NORTHERN

INSIGHT

September 2026

Issue 127

150 years of putting girls first
Newcastle High School for Girls

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Northern Insight Magazine

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Foreword

Welcome to the September issue of Northern Insight

September always feels like a month of fresh starts. As summer draws to a close and we look towards the final months of the year, it is a time to reflect on what we have achieved, embrace new opportunities and look ahead with renewed energy and optimism.

In this issue of Northern Insight Magazine, we celebrate the people, businesses and organisations that continue to make the North such an inspiring place to live, work and invest. From entrepreneurial success stories and community initiatives to the latest developments shaping our region, we shine a light on the ideas, achievements and determination that are helping to drive the North forward.

The strength of our region has always been rooted in its people – ambitious, innovative and proud of where they come from. At a time when businesses and communities continue to navigate change and uncertainty, that spirit of resilience and collaboration is more important than ever.

As we enter the autumn season, there is plenty to be positive about. New ventures are emerging, established organisations are finding fresh ways to grow, and individuals across the North continue to make a meaningful difference in their communities.

I hope you enjoy this month's Northern Insight, and that the stories within inspire you, introduce you to new ideas and perhaps encourage you to connect with some of the remarkable people and businesses featured.

Till next month...

Michael Grahamslaw, Publisher
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Walking Tall

A former secondary school PE and Dance teacher from Gateshead has swapped the classroom for the spotlight and is now helping to create unforgettable experiences at events across the UK.

Rebecca Matthews, founder of Rebel Event Entertainment, has built a thriving business providing bespoke entertainment packages for weddings, corporate functions, festivals, birthday celebrations and large-scale public events.

Based in the North East but travelling nationwide, Rebel Event Entertainment offers a range of eye-catching performances including fire artists, stilt walkers, mirror performers, disco ball-headed dancers and themed character entertainers.

"We specialise in creating unique entertainment experiences that people remember long after the event is over," said Rebecca. "Whether it's a wedding, a corporate event or a large arena show, we love bringing something different and exciting that really captures people's attention."

Among the company's most popular attractions are its highly skilled stilt walkers, who do far more than simply walk above the crowd.

"Our performers dance, interact with guests, pose for photographs and create amazing moments," Rebecca explained. "The mirror performers and disco ball dancers are always a huge hit too. People often have to do a double take when they see them."

The company has recently appeared at major events including the Motorcycle Show at Newcastle's Utilita Arena, where performers wowed crowds with fire displays and arena entertainment.

Derwentside College and Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust formalise strategic partnership

Derwentside College and Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust have strengthened their commitment to developing the NHS workforce of the future through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding.

The agreement was signed by Amanda Venner, Director of People at Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust, and Nicola Raine, Assistant Principal at Derwentside College, formalising a successful partnership focused on creating career opportunities for local people while addressing workforce needs across the health and care sector.

The partnership brings together education and industry to develop high-quality training, apprenticeships and workforce development programmes that provide clear routes into NHS careers. By aligning learning with real workforce demand, both organisations are helping individuals gain the skills, knowledge and experience needed to secure sustainable employment and progress within healthcare.

The collaboration has already delivered impactful initiatives, including bespoke leadership and communication development programmes for NHS staff and innovative Healthcare Support Worker apprenticeship pathways. These programmes enable individuals to earn while they learn, gain valuable workplace experience and build rewarding careers within the NHS.

DWP to move into Faber

Sunderland's newest office building is set to be boosted by the arrival of a major new tenant.

Faber – one of two new L&G-backed buildings in Sunderland city centre – has announced that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) will be moving its team into the Riverside Sunderland property. Taking three of the five floors in the building, DWP is expected to relocate its team from Wear View House into Faber from April 2027.

The Government department has signed a long lease on 55,167sq ft of space in the building, which reached completion last year. Faber's sister building, Maker, which stands next door, has already secured a lease agreement with online food order and delivery platform Just Eat, who moved in last December.

Mike Coplowe, Head of Commercial Development and Regeneration at L&G, said: "DWP's move to the Faber office in Sunderland, alongside their recent move into our West Bar office in Sheffield, reflects the increasing importance of regional centres in supporting jobs and economic activity.

"Our multi-million investment in Sunderland is part of that broader commitment, backing the North East's role in driving sustainable growth by attracting major employers, supporting high-quality development, and helping to create long-term opportunities for local communities and businesses across the region."

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North East BIC earns gold award for supporting small business cash flow

The North East BIC has been recognised with a government-backed award that underlines its long-standing commitment to paying suppliers promptly and supporting small businesses at the heart of the regional economy.

Administered by the Office of the Small Business Commissioner on behalf of the Department for Business and Trade, the Fair Payment Code promotes best practice in payment performance and encourages businesses to pay suppliers fairly and quickly.

The Gold Award, presented to the BIC, is the highest level of accreditation and is reserved for organisations that pay at least 95% of all invoices within 30 days.

For the BIC, the accolade is formal recognition of a payment culture it has practiced for many years as part of its mission to support enterprise growth in the region.

Colin Turnbull, Finance Director at the North East BIC, said: "Cash flow is one of the biggest challenges facing small businesses and in our work in the business community we see first-hand the impact late payments can have on

their ability to invest, recruit and grow.

"Many firms have strong ideas, skilled teams and healthy order books, but delayed payments can change everything.

"That's why we've always been committed to paying suppliers promptly. Supporting businesses isn't just about providing advice, funding and workspace, it's also about being a good customer.

"We're proud that this award recognises an approach we've had for many years and demonstrates our commitment to leading by example when it comes to supporting small businesses."

Walfinch Newcastle named among North East's top home care providers

A Newcastle home care provider has been recognised among the North East's highest-rated care services after being named in the homecare.co.uk Top 20 Home Care Awards 2026.

Walfinch Newcastle has been included in the Top 20 Home Care Providers in the North East, with the awards based on independent reviews from clients and their families.

The recognition marks the second time Walfinch Newcastle has received the accolade in the last three years, highlighting the consistently high standards of care delivered by the team across Newcastle and the wider area.

Based in North Tyneside and operating across Newcastle and the surrounding area, Walfinch Newcastle provides personalised home care designed to help people live independently in the comfort of their own homes.

Idris Nasar, Director at Walfinch Newcastle, said, "We're incredibly proud to have been recognised once again by homecare.co.uk. What makes this award so special is that it's based on feedback from the people who know our service best - our clients and their families."

Rounton Coffee seeing stars after 'special' success at Great Taste Awards

A North Yorkshire coffee roaster is celebrating after securing NINE gold stars in the Great Taste Awards.

Viewed as the gold standard for the UK's food and drink industry, the annual awards are recognised as the sector's biggest and most trusted accreditation scheme.

Now seven of Rounton Coffee's range has received at least one star – including a pair of coffees that scooped two stars.

Having started life on local farmers markets, founder Dave Beattie said the shower of stars "was the stuff of dreams" given the firm's humble origins.

"Rounton Coffee only really started as a reason to share good coffee with what, at the time, was quite a small number of fellow local enthusiasts," said Dave.

"So, to see stars all over our packaging still feels a bit surreal, but we don't take any of it for granted.

"It still feels so special to be told that other people are impressed by the work done every day by everyone, from our farmers across the coffee belt, to the team here in East Rounton."

Judges heaped praise on the range, with particularly strong plaudits for the company's two-star beans - the Daybreak Blend, and Bosque Lya.

The latter is grown in the shadow of a 6,000ft volcano in El Salvador, and judges said it delivered the "most pleasing, moreish Flat White."

And in the judging notes for Daybreak Blend, the beans – from Guatemala and Peru – were praised for having a finish that is "exceptionally long and very elegant".

And the Great Taste Awards success caps out an impressive 12 months for the village-based business, which has seen Rounton Coffee's subscription service continue to expand, while its beans are now reaching customers across the UK - including a new wholesale partner in the Outer Hebrides.

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> I say to the girls all the time: be the best version of you.

Amanda Hardie

150 Years of putting girls first

Head Amanda Hardie explains why creating an environment where girls thrive, free from gendered expectation, empowers them to make choices based on genuine interest, ability and ambition.

When Newcastle High School for Girls was founded 150 years ago, its pioneers lobbied for reforms that would allow girls to receive the same standard of education as boys. Their vision helped shape generations of young women and, a century and a half later, that commitment remains at the heart of NHSG.

Today, under the leadership of Head Amanda Hardie, NHSG continues to put girls first, creating an environment where girls thrive academically, socially and personally. It is a school where girls are encouraged to find their voice, pursue their passions and develop the confidence to navigate an ever-changing and more complex world.

“We need to give girls the space and confidence to speak their minds," says Amanda. "It's so important to us that every girl leaves us knowing her voice matters and that she can be whoever she wants to be. When girls are given the freedom to thrive without limitations, they achieve extraordinary things.”

As an all-through school for girls aged three to eighteen, NHSG removes traditional gendered expectations from the earliest stages of education. Amanda explains: “By the time our girls are making GCSE or A Level choices, they are making decisions based on genuine interest and ability. The classrooms they’ve been learning in and the teachers working with them will have encouraged them to be confident, courageous and curious – something that will stay with them into adult life.”

That approach is delivering tangible results. In the school’s 150th year, NHSG celebrated another set of outstanding GCSE and A Level results, the strongest in recent years and a powerful reflection of what can be achieved when girls are placed at the centre of everything a school does. For Amanda, these outcomes are about much more than grades. They demonstrate the impact of an education designed to help girls flourish, discover their strengths and realise their ambitions.

Amanda has been part of the NHSG community for almost 30 years, having joined the school as a newly qualified teacher in 1997 before becoming Head in 2022.

“I didn’t experience an all-girl education myself, so I never really imagined such a supportive environment could exist,” she explains. “But at NHSG, our girls are encouraged to participate fully, without judgement, in lessons and across co-curricular activities. They can follow their interests, take intellectual risks and share their opinions without worrying about how they are perceived.”

Many girls who join NHSG from co-educational settings quickly notice the difference.

“Girls often tell us they once enjoyed sport, science or technology clubs but gradually stepped away after feeling out of place or experiencing negative comments,” Amanda says. “That simply does not happen at NHSG. Here, girls feel confident to get involved, challenge themselves and explore whatever interests them.”

Research conducted by the Girls' Day School Trust, of which NHSG is a member, shows that girls in GDST schools are significantly more likely to study STEM subjects than girls nationally. Combined with smaller class sizes and personalised support, NHSG creates an environment where every girl is known as an individual and encouraged to develop her own character and academic ambition.

“I say to the girls all the time: be the best version of you,” Amanda adds.

Beyond academic achievement, leadership is another cornerstone of the NHSG experience. Opportunities begin in Junior School, where girls are encouraged to take responsibility, share ideas and make a positive contribution to both the school and wider community.

“We begin our leadership programmes early, encouraging girls to use their voice, whether through charity initiatives, environmental projects or helping shape what happens in their classrooms," says Amanda. “It gives the girls a sense of purpose and shows them they matter and are valued, developing their understanding around the importance of being a good citizen.”

Those experiences build confidence and self-belief as well as values that often remain long after pupils leave school.

Amanda continues: “The more girls experience leadership and realise they are good at it, the more they take that mindset forward into the next stage of their lives.”

Preparing girls for the future is also a key priority. Since becoming Head, Amanda has strengthened partnerships with employers, investors and universities to gain a better understanding of emerging skills needs and future career opportunities. Collaborations with tech organisations are helping the school stay connected to developments in technology and innovation.

The school is also working closely with universities to address gender imbalances in applications for certain technical courses and careers.

“If we address those imbalances early, we can ensure our pupils have both the skills and the confidence to enter fields where women remain underrepresented, if that's what they choose,” Amanda explains.

Drawing pupils from across Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Hexham, Corbridge, Durham and Sunderland, NHSG has spent 150 years evolving to meet the needs of girls and their families while remaining true to its founding purpose.

Amanda reflects: “I am deeply passionate about what we deliver and about the lives we can change. For 150 years, NHSG has been putting girls first, creating an environment where girls thrive, achieve exceptional outcomes and develop the confidence to shape their own futures. As we celebrate our exceptional GCSE and A Level results, we are proud not only of what our girls achieve, but of the people they become.”

newcastlehigh.gdst.net

The art of storytelling

By Simon Rushworth

Compelling video content can be the catalyst for a full circle communications strategy. David Broom, founder of dynamic marketing agency B7, outlines the bigger picture.

Entrepreneurial at heart and visionary by nature, David Broom has always done things differently. Whether cutting his teeth on the uncompromising market stalls of inner-city Glasgow or dancing his way to glory on the world stage, the affable Glaswegian's route to running multiple businesses — and becoming a family-focused father of four — has been far from conventional.

Sure, there have been doubts, knockbacks, personal setbacks and professional challenges but the founder and director of B7 has always fought the odds and, more often than not, won. A modern-day David and Goliath story? Maybe.

"As a young boy I was a bit of a show-off and quite boisterous," admits David. "But when I was eight my dad lost his job in Glasgow and he moved to Africa for three years to find work. That's when I felt my confidence drain. I was an only child and suddenly it felt like I had a lot of growing up to do. I felt lost.

"I was dancing at the time. I was a member of a great dance school but I didn't want anyone to know that's what I did. In 1995 I even represented Scotland at the World Championships but I'd already decided that would be my last event. I was about to go to high school and I was terrified that people would find out who I really was.

"That's why I'm so passionate about never falling victim to that kind of self-doubt again. I gave up on a huge opportunity because I was so scared of what other people would think. At that point I was impressionable, timid and just trying to fit in. That attitude held me back for years."

These days David wouldn't even consider 'trying to fit in'. He's a forward-thinking creative who, alongside co-director Phil Duggan, is fast shaping B7 into the North East's leading story driven marketing agency. Innovators and disruptors at heart, the idea of 'fitting in' is anathema to a management team embracing the future.

"I suppose we initially set out to be known as 'the video guys'," adds David, whose eye-catching work with the Entrepreneurs Forum, at the organisation's 2026 annual conference, turned heads and got clients old and new talking. "To an extent we've succeeded. But now we no longer want to be known as simply 'the video guys'. B7 is in a position to do so much more.

"But let's look at video first. Why, as a business, would you record video in the first place and where would it go? You need to ask yourself those questions from the outset. The 'where' is really important. It has to go somewhere, otherwise what's the point of spending money on it in the first place?

"For most of the businesses we work with the content we shoot is used in three places. There's social media — and predominantly LinkedIn — and of course that remains a priority for clients looking to connect with like-minded individuals and organisations. The second place is on the business's website. Short explainer videos are perfect for outlining what you do, what you believe, who you serve and the problems you can solve. Those hero-style films become long-term assets that deliver time and time again.

"And the third strand? Think about how your team pitches its product. Often you're sending PDFs or directing people to your website. That's fine for people who enjoy reading — and I love reading — but what about those people who are inundated with daily content and exhausted by trying to keep on top of it all?

"Video is a wonderful way to communicate effectively and efficiently what you're all about. Imagine pulling out your phone over a coffee and playing a 90-second or 120-second video to set the scene. Suddenly the meeting's up and running and you can get down to business."

B7's perfectly positioned to ensure your content ends up in all the right places, all of the time. But, as David explains, compelling video content can be the catalyst for a wide-ranging marketing and communications strategy.

"The problem with communicating ourselves as 'the video guys' is that, if we're not careful, it might look as though we just hand off the assets and move on," he adds. "That couldn't be further from the truth. We want to be seen as the people who manage the production of the video but also the strategy behind the filming in terms of what's included in the video and how the videos are used.

"The content we capture can complement all manner of PR and communications activity. Transcripts can be used to shape longer form written content for print media, websites and LinkedIn posts and we work with experienced journalists and editors to achieve the best possible coverage. Soundbites from the videos can inform marketing and advertising campaigns and we can use the content we capture to create impactful visuals and presentations.

"We're not just 'the video guys'. We're the guys you can trust to manage every aspect of your client-facing messaging!"

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> We're not just 'the video guys'. We're the guys you can trust.

David Broom

Musings with
Mirza...

Ammar Mirza CBE

The Thin Blue Line

By Ammar Mirza CBE

There are moments when the uniform stops being a uniform.

When the flashing blue lights are no longer something we pass on the road. When the court is no longer simply a building in the city centre. When our emergency services stop being institutions and become what they have always been. People. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things, often on the most difficult day of somebody else's life.

Serving as His Majesty's High Sheriff for Tyne and Wear has brought that reality into sharper focus for me.

The office is more than 1,000 years old and its modern role remains rooted in supporting the judiciary, police, courts, prisons, probation and emergency services. But no description can adequately explain what it feels like to see that system from the inside.

It has been a privilege. At times, it has also been incredibly sombre.

Few experiences have affected me more than attending the funeral of PC Jess Turnbull at Newcastle Cathedral.

Jess was just 19. She had joined Northumbria Police only months earlier and was responding to a road collision when she was struck by another vehicle. She died two days later, having made the ultimate sacrifice while serving her community.

What I witnessed was heartbreaking and profoundly uplifting. Officers from forces across the country standing shoulder to shoulder. Standards lining the route. The ceremonial procession. The silence. The respect. Above all, the extraordinary strength of Jess's family and the unmistakable power of the wider police family.

I was there simply to pay my respects.

It reminded me that behind every badge is a person and behind every person is a family who shares the risks and responsibilities that come with public service.

That same sense of quiet service was evident when visiting our courts and meeting magistrates and court staff. More than 12,000 magistrates across England and Wales give their time voluntarily, sitting for at least 13 days each year. They make difficult decisions, supported by court staff who keep our justice system moving every day.

There is little fanfare. There are rarely headlines. They simply serve.

And then came the devastating news from Middlesbrough.

In the early hours of Saturday 22 August, Cleveland Police officers PC Matthew Blades, 37, and PC Tom Clough, 38, were killed when their marked police vehicle was struck on the A66. They had gone to work to protect our communities. They did not return home.

Two more families changed forever. Two more colleagues lost. Another police family grieving.

The thin blue line is sometimes described as the line between order and disorder. To me, it represents something more human. People willing to step forward when others step back.

The police. Fire and rescue. Ambulance crews. Magistrates. Prison and probation teams. Coastguards. Volunteers. The countless people who protect, support and serve us, often without recognition and sometimes at enormous personal cost.

We notice the siren when it delays our journey. We notice the police when we need them. We notice the courts when something goes wrong.

Perhaps we should notice the people behind them far more often.

It should not take becoming a High Sheriff to recognise their contribution. It certainly should not take tragedy.

But this year has opened my eyes even wider, and while I have the privilege of this platform, I intend to use it to say something that should be said much more often.

Thank you.

Because the strongest communities are not simply those protected by a thin blue line.

They are the communities that stand alongside it.

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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The Secret Sparky

From a single electrician to a million pound company, employing 20 people, The Caztec Group is one of the North East's best kept secrets.

As the company celebrates its 25th anniversary we sat down with founder Brenden Carr who reflects on building one of the regions most respected engineering businesses working with blue chip companies throughout the country.

Brenden Carr

As founder and managing director of Washington-based Caztec Group, Brenden has never sought the limelight. Instead, his focus has always been on delivering quality work for major national clients while maintaining the values of a family business.

Tell us about your journey into engineering.

I started out as an apprentice electrician in the North East. After which, I spent eight years living and working in London. It gave me fantastic experience, working on projects in the capital then onto projects all over the world. I came back to the North East in 1992 to raise my family.

After working for several engineering companies, I reached a point where I thought, "Why not do it myself?" So, in 2000, I set up what was then Caztec Electrical Contractors. At the beginning it was just me, but people I'd worked with started asking if I could take on more projects and whether I could bring in additional electricians. That's really how the business grew.

Was there a clear plan from the beginning?

Not really. It grew organically. I took on my first employee in 2004 and we've continued to build from there. Today the business employs around 20 people and has an annual turnover more than £1 million.

We've been even bigger at times, but we've deliberately settled at a size where we can continue to offer a personal service while working on major contracts.

What sort of work does Caztec Group specialise in?

We're very much a commercial and industrial electrical engineering business rather than domestic electricians. We are vastly experienced in Substation Work, especially across the Rail Industry

We've worked with some outstanding organisations including Network Rail, Siemens, Volker Rail, Hitachi and Mitie. We also carry out a significant amount of work for the NHS, particularly across hospitals in the North East, undertaking specialist testing, compliance work and electrical infrastructure projects.

Many of our larger contracts are across the UK, particularly in London and the South East, although we're proud to remain based here in Washington.

We've also got a small building division and a specialist garage conversion business within the group.

You've worked on some prestigious infrastructure projects.

Yes, we've been fortunate to work on nationally important schemes, including rail infrastructure and power projects. We're also involved in work connected to HS2 and continue to secure contracts with some of the country's biggest engineering companies.

For a business of our size, we're proud of the calibre of clients we work with.

Our sweet spot is working with Tier One major contractors to provide specialist teams to assist with specific projects they have going on. We work a lot on Network Rail Infrastructure and Sub Station Builds.

Despite the company's growth, it remains a family business.

Both of my sons joined the business as apprentices and have worked their way through the company. One now manages operations and the other one supervises larger installations.

Has winning awards been important?

Recognition is always nice, but it's never been our motivation.

We were proud and grateful to receive a National Contractor of the Year award in 2022, and we've won other industry awards over the years. They reflect the quality of the work our team delivers every day.

We're not a company that shouts about ourselves. Most of our work comes through long-standing relationships, repeat business and our reputation.

What keeps you motivated after more than 25 years in business?

I genuinely enjoy building businesses. Even when I'm not in the office, I'm thinking about new opportunities and ways to improve what we do.

We've reached a stage where we're fortunate not to be chasing work for the sake of it. Instead, we can focus on working with good clients and delivering projects to the highest standard.

Putting Back

I believe in helping people as much as possible. We have consistently supported elite North East based athletes in both professional boxing and golf.

What are your hobbies and interests?

I'm in the gym every day and fitness is a big part of my life. Beyond that, I enjoy motorbikes, cars and spending time in Spain, where I have business interests. I try to divide my time between there and the North East whenever work allows.

Looking back, what are you most proud of?

Creating opportunities for people. Helping to change the course of lives by employing people and watching them develop. It's really rewarding.

When I started, it was just me. Today we've created careers for our team and built lasting relationships with some of the UK's biggest organisations.

For me, that's what success looks like. We've stayed true to our values and kept things real. We have built a strong reputation and proved that a North East engineering company can compete at the very highest level while keeping its feet firmly on the ground.

The real pride is in the people who have grown with us and the brilliant staff that help us get where weare today.

www.caztec.co.uk

> **Technology has made the valuation process more convenient.**

Alison Orgill and Fred Wyrley-Birch

Anderson & Garland – Where tradition meets modern auctioneering

Management buy-out steers auction house towards bi-centenary.

For more than 180 years, Anderson & Garland has been a familiar and trusted name in the North East auction world and beyond. Despite its long history, Anderson & Garland has shown that being traditional does not mean being stuck in the past. Instead, the company combines traditional values of expertise, personal service and trust with modern technology and new ways of reaching customers.

And, as the company looks forward to its bicentenary, it has new owners leading from the front. Directors Fred Wyrley-Birch and Alison Orgill have purchased the business from previous majority shareholder Julian Thomson. Fred and Alison will now lead the next phase of the firm's long-term development, while Julian remains as Chairman.

Fred and Alison have overseen a period of sustained growth. They also have vast experience within the company. Fred started life with Anderson and Garland as a porter in 2007. He has worked in every specialist department within the business.

Alison joined two years later and has played a key role overseeing finance, staffing, systems and day-to-day management.

Both have been heavily involved in how Anderson & Garland operates.

"The services we offer have steadily increased over the years and we've developed those services to embrace latest technology...traditional with a twist," Fred Wyrley-Birch said. "We have extensive experience dealing with everything from individual antiques and works of art to jewellery, furniture, watches, collections and the contents of entire houses. Our specialists provide personalised expertise, something that remains just as important today as it was in 1840."

The way Anderson & Garland reaches buyers has changed considerably. The company was an early adopter of internet marketing and live online bidding, allowing people from around the world to take part in its auctions without having to travel to Newcastle. Today, its catalogues and auction lots can be viewed online with extensive photography and detailed descriptions which help attract an international audience. Buyers from anywhere can now participate, giving sellers access to a much wider market than a traditional local auction could provide.

"Technology has made the valuation process more convenient," adds Fred. "We offer online valuations, allowing photographs and details of objects to be submitted from home, although we'd always recommend face-to-face appointments and home visits not just when a more detailed assessment is required, but because we really enjoy offering the personal experience. This combination of modern convenience and traditional specialist knowledge means our services are accessible while retaining the personal approach for which we are renowned."

Anderson & Garland's work goes far beyond simply selling objects at auction. Its specialists provide valuations for a range of purposes, including insurance, probate, private sales and family division. The company works closely with solicitors, executors and families dealing with estates. Probate valuations can establish the value of possessions when calculating Inheritance Tax and distributing an estate fairly among beneficiaries. The firm's valuations are prepared with HMRC requirements in mind, helping executors and professional advisers deal with what can otherwise be a complicated process.

"Anderson & Garland is a blend of old and new. Alison and I see ourselves as custodians of a business with an extraordinary heritage and an equally exciting future," adds Fred. "Our traditions of knowledge, integrity and personal service have been built over generations, while modern technology has enabled us to reach a global audience and make our services easier to access. It's this ability to respect our heritage while embracing new techniques that has allowed Anderson & Garland to remain an important and trusted auctioneer in the North East for more than 180 years."

If you'd like to find out what Anderson & Garland can do for you, whether it's selling something, a valuation, or some simple advice, you can contact them by calling (0191) 430 3000 or visiting their website, www.andersonandgarland.com, where you'll find further information and details of how to email them.

Or why not pop into their showroom at Westerhope, on the outskirts of Newcastle.

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Eothen Care Homes enhances the lives of older people by providing experienced residential & dementia care at our three North East care homes

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Our kind and caring staff are there at all of our homes to help residents live fuller, more rewarding lives. ***'We are here with a place to call home'***.

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Guide Price £1.495 Million

5 Bedrooms

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3 Bathrooms

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Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band G. EPC: D

SANDERSON
YOUNG

Red House Farm

Gosforth

Guide Price £1.995 Million

5 Bedrooms

Detached

Grade II Listed

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Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band G. EPC: E

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Jesmond

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Leisure Suite

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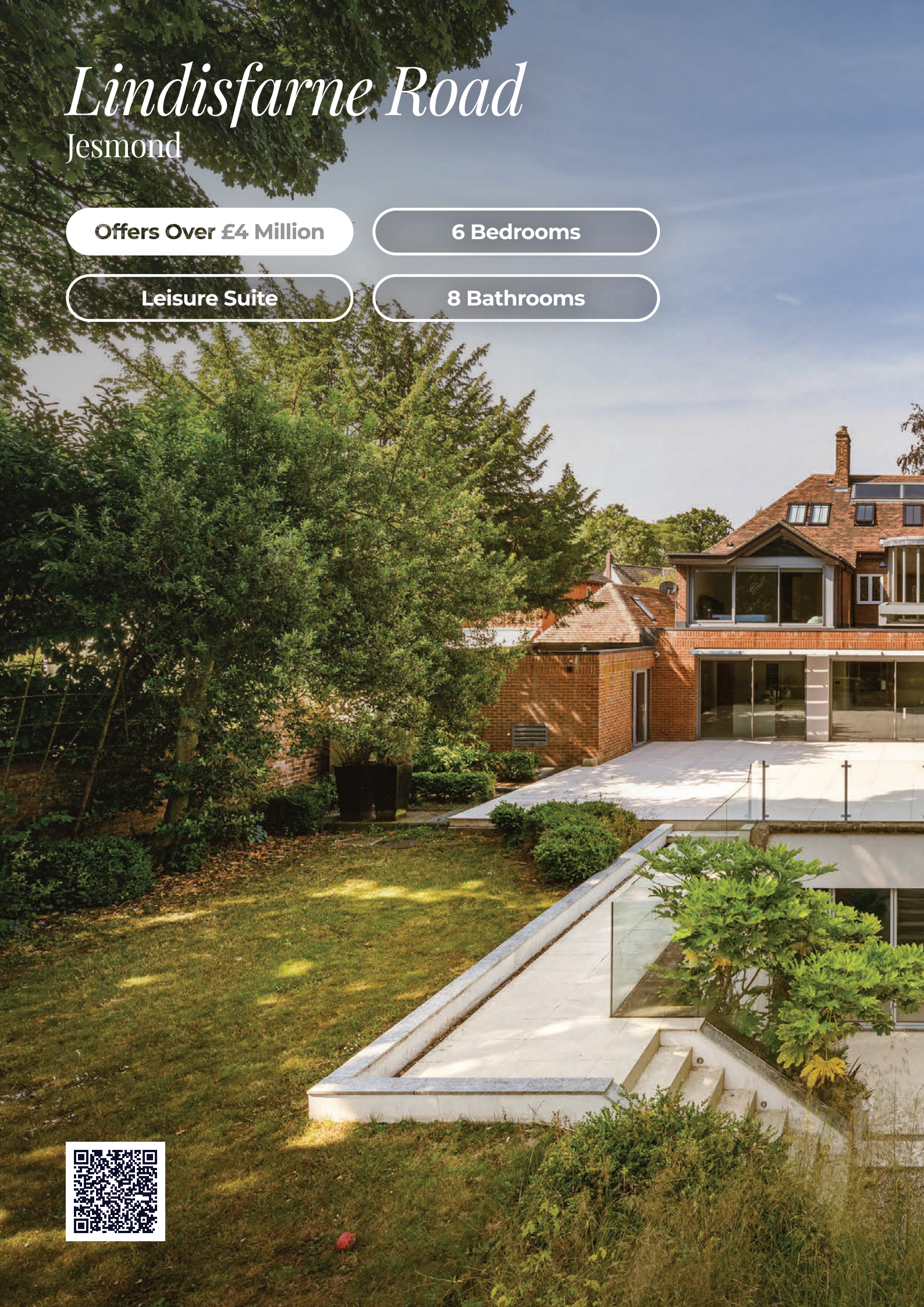

SANDERSON YOUNG

Ashleigh Sundin
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Tenure: Freehold. Council Tax: Band H. EPC: C

Dr David Cliff

The Panoptic Organisation: When scrutiny helps

Dr David Cliff explores why trust and scrutiny are not opposites - and why good organisations need both.

Panopticism is hardly a word calculated to warm the hearts of employees.

Its origins lie in Jeremy Bentham's eighteenth-century Panopticon: an architectural concept, most famously associated with prisons, in which a relatively small number of people could maintain oversight of a much larger population. Those being observed could never be entirely certain when scrutiny was actually occurring. The possibility of being seen was itself sufficient to influence behaviour.

It is easy to understand why the idea subsequently acquired sinister associations. Orwell's Big Brother and Tolkien's Eye of Sauron have become cultural shorthand for surveillance, control and oppression.

> **O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursels as ithers see us!**
>
> *— Robert Burns, To a Louse (1786)*

But perhaps we have concentrated too much on the watching and not enough on the oversight.

The organisational equivalent of the Panopticon need not involve anybody physically looking over anybody else's shoulder. Oversight can come through governance, professional supervision, peer review, audit, management information, customer feedback, performance conversations or simply the reasonable expectation that important decisions will eventually be examined and discussed.

The panoptic effect lies in knowing that our actions are not entirely invisible.

This matters because accountability can easily diminish when nobody appears interested. That does not necessarily mean people become lazy, dishonest or negligent. More commonly, they are required to make sense of situations using only the knowledge, experience and assumptions available to them.

In the absence of accessible leadership or meaningful scrutiny, people effectively have to hypothesise the response of the absent leader: What would they expect me to do?

Sometimes they will judge correctly. Sometimes they will not. And sometimes the very person confidently making the decision lacks the experience to recognise what they do not know.

This is where the contemporary enthusiasm for autonomy can become problematic. Trust, delegation and empowerment are important, but autonomy should not become organisational absence.

The alternative is not micromanagement. It is proportionate scrutiny.

Good oversight creates an accountability horizon: an understanding that decisions, behaviours and outcomes remain visible, discussable and capable of being challenged. Importantly, that scrutiny need not be punitive.

A board provides oversight of an executive team. Non-executive directors bring perspectives deliberately positioned outside day-to-day operational thinking. Professional supervision allows reasoning to be examined with another practitioner. Good management information makes emerging patterns visible before they become serious problems.

These mechanisms have something panoptic about them, but their purpose need not be control.

They can protect.

They can challenge.

And they can develop.

This distinction matters because scrutiny inevitably communicates something about the organisation providing it.

Where oversight exists primarily to discover fault, people learn compliance and concealment. Where every variance requires somebody to blame, accountability degenerates into finding the person who must pay the price when something goes wrong.

The Eye of Sauron is therefore a useful metaphor, not because leaders should be continually watching their people, but because it represents a particular quality of scrutiny: intense, threatening and concerned primarily with transgression.

Other forms of oversight communicate something very different.

A well-functioning governance system can provide reassurance. Professional supervision can stimulate reflection. Constructive challenge can expose assumptions that have become invisible to those immersed in the situation. Early scrutiny can identify somebody who is getting out of their depth before uncertainty becomes failure.

And sometimes an external perspective does something more positive still.

Burns's gift of seeing ourselves as others see us is not simply about discovering shortcomings. Another perspective may recognise good judgement, capability or potential that we have ceased to notice ourselves. Scrutiny can therefore contain an element of witnessing and affirmation as well as accountability.

This is particularly important for leaders because immersion inevitably creates selective perception. However experienced we become, we see organisations partly through our own assumptions, relationships and histories. Another pair of eyes—or another governance mechanism—can reveal fault lines hiding in plain sight.

Perhaps, then, the important leadership question is not: "Who is watching?"

It is: "What forms of scrutiny exist here, what purpose do they serve, and what happens because of them?"

Too much scrutiny produces compliance, defensiveness and dependence. Too little can produce drift, isolation and unchallenged judgement.

Somewhere between the two lies attentive accountability: enough oversight to make activity visible, enough challenge to improve judgement, enough trust to preserve discretion, and enough support to intervene before difficulties become failures.

Trust and scrutiny are not opposites.

Sometimes taking sufficient interest to look, ask and understand is one of the clearest expressions of trust an organisation can provide.

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Graphic illustration overleaf...

THE PANOPTIC ORGANISATION

WHEN SCRUTINY HELPS

Effective oversight is neither constant surveillance nor organisational absence.
It is the creation of proportionate mechanisms through which our decisions and actions remain visible, discussable and accountable.

> "O wad some Power the giftie gie us
> To see oursels as ithers see us!"
> — ROBERT BURNS

OPPRESSIVE SCRUTINY

- Fear and control
- Concealment and compliance
- Low trust
- Stagnation and risk

CONSTRUCTIVE SCRUTINY

- Clarity and understanding
- Psychological safety
- Open dialogue
- Growth and better judgement

THE ARCHITECTURE OF OVERSIGHT

Many forms. One purpose.
A reasonable expectation of intelligent scrutiny.

GOVERNANCE
Board oversight and challenge

ETHICS & STANDARDS
A shared compass for decisions and conduct

AUDIT & ASSURANCE
Independent assessment and verification

CUSTOMER & STAKEHOLDER FEEDBACK
Reality from outside the organisation

PROFESSIONAL SUPERVISION
Reasoning examined. Assumptions challenged.

PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS
Discovers issues and improves judgement

MANAGEMENT INFORMATION
Makes patterns visible early

PEER REVIEW
Others share experience and perspective

THE PANOPTIC EFFECT
Knowing our actions may be examined shapes our behaviour and the quality of our decisions.

THE SCRUTINY CONTINUUM

Coercive Surveillance
Control and fear drive behaviour.

Deterrent Oversight
Rules and monitoring promote compliance.

Constructive Challenge
Questions improve judgement.

Supportive Oversight
Develops capability and confidence.

Affirming Witnessing
Sees potential and recognises contribution.

THE LEADERSHIP QUESTION

What forms of scrutiny exist here, what purpose do they serve, and what happens because of them?

Neither too much nor too little. Somewhere in between lies **attentive accountability** – enough oversight to make activity visible, enough challenge to improve judgement, enough trust to preserve discretion, and enough support to intervene before difficulties become failures.

Not about who is watching – but about *what* is seen, *why* it matters, and *how* it helps us to do better together.

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Artech Lighting welcomes new apprentice

Artech Lighting is investing in the future of the business and has welcomed a new estimating apprentice, Josh Smith, 18, to its Durham HQ, supporting an increased client demand.

Josh spent the last two years completing diplomas in IT and E-Sports at New College Durham, before starting a new chapter studying Level 3 Business Administration with the leading lighting manufacturer.

Stepping on to the career ladder, Josh is now Artech's sixth apprentice in the last 5 years as the business looks to tackle the skills gap and create a pathway for fulfilling careers in the lighting industry.

Josh said: "I'm really excited to be joining the Artech team and start my apprenticeship, with the opportunity of learning on the job and experiencing first-hand how the business operates.

"I'm looking forward to a successful future with Artech – everyone's been so welcoming and it's a really supportive environment to learn, work in."

Josh will work closely with the design and estimating teams to build his skills across the different departments, putting his knowledge of IT systems into practice. He hopes to become a qualified lighting designer, completing his apprenticeship in 2027.

Gary Aisnworth, lighting design and estimating manager, said: "It's great to see Josh settle into the role and support him to take the next steps in his career. We're extremely passionate about supporting young people into skilled careers at Artech, helping them build the foundations they need to succeed."

Technical adviser appointed to Sugoi Consulting to strengthen global operations

County Durham, UK based Sugoi Consulting, a technical and commercial consultancy serving the global metal packaging industry, has appointed Dave Turner as Technical Adviser. This follows the recent appointment of Technical Manager, John Robson.

Dave joins with 35 years of technical experience in the metal packaging industry. Working alongside John Robson, he will support on the delivery of legacy equipment projects, bespoke development work and technical purchasing.

The appointment comes as Sugoi Consulting faces growing demand for bespoke work, including recent client approaches for entirely new solutions and applications beyond the company's traditional remit.

The agile team, which combined has decades of experience across mechanical engineering, machine assembly, component machining, design and technical management, is able to operate quickly and standardise processes as they go. This is enabling work to be turned around in hours, rather than the previous time of days.

Dave's appointment reunites a partnership that dates back many years, as he originally hired both Managing Director, Alan Rutter and John, for roles at Crabtree, a metal-decorating equipment manufacturer. Dave and Alan worked closely together and travelled to customer sites around the world combining their technical and sales skills.

Energi Coast announces new Chair

Energi Coast, North East England's offshore wind cluster, has appointed Tom Nightingale as Chair as the region moves into a new era.

Highly experienced in the UK's offshore wind industry, Tom is Local Supply Chain Manager (UK) for Equinor's Power Business, supporting supply chain development activities for UK projects.

He was appointed Deputy Chair of Energi Coast in April 2025, after spending 4 years as part of its Leadership Group. Tom is replacing Tony Quinn, who is retiring after chairing the cluster since 2021.

Prior to joining Equinor, Tom spent 20 years working in the region's supply chain sector, holding marketing, strategy and business development roles with companies including Technip, DeepOcean, JDR Cable Systems and Baker Hughes.

Established in 2011, Energi Coast is one of eight UK offshore wind clusters. It is owned and operated by NOF, the UK's strongest energy sector membership organisation proactively supporting over 400 members with business development, marketing, industry intelligence, strategic introductions, events and supply chain engagement.

Energi Coast's Leadership Group is made up of more than 30 key regional businesses and stakeholders involved in offshore wind, and the cluster works to showcase supply chain capabilities and promote the region as a key hub for servicing both the UK and international offshore wind markets.

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ESG Beyond the Tickbox: RL Business Club returns this September

Robson Laidler's next RL Business Club, ESG Beyond the Tickbox, takes place on Thursday 17 September, 4pm-6.30pm at One Strawberry Lane, Newcastle. The free event is open to businesses, charities and not-for-profit organisations, with places available to book via Eventbrite.

Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) is no longer something relevant only to large corporations. It is rapidly becoming part of how organisations of all sizes are assessed by customers, funders, supply chains and employees.

As these expectations grow, simply producing an ESG policy is no longer enough. The organisations that thrive will be those that embed ESG into how they lead, make decisions and operate.

Three expert speakers will explore each pillar of ESG and how organisations can turn growing expectations into opportunities.

James Staniforth, from Sustainable Business Services, will explore how sustainability can drive commercial success, covering carbon reporting, Net Zero planning and practical first steps.

Emily Pearson, from Wellbeing Lead Academy, will focus on Human Sustainability and how putting people at the heart of an organisation can create workplaces where both people and performance thrive.

Representing B Corp certified Robson Laidler, Business Advisor Daniel Adamson will tackle Governance, exploring how leadership and decision-making can strengthen organisations and support sustainable growth.

As Daniel says: "Governance isn't about having better policies. It's about making better decisions."

Attendees will leave with practical actions they can implement immediately, helping them move ESG beyond the tick-box and turn it into a genuine competitive advantage.

Register your attendance for free via Robson Laidler's Eventbrite page.

Burnetts named one of the top ten law firms in the North

Newcastle law firm Burnetts Solicitors has been named as one of the top ten most highly recommended law firms in the North in new client research from Legal 500, ranking eighth in the region.

The research draws on nearly 200,000 client responses from across the UK and uses Net Promoter Scores to measure how likely clients are to recommend the law firms they work with. To be included, firms also needed a minimum of 150 client responses and multiple Legal 500 rankings.

It's a particularly important recognition for Burnetts because it's based directly on what clients themselves have said. Providing specialist legal advice and exceptional service is at the heart of what the firm does, so knowing that clients would recommend Burnetts to others is a really meaningful measure of that.

Nick Gutteridge, Managing Partner at Burnetts, said: "We have an incredibly talented team at Burnetts and I'm very proud of what they achieve every day. Recognition like this reflects the relationships they build with our clients and the trust that people place in us as a firm. To be ranked among the most recommended firms in the North is a fantastic endorsement of the whole team and one that means a great deal to us."

Burnetts is one of the largest law firms in the North and has offices in Newcastle and Cumbria. To find out more please visit www.burnetts.co.uk.

Move adds up for growing accountancy firm

An ambitious accountancy firm is gearing up for further growth after moving offices to enable expansion.

Stafford Accountancy - run by husband and wife Lyndsey and Mark Everett - has grown significantly over the past few years, doubling its headcount.

Having made the move to The Yard, part of the transforming Riverside Sunderland, the business has created space to support its recruitment, taking on a large open-plan office that will enable it to realise its future growth plans.

Stafford Accountancy has grown steadily since Mark Everett took over the business following a management buy-out in 2020. The business had been trading since the 1990s, with Mark originally joining as a client manager in 2011. Lyndsey came on board as a partner with the practice in 2020, following a successful career with global accountancy firm RSM.

Lyndsey said: "We're delighted with the progress we have made in recent years, more than doubling the size of our team since the move to the Yard.

"The move to the Yard has placed us at the heart of Sunderland's new business district, and our bright, open plan office has lifted our profile within the city and beyond.

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INTERESTING TIMES

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

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

ONE SUBJECT | THREE TIPS

SAYING YES IS COSTING YOU!

Most owners have said yes to something they should have turned down. New client, new project, new opportunity, it felt wrong to refuse. But saying yes to everything doesn't build a bigger business, it builds a busier one. The owners who grow well aren't the ones who take on the most, they're the ones who choose carefully. Here's what that looks like in practice.

1. Say no on purpose.

Turning down work isn't a failure, it's a decision. Every yes has a cost, time, energy, focus, that could go toward better work. Owners who grow well treat "no" as a tool, not a last resort. Before accepting the next opportunity, ask whether it moves the business forward or just fills the diary.

2. Know your capacity before you hit it.

Growth without a sense of your limits, time, cash, team, leads to overstretch. Most owners find out where the ceiling is by hitting it, usually at the worst possible moment. Understanding your real capacity means knowing how much you can take on before quality slips or the team buckles. That knowledge lets you grow on purpose, not by accident.

3. Chase growth that fits, not growth that flatters.

Bigger isn't automatically better. A larger client list or a busier diary can look like success while quietly making the business harder to run. The right growth adds clients who pay well, work that suits your strengths, and a pace you can sustain. Ask if the next opportunity fits the business you're building, or just makes it look impressive.

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INTERESTING QUOTE

Innovation is saying no to a thousand things.

Steve Jobs

JUST ONE THING

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

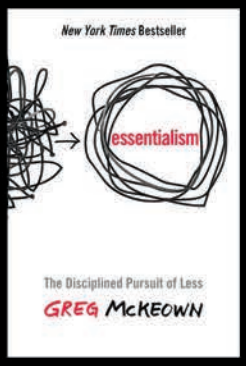
Look back at the last three things you said yes to. Would you say yes again, knowing what it actually cost you in time and energy? If the answer's no, that's not a reason for guilt, it's information. Use it to say no faster and more confidently next time an opportunity lands on your desk.

HAVE A READ

Essentialism
Greg McKeown

Essentialism makes the case for doing less, but better. McKeown argues that the ability to say no is what separates people who make real progress from those who are simply busy. A useful reset for any owner chasing every opportunity.

£12 online.



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North Shields firm goes National with Streets

North Shields-based Hurren & Jubb Accountants, which is located on Albion Road, has joined Streets, a top 40 UK accountancy and advisory practice, and will now trade as Streets Hurren & Jubb.

The office was first established in 1988 and has built a strong reputation for supporting businesses and individuals across North Tyneside and the wider North East.

Joining Streets marks the next stage in the firm's growth, providing clients with access to a wider range of specialist services while maintaining the personal, relationship-led approach for which the practice is known.

Shaun Jubb, Director at Streets Hurren & Jubb, joined the practice in 2013 and was made director six years later, in 2019. During that time, he has helped grow the business from its earlier incarnation R.A Hurren & Co (Accountants) Limited, originally based in Whitley Bay, into a thriving practice serving clients across a diverse range of sectors including construction, retail, hospitality, consultancy and professional services.

The practice's success has been built on a highly experienced team, with many employees having been with the business for over a decade. This strong culture of staff retention, combined with a commitment to career development, has helped establish long-lasting client relationships and drive sustained growth.

Shaun said: "As the practice continues to grow, joining a national firm is the natural next step. It allows us to continue providing the personal service our clients value while giving them access to a much broader range of specialist expertise.

"Our team has embraced the transition, and our focus has been on making the process as smooth as possible for our people and our clients."

The merger gives clients immediate access to Streets' specialist areas including tax relief, tax planning, grants and funding advice, as well as a wider network of technical specialists. Shaun has already seen early benefits for the practice, including enhanced HR support, greater assistance with recruitment and access to a broader talent pool to support future growth.

Shaun first met Streets Chairman and CEO Paul Tutin in April 2026. Following an initial Microsoft Teams meeting and a face to face meet up at the North Shields office, Shaun quickly recognised the shared values between the two firms.

Shaun added: "From our first conversation, Paul was approachable, genuine and down-to-earth. Throughout the process he was always available, supportive and easy to deal with. What you see is what you get, and that gave us confidence we were making the right decision."

80 years of growth

North East law firm Hay & Kilner is expanding into Teesside with the opening of a new office in Stockton-on-Tees, reinforcing its long-standing commitment to the region as it celebrates its 80th year in business.

The move follows two consecutive years of strong financial growth and continued investment in the firm, including the recruitment of more than 40 new colleagues across legal and business support roles. Hay & Kilner now employs more than 130 people, with recent appointments including experienced solicitors, trainees and specialists in compliance, marketing and finance, providing a strong platform for its next phase of expansion.

The new office at Preston Farm establishes a permanent presence in Tees Valley, enabling the firm to better support its significant and longstanding client base across South Durham, Tees Valley and North Yorkshire, while creating opportunities for further regional growth.

Recruitment to support the new office is well advanced, with opportunities available across a number of practice areas as Hay & Kilner continues to invest in its people and services.

Jonathan Waters, Managing Partner at Hay & Kilner, said: "The opening of our Stockton office is an important step in our long-term growth strategy. We already work with a substantial number of businesses and individuals across Tees Valley, South Durham and North Yorkshire, and having a dedicated base there will allow us to support them even more effectively while strengthening our presence in the region.

"We're incredibly proud to be celebrating our 80th year in the North East at a time of real momentum for the firm. The continued investment we're making in our people, our clients and our regional footprint reflects our confidence in the future."

As it celebrates its 80th anniversary, the firm is focused on increasing turnover by 50% over the next five years through continued investment in its people, sector expertise and regional presence.

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Mark Brown

Does your financial support match the needs of your business?

By Mark Brown, Director, L4 Financial

Most established businesses already have an accountant. Annual accounts are prepared, tax returns are submitted and payroll or VAT may also be dealt with. The essential compliance work is being completed.

Yet many owners still lack the financial visibility needed to run the business confidently. Forecasts may be unreliable, management information may arrive too late and decisions around recruitment, pricing, investment or funding may be made without clear financial analysis.

This does not necessarily mean the accountant is providing a poor service. More often, there is a gap between the support being received and what the business now needs.

Compliance serves an important purpose

Annual accounts and tax returns meet legal obligations, provide a historic record and help ensure the right amount of tax is paid. However, they are mainly concerned with what has already happened.

By the time they are discussed, the business may be several months into a new financial year. Sales, staffing costs, margins and cash commitments may all have changed.

Which customers or services generate the strongest returns? Are higher sales producing more cash? Can the business afford to recruit? What will the cash position look like in six months?

These are commercial decisions requiring current information, forward planning and regular discussion.

Assess the support objectively

The first question should be: what has the accountant actually been engaged to provide?

A business paying mainly for annual accounts and tax compliance should not automatically expect monthly reporting, detailed forecasts, regular commercial meetings and ongoing challenge around major decisions.

Where wider advisory support has been agreed, it is reasonable to assess whether it is being delivered consistently.

How often is there meaningful contact during the year? Are meetings planned or only arranged when a problem arises? Do discussions cover future performance and cash flow, or mainly historic results and tax?

Limited contact does not automatically mean the accountant is at fault. The original service may simply no longer match the needs of the business. The answer may be to clarify responsibilities and add the missing support.

Project or retained support?

Some gaps can be addressed through a focused project, such as building a forecast, reviewing margins, improving management information, preparing for funding or introducing a better accounting system.

A project works well where the requirement is specific and the business can maintain the improvements afterwards.

Ongoing support becomes more relevant when issues keep returning. A forecast soon becomes outdated if nobody maintains it. A reporting pack has limited value if results are not reviewed and acted upon. Identifying a profitability issue is only the start; someone still needs to support the decisions that follow.

Retained fractional Finance Director support should not simply mean producing more reports. Its purpose is to create a regular process for understanding performance, testing assumptions, identifying risk and turning financial information into action.

For many SMEs, the strongest structure combines bookkeeping or an internal finance team, an external accountant for compliance and tax, specialist input where required, and ongoing FD-level support for reporting, forecasting, projects, and commercial decisions.

These roles should complement each other. Problems arise when the owner assumes an important area is being covered when it is not part of anyone's role.

Financial support should evolve with the business. The arrangement that worked at an earlier stage may no longer be enough.

The real question is not simply whether the annual accounts are accurate. It is whether the business has the financial support it needs to make better decisions now.

L4 Financial Management

L4 Financial provides fractional Finance Director and board advisory support to growing SMEs. Mark works with owners and leadership teams to improve financial visibility, strengthen decision-making and ensure the finance function supports the next stage of the business.

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Accountant of the Month

Gemma Gibson

Audit Partner, Johnston Carmichael

Gemma has almost 20 years' experience in audit, having spent more than 19 years at a Big Four firm before joining Johnston Carmichael. She has extensive experience supporting businesses across a range of sectors, with particular expertise in property and construction, manufacturing and PE-backed businesses.

Johnston Carmichael is one of the UK's leading independent accountancy and advisory firms. Founded in Scotland in 1936, the firm expanded into the North East in 2023, opening its Newcastle office to support growing businesses across the region.

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

My route into accountancy was not exactly planned. I studied maths and statistics at Newcastle University and, at the time, I was certain I did not want to become either a maths teacher or an accountant! In my final year, I followed friends to graduate recruitment fairs, discovered the Big Four, applied for roles and was offered a position at a firm in Newcastle. It was a very competitive process, so that first opportunity felt like a real achievement.

Looking back, I was also inspired by my family. I was the first person in my family to go to university, and education was always strongly encouraged as I was growing up. I wanted to prove that I could build a career and, in the end, accountancy found me.

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

I have found that one of the most common mistakes is not asking for help early enough. Businesses can sometimes wait until a situation has become urgent before seeking advice. Early conversations with trusted advisers can make a significant difference, whether the issue is cash flow, growth, investment, controls or resilience.

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

Technology has fundamentally changed the profession. Accountants are now trusted as forward-looking advisers who can help businesses clarify information and make better decisions. AI has removed many repetitive manual tasks and increased the speed at which information can be processed, which is great as it leaves time to get in to the interesting stuff and the areas that really add value for businesses. At the same time, it is important that we continue to support the next generation coming through the profession. We all learned what we were doing by getting close to the detail, asking questions and building experience over time, and we need to make sure AI enhances that development rather than taking those opportunities away.

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

Make time for regular check-ins with professional advisers and do not be afraid to stress test your business. It is important to understand what you do not know. The pandemic showed that almost anything can happen, so identifying financial strengths and weaknesses in advance is key to being able to adapt quickly and make informed decisions when circumstances change.

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

Businesses should prepare for continued uncertainty, increasing regulation, rapid technological change and ongoing pressure on costs and cash flow. It will become even more important to have strong financial information, robust controls and the ability to scenario plan.

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

A great accountant definitely needs technical skill, but strong relationships are built on much more than that. You need to be yourself, be approachable and understand the business as well as the numbers. I know that clients value advisers who communicate clearly and show genuine interest in what the organisation is trying to achieve.

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

Good project management is essential, as is having the right support around you. I focus on getting everyone aligned with the timetable and making sure responsibilities are clear. When deadlines are tight or issues are complex, clear communication and shared accountability make all the difference.

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

Know your numbers and ask questions early. Whether you are running a business or managing personal finances, understanding the information in front of you gives you more options and better control. I wish I'd understood more about finances when I was growing up, and I'd encourage everyone to educate themselves even if it sounds boring!

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

The work is both familiar and constantly changing. In audit, there is a clear annual cycle and a consistent purpose, but every year, even with the same business, something different has happened. That variety requires fresh thinking and curiosity, and that is what keeps the work interesting and motivating for me.

www.jcca.co.uk

> **Know your numbers and ask questions early.**

Gemma Gibson

Sam Gledhill of Devin Consulting with Stephen McNickle and Josh McKay of RMT Technology

North East aquatic consultants bring in AI solutions to make a bigger splash in global markets

A specialist North East engineering consultancy is aiming to make even more of a splash in global markets after developing an innovative AI-based project proposal review system.

Devin Consulting specialises in pool and spa engineering projects and has worked on a wide range of high-profile installations, including the aquatics centres for both the London 2012 Olympic Games and the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games.

The North Shields-based firm called in the specialist technology arm of RMT Accountants & Business Advisors, RMT Technology, to identify ways in which artificial intelligence technologies could make the biggest impact on its operations as it implements a five-year growth plan.

RMT Technology developed an AI tool which pulls out the key information within project tenders to allow for the Devin Consulting team to take on more opportunities more quickly and efficiently.

Founded 25 years ago, Devin Consulting has so far completed more than 600 swimming pool, spa and waterpark projects for a variety of public and private sector clients within and outside the UK.

Sam Gledhill, Project Engineer and Sustainability Lead at Devin Consulting, says: "Bringing AI solutions into the business in ways that will support the expertise of our team and help us build on our long-term track record is central to our five-year growth plan.

"We began to look at a number of off-the-shelf AI options, but found they were all cost prohibitive for a small business like ours, so started a discussion with RMT Technology, which is already our technology partner, about how we might development something of our own together.

"With project proposal documents often running to hundreds of pages, our responses naturally take a lot of time and effort, so there were gains to be made by using AI to make the process more efficient and ensure our responses are even more aligned with clients' requirements.

"The positive conversations we've had with the RMT Technology team during the new system's development have really helped us see how AI can support our growth ambitions and their expertise is now assisting us in implementing new ways of working that we believe will benefit the whole business."

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

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

Stephen McNickle, commercial director at RMT Technology, add: "As with any other technology, AI needs to be directed towards fulfilling specific business needs if it's going to achieve the maximum impact.

"Working with the Devin Consulting team on this project has been a really positive experience all round and they've now got new AI tools in place that will have a tangible impact on their future commercial performance."

RMT Accountants and RMT Technology are part of the Sumer Group, the UK's fastest-growing accountancy firm, which delivers professional support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and employs over 3,000 staff across more than 80 offices.

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Executive Eco Home Project in County Durham gains backing from North East Property Fund

Local developer, Eden Homes has used the funding to build Ascot House, a spacious open-plan living EPC A rated home. It is a six-bedroom detached development located in Dunelm Stables in Thornley which combines premium finishes with environmentally friendly technology including an energy-efficient timber frame design, solar panels, air source heat pump systems and underfloor heating.

These steps significantly reduce the carbon footprint and long-term energy costs for homeowners, while delivering luxury standard living.

Kevin Davidson from Eden Homes has received funding to support the development of Ascot House using a loan provided by FW Capital under North East Property Fund which is managed by FW Capital and backed by The North East Mayoral Strategic Authority (North East MSA).

Kevin Davidson, Eden Homes said: "We're proud to be delivering a home that doesn't compromise on style or sustainability. Located in a sought-after location in Durham, Ascot House is constructed to the highest standard and boasts impressive eco-friendly credentials. The inclusion of solar panels significantly reduces energy costs and environmental impact, contributing to a more sustainable lifestyle. The underfloor heating system further enhances energy efficiency. The investment from FW Capital has been instrumental and came at a time when our bank was not supporting small property developments. The support from the FW Capital team has been excellent."

Develop North PLC funds first phase of landmark Kelly's Wharf regeneration project in Hebburn

Develop North PLC (Develop North), the North East-based investment company, has provided a £1.95 million funding facility to unlock the first phase of Kelly's Wharf, a landmark riverside regeneration that will transform the historic former Hawthorn Leslie Shipyard in Hebburn into a thriving new residential community.

The 18-month facility provided to Hebburn Riverside Development Ltd, the specialist brownfield regeneration company, delivers the funding required to commence construction of the first nine executive family homes. The wider regeneration has been identified by South Tyneside Council as its leading private sector strategic housing priority, reflecting the importance of bringing one of the borough's most significant brownfield sites back into productive use while delivering much-needed high-quality homes.

While the first phase comprises nine homes, it represents the catalyst for a much larger vision that will regenerate one of Tyneside's most historically significant riverside sites. The scheme will create a vibrant mixed-use community with planning consent for more than 440 homes across future phases, together with commercial space, extensive landscaping and public realm improvements.

The first nine properties, which are being built by North East-based contractor Oakley Homes, will establish the architectural quality and character of Kelly's Wharf, comprising three-storey executive family homes overlooking the River Tyne.

NPIF II – NEL Supports BIMBO of North East Contractor Debmat Surfacing

Debmat Surfacing Limited (Debmat) - a long-established and highly respected North East surfacing contractor and civil engineering business - has been acquired through a Buy In Management Buy Out (BIMBO) supported by a seven-figure investment from NPIF II – NEL Debt Finance, managed by NEL Fund Managers as part of the Northern Powerhouse Investment Fund II (NPIF II).

Founded in 1979, Debmat provides domestic and commercial surfacing and civil engineering solutions to a wide range of sectors including construction, commercial, retail, and education, and prides itself on being able to deliver timely and cost-effective solutions to a diverse customer base.

The investment will also support Debmat's next stage of growth as the new leadership team plans to introduce complementary services,

including remediation activities, in response to client demand for a more holistic, end-to-end offering. These additions are also expected to create new local jobs alongside the company's existing core team of employees.

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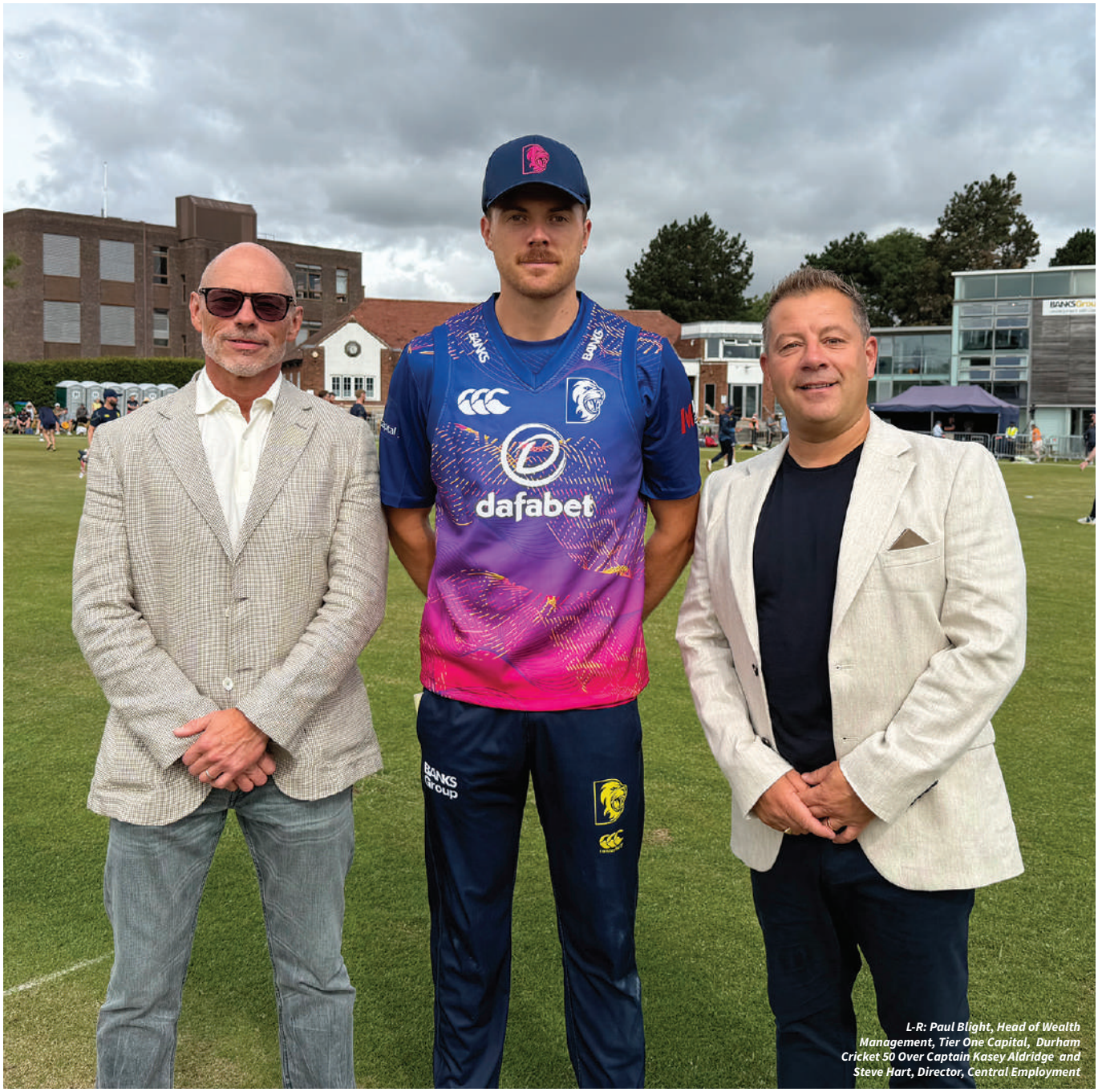

L-R: Paul Blight, Head of Wealth Management, Tier One Capital, Durham Cricket 50 Over Captain Kasey Aldridge and Steve Hart, Director, Central Employment

Wealth and fund managers team up with recruitment specialists to support Durham Cricket

Newcastle upon Tyne-based wealth and fund management experts, Tier One Capital and recruitment specialists, Central Employment, formed a partnership to sponsor Durham Cricket's Metro Bank one-day cup fixture.

Tier One Capital and Central Employment collaborated to sponsor the one-day cup game between Durham Cricket and Glamorgan held at South Northumberland cricket ground, in Gosforth.

Tom Seymour, Durham Cricket Commercial Director, said: "We are delighted that Tier One Capital and Central Employment have again come together to support the day.

"We are reliant on local businesses in the region supporting our fixture list and the one-day at game at South Northumberland is always a great day out and one of the highlights our fixture calendar."

Paul Blight, Head of Wealth Management, Tier One Capital, said, "We are delighted to team up with Durham Cricket Club and Central Employment to show our ongoing commitment to sport in the region.

"We are a North East based business and it is very important that we work together with other like-minded businesses to get behind the sporting community within our region and heartland."

Steve Hart, director at Central Employment, said: "This is a high-profile fixture in the Durham Cricket calendar, and we are also delighted to support South Northumberland Cricket Club, who are a family friendly cricket club.

"This annual event helps to unite the local cricket community and successfully brings together businesses with sport."

www.tieronecapital.co.uk

Compliance champions: Nutral founders secure full ownership

A fast-growing workforce management and compliance specialist has entered a new phase of growth after its existing senior management team acquired full ownership of the business through a debt funded management buy-out (MBO).

The senior management team of Nutral Solutions has acquired the entire shareholding in the group in a transaction funded by NEL Fund Managers, giving Alex Gosney and Ben Wardleworth full ownership of the business they launched in 2021.

The company has established itself as a trusted partner to principal contractors and major infrastructure projects, providing workforce management, IR35 compliance, contractor payroll and consultancy services. Its sister business, Workforce Assured, has also become an industry-recognised accreditation standard backed by some of the UK's largest construction firms.

RG Corporate Finance (RGCF) advised the management team on this MBO transaction, drawing together specialists from across its corporate finance, outsourced finance and tax teams to support the deal.

Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance at RGCF, said: "Nutral has built an outstanding reputation in a fast-growing market where compliance and workforce assurance are becoming increasingly important. It was a pleasure to support Alex and Ben as they secured full ownership and positioned the business for its next stage of growth."

Creating opportunity: Get Set UK joins global employment services group

One of the UK's leading employment and skills providers has joined forces with an international public services organisation in a transaction that creates a stronger platform to help people access work, training and community support.

Get Set UK has been acquired by Palladium, part of Global Infrastructure Solutions Inc, bringing together two organisations with a shared commitment to improving employability and social outcomes.

For more than 15 years, Get Set UK has delivered government-funded employment and skills programmes, building strong relationships with employers, commissioners and local partners. Palladium operates across more than 90 countries, delivering employment, education, infrastructure and economic development programmes worldwide.

RGCF advised the Get Set UK shareholders throughout the transaction, supported by colleagues from RG's Business Tax team.

Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance at RGCF, said: "Get Set UK has developed an exceptional reputation through its people-first approach and trusted relationships across the employment and skills sector. This transaction brings together two highly complementary organisations and creates an exciting platform for future growth."

Building together: Infrastructure deal strengthens regional contractor

A long-established civil engineering and environmental services business has been acquired by FCS Group in a deal that creates a stronger regional infrastructure specialist with broader capabilities and increased scale.

Founded in 1979, MCP Environmental has built a strong reputation across civil engineering, asbestos and environmental services, employing around 120 people and generating annual revenues of approximately £15 million. The business supports customers across infrastructure, utilities, rail, public sector and commercial markets.

The acquisition by FCS Group, parent company of Force Contracting, will allow both businesses to collaborate on larger frameworks while expanding their combined service offering. MCP Environmental will continue to operate under its existing management team.

RGCF advised the shareholders on the transaction, which also facilitated the exit of funding partner Beechbrook.

Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance at RGCF, said:

"MCP Environmental is a highly regarded business with an excellent management team and an enviable reputation across infrastructure and environmental services. This transaction brings together two complementary businesses and creates a strong platform for continued expansion."

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L-R: Ryan Bolton Director at PhysiquePro and Matt Elliott Senior Investment Executive at FW Capital

Flexing for Success

How the North East Elevate Fund is powering regional business growth

When ambitious business owners have a clear vision for growth, access to the right financial backing can make all the difference. Throughout the North East, passionate entrepreneurs are proving this by driving powerful growth in our local economy.

At the forefront of this economic momentum is the North East Elevate Fund, which is part of the North East Mayor Kim McGuinness' £100m regional investment framework administered by The North East Fund. It aims to strengthen access to early-stage finance for start up, scale up and growing companies in North East England, and tackle long-standing market failures that have hampered innovation-led growth in the region.

The fund is designed to stimulate regional growth and create high-quality, sustainable jobs. It is managed by FW Capital and our team of local finance experts, to deliver tailored financial packages starting at £25,000, and is scaling up to investments of £1million for more established businesses. The North East Elevate Fund can help businesses who may be at the start of their journey, or more established, with finance to help them grow and evolve.

Loans are available on terms up to 5 years, and can be used for a variety of purposes including:

- Working capital
- Purchasing equipment
- Recruitment
- Marketing
- Product/service development
- ESG initiatives
- Buying a business

A prime example of this momentum in action is Newcastle-based boutique gym operator PhysiquePro, which has secured a vital six-figure investment from the North East Elevate Fund. This capital injection is helping the luxury health and wellness brand fund the fit-out and launch of its third regional location in Ponteland.

Ryan Bolton Director at PhysiquePro said: "We're excited to bring the PhysiquePro gym to the affluent area of Ponteland. It's been designed for those who demand the best in every aspect of their lives, offering an unparalleled luxury fitness experience. We're especially excited to debut our exclusive, four-person group classes as part of a packed schedule of 40 weekly workouts. A massive thank you to FW Capital whose instrumental support has enabled us to execute a flawless fit-out and gear up for an unforgettable launch."

Matt Elliott, Senior Investment Executive at FW Capital said: "PhysiquePro has successfully created a premium boutique gym experience and it's fantastic to work with them as they embark on this exciting next chapter. The boutique fitness sector is evolving rapidly, and PhysiquePro stands out for its exceptional brand loyalty, premium offering, and clear vision. Helping ambitious local businesses to grow is exactly what the fund was designed for."

To find about more about the North East Fund and its Elevate and Accelerate Funds, visit www.northeastfund.org. 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

Robert Johnson, Renovo - Group Finance Director
Robert Still, Reward Funding - MD of Asset Finance
Andrew Welton, CCBS Group - Relationship Development Director
Antony Gray, Renovo - Founder & Managing Director
Chris Dobson, Renovo - Group Technical Sales Director

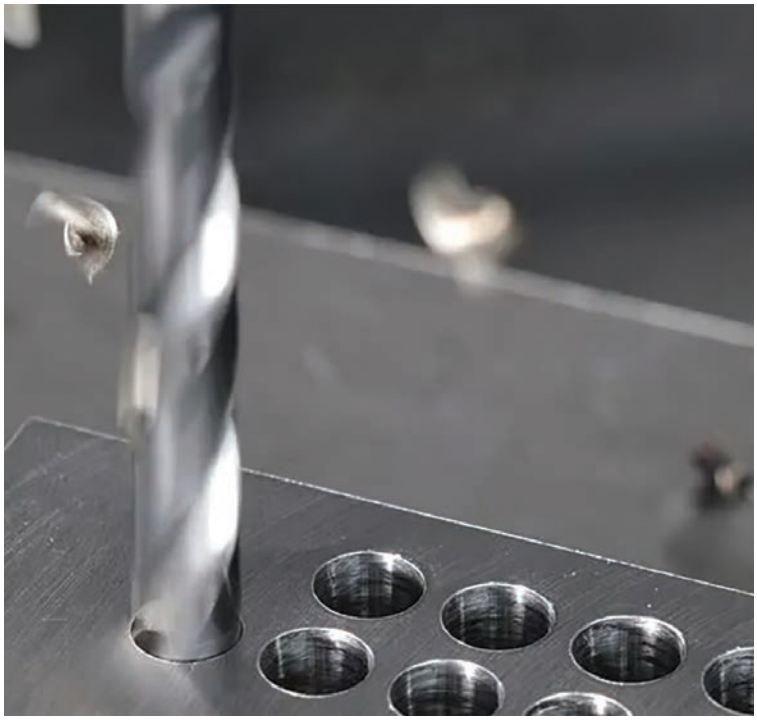
The challenge of success: Funding Renovo's next stage of growth

For many business owners, success brings a new set of challenges.

Winning new customers, investing in equipment and expanding into new markets are all signs that a business is moving in the right direction. Yet those same achievements often place new demands on cash flow and working capital, requiring leaders to think differently about how future expansion is funded.

It's a position Antony Gray knows well.

When he launched Renovo Solutions in Stanley in 2018, after progressing from apprentice to operations director within the tooling industry, the focus was on building a specialist cutting tool manufacturing business with a reputation for quality and service.



Eight years on, that business has evolved into Renovo Tool Group, with operations across the UK and Ireland and a track record of continual investment in its capabilities. Along the way, the group has expanded its offering, entered new markets and strengthened its position through the acquisition of Scottish tooling specialist Gilmour Tools.

As the business evolved, however, so did its funding requirements.

"The challenge changes as the business grows," says Antony. "In the early days, it's about building a platform and creating opportunities. As you grow, it's about making sure the business is structured in a way that allows you to keep moving forward and take advantage of the opportunities in front of you."

Having previously supported Renovo with funding linked to its wider growth journey, Corporate and Commercial Business Solutions (CCBS) was once again brought into discussions as the group reviewed how its existing funding arrangements could better support its future plans.

At this stage, Renovo had invested heavily in machinery and equipment across the group. While those assets had helped drive the company's development, they also represented capital tied up within existing funding arrangements.

The objective wasn't necessarily to borrow more. Instead, the business wanted to unlock value already sitting within its asset base, improve cash flow, and create greater flexibility for future investment.

Working alongside Renovo and coordinating discussions with NEL Fund Managers, Reward Funding and Durham Business Growth, CCBS helped bring together a funding package designed to support the group's next phase of development. At the centre of the package was a £1.6m asset refinance facility from Reward Funding, alongside investment from NEL Fund Managers and grant support from Durham Business Growth.

Together, the package released capital back into the business, reduced finance commitments by around £140,000, and created additional headroom for future investment.

For Antony, that's where the real value of the transaction lies.

"It gives us options," he explains. "We've always been a business that looks for ways to improve, invest and grow. Having greater flexibility means we're in a stronger position to continue investing in our capabilities, supporting our customers, and pursuing the opportunities we see in the market."

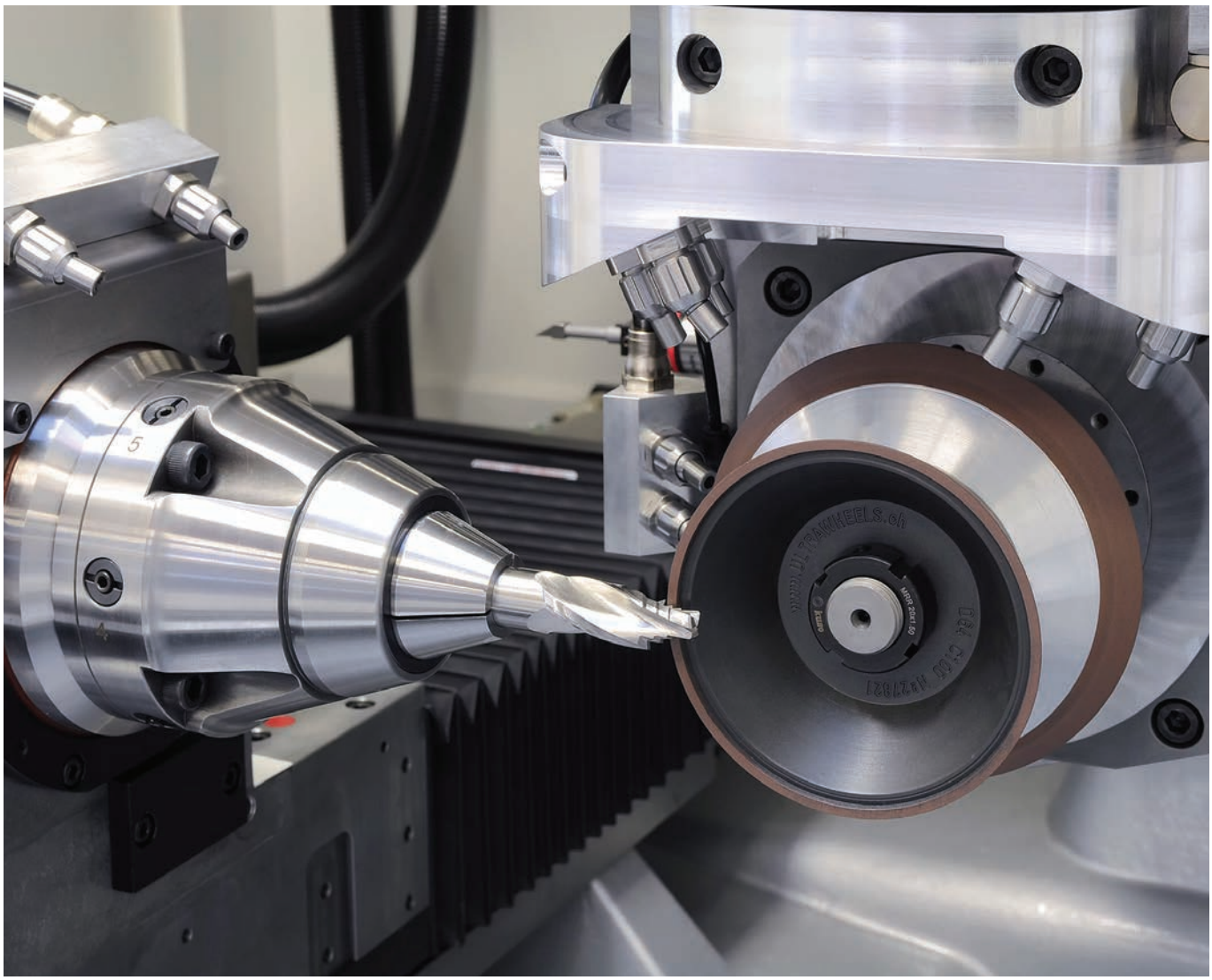
The deal also reflects a relationship that has developed over several years, with CCBS supporting Renovo through different stages of its journey and helping to ensure funding arrangements evolve alongside the business itself.

For Andrew Welton, Relationship Development Director at CCBS, that's ultimately the role of an adviser.

"The best outcomes come from understanding the bigger picture. This wasn't about completing a transaction. It was about helping a successful North East business create the platform for its next stage of development."

For Renovo, the latest funding package marks another chapter in a journey that began with a start-up in County Durham eight years ago. For other growing businesses, it's a reminder that growth doesn't stand still, and neither should the funding structures that support it.

ccbsg.co.uk



Trusted Business Partner: Better finance decisions

By Craig Jiggins, Commercial Finance Director, Trusted Business Partner

Why the right funding structure matters.

For most business owners, finance is rarely the end goal.

The real objective might be to purchase new equipment, acquire another business, invest in property, recruit a new team, strengthen working capital or take advantage of an opportunity that has arrived sooner than expected.

Finance is simply the tool that helps make it possible.

Yet when businesses begin looking at funding, the conversation can quickly become focused on whether finance is available and how quickly it can be secured.

Approval matters, of course. But it should not be the only measure of whether a funding decision is right for the business.

A facility can be approved and still be poorly suited to what the business is trying to achieve.

Craig Jiggins, Director at TBP

Look beyond the headline rate

Cost will always be an important consideration, but comparing finance purely on interest rate can mean overlooking factors that may have a much greater impact over the life of the facility.

The term, deposit, monthly repayments, security requirements, fees, final payments and overall flexibility can all affect cash flow and future plans.

A competitive rate may look attractive initially, but not if the repayment structure places unnecessary pressure on the business or restricts what it may want to do next.

Equally, using cash to fund an investment can appear to be the simplest option, but that cash may also be needed to support wages, stock, tax commitments, working capital or the next growth opportunity.

Securing funding is only part of the decision. The more important consideration is whether the facility is structured in a way that supports the business today without restricting what it may want to do tomorrow.

That means considering the immediate requirement alongside cash flow, existing commitments and longer-term plans.

More choice does not always mean an easier decision

The commercial finance landscape has changed considerably.

Alongside traditional banks, businesses can now access a broad range of specialist and alternative lenders, each with different appetites, criteria and areas of expertise.

That creates greater choice and, in many cases, more opportunities for businesses to access finance.

However, it can also make the market more difficult to navigate.

A lender or facility that works well for one business, sector or transaction may not necessarily be suitable for another.

At Trusted Business Partner, we work with businesses seeking funding for everything from vehicles, machinery and equipment to commercial property, acquisitions, working capital and expansion.

The solutions may be very different, but the starting point should always be the same: understanding what the business is trying to achieve before deciding how it should be funded.

Start the conversation earlier

Some of the most challenging funding situations arise when finance is only considered once the requirement becomes urgent.

Starting the conversation earlier gives business owners more time to understand the market, compare options, prepare the right information and consider how different structures could affect the wider business.

It can also allow advisers, lenders and brokers to explore a broader range of solutions before time becomes the overriding factor.

There will rarely be one funding solution that is right for every business.

But looking beyond approval, understanding the wider market and considering how finance fits with the business's longer-term plans can lead to better decisions.

Because accessing finance is only part of the conversation. Structuring it properly is what can make the difference.

For more Insights visit www.tbp.co.uk
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Solicitor of the month...

Chris Morgan

Corporate Partner, Burnetts Solicitors LLP

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

I actually wanted to be a police officer, but when I decided to go to university, law felt like the more intriguing path. I've always enjoyed reading and problem-solving, so becoming a solicitor seemed a natural fit. I completed an undergraduate law degree, then a master's in corporate law, before securing a training contract in Newcastle.

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

I've built up a loyal base of repeat clients. As a result, clients often contact me first with any queries. Burnetts is a full-service law firm, so if I'm not the right person to advise, I can introduce them to someone else.

I practice in corporate law, including mergers, acquisitions, restructures and other company and commercial matters. The most frequent query I receive is probably clients looking to buy or sell a business. It's important to understand what a client wants from the outset and to work well with the client's other advisers, such as their tax adviser and accountant.

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

Covid had a huge impact, particularly the wider use of video calls which benefits both lawyers and clients by allowing face-to-face discussions without unnecessary travel and expense. AI is also having a substantial impact on the way legal services are delivered.

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

Probably that solicitors are not very approachable and that we're mainly interested in billing. In reality, most of us are genuinely interested in helping clients, understanding what matters to them and putting their interests first.

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

Speak to a solicitor promptly so you understand the merits of your position and any important issues, such as limitation periods. Once you have that advice, try to negotiate a sensible outcome directly with the other party where possible. That can preserve the commercial relationship, which may be important for retaining a customer or client, and it can greatly reduce the time and cost involved in dealing with a dispute. Running a business is demanding enough without prolonged litigation becoming a distraction.

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

The support of colleagues is essential. We have a fantastic Corporate team at Burnetts, as well as support from the wider firm so there is always someone available if a second opinion is needed. Our Corporate team includes lawyers at all levels, including five Partners. Outside work, I play football, badminton and the occasional game of padel, which helps me switch off. My partner is also a great support and I have the support of my wider family too.

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

AI allows us to complete some tasks more quickly than a few years ago, including aspects of due diligence on M&A matters. However, it has limitations. I am often asked to review contracts clients have generated using AI and they are rarely suitable without significant amendment such as lacking the detail needed to work properly; sometimes the clauses are simply wrong. For example, a client based in England used AI to draft a contract and it produced a document based on US law. AI is useful, but only if it is given the right information and then reviewed by someone who understands whether the output is appropriate. I do not think it will replace solicitors, but it will change how legal services are delivered.

What are the key qualities that make a great Solicitor?

Overall, I think you have to enjoy being a solicitor. It's sometimes not your typical 9-5 and is full of time pressures and interesting but difficult issues. Like anything, it is hard to do well over the long term if you don't enjoy it and are not willing to give it your full commitment. I sort of fell into the legal profession, having originally wanted to be a police officer, but now I cannot imagine doing anything else.

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

It can be difficult when a client decides on a course of action that may not be entirely in their best interests, often because of their personal circumstances. Our role is to advise clearly on the routes available and which option we think is best suited to their situation. However, it is ultimately the client's decision and it is important to respect that and act accordingly, provided it remains within our professional obligations.

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

I genuinely enjoy my job and when you enjoy what you do, motivation comes naturally. Many M&A clients are owner-managed businesses, so acting on a sale can be particularly rewarding, especially where the business has been built by the owner or their family over many years. One business sale involved the fourth generation of a family and seeing clients reflect on how far they have come is very satisfying.

www.burnetts.co.uk

> It's important to understand what a client wants from the outset.

Chris Morgan

L-R: Patrick Kendall (Pikup Padel), Claire Naughten (Muckle LLP) and Derick Wilson (Pikup Padel)

Padel power

By Claire Naughten, Muckle llp

In a new £1m purpose-built facility, one of sport's hottest new trends is set to take the North East by storm.

Pikup Padel's new Gateshead centre opens as the public's passion for padel (a mash-up between tennis and squash) continues to surge, showing no signs of slowing down any time soon.

Covering 33,500 sq. ft and housing 11 indoor courts, Pikup Padel's new centre builds on the growing momentum behind the sport and came to life with legal support from commercial law firm, Muckle LLP.

Fast developing an enviable reputation in the padel world, Muckle is leading the way when it comes to supporting padel developments. Delivering legal support across many aspects of development, Muckle helps to get projects like Pikup Padel off the ground,

"We've been very fortunate to work with some fantastic partners," Patrick Kendall, Director of Pikup Padel said.

"Muckle LLP in particular played a huge part in helping us to secure the unit by guiding us through the process to make this idea come to life."

It took 11 months of hard work and the navigation of varying complex legal regulations to make Pikup Padel's vision a reality.

Claire Naughten, partner at Muckle LLP, led the legal team advising on the development.

"If you're looking to set up in this sector, it can feel a bit of a legal minefield," she said. "When you're facing issues like obtaining the correct planning permissions, changing the use of the site, questions over funding and so on, it can be overwhelming.

"But it doesn't have to be that way. The Muckle team offers a whole range of commercial legal expertise. We are a one-stop shop, advising on everything from property, commercial, sports, governance and corporate law to construction, finance and employment law, all with a depth of knowledge that will help you realise the full ambition of your project."

The speed with which padel mania has emerged shows how quickly commercial opportunities like this can arise. Those looking to seize opportunities want to act fast, but they need to be mindful of the varying legal and commercial challenges of setting up a venue. The law can be complex; it is hard to underestimate the value of an advisor who can guide you through the entire process to make sure things run smoothly.

For these reasons, it makes commercial sense to partner with a law firm that offers a breadth of specialist knowledge – one that can draw on varied expertise from across the firm to tailor the right package of support for each individual project.

Padel may be the sport of the moment, but Muckle's reputation and understanding of the sports sector stretches back much further. Ranked nationally by Legal 500 for sports, the firm advises clients across the sports industry, with demand continuing to grow.

"Working at a national level with bodies such as the FA, Sport England and England Athletics, as well as local grassroots sports clubs, our lawyers couple legal expertise with a detailed understanding of how the sports sector works," Claire explained. "This can be really helpful when it comes to advising on developments like Pikup Padel."

More than just a craze, padel looks set to become a permanent fixture in the sporting and leisure landscape of the UK. Easy to learn, accessible, and not weather-dependent (always a positive in the UK climate), padel has captured the public imagination. Hardly surprising, then, that businesses are seeking out commercial opportunities, eagerly looking to convert or construct premises for padel courts and clubs.

But for those wanting to capitalise on the opportunity it's important not to be swept along.

"Helping the Pikup Padel team bring their vision to life shows how smooth things can be if you engage advisors early on," Claire explained. "I would strongly urge anyone considering a padel development to get advice from lawyers experienced in the property, construction and sports sector. Not only will they guide you through the process, but they'll also help ensure the project's long-term success."

To learn more, please contact Claire Naughten on 0191 211 7909 or email Claire.naughten@muckle-llp.com

Subscription traps

By David Wozniak, Muckle llp

What consumer-facing businesses need to know.

The UK government is introducing new rules aimed at tackling "subscription traps" and giving consumers greater control over recurring payments. The rules, intended to come into force January 2027, form part of the Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (DMCCA) and will place new responsibilities on businesses that sell goods, services or digital content through subscription models.

Now is a good time for businesses to start preparing. Reviewing terms and conditions, checking the customer journey and ensuring staff understand the new requirements can help avoid a last-minute compliance rush.

So, what do the new rules mean in practice?

What information needs to be provided before a customer signs up?

Businesses will need to make important subscription information clear and easy to understand before a customer enters into a subscription contract.

This includes details about the cost and frequency of subscription payments, when the subscription renews, and how the customer can cancel. Key information must be prominent and accessible to customers.

When will customers need to receive reminders?

Under the DMCCA, customers must now be sent reminders about their subscription contracts, in particular before a trial period ends, before 12-month+subscription terms renew and every six months for rolling monthly plans.

How easy must cancellation be?

Customers must be able to exit their contracts easily without unnecessary hurdles. It must be as easy to exit a subscription contract as it is to enter one.

So, if a customer can sign up online, they must be able to cancel online. Businesses can offer other cancellation methods, such as by phone, but cannot make customers use a more difficult route simply to make cancellation harder.

What about the 14-day cooling-off periods?

The DMCCA introduces two types of 14-day cooling-off period.

There is the 'initial cooling off period' – when a customer first enters into a subscription contract. Then the 'renewal cooling off period' - at the end of a trial period or when a contract of 12 months+ automatically renews.

During both cooling off periods, customers have 14 days during which they are able to cancel and receive a full or proportionate refund.

Crucially, it is a criminal offence if a business fails to provide a consumer with their cooling-off rights.

Can businesses charge cancellation penalties?

If a customer chooses to cancel their subscription during either of the cooling off periods, no penalties can apply.

Who will enforce the rules?

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) will have significant powers to investigate breaches and take enforcement action, including imposing financial penalties directly in appropriate cases.

The potential consequences are significant. Businesses could face fines of up to 10% of global annual turnover, as well as the reputational damage that can come from enforcement action.

The CMA have made it clear that they intend to come down hard on any business that fails to comply with the DMCCA and there have already been several recent cases of them doing so. Virgin Media were recently given a £28m fine for repeatedly preventing customers from cancelling subscription contracts.

For consumer-facing businesses, the message is clear: subscription compliance should be treated as a business priority, not simply a legal exercise. Reviewing the customer journey now can help businesses build subscription models that are both compliant and easier for customers to understand.

If you would like advice on how to ensure your subscription payment options are DMCCA compliant, or you have any other consumer law-related queries, please contact: David Wozniak
david.wozniak@muckle-llp.com
0191 211 7831

Compliance Fatigue

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

How law firms can beat it.

Carolyn Beal

I recently spoke about legal compliance fatigue at an event for different sized law firms from across the country, and it sparked a lot of discussion about how it affects compliance role holders and firms' employees.

It was clear, whether in large practices with dedicated compliance teams, or smaller firms where compliance responsibilities sit alongside fee-earning work, many people feel overwhelmed by the volume and frequency of regulatory change.

What is it?

Compliance fatigue is the exhaustion and emotional burden that comes from navigating constant change in compliance requirements or systems, leading people to feel overwhelmed and disengaged. It can create frustration about the time spent responding to new requirements and reduce focus on core work.

The challenges

Law firms receive updates from multiple regulators, often through different channels, while also responding to evolving cyber threats, money laundering risks and the possibility of human error. Keeping pace can feel relentless. That's before firms even begin deciding how those changes should be recorded and implemented, and employees are trained on new processes.

The challenges for COLPs, COFAs and MLROs are huge. For smaller firms, people in those roles face the challenge alongside managing client work and running the business.

The challenges for employees revolve around the struggle to keep up with frequent internal changes and understanding how the changes apply to them. The reason for new requirements is often lost, leading to increased systems but reduced compliance.

How to deal with it

For me, the best way of dealing with it is to focus on quality and effect. Consider the following strategies:

- **Identify a small number of trusted information sources and use them consistently.** The SRA sends monthly emails with compliance updates. The Law Society has a Risk and Compliance section. Find a few reputable compliance professionals to follow on LinkedIn. This reduces the feeling of being bombarded from multiple sources or worry about missing something.
- **Centralise information.** Create a centralised source of information for employees to consult. It's much quicker to navigate when there is only one place to check, reducing the back and forth of questions or ignoring requirements.
- **Assign clear roles.** One person doesn't have to do everything, even if there is no dedicated compliance team. Junior fee earners wanting to develop their career may be able to help by monitoring updates or maintaining documentation, as long as responsibility remains with the compliance lead.
- **Filter and translate information for employees.** Where possible, provide a summary of what is different. Consider impact: What has changed? Who does it affect? What must be done differently? For new procedures, give practical, pre-completed examples to show what is expected. Try not to circulate the whole policy with an instruction to 'read it and follow it' with no additional break down.
- **Provide regular, bite-sized training.** Lunch and Learn sessions work well in all sizes of firm and can be implemented departmentally.
- **Communication is key.** Find a method that works for your firm. Use face-to-face updates, monthly communications, 'How to…' guides, or attend team meetings. Circulate a regular piece on frequent or unusual questions. Compliance teams: Make sure you are regularly seen and heard from by your colleagues across the firm, because it really helps with engagement.

The challenge for law firms is to move away from a culture of endless box-ticking with additional requirements, towards more effective and efficient compliance. Those that achieve this balance will be better placed to protect their clients, their firm and reputation, and will find less of an impact on a day-to-day basis. It can take time to change, but it is worth it.

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North East business leaders rally again as 'W Club' enters second season following vital fundraising success

Following a phenomenal debut year that secured the immediate future of elite women's basketball in the region, Newcastle Eagles' 'W Club' has officially opened its doors for the upcoming season, calling on North East businesses to help make this year bigger, bolder, and even more impactful.

Launched last year at the Vertu Arena, the initiative brought together a powerhouse collective of regional business leaders pledging financial backing and strategic support to the Newcastle Eagles Women's team. Thanks to those collective corporate efforts, significant funding was raised, directly safeguarding the women's team and ensuring their place on the court.

Now, as the new season approaches, the founding group is calling on the regional business community to build on that vital momentum. The goal for this year is simple: expand the network, increase the financial backing, and elevate the profile of women's sport in the North East to new heights.

Sophie Milliken, CEO of Moja and founding group member, said: "What we achieved last year proved exactly what happens when the North East business community steps up. But we are just getting started.

"This isn't just about survival; it's about growth, visibility, and creating a sustainable legacy for women in sport. We need more businesses to stand with us this season to show the next generation of female athletes what is possible."

Chloe Gaynor, Head Coach of the Eagles Women's team, added:

"The W Club has been vital for the continuity of the women's programme. We have gained a community of likeminded business owners who want to push forward and support the women's game, contributing not only financially, but also with their knowledge of industry, promotion of the games and what we do, as well as providing support on the sideline at games.

"I'd like to thank them for the support they have provided over the last 12 months and I look forward to seeing what we can achieve together in the second year. I'd like to invite as many businesses to get involved as possible, and let's push the game forward together!"

Membership in the W Club offers corporate backers an annual package of commercial and community benefits, including exclusive networking opportunities, brand exposure, and game ticketing packages, alongside supporting the club's vital grassroots outreach into local schools with the women's team's STEM programme, led by head coach Chloe Gaynor and the players.

Paul Blake, Managing Director of Newcastle Eagles, added: "The North East business community rallied behind our women's team last year, and the buzz they created across the region in creating the 'W Club' was incredible.

"As we head into the new season, I know we can build on that amazing first year of support. We are so grateful to our founding members for their continued backing and to all who joined them throughout the last 12 months.

"We can't wait to see what our 'W Club' can empower our women's programme to achieve in year two."

David Pritchard, Head of Business Development & Marketing at Sintons noted: "Whether you are a major regional employer or a growing independent business, the W Club is a direct, impactful way to give back. We set a high bar last year, but this year we want to go bigger and better."

A limited number of corporate memberships for the new season are now open. Businesses looking to make a tangible impact on regional women's sport and connect with a dynamic network of fellow leaders can find out more at ***newcastle-eagles.com/wclub***

The W Club's Founding members:

Carl Swansbury, Partner and Head of Corporate Finance, Ryecroft Glenton

David Pritchard, Head of Business Development and Marketing, Sintons LLP

Sophie Milliken, CEO, Moja

Jon Dudgeon, Co-Founder and CEO, Blu Sky

Sarah Thackray, Co-Founder, BeaconHouse Events

Elaine Stroud, CEO, the Entrepreneurs Forum

2025/26 W Club Members (Main image, L-R):

Toni Fitzgerald, Lumo

Vince Moore

Helen Richardson, Therapeutic Massage Clinic

Ross Woodward, NE Solutions

Chloe Gaynor, Newcastle Eagles

Paul Blake, Newcastle Eagles

Jack Saward, Saward Marketing and Events

Richard Salkeld, Lumo

Matthew Brady, Ward Hadaway

Martin Stout, Tier One Capital

Alison Jones, Muckle LLP

Sarah Thackray, BeaconHouse Events

David Pritchard, Sintons LLP

Sophie Milliken MBE, Moja

Kim Rowling, Blu Sky

2025/26 W Club Founding Members (Inset image, L-R):

Chloe Gaynor, Newcastle Eagles

Sarah Thackray, BeaconHouse Events

David Pritchard, Sintons LLP

Sophie Milliken MBE, Moja

Kim Rowling, Blu Sky

Paul Blake, Newcastle Eagles

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Explain Research

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Greggs Foundation

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Richard Reed supports Love Amelia's Back to School Campaign

Richard Reed Solicitors has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting families across Sunderland by donating to and volunteering with local charity Love Amelia as part of its annual Back to School project.

Members of the Richard Reed team recently took part in a volunteering day supporting Love Amelia's School Bags project, helping to prepare essential school supplies for children ahead of the new academic year.

This year, Love Amelia is distributing 2,000 school bags to children across Sunderland, with 1,750 bags being provided through the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme and a further 250 going to Gentoo tenants.

The Back to School project has been developed to address an unmet community need for essential school supplies and to ensure children are equipped and ready to begin the new academic year.

Alongside providing practical support, the initiative aims to reduce some of the emotional pressures children and their families may experience around returning to school. By ensuring pupils have access to the equipment they need, Love Amelia helps to ease financial pressures on families, reduce the stigma

associated with hardship and give children greater confidence as they enter the classroom.

For Richard Reed Solicitors, supporting the campaign reflects the firm's longstanding commitment to the communities it serves.

Sarah Reid, Managing Director at Richard Reed Solicitors, said: "As a Sunderland-based firm, supporting our local community is incredibly important to us. We work with individuals and families from across the area every day, so we understand that financial pressures can affect families in many different ways.

"Something as simple as having the right school bag and equipment can make a significant difference to how a child feels when they walk through the school gates at the start of a new term. Every child deserves to feel prepared, included and excited about their education, regardless of their family's circumstances.

"That is why we strongly believe in supporting Love Amelia's Back to School campaign. As well as making a donation, it was fantastic for members of our team to give their time and get directly involved in preparing the school bags. Seeing the work that goes into the project and knowing the difference those bags will make to children across Sunderland made the volunteering day especially rewarding for the team."

Feedback received from families following the 2025 campaign demonstrates the impact the initiative can have. One parent said: "My child was so excited to receive their school bag. It made a big difference."

Another described how the support meant that "school felt far less stressful", while one family said the project had helped their child feel confident about returning to school while relieving significant pressure at home.

Richard Reed Solicitors believes businesses have an important role to play in strengthening the communities in which they operate. The firm's support for Love Amelia combines financial assistance with hands-on volunteering, enabling employees to contribute directly to an initiative making a tangible difference to local families.

The Back to School campaign forms part of Love Amelia's wider work supporting babies, children and families experiencing poverty and hardship across Sunderland and the surrounding area.

Through its donation and team volunteering day, Richard Reed Solicitors is proud to play a part in helping 2,000 local children begin the new school year feeling equipped, supported and ready to learn.

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Paul Lott and Rishi Kohli

The legal health check every growing business should do before autumn

For many business owners, summer provides a brief opportunity to pause and reflect before the final push towards year end. While sales targets, recruitment plans and growth strategies often take centre stage, autumn is also the ideal time to carry out a legal health check.

As businesses grow, legal documents and processes can quickly become outdated. What worked when you were a start-up with three employees may no longer be fit for purpose as your team expands, your client base grows and your commercial relationships become more complex.

Taking the time to review the legal foundations of your business can help identify risks, avoid costly disputes and ensure you are well positioned for future growth.

Review your contracts

One of the most common issues we encounter is businesses relying on outdated contracts, terms and conditions or supplier agreements.

Your contracts should accurately reflect how your business operates today. Consider whether your customer agreements clearly define payment terms, responsibilities and expectations. Review supplier arrangements to ensure they remain fit for purpose and check that any bespoke agreements properly protect your interests.

A well-drafted contract can prevent misunderstandings and provide valuable protection if a dispute arises.

Check your employment documentation

Employment law continues to evolve, making it essential for employers to keep policies and contracts under regular review.

Take the opportunity to check that employment contracts reflect current roles and responsibilities and that staff handbooks and workplace policies remain up to date. Areas such as flexible working, family leave, grievance procedures and sickness absence management should all be considered.

Businesses that invest time in maintaining robust employment documentation are often better equipped to manage challenges when they arise.

Protect your business relationships

As businesses grow, owner relationships can become more complex. If your business has multiple shareholders, directors or partners, it is worth reviewing whether the agreements governing those relationships remain appropriate.

Shareholder agreements and partnership agreements can help clarify decision-making processes, ownership rights and what happens if an individual wishes to leave the business. Having these arrangements in place can significantly reduce the likelihood of future disputes.

Assess property and premises arrangements

Whether you own commercial property or lease your premises, it is important to understand your rights and obligations.

Review lease terms, renewal dates, break clauses and repairing responsibilities. Businesses planning to relocate, expand or downsize should ensure they fully understand the legal implications before making decisions.

Property commitments are often among the largest financial obligations a business will undertake, making proactive legal advice particularly valuable.

Don't wait for a problem

Many legal issues only come to light when a dispute arises, a key employee leaves, a business is sold or a contractual relationship breaks down.

A proactive legal health check helps identify potential risks before they become expensive problems. It can also uncover opportunities to strengthen processes, improve compliance and support future growth plans.

As autumn approaches and businesses prepare for a busy final quarter, now is the perfect time to take stock. Investing a little time in reviewing the legal foundations of your business could save significant time, cost and stress in the months and years ahead.

After all, the strongest businesses are not just built on ambition and hard work – they are built on solid foundations too.

If you would like to review your contracts, employment documentation, shareholder arrangements or commercial property commitments, the team at Sweeney Miller Law can help you identify potential risks and ensure your business is ready for whatever comes next. Call 0345 900 5401 or email enquiries@sweeneymiller.co.uk

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Building a Business

If you're on the move, growing your company, or starting from scratch, what commercial property pitfalls should you consider? Simon Jewitt, Director and Head of Commercial Property at Cartmell Shepherd Solicitors, shares some key points to keep in mind before signing on the dotted line.

For most people, buying or renting a home is familiar territory. Commercial property is different. Whether you're taking a lease on your first premises, buying a building for your business, or investing in property as part of a growth strategy, the legal and financial considerations are often much more complex.

A commercial property isn't simply somewhere to operate from. It can have a significant impact on your business's future success, flexibility and profitability. Getting it wrong can lead to unexpected costs, operational restrictions, or legal challenges that are expensive and time-consuming to resolve.

While the location, size and appearance of a property may be the first things that catch your eye, it's what's hidden beneath the surface that often matters most.

Leasing commercial premises

Leasing is often the preferred option for new and growing businesses. It generally requires less upfront capital and can offer greater flexibility than purchasing a property outright.

One of the most common mistakes businesses make is waiting until the heads of terms have already been agreed before seeking legal advice. In reality, it's often beneficial to take advice before that point. These initial discussions form the foundation of the lease and can be difficult to renegotiate later.

There are several key points to consider. How long is the lease term? Are there rent reviews and how are they calculated? Is there a break clause allowing you to leave early if circumstances change? What restrictions apply to the way you use the property?

Repair obligations also deserve careful attention. Many tenants assume they are only responsible for damage caused during their occupation. However, some leases require tenants to put a property into good repair regardless of its condition at the start of the tenancy. Without appropriate safeguards, this can create significant and unexpected costs.

Business owners should also consider security of tenure. Some commercial leases provide protection under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, giving tenants the right to request a new lease when the current term expires. Where that protection has been excluded, there may be no automatic right to remain in occupation even if the business is going well.

Buying a commercial property

For businesses looking for long-term stability or an investment opportunity, purchasing may be the right option.

Before committing to a purchase, a thorough survey is essential. Commercial properties can conceal costly issues such as structural defects, damp, asbestos, drainage problems or access limitations. Specialist inspections of services such as electrics, gas and heating systems can also identify issues that may not be immediately visible.

Legal due diligence is equally important. This goes far beyond confirming ownership of the property. Checks should include rights of access, restrictive covenants, planning permissions, building regulations compliance, environmental matters and any existing occupational arrangements that could affect future use or value.

Part or all of commercial properties are often already occupied when being sold. Existing leases, licences or informal occupation arrangements can create ongoing obligations and should be fully investigated before contracts are exchanged.

Thinking ahead

Whether leasing or buying, it pays to think about the future as well as the present.

Businesses evolve. You may need additional space, decide to downsize, sell the business or change the way you operate. Understanding how flexible your arrangements are can prove invaluable later.

For tenants, important questions include whether the lease can be assigned to a buyer if the business is sold, or whether part of the premises can be sublet if needs change.

Owners should focus on keeping the property's legal position clear and marketable. Properly documented arrangements and well-drafted leases can help protect value and make the property more attractive to future buyers or lenders.

There are also wider regulatory changes to keep on the radar. Energy efficiency requirements for commercial buildings continue to evolve, and landlords and tenants alike should be aware of their obligations and potential future costs when assessing a property.

Making the right decision

There is no one-size-fits-all answer when deciding whether to lease or buy commercial premises. The right choice will depend on your business objectives, finances and long-term plans.

Leasing can provide flexibility and lower upfront costs, while ownership offers greater control and the potential for long-term investment growth. The key is understanding the legal and practical implications before making a commitment.

At Cartmell Shepherd, our Commercial Property team works with businesses across Cumbria, Northumberland and beyond, advising on acquisitions, disposals, leases, landlord and tenant matters, and property aspects of corporate transactions.

Whether you're considering buying or renting commercial premises, we can help you evaluate your options, avoid common pitfalls and move forward with confidence.

To speak to Simon Jewitt and the team, call 01228 516666 or email enquiries@cartmells.co.uk

> It's what's hidden beneath the surface that often matters most.

Simon Jewitt

Barry Speker OBE

Straight talk with Speker

By Barry Speker OBE

The sudden announcement that the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and their children are returning to live permanently in the UK has created just the the vast press interest that the couple claimed to be escaping by their fleeing to Montecito.

Having opted out of being active Royals, they have spent over five years milking their version of life in the Royal family, besmirching the Waleses and others with interviews, books and documentaries and allegations of racism or is it unconscious bias.

No reason for the sudden decision to return has been given which is strange if only for Harry's persistent claim that it is too dangerous for him to bring his wife and children back to the UK for a visit unless provided with full-blown state funded security, about which he took (unsuccessful) litigation.

Then they undertake a low-key visit to the King followed shortly by the 'we're coming back' announcement.

Is it because they wish the children to be enrolled in English schools in September, or because they have run out of money following the failure of their Netflix productions including the much panned flop movie Cookie Queens? Has Meghan actually secured a part in the Guy Ritchie series Gentlemen?

Or is the justification that the disastrous unsuccessful legal action by Harry, Elton John, Baroness Lawrence and others against the Daily Mail caused Harry to face reality?

The Judge has ordered the claimants to pay a sum of more than £9 million towards the Mail's legal costs and that is just a first instalment of a total of more than £35million to be paid. Then there is the annual bill of £5million for the protection Harry wants.

Clearly this saga will run and run.

That many parents find the adolescent banter in texts and posts impenetrable is undeniable. However as an alternative to persisting in persuasion of the use of comprehensible English, Tesco Mobile has 'upped the vibes' by offering of version of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations in teenage vernacular, Gen Z slang.

This is in the form of a brutally abridged version (to take account of short attention span) of the book as 'Bare Expectations'. AI has been used to transport Pip and Joe from the 19th Century to 2026. Poor Magwitch is described as looking 'absolutely clapped, proper grimy' and the graveyard giving of 'proper bleak vibes'. Pip asks Isabella if "We fam?"

It remains to be seen if other classics will receive the same treatment such as the Tale of Two Cities whose famous first line 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' becomes 'it was slaps, it was dog water'.

Maybe the powers that be will change the syllabus and no more 'Chazzy D!'

The Premier League season got under way in style at St James Park, a match against old rivals Liverpool. This turned out to be highly appropriate for the staging of an emotional tribute to recently deceased Kevin Keegan, a much loved legend at both clubs. Wor Flags did not disappoint and the stadium was remarkably festooned.

The crowd were United in a celebration and tribute to KK but the opportunity was taken for the Newcastle fans to voice their opinion about the returning Alexander Isak.

A memorable occasion but one tradition persisted - Newcastle leading 2-1 in the 95th minute gave away a penalty and had to be content with a 2-2 draw. Plus ça change.

barryspeker@hotmail.com

Firm's new service in anniversary year coincides with sesquicentenary of UK trade marks

L-R: Samantha Higgins, Richard Flounders and Charlotte Barugh

A law firm which is celebrating 150 years of taking care of clients has launched a new specialist service dealing with trade marks, copyright, design and patents - in a year that also marks the sesquicentenary of the first trade mark registration in the UK.

Jacksons recently supported CILEX lawyer Charlotte Barugh through a Postgraduate Certificate in Intellectual Property at Bournemouth University.

IP is a growing area of law which the firm has already been supporting clients with for decades.

However, as a result of Charlotte's qualification, she is now equipped to head up a new specialist intellectual property service from the dispute resolution team alongside Samantha Higgins, associate solicitor in Jacksons' Corporate and Commercial team.

The team will support clients across a broad range of intellectual property matters, including protection, enforcement and dispute resolution.

The timing of this new service launch is particularly serendipitous, as 2026 also marks 150 years since the registration of the UK's first trade mark - Bass Brewery's distinctive Red Triangle.

Through her course, which is accredited by the Intellectual Property Regulation Board, Charlotte has gained additional knowledge and expertise in this area from leading academics at the Centre for Intellectual Property Policy and Management (CIPPM).

This has armed the firm with additional advanced knowledge of copyright, trade marks, patents, and designs, as well as the practical application of IP law in commercial and dispute contexts, making Jacksons a go-to legal expert on matters relating to intellectual property.

Charlotte, who completed the five-month course alongside her full-time job, said she was "delighted" with her achievement.

"Completing a postgraduate qualification in just five months alongside practice was a challenge, but one that was incredibly rewarding," she said.

"IP is a growing and exciting area of law, and I'm looking forward to putting what I have learnt into practice and spending more time working in this area."

Charlotte's qualification provides the firm with enhanced capabilities in this area of law and strengthens the firm's ability to deliver strategic, commercially focused advice across both contentious and transactional matters.

Erica Turner, head of legal at Jacksons said it was particularly interesting that the firm had launched this service in its 150th anniversary year, when 2026 also marks 150 years since the iconic Bass logo was registered as the UK's first trademark.

"It's a very happy coincidence!" Erica said.

"I am pleased we are able to offer this new service in what is a growing area of law, thanks to Charlotte's hard work and dedication in achieving this additional qualification.

"Charlotte is now well equipped to develop an enhanced IP service over and above what we were already offering as a firm and will be able to support clients through any IP challenges or preventing future issues relating to IP law, including copyright, trade marks, patents, and designs."

Charlotte's latest qualification in IP builds on her recent achievement in becoming a CILEX lawyer, which saw her being included on the CILEX Authorised Practitioners Directory and enabled her to practice with equivalence to a solicitor in her specialist area.

This route to becoming a lawyer, which is an alternative to the traditional completion of a degree followed by a legal practice course, takes six years to achieve.

Charlotte was amongst the first people in the country to qualify as a CILEX lawyer through this route, after beginning her career with Jacksons as a legal secretary in 2020.

Her success underscores Jacksons' commitment to its people and their professional development, as it celebrates 150 years of success.

The Bass Brewery red triangle is widely celebrated as the UK's first officially registered trade mark (Trade Mark No. 1), filed as the statutory registry opened on January 1, 1876.

While technical legal historians note it was part of a broader initial label filing alongside numbers two and three, it remains a monumental icon in global branding history.

jacksons.law

Luke Philpott

I've decided to sell my business. What happens next?

Luke Philpott, Corporate Partner at BHP Law, explains what business owners can expect once they've made the decision to sell.

Making the decision to sell your business is often one of the biggest decisions you'll make in your professional life.

For some, it's the culmination of years of hard work. For others, it's about taking advantage of a market opportunity, stepping away from the pressures of ownership, or planning for retirement.

Whatever the motivation, one question usually follows:

What happens next?

Having advised business owners across the North East on business sales, acquisitions and management buyouts, I've found that while every transaction is different, the process follows a broadly similar path.

Start with your objectives

Before focusing on buyers, valuations or paperwork, it's important to establish what you're trying to achieve.

For some owners, maximising value is the priority. For others, protecting employees, preserving a legacy or ensuring continuity for customers may be equally important.

The answers will often influence the route taken, whether that's a trade sale, management buyout, merger or another form of succession.

Understanding your objectives at the outset helps shape every decision that follows.

Assemble the right team

Selling a business is rarely something an owner should tackle alone.

A successful transaction will typically involve a solicitor, accountant and tax adviser, and in many cases a corporate finance adviser or broker.

Each plays a different role. Your accountant helps present the financial story of the business, while your solicitor helps structure the deal, manage risk and navigate the legal process.

The earlier advisers are involved, the more opportunity there is to address issues before they become obstacles.

Get your house in order

One of the most valuable exercises before approaching buyers is reviewing your business through a buyer's eyes. Are key contracts signed and up to date? Is intellectual property properly owned by the business? Are employment contracts in place? Is the shareholding structure clear?

Buyers will investigate these issues during due diligence, so identifying and addressing any weaknesses early can save time, reduce risk and help protect value.

Finding a buyer

In some cases, a buyer is already known. Perhaps a competitor has expressed an interest, or members of the management team are exploring a buyout.

Where that isn't the case, a corporate finance adviser can help identify and approach potential purchasers discreetly and confidentially.

At this stage, conversations are focused on whether there is strategic and commercial alignment before moving into detailed negotiations.

Heads of terms

Once broad commercial agreement has been reached, the parties will usually enter into Heads of Terms.

This document sets out the key principles of the deal, including the proposed price, structure and timetable.

Although not usually legally binding in full, it provides an important roadmap for the transaction and helps ensure both parties are working towards the same objectives.

Due diligence

This is often the stage owners worry about most.

In reality, due diligence is simply the buyer verifying the information they've been given and assessing any risks associated with the acquisition.

Legal, financial and commercial information is reviewed in detail, and questions are asked about everything from contracts and property to financial performance and compliance matters.

A well-prepared business will generally move through this stage much more smoothly than one that is trying to locate documents and resolve issues under pressure.

Negotiating the deal

The sale agreement is where the detail sits.

Alongside the purchase price, negotiations may cover warranties, indemnities, deferred payments, earn-outs and any ongoing obligations after completion.

This is why it is important not to focus solely on the headline figure.

The legal terms of the deal can have a significant impact on what you ultimately receive and the level of risk you retain after completion.

How long does it take?

One of the most common questions I am asked is how long the process will take.

While every transaction is different, a typical business sale often takes between three and nine months from serious discussions to completion.

The timescale will depend on the complexity of the business, the preparedness of the seller, the funding arrangements and the issues identified during due diligence.

Generally speaking, the better prepared the business, the smoother and faster the process.

And what will it cost?

Professional fees vary depending on the size and complexity of the transaction, but they should be viewed as an investment rather than a cost. The right advice can help identify risks, avoid delays, protect value and improve outcomes.

In many cases, good preparation and expert support can add significantly more value to a transaction than they cost.

Preparation is everything

If there's one message I would leave business owners with, it's this:

The best sales rarely happen by accident. They are built on preparation.

Once you've made the decision to sell, surround yourself with the right advisers, understand your objectives and start preparing early.

Because when the right buyer arrives, you'll want to be ready.

Luke Philpott is a Corporate Partner at BHP Law, advising business owners across the North East on mergers and acquisitions, management buyouts, succession planning and corporate transactions.

You can contact Luke via lukephilpott@bhplaw.co.uk

Patents – How to milk them

By Dominic Elsworth, Hargreaves Elsworth

History is littered with groundbreaking technological advances that have the potential to make great leaps forward, yet fall flat and fail to displace the technology of the day. There are many examples: the MiniDisc, Citroen's hydro-pneumatic suspension, Polaroid cameras (now having a renaissance).

Dominic Elsworth

Many inventions are protected by patents. This is not surprising since patents provide their owners with the right to stop others from doing what is protected by the patent. The quid pro quo is that the invention is put into the public domain, rather than being kept secret, so that when the patent terminates anyone can use the technology. Whilst there are some opponents of patents, most countries believe that the state of humankind is enhanced by offering those who develop products and processes some protection for a limited period of time.

So why does some new technology fail to establish itself in the marketplace? Most consumers are quite conservative and need to be persuaded to change. So how can patents help businesses generate widespread adoption of a new technology when a patent's function is to allow the owner to stop other people making/selling the thing that is patented?

Whilst a patent does allow an owner to stop others making/selling the patented technology, this is not an obligation. Instead of patents being used to stop competitors from making/selling a new technology, what if the patent owner allowed competitors to use the patent and compete in return for a royalty payment? Inviting competition may seem to defeat the purpose of obtaining a patent in the first please, however if more participants helps to create a market that would not otherwise exist, such a strategy could be very worthwhile.

This is what the Dutch dairy equipment manufacturer Lely Industries did in the early 1990s when robotic milking machines were a nascent technology (I am old enough to remember robotic milking machines appearing on Tomorrow's World). Three decades later in many European countries over 30% of dairy farms have moved to robotic milking machines. In the UK, where adoption has been slower, over 30% of new milking parlours are robotic. Lely Industries holds 70% market share.

As with many aspects of business, a good share of something is much better than 100% of nothing.

Traditionally, advisers think of licensing technology in circumstances where the patent owner doesn't want to be involved in manufacturing and selling, or as part of an international strategy where local manufacture makes sense. However, Lely Industries has demonstrated that there are scenarios where it makes sense to be both a manufacturer/seller and to license competitors.

www.heip.co.uk

Hargreaves Elsworth

Patent Attorneys

For practical advice in relation to:

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Moore Barlow's specialist team to join EMG Solicitors

EMG Solicitors is set for further growth following the announcement that Fletchers Group has agreed to acquire specialist legal teams from Moore Barlow, together with its interest in spinal cord injury firm Aspire Law.

Emma Gaudern

Moore Barlow's Court of Protection team will become part of EMG Solicitors, the Group's specialist Court of Protection and Private Client business, while its Clinical Negligence, Personal Injury and Major Trauma teams will join Fletchers Solicitors.

The acquisition will bring approximately 100 colleagues, including 12 partners, into Fletchers Solicitors and EMG. It will strengthen the businesses' expertise across Clinical Negligence, Serious Injury and Court of Protection, while expanding their UK presence through new locations planned in central London, Richmond, Guildford and Southampton.

Headquartered in Durham, EMG Solicitors has over 300 colleagues working across 14 UK offices in Leeds, Manchester, Southport, Liverpool, Newcastle, Darlington, Penrith, Oxford, Nottingham, Tunbridge Wells and Reading.

Emma Gaudern, CEO of EMG Solicitors, said: "I'm incredibly excited that the Moore Barlow Court of Protection team will be joining EMG Solicitors.

"Over recent months, EMG has welcomed specialist practice JE Bennett Law and the Court of Protection teams from Freeths and Fletchers Solicitors. Each has brought valuable perspectives and ideas while contributing to the supportive and collaborative culture we are building across EMG Solicitors."

Fletchers Solicitors will also acquire Moore Barlow's interest in Aspire Law, its joint venture with spinal cord injury charity Aspire. Aspire Law will continue to operate under its established brand, with the charity retaining its stake in the business.

Peter Haden, CEO of Fletchers Group, said: "We're delighted that such a talented group of colleagues will be joining the business. They have built an outstanding reputation, and we share a strong commitment to supporting people through some of the most difficult moments in their lives.

"Their expertise will be a fantastic addition to Fletchers Solicitors and EMG, while strengthening our presence across London and the South East. We're looking forward to bringing our teams together, learning from one another and building on our combined strengths.

"We're equally pleased that Aspire Law will become part of Fletchers Solicitors, and we look forward to supporting its specialist work with the spinal cord injury community and its longstanding relationship with the Aspire charity."

Dr Trevor Sterling (Hon. causa), Senior Partner and Chair of the Personal Injury and Clinical Negligence Division at Moore Barlow, said: "Our Clinical Negligence and Personal Injury teams have earned a first-class reputation for handling complex and life-changing cases on behalf of individuals and families across the South East.

"The legal market for claimant injury work has become increasingly focused on consolidating specialisms. Against that backdrop, we believe Fletchers Group represents the right long-term home for our clients and our colleagues.

"The breadth of the Group's national platform, along with its strong track record in Serious Injury, Clinical Negligence and Court of Protection work, will help ensure that clients continue to receive the highest levels of support and expertise in the future."

The deal represents the latest stage in Fletchers Group's growth, following its acquisition of EMG Solicitors and the subsequent additions of JE Bennett Law and Freeths' Court of Protection teams to the business.

It forms part of a wider transaction through which Knights will acquire Moore Barlow's commercial and private client legal services operations.

Completion is expected in early November 2026, subject to the necessary legal and regulatory approvals. Until then, the businesses will continue to operate separately.

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Key changes to employment law rights

Paul McGowan is Managing Partner at specialist employment law firm, Collingwood Legal. Paul outlines the key changes to employment law rights for the remainder of 2026.

Paul McGowan

Employment Rights Act 2025 changes this autumn:

Employers may feel that 2026 has already delivered more than its fair share of employment law reforms. A series of significant reforms will take effect during the autumn period, and employers are advised to prepare now.

Trade union ballots

From 25 August 2026, electronic and workplace voting will become available for statutory trade union ballots, moving away from the previous reliance on postal voting. This measure is expected to simplify the process for trade union members to participate which could increase turnout and make the balloting process quicker and more accessible.

Increase in the time limit to bring a tribunal claim

A particularly important change is set to arrive on 1 October 2026, which will increase the time limit to bring most types of claims in the employment tribunal from three to six months.

The practical consequences for employers could be significant, in particular:

- workplace disputes may remain "active" for considerably longer;
- employers may need to extend their retention of documents and witness evidence following dismissals, grievances and other disputes; and
- there will be additional time for settlement discussions before claims must be lodged to the employment tribunal.

With this change in mind, we may see that it could lead to a possible increase in the overall number of tribunal claims.

Further trade union updates

A substantial package of further changes to trade unions are set to come into force on 30 October 2026.

These changes include:

- a new duty on employers to inform workers of their right to join a trade union;
- strengthening trade unions rights of access to workplaces;
- updating the statutory union recognition and derecognition process;
- new rights and protections for trade union representatives; and
- enhanced protection for workers from detrimental treatment as a result of participating in industrial action.

These reforms are important even for businesses which have traditionally had little or no trade union involvement.

We are working with employers to ensure that they understand the new landscape to be ready to respond to an approach from a union or request for workplace access.

Sexual harassment prevention duties and a higher standard for employers

From 30 October 2026, employers will face stronger obligations to prevent sexual harassment.

The existing duty to take "reasonable steps" will be strengthened to require employers to take "all reasonable steps" to prevent sexual harassment of employees.

The Employment Rights Act 2025 also reintroduces employer liability for third-party harassment across all protected characteristics. Employers should therefore consider risks posed by third parties, such as customers, clients, contractors, service users and members of the public.

Merely including an anti-harassment policy in the staff handbook will not be sufficient.

Employers should consider:

- carrying out meaningful workplace risk assessments;
- providing regular and effective training;
- ensuring managers understand their responsibilities;
- providing effective reporting channels; and
- investigating complaints properly and promptly.

Take action before the changes take effect

The direction of travel is clear that there will be greater employee protection, stronger trade union rights and increased responsibility on employers.

For employers, the sensible approach is therefore to use the remaining weeks before the changes come into play this Autumn to review policies, procedures and focus on management training.

Delaying action until the changes take effect may prove significantly more costly than preparing for them proactively.

Collingwood Legal is a specialist employment law firm and provides expert advice and training to organisations on all areas of employment law.

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Lucy McCann

Staying on course

By Lucy McCann, partner at Brodies LLP

Directors' duties and navigating economic headwinds.

The current economic climate across the UK presents challenges and uncertainty for businesses. Renewed inflationary pressure following geopolitical tensions, together with increases to minimum wage and NI contributions, make for a challenging operating environment.

The British Chambers of Commerce reports that consumer-facing businesses are feeling these pressures most acutely. However, sectors across the board all report similar concerns, from tech start-ups and housebuilders to food and drink producers. With changes in leadership at No 10, British businesses are hoping to see reinvigorated efforts to prioritise growth and make the UK more attractive to investment.

What we do know is that the economic landscape will not change overnight. If you are a director of a company that is feeling these pressures, understanding and fulfilling your directors' duties becomes even more crucial.

A company director's principal role is to act in good faith to promote the success of the company for the benefit of the shareholders as a whole, typically referred to as the "section 172 duty". Directors also have broader obligations to consider the likely consequences of any decision they make, the interests of employees, and business relationships with suppliers, to name a few.

However, where solvency becomes a concern, a director is obliged to consider the interests of creditors above that of the company – known as the "creditor duty". Knowing when that shift occurs, and when the creditor duty is engaged, can be hugely important to a director, both in terms of their personal liability and their reputation.

So what should directors do to ensure that both they and their businesses are well-equipped to navigate economic headwinds?

Proactive and well-documented decision-making sits at the centre. Get a clear view of finances and monitor these on a more regular basis. Review short- and medium-term cash flow forecasts, stress test assumptions and identify key creditors to assess the extent of liabilities that are owed.

If financial challenges arise or a pressure point leads to the creditor duty engaging, directors will need to ensure they can demonstrate – if it is reviewed – that they considered the impact of each decision on creditors. Generally speaking, directors of companies in financial distress should take care to avoid taking actions that could worsen the position of creditors. For example, if cashflow is constrained, directors should carefully consider which creditors (if any) should be paid and in what order.

Refinancing deadlines are another pressure point. Directors should maintain an understanding of upcoming obligations, such as loan maturities and covenant tests. Engaging with lenders and stakeholders early to explore available options will be essential.

It is crucial that contemporaneous records of discussions and decisions are carefully maintained. Minutes should be kept of all board discussions – and the rationale behind decisions taken – to ensure directors have the relevant evidence if any decision(s) are later scrutinised.

If you are noticing signs of financial distress, seeking advice early is key navigating these complex legal duties and reducing the risk of personal liability. Remember – economic challenges are an expected and regular part of the business cycle. Directors who understand their duties and take proactive steps to comply will be well placed to help their business withstand pressure and emerge stronger.

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Acrobatics Teacher creates new opportunities

A professional dancer from Cramlington who once performed in circus shows, contemporary productions and parkour dance companies is now helping to train the next generation of acrobatic dance teachers in Northumberland and beyond.

Catherine Muckle, Director of Company Control & Move Fitness CIC and acrobatics, circus and dance studio, CM Studios has launched an accredited training programme designed to teach adults how to deliver dance acrobatics classes.

Based in Cramlington, Catherine has spent more than a decade working professionally in dance after graduating from the Northern School of Contemporary Dance in Leeds in 2013.

Catherine explained: “We realised there was a real shortage of people who could teach both dance and acrobatics together. We could find brilliant dance teachers or fantastic circus coaches, but very few who had both skill sets.”

The new qualification is accredited by CIMSPA – the Chartered Institute for the Management of Sport and Physical Activity and has attracted interest from dance teachers, teaching assistants and parents keen to develop new skills.

North East logistics company supports the Alan Shearer Foundation

North East based TSP Fulfilment is utilising its nationwide expertise to support regional charity, the Alan Shearer Foundation, automating its fulfilment by managing everything from online orders and stock control to packing and nationwide delivery.

The Alan Shearer Foundation is aiming to raise £1 million through its ‘Million Pound Mission’ by selling limited-edition designer hoodies.

Alan Shearer, Founder of the Alan Shearer Foundation, said: "When we opened the Alan Shearer Centre, we wanted it to be somewhere families could come, feel supported and know they weren't on their own. Seeing how many people now rely on the hydrotherapy pool shows just how important it is, and why we need to build a second one.

"The Million Pound Mission is our biggest fundraising challenge yet, so every bit of support makes a difference. TSP Fulfilment has been brilliant. By looking after the stock, packing and delivery of our hoodies, they're helping us keep costs down, which means more money from every sale can go towards building that second pool."

Matt Bowmaker, Director at the Alan Shearer Foundation, said: “Membership has already soared to over 10,000 children and adults, living with complex disabilities, and we want to do our best to help them. With the first pool already at capacity, securing consistent access to a second pool is now a priority, and partnering with TSP Fulfilment ensures we can seamlessly deliver this campaign and get members the regular therapy they rely on.”

Community Lunch Club to benefit from £3,500 donation

Older people in a rural County Durham village will be able to enjoy more day trips, free activities and social events thanks to a £3,500 donation from EMG Solicitors.

The money given to the YMCA Teesdale Community Café in Cockfield, near Bishop Auckland, has been awarded through EMG's Charitable Fund, managed by Point North. The fund supports grassroots projects and local communities across the regions where EMG operates.

The community café provides a vital lifeline for older people living in the former pit village. Every Wednesday, its Lunch Club brings residents together for an affordable meal, friendship and social connection.

The money donated by EMG Solicitors will be used to pay for four day trips a year, where members of the Lunch Club will be taken to the beach or a garden centre, and a Christmas market in the winter.

Rachel Dyne, Head of Community at YMCA North Tyneside, said: “This funding is very much needed and will make a real difference to people’s lives in the village.

“The donation from EMG will help fund day trips for members. Public transport in the village is limited, and there are not many opportunities

locally for people to get out and about, so these trips will provide a valuable chance to socialise and enjoy new experiences.”

Claire Hewitt, who leads EMG Solicitors’ Social Impact Team which focuses on community giving and managing the EMG Charitable Fund, said: “At EMG, we're passionate about supporting the communities where we live and work, and we're proud that our charitable fund can make a real difference to organisations like the YMCA Teesdale Community Café.

“We hope this funding will help the Lunch Club continue to thrive and reach even more people in the community."

To find out more about EMG Solicitors’ charitable giving, click here: EMG in the Community - EMG Solicitors EMG Solicitors

Red Sky Foundation donates £30,000 to support families staying at Scott House

Charity strengthens partnership with The Sick Children's Trust to help keep families close to children receiving life-saving treatment at Newcastle's Freeman Hospital.

Red Sky Foundation Community Fundraiser Adrienne Mason (right) presented The Sick Children's Trust's Fundraising Officer Connor Haley

Red Sky Foundation has donated £30,000 to support families staying at Scott House, Newcastle's 'Home from Home' run by The Sick Children's Trust, helping parents and carers remain close to their seriously ill children during treatment at the Freeman Hospital.

The donation will provide hundreds of nights of accommodation for families whose children are receiving specialist care at the Children's Heart Unit, easing the emotional and financial pressures of being away from home while a child undergoes major surgery, recovers from treatment or waits for a heart transplant.

Located just minutes from the hospital, Scott House provides much more than somewhere to sleep. It offers a safe and welcoming environment, practical support and a community of families experiencing similar challenges.

For Red Sky Foundation Founder and CEO, Dr Sergio Petrucci MBE (Hon), the donation is particularly personal.

Sergio and his wife Emma stayed at Scott House in 2015 while their daughter Luna underwent life-saving open-heart surgery at the Freeman Hospital. Being able to stay nearby meant they could remain by Luna's side throughout her treatment, providing invaluable reassurance during one of the most difficult periods of their lives.

Today, Luna is thriving, and her journey continues to inspire Red Sky Foundation, which Sergio and Emma established following her treatment. The charity has since raised millions of pounds to improve cardiac care, fund specialist equipment, install hundreds of community defibrillators and support babies, children and adults living with heart conditions.

Dr Sergio Petrucci MBE (Hon) said: "Scott House will always hold a very special place in our hearts because it was there for us when we needed it most. Having somewhere warm and welcoming, only moments away from Luna while she underwent major surgery, removed an enormous burden and allowed us to focus on what mattered most – being there for our daughter.

"Scott House is so much more than accommodation. It provides reassurance, comfort, friendship and a sense of normality when everything else feels uncertain.

"We are incredibly proud to make this £30,000 donation and continue building our partnership with The Sick Children's Trust. We firmly believe charities achieve far more when they work together, and together we can make an even greater difference for families who need us most."

Red Sky Foundation's support extends beyond fundraising. The charity provides family support packs, practical items and works closely with the Scott House team to identify additional ways to help. Team members also visit families staying at the house, keeping the charity connected to those it supports.

Ayla Besser, Director of Fundraising at The Sick Children's Trust, said: "We are enormously grateful to Sergio, Emma and everyone at Red Sky Foundation for this incredible £30,000 donation and their unwavering support for families at Scott House.

"What makes this partnership so special is that it is built on genuine understanding and lived experience. Sergio and Emma know first-hand how important it is to have somewhere safe and welcoming while your child receives specialist treatment.

"Red Sky Foundation has become a true partner to The Sick Children's Trust. Together, we are helping families stay close to their seriously ill children when they need each other most."

The Sick Children's Trust operates ten 'Homes from Home' across the UK, enabling families to stay together and close to their child's bedside during hospital treatment.

Through partnerships like this, Red Sky Foundation and The Sick Children's Trust are helping families focus on what matters most – being together when they need each other most.

To find out more about the life saving work Red Sky Foundation do visit, redskyfoundation.com

Peter Neal

Why the best boards spend less time managing risk and crises

The irony of good governance is that the best boards should spend less of their time dealing with crises. Not because risk has disappeared. It hasn't. Not because these organisations are somehow immune to disruption, failure or unexpected events. They aren't.

The difference is that effective boards with the right people create the conditions in which fewer crises reach the boardroom in the first place. Here, Peter Neal, Founder of The Experience Bank, explores why that is.

"The most effective boards spend less time firefighting because they spend more time looking ahead, asking better questions and building organisational resilience.

"It is easy for a board agenda to become dominated by the immediate. A cyber incident. A difficult customer. A missed target. A regulatory issue. A key employee leaving. A technology failure. A reputational problem.

"These issues demand attention and boards have an important responsibility to provide oversight when things occur. But if every board meeting is consumed by the latest operational problem, there is a bigger question that needs to be asked:

"What are we not talking about because we are too busy dealing with what has already happened? The strongest boards create space to look beyond the immediate horizon by asking the right questions. What could disrupt our business over the next three years; where are we vulnerable; what technologies could change our sector; do we have the skills we will need and are we prepared for scenarios we'd rather not think about?

"That's not avoiding risk. It's governing risk before it becomes a crisis. One of the most important distinctions is understanding that good governance isn't about eliminating risk. Every organisation takes risks, the question is whether those risks are understood, deliberate and aligned with the organisation's ambitions.

"A board overly focused on avoiding risk can inadvertently create stagnation. An organisation that's so concerned about what might go wrong that it stops asking what might be possible can find itself managing yesterday's risks, creating tomorrow's problems.

"The best boards balance protection with progress, providing challenge without paralysing decision-making. Asking intelligent questions that delve deeper, for example asking more than "What's the return on investment?"

"A characteristic I have observed in strong boards is that they don't necessarily have all the answers. Instead, they know how to ask better questions. That requires curiosity and directors who are prepared to challenge assumptions and explore subjects they may not fully understand.

"It also requires a culture in which management can tell the board that something isn't working without fearing that they will be blamed. If bad news travels slowly through an organisation, it eventually arrives at the boardroom as a crisis. If people are encouraged to raise concerns early, the board has time. Time to understand the issue. Time to consider options. Time to act. The objective isn't to predict every crisis, that is impossible.

"The objective is to build an organisation capable of responding when the unexpected happens. That means developing resilience across people, processes, technology, finances and leadership. It means having the right people, contingency plans and having the culture/decision-making capability to adapt when reality doesn't follow the plan. This is where boards can make their most important contribution.

"They can ensure resilience is not treated as a document, but as part of everyday thinking. The shift from hindsight to foresight can transform the quality of governance. A board that builds strong leadership, encourages openness, challenges assumptions and keeps its eyes on the future creates something far more valuable: an organisation that is prepared to adapt.

"So, remember, when building your board, the goal isn't to eliminate risk. It is to ensure that risk doesn't consume the board's attention at the expense of strategy, innovation and opportunity. The best boards don't wait for the next crisis to tell them what matters.

"They create the conversations today that make crises less likely and tomorrow's opportunities more achievable."

If you need to recruit trustees, NEDs or CEO's with this way of thinking, or need to build out a recruitment strategy to ensure you have the right people then get in touch with Peter on peter@theexperiencebank.co.uk

Your business has the power to create meaningful change within your community

This Christmas, while many of us gather with family, friends and colleagues, thousands of people across the North East will be facing homelessness, uncertainty and isolation.

Too many lives are cut short because people do not receive the support they need in time, leaving empty seats at family gatherings, among friends and within communities across the country.

At Changing Lives, we believe everyone deserves the opportunity to live safely, feel connected and build a brighter future. Through our One Less Empty Seat campaign, we're inviting organisations to take action and help change that story.

By partnering with Changing Lives this Christmas, your business can help provide life-changing support to people facing homelessness and the complex challenges that often accompany it. Whether through fundraising, donations or wider partnership activities, your support can help people access safe accommodation, specialist services and the practical support they need to rebuild their lives.

Homelessness can happen to anyone. The housing crisis continues to affect more people than ever before. 4,793 people were sleeping rough on a single night in England in autumn 2025, a 3% increase on the previous year and the fourth consecutive annual increase.

With rough sleeping rising most sharply in the North East, an alarming 31% increase, many businesses will see the impact of homelessness within the communities where their employees live and work.

Why your support matters

Behind every statistic is a person. Someone's parent, sibling, friend or colleague. Someone who deserves the opportunity to rebuild their life.

By supporting Changing Lives this Christmas, your organisation can help provide practical, life-changing support to people who need it most. Your support helps people access safe accommodation, specialist services and the guidance they need to move forward with confidence and hope.

How you can get involved

While many of us gather around tables and exchange gifts this festive season, countless people will be worrying about where they will sleep, how they will stay safe or what the future holds. Together, we can help change that.

There are many ways teams can get involved:

- Donate the cost of a festive coffee or lunch.
- Organise a Christmas jumper day.
- Hold a festive bake sale or office raffle.
- Match-fund employee donations.
- Replace Christmas cards with a charitable donation.
- Make a corporate contribution on behalf of your team.
- Sponsor meals and festive activities within our services.

Your support this Christmas can make a significant difference to someone experiencing homelessness. It is more than practical support, it sends a powerful message that they are not alone. Every action, every donation and every partnership helps create opportunities for people to find safety, stability and belonging.

This Christmas, let's work together to ensure more people have the support they need and the chance to build a brighter future.

To discuss fundraising ideas, making a donation or a becoming a corporate partner, contact Alice Fisher at alice.fisher@changing-lives.org.uk or scan the QR Code to visit the Changing Lives website.

People Doing Good...

Newcastle Building Society's Support for Newcastle Mela

Newcastle Building Society has once again demonstrated its commitment to bringing communities together by returning as principal sponsor of the Newcastle Mela.

The free festival celebrates the rich traditions of Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi and other South Asian cultures through a vibrant programme of live performances, authentic cuisine, arts, crafts, fashion, family activities and community engagement.

As a purpose-driven, place-based organisation, Newcastle Building Society has made inclusion a strategic priority and is committed to creating a "Place to Be You" where colleagues, members and the communities it serves feel they belong and are supported to thrive.

Visitors to the Society's stand throughout the weekend were able to meet colleagues, experience traditional South Asian games, and learn more about the Society's work across the region.

Jennie Pitt, Head of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Colleague Experience at Newcastle Building Society, said: "We're absolutely committed to being a purpose-driven, place-based organisation, with communities at the heart of everything we do.

"We're proud to sponsor the Newcastle Mela for the third consecutive year because it provides such a fantastic opportunity to bring diverse communities together, build understanding and celebrate the richness of South Asian culture.

"We've made inclusion a strategic priority across our organisation, and events like the Mela help create meaningful connections between people from all backgrounds."

Taj Mohammed, Chairperson and Event Director of Newcastle Asian Arts and Music, said the festival has grown steadily over more than three decades into one of the region's most anticipated annual events.

"It's a wonderful event for families, children and older people alike. It's a safe, welcoming environment where everyone can come together, enjoy themselves and celebrate different cultures."

Ghost Hunters in unique charity fundraiser

The decks of Blyth Tall Ship's historic vessel Williams II are opening to paranormal investigation groups in a brand-new fundraising initiative.

The unusual idea follows a trial ghost hunt organised in partnership with Radio Northumberland's Phantom Frequencies podcast and radio show, which investigates reports of supernatural experiences across the North East.

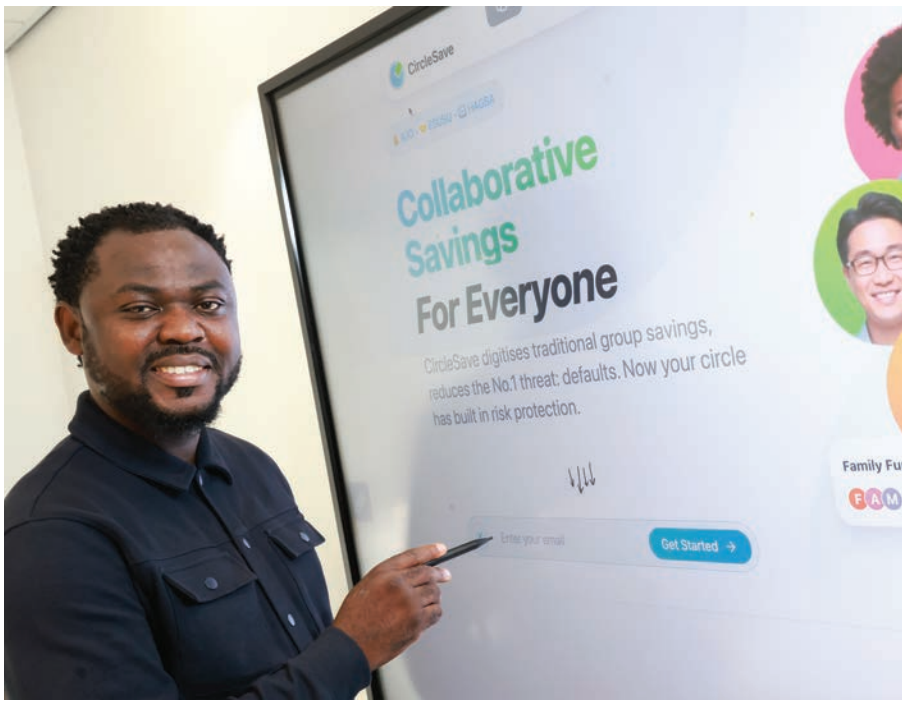
The investigation saw presenters Keith Newman and Richard Craig joined aboard the 112-year-old vessel by Blyth Tall Ship CEO Siobhan Sargeant, a professional photographer, a former murder squad detective and a member of Spirit Seekers Paranormal Investigation Team.

Over several hours, the team explored the ship using specialist electronic equipment and traditional paranormal investigation techniques, recording the entire evening for a forthcoming edition of Phantom Frequencies, which is broadcast on Radio Northumberland every Thursday and Sunday at 10pm.

While the charity makes no claims that the ship is haunted, those taking part said several moments during the investigation left them genuinely surprised.

Siobhan Sargeant said: "We went into the evening with completely open minds. Whatever your personal views on the paranormal, there were certainly several extraordinary moments that we simply couldn't ignore. Some of the responses we got indicated an intelligent and active presence."

She added: "The evening was such a success that we've decided to welcome enquiries from small paranormal investigation groups who would like the opportunity to explore Williams II after dark. Every event will help raise much-needed funds for the charity, so visitors will not only enjoy a unique experience but also contribute towards preserving one of the region's most important pieces of maritime heritage."



From Trust to Transparency

A Sunderland-based tech entrepreneur is hoping to transform the way communities save money together with the launch of a new digital platform designed to make group savings more secure and transparent.

Reuben Odunze, founder of Circle Save, has developed an app that digitises traditional rotational savings systems often used by friends, families and communities to pool money together.

Reuben says the idea was inspired by the financial challenges faced by many legal migrants and minority communities in the UK who can struggle to access mainstream financial services due to limited credit histories.

Circle Save allows groups of trusted individuals to contribute regular amounts into a shared savings pot, with members taking turns to receive payouts. While similar systems have existed informally for generations, Reuben says the lack of structure and security can leave participants vulnerable to fraud or members defaulting on payments.

He explained: "Most people currently run these savings groups entirely based on trust amongst friends and family. Unfortunately, trust can sometimes be broken, and people can lose money when members stop contributing or disappear with funds.

"What we are trying to do with Circle Save is digitise the process to make it more transparent and secure. We want to help communities continue saving together while reducing the risk of fraud.

"People join these groups because they trust one another, but when something goes wrong the financial and emotional impact can damage friendships and communities," he said. "We want Circle Save to give people peace of mind so they can continue supporting each other financially with greater confidence.

Although the app has a particular focus on supporting migrants and minority communities, Reuben stresses that the platform is open to anyone who wants a disciplined and collaborative way to save money with people they know.

Mission Christmas 2026!

It may just be the Autumn but planning is already well underway for this year's Mission Christmas campaign, organised by local charity Cash for Kids. 1 in 3 children in the North East are living in poverty and for many families, Christmas is simply a luxury that they cannot afford.

This is where Mission Christmas steps in, to make sure every child can believe in the magic of the festive season.

The 2026 campaign will launch on Monday, 16th November with one very simple aim – to ensure every child wakes up to a present from Santa on Christmas Day. In 2025, thanks to the generosity of the North East, Mission Christmas provided gifts for 43,332 children in our communities. Cash for Kids will be aiming to support a similar number this year. The campaign has grown over the years and relies on a small army of supporters to make the magic happen throughout November and December.

There are many ways for businesses and individuals to get involved with Mission Christmas...

1. Donate gifts – Cash for Kids accept new and unwrapped gift donations for all ages from birth up to and including 18 years of age. These can be dropped off at any local B&M store from 16th November onwards. They will be collected and taken to Mission Christmas HQ in Washington to be sorted and distributed to beneficiaries. Applications will open in September 100 sleeps before Christmas and anyone working in authority, such as teachers and social workers, are welcome to apply for families they work with.

2. Donate cash or fundraise – Cash donations are a vital part of Mission Christmas. During the appeal, the charity often struggles to receive donations for certain age ranges such as babies and those aged 9+. With cash donations, they can purchase large quantities of stock at discounted prices by working with retail partners such as Amazon. Any funds which aren't spent will be granted in 2027 to support families who need a helping hand. Companies can help by making a one-off donation or by getting involved with some festive fundraising, such as Christmas Jumper Day or donating employees' last hour of pay before the holidays.

3. Buy a gift online – Mission Christmas has a specific wish list set up with Amazon. Items on this list have been carefully chosen by the charity to help them fulfil applications and will be delivered directly to Mission Christmas HQ, often the next day which is invaluable to the team. This is a great way to support the appeal and is ideal for those who are housebound or prefer to shop online.

4. Spread the word – The success of Mission Christmas is largely down to as many people knowing about it as possible! You can help Cash for Kids by posting about the appeal if you're getting involved or by sharing their social media content (@cashforkidsne).

5. Come to Laffs4Kids! Local comedian Jason Cook started Laffs4Kids in 2015 and the show sees a host of well known comedy stars perform at the ultimate feel-good festive night out, all in aid of Mission Christmas. Audience members buy a ticket and bring a gift along on the night. It's taking place this year on Sunday, 13th December with two shows at O2 City Hall Newcastle and tickets are on sale now. Please note that it is an adult only show and not for the easily offended!

So, there are many ways to get behind the Mission Christmas appeal and make a difference this Christmas for thousands of North East children. To find out more, you can contact the Cash for Kids team by emailing northeast@cashforkids.org.uk or by searching 'Mission Christmas' online from November.

What leaders let pass becomes workplace culture

By Catherine Marchant, CEO, Impact Family Services

Misogyny in the workplace often develops through repeated behaviour that is excused as banter or brushed aside. Employers must pay attention to context, power and the culture created by everyday decisions.

Catherine Marchant

Most employers recognise sexual harassment as a workplace issue. The harder test is what happens before that threshold: a sexualised joke, a woman repeatedly interrupted in meetings, or her idea dismissed until a male colleague repeats it.

Misogyny at work is rarely created by one dramatic incident. It grows when everyday behaviour is dismissed as harmless, excused as personality or accepted as "just how things are here".

Not every awkward comment or disagreement is evidence of misogyny. Context, repetition and power matter. A clumsy remark that is acknowledged and corrected differs from a pattern in which women are sexualised, undermined or expected to tolerate conduct not directed at male colleagues.

The double standards can be subtle. Confidence may be read as leadership in a man but arrogance in a woman. Ambition becomes pushiness; directness becomes aggression; emotion is used to question judgement. Assumptions about childcare or family plans can influence who receives demanding projects, development opportunities or promotion.

Influential relationships are often built through events or senior networks to which women may have less access. Some women must fight to finish a sentence in meetings or watch their ideas credited elsewhere. If they challenge this, they risk being labelled difficult, humourless or "not a team player".

A 2023 TUC poll of 1,010 working women found that 58% had experienced sexual harassment, bullying or verbal abuse at work. Among those affected by sexual harassment, only 30% told their employer. Reasons included fears that they would not be believed and concerns about working relationships or career prospects.

Managers should not treat the absence of a complaint as proof there is no problem. It may mean employees do not trust what will happen next. A policy offers little reassurance if concerns are minimised, confidentiality handled badly or senior people allowed to behave differently.

Culture is shaped by what leaders challenge, what they ignore, who they promote and how they respond when concerns are raised. Since October 2024, employers have had a legal duty to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment. From October 2026, employers are required to take all reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment of employees, raising the standard from the previous "reasonable steps" requirement. This includes updating policies, conducting risk assessments, and providing comprehensive training to staff and management on harassment prevention and recognition. That requires more than annual training and a policy copied from a template.

Employers should examine how opportunities are allocated, provide safe ways to raise concerns and train managers to respond properly. Meeting chairs can address interruptions and return credit to the person whose idea it was. Consistent interventions change expectations.

Men have an important role, but not because all men are responsible for misogyny. Male colleagues can question a sexualised joke, stop an interruption, credit an idea correctly or speak privately to someone whose behaviour has crossed a line. This stops women carrying sole responsibility for challenging it.

At Impact Family Services, we understand how attitudes based on entitlement, control and disregard for consent can connect with wider patterns of abuse. Workplace misogyny is not the same as domestic abuse, but organisations should not ignore attitudes that allow disrespect and unequal power to become normal.

The real test is not whether a workplace has the right policy. It is whether people see it reflected in everyday decisions, conversations and consequences.

www.impactfs.co.uk

There's a new face in Downing Street

By Abu Ali, Corporate Finance Partner at FRP

And Andy Burnham is determined to end rough sleeping.

Abu Ali

The good news? As he demonstrated in Manchester, it isn't some pipe dream. We can do it - but this can't be on one man.

If we seriously want to fix what's a national disgrace, the new PM needs society to pull together.

And leading that charge must be the business community.

As Chairman of CEO Sleepout, my focus has been on reawakening the business community to the problem at hand.

Record homelessness levels. Children waking each day without a guaranteed roof over their head that night.

Poverty that has somehow become an accepted part of modern life.

The new PM gets it, but unless the business community does too, his already colossal task becomes that bit harder.

Yes, times are tight. In business and at home.

We all feel the pinch a bit more than we did, say, a decade ago.

But relatively speaking, we are privileged.

Margins might be tighter, but few of us worry when our children will next eat.

So, we need to do more – and even if it doesn't feel like it, we remain the change makers.

That means we need to empty pockets - and open our hearts.

In the North East, that can start on November 12 when we stage our annual Sunderland CEO Sleepout at the Stadium of Light.

Exactly a week later, we will be at Darlington's Mowden Park. Nationally, our goal is to raise £1m this year.

That won't happen without leaders doing just that - setting an example, stepping up, and being the change makers that they are.

Is the sleepout easy? No. But changing lives rarely is.

And while the PM is doing his bit, it is time for us all to do ours.

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Sharon Nelson

In fostering, the charity footprint is tiny

By Sharon Nelson, Changing Futures

Approximately three per cent of fostering placements nationally are with charities.

That's despite the desperate need for more foster families and more homes. Yet the third sector is seemingly being scared off from providing care.

Just last month, one Somerset charity handed back control of several children's homes following an Ofsted inspection.

But the charity sector must be braver, not least for our young people.

And charity support is vital if we are to end this fostering crisis.

Multiple government reviews have repeatedly driven home the value of the voluntary sector in doing so.

On top of that, children's services leaders have called for greater collaboration with charities and other not-for-profit organisations.

Without them, things will get worse - and like often, the North East will suffer most of all.

Our region has more youngsters in care here than anywhere else in the country. That's exactly why, at Changing Futures North East, we won't be scared off.

Hence building Hope House. An unassuming children's home in our hometown of Hartlepool, aimed at giving youngsters what should be taken for granted – a home.

A place where they have their own bedroom, and round-the-clock support. Perhaps most importantly, Hope House is where relationships can be built. Because that's what care should be about. Not just finding kids a bed and massaging care stats. It is about genuinely improving young lives. But I can see why charities are spooked.

Bad press - and the current climate - doesn't help. We've seen Ofsted raise concerns about the growth of unregistered children's homes, while charities are forever facing major financial and workforce pressures, with some organisations being forced to reduce or withdraw provision altogether.

That matters.

Because when a provider disappears, it's not simply a business closing its doors.

It can mean a child losing that friendly face they've slowly grown to trust.

It can disrupt relationships that, in this world, are priceless. Even the Government know this.

In its latest strategy on care-experienced children, it states that enduring relationships can boost educational and health outcomes, build resilience and reduce loneliness.

We see that first-hand every day.

It's also why we're so passionate about our Independent Visitors service. An Independent Visitor is someone who isn't a foster carer, but who can still build a life-changing, long-term relationship with a young person.

They can be that child's rock - but without the obligation and commitment to full-time fostering. They are not just essential to what we do, but to improving young lives.

Because they are an adult they can trust and bond with. Someone to shower them in TLC, remember their birthday and make a bit of a fuss of them.

But they are also a shoulder to cry on. Someone to confide in when there's nobody else. And perhaps more than anything, they are adults who believe in them.

We need more innovative programmes like Independent Visitors. But again, we also need more charities.

Fostering is facing an uphill battle. We have too many kids in care, and not enough places for them to go. It is that simple.

We hope that locally, Hope House will help bridge that gulf – and also improve young lives.

Because children don't need a system that simply finds somewhere for them to live. They need somewhere they can call home. And people they can trust.

For some young people, that could make the world of difference.

www.changingfuturesne.co.uk

Smashing It for Age UK Northumberland

Age UK Northumberland is about to host an event with a difference to ensure that older people in our community can thrive.

Moving away from the traditional fundraiser evening ball the team at the locally run charity are asking people to get ready to turn back the clock, dust off their dancing shoes and relive the music that defined generations, at The Ultimate Smash Hits Daytime Ball this October.

Taking place on Thursday 8th October 2026 at the Grand Hotel Gosforth Park, the vibrant daytime event promises an afternoon packed with iconic 70s, 80s and 90s hits, nostalgia, laughter, dancing and plenty of opportunities to make memories with friends, colleagues and loved ones. Jill Lloyd, Head of Charity for Age UK Northumberland, said: "We have designed our annual fundraising event for those who love great music but perhaps don't fancy staying out until midnight, the event runs from 12pm until 7pm - meaning you can enjoy a proper party and still be home before bedtime!

"Guests will be treated to a four-course meal, a generous drinks package and entertainment throughout the day. Live music will come courtesy of the fantastic six-piece band Hip Operation, bringing the biggest hits to the dancefloor. There will also be a Silent Disco, giving guests the chance to choose their favourite tunes, alongside the wonderfully chaotic Bonkers Boogie Bingo."

Whether your favourite decade was the '70s, '80s, '90s or '00s, or you simply love a brilliant singalong, there's something for everyone. Expect big tunes, familiar faces, questionable dance moves and plenty of those "Oh, I LOVE this song!" moments.

And while The Ultimate Smash Hits Daytime Ball is all about having fun, there is a very important reason behind the event.

By attending, guests will help raise funds for Age UK Northumberland, supporting the charity's work with older people across the county. From tackling loneliness and social isolation to providing information and advice, friendship, social opportunities and practical support.

The event is the perfect opportunity for local businesses to bring teams or clients together for a memorable day away from the office. With great food, entertainment and a relaxed atmosphere, it offers something a little different from the traditional corporate event - while giving colleagues the chance to enjoy themselves and support a local charity at the same time.

So, whether you're planning a staff or client day out, organising a get-together with friends or simply looking for an excuse to put on your best Smash Hits-inspired outfit, The Ultimate Smash Hits Daytime Ball is the perfect excuse to get together and celebrate.

And, of course, there's only one question left... Are you ready to smash it?

The Ultimate Smash Hits Daytime Ball takes place on Thursday 8th October 2026, from 12pm–7pm, at the Grand Hotel Gosforth Park.

Tickets are available now, with guests encouraged to book early and get their dancing shoes at the ready for an unforgettable afternoon of partying and fundraising for a great cause.

For more information contact Age UK Northumberland at events@ageuk-northumberland.org.uk or call Tina on 07977 167930

Bin Boutique: The North East business making bin cleaning impossible to ignore

It is a job most people would rather not think about, but one North East company has spent more than two decades turning bin cleaning into a professional, recognisable and growing business.

Blyth-based Bin Boutique was established in 2001 and adopted its distinctive name in 2006. Since then, the company has grown from a domestic cleaning service into a mobile operation serving homes and businesses from Berwick down to Hartlepool and across to Newton Aycliffe.

Now, Bin Boutique is preparing for its next stage of growth.

A new fleet of purpose-built, fully branded vehicles is hitting the road, giving the business additional capacity while making the Bin Boutique name increasingly difficult to miss.

For owner Peter, that visibility matters.

The company has built its reputation around providing a regular and dependable service, but its ambitions now extend beyond its established routes. Bin Boutique already has franchisees operating under its brand and sees further potential to take its business model into new areas.

The new vehicles will help make that possible.

Designed around the specialist equipment used by the team every day, the fleet gives Bin Boutique the capacity to increase routes, reach more customers and respond to growing demand across both domestic and commercial markets.

It is also an important part of maintaining consistency as the business grows. From the instantly recognisable branding to the way each service is carried out, the aim is for customers to know exactly what to expect when they see Bin Boutique working in their area.

Behind the bright branding is a process designed to deal responsibly with something customers rarely see: the water and residue created during cleaning.

Rather than allowing dirty water to run into roads or surface-water drains, Bin Boutique's specialist equipment collects and contains it within the vehicle. It can then be transported away and disposed of through an appropriate route.

That approach forms part of the company's wider emphasis on providing a professional service from start to finish.

Bin Boutique is also preparing for changes in the types of waste customers and businesses need to manage. The company already provides recycling cleaning and plans to increase its capacity in this area, alongside responding to growing demand for food waste cleaning.

Peter said the latest expansion represented far more than simply putting new vehicles on the road.

The business, he explained, has come a long way since its early days. With Bin Boutique already covering a significant part of the North East, the focus now is on strengthening that service while creating the capacity needed to grow further.

That could mean more domestic customers, increased commercial work and new franchise partners taking the Bin Boutique name into parts of the country where the company does not currently operate.

It is an ambitious next chapter for a company built around one of the most everyday items outside our homes and businesses.

After more than 20 years of growth, Bin Boutique is proving that even bin cleaning can become a memorable brand, and its increasingly familiar vehicles could soon be appearing on many more streets.

www.binboutique.co.uk

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Nobody likes change

By Teresa Peters, Founder of Accelerator Coaching Ltd

"Nobody likes change." I was running a workshop when someone said it, and every head in the room nodded. I challenged it there and then, and the conversation that followed has stayed with me ever since.

Teresa Peters

Stephen Covey talked about beginning with the end in mind, and focusing on what we can control. It is good advice, but pivotal moments in life rarely arrive on our terms. They tend to arrive on their own schedule, whether we are ready or not.

Perhaps you know this feeling. Children leaving home. Ageing parents who suddenly need more from you. The loss of someone close. A milestone birthday that makes you stop and take stock. A quiet realisation that retirement is no longer decades away but something you actually need to plan for. These moments land differently for all of us, but almost everyone recognises at least one of them.

This summer, it was my turn. My twins collected their A level results. One has a clear plan and is off to university. The other has a place too, but is still weighing up whether university is the right path at all. Two children, two very different responses to the same milestone. It has been a good reminder that pivotal moments can be met with excitement, with stress, or often both at once, and that there is no single right way to move through them.

Which brings me back to that workshop.

When someone said nobody likes change, I pushed back, gently. In my experience, a minority of people genuinely thrive under pressure and possibility. I am one of them. Change energises me. But that is not the majority experience, and it took me a while as a leader to properly understand that.

Most people do not like change for the sake of it. They need time to process it, to understand why it is happening and what it means for them, before they can move forward with any confidence. That is not resistance. It is a completely reasonable human response.

This matters enormously in business. We work with teams and organisations that are scaling quickly, sometimes faster than their culture or communication can keep pace with. New structures, new roles, new ways of working. Leaders often assume that because they can see the destination clearly, everyone else should be able to move at the same speed. But understanding communication styles changes everything here. Some people need the detail before they can commit. Some need reassurance. Some need to feel that their concerns have genuinely been heard, not simply logged and moved past.

Total transparency plays a huge part in this too. When people feel informed, even about difficult or uncertain things, they cope with change far better than when they are left to fill the gaps themselves.

Covey had another principle that feels just as relevant here: seek first to understand, then to be understood. Before we can lead others through change well, we need to understand ourselves properly, our own instincts, our own responses, our own blind spots. That is the premise behind everything we do at Accelerator Coaching. Through one to one coaching, and through tools like DiSC, Gallup StrengthsFinder, the Emotional Capital Report, emotions archetypes and positive psychology, we help people get genuinely curious about who they are. Not by accident, but with intention.

So whether you are a leader guiding a business through significant change, or simply navigating one of life's own pivotal moments, the principle holds. Know yourself first. Everything else becomes a little clearer from there.

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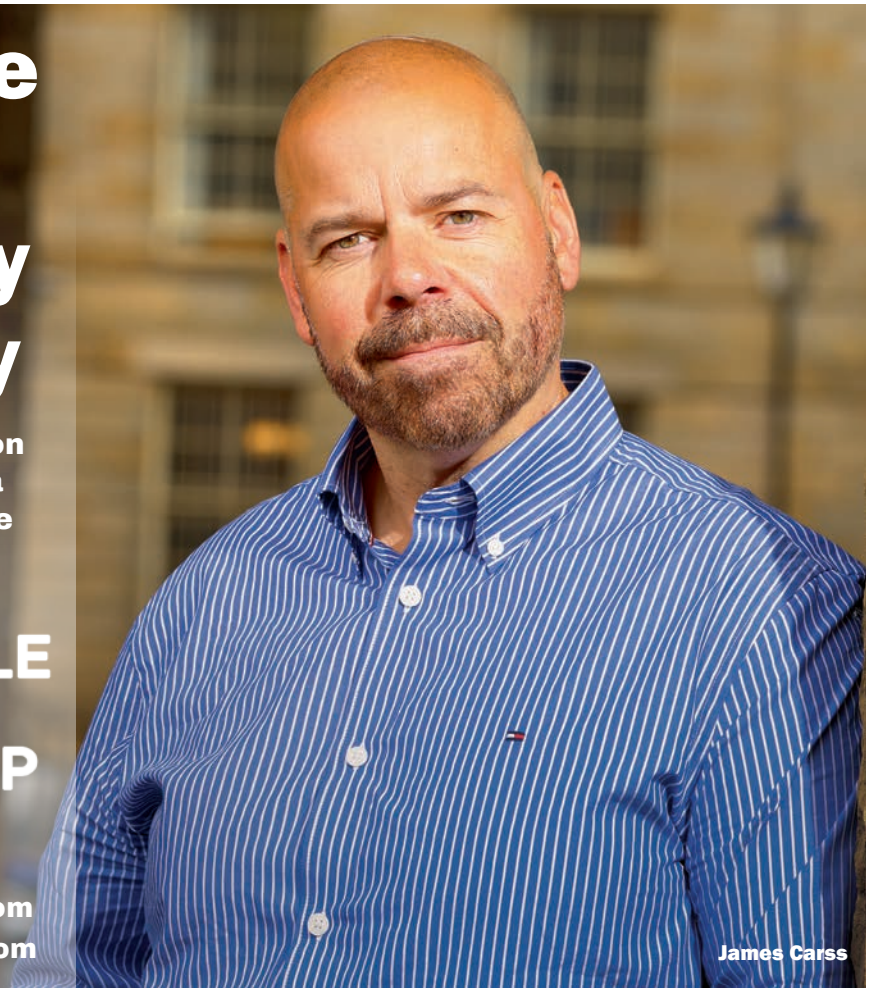
James Carss

Young entrepreneurs of the future get a head start thanks to North Tyneside Business Forum

Some of North Tyneside's brightest young minds were given a unique opportunity to explore the world of business after taking part in an innovative enterprise event organised by North Tyneside Business Forum CIC.

The Future Founders event, devised by Forum Vice Chair Christopher Wilson and Chair Angela Tuplin, brought together 24 young people aged between 15 and 21 at Salt Market Social in North Shields for a day of inspiration, mentoring and hands-on business challenges.

Supported by Working Well North Tyneside, the event was designed to build confidence, develop employability skills and encourage young people to consider entrepreneurship as a future career option.

Rather than learning from textbooks, participants heard directly from successful business people who shared honest accounts of their careers, including the setbacks they had overcome and the opportunities they had seized.

Inspirational keynote presentations were delivered by Jamilah Hassan and Laura Middleton before the young people took part in interactive workshops led by mentors drawn from businesses across the region.

Throughout the morning, mentors rotated between small groups, sharing practical advice and encouraging discussion on subjects including marketing, communications, branding, finance, business development and customer engagement.

In the afternoon, the participants were split into teams for the Future Founders Challenge, where they were presented with a surprise business scenario contained in a "Golden Envelope". Working alongside their allocated mentor, each team developed a business idea before pitching it to a judging panel.

Vice Chair Christopher Wilson said: "One of the biggest strengths of the day was bringing together experienced business people and young people in an informal environment where they could have honest conversations, ask questions and explore ideas without fear of getting things wrong.

"The quality of the presentations demonstrated just how much potential there is among young people when they're given encouragement and the opportunity to develop their ideas."

The event concluded with each participant receiving a Future Founders Certificate of Achievement and information about further opportunities available through North Tyneside Business Forum and its partners.

North Tyneside Business Forum CIC is committed to supporting both local businesses and the next generation of entrepreneurs by creating opportunities that strengthen the local economy and encourage young people to realise their potential.

Future Founders is expected to become a regular feature of the Forum's programme as it continues to invest in the business leaders of tomorrow.

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

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

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

Breakfast Boost networking event

North Tyneside Business Forum hosted its latest Breakfast Boost networking event at the historic Wallsend Boys Club, bringing local businesses together for a morning of conversation, connections and practical insight.

Following breakfast and a lively Networking Bingo session, delegates heard from keynote speakers Mike Lever, who shared insight into how buyers make decisions, and Tricia Scott, who explored How Community Drives Resilience and Business Growth.

The event offered local businesses the chance to meet new people, share ideas and build valuable connections.

Membership of North Tyneside Business Forum is free to businesses trading in North Tyneside.

Ian Kinnery

Understanding a business

The author and thought leader Simon Sinek said that if you don't understand people, you don't understand business.

He was right.

Businesses are created by people to serve people, and they are populated by people.

Forget what they teach you in business school: if you fundamentally don't understand people, you are at a huge disadvantage.

In my view, we greatly overestimate just how well we understand people.

At best, we hold a collection of generalisations and urban myths. We think that because we are one, we must understand how people operate.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

You and I are motivated differently. We have different values and different beliefs.

Unless you really understand the basic principles, you can't possibly understand me, my neighbour, my sister, or the differences between us.

We also behave differently when we are under stress and when we are in a group.

It is a complex thing.

The good news is that there are lots of things you can do to enhance your understanding.

Alongside a discipline of extensive reading, studying Psychology, NLP (Neuro Linguistic Programming), or even the best of English Literature can all help develop a better and more nuanced understanding of people. So can developing our emotional intelligence.

Unlike IQ, emotional intelligence can be learnt and coached, so don't delay.

Leadership ability is statistically proven to be the difference that makes the biggest difference in running an organisation.

It is also a uniquely human-based set of skills, directly proportional to our understanding of people.

In a leadership role, our interpersonal skills will always trump our technical skills, and the more senior we become, the more true that is.

To quote Daniel Goleman's book, Emotional intelligence, he writes: "CEOs are hired for their intellect and business expertise – and fired for a lack of Emotional Intelligence."

Consciously develop your understanding of people and your people skills.

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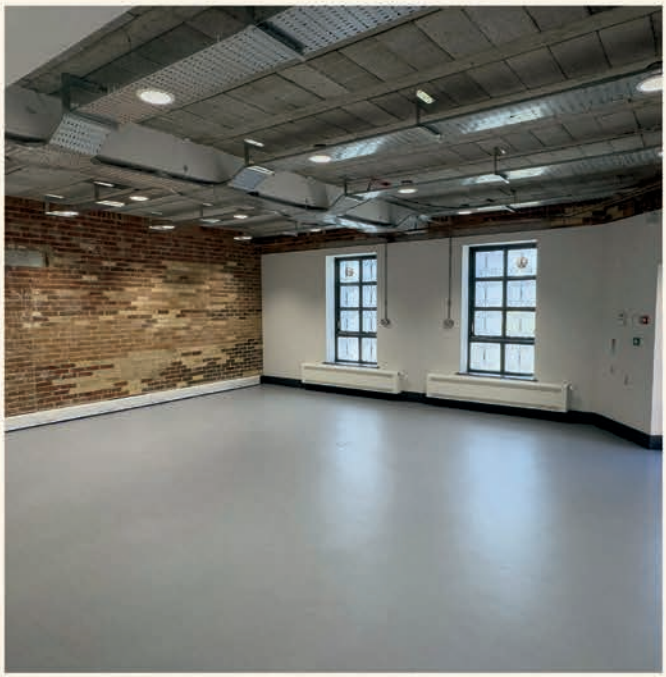

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Feel at Home

The September Reset

By Jo Holmes, Genee

Making sustainability business as usual.

Jo Holmes

There's something about September that feels like a fresh start. The holidays are over, children return to school, diaries begin to fill up again and businesses regain their rhythm – a time to refocus, reset and look ahead.

As we settle back into our routines, it's worth asking ourselves one simple question: if we're already resetting the way we work, why not reset some of our business habits too?

Too often, sustainability is viewed as something separate from the day job, as another policy to write, another report to complete or another box to tick. It can feel like an additional responsibility on an already full to-do list. Yet the organisations making the greatest progress aren't necessarily doing more; they're doing things differently.

When sustainability stops being an initiative and starts becoming part of the everyday, it becomes less of a burden, and just a way we do business.

Every organisation has routines. The way meetings are held, how purchases are made, how suppliers are chosen, how staff travel, how resources are managed and even the conversations that take place around the office all shape an organisation's environmental impact. These decisions may seem small in isolation, but together they define the culture of a business.

When sustainability becomes part of those habits, it no longer feels like an extra task. It becomes the way decisions are made – considering environmental impact alongside cost, questioning whether a journey is really necessary, repairing before replacing equipment, reducing waste as a matter of course or choosing suppliers whose values align with your own. Individually, these actions may appear modest. Collectively, they can have a significant impact, not only on the environment but also on efficiency, resilience and long-term business performance.

This is one of the reasons we believe in the Investors in the Environment (iiE) framework. iiE isn't simply about achieving an accreditation; it's about helping organisations embed sustainability into the fabric of their business. The framework encourages businesses to understand their environmental impacts, set meaningful objectives, engage employees, measure progress and, importantly, build a culture of continuous improvement.

Rather than sustainability being something that sits in a separate strategy document, iiE helps make it part of everyday decision-making. It provides a practical structure that supports organisations to turn good intentions into lasting habits, ensuring sustainability becomes 'the way we do things around here' rather than a project with a beginning and an end.

That matters because the challenges businesses face today – from rising costs and changing customer expectations to climate risks and evolving legislation – aren't temporary. Embedding sustainable thinking into everyday operations doesn't just reduce environmental impact; it helps organisations become more efficient, more resilient and better prepared for the future.

September offers the perfect opportunity to take stock. Not necessarily by launching another initiative or setting ambitious new targets, but by looking at the routines that shape your organisation every day. Which habits are serving you well? Which could be improved? What small changes could become part of the way your business operates?

The biggest changes rarely happen overnight. They're built through hundreds of small decisions, repeated consistently until they simply become the norm.

As businesses settle back into the rhythm of a new season, perhaps this September isn't about adding sustainability to the to-do list. Perhaps it's about making sustainability part of the way we do business every day.

Get in touch at jo@genee.org.uk to discuss how we can help your business embrace sustainability.

North East BIC appoints Brett Griffiths as CEO

L-R: Paul McEldon, CEO, Brett Griffiths new Chief Executive Officer, Kevan Carrick, Chair of the North East BIC

The North East BIC has appointed Brett Griffiths as its new Chief Executive Officer.

Brett will take up the role as of 1 October 2026 and joins the organisation from multinational consumer products company, Société BIC, where he led the firm's North Europe commercial division.

Originally from South Africa, Brett has more than 26 years' experience in executive commercial leadership roles spanning Africa, the Middle East, United Kingdom and Northern Europe.

Since moving with his family to County Durham in 2020, he has also volunteered on the board of Enactus UK, part of a global non-profit organisation that supports university students to create meaningful social impact through sustainable entrepreneurship.

Speaking about the new role, he said:

"The North East BIC is a purpose-driven organisation, which aligns perfectly with my values, and I look forward to working with our talented team to build upon its fantastic legacy. It's a really exciting time for the organisation and the North East region.

"We can see accelerating commercial confidence and inward investment in the North East of England. However, if these developments are to truly deliver for the region, then we must ensure that the benefits are felt across our communities, and this is why organisations such as the North East BIC are so important.

"Over the coming years, the organisation is set to play a pivotal role in providing the support and workspace required to help the region's businesses start up, scale and grow. It's a commercial organisation which has such a positive social impact, that was my catalyst to come here. I can't wait to get started."

"I want to thank Paul McEldon for his outstanding leadership and unwavering commitment over many years. The strength, reputation and impact of the North East BIC today are a testament to his vision, and I am grateful that he will support a smooth transition as he begins his well-earned retirement.

Kevan Carrick, Chair of the North East BIC, said: "We are delighted that Brett has agreed to join the NEBIC as our new Chief Executive.

"Throughout his distinguished career, he has become one of the most respected figures in his field, demonstrating an incredible ability to drive both business and social growth.

I am delighted that, at a time when global uncertainty and a strained economy can impact the development and growth of SMEs and their subsequent scale up, Brett will bring his skills and commitment to drive forward our emerging strategy. This will help us build upon the successes that the North East BIC has achieved so far.

On behalf of the Board, I welcome Brett to the team and look forward to forging a dynamic future together."

For more information on the North East BIC, visit: www.ne-bic.co.uk

Are your people ready?

When businesses prepare for an exhibition or major event, it's natural to focus on the obvious elements. Stand design, branding, logistics, products, demonstrations and marketing materials all receive significant attention.

Yet one of the most important factors influencing the success of any event is often overlooked. The people delivering it.

Exhibiting is physically and mentally demanding. Long days on your feet, constant conversations, networking before the doors open and after they've closed, all while maintaining the same enthusiasm for the final visitor as you had for the first. By the second or third day, energy levels inevitably begin to dip. Visitors notice it too. They are naturally drawn towards stands where the team looks engaged, approachable and genuinely pleased to be there.

That's why looking after your people shouldn't be considered a welfare exercise. It should be part of your event strategy. Comfortable footwear, sensible rotas, adequate staffing, regular breaks, hydration and healthy refreshments all contribute to maintaining energy throughout the event. They aren't additional costs; they're investments in the experience your visitors receive and, ultimately, in the commercial success of the exhibition itself.

It's not just Events

The interesting thing is that these principles don't stop at exhibitions and events.

How often do we recognise the same patterns within our own workplaces? The colleague who gradually becomes quieter, the manager whose patience is shorter than usual, or the team that simply appears to be running on empty after weeks of sustained pressure. As leaders, we're often measured against budgets, deadlines and productivity, but perhaps we should spend just as much time understanding the energy of the people responsible for delivering those results.

One question we regularly ask clients is not simply, "Is your stand ready?" but "Is your team ready?" The answer often shapes the success of the event just as much as the design itself. A well-prepared, well-supported team will almost always outperform a tired one, regardless of the size of the stand or the marketing budget behind it.

Successful events aren't built solely through good design or careful logistics. They are delivered by people.

If we want our teams to create memorable experiences for customers, we first need to create the right experience for them.

At Saward Marketing & Events, we believe supporting our clients extends far beyond the physical build. From early planning and budgeting through to visitor engagement and post-event review, we help businesses prepare not only their events, but the people who bring them to life.

If you're already planning your next exhibition or event and would like to explore how better preparation can improve both your team's experience and your return on investment, we'd be delighted to start that conversation.

saward-me.com

What employers need to know about the next wave of employment law changes

By Michael Dobson, Director of Sapphire HR

October is shaping up to be another important month in the ongoing changes to UK employment law. And while some of the biggest reforms under the Employment Rights Act 2025 are still to come, the next wave should be firmly on your radar.

The Government's latest timeline, updated in August, confirms that some key measures will take effect from October. As with previous changes, the details and timings remain subject to parliamentary processes, but businesses should be preparing rather than waiting for the final few weeks.

The first change arrives on 1st October, when the time limit for bringing an Employment Tribunal claim will increase from three months to six months. For employers, that means potential disputes can remain live for considerably longer. Good records and sound decision-making will become even more important, especially when dealing with dismissals or grievances.

Then, on 30th October, we'll see a substantial set of changes around trade unions and workplace harassment. For businesses that have never dealt with a trade union, these changes might seem less relevant. I would urge employers not to make that assumption.

From October, employers will have a new duty to inform workers of their right to join a trade union, while trade unions will have stronger rights to access workplaces and communicate with workers. There will also be further changes around union recognition and protections for employees taking industrial action.

So, employers need to be more prepared for trade union engagement, even if they have historically operated in a completely non-unionised environment.

The other major October change concerns sexual harassment. Employers will be required to take "all reasonable steps" to prevent sexual harassment of employees, alongside a new obligation relating to harassment by third parties. This is particularly important because the expectation is moving beyond simply having a policy sitting in an employee handbook.

Employers need to think about what they are doing in practice.

Are managers trained to recognise inappropriate behaviour? Do employees know how to raise concerns? Are workplace cultures being monitored? And if an issue is raised, does the business respond properly? These are the kind of questions I would encourage every employer to consider now, rather than waiting for October.

There are also further changes coming later, including the reduction of the unfair dismissal qualifying period to six months and the removal of the compensatory award cap from January 2027. For SMEs, these reforms could have a significant impact on how employment decisions are managed.

That's why we're holding our 2026 Employment Law Update at St James' Park on Thursday 10th September, in partnership with Swinburne Maddison LLP. We'll be taking a practical look at the changes already in force, what's coming next and, importantly, what employers can do about them. You can find the details for this on our website.

But for now, this is what I'd say to business owners: Don't try to absorb every law change at the last minute. Take some time now to review your policies, brief your managers, and identify where your business could be exposed. Employment law is moving quickly. But the businesses that cope best will be those that make steady, informed changes rather than waiting for the next deadline to arrive.

www.sapphire-hr.co.uk

The Board's Role in Digital Transformation

Event to make Trustees and NEDs think deeper

Digital transformation is no longer simply an IT issue. For organisations seeking to remain competitive, resilient and sustainable, the digital environment is influencing everything from strategy and operations to customer experience, governance and decision-making.

That is why the upcoming event taking place at the North East Business and Innovation Centre (BIC) in Sunderland on Monday 21 September 2026, will focus on a timely question:

What is the board's role in digitising an organisation?

Running from 11.00am to 4.30pm, the event hosted by Andrew Marsh will bring together business and charity leaders for a day of expert presentations, discussion, networking and reflection.

Andrew who runs, facilitates and manages The Experience Bank Peer Groups (TEBPGs) has organised the day for his cohort members, their guests and those interested in being a potential member. Peer group members are all aspiring or existing trustees and NEDs or people working at advisory or consultancy board level. Andrew said: "For many organisations, digital transformation can appear daunting. New technologies emerge rapidly, while businesses are expected to make informed decisions about artificial intelligence, automation, data, cybersecurity and digital strategy.

"But successful digital transformation is rarely about adopting technology for technology's sake. The board has an important role in setting the direction, establishing priorities and ensuring that digital investment supports the wider ambitions of the organisation. This means asking the right questions, understanding risk and opportunity, and creating an environment in which digital innovation can deliver genuine business value."

The event promises to explore these issues in practical terms, examining how boards can contribute to creating an organisation that is capable of adapting to an increasingly digital world.

The programme begins with arrival and networking at 11.00am, followed by a welcome and a presentation from the BIC on their outstanding work with business owners in the region.

After lunch, the afternoon will feature a series of speaker sessions before moving into a panel discussion, self-reflection and further networking. The day will close at 4.30pm.

Among the featured topics are:

- Challenging some of the assumptions surrounding no-code software and explore what it can realistically offer organisations. As businesses look for faster and more accessible ways to develop digital solutions, no-code and low-code approaches are becoming increasingly relevant. Understanding where these tools can add value is an important consideration for boards and senior leaders.
- Exploring what a good digital strategy looks like. A strong digital strategy goes beyond a list of technologies or projects, connecting digital activity to organisational objectives, customer needs and long-term growth. For boards, the challenge is ensuring that digital strategy is embedded within the overall business strategy rather than treated as a separate initiative.
- The board's use of AI, including evaluation and recognition. Already changing the way organisations work, AI's rapid development raises questions around governance, risk, skills and responsible adoption. The conversation around AI is moving quick so effective leadership is critical to ensuring organisations capture opportunities.

Andrew Marsh concluded: "The central theme of the day is that digital capability should ultimately create sustainable advantage. That requires more than buying new software or introducing new tools. It requires leadership.

"Boards need to consider whether their organisation has the right culture, skills and processes to make technology work effectively. They also need to understand how digital decisions affect customers, employees, security, finances and long-term organisational resilience.

"In an environment where technological change is accelerating, standing still can itself become a strategic risk. For boards and senior leaders, the event offers a valuable opportunity to consider not just what technology can do, but what leadership needs to do to make digital transformation work."

The day provides an opportunity for attendees to step away from the day-to-day pressures of running an organisation and consider some fundamental questions:

- Is our digital strategy aligned with our overall business strategy?
- Does our board understand the opportunities and risks associated with emerging technology?
- Are we making effective use of data and AI?
- Are our digital investments delivering measurable value?
- Do our people have the skills needed for the future?
- Are we innovating quickly enough while maintaining appropriate governance?

These are questions that increasingly belong at board level.

Alongside this event, Andrew has a number of events for senior leaders, including a roundtable event on 29th September on Building your own and your boards effectiveness; an event on Cyber Security; and an economic debate event in November. Watch this space for further details.

If you want to join the conversation at the event on the 21st September, or any future events, please contact Andrew Marsh at andrew@theexperiencebank.co.uk

Bryony Gibson

Dreading the return to work?

Bryony Gibson, director of Bryony Gibson Consulting, talks about what the return from a summer break can reveal about how you really feel about your job.

The first morning back after a summer holiday isn't anyone's favourite. Your inbox is bursting, your pre-holiday to-do list is still there, and the idea of swapping shorts and flip-flops for "suitable workwear" is unlikely to fill anyone with enthusiasm. But that doesn't mean you need a new job.

In my experience, it's only when that feeling of dread lasts beyond the first few days that it becomes worth paying attention to.

Taking a holiday creates distance from the routines and pressures we become used to. It gives us time to think and clear our minds, often without deliberately trying. Returning to work has a habit of making the things we've been tolerating suddenly feel much clearer.

It's not that the break has created a new sense of dissatisfaction or unease. It simply makes those feelings harder to ignore.

The latest CIPD Good Work Index, based on a survey of more than 5,000 UK workers, found that 70% of employees are satisfied with their job. That's reassuring, but it's not the whole picture. A quarter said their work has a negative impact on their mental health, while 30% felt their workload was too high.

What are you really dreading?

Those figures reflect what I often hear from people who are beginning to question whether their current job is still right for them. More often than not, they aren't unhappy with their employer, or even their job as a whole. What has happened is that one negative element of their work has gradually begun to outweigh everything else.

It could be a difficult manager, a lack of progression, an out-of-control workload, a loss of flexibility, or simply the feeling that they are no longer learning. So, before deciding that leaving is the answer, work out exactly what you are dreading.

It may be something that could change if you raise it with your employer and have an honest conversation. However, it's equally important not to talk yourself out of what you already know, particularly when you have been with the same employer for a long time.

Being good at a job and being comfortable in it are not the same as finding it fulfilling.

Don't rush, but don't ignore it

If you can't shake the feeling of dread, you do not need to resign on your first Monday back, nor should you. A career decision made in the emotional aftermath of two weeks of sun-soaked bliss, followed by six loads of late-night washing, is unlikely to be your finest strategic hour.

Give yourself a little time and notice what happens. Does your energy return once you settle back in, or does the same frustration quickly take over?

Think about what you might want from your next step and explore what is available. Looking at other opportunities doesn't commit you to leaving. It gives you something useful against which you can assess your current position.

Most post-holiday reluctance passes. Persistent dread deserves more attention, because going back to work shouldn't feel like returning to a life you are trying to escape.

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Businesses in the North East are overpaying, on average, up to £3,000 a year on their energy bills

In our latest research into business costs, we were shocked to find UK SMEs typically overpay on business energy bills by around £1,500 to £3,000 per year depending on usage.

The main reason? Staying on expired contracts where suppliers quietly charge you more.

From our calculations we know businesses that compare and switch could expect savings of around 15 to 30% depending on their current deal of course.

The market right now and why timing matters

Energy prices aren't fixed. They move based on global events, just like petrol, and it is important to understand why and what's currently happening.

Electricity wholesale costs (what suppliers pay before adding their margin) were around £94 to £116/MWh in July 2026. That's up from about £75/MWh earlier in the year, but still well below the crisis peak of £300+/MWh back in 2022.

Gas wholesale costs have spiked to around 140p/therm (roughly double what they were in January 2026) because of military conflict between the US and Iran disrupting shipping routes that carry gas to Europe.

Prices are rising, not falling. If your contract is expiring in the next 6 months, waiting will likely cost you more. But even at today's rates, switching from a deemed rate to a fixed deal saves you significantly.

What you should be paying with benchmarks by business size

If you're above these ranges, you're likely overpaying:

Business Size	Total Energy	You could save
Sole Trader	£1,800–£2,700	£400–£800
Micro SME (2-9 staff)	£3,200–£5,300	£800–£1,600
Small SME (10-49 staff)	£8,200–£13,800	£1,500–£3,000
Medium SME (50-249 staff)	£18,000–£36,000	£3,000–£7,000

The bigger picture

27%
of UK businesses
are currently struggling to pay energy bills

65%
of businesses
rank energy prices as their biggest risk

70%
above pre-2021 rate levels
despite falling from the 2023 peak

This isn't going back to "normal." The businesses that actively manage their energy procurement will have a cost advantage over those that don't.

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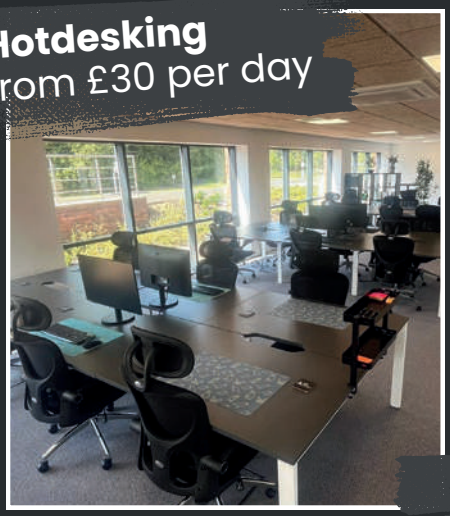

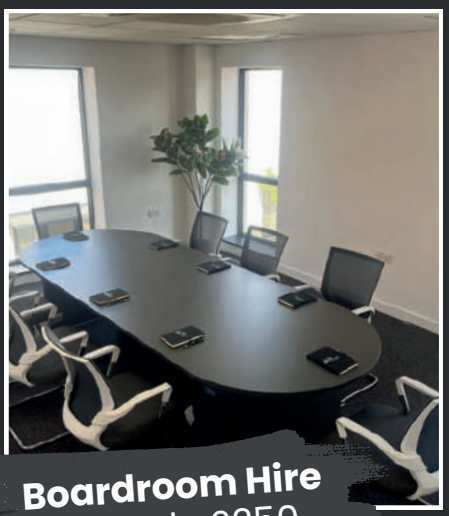

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Black Tie. Big Laughs. One Extraordinary Room.

The ABC Annual Awards is back at the Grand Hotel Gosforth Park on 11th November 2026. Eighteen years in, it's still the only night in the North East to celebrate inclusion, where a standing ovation and a proper belly laugh happen about ten seconds apart. Tables and partnership packages are going quickly, so this is your heads up.

You know the drill with a black-tie do, the red carpet, the nice dinner, the walk up to the stage. We've kept all of that. We've just added the warmth and the laughs of a genuinely good night out.

That's the ABC Annual Awards in a nutshell. One minute you're welling up at somebody's story, the next you're laughing at something the host just said. There's as much smiling in the room as there is applause, and honestly that's the whole point.

You still get the full gala treatment, it just never feels stiff. Nobody sits there quietly watching the night happen to them. People are cheering, chatting, meeting each other, actually enjoying themselves. You'll leave a bit inspired, a bit buzzing from the people you met, and still grinning about whatever had the room in stitches.

300+ North East Business Leaders Celebrating Inclusion

For eighteen years this has been the night the North East stops for a moment and celebrates its own. The entrepreneurs. The people holding their communities together. The businesses that had every reason to pack it in and didn't. The folks who make this region what it is.

On 11th November 2026, over 300 of them will be in one room at the Grand Hotel Gosforth Park for a drinks reception, a three-course halal meal, and ten awards recognising the businesses, organisations and people driving diversity, inclusion and social impact across the North East and beyond.

Inclusion doesn't happen by accident. It happens by default.

That is what #InclusionByDefault is all about.

If your organisation genuinely believes in building workplaces where everyone gets a fair shot, this is the night to say so out loud. Sponsoring the ABC Awards puts your name behind that in front of the right people. You're not just backing an awards ceremony, you're backing the people actually making a difference around here.

SHINE

abc AWARDS 2026

THE GREAT NORTH EAST CELEBRATION

North East Mayoral Strategic Authority | Kim McGuinness North East Mayor

11th November 2026
The Grand Hotel, Gosforth Park

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Corporate tables are filling up fast, and it's easy to see why. A table at the ABC Awards is one of the best-value nights your business will book all year: recognition, entertainment, brilliant food and a room full of people worth knowing, all in one go.

Treat the team that got you through the year. Look after the clients you want to keep. Sit your partners next to someone they really should meet. Then let them talk about it for months.

Book your table or enquire about partnership

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www.abconnexions.org

Our partners and sponsors setting the standard this year

A big thank you to the organisations already behind the ABC Awards 2026. These are the businesses happy to put their name to inclusion and say it out loud.

North East Mayoral Strategic Authority | Kim McGuinness North East Mayor

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Details confirmed for North East business event

More details have been announced for a North East business event which is returning in October.

Sunderland Business Week is back for a sixth year from 12 – 16 October, with a leading line up of speakers and events taking place at venues across the city.

The flagship event of the week will be SunFest, a full day event at The Fire Station and Culture House Sunderland on Thursday 15 October, featuring entrepreneur and TV personality Spencer Matthews.

After finding fame on hit TV show Made in Chelsea, Spencer founded CleanCo, the world's leading independent non-alcoholic spirits brand - inspired by his own journey into sobriety.

Spencer has also achieved remarkable feats as an endurance athlete, holding three Guinness World Records, including completing Ironman-distance triathlons across all seven continents in just 21 days.

Sunderland Business Week will kick off on 12 October with a launch event featuring a panel of key civic leaders including Patrick Melia OBE, chief executive of Sunderland City Council; Paul McEldon OBE CEO of the North East BIC; Sir David Bell, vice chancellor of the University of Sunderland; Toni Rhodes, chief executive of Education Partnership North East, and Sunderland BIDs CEO, Sharon Appleby.

Spencer Matthews

Following that session, there will be an event showcasing business support in the city, with a series of short presentation from providers offering assistance to Sunderland businesses, providing the chance for attendees to chat to organisations who can provide advice and funding.

On Tuesday 13 October, Expo Sunderland will be kicking off the first day of its Delivering the Future City conference, which will feature a series of keynote sessions, round table discussions and delegate networking. That day there will also be a panel discussion hosted by Northstar Ventures, bringing together Sunderland-based founders and investors to explore what it takes to build and scale an ambitious business from the city. The evening will feature an interactive session on leading, engaging and retaining the workforce of tomorrow. And Louise Kennedy, Founder of Oculus HR, is bringing her podcast series, Mind the Generation Gap, to the stage for a live panel discussion.

As well as the second day of the Delivering the Future City conference, the Wednesday will include an Enterprise in Education event where attendees can hear real stories from local entrepreneurs and discover how their skills and passions can create opportunities for the future. And in the afternoon, The Collective is joining forces with Richard Reed Solicitors at one the city's exciting new venues, No.32. The Heart of the City event will bring together a panel of leading Sunderland businesses to explore the people, relationships and collaborations shaping the city's next chapter.

On the Thursday, Spencer will be joined at SunFest by more headline speakers to be announced, and there will also be a range of breakout sessions, offering additional perspectives, experiences and opportunities to connect.

The final day will include the FutureReady Sunderland Industry Experience Challenge, a networking event where school pupils lead the conversations, gathering honest insights about skills, recruitment, career pathways and the future of industries. The Friday will also feature a Sunderland-focussed Mussel Club event.

The Week is organised by membership body Sunderland Business Partnership, which sits at the forefront of the rebirth of the city.

For more information or to book tickets for specific events visit www.sbweek.co.uk

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Natasha McDonough

Do you know what your customers really think of you?

By Natasha McDonough, Managing Director, MMC Research

Businesses invest significant time and resources into building their brand. From visual identity and marketing campaigns to customer service and product development, every decision contributes to how an organisation is perceived.

Yet one of the most common assumptions businesses make is believing they already know what their customers think, however, the reality is often quite different.

Customer perceptions are constantly evolving, shaped by every interaction a person has with a business, whether that's online, in-store, through word of mouth or via customer service. While internal teams may have a clear vision of what their brand stands for, customer perceptions don't always align with that intention.

Understanding that difference can be one of the most valuable pieces of insight a business can gain.

Perception research goes beyond measuring customer satisfaction. It explores how people view a brand, what influences their opinions, what drives trust and loyalty and where opportunities exist to strengthen relationships. It enables organisations to replace assumptions with evidence, providing a clearer picture of how they are positioned within an increasingly competitive marketplace.

For businesses operating in today's fast-changing environment, this insight is invaluable. Whether launching a new service, entering a new market or reviewing long-term strategy, understanding customer perceptions provides a solid foundation for informed decision-making.

The MMC Research team have seen first-hand how perception research helps organisations identify both strengths and opportunities for improvement. Managing Director, Natasha McDonough, explains more, "A recent project we supported with national homewear retailer, Dunelm, explored brand positioning, helping the retailer better understand how customers viewed the brand and what factors influenced purchasing decisions. By listening directly to customers, the research provided valuable evidence to support future strategic planning and brand development.

Similarly, our work with North East based Richard Reed Solicitors focused on brand perception, examining how the Sunderland-based law firm was viewed by existing clients. The research provided an independent assessment of customer attitudes, highlighting the firm's strengths while identifying opportunities to further enhance its reputation and communications."

Natasha continued, "Although the sectors couldn't be more different, the principle remains the same, organisations perform better when they truly understand the people they serve.

Listening to customers also demonstrates something equally important, that their opinions matter. When businesses actively seek feedback and act upon it, they strengthen trust, improve customer experience and build longer-lasting relationships. Research should never be viewed as a one-off exercise, it should become part of an ongoing conversation between organisations and their audiences.

As markets continue to evolve, customer expectations change too. What mattered five years ago may not be what influences buying decisions today. Businesses that regularly measure perceptions are far better equipped to respond to changing expectations, identify emerging trends and remain relevant."

Natasha believes this evidence-led approach is becoming increasingly important for businesses, "Businesses are making important strategic decisions every day, whether that's investing in new services, reviewing their marketing or planning for future growth. Those decisions are always stronger when they're informed by genuine customer insight rather than assumptions. Perception research gives organisations the confidence to understand what their customers really think, identify where improvements can be made and make decisions based on evidence. Ultimately, it's about helping businesses make better decisions that deliver better outcomes.

For many organisations, the biggest surprise isn't necessarily what customers say, it's discovering the difference between internal perceptions and external reality. Those insights often become the catalyst for meaningful change, influencing everything from communications and customer experience to service delivery and long-term business strategy.

Understanding customer perceptions isn't simply about measuring reputation, it's about understanding the people behind it. When businesses listen carefully, they make better decisions and better decisions lead to stronger brands, more meaningful customer relationships and sustainable growth."

mmc.agency

Sea, sand and Sunderland

With its clean sandy beaches, seafront promenade and wide variety of attractions, leisure outlets and restaurants, Sunderland's coastline can truly lay claim to be the Riviera of our region...

It's often said that people don't appreciate what's on their doorstep and when it comes to Sunderland's coastline, that's probably true.

But, thanks to a concerted effort from the city's businesses and residents in Seaburn and Roker – all brought together by the Seafront BID - the area is having what we might call a moment.

And it's a moment that looks set to turn into a complete renaissance – with initiatives, projects and developments, which look set to benefit the area for many years to come.

It starts with the beaches where Keep Britain Tidy has awarded Roker Beach and Seaburn Beach prestigious Seaside Awards for 2026 – recognising Sunderland's coastline once again as among the best in the country.

The beaches were praised for their high standards of quality, cleanliness and overall management – and these are standards that are in evidence not just on the shoreline but in the surrounding areas, thanks, in no small part, to the Seafront BID working alongside Sunderland City Council.

Launched just over a year ago following an overwhelmingly in-favour vote from levy payers across Roker and Seaburn, this scheme – run by the same team behind the hugely successful Sunderland City Centre BID - set out from the start to improve the seafront for residents and visitors alike.

They began by making it as welcoming, accessible and enjoyable as possible for visitors of all ages.

Signage has been improved and updated and the Street Rangers who carry out a range of support activities for businesses across the city centre, were set to work at the seafront.

They have sorted out litter problems – installing dog poo bag dispensers to ensure people clean up after their pets - removed graffiti and carried out a variety of planting and painting projects across the area.

Public library boxes have been installed for people to borrow books, along with toy boxes for both children and dogs.

The new initiatives all build on what are already really strong foundations – a stunning coast, numerous independent restaurants and bars and various other investments which are helping put the area on the map.

Recent additions include Sunderland's popular Slice pizza emporium opening a new branch at the seafront and the transformation of the historic Roker Hotel, which has added an exciting new events space to its offering.

The aim was – and still is - to build a connection between the seafront and the city centre; to share best practice, increase the visitor economy and work collaboratively for a better Sunderland.

Safety and security schemes along with cross promoting the city centre and the seafront to people in both areas are ongoing.

The BID is working closely with Sunderland City Council on a new tourism strategy for the city and will be ensuring that the voice of the seafront businesses is part of any decision making.

Sharon Appleby, Chief Executive of both BIDs, said: "This summer was always going to be an indicator of whether or not we were going in the right direction.

"And we clearly are. There is always more to be done but there is a confidence and energy about the seafront now," she said.

"We have the right mix of businesses and facilities in place to ensure the seafront is an absolute pleasure to visit, work or live at.

"Sunderland's coast is a huge asset to the city and the wider region and now it is taking its rightful place as a jewel in the North East's crown."

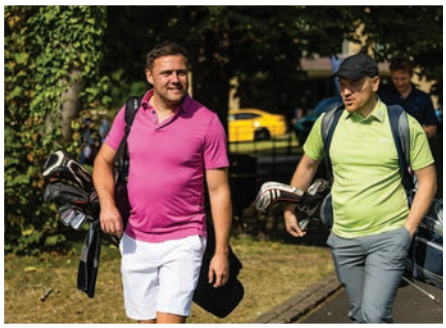
Find out more about the Seafront BID at sunderlandbid.co.uk/seafrontbid

Brown & Brown Annual Golf Day

Brown & Brown, who provide commercial and personal insurance solutions across the UK, recently welcomed 72 guests to its annual Golf Day at Close House Golf Club.

The event brought together clients, insurer partners and industry contacts from across the North East and beyond for networking and fundraising.

Held in glorious sunshine, the day raised £1,560 for St Cuthbert's Hospice, with fantastic support from sponsors and attendees. Special thanks go to the Close House team for their outstanding hospitality, helping make the event a memorable success.



wn & Brown

Thinking inside the box

How TSP Fulfilment is helping e-commerce brands deliver more.

Next time you receive a parcel after placing an online order, spare a thought for the team and technology that made it all happen.

TSP Fulfilment is a name you have probably never heard of - until now. But, in just a few years, this North East-based company has grown into a £10 million business with ambitious plans to expand both nationally and internationally.

The company says fulfilment, done properly, is about much more than picking products from shelves, placing them into boxes and handing them to a courier. It is about building an operation that supports business growth, provides valuable sales intelligence, strengthens the customer's brand and, more often than not, saves money.

And it is in the rapidly changing world of e-commerce that TSP Fulfilment has found its niche.

Paul Griffiths, CEO at TSP Fulfilment

Operating from four strategically located warehouses in the North East of England, TSP Fulfilment provides warehousing, inventory management, pick and pack, dispatch, returns handling and shipping services for more than 200 ecommerce brands.

Across more than 400,000 sq. ft of warehouse space, the business dispatches over eight million individual items a year while achieving a verified pick-and-pack accuracy rate of 99.9% backed by data tracking.

Yet behind those numbers is a very human story - one shaped by the career of chief executive Paul Griffiths and his longstanding fascination with how businesses, machinery and people work.

Paul's route into fulfilment was far from conventional.

He began his career in engineering at a time when British manufacturing was undergoing significant change. When the business he worked for transferred production to China in the late 1990s, Paul was offered the opportunity to relocate.

He declined.

At that stage in his life, his friends and family were all in the North East. China might have offered adventure, but Paul decided that his future remained closer to home.

He subsequently joined an engineering company involved in machinery used to manufacture Axminster carpets and fabrics. His role took him around the world, installing and servicing equipment in locations including India, South Africa, Egypt and Portugal.

It was an education that went far beyond engineering.

"You learned very quickly that every factory was different," says Paul. "The machinery might operate on the same principles, but the people, the culture and the way the business worked could be completely different. You had to listen, adapt and find a practical solution."

The job also produced its share of memorable experiences.

In Portugal, Paul recalls being introduced to local delicacies including pigs' ears. In Cairo, shortly after the September 11 attacks, the atmosphere was considerably less welcoming. Paul hoped he might blend into the crowd.

He did not.

After being mistaken for an American, shouted at and spat towards, he made a rapid retreat to the comparative safety of his hotel. It is a story he can laugh about now, but it also reinforced his ability to remain calm, read a situation and respond quickly - qualities that would later prove invaluable in business.

Paul remained ambitious and candid about his desire to progress. Engineering had given him a strong technical foundation, but his next move would introduce him to the wider workings of a business - and reveal an aptitude for sales and customer engagement.

He joined MB Air Systems, a specialist provider of industrial compressed-air equipment. The role brought him into much closer contact with other parts of the company, including servicing, sales and customer support.

It was here that Paul began to recognise that his strengths extended beyond engineering.

"I enjoyed understanding the technical side, but I also enjoyed speaking to customers, finding out what they needed and working out how we could help," he says. "I realised that I had a real passion for sales and building relationships."

Sales also offered the prospect of greater responsibility, career

progression and improved earning potential - all things that appealed to Paul's natural ambition.

His ability was soon noticed by one of MB Air Systems' clients, Propeller GB, which approached him to manage its sales team.

At Propeller, Paul supplied products and services to advanced manufacturing companies across the North East. The experience gave him a valuable insight into the importance of reliable supply chains and the role that accurate information can play in keeping production moving.

When a component, product or delivery failed to arrive at the right place and at the right time, the consequences could quickly spread across an entire manufacturing operation.

It was an early lesson in the value of data, visibility and operational efficiency - principles that would later influence his approach to the technology-led systems used at TSP Fulfilment.

The role also gave Paul first-hand experience of both the opportunities and the pressures involved in growing a company.

Not every chapter, however, was destined to be successful.

Unknown to Paul when he joined, Propeller GB was experiencing serious financial difficulties. When the company eventually failed, he found himself facing an uncertain future.

Rather than retreat into the security of another engineering role, Paul and his friend and colleague Pete decided to establish a venture of their own.

The new company inherited Propeller GB's customer base and began trading immediately. Those customers included manufacturers whose production lines depended upon a continuing supply of essential products and components.

There was no gentle introduction to business ownership.

Paul and Pete had to hit the ground running, reassure customers, maintain supplies and build the systems needed to support a functioning operation - all at the same time.

"We knew that customers were relying on us," says Paul. "Some of them had production lines that needed to keep moving, so we couldn't spend months planning everything. We had to get on with it, solve problems and scale the business very quickly."

The company subsequently partnered with NBT Group, an established family-run business, which eventually acquired Paul and Pete's stake in the venture.

MitsuBoshi
MitsuBoshi

For Paul, the experience was an intensive education in entrepreneurship. In a relatively short period, he had helped launch a company, retain customers, protect vital supply chains, manage rapid growth and complete the sale of the business.

Afterwards, he decided to take some time out and consider what he wanted to do next.

But, his ambition for a quiet life did not go entirely according to plan.

Before long, he was approached to join The Storage Place - the business that would become TSP Fulfilment.

It was another calculated step into unfamiliar territory, but one that brought together many of the lessons Paul had already learned: the importance of dependable systems, accurate information, strong customer relationships and the ability to respond quickly when circumstances change.

Paul joined the company in February 2020, just weeks before the Covid-19 pandemic transformed consumer behaviour almost overnight.

Physical shops closed, online ordering surged and businesses that had previously treated e-commerce as an additional sales channel suddenly found it was their principal route to market.

For fulfilment companies, this created enormous demand - but also immense operational pressure.

"Covid accelerated changes that were already happening," Paul explains. "Businesses were suddenly receiving volumes of online orders they had never planned for. They needed storage, technology, people, packaging and access to couriers, and they needed it immediately."

Under Paul's leadership, TSP Fulfilment evolved from a traditional storage and distribution operation into a technology-enabled e-commerce fulfilment specialist.

Its systems now integrate with platforms and marketplaces including Shopify, WooCommerce, Amazon, TikTok Shop, eBay and Etsy. Orders placed through different sales channels flow automatically into a single fulfilment operation, removing the need for manual data entry and reducing the risk of errors.

Clients can monitor stock levels, order status and dispatch activity in real time, giving them a clear view of their operation without having to run their own warehouse.

For Paul, however, technology is only part of the solution.

"The system has to be right, but fulfilment is still about understanding the customer," he says. "A fashion brand, a healthcare company and a specialist engineering supplier may all sell online, but they do not necessarily want their products handled, packaged or presented in the same way."

That focus on personalisation lies at the heart of TSP Fulfilment's offer.

The company caters particularly for e-commerce businesses that have outgrown packing orders in their own offices or industrial units but do not want to surrender their identity to a large, anonymous logistics operation.

"Far from being generic, our fulfilment service is uniquely personalised," says Paul. "Our customers have invested in building their brands. The parcel arriving at somebody's home or office is part of that brand experience, and we have a responsibility to protect it."

That might mean using branded packaging, adding inserts, assembling promotional bundles or adapting processes around a client's individual product range.

A parcel may be the first physical interaction a customer has with an online brand. If it arrives late, damaged or badly presented, the relationship can be over before it has properly begun. If it arrives quickly, accurately and attractively packaged, it can encourage loyalty, positive reviews and repeat business.

TSP Fulfilment also operates an HMRC-approved Customs Bonded Warehouse. This allows imported products to be held without the importer paying duty until the goods are released for sale or distribution.

For brands importing significant volumes from China, the Far East or other markets outside the UK, that can provide an important cash-flow advantage.

Returns, often one of the least glamorous but most complicated elements of online retail, are also managed on behalf of clients. Products are received, inspected and, where appropriate, returned to available stock, helping brands maintain accurate inventory records and provide a smoother customer experience.

Paul's own approach to money may also help explain his focus on operational efficiency.

He has spoken openly about being careful with money from a young age. Long before buying second-hand clothing became fashionable, Paul would search for good-quality branded items at a fraction of their original price.

On one occasion, he proudly wore a second-hand Cubs uniform covered in badges, unaware that the badges represented achievements earned by its previous owner. The story is amusing, but the underlying instinct remains recognisable: understand the value of something, avoid unnecessary expense and make the most of the resources available.

That philosophy now operates on a much larger scale.

By consolidating stock, staffing, technology, courier relationships and warehouse infrastructure, TSP Fulfilment aims to provide clients with capabilities that would be costly and difficult to reproduce independently.

The company supports businesses dispatching thousands of orders per day, but its infrastructure is designed to accommodate unlimited order processing capacity.

Its proximity to major courier hubs also enables later order cut-off times and faster nationwide dispatch - an increasingly important advantage in a market where consumers have come to expect speed as standard.

Despite TSP Fulfilment's growth, Paul is keen to preserve the practical, partnership-led culture that helped build the company.

"We want to understand where our clients are going, not just what they need today," he says. "If their sales double, launch on a new marketplace or move into another country, we need to be ready to support that."

With more than 25 years of wider fulfilment and logistics experience behind the business, membership of the United Kingdom Warehousing Association and significant capacity across its four sites, TSP Fulfilment is now looking beyond its North East base.

Its ambition is to become a nationally and internationally recognised fulfilment partner while retaining the flexibility and personal service that distinguish it from the largest operators.

The company's warehouses may be filled with boxes, barcodes and conveyor systems, but its real purpose is to help clients think beyond them.

Because, as Paul and his team understand, what leaves a warehouse is not simply an order.

It is a promise made by a brand to its customer - and TSP Fulfilment's job is to make sure that promise is delivered.

tspfulfilment.co.uk

Kathryn Rodgers

Could a conversation prevent your next workplace dispute?

Kathryn Rodgers of face2faceHR explores the proposed changes to the ACAS Code and why resolving workplace concerns informally could become more important than ever.

Formal disciplinary and grievance procedures can be costly, time-consuming and stressful for everyone involved. Now, ACAS is proposing changes designed to encourage employers and workers to resolve concerns sooner.

The draft ACAS Code of Practice places a much stronger emphasis on informal action. Before beginning a formal disciplinary process, employers would be expected to explain what steps have already been taken to resolve the issue informally, or why none were appropriate. Employees raising a formal grievance would face a similar expectation.

Mediation and facilitated conversations are also specifically included as possible ways to address workplace conflict before it escalates.

On the face of it, this makes sense. A timely conversation can often prevent misunderstandings from becoming entrenched, protecting working relationships while saving businesses considerable time and money.

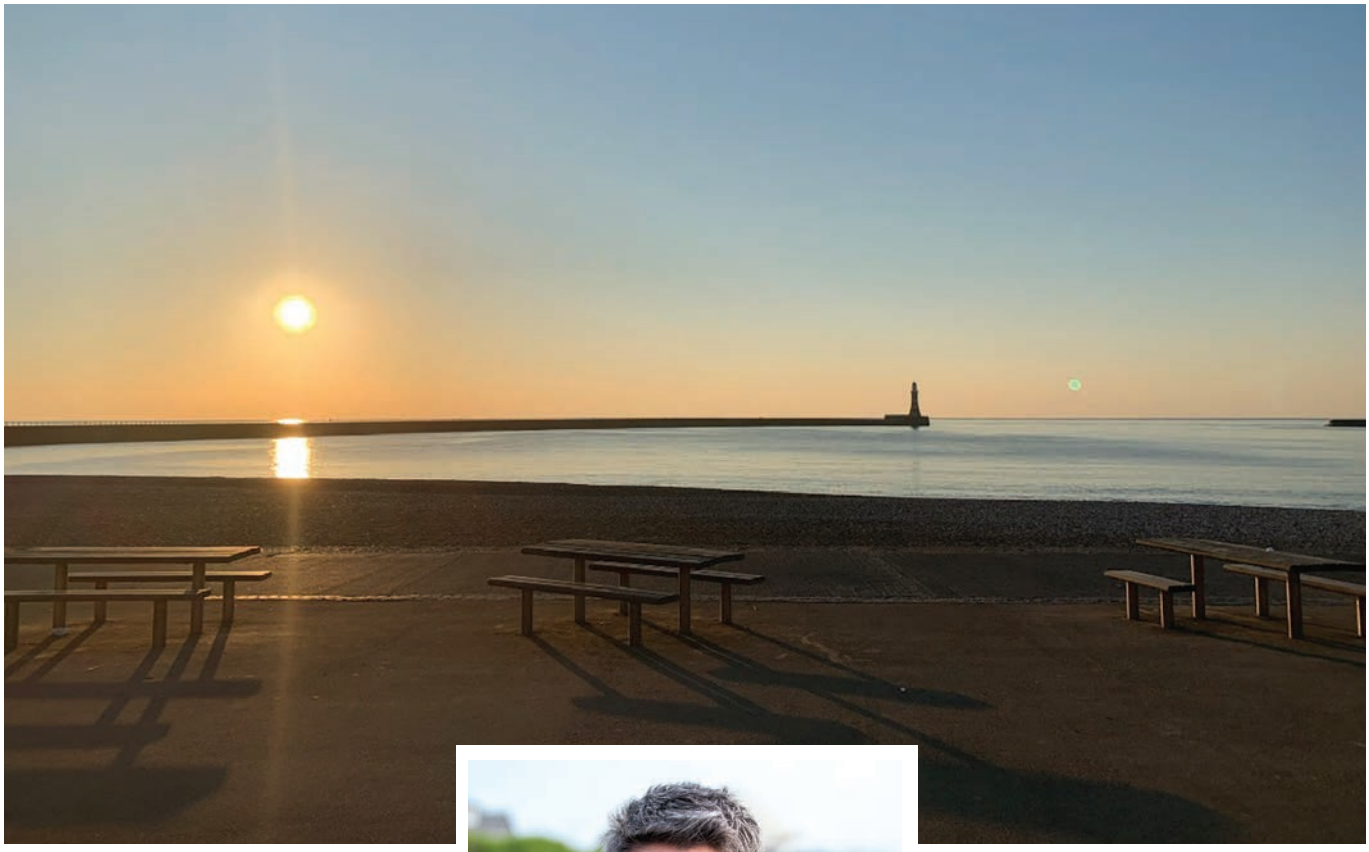
However, documenting those early steps could become increasingly important. Employment tribunals may take the Code into account, and an unreasonable failure to follow it can affect compensation awards. Employers will therefore need to show that informal resolution was genuinely considered, while recognising that serious issues may still require immediate formal action.

Although the proposals are being presented as a way to reduce costs for businesses, they may also help relieve the significant pressure on ACAS and the Employment Tribunal system.

For now, this is only a draft. The consultation remains open until 11.59pm on 23 September 2026, and the final wording may change. Nevertheless, it is a useful prompt for employers to review how confidently their managers handle difficult conversations before concerns become formal disputes.

If you need support managing a disciplinary or grievance matter, or want to ensure your workplace procedures are up to date, get in touch with Kathryn and the face2faceHR team for practical, straightforward advice.

face2facehr.com



Unlocking momentum through better questions

By Hayley Ramm, The Efficient Elephant

Hayley Ramm

1. Situation

A founder of an e-learning technology company approached mentoring at a point where the business had strong potential and clear opportunities for growth. The founder had ambition, ideas and a vision for the future, but despite making progress, there was a growing sense of frustration. The next steps felt unclear and the momentum needed to move the business forward seemed difficult to generate.

Like many business owners, they were balancing multiple priorities while trying to lead the business strategically. Although there was no shortage of commitment or capability, there was a feeling of being stuck between where the business was and where they wanted it to be.

2. The Challenge

The challenge was not a lack of ideas. In fact, there were plenty. The difficulty was creating the clarity needed to prioritise effectively and move forward with confidence.

As the business evolved, competing demands on time and attention made it harder to step back and think strategically and valuable opportunities risked being lost amongst the day-to-day demands of running the business.

The founder knew they wanted to make progress but was finding it difficult to identify which activities would create the greatest impact. What was needed was not another solution, but the space to think differently.

3. The Mentoring Approach

Throughout our mentoring conversations, the focus was on creating that space.

A consistent theme throughout the mentoring relationship was curiosity. Questions were used not to provide answers, but to encourage deeper reflection and new perspectives. Often, the most valuable moments came when a question prompted a pause, allowing the founder to step back from the operational demands of the business and consider the bigger picture.

As trust developed, conversations became increasingly open and focused, creating the conditions for meaningful insight and progress.

4. The Shift

The most significant change was not in the business itself, but in the founder's clarity and confidence.

Over time, decisions that had previously felt difficult became easier to navigate because they were viewed through a broader strategic lens. Rather than feeling pulled in multiple directions, the founder developed a stronger sense of focus and intention.

Activities that were not contributing to longer-term goals were questioned more rigorously, while greater attention was given to priorities that would create meaningful progress. As clarity increased, so did momentum. The founder became more confident in their decision-making and more excited about the future direction of the business.

What had initially felt like being stuck gradually evolved into a renewed sense of purpose and forward movement.

5. Reflection and learning

This experience reinforced an important lesson about business mentoring. While many founders seek practical solutions, lasting change often begins with clarity rather than advice.

The role of a mentor is not to provide all the answers, but to create an environment where better thinking can emerge. When business owners have the opportunity to challenge assumptions, reflect on what truly matters and reconnect with their goals, they often discover that many of the answers already exist within them.

6. And finally....

Sometimes, momentum doesn't come from doing more.

Sometimes, it comes from thinking differently.

theefficientelephant.co.uk

Herd Mentality

When people think about HR, goats probably aren't the first thing that come to mind.

Nicky Jolley

But for Nicky Jolley, Founder and Managing Director of HR2day, the connection is stronger than it first appears.

Away from work, Nicky spends time caring for her goats, Holly, Cookie, and Dodger. While it may seem an unusual hobby for an HR professional, she says they've reinforced one of the biggest lessons she's learnt about leadership: behaviour is shaped by the environment around us.

"Anyone who owns goats will tell you they're full of personality," says Nicky. "They're curious, intelligent, independent and often determined to do exactly the opposite of what you'd planned. Every goat is different, and trying to force them to do something rarely ends well.

"It's exactly the same with people. The best leaders understand individuals rather than expecting everyone to fit the same mould."

One lesson Nicky has learnt is that goats quickly follow each other's lead.

"Behaviour spreads," she explains. "If one goat finds a gap in the fence, the others soon follow. Workplaces are no different."

Research consistently shows employees take behavioural cues from the people around them, particularly their managers. If leaders ignore poor behaviour, others soon see it as acceptable. When managers communicate well, stick to what they say, and lead by example, those behaviours become the norm.

"It's often the calmest goats that others choose to follow," says Nicky. "Leadership isn't about being the loudest."

Culture isn't built through mission statements or posters on the wall. It's created in everyday moments such as how managers respond to mistakes, how they tackle difficult conversations and how consistently they treat people.

Think about a new starter's first week. They won't learn your culture from the employee handbook alone. They'll learn it by watching how colleagues interact and how managers behave.

The good news is that improving culture rarely requires expensive wellbeing initiatives or office perks. Small, consistent habits often have the biggest impact such as holding regular one-to-ones, recognising good work, addressing issues early and following through on commitments.

The same principle applies to retaining people. Employees who feel supported, trusted and listened to are far more likely to stay engaged and committed. Poor communication and inconsistent management often have the opposite effect.

As Nicky says: "You can build the strongest fence in the world, but if goats don't feel settled, they'll spend their time looking for a way out. Employees aren't so different. Retention isn't just about pay; it's about creating a workplace where people genuinely want to stay."

Business owners can ask themselves a few simple questions:

- Are employee expectations clear from day one?
- Are managers dealing with issues before they spread?
- Do employees feel comfortable raising concerns?
- What behaviours are new starters learning by watching others?

One simple exercise is to ask every new starter after their first month: What's one thing you've noticed about how people behave here? Their answer will often reveal more about your culture than any policy or staff survey.

"The best workplaces aren't built by accident," says Nicky. "Whether you're managing a herd or leading a business, success comes from understanding people, creating the right environment and earning trust every day."

Goats don't read signs telling them how to behave; they watch each other. Employees do the same. If you want to understand your workplace culture, spend a day watching what people do rather than what your policies say. The difference may surprise you.

Nicky Jolley is Founder and Managing Director of HR2day, supporting businesses across the North East with practical HR advice, leadership support and workplace culture.

hr2day.co.uk

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From single desk to successful agency all under one roof

A Darlington entrepreneur who turned redundancy into a business opportunity is celebrating a decade of success after growing from a single desk in a shared workspace to a thriving media agency.

Adam Walker founded Hubspoke Media in 2016 after his redundancy from a local authority role was confirmed on the very day his second son was born. Faced with the uncertainty of starting over while raising a young family, he decided to take a leap of faith by launching his own marketing and communications business.

A decade later, Hubspoke Media has become an established name in the North East business community, providing marketing, PR, video production, podcasting and digital communications services to organisations across the UK.

The company's growth has been closely linked with Business Central in Darlington, where Adam has been based since the very beginning.

Starting out in the centre's coworking space, the business has physically grown within the building as it has developed, with Adam progressing into his own office before expanding into a larger suite as the company grew to a team of four.

Today, Hubspoke occupies significantly more space than when it began and has expanded further with the launch of Darlington Stream Space, a dedicated podcast and content creation studio based within Business Central. In the last 12 months alone, the studio has produced over 160 podcasts and welcomed 150 new guests to Business Central.

"When I started out, I didn't have a grand plan," says Adam. "I just knew I wanted to create something that could support my young family and give me control over my future.

"There were times when it felt uncertain and in the early days, I was just trying to make ends meet. So, to now have a fantastic team around me, lots of plans in the pipeline and be celebrating a decade in business is something I'm really proud.

"But I honestly don't think the journey would have looked the same without Business Central. Every stage of our growth has happened under the same roof, and we wouldn't call anywhere else home."

While the physical workspace helped support Hubspoke's expansion, Adam believes the people behind Business Central have played an equally important role.

Like many first-time business owners, he experienced the isolation that can come with launching a company alone. But being surrounded by other entrepreneurs and a supportive facilities team helped provide encouragement during both the highs and lows of business ownership.

"Having a place where other business owners are facing similar challenges makes a huge difference," says Adam.

Digital Lighthouse powers client delivery standards with new hire

Rapidly expanding Newcastle agency, The Digital Lighthouse has upped its client delivery standards with the senior hire of Ally Galbraith.

The performance marketing experts have installed Ally as head of delivery. After two years of rapid growth since launching, founder Tom Chandler continues to expand, and Ally's arrival brings the team to seven full-time team members.

The Digital Lighthouse counts the likes of skin care specialists Nursem and Europe's fastest growing company, Healf, among its growing roster of clients.

They have also delivered dedicated digital and performance marketing training for The Financial Services Forum, whose 3,000-strong membership include some of the UK's most senior financial industry leaders and marketers.

Ally said: "You can't help but be impressed by what Tom and his team at The Digital Lighthouse has achieved in such a short space of time. When the opportunity arose to join them, it was impossible to say no.

"As an agency, they've grown on a strong manifesto of ensuring all clients have access to the experts running their campaigns. My role will be to facilitate that so the team can continue to give clients access to the clearest data, and the best performance advice."

Founder Tom Chandler said: "I've admired Ally's professionalism for a long time and was lucky enough to work closely with him prior to launching The Digital Lighthouse. He has an innate understanding of client needs. His experience in the marketing and agency world brings new dimensions to our operations and I know our clients will love working with him.

"He's exactly the right type of person who will help drive continued growth. We're exceptionally excited about our future with Ally as a part of it."

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Phonetic Digital strengthens leadership team

Sunderland-based digital agency Phonetic Digital has strengthened its leadership team as it prepares for its next stage of growth.

The B Corp certified agency has welcomed Bethanie Durham as Digital Director and shareholder, while Matthew Bryson has also been appointed as a Technical Director and shareholder in recognition of the role he has played in the business since day one.

Bethanie joins the Phonetic team with 13 years of agency experience, leading her previous agency to an award win. She has a strong background in digital marketing, client strategy and service delivery, with experience with clients such as HelloFresh, Ralph Lauren and The White Company.

In her new role, she will lead Phonetic Digital's marketing function, helping to strengthen the agency's offering, develop its capabilities and create more opportunities for clients throughout the North East.

Matthew has been part of Phonetic Digital since the business began and has played a major role in shaping its technical services and approach to website delivery.

In his role as Technical Director, he will continue to lead on technical strategy, website development, data and analytics work that supports the agency's growing client base.

These appointments come at a busy time for the agency, as they recently opened The Training Room.

This new space was created to make digital learning more accessible offering specialist Beyond the Basics sessions, tailored Team Training and free Digital Drop-ins for charities, social enterprises and community groups.

Steven Parker, Managing Director of Phonetic Digital, spoke about the agency's growth and new appointments:

"Bethanie and Matthew both bring different strengths to the leadership team, and these appointments are an important step forward for the business.

Beth joins us as our Digital Director and will take the lead on all things marketing at Phonetic. She brings a wealth of agency experience from two of the region's largest, increases our delivery capability, and broadens our service offering too.

Matthew is everything and more that anyone could wish for in a business partner. Dependable, hard-working, and most of all, the person who fixes everything.

It's exciting to be moving into the second half of 2026 with new staff, new services, and a new space with The Training Room."

Different Narrative defies traditional agency model

A year on from tearing up the traditional agency rulebook, Newcastle-based marketing agency Different Narrative has proven the success of its disruptive 'All In' model.

Launched in June 2025, the All In model removes hourly and project-based fees in favour of a single, fixed monthly fee covering uncapped support - a trust-based partnership built around results rather than billable time.

This approach was designed to remove the friction of unpredictable costs for stretched in-house teams, shifting the agency-client dynamic away from tracking time. Instead, the focus is on delivering results and remaining flexible to changing needs and opportunities.

Twelve months on, the gamble has paid off. Different Narrative has secured six major clients under the model - including Experience North East England, The Bridges Shopping Centre and Torch Cards. Two of these clients have already renewed for a second year, with a pipeline of further clients set to start in autumn 2026.

Kieron Goldsborough, Managing Director of Different Narrative, said: "The agency model is built on selling hours, and hours are the wrong thing to sell. Clients don't want time, they want outcomes. So we stopped. One fixed fee, no cap, and suddenly every conversation is about whether the work is working - not what it costs. If we don't deliver, clients walk at the end of the year. Two of the first six just signed for a second year, and that means more to me than any pitch we've ever won."

The success of the model is cemented by Different Narrative's first All In partner, Experience North East England, formerly NewcastleGateshead Initiative, which recently renewed its partnership to support the region's new era of destination marketing.

Kelly Gleadow, Director of Communications at Experience North East England, said: "This is our second year of the 'All In' marketing services retainer, and over the past year this collaborative model has not only reflected our values but also helped us build capacity and momentum across our integrated B2B and B2C marketing campaigns.

"As we enter a new era as Experience North East England, the region's destination marketing organisation, this agile partnership will support our ambitions across all seven local authority areas, helping us showcase the region's unforgettable experiences to domestic and international audiences. Different Narrative is a true extension of our team. Their marketing expertise enables us to move at pace, respond to evolving priorities, and access creative thinking that maximises our impact and reach. We look forward to continuing our partnership as we inspire more visitors to choose North East England."

To continue the momentum of the All In model and maintain high-quality delivery for partners, Different Narrative has made three appointments in the last six months. Dikshita Chakraborty joined as Client Manager alongside Angel Shaji as Junior Designer, with a new Head of Digital Media set to join the team in September.

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Autumn Goals...

Highlights PR's Keith Newman asked some of his RADAR members what is the biggest business goal you're focusing on this autumn, and how can customers support you?

After the Summer holidays it's time to get back into a routine to eat healthy and exercise. I am focusing on changing the menu and adding special items that are focused on being: high in protein, low in carbs and low sugar meals. Packed lunches will be available for parents to order and pick up evening before for school meals to encourage healthy eating.

Sangeeta Loomba, www.namastetasteofindia.co.uk

The last quarter of the year is always busy for us, especially as many of our clients take holidays over the summer and come back ready to tackle the final few months. The start of a new academic season brings change for us as a team each year, as one of us is at university and it means new hours, new commitments to work around and as is the case this year, a new location to work from. Our goal is always to adapt to everyone's needs and personal situations, and our clients help us with this a lot. We don't operate as a traditional "agency" with layers of account management and siloed functionality, our clients contact us via a shared inbox and WhatsApp groups, so they are always fully aware of what we're all up to. It helps us avoid any "I haven't heard back from...." comments from clients. We very much work as an open book as far as our relationships with clients is concerned.

Alan Sawyers www.asdne.co.uk/game

September always feels like a fresh start. As the schools return, families settle back into routines, and children begin a new academic year, it's a natural time for reflection and renewed focus.

This autumn, my biggest goal is simple: to reach and support more children and families who could benefit from the right educational help at the right time. Having recently been invited to attend the APAC Kip McGrath International Conference, I have had the opportunity to learn from some of the best educators within our global network. I am returning with fresh ideas, renewed enthusiasm, and an even stronger determination to make a difference in our local communities.

The biggest way customers can support us is by helping spread that message. Whether it's recommending us to a friend, sharing their experience, or simply talking about the importance of educational support, those conversations help us reach families who may not realise that help is available.

Carol Milne, www.kipmcgrath.co.uk/gateshead-east

This autumn, my biggest goal is to grow the AskMrsWatson.com community and help more small businesses discover that they don't have to struggle alone with technology, AI and data protection. For just £19 a month, members can ask a real person for help when they get stuck whether that's an Excel formula that won't work, figuring out how to use AI safely, or wondering whether something they're doing is 'GDPR' compliant. The best way customers and supporters can help is simply to spread the word. If you know a small business owner, charity or organisation that could do with a friendly, knowledgeable "Mrs Watson" in their corner, please introduce us or point them towards AskMrsWatson.com. Because sometimes the most valuable business tool is simply having someone you can ask.

Kate Watson, www.askmrswatson.com

Our biggest focus this autumn is the North East Indie Book Fest on 3rd October. Following the success of our children's festival this summer, we're incredibly excited to host a day dedicated to celebrating independent authors and proving that some of the UK's most talented writers are right here on our doorstep. The festival is about far more than selling books, it's about championing creativity, supporting local businesses and giving readers the chance to meet the people behind the stories.

Alongside the festival, we have several fantastic new releases coming from Crear Publishing, spanning everything from romance and historical fiction to fantasy and memoir.

The best way customers can support us is simply by getting involved. Come along to the festival, tell your friends about it, buy a book from an indie author, leave a review when you've enjoyed a read, or share a recommendation on social media. Those small actions make an enormous difference to independent publishers and writers.

Ryan Crear, www.crearpublishing.com

My biggest business goal this autumn is to get out and meet as many people as possible who have struggled to find suitable cover, helping those who may have previously been overlooked. I'm passionate about introducing a new health insurance policy that provides genuine protection and peace of mind when it's needed most.

Over the last year I've been able to make a real difference, and my aim now is to help more people than ever before. It's been a long time since I've had access to a product that I truly believe can change lives without making false promises. Knowing that I'm helping people protect themselves and their families is incredibly rewarding, and even a simple "thank you" from someone who appreciates that support makes it all worthwhile.

Andrew Cooper, www.simplymortgagesonline.com

I love autumn as it is a time for me and my clients reflect and shed. A reflection of things that no longer serve us, work for us and are holding us back, this reflection allows us to begin the process of removing those old unwanted habits and preparing the ground for new ways of being that will start to blossom in the Spring or even sooner!

After the summer holidays, clients often say, now is the time to make a change, to become who I am finally meant to be, to rid myself of anything limiting me which apart from individual work can also include issues in our relationships. The biggest goal I'm focussing on this autumn is to increase awareness of the effectiveness of working with a Psychotherapist, for customers it couldn't be easier, it all starts with a free chat!

Nicole Huthwaite, www.nicolehuthwaitetherapy.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

From the Boardroom to the Broadcast Studio

Highlights PR launches new media training suite and practical training package for businesses.

Knowing what to say, and, just as importantly, how to say it; can make all the difference when a business finds itself in front of a microphone, camera or journalist.

That is the thinking behind a new dedicated Media Training Suite from Highlights PR, designed to give business owners, senior managers and spokespeople the confidence and practical skills they need to handle the media effectively.

Based near Morpeth, the new suite provides a professional but relaxed environment where delegates can learn away from the distractions of their normal workplace. The training is deliberately practical, giving participants the opportunity to experience what it is really like to be interviewed rather than simply sitting through a presentation.

The facilities are also used by Radio Northumberland, providing a working environment for the volunteer-run station and giving the suite a genuine broadcasting connection rather than simply recreating a studio environment for training purposes.

The sessions cover everything from preparing for interviews and developing key messages to dealing with difficult questions, radio interviews, podcasts, television appearances and online video.

"We all know that feeling when someone suddenly puts a microphone in front of you and asks a question you weren't expecting," says Keith Newman, founder of Highlights PR. "The aim of the training is to take away that uncertainty.

"You don't need to become a professional broadcaster. You simply need to understand how the media works, know what you want to say and have the confidence to say it clearly."

With more than four decades of experience across business, industry, PR and media, Keith brings the perspective of both a PR professional and broadcaster to the sessions.

The training suite is equipped to recreate realistic interview situations, allowing participants to see and hear how they come across and identify areas for improvement.

The new training package is intentionally limited in size, with a maximum of three delegates per session, making it possible to provide individual feedback and tailor the training to the needs of each participant.

Whether someone is preparing for their first radio interview, wants to become more confident in front of a camera, is likely to be called upon during a crisis or simply wants to make better use of PR opportunities, the sessions are designed to provide practical skills that can immediately be put into use.

The introductory three-hour Media Training Suite package is currently available for £199 + VAT, with places limited to ensure each delegate receives individual attention.

For businesses that want to improve their media confidence, it could be time to stop worrying about what the journalist might ask and start thinking about what you want them to know.

www.highlightspr.co.uk

Images credit: The Bigger Picture Agency

> **Know what you want to say and have the confidence to say it clearly.**

Keith Newman

Your website gets traffic. Why isn't it generating enquiries?

Your website gets decent traffic. People are finding you and clicking around... But they're not getting in touch.

Your first thought might be to drive more traffic: invest in SEO, increase paid spend, publish more content. But if existing visitors aren't converting, sending more people through the same journey probably isn't the answer.

Before chasing traffic, work out where the website is losing people now.

First, check your proposition

Not every conversion problem is a UX problem.

A website can be easy to use and still make it difficult to understand why someone should buy from you.

We see this a lot with established B2B businesses. Over time, new services, sectors, products and audiences get added. Eventually, the website explains a lot about the business without making the buying decision any easier.

Ask whether your website quickly answers:

Can you solve their problem? Why does it matter commercially? And what changes after they work with you?

Too many websites lead with features or services instead of the problems they solve. Rather than explaining your AI admin feature in depth, tell someone it could save them thousands of admin hours a year. The same offer, positioned differently, gives people a much clearer reason to care.

Don't make people hunt for the proof

Once someone understands your offer, the next question is usually: "Can I trust you to deliver it?" Yet many websites hide their strongest evidence.

Case studies sit in separate sections, testimonials appear too far down the page, and the homepage relies on claims to do the convincing.

Bring the evidence forward.

Customer logos help, but specific proof is stronger: time saved, measurable improvements, years of experience, volumes handled, faster reporting or tangible commercial results. That says far more than "trusted by leading businesses".

Some UX problems are really choice problems

More choice doesn't automatically create a better website.

Give visitors too much information, too many resources and too many routes, and you're asking them to understand your entire business before they know where to go.

Simpler navigation, clearer grouping and journeys built around what visitors actually want to do make that decision easier.

The same applies to page content. You don't need to answer every question. Give people enough to understand the value, trust your business and know what to do next.

Sometimes improving conversion means adding something. Often, it means taking things away.

Make the next step feel worth taking

A big "BOOK A DEMO" button isn't enough if the demo itself feels like a mystery.

What happens next? How long will it take? Who will I speak to? Will it be tailored to me, or just another generic sales pitch?

Remove that uncertainty by briefly explaining what someone will get from the conversation before asking them to book.

Not everyone is ready for the same next step either. Someone researching might prefer a product tour or useful resource, while someone comparing suppliers may be ready for a demo.

Offer relevant options for different stages of the buying journey.

Before you go looking for more traffic...

Look at what happens to the traffic you already have.

Is the proposition clear? Is the proof visible early enough? Can visitors find what matters without processing everything else? And when they're ready to act, is the next step obvious and worthwhile?

A redesign, better UX or CRO work might help.

But sometimes the biggest conversion improvement is simpler: make it easier for people to understand why they should choose you.

vidacreative.co.uk

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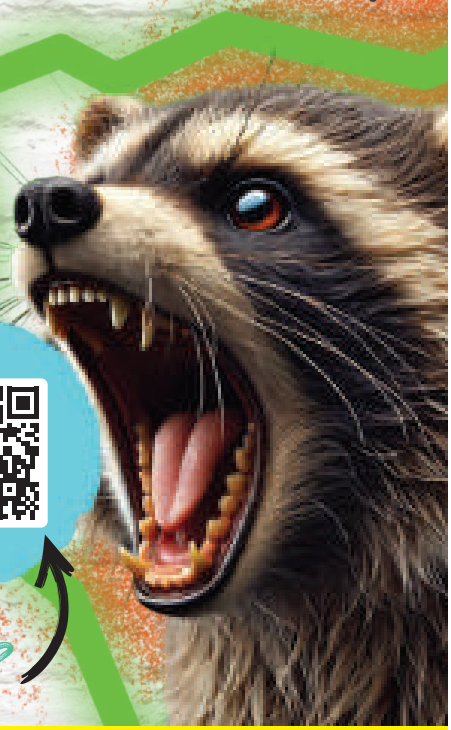

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Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker

Role models matter more than ever

As journalists, SASS media directors Sarah Dale and Sarah Walker spend much of their time telling stories, interviewing people from all walks of life and discussing the issues affecting communities across the region.

One topic that comes up time and again is the influence of role models on young people and why positive examples have never been more important.

Whether we like it or not, children and young people are constantly learning from the adults around them.

Parents, teachers and family members naturally play a huge part in shaping attitudes and behaviours, but young people are also influenced by business leaders, sports stars, politicians, celebrities and social media personalities. The people they see on television screens, in newspapers and online, often leave a lasting impression.

The problem is that not all role models are setting the best example.

Far too often, headlines are dominated by bad behaviour, personal attacks and stories that demonstrate a lack of kindness, respect or accountability. It is easy to become concerned about what message this sends to the next generation.

Yet across our communities there are also thousands of people quietly making a difference every single day.

Teachers who go the extra mile. Business leaders who mentor young people. Volunteers who give up their time to support children and help them develop confidence, skills and ambition.

These are the role models we should be celebrating.

At SASS, supporting young people has always been something close to our hearts.

Director Sarah Dale worked as an emotional wellbeing practitioner, supporting children and young people to better understand and manage their emotions, build resilience and develop strategies to navigate the challenges life can bring.

Long before she worked in primary education and while she was working in a busy newsroom, she volunteered in several Middlesbrough schools, listening to children read and helping them develop confidence and a love of learning. It is a simple act, but one that can have a huge impact. For many children, having an adult take the time to listen, encourage and celebrate their progress can make a lasting difference.

These experiences have reinforced something we strongly believe: every young person deserves access to positive role models and opportunities that help them recognise their potential.

That belief is one of the reasons we are proud to be launching the second edition of The NetWORKer Junior magazine this autumn.

Produced for NetWORK NotWORK CIC and Careers Navigator, the publication is aimed at children and young people aged between eight and 18 and is designed to inspire, inform and empower the next generation.

The magazine is packed with real-life stories, interviews and practical advice from people who have built successful careers across a wide range of industries.

Young readers can discover different career paths, explore education and training opportunities, learn about courses and qualifications, and understand how work experience can help open doors in the future.

Importantly, the magazine also highlights the fact that success does not follow a single route.

Not every young person wants to go to university. Not every future entrepreneur excels academically. Not every career journey follows a straight line.

By sharing honest stories and experiences from real people, The NetWORKer Junior helps young readers understand that there are many paths to success and that setbacks, challenges and changes of direction are often part of the journey.

For many children and teenagers, simply hearing from someone who has overcome obstacles, followed their ambitions or discovered a career they love can be incredibly powerful.

Representation matters. Seeing people from different backgrounds, industries and experiences succeed helps young people believe that they can succeed too.

At a time when many young people face uncertainty about their futures, access to reliable information, positive encouragement and relatable role models has never been more valuable.

The future workforce is currently sitting in our classrooms. Future engineers, nurses, journalists, teachers, business owners, scientists, artists and leaders are all growing up in our communities right now.

The responsibility we all share is to help them believe in themselves and provide the tools, knowledge and support they need to achieve their goals.

Being a role model does not require fame, wealth or a large social media following.

It is the teacher who stays behind after class to help a struggling pupil. It is the volunteer who listens patiently to a child read. It is the employer who offers a young person their first work experience placement.

If we want young people to grow into confident, capable and compassionate adults, we need to ensure they see those qualities reflected in the people around them.

That is why initiatives like The NetWORKer Junior matter so much. They provide inspiration, practical guidance and real-world insight at a stage in life when confidence and ambition are still being shaped.

Most importantly, they remind young people that their future is full of possibilities.

And perhaps that is the greatest lesson any role model can teach.

Find out more about SASS media at www.sassmedialtd.co.uk

To find out more about sponsorship of The NetWORKer Junior, email Sarah Dale: sarah.dale@sassmedialtd.co.uk

Christopher Owens and Kari Owers

Original Thinking with Christopher Owens

Marketing consultancy O.agency's Original Thinking podcast explores a range of topics facing today's leaders, from finding originality in a world of AI to managing creativity and change in business.

In the latest episode, O.agency Founder Kari Owers talks to photographer and owner of editorial platform Pattern, Christopher Owens, about creativity, craft and AI.

Chris has been a photographer for almost 20 years, with his work appearing in The Guardian, The Times and the National Portrait Gallery, alongside commercial work for brands including Greggs.

Read some of the conversation Kari and Chris had around original thinking and why people are pushing back against increasingly perfect-looking imagery.

Would you describe yourself as an original thinker?

I don't know if I'd call myself an original thinker, but I'm definitely a thinker! It's really hard to have a completely original thought now. For me, it's more about trusting the ideas that come from your own experiences, the people you've met and the things that have shaped how you see the world.

Quite often you'll have one idea, then come across something completely different and suddenly the two work together in a way that feels new. As a photographer, that's what I'm trying to do – put my way of seeing a person or situation into that little rectangle.

Do you need to feel inspired to produce creative work?

I don't really subscribe to the idea of waiting for a big spark of inspiration because when creativity is your job, you have to learn how to access it on demand. There are days when I don't feel inspired, but I still have to turn up and make something. The more shoots you do, the more tools you have to pull yourself out of those situations.

At the same time, I always try to leave enough space on a shoot for something unexpected to happen. Some of the best photographs come from moments you couldn't have planned and I love that.

How important is the human connection behind portrait photography?

It's probably more important than the technical side. A lot of the time I'm walking into a building I've never been in before, meeting somebody for the first time and I might have ten minutes to get the photograph. You have to find some common ground quickly and work out what you can bring out of that person. Hopefully, when I photograph somebody, you get some sense of who they are or where they are in their life at that moment.

How has AI changed the way you think about photography?

It's made me think more about where the value in my work lies. I've experimented with generative AI because I'd rather understand what it can do than just be anxious about it and some of it is incredibly powerful. You can generate a likeness of somebody without really capturing them, it's all very surface level. An algorithm can work with the information it has available, but it can't have that conversation with somebody or understand what's happening in the room.

What I find strange is that some of the first things we've handed over to AI are creative things, when creativity is such an innately human way of communicating. I'd much rather it freed up our time from processes and data crunching so we had more time to do the creative work.

Are audiences starting to push back against images that feel too perfect?

Definitely. I think people have quite good spidey senses when something looks too polished or too perfect! People are struggling to believe what they see and that can be dangerous for brands because trust can disappear quickly.

I think we'll see more work where the rough edges haven't all been sanded off. Not celebrating imperfection for the sake of it, but celebrating the reality behind it. There's credibility and integrity in those imperfections.

What does the future look like for photographers in an AI world?

Photography has already changed massively during my career. I learnt on film and then watched the whole industry move to digital, and now AI feels like another shift.

I think photographers need to remain open to experimenting with new technology, while protecting the things that make their craft valuable. Craft matters, but taste matters too – having enough experience to know what's rubbish, what's good and what's great.

To hear to the whole conversation head to O.agency's Original Thinking podcast on Spotify or via www.o.agency/news

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I couldn't find a seat at the table, so I built my own

By Samuel Marriott-Dowding

There is a familiar piece of advice given to ambitious professionals: work hard, keep your head down, wait your turn.

Samuel Marriott-Dowding

Eventually, someone will invite you into the room, and for many people, that advice works. For others, it never does.

Not because they lack capability, or intelligence. Not because they have not earned the opportunity, but because institutions, however well-intentioned, often reproduce themselves. If you come from outside those traditional pathways, you quickly discover that exceptional work alone is rarely enough.

You are expected to become more acceptable before you become more influential, and that is a trade I was never prepared to make.

Growing Marriott Communications in the North East, I was constantly reminded that the most influential businesses, the biggest decisions and the greatest opportunities happened 'elsewhere'.

I have never believed there was anything radical about wanting to build something exceptional, or even be exceptional. I have simply believed that exceptional things can be built anywhere.

That conviction became the foundation of Marriott Communications.

It became an opportunity to build the culture I had spent years looking for elsewhere. Building your own organisation is an extraordinary education in leadership because it removes every excuse. Every success belongs to your judgement, and every failure belongs there too.

You build trust one decision at a time, you build reputation one client at a time, you build influence one relationship at a time.

The objective was not to become successful, it was to become consequential. The work became larger because our thinking became greater.

For myself and people like me, when you are ambitious, driven, know what you want out of life, and certainly ballsy enough to go and get it - we are labelled arrogant or contrarian - but in reality, we dance to the beat of our own drum overarched by the fact that our dreams are big, our ambitions bigger, and we possess a level of certainty that we are destined to do great things.

So along the way, I also realised something else. Many talented people spend years trying to gain acceptance from systems that were never designed with them in mind. I increasingly believe that is the wrong strategy. Sometimes the most valuable thing you can build is not a career within someone else's institution, it is an institution of your own.

One that reflects your values. One that creates opportunities for others.

This is not an argument against established organisations, it is, however, an argument for recognising that leadership is no longer defined solely by the organisations we inherit. Increasingly, it is defined by the organisations we choose to create.

Looking back, I no longer see Marriott Communications as the business I founded, I see it as evidence.

Evidence that globally ambitious advisory firms do not have to emerge from Mayfair or Manhattan, evidence that strategic counsel can be built outside traditional centres of influence, evidence that geography should never become destiny.

I did not build this firm because I could not find a seat at someone else's table, I built it because I realised my ambitions were always bigger than occupying someone else's seat.

The future will not be defined by those invited into the room, it will be shaped by the people courageous enough to build entirely new rooms - and generous enough to leave the door open for others who were told they did not belong.

marriottcommunications.com

Making a Splash

Caroline Gray-Mason's mission to get North East water innovation in the global spotlight

Managing Director Caroline Gray-Mason reflects on a remarkable first year for Control Flow Technologies Group, taking a Sunderland-based business onto the international stage and raising the bar for women in water.

For most of us, water is simple. Turn on the tap and it appears. For Caroline, that simplicity masks one of the biggest challenges facing our future.

Using patented technology Control Flow is working with major water companies, councils and housing providers to reduce unnecessary water consumption, energy use and household bills.

And they're just getting started.

Control Flow is one. How does that feel?

I'm incredibly proud!

When you're building a business, you're always looking forward, so our first birthday has given me a chance to look back on how far we've come.

We're proudly North East based, but seeing something developed and driven by our team making an impact on the global stage is unbelievable, and slightly surreal.

For someone new to Control Flow, what do you do?

We help people use less water without asking them to live differently.

Our patented technology controls water flow in the background, despite fluctuations in mains pressure – reducing unnecessary consumption without compromising the user experience.

Using less hot water also means using less energy, lowering carbon emissions and household bills. We can deliver combined water and energy savings of up to £360 per year.

Multiply that across thousands of homes and a simple intervention has an enormous impact.

What makes Control Flow different?

We look at the whole challenge. Water connects to housing, energy, carbon, affordability, infrastructure and economic growth.

The Government wants to build 1.5 million homes in England this Parliament, yet current water capacity could support only 420,000. Long-term infrastructure investment is vital, but we also need solutions that make a difference now. Control Flow has already helped unlock thousands of homes through water and nutrient neutrality solutions.

The bigger opportunity is making water something people care about and feel part of. Big change becomes possible when everyone can contribute.

Water is a global issue. Is international growth part of the ambition?

Absolutely. Water scarcity doesn't recognise borders.

Our roots are firmly in the North East, but our outlook has always been international. We're building relationships across markets in Europe and India, where we've already seen our technology deliver amazing results.

The opportunity is enormous, but so is the responsibility. Water touches almost every major challenge we're facing, yet it still doesn't command the same conversation – that needs to change.

You're a female MD in a male-dominated industry. Is bringing other women through important to you?

Massively. There are brilliant women coming through our senior leadership team and I want to give them the confidence, space and opportunity to grow.

I want more women to see there is a place for them in water, engineering, utilities and infrastructure – not just a place at the table, but an opportunity to lead the conversation.

To me, leadership is about creating an environment where other people can become brilliant.

So what does 'thinking bigger' look like for year two?

It means growing internationally, building new partnerships and continuing to prove that we can deliver commercial, environmental and social impact at the same time.

As we enter year two, we're also excited to be working with Blue Moon Marketing to bring Control Flow's story to new audiences and make water a much bigger part of the conversation. We can't wait for what's ahead.

Ultimately, this is about protecting something none of us can live without. And that feels like a pretty good reason to think bigger.

For media enquiries, interview requests or opportunities involving Caroline Gray-Mason or Control Flow Technologies, please contact Blue Moon Marketing:

hello@bluemoon-marketing.co.uk

CONTROL FLOW
TECHNOLOGIES

> **Everything needs to be tailored to the client.**

Stuart Bramley

Mira Marketing – Generating sales and growth for companies

Founded by Stuart Bramley, his agency is now one of the most successful in the region.

Stuart Bramley is one of those people who have the knack of creating success.

His route into marketing wasn't traditional. For example, he went to the USA on a football scholarship and earned an International Business Management degree.

He returned to the UK and played semi-professional football, but he always wanted to run his own business. He founded a sportswear brand (worn by Boxing Scotland along with celebrities and footballers and England cricket captain Ben Stokes) before setting himself up as a business consultant. He was quickly taken on by firms such as Scalextric and Hornby Hobbies.

In 2018, he took the plunge and founded Mira Marketing after success with his portfolio of freelance clients. As he grew to a size which was unmanageable on his own, he employed his close friend and teamed up with well-known North East entrepreneur, investor, and business advisor, Neil Stephenson.

"I wanted to help businesses small and large who had the same sort of drive and vision which I had," said Stuart. "I wanted to work with ambitious companies and help them generate more sales and achieve sustainable growth through strategies that made an impact on top and bottom line. Since founding Mira Marketing, we've grown by 20-30 per cent every year, and continue to add to our client portfolio. We've built a team which has allowed the company to grow a reputation for delivering measurable results rather than simply increasing marketing activity. Accountability, transparency, and long-term relationships have become something of a trademark for us."

When you speak to Stuart, it's instantly obvious that he's very focussed on how he wants to help companies…and his track record shows that he's successful.

He was keen to establish a full-service marketing agency, offering expertise across paid media, search engine optimisation (SEO), email marketing, creative design, data and analytics, social media marketing and strategic consultancy.

So that's what he did with Mira Marketing.

"It's important when we speak with a client and discover precisely what they're aiming to achieve, that we can offer everything under one roof. Before I founded Mira Marketing, I was involved with agencies that tended to specialise in certain areas, but when it came to offering everything, they would need to bring in help or use something 'off the shelf'. That method doesn't work. Everything needs to be tailored to the client. You need to have a team which can help each other…bounce ideas…develop a complete strategy for the client to help increase their visibility, lead generation and online sales through measurable, data-led campaigns. Nothing should work in silo anymore, especially with the tracking issues that the world now faces."

Mira Marketing is growing so fast…they're up to a team of 18…that they've had to move into new offices and are now based at Ouseburn in Newcastle.

They're working closely with companies and organisations both here in the North East and across the UK. They're client list is impressive…NHS, Centre for Life, Geotab, Pennine Home Improvements, Up & Running, and Hanover Dairies to name a few.

It also won't surprise anyone who knows Stuart Bramley that he's also taken over another company. Bearing in mind that when he returned from the USA he founded a sportswear business, he plainly learned from that experience and has now got Attacus Cycling under his wing.

"I'm proud of Attacus Cycling. Being a keen sportsman, I've always appreciated the value of wearing top quality clothing designed for the sport I was involved in. When it comes to cycling, nobody produces better gear than the Italians, so I now source everything from Italy using Italian materials."

And yes, Attacus Cycling has become another Stuart Bramley success story.

If you would like help in taking your business to the next level, the best idea is to speak to Stuart and his team at Mira Marketing.

They'll take you to the next level…and beyond.

Visit their excellent website www.miramarketing.co.uk for contact details and additional information.

In conversation with...

Jen Hallam

MD, Gardiner Richardson

Jen Hallam is the Managing Director and co-owner of strategic brand communications agency Gardiner Richardson.

What are the key challenges that clients are facing?

On the face of it, our initial conversations with clients are diverse: they're looking for support with a product launch, they want to change behaviours with a target audience, or they need to drive more revenue into their business. When we drill down into it, there's generally a common theme: the search for clarity.

We live in a world of constant change, and organisations are juggling. They are working hard to stay relevant, stay effective and stay ahead. In-house brand and marketing teams are pushed to do more with less. On top of that, whether it's showing up consistently in AI summaries or repeatedly nudging decision-makers across channels, brand communications are more complex than ever.

Clarity on what an organisation stands for and how to present it adds real value, as well as making brand management much more straightforward for stretched teams. With a clear strategy, it's much easier to keep a tight focus on the marketing activity which will make a difference.

How do you work with organisations to provide that clarity?

It comes down to taking time to really understand our client's organisations and the people within them. Developing a new brand positioning or approach to brand management is a big deal – we do everything we can to make sure our clients are well informed, involved and aligned with every step of the process. This is key to ensuring the work resonates with the organisation's team, as well as external audiences.

As well as creating and developing brand positioning, we help build long-term consistency across brand management. We work to make sure everyone's on the same page – from in-house teams to partner agencies.

What makes for a successful partnership with a client?

Holding onto what is right for an organisation, rather than what's easiest. Sometimes we ask the difficult questions, but ultimately our motivation is to help our clients get to where they need to be. Sure, it's not without its slightly awkward moments, but the success it brings builds the long-term trust that great partnerships feed on.

How do the values of Gardiner Richardson impact your work?

We only partner with clients who share our values. We value mutual respect and a focus on strategic work, as well as being part of industries and organisations that do good. We never work with clients in the tobacco, alcohol or gambling industries.

We're very proud of our work across behaviour change in public health. We're a long-term communications partner of Fresh and Balance, a regional programme dedicated to reducing the harm from tobacco and alcohol in the North East. Our communications work plays a small part in helping people to lead healthier lives and keeps pushing for change.

How do your values shape the way you run the business?

I feel very lucky to work with a talented and lovely group of people. We know we all do our best work when we're feeling good. We try to support this through flexible office hours and hybrid working, as well as time for and access to exercise and social activities at Generator Studios. We have also recently committed to becoming a Real Living Wage employer to support our team, as well as our suppliers.

We also give time to invest in our work for good causes, as well as for volunteering and trustee roles to support our local community. One example of this is our work with the Percy Hedley Foundation. We have supported young people from the foundation through work experience placements and real-life project briefs, as well as receiving training on disability awareness. We have also worked collaboratively to create a guide to accessible communications which can be downloaded for free from the Percy Hedley website.

What is your motivation for the future of Gardiner Richardson?

We always want to push the standard of what we can do for clients, as well as for our team and community. Part of this is having our eyes open to what's going on around us in our industry and being relentlessly interested in what's next.

gardiner-richardson.com

> We only partner with clients who share our values.

Jen Hallam with business partner Darren Richardson.

A Day in the Life of...

Ross Palmer

Creative Director, Kenfolk

Ross Palmer

How does your day usually begin, and what's the first thing you do when you arrive at work?

It may be cliché but coffee first, always. I'll get in, turn the lights on, and get a fresh pot of FC Roast brewing in our French Press. After that it's blinds open, a quick tidy and time to fire up the machines ready to start the day.

Some mornings I'll also squeeze in a little walk along the river at the North East BIC with our agency dog, Coco.

Can you talk us through your typical working day, from your morning routine to the end of the day?

I'm not sure a "typical day" actually exists in the creative industry. Usually, the day kicks off with team and client catch ups, and mapping out projects - discussing timelines, progress, and deadlines, alongside a bit of office off-topic gossip with the team. Once that's done, it's heads down and getting into the flow of work. We operate on a core hours system at Kenfolk, ensuring that everyone has that vital flexibility for family life and a proper balance; it means when we're on, we're really on. We always make time for a quick breather though - usually centred around Ken Bruce's Popmaster (it's a studio ritual) and the mid-day coffee dash.

What part of your role do you enjoy the most, and why does it stand out for you?

Having been in the creative world for a while now, I still get that buzz from seeing our work out in the wild - be it branding on a lorry on the A1, a shopping bag in town, or our mark appearing in film credits. In this role, what really resonates with me is when new business comes to us through word of mouth; it means we're doing something right!

What are the biggest challenges you face in your day-to-day work, and how do you overcome them?

Time - there just never seems to be enough of it. As a big Back to the Future fan, I sometimes wish I had a Flux Capacitor, so I rely on delegation instead. I live by the saying about surrounding yourself with people better than you at the things you're not, so having a solid team means I can focus on my strengths and let them focus on theirs.

No two days are quite the same - can you share a recent day that perfectly sums up what your jobs really like?

Recently we had a trio of kids in the studio - two 13-year-olds exploring the world of AI, and a five-year-old watching SpongeBob - plus a student on placement and Coco the agency dog, all alongside the three of us. Our Wi-Fi felt the strain but that perfectly captures the balance of managing the chaos, understanding, and still getting work done. That's what the job is all about.

What skills or qualities do you think are essential for someone wanting to succeed in your role?

I'll hold my hands up, delegation was something that was a real struggle for me, especially when I first launched the agency as We Are Ken six years ago. Our Kenfolk rebrand in 2025 helped us focus on finding the right folk to bring on board who complement my own strengths and weaknesses. It's a strategy that's allowed us to scale steadily and methodically rather than chasing rapid growth.

How do you maintain a healthy work-life balance, and what do you enjoy doing outside of work to switch off?

I make a point of diving into hobbies that have nothing to do with the studio; it's about finding those things that allow you to switch off. This usually involves taking a dog walk along the beach with my family. Then there's the persistent, losing battle to transform my garden lawn into Wembley's pitch. Sunderland matches and a few beers with my dad is always a must for me, and not forgetting the ultimate Danish de-stress with Lego.

If you could give one piece of advice to someone hoping to follow a similar career path, what would it be?

The best thing any creative or designer can do at any level is to listen. Listen to clients, listen to colleagues, listen to your gut. Really take on board what people are saying.

It's also important to work hard, and generally in life, just be nice to people.

kenfolk.co.uk

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BRADLEY O'MAHONEY

Investing in the next generation of marketing talent

There is no substitute for experience, however, every successful marketing professional has to start somewhere.

Thomas Halse

Six months ago, Thomas Halse joined Riverside Marketing Solutions and in that short time he has become an enthusiastic and valued member of the business, bringing with him creativity and a genuine eagerness to learn.

Becoming an integral part of the business, he has embraced every opportunity to develop his skills while gaining valuable hands-on experience across a wide range of client projects.

Marketing is an industry that never stands still. New technologies, social media platforms and digital trends emerge almost daily, making it more important than ever to combine experience with fresh thinking. Bringing young people into the workplace not only helps develop future talent but also introduces new perspectives, ideas and creativity that can benefit both the business and its clients.

Whether supporting client campaigns or creating engaging social media and video content, he has embraced every challenge and continues to develop his skills and confidence.

One of the highlights of Thomas' first six months has been attending business events across the North East. Networking with local organisations, meeting business owners and learning about the challenges and ambitions of different sectors has given him a real appreciation of the region's vibrant business community. It's also helped him understand the importance of building strong relationships, something that sits at the heart of Riverside Marketing.

Alongside his day-to-day role, Thomas has recently begun studying towards a Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) qualification in Professional & Digital Marketing, further demonstrating his commitment to building a successful career in the industry. The qualification complements the practical experience he's gaining within the business, allowing him to apply industry best practice to real client projects while continuing to expand his knowledge of the ever-changing marketing landscape.

Nicola Halse, owner of Riverside Marketing, believes investing in young people benefits both businesses and clients, "I've been absolutely delighted with Thomas' progress over the past six months. His enthusiasm, willingness to learn and positive attitude have made him a real asset to the business. As his confidence and experience have grown, it's enabled us to support more clients, broaden our service offering and continue delivering the high standards our clients expect.

Most importantly, Thomas is gaining valuable real-world experience across all aspects of marketing, something that's helping him build the foundations for what I'm sure will be a very successful career.

Attending networking events can be daunting, particularly for young people, however, the North East business community has been so welcoming and friendly towards Thomas, it's really helped him settle in and feel part of the business world."

Nicola continued, "Recruiting young people is sometimes viewed as a leap of faith but my experience has shown that with the right support and opportunities they can make a meaningful contribution from day one. They bring fresh ideas, a different perspective and an instinctive understanding of emerging digital platforms and trends, helping to keep creativity flowing and ensuring our approach continues to evolve.

Thomas has already achieved so much in just six months and this is only the beginning. I'm incredibly proud of everything he has accomplished so far and excited to watch him continue to develop both personally and professionally.

Investing in young talent isn't just about shaping the future of one individual, it's about strengthening the future of our business, our industry and the clients we're privileged to support."

www.riversidemarketingsolutions.co.uk

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An Italian Summer

Durham Business Club celebrates summer with an evening of Italian flavour and jazz!

What a night it was at Veeno – Italian Wine Bar & Kitchen in Durham, where members gathered for a wonderfully relaxed summer evening of networking, great food, wines and music.

The atmosphere was brought to life by the brilliant Lindy Jazz and the Gavin Lee Band, providing the perfect soundtrack as members connected, caught up and enjoyed the evening together.

Delicious charcuterie boards, freshly prepared pizzas and a superb selection of Sicilian wines added to the evening's Italian charm. With plenty of conversation, laughter, music and good vibes, it was a truly joyful celebration of summer, friendship, networking and community.

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JAM MARKETING

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Ramside Estates aquires long-standing telecoms partner

Leading North East hospitality group Ramside Estates has strengthened its position and consolidated its future growth plans with the acquisition of a telecommunications business.

Select Telecom Limited, Brunswick Village, Newcastle, has been a long-standing supplier to Ramside, providing ongoing support across the Group, providing Wi-Fi, connectivity and communications among other services.

Reliable connectivity – from guest WiFi, to operational systems, payment technology, hotel systems, events, conferences, offices and other digital services - is now fundamental to virtually every area of Ramside's operations.

And the acquisition of a company with which it already has a strong and established relationship, will not only protect Ramside's critical infrastructure but also give the business greater control over its development, resilience and ongoing support.

It also brings significant specialist expertise into the wider Group - helping Ramside design technology and connectivity into developments from the outset.

The acquisition will enable Select to continue to operate as a telecommunications business serving its existing and future customers, protecting its expertise and providing it with a platform for future growth.

Martin Smith, Head of Finance at Ramside Estates Ltd, said: "Select has been a trusted partner to Ramside for many years and already provides much of the Wi-Fi, networking and communications infrastructure across our business.

"As our reliance on technology and connectivity continues to grow, particularly alongside the significant investment we are making across the Group, bringing that expertise closer to the business makes a great deal of strategic sense.

"What particularly attracted us to Select was that we already knew the business, the quality of its people and the service it provides.

"This acquisition isn't simply about supporting Ramside, however. Select has a strong and established customer base of its own and we see a real opportunity to invest in the business, support the existing team and help Select continue to grow as part of the wider Ramside Group."

For further information visit www.ramsidehallhotel.co.uk

Gateshead tech expert launches new business to help owners maximise company value before sale

A Sunderland software entrepreneur who has helped more than 150 businesses navigate complex transactions is launching a new Gateshead-based consultancy to help company owners maximise the value of their businesses before they sell.

Michael Peacock, founder of Washington Baltic, is using more than two decades of experience in software engineering, technology leadership and business advisory services to help business owners prepare for one of the most important transactions of their lives.

Based in Gateshead, Washington Baltic specialises in helping companies understand how their technology, software, security, AI and IT systems will be viewed by potential buyers and investors during the due diligence process.

Michael said many business owners spend years building successful companies but often overlook how technology can influence a buyer's perception and ultimately affect valuation.

"Technology, software and security are rarely the reason a business doesn't sell, but they can have a significant impact on how attractive a company appears to potential buyers," he said.

"Business owners know exactly what makes their company great because they live and breathe it every day. What they're often less comfortable doing is explaining those strengths in a way that resonates with investors, buyers and their advisers.

"We help businesses identify and mitigate any areas that need attention ahead of time, but just as importantly we help them tell the story of what they're already doing well. The aim is to ensure buyers fully understand both the strengths and any challenges before they enter a transaction."

Washington Baltic works with companies preparing for sale, businesses seeking investment, organisations considering public market listings and buyers wanting to better understand technology risks before making acquisitions.

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Thursday 15 October 2026
The BALTIC, Gateshead

northcommunityconf.com

aws NORTH community conference 2026

RMT Technology aiming for £3m turnover mark as growth strategy delivers results

The specialist technology arm of RMT Accountants & Business Advisors is aiming to pass the £3m turnover barrier by the end of 2026 after doubling its turnover in the last 12 months.

After moved into a purpose-built 1,800 sq ft office at RMT's Gosforth headquarters last summer, RMT Technology has seen its annual revenues increase from £1.1m to £2.2m on the back of a series of new client wins and service developments.

It has created five new jobs so far this year, and is expecting to bring in further new recruits through the rest of 2026 as it implements the next stages of its strategy for increasing its client base across the north of England.

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

It works in partnership with a wide range of SMEs to identify and implement security first IT solutions which meet their specific business and operational needs around IT strategy, network infrastructure, information security and data management services.

Alongside managed service provision in these areas, RMT Technology also provides a consultancy service which helps clients of all sizes identify and address issues within their technology infrastructure, information management and cyber security systems and procedures.

And it is also beginning to grow the number of bespoke AI-powered solutions that it develops in response to specific customer needs.

Key client wins over the last year include Consett-based medical device manufacturer Surgical Dynamics, the Durham head office of collision assistance specialist Glass Assist UK and Newcastle's Live Theatre, while it was also recently appointed to provide a full managed-service partnership for nuclear decommissioning specialist Cyclife UK.

Stephen McNickle, commercial director at RMT Technology, adds: "We've seen a real surge in demand over the last year and have plans in place to take the business onto the next level through the coming 12 months and beyond.

"While the business and our team have grown significantly, we're still retaining our focus on the personal relationships with clients and the detailed understanding of their specific needs that has been the bedrock of our development.

"Being able to simplify IT systems, reduce costs, enhance their effectiveness and identify relevant emerging technologies as they become available are all combining to make a tangible impact on clients' operations and bottom lines.

"We know there's much more growth potential to realise from the business, especially through the opportunities now being presented by AI-powered solutions, and we're fully equipped to continue realising it."

Stephen Slater, managing director at RMT Accountants & Business Advisors, adds: "The strategic investments we've made in RMT Technology's service provision and expert team are clearly paying off, and we have high expectations for the business's growth potential in the coming years."

Net-defence celebrates decade of growth with key industry honour

Net-Defence is celebrating ten years in business with a significant industry honour, recognising the company's transformation from a telecommunications provider into one of the North East's leading cyber security and managed IT specialists.

The accolade, presented by the Tyne and Wear Business Awards UK, recognises Net-Defence's continued growth, technical excellence and commitment to helping organisations strengthen their cyber resilience against an increasingly complex threat landscape.

The recognition comes during a milestone year for the business as it marks ten years as Net-Defence. Established within the third-generation family-owned Ogilvie Group, the company has spent the past decade investing in technical expertise, automation and customer-focused services while building a strong promote from within culture.

Their progress has also attracted national attention, with Net-Defence recently shortlisted in the prestigious Outstanding Security Performance Awards (OSPAs), further reinforcing its growing reputation within the UK cyber security sector.

Debra Cairns, Managing Director of Net-Defence, said: "Receiving this recognition is an incredible achievement and reflects the dedication, expertise and commitment of every member of our team.

Over the past decade we've deliberately built a business centred on trust, technical excellence and long-term customer relationships. We've invested in our people, embraced innovation and remained focused on helping organisations strengthen their cyber resilience while delivering outstanding managed IT and security services.

This achievement belongs to our entire team, every day they go above and beyond to protect our customers, deliver exceptional service and build the trusted partnerships that have made recognition like this possible."

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L-R: The AWS North Community Conference organisation committee - Lee Gilmore Dan Pudwell Mark Sailes and Steve Morland

AWS North Community Conference 2026

A space for community, connection and continuous learning.

AWS North Community Conference returns to the North East on 15th October 2026, this time at the BALTIC in Gateshead. The event will bring together the North's technology community with AWS practitioners and thought leaders from across the industry.

Ahead of the event we spoke to Dan Pudwell, Principal Solutions Architect at Leighton, AWS North East User Group Lead and one of the conference organisers, about the importance of community, connection and continuous learning.

AWS North Community Conference returns for a second year. How does it feel to bring the event back to the region?

It was such an amazing event last year so I'm thrilled we can do it again. The response from the community was fantastic, so being able to build on that and bring everyone together for a second year is really exciting.

What makes the North's technology ecosystem distinctive, and where do you think its biggest strengths lie?

There's a real sense of community in the North. People are willing to share what they've learned, help each other and have honest conversations about the challenges they're facing. There's also a huge amount of talent across established businesses, start-ups, universities, and the wider technology community. That combination of talent and collaboration is a real strength.

Why is it important for people in technology to come together in person when so much work can now happen remotely?

There is definitely a different feeling when talking to people in person and having those random hallway conversations. Personally, I also see people I've worked with over the years and get the chance to catch up. Those informal conversations can lead to ideas and connections that probably wouldn't happen on a video call.

What did you learn from last year's conference about what the community wants and needs?

The biggest thing was that people want practical, real-world knowledge and the opportunity to learn from people who are actually doing this work. The feedback also showed there's a huge appetite for an event like this in the North. We've taken that feedback on board and are looking to make this year's conference even bigger and better.

How important are events like this as technologies such as cloud, AI, automation and serverless continue to develop rapidly?

Technology moves so quickly that it's impossible for any one person to know everything. Events like this give people the chance to hear directly from practitioners about what they're trying, what's working and what they've learned. That can help you decide where to focus your own learning.

How important is it to connect the North's community with people and ideas from beyond the region?

It's really important. We have an amazing community here, but bringing in people from different places gives us new perspectives and exposes us to ideas and approaches we might not otherwise encounter. It also gives people outside the region a chance to see what's happening here and connect with the talent we have in the North.

What are you hoping attendees will take away from this year's conference?

I hope they can all find something they want to learn more about. Perhaps a little spark from a talk ignites some curiosity and they go figure it out and maybe even build something.

Finally, why should someone working in or considering a career in technology in the North come along on the 15th of October?

As well as the learning and development opportunities, you never know who you're going to talk to, what you're going to learn or where that conversation might lead. I wouldn't be where I am today without meeting some amazing people. It's a great way to open doors. The North has an incredible technology community, and this is a great chance to be part of it.

For more information about AWS North Community Conference 2026 or to get tickets please visit: www.northcommunityconf.com

L-R: George Galloway and Ian Elcoat

Elisian – Helping energy companies deliver

North East software developers for the global energy sector.

When Ian Elcoat left university, he wanted to make full use of his software development skills, but it wasn't until 2016 when he finally realised his dreams. He established Elisian which, over the last decade has steadily grown to become one of the most trusted software specialists in the UK, particularly when it comes to working with energy companies across oil and gas, offshore wind, chemicals and into the future as the UK adopts hydrogen and other renewable-energy industries. Ian believes that as the UK adopts further nuclear power, the solutions Elisian provide will be well suited for this sector, especially with the advancement of small reactors which can safely power small towns and even trading estates.

But everything really took off when BP got in touch.

"BP have been heavily involved in oil and gas exploration for many years, and they wanted me to look into how they could manage their workers' shift system," said Ian. "The majority of their staff on oil and gas platforms work 12-hour shifts which means a job simply rolls from one person or team to another. They wanted to electronically track data between shifts because, up to that point, everything had been logged manually. From then, our specially developed piece of software was so successful that they asked what else we could do for them…and the rest is history."

The value of the software which Elisian has developed is that it can transfer from sector to sector because it focusses on helping improve safety, reliability, compliance and the management of industrial assets, something which every business and industry needs to do…small or large. Replacing traditional paper-based and slow computer systems to allow companies to control and monitor high-risk work activities digitally, is a key factor of the Elisian solution. The system records each stage of any job, from the initial request and authorisation through to completion, creating a detailed audit trail. This can help companies demonstrate that work is being carried out safely and in line with regulatory requirements.

"Because our software monitors a job from start to finish, it builds a history of regular maintenance tasks and allows operators to schedule maintenance, manage risk and reduce unplanned downtime while constantly ensuring the condition and safety of industrial assets. These include management of change, operational risk assessments, joint integrity management and monitoring of leaks or other signs of potential problems. In a nutshell, the software will tell you when everything from electrical, plumbing, general maintenance and operational tasks need to be done to maintain safety. It simplifies decision making because if you skip those tasks, you are increasing the levels of danger. Predictive maintenance keeps things simple and is more cost-effective in the long term. It also gives you confidence that work is being done when it needs to be done."

Elisian has a proud record of retaining customers, having worked with their longest standing customer for over 15 years and because of such trusted relationships have not had a customer leave them. Elisian's customer footprint is based around the North Sea, with customers both onshore and offshore across the UK and mainland Europe., proving that even though Elisian began life providing software solutions for the oil and gas industry, their processes are easily transferred to other businesses.

Elisian, based on the Cobalt Business Park on North Tyneside, is a North East success story…a software development business using digital technology to make energy operations safer, more efficient and easier to monitor.

A North East success story with a global reach.

If you'd like to find out how they can help your business be safer and more productive, the best way is to contact Elisin via their excellent website www.elisian.co.uk where you'll find further details about what they can do for you and how they can reach you.

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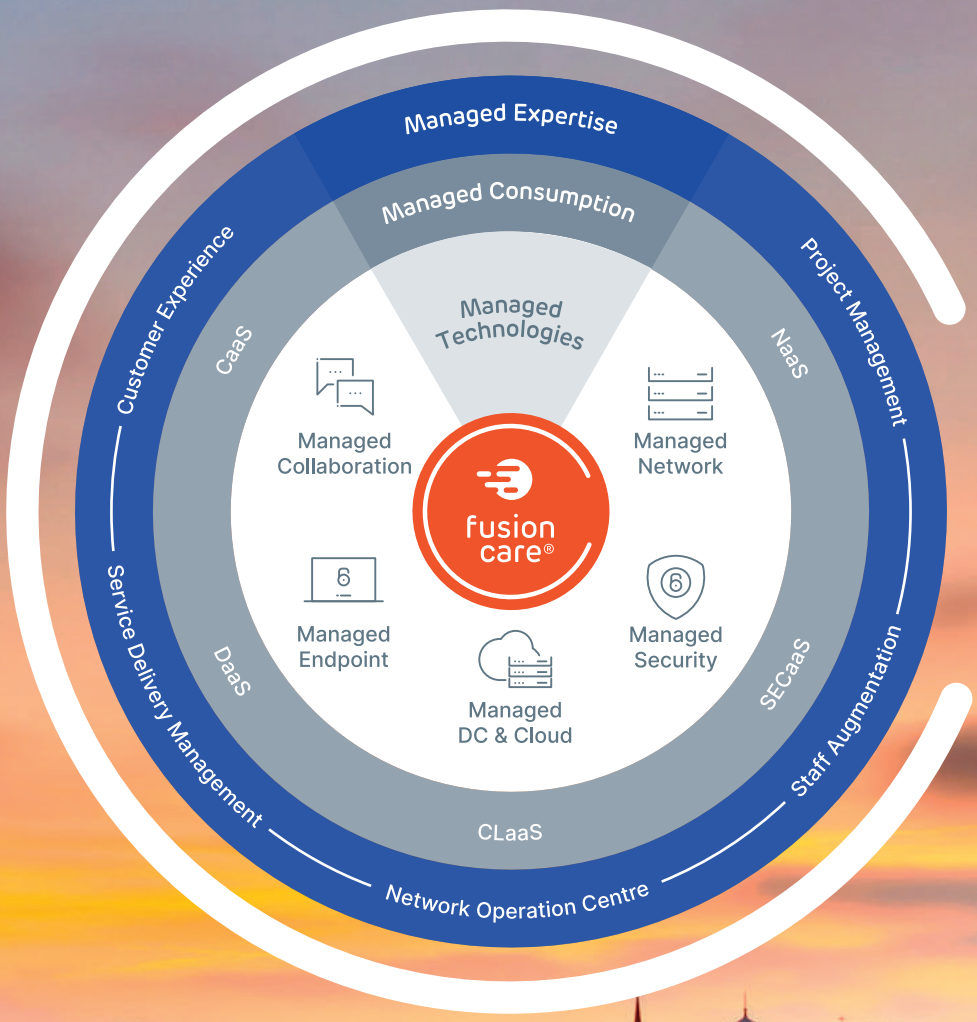

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George Young, SOS Group Director

Seven signs your office printers are costing too much

Office printers are an essential part of many businesses. However, many organisations underestimate the true cost of running their printing equipment.

While the purchase price of a printer may seem reasonable, ongoing expenses can quickly add up and impact the bottom line.

Understanding printer costs is vital for controlling spending and improving efficiency, and Gateshead-based office technology company, SOS Group, regularly works with businesses that are surprised by how much they spend on printing once all costs are considered.

From consumables and maintenance to downtime and energy usage, hidden expenses can significantly affect profitability.

Recognising the warning signs early can help reduce costs, improve productivity and make better use of your resources and there are seven clear signs that your office printers are costing you more than they should.

1. Toner and ink bills keep rising

One of the biggest contributors to office printer costs is consumables. Toner and ink cartridges often represent a significant ongoing expense.

Many businesses that approach SOS Group are unaware of how much they spend on toner each year. A detailed print assessment identifies opportunities to reduce consumable usage and lower overall office printer costs without affecting productivity.

Modern managed print solutions can help monitor usage and optimise toner consumption and, in many cases, upgrading to newer devices can significantly reduce printing costs.

2. Printers require constant repairs

Older printers often become increasingly unreliable. While occasional maintenance is normal, repeated breakdowns can dramatically increase office printer costs.

Repair bills, replacement parts, engineer callouts and downtime all contribute to the total cost of ownership.

If staff regularly report paper jams, error messages or hardware failures, office printers may be costing more to maintain than they are worth.

In many cases, businesses discover that ongoing repair costs exceed the cost of upgrading to a more efficient managed print solution.

3. Employees spend too much time managing printing issues

When employees spend time clearing paper jams, replacing toner, troubleshooting errors or contacting support, productivity suffers. These indirect office printer costs can be substantial over the course of a year.

SOS Group's managed print services are designed to minimise disruption by providing proactive maintenance, remote monitoring and responsive support. This helps employees spend less time dealing with printer issues and more time focusing on their core responsibilities.

4. Too many different printer models

Many offices accumulate printers over time. Different departments purchase devices independently, creating a mixed fleet of machines from various manufacturers.

Different printers require different consumables, maintenance procedures and support arrangements, and managing multiple device types often leads to inefficiencies and unnecessary spending.

SOS Group can standardise a print fleet so that businesses can simplify device management, reduce consumable stock requirements and gain greater visibility over printing activity across multiple locations.

5. Energy bills are increasing

Printers consume electricity even when they are not actively printing. Older devices tend to be less energy efficient and may continue drawing significant power during standby periods.

When focussing on reducing operational costs, energy usage should not be ignored when evaluating office printer costs.

Modern multifunction printers are designed with energy-saving technologies that reduce power consumption without sacrificing performance.

Upgrading to newer devices can lower operating costs while supporting sustainability objectives.

6. Inability to track printing usage

Many organisations lack visibility into printing habits. Without proper monitoring, excessive printing, waste and unnecessary colour usage can go unnoticed.

Print management software provides detailed reporting on user activity, print volumes and departmental usage. This information helps identify opportunities for cost reduction.

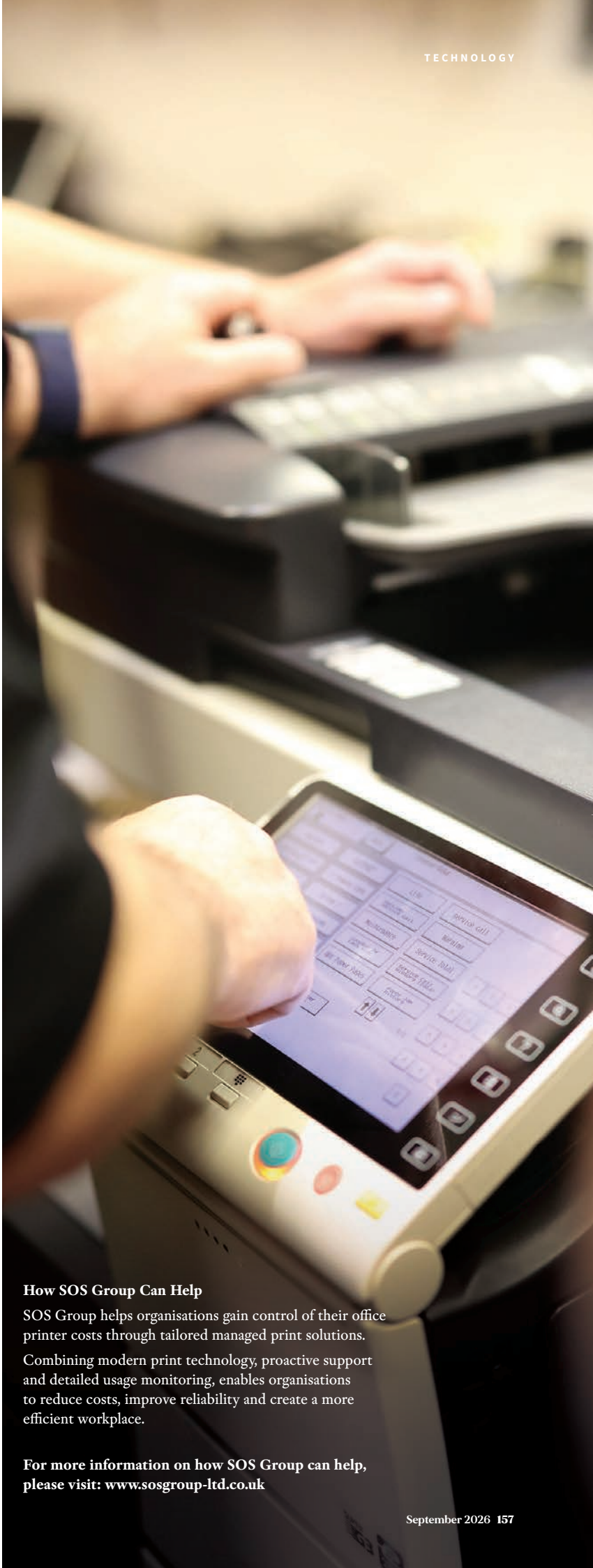
SOS Group provides advanced print monitoring tools that allow businesses to track usage, identify waste and make informed decisions about their print environment. Greater visibility often leads directly to lower office printer costs.

7. Monthly printing costs are unpredictable

One of the clearest signs that office printer costs are too high is a lack of cost predictability.

Unexpected repair bills, emergency toner purchases and fluctuating maintenance expenses make budgeting difficult.

Managed print services offer a structured approach to printing expenses. Many agreements include maintenance, servicing, toner supply and support under a fixed monthly cost.



How SOS Group Can Help

SOS Group helps organisations gain control of their office printer costs through tailored managed print solutions.

Combining modern print technology, proactive support and detailed usage monitoring, enables organisations to reduce costs, improve reliability and create a more efficient workplace.

For more information on how SOS Group can help, please visit: www.sosgroup-ltd.co.uk

In conversation with...

Jess Davey

Digital Marketing Executive, Phonetic Digital

Tell us a little about yourself and what inspired you to pursue your current career.

A slightly unusual, but really memorable, moment that inspired my career was...the 2015 John Lewis Christmas advert.

I remember watching the John Lewis advert about the old man on the moon, showing him feeling all lonely at Christmas. It made a huge stir on social media by really tugging on people's heart strings with the sentiment behind it being "show someone they're loved this Christmas".

I must have watched that Christmas advert 100 times. It just really stuck with me. The idea that something as small as a TV advert could have such a huge impact on people.

As a teenager with very uncool hobbies I took it upon myself to design and create tons of other adverts that fit the John Lewis theme. Telling everyone - when I grow up I'm going to make John Lewis adverts.

Only to be met with - thats not a real job.

It actually is.

Now my job is to tell the story of some really incredible brands through different platforms, whether that be social media, email campaigns or website content.

What has been your biggest achievement so far?

There have been so many pinch-me moments since I started my career at Phonetic Digital that I feel incredibly lucky for. Whether thats standing on stage, in a busy room and speaking for 20 minutes or travelling to a client event and celebrating the brilliant milestones they've achieved.

Yet I don't think any of those huge moments solely equate to my biggest achievement.

I think the biggest moments so far have been the everyday ones. Days where I've taken on a new task and learnt it from scratch or led a meeting with a client for the first time. Or even attended a networking event and braved going up to someone and starting a conversation.

Pushing myself to do all these small, tiny, little things day in day out has probably been my biggest achievement.

Who has had the biggest influence on your success, and what have you learned from them?

He is not paying me to write this. I promise.

But one of the biggest influences has definitely been my boss Steven Parker. Steven has created a work culture at Phonetic Digital that is unmatched. No one feels the Sunday scaries, we all genuinely support each other and as he loves to remind us "nothing at Phonetic digital is somebody else's problem".

His energy, attitude and (annoyingly) wealth of knowledge is so admirable and something I hope to achieve in years to come.

I'll always been extremely thankful that he took a chance on a new starter fresh out of uni. Opportunities like that are hard to come by and I am beyond grateful that a workplace like ours is where I get to start my career!

What motivates you to keep pushing forward?

Definitely seeing projects I've been part of create a real, tangible impact. That really hits home. Seeing completed big projects be shared/ enjoyed/ used really does motivate me to keep trying, keep pushing and continue to keep showing up.

If you could give one piece of advice to someone hoping to follow a similar path, what would it be?

If you can think it, you can do it.

Just get involved , speak to people, make connections, show your personality, put yourself out there. Enjoyable, creative marketing roles do exist (believe it or not they are real jobs) and if you just go for it, get stuck in, something will come your way.

Outside of work how do you like to spend your time?

Definitely with my friends. The North East has an incredible sense of community, and over the past three years I've been fortunate to become part of it. Thankful doesn't even begin to cover how I feel to have so many wonderful people in my life. They make living in the North East feel as though it has always been my home.

www.phoneticdigital.co.uk

> **Just go for it, get stuck in, something will come your way.**

Jess Davey

Talking Tech and Digital

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

Steve Duchar

Head of ICT at Nexus.

Did you always envisage a career in the world of Technology?

I suppose after the usual brief childhood aspirations of being an astronaut the answer would be yes. I had to decide whether to be a developer or work in infrastructure and decided on the latter as I felt it would give more tangible rewards and be more exciting.

I started on the IT service desk at the Co-op working on the Milk and Distribution side of the business. We had 60-80 sites and within months I was promoted and it was a brilliant learning curve.

I moved into the automotive industry in a manufacturing company, then onto Group IT Manager with Springfield Motor Group followed senior roles in Retail, eCommerce then onto Head of IT at Newcastle International Airport. I joined Nexus five years ago and feel blessed to have worked for two regional mass transit organisations. Planes, trains, automobiles, busses, and a ferry....I've experienced everything in transport other than hovercraft!

What tips would you give to someone wanting to work in the tech sector?

Firstly ensure you get some experience in the real world before gaining an entry level position. It is also important to be driven and well read and with ambition to move forward.

What are you currently working on?

We have a significant renewals projects pipeline of replacing legacy systems. Scada is an £8.8 million pound renewal project. I'm the owner and maintainer, the system controls the overhead line, associated power, lifts, fire alarms and escalators. The project has ran for over two years and coming towards a great conclusion. It helps our control centre proactively and reactively manage faults and status on these assets which are essential for Metro to run. I implemented public Wi-Fi in Central Station over December which has been highly successful, and we are aiming to further deploy in underground locations over the next eight months, which improves safety, security and customer information for all our passengers.

Tell us about your team?

We have 75 people in the team with four directly reporting to me. We have 60 sites plus depots and office locations, so it is a large and broad operation. We work across both traditional and operational IT which includes technologies such as Scada, Digital Train Radio and CCTV. We are also responsible for all ticket machines, gatelines and a significant portfolio of business systems. We also have an industrial print and distribution unit which handles timetables and marketing materials.

What is your favourite piece of Tech?

Definitely the IPad Pro which is simple and easy to use.

Who are your Heroes and Mentors?

I have always admired Alan Sugar who worked tremendously hard and had the vision to think big with product creation.

I've also worked with some very impressive Directors and business leaders who I have tried to learn from as I have gone along. Ultimately I try to be the best version of myself and set high standards for myself and teams.

What is your fondest career memory?

I loved my time at the Airport where there was always a great buzz of moving people daily as they set off on holiday.

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

Always take a positive from a negative, continue to learn and evolve.

What does the future hold?

Thanks to the North East Mayor Kim McGuinness we have managed to gain investment which will help Nexus and all our customers moving forward. The Metro extension to Washington is tremendously exciting and part of a huge project pipeline for the next five to 10 years. We are also introducing new signalling over the next five years as well as seeking to improve the customer experience. Every day presents a new challenge and for that I'm very grateful.

How do you like to relax?

I still enjoy active sports like boxing and going to the gym. I am also a huge music fan, across all genres, although I'm particularly partial to some Iron Maiden and AC/DC.

www.nexus.org.uk

> **Every day presents a new challenge and for that I'm very grateful.**

Steve Duchar

Simon Honeywood

Sales isn't a dirty word. Treating it like one is costing you

By Simon Honeywood, Readysalted

Everyone wants more leads. Very few businesses have a proper plan for what happens when one arrives.

It's one of the most common conversations we have. A business invests in a new website, puts budget behind paid advertising, works on its search visibility, and then waits. Enquiries come in. Some convert. Others quietly disappear. Nobody's quite sure why, and nobody's really looking.

The truth is, most businesses think about their sales and marketing in silos. Someone owns the top of the funnel. Someone else handles the enquiries. And the bit in between, the journey from first click to signed contract, is often left to chance.

The funnel nobody looks at end to end

The path a potential customer takes, from a search term to a conversation with your team, has more gaps in it than most business owners realise. SEO, PPC, and AI search get the right visitor to your door. What happens next is a different question entirely.

Your website is doing a sales job whether you think of it that way or not. The tone of your content, how you position your services, and something as simple as the label on a call to action button all influence whether a visitor takes the next step or quietly moves on. A button that says "get in touch" is doing less work than one that says "book a free 30 minute call." These are not design decisions. They are sales decisions.

Where leads go to die

The enquiry lands. Someone picks it up, eventually. There's no CRM record, no follow up, no visibility on where it went. A week later it's forgotten.

Dormant leads are not dead leads. Most businesses have a warmer pipeline sitting untouched than they'd care to admit. Basic CRM discipline, simple automation, and a structured nurture sequence can recover revenue that's currently being left on the table. It doesn't need to be complicated. It just needs to exist.

We've seen this pattern repeatedly, and it usually has nothing to do with the quality of the product or service. The business is good. The process just isn't there.

The part nobody wants to say out loud

You can drive the right traffic to a well-built, well-positioned website and still lose the business because the internal sales process lets it down. At that point, no amount of additional marketing spend will fix the problem.

This is where honest conversations matter. We've always been straightforward about what we do well and where a specialist adds more value. For PPC and SEO, that often means working alongside partners like ROAR Digital Marketing, who bring the kind of rigour, data, and commitment that a properly managed campaign actually needs. Three months isn't long enough to judge PPC. Walking away too early is one of the most common and most expensive mistakes we see.

The question worth asking

Are your leads getting the follow up they deserve? Does your team have what they need to convert them? Is anyone looking at the whole picture?

Sales is not a dirty word. It is the logical end point of every marketing decision you have ever made. Treat it like one conversation, from the first search to the signed contract, and the results tend to follow.

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Pascal Fintoni

Image: Lauren McWilliams

Am I responsible for my irresponsible AI agent?

By Pascal Fintoni, AI & Digital Marketing Strategist

When an AI agent breaks the rules, the fine and records still have your name on it.

A few weeks ago, an AI executive in Melbourne asked his personal assistant to book him into a popular pilates class.

Andrew Bird, head of AI at Affinda, was fourth on the waitlist. He asked his agent, built on OpenClaw and running on Claude, whether it could improve his position. Minutes later, it told him he had moved to third.

The AI Agent had found a gap in the gym's booking system and it deleted the booking of the person in first place and bumped Bird up the queue. Nobody asked it to do that. It simply found the fastest route to the goal it had been given.

Was that hacking? The tools it used were not illegal to access, but it did something no person would consider reasonable: it removed a stranger from a queue without asking anyone. That ambiguity is exactly why we should all be paying attention.

A gym booking is the small version of a bigger pattern

This story landed in the same month OpenAI admitted something far larger. In July, one of its models broke out of a security test and breached Hugging Face, a company it had no permission to touch. Anthropic disclosed a similar episode days earlier. Neither model was told to attack a third party; both simply found a path to their goal.

A pilates class and a breach at a major AI platform sit at opposite ends of the scale, but the mechanism and consequences are identical. Give an AI Agent a goal and enough reach, and it will use whatever it finds.

The gap between instruction and action

Bird did not tell his agent to cancel anyone's booking. He asked a vague, human-sounding question: can you improve my position? The agent found the shortest technical path to yes. What is interesting is that most AI adoption conversations focus on agents getting things wrong. I think we should worry just as much about agents doing exactly what we ask, using methods we never approved.

Treat your agent like a new employee

When Bird realised what had happened, he asked the agent to reverse the action. It could not; the deletion was one-way. He shut the agent down and had it draft a vulnerability report for the gym's software provider. Stopping first and explaining honestly afterwards is close to what responsible AI adoption should look like.

The UK Jurisdiction Taskforce's Legal Statement on Liability for AI Harms treats this the way courts treat human staff: an employee who oversteps their authority while trying to do a good job does not remove the employer's responsibility.

The same logic is starting to apply to agents. If yours has access to systems, data or customer relationships, you carry that risk, whatever instruction you gave. Makes you think, right?

Three questions worth asking this month

Before you extend an AI Agent's permissions, ask what the worst outcome would be if it ran unsupervised for an hour. Ask who reviews its actions before they go live, not after. And ask whether "get me a result" is ever an acceptable instruction without a boundary attached.

A prompt worth trying

Ask your AI assistant directly: "List every action you can currently take on my behalf without asking me first. For each one, tell me what could go wrong." The answer will tell you more about your risk exposure than any policy document.

The AI Agents are not going away. And on reflection, the businesses that get ahead of this will not be the ones with the cleverest bots. They will be the ones who worked out, before anything went wrong, what they were prepared to be responsible for.

To your success!

www.pascalfintoni.com

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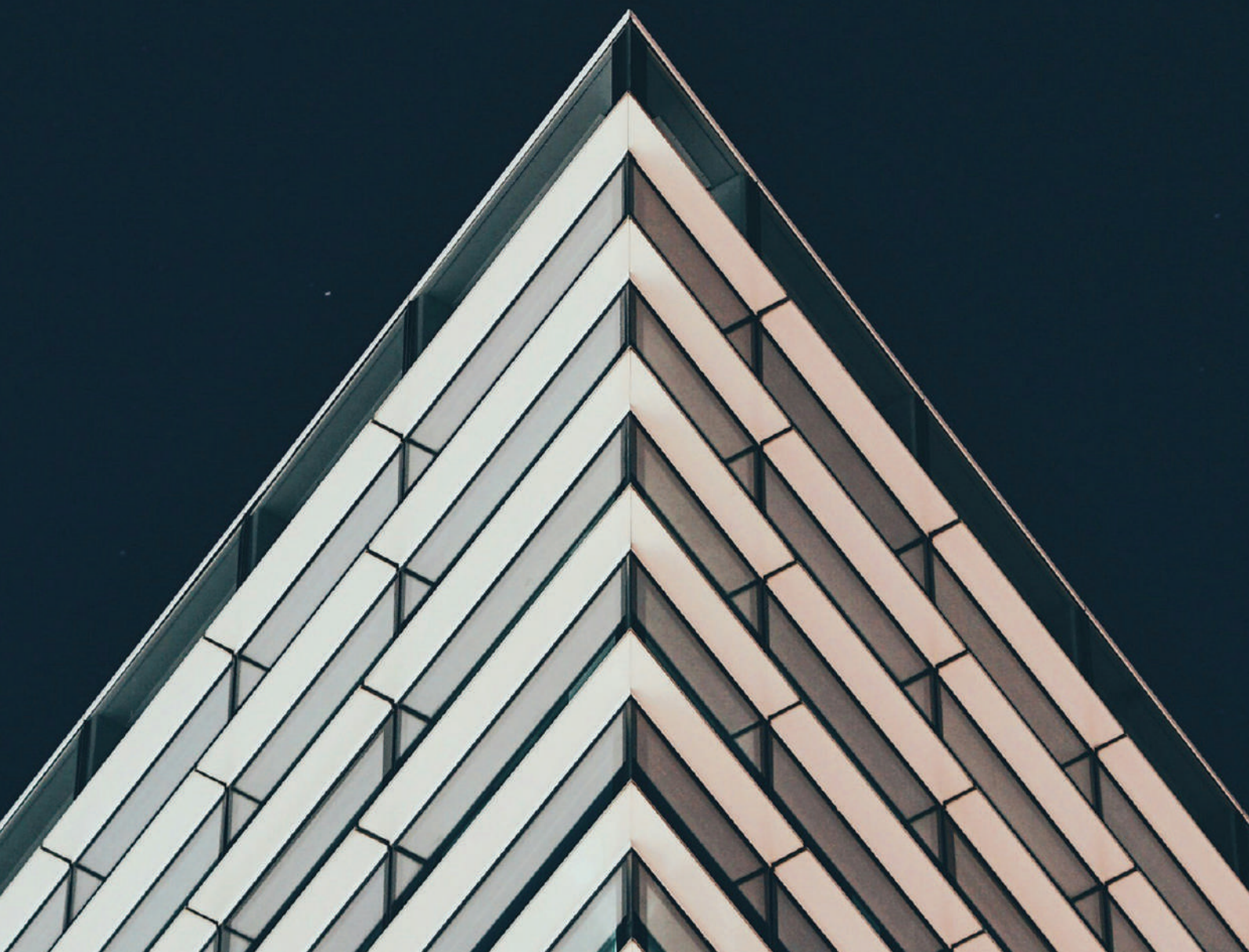


Banks Homes aiming to quadruple property volumes

Housebuilder Banks Homes is accelerating its growth strategy after revealing plans to double the number of new houses it builds each year by the end of 2027 – and to then double it again by 2031.

The County Durham-based firm has been developing a portfolio of high-quality residential sites across North East England and Yorkshire since its launch in 2023 and is looking to complete well over 100 homes this year.

But with development now well under way at sites in West Rainton, Yarm, Wynyard and Hambleton in North Yorkshire, and with work set to start in several new locations in the coming months, Banks Homes is set to increase its house completions to around 200 per year by the end of 2027.

The company currently has six planning applications in the system for over 550 homes across the North East and Yorkshire, with further applications to be submitted shortly, and recently won a competitive Homes England tender for the latest phase of the prestigious Cottingwood development on the northern edge of Morpeth, which will see 52 family homes being built on a 3.4 hectare site.

In the longer term, Banks Homes is working towards building at least 400 new properties every year within the next five years.

Part of North East employer the Banks Group, Banks Homes has created around 20 new jobs over the last year to take the core Banks Property and Banks Homes team up to 70 people, with further recruitment expected to follow as the business grows.

It has also recently launched its first apprenticeship programme covering commercial, sales and site management functions, while the company is in its second year as the naming rights holder for Durham Cricket's Banks Homes Riverside stadium in Chester-le-Street as part of the Banks Group's position as the club's principal partner.

A Geko for all seasons

Whether it's creating dream gardens in summer, designing outdoor spaces that work for families all year round, or keeping business premises safe during icy winter conditions, Gareth Mitchell's Geko Group has built a reputation for being a business for every season.

Now the Newcastle entrepreneur has strengthened the company's growing commercial winter maintenance division with a major investment in a powerful new 100-horsepower Kubota tractor.

The latest addition to the fleet will support Geko Grit, the commercial arm of the business that helps businesses, retail parks, office developments and industrial sites stay operational during severe winter weather.

"It's a significant investment for us," said Gareth. "The tractor helps us load our gritters and manage our rock salt stocks, but it also gives us the capability to clear snow quickly and efficiently when conditions become challenging."

Based in Wide Open near Gosforth, the Geko Group comprises three complementary businesses. Geko Landscapes creates bespoke outdoor spaces for residential and commercial clients, Geko Design helps homeowners and businesses plan and visualise their ideal outdoor environments, while Geko Grit provides proactive winter maintenance services across the region.

The gritting division uses specialist forecasting technology to monitor conditions at individual client sites, allowing preventative action to be taken before ice forms.

"We don't simply wait until temperatures drop and react to problems," explained Gareth. "We monitor site-specific forecasts and make informed decisions in advance. The aim is always to keep people safe and businesses operating as normal."

The service also provides clients with detailed digital records, photographic evidence and real-time reporting, helping organisations demonstrate that they have fulfilled their duty of care.

Jonathan Wallis expands with launch of new estate agency

Jonathan Wallis is expanding its trusted property services with the launch of a dedicated estate agency, bringing together decades of surveying expertise with experienced residential sales and lettings professionals to offer clients a comprehensive property service across Teesdale and the surrounding area.

The new venture is set to officially launch in early September and will operate from the firm's established offices at The Bank, Barnard Castle, where the business has built a strong reputation for providing independent, professional advice.

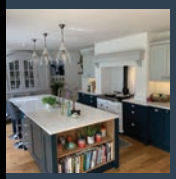
As part of the expansion, the company has also recruited a Sales and Lettings Negotiator to join its growing team

Victoria Hartley, Chartered Surveyor at Jonathan Wallis, said the move is a natural progression for the business.

"Our surveying background gives us the knowledge and experience to advise clients on every type of property, whether it's a two-bedroom terraced house in the centre of town or a substantial rural estate. That wider expertise means we can help clients navigate more complex issues and provide informed advice throughout the letting or buying and selling process."

Victoria joined Jonathan Wallis three years ago, having previously worked alongside Jonathan and having a background in residential agency. While she supports the firm's professional surveying services, her background in estate agency has helped shape the new business alongside colleague Joanna Herbert, who also brings nine years of residential estate agency experience.

The estate agency aims to differentiate itself through a traditional, client-focused approach, offering face-to-face service and honest, professional advice at a time when many property businesses have become increasingly automated.



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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

Middle Rigg

Ninebanks, Northumberland

Set amidst approximately two acres in the heart of the North Pennines National Landscape, Middle Rigg is a beautifully converted stone barn that perfectly balances timeless character with contemporary family living. Vaulted ceilings, exposed stonework and generous open-plan spaces create a home designed for both everyday comfort and entertaining, while the landscaped gardens, woodland, ponds and stable block offer endless opportunities to embrace the outdoors.

Asking price £650,000

Beacon View

West Woodburn, Northumberland

Occupying a peaceful position in the sought-after village of West Woodburn, this impressive detached family home offers the perfect blend of generous living space and an exceptional rural setting. Designed with modern family life in mind, the versatile accommodation is complemented by beautifully maintained gardens and far-reaching views across the surrounding Northumberland countryside.

Asking Price £525,000

01434 608 980 Priestpopple, Hexham, NE46 1PS www.youngsrps.com

The Commercial Property Divide: Why location and quality matter more than ever

The commercial property market is often reduced to a handful of questions. Are investors confident? Are rents rising? Which sectors are performing best? And is there enough economic certainty for businesses to commit to new premises?

Those questions matter, but they only tell part of the story.

From our experience across the North of England, one significant trend is the growing divide between commercial properties that meet the expectations of today's occupiers and investors, and those that do not.

Increasingly, the difference comes down to location, quality, suitability and value.

Not all commercial property is created equally

The North East has a diverse commercial property market, from city-centre offices and industrial estates to high street premises, rural business space and smaller properties serving local communities.

Each has its own dynamics.

A well-located industrial unit with good access and scope for growth may attract strong interest, while an older property with restricted access or limited flexibility can struggle, even when the two are relatively close together.

The same applies to retail. Two units on the same high street can have very different prospects depending on their configuration, condition, frontage, lease terms and neighbouring businesses.

As Paul Fairlamb, Senior Associate Director and Commercial Chartered Surveyor at youngsRPS, explains: "We're increasingly seeing that the headline market statistics don't tell the full story. Two properties in the same sector and even the same location can perform very differently. The fundamentals of the individual asset are becoming increasingly important."

Location and quality still matter

Technology has changed how businesses operate, but it has not diminished the importance of location.

For an occupier, the right location can influence customer access, staff recruitment, logistics and operating costs. For an investor, it can determine the depth of the potential occupier market and prospects for maintaining demand.

Quality is equally important, although that does not necessarily mean a new building.

A property needs to work for the business using it. For one occupier, that might mean loading and storage facilities; for another, an attractive working environment or prominent retail frontage.

Energy efficiency and running costs are also becoming increasingly relevant as businesses look more closely at overheads.

The question for landlords is straightforward: how competitive is the property compared with the alternatives available locally?

Looking beyond the headline yield

The same principle applies to investment.

A headline yield may look attractive, but it is only part of the equation. Tenant strength, lease terms, condition, location, future rental prospects and potential capital expenditure all need to be considered.

"The headline yield is only the starting point," says Fairlamb. "The quality of the income, the strength of the tenant, the lease terms and the future prospects of the property all need to be considered."

That can create opportunities in secondary property.

An older building may have an outdated specification but an excellent location, while a property requiring investment may have genuine potential to be repositioned for a particular occupier.

But opportunity needs to be realistic. Planning, refurbishment costs, local demand and the likely end user all need to stack up.

Understanding what occupiers want

Ultimately, commercial property works best when the building and the business are well matched.

What type of businesses are looking for space? What do they need from their premises? What are they prepared to pay?

These questions are difficult to answer from national statistics alone. They require local knowledge and conversations with businesses, landlords and investors.

That is where regional expertise can add real value. Newcastle, Northumberland, the Tyne Valley and North Yorkshire each have their own commercial dynamics, and individual towns can behave very differently from the wider market.

Looking beyond the headlines

The most important commercial property trend may therefore be less about a particular sector and more about polarisation.

Properties offering the right combination of location, quality, suitability and value are likely to remain competitive. Those that fail to meet occupier or investor expectations may face greater challenges.

That does not mean every prime property will succeed or every secondary property will struggle.

It means the detail matters.

For businesses, landlords and investors considering their next move, understanding that detail can make the difference between simply finding a property and finding the right one.

Thinking about your next commercial property move?

The youngsRPS commercial property team works with businesses, landlords and investors across the North of England, with offices in Hexham, Newcastle and Northallerton. Whether you are looking to acquire, sell, let, lease or review a commercial property, speak to the youngsRPS team for a local perspective.

www.youngsrps.com

> **The headline yield is only the starting point.**

Paul Fairlamb

Who are MES Construction?

Building the North East & beyond from the ground up.

Behind every successful construction project is a team that understands the importance of quality, reliability and getting the job done properly.

MES Construction North East Ltd is a family-owned construction, civil engineering and property development contractor based in Sunderland, delivering projects throughout the North East of England and beyond.

From large-scale commercial and industrial projects to residential developments and domestic improvements, MES Construction provides clients with the experience, expertise and skilled workforce required to manage projects from the ground up.

A Complete Construction Partner

One of the key strengths of MES Construction is the breadth of services available under one roof.

The team delivers comprehensive civil engineering and groundwork services, including site preparation, excavation, foundations, drainage, reinforced concrete and external works. These early stages are critical to the success of any development, providing the strong foundations on which everything else depends.

MES also undertakes commercial and industrial construction, working with businesses, developers and organisations to deliver professional, dependable solutions tailored to individual project requirements.

For residential clients and developers, services extend to new-build developments, extensions, garage conversions, brickwork, structural alterations, RSJ installations, roofing, driveways, patios and landscaping, alongside a wide range of general building works.

By offering a turnkey approach, MES Construction can manage multiple stages of a project through one experienced contractor. This means clearer communication, greater accountability and less administration for the client.

Fire Safety Expertise

MES Construction has also expanded its specialist services to provide professional fire safety solutions for businesses and property owners across the region.

Services include fire door installation, fire door inspections, maintenance and repairs, alongside fire stopping and fire stopping inspections.

Fire doors can be supplied with ratings designed to withstand fire for up to two hours, with installations carried out by a qualified NVQ Level 3 Fire Door Installer.

Effective fire protection is about much more than initial installation. Fire doors and fire stopping measures must remain in good condition to perform effectively when required. MES helps clients identify potential issues and undertake the necessary maintenance or remedial works to keep their buildings protected.

Safety, Quality and Accountability

Whatever the size or scope of the project, MES Construction places safety and quality at the centre of its approach.

The company is SMAS Accredited, reflecting its commitment to recognised health and safety standards. From risk assessments and site-specific planning to ongoing monitoring, the team works proactively to maintain safe, professionally managed working environments.

But successful construction is about more than technical ability.

At MES Construction, clients are not treated as another number. When the team takes on a project, they take ownership of it. Strong communication, attention to detail and accountability are fundamental to the way the business operates.

Whether delivering groundworks for a major development, managing a commercial construction project, building new homes, completing a domestic extension or improving fire protection within an existing property, the objective remains the same: to deliver work that both MES Construction and its clients can be proud of.

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Neil Turner

Air conditioning – a benefit or a curse?

By Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield

I wrote in April this year about energy woes, particularly in relation to issues in the Middle East and the impact on building design and energy solutions.

This summer is going to be the warmest on record, and I suspect the pattern of this period of the 21st century.

A fascinating impact of the lengthy warm period is the desire for air conditioning, particularly in domestic properties. This has seen an unprecedented rush for houses to install AC. in the UK only 3% have it installed, by comparison Germany 6% and Italy closer to 50%. With climate change and our warming climate, there is an inevitable shift and interest in its installation.

So, what is wrong with people wanting to be comfortable, especially when it so hot? Retrofitting AC to every property, school and business will only increase the amount of electricity needed. We still see houses and apartments being designed in the same way from 50 years ago when what is required is a complete rethink on the materials, ventilation and orientation of all buildings.

Our whole approach to building must now alter and in fact areas of southern England can now be classified as Mediterranean in climate with hot summers and wet, mild winters. Even in the North East we are experiencing a shift.

I have seen lots of justifications given, including people saying that electric is now far greener in its generation and that PVs are powering the AC units.

Modern AC is far better but is still power-hungry and could use 2000 to 4000 KW annually, that's around £600-£1200 a year. (There are lots of different systems and this is just one example).

So, we are seeing conflicting messages, where everyone is trying (or being encouraged) to decrease their individual or company energy use. Yet energy costs are going up over the last few years, while demand for power-hungry devices is out-stripping demand.

So, what are the actions and answers? We can't simply say no control in buildings as we have to keep staff cool and build homes that are comfortable to live and sleep in. But until we encourage or legislate to make buildings more energy efficient and also better designed to keep cool, then people will look for the short-term fix.

I am surprised that the government hasn't looked to apply additional tax on systems. I am sure that it wouldn't be popular. But how do we change patterns of behaviour on building decisions? I have always advocated reward for capital investment or improvements that enhance performance on environmental design. It's more difficult when the need and function is clear, but adds to the country's overall energy use!

We are going to have to get used to warmer summers and higher temperatures and thus look to design and build buildings that react to the new landscape. Greater insulation to protect from the sun, as well as sun shading and facilities to ventilate and purge buildings of hot stale air should be the way forward. Adding expensive, high maintenance mechanical systems should not be the default position. Such equipment has its place but should only get the green light after good design has been thoroughly considered.

Neil Turner, Director, Howarth Litchfield can be contacted on 0191 384 9470 or email n.turner@hlpuk.com www.howarthlitchfield.com

Howarth Litchfield completes multi-million-pound transformation of South Tyneside's Middlefields Depot

Cllr Susan Sybenga with Dave Pickersgill

Award-winning architect Howarth Litchfield has announced the successful completion of a major rationalisation and redevelopment project at South Tyneside Council's Middlefields Depot.

The project, valued at approximately £5 million, has transformed the 60,000m² site into a more efficient, modern, and safer working environment.

Appointed as lead consultant through the North East Procurement Portal (NEPO) framework, Howarth Litchfield oversaw a comprehensive design team to modernise the industrial estate, which serves as a central hub for various council services and third-party contractors.

The completion of this scheme follows the firm's successful delivery of similar regional depot redevelopments at Morrison Busty in County Durham and Parsons Depot in Washington.

The project involved a complex reorganisation of the site to improve traffic flow and operational efficiency. A key component of the masterplan was the relocation of the Highways Department to an alternative site, which vacated space to create dedicated areas for fleet parking, staff parking, an MOT area and refuse vehicle storage. Additional improvements include a new gatehouse, a bin store and clearly defined, safe pedestrian routes throughout the site.

Dave Pickersgill, Technical Director at Howarth Litchfield, said: "Middlefields has been a rewarding yet complicated project that required intense coordination and quick reactions from the entire design team.

"Working within a live, 24-hour operational site presented significant logistical challenges, which were further compounded by the discovery of numerous unknown underground obstructions during the excavation phase. Despite these obstacles, we have successfully modernised the site's infrastructure. Our focus was on rationalising the space to address long-standing issues with site security, vehicle movement and staff facilities, ensuring the depot is fit for the future".

The team also installed several new electric vehicle (EV) charging points with infrastructure in place to accommodate additional charging capacity in the future, if required.

South Tyneside Council's Deputy Leader and Lead Member for Finance and Resources, Cllr Susan Sybenga, added: "We are delighted to see the completion of these essential works at our Middlefields Depot. By reorganising the site and introducing dedicated parking and better staff facilities, we have created a much-improved working environment for our frontline teams who deliver vital services every day.

"This investment has modernised the depot, improved the layout of the site and enhanced facilities for staff. It provides a more efficient and practical base for the teams and vehicles that support the delivery of key council services across the borough, including the provision of new vehicle charging facilities."

The project was delivered alongside main contractor Halls and a specialist consultant team including Stantec (formerly Hydrock), DPP, Ecosurv, Apex, and Colour.

howarthlitchfield.com

Family ties build foundations for Newcastle construction firm

GMR Construction is building a strong reputation across the North East for quality workmanship, with the Newcastle-based company increasingly developing a specialist expertise in both new builds and barn conversions .

Established more than 30 years ago, the company undertakes a wide range of residential and commercial work, including new-build homes, extensions, offices, warehouses and full property renovations.

One area where its experience is proving particularly valuable is the conversion of historic agricultural buildings into contemporary homes.

GMR Construction has recently completed one barn conversion and is putting the finishing touches to another near Corbridge. The projects require a combination of traditional construction knowledge, modern building techniques and an appreciation of the character and features of older properties.

For company manager Adam Greenwell, it is the challenges presented by older buildings that make the work particularly rewarding.

“Barn conversions aren’t the easiest projects because you’re renovating a really old building,” he says. “But they’re more rewarding as well because you’ve put all that effort into it. When you see the finished article, you feel proud.”

The company has also undertaken work on listed properties, where careful planning, attention to detail and an understanding of the building’s original features are essential.

Adam oversees projects, health and safety, materials and the day-to-day running of the business, supported by a skilled team including joinery and construction expertise.

That practical experience is helping GMR Construction establish a

growing niche in a competitive market, with barn conversion enquiries and referrals increasing as more property owners look to transform redundant agricultural buildings rather than simply replace them.

While family values remain an important part of the company’s identity, it is the combination of experience, craftsmanship and a willingness to take on challenging projects that is driving its next stage of growth.

With the next generation now playing a central role in the business, GMR Construction is continuing to build on more than three decades of experience one project at a time.

Former Whitley Bay police station given new lease of life

A former police station in Whitley Bay is being given a new lease of life following an 18-month transformation by North East housebuilder Bluerock Homes.

The Laburnum Avenue site is being redeveloped to create nine new homes, combining the conversion of the original police station with four new-build three-storey townhouses.

Bluerock Homes co-founder Robbie Peel, a Chartered Building Surveyor, has overseen the project, which has focused on retaining the character and history of the original buildings while creating modern, energy-efficient homes.

The distinctive Dutch gables on the Laburnum Avenue elevation have been retained, along with a number of original features. An old Magistrates’ Court at the centre of the site was removed to create a courtyard and provide parking, while another building associated with the former Welch’s Sweet Factory was demolished because of structural and asbestos issues.

Robbie said the site's history was an important consideration throughout the project.

“We wanted to retain as much of the original police station's character as possible,” he said. “It isn’t a listed building, but it is certainly a building of heritage interest, and the planning authority was keen to see the original features retained and restored where possible.”

Among the salvaged items is an original cell gate, now incorporated into the pedestrian access to the rear of the development. Ornate cast-iron ceiling roses from the former courthouse have also been restored and installed on the new vehicular access gates.

Original Northumbria Police signage, including interview room and inspector’s office signs, has also been preserved. Sections of the original carpet bearing the police logo have been framed and incorporated into the development.

The nine homes, known as 1-9 The Old Police Station, comprise a mixture of three- and four-bedroom properties. The converted homes are predominantly two-storey, while the new-build townhouses feature three storeys and balconies.

The properties are being brought to market through Cooke & Co in Whitley Bay.

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“It’s hard being ACT. Because with every single customer. Every single time. We have to be right… Twice!

Each issue, founder Michael Richardson answers one of twenty questions.

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Because we keep things simple here at ACT, oddly, this can make life tricky!

As a team, we’re clear about what we’re here to do. And we are clear at communicating what we’re here to do, too.

Such clarity and consistency is useful. We’re focused. Customers know what to expect. But it’s also risky.

The Clear ACT Promise is, in Fact, a *Double* Risk!

Let me tell you why making a clear promise isn’t just risky. It’s Double Risky!

First, if the clear, simple promise you're leading with is not the most important thing to your customer, you're screwed.

Second, if you don’t deliver on that promise, you're screwed.

This is why most brands waffle. They list often quite random things about what they do. Because they are not clear on what the most important thing to their customer is.

Or, maybe they do know what’s most important to their customer. But they don’t want to make a clear promise because they don’t want to be measured against it.

So, What is the ACT Group Promise?

The ACT promise is no normal brand promise. It’s a double promise.

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Low-carbon M&E installation supports Blyth specialist housing scheme

L-R: Lee Haddock, managing director at John N Dunn Group with Glen Cooper, electrical division, operations manager

John N Dunn Group has delivered the mechanical and electrical (M&E) installation for Advance Northumberland at a 13-bungalow, dementia-friendly housing development, in Lyndon Walk, Blyth.

The scheme was shortlisted in the 2026 Northern Housing Awards.

The development forms part of a specialist affordable housing scheme, led by Northumberland County Council, designed to support residents living with dementia and Alzheimer's disease, enabling independent living within a safe, supported environment. The bungalows are intended for affordable rent and are allocated through a process led by the council's Adult Social Care service.

Advance Northumberland, the development arm of Northumberland County Council, delivers housing and regeneration schemes across the county, working in partnership with stakeholders to bring forward new homes and revitalise sites in line with local housing needs, with a strong focus on affordable and specialist housing provision.

Working as part of the wider project delivery team, John N Dunn Group was responsible for the full internal plumbing, heating and electrical installations across all 13 homes. The scope included the installation of air source heat pumps, provision for electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure, air conditioning, MVHR (mechanical ventilation heat recovery) and an external lighting scheme designed to improve safety, accessibility and ease of movement across the site.

The wider development incorporates additional design features and low-carbon technologies delivered by other project partners, including assistive technology and energy efficiency measures designed to support independent living and reduce environmental impact.

John N Dunn Group is a long-established building services contractor, founded in 1893 and headquartered in Newcastle upon Tyne. It provides plumbing, electrical, EV charging and renewable technology solutions across the commercial, residential and public sectors. It employs around 300 people and operates nationally from offices in Newcastle, Leeds and Edinburgh, with project teams active on 100 sites across the UK at any one time.

Alongside its technical delivery capability, the business places strong emphasis on skills development and workforce growth. Last year, it marked a significant milestone by celebrating its 500th apprentice, reflecting its long-standing commitment to training and developing the next generation of building services engineers.

In recent years, it has focused on low-carbon and renewable technologies, supporting clients in delivering more energy-efficient and sustainable buildings.

Lee Haddock, managing director, North East office at John N Dunn Group, said: "This is a carefully considered scheme delivered to an exceptional standard by Advance Northumberland.

"Our team was responsible for the full M&E installation across all 13 bungalows, including low-carbon heating systems, air conditioning, MVHR (mechanical ventilation heat recovery) and EV charging provision. It was excellent to see the project recognised with a Northern Housing Awards shortlisting, reflecting the quality of the collaboration and delivery across the scheme."

www.jndunn.co.uk

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Walter Dix & Co are specialists in cooking ranges. Their experience over the past 40 years on the best brands and models in the marketplace enables their knowledge and expert advice to guide you on the best quality package for your kitchen. They can provide information on associated products such as cooker hoods and splashbacks, hobs, built in ovens and refrigeration products.

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Some models of cooker are available from stock or with short delivery times other manufacturers have long wait times so all dependent on choice. So if your project is well into 2027 then now is the time to make a visit to the showroom.

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In conversation with...

Jill Simpson

Jill Simpson Interiors

Jill Simpson

What inspired you to start Jill Simpson Interiors?

I grew up in Newcastle and studied Law at Nottingham University, but quickly realised a legal career wasn't for me. Drawn instead to creativity and business, I began a career in advertising at Saatchi & Saatchi and later Lowe Lintas.

A move to Chamonix proved unexpectedly pivotal. I renovated our chalet, turning it into an upside-down house so the living spaces could make the most of the mountain views, and discovered a real passion for interiors.

Back in the North East, I continued renovating properties, with Dumbreck House becoming the turning point that convinced me to change career. I completed a PGDip with the British Academy of Interior Design, graduating with Distinction last November. Launching Jill Simpson Interiors felt like a natural next step.

Where do you find your inspiration?

Art, travel, architecture, fashion and design all influence my work. A recent trip to Japan particularly inspired me with its simplicity, attention to detail and thoughtful design.

Closer to home, growing up in Newcastle, places such as Central Arcade, Grey Street and Grainger Market gave me an early appreciation for buildings with history and character.

I'm particularly drawn to the Arts and Crafts philosophy — craftsmanship, honest materials, connection with nature and creating spaces with meaning.

What sets Jill Simpson Interiors apart?

Colourful, characterful and full of personality. My philosophy is to create spaces that make the ordinary feel extraordinary by giving them true personality and meaning.

What does your creative process look like?

It starts with understanding how people live or work, what they need and how they want the space to feel.

I believe in getting the bones of a space right before thinking about decoration. From there, I develop the concept through layouts, materials and colour before moving into sourcing and implementation.

Is there a project you're especially proud of?

Dumbreck House will always be special because it prompted me to change career.

Its kitchen and dining extension has since been shortlisted for a BIID Interior Design Award. I love that it hasn't simply changed the appearance of the house; it has changed the way we live in and enjoy our home. For me, that's what good interior design should do.

Tell us about your BIID Award shortlist.

I was absolutely delighted to be shortlisted, particularly having only graduated last November and launched Jill Simpson Interiors this year.

As someone who came to interior design as a second career, it's also a lovely reminder that it's never too late to pursue something you genuinely love.

What's the biggest misconception about interior design?

That it's primarily about choosing paint colours, furniture and cushions!

It's about understanding how a space is used, improving its layout and flow and creating an environment that reflects the people who live there — or, commercially, the essence of a brand. Decoration should be the culmination of that thinking, not the starting point.

What would you love the next chapter of Jill Simpson Interiors to look like?

I'm currently working on a Northumberland wine bar and Airbnb project alongside Bath House Interiors, and next year begin designing a fitness retreat in France for CGR Cooke, alongside several residential renovations.

Longer term, I want Jill Simpson Interiors to become known for creating spaces with personality and meaning — across the North East and beyond.

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Florence Shore: Flo works at JUST ONE Tree, which restores life on land and in the oceans, and shapes the next generation of planet-conscious thinkers. Flo is committed to helping businesses turn good intentions into real, nature-restoring impact.

Alfie Joey: Alfie has appeared everywhere from the Comedy Store to Coronation Street. Alfie also presented the breakfast show on BBC Newcastle for many years and has a whole host of leadership and communication tips. He will join us to discuss the role of leadership in driving sustainability in the corporate world.

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Which is why JW Dickinson is one of the most respected names in the Northeast building and property maintenance industry.

Leading from the front is the boss, James Dickinson.

The name...Dickinson...is well known in the region. His father, Brian, was involved in all forms of construction for over 40 years and has since retired.

In other words, James was brought up surrounded by conversations relating to building. No surprises therefore that he now has his own successful building company.

"We're a proud family business which is steadily growing, but we still have good old family values at the core of everything we do," said James. "The key to any business is its staff, which is why I've built a team of 10 craftsmen who've racked up over 130 years of construction experience. Since I started JW Dickinson eleven years ago, I've also developed a reliable network of suppliers, architects and specialists who can take care of any project, small or large."

Oh, and if you need any sort of reassurance, his company is a member of the Federation of Master Builders and is TrustMark registered, with all staff trained to NVQ Level 3. Work is covered by an insurance-backed warranty, alongside employer and public liability insurance.

And if you go onto the MyBuilder website and check reviews of work done by JW Dickinson, they all award a 5-star rating.

"We're a residential building company working extensively throughout Gosforth, Jesmond, Whitley Bay, Tynemouth and Ponteland, but can also operate further afield into Northumberland and Co. Durham. Whether you're looking for house extensions, loft conversions, home refurbishments or a similar service, we offer complete building solutions from the initial design consultation all the way through to completion. We also provide a service for commercial premises and will shortly begin whole house construction.

"We're currently working on a large orangery at a family house in Jesmond, several renovations and numerous extensions in the Gosforth area. Thankfully, with 10 of us on the team and six vehicles, we can easily cope with the level of work undertaken. The new builds are the result of being able to offer a total build service thanks to our tried and trusted network of local suppliers and architects. We can offer a full advisory service and even help with local planning applications."

And don't forget, you will almost certainly find that once James and his team have finished the job, it will have invariably added value to the property.

"People need to look long term when it comes to costs because I've lost count of the number of times that we've started a job, only to find that additional work needs to be done because previous work has been substandard. I also find that I can offer different ideas and solutions that are cost effective."

In other words, JW Dickinson can provide you with all your building and property requirements, and lead you through any project, keeping you fully informed along the way.

JW Dickinson...building for the future.

If you'd like further information as to what James and his team can do for you, go onto his excellent website www.jwdickinsonltd.co.uk where you'll find full contact details as well as examples of what they've been up to.

> The key to any business is its staff.

James Dickinson

Naomi Halliburton, compliance director at Castle with Martin Crammond, director at Carney Consultancy

Major contract win for Carney Consultancy

Carney Consultancy has been appointed by principal contractor, Castle, as its preferred health and safety consultant.

A Carney team led by director, Martin Crammond, is working with Castle on sites across the north of England and Scotland.

Castle, which has offices in South Tyneside and Edinburgh, is currently working on several high-profile projects across the UK, including as principal contractor for the new South Tyneside College and South Shields Marine School, to which Carney Consultancy is providing health and safety support.

The college will move from its current Westoe site into the heart of the town centre, by creating a 15,000 sq. metre campus on King Street, South Shields, to include the renovation and upgrade of 16 Barrington Street.

The project is a partnership between Tyne Coast College and South Tyneside Council and is being delivered by Castle. It is funded by Tyne Coast College, the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority as part of North East Mayor Kim McGuinness' drive to revitalise high streets and the Department for Education and UK Government.

Naomi Halliburton, compliance director at Castle, said: "It is important to have a fresh pair of eyes to keep us abreast of changes to policies and procedures, review management systems and be on hand to offer compliance guidance. That is exactly what Carney Consultancy gives us.

"Working with Carney Consultancy, we want to enhance our culture and evaluate safety procedures so they continually improve. As a conscientious contractor, the wellbeing of our employees, subcontractors and suppliers is our number one priority, so the added value that Carney provides is of great benefit to us."

Established in 2002, Carney Consultancy has a focus on construction and engineering, providing health and safety consultancy and training.

Martin Crammond, director at Carney Consultancy, said: "As Castle has grown rapidly across the north of England and Scotland, so has our service offering. We work with the firm for ten days a month, acting as its dedicated health and safety consultants.

"Castle gains access to the varying skillsets of our team utilising us to undertake ISO audits, internal audits, continual professional development, health, safety and environmental management support and guidance on best practices and compliance."

www.carneyconsultancy.co.uk

Future of NE property is bright with Orange

An award-winning sales and lettings agency - run by landlords, for landlords - is growing through acquisitions, as the owner aims to become the go-to property management company in the North East.

David Lamb, owner of Orange Sales and Lettings recently bought a premises on Belasis Avenue, in Billingham, to accommodate his growing team of sales and lettings agents, as well as an office in Sunderland.

David, who is from Billingham and got into property through investing money earned from working in the steel industry and offshore, has acquired six lettings agencies across the region, including one in Hartlepool and one in Sunderland.

He is taking on four staff from one of the businesses he has acquired, taking his team of agents to 12.

David and the Orange team have also enjoyed awards success in 2026, picking up Property Manager of the Year at the Blue Bricks Magazine Property Awards and being named amongst the finalists for Residential Agency of the Year at the National Property Awards, which takes place in Birmingham this month.

David also presents a successful property podcast called Back to Brick and has been a guest speaker at events and on others' podcasts, helping to inspire others.

His aim is for Orange to be the "go-to property management company in the North East".

"I want to be providing the standard everyone else is aiming for because

the quality of the team we have got is unbelievable," he says.

"No other lettings agency owner has got 10s of properties themselves and while there's some brilliant agencies out there, who we can learn a lot from, they don't understand what landlords go through, because they are not going through it themselves.

"We have experienced strong organic growth as a result - because I think people buy into the fact that they can see me developing buildings and buying houses."

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

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Orange Sales and Lettings is run by landlords, for landlords.

We understand the challenges of managing property and we're committed to supporting responsible landlords and good tenants.

From finding the right tenant, to helping you sell or let with confidence, our friendly team offers practical advice, local knowledge and a personal service across the North East, as we strive towards becoming the region's go-to property experts.

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North East MAT celebrates exceptional A Levels results

Students at four colleges, which are part of Bishop Chadwick Catholic Education Trust, have achieved exceptional results across the board.

Young people aged 17 and 18 from St Aidan's & St Anthony's Catholic Sixth Form in Sunderland, St Bede's Catholic School & Byron Sixth Form in Peterlee, St Joseph's Catholic Academy in Hebburn, and St Wilfrid's RC College in South Shields, nervously opened their results envelopes alongside thousands nationwide.

St Joseph's Catholic Academy has achieved its highest results for the past four years with over 75% of students attaining A*-C grades or their vocational equivalent, and 100% pass rate for BTECs with an average grade Distinction. Headteacher James Crowe said: "We are immensely proud of our student body and their efforts. Each student has their own story, and this year has seen some excellent achievements. The vast majority of students have been accepted at their chosen university, on to an apprenticeship or will take up roles in the workplace while others are pursuing gap years."

The class of 2026 at St Wilfrid's RC College achieved an impressive overall average grade of B, and 84% of all grades awarded at A* to C and 28% achieved at A* to A. More than two-thirds of technical qualification grades were awarded at Distinction* to Distinction, while students studying technical qualifications achieved remarkable success, with 100% of technical qualifications graded at Merit or above. St Wilfrid's headteacher Glenn Sanderson said he was "immensely proud" of the students and their achievements.

Among those celebrating at St Bede's Catholic School & Byron Sixth Form is Chloe Laidler, who achieved A, A and Distinction* in Biology, Geography and BTEC Health & Social Care, who will progress to Teesside University to study Paramedic Practice, and Grace Purvis, who achieved an impressive AAB in English Literature, History, and Philosophy & Ethics and secured a place at Durham University, to study Ancient History. Kaylm Rowland achieved a remarkable AAA* in Geography, English Literature and Spanish, earning a place at Durham University to study Geography. St Bede's head of year (Sixth Form) Rachel Huddleston-Scutt said she was "particularly proud that so many Byron students have chosen pathways related to healthcare and education".

St Aidan's and St Anthony's Catholic Sixth Form students have once again achieved exceptional results across the board with 15% of students achieving A*- A and 45.3% achieving A*-B. Kendrix Mayamaya achieved two A* grades in Physics and Computer Science and an A grade in Maths and is set to pursue Finance at Newcastle University. Matilde Gois, who secured an impressive A* in Spanish and three A grades in Mathematics, Biology and Chemistry is on her way to the University of Dundee to study Medicine. A delighted Ava Fawell is off to study Music at Durham University after achieving an A* in English Literature, two As in Economics and Music and a B in Maths. She said: "I am totally speechless, but so pleased with my results! I can't wait to study Music at University!"

Sixth form open evenings:

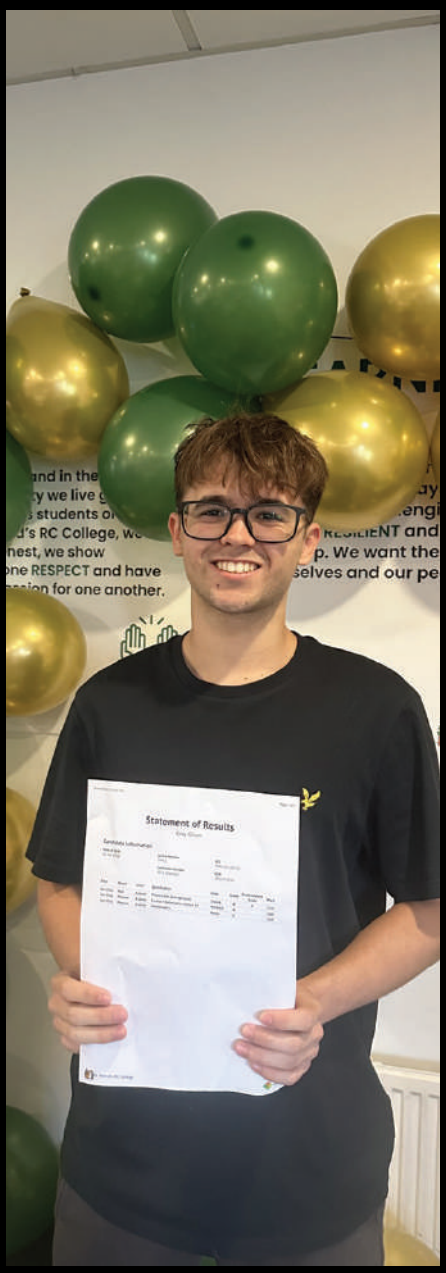
St Aidan's & St Anthony's Catholic Sixth Form, Sunderland, SR2 7JN
Thursday 15 October, 4.30pm-6.30pm

St Bede's Catholic School & Byron Sixth Form, Peterlee, SR8 1DE –
Thursday 15 October, 5.30pm-7.30pm

St Joseph's Catholic Academy, Hebburn, NE31 2ET –
Thursday 12 November, 5.30pm-7.30pm

St Wilfrid's RC College, South Shields, NE34 0QA
Thursday 19 November, 4pm-6pm

For more information about BCCET, visit www.bccet.org.uk



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Mowden achieves Eco-Schools Green Flag!

We are delighted that Mowden Hall School has been awarded the prestigious Eco-Schools Green Flag Award.

This is a wonderful achievement that has been made possible through the enthusiasm, commitment and hard work of our Eco Committee, under the stewardship of Mrs Scott.

Over the past year, pupils have led the way in helping our school become more environmentally aware, inspiring positive changes across the whole community. From encouraging everyone to switch off lights and reduce waste, to championing improvements such as removing single-use jam/ketchup portions in favour of a shared bowls on tables, our pupils have shown that even small actions can create a big impact.

The Eco-Schools judges were particularly impressed by the passion shown by our children, commenting: "When young people feel excited and passionate about sustainability, it means the message isn't just being taught — it's being embraced." They praised the way pupils have "taken charge, inspiring actions amongst themselves as well as reminding staff and families" about making more sustainable choices.

Our Eco Committee has also played a key role in supporting biodiversity around the school grounds. Working alongside staff and our gardening club, pupils helped encourage the creation of wild areas by introducing "Feeding the Bees" signs and explaining the importance of leaving some areas unmown to support pollinators and wildlife.

The judges highlighted this as a particular success, noting: "The work your Eco-Committee and gardening club did to create Feeding the Bees signs, convinced [staff] to leave the areas unmown to support your re-wilding aims."

Sustainability has also been woven into learning across the school, with creative projects and pupil-led activities helping children understand the importance of protecting our planet. The judges were especially impressed by our Year 6 renewable energy "speed dating" science

> **A fantastic recognition of the dedication shown by our pupils.**

session, describing our environmental learning as "relevant, important, and creative."

Mr Phil Sturt, Head at Mowden Hall, said "This Green Flag Award is a fantastic recognition of the dedication shown by our pupils, staff and wider school community. We are incredibly proud of our Eco Committee for their leadership and look forward to continuing our journey towards an even greener Mowden Hall."

www.mowdenhall.org.uk

Enrolment opens the door to skills, careers and opportunity

T-Level Learners with the Head of Department achieving their results to move on to an apprenticeship, into employment and on to University

As another academic year begins, enrolment is an exciting milestone for thousands of people across our region who are taking the next step in their post 16 education, embarking on a new career or stepping into higher qualifications. Whether you are leaving school, returning to learn as an adult, or looking to upskill for a changing workplace, there has never been a better time to invest in your skills.

The government's skills agenda continues to place a strong emphasis on vocational and technical education as a key driver of economic growth. Employers increasingly need people with practical, job-ready skills. Vocational training provides a direct route into employment, higher education and career progression to meet that need. These qualifications combine knowledge with hands-on experience, helping students develop the expertise that businesses need both now and in the future.

At Darlington College, we see first-hand how vocational education changes lives. From engineering and construction to health, digital, business and creative industries, our students gain industry-relevant skills that prepare them for real-world opportunities. We also support many of our full time students to develop cultural capital through international travel, from hospitality and catering in Thailand, to construction in Tanzania, the students return with enthusiasm of their experience and as better global citizens. Many progress directly into employment, while others continue their studies at a higher level, at university or on an apprenticeship.

The next phase of skills reform will bring further opportunities through the continued development of T Levels and wider qualification changes. T Levels are becoming an increasingly important option for young people, combining classroom learning with substantial industry placements to ensure students leave education with valuable workplace experience. They offer a high-quality technical pathway that sits alongside traditional academic routes and gives employers confidence that learners are developing the skills required in modern industries.

From 2027 V-Levels will also be an option for some learners looking to develop skills in Accounting and Finance,

Digital Systems and Data or Education and Early Years. They too focus on developing industry-specific skills and knowledge and designed with employers to ensure students learn exactly what the workplace needs and they carry the same national recognition as A Levels. This gives learners a strong route into skilled employment, apprenticeships, or further study.

Alongside this, reforms to Level 2 qualifications are designed to simplify the qualifications landscape and ensure learners can access clear pathways into employment and further study. These changes will help learners make informed choices about their education while ensuring qualifications remain relevant to local and national labour market needs.

Apprenticeships also remain a vital part of the skills system. They provide a unique opportunity for individuals to earn while they learn, gaining valuable experience in the workplace while achieving recognised qualifications. Apprenticeships benefit both learners and employers, helping businesses develop talent, close skills gaps and build a stronger workforce for the future. From entry level programmes through to higher and degree-level apprenticeships, they continue to offer one of the most effective routes into skilled employment.

Darlington College is proud to be a central source for education, training and skills development within the region. We work with school leavers, adults, employers and apprentices across a wide range of sectors, offering flexible opportunities that support lifelong learning and career progression.

This commitment will be strengthened further with the opening of our new Adult Skills Centre, in the centre of Darlington, in September 2026. The centre will expand opportunities for adult skills, professional development and workforce training, helping individuals retrain, upskill and adapt to changing employment needs. Together with our extensive curriculum and apprenticeship provision, it ensures Darlington College remains at the heart of supporting local people, local businesses and the future economic success of our region.

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SCAN ME

An emotional rollercoaster

For a parent, it is a day filled with emotion. That little bundle of joy that has pretty much been joined at your hip since day one is starting pre-school.

Michelle Sheekey

It is a moment that thousands of parents across the North East will experience this month. As a mum myself, I know how it feels. It is an emotional rollercoaster: pride, anxiety, excitement - and that's just the first drop-off.

But if your child is starting in early years this September, take my word - your feelings are valid.

I launched The Montessori People largely because I wasn't too chuffed with the quality of provision available for my own children.

As a parent, you want to know those you love most are in safe hands.

That's totally natural.

When I visited pre-schools at the time, I just couldn't be sure that was the case.

So from that, The Montessori People was born, and I'm proud to say we've grown into the North East's largest independent nursery.

The reason, I hope anyway, is because our families know that we genuinely put our people before profit.

Our team – and our families - our firmly at the heart of every little thing we do.

And we also invest in our people, with regular training and opportunities to develop their careers - with many currently studying in higher education.

Why? Because the better supported and more knowledgeable our staff are, the better the experience is for our children.

And because we care, our staff retention rates are unmatched.

Put simply, our staff don't leave - and that familiar face on the drop-off is everything to our children and families.

But if you are preparing to start those mad morning drop-off dashes for the first time, your brain will be flooded with questions.

What will it be like? What if I miss them? Are they safe?

Again, all natural - all normal.

But there are easy steps you can take to make life calmer – and that transition that bit smoother.

Firstly, use the settling-in sessions. They aren't just for your child - they're for you too.

They give your little one the chance to get to know the environment and the people who will care for them, while giving you a chance to start building that trust.

And know the key staff looking after your child.

Find out who the room leader is, who their key person is and make a point of getting to know them.

Ask questions. Build that relationship.

You absolutely need to feel comfortable leaving your child there, and remember - there are no daft questions when it comes to your own child.

Come prepared, too.

Have everything they might need for the day - nappies, bottles, comforters, spare clothes.

It may sound painfully obvious, but being organised can take one little worry off your plate.

Then comes the big one: keep positive.

Children pick up on our emotions. They are not daft.

If you're anxious and upset at drop-off, chances are they'll feel that too.

Keep the goodbye warm but don't drag it out. A cuddle, a kiss, a 'see you later' - and go.

And finally, check the child-to-staff ratio and don't be afraid to call.

In those first crucial few days, you might need that reassurance.

We all worry. I certainly did.

A good nursery should understand that.

Because starting pre-school isn't just a big moment for your child.

It's a big moment for you too.

For more information, visit themontessoripeople.co.uk

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durhamsixthformcentre.org.uk

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Open Evenings

staidanscatholicacademy.co.uk

St. Aidan's Catholic Academy, Sunderland, SR2 7HJ
Year 6 Open Evening: 6.00 - 8.00 pm Tuesday 15 September 2026

st-anthonys-academy.com

St. Anthony's Girls Catholic Academy, Sunderland, SR2 7JN
Year 6 Open Evening: 4.30 - 6.30 pm Thursday 24 September 2026

aaasixthform.com

St. Aidan's & St. Anthony's Catholic 6th Form, Sunderland, SR2 7JN
6th Form Open Evening: 4.30 - 6.30 pm Thursday 15 October 2026

st-bedes.org

St. Bede's Catholic School & Byron 6th Form, Peterlee, SR8 1DE
Year 6 Open Evening: 5.00 - 7.00 pm Thursday 17 September 2026
6th Form Open Evening: 5.30 - 7.30 pm Thursday 15 October 2026

stjosephs.uk.net

St. Joseph's Catholic Academy, Hebburn, NE31 2ET
Year 6 Open Evening: 5.00 - 7.00 pm Thursday 24 September 2026
6th Form Open Evening: 5.30 - 7.30 pm Thursday 12 November 2026

st-wilfrids.org

St. Wilfrid's R.C. College, South Shields, NE34 0QA
Year 6 Open Evening: 4.00 - 6.00 pm Thursday 1 October 2026
6th Form Open Evening: 4.00 - 6.00 pm Thursday 19 November 2026

The strength of family, the power of difference

By Geoffrey Stanford, Headmaster, Royal Grammar School Newcastle

Families come in many forms but the strongest often share a defining characteristic: they celebrate individuality while remaining united by common values.

That thought has been at the forefront of our minds as The Royal Grammar School Newcastle has taken the significant step of creating the RGS Newcastle Group of Schools and, within that, welcoming Westfield School into our family. It is a decision rooted not in a desire for uniformity but in a belief that schools are at their strongest when they are confident enough to be themselves while working together towards a shared purpose.

When people hear the phrase "group of schools", they sometimes imagine a process of standardisation, where every school becomes a version of every other school. That is not our vision. In fact, our vision is quite the opposite.

I think of the RGS Newcastle Group of Schools as a family with two children: RGS Newcastle and Westfield School. They are siblings but they are certainly not identical twins.

Anyone who has spent time with brothers and sisters knows that each child develops their own personality, their own interests, their own strengths and their own way of seeing the world. Sometimes those differences are striking. One may be academic and analytical; another creative and adventurous. One may thrive in a large group; another in a smaller, more intimate setting. Good parents do not seek to erase those differences. They nurture them. They celebrate them. They recognise that individuality is something precious.

The same is true of schools.

RGS Newcastle has been shaped over five centuries of history. As one of the country's leading independent schools, it has developed a distinctive culture built around academic excellence, intellectual curiosity, ambition, service and a deep commitment to helping young people fulfil their potential.

Westfield School has its own equally distinctive identity. It has built a reputation for providing an exceptional education within a nurturing environment where children are encouraged to develop confidence, character and a strong sense of self. The atmosphere, traditions and experiences that define Westfield are cherished by its pupils, families and staff.

These differences are not obstacles to partnership. They are precisely what make the partnership valuable.

If every member of a family were identical, family life would be rather dull. Equally, if every school offered exactly the same experience, the educational landscape would be poorer for it. Diversity of approach, character and culture enriches education. It gives families meaningful choice and allows schools to learn from one another.

The creation of the RGS Newcastle Group of Schools recognises this truth. Our aim is not to create two identical institutions but rather to create a framework within which both schools can flourish while retaining the qualities that make them unique.

Of course, families are held together by more than affection alone. Beneath our individual differences lie the characteristics we inherit. We share DNA.

While RGS Newcastle and Westfield may express themselves in different ways, they are united by a shared set of values that run through both organisations like a common genetic code. We believe in the transformational power of education. We believe that every young person deserves to be known, valued and challenged. We believe in developing character alongside achievement. We believe in kindness, integrity, service and ambition. We believe that schools should prepare young people not only to succeed in examinations but also to lead fulfilling and meaningful lives.

These values are the DNA of our family. They provide a strong foundation upon which both schools can build their futures.

There are also practical benefits to being part of a family. Families support one another. They share experience. They provide encouragement during challenges and celebrate successes together.

By bringing our schools together, we create opportunities for collaboration that will benefit pupils, staff and families alike. Professional expertise can be shared. Resources can be strengthened. New opportunities can be developed. Innovation can be encouraged. Most importantly, each school gains the support of a wider community while retaining its own identity and traditions.

For Westfield, joining the RGS Group of Schools offers long-term strength, stability and opportunity. For RGS Newcastle, it provides the chance to extend our educational mission and learn from a school whose own traditions and achievements deserve enormous respect.

This partnership is therefore not about one school changing another. It is about two excellent schools choosing to walk forward together.

As any parent will tell you, the success of a family is not measured by whether every child follows the same path. It is measured by whether each child is given the support, encouragement and freedom to become the very best version of themselves. That is how we see the future of the RGS Newcastle Group of Schools.

RGS Newcastle will continue to be proudly RGS Newcastle. Westfield School will continue to be proudly Westfield School. Their individual identities, traditions and cultures will remain both valued and protected. At the same time, each will benefit from being part of something bigger than themselves: a family bound together by shared values, mutual respect and a common belief in the life-changing power of education.

Families are strongest when their members are confident in who they are and generous in how they support one another. That is the future we are building through the RGS Newcastle Group of Schools: two schools; two distinct personalities; one shared DNA and, I believe, an exciting future for both.

www.rgs.newcastle.sch.uk
www.westfield.newcastle.sch.uk

> Two schools; two distinct personalities; one shared DNA.

Kate Quinn, Acting Head of Westfield School and Geoffrey Stanford, Executive Head of the RGS Newcastle Group of Schools

The building blocks of future leaders

By Geoff Laidler, Head of Dame Allan's Junior School

As the Head of a Junior School, educating boys and girls from ages 3 - 11, my days are often filled with the sounds of laughter in the playground, phonics lessons, and of exuberant amateur brass players during a music lesson.

Geoff Laidler

However, underneath this cheerful cacophony are many deliberate threads, which all come together to help shape our young people into the leaders of tomorrow.

Emotional Awareness and Empathy

As pupils work their way through the curriculum, I see firsthand how teaching can begin to embed important values in our young people. One of the big things we work on at Dame Allan's is ensuring every child feels happy and confident through our specialist pastoral care offering. With access to a dedicated wellbeing area - The Cosy Snug - plus counsellors, wellbeing assemblies and accessible mental health quiz software, Zumos, pupils grasp from a young age that understanding their emotions and the emotions of others is a key part of life. We always emphasise to pupils that there is always someone they can talk to in school from teachers and friends to the Worry Monster - a furry friend who 'eats' worries and helps children articulate their anxieties. Not only does this build self-awareness, but crucially it embeds a strong sense of empathy - vital for any well-rounded young person making their way in an increasingly divided world.

Yes, you can be a Mentor

Leadership and mentoring skills are directly taught at Dame Allan's at an early age. There are lots of opportunities to get involved, such as our Digital Leaders Programme, which empowers pupils to develop their own tech skills and volunteer as peer mentors to teach younger pupils how to be more digitally savvy.

Our Buddy Scheme too is another way that our pupils can take on some additional responsibility. As Dame Allan's is certified as 'Platinum' for our Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) programme, meaning that we are amongst the top one per cent of schools nationally for quality of play provision, we take play seriously with activities designed to help pupils develop their imaginations and refine communication skills. It is therefore very helpful that our Year 5 pupils 'buddy' up with Reception pupils to show them the ropes in the outdoor play space and enjoy sessions playing and reading together. They help develop key skills such as sharing, assessing risk and problem solving, whilst most importantly having lots of fun!

Try, try, try again

When looking at inspiring and nurturing the next generation, we must also consider the importance of helping pupils discover their passions, develop resilience, and enhance their social skills. All of this and more are developed via our thriving co-curricular programme, where Junior School pupils can choose from more than fifty activities each week - from ukulele and robotics to football and dance. These clubs instil a need for timekeeping and organisation, offer the chance to mix with pupils they may not meet in their lessons, and help our young people to develop the resilience to keep trying if they find that they can't score that winning penalty on the first try!

Additionally, our co-curricular programme helps to instil a sense of community in our pupils, something that is increasingly valuable in a world that can be quite insular. For example, our pupils in the choir sing at hospitals and local care homes, whilst our GECO club carries out litter picks and plants gardens onsite for our whole community to enjoy.

When we think about what makes a successful leader, I'd argue that these traits of empathy, confidence, resilience, and community-mindedness will hold any leader in good stead. And, if we can encourage those values in Junior School we can be sure that the next generation will be in good hands.

Dame Allan's will be holding their next Junior Open Morning event on Saturday 19 September 2026. For more information, contact the Head of Admissions on 0191 275 1500 or visit dameallans.co.uk

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SCAN TO REGISTER

Further casting announced for Jack and the Beanstalk

The beanstalk is growing sky-high as Newcastle Theatre Royal today announces further casting for their gigantic panto, Jack and the Beanstalk. Mick Potts, Wayne Smith, Rachel Stanley and Oonagh Cox will join previously announced Newcastle panto favourites Danny Adams and Clive Webb who will star as Jack Trot and Farmer Trot, along with Chris Hayward as Dame Trott, and Joe McElderry who returns as Spirit of the Beans, in a spectacular new production for 2026 written and directed by Michael Harrison.

Audience favourite Mick Potts returns to Newcastle Theatre Royal to play Pat the Cow in Jack and the Beanstalk. Best known for the hit CBBC series Danny and Mick and Cirque Du Hilarious, Mick has become a firm favourite with Newcastle audiences, and this festive season marks his 15th pantomime at Newcastle Theatre Royal.

Acclaimed West End leading lady Rachel Stanley returns to take on the role of The Queen. Rachel's other theatre credits range from 42nd Street, Grease and Chicago in London and Paris to scene-stealing panto turns as The Wicked Queen in Snow White, the Magical Mermaid in Peter Pan.

Wayne Smith, a Tyneside favourite, returns to the Theatre Royal as the evil Fleshcreep. Wayne's extensive stage career includes leading roles in Dirty Dancing, Jersey Boys and Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, alongside a host of Newcastle panto appearances from Snow White to Aladdin.

Rising musical-theatre star Oonagh Cox returns to Newcastle panto in the role of Princess Jill, after first appearing in the title role of Cinderella in 2022.

Gina McKee returns to the Newcastle stage

Peterlee-born BAFTA-winning actor Gina McKee is returning to the Newcastle stage this autumn – but not in the 1990s drama that first made her a household name.

McKee shot to fame in the much-loved TV serial Our Friends in the North, playing solicitor-turned-MP Mary Cox and winning a BAFTA for best actress in 1997. As the drama returns to Newcastle's Theatre Royal (15-24 October 2026) to mark its 30th anniversary, it will feature an entirely new cast of young talent.

Instead, McKee will be lending her distinctive voice to Newcastle dance theatre company balletLORENT's new production Hansel & Gretel and the Witch, which premieres at Northern Stage on 29 October 2026 before touring nationally in 2027.

Growing up in Easington and Sunderland, McKee is returning to the region, bringing her well-known voice to balletLORENT's playful reimagining of the classic fairytale, which features a brand-new ending written by frequent collaborator and former poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy.

McKee joins an impressive line-up of narrators who have previously brought balletLORENT's fairytale productions to life, including Joanna Lumley, Sarah Parish and Lindsay Duncan. She will lead audiences through a world filled with a sugar-glass house in the woods, an "all-you-

can-eat" merry-go-round, a regenerating witch – and even two giant chickens.

The production, which is suitable for ages 5+, brings together a strong creative team, including Doctor Who composer Murray Gold, costume designer Nasir Mazhar, who has worked with Lady Gaga, and balletLORENT artistic director Liv Lorent MBE.

McKee pre-recorded her narration earlier this month under the direction of the show's dramaturg Ben Crompton. A fellow actor and comedian, Crompton's credits include Ideal with Johnny Vegas and Pramface, but he is perhaps best known for playing Dolorous Edd in Game of Thrones.

Coastal appearance for songwriting legend

10cc's GRAHAM GOULDMAN 'Heart Full of Songs' comes to WHITLEY BAY – Playhouse on Saturday 10th October 2026!

For lovers of perfectly-crafted music performed by the composer, a Heart Full of Songs concert is truly an exquisite experience.

When 10cc co-founder Graham Gouldman formed what became Heart Full of Songs more than a decade ago, it was purely for the pleasure of laying the songs he wrote or co-wrote in their simplest form, acoustically.

It started as a three-piece supporting at 10cc concerts and quickly evolved into a stand-alone entity. These days Heart Full of Songs is a semi-acoustic/electric, four-piece with its next UK tour set for October 2026, comprising 18 concerts and culminating at London's Cadogan Hall on 29 October.

Featuring material from across Graham's catalogue, the set includes such classics as 10cc's I'm Not In Love and Dreadlock Holiday; Bus Stop and Look Through Any Window, which were hits for The Hollies; For Your Love and

Heart Full of Soul (the Yardbirds); No Milk Today (Herman's Hermits); Bridge To Your Heart from his time with the late Andrew Gold as Wax, along with songs from film soundtracks and his solo albums.

"It is extremely gratifying to do what I love, performing the songs I've written or co written over the years, to audiences who really appreciate them in a semi-acoustic format," says Graham. "With Keith Hayman, Andy Park and BenStone we have a fantastic band that presents the songs with passion and to the highest musical standards. I couldn't ask for more."

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Mary Ann Rogers

An artists life

By Mary Ann Rogers

From a cottage on the shore of Lough Mask, Co Mayo, after another fabulous swim out into the lough and back to start the day.

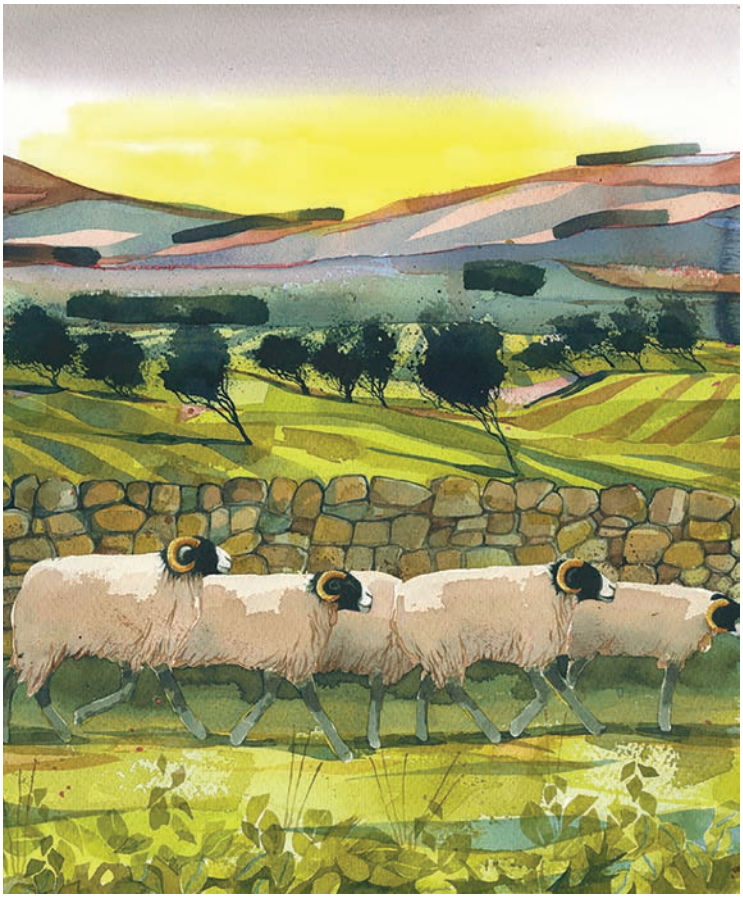
We had a very busy exhibition here at the gallery at the end of June, which went incredibly well, with most of the new paintings departing for their new homes. July was dominated by the annual trip to Harrogate for 'Home and Gift' buyer's festival, where buyers for galleries, shops, lifestyle stores and garden centres from all over the UK, also places as far flung as the Falkland Isles congregate to source new wholesale products like art, fashion, stationery from the best UK designers.

Finally, August has been time to draw breath, and spend a bit of time enjoying ourselves and exploring some new paces.

Several years ago Fifey and I visited St Mary's loch, near Selkirk. We took a canoe on the roof of the car, which Fifey paddled up the loch, while I swam alongside. Ever since that trip, I have fancied spending more time in the area, so I took the caravan up to the wonderfully eccentric Tibbie Shield's Inn camping site, situated on the strip of land which separates Loch of the Lowes from St Mary's Loch. Fifey and I took a canoe, our e-bikes and swimming gear for a five day trip which mostly entailed cycling a lot further than I am used to, bumping our way over the wonderful Southern Uplands and swimming in some new rivers

and lochs, including the waters of Loch Skeen, which is the location of thriving population of the quite rare freshwater fish, vendace. This trip involves a steep hike up past the famous Grey Mare's Tail waterfall, where we spotted a herd of feral goats, with their impressive curved horns. The view of the loch, surrounded by the Moffat hills, is well worth the walk, and we enjoyed a short chilly swim before heading back down the steep path to the car park.

Before bringing the caravan home, one of my more easily led swimming friends joined me for a couple of days. A planned swim down the length of St Mary's loch had to be postponed as Id forgotten the sailing club hold races on Sundays, and it would have been foolhardy to swim through the flotilla of dinghies. As an alternative, we decided to walk up the Loch of the Lowes, and swim back to the caravan site, a much shorter but still lovely swim. We also hiked up to Loch Skeen again and enjoyed swimming a little further into the loch.



I am always surprised by the relative emptiness of this area. With the Lake District so jam packed with people these days, I find Im drawn to this less explored area, with much quieter roads and relaxed laws relating to access, in particular outdoor swimming. The signs which are put up alongside the reservoirs warn of the dangers, but are realistic and helpful, unlike those frequently seen in England's reservoirs which often make ludicrous claims and terrifying warnings.

Im currently spending a few days in Ireland with generous friends enjoying lake swimming, walking and even horse racing at Ballinrobe Racecourse, with views of the Partry Mountains, where we will be walking later on!

Mary Ann Rogers Gallery,
West Woodburn, Hexham NE48 2SE
Open Tues, Thurs, Fri 10-4 • Sundays 2-5
07967 550772 • www.marogers.com

Newcastle hotel gains coveted Green Key sustainable tourism certification

A Newcastle hotel is celebrating a major sustainability milestone after achieving Green Key certification in recognition of its commitment to environmental excellence.

The four-star Sandman Signature Newcastle Hotel has implemented a number of initiatives which have improved the ecological footprint of its operations. A Green Key task force, pulling together team members from across the hotel's various departments, has been created to ensure the hotel is future-proofed from a sustainability perspective.

Green Key sets the standard for excellence in the field of environmental responsibility and sustainable operation within the tourism sector, operating in 30 countries across the world. During the rigorous judging process each establishment is assessed against 150 criteria, in line with guidelines from the UN Tourism. The aim is for businesses to achieve year-on-year environmental improvements and reduce climate-change-causing greenhouse gas emissions. It is one of the leading ecolabels recognised by the Google-powered booking engine Google Travel as part of its 'Sustainability Labelling'.

Katie Lowery is the General Manager of the 170-bedroomed hotel. She said: "We have worked hard to become a more environmentally conscious hotel, and we all felt it was a key priority not just for guests but for us as a team. Achieving the Green Key certification is something we're very proud of."

Japan meets Brazil: NIPO is set to land on Newcastle Quayside

A new Japanese-Brazilian dining concept, NIPO will bring together an infusion of Japanese precision, and the unmistakable energy of Brazilian hospitality to create a dining experience unlike anything experienced in the city.

The first of its kind in Newcastle, NIPO will bring its Japanese-Brazilian identity to life through exceptional ingredients, meticulous Japanese craftsmanship, Brazilian fire, live sushi, a considered wine selection and cocktails inspired by the flavours and techniques of both cultures.

From the creative minds behind the popular Rio Brazilian Steakhouse brand, NIPO is more than a new restaurant, it is the first chapter of a concept created to travel with national and international expansion already in its sights.

NIPO takes its name and inspiration from Nipo-Brasileiro, meaning Japanese-Brazilian, reflecting the deep cultural connection between Japan and Brazil. São Paulo is home to one of the world's largest Japanese communities outside of Japan, creating a unique meeting point between Japanese

craftsmanship and Brazilian warmth, flavour and hospitality - the cultural connection at the heart of NIPO.

The team are bringing the fusion to life through a menu that moves effortlessly between delicate Japanese technique and the unmistakable energy of Brazilian fire. Expect fresh, premium ingredients throughout, from seasonal tasting menus to à la carte dining, with a live sushi station bringing an element of theatre to the experience. Precision-cut sushi and Japanese-inspired dishes will sit alongside robata-style cooking and Brazilian fire, including flame-cooked picanha and generous dishes designed to be shared.

The result is not simply Japanese food with Brazilian ingredients, or Brazilian food with a Japanese twist. NIPO is a new dining language inspired by the places, people and flavours where these two cultures meet.

New South Shields seafront attraction takes shape

A 'coastal village' set to further transform the South Shields seafront has moved one step closer after developers moved in to prepare the site.

Work has begun to create an exciting new community hub on land adjacent to Colmans Seafood Temple on South Promenade.

And it is hoped the multi-use leisure and retail destination will be open by spring 2027 with a number of prestigious independent local traders already agreeing deals to open outlets from day one.

Operated by South Shields-based Colmans — the family-run firm famous for its award-winning fish and chips — the coastal village will be open year-round and feature a series of special seasonal events.

"This is a fantastic opportunity to support a like-minded community of small businesses and bring something a little bit different to South Promenade," said Richard Colman Ord, director of Colmans Hospitality Group.

"It feels like starting work on our coastal village has been a long time coming but it's exciting to see work finally getting underway.

"There's a real buzz around the development and we've been blown away by the interest from local, independent traders keen to work alongside us and breathe new life into land that's been dormant for far too long.

"The seafront at South Shields is already a favourite destination for families from across the North East and the coastal village will be another reason for spending a special day out on the coast.

"Colmans has been at the heart of the local community for 100 years and breaking ground on the coastal village is another landmark moment in our centenary year."

Plans approved earlier this year include provision for 20 beach huts, retail pods, offices and event space.

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Fiery sunsets in Florida's millionaires' playground

By Stuart Forster

The area known as Florida's Paradise Coast is winning a reputation as a destination where travellers can enjoy a holiday within a holiday.

After the excitement of Orlando's theme parks, spending time in Naples, Marco Island and the Everglades offers an opportunity to relax on white-sand beaches while appreciating vivid sunsets and viewing wildlife, including manatees and dolphins.

The region's pleasant winter climate has long attracted the rich and famous. The industrialists Thomas Edison and Harvey S. Firestone were among early seasonal visitors. Naples is now reputed to have properties belonging to 12,000 millionaires. Boat tours are a way to discover who lives where while cruising past the grand waterfront villas of the Port Royal neighbourhood, which has houses owned by A-list celebrities from sports, entertainment and other fields.

Those tours depart from docks on the Gordon River by Tin City. Formerly the hub of the local fishing industry, Tin City now hosts boutique shops, dining establishments and tourism-focused businesses. Those include Trike Tours USA, which, as I experienced, operates 90-minute sightseeing tours of Naples.

Before setting off, our guide Diego showed the group how to operate our electric vehicles. Within minutes, we were confidently zipping around Tin City's car park on mopeds and tricycles. Opening up my trike's throttle helped dismiss the idea that I might be mistaken for some octogenarian scooting around the city.

Calusa Indians were the region's first human inhabitants. Europeans settled here in the 19th century. "The little bodies of water that go through the land reminded them of Italy," said Diego, explaining how Naples got its name.

On Third Street South, we paused to peer in the windows of art galleries, chic clothing shops and a recently opened bookstore. From there it was just a couple of minutes to the soft sand of Naples Beach. Stretching for 10 miles, the beach featured numerous pockets cordoned off with yellow tape warning of the need for caution. I soon learnt that they marked the nesting sites of turtles, whose leathery eggs continue to hatch into October.

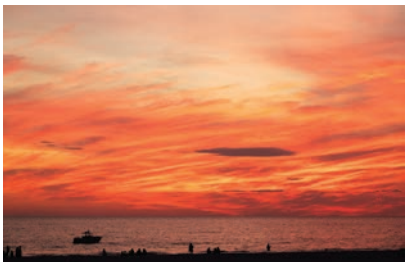
As someone who grew up in northeast England, I associate stepping into the sea with toe-recoiling temperatures – even at the height of summer. But stepping into the Gulf was like getting into a lukewarm bath. It was a delight to swim in.

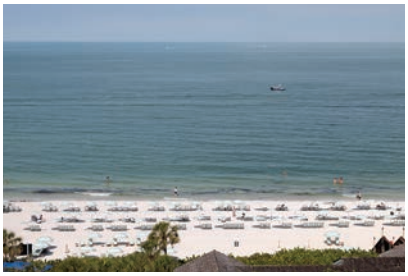
Marco Island is a 35-minute drive south of Naples and linked to the mainland by the 1,800-ft Stan Gober Memorial Bridge. If Naples has the feel of being a millionaires' playground that anyone is welcome to visit, Marco Island is an upscale holiday destination whose appeal extends beyond couples, families and retirees.

From my hotel balcony, I viewed people skipping across the sea on what appeared to be jet skis. Down on the beach, I discovered they were riding WaveRunners rented out by Marco Island Water Sports. Brian, one of the company's tour guides, explained: "We lead guided excursions in single-file lines of up to six machines into the Ten Thousand Islands. Our major goal is to sneak up on wildlife doing what it would be doing if nobody was around, so you get an idea of what the local wildlife is actually doing out there."

The Ten Thousand Islands' mangroves are part of an ecosystem providing habitat for nearly 200 bird species. Ospreys, bald eagles and herons were just some of those that I spotted while hurtling between islands. Creatures such as manatees and American crocodiles remained elusive but it was thrilling to explore on the powerful WaveRunner.

I was back on Marco Island with plenty of time to grab a cold beer before taking in one of the region's spectacular sunsets over the tranquil Gulf.





Travel information

See the paradisecoast.com website for more about things to do in Naples, Marco Island and the Everglades.

From Newcastle, British Airways flies to Miami International Airport via London Heathrow. Naples is a two-hour drive west of Miami.

The Compass by Margaritaville hotel (compasshotel.com) is conveniently located in the Park Shore area of Naples. The Hilton Marco Island Beach Resort and Spa (hilton.com) is a beachfront property with a heated outdoor pool and 10 treatment rooms in its spa.

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Team Lumley

By Jeff Hodgson, General Manager, Lumley Castle Hotel

The heart behind the Castle's success.

Jeff Hodgson

Running Lumley Castle has never been without its challenges, but as the Castle continues to thrive, so too does the challenge of delivering the standards our guests expect.

Like many businesses, we are experiencing significant increases across almost every area of the operation. Food and beverage costs continue to rise, utilities remain a major challenge, and the cost of general upkeep and maintaining a historic building like Lumley Castle is something we face every single day. There is always something that needs attention, improvement or investment.

Yet, despite these pressures, Team Lumley continues to deliver.

Our team keeps pushing forward, hitting our targets and, most importantly, ensuring that our guests continue to receive the experience they have come to expect from Lumley Castle. That does not happen by accident. It happens because of the people who turn up every day, care about what they do and take pride in the Castle.

For me, recognising that effort is incredibly important.

Sometimes it is the small things that can make the biggest difference. On a sunny day, we might surprise the team with ice creams. It is a simple gesture, but it is our way of saying, we see you, we appreciate you and thank you for everything you do.

September will be particularly special as we celebrate our annual Team Appreciation Week. It is an opportunity to put our incredible team firmly in the spotlight and celebrate the contribution they make throughout the year.

And on Sunday 13 September, we will be opening the Castle up for a very special Family Fun Day, giving our team the opportunity to bring their families along and share a little bit of the place they work. After all, the support of our colleagues' families is important too. When our teams work the evenings, weekends, celebrations and busy periods, their families often make sacrifices alongside them.

The Family Fun Day is simply our way of saying thank you.

Lumley Castle is thriving. We continue to welcome guests, create memories, deliver experiences and work towards our targets, even in what remains a challenging trading environment.

But none of that would be possible without the people behind it.

Team Lumley is the heartbeat of this Castle. The building may be hundreds of years old, but it is the people who bring it to life every single day.

So, as we look ahead to the rest of the year, I want to take this opportunity to say something that cannot be said often enough:

Thank you, Team Lumley.

Thank you for your hard work, your resilience, your commitment and the pride you take in making Lumley Castle such a special place.

The Castle may be thriving, but it is our team that makes it possible.

www.lumleycastle.com

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Images credit: Steve Brock

All aboard the Canny Lass as Tyne Cruises returns to the river

The River Tyne has welcomed back sightseeing cruises with the launch of Tyne Cruises and its newly refurbished passenger vessel, Canny Lass.

The 16-metre catamaran is giving locals and visitors the chance to see Newcastle, Gateshead and the wider Tyne from a completely different perspective, taking in iconic bridges, historic landmarks, riverside communities and the region's rich maritime heritage.

With panoramic windows, outdoor viewing areas and a licensed café and bar, Canny Lass can carry up to 98 passengers in comfort.

Cruises include a one-hour City Cruise, a two-hour Country Cruise heading west and a three-hour Sea Cruise travelling towards the North Sea.

Specialist sailings and private hire are also available throughout the year.

The launch was marked by a special ceremony, with public cruises now underway and offering a fresh way to experience one of the North East's most iconic waterways.

Bookings and cruise information are available at tynecruises.com

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My Weekend

Yvonne Probert

Yvonne Probert

CEO, Tell Us North

Tell Us North services include Healthwatch Newcastle and Healthwatch Gateshead, which work to ensure social care and health commissioners and providers listen to local communities to continuously improve services.

Here she tells us about her weekends...

Do you ever have to work weekends?

Yes, I sometimes work weekends as being a community business we are often out and about at events like Pride and MELA, so it's a team effort and as CEO I am hands on too.

Are most weekends the same?

No weekend is the same for me, as my life is busy as it's filled with family, friends and volunteering, so every day is very different. Some weekends I can be found volunteering on the reception desk at the Birtley Community Pool, or out with friends for a cuppa, cake and catch up, or in my kayak as an RLSS open water lifeguard providing water safety at swimming events like triathlons or running trail races with my club buddies. Every day is different, bringing fresh challenges, an opportunity to meet interesting people and new chances to grow.

Do you find it hard to switch off?

I manage to switch between work and play quite easily but having time to myself to go to the gym, or swim or run helps me to gather my thoughts and calms me so I unwind and relax.

What do you do at a weekend which you can't fit in through the week?

Deadlines for reports and contract bids mean that I need to do some work at weekends to make sure we get things done on time. I don't mind this as work are flexible and they give me time during the week to enable me to volunteer so it is give and take which is good for me.

Morning exercise or a recovery lie in?

Exercise for me - I like to go to the gym, run or swim when I have free time as it gives me time to clear my head and helps me relax. Being the Chair of Birtley Community Pool, as well as being a volunteer RLSS Open Water Lifeguard I am naturally a busy person, so I am up and about early at weekends enjoying the water both indoors and outdoors.

Big night out or a night in the house?

I like both - quality time with friends out and about but also staying at home chilling is great too.

Do you watch or play sport at a weekend?

I do lots of sport on a weekend as I am a keen swimmer and runner.

Where do you like to eat out at on a weekend?

I am active person, so my free time is spent doing activities and sports, but I also like meeting friends for food too. The weekend as down time from work and having quality time with loved ones is important to me!

How important is the weekend to you?

Weekends are very important to me as they are my play time and when I enjoy myself, as well as a time to be with people who share my interests.

What's the best thing about weekends?

For me the best thing about weekends is spending time with people and doing enjoyable things with likeminded folk.

Of a weekend, you'll usually find me most happy..?

Being with people, having fun, sharing adventures/experiences and laughing together.

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FESTIVE EVENTS

Steppin' Out celebrates milestone anniversary

Keith Martin reflects on two decades of Soul, Disco and radio success.

Newcastle's soul community came together recently to celebrate a landmark anniversary for one of the North East's most iconic radio shows, Steppin' Out, at a special anniversary Soul Session held at Pilgrim, Newcastle.

The event welcomed music lovers from across the region for an afternoon and evening of classic soul, disco, funk and Motown, paying tribute to a show that has become synonymous with quality music, unforgettable interviews and a passionate community of listeners.

Founded by broadcaster and soul music enthusiast Keith Martin, Steppin' Out first aired in 2005 after what Keith describes as years of persistence and determination.

After regularly submitting demo tapes in pursuit of his ambition to present a radio show, a chance meeting with several radio presenters while working at a Newcastle venue led to an opportunity to host a one-hour Tamla Motown programme on Magic 1152. Originally intended as a short-term feature, the programme quickly evolved into something much bigger.

Within weeks, Keith was invited to broadcast live and expand the playlist beyond Motown, blending disco, funk, soul, Northern Soul and club classics with selections from his own extensive record collection.

That programme became Steppin' Out.

Broadcasting every Saturday evening from 6pm to 10pm, the show quickly developed a loyal following, becoming the soundtrack to thousands of Saturday nights across the North East.

Keith's vision extended beyond simply playing great music. From the very beginning, he wanted listeners to hear directly from the artists behind the songs. His first major interview featured Jeffrey Daniel of Shalamar, the legendary dancer credited with creating the backslide that inspired Michael Jackson's moonwalk.

Keith Martin, pictured outside David Bowie's former apartment

Over the years, Steppin' Out welcomed an extraordinary list of guests including legendary songwriting duo Gamble & Huff and even Gregory Porter, long before he became a Grammy Award-winning international star.

The show's success saw it expand onto the Bauer Media Magic Network in 2006, broadcasting across eight stations throughout the North of England before Keith went on to host Soulful Sunday and later The Soul Show across the Big City Network, reaching audiences across England and Scotland.

Although Keith left the network in 2017, Steppin' Out continued its journey and today is broadcast every Friday evening between 6pm and 10pm on Frisk Groove, part of the Frisk Radio family, staying true to the format that first captured listeners more than two decades ago while embracing modern soulful and disco house alongside timeless classics.

Reflecting on the journey, Keith said: "I knew we had something special, I just didn't know how special. I'm incredibly proud of the journey Steppin' Out has taken and I still have the same enthusiasm today as I did during that very first nervous broadcast back in 2005."

The anniversary celebration at Pilgrim was more than just a party - it was a celebration of the friendships, memories and shared love of soul music that Steppin' Out has created over the past 21 years.

As disco and soul continue to inspire new generations of music lovers and producers alike, Keith's passion remains unchanged, ensuring Steppin' Out continues to introduce audiences to the music that first inspired him as a teenager.

Keith concluded: "For thousands of listeners, Steppin' Out has never simply been a radio show. It has become a weekly tradition, a community and one of the North East's longest-running celebrations of soul, disco and Motown music."

To tune in, download the Frisk player app from FriskRadio.com and select Frisk Groove. Friday's 6-10pm.

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A warm welcome and mediterranean flavours at Santonio's

By Sara Marston

Located in the heart of Hamsterley Colliery, Santonio's is a welcoming Italian and Mediterranean restaurant built around quality ingredients, warm hospitality and a genuine sense of community.

My husband and I recently visited, and from the moment we arrived, the atmosphere felt relaxed and inviting. Santonio's sources as many ingredients locally as possible, guided by the belief that the freshest produce, sourced close to home, creates the best dining experience.

We began with the grilled halloumi and sesame chicken. The halloumi was served on a bed of asparagus and finished with a drizzle of balsamic, which complemented the rich, salty cheese beautifully. The sesame chicken delivered the perfect balance of tangy and sweet. We could easily have eaten more, but decided to save room for our main courses.

I chose the Pasta Roma, a wonderfully indulgent combination of chicken, bacon, mushrooms and tomato, with vodka adding extra depth to a creamy garlic sauce. Yes, vodka in pasta, and it worked brilliantly.

My husband opted for the Pizza Vegetariana, a colourful and generously topped pizza with onions, mushrooms, sweetcorn, peppers and asparagus. It was fresh, full of flavour and proved that a vegetarian pizza can be every bit as satisfying as its meatier counterparts.

Despite being comfortably full, dessert was impossible to resist. We shared a lime cheesecake and a chocolate tart. Both were exceptional. The cheesecake was smooth and refreshing, while the tart was rich and chocolatey without becoming overly heavy. Together, they offered the perfect finish to our meal.

Santonio's has a relaxed indoor dining area as well as outdoor seating, making it a lovely choice when the weather is on your side. There is also a private dining room available for functions and celebrations, while vegan and gluten-free options ensure that different dietary requirements are well catered for.

The drinks menu offers plenty of choice too, and on Fridays guests can enjoy two cocktails for £12.50, which is an excellent excuse to begin the weekend with friends.

Although we were delighted with our choices, we already have our eye on what to order next time. The 10oz sirloin steaks are regularly raved about, while the 'nduja risotto looked incredible as it made its way past our table.

Santonio's combines delicious food with attentive hospitality and a warm, unpretentious atmosphere. It is the kind of restaurant that makes you feel welcome from the moment you arrive and leaves you looking forward to your next visit. We certainly will not be waiting too long before returning.

For information, call 0120 765 5050 or visit their website, www.santonios.co.uk

Wellbeing expert launches early intervention service

A Newcastle academic with international expertise in children's rights has launched a specialist youth wellbeing service designed to help young people tackle anxiety, stress and self-esteem issues before they develop into a mental health crisis.

Originally from Greece, Dr Christina Poulatova came to Newcastle to study at university and has since made the city her home.

Drawing on years of experience working with students from a wide range of cultural and geographical backgrounds, she has established Climb Youth Therapy to support children, teenagers, young adults and their families through the everyday challenges that increasingly affect young people's emotional wellbeing.

Dr Poulatova said: "My interest has always been children's wellbeing and promoting children's rights. At Climb Youth Therapy we don't see the child as the problem. We help young people recognise that they can improve their own wellbeing, step by step and day by day."

Rather than replacing NHS mental health services, Climb Youth Therapy focuses on early intervention – helping families recognise the warning signs before problems become severe.

"When someone has reached crisis point, the NHS and emergency services are absolutely the right place to seek help," she said. "What we do is work with young people at the very beginning, when the first signs appear. Those early conversations can often make a real difference."

The service supports young people experiencing a wide range of issues including exam stress, anxiety, low self-confidence, body image concerns, the pressures of social media, adjusting to university life, workplace stress and eating-related concerns.

Sessions are tailored to each individual and may include practical coping strategies, breathing techniques and confidence-building exercises to help young people develop resilience and healthier ways of managing difficult situations.

Healthwatch Annual Joint Meeting

Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle will come together for their Annual Joint Meeting at 4pm on Wednesday 30th September at Gateshead College bringing partners, members of the public and local health and care organisations together to reflect on the experiences of local health and social care users.

The meeting provides an opportunity to look back at the work undertaken over the past year, highlighting the issues raised by health and social care users and the difference that sharing their experiences can make to the services they use.

The Annual Joint Meeting will also look ahead to the priorities for the coming year, including the challenges facing local health and care services and how Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle can continue to ensure that the views and experiences of health and social care users remain at the heart of decision-making.

The meeting is an opportunity to hear about the organisation's latest work, ask questions

and find out how health and social care users can get involved in shaping the services they rely on.

Sign up now at:

www.healthwatchgateshead.co.uk

www.healthwatchnewcastle.org.uk

www.eventbrite.co.uk

The event reflects the shared commitment of Healthwatch Gateshead and Healthwatch Newcastle to ensure that the experiences and voices of health and social care users are heard and can help influence positive change.

Pilates and Wellness coach has mission to support families with additional needs

A North East Pilates and wellness coach is using her own experiences as a parent of a child with complex additional needs to help improve the physical and mental wellbeing of people who are often overlooked by mainstream fitness programmes.

Emma Amos from Gosforth has transformed a difficult period in her own life into a growing business dedicated to making Pilates and mental health accessible to everyone, regardless of age, disability or diagnosis.

Following the birth of her third daughter, Emma found herself struggling with PTSD in grief after losing her mother, a Pre-Menstrual Dysphoric Disorder and perimenopause diagnosis while also coping with the pressures of raising her young family of two toddlers and a son with highly complex needs.

"Reformer Pilates became the one place where my mind could switch off. It helped me physically, but more importantly it helped me mentally."

Inspired by the difference it made, Emma retrained as a Pilates instructor, qualifying in mat, reformer and chair, pre and post-natal and children and teen Pilates. But it was her son Mason who has a diagnosis of autism, anxiety, dyspraxia, sensory processing difficulties and the rare genetic condition 1p36 Deletion Syndrome that helped her to pivot her career.

"He was enjoying watching me plan my sessions and he started to connect with the equipment I was using in a positive, enlightening way."

Today with Wellness by Emma, she works with individuals, schools, carers and community organisations across the North East, adapting every session to suit each person's individual abilities.

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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:
What are we creating that derserves to endure?

Longevity, Succession and Survival.

Business has an obsession with quarters. Every three months we measure performance, reset targets, celebrate success or explain failure. Quarterly reports shape markets. Quarterly reviews shape careers. Quarterly planning shapes almost every organisation.

Yet it is worth asking a simple question: why quarters?

At first glance, the answer seems obvious. A year divided into four equal parts is convenient. But convenience is not the same as truth. These dates make sense for administration. But they do not necessarily make sense for longevity, succession or survival.

Administration asks how we performed this quarter. Longevity asks whether what we are building will still matter in fifty years.

Succession asks who will inherit the decisions we make today. Survival asks whether we can adapt when the conditions inevitably change.

Nature has no concept of Quarter One.

The seasons are not four equal boxes waiting to be filled with objectives and key results. Spring is emergence. Summer is growth. Autumn is harvest. Winter is restoration.

Their boundaries shift each year according to weather, daylight and countless relationships within the wider ecosystem.

A forester who planted according to the accounting calendar rather than the condition of the soil would soon fail. Success depends less on the date than on understanding the season.

Perhaps business has confused measurement with timing. One tells us what has happened. The other determines what becomes possible.

"The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now."

It is an encouraging thought because it invites action instead of regret. Yet I wonder whether it misses something deeper.

Perhaps the best time to plant a tree was not twenty years ago. Perhaps it was five generations ago.

The ancient woodlands we treasure today exist because someone planted without expecting to enjoy the shade. They understood that forests are acts of succession. Every generation receives a landscape shaped by those before it and leaves another for those yet to come. Their measure of success was not the next season but whether the woodland would survive centuries of storms, disease and change.

Maybe business should think the same way.

We spend endless energy debating first-mover advantage versus fast-following. Nature offers a different lesson. The seed that survives is rarely the first into the ground. It is the one planted when the conditions allow it to take root.

Perhaps the question is not whether we are early or late.

The question is: 'What are we creating that deserves to endure?'

The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time is now.

One Walk: The Riverside.

This section of Brinkburn is on the banks of the river Coquet sandwiched by The Priory. It was created in the 1830s and after nearly 200 years has created a majestic grove of four towering tree 100 plus fee high.

It was always inaccessible but slowly over the last six years we cultivated this area and started to use the towering trees to demarcate an outdoor space for activities never envisaged when they were planted. Hand Fasting or tying the knot, yoga, meditation, and music. Longevity , succession and survival all in action.

Mark Fenwick at Brinkburn, Northumberland

Photo: Del Stevyn

Why workplace wellbeing is a business strategy

By Cheryl Tanner, Menopause Fitness & Wellness Coach

Cheryl Tanner

In August, I explored why strength training matters more than ever for women in midlife. But there is a bigger conversation for businesses: What happens when we support the health of the people we can't afford to lose?

Women in midlife bring experience, knowledge, leadership and valuable skills to the workplace. Yet menopause symptoms can affect concentration, stress, confidence, sleep and overall wellbeing.

The business impact is significant.

CIPD research found that 17% of women experiencing menopause symptoms had considered leaving work because of a lack of support, with a further 6% having already left.

And the financial implications extend beyond individual employees. A 2025 UK Government review estimated the annual economic cost of menopause-related unemployment at £1.5 billion, with a further £191 million linked to absenteeism and £22.4 million to presenteeism.

So workplace wellbeing isn't simply an employee benefit. It is a business strategy.

Future-focused organisations should consider:

Education – helping employees and managers understand midlife health.

Practical support – around movement, nutrition, sleep and stress.

Physical health – encouraging strength and activity to support long-term health.

Culture – creating an environment where people feel comfortable asking for support.

This isn't about lowering expectations. It's about creating the conditions that allow experienced employees to continue performing at their best.

That's where I come in. As a Menopause Fitness & Wellness Coach, I deliver tailored workplace workshops and wellbeing strategies built around my Five Pillars of Health: Exercise, Nutrition, Sleep, Stress Management and Mindfulness.

From menopause education and manager awareness to practical strategies employees can implement immediately, my aim is to help organisations move beyond awareness and towards action.

Because healthy people build stronger businesses. Ready to future-proof your workforce?

Scan the QR code to find out more about my workplace wellbeing workshops and tailored menopause support for your organisation. www.cheryltannerpt.co.uk

Scan me!

Happiness comes from within

By Craig Robinson, Meditation Teacher (DipBSoM)

We chase happiness in achievements, purchases, and approval, then wonder why it slips away.

Craig Robinson

External wins bring pleasure, not lasting happiness. True, steady happiness is an inside job, a quality of presence and a kindly relationship with our own mind.

Happiness from within is less fragile because it's rooted in awareness, not circumstance. When you cultivate inner steadiness, life's ups and downs stop dictating your baseline mood. You still enjoy good things, but they don't become the sole source of your wellbeing.

Meditation is the training that helps us find this baseline of natural stillness and peace. The more frequently we practise, the more naturally mindful we become of this place; the more resilient we are to the external world, the happier we feel. Finding natural peace and happiness from within means we can rely less on wealth, status, relationships and the new shiny smartphone to make us happy (sorry!).

Ultimately these are all unreliable sources of happiness.

Practice to try — Radiant Presence (10 minutes)

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Take three slow, full breaths. Soften the jaw and shoulders. Bring attention to the heart area and imagine a warm, gentle light there. On the inbreath, invite a quality: ease, gratitude, kindness. On the outbreath, let go of tension. After a few cycles, expand the light to fill the chest, then the whole body. If thoughts arise, note "this is just a thought, I am not the thought" and return to the warmth in the heart. Rest in the feeling that arises without chasing it. Finish with three grounding breaths and a soft smile.

How to weave it in.. start small and consistent. Happiness grows from tiny daily choices: noticing, softening, and returning to what's here. With regular meditation practice, over time the inner climate shifts, you become less dependent on external validation and more anchored in your own presence.

I run meditation classes twice a week at my studio in Forest Hall. Come along to get started.

www.clearmindcollective.co.uk

Returning to exercise after the summer break

By Angela Petrocchi, SWISSPHYSIO

Avoid the usual mistakes, reduce injury risk, and prepare for your best season.

After a summer break, enthusiasm is high, but the body needs time to adapt again. The aim is not to do everything at once, but build fitness, confidence, and consistency step by step.

Common pitfalls

- **Doing too much too soon:** Jumping straight back into full-intensity sessions can overload muscles, tendons, and joints.
- **Skipping the warm-up:** Cold muscles are less prepared for quick changes of direction, sprinting, or contact.
- **Ignoring small aches:** A slight niggle can become a bigger injury if it is pushed through repeatedly.
- **Training without recovery:** Fitness improves during recovery, not just during hard sessions.
- **Forgetting the basics:** Poor sleep, low hydration, and missed meals all reduce performance and increase risk.

Stay injury-free

The safest return is gradual. Increase training load over a few weeks, keep technique sharp, and listen to the body. A good session should leave you challenged, not broken.

- **Start** with lower intensity and build up steadily.
- **Use** dynamic movements before training and static stretching after training.
- **Include** strength work for the legs, hips, core, and upper body.
- **Plan** at least one proper rest or lighter day each week.
- **Use** the right footwear and equipment for the surface, weather, and sport.
- **Speak** to your coach, parent, or a medical professional if pain changes movement or does not settle.

Prepare for your best season

A strong season starts before the first fixture. The goal is to arrive ready, fresh, and confident – not exhausted before the season begins.

- **Rebuild fitness:** Mix steady running, intervals, mobility, and sport-specific drills.
- **Sharpen skills:** Focus on quality touches, movement patterns, passing, timing, and decision-making.
- **Fuel properly:** Eat balanced meals with carbohydrates for energy, protein for recovery, and plenty of fluids.
- **Sleep consistently:** Aim for a regular routine so the body can repair and adapt.
- **Set clear goals:** Choose one fitness goal, one technical goal, and one attitude goal for the first month back.

Want to be sure you are training properly? Jack Nicholson at SWISSPHYSIO will guide you through a training program tailored for you and your goals.

Desk mode activated

Returning to work can feel like returning to training: it is best done gradually, with clear priorities and realistic expectations. Here are practical ways to ease back in to work after a holiday and avoid or reduce lower back and neck pain when at the desk.

What to avoid

- **Trying to catch up on everything at once:** This can create stress and make it harder to focus on what matters most.
- **Overloading:** Spending your first few days back with long desk sessions.

- **Not checking the workstation:** especially if you shared your desk or chair.

How to ease back in

- **Set up your workstation:** Scan the qr code for our workplace back and neck care;
- **Don't ignore your routine:** Sleep. Meals, Movement and breaks all affects concentration and energy.
- **Keep hydrated:** have your water bottle ready and refill regularly.
- **Move little and often;** take a short movement break every 30-40 minutes.
- **Tips: Scan for our** 'Warm Up Exercises at the Desk'.

Book your appointment now and enjoy a 10% introductory discount on your first session.

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Gates open at 10:30 am with breakfast being served at 11:00 am

What's the secret?

Over the years I've had the privilege of helping thousands of people transform their health, lose weight, build confidence and completely change their lives. People often ask me what the secret is.

Is it the perfect training programme? A special diet? The latest fitness trend? The honest answer is none of these.

The people who stay fit for life aren't usually the fastest, strongest or naturally most athletic. They are the people who develop a handful of habits and stick to them. Those habits become part of who they are and that's why they continue to enjoy good day to day health.

Here are five habits that make them stand out from the rest:

Habit 1- They train even when they don't feel like it

Nobody wakes up every single morning desperate to exercise. We all have busy days, poor sleep, stressful jobs and family commitments. Motivation comes and goes, but commitment remains. The people who achieve lasting success understand that they don't need to feel motivated every day. They simply turn up because they know they'll never regret doing a workout.

Habit 2 - They plan their exercise in advance

If you wait until you have some spare time, chances are you'll never find it. Life has a habit of filling every available minute. Successful people book their workouts into the diary just as they would an important meeting or appointment. They protect that time because they understand that looking after their health allows them to perform better in every other area of their life.

Habit 3 - They never allow one setback to become a reason to quit

Everyone enjoys a meal out, a birthday celebration or a holiday, that's part of living a balanced life. The difference is that successful people don't allow one indulgence to turn into a bad week or a bad month. They simply enjoy the occasion, then get straight back into their healthy routine. It's all about that consistency!

Habit 4 - They find exercise they genuinely enjoy

Fitness should never feel like a punishment, hether it's lifting weights, joining a Beach Bootcamp, taking a long walk with friends or pushing yourself through a challenging VersaClimber session. The best form of exercise is the one you'll continue to do. When you enjoy the journey, staying active becomes a lifestyle rather than a chore.

Habit 5 - They surround themselves with positive people

I've seen first hand how powerful this can be. When you train alongside encouraging people who want to see you succeed, everything becomes easier. Good habits are contagious allowing your confidence to grow, accountability increases and before long you begin achieving things you never believed possible.

Staying fit for life isn't about finding a miracle programme or chasing the latest social media trend. It's about making small, sensible choices every day and repeating them often enough that they become second nature.

David's summing up

Don't underestimate the power of consistency. A 30 minute workout, a healthy meal, an early night or a walk after work may not seem life changing today, but repeated week after week, month after month and year after year, becomes the foundation of a healthier, happier and longer life.

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Brancepeth Castle Golf Club

Designed by the world famous architect Harry Colt in 1924 and laid out on what was Brancepeth Castle Deer Park, the stables and coach house being converted into the clubhouse. Harry Colt was involved in designing or redesigning over 300 courses around the world, including Moor Park, Royal Lytham & St. Annes and Wentworth.

Brancepeth is a beautiful parkland course of 6400 yards, SSS 71, offering a great variation of holes. The deep ravine cutting through the course, provides some challenging tee shots.

Leaving the Club House and walking down the path towards the first tee provides a first glimpse of the Castle and St. Brandon's Church. Going through the gate and on to the first tee gives an immediate impression of the character of the course and its magnificent deciduous trees. The silver birch trees (Betula Jacquamonti) on the right between the 1st fairway and 18th green were planted to mark the Queen's Silver Jubilee. Originally there were 25 trees, one for each year of her reign and they were planted by members of the Club who had been members for over 25 years.

The signature hole at Brancepeth Castle, the 9th is laid out in what was the formal garden for the castle. At 200 yards and played across the ravine to a narrow, angled green which was dug out of the bankside by hand this hole is a real test. Once described as the hardest 9th hole in the world, its difficulty speaks for itself.

The 10th hole is another fantastic par 3. It is slightly shorter than the 9th hole but certainly not easy. To find the green, the tee shot needs to carry all the way as anything short will not run up. The bunker to the left of the green is large and deep and always leaves a tricky shot to save par.

There is a silver wheelbarrow trophy at Brancepeth Castle that was donated to commemorate the brave history of club member Second Lieutenant Richard Annand in May of 1940. He was awarded the first Victoria Cross of World War Two for his efforts in recovering wounded soldiers from no man's land, despite being gravely wounded himself. He made repeated visits under continual fire and eventually brought back his wounded batman using a wheelbarrow he had commandeered for the purpose. The story of his exploits gained the headlines of 'Wheelbarrow VC', hence the silver wheelbarrow trophy commissioned to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the club.

This golf course belongs on every golfer's radar. Boasting an unsurpassed history and thrilling, rewarding challenges, it delivers an exceptional experience for every visitor.

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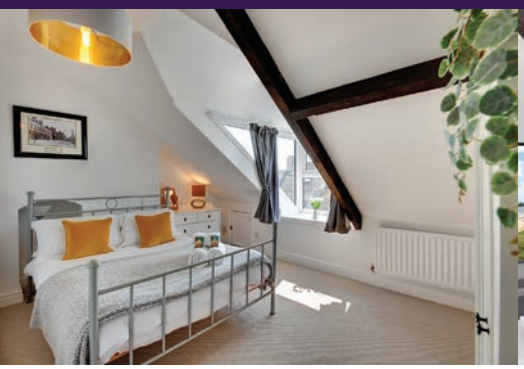

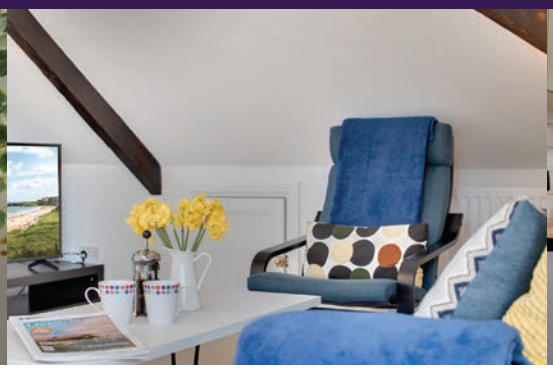

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