

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

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2024

2025

Impact

2026

Report

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# A Message from Our CEO



## Welcome to our Impact Report for 2025/2026

The Entrepreneurs' Forum exists to help North East entrepreneurs succeed by learning from and supporting each other. We believe the North East economy grows stronger when business owners help each other to build better businesses.

The North East is home to thousands of business owners, yet being an entrepreneur can be a lonely experience. Our role is to make it easier for founders to connect to peers who understand the realities of entrepreneurial risk-taking. It's because we understand the enormous value of learning directly from other founders that we ran over 80 events in the past 12 months. Sessions were shaped by entrepreneurs who gave their time generously and altruistically to help.

The past year hasn't been without challenge for our members. Rising costs, increased taxes and wider economic uncertainty have dented business confidence and left members frustrated. Despite this, we have seen growth from our members, although often slower than many had hoped or planned for.

One of the most significant opportunities for our members is to master how AI can give them an advantage. Amongst our members, AI usage is now close to universal and more than 85% have reported gains at the individual task level. Those agile enough to redesign workflows and lock in enterprise-level efficiencies are hoping to gain a competitive advantage going forward.

Throughout this report, our impact is measured through the eyes of our members and the businesses they lead. Their feedback demonstrates the value of our services and strength of the community we have been building since 2002.

We are so grateful to every entrepreneur, partner, and supporter who has contributed their time and experience over the past year. Together, we are helping to inspire the next generation of entrepreneurs, and we look forward to continuing our mission throughout 2026 and beyond.

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Elaine Stroud". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Elaine Stroud, CEO

# Who We Are

The Entrepreneurs' Forum is a vibrant community for North East business owners. Built and run independently by entrepreneurs, for entrepreneurs, it is a trusted space where real experience is shared without ego.

Established in 2002 as a not-for-profit membership organisation by leading North East founders Sir Peter Vardy (Reg Vardy Group) and Lorna Moran OBE (Northern Recruitment Group), over the past 24 years, we have grown from 40 founding members into a community of more than 360 business owners.

Today, our members represent companies spanning a diverse range of sectors, with a combined annual turnover of more than £2.5bn and in excess of 17,400 employees.

## Our mission

To build a stronger North East through entrepreneurship.

## Our purpose

To grow a vibrant community where entrepreneurs help entrepreneurs.

## Our values

The Entrepreneurs' Forum is built around a simple belief: entrepreneurs learn best from those who've been there before.

As an organisation, we put our members first. Making sure their interests, and those of their businesses, are at the heart of everything we do.

Embracing an entrepreneurial mindset, we continue to drive improvement and

try new ideas to facilitate the right conversations.

Through strong collaboration and by being a voice for North East entrepreneurs, we consistently deliver above our weight.

## How we're funded\*



- Member contributions 64%
- Commercial sponsorship 32%
- Local government support 4%

\*Funding applies to 2025/26 and can vary year on year.

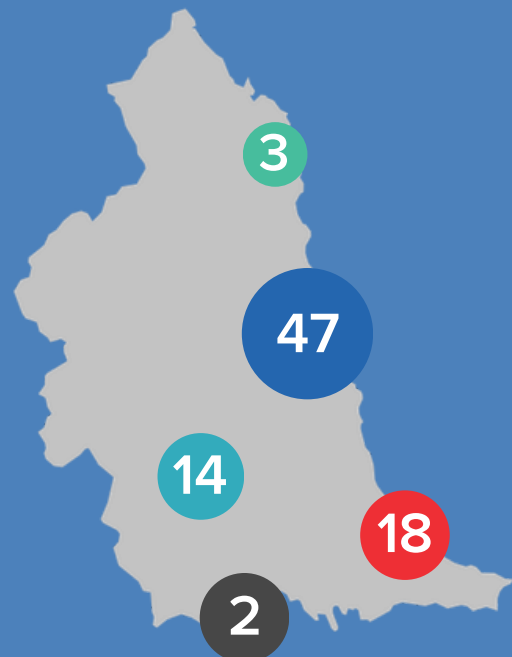
# Year in Review: Our Impact in Numbers

Events, mentoring, conversations, and connections form the heart of our community.

2025 - 2026	2024 - 2025	
421	411	North East entrepreneurial members supported
130	96	bespoke 1-1 mentoring connections made
84	70	face-to-face events hosted
3	6	online events
1,804	1,700	delegates attended our events
80%	87%	felt more energised after attending our events
4,500	4,500	copies of forum magazine distributed

## Breakdown of event locations

- 47** Tyne and Wear  
2024 - 2025 figure: 42
- 14** County Durham  
2024 - 2025 figure: 10
- 18** Teesside  
2024 - 2025 figure: 12
- 3** Northumberland  
2024 - 2025 figure: 6
- 2** North Yorkshire



# Year in Review: Our Members

Everyone in the room is there because they are building something. But entrepreneurship is not a formula, and there is no single path or playbook to follow.

That's why we bring entrepreneurs together from different backgrounds and sectors, to share experience, challenge thinking and offer fresh perspectives that help businesses grow.

2025 - 2026	2024 - 2025	
<b>421</b>	<b>411</b>	North East entrepreneurial members supported
<b>£2.5bn</b>	<b>£2.5bn</b>	combined turnover of our members
<b>17,400</b>	<b>16,000</b>	combined employees of our members' companies
<b>28%</b>	<b>28%</b>	members are female founders
<b>32%</b>	<b>32%</b>	members are based south of the region
<b>68%</b>	<b>68%</b>	members are based north of the region
<b>19%</b>	<b>22%</b>	members are under the age of 40
<b>26%</b>	<b>24%</b>	members are over the age of 55
<b>33%</b>	<b>33%</b>	members who's businesses export
<b>38%</b>	<b>37%</b>	members belong to a family-owned business

# Year in Review: Our Members

Hamish Adamson, Harlyn Solutions  
Natasha Addis, Wharton Global  
Bethany Ainsley, OptiMe  
Abu Ali, FRP Corporate Finance  
Gareth Allen, Allen Champion and Shaw  
Tara Allen, Nortec Fire  
James Allison, Middleton Lodge Events  
Imran Anwar, Alt Labs  
Ian Armstrong, Pulcea  
Shak Asghar, Like Us  
Niall Ash, Ashgarth Engineering  
Ian Baggett, Adderstone Group  
Simon Bailes, Simon Bailes  
Toby Bailey, RED Engineering  
Tom Baker, Certax Teesside  
Dame Margaret Barbour, J Barbour & Sons  
Emma Barugh, MB Human Resources Consulting  
Nicola Bath, Parnell Plus  
Michael Beaton, DRS  
Laurence Beck, Parkers Chauffeurs  
Karl Beckett, Karl Beckett Business Walks  
John Behan, Smart Office Systems  
Steve Beharall, Is This You?  
Olga Bell, MMCS Commercial Cleaning  
Yvonne Bell  
Nima Beni, Prima Cheese  
Oliver Bennett, Tyne Bank Brewery  
Dean Benson, Visualsoft  
Alisdair Beveridge, The Build Directory  
Kerry Black, Clementine Services  
Stephen Black, Kinetic Properties  
Mark Black, Clementine Services  
Mark Blacklee, Curo  
David Blair, Blair West  
Paul Blake, Newcastle Eagles Basketball  
Paul Blight, Tier One Capital Ltd.  
Shawn Bone, Cavu Corporate Finance  
Oliver Bourke, Mercury Wealth Management  
Ali Boville, BearTech Dev  
Rob Boville, BearTech Dev  
Matthew Boyd, Jones Boyd  
Mark Bracknall, Theo James Recruitment  
Louise Bradford, Creo Communications  
Richard Bradley, SST Group  
Barry Braley, Creators Academy  
Stuart Bramley, Mira Marketing  
Hannah Brennan, Seer  
Toby Bridges, PartLogic  
Andy Briggs, IA Growth  
Simon Briton, Quantify R&D  
David Broom, B7  
David Brophy, Waymark  
Beverley Brown, CPBS Property Services  
Kevin Brown, Pacifica Group  
Maureen Brown, Sullivan Brown Resourcing Partners  
Richard Brown, Melius Cyber Consultancy  
Rob Brown, JUMP  
Ian Brown, Chestnut BioPolymers  
Mark Bryce, Agilico  
Gill Burgess, Revolution Marketing UK  
Paul Callaghan CBE, The Leighton Group  
Sarah Callender, Perform Platform  
Paul Card, Paul Card Recruitment

Angela Carrington, The Bigger Picture  
Chris Carroll, Resolved Group  
Jo Carter, Concept Personnel  
Kimberley Cattin, SB1 Beauty Group  
Jonny Catto, iPac Packaging Innovations  
Grahame Chapman, Cleaning and Support Services  
Melissa Chapman, Recruitrite  
Brian Chick, Birch Tree Northern  
Nicki Clark OBE, UMi  
Ben Cleary, Full Circle Brew Co.  
Caroline Cleary, Lanchester Wines  
Tony Cleary MBE, Lanchester Wines  
James Clinghan, TBP - Trusted Business Partner  
Chloe Clover, Wander Films  
Richard Coates, Lumanorth  
Henry Coggin, Vida Creative  
Warren Colby, Agilico  
Siobhan Collyer, Norton Loxley  
Ross Cooney, Stable State Consulting  
Tania Cooper MBE, Steel Benders (UK)  
Kate Cooper-Fay, Cooper-Fay Harris  
Andrew Corsar, Owben  
Jason Cotton, Newcrest Digital  
Michael Coulthard, ThreeSixty Talent  
Steve Cowie, Melius Cyber Consultancy  
Graeme Coyle, Seller Presto  
Alistair Crerar, Acre Design  
Beth Crosier, Co4ch  
Nicola Crowther, Crowther Mediation  
David Cudlip, The Advisory Group  
Glenn Cue, Todd & Cue  
Grant Davidson, Rotational Engineering  
Sara Davies MBE, Crafter's Companion  
Kim Davis, Explain Market Research  
Lee Daymond, Creators Academy  
Graeme Deanus, Acorn Laser  
Jack Deverson, Evidence Based Education  
Alex Devitt, Recovery4Life  
John Devitt, Recovery4Life  
Douglas Dinwiddie, Fair Way  
Michael Ditchburn, Mint Interactive Solutions  
Michael Downey, Parker Knights  
Paul Drake, Sapere Software  
Simon Dronfield, Fuse Telecom  
Jon Dudgeon, Blu Sky  
John Duns, North East Times  
Bruce Durham, Huddle Culture  
Kelly Durham, Huddle Culture  
Lee Durham, durhamlane  
Peter Eagle, TMS Grid  
Rob Earnshaw, DraughtSmith  
Mark Easby, Better Brand Agency  
Nagma Ebanks-Beni MBE, Prima Cheese  
Simon Edminson, Intelligent Gas and Power  
Mark Edmondson, Inflo  
Paul Edwards, Edwards Commercial Cleaning Services  
Lorraine Ellison, Simply Additions  
Jayden Elwell, Tbox Tech  
Jon Elwell, Tbox Tech  
Bob Evans, Kingsmere Finance Directors  
Lyndsey Everett, Stafford Accountancy  
Peter Fairley, Fairley Gunn Group  
Matthew Fannan, Atom Financial

Will Fatherley, Pro Fire Safety & Training  
 Tracy Fee, Hiyed CIC  
 Eileen Ferguson, Ad Gefrin  
 John Forth, Is This You?  
 Ian Fraser, EastQuayIT  
 Louis Freeman, LeisureSpace  
 Ciaron Gallagher, Unity Angels  
 Richard Garland, GFW  
 Emma Garrick, IGNITE Gas Training  
 Emma Gaudern, EMG Solicitors  
 Nicholas Gianfreda, Wriggle Marketing  
 Austin Gibbons, Brighter Compliance  
 Jonathan Gold, Finance Tree  
 Kieron Goldsborough, Different Narrative Integrated Marketing  
 Sam Gordon, Big Purple Productions  
 Michael Grahamslaw, Northern Insight  
 Jean-Louis Gravier, iPac Packaging Innovations  
 James Gray, Taopix  
 Phil Gray, Is This You?  
 Andy Greener, Komodo  
 Andrew Greenwell, NBMS  
 Alasdair Greig, Northstar Ventures  
 James Griffiths, IMH  
 Will Halford, Boniplas  
 Michael Hall, eQuality Solutions Group  
 Sim Hall, Populus Select  
 Jen Hallam, Gardiner Richardson  
 Andrew Halpin, Owben  
 Ummar Hanif, United Kingdom Development Corporation  
 James Hanson, Layers Studio  
 Paul Harbord, Steadfast Security Group  
 Helena Harford, Print Cakes  
 Johnny Harrison, Corporate Personal Wellbeing  
 Samuel Harrison, Animmersion UK  
 Sally Hart, GFW  
 Paul Haverson, D3 Associates  
 Craig Hawkes, Kaleidoscope CFA  
 Brendon Hayward, OSBIT  
 Ellen Hedley, Vida Creative  
 Grant Henderson, Shorza  
 Neil Henry, Option3 Logic  
 Matthew Herrell, Atom Financial  
 Richard Hogg, Jackson Hogg  
 Shaun Hogg, Vove  
 Anthony Holmes, Owben  
 Simon Honeywood, Readysalted  
 Charlie Hoult, Hyhubs / Opencast  
 Kevin Howell, Howell Technology Group  
 Sarah Howell, Howell Technology Group  
 Malcolm Humble, Arian EMS  
 Gill Hunter  
 Craig Huntingdon, Headspace Ventures  
 Allana Hurst, Tights Tights Tights  
 Abbi Hutchinson, Studio6  
 Jamie Hutchinson, No Drama  
 Lee Hutchinson, Double Eleven  
 Sola Idowu, Hexis Lab  
 Philip Inegbedion, OtaskiES  
 Ryan Ingram, Vacant Nests  
 Stephen Irish, Smart Origin  
 Elaine Irving, Extension Recruitment  
 Mohammed Ishaq, The Punjab Kitchen  
 Vikki Jackson-Smith, J&B Recycling  
 Kieran James, Stryde Accountancy  
 George Jenkins, Modo Bloc  
 Paul Jenkins, North IT  
 Joshy Jin, WowzaBox  
 Eldon Jobe, Melius Cyber Consultancy  
 Brian Jobling  
 Brad Johnson, Yellow Box Marketing  
 Nadia Johnson, Ringtons  
 Kevin Johnston, Funky Chunky Furniture  
 Tony Joice, Owben  
 Brigitte Keatings, Ringtons  
 Louise Kennedy, Oculus HR  
 Ian Kinnery, Kinnery  
 Dan Kitchen, Razorblue  
 Jason Knights, Blue Kangaroo Design  
 Andrew Knowles, Knowles & Co.  
 Dave Knowles, Alpine Online  
 Michael Knowles, ROAR Digital Marketing  
 Chrissie Krappe, Blu Sky  
 Dinesh Kumar, Lumanorth  
 Aaron Lally, VEST Energy  
 Richard Lane, durhamlane  
 Kayleigh Laverick, Mamma Social Co.  
 Josey Lawrenson, Therapy North  
 Kirsty Lawrenson, Therapy North  
 Steve Lawrenson, Therapy North  
 Keith Lawson, Metrik Systems  
 Laurance Laybourne, 21 Hospitality Group  
 James Lees, Yellow Box Marketing  
 Jon Leighton, Land Digital  
 Julian Leighton, Seaside Drive  
 David Lewis, Collectables Retail Ltd.  
 Peter Lillie, Double A Side Consulting  
 Aidan Ling, Ling Group  
 Ross Linnett, Recite  
 Derek Lister, Nicander  
 James Lomax, Lomax Training Services  
 Alex Longton, Tiba Tempeh  
 Ross Longton, Tiba Tempeh  
 Chris Lowery, NWR Hygiene Group  
 Linda Lowther, Advice4Business  
 Jonathan Luke, NEL Fund Managers  
 Victoria Lynch, Additional Lengths  
 Jamie Mableson, Fuse Media  
 Andrew Mackay, Coleman James  
 Geoff Maclaughlan, Kingsmere Finance Directors  
 Aneta Majerska, AG Controls  
 Grzegorz Majerski, AG Controls  
 Pete Mallon, North East Times  
 Chris March, Allies Group  
 Joel Marks, St. Ebba Capital  
 Sally Marshall, Marshall Robertson Group  
 Nigel Marston, Jayne Prior Funeral Directors  
 Dan Martin, Black Bee Rum  
 Nikki Masterman, Inspired HR  
 Malcolm Mathie, Twisted Loop  
 Rob Mathieson, Ion Industries  
 Matthew Mavir, Last Night of Freedom  
 Tom Maxfield, Tom's Companies  
 Kelly Maxwell, Kelly's Heroes Private Tuition  
 Rachel McBryde, McBryde & Co  
 Lyle McCalmont, MCD Systems  
 Alex McCarthy, Priority Facilities Management  
 Luis McCarthy, JMAC Group Holdings  
 Natasha McDonough, MMC Research & Marketing  
 Ian McElroy, Tier One Capital  
 Bryan McGill, North East Transport Services  
 Lorraine McGill, Willow & Maine  
 Paul McGowan, Collingwood Legal  
 Neil McGregor, N McGregor Property Services  
 Alistair McLeod, Gray Fox Consulting  
 David McPherson, Melius Cyber Consultancy  
 Ann-Marie Middleton, Zaltek  
 Mark Middleton, Zaltek  
 Keith Miller, Miller International  
 Laurie Miller, We Care Bespoke  
 Sophie Milliken MBE, Moja Group  
 Nigel Mills CBE  
 Ammar Mirza CBE, SME Centre of Excellence  
 Michael Mitten  
 Sarah Monk, The Edwin Group  
 Liam Monte, 3Dental Manufacturing  
 Caroline Moody, Moody Logistics & Storage  
 Amy Mooney, Mutha Cuva  
 Peter Moore, T3 Security

Joaquín Morales, New Horizon Marketing and Advertising  
 Lorna Moran OBE  
 Jonathan Morgan, MITS Group  
 Vic Morgan, Venture Stream  
 Chris Mullen, Classic Windows North East  
 Charlotte Nichols, Harvey & Hugo Ltd.  
 David Nicholson, The Nicholson Group  
 Graham Nicholson, G Forex  
 Christine Nugent  
 Mike O'Brien  
 Helmut Okike, Quovoy  
 Kirsty Ostell, O.agency  
 Kari Owers, O.agency  
 Brian Palmer OBE, Tharsus Group  
 Chris Park, Park Corporate Insurance Brokers  
 David Park, Park Corporate Insurance Brokers  
 Steven Parker, Phonetic Digital  
 James Parkinson, Wear Homes  
 Claire Parry, Week2Week Serviced Apartments  
 Ean Parsons, Parsons Containers Ltd.  
 Stephen Paul, Valued  
 Chris Peacock, Peacocks Medical Group  
 Sarat Pediredla, Hedgehog Lab  
 David Penny, Penny Petroleum Group  
 Jamie Petterson, Sales Boutique  
 Pamela Petty, Ebac  
 Antonia Philp, Nursem  
 Jonny Philp, Nursem  
 Sarah Pittendrigh, Sarah Pittendrigh Coaching  
 Ruth Plater, Radial Path  
 Chrissie Plunkett, Twist Group  
 David Porter, Surge  
 Michael Povey, Circle Cloud  
 Charlotte Prenelle, Pranella  
 Sarah Price, Go Well  
 Steve Pugh, Roadmap MBA  
 Lee Quarzi, Lumo.Tax  
 Mike Racz, Racz Group  
 Steven Rawlingson, Samuel Knight International  
 Paul Read, Dynamic Surface Repairs  
 Sam Read, APM Cleaning & Repair  
 Paul Reade, Francis Bradshaw Consulting  
 Tayler Reed, iPac Packaging Innovations  
 Sarah Reid, Richard Reed Solicitors  
 Mark Renney, Wubbleyou  
 Steven Renney, IBSL  
 Nikki Renton, J Renton Groundworks  
 Martin Reynolds, Subco Engineering  
 Ian Richards, Northstar Ventures  
 Graham Robb, Recognition Marketing & PR  
 Tomas Roberton, Circle Cloud  
 Rebecca Roberts, Unity Angels  
 Bianca Robinson, CEO Sleepout  
 Lee Robinson, JohnJasper Associates  
 Steven Robinson, Blu Sky  
 James Robson MBE, Micropore Technologies  
 Gary Rodgers, Agilico  
 Claire Rolston, CLR Law  
 Kate Rose, TUTTI  
 Christian Rowe, Executive Compass  
 Claire Rutherford, Definition IP  
 Fozia Saleem, Magnitude Biosciences  
 Keian Sanchez, A Greener Solution  
 John Sanderson, STR Enterprises & subsidiary Keeping Inn  
 Derek Scott, Consultive Solutions  
 Mark Scott, Skyflo Digital  
 Paul Scott ,NEL Fund Managers  
 Bill Scott OBE, Wilton Engineering  
 Sue Shaw-Toomey, Toomey Legal  
 Richard Shell, The Doxford Group  
 Garry Sheriff, IT Professional Services  
 Trevor Shingler, T&G Direct Funeral Services  
 Helen Short, Absolute Quality Consultancy & Training  
 Andrew Silver, 360 Growth Partners

Andrew Skelton, Smart Office Systems  
 Dan Smith, TMP Wealth Management  
 Elliot Smith, Ringtons  
 Jeni Smith, NetKno  
 Julia Smith, People Science Consulting  
 Karl Smith, Corporate Trade Supplies  
 Rob Smith, William Smith Group 1832  
 Tom Smith, Ringtons  
 Tony Snaith, Communicate Technology  
 Sam Spoons, Talentheads  
 Chris Spraggon, The Impulse Group  
 Charlotte Staerck, The Handbag Clinic  
 Sharon Starkey, Resolution Communications  
 Andrew Stevenson, Samson Forth  
 Carole Stonehouse  
 Matthew Strain, Silva  
 Aaron Swinbank, Corporate Trade Supplies  
 Ben Tansey, Re:heat (Renewable Technologies)  
 Victoria Taylor, Probe Industries  
 Graeme Tennick, Tennick Accountants  
 Sarah Thackray, BeaconHouse Events  
 Chris Thompson, Media Borne  
 Joe Thompson, TT Industrial  
 Josh Thompson, Endeavour Windows & Motor Finance Broker  
 Mark Thompson, Ryder Architecture  
 Ralph Thompson, Silvermoor  
 David Tolson, Chaser Communications  
 Richard Townsend, T3 Security  
 Kimberley Turner, Double Eleven  
 Michael van Zwanenberg, DME Systems  
 Sir Peter Vardy, The Vardy Group of Companies  
 Samantha Vassallo, Horizon Works  
 Daniel Wade, Wade Construction Management Consultants  
 Alastair Waite, Altec Engineering  
 Jason Waite, Waite Accountants  
 Paul Walker  
 Sarah Walmsley, Go Well  
 Andy Walton, The Nine Software Company  
 Sasha Warr, Outsourced HR  
 Joanne Warren, Lumo.Tax  
 Pete Watson, Atlas Cloud  
 Shaun Watts, Chameleon Business Interiors  
 Laura Weaving, Perform Platform  
 Karen Weir, Weir Insurance Brokers  
 Marcus Welch, Gosforth Fire Station  
 Oliver Wentworth, Wentworth Security & Fire Protection  
 Simon West, Blair West  
 Paul Westgarth, Ashgarth Engineering  
 Neville Wharton, Wharton Global  
 Paul White, Optimal Accountancy  
 Philip White, Irrigonics  
 Keith Wickham, Gate 7  
 Oliver Wickham, R9 Group  
 James Widmer, Advanced Electric  
 Ben Wilkes, Metrik Systems  
 Pete Wilkinson, Reclaro  
 Tim Wilks, Lane 7  
 Jessica Williams, Just Williams  
 Joanna Williams, Parnell Plus  
 Nick Wilson, Robson Laidler  
 Tony Wilson, Smart IT Support  
 Charlotte Windebank, FIRST  
 Nicola Wood, The Wonderful Wig Company  
 Chris Wood, Tanglewood Games  
 Joe Wood, Country Style Foods  
 Louise Woodhall, HWI Solutions  
 Ashleigh Wright, Westray Recruitment Group  
 Kris Wylam, Intelligent Gas and Power  
 Deborah Wylie, Little Angels Fun Club and Nursery  
 Martha Wylie, Little Angels Fun Club and Nursery  
 Sir Graham, Wylie Close House  
 George Young, Smart Office Systems  
 Aqib Zeeshan, Platvix

# Year in Review: Our Partners

Our partners play an active role in the Forum, bringing experience, perspective, and practical support that helps entrepreneurs navigate the challenges of growth. We are truly grateful for their continued commitment and support.

## Our corporate partners

Each of our corporate partners is carefully selected for the value they bring to our community. They are all strong champions of entrepreneurship in the North East, providing expert advice and support, as well as generously offering their offices as venues for our events programme.



Brewin  
Dolphin

blusky

Maitland.  
Creative & Digital Solutions

ward  
hadaway

Hilton.  
NEWCASTLE TYNE BRIDGE



agilico

Sage

## Our business support partners

Including local government and educational institutions, chosen for the important role they play to strengthen the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem, we work closely with our Business Support partners, sharing information, opportunities, and resources with our members.



Kim McGuinness  
North East  
Mayor

TEES  
VALLEY



Northern  
Accelerator



# Year in Review: Guest Speakers

Throughout our events programme, we invite a diverse range of speakers and industry experts to share their experience. Over the past year, we have continued to ensure there is a more consistent representation of real, lived entrepreneurial experience on our stage, in particular, spotlighting regional talent.

With a breadth of experiences and perspectives, we want to offer our members the opportunity to hear from a wide variety of voices, ensuring their messages are positive and inspirational. It's not just about demographics; it's about fostering genuine diversity of thought that challenges assumptions, broadens perspectives, and enriches every conversation.

2025 - 2026	
3%	BAME speakers
80%	entrepreneur speakers
11%	speakers from outside the region
68%	male speakers
32%	female speakers



Male speakers (68%)  
Female speakers (32%)



Male speakers (54%)  
Female speakers (46%)

2024 - 2025	
7%	BAME speakers
80%	entrepreneur speakers
13%	speakers from outside the region
54%	male speakers
46%	female speakers

# Inspiration: Insights and Events

Every entrepreneur faces difficult moments, and we recognise that building a business can be a lonely journey. In response, we offer inspirational events designed to help entrepreneurs navigate challenges, re-energise their commitment, and continue driving their businesses forward. We do this through peer-to-peer learning, problem sharing, and the exchange of entrepreneurial experience.

## Founders' Lunch

An exciting new addition to our 2026 events calendar, the Founders' Lunch brought together over 75 entrepreneurs and senior business leaders in the stunning Garden Room at The Biscuit Factory. Over a two-course lunch, members connected, shared experiences, and heard from some of the region's most respected founders.

A lunch like no other, a select group of nine founding, honorary, ambassador, and award-winning members each hosted a table, sharing one key lesson every entrepreneur should carry into 2026. From scaling regional powerhouses to leading award-winning teams, their insights were honest, practical, inspiring, and rooted in personal experience.

Guests rotated tables three times, sparking new conversations, exchanging ideas, and making meaningful connections with people they may not otherwise have met. The standout takeaway? Success isn't just about tactics, tools, or trends. Time and again, the conversation returned to people, priorities, and leadership - investing in your team, trusting your instincts, and surrounding yourself with the right support.

A huge thank you to our table hosts:

- Brendon Hayward
- Lee Hartley
- Caroline Theobald CBE
- Fiona Raglan
- Christine Nugent
- Brian Palmer OBE
- Sir Peter Vardy
- Steven Bell
- Mark Squires

“Really enjoyed the format, as it provided an opportunity to hear a story or lesson from an experienced entrepreneur, followed by an engaging discussion with a small group of peers. Then repeat this twice again, meeting new people and hearing a new angle. I felt I had the opportunity to engage more meaningfully with more people at this event than at others because of the format”

Mark Easby, Better



# Inspiration: Insights and Events

## Round Tables

Our entrepreneur-only events are designed to create a truly open and honest environment where members can speak freely, share challenges, and gain real insight from those further along in their journey.

In recognition of their value and to reflect the growing demand and engagement from our members, we increased the number of round tables from 17 to 19 this year.

This includes a monthly session dedicated to the quickly evolving world of AI. These expert-chaired discussions are designed to help entrepreneurs stay ahead of rapid change, explore practical applications, and better understand how AI is reshaping the way we build and grow businesses.

“Enjoyed meeting people from breadth of different businesses - discussion was focused, relaxed environment and everyone had opportunity to contribute.”

Sarah Walmsley, Go Well



“It was a nice experience visiting a brand such as Barbour in our region. The history is amazing and seeing the famous clothing being made first-hand.”

Andrew Skelton, Smart Office Systems



“Great ability to mix with like-minded people and share conversations, ask for advice, give advice, and meet people I probably wouldn't normally.”

Richard Coates, Lumanorth

“A really engaging way to have an open discussion around an area of uncertainty and feel everybody is listening and contributing in a constructive way.”



Kim Davis, Explain Market Research

“Really good, honest event. It was good to hear that "it's not just me" from others in the room.”

Derek Scott, Consultive Solutions



## Founder-led On-site Visits

On-site visits offer our members an exclusive opportunity to go behind the scenes of some of the region's most innovative and successful businesses. Often led by entrepreneurial founders, these tours are guided by the people who built the business, sharing their journey alongside valuable insights into their growth and future ambitions.

Thank you to Brendon Hayward of Osbit, Vikki Jackson-Smith of J&B Recycling, Ben Staerck of Furniture Clinic, and Barbour for generously taking the time to welcome us to their fantastic facilities.

# Inspiration: Entrepreneurial Stories

## Focus Dinners

Throughout the year, our focus dinners brought together an inspiring mix of regional entrepreneurs sharing their unique journeys: the highs, the lows, and everything in between.

Nicola Wood, The Wonderful Wig Company, spoke candidly about her path from hairdresser to the region's only multi-award-winning salon experience wig provider and hair-loss specialist.

A fireside chat between 2025 North East Entrepreneur of the Year Lee Hartley and his close friend John Duns, Director and Co-owner at North East Times, explored the full Fairstone journey, from early concept and rapid growth, through to the challenges, breakthroughs, and lessons learned, culminating in Lee's successful exit from the business.

Tania Cooper MBE shared her experience of building Steel Benders (UK) in a traditionally male-dominated industry, with honest and inspiring reflections on resilience, leadership, and determination.

We also heard from Mike Racz (Racz Group), Chris March (Allies Group), and Ben Ridgway and Jamie Cooke (Iamproperty). These evenings continue to showcase the power of shared experiences, meaningful conversation, and learning from those who have been there and done it.

"I had not attended a dinner before, so I was not sure what to expect. However, the informal setting was perfect to allow a relaxed, informative discussion to take place. It exceeded my expectations and the food was lovely too!"

Sue Shaw-Toomey, Toomey Legal



"I really enjoy the Focus Dinners, with them being smaller more intimate events it allows you to build better connections with other members and I very much enjoy hearing about the trials and tribulations the speakers have been through during their business journey."

Peter Moore, T3 Security



## Larger Gatherings

Our larger events are open to the wider teams of our entrepreneurial members, as well as our Corporate and Business Support partners, extending their reach and impact.

This year, through a series of fireside chats, spotlight sessions, and in-conversation events, we have heard from Charlie Hoults of Hoults, Pete Daykin of Wordnerds, Andrew Walton of Connect Health, Rob Mathieson of ION, and David Lewis of Collectables.

# Inspiration: Entrepreneurial Stories

## World-class Conference

With over 68% of attendees rating our conference 9 or 10 out of 10, and 76% leaving feeling more energised, we're proud of the powerful and lasting impact the day has on our members and partners. We believe that honest, inspiring stories combined with interactive, hands-on experiences can be hugely impactful, and that's exactly what we deliver.

Our conference consistently features world-famous founders as headline speakers. In 2025, we were lucky enough to be joined by an outstanding line-up, including Dominic McGregor, co-founder of Social Chain; Simon Cooper, founder of On the Beach; and Joanna Jenson of Child Farm.

Blending entrepreneurial inspiration with practical sessions that spark creativity and fresh thinking, attendees also took part in a masterclass on Fierce Conversations led by Sarah Vogel of People Development Associates, alongside a brand workshop courtesy of Mark Shayler, owner of Ape, who has spent his career helping big companies think small - and small companies think big.

We also introduced a new element designed to push attendees outside their comfort zones: a choice of immersive breakout sessions. Activities included an art class with Alfie Joey, a Rock Choir session with Dr Mark Deeks, pickleball with Sarah Price and the team at Go Well, and a gift-wrapping masterclass with Aoife Forbes of Forbes Finishing.

## 10/10 Feedback

**“Simply one of the best conferences in the annual calendar. Big enough to be a great event, small enough to feel personal engaged connected. Brilliant speakers outstanding hospitality and exceptional organising thanks to the team at Entrepreneurs’ Forum.”**

Kate Cooper-Fay, Cooper Fay Harris

**“Best events in the North East and feels more like a support group than a business network. Great speakers talking about struggles and failures not just successes and made some great new contacts for advice.”**

John Devitt, Recovery4Life

**“It was an excellent event, speakers were inspiring and the stories resonated. Great to see friends and make new ones too.”**

Paul Edwards, Edwards Commercial Cleaning

**“As always, a great selection of speakers, as well as fun activities and a huge opportunity to network.”**

Andy Briggs, IA Growth

# Entrepreneurial Awards:

## ILLUMINATING NORTH EAST SUCCESS

For more than two decades, our annual Entrepreneurial Awards have celebrated the very best of North East business talent, shining a spotlight on entrepreneurs at every stage - from emerging Ones to Watch to those achieving lifetime recognition.

Often described as the jewel in the crown of the region's entrepreneurial events calendar, our gala dinner celebrates and illuminates the entrepreneurs who are rewriting the rules. The trailblazers, pioneers, and innovators of the North East.

Award winners for 2025 were:

<b>One to Watch</b>	Ross and Alexandra Longton, Tiba Tempeh
<b>Impact Award</b>	Nicola Wood, The Wonderful Wig Company
<b>Caroline Theobald Award</b>	Ammar Mirza CBE
<b>Entrepreneur of the Year</b>	Lee Hartley, Fairstone Group
<b>Lifetime Achievement</b>	Keith Miller, Miller International

### Event Partners

The financial backing of our event partners, who supported both our Spring and Autumn conferences, as well as our annual Entrepreneurial Awards dinner, is invaluable.

We are extremely grateful to:

North East Mayoral Strategic Authority, RTC North, Agilico, UMI, Oculus HR, Talentheads, Wubbleyou, LumaNorth, Kinnery, Mercia Ventures, Ward Hadaway, House Seven, ROAR Digital Marketing, and FW Capital.

# Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

Mentoring is far more than a “nice to have”, it helps you navigate your own path by tapping into others’ lived experiences.

A 2018 Forbes study found that founders mentored by top-performing entrepreneurs are three times more likely to become top performers themselves.

Mentoring comes in many shapes and sizes, and we offer a range of ways for our members to get involved. From our entrepreneurial “matchmaking” service to regular mentoring drop-in sessions, we make it easy to access the right support at the right time.

80%

With more than 20 years of experience bringing like-minded people together, we’re confident we can help find the right match, with 80% of business owners agreeing that having a mentor has a direct impact on both the growth and survival of their business.

130

In 2025/26, we brokered 130 mentoring connections, up 35% on the previous year, helping more entrepreneurs than ever access either ongoing one-to-one support or targeted guidance for a specific, one-off challenge.

100+

We have over 100 entrepreneurs enrolled as mentors, generously giving their time altruistically to help fellow entrepreneurs.

“As a founder working within the creative industries, I was looking for a mentoring session with someone who had been there and done it, but also someone who could understand my perspective as a creative who has had to pivot and adapt.

The mentor I was paired with was great at talking through the challenges of the creative industry. He was reflective, thoughtful and clearly understood the challenges I’m facing. Having that time to speak openly was both encouraging and useful, and it has pushed me to reflect on, and begin changing, certain processes and approaches within my own business. I’m very grateful for the time and support.”

Craig Hawkes, Kaleidoscope CFA



“The whole process was easy from initial enquiry to matching with a mentor. I’d recommend without hesitation. My mentor supports us as a sounding board and has quickly become an important piece of our jigsaw.”

Tara Allen, Nortec Fire



# Socialising

Building a business can often be a lonely and stressful journey. That's why we make it easy to build meaningful relationships and authentic friendships with fellow Forum members through a wide range of social events.

Hosted across the region, these events have sparked hundreds of conversations, providing a welcome break from the day-to-day demands of running a business and creating opportunities for peer support in a relaxed environment.

Alongside our informal lunches, coffee roulettes, and sporting activities - including local walks, Tour de Forum, crazy golf, and bowling - we also offer members the chance to connect at some of the region's leading experiences.

From watching the high-flying Newcastle Eagles or enjoying live entertainment at the Utilita Arena, to a round of golf at Close House or Rockliffe Hall, there are plenty of opportunities to build relationships in memorable settings.

33

33 social events were delivered in 2025/26, compared to 22 in the previous year.

307

307 entrepreneurs came together from all corners of the North East at our social events, compared to 212 the previous year.

**"The quality of the events and the opportunities provided to entrepreneurs to share experiences are excellent."**

Claire Rolston, CLR Law



**"I always come away with useful learnings from Forum events and it's always such a lovely bunch of people."**

Sarah Howell, Howell Technology Group



**"It's always excellent to get lived experience, feedback and recommendations from successful, experienced business leaders. Thank you!"**

Samantha Read, APM Cleaning & Repair



# Learning: Workshops

We believe successful entrepreneurs build a culture of continuous learning within their businesses. That's why we encourage members to bring their senior leadership teams to our workshops, to learn, grow, and develop as leaders together.

In the past 12 months, we have hosted seven expert-led workshops, each designed to address key barriers to growth. These working sessions combine thought-provoking talks with interactive audience participation. Topics have included 'Agentic AI', 'Radical Candour', 'Selling at a Higher Level', and 'Building a High-Performance Culture'.

2025 - 2026	2024 - 2025	
229	217	participants over six sessions (2024/2025) and seven sessions (2025 - 2026)
5,610	4,557	hours of learning (based on 3.5 hours of learning per session)

"I loved this event! Kirstie is a brilliant speaker, and I got a lot from the morning - some brilliant take aways and learnings. Radical Candour has definitely inspired me to consider my own thinking traps and inner dialogue in relation to difficult conversations. I'll be using the C.H.A.T and C.O.R.E models when conversations need to be had, not just for the difficult conversations but will also apply these techniques when giving positive feedback to my team!"

Elaine Irving, Extension Recruitment



# Learning: Scale-up Leaders' Academy

In 2025, the Scale-up Leaders' Academy (SULA) was promoted from the ScaleUp Institute's "One to Watch" list to a fully endorsed programme, recognised for its excellence in developing scaling leaders across the North East. Since its inception in 2017, SULA has been dedicated to closing the leadership gap for scaleup founders, helping them strengthen strategic capacity, build growth-focused teams, and connect within a vibrant peer network.

Born out of the Forum's participation in the ScaleUp Institute's Driving Local Economic Growth through Scaleup Ecosystems course, SULA continues to be the region's only leadership development initiative exclusively designed for ambitious entrepreneurs. It has now supported over 75 business leaders, whose companies collectively employ more than 2,000 people and contribute substantially to regional growth and innovation.

Delivered in six-month cohorts, the programme combines peer group coaching, expert-led workshops, and strategic planning sessions grounded in Verne Harnish's scaling methodology. Participants work intensively on the core principles of People, Strategy, Execution, and Cash, culminating in the creation of a one-page strategic growth plan.

## 2017-2025 impact:

- 73 entrepreneurs completed the programme
- Average growth in employees since completion of the programme = +21%
- Average growth in balance sheet since completion of the programme = +137%
- 10 founders have raised external finance totalling approximately £8 million

## 2025 cohort members:

- Toby Bailey, RED Engineering
- Doug Dinwiddie, Maitland
- Lyle McCalmont, MCD Systems
- Lee Robinson, John Jasper Associates
- James Clingham, Trusted Business Partners

Previous alumni include Joanna Feeley (Trend Bible), Richard Lane (durhamlane), Raman Seghal (ramarketing), Steve Rawlingson (Samuel Knight), Emma Gaudern (EMG Solicitors), Chloe Clover (Wander Films), and Danny Wade (Wade Construction Management).

"The Scale-up Leaders' Academy gave me the space to step back, think strategically and see Talentheads not just as a business I run day-to-day, but as something I can shape and scale for the future."

Sam Spoor, Talentheads

"Every day I was practising what I was learning on the course. It really changed my mindset and helped me get the business back in line. I learned to think like a CEO. I can't tell you what it did for me."

Steven Rawlingson,  
Samuel Knight International

# Beyond the Forum

## Our Environment

We are committed to operating sustainably and, wherever possible, minimising our impact on the environment.

- Our member magazine is printed on paper sourced from suppliers certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC®) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC). These certifications ensure that the paper originates from responsibly managed forests and other controlled sources that meet strict environmental, social, and economic standards. The ink used is made from vegetable oils and colourants, providing a more environmentally friendly alternative to traditional petroleum-based inks.
- To reduce travel-related emissions, we encourage the use of public transport and car sharing for our events, including for speakers travelling from outside the region.
- We also work closely with our event venues to minimise our carbon footprint, as well as reduce plastic use and food waste.

## Our Supply Chain

We make every effort to use North East suppliers. In the year ending March 2026, over 94% of our suppliers were based locally, with the remaining 6% being UK National or overseas.

## Our Communities

In 2025, we expanded the Forum's impact beyond our membership and into the wider community. Our annual Entrepreneurial Awards Dinner proudly raised £2,170 in support of the North East STEM Foundation, a charity dedicated to inspiring and equipping young people across the region with the skills and opportunities to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.



# Our Governance

**We are a not-for-profit membership organisation.**

Our Board of Directors is made up of experienced entrepreneurs who meet quarterly to guide our strategic direction and champion our ambition to be the UK's leading support organisation for entrepreneurs.

The Board is chaired by Brendon Hayward of OSBIT, who was appointed in January 2024. All members generously volunteer their time and expertise altruistically to support the work of the Entrepreneurs' Forum.

Previous chairs include James Robson MBE, Nigel Mills CBE, Paul Walker, Tom Maxfield, and Sir Peter Vardy.



**Brendon Hayward (Chair)**  
Co-founder, OSBIT



**Kimberley Turner**  
Co-CEO, Double Eleven



**Brian Palmer OBE**  
Founder, Tharsus



**Sarah Thackray**  
Co-founder,  
BeaconHouse Events



**Pamela Petty**  
Managing Director, Ebac



**Kari Owers**  
Founder, O.agency



**Richard Lane**  
Co-founder, durhamlane

A huge thank you to Toby Bridges, James Robson MBE and Mike O'Brien who stepped down during the year.

\* Directors as of 31st March 2026

# Our Team

A small team of six, led by our CEO, Elaine Stroud, we're united by a shared commitment to making a meaningful impact. Our culture is rooted in inclusivity and empowerment, with everyone given a voice and the opportunity to shine.

- We believe that when people feel supported and heard, great things happen.
- We operate a hybrid working model, offering flexibility so the team can work when and where it suits them best, making it easier to balance work and life outside the office.

We also provide opportunities to learn and develop, both through participation in Forum events and external training.



**Elaine Stroud**  
CEO



**Michael Dixon**  
Membership and  
Mentoring



**Amy Mason**  
Marketing and  
Communications



**Steve Gibson**  
Marketing and  
Communication



**Emma Mills**  
Events



**Stacey Crowther**  
Events

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The Entrepreneurs' Forum Limited

PROTO, Abbott's Hill, Baltic Business Quarter, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear, NE8 3DF

T 0191 500 7780 E [info@entrepreneursforum.net](mailto:info@entrepreneursforum.net) W [entrepreneursforum.net](http://entrepreneursforum.net)