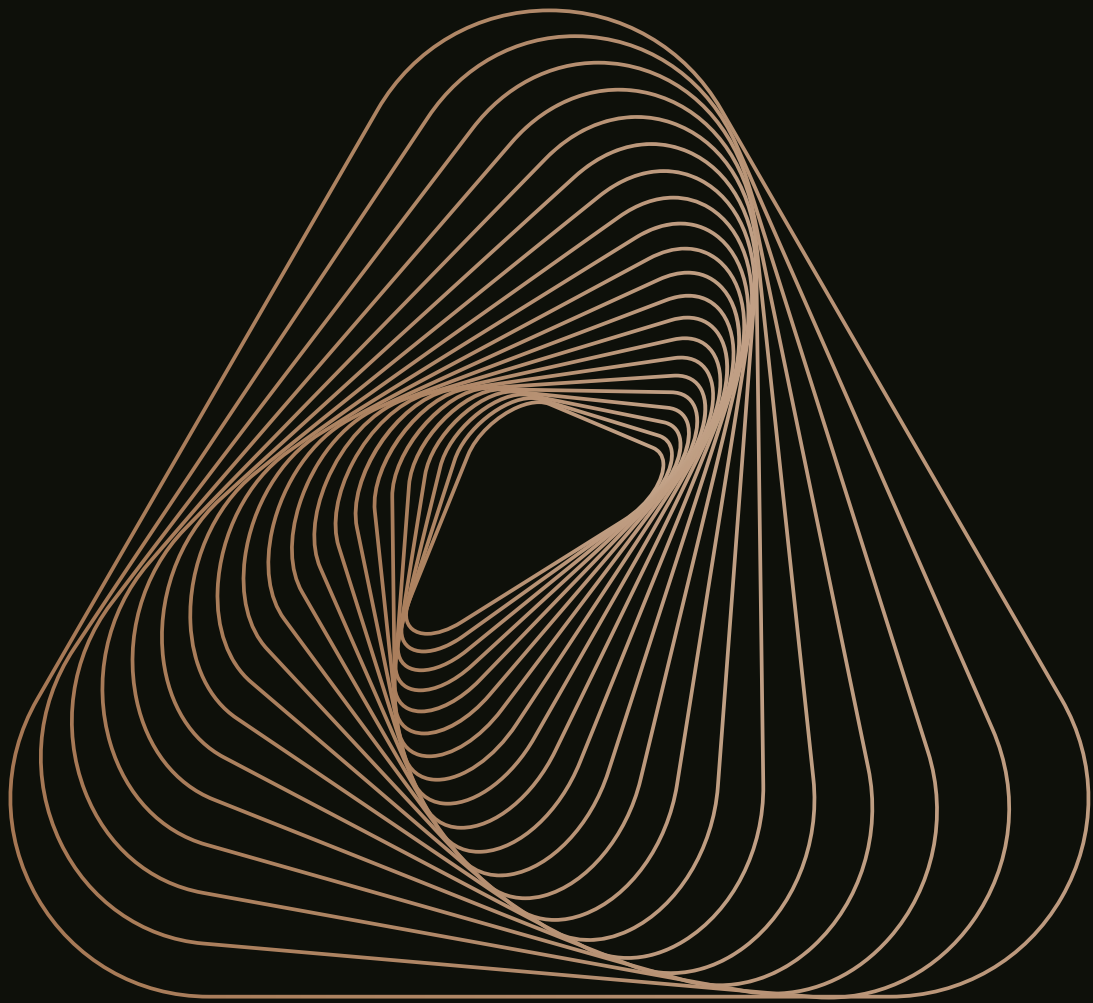


SCALING
NORTHERN
AMBITION

TrueNorth ✦



A framework for businesses to
address the region's key challenges

Brabners

About this report

Scaling Northern Ambition is the second report from True North — the collaborative network for purpose-led businesses, established by Brabners: the purpose-led independent law firm. It seeks to unlock the true potential of the northern economy by uniting like-minded businesses, leaders and other organisations to work together, learn from one another and accelerate inclusive growth across the whole of the region.

In 2023, the network launch was marked by releasing our first report, *Defining Northern Ambition*, which explored the challenges present in all parts of the northern economy as well as their impact on its broader society. The report acknowledged those challenges, while also spotlighting organisations and initiatives seeking to make a positive impact in response, across four key areas where True North would focus its attention:

1. People, Skills & the Future

Ensuring that organisations are connected to talent in their communities.

2. Innovation & Change

Unlocking growth for businesses in all sectors by supporting them to use new tools and technologies.

3. Sustainable Growth

Supporting organisations to play an active part in an inclusive sustainable transition.

4. Purpose & Social Impact

Spotlighting the importance of business-led place-based initiatives that support communities to thrive.

Since its launch, True North has grown into a network of more than 350 members, drawn from purpose-driven organisations from across the region who care deeply about our future and how these four areas can have an impact on it.

Scaling Northern Ambition builds on insights we have gathered from the network and the True North Advisory Council — who provide strategic direction to the network's activity — and our data partners at Open Innovations. It provides a practical guide for organisations to scale their impact through:

- **Data** that helps us to ask better questions about how to make a positive impact and where action needs to be focused.
- **Insights** from a series of roundtables held across the North, led by members of the True North Advisory Council and the network.
- **Case studies** from organisations already scaling their impact that demonstrate best practice we can learn from.
- **A framework** and top tips that illustrate how businesses can take incremental steps towards greater impact.

We hope you find ideas and inspiration throughout this report that can support the next chapter for the North.

Find out more and join the network here:

<https://hub.brabners.com/join-true-north>



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In 2023, we set out to unite the purpose-led organisations of the North by creating a network for like-minded businesses, leaders and other organisations to come together and co-create a path forward for the region.

As we enter 2025, the network now consists of over 350 members — all of whom are passionate about and committed to unlocking the true potential of the northern economy.

True North has resonated because of this passion and commitment, which is self-evident in the purpose-led business community and because the four themes identified in our first report — *Defining Northern Ambition* — align with what businesses are seeing and feeling every day:

- The challenges they face in recruiting talent with the appropriate business skills that will help to futureproof them for the long-term.
- The barriers many face in keeping up with the ongoing and ever accelerating technological revolution.
- The opportunities (and challenges) they see in contributing to a sustainable transition that they know all businesses must play their part in.
- The commitment they show to their communities as they strive to deliver inclusive impact.

Our network is representative of the view that the defining northern ambition of the purpose-led business community is the desire to succeed in each of these areas. However, if we are to use this as the platform to address the region's challenges and to unlock its full potential and thrive, we need to scale that ambition.

This need forms the basis of our second report: taking insights, perspectives and experience from members of the network and providing guidance for those who are unsure where to begin. We do not claim to offer all of the answers. Nor do we seek to supersede the brilliant work of other organisations and business networks that have come before us — The NP11, The Northern Powerhouse Partnership, the Chambers of Commerce and more. We seek to stand alongside them, complement them and offer something different.

True North offers a grassroots approach to defining and addressing the opportunities and challenges that organisations of all shapes and sizes face, from the heart of the purpose-led business community — but especially from the often overlooked privately owned, owner-managed businesses who fuel economic activity and social progress on a day to-day basis.

Foreword.



This is perhaps best illustrated by our *Northern Stars* initiative, which spotlights case studies of business leaders that are often the unsung heroes in their communities. They demonstrate that everywhere you look across the whole of the North, there are organisations doing brilliant things differently and truly making the difference.

As a law firm with a mission to make the difference, we accept the responsibility to play our part in shining a light on those stories and bringing them to a wider audience, so that others can celebrate and take inspiration from what they do.

Importantly, our work is also guided by data. The *True North Data Explorer*, launched last year in conjunction with our partners, Open Innovations, helps to validate our instincts, ask better questions about where action could be targeted and highlight those areas most in need of support.

We have taken these three themes: insights from our members, inspiration from our *Northern Stars* and open data, to create a practical report that can contribute to helping organisations who seek to scale their own ambitions.

What remains unresolved, however, is how the wider public authorities engage with the purpose-led business community in the North. That is why we wrote to the new Government and all elected northern MPs following the General Election last year, as well as the metro mayors in each of the region's combined authorities. We made the case that one of the principal keys to achieving our ambitions and to unlocking our true potential is a genuinely stronger public-private partnership. One that entrusts and empowers purpose-led businesses to make decisions about their own growth and how they best contribute positively to driving prosperity in the communities they serve.

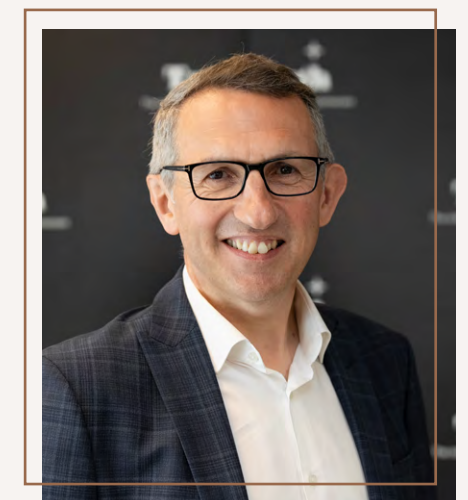
Devolution offers part of the answer. Done right, it can allow for closer, decentralised relationships between public sector decision-makers and businesses, leading to more aligned, long-term, local growth strategies — directing capital investment where it is most needed.

But it is only one piece of the jigsaw. The big picture needs to be about how we empower businesses with the confidence to deliver that much-needed growth.

In the conversations I have had with MPs and policy influencers so far, the overarching theme has been a lack of confidence and a nervousness from the businesses in their constituencies to plan and invest for the long-term in each of those key areas of skills, innovation, sustainability and social impact.

That means, alongside increased devolved powers, at the very heart of the North's future prosperity there needs to be a united and consistent effort — beyond short-term political cycles — that amplifies our aspirations as a region and celebrates the ability of our purpose-led businesses to deliver the growth and inclusive prosperity we so desperately need.

If our first report showed that aspiration exists, then *Scaling Northern Ambition* is about how it can be delivered.



Robert White
CEO, Brabners

Introduction: The True North Advisory Council

The True North Advisory Council brings together leaders that are at the heart of transformative projects and impactful research across the North to provide strategic direction to the network's ambition.

Led by Robert White, alongside Professor Maggie O'Carroll (CEO, The Women's Organisation) and Michael Hayman MBE (Co-founder and Chair, Seven Hills BPI), it is made up of four working groups led by experts on each of the themes that make up the focus of the network.



Professor Maggie O'Carroll
CEO,
The Women's Organisation

True North has the potential to be a leading, go-to source of new thinking and approaches for a more productive, prosperous and equitable region, positioning business as the central delivery mechanism by which that is achieved. While we are an apolitical network — we will work with all parties in all places, to drive better outcomes for the North — if the story of devolution so far has been a decentralisation of power from Westminster, then its next chapter must be further devolvement from political decision-makers to the business community.

The new Government's emphasis on good growth and measures that would underpin that, such as GB Energy, more flexible and agile planning regulations to accelerate housebuilding, and a national skills body are all welcome. But the success of these initiatives is going to be reliant on the majority of business delivering them. That majority being privately owned, owner-managed businesses who are rooted in the places they operate.

However, we are lacking many of the fundamental skills that are required to deliver on these policy ambitions.

Planning rules are not the only issue, delivery is too — a result of low skills attainment in this sector. Addressing this requires a rapidly scaled training and bootcamp approach, not only in terms of younger talent but the long-term unemployed of working age — a number that has increased in recent years.

Where I think True North can play a role is as an honest broker — rebuilding trust and highlighting where policy ambitions do not match the reality on the ground, with a view to working collaboratively and taking productive action. We felt it was important to write to the new Government immediately after it took office to make it clear that purpose-led businesses stand ready to be a partner, but they must be heard and given an equal status and role.



Michael Hayman MBE
Co-founder and Chair,
Seven Hills BPI

The notion around business as a force for good is so much more than a great sound bite. The North has it and so does the nation, but it needs more.

If there is a genesis around our work as True North, it is the understanding that economic growth is an opportunity but that we need to organise better to realise it. Why? Across the North there are phenomenal examples of growth companies making a difference, so the urgent question is how do we turn individual stories of inspiration into systemic economic delivery?

Confidence and belief matter and that means pitching your story. Our towns and cities are important catalysts for that — projecting the promise of a place to start and scale a business, or a destination where an inward investor can develop products and services through the access to world class talent.

That means harnessing a story that showcases attitude and ambition, because if you want to stand out you have to own your story and message.

It also means showing the potential for investment everywhere you look. In

our work as an Advisory Council, we have come to understand that there is not a local authority in the region that does not have businesses that are exemplars of the unique, the innovative and the purposeful.

Want the proof? Take our Northern Stars initiative showcasing incredible growth companies. Pioneering and purposeful in outlook and outcomes.

I have always been inspired by the saying that attitude is the small thing that makes a very big difference. These companies demonstrate the truth of that. Can-do, confident in facing the future, and creative and innovative in their business models.

We need to turn these stars into a northern constellation of companies that can drive our country forward. It's at the heart of True North — a direction of travel and a destination in mind. A call to action to create a team that shows the best of the private sector as a catalyst for communities, creators of wealth, and campaigners in the quest of our time, the quest for growth.

That is what it takes to be a force for good and that is what True North is there to help inspire and deliver.

True North has the potential to be a go-to source of new thinking and approaches for a more prosperous region.

01

PEOPLE SKILLS & THE FUTURE

Ensuring that organisations are connected to talent in their communities



What the data tells us¹

1 in 4

people in the North are economically inactive (23.5%)²

Economic inactivity remains highest in the North East, but is trending downwards, while there has been a small rise in both the North West and Yorkshire & The Humber.

13.6%

youth unemployment rate in the North³

Youth unemployment is down from over 24% across the region in 2010. But while both the North East and Yorkshire & The Humber are seeing a continued fall, youth unemployment in the North West rose from 11.2% in June 2023 to 15.6% in June 2024.

37%

percentage of the population in the North with NVQ Level 4 or above⁴

This figure has risen from just over a quarter of the region's population in 2010, to more than a third. This is mostly being driven by an increase in university graduates, as well as an increased use of the apprenticeship levy.

CONSIDERATIONS

Over the past year, we have considered the following questions when exploring how we might support a better landscape for skills and young talent across the North:

1.

What are the challenges businesses in the North face in attracting, retaining and upskilling talent effectively?

2.

How can HR and people leaders better engage with communities and specifically, schools and colleges, to tap into talent?

3.

How do businesses, the third sector and government (regional and national) better work together to address regional skills shortages and foster collaboration?

Insights⁵

Articulating a vision

Young people entering the workforce today are continuing to demand that their employers offer a flexible and purposeful culture. The view is that increased visibility of alternative options in the job market is leading to reduced loyalty from younger employees and that to compete, companies must clearly articulate their values and social impact—building a stronger ‘employer brand’⁶.

Through the True North network and our data explorer, we can see how this applies in reality. The average growth rate of the nearly 400,000 ‘owner-managed’ businesses identified in the North is 8.5% per year. We believe that these owner-led businesses are in a stronger position for growth as they are more likely to both be invested in a place or community and to operate with a purposeful mission, due to the vision and ties of the founders or owners.

Human-centred approach

Companies should seek to hire employees with transferable skills as role requirements become more flexible, rather than on paper qualifications⁷. At the same time, organisations are continuing to use AI in their recruitment processes in order to drive efficiency — with the number doing so tripling between 2022 and 2023⁸. The risk of this approach is that candidates with strong interpersonal skills that could be beneficial to a company may be overlooked by AI models focused on specific data-led criteria — emphasising the need for a human-centred approach to remain at the heart of any business.

This is important to consider not only for hiring but retention too, which often depends on offering tailored career progression opportunities, with technical or specialised tracks that support each person’s own development rather than a specific role⁹. Businesses need practical, budget-friendly coaching models to support their people’s progression and reduce the risk of employee turnover, while providing upskilling training to those whose roles may be replaced by AI.

Effective partnerships

Relationships between businesses and educational institutions are often under-resourced and ineffective. Smaller companies rarely have the capability and support infrastructure to spend significant time with local schools and further education colleges, while larger employers are often less closely connected to the communities they invest in. But these relationships are a vital tool to demonstrate the breadth of opportunity available to young people in a given area.

We require a much closer partnership between employers, local government and education — particularly vocational and specialist University Technical Colleges (UTCs). Government can play the role of identifying the required skills in an area based on existing strengths and acting as the connector between education and business in ensuring that the necessary skills are taught that companies in that area will benefit from. This will create a clearer pipeline of talent and offer certainty for both employers and future employees.

The average growth rate of the nearly 400,000 ‘owner-managed’ businesses identified in the North is 8.5% per year.

Northern Stars: Examples we can learn from

Kao Data

STOCKPORT, GREATER MANCHESTER

Kao Data is a leading developer and operator of data centres engineered for AI and advanced computing, which commenced work on a new £350 million facility based in Reddish, Stockport — its first in the North of England.

Set to open in 2026, the investment forms part of Kao Data’s next-tier market expansion and will provide vital new computing resources for the region’s AI, cloud, research, and enterprise businesses. It will also underpin what Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham has described as “a mission to ensure world-class digital infrastructure for the region... reinforcing our position as a global leader in AI and data centre capacity.”¹⁰

Most importantly, Kao Data has also committed to upskilling the local community¹¹ — partnering with Stockport College to create courses that will equip local young people with the skills for careers in digital and technology with a consideration of job opportunities in its own facility. It has also launched a community fund, called the Kao SEED Fund, to support voluntary and social enterprise companies in the town.



JJ Smith

KNOWSLEY, MERSEYSIDE

JJ Smith is a major supplier of both new and used woodworking machinery, exporting and installing it around the world. But more than that, it is a family business in every sense of the word — founded over 100 years ago with third and fourth generation members leading the organisation today, including Managing Director Rachael Baker. That family-oriented approach sees it recognised as one of the North’s best employers, with more than a quarter of its workforce having been with the company for over 20 years¹².

This is not just about creating a positive environment for people to work. JJ Smith’s approach to employment is one totally focused on development — from the moment people join the company, throughout their careers. Over half of its workforce are either current or former apprentices, including some in director roles today, while the company also actively collaborates with local schools and social enterprises to promote apprenticeship opportunities¹³. Furthermore, JJ Smith offers on-site development opportunities from practical skills training to degree-level qualifications.



MIKE SMITH
FOUNDER & CEO, OPEN MEDIA

OPEN Media is an out-of-home advertising company that brings brand stories to life on large-format, premium digital screens in cities across the UK. We spoke to its founder and CEO, Mike Smith for our digital Northern Stars series.

“The number one priority for me is ensuring that when you’ve built your foundations and are on stable ground, you reinvest any capital into your workforce. People are the most important thing for any business and at OPEN, we’re committed to creating opportunities for our people to grow and fostering an environment where they feel supported.

“My leadership style is all about putting people first — I want to understand how my team is feeling and to lead with empathy, which I believe creates an environment for them to thrive. That’s how people grow. That’s what fuels collaboration. And that’s where true innovation comes from.

“I also always prioritise hiring people who can do the job better than I can. I might be the leader, but I can’t do every job, so it’s important to bridge those gaps by bringing in talented people who have those missing skills.”



Read more about Mike’s people-first approach with OPEN [here](#).



Framework for success

Five top tips that businesses can take forward to support their people and fulfil their skills needs for the future

1.

Mission matters

How you position yourself and how you are viewed as an employer matter. Have a mission and ensure that purpose is clear in your messaging and marketing, so potential recruits know who and what you stand for.

2.

Leverage the best of people and technology

Use human-centric recruitment strategies to complement AI tools and avoid talent gaps, while supporting employees impacted by automation to reskill and transition into new roles.

3.

Tailor to employee strengths

One size does not fit all when it comes to training and development. Improving managerial skills are not the only requirement for career advancement and pathways should be moulded to the strengths of an individual.

4.

In-house development

Invest in training programmes, coaching and mentoring within your business to create opportunities for employees to progress without leaving your organisation.

5.

Community collaboration

Explore opportunities to partner with schools and further education colleges in the communities you operate — not only through careers fairs but the curriculum, to ensure the skills young people learn support their potential future pathways.

HOW TRUE NORTH CAN HELP

Three areas in which we will look to focus our own impact in 2025 and beyond:

Resource sharing: Leverage the strength and size of our network to share best practice around recruitment, retention and reskilling from those doing it best.

Voice to policymakers: Advocate for government funding and policies that prioritise improving the skills infrastructure in the North.

Foster collaboration: Create a platform for HR and people leaders, education and government to connect and discuss targeted, collaborative solutions to skills challenges where they’re most present.

02

INNOVATION & CHANGE

Unlocking growth for businesses in all sectors by supporting them to use new tools and technologies



What the data tells us¹⁴

IT & Communications

the fastest growing sector in the North

Growth in this sector is well distributed across the North, with significant activity in historically underserved areas of the North East. Other sectors such as arts & entertainment, accommodation and food have also shown strong growth, though in smaller geographic pockets.

5

areas of the North where new business births are growing at a rate of more than 15% per year

The foundations for strong future growth are being laid in areas of the North that have historically faced lower economic outcomes. Blackpool, Doncaster, Middlesbrough, Oldham and Liverpool are seeing the most new business births of all local authorities in the region.

51

local authorities in the North where productivity is below the national average

Of 62 local government districts measured across the North West, North East and Yorkshire & The Humber, just 11 of them saw productivity exceed the average level of just under £40 gross value added (GVA) per hour worked¹⁵. Only one (South Ribble, Lancashire) saw GVA levels above £50 per hour.

CONSIDERATIONS

Over the past year, we have focused on the following questions when exploring how we might support increasing productivity and harnessing innovation across the North:

1.

What practical solutions can help businesses, especially small firms, to innovate and grow effectively and sustainably?

2.

How can the existing technology ecosystem support businesses in more traditional industries to adopt new tools and technologies?

3.

How do we better connect companies across communities in the North through infrastructure to drive productivity and innovation?

Insights¹⁶

Closing the digital divide

While the North is home to a thriving technology sector, success in terms of investment in digital native businesses often comes at the expense of organisations in more traditional sectors of the economy — particularly those outside major cities and investment hubs such as Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and West Yorkshire. Many businesses face barriers in even adopting technology, for a wide variety of reasons including a lack of infrastructure, knowledge or confidence in selecting the right tools¹⁷.

Ensuring that businesses in all sectors have at least basic digital literacy and an understanding of new technologies such as AI is crucial to overcoming the North's and wider UK's ongoing productivity puzzle. Large existing networks around the digital sector should turn outwards and provide mentorship and external guidance to smaller employers that lack access to a support system.

Fostering a culture of sustainable innovation

A successful approach to innovation requires strong leadership. When strategy is misunderstood or poorly communicated from leaders to their teams, that can lead to misalignment and inefficiencies. Conversely, a coherent and connected approach and a central purpose — where all levels of an organisation are bought into a strategy — can support agility, risk-taking and an entrepreneurial culture. A structured methodology for problem-solving and innovation is often lacking, especially among smaller businesses.

A key focus should be on ensuring that companies in all sectors are resilient to ongoing technological change — striking a balance between helping non-digital native small businesses move faster in adopting innovation tools and approaches, while also ensuring that companies in the North's thriving technology ecosystem continue to grow without compromising stability. It is vital that businesses across the region are set up for the long-term, willing to adapt while providing security for their people.

Connected infrastructure

A more digital future does not necessarily mean that there is no longer a role for in-person interactions. Local authorities have a role to play in supporting small businesses by creating environments conducive to growth, such as hubs with technical experts and spaces for collaboration. High streets, which face continued challenges with footfall, can be repurposed with co-working and collaborative spaces for businesses to share knowledge. Peer support and mentorship play a crucial role in enabling businesses to uncover solutions and take the initiative on innovation.

Lessons can be drawn from the Connected Hubs initiative in Ireland — a national network of almost 400 workspaces across the country that is a central driver of the Irish Government's National Hub Network¹⁸. Its mission is to harness the full potential of hubs in revitalising towns and villages through the promotion of collaborative working — breathing new life into communities, fostering a vibrant and inclusive economy, while supporting businesses outside of major cities to collaborate and innovate together.

A key focus should be on ensuring that companies in all sectors are resilient to ongoing technological change.

Northern Stars: Examples we can learn from

The North of England Robotics Innovation Centre

SALFORD, GREATER MANCHESTER

Part of the University of Salford, the North of England Robotics Innovation Centre (NERIC) is a £16m facility that serves as a hub and 'one-stop-shop' for businesses looking to develop, test, and validate new robotics and automation solutions.

NERIC's 23,000 square foot facility¹⁹ is purpose-built for industry collaboration. Offering access to specialist robotics equipment and multidisciplinary expertise, NERIC provides services that support innovation and adoption, making it a key player in supporting the overall upskilling of technical infrastructure capabilities in Greater Manchester.

By offering a 'sandbox' for businesses to test and validate their innovation before rolling it out, NERIC allows organisations to de-risk their future investments, resulting in improved operational efficiency and the integration of innovative technologies into their processes, contributing to the region's economic growth.



Groundswell Innovation

LANCASTER, LANCASHIRE

There is no one single approach to innovation. All organisations can consider how their innovation will make the greatest impact on their business and their community, in order to support sustainable growth. Groundswell supports its customers with sustainable product innovation²⁰, ensuring they don't fall foul of the main reason ideas tend to fail — that no-one wants or needs them. This is about delivering for target customer groups and ensuring products are anchored in a financial, social or ecological need. It also takes a place-based approach, ensuring that the communities its clients serve are a part of the innovation around them and can shape how new services evolve.

All of this is underpinned by what Groundswell describes as an intelligent, creative and empathetic approach to innovation²¹. Intelligence is about drawing together evidence for businesses to know which projects to push ahead with. Creativity is ensuring those ideas are not a replication of what's already in the market. And empathy is about taking all of your people along with you, aligning the organisation around the same outcomes.



LEE CHAMBERS
FOUNDER AND CEO, ESSENTIALISE

Essentialise is an award-winning workplace wellbeing and inclusion agency based in Lancashire that uses technology solutions to help organisations build effective, sustainable and tailored strategies that help to empower and engage employees, improve staff retention and attract talent. We spoke to founder and CEO, Lee Chambers, for our digital Northern Stars series.

“We live in a very personalised world—whether it’s the adverts on our social media feeds, recommendations on our streaming services or offers in our supermarkets. Wellbeing should work in the same way, where employers recognise that different people are receptive to different things and deliver bespoke support that meets individual needs.

“A priority of ours is exploring how emerging technologies can be harnessed to drive behavioural change in the workplace to create a more inclusive, accessible and wellbeing-focused culture. The best example is our 360° virtual reality video, which puts you in the shoes of someone who’s struggling with their mental health at work, witnessing a day in their life first-hand. With this, we aim to foster a more empathetic way of interacting with people and start more conversations around wellbeing.”



Find out more about Lee’s innovative approach to employee wellbeing [here](#).



Framework for success

Five top tips for businesses to approach growth, innovate and adapt to technological change

1.

Define your innovation strategy

Create a clear and consistent strategy around your innovation that connects with all organisational levels, bringing everyone in the business along with you.

2.

Stay agile

Always remain open to new ideas from across your business, encouraging entrepreneurial thinking and problem solving.

3.

Experiment with innovation

Leverage low-cost experimentation ('sandbox' environments) to explore new tools and technologies without high risk.

4.

Know your audience

Gain a deep understanding of your customers and the places in which you operate to ensure your innovation addresses genuine needs and has a sustainable impact on both your business and your people.

5.

Share ideas and learnings

Where possible, view competition as an opportunity for collective growth and engage with like-minded organisations to explore ideas.

HOW TRUE NORTH CAN HELP

Three areas we will look to focus our own impact in 2025 and beyond:

Widening networks: Promote mentorship and knowledge-sharing between existing networks and non-digital businesses to address gaps in technological understanding and adoption, ensuring they are visible and easily navigable for all business sizes.

Community connections: Advocate for an increase in collaboration and co-working hubs for businesses to access technical expertise and network with peers, leveraging high streets and community spaces.

Make it real: Continue sharing best practice approaches from businesses that are innovating with impact, across all sizes and sectors, to demonstrate the art of the possible.

03

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Supporting organisations to play an active part in an inclusive sustainable transition



What the data tells us²²

3,400

companies identified as part of sectors in the North's net zero economy²³

These companies are turning over an estimated combined £2.2bn, employ 21,000 people and are growing at an estimated rate of 7% per year.

Yorkshire

includes three of the five local authorities with highest estimated net zero turnover in the North

Leeds (estimated £138m net zero economy turnover per year), North Yorkshire (£125m), and Doncaster (£120m) are all key drivers, with Cheshire East (£123m) and County Durham (£113m) the highest performing local authorities in the North West and North East respectively.

237

number of certified B Corps²⁴ in the North

Around 10% of the total B Corps in the UK are based in the North of England, with the highest clusters in Manchester and Leeds city centres.

CONSIDERATIONS

Over the past year, we have considered the following questions when exploring how we might support sustainable growth across the North:

1.

How do we reduce barriers around costs and resources to position net zero as a growth opportunity for businesses, rather than a challenge?

2.

What frameworks, knowledge and tools can be shared across networks and regions to demystify and simplify the sustainability journey for businesses?

3.

How can government and local authorities better incentivise businesses to adopt net zero practices?

Insights²⁵

Reducing complexity

Balancing sustainability with profitability, particularly in an economic climate where rising costs and limited resources are already straining smaller firms, is one of the key challenges we face in driving a net zero economy. While significant progress has been made in the UK with a 50% reduction in carbon emissions since 1990²⁶ — the first major economy to achieve this goal — progress is at risk of stalling due to the complexity of adopting sustainable practices, particularly for small businesses. Sustainability reporting is seen as a significant barrier²⁷, often requiring specialised resourcing, as is cost — with limited incentives or grants that make it challenging for businesses to justify initial investment. Regulation is similarly often unclear, with no standardised framework.

Ultimately, policies and funding mechanisms are perceived by many as too inconsistent, with opportunities to provide meaningful support often missed²⁸. Government support must therefore go beyond funding to include consistent messaging and clear regulations. Without streamlined processes and collaborative frameworks, we risk businesses feeling isolated in their sustainability journey.

Creating local supply chains

Another process challenge exists around procurement. With both government and larger businesses often setting requirements for supplier sustainability, it can be more difficult for small businesses in those supply chains to meet these expectations. By creating open and accessible resources for smaller businesses to meet these requirements, there is an opportunity to empower them to take steps towards net zero²⁹.

Collaboration on a local level is a powerful tool, with networks such as GB Shared — a True North network member and *Northern Star*³⁰ — offering a centralised hub of resources that allow companies to form supply chains with businesses in their local areas. Another *Northern Star*, Stone UK, has developed its own ethical asset assessment, allowing it to connect with local construction and demolition projects to repurpose building materials in new projects and installations. It is important to showcase these stories of best practice and to put a spotlight on community assets that will support organisations to embark on their own sustainability journeys.

Education and collaboration

Education is a critical enabler of sustainable growth, particularly for smaller firms that lack expertise in this area and often do not know where to start. Training employees at all levels and engaging customers in sustainability efforts are key priorities.

There must be a regular dialogue between local authorities, national government, business and the third sector to ensure that accessible guidance and clear information is available. We need to demystify sustainability for smaller businesses — breaking approaches down into manageable, incremental steps³¹ so that firms are clear on where they can make an impact without incurring high costs. Additional incentives from government are important to support companies with larger operational transitions³². At the same time, closer collaboration between local authorities through regional forums to align efforts and avoid duplicative spending on similar initiatives will allow places that are further ahead on this journey to support those that require greater guidance.

Education is a critical enabler of sustainable growth, particularly for smaller firms.

Northern Stars: Examples we can learn from

Carbon Happy World

LIVERPOOL, MERSEYSIDE

Carbon Happy World supports businesses in bridging the gap between their sustainability ambition and their ability to act. Driven by the understanding that carbon reduction targets can cause confusion for businesses, it works with clients to create a tailored carbon reduction plan that can be implemented by all individuals across an organisation.

Its services include the Carbon Happy Tracker, which seamlessly collects and processes emissions data across Scopes 1, 2 and 3³⁵. Through a yearly subscription, organisations can access internal reports of emissions trends by scope, department and date — supporting not only their carbon reduction planning, but also making it easier to comply with mandatory emissions and ESG reporting and regulations. The tracker also conducts a baseline year emissions audit, identifying carbon intensive areas within a business and across their supply chain to create a Net Zero Action Plan. Furthermore, Carbon Happy World supplies services to the food industry — calculating the carbon emissions of any recipe, so that ingredients and sourcing can be adapted accordingly. It is also soon set to launch a new series of solutions that give small businesses greater control over their emissions tracking.



Barrow Green Hydrogen

BARROW-IN-FURNESS, CUMBRIA

The Barrow Green Hydrogen project is an industry-leading project that will use renewable energy to produce green hydrogen fuel, helping to decarbonise industry and transport — key elements of the UK's plans to achieve net zero by 2050. Carlton Power Group, an independent, UK-based energy infrastructure company, is developing the project in collaboration with Kimberly-Clark, the international manufacturer of consumer products.

The location was identified due to Barrow's existing industrial sites, like Kimberley-Clark, which can take green hydrogen without extensive modifications, allowing businesses of all sizes across Cumbria to decarbonise and benefit from the facility. Its projected environmental impact is the reduction of 25,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions annually, but the economic potential can go much further — creating jobs while safeguarding existing employment for industrial businesses in the region and encouraging economic growth³³.

The project has benefitted from a public-private partnership led by Carlton Power, involving Cadent Gas, Cumbria Local Enterprise Partnership, Westmorland & Furness Council and Electricity North West, with funding from the Government's first Hydrogen Allocation Round³⁴.



LISA EDGE
FOUNDER, GB SHARED



GB Shared is a sustainable business marketplace, providing a centralised platform that connects local people and companies with an open pool of resources and opportunities in their region. We discussed the mission behind it with founder Lisa Edge for our digital Northern Stars series.

“From day one, we have had two aims: to listen to our local communities and to drive sustainable growth. Everything on our platform must have a sustainable impact, because we’d rather make a difference than make a million. And by enabling businesses to work with local partners, the supply chains we create are sustainable by nature.

“Noting the sustainable impact of collaborative working, we partnered with a global sustainable accreditor, mapping our journey to accreditation and offering this ourselves as an optional part of our membership. Alongside this, we connect businesses with sustainability support, resources and education to respond to regularly evolving sustainable procurement standards and ensure that our members have the knowledge to understand and navigate them.”



Discover the UK’s first sustainable business marketplace by reading more on GB Shared [here](#).



Framework for success

Five top tips that businesses can take forward to support sustainability ambitions

1.

Keep it simple

Starting your sustainability journey, however small, is better than not acting at all. Even small changes, such as switching off electric machinery, can have a significant impact. Explore potential quick fixes while taking the time to develop a wider sustainability strategy.

2.

Subscribe to services

Use third party services that can help to simplify carbon reduction targets such as Carbon Happy World, the GC Business Growth Hub’s Journey to Net Zero course, or Business in the Community’s Responsible Business Health Check, to help you tailor a plan to your own business.

3.

Leverage local

Foster local supply chains by connecting with platforms like GB Shared and Supply Chain North. Explore potential partners to repurpose materials, such as resource distribution network Warp It or tech recovery service BornGood — both in the North East.

4.

Public engagement

Engage with local chambers of commerce and regional government on targeted sustainability goals and initiatives for your area.

5.

Consider certification

Sustainable accreditation often requires significant time commitment and cost. But the benefits in terms of access to networks and resources cannot be underestimated. As well as B Corp, UK recognised sustainability certifications include Carbon Trust, British Standards Institution and Green Accord³⁶.

HOW TRUE NORTH CAN HELP

Three areas we will look to focus our own impact in 2025 and beyond:

- Be the connector:** Act as a ‘black book’, connecting businesses with their peers who can provide support, while offering guidance to companies going through the sustainable accreditation process — using the experience of Brabners and other network members.
- Policy voice:** Advocate for clearer regulation and public procurement frameworks that reward sustainability efforts, creating additional incentives for small businesses to adapt.
- Spotlight success:** Showcase successful sustainability initiatives by small businesses to inspire and guide others.

04

PURPOSE & SOCIAL IMPACT

Spotlighting the importance of business-led place-based initiatives that support communities to thrive



What the data tells us³⁷

31,600

limited by guarantee³⁸ and Community Interest Companies (CICs)³⁹ across the North

There are upwards of 24,000 limited by guarantee companies registered in the region, turning over £25bn and growing at a rate of 5.5% per year. A further 7,600 CICs turnover £662m, growing at a rate of over 15% per year.

4.4%

of all businesses in the North operate as not-for-profit companies

While the distribution of not-for-profit businesses is similar to that of all companies, there is a higher concentration of non-profits in rural areas.

£1.1bn

of total 'Levelling Up' funding went to bids in the North

Across two funding rounds from 2021-2023, a total of £3.8bn of Levelling Up funding was awarded by the previous Government across the country, with around 29% going to the North. Blackpool received the highest total of anywhere in the region, with £40m.

CONSIDERATIONS

Over the past year, we have considered the following questions when exploring how we might drive social impact in the North:

1.

What role should businesses play in fostering long-term social and environmental impact?

2.

How do organisations measure their impact and put it on an equal footing with business performance?

3.

How can communities and businesses collaborate to address significant social issues such as child poverty and workforce shortages?

Insights⁴⁰

Incremental steps

Effective social impact engagement is not about asking everyone to try and do everything. It is more important to do something. While the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)⁴¹ act as a guide for both governments and many international organisations to direct purposeful action, for smaller companies this framework can feel overwhelming — particularly with many leaders focused on the day-to-day challenges of running a business. It could be more practical and attainable to set the expectation that small businesses focus on understanding and addressing local issues.

Businesses should start with clear, measurable objectives tailored to their specific strengths and values, so that purposeful initiatives are not only aspirational, but achievable. This process involves mapping out connections and assessing impact opportunities across employees and communities, focusing on actions that deliver both economic and social value. Accountability and transparency are also essential, as businesses risk losing public trust if their commitments are perceived as performative.

Thinking for the long-term

The tension between immediate business needs and long-term societal impact is, in no small part, driven by traditional performance metrics, such as profit. Long-term impact indicators around community wellbeing and environmental sustainability can help to refocus businesses towards more purposeful goals, supported by impact assessments such as those provided through the B Corp process⁴². Leadership is critical in this shift, requiring boldness and a willingness to prioritise purpose over short-term gains. But the fast growth of B Corps⁴³ and other organisations delivering both profit and purpose — who should be spotlighted to inspire others — demonstrates that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Businesses should look to act through the lens of ‘the good ancestor’ — considering the legacy their actions will leave for future generations. Younger voices and diverse perspectives are also essential in fostering new ideas and considering how a company’s actions may impact communities and the planet — both now and into the future.

Understanding community needs

For leaders who find it challenging to carve out time for purposeful initiatives, it is important to consider areas of impact that can provide mutual benefit to both the company and the community it operates in. Addressing a lack of access to education and skills shortages, which in turn can support companies with their own challenges in accessing talent, is one area where there is room for greater collaboration — inspiring future talent and fostering local skills pipelines.

However, businesses must also consider the specific needs of a community and where the greatest impact can be made, so that initiatives across a place complement one another rather than compete or simply replicate what has been tried before. Data can provide some of the answers — or at least help companies ask the right questions about where they can make a difference — but more importantly, businesses should also take the time to build deep, long-term relationships with local partners. This will help leaders to develop a strategy that supports their organisation’s own goals as well as the needs of the community.

Education is a critical enabler of sustainable growth, particularly for smaller firms.

Northern Stars: Examples we can learn from

GameChangers

LIVERPOOL, MERSEYSIDE

GameChangers is an initiative powered by the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Careers Hub and facilitated by All About Futures, in partnership with the thriving hub of gaming studios around the city. Launched in 2023, it aims to pave the way for the next generation of video games creators — supporting what is becoming an increasingly important part of the regional economy in a way that benefits the organisations working within it, while fostering a pathway into work for young talent. Companies sign a pledge to be a part of the initiative⁴⁴, committing them to working with the Combined Authority Careers Hub and All About Futures, educational and career providers, and community organisations to support the growth and development of gaming talent.

Businesses signed up to the pledge must contribute at least eight hours per year towards GameChangers activity, while also celebrating and disseminating best practice to spotlight gaming careers and pathways in the region. Progress is measured through an annual impact report, which in its first year saw a combined 1,600 hours dedicated to engaging with over 2,700 young people in schools and colleges, leading directly to 40 work experience or T-level placements with studios pledged to GameChangers.



Cones Children’s Educational Books

LEEDS, WEST YORKSHIRE

Author Chris Madeley began writing Cones Books when visiting schools and found that many pupils did not have access to books at home. Also aware that many corporate organisations were looking at routes to give back to communities, she began to write and illustrate a series of children’s books through the eyes of traffic cones brought to life⁴⁵. In each story, the cones learn about different industries — particularly focused on energy and the built environment — the types of jobs available and their impact on the environment and communities around them.

Each book is commissioned by a different company, who distribute it to children around the country — providing these young people with opportunities to read, learn and better understand the world in which they live, while also getting them excited and aware about potential careers, supporting a potential future pipeline of talent. Organisations including Balfour Beatty, Jaguar, Caddick Construction, Drax, BAM Nuttall and many more have all supported in the creation and launch of the books⁴⁶, which have been distributed to tens of thousands of children across the country.



BRONWEN RAPLEY
CHIEF EXECUTIVE, ONWARD HOMES



Owning and managing around 35,000 homes across the North West, Onward Homes is a people-first not-for-profit housing association committed to collaboration, urban regeneration, and building neighbourhoods that create a real sense of community.

We spoke to CEO Bronwen Rapley for our digital Northern Stars series.

“Onward is a business that is enormously invested in the communities we serve. We provide all the usual services you would expect from a landlord, but also some that you wouldn’t. Our work goes far beyond putting good-quality roofs over people’s heads.

“Delivering impact and value is about tapping into the specific strengths of your organisation and weaving them together with the strengths of the community, joining forces to create something together. Working hand-in-hand this way is always going to bring better results than working in silos. Onward is doing this in a really coordinated way.

“For example, we always ask our contractors to make a contribution to the community, but they often don’t know how to make a difference. We connect them directly into the community, pinpointing exactly where they can have the biggest impact. One of the ways we do this is through a tool called ‘Match My Project’. This enables local community groups and organisations to request support from contractors in our supply chain that share our commitment to making a positive impact.”



Read more about how Onward Homes supports communities in the North [here](#).



Framework for success

Five top tips that businesses can take forward to deliver a positive social impact

1.

Start small

Identify areas where your business already has a natural impact — employees, supply chain, or local community. Develop clear, measurable objectives tied to these areas and build purpose into your strategy.

2.

Leverage existing tools

There is no need to reinvent the wheel. Explore what already exists to ensure you’re not replicating what has already been tried and plug into community initiatives that you can support and help to scale.

3.

Stay open

Regularly communicate progress with stakeholders to maintain trust and accountability.

4.

Address community needs

Use local data to identify community challenges that align with your expertise. Collaborate with schools, non-profits and local authorities to develop initiatives, such as mentorship programmes or skill-building workshops.

5.

Re-define your metrics of success

Shift from traditional KPIs to impact-based metrics, regularly evaluating the long-term impact of your actions on all stakeholders.

HOW TRUE NORTH CAN HELP

Three areas we will look to focus our own impact in 2025 and beyond:

Build bridges: Use our network to bridge gaps between businesses, education, local authorities and communities to highlight place-based needs.

Data insights: Continue to build the True North Data Explorer as an open tool for our network to identify where they can make the greatest impact.

Share best practice: Spotlight existing impactful initiatives from our network to inspire our membership and to encourage learning from one another, so that ideas that work in one location can be replicated and scaled across the region.

Reflecting on the inspiring insights from the True North network and our Northern Stars who have informed this report, if there is a common thread that runs through each of the four chapters, it is skills.

While this is naturally a theme in and of itself, the more we consider the opportunities and challenges the North faces, it is increasingly evident that equipping more people with the skills needed to support our future prosperity and ensuring they align more successfully with the businesses that need them are going to be the key factor in our success.

Whether those skills relate to innovation and change, building sustainable growth, delivering purposeful social impact or, indeed, whether they relate to all three working together.

What does it say about the current skills landscape when economic inactivity in parts of the North is on the rise, even though more people are gaining qualifications than ever before?

It illustrates that the more traditional skills typically taught in our schools, colleges and even universities are not necessarily the ones that many employers need today. Vocational qualifications such as apprenticeships are — in theory — a way to close that gap. However, the route towards embracing them often feels too opaque and complex, while the levy associated with them is simply too high for many smaller businesses to afford.

There is, however, a significant opportunity and a pressing need to address the skills gap by forming a meaningful and impactful focal point through a strong, more devolved public-private partnership. This report — and the sentiment that supports True North — demonstrates that the purpose-led business community is ready to play its part.

It is imperative that we find new and innovative ways to connect employers with the employees of the future in a way that is far more inclusive than in the past. And while there is no doubt a parallel need to bring the many established workers who have fallen out of employment since the pandemic — or those who could re-skill — back into employment, the primary challenge must be to ensure the next generation are equipped with the skills that business needs for the long-term.

The *Northern Stars* highlighted in this report are no accident. In a region of many thousands of businesses that do outstanding work — most often naturally and quietly under the radar — they have been chosen because each of them is focused on developing future skills that contribute to moving our other themes forward.



Conclusion.

Whether that is Kao Data and JJ Smith who are committed to directly upskilling in their communities; NERIC and Groundswell Innovation offering a testing ground and framework for innovative ideas to succeed; Barrow Green Hydrogen and Carbon Happy World investing in the education and application of sustainable practices; or GameChangers and Cones Books inspiring the next generation.

There are many more inspiring examples we could have included. And while one of True North's goals is to raise awareness and spotlight them, our greatest ambition must be to contribute to connecting them, so they are not just individual stories of inspiration but are part of an integrated northern industrial strategy, which aligns hand-in-hand with a strategy for skills.

If there is one area where the muscle memory has been to centralise rather than decentralise, it is in the area that relates to skills. What we can learn from the incredible case studies of our *Northern Stars* is that the most successful skills initiatives are those that address a genuine need in a specific community.

A place-based approach that focuses on developing the right skills in close proximity to the organisations that need them, rather than simply creating employment as an end goal in itself.

In the last year, we have successfully established True North as a community of aspirational, purpose-led businesses.

Having done so, our focus over the next 12 months (and beyond) will be on demonstrating how a place-based approach to skills can be scaled by connecting employers directly to talent in a specific local community.

If successful, we hope to highlight an approach that can be replicated throughout the region and to validate that the golden thread to scaling northern ambition is through a strategic, targeted focus on skills.

If you want to support us in that mission, or know other purpose-driven businesses, leaders or other organisation who can help, please join the network to receive our latest updates.

Join the network here:
<https://hub.brabners.com/join-true-north>



1

All figures are available and published openly on the True North Data Explorer. The latest available data has been used wherever possible

2

Economically inactive defined as people not in employment, educations or training (NEET)

3

Youth defined as aged 16-24

4

NVQ is a work-based qualification that recognises the skills and knowledge a person needs to do a job. A Level 4 NVQ is considered equivalent to a Higher Education Certificate or a BTEC qualification

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The following insights are an amalgamation of perspectives from a roundtable discussion that took place on 5th December 2024, featuring members of the True North network. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Brabners LLP

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National Apprenticeship Week: Shaping the Future Workforce, JJ Smith, February 2024, <https://www.jjsmith.co.uk/news/national-apprenticeship-week-shaping-the-future-workforce>

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All figures are available and published openly on the True North Data Explorer. The latest available data has been used wherever possible

15

Gross value added (GVA) per hour worked is a measure of labour productivity that's calculated by dividing the gross value added (GVA) by the hours worked to produce it

16

The following insights are an amalgamation of perspectives from a roundtable discussion that took place on 5th November 2024, featuring members of the True North network. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Brabners LLP

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All figures are available and published openly on the True North Data Explorer. The latest available data has been used wherever possible

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Companies classified under the Data City's Net Zero Real-time Industrial Classification (RTIC) — 16 key sectors which play a role within the whole UK net-zero economy

24

B Corporation, is a for-profit company that has been certified by B Lab to meet high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency, and accountability

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The following insights are an amalgamation of perspectives from a roundtable discussion that took place on 7th November 2024, featuring members of the True North network. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Brabners LLP

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All figures are available and published openly on the True North Data Explorer. The latest available data has been used wherever possible

38

Companies limited by guarantee are widely used for charities, community projects, clubs, societies and other similar bodies. Most guarantee companies are not-for-profit companies and do not distribute their profits to their members but either retain them within the company or use them for some other purpose

39

CICs are limited companies which operate to provide a benefit to the community they serve. The purpose of a CIC is primarily one of community benefit rather than private profit

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The following insights are an amalgamation of perspectives from a roundtable discussion that took place on 14th November 2024, featuring members of the True North network. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Brabners LLP

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