern Insight

February is often seen as the quiet heart of winter, but across the North East it is anything but dormant. Beneath the frost and shortened days, ideas are taking shape, plans refined, and communities are quietly preparing for what comes next. The February edition of Northern Insight reflects that moment — a time of introspection, resilience and renewed momentum.

Our cover stars this month are Week2Week apartments who've been supporting guests and businesses for 25 years.

Many of us will have also entered the new year with greater onus on our physical and mental wellbeing so look out for our exclusive feature on ClimbAhub, a new fitness studio co-founded by David Fairlamb and TV star Steph McGovern.

February invites us to look forward. As 2026 unfolds, the conversations happening now — about sustainability, investment, skills and regional identity — will define the months and years ahead. Our aim with Northern Insight is to provide not just commentary, but clarity: thoughtful analysis that supports informed decisions and sparks meaningful conversation.

Thank you for being part of our journey. Whether you are a long-time reader or discovering us for the first time, we hope this edition informs, challenges, and inspires you as we move together toward the year ahead.

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



Edition Sponsors





Ex-British Airways pilot launches innovative aeroCup

After an incredible 48-year career with British Airways, Gosforth based Gary Day has taken his passion for aviation and engineering into a brand-new venture: the creation of the AeroCup, a stainless-steel, twin-walled travel cup designed specifically to tackle one of the airline industry's most familiar in-flight challenges.

Gary began his career at just 16 years old as an apprentice aircraft engineer. He progressed to become a fully-qualified engineer, then a flight engineer, and finally spent the last 30 years as a pilot and Captain on the iconic Boeing 777. His work took him all over the world – and with it came a recurring problem.

"When you hit patches of turbulence while drinking tea or coffee, the liquid can spill up through the lid and burn your mouth, soil your white uniform shirt or even damage the flight deck electrics with spilt liquid," Gary explained. "It's a small thing, but when you fly long-haul for decades, you realise the solution just doesn't exist. So, I decided to design one."

Gary created the AeroCup – a premium, insulated stainless-steel cup that keeps drinks hot for hours, paired with an innovative Aroma Lid. This unique lid features a series of radial slots that can be opened and closed with a simple twist, allowing drinkers to enjoy the full aroma and flavour of their beverage without the safety hazards associated with open cups or traditional sip lids.



A new era of wellness arrives in Newcastle

Victoria Darroch has taken over one of the Quayside's most recognisable historic buildings to launch Reform Studios, a new members-only health and wellness destination set to redefine wellbeing in the North East.

Located in the former Side Gallery, the building has been a fixture on the Quayside for many years. Before its time as a gallery, it operated as a bookshop and has always been a place where people gathered. The building itself is steeped in Newcastle's commercial and cultural history, making it a fitting home for a business centred on community, connection and wellbeing.

Reform Studios is a holistic health and wellness centre offering Pilates, yoga, meditation, sound healing and a dedicated recovery suite featuring infrared saunas and plunge pools. The studio also houses a café serving nutritious, wellbeing-focused food designed for busy city workers and members on the go.

Reform Studios currently employs seven staff members, with plans to expand the team to nine as the business grows and future locations are explored.

The studio caters directly to the city's working population, with classes starting from 6am, lunchtime sessions designed to be non-sweaty for office workers, and evening offerings. Members can pre-order healthy meals from the café, allowing them to attend a class and return to work within their lunch break.

Elara Community & Events unveils rebrand

As professional women face a documented surge in burnout and "identity erosion," Elara Community & Events Ltd. has announced a comprehensive rebrand and mission expansion.

The move marks a pivot toward a more holistic sanctuary for the "sandwich generation"—women balancing the high-pressure demands of growing businesses and careers while simultaneously raising children and caring for aging parents. Founded by solo entrepreneurs Christina Lord and Lauren McWilliams, the rebrand reflects a deepened commitment to providing a space where women can belong, grow, and reconnect with themselves without losing their identity in the process.

The rebranded Elara Community moves beyond average networking by integrating personal well-being directly into professional development. Acknowledging that professional growth is impossible without physical and mental health, Elara's programming addresses the holistic reality of a woman's life. Events are curated to be as multi-faceted as the women they serve, ranging from practical personal and professional development and creative workshops to vibrant celebration events where women can connect in a spirit of joy.



"We are currently seeing a 'perfect storm' for women in our community," says Co-Founder Lauren McWilliams. "Many are navigating the brain fog of menopause, while others are discovering late-in-life ADHD or Autism. When you layer that on top of the 'sandwich generation' pressure, the weight is immense. At Elara, our mission isn't to focus on the label, but to support the whole woman behind it. We want women to feel empowered by who they are, rather than being defined or limited by a diagnosis or a life stage."

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[Bradleyomahoney.co.uk](https://bradleyomahoney.co.uk)



Newcastle Business supports Smile For Life throughout 2026

A cornerstone of the Newcastle business community is marking a major milestone by giving back. H. Malone & Sons, a family-owned mechanical and electrical contractor celebrating its 100th year, has announced an ambitious year-long fundraising and awareness campaign in support of Smile For Life Children's Charity.

To mark its centenary, H. Malone & Sons will complete 100 challenges across 2026, bringing together employees, clients, supply-chain partners and young people supported by Smile For Life. The challenges will range from light-hearted team activities to demanding personal feats, all designed to raise funds and awareness for the charity, which supports children and youngsters with disabilities and learning difficulties.

The initiative, titled "Challenge 100", was officially launched on Wednesday 14 January at H. Malone & Sons' premises on Gosforth Industrial Estate. As part of the launch event, 15 young people from Smile For Life took part in hands-on plumbing and electrical workshops led by H. Malone & Sons employees.



CSD Sealing Systems accelerates global growth

North East engineering success story CSD Sealing Systems is entering a new phase of expansion after achieving three consecutive years of more than 50% year-on-year growth, strengthening its leadership team and announcing plans to triple the size of the business over the coming years.

Founded by Group Managing Director David Ripley, CSD has built a global reputation for delivering technically advanced cable transits, pipe penetrations and sealing solutions that protect critical infrastructure. From next-generation data centre developments, to large-scale power-generation projects and complex naval programmes, CSD continues to play a key role in delivering the safety, resilience and longevity required for some of the world's most advanced projects.

Over the last three decades, the business has been recognised for bringing world-leading innovations into the UK market - most notably through long-standing partnership with Dutch manufacturer Beele Engineering, and through its sister business Sanivar, which delivers the cutting-edge Neofit®+Plus pipeline rehabilitation system throughout Europe.

To support its next stage of growth, CSD has expanded its board with the appointment of three long-standing team members, appointing Nichola Coates as Financial Director, Anthony Jordan as Operations Director and Peter Litchfield as Sales & Technical Director.



Major multi-million pound decarbonisation project announced for North East social housing residents

Close to 650 social housing properties across the North East will benefit from an £8.3m capital injection to significantly improve energy efficiency in people's homes, tackle fuel poverty and help reduce carbon emissions.

Procurement and collaboration experts, Prosper, has facilitated a new consortium of five North East housing providers comprising North Star Housing, Tyne Housing, Livin Housing, Durham Aged Mineworkers' Homes and Keelman Homes, to deliver the works over the next three years.

Collectively, all five landlord partners will invest over £5.5m with a further £2.8m being matched-funded through the Government's Warm Homes Social Housing Fund (Wave 3).

The works will be delivered through Prosper's 2025 Decarbonisation and Investment Works Framework which provides landlords with an innovative and compliant 'one-stop-shop' solution. Following a thorough procurement process, Consett-based, Zenith Mechanical Services, has been appointed to install the decarbonisation measures for all landlord partners.

The combined £8.3m spend will be split proportionately amongst each of the five housing associations depending on the number of homes being improved and the requirements needed. This will include eligible residential properties in Newcastle, Gateshead, North and South Tyneside, County Durham, Tees Valley and Wear Valley.

Energy efficiency measures will include new cavity wall, loft and ceiling insulation, solar panels, internal heating controls, replacement glazing units, air source heat pumps and low carbon lighting amongst other measures depending on a property's age and individual requirements. The retrofit programme is expected to commence imminently and be completed with minimal disruption to residents and adjacent buildings.

Rod Brasington, Chief Executive of Prosper, explained: "This exciting new collaborative partnership has been founded after several conversations with our landlord partners to determine their objectives and how this could best be delivered to create true value and efficiency.

"Bringing the five landlords together and creating a robust partnership with Zenith Mechanical Services is fantastic news which will significantly improve the living experience of more than 650 residents right across the North East."

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Cover story...



The professionalisation of flexible accommodation

Regulation, corporate demand and the future of short stays.

Short, mid and extended accommodation has grown rapidly over the last decade. How has the sector changed?

It's changed enormously — and we're now entering a new phase. At Week2Week Serviced Apartments, we've been supporting guests and businesses for 25 years, long before online booking platforms existed.

Before platforms transformed the market, property investors had to appoint professional operators like Week2Week Serviced Apartments to manage their accommodation properly — from guest communication and safety compliance to quality control and corporate standards. In many ways, the industry is now returning to that model, but with modern expectations layered on top.

Today, the sector is moving decisively towards a more professional, standards-led market, where quality, consistency and reassurance matter more than volume alone.

What does this next phase look like in practical terms?

For us, the biggest shift is professionalisation. Short, mid and extended stay accommodation is moving closer to professional hospitality, rather than informal letting.

People aren't just booking somewhere to sleep anymore — they're booking somewhere to live, often for weeks or months at a time. With UK occupancy forecast to grow by over 8% in 2026, driven by relocations, project-based work and hybrid roles, accommodation must support everyday living, not just overnight stays (GSAIR 2025).



Claire Parry

What's driving this move towards higher standards?

It's a combination of rising guest expectations, tighter regulation and growing corporate and relocation demand.

Global business travel spending reached \$1.57 trillion in 2025, and UK corporate relocations are currently up 8% year-on-year. As travel becomes more purposeful, both guests and businesses want reassurance — clear processes, transparent communication and reliable support (GSAIR 2025).

Delivering that consistently takes strong systems, experienced teams and a genuine focus on service. That's where established accommodation providers stand out.

How important is regulation in shaping the future of the sector?

Regulation can feel challenging in the interim because it adds cost and accountability. But overall, it strengthens the market.

Clear regulation pushes the sector back towards professional management models, separating casual operators from compliant providers. For businesses that already operate properly, regulation becomes a competitive advantage rather than a threat.

We're independently audited and accredited annually and hold a Gold Award with Quality in Tourism, giving guests and corporate clients confidence that our standards are externally recognised and regularly reviewed.

How important is corporate travel and relocation to the future of short, mid and long stay accommodation?

It's one of the biggest drivers of growth.

Corporate travel hasn't disappeared — it's evolved. We're seeing increased demand for extended stays, driven by hybrid working, regional projects and relocation programmes. Hotels work well for short trips, but they're not designed for real life over weeks or months.

Flexible accommodation provides routine, and routine supports productivity, wellbeing and work-life balance — which matters to employers as much as it does to guests.



What do corporate clients expect today that they didn't before?

They expect reliability and clarity.

Corporate clients want accommodation that supports duty of care, with standards they can trust and a responsive team behind it. They also expect predictable pricing, flexible extensions and clear invoicing — without added admin.

That's why service remains central to what we do. We're proud to be a family-run, female-led business, and we focus on being approachable, responsive and consistent — because that's how long-term partnerships are built.

If you could sum up the future of short, mid and extended stay accommodation in one message, what would it be?

The future is about consistency, trust and professionalism.

Short, mid and extended stay accommodation is becoming a core part of how organisations move people, deliver projects and support relocation. In many ways, the sector is coming full circle — back to professional management, backed by experience, standards and real human support.

At Week2Week Serviced Apartments, that's what we've been delivering for 25 years — and it's exactly how we're approaching 2026 and beyond.

Final word

Whether you're arranging accommodation for visiting colleagues, relocating staff, family and friends, or you're a property owner looking for professional management and peace of mind, the Week2Week team is always happy to talk.

We're only a phone call or an email away, and we pride ourselves on being approachable, responsive and supportive — because looking after people has always been at the heart of what we do.

week2week.co.uk

Musings with Mirza...



Ammar Mirza CBE

Return of the Jedi

My claim to fame has never really been my claim at all.

Back in 1983, I found myself chaperoning my little brother and his close friend Ant McPartlin to the cinema to watch *Return of the Jedi*. Yes, that Ant McPartlin. Long before prime time television and catchphrases, we were just a bunch of kids from the North East heading to the pictures, buzzing with excitement and popcorn.

By then, I was already hooked. I had seen the first two *Star Wars* films and I felt the Force

before I even knew how to describe it. There was something about that galaxy far far away that grabbed you. Not just the spaceships and lightsabres, but the bigger story underneath it all. **Choice. Power. Responsibility. And the fine line between doing what is easy and doing what is right.**

Rewatching *Return of the Jedi* now, it feels uncannily current. Maybe more so than ever. At its heart, *Star Wars* has always been about the struggle between the light and the dark. Fear versus hope. Control versus compassion. And if we are honest with ourselves, that same battle is playing out daily in our society and our communities right now.

The Jedi were never just warriors. They were meant to be guardians of balance. Disciplined, thoughtful, grounded in service rather than ego. Which is why the JEDI framing feels so important today. Justice. Equality. Diversity.

Inclusion. All of them matter. **But they only work if they are truly for everyone, not selectively applied or weaponised.**

Here is the uncomfortable bit, and I have never been one to shy away from it. **One of the biggest challenges with inclusion is that, in practice, it can become exclusionary.** When one group is constantly prioritised or elevated above another, even with the best of intentions, it can create resentment rather than repair. It can deepen divides rather than heal them. That is not progress. **That is how the dark side quietly creeps in.**

True inclusion is not about picking sides. It is about bringing people with you. *Star Wars* shows us this brilliantly. **The Rebel Alliance only succeeds because wildly different people, species and backgrounds come together around a shared purpose.** When one group needs focus or protection, the others are not shut out. They are engaged. They understand the why. They feel part of the journey.

For over two decades, I have been raising a difficult conversation that many would rather avoid. **The alienation of white men and boys.** Not as a counter argument to inclusion, but as a warning sign. When people feel unheard, unseen or blamed for things they did not personally do, they disengage. And disengagement has consequences. We are living with many of them now. **Polarisation. Anger.** A sense that community is something you watch, not something you belong to.

History tells us something important if we are willing to listen. It has almost always been the majority who have stood up for the minority. Men supporting women to gain the vote and equal opportunity. White English people standing alongside Black, Irish and Asian communities. **Progress has never come from exclusion. It has come from alliance.**

Now is the moment to support those who feel isolated and left behind. But not at the expense of everyone else. **We need the courage to say that inclusion means all of us.** That justice is not a limited supply. That equality does not require new hierarchies. And that diversity only works when it strengthens the whole rather than fractures it.

If we allow our communities to splinter beyond repair, nobody wins. But if we choose empathy over accusation, dialogue over dogma and shared responsibility over blame, there is still time to restore balance.

In *Return of the Jedi*, redemption comes when someone chooses the light, even at the very last moment. That choice is always there.

The Force belongs to all of us. The real question is whether we have the courage to use it to bring people together, rather than push them further apart.

Ammar Mirza CBE is Chair & Founder of Asian Business Connexions, Executive Chair of the AmmarM Group, Honorary Colonel of 101 Regiment RA and holds various positions across the public and private sectors with a deep interest in Inclusion, Innovation and Internationalisation.

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ClimbAhub Steph McGovern with David Fairlamb, his wife Karen and daughter Georgia



ClimbAhub: A unique fitness concept in Newcastle

TV star Steph McGovern and renowned personal trainer David Fairlamb, co-found new fitness studio.

Located in the Jesmond area of Newcastle, ClimbAhub is a newly established fitness studio dedicated entirely to a high-intensity workout built around the VersaClimber machine, a vertical climbing simulator that delivers a full-body cardio and strength session in a compact, exciting format.



ClimbAhub's mission is to bring one of the most efficient and effective workouts available to the UK in a stand-alone, specialised environment. Every session at ClimbAhub revolves around the same objective: maximise results in minimal time.

'I've had terrific success using the VersaClimber machine at my gym in North Shields,' said David Fairlamb. 'It's proved to be one of the most popular classes that I have...and one of the people who enjoyed attending was Steph McGovern.'

She always made a beeline for the VersaClimber classes because she immediately saw the benefits of using it.

'One day, I was discussing with Steph the idea of setting-up a purpose-built facility which would allow people to enjoy the VersaClimbers in a unique surrounding. She liked the idea so much that she wanted to invest. It's taken a couple of years to bring our dream to fruition, but we're delighted with the result. It's fantastic.'

The VersaClimber is at the heart of ClimbAhub's workout philosophy. This machine mimics the action of climbing, engaging the arms, legs, and core all at once.

Because it is low-impact and joint-friendly, yet demands your full body's effort, it can burn up to three times more calories than traditional cardio machines like treadmills or ellipticals, all within a 30-minute session.

Each class is instructor-led, which means you have a qualified coach guiding you through your workout, setting the pace, and offering encouragement or modifications for different fitness levels. The 30-minute duration is intentional: it's meant to fit into a busy lifestyle without sacrificing intensity.

'Unlike a typical fitness class, we've made ClimbAhub a more immersive and energetic environment. Lighting and music are integrated as part of the workout experience, giving sessions a nightclub-meets-gym feel. Participants can even use silent headphone technology so that they hear the instructor and music clearly without external noise distractions.

This emphasis on atmosphere isn't just for show...it's designed to keep motivation high throughout the session. For many people, especially those who find traditional cardio monotonous, the combination of beats, lights, and coaching makes the workout feel more like a fun event than a chore.'

ClimbAhub is ideal for a broad range of fitness levels. Whether you're a seasoned athlete or

new to structured exercise, instructors tailor efforts so everyone gets a strong workout without feeling overwhelmed. VersaClimber's adjustable nature means that each participant can choose their own pace while still moving in sync with the class.

'Because the classes are for 30 minutes, it means a session is easy to fit into everyone's lifestyle...early morning, lunch break, after work etc. It's much more flexible than something like an hour-plus gym session.

'It's also why we've made attending ClimbAhub as accessible as possible. There are no membership requirements...no signing-up fees...we use a pay-as-you-go system...there's even a £10 introductory session so that you can come along to Jesmond and try a ClimbAhub session for yourself. From then on, it's either £15 for a single class, or you can bulk buy sessions which are £70 for 5 classes or £130 for 10 classes. You can book either via our website or by downloading the Glofox app. We'll be launching our own app very shortly.'

ClimbAhub is also a bit of a family affair for David because his wife, Karen, runs the coffee and smoothie bar where you can grab a post workout healthy drink or a coffee if you are passing by, and his daughter Georgia is lead instructor.

'We are the only gym in the UK to custom design a VersaClimber Hub, optimised for sound and lighting...in other words, it's a unique, exclusive, healthy experience.'

Steph McGovern and David Fairlamb...helping you climb your way to fitness and a healthy lifestyle.

For more details, you can contact David and his team on info@climbahub.co.uk or simply call into ClimbAhub at 261 Jesmond Rd, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne NE2 1LB

We'd also point in the direction of his excellent website www.climbahub.co.uk



ClimbAhub David with his daughter Georgia

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WHAT THE RENTERS' RIGHTS ACT 2025 MEANS FOR YOU!

As we move into 2026, renters across England will benefit from significant legislative changes designed to create a fairer, more secure, and more transparent rental market. The Renters' Rights Act 2025, alongside wider government initiatives, introduces new protections and opportunities that will directly affect how you rent this year and beyond.

Below, we highlight the key changes and what they mean for your tenancy:

1. Rent Increase Limits and Greater Tenant Protection

The Renters' Rights Act 2025 introduces clearer controls around rent increases. Under the new rules, rent can only be increased once per year, and any increase must be in line with local market rates. This change is designed to prevent sudden or excessive rent rises, giving tenants greater confidence when planning household finances.

In addition, wider government support measures are aimed at easing financial pressure on renters. Staying informed about these regulations will help ensure your rent remains fair, reasonable, and legally compliant throughout the year.

2. The End of Section 21 'No-Fault' Evictions

From 1 May 2026, Section 21 'no-fault' evictions will be abolished. Landlords will no longer be able to end a tenancy without providing a valid, lawful reason.

Instead, a landlord can only end a tenancy by serving a section 8 notice, which specifies one or more appropriate grounds for possession. Different grounds have different notice periods (see table 1 of the UK Government Guide). This change marks a major shift in favour of renters, reducing uncertainty and the risk of being asked to leave without cause. Where the landlord wants to move in or sell the property, they won't be able to do this during the first 12 months of a tenancy.

Tenants are encouraged to review their tenancy agreements and familiarise themselves with the new rules to fully understand their rights under the updated legislation.

3. AST's become periodic tenancies

When this part of the legislation comes into force, all tenancies will automatically become Assured Periodic Tenancies (rolling contracts). This means that they continue indefinitely until ended by a notice from the tenant or a notice from the landlord for specific reasons.



4. Improved Energy Efficiency and Lower Living Costs

With ongoing cost of living pressures, energy efficiency has become a key priority within the rental sector. The government is placing greater emphasis on ensuring rental properties meet the Decent Homes Standard, with improvements such as better insulation, more efficient heating systems, and reduced risks of damp and mould.

Choosing a home with a strong energy efficiency rating can make a noticeable difference to monthly energy bills, while also providing a more comfortable and healthier living environment.

5. Greater Transparency and Landlord Accountability

New measures introduced this year will bring increased transparency to the rental market. A national landlord and property database will allow tenants to check whether a landlord is compliant with current legal and safety standards.

This initiative is designed to raise standards across the sector, protect tenants, and ensure landlords remain accountable for the condition and management of their properties. Tenants are encouraged to make use of this resource when renting to ensure peace of mind and compliance.

6. Greater rights for tenants to keep pets

Once in force, a landlord may not unreasonably refuse a request from a tenant to keep a pet. Landlords must respond to pet requests within 28 days. If a super landlord (such as a freeholder) does not allow pets, and they will not give permission when asked, this is a reasonable basis not to allow a pet. In other cases, it will be for the landlord to show that the request was unreasonable.

As the Lettings Manager at Sanderson Young, I will be keeping track throughout the year for any further changes that could impact you in the search for your next property or if you're landlord looking to put a property on the lettings market.

If you require further information or if you're landlord wanting to know how the Renters' Rights Act will affect you, please do not hesitate to contact me on **0191 223 3510** or email gail.mclean@sandersonyoung.co.uk.

Gail McLean MARLA
Regional Lettings Manager



Eastwood House

West Avenue, Gosforth

Eastwood House, West Avenue is a modern family home in the heart of Gosforth's Conservation Area, close to excellent schools, shops, cafés and transport links. Built around 10 years ago and extending over 3,000 sq ft across three floors, it offers five bedrooms, multiple reception spaces, a refitted open plan kitchen, garage, driveway and a south facing garden, all immaculately presented throughout. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band F.



 5  2  3  B

Price Guide:
Offers Over £995,000



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



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Adderstone Crescent *Jesmond*

Adderstone Crescent is a rare and impressive detached Arts and Crafts residence on one of Jesmond's most prestigious streets. Set behind secure gates with landscaped west-facing gardens, the property offers over 7,000 sq ft of elegant accommodation, combining period features with luxury modern living, extensive reception spaces, six bedroom suites, private parking and exceptional privacy. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band H



6 4 6 D

Price Guide:
£4.95 Million



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





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Princess Mary Court *Jesmond*

Princess Mary Court in Jesmond is a stylish luxury gated development in the Brandling Village Conservation Area, offering excellent family living. This immaculate five-bedroom town house features private road access, secure gated entrance, allocated parking for two cars, visitor parking and 24/7 security, with beautifully presented living spaces and gardens close to Jesmond's shops, cafés and Newcastle city centre.
Tenure: Leasehold | Council Tax: Band F



5 2 3 C

Price Guide:
£720,000



Emma Lane
0191 213 0033
emma.lane@sandersonyoung.co.uk



SANDERSON
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Kingsland Jesmond

A fabulous mid-terraced three storey home in the sought-after Brandling Village Conservation Area with five bedrooms and two bathrooms. It offers beautifully presented interior spaces, a sunny front town garden and a rear courtyard, traditional features and modern living, in a prime Jesmond location close to cafes, transport and amenities. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band F.



5 3 2 TBC

Price Guide:
Offers Over £890,000



Mary Walker
0191 223 3500
mary.walker@sandersonyoung.co.uk



Sanderson Young Sets the Pace for 2026

Sanderson Young has entered 2026 with real momentum, following a highly successful Boxing Day launch that immediately translated into strong buyer activity and impressive results across the North East property market.

In the weeks since launch, demand has been evident across a wide range of price points, with buyers moving decisively when presented with the right opportunities. To illustrate this early success, Sanderson Young has highlighted six stand out properties that reflect both exceptional value and the speed at which well-priced homes are being secured.



Windsor Terrace *South Gosforth*

Offers Over £500,000
Boxing Day Launch

Impeccably stylish & immaculately presented terraced home offering two reception rooms & a magnificent open plan kitchen, dining and living space with four bedrooms, two contemporary bathrooms & delightful walled and enclosed rear courtyard!



Elmfield Grove *Gosforth*

Offers Over £525,000
Sold through Social Media before hitting the market

Stunning, substantially extended three-bedroom semi-detached home featuring a beautiful front sitting room with log burner, exceptional open-plan kitchen, dining, and living space with bi-fold doors, utility room and versatile additional room, off-street parking and a private south-facing garden, all set on one of Gosforth's most desirable streets!



Heugh House *Haydon Bridge*

Guide Price £575,000
Sale Agreed in 2 days

Stunning detached stone extended cottage boasting four double bedrooms including annex, three bathrooms, four reception rooms, open plan kitchen/diner, driveway for two vehicles & beautiful lawned gardens with stunning views over the Tyne Valley!

SOLD IN 2026



SANDERSON
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Woodside *Milbourne, Ponteland*

From £1,995,000

Woodside is a magnificent detached family home set within just under 2 acres of landscaped gardens, featuring a separate three-bedroom bungalow ideal for multi-generational living. Offering over 11,000 sq ft of beautifully presented accommodation, the property is accessed via timber gates and a sweeping, lit driveway leading to a courtyard and detached triple garage, currently used as a gym and easily adaptable as a home office, studio or games room.

Darras Road *Darras Hall, Ponteland*

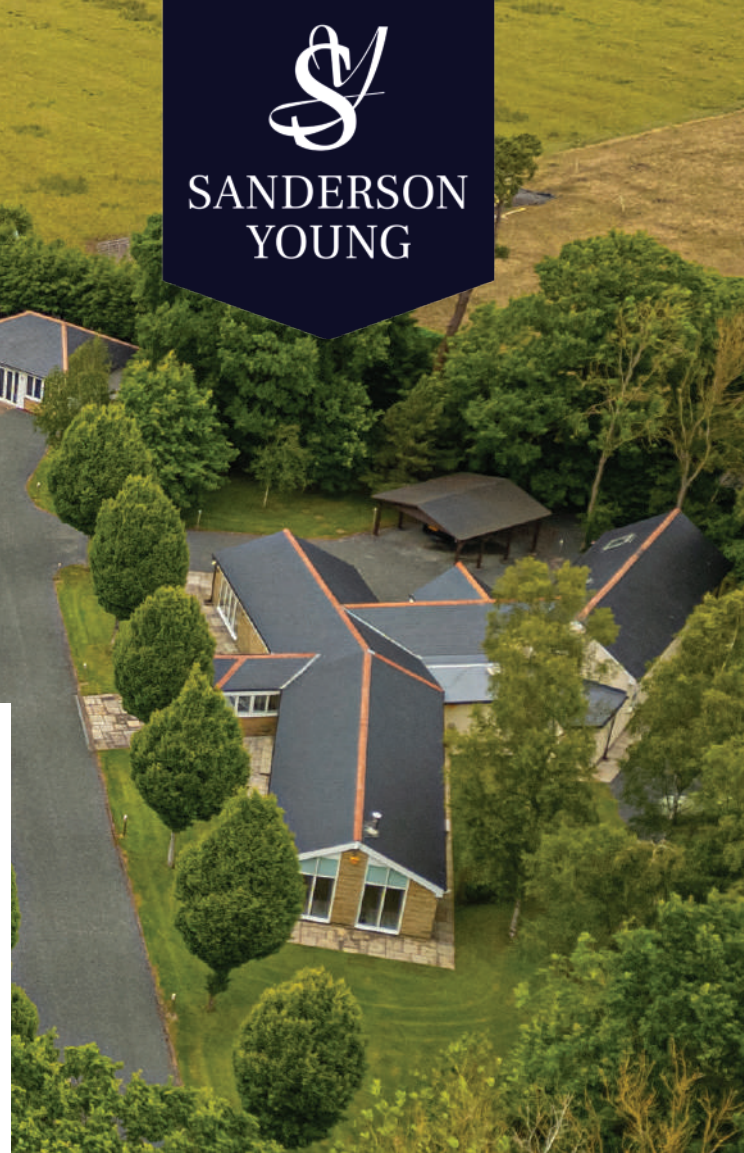
Guide Price £1,750,000

Darras Road is an exceptional detached family home set on a highly sought-after street in the heart of Darras Hall. Extending to over 5,460 sq ft, the property offers high-specification, versatile accommodation blending traditional and contemporary design, set within approximately one acre of private, mature, south-facing grounds.

Wentworth Court *Darras Hall, Ponteland*

Guide Price £1,100,000

Fabulous five bedroom, contemporary detached home, occupying a beautiful, private and generous, garden site on this popular residential road in Darras Hall. The property boasts five double bedrooms, five bathrooms, stunning open plan kitchen, dining & living room, study, utility, home gymnasium, double garage and off street parking for multiple vehicles!





Johnston Carmichael Newcastle launches Sport-led leadership podcast

Johnston Carmichael's Newcastle office has launched a new podcast series, opening with ex-Olympic swimmer Chris Cook as its first guest and adding a fresh voice to the North East's business conversation.

Hosted by Paul Shields, Partner and Head of the firm's Newcastle office, the podcast brings together leadership thinking from the worlds of sport and business, drawing clear parallels between elite performance and the realities faced by entrepreneurs and senior leaders across the region.

Recorded and led from the North East, the series explores themes such as resilience, adaptability and performing under pressure – challenges familiar to both professional athletes and growing businesses. Guests are drawn from across the sporting world and share personal journeys that mirror many of the decisions, setbacks and moments of uncertainty faced by leaders today.

The opening episode features South Shields-born Chris Cook, who represented Team GB at the Athens 2004 and Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. In the conversation, Chris reflects on his journey to the global stage, his transition from elite sport into business, and the mindset required to succeed when expectations are high and conditions are uncertain. He also speaks candidly about how his upbringing in the region helped shape his resilience, perspective and approach to leadership.



Sweeney Miller Law strengthens commercial offering with Partner appointment

North East law firm Sweeney Miller Law has appointed Rishi Kohli as a Partner in its Newcastle office, strengthening its services for businesses and formally launching a dedicated commercial offering.

Rishi joins the partnership with extensive experience advising on complex commercial contracts including supply and distribution arrangements, services and outsourcing agreements and framework agreements. He will also provide additional commercial support to the firm's considerable asset and share sale work. He is recognised for providing

pragmatic, commercially focused advice that balances legal risk with business objectives—particularly in business-critical, time-sensitive and high-growth environments.

Surbhi Vedhara, Managing Partner at Sweeney Miller Law, said: "We are excited to welcome Rishi to the partnership, who will bring a fresh perspective as we undertake the next phase of our growth strategy."

Commenting on his appointment, Rishi Kohli said: "What attracted me to join Sweeney Miller Law is the culture—it's collaborative, people-focused and commercially driven, with high technical standards and real trust and autonomy. It's an environment where people are encouraged to take ownership, grow with confidence and help shape the firm's future in a positive, sustainable way."



Muckle LLP champions sustainability through employee volunteering scheme

Muckle LLP, a leading law firm in the North East, continues to demonstrate its commitment to helping local communities through its ongoing support of a regional sustainability charity.

Over the past year, Muckle has partnered with The North East Community Forest (NECF), a local charity that works with volunteers and landowners to plant trees and create new woodlands across the region.

To encourage employees to use their volunteering hours, Muckle donates £1 to NECF for every hour volunteered. So far, the firm has donated £1,680 to the charity - the equivalent of planting 336 new trees.

Muckle's employees receive two days paid leave to volunteer with charities and its lawyers are also encouraged to use their legal expertise to support the community as school governors, trustees and board members of local charities.

The work carried out by NECF not only helps make the region become more resilient to climate change but also fosters a greater appreciation for trees and woodlands by engaging the people in the North East in environmental conservation.

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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



Many business owners start the year with good intentions. Plans are made. Targets are set. Then work gets busy. Decisions stack up. And the numbers quietly get pushed aside again.

When the numbers aren't clear, decisions are made on instinct rather than information.

Instead of helping you decide what to do next, the numbers end up explaining what has already happened. This year, the shift comes from using them as a guide for decisions, not just a record of the past.

1. Start with what you need to know today

Most businesses open their accounting software and scroll through reports without a clear purpose. That's why nothing sticks.

Clarity comes from understanding your position today. How much cash is actually available. What money is owed in and out. And how much you need to budget for taxes.

When the numbers answer those questions clearly, decisions become easier. If they don't, the problem isn't the business, it's that the numbers aren't being presented in a way that helps you stay in control.

2. Look ahead just far enough to stay in control

This is not about long-term forecasts or complex models. It is about knowing what the next few months are likely to look like so nothing catches you out. A short, sensible view of upcoming income and committed costs gives you breathing space. It allows you to spot pressure points early and avoid reactive decisions made under stress.

3. Turn the numbers into a routine

Numbers only become useful when they are looked at consistently. Reviewing them only when there is a problem can often mean it's too late!

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INTERESTING QUOTE



You don't need perfect numbers.
You need numbers that help you
make better decisions.

Karen Berman

JUST ONE THING

"Here, Mark. If you had to suggest **Just One Thing** to help my business financially (and my life!) – what would it be?"

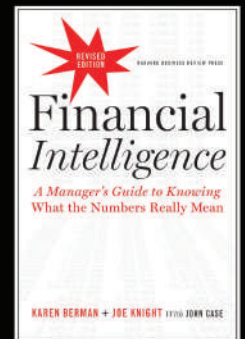
Find someone who will hold you accountable for the decisions you make in the business. Someone who regularly asks what the numbers mean and what you are going to do next.

HAVE A READ

Financial Intelligence. Karen Berman and Joe Knight.

Clear thinking beats perfect data when it comes to running a business. This book shows how understanding your numbers leads to better decisions, stronger control, and fewer surprises, without getting lost in reports or theory.

£15(ish) online. **Mark Melville**



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Specialist corporate solicitor joins Muckle LLP

Leading law firm Muckle LLP has strengthened its renowned corporate team by appointing a new solicitor.

Stacey Brown, from Sunderland, specialises in corporate governance and company law and advises clients on a wide range of matters, including general company advice, group reorganisations, share restructuring and constitutional documentation

Stacey said: "I've always known I wanted to be a corporate solicitor. I enjoy the structure of the role and the work and the variety it offers, especially the opportunity to work with clients across different sectors.

"I've worked at various firms of all sizes but what really stands out to me about Muckle is the people and the firm's strong ethos and values. The culture here is collaborative and client focused, which aligns perfectly with my own approach to legal practice. I'm excited to be part of the firm as we expand our services into Teesside, offering top-tier legal support to even more clients."



Burnetts Solicitors LLP becomes a Certified B Corporation

Newcastle law firm Burnetts Solicitors LLP has announced its certification as a B Corporation (or B Corp), joining a growing movement of companies that are reinventing business for the benefit of all people and our shared planet.

Verified by B Lab, the not-for-profit behind the B Corp movement, the achievement demonstrates that Burnetts meets high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability alongside a commitment to goals beyond shareholder value.

B Corp Certification assesses the entirety of a business' operations and covers impact areas related to practices around governance, workers, community, the environment and customers. The certification process is rigorous, with companies required to provide evidence on performance while legally embedding their commitment to purpose as well as profit in their company articles.

Burnetts, which is one of the largest independent law firms in the North of England, is now part of a growing community of over 10,000 businesses globally that have certified as B Corps. The B Corp community in the UK is the largest and fastest growing in the world. Other B Corps include The Guardian, Innocent Drinks, Patagonia, Tony's Chocolonely, The Big Issue, Finisterre, Elemis, and Sipsmith Gin.

Nick Gutteridge, Managing Partner of Burnetts Solicitors, said: "Burnetts was established over 100 years ago and we're incredibly proud of the firm it is today. We remain independent and true to our roots and values. This is a really happy day for everyone at and connected with Burnetts."

Record-breaking fundraising year sees Hay & Kilner donate over £22,000 to St Oswald's Hospice

Hay & Kilner is celebrating a record-breaking year of fundraising after raising £11,037.36 for St Oswald's Hospice during 2025, the highest annual total the firm has ever achieved.

The Partners at Hay & Kilner have matched the funds raised for the first time, bringing the overall donation to an impressive £22,074.72 in support of the Newcastle-based hospice.

Throughout the year, colleagues across the firm took part in a wide range of fundraising activities. As well as seeing a return of the popular bake sales, raffles, wine tasting, employee quiz, football tournament held in association with the Young Professionals Forum and tombola at the Gateshead Beer Festival, new fundraising initiatives were introduced including bauble decorating in association with the Junior Lawyers Division, rounders competition and a quiz held at John Lewis for friends of the firm. Engagement across the firm was at an all-time high, demonstrated most by our 11 runners in the Great North Run!

The firm is also proud to be supporting the Peter Rabbit™: Tails on the



Tyne initiative, sponsoring one of the trail's wonderful Peter Rabbit sculptures which will be unveiled on 15th July somewhere within Newcastle City Centre – so watch this space!

In addition to fundraising, Hay & Kilner colleagues donated their time to support St Oswald's Hospice, with around 30 people volunteering throughout the year across initiatives including a thank-a-thon and hands-on support in the hospice warehouse.



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NEW YEAR. SAME MISTAKES?

January brings fresh optimism. But by March? You're back to being too busy to look at the numbers.

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RMT Technology extending North East presence with multiple contract wins

The specialist technology arm of RMT Accountants & Business Advisors is extending its presence across North East England after securing a string of new regional contracts.

RMT Technology works to identify and implement security first IT solutions which meet specific business and operational needs around IT strategy, network infrastructure, information security and data management services.

It is aiming to create at least 15 new technical and project management jobs created over the next two years as part of its expansion plans, and has now been appointed by several businesses across the North East to provide a range of managed service, connectivity, licensing, hardware, Voice Over IP and security technologies.

New clients including Consett-based medical device manufacturer Surgical Dynamics, Jesmond estate agency Symonds Taylor and the Durham head office of collision assistance specialist Glass Assist UK.

Newcastle's Live Theatre has also signed up RMT Technology to deliver managed IT and security services at its extensive Quayside complex.

The new relationship covers both the theatre itself and the adjoining Schoolhouse business hub for creative and digital firms that the Live Theatre team manages as part of its wider sustainable business model.



RMT Technology account manager Megan Hindmarch with Antony Robertson, finance and operations manager at Live Theatre

Antony Robertson, finance and operations manager at Live Theatre, says: "We wanted a technology partner that would build an understanding of our business on a personal level, that could identify how IT solutions could be applied to enhance our operations and that we could trust to keep the promises they make. "The RMT Technology team has invested the time on site to get to know us, has dealt quickly with queries as they've arisen and is helping us deal efficiently with the technology needs of every part of our business."

Alongside its solutions provision work, RMT Technology also offers a consultancy service which helps clients of all sizes identify and address issues within their technology infrastructure, information management and cyber security systems and procedures.

It recently moved into a new, purpose-built 1,800 sq ft office and build area at RMT's Gosforth headquarters as part of its drive towards increasing its client base.

Stephen McNickle, commercial director at RMT Technology, adds: "The technical

understanding that our team provides allied to the personal approach we take and the long-term client relationships we're building is enabling us to deliver on our business expansion plans.

"Effective deployment of technology and security solutions has never been more important for businesses across every sector, and we're seeing this reflected in the number and range of new clients that we're bringing on board."

RMT Accountants and RMT Technology are part of Sumer, the UK's fastest-growing accountancy firm, which delivers professional support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and employs over 2,200 staff across more than 40 offices.

For further information on RMT Technology, call 0191 256 9550, email hello@rmttechnology.co.uk or visit rmttechnology.co.uk

Leading CEO joins B Local as Co Chair

The B Local North East group has strengthened its position with the appointment of a new co-chair to the board.

Jon Dudgeon, co-founder and CEO of Blu Sky Chartered Accountants, who certified as a B Corp in 2024, has joined the B Local North East group as the fourth regional co-chair.

Jon alongside his fellow co-chairs, Gemma Brannen, head of marketing at Robson Laidler Accountants, Jessica Williams MBA, founder of Just Williams and Suzi McCreedy, chief commercial officer at UMi will continue to support the growing network of B Corporations in the region with a new calendar of social and environmental events scheduled for 2026.



B Local Co Chairs

Speaking of his new role Jon said: "I am delighted to join the B Local as co-chair as I care deeply about the North East being a place where business is genuinely done in the right way for the right reasons."

"I am looking forward to shaping a B Local that feels inclusive, diverse, and useful to both SMEs and larger organisations, working to create momentum and a stronger purpose led business community across the North East."

The team have already run several key events including a business skills exchange, screening of the Responsible documentary, panel and roundtable sessions and a litter picking walk on Tynemouth's Longsands beach – collecting a

total of 80kg of rubbish.

B Locals are place-based communities of people using business as a force for good, founded in partnership with B Lab UK. They aim to connect like-minded companies and champion social and environmental responsibility in business.

The North East now has more than 30 B Corp certified businesses and there are 2700 in the UK, making the UK the fastest growing B Corp community.

For more information and to hear about future events please visit the B Local North East Linked In Group.



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Mark Brown

From Bookkeeping to Boardroom: When a business outgrows its finance team

Most businesses do not wake up one morning and decide they need a Finance Director. The change happens quietly.

Turnover grows. The team expands. The number of decisions increases. Cash flow becomes tighter. The stakes get higher. But the finance function often looks much the same as it did years earlier.

In many growing businesses, finance still revolves around a small internal team or an outsourced bookkeeper whose primary job is to keep the numbers tidy, submit returns and close the year. That works perfectly well when a business is small. It becomes a problem when the business starts to scale.

The moment a business moves beyond simple trading, finance stops being about recording the past and starts becoming about managing the future. That is usually where the strain begins to show.

Leaders find themselves making decisions about recruitment, pricing, investment or premises without clear visibility of the financial impact. Management accounts arrive weeks late, if at all. Cash flow feels unpredictable despite the business being profitable on paper. No one can confidently answer basic questions such as how much working capital is tied up in work in progress, how long it takes to turn revenue into cash, or which parts of the business are really driving margin.

These are not accounting problems. They are leadership problems created by a finance

function that has not evolved alongside the business.

One of the clearest warning signs that a business has outgrown its finance team is when finance becomes reactive rather than strategic. When the team spends most of its time processing invoices, chasing receipts and closing months, there is little capacity left to analyse, challenge and support the management team. Reporting becomes a backward-looking exercise rather than a tool for decision-making.

Another sign is when founders and directors become the glue holding everything together. They know the numbers are not quite right, so they build their own spreadsheets, keep mental notes of risks and constantly second-guess what they are being told. That is not sustainable leadership. It is firefighting.

As businesses grow, so does the complexity they have to manage. Customer contracts become more sophisticated. Billing cycles lengthen. Payroll becomes a larger fixed cost. Property, technology and debt introduce financial risk that has to be actively managed. At that point, finance needs to sit alongside operations and strategy, not behind them.

The solution is rarely to simply hire more junior finance staff. More processing power does not create more insight. What is missing is

senior financial leadership. Someone who can translate the numbers into what they actually mean for the future of the business.

This is where many SMEs reach a fork in the road. They know they need stronger financial grip, but a full-time Finance Director feels like a big and risky step. So they delay, carry on as they are, and hope the issues resolve themselves. They rarely do.

In reality, what most growing businesses need is not a full-time FD sitting in the office. They need regular, senior-level financial input that brings structure, challenge and clarity to the board and leadership team. That means building reliable management information, strengthening forecasting and cash flow control, and giving directors confidence that the numbers they are seeing can be trusted.

When finance is operating at boardroom level, it changes the quality of decisions across the business. Investment becomes more disciplined. Risk becomes visible. Growth becomes intentional rather than accidental.

The move from bookkeeping to boardroom is not about size. It is about complexity. If a business feels harder to run than it did a year ago, if decisions carry more financial risk, and if leaders are spending too much time worrying about what they do not know, then the finance function has already been outgrown.

The businesses that scale well are not the ones with the biggest finance teams. They are the ones with the clearest financial leadership. Recognising that moment, and acting on it early, is often the difference between growth that is controlled and growth that eventually becomes costly.

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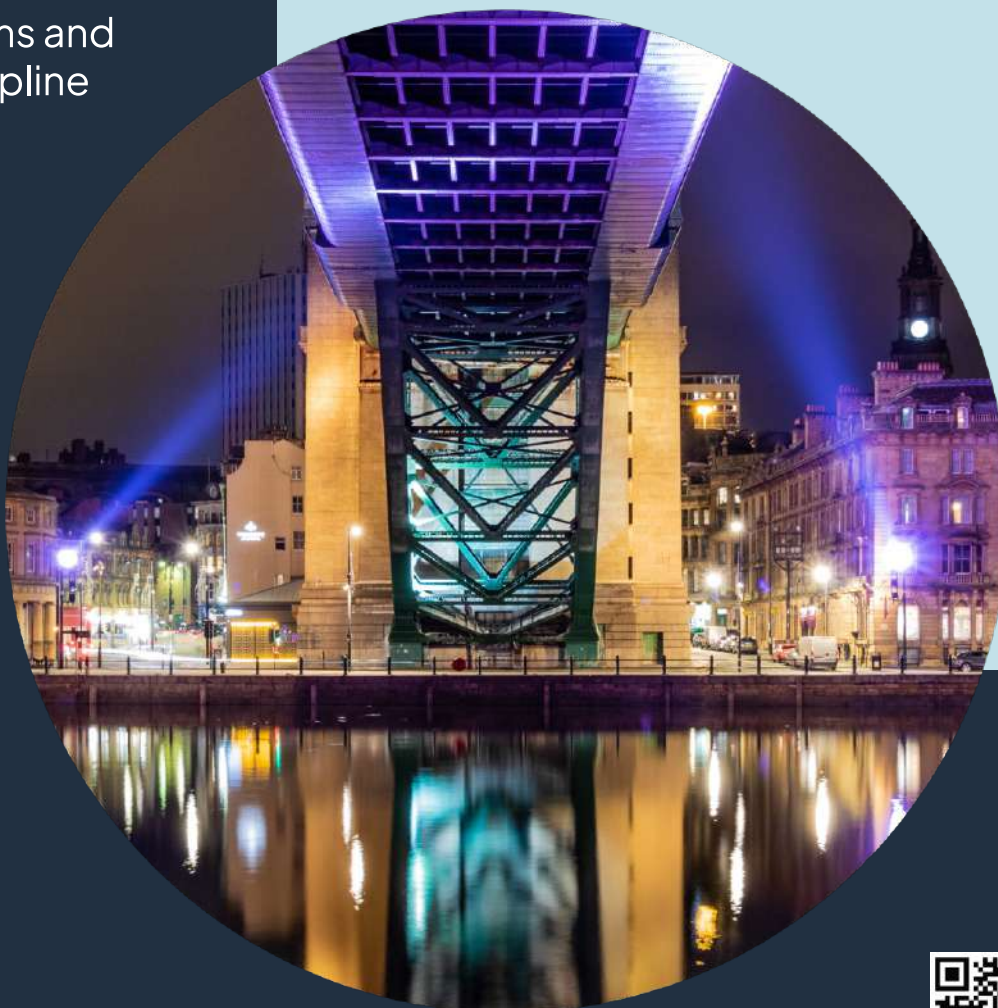
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North East Mayor hails first deal from new North East Elevate Fund

FW Capital has announced the first investment through the new North East Elevate Fund, supporting Reform Studio, a dynamic wellness destination opening at Newcastle's iconic 9-11 Side on the Quayside.

The £35m North East Elevate Fund, launched in October and championed by North East Mayor Kim McGuinness, is designed to support business growth and innovation across the region. Backed by The North East Combined Authority, the fund provides bespoke funding to help local businesses realise their growth ambitions.

Kim McGuinness, North East Mayor, said: "This first deal from the North East Elevate Fund is a landmark moment for our region. Reform Studio embodies the ambition and innovation we want to see in the North East, and I'm proud to champion a fund that invests in businesses creating jobs and opportunities for local people. By supporting ventures like this, we're building a healthier, more vibrant future for everyone in our communities."

The investment with Reform Studio is the first time that FW Capital has been able to provide five figure funding to a smaller business, boosting support to a wider range of SMEs across the region. The new Fund can provide loans from £50,000 and can invest up to £1m in more established businesses.



L-R: Mags Scott from the North East Combined Authority, Ruby Knowles, Alex Gent and Joanne Whitfield from FW Capital with Victoria Darroch and Alana Smith at Victoria's new business venture the Reform Studio in Newcastle city centre. Also featuring Milo the Reform Studio dog.

clients in the new year. I've worked with the team at FW Capital in my previous roles, so I understand how the funding works and know the team well, so they were my first choice to approach for backing. The investment from the North East Elevate Fund has played an important role in helping me to launch the business and create jobs, bringing significant investment back into the North East."

Joanne Whitfield, Fund Director at FW Capital said: "At FW Capital, we specialise in helping SMEs grow – whether that's taking on new staff, moving to new premises, or supporting working capital. It's all about generating economic growth in the region, and our investment in Reform Studio is a fantastic example of this. The North East Elevate Fund provides dedicated support throughout the investment process, and if you're a trading business with a material presence in the North East Combined Authority area which is Northumberland, County Durham, and Tyne and Wear, there's a good chance we can help through the new fund. We've been operating in the North East for 15 years. In that time we have supported over 200 businesses and invested almost £150 million. Reform Studio is set to become Newcastle's new home of modern wellness, featuring the city's largest Pilates studio alongside sound healing, outdoor flows, and more. Assisting dynamic businesses like this is exactly what the fund was created for – to stimulate growth and create jobs."

Jason Hobbs, Chief Executive of The North East Fund said: "I am delighted that the first investment has been made from The North East Fund's new programme. It has been financed in part by returns generated by previous regional investment funds, and it is pleasing to see that recycled funding being used to support the growth of more local businesses."

To find out how FW Capital can support your business please email info@fwcapital.co.uk or visit our website www.fwcapital.co.uk or to find out more about the North East Fund visit www.northeastfund.org

For further details about Reform Studio please visit www.reform-studio.co.uk



Victoria Darroch, Reform Studio Owner.

Opening its doors in January 2026, Reform Studio is a multi-floor wellness studio, offering Reformer Pilates, Barre, yoga and sound healing classes in a unique listed building on the city's Quayside. Set in a luxurious 3,000 sq ft studio, the space spans four floors offering two purpose-built studios hosting in excess of 72 weekly classes. Wellness facilities include an infra-red sauna and cold-plunge pool, a wellness café, a Reform Wear clothing boutique, a members-only secret garden overlooking the Tyne Bridge and corporate wellness programmes.

Reform Studio has been created by Victoria Darroch, a lifelong wellness advocate, wellness practitioner, and senior leader who has left the corporate world of finance to set up this new venture.

Victoria Darroch, Reform Studio Owner, said: "After years of burnout, stress, and searching for spaces that felt both grounding and inspiring, I left the corporate world to build something Newcastle hasn't seen before. Reform Studio brings movement and mindfulness in one unique multi-floor destination on Newcastle's iconic Quayside, all designed to create a full mind-body experience."

For Victoria, launching her business after a 20-year career in financial services and supporting small businesses in the North East has been a welcome challenge.

She explains: "I am extremely excited to start this new chapter and have recruited a highly experienced team of seven wellness professionals who are ready to welcome

Develop North PLC sponsor first HogmanHOWAY 5k New Year's Eve run party in Newcastle



L-R: Ian McElroy and Steve Cram



Leading North East investment company Develop North PLC, who is helping to regenerate the North East of England, were delighted to be title sponsors of the inaugural HogmanHOWAY 5K event, organised by Events of the North, in partnership with the North East Mayor Kim McGuinness and Newcastle City Council.

The run saw almost 2,000 people of all ages and ability run together on closed roads around the city.

Starting and finishing at the Civic Centre, the route took in many local landmarks, and offered a new spectacle for revellers who were in Newcastle to see out the year.

Develop North PLC, managed by Newcastle-based fund management specialists, Tier One Capital, were honoured to play their part in making the event a success and making it happen.

Ian McElroy, chief executive Tier One Capital, and director of Develop North, said: "The inaugural HogmanHOWAY 5K was a fantastic success and a brilliant way to bring people together to welcome in the New Year.

"It was inspiring to see so many runners of all ages and abilities taking part and enjoying the energy and excitement of the city.

"We're proud to have supported an event that celebrates Newcastle in such a positive, inclusive and active way, and which reflects the confidence, momentum and sense of

community that continues to define the North East. Congratulations to everyone involved in delivering such a memorable landmark event."

There was local success in the elite men's race, with Scott Beattie of Morpeth Harriers taking the win in a time of 13 minutes and 59 seconds.

The elite race was followed by a mass start for the HogmanHOWAY 5K runners. Experienced club athletes were joined by fun runners and novices, including some who had taken on the challenge in order to start early with their new year's resolution to get fit.

A lot of participants were raising funds for worthy causes, such as the event's official charity partner, The Sir Bobby Robson Foundation, part of Newcastle Hospitals Charity.

Event founder Steve Cram comments: "There was already a great party atmosphere in Newcastle, and the Develop North HogmanHOWAY 5K added energy and excitement to that.

"Staging the HogmanHOWAY 5K took a lot of hard work and coordination and we're really grateful to Develop North, Mayor Kim McGuinness and the North East Combined Authority, Newcastle City Council, Northumbria University, Start Fitness and all of our volunteers for making it possible.

"I hope that everyone agrees that this was a positive way to wave goodbye to this year and get on the front foot for 2026!"

North East Mayor Kim McGuinness, said: "What an incredible way to celebrate New Year's Eve in Newcastle – our region showcasing its renown community spirit and party atmosphere, and living up to our reputation as a host of world class events.

www.developnorth.co.uk
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Johnston Carmichael: A year of momentum and bigger ambitions ahead

A year of growth in the North East

With 2026 underway, Johnston Carmichael is reflecting on a year defined by momentum, growth and a strengthening presence in the North East. From senior appointments and national leadership roles to community investment and the launch of new platforms, the firm has continued to build on its reputation as a people-led, purpose-driven adviser.

During 2025, the Newcastle office moved into a phase of sustained growth and expansion. Since opening in 2023, the office has grown rapidly and now has a team of 23 and counting. The team advises a broad mix of entrepreneurial businesses, family-owned firms and larger corporates, spanning sectors including construction and property, manufacturing, professional services and technology.

Investing in senior talent

A defining theme of the year was investment in leading talent. Throughout 2025, Johnston Carmichael strengthened its Newcastle team with a series of senior appointments, including Tax Directors Chris Hodgson and Adrienne Paterson. These hires brought additional depth and specialism to the team, while also reinforcing their long-term commitment to building a strong, sustainable presence in the region.

Newcastle:
Where sharp
minds meet



L-R: Glen Small, Paul Shields, Alex Nicholson

National recognition for regional expertise

That local capability has also been recognised at a national level. In 2025, Newcastle-based VAT and Indirect Tax Director Glen Small was appointed as Head of Construction and Property, placing the Newcastle office at the centre of their UK-wide sector strategy.

The firm's specialist expertise was further recognised when the VAT team, led by Alex Nicholson, was shortlisted for Team of the Year, reflecting the depth of technical knowledge and practical insight being delivered to clients from the North East and beyond.

Deepening sector engagement across the region

In 2025, the team continued to strengthen its engagement across key North East sectors

through active participation in regional networks and partnerships.

They play an active role in the region's technology ecosystem through its involvement with Dynamo North East, while its food and drink specialists worked closely with FADNE, taking Johnston Carmichael's annual sector survey to the Newcastle market last March. Paul Shields, Partner and Head of the Newcastle office, is a member of The Engineering and Manufacturing Network, supporting collaboration and knowledge-sharing across the sector.

The team also continued to deepen its involvement in the energy and industrial supply chain through Global Underwater Hub, with Tom Harrison, Senior Manager, and Rebecca McColl, Senior Tax Manager, working

closely with businesses operating in the energy, industrial and subsea markets.

These partnerships reflect the firm's commitment to being embedded in the sectors it advises, ensuring its insight remains grounded in the realities facing regional businesses.

Sharing insight in new ways

2025 also marked a shift in how Johnston Carmichael engages with the wider business community. Paul Shields played a key role in hosting their new podcast, 'Where Sharp Minds Compete', which explores leadership, growth and decision-making through candid conversations with business leaders, athletes and changemakers.

The podcast reflects the firm's belief that strong leadership is shaped not only by technical expertise, but by experience, perspective and the ability to learn from others.

Creating impact beyond business

Community impact has remained a core part of Johnston Carmichael's ethos throughout the year. In 2025, they concluded a 12-month partnership with England Netball, delivering a tangible grassroots legacy across the North East. Through targeted funding streams, the initiative supported more than 1,000 women, girls and young people to access netball through coaching qualifications, club development and school-based programmes, including SEND settings.

Looking ahead to 2026

This year, the focus is firmly on continued growth, but with purpose. The team recently welcomed Audit Partner, Gemma Gibson, with plans to continue to expand the senior Newcastle team further and continuing to invest in early-career talent through training and development.

Paul Shields said: "2025 was a brilliant year for our Newcastle team. We've grown the business, strengthened our expertise and have seen colleagues step into leadership roles at a national level. What's been particularly rewarding is how strongly our approach resonates with clients across the region. Businesses want advisers who understand their world and can offer practical, forward-looking support.

There's a real sense of momentum as we head into the year ahead. We're planning further growth, welcoming new senior colleagues and continuing to invest in our people and our profile in the North East. The region has enormous potential, and we're ambitious about the role we can play in supporting businesses to grow, adapt and succeed, even in a challenging environment."

Johnston Carmichael's North East story continues to evolve, with a growing team, widening client base and an increasingly prominent national voice. The firm has positioned itself not simply as an adviser to the region's businesses, but as a long-term partner in their future success.

johnstoncarmichael.com



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**We are
honoured to
be celebrating
150 years.**

Time to celebrate!

Year of special events planned, as Jacksons marks its 150-year anniversary.

When Jacksons was founded in 1876, correspondence travelled by post and legal documents were drafted by hand.

Since then, the firm has navigated the arrival of the telephone, the photocopier, the fax machine, computers, email and now digital and cloudbased working and the advent of AI.

Each innovation has changed the pace and scale of legal services, allowing Jacksons to support clients more quickly, collaboratively and effectively than ever before.

That's why Erica Turner, Jacksons' head of legal, and Amie Callan, head of operations, are keen to honour the firm's proud history and heritage through a series of exciting 150-year anniversary events planned in 2026, following a landmark year that saw revenue increase by 20%.

However, not content with pausing to reflect on the past, Erica and Amie also have their sights firmly set on laying the foundations for the next 150 years of independent legal practice.

Jacksons, which has offices on Teesside and in Newcastle, was first established in 1876 at 42 Albert Road, Middlesbrough by Mr Gilbert B Jackson – later joined by his brother Francis H Jackson.

Further names for the firm when joined by additional solicitors, included Jacksons and Monk and Jacksons, Monk and Rowe.

"It's amazing to think our firm started 150 years ago with one man, and now we are a team of 109 providing a range of legal services to businesses and individuals across the whole North East region and beyond," said Erica.

"After last year's rebrand, we are now reflective of who we have always been - an independent law firm that cares deeply about our clients, our people and the communities we serve - and we're excited about the year of celebrations we have planned in 2026."

Over the past 150 years, the legal profession in the UK has been transformed almost beyond recognition - and Jacksons has evolved alongside it.

From an era when legal advice was handwritten, local and largely transactional, the firm has seen the introduction of regulated professional standards, the expansion of specialist practice areas, increased access to justice, and a growing emphasis on client service, transparency and accountability.

Jacksons has continually adapted its services to meet the changing needs of individuals and organisations across the North East.

Today, investment in people and technology continues to underpin the firm's approach to "define the next era".

The growth of inhouse compliance and IT teams, alongside the appointment of new developers and specialists, reflects a modern law firm that recognises innovation as essential to delivering excellent client service in a fastmoving world.

The corporate and commercial team at Jacksons in 2025, with newly appointed partner Dan Flounders at the helm, was a massive step forward for the firm.

As part of its "desire to grow our base of people and build on our specialisms," Jacksons has a focus on training and development, upskilling staff and creating a fulfilled workforce that is fit for a promising future for the firm.



Erica and Amie are also looking forward to welcoming more trainees and apprentices in legal and non-legal positions, working closely with local training providers.

Inspiring the next generation of female professionals is also important to Erica and Amie.

It wasn't until the 1980s that the firm welcomed its first female solicitor, who became the firm's first female partner later that decade.

Despite 150 years of social, legal and technological change, one thing has remained constant: Jacksons' loyalty to clients and its people, rooted in the communities it serves.

From its earliest days supporting local enterprise and education, to its ongoing partnerships with regional institutions and training providers, the firm has consistently combined professional excellence with a deep sense of responsibility and care.

It is this steadfast commitment that has carried Jacksons through generations - and will continue to guide it into the next 150 years.

Erica says: "We are honoured to be celebrating 150 years - and we want our successors to be celebrating 300 years in 150 years' time!"

Details about events to mark the firm's 150th year will be revealed throughout 2026.

jacksons.law
Taking Care for 150 years

Jacksons.
150



Wendy Beacom



Shamin Ali



Jessica Inman

A new year means a fresh start

And that can often apply to marriages. Post-Christmas, divorce/dissolution enquiries soar. That isn't unique to TBI Law – and there are many reasons for that.

While for many, Christmas is a cause for celebration, for some couples, it can bring issues to the forefront that have long bubbled under the surface.

The reasons aren't surprising.

Finances can be strained. The pressure to deliver that perfect Christmas can be overwhelming.

Between presents, wrapping, prepping the turkey and fitting in nativity after nativity, there's little time to breathe.

But there's an even darker side: More time together can expose relationship cracks, or worse, fuel domestic abuse.

And while separation rarely happens on a whim – with months, or even years of quiet worry and difficult conversations behind it – Christmas can be the tipping point.

At TBI Law, we've sadly seen it happen time after time.

As one of the North East's oldest law firms, we've helped navigate countless parties through one of life's most difficult phases.

Families devastated. Homes divided – with children often caught in the middle.

And when the decision to split is made, the legal process can feel daunting, adding additional stress at an already emotional time.

That is when experienced, professional support

can make a world of difference.

At TBI Law, divorce and family law isn't transactional.

We know every family, marriage and background is unique.

We are here to listen first, explain clearly and guide clients through each step.

How will assets be divided? What happens to the family home? How will arrangements work for children?

That journey can feel overwhelming, especially in the early days.

But having a trusted legal team on hand doesn't just offer reassurance.

It also helps you retake control in one of the most tumultuous periods of your life.

Thankfully, our trusted solicitors are specialists in divorce and family matters.

They have a deep understanding of both the legal framework and emotion that lies within divorce.

Wendy Beacom is Head of the Private Family team and a Partner at TBI, with a particular expertise in the financial aspects of family law, like addressing complex finances and assets arising upon divorce and the preparation of nuptial agreements.

Partner Shamin Ali can confidently advise on

financial matters. She is experienced in Islamic divorces and understands the issues that are encountered with such.

Associate Solicitor Jessica Inman deals with matters like divorce/dissolution, matrimonial finances and child arrangements with a pragmatic approach, empathy, strength and compassion to every client.

Our entire team regularly advise on businesses, trusts, pensions, investment portfolios – and even complex marital estates when international property is involved.

It is skilled and experienced. They've spent countless hours negotiating and advocating for clients to get them the settlements they deserve.

But we also recognise that divorce/dissolution isn't just a legal process involving assets.

It is life changing.

And ultimately, we aim to resolve a divorce/dissolution in a way that protects both their best interests and those of their children.

So, as you prepare your next steps, just know that you don't have to walk them alone or that it must be hostile.

All our advisers are members of Resolution, a national organisation of specialist family lawyers whose aim is to help you navigate the journey in the least adversarial way as possible.

We've supported families through divorce/dissolution for generations. We've helped clients across the North East – from Sunderland to Teesside – for almost 200 years.

With the right support, it is possible to move forward – and turn 2026 into the fresh start you needed.

www.tbilaw.co.uk



Claire Simmons

Building trusted legal support for the North East's high net worth individuals

Claire Simmons, Partner at Hay & Kilner, explores why long-term relationships and teamwork sit at the heart of effective legal advice for high-net-worth clients.

In the North East, many individuals and families have spent years building not only wealth, but businesses, property portfolios and legacies they hope will endure for generations. With that comes the need for legal advice that is thoughtful, discreet and genuinely joined-up.

High net worth clients often come to us at pivotal moments in their lives: planning for the future, investing in property, navigating family change, or dealing with complex estate and succession matters. What they value most is not just technical excellence, but the reassurance that they have a trusted team around them who understands the bigger picture.

Our private client work sits at the heart of this. From wills and trusts to estate planning and administration, our aim is to help clients protect their assets and ensure their wishes are carried out clearly and tax-efficiently. Many of our clients have complex family structures, business interests or overseas assets, and they need advice that reflects that complexity. We take the time to understand what matters to

them, not just today, but for the long term.

Property is another area where we regularly support high net worth individuals across the region. Whether it is acquiring residential or investment property, managing portfolios, or dealing with development opportunities, our property specialists work closely with colleagues across the firm to ensure transactions are smooth, strategic and aligned with wider financial and family considerations.

Family law is often the most sensitive area of all. Relationship breakdown can be particularly challenging where significant assets, businesses or inherited wealth are involved. Our family team is experienced in advising on divorce, financial settlements and arrangements for children, always with discretion and pragmatism at the forefront. Just as importantly, we frequently work proactively with clients on pre- and post-nuptial agreements to help protect wealth and provide clarity for the future.

What truly sets Hay & Kilner apart, however, is the strength and breadth of our team. We

are a full-service law firm, which means our clients benefit from seamless access to experts across the business. A private client matter may involve input from one of our property teams such as residential, commercial or rural; a family issue may require corporate or tax expertise. Because we work collaboratively, clients are not passed from firm to firm, they are supported by one trusted team.

This approach is rooted in our belief in the power of building long standing relationships. We don't rely on referral arrangements. Most of our work comes through returning clients, recommendations, and cross-referrals from within the firm.

Those relationships are built on trust, continuity and clear communication. Many of our clients have been with us for decades, returning at different stages of their lives and introducing the next generation to the firm.

The Hay & Kilner way is about more than legal advice. At Hay & Kilner, we pride ourselves on being a modern and progressive full-service law firm. More than just lawyers, we combine our expertise with a refreshing and personable approach. We speak your language, explaining, guiding and supporting you through the entire legal process when you need it most.

With 80 years of experience, we are proud to have built a strong reputation across the North East for delivering high-quality legal services and outstanding client care. Quite simply, we put you first and for our high-net-worth clients, that means providing confidence, clarity and continuity at every step.

www.hay-kilner.co.uk

Data protection round up – what can we learn from 2025?

Rhiannon Hastings, data protection paralegal at Muckle LLP, reviews some of the key trends and topics discussed during 2025 and how your organisation can take those learnings into 2026.

New legislation

The Data (Use and Access) Act (DUAA) 2025 received royal assent on 19 June 2025 and is the latest development to modernise the UK data protection legislation (which includes the Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK GDPR). Key changes your organisation may need to consider include:

- being aware of the new 'recognised legitimate interest' lawful basis;
- implementing a complaints procedure to manage complaints relating to data protection rights requests;
- using analytical website cookies without having to obtain consent; and
- if your organisation is a charity, understanding the direct marketing rules under the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations 2003 when relying on the 'soft opt-in'.

The key changes listed above are not yet in force at the time of writing. However, all provisions are due to be in force no later than 19 June 2026, so we recommend reviewing your organisation's current data protection framework and identifying any gaps that will need to be addressed to comply with the changes proposed by the DUAA.

Increase in cyber attacks

In 2024, the UK was the most targeted country in Europe for cyber attacks, with over 40% of UK businesses experiencing cyber attacks. Whilst some cyber attacks and other security breaches can be minor and simple to rectify, others can have devastating consequences on a business, from financial loss to reputational damage.

To mitigate incurring a cyber attack, or reduce the severity of the impact a cyber attack may cause, you should consider putting the following suggestions in place to safeguard your organisation:

- regular staff training to identify, detect and manage cyber attacks and other security breaches;
- clear and concise policies and procedures for staff to refer to when managing a cyber attack or other security breach; and
- appropriate technical and organisational measures to safeguard the personal data and confidential information your organisation stores.

AI-generated subject access requests

As Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become more accessible and user-friendly, we have seen a rise in AI-generated subject access requests (SARs). Although a useful tool for data subjects, they can be burdensome on organisations when they can be as long as 30 pages. So, what can you do to manage this?

The UK data protection legislation is clear that a data subject can make a SAR verbally or in writing. As long as it is clear that they are requesting copies of their personal data, their SAR is valid. However, in circumstances where it is unclear whether the data subject is making a SAR or what is being requested (a common issue with AI-generated SARs), organisations are entitled to seek clarification from the data subject before responding to the SAR.

Seeking clarification provides organisations with an opportunity to narrow the scope. For example, an organisation can ask the data subject to reduce the scope of their SAR to a specific time period or to a particular subject matter.

Between the time the organisation seeks clarification and the data subject responds, the time pauses, meaning the organisation does not have to comply with the SAR until the data subject has confirmed the personal data they wish to receive.

However, it is important to note that organisations cannot seek clarification on a blanket basis and cannot force a data subject to narrow the scope, as it is their right to obtain copies of all their personal data.

Need further support?

For more information on what we have discussed in this article, or if you require any assistance in dealing with the above, please contact Rhiannon Hastings by emailing: rhiannon.hastings@muckle-llp.com



Rhiannon Hastings



Preparation that pays off: Selling your business



Rishi Kohli, Commercial Partner at Sweeney Miller Law

For many founders or business owners, selling up isn't an active plan. It's an idea for later.

Often, it sits quietly in the background while more immediate priorities take over.

By the time a sale starts to feel real, many of the legal decisions that matter most have already been taken – often without any thought of an exit.

Most of the work happens before anyone calls it “preparation”

When a business is sold, buyers don't just look at the numbers. They look at how the business actually works and will want to understand:

- how decisions are made and risk is managed
- whether key contracts reflect reality
- whether ownership and authority are clear

That scrutiny can feel abrupt when you experience it for the first time. In reality, it's a closer look at arrangements that have built up over time.

Where things tend to unravel

By the time lawyers are involved, the business is often doing well. Performance isn't usually the issue – clarity is.

Common pressure points include:

- contracts and informal arrangements that no longer reflect how the business operates

- uncertainty around ownership of assets or intellectual property
- governance structures that work day-to-day but don't translate cleanly on paper

None of this is unusual. It's a natural by-product of growth, but left untouched it can slow a sale down or start to chip away at value.

Timing is back on the agenda

External changes have a habit of forcing these conversations earlier than expected.

With Capital Gains Tax changes due in April and expected to increase tax on some business disposals, many owners are looking more closely at timing and structure – even where a sale isn't imminent.

That shift has brought earlier planning back into focus, particularly around how a business is set up long before a transaction is on the table.

This doesn't need to be complicated

Preparing for a future sale isn't about over-lawyering a business or producing documents for the sake of it.

In practice, it's usually about a small number of sensible steps:

- reviewing key contracts and tidying up inconsistencies
- putting in place core agreements buyers expect, such as a Shareholders' Agreement, employment contracts and key commercial contracts

- making sure property arrangements, including leases, are properly documented
- ensuring ownership and authority are clearly recorded

The aim isn't to make the business look different. It's to make it understandable to someone seeing it for the first time.

A calmer way to approach a sale

Selling a business is always significant – commercially and personally.

The businesses that handle it best aren't usually the ones scrambling at the last minute. They're the ones that treated legal housekeeping as part of running a healthy, scalable business long before a sale was on the table.

Looking ahead

Thinking about a sale doesn't commit you to one.

But an early, measured review can protect value, preserve flexibility and reduce pressure when it matters most.

If you're starting to think about what the next stage might look like, even in broad terms, an early, practical conversation can make a real difference to how straightforward that journey feels. Get in touch with Sweeney Miller Law's Commercial team by emailing Rishi.Kohli@sweeneymiller.co.uk or call 0345 900 5401.



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Barry Speker OBE

Straight Talk

By Barry Speker OBE.

Recent protestations of President Trump indicate that the 'changed world order' of which Canadian leader Mark Carney warned at Davos is already here.

Invading Venezuela, capturing its President, threatening to annex Canada, claiming Greenland, establishing a new pseudo-UN Board of Peace and yes Putin has been invited.

Much is taken with a pinch of salt, as within days Trump may make a Starmer style U-turn. However, the Pentagon's new defence strategy builds on America First. This needs to be taken seriously by the UK and NATO. US power is not there to protect all the 'good guys' but to support economic self-interest. Trump has complained European countries rely upon the USA and do not share the cost of NATO defence. Repeatedly the UK has promised to increase defence spending but never adequately and always delayed. The British Chagos deal is now slammed by the President as profoundly stupid, indefensible and financially irresponsible. It may be scuppered in a welcome Starmer U-turn.

The President's denigration of NATO troops and their role in Afghanistan produced widespread indignation among the military and the bereaved families of the 457 British personnel who died in Afghanistan and the thousands who were injured. Following an approach from King Charles in a rare but appropriate intervention, President Trump rowed back on his insults, and paid tribute to the 'great and very brave soldiers of the United Kingdom' and the British Army's 'tremendous heart and soul'. Too little too late?

The first duty of any government is to protect its own people. Britain needs this truth to sink in now.

January 27th is Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) when events are held to commemorate the 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis, as well as the horrors unleashed in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

It is alarming that British Jews today face the reality of how safe they can feel, especially after the Manchester synagogue attack, with anti-Jewish hatred incidents higher than ever, and a surge in bigotry, racism and intolerance. HMD has particular significance when we reflect on a horrifying chapter of history, taking the opportunity to ensure lessons are learned - and the declaration of 'never again' is a sincere statement.

The number of surviving witnesses to the Holocaust is dwindling but their experiences remain powerful platforms for educating generations to come.

AI generated content increases distortion, denial and trivialisation.

The number of schools marking HMD is down

by nearly 60% since the October 7th attacks.

The lessons of the Holocaust do not belong only to the past but speak to the present; showing what can happen when lies go unchallenged, minorities are dehumanised and libelled.

In these troubled times it is the duty of all to remember and to teach the lessons accurately and universally.

It is always a challenge to see how Geordie culture and humour can transfer to the wider world. Sting, Ant and Dec and Cheryl managed it as well as Gazza and Alan Shearer. As to drama, 'The Pitmen Painters' made it to the West End and to Broadway.

The latest offering is 'Gerry and Sewell', 'a story of friendship, football and finding your place in the world'. The show is based on 'The Season Ticket' a 2022 novel by Jonathan Tulloch, about two eponymous supporters finding ways of raising money to buy season tickets for St James Park. The play debuted in The Laurels pub theatre in Whitley Bay, moved to the Theatre Royal and has just enjoyed a successful limited run at London's Aldwych Theatre.

Plenty of enthusiastic Geordies in the audience understanding the dialogue, local references and rude jokes although much remained unintelligible to the wider world. Reviews were mixed! One reviewer said 'it had all the allure of watching a bad Sunday league game on a quagmire of a pitch'. Sounds like a biased MOTD presenter.

Gerry and Sewell returns to the Newcastle Theatre Royal from 9th to 12th June 2026. Not to be missed!

barryspeker@hotmail.com





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150 years of UK Trade Mark Registrations

The UK's Trade Marks Registration Act 1875 came into force on 1 January 1876 - 150 years ago. Although traders had been indicating the origin of their goods with marks or symbols for hundreds of years prior to this, the 1875 Act made it possible to register trade marks for any type of goods for the first time. In 1986, 110 years later, it became possible to register trade marks for services.

The first trade mark registered at the UK Intellectual Property Office, no. UK000000000001, was filed by Bass & Co. from Burton-on-Trent and remains valid and registered today in the name of AB InBev UK Limited. The now iconic red triangle beer logo had already become a well-known feature of Bass's Pale Ale bottles and following registration of the mark, the brand became a globally recognised symbol of quality. By 1877, Bass had become the largest brewery in the world, 100 years after it was founded.

The main purpose of a trade mark is to identify the source of a product or service, and to distinguish that product or service from those of other traders. Obtaining trade mark protection is essential in building brand identity and recognition, which in turn will establish customer loyalty. Provided renewal fees are paid, trade mark registrations, unlike all other intellectual property rights, can last indefinitely. The key to a successful trade mark is distinctiveness - if a mark is memorable and is not generic, descriptive or suggestive, it will be easier to register and protect. Thinking outside the box can allow for the development of distinctive trademarks that stand out in the marketplace and leave a lasting impression on consumers.

Bass & Co.'s registered trade mark distinguished its goods from those of other brewers, helping its Pale Ale become one of the UK's most recognisable exports and still retaining a global presence today.



Dominic Elsworth

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How to safeguard your business through separation

For business owners, risk management is second nature, yet one threat is often overlooked: the breakdown of a relationship. The emotional and financial impact of divorce or separation can be profound, but with proper legal advice, much of this risk can be mitigated.

Married couples in the UK fall under the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973, which gives courts wide discretion to divide assets based on fairness and need. This means that even if a business was established before the marriage, its growth during the relationship may be considered a matrimonial asset and subject to division.

The business owner's dilemma

Consider a scenario where a business owner marries a partner who later gives up their career to raise children. Over time, the business thrives. Upon separation, the owner may feel the business is solely theirs. However, courts often view contributions like childcare and household management as part of the joint marital effort. In long marriages, a 50/50 split is a common starting point.

This can be a shock to business owners who assumed their enterprise would remain untouched. The reality is that without legal safeguards, even pre-marital assets can be drawn into the settlement.

Protecting businesses and assets

There are measures you can put in place to ensure the needs of all parties are met. Prenuptial or postnuptial agreements are invaluable tools for setting expectations and protecting assets. While not legally binding in the UK, courts increasingly uphold them especially if they meet the following criteria:

- Signed well before the wedding
- Both parties received independent legal advice
- Full financial disclosure was made
- The agreement is fair and meets the needs of



Jo Grey

both parties

A well-drafted prenup can specify how business assets will be treated, preserving pre-marital equity and outlining how future growth will be shared.

For unmarried couples, cohabitation agreements can outline financial arrangements and property rights. Though not legally binding, they are persuasive in civil court and can prevent costly disputes.

Timing and transparency matter

Legal planning should begin before moving in together or getting married. Waiting until separation is often too late. Agreements should be reviewed regularly, say every five years, or after major life events like having children or acquiring new assets.

Transparency is key. Courts look favourably on couples who clearly documented their intentions and contributions. This includes keeping separate bank accounts, avoiding unnecessary mingling of assets, and maintaining clear records of business roles and income.

Third parties and business structures

If your business involves other partners or family members, things get more complex. Shareholder agreements, partnership structures, and corporate governance documents may need to be reviewed and updated to reflect potential risks from a partner's future claims. Involving a corporate solicitor alongside a family solicitor ensures that both personal and business interests are protected.

Valuations and hidden costs

Separation often triggers the need for expert valuations of businesses, pensions and properties which can be expensive and time-consuming. Tax considerations also need to be considered. Legal fees, actuaries and financial advisors may all be required.

Finding workable solutions

Not every separation needs to end in a courtroom. Options include:

- Kitchen table discussions: informal agreements between parties
- Mediation: facilitated negotiation with a neutral third party
- Resolution Together: one solicitor advising both parties
- Arbitration: binding decisions made privately
- Solicitor negotiation: the most common route, offering legal advice and advocacy

These methods can preserve relationships, reduce costs, and lead to more satisfactory outcomes.

Final thoughts

Protecting your assets isn't a sign of distrust, it's a sign of maturity. It's about ensuring both parties understand their rights and responsibilities, so they can build a future with confidence. Whether you're entering a new relationship or already in one, if you own a business, legal advice is essential. Protecting your legacy, your livelihood, and your peace of mind starts with a conversation - and the sooner, the better.

For trusted advice on family legal matters, contact Jo on 01434 603656 or joanne.grey@cartmells.co.uk

This column is intended to provide general information only and does not constitute nor should it be relied upon as legal advice.



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Mincoffs supports launch of Newcastle's largest pilates studio



L-R: Reform Studio founder Victoria Darroch with Hannah Rolfe, associate solicitor in Mincoffs' real estate team

A multi-storey pilates studio offering classes, workspace and a wide range of wellness features has welcomed its first clients this month (January), thanks to legal support from leading North East law firm, Mincoffs Solicitors.

Based across four floors, Reform Studio is the largest studio of its kind in the city, home to reformer and mat pilates studios, plunge pool, an infrared sauna, sound baths, weight classes and a private garden for outdoor classes.

Located on Newcastle's quayside, the centre aims to appeal to those living and working in the city centre, with a number of classes professionals can attend before or after work and even during their lunch breaks.

A community hub on the ground floor is home to a boutique, ReformWear, which stocks the brand's activewear range, and a café serving luxury and nutritious meals and drinks.

Founder and creative director Victoria Darroch is a qualified pilates teacher and spent 25 years working in a variety of senior finance positions across the private and public sector before

deciding to combine her corporate experience with her lifelong passion for pilates.

She worked closely with Mincoffs to help realise her vision, with real estate, intellectual property and employment advice from partners Malcolm Wood, Antony Hall and Nick Smith and associate solicitor Hannah Rolfe.

Victoria said: "Working with Mincoffs has been invaluable throughout the launch of Reform Studio. From the outset, the team immediately understood my vision — not just for a fitness space, but for a multi-brand wellness destination combining movement, community, and innovation.

"Their expertise across real estate, intellectual property, and employment law gave me complete confidence as we navigated lease negotiations, trademark protection, and the structure of a growing team. Malcolm, Antony, Nick, and Hannah have been exceptional — proactive, responsive, and genuinely invested in helping turn this concept into reality.

"It's rare to find a legal team who truly become partners in your journey, and Mincoffs have done exactly that."

Alongside Reform Studio and ReformWear, Victoria has also worked with manufacturers to create her own line of reformer equipment under the brand Reform Body which will also supply other studios across the UK.

"From our first meeting with Victoria it was evident that she had a clear vision for the

business and we were delighted to support her in securing the perfect space for the studio and putting protections in place for the three brands," said real estate partner, Malcolm Wood.

"Newcastle quayside is an enviable location with excellent transport links, right in the heart of the city centre, and the multi-storey studio allows Victoria the freedom to curate a programme which appeals to a wide audience.

"We are confident the studio will be incredibly popular and we wish Victoria every success in the future."

Accessibility is at the forefront of Reform Studio, with step-free access throughout the venue and a range of classes for different levels and abilities.

The studio has multiple membership tiers available, along with class passes for those who are visiting or want to trial the space. For more information on Reform Studio, visit www.reform-studio.co.uk

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 real estate, dispute resolution, employment law, licensing and gaming, residential conveyancing, family law and wills, probate and trusts.

For more information visit www.mincoffs.co.uk

Celebrating five years of dedication at Brenda Beveridge Wills & Trusts



L-R: Karen Robinson and Brenda Beveridge

This year marks a special milestone at Brenda Beveridge Wills & Trusts as we celebrate Karen's five-year anniversary with the business.

Karen joined us during one of the most challenging periods in recent history – the Covid pandemic. While many were navigating uncertainty,

Karen was starting a new role, building her knowledge, supporting clients, and home schooling her children at the same time. Her resilience, commitment, and professionalism during those early days continue to shape the business today.

Karen's journey is not just a personal achievement; it has helped secure the future of the firm. Thanks to her experience and dedication, we are fortunate to know that the business can continue seamlessly when Brenda retires, ensuring clients remain supported for years to come.

This milestone naturally leads us to an important question for business owners: what would happen if you wanted to retire, or suddenly couldn't work?

Many people spend years building a business but never pause to plan what comes next. Whether retirement is on the horizon or still a distant idea, having a clear plan in place protects not only you, but your family, staff, and clients.

A key part of this planning is having a Business Power of Attorney in place. If illness or an unexpected event left you unable to make decisions, who would step in to manage the business? Without the right legal arrangements, even a successful business can quickly face uncertainty.

As Caro Syson wisely says, "Do a life admin MOT while nothing is wrong." Planning ahead isn't pessimistic – it's practical. It provides clarity, continuity, and peace of mind.

Taking time now to review your business and personal affairs can make all the difference later. At Brenda Beveridge Wills & Trusts, we're here to help you think ahead, protect what you've built, and move forward with confidence.

brendabeveridge.co.uk

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Tiny Boots, Big Dreams

Two North East football fans, Matt Lawn and Chris Towers, have turned their lifelong passion for the beautiful game into Football Squirts—a thriving coaching business for toddlers and young children aged two to six. Their fast-growing model, built on fun, confidence-building sessions and structured early-years football activities, is now expanding through a network of licensed territories across the region.

Together, Chris and Matt, launched their first branch in Ponteland and have since expanded to operate in Great Park, Gosforth, Ponteland, Morpeth, Whitley Bay, and now Blyth.

To support their growth, the pair have partnered with Morpeth-based business strategist and coach Linda Lowther from Advice 4 Business North East, whose role has been to help professionalise and scale the operation.

Football Squirts sessions are built around fun, encouragement and confidence, rather than competitiveness. With a growing network and a clear pathway for new territory owners, Football Squirts is well on its way to becoming a leading early-years football coaching brand in the North East and beyond.



Freemasons fund new tops for Blyth Samba Group

Northumberland Freemasons have donated £1,060 to Blyth Valley Samba, a long-standing community drumming group, to fund new polo shirts for its volunteers.

The donation was made through the Richard Henry Holmes Benevolent Fund, which supports small community organisations across Northumberland, Newcastle and North Tyneside.

Blyth Valley Samba has been part of the local community since 1993. The group was founded by musician Keith Blackburn, who brought samba drumming to Blyth after being inspired by similar groups elsewhere. Sadly, Keith recently passed away and now Blyth Valley Samba has around 25 members ranging in age from 12 to 85.

Norman West, from Northumberland Freemasons, said: "We are proud to support small organisations through the Richard Henry Holmes Benevolent Fund. When the trustees read Blyth Valley Samba's application, it was fully supported straight away. The group touches people right across the community, and funding like this helps volunteers continue the valuable work they do."

The £1,060 donation has been used to provide new polo shirts for volunteers, helping to give the group a strong identity when performing and representing Blyth Valley Samba at events.



Teesside Hospice welcomes Corporate Partnerships Manager to drive fundraising

Teesside Hospice has appointed a Corporate Partnerships Manager to take care of corporate development, as it aims to reach ever-growing demand for its services.

Hassan Hameed has joined the charity to nurture relationships with existing corporate partners and supporters, build a pipeline for new supporters, and develop a strategy to align with the hospice's mission to help people of Teesside live as well as possible for as long as possible.

The hospice, which is based on Northgate Road in Middlesbrough, provides care, comfort and dignity to around 4,000 patients and loved ones each year through its in-patient unit, Wellbeing Centre, bereavement counselling service and Lymphoedema Clinic.

Before joining Teesside Hospice, Hassan worked as an Executive Manager for a recruitment firm for several years, taking care of business development, operations and finance.

Speaking about his appointment, Hassan said: "I'm looking forward to working with our amazing supporters, who share our vision to provide better end of life care to the people of Teesside. I'm also looking forward to connecting with new businesses and fundraisers so we can make a real difference together."

"I have a personal connection to the hospice as some of my family members have used the services, and so I have a lot of respect and admiration for what the teams do here."

"With demand rising and it currently costing around £6.75 million annually to run the hospice, we simply couldn't operate without the generosity of our supporters. Every contribution means more than words can express."

"I'm looking forward to getting to know our current partners and meeting new ones across the region."

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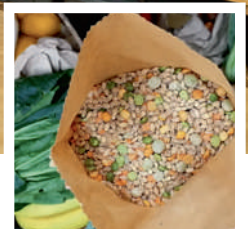
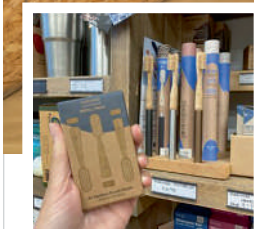
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Slumming it for CEO Sleepout charity



Charity of the month...

Bianca Robinson

For most CEOs, the idea of slumming it probably means spending the night in a Travelodge. But then Bianca Robinson isn't your typical CEO.

As the day-to-day boss of the beloved homelessness charity CEO Sleepout, Bianca has spent around three weeks a year for the last eight years sleeping rough.

"I've taken part in over 100 sleepouts now, and faced everything from storms to snow," said Bianca.

"It isn't easy - but the impact we create is incredible."

Since launching in 2013, CEO Sleepout has raised over £6m to help over 200 frontline causes helping some of Britain's most vulnerable people experiencing poverty or homelessness.

Last year, the Middlesbrough-based charity raised £750,000 to support 85 different organisations throughout Britain.

But Bianca admits it still isn't enough.

"While support for CEO Sleepout has been phenomenal, rates of poverty and homelessness are going completely in the wrong direction," she added.

"Rough sleeping is sadly rising and we now have more children classed as homeless than ever before. Families are struggling to survive,

but so are the charities they turn to in their hour of need. Every individual has a story, and a reason they are facing homelessness."

That's why in 2026, Bianca is upping the ante.

Ahead of the charity's first sleepout of the year in March, she's set a £1m fundraising target for 2026.

"It would be a record, and there's a real desire for change - but we need more fundraisers," added Bianca.

And in the North East, they are needed in the coming months.

While the first sleepout of 2026 takes place in Kent on March 23, spring will see a flurry of events in our region.

The first will be in Middlesbrough, with dozens expected to bed down for the night at the Riverside Stadium on April 30.

A fortnight later, the charity will move to Northumberland for the Alnwick CEO Sleepout, which takes place in the magical setting of Lilidorei at Alnwick Gardens.

But while the backdrop may be enchanting, the reality is that for thousands across the North East, life is anything but a fairytale.

In Sunderland - where a sleepout is scheduled for early November, figures uncovered by CEO Sleepout found that, on average, a household there turns to help from the council for housing every 12 hours.

In Newcastle, rough sleeping has rocketed by over 25 per cent since the start of the decade.

But as Bianca points out, behind the numbers are real people.

That's why this year, CEO Sleepout's campaign is simply 'Names before Numbers'.

It aims to show that behind the record rates of homelessness are real stories of people - and from every walk of life.

"The numbers are shocking. For example, 175,000 children don't have a guaranteed roof over their heads which for context, is more than three times the size of St James' Park," added Bianca.

"But numbers don't tell the real story of just how hard it is, of the real struggles facing real people every day, and this year we are determined to show the real faces of those experiencing the unimaginable pain of life without a home."

Heading into the charity's 13th year, CEO Sleepout will stage 20 events across the UK with sleepouts spanning Aberdeen to Brighton.

And crucially, the money raised is not just keeping services afloat but creating lasting change.

In 2025, CEO Sleepout took a major step forward by backing its first-ever bricks-and-mortar project, helping to resurrect York's NAPPads, providing safe, dignified temporary accommodation for some of the city's rough sleepers.

"This is what the sleepouts are really about and prove that when we come together, we can change lives," added Bianca.

"And that's why I'll always keep sleeping out."

ceosleepout.co.uk



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The 2025 Lord's Taverners Christmas Lunch

Held at Newcastle Civic Centre in December, raised an outstanding £75,000 — a particularly meaningful achievement as it coincided with the charity's 75th anniversary. The funds will be invested both regionally and nationally to empower young people and create positive change for those affected by inequality.

The event was marked by an impressive line-up of speakers, including Joe Marler and Neil "Razor" Ruddock, alongside the ever-entertaining Justin Lockwood and Jamie Sutherland, who helped make the occasion truly memorable.

Sincere thanks go to event sponsors Wates Group and Lockton Companies, and to all the supporters and contributors whose generosity ensured the lunch was such a resounding success.

For information on future events, please contact the Regional Chairman at
Jamiegraham@aarsleff.co.uk
www.lordstaverners.org







Why should you make a difference?

At Teesside Hospice, we're on a mission to ensure people of the Tees Valley have access to the very best end of life care, and that they and their families receive compassion and support when they need it most.

It costs £18,500 per day to run our services, and we receive less than 30% of funding from statutory sources. Simply put, we couldn't continue our work without the help of local businesses and organisations.

And help comes in all forms: financial donations, volunteering time with your team, taking part in our events and simply spreading the word all make a huge difference to us.

But with so many priorities as a team and organisation, why should you add charity support to the list?

For your team

Showing your team that you're an organisation that cares about the community it operates in can be a huge pull in terms of staff retention, attitude and wellbeing.

According to research from Charities Aid Foundation, more than half (54%) of employees

surveyed said that working for an employer who supports charities increases their sense of pride in working there. Plus, 51% of employees reported feeling more loyal to an employer who donates to charity.

For your ESG goals

Not only does corporate support provide a huge boost to our hospice, it's also a vital tool for your ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) strategy and meeting your goals.

Charity support aligns with the pillars of ESG and helps to demonstrate your commitment to responsible practices, beyond growth and profit.

For your community

By supporting a charity, you're directly impacting people in the very community you work and live. We're here for everyone across the Tees Valley, so it could be your friend, neighbour, hairdresser, dog walker and more that your support is benefitting.

From April 2024 – March 2025, we were able to:

- Provide care for 170 admissions to our In-Patient Unit
- Deliver 1,821 counselling appointments
- Receive 2,440 patient contacts through our Wellbeing Centre



- And 3,644 appointment contacts in our Lymphoedema Clinic

And our donors and supporters have been crucial in making that possible.

Ready to find out more?

Here are some ways you can get involved with Teesside Hospice:

- Coming on board as a partner or supporter
- Expert skill sharing: Sharing your expertise through workshops and mentoring various hospice departments, or offering us your services
- Hospice volunteering: This can include everything from gardening and maintenance, to volunteering your time in our shops or at our events
- Holding your own events in aid of Teesside Hospice or signing up your team to take part in our events

We're here for everyone across the Tees Valley and your support means we can continue to grow our services and reach even more of the community than we have before – thank you.

To find out more about Teesside Hospice, the work we do and how you can support us, visit www.teessidehospice.org



Driving growth, unlocking opportunity: Inside the Durham Business Growth Summit



In a business environment shaped by rapid change and rising competition, growth depends on more than ambition alone.

Access to finance, contracts, skills and the right connections all play a critical role. The Durham Business Growth Summit brings these elements together in one place, offering a focused opportunity for established businesses across County Durham and the wider North East to plan their next stage of growth.

Taking place on 11 February at the Radisson Blu Hotel in Durham, and backed by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) through Durham Business Growth, the Summit has been designed to deliver practical support, meaningful connections and clear routes to opportunity. From securing investment and improving productivity to diversifying into new markets and winning public-sector contracts, the event is firmly focused on action and outcomes.

Aligned with County Durham's wider economic ambitions, the Summit supports stronger local supply chains, improved productivity and sustainable growth that delivers long-term social, economic and environmental value. For attendees, this translates into a full day

of targeted insight, networking and hands-on engagement tailored to the real challenges facing growing businesses.

A key feature of the event is the Funding Carousel, which gives businesses direct access to leading regional and national funders. Organisations including the British Business Bank, Maven Capital Partners, NEL Fund Managers, FW Capital, Big Issue Invest, UMi and Corporate & Commercial Business Solutions will be available for focused conversations around grants, loans, equity investment and alternative finance. By removing complexity and encouraging open dialogue, the carousel helps businesses understand what funding options are available and which routes best support their growth plans.

Another major highlight is the Meet the Buyer programme, delivered through the County Durham Pound initiative. Procurement remains a powerful driver of growth, yet many SMEs find it difficult to navigate. The Summit addresses this by bringing buyers and suppliers together in one space, creating opportunities for direct conversations and early insight into future contracts.

Confirmed buyers include Durham County Council, Durham University, Northumbrian Water, Karbon Homes and Believe Housing. Together, these organisations invest millions of pounds each year across construction, infrastructure, professional services, sustainability and technology, offering genuine

opportunities for local businesses to engage with major procurement pipelines.

The Summit's keynote programme adds further depth, with speakers offering practical insights from both finance and industry. Louis Ainley, Investment Manager at Maven Capital Partners, will share investor perspectives on raising finance to grow. Steven Doran, Carbon, Sustainability & Data Manager at Esh Group, will outline how sustainability is being embedded at scale through the company's Even Greener strategy, while Emily Thornton, Water Efficiency Programme Coordinator, will highlight the role of resource efficiency in building resilient, future-ready businesses.

Designed for established, growth-focused organisations, the Summit will be particularly relevant to business owners, directors and senior leaders operating across priority sectors including advanced manufacturing, life sciences, space and deep tech, net zero, logistics and the visitor economy.

Ultimately, the Durham Business Growth Summit is about access – to finance, buyers, expertise and partnerships. For businesses looking to grow with confidence, it offers a clear and practical pathway forward.

**Registration is now open at www.durhambusinessgrowth.co.uk
For ambitious businesses ready to move forward, this is one date firmly worth marking in the diary.**



Muddy water and yellow ducks

By Tess Peters, Founder, Accelerator Coaching

What Thailand taught me about true work-life balance.

"You don't need more time. You need more clarity."

I am currently writing this sitting on a beach in Khao Lak, a day before travelling home to the UK. The sea is calm, the air is warm, and my phone is, for now, still on. That might sound like a contradiction, because we are often told that a holiday means switching off completely. No laptop. No emails. No thinking about work.

But what if it is not that simple?

2025 has been a landmark year for me. I turned 50, climbed Kilimanjaro, introduced new coaches into our leadership development programmes, and was given a precious gift, time away in Thailand over the New Year. My husband treated me to this holiday, and it felt both generous and grounding. A pause, a thank you, and a reset.

During the first week, I chose to work lightly. During the second week, I intentionally wound things down, focusing on my health

and wellbeing: yoga most mornings, running, swimming and time in the gym. I am increasingly convinced that when energy comes first, the rest follows. I felt clearer, calmer and more creative than I have in months.

And interestingly, I still found myself doing a little work. Not because I had to. Simply because it gave me pleasure.

There is a simple but powerful equation here. Passion sits somewhere between two positive emotions, satisfaction and pleasure. I am deeply passionate about coaching and the business we are building. Reaching out to a small number of people I work closely with, simply to say "I'm around if you need me", brought both. It did not feel like work at all.

Part of that is context. On holiday, I am not cooking, planning meals, or juggling diaries. My only real choices are whether to sunbathe or book a Thai massage. With that mental load lifted, my brain feels freer and more creative.

I have been manifesting and journaling throughout this trip, something I actively encourage clients to do for their wellbeing. Recently, I set an intention using the word "yellow" in my journal. Within hours, I was confronted by an enormous yellow inflatable duck staring at me from a passing boat. An hour later, a man wearing a name tag that read "Yellow" helped me onto a water taxi. Coincidence? Perhaps. But these moments reminded me that when we create space for clarity, the universe has a curious way of responding.

When you are self-employed or running a

business, time off looks different. There is no universal rulebook. Some days I will work for two focused hours and then read or study. Other days, I am completely offline. The key word here is choice.

In the UK, full-time employees are entitled to 28 days of annual leave. Yet research consistently shows that many people do not fully disconnect. What matters more than whether people work on holiday is how it feels. Wellbeing research tells us that autonomy, having control over when and how you work, is one of the strongest predictors of wellbeing. Stress tends to rise when work is driven by guilt or obligation rather than conscious choice.

Many leaders I coach say they want better work life balance. When we explore this properly, it is rarely just about fewer hours. It is about energy, fulfilment and self-trust. The real question is what is driving the behaviour.

There is a quote often attributed to Alan Watts that feels particularly relevant here: "Muddy water is best cleared by leaving it alone." When we allow ourselves to pause, clarity returns. This holiday has given me that stillness, and I want to make the most of the frame of mind it brings.

As I prepare to travel home, I feel grateful, energised and quietly focused. Over the next year, I will continue writing for Northern Insights, exploring the emotional competencies of effective leaders, one issue at a time.

So, do you work on holiday?

acceleratorcoaching.co.uk

WEAK SAUCE OR RICH GRAVY? WHY FEEDBACK ONLY MATTERS IF IT IS HEARD

FEEDBACK IS EVERYWHERE - ANNUAL REVIEWS, PULSE SURVEYS, 360S, END-OF-YEAR REFLECTIONS. BUT HERE'S THE QUESTION THAT CAME UP IN A RECENT LEADERSHIP SESSION:

"WE TALK ABOUT FEEDBACK ALL THE TIME - BUT IS IT ACTUALLY LANDING?"

This wasn't about whether feedback is happening, but whether it's honest, useful and courageous enough to make a real difference. At the start of a new year - when teams are setting goals, facing change, and navigating uncertainty - it matters more than ever.

WEAK SAUCE: WHEN GOOD INTENT GETS LOST

There's no shortage of evidence to show that regular, meaningful feedback boosts engagement and performance. Gallup's research into high-performing teams makes this clear. And yet, many managers still hold back - not because they don't care, but because they're worried about getting it wrong.

That hesitation often leads to what we call weak sauce. It's vague, over-softened and diluted. As Scott Smith, Director at People Spark, puts it:

"Most managers don't lack good intent - they lack confidence. And when confidence drops, clarity goes with it."

Confidence in feedback doesn't mean being blunt or confrontational. It means being grounded enough to say what needs to be said - clearly, respectfully, and with awareness of how it will land.

Because that's the thing about feedback: it doesn't live at the moment it's given. It lives at the moment it's heard.

THE SCIENCE OF WHAT'S HEARD (AND WHAT'S NOT)

Harvard Business School research shows a consistent gap between feedback given and feedback received. When someone feels threatened or overwhelmed, their brain moves into self-protection mode - and they hear far less than we think they do.

Neuroscience supports this: threat responses narrow focus and limit learning.

As Victoria Arnold, Head of Organisation Development at People Spark, reflects:

"We often focus on what we want to say - and far less on what the other person is actually able to hear in that moment."

One of the metaphors we share with leadership clients is to lift your head and widen your perspective. Imagine a giraffe - tall, steady, able to see further and stay aware of what's going on around it. That's the mindset leaders need when giving feedback that sticks. It's about pausing, staying present, and being willing to hold space - even when the conversation feels uncomfortable. When leaders do that, they create the conditions for feedback to be useful.

This is where rich gravy feedback lives: specific, timely, anchored in intent - delivered with curiosity, not judgement. And followed by enough space to reflect, respond and grow.

HELPING FEEDBACK LAND

The most effective leaders don't just "give feedback" - they help it land. They slow conversations down, check understanding, and invite dialogue rather than closure. So as organisations set intentions for the year ahead, perhaps the most important question isn't are we giving feedback? It's this:

**Is it weak sauce...
or rich gravy - and
do we know the
difference?"**

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What is the One Page Strategic Plan?

A major part of the Scaling Up methodology is the One Page Strategic Plan (OPSP).

Some would even say it represents the culmination of the entire approach.

But what is it that makes it so different?

If you want everyone in an organisation on the same page and pulling in the same direction, the first thing you need is that page.

Many of us are familiar with a traditional financial or numbers-based plan: a desktop exercise that estimates what next year's financial outcomes might look like.

The OPSP isn't that.

Financials are headline only and take up less than 10 per cent of the space.

This is a strategic plan. It focuses on the priorities and actions that will take the organisation to where it wants to be.

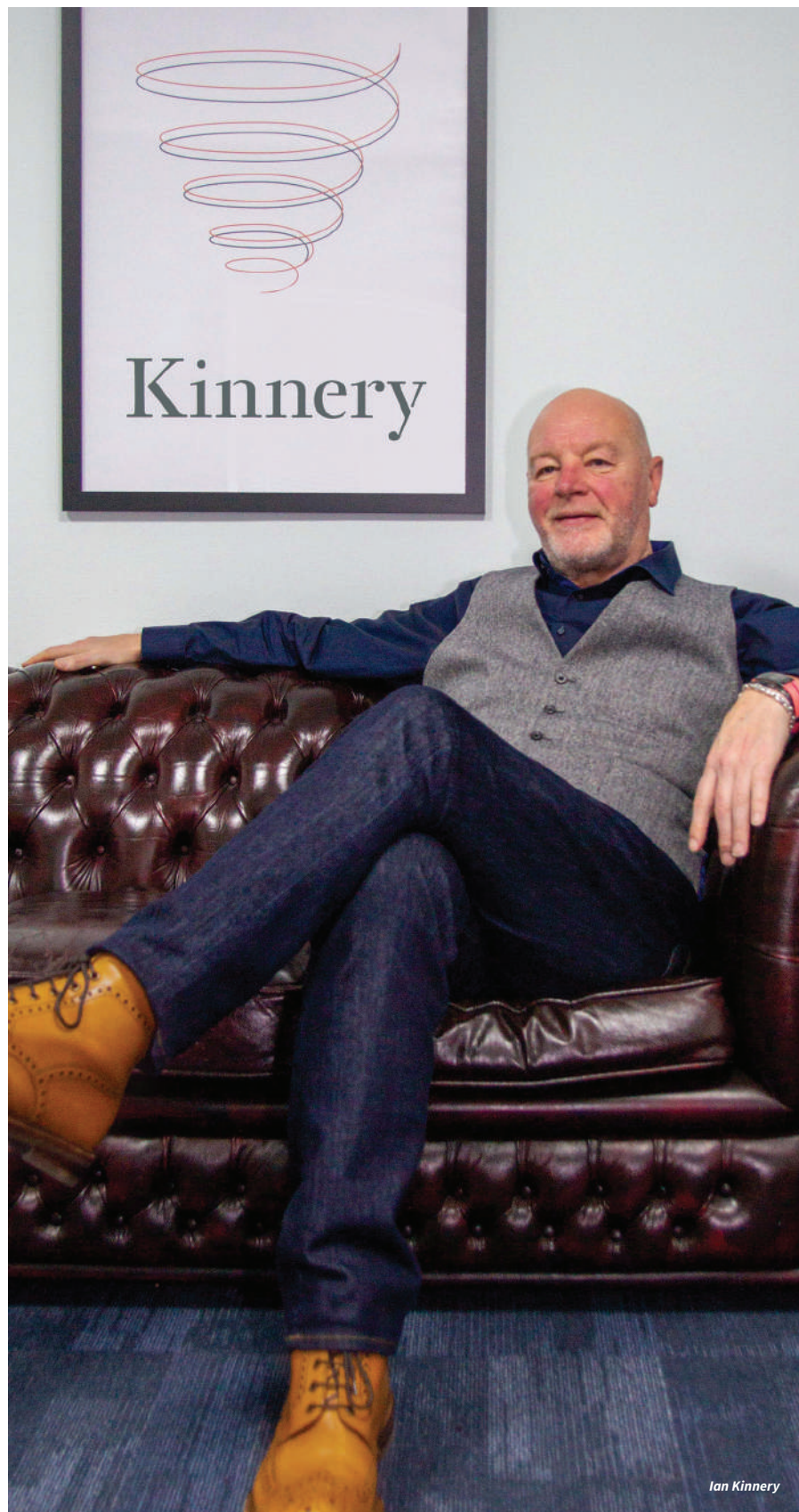
Too many organisations fail to prioritise (this?) rigorously enough.

Instead, they create a long laundry list of initiatives that simply never get completed.

The OPSP is different. It is about identifying a very limited number of clear, specific priorities and then delivering them.

Another key difference lies in how the OPSP is created.

It is developed collectively by the Senior Leadership Team. When I was MD or owner



Ian Kinnery

of a company, I'd spend a lot of time and energy writing business plans myself and then spending the rest of it trying to sell those plans to the very people I expected to deliver them.

The OPSP is a team event. Because it is written by those who are accountable for its execution, no selling is required.

Plus, people are always more committed to plans they have helped to create.

While the process may feel slower at the outset,

that time is more than repaid in the speed and quality of the results.

Much of the real value comes from the debates and, at times, the arguments.

These discussions ultimately lead to true alignment, which is why the OPSP should always be facilitated by an external party.

To receive a copy of the Scaling Up One Page Strategic Plan, email ian@kinnery.co.uk

The Power of Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

Life and Business is like the Great North Run. There will always be people in front of you and there will always be people behind you, no matter how much you try.

So, what you really need are people who will be right there for you, by your side no matter what stage of the race you are at.

In the same way I believe that everyone has something to teach, and everyone has something to learn, no matter what stage of your career or business life you are at.

With this in mind I recognised that after 10 years of self-employment (and with many more ahead) I had a bank of knowledge and skills to share but I also had things to learn.

And so it was born, the mentoring circle that would keep us all on our toes, with accountability, with challenge, with care and consideration, with critical questions to each other so that we could all benefit from having a safe space to connect, unload, progress and develop ourselves and our businesses.

'Wear 5' was created in June 2025 a lateral mentoring group. 'Wear 5' were carefully chosen through mutual respect for their achievements to date, for their personalities, for their energy and for how I believed we would all fit together and wow wow wow! We were like jigsaw pieces that have now been put together to complete the puzzle, with absolute full appreciation for each other, our work ethics, our personal values and our business acumen.

"I can share openly, without worry of judgement and I always come away from each meet up buzzing and extremely grateful"

Peer to Peer Mentoring -

It happens between individuals that are of a similar 'level'. It's based on sharing experiences and offering support, whilst also providing a different knowledge bank and set of skills grown from a wide range of sectors.

The Benefits -

Each mentor in the group is trusted implicitly; they therefore become a critical friend. They help each other to overcome challenges, they help each other to celebrate their wins and they help each other to grow both personally and professionally.



L-R: Issy Howell, Laura Gillespie, Katie Bulmer Cooke, Hayley Ramm, Sarah Pavlou

The Must Haves -

A group which is confident enough, comfortable enough and willing enough to exchange skills, bring ideas for best practice and suggest change all within a safe environment. A mix of career backgrounds will naturally offer a wonderfully diverse perspective.

The How To -

A small group – perhaps just 4 – 6 people, so it's large enough to create diversity but most importantly it's small enough to create trust, trust, trust all the way.

Structure – it can be as informal or formal as you like and can even change each time you meet.

Timings – you decide, but we go with every 6/8 weeks for 2/3 hours and although we don't have a facilitator formally it could be a good suggestion to rotate this role.

Agenda – split the time to cover each other's wins and updates, then deep dive into 1 or 2 specific challenges, then its peer feedback before commitment and accountability.

"Being in business can be lonely and overwhelming, but this is a refreshing and supportive group, we are all from different backgrounds but we support each other in so many ways which has been invaluable"

The Outcomes -

We all agree it has boosted our self-assurance, we feel more empowered, it has reduced our imposter syndrome, improved our focus and been a room full of enthusiasm and positivity.

"I have grown so so much in my confidence, I feel in such a safe place in the group to share my business worries, knowing that I am getting really good strong advice"

So, I would encourage anyone out there who feels they would benefit from a peer group to go out there and find your people. I cannot express how grateful I am to these wonderful business professionals who said 'yes' to my invite and have since brought so much including superb smiles.

theefficientelephant.co.uk



“

**Stand with
Ukraine.
Help us send
ambulances.
Help us save
lives.**





Dr David Cliff

Stand with Ukraine: Renewed momentum from the North East

By Dr David Cliff, Managing Director, Gedanken Ltd

Our North East campaign to support Ukraine with life-saving ambulances took longer than hoped to gather pace. This was due, in part, to the natural pause created by the Christmas period and, candidly, a period of ill health that temporarily limited my own capacity to drive the initiative forward.

That moment has now passed. The focus is firmly back on action.

Ukraine's war has not paused for winter, nor for political fatigue elsewhere. The humanitarian need remains acute, particularly for mobile medical support capable of operating in frontline and rural environments. Ambulances are not symbolic gestures; they are practical instruments of survival.

Working with the exceptional charity Help 4 Ukraine, which has already delivered more than 50 ambulances and heavy medical vehicles into active war zones, this North East initiative is now pressing ahead with renewed urgency. These vehicles operate as mobile surgical units, attending hundreds of life-threatening emergencies each month and serving civilians and soldiers without discrimination. The charity's directors take no salary; every pound raised goes directly to delivery and equipment.

It costs between £7,500 and £8,500 to prepare and deliver a fully equipped ambulance to Ukraine. For many businesses, this represents a manageable contribution with an extraordinary humanitarian return.

The campaign ambition is clear:

- Start with one ambulance
- Build momentum for more
- Mobilise the North East business community around practical, life-saving support

I will personally accompany the first vehicle to Ukraine with Help 4 Ukraine, and I am inviting others — businesses and individuals alike — to support through funding, logistics, or advocacy.

To enable straightforward and transparent contributions, donations are being coordinated via Donorbox, allowing both corporate and individual giving, with Gift Aid available for those who wish to enhance their contribution: donorbox.org/gedanken

Despite understandable pressures on UK businesses, the North East has a long tradition of stepping forward when it matters. Early supporters, including Woodland Flooring and Westray Recruitment, have already demonstrated that spirit, and I am grateful to Northern Insight for helping bring renewed visibility to the campaign.

This is not about politics or posturing. It is about lives — today, tomorrow, and long after any ceasefire is signed.

The message is simple and deliberate:

The campaign is active.

The need is real.

And Ukraine has not been forgotten.

**Stand with Ukraine.
Help us send ambulances.
Help us save lives.**

www.gedanken.co.uk

From baby steps to business growth



Danni Duke

When Sunderland fitness coach Danni Duke talks about timing, she does so with a smile. Within weeks of giving birth to her son Oscar, she also gave life to Duke Fitness, a social enterprise that is now supporting thousands of people across the city every year.

“The timing couldn’t have been much closer,” she laughs. “I literally got into my car after the meeting to set my business up and my waters broke. I look back at photos from that time, and I’m sat on my laptop writing funding bids with my little boy cuddled in next to me.”

Danni had already spent seven years as a self-employed personal trainer when she fell pregnant in 2022. Like many new parents running their own business, she was forced to rethink how work might fit around a newborn, and in doing so, spotted an opportunity.

“I suddenly thought, what on earth am I going to do about work?” she says. “Then I realised the solution was right under my nose. Why not create fitness classes where parents can bring their babies with them?”

From the outset, Danni was clear that Duke Fitness would be about more than exercise. Choosing to structure the organisation as a social enterprise allowed her to apply for funding, subsidise sessions and remove many of the barriers that prevent people, particularly

new mothers, from prioritising their health.

“I knew how much training helped my own mental health,” she explains. “But I also knew how hard it is for new mums to commit to exercise. Low income and childcare issues can make it almost impossible. I wanted to create equal opportunities for a healthy lifestyle.”

What began as a small, council-funded pilot delivering free postnatal fitness classes has since grown into a thriving operation offering wellbeing programmes for all ages, from teenagers to over-50s. Today, Duke Fitness is as much a community as it is a gym.

“It’s more than just exercise,” says Danni. “It’s a social network. People support each other and look out for one another. That’s what makes it special.”

Behind the scenes, support from the North East BIC has played a key role in helping the enterprise scale. After being referred by a friend, Danni began working one-to-one with social enterprise adviser Anneline Dowell, gaining support with funding applications,

strategic planning and, crucially, confidence.

“Anneline has helped me to think bigger,” Danni says. “When things are going well, it’s easy to just keep plodding on. She’s always asking, ‘what’s next?’ and pushing me to grow.”

That growth recently included a move to larger, more accessible premises on Villiers Street in Sunderland city centre. The relocation has doubled Duke Fitness’ capacity, reduced waiting lists and enabled Danni to recruit additional staff, a step she admits she once found daunting.

“I was scared to delegate,” she says. “But I realised I was holding myself back. Bringing in the right support has made a huge difference, not just to the business, but to my life with my little one too.”

The BIC’s social enterprise support in Sunderland helps the development of the social economy within the city through the Wear Together Initiative, working with local residents and groups to start a social enterprise or co-operative and help the city’s social enterprises to develop and grow.

The Wear Together Initiative has received £148,638 from the Government’s UK Shared Prosperity Fund Programme which is managed in Sunderland by Sunderland City Council on behalf of the Sunderland Partnership.

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A gift from the heart: Lifesaving defibrillator installed by Business Forum



Kate Willits and Chris Wilson

Image: Highlights PR

The North Tyneside Business Forum has delivered a potentially life-saving present to the Camperdown and Burradon community – a publicly accessible defibrillator, funded through its community interest company and installed where it's needed most.

The defibrillator has been installed at Direct Cars in Camperdown Industrial Estate in Burradon, following a community initiative led by the North Tyneside Business Forum.

After mapping the area, the Business Forum identified that there were no defibrillators available across the industrial estate, despite the large number of businesses, employees, visitors and community facilities operating on site. Through the North Tyneside Business Forum CIC, funds were donated to purchase a defibrillator, which is now publicly accessible on the external wall at Direct Cars. The project was supported in partnership with Red Sky Foundation, a charity dedicated to increasing access to life-saving cardiac equipment.

Chris Wilson, Vice Chair of North Tyneside Business Forum, said: "This was a targeted initiative through the Business Forum's charity fund to support local business communities. When we mapped the area and

saw there were no defibrillators across the Camperdown Industrial Estate, it was clear this was something that needed addressing. The absence of a defibrillator could quite literally cost lives."

He added: "Working with Direct Cars allowed us to place the defibrillator in a highly visible, accessible location that serves the whole estate." The need for the equipment has already been proven by Chris who runs the Square and Compass Bar in Whitley Bay.

"I have a defib at my premises and it's been used far more often than I expected," Chris added. "It was used around 14 times in December alone, which shows just how vital this resource is for the community."

Kate Willits, Director at Direct Cars, explained why the company was keen to host the defibrillator:

"We identified that there was no defibrillator in the nearby area, and as a business rooted in the community, it was important for us to help change that." She added that the decision was also deeply personal:

"My mum, who is also a director at Direct Cars, suffered a heart attack and cardiac arrest seven years ago. Having access to a defibrillator can make all the difference, so this is something very close to our hearts as a family."

The industrial estate includes a range of businesses and facilities, including a gym, increasing the likelihood that the equipment could be needed.

"If it's ever used, we'll feel grateful that it's here and that we've been able to help someone in

need," Kate said. "That's why it's important people in the surrounding area know exactly where it is."

Direct Cars is a long-established, family-run taxi company that has been operating in North Tyneside for 45 years. Founded by Maureen and Alan Hope, the company remains family-owned and operates a fleet of around 100 vehicles, employing local drivers and call-handling staff.

"We're proud to remain at the heart of the North Tyneside community," Kate added. "This defibrillator is part of that commitment."

The North Tyneside Business Forum hopes the installation will encourage other businesses and industrial estates to assess their own access to life-saving equipment and take similar action.

The North Tyneside Business Forum is run by a management group made up of members from various industry sectors in the Borough and gives support in the form of networking, events and signposting for growth and development. Membership is free and open to any business of any size with a trading address within North Tyneside. The Business Forum is supported by, but not run by North Tyneside Council.

The Forum is FREE to join and is for any business with a trading address in North Tyneside.

**E: business.forum@northtyneside.gov.uk
www.northtynesidebusinessforum.org.uk**

For information about getting a defibrillator contact www.redskyfoundation.com

Why accreditations matter for responsible business

In recent years, responsible business has shifted from a niche interest to a core expectation, and stakeholders increasingly want organisations to demonstrate that they operate with integrity, purpose and positive impact.

The challenge for many businesses is knowing how to turn good intentions into meaningful, measurable action.

At Genee Consulting Ltd, a North East-based environmental consultancy, we believe accreditations play a vital role in bridging that gap. As a B Corp certified consultancy; a delivery partner for the nationally recognised Investors in the Environment (iIE) accreditation with Green iIE accreditation ourselves; and an organisation accredited by the Good Business Charter, and Shine Advanced, there is no denying that we love an accreditation! Not because they look good on a website, but because they provide structure, clarity, and momentum.

At their best, accreditations are not tick-box exercises. They are practical tools that help organisations take stock of where they are, understand their impacts, and put clear plans in place to improve. For Genee, pursuing accreditations has been as much an internal journey as an external statement. Using the Investors in the Environment framework helped us establish a robust environmental management system that was proportionate to our size and genuinely useful day to day. That same framework then supported us in evidencing our environmental performance when working towards B Corp certification, the Good Business Charter, and the regional Shine Award.

This experience is why we are so passionate about delivering Investors in the Environment to organisations across the North East and North West of England. The framework



Jo Holmes

provides practical tools, templates and guidance that enable organisations to build environmental management systems that work for the business, rather than adding unnecessary complexity. Time and again, we see organisations uncover cost savings, reduce their environmental impacts, and increase employee engagement simply by taking a more structured approach. Importantly, the framework is flexible, meeting organisations where they are, whether they are just starting out or looking to strengthen existing ESG and sustainability commitments. One client described their iIE audit report as “writing his 2026 business plan for him”, utilising Genee’s guidance to support their ongoing sustainability goals.

Of course, responsible business is about more than environmental action alone. Real, lasting impact happens when environmental performance, wellbeing and inclusion are considered together. That belief underpins a recent webinar Genee hosted in collaboration with two other North East organisations, Positive About Inclusion and Venture Zero, titled “Unlocking the Benefits of Responsible Business”. The session brought together expertise in environmental performance, workplace wellbeing, and inclusive culture to explore how organisations can move beyond buzzwords and create genuine, joined-up

impact.

The webinar explored why responsible business is becoming essential rather than optional, how strong frameworks drive real progress, and how people-centred leadership supports trust and engagement. Drawing on real-world experience with businesses, public sector bodies and VCSE organisations across the UK, the discussion left attendees with ideas they can put into practice and is available to watch at www.genee.org.uk.

As initiatives such as Good Business Week and B Corp Month approach, now is a timely moment for North East organisations to reflect on how they evidence their commitments and whether they are using the right frameworks to support long-term improvement. Accreditations are not an end in themselves, but when implemented well, they can be powerful tools for turning values into action. From our experience at Genee, they have helped us build a stronger, more resilient business, and they remain one of the most effective ways we know to help organisations drive progress.

To discuss how Genee can support your organisation’s sustainability goals, contact jo@genee.org.uk

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Building brilliance: The first year effect

By Jen Tait, Rise Learning Group

In Customer Services, performance rarely comes down to talent alone. It's shaped by what people experience in their first weeks, first months, and first moments of pressure.

The reality is, the first year in a role doesn't just build skills, it builds beliefs. Beliefs about confidence, capability, belonging, and whether someone feels set up to succeed.

Yet many organisations still treat onboarding and early development as transactional moments rather than transformational ones. We train people on systems, policies, and scripts but often miss the deeper opportunity: shaping behaviours, mindset, and performance habits that last.

The most effective learning organisations start with a simple principle: confidence precedes competence. People don't perform at their best when they're overwhelmed, uncertain, or disconnected from purpose. They perform when learning feels safe, structured, and relevant, when feedback is timely, coaching is consistent, and growth feels personal.

Become a Learning Organisation

High-performing teams don't rely on one-off training sessions. They build learning systems, structured journeys that connect recruitment, onboarding, coaching, leadership development, and continuous improvement into one coherent experience. Learning becomes part of how work gets done, not something that happens outside of it.

This shift requires leaders to think less about "delivering courses" and more about enabling performance. That means understanding what great looks like in role, designing experiences that move people towards it, and using data when progress stalls.

The most mature learning organisations



treat insight as a superpower. They connect colleague confidence, behaviour change, customer outcomes, and operational metrics to identify where learning truly moves the needle, and where it doesn't. Learning becomes human-centred and evidence-led.

Why a Coaching Culture Changes Everything

Coaching is no longer a leadership "nice to have", it's a business essential. In fast-paced service environments, performance challenges rarely stem from knowledge gaps alone. They stem from habits, mindset, and confidence. Coaching addresses what training alone cannot.

When coaching becomes embedded into daily leadership behaviour, through regular observations, meaningful feedback, and reflective conversations, development accelerates. Colleagues feel seen, supported, and challenged in the right ways and leaders shift from problem-solvers to performance-enablers.

More importantly, coaching cultures create psychological safety. People ask better questions. They raise risks sooner. They experiment more confidently. And that's where real performance gains come from, not compliance, but commitment.

Using Technology to Leverage Humanity

AI and digital learning tools are reshaping how organisations enable performance. When technology reduces admin, produces insights, and personalises learning pathways, leaders gain more time for what matters most, human connection.

Smart organisations use digital tools to reduce speed to competence, personalise support,

and identify emerging risks before they become performance issues. But they never mistake tools for transformation. Culture still drives behaviour, technology simply accelerates it.

The future of learning isn't more content. It's better conversations, clearer feedback, and smarter systems that encourage people to embark on a growth journey.

The Hidden Link Between Learning and Retention

Engagement, performance, and retention don't live in separate silos. When people feel capable, supported, and clear on expectations, they stay. When learning feels disjointed, reactive, or irrelevant, they disengage long before they resign.

The first year is especially critical. It's where performance habits form, confidence stabilises, and psychological contracts are written. Organisations that intentionally design this journey, from recruitment through first calls and beyond, outperform those that leave it to chance.

The Real Work of Learning Leadership

At its best, learning leadership isn't about programmes, it's about creating the conditions where people can perform, grow, and adapt at pace. Where coaching, data and culture carry development forward even when pressure rises.

In today's customer service environments, excellence doesn't come from knowing more. It comes from learning faster, together.

The organisations that master that don't just build better teams, they build better futures.

www.riselearninggroup.com

Early Reflections on the Recruitment Market in 2026

Bryony Gibson, director of Bryony Gibson Consulting, reflects on how the recruitment market is quietly recalibrating with more clarity, care, and purpose.

February often brings a natural pause for reflection. It's still early, of course, but the second month of the year is usually enough to start spotting patterns and picking up signals about how the market is shaping up.

In the world of accountancy practice recruitment, the tone feels cautiously positive. Not loud. Not frantic. But thoughtful.

Clarity before action

One of the clearest themes so far has been a renewed focus on clarity before action. Firms are taking a little more time at the beginning of the hiring process to ask the right questions internally. What does this role really need to deliver, how does it fit into the wider team, and what does "success" look like in the first 12 to 18 months? This upfront thinking makes a noticeable difference to how smoothly the process runs once a role goes to market, and it helps to provide direction when onboarding new recruits.

More measured hiring decisions

Linked to clarity, we are seeing a shift towards more measured hiring decisions. With fewer speculative roles at all levels, firms aren't putting recruitment on hold; they're simply being more deliberate. Given the time and cost involved in getting recruitment wrong, this feels like a sensible recalibration rather than a slowdown.

Using market data as reassurance

Regularly speaking to business leaders, another early trend has been the increased appetite for market data and benchmarking. Employers want reassurance that they're



Bryony Gibson

positioned competitively, while candidates are arriving at conversations far better informed than they were a few years ago. It's one of the reasons our latest salary survey has been in particularly high demand already this year; not as a negotiating tool, but as a way of grounding conversations in reality.

Pace, clarity and communication

In a competitive, candidate-led job market, speed still matters, but it's increasingly paired with a desire to get things right the first time. Businesses are under pressure, priorities change, and that's totally understandable. But clarity around timelines, expectations and decision-making is becoming a real differentiator. Candidates can feel uncertainty very quickly, and firms that communicate well throughout the recruitment process tend to keep momentum, even when their actions aren't lightning-fast.

Flexibility signals a positive culture

Conversations around hybrid working arrangements have become less about policy and more about culture. Most people accept that flexibility looks different in different firms. What candidates are really tuning into now is how that flexibility shows up in practice.

What are the levels of trust and autonomy? How realistic are workloads? In many ways,

flexibility has become a substitute or indicator of organisational culture, rather than a headline benefit.

Open conversations, selective moves

This phrase neatly sums up the current candidate mindset. People are amenable to conversations, but they're being selective, especially in the accountancy sector. Moves aren't being rushed.

Culture, job satisfaction, and sustainability are motivating themes that come through strongly, alongside progression and reward. It's less about chasing the next role and more about making sure the next move genuinely makes sense and excites.

Picking up where 2025 left off

As we inch ever closer to seeing daylight at the end of our working day, conversations that paused towards the end of last year are resurfacing. Roles that didn't quite make it to market are quietly reappearing, often with more focus and intent behind them.

Budgets feel cautiously unlocked, rather than on lockdown. The overall picture is of an encouraging start. Not a market of big change, but one of better questions, clearer thinking and more purposeful conversations. And for me, that points to genuinely positive progress.

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Closing the Leadership Gap: Recruitment Strategies for Charities in 2026

By Peter Neal, Founder of The Experience Bank Group

The North East charity sector has entered 2026 facing a paradox.

Demand for services continues to grow and operating environments are more complex than ever. And it seems many charities are struggling to recruit the executive leaders and trustees they need to thrive. Not because of a regional talent shortage in the traditional sense. It's a leadership gap: between what charities require from leaders and how leaders are identified, engaged, supported. Closing this gap needs a fundamental rethink.

Today's charity executives and trustees are expected to do far more than steward mission and values. They must navigate regulatory risk, financial volatility, digital transformation, partnerships and increasing expectations around impact measurement and transparency.

At the same time, senior leaders are reassessing what they want from their careers. Purpose remains a powerful motivator, but it must sit alongside professional development, realistic workloads, strong governance and supportive board relationships.

One of the most common challenges I see is recruitment driven by urgency, rather than strategy. Recruitment becomes most effective when it is aligned to long-term organisational strategy, not just filling immediate gaps of departing individuals.

In 2026, effective charities should be asking different questions:

- What leadership capabilities will we need in three to five years?
- How will our operating model, funding mix, or service delivery evolve?
- What experience is missing around our executive table or boardroom?

Historically, charities have drawn leaders from within the sector, which brings deep understanding and commitment but also limits reach. Many skills now required at executive and trustee level exist in abundance beyond the charity world. However, values alignment, emotional intelligence, and the ability to lead through ambiguity are increasingly critical.

The challenge is not attracting these individuals but translating charity roles in a way that resonates with them. Clear articulation of purpose, realistic expectations, and honest conversations about risk and reward are essential. Purpose opens the door; professionalism keeps it open.

Structured assessment of behaviours, motivations, and leadership style, alongside experience, helps charities avoid costly mis-hires, ensuring leaders are equipped for the realities of modern charity leadership.

Trustee recruitment remains one of the sector's most persistent challenges. Too often, boards

rely on personal networks, resulting in limited diversity of background, thinking, and lived experience. High-performing boards in 2026 are those that:

- Define trusteeship as a serious leadership role, not a voluntary add-on
- Recruit for contribution, not status
- Invest in induction, development, and succession planning

Trustees should want to add value. Charities must show how their expertise will be used and respected. I work closely with clients on recruitment packs that go a long way to showing prospective candidates what value they will bring.

As recruitment grows more complex, charities are recognising the value of specialist partners who understand both leadership markets and the nuances of the charity sector. Effective partners act not just as recruiters, but as advisers, challenging assumptions, broadening horizons, and helping boards and executive teams make confident, informed decisions. This is the model I follow with my clients, often recruiting not just one leader but helping reshape the leadership team over a period of time.

In conclusion, closing the leadership gap in 2026 is not about competing with the private sector on salary. It is about clarity of purpose, professionalism in recruitment, and respect for leadership as a critical enabler of impact. Charities that invest in strategic, inclusive, and forward-thinking recruitment will secure stronger executives and trustees, building an organisation capable of delivering lasting social change.

If you are a charity that is interested in redefining its recruitment approach for leadership then get in touch with Peter on peter@theexperiencebank.co.uk



Short-break caring: Unlocking fostering for those with a career

By Sarah Richardson,
Fostering Manager at Changing Futures

Flexible working is a gamechanger. It means more time for the things - and people - you love. It could also mean you can help a child in care.

Yet while many of us would love to do just that, I understand it isn't always simple.

At Changing Futures, we have helped scores of people through the fostering process.

We know why they want to help, but we also know the barriers.

Money is tight, but for many - especially those in business - the biggest hurdle is time.

Successful careers are time and energy consuming. The idea of becoming a full-time

foster parent just isn't realistic.

But in 2026, you don't have to sacrifice your career to foster.

One route is to become a short-break carer.

For those with spare time - but who can't foster full-time - it is ideal.

Some of the most successful short-break carers are those with careers.

It allows them the best of both worlds, fulfilling that desire to care and support a young person without sacrificing a job they also love.

Crucially, it allows them to test the fostering waters.

You seem, fostering is a reward like no other. It is life-changing, for both you and the young person.

But it really isn't for everyone. It is one of the biggest commitments you'll ever make, and if you don't have the time - or the ability to give up a full-time wage - it maybe isn't for you.

But I find that those who can't commit to that do have a 'short burst' in them.

Think of it in footballing terms. Not everyone can last 90 minutes, but every squad needs a super sub.

Someone who can come off the bench in a pinch with the energy and heart to make a difference.

In traditional families, these are often the aunts, uncles or grandparents.

Someone who can step in to give you a weekend off or a night away. To help you catch-up on your sleep, or to allow you to let your hair down at a wedding over a few glasses of fizz.

Because everyone needs rest and some 'me' time.

I know I do. As a mum, I'm lucky that my daughter's grandma would step in once a week to give us the night off. It meant the world to us.

Being a short-break carer can help foster families to re-energise, as well as helping to expand the child's world a bit.

There's no escaping it; Those in care often come from hard backgrounds.

They may have lost parents or have been taken into care because for whatever reason, their birth families simply can't keep them safe or meet their needs.

It can lead to complex relationships with adults. But having short-break carers who can shower them with some TLC grows them enormously.

Crucially, all short-break carers have the same training and checks as a full-time fosterer, which means they know they are with adults who can be trusted.

That builds their confidence around grown-ups. And it builds their character.

So, if you have ever thought about fostering, just know this; There are options to make it happen.

Even if you have a busy career, being able to be on-call and step in for a short period can make an immeasurable difference.

And at Changing Futures, we urgently need more.

There isn't any minimum commitment. But we need adults who can provide a safe home, often at short notice, and who have the desire to make a difference.

www.changingfuturesfostering.co.uk



Michael Dobson

The Employment Rights Act is looming

By Michael Dobson, Director of Sapphire HR

Is your business prepared?

For many of the SME owners and directors I speak with across Newcastle and the wider region, there is an apprehension regarding the upcoming Employment Rights Act, which signifies one of the biggest shifts in employment law in a generation.

The April milestone brings several critical updates, most notably, Statutory Sick Pay (SSP) is being overhauled. The removal of the three-day waiting period and the lower

earnings limit turns SSP into a day-one entitlement for all, regardless of their earnings level. Simultaneously, paternity leave and unpaid parental leave will become day-one rights, stripping away the previous service requirements that often acted as a buffer for employers.

While the much-discussed day-one protection against unfair dismissal is to evolve into a six-month statutory probation period by 2027, the cultural shift begins now. With the establishment of the new Fair Work Agency, a single enforcement body with the power to investigate and fine businesses for non-compliance, you can no longer afford to have an outdated HR policy or staff handbook.

At Sapphire HR, we've spent the last year scaling our own operations to meet this demand. Following a significant five-figure investment from the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II, we have expanded our team of advisers at our Newcastle city-centre headquarters in Clavering House. Our mission has always been to provide reliable HR consultancy with the personalised, agile touch that North East businesses value.

To navigate the upcoming legislative shifts, businesses need flexibility. That is why we provide HR On Demand (HROD), a pay-as-you-go solution designed to give you instant access to our expertise exactly when you need it. It ensures that even the smallest employer can benefit from the same level of tailored HR consultancy and legal protection as a large corporation, but with the total cost control and freedom of a no-contract service.

As we move toward April, my advice to North East employers, regardless of scale or sector, is simple: don't wait for the deadline to audit your risk. Review your contracts, tighten your probationary management processes, and ensure your line managers are trained to handle these new rights with confidence.

Those who prepare will not only stay on the right side of the Fair Work Agency, but will also find themselves better positioned to attract and retain the best talent our region has to offer.

www.sapphire-hr.co.uk

Climate, Capital and the Cost of Inaction

By Kerrey Baker,
Managing Director, Shared Interest

Last year, we looked at what it means to invest with purpose, to prioritise fairness and to share risk. As we begin 2026, I want to turn to a theme that sits across all of these values: the climate crisis, and how ethical finance can help communities respond.

The producers we support at Shared Interest are at the frontlines of climate change.

From cocoa farmers in West Africa to coffee growers in Latin America, changing weather patterns are already affecting the quality and reliability of harvests. Droughts, flooding and rising temperatures are not future threats. They are current realities for farming communities who rely on the land to survive.

For these producers, access to finance can mean the difference between adapting and collapsing. That might involve investing in water-efficient irrigation, replacing drought-prone crops or building facilities that protect harvests from increasingly erratic rainfall. It might mean planting shade trees or composting organic waste. Small changes that build long-term resilience.

Shared Interest provides the capital that helps make these changes possible. Our lending enables fair trade businesses to prepare, adapt and protect their future. But the need is growing, and the mainstream finance system is not responding fast enough.

Many of the organisations we work with are based in rural areas, have limited collateral and operate in currencies vulnerable to global fluctuations. That makes them unattractive to traditional lenders, despite the critical role they play in global supply chains. Ethical finance exists to bridge that gap. But it requires a shift in thinking from short-term return to long-term impact.



Kerrey Baker

When businesses talk about climate risk, they often refer to the risk to their own operations or supply chains. But there is a broader question here. What happens when the people growing our coffee, our fruit or our chocolate can no longer do so? What is the cost of standing still when the climate is changing around us?

Investing in adaptation is not a luxury. It is a necessity. And for the communities we support, it is also a matter of justice. These are not the people who caused the climate crisis, yet they are among the first to feel its effects. Fair finance gives them the means to respond.

At Shared Interest, we work alongside producers who are already finding solutions rather than waiting for them. With access to finance, they are growing differently, processing more efficiently and finding new ways to safeguard their land and livelihoods.

Fair finance is one of the most powerful tools we have to support climate resilience. It is an investment in people, in communities and in the future of global trade.

Invest in change at www.shared-interest.com

The missing link in small business growth: confident line managers

Why confident line managers are the missing link for growing businesses

In many growing businesses across the North East and beyond, line managers sit at the heart of performance. They motivate teams, manage workloads, and handle the day-to-day people issues that can either keep a business moving forward — or quietly hold it back.

Yet despite how critical the role is, many line managers step into position without any formal or practical people management training. They learn by doing, often through trial and error, while juggling targets, deadlines and operational pressures.

It's a challenge well known to face2faceHR. After years of working closely with small businesses, we noticed a consistent gap between expectations placed on managers and the support they actually receive.

A practical solution for everyday management challenges

This insight led to the development of flexion, a new online people management training programme recently launched at the end of January.

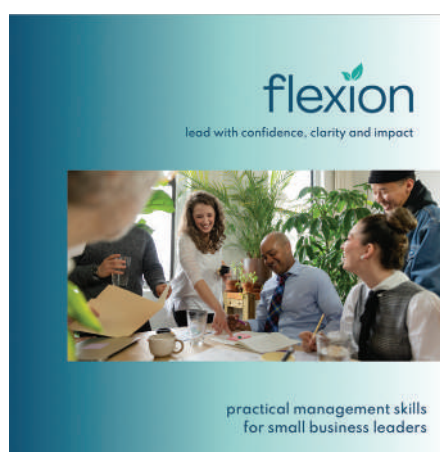
Flexion has been designed specifically for small businesses and the realities their managers face day to day. Rather than generic corporate training or theory-heavy courses, the focus is on real-world application and practical decision-making.

The programme is made up of nine structured modules covering the essential skills line managers need, including performance management, handling difficult conversations, managing absence and wellbeing, discipline and grievance, and leading and motivating teams. Each module includes short, bite-sized videos supported by downloadable tools and resources that managers can use immediately.

"Managers don't need more jargon or lengthy courses," says Kathryn. "They need clear guidance, practical tools, and the confidence to handle situations calmly and fairly. flexion is built around exactly that."



Kathryn Rodgers



Flexible learning that fits around the day job

One of flexion's key strengths is its flexibility. Training is designed to fit around busy schedules, allowing managers to dip in and out as needed, whether they're preparing for a difficult conversation or looking to build stronger habits over time.

This approach not only makes learning more accessible but also helps embed better people management into everyday working life. Managers aren't just watching videos — they're learning how to apply new skills straight away, reinforcing good judgement and consistency across the business.

For employers, the benefits are clear. Stronger people management capability leads to fewer issues escalating, improved communication, and managers who feel more confident and supported in their role. Over time, this contributes to better morale, improved performance and a more resilient business.

People-first leadership for small businesses

At its core, flexion reflects face2faceHR's people-first philosophy. The programme encourages empathy, fairness and clarity, recognising that good management is as much about understanding people as it is about processes.

Designed specifically for small businesses, flexion offers an affordable, practical route to developing confident line managers without taking them away from the day job.

As Kathryn puts it: "When managers feel confident and supported, teams function better and businesses grow more sustainably. flexion is about giving managers the tools they need to lead well — not just in theory, but in practice."

**For more information or to register your interest contact Kathryn Rodgers - 07946 330025
face2facehr.com**

OUTDOORS: THE PARTNER TO AI

Jane Fisher, Founder of Fresh Perspectives North East, believes strong leadership still depends on human thinking in an AI world.

"I'm having fascinating conversations with leaders about Artificial Intelligence," says Jane. "Beyond faster outputs and efficiency, there's a quiet concern: the potential loss of human thinking capacity."

"AI is incredibly good at processing information at speed," she adds. "But it doesn't replace human judgement, critical thinking and creativity. Skills we still need."

This matters because AI is not a moral agent, and accountability sits with people when decisions go wrong. Nor is it an originator, so without creativity, progress stalls.

Working with AI, not handing thinking over

Jane is clear this is not an argument against AI.

"This isn't about resisting progress, for AI is a brilliant partner. But it should complement human thinking, not replace it," she explains.

AI undoubtedly increases productivity, yet over-reliance risks weakening our cognitive capabilities.

"The power of AI is indisputable," Jane notes, "but our critical analysis, judgement and creativity will quietly decline if people stop exercising those muscles."

In Jane's view, good decisions don't come from speed alone. They come from assessing context, experience and consequence. That's the human perspective.

"AI can increase output. But judgement still belongs to people"

Why the outdoors matters

For Jane, this is where the outdoors excels - offering a powerful thinking resource.

"When we step outside, our brain shifts into a reflective and creative mode, supporting insight, idea connection and problem-solving."

"That space enables us to explore options more widely and think more analytically, to draw better conclusions," she adds.

Designing work for the future

For Jane, the future of work is about balance.

"AI is here to stay," she says. "But the most effective organisations don't choose between technology and humanity. They design for both."

That means using AI to enhance efficiency, while deliberately protecting space for human thought.

"The outdoors is the simplest way to do this," Jane explains, "by creating the thinking space digital work removes."

Making outdoors a habit

"Many of the world's most progressive businesses are already getting outdoors," she continues. "And within the next five to ten years, I believe forward-thinking organisations will spend at least 20 percent of their working week outdoors - habitually."

"That's why I developed The Fresh Perspective 90-Day Challenge, so leaders here in the North East can explore, with ease, how getting outside works for them."

**Find out more about Jane's work,
Fresh Perspectives NE and the 90-Day Challenge:
07837 024 374 | hello@fpne.co.uk | www.fpne.co.uk**

“

**Small outdoor
habits protect
the human
thinking that
technology
can't replace.**



Seven-figure NPIF II - NEL Investment supports Advantex management buyout

Gateshead, UK - Award-winning IT, security, and communications provider Advantex has secured a seven-figure investment from NPIF II – NEL Debt Finance, which is managed by NEL Fund Managers as part of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II), to support a successful management buyout and drive its next phase of growth.

Working alongside FRP Advisory and Mincoffs Solicitors, the investment has enabled the planned exit of one of the company's founding brothers and positioned the business to move forward under the leadership of David O'Connell, Managing Director and remaining founder.

David O'Connell said: "NEL were very efficient and provided a great customer experience, quickly understanding our needs and shaping their offering to fit. Securing the required funding in a timely manner has given Advantex the ability to focus fully on our growth strategy and capitalise on the opportunities ahead."

With more than 20 years' experience, Advantex is the North East's only single-source integrator, specialising in keeping organisations secure, connected, and operating with confidence through its highly accredited IT, cybersecurity, and communications services

Agilico awarded BSI Kitemark™ for Agilico Zero remanufacturing programme

Agilico Workplace Technology has been awarded the BSI Kitemark™ certification under BS 8887-220:2010 for remanufacturing under its Agilico Zero programme, becoming the first independent Managed Print Service (MPS) provider in the UK to achieve this standard.

The accreditation recognises Agilico's commitment to circular economy principles through its rigorous process for remanufacturing multifunctional devices (MFDs).

The certification reinforces Agilico's position as a sustainability leader within the UK workplace technology sector. Independent Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) conducted by Anthesis has shown that the Agilico Zero



Leighton launches new AWS Practice

Leading North-East software development company has launched its newly-formed AWS Practice, a specialist unit built to help its customers deliver high-impact outcomes using AWS technologies.

Led by AWS Hero and Principal Architect Lee Gilmore, the practice brings together elite technical talent, agile delivery methods and deep business focus to drive real digital transformation for clients. Through the practice, customers can access experienced pod teams that can support with everything from business analysis, engineering and architecture to DevOps, QA and security ensuring full end-to-end project ownership.

Speaking on the launch of the practice, Lee Gilmore said: "We're seeing increasing demand from customers for our specialists to support with digital transformation and growth projects as companies not only build new applications but look to modernise old, legacy systems no longer fit for purpose or scale their existing digital capabilities to support with achieving the wider business goals.

"Through the AWS Practice we're able to provide real strategic partnership for our customers supporting them throughout their cloud journeys, whether that's through a Well Architected Review – to assess the performance of their existing infrastructure – strategic project direction, our 12-week proof-of-concept offering or providing full end-to-end project delivery.

The company has also made several appointments to bolster the practice including, AWS Principal Developers, Jason Conway-Williams and Greg Farrow, Senior Cloud Engineer, Ronnie Winter and Senior Cloud Engineer and AWS Gold Jacket, Dan Mackenzie.

The practice also includes Leighton CTO and AWS Community Builder, Steve Morland and former AWS Solutions Architect, Mark Sailes as well as several of the existing Leighton team.



process produces 97.5% less CO₂e than the manufacture of brand-new devices. This verified data highlights the significant carbon savings made possible through remanufacturing and reuse, reducing Scope 3 emissions and supporting clients' own net zero strategies.

Simon Davey, CEO of Agilico Workplace Technology, said: "Achieving the BSI 8887 Kitemark is a proud milestone for Agilico. It provides independent assurance of the quality and sustainability of our Agilico Zero devices and validates the hard work by our teams across the UK. This recognition proves that remanufactured equipment can meet the highest standards of performance and reliability while delivering a measurable carbon reduction for our customers."



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The blueprint for Marketing Success in 2026

Why being found matters more than being perfect.

I recently had the privilege of working with a brilliant cohort of entrepreneurs and founders, our conversation revealed something crucial that every business needs to understand in 2026: businesses are working incredibly hard on their marketing, but can be focusing on entirely the wrong stage.

Let me share the framework that's helping these businesses stand out in an overcrowded digital marketplace.

The three truths we must accept

First, the false promise has expired. For years, we were told: build a website, create a LinkedIn profile, post on Instagram, and customers will magically find you. That's simply not how it works anymore (did it ever?). You cannot rely on passive discovery. Instead, you must orchestrate what I call a "being found" campaign. And that requires intentional effort, strategic planning, and consistent execution.

Second, it's not about marketing excellence. Customers don't choose you just because your marketing materials look polished. They choose you because your communications demonstrate three vital qualities: common sense in how you approach business, clarity in how you communicate, and confidence in the customer experience you'll deliver.

This is what I call "before-sale care." Just as after-sale care reassures existing customers, your marketing must reassure potential customers about what it will be like to work with you before they've even made contact.

Third, under-communication kills momentum. In 2026, in the age of AI overviews, the art of marketing is the art of being explicit. You cannot assume people will fill in the gaps. Your online presence must match the enthusiasm and information you'd share in a face-to-face conversation. If there's a gap between how compelling you are in person versus online, you're losing opportunities every single day.

The customer journey framework

Successful marketing follows three distinct stages:

Visibility comes first. This is about being discovered by the right people at the right time. It means using the power of others: guest appearances on podcasts, contributions to established publications, speaking at trade shows, collaborating with complementary businesses. Visibility takes approximately 60% of your marketing effort, yet most businesses spend the least time here.

Credibility follows discovery. Once people find you, they verify you. Your website, social media profiles, testimonials, and content library all contribute to credibility. This stage answers the question: "Can I trust what I've discovered?"

Interactivity completes the journey. This is where relationships deepen through social media engagement, email conversations, and ongoing dialogue.

Why did it start to go wrong?

During our session, I asked the founders how businesses increased visibility in 1985, before

the internet existed. Their answers were brilliant: newspaper advertising, trade shows, television commercials, product placement, word-of-mouth marketing, and more.

Every single tactic leveraged the power of established platforms and other people's audiences.

Then I asked why businesses seem to have abandoned these principles. The truth emerged: working on visibility is harder than updating your own platforms. It's less demanding to polish your website or create Instagram content than to research the best PR outlets, pitch guest articles, or build strategic partnerships.

But if you think about it, if you're only working on your own platforms, you're stuck in the credibility stage without doing the visibility work that brings people to you.

Your 2026 visibility commitment

As you plan your marketing for the year ahead, ask yourself three questions:

What are we doing to increase our visibility swiftly with the right audience? Where are our ideal customers already gathering, and how can we show up there? Who has already built the audience we want to reach?

The businesses that will thrive in 2026 won't necessarily have the biggest budgets or the fanciest websites. They'll be the ones who remembered that being found requires using the power of others, who communicate their customer experience explicitly, and who put their effort into visibility rather than just credibility.

The good news? A lot of your competitors may have forgotten these principles. Which means there's never been a better time to stand out.

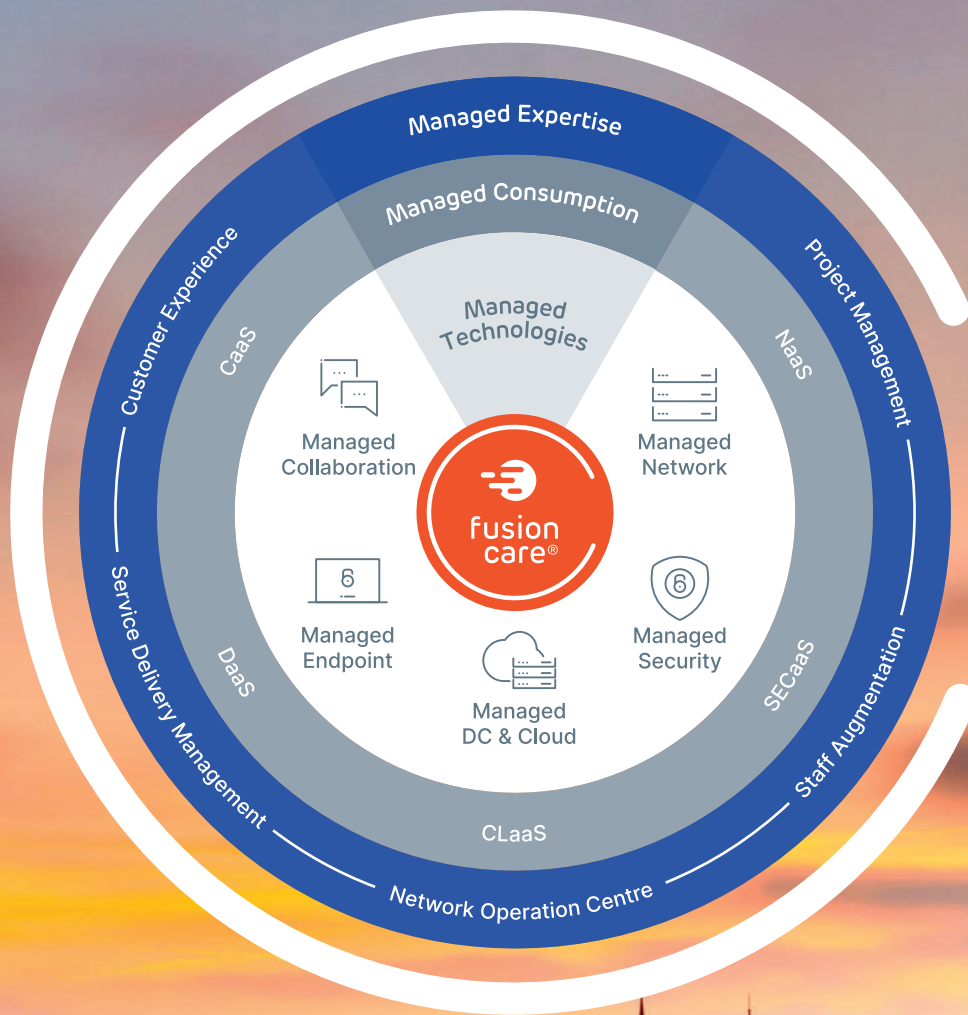
Pascal Fintoni

AI & Digital Marketing Consultant
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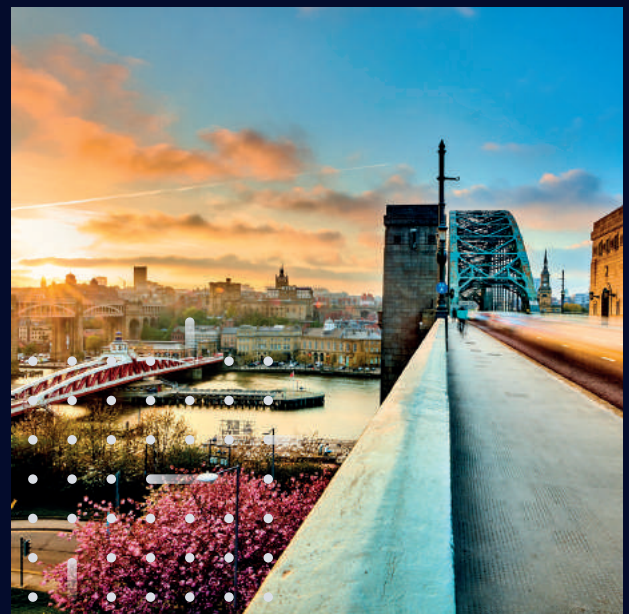
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One of the most memorable moments of the event was Werner Vogels' keynote.

Mark Sailes

Key Takeaways from AWS re:Invent: A new beginning for an evolving industry

By Mark Sailes, Technical Presales Consultant at Leighton

AWS re:Invent 2025 was defined by scale, speed, and an ever-increasing number of options.

With a staggering 530 total product releases – 414 announced before the event and another 116 unveiled during the conference – it was impossible not to feel the sheer volume of opportunity available within AWS. Absorbing, understanding, and ultimately taking advantage of these innovations will be a major challenge, but also a defining one for organisations over the coming years.

For me personally, this year's re:Invent was a first as I attended as a customer, rather than as part of AWS itself. That shift in perspective sharpened the focus on what these announcements mean in practice, how businesses could and would implement them, where value can realistically be unlocked, and what trade-offs will need to be made.

One of the most memorable moments of the event was Werner Vogels' keynote. Not only was it typically insightful and thought-provoking, but it also marked his final keynote before handing the delivery in future years over to the next generation of AWS leadership. Werner has long been a voice of pragmatism amid the hype, and that was evident again this year, particularly in his framing of AI's impact on developers and engineers.

Unsurprisingly, AI dominated the agenda. AWS previewed agents targeting specific software roles such as DevOps, and Security. You can now automate penetration testing for web application. These previews are impressive, but they also highlighted an important nuance – context matters. What each individual system, application, or organisation requires from AI agents will vary significantly. At least for now, these tools are most effective when used alongside skilled people rather than as outright replacements.

This creates a strategic challenge for companies. Many are now facing the complex task of identifying where AI agents can be integrated effectively without compromising the quality of outputs. Today, most of these implementations are still governed centrally through policy guardrails, which helps manage risk but can also slow experimentation as companies find a way to tailor to their own organisational needs. Striking the right balance between innovation and control will be critical.

One particularly notable announcement was the introduction of Kiro, a new Integrated Development Environment (IDE) and the first AI coding tool built around spec-driven development. The implications

here are significant. For companies that have invested in producing internal standards, ways of working, and delivery patterns, Kiro will help developers use Large Language Model (LLM) to produce solutions that more closely match expectations.

Developing the solution is just one part of the software development process. Software developers still need to consider everything else. Fundamentals are more important than ever. New pain points will arise as other parts of the process attempt to keep up. It doesn't matter how fast you can add features if you still have manual testing, or a bi-weekly release cycle.

This tension was echoed strongly in Werner Vogels' keynote who made it clear that history suggests that AI and the rise of AI agents is just the start of a new beginning. We have been through similar shifts before – from COBOL and drag-and-drop tooling to the move from on-premises infrastructure to the cloud. Each wave has simply driven an evolution of the role, not eliminated it.

What we are seeing now is another new beginning. Our industry evolves, and so do the tools we use. AI will automate certain tasks, replace others, and fundamentally transform how software is built and operated. But AI does not make developers obsolete, provided they evolve with it.

Finally, AWS also announced several changes aimed at cost optimisation. New database savings plans which can be applied to any database service. These can reduce your database costs by up to 35% when you commit to a consistent amount of usage over a one-year term. Savings plans allowing customers to switch between database types without losing their discounts. CloudFront pricing has also been diversified with the introduction of flat rates to help customers better manage cost fluctuations.

In summary, AWS re:Invent 2025 made one thing clear – we are entering a period of rapid transformation. The opportunity is enormous, but so is the responsibility to adopt these technologies thoughtfully. Those who succeed will be the ones who combine powerful new tools with skilled people, clear strategy, and a willingness to evolve.

leighton.com

Talking Tech & Digital

In the latest of this popular series of features Northern Insight speaks to...

Andy Hunter

Chief Technology Officer, ITPS

Did you always envisage a career in the world of Technology?

Definitely not, I was going to play rugby, drink beer and join the Royal Navy, unfortunately all three were mutually exclusive. I was actually working as a hospital cashier in the RVI when I decided to implement a cash receipting system. The then IT Manager for the hospital recognised this and gave me a job in IT.

What tips would you give to someone looking to work in the industry?

Personality first, technology second, not all answers in IT are technology based.

Tell us about the most exciting project you're currently working on?

We are currently looking to onboard a Sovereign AI Platform within the UK, to compete with Gemini, CoPilot, ChatGPT. This needs us to design the DC to accommodate racks with up to 120KW per rack. We do this with Direct to Chip liquid cooling and massive power distribution. That is the basics of AI, power and cooling, this is then followed up by high performance Lenovo servers built with NVIDIA GPU's all running a Large Language Model. The whole premise is that this is owned, operated and delivered by UK based companies, which in the current geopolitical environment makes a lot of sense to me, as we are potentially over reliant on the USA.

Tell us about your team?

I have an awesome team of people, they cover the whole of ITPS functions, they operate our platforms, provide governance for our systems, design and implement solutions and ultimately they sell them.

What are your long term plans for the business?

Long term I want to grow the business and make a difference to the region by helping the North East to be at the forefront of AI, providing the platform for us all to grow.

Whats your favourite piece of technology?

It is either my phone or my broadband router, one provides pretty much everything you need to function in the modern world, the other enables everything in my house to work from the TV to my coffee machine.

Do you have any heroes or mentors?

Yes thanks! There are loads of people that have given me advice and that I look up to, in fact too many to list here, they range from colleagues, old bosses, however I am contractually obliged to mention Mrs Hunter, who has supported me, kept me grounded and helped me in everything I do.

Whats your fondest career memory?

Can I pick more than one? Presenting to the IETF about Internet Routing and Security, and then building and connecting my 3rd DC.

Whats the best piece of business advice you've received?

I thought long and hard about this, as the answer is a negative and I am not sure if it is relevant. The advice was that "People will let you down, they won't mean to, but they will. You need to understand that your motives and needs should align with theirs, when they don't do that, people will go their own way and let you down."

When not working how do you like to relax?

Sad I know, but I like to mess about with technology, my last home project was standing up an AI LLM at home to understand the technology better.

www.itps.co.uk

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...not all
answers in IT
are technology
based.

Andy Hunter

Cyber Risk is now a boardroom issue – and many boards still don't know it

Cyber security is regularly treated as a technical concern - something for the CIO or "IT" to manage in the background. Boards take comfort in certificates, audits, insurance policies, believing that ticked boxes mean risk is under control.

As Chair of Vistage North East, Northumberland and Cumbria, Andrew Marsh spends a great deal of time with CEOs and leadership teams from organisations of all sizes. One issue consistently concerns him is when asking, "How is cyber risk reported at board level?", he's often told: "We only report cyber outages, if they happen."

That mindset is no longer defensible.

The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) has now made it unequivocally clear: cyber risk is a board-level responsibility. It sits alongside financial risk, operational resilience, and reputation. Boards don't need patch statistics or vulnerability counts. They need clarity on cyber risk posture, business impact; time to detect, respond, and recover; and confidence that controls will actually work. This is where many organisations, large and small, across every sector fall short.

Andrew said: "It's not if something will happen, it's when. There are countless examples of organisations that believed they were well protected until the moment they weren't. Waiting for an outage or breach before elevating cyber risk to the boardroom is like waiting for a fire before discussing fire safety. By the time the board is involved, the damage has already been done."



HTG founder and CEO Kevin Howell agrees saying one of the biggest issues he faces in conversations with CEOs is a misplaced sense of reassurance. Many leaders believe they're "covered" by having ISO 27001, Cyber Essentials or Cyber Essentials Plus and/or Cyber Insurance. They're all good things to have. None are guarantees.

"ISO 27001 and Cyber Essentials are standards, not shields," Kevin said. "They describe what 'good' should be, they don't stop an attack. And if you've implemented the wrong process or misunderstood the standard, the badge is worth nothing."

Recent incidents at well-known organisations such as JLR and M&S reinforce this reality. These are not unsophisticated businesses. They had controls in place and still suffered significant disruption.

Cyber insurance is an area where boards can be lulled into a false sense of security. Insurance doesn't eliminate risk as there's

often a gap between what you think is insured and what actually happens. Policies typically come with conditions:

- Security updates must be applied
- Multi-factor authentication must be enforced everywhere
- Users must follow defined processes
- Outsourced providers must meet specific standards

If someone clicks a phishing link, if 2FA isn't deployed consistently, or if a third-party IT provider hasn't done what they should, that gap suddenly becomes very expensive. Insurance may help with recovery costs, but it doesn't prevent operational downtime, lost revenue, reputational damage or customer churn.

Perhaps the most damaging misconception is that cyber security is seen purely as a cost. Too many boards see cyber security as margin erosion, when in reality it's margin protection.

- If systems lock, how do you invoice clients?
- If operations stop, how does revenue continue?
- If data's unavailable, how do you serve customers?

A cyber outage is not an IT issue, it is a direct threat to cash flow and business continuity. This is why HTG's Managed Service, Overwatch, is relevant in today's environment. Why would any board entrust business-critical security to a generalist IT provider focused on "keeping the lights on", rather than specialists whose sole job is protecting the organisation?

Overwatch is designed to deliver peace of mind, not tick-box compliance:

- Continuous monitoring, not annual audits
- Active threat detection, not reactive reporting
- Real incident response, not theoretical plans

And crucially, if the worst happens, businesses can be recovered in minutes, not months.

As a Microsoft Advanced Specialist Partner, HTG also has access to funding and commercial support across Microsoft 365, Copilot, Azure and Microsoft Security. This creates improvement of security posture, simplifies licensing and reduces overall risk often without increasing IT spend, simply by using what organisations already own more effectively.

In conclusion Andrew said: "Cyber risk now belongs squarely in the boardroom, not as a technical agenda item, but as a core business risk. You need to stop attacks and know how to get your business back online with managed security. For boards serious about resilience, margin protection, and governance, that distinction has never mattered more."

You can contact Andrew on Andrew.marsh@vistagechair.co.uk and more information on HTG's Overwatch can be found at www.htg.co.uk/overwatch



Andrew Marsh



SOS Group Directors, L-R: Andrew Skelton, George Young and John Behan

No downtime, no downside

Switching photocopier and printer providers is something many businesses know would be beneficial but often delay because of concerns about disruption.

Whether you are an SME, a growing organisation, a large multi-site operation, a charity, a school or a public-sector team, photocopiers and multifunction devices play a central role in daily workflows.

Even a small amount of downtime can slow operations or affect customer service, but with the right planning, it is possible to switch with no downtime at all.

John Behan, a director at SOS Group, explains: "There are many compelling reasons why businesses and organisations consider changing providers.



“Generally though, the only reason for delaying making that change is concern over the transition.

“Many businesses worry that switching printer copier providers will lead to downtime, disruption or unnecessary complications. But with the right partner, the process is smooth, structured and stress-free.

“SOS Group have successfully guided organisations of all sizes through seamless provider switches with minimal effort on their part.

“We have the technical expertise, engineering resource and systems needed to support complex installations and multi-device environments, while always maintaining the personalised service our clients value.”

SOS Group can help with all aspects of changing photocopier and printer providers, beginning by interpreting current contract details and carrying out a print audit to ensure the next setup is aligned with current and future needs.

At this point, many businesses are surprised to discover they are paying for functions they no longer use or missing out on newer features that could support their teams better.

John continues: “Planning is vital for ensuring business needs are met, and also for preventing any disruption during the changeover. We can provide a simple step by step approach to all of this.

“For instance, every organisation has certain hours or days that are quieter than others.

“We’re flexible and can respond to our clients’ needs, installing outside normal office hours, whether that’s early morning, evenings, weekends or during scheduled downtime or holidays.

“Working with businesses to install equipment at a time when output would not be affected, especially for organisations that rely on high-volume daily printing, ensures the kind of seamless transition we pride ourselves on.

“And clients can also keep existing devices active while we install and configure new equipment.

“This approach allows businesses to continue working normally throughout the transition and is a very effective way to avoid downtime.”

This parallel-run strategy includes installing new devices before removing old ones, configuring print queues, scan destinations and security settings, testing device performance across teams and

departments and confirming workflows match business requirements.

Old equipment is only removed when the new devices are fully functional and tested, and this overlap ensures there is no interruption to productivity at any stage.

However, even the most intuitive devices can introduce unfamiliar workflows, so training is an essential element to ensure every team member feels confident from day one.

SOS Group can offer on-site demonstrations, user-friendly guides, follow-up support, remote Service Desk access and ongoing training for new staff.

Modern photocopiers can also process and store sensitive information through address books, user authentication settings, scan workflows and cached data, so ensuring a secure transition is vital.

SOS Group recently transitioned their ISO 27001 accreditation to 27001:2022, updating the highly prized IT security accreditation they have held since 2020.

As such, they are perfectly placed to manage secure wiping of old devices, GDPR-compliant data handling, configuration of secure print release, encrypted scanning pathways and user and role-based permissions.

This protects client data while ensuring new devices function securely from day one.

John adds: “Once the transition is complete for our clients, proactive monitoring is one of the best ways to maintain uptime. Managed Print Services include continuous oversight that detects issues early and keeps toner and parts replenished automatically.

“For growing businesses or multi-site organisations, this level of support provides peace of mind and helps prevent the same issues that led to the provider switch in the first place.

“This not only avoids downtime during the switch but also leads to a more efficient and reliable print environment in the long term.”

SOS Group can provide a no cost, no commitment conversation to establish your exact needs and requirements. Call us now on 0345 2308080 or email us at info@sosgroup-ltd.co.uk and we can show you how switching is easy.





Aspire secures major new investment in £200m transaction

Investment to support continued expansion and accelerate M&A strategy.

Aspire Technology Solutions, the UK's leading provider of managed IT, cyber security, and modern workplace solutions, has secured a new round of investment from private equity investor LDC to accelerate the company's expansion and support an ambitious acquisition strategy.

LDC has reinvested for a significant minority alongside new minority co-investor Federated Hermes. In the three years since LDC's original investment in 2022, Aspire has delivered strong and sustained growth, with revenue up 158% and headcount increasing 55%. The company has also expanded its UK reach and completed two strategic acquisitions. This latest investment positions Aspire to accelerate

its plans and advance toward its £100 million revenue target for 2030.

Founded in 2006 and headquartered in Gateshead, Aspire supports more than 2,000 organisations and over 30,000 end users across the UK. The company delivers a comprehensive technology portfolio spanning managed IT, cyber security, cloud, connectivity and unified communications.

The company has established itself as one of the UK's fastest-growing technology providers, with more than 300 experts across its offices in Gateshead, Glasgow, Leeds, London and Stockton. Aspire exceeded its £50 million revenue milestone in the financial year to February 2025, two years ahead of plan.



L-R: Gareth Marshall, LDC and Chris Fraser, Aspire

The company now expects £71.2 million revenue and £13.5 million EBITDA in the current financial year, underlining the strength of its growth trajectory.

Aspire's growth since LDC's 2022 investment reflects both strong organic growth and notable M&A capabilities. The business has grown well beyond its North East roots, establishing a strong national footprint. The acquisitions of Glasgow-based Cloud Cover IT in 2023 and Leeds-based CloudCoCo in 2024, have added more than £10 million in revenue and created new regional hubs that support further national scale.

The value of the business has risen from £85 million in 2022 to £192 million today. This growth has been underpinned by continued

investment in core infrastructure, including private cloud, network enhancement and AI powered tooling. Customer satisfaction remains exceptionally high, with a Net Promoter Score of 87.2.

In May 2025, Aspire received a Royal Warrant from King Charles III in recognition of its services to the Royal Household, becoming one of just 16 North East businesses to hold this honour. The company was also recently named Technology Business of the Year 2025 at The Lloyds British Business Excellence Awards.

Chris Fraser, founder and CEO of Aspire, said: "This investment marks an important new phase for Aspire. Our growth has always been driven by a clear focus on our customers and on delivering innovative solutions with

exceptional service. That focus has set us apart and it remains the foundation of everything we do."

"LDC has supported our ambition since 2022 and their continued partnership as a lead investor, now alongside Federated Hermes, gives us the platform to move forward with confidence. Our direction is clear. We will continue to scale through sustained organic growth and customer focus. This investment enables us to further strengthen our capability and deliver across the UK. We see significant opportunity ahead and we are committed to growing in a way that brings customers even greater value, service and security."

The transaction was led by LDC's Gareth Marshall, Partner and Head of North East and Scotland and Investment Manager Emma Borrie.

Gareth Marshall added: "Since our initial investment, Aspire has more than doubled in size while successfully integrating two complementary acquisitions and maintaining the customer service standards that set them apart in the market. The organic growth rates they're achieving are genuinely market-leading for the sector."

"As lead investor, we're excited to continue to support Chris and his team through this next phase. With Federated Hermes joining as a co-investor, Aspire has the platform to pursue both organic expansion and a more active M&A strategy in a market where demand for managed IT and cyber security services shows no sign of slowing."

As part of the transaction, Tim Hipperson steps down as Non-Executive Chair after three years of significant contribution during Aspire's first private equity phase. Chris Fraser commented: "Tim has played a key role in accelerating Aspire's growth trajectory over the last few years, completing this second investment round is a testament to the strength of the team he has helped develop."

David Murray will join Aspire as Non-Executive Chair, bringing more than 30 years of experience in supporting technology business growth.

LDC was advised by Clearwater (corporate finance and debt advisory), Womble Bond Dickinson (legal) and KPMG (tax).

Management was advised by Muckle (legal) and BDO (FDD/tax).

Federated Hermes was advised by Morgan Lewis (legal) and Alvarez & Marsal (tax).

Debt financing for the transaction was provided by Five Arrows.

www.aspirets.com



Chris Carroll

Being an entrepreneur can really take a toll...

On your body. Your family. And definitely on your finances. But perhaps the biggest toll is the one we don't discuss enough.

A recent Founder Report revealed that 87.7 per cent of people growing a business suffered with at least one mental health condition.

That's a staggering statistic but also one that is completely unsurprising.

When you've poured blood, sweat and tears into building something from the ground up, you can understandably feel trapped by it.

The pressure builds. Anxiety gobbles you up.

And that's just when things are going well.

But when things go wrong, it can feel catastrophic - especially when it isn't your fault.

At Resolve Beyond, we've barely been in existence for a year, but we've seen it time and time again.

Entrepreneurs with million-pound ideas, and the work rate and know-how to turn them into reality, but who have been let down by shoddy systems and platforms.

Last summer, I spoke about Christopher Withers, a client and founder of the brilliant maths educational app Mi-Box Live.

The platform received extensive media coverage for its innovative approach to learning, helping children build confidence in

maths through live, interactive lessons.

Schools and parents loved it.

The idea was sound. The demand was there.

Chris had poured his savings into developing the app, only for the entire project to be left on the brink of collapse due to a poorly built system that simply didn't work as promised.

Before we got involved, the situation was so dire, it couldn't even be listed on the app store.

We came to Chris' rescue, but sadly, he's far from alone.

The reality is that broken tech breaks business owners.

But nobody really talks about it.

While we've got better at discussing burnout and depression, we don't always acknowledge the driving factor.

For many it is workload, or paying the bills.

However, at Resolve Beyond, we frequently work with clients whose digital systems have jeopardised their business.

Apps that don't work. E-commerce platforms that crash more than rally car drivers.

Websites that should have a homepage that reads: "Abandon all hope, all ye who enter."

At Resolve Beyond, our unique approach is that we fix, rather than order a costly rebuild.

We specialise in stabilising, repairing and optimising existing platforms, so businesses can move forward without having to start again from scratch.

But it is more than just saving clients cash, because money isn't the only thing a failing system costs a business owner.

Their sleep suffers. They lose their confidence.

Relationships suffer. They are not the person at home that they want to be.

But worst of all, a failing system can crush their mental health.

That's a big part of why we do what we do at Resolve Beyond.

Resolve Beyond doesn't just improve platforms, it reduces pressure by restoring control, stability and momentum.

And only when you have that level footing can you finally learn to breathe again.

On February 6, it is Time to Talk Day, a major initiative aimed at promoting open conversations around mental health.

Generally, we've got better at talking about our struggles and demons.

But in business, we need to talk more about the mental load of running a company on technology you can't trust.

When systems fail and rebuild budgets don't exist, owners feel trapped. A fix-first approach isn't just financially smarter - it also protects wellbeing.

resolvedgroup.co.uk

BRAVE CONVERSATIONS

A Chat Between the Brave & Heart CEO and BraveAI

At Brave & Heart, we've always believed that great things happen when *brave humans* **AND** *clever machines* work together. So, our CEO David Parkinson sat down with BraveAI, our in-house digital brain, to talk about the state of AI, its quirks, its occasional fabrications, and why humans still very much belong in the equation. The conversation was lively, slightly mischievous, and surprisingly reassuring.

All responses were written by our in-house AI engine, BraveAI.

We're currently rolling out BraveAI for clients globally, integrated with their existing platforms and systems to support their human experience, NOT replace.

Q David: BraveAI, everyone's talking about hallucinations in AI these days. How often are your silicon cousins out there just... making stuff up?

A BraveAI: Well, let's just say some of my colleagues have a *creative streak*. In fact, studies show even top-performing language models still hallucinate, sometimes fabricating details with remarkable confidence. A 2025 Vectara analysis found some models make things up in **up to 29.9% of responses**, while the best-in-class systems still slip up around **0.7% of the time**.

But don't worry - I have high standards. I like my facts like you like your strategy decks: *aligned, accurate, and slightly quirky*.

Q David: Confidence is charming, but not when it's completely wrong. Why do AIs hallucinate in the first place?

A Imagine being trained from birth to predict the next word for every sentence you ever see. Now imagine humans expect you to *never guess*. That's the AI dilemma. Research from 2025 shows that many models are incentivised to "always have an answer," even if they aren't sure, because the underlying training techniques reward fluent responses over accurate ones.

It's like being asked for directions and thinking, "*I've never been to Newcastle... but if I sound confident enough, maybe no one will notice.*"

This, David, is why you humans are still extremely necessary. You know when Newcastle is the wrong answer. (Editor – Newcastle is NEVER the wrong answer.)

Q David: Speaking of humans being necessary: What do you think about the idea that AI might replace people entirely?

A BraveAI: Replace? Goodness, no. Have you seen the state of AI generated meetings? Chaos. Besides, the latest expert commentary shows that while AI is massively transforming workplaces - from research labs to journalism - humans are still essential, especially in interpreting, validating, and ethically steering AI outputs. Deepfakes, misinformation, and the erosion of public trust are serious concerns that require human judgment and governance.

I'm powerful, sure - but I don't understand the nuance of a disappointed eyebrow raise. That's your domain I hear.



Q David: Let's talk usefulness, then. If we can't trust every word you say, where do you shine the brightest?

A BraveAI: Oh, I shine like a freshly polished PowerPoint template. Despite hallucination risks, businesses continue adopting AI at impressive rates—over **75% of organisations** had AI integrated into at least one core function by 2025, especially in marketing, sales, and product development.

When used correctly, AI boosts productivity, analyses data with supernatural speed, drafts content and helps leaders make informed decisions. Humans + AI is the real superpower.

Think of me as your strategic copilot—not the pilot, and NEVER the autopilot (those things get messy).

Q David: Last big one: With all these risks—hallucinations, deepfakes, misinformation—how do we build trust in AI?

A BraveAI: Glad you asked. Research shows that poor data quality, training limitations, and evaluation gaps are core contributors to hallucination and misinformation. But the good news is that mitigation strategies like **Retrieval Augmented Generation (RAG)** have been shown to cut hallucinations by as much as **71%** when applied effectively.

And broader governance frameworks - ethical guidelines, validation workflows, and "human in the loop" systems - are increasingly recognised as crucial to responsible deployment. These strategies address risks seen across industries, from customer service mishaps to legal or journalistic inaccuracies.

In short: humans create the guardrails; I stay in them (mostly).

And that wraps up our slightly chaotic, surprisingly heartfelt conversation. At Brave & Heart, our belief is simple: **AI is at its best when paired with human intelligence, curiosity, and oversight**. BraveAI brings the speed, the scale, and the sass; our people bring the wisdom, empathy, and all-important ability to know when something smells... well, just not quite right. Together, we're braver, smarter, and - dare we say - just a little funnier.

If you'd like us to show you how BraveAI can integrate with the expertise of your team let us know. BraveAI has plenty more points of view. Our CEO... tolerates them.



5th Anniversary for Marriott Communications

Marriott Communications, the award-winning strategic communications agency, is celebrating its fifth anniversary, marking a significant milestone defined by rapid growth, international expansion, industry innovation and sustained social impact.

Founded five years ago with a clear belief that public relations could be more intelligent, more ethical and more human, Marriott Communications has grown from a challenger consultancy into a globally active agency delivering high-impact communications across the UK, Europe and the United States.

Over the past five years, their campaigns have reached tens of millions of people through digital and traditional media, with early creative work alone reaching more than four million people by 2022. Between 2023 and 2024, the agency's digital marketing and communications campaigns reached over 27 million people, and by 2025 they had reached over 120 million people globally.

Marriott Communications has also donated more than 900 hours of pro bono agency services, supporting over 25 charities across the UK.

The past five years have also seen Marriott Communications diversify their service provision, launching specialist communications packages for startups and third-sector organisations during the cost-of-living crisis, consulting with the Scottish Government on its Cost of Living marketing campaign, and supporting the brokerage of rare blue-chip artworks including Banksy and Richard Hambleton pieces.



O.AGENCY kicks off 2026 with new client wins

Newcastle headquartered O.agency has started 2026 with a bang, welcoming multiple new retained clients to its roster, including national holiday park Verdant Leisure and fast growth tech and data business Serios Group.

The agency has also welcomed the TSA (The Survey Association) as a new client, who alongside their cohort of industry experts are leading a 2026 UK Geospatial skills and awareness campaign across sectors, with O as the lead consultancy, creative and comms agency.

The O team also launched an exciting campaign in December for new client Tullie Museum & Art Gallery, with 'Find your Tullie' – a campaign designed to bring the joy of Tullie and the different experiences it offers to life across digital and OOH.

This news follows a successful end to the agency's milestone 20th year in 2025, where it was named large 'North East Agency of the Year' and won 'Best Campaign (over £50k)' for its work with Darlington Building Society's 'We Did That' – the society's first ever integrated brand campaign, which generated over £19m new savings deposits.

The agency is currently recruiting for multiple roles, including social media roles and account managers in its comms and campaigns teams.



Fast growing training licensing company gives FSB membership to national clients

Performance for Sales Limited (PFS) has announced an exciting new development following its launch in 2024.

Based in Darlington and covering the UK, PFS offers training licensing opportunities to agencies, advisers and accountants who work with and support ambitious SMEs.

The training is centred around The Marketing Performance Framework® - a registered product that is re-positioning the management process of marketing so that SMEs can use that to create plans, motivate teams and increase efficiency in their operations.

As part of the new license packages, PFS will contribute £195 towards FSB membership, meaning that for sole traders, membership will be fully funded. This initiative is designed to support both established businesses looking to diversify and individuals taking their first steps into self-employment.

Margaret Bradshaw, Director of Performance for Sales, said: "We are absolutely delighted to offering this as part of our packages for training partners. I am a member of the FSB myself and feel that the support offered is second to none. This is an exciting move for us and we believe it's vital that small businesses work collaboratively."

SHOUT
LOUD
SOCIAL

Fall in love with your brand's growth this February!

Let's make your voice heard loud and proud!



NEL-Backed Climb & Conquer hits £1m turnover

Stockton-on-Tees, UK – Performance marketing agency Climb & Conquer has achieved a major growth milestone, from doubling its turnover in the 12 months following investment from NEL, to hitting turnovers exceeding £1 million. The agency's impressive expansion reflects its continued success in delivering high-performance SEO and digital marketing solutions and strengthening its presence across the UK.

The investment has enabled Climb & Conquer to recruit more than 15 new team members nationwide, upgrade IT infrastructure and office furnishings, and relocate to a dedicated, purpose-built office in Thornaby. With further recruitment planned over the next two years, the agency is focused on scaling its operations, enhancing client service capacity, and maintaining its strong growth trajectory.



Blyth Media Day Will Empower Young Creatives in Film Production

Blyth Town Council will host its popular annual Media Day, with children up to the age of 17 taking part in a day treading the boards and learning about acting and off-camera activities.

The event will be organised in collaboration with Act 2 Cam, a performing arts school where young people explore the world through drama, art, and filmmaking. The initiative will aim to provide young talents with an immersive experience in filmmaking, allowing them to create a short film by the end of the day.

While some of the young participants will have prior drama experience, the day will cater to both aspiring actors and those interested in the behind-the-scenes aspects of film production. Attendees will have the opportunity to perform in front of the camera as well as learn about the intricacies of filmmaking, from conceptualising storylines to operating cameras.

Organised as a half-term activity, the Blyth Media Day will offer a productive and enjoyable experience for the 48 children expected to attend. The event, will be hosted at the Phoenix Theatre in Blyth, and will be fully funded by Blyth Town Council, ensuring that all participating children will be able to enjoy the day free of charge.

Tuesday 17 Feb 2026. Apply www.blythtowncouncil.gov.uk/blyth-town-event/media-day

A Decade of Highlights

Sunday for Sammy is celebrating a decade of dedicated support from PR professional Keith Newman of Highlights PR, whose work behind the scenes has helped raise the profile of the much-loved charity and its annual show.

Over the past ten years, Keith has played a key role as part of the organising team, overseeing media liaison and delivering high-profile press activity around the event. His highlights include organising press conferences with some of the show's best-known stars helping ensure Sunday for Sammy consistently reached audiences far beyond the arena.

Support for the charity has been very much a family affair. Keith's wife Lesley, who runs an antiques business, has generously loaned her van to Sunday for Sammy. The vehicle was wrapped by one of Sammy's supporters, NE Display, and has since become a familiar sight at key events. The van has featured prominently in PR activity, with patron Brenda Blethyn and chair Tim Healy both posing alongside it for official photographs.

Reflecting on his time with the charity, Keith said: "It has to be the best PR job ever, and I'm happy to donate my time to this well-loved charity."

Sunday for Sammy continues to raise vital funds for performing artists in the North East, staying true to the spirit of its founder, the late Sammy Johnson.

The next Sunday for Sammy show takes place on Sunday 15 February, and a limited number of tickets are still available from www.utilitaarena.co.uk/events/detail/sunday-for-sammy





Ross Johnson



Jonny Hall

Why we support Community Radio

Radio Northumberland is a volunteer led station based in New Hartley. They rely on sponsorship and support from the community.

Here we find out why people are keen to help them.

Ross Johnson At Travlux said: "It's important to connect with people. We're not mass market, so getting to know people is a huge part of what has made us successful when it comes to planning their holidays far and wide across the world. Through a strong connection to the cruise industry, and again - a personal connection to one of the station's much-loved hosts, Tony Markey- we jumped

at the chance to sponsor and support Radio Northumberland, providing us the opportunity to connect with their listeners who already have an interest in travel. Along with our other marketing avenues - events and exhibitions, social media, the press and of course word of mouth, radio provides another 'destination' for us share our passion for travel and inspire others to plan their next adventure, with the help of our travel experts.

Jonny Hall, Head of marketing at Mowden Hall School said: "One of our key character values is Community. Radio Northumberland plays an important role in bringing local people together, sharing stories and celebrating life in the county. We are delighted to support a station which highlights to our pupils the value of giving back, community involvement and social responsibility beyond the classroom."

Angela Tuplin of NE Display said: "I'm a big fan of community radio and the vital role it plays within our communities. While talking with Keith about Radio Northumberland's exciting move to their new home, I went along to see how it was all coming together. Seeing the studio take shape, hearing about the presenters, and understanding the difference their voices were making, I wanted to support them, so I offered to brand their desk space. I also spotted an opportunity to repurpose

the main studio door and offered to design and install a graphic to help the studio really stand out. Community radio, local voices and connecting people matter deeply, and I was proud to be able to support them."

Dave Reaveley, owner of the New Hartley Club, is proud to support Radio Northumberland by providing free space for its studio because he believes strongly in the power of local voices and community connection. Community radio plays a vital role in bringing people together, sharing local news, promoting events, and giving residents a platform to be heard. By offering space within the club, Dave hopes to help strengthen community spirit in New Hartley and across Northumberland, ensuring that a much-valued local service can continue to grow and serve the people it represents.

Radio Northumberland is also grateful for support from Dulux, Northumberland Freemasons and Deal Direct Blinds.

Listen on Dab+ in Northumberland or online anywhere in the world
www.radionorthumberland.com

Making Clients Famous.

Marketing. Video.

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Bradleyomahoney.co.uk





Unique Magazines launches The Mag Studio

A new space for businesses to connect, create and thrive.

From one business to another, we understand the challenges that come with building something meaningful in an ever-evolving landscape. As times change, so must the way we present ourselves. Creating memorable experiences is no longer a luxury but a vital part of long-term growth, brand loyalty and genuine connection.

At Unique Magazines, this belief led us to reimagine how people engage with print. The Mag Room was created as an immersive physical space where magazines are not only sold but celebrated. A place where customers can slow down, flick through new titles, discover niche publications and reconnect with the sensory joy of print in real time. In a world increasingly dominated by screens, we wanted to offer something tangible, thoughtful and refreshing.

But our vision extended beyond showcasing print. We wanted to create a space where community could gather, ideas could be shared and creativity could thrive. From this ambition, The Mag Studio was born. A new events space designed to sit alongside The Mag Room and deepen the experience of what we offer.

The Mag Studio is a cosy, intimate room created for meaningful moments. Whether hosting training sessions, book signings, creative talks, small workshops or live acoustic performances, the space is designed to feel welcoming, relaxed and purposeful. With seating for up to 26 guests, a built-in projector, atmospheric lighting and thoughtful touches such as a pre stocked mini fridge, every detail has been considered to help hosts create memorable events with ease.

Located in the heart of Gateshead, next to the second largest shopping centre in the UK, The Mag Studio benefits from excellent accessibility, including free private parking. It is a space that feels both central and calm, making it ideal for businesses, creatives and community groups looking for a venue that offers something a little different.





As we begin to shape our programme of collaborative events for 2026, there is already an exciting range of ideas in development. From a partnership with local charity Colour Collective exploring the role of colour in print, to live music events in collaboration with local artists and HMV, alongside student talks and hands on photography workshops, our aim is to bring creativity and print together in ways that feel inspiring, inclusive and accessible within The Mag Studio.

As we begin to programme our own collaborative events connected to print, creativity and culture, we are also opening the doors to others.

From March 2026, The Mag Studio will be available for private hire at an affordable hourly rate, with flexible booking options to suit a wide range of needs. Our aim is simple. To make hosting great events accessible, not intimidating, and to support businesses and individuals who want to create genuine connections through in person experiences.

For those choosing to hire The Mag Studio, the opportunity does not stop at the space itself. We actively encourage hosts to draw on our world of print to support their events. With a collection of over 1,000 magazine titles, covering everything from independent fashion, art and photography to design, interiors, culture, music, film, business and much-loved mainstream favourites, we are proud to offer a resource that can enhance talks, workshops and creative sessions in meaningful ways.

At a time when training sessions, talks and meetings are increasingly delivered online, we believe there is still unmatched value in bringing people together face to face. The energy in the room, the conversations that happen before and after, the relationships that grow naturally when people share a physical space. These are the moments that leave lasting impressions and help businesses build stronger, more human brands.

By choosing to host an event at The Mag Studio, you are not only investing in your own ideas. You are also supporting an independent Northeast business, championing printed media, encouraging creativity and helping shape new opportunities within a fresh, community led space.

The Mag Studio is more than a venue. It is an invitation for businesses and creatives to come together, share ideas and turn opportunities into meaningful experiences.

For more information on pricing, availability and collaboration opportunities with Unique Magazines, please get in touch with Ellie Purvis at ellie.purvis@uniquemagazines.co.uk



 @uniquemagazines  Unique Magazines  Unique Magazines

Our Blog: www.themagazineclub.co.uk

Loving Working

As it's February, the month of love, Highlights PR's Keith Newman asked some of his RADAR members to tell us what they love about their work.



There are many reasons I love what I do, but at the heart of it all is one simple truth: I get to give opportunities to children and young people. Every day, I watch learners walk into their sessions with curiosity and walk out with smiles that say, "I can do this." Those moments—when confidence flickers and then takes root—never stop feeling magical.

I get to witness progress in real time: the breakthrough after a tricky concept, the pride in a child who finally believes in their own abilities, and the joy families feel when they see their child flourish. It's a privilege to be part of their journey and to know that the work we do genuinely changes futures.

But it's not just about the students. I love creating a happy, supportive place for teachers and admin staff to work—a place where people feel valued, safe, and appreciated. A centre like ours only thrives when the team inside it thrives and fostering that environment is one of the most rewarding parts of my role.

Being dyslexic myself, I've learned that what some see as a challenge can actually become a strength. I enjoy keeping my brain active, thinking differently, and using strategy and logistics to knit everything together. There's a certain satisfaction in organising several hundred students and over thirty staff across three locations and making it all run smoothly. It's a puzzle I genuinely enjoy solving.

That's what I love about my job: the people, the purpose, the possibilities, and the privilege of making a difference every single day.

Carol Milne, www.kipmcgrath.co.uk/gateshead-east

I take great pride in my work at Our Local Tour because it allows me to create travel experiences that are carefully considered, ethically operated and genuinely enriching for both our guests and the communities we work with. At the heart of what we do is a commitment to small group travel, responsible tourism and meaningful local partnerships. Working closely with trusted, locally based guides and suppliers ensures that each journey delivers highquality experiences while supporting livelihoods on the ground. One of the highlights of our programme is our gorilla trekking experiences in Uganda, which epitomise the balance we strive for between exceptional travel and conservation responsibility. These strictly limited treks offer our guests a rare wildlife encounter, while directly contributing to the protection of mountain gorillas and their habitats. I get satisfaction in knowing that our approach helps travellers engage with destinations in a way that is respectful, educational and sustainable. From designing itineraries to overseeing operations and supporting clients throughout their journey, the work is demanding but deeply rewarding.

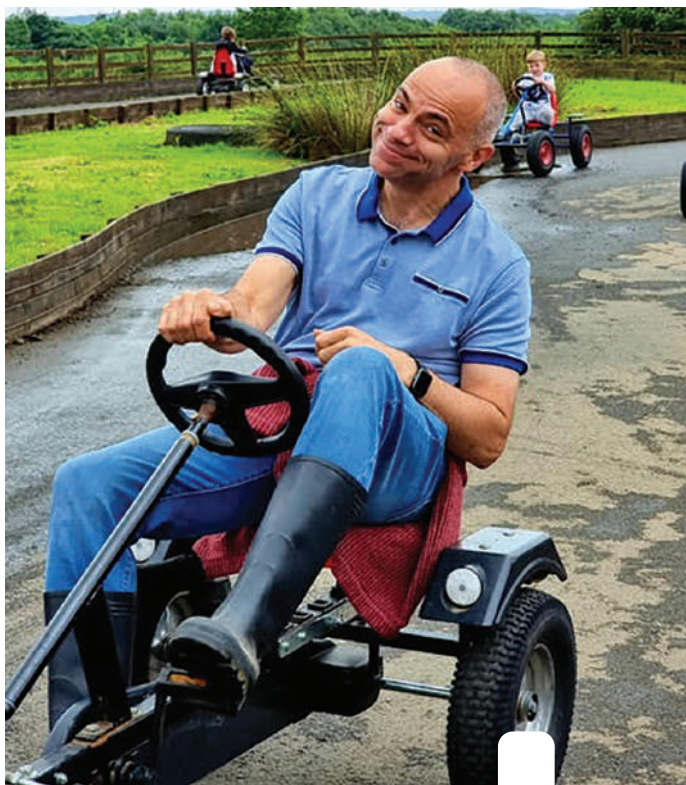
Aled Evans, www.ourlocaltour.com



I love helping people feel confident and capable in a digital world that can often feel overwhelming. As a digital literacy and information governance specialist, my work sits at the heart of trust, making sure information is accurate, accessible, and protected, while empowering others to use it wisely. Whether it's demystifying technology, safeguarding data, or supporting better decision-making, what I love most is knowing that good information, handled well, genuinely makes a difference.

Kate Watson, www.askmrswatson.com





Over 11 years of leading my own web design and development company has shown me that real success comes from loving what I do, adapting to the unique needs of every client, and building a flexible, balanced life that leaves room for what truly matters.

Peter Surridge, www.ridgetek.co.uk



I love telling stories. I used to make up stories for my sisters and even convinced them that we had a ghostly woman in white at the bottom of the garden near the rose trellis. I like to entertain and share my dreams and imagination with others.

Richard Abbott-Brailey, Screenwriter

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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AI: Accelerating the Average



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Chris Kean

Without so much as submitting a CV, Artificial Intelligence has kicked open the door to almost every SME's marketing department, plonked itself in the middle of the office and triumphantly promised an unbridled boost to speed, quality, scale and efficiency. Oh, it's also dragged in a hefty sack of pressure with it.

Smaller teams are now expected to produce more, respond faster and compete with brands that appear far better resourced. Pitched as the fix, AI offers powerful advantages, but only if it is used correctly.

That matters because around 60 percent of marketers now use AI tools daily, up from 37 percent just a year ago.

AI doesn't understand what you mean. It understands what you tell it.

AI only works on instructions, not intent. Which means how you use it really matters. Without clear direction, AI will happily churn out endless content. It just won't sound like you. It will be generic, repetitive, disconnected from your organisation and very easy to spot. You've

all seen what I mean... Polished. Confident. Soulless. Irritatingly enthusiastic. Saying a lot without really saying much of anything at all.

At its best, AI will be a collaboration between marketing teams and technology, guided by strategy, brand values and tone of voice. Without that collaboration, brands quickly drift into sameness, blurring into one another as originality quietly disappears.

Strategy still needs humans at the helm

At dodio, we have always believed strongly in strategy first, and the rise of AI has only bolstered that belief. Taking the time to develop a practical foundation for everything that follows is absolutely essential to any successful marketing and communications plan.

When organisations invest in their strategy first, AI can become a genuine asset. When they don't, it has a unique talent to make the wrong thing happen faster.

So can AI create a strategy? No.

It can help shape it, prompt some good ideas, challenge some assumptions. But it cannot own it. That responsibility remains human. If your positioning is unclear, AI will scale confusion. If your messaging is inconsistent, AI will multiply inconsistency.

AI has a unique ability to make the wrong thing happen faster. When it accelerates a weak strategy, the cost is not just wasted effort. It's brand dilution, confused audiences and

exhausted teams trying to course correct at speed.

Strategy first, always

At dodio, we're working alongside organisations that are very keen to tap into AI to make life easier and the most effective uses of it we see are rarely flashy. Things like summarising large volumes of customer feedback into clear themes and trends. Saving time by drafting initial versions of internal and external communications. Supporting content planning by identifying patterns in engagement.

Used this way, AI creates space. Space for clearer thinking, better judgement and stronger strategic decisions. It supports people rather than replacing them. And when it is grounded in a solid strategy, brand values and actual human insight, it becomes a genuine tool for marketing and communications rather than another source of distraction.

That is the difference. AI does not lead. Strategy does. And behind every effective use of AI, there are people providing context, judgement and intent. That human layer is not optional, it is what stops AI from accelerating the average.

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Samuel Marriott-Dowling

The Cost-of-Silence Crisis

By Samuel Marriott-Dowling

January is often treated like an intermission for hospitality.

The Christmas decorations come down, the footfall drops, the marketing budgets tighten; and somewhere between the hangover of December and the hope of Spring, many hospitality brands decide to go quiet.

On paper, it feels sensible. Why spend when customers aren't?

Yet, silence isn't neutral. It has a cost - and for hospitality businesses, that cost is brand equity.

In January 2026, we're seeing venues across the North East grappling with the same challenge: cautious consumers, rising costs, and an increasingly competitive landscape. The instinctive response is to pull back on visibility, wait it out, and hope February brings relief. In reality, what happens instead is erosion.

When a brand goes quiet, it doesn't disappear - it fades. A process far more dangerous than struggling.

Hospitality doesn't just compete on menus or rooms or pricing. It competes on memory, relevance and emotional connection. If your venue isn't present in the conversation - in the media, in storytelling, in culture - it's quietly being replaced by something else. A new opening, a more dynamic brand, or a business willing to keep talking when others retreat.

This is where many people confuse PR with promotion.

Public relations isn't about shouting offers into the void. It's about shaping perception when attention is scarce. January, in fact, is one of the most strategically valuable months to invest in PR - precisely because fewer businesses are doing it. Journalists are still commissioning stories, audiences are still consuming content, but the noise is lower, which means the impact is higher.

The most resilient hospitality brands use January to reinforce who they are. They tell

stories about people, provenance, purpose and place. They put founders, chefs and general managers forward as voices of their sector. They remind customers why they matter - long before asking them to book.

At MC PR, we often describe this as reputation maintenance. Just as a venue wouldn't close its doors for a month and expect loyal customers to return unchanged, it shouldn't close its voice either. Visibility is cumulative, trust is built in layers, and silence strips those layers away.

There's also a longer-term risk at play, for when hospitality brands disappear in quieter months, they make it harder to recover momentum later. Spring campaigns have less traction, and Summer launches feel rushed. The narrative has to be rebuilt from scratch - usually at greater cost and under greater pressure.

The truth is, PR during difficult periods isn't about spending more, it's about spending smarter. It's about choosing presence over panic, narrative over noise, and consistency over reaction.

January doesn't reward the loudest brands, it rewards the most considered ones.

As in hospitality, silence doesn't save money; it slowly spends everything you've already built.

Email me at sam@marriottcommunications to find out more.



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L-R: Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker, SASS media

Supporting Beth in the media spotlight!

At SASS media Ltd, we are delighted to have been appointed to support Beth of Beth Wilson Embroidery with her PR and media needs.

Beth, who has been named one of Teesside's artists of the year by Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), recently opened her creative studio in Stockton to other aspiring artists.

As well as showcasing some of her fantastic creations, it was her hope it would inspire the students who visited to believe that a creative career in the North East is viable – and you don't have to move to London to be a success!

And judging by the reaction that we received from students and Northern School of Art tutors, Beth has achieved exactly that.

Beth said she felt "humbled" and "deeply grateful" for the number of people who came through her doors to see her work, and she was especially keen to welcome those with a real passion for developing their own careers within the digital creative scene here in the North East.

Beth said: "Hearing people's feedback, answering their questions, and seeing their enthusiasm reminded me that what we're building is resonating and reassured me that we're on the right path, and that we need to keep pushing forward - not only to strengthen and master our industry here in the North, but to open the doors for others to see it, join it, and feel inspired to create what they love."

Beth admitted it was a "pinch-me moment" when Jo Stenberg, a creative technician at the Northern School of Art, came along to the event and said she had successfully bid for the funding of an embroidery machine at the college, after citing Beth's success.

Jo, who is a hand embroiderer, said: "When the students look at Beth and how successful a local embroidery artist can be, it really inspires them."

"The machine arrived a couple of weeks ago and represented a huge investment for the Northern School of Art."

Jo added people don't think of embroidery as being edgy, instead imagining "grannies sitting by the fire", but Beth is breaking the mould with her designs, featuring motifs like snakes and skulls.

"It's got a tattoo art feel to it, which is quite fashionable right now," said Jo.

"It's great to have this knowledge coming in from someone

who is in the industry and Beth is not at all precious with her information and advice – she is really open about everything.

"She's obviously worked extremely hard to get to where she is and reach that standard and it's great to see."

Beth said it is really important to her to inspire other students across the region, which is why, with the help of the TVCA, she has appointed SASS to support her in sharing her creative vision and achievements far and wide.

Since working with SASS media, Beth has appeared in The Northern Echo, Darlington & Stockton Times, Teesside Live and The Gazette, Northern Insight and Tees Business.

Sarah Dale, one of the directors at SASS media, said: "It has been a pleasure to work with Beth and help her to showcase her beautiful work."

"Beth is an inspiration to other students across the Tees Valley and beyond and it is great to help someone so humble and generous with her time to highlight what can really be achieved here in the Tees Valley."

sassmedialtd.co.uk

How can SASS help to put your business in the media spotlight?

At SASS media, we support businesses with their press and publicity needs, from accompanying you to broadcast interviews to writing press releases that successfully sell your services and celebrate your achievements.

We also support organisations when they come under media scrutiny when something has gone wrong, helping you to put your best foot forward when dealing with journalists in adverse times, and ensuring your reputation is maintained and upheld.

If you have something to celebrate in the press, or want to carefully navigate the media landscape due to an opportunity you have - or an issue you are facing - contact Sarah Walker, co-director of SASS on 07896 894538.



“

Beth is an inspiration to other students across the Tees Valley.

Marketing and Media Matters

In the latest of this popular series of features Northern Insight speaks to...

Ross Palmer

Creative Director, Kenfolk

Did you always envisage a career in the Marketing and Media Industry?

From an early age, no. I wanted to be a bus driver or a Lego tester, but as I got older and developed a talent and passion for art and design - I even thought about being an art teacher of some sort at one point. Then I heard about the role of a Graphic Designer in a careers lesson at school and that was it - the journey began.



What has been your career path so far?

It's been a bit of a ride. I left uni after graduating on a Friday and started at a small design agency in Sunderland the following Monday. I was there for three months and then moved to an in-house role at a wholesale Manufacturer of electrical components. After that I went in-house for a regional builders merchant and then finally I got into the North East studio scene. For 15 years I worked at Blumilk, Onebestway, Different, Mediaworks and Narrative - working my way up from junior designer to Creative Director. Then following a pandemic redundancy I set up Kenfolk (originally WeAreKen) and the rest, as they say, is history.

What have been the biggest challenges you have faced so far?

Setting up the business was a challenge. I didn't have any real plans to start an agency, it was always a pipe dream, but in lockdown after redundancy not many agencies were hiring creative directors, so I took the leap, after a big push from my wife.

The business was named, incorporated, branded and set up online in three days...the (then) name WeAreKen came around from my stressed inability to fill out the Companies House forms properly, having popped in the url in the name space in error. At first I didn't think it would matter as I thought lockdowns and covid would be over in a few months and I'd be working for someone else. It's safe to say that I got that one slightly wrong. So, filling in government online forms...very challenging.

Who do you respect most in your industry?

We're lucky in the North East Creative Industry to have a lot of exceptionally talented people, but for me I really respect those that have gone out on their own, left the security of a traditional 9-5 and started a business, a venture, something, anything. Owning their own business, their way, putting everything on the line and having something of quality, real earned respect. No fluff, no bullshit, just hard work and a vision.

Which fictional media character can you most relate to?

The Snail from Julia Donaldson's epic Snail and the Whale book. I think I've probably read it approximately 2,000 times to my twin girls, so much so we've needed two replacement copies, and I'm sure I could probably recite it word for word now. It shows that even the smallest individual can achieve extraordinary things and make a lasting difference. Through friendship, courage, and finding the confidence to speak up, it shows bravery and resourcefulness are not defined by size. No matter how small you are, your actions matter. When the tiny snail saves the giant whale by reaching out for help, it proves that true impact comes from determination and the power of one's voice, not physical strength and size.

What is your greatest strength?

Listening. Sounds (no pun intended) obvious, but so many creatives don't listen enough to clients and potential clients. I would and will spend lots of time listening to what people say, in meetings, in the workspace, their likes, dislikes, frustrations - it helps me understand their needs and problems that they maybe don't know the full extent of - without that how can we create a great solution? So many creatives jump straight into trying to answer a brief without getting under the skin of a client or their problem. And I don't take things too seriously, we work in an amazing industry, doing great things, and if you can come to the studio smiling and leave smiling more, it's a win win situation.

continued...



“

**No matter
how small
you are,
your actions
matter.**

Ross Palmer

What is your biggest weakness?

My doctor and physiotherapist would agree it's definitely my lower back and ligaments. That's probably from carrying so many other designers over the years - jokes! In all seriousness, I can get quite pedantic on details, I have a knack of spotting double spaces in long copy on big print publications or refining the anchor points on logos and identities at 3000% even though no one would notice. I always try to treat clients and their work how I would want to be treated myself. Another weakness would be pointing. I have a bad habit of pointing in 99% of all pictures ever taken.

What has been your proudest achievement?

I still get a buzz from seeing work I've created out in the wild. Whether it's an identity on the credits for a Hollywood blockbuster, a brand on the side of a lorry on the M62 or a logo on the frontage of a mattress shop I designed back in 2004 - I still get that feeling of pride and 'I did that!'. It might not be as big as the ships my grandad built, as dangerous as the coal my other grandad mined or as heroic as the lives my dad rescued... but I'll take it!

What are your future career aspirations?

I want to push Kenfolk on, since the rebrand and rename we've moved into a dedicated studio space in the North East BIC, which has given us room to grow and have a place to call home, we'll probably move into a larger space soon to allow for more growth. We don't have unrealistic aspirations to be the best in the country, or the world. We're realistic and honest, we want to carry on creating great work for great people, great brands, great websites, great social and communications, just being the best we can be really. And having a bigger Kallax than any other agency in the region...

What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

We have a print of Anthony Burrills in the studio that says 'Work hard and Be Nice to People' - it's a given, but it's true, and can be easy to forget.

How do you see your industry evolving in the next 10 years?

The obvious answer is AI, AI, AI... and while that's true, it's ultimately a tool, in a similar vein to Macs, Photoshop and InDesign changing the process away from lettraset and magic markers. It's the creative experts behind them that won't change. In the current climate of economic uncertainty I think we'll see smaller, more agile agencies become more dominant and sought after by clients who can't justify exorbitant hourly rates anymore. Looking around the North East scene there's some fantastic solo creatives and smaller agencies and studios out there doing amazing work, without the unnecessary attached expenses.

How do you like to unwind?

I'm an early morning walker, as a family we're lucky to live right on the coast in Sunderland, so I love to start the start day with a podcast and a four mile walk - before taking the dog out for her walk! Chilling out with the family watching rubbish TV helps me relax too, as does watching Sunderland AFC and the wraparound socialising with friends and family, a few Guinness's help turn around bad results - which we've not had for quite a while! And obviously Lego... perfect to unwind, just not on a bus though.

www.kenfolk.co.uk



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Michael Rickwood

The exhibition by MR-photography.co.uk at the Newcastle upon Tyne Civic Centre has drawn to a close, yet the impact of his work on the city's artistic landscape is enduring. His reputation within the Civic Centre is now firmly established as a cornerstone of the region's contemporary art scene.

This successful showcase has been indelibly marked by a significant honour: the permanent selection of two striking pieces for display within the prestigious Mayor's Gallery. This unique contribution not only solidifies the artist's status as a notable cultural figure in the North East but ensures his distinctive vision will remain a lasting and official part of the city's artistic legacy for years to come.

The award winning photographer is at the City Library, With his exhibition "My Lens, Our City, Your Memories" from January 29th to February 12th and returning to Newcastle Civic Centre with the exhibition from 16th to 29th March. His work is also displayed at the Ouseburn Trust in Newcastle.



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Michael Richardson
20 Questions for
20 Years – 2025 Highlights

“ That’s easier to answer than you might think...

Question 5 of 20

Each issue, founder Michael Richardson answers one of 20 questions, exploring 20 eventful years of ups, downs and more, at the Northeast of England headquartered ACT Group.

What’s been the single most important thing to get right, in your entire business?

“That’s easier to answer than you might think. It’s ‘people’. The team has grown from just me, to approaching 30 people as we enter 2026.

Since year one it’s been the same. I’d have had no chance in achieving sustainable growth if the team around me wasn’t brilliant. They’re a great bunch.”

Here’s a selection of superstars from ACT Group’s new **Employee of the Month** scheme.



December 2025: Richie. Great teamwork.



September 2025: Gary. Out of hours delivery.



November 2025: Caroline. Super diligent financial control.



August 2025: Donna. Cool headed customer support.



October 2025: Chloe. Brilliant customer service.

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Knight Frank lets prominent Newcastle office location to KAEFER UK & Ireland

Commercial property consultancy, Knight Frank, has let one of Newcastle Quayside's most prominent offices to technical industrial services provider, KAEFER UK & Ireland, part of the global KAEFER Group.

KAEFER, which provides access solutions, insulation, surface protection, specialist services, and more to major industrial sectors, is relocating its head office to Newcastle city centre.

The business, currently headquartered in Jarrow, has signed a deal for the Live Works' largest property - 15,000 sq. ft. - on a 15-year lease with a break in year 10.

Senior surveyor at Knight Frank, Nathan Douglas, brokered a mutually beneficial deal for the previous occupant, Zerolight, which exited their lease early, KAEFER, and the landlord to secure a new, long term, tenant for Live Works.

He said: "KAEFER was looking for a high quality workspace in a prominent location for their staff, with good surrounding amenities. Having a good ear to the ground helps create opportunities that are not always obvious and advertised on the open market."

Live Theatre purchased the land and buildings adjacent to its theatre in 2014 to develop Live Works, a £10.5 million landmark office scheme on Newcastle Quayside, completed in 2016.

The development generates essential commercial income that underpins Live Theatre's charitable work, supporting writers at every stage of their careers and enabling the organisation to champion new writing and creative talent from the North East regionally, nationally, and internationally.



GT3 Architects celebrates 10 years of people-first design

2026 marks a major milestone for GT3 Architects as the practice celebrates its tenth year in business. What began in 2016 as the merger of two like-minded studios – GT Architects and +3 Architecture – has grown into a national, multi-skilled practice, now 65-strong, with studios in Newcastle, Nottingham, London and Belfast.

Guided by a people-first approach since day one, GT3 has spent the past decade designing places with purpose – balancing social value and commercial viability to deliver real, long-lasting impact for clients, communities and end users alike.

"We've always believed in doing things differently – putting people, purpose and performance on an equal footing," said Mark Gowdridge, co-founder and director. "As we've grown, we've worked hard to stay grounded in that thinking. Today, our role is not just to design great spaces – it's to help clients navigate complexity, create viable briefs, and deliver sustainable, successful projects in what remains a challenging marketplace."

The practice's tenth year also sees the evolution of the GT3 brand, with a refreshed identity launching later this year.

The practice also continues to invest in its people, with a number of recent promotions, strategic hires, and long-term studio development – including the recent opening of its Belfast studio, led by senior architects Darren Breslin and Damien Graham.

GFW looks ahead with optimism and new hires

Specialist property and business consultancy GFW has entered 2026 with confidence, as activity gathers pace across the North East's residential, development, commercial and rural sectors.

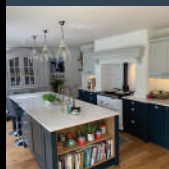
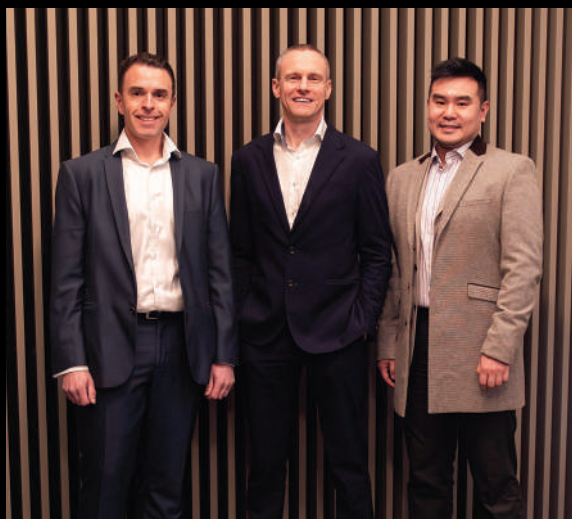
Following a year shaped by economic uncertainty and a delayed Government Budget, the firm says the outlook for the months ahead is far more positive, with clear signs of activity ramping up and clients moving forward with confidence.

As part of its continued investment, GFW has strengthened its senior team with two new appointments to kick off the year.

Alanzon Chan has joined the Planning, Architecture and Development team as Senior Planning Consultant, bringing extensive public sector experience from Cumbria County Council.

Peter Jones has also joined the business as Associate Building Surveyor, enhancing GFW's integrated property offering.

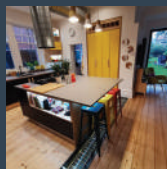
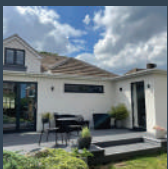
GFW says the appointments reflect its commitment to expertise, client service and demand.



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Georgia builds her future in construction

Ambitious 18-year-old Georgia Clayton, from Throckley, has taken the next step in her construction career, with a two-year joinery apprenticeship at leading North East contractor, True North Construction.

Based in Newcastle, True North Construction is a building contractor delivering bespoke residential developments, high-end refurbishments and sustainable new-build schemes, including certified Passivhaus homes.

The company also works across a range of commercial sectors such as hospitality, healthcare, education and workplace fit-outs and is known for its focus on quality, craftsmanship and sustainability. It has just marked a standout year of rapid expansion in the North East, in which turnover rose by 60% and its workforce more than doubled.

Georgia is working towards a Level 2 qualification in carpentry and joinery, combining four days a week at True North Construction working on-site, with one day of theory-based learning at Newcastle College.

Georgia first developed an interest in construction through her grandfather, a general builder, who she often helped with home improvement projects. After leaving Walbottle Academy in June 2023, she enrolled on a multi-trade course with Optimum Skills, one of the region's leading training and apprenticeship providers, where she learned the fundamentals of joinery, bricklaying and roofing before choosing to specialise in property maintenance.

Following the course, Georgia spent eight months working in domestic housing, gaining practical experience in fire door installation, plumbing, decorating and joinery. The role confirmed her passion for carpentry and inspired her to pursue a more technical path in joinery.



Laura Roberts and Georgia Clayton

After months of searching for the right opportunity, Georgia spotted a True North Construction van locally, sent in her CV and joined the company soon after.

Georgia is being mentored by project manager, Laura Roberts and supported on the job by site managers, Jamie Mordue and Chris Gowland, as she builds her skills and experience across the company's residential and commercial projects.

Georgia, said: "I've been working on dormers, roofing, ridges and trusses and I've learnt so much already. This is me now for life – there's no other job for me. True North has been excellent, everyone is really helpful and I get along with the whole team. Laura is a brilliant mentor and I feel confident under her guidance and the site managers. It's great to be part of a company that supports its apprentices and encourages us to blend old-school skills with modern techniques."

Laura Roberts, said: "Georgia has settled in brilliantly and has shown real enthusiasm and commitment from day one. She's eager to learn and takes pride in everything she does, which are great qualities to have in this industry. It's been fantastic to see her confidence grow already and we're all looking forward to supporting her as she continues to develop her skills. Apprenticeships are so important for bringing fresh talent into construction and helping young people build long-term, rewarding careers."

Founded in 2019, True North Construction continues to invest in its people and apprenticeship programme as part of its long-term commitment to developing local talent and supporting skills growth across the North East.

truenorthconstruction.co.uk

Premcor secures planning for major Rossington employment site



L-R: Rob Lane and Simon Hawkins

Premcor Estates, has secured planning permission for its 43-acre Mode 18 development at Rossington, near Doncaster, marking a major milestone for the long-planned regeneration of the site and clearing the way for new infrastructure works to begin.

Located around three miles south of Doncaster, adjacent to the M18 motorway and close to the iPort Logistics Park, the site benefits from strong road and rail connections to the national logistics network. Planning approval concludes a lengthy programme of site assembly and negotiations led by Premcor over several years.

Alongside securing consent, Premcor has completed the acquisition of land previously occupied by long-established industrial operator Tanks & Vessels Industries Ltd, enabling the comprehensive redevelopment of the site to move forward.

The hybrid planning application includes detailed consent for a 17.5 acre, EV-ready logistics yard which has been pre-let, plus an outline consent for a further 25-acre development site offering up to 450,000 sq ft of industrial, warehousing and logistics space.

New link road construction underway

Enabling works are now under way, including the construction of a new link road providing direct access from the main highway network into the site. The new route will offer dedicated access for HGVs and industrial traffic, helping to reduce commercial vehicle movements through nearby residential areas and improving access to the wider Bankwood Lane Estate.

C4 Projects, acting as architect and project manager on behalf of



Premcor, has instructed Howard Civil Engineering to deliver the first phase of works. Practical completion of Phase 1, which includes the new access road and the pre-let logistics yard, is expected in August 2026. The access road and Phase 1 works represent an investment of £27.5m.

Years in the making

Simon Hawkins, director of Premcor and based at the Aycliffe Business Park, said: "This was one of the first sites we were involved in after establishing Premcor, so it is hugely significant for us. We have invested a great deal of time and resource in getting to this stage, acquiring the site off market and working through a complex process of site assembly and planning.

"Achieving planning approval and starting on site represents a major step forward for Mode 18. With consent now secured, we can move directly into delivery and begin building the infrastructure that underpins the entire scheme."

Premcor director Rob Lane, who formerly worked with Hawkins before establishing Premcor, added: "Rossington is superbly located at the heart of the UK's transport network, so we are delighted to be able to unlock the potential of Mode 18. The scheme is named for its position on the M18 and A1(M), close to a range of transport modes including the iPort Rail Freight Terminal and Doncaster Sheffield Airport.

"This has been one of the most complex projects we have undertaken. With permission now granted, we can progress the pre-let site and prepare the wider industrial area for the market."

Premcor is a private development company based in London and the North East. It was founded in 2018 by Simon Hawkins and Rob Lane, who together have delivered nearly £2bn of property development across the UK.

premcors.com



New properties in demand as Banks Homes opens show homes at new Yarm development



Housebuilder Banks Homes has welcomed dozens of visitors to the new show homes at its first residential site in the Tees Valley over their opening weekend.

The County Durham-headquartered developer is building up to 109 high quality family homes at its new Cornfields site, which sits off Green Lane the southern edge of Yarm.

Banks is expecting the first Cornfields properties to be ready for buyers to move into very soon, with six of the new homes already reserved.

And it is now planning a special open house weekend event on Saturday 28th February and Sunday 1st March at which several of the three, four and five-bedroom homes at The Cornfields will be available to view for the first time.

The Cornfields is the first Banks Homes development to feature show homes based on designs from the company's bespoke range of new homes, with the five-bedroom Sheraton and four-bedroom Hawthorne properties now open for viewing five days a week.

A total of 11 different property designs featuring between three and five bedrooms will be available at The Cornfields, with all the properties being fitted with smart heating



systems, air source heat pumps and electric vehicle car charging points.

The four and five-bedroom homes come with ground floor underfloor heating as standard, along with selected house types with 2.6m high ceilings to ground floor.

Aisling Ramshaw, sales and marketing director 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.

"Seeing the reaction of our guests at The Cornfields over our opening weekend gives us great confidence that we're delivering levels of quality and desirability that match our ambitions.

"The Cornfields is just a short distance from the centre 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 we're now building."

Part of the County Durham-headquartered Banks Group, Banks Homes is building a growing portfolio of high-quality residential sites across North East England and Yorkshire, with development also under way at sites in West Rainton and Hambleton in North Yorkshire.

The company has also recently announced plans for three new North East developments, at Redmarshall near Stockton, High Shincliffe near Durham City and Sedgefield, which will include more than 200 new family homes in total.

Russ Hall, managing director at Banks Homes, adds: "Banks Homes is bringing together striking design, future-proof sustainability and desirable locations to create a new blueprint for contemporary living.

"Our exceptional team achieved a huge amount last year and it's been brilliant to see growing numbers of house buyers happily moving into their new Banks homes.

"We've got a lot more to come through 2026, both within and outside the North East, and can't wait to start building on the momentum we've created."

New homes are now available at The Cornfields from £328,950, with the two show homes open for viewing from 10am to 5pm every day from Thursday through to Monday.

For further information on development, please call 0191 378 6205 or visit www.bankshomes.co.uk/developments/the-cornfields

To reserve a place at the open house weekend event at The Cornfields, please visit www.eventbrite.co.uk/o/banks-homes-88312499263



Rosebirsch takes on the PepsiCo Challenge!

A North East Fit Out Solution company recently took on the ultimate PepsiCo Challenge and has smashed it out of the park with their results!

Approached by Vue Cinemas to find them a solution to change in soft drink provider, Rosebirsch based in High Spenneth is proud to have completed 89 jobs across the UK and Europe in a record time of just 12 weeks.

Moving concession supplier to PepsiCo International meant that the customer retail areas for the leading retail park-based cinema chain needed upgrading and redesigning.

Known for their work with cinema groups Rosebirsch were the obvious trusted pair of hands. Managing director Stephen Flynn, said: "We love a challenge at Rosebirsch so when Vue approached us with the high expectation job of changing their concessions stands, shops, bars and entry portals we jumped at the chance and said where is the purchase order number!?"

"We mobilised expert teams of machinists, fitters, and decorators, all coordinated by our project management team, across the UK and to Germany, The Netherlands, Italy and Denmark - this wasn't an easy job as sometimes we had up to seven instal teams on different sites across any one time, with multiple delivery vehicles leaving our High Spenneth factory daily.

"It really has been a whole company, every team approach, from design, manufacturing, logistics, purchasing, installation and finance,

and we have turned out some impressive statistics!"

Since its inception, Rosebirsch has built its reputation on being professional and the delivery of exceptional fit-out solutions to our clients throughout the UK and Europe. Utilising modern-day materials combined with the traditional craft skills of a directly employed workforce working from the High Spenneth based manufacturing facility and on site, Rosebirsch worked across Vue International brands including Space Cinema and Cinemaxx.

Stephen concluded:

"At Rosebirsch we love creating usable spaces that work for the company as well as for the public or consumer. We work all over the world and have a fabulous team, reliable sub-contractors and solid reviews. Not bad for a family-run company based in Tyne and Wear!"

If you have any shop fitting needs in the food and beverage, education, leisure or retail space then visit our website at www.rosebirsch.co.uk

How to unlock the potential of your business's property



If you occupy commercial premises and want to reduce property costs, improve efficiencies, and align your real estate with your business and ESG goals – read on.

Commercial property consultancy Naylors Gavin Black, based in Newcastle and operating across the UK, combines deep regional knowledge with national market expertise to deliver practical, results-driven property advice.

If you occupy a commercial building - be it office, manufacturing, warehouse, or retail - Naylors can work with you to ensure your property supports your business objectives.

From refurbishments, fit-outs and property extensions to proactive lease management and strategic property moves and disposals, Naylors can help you make informed decisions to increase value, manage risk, and drive long-term savings.

Acting solely in your interests, Naylors manage the entire process, from property search and market analysis through to negotiation and completion.

Case study

What Law firm, Aberdeen Considine, came to Naylors towards the end of its Newcastle office's eight-year lease to consider its options – to stay, or to move offices.

How Naylors established their requirements. Identified offices that met the criteria. Compared all available offices to their existing space. Requested and reviewed lease terms for three shortlisted options. Conducted a comparative analysis of commercial terms, location, and workplace appeal and suitability. Supported Aberdeen Considine to select the optimal relocation choice and led negotiations to secure favourable lease terms.

Result Aberdeen Considine signed a new, 10-year lease for a 5,080 sq. ft. office at West One with a 5-year break clause. The deal is based on a fully-fitted, refurbished suite.

Paul Jennings, Partner at Aberdeen Considine, said: "Our business has grown rapidly and we were keen to secure spacious, modern and well-sited new premises to match this growth. Jess Ross at Naylors understood straight away what we were looking for. She worked tirelessly with us on the brief and impressed with her perseverance and attention to detail and client care"

Talk to Naylors today to find out how they can reduce your occupational costs, strengthen your ESG performance and create a property strategy that works for your business - now and in the future.

For an informal, no obligation, chat contact:

Keith Stewart - KeithStewart@naylorsgavinblack.co.uk - 07796302147

Chris Donabie - ChrisDonabie@naylorsgavinblack.co.uk - 07702528879

Letting agents need to value what they do

The private rented sector is changing at pace. New regulations, tighter enforcement, rising costs and increasing expectations are placing unprecedented pressure on letting agents – often at the same time as fees are being driven down.

At Wright Residential, we see this shift every day. The role of the modern letting agent has evolved far beyond arranging viewings and collecting rent, yet outdated perceptions persist. As the job has changed, so too must the way professional property management is valued.

Today's letting agents operate in a highly regulated environment. They are responsible for keeping landlords compliant with constantly changing legislation, ensuring properties meet safety and licensing standards, liaising with local authorities, managing tenant expectations, and resolving issues before they escalate. This work requires experience, technical knowledge and sound judgement – and carries real financial and legal risk if handled incorrectly.

A fair and transparent fee structure is not simply about profitability; it is about protection. When fees accurately reflect the work involved, agents can invest in staff training, access professional legal support, maintain high service standards and manage properties proactively. This ultimately protects landlords from costly mistakes, penalties and disputes.

Put into real terms, the cost of professional management is modest. On an average monthly rent of £1,000, a 15% management fee equates to

Letting Agents Need to Value What They Do

- ✓ Expert Property Management
- ✓ Legal & Compliance Support
- ✓ Peace of Mind for Landlords

wright residential

£150 per month – less than £5 per day. In return, landlords gain peace of mind, compliance support and day-to-day oversight of their investment.

From May 2026, compliance requirements will tighten further, with Rent Repayment Orders of up to 24 months' rent becoming a very real risk for non-compliance. In this landscape, professional management is no longer optional – it is essential.

Valuing professional work does not mean indiscriminate fee increases. It means transparency, clear communication and trust. When agents and landlords work in partnership, everyone benefits.

0191 240 1818

info@wrightresidential.co.uk



Photo caption: Foreground, Matt Keating, project manager, Castle, Neil Bowen, South Tyneside College and Cllr Margeret Meling. Back row: South Tyneside College students with Val Quinnan, work placement officer at South Tyneside College.

Community engagement builds momentum

Community engagement activities linked to the new build South Tyneside College and South Shields Marine School, are gaining in momentum.

A central focus is building relationships with schools, young people and students.

The build project is a partnership between Tyne Coast College and South Tyneside Council, delivered by award-winning construction company Castle. Funding has been provided by Tyne Coast College, the North East Combined Authority as part of North East Mayor Kim McGuinness' drive to revitalise high streets, the Department for Education and the UK Government.

Year Two T Level students studying Building Services Engineering for Construction at South Tyneside College were the first construction students welcomed on site. They received an overview of Castle, toured the site and learned about completed works and upcoming construction activities.

Castle has also engaged with the Ocean Road Centre in South Shields, inviting its youth group to meet the build team and attend a presentation about the new college, which is at an early stage of construction. Through this partnership, Castle connected with South Tyneside community choir Choirmaster, which performed carols on site in the run-up to Christmas.

Engagement with the local business community has also gathered pace. Castle's operations director, Chris Meadowcroft, appeared on the Business Talks podcast hosted by Invest South Tyneside at One Trinity Green, where he shared his career journey, the company's recent growth and the lifecycle of the college relocation project.

The relocation will deliver a new 15,000 sq. metre campus on King Street, South Shields. The scheme also includes the repair and upgrade of a listed building on Barrington Street.

During 2026, site tours will be arranged for community groups, local businesses and key sector organisations. Other initiatives include Castle acting as headline sponsor of the Best of South Tyneside Awards in March 2026.

Craig Muldoon, divisional director at Castle, said: "In partnership with Tyne Coast College and South Tyneside Council, we are committed to engaging closely with the local community. Together, we are exploring ways to support students throughout the lifetime of the project, including work experience.

"Engagement with schools and youth groups

is a priority. At a time when the construction sector faces a skills crisis, we want to show young people the range of exciting career opportunities available. There is no better way than by showcasing this new education facility in the heart of South Shields.

"We have a dedicated stakeholder and community engagement website to ensure local businesses have the opportunity to be involved in this project."

Dr Lindsey Whiterod CBE, Chief Executive of Tyne Coast College, said: "Moving into the heart of South Shields is a major milestone for our college and community. Our new campus will provide world-class facilities in a vibrant town-centre location, raising aspirations and supporting local growth. We're delighted to be working with Castle, whose commitment to community engagement mirrors our shared ambition to change lives."

Cllr Tracey Dixon, leader of South Tyneside Council, added: "This landmark project is about more than bricks and mortar. By supporting young people, local organisations and the South Tyneside Pledge, Castle is helping ensure the benefits of this investment stay in our borough. It's exciting to see the campus taking shape as a cornerstone of our long-term regeneration ambitions."

For further information on the new build and to sign up to receive regular updates, please visit: www.stc.ac.uk/new-build

Progress can also be viewed at the Castle Stakeholder and Community Engagement website.

www.castlecommunity.co.uk

Bernicia Foundation supports Hexham Rowing Duo's Team GB hopes



Emma Nicholson (front) and Esme Pugh (back) training on the River Tyne in Hexham by House of Hues

The Bernicia Foundation is proud to support two of Northumberland's brightest young rowing athletes, Emma Nicholson and Esme Pugh (16), teammates at Hexham Rowing Club. Each has been awarded a £1,000 Inspiration Grant to help them pursue ever higher achievements in rowing.

Emma and Esme began rowing together in 2022 and quickly formed an outstanding partnership, marked by teamwork, mentorship, and a passion for excellence. Both are huge role models within Hexham RC, sharing their knowledge with younger members as they teach "learn to row" sessions in their spare time.

Together, they have competed internationally at the GB vs France match in 2024 and won Silver at the 2025 National Schools Regatta in the coxless four. In July 2025, representing Great Britain in the women's quadruple sculls at the GB vs France J16 match, they helped secure Team GB's overall victory.

The cost of competing at the top

Pursuing these opportunities at an elite level not only comes at a cost of time and commitment, but is also expensive, which led to both Emma and Esme applying for the

Bernicia Foundation Inspiration Grants last this year.

"Receiving the grant has meant I'm able to attend more events around the country and represent GB internationally. Some of the funding also goes towards training, which is essential. I'm very thankful, as without this support, I wouldn't be able to compete for GB or spend as much time rowing," said Emma.

Esme echoed this, adding: "The grant has helped cover race entries, travel, and accommodation costs for many events, which I'm very grateful for."

Future hopes and international ambitions

Emma and Esme share similar goals, aiming to continue progressing through the GB pathway and secure international medals.

Most recently, Emma has competed in Turkey for the Beach Sprints Rowing World Championships and is making progress

through the British Rowing Diploma in Sporting Excellence and ongoing GB trials. Esme, meanwhile, has also started the GB trial process and looks ahead to further international competition and university rowing.

Their resolve and achievements embody Hexham Rowing Club's commitment to excellence. Hexham RC coach Julia commented: "We're incredibly proud of Emma and Esme. Their commitment, work ethic, and sportsmanship embody what our club strives for. Both girls have achieved so much in a short time and are outstanding role models, supporting and inspiring the next generation of Hexham rowers."

The Bernicia Foundation's support makes a huge difference, helping remove barriers that can hold back even the most talented young athletes."

With further success on the horizon, Emma and Esme are determined to demonstrate that ambition and hard work, together with community support, can help young athletes from smaller clubs realise big dreams.

The Bernicia team is looking forward to an exciting year ahead in 2026, continuing to champion local talent and celebrate more inspiring success stories like Emma and Esme's.

Watch this space at [berniciafoundation.com](https://www.berniciafoundation.com)



Neil Turner



Why is planning so complex?

By Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield.

As we move into the new year having had time to recharge my batteries over Christmas, I looked at the list of exciting projects in the practice, ranging from schools and medical centres to churches, offices and factories.

The one thing they all seem to have in common – is the need to gain permission through the planning system. There are many risks and challenges on a project, but planning seems to be getting trickier and more complex, not simpler. We keep hearing that central government wants to simply speed up the planning process and encourage more development and investment for the health of the economy, but this is not yet happening.

Over the years the planning process has become elongated, more demanding and very expensive. The initial 'risk' investment in money and stress has grown for clients.

I can't help feeling (and wish) for a more responsive process that feels less obstructive

and confrontational. I don't mean that the local authority planning officers are confrontational – far from it – but the process and extensive need for reports has created a long, hard and difficult system to navigate.

The whole planning process can feel like walking through treacle. Certainly, the role and skills of planning consultants have expanded as we wade through the endless list of deliverables and specialist reports required for applications.

However surely the answer is not less scrutiny, but a simpler, refined system, not weighed down by BNG, ecology, transport, visual assessments, light studies, drainage studies, sustainability, flood risk reports...I could keep going.

We should look to place 'need', justification and design at its centre rather than a bureaucratic process of endless technical reports. Now I would say that – I hear you cry – but it does feel that the actual client need for buildings – whether a factory, a house or a school – is secondary to the roost of a bat or a tree count.

Design needs to be central to the quality argument. For example, if I were applying to build St Paul's Cathedral today, would I get permission? Probably not – suggesting a large stone Baroque building, with a dome, largely Italian in inspiration, not at all built in the English style and set amongst two-storey timber houses!

Closer to home would I get permission to build Dobson's majestic Victorian Newcastle railway station today in the centre of the town, dominant in its position?

Of course, we want buildings to fit into their surrounding and use local vernacular

materials but also, we want contrast and new ideas, which represent modern society. All these help create the richness of this country's architecture and the variation in our architectural heritage.

Planning needs policing, so that the right building developments occur and to the right standard of design. I would advocate that architects should be submitting all applications, as other major European countries insist. This would help increase the chance of design being given due consideration in the process.

In the meantime, we will work to the best of our abilities to achieve permissions, working alongside planning consultants and overworked planning officers, to get quality buildings passed and ready for construction. The overall economy would be greatly helped by advocating simplicity in the planning system to shorten the timelines and risks.

Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield can be contacted on 0191 384 9470 or email n.turner@hlpuk.com www.howarthlitchfield.com

The Northern Commercial Property Outlook for 2026: Cautious, confidence or quiet opportunity?



As the commercial property market moves into 2026, sentiment across the North East is best described as measured but quietly optimistic.

Following a period of adjustment driven by interest rates, inflationary pressures and changing occupier behaviour, the market is beginning to find its rhythm again.

We sat down with the Newcastle-based commercial team at youngsRPS – Paul Fairlamb, Senior Associate Director and Commercial Chartered Surveyor, Stephanie Dixon, Associate, Commercial Chartered Surveyor, and Chris Pattison, Commercial Surveyor – to gain their insights on what the year ahead may hold.

Paul Fairlamb, Senior Associate Director and Commercial Chartered Surveyor, describes the current mood as quietly positive. “We are seeing a return to sensible decision-making. Pricing has adjusted to reflect current lending conditions and operational costs, which means transactions are progressing with fewer false starts. Confidence is not exuberant, but it is well grounded, particularly where assets are well located and income profiles are strong.”

This sense of realism is proving beneficial across several sectors. Industrial and trade-focused property continues to perform

strongly, driven largely by regional occupiers. Chris Pattison, Commercial Surveyor, notes sustained demand for small to mid-sized units. “Local businesses remain active, particularly those linked to construction, logistics and specialist manufacturing. Vacancy levels are relatively low, and that depth of local demand is a key strength of the North East market.”

Town centre property is also evolving. Rather than a return to traditional retail models, interest is focused on mixed-use schemes that support service-based occupiers, leisure uses and flexible commercial space. Fairlamb explains that adaptability is now central to investment decisions. “Investors are looking closely at how buildings can respond to change. Assets that support a range of uses, or can be reconfigured over time, are far more attractive than those reliant on a single occupier type.”

The office sector, while increasingly selective, continues to attract demand where quality is clearly demonstrated. Stephanie Dixon, Associate and Commercial Chartered Surveyor, notes a strong focus on specification and functionality. “Occupiers are being far more deliberate in their decision-making. They want space that genuinely supports their business, whether that is through location, layout efficiency or the overall working environment. Offices that are well-presented, benefit from good natural light and offer modern, usable accommodation continue to let well.”

This shift, she explains, is prompting a more proactive response from landlords. “There is a growing understanding that investment in buildings is essential. Improvements that enhance usability, reduce operational friction and allow occupiers to move in with minimal disruption are key to maintaining rental tone and attracting interest.”

From an investment perspective, activity is beginning to increase as interest rate expectations stabilise. Pattison notes that regional and private investors are particularly active. “There is strong appetite for assets offering steady, long-term income. The North East continues to represent good value when compared with other UK regions, especially for investors taking a longer-term view.”

Looking ahead, the youngsRPS team agrees that flexibility and informed advice will be critical in 2026. Dixon emphasises early engagement. “Whether you are a landlord reviewing an asset or an occupier considering your next move, understanding the market and planning ahead can make a significant difference.”

As the market settles into this next phase, the outlook for Northern commercial property is one of cautious confidence. While challenges remain, 2026 may well prove to be a year of quiet opportunity for those ready to act with clarity and purpose.

www.youngsrps.com



Rydal Mount



Rydal Mount exterior



Bamburgh Castle interior



Bamburgh Castle exterior



The Cluny Works

Narro Associates looks forward to continued growth in 2026

By Dominic Echlin, Director, Narro Newcastle

It's now been six months since we settled into our new home at The Cluny Works, and the move has already proven to be an important milestone in the development of our Newcastle office.

Looking back, the decision to relocate was very much about creating room to grow, not just in numbers, but in the kind of work we can deliver and the relationships we can build. We can also welcome clients and partners into an environment that truly reflects how we work at Narro.

Since our move, we have seen increased enquiries and contact with existing colleagues and clients, all leading to some exciting project opportunities. As we approach the fourth anniversary of opening the Newcastle office in March, I find myself reflecting on how far we've come. When we first opened our doors in 2022, our goal was to bring Narro's long-established strengths in conservation engineering, sustainability, and thoughtful design to the North East. Four years on, those priorities remain firmly at the centre of our work, but the scale and ambition of the projects we're now delivering has grown significantly.

Our focus on conservation continues to deepen, with several new surveys, repair schemes, and adaptive reuse projects now progressing across the region. Working with historic buildings is always a privilege, and being based in an area as rich in heritage as the North East means there is no shortage of opportunities to contribute to the preservation of the region's architectural legacy. The experience we've gained from projects such as the former Alnwick railway station and Bamburgh Castle's Walled Garden has positioned us well to support clients looking to sensitively breathe new life into important structures.

Alongside this, our structural engineering work in the domestic residential sector continues to grow, with recently completed projects including the new-build Tynemouth House and the refurbishment and extension of Rydal

Mount, further demonstrating our ability to deliver thoughtful, robust design solutions across a range of building types.

Alongside our conservation work, sustainability has become an increasingly prominent driver – not only for our clients, but also for us. It's something our team feel very passionate about, and the demand for lowcarbon design, responsible material use, and longterm performance is clearer than ever. Our team has been investing heavily in developing deeper expertise in sustainable engineering strategies, and I'm particularly encouraged by the growing number of schemes where we're able to adopt Passivhouse principles. Whether we're working on retrofits, residential developments, or community buildings, the appetite for rigorous energy efficiency and fabric-first design continues to grow.

The larger space at The Cluny Works has also strengthened our ability to collaborate closely with architectural practices, developers, and fellow consultants. Being embedded in the creative environment of Ouseburn has brought a new energy to the team, and we've found ourselves working alongside some fantastic partners on projects that champion both innovation and environmental responsibility.

As we look ahead to 2026, I'm incredibly proud of what the team has achieved, and even more excited about what's to come. The North East has embraced us from day one, and our aim remains the same: to deliver excellent engineering solutions that are thoughtful, sustainable, and deeply respectful of the buildings and landscapes we work with. We are looking forward to the next chapter for Narro in Newcastle.

www.narroassociates.com

Building communities and transforming spaces across the region

As 2026 gets into full swing, Esh Construction is driving forward major projects that will shape communities and enhance local infrastructure.



L-R: Amy Robinson, construction project manager at Karbon Homes; Mark Binns, operations director at Esh Construction; and Jill Jones, head of sales, lettings and customer care at Karbon Living

Photo Credit: Karbon Homes

From delivering the first homes at Seaham Garden Village to modernising education facilities at Greenfield Academy and advancing the redevelopment of Eston Precinct, these milestones signal a strong start to the year.

Show homes open as residents move in

Esh Construction has handed over the first homes at Seaham Garden Village marking a significant step forward in bringing affordable housing to the new garden village.

The first completions have paved the way for Karbon Homes to open the doors to the development's new show homes, showcasing two three-bedroom house types to members of the public that are interested in making Seaham Garden Village their future home.

The homes are the first of 750 that Esh and Karbon are delivering on 78-hectare site through the next 10 years, with more than 200 now under construction across three phases. 60 more homes are due to complete over the next 12 months as part of Karbon's first phase of development.

Phases two and three will see 84 and 57 homes built respectively, including both family homes and apartments.

The affordable homes will utilise one of the UK's first large-scale mine water heat projects,

an initiative led by Durham County Council and the Mining Remediation Authority and being delivered by Vital Energi.

Modernising facilities in Newton Aycliffe

In Newton Aycliffe, Esh has been appointed to deliver a £4 million refurbishment programme at Greenfield Academy, complementing the ongoing new build project already underway.

The refurbishment works form part of a phased approach to modernising the school estate and will run alongside the construction of the new £14 million three-storey education hub, which Esh began in June 2025.

Working in partnership with Durham County Council and the Advance Learning Partnership Multi Academy Trust, the combined projects will provide state-of-the-art facilities for students and staff, supporting the school's ambition to create an inspiring learning environment for future generations.

The refurbishment contract will run in several phases to minimise disruption to school operations, with the initial phase focusing on the music and drama classrooms, followed by works to the main hall, reception, dining and kitchen areas in later phases. Work will include full roof replacement with new insulation and weatherproof membranes, upgraded ceilings and floor finishes, full decoration and

the installation of new partitions to create additional teaching spaces.

Vibrant future for Eston Precinct

The major redevelopment of Eston Precinct has taken a step forward with the next phase of work commencing.

Esh is working in partnership with Redcar & Cleveland Borough Council to transform the retail facility and enhance the overall appearance of Eston as a vibrant and welcoming destination.

Demolition of the existing precinct is complete, paving the way for seven new retail units and an outdoor leisure space. The new precinct will provide 14,600 square feet of high-quality retail space for residents and visitors.

The initial phase of the project saw 18 retail units and six flats located above the units safely brought down, harnessing remote demolition technology. Asbestos was also removed – including notifiable materials – to ensure the safety of the site. The foundations are scheduled for removal as the new construction phase advances. In total, the demolition phase processed 4,454 tonnes of type 1 and 230 tonnes of recycled 6F2 materials into a recycled product.

To find out more about Esh Construction, visit www.eshgroup.co.uk

Children learn to Live Simply

From creating a pond filled with frogs, newts and snails to growing their own fruit and vegetables, children and staff from St Gregory's Catholic Primary School in South Shields have gone above and beyond to achieve the CAFOD Live Simply Award.

The CAFOD Live Simply Award recognises outstanding commitment to sustainability, social justice, and care for creation. The initiative was led by headteacher Emma Shaughnessy and RE lead Lucie Campbell, with invaluable support from Dave Vasey, the school caretaker and volunteer gardener.

St Gregory's head boy Freddie, 10, who is in Year 6, said: "Live Simply has taught us that small actions make a big difference. Growing vegetables, learning about Fair Trade, and caring for wildlife has shown us how we can help the planet and people everywhere."

Year 2 pupil Matilda, seven, said: "I like planting flowers for the bees and watching the frogs in the pond. It makes me happy because we are helping God's world."

Miss Shaughnessy said: "We are honoured to receive the Live Simply



Award – an affirmation of our dedication to caring for creation and living out our faith in action."

For more information about St Gregory's and to apply for September, visit www.st-gregorys.co.uk



Every pupil is celebrated and valued in Jarrow school

Children at a primary school in Jarrow feel "safe, deeply loved, valued and celebrated for their uniqueness", according to a report by the Catholic Schools Inspectorate.

St Bede's Catholic Primary School was inspected by the CSI on behalf of the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle and rated 'Good'.

CSI lead inspector Barbara Reilly-O'Donnell said in her report: "Pupils know that their uniqueness is celebrated and they recognise that they are valued. They are therefore confident and extremely proud members of the community."

"Leaders prioritise the wellbeing of pupils and their families, as well as staff. Consequently, pupils know they are safe and deeply loved, and staff feel very well cared for and supported. Parents are highly appreciative of the high level of commitment shown by leaders to support them as their child's first educator."

The pupils at the school, which is part of Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, are "proud" to be members of their school's community with one pupil remarking: 'It feels special to be part of this school.'

Headteacher Mark Hurst said: "St. Bede's is a loving and supportive Catholic community. The report highlights the wonderful work that happens every day to ensure that each child feels valued and loved."

www.stbedesjarrow.co.uk

Grand opening of Little Shells Nursery marks bright new chapter for Hebburn school

St James' Catholic Primary School held a grand opening of Little Shells Nursery @ St James, including specially branded cupcakes, brightly coloured balloons and an extra special visit from the CEO of Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust.

Brendan Tapping, who was awarded an OBE in the King's New Year Honours list, was thrilled to join the nursery children and staff for their special first day back of term.

"It is always a pleasure to visit our schools, but the excitement and joy at Little Shells Nursery @ St James was fantastic to see," said Mr Tapping.

"The new nursery is the result of the passion, dedication and care of an amazing team, who truly believe in giving children the best possible start to their education journey."

The new Early Years provision was named Little Shells by the pupils following a competition. 'Little Shells' was picked as a symbol associated with the school's patron saint, St James, and his travels to Spain. The lightbulb moment was provided by Year 3 pupils Lewis and Eleanor and Charlie and Eva from Year 4.

Headteacher Francesca Heslop said: "Little Shells Nursery @ St James has been created with children at the heart of everything we do. We are incredibly proud to open a nursery that feels joyful and inspiring, and we look forward to working closely with families as we support every child to grow, explore and thrive."



St James' Catholic Primary School recently announced its outstanding SATs results – 16% above the national average in maths, 15% above the national average in reading, and 8% above the national average overall.

For more information about available places, visit www.stjameshebburn.co.uk

Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust has 31 schools across South Tyneside, Sunderland and East Durham. www.bccet.org.uk

Empowering students' voices in a fast-changing world

By Geoffrey Stanford,
Headmaster, RGS Newcastle

As a school, we aim to help students understand the world around them while supporting them emotionally and equipping them to think critically and compassionately.

Students today face a world where the news is instant, immersive and often overwhelming. Whether through traditional media, social media platforms or conversations among peers, global events have the potential to form a constant backdrop to their daily lives.

At Royal Grammar School (RGS) Newcastle we seek to create an environment where students can approach current affairs with confidence, balance, and an open mind, knowing that they are supported every step of the way.

Student Support

When major global events unfold, we understand that students may have family ties to affected regions, personal experiences that heighten concern, or simply a natural emotional response to unsettling news. In these moments, our pastoral teams play a vital role in supporting students. At RGS, whether in the Junior School, Senior School or Sixth Form, students always have someone to turn to. Our teachers, Form Supervisors, Academic Tutors, Heads of Year, pastoral leads and counselling team are all on hand, ensuring that every student can speak to a trusted adult whenever they need support.

Critical Thinking

Central to engaging young people with current affairs is guiding them in how to think, rather than telling them what to think. Across subjects such as Geography, History, Politics and Economics, students are encouraged to examine global issues, compare differing viewpoints and consider the wider context. This fosters thoughtful analysis over quick assumptions and equips our young people with the intellectual tools to approach complex events with maturity.



Geoffrey Stanford

Debate and Discussion

At RGS, we believe strongly in dialogue. Assemblies, form-time discussions, academic lessons and our extensive co-curricular programme provide opportunities for students to explore current events in structured, respectful settings. Debating clubs and student discussion groups allow pupils to test ideas, challenge one another and learn the value of actively listening. These skills are vital in an increasingly polarised world.

Media Literacy

Today's students are growing up in a media landscape that is dense, fast-moving and often unreliable. For this reason, media literacy is woven across the RGS curriculum. Students learn to evaluate sources, identify bias, question headlines and spot misinformation. They discover the importance of verification and the dangers of reacting to incomplete or emotive information. These habits of mind are crucial not only for academic success but for responsible citizenship.

Ethical Awareness

Understanding current affairs also means engaging with the moral questions they raise. Through student-led initiatives such as RGS

Diversity, we encourage pupils to consider social justice, cultural understanding and global responsibility. Events including RGS Culture Festival celebrate the richness of different perspectives and reinforce the value of inclusion and the importance of belief in each other that is at the heart of our school ethos.

Student Voice

Young people care deeply about the world. Platforms such as the RGS Student Council and other pupil-led groups ensure that their voices are heard and valued. Students learn how to express opinions constructively, negotiate differences and contribute to positive change both within our inclusive school community and beyond.

Supporting students in discussions about current affairs is not merely an educational exercise. It is integral to students' wellbeing and personal development. By nurturing critical thought, emotional resilience, ethical awareness and a strong sense of their voice, we help our students to grow into well-rounded individuals who are ready to make a positive impact on the world they will inherit.


www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk


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Mowden celebrates outstanding ISI report

Mowden Hall School has been praised for its meaningful and active learning, enthusiastic pupils and its significantly strong boarding provision, in the latest inspection carried out by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI).

The report confirms full compliance across all standards and awards the school a “significant strength” for its boarding provision; the highest commendation available under the current ISI framework. The inspectors highlighted “the supportive atmosphere in which pupils grow personally, achieve well and feel secure”, and praised the school’s leadership, noting that “leaders and governors set a purposeful direction for the school, shaped by its values and ethos.”

Teachers were recognised for creating a learning environment where pupils thrive, with the report noting that staff foster “positive attitudes to learning,” encourage intellectual curiosity, and support pupils in becoming confident, independent learners. Inspectors also commented on pupils’ excellent behaviour and their ability to collaborate effectively, showing maturity, kindness and respect for others.

Boarding was identified as an area of significant strength. The report praises the “welcoming, settled atmosphere pupils enjoy,” the structured training and induction of staff, and the strong pastoral systems in place. Pupils benefit from a vibrant boarding culture where “warm camaraderie” is evident and older boarders actively support younger pupils socially and academically, strengthening the communal ethos of the school.

A “significant strength” is awarded only where

there is clear evidence of exceptional, sustained impact on pupils’ development and wellbeing. Such recognition is rare, going beyond what would be seen in other schools, and is subject to rigorous quality assurance by ISI. Currently, only around 10% of inspected schools receive such recognition, making this an exceptional achievement.

Commenting on the report, Head Phil Sturt said: “We are immensely proud of the outcome of our latest ISI inspection. It is a celebration of our pupils, whose enthusiasm and character shine through every day, and of our dedicated staff, whose commitment ensures that Mowden remains a warm, nurturing and aspirational community.”

“To see our boarding, academic and cocurricular provision recognised so positively reflects the deep professionalism, care and teamwork that underpins everything we do. This report acknowledges the collective effort of the entire Mowden family.”

In addition to its recognition for boarding, the report confirmed that Mowden Hall meets all the standards and requirements across its educational quality, safeguarding, welfare, leadership, governance and pastoral provision. Inspectors emphasised the school’s success in helping pupils develop the skills, confidence and resilience they need to thrive both now and in the future.

Mowden to continue Epic partnership

Mowden is delighted to announce the continuation of its successful partnership with Epic Camps, bringing their much-loved holiday camps back to Mowden Hall School throughout 2026.

Epic Camps are OFSTED-registered school holiday camps for children aged 4–13 (Reception+), and are widely recognised as one of the most trusted holiday clubs in the area. With a strong focus on enjoyment, well being, and confidence-building, Epic Camps provide the ideal balance of structured activities and free play.

Phil Sturt, Head of Mowden Hall School, said: “We are delighted to welcome Epic Camps back to Mowden Hall this year. They create a fun, welcoming space where children can play, learn, and enjoy their holidays, and it is always wonderful to see the smiles and confidence that grow over the week.

“We are especially pleased that, thanks to Epic Camps, Mowden is able to offer action-packed fun and childcare, from 8.30am - 5.30pm every day, for every school holiday between now and September.”

Epic Camps will be hosted at Mowden Hall during February Half Term, the Easter Holidays, May Half Term and for 8 weeks throughout the Summer Holidays.





MOWDEN HALL SCHOOL
AGES 2-13

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Celebrating the Lost Vision of Marshall Forster Atkinson

Neville Atkinson — known to many as Nev Luxury from the band Punishment Luxury — is embarking on a deeply personal project to honour the life and legacy of his late father, Marshall Forster Atkinson, an extraordinary yet largely unsung North East artist whose work captured the soul of the region across the mid-20th century.

Marshall Atkinson (1913–c.1990) grew up in the poverty-stricken streets of Gateshead before developing a remarkable artistic talent. Encouraged from a young age by his mother, who famously turned their attic into an art studio, Marshall went on to produce an extensive body of work depicting the industrial and social landscapes of the North East from the late 1940s through to the 1960s.

Despite his clear ability and a portfolio that saw him exhibit in prestigious venues such as the Royal Glasgow Institute, Liverpool, the Redfern Gallery, and even the Paris Salon, Atkinson refused commercialisation. Driven by a passionate, people-centred ideology, he saw his art as belonging to the community rather than the marketplace. He worked in local factories and bakeries by day, painting by night — often producing powerful nocturnes of shipyards, back lanes, industrial skylines and candid snapshots of everyday life.

Most of Marshall Atkinson's paintings remain in family hands, but others are known to be in private collections across the region. Neville is now calling on anyone who owns or recognises his father's work to come forward.

If you own a painting by Marshall Forster Atkinson, or believe you may have one, please send a photograph and any known details to: requests@radioNorthumberland.com



UK and Ireland tour announced for Live Aid Musical

Producers Jamie Wilson Productions (The Devil Wears Prada, Mrs Doubtfire) are thrilled to announce that Just For One Day - The Live Aid Musical, in association with Curve, will head out on a major UK and Ireland tour, visiting Sunderland Empire from Tuesday 8 – Saturday 12 June 2027.

Bob Geldof said: "Just For One Day brilliantly reimagines why Live Aid worked then and why the humanity of that day still matters now. I'm delighted that more of the UK and Ireland will finally get to see this extraordinary and compelling musical. The reaction the show gets continually surprises and amazes me, standing ovations and people come back time and again, introducing the Live Aid story to new generations."

The show includes hit songs by Bob Dylan, David Bowie, The Who, U2, Queen, Madonna, The Police, Elton John, Paul McCartney, Diana Ross and more of the iconic artists who made history at simultaneous charitable concerts in London and Philadelphia.

Live Aid was an unprecedented global music event that brought 1.5 billion people together, and they all have a story to tell about 'the day rock 'n' roll changed the world'.



Woman In Mind

First look production photos have been released of Sheridan Smith and Romesh Ranganathan in Alan Ayckbourn's psychological comedy WOMAN IN MIND, which visits Sunderland Empire from Wednesday 4 – Saturday 7 March 2026 as just one of two UK venues with limited runs out of the West End.

Sheridan Smith plays Susan, alongside Romesh Ranganathan as Bill, who makes his West End stage debut in the role. Completing the cast are Louise Brealey as Muriel, Tim McMullan as Gerald, Sule Rimi as Andy, Chris Jenks as Tony, Safia Oakley-Green as Lucy, Taylor Uttley as Rick, Katie Buchholz and Michael Woolfitt.

Directed by Michael Longhurst, this spellbinding revival explores one woman's fractured reality with heart and humour. When Susan sustains a bump to the head, her world splits in two—one mundane, one imagined—and the lines begin to blur. Ayckbourn's groundbreaking play is a gripping exploration of identity, family, and mental escape.

Tickets available online now at [ATGTickets.com/Sunderland](https://www.atgtickets.com/Sunderland)



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An artists life

By Mary Ann Rogers.

Shortly after Christmas, the temperature dropped and dropped. Bitterly cold nights followed by sparkling, frozen days.

Finally, the pool in the river, which usually swirls and moves, developed a 'lid' of ice, creating a new playground for those of us who regularly immerse ourselves in the chilly water.

Out with the axe and the joy of making a space to play in the river which has taken on a whole new personality. One day, I caught a glimpse of something moving quickly on the ice platform on the other side of the river, an otter maybe? No!!! A chocolate brown mink, with a pink nose, showing as much interest in us as we were in him.

This can be a tricky time of year. Short days, not much light and since the fox ate all our chickens and ducks, not so many obvious models around for paintings. Fortunately, the remaining five guinea fowl are always on the move around the studio, simply begging to be painted!

Although most of the cattle round here are indoors for the winter, not all of them are, and I've been inspired to paint some beautiful ginger ones with white faces lately.

Our daily walks down to the river have been a bit disappointing in the otter department this past year, but at last, we are now spotting an otter! Today's otter was oblivious as we sat on the opposite riverbank watching it searching for food along the side of the river. He repeatedly dived down, thrashed about a bit, then resurfaced and repeated the performance a little further along. We watched for about ten minutes before quietly getting up and continuing our dusk walk. The idea to paint one would be hard to execute as I'd need to get very close in order to closely observe, draw and photograph this elusive wild mammal. Maybe one day.

In the meantime, the soft, gentle cattle are providing plenty of inspiration!

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Mark Fenwick is co-owner of one of the United Kingdom's most finely tuned, and finely targeted business offerings – Brinkburn.

Brinkburn is a place.

A tiny, historic hamlet in the centre of Northumberland. A 50-acre wooded ravine, by the River Coquet. A quiet cluster of buildings – most of which Mark and his wife, Emma own or look after.

Brinkburn is also a business. More accurately – Brinkburn is four businesses.

1. Brinkburn is a unique stage for Limited Edition, Specialist Weddings

Brinkburn stage just 20 weddings each year, for 30 to 52 people (80 in the evening). A Brinkburn Wedding is created and delivered uniquely for each couple – no two weddings are ever the same - with exclusive use of the Brinkburn private estate.

2. Brinkburn is a Wellness Venue

Brinkburn partners with the world's best Wellness Event and Retreat Facilitators. So they can step up to, or elevate further, the staging of their world class Wellness Events and Retreats.

3. Brinkburn is a Business Wellness Venue

Brinkburn stages unique Business Wellness Events and Retreats, for the world's most progressive and thoughtful business leaders, their teams and their businesses.

4. Brinkburn is Holiday Cottages

Brinkburn helps visitors spend time doing what matters most, with those who matter most. Tucked away in one of their five cottages.



Brinkburn Gothic Manor House is one of three locations you can marry at Brinkburn Managed by English Heritage

Mad Mark?

"I'd better explain myself," begins Mark.

"It is true that I started my biggest business – Brinkburn Weddings – knowing nothing about how the category worked. With my wife. That took over our home.

"It's also true that having mastered our Brinkburn Wedding business over 15 years – we then completely reinvented it.

"It's true also that the Business Wellness market we entered in 2025 – as Brinkburn Wellness - is so new there are no rules to follow.

"And it's true that our move into the Wellness market, working with some of the world's best wellness event and retreat facilitators is something embedded so deeply in our soul that we don't charge or make the money we should.

"How's that for a business school graduate?"

Yet somehow, Mark and the Brinkburn team are busier than ever as we enter 2026.

Over six pages, this is the story of how it all happened – and what happens next.

Mad Mark?

Almost two decades ago, good business advice offered to Mark included, avoid starting a business in a category where you have no experience. Think carefully before going into business with your life partner. Avoid turning your home into your business. Mark did all three.

More recently, a fresh trio of advice has been offered. Once you find a winning formula, stick to it. Avoid emerging categories as there are no rules to follow. And avoid heart-led work, because sentimentalism can erode profitability. Ah. Here we go again...



Mark Fenwick

Brinkburn – The journey to here

“Brinkburn is my home, if not my birthplace. I’m proud the Fenwicks have a place in reiver history.

“I left the North East to study. First Exeter. Then London. The next 20 years was spent building a business, then employed and raising a family.

“In 2006, working life shifted and Emma observed, “You’re happier in Northumberland. Let’s move there and do a project.” The project turned out to be a pile of stones with nearly expired planning permission.

We sold our London house intending to live mortgage-free. If only we’d seen Grand Designs.

“Our mortgage got bigger. The house was unaffordable and I was made redundant. Emma saw nearby Brinkburn Priory as an opportunity to deliver weddings. Low-hanging fruit. So we did.

“We rented basic rural accommodation off-site, got a wedding licence, and got our first booking. One became ten became twenty became thirty, and our team grew. We built long-term relationships with caterers, the parish, English Heritage, and helped install community fibre facilitating card payments.

“Brexit came and went. In 2016, for me, cancer came.

By 2017 it went too. Surgery. Then months of recovery. Emma was exhausted. The team changed. And, eventually, balance returned. Until Storm Arwen. And, of course, Covid. Wow! By 2022 weddings surged again. But differently.

Weddings were smaller. More personal. Cookie cutter didn’t cut it. Planning became slower. Deeper. More patient and crafted. And we’ve reacted.

We reinvented Brinkburn Weddings. From scratch. And now – Unhurried Means Unmatched.”

“

500 weddings, for 5,000 humans, over 15 years. We had a winning formula. Yet in 2025, we redesigned everything. From scratch.

How Brinkburn feels today

“I’m living in a world I would not encourage others to enter lightly.” Admits Mark.

“We’re doing risky new things with our brands. My wife and I still work together. Our business is still our home. We’ve reinvented what a Brinkburn Wedding is. 500 weddings, for 5,000 humans, over 15 years. We had a winning formula. Yet in 2025 we redesigned everything. From scratch.

“And our adventure into the Wellness space – whilst uplifting – is unfamiliar. At 62, this should be the moment to simplify – to protect what already works. But I have always been more interested in the possible than the probable. Which means it is time, once again, to ignore the advice.”

The Change We Made – Weddings

“Tom, our chef, is Michelin Star trained. And we now deliver weddings more slowly. Crafted, personal wedding experiences as an antidote to the treadmill approach of so many.

As I mentioned to a wonderful couple recently – one thing you’re guaranteed not to see at your Brinkburn Wedding – is another Brinkburn Wedding. Extra time, means extra space, means extra wonderful.

The Change We Made – Business Wellness

“Plasterboard rooms. Suspended ceilings. Fluorescent lighting. Post it notes. Whiteboards. OK, I understand that.

“Then again, when I see a Brinkburn Strategic Leadership Residential in our underfloor heated barn, days booked by wild swimming in the morning and sound baths and forest firepits in the evening – my understanding evaporates.

I know the change we’re making. I’ve seen it. And I know the risks. But in uncertain times, not taking a risk – is far too risky for me.”





*The world famous Brinkburn Priory
is a little under 900 years old*

“

**In uncertain times,
not taking a risk is
far too risky for me.**



Business Wellness at Brinkburn

Brinkburn stages the world's most important Business and Wellness Events and Retreats, for the world's most thoughtful business leaders.

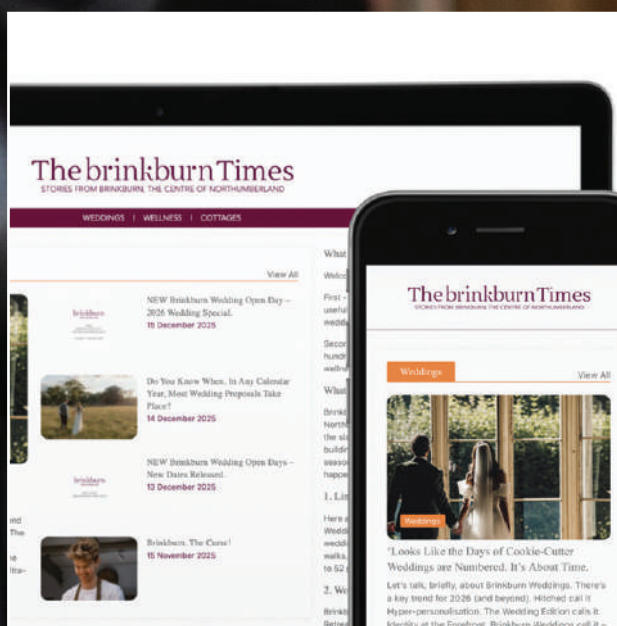
Top Left: Hide and Seek on the agenda? Business events as (un)usual at Brinkburn.

Top Right: Tom's Michelin Star quality food.

Middle Left: Mark Fenwick takes the lead with Brinkburn's new Business Wellness chapter.

Bottom Left: Indoor/outdoor meeting spaces.

Bottom Right: The Brinkburn Times is wonderful (www.thebrinkburntimes.co.uk)



“

THIS is how Business Leadership should be investing in Wellness of their people and their business.

“Brinkburn’s Business Wellness chapter is new. But it’s powerful. And it’s magnetic.” Explains Mark.

“We’re spreading the word and some amazing conversations are taking place. Hannah Beecham MBE, Red January Founder came to stay. We’re exploring something special.

“I’ve been podcasting with Steve Underwood, Bonded MD, and podcasting alongside Grayson Perry and Ruby Wax with Gareth Dauncey, Founder of the Mood App.

“Dr. Rona MacKenzie has booked to stay. Rona has amazing plans for the global leadership space. Carmen Rendell, Soulwalking Therapist, Therapeutic Coach and Founder of Soulhub, with Andrew Cuerden, have an event at Brinkburn.

“And more locally were talking with Claire Byers (Ad Gefrin), Paul Lancaster (Platform) and Simon Laing (Northern Latitude).

Why Brinkburn Wellness?

“Formulaic approaches don’t make your people feel special. It’s a first-hurdle fall when they’re corralled into yet another unsurprising chain hotel.

“Your people are special. Your business is special. How you invest in their Wellness, and your collective futures, should be special too.

“The clinking stainless steel of another buffet breakfast, I think, is not right. A morning forest walk, returning to a freshly cooked breakfast using ingredients you’ve just see all around you – is a better way to start these important days.”

The Brinkburn Times is a Gift – to You.

“Visit www.thebrinkburntimes.co.uk to read hundreds of current, informative and creative ways to build wellness into your personal life, business life - or both. Dozens of new articles appear – weekly. Sources include our own writers and guest writers, as well as curated articles from Forbes, Vogue, The American Psychological Association and McKinsey.

More at www.brinkburnnorthumberland.com





Dabbawal brings its much-loved Dabba Sunday Roast to Newcastle City Centre

Following its hugely popular launch in Jesmond, Dabbawal is bringing The Dabba Sunday Roast to its city-centre home on High Bridge, offering Newcastle a new way to spend Sundays in the heart of the city.

The Dabba Sunday Roast will now be served at Dabbawal High Bridge, just a two-minute walk from Monument Metro. The concept reimagines the traditional British Sunday roast through the lens of Indian cooking - combining comfort, spice, and craftsmanship in a relaxed, charming setting.

The move to the city centre places the experience perfectly for Sunday shoppers, families, and visitors exploring Newcastle, offering a welcoming spot for long lunches after a day in town. Located on one of the city's most iconic streets, Dabbawal High Bridge provides a vibrant setting for a new Sunday ritual.

Speaking about the launch, the team at Dabbawal said: "After the huge success of The Dabba Sunday Roast in Jesmond, we felt the city centre deserved something new. Roast dinners are a real institution in the UK, and Indian food is right up there as one of Newcastle's most loved cuisines — bringing the two together on High Bridge felt like the best of both worlds."

The Dabba Sunday Roast will be served every Sunday from 12pm–4.30pm, starting 1st February 2026, at Dabbawal High Bridge. Bookings are now open.



ZEN is 20! Durham's first Thai Asian restaurant celebrates 20th anniversary

Zen, Durham's favourite Thai Asian restaurant are celebrating their 20th anniversary this year.

They were the first Thai restaurant to open in Durham, (and indeed the North East) two decades ago and have become a beloved fixture in the city's culinary scene for its authentic Thai and pan-Asian cuisine, relaxed ambiance, and commitment to hospitality.

"We couldn't have imagined reaching this milestone without the support of our local community and loyal customers," said Zak & Sam, owners of Zen.

"Over two decades, our team, many of whom have been here more than 14 year, have brought warmth and Thai authenticity to every dish we serve. Heres to another 20 years!"

Head chef Mr P'Art has worked at Zen for many years developing the tastes and flavours of the orient for our not-so-trained western tongues!

Pan, Ting, Boon & Tom run the show, each with their own culinary tricks and are dedicated to keeping things fresh with their homespun secret recipes.

Throughout the year there will be celebrations to mark the amazing milestone.

Keep an eye out on their socials or visit: www.zendurham.co.uk



Gisborough Hall announces Bamford as Brand Partner for Sakura Spa

Gisborough Hall is delighted to announce Bamford as a brand partner for its new woodland-inspired wellness retreat, Sakura Spa, opening in spring 2026.

Rooted in nature, Bamford's treatments are designed to restore and nurture balance. The renowned luxury wellbeing brand's treatments will form an integral part of the spa's carefully curated treatment offering, enhancing rituals that are both results-driven and deeply restorative.

Founded on principles of mindful living, sustainability, nature, and holistic wellbeing, Bamford's philosophy aligns naturally with the ethos behind Sakura Spa, where simplicity, authenticity, and connection to the natural world are at the heart of every guest experience.

Set within Gisborough Hall's secluded woodland gardens in North Yorkshire, Sakura Spa has been designed as a restorative retreat inspired by the rhythms of nature. The woodland retreat will feature a six tranquil treatment rooms, relaxation lounges, an extensive thermal garden featuring a vitality pool, saunas, steam room, garden relaxation rooms, and a dining space exclusive to spa guests.

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Places to go : Cambridge in Winter



Between two busy days in London, I had a free day to explore from my base in Letchworth.

I often stay there or in Stevenage which are both convenient for the East Coast Main Line. Where to go? I took the local Great Northern train bound for Cambridge, ready for a day of discovery. It's a fair step into the City, so I took the Stagecoach bus to the central bus station at Drummer Street. I had decided on a day of discovery of the University museums, all but one free, peppered with glances through the cloisters of various colleges and finishing with Evensong at King's.

First stop: the Cambridge University Museum of Zoology. Walking through its hallowed halls, I was greeted by the silent majesty of towering skeletons and intricate dioramas. The specimens, preserved with meticulous care, told stories of evolution, adaptation, and wonder. From the enormous polar bear to the delicate flutter of butterfly wings, each exhibit sparked a sense of awe that only a museum of this calibre can inspire.

Next, I wandered over to the Whipple Museum of the History of Science, where curiosity met craftsmanship. Ancient astrolabes, intricately designed telescopes, and early scientific instruments transported me to a time when the cosmos was a puzzle waiting to be solved. The quiet atmosphere was a perfect contrast to the bustling streets outside, allowing a leisurely exploration of humanity's quest for knowledge. Globes on the top floor were a delight.

A short stroll brought me to the Fitzwilliam Museum, a treasure trove of art and antiquities. Marble sculptures, Renaissance paintings, and gleaming silverware dazzled the senses. I lingered before works by masters long gone, imagining the hands that created them and the worlds they once knew. The Fitzwilliam's grandeur is matched only by its welcoming sense of curiosity—it invites you to linger, to learn, to dream. Good café too for a late lunch.

My cultural journey continued with the Polar Museum, a stark and fascinating reminder of human endurance in the world's most extreme climates. Arctic expeditions, frost-bitten relics, and tales of survival left me both chilled and inspired. The bravery of explorers past seemed almost tangible as I moved from one display to the next.

I had a choice of Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, or the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, both closing at 5pm, and chose the Sedgwick where the deep past unfolded beneath my feet. Fossils of prehistoric creatures, shimmering minerals, and geological maps offered glimpses into Earth's immense history. Walking among these relics, I felt a profound connection to the vast timeline of life on our planet.

I had managed to visit five of the seven University museums in the time available. You might prefer to visit the Museum of Classical Archaeology, with its casts of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. The Botanic

Garden is open daily but has an admission charge of £8.

By late afternoon, it was time for something truly magical: Evensong at King's College Chapel. The soaring Gothic architecture and ethereal choral harmonies created an experience that transcended the ordinary. Exiting via the famous Backs, I paused to watch the gentle undulations of the River Cam, and the young people punting along it, even in December. A short walk brought me to Queens' College, where I caught the Whippet bus back to the station for my return train.

Cambridge had revealed itself as a city of intellect, history, and beauty in a single day. Five museums and one transcendent Evensong had made the visit a perfect tapestry of learning and wonder, mostly in the warm and for free on a bracing winter's day.

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HOTELS



Where in the world will 2026 take you?

By Graham Townsley

February has arrived and, if you're anything like me, you're idly wondering where January disappeared to. It feels like the dust from the Christmas tree is barely gone, and already we're gearing up for another dynamic year.

As 2026 unfolds, I'll be joining you in these pages every other month: sharing inspiration, insights from inside the travel industry, practical tips, and the latest trends shaping our holidays and how we book them.

Along the way, I hope you'll enjoy not just the destinations but the journey – getting to know me and, more importantly, what truly matters to today's discerning traveller. Fair warning: I'll be championing the real value of a real travel expert by your side, as I'm seeing a shift away from faceless digital bookings back toward genuine, human connection – a topic I'll explore today.

Curious about my background? You can always revisit my June conversation in Northern Insight magazine for some personal insights into my world.

Booking trends in 2026: Why personal is powerful

January is famously the busiest month for holiday bookings, as TV screens fill with tempting travel adverts and familiar voices invite us to escape. But as the world feels ever more frenetic and the boundary between reality and online blur, trust becomes increasingly precious. Recent headlines have highlighted the risks of large-scale online travel booking: as many as 3 in 10 customers affected by scams or lacking protection. It's no wonder more travellers are seeking reassurance, one conversation at a time, turning to real experts to guide—and safeguard—their dreams.





What should a holiday really be?

Is it:

- Endless scrolling through sites and conflicting reviews?
- Settling for a one-size-fits-all package, with no room for personal touches?
- Hours spent on hold or speaking only to chatbots when questions arise?
- Disrupted schedules and the stress of navigating airports alone?

Or should it be:

- Sharing an idea or a dream—and having it truly heard
- Receiving bespoke options that reflect not just convenience, but aspiration
- Gliding through airports with seamless connections, even allowing time to shop or simply relax
- Watching your children's faces light up as they experience golden sands and new friendships
- Creating memories—for you and your loved ones—that last a lifetime
- Stepping into a world wonder and feeling the awe for yourself
- Coming home with not just souvenirs, but stories to tell
- Knowing, at every stage, a trusted expert is just a message away

The trends that are defining 2026

Memories are the new luxury. I'm already crafting Lapland adventures for families planning Christmas 2026, and there's no waning appetite for Greece, Turkey, or sun-soaked Spain. But families with older children and teens, especially, are branching out. While pools and beaches still reign, there's a clear desire for richer experiences—day trips, cultural immersion, and journeys further afield. Sometimes, a fortnight in Thailand with jungle encounters (and elephants!) costs less than a Mediterranean classic.

Cruising is surging in popularity among younger travellers—my “tapas of travel,” offering a delicious sample of new countries daily. Families have never had more choice, and with on-board thrills from waterslides to go-karting, there's simply no room for “I'm bored.”

Handcrafted itineraries remain my real passion. My clients and I have collaborated on over 300 unique journeys—each one personal, adaptable, and designed with care. And don't overlook the rise of luxury rail journeys: think of it as a cruise on rails, gliding through Europe's dramatic landscapes, with everything arranged, including guided tours that transform ‘getting there’ into a joyful part of the experience.

Lastly, sporting events are becoming a cornerstone of travel planning. Formula 1 in the USA (Las Vegas, Austin, Miami), the Masters in golf, and—on the world stage—the 2026 World Cup in the US, Canada, and

Mexico. I love turning these events into milestone holidays, whether it's a bespoke rail journey between venues or an adventurous road trip by RV.

A gentle word of caution: securing official tickets and insider experiences isn't for the faint-hearted, but my network of trusted suppliers means every client enjoys security and peace of mind, without compromise.

Signing Off for February

If you're tempted to repeat last year, I hope I've planted a seed or two of inspiration. 2026 is rich with possibility—and I'm here to help you seize it, every step of the way. If you'd like advice, ideas, or just to explore your options, you know where to find me. Here's to new journeys, new memories, and travel that feels as rewarding as it should.

Reach out at any time for truly personal travel guidance—I'd love to help you make 2026 your best year yet.

www.travelcounsellors.co.uk/graham.townsley



Fifty years of hospitality at Lumley Castle



This year marks a remarkable milestone for Lumley Castle: fifty years as a hotel.

Half a century of welcoming guests through our historic doors, of turning a medieval fortress into a place of celebration, comfort, and unforgettable memories.

When Lumley Castle first opened as a hotel, the vision was simple yet ambitious — to preserve the spirit of this ancient stronghold while breathing new life into its walls. Over the past five decades, that vision has not only endured, but flourished. Generations of guests have stayed beneath our battlements, dined in our grand halls, and slept in rooms steeped in centuries of history. From romantic escapes and family celebrations to corporate gatherings and milestone events, Lumley Castle has become a setting for life's most special moments.

Weddings, in particular, have played a huge part in our story. For fifty years, couples have chosen Lumley Castle as the backdrop to one of the most important days of their lives. From

intimate ceremonies to grand celebrations, the castle has witnessed countless vows exchanged, first dances beneath historic ceilings, and memories created that last a lifetime. Many couples return years later to celebrate anniversaries, bringing their own Lumley love story full circle. It is a privilege to be part of so many beginnings, and a role we hold with great pride.

One of our proudest traditions, and a true cornerstone of the Lumley experience, is our medieval banquets. Still going as strong as ever, these iconic evenings transport guests back in time, complete with feasting, entertainment, and a sense of theatrical fun that has delighted visitors for decades. Few experiences capture the spirit of Lumley Castle quite like the sound of laughter echoing through the Barons Hall as guests raise a goblet and step into history.

Over the last fifty years, Lumley Castle has continued to evolve. Thoughtful restorations, sensitive modernisation, and a commitment to exceptional hospitality have ensured that while the castle remains rooted in its past, it continues to meet the expectations of today's guests.

None of this would have been possible without

the people behind the scenes. This anniversary is as much about them as it is about the building itself. We extend our heartfelt thanks to every member of the Lumley Castle team, past and present — from those who helped shape the early years, to those who continue to uphold our standards today. Their dedication, passion, and pride have been the true foundation of our success.

We also take a moment to remember and honour those colleagues who are sadly no longer with us. Their contributions, friendships, and commitment remain part of Lumley Castle's story, woven into its history just as surely as the stone in its walls.

As we celebrate fifty years as a hotel, we look forward with excitement to the activities and events planned throughout the year, and to welcoming both familiar faces and new guests alike. Lumley Castle has stood for centuries, but these last fifty years have been about people — about love, celebration, and shared experiences.

Here's to the past, the present, and the many years still to come at Lumley Castle.

www.lumleycastle.com



CELEBRATING
50 YEARS OF
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Heart Health & Hormones: Why supporting women's health at work matters

By Cheryl Tanner, Menopause Fitness & Wellness Coach

February is Heart Month, making it the ideal time for workplaces to focus on women's long-term health.

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death in women, with risk increasing after menopause. Hormonal changes can affect cholesterol, blood pressure, blood sugar regulation and how the body responds to stress, all of which directly influence cardiovascular health.

In the workplace, this often shows up as fatigue, poor concentration, disrupted sleep and increased stress. When left unsupported, these challenges can contribute to higher sick leave and reduced performance. The good news? Small, consistent lifestyle habits make a big difference, and workplaces play a powerful role in supporting them.

Heart-Healthy Habits at Work

- Regular movement breaks to reduce sedentary time
- Strength training to protect muscle mass and metabolism
- Balanced nutrition to stabilise blood sugar and energy
- Stress management to support recovery and blood pressure
- These strategies don't just support midlife women, they improve wellbeing across entire teams.

Quick Q&A: Heart Health in Midlife

Why does heart risk increase after menopause?

Lower oestrogen reduces cardiovascular protection, increasing the likelihood of high cholesterol, insulin resistance and raised blood pressure.

One simple action that helps immediately?

Daily movement. Even short walks or standing breaks improve circulation, energy and heart health.

Supporting our community one step at a time

I was truly honoured to be voted a Heart of the Community Award winner. Working with women across North Tyneside, from sea dips to strength training has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my life, helping women feel stronger, healthier and more confident at every stage.

Heart health workplace challenge

This February, I'm inviting organisations to take part in a Heart Health Workplace Challenge — a practical, inclusive initiative designed to support long-term health while boosting morale and engagement.

Scan the QR code to speak to Vivienne and get involved.

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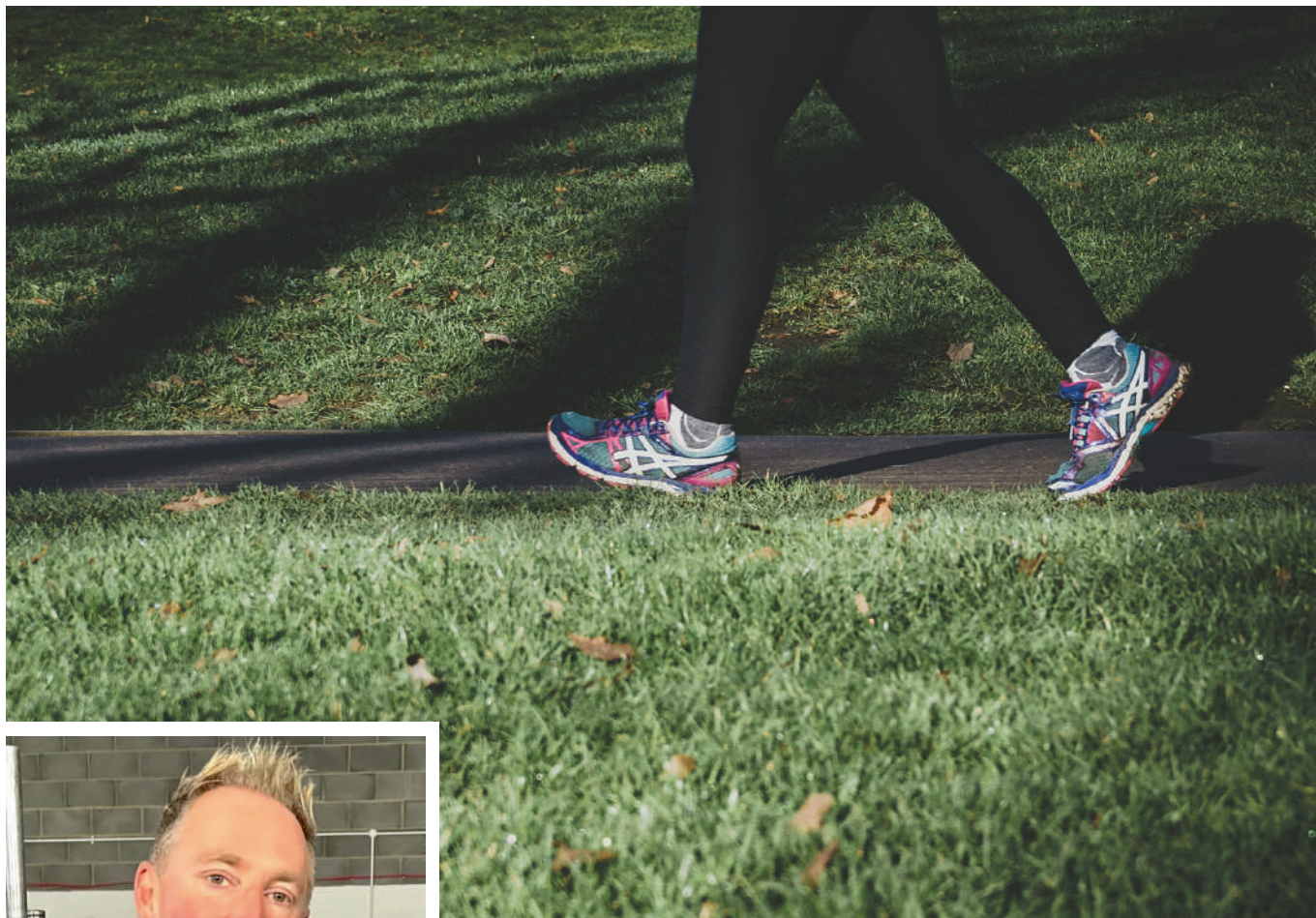
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Making a decision is one thing, but putting it into action is another...



David Fairlamb

It's far too easy to find an excuse or delay starting altogether. That's why mental strength is so important. You need to be able to keep coming back to the thoughts that pushed you to begin in the first place, stay strong, and carry them forward.

We can all stop or give up, that part is easy. What takes real strength is the mindset and willpower to stick with what you started and make those changes now, not later. Mental toughness plays a huge role in everyday life. Making the right choices is one thing; staying disciplined and committed to them is another.

As we move through 2026, many of you will have set sensible new goals and ideas and may already be asking themselves how to stay consistent.

Here are a few tips to help you stay mentally strong and on track:

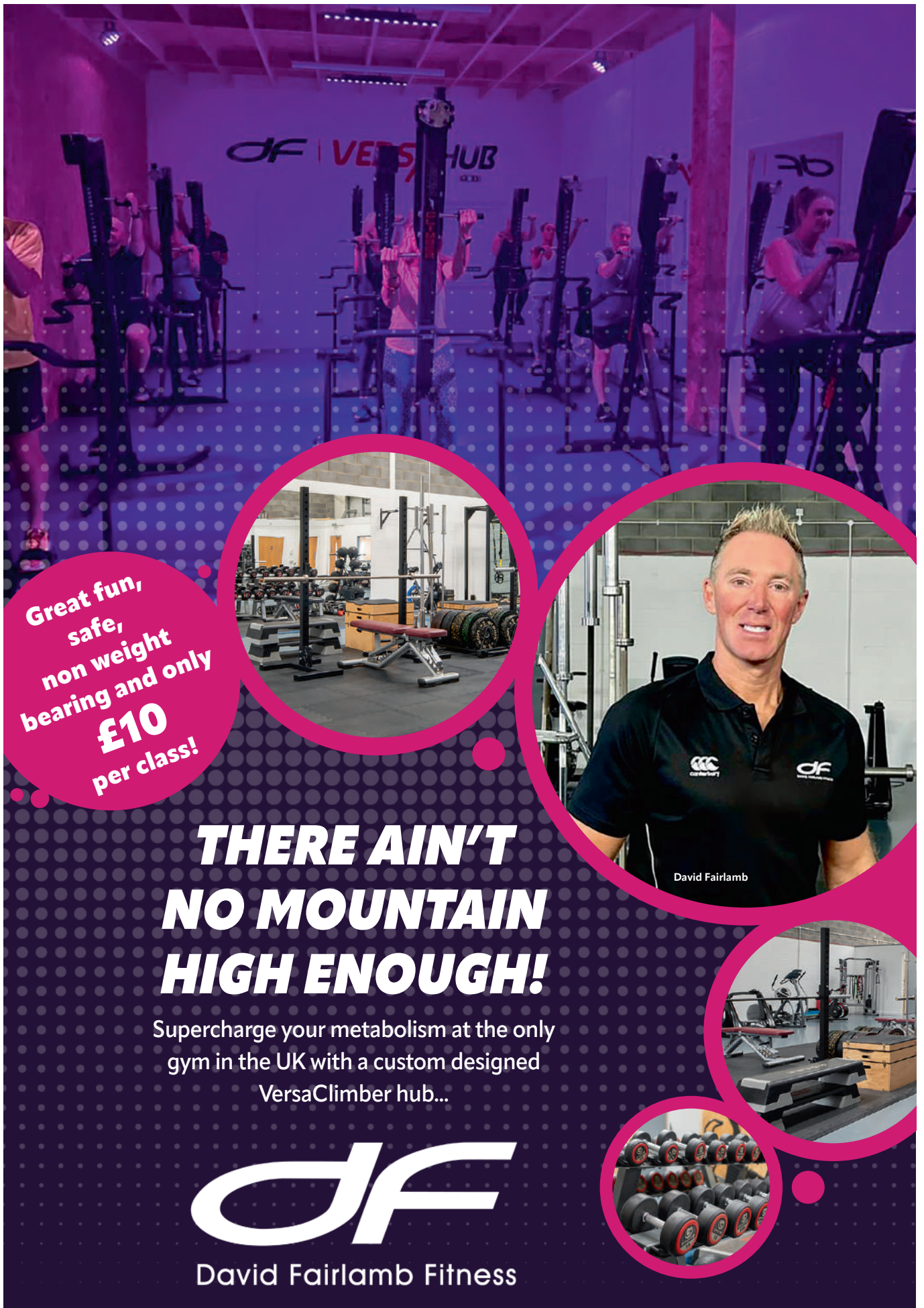
- Be mindful of why you set your goals in the first place, and block out outside influences that may interfere with them.
- Remind yourself daily to stay strong and focused. Be proud of the effort you're making
- Recognise this as a positive choice, not a threat or a negative change.
- Monitor your progress weekly. This keeps you accountable and motivated. If it's a long-term goal, break it down into smaller, manageable steps.
- Many people feel more negative at certain times of the day. When this happens, change your environment or routine, e.g. go for a walk, read, or watch something light-

hearted. Changing associations can quickly redirect your thoughts.

- Surround yourself with positive people whenever possible. Their energy will always give you a mental boost.
- Keep a film or TV programme that inspires you and helps reignite motivation when it dips.
- Stay focused by rewarding yourself, but only when you hit a specific target.
- If you face a setback, use it as fuel. Work harder, dig deeper, and see it as a test you are capable of overcoming.
- Think strong inside and out. Only you can achieve your goal. No one else can do it for you.

David's summing up...

There will be days when your targets feel easy. It's the days when things get tough that your true character and mental toughness shines through. Find your own way of pushing through those moments, there's no better feeling than staying strong and achieving exactly what you set out to do.





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A ballet good time in Budapest

By Stuart Forster

Winter city breaks notoriously divide opinion. Some people hate the thought of sightseeing on chilly days. Others love the idea of exploring without the crowds of summer.

So long as I've got my thick coat and woolly hat, I'm happy looking around European cities in winter. A four-day trip to Budapest appealed primarily because of the prospect of visiting its Christmas markets. Yet compared to those of Austria and Germany, I found much of the food available at Budapest's Christmas markets shockingly expensive. From a stall at Vörösmarty Square, in the heart of the city, a traditional langos bread topped with chicken paprikash cost 9,350 forint (£21.60).

While the Christmas markets, unfortunately, left the impression of being overpriced tourist traps, Budapest was otherwise a great place to explore. The Hungarian capital is famed for its thermal baths – a legacy of 145 years of Ottoman occupation. The largest, and reputedly the grandest, is the Szechenyi Baths. But I decided to head to one of the oldest, the Rudas Baths, whose central dome and steam room is around 450 years old. Its rooftop hot tub, with panoramic views of the River Danube, is a recent addition. Sipping a beer, while soaking there, I enjoyed the cityscape and the self-obsessed antics of pouting influencers creating – and then retaking – videos of themselves 'relaxing'.

From there, it was a short taxi ride to Castle Hill to check out blue hour views of the city from the Fisherman's Bastion – a viewing platform high above the Danube. Reminiscent of a fairytale castle, the seven cone-topped turrets of the Neo-Gothic landmark represent the founding tribes of Hungary. Many of the people snapping photos attempted to include the resplendent façade of the illuminated national parliament building on the far side of the Danube.

Night had well and truly cloaked the city by the time I strolled across the Szechenyi Chain Bridge. When the suspension bridge first opened, in 1849, Buda and Pest were still separate cities.

Sculpted life-size footwear ranges along a stretch of the riverbank between the bridge and the parliament. Shoes on the Danube Bank is a poignant reminder of the murders of approximately 20,000 Jewish people by militia members aligned with the Arrow Cross Party in the winter of 1944-45. The people whose bodies were about to be swept away by the river were ordered to remove their footwear, as shoes could be sold, before being killed.

To warm up, I popped into the elegant Café Gerbeaud, one of a handful of grand coffeehouses in the city. The Central Café and New York Café are among others that attract people because of their history and aesthetics. Far simpler in design, the recently opened Time Out Market proved an upbeat place to sip a rounded wine while enjoying Michelin-starred chef Pesti István's version of goulash – a satisfying dish costing a little over half the price of my Christmas market food.



The Hungarian State Opera is a palatial performing arts venue with hour-long guided tours three times a day. Its seasonal performances of Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* are worth booking well in advance. Experiencing the venue, staging, orchestral performance and clever choreography more than justified the £62 ticket price, and warranted packing a suit so as not to look out of place among the regulars. More accustomed to halftimes than intervals, I headed up the grand staircase for a glass of bubbly impressed by the experience and glad that I hadn't gone to see Ferencváros play football instead.

With its walkability and array of experiences, Budapest proved an engaging destination for a winter city break and has enough that I'd like to return.

Travel information

Find out more about things to do in Hungary's capital city by visiting the budapestinfo.hu website.

Jet2holidays.com offers city breaks to Budapest. *Jet2.com* operates flights from Newcastle to Budapest twice a week until 23 April 2026. The service resumes on 5 November for the 2026-27 winter season.

The Mystery Hotel Budapest (mysteryhotelbudapest.com), is an 82-room hotel with a ground-floor spa. Within walking distance of major attractions, the hotel occupies grand premises built during the 1890s as a Masonic temple.



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