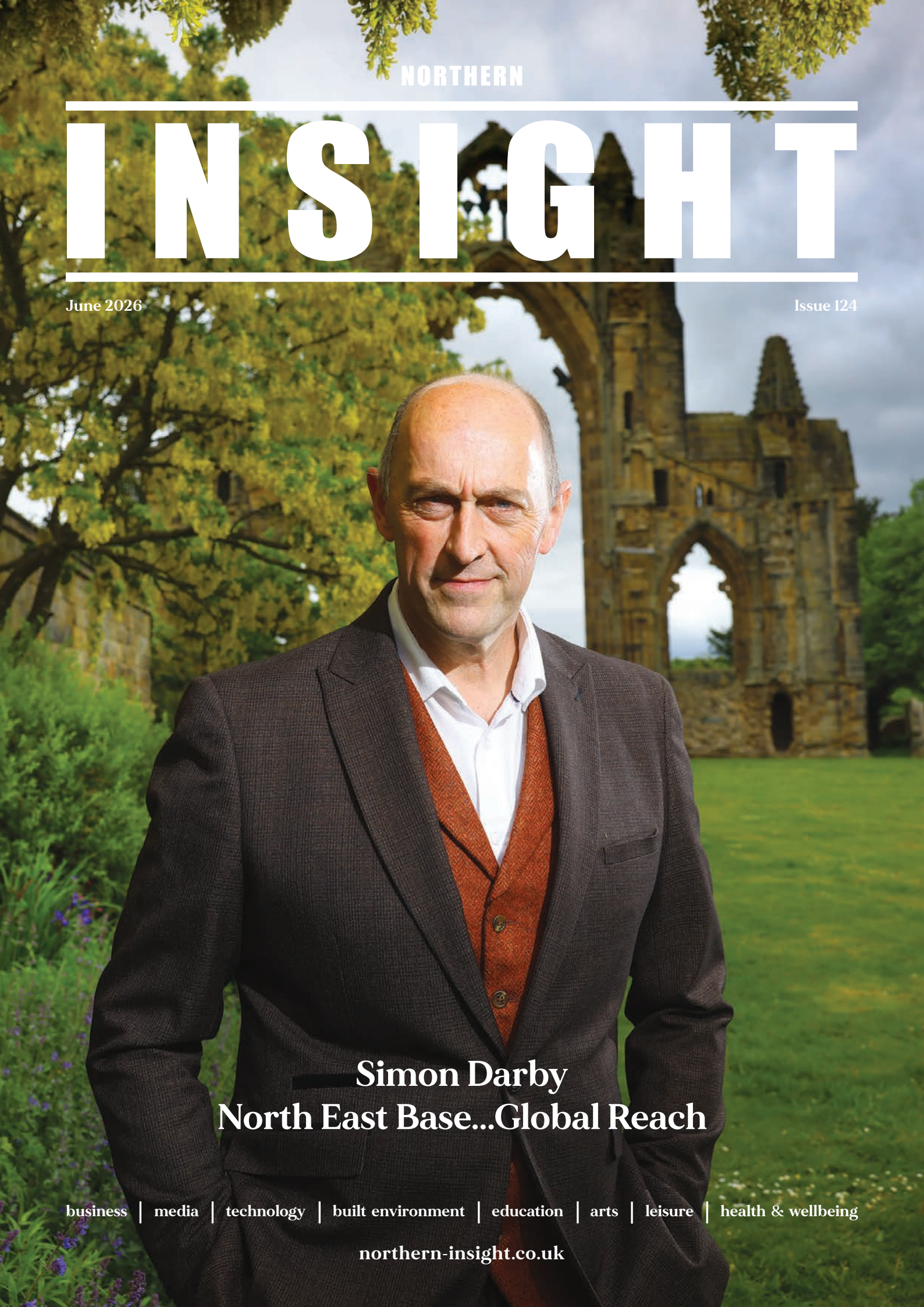


NORTHERN

INSIGHT

June 2026

Issue 124

Simon Darby
North East Base...Global Reach

business | media | technology | built environment | education | arts | leisure | health & wellbeing

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Contents

6/7	**Business News**
8/9	**Cover Story** *SD Legal* *North East Base - Global Reach*
12	**Musings with Mirza** *Ammar Mirza CBE*
16/17	**The Big Interview** *Steven Forrest, Forfusion*
30/32	**Deals News**
36/38	**Legal and Financial News**
78	**Charity & Community News**
80/81	**Charity of the Month** *Poppy's Light Foundation*
126/127	**Media News**
148	**Technology News**
162	**The Built Environment News**
176	**Education News**
184/186	**Arts News**
192	**Leisure News**
210/212	**At Your Leisure** *Scott Wilson-Laing, WL Distillery*
216/218	**Health and Wellbeing News**
234	**Straight Talk with Speker** *Barry Speker OBE*









Foreword

Welcome to the June issue of Northern Insight

Over the last 11 years it has been a privilege to work and connect with our wonderful business community and this issue is undoubtedly one of our best yet.

Across the next 200 plus pages you will find a ton of stunning content, critical analysis, social event coverage and fabulous features.

Our cover star is Simon Darby of SD Legal Services who, from their Guisborough base, are dealing on a national level.

Look out for our showcase of the annual Entrepreneurs Forum Conference, which I was delighted to attend, as well as coverage of the legendary South Northumberland Cricket Dinner.

Congratulations must go to long term contributors Forfusion who are the the recipients of a Kings Awards for Enterprise. Our interview with CEO Steven Forrest brings us up to date with their story so far.

We are also delighted to introduce "At your Leisure," a new platform showcasing North East leisure entrepreneurs. Scott Wilson-Laing of WL Distillery is a brilliant first participant in this.

Thank you as ever to all of our loyal clients, readers and suppliers without whom none of this would be possible.

124 issues and counting.

Till next month...

Michael Grahamslaw, Publisher
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Inspire future talent through school career initiative

Students at Kenton School experienced a valuable insight into the world of work when volunteers from business and the voluntary sector took part in a Speed Career Networking session.

One of the volunteers was Yvonne Probert, CEO of Tell Us North (TUN), who is committed to empowering young people by volunteering as an Enterprise Advisor within the Careers & Enterprise Network across local schools.

In her role, Yvonne works to broaden students' understanding of career opportunities, with a particular focus on encouraging pathways into the voluntary and not-for-profit sector, as well as promoting careers in health and social care. Her work aims to highlight the meaningful impact these sectors could have on individuals, families, and communities.

She also encouraged her team at Tell Us North to get involved. Tell Us North is a community-focused organisation dedicated to giving people a voice, promoting wellbeing, and improving access to services and opportunities across the North of England. The organisation works with residents, businesses, and schools to support social initiatives, encourage community engagement, and develop programmes that made a tangible difference in people's lives.

The Speed Career Networking event was designed for Year 8 students aged 12-13. The initiative provided a valuable opportunity for students to engage directly with professionals from a wide range of industries, helping them gain early insight into potential career paths.

Yvonne was joined by colleagues from Tell Us North at the event as well as author Robert Little (an ex-Kenton student), Highlights PR, the Police, Civil Service and the North East Combined Authority.



ASSAP 45th Anniversary Conference

The Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP) is proud to announce its 45th annual conference, taking place this summer 21st August until the 23rd, at the University of Worcester. This milestone event marks nearly half a century of dedicated scientific investigation into the paranormal, bringing together leading experts, researchers, and enthusiasts from across the country.

Since its inception, ASSAP has remained at the forefront of the objective study of anomalous phenomena. To celebrate its 45th year, the 2026 conference will feature a diverse lineup of speakers covering the full spectrum of the paranormal—from hauntings and ufology to cryptozoology and parapsychology.

"We are thrilled to bring our 45th-anniversary celebration to Worcester," said an ASSAP spokesperson. "This conference is not only a look back at the history of anomalous research but a look forward to the future of scientific investigation. It's a unique opportunity for the public to engage with experts and explore the unexplained in a rigorous, evidence-based environment."

We start off the weekend on the Friday night Ghost Tour: An atmospheric guided tour exploring the local legends and haunted history.

On the Saturday and Sunday, we have a comprehensive program of 18 speakers representing all areas of paranormal research.

The conference is open to both long-time members and members of the public who have a keen interest in the scientific approach to the unknown.

Dalton Park enhances its premium fashion line-up with new Belstaff store

Dalton Park Outlet, the North East's largest outlet shopping destination, is set to welcome leading British fashion brand, Belstaff in June. The announcement cements Dalton Park's position as a premier shopping destination, offering a compelling mix of highly sought-after brands at unbeatable outlet prices.

The store will be a true representation of the brand and feature iconic British heritage products. The opening at Dalton Park is a significant milestone and reflects the ongoing evolution of Dalton Park's retail offering – and the strategic asset management approach of Global Mutual. The brand will complement the already strong fashion offering, maintaining Dalton Park's status as the outlet destination of choice for both shoppers and retailers in the North East.

Nicky Lovell, Head of Outlets and Retail Business Development at Global Mutual commented: "Belstaff is a highly desirable British brand with a loyal following. We are confident the store will thrive at Dalton Park. We are continually working to secure leading fashion brands - ensuring that our retail mix is relevant and drives sustained footfall and spend growth.



The addition of Belstaff is testament to the ongoing appeal of Dalton Park and the hard work and dedication of the team."

With a line-up of over 65 world famous brands that includes Calvin Klein, Castore, Levi's and Tommy Hilfiger, Dalton Park continues to strengthen its position within the UK outlet sector – and is strategically targeting another year of growth in 2026.

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Newcastle College students take centre stage in Newcastle Eagles takeover

Newcastle College students delivered the largest and most comprehensive student-led takeover ever seen at a Newcastle Eagles men's game, supporting the club's Super League Basketball Play-Off Quarter-Final clash with the London Lions at the Vertu Arena.

Students from across the College played a central role in the live event, taking on a wide range of industry-relevant responsibilities in front of a full crowd on one of the biggest nights of the Eagles' season.

From pre-match build-up through to in-game delivery, learners worked across performance, production, hospitality and customer experience, contributing to a professional standard event environment.

Catering students from the College's 'Canteen Club' prepared and delivered nearly 200 signature desserts, served in the Brian Manning Suite as part of the arena's VIP hospitality offering. Earlier in the week, the College's Chef's Academy also hosted the Eagles squad, providing a specially prepared pre-match meal ahead of the fixture.

Students from Digital Arts captured live content and behind-the-scenes footage throughout the evening, while Performing Arts students delivered a half-time routine. Music students took on DJ responsibilities, and learners from Travel and Tourism supported guest services and front-of-house delivery.

The takeover forms part of Newcastle College's long-standing partnership with the Eagles, which continues to create opportunities for students to gain experience in live, professional environments.

Colman family invited to first Royal Garden Party of the season

The North East family behind Colmans' world famous fish and chips has been rubbing shoulders with the Royal Family for the second time in a matter of weeks!

April saw HRH The Princess Royal stop off at Colmans Seafood Temple, in South Shields, to savour a plate of freshly caught cod with chips and mushy peas.

And this month Princess Anne was able to return the favour as brothers Richard and Dominic Colman Ord and their partners attended Buckingham Palace's first garden party of the summer.

King Charles and Prince Edward joined their sister — and other senior royals — at the event recognising and rewarding public service.

And Richard Colman Ord admitted: "As the fifth generation of South Shields Colmans it was a great honour to represent our family at the Palace.

"It was an amazing day and a little bit different to hosting HRH The Princess Royal at our restaurant!

"It was a truly memorable experience to meet King Charles and share a few words on what we do and what our family business means to us.



"As we celebrate our centenary it's moments like this that will live with us forever and we're extremely proud to represent South Shields and South Tyneside on the national stage."

Richard's partner, Alex, and Dominic's partner, Georgia, joined fellow guests in the grounds of the Palace after accepting an invitation from Ms Lucy Winskell, Lord Lieutenant of Tyne & Wear.



VIP Launch

Driven females filled the Porsche Teesside showroom in Stockton for the VIP launch of Her Invest – a new empowering service to encourage women to be more financially savvy and secure.

Christine Tarran, owner of Tarran & Co, was driven to launch Her Invest for women to achieve financial independence at all ages and stages of their lives.

"Her Invest has been created by women for women," explains Christine, who has almost 30 years' of experience as an independent financial adviser (IFA).

"I know what it is like being a professional woman juggling all of life's priorities such as managing a business, running a home, and being responsible for your children.

"Taking the time to properly understand and plan your finances isn't easy, and many women don't know where to start. That's where we come in. We provide bespoke holistic financial advice in a space where women can feel comfortable to talk about the things that are most important to them now and in the future. This is a brand we want to really resonate with women."

The launch event was held at the Porsche Teesside Centre at Preston Farm Industrial Estate on Thursday, 7th May. The event included an intimate In Conversation With… style interview with Christine and Sarah Dale, journalist and director of communications consultancy SASS media; luxury pop-up stalls; and the opportunity for guests to test drive one of five Porsches.

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Cover Story



Simon Darby

SD Legal Services, North East Base – Global Reach

Offering process serving, investigation and enforcement solutions to the debt, legal, property management and local authority sectors.

In 2007, Simon Darby set up SD Legal Services. He'd worked as a police officer and, after always wanting to run his own business, moved into the private enforcement industry and gained extensive experience in all aspects of Bailiff and High Court Enforcement work.

"My experience in policing and enforcement led naturally into legal support services such as process serving, people tracing, investigations, property visits and commercial forfeitures, and I'm proud to say that our reputation now spreads beyond the North East to the rest of the country as well as internationally," said Simon." We've built a strong reputation within the enforcement and legal services sector which sees us work closely with almost every law firm in the region…and word is spreading…with the number one aim being to help businesses, law firms, property companies and public sector organisations manage legal processes efficiently."

Simon rebranded his business in 2017 and has seen growth in terms of cases and revenue every year. He now works on approximately 40 cases per day. The turnover of SD Legal Services has gone from £50,000 to £600,000. A staggering rate of success which this year is running at 30% higher than this time last year.

But there is one surprising element about SD Legal Services.

When you call or email his office, you'll either speak directly to or receive an email from Simon. He is…and always will be…your first and only point of contact. Once you've explained precisely what sort of service you require, Simon will then put wheels into motion.

"Dealing with process serving, investigation and enforcement, is a sensitive topic, invariably highly confidential and often very sensitive to all parties. It can also be time sensitive. That is why clients deal with me and nobody else. Once I have the details of what is required, I contact my network of agents around the region and beyond who can get the job done."

Hundreds of businesses…law firms, local authorities, government-related organisations, housing associations, debt recovery and property management firms… rely on SD Legal Services to serve legal documents quickly and accurately, trace individuals or debtors, carry out property visits and provide pre-litigation reporting. These services are valuable for any business or organisation.

As one of his clients mentions on his website…
"I have used and will continue to use Simon Darby as the go to person in insolvency matters for extremely fast personal service of statutory demands and petitions and other court documents as well as tracing the whereabouts of debtors. He is always available and willing to go the extra mile to help. There are no forms to complete, and a simple email gets the job up and running quickly."

As SD Legal Services approaches its 20th year, the business continues to grow. Most of Simon's work is in the North East region, but he's now increasingly busy in other parts of the UK, especially the London area. He's also working extensively abroad because when it comes to something like people tracing or settling debt, the tentacles can spread far and wide.

Although the line of business in which Simon works is always changing…one thing hasn't changed. Simon is based in Guisborough…he's proud to live in the town which has been his home for 53 years.

If your firm or organisation needs help, the best idea is to email Simon on sdlegalservices@btinternet.com and he will reply quickly to your request, alternatively you can ring him on 07832238441.

As another of his clients said…
"I have trust in SD Legal Services getting the job done and getting the job done right."

Simon generally works approx. 70 hours a week, but when he isn't working, he has a passion for supercars and spending as much time in his happy place, a villa in Tala, Paphos.

You can also visit www.sdlegalltd.co.uk for further details of what Simon Darby can do for you.





Entrepreneurs' Forum Annual Conference Ramside Hall Hotel, Durham

220 founders, business leaders, and entrepreneurs from across the North East gathered in Durham for the Entrepreneurs' Forum Annual Conference.

Opening the day with a live audience poll, 88% of attendees said they felt optimistic about their business's prospects over the next 12 months, reflecting an ambitious community, despite rising costs and wider economic uncertainty.

Hosted by Alfie Joey, the conference brought together experienced entrepreneurs to share honest insight, practical lessons, and personal stories from the realities of building and growing businesses.

Speakers included Justine Roberts CBE, founder of Mumsnet, North East Mayor, Kim McGuinness, Inflo founder Mark Edmondson, Attention Intelligence founder Alexander Bell, entrepreneur and investor Sir Richard Harpin, and Paralympic champion Jonathan Broom-Edwards MBE.

Alongside the talks, the conference focused on what the Entrepreneurs' Forum is built around: entrepreneurs helping entrepreneurs through shared experience, open conversation, and a willingness to support others building businesses across the region.






















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Musings with
Mirza...



Ammar Mirza CBE

I believe the children are our future

By Ammar Mirza CBE

"I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way..."

Whitney Houston did not just sing those words. She gifted the world a reminder. A challenge. A responsibility.

Every time I hear that song, it stops me in my tracks. Because behind the melody sits something incredibly powerful. Hope.

Not fake hope. Not the kind wrapped up in slogans and soundbites. Real hope. The kind that says if we invest properly in children and young people, if we genuinely believe in them, then everything else changes too.

Growing up in the West End of Newcastle, opportunities were not always visible. Support certainly was not structured in the way it is discussed today. Many young people had talent, ideas, personality and potential, but no real roadmap. No one talking about entrepreneurship, innovation, confidence, communication or aspiration. You just tried to figure life out as best you could.

That stayed with me.

Which is why, when I was eventually given the opportunity, I became a school governor and later Chair of Governors, dedicating sixteen years of my life to education and seeing an entire generation grow up in front of me.

Now here is the important bit. I was never a teacher. I was never an education expert. But I was an enterprise one.

I understood business. I understood resilience. I understood communication, confidence, relationships and problem solving. I understood what happens when people are encouraged, empowered and believed in.

And increasingly I realised something worrying. Too many young people were being measured purely by academic outcomes, whilst many of their greatest strengths were being ignored.

Some of the most creative young minds I met did not fit neatly into boxes.
Some struggled with confidence.
Some struggled with behaviour.
Some struggled with traditional learning environments.
But many of them had brilliance inside them.

That is where PIE was born.

Primary Inspiration through Enterprise.

Or as I often joke, giving young people a proper slice of PIE.

Not just a programme. Not just another initiative. A movement.

A chance to help children discover who they are before the world tells them who they are supposed to be.

Over the years PIE has evolved into something incredibly special. We have seen young people develop confidence, communication skills, leadership, teamwork, resilience and aspiration. We have seen children who barely spoke stand on stages presenting ideas. We have seen teachers rediscover creativity. We have seen employers reconnect with purpose.

We have also introduced something genuinely groundbreaking through our partnership with the Institute of Enterprise and Entrepreneurs. For the first time globally, vocational enterprise and entrepreneurship qualifications are now being introduced to primary aged children, creating a formal pathway from 6 to 60 plus.

Think about that for a moment.

A structured journey where children, parents, carers, teachers, employers and employees all become part of the same ecosystem of learning, growth and aspiration.

A true community.
A Life of PIE, if you like.
And here is the reality many people avoid talking about. When we discuss Health, Wealth and Happiness, the most critical factor is often wealth.

Not greed. Not excess. Opportunity.
Because money gives people options.

Without opportunity, health suffers. Stress rises. Confidence drops. Happiness becomes harder to sustain. Communities struggle.

That is why enterprise education matters so much. It is not simply about creating future business owners. It is about helping young people understand their own value, strengths and possibilities. It is about equipping them with life skills, adaptability and belief.

PIE focuses on strengths, not weaknesses.
Potential, not problems.
Possibility, not limitation.
And perhaps most importantly, belonging.

Because every child deserves to feel seen. Heard. Valued. Inspired.

Whitney Houston was right.
The children are our future.
But futures do not build themselves.

They require investment. Encouragement. Community. Leadership and action.

So here is my call to action.

Whether you are a parent, teacher, business owner, policymaker, employer or simply someone who cares about the next generation, get involved. Mentor a young person. Support a school. Open doors. Share experiences. Create opportunities. Believe in potential before it fully reveals itself.

Teach them well. Then let them lead the way.

High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear, Ammar Mirza CBE, is Chair and Founder of ABConnexions & Executive Chair of the AmmarM Group. He also serves as Honorary Colonel of the 101st (Northumbrian) Regiment Royal Artillery and holds a range of roles across the public and private sectors as a leader in inclusive innovation, investment and internationalisation.

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Some of the Lumo team at London Euston



Stirling landmarks turned blue to welcome Lumo

Photos: Greg Macvean

Gateway to the Highlands opens for Lumo

By Ross Lydall

The skirl of bagpipes greeted a VIP crowd of politicians, business leaders and transport executives as the first Lumo train departed from Stirling to London.

Lumo, the Newcastle-based low-cost rail operator, is aiming to replicate its success on the East Coast Main Line with a new service linking central Scotland with the Borders, the North of England and the capital.

There was an unmistakable buzz of excitement on board as customer driver instructor Heather Waugh pulled out of the "gateway to the Highlands" bang on time at 8.50am, with Euston station a six-hour journey away.

"This is the first time I can genuinely say that people in my community are showing real excitement about trains," said Ms Waugh, who has worked on the railways for 21 years.

"It's such a privilege to be involved and I'm really proud to be part of this journey."

The previous night, Stirling's Wallace Monument, a national landmark that towers over the outskirts of the city, had been floodlit in Lumo blue to mark the occasion.

Just as Lumo has attracted visitors and investment to the North East, there are high hopes that it can do likewise along its new West Coast route.

Three stations in central Scotland – Larbert, Greenfaulds and Whifflet – get a direct rail connection to London for the first time.

The trains will also call at Lockerbie and Carlisle, boosting links for communities living either side of Hadrian's Wall.

On board the newly-refurbished six-carriage trains, politicians and business leaders, from Stirling MSP Alyn Smith to Stirling council leader Cllr Susan McGill, spoke about how the new service was not merely a route south - but a way to attract visitors north.

Mr Smith, one of only two politicians to have been an MP, an MSP and an MEP (the other is Winnie Ewing), was also keen to praise the environmental benefits of rail travel.

"What I like about Lumo is that their prices are very competitive with the low-cost airlines," he said. "If we are to be serious about decarbonisation, we need to fly less."

Cllr McGill said: "The sight of the first blue Lumo train in Stirling is an exciting moment."

About 1.5m passenger journeys have been made on Lumo's East Coast trains in the past 12 months, according to the Office of Rail and Road, with the popularity of the "open access" operator growing annually.

Lumo's distinctive blue trains, which call at Morpeth and Newcastle on route to King's Cross, or north to Edinburgh, Falkirk and Glasgow, have developed a growing fan base since their launch in 2021.

The new West Coast route has been about four years in the planning. Lumo, part of First Group and a sister operator to Hull Trains, has helped to attract travellers away from short-haul domestic flights with competitive pricing and a warm on-board welcome from its enthusiastic staff.

Stuart Jones, managing director of First Rail Open Access, said: "It's been a lot of hard work to get us to this stage, but being able to connect Stirling into London and the West Coast Main Line, and the heart of Scotland... we are really excited."

He added: "We're passionate about the benefits that Lumo can offer the West Coast, with a service that is important for both customers and communities along the route."

The "Class 222" trains that Lumo will operate on the Stirling to Euston route have been refurbished and upgraded at Alstom's depot in Widnes.



Customers give Lumo the thumbs up for accessibility


All aboard! Lumo services will be phased into the timetable from 25th May 2026





Lumo's Rail Roadshow on tour promoting the service


Jamsalana play for guests at Euston

They boast some of the most powerful free on-board wifi on the UK rail network and are fully accessible to wheelchair users.

Paul Sutherland, fleet director of Beacon Rail, which owns the rolling stock, said: "It's been a great team effort."

About 100 jobs have been created, including at Lumo's new rail base in Preston, which opened in March.

New roles include customer drivers, instructors and customer experience ambassadors.

A recruitment drive encouraged people to join the rail industry from a variety of backgrounds and previous careers.

Mr Jones said there were long-term hopes of introducing battery-electric trains on the route to further improve the environmental benefits and passenger experience.

There will be four return trains a day between Stirling and Euston and a fifth return service between Euston and Preston.

Ticket prices start at £14.90 for Stirling to Preston and £29.90 for Stirling to Euston. The service launches on May 25, with a full timetable in place by late July.

Other stations served along the route are Milton Keynes, Nuneaton, Crewe and Motherwell.

On the VIP train's arrival in Euston, the music continued. Members of the Lumo train crew danced on the platform as the Jamsalana Steel Band performed classic tunes, including one of Tina Turner's greatest hits.

Which one? Simply The Best!

lumo.co.uk



> **We're a business committed to giving something back to communities.**

Steven Forrest

Forfusion wins King's Award

North Tyneside-based IT and infrastructure specialist Forfusion has received one of the UK's most prestigious business honours after being named a recipient of the King's Award for Enterprise in the Promoting Opportunity category.

Forfusion, one of the region's leading technology consultancies, specialises in mission-critical IT infrastructure, cybersecurity, networking, and managed services for public and private-sector organisations. The company has built a strong reputation for delivering secure, high-performance digital transformation solutions to organisations, including the NHS, government bodies, and major enterprises.

The King's Award recognises Forfusion's commitment to creating meaningful career opportunities by supporting Armed Forces personnel transitioning into civilian employment.

Only 185 organisations across the UK received a King's Award this year, highlighting the significance of the accomplishment.

"Winning the King's Award for Enterprise is a fantastic achievement for everyone at Forfusion," said Forfusion CEO, Steven Forrest. "It recognises our commitment to investing in people and creating opportunities, not just commercial success.

"We regularly receive awards for technical work, but this recognition reflects the work of the entire business. It highlights the importance of the work we do supporting Armed Forces personnel as they transition into civilian careers through our Civilian Work Attachment programme.

"The initiative provides mentoring, practical experience and long-term career opportunities, helping veterans transfer their valuable skills into the technology sector. It's a huge boost for the team and shows we're doing the right thing for the right reasons. I couldn't be prouder, especially when you consider how few organisations across the UK receive a King's Award each year."

The award marks a further milestone in the company's success.

Forfusion was the first business in the North East to achieve Cisco Gold Partner accreditation and later secured a second Gold certification. More recently, the company advanced to Cisco Preferred Partner status, an elite designation held by only around 40 organisations nationwide, once again becoming the first in the North East to attain this distinction.

Achieving Cisco Preferred Partner status is not based on a one-off audit or certification, but on continuous, outcome-driven assessment. It recognises partners who consistently demonstrate advanced technical capability, highquality service delivery, and measurable customer value across the full technology lifecycle, further reinforcing Forfusion's position at the forefront of networking and infrastructure excellence.

"Recognition from both the King's Award and Cisco gives customers confidence that they're working with a business operating to the very highest industry standards," said Steven. "It also demonstrates that we're a business committed to giving something back to communities, both locally and UK-wide."

Forfusion has one of the most highly accredited teams in the UK, enabling the company to design, deploy and support complex IT systems securely and efficiently.

"One of the reasons we've built such a strong team is because we've intentionally kept the business focused, streamlined and agile," Steven added. "That allows us to work proactively, respond quickly and stay close to our clients' needs.

"A large proportion of our leadership team and engineering capability comes from a Cisco background, giving us deep, first-hand expertise across the entire Cisco architecture. We specialise across all Cisco portfolios, enabling us to respond rapidly in environments where downtime or cyber threats simply aren't an option.

Crucially, we deliver through our own proven framework, ADIOlogy (ADIO), which provides a consistent, outcome-focused methodology, helping customers innovate and modernise with confidence, every single time."

Such is the company's reputation that Forfusion has recently secured work with one of Scotland's leading educational organisations, underlining the company's growing profile beyond the North East.

Forfusion designs and manages secure IT environments that improve connectivity, productivity and resilience. Services include cybersecurity, cloud solutions, networking, IoT, managed IT services and digital transformation strategies tailored to individual business needs, helping organisations build modern, AI-ready infrastructure. The company also supports organisations moving towards cloud-based systems and modern hybrid working environments.

Based at Cobalt Business Park in Newcastle, Forfusion continues to expand its client base while maintaining its focus on technical excellence, customer service and community impact.

With strong momentum, national recognition, and growing demand for its expertise, the company is set for an exciting period of continued growth and opportunity.

Further information about the company and its services can be found at www.forfusion.com

When roles are clear, what actually helps people perform?

By Andrew Silver, 360 Growth Partners

"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership."

– Harvey S. Firestone


Andrew Silver

In my last article, I wrote about one of the hidden reasons strategy starts to stall: ownership becomes unclear.

When that happens, decisions drift upwards, managers become less certain about what they really own, and progress starts to slow. The issue is often not capability. It is clarity.

But once ownership is clearer, another challenge quickly follows.

How do you actually help people perform?

For many growing businesses, this is where things can still start to wobble. Roles may be better defined, but without the right structure around people, clarity alone is not enough to turn good intentions into consistent progress.

People perform better when they know where they stand

In practice, performance improves when people know where they stand.

That means understanding what is expected of them, what good looks like, how they are doing, and where they need support. It also means leaders creating regular opportunities for those conversations to happen.

Simple things such as one-to-ones, review points, clearer objectives and more meaningful dialogue can make a real difference. Not because they create more process for the sake of it, but because they make performance more visible. They help issues surface earlier. They give people confidence. And they move leaders away from assumption and towards proper understanding.

Too often, businesses rely on informal updates, rushed conversations, or the hope that capable people will simply get on with it. Sometimes they do. But over time that approach can leave people unsure, unsupported or stuck.

Performance rarely improves by accident. It tends to improve when leaders are deliberate about how they support it.

The process matters, but so does the skill

That said, putting a process in place is only part of the answer.

Using it well is another.

A business can introduce one-to-ones, PDRs and clearer review structures with the right intentions, but if leaders are not equipped to have honest, effective conversations, the process can quickly become shallow. Meetings happen, but nothing really moves forward.

This is why improving performance is not just about tools. It is about leadership capability too.

Can managers hold a constructive conversation when performance dips? Can they ask the right questions rather than avoiding the issue? Can they give feedback clearly, delegate properly and create accountability without making it feel heavy-handed?

These are skills. And like any skills, they need attention.

Inspiring and improving performance

This is also why I think less in terms of "performance management" and more in terms of inspiring and improving performance.

Most people come to work wanting to do a good job. But everyone has difficult days, challenges they cannot solve alone, and moments where they need more clarity, support or direction. Good leadership is about creating the right environment for people to do their best work, not just stepping in when something has already gone wrong.

For some businesses, that starts with introducing the right systems and review points. For others, it is about helping leaders and senior managers build the confidence and skill to use those moments well.

Usually, it is both.

A useful place to start

If this has prompted you to reflect on how performance is being supported in your own business, that is often a useful place to start.

I spend much of my time working with business owners and leadership teams to help put the right structure and conversations around performance, so that ownership is not just clearer on paper, but stronger in practice.

If a conversation would be useful, I'm always happy to talk things through.

Get in touch at: start@360growthpartners.co.uk

www.360growthpartners.co.uk

SANDERSON YOUNG

Rebecca Blakey - Head of Social Media



Rory Nicholson - Marketing/Social Media Consultant

SOCIAL MEDIA DRIVES SALES

The way buyers are discovering properties is changing; over the last 5 years, especially, an agent's website and Rightmove have reigned supreme as the number 1 source for buyer and vendor enquiries. However, over the last 2 years, social media has played an increasingly important role in securing deals and is now central to how we create awareness.

Looking at 2026, Sanderson Young's core social channels are forecast to generate well over 10 million views across Facebook & Instagram, and when combined with our individual agent accounts, audience reach is both substantial and highly engaged.

By investing in our media capabilities and building a strong foundation of engaged vendors and buyers, several properties teased on social media have sold directly, before ever reaching the open market. Increasingly, vendors are approaching us directly through social media, with over 10 serious enquiries in the last few months alone, highlighting just how powerful well targeted, high quality content can be when it's shown to the right audience.

Second to large visibility, calls to action serve as a pivotal statistic to ensure our audience hits the correct demographic. Property clicks have increased by around 360% year on year, driving meaningful enquiries from both buyers and prospective vendors.

While portals such as Rightmove still continue to play an important role in any sale, early visibility and momentum often lead to faster outcomes. Our social media presence is carefully designed to showcase homes in a way that builds genuine demand ahead of a formal launch, meaning we're able to connect the right homes with the right people, quickly. This should be a major consideration for any vendor when deciding on an Agent to appoint.

Our Head of Social Media, Rebecca, said:

> *"This success is driven by strategy, high-quality visuals, intelligent scheduling and a cohesive brand style, which ensures each property is positioned effectively. We constantly look at new and innovative ways to advertise properties, whether that be a focus on the location, or a finer detail often overlooked when viewed online."*

Individual agents are increasingly helping to expand reach and engagement. Since starting his Instagram account recently, valuer Harry has gained over 17,400 followers. His weekly content now generates 87,000 views, with more than 81% coming from non-followers. This exposure shows how property related content is connecting with new audiences beyond existing networks. With nearly 2,000 interactions in just one week and steady follower growth, this personal approach is highly effective in building awareness and early interest.

So, if you're looking for a property or an agent that has a proactive approach to multichannel marketing, get in touch with the Sanderson Young team on **0191 213 0033 or email contact@sandersonyoung.co.uk.**



Springfield Avenue
Eighton Banks, Gateshead

Substantially redeveloped family home featuring two refitted bathrooms, three reception rooms, and a spacious open plan kitchen/diner with integrated appliances. Benefits include secure parking for multiple vehicles, a detached double garage, large rear gardens with insulated garden room, stunning open views, and excellent access to local amenities and transport links.
Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band D

4 3 2 TBC

Price Guide:
£615,000

Hugo Davison
0191 213 0033
hugo.davison@sandersonyoung.co.uk

Pipit Close
North Gosforth

A superb extended detached family home in Five Mile Park, offering five bedrooms, four bathrooms and stylish interiors throughout. Featuring a stunning open plan kitchen and living space with bi-folding doors, landscaped gardens, garage and driveway parking, this is an outstanding modern home close to Gosforth and excellent transport links. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band E.

5 3 4 C

Price Guide:
Offers Over £600,000

Julie Summerbell
0191 213 0033
julie.summerbell@sandersonyoung.co.uk





Moor Lane
Darras Hall, Ponteland

An exceptional family home on sought-after Moor Lane in the prestigious Darras Hall Estate, set within approximately 0.75 acres of private landscaped gardens. Finished to a high specification throughout, it blends modern luxury with practical living. A gated entrance, block paved driveway and integral double garage create an impressive arrival, while inside a striking double-height hallway leads to spacious reception areas and superb open plan living. The principal suite offers a dressing area, ensuite and balcony, with versatile additional accommodation. Ideally located close to excellent amenities, schools, Ponteland village and Newcastle. Airport are nearby. Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band H.





7 3 5 B

Price Guide:
Offers Over £2.35 Million



Ashleigh Sundin
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Business as Usual, *Demand as Strong as Ever*

Gail McLean explains why the North East lettings market remains buoyant despite changes in the rental sector.

There has been no shortage of conversation around the recent changes in the lettings sector, and what that could mean for landlords, but from what we are seeing on the ground, in this early period, the reality is far more reassuring.

In fact, the North East lettings market remains not only active, but exceptionally strong. Quality rental homes are continuing to attract significant interest, and well-presented properties in desirable locations are letting quickly.

A recent example was a luxury rural property in Longframlington, which was let within 24 hours of coming to market. This was not an isolated case. Demand remains particularly high for homes that offer lifestyle, whether that be is a village setting or a prime suburban home.

Average rents across our lettings portfolio are currently in the region of £1,600 per calendar month, reflecting the continued appetite for high-quality rental accommodation. Tenants are increasingly discerning, but when the right property becomes available, they are ready to move quickly.

Gosforth, as ever, remains one of the ultimate places to live. Its combination of excellent schools, green spaces, independent shops, transport links and proximity to Newcastle city centre continues to make it one of the region's most sought-after addresses. Properties in and around Gosforth rarely stay quiet for long.

One recent two-bedroom flat generated more than 30 enquiries in less than 24 hours. That level of response tells its own story. The demand is there, the applicants are serious, and the market is very much moving.

In my opinion, it is also important to challenge the idea that renting is perceived as 'short term', many tenants are choosing to stay longer, with our average tenancy now around two and a half years. In some cases, relationships between landlord, tenant and agent last much longer. Our longest-standing tenant has been with the same landlord through us for more than 21 years, a fantastic example of how well-managed lettings can provide stability for everyone involved.

People still need homes. Tenants still want quality, location and service. Landlords still want reliable tenants, strong returns and peace of mind.

For us, it is very much business as usual.

The key is advice. In a changing regulatory landscape, landlords should not rely on hearsay or headlines. They should work with experienced lettings professionals who understand the legislation, the local market and the practicalities of matching the right tenant to the right property.

If you're a landlord or homeowner looking to let, get in touch with me and my team on:

Tel: 0191 223 3510
Mobile: 07793 505106
Email: gail.mclean@sandersonyoung.co.uk

Our *Lettings Experts* are Here to *Guide the Way*

Gail McLean and Ryan Hopkins are here to help landlords let with confidence.



sandersonyoung.co.uk

In conversation with...

Jo and Brogan

Founders of Ānela, new boutique wedding experience

Founded by Jo Stott and Brogan Owen, Ānela is a luxury North Shields boutique dedicated to mothers of the bride and groom. Based in The Exchange 1856, the brand offers modern, stylish occasionwear and a deeply personal shopping experience designed to make women feel celebrated, confident and truly seen.



We spoke to Jo and Brogan about what their first few months in business have been like, and why they are passionate about putting mams at the heart of the wedding experience.

Ānela opened its doors earlier this year - what has the reaction been like so far?

Jo: Honestly, it has blown my mind. We officially launched at the end of March and the response has been phenomenal, it has just blown us away. We opened our doors mid-February as a soft launch due to demand - which was such a lovely start. Since then, we've learned so much, so quickly. We talk sometimes as if we've been open for five years, not just a few months, because we're already so clear on what works, what our customers need and how special this experience is for them.

Brogan: It has felt fast-paced, but in the best possible way. We're constantly listening, learning and refining and I think that comes from both of us having vast experience in the wedding industry and really understanding these milestone moments. We know how much they matter.

Tell us more about the idea behind Ānela. Why is it important?

Jo: At its core, Ānela is about women. It's about mothers, yes, but also women who have lived, raised families, built careers, supported others and now deserve to feel incredible in their own right.

For so long, mother of the bride and groom outfits have felt like an afterthought. They're often tucked away in bridal shops or treated as secondary to the main wedding experience and we wanted to create a dedicated space where mams could come in, relax, be cared for and feel completely and utterly celebrated.

Brogan: There were two gaps that were really clear to us from working in the industry. The first was style, so we want to offer something more modern, fashionable and elegant for mothers who don't want to feel dated or put into a box. The second was experience so all of our appointments to feel personal, unhurried and special - it's not just about buying an outfit, but about marking a really meaningful moment.

How did your paths lead to you launching Ānela?

Jo: The idea had been bubbling away for around three years. Through my work in the bridal industry and as a celebrant, I kept seeing mothers of the bride and groom struggling to find something that felt like them. Being so close to weddings, you see every part of that journey and this was the one area that consistently felt overlooked.

Then 2025 became a big year personally. My daughter Abbie got married in Kielder, and Brogan got married in Las Vegas. Both experiences showed us just how real that gap was and that finding the right look wasn't easy. It confirmed what I already felt, that Ānela needed to exist.

...continued





L-R: Jo and Brogan







Brogan: Jo had mentioned the idea before, and then in January 2025 it started to feel very real. With my background in fashion and design, I could immediately see the potential in creating something bespoke and more flexible for women, pieces that could be adapted to suit them, rather than the other way around.

I brought a few designs to Jo's house, almost as a starting point, and we began exploring what the Ānela collection could be. By June, after my wedding, we shook hands over brunch and said, "Right, we're doing this."

From there, it was a full year of creating the brand, the designs, the space and the experience.

Your home is in The Exchange in North Shields - why the North East?

Jo: The North East is home. My 'very large' family roots are here, and there is such a strong sense of community. We've felt so much support, not just from the wedding industry, but from local people who genuinely want us to do well and love the concept of Ānela. It is so unique and we deserve to celebrate these moments authentically and honestly for our Mam's. The North East has a natural warmth and Ānela emulates this utterly.

The Exchange is perfect for us. It's beautiful, full of atmosphere and has that sense of heritage and occasion. It feels glamorous but welcoming, which is exactly what Ānela is.

Brogan: I'm originally from Yorkshire, but I've felt that community too. People want to support something local and special. We also love the idea that Ānela can become a destination. People have already travelled here for an appointment, they can then stay for lunch, have a drink, explore North Shields or the wider coast. That's exciting for us and for the local economy.

What is an experience like Ānela bringing to the region?

Jo: It brings a space that hasn't really existed here before. We call it a sacred shopping experience because that's what it feels like. Women come in with their daughters, sons, husbands, sisters, friends, even future in-laws, and they have time that is completely about them. The North East is such a welcoming and special place and we know that having a shopping destination like Ānela here is going to have a benefit for local hospitality businesses too.

Brogan: So many women tell us they want to make their son or daughter proud. That has really stayed with me. We often think of children wanting to make their parents proud, but here it's the other way around too. These women want to feel confident, stylish and like themselves on one of the biggest days in their family's life.

What's next for Ānela?

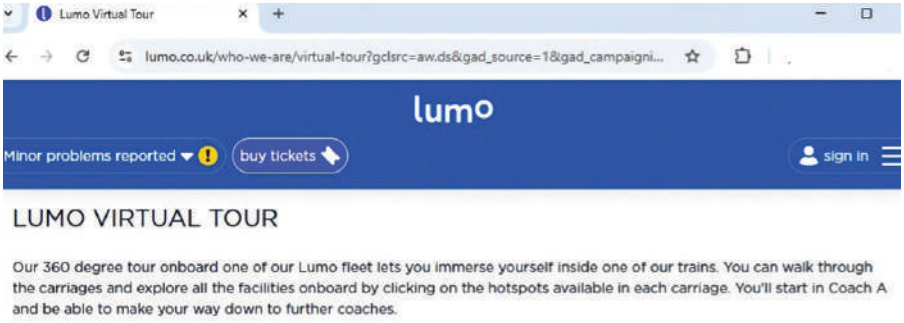
Jo: We're still a baby, but we have big ambitions. We'll continue developing our own Ānela collection alongside very carefully chosen designers, always with our customers in mind.

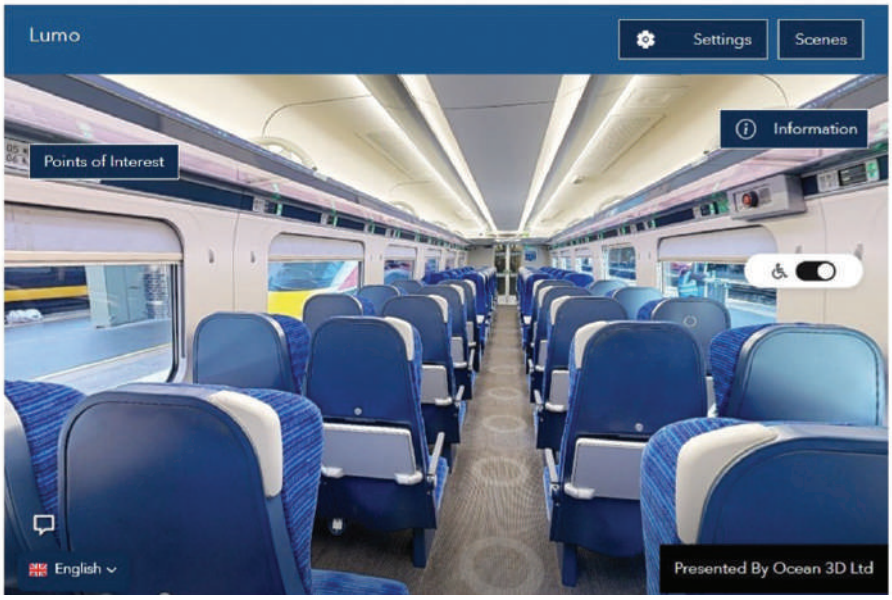
Brogan: The goal is to keep growing without losing the heart of it. Beautiful clothes matter, but the feeling matters most - we want every woman who walks through our door to leave feeling marvellous.

anela.co.uk

Step in, walk around – virtually

Go on a tour from the comfort of your armchair.





You want to find out what something looks like, where you're going to sit, how you find your way in, does it look interesting...all simple questions which are difficult to answer by flicking through website or social media pages.

And what about if you have some sort of disability? Are there steps, is access tricky, could it be noisy or confusing and, if it's an outside venue or event, would a visit really be sensible?

Imagine how good it would be to step inside a building and look around to see what's on show at something like a demonstration or an exhibition. It allows you to make an informed decision.

Thankfully there is a way to answer these questions.

Take a virtual tour on your phone, tablet or desktop and see everything for yourself. It's not like being there...you ARE there. No app to download, no headset to buy, just tap on your screen and you're there.

And that's precisely what Chris Wood and Paul Barker can do for you at Ocean 3D.

"We've a background in estate agency and discovered the benefits of allowing people to walk around properties...virtually...by taking a 3D tour," said Chris. "It's a simple and inexpensive idea which means you can judge everything for yourself rather than relying on the estate agent's description. What Paul and I have done is take that idea onto the next level and use it for a whole range of businesses and attractions to allow people to judge for themselves."

Uncertainty is something none of us like, but if you've already had a virtual tour, you know what to expect, all of which can help to reduce anxiety. You can plan ahead. This is particularly beneficial for people living with autism, PTSD, dementia, anxiety disorders, or other hidden and physical disabilities.

It's easy to remember situations which you've been in and realised that a bit of early information would have been incredibly beneficial. So, if you have a business which could benefit from giving customers and clients a terrific view of what you do or what's available, why not create an immersive digital experience and make customers feel comfortable with your location before they even arrive? There's no need for a dedicated app. Simply copy and paste your locations tour straight into your website, newsletters, emails and SMS messages.



Ocean 3D's services offer major advantages to companies across sectors including healthcare, transport, tourism, retail, education, hospitality, and property. Businesses can use the tours to showcase venues, improve customer confidence, support staff training, and enhance operational planning. For example, airports, train operators, hospitals, and tourist attractions can provide visitors with a realistic preview of entrances, waiting areas, facilities, and routes before arrival. This helps improve customer satisfaction and improve review scores whilst also reducing stress for both visitors and frontline staff.

"One of our biggest clients is Lumo Trains," adds Paul. "Our 3D virtual tours show passengers what to expect when they board a train...they can zoom in on their actual seat. We've worked closely with other organisations including NHS hospitals, the National Trust, Spaceport, UNESCO World Heritage sites, RNLI, and international airports. We've also received recognition from organisations such as the National Autistic Society and the British Aviation Group for our innovative approach to accessibility and inclusion.

Ocean 3D virtual tours give customers an opportunity to spend more time exploring a business online, giving organisations a proven competitive edge. We provide clickable information points, floorplans, embedded videos, navigation, and integrated booking or e-commerce links, all of which make the experience highly interactive and commercially valuable."

For more information, visit www.ocean3d.co.uk


Dr David Cliff

The time is now

Events create energy, possibility and commercial optimism. They also consume huge amounts of time and money.

Yet many organisations unintentionally sabotage the very opportunities they invest to create. Dr David Cliff explores why sales interest decays faster than most businesses realise — and why rapid follow-up matters.

Businesses spend thousands each year attending conferences, trade shows, exhibitions and networking events. These events undoubtedly have value. They expose organisations to new ideas, create strategic conversations, strengthen relationships and allow people to discover solutions they may never previously have considered.

Yet there is a hidden problem quietly operating beneath the surface of many business development activities.

A significant proportion of organisations unintentionally waste the very opportunities they invest to create. It is'nt because the events are poor, nor because the products or services are weak, not even because the conversations lacked promise. The problem often emerges in follow up processes.

I have increasingly become interested in what might be called the "half-life" of commercial interest.

Borrowed loosely from nuclear physics, a half-life describes the period over which a substance loses half of its radio-activity. Commercial opportunities are obviously not radioactive materials, but the metaphor may nevertheless help explain a recurring problem in business development and sales follow-up.

"Decay" occurs in:

- Interest.
- Enthusiasm.
- Urgency.
- Memory.
- Momentum.

And it often happens far faster than many realise.

Research highlighted through Harvard Business Review found that organisations responding to leads within an hour were dramatically more likely to achieve meaningful engagement than companies waiting longer.

This matters because events create temporary psychological states.

During exhibitions and conferences, people become stimulated by possibility. Conversations generate optimism. New ideas emerge. Problems appear solvable. Strategic imagination expands.

But once people return to ordinary operational life, reality reasserts itself quickly. Emails accumulate, meetings intervene, operational pressures return and most importantly attention fragments and energy dissipates.

The event no longer occupies centre stage psychologically.

Many organisations underestimate this transition.

There is also another issue at play. Sometimes conversations themselves create a sense of emotional completion without any genuine commercial progression occurring. The interaction feels productive and meaningful, yet no structured next step follows with despatch.

In effect, we can easily begin to confuse "social energy" with pipeline progression. The "Buzz" of human connection and possibility can too often transcend the realpolitik of the urgency of need for working on further engagement and move towards real outcomes.

Good events remain enormously important. However, events should perhaps be viewed as the beginning of commercial acceleration rather than the conclusion of it.

The organisations that appear most effective operationally are often highly disciplined in this respect. Follow-up activity is scheduled rapidly. Lead ownership is clarified immediately. Prospects are categorised by urgency and relevance.

By contrast, many organisations return from events exhausted, overloaded and operationally distracted, and with little thought out infrastructure the follow up.

By the time contact is finally attempted, the emotional warmth and immediacy generated during the original conversation may already have evaporated.

At that point, the organisation is often no longer continuing a warm discussion.

It is effectively reintroducing itself.

Perhaps the real question businesses should ask after every event is not:
"Did we enjoy it?"

or even:
"Did we make contacts?"

But rather:
"How quickly did we convert temporary interest into sustained momentum?"

Because in business development, as in physics, timing matters.

www.gedanken.co.uk



Dr David Cliff

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

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

Gedanken

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

AK Teaching deal strengthens tech-led education staffing business

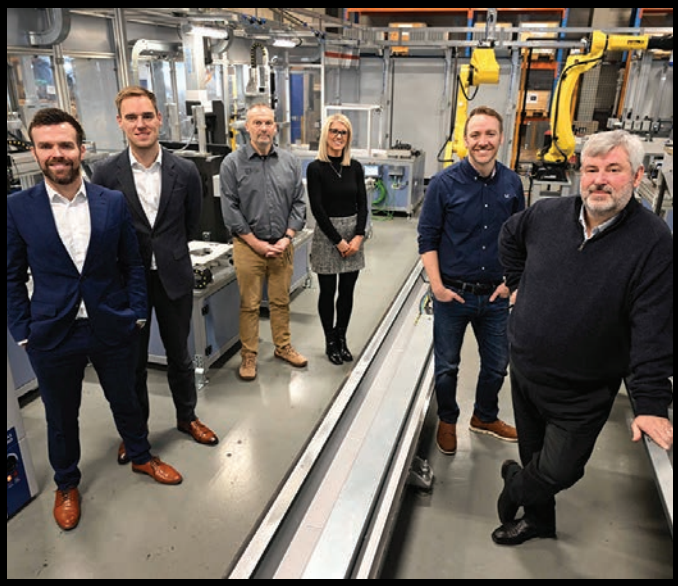
A leading regional education staffing specialist has joined forces with a fast-growing international platform in a deal that reflects the increasing role of technology in shaping the future of staffing.

AK Teaching, headquartered in Sunderland, has been acquired by Zen Educate, a UK and US-based education staffing technology business. Founded in 2012 by Anthony Kirtley, AK Teaching has built a strong reputation across the North East, supplying teachers and support staff to primary, secondary and SEND schools.

The acquisition brings together AK Teaching's established regional network with Zen Educate's technology-driven platform, which connects schools directly with educators and is backed by more than $70m of investment.

RG Corporate Finance advised the AK Teaching shareholders on the transaction. Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance, said: "This deal highlights the strength of well-established regional businesses and their appeal to ambitious, tech-enabled international groups looking to scale. It was a pleasure to advise the AK Teaching shareholders on this significant cross broader transaction."





GT Group returns to North East ownership

One of the North East's most established engineering businesses has returned to regional ownership following a management buy-out that marks a significant new chapter in its long history.

GT Group, headquartered in Peterlee, has been acquired by its senior leadership team from private equity firm Rcapital, with funding support from Cynergy Bank. The deal sees the business, which employs more than 180 people and generates revenues in excess of £40m, move back into local control for the first time in nearly a decade.

Founded in the 1970s, GT Group supplies engine air and emissions control systems to global OEMs including Daimler, Volvo and Scania, and is well positioned to support manufacturers as emissions standards continue to evolve.

RG Corporate Finance advised the management team on the transaction. Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance, said: "This is a landmark deal for a business with deep regional roots and global reach, and one that reinforces the strength of North East manufacturing and leadership."



Quorum deal brings global backing to UK energy tech

A North East energy technology specialist has secured international backing in a landmark deal that highlights the region's growing influence in the UK's transition to a low-carbon energy system.

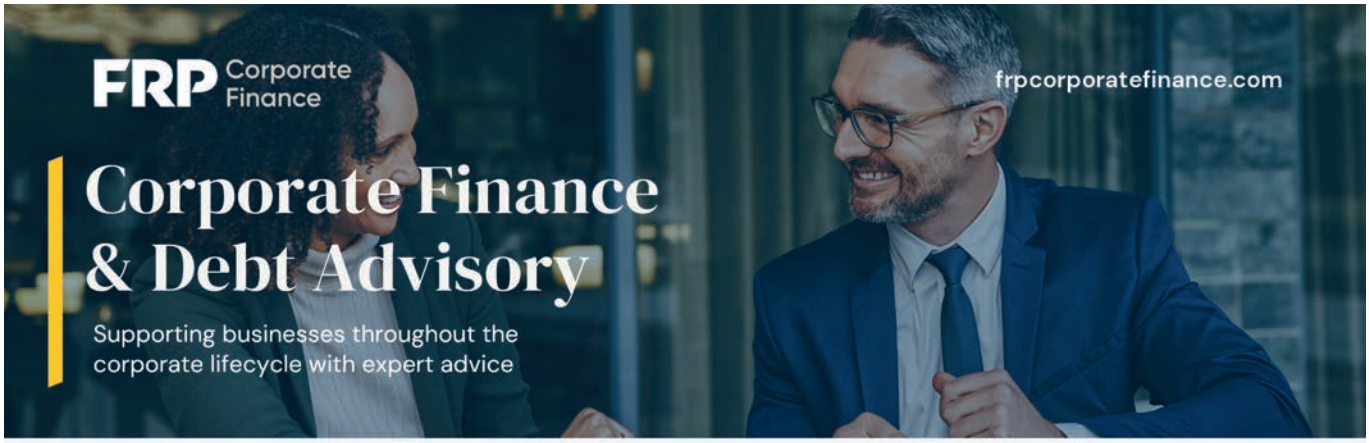
Quorum Technology, based at NETPark in County Durham, has been acquired by Oslo-headquartered Volue, marking a significant inward investment into the UK market. The business provides mission-critical IT infrastructure to the energy sector, including systems that support the real-time balancing of electricity supply and demand.

Founded by Paul Fothergill, Quorum has grown into a market leader with more than 65 percent share in its niche, supporting major clients including Drax, Shell and EDF.

RG Corporate Finance advised the Quorum shareholders on the transaction. Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance, said: "This is a standout North East success story and a great example of international buyers recognising the strength of our region's technology and energy expertise."

RG
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RG Corporate Finance
Every Step. Every Decision.
0191 281 1292 • ryecroftglenton.com
CARL SWANSBURY
Partner – Corporate Finance





Expert solutions for your business goals

Your business evolves over time. As you grow and become more established, your aims, strategies and challenges change. You need advice that can guide you through every stage of your journey.

Whatever your business goals, FRP has the corporate finance expertise to help you. Every business is unique, and so is our approach to helping each one of our clients execute strategic change.

We always start with relationships. In becoming reliable, trusted, long-term partners, we're better placed to help directors, shareholders and other stakeholders meet their needs such as selling a business or acquiring a new one, raising additional finance or seeking investment.

Whatever opportunities and challenges lay ahead, our independence and objectivity build solutions and get results.



Abu Ali
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abu.ali@frpadvisory.com

RICHARD REED
SOLICITORS

Legal advice for all aspects of **personal** and **business** life

GET IN TOUCH

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Crowdhouse Energy secures NPIF II investment

Newcastle-based renewable energy business, CrowdHouse Energy (CHE), has secured a 'transformative' investment from NPIF II – NEL Debt Finance, managed by NEL Fund Managers as part of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II). This partnership marks a significant milestone for CHE, enabling the company to accelerate its growth and impact within the renewable energy sector.

CHE specialises in commercial solar solutions, offering rooftop photovoltaic (PV) systems and its distinctive Helios Volt PV Parking Canopy, incorporating Supernova™ PURE Bifacial PV, plug-and-play modules. The company provides comprehensive renewable energy generation solutions encompassing in-house design, consultancy, installation, and ongoing maintenance.

The investment will allow CHE to capitalise on the growing demand for green energy by growing its team and strengthening operations.

It has also enabled the business to bring in an Olympus CNC machine and Elumatec DG79 double mitre saw to fully equip its Scotswood Road manufacturing facility - advancements which are instrumental in enhancing CHE's production capabilities and supporting the company's commitment to sustainability and innovation.



Maven strengthens North East team

Maven Capital Partners has announced two new appointments to its North East team, further strengthening its investment capability as it continues to support the growth and scale-up ambitions of companies across the region.

Katie Bohill joins Maven as an Investment Manager with responsibility for deal origination and execution across the North East of England. Prior to joining Maven, she spent three years in EY's audit team, where she worked with some of the region's largest plcs and qualified as an ACA Chartered Accountant. A Chemical Engineering graduate, Katie began her career in CPI's Biotechnology division, where she supported process scale-up and optimisation projects across the AgriFoodTech and pharma sectors.

Niall Choat also joins Maven as an Investment Manager from FRP Corporate Finance, where he advised on a range of mid-market M&A and capital raising transactions across multiple sectors. Prior to this, he held roles at Aspire Technology Solutions, RSM and Deloitte, building broad experience in advising growth businesses and their stakeholders. Having worked in both industry and practice, his background spans deal execution, strategic advisory and supporting management teams through key stages of growth and investment.

Precursor Technology Group Accelerates AI-Driven Cyber Security Innovation

A fast-growing cyber security specialist has received a six-figure investment from NPIF II – NEL Debt Fund, managed by NEL Fund Managers as part of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II), to fuel its next phase of growth.

Precursor Technology Group, is one of the UK's leading Cyber Security specialists and offers a full range of services to help businesses stay secure, including penetration testing, a 24/7 managed Security Operations Centre, and compliance certification.

This is NEL's second investment in the company and will be used to facilitate Precursors' further expansion into new geographical markets whilst creating 2 new jobs in Newcastle. The investment will also accelerate further releases of its new AI powered Cyber Threat Intelligence platform, Precursor Intelligence.

Precursor Intelligence gives organisations of every size access to threat intelligence that was previously the preserve of enterprise security teams. The platform uses AI to continuously collect, correlate and analyse signals from over 160 countries, transforming vast volumes of raw global threat data into clear, business-specific intelligence. Clients receive a concise view of the threats that actually matter to them, what's targeting their sector, their technology stack, and their supply chain alongside a plain-language articulation of the cyber risk their business faces.

Founded in 2018, Precursor Technology Group works with a wide range of public and private sector organisations. and is certified by the UK's



leading cyber security accreditation body, the Council of registered Ethical Security Testers (CREST).

The Security Operations Centre, which was launched in Newcastle in 2024, also holds CREST certification, positioning them in an elite group of organisations worldwide who are certified at that level.

Scott Cardow, CEO at Precursor Technology Group, says: "Precursor has grown rapidly over the last few years, and now in the age of AI, we are positioned at the forefront of its use in the Cyber Security sector.

"This is now the second time we have taken investment from NEL. This speaks to the ease of the process, and the fact that they are genuinely interested in seeing businesses grow. It's fantastic to have them as a true partner as we scale."

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A ring of support

5 Circles throws ring of support around growing businesses at Bealim House launch event in the heart of Newcastle.

Busy professionals steering growth are benefiting from a one-stop shop for strategic business support following the launch of full-service consultancy 5 Circles.

Founder Maxine Fox combines more than 25 years of experience backing businesses with a wide network of sector specialists to help firms run smoother, smarter and better.

And that network was out in force at the official launch of 5 Circles as Newcastle's Bealim House brought together a hive mind of proven business success.

"5 Circles is all about helping businesses find the time — and develop the strategy — to realise their potential and grow," explains Maxine.

"I get to know my clients, identify opportunities and help them to deliver effective solutions. But sometimes it takes more than one pair of hands to maximise the potential.

"That's where my amazing network comes in. I work with people I trust and people with a proven track record of helping businesses thrive."

Guests, who enjoyed complimentary drinks on arrival, heard Maxine set out her 5 Circles vision before jumping aboard the social media spinning wheel and creating their own standout content.

www.5circles.co.uk

















> **I'm certainly not ready to hang my boots up yet.**

Andy Briggs

In conversation with...

Andy Briggs

IA Growth, who provide growing businesses with strategic financial guidance

What were your career ambitions growing up?

Like many youngsters I probably wanted to be a train driver although I didn't have a career in mind until I thought of university and decided to explore either accountancy or engineering. Whilst I graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering, I decided that wasn't a career for me, so I applied to a few big Accountancy firms.

I joined Price Waterhouse where I spent six enjoyable years learning the rudiments of the job. I then joined an M&E sub-contractor in the construction industry during the early 90s recession which was tremendous but challenging experience and where I soon learned "Cash is King"! 12 years as Finance Director with Fila followed before a long spell with T&G Allan and The Pen Shop. Whilst there I was involved in a management buyout taking it out of family ownership for the first time in over 150 years.

Tell us about your current role?

I left T&G Allan in 2017 and after a long break co-founded IA Growth in 2018, with Graham Sleep and David Land. We had the aim of working with scaling businesses with £2m to £50m turnover through strategic planning, executive coaching and talent management. David has subsequently retired, but I still collaborate with Graham on occasions. We primarily support ambitious SME's within the North East region.

What are you currently working on?

Our main project currently is an ERP implementation alongside a CFO role for an import, wholesale and distribution business based in Durham. We are also working with a few other businesses managing forward planning, identifying challenges, providing insight and ensuring they have an understanding of their numbers.

What has been your biggest challenge in business?

Unquestionably this came whilst at The Pen Shop during the 2009 recession. Lehmann Brothers collapsed and being a luxury brand our turnover fell by 30% overnight. We put together plans A, B, C and D and within a month adopted the latter which involved closing shops, cutting stock, negotiating rents and making agreements with key suppliers. Before long the RBS put us in their intensive care banking unit which was known as the Global Restructuring Group and became known for closing businesses. They literally could have done with us as they pleased. Fortunately, we managed to progress and after four tough years returned to profitability, saving 150 jobs in the process. In November 2013 we were released back to mainstream banking, one of the first business that year to do so.

What is your proudest business achievement?

I'd always prefer to be thought of as a team player, but I was very flattered to be runner up in the Finance Director category at the 2014 North East Accountancy Awards.

What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

I am an active member of the Entrepreneurs Forum and have gained a lot of knowledge from their events over the years. I suppose the one that always resonates is "know your numbers."

Who are your Heroes and Mentors?

Hero is a strong word, but my late father always set a terrific example and enjoyed a 40 year accountancy career before getting involved in a host of voluntary projects post retirement. Bill Teasdale from PWC and Richard Allan, Chairman of T&G Allan, were also influential in shaping my career.

The much-missed Doddie Weir was someone I admired greatly as he had the rare gift of making you feel like a long-lost friend whenever I met him.

What do you like to do to unwind?

I have had an allotment for 10 years which I find very therapeutic and a great social outlet. I also love rugby and cricket as well as the experience of live theatre and music.

I suppose one of my great pleasures would be listening to Fleetwood Mac or Lindisfarne, on vinyl, with a glass of whisky in hand!

Favourite Book and Boxset?

I'm afraid I don't have the attention span to watch a boxset and tend to only read books for factual information. When I do find time to watch television, I enjoy live sport and quiz shows.

What does the future hold?

I'm 62 so keen to retain a nice balance, but I'm certainly not ready to hang my boots up yet. I'd like to think I've got a few years enjoying selective work which I find rewarding and stimulating.

iagrowth.co.uk



EMG Solicitors continues to grow specialist Court of Protection and private client business

Durham-headquartered, EMG Solicitors is set for further growth following the announcement that Fletchers Group has agreed to acquire the clinical negligence and Court of Protection teams of Freeths.

A total of 42 colleagues will join the Group, comprising 21 in clinical negligence and 21 in Court of Protection, strengthening its position as a leading UK provider of specialist legal services.

Under the agreement, the clinical negligence team will join Fletchers Solicitors, while the Court of Protection team will become part of EMG Solicitors, a standalone business within Fletchers Group led by Emma Gaudern.

Freeths' teams bring a strong reputation for high-value, complex work, with Tier 1 legal directory rankings across both disciplines, alongside a high-quality caseload and a substantial Court of Protection portfolio.

The Clinical Negligence team is led by Jane Williams and Carolyn Lowe. The Court of Protection team is led by Natasha Molloy.

Both teams are based in Nottingham, Oxford and Derby and will join Fletchers and EMG Solicitors in June, expanding the Group's reach and capability across these key regions.

Emma Gaudern, CEO of EMG Solicitors, said: "This is another important step in the continued growth of our Court of Protection business.

"Alongside our new colleagues from JE Bennett Law and Fletchers' Court of Protection team, we are delighted to welcome the Freeths team to EMG as we continue to grow our specialist Court of Protection and private client business.

"With more than 300 colleagues across the business, this gives us even greater strength and depth to support clients with long-term and complex needs."

RG Corporate Finance strengthens team with senior appointment

RG Corporate Finance (RGCF), the North East-based, nationally focused independent corporate finance advisory boutique, has appointed Michael Guellard as Corporate Finance Manager as part of its continued growth.

Michael joins the firm from NEL Fund Managers, where he spent ten years originating and executing more than 100 growth funding transactions across a wide range of sectors. During his time at NEL, he also served as a voting member of the firm's Investment Committee.

His career to date has focused on investment and advisory roles across banking, alternative lending and fintech, supporting SMEs in both the North East and London.



Energy Solicitors promotes Ryan McDonald to Partner

Ryan joined ESL in March 2023 shortly after it was established, following eight years at another law firm.

A Northumbria University graduate, Ryan has played a key role in the development of the business, thanks to his legal expertise and commercial awareness.

"Ryan has been an integral part of operations since he joined us back in 2023," explained Senior Partner and Director Victoria Myers. "He has been my right hand man for the past three years and has been an invaluable asset to the team.

"His dedication has been second to none, along with his hard work and commitment to the business and our clients. He's made a very positive impact across the business.

"This promotion comes in recognition of his hard work and dedication so far and he will now play an even greater role as we continue to expand. It's a particularly exciting time for ESL with our move to the city centre which will enable us to grow further, so Ryan's promotion comes at the perfect time and we know he will thrive in his new role.



Michael holds a degree in Politics from the University of Nottingham and a Law degree from Nottingham Law School. He also holds the CFA Investment Management Certificate.

His appointment comes as RGCF continues to expand its operations across the North East, Yorkshire and London, supporting a growing national client base and increased deal activity across multiple sectors.

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

ONE SUBJECT | THREE TIPS



STOP HIRING PEOPLE LIKE YOU

Most business owners don't set out to work seven days a week. But somewhere between the early ambition and the daily grind, the business takes over. If you're the first in and the last out, if your phone never really goes quiet and the thought of a two week holiday makes you anxious, it's worth asking the question honestly. Here are three things worth thinking about.

1. The hidden cost of never switching off.

Fatigue is expensive. Not in a way that shows up on a balance sheet, but in the decisions you don't make clearly, the opportunities you don't spot and the people around you who quietly notice you're running on empty. Business owners who never properly rest don't perform better. They just get used to performing worse without realising it.

2. How to start building systems that don't need you.

Start small. Pick one thing you do every week that someone else could do if it was written down clearly enough. Write it down. Hand it over. Then do it again. Building a business that doesn't depend on you isn't a single big decision, it's a hundred small ones that compound over time into something that actually runs properly.

3. The question every owner should be able to answer.

If you had to step away for a month, what would break? Most owners know the answer immediately, and it tells them everything they need to know about where to focus. The goal isn't to be unnecessary. It's to be confident that things would hold together without you holding them up.

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INTERESTING QUOTE

They own their companies on paper, but in reality, their companies own them.

John Warrillow

JUST ONE THING

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

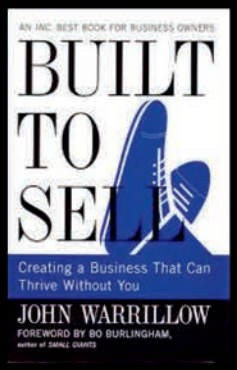
Book a holiday. An actual one. Put the dates in the diary before you feel ready, and use the gap between now and then to figure out what needs to change before you go. If the thought of it makes you anxious, that's not a reason to wait. That's the reason to do it.

HAVE A READ

Built to Sell
John Warrillow

A short, straightforward read about building a business that isn't dependent on its owner. It's written as a story rather than a manual, which makes it surprisingly easy to get through. Worth an afternoon of anyone's time.

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Richard Reed accelerates property team growth as conveyancing demand surges

Sunderland based Richard Reed Solicitors has announced a major expansion of its conveyancing department in response to sustained demand across a stabilising UK property market, where steady price growth and consistent transaction levels are continuing to fuel activity.

The move comes at a time when the property sector is experiencing notable change. Despite wider economic pressures, transaction levels have remained resilient, resulting in the demand for legal support at the firm remaining consistently high in recent months.

Against this backdrop, Richard Reed has significantly strengthened its conveyancing team, led by Nicola Bennell, Director and Solicitor. The department has expanded at multiple levels to meet rising client demand while maintaining service quality during a period of heightened market activity.

Nicola Bennell commented: "We're operating in a market that continues to evolve, but demand for property services has remained strong throughout. We've seen a consistent flow of instructions over the past year, and it became clear that strategic growth was essential—not just to manage volume, but to maintain the high standards the firm and our clients expect."

The expansion includes the promotion of Steven Douglas to Associate Solicitor, reflecting both his expertise and the firm's commitment to developing talent from within.

Steven Douglas added: "The pace of the property market has created both challenges and opportunities. With the right team structure in place, we're now better equipped to manage that demand while continuing to deliver a high-quality service."

To further strengthen capacity, the firm also welcomed Kathryn Musgrove as Solicitor and Savannah Beckett, both joined in December 2025, followed by Hannah Cullen in March 2026, with their appointments reflecting a dual focus on immediate delivery and long-term growth.

Kathryn Musgrove said: "There's a real sense of momentum within the team. The volume of work speaks to the strength of the market, but also to the trust clients place in the firm. It's an exciting time to be part of that growth."

Additional support has been provided through the recruitment of paralegals Lynn Liddle and Lucy Cardy, helping to streamline processes and enhance the overall client journey.

The department's expansion builds on a strong period of performance, with turnover increasing by 48% over the past year. This growth reflects both favourable market conditions and sustained investment in people, including the earlier addition of Hannah Parton in June 2024.



EMG Solicitors and JE Bennett Law to join Fletchers Group

EMG Solicitors, the UK's leading independent Court of Protection practice, has agreed to join Fletchers Group, creating a dedicated Court of Protection and private client division.

Alongside EMG, specialist Kent-based firm JE Bennett Law will join the Group as part of the expanded EMG business, while Fletchers Solicitors 30-strong Court of Protection team will also transfer into EMG Solicitors.

The combined practice will bring together more than 200 specialists across a national network of offices, operating under the EMG brand to create one of the largest and most experienced Court of Protection practices in the UK.

EMG will sit alongside Fletchers Group's other specialist legal businesses, including Fletchers Solicitors, Rayden Solicitors, Blume and Medical Law Services, benefiting from the Group's scale, access to capital, continued investment in technology, and enhanced capabilities to support future growth, including M&A.

The business will be led by EMG founder and CEO Emma Gaudern, who will join Fletchers' management board. It will continue to offer consumer legal services in residential conveyancing, wills and probate, and family law.

JE Bennett Law is led by founder and managing partner Jane Bennett, who will join the leadership team of the expanded EMG business.

Commenting on the move, Fletchers Group CEO Peter Haden said: "I am absolutely delighted to welcome Emma, Jane and their colleagues to be part of the Group.

"EMG and JE Bennett Law are two highly impressive, respected firms with deep expertise in Court of Protection and private client work. Bringing these teams together creates a specialist practice with real depth across the full spectrum of Court of Protection services, ranging from complex financial management and deputyships to high-value estates and trusts.

He continued: "It will also provide a full-service health and welfare offering, supporting clients on some of the most complex health and care decisions, education law matters and continuing healthcare challenges."

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L-R: RMT Accountants & Business Advisors' commercial services director Paul Gainford, audit manager Becky Barker, associate director Joe Mackie-Walsh and audit managers Olivia Nailon and David Hutcheon

RMT Accountants strengthens audit team with senior hires

RMT Accountants & Business Advisors has brought two further senior recruits into its audit team as it continues to invest in meeting growing client demand.

Joe Mackie-Walsh has joined the Gosforth-based firm's audit team as an Associate Director, with Becky Barker taking up the role of Audit Manager.

And RMT is continuing to actively look to add further recruits to its audit department, as well as right across the business.

Originally from Darlington, Joe moved to the London office of one of the UK's Big Four firms after graduating from Newcastle University before deciding to return to the North East.

He brings over a decade of experience across a broad range of sectors, gained at leading North East professional services firms and private businesses.

Becky also began her career in London after graduating from Durham University and has over eight years' audit experience gained in practices in the capital and back in the North East.

Joe Mackie-Walsh says: "RMT's position at the forefront of the North East SME market, the comprehensive resources it can call upon to support this locally-focused, personable approach and its long-term investment in its growth strategy all combined to provide a very attractive career development opportunity.

"My focus has very much been on the cultural as well as the professional development of the businesses I've worked in. This helps ensure that as we grow, we continue to invest time in in the career development of our people, helping them become technical and professional experts who deliver a first class client service.

"RMT places the same degree of importance on developing its clients and people. This matched to the continuing development of technical expertise and investments in technological advancements, will collectively help us achieve our growth ambitions."

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

Paul Gainford, director of commercial services at RMT Accountants & Business Advisors, adds: "We've seen a surge in new business wins over recent months from a wide range of clients, and we've been building our audit team to ensure the support and advice they need is on hand.

"Joe and Becky are excellent additions to this team, with both the personal and professional qualities that will help them thrive at RMT, and we're expecting to see further new recruits joining us in the coming months."

Sumer is the UK and Ireland's leading mid-market accountancy practice, delivering professional support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and employs over 3,000 staff across more than 60 offices.

r-m-t.co.uk



Trapped cash

By Andrew Welton, Relationship Development Director

Unlocking value from existing borrowing.

For many businesses, borrowing is arranged to solve a specific problem, then left alone. Facilities are agreed, documents signed, and attention turns back to trading. Over time, those same arrangements can start to hold a business back rather than support it.

We often come across situations where cash is effectively locked within existing borrowing structures. The business may be profitable and stable, yet still feeling stretched. Repayments may be higher than needed, and security tied up in ways that limit flexibility. Facilities that once made sense can become outdated as the business evolves.

Rethinking existing borrowing

Refinance is often misunderstood as simply chasing a better rate. In reality, it can be a chance to revisit how debt is structured and whether it is still working for the business today. That might mean consolidating facilities, extending terms to ease pressure, or moving to a lender better suited to the current position.

Looking beyond individual facilities

Restructuring debt takes a broader view, looking at how borrowing sits across the business. Growth can lead to layers of finance built up over time, each added for a good reason, but not always working well together. The result can be unnecessary complexity and strain on cashflow, with value often sitting untapped within the business. With the right structure, it is often possible to reduce monthly repayments while also releasing equity to inject additional working capital.

June is a sensible time for these conversations. With the tax year behind them, many business owners have a clearer picture of performance and liabilities and start thinking about the months ahead. In many cases, the funding needed to support those plans is already there, just not being used effectively.

Spotting the opportunity earlier

For those working closely with business owners, this is an area that can be overlooked. A client may not be raising concerns about their borrowing, having accepted their current position as normal. Yet there are often signs. Repayments that feel tight despite good performance. Multiple facilities that could be simplified. Security that has not been reviewed in years.

One example is a business with strong assets but limited working capital due to historic decisions. Another is a company that has outgrown its original lender but has not revisited its structure. In both cases, the opportunity lies in reshaping what already exists.

In many cases, the limitation is not the business itself, but the scope of the conversation. When discussions are held with a single lender, the outcome is often confined to what that lender can offer. Taking a broader view of the market can open alternative structures and more flexibility than might initially seem possible.

A stronger position going forward

Timing matters. Early engagement opens up more options and leads to better outcomes. It allows businesses to make decisions from a position of strength, rather than under pressure.

Unlocking value from existing borrowing rarely grabs attention in the same way as new funding. Yet for many businesses, it can make the greatest difference. Better structured debt can ease cashflow, reduce risk, and create room to move.

The question is not always how to borrow more. Often, it is whether what is already in place is working as hard as it should, and whether the full range of options has been explored.


Andrew Welton

Andrew Welton is a Relationship Development Director at CCBS Group, working with businesses to understand their funding needs and secure the right solutions. He focuses on building long-term relationships and helping business owners access funding that supports growth and stability.

www.ccbsg.co.uk | 0191 211 1471



The personal touch

Clive Owen LLP's tax team is fast becoming one of the North's in demand advisers for businesses and individuals looking to stay ahead of an increasingly complex tax landscape.

The firm's respected tax offering is one of the core strengths of the business, and is identified as an important growth area as part of the wider practice's ambitious strategy to significantly increase its 150-strong workforce by 2030.

Widely regarded as one of the region's leading independent accountancy firms, with geographical presence from York to Newcastle, with Middlesbrough, Darlington and Durham in between, Clive Owen LLP remains proudly independent, a crucial factor that has contributed to its continued, organic growth in recent years.

"This is a firm where we can deliver high quality advice, but with a personal approach," explains David Baggaley, Partner and Head of Tax, who joined the firm in 2022 from the one of the "Big Four".

"Tax has always been one of the core strengths of the business and that was a vital factor in my decision to make the move to an independent practice. What stood out to me was the quality of the client base and the belief that I could add value to the team and enhance the profile of an already strong tax practice."

The team is continuing to grow, offering career opportunities for experienced professionals and trainees alike, with the expectation that Clive Owen LLP's tax team will be 25 strong by the end of the year.

Lee Watson, Tax Partner, has been with the firm for over 12 years and has seen a huge expansion in the tax team from seven tax practitioners to now over three times that number.

He said: "Tax is one of the biggest burdens for an individual or business. While we deliver high-quality compliance work, our real focus is on helping clients manage their tax position through practical, tailored advice, with many of the team possessing Big Four and national experience."

For Elizabeth Layfield, Associate Tax Partner, a straightforward approach from the firm's founder, Clive Owen, has remained a constant that has served her well over the last 28 years with the practice.

"Clive's mantra was to be proactive, a very overused word in today's professional services, but not back then," she explains.

"He used to say, 'if you don't look after the client, someone else will' and that has been the approach that I have taken in my career. It has been incredible to be part of the firm's growth journey, launch new offices, take on new partners and represent amazing clients."



> **Tax is one of the biggest burdens for an individual or business.**

Having enjoyed strong growth across the Tees Valley, fuelled by increased demand across Clive Owen LLP's service lines, the next natural step was to establish a presence further North.

The firm opened its Newcastle office in 2024, led by Tax Partner Stephen Harris. Since then the team has grown to double figures, with plans in place to expand into a new city centre location in the near future.

"I was impressed by the firm's ethos of offering a tailored, client-focused service, which is something that I truly value. The Newcastle office has continued to grow significantly, led in part by our growing range of tax services and specialist personnel."

He added: "We are excited for what the future holds for us in Newcastle, with a new, larger office in the heart of the city centre adding to what has been a successful 18 months here."

Clive Owen LLP's growth on Tyneside has been supported by a strong recruitment drive of respected tax professionals, including Associate Tax Partner Elizabeth Rothery, and a demand for services following announcements delivered in consecutive Budgets.

"These have impacted businesses and individuals quite significantly, but with effective tax planning and proactive advice, we have helped clients mitigate these additional tax burdens," Elizabeth says.

Inheritance Tax matters, among other measures announced by the Chancellor, have contributed to a strong rise in demand for our services. We take great pride in navigating clients through what can be tricky situations and enhancing their tax positions in a timely manner."

Cross-office collaboration and a one team approach play a massive role in the ongoing success of the firm, with clients able to access multiple specialisms, regardless of their geographical location.

Angela Mikola, Associate Tax Partner, is leading Clive Owen LLP's tax expansion further in York.

She said: "Whilst York is the most distant of the offices, we collaborate regularly and emphasise a one team approach to clients and the team itself, which works hand in hand and continues to produce excellent results."

Hydeam Sulton is the most recent tax partner to join the practice, in February 2026 and leads the firm's VAT and Indirect Tax provision – a dedicated service line that is set to benefit clients from a range of sectors.

"My remit is to help our clients navigate the complex world of VAT, which does not particularly align with the logic of other taxes," Hydeam explains.

"Getting it wrong can cause a business significant issues. Our team is highly experienced in a variety of tax matters and would be happy to help you or your business."

It is an exciting time for Clive Owen LLP, as its growing tax offering continues to build momentum and drive further expansion across the North.

www.cliveowen.com


Mark Brown

What an external finance director sees that you don't

By Mark Brown, Director, L4Financial

One of the most valuable things a CEO can introduce into their business is an independent view.

Not more data. Not another report. A clearer line of sight. Because the closer you are to the day-to-day, the harder it becomes to assess it objectively.

From the inside, decisions feel logical. From the outside, patterns are easier to identify. That difference is where most untapped value sits.

Across the SMEs I work with, similar issues surface repeatedly. Not due to a lack of capability, but because leadership teams are operating within the systems and habits they have developed over time.

They are embedded in it.

An external finance director is not there to take on operational finance. The value comes from creating distance and applying an objective lens to the business.

That starts with asking questions that are rarely raised internally.

Why does reporting take this long?

What is driving margin movement, and is it properly understood?

Why are key decisions waiting for month-end?

Why is cash under pressure despite consistent revenue?

These are not technical finance issues. They are commercial ones.

And they are often visible, but not addressed.

In most cases, the data already exists. It simply is not shaping decisions.

This tends to surface most clearly in growing businesses where complexity has outpaced structure. Reporting improves, but clarity does not. More detail is produced, but less is used.

What changes with external input is not the information available, but how it is applied.

Finance moves from describing performance to informing action.

That distinction is where momentum is either created or lost.

Board discussions become more focused.

Reporting becomes more purposeful.

Conversations shift towards forward-looking decisions.

Timing improves.

The role of a fractional finance director is to enable that shift without introducing unnecessary complexity or cost.

However, it does require a willingness to be challenged.

An external FD will question assumptions that have been accepted for years. They will highlight inefficiencies that have become part of the operating model. They will bring clarity to areas that are often left unresolved.

That is not always comfortable.

But it is where progress is made.

The strongest CEO and FD relationships are not defined by agreement. They are defined by constructive tension.

A shared objective, underpinned by open challenge.

If your board meetings are largely spent explaining what has already happened, that is usually the signal.

Not that the business is underperforming.

But that it is not being challenged enough.

Is the business genuinely operating at its full potential, or has it simply stopped being questioned?

L4 Financial Management

L4 Financial provides part-time Finance Director and board advisory support to SMEs, helping leadership teams improve financial visibility and strengthen decision-making as their businesses grow.

Mark works with SME owners and leadership teams who want clearer insight into profitability, cash flow and the key drivers of financial performance.

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L-R: Stuart Hodgson and Lesley Telford FW Capital, Phil Anderson, Tania Cooper and Ashleigh Glass from Steel Benders UK Limited

Teesside investment sparks major site move and growth for SBUK

Steel Benders UK Limited (SBUK) has announced a landmark expansion project following significant investment to support its expansion plans.

The development of new 40,000 sq ft industrial premises at the former Caparo and forge plant site on Brenda Road in Hartlepool has been funded by a collaborative investment. This sees the firm match significant external funding via the Teesside Flexible Investment Fund with its own substantial financial commitment.

SBUK's new development will enable the steel profiling and forming specialists to relocate its operations from Middlesbrough and embark on an exciting new chapter of growth. It will double the firm's capacity and create at least 15 new jobs for the local community.

The funding has been delivered via the Teesside Flexible Investment Fund which is managed by FW Capital with investment from the Teesside Pension Fund. The development will create a modern office space and a base for the only 8x2m fibre laser cutting bed in the North of England, further increasing SBUK's capabilities and service offering.

Established in 2002, SBUK is the largest steel bending company in the North East offering high-precision services such as plate rolling, section bending and press braking. The firm's facilities use advanced high-definition plasma and laser cutting technology, making it a comprehensive one-stop shop for steel profiling.

Tania Cooper, Owner and Director at SBUK said: "The new facility provides the necessary scale and infrastructure to house our latest state-of-the-art machinery. This expansion, underpinned by significant capital investment, enhances our capacity for large-scale bending and profiling. This site is a testament to the future of SBUK and our commitment to the region. We are grateful to the team at FW Capital for their invaluable partnership in realising this vision"

Lesley Telford, Senior Investment Executive at FW Capital added: "With a 20-year track record of excellence across the UK, SBUK is now deploying this investment into scaling up. It's fantastic to back their new Hartlepool development through the Teesside Flexible Investment Fund—an investment that directly fuels their expansion and meets the rising demand for their expertise."

Councillor John Kabuye, Chair of the Teesside Pension Fund Committee, said: "The Flexible Investment Fund is all about supporting local businesses to grow, creating new jobs and prosperity for the whole Tees area. SBUK are at the cutting edge of this highly specialised field, and I wish them every success for the future."

Designed by FW Capital with investment from the Teesside Pension Fund, the Teesside Flexible Investment Fund provides a mix of property development funding, contract-related bond finance and finance to support management teams in buying a business, covering Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton-on-Tees. This provision of loan and equity packages to support management buy-outs and the transfer of ownership is a first for FW Capital.

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

Are law firms ready for changes to data protection complaints rules?

By Carolyn Beal, Legal Compliance Consultant, Beal Cooper Compliance Ltd

It has been on the horizon for a while, but the deadline for implementing data protection complaints procedures is 19th June 2026 and it is important that firms do not simply rely on their existing client complaints procedure without amendment.



Carolyn Beal

The Data (Use and Access) Act 2025 ("DUAA 2025") requires a specific data protection complaints process.

Law firms are already required to have a complaints procedure and a process for protecting personal data, but complaints about the latter are not often specifically covered by the former.

Under the DUAA 2025, firms must:

- provide a way for people to make data protection complaints
- acknowledge receipt of the complaint within 30 days of receipt
- without undue delay, take appropriate steps to respond to the complaint, including making appropriate enquiries and ensuring the person is kept informed
- without undue delay, tell the person the outcome of their complaint

There is no set way to deal with the requirements, so law firms could consider whether to adapt their existing complaints procedure, or whether to create a separate data protection complaints procedure.

My preference is for a separate procedure rather than incorporating them. Despite having two procedures, it will be much easier to manage. Client complaints and general data protection complaints will be overseen by separate regulatory bodies, with different mandatory requirements and regulatory approaches.

Attempting to cover the different requirements in one document will likely lead to complexity and room for confusion, for example, explaining which organisation to refer to if the complainant remains dissatisfied. How will you explain in plain terms which complaints will escalate to the Legal Ombudsman, the SRA, or the ICO, then explain the process to follow for each?

Data protection complaints can come from any individual, not just clients. Potential complainants to the SRA or LeO are more limited. The references to each type of complainant will be different.

Under the DUAA 2025, firms must accept complaints about data protection no matter how they are received, including over social media for firms with a social media presence.

Firms must consider their internal resources and ability to manage processes and complaints, to protect their reputation and avoid penalties. No matter how you plan to implement the requirements, it is helpful to consider:

- Will you have a designated data protection email address?
- How will you manage complaints received over the phone or via social media?
- Will you reference the procedure in the client care letter alongside other complaints information, or will you reference it in a privacy notice?
- Who is responsible for coordinating the process?
- How will you train employees to recognise a data protection complaint and refer it to the correct person?
- If data protection complaints will not be managed by your COLP, are you confident an upheld complaint will be reported to them as a breach?

When you create your data protection complaints procedure, as a minimum I'd recommend that it covers:

- your preferred method for receiving complaints (remember that people can use other methods)
- an explanation of how you will check the identity of the complainant
- details of how you will deal with complaints made on behalf of others
- an explanation of how you will keep people informed of progress
- compliance with other regulatory requirements, such as equality legislation
- confirmation of the complainant to escalate the matter to the ICO
- publication of the procedure on your website

I can help firms decide on the best way for them to comply, so please get in touch for more information.

www.bealcoopercompliance.co.uk

Accountant of the month

Adrienne Paterson

Tax Director at Johnston Carmichael

Adrienne is a Chartered Tax Adviser with extensive experience, having worked in the accountancy sector for more than 30 years, who joined Johnston Carmichael in 2025 as a Tax Director in their Transaction Tax team. Johnston Carmichael is one of the UK's leading independent accountancy and advisory firms. Founded in Scotland 90 years ago, the firm expanded into the North East in 2023, opening a new office based in Newcastle's city centre. Since opening, the office has been committed to supporting growing businesses across the region.

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

At university, I did a degree in Business Studies, which after graduating, opened up a vast range of options for me to explore. What attracted me to being a tax adviser, though, was the combination of logical thinking and problem-solving that the role required. It's a job that constantly keeps me on my toes, as the environment I work in is always changing.

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

Across the board, the most common mistake I encounter is a lack of planning. At each stage in a business's life cycle, there are different vital taxes to be aware of. It's important to always be conscious of the future to ensure your commercial position and tax position are aligned so that tax does not become an unexpected cost.

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

Tax advice often involves absorbing and contrasting large amounts of information, for example, financial accounts and case law. One tool that can help with this is AI, speeding up the analysis process so an experienced tax adviser can reach a more comprehensive understanding. AI is certainly not a substitute for the human experience though; it's a tool to be utilised by experienced individuals to improve efficiency.

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

I'd say that ensuring your "house is in order" will pay dividends if you decide to look at selling. When undergoing a sale, a buyer will usually undertake tax due diligence on the target. Occasionally, the due diligence process throws up compliance tax issues, which impact the transaction and potentially the outcome of the sale. Often, if these issues are addressed at an earlier stage, they would not have the same impact on the transaction.

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

For me, I think that the key to providing good tax advice that is relevant and practical all comes back to making sure you take the time to establish a detailed understanding of your client. I think it's incredibly important to maintain an open dialogue with them and really make sure you understand them and their needs.

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

In recent years, the Government has followed the pattern of announcing significant changes to tax law in advance, which has allowed businesses with a refined strategy to take action well in advance. A good, recent example of this is the change to the Inheritance Tax relief, known as Business Property Relief. While the benefit of the relief came into effect on 6th April 2026, the changes were initially announced in the Autumn 2024 Budget. This left a window of over a year for proactive taxpayers and their advisers to take appropriate action to minimise its impact.

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

While lots of people might look at accountancy as being all about the numbers, it's actually really geared towards the people involved and understanding how best to assist them. This all leads back to one of our core values at Johnston Carmichael, "standing in other people's shoes". This outlook helps me build trust with my clients and professional advisers, making a complex and lengthy process manageable for all.

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

Working with a great team is extremely important, and I'm fortunate to have this both internally within Johnston Carmichael and with those I work with externally. No single adviser has all of the answers, so maintaining good communication and collaboration helps the process run smoothly.

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

I would always say to ensure that at each life stage in the business, you have the right advisers on board to help you remain efficient and keep the process moving forward. Having the right people around you is a key to success for both your client and yourself.

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

My job allows me to meet so many different people and businesses, which offers me a huge amount of diversity! Combining this with knowing you've made a positive difference and helped a client achieve their goal is really what brings me to work each day with a smile on my face.

www.jcca.co.uk



> **The most common mistake I encounter is a lack of planning.**

Adrienne Paterson



Ian McElroy

People talk about the brain drain – this is the North East money drain'

Offering a candid perspective on regional investment, economic potential and the long-term vision behind Develop North PLC - journalist Simon Rushworth, talks to Ian McElroy, Chief Executive, Tier One Capital and founding board member of North East investment company, Develop North PLC.

The interview explores the concept of the North East's 'money drain' and sets out a compelling case for keeping investment within the region to drive growth, opportunity and lasting impact.

"More than one hundred billion pounds belongs to people who live in the North East," Ian explains.

It's the kind of sum that naturally elicits a sharp intake of breath — a transformative amount that could truly reshape our region.

"You might have some savings, your next-door neighbour will invest in some stocks and shares and the lady behind the bar at your local will have a little pension."

Does a lifetime collection of limited edition 50p pieces stored in a chipped Doulton sugar bowl count?

"Look, it all adds up, whether it's £100 or £100,000," Ian points out. "Put all of our region's money into a big pot and that's more than £100bn that belongs to the North East. Pretty much none of that is invested in our region."

"What happens is that we put our regional worth into savings schemes month after month — and I'm including pensions here — without thinking about where it's going or what it might do to benefit our region," adds Ian.

"Think of it like a giant holdall of North East cash. We drop it off at Newcastle's Central Station and wave it off to London, never to be seen again."

"What makes it even crazier is we then have these trade missions all over the world to ask for the money back! Don't get me started on inward investment. People talk about the North East brain drain — this is the North East money drain."

"Develop North's Investment fund aims to plug that drain."

It turns out Rachel Reeves is of a similar opinion when it comes to the perceived 'craziness' of the current situation. At last summer's Mansion House speech, the Chancellor addressed pension reform and pledged to ringfence 5% of local government pension scheme assets for investment in regional growth.

"The decision to amend the Pension Schemes Bill to include investment companies is welcome news for Develop North, opening the door for pension schemes to play a greater role in funding infrastructure, housing and regional growth."

How would that look in the North East? The latest published reports reveal that the Tyne and Wear Pension Fund (TWPF) had net assets of £13.5bn. Under Reeves' reforms that would translate to a guaranteed £675m investment in regional growth.

"I've long advocated for a hypothetical 1% contribution and even that would equate to £135m," adds Ian. "It's no small sum. Five per cent of the TWPF could do so much good for the people who already pay into its fund."

"We simply want to retain what's ours. Keep North East money in North East hands. We've launched an investment fund that's accessible to everyone. If we're going to invest in the region, we want that to be an opportunity for everyone to invest in the region. If people have ownership of assets in the place that they live and work, I can guarantee you that connection between people and place will be way higher than anywhere else in the country. We're so passionate about our region and as a wider community we want it to thrive."

"Develop North offers an opportunity to the people of the North East to invest in the North East. See where your money goes, experience its effect and celebrate its impact. Oh, and enjoy a return on your investment too."

"Now with the combination of devolved regional powers — and we anticipate working alongside the North East Combined Authority and the Tees Valley Combined Authority by complementing public sector investment with private sector money — and the Saudi ownership of Newcastle United means the spotlight is on our region right now."

Right person at the right time

"But to take the next step we needed a recognisable and well-connected CEO, rooted in our region, with experience of both the public and private sector," explains Ian.

"A figurehead. As luck would have it I had a coffee with that person last year…"

By the time Michelle Percy left her prominent position as Director of Investment and Place last summer, one of the North East's most proactive regeneration and investment leaders had held four key roles across nine years at Newcastle City Council. Prior to that, her private sector experience included oversight of a series of commercial and mixed-use developments. Develop North felt like the perfect fit.

"If you're going to appoint someone to be chief executive of a PLC, they have to be an experienced business leader," adds Ian.

Michelle stepped into her Develop North role towards the end of January. Two months down the line and Ian reports the board's key hire has hit the ground running.

"I probably underestimated just how connected Michelle is," admits Ian. "Not just in the North East but also nationally and internationally. She's also brilliant at managing people. We've been hugely impressed at how she can bring a team together quickly."

"Michelle is raising Develop North's profile and raising awareness. That experience of the private and the public sector is priceless at this stage of our journey."

So what does the future hold for Develop North? Flick through the firm's website and the key numbers that flash across a clean homepage are hugely impressive: 12,000 jobs created with their help; almost £90m in real estate investment raised since 2017; 43 projects undertaken with 35 developers; and a gross development value in excess of £280m. According to Ian, it's only the start.

"The surface has only been scratched." says Ian.

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



Michelle Percy



Our team is our greatest asset, and we want people to build long, fulfilling careers here.

Victoria Walton with Jonathan Moreland

Managing Partner transition at Swinburne Maddison

A joint interview with Jonathan Moreland and Victoria Walton.

Looking back over your careers at Swinburne Maddison, what's been a defining moment?

Jonathan: Some of my proudest moments include being a founding partner of what we now know as Swinburne Maddison, by way of merger in 1998. Later being appointed Managing Partner in 2021 was also a significant milestone. It reflects both my own progression and the firm's development over time.

Victoria: When I joined, the firm already had a strong reputation, but it was very different to what it is today. From early on, I was involved in its growth and direction. Becoming a Partner was a real highlight, and being appointed Managing Partner now feels like the natural culmination of my journey here.

How has the firm evolved, and what has stayed constant?

Jonathan: I hope the culture has remained consistent. When the firm was much smaller, the feeling was very similar to what we have today. What has changed significantly is the level of support available to teams. We now have both a strong operational structure and a leading reputation as a specialist law firm.

Victoria: The scale, structure and support we have now are very different, but the sense of belonging and shared purpose has remained. The firm has grown by developing its own people while also making strategic appointments. The way we work with technology has significantly changed how things are done day to day. When I first joined we didn't even have computers on our desks and we weren't using the internet regularly!

People talk a lot about culture. What does it look like in practice?

Jonathan: Every organisation has a personality. Culture needs to be positive, inclusive and instil a sense of belonging, and if it isn't actively nurtured it can be lost quickly. Leadership plays a crucial role in setting the tone by leading by example every day.

Victoria: Culture shows itself in how people work together and how supported they feel. We make sure staff have a voice and that communication works both ways. As we grow, recruiting people who are the right cultural fit, not just technically, but it is essential to protecting that culture.

What makes the firm so strong right now?

Jonathan: Every department, legal and non-legal, has grown and strengthened and really matters. The support structures now in place allow teams to focus on their legal work, while highly specialist lateral hires and Partner appointments have further strengthened key practice areas.

That's reflected in the fact we've just completed our three-year business plan, hitting our financial and other objectives and putting the firm on a very solid footing for what comes next.

Victoria: This is the strongest team the firm has ever had. We've nurtured talent internally while also bringing in people with different outlooks and skill sets, and we have a strong record of retention at all levels. That depth and resilience puts the firm in a very strong position. Many of the equity partners trained at Swinburne Maddison and we have a good record of retaining talent at all levels. We have also made strategic appointments, bringing in people with different experiences and skill sets.

Why is developing people so important?

Jonathan: The firm has always been built on its people. Many of us trained here and progressed together over long careers. Supporting development strengthens the firm and provides continuity.

Victoria: It's fundamental. Investing in training, giving honest feedback and supporting progression benefits both individuals and the firm. Our team is our greatest asset, and we want people to build long, fulfilling careers here. We want to make sure that our team can develop fulfilling careers with us.

Victoria, how did it feel to be asked to step into the Managing Partner role?

I felt incredibly proud to be asked. It's a huge responsibility, but one I am ready for. I've been part of the growth and direction of the firm for a long time, so this feels like a natural next step rather than a sudden change.

Why was careful succession planning so important?

Jonathan: We wanted absolute clarity before announcing my retirement. Uncertainty can lead to worry and rumours, and we've always believed in being open and honest with both staff and clients.

Victoria: The transition allows for proper knowledge transfer while continuing to deliver our business plan, while also giving people confidence in where the firm is heading. I'll remain part of the management team and become even more involved in the responsibilities Jonathan currently handles.

Why does now feel like the right time?

Jonathan: I wanted to step back knowing the firm was strong and stable, and to allow someone else to take it to the next level. I will miss our firm hugely and especially our people, be they colleagues, clients or contacts. Many of them have become friends. I've spent over 35 years here, and the firm has always been a place where people feel they belong. For clients, it really is business as usual — the same teams and the same commitment.

Victoria: I feel proud and ready to take on the role. While it's a huge responsibility, it's one I've planned for, and I'm excited to build on the strong foundations already in place. It is bittersweet because Jonathan has been a huge part of Swinburne Maddison and will be a huge miss. Jonathan cares deeply about the firm and its success in the future and so the fact that he feels that it is the right time to hand over the reins is a huge compliment not only to me but also the wider partnership and management structure.

What excites you most about the future?

Victoria: The people. We have an incredibly strong, ambitious team, and that gives me real confidence about what lies ahead.

swinburnemaddison.co.uk


Katie Beddoes


Mark Ellis


Kay Ditcham

The tough get going

When life hits hard, in steps Katie Beddoes.

A partner at Tilly Bailey & Irvine (TBI Law), Katie and her team handle – amongst other things – personal injury claims.

"It can be anything from traffic accidents to slipping in an aisle at Tesco," said Katie.

"It ultimately doesn't matter; If you've suffered and it wasn't your fault, then we are here to try and ease that pain and ensure you don't also suffer financially."

With fourteen fee-earning staff, backed up by an impressive admin team, the department is a key part of what is one of the North East's largest, oldest and most successful law firms.

For well over a century, TBI Law has been helping clients with every aspect of the law – from criminal defence, to will writing.

Having started in Hartlepool, it has grown across Teesside and County Durham. Last year, it expanded into Sunderland.

That's where Katie is now based – and she's busy.

"At any one time, our department has hundreds of claims ongoing, with a varied caseload," she added.

And busy is the key word throughout the Sunderland branch, since TBI Law merged with Scanlans last Spring. And not least because word is spreading about the personal injury team's expertise.

"For years, TBI has been a really respected regional force but increasingly, our clients are spread across the country," revealed Katie.

"We are getting leads from London, Wales – you name it. And I think a big driver is the success we have and the significance of the cases we work on."

They include some of the biggest cases in the North East, among them the Infected Blood Enquiry and the Medomsley Detention Centre – cases that have dominated the news agenda in recent years.

And while TBI Law's highly experienced personal injury team take on cases both big and small, they won't waste your time.

"We work on a no-win, no-fee basis, and the nature of personal injury claims – particularly clinical negligence – means they are incredibly difficult cases to win because of their complexity and how long they take to conclude," said Durham-born Katie, who has over two decades of experience.

"We know the process can take a toll on the claimant, that's why if we take it on, we feel we can deliver a result – and we also do all the leg work."

For instance, with clinical negligence cases, Katie and her team do everything from securing medical records to obtaining medical expertise to back-up a claim.

"We handle all sorts of cases; Traffic accidents, holiday sickness, industrial accidents and even deaths in custody – our workload is incredibly varied, and that means our skillset and expertise is too," added Katie.

And the award-winning firm has a wealth of in-house expertise to tap into to help your claim.

That includes John Hall, a national authority on clinical negligence, along with senior parters Mark Ellis – an industrial disease expert – and Kay Ditcham, the department's head, who offers decades of experience within personal injury and industrial disease work.


John Hall

And while TBI Law may be making national inroads, most of their clients remain in the North East – thanks to good old-fashioned word-of-mouth.

"A lot of our cases are walk-ins, which is increasingly rare, but speaks volumes for our reputation in this region," added Katie.

"We are firmly established in Teesside, and thanks to the Sunderland office, our presence is really growing further north.

"A big factor is the fact we are a full-service law firm, and our team's size and skills mean we can offer so much more than other firms and we can refer internally.

"More than anything, we deliver results – and we always have our clients' interests at heart."

www.tbilaw.co.uk



Rachel Armstrong

Partnership disputes: why a partnership agreement is essential

By Rachel Armstrong, Solicitor, Dispute Resolution Team at Hay & Kilner

When disputes arise between business partners, the route to resolution often turns on one key question: is there a partnership agreement in place? While many partnerships begin with optimism and shared ambition, the absence of a formal written agreement can quickly turn misunderstandings into costly disputes.

A partnership agreement is a legally binding contract that defines the relationship between partners. It sets out each partner's rights, responsibilities and obligations, and addresses key areas such as financial arrangements, decision-making processes, and procedures for joining or leaving the business. Although not a legal requirement, having a carefully drafted agreement is strongly recommended.

Without such an agreement, partnerships are governed by the default provisions of the Partnership Act 1890. While this legislation provides a basic framework, it is often ill-suited to modern business. For example, it assumes equal sharing of profits and losses regardless of contribution, requires unanimous consent for certain decisions, and can result in automatic dissolution if a partner exits, dies or becomes bankrupt. These outcomes rarely reflect the intentions of today's business partners and can create significant challenges when disputes arise.

Partnership disputes commonly stem from a breakdown in personal relationships, but can also arise from financial pressures, differing strategic visions, or imbalances in contribution. Disagreements over profit distribution, decision-making authority, or the future direction of the business can escalate quickly where expectations have not been clearly defined. Issues such as breaches of fiduciary duties, the admission or removal of partners, and disagreements over exit terms are also common sources of conflict.

Many of these disputes can be avoided, or at least mitigated, through a well-drafted partnership agreement. By documenting expectations at the outset, partners reduce ambiguity and prevent minor misunderstandings from developing into legal disputes.

One of the primary benefits of a partnership agreement is clarity around financial arrangements. Financial disagreements are among the most common causes of partnership disputes, so it is essential to define how profits and losses are shared. Without explicit provisions, the default position of equal sharing may lead to resentment, particularly where partners have contributed differing levels of capital or effort.

Defining roles and responsibilities is equally important. A partnership agreement should clearly outline each partner's duties and authority, helping to avoid confusion over who is responsible for what and who has the power to make key decisions.

Decision-making procedures are another critical element. An effective agreement will specify which decisions require unanimous consent, which can be made by majority, and how deadlock situations should be resolved.

Exit provisions are also vital. A well-drafted agreement should address what happens when a partner wishes to leave or retire, or in the event of death or incapacity. Without such provisions, the default legal position may result in automatic dissolution of the partnership.

Finally, partnership agreements should include dispute resolution mechanisms. Provisions for negotiation, mediation or arbitration can offer a more efficient and less adversarial alternative to litigation.

While it is impossible to eliminate all risk of dispute, proactive planning and clear communication can make a significant difference. A robust partnership agreement not only provides a framework for managing disagreements but also strengthens the foundation of the business itself.

Hay & Kilner's Dispute Resolution Team has extensive experience advising on partnership disputes across a range of sectors. By offering clear, pragmatic guidance and engaging early, we help clients resolve issues efficiently, minimise disruption, and protect valuable commercial relationships. Get in touch to find out how they can help you.

www.hay-kilner.co.uk



> **Confidence comes from trusting that you're learning and developing as you go.**

Georgia Whitfield

Solicitor of the Month...

Georgia Whitfield

Senior Associate, Commercial Property Team, Hay & Kilner

What were your career ambitions growing up?

Looking back, I didn't follow a carefully mapped-out path into law, although I did confidently stand up in my primary school leavers' assembly and say I wanted to be a lawyer, without really understanding what that involved at the time.

More generally, I was always focused on doing whatever I chose to the best of my ability. Law started to feel like a natural fit when I studied at Newcastle University. I particularly enjoyed exploring law in a broader context and seeing how much of it is about people and decision-making, not just theory. I've carried that perspective throughout my career and always try to understand the personal drivers behind a transaction.

Growing up in the North East also shaped my career decisions. I've always been proud to live and work here, and being involved in regional projects and the communities they impact felt like a natural fit.

Tell us about your current role and what you most enjoy?

I'm a Senior Associate in the Commercial Property team at Hay & Kilner, advising on land acquisitions, disposals and development projects for businesses, charities and investors. Much of the work is fast-paced and collaborative, often involving multiple teams and stakeholders.

A recent example is our involvement in Hubexo's office relocation, where we worked closely with the client, agent and building consultant. It's a great example of the strategic, multi-disciplinary work we do.

I'm also involved in equality, diversity and inclusion initiatives at the firm, which is something I'm genuinely passionate about. Support isn't just talked about, it's embedded across the business.

What is your proudest business achievement?

Probably the recognition both the firm and I have received for our EDI work over the past year. I've been fortunate to receive two awards in that space - "Most Inspiring Employer" at the NECC Inspirational Women in Business awards and "Rising Star" at the Women and Diversity in Law awards - which has been incredibly meaningful.

EDI work often feels like a long-term commitment, with much of the impact happening behind the scenes, so external recognition felt both personal and important. That said, I also take huge pride in seeing people I've mentored or supported go on to thrive in the profession.

How has your industry evolved in the last decade and what changes do you see ahead?

There has been a clear and positive shift towards greater diversity within the legal profession. At Hay & Kilner, that's reflected at all levels, including our Management Board, where there is strong female representation alongside supportive allies.

Looking ahead, I think the focus will move beyond representation alone to embedding inclusion more meaningfully, not just opening doors, but ensuring people have the support and opportunities to succeed.

What are you currently working on?

Alongside my Commercial Property work, I'm actively involved in EDI initiatives within the firm, focusing on inclusion, visibility and progression. I'm also a member of the Law Society's LGBTQ+ Committee, contributing to policy, events and representation at a national level.

Balancing that with client work means there's always plenty going on, but it's a combination I really enjoy.

Tell us about the team you work with.

It's a strong mix of ambitious and supportive people, and what stands out most is how well everyone works together. There's a genuine sense of collaboration, and people are encouraged to be themselves. That authenticity creates different perspectives, which makes the team stronger and more dynamic.

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

I'd probably say don't aim for perfection at every stage. It's easy to put a lot of pressure on yourself early on, especially in professions that attract perfectionists.

In reality, confidence comes from trusting that you're learning and developing as you go. A bit less overthinking and a bit more self-belief can make a real difference.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?

I'd love to continue having a meaningful influence on culture and progression within the profession. I'd like to be actively driving change around representation and diversity, not just taking part in those conversations, but helping shape them.

Who would be your four ideal dinner guests?

A mix of inspiration and good conversation:

- **Simone Biles** - trailblazing athlete and champion of mental wellbeing
- **Freddie Mercury** - an LGBTQ+ icon
- **Barack Obama** - for setting a modern standard in leadership and communication
- **David Attenborough** - for storytelling and a lifetime of experience

Alternatively, my close friends are spread across the country, so bringing everyone together for one dinner would be pretty special.

How do you unwind outside of work?

Exercise is a big part of how I unwind. I used to be a competitive hurdler, so being active has always played a large role in my routine. I also enjoy spending time with my dog, Murphy, who is very good at enforcing proper downtime.

Favourite book and box set?

I'm a serial re-watcher of comedies like *Peep Show*, *The Office*, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* and *Parks and Recreation*.

www.hay-kilner.co.uk

Sintons strengthens real estate team with appointment of Partner Claire Archer

Sintons has announced a significant boost to its nationally-recognised real estate practice with the appointment of Claire Archer as a Partner.

Claire joins the firm with an exceptional track record in all aspects of commercial real estate. She brings particular expertise in large-scale development projects and regularly advises PLC house builders on site acquisitions and navigating complex title matters. Her experience also extends to acting for institutional landlords in the acquisition, disposal, and development of major mixed commercial schemes.

Throughout her career, Claire has led some of the sector's most high-profile transactions. Notable highlights include:

Specialist Healthcare: Leading the £200m acquisition of a specialist care property portfolio from CareTech for Civitas Investment Management.

Historic Redevelopment: Advising the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan on the transformation and multi-letting of the Grade II listed 78 St James's Street in London.

Public Sector & Regeneration: Negotiating the sale and leaseback for a £100m city centre redevelopment on behalf of a local council, creating 120,000 sq ft of Grade A office space.

Retail & Leisure: Acting for Lendlease and Invesco Real Estate on the £60m extension of the Queensgate Centre in Peterborough, securing anchor tenancies with John Lewis, River Island, and Five Guys.

Alok Loomba, Partner and Head of Real Estate at Sintons, commented: "We are thrilled to welcome Claire to the partnership. Her reputation for handling intricate, high-value development work precedes her, and her arrival marks a key milestone in our growth strategy. Claire's ability to manage complex due diligence and multi-disciplinary teams makes her a formidable asset to our clients and a perfect fit for our expanding real estate offering."

Claire Archer, Partner at Sintons, added: "I am delighted to join Sintons at such an exciting time for the firm. Sintons has a longstanding reputation for excellence and a deeply client-focused culture. I look forward to working alongside Alok and the wider team to deliver strategic advice on the ambitious development and regeneration projects that are currently shaping our landscape."

Claire's appointment reinforces Sintons' position as a leader in the real estate sector, capable of managing the most sophisticated legal challenges in construction, planning, and property litigation.

www.sintons.co.uk



> **I am delighted to join Sintons at such an exciting time for the firm.**

Claire Archer


Lydia McCaslin

Why a will isn't just for later life

Mincoffs Solicitors' wills, probate and trusts partner Lydia McCaslin advises why it is never too early to get your affairs in order.

When old age feels like a distant concept and you are often being encouraged to enjoy your youth, writing a will can easily fall to the wayside.

However, with 41% of young adults in the UK aged 18-24 now having a will, data suggests more and more young adults are choosing to plan ahead.

When can I make a will?

In the UK, you can legally write your will as soon as you turn 18 years old, but when you feel ready to write a will can very much depend on your personal circumstances. Key factors that often encourage someone to write a will include:

- Having children
- Buying a home
- Starting a business
- Marriage, cohabitation or divorce
- A new job or promotion

What happens if I don't have a will?

If you die without making a valid will, your estate will be distributed in accordance with the rules of intestacy. These rules determine who is entitled to inherit your estate, and whilst this may seem like a straightforward alternative to writing a will, the outcome is not always what people expect.

For instance, the rules of intestacy make no provisions for unmarried partners or close friends, nor do they take into account complex or strained family relationships.

By writing a will, you retain control over what happens to your assets after your death and can ensure your estate is distributed in line with your wishes.

Why should I plan ahead?

1. Life is unpredictable and can change in an instant. Having a will can provide peace of mind should something unexpected happen.

2. Reduce stress for your family. In the event of your passing, a will guides your loved ones during an already difficult time by clearly outlining your wishes and ensuring your estate is distributed the way you intended.

3. You may already have assets. Even if you are young, you might own a car, have savings, investments, digital assets or personal belongings that matter to you. Writing a will allows you to decide who receives them.

How do I write a will?

Start by reviewing your assets and liabilities. Creating a clear list of what you own and any debts you have will help you understand the scope of your estate and make it easier to decide who should inherit specific items.

Next, appoint an executor. This individual will be responsible for managing your estate, distributing assets and paying any tax due on your estate. Your executor could be a trusted family member, friend or solicitor.

You may also want to include your funeral wishes. This could be as simple as stating whether you prefer burial or cremation, or could be as detailed as specifying music choices and the location of the service.

Finally, draft your will. Whilst some people choose to write their own, many find it helpful to seek professional guidance from a solicitor to ensure there are no issues, and everything is comprehensive.

If you would like to discuss making a will or planning for your future, Mincoffs' private client team are here to help. With a wealth of experience and specialist expertise, our solicitors are on hand to provide clear, practical advice tailored to your needs.

To book an appointment with one of the wills, probate and trusts team, please email probate@mincoffs.co.uk or call the office on 0191 281 6151.

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New unfair dismissal claims – are you ready?

If you're going to protect your company, monitoring new employees' performance is key, says Jennifer Cafferky, Associate Solicitor in the Employment Team at Cartmell Shepherd Solicitors.

A new stage of the Employment Rights Act is coming into force and businesses need to prepare now.

The Act became law in December 2025 and has already changed sick pay, paternity and parental rights. One of the next steps begins on 1 January 2027 and affects those early months of an employee's contract, when they first have the chance to show they are the right person for the role. From that date, the Act will reduce the length of service required to bring an unfair dismissal claim from two years down to six months.

While a probationary period of up to six months will still be lawful, employers and managers will need to make sure that they are actively reviewing performance and conduct during that time. If they fail to do so, they risk unfair dismissal claims after six months of continuous service. Employers dismissing near to this six-month deadline may also be caught out if an employee would have had the necessary service had they been allowed to work their notice period.

Even if you have a fair reason for terminating an individual's contract – like misconduct, or poor performance, or if you need to make a position redundant – you have to be extra careful.

Every effort must be made to alert the employee to why their performance is falling short through regular appraisals, probation reviews or formal performance meetings. These must be supported by written records of what has been requested and achieved.

But companies often fail to do this until it is too late and the probationary period has passed. Be aware that if you don't keep those written records, giving evidence to an Employment Tribunal is going to be challenging.

You can plan for this with a few careful steps:

- Draft a clear job description when you advertise
- Clearly set out expectations when you hire
- Conduct a good induction process
- Provide appropriate training – for your employee and for your managers
- Implement a fully-explained probation period
- Ensure internal policies and procedures are updated in advance
- Ideally, reviews during a probation period should be completed every month.

In addition, from October 2026, the existing three-month time limit to pursue an unfair dismissal claim is expected to increase to six months. Employees are required to submit an Early Conciliation Notification Form to ACAS within this period. Employers will therefore need to remain vigilant for a longer period following post-October dismissals.

And please bear in mind that the six months' continuous service rule does not apply to other claims such as disability discrimination. These can still be brought from day one of a person's employment.

Another change coming into force from 1 January 2027 is the removal of the cap on the compensatory award for unfair dismissal claims. This means awards for successful claims are likely to be higher.

The Cartmell Shepherd Employment Team is available to discuss all the legislation changes, including advising you in advance of recruiting. If you suspect there is a risk of litigation, or have been contacted by ACAS, we are available to support you.

Please don't wait until December. We're here to advise you now.

The information in this article is for information only and does not constitute professional legal advice. If you need expert support contact Jennifer and the Employment Team by calling 01228 516666 or emailing enquiries@cartmells.co.uk



> **Employers will therefore need to remain vigilant for a longer period.**

Jennifer Cafferky



5 reasons why it pays to invest in data compliance

Data is the new currency - ubiquitous, valuable and in high demand. Organisations of all sizes are handling and processing data all the time while striving to keep it safe from attack and misuse.

And this is their legal responsibility.

Commercial law firm, Muckle LLP, looks at why a robust training programme is crucial to the mix and how the right training keeps you a step ahead.

Virtually every organisation handles data multiple times a day – processing or managing it with a suite of software solutions. The risk of staff inadvertently leaking or mishandling data is significant. Add to this the growing volume of data requests and the increasing number of attacks from sophisticated AI agents or bots and it's a perfect storm.

But it doesn't have to be this way. With the right training, you can help protect your organisation, your employees and customer data, while ensuring compliance with regulations at every stage. When a minor slip-up could have devastating consequences, it pays to train.

Here are five top reasons why:

Reason 1 – It's complicated!
Organisations use and process data in a host of different ways. They might be acting in multiple capacities or with different software suites, and this is where things get complicated. The law makes numerous demands on organisations depending on how they handle data – and they must ensure absolute compliance at every stage.

This is further complicated when data is transferred internationally. The organisation is responsible for doing the right checks and making sure any data transferred overseas is handled in the right way in line with UK law.

Reason 2 – Changing, challenging tech
Smarter tech helps staff manage and process data requests, but it is also part of the problem. Advancements in AI have resulted in automatically generated requests flooding organisations. As these are frequently peppered with mistakes, staff face a substantial volume of new work and must process more data faster than ever.

Reason 3 – It's the law
Businesses can't pick and choose which pieces of data legislation to adhere to. The rules can be complex, but compliance is non-negotiable, and falling foul of regulations can lead to hefty fines.

Alex Craig, partner and head of commercial at Muckle, says, "With technology changing all the time, organisations are keen to keep pace. But they must also ensure compliance with the law and regulations at every stage.

"For this reason, it's crucial companies don't see data protection training as a simple box-ticking exercise, done and dusted after a single training course."

Reason 4 – People make mistakes
Over 60% of data breaches are down to human error, according to a report from Verizon Data Breach Investigations. It's easy to input the wrong email and share sensitive information or inadvertently click on a link and expose your system to a digital attack.

Training can teach your staff how to spot risks and mitigate them early.

And if the worst happens and the company does suffer a data breach, training can teach your staff to manage the event and significantly reduce its impact.

Alex says, "Your staff are your first and last line of defence. By giving them the right skills, you create a more secure system in-house, reducing your reliance on potentially costly external third-party providers."

Reason 5 – Cyber threat
High-profile ransomware attacks are becoming a regular occurrence driven by the huge advancement in AI and bot technology. According to Government data, around 19,000 UK businesses were affected by ransomware in 2025 with 4.4 million user records exposed in the UK during Q4 2024.

"Our suite of training solutions can really help," says Alex. "Companies need peace of mind in the face of potentially existential threats. By investing in proper and regular training for staff, they can be confident they have complied with the law and done their utmost to protect business assets."

No train, no gain

The scale of an organisation's legal responsibilities, along with the threat to data, can seem daunting in the extreme. But the problem is easily rectified. By investing in regular staff training, your employees gain the skills and the confidence to handle data correctly. You keep valuable personal and company data safe and secure, you remain compliant and you never fall foul of the rules.

For more information on Muckle data protection courses and upcoming events, please visit: www.muckle-llp.com/events

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Rishi Kohli

Successful franchising: structure before scale

By Rishi Kohli, Corporate & Commercial Partner, Sweeney Miller

From convenience stores and coffee shops to takeaway brands, cleaning and property services, and education and entertainment businesses, franchising continues to be an attractive route to growth for many businesses.

A successful brand, a proven model and the opportunity to expand can understandably make franchising appealing. However, successful franchising is rarely as simple as replicating an existing business model.

At the heart of most successful franchise arrangements is one key factor: clear expectations from the outset.

From a franchisor's perspective, protecting the brand is critical. Customers expect consistency, whether they are dealing with the original business or a franchise operation. That consistency often extends beyond branding into operational standards, customer experience, supplier arrangements and marketing approaches.

For franchisees, the attraction is often the ability to operate under an established brand with existing systems and support. However, franchisees are also independent business owners investing significant time and money into their operation.

Tensions can arise where expectations around autonomy, performance or support are not properly aligned from the outset. In practice, many franchise issues do not arise because either side has acted improperly, but because both parties assumed the relationship would operate differently as the business grew.

This is where strong contractual foundations and clear commercial documentation become particularly important.

A franchise agreement should do far more than simply deal with fees, territories and termination rights. It should set a framework for how the relationship will operate day-to-day, particularly around operational standards, branding, support obligations and performance expectations.

It is also important that franchisees properly understand the commercial obligations they are signing up to. Issues can often arise where minimum purchasing requirements, supplier restrictions or operational targets have not been fully considered at the outset.

Equally important is ensuring that the legal documentation properly reflects the commercial reality of the arrangement. Many issues arise not because an agreement is poorly drafted, but because the parties have not fully considered how the model will work in practice.

The businesses most likely to scale and succeed are often those that have already built consistency into the model from day one.

Successful franchising starts long before the second site opens.

Get in touch with Rishi Kohli, Corporate and Commercial Partner at Sweeney Miller Law, to discuss how clear agreements and expectations can support your business as it scales. Email rishi.kohli@sweeneymiller.co.uk or call 0345 900 5401.



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The Renters' Rights Act: ten changes explained

By George Cohen, Brodies LLP

The Renters' Rights Act 2025 marks a significant shift in the legal landscape of the private rented sector in England – but what are the headline reforms and what impact will they have?



George Cohen

Designed to enhance tenant protections and modernise rental practices, the Renters' Rights Act received Royal Assent on 27 October 2025 and introduces sweeping reforms in stages – with the first phase taking effect on 1 May 2026.

Some of the most significant changes include:

1. Abolition of fixed-term tenancies: Fixed-term assured and assured shorthold tenancies are abolished. All new tenancies will be periodic.

2. End of Section 21: Landlords are no longer able to evict tenants without giving a reason. Possession must instead be sought under specific statutory grounds.

3. Revised grounds for possession: The grounds on which landlords can seek possession have been updated.

4. Rent increase controls: Tenants must be given at least two months' notice of proposed rent increases. Rent review clauses and informal agreements to increase rent will be void, and tenants have enhanced rights to challenge increases.

5. Ban on rent in advance: Landlords and agents are prohibited from requiring rent before a monthly tenancy agreement is signed. Once signed, they may require no more than one month's rent before the tenancy starts.

6. Right to request pets: Tenants have a statutory right to request permission to keep a pet. Landlords must not unreasonably refuse and must generally respond in writing within 28 days.

7. Private Rented Sector (PRS) database: A national database of landlords and rented properties will be introduced in stages from late 2026, starting with a regional roll-out for landlords and local authorities. Registration will become mandatory once requirements are brought into force.

8. Landlord redress scheme: A new PRS Landlord Ombudsman will be introduced after the PRS database. Expected in 2028, membership will become mandatory for private landlords.

9. Anti-discrimination measures: New provisions prohibit discrimination against prospective tenants on the basis that they have children or receive benefits. Discriminatory terms in tenancy agreements, superior leases, mortgages and insurance contracts will be of no effect.

10. Decent Homes Standard: A statutory framework for a "Decent Homes Standard" will be introduced, setting requirements for qualifying residential premises by regulation, covering state of repair, safety, and maintaining suitable temperatures. This is expected to be implemented later following consultation.

For landlords, investors and managing agents, the immediate focus will be preparation following the 1 May 2026 tenancy reforms:

- The most urgent step is to provide the government's Renters' Rights Act Information Sheet by 31 May 2026 to existing named tenants. Failure to comply can result in a civil penalty of up to £7,000.
- New tenancy agreement templates should be reviewed to reflect the move to periodic tenancies. Remove fixed-term wording, Section 21 assumptions and rent review clauses, and include the written information required for new tenancies, including the landlord's details, rent, deposit, repair responsibilities, and tenant bills.
- Rent increases should be planned for each property, as landlords will need to use the amended Section 13 process and will no longer be able to rely on oral or written agreements, or rent review clauses.
- Policies for pre-tenancy payment requests should be checked to avoid seeking prohibited upfront payments or advance rent beyond what the Act permits.
- Adverts, application forms and letting criteria should be reviewed to remove any discriminatory wording, such as "no children", to ensure decisions are based on suitability.

The reforms may also affect investment assumptions, including those about vacant possession, sale, redevelopment, re-letting timescales, rental growth and enforcement risk.

For more information, or to contact George, visit Brodies.com


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‘We’re not just lawyers – we’re trusted advisers’

Jacksons’ partners discuss secrets to 150-year success.

Jacksons has been going strong in the North East and beyond for 150 years and enjoys a glowing reputation as an independent law firm that cares.

In an age where everyone is an armchair expert through access to AI generated information, increasing client demands and ever-increasing new laws and regulations, Jacksons still keeps evolving.

However, one key thing remains the same – the need to put people – both employees and clients – at the heart of everything.

In a recent roundtable discussion, the partners talked openly about what has changed in its 150-year history - and why its fundamental values are now more important than ever.

Our heart

Head of operations, Amie Callan says the Jacksons team are “at the heart of what we do”.

“Having a culture where people want to stay and be a part of something is important – because having the best people puts us in a position where we can give the best advice,” she says.

“They are very much part of our culture and what they value most is succession planning in a safe and positive working environment where we are going to retain talent and grow from within.”

Erica Turner, head of legal says: “It’s really our people that set us apart from other firms.”

Working together

Both our team and clients at Jacksons benefit from the firm’s collaborative approach.

David Adams, the firm’s newest partner working in the corporate and commercial team, explains: “In some law firms, the interaction between the teams is minimal, because everyone tries to protect their own client relationship.

“Here, the client gets holistic legal advice because people are not reluctant to refer their clients to other teams.”

Toby Joel, partner and head of dispute resolution and debt recovery, believes this is a real USP, helping the firm win work and retain longstanding clients.

“We ensure all our clients know that if they have a problem, they can call us and we can put them in touch with someone we know and trust,” he says.

Understanding our clients

David has learned something important about client relations from the many accountants and financial advisers who refer to Jacksons.

“Some of the best accountants will say: ‘I haven’t seen you for a while, I’m just in the area can I pop in for a coffee’,” he says.

“I like to adopt that approach myself. You sit and have a chat with them and ask ‘what’s going on?’ and they might say, ‘well, I have this employment issue’.

“You get to understand their business and find out where the firm can add value - and this means they come back to you regularly, you understand your client’s business fully and it’s easier to advise on an outcome, proposal or solution.”


Richard Flounders


Nicola Neilson


Erica Turner

Richard Flounders, partner and head of property litigation, adds: "People buy from people and - certainly with what Toby and I do - nobody comes to see us with something that isn't giving them a certain level of stress.

"The results are potentially life changing if we can't help change things."

Care in communication

Erica firmly believes empathising with clients enables them to fully confide in you – and this is crucial to helping them find a timely solution.

"Sometimes the advice we give is quite general rather than legal – but people choose to come back to someone who has shown them a sympathetic ear," she says.

Nicola Neilson, partner and head of commercial property and agricultural and rural affairs, adds it's important to be approachable and available.

"People ring up, they want to speak to you – and they get to speak to you," she says.

"This makes them feel seen, heard and valued."

She adds the complexities of the law are increasing at the same rate as time pressures, with new technology meaning clients often expect an immediate response.

"If you've been emailed one day and your client's question needs some thought, it's important to tell them you're going to need time to think before responding fully," she says.

"When you update people like that, they appreciate it."

Remaining independent, embracing change

Jacksons is committed to retaining independence to protect its unique culture and client care.

"We are independent business owners, dealing with other independent business owners," Toby says.

"When you appoint Jacksons, you are dealing with the firm's owners – that's how we can form relationships and that's what sets us apart and makes us unique and successful."

Erica says: "If you're going to be a business that stands still, people are going to overtake you.

"Change should be your friend and not your foe.

"We are still providing pragmatic advice like we always have – but the manner in which we are delivering the advice is different."

Richard adds the advent of AI means clients now visit lawyers already armed with information and "rightly or wrongly perceive they already understand their legal situation," which can be a challenge.

"In the past, a solicitor would tell you what to do and you would accept that, but now it's a two-way street," he says.

"We give them options and they can choose what they want to do based on our advice."

Business advice

Both Toby and Richard advise seeking legal advice as soon as a problem in your business becomes evident.

"We see things when something has gone drastically wrong and we often say, 'if we'd picked this up six months ago, we could have turned this around'," Richard says.

David adds: "Your bank manager, your lawyer and your accountant should be the trusted advisers around you.

"You shouldn't be afraid to pick up the phone to them and ask their advice about your plans."

With 150 years of success behind it, Jacksons certainly offers advice worth taking!

jacksons.law



> **In this online world, untrue, libellous and malicious accusations are published every day.**

Matthew Howe

Reputation Management

By Matthew Howe, Samuels Solicitors

What business owners and professionals can learn from the Eni Aluko case.

Reputation is as much an asset as money in the bank or property. It needs to be protected because if it is harmed, the consequences can be serious and, in some cases, irreversible.

In this online world, untrue, libellous and malicious accusations are published every day. This could be in the form of a fake review on a business's Google page, an article in a national newspaper or a post on a social media platform.

If an untrue statement is read by others, and it causes, or is likely to cause, serious harm to someone's reputation, they can bring a claim for defamation to compensate them for that harm.

The Eni Aluko Case

This is what happened when ex-footballer and pundit, Eni Aluko, was targeted by ex-footballer and manager, Joey Barton. In 2024, Mr Barton published a series of libellous and harassing posts to his millions of followers on X, comparing Ms Aluko and a fellow pundit to Fred and Rose West, alleging that Ms Aluko was the beneficiary of her Nigerian father's "dodgy money" and that she had cynically sought to exploit her race.

Ms Aluko instructed reputation management experts, Samuels Solicitors LLP, to bring a claim for defamation (specifically libel) and harassment against Mr Barton which resulted in him being ordered to pay Ms Aluko £339,000 in damages and costs. Mr Barton was also made subject to an injunction to prevent him from publishing further defamatory statements about Ms Aluko.

The conclusion of Ms Aluko's claim follows the earlier successful claim for harassment and libel brought against Mr Barton by BBC and Channel 5 presenter Jeremy Vine, in which Samuels Solicitors LLP were also instructed. In that case, Mr Barton was ordered to pay Mr Vine significant sums in damages and costs.

What can you do if you are defamed?

Business owners, professionals and those in the public eye should be mindful that, at any time, their reputations could come under attack and it is therefore important to have appropriate safeguards and plans in place. There are numerous lessons to be learned from cases such as Aluko and Vine, if you or your business are the victim of libel or harassment:

1. It is important to act promptly to prevent the accusations spreading or further accusations being published. A post on X, Instagram, TikTok or Facebook could be shared, liked and screenshotted hundreds or thousands of times very quickly.

2. Screenshots should be taken immediately of the original defamatory or harassing statements along with any comments, reactions or responses from the defendant's followers. The URL of each defamatory or harassing post should also be recorded, along with the date and time of publication, and the number of reactions and responses generated by followers. This is crucial evidence in any claim for defamation or harassment.

3. Speak to a solicitor, or other representative, with a specialism in reputation management, as quickly as possible, to ensure that prompt but appropriate action is taken to limit any reputational harm and to help with collating and preserving evidence.

4. Once the necessary evidence has been captured, the defamatory or harassing publications should be reported to the appropriate platform, and the publisher should be contacted and warned that their statements are libellous or harassing and should be immediately deleted.

5. Consideration also needs to be given to the harm which has been caused to a victim's reputation by the untrue statements and evidence of such harm preserved. If the victim is a company or business, it would also need to show that the statements have caused, or are likely to cause, serious financial loss.

What the Courts can award

If a claim for libel or harassment is successful then the Court can award compensation for reputational harm and an injunction, which is a type of Court order preventing the defendant from publishing the same or similar untrue statements again or encouraging others to do the same, or continuing with their harassing behaviour.

Reported defamation claims often involve celebrities and those in the public eye, but anyone who is the victim of untrue accusations or harassing behaviour is entitled to bring a claim for compensation.

Specialist advice in Newcastle

Samuels Solicitors LLP recently opened their Newcastle Office, headed up by reputation management expert, Matthew Howe. Anyone who has been the victim of harassment or libel can contact Mr Howe at 0191 622 1998 or mah@samuels-solicitors.co.uk.

www.samuels-solicitors.co.uk





More than a game: Intellectual property and the FIFA World Cup

By Dominic Elsworth, Head of Practice, Hargreaves Elsworth

The upcoming FIFA World Cup is not only the biggest football tournament in the world, but also a major source of intellectual property (IP) rights.

FIFA carefully manages these rights to protect the commercial value of the tournament and its global brand.

One of the most important forms of intellectual property connected to the World Cup is trademarks. FIFA owns trademarks for the tournament name, official logos, mascots, and slogans. Terms such as "FIFA World Cup," official emblems, and tournament symbols cannot be used commercially without permission. These trademarks help FIFA maintain brand identity and prevent counterfeit products or misleading advertising.

Copyright is another major form of intellectual property in the World Cup. Broadcasts of matches, official photographs, promotional videos, music, and digital content are all protected under copyright law. Television networks and streaming platforms pay billions of dollars for exclusive rights to air World Cup matches. Unauthorised recording or distribution of this content may result in legal action.

Patents also contribute significantly to the modern World Cup experience, particularly through sports technology. Patents protect new inventions and technological innovations from being copied by competitors. Technologies such as goal-line technology and the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) system are important examples used during the tournament. These systems rely on advanced cameras, sensors, and software to improve the accuracy and fairness of officiating. Companies that develop such innovations often secure patents to protect their technological advancements.

In addition, FIFA earns considerable revenue through licensed merchandise. Approved manufacturers are granted permission to produce official shirts, footballs, footwear, and souvenirs. This licensing system ensures quality control and generates significant revenue for FIFA and its partners. Counterfeit merchandise is considered a violation of intellectual property rights.



Dominic Elsworth

Overall, intellectual property plays a crucial role in the success of the FIFA World Cup. It protects creativity, supports business partnerships, and ensures that FIFA can continue organising one of the world's most celebrated sporting events.

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Kat Moody

The Cost of Banter

Why employers can no longer ignore workplace culture.

Richard Reed Solicitors' Associate Solicitor, Kat Moody, says employers are increasingly judged not only on written policies, but on workplace culture.

For employers, that means understanding discrimination, setting clear standards and acting early when conduct falls short.

Banter has long been part of office life -humour, teasing and informal chat- often treated as harmless. But left unchecked, it can become bullying, harassment and discrimination, exposing businesses to legal, financial and reputational risk.

Kat warns that workplace culture is defined by what managers tolerate, encourage or fail to challenge. "Leadership defines workplace culture by what it laughs at, and what it ignores," she said.

Section 26 of the Equality Act 2010 defines harassment as "unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic, or conduct of a sexual nature, which has the purpose or effect of violating dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment".

That includes sexual harassment. Employers are expected to take preventative steps where conduct comes from colleagues or third parties.

Under the Equality Act 2010, conduct need not be intended to offend to amount to harassment. Tribunals focus on its effect and on whether it creates a degrading, hostile or offensive environment. Kat says, "It's not about intention but perception and how the person being harassed feels".

The Employment Rights Act 2025 is expected to strengthen protection from workplace harassment and increase employers' responsibility to prevent it. Kat added, "As we have seen with the introduction of Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023 that came into effect in October 2024, employers already need to take reasonable steps to prevent sexually harassment, as compensation can be increased by 25% at a tribunal, if an employer fails to do so."

The issue matters even more as workplace communication extends beyond the office. "What begins as 'just banter' can ultimately expose a business to significant financial liability," Kat added.

Tribunal decisions reinforce the point. In one case, a woman exposed to male colleagues watching pornography at work succeeded in a harassment claim after saying it created a degrading and hostile environment. The Employment Appeal Tribunal confirmed that delaying her complaint did not weaken her claim. Silence should not be seen as acceptance.

Other cases show how workplace culture can become evidence. Tribunals may consider whether nicknames, insults or jokes formed part of the workplace culture. Kat said: "A workplace culture of banter may explain behaviour, but it can become evidence of a toxic environment."

Appearance-based comments remain high risk. Employers should be especially cautious about humour relating to appearance, age, race, gender, disability, sexuality, religion or identity.

Digital communication also expands the risk. WhatsApp groups, Teams chats, Slack messages, memes, GIFs and emojis are now regularly disclosed in investigations and Tribunal proceedings.

The consequences can be severe. Compensation may include injury to feelings, psychiatric injury, aggravated damages, future financial loss and loss of earnings.

Legal awards are only part of the impact. Employers may also face reputational damage, staff turnover, sickness absence, reduced morale, recruitment difficulties and management time spent on grievances.

As scrutiny of workplace culture grows, Kat believes employers should focus on prevention rather than reaction.

"Employers need to look beyond policies and focus on culture," she said. "A joke, nickname or meme shared in seconds can lead to significant legal and reputational consequences."

Take a deeper dive into the Employment Rights Act 2025 and its staged rollout across 2026 and 2027—one of the most significant overhauls of UK employment law in decades—in the latest episodes of Richard Reed's Legally Sound Podcast, available now across all major platforms.

richardreed.co.uk

Employer checklist:

- Train managers on harassment and conduct
- Address inappropriate comments early
- Review digital communication policies
- Be cautious with nicknames and appearance-based humour
- Make reporting concerns feel safe
- Remember remote and online communications count
- Focus on culture, not just policies

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Lord Mayor praises volunteers at The People's Kitchen

The Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Henry Gallagher, has thanked volunteers at The People's Kitchen as he comes to the end of his term of office.

Founded in 1985, The People's Kitchen is one of the Lord Mayor's chosen charities. The charity provides free hot meals, friendship and practical support to vulnerable people across Newcastle. Run entirely by volunteers, it serves around 300 meals every day of the year and offers a vital sense of community to those most in need.

As part of his civic role, Councillor Gallagher helped raise funds and awareness for the charity through a range of civic events and community activities during his year in office.

Speaking about the charity, the Lord Mayor said: "It's been fantastic being able to help The People's Kitchen. I first came here when I was Deputy Lord Mayor, and I was really impressed by how caring and dedicated the volunteers are. I decided then that this needed to be one of my chosen charities because the volunteers do such an excellent job.

"I've seen how caring they are and have been privileged to see the work they do at first hand."

Maggie Pavlou, Trustee at The People's Kitchen, welcomed the Lord Mayor's support. She said: "We've been honoured to have the Lord Mayor championing our work this year. His involvement reminds the city that kindness costs nothing but changes lives."



Mayor unveils RNLI Plaque at Blyth Harbour Day

Mayor of Blyth, Councillor David Swinhoe, performed the ceremony recognising two centuries of lifesaving service and the station's enduring contribution to the town's maritime heritage.

Established in 1826, the lifeboat station has served the community for 200 years, with crews displaying extraordinary courage and commitment in often extreme conditions. Over that time, Blyth crews have been awarded eleven RNLI gallantry medals for acts of exceptional bravery. The station's history reflected both remarkable rescues and profound sacrifice, including the tragic events of 1841 when ten crew members lost their lives during a rescue attempt.

The commemorative plaque read: "Blyth Lifeboat Station, Est. 1826 – In recognition and appreciation of 200 years of continuous lifesaving service and contribution to the town's maritime heritage." The unveiling formed a key moment within Blyth Harbour Day, reinforcing the town's strong maritime identity and celebrating the volunteers who continued to serve.

The Mayor spoke of his pride in the town's lifeboat station. "The people of Blyth are very proud of their lifeboat station and the volunteers who are willing to risk their lives at a moment's notice to help those in peril at any time day or night. We are justly proud of 200 years of maritime history and the blue plaque is a reminder to us all of the dedication of the RNLI crews and supporters."

FW Capital, alongside the Development Bank of Wales, mark a record-breaking fundraising year

A year of fundraising for bigmoose has ended on a high with more than £88,000 raised for the mental health charity.

Colleagues from across the Group business, took part in a wide range of activities throughout the year. Together, they helped fund fast and effective access to therapy and counselling for more than 170 people experiencing mental health challenges across the UK.

The partnership with bigmoose builds on a strong track record of charity fundraising at FW Capital and the Development Bank of Wales. It has been the tenth charity partnership with the record-breaking total reflecting both the scale of colleague engagement and the importance placed on supporting causes that make a meaningful difference to people's lives.

Maggie's has been announced as the new charity partner for 2026/27. This is in memory of Dr Carl Griffiths, a much-loved colleague who passed away in the autumn of 2025 following a short battle with cancer.



Maggie's provides free, expert cancer support to people living with cancer, as well as their family and friends, through a network of welcoming centres built alongside NHS hospitals across the UK. Support includes psychological, emotional and practical help, benefits advice, coping strategies and one-to-one counselling.

Fundraising for Maggie's will run throughout the year, with colleagues across the Group taking part in a programme of activities designed to raise vital funds and awareness for the charity's work.

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Changing Lives

Why your footsteps this September could help fund frontline support to those experiencing homelessness across the North East.

Missing the Great North Run or just fancy a challenge this year? Take on something different.

This September, Changing Lives is calling on businesses and individuals across the region and beyond to help cover 24,901 miles in just seven days. That's the circumference of the planet. From 7 to 13 September 2026, every step, every pedal turn, every length of the pool counts towards the total.

On a single night last November, 46 people were recorded bedded down on Newcastle's streets. Three years earlier, that figure was 14. Across 2024-25, 384 different individuals were found sleeping rough in the city.

The national picture is worse. 299,100 households in England are now experiencing the worst forms of homelessness, a 21 per cent rise in two years.

The North East has the highest poverty rates in the country. The crisis is on the region's doorstep, and it is getting deeper. For 55 years, Changing Lives has worked on the frontline, supporting people through homelessness, addiction, domestic abuse and sexual exploitation, and into employment. These issues rarely arrive alone. Housing alone is not enough. Changing Lives walks alongside people, helping them build safe and fulfilling lives. Every mile this September supports that life-changing work.

How it works

Sign up. Set your goal as an individual or a team. 200 miles across the week. 200,000 steps. A daily swim, walking to meetings. Cycle the school run. Take the long way home. Every mile logged contributes to the overall total. Every pound raised goes directly to frontline work in the North East.

Get your team on board. Set a target. Help Changing Lives go around the world.

Find out other ways to support our work by heading to www.changing-lives.org.uk or email fundraising@changing-lives.org.uk

Sign up by scanning the QR Code below.



(Source: Newcastle City Council Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2025-2030.) (Source: Crisis, The Homelessness Monitor: England 2025.)

Charity of the Month

In the latest of this popular series of features we spoke to...

Poppy's Light Foundation

Vicki Eagle, Founder, Poppys Light Foundation

What is the mission of your charity, and what inspired its creation?

When my daughter Poppy died suddenly in August 2024 from an undiagnosed inherited cardiac condition called CPVT (Catecholaminergic Polymorphic Ventricular Tachycardia), I was left with one devastating truth: her death was preventable.

Poppy was just 20 years old, vibrant, ambitious, and full of life. In February 2025, just months after losing her, I founded Poppy's Light Foundation, a charity dedicated to raising awareness of inherited cardiac conditions (ICCs), improving access to screening, and helping prevent avoidable deaths through earlier diagnosis and intervention.

Inherited cardiac conditions affect around 1 in 200 young people and include a range of genetic heart disorders, many of which can be effectively managed, treated, and sometimes even cured when identified early. Yet awareness remains dangerously low, and when these conditions go undetected, the consequences can be fatal.

What are the biggest challenges your organisation faces in achieving its goals?

One of the greatest challenges is recognition of the warning signs. Many people still do not realise that fainting or seizures during, or soon after, exercise should always be treated as a cardiac red flag until proven otherwise. Too often, symptoms are misunderstood, dismissed, or attributed to less serious causes.

Another challenge is ensuring clinical pathways fully reflect the nature of inherited cardiac conditions. While ECGs are an important first-line investigation, some conditions, including CPVT, may not always be detected on a resting ECG alone. Clinical history and exercise-related symptoms should play a far greater role in decisions around referral for specialist inherited cardiac assessment.

Our work aligns closely with wider priorities around prevention, genomics, earlier diagnosis, and reducing avoidable deaths. We believe inherited cardiac conditions must become a far greater national health priority.

Can you share a success story that highlights the impact of your work?

Although the charity is still in its early stages, the impact of awareness is already becoming clear. The foundation's work has contributed to urgent cardiology referrals for children experiencing fainting during exercise after families and schools recognised warning signs through our awareness campaigns.

For me, that demonstrates exactly why awareness matters. Early identification not only saves lives, but also enables family screening, genetic counselling, and proactive management for future generations.



Poppy

How do you raise funds, and what are the most effective fundraising strategies you've used?

Community support and fundraising have been extraordinary. Earlier this year, our second charity ball raised £31,256 in support of the foundation's work. We also launched the PLF Intrepid Expedition to Machu Picchu, where the "Magnificent 7" mountaineers, including Poppy's dad Peter, her brother Ollie, radio personality Justin Lockwood, alongside friends and colleagues, took on the challenge to raise awareness and funds for the charity.

On Friday 17th July, we host our inaugural summer party at Beamish Hall, a favourite childhood venue of Poppy's. These events are about far more than fundraising alone; they reflect the strength of community and the growing movement of people committed to ensuring inherited cardiac conditions receive the attention they deserve.

What role do volunteers play in your organisation, and how can people get involved?

Volunteers, supporters, families, schools, and local communities all play a vital role in helping the foundation grow. From fundraising events and awareness campaigns to school outreach and community engagement, the support we have received has been incredible.

People can get involved by supporting events, helping raise awareness, sharing information about inherited cardiac conditions, fundraising, or simply encouraging conversations around heart health and family history.

What partnerships or collaborations have been most beneficial to your mission?

Collaboration sits at the heart of our work. We are committed to working alongside specialist cardiac teams, healthcare professionals, public health experts, policymakers, schools, and government to drive meaningful change.

Real progress will only happen when inherited cardiac conditions are recognised as a major public health issue requiring coordinated national attention, prevention strategies, and earlier intervention.



Poppy and Vicki





What's next for your charity? Any upcoming projects or long-term goals?

A major part of our campaigning work is calling for inherited cardiac conditions to be added to the newborn heel prick screening programme, commonly known as the Guthrie test. Advances in genomics and screening technology now create an opportunity to identify inherited cardiac conditions much earlier in life, potentially saving lives on a national scale.

Within the next year, we aim to open the UK's first dedicated clinical hub focused specifically on inherited cardiac conditions, providing specialist screening, diagnosis, education, and family support. Longer term, the ambition is to expand into regional hubs and mobile outreach services for underserved communities.

Poppy's death was preventable. With earlier detection, stronger awareness, improved referral pathways, and national screening strategies, we could significantly reduce the number of young people dying every week from undiagnosed cardiac conditions. These are avoidable tragedies; in many cases, they are preventable deaths.

www.poppyslightfoundation.com







The Toby Henderson Trust Spectrum Charity Ball

The Toby Henderson Trust were immensely proud to celebrate at their Silver Jubilee Anniversary Ball, held recently at The Grand Hotel, Gosforth Park.

A magnificent £19,000 was raised on the night which will contribute to the all important running costs at the trust.

With 25 years of experienced and passionate service delivered to tens of thousands of autistic young people and their families under their belt– to say it was a special night for all involved was indeed an understatement.

Over 250 guests – old friends and new – joined us to make it "a night to remember".
















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The men who don't say anything

Catherine Marchant , CEO, Impact Family Services

When we talk about domestic abuse, most people still picture the same scenario, often shaped by what they've seen in campaigns, media and social channels.


Catherine Marchant

A woman. Arguments. Shouting. Maybe something physical.

But in our work, we also meet men who say nothing at all.

They don't always come forward.

They don't always recognise what's happening.

And when they do, they often convince themselves it's not something they can talk about.

Because for many men, the barrier isn't just the abuse itself.

It's what they believe it says about them.

There is still a strong cultural expectation, particularly in professional environments, that men should be in control. That they should cope and should not show vulnerability.

When control is taken away from them, when their confidence is eroded, when their home life becomes something they are managing rather than living, they often stay silent.

Over time, that silence can show up in other ways.

Mental health can suffer.

Sleep becomes disrupted.

Some stop looking after themselves.

Others turn to alcohol or unhealthy coping mechanisms.

For those in long-term relationships, sometimes spanning years or decades, the situation can become so familiar that it is no longer questioned. Patterns of behaviour are accepted, explained away, or simply endured.

In the North East, we already know the impact of poor mental health among men can be significant. When that pressure is combined with isolation, control and silence, the consequences can be far more serious than many realise.

In some cases, victims do not immediately recognise what they are experiencing as abuse at all. It is only when something shifts, or when they begin to see a different perspective, that they realise how much has been eroded over time.

At work, this silence can look like something else entirely.

A senior employee becoming withdrawn.

Someone missing deadlines they would normally meet.

A colleague who avoids personal conversation or appears constantly distracted.

Rarely does anyone think to ask whether that person feels safe.

Male victims of domestic abuse exist across all sectors, including senior leadership roles. But they are significantly less likely to seek help. Fear of not being believed, fear of judgement, and fear of professional impact all play a part.

For some men, there is also a strong sense of responsibility tied to being the main earner. The idea of leaving can carry practical consequences, the potential loss of the family home, financial instability, or disruption to their children's lives. When the focus is on protecting their children, even an unhealthy situation can feel like something they have to hold together, often at their own expense.

This is where workplaces have a quiet but important role.

Not by treating men differently. Not by making assumptions. But by creating environments where anyone, regardless of gender, feels able to speak without being dismissed or defined by it.

The same principles apply.

Listen without judgement.

Respond calmly.

Offer practical support where possible.

Signpost to specialist services.

For some men, the greatest barrier is not the situation itself, but the belief that no one will take it seriously.

If we want society and importantly workplaces, to be genuinely supportive, that belief has to change.

Sometimes the people who need support the most are the ones least likely to ask for it. Often, they are the ones saying nothing at all.

The organisations that respond best are not the ones with all the answers, but the ones that have taken the time to understand how to respond. Training and awareness give leaders and teams the confidence to act appropriately when it matters most.

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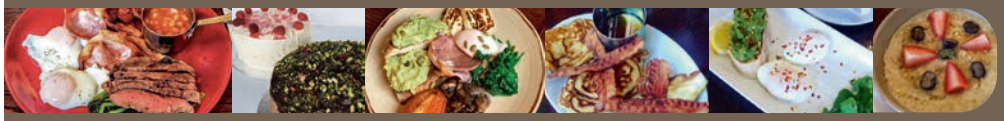
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Good News From Blyth Town Council

Bay City Rollers return to Blyth Live to finish what they started



Blyth Live Music Festival have announced the return of legendary pop icons Bay City Rollers after their performance was dramatically cut short in 2025.

Festival goers will remember last year's unforgettable headline set in Blyth, when the Rollers were midway through their iconic hit "Bye Bye Baby" as an unexpected thunderstorm swept across the site. With safety the top priority, organisers made the difficult decision to cut power to the stage, bringing the show to an abrupt but memorable end.

Now, in a gesture that reflects both their dedication to fans and their enduring love of live performance, the Bay City Rollers have confirmed they will return to Blyth Live this year to complete their set properly.

This year's festival will take place on Saturday June 20th, and is free to attend, continuing its commitment to accessible live music for the whole community. Organised and delivered by Blyth Town Council, the event has become a standout date in the North East calendar.

Organisers have also confirmed that D-Ream will headline the festival, promising a huge finale packed with iconic dance anthems.



New Mayor elected

Councillor Mark Peart has been elected as Mayor and Chairman for the forthcoming civic year.

Speaking following his appointment, the new Mayor said: "I am deeply honoured to have been appointed Mayor and grateful for the trust and confidence placed in me by fellow councillors.

"I undertake this role with a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to serving all members of our community to the very best of my ability.

"During my term of office, I look forward to supporting local organisations, charities, volunteers, and residents whose dedication and contribution help strengthen our town and civic life.

"I would also like to place on record my sincere thanks to the outgoing Mayor for their service, dedication, and commitment during their year in office. I very much look forward to meeting residents and representing the council at events and engagements

The Mayor will be supported throughout the civic year by Councillor Denise Nicholson, who was elected Deputy Mayor and Vice Chairman.

Blyth Town Council appoints first-ever mayoral cadet



Flight Sergeant Owen Miller-Hall of 1000 Blyth Squadron Air Training Corps has been formally appointed as Blyth's first-ever Mayoral Cadet.

The new civic role has been created to strengthen links between the Council, young people and the wider community. As Mayoral Cadet, Owen will accompany the Mayor of Blyth at ceremonial engagements and community events, serving as an ambassador for young people across the town while supporting the Council's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant.

Owen's appointment recognises his exceptional dedication, leadership and professionalism during his two years with the Squadron. During that time, he has progressed rapidly through the ranks and is now also being proposed for appointment as a Cadet Warrant Officer.

The Mayor of Blyth Cllr Mark Peart said: "We are delighted to appoint Owen as Blyth's first-ever Mayoral Cadet. His commitment, maturity and enthusiasm have made a real impression, and he will be a fantastic representative for young people in our town.

"This new role reflects our desire to celebrate the contribution young people make to civic life and to strengthen our links with the cadet forces and wider community."

Blyth Town Council also extended its thanks to the Ashington Sea Cadets and the Bede Academy Royal Navy Combined Cadet Force for their considered and impressive nominations, highlighting the commitment, professionalism and dedication shown by young people across the area.



Life-saving partnership brings defibrillators to communities across the North East

Red Sky Foundation is proud to be partnering with Karbon Homes to install life-saving defibrillators across all 38 of Karbon Homes' over-55s housing schemes throughout the North East.

The initiative has been made possible thanks to £34,000 of funding through Karbon Homes' Unlocking Social Value Fund, alongside £28,000 of match funding from Red Sky Foundation. The project is another example of how the vital funds raised through the charity's renowned Red Sky Supporters are reinvested directly back into communities to help save lives.

The scheme will provide publicly accessible defibrillators to communities stretching from Middlesbrough to Northumberland, helping to ensure more people have access to potentially life-saving equipment in an emergency.

Every minute matters during a cardiac arrest, and having a defibrillator nearby can dramatically increase a person's chance of survival. Defibrillators work by delivering an electric shock to restart the heart and restore a normal rhythm while emergency services are on their way. When used within the first three to five minutes of a cardiac arrest, survival rates can increase significantly - from less than 10% to as high as 50–70%.

That is why partnerships like this are so important.

Karbon Homes has responded directly to requests from residents by taking proactive steps to support both customers and the wider community. Alongside the installation of the devices, colleagues across the housing schemes are also being trained and upskilled on how to use the equipment, helping to build confidence and awareness within local communities.

The project will also see Karbon Homes become guardians of the defibrillators already installed across their supported housing schemes, ensuring each device is maintained, monitored and always ready should it ever be needed.

Residents have already spoken of the reassurance that comes from knowing the equipment is available not only for those living within the schemes, but also for surrounding communities who may need urgent access during an emergency.

Founded in 2020 by Sunderland couple Sergio Petrucci and Emma Petrucci, Red Sky Foundation supports babies, children and adults living with complex heart conditions, while also raising awareness around cardiac arrest, organ donation and heart disease.

Speaking about the partnership, Sergio Petrucci MBE, Founder of Red Sky Foundation, said: "It's inspiring to see organisations like Karbon Homes taking such meaningful action to protect the health and wellbeing of both their residents and the wider community. Together, we are helping to create safer spaces and ultimately save lives. We're looking forward to a long-lasting continued partnership."

Red Sky Foundation is always looking to work alongside businesses and organisations that want to make a meaningful difference within their communities. Through the charity's Charity of the Year initiative and community partnership programmes, organisations can help fund vital projects, raise awareness and support life-saving work across the region.

If your organisation would like to partner with Red Sky Foundation in a similar way and make a positive impact within your community, please contact the team at info@redskyfoundation.com

Sunderland's BIDS opens the doors to business benefits



Since it launched more than a decade ago, Sunderland BID – or now Sunderland's BIDs to be more accurate – has made a massive, positive impact on the city.

Along with staging large scale events such as the ever-popular Restaurant Week to the up-coming Food and Drink Festival, the BIDs – which now comprises both the City Centre and the Seafront BID – have been a massive ally to their levy payers.

The benefits are there for all to see – from running innovative courses to free advertising around the city centre to inspirational business events to street rangers who offer a range of clean-up services.

And that's just a small representation of the vast support given by the organisation – which is great news for those who pay their levy and get all of this in return.

Around two years ago Sunderland's BIDs Chief Executive, Sharon Appleby, realised that the advantages of being under their wing should not just be limited to levy payers.

And so the BIDs' Affiliate Scheme was born, with the aim of extending the many levy payer benefits to non-levy payers for an annual fee.

From day one forward-thinking businesses quickly signed up – including communication companies, training providers, print experts, entertainment agencies and many more.

That eclectic mix was also boosted by market research providers, design and building organisations and financial advisors, a broad spectrum united by their recognition of the value being part of the BIDs can bring.

With around 30 members at present, Sharon is delighted with the response to date and hopes that other companies will recognise just how much they can get out of getting involved.

"Sunderland is at such an exciting time in terms of its growth and investment," she said.

"And as BIDs it is so important for us to keep moving forward and to have the ability to support all businesses, not just those who are levy payers.

"We are committed to giving the business community a stronger voice, along with investing in measures to improve both the city centre and the seafront.

"Becoming an affiliate member brings with it so many benefits and I'm delighted so many companies have already recognised this and hopefully we will be able to encourage even more of them to sign up."

Those benefits include the ability for businesses to promote themselves via the BIDs' many channels including its social media and its regular email newsletters.

Each affiliate gets the opportunity for a week of advertising on digital screens across the city each year, along with invitations to events, meetings and training sessions.

Access to unique networking opportunities, regular email updates about special initiatives and events, volunteering options for staff, PR opportunities – the list continues to grow.

And arguably most importantly, affiliate members can also make a meaningful contribution and have their voice heard in terms of shaping the city's future.

"Our levy payers and affiliate members are really visible and can access so many fantastic opportunities," added Sharon.

Anyone interested in joining the scheme or just wanting more information, should contact our Business Liaison Officer Debbie Bowman on 07984381451 or debbie@sunderlandbid.co.uk

Why summer is the ideal time to recruit charity leaders

By Peter Neal, Founder of Experience Bank

For some charities and non-profit organisations, summer can be a quieter operational period.


Peter Neal

Fundraising campaigns may slow slightly, a longer gap between board meetings, and key decision-makers on annual leave. Yet from a leadership recruitment perspective, summer can be one of the most strategic and productive times of the year to secure exceptional talent. Here Peter Neal, founder of Experience Bank Group, gives his thoughts on a summer recruitment campaign.

"Recently, I have seen a noticeable shift in how charities approach executive recruitment. Increasingly, organisations are using the summer months as an opportunity to plan ahead, strengthen governance, think about succession planning, and attract experienced leaders before the highly competitive autumn hiring cycle begins.

"Leadership recruitment within the charity sector has become significantly more competitive over the past five years. Charities are no longer simply seeking operational managers; they are searching for commercially aware, strategically minded leaders capable of navigating rising financial pressures, digital transformation, governance expectations, and growing public scrutiny.

"This means the talent pool for senior charity positions is narrower than many organisations realise. However, the summer offers a valuable advantage because experienced executives often use this period to reassess their careers, evaluate work-life balance, and consider new opportunities before returning to a busy autumn schedule.

"For recruiters and potential candidates, this creates a window of opportunity. One of the biggest challenges in executive recruitment is securing quality time with senior professionals. During peak business periods, many potential candidates are consumed by quarterly targets, board responsibilities, or operational demands.

"In contrast, summer often allows executives more breathing space to think strategically about their futures. Candidates who may not actively search for roles during the rest of the year are often more open to confidential conversations during June, July, and August. This is particularly true for professionals considering portfolio careers, non-executive positions, or purpose-driven leadership opportunities within the charity sector.

"At Experience Bank, we frequently see increased engagement from highly experienced professionals during summer months, particularly those seeking purposeful roles where they can apply years of commercial or leadership expertise to social impact initiatives.

"Many charities wait until September or October to begin senior recruitment exercises. By then, competition intensifies significantly as organisations simultaneously launch leadership searches leading to longer recruitment cycles, increased salary pressure, reduced candidate availability and greater competition for specialist skills

"Charities that begin recruitment during summer place themselves ahead of the market. They can identify candidates earlier, conduct more considered interviews, and secure appointments before the autumn surge begins and for organisations facing upcoming strategic changes, funding transitions, or governance restructuring, proactive summer recruitment can prevent leadership gaps later in the year.

"The profile of the modern charity leader is changing rapidly. Today's non-profit executives are expected to combine social purpose with commercial discipline. This has expanded the candidate market beyond traditional charity professionals to leaders from the private sector who want to transition into purpose-led organisations later in their careers. Summer is often the point at which these individuals begin exploring opportunities aligned with personal values and long-term legacy.

"One of the biggest mistakes charities make is viewing recruitment purely as a response to a vacancy. Effective leadership recruitment should be part of a wider strategic conversation about organisational direction, succession planning, governance capability, and future growth.

"In conclusion, for charities prepared to act early, summer offers a rare opportunity to engage experienced leaders before the market becomes crowded and competitive again in autumn. Organisations that use this time strategically will not only strengthen recruitment outcomes but also position themselves more effectively for future growth, resilience, and impact. Indeed as the leadership landscape continues to evolve, summer may no longer be the quiet season many charities once assumed it to be!"

If you have recruitment needs over the summer or want to start to think strategically about succession planning, get in touch – pter@theexperiencebank.co.uk









Built by Local Businesses, for Local Businesses

By The North Tyneside Business Forum

The North Tyneside Business Forum is volunteer-led by local business owners. That means it is shaped by the needs of the business community, for the business community.

At a time when many SMEs are facing rising costs, recruitment pressures, and increasing competition, local businesses are placing greater value on practical support, trusted relationships, and genuine collaboration.

Established as a Community Interest Company in 2012, the Forum was created to connect, support, and champion businesses across North Tyneside while helping strengthen the local economy through shared opportunity.

Led by business owners themselves, the Forum remains closely connected to the realities of running a business in North Tyneside. The conversations are relevant, the advice is practical, and the relationships built are driven by shared understanding rather than transactional networking. Just as importantly, the Forum has helped nurture a welcoming and supportive business community where local companies can connect openly, share experiences, and support one another.

Over the years, we have seen how valuable local relationships can become. A conversation at an event can lead to a new client, a trusted supplier, expert advice, or a collaboration that creates new opportunities. In many cases, simply having access to other local businesses facing similar challenges can make a significant difference.

North Tyneside has a strong and diverse business community, and businesses that stay connected locally are often better positioned to identify opportunities, build resilience, and support long-term regional growth.

Endorsed by North Tyneside Council, the Forum continues to provide free networking events, workshops, and support for businesses with a trading address in North Tyneside. More importantly, it continues to create opportunities for businesses of all sizes to connect, collaborate, and grow together.

As businesses look ahead, strong local networks may prove to be one of the most valuable assets a business can have.

Find out more...









Teresa Peters

Image credit: kg photography



Tyne Rivers Trust Team Coaching

Read the room you can't see

By Teresa Peters, Founder of Accelerator Coaching Ltd

Why digital body language is the leadership skill no one taught you.

Stephen Covey wrote that most people do not listen with the intent to understand, they listen with the intent to reply. That observation has never felt more relevant, in a world where the majority of our conversations happen through a screen.

Around 70% of workplace communication now takes place digitally. Emails, Teams messages, Slack threads, video calls. These are the spaces where decisions are made, relationships are built, and trust is either strengthened or quietly eroded. Yet most of us have never been taught how to communicate well in these spaces. We have been trained in presentations, report writing, even difficult face to face conversations. But digital? We are largely making it up as we go.

This is what Erica Dhawan calls digital body language, the cues we send and receive through our digital communication. In a face to face conversation, we rely on eye contact, tone of voice, posture and facial expression. Online, those signals vanish. In their place, we have response times, punctuation, emoji use, capital letters and the presence or absence of a greeting.

Think about it. "Can you send me the report." No greeting, no question mark, full stop instead. Now compare: "Hi! When you get a chance, could you send over the report? No massive rush." Same request. Completely different feeling. The first feels curt. The second feels human. The difference is not content, it is digital body language.

We recently had the pleasure of facilitating a team development day with Tyne Rivers Trust, exploring exactly this. We worked through Dhawan's four laws: value visibly, communicate carefully, collaborate confidently, and trust totally.

The conversations sparked were fascinating and this team already works very well together.

During these sessions many people realise they have been misreading each other's tone for months. A short reply that felt dismissive was actually someone being respectful of time. Once the team can name these patterns, they stop assuming the worst and started asking better questions. I always say 'assume everyone has good intentions.

Jefferson Fisher, whose podcast I would highly recommend, puts it beautifully: the goal of communication is not to be understood, it is to make it nearly impossible to be misunderstood. Before you press send, the question is not "does this make sense to me?" It is "could this be read differently than I intend?"

This matters enormously for leaders. A one word reply from a colleague is forgettable. A one word reply from a manager can send someone spiralling. Leaders set the digital tone whether they mean to or not, and in a hybrid or remote world, that tone is often the only version of you your team experiences on any given day.

At Accelerator Coaching, we are increasingly weaving digital body language into our leadership programmes alongside emotional intelligence, strengths and behavioural profiling. Because communication is not just about what you say in a room. It is about what you signal in every channel, every day.

So here is my challenge. Before you send your next email, pause for five seconds and read it as if you did not write it. How does it land? That small habit might be the most powerful leadership micro skill you practise all year.

Reading carefully is the new listening. Writing clearly is the new empathy. And in a world where three quarters of our working conversations happen through a screen, getting this right is no longer optional. It is essential.

Accelerator Coaching Ltd helps leaders and teams across the UK communicate with confidence, manage emotions effectively, and perform with purpose through our coaching led Leadership Accelerated programmes. If this article sparked something, we would love to hear from you.

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We all love a quick win

By Ian Kinnery, Kinnery

But in business, the quickest route often doesn't lead to the summit.

Growing a business takes time. Commitment. Sacrifice. But now AI has arrived, it suddenly feels like you've been joined by a Sherpa on your ascent. Yet while AI can do a lot of the grunt work and heavy lifting, can it really replace that human touch when it comes to coaching?

While I'm not exactly sold, I'm keen to find out more.

That's why, with the support of the Entrepreneurs Forum, I'm asking business owners and leaders across the North East for their views on AI and coaching.

I've launched a survey for members to see just how they are using AI as a coach, how useful they find it - and if they really trust it.

The survey has been launched on the back of a notable rise in bots being deployed as mentors or coaches.

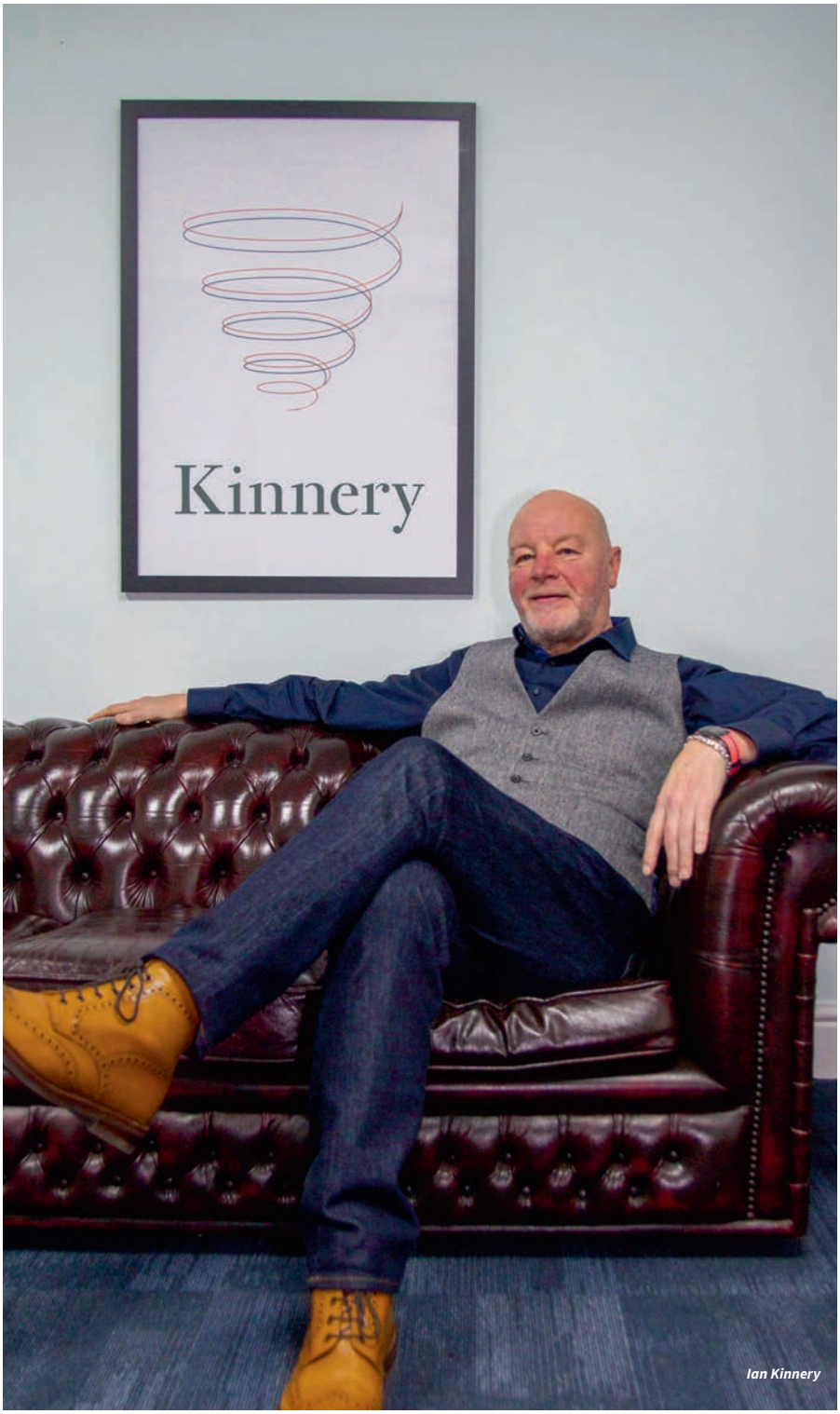
But also, like many people, I've noticed that we are using them more for personal advice too – as confidantes. When it comes to the latter, that seems filled with risk.

But even I accept that in the current climate, there's logic to using it as a mentor or coach. Times are tight, and if there's a cheaper solution, that can be very appealing. Plus, bots don't sleep.

Having a sleepless night about your business, or worried about cash flow?

ChatGTP is on call 24/7. But as someone who has helped hundreds of leaders scale their companies over the past 20 years, I'm not sure it is a long-term solution.

For one, a bot has never run a business (and let's all hope that stays the same!) It knows the theory, but it has never been in the trenches.



Ian Kinnery

A human coach has lived experience. I've run successful businesses myself, and I've experienced the incredible highs - and the lowest of lows.

I've had those sleepless nights. I know how stress can drive you into some dark and lonely corners. A bot doesn't worry. It doesn't understand the emotional trauma of having to lay off people you care about, nor does it have skin the game.

As a coach, my own business lives or die by my clients' results. If the advice you receive from AI hinders your own growth, there's no accountability for the bot. But the reality is, we are using AI. A lot.

So, I want to know - why? Is it working? Do you get results? And is it transforming your business - for good or bad? Because like much of life, AI – love it or loathe it – isn't without an upside.

And it will change our world, whether we like it or not.

But you have to question: What are we risking when we outsource our thinking and our judgement? And where does that end?

kinnery.co.uk

Scan me to complete the survey!



L-R: Torquil Gundlach and Peter Chalder-Wood from SEEDS, Cllr Joe Quin from Durham County Council Christian Pape and Sara Williams from Business Durham

Why science businesses are choosing NETPark

Across the UK, regions are competing to attract the next generation of high-growth science and technology businesses.

Increasingly, companies are looking beyond the traditional innovation hotspots in the South East and choosing locations that offer more than just laboratory space.

At the North East Technology Park (NETPark) in County Durham, businesses are choosing an environment that combines specialist facilities, collaboration opportunities and support designed to help companies scale globally.

Over more than two decades, NETPark has built a nationally recognised environment for advanced science and technology companies working across sectors including advanced materials, semiconductors, photonics, life sciences, defence and space technologies. Home to more than 40 businesses and supported by strategic partnerships with Durham University and CPI, the park has become one of the UK's leading examples of place-based innovation.

One company demonstrating the impact of that environment is SEEDS (Sustainable Energy Efficient Designed Structures), which recently announced a major expansion at NETPark as it accelerates the global commercialisation of its graphene technologies.

The company is moving into a significantly larger facility within NETPark's expansion space, enabling it to increase production capacity and support growing international demand across sectors including aerospace, semiconductors, energy storage and advanced manufacturing.

For Jason Chehal, founder of SEEDS, the move represents a pivotal moment in the company's evolution from research-led innovator to global commercial business.

He said: "This expansion marks a defining moment for SEEDS, as we move from research excellence into full commercial deployment."

Over the past decade, SEEDS has worked closely with partners across the NETPark ecosystem, including CPI and Durham University, to develop engineered graphene technologies capable of solving real-world industrial challenges at scale.

Importantly, the company's growth story reflects a wider trend emerging across the North East, where collaboration between industry, academia and innovation infrastructure is enabling companies to scale faster and compete internationally.

He said: "We've reached a point where the technology is proven, the demand is clear, and the partnerships are in place. With CPI's long-standing support, Mitsui opening doors internationally, and a world-class ecosystem here at NETPark, we're able to accelerate into the next phase.

"What excites me most is that every reactor we build here can directly support a leading manufacturer somewhere in the world. It's not just growth for our company, it's an opportunity to demonstrate what can be achieved from County Durham on the global stage."

Unlike many science parks that focus primarily on property, NETPark has positioned itself as a long-term growth environment where businesses can access specialist facilities, research expertise and strategic partnerships while remaining part of a connected innovation community.

Recent expansion across the park is creating more than 280,000 sq. ft. of new laboratory, office and technical space, providing growing businesses with room to expand without leaving the region.

Christian Pape, Business Property Director at Business Durham which manages NETPark believes that combination of infrastructure, collaboration and environment is becoming a major differentiator.

He said: "Supporting science-based scale-up through collaborative partnership is what we do best here at NETPark. But it's also about creating an environment where businesses and people can thrive together.

"We've built a campus culture that is innovative, ambitious and supportive, where companies can access world-class facilities and expertise while being part of a connected community that helps attract talent, encourage collaboration and support long-term growth."

Set within a landscaped, semi-rural campus in Durham, NETPark offers businesses a location designed to support both innovation and wellbeing, something increasingly important in attracting and retaining highly skilled talent.

Discover how NETPark is helping innovative businesses start, scale and grow globally from Durham.
Explore available space, business support and the innovation ecosystem at www.northeasttechnologypark.com



Frazer Barker

Football coach proves he has the skills to pay the bills

At just 19 years old, Washington-based football coach Frazer Barker is already proving that passion, determination and a strong work ethic can turn a dream into a thriving business.

Frazer launched Technical Focus after deciding to branch out on his own following experience working for another football coaching company. Less than a year on, the business is going from strength to strength, with more than 40 young people taking part in coaching sessions each week.

Offering group coaching, one-to-one training and holiday sessions for children aged six and above, Technical Focus has quickly built a strong reputation across the area. Sessions currently take place at The Millennium Centre and The Hub in Washington, with demand continuing to grow.

What began as a single weekly group session has rapidly expanded into four regular classes, alongside a growing number of individual coaching appointments. The business has developed so quickly that Frazer now works with additional freelance coaches to help meet demand.

"It was definitely daunting setting up on my own," he said. "But the response has been incredible. I started with one session a week and it's grown far quicker than I expected.

"I've always enjoyed football and working with children, so coaching felt like the perfect fit. Playing football from a young age shaped who I am and taught me a lot about discipline, confidence and teamwork. I want other young people to experience those same benefits."

Alongside running his business, Frazer also plays Northern League football and believes the sport can have a hugely positive impact on both physical and mental wellbeing.

"Football is about much more than just fitness," he added. "It helps young people build confidence, social skills and resilience. Hopefully we can encourage more children to get involved and enjoy the game."

Despite his success, Frazer admits he had little experience of running a business before launching Technical Focus. To help turn his idea into reality, he sought support from the North East BIC through its Enterprising Sunderland programme.

Working alongside business adviser Helen Wardropper, Frazer received guidance on registering the business, developing a business plan and exploring future funding opportunities to support expansion.

"Helen has been brilliant," he said. "She helped me through every stage of setting up the business and continues to support me as I look at ways to grow. Having that advice and encouragement has made a huge difference."

Frazer is now exploring grant funding opportunities to invest in equipment and secure additional venues as Technical Focus continues to expand.

Helen praised Frazer's commitment and ambition, describing him as "remarkably motivated and driven".

"He has worked incredibly hard to qualify in his chosen career and has combined that with a natural ability to work with young people," she said. "The business is already thriving and the service he provides is invaluable for young people looking to improve both their football skills and their confidence."

The support accessed by Frazer was delivered through Enterprising Sunderland, part of Sunderland's wider business support programme. Funding for the initiative has now been extended until the end of 2026 through the North East Combined Authority.

www.ne-bic.co.uk


Jo Holmes

Building a culture of sustainability across your business

By Jo Holmes, Genee

Sustainability means different things to different people, and often, those motivations vary depending on where someone sits within an organisation.

For leadership teams, sustainability may be closely linked to company values, long-term resilience and meeting growing stakeholder expectations. Marketing and communications teams may focus more on reputation, public perception and how sustainability strengthens the organisation's brand. HR teams may see it as an important part of attracting and retaining talent, particularly as more employees want to work for organisations whose values align with their own.

Meanwhile, operational and facilities teams often engage with sustainability from a more practical perspective. Here, the focus may be on efficiency, reducing waste and identifying cost savings. Procurement teams may look at supply chains and responsible sourcing, while finance teams may be interested in risk reduction and long-term value. The key is understanding how to frame sustainability in ways that matter to different audiences.

For operational teams, that might mean demonstrating how reducing waste and energy use can improve efficiency and lower costs. For marketing teams, it may be about communicating achievements through social media, press coverage and client engagement. For employees, it could be about creating opportunities to contribute ideas and be part of positive change within the organisation.

Importantly, these motivations are not mutually exclusive. Sustainability is wide ranging and often delivers benefits across all these areas at once. Reducing resource use can cut costs while also reducing environmental impact. Strong sustainability credentials can improve reputation while helping businesses meet customer and supply chain expectations. A visible commitment to sustainability can strengthen company culture and staff engagement at the same time.

The challenge for many organisations is knowing how to bring all these strands together in a meaningful and manageable way. This is where frameworks such as Investors in the Environment can provide real value.

Its staged approach recognises that organisations are at different points in their sustainability journey and supports continual improvement rather than expecting perfection from day one. iiE takes a holistic view, looking not only at resource management and operational efficiency, but also at how sustainability is reflected in policies, culture, staff engagement and external communications. Accreditation also gives organisations a credible way to communicate their environmental impact externally, helping demonstrate commitment to clients, stakeholders and wider audiences.

As part of the process, organisations receive a detailed audit report with feedback across different areas of the business. This can then be used to shape ongoing action plans, identify opportunities for improvement and support long-term progress rather than one-off initiatives.

Engaging staff across different teams and departments is also a key part of building a successful sustainability culture. To support this, iiE has partnered with Stickerbook, a micro-learning platform designed to make sustainability easy and enjoyable for teams to engage with. Through short, accessible learning modules, staff can explore sustainability topics that may sit outside their usual job roles, helping build wider understanding across the organisation. The platform also uses friendly competition and shared challenges to keep engagement high, giving organisations another way to connect sustainability to the different motivations that exist across teams whether that is operational efficiency, personal values, innovation or organisational reputation.

Ultimately, sustainability is not just about carbon, waste or compliance. It is about culture. When organisations understand what motivates different departments and stakeholders, sustainability stops feeling like an obligation and starts becoming part of how people work, communicate and make decisions every day.

Genee is the Northern Delivery Partner for Investors in the Environment. To find out more about the accreditation, contact us at jo@genee.org.uk

Why northern businesses deserve world-class events

By Jack Saward, Founder, Saward Marketing and Events

The North has superb venues and exceptional suppliers and - perhaps most importantly - a business community that understands what events are actually for.

At Saward Marketing & Events, much of our work has been rooted in the North East, and what I see consistently is that regional businesses are focused on outcomes.

They want to know what an event will do for them commercially, not just how it will look on social media. That's exactly the right question to be asking.

One of the most common misconceptions we come across is that working with local suppliers means compromising on quality. That most definitely isn't the case.

From production companies and AV specialists to caterers, photographers and venue teams, the North has talent that rivals anything available elsewhere in the country.

For Saward Marketing & Events, working locally has had practical advantages that go beyond cost. Relationships matter in events. When something needs to change at short notice, having suppliers who know you and vice versa makes all the difference.

Some of our North East client relationships go as far back as 20 years. That isn't accidental, it comes from consistently showing up and understanding a client's business well enough to know when an event is the right solution and when something else entirely is what's needed.

In some cases, we've helped to create full event experiences. In others, it's been videography, photography or simply helping a business think more clearly about the event strategy before committing.



L-R: Jon Plaskitt, Area Sales Manager at Snorkel UK, Jack Saward, Managing Director at Saward Marketing & Events Ltd., Scott Holtby, Sales Director at Snorkel UK

Cost-effective doesn't mean cutting corners

Events budgets are under pressure across the board, and northern businesses are often working with tighter parameters than they'd like. But cost-effective event delivery isn't about doing less, it's about being smarter with every decision.

That means being rigorous about what the event needs to achieve before a venue is approached or a supplier is briefed.

I tell all of our clients that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. We look at where a company's strengths and resources currently sit and identify where we can genuinely add value, rather than arriving with a templated solution that doesn't fit the brief.

The proof, as ever, is in the work. Over the years we have been associated with the Newcastle Eagles, the professional British basketball team. Working with organisations of that calibre in the North East demonstrates what's possible when regional ambition is matched with the right event expertise.

Snorkel Lifts, a Tyne & Wear-based company that provides powered access equipment, is now one of our most regular North East clients for event activity. We've delivered multiple events this year alone with another on the horizon in Europe this month. That's a relationship that began locally and has grown into something with genuine international reach, a reminder that starting close to home doesn't mean staying there.

Supporting local means investing in your own ecosystem

There's a bigger argument here too. When northern businesses choose northern suppliers, the benefits compound. Talent stays in the region. Smaller agencies and suppliers grow. The ecosystem strengthens. And the next business looking for world-class event support finds it on their doorstep rather than having to look elsewhere.

Many of our strongest client relationships began with a conversation at a show, someone seeing work we'd delivered, striking up a dialogue and deciding to explore what a first project together might look like. Those first conversations have a habit of becoming long-term partnerships, and long-term partnerships have a habit of going places neither party initially expected.

For any northern business considering its next event, the answer to "where do we start?" should begin closer to home than they might think.

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The No-Code Revolution: Why businesses are building faster, smarter, and leaner

For decades, software development followed a familiar formula: hire developers, write thousands of lines of code, spend months or years building systems, then spend even more time maintaining them. That model is rapidly changing.

Andrew Marsh

Here, Andrew Marsh, chair of Vistage Northumberland, North East and Cumbria teams with Ian Brown, managing director of Excelpoint, to bust some myths. Andrew said: "Today, businesses are embracing no-code platforms, accelerating innovation, reducing costs, and giving operational teams the power to build digital systems themselves whilst maintaining centralised control. What was considered niche has now become a central pillar of digital transformation.

"From manufacturing and healthcare to logistics and public services, organisations are discovering that no-code technology is not just convenient. It is about survival in an increasingly fast-moving business environment.

"According to Excelpoint, which has deployed enterprise workflow systems at scale globally, businesses are increasingly demanding platforms that can adapt in weeks. The company says its no-code system allows organisations to create new systems and automate workflows "ten times faster than bespoke development projects sometimes a hundred times faster."

"No-code platforms allow users to create software applications, workflows, dashboards, and automations without traditional programming. Instead of writing code manually, users employ drag-and-drop interfaces, logic builders, templates, and integrations."

Ian said the result of no-code is a dramatic reduction in development complexity, continuing: "Businesses can build systems for CRM and customer management, compliance tracking, risk management, asset management, incident reporting, HR workflows, reporting dashboards and AI-driven automations.

"We deliver no-code environments that replace fragmented spreadsheets and disconnected legacy systems with unified business platforms. Core benefits include speed to deployment, sometimes as little as four weeks; lower development costs; and greater business agility. Markets shift rapidly. Regulations evolve. Internal processes change constantly. Speed, affordability and agility are everything!"

No-code platforms allow modification of workflows and systems without rebuilding from scratch. This flexibility is valuable in sectors such as manufacturing, healthcare, energy, and government, where operational requirements evolve continuously.

Excelpoint highlights that modern organisations need systems that are "agile and scalable" to adapt to changing business needs.

No-code platforms also simplify maintenance by reducing complex business logic and operational flows to visual diagrams and simple screens

Ian says: "Perhaps the most transformative aspect of no-code is cultural rather than technical. Operational teams no longer need to wait for IT departments to prioritise their requests. Departments can prototype and improve processes themselves. This shift creates faster experimentation, better collaboration, and stronger alignment between software and real-world business operations reducing mis-communication and complicated application bloat. A win-win all round."

Artificial intelligence is now accelerating the no-code movement even further.

Modern platforms increasingly integrate AI tools capable of:

- Generating screens, systems, workflows and integrations automatically
- Analysing operational data to provide senior level insights
- Automating the production of reports and forecasts
- Automating repetitive decisions
- Assisting customer support
- Recommending process improvements
- Explaining existing complex processes to simplify and accelerate system support

Excelpoint markets itself as a platform for building "AI business systems," combining workflow automation with intelligent insights and AI-assisted operations. This convergence is significant because it removes a number of traditional barriers simultaneously:

1. The need for coding expertise
2. The need for advanced data or information understanding
3. Application of current trends and best practices previously unknown

Some AI proponents would suggest that AI can "Write all the code you need" but Ian would argue that code-generators have existed for decades and the problems with AI code are the same, namely:

1. You still need a development team to review, refactor, and maintain this "bespoke" code
2. The technical debt is difficult to escape
3. Although AI can generate better quality code and faster the age-old issues associated with bespoke code still exist.

No-code platforms like Excelpoint don't require technical teams, avoid risk and resilience issues associated with over dependency on technical staff, and reduce cost and technical debt by abstracting complex business systems into easy to understand GUI elements.

Businesses can now deploy increasingly intelligent systems without building dedicated AI engineering teams. "In fact," Andrew said "The software industry itself is undergoing a major identity shift. Three models are now shaping the future: "SaaS transformed enterprise software by moving applications to the cloud. Businesses no longer needed to install or maintain infrastructure locally. However, SaaS products often force organisations into rigid workflows. Companies must adapt their processes to fit the software. This rigidity has become a growing frustration for many businesses.

"Businesses now expect systems to connect seamlessly rather than operate in silos. Modern no-code platforms are responding by offering deep integrations with existing enterprise tools, allowing businesses to preserve existing investments while modernising operations by utilising no-code integrations.

"And AI which is rapidly becoming the next evolution of software creation itself. Rather than manually building workflows, users are beginning to describe systems conversationally using natural language prompts. AI then generates the logic, structure, and automation automatically."

Excelpoint consistently positions no-code as more than a productivity tool. Instead, it's seen as a strategic enabler of digital transformation, allowing businesses to modernise operations while reducing complexity and cost.

Enterprise-grade no-code vendors like Excelpoint are increasingly addressing current challenges with stronger controls, integration layers, advanced permissions, and hybrid architectures.

In conclusion, the future of software is becoming faster, more accessible, and increasingly intelligent. No-code platforms are enabling organisations to innovate without being constrained, and at the same time, AI is reshaping how systems are designed, automated, and managed.

For businesses seeking to modernise operations, reduce costs, and accelerate innovation, no-code is no longer an experimental trend. It is becoming the new operating model for digital transformation.

For more information contact Andrew.marsh@vistage-chair.co.uk



Ian Brown

The Recruiter

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

Rachel Scott

Founder of Lemon Drizzle Recruitment

What inspired you to start your own recruitment agency?

After 15 years in the industry it was a long held dream to form my own business and do things my way. Two years ago I finally took the plunge and have never looked back.

Where does the name Lemon Drizzle originate from?

When I started in the industry my Grandmother used to bake her special brand of lemon cake which I used to take with me when visiting sites. I quickly became known as "Rachel with the lemon cakes!" She was a real inspiration to me and gave the recipe before she sadly passed away. The business name is very much in tribute to her.

What services do you offer?

I offer permanent recruitment services within the construction sector for regional contractors and sub contractors. The majority of my clients are North East based but I also cover Yorkshire and the Midlands.

What are the biggest challenges you have faced so far?

Working on my own means I have to be very self disciplined. Sometimes the role can be quite lonely and I miss collaborating with colleagues. However, I really appreciate the freedom working for myself gives me and it is hugely rewarding when a placement comes together where I've managed the process completely independently.

The job is a real rollercoaster but, despite its challenges, I wouldnt swap it for the world.

What qualities do you look for when placing candidates?

My clients mainly look for quantity surveyors who can run a project independently from a commercial perspective, and estimators who can manage the tender process efficiently and work quickly to tight deadlines. Those are the key things I focus on, alongside a good attitude, a solid track record, and experience working for a similar type of business.

What advice would you give to anyone looking to work in the recruitment and construction industries?

Recruitment - Become a market expert in your chosen specialism and stick at it. Also important to not be afraid to fail and work hard in what can be a relentless environment.

Construction – If you're interested in white-collar construction roles, I'd definitely look at a degree apprenticeship. You work full-time, get hands-on experience, and go to uni one day a week to learn the theory behind it. It's also funded through the government levy scheme, which is a big help with the cost of higher education.

What is the best piece of business advice you have received?

Try and always have enough money to be able to cover your salary and business costs for three months.

Also important to remember the old adage "For every person who says no, you're one call closer to getting a yes."

Who are your heroes and mentors?

I've picked up a lot from different people over the years rather than someone specific. In recruitment, I've learned a lot from experienced consultants who've shown me the value of really knowing your market and staying consistent. In construction, I've always respected the people who've worked their way up and built proper careers through hard work and graft. I also really admire my mam. She's still working incredibly hard, which I really look up to.

What is your greatest strength?

The recruitment industry is always challenging so undoubtedly resilience!

How do you like to unwind?

Putting my apron on and baking lemon cakes! I also love to spend time with my two amazing boys, walk my dog, Peggy Sue the Cavapoo, and socialise with my friends.

What does the future hold?

I certainly don't want to take over the world! As this business is such a personal brand I'd like to retain full control of what I do and continue to do it better.

www.lemondrizzlerecruitment.com



I'd like to retain full control of what I do and continue to do it better.

Rachel Scott

When Did Recruitment Become So Complicated?

Bryony Gibson, director of Bryony Gibson Consulting, talks about the growth of online recruitment processes and the power of an old-fashioned conversation.


Bryony Gibson

Once upon a time, recruitment was 'relatively' straightforward. A CV came in, someone picked up the phone, a conversation happened, and if there was interest on both sides, a meeting followed.

Decisions were made quickly, based on experience, education, cultural fit, and human connection. Today, finding a new job can feel more like tackling an obstacle course.

Across the recruitment market, processes increasingly stretch over weeks, sometimes months. With multiple interview stages, delays between meetings, online tests, and long periods of silence while "feedback is reviewed".

In some cases, people are being asked to repeat the same conversations with different stakeholders, all assessing the same thing. And in a candidate-short market, that approach doesn't work.

Good People Won't Wait

The reality is that good, skilled people are not available for long. When it comes to accountants, tax specialists, and audit professionals, many have multiple opportunities in front of them at once. So, if a process drags, they move on.

What's also concerning for the firms recruiting is the impression they unintentionally create during the process. Hiring has naturally become far more process-driven. Applications arrive from multiple sources. Recruiters are managing larger volumes of information, and technology plays a significant role in filtering and coordinating their activity. But, where culture, trust and long-term fit matter there is still huge value in simply having a conversation early in the process.

The problem that internal recruitment teams often have is managing external recruiters, LinkedIn applications, employee referrals, outsourced screening providers, and overseas processing centres, all for a single hire. And the result can be a drawn-out, impersonal experience for the candidate.

What is often forgotten is that recruitment is the first direct interaction most people have with a company's culture. If the process feels slow, disorganised or overly bureaucratic, they naturally start to question what working there might feel like.

Of course, businesses need to make the right hiring decisions. That's crucial, and sometimes it does take time. But somewhere along the way, we have started to confuse "thorough" with "complicated".

Do we need four or five interview stages?

In most cases, experienced hiring managers know quickly whether a candidate has the technical capability and personality to succeed in their team. Yet many businesses seem determined to push recruitment further and further into portals, automated screening questions, and lengthy online processes that strip away the very thing that helps people make good hiring decisions in the first place: human judgment.

From my experience, not every strong candidate appears perfectly on paper. Not every good hire emerges from a keyword search or an applicant tracking system. Sometimes the best recruitment decisions still come from a chance conversation, a meeting, a referral, or simply getting a feel for someone's ambition, attitude, and potential.

Technology absolutely has a role to play, but it should support conversations, not replace them.

The firms attracting the best people right now are the ones keeping things simplest. Quick response times, clear communication, and one or two well-structured interviews, all with direct access to decision-makers.

The people you hire determine your business success, and a big proportion of that depends on them working well together.

In a competitive recruitment market, those who move quickly, with clarity, and who prioritise real conversations will continue to stand out.

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ACCOUNTING & BUSINESS ADVISORY PARTNER

NEWCASTLE, Ref: BGC2449

A key Partner opportunity within a global professional services firm investing heavily in its regional offering. This role will play a central part in shaping the future of accounting & business advisory services across the North East, combining leadership, client development, and growth. Ideal for a commercially astute senior professional looking for greater influence, autonomy, and long-term opportunity. **Hybrid working.**

BUSINESS SERVICES MANAGER

NEWCASTLE, Ref: BGC2440

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STOCKTON, Ref: BGC2451

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To express your interest in a vacancy, or for a confidential discussion, contact Bryony Gibson, Bryony Gibson Consulting, on 0191 375 9983 or visit BryonyGibson.com/Vacancies

Celebrating 10 years of excellence

Over the last decade, we've supported 17,500 businesses, connected SMEs to 350+ service providers, and helped businesses raise £150m+.

This year marks a milestone we're incredibly proud of: 10 years of SME Centre of Excellence. A decade of standing alongside business owners, championing their ambitions, and delivering the practical, credible support that helps people start, survive, and thrive.

That phrase has guided us from day one, and as we celebrate this anniversary, it feels more relevant than ever.

We see it play out daily. People begin with an idea but often face doubt. Others survive a tough quarter, a challenging year, or a difficult decision. Many try to grow without losing their heads or their weekends.

For 10 years, we've been there for every stage of that journey.

★★★★★

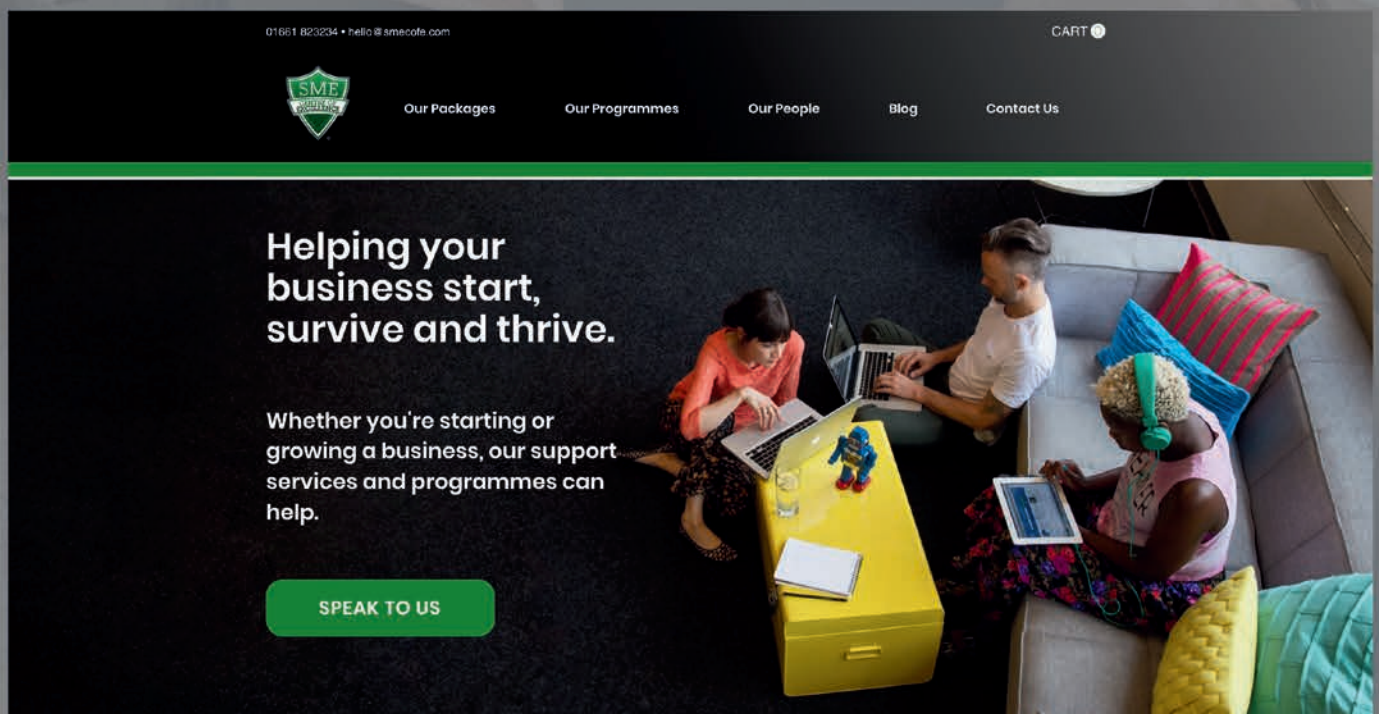
We've been using the virtual office service at the SME Centre of Excellence for our registered business address and have found it to be excellent value for money.

★★★★★

Kevin, Phil and the team at SME Centre of Excellence, Ponteland have been an invaluable support to the development and launching of our business.

★★★★★

The advice and training I have received from SME has been without doubt the most valuable. The staff are highly professional and have a wealth of experience in the business world.



Our 10 year timeline...

2016 to 2017: Getting the Foundations Right

The early years were about building something that could last.

We focused on the basics that make delivery possible: building a trusted network, shaping workshop formats that people actually want to attend, and strengthening relationships across the North East enterprise ecosystem.

2018 to 2019: Becoming a Visible Hub

As the organisation grew, our Ponteland base became a more visible part of the story. It provided a practical way to support SMEs through a mix of workspace, virtual office solutions, workshops, and one-to-one support.

Some people need a desk and a quiet place to think. Others need a business address that enhances their credibility. Some require a room full of peers, while others need a straightforward conversation and a plan.

2020: Showing Up for SMEs in Need

COVID changed everything for many businesses.

During that period, we helped launch Save Our SME, a support network created to help business owners navigate the crisis. It was practical and fast because it had to be. People didn't need polished messaging; they needed help.

2021 to 2022: Helping Businesses Build Momentum

This is where structured programs mattered. Peer learning became essential. Investment readiness was crucial.

We delivered Grow2Succeed in January 2021, helping businesses identify pain points and connect to the right support through a diagnostic workshop and coaching. We partnered with the North East Growth Hub to deliver Peer Networks for SMEs in the Creative and Culture sector,

2023: More Delivery, More Partnerships, More Reach

By 2023, our work was increasingly shaped by partner-funded and commissioned delivery.

Enterprise Ignition, including an event in July 2023, supported entrepreneurs and founders through interactive sessions designed to help them define and ignite their business goals.

Throughout the year, we continued our delivery through programs such as Digital City Accelerator, Durham City Incubator, Add-Venture Builder (internationalisation), Yohlar, and others.

2024 to 2025: Recent Programs, Real Delivery, Measurable Impact

We strengthened partnerships across the region, including NECA, Durham County Council, and NSBS, and continued building connections that open doors for SMEs.

2026: The Next Chapter, Built from Everything We've Learned

2026: The Business Club, built from everything we've learned.



Connect with the team for any help, support or to join our new Business Club :

www.smecofe.com | hello@smecofe.com



abc AWARDS 2026

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11th November 2026

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We invite you all to join us in honouring extraordinary individuals and their remarkable achievements. Prepare for a night of celebration that includes a sparkling drinks reception, a delectable three-course halal meal, and the highly anticipated awards!

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NOMINATIONS: **TICKETS & TABLES:** **SPONSORS:**

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ABC is a not-for-profit social enterprise that aims to connect, support and promote the Asian and wider community.









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L-R: Emma Bailey, Laura Gillespie and Natalia Lamb

Celebrating five years

A conversation with Gillespie Recruitment.



Congratulations on five years in business! What does this milestone mean to you?

Thank you, it really does mean a lot. Reaching five years feels like a moment to pause and reflect on our journey so far. We've met so many incredible people along the way, both clients and candidates, and that's what makes it so special. For us, it's not just about business growth, it's about the relationships we've built, and the trust people have placed in us.

What inspired you to start Gillespie Recruitment?

At its heart, it was about people. We felt there was an opportunity to bring a more honest, caring, and personal approach to recruitment. We wanted to move away from the "one-size-fits-all" mentality and instead really listen, understanding what motivates someone, what a business truly needs, and what makes a placement successful long-term.

How would you describe your approach to recruitment?

We're very much relationship led. We take time to get to know people properly, their goals, their challenges, and what success looks like to them. Whether it's a business looking to grow their team or someone searching for their next opportunity, we treat every interaction with care. Recruitment can be life-changing for people, so we take that responsibility seriously.

What makes Gillespie Recruitment different?

We genuinely care. That might sound simple, but it's something people really notice. We're honest, approachable, and are always focused on doing the right thing. Our aim is to build long-term partnerships, not just make quick placements.

What have been some highlights over the past five years?

Seeing people thrive in roles we've helped them secure is always a highlight. We've had candidates come back to us later as clients, which is incredibly rewarding as it shows the relationships we build really do last. Growing our reputation locally and becoming a trusted name has also been something we're very proud of.

How important is the local community to your business?

It's hugely important. We're proud to work closely with local businesses and support people within our community. Being local means, we understand the market, but more than that, we understand the people and that makes a huge difference.

What's next for Gillespie Recruitment?

We'll keep doing what we do best, which is putting people first. We're always learning, always adapting, and always looking for ways to improve. The future is about continuing to build strong relationships and helping even more people and businesses succeed.

Finally, how are you celebrating?

We held a great networking event here at NE BIC with Aoife Forbes of Forbes Finishings! We really appreciate the support we have received from our clients, candidates, and the local business community. We're excited for what the next five years will bring!

At Gillespie Recruitment, it's always been about people. Whether you're growing your team or looking for your next opportunity, we're here to help, let's start the conversation!

gillespierecruitment.co.uk













Gillespie Recruitment networking event

Gillespie Recruitment recently hosted a successful networking event at the NE BIC, bringing together a vibrant mix of clients, candidates, and members of the local business community to celebrate their 5th year in business.

Guest speaker, Aoife Forbes of Forbes Finishings, delivered an engaging and practical session on sustainable gift wrapping, sharing creative, eco-friendly techniques.

The event provided valuable opportunities to connect, exchange ideas, and strengthen professional relationships while promoting sustainability within everyday practices. Attendees left inspired and equipped with useful skills to apply.













Whistleblowing in the Workplace

By Kathryn Rodgers, Face2FaceHR

What employers need to know.

Whistleblowing is becoming a more common feature in workplace disputes—and not always in the way employers expect. Increasingly, we're seeing it raised alongside other claims, particularly as a way for employees to strengthen their position in situations such as dismissal.

With upcoming changes set to bring sexual harassment more clearly into the scope of whistleblowing, now is the time for businesses to understand what it means, what qualifies as a protected disclosure, and how to manage the risks.

What is whistleblowing?

In simple terms, whistleblowing is when a worker reports wrongdoing in the public interest. This could include criminal activity, breaches of legal obligations, health and safety risks, or attempts to cover these up.

For a disclosure to be legally protected, it must meet certain criteria. It's not enough to raise a complaint—the worker must reasonably believe the information is true and that it's in the public interest, rather than purely a personal grievance.

However, the line between a grievance and a protected disclosure isn't always clear, which is where many employers run into difficulty.

Why it matters more now

We're seeing a rise in whistleblowing claims, often linked to disciplinaries or dismissals. In some cases, concerns are raised shortly before or during formal processes, making it more challenging for employers to proceed without risk.

Sexual harassment is also expected to fall more clearly within whistleblowing protections later this year. This means complaints in this area may carry additional legal weight, increasing the risk of claims such as automatic unfair dismissal or detriment if handled incorrectly.



Kathryn Rodgers

What counts as a protected disclosure?

A disclosure is likely to be protected if it:

- Relates to a relevant wrongdoing (e.g. legal breach, health and safety risk, discrimination or harassment)
- Is something the worker reasonably believes to be true
- Is made in the public interest
- Is raised through an appropriate channel

Even if the concern turns out to be incorrect, it can still be protected if the belief was reasonable at the time.

How employers can protect themselves

Preparation and consistency are key. Employers should:

- Have a clear whistleblowing policy in place
- Train managers to recognise potential disclosures
- Take all concerns seriously, even if raised informally
- Avoid reactive decision-making, especially around disciplinary action

Keep clear records of decisions and reasoning

It's also important to separate the issue from the individual. Raising a concern doesn't prevent action on unrelated performance or conduct—but timing and handling are critical.

Final thoughts

Whistleblowing doesn't have to be a risk—it can help identify issues early and protect your business in the long run. But it must be handled carefully.

As the legal landscape evolves, particularly around sexual harassment, businesses that take a proactive approach will be in a much stronger position. If you're facing a whistleblowing concern or want to strengthen your approach, now is the time to act. Proactive support can help you manage risk, stay compliant, and handle situations with confidence.

face2facehr.com



Sarah Richardson

Foster Care Fortnight

Over 6,000 NE children 'need families'.

Over 6,000 children across the North East need foster families, new data shows.

The heartbreaking stat comes amid a stark warning that the region is experiencing an "unprecedented" fostering crisis.

Currently, the North East has the highest rate of children in care in England. One area – Hartlepool – has the third highest rate of any town or city.

A not-for-profit fostering organisation from the town, Changing Futures North East, has urged people to "think again" about the possibility of fostering.

"The scale is unlike anything we've seen previously, and we now have more children in care than families to look after them," said Sarah Richardson, fostering manager for Changing Futures Fostering.

"These are often vulnerable children, from Northumberland down to Redcar, who just desperately want some stability and safety in their lives."

Her warning comes as part of Foster Care Fortnight, a national campaign that runs from May 11 – 24.

The campaign aims to highlight the life-changing impact foster carers can have on vulnerable children and young people.

And the latest Government drives home the sheer scale of the crisis in our region.

- In the North East, there are 1,060 looked after children aged four or under – including 310 babies
- Abuse or neglect is the main reason 69 per cent of local children are in care
- 800 children in the North East have been placed over 20 miles from their home

At Changing Futures North East, the organisation helps place children with foster families across the region, from Washington down to East Cleveland.

And having recently warned of "fake news" deterring many would-be applicants, she has urged potential foster families to explore the possibility of supporting a youngster.

"People are needlessly deterred from fostering for multiple reasons – be it the cost, or the assumption they wouldn't be suitable – but often these are barriers that can either be overcome or simply aren't real," she added.

"Additionally, some worry that children in care or potentially unruly, but the Government data shows that just one per cent of North East children are primarily in care due to their behaviour

"Instead, the overwhelming majority are children who just need some love. The data says it all; these are kids who have suffered abuse or neglect or come from homes where parents have struggled to provide the safety and stability they need.

Data shows that 1,440 children in the region – almost a quarter of those in care – are there due to either a family that's that's unable to meet children's needsor in acute stress.

"Ultimately, these children are the victims and simply need a chance – a bit of TLC and guidance – and a fresh start," added Sarah.

"Fostering comes in all shapes and sizes. We support families who foster children long-term, but I also have families who are not full-time.

"It can be challenging but also incredibly rewarding, and even providing stability for a short period can have a lifelong positive impact on a child.

"We would encourage anybody who has ever considered fostering, even briefly, to have a conversation and find out more."

For more information visit changingfuturesfostering.co.uk





Durham Business Club celebrates 45 years with Mayor's Growth Vision

One year on, Durham Business Club welcomed North East Mayor Kim McGuinness back to the stage at Radisson Blu Durham as she outlined ambitious plans to boost tourism and economic growth across the region.

Speaking to around 100 members in a fireside chat with club chair Graham Soult, she described the North East as "the best place in the world" and highlighted tourism's role in driving prosperity despite ongoing financial pressures on businesses and households.

The evening also celebrated Durham Business Club's 45th anniversary, with members unveiling a new gold logo. Train operator Lumo joined the celebrations, with communications director Richard Salkeld helping cut a ceremonial cake and Radisson Blu created the perfect atmosphere for an insightful and uplifting evening.

www.durhambusinessgroup.co.uk















Photography credit: Will Walker/North East News

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Could your next market research project be 50% funded?

For many growing businesses, investing in market research is something that can sometimes sit on the 'important but not urgent' list.

Leaders know the value of understanding their customers better, testing new ideas before launch or exploring new markets with confidence but when budgets are under pressure, research can often be delayed or in some cases, attempted by internal teams.

That is why the latest phase of the NBSL Support Fund could prove to be a valuable opportunity for businesses North of the Tyne.

The fund offers eligible businesses the chance to access up to 50% funding towards external support projects, helping organisations invest in expertise that can strengthen performance, sharpen strategy and support long-term growth. For companies considering market research, customer insight projects or strategic planning, it presents an opportunity to move forward with less financial risk.

At a time when businesses are navigating economic uncertainty, changing customer expectations and increasing competition, having access to reliable insight has never been more important. Market research is no longer simply a 'nice to have' activity for larger organisations, increasingly, it is becoming an essential tool for SMEs looking to make informed decisions and build resilience.

As a registered provider with NBSL, MMC Research works with organisations to deliver tailored insight projects that align with the objectives of the fund while creating meaningful commercial value. That could include voice of customer research, product testing, market analysis, competitor benchmarking, stakeholder engagement or strategic insight projects designed to support business growth plans.

Funding for eligible projects range between £3,000 and £8,000, with up to half of the project cost covered. The support is available to small and medium-sized enterprises with fewer than 250 employees that are based in Newcastle, North Tyneside or Northumberland.

Research can take many forms depending on a company's objectives. It may involve understanding how existing customers perceive a brand, testing demand for a new product or service, analysing competitor activity, or identifying opportunities within new sectors or regions. It can also help businesses uncover barriers to growth that may not be immediately obvious internally.

Too often, strategic decisions are based on assumptions, anecdotal feedback or instinct alone. While experience and intuition absolutely have their place, businesses that combine them with evidence-based insight are often in a much stronger position to make confident decisions.

Launching a new service without understanding market demand can be expensive. Expanding into a new sector without clarity on customer needs can create unnecessary risk. Equally, failing to recognise changing expectations within an existing customer base can leave businesses vulnerable to competitors.

It provides organisations with a clearer understanding of what customers value, how markets are evolving and where the greatest opportunities for growth exist. In practical terms, that can lead to stronger marketing strategies, more targeted business development, improved customer retention and smarter investment decisions.

For businesses North of the Tyne, the timing of this funding opportunity is particularly significant. While the region continues to see innovation and entrepreneurial growth across sectors including manufacturing, technology, professional services and green energy, growth often depends on the ability to adapt quickly and make strategic decisions with confidence.

For businesses already considering investing in research or strategic planning over the next 12 months, now may be the ideal time to act.

In a competitive and rapidly changing market, clarity can be one of the most valuable assets a business possesses. MMC Research provides that clarity and with funding support available, it may now be more accessible than many organisations realise.

For more information on MMC Research's services, head across to their website at mmc.agency

Navigating Stakeholder Transition

By Annabel Graham, Successful Training

As I write this, we are in the fall out of the local government elections in the UK and battle within the government for who will be leader.


Annabel Graham

Across the country, thousands of employees and leaders in local government and associated businesses are going through a massive transition. Their stakeholders have changed overnight!

People who they built close working relationships with for years have gone, and they are left with the prospect of not just one new face around the table but dozens who they need to get to know and influence. It's daunting!

I've been there. Many years ago, when a senior manager, my director and CEO went over a weekend. I worked in a PLC, the results weren't good enough, the board had spoken and they had to go. It was a shock. The person I'd got to know, work with and trust vanished, and it got worse from there.

I was on holiday, but my first call after hearing, was to call my director and check he was ok. We're dealing with people – they have feelings! Thankfully he went on to an outstanding career, the company, very sadly, not so much. Like football teams with a revolving door of managers, businesses who do the same with CEOs, suffer.

What we are seeing now in politics is not unusual in any business, you don't have to be part of local government. A merger, acquisition, restructure can all cause this. And how many of us have seen the back biting, infighting and toxic behaviours when the top team start to fall apart or has a new leader. They think they are hiding it, but they aren't – it's plain to see. It's ripples down through the organisation, causing paralysis whilst people work out which horse to back and protect their own position.

How then can we navigate this, build resilience across teams and organisations in the face of large-scale stakeholder change and build credibility fast?

1. Be very clear on your mandate: As an organisation be clear on your vision, desired outcomes, and key priorities, and make sure all your teams are aligned. Then one message goes out – not a scatter gun effect which breeds uncertainty and lack of trust in others.

2. Understand your stakeholders' expectations: do your mandates align? If not, what needs to change? Be clear on what they expect of you in focus, output, communication and share your expectations of them. Treat it like a service level agreement: how will you all play together?

3. Identify who is crucial to your success: this may be an individual or team. As a team map those teams internally & externally who are crucial to your success, and who else you need to involve. Then decide who is going to own which stakeholder. No-one has time for you all to talk, so agree your liaison strategy.

4. Align internally across teams: nothing is more unsettling to an external stakeholder than getting mixed messages across the business they work with. It creates uncertainty. We like behaviours and messages to be congruous, so create cross team touch points to share best practice, create shared priorities and align on approach.

5. Remember the 3Cs. Communication, consistency and commitment. Communicate often, be consistent in your message, and keep saying it long after your bored. People need repetition, up to 20 times before they commit to it, so keep repeating what's important.

If you're facing this situation currently; take a breath, prepare a plan, and be friendly. If your stakeholders meet the person before the job title, it will go a long way!

If you'd like to talk more about how Annabel can support alignment within and across teams, then reach out at annabel@successfultraining.co.uk or www.linkedin.com/in/annabelgraham-coach-facilitator

Newcastle's Late Night Levy has had its day

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

Newcastle City Council has taken the momentous first step towards repealing the Late Night Levy, a decision that should be welcomed by everyone who cares about the future of our city centre economy.

Introduced in 2013, the late night levy is a throwback to different times and a very different Newcastle. At the time, the city's night-time economy was dominated almost exclusively by vertical drinking venues with 'trebles for a pound' and similar drinks promotions the norm.

This culture, it was thought, placed additional pressures on policing and council resources at night. The Council's own justification for introducing the levy described the city's nightlife as "dominated by high volume, vertical drinking establishments placing the greatest demand on police resources at night."

Fifteen years on, Newcastle has changed beyond recognition.

The city that once had 14 nightclubs now has only four. Gone are the high-volume drinking venues that defined Newcastle's nightlife. In their place has emerged a more sophisticated hospitality environment, based largely around food, experiences, and quality. Operators have invested millions of pounds transforming their venues and their offer to meet changing customer demand and to accommodate the cultural shifts towards wellbeing, premium experiences and a different approach to socialising.

Our hospitality sector has evolved, the Levy has not.

Businesses selling alcohol between midnight and 6am in Newcastle city centre still pay up to £4,400 every year through the levy, despite facing the toughest trading conditions in living memory. The two recent catastrophic budgets have imposed hideous financial pressures on the hospitality and leisure sectors through higher tax and wage bills on top of spiralling energy bills and rising costs. The Business Rates re-evaluation nationally and the loss of rates relief compounded this financial crisis with some venues facing staggering rate rises of up to 660%. Many have folded under the financial burden placed on them by the state. In the last twelve months alone, we have lost 16 venues in Newcastle and even more are just about managing to keep their head above water for now.

Margins across hospitality are now paper thin. Industry figures suggest pubs make as little as 14p profit on each pint. A venue paying the highest rate of late night levy would need to sell 31,000 pints to cover the cost of this outdated tax liability.

Newcastle has become a clear regional and national outlier in the late night levy stakes.

No other city in the North East imposes it. Sunderland and Durham operate without it and remain safe. Major cities across the UK, including Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield and Bristol manage thriving and safe night-time economies without imposing the levy. Cheltenham, Southampton and Nottingham recently abolished theirs to support their hospitality businesses, valuing the sector as an asset not a burden. Newcastle risks falling behind these and other cities where the levy has been abandoned by proactive councils keen to support their hospitality sectors.

This raises a fundamental question, what makes Newcastle exceptional enough to justify retaining the tax?

The answer becomes harder to justify when examining the city's own safety data.

Newcastle City Council and Northumbria Police's own statistics show that Newcastle is a remarkably safe city, particularly given the scale and success of its night-time economy. In fact, much of the available data supports the case for abolishing the levy, showing that the associated crime levels are actually higher during the day than they are post-midnight.

The reality is that Newcastle is rightly recognised as one of the safest cities in the UK and yet the levy is still imposed. The tax also raises such insignificant sums when compared to the overall policing budget that the suggestion that Newcastle's safety would be compromised by abolishing the levy bears no scrutiny. Other major cities achieve the same or better safety outcomes without the tax.

After all, hospitality is one of the highest taxed sectors in the UK, and general taxation already contributes to the cost of providing a safe trading environment. Imposing an exceptional tax, needs an exceptional justification. This is why the council's decision to commit to an independent consultation and levy review is so very important. It highlights the council's partnership approach and willingness to listen to feedback from businesses and NE1 through the newly reinstated Licensees Forum which called for this review. It is only by working together that we can secure the future of the sector, ensuring it is safe and can thrive.

Licensees who have shouldered the burden of the levy for over a decade will finally have their say and will be able to explain how it affects their businesses. The consultation which runs until the end of June gives the council the chance to reassess whether a policy designed for the Newcastle of 2013 can still legitimately be applied today. We will be giving our views to the consultation, and we have confidence that the council will see the unfairness of the scheme and belatedly remove it.

The case for the levy was tenuous at best. Now it is virtually non-existent and increasingly impossible to defend.

Newcastle's hospitality sector is one of the pillars of the city's economic and cultural success. It supports thousands of jobs, drives tourism and helps make Newcastle one of the most vibrant cities in the UK.

At a time when businesses are facing the toughest economic trading conditions in history, removing an outdated and unjustifiable tax is not just sensible policy, it is the right and moral thing to do. It is time to scrap it.

www.newcastlene1ltd.com



Stephen Patterson



Image credit: Steve Brock Photography

North East BIPC celebrates supporting over 1,500 businesses – with people at the heart of its success

With people at the heart of its success, the Business & IP Centre North East (BIPC) is celebrating a transformative 36 months supporting entrepreneurs and small businesses across the region.

More than 1,500 businesses have benefited from expert advice, improved business performance, the acquisition of new skills and business growth including gaining new customers. In addition, hundreds more individuals have been supported to take their first steps into enterprise.

In the last three years, BIPC North East has given these businesses tailored, non-financial advice, connecting them with a wide network of more than 50 experts across areas such as marketing, PR, sustainability, finance and intellectual property. Alongside this, more than 700 aspiring entrepreneurs have benefitted the support of partners: The Millin Charity and Reviving The Heart of the West End, with workshops, one-to-one sessions and confidence-building programmes designed to help turn ideas into reality.

The Citylife Business Support Grant has also given eligible businesses access to up to 12 hours of fully funded, specialist support as well as the opportunity to work directly with experts to accelerate growth, refine strategy and respond to an ever-changing business landscape. Around 700 businesses have benefited from grant-backed programmes, helping to drive innovation, create jobs and strengthen the regional economy.



Businesses and staff from BIPC NE

At the heart of this success is a people-first approach; something Economic Development Officer Sarah Turnbull says defines the BIPC's work.

"Everything we do is centred around supporting people in business and championing inspiring entrepreneurs," she said. "We're incredibly proud to support such a diverse and inspiring business community across the North East. Whether someone has a new idea or an established business, we're passionate about helping individuals turn ideas into reality, build their confidence, and give the reassurance that we are there to help them grow, adapt and thrive.

"There's so much talent here from entrepreneurs and growing businesses to the partners and more than 50 experts who support them. It's that mix of people and ideas that makes it so special, we're giving businesses the foundations they need to succeed in a rapidly changing world."

Behind the figures are real people whose businesses have grown, adapted and flourished with BIPC support.

Nicky Gibson of KG Photography in Gateshead has been running her business for more than 25 years, building a reputation for commercial photography, events and weddings. She describes the reality of running a creative business in the North East as "spinning plates," constantly adapting to client needs and solving problems on the go.

Her studio, based in a former bank building known as Bank Studio, proved vital during the COVID-19 pandemic, giving the business a physical base at a time when much of the industry shut down. Seeking to stay ahead of rapid technological change, Nicky connected with BIPC's Retail Expert in Residence, Karen Williamson.

"With the internet, AI and new technology, things are changing all the time," she said. "You must keep learning. Since working with Karen, we've expanded into drone work, video production and editing. It's really pushed the business forward and made me think differently."

In the hospitality sector, Laura Race from Hinnies restaurant in Whitley Bay, part of the Dene Hospitality Group which includes Blackfriars and Dobson & Parnell, has used BIPC support to strengthen the restaurant's marketing. Located just off the seafront near Spanish City, Hinnies focuses on relaxed, family-friendly "Geordie comfort food."

Through the BIPC, the team accessed expert advice on food photography from specialist photographer Sue Todd to provide an essential part of modern restaurant marketing. "It's benefited us hugely," she said. "We've used the images across our website, social media, newsletters and menus. It really helps showcase the quality of what we do."

For Louise Renwick of Cragend Farm in Rothbury, a rural business offering holiday accommodation and heritage tours near the National Trust's Cragside estate, BIPC support has been wide-ranging. From marketing and PR to improving photography and embracing new technology, the support has helped her better promote the business.

It has also enabled her to publish a book about the farm and its connection to Lord Armstrong of Cragside creating a unique additional way to tell the story of the business. "It's helped me market ourselves more effectively and understand how to use different channels to reach people," she said.

A key part of the BIPC's impact is its collaborative approach, working closely with partner organisations across the region including The Millin Charity and Reviving the Heart of the West End. They have supported many West End based businesses including Lulu Chen, founder of 35C Supper Club in Newcastle, who created a distinctive dining experience by hosting guests in her own home and creative entrepreneur Thushara Chandrasiri, founder of Darkus Magazine, who has turned his passion into a profession.

Delivered through BIPC North East's established regional centre at Newcastle City Library, alongside seven BIPC Local centres based within key libraries across the region including Northumberland, Gateshead and South Tyneside, the service ensures business support is accessible, inclusive and firmly rooted within local communities.

Whether individuals walk into their local library, connect with experts online, or attend workshops and events designed to inspire and inform, BIPC North East offers support at every stage of the business journey. From developing early-stage ideas to helping established enterprises scale and grow, the BIPC provides a vital support network for the North East's thriving business community.

www.bipcnortheast.co.uk


The
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When you
back women,
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The Whole Point Launches in Newcastle to Help Women-led Businesses Access Investment

The launch of The Whole Point in Newcastle saw leaders, investors, and connectors raise the roof of The Biscuit Factory's Garden Room with overwhelming support for a shared belief: when you back women, the whole economy grows, and everybody wins.

Aligned with the UK Government's Invest in Women Taskforce, The Whole Point is a UK-wide initiative to unlock capital and opportunity for high-growth women-led businesses.

Newcastle's launch event, sponsored by Lloyds, Perspective Financial Group, Square One Law and The Biscuit Factory, was a huge success. And it felt like the start of something bigger for the region's business community, reinforcing the power of collaboration and a collective drive for change.

Learn more at: www.thewholepoint.co.uk

Join The Whole Point ecosystem

The Whole Point.

Women-led businesses receive only 7.3% of Newcastle's total funding.

(May 2026 data from The Data City)

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> We help leaders, managers and teams better understand how different brains operate in the workplace.

Shelley Farnham and Paul Cheetham

Why emotional safety is the missing link in human workplace performance

"Emotional intelligence isn't another skill leaders need to squeeze onto an already overloaded plate – emotional intelligence is the plate that all other leadership skills sit on." *– Mucha Mlingo (adapted)*

In an age increasingly shaped by AI, emotional intelligence is becoming one of the most valuable human skills in the workplace. "AI can take over the processes, so the competitive advantage now lies in our human skills," says Paul Cheetham, emotional intelligence coach and trainer and co-founder of Brilliant Brains, Wise Hearts. "The ability to communicate, collaborate, problem-solve and build relationships will increasingly define successful organisations."

Yet emotional intelligence cannot grow in environments where people feel stressed, judged or unsafe. This matters for everyone, but especially for neurodivergent employees. Many neurodivergent individuals process, experience and respond to the world differently. Their nervous systems may move more quickly into states of stress, overwhelm or self-protection, particularly in workplaces still designed around neurotypical ways of thinking, communicating and working. This isn't about capability, it's about context.

When environments create unnecessary sensory overload, communication barriers or executive function challenges, talented people can find themselves working against their strengths rather than with them.

That is where Brilliant Brains, Wise Hearts comes in.

Created by neurodivergent nervous system advocate and educator, Shelley Farnham, alongside Paul, the initiative bridges two workplace needs that are very often treated separately: understanding neurodiversity and building emotional intelligence.

"We help leaders, managers and teams better understand how different brains operate in the workplace," says Shelley, "and how small, practical changes can create environments where people feel safe, supported and able to perform at their best."

The benefits go far beyond neurodivergent employees. Every employee performs better when they feel psychologically safe. Teams communicate more effectively, problem-solve more creatively and collaborate more successfully when people are not operating in survival mode.

That is why understanding the nervous system sits at the heart of the Brilliant Brains, Wise Hearts approach. Their workshops explore how body stress impacts thinking, communication and performance – particularly the executive function skills workplaces depend on every day: organisation, prioritisation, task initiation, time management, emotional regulation and problem-solving.

"When people are overwhelmed or dysregulated, these skills are often the first to suffer," Shelley explains. "The brain's threat system can trigger a stress response that compromises clear thinking, emotional awareness, decision-making and creativity."

Often, meaningful change comes through relatively simple adjustments. Take meetings and conversations - for some neurodivergent employees, maintaining eye contact can be cognitively exhausting because of sensory overwhelm or executive function fatigue. A traditional face-to-face meeting across a desk may increase stress and reduce communication. Sitting side by side, walking while talking, or reducing sensory demands can make it easier for that employee to engage, think clearly and contribute effectively.



Shelley Farnham and Paul Cheetham on the Anna Foster Show

Alongside nervous system awareness, their workshops develop emotional intelligence using the globally recognised Six Seconds model, helping participants to:

- **Know Yourself** – understanding emotional data
- **Choose Yourself** – making intentional responses
- **Give Yourself** – building purposeful, empathetic connection

Importantly, participants learn that emotional intelligence may look different for neurodivergent individuals – different, not wrong.

"I was already delivering emotional intelligence workshops in many businesses," says Paul, "and neurodivergent participants were telling me that these essential skills felt inaccessible because the environment didn't allow them to be fully themselves or ask for support. I realised something else had to sit alongside emotional intelligence to make it relevant for everyone."

If emotional intelligence is the plate that leadership, communication and performance sit on, then emotional safety is what allows that plate to become bigger and stronger.

When people feel safe enough to ask for support, work to their strengths and contribute fully, organisations gain greater capacity too. Performance improves, wellbeing grows and retention strengthens because people are no longer spending energy simply coping.

In a workplace increasingly shaped by technology, the organisations that thrive will be those that invest in the human conditions that help people perform at their best.

brilliantbrainswisehearts.co.uk

Local know-how, local offices, global assurance

Brown & Brown. The North East insurance broker with worldwide support.

When it comes to insurance, confidence matters. For many businesses and individuals, that confidence comes from knowing they are dealing with people who understand local challenges, local markets and the way local organisations operate; while also having the strength and stability of a global organisation behind them.

That combination sits at the heart of Brown & Brown.

Brown & Brown is an international insurance brokerage group with revenues of more than £5 billion, but its approach remains firmly rooted in local communities. The firm places great emphasis on longterm relationships, whether with commercial businesses, notforprofit organisations or private individuals. In practice, this means clients benefit from personal, facetoface advice from professionals who live and work locally, supported by the resources, expertise and buying power of a multinational business.

In the North East, Brown & Brown has an established and growing presence, with offices in Newcastle, Sunderland, Gateshead and Durham, ensuring clients across the region have access to specialist advice close to home.

"We provide customised insurance solutions for commercial, corporate and notforprofit clients, while also supporting private individuals," explains Brad Galloway, Regional Development Director. "Our focus is on building longterm partnerships and delivering a friendly, professional service that is shaped around the specific needs of each client, rather than offering a onesizefitsall product."

As Brown & Brown continues to invest in the region, its expanding footprint also means greater accessibility and responsiveness for clients, combining local knowledge with national and international capability, working to deliver tailored insurance solutions across the North East.

Brown & Brown is continuing to grow across the UK, including in the North East, but the emphasis is firmly on partnership rather than consolidation for its own sake.

Growth is achieved by welcoming highquality insurance businesses that share Brown & Brown's values and clientfirst culture. These are typically wellrun, relationshipdriven firms with a strong local reputation, whose leadership teams are keen to remain part of the business while gaining access to broader capability and support.

"It's very much about alignment," says John Neill, Managing Director. "We're always interested in talking to brokers who recognise the benefits of being part of a wider group but still value their culture and local client relationships.'

For those businesses, joining Brown & Brown brings the opportunity to enhance what they already do well. Teams gain access to specialist expertise, market relationships, technology and administrative support that would be difficult to build alone, while continuing to serve clients locally.

This approach has supported steady growth in the region, with Brown & Brown now employing more than 55 teammates across its North East offices, a figure expected to increase further as the business continues to invest in people and capability.

Being part of a larger organisation also allows Brown & Brown's local teams to offer a broad range of products supporting sole traders and SMEs to complex corporate and multinational organisations.

The firm works with individuals and businesses requiring highly specialised insurance solutions, including leisure and hospitality, holiday parks, taxis, sports, education and professional risks, alongside more traditional sectors such as construction, manufacturing and engineering. Beyond arranging cover, Brown & Brown places strong emphasis on risk management, helping organisations identify vulnerabilities, reduce claims exposure and manage losses efficiently when they occur. The business also supports clients with areas such as asset protection, trade credit and employee benefits, providing a holistic approach to risk.

Private individuals are equally supported, with advice available across home, motor, travel, pet and equine insurance, combining personal service with access to a wide insurer market.

As Brown & Brown continues to grow, its focus remains consistent: combining local expertise with global strength, investing in people and longterm relationships, and offering clients confidence that their insurance is built around their specific needs.

Brown & Brown — global capability, delivered locally.

For more information, visit www.bbrown.com, where details of services and local offices can be found.

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The Power of WE

Sponsor your local radio station

Community radio station Radio Northumberland is appealing for new volunteers and business sponsors to help support and grow its locally focused broadcasting service.

Run entirely by volunteers, the station provides a platform for local news, music, community stories and specialist programming, while also giving people the chance to gain experience in presenting, production, journalism and media.

Businesses across the North East and beyond are being encouraged to sponsor programmes or advertise on the station, with affordable opportunities available for companies of all sizes.

The station is currently seeking a headline sponsor for its weekend programming, with the chosen business receiving regular on-air mentions across every weekend show. Director Keith Newman said: “We broadcast locally on DAB and worldwide on the internet, so there’s every opportunity to shout about your business no matter where you are. Community radio is all about supporting local people, organisations and businesses, and we’d love to hear from anyone who wants to get involved, whether that’s as a volunteer, advertiser or sponsor.”

More information about volunteering, sponsorship and advertising opportunities can be found at www.radionorthumberland.com





Northern Digital returns to roots to build future at the North East BIC

Sunderland-based digital agency, Northern Digital, is building a forward-thinking business with the support of the North East BIC - bringing a family story full circle.

The BIC has become more than just a base for founder Dave Head; it has become a community woven into his family’s entrepreneurial history for over 25 years.

For Dave the BIC is a “home from home” as he spent his childhood watching his late mother working for an engineering firm from 1999, and then going on to set up FS Design in 2002, designing for industry giants Nissan and Jaguar Land Rover, located in Unit 9.

Now years later, Dave has returned to those same corridors to build a future facing legacy as he expands his digital offerings. Since taking space in the BIC's dedicated coworking space, Northern Digital has evolved from a freelance venture into a specialist in brand identity and automation, streamlining operations for clients such as WE-AR VR and Menopause Medical.

Northern Digital focuses on helping organisations simplify complex processes, using AI and automation to save time and improve decision making, a service not previously offered.

Dave Head, Founder of Northern Digital, said: “I’ve been coming to the BIC since I can remember, so being back here now feels like coming home. Before setting up the agency, I reached a point where I felt limited by other people’s systems and processes. Running my own business isn’t just a job, it’s who I am.”

Since basing the business at the BIC, Dave has built a growing portfolio of retained clients across healthcare, software, and immersive technology. Alongside his technical expertise, Dave credits the BIC’s business support and culture as a major factor in his growth, working closely with Business Support Advisers; John Forth, Hina Joshi and Debbie Simpson.

Paul McEldon OBE, Chief Executive at the North East BIC, said: “It’s stories like Dave’s that truly showcase the heart of the community here at the BIC. It is a privilege to see the legacy his late mother has left behind come full circle, with Dave returning years later to build his own successful business in the very same place.”

Dave added: “The support has been massive - from funded services to advice and introductions. There is a huge sense of community here; coworking and networking help combat the isolation of running a business solo.”

The agency is also committed to supporting local talent. University of Sunderland student, Alex Clennell joined the team as a funded intern earlier this year and, under Dave’s mentorship, has already transitioned into a professional project-based supplier.

Looking ahead, Dave is focused on building long term partnerships with clients. He has also set a personal goal to secure a permanent office at the BIC to follow in his mother’s footsteps and complete his full-circle journey.

Find out more about Northern Digital here: northern.digital



North East International Film Festival launches first competitive games strand in regional first

The North East International Film Festival (NEIFF) has announced the launch of a Competitive Games Strand, marking a major milestone for the region's creative industries.

The initiative makes NEIFF the first and only festival in the North East to introduce a competitive platform for games, and one of only a handful across the UK to formally recognise games within a festival environment.

The new strand will showcase independent game developers, celebrating innovation, storytelling, and technical excellence within the rapidly growing interactive sector.

The move reflects a broader shift in how storytelling is defined, with NEIFF expanding its remit beyond traditional film to embrace the full spectrum of the moving image, including interactive and immersive formats.

Festival Director Lisa-Marie Tonelli MBE said: "Games are one of the most exciting and influential storytelling mediums today. By introducing a competitive games strand, we're recognising the creativity, innovation, and narrative depth within the sector, and giving it a platform it deserves in the North East."

The announcement positions NEIFF at the forefront of cultural innovation in the UK, reinforcing its commitment to supporting emerging creative disciplines and providing new opportunities for artists and developers.

NEIFF is currently inviting partners and sponsors to support the launch of this pioneering initiative.



Media Training with A Twist

Keith Newman of Highlights PR has announced the return of his popular radio media training courses, this time from a unique new venue set in the heart of the Northumbrian countryside.

The three-hour sessions are designed to help business owners, charities, spokespeople and community leaders feel more confident and prepared when appearing on podcasts, radio programmes and interviews. Participants will receive practical guidance on interview techniques, handling difficult questions and understanding the key do's and don'ts of broadcast media.

As part of the hands-on experience, attendees will take part in mock radio interviews inside a working radio studio environment, helping them build confidence in front of a microphone. They will also have the opportunity to create and record their own short radio advert to promote their business or organisation.

The courses will take place at a newly created training facility which Keith has invested in at his home near Morpeth.

Keith said: "People are increasingly being asked to appear on podcasts and radio shows, but many have never had any media training. These sessions are designed to be practical, relaxed and enjoyable while giving people the confidence to represent themselves and their organisations professionally."

shoutloudsocial.co.uk info@shoutloudsocial.co.uk

Need to get noticed? – Shout Loud Social will sort it!

Ryan Briggs and his team are experts are shouting about you.

> **"There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."**
>
> *1890-Oscar Wilde*

When Oscar Wilde wrote that line, he couldn't have imagined the various ways you can be talked about nowadays.

And there's probably some of you reading this who're also baffled by the number of ways you can gain some publicity. You either need a crash course in 21st Century publicity, or you need help because, if you don't, you are missing out.

You need Shout Loud Social.

"We're a digital marketing and creative agency that helps businesses strengthen their online presence and connect with wider audiences through modern, results-driven marketing, and we've built a reputation for providing a full range of creative and digital services under one roof, making it easier for businesses to manage their branding and marketing in a single place," said Managing Director, Ryan Briggs.

"We specialise in social media management, SEO, paid advertising, photography, videography, branding, graphic design and web development, and always ensure that everything we undertake for a client is tailored 100% to suit their goals."

You only need to spend a few minutes with Ryan and his team to discover they do things rather differently at Shout Loud Social. They don't do hard-hitting presentations; they don't bombard you with facts and figures. Meetings are relaxed and informal, and it quickly becomes apparent that they're more interested in finding out about you rather than what they can do for you.

"We want to build relationships. In effect, we want to become another department for their business and take care of delivering results via social media and traditional outlets while they get on with running their company. I'm proud to say that our clients plainly enjoy how we operate and achieve results, because we still have clients who've been with us since we first started."

Shout Loud Social was launched six years ago, but the team have a lot more experience than that. Take Adrienne Hawkins who leads the creative side of the business. She came to Shout Loud Social after working with Disney and Butlins.

"We mainly operate with small, independent businesses, but we're lucky that our team has the sort of experience that can ensure results for any company or organisation. Recent work has been with Northumbrian Water, Durham Cathedral, Swinburne Maddison, Dunelm Foundation and various other SME's.

Ryan has also supported more than 50 businesses through engaging workshops and training sessions focused on social media best practice and digital marketing.

These sessions are designed to help businesses understand how to promote themselves more effectively, whether they are looking to grow their in-house marketing team, raise awareness of their services or showcase the products they manufacture.

Through practical guidance and clear advice, Ryan helps firms understand what good digital marketing looks like, how to use social media confidently and how to plan campaigns that feel consistent, purposeful and effective. By the end of the training, businesses have the knowledge to support their own teams and move forward with stronger promotional and awareness campaigns.

Shout Loud Social is based in Durham, but they work across the North East. They make brands become more visible online by making them stand out. Shout Loud Social does this by creating engaging content that attracts attention and encourages interaction. Whether it's via professional photography, promotional videos, social media campaigns or targeted advertising designed to reach the right audience at the right time, they can help.

Get noticed...get Shout Loud Social.

The best idea is to have a chat with Ryan and his team. Head to their excellent website www.shoutloudsocial.co.uk to find out further details of what they can do for you plus all the various contact details.



> **Everything we undertake for a client is tailored 100% to suit their goals.**

Ryan Briggs

Here's some sound advice for you...

Highlights PR's Keith Newman asked some of his RADAR members to tell us about their perfect workplace.

A good workplace is something I'm passionate about and for me, it's all about trust, flexibility and positivity. I know I do my best work when I feel supported and encouraged, so I'm passionate about creating that same environment for my team at H Social. Life is also crazy busy; having the ability to pick kids up from school or go to the doctors and work around that should be the norm. I trust my team to get their work done, and in return they have flexibility to find the balance they need between office, working from home, and life. We spend such a huge part of our lives at work, so it should be a place where people feel energised, appreciated and excited to be part of something together. A great lunch always helps too; we all love good food, and we're lucky to be based on Park View in Whitley Bay. We're surrounded by excellent cafes and restaurants, and a huge part of our office life is based around the key question 'what are we doing for lunch?'.

Helen Arnold, www.hsocial.agency





Across my Kip McGrath centres, trust has become the cornerstone of a genuinely positive workplace. Trust grows when people know where they stand; when leadership decisions are consistent; and when staff understand why changes are happening, even if they don't love them.

People don't expect leaders to get everything right, but they do expect honesty. I've learned that sharing the reality of running a business, including challenges, builds far more respect than trying to protect everyone from uncomfortable truths. Trust is not a "soft" value. It underpins retention, engagement and performance. Like many leaders, I care deeply about the wellbeing of my staff. But experience has shown me that wellbeing can't rely on goodwill alone. If a business is running unsustainably, overstretched staffing, underviable sessions, unclear expectations that pressure inevitably lands on people. Making hard business decisions is not unkind; it is often what protects jobs, stability and wellbeing in the long term.

Taking responsibility for the health of the organisation is, ultimately, part of caring properly for the people within it. A genuinely great workplace isn't created by kindness alone, nor by hardedged decisionmaking. It's created when leaders are willing to balance empathy with responsibility, honesty with care, and heart with head. When leaders step fully into their role as business leaders while still valuing people deeply, workplaces become not just kinder places to work, but stronger, clearer and more sustainable ones too.

Carol Milne, www.kipmcgrath.co.uk/gateshead-east

A genuinely great workplace is not about fancy offices or trendy perks, it is about the feeling people create together. As a husband-and-wife publishing team, we work from home in a shared office with two desks, endless cups of tea and a permanently open packet of custard creams. Our fluffy rescue cat, Pickle, acts as both office supervisor and occasional keyboard obstacle.

We may not always agree on the music playlist, but we have mastered the art of compromise, laughter and knowing when one of us needs encouragement or simply another biscuit. Working so closely together could easily lead to friction, yet we have found that mutual respect, humour and a shared passion for books make all the difference.

For us, a great workplace is somewhere you feel comfortable being yourself. It is a place where creativity flows, ideas are valued, hard days are met with support, and small moments of joy matter just as much as productivity. When people genuinely enjoy working together, whether in a skyscraper office or a small room at home with a snoring cat curled up nearby, it creates an environment where everyone can thrive.

Ryan Crear, www.crearpublishing.com





A genuinely great workplace is one where people feel supported, respected and empowered to grow, not a toxic environment ruled by "knowledge hogs" or undermined by digital bullies who use technology, jargon or control of information to exclude others. The best organisations create cultures where sharing knowledge is encouraged, questions are welcomed, and digital skills are seen as something everyone can develop together. At AskMrsWatson.com we believe great workplaces are built on collaboration, confidence and kindness and when it comes to technology, helping people feel confident using it to help them thrive rather than making them feel left behind.

Kate Watson, www.askmrswatson.com



A work place should be somewhere where you can be yourself, where you get respected, listened to and everyone can get on as a team together. I pride myself on these things at Namaste – pop by and see for yourself.

Sangeeta Loomba, www.namastetasteofindia.co.uk



A good workplace is somewhere where you are comfortable, and people are easy to talk to, and you get good feedback and nobody is negative. It should be a safe environment like your home.

Andrew Cooper, www.simplymortgagesonline.com

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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HIGHLIGHTS PUBLIC RELATIONS



> **I believe creating a genuine culture of learning is really important.**

Senga Kean

Marketing and Media Matters

In the latest of this popular series of features we spoke to...

Senga Kean

Director of dodio-The Do Studio

Did you always envisage a career in the Marketing and Media Industry?

Not at all. When I was younger I actually wanted to be a vet. I've always been interested in people though, which naturally led me into marketing in the end. I was fascinated by the psychology behind why people connect with certain brands, campaigns or ideas, but equally loved the creative side of marketing too, which is probably why I've stayed in the industry for over 20 years.

Studying for my Business and Marketing BA really solidified that interest and confirmed that marketing was the right career path for me.

What has been your career path so far?

I've worked across both corporate and agency environments for more than 20 years. Earlier in my career I worked in marketing roles with Stagecoach and SCS, and also spent time working for Empire Theatres in Toowoomba, Australia before co-founding dodio in 2015 with my husband Chris.

Over the years my role has evolved quite a bit. What I enjoy most now is the strategic side of marketing - understanding organisations, identifying what's holding them back and creating plans that deliver meaningful impact.

A lot of the organisations we work with are purpose-led businesses, charities and education providers doing important work behind the scenes. Helping them communicate that more effectively is a big part of what keeps me motivated. I also really value the mentoring, workshop and training side of the role to help empower and educate others.

I believe creating a genuine culture of learning is really important too, both within our own team and for the organisations we support. Marketing changes so quickly that curiosity, adaptability and continuous learning are essential.

What have been the biggest challenges you have faced so far?

One of the biggest challenges can be getting clients to think about their audience's needs rather than simply what they personally like. Strong marketing and branding should always start with the audience and what resonates with them.

I've also learned that running a business involves a lot more than just the part you're naturally good at. Marketing comes naturally to me, but accounts, HR, legal, operations and everything else that comes with running an agency has definitely been a learning curve... as is working with your husband every day!

Who do you respect most in your industry?

I respect people and brands that lead with integrity and consistency rather than ego. I admire the people quietly doing good work, building strong relationships and creating businesses with genuine values behind them.

Which fictional media character can you most relate to?

Hmm... this is a difficult one, but perhaps AFC Richmond owner, Rebecca Welton from Ted Lasso. She's fierce, loyal and stands tall in a male dominated industry, while being genuinely caring about her team and the people around her, something I relate to both professionally and personally.

What is your greatest strength?

Communication and connection. I'm good at bringing people together, asking the right questions and helping turn what can appear to be complex at first into something clearer and more manageable.

What is your biggest weakness?

I care about the work and the people involved in it, which sometimes means I struggle to switch off properly. I'm also guilty of wanting to support every good cause or community initiative that comes my way.

What has been your proudest achievement?

Having the courage to go all in and start a business with my husband despite already having a strong career path is something I'm incredibly proud of.

Building dodio into a thriving agency that's still growing after 10 years has allowed me to create a life that accommodates the things most important to me like volunteering, fostering dogs, spending time with family and having more autonomy over how I work and live.

What are your future career aspirations?

To continue growing dodio sustainably while staying true to what makes us different. Personally, I'd like to continue developing the consultancy and mentoring part of my role, particularly within the education and charity sectors, because that's where I feel I bring the most value and where I can have the biggest positive impact within the wider community.

What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

Learning that it's ok to say no to work, clients or opportunities that don't align with your values or the type of business you want to build.

Earlier in my career I felt pressure to say yes to everything, but over time I've realised the best relationships and work come from genuine alignment, trust and shared goals.

How do you see your industry evolving in the next 10 years?

AI will continue to transform the industry and automate a lot of production-based marketing activity. But I actually think that will make human skills even more important. Strategy, creativity, emotional intelligence and trust will become bigger differentiators as more content becomes automated.

We're already seeing lots of very similar AI-generated content that risks switching audiences off from brands completely. The businesses that succeed will be the ones who truly understand who they are and communicate that clearly and authentically.

How do you like to unwind?

Any type of exercise is usually my go-to. Hiking in the fresh air is probably my favourite, along with paddleboarding and wild swimming when I'm feeling brave enough.

I'm also trying to get back into running... although currently I'm still at the "thinking about it" stage.

dodio.co.uk



L-R: Sarah Dale and Christine Tarran

New empowering women's finance platform launches in Teesside

Driven females filled the Porsche Teesside showroom in Stockton for the VIP launch of Her Invest – a new empowering service to encourage women to be more financially savvy and secure.

Christine Tarran, owner of Tarran & Co, was driven to launch Her Invest for women to achieve financial independence at all ages and stages of their lives.

"Her Invest has been created by women for women," explains Christine, who has almost 30 years' of experience as an independent financial adviser (IFA).

"I know what it is like being a professional woman juggling all of life's priorities such as managing a business, running a home, and being responsible for your children.

"Taking the time to properly understand and plan your finances isn't easy, and many women don't know where to start. That's where we come in. We provide bespoke holistic financial advice in a space where women can feel comfortable to talk about the things that are most important to them now and in the future. This is a brand we want to really resonate with women."

The launch event was held at the Porsche Teesside Centre at Preston Farm Industrial Estate on Thursday, 7th May. The event, organised by Female Founder UK, included an intimate In Conversation With... style interview with Christine Tarran and Sarah Dale, journalist and director of communications consultancy SASS media; luxury pop-up stalls; and the opportunity for guests to test drive one of five Porsches.

The Q&A began with Sarah quoting several shocking women's finance statistics, including the fact that women in the UK couldn't have their own bank account until 50 years ago. The UK Sex Discrimination Act (1975) was the first time a woman could open a bank account and apply for credit and loans without needing a co-signer. She also highlighted research which revealed the finance literacy gap between men and women against the backdrop of the 2022 Rose Review which found that the growth of new female-led businesses in the UK was outstripping that of male-led companies for the first time ever.



Tarran & Co and Her Invest team

"The difference between men and women when it comes to finance is stark," adds Christine.

"British women retire with a pension around 37% lower than men's and only 32% of women are confident that they are saving enough for retirement (compared to 48% of men). With a divorce rate of 42% and with women typically covered for life insurance for up to 20% less than men, women need to be independently financially secure.

"We have found that there are several barriers to women investing their money: time, confidence and knowing where to go for advice. We want Her Invest to empower women to take charge of their own futures."

Ross Jameson, centre principal of Porsche Teesside Centre, said: "Her Invest is a great fit and aligns really well with Porsche as a high-end luxury brand. In recent years, Porsche has seen a real shift in its customer demographic and who are purchasing the cars. One of the fastest growing customer demographics is what Porsche calls The Driven Female! Driven Females are ambitious, independent females who work hard to achieve their goals – and Christine, a Porsche owner herself, is the ultimate example of a Driven Female."

Max Freer, creator of Female Founder UK, has been working alongside Christine to support her vision for Her Invest to build a business strategy for the new service and bring to life the brand identity of Her Invest with VIA Creative. She said: "Female Founder UK is the official trademark brand - we work with founders to help them bring their ideas into built brand success with business strategy. It's been a lot of work, Christine's ambition is powerful, and I am in no doubt Her Invest will be a huge success."

Pop-up stalls included Beth Wilson Embroidery, Surfacephilia and Oona Art Studio.

Christine added: "It was fantastic to see so many women who were inspired to take charge of their own finances at the launch and we can't wait to help more women become financially secure with our expert help."

For more information about Her Invest, visit www.herinvest.co.uk

For more information about SASS media, visit www.sassmedialtd.co.uk or email: sarah.dale@sassmedialtd.co.uk

Behind the scenes

It takes a whole team to pull together a successful launch event to promote a new brand and service.

Project-managed by Female Founder UK under the experienced lead of marketing, brand and events expert Max Freer, the team, which worked with Her Invest, included:

VIA Creative
Worked with Female Founder UK to create the new brand and visual identity of Her Invest and event support through artwork on some of the cars and around the venue.

SASS media
Conducted an in-depth Q&A style interview with Christine in front of VIP guests in the Porsche showroom, liaised with guests and organisers, and liaised with the media to publicise the launch.

Porsche Teesside Centre
Provided a high-end venue to host the event and accompanied guests on test drives.

Dawn McNamara
Official photographer

Social Allies
Filmed content for social media

Little Fizz and Nibble Co
Provided delicious canapés to guests

Beth Wilson Embroidery, Surfacephilia and Oona Art Studio
Pop-up stalls at the event




L-R: Max Freer and Christine Tarran



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Web Accessibility

Why it matters and how to get it right.

Every business wants a website that looks great, works well and is easy for people to use. What's often overlooked is that accessibility plays a big part in all three.

It's sometimes treated as a niche issue or left until the end of a project, when in reality, around 1 in 4 people in the UK live with a disability. If your website is difficult to read, navigate or use with assistive technology, you're potentially shutting out a significant portion of your audience.

A quick guide to web accessibility

In real terms, website accessibility means designing and building websites, apps and digital tools so everyone can use them.

That includes people with visual, hearing, motor, cognitive or neurological disabilities. It can also support people with temporary access needs, such as an injury, or situational barriers that affect how they browse.

Features of accessible websites often include: keyboard-friendly navigation, descriptive links, strong colour contrast, alternative text for images and transcripts for video and audio content.

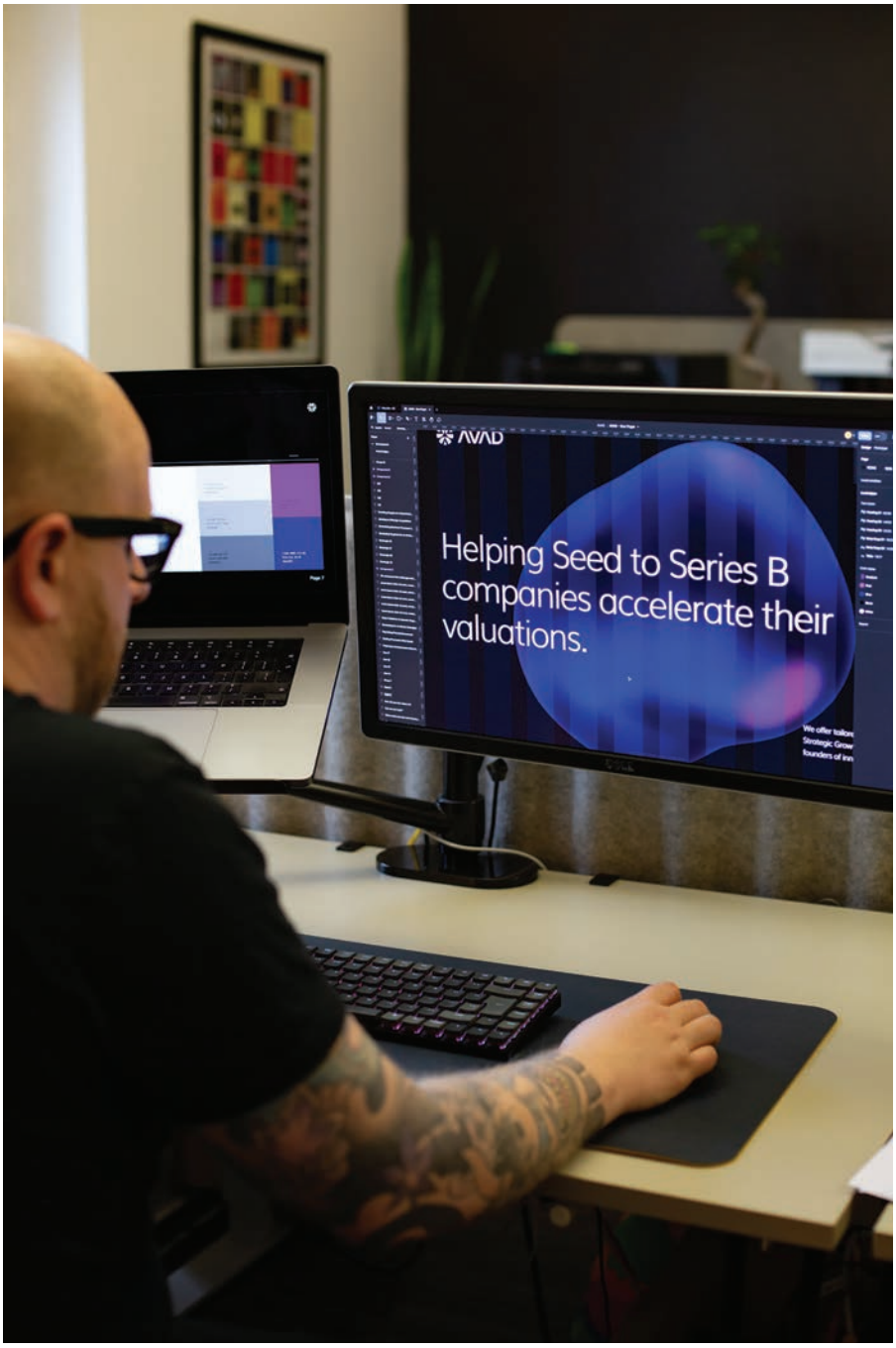
The most widely used guidelines come from the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), through the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These set a clear standard for making digital content more usable and inclusive.

The case for better accessibility

If you're a public sector organisation, digital accessibility is a legal requirement, not an option. Even when there isn't a legal obligation, accessibility is still part of creating a more inclusive digital experience. The easier your website is to use, the more people can access the information, services or support they need.

Reach more people

If around 1 in 4 people in the UK live with a disability, accessibility has a direct impact on how many people can engage with your business. If website users can't complete simple actions like reading a page, filling in a form or making an enquiry, they're unlikely to stay.



Improve usability for everyone

Accessibility features make websites easier to use in everyday situations, whether someone is on a mobile, in a loud place, dealing with poor Wi-Fi or recovering from an injury.

Support SEO

Good accessibility often overlaps with good SEO. Clear headings, alt text, transcripts and well-structured content help search engines understand your website more easily.

Reduce work later

Building accessibility into a website from the start is far more efficient than trying to fix problems after launch. It saves time, reduces cost and creates a stronger foundation for the future.

Accessibility should be built in, not bolted on

A strong website partner will help you consider accessibility across strategy, UX, design, content and development, from planning clear user journeys and accessible layouts to writing helpful labels, structuring content properly and building against recognised standards.

Automated checks have their place, but they only tell part of the story. Human testing is key to understanding how people actually use a website: where they get stuck, what feels unclear and what could work better.

The right support also helps accessibility last beyond launch, making it easier for your team to keep content, pages and future updates consistent.

If you're planning a new website or looking to improve an existing one, we're always happy to chat. Get in touch at hello@vidacreative.co.uk

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The Mag Studio: Bringing print to life

Where print becomes experience through creativity, conversation, and community.

After years of retailing magazines online to customers across the world, we knew opening a physical store was the natural next step for Unique Magazines. Alongside this came another long-held ambition: creating a dedicated events space and cultural hub for inspiring conversations, hands-on creativity, and immersive experiences.

With The Mag Studio, we saw an opportunity to make print even more physical through in-person experiences that bring communities of print lovers, creatives, and curious minds together. It became a way to explore not only magazines, but the culture, creativity, and connections that surround them.

The result is a space that has expanded Unique Magazines beyond retail and into something more experiential. Today, The Mag Studio is home to everything from networking events and creative workshops to live performances and collaborative experiences.

To help shape the variety of experiences we offer, we created two dedicated event series under The Mag Studio umbrella.

The Mag Studio Sessions

The Mag Studio Sessions are collaborative events where we invite creatives, musicians, industry professionals, and makers into our space to share their craft, knowledge, and experiences.

These sessions are designed to inspire conversation, encourage learning, and bring people together through creativity and storytelling. From intimate live music performances with local artist Matt Fairley to cocktail masterclasses, publisher talks, and creative discussions, every session offers something different.



Our aim is for guests to leave with more than just memories from the evening. Whether it is a new perspective, a skill, a conversation, or a creative spark, we want each event to create a lasting impression.

The Mag Studio Makes

The Mag Studio Makes are our hands-on creative workshops centred around making, designing, and creating using printed and recycled materials.

For us, it is about celebrating print in a different way and showing how versatile, inspiring, and valuable physical media can be. Rather than letting magazines go to waste, we transform them into tools for creativity and self-expression.

From collaging and designing personalised notebook covers to learning how to gift wrap using recycled magazines, each workshop encourages guests to slow down, switch off from screens, and immerse themselves in a calming, creative environment.

These sessions are about more than crafting. They are about connection, mindfulness, and giving people the opportunity to step into a welcoming space where they can feel inspired, relaxed, and creatively recharged.

We aim to host at least two events every month, with one Mag Studio Session and one Mag Studio Makes workshop, alongside other collaborative events including networking evenings and creative community experiences.

We also love collaborating with local businesses and creatives through events and partnerships that help introduce brands to new audiences within the community. From workshops and networking evenings to sponsored experiences and product showcases, The Mag Studio creates opportunities for meaningful connections through creativity and shared experiences.

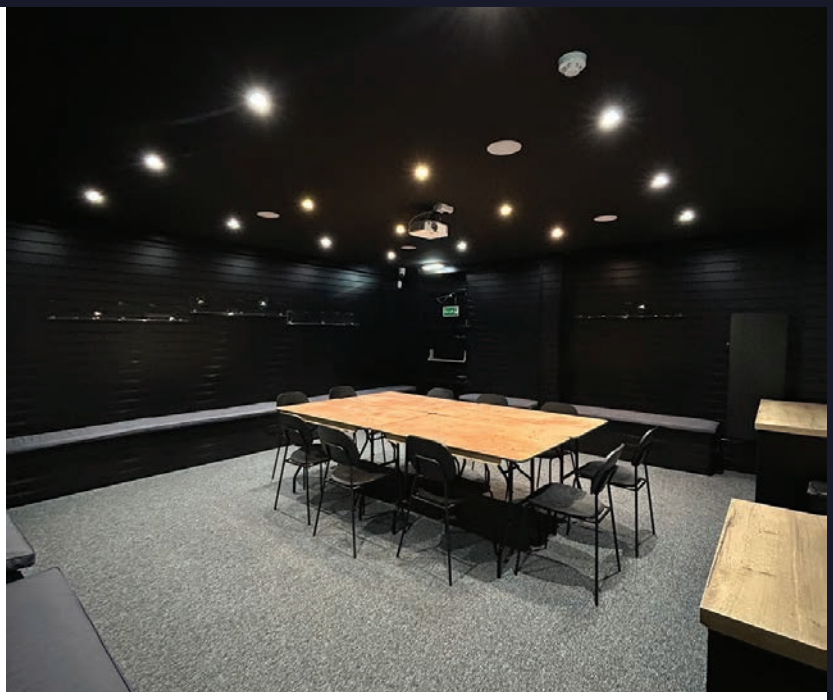
The Mag Studio is also available to hire for businesses and organisations looking for an intimate and inspiring venue. Whether it is for launch events, meetings, workshops, training sessions, or team gatherings, the space offers a cosy and creative environment in the heart of Gateshead, just five minutes from the Metrocentre.

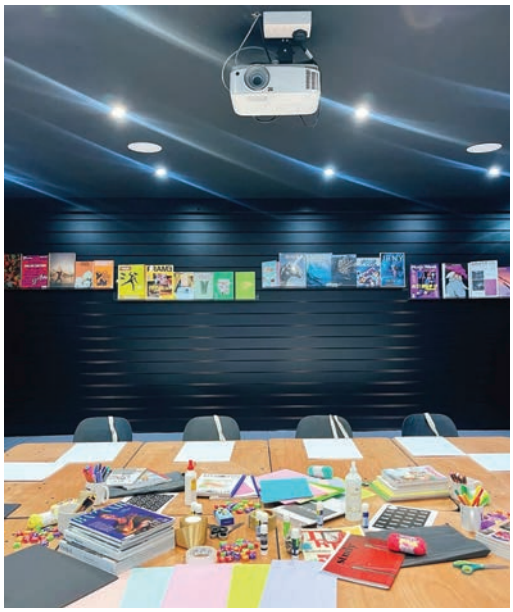
With flexible room layouts, WiFi access, and support from our team, we aim to make the space accessible, welcoming, and adaptable for a wide range of events and experiences.

At its core, The Mag Studio exists to celebrate physical experiences in an increasingly digital world. Through print, creativity, conversation, and community, we hope to bring vibrant and meaningful events to the heart of Gateshead whilst building a creative community centred around print, culture, and shared experiences.

For more information on our upcoming events, visit: www.themagazineclub.co.uk/events/list/

To discuss collaborations or space hire, contact: ellie.purvis@uniquemagazines.co.uk













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Delivering Lasting Impact

How RE:GEN Academy is creating real pathways into employment across the North East.

At a time when the construction industry is facing mounting pressure around skills shortages, ageing workforces and widening gaps between training and employment, one North East organisation is taking a markedly different approach.

Backed by the long-term visibility and investment pipeline of RE:GEN Group, RE:GEN Academy has quickly positioned itself as one of the region's most progressive employer-led training providers - connecting local people to genuine career opportunities across refurbishment, retrofit and regeneration.

But for Academy Director Cheryl Campbell, the mission goes far beyond employability statistics.

"Regeneration should never just be about buildings," she says. "It should be about enhancing lives, strengthening communities and making sure the people living on the doorstep of investment can genuinely benefit from it."

And that philosophy is helping the Academy make real headway across the sector.

"We can see where the jobs will be needed"

Unlike many traditional training providers, the Academy's model has been built around real-time industry demand and long-standing relationships across the housing sector.

Through RE:GEN Group's partnerships with five of the largest social housing providers in the North East, the Academy has unique visibility of future investment, future works and future skills demand.

That visibility, Cheryl explains, changes everything.

"We're not designing programmes in isolation or training people for hypothetical opportunities," she says. "We can see where investment is happening, where the gaps are emerging and where jobs will be needed in the years ahead. That allows us to create direct, sustainable pathways into employment."

The result is a model firmly rooted in both community impact and commercial reality - something increasingly important in an industry grappling with workforce shortages and an ageing talent pool.

Creating opportunity where it matters most

The Academy has supported hundreds of people into employment but notably 46 social housing residents to date, including 15 during FY25/26, while achieving a 74% progression rate across its programmes.

But behind those figures are stories of confidence rebuilt, careers launched and communities strengthened.

Many of the learners supported by the Academy come directly from the same communities where regeneration projects are taking place - creating opportunities close to home for people who may never have previously considered construction as a viable career route.

"It's about showing people that opportunity exists for them too," Cheryl explains. "Not somewhere else. Not in theory. Right here, within their own communities."

Alongside supporting people into work, the Academy also continues to help address wider industry challenges around upskilling, reskilling and attracting new talent into the sector.



Collaboration over competition

Partnership working sits at the heart of the Academy's approach.

Over the past year, the organisation has worked collaboratively with partners including NECA, TVCA, ETC, EPNE, HENNE and NEHP, alongside housing providers, employers and local stakeholders across the region.

For Cheryl, collaboration is essential if the industry is serious about creating lasting change.

"When organisations align around the same goals, the impact goes far beyond employment figures," she says. "You create stronger communities, greater social mobility and long-term opportunities that genuinely change lives."

As the Academy continues to grow, visibility has also played an increasingly important role in communicating that impact. Working alongside Blue Moon Marketing, the organisation has refined its proposition and strengthened how it communicates its mission across the sector.

Because ultimately, for RE:GEN Academy, this is about far more than training. It's about delivering lasting impact.

Businesses, housing providers and organisations interested in collaborating with the Academy to create meaningful employment pathways are encouraged to connect with the team and be part of shaping the future workforce of the industry.

Looking for advice on how to effectively communicate your mission? Drop us an email: anne@bluemoon-marketing.co.uk

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BRADLEY O'MAHONEY

Get a personality!

By Matt Forster, Strategic Communications Director, Gardiner Richardson

Content creation is now part of everyday business communication.

For many organisations, the challenge lies not in having ideas, but in expressing them in a way that reflects the right brand voice and tone.

Whether it is a thought leadership article, a LinkedIn post, or a customer letter - consistency in style, language, and messaging helps shape how an organisation is perceived.

Even though you might be clear on what you want to say – making it sound genuinely 'on brand' is a whole other ball game.

If you, or someone in your team, writes well, how your business sounds is probably down to you (or them).

This might not be a problem until the company expands or the person responsible for doing the bulk of your writing gets swamped or moves on.

Then what?

Whose voice does the business use, how do you know it's the right voice for you and why does it even matter?

It matters because how you come across sets the foundation for the relationships you are going to develop.

In our day to day life, we're attracted to people with personality traits we share or admire, ones we wished we had or ones that complete us.

It's the same when it comes to brands. We're more likely to engage with those that have a personality that aligns with our own.

Importantly – in ever more crowded marketplaces where differences between products and services are often too close to call – a strong personality can be a differentiator. It can help your brand or business to stand out, to be recognised, remembered and chosen.

So, how do you find your voice?

If you're lucky, there might be a tone of voice guide down the back of the sofa.

These don't always look the same but in many cases they comprise a list of words that you should use and a list of words that you shouldn't use.



Matt Forster

They may even offer some advice. It's usually something about being friendly but professional and speaking plain English. What a personality to conjure with! The truth is they don't always give you much of any meaning to go on.

Any of this sounding familiar?

If it does – then it sounds like your business is in need of a personality.

'But where do I get a personality?' I hear you say.

When it comes to defining your brand's personality, the most important thing to do is understand the core motivation behind your brand's behaviours – what drives your brand to do what it does for your customers.

Is it driven to care for people?

Does it use wisdom to solve their problems?

Does it seek to return them to a more natural state?

Understanding motivation is the key to unlocking your brand's personality.

When you understand this, you will have a clear sense of who your brand is.

You'll be able to step into its shoes to write and create in character.

When you're consistently communicating with your authentic character – you're consistently showing up in a way that is going to attract and engage customers and audiences that will be authentically interested in engaging with you.

This probably sounds easier said than done but with the correct inspiration, guided investigation, application of archetypal thinking and some creativity – every business is capable of discovering its own personality.

Interested in finding your personality? Get in touch with us at Gardiner Richardson. gardiner-richardson.com

Agency launches new consultancy arm for investment-ready businesses



L-R: Kari Ower with Kirsty Ostell

Newcastle based O agency has launched a new consultancy arm for scaling North East businesses seeking growth investment.

Having helped its clients successfully secure over £1billion in funding in the last five years alone, the marketing communications and strategy consultancy is launching a series of new services designed for scaling businesses.

The senior consultancy team at O are bringing a variety of new packaged services that support businesses through different stages in their investment and growth journeys, from seeking first time investment or driving brand equity ahead of large investment rounds, to ongoing growth and exit strategy.

The new division is led by Kirsty Ostell and Kari Owers, who both bring decades of experience working in both the world of financial services and the entrepreneurial community.

Kirsty is a marketing strategist with a finance sector background, working directly with funders and business owners to develop an investor-ready proposition and growth marketing strategy.

Kari is a comms expert who has been working with entrepreneurs in fast-growth sectors since the dot com boom of the 2000's, shaping their messaging and raising their profiles to attract investment, execute merger and acquisition strategies and plan for exit.

They are supported by their consultancy team of insights experts, branding designers and comms specialists.

Kirsty said, "In the last five years alone we have sat in numerous boardrooms with fast-growth companies looking to secure private equity finance to grow by acquisition or scale-ups seeking Series A funding to expand into the US and Europe. Often it is not the business idea or ambition that fails but the way it is planned, pitched and communicated to its key stakeholders.

"We are taking our breadth of experience into a new scale-up growth marketing strategy programme built for founders, leadership teams and investors navigating the transition from successful start-up to scalable enterprise, aligning leadership, brand and commercial strategy into a single, execution-ready growth marketing system.

"It is not about creating a pretty pitch deck or short-term comms plans, but about strategically becoming a different kind of business before you even pitch for finance; one that is built to scale by using brand and comms as value creation tools."

The programme will support businesses that work with the O consultancy team to develop:

- A clear growth plan and category ambition
- A globally credible brand strategy and identity aligned to commercial goals
- A go-to-market and BD strategy designed for measurable revenue impact
- A marketing and growth operating model built for scale
- A talent and capability roadmap to support execution
- A bold and definitive comms strategy to build the brand in key markets
- A growth marketing playbook that becomes a leadership and investment reference point

Kari Owers said, "For our clients on the investment journey we are a powerful partner. Quite often they have hit a roadblock where they have outgrown founder-led or ad-hoc marketing and want a senior-level partnership that have a demonstrable track record to accelerate them into the investment pitch and beyond, with clarity and structure."

Michele Gettins, CMO at iamproperty said: "We've been working with O since 2020 and they are an amazing extension to our team. They've been with us through multiple acquisitions and huge investor rounds. They've helped us to improve our position in the market, drive growth across market categories and raise our profile every step of the way. We wouldn't be where we are today without them."

O agency celebrated 20 years in the North East in 2025, working across sectors in technology, property, manufacturing and professional services as well as new product innovation, FMCG brands and sustainability specialists. Its clients include one of the UK's fastest growing tech firms iamproperty RFID innovation specialists PervasID and international brands such as Fentimans.

www.o.agency



Benjamin Lloyd

Living with purpose, leading with impact: In conversation with Benjamin Lloyd

By Samuel Marriott-Dowding, CEO, Marriott Communications

When you strip everything back, who is Benjamin Lloyd, and what has shaped him most?

At my core, I am someone who wants to make people feel seen, valued, and understood. Everything I do, whether it is teaching, performing, or advocacy, comes back to connection. I am shaped by my journey through mental health struggles and sobriety, which forced me to really confront who I am and who I want to be.

Was there a moment in your life when you truly felt seen for the first time? What did that change for you?

There was not one single moment, it was more of a shift that happened when I started speaking openly about my mental health and my sobriety. The first time I shared those parts of my life and people responded with understanding, not judgement, it changed everything. It allowed me to stop hiding behind a version of myself that felt safe, and start living as someone who felt real.

If your younger self could see you now, what do you think he would say?

I think my younger self would feel a mix of emotions. I think he would feel relief that he made it to a place where he can be open, confident, and proud of who he is. I think he would feel comfort in knowing that the things he once struggled with do not define him anymore. But I also think he would be emotional, because there were times where he did not think this version of life was possible.

What does meaningful allyship look like to you, particularly in your role at OUT North East?

Meaningful allyship, especially in my role at OUT North East, is about moving beyond intention and into real, visible action. It is not enough for organisations to say they support the LGBTQIA plus community, it is about how that support shows up in practice, consistently and authentically.

For me, a huge part of that is the partnerships I build. As Commercial Manager, I have a responsibility to ensure that the organisations we work with are not just looking for visibility, but are genuinely invested in supporting the community. That means creating opportunities where businesses can give back in a meaningful way, whether that is through funding community initiatives, supporting workshops, or helping us create safe and inclusive spaces within the ONE Centre.

Looking ahead, what are you most excited to build, not just achieve?

I am really excited about building spaces and platforms that bring people together in a meaningful way. That could be through performance, through education, or through community work, but the core of it is connection.

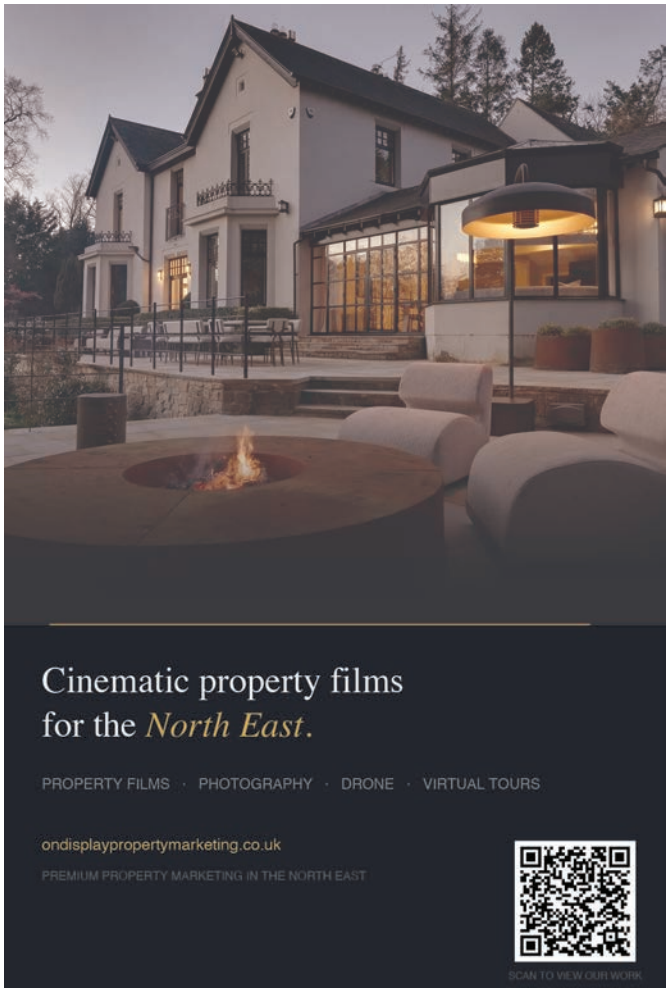
I want to build opportunities for people who may not always feel like they have a place. Whether that is young people finding confidence through performing arts, or individuals within the LGBTQIA plus community finding safe and supportive spaces, I want to create environments where people can grow and feel empowered.

I am also excited about building something that has longevity. Not just one moment or one achievement, but something that continues to support and impact people beyond me. That idea of creating something that lasts and continues to make a difference is what really drives me.

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Samuel Marriott-Dowding



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North East global tech success story to close TechNExt Festival Startup Hub

Dr Arnabu Basu, CEO of Durham tech innovator Kromek, will join Jamie Hardesty on a day dedicated to North East tech startup prowess.

A new tech founder-focused event at this year's North East Technology Festival, TechNExt, will bring together entrepreneurs from across the North East to explore the realities of building technology companies.

Taking place at Durham Business School on Wednesday June 17, the Startup Hub has been curated by Jamie Hardesty, Director of Ecosystem Development, Sunderland Software City, and aims to move beyond polished startup mythology to focus on the genuine challenges, decisions and pressures involved in growing a company.

The full-day programme follows the arc of the startup journey itself: beginning with first-time founders, moving through traction and the messy middle of growth, before exploring serial entrepreneurship and concluding with a deep dive into global scaling through County Durham success story Kromek.

A pioneer in advanced radiation detection and biosecurity solutions, Kromek reported record revenues of £26.5m for the fiscal year ended April 30, 2025, representing a 37% increase from £19.4m in 2024.

The event comes at a time when questions are increasingly being asked about the strength of the North East's startup pipeline and ability to create more scalable technology businesses.

Despite growing momentum around innovation, AI and digital investment nationally, North East startup investment activity remains comparatively small.

In 2024, the region accounted for just 81 venture deals out of an estimated 4,250 completed across the UK, less than 2% of total activity. At seed stage, widely viewed as a key indicator of new company formation and startup pipeline health, the region accounted for approximately 33 deals from 1,901 UK-wide.

Hardesty says the Startup Hub is designed to address part of that challenge directly: helping demystify entrepreneurship, making the startup journey more visible and accessible, and creating stronger founder-to-founder connections within the region.

Mr Hardesty, who will also host the event on the day, said: "One of the challenges we have in the North East is that startup success can often feel distant or abstract. People see headlines about funding rounds or fast-growth companies but not necessarily the reality underneath it all.

"This event is about showing what building a company actually takes. The uncertainty at the beginning. The pressure of finding customers. The messy middle where growth gets hard. The lessons people carry into second and third ventures. And ultimately what scaling from this region can genuinely look like.

"If we want more scalable tech companies in the North East, we need more people who can realistically see themselves in that journey. That means being honest about the challenges, not just celebrating the highlights.

"There's huge talent in this region. But ecosystems strengthen when knowledge, experience and ambition become visible and shared."

Sessions throughout the day will feature founders and operators at different stages of the company-building journey, including first-time entrepreneurs, scaling businesses and experienced serial founders, culminating in a closing conversation with Dr Arnab Basu exploring how globally significant technology businesses can emerge from the North East.

The Startup Hub forms part of the wider TechNExt festival programme, which celebrates the North East's growing technology ecosystem through events, discussions and showcases across the region.

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Lee Gilmore

The Architect-Developer: Software engineering in the AI era

By Lee Gilmore, AWS Practice Lead at Leighton

Artificial intelligence is fundamentally reshaping how organisations operate, compete, and create value, transforming everything from decision-making and customer experience to product innovation and workforce operations.

In software engineering AI is changing how digital products are designed, built, and delivered today.

Some organisations are embracing AI rapidly and seeing major productivity gains. Others remain cautious, questioning the reliability of these systems and the risks of overdependence. Both perspectives are valid. AI is incredibly capable, but it is not infallible. It can accelerate innovation just as easily as it can accelerate technical debt without the right oversight.

That is why the conversation around AI in software engineering should not focus on replacement. It should focus on elevation.

The role of the engineer is shifting from writing every line of code manually to orchestrating increasingly capable AI systems. The value is no longer in typing faster, but in thinking more clearly. Engineers who understand architecture, systems design and business context are becoming exponentially more effective when paired with AI-enabled tooling.

This mirrors what happened in industries such as radiology, where AI augmented specialist practitioners rather than replacing them. Repetitive work became automated, allowing professionals to focus on judgement, interpretation and complexity.

As the cost of generating code rapidly approaches zero, the real differentiator becomes the ability to generate the right code in the right way. This is creating demand for a new kind of engineering leader: the architect-developer.

The architect-developer sits between traditional architecture and hands-on software engineering. They understand cloud platforms, engineering standards, product thinking and AI tooling. Their role is to guide AI systems, validate outputs and ensure that speed does not come at the expense of maintainability, governance or business alignment.

This evolution is also changing how teams operate. Traditional large-scale delivery models were built around the assumption that humans manually produced all software. AI changes that equation. Smaller, highly skilled teams can now deliver outcomes at a pace that previously required significantly larger departments.

At Leighton, we are increasingly seeing autonomous "pods" of engineers, guided by architect-developers and supported by AI agents, delivering software in dramatically shorter cycles. In many cases, allowing working software to be generated and iterated in hours rather than weeks.

However, speed alone is not the goal. Governance and context are becoming more important than ever.

Organisations succeeding with AI are not simply adopting tools quickly; they are building the frameworks, standards and architectural guardrails that allow AI to operate responsibly. In many ways, an organisation's most valuable intellectual property is no longer just its codebase, but the engineering principles, domain knowledge and operational context that shape how AI generates solutions.

The next phase will go even further. We are moving towards generative-native systems where AI assists not only with writing software, but also with monitoring, remediation and optimisation across entire platforms.

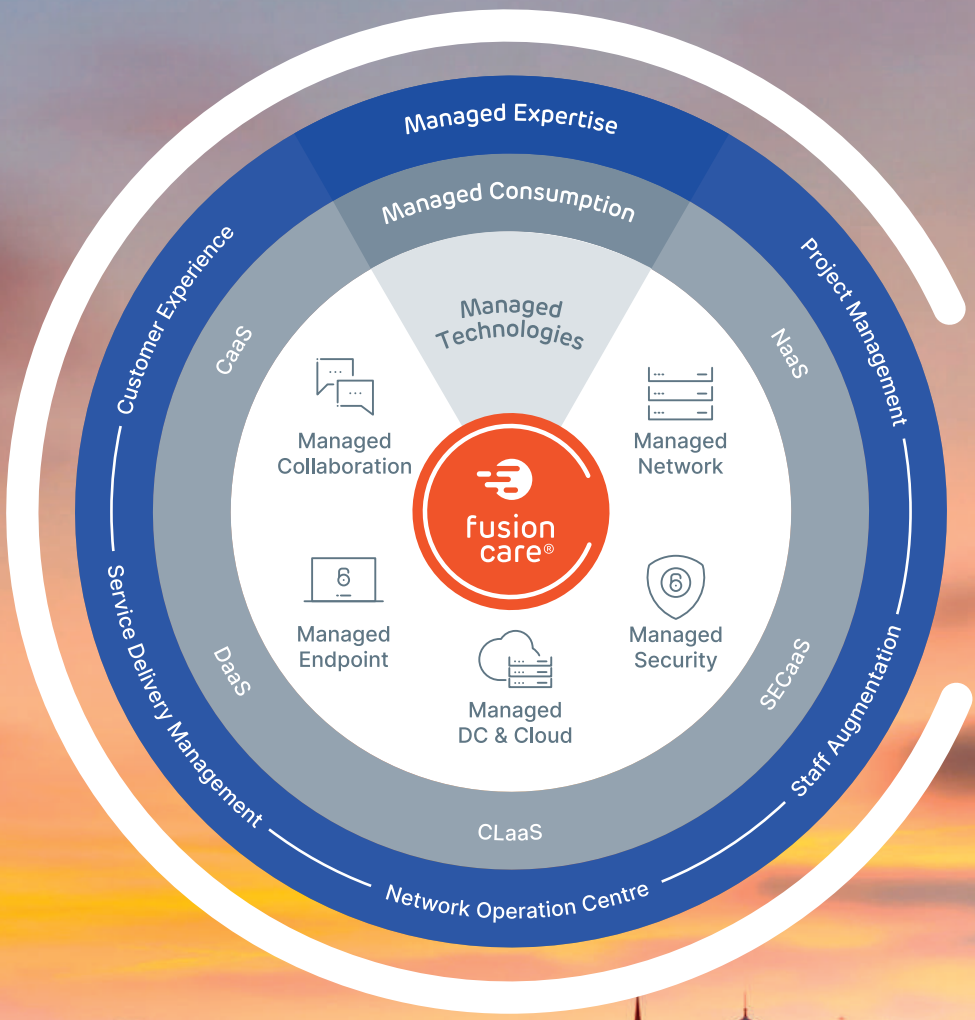
For businesses, the message is clear. AI will not eliminate the need for engineers, but it will redefine what great engineering looks like. The organisations that thrive will be those that invest in adaptable teams, modern platforms and people capable of orchestrating AI with purpose, judgement and accountability.

At Leighton we're working with our customers to help them better understand how they can integrate AI into their teams and workflows through our AI-driven workshop. If you're interested in exploring how you can better enable your teams to deliver in an AI era we'd love to hear from you: hello@leighton.com

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Steven Parker and Jess Davey

Phonetic Digital shortlisted for two Living Wage Champion Awards

Sunderland digital agency recognised for fair pay leadership and work championing the real Living Wage across the region.

Phonetic Digital is celebrating a double shortlist at the 2026 Living Wage Champion Awards, after being recognised for its commitment to fair pay and its ongoing work to champion the real Living Wage in Sunderland and across the wider North East.

The Sunderland-based agency has been named on the shortlist for:

- Living Wage Leader (SME)
- Living Wage Champion of the Year

The Living Wage Champion Awards celebrate individuals and organisations that have made an outstanding contribution to the real Living Wage movement, whether through implementation, advocacy or leadership.

The double nomination reflects both the company's own accreditation as a real Living Wage employer and its wider contribution to the Living Wage movement locally.

Since Sunderland became a Living Wage City in 2022, significant progress has been made. There are now 62 accredited real Living Wage employers in the city, with more than 2,000 workers benefiting from a wage increase based on the real cost of living.

That work is continuing through a new three-year action plan, with Phonetic Digital's Managing Director, Steven Parker, continuing to chair Sunderland's real Living Wage action group.

Speaking about the importance of the real Living Wage, Steven Parker, Managing Director of Phonetic Digital, said: "Low pay is highly prevalent in Sunderland, and median pay in the city remains below the national average. Child poverty in Sunderland also remains a serious issue, with around 23 to 25% of children living in poverty despite having at least one working parent. This is why it is so important that more businesses across our region commit to paying the real Living Wage."

Phonetic Digital's role in championing the real Living Wage has also included designing and building the Living Wage North East website. The site provides a dedicated platform to share news, resources and updates from across the region, helping employers, partners and supporters access information about the real Living Wage and the progress being made locally.

The real Living Wage North East site can be found at: livingwagenortheast.co.uk

The winners of the 2026 Living Wage Champion Awards will be announced later this year. For Phonetic Digital, the shortlist is a welcome recognition of work that remains focused on supporting fair pay, strengthening their local community and helping drive continued progress across Sunderland and the wider region.

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SOS Group Director, Andrew Skelton with Newcastle Panthers Volleyball Club

SOS Group support offers more than a sporting chance

Internationally significant sporting events have become a key component of SOS Group's client base, and sport is a personal passion for the office technology company's three directors.

During 2026, SOS Group will be helping deliver high profile events for clients including Swim England, Aquatics GB, British Universities and Colleges Sports, English Schools Swimming Association and UK Athletics.

Events can range from one day to two weeks in duration in venues as large as 13,000 square metres and requiring as many as 50 devices.

Last year, the company provided office technology solutions at events including the Swim England Open Water National Championships, the Aquatics GB Diving Championships and Novuna UK Athletics Championships.

The Gateshead-based firm was also recently awarded the contract to supply the European Athletics Championships 2026 being held in Birmingham.

Given their national involvement in sport, it is no surprise that the copy print scan specialists are strong supporters of local sporting talent, whether that is sponsoring individuals and teams or supporting inclusion in sport.

Director, John Behan, explains: "Sport plays such an important role in our region, and we're committed to helping nurture the talent and ambition that make the North East so special.

"We believe that sport brings people together, promotes wellbeing, and strengthens community spirit.

"It's something that's personally and professionally important to us and every time we help deliver a major sports event, wherever we are across the country, we always look out for the local names competing"

Most recently, within the North East, SOS Group has supported activities as diverse as lawn bowling, triathlon and basketball.

The company is also proud to continue its long-term support for the Sport Newcastle Awards, and the inspiring work they do to champion the next generation of local sporting heroes.

As the city's oldest and most inclusive sports charity, Sport Newcastle is dedicated to supporting grassroots sport and helping young people, clubs, and organisations achieve their sporting dreams.

At their most recent awards night, SOS Group sponsored the 'Community Champion Award,' which John was proud to present to Newcastle Eagles Foundation Chief Executive, Sam Blake.

Matthew Squires, Sport Newcastle Trustee and Head of Fundraising, said: "The Sport Newcastle Awards showcase the very best of sport across our region, from the rising stars to the local heroes who inspire us all.

"Continued support from partners like SOS Group enables us to back aspiring athletes, proactive community projects, ambitious clubs, and forward-thinking coaches."

Inclusion in sport, in both competitive and non-competitive environments, is something everyone at SOS Group is passionate about.

John explains: "Sport is such a force for good and should be for everyone.

"We recently agreed to support the Riding Disability Association Championships for the next five years. It's the world's biggest equestrian disability event, and something we've been part of for some time, and we're pleased to commit longer term.

"We're also proud to take an active role in supporting both the Reason To Disability Triathlon in Hexham and the Yorkshire Ability Triathlon.

"They're fantastic events designed for people with special educational needs and disabilities in which participants can take part at their own pace.

"With the right support, equipment and adaptations, everyone can experience the joy of sport. We love being part of it all."

SOS Group also recently announced an extension of its partnership with Newcastle Panthers Volleyball Club.

Based in Newcastle, the Newcastle Panthers offers access to volleyball for players of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds.

The club prides itself on being one of the North East's most diverse sporting communities, welcoming members from a wide range of nationalities and promoting inclusion in every aspect of the game.

John adds: "Supporting regional clubs and organisations allows us to give back to the communities where we live and work, helping to nurture talent, promote inclusivity and keep local sport thriving.

"As a company, we work at the highest level of sport, delivering office technology services at national and international competitions all over the country and it's always a privilege to see the commitment of the competitors and the power of sport to transform lives."

Established in 2002, SOS Group is an award-winning office technology company facilitating business requirements across all sectors and specialising in providing copy, print, scan solutions.

For more information on how SOS Group can support the needs of any business or event, please visit: www.sosgroup-ltd.co.uk



Swim England Artistic Swimming National Age Group and Youth Championships



SOS Group Director John Behan with Newcastle Eagles Foundation Chief Executive, Sam Blake



Sweet Sandwich Time

By Pascal Fintoni, AI & Digital Storytelling

Hellmann's *Meal Diamond* and the power of nostalgia.

A couple of Sundays ago, I was sitting with my wife Denise, watching one of our favourite TV series. Halfway through, the ad break appeared and on came something I'd never seen before. Hellmann's "Meal Diamond" campaign. Within thirty seconds I was bursting with laughter. By the end, I was scrambling to find out how I'd managed to miss it.

If you haven't caught it, the premise is simple. A character called Meal Diamond, played with full method-acting commitment by Andy Samberg, strolls into a diner and launches into Neil Diamond's "*Sweet Caroline*", except the lyrics have been twisted into "Sweet Sandwich Time". By the time the crowd joins in on the "so good, so good, so good" chorus, you're grinning. It's Weird Al Yankovic territory for a new generation, and it is absolute genius.

The advert was released in the US in January as part of the Super Bowl. Six months later, people



Pascal Fintoni

are still talking about it. That sort of longevity in a fragmented media landscape is rare, and it points to the kind of work that pays back over time.

For six years on our podcast with Roger Edwards, we've banged the same drum. Combine clear communication, real audience understanding, and a clever play on nostalgia, and you have a winner.

Hellmann's is probably the best example.

The setting is universal: it could be a pub in Manchester as easily as a diner in Memphis. The song is borderless. With the World Cup only weeks away and "*Sweet Caroline*" being the unofficial anthem of England's men's and women's football teams since 2020, this campaign has a second life waiting for it on our side of the Atlantic.

I keep hearing nervous marketers say they dare not reach for eighties or nineties references because it will alienate younger audiences. With respect, that's nonsense. Look at what *Stranger Things* did for Kate Bush's "*Running Up That Hill*", sending a forty-year-old track back to number one and introducing her to a brand-new audience. Young people are discovering older culture in droves, watching reaction videos to Freddie Mercury at Live Aid and Phil Collins's drum fill in "*In the Air Tonight*". Used well, nostalgia is the most cross-generational tool in the marketing kit.

There is a bigger point to be made here. The news at the moment is, frankly, a bit grim, and people are feeling it. In conditions like these, the boardroom instinct is to slash communications budgets and hunker down. I'd argue the opposite. When audiences are weary, the brands that lift the mood, make people smile, laugh even, and hand them a moment of shared joy are the brands that earn loyalty for years afterwards.

Hellmann's, with one sandwich and a familiar tune, have produced something I hope every board member, marketing leader is paying attention to. Six months of cultural traction from a single Super Bowl spot is the kind of return that should make any board think twice before swinging the axe at the comms budget.

And right now, we could all do with the lift.

www.pascalfintoni.com



Dave Sample

Cyber Essentials – From 'nice to have' to commercial necessity

By Dave Sample, Advantex

Cyber Essentials is often positioned as a baseline. In reality, it has become something else entirely.

Across the UK, Cyber Essentials is increasingly being used by procurement teams, insurers and supply chain partners as a proxy for trust and cyber maturity. That shift has happened quietly, but its implications are significant.

A growing disconnect at leadership level

Many organisations still treat certifications such as Cyber Essentials as an endpoint, rather than part of a broader approach to cyber resilience.

At the same time, cyber risk is no longer contained within IT. It sits alongside operational risk, financial exposure and reputational impact, and is increasingly recognised as a board-level responsibility rather than a technical one.

The result is a growing tension. Internally, organisations may feel secure. Externally, they are being assessed against a much higher and more visible standard.

Cyber Essentials as a commercial gatekeeper

For many organisations, the drivers are now commercial rather than strategic.

Cyber Essentials, and particularly Cyber Essentials Plus, is now routinely required to:

- Access public sector and government-linked contracts shaped by requirements such as PPN 01/24
- Retain position within supply chains, particularly manufacturing and automotive
- Meet increasingly stringent cyber insurance expectations

What began as a technical control framework has evolved into a market filter.

Organisations without certification are not just seen as higher risk. In many cases, they are excluded altogether.

The 2026 Shift: From assertion to evidence

From April 2026, Cyber Essentials assessments become more rigorous and evidence-driven, placing greater emphasis on proving controls are consistently applied across the organisation.

For leadership teams, this has two implications. First, certification will become harder to achieve without preparation. Second, it will carry more weight once achieved.

In effect, Cyber Essentials is becoming a more credible indicator of operational discipline and governance.

Where organisations are exposed

For many organisations, the issue is not the absence of security controls, but inconsistency in how they are applied across systems, users and cloud environments.

Multi-factor authentication may be enforced in some areas but not others. Patch management may exist, but without the discipline required to meet defined timelines. Cloud platforms are often assumed to be secure without full visibility of configuration or access control.

These are not technical failings in isolation. They are indicators of how security is governed across the organisation. Under the updated framework, these weaknesses are far more likely to be exposed.

Beyond compliance: A signal of maturity

Cyber Essentials has evolved into a signal of maturity as much as protection.

Government-backed frameworks already position Cyber Essentials as a baseline defence against common cyber attacks. To procurement teams, insurers and customers, certification signals reliability, reduced risk and professionalism.

In many cases, they are the difference between being considered and being overlooked.

A Leadership Decision, Not a Technical One

What is becoming clear is that Cyber Essentials is no longer an IT-led initiative. It requires clarity around scope, accountability for controls, and alignment across systems, people, and processes. Certification is not the objective, resilience is.

Organisations that approach it in this way tend to achieve more than accreditation. They strengthen their operational foundations.

A practical perspective

Businesses that prepare properly and align certification to wider business resilience strategies typically achieve far stronger outcomes than those treating Cyber Essentials as a last-minute compliance exercise.

Looking ahead

As supply chain scrutiny, regulation and cyber risk continue to increase, Cyber Essentials is becoming less a technical accreditation and more a reflection of whether an organisation is considered secure, credible and fit to operate in modern markets.

advantex.uk.com



The business you are now deserves a better introduction.

Simon Honeywood

After the Pivot

By Simon Honeywood, Readysalted

Most pivots don't happen in a boardroom. There's no announcement, no rebrand, no moment where someone draws a line in the sand.

A client asks for something slightly different. You say yes. It goes well, so you do it again. Six months later that's quietly become 20% of your revenue, and nobody has updated anything. The website still describes the old business. The proposals still carry the old assumptions. New staff onboard into a version of the company that no longer quite exists.

This is the organic pivot and it's far more common than the strategic kind.

The gap nobody closes

Post-Covid accelerated this for a lot of businesses. Some pivots were deliberate, some were survival, and many turned out to be genuine improvements. But in the scramble to adapt, the digital presence rarely kept pace. Not out of laziness, out of momentum. The business moved, the admin didn't. I know we have been guilty of that.

The result is a quiet misalignment between what a business actually does and what everything around it says it does. The website points one way. The sales conversation points another. Internal systems carry assumptions baked in three years ago and nobody quite sees the whole picture, because everyone is too close to it.

It's not just a marketing problem

This is where a lot of businesses make a misstep. They recognise the disconnect, commission a new homepage, and consider it done. But a pivot isn't finished when one page is updated. It's finished when every part of the business reflects where you actually are.

That means the website, yes, but also proposals, onboarding documents, CRM workflows, and how you introduce yourselves in a first meeting. Outdated systems create invisible overhead. Staff work around tools rather than with them. Clients arrive with expectations shaped by the old version of the business, and that mismatch tends to show up later as scope creep or difficult conversations.

The review most businesses skip

Before updating anything, the more valuable exercise is stepping back and getting clear on what the business actually is now. Not what it was. Not what it aspires to be. What it genuinely does well today, and for whom.

That clarity sounds obvious, but very few businesses make proper time for it. And fewer still have someone outside the business to help them see it. When you're inside it every day, it's hard to read the label from inside the jar.

The businesses that come through a pivot cleanly are usually the ones who paused long enough to get the story straight first. They asked the harder questions before touching the website. Where is the profitable work actually coming from? Who are the clients we'd like more of? What would we say if a good prospect asked us what we do?

The pivot was the hard part

You've already done the difficult work. You adapted, you survived, in many cases you improved. Don't let an outdated digital presence keep telling the old story to every new prospect who looks you up.

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Banks Homes launches first apprenticeship programme

Housebuilder Banks Homes is opening up new early career opportunities in the residential property sector after launching its first apprenticeship programme.

The County Durham-headquartered firm has begun recruiting for a commercial trainee, a trainee assistant site manager and a trainee sales executive as it looks to increase the number of staff that it brings through the ranks itself.

Bespoke apprenticeship training programmes have been developed with Northumbria University, New College Durham and Sunderland College to ensure the new apprentices have access to the outside support they will need as their training progresses.

Each role will also enable the recruits to gain formal qualifications, including up to degree level, in their respective areas of expertise.

Founded in 2023 and part of North East employer the Banks Group, Banks Homes is building a growing portfolio of high-quality residential sites across North East England and Yorkshire, with development under way at sites in County Durham, the Tees Valley and North Yorkshire and work due to start in other locations through the rest of this year.



Architectural innovation and heritage expertise secure transformative Durham PBSA for Howarth Litchfield

Leading architecture practice, Durham-based Howarth Litchfield, has been appointed architect for Ward Group Investments' (WGI) latest purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) development, Hopper House, in Durham.

The multi-million-pound scheme recently received unanimous approval from Durham County Council's planning committee who were appreciative of the consideration given to the gym, fitness room and large kitchen/living space for mixing and mingling in the transformative proposals as well as the additional fenestration to maximise the amount of daylight entering the building,

The development will transform the 18,000 sq. ft. Hopper House on Atherton Street - a "nondescript" 1980s office building that has stood vacant for over 12 years - into 45 high-spec, self-contained studio apartments.

While the scheme has already garnered significant attention, the design was specifically commended by the Council's planning department for its innovative approach to internal amenity and heritage sensitivity.

Polar NE: Window specialists open the door to new business with several 'six figure' contracts

Business is booming at an award-winning Teesside company, after the firm secured a string of six-figure contracts on key projects across the North East.

For over 40 years, Polar NE has been developing unique windows and doors. For the past two decades, it has largely specialised in reduced-ligature products for the NHS.

However, the Middlesbrough-based firm has won four major contracts that will see it install more traditional glazing at hospitals and schools across the region.

In total, the projects will see Polar NE's team install over 500 windows across the North East, as the company continues to grow.

"Through years of innovation and strong results, we've earned a reputation as being the go-to provider of reduced-ligature windows and doors," said Operations Manager, Rob Lofthouse.

"But traditional windows and doors have always been a strong part of our business, and these contracts are a reminder that there's a lot more depth to our business than just the mental health sector.

"Ultimately, whatever the project – be it a complex NHS environment or simply a large-scale project at a school – we are routinely trusted to find a solution for clients, and that's evidenced by the fact all four contracts



are from clients who've used us before."

The projects will see Polar NE deliver windows to both Blyth and North Tyneside Hospital, alongside Holystone Primary.

On Teesside, they've also secured the contract to help refurbish Yarm School.

The windows are currently being fabricated at the firm's factory in Skipper's Lane, with installation expected to start on all four projects over the summer months.



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First residents making themselves at home at The Cornfields in Yarm



Housebuilder Banks Homes has welcomed the first residents into their new homes at its first Tees Valley residential development.

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.

Four families moved into their new properties at the start of May, with Banks Homes providing welcome packs filled with produce from the nearby Hutchinson Hobbs Farm Shop to mark the occasion – and the new residents have been quick to start feeling right at home.

Residents Ross & Martina, who have moved into a Broadoak home at The Pastures said: "We were absolutely delighted when our home was completed on schedule and ready for us as promised.

"The level of support, communication, and professionalism from the entire Banks Homes team has been outstanding. Thank you to everyone involved for helping make this such a smooth and positive experience for our family - we couldn't be happier!"

A fellow new resident added: "As a first-time buyer, I had many questions and uncertainties, but sales executive Linda took the time to explain every step clearly and ensured I felt confident in my decisions.

"I am impressed with the overall build quality and the thoughtful details incorporated into the home.

"It is clear that Banks Homes takes pride in their work and strives to provide a positive experience for buyers - thank you for delivering a home that I am truly happy with."

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 open for viewing five days a week.

A total of 11 different property designs are available, with each of the three-to-five-bedroom 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 in Banks Homes' Elevated range having 2.6m high ceilings on the ground floor.

Sixteen of the new properties at The Cornfields have now been reserved, with more new residents due to move into their new homes through the summer.

Aisling Ramshaw, sales and marketing director at Banks Homes, says: "Banks Homes is bringing together striking design, future-proof sustainability and desirable locations to create a new blueprint for contemporary living.



"Seeing the first residents move into a new development is always a milestone moment for us and we couldn't be happier with the feedback we've had from the first families that can now call The Cornfields their home.

"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're very much looking forward to welcoming more families into their new homes there in the coming weeks."

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.

New homes are now available at The Cornfields from £325,950. For further information, please call 0191 378 6205 or visit www.bankshomes.co.uk/developments/the-cornfields

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Beyond the Headlines

By Teresa Sargeant, youngsRPS

What the Renters' Rights Act really means for North East Landlords.

The initial flurry of media attention surrounding the Renters' Rights Act has now subsided, but for landlords across the North East, the practical implications are very much a live issue.

As Residential Lettings Manager for youngsRPS, Teresa Sargeant has been speaking with many landlords across the North East and the key question remains: what does this really mean for us, and what should we be doing now? Teresa talks us through the headlines, separating fact from speculation, and explains the practical considerations North East landlords should be thinking about now to stay ahead of the changes.

First, let's acknowledge the significant shift. As of 1 May 2026, most existing Assured Shorthold Tenancies (ASTs) automatically transitioned to Assured Periodic Tenancies. This fundamental change, coupled with the phasing out of Section 21 'no-fault' evictions, means a new landscape for managing your properties. The immediate, non-negotiable step was to issue the new Renters' Rights Act Information Sheet to all tenants by 31 May 2026. If you haven't already, this needs to be addressed urgently, and clear records of service kept.



Teresa Sargeant

Navigating the new landscape: Practical steps for landlords

For many landlords, particularly those with long-standing arrangements or informal agreements, this Act necessitates a thorough review of current practices. It's about ensuring your documentation is robust and your procedures are compliant. Here's what we're advising:

1. Understand Periodic Tenancies: With tenancies now largely periodic, tenants have greater flexibility. This means understanding the new grounds for possession and ensuring you meet all legal requirements should you need to regain your property.

2. Rent Increases: Rent increases are now limited to once per year, and must follow the Section 13 procedure, providing adequate notice. Transparency and clear communication with your tenants are more important than ever.

A focus on the North East: Our unique market

Here in the North East, our rental market has shown remarkable resilience. We've seen the highest rental inflation in England, at 6.5% as of March 2026. While the average rent sits around £770, areas like Newcastle command significantly higher figures, averaging around £1,169. This strong demand underscores the importance of retaining good tenants and ensuring your properties remain attractive and compliant.

Moving forward with confidence

The Renters' Rights Act is a significant piece of legislation, designed to create a fairer and more secure rental market. For landlords, it means a greater emphasis on professionalism, clear communication, and meticulous record-keeping. While the initial media storm may have passed, the need for proactive management and expert advice has not.

At youngsRPS, we understand the nuances of the North East property market and the evolving legislative landscape. We're here to help you navigate these changes, ensuring your properties remain compliant and profitable. Don't let uncertainty lead to complications; take stock of your arrangements and plan with confidence.

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Greystead Rectory and Cottage

Tarset, Northumberland

Greystead Rectory is an exceptional Grade II listed Georgian home set within the Northumberland National Park, offering elegant interiors, sweeping countryside views and North Tyne river frontage with fishing rights. Complete with a detached cottage and income potential, this is a truly rare lifestyle opportunity.

Asking Price £1,500,000



Lauder Cottage

Stocksfield, Northumberland

Impressive four-bedroom detached home in the desirable village of High Mickley, offering spacious and well-balanced accommodation. Featuring generous reception space, modern kitchen and comfortable bedrooms. With attractive gardens, driveway parking and countryside surroundings, this property provides an excellent opportunity for family living within easy reach of Stocksfield and commuting links.

Asking Price £750,000



Harlow Keep

Catton, Northumberland

Attractive four-bedroom detached home set within the desirable village of Catton, offering spacious and versatile accommodation. Featuring generous reception rooms, well-appointed kitchen and comfortable bedrooms. With gardens, driveway parking and appealing rural surroundings, this property provides an excellent opportunity for family living within easy reach of Hexham and transport links.

Asking price £750,000



Townhead House

West Woodburn, Northumberland

Impressive four-bedroom stone-built farmhouse set in picturesque countryside, offering spacious and versatile accommodation. Featuring multiple reception rooms, characterful kitchen with AGA, outbuildings, workshop space and generous gardens. With private access, ample parking and stunning rural views, this property delivers an idyllic Northumberland lifestyle opportunity.

Asking Price £650,000



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Ready for take off

A company which started off from a modest base at Team Valley has now grown to employ more than 50 staff, has a multi-million pound turnover and has five North East sites – and there's more to come...



L-R: Wes and Jay with Victoria Ashby, Head of Property and Development at Teesside International Airport at the opening of their airport site

When any of the team from Jaymac Solutions meets with a potential new client, they don't sell their diverse range of services.

They simply ask a question – "what is the biggest issue you're facing?"

It's from that starting point that they live up to their name, finding the perfect solution which deals with any particular problem.

It's a clever business model because it means that Jaymac can constantly show its creative teeth, providing a range of services but also diversify to meet their clients' needs.

That's particularly evident with one of its latest ventures – developing a fabrication site which creates moulds for engineered foam products.

For Wes Thompson, CEO at Jaymac Solutions, being agile enough to adapt and help clients is why the company is progressing at such a pace.

It's been 30 years since founder Tony Macari (the company name is a nod to his son Jay who is COO) realised he could repurpose the pallets that were stacking up at the fruit and veg wholesalers he ran at Team Valley.

Tony soon realised he'd found a gap in the market and started to build his business, which over the years has continued to grow and flourish.

While Jaymac still has that original site – and still has a pallets arm – it's reach now stretches far and wide.

Jaymac Solutions has become a huge logistics, warehousing, transport and packaging company, with six sites across five locations.

There's a direct packaging facility at Gateshead's Team Valley and a 30,000 sq ft pallet recycling operation, a warehouse in Washington which manufactures pallets, along with offices and showrooms at Newburn in Newcastle.

It also has a major hub at Faverdale in Darlington where the company services a national supermarket chain and a major high street pharmacy.

"It's a continuous loop," explained Wes.

"Every wagon that picks up the empty containers and pallets from around their sites nationally and brings them to us before they are then picked up by the manufacturers and the loop starts again."

The most recent addition is a 1.8m base at Teesside Airport which is being used to warehousing, packaging and fulfilment solutions for the air freight which is set to land at Teesside, following the recent announcement of a multi-million pound deal with European Cargo.

At the same time the company has seen the potential of the site for creating new business opportunities – hence the creation of the fabrication facility.

A combination of Jaymac's ability to deliver and in Wes' words "its network of relationships, contacts and reputation" is why year on year it is enjoying growth, on course to turnover in excess of £7.5m this year.

The company is working across a range of industries, from food to pharma, and is also poised to launch a new brand – Arpex - which will also have a range of divisions including print and packaging.

"Our success is definitely partly due to us having a genuine interest in our clients and wanting to help them improve their business," said Wes.

"We are always looking to grow and diversify but we still maintain that original family and business ethos."

For further information visit www.jaymacsolutions.co.uk



We are always looking to grow and diversify but we still maintain that original family and business ethos.

L-R: Wes Thompson and Jay Macari of Jaymac Solutions



Playing with fire isn't an option – Protect your building the right way

Fire safety in commercial, industrial, and civil environments isn't something to take lightly—it's a legal obligation, a moral responsibility, and a critical investment in protecting lives and property.

At MES Construction, a leading construction specialist across the North East of England, fire protection is delivered with precision, expertise, and a thorough understanding of current regulations.

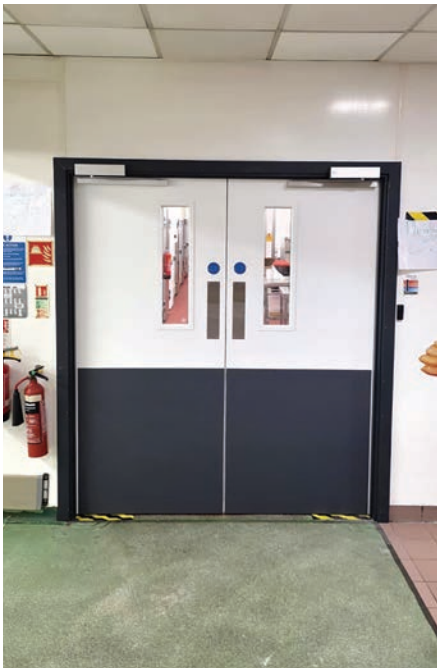
Fire doors are a fundamental part of any building's fire protection strategy. Designed to slow the spread of fire and smoke, they provide vital time for occupants to evacuate and for emergency services to respond. MES Construction supplies and installs high-quality fire doors rated to withstand fires for up to two hours, ensuring robust protection tailored to your building's needs. Every installation is carried out by a qualified NVQ Level 3 Fire Door Installer, guaranteeing compliance with strict industry standards and manufacturer specifications.

However, installation is only one part of the process. UK legislation places clear responsibility on building owners, landlords, and duty holders to ensure fire safety measures are properly maintained. Under the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005, responsible persons must carry out regular fire risk assessments and ensure that fire doors are correctly installed, routinely inspected, and fully operational at all times.

Further legislation, including the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022, has reinforced the importance of fire compartmentation—ensuring that fire is contained within specific areas of a building to limit its spread. This is where fire stopping plays a crucial role.

Fire stopping involves sealing gaps, joints, and penetrations within a building's structure to prevent fire and smoke from spreading. Even small openings around cables, pipes, or ductwork can compromise safety. MES Construction provides professional fire stopping solutions that maintain the integrity of fire-resistant walls and floors, helping buildings meet stringent safety requirements.

To support ongoing compliance, MES Construction offers a complete fire safety service, including fire door installation, fire stopping inspections, fire door inspections, and maintenance programmes. Regular inspections



are essential, as fire doors can become less effective over time due to wear, damage, or incorrect use. Addressing issues early ensures that doors perform as intended in the event of a fire.

Failure to meet fire safety regulations can result in serious consequences, including fines, legal action, and increased risk to life. Investing in professionally installed and maintained fire doors, alongside effective fire stopping, is one of the most important steps any organisation can take.

For expert advice or to arrange a consultation, contact MES Construction on 0191 816 0649 or email admin@mesconstruction.co.uk

One month on

The Renters' Rights changes — What's really happening in the rental market?



One month after the introduction of the Renters' Rights changes on May 1st, the picture is far clearer than many predicted — and despite widespread speculation, the rental market has not collapsed.

In the lead-up to the changes, landlords were exposed to a wave of alarming headlines and misinformation, suggesting a mass exodus from the market. While some landlords did make the decision to reduce their portfolios, the reality has been far more stable. Properties are still being let, tenant demand remains strong, and the market continues to function.

However, while the more dramatic predictions have not materialised, the importance of compliance under the new legislation cannot be understated.

Landlords who fail to adhere to the updated regulations could face financial penalties starting at £7,000, rising to as much as £40,000 for more serious breaches. These figures highlight a significant shift — not in the viability of the market, but in the level of responsibility placed on landlords.

This is where professional guidance becomes essential.

At Wright Residential, the focus is on helping landlords navigate these changes with confidence. From ensuring legal compliance to managing tenancies effectively, having an experienced agent in place is no longer just a convenience — it is a safeguard.

As the industry continues to adjust, clarity and accurate information will be key. Over the coming weeks, Wright Residential will be sharing insights to separate fact from fiction, providing both landlords and tenants with a clearer understanding of what these changes mean in practice.

The message, one month on, is simple: the rental market remains strong — but success within it now depends on staying informed, compliant, and well-supported.

Landlords — if you want expert support managing your property portfolio compliantly and confidently, get in touch with Wright Residential today.

www.wrightresidential.co.uk
0191 240 1818

Robinson Bathrooms & Kitchens expands to offer bespoke kitchen design & installation



Robinson Bathrooms & Kitchens has built a strong reputation for delivering high-quality bathroom design and installation, known for attention to detail, reliability, and exceptional craftsmanship.

Now, the company is proud to announce the expansion of its services to include bespoke kitchen design, supply, and installation.

A kitchen is more than just a place to prepare meals — it's the heart of the home. It's where families gather, where mornings begin, and where memories are made.

Recognising this, Robinson Bathrooms & Kitchens brings the same level of care and expertise that customers have come to expect, now tailored to creating beautiful and functional kitchen spaces.

From sleek, contemporary designs to timeless, classic styles, every kitchen is carefully planned around the customer's lifestyle, space, and personal taste. The team works closely with each client from the initial consultation through to the final installation, ensuring a smooth and stress-free experience throughout.

What sets Robinson Bathrooms & Kitchens apart is their commitment to delivering a complete service. From design and product selection to installation and aftercare, every detail is handled with precision and professionalism.

The result is a kitchen that not only looks stunning but is built to stand the test of time.

With a focus on quality materials, skilled workmanship, and dependable service, the company continues to grow while maintaining the values that have earned them the trust of homeowners across the region.

Whether you're planning a full renovation or simply looking to upgrade your space, Robinson Bathrooms & Kitchens is ready to help bring your vision to life.

Get in touch today to discuss your kitchen project.
0191 483 5888
robinsonbathroomsandheating.co.uk



Neil Turner

Building costs

By Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield

In this country we constantly hear in the news about the need for more housing. Over the last 40 years the country has debated how to build more housing – often ignoring the quality debate.

The cost of building has risen steadily since 2020 and in its report, 'The Viability Crunch' - which analyses the impact of increasing policy, tax, and regulatory pressures on home builders in England and Wales - the Home Builders Federation (HBF) notes an increase of nearly £80k or 20% to the price of the average new home.

The cost increases are not just due to inflation and the cost of materials but have come from the increase in regulatory costs, taxes, levies and environmental issues on site.

The country needs more houses to be built and yet each year, it is widely reported that the number doesn't hit central government targets - and that's before we even get onto the issue of the quality and design of the houses.

Cost will be further impacted by the increases and levies to be incorporated into the Building Safety Levy, described by the Government as a tax on new residential buildings.

Current legislation, which is already creating longer planning application periods will focus more on biodiversity rules for offsite planting and Section 106 Agreements, which are financial contributions to local infrastructure - and even land fill tax increases.

Building regulations changes have steadily increased thermal and energy requirements for housing so that insulation levels, PV panels, EV chargers and low carbon heating (often air source heating) mean the energy efficiency of new housing is improved but at some cost to the development and ultimately the purchase price.

The combination of additional regulations and greater complexity along with rising materials costs inevitably result in making housing schemes harder to get to site. As clients and developers do the sums and viability testing, more schemes will fail the initial tests.

Alongside the extra costs, there are additional considerations such as the timescales of all the various permissions and consultants' reports, which all add to the overall development total.

Further changes with the Future Homes standard and likely building regulations increases will see more costs rise.

I am conflicted over these changes because whilst I recognise that technology will constantly evolve, improving (hopefully) what is being built and that great thermal improvements in housing will lead to lower fuel costs, at the same time, investment in all these policies, environmental rules and energy performance improvements, come at a cost.

As an architect I am naturally concerned that the design quality of housing needs to improve and we want to make future housing, suburbs and villages more beautiful, viable and attractive places to live and work. But to make housing available, then development needs to balance the needs of the environment, the social demands, the affordability and the energy performance – as well as being affordable to develop and buy – which is not an easy juggling act at all.

As this is a wide-ranging subject involving politicians, planners, environmentalists, economists and developers, I have summarised the key complexities in my article in a simplified way, yet for the sake of society, we do need to create the right conditions for harmony and balance.

Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield can be contacted on 0191 384 9470 or email n.turner@hlpuk.com www.howarthlitchfield.com

Esh Construction completes landmark £6.4m redevelopment of Bishop Auckland Bus Station



The new £6.4 million Bishop Auckland Bus Station is now officially open to the public, marking the completion of a major investment in the town centre's transport infrastructure.

Delivered by Esh Construction on behalf of the Durham County Council, the bus station was built on the site of the former facility on Saddler Street and provides a modern, safe and welcoming transport hub for residents and visitors travelling into Bishop Auckland.

Representatives from Esh joined Durham County Council at a formal opening ceremony, following the completion of the bus station and £1.8 million of associated enabling works. The project forms part of wider regeneration activity aimed at improving connectivity and supporting the town's long-term vitality.

Steven Garrigan, Divisional Director at Esh Construction, said: "Esh is proud to have delivered a modern, fully accessible transport hub that will play an important role in supporting Bishop Auckland's regeneration and strengthening local connectivity.

"Working closely with Durham County Council, this project reflects our commitment to delivering high quality infrastructure that serves communities across the region, while also creating meaningful social value and opportunities locally."

Bishop Auckland's transport hub features new and improved passenger information with live updates, CCTV, toilet facilities – including accessible toilets, a changing places unit and a parent and child facility – and a retail kiosk.

The bus station is fully accessible, with anti-slip flooring and seating as well as wheelchair spaces at the front of each passenger waiting area.

The area surrounding the bus station has also been landscaped, with paved areas, drainage systems, street lighting installed.

More than 120 hot rolled steel girders weighing a total of 23.49 tonne were installed on the building, having been fabricated less than two miles from the development by South Durham Structures Ltd.

A variety of sustainable technologies serve to boost the building's environmental credentials feature within the design, including solar photo voltaic panels on the roof, a rainwater harvesting and re-use system and a Sedum green living roof to promote biodiversity.

Alongside the bus station, there will also be a new 124-space car park, with accessible spaces for wheelchairs and Blue Badge holders and parking for motorcycles.

There will also be electric vehicle charging points and bicycle parking.

Cllr Tim McGuinness, Durham County Council's Cabinet member for rural, farming and transport, said: "The completion of Bishop Auckland Bus Station is a major step in our plans to regenerate Bishop Auckland and boost its standing as a thriving market town and visitor destination.

"The bus station looks fantastic and will provide the local community with modern, up-to-date facilities so they can access opportunities within the county and beyond. It will also serve as a positive welcome for visitors travelling into the centre for Bishop Auckland's growing culture, heritage and events offer."

The project has delivered £2.2 million in social value, with 37 weeks of work experience and T-Level time provided to County Durham students, 55 weeks of work on site by County Durham veterans and reservists, 97 hours of STEM and employability skills delivered in schools and education settings and a £2.2m spend in County Durham's supply chain.

Bishop Auckland Bus Station has been developed using £11.8 million of funding from the Future High Streets Fund.

To find out more about Esh Construction, visit www.eshgroup.co.uk







David Wadds, director and Claire Wadds, administrative assistant with Zachary Marshall, (seated) SSIP coordinator

Driving Constructionline Gold success for UK firms

Following the successful launch of its compliance support service at the end of 2025, Carney Consultancy has helped 15 construction and engineering businesses secure Constructionline Gold accreditation.

The achievement reflects the consultancy's practical, hands-on guidance and rising demand for expert support as firms navigate tighter building safety and procurement standards.

Carney Consultancy helps clients across the North of England manage compliance, procurement and operational challenges. Through expert health and safety advice, process improvement and strategic guidance, the company supports organisations in meeting regulatory requirements while maintaining operational efficiency and commercial competitiveness.

The initiative comes as organisations across the sector face increasing obligations under the Building Safety Act, with clients and regulators demanding clear evidence of competence, robust systems and compliance with procurement requirements.

The service is led by director, David Wadds and SSIP co-ordinator, Zachary Marshall, who plays a central role in delivering the service, bringing extensive in-house training and hands-on experience.

David Wadds, said: "Since launching our compliance support service at the end of 2025, it's been incredibly rewarding to see companies put the right systems in place and secure this important recognition. Achieving Constructionline Gold is becoming a key requirement for businesses but many are still unsure how to get there and Carney Consultancy can help make the journey a painless one."

Carney Consultancy supports organisations through the Constructionline Gold accreditation process, guiding them from initial gap analysis to successful submission.

The consultancy's approach goes beyond application support, focusing on building long-term compliance frameworks aligned with the Building Safety Act and Safety Schemes in Procurement (SSIP).

Clients benefit from hands-on guidance in developing tailored policies, procedures and documentation, alongside practical SSIP training, risk assessment templates, method statements, training records, supply chain management processes and competence management systems.

The team also works directly with contractors to assess competence, implement site-level controls and produce the evidence required by clients and regulators.

Zachary, said: "Our team works directly with contractors to assess competence, produce the evidence that clients and regulators now require, improve organisational capability, prepare robust documentation for tenders and audits, and develop the necessary policies, procedures and forms to demonstrate full compliance."

The consultancy has also delivered three free seminars focused on the Building Safety Act, attracting more than 100 attendees and helping businesses understand the evolving regulatory landscape.

David, added: "We've invested significant time and resources to turn complex legislative requirements into simple, actionable guidance that sets our clients up for success and we are ready to take the stress out of compliance for more businesses."

www.carneyconsultancy.co.uk



L-R: Joe Clark, project manager, Total Project Integration; Alex First, project manager at Placefirst; Emma Bond, senior development manager, residential development team, Economy and Place, Julie McCartney, head of residential development, Economy and Place, Jane Simpson, assistant commercial manager all at Sunderland City Council; David Reagan, project manager, Katie Green, head of commercial, Duncan Bowman, director, Robyn Wright, project coordinator and Ritchie Wharton, director, all at Falcon Fox Construction

Civil engineering works completed for landmark residential development

Falcon Fox Construction has completed remediation and civil engineering works at Nile + Villiers, a new residential-led development in Sunniside, Sunderland.

The scheme is a key part of Sunderland City Council's Sunniside Place Strategy—a ten-year plan to bring new life, activity and investment to the area.

Falcon Fox is acting as construction manager for this innovative development which will provide 75 new energy efficient homes, alongside 6,000 sq ft of commercial space fronting onto High Street West. The scheme aims to reinstate two streets demolished in the 2000s which were historically home to printers, cabinet makers and textile workers.

Over the next decade, the Council is aiming to deliver approximately 2,000 new homes across the city centre in developments at Riverside Sunderland, Sunniside, and at West Park, on the site of the former Civic Centre.

Upon completion, 65 of the homes at Nile + Villiers will be acquired by built-to-rent specialist, Placefirst, with the remaining homes being sold to the public. The commercial space will be leased to smaller and start-up businesses.

Since the project commenced in autumn 2025, Falcon Fox has overseen the completion of site remediation and major civil engineering works, with structural timber frames currently being erected on numerous phases of the build and internal fit out works progressing at pace.

As a direct result of the Nile + Villiers contract, Falcon Fox has employed five new members of staff and has subcontracted to a range of North East-based companies including All Floors Services based in Boldon and James Burrell Builders Merchants in Sunderland.

Falcon Fox, director, Duncan Bowman, said: "We were delighted to be appointed at the outset of such an ambitious regeneration project for the city of Sunderland and, through our commitment to deliver added social value, we are recruiting new staff and ensuring companies from within the North East are given the opportunity to provide their services and expertise throughout the development process.

"This project combines really striking and innovative architecture with fully tiled façades and EPC A rated homes that incorporate many sustainable features including photovoltaics, timber frames and air source heat pumps. The housing is designed to generate a real community feel with homes located around a central landscaped area with a sustainable urban drainage system which is buried 4.50 metre below ground.

"The project comprises elements of major civil engineering and housebuilding, making it a technically challenging project, which we are thoroughly absorbed in."

Patrick Melia, Chief Executive of Sunderland City Council, said: "It's fantastic to see work progressing at pace at the Nile + Villiers development, and even more so to see a North East business playing such a pivotal role in its delivery.

"The scheme is a key part of our ten-year strategy to breathe new life into this historic part of the city, developing a strong sense of place and purpose, creating a safe and active neighbourhood, intensifying the population and business uses, supporting the growth of the local cultural and creative community, and sustaining change through cooperative stewardship.

"Completing the civil engineering works is an exciting milestone in the delivery of the development and the ongoing transformation of Sunniside."

falconfox.co.uk

Two BCCET primary schools rated 'Outstanding' by education inspectors

St Matthew's Catholic Primary School in Jarrow and St Aloysius Catholic Junior School in Hebburn have both been rated 'Outstanding' by the Catholic Schools Inspectorate.

The schools, which are part of Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, were recently inspected by the CSI, which judges Catholic schools on overall effectiveness, Catholic life and mission, religious education, and collective worship, on behalf of the Bishop of Hexham and Newcastle. Both schools received glowing reports.

"There is something very special about St Matthew's. You feel it as soon as you walk through the door." That was how a parent described St Matthew's to the CSI inspectors. The CSI praised the pupils' exemplary behaviour, pride in their learning and high-quality work and described leaders at the school as passionate, committed and dedicated to the school's success.

CSI lead inspector Michael Ewing said in his report: "Pupils are happy, confident and secure. They care for each other well and are sensitive to the different needs of each other.

"Parents hold the headteacher in the highest regard because of her knowledge of all pupils, high visibility and approachability."

St Matthew's headteacher Eve Alderson said: "This outcome is a wonderful recognition of our whole school community. Our pupils live out Gospel values each day, and this inspection highlights how faith is not just taught but truly lived in our school. I am incredibly proud of our children, staff, governors and families who work together to make our school such a nurturing and special place."

The CSI said pupils at St Aloysius Catholic Junior School have a "clear understanding of the fact that they are known, valued and loved as individuals".

CSI lead inspector Claire Garbutt said in her report: "There is a lived sense of community at St Aloysius where there is strength in relationships, a deep respect and dignity for each other and a genuine culture of welcome.

"There is a flourishing partnership between home, school and parish which is deeply appreciated by all. Outcomes in religious education for pupils are strong, underpinned by effective teaching rooted in clear subject knowledge with a focus on challenge and depth of learning.

"Everyone is valued, without exception, in a supportive and joyful community."

St Aloysius' headteacher Anna Tumelty said: "Our pupils are at the heart of everything we do, and their enthusiasm, kindness, and commitment to learning shine through in every aspect of school life. We are incredibly proud of them.



St Matthew's Catholic Primary School

"This achievement also recognises the dedication and hard work of our staff, who consistently go above and beyond to provide an exceptional education and a nurturing environment for every child.

"We are equally grateful for the unwavering support of our families and our strong and cherished links with our parish."

For more information about St Matthew's Catholic Primary School, visit www.stmatthewsjarrow.co.uk

For more information about St Aloysius Catholic Junior School, visit www.st-aloysius.co.uk

For more information about BCCET, visit www.bccet.org.uk



St Aloysius Catholic Junior School

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RADLEY
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A week of adventure on the South Coast

Year 7 pupils at Mowden enjoyed what can only be described as an outstanding residential experience, combining adventure, history, teamwork and friendship across Oxfordshire and the south coast.

After travelling south and settling into their accommodation, the children quickly embraced the spirit of the week, making the most of time together and preparing for the packed itinerary ahead. The first full day saw them hosted by Radley College's Agricultural Centre, where they threw themselves wholeheartedly into a wonderfully varied programme.

From handling livestock and learning about animal care, to cooking lunch over a campfire, meeting the remarkable inhabitants of Radley's Biology Department "zoo", and even trying their hand at air rifle shooting, it was a day full of curiosity, challenge and discovery. The children represented Mowden impeccably throughout, asking thoughtful questions, engaging enthusiastically and showing real maturity.

The following day brought a shift from countryside to coastline, with a fascinating visit to Portsmouth Historic Dockyard. Exploring HMS Victory, learning about Lord Nelson and stepping into the world of naval history brought classroom learning vividly to life, while the Mary Rose Museum offered a remarkable insight into Tudor England. What stood out most was how genuinely engaged the children were throughout the day - asking questions, absorbing information and showing a real appetite for learning.

The residential also highlighted the extraordinary opportunities that collaboration within the Radley Schools Group can create. A warm welcome from West Hill Park saw our pupils enjoy life in the boarding house, integrating with other children, swimming together and experiencing another school community first-hand. This spirit of partnership continued at Barfield Prep School's outstanding Three Peaks adventure centre, where the children tackled high ropes, low ropes, quad biking, laser tag and a series of team-building challenges. These experiences pushed many children well beyond their comfort zones, requiring resilience, courage, trust and cooperation in abundance.

The week concluded with a brilliant watersports day, where kayaking, paddleboarding and windsurfing provided a fittingly energetic finale. Even with changing weather, the children approached every challenge with enthusiasm and determination.

Above all, this was a week that developed exactly the qualities we seek to nurture in a Mowden education: independence, resilience, curiosity, teamwork and confidence. Most importantly, it was enormous fun. The children were exceptional ambassadors for the school throughout, and we are hugely grateful to the staff, our Radley Schools Group partners and all those who helped make such a memorable week possible.

mowdenhall.org.uk





Opening minds, one book at a time

By Geoffrey Stanford, Headmaster, Royal Grammar School Newcastle

Reading shapes our children's lives. I can still recall the books that inspired me and opened doors to new worlds, from Horatio Hornblower to the Hobbit.

Today, there are a variety of ways children can engage with books, whether in hard copy, reading on a kindle or listening to audiobooks. RGS students are encouraged to discover their favourite way to read and to do so daily. That is why we are proud to be wholeheartedly supporting the National Year of Reading campaign.

Led by the National Literacy Trust and The Reading Agency, the Year of Reading comes at a crucial moment. Reading for pleasure is at its lowest level in years. Busy lives, digital distraction and the pull of instant entertainment all play their part, yet the importance of reading has never been greater. It expands minds, builds confidence, fuels creativity and quietly equips young people with the curiosity and resilience they need to thrive.

At RGS, we believe reading should not feel like an obligation. It should be a joy. That is why our entire community has chosen to 'go all in' for the National Year of Reading. From our Junior School Reading Ambassadors, who proudly champion their favourite books, to teacher recommended reads displayed on classroom doors, to Sixth Form students volunteering to support literacy in local primary schools, reading is visible, shared and celebrated daily across the school.

We encourage our students to read widely but, more importantly, to read willingly. Whether that is fiction or non-fiction, poetry or prose, history or fantasy, what matters is that reading sparks curiosity and genuine enjoyment. As Mrs Wall, Assistant Head (Pastoral) at RGS Junior School, put it recently, "Developing a love of reading is the passport to a lifetime of knowledge, adventure and wonder." That passport should be open to all.

Our commitment to reading is not new. In fact, it is woven into the very fabric of our school. RGS has always had a library. Some of the earliest books in our collections date back to the sixteenth century – precious volumes of Cicero, Aristophanes and Plutarch that survived civil war, rebuilding and centuries of change. They remind us that reading has long been at the heart of an RGS education, even when books were rare and precious objects.

Today, our libraries continue that tradition. The Junior School library is a welcoming space where a love of stories begins – a place for imagination, shared reading and early independence. In RGS Senior School, the Library and Archive sit at the academic heart of the school: calm, light filled and thoughtfully designed, with reading corners alongside collaborative workspaces. It is a space where students can pause, reflect and read for pleasure, as well as study and research.

The National Year of Reading aims to reconnect students with the joy of reading everyday. That message resonates strongly with our school community. When reading becomes social, visible and fun, it no longer feels like effort. It feels like belonging.

As a school celebrating over 500 years of learning, we are proud of our history, but we are equally focused on the future. By nurturing a genuine love of reading today, we are equipping our students not just for exams but for life.

www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk

Scan below to explore how RGS Newcastle is celebrating the National Year of Reading.







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www.newcastleprepschool.org.uk

Reflections of a School Principal

By Will Scott, Principal at Dame Allan's Schools

Change, Community, and Confidence for the future.

The end of term is almost upon us, with many older pupils contemplating their last ever days at their school (bar those all-important A Level exams!). This is especially poignant for me this year, as I am also having my last day at school as Principal of Dame Allan's, before heading south for a new headship opportunity closer to family.

When I took up the post of Principal at Dame Allan's in 2020, I could not have anticipated the events that would unfold. The impacts of a global pandemic, significant societal and economic disruption, war in Europe, and tax policy changes hitting independent schools have all shaped the context in which we have worked.

Yet it is not those external pressures that define my reflections. What stands out far more clearly is how the Dame Allan's community has responded to them. Schools are, at their core, people places, and everything we do is built on the quality of relationships between pupils, staff, parents and governors.

Across my time here, we have worked diligently to strengthen the Schools in ways that benefit our pupils' education. There has been clear progress in academic achievement alongside sustained development of pastoral care and the wider experience of pupils. Our co-curricular provision has continued to expand in both breadth and quality, reflecting our belief that learning must extend well beyond the classroom.

We see this in everyday participation as well as those moments of collective achievement, not least the 1st XV reaching the Schools' Rugby National Vase Final at Twickenham, and our Girls' U-14 Netball team competing in their national finals in Sheffield.



Will Scott

Change has impacted a lot of my time at Dame Allan's, from COVID-19, to the development of our state-of-the art Jubilee Building and refurbished Sixth Form, to the move to co-education for this coming September.

I have been very lucky to see the Schools develop in all sorts of ways over the last few years, including the introduction of the Combined Cadet Force - and the resulting visit from the Lord Lieutenant, at which our pupils made us very proud - the introduction of The Snug and The Cosy Snug at our Senior and Junior Schools, championing pastoral care and pupil mental health, our success in several Sunday Times' Parent Power Awards, the introduction of rowing at the Schools in the form of the Dame Allan's Boat Club, and last year, our best ever GCSE results in over 20 years.





It has been the greatest privilege of my professional life to serve as Principal of Dame Allan's. I am proud of what has been achieved collectively over this period, not only in terms of measurable outcomes but also in the strength of the culture that underpins them.

As I step away at the end of this academic year, I do so with confidence in the future of the Schools. The incoming Principal, Mr Neil Seaton, brings a wealth of experience to the Schools, and I have no doubt that the Schools will continue to develop and flourish in the years ahead under his leadership.

For my part, I leave with a strong sense of gratitude and fond memories of my time here. It has been a privilege to play a part in the life of the Schools and in the education of the many young people who pass through them. I look forward to watching from afar as the School continues to flourish.

Find out more about Dame Allan's Schools by visiting their website www.dameallans.co.uk or contact the Head of Admissions on 0191 275 0608


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Singin' In The Rain returns

Jonathan Church Theatre Productions are delighted to announce that the Chichester Festival Theatre, Stage Entertainment and Sheffield Theatres smash-hit production of SINGIN' IN THE RAIN will embark on a UK and Ireland tour, visiting Sunderland Empire from Tuesday 2 – Saturday 6 March 2027.

The tour opens at the Churchill Theatre, Bromley from 28 January – 6 February 2027, including a summer season at Sadler's Wells from 2 June – 3 July 2027.

The tour follows the production's Christmas season at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield (26 November 2026 – 16 January 2027).

Casting for the UK and Ireland tour to be announced soon.

Director Jonathan Church says, "I'm absolutely delighted that our production of Singin' In The Rain is coming back to the UK and Ireland to tour and visit Sadlers Wells again.

Following its Chichester and West End premieres this production has now been seen by millions of people around the world - as far afield as China, Russia, Japan, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. It's even more thrilling to start this tour at the mighty Sheffield Crucible where my directing career began.

I look forward to UK audiences revelling in the dazzling choreography of this classic musical treat and marvelling at the 14,000 litres of water that the company splashes its way through every night!"

Beautiful, charismatic, and very much in love (if you believe what you read in the press), Hollywood's golden couple, Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont have the world at their feet. But when "talkies" start to replace silent movies, and an aspiring actress is drafted in to save the day, life as they know it is turned upside down.

Singin' in the Rain features the glorious MGM score including Good Morning, Make 'em Laugh and the legendary Singin' in the Rain.



The Rise and Fall of Little Voice

Newcastle Theatre Royal is delighted to announce that as part of a landmark partnership with the National Theatre, a brand-new production of The Rise and Fall of Little Voice, will tour directly from the theatre, with its original cast, in 2027 from 3 until 6 February 2027. Newcastle Theatre Royal is part of National Theatre Nationwide, a new network of leading theatres in all nine regions of England dedicated to ensuring parity of access to art and culture, enriching people's lives - wherever they live.

The Rise and Fall of Little Voice will be the first National Theatre production to tour as part of NT Nationwide, supported by funding from Arts Council England.

This new production will feature Francesca Mills (Silent Witness, BBC), who will play the title role of Little Voice, with Olivier Award-winning actress, Jill Halfpenny (The Long Shadow, ITV) and BAFTA Award-winning actor, Paul Chuckle (The Madam Blanc Mysteries, Channel 5), playing the roles of Mari Hoff and Mr Boo, respectively. Further casting will be announced soon.

Alone in the sanctuary of her small bedroom, Little Voice fills the air with pitch-perfect renditions of her deceased dad's prized record collection of the great divas, from Judy Garland to Billie Holiday.

But when her mother Mari's latest fling, local wheeler dealer Ray, hears her sing he's certain he's struck gold. Will Little Voice be pushed into a spotlight she never asked for?

Tickets for The Rise and Fall of Little Voice can be booked via Newcastle Theatre Royal's Box Office and online at theatreroyal.co.uk.

Tyne Theatre Productions announces 2027

Amateur Dramatic production of Annie Tyne Theatre Productions is delighted to announce its upcoming in-house amateur dramatic production for early 2027: the beloved musical Annie.

This exciting production will see a unique collaboration with Tyne Youth Company, bringing together performers of all ages in a vibrant and heartwarming show.

Known for its uplifting story, iconic songs, and endearing characters, Annie will provide a fantastic platform for both seasoned performers and emerging young talent to shine.

Set to run at the historic Tyne Theatre & Opera House, Annie promises to be a highlight of the theatre's 2027 cultural and community calendars.

Head of Community Engagement & Participation, Rachel Snape said: "I'm incredibly excited that we'll be bringing Annie to the Tyne Theatre & Opera House in 2027.

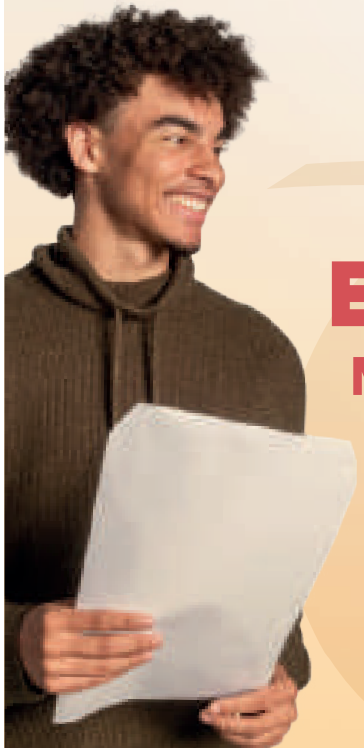
"Following their rebrands just last year, our in-house companies are already making huge strides towards becoming a cornerstone of the theatre's community engagement & participation programme.

"Annie will give us the unique opportunity to bring together two of our companies in what promises to be a spectacular production."

Audition information for cast members will be announced soon via the theatre's official social media channels. Further details, including performance dates and ticket information, will also be released in the coming weeks

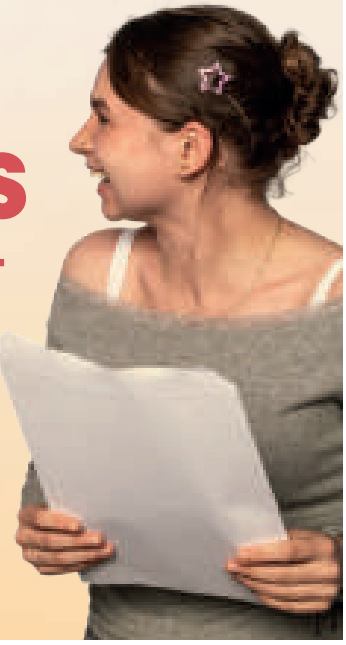


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Pretty Woman

Big night out. Big. HUGE. PRETTY WOMAN: THE MUSICAL returns for a major UK Tour. It's time to head to Beverly Hills and experience one of Hollywood's most iconic romantic comedies of all time as the production takes to the road again in 2027 following a record-breaking run in the West End and a sell-out first UK tour in 2023.

The tour will visit Sunderland Empire from Tuesday 29 June – Saturday 3 July 2027. Casting to be announced.

Vivian and Edward are unlikely soulmates who overcome all odds to find each other… and themselves. Experience the moments you love from the movie - and get to know these iconic characters in a whole new way - in this dazzlingly joyous love story for the ages.

Brought to life by a powerhouse creative team representing the best of music, Hollywood and Broadway, PRETTY WOMAN: THE MUSICAL features direction and choreography by two-time Tony Award® winner Jerry Mitchell (Kinky Boots, Legally Blonde, Hairspray), an original 'blazing rock score' (Daily Mail) score by Grammy® winner Bryan Adams and Jim Vallance ('Summer of '69', 'Heaven') and a book by the movie's legendary director Garry Marshall and screenwriter J.F. Lawton.

Featured in the musical is Roy Orbison and Bill Dee's international smash hit song 'Oh, Pretty Woman' which inspired one of the most beloved romantic comedy films of all time. PRETTY WOMAN the film (produced by Arnon Milchan - New Regency Productions) was an international smash hit when it was released in 1990.

PRETTY WOMAN: THE MUSICAL has scenic design by David Rockwell, costumes by Tom Rogers from the original Broadway designs by Gregg Barnes, lighting design by Kenneth Posner and Philip S. Rosenberg, sound design by John Shivers, hair design by Josh Marquette, and music supervision, arrangements and orchestrations by Will Van Dyke. 101 Productions, Ltd/Kathy Kim are the Global General Management Consultant. Direction recreated by Dominic Shaw.

PRETTY WOMAN: THE MUSICAL had its world premiere at Chicago's Oriental Theatre in March 2018 before transferring to Broadway where it ran at the Nederlander Theatre. The German production opened in Hamburg at the Stage Theater an der Elbe in September 2019 to rave reviews, and a US Tour of the show opened in October 2021. The production opened in the West End at the Piccadilly Theatre on 13 February 2020, before relocating to the Savoy Theatre from 8 July 2021, where it played its final performance on 18 June 2023, ahead of embarking on its first sell-out UK and Ireland tour in October 2023.

PRETTY WOMAN: THE MUSICAL is produced by ATG Productions, Paula Wagner, Nice Productions, LPO & Gavin Kalin Productions.

Trainspotting to visit Sunderland Empire

Thirty years on from the film that changed everything, and following its world premiere in London's West End, Trainspotting The Musical will embark on a major UK tour visiting Sunderland Empire from Monday 22 – Saturday 27 February 2027. Written by Irvine Welsh (adapted from his best-selling debut novel) and directed and developed by Caroline Jay Ranger.

In 1996 the "breakthrough British film" (The Guardian) Trainspotting was released and became the biggest grossing UK film of the year taking over $76 million worldwide and won a slew of awards including a BAFTA for Best Screenplay. In 1999 it was ranked 10th in the British Film Institute's 'Top 100 Greatest British Films of the 20th Century'.

Now, three decades later, the industrial drug crazed working-class heroes of British youth culture are back, live on stage: Renton, Sick Boy, Begbie, Spud, Tommy and Kelly. Renton (played in the film by Ewan McGregor) will be played on stage by 26-year-old Scottish actor Robbie Scott. He will be joined by fellow Scots actors Sheridan Townsley as Sick Boy, Kieran Andrew as Spud, Frankie O'Connor as Begbie, Finlay Paul as Tommy, Rebecca McKinnis as Cathy Renton, Gordon Cooper as Davie Renton, Ashley J. Russell as Colleen, Rosie Dignan as Alison, Yana Harris as Kelly, and Sophie Hutchinson as Lizzie. The ensemble comprises Ally Kennard,



Kieran Brown, Melanie Marshall, Lewis Kidd, Samuel Stewart, Finlay McKillop, Ciara Ennis, Victoria Nicol, Kyra Fyvie, and Chris O'Mara.

Irvine Welsh said: "I believe the musical has a bigger, loudly beating human heart than either the book or the film. People need to think about the world we're living in, and we offer that inspection, but they also need to sing their hearts out and laugh their heads off. It's what being human is all about. We've put together an incredible Scottish cast and I can't wait to see them bring the musical to life."





MR Photography

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SCAN ME



Mary Ann Rogers

An artists life

By Mary Ann Rogers

Finally some warmth is creeping into these far flung hills and valleys, the rug has come off the horse, the tomato plants are shooting up and the runner beans are finally in the ground in our vegetable patch.

Preparations are well underway for the summer exhibition, 'Untamed', which previews on the weekend, 27 & 28 June, 3-6 each day. Guests are plied with bubbly then relax with afternoon tea, hopefully having been tempted by one of the new paintings or prints! All are welcome. The freezer is filling up with home baked cakes and scones and the grand tidy up is proceeding steadily.

Over 20 new paintings and four new limited edition prints will be framed and hung throughout the gallery and house for the exhibition, which is full of pheasants, hares, ducks, guinea fowl and the landscape of this area.

'Mary Ann's life is deeply connected to the landscape around her. Whether walking, cycling, or swimming year-round in the chilly rivers, lakes and sea, she is immersed in the wildlife of Northumberland. Encounters with otters, kingfishers, geese, ducks and even eels (!!) plus the sheep and cattle in the fields are part of everyday life, and this close relationship with nature shines through her work with authenticity and passion.'

Interesting. The above was my first foray into the world of AI. Impressive? I couldn't have said it better myself.

As I stand painting, listening mostly to BBC Radio 4 most of the time, incessantly talking about AI and how it will affect all of our lives, I've wondered whether it would make any difference to a life like mine? Does true authenticity matter anymore? Is plagiarism and laziness the way forward I wonder. Throughout my life as an artist I have followed the same rule- subject first, then honest response. I think I'll stick to that.

Warmer weather means longer river swims. Accompanied by a heron catching a fish on the weir close to where I enter the river, fish leaping, watched by bewildered sheep grazing on the riverbank, I passed an enjoyable hour swimming up, then back down the river recently. The water feels more welcoming with the higher temperature, and staying in to explore further no longer has the element of jeopardy of swimming when the temperatures are lower.









‘Untamed’ exhibition. Preview:
Sat 27th & Sun 28th June, 3-6. All welcome.

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Nothing meaningful grows in isolation.

It's a simple idea, but one that asks something of us: to notice, engage with, and actively tend the systems we are part of.

The first step is to recognise your ecosystem. In business, this means seeing beyond your own offer to the wider network, the people, partners, landscape, and shared values that shape what you do. Like the bluebells beneath the hazel at Brinkburn, what thrives is always connected to what surrounds it.

Second, explore it. This requires curiosity and a willingness to test, new collaborations, different ways of working, unexpected connections. Not everything will take root, but exploration reveals where energy naturally flows.

Then, cultivate. Strengthen what shows promise. Invest in relationships, nurture trust, and create the conditions where others can flourish alongside you. The hazel doesn't force the bluebells to grow, but it creates the light and space they need.

Next, respond. Ecosystems are dynamic, not fixed. Pay attention. Adjust to seasons, feedback, and change. What worked once may need to evolve. And finally, harvest. Not just in the sense of outcome or success, but in recognising what has grown, shared value, resilience, and the richness of connection.

Working in this way also builds resilience. A diverse, well-tended ecosystem can absorb shocks; when one element falters, others sustain the whole. You are not relying on a single path, but your business is supported by many.

> **Your eco system becomes part of your identity.**

One Walk. One Thought.

Each issue, Brinkburn Co-Founder Mark Fenwick introduces us to One Walk around the 52-acre Brinkburn Estate in Northumberland. Alongside, because the greatest outdoor spaces cultivate the greatest thinking – there's a focus on One Thought, too.

One Thought: A diverse, well-tended ecosystem can absorb shocks; when one element falters, others sustain the whole.

It also defines your positioning. You are known not only for what you offer, but for who and what you are connected to. Your ecosystem becomes part of your identity.

At Brinkburn, this is not a theory, but a practice, a way of growing that is both grounded and enduring.

One Walk: Bluebell Wood

Bluebells are one of the most recognisable signs of ancient woodland in the UK, but they rarely stand alone. They are part of a wider community of plants that signal long continuity and undisturbed ground.

Among them are wood anemone, spreading slowly over decades, and wild garlic, which fills the air with its scent each spring. Dog's mercury is another constant, often carpeting the woodland floor, while lesser celandine appears early in the season. In some places, rarer species like herb Paris or native yellow archangel can also be found.

Above them, trees and shrubs such as hazel, field maple, and spindle help shape the conditions — filtering light, holding structure, and supporting life below.

What connects these species is time. Many spread slowly and depend on stability, so their presence tells a deeper story. Together, they are not just plants, but indicators of a woodland that has endured, largely unchanged, for generations.

Mark Fenwick at Brinkburn, Northumberland

Photo: Jodie Beardmore

Hilton Garden Inn Sunderland celebrates 10th Anniversary

One of Sunderland's leading hotels recently rolled out the red carpet as business leaders and civic dignitaries gathered to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

Among those attending the milestone event were The Right Worshipful, the Mayor of the City of Sunderland, Councillor Ehthesham Haque, and the Mayoress, Councillor Lynda Scanlan, who joined guests for a special birthday drinks reception.

Attendees were also given a first look at the hotel's newly refurbished lobby, bar and public seating areas, now enhanced with vibrant furnishings and striking artwork.

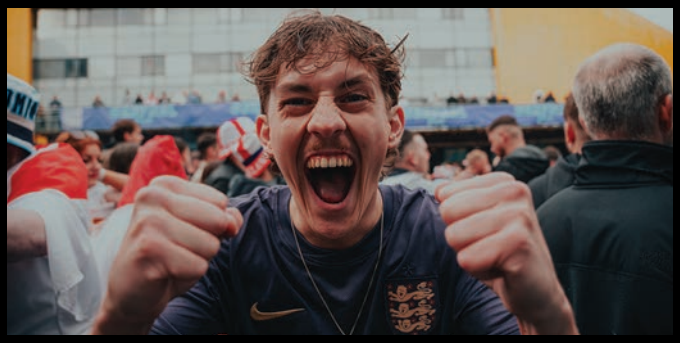
The hotel's popular Karbon Grill has also undergone a full transformation, with new seating and carpets creating a more contemporary and welcoming atmosphere.



Its range of conference and event spaces has remained consistently popular with corporate guests from both the local area and further afield and the hotel has hosted countless celebrations and special occasions.

Leisure visitors, meanwhile, are drawn to its convenient access to the city centre and nearby beaches.

World Cup to kick off a summer of sport at Times Square



Sports fans can watch the summer's biggest events at Newcastle's largest, open air, city centre venue – kicking off with the World Cup.

Throughout June and July, Times Square will become a giant fanzone, screening the biggest fixtures of the year, from Wimbledon and F1 to cricket and international football.

And the action begins with England vs Croatia on Wednesday 17 June, courtesy of EVNT Live; the live event arm of EVNT Inspirations.

The game will kick off at 9pm and will be followed by England vs Ghana at 9pm on Tuesday 23 June and England vs Panama on Saturday 27 June at 10pm – and tickets are now on sale with discounts for early bird bookers.

Along with the chance to watch the match live on a giant LED screen, there will be fully stocked bars, some of the region's top street food traders and DJs playing before and after the games.

Times Square has already delivered some of the biggest sporting moments Newcastle has seen, including England's run to the UEFA EURO 2024 final, the UEFA Women's EURO 2022 Final and Newcastle United FC lifting the Carabao Cup after beating Liverpool at Wembley in 2025.

And Mike Hesketh, of EVNT Live, said: "There's nothing to beat the atmosphere; thousands of fans, sold out crowds, last minute winners and scenes you just don't get if you're sitting watching at home.

"If you've been, you know. And, if you haven't, it's what a sporting summer is all about."

Rising hospitality duo Jack Brown and Alice Lawson take on iconic Northumberland Arms after success at Hadrian's Hotel

Hospitality rising stars Jack Brown and fiancée Alice Lawson are celebrating another exciting new chapter after taking over The Northumberland Arms — hot on the heels of their successful transformation of Hadrian's Hotel just a couple of months ago.

The ambitious duo have already made waves at Hadrian's Hotel, where their fresh approach to hospitality, from crowd-pleasing gastro pub favourites to their standout Sunday lunches, the place has quickly become a hit with customers. The venue, formerly home to Michelin-starred Restaurant Hjem, has been reimagined into the stylish new Willow restaurant alongside a boutique hotel and relaxed gastro pub offering.

The Hadrian's project marked the first solo venture for Jack, who is already well known on Newcastle's food scene as co-owner of Nest and Flight. Impressively, both restaurants secured places in the Michelin Guide within months of opening — a testament to the team's creativity and growing reputation.

Now, after acquiring The Northumberland Arms from Stuart Young and Sue Young, the pair are preparing to bring their signature warmth, quality and modern flair to one of the county's best-loved former coaching inns.



Jack said: "We are delighted to have been given the opportunity to take on The Northumberland Arms. Stuart and Sue have developed a great brand and reputation over the last six years. We intend to build on the brilliant product and add our personality over the coming months'

Jack and Alice are committed to providing exceptional hospitality and quality food and drink will be key to their approach.

www.thenorthumberlandarms-felton.co.uk

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Jeff Hodgson

Hospitality at a Crossroads

By Jeff Hodgson, General Manager, Lumley Castle Hotel

Resilience, reform and the future of our industry.

As General Manager of Lumley Castle Hotel, I have the privilege of leading an incredible team within one of the UK's most historic hospitality venues.

Standing proudly for 636 years, our castle has weathered wars, recessions, changing markets and evolving guest expectations. Yet today, the hospitality industry faces some of the most challenging conditions many of us have experienced in decades.

Across the sector, operators are balancing rising operational costs, labour shortages, increasing legislation and changing consumer expectations — all while continuing to deliver exceptional guest experiences. Hospitality has always been resilient, but we are now at a critical moment where the industry needs meaningful support from government to ensure its long-term sustainability and success.

One of the biggest concerns for our sector remains the impact of the so-called "holiday tax" on tourism and visitor spending. The UK should be encouraging both domestic and international travel, not making it more expensive. Hospitality contributes enormously to local economies, employment and regional tourism, and removing barriers to growth must become a priority if we are to remain competitive.

At the same time, sustainability is becoming increasingly important — not just for businesses, but for our guests and future generations. Historic properties like Lumley Castle face unique challenges when it comes to energy efficiency and environmental improvements. Maintaining a 636-year-old castle is no small undertaking, and the cost of operating heritage buildings continues to rise significantly. From utilities and maintenance to supply chain pressures and wage increases, controlling costs becomes more challenging every year.

However, despite these pressures, Team Lumley continues to embrace change with positivity and determination. Flexibility has become one of the hospitality industry's greatest strengths. Our teams adapt daily to meet guest expectations, business demands and operational changes. We are proud of how agile and committed our people are, but flexibility also comes with challenges — particularly as new employment rights and reforms are introduced across the sector.

While we fully support fair employment practices and creating positive workplaces, it is vital that reforms also protect the flexibility hospitality businesses rely upon to operate effectively. Hospitality is unlike many other industries; it requires responsiveness, adaptability and the ability to meet fluctuating demand. Navigating these reforms carefully will be essential to protecting both businesses and jobs.

Perhaps most importantly, we must continue investing in the talent of the future. Hospitality offers incredible career opportunities, yet too often the industry is overlooked. We need greater support for apprenticeships, training and development programmes that encourage young people to see hospitality as a long-term and rewarding profession. The future of our industry depends on attracting passionate, skilled individuals who can help drive innovation, service excellence and growth.

At Lumley Castle, we remain incredibly proud of our team and what we achieve together every day. The dedication, resilience and passion shown by our staff is what keeps this historic castle thriving. Hospitality people are problem-solvers, relationship-builders and experience-creators. It is an industry built on hard work, adaptability and heart.

We will continue to embrace change and move forward positively, as we always have done. But there is no doubt that the industry needs stronger support from government to help businesses navigate rising costs, economic uncertainty and regulatory change. Hospitality is a major employer, a driver of tourism and an essential part of communities across the country. With the right support, investment and collaboration, the sector can continue to thrive for generations to come.

www.lumleycastle.com

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A long weekend in France's Dordogne Valley

By Stuart Forster

Satisfyingly, a carefully planned long weekend away can feel like a much longer break. That was my conclusion after three nights in southwest France, on an enjoyable trip with a gastronomic and cultural focus.

The first night was at the Chapelle Saint Martin, a charming hotel this year celebrating 40 years since its owner, Gilles Dudognon, was first awarded a Michelin star. He was aged 24 at the time, becoming the youngest-ever chef in France to gain that culinary distinction. These days, he works in the kitchen with his son.

His property is less than 10 minutes' drive from Limoges Airport. It's on a country estate formerly owned by a porcelain manufacturer – an industry that continues to thrive in Limoges. The Adrien Dubouché National Museum, in the heart of the city, explores the history of ceramics. Yet after staying the night at the Chapelle Saint Martin, it was La Maison du Fromage that drew me into Limoges, for a candlelit cheese tasting in one of the centuries-old cellars hewn beneath the city's streets.

Gilles explained that he enjoys showcasing seasonal produce from the region and that his menus frequently feature Limousin beef. Leather has long been a byproduct of the meat industry. That and other details are conveyed at the Cité du Cuir, a riverside attraction that opened in December in Saint-Julien. Translating into English as 'City of Leather', Cité du Cuir tells the story of leather production and hosts workshops offering interactions with craftspeople, helping to maintain and share artisanal skills.

The Dordogne Valley is known as the land of 1,001 castles because of its many manor houses, palaces and fortifications. At the Château de la Treyne, whose origins date back to the 14th century, I stayed in a spacious tower room with elevated views over the sweeping river. In a dining room adorned with a tapestry and gilded coats of arms, executive chef Stéphane Andrieux's exquisitely presented menus feature local produce, including foie gras, truffles and lamb.

The five-star property is an ideal base for a romantic weekend break or for delving into the region's heritage. It is a short drive from Rocamadour, a cliffside village that was one of medieval Christendom's most important pilgrimage sites. Rocamadour's Black Madonna statue became associated with miracles and people would climb more than 200 steps on their knees to reach her chapel and pray. The site continues to draw a steady stream of pilgims yet many more visitors are attracted by the sheer beauty of the village, which attained UNESCO World Heritage Site status in 1998.

Another of the region's A-list attractions is the Gouffre de Padirac, a 75-metre deep chasm that leads into a network of caves and underground rivers. Thanks to local lore associating the site with the Devil, nobody dared descend for centuries. In 1889, Édouard-Alfred Martel was winched down and the commercial value of opening the caves to tourists became apparent. Boat journeys along a subterranean river bring opportunities to view illuminated stalactites, including the 60-metre-high Grande Pendeloque. Some of the rock formations resemble abstract sculptures, including the stalagmite known as the Pile d'Assiettes (meaning 'pile of plates'), in a chamber large enough to house Paris's Notre-Dame cathedral.

Le Vieux Logis, a four-star hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant, is a two-minute stroll from the heart of the quaint village of Trémolat, whose church walls feature colourful, medieval murals. From there, it's a 40-minute drive to Bergerac. At Place Pélissière, a statue of the literary character Cyrano de Bergerac gazes towards his romantic interest Roxane. His passion went unrequited.

I returned home smitten by the charm of this laid-back part of France.





Travel information

Ryanair flies from Leeds-Bradford Airport to Limoges and from Edinburgh to Bergerac.

La Chapelle Saint Martin (chapellesaintmartin.com) is a boutique hotel near Limoges.

The Château de la Treyne (chateaudelatreyne.com) is a luxury castle-hotel at Lacave.

Le Vieux Logis (vieux-logis.com) is a charming four-star property in Trémolat.



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A proper Sunday spot!

Khai Khai's Curry Pie Club is quickly becoming one of Newcastle's favourite Sunday spots, bringing together two things people already love — a proper pie and a proper curry.

Created by the team behind Khai Khai's fire-led kitchen, the concept takes classic British comfort food and gives it a smoky, flavour-packed Indian twist. The result is something that feels familiar but completely new at the same time — rich curries baked into golden pastry and served as part of a full Sunday spread.

Since launching, Curry Pie Club has already built a strong following, with guests returning week after week to try different combinations and make it part of their Sunday routine. It's exactly the kind of idea Khai Khai has become known for over the years: taking comfort food people already know and reworking it in a way that feels exciting, indulgent and genuinely different.

Each pie is freshly baked in crisp, flaky pastry and filled with one of Khai Khai's signature curries. The menu includes the Old Delhi Butter Chicken pie, filled with smoked chicken tikka in a rich tomato and herb butter sauce, alongside the Lamb Roganjosh pie inspired by slow-cooked lamb and warming Kashmiri spices. There's also the Kheema Matar pie with spiced minced lamb, potatoes, garlic and chilli, plus the Vegetable Jalfrezi option with seasonal vegetables, paneer and mushrooms in a spiced tomato sauce.

But the experience goes beyond just the pie itself. Every plate comes with a choice of sides, vegetables and sauce, turning it into the kind of Sunday meal that's made for settling in and sharing around the table. From gunpowder chips and Khai Khai mash to masala crushed peas and rich Roganjosh gravy, every part of the menu carries the same balance of comfort and bold flavour that defines the restaurant's cooking.

Like the rest of the Khai Khai menu, Curry Pie Club is rooted in traditional Indian flavours while still feeling playful and modern. Smoke, spice and slow cooking are still at the centre of everything, tying the pies naturally into the restaurant's wider identity and fire-led kitchen.

What makes the concept work so well is how naturally it fits into Newcastle's food scene. Sunday lunch has always been a big part of British culture, but Curry Pie Club offers something the city hasn't really seen before. It captures Khai Khai's style perfectly: confident, creative and designed around big flavours and good company.

As more people continue to discover it, Curry Pie Club is quickly becoming another Khai Khai signature. Much like the restaurant's famous tandoori broccoli, it's the kind of dish people come back for, recommend to friends and end up talking about long after the meal is over.

Khai Khai Curry Pie Club is available every Sunday from 12pm to 4:30pm. Limited availability.

www.khaikhai.co.uk

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Cruise: The tapas of travel

By Graham Townsley, Travel Counsellors

Our appetite to explore new cultures and seek out new adventures has never been stronger. Many travellers are looking for smarter ways to see more of the world in one trip. That is exactly where cruising comes into its own.

From sun-drenched Mediterranean sailings to once-in-a-lifetime expeditions in Antarctica, modern cruise holidays offer an incredible variety of experiences in one seamless journey. Yet cruising can still divide opinion. Some people love it, while others are convinced it is "not for them", often because of outdated stereotypes.

In reality, the cruise world is hugely diverse. There are family-friendly mega ships packed with entertainment, elegant boutique vessels focused on fine dining and service, relaxed river cruises through Europe's great cities and expedition ships designed for adventure in remote destinations. The key is finding the right cruise style for you.

Cruises also make travel remarkably easy. You unpack once, yet wake up somewhere new on many mornings. Flights, transfers and constant hotel changes are replaced by one comfortable floating base, making cruising one of the most relaxing and efficient ways to explore multiple destinations in a single holiday.

Who is cruising really for?

Cruising works brilliantly for multi-generational travel, with grandparents, parents and children all able to enjoy the same holiday in different ways. Family-focused ships are packed with activities including water slides, surf simulators, VR gaming, kids' clubs and teen lounges, while evenings often feature full-scale theatre productions, live music and comedy shows.

For couples, there are sophisticated small ships with a more grown-up atmosphere, luxury cruise lines with exceptional dining and personalised service, and adults-only options with stylish bars, wellness spaces and lively nightlife.









Cruises also suit solo travellers surprisingly well. Many ships now offer solo cabins, hosted meet-ups and sociable spaces where it is easy to meet people, while still allowing complete independence if you prefer quiet time.

There are cruises for food lovers, culture seekers, wellness enthusiasts and adventure travellers alike. Some ships focus heavily on spas, fitness and wellness programmes, while others offer guest speakers, cookery classes, wine tastings and immersive shore excursions led by local experts.

Sea days, port days and the "tapas of travel"

A cruise is really a combination of sea days and port days, and both offer very different experiences.

On sea days, the ship itself becomes the destination. For some, that means relaxing by the pool with a cocktail in hand and the ocean stretching endlessly around them. Others might head to the spa for a massage, join a yoga class, enjoy a long lunch or simply curl up with a book on deck.

Port days are where cruising becomes what I like to call the "tapas of travel". Each stop offers a taste of somewhere new without committing your entire holiday to one destination.

Imagine sailing through Asia with stops in Singapore, Vietnam and Hong Kong, or island-hopping through the Caribbean. You may discover somewhere you completely fall in love with and decide to return for a longer trip in the future. At the end of the day, you simply return to your ship, freshen up and enjoy dinner as you sail overnight to your next destination.

Different styles of cruising

One of the best examples of cruising's variety is Alaska. Widely considered one of the world's great cruise destinations, it combines glaciers, snow-capped mountains and wildlife with charming frontier towns such as Juneau and Ketchikan.

At the more intimate end of the market, boutique small-ship cruise lines focus on destination-rich itineraries and longer stays in port. These cruises are often more inclusive, with drinks, gratuities and speciality dining included in the fare. Smaller ships can also access ports that larger vessels cannot reach, creating a more relaxed and immersive style of travel.

River cruising offers yet another experience altogether. Smaller ships glide directly into the heart of great cities, making them ideal for travellers interested in culture, history and scenery.

Expedition cruising: small ships, big adventures

The fastest-growing area of cruising is expedition travel. These voyages use smaller, purpose-built ships to reach some of the world's most remote destinations, including Antarctica, the Arctic, the Galapagos Islands and remote stretches of Norway.

Expedition cruises focus far more on exploration than onboard glitz. Guests travel with naturalists, photographers and expert guides who lead Zodiac excursions, hikes and wildlife encounters while sharing in-depth knowledge about each region.

For travellers who value adventure, discovery and authenticity, expedition cruising can be genuinely life-changing.

Ready to discover your own tapas of travel?

A cruise holiday can be whatever you want it to be: a family adventure, a floating spa retreat, a cultural city-hopping journey or an expedition into some of the world's last great wilderness areas.

Whether you are completely new to cruising or already a seasoned traveller looking for something different, it is worth exploring how a cruise could fit into your next holiday plans.

www.travelcounsellors.co.uk/graham.townsley





UNOde50

UNOde50, the iconic Spanish jewellery brand, hosted an exclusive pop-up GWP event at Fenwick, celebrating its bold spirit of individuality, creativity and self-expression.

Renowned for its handcrafted jewellery and distinctive artistic designs, UNOde50 champions freedom through collections that are effortlessly unique, contemporary and unapologetically striking.

Each piece is designed to stand out, blending artisanal craftsmanship with a modern edge. Guests explored signature statement jewellery alongside exclusive gifts with purchase, making the event a memorable in-store experience.

UNOde50 collections are available now at all Fenwick stores nationwide.
















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Meet the GM

Chris Main

Chris Main

Recently appointed General Manager at the Grand Hotel, Gosforth Park

What inspired you to pursue a career in the hospitality industry?

I originally had no interest in working in the sector and actually started my career on the family fishing boat catching salmon in the Summer and crab and lobster in the Winter.

I finally joined Linden Hall as a night porter where I was inspired by the Head Concierge, Dean Maddison, to become a golden keys concierge. I found I loved the industry and over the next few years worked across all departments before deciding I wanted to be a General Manager. My first GM position came at Horton Grange before I moved to Doxford Hall and then back to Linden Hall. It has been a very enjoyable journey.

Tell us about your current role?

The Grand Hotel, Gosforth Park is an iconic property celebrating its 60th birthday. I met Simon Powell, the Director for Elite Venue Selection and was hugely impressed with his passion and plans for the venue.

We have 232 bedrooms, huge conference and banqueting facilities as well as a fantastic Health Club with 600 members.

I couldn't have been made to feel more welcome by our fantastic long serving team.

What are the biggest challenges you face in running a Hotel?

Ultimately keeping customers happy whilst exceeding expectations and offering the best level of service.

What has been your most memorable career experience to date?

Looking after Take That for 11 nights whilst at Seaham Hall was pretty special.

How do you handle difficult guests?

Listen, evaluate the situation and treat customers with respect. It is vitally important to be on the front foot and also empower staff to deal with things.

What trends are shaping the future of hospitality?

AI reservation calls and self service check ins are becoming ever more prevalent but my preference remains for the personal touch and traditional service.

What is the best piece of business advice you have been given?

Never judge a book by its cover. Also be the best person you can be.

What does the future hold?

Having worked in both country house hotels and wedding venues I am aiming for longevity within my role here and to enjoy working in a hotel which offers amazing hospitality.

Who are your Heroes and Mentors?

I have always admired Tyson Fury having watched his return from clinical depression to becoming a World Heavyweight Champion again.

On the work front Peter Llellwyn was someone I could always ask for advice whilst he was General Manager at Close House and then a Regional Manager with MacDonald Hotels.

How do you like to unwind?

I like to escape with my wife and two children in our touring caravan.

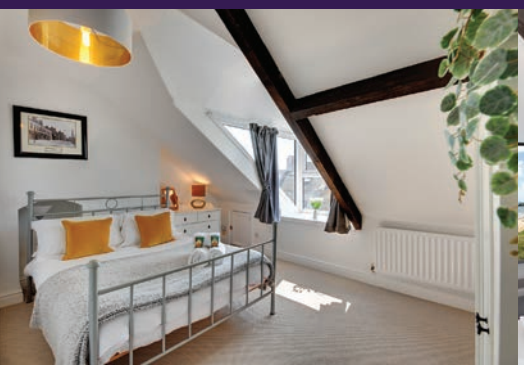
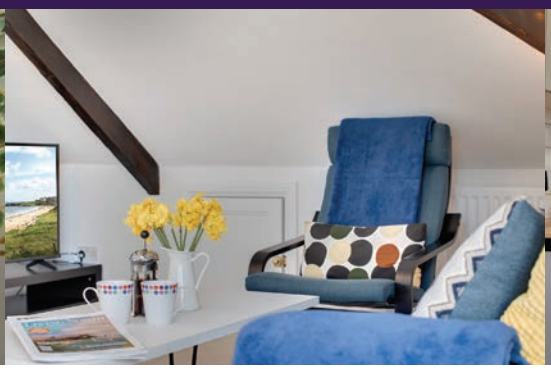
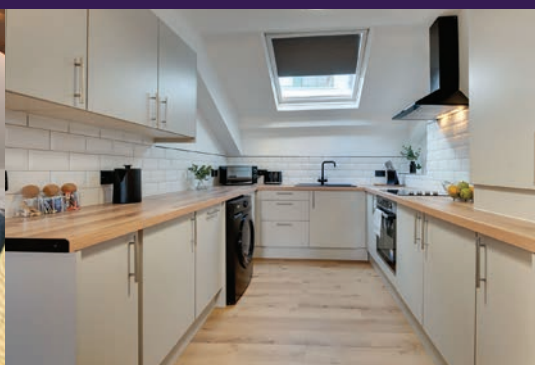
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David Beattie

Full of Beans

When it comes to coffee, David Beattie knows his stuff.

As founder of Rounton Coffee, he's slept in jungles in search of the perfect beans. But a good cuppa is just one reason David launched the award-winning business.

"I was a chemical engineer in Teesside. It was the career I'd trained for, but then I travelled," said David.

"In Sumatra, I watched people roast coffee, and my world changed."

But it wasn't the smell and taste of those freshly roasted beans that made David change careers.

It was the people roasting them.

"I wanted a business that could help those working on these plantations improve their lives," he added.

Fast forward a decade, and Rounton Coffee's impact has been felt in far more places than just Indonesia.

To date, the company has pledged tens of thousands of pounds - and a lot of coffee - to support organisations from the Ouseburn to Uganda.

Among those supported is Raw Material, an organisation planting 11 million trees in East Timor's coffee forests.

Given that's over 8,000 miles from Rounton's rustic HQ in the shadow of the A19, it would be easy not to get involved.

But as a proud 1% for the Planet business, Dave believes it is the company's "duty" to do so.

"We are not a business that views success purely in pounds and pence," he said.

"Commercial growth and doing the right thing should go hand in hand, especially in our industry."

And it is an industry - and business - on the up.

Having started life on local farmers' markets with his wife, Tracy, Rounton Coffee is a genuine independent success story.

From those humble origins, Dave and his team have grown the business to the point they are roasting up a tonne of beans per day – packing as many as 2,000 bags a week.

A recently launched subscription service has quickly become hit, doubling in subscribers in one year partially due to Rounton's cult nationwide following in a crowded market.

Recent data shows there are almost 900 UK roasters – a number that's growing year-on-year.

But despite Rounton's impressive range securing eight Great Taste Awards last year - including two-stars for their Rwamatamu beans - the company's focus is still fixed on people.

Locally, Rounton Coffee has supported several good causes, including the North York Moors Trust, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and the Ouseburn Trust, alongside grassroots groups and charities across North Yorkshire and Teesside.

One initiative particularly close to David's heart is the Stepping Stones to Nature programme, which helps underprivileged children from Teesside's most deprived areas experience the countryside - often for the first time.

During the pandemic, Rounton launched Nightingale Coffee, supplying free coffee and equipment to NHS hospitals.

Meanwhile, the business has donated thousands of pounds to Myaware, a charity supporting people affected by myasthenia gravis, following the diagnosis of David's son with a rare genetic form of the condition.

"Rounton Coffee has always existed, in part, to help others," added Dave.

"We don't aspire to be some faceless multi-national company.

"Our ethos is to do the right thing - whilst making and drinking some great coffee along the way!"

And that ethos extends to their suppliers, who are promoted heavily on Rounton's packaging and website.

For Dave, they are the lifeblood of the company and at least twice a year he embarks on often lengthy journeys to visit them across the 'coffee belt'.

Brazil. Rwanda. Peru. Zambia.

Not places easily accessible via Ryanair.

The journeys can be gruelling - but the rewards huge.

"We've developed relationships with our suppliers that go beyond business," he added proudly.

"They are part of our business, and our story."

rountoncoffee.co.uk



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At Your Leisure

In the first of this new series of features with North East leisure entrepreneurs, Simon Rushworth spoke to...

Scott Wilson-Laing

Founder of WL Distillery

Where did the idea for WL Distillery come from?

Having had a few different roles from Archaeology to working in a lighthouse to operational roles in a few industries, I was at a point in my life like many people where I was in a role I had been in for a few years and looking for a new challenge. Once I made the decision, I started by making a list of things that I enjoyed, thought I was good at liked and was interested in. While making that list a few key elements surfaced and during this process I was fortunate enough to find a course that taught theoretical distillation.

Why gin?

One of the main positives for me was it allowed me to lean into my creative side and explore a range of flavours and botanicals while creating the gin. The first flavour I experimented with was based on my grandad's garden. This was very personal to me and evokes memories from my childhood. Almost like bottling up the flavours I and many other people grew up with. Plus it's a shared experience that really resonates with me having spent my childhood raiding the fruit trees and bushes as did my daughter when she was younger.

Tell us about the next step.

Once I had completed the course, I purchased a very small still and began to experiment with different botanicals and flavours. From there friends and family began to ty it and complimented the gin. I thought they were just being polite and brushed it away but their insistence on how nice it was and that I 'really had something here' allowed this to develop into the planning stage and development that would eventually be WL Distillery.

How challenging were the early years?

To be honest it was quite challenging. Setting up a distillery is no small task and the initial set up in finding a location, getting the correct licences, installing equipment and developing the recipes and processes take a very long time before the first bottle even leaves the site. I spent the most part of 2019 setting all this up with a plan to launch our products in the Spring of 2020.

I had planned to focus more on the B2B side of sales to start with and to work with bars, restaurants and stores doing a lot of tasting and activation events to showcase the brand as much as we could.

Sadly that wasn't meant to be and all of these plans had to be shelved or cancelled with the onset of Covid and the nation going into lockdown a few weeks before our planned launch. This was particularly difficult as bringing a new brand and product to market especially in the food and drink sector people need to be able to experience it, to hold it, to taste it but this was impossible with the restrictions in place. So those first few months looked very different to what we had planned and mapped out.

What happened next?

During the period of setting up the business I was already networking and getting to meet and know businesses in the region including some charities. When Covid first started there was a clear lack of available PPE in particular hand sanitizer. Some of the charities I was aware of were already struggling to get their hands on this and that would have resulted in them not being able to support people. I researched a World Health Organisation recipe they used when deployed and had the vast majority of the raw materials and equipment to start to manufacture hand sanitizer using the materials we had planned to use to make our Gin. Once word got out of what I was doing calls and emails kept coming so I busied myself for the first 6 months of covid spending my days making batches, then bottling them then distributing them across the North to the NHS, Emergency Services, Charities and high risk individuals.



Is it a period you look back on with pride?

Very much so. I am glad that during that difficult time I was able to help so many people. Being one of the first individuals to start making hand sanitizer during covid I was delighted that after the pandemic examples of our hand sanitizer along with equipment and an interview was been archived in the National Science Museum in London for future generations to learn from. For this work I was nominated to represent the North East as one of the Queens Baton Bearers for the 2022 Commonwealth games. Once the supply chain caught up and hand sanitizer became more available we were able to return to our core business and launched our first gin later that year online. Followed by a second flavour the following year with both going on to win international awards.

Continued...



Scott Wilson-Laing



When you were finally able to refocus on the B2B market what helped you stand out in a notoriously competitive sector?

First and foremost its the gin itself. Although I may be biased they are delicious and unique flavours that really resonate with people. Following closely it's the story behind the business and the products. People are very interested in the business and about the gins especially the one based on my Grandads Garden. From there its down to relationship building which we have spent the last few years developing working relationships with partnerships with buyers, distributors and venues in the hospitality and culture sector. Its very exciting when these relationships develop and you get to see a product you have made sitting proudly on a shelf or behind a bar. I still get a buzz from that every time.

How supportive have the people of the North East been to the business you've built?

Setting up a business in this part of the world is fantastic. The people here are so interested and invested in our product, its story and its origins. They really want to work with us and really want to understand what we're doing and why we do it. When we launched a Christmas gift set we couldn't get it out of the door quickly enough. Within a 10-mile radius of the distillery the sales were off the scale and I saw first-hand how North East people like to support North East businesses. I think the personal element of the business and the story around my grandad resonates with the people from this region. I've been very fortunate to be able to take our products on international trade missions to India and Dubai to showcase the North East.

How important is it that you remain hands on, even as the business grows?

Its funny you should ask that as I'm just taking a short break from bottling and labelling an order for us to have this chat. The very nature of setting up the business and the effect of covid meant it was just me for a very long time. Most entrepreneurs end up wearing many hats during the start up period of their business. I'm still very much involved in all aspects of the process to maintain the quality of our products. As we have grown and are making a lot more products for ourselves and others its probably more important than ever to be in the process from the initial R&D all the way to the finished product leaving the front door. It's all about the liquid and the quality of the ingredients and that's what I love. That's why I started WL Distillery in the first place. I like to be creative and make products that people will love and want to share with others.

What's the plan for the next 12 months?

Theres lots of exciting projects over the next 12 months. We are currently working on new products to expand our own brand as well as new products for partners we work with in the hospitality and culture sectors. With our strong foundation of loyal fans here in the North East we aim to continue to take our products and showcase the North East across the rest of the UK and continue our exporting plans to take the taste of the North East internationally.

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In conversation with...

Andy Barnsdale

General Manager of The Milner York

Your career spans nearly three decades in hospitality across Yorkshire and beyond – what have been the defining moments so far?

I've worked in hospitality for more than 30 years, starting behind the bar at a hotel on the Isle of Wight. Since then, I've been fortunate to work across several well-known properties and brands, including Nidd Hall, Thoresby Hall, DoubleTree by Hilton Majestic Harrogate and Village Hotels.

A defining moment was joining The Principal York in 2023 and leading its transition into The Milner York. It's been an exciting opportunity to help shape the future of such an iconic Grade II listed hotel while building a strong culture across a team of 200 people. Seeing the hotel evolve commercially and culturally has been one of the proudest moments of my career.

What drew you to The Milner York?

The opportunity to lead such a landmark hotel at a defining moment in its journey was incredibly appealing. York is one of the UK's most historic and well-loved cities, and The Milner York has always held a special place within that landscape.

What really attracted me was the chance to help shape the hotel's future following its transition to independence – honouring the building's heritage while bringing fresh energy to the guest experience.

The Milner is a landmark property with over a century of history; how do you balance preserving its heritage while evolving it for today's guest?

The rebrand to The Milner York has been about far more than changing the name above the door – it's been a full transformation for both the hotel and the team. We wanted to respect the building's heritage while ensuring the experience still feels fresh and relevant for today's guests.

The name itself pays tribute to William Milner and the hotel's deep connection to York's railway history, giving the property a real sense of place. Alongside that, we've invested more than £2 million into upgrades across the hotel, from modernising guest spaces to improving comfort and energy efficiency.

Equally important has been the investment in our people. We've focused heavily on culture, bringing 200 team members together around shared values and a collective vision for the future.

What does the "next chapter" of The Milner York look like to you?

For me, the next chapter is about building on the momentum we've created over the last couple of years. We want The Milner to strengthen its position as one of York's leading destinations for leisure stays, corporate travel, weddings and events, while continuing to evolve the guest experience.

At the same time, it's important that we stay true to the character and heritage that make the hotel so special.

Can you tell us a bit more about your team structure?

We operate with a collaborative and deliberately flat structure where every role is valued.

We place a huge emphasis on communication, internal progression and creating opportunities for people to grow their careers. I often joke that I have "the biggest open-door policy because I don't actually have one" – I like to stay visible and connected to the day-to-day rhythm of the hotel.

What defines a strong hospitality team in 2026?

A strong hospitality team is one where people feel genuinely valued, listened to and empowered to take ownership in delivering memorable guest experiences.

When colleagues enjoy where they work, guests notice the difference immediately.

With guest expectations evolving rapidly, where do you see the biggest opportunities for hotels like The Milner York right now?

Guests increasingly want experiences that feel meaningful and memorable rather than purely transactional. One of the biggest opportunities for hotels like ours is creating a stronger sense of place through heritage and personalised service.

There's also a growing opportunity around "bleisure" travel, where guests combine business and leisure stays. With York's popularity as a leisure destination and our strong meetings and events offer, we're seeing more guests extend work trips to spend more time in the city.

Who have been the biggest influences on your career, and what lessons have stayed with you?

I've been lucky to work with a number of strong leaders throughout my career, but the biggest lesson I've taken from them is the importance of treating people properly. Hospitality can be a demanding industry, but creating the right culture is everything.

What advice would you give to someone looking to build a long-term career in hospitality today?

Be open to starting anywhere and learning every aspect of the business. Some of the best hospitality leaders are the people who understand operations from the ground up and never stop learning.

It's also important to stay adaptable, take opportunities when they come and focus on building strong relationships along the way. Hospitality is a people industry, and attitude and work ethic go a very long way.

After a busy week, how do you switch off and recharge?

Usually by spending time with family and friends, getting outdoors and enjoying Yorkshire itself.

York has such a fantastic hospitality scene, so I also enjoy supporting local venues and experiencing the industry from the guest perspective whenever I can.

www.themilneryork.com



> **Hospitality is a people industry, and attitude and work ethic go a very long way.**

Andy Barnsdale



Healthwatch Newcastle business as usual

Yvonne Probert CEO of Healthwatch Newcastle has commented on the King's Speech relating to a new NHS law which is being planned called the NHS Modernisation Bill. This will change how people's voices are heard for health and social care.

"This change hasn't happened yet, said Yvonne.

"For now, nothing is changing. Healthwatch Newcastle is still here to listen to your experiences, give free, confidential advice and speak up to improve services.

Your voice still matters and helps make care better for everyone.

We'll share further updates when we know more."



Cancer survivor turns life's darkest moments into publishing success

North East author and entrepreneur Karen Crear has transformed personal tragedy into a thriving new chapter, using humour, resilience and storytelling to rebuild her life after devastating loss, fraud and two cancer diagnoses.

In 2020, Karen found herself at what she describes as the lowest point of her life. After losing money, property and her career at the hands of what she calls "an audacious conman", she believed life could not possibly become any more difficult.

Then, during lockdown in September 2020, she was diagnosed with stage three kidney cancer. Just months later, in May 2021, she received another life-changing diagnosis — an extremely rare and aggressive parathyroid cancer, with fewer than one case per million people diagnosed each year.

Around the same time, Karen was offered the opportunity to write a book about her family's experience. The result was Playing with Fire, a gripping account of the highly manipulative fraudster who turned their lives upside down.

What began as a deeply personal project with modest expectations soon became an international success story. The experience gave Karen the confidence to begin writing funny women's fiction, inspired by her belief that humour can help people survive even the darkest moments.

She said: "I genuinely believe that finding humour in the darkest days is a superpower."

Today, Karen and her husband run Crear Publishing, an ethical publishing company dedicated to helping unheard voices across the North East tell their stories.

Reflecting on the extraordinary journey that brought her to this point, Karen believes adversity ultimately led her towards a more fulfilling life. She said: "Looking back, I truly believe we all end up where we're meant to be, just rarely to our own timetable. Bizarrely, without cancer, I may never have found the life I now love."

Ask Mrs Watson

Founder Kate Watson is highlighting the growing connection between digital literacy and mental wellbeing, calling for more compassionate and judgement-free support for those struggling with technology.

As daily life becomes increasingly digital, many people quietly battle anxiety and embarrassment over tasks others may take for granted, from setting up email accounts to accessing online services. Kate says the assumption that everyone should "just know" how to use technology can leave people feeling isolated, ashamed, and reluctant to ask for help.

"Digital exclusion is not just about lacking skills, it's about the emotional impact that comes with it," said Kate. "People are often terrified of making mistakes, being scammed, or looking foolish. When someone feels judged, they stop asking questions and their confidence drops even further."

Through her work with Ask Mrs Watson, Kate provides patient, supportive guidance designed to help people learn at their own pace without fear of embarrassment.

"The reward comes when you see that stress disappear and confidence begin to grow," she added. "Something as simple as sending an email or joining a video call can completely change how someone feels about themselves. Technology should empower people, not intimidate them."



Fuel your brain not just your day

By Cheryl Tanner, Menopause Fitness & Wellness Coach

Many midlife professionals are not struggling with workload, they're struggling with energy they can't seem to sustain through the day.

What often gets labelled as stress or "just being busy" is, in many cases, linked to blood sugar instability and hormonal changes during menopause. The result is a familiar pattern, rising focus in the morning, followed by a sharp afternoon crash that affects concentration, mood, and confidence.

One client described her experience before making changes:
"I felt like I was running on empty all the time. My energy was gone, my confidence was low, and I didn't recognise myself anymore. Years of poor sleep, anxiety, weight gain, and constantly putting everyone else first had left me completely exhausted."

She explained how this showed up in her working day: "By the afternoon I would hit a wall. I couldn't think clearly, I was irritable, and I just didn't feel like myself."

Through strength training, simple nutrition changes, and consistent support, her energy and confidence began to rebuild.

"Since starting with Cheryl, everything has changed. I've met a group of strong, like-minded women. We're investing in ourselves and future-proofing our bodies. I feel stronger, more focused, and like I've got myself back."

Her story reflects what many women experience when they begin to stabilise blood sugar, build strength, and support their bodies through midlife transitions. The changes are rarely just physical,they impact clarity, mood, and how women show up in both work and life.

My focus is on helping women build sustainable habits that support energy, strength, and long-term wellbeing without restriction or overwhelm.



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Gateshead tutor highlights hidden impact of anxiety in education

A Gateshead education specialist is encouraging parents to look beyond grades and recognise the growing link between learning difficulties and children's mental health.

Carol Milner, who runs Kip McGrath Gateshead East, says many children struggling in school are also quietly battling anxiety, low self-esteem and a fear of failure.

"For many children, difficulties at school are about far more than spelling tests or maths homework," said Carol. "Behind the classroom struggles are often children who feel overwhelmed, worried and convinced they're simply 'not clever enough'."

Carol says her team regularly works with bright, curious children whose confidence has been damaged by repeated setbacks in the classroom.

"We often meet children who are kind, capable and eager to learn, but they've reached a point where they associate learning with stress," she explained. "Some experience panic before lessons, while others shut down completely. What can sometimes look like poor behaviour or a lack of effort is often a stress response."

One parent recently approached the centre concerned that their daughter, who is dyslexic and highly anxious, would struggle to cope with additional tuition.

"They were understandably worried that extra support might add even more pressure," said Carol. "But once she experienced calm, patient teaching and realised it was safe to make mistakes, everything began to change."

According to Carol, she not only began making academic progress, but also developed greater confidence and resilience.

"Her parent told us the biggest difference was that she felt reassured



rather than judged," she said. "That feeling of safety allowed her to try again, take risks and slowly start believing in herself."

Carol believes the connection between learning and mental health is often underestimated.

"When children constantly feel behind, their nervous system can stay in a heightened state of stress," she explained. "That affects concentration, memory, sleep, mood and family life. It can quickly become a cycle of anxiety and avoidance."

However, she says the right support and environment can help break that cycle.

Healthwatch Newcastle appoints new Chair



Healthwatch Newcastle has announced a new Chair. Alex Hoole has been appointed as the new Chair. Alex brings a wealth of experience from a nearly 20-year career in social housing, having worked across local authorities and, more recently, in a national role with Anchor Housing. She has been a member of the Healthwatch Newcastle Committee since September 2024.

Speaking about her appointment, Alex said: "I'm delighted to take on this role with Healthwatch Newcastle and look forward to working with the Committee to continue driving our work forward. Health and social care are closely linked to housing, and through my experience I've seen first-hand how important it is to have strong, joined-up support for communities."

Alex added that her decision to join Healthwatch Newcastle was driven by a desire to give back to the city where she lives, alongside a commitment to meaningful public service:

"It was important to me to be part of something that genuinely makes a difference. Healthwatch Newcastle stood out as an organisation that gives a voice to local people and helps shape better services."

Looking ahead, Alex acknowledged the challenges facing Healthwatch organisations nationally, including uncertainty around future structures and funding:

"The biggest challenge is the unknown. We know change is coming, but not exactly what that will look like. Our focus is on making the most of the time we have—delivering meaningful projects, supporting our communities, and ensuring their voices continue to be heard."

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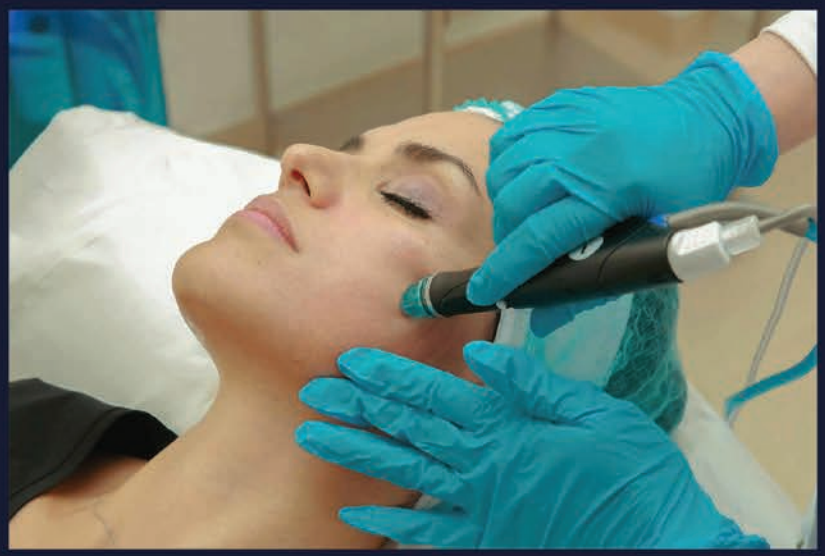
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On course to change

Embracing change while honouring tradition at Northumberland Golf Club.

It is instinctive to be cautious about change; we often find comfort in the familiar. However, as many business leaders can attest, stagnation can lead to regression.

This principle is at the forefront of James Thomas's vision as the General Manager of Northumberland Golf Club. He is dedicated to ensuring that the club not only continues to evolve but also respects its rich heritage, which dates back to its founding in 1898 at High Gosforth Park.

As the landscape of golf continues to transform, members and players now seek amenities and experiences that were unimaginable 130 years ago. Under Thomas's leadership, Northumberland Golf Club is committed to enhancing the member experience while preserving the historical significance that makes it a cherished institution in the golf community.

"It's a balancing act to ensure the course and clubhouse retain their unique atmosphere and character, but are fit for purpose in 2026 and beyond," said James. "We want to ensure Northumberland Golf Club remains instantly recognisable, but offers everything that members, players and visitors can quite rightly expect."



James Thomas

James has a successful history of improving the fortunes of golf clubs, both in terms of the golf course itself and the operational and financial aspects of running a business. Since he arrived in 2023, he's undertaken a full review of the club's operations.

"We mustn't forget this is a sporting facility so it's important to ensure that the course is always in top condition with redesigned bunkers, improved drainage and true greens."

Head out of the clubhouse and you will find a new practice putting green, driving range and chipping area. If you are trying to improve your game, you can make full use of the swing studio with one of 3 PGA Golf Professionals.

"Without stating the obvious, the reason why Northumberland Golf Club has been such a success is because people enjoy playing golf here. The course and our additional golfing facilities allow players to enjoy a challenging round in stunning surroundings. However, members and visitors also enjoy our hospitality and the ambience of our clubhouse."

A new Head Chef is now in place and the quality and variety of food is winning rave reviews.

The first thing everyone sees when arriving at the club is the new pro shop and reception. This has been completely refurbished and is part of the overall upgrade to facilities. The changes have elevated the club to the forefront of members' clubs in the North East.

"At lot of work has taken place behind the scenes, both within the clubhouse and on the course," adds James. "We have reorganised the staff structure, have more opportunities for businesses to get involved with the club, and are emphasising the importance of sustainability. The climate is changing and we have plans in place to be ready. We are moving to finer grasses on our greens, which are not heavily dependant on water and are much more disease resistant, we have changed the way we manage and maintain our golf course, and we are managing the use of water efficiently".

James Thomas is ensuring that Northumberland Golf Club has evolved to be fit for purpose in 2026 and beyond.

For more information about The Northumberland Golf Club and to learn about membership, hiring the clubhouse for business and social events, as well as booking a round of golf, tel: 0191 236 2498, email: admin@thengc.co.uk or visit www.thengc.co.uk

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Sporting Dinner celebrates Sportsmanship

With over 500 guests the South Northumberland Cricket Club Annual Dinner has long been a staple in the local business calendar.

Sponsored by Womble Bond Dickinson this years was one of the best yet, expertly compered by Charles Dagnall and featuring a superb after dinner speech by the world renowned rugby referee Nigel Owens.

Fundraising efforts on the evening were in support of CHUF, aiding their vital work in the community.



















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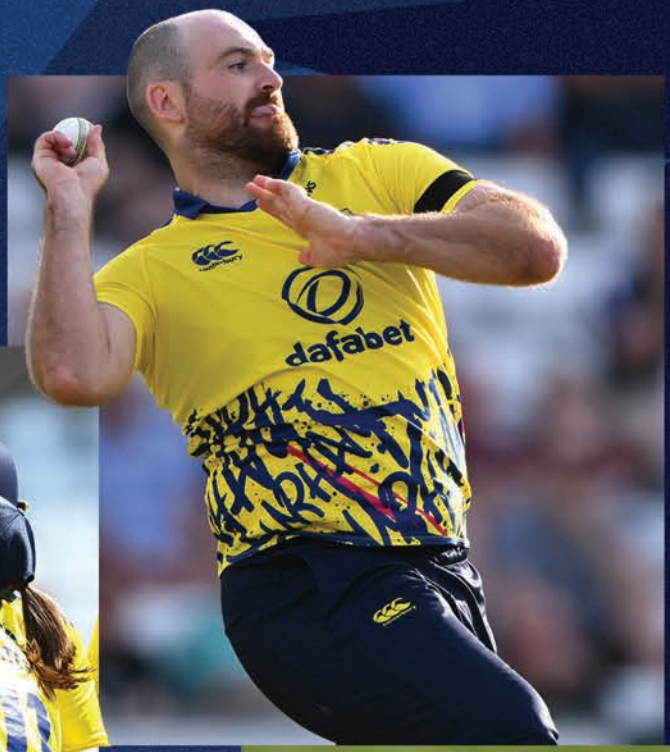





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James Palmer

Mindset shift key to long-term weight loss success

A growing number of people are discovering that losing weight is only part of the challenge — keeping it off can prove even harder once medication stops, according to hypnotherapist and behavioural change specialist James Palmer.

James, founder of New-Thinking.net, says he is increasingly working with clients who achieved dramatic weight loss using Mounjaro, only to find old eating patterns slowly beginning to return once they stopped taking the medication.

"Many people begin a weight-loss journey believing the problem is simply about food — eat less, move more, show more willpower," said James. "But for many, the real battle is happening much deeper in habits, emotions, identity, stress and the subconscious mind."

James explained that many of his clients initially experienced life-changing results with Mounjaro, regaining confidence as the weight came off rapidly.

"They felt hopeful again," he said. "Clothes fitted properly, confidence returned and people around them noticed the transformation. But after stopping the jab, many found the old behaviours quietly creeping back in."

According to James, emotional eating, stress snacking and comfort eating are often rooted in subconscious patterns rather than simple hunger.

"At first it can be very subtle — eating during stressful evenings, mindless snacking after a difficult day, or that familiar inner voice saying, 'You deserve this,'" he explained. "The medication may reduce appetite and cravings, but it does not always address the emotional reasons the weight accumulated in the first place."

James believes lasting transformation comes when physical change is supported by psychological change.

"Weight gain is often not just about hunger," he said. "Sometimes food becomes protection, reward, relief, distraction or comfort. Without understanding those deeper patterns, there is always a risk the mind will return to familiar behaviours, even after the body has changed."

Using a combination of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP), hypnosis and behavioural education, James works with clients to explore the emotional and subconscious drivers behind eating habits.

"Through hypnosis, clients learn to deeply relax and access subconscious patterns that may have been running automatically for years," he said. "Emotional triggers that once led to overeating begin losing their power, and situations that previously caused stress eating become more manageable."

He added that changing a person's internal identity around food can be one of the most powerful breakthroughs.

"Using NLP techniques, we work on changing the language people use with themselves," said James. "Instead of feeling deprived or constantly 'on a diet', they begin to see themselves as someone naturally in control around food. That shift in identity is incredibly important."

James also educates clients about the brain's reward systems, emotional conditioning and habit loops to help remove guilt and shame around eating behaviours.

"Understanding why the mind behaves the way it does can replace shame with clarity and control," he said.

He believes medications such as Mounjaro can still play an important role in helping people lose weight, but says they work best when combined with deeper behavioural support.

"For many people these medications are genuinely life-changing," James added. "But real success is not simply losing weight. It is becoming the version of yourself who no longer needs the old coping patterns that caused the weight gain in the first place."

www.new-thinking.net


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A fresh start

By Bethany Ainsley, OptiMe

At the start of the year, there's a sense of motivation. A fresh start. We set intentions to move more, switch off properly, create better routines.

Gym memberships go up, calendars feel more structured, and there's a belief that this will be the year we do things differently.

But by the time June arrives, that clarity often looks very different.

The gym visits have slowed. The boundaries we planned to set have blurred. And the habits we hoped to build have been replaced by the reality of day-to-day demands. Not because we've failed, but because life hasn't slowed down in the way we expected it to.

There's always something to get through first, a deadline, a busy period, or a project to finish. We tell ourselves we'll reset when things calm down, or after this week, or once this project is complete.

But the reality is, it rarely does calm down. There is always something else. The next target, the next priority, the next demand on our time and energy. And that's exactly why a mid-year reset matters.

Not as a reaction to burnout, but as a conscious decision to pause, even when life feels busy. Because if we wait for the "right time," we often end up waiting indefinitely.

A mid-year wellbeing audit

A reset doesn't need to be complicated. It starts with taking an honest look at how the first half of the year has actually felt, not just how it has looked on paper. Rather than setting new goals, begin by observing:

- Where has my energy been going?
- What has felt sustainable, and what hasn't?
- Where have my boundaries shifted without me noticing?
- How have I been feeling day to day?
- What has quietly dropped off that once mattered to me?

This is about building awareness, because without pausing, it's easy to continue in patterns that were never designed to last.

Why most resets don't stick

The challenge isn't a lack of motivation, it's that the way we're trying to approach wellbeing often doesn't fit with how we actually live and work, making it difficult to sustain.

We often set goals based on what we think we should be doing, rather than how we actually function best. And when there's a disconnect, even the best intentions become difficult to maintain. This is where a different approach can help.

Finding your wellbeing philosophy

At OptiMe, we often talk about wellbeing philosophies, different ways people naturally approach how they live, work and recharge, because not everyone resets in the same way.

For some, wellbeing comes from slowing down and creating moments of comfort and connection. The Danish concept of Hygge captures this with a focus on warmth, presence and togetherness in everyday life.

For others, it's about purpose and direction. The Japanese philosophy of Ikigai centres on having a clear sense of meaning, aligning what you do with what matters to you.

Some people need balance above all else. The Swedish idea of Lagom, meaning "not too much, not too little," reflects a more sustainable, steady approach to work and life.

Others benefit from stepping away from perfection altogether. Wabi-Sabi encourages self-compassion, accepting that things don't have to be complete or flawless to be enough.

For many, wellbeing is rooted in connection with others. The African philosophy of Ubuntu reminds us that we don't thrive in isolation, our wellbeing is shaped by the people around us.

And for some, the reset comes from stepping outside entirely. The Norwegian concept of Friluftsliv reflects the importance of getting outdoors, creating space away from screens, pressure and routine.

None of these approaches are right or wrong, but understanding which one resonates with you can make your reset far more effective.

The second half of the year will fill up quickly, as it always does. The difference is whether you move into it carrying the same patterns, or with a clearer, more sustainable way of working.

A mid-year reset doesn't require everything to change. It simply asks you to pause long enough to notice what needs to and then make small, intentional adjustments that actually fit your life, not an ideal version of it.

If you're curious to explore your own approach, you can find out which wellbeing philosophy you're most aligned to via the QR code.

The most effective reset isn't about doing more, it's about doing what works for you.

bethanyainsley.com



A mid-year reset doesn't require everything to change.

Bethany Ainsley

Inside the body

By Hannah Dodds, Founder of Self Medical Aesthetics

The role of Advanced Blood Testing at SELF Medical.



There is a growing shift in how people approach their health. Increasingly, patients are no longer waiting for symptoms to become disruptive before seeking answers. Instead, there is a quiet but significant movement towards understanding the body earlier, more deeply, and with greater precision.

At SELF, this has led us to expand beyond aesthetics into functional wellbeing, where skin health, energy, hormones and overall vitality are all viewed as interconnected. How we feel externally is often a reflection of what is happening internally, and advanced blood testing allows us to explore that relationship in a meaningful way.

In partnership with Goodbody, we now offer comprehensive blood screening within clinic, giving patients access to detailed insight into their health in a way that is both accessible and clinically robust. These tests move far beyond standard checks, offering a clearer picture of what is happening beneath the surface.

The range of testing available is extensive. From hormone profiles and thyroid function to testosterone levels, energy markers, weight management insights, allergy testing and advanced cancer screening indicators, these assessments allow us to build a far more complete understanding of the body. For many patients, it is often the first time they have been able to connect everyday symptoms such as fatigue, mood changes, skin concerns or weight fluctuations with measurable biological data.

This type of testing is not about over medicalising wellness. It is about clarity.

Many people live with symptoms for years without clear answers, often attributing them to stress, ageing or lifestyle alone. While these factors certainly play a role, they do not always tell the full story. Hormonal imbalance, thyroid dysfunction, nutrient deficiencies or inflammatory responses can all present in subtle ways that are easy to overlook without proper investigation.

This is where advanced blood screening becomes so valuable. It allows us to move away from guesswork and towards evidence based understanding, creating a foundation for more targeted and effective treatment plans.

At SELF, every patient journey begins with a detailed consultation. We do not view blood results in isolation. Instead, we consider them alongside lifestyle, symptoms, goals and clinical presentation.

This allows us to build a truly individualised approach, whether the focus is improving energy levels, supporting weight management, balancing hormones or enhancing overall wellbeing.

For some patients, the results provide reassurance and confirmation that everything is functioning as expected. For others, they offer a clear pathway towards addressing underlying issues that may have previously gone unexplained. In both cases, the value lies in knowledge and the ability to make informed decisions about health moving forward.

It is also important to recognise that wellness testing is not a one size fits all solution. The purpose is not to overwhelm patients with data, but to interpret information in a way that is meaningful, supportive and actionable. This is where clinical guidance becomes essential, ensuring that results are translated into realistic and appropriate next steps.

As we continue to evolve SELF in 2026, integrating advanced blood testing into our clinic reflects a wider commitment to preventative, personalised care. It allows us to bridge the gap between aesthetics and internal health, acknowledging that confidence, energy and skin quality are all deeply connected to what is happening within the body.

The goal has never been to treat isolated concerns in isolation. It has always been to understand the individual as a whole.

For many of our patients, this approach becomes a turning point, not just in how they manage their health, but in how they understand it. And that shift, from uncertainty to clarity, is often where realchange begins.

www.selfmedicalaesthetics.com

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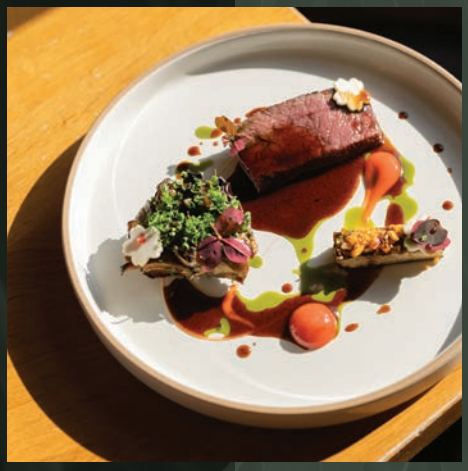
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Before


After

Small and steady

By David Fairlamb, David Fairlamb Fitness

Over the years as a personal trainer, I have seen just how deeply weight gain can affect a person's self esteem and confidence. It can slowly change how someone sees themselves, sometimes even altering their personality.


David Fairlamb

Many begin to believe there is no way back, that nothing will ever change, that is where they are wrong.

A lot of new clients take months to build up the courage to make that first call. Some arrive at their consultation feeling so low they can barely lift their eyes from the floor. This is where the journey really begins. My role is to help rebuild that lost belief, to reignite the spark and remind them that change is possible. You can become the person you once were or the person you have always wanted to be.

It all starts with that first step and a shift in mindset. When you begin exercising and fueling your body properly, the results can be hugely powerful both physically and mentally. The transformation goes far beyond appearance, it is life changing.

Watching my clients grow stronger, happier and more confident is the most rewarding part of what I do. Over the years, I have witnessed some incredible transformations, including:

- 6 stones lost in 16 weeks
- 12 stones lost in 8 months
- 5.5 stones lost in 12 weeks

So what drove them to completely change their lives?

- They reached a point where they could no longer accept how they looked or felt, their health was suffering
- They wanted to be there for their children and future grandchildren
- Their weight consumed their thoughts, morning to night, it had to stop
- They wanted to feel comfortable, confident and able to buy clothes that fit
- Their weight influenced nearly every decision they made, it became their biggest source of stress
- They realised that only they could take responsibility, no one else could do it for them

Many of these clients started at their lowest point, believing there was no way out. Yet within weeks, they began transforming not just their bodies, but their entire mindset.

Their success came from determination, consistency and adopting a completely new outlook on life.

If you are reading this and thinking, I could never do that, that is just a one off, it is not. Lives are being changed every single day.

Be inspired, make the decision, change yours.

davidfairlambfitness.co.uk

David's summing up

Stop waiting for the perfect moment, take action now and start creating a healthier, more confident version of yourself.



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Straight Talk with Speker...

Comments

By Barry Speker OBE

It is less than two years since Labour won a landslide victory in the General Election on a campaign promising change. Sir Keir Starmer the somewhat unlikely leader had presided over making Labour electable although the common view was that the victory owed more to the Tories having made themselves unelectable.

It has not taken long for Labour to follow suit and become seriously unpopular throughout Britain. However, the awful results at the local elections were widely expected. With such a large majority, the prudent and self-confident course in power would have been to rebuild, stop u-turning and try to deliver those parts of their election manifesto which Labour had put to the nation, and which the left wing of the party would not sabotage.

Instead we are thrust into Makerfield Madness. It is unedifying with the daily self-promotion of Starmer, Streeting and Burnham stabbing each other, resurrecting the Brexit debate and changing their positions to attract support from Labour MPs. So much attention on the June by-election; fiddling while Rome burns.

I contrived to avoid watching the Eurovision Song Contest but saw the announcement and award of the popular votes. This is accompanied by hysterical euphoria with sardonic commentary by Graham Norton as heir to Terry Wogan.

It seems to have become a tradition that the United Kingdom finishes in last position - 25th out of 25? Awarded one point from the jury vote and Nil Points from the popular votes - for the 4th year in succession.

How can Bulgaria win with a song called Bangaranga?

In recent years the UK has produced many leading songwriters - the Beatles, Elton John, Adele, Queen etc how can the powers that be at the BBC contrive to offer up entries universally acknowledged by Europe (and Australia) to be hopeless. Now this IS a real waste of licencepayers' money.

Does the punishment fit the crime? - this principle ranges from the Latin maxim 'Culpae poena par esto' through Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado to Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment.

But now it has been strongly debated in the Spygate issue. Southampton Football Club admitted their guilt in spying on the training sessions of Middlesbrough FC in advance of their playoff semi-final to get to the final at Wembley, the winner getting promotion to the Premier League, estimated to be worth more than £200million.

Southampton had won the match but lost the case brought by the Football League as to admitted clear breaches of the rules.

They were immediately expelled from the play-off competition and Middlesbrough were awarded the place in the playoff final. Southampton's appeal was dismissed by a League Arbitration Tribunal and the expulsion remained in place as well as a four-point deduction next season and a reprimand.

The magnitude of the penalty sent alarm bells through football. Was it disproportionate?

Certainly it was the right way to protect the integrity of football and the competition, be fair to Middlesbrough and show there will be serious consequences for cheating.

The Southampton supporters and the players are up in arms. There may be claims by players for lost earnings and further action against Southampton's head coach, their technical director and Southampton's 23 year old analyst, pictured hiding behind a tree whilst filming Middlesbrough training.

Plenty of work in hand for many lawyers.

And the supreme irony is that this involves Southampton- nicknamed 'The Saints'! ...and Middlesbrough lost the Wembley final, having already lost the semi-final!

"These are my principles, and if you don't like them...well I have others!" Thus quipped Groucho Marx.

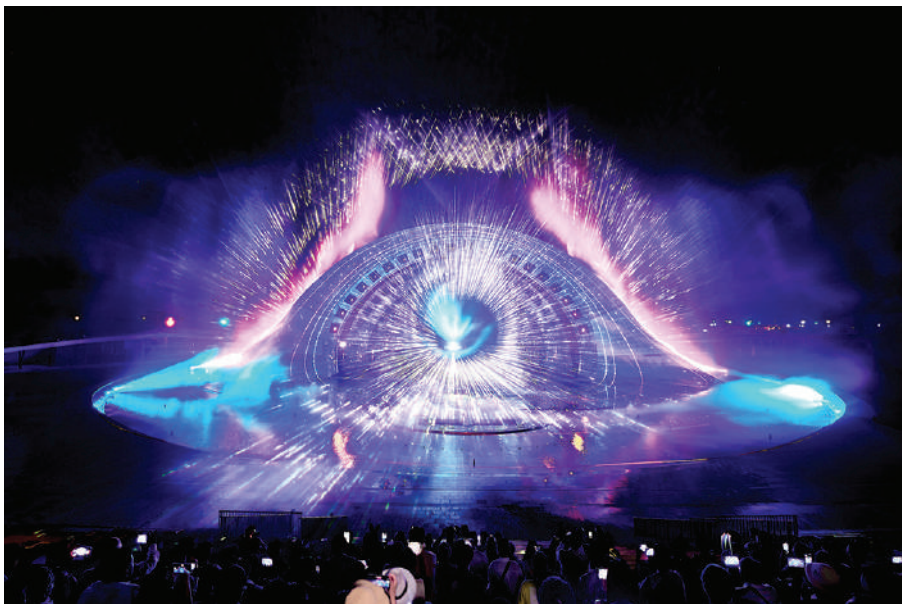
While the people of Ukraine shed their blood in defence of freedom (European freedom) we in the west have been showing support.

This included imposition of sanctions by the UK and others on the Russian invader's oil and gas exports, from which Russia gets 30 to 50% of its revenue.

But now, to limit price increases of oil and aviation fuel, Britain is easing the sanctions. Supporting cheap summer holidays is clearly deemed a more important principle than limiting Putin's war chest; and stubbornly refusing to drill our own North Sea oil for the benefit of the British people (on principle!).

Understandably there is dismay in Kyiv but increased morale in the Kremlin.

barryspeker@hotmail.com



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