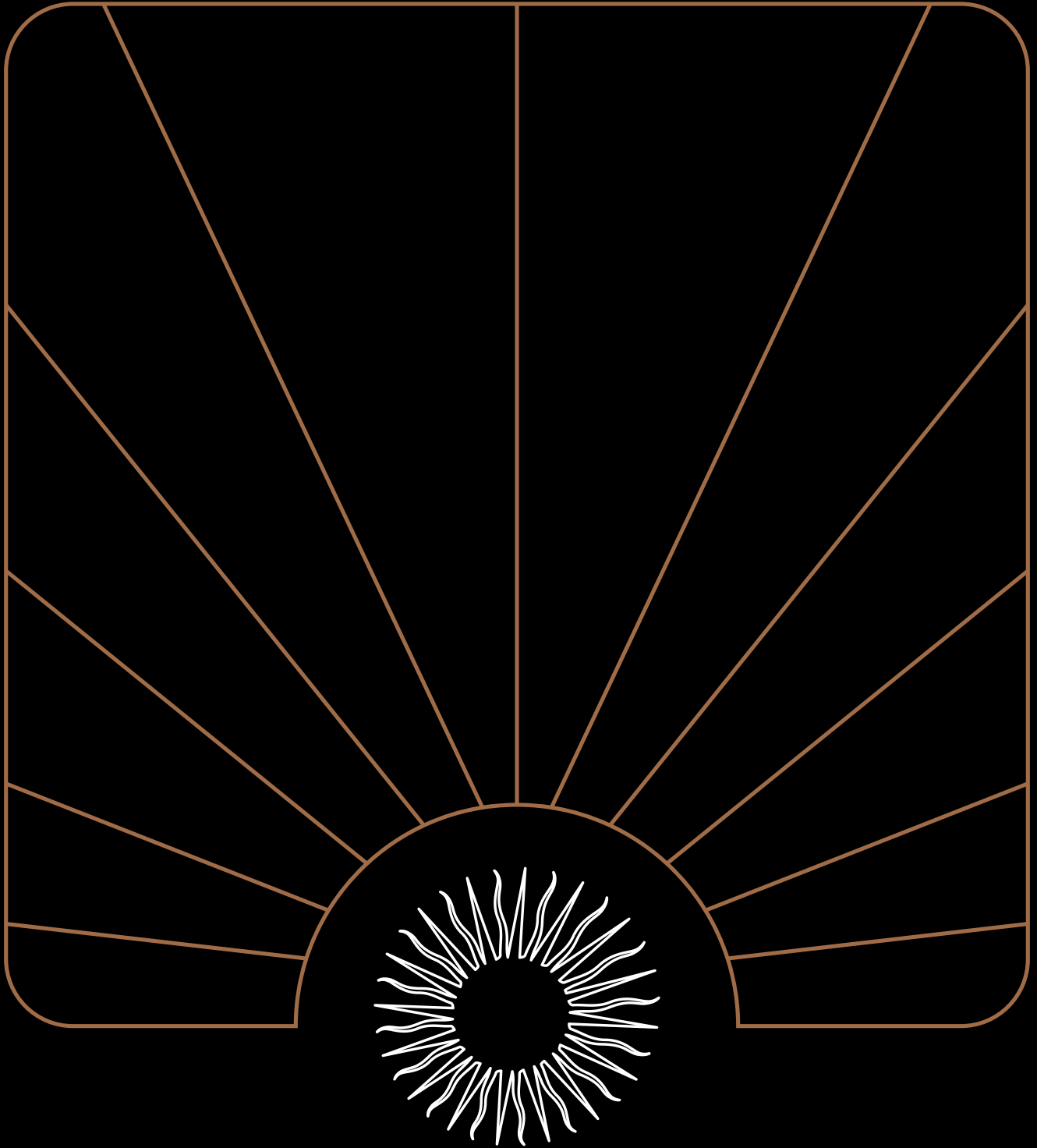


# TRUE NORTH

DEFINING NORTHERN AMBITION



Uniting the North's purpose-driven, progressive organisations, to unlock our true potential

**Brabners**



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**True North is a new network, committed to supporting the future of the North.**

It will unite the region's most influential voices and purpose-driven organisations to co-create a path forward — with a view to ensuring we play our part in unlocking the true potential of the Northern economy, and the attitude and ambition that is in an abundance here.

This report is just the beginning of our journey and mission. It summarises a collection of insights gained from a series of discussions we convened in Lancashire, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield.

Each focused on just some of the Northern organisations and people delivering positive change around four core areas: skills, sustainability, society and innovation.

Guests at the events included influential and change-making organisations with a presence in the North, such as the Prince's Trust, Greengage, AMRC, Fleetsolve and The Data City – all included in this report – as well as the likes of

Booking.com, GP Bullhound, Gripple, Handelsbanken, the Institution of Civil Engineers, Lloyds Banking Group, M&C Saatchi, TalkTalk, and the universities of Leeds, Leeds Trinity, Liverpool, Salford, Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam.

**Promoting prosperity and productivity**

These events reinforced our belief that there is a desire to go further than the concept of the Northern Powerhouse, by developing meaningful partnerships and a culture of collaboration, aimed at building a better understanding of where the greatest opportunities lie for the region's prosperity.

We'll be looking at key challenges along the way and how, ultimately, these can be met and the opportunities grasped.

For example, the UK's ongoing productivity puzzle is a challenge that transcends regional boundaries, but is most acute in the North.



**Robert White**  
CEO, Brabners

# Foreword.

The majority of UK regions with productivity above the national average are located in London and the South East. Out of the 38 sub-regions that make up the North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber combined, only two have higher productivity than the UK's national average.

This chasm between Northern productivity and its future prosperity cannot persist, particularly as we move through an era of AI, data, quantum computing and green industries.

To finally address this long-standing challenge, we seek to promote increased collaboration between like-minded partners on a region-wide basis — promoting each other's strengths.

However, what was reinforced at our events is that productivity alone cannot act as the sole measure of Northern success.

**Investing in our future**

Brabners' Northern Investment Index report, released in early 2023, pointed towards an increase in private sector capital in the region. It confirmed that investors see huge potential here too.

The opportunity is to maximise that potential by delivering progress in four key areas: harnessing the best

of our talent and fostering skills for the future, driving forward inclusive innovation through emerging industries, powering sustainable growth, and delivering purpose and social impact for the benefit of all.

True North is all about creating a new network that collaborates, to proactively play its part in driving positive change, from the bottom up.

Going forward, we want to hear from and spotlight organisations that make an impact in their communities — those achieving progress without waiting on other stakeholders to act.

**A new approach to change**

We believe in a long-term approach. One that transcends short-term political cycles in favour of a commitment to and investment in long-term and sustainable change.

The generational nature of the challenge is why we believe that Brabners can act as the convener to address it. With a mission to make the difference, we recognise the pivotal role that business, community interest groups, social enterprises, charities, local government and academia play in driving this transformation by working in tandem.

As a law firm with a heritage of over 200 years of history, our work naturally takes us across a significant

range of sectors; and, as a purpose-led firm with a national reach that is proudly anchored in the North, we believe it is our responsibility to play a leading part in driving the necessary and positive change — something that is reflected in our B Corp certification, achieved in 2022.

**Join the network**

True North is an invitation. An open call to organisations across the region to seize this opportunity and be the architects of change.

You can see more detail on how to get involved at the end of this report, or by scanning the QR code below.

If you are an organisation that is delivering progress against those four key measures and could benefit from collaborating with new partners to scale that impact, True North can be the catalyst for you to accelerate that ambition.

**Will you  
join us?**



**The North is home to world-beating industries — advanced manufacturing and spacetech in Yorkshire, life sciences and logistics in Liverpool, digital and AI in Manchester, aviation and aerospace in Lancashire, and much more.**

This demonstrates the ability of organisations in the North to lead by constantly innovating and collaborating.

However, what many feel is missing is an aligned strategy between business, government and academia that translates across the entire region.

As such and in line with the thinking of the IPPR think tank, we believe that now is the moment to move away from a devolution model that pits the individual cities, towns and authorities of the North against one another and instead switch to a model where investment in the

North is distributed more equally – in the spirit of collaboration, rather than competition.

If this can be achieved, the North could become a super-investment region and connected innovation district, with thriving clustered specialisms that complement rather than compete — akin to cities like Austin, Stockholm and Singapore.

If we can bring together like-minded people with the right attitude and ambition — all committed to delivering progress, sharing best practice and fostering new partnerships — the result will be a far more prosperous future.

**“Now is the moment to move away from a devolution model that pits the individual cities, towns and authorities of the North against one another.”**



**“Regional transformation over the past few decades must be recognised as crucial to the success of the UK economy and society.”**

In our True North discussion series — which took us to Lancashire, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield — we uncovered three types of leaders:

- **The Innovators:** entrepreneurs, and progressive businesses that embrace new technologies to redefine their industries.
- **The Connectors:** investors and influencers that connect innovators with the capital, knowledge and networks to scale.
- **The Frustrated Achievers:** those who have already scaled to success and are delivering purposeful impact in their field, but remain frustrated by external perceptions of the North's limitations.

It is imperative that the regional transformation over the past few decades — led by our Innovators, Connectors and Achievers — is recognised as crucial to the wider success of the UK economy and society. That is why, in this report, we celebrate our 'Northern Stars' — selected organisations that we highlight as having the right approach to addressing core challenges.

You will also read a series of important insights that show us what is at stake by getting this right — for our economy, our individual towns and cities, and even potentially the planet as a whole.



# PEOPLE SKILLS AND THE FUTURE

# 1



Over the course of 2023, Brabners gathered leaders in locations across the North to discuss the key challenges and opportunities to accelerate progress in the region. Tackling the importance of fostering skills and nurturing talent, we found three key takeaways that speak to the need of a joined up approach between businesses and the education system — to create more direct pipelines of talent, equipped with skills for the future:

## 1.

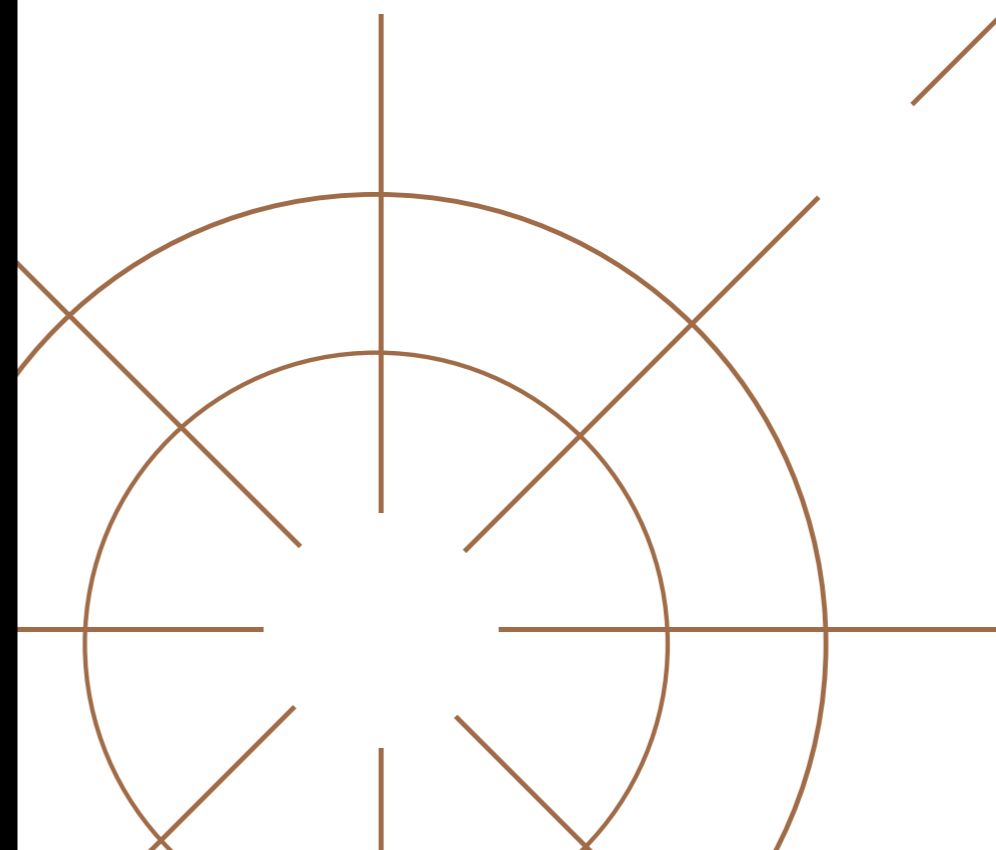
The acceleration of automation and AI means that the skills employers are looking for are constantly changing. Organisations should therefore consider more flexible routes into work for potential talent, which focus on soft skills and potential over polished CVs. They must also think about how they retain and reskill existing members of their workforce, as well as unlock opportunities for the long-term unemployed.

## 2.

We need connectors with capital to provide the funding that enables more companies — particularly small businesses lacking in resource — to retrain their staff and identify high potential prospective employees. Businesses should also unlock routes to employment that move beyond traditional academic routes, with well-paid apprenticeships serving as an alternative to university pathways.

## 3.

Without role models that represent the full breadth of society, young people will not see themselves as represented where they live or in jobs of the future. It is therefore crucial that organisations reach into harder-to-access schools and communities, acknowledging the power of small interactions. Just a few encounters between an individual and a business beyond their familiar sphere can be the difference.





**Regeneration Brainery is a Greater Manchester-based social enterprise with a mission to revolutionise the property and construction sector. Its approach is rooted in a commitment to inclusivity, social mobility and community representation, addressing the skills gap and lack of diversity prevalent in the sector.**

**“Regeneration Brainery engages with around 4,000 young people each year, with twice the number of female participants than the industry average.”**

By strategically engaging with harder-to-reach young people in schools and colleges across the country, Regeneration Brainery identifies potential and helps to project young voices, so that regeneration truly reflects the needs of the local community.

their needs intimately. This principle informs its efforts to create opportunities for young people from diverse backgrounds to engage in urban development.

networking and social interaction. However, the relationship between Regeneration Brainery and young people doesn't end there.

Regeneration Brainery recognises the importance of community representation in the decision-making process. Its ethos revolves around the idea that communities should be designed and developed by individuals who understand

By involving individuals with lived experiences, Regeneration Brainery promotes authentic and meaningful community representation in regeneration initiatives.

The organisation's unique approach involves nurturing participants beyond the bootcamp, with a focus on continuous engagement. Young alumni are encouraged to stay involved for several years, serving as ambassadors and mentors. This extended commitment enhances participants' confidence, networking skills and employability prospects.

Part of the process for students is the immersive 'Brainery Bootcamp' — a week-long programme that lays the foundations for skills development,

In addition to involving a more diverse set of people in placemaking, Regeneration Brainery supports those same people towards job readiness, addressing the skills gap and ensuring a more inclusive talent pool.

It engages with around 4,000 young people each year, with twice the number of female participants than the industry average.

While it takes a targeted and time-consuming approach to identifying young people for its programme, Regeneration Brainery has made significant inroads in the communities it serves across the country — including in Liverpool, Leeds, Manchester and Stoke.

Regeneration Brainery's holistic approach serves as a model for addressing diversity and skills disparities in the property and construction sector. By nurturing young talent, boosting confidence and promoting community representation, it is taking small steps to reshape the sector's landscape.

**“By involving individuals with lived experiences, Regeneration Brainery promotes authentic and meaningful community representation in regeneration initiatives.”**



# Opportunity in the North is abundant when you know where to look

I come from a working-class background and didn't have a lot growing up. I hated the thought of my parents approaching a financial advisor and being told no because they didn't have enough money.

And so, about five years ago, my wife Annabel and I said: 'let's be the change that we want to see'.

I can't imagine that there are too many all-female-led — let alone LGBTQ+-led — financial advisory firms out there, so we created one. One that serves all businesses and those who are in real need of financial support.

The name, TP Financial Solutions, reflects those values and the community we serve. TP stands for Twemlow Parade — our road in Morecambe. For people in the area, it is recognition that we are for them and that we know the needs of this community.

This led me to get involved with the Lancaster & District Chamber of Commerce. I always tried to encourage others to join the Chamber, as we are always 'stronger together'. However, I kept getting push back from my peers, who felt that the Chamber was a 'boys club', or for older

professionals and larger businesses — not sole traders like them. While some of these perceptions did not reflect the reality, they demonstrated a broader point. If you are a network made up of white collar, middle-aged, white, male professionals, then many in your community will not see themselves reflected in it and will not join. This then exacerbates the lack of diversity.

As soon as I joined the board, we worked to commission an EDI study, which compared the demographics of businesses in our district to those of the businesses in the Chamber.



**Tarnia Elsworth**  
Co-founder and Director,  
TP Financial Solutions



Although we have more female members than are represented in the wider district, we did broadly see the lack of representation we had anticipated — giving us a real impetus to become more inclusive.

We now proactively go out and speak to business leaders from all backgrounds — and we see how few even realised the Chamber existed before. It showed us that you cannot sit and hide, doing the same things you always have. To change, you have to get out into the community and make sure you are speaking for a greater cross-section of society.

I have always been about finding solutions, not problems. I was brought up in an estate with a real sense of community and a responsibility to the people around me.

Since I had that instilled in me from a young age, I have never been the kind of person that complains about where they live or looks for the first opportunity to get out.

The major challenge for towns like Morecambe is encouraging our young people to lay down roots here. Even if people grow up with aspirations to set up a business, they do not think they can be as successful here.



**“The major challenge for towns like Morecambe is encouraging our young people to lay down roots here.”**

We need to get better at showing them what is on their doorstep. I cannot think of one job off the top of my head that you cannot do in the North of England. For example, within a stone's throw of Morecambe, we have a thriving tech hub in Lancaster.

What is missing is the funding to connect businesses with schools, to show the breadth of opportunities that exist. Many small businesses do not have the capital to go to careers fairs, or resource to take significant time talking to young people.

In schools, careers tutors are often part-time, or even unpaid. So, whose job is it to guide students and tell them about the opportunities? Even with people who are willing to do it, there is only so much time and money they can give up.

This is where support from and a greater connection between local businesses, schools and government is needed. There are people with the willpower to take the lead, but only if they are given the resources to do so.



**“True North is an opportunity to make connections and bring together interesting businesses that people may not know exist, to show how much is happening across the region.”**

True North is a fantastic initiative because it is an opportunity to make these connections. It brings together so many interesting businesses that people may not know exist, to show how much is happening across the region, in both small towns and cities.

In Morecambe, there are barely a handful of shrimp fishermen left and they do not have successors. The industry that this town has traditionally been best known for is on the verge of extinction. Morecambe's tourist industry has also declined with the rise of the 'package holiday abroad', leaving us without our main sources of income.

That can be seen as a bad thing and something that needs to be prevented. But the world is changing and towns like Morecambe must change with it.

For Morecambe, a brighter future comes with various initiatives that are happening locally, the most prominent being the arrival of the Eden Project Morecambe — the sustainable education charity and botanical garden, which opens here in 2025/26. While a significant tourist attraction, the Eden Project Morecambe could also catalyse new career opportunities in industries like sustainability and environment studies.

Fishing may not be our economic future, but something else will be. Let's tell that narrative to the next generation, bring more people into our networks and show that potential is everywhere if we are willing to make the case for it.

**“The world is changing and towns like Morecambe must change with it.”**



# INNOVATION AND CHANGE

# 2



**With technological innovation continuing at pace, we gauged three key takeaways from those who attended our True North discussion series, which they believe will support this constant change:**

## 1.

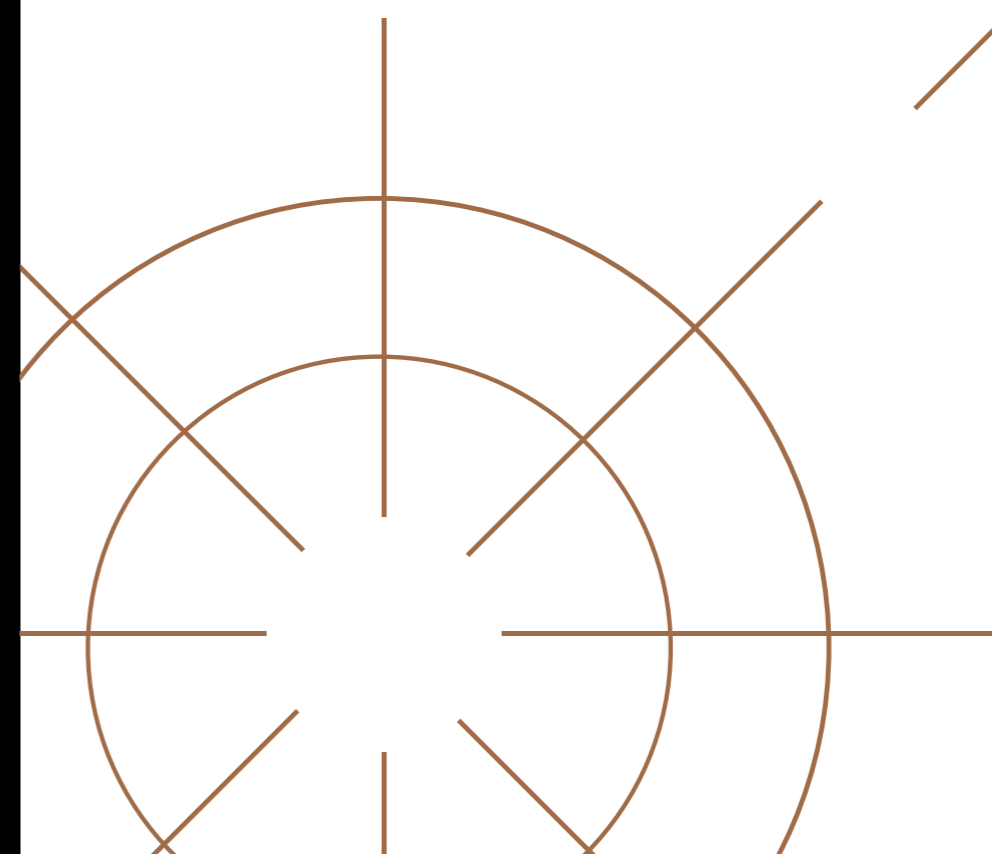
While the North boasts world-class academic institutions and ground-breaking research assets, a concerted effort is required to transform these into scalable ventures that can compete on the global stage. There is no reason that in the future, our universities cannot spin out innovation success stories at the rate of MIT or Stanford, if we can resist 'brain drain' and retain the talent at our universities in the region.

## 2.

A long-standing challenge faced by companies in the North is the transition from start-up to scale-up. UK investors need to take risks on the entrepreneurial ideas that transform our society. Rapid technological change is not a future that might happen, but something that is happening. We need to get comfortable with those conversations, put more risk capital into industries of the future and define success not only by job creation, but business growth.

## 3.

By channelling resources into sectors of strategic importance — as the recently announced South Yorkshire Investment Zone will do for advanced manufacturing and the Liverpool City Region Investment Zone will do for life sciences research — the North's innovation potential can move beyond geographical boundaries. A more holistic approach that paves the way for a unified growth trajectory will drive the region forward with a shared purpose. We should leverage the individual strengths of our locations for the benefit of the whole region.



**The University of Sheffield Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) focuses on driving digitalisation, sustainability and skills development in both local economies and the broader UK manufacturing landscape.**

Founded in 2001 as a collaborative venture between the University of Sheffield and Boeing, the AMRC emerged with a distinct vision: to bridge the gap between cutting-edge academic research and the practical needs of manufacturing companies. Over the years, this vision has transformed into reality, making the AMRC a global leader in manufacturing excellence — building on Sheffield’s history as the ‘Steel City’, while leveraging emerging technologies and academic excellence to take its past success into a new era.

The mission of the AMRC — which is part of the national High Value Manufacturing Catapult network — is to transform lives through innovation, improving local people’s life chances and the regional economies in its main locations of South Yorkshire, Lancashire and North Wales. Yet its influence extends far beyond, as a national asset, working with 1,100 companies each year, across the country and around the world.

With a network encompassing 70 universities and over 1,000 companies, ranging from start-ups to industry giants – including Airbus, Boeing, and Rolls-Royce – the AMRC

translates research into practical solutions that enhance productivity and efficiency. With a team of more than 500 highly-skilled researchers and engineers, it tackles diverse challenges from composites to castings, digital and data to additive manufacturing and machining.

The centre operates within six core strategies: digital transformation, future propulsion, impact, supply chain resilience, sustainable manufacturing, and training and skills. This multifaceted approach enables the centre to address a diverse array of challenges facing the manufacturing industry.

**“With a network encompassing 70 universities and over 1,000 companies, the AMRC translates research into practical solutions that enhance productivity and efficiency.”**



The AMRC’s unique approach to innovation involves tailoring solutions to each company’s needs, mitigating the risks associated with implementing novel technologies or new processes. This commitment to de-risking innovation has led to substantial advancements across the manufacturing sector, yielding benefits such as increased speed, reduced costs, enhanced safety, less waste and heightened sustainability.

Behind some of the biggest private sector investments in UK advanced manufacturing over the past 15 years, the AMRC has helped to bring more than £260m and 600 jobs to South Yorkshire and has turned £5m of EU funding into £22.5m of value for SMEs in Lancashire. It has also trained more than 1,700 apprentices — 80% from South Yorkshire and many from the most deprived postcodes — for fulfilling careers in advanced manufacturing.

The AMRC is at the heart of the South Yorkshire Advanced Manufacturing

Innovation District and alongside the announcement that South Yorkshire would be home to the UK’s first investment zone, it recently launched Composites at Speed and Scale (COMPASS). This £80m funding boost and innovation facility in partnership with Boeing, Spirit Aerosystems and Loop Technology will place the UK in a world-leading position to make the global aviation industry more sustainable.

Employing leading graduates coming out of not just the University of Sheffield, but academic institutions across the country – as well as the most talented young people from schools in the local area to take up its apprenticeships – the AMRC offers a unique experience. It gives its people the opportunity to work with hundreds of technologies across multiple disciplines. It’s a hub of talent, an organisation trading on know-how and predicated on the idea that technology can take ideas and innovation to production and development.



## Where we grow — understanding the sectors driving the North's success

While the UK's growth story has been somewhat tempered in recent years, we are seeing notable innovation in Northern cities — as found in research from The Data City, where we track the UK's fastest growing sectors, clusters and companies.

Liverpool leads the pack with an impressive growth rate of approximately 20%. This surge is indicative of a broader trend in the North's resurgence as a hub of economic activity and innovation.

Sheffield is close behind, boasting a growth rate of 12.4%, followed by Bradford at 10.9% and Manchester at 8.5%. The only non-Northern city in the top five is Portsmouth at 10.2%.

Supportive infrastructures and strategic investments have been instrumental in propelling the growth of these cities, with three key drivers standing out.

**“The disruptions caused by the pandemic underscored the importance of domestic supply chains.”**



**Kelly Weston**  
COO, The Data City



### 1. The Covid effect

The disruptions caused by the pandemic underscored the importance of domestic supply chains. Liverpool's logistics growth (particularly in US trade) — buoyed by its newly established freeport — aligns with the imperative to bolster the nation's supply chain resilience.

Investments like the £400m Liverpool2 project and expanded warehousing, coupled with improved multi-modal infrastructure and geographical location, positions Liverpool for further logistics expansion.

Aside from logistics, Liverpool has become a hotbed of talent in software development, due to a rise in security engineering and game development companies. There has been significant capital investment and expertise in the area via the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) Hartree Centre.

Business support services is another growth area in the Liverpool City Region, growing by 12.7% per year and employing more than 5,000 people.



**2. The circular economy**

In the face of climate change, cities like Sheffield and Bradford have focused on energy storage and sustainable 'green growth' practices.

Bradford District Council has been particularly keen to orient its economy towards green growth. This is great news, given the energy generation companies that exist in neighbouring councils, such as Green Energy 4 All in Halifax, which supports businesses in the whole of West Yorkshire and beyond to reach their net zero targets.

In Sheffield, the presence of institutions like the Translational Energy Centre and Nuclear Advanced

Manufacturing Research Centre has led to breakthroughs in energy storage technologies, such as synthetic air fuels.

Sheffield's innovation extends to supporting net-zero initiatives, as demonstrated by its SAF Innovation Centre's contribution to the first net zero transatlantic flight.

The potential of Sheffield's further growth and continued leadership in sustainable innovation is significant, with South Yorkshire having been announced as the first of the UK's new investment zones. Specific investment is being provided for a new research partnership between the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre and Boeing.

**“In the face of climate change, cities like Sheffield and Bradford have focused on energy storage and sustainable ‘green growth’ practices.”**



**3. Technological innovation**

The rapid pace of technological evolution demands leadership in AI and related fields. Manchester, with its storied history in computing and AI, is a hive of activity.

Supportive initiatives like the Greater Manchester AI Foundry and successful AI-driven companies like PeakAI and InTechnica have solidified Manchester's role as a leader in AI advancement. Additionally, the life sciences have flourished, driven by institutions like the National Institute for Health and Care Research and UK Biobank.

Meanwhile, Bradford University has announced a focus on Space and AI technologies, with the announcement of the Bradford-Renduchintala Centre for Space AI last year. The university

is now set to launch its own satellite later in 2023. And with advanced manufacturing expertise in the region, there is real potential for the space economy in Bradford.

As growth continues, addressing transport links between Northern cities and towns remains pivotal. Advocacy for devolution is growing, as local authorities possess a nuanced understanding of the unique growth trajectories of different sectors. Local government empowerment, coupled with data-driven insights, is key to maintaining momentum and focusing resources effectively.

What we can take from this data is that the fastest growing cities in the UK — particularly those in the North — are characterised by a convergence of factors such as advanced

manufacturing, climate-conscious initiatives and technological innovation. These cities serve as testaments to the power of strategic investments and supportive ecosystems in propelling growth and innovation.

Our ability to harness technology and data insights is essential to understanding, targeting and nurturing innovation clusters. The Data City platform provides visual representations of these clusters, aiding in identifying investment needs and required training programmes. The platform's capabilities have illuminated the success stories outlined in this report, emphasising the vital role of focused investments and support.

**“The rapid pace of technological evolution demands leadership in AI and related fields. Manchester, with its storied history in computing and AI, has positioned itself as a hive of activity.”**

# SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



**While climate change may be a global issue, guests in our True North discussion series identified three key considerations for businesses in the North to prepare for net zero — a multidimensional approach that brings together environmental, economic and social factors.**

## 1.

While governmental mandates set the trajectory for net zero targets, the demand for accelerated change often comes from consumers and workforce talent. Businesses hold the power to lead by example, rather than waiting for directives from the top. A growing number of businesses are therefore seeking B Corp status which is a commitment to meeting high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability. This is a recognition and certification that rightly appeals to potential employees but also attracts investors who prioritise ethical and sustainable practices.

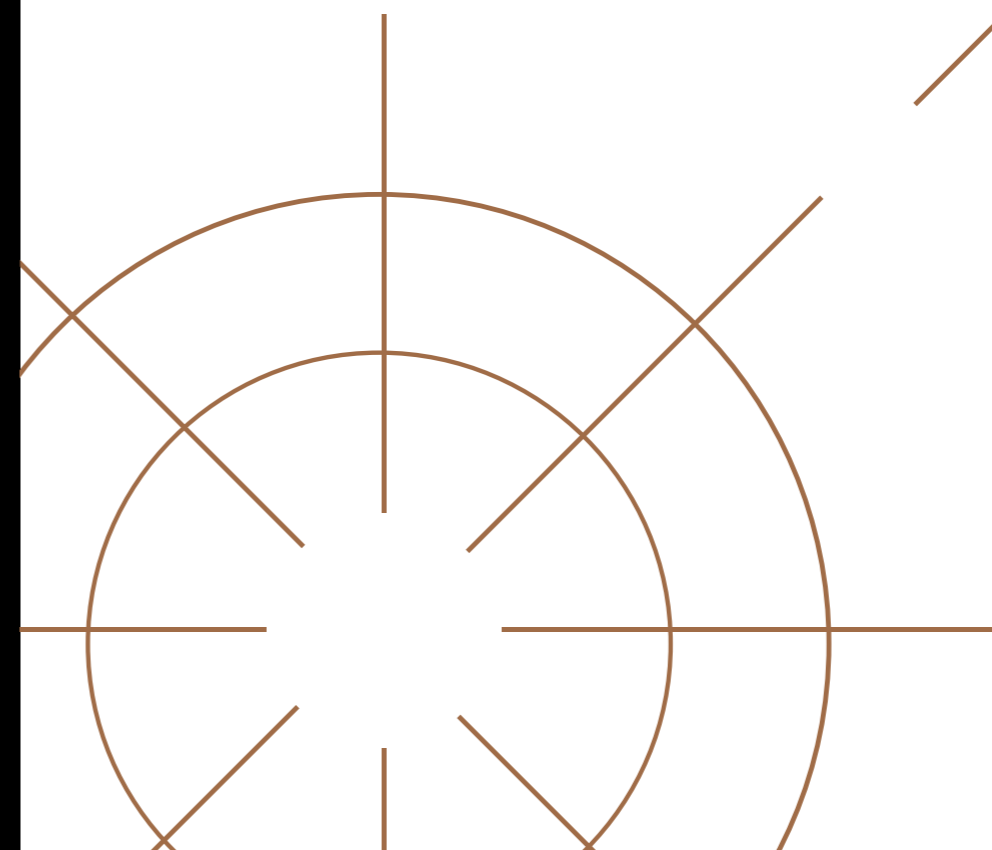
## 2.

The urgency of the climate change issue is undermined by its lack of tangible presence. Overcoming this hurdle requires uniting businesses, individuals and even countries to visualise the collective impact they can make in addressing this emergency. With no singular solution, catalysing action requires effective communication and messaging that focuses on the cost of not adapting, rather than the cost of doing so.

## 3.

Even among those who agree on the urgency that climate change presents, there remains profound disagreement over the extent of action. Is it possible to have 'good growth' with responsibility to both people and the planet? In the immediate term, impact investing can make a significant difference. If the collective force of individuals were to divest their pensions from polluting companies, a profound acceleration of change could be achieved.

# 3



**Fleetsolve is a multi-award-winning renewable power business that delivers energy security, supports the energy transition and helps to deliver on-site industrial decarbonisation across the UK and Ireland. Based just outside Liverpool on the Wirral, Fleetsolve adopts a holistic, stakeholder-led approach to address diverse business energy challenges.**

At the helm is CEO and founder Keith O'Connor, whose passion for engines, alternative fuels and innovative energy solutions drove him to establish a company that not only adapts but thrives in a changing energy landscape. This is something he did more than 20 years ago, when the conversation around renewables and pace of change was very different to today.

Fleetsolve partners closely with a wide range of clients and businesses from the built environment, ranging from public sector entities across local authorities, education and the NHS, to companies in industrial sectors such as chemical production and food processing. This collaborative stakeholder model ensures that it crafts solutions that work for its customers, both now and into the future.

The driving force behind Fleetsolve's mission is the imperative to achieve carbon reduction targets. The company assists clients in scrutinising their current energy consumption patterns across heating, cooling and power usage. This comprehensive evaluation serves as the foundation for its 'Energy as a Service' process, where Fleetsolve's experts meticulously design prime energy solutions tailored to each client's unique requirements.

**“The driving force behind Fleetsolve’s mission is the imperative to achieve carbon reduction targets. The company assists clients in scrutinising their current energy consumption patterns across heating, cooling and power usage.”**



A cornerstone of the company's offering is the design and manufacture of innovative onsite combined heat power (CHP) units. Capable of running to meet the energy needs of the building on a variety of renewable fuels, these units deliver electricity, heating and cooling from a single fuel source. Whether clients seek fiscal benefits, carbon neutrality, resilience or a strategic blend, Fleetsolve's CHP units offer customisable solutions to meet diverse needs.

The company's commitment to innovation extends beyond products to its internal infrastructure. Fleetsolve boasts an in-house team of engineering design experts, carbon researchers and software modellers, augmented by a huge database containing two decades' worth of operational insights. This rich trove of data — combined with cutting-edge design capabilities — empowers its team to create sustainable

solutions that bridge the gap between carbon reduction goals and operational realities.

Fleetsolve's impact resonates far beyond its immediate client base. By enabling private and public sector businesses, developers and large-scale commercial landlords to transition towards carbon neutrality, the company is fostering a collective movement to a sustainable future. This impact is particularly pronounced in the higher education sector, where it has been instrumental in helping universities to align their operational practices with sustainability-focused curricula.

As the world grapples with the mission-critical challenges of carbon reduction and sustainable energy, Fleetsolve shows the way forward from its home in the North, with an unwavering pursuit of innovation and sustainability rooted in the pragmatic economic necessity of the energy transition.



# Embracing nature for resilient urban development

“For nature to be commanded, it must be obeyed.” This quote has long resonated with me, encapsulating the essence of why we need to harmonise our aspirations of urban development with the natural world.

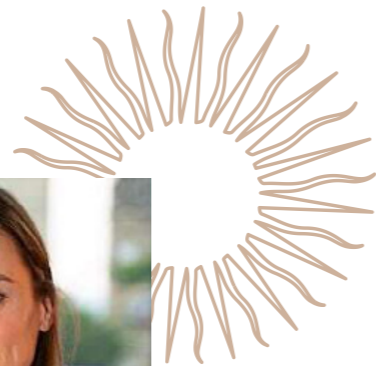
Throughout my career, I have come to appreciate the power of nature in shaping resilient, healthy and thriving communities. However, the modern urban landscape often falls short in providing these conditions. We need to realign our built environments with these principles.

With each subsequent generation there has been a ‘shifting of the baseline’ in terms of what each generation views to be ‘normal’. This, until recently, has resulted in a continual decline in how we consider nature in development projects – favouring chemical control and man-made diversions of natural resources.

But we cannot control nature. Instead, we must incorporate nature-based solutions into our construction and way of life in order for our use of it to be sustainable.

By assessing the natural capital and ecosystem services within a region, we are discovering how to align development with existing strengths. This approach maximises the value of biodiverse, green spaces and steers development towards areas of lower natural value.

As much as anything, this is an exercise in narrative — making the case that embracing nature does not entail slowing productivity but rather secures it for the long run.



**Faye Durkin**  
Head of Ecology and Natural Capital (North), Greengage



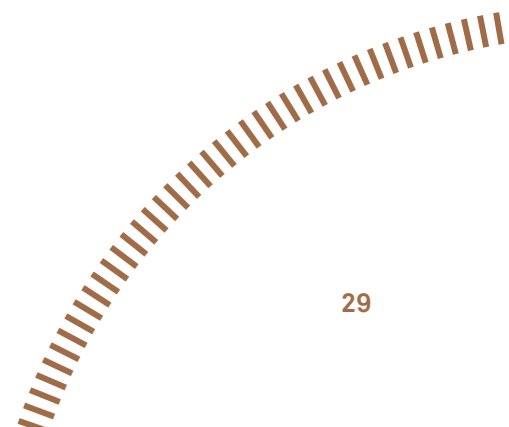
Shifting public perceptions is vital, highlighting the importance of making environmental considerations accepted in daily life. It is not about depriving oneself but about making informed decisions that reflect the true costs, beyond mere monetary value. Fast fashion is perhaps the most obvious example, where the unseen price you pay for cheap items far outweighs the immediate financial outlay.

The Environment Act has been a catalyst for change. It has prompted developers to proactively engage with ecological considerations rather than just ticking boxes.

Biodiversity net gain has led to a fundamental shift in thinking, inspiring a commitment to nature-positive strategies.



**“We cannot control nature. Instead, we must incorporate nature-based solutions into our construction and way of life in order for our use of it to be sustainable.”**



Balancing preservation and adaptation is a critical challenge. The adaptive reuse of historic buildings, the integration of green infrastructure and innovative retrofitting methods are avenues for sustainable progress.

This requires framing solutions according to the client's values, underlining the multi-faceted nature of sustainability. They may not care about wildlife protection, but they do care about reducing flood risk or increasing the value of their property by including open green space, which may lead them to sustainable decisions.

Often, expanding urban areas is presented as a choice between building on the Greenbelt, or not at all. While we must be wary of urban sprawl, much of the Greenbelt has a much reduced biodiversity value as a result of motorway building. These green deserts are of little value for wildlife.

So, we need to think strategically and use land in the right way, protecting areas of biodiversity while maximising use and value from all of our land.



In envisioning future cities, I see green and blue infrastructure seamlessly blending with urban architecture. Green walls, green roofs and climate-resilient planting should be the norm, not the exception. Sustainability's three pillars — social, economic and environmental — shape this vision. It is a complex tapestry that interweaves heritage, community well-being and efficient use of resources.

There has been mixed success so far in the North across different cities.

While some are ahead of others, True North is an opportunity to put disagreements and competition aside and work together to make bigger, better, more connected cities. We are lucky in terms of our geography, with the space that London lacks and many brownfield sites available for sustainable development.

Overall, I feel optimistic about the path we are on. The recent shifts in developer mindsets, prompted by policy changes, are evident – and over the last two years or so we have really seen this in action.

I am increasingly approached by strategic land teams or land agents, whereas in years gone by it would have been the planning team or technical design team that would have engaged with an ecologist. This shift demonstrates that nature is now being considered at a much earlier stage in the process of a development site. Projects are considering the environmental constraints and opportunities as part of the initial layout, rather than mitigating for impacts to nature once a design has been decided.

We have to remember that nature is to be embraced, not conquered. We should continue to build places that thrive in harmony with the natural world. In doing so, we pave the way for a future where well-being, prosperity and sustainability are intertwined, reflecting the wisdom of nature itself.

**“In envisioning future cities, I see green and blue infrastructure seamlessly blending with urban architecture.”**



# PURPOSE AND SOCIAL IMPACT

# 4



**Discussing how to truly unlock the potential of people everywhere and open up opportunities to the underserved, attendees in our discussion series identified three key areas where change is needed:**

## 1.

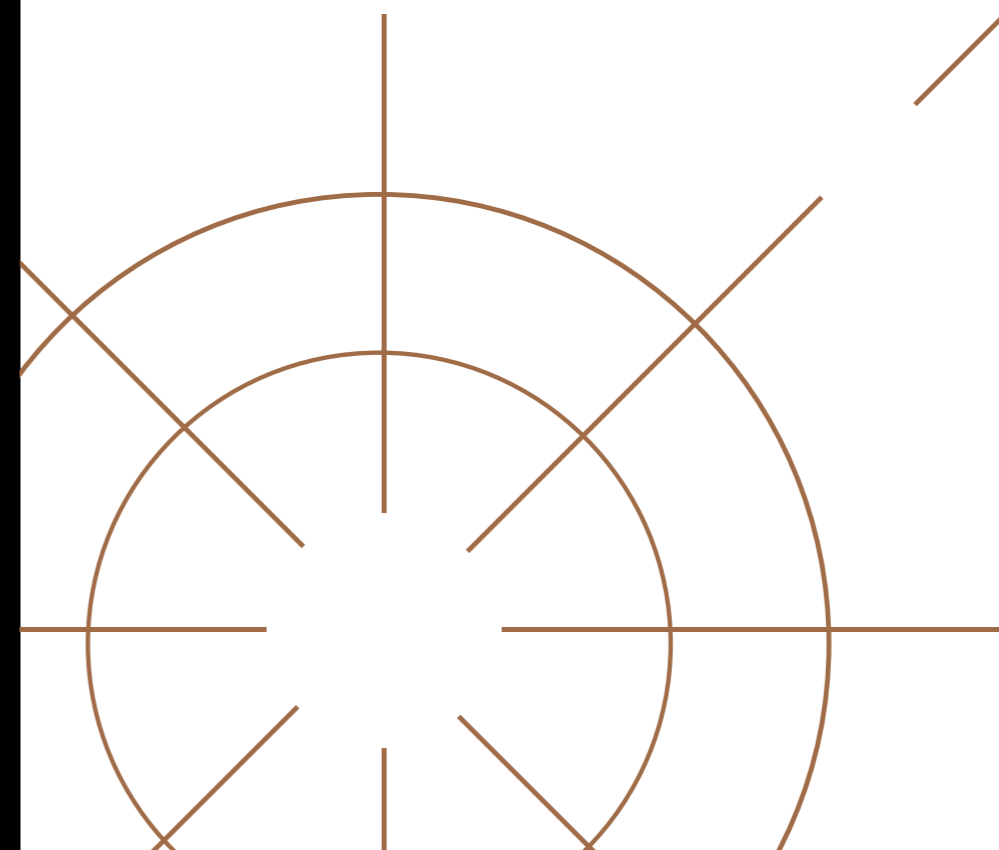
Underserved neighbourhoods, towns and rural communities continue to grapple with disparities in wealth and life expectancy, painting a stark contrast to the progress being achieved in the heart of our Northern cities. Addressing this means ensuring that individuals are active participants in urban development, rather than mere subjects of change. Encouraging civic engagement and involvement empowers residents and fosters a sense of ownership over their communities.

## 2.

The concepts of devolution and levelling up have demonstrated promise, yet their execution thus far has leaned towards a competitive funding process. This approach pits regions against one another in pursuit of limited resources, detracting from a holistic strategy for fostering equitable growth in the North. A more harmonised approach that emphasises collaborative planning and shared goals can truly harness the region's potential.

## 3.

Enhancing connectivity between towns, rural areas and urban centres across the North would be transformative to the region's economy and the prospects of many. Yet such a project demands a departure from the short-term thinking that many businesses and government bodies tend to deploy. Embracing a more patient approach is crucial to achieving lasting impact.



**For nearly 50 years, The Prince's Trust has transformed the lives of young people facing disadvantage across the UK. It aims to ensure that every young individual, regardless of their background or challenges faced, is equipped with the tools they need to succeed in life.**

The Prince's Trust runs a diverse range of programmes for young people aged 11 to 30. These initiatives are designed to enhance confidence and impart vital life skills that are essential for success. The organisation's core objectives include reintegrating individuals into education, training and employment, or supporting them in establishing their own businesses. By empowering young people, The Prince's Trust enables them to forge a brighter future and achieve their aspirations.

In tackling the persistent challenges of geographic disparities, The Prince's Trust has adopted a strategic, place-based approach. It looks to maximise its impact by using data to identify the

areas most in need of support and specific programmes aligned to local needs — with a specific focus on large metropolitan areas, where deprivation is more prevalent, as well as opportunities to address that deprivation.

Youth Development Leads (YDL) play a pivotal role in identifying where support is most needed on the ground. These individuals facilitate connections with local partners, making programmes accessible and relevant to the targeted demographics. This localised approach bolsters engagement and ensures that The Prince's Trust's offerings resonate with the people it serves.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing young people in society today is in mental health. The Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index 2023 — annual research into the happiness and confidence of 16–25-year-olds across the UK — identified that well-being was at its lowest recorded rate. This in itself is preventing many young people from even seeking employment.

To address this, The Prince's Trust focuses on supporting young people to build strong foundations for emotional well-being, providing them with the confidence to seek work and thrive in employment.

**“The Prince's Trust looks to maximise its impact by using data to identify the areas most in need of support and specific programmes aligned to local needs.”**



An example of success in its place-based approach came through the Future Workforce Fund, in partnership with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority. Part-funded by the Department for Education and match-funded by local businesses, over three years the programme supported more than 6,000 young people across Greater Manchester's ten boroughs.

Three in four participants reported positive outcomes within three months of engagement with The Prince's Trust, with over 70% coming from the most underserved communities in the region and one in three having been out of employment, education or training for more than 12 months.

Crucially, the programme not only imparts tangible skills but also significantly enhances their mental health and self-esteem.

On average, participants witnessed a 9% improvement in their well-being, with this figure nearly doubling for those with pre-existing mental health challenges.

The Future Workforce Fund has enabled The Prince's Trust to meet the varied and ever-changing needs of young people, with further initiatives including support and resources for digitally isolated young people, accessible life-skills evening programmes, free bus travel for care leavers and a partnership with Manchester Deaf Centre to train YDLs in basic British Sign Language — improving the accessibility of its digital programmes.

The Prince's Trust now aims to replicate the success of the fund across more Northern metropolitan areas, acting as an exemplar of the power of collaboration between different sectors — public, private and voluntary.



# It is the civic duty of business leaders to make their cities better places to live

As a proud 'born and raised' native of Bradford, I have witnessed its journey through various phases of growth, challenge and transformation. My connection to this city runs deep. Aside from a brief stint in Leeds, Bradford has been home for my entire life.

Over the years, I have come to understand the intricate dynamics that shape Bradford's identity and its untapped potential. I believe that this holds lessons that can be applied to many places across the North.

In co-founding my current venture — Crisp, a compliance management platform — I wanted to do my bit to support businesses in Bradford. We set up at Salts Mill, a UNESCO World Heritage Site that symbolises the history of the city.

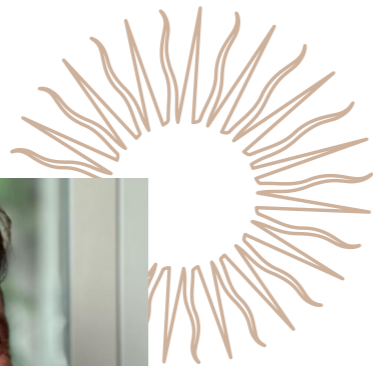
Salts Mill was founded by an entrepreneur, Titus Salt, in the mid-19th century at a time when the average life expectancy in the city was just 18, due to high rates of infant mortality. He designed a purpose-built model village, Saltaire, which

— like Bournville in Birmingham (as designed by the Cadbury family) — aimed to improve working conditions, raise aspirations and simply offer a better life for people in and around Bradford.

What remains as true now as it was back then, is that entrepreneurs and businesses have a civic duty. It cannot be that leaders only think about the bottom line. Making an impact is just a part of the job.



**Pete Mills**  
Chair, Bradford District Place Making and Investment Partnership



Bradford has had its fair share of challenges. Yet I am confident that our history serves us well, with a rich heritage and architecture that in my view, can only be rivalled by the likes of Bath, Edinburgh and the City of London.

The city is currently undergoing an infrastructure regeneration, with compulsory purchases of 1960s and 70s buildings which will be turned into more than 1,000 affordable homes with a vision to retain our young talent. We have the youngest population in the country — vibrant, multicultural and tolerant. That has always been central to the identity of people within Bradford, enriching our community and offering diversity of thought like almost nowhere else.

It gives us great capacity for innovation, with Bradford becoming known as one of the country's leading advanced manufacturing hubs, particularly in terms of the space industry. The city also boasts significant capabilities in AI, with substantial investments being funnelled into AI specialisms at the University of Bradford. Additionally, we have a strong heritage in food distribution, with major national players in this industry.



**“Entrepreneurs and businesses have a civic duty. It cannot be that leaders only think about the bottom line. Making an impact is just a part of the job.”**

I chair the city's District Place Making and Investment Partnership, so I am privileged to contribute to Bradford's future narrative and supporting its growth. Central to our mission is empowering young minds to recognise that Bradford offers a platform for their aspirations — with a message that you can be a success here.

Our board is made up of more than 20 members, each representing different facets of Bradford life, from tourism and infrastructure

to education and commerce. We are fostering extensive community engagement, giving every voice an opportunity to shape Bradford's narrative.

A robust ecosystem is taking shape, attracting both private enterprise and investment. Bradford's selection as the UK City of Culture 2025 has injected fresh energy. The accompanying funding of £10 million opens doors to even more ambitious projects that will redefine our city.

**“We have the youngest population in the country — vibrant, multicultural and tolerant. That has always been central to the identity of people within Bradford.”**



One lesson we have learned is the power of owning our narrative. We are not trying to replicate Leeds or Manchester — our strength lies in our unique identity. And the strength of the North as a whole comes from the individual assets of each place. For Bradford, those assets are our cultural heritage, vibrant tourism and global accessibility through Leeds-Bradford Airport.

My call to action for Bradford's citizens and businesses is one of engagement. There are more than 500,000 of us here and each individual's role — no matter how seemingly small — contributes to our collective success.

As a father of two daughters, I am committed to providing them with a city they can be proud of — one that nurtures their dreams and offers the potential for a fulfilling life and career. They, of course, will have their own choice to make about whether Bradford is the right place for them, but all I can hope is that this city is perceived as a realistic option for all young people to thrive.

As we head towards a more exciting, prosperous and purposeful future, we hope to not only redefine Bradford's narrative but also inspire other regions to harness their unique strengths and craft their own success stories.

**“Bradford's selection as the UK City of Culture 2025 has injected fresh energy.”**



WHAT  
COMES  
NEXT

5



**From Manchester to Morecambe Bay, Liverpool to Leeds, Sheffield to Sunderland, Bradford to Blackpool, the North is a rich tapestry of people, businesses, innovation and opportunity.**

Where challenges present themselves, there are any number of initiatives and organisations driven to breaking down barriers in communities, opening up access to the workplace and networks, and driving investment into our towns and cities.

The impact of their work can only go so far alone. While many work closely with local partners, we are still missing a strategic vision for the North as a whole and a recognition that our successes aren't confined to silos.

If you have been inspired by our Northern Stars or any of the perspectives from Tarnia Elsworth, Kelly Weston, Faye Durkin and Pete Mills, let me tell you that these examples do not even scratch the surface.

In gathering more than 100 leaders in recent months for our discussion series across the region, we have uncovered countless examples of initiatives taking place that need support from a wider network.

Over the page, you can see just a few more of those that we feel are worth recognising. We encourage you to get in touch if you can support their work or if you know someone who would benefit from an introduction.

True North is about highlighting all of this activity and bringing it together in one place. One network for purpose-led organisations, our Northern Stars – small businesses, social enterprises, foundations – who don't have a voice.



**Robert White**  
CEO, Brabners



In the coming months and years, we will continue to spotlight more of these and share the perspectives of leaders in our network.

Having established the network, the first step will be to decide how we will measure its success and identify the targets we will set ourselves. If you want to play an active role in True North by co-curating events, helping us to set our targets, and introducing us to people and organisations in your network that require further support, then please register by scanning the QR code or emailing [brabners@wearesevenhills.com](mailto:brabners@wearesevenhills.com).

Finally, let's ensure that those who are delivering progress and prosperity are recognised as such.

In 2022, Brabners became the UK's largest law firm — and first outside London — to achieve B Corp status, joining a select group of businesses to be certified globally.

We are using the certification as a framework to continue to evolve and deliver our ESG strategy. In becoming a B Corp, we joined a global network of 5,000 businesses — including over 800 in the UK — independently

recognised for being purpose-driven, committed to creating benefits for all stakeholders and operating as a force for good. We are now supporting more businesses in going through the complex process of securing this certification. Get in touch if you want to find out more about how we can help you to become a B Corp.

It is a certification that I would urge organisations to seek. If we can grow our B Corp network in the region, it will not only benefit the North but also the wider global community.



**Ahead Partnership**

The Ahead Partnership creates unique business partnerships and programmes that connect young people to opportunity.

[aheadpartnership.org.uk](http://aheadpartnership.org.uk)

**Catapult Network**

The Catapult Network supports businesses in transforming great ideas into valuable products and services. It is a network of world-leading technology and innovation centres established by Innovate UK, including the AMRC.

[catapult.org.uk](http://catapult.org.uk)

**Digital Futures**

Digital Futures is a digital skills, curriculum support and careers insights programme for schools and colleges across Greater Manchester, with a focus on enabling young people from under-represented groups.

[manchesterdigital.com](http://manchesterdigital.com)

**Digital Poverty Alliance**

The Digital Poverty Alliance believes that digital poverty and its definition needs to feature in the current agendas including social mobility and levelling up the UK.

[digitalpovertyalliance.org](http://digitalpovertyalliance.org)

**Fair Work Charter for West Yorkshire**

A joint venture between the Mayor, partners, key stakeholders and businesses to develop a way of setting a clear and ambitious standard for fair work in the West Yorkshire region.

[westyorks-ca.gov.uk/a-mayoral-combined-authority/mayoral-pledges/fair-work-charter/](http://westyorks-ca.gov.uk/a-mayoral-combined-authority/mayoral-pledges/fair-work-charter/)

**Fast Track Digital Workforce Fund**

The Fast Track Digital Workforce Fund addresses locally identified digital skills gaps and supports Greater Manchester and Lancashire residents with accessible routes into digital employment.

[greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/digital/fast-track-digital-workforce-fund/](http://greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/what-we-do/digital/fast-track-digital-workforce-fund/)

**GB Shared**

GB Shared is a network of countywide sharing platforms aimed at creating a central point for each UK county to 'share' to and from. Through working collaboratively, businesses come together to 'share' knowledge, expertise, resources and opportunities.

[gbdigidoc.co.uk](http://gbdigidoc.co.uk)

**Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses**

The Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses UK programme is designed to provide high-quality, practical education and business support to leaders of high-growth small businesses and social enterprises across the country.

[goldmansachs.com/citizenship/10000-small-businesses/UK/about-the-program/](http://goldmansachs.com/citizenship/10000-small-businesses/UK/about-the-program/)



**Help to Grow**

Designed and delivered by entrepreneurs and industry experts at world-class business schools, this 12-week leadership course provides time away for founders from the challenges of running a business to invest in leadership, and to learn how to take their business to the next level.

[smallbusinesscharter.org/help-to-grow-management](http://smallbusinesscharter.org/help-to-grow-management)

**LCR Careers Hub**

The Liverpool City Region Careers Hub works with secondary schools and colleges to ensure that every young person receives outstanding, relevant careers education. Supporting 137 secondary schools, special schools and colleges across Liverpool City Region.

[lrcareershubs.co.uk](http://lrcareershubs.co.uk)

**Nexus Leeds**

Nexus brings together the brightest minds from business, technology and academia. Its community of high growth businesses is located across the globe but has its physical base in a state-of-the-art innovation hub on the University of Leeds campus.

[nexusleeds.co.uk](http://nexusleeds.co.uk)

**RIBA Future Architects**

Every year, RIBA facilitates a mentoring programme for students of architecture, bringing practices into education to support the next generation. Each academic year, around 1,000 mentees and 500 mentors take part in the scheme.

[architecture.com/education-cpd-and-careers/studying-architecture/student-mentoring](http://architecture.com/education-cpd-and-careers/studying-architecture/student-mentoring)

**RSM School Leavers programme**

RSM's two-year school leaver professional apprenticeship programme helps young people take this first step with confidence and find a path that leads towards their goals, with a fast-tracked business career.

[careers.rsmuk.com/uk/en/school-leavers](http://careers.rsmuk.com/uk/en/school-leavers)

**Sheffield Hallam University Enterprise Team – The Hallam i-Lab**

The SHU Enterprise Team supports graduates to develop the key enterprising and entrepreneurial skills which are so essential when setting up a business venture. The Hallam i-Lab is a dynamic co-working business incubation space.

[shuenterprise.co.uk](http://shuenterprise.co.uk)

**Tech Returners**

Tech Returners supports teams to create a more engaged and productive workforce, leading to long-term growth and improvement for all.

[techreturners.com](http://techreturners.com)

## We are here to make the difference

**Our mission to make the difference guides everything we do, pushing us to go the extra mile for our clients and empowering our people to do what they do best.**

We specialise in enabling public and third sector organisations and private individuals to achieve their goals. We provide a full service legal offering to large and mid-sized businesses, SMEs, public sector bodies, charities, business owners, entrepreneurs and high-net worth individuals.

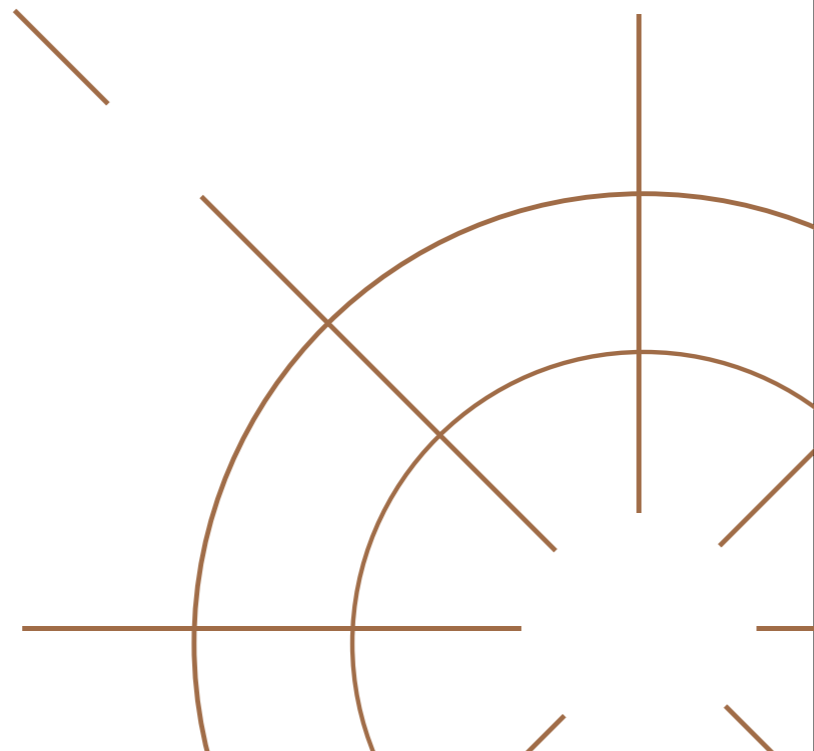
We are proud of our heritage. Practising law since 1815, we have developed a unique culture that has made us commercially successful and has helped us adapt to change and move with the times.

We work with clients across a wide range of sectors including charity and social enterprise, healthcare, housing and regeneration, manufacturing and supply chain, media and tech, real estate, recruitment, retail and sport.

Our practice areas cover banking and finance, commercial, corporate, deal advisory, employment, family, insolvency and restructuring, international, investigations, litigation, pensions, private client and property and construction.

We have strong connections with legal advisers around the world. As active members of Eurolegal and the Association of European Lawyers (AEL), we offer cross-border support and trusted foreign legal advice across Europe.

Our flexible cross-office approach enables us to put the best team on the job at all times to meet the needs of our diverse client base.



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DEFINING  
NORTHERN  
AMBITION

**Brabners**