

NE1 TURNS TEN

Chief executive of NE1 Ltd Sean Bullick reflects on the past ten years of the city's business improvement district company, and tells Alison Cowie why, in the face of Brexit, austerity and ongoing uncertainty, it remains a beacon for growth and prosperity in our region

The award-winning business improvement district company, NE1 Ltd, celebrated its tenth anniversary this year.

The organisation – led by chief executive Sean Bullick – receives around £2 million each year from local businesses (via a levy on their business rates) to deliver a range of projects that promote and stimulate the economy of Newcastle city centre and the surrounding areas.

NE1's Alive After Five initiative, bridging Newcastle's daytime and evening offering, has attracted 11.6 million visitors and contributed £708 million to the local economy since it was established in 2010.

The organisation has also hosted and supported several high-profile events including the biannual Newcastle Restaurant Week – the last of which saw more than 40,000 diners spend in excess of £530,000 over a one-week period; Newcastle Motor Show, which added an estimated £8 million to the region's economy; Northern Pride; RFL Magic Weekend; Vueling Quayside Seaside and more.

The Welcome Students of the World event was organised by NE1 for the first time this year and helped to showcase Newcastle as a thriving city for international students with seven searchlights (representing the seven continents) shining over the city, alongside flags from 152 nationals, over a three-week period.

NE1 was also heavily involved in the £24.5 million redevelopment of Central Station (in partnership with Newcastle City Council, Network Rail and Virgin Trains East Coast) and, before this, brought a city marina to Newcastle's Quayside which has brought a number of multi-million-pound yachts – and their owners and crews – to the city.

In February this year, NE1 opened its Space2 facility to help young people into work. This has since transformed into NE1 CAN, which looks to bring the city's young people and 1400 employers and employment providers together.

Sean, a former commercial lawyer who moved to the Imperial War Museum where he worked with the Government on projects of historical and cultural importance, relocated from London to establish NE1 Ltd.

From his Newcastle office on the top floor of Milburn House, overlooking the Castle Keep, he reflects: "We deliver a range of projects and activities that on the surface may not have an obvious narrative but are all focused on helping the business environment of Newcastle and its surrounding areas."

Business improvement district companies, or BIDs, are based in cities across the world and their activities can vary dramatically depending on the requirements of their localities.

"I have spoken to BIDs in South Africa's Cape Town who spend 70 per cent of their funds on security and the remaining 30 per cent on helping people into jobs," Sean explains. "On the other hand, someone from a BID in Hamburg, Germany, described its work to me as 'organising parties for the rich' – to encourage affluent people to spend more money in the city."

While NE1's work initially focused on a programme of marketing and events to raise Newcastle's profile, in recent years it has supplemented this activity with more ambitious capital projects.

After completing the successful redevelopment of Newcastle Central Station last year, NE1 has turned its attention to the Bigg Market and recently secured £3.2 million of funding to revamp this area of the city, with the potential of attracting an additional £30 million of investment from surrounding land owners.

NE1 has also embarked on its Newcastle Retail Quarter project which plans to improve Newcastle's main shopping thoroughfare, Northumberland Street, and its tributaries by ambitiously creating a partnership of up to 50 property owners and developers.

Sean cites a recent study released by The ▶





Academy of Urbanism on Lisbon in Portugal as the inspiration for the project. In the study, it talks about horizontal investment on streets, parks, and so on at the ground level, leading to vertical investment with more companies leasing space in buildings from the first floor upwards.

"It's a model that we're hoping to replicate in Newcastle's main shopping area," Sean says.

NE1's diverse workload was recognised this year when it was awarded the EU BID Award 2016.

Presented by the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce, it is the first time a BID outside Germany has won the accolade.

"We were absolutely delighted to have been awarded the [EU BID Award 2016]," says Sean.

"One of the reasons we believe we were successful was our ability to clearly demonstrate the return on investment for the businesses that fund us."

He explains further: "It would be very easy for businesses to simply see the payments that they make to us as another tax but we want them to see it more as an investment and spend a lot of time measuring the footfall and projected spend from our activities to show that businesses receive more than they put in.

"For example, we announced this year that our Alive after Five initiative has contributed more than £700 million to the local economy over the past six years.

"Much of this has been spent directly in Newcastle's bars, shops and restaurants, but actually some of our biggest supporters of the initiative have been from the professional services that see the benefit in creating a vibrant night time economy for their staff and clients."

NE1 has also been keen to demonstrate the effectiveness of BIDs to Government and Sean visited 10 Downing Street a year ago to speak to advisors of the then Prime Minister David Cameron.

"The basic point we wanted to get across was

that NE1 was a very cost effective way of delivering really useful change," says Sean.

"As a private sector body, we can work nimbly without having to get bogged down in public sector procurement," he adds.

There has, of course, been much political upheaval since that visit – not least with the person who presides at 10 Downing Street.

Sean, however, is confident that Theresa May's Government remains committed to the future of NE1.

"We recently met with Andrew Percy [who replaced James Wharton as the Minister for the Northern Powerhouse in July this year] and I got a sense that he had a good understanding of the potential NE1 has to deliver more. He seemed genuinely committed to the North and in working together to deliver economic growth," Sean reflects.

In the face of Brexit, ongoing austerity and continued uncertainty for businesses, Sean maintains that the role of NE1 is now more important than ever.

"Newcastle and the region are at risk of becoming horribly isolated simply because of our geographic position," he explains.

"Unless we make the business case, as effectively as we can, for better infrastructure, more inward investment and increased export trade, we as a region could be forgotten about.

"We must demonstrate our importance and show Government we can grow GVA, create a wealthy and prosperous region and trade with the rest of the world.

"If we don't make the case, then no one else will."

The chief executive considers the collapse of North East devolution in September this year – when four of the seven local authorities declined the proposed agreement – a major blow in putting this case forward.

"It absolutely was a lost opportunity and NE1 is very supportive of Nick Forbes [leader of Newcastle City Council] in his pursuit of a devolution deal for the three local authorities north of the River Tyne who did agree," he says.

Looking to the future, Sean is cautiously optimistic that Newcastle and its surrounding area will build its reputation nationally and internationally.

Next year, NE1 will continue with its Big Market and Newcastle Retail Quarter projects, as well delivering a programme of events.

"We're currently exploring opportunities which will provide a more visually dramatic Christmas 2017," Sean reveals.

The business owners and residents of Newcastle and its surrounding areas will have to wait and see what other opportunities NE1 brings next year and beyond.