
inspiring growth

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Foreword

This past year has been a really important one for RTC North. As we look back on 2025/26, there should be a sense of collective pride in what we’ve achieved, but also a stronger sense of who we are and what we’re here to do for the North of England in the years ahead.

One of the biggest moments for us has been becoming employee owned. Moving the business into the shared stewardship of our people felt like the right step at the right time. It protects what matters most to us – our values, our regional focus, and our long-term commitment to supporting innovation, skills and business growth across the North. In many ways, it’s not a shift in direction, but a natural continuation of what RTC North has always stood for.

Since we were founded in Sunderland in 1989, we’ve grown from strong local roots into an organisation working right across the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humber. We’re still proudly based in Sunderland city centre, and that sense of place remains really important to us, even as we work at a wider regional scale. That balance – being locally grounded through our people but active pan-regionally – is central to the role we play in supporting economic renewal, good jobs and long-term confidence in the North.

Becoming a certified B Corp this year, alongside employee ownership, reinforces something we’ve always believed: that doing well as a business and making a positive impact should go hand in hand.

Having a people-first ownership model means those delivering the work every day have a real stake in the future. It also gives us the space to think long term – investing in people, partnerships and places, and continuing to support responsible innovation and inclusive growth.

Across 2025/26, our teams have worked with thousands of businesses, helping them deal with uncertainty, improve productivity, adopt new technologies and bring ideas to market. From advanced manufacturing and clean growth to digital, health and defence, the range of sectors we support shows both the diversity of the North’s economy and its potential. Our focus remains the same throughout – practical, evidence-led support that helps businesses move forward with confidence.

RTC North has always been about innovation and hands-on support. That goes right back to the early days of the digital economy, when dad saw the opportunity technology offered small businesses – and the need for the right support to help them make the most of it. That same approach still shapes what we do today: working alongside businesses to tackle real challenges, while helping build lasting capability and confidence.

Looking ahead, I feel optimistic. There are real challenges facing businesses across the North, but there’s also a huge opportunity to build something stronger through innovation, collaboration and good work.



Employee ownership gives us a strong foundation for that – with shared responsibility, long-term thinking and a clear focus on delivering impact not just for the organisation, but for the communities we serve.



I’d like to thank our partners, funders and stakeholders for their ongoing support. Most of all, thank you to everyone at RTC North. It’s your expertise, commitment and belief in what we’re trying to achieve that makes all of this possible.

Jamie Ollivere,
Chief Executive, RTC North



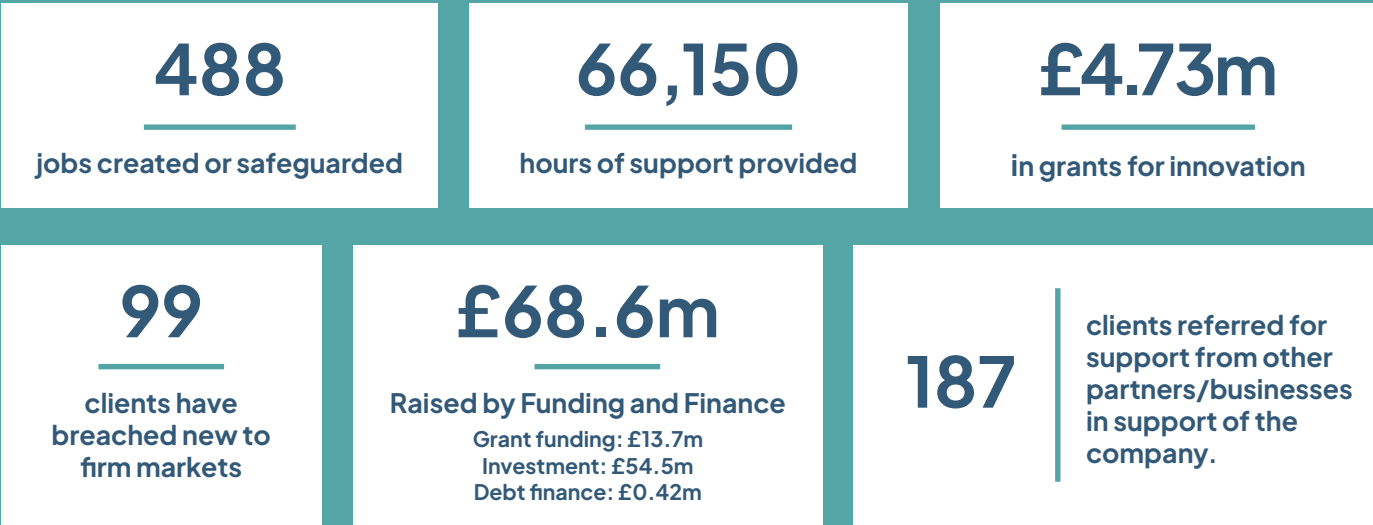
2025/26 in numbers



During 2025/26, we helped:



Leading to:



Building competitiveness from the classroom up

Long-term competitiveness starts with the people entering the workforce. Our STEM Hub continues to build the region's future skills pipeline, closing gaps in engineering, digital, manufacturing and other high-demand sectors by connecting young people with the industries that need them.

- In 2025/26:
- We engaged more than 160,000 young people across the North
 - We worked with 1,756 schools
 - We welcomed 820 new STEM Ambassadors across the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber
 - We hosted our flagship CyberFirst Education Conference, bringing together over 100 educators and professionals
 - Industry leaders including Airbus, Nissan, Johnson and Johnson MedTech and Cummins were recognised at our 2025 STEM Awards for their commitment to the region's talent pipeline

Three priorities. Thousands of businesses. One goal: a stronger, more confident North.

At RTC North, we believe that doing well as a business and making a positive impact should go hand in hand. That belief is at the heart of our three strategic priorities, Innovate, Compete, Grow.

This year, we became employee-owned. Ownership passed into the hands of the people who deliver impact every day, protecting our values, our regional focus and our long-term commitment to the North. Coupled with our B Corp certification, it confirms what has always been true about how we work: with a real stake in the success of the businesses and communities we serve.

Since our founding in 1989, we have grown from strong local roots into an organisation working across the North East. The scale has changed. The approach has not. We remain evidence-led, partnership-driven, and focused on the sectors where the North's potential is greatest: advanced manufacturing, clean growth, digital, health and defence.

Our three priorities are interconnected. Businesses that innovate compete more effectively. Businesses that compete are better placed to grow. Two cross-cutting commitments run through all three

priorities: our STEM work, which builds the talent pipeline the North's economy depends on; and our supply chain programmes, which connect SMEs with new markets, new partners and the confidence to scale.

Innovate, Compete and Grow is how we turn the North's potential into progress – practically, purposefully, and for the long term.

Innovate Innovate is about turning creativity and knowledge into action. We help businesses across the North explore new ideas, develop products and services, adopt new technologies, and embed innovation into how they think and operate, from early-stage founders taking their first steps to established firms ready to break into new markets. As a long-standing Innovate UK delivery partner, we connect national innovation priorities with local potential and provide tailored support that builds commercial confidence and capability.	Compete Compete is about giving businesses the tools to stand out - locally, nationally, or globally. In sectors like advanced manufacturing, digital, clean growth and defence, competitiveness demands focus, capability and resilience. We help SMEs work smarter. Our supply chain work is central here: connecting smaller businesses with major buyers, helping them benchmark against the best, and equipping them to win and deliver significant contracts with confidence.	Grow Grow is about building the long-term foundations that turn ambition into lasting success. We work alongside businesses to strengthen leadership capability, develop high-performing teams, access the right finance and investment, and build strategies that stand up to real-world pressure. Whether a business is ready to scale, diversify, or simply take the next step with confidence, we provide the practical support and expert challenge to make it happen, with the future firmly in mind.
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STEM: Our STEM work connects young people with the inspiration, skills and role models they need to pursue careers in high-value sectors, from engineering and digital to clean energy and life sciences. By bringing educators, employers and ambassadors together, we're closing skills gaps, and ensuring the North's next generation is equipped to drive the innovation and growth our region depends on.	Supply Chain: Strong supply chains are the backbone of a competitive, resilient regional economy. We help businesses become supply-chain ready, connecting SMEs with major buyers, opening doors to new sectors and contracts, and building the capability to deliver at scale. Anchoring more economic activity locally reduces risk, creates jobs, and generates the kind of collaborative innovation that benefits entire industries.
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Innovate

From idea to impact

Innovation is not always about what you build. It is about what you believe is possible, and having the support, structure and confidence to make it real.

This year, our innovation programmes have worked alongside founders at every stage of that journey: from a solo entrepreneur with a platform concept and no time to spare, to an EdTech founder securing Innovate UK funding with an impressive 96 percent score, to a regulatory tech startup that moved from early idea to registered company, secured grant funding and opened a public waitlist - all within a single programme year.

As a long-standing delivery partner for Innovate UK, we connect national innovation priorities with the people and businesses that can bring them to life.

Empowering innovators to lead

Hawa Kandeh came to the Innovative Entrepreneurs Programme with a bold vision for Globally Linked, an inclusive EdTech platform combining smart toys, an app, AI chatbots and learning tools designed to support children, parents and schools.

The vision was clear. What Hawa needed was the confidence, structure and commercial grounding to match it.

Working with Innovation Coach Chantelle Brandon Reeves, Hawa refined her value proposition, strengthened her pitch and built the operational foundations - the financial systems, IP protection, HR processes - that investors and grant funders expect to see. She prepared for Demo Day and Pitch Day,

“Place-based innovation isn’t just my job; it’s what gives me purpose, and at RTC, I get to do it with commitment, trust and a long-term mindset that genuinely supports businesses and strengthens the region I care deeply about. If you’re a business, policymaker or regional leader who believes in the power of place-based innovation, or if you want to understand how to unlock more value from your local ecosystem, RTC North can help.”

Alex Pilkington,
Senior Innovation Specialist, RTC North



96% score achieved

by Globally Linked founder Hawa Kandeh in the DCMS Create Growth Programme competition, securing Innovate UK funding.

Through programmes including the Innovative Entrepreneurs Programme and Regional Talent Engines, we offer the coaching, peer networks and strategic insight that help founders turn ideas into viable, scalable ventures.



“The programme tackles different types of support: 1-2-1, academic, coaching. It was also amazing to be in company with such a wide range of different businesses.”

Melissa Matthew, Founder, Reen Platforms, Yorkshire and the Humber



“Chantelle’s guidance has been truly transformative. She made me feel that I belonged in big rooms, that my voice, my leadership and my innovation had weight.”

Hawa Kandeh,
Founder and CEO, Globally Linked, Yorkshire and the Humber

simplified her slides, practised her delivery and learned to tell her story with clarity and conviction.

The results speak for themselves. Hawa secured Innovate UK funding through the DCMS Create Growth Programme competition, achieving a score of 96

percent. She has since transitioned into the Innovate UK Business Growth pathway, with pilot partnerships established with Leeds Central Library and schools, and international expansion strategies developed for Saudi Arabia and Spain.

From first idea to investable venture

Stephen Walker had spotted a real opportunity. With new EU regulations requiring manufacturers to adopt Digital Product Passports, a system for tracking the sustainability and traceability of products across their lifecycle, he could see the gap in the market clearly. What he couldn’t yet see was the path from idea to business.

Joining the Innovative Entrepreneurs Programme, Stephen worked with Business Support Specialist Ralph D’Attorre through one-to-one coaching that helped him breakdown the vision into a manageable plan: what to learn, what to prioritise and how to build something sustainable. Group sessions and structured workshops on lean methodology, market discovery and

investment readiness further helped to keep the project moving.

During the programme, Stephen held early conversations with manufacturers to validate demand, formed a co-founding team, officially registered Sentiri Ltd and opened a public waitlist to build a community of early adopters. The business also secured grant funding through a competitive pitch competition to begin developing its minimum viable product.

What began as an idea with no clear structure is now a growing business, backed by industry insight, early traction and a defined roadmap, ready to support manufacturers as they adapt to incoming regulation.



“The programme helped me move from idea to action. I’ve launched Sentiri as a registered company, secured a grant, formed key partnerships and launched our public waitlist. It gave me the confidence and connections to turn a concept into a real, investable venture.”

Stephen Walker,
Founder, Sentiri, North East

Building an ecosystem that supports innovation

Through all our innovation work this year, one theme has come through again and again: the moment a founder stops carrying the uncertainty alone.

For Dragos Popa, co-founder of PLATO Academic, that moment came during the coaching sessions that helped him untangle the commercial side of a product already built and ready for market. PLATO’s AI-powered study platform integrates directly with student digital learning environments, giving students 24/7 on-demand, module-specific support and freeing academic staff to focus on higher-value teaching. The concept was proven. What was missing was a clear sales pipeline, an investor narrative and the confidence to approach university partners at scale.

Working with Business Support Specialist Ralph D’Attorre, the team rebuilt their sales process from the ground up, identifying bottlenecks, reshaping the pipeline and developing

a sharper, more compelling approach to funding conversations. PLATO is now strengthening partnerships with universities, expanding into new institutions and preparing for investment to support further development.

For Melissa Matthew, sole founder of Reen Platforms, the programme offered something equally valuable: structured time and accountability. Melissa is building an all-in-one job management platform for tradespeople, covering quoting, scheduling, approvals and payments in a single, transparent system.

Balancing a full-time job with solo development meant progress was hard to sustain alone. Through one-to-one coaching, peer sessions and investment readiness training, she registered the business as a limited company, launched a website and reached the point where she could talk about her idea with confidence in front of a panel.

“One of the standout aspects was the one-to-one coaching. It helped me address key challenges around defining our sales pipeline and identifying ways to speed up our sales cycle. The clarity gained through the programme has positioned us strongly for our next phase.”

Dragos Popa,
Co-Founder and Director, PLATO Academic, Yorkshire and the Humber

When an innovative idea is backed with the right support, it doesn’t just lead to a great business it, creates something that endures.

Grow

Tailored support for business growth.

Here at RTC North, we are proud to champion the businesses that power our economy and shape the future of our region. From start-ups finding their feet to established SMEs and fast-growing firms ready to scale, businesses across the North of England are creating jobs, driving innovation and strengthening communities.

They are also central to the UK economy, making up 99.9% of all businesses, employing more than 16 million people, and contributing over £2.4 trillion each year. We are proud that we



“Paul and the team have developed an important platform that will play such a significant part in many people’s lives. I am so pleased to have been able to assist them during this rapid growth stage of their journey.”

Craig Huntingdon, Scaleup Partner

have supported hundreds of these businesses this year to grow, adapt and unlock their potential.

We know that every growth journey is different. The challenges faced by an ambitious founder, a scaling manufacturer or an expanding tech business are never exactly the same. That is why our role is to provide the right support at the right time, practical, tailored and centred on the real needs of businesses.

Through our programmes, partnerships and people, we have supported businesses at every stage of their journey this year, connecting founders and leaders with experienced partners who have built and scaled businesses themselves, and who bring their sector knowledge, their network and honest challenge to help SMEs deliver growth with confidence.

Scaleup North East: Turning ambition into impact

Some businesses grow steadily over several years, but others are on the fast track. Through our Scaleup North East programme, we help high growth potential businesses overcome the barriers that can hold them back. Whether that’s access to finance advice, leadership coaching, or market entry support and commercial clarity, our Scaleup Partners have the lived experience to help unlock growth potential.

iPac Packaging Innovations has grown fast, deliberately and on its own terms.

Founded in Gateshead in 2016, the business produces thermoformed packaging for the food and pharmaceutical industries. From a ten-person start-up with £500,000 turnover, iPac has scaled to a 100-strong team generating more than £24 million while staying fiercely committed to quality, sustainability and a North East manufacturing ethos.



“He’s been there and done it; he’s built and scaled a business, so being able to bounce things off him is invaluable. It has proven massively beneficial for us.”

Jonny Catto,
Managing Director, iPac Packaging Innovations, North East

Managing director Jonny Catto joined the Scaleup North East programme to work alongside Partner Tony Brooks, who built his own two-person engineering firm into a multi-million-pound operation. For Jonny, the relationship has been transformative.

Tony directed iPac to a Made Smarter grant that funded a full warehouse management system, replacing an Excel-based process that was “creaking at the seams” while the business was handling thousands of pallets a week.

Beyond funding, the introductions and industry connections Tony provided have opened doors at exactly the right moment.

Now iPac is preparing for its next chapter, a £10 million investment programme over 18 months, bringing extrusion in-house, installing new thermoforming lines, and creating around 15 new jobs. A new site in County Durham is already operational and their pipeline is full.

Supporting innovation and keeping families connected at scale

Care Messenger was founded with a simple, powerful idea: that elderly people in care settings should be able to stay connected with the people who matter to them, using technology they already understand.

In partnership with LG, the North East-based company developed a TV-based video calling and messaging platform operated by standard remote control, removing digital barriers and putting connection within reach for those who might struggle with smartphones or tablets.

After several years of steady growth, Care Messenger entered a pivotal new phase. Major contract wins resulted in a deployment across every Health and Social Care run facility in South Lanarkshire; 424 apartments with the Netherlands’ leading care provider Viente; a new care village in the

Borders; and integration into wider telecare ecosystems in Moray and the Netherlands.

The opportunity was significant. But so was the complexity. Scaling from a lean, efficient team to an organisation capable of multi-site international delivery required a different kind of thinking.

Working with Scaleup Partner Craig Huntingdon, chief executive Paul Slaughter and his leadership team focused on the foundations: resourcing plans, funding strategy, investor narrative and the operational infrastructure needed to deliver at pace when contracts landed.

The result is a business that has now achieved successful rollout in two countries and is entering its next phase with confidence and a platform that has evolved well beyond its original scope, incorporating AI and IoT capabilities while keeping user experience front and centre.



“You typically only get one opportunity to engage an investor. We are deeply appreciative of the professional support from Craig to help us prepare for this next vital step.”

Paul Slaughter, Chief Executive, Care Messenger, North East

Building foundations for scale

For Aubin, founder of Baobab Logix, the challenge wasn’t the technology, it was everything around it. With a clear vision for an AI-powered enterprise contact centre platform, he needed strategic clarity and investor readiness to match his technical foundations.

Through the Innovative Entrepreneurs Programme, Aubin worked with Business Support Specialist Ralph D’Atorre with coaching sessions covering strategic development and the personal resilience early-stage founders need. The outcomes were significant: acceptance into Microsoft for Startups, NVIDIA Inception, HubSpot, OpenAI and AWS programmes, unlocking cloud credits and resources valued at over one million pounds, alongside a clear MVP roadmap and a new internship partnership with Bradford University.



“The support helped us refine our strategy, gain confidence in investor discussions, and connect with key stakeholders. I truly appreciate the guidance. It has played a key role in the progress we have made.”

Aubin, Founder, Baobab Logix, Yorkshire and the Humber

Building the capability to grow

From a North East manufacturer investing £10 million in vertical integration, to a care technology company rolling out across two countries, to an AI founder unlocking a million pounds in global resources, the businesses we have supported this year are proof that the North’s growth potential is real, and that the right support at the right time can transform ambition into momentum.

What connects these stories isn’t sector or scale. It’s the moment when a business needs someone to think alongside them. To ask the difficult question. To make the right introduction. To help a leadership team trust their own judgement and move forward with confidence.

That’s what we’re here for. Their success is what drives us, and we are proud to play our part.

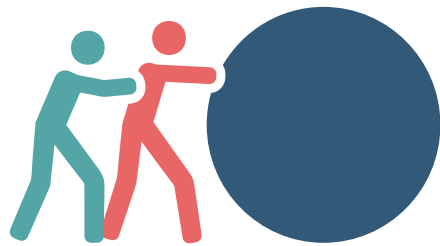
Compete

At RTC North, we know that competitiveness is rarely about one big decision. It is about the cumulative effect of working smarter, improving a process here, removing a bottleneck there, and introducing new technology at the right time. For businesses across the North, that is where we come in.

In a fast-moving economy, standing still is not an option. The manufacturers we support are facing pressure on productivity, lead times and sustainability. The SMEs competing for contracts are navigating complex procurement landscapes and trying to

get in front of the right buyers. Our role is to help businesses of all shapes and sizes sharpen their competitive edge, and to make sure the support they access is practical and built around what they actually need.

This year, our Made Smarter programme, supply chain work and procurement support have helped hundreds of businesses across the North succeed. From a seven-person valve engineering firm in Teesside to a Northumberland manufacturer with new contracts in the Far East, the results speak for themselves.



From cutting assembly times in half, opening new markets through digital investment, to connecting SMEs with major buyers in a single day, we have helped businesses across the North compete with confidence.

Smarter Manufacturing

Probe Industries has been manufacturing rotary atomiser systems and liquid odour control products from Northumberland for thirty years. This established and respected business had seen turnover rise 18% to £1.1 million in a single year, with new contracts in the Far East and projections of £1.3 million to come.

But growth was creating pressure. Manual chemical blending and atomiser assembly processes were producing variable lead times, with assembly times exceeding five hours per unit. The team could see the problem. What they needed was the confidence and expertise to act on it.

Through the Made Smarter programme, RTC North conducted a full site visit and developed a tailored Digital Roadmap. Lean practitioner Jim Barr reviewed every stage of the process, identifying where time was being lost and where technology could make the biggest difference. The introduction of body cameras to analyse workflows alone



cut assembly time from eight hours to under five. The introduction of the 5S methodology, a structured approach to workplace organisation, transformed the layout of the assembly process. With a Made Smarter revenue grant now in place, production time is expected to fall further still, to around three hours per unit.

“I established Probe over thirty years ago and have had a lot of advice from consultants, often finding it wanting. RTC North has genuinely changed my opinion of business support specialists. Without their guidance, we would not have had the same confidence or understanding of what help is available. They achieved more than we expected.”

Phil Rutherford, Technical Director, Probe Industries, North East

The impact has gone beyond the production line. Staff morale has lifted noticeably. And a business that had grown wary of external consultants has a new view of what good support looks like.

Going digital to work smarter

For Virasel Valve Solutions, a seven-person valve servicing and repair business based in Teesside, the challenge was not finding work. The work was flooding in.

Operating across pharmaceutical, power, utilities, oil and gas, aerospace and defence and offering a rapid-response mobile repair service nationwide, Virasel had built a strong reputation since its founding in 2016. What it needed now was the infrastructure to keep pace.

Through the Made Smarter programme, two team members attended workshops that identified where time was being lost. Report writing, a necessary but time-consuming task, was absorbing

valuable hours that could be spent on core engineering work. RTC North arranged a site visit, advising on workflow layout and identifying a software solution to automate and streamline the reporting process.

A Made Smarter capital grant funded a new valve test bench, opening the door to new markets across the UK and Ireland. A revenue grant application is now in progress to bring in a software consultant to complete the digital transformation. The impact has already reached beyond efficiency. The programme helped Virasel open conversations about values, mission and what the business is building for, bringing the whole team along, including those who were initially reluctant to change.

Staying competitive is not just about the here and now. It is about ensuring that when a contract lands, your processes are ready to deliver it. When a new market opens, your technology means you are ready to grab the opportunity.

“The Made Smarter programme gave me hope that we can make meaningful digital changes to support the business and, importantly, improve work-life balance for the team. It’s not just about technology. It’s about bringing everyone along on the journey.”

Sue Donnelly, Director of Operations, Virasel Valve Solutions, North East

Opening doors through supply chain support

Competitiveness is not always about what happens on the shop floor. Sometimes it is about getting in front of the right people at the right time.

When Adderstone Living, the social housing division of Adderstone Group, was preparing to expand its development activity into West Yorkshire, it faced a familiar challenge: new region, no established relationships, and groundworks due to begin within months. Building a reliable local supply chain from scratch can take years. The business needed a faster route.

RTC North facilitated a Meet the Buyer event, bringing Adderstone Living together with SMEs in the construction sector in a single day of structured conversations. For businesses that had previously found it difficult to get in front of developers of this scale, it was a direct line to the decision-makers.

One of those businesses was Palmer Barnes Limited, a Wakefield-based tiling specialist. A one-to-one meeting during

“These Meet the Buyer events are incredibly beneficial, for smaller suppliers to find relevant opportunities, and for us as developers to discover talented local businesses who share our ethos. The connections we made have already started to bear fruit.”

Debbie Hope, New Business Director, Adderstone Living

the event gave the team the opportunity to showcase their expertise and establish a personal connection with Adderstone’s commercial team. Within days, Palmer Barnes received a tender offer worth £10,000, and a clear pathway to larger collaborations ahead.

For Adderstone Living, the event delivered immediate results: pricing opportunities issued to multiple attending businesses, sharper understanding of regional pricing, and a supply chain pipeline aligned with its sustainability goals.

“Attending the Meet the Buyer event was a fantastic opportunity. Receiving a tender so quickly after was beyond our expectations. It’s a small step, but we believe it could open doors to much larger collaborations.”

Dean Palmer, Managing Director, Palmer Barnes Limited, Yorkshire and the Humber

In only one day, Adderstone Living was able to make connections that previously would have taken months to build.

From the production line to the procurement room, and from the workshop floor to the boardroom, we are proud to be helping businesses across the North compete with a clear vision, ambition and resilience. The challenges are real. So is the opportunity.



We are looking forward to 2026/27,
follow along on our journey:

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RTC
inspiring growth

