

NORTH EAST

Entrepreneurship Week

THE PLACE TO RISE

SUNDERLAND | WEDNESDAY 18TH NOVEMBER

Mentoring Drop-in

Confidential 1-2-1 time with entrepreneurs and funding specialists

WHEN

Wednesday 18th November 2026

Sessions from 9.30am to 5pm

WHERE

North East BIC

Enterprise Park East, Wearfield,
Sunderland, SR5 2TA

Whatever stage your business is at, having the chance to talk things through with someone who has been there before can be invaluable.

On Wednesday 18th November the Entrepreneurs' Forum is holding a Mentoring Drop-in session at the North East BIC in Sunderland as part of North East Entrepreneurship Week, open to any business owner who would welcome a 1-2-1 meeting with a mentor.

These confidential peer-to-peer sessions are designed to give you space to explore challenges, test ideas, or sense-check decisions with another entrepreneur in a supportive, neutral setting.

We are delighted to have four entrepreneurs available to speak to at different points in the day, as well as funding experts from UMi who will be available in the atrium. Our mentors and their availability are below, along with biographies outlining their background and areas of expertise.

Who you can meet

Morning mentors

1-hour appointments
9.30am | 10.30am | 12 noon

John Forth - Co-Founder of IS THIS YOU?

Carl Buckley - Founder of Clarity in Business and former Managing Director of Urban River

Afternoon mentors

1-hour appointments
1.30pm | 2.30pm | 4pm

Di Gates - Founder of Connection Heroes

Neil Henry - Founder of Option3 Logic and former owner of HLA Services

Funding experts

In the atrium
9.30am - 2pm
Half-hour slots

Phil Sly & Gemma Cruz - UMi - talk through your funding needs

How to book

To book a private 1-2-1 mentoring session or a funding conversation, please email Michael Dixon at michael@entrepreneursforum.net and let him know:

1. Which mentor or UMi representative you'd like to meet
2. Your preferred time slot
3. What you'd like to discuss on the day

If you'd like both a mentoring conversation and a funding conversation, please confirm your preferred times for each in your message.

Cancellation

Our mentors are giving up their time to support fellow business owners, so if you need to cancel your session please do so with as much notice as possible, so that we can offer the place to another business owner.

About our mentors

John Forth

Co-Founder, IS THIS YOU?

John Forth is a coach, mentor and co-founder of IS THIS YOU?, a North East business and leadership coaching firm, working with senior leaders from regional, national and international businesses including tech giant Sage PLC.

After building and losing a seven-figure property business during the 2008 global financial crash, John rebuilt from the ground up, turning an opportunistic demonstration of solar panels into a seven-figure renewables business.

John now works with founders and SME leaders, helping them to build businesses, careers and lives they love - to lead with purpose, stretch their comfort zones, and build high-performing businesses and teams.

John also co-hosts the North East BIC Growth Lab events, bringing honest insight, energy and practical experience to business audiences across the region. He delivers high-impact coaching and mentoring, combining lived entrepreneurial experience with structured leadership and personal development.

The team at IS THIS YOU? have recently secured investment from Mercia Ventures to accelerate the rollout of their Advantage OS coaching platform, designed to help individuals and teams maximise performance at scale.

John's work is centred around helping people grow in capability, mindset and knowledge, and pairing this with the latest business tech to accelerate results. He is always happy to share practical insight on business, leadership, personal growth, and what it really takes to turn potential into results.

Carl Buckley

Founder, Clarity in Business

I come from a background in legal and finance, having worked for a number of business consultancies from 1987 to 1997, effectively troubleshooting issues over the years to provide them with a degree of clarity. A real mixture of organisations, from high-growth start-ups through established private sector and large public sector, including the Department of Health.

Since 1997, I have established, scaled and exited two consultancies and a healthcare business, which we took from a blank sheet of paper to 3,500 staff and £80m turnover in less than 20 months. Not a brag, just to provide context of experience.

In 2003, I established a full-service marketing agency working across strategic marketing, branding, web and digital marketing, including SEO and e-marketing. I built this business up working with the public sector, charities and a mixture of private sector businesses in both B2B and B2C. I exited this at the end of June 2026 through a management buy-out.

Nearly 40 years helping businesses, business owners and boards with clarity of issues and how to address them. I have a direct, people-centred discussion/workshop-type approach rather than online/telephone calls. Direct “real life” experience in setting up, managing and exiting through the sale of a number of businesses, and until recently I have been immersed in the everyday problem solving that being in business brings. A non-jargon approach and deep understanding of marketing, finance and sales in equal amounts.

Experienced in all areas of strategic and operational marketing, covering branding on/offline, overall business structure, business development and all forms of finance - from understanding financial models (how organisations make money and whether they are doing just that) to cashflow forecasting, funding and analysis of profits/planning around profit improvements.

I have experience across a number of sectors and businesses of all types, from start-ups through scale-up to larger, well-established organisations.

Di Gates

Founder, Connection Heroes

Over 15 years ago, Di sold her half of a bustling city-centre creative agency to launch Stick Theory - a fully remote, freelance-driven collaboration agency that was years ahead of its time.

Di has now evolved that approach into Connection Heroes, a specialist training provider that helps organisations strengthen human connection and improve collaboration across distributed teams. Combining agile values, human-centred design, evidence-based neuroscience and organisational psychology, Di is uncovering what drives meaningful workplace connections while helping leaders create happier, healthier, high-performing teams.

Neil Henry MIOR

Founder, Option3 Logic | Formerly of HLA Services

Neil Henry is an entrepreneur, former business owner and governor of various charitable organisations.

As one of the founding shareholder/directors of HLA Services, Neil assisted in the expansion of the company over 20 years as Service and Operations Director, taking the company from a turnover of £100,000 in 2003 to a turnover of £12.5m in the year ending March 2023, and staff from 5 to 120.

Neil led the service department in securing long-term contracts with organisations such as Durham University, Caterpillar UK and Northumbria Police, amongst many others, establishing the company as a market leader in the building services and HVAC industries.

Neil is also vice chairman of Grace House Charity, a respite centre for children based in Sunderland, and sits on the board of governors of South Tyneside College.

Neil recently sold his shareholding in HLA Services and is looking to assist new and established SMEs, either in a non-executive position or as a mentor through the Forum.

“I’m sure the experiences I have had over the last 20 years, including the 2008 crash, Brexit and Covid, will help me assist SME businesses in the minefield of an ever-changing business landscape, especially in the area of operations and business development.”

Areas of expertise: Organic Growth, Tendering, Customer Satisfaction, Sales Process, Service Excellence, Warehousing & Storage, Environmental Issues, Operations, Sales Strategy, Delegating, Investors in People, Networking, Recruitment & Retention, Staff Development & Motivation, Leadership, Time Management, Work/Life Balance, Property, Business Plans, Risk Management, Exit Strategies, Contingency Planning & Disaster Recovery, Project & Change Management, Corporate Hospitality, Event Management, Lifestyle Management, Travel Management, Vehicle Management

Phil Sly & Gemma Cruz

UMi | Funding experts, available in the atrium

UMi's Get Funding service simplifies the funding journey for businesses by providing expert guidance and tailored support. With a streamlined, one-stop-shop approach, they bring together the knowledge and expertise needed to help businesses access the funding solutions that best suit their needs.

There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to business funding. With multiple funding sources available, it can be difficult for SMEs to determine the best option for them - in fact, 60% of SMEs struggle to access the right funding simply because they don't know what's available. Whether it's grants, loans or investment, navigating the funding landscape alone can be overwhelming and costly.

HOW WE USE YOUR INFORMATION

When you book a mentoring session or funding conversation, the Entrepreneurs' Forum will record and use the details you give us (your name, business, contact details and what you'd like to discuss) to arrange and manage your booking for this event. We will share your name, business and discussion topic with the mentor or UMi representative you have chosen so they can prepare for your session, and we may contact you afterwards to ask how it went. We also keep a record of mentoring sessions to help us run and improve our mentoring programme.

Any information you share directly with UMi will be handled under UMi's own privacy policy. We will not use your details for marketing, or share them with anyone else, without your permission, and we will keep them only for as long as we need to for these purposes. You can ask to see, correct or delete the information we hold about you at any time by emailing info@entrepreneursforum.net. Full details are in our privacy policy at entrepreneursforum.net.