

Network

WHAT'S NEXT FOR DONCASTER?

Explore our city's ambitions for the future and the role that businesses will play in that vision.

REJUVENATING THE CITY CENTRE

Discover the big plans that are underway to give our city centre a much-needed boost.

CRACKING DOWN ON BUSINESS CRIME

Doncaster's District Commander on how South Yorkshire Police are helping businesses protect themselves

THE KEY TO GOOD COLLABORATION

Richard Clarke, Managing Director of Highland Carbon, explains how he thrives by working well with others

Doncaster Chamber August 2023

On Tuesday the 6th of June, over 200 Chamber members — from across different industries and of varying sizes — gathered together under one roof for an all-encompassing conversation about the future of our city.

At the Doncaster, What's Next? Business Conference, we explored topics like: how we can attract further investment into South Yorkshire; what more can be done to foster the next generation of talent; and if levelling up is truly being achieved in the North.

The discussion was candid, yet crucially still optimistic, reflecting on how things haven't exactly been going our way in the region lately, but also looking at what more can be done to get South Yorkshire back on track.

In order to get the ball rolling here, we were joined by a number of high-profile speakers and expert panelists. Among others, we heard from Nick Fletcher, MP for Don Valley; Ros Jones, Mayor of Doncaster; and Baroness Martha Lane-Fox CBE, President of the British Chambers of Commerce. Meanwhile, a range of inspiring entrepreneurs, major

investors and distinguished business leaders also came along to thrash out the pressing issues of the day.

However, the most important part of the event was that it was wholly interactive, affording guests regular opportunities to feed into the conversation. Indeed, the crowd were encouraged to reflect on Doncaster's assorted fortunes & setbacks from recent months, and to share their own aspirations for the years ahead.

Amidst all of the speechifying and robust debates, attendees were able to interject with their thoughts and suggestions. Sometimes they were given a chance to pose questions directly to panelists, while on other occasions they were asked to submit opinions via a live polling system (that would then broadcast their answers onto a big screen).

It was here that we gleaned some really valuable insights from our member community about what matters most to them, and what they think should be prioritised in order to help Doncaster realise its full potential. Many of the results were precisely what you'd expect — with guests calling for increased

funding and a reduction in business rates — but there were some other, more specific asks too.

In this latest edition of Network, we will be following up on some of the themes that were raised here and will be delving into them more incisively.

For our headline feature, we have spoken to key stakeholders (including businesses and the commissioner of South Yorkshire Police) about the need to rejuvenate our City Centre and what that will entail. Meanwhile, we have also interviewed a local manufacture that is currently doing incredible work to represent Brand Doncaster on the world stage, and picked the brains of an entrepreneur who has seemingly perfected the art of collaboration.

If you were at our business conference in June, then it will be interesting to see all of these ideas unpacked. On the other hand, if you couldn't make it, then this should be a great chance to catch up on what's next for Doncaster!

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At the Doncaster, What's Next conference, one of the very first questions that we put to our audience was

“What Support Would You Most Welcome For Your Business?”



The answers were predictably manifold, but there were some recurring themes here. In particular, attendees were keen to see things like enhanced training & skills provision, alongside more funding opportunities, improved connectivity and a better sense of collaboration. All of which you might reasonably expect.

However, one far more specific idea kept cropping up. Dotted around the big presentation screen (where guests' submitted responses were displayed in a live word-cloud) were several variations on the phrase: "Regenerate the city centre".

This subsequently became a major talking point for the rest of the event, raised again and again throughout Q&A sessions and debated at length in panels. Based on how often we returned to the subject, it's clearly a hot-button issue for our business community and one that's considered to be a top priority.

For Tariq Shah OBE, Director of local property developer Vigo Group (and incidentally the host for our conference as well), this didn't come as too much of a shock. On the contrary, he believes it is often the elephant in the room.

Joining us for a post-event debrief, the business leader claims: "No, it wasn't surprising at all to see how strongly people feel about the city centre. It's been a contentious topic for a number of years.

"In my experience, Doncaster is not unique in terms of the challenges that it faces, but I would say that we are especially critical of ourselves. Which is a good thing in many respects. It means that we are eager to improve. Still, when compared to a lot of other places in the country, I have to say that Doncaster looks pretty bright."

When listing the unsung virtues of our city centre, Tariq cites its relatively good



occupancy levels; its lack of void units; healthy activity; and the navigability of the public realm. He also argues that the Woolmarket has been a real shot in the arm too, and that it's made the area far more attractive to residents.

However, none of this means that we can afford to rest on our laurels, as Tariq points out: "There is an awful lot that we need to be moving forward with, in order to make the city centre the best place that it can possibly be. There's no question about that.

"There are still things that we need to get right. I guess the challenge is trying to sift through all of the ideas and determine which of them will have the most impact."



Investing in the Long Term

Tariq certainly knows a thing or two about placemaking, given that it has run in his family for three generations.

His grandfather first established Vigo Group in the late sixties, when he bought, refurbished and rented out a house over in Hexthorpe. Fast forward 55 years later, and the company is still going strong. Indeed, it has become one of the most reputable names in local real estate development and investment.

Speaking about this, Tariq tells us: "Our ethos has always been about making places better. We are proudly headquartered here in Doncaster and one of the things we love to do is invest in the area. We try and do things that leave the place a little bit better really."

When pressed for examples of this, Tariq mentions the work that he and his team have undertaken to uplift Cavendish Court (which they acquired back in 1999). A continuous process that has been ongoing for the past 24 years, this regeneration effort has been more than just a one-off investment. Yet it has clearly paid off.

Now playing host to a wide range of businesses — from NHS services and health & wellbeing companies, through to cyber security, tech development and other private sector firms — Cavendish Court is far from the derelict site it once was. In fact, it's got a thriving community, footfall that extends beyond the regular 9-5 hours, and even an on-site deli.

Having learned from this resounding success, Tariq believes that regeneration needs to be thought of in the long-term and that you can't expect

a miraculous transformation to occur overnight.

He clarifies: "I think that's one of the things that makes the biggest difference. Our uplift of Cavendish Court has been an extended process. Not just a case of us saying: 'Let's take a piece of space, repaint it and then rent it out.'"

The same ethos was also applied to Vigo Group's project on Duke Street, where they converted existing retail and office space into residential accommodation. Taking a phased approach, the journey here was quite long and piecemeal, but Tariq maintains that it is absolutely right way of going about it.

"We didn't do a cheap, basic conversion", he contends. "It was a full reskin. For all intents and purposes, we created a brand new space in there. There are really big windows on the north-facing side of the buildings, that let natural light in, as well balconies and terraces on the south side.

"It's now high-quality accommodation that's really attractive. We even have tenants who have relocated from London, who have been able to cut down on their daily commutes, reduce their property costs and get a better standard of living. It's a no-brainer."

In Tariq's opinion, the key to regenerating Doncaster city centre is to take on board these lessons and apply them on a macro scale. He summarises: "It's all about being flexible, taking a long-term view, and investing holistically. That's how we can really fulfil our potential."





Thinking Outside the Box

When appraising the current situation, Tariq outlines: “Because there is now a much greater tendency to work from home, we’ve lost a lot of people who might have otherwise been working in city centre offices.

“Of course, that’s not a challenge that Doncaster faces alone — we’re seeing the exact same problem in Canary Wharf at the minute, and if Canary Wharf is suffering then there is no reason that we wouldn’t be as well — but we still have to think about how we can replace that missing footfall with something else. That means being prepared to adapt existing buildings, to seize new opportunities and to think outside of the box.”

This sentiment is echoed by Richard Topping, Owner of The Topping Pie Company, whose pastry-manufacturing business is headquartered just opposite Doncaster College. Being in such close proximity to the city centre himself, he inevitably has a lot of thoughts on how it could be improved.

He too recognizes that there is an urgent need to get people back into the centre and frequenting local firms. Sharing his insights here with us, he says: “It is quite simple. [We need to] open up the pedestrian roads to traffic and create more in-town parking at reasonable prices. The alternative is to turn all the

empty offices into apartments and flats. That way people are actually living in town, will shop there, and will bring life back to it.”

Tariq’s suggestions overlap a fair bit with Richard’s, placing a similar emphasis on themes of accessibility, connectivity, and appealing to local residents. Offering his own recommendations, he posits: “There are some really obvious things that can be fixed and opportunities that are currently being missed in the city centre.

“Commercial space is becoming increasingly difficult to make work and we have to rethink how we do that. We are sorely lacking in green spaces too, so rectifying this needs to be another part of the mix. After all, it is crucial for attracting families and making people want to come here to begin with.

“We should also be thinking more creatively about our health system. We’ve unfortunately missed out on new hospital funding and Doncaster Royal Infirmary is dramatically underfunded as it stands.

“We’ve got a healthcare system that doesn’t operate in the way that we might want it to and I think that the city centre can play an important role in tackling this. Why not move some frontline services over here to ease those challenges faced by DRI and to simultaneously increase

footfall where it’s needed most?”

Tariq also identifies the immediate area surrounding our train station (where many first-impressions of Doncaster are formed) as one that is primed for what he dubs “sensitive redevelopment”. Elaborating upon this further, he says: “Station gateway is the best-connected spot in Doncaster and represents an opportunity that is not fully being taken advantage of right now.

“For instance, if you come into Doncaster for work or whatever other reason, and you do so by train, you have then got a bit of a trek to get to the nearest hotel. There should be one much closer by. Meanwhile, we should be creating a better access route that runs from that train station up through town and to the front of the Frenchgate.

“One last thing I’ll add is that we also need to be on the lookout for more opportunities like the Woolmarket. That has been a great success for Doncaster so far and we need to capitalize on it.”

On that last point, Richard Topping concurs, adding: “The wool market is doing well, [I] agree. The trouble is that it’s [primarily] an evening location and that it does not bring regular shoppers into the town every day.”

Getting Started

Suffice it to say, that’s quite a laundry list to be getting on with for now. Rest assured though that Tariq isn’t just wildly spitballing ideas.

Not only does he have a background in real estate development, but uplifting the city centre is something that he has spent a lot of time thinking about and passionately advocating for.

In fact, he currently chairs the Doncaster Town Deal Board. Helping to oversee the spending of £24.8 million worth of capital funding — that was bestowed to the local authority by national government all the way back in 2019 — this group is comprised of both public and private sector partners. Its job is essentially to provide strategic direction on how the allocated money should be used.

Breaking down the “rigorous process” that was used to whittle down proposals here, Tariq explains: “We wanted to be confident that, however we chose to spend the Town Deals funding, it would act as a pump-prime for regeneration. It needed to be something that made a visible, tangible difference and we didn’t want it to be [spread thin] over multiple different projects either.”

Taking public feedback into account, the board decided that its top priority would be spruce up the entrance to

Doncaster itself, especially around that aforementioned train station area.

Making the case for this, Tariq says: “That’s supposed to be where the tone for our city is set, and it leaves a lot to be desired at the moment. To your right you’ve got some office buildings that are no longer up to modern standards, and straight in front of you there is the Grand Theatre, which is in pretty poor condition as well.”

To address the latter, some of the Town Deal money went towards a feasibility study of the Grand, exploring potential uses for that building and what it would ultimately take to get it back up and running. For a more in-depth look at this, and the progress that has already been made, turn to page 7.

As for where the rest of the funding has been invested, Tariq continues: “We are going to replace those old office buildings with nice public green spaces, to make your initial entrance into Doncaster feel more welcoming. Then, behind that, we will build what could end up being Doncaster’s first BREEAM excellent grade-A office space.

“The thing is: the station gateway area is bounded on one side by the railway line and on the other two sides by dual carriageways. Which means that you

are working on a really constrained piece of land. And actually, for me, that is some of the best-located land in all of Doncaster. So we’re planning to do a lot of development there also, which will in turn create construction jobs, generate footfall and drive local spending.”

If you are wondering how long it will take for all of this to come to fruition, it’s estimated that the station gateway transformation will be completed sometime between 2025 and 2026. While this will no doubt be seen as a great start for rejuvenating our city centre, and is cause for optimism, it is by no means the full ambition for Doncaster.

Indeed, Tariq is acutely aware that this is only the beginning and that there is still a long road ahead. Returning to that theme of long-term thinking, he acknowledges: “This is meant to be a pump-prime for future development and investment, and the real wins could be years or even generations down the line.

“But you need to look at things from a holistic and intergenerational perspective when doing something like this. If we are to have a city centre that is thriving and successful, then it’s going to take some time.”





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Bringing Back The Grand

Situated right outside of Doncaster Railway Station — making it one of the very first sights that you'll glimpse upon arriving at our city — the Grand Theatre has been in a state of disrepair for quite some time.

Having been constructed at the turn of the twentieth century, the building stopped being used as a playhouse around sixty years later. It then became a bingo hall for a short while, before closing for good in the early 1990s.

Since then, it has received only the most essential of maintenance to keep it up to code, and was even almost demolished at one point. What was once a bustling cultural hub now lies dormant as an empty adjunct to the Frenchgate Shopping Centre; abandoned and utterly without purpose.

For the Doncaster Towns Deal board, this obviously posed a significant challenge. While they had aspirations to uplift the Station Gateway — and thereby improve the first impression that our city makes — they also had to contend with the fact that anybody disembarking a train in Doncaster is going to be confronted with a shabby-looking, neglected building.

Speaking about this, Chair of the Board, Tariq Shah OBE, reasons: "From our perspective, as people who were trying to change that initial sense of arrival into Doncaster, the Grand was something that we knew we had to address. It's far too big to change, so we instead pivoted to thinking about how we can help it move forward."

With that goal in mind, the Towns Deal Board decided to allocate some of its £24.8 million capital funding to support a feasibility study. Considering viable futures for the venue, and exploring what it would take to reopen its doors, this report was the first step towards a long-overdue comeback.

To find out more about this, and what needs to happen next, we spoke with Ken Waight, incumbent Chair of the Friends of Doncaster Grand Theatre.



The Story Thus Far

As the group who prevented the Grand's demolition in the '90s, it's safe to say that the Friends are deeply invested in restoring this site to its former glory.

Ken himself has been a member of the group for about 15 years and joined its committee back in 2014 (upon his retirement). Then, last year, he assumed the role of chair and has since been heavily involved with much of the work surrounding the aforementioned feasibility study.

"It's exciting to see that things are finally happening now, after having endured such a lengthy period without any [real headway] being made", Ken admits as we sit down for a chat at Doncaster Golf Club.

"For a long time, our group had been meeting to organise fundraising, tombola stalls and things of that nature. We'd go to local history fairs to try and raise awareness [of the cause] and to keep the name going, but there wasn't a lot more that we could do beyond that.

"The project was almost fallow, and you saw no signs of progress. There just simply wasn't any money to get the theatre back up and running."

Things took a turn for the better, however, when the work to overhaul Doncaster Station forecourt began. With everything else starting to look much tidier in that area, Ken believes that the Grand ended up "sticking out" in a very bad way.

As mentioned by Tariq, it was at this point that the renovation jumped up the -

- priority list. Monies were subsequently made available from both the Towns Deal fund and also The Theatres Trust (who are dedicated to protecting "at risk" venues like the Grand), which were in turn used to commission that feasibility study.

Published in 2022, this initial report focussed on assessing the current state of the building, if there's sufficient appetite for it reopening in the first place, what repairs would be necessary, and if all of that effort would be worthwhile.

The encouraging findings here then prompted a second, more forensic study that went into granular detail about costings and even included a structural survey. At the end of all of that research, it was estimated that £22 million (from external sources, rather than the Towns Deal Fund) would be needed to complete renovations and get the theatre fully operational again.

Why It Matters

Needless to say, Ken is adamant that this would be a desirable investment. Making his case, he argues: "I just think that, if we already have this asset in the city, then it makes sense to do something with it!

"I don't like to see a historic building go to wreck and ruin. We've already lost so much of our heritage in Doncaster. I moved here back in 1975, just a few years after the original public library had been demolished. The Guild Hall was also gone, as a '70s style shop had been put up in its place.

"So, yes, I think it is important that we preserve the Grand from a historical perspective. And, if we can turn it into a theatre that works and captures part of the market that [otherwise] isn't being captured, then that's even better."

Of course, there are plenty of other reasons why people might feel strongly about reopening the Grand. For instance, Ken tells us that many of the Friends are former thespians themselves — or ex-theatre workers — and have sentimental attachments to the site, having performed there in their youth.

Then you have experts like Tariq, who recognise the value that the Grand could have in terms of wider, holistic regeneration. Substantiating this belief, a survey by ChamberlainWalker recently found that culture, arts & heritage organisations in South Yorkshire directly

contribute towards placemaking. Bringing back the Grand is not just about preserving the past then, but also about securing our future.

On that last note, you might be wondering if we really need another theatre in the City Centre, given that we already have CAST. When we broach that topic in our conversation, Ken is quick to draw a distinction between the two venues.

"I really don't see CAST as a rival or threat to the Grand", he elaborates. "In fact, they've actually been very supportive of us and I think we could complement each other quite nicely.

"You see, CAST can only hold six or seven hundred people in its main theatre. Whereas the Grand held 1,600 in its heyday. And to attract those big touring shows from London, you need to have a capacity of at least 1,000. CAST cannot accommodate that, but it may be possible in a redeveloped Grand.

"If the Grand were to reopen, we would be an entirely different venue with an entirely different offering. We wouldn't be in direct competition with CAST at all. I'd point to Sheffield as evidence of this. They've got both the Lyceum and The Crucible, which manage to [coexist] just fine."

In The Meantime

Just like when it comes to uplifting the rest of our city centre, getting the Grand back into shape won't happen overnight.

Additional funding from external sources has to be obtained to cover that £22 million costing, a "false front" (that's causing damp and ingress to spread throughout the stonework) needs to be removed, and there are vital health & safety works that must be undertaken before the public is granted access to the venue.

While that sounds like an overwhelming to-do list, Ken points out that the theatre could be welcoming guests sooner than you might think. With a comparatively small £1.5 million investment, the bare essentials can be taken care of, allowing parts of the site to open up for so-called "Meanwhile Use".

Describing what this would entail, Ken explains: "Through Meanwhile Use, we aim to generate renewed interest in the theatre. We are exploring the potential for constructing a viewing porthole in the Frenchgate — to let people have

a sneak peek inside the Grand — information points, and maybe a café [in those parts that can be safely opened]. There might even be a chance for smaller shows to be performed here, or for events to be held where it's appropriate."

The Friends are also planning on setting up a mini-exhibition centre, where visitors will be able to learn more about the Grand and its storied history. Actively pursuing this, they applied for a £6,500 grant (via a competition run by the Theatres Trust) which is funding an oral history and digitisation project.

Pitching this idea to us, Ken continues: "We will effectively be copying old artefacts, like programmes, original posters and anything else that we've [managed to recover], and making them available digitally. Archiving them for all to see.

"As for the oral history, that will consist of talking-head videos in which people reminisce about their experiences with the Grand. We'll be interviewing some of the Friends here, as well as local people who might remember when the theatre was open. Our intention is to then play these videos on a continuous loop in the exhibition centre, getting people excited for the project."

With all of that said, while a full reopening might be some time away, there's a very real possibility that the Grand might finally be coming out of its dormancy in the near future. In fact, Ken predicts that we could see it transitioning into Meanwhile Use by as early as 2025.

Articulating his hopeful stance, he said: "I'm a lot more optimistic than I was three years ago let's just say that. I still think it's a big job [but], whether it's for meanwhile use, our exhibition space, or just minor shows taking place on the ground floor, I do think it is realistic that we are going to see something happen now. Let's say, within the next 3 or 4 years."



Cracking Down on Business Crime

To wrap up our exploration of Doncaster City Centre (at least for this edition) — and what more can be done to make it a better place for doing business — we decided to get the perspective of local law enforcement.

Sitting down with Chief Superintendent Ian Proffitt, Doncaster District Commander, we asked all about the various challenges our city centre is facing right now, particularly in relation to theft and Antisocial Behaviour (ASB), how these issues are being cracked down on, and what steps businesses can take in order to make themselves less easy targets.

With 25 years' worth of experience under his belt, it is fair to say that Ch Supt Proffitt has a rounded view on all the different aspects of the force. He's spent time in neighbourhood and response policing, the Criminal Investigations Department (CID), and has even worked alongside colleagues in the Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU).

To put it another way, he really knows his stuff about both the job itself and the wider borough at large. Giving us an overview of everything that falls under his remit, the District Commander told us: "We have a broad range of challenges here in South Yorkshire.

"We have large patches of beautiful countryside that are inevitably troubled by rural crime. We also have a city centre, a football club, a rugby club, shopping centres and a motorway network, all of which come with their own issues as well. Like any other borough or ward across the country, we are dealing with things like: child exploitation; organised crime; drugs issues; and antisocial behaviour. It can be very difficult. But also very rewarding."

Indeed, there are a lot of issues to unpack here but, for now, we are specifically interested in the City Centre

and what South Yorkshire Police is doing to help make this place as business friendly as possible. Below is a transcript of our conversation.

Network: Many businesses feel that it is important for us to start thinking about rejuvenating Doncaster City Centre. Where does South Yorkshire Police fit in with this ambition?

Ch Supt Proffitt: I believe we have a really important role to play in terms of creating a city centre in which people can comfortably live, work and spend their leisure time. The local authority and businesses can obviously focus on regenerating our infrastructure, but our job here at SYP is to create an environment that allows for, and encourages, such investment in the first place.

For example, when I came into this post 18 months ago, I understood how crucial it was that we deal with antisocial behaviour in [what was then] our town centre. At the time, Doncaster was campaigning for city status and, so it was important that retailers could trade effectively, as that's good for footfall and the wider economy.

Unfortunately, we had persistent challenges relating to youth ASB and recognised that this could potentially deter people from coming into the centre. In response, our Central Neighbourhood Policing Team (NPT) worked alongside partners including: Frenchgate management; the interchange security staff; and the local authority [the latter of whom also brought in the EPIC youth service].

Over a number of months, these partners worked together to address that youth ASB and we've seen some great successes there. The team even won awards for the approach they've taken.

Network: Given that this initiative has been so successful, what would you say is the next priority for making our city centre feel more business friendly?

Ch Supt Proffitt: We are still aware of two particular issues that are quite apparent in the in the city center right now, although I hasten to add that neither of these are unique to Doncaster.

First of all, we do have some rough sleepers and an issue around aggressive begging, which can cause the public to feel intimidated or threatened. Of course, homelessness is a nationwide,

societal issue and it's not for the police alone to solve. In fact, we've found that enforcement often doesn't help to solve the problem.

What we've done instead then, is bring together our neighbourhood team that works alongside the council to deal with those issues. A big part of that is actually about diversion and trying to divert some of the rough sleepers into accommodation or drug & alcohol services [where relevant].

Network: And what is the second issue that is a priority at the moment?

Ch Supt Proffitt: The other issue, which I'd say is maybe related, is theft. Of course, any shopping center or town will experience its share of shoplifting, but we have fairly consistent levels of that at the moment.

Our response has been to put together a small retail-crime coordination team, which is focused on conducting investigations faster, breaking series of thefts quicker, getting better outcomes and ultimately reducing the volume of offenses.

As for business robbery, we are seeing some great success around that too and now detect approximately a third of all offenses. Which is reasonably good. However, there's still a lot more that we can be doing.

Network: What kind of resource is there in SYP to police the city centre?

Ch Supt Proffitt: Well, we recently changed from three neighborhood teams, across all of the borough, to four.

This expansion means that the team dedicated to the central locality now has a smaller area of responsibility. They're still very busy of course, and have all of the same duties as any other police officer, but they do get to spend a lot more time in the city centre.

Their presence is now complemented by GRIP - the force's response to serious violence. They regularly patrol a number of areas in the city centre too. Then we've also got operation CIVITAS, which polices hotspots for antisocial behaviour. As a result of these two externally funded projects, almost every part of the city center now has some additional visibility and will have for the next 24 months, which is really encouraging.

My challenge at the moment is actually related to the volume of police officers

who are still being trained. It's my intention over the next year to increase our numbers in those neighbourhood teams, so that we can have more staff in key places, but the training needs to be done first.

Network: What else is being done to crack down on business theft at the moment?

Ch Supt Proffitt: We are currently rolling out more extensive use of DAMS (Digital Asset Management System). Through this system, any private or personal retailer can sign up to share their CCTV footage with us via the cloud. It makes investigations much smoother.

If we need to burn footage onto a disk or transfer it onto a USB stick, that can often cause unnecessary delays. Frankly, we find it challenging to then find officers who are free to go and do that, especially when we are experiencing high 999 demand. After all, every member of the public would prefer that we respond to the emergency before we go collect some CCTV.

DAMS allows us to join the dots much earlier. When a business' CCTV is uploaded to that cloud, we can match suspects to multiple offenses and identify them quicker. Which, in turn, means that we arrest and incarcerate people quicker too.

Our central neighborhood team have already engaged with businesses in city centers to try and encourage them to sign up here, but I think we still have some gaps. It would be good to get as many businesses as possible signing up to DAMS.

Are there any ways that businesses can help by working with the police?

Ch Supt Proffitt: It's vital that you always maintain communication with the police. We deal with all sorts of threats from child exploitation through to criminal use of firearms, domestic abuse and violence against women. I think we can be pretty adept at managing those demands but we often find ourselves, as anyone would imagine, driven towards more immediate threats and risks to people.

Around a quarter of our work is around vulnerability and as a county, we receive 60,000 telephone calls per month. There's a lot, and it's sometimes hard for us to determine where to put our resource. We don't always get it right.

As such, people in the business community have understandably felt like



they are not always being heard or that we're not interested. This simply isn't the case.

I am keen for us to try and maintain that dialogue, so that we can understand one another's position. Where there are concerns from businesses, we encourage them to raise these with their local neighbourhood team. We will happily engage with them and send staff over to consider where vulnerabilities may be on their premises.

If you look at the work we have done with license-traders for example, I think that we have managed to develop really strong relationships. We work alongside licensees, we try to resolve issues they deal with and we work alongside door-staff. We know how important it is that we have a thriving nighttime economy in a place like Doncaster. That's why we are keen to support it and not just purely be an instrument of enforcement.

The key word for us "relentlessness", because as soon as you resolve one issue with a cohort of people, you find that there is a different challenge coming from elsewhere. That's the nature of policing. But there is a commitment from us to continue supporting the local economy by making the city centre a pleasant place to be.

Network: Finally, is there anything that businesses can do to protect themselves from crime?

Ch Supt Proffitt: We've got some fantastic people in our business

community — and I've had the pleasure of meeting some of them at Chamber events — so I'm sure they'll understand the fundamentals here. Things like the importance of having good CCTV, alarm networks, lighting and so on. Those are the bare essentials that we would expect to see and, in the majority of cases, they will deter criminality.

It's no different from the way that individuals might try and target-harden their home addresses. Thieves are opportunistic and so if they see an open window, or a house that doesn't have a security light or an alarm, they're going to choose that one over the houses that are better protected. They will always go for the line of least resistance and that's the same in retail.

Our Designing Out Crime Officers (DOCOs) can work with businesses to further educate them on more advanced tactics. For instance, they will look at how security teams manage incidents, or the way that shops are laid out, so that alcohol isn't placed right near the front door. They'll basically engage with locations that have high demand and try to understand what is causing them to be repeatedly targeted.

Meanwhile, we also support retailers by showing them how they can properly deal with violence against their workers: circulating links to useful websites, sending guidance videos on how to respond to aggressive shoplifters; and so on.

The Keys to good collaboration

When we meet up with Richard Clarke, Managing Director of Highland Carbon, it's against the idyllic backdrop of Potteric Carr Nature Reserve. And we happen to be there on one of the (vanishingly few) days this July that isn't overcast or pouring with rain.

In fact, it's quite serene and beautiful out here. To our left is a reedbed gently swaying in the summer breeze, while just behind us a school trip is heading down the forest trail to embark on some mini-beasting. Elsewhere, we are surrounded by avid bird watchers and other such hobbyists, all looking to take advantage of today's relatively clement weather.

It's the perfect setting for our conversation with Richard, whose business model is all about doing things right by the natural world. Highland Carbon (which he founded and now runs) is an award-winning supplier of conservation-grade UK carbon credits.

In a nutshell, this means that he helps other companies to balance out their impact on the environment — and to compensate for their greenhouse gas emissions — by creating relevant opportunities for them to offset. Typically he does this by vetting and then shaping reforestation and peatland projects in Scotland and Northern England, although he does spot trade internationally as well.

What makes his venture stand out from the crowd, however, is that Richard does all of this with a totally science-based,

conservationist approach. Determined to do more than just plant trees for the sake of having a commodity, he will also look at how these projects can be used to propagate endangered species and to restore the landscape, in a way that he compares to: "rolling the clock back to before Roman times." The result is conservation grade carbon offsetting.

Filling A Gap in the Market

Recounting how he got into this niche speciality, Richard tells us: "As a young boy, I was really inspired by watching Jacques Cousteau and reading National Geographic magazine. Throughout my childhood, I was into nature, and it was my dream to help save rare species. It's something that I've really carried with me ever since I was small."

Intent on following this passion, Richard decided that he wanted to go into the field of Zoology and so studied this subject at Michigan State University. An all-encompassing degree, his education here covered everything from forestry to ecology, wildlife management, and even marine biology.

After getting his Masters, he then went to work for U.S. environmental organisation The Nature Conservancy, which he likens to the States' equivalent of the National Trust (only much larger in scope). There, he had the opportunity to be involved with a wide range of projects that spanned the entirety of the Americas, from the very

top of Alaska right down to the bottom of Chile, and the Pacific Rim.

"It was a great place for me to [get my] start, because I was able to see how the big organisations do this sort of thing", explains Richard. "And, in this case, it was very much science-driven."

"I later joined The Woodland Trust here in the UK, which is a charity that has a mission of restoring land by planting forests. It was then that I had the epiphany for creating my own business, because I saw how I could [knit] together aspects of both of the organisations I had worked for to achieve impactful habitat restoration at scale."

Describing a feeling that will be all too familiar to anyone who has ever tried to set up their own company, Richard admits that the subsequent early days of Highland Carbon were incredibly stressful and led to many sleepless nights on his part.

He recalls: "I established the business while juggling another full-time job. I was doing it in my free time, my evenings, my weekends, and was ultimately adding hours onto my workdays. I think anyone who has started a business will attest to the fact that you never stop thinking about it, and it certainly took a few years for us to build up steam, due to the long lead-time for woodland and peatland project approvals and the subsequent grant funding awards."

Yet, in the face of hardship, he remained

undeterred; confident that his idea was a good one and that it would be worth persisting with.

Delving deeper into the origins of Highland Carbon, Richard continues: "You see, there was a gap in the market when it came to science-driven approaches for creating carbon offsetting here in the UK. Typically, the projects at that time were based around planting trees on arable farmland and with only a few species [none of which were particularly rare]. So, I felt like there was a lot more that could be done to restore nature for rare species."

Changing Attitudes

Keen to have a greater understanding of how these offsetting projects work in practice, and the role that Highland Carbon plays in organising them, we ask Richard to give us a quick crash course.

More than happy to oblige, he elaborates: "Businesses will go through their own process when it comes to measuring greenhouse gas emissions and then taking actions to reduce them. A lot of the time that's about looking at energy usage."

"However, no matter how hard they try, there is always a limit to what a company can do. Even with the best of intentions, they will have some carbon emissions that they cannot erase, [either due to] costs or technology. That's when they come to us."

"The way it works is that we are effectively conduits between landowners and those businesses who are looking to offset. We provide our clients with a kind of menu, listing all of the various opportunities they have available to them in the UK — and the [associated] standards that they will meet by choosing a project, as well as the badges that they get to use and so on."

"Then, once they have committed to an offsetting project, they can put in their official reporting that they have a carbon-neutral product or even that they are a Net-Zero company."

"We sell international offsetting too, which is sourced from around 80 different countries and involves projects like hydroelectric plants, wind farms, solar arrays and Greenhouse Gas abatement initiatives. And we carefully vet those to make sure that they are validated and recognised by the appropriate bodies."

"We will also risk assess them. So, for example, if we are looking at a hydroelectric plant in Turkey, we will make sure that it's not in the earthquake zone or anything like that. We also eliminate projects in countries with issues of poor governance and corruption. Essentially we try to make offsetting as easy and streamlined as possible for our clients."

The demand for this service is certainly high as well, with businesses from across all sectors exploring how they can offset in the most responsible manner. In

terms of why there's been such a boom lately, Richard points to the fact that certain pension funds won't own stock in companies if they cannot evidence that they're working towards climate targets (even going so far as to divest their portfolios if need be).

Meanwhile, larger corporations still have to report on what their suppliers are doing in terms of emissions. So if a small warehouse or forklift truck business wants to work with, say, M&S, it behooves them to look at offsetting, given that this could be what makes the difference between them winning the contract and missing out.

Richard adds that PR is often a key motivation for looking at offsetting too, elaborating: "For public-facing companies that rely on customer loyalty, it's a big concern. There are dozens of surveys where respondents say that they are [likelier] to align with a brand that has genuine green credentials. And the statistics are quite surprising. It doesn't skew as young as you might think, and it turns out that this is an important issue for all generations."

"Indeed, public attitudes have moved on a lot since I started out as an environmentalist. Back then, environmentalists were branded as kind of hippies, but it's no longer a fringe movement. Now it really is the core of business."

The Keys To Good Collaboration

With that said, Highland Carbon is selling to an awful lot of clients (60 to be exact). These range from minor SMEs right through to big multinationals like Sky and Microsoft.

Speaking about the latter group, Richard enthuses: “Those bigger companies would normally go through brokers in New York or London, so it’s been a bit of a coup attracting them! I have a background in corporate partnership recruitment, which I’m sure helped here, and having the Nature Conservancy on my résumé definitely gave me extra clout over in America.

“Yet I think it’s the fact that I am a zoologist that has lent Highland Carbon the most credibility. The vast majority of offsetting brokers come from the worlds of venture capital, finance or land surveying. I bring a distinctly scientific [perspective] that I think the multinationals really appreciate. That gives authenticity to our projects given that I truly am passionate about the cause.”

Of course, Richard isn’t only dealing with clients here. On the contrary, his role as a broker requires that he manage dozens upon dozens of relationships; partnering with large estates in Scotland and landowners in the North of England; cooperating with government bodies such as the Forestry Commission (to make sure that projects are certified); looking for ways to work alongside charities like the Ribble Rivers Trust; and also liaising with supply chains.

Being able to collaborate is therefore an integral part of his job and — given that this was a big theme at our business conference, one that members said they were keen to explore for themselves — we decide to pick his brains on the subject.

Laying out his guiding principles, he says: “For me, one of the core tenets of collaborating with any partner is to never assume that you have all the answers. It should always be a conversation.

“For instance, when we are working with landowners, we rely on their knowledge as much as on our own. Especially when thinking about how to reforest. They will often have information on what kind of trees used to be there, [courtesy of] local

intelligence, notebooks from throughout the centuries and documents that catalogued the species and abundance of birds that once lived on the estate in question

“On a related note, I’d also say that you need to be open-minded. We work with some company suppliers that others in our position might consider to be competitors, but I believe that’s often how you find your best opportunities for a win-win. You can’t afford to just operate in a silo.

“Thirdly, I’d stress the need to be flexible so that you can meet your partners’ needs or requests. We’re lucky in the sense that, as a small organization, I don’t have to run nominal changes in contract clauses past large legal teams whenever a decision is required. We are competing against much larger companies who often do have to [jump through bureaucratic hoops], so it’s nice that we can distinguish ourselves by being nimbler and more responsive.

“If I am speaking to a buyer and they make a particular stipulation, I can often agree to it on the phone then and there. Speaking of which, it also helps that I can pay my suppliers immediately, often on the very same day that they submit an invoice. Frankly, that has created an enormous reservoir of goodwill, but I do appreciate that not everyone will be able to do that.

“Finally, I don’t think you can overestimate the importance of meeting people face-to-face when collaborating. The reason that I chose to base Highland Carbon in Doncaster is that I often have to meet with company clients in say, London or Manchester, but also with landowners in Scotland and Northern England. Because of the strong connectivity here, I am ideally situated and within reach of both places.

“We might have moved into an era of virtual meetings, but I still believe it’s important to meet with people in person. You have to look someone in the eye and shake their hand. In our sector, they will not commit to a large deal over Zoom.”

These approaches are clearly paying off for Richard, as he’s got a number of exciting collaborations in the pipeline for the future. Some of these are under strict embargo at the time of writing (including one with another major player in Doncaster) but he is able to tell us a little bit more about that aforementioned

Galloway Coastal Rainforest project, which sounds like it’s going to be a real milestone achievement once it’s finished.

About this, he teases: “The scale of [that] project is over a million trees. It’s the size of nearly 2,000 football pitches and it will offset 213,754 tons of carbon dioxide. It’s one of the largest projects of its type ever undertaken in the UK. And that’s exactly where we want to be.”



Winding Back the Clock

What sets Highland Carbon apart is that they don’t just plant any kind of tree in any given environment without thinking about it from a scientific point of view.

Taking cues from the Nature Conservancy, they will instead carefully select where projects are located and then design them in a way that specifically expands habitats for endangered species.

About this Richard clarifies: “We are pioneers in what I call ‘conservation-grade carbon offsetting’. So that means that we can demonstrate the biodiversity impact and net-gain of our projects, beyond just the tons of carbon that are offset.

“For example, we have replanted forest between two existing woodlands in Loch Ness, thereby bridging the two. This had the effect of expanding the habitats for red squirrels, pine martins, ospreys, otters and all sorts of wildlife. It’s not just about offsetting. It’s also conservation.

“In Scotland, only 1% of the native forest remains today and most of that is in places that are inaccessible; like islands and steep craggy mountainsides. Meanwhile, for the whole of the UK, we have about 12% forest cover. And that includes things like timber plantations.

“So we have very little of our native forest remaining. Compare that with somewhere like Germany (which has 33%) or Finland (75%) and you can see that we are one of the most altered nations in the entire world. That’s why what we do here is so important.”

Representing Brand Doncaster

Another theme that came up time and time again in our Business Conference was how important it is to have companies that represent brand Doncaster on a global stage. With international acclaim and high demand for their products across multiple continents, World Feeds are doing just that.

To find out more about how they've managed to make such a respected name for themselves, and their continued striving for excellence, we visited the Thorne based manufacturer.

"We're not just trying to produce to a price point. We don't put cornflour in to thicken up the gravy, so to speak."

This is the analogy that Peter Kersh, Managing Director of World Feeds, employs when describing the philosophy of his aquatic-diet manufacturing firm. Of course, even a layman could tell you that gravy probably shouldn't be used as an ingredient in fish food (which is what the Thorne-based company primarily specialises in), but we understand the comparison that's being made here.

A lot of World Feeds' competitors may skimp on quality by looking for ways to minimize costs. Sometimes they will use terrestrial materials that aren't really suitable for a fish's digestive system — like vegetable oils — and they may also inadvertently reduce vitamin levels with their extrusion processes, resulting in hard-baked pellets that are basically full of air.

Elaborating upon this, Peter says: "On the label that may look okay, but in practice it can certainly be better. Those products are typically made with human [consumers] in mind, not necessarily the actual welfare of fish. And we don't like that."

Before resuming his elevator pitch, Peter opens up a briefcase that's lined with multiple test tubes and petri dishes. Resembling a portable laboratory, this "show kit" is used by World Feeds to exhibit its industry-leading products to both customers & veterinarians alike, and it's due to be presented again in the coming weeks, for an exciting demo with SeaWorld Abu Dhabi.

For his part, Peter is clearly hyped up about this new client. And who could blame him? The largest aquarium in the entire world — it's a huge win for a Doncaster business like his.

Using over 70 million litres of water and housing over 100,000 exhibits, SeaWorld Abu Dhabi absolutely dwarfs its Orlando counterpart and is expected to be a major draw for a country that demands only the biggest & best from its tourist attractions.

The fact that the park is also going to be using World Feeds' diets exclusively is just a testament to the latter's sterling reputation. Through acclaimed products and cutting-edge innovations, they have truly made a name for themselves within their respective industry and are roping in some very high-profile clientele as a result.

But we're going to leave it there for now, as Peter is about to start that demo for us.

A Crash Course in Aquaculture

Glancing over the aforementioned briefcase, we see that its top row is comprised of vials that bear labels like: "Squid"; "Algae"; and "Mussel". Our initial assumption is that these correspond to what type of creature the food stored within is intended for. Yet, as it turns out, they are actually the highest quality ingredients.

So the test tube that is marked as "Shrimp" is not for feeding to a crustacean. Rather, it is a crustacean. One that has been grounded up, pressed and milled into a fine (and apparently very expensive) powder.

Once these ingredients have been processed, they are then mixed together in various combinations and delivered through an extruder, to yield what is known as a "Wet Mix". Depending on what kind of animal is being catered for, said mix could take a number of different forms.

For example, micronized grains are useful for feeding corals and jellyfish but are hardly appetising for the other residents of an aquarium. Indeed, Peter mentions that a lot of the bigger fish would simply ignore it, because it doesn't remotely approximate to what they would be ingesting out in the wild.

To accommodate those picky eaters, World Feeds also make different size pellets (think of dog kibble but soft), which can serve multiple species at once within the same tank. Sinking beneath the surface, they are first consumed by pelagic fish — which are accustomed to catching prey in the midwater column of the sea — before the remaining scraps then descend to the waterbed, where they will in turn be hoovered up by demersal species. Meanwhile, any tiny flakes that break off here are ripe for the taking and will go on to nourish smaller feeders.

Finally, there are grazing species — such as Surgeon Fish and Yellow Tangs — who prefer to nibble away at their food, as opposed to swallowing it whole in a single meal. For them, the team manufacture cylindrical "feed blocks"

which are dangled from a rope and act like a buffet that the fish can periodically return to when they are feeling a bit peckish.

Summing up the products, Peter recaps: "The point is that we have many alternate ways of presenting our food. The primary wet mix can be converted into different formats to suit different fish of different shapes and sizes.

"We have an enormous matrix of animals that we can feed across the globe. Everything from herbivores to carnivores and omnivores, as well as those [that live] in freshwater, marine, tropical or colder habitats.

"There is obviously a lot more complex science behind this — relating to vitamins, minerals, protein, lipid and so on — but what matters is that we are putting the needs of the animals first, giving them everything they'd be getting in nature. We're catering to their diets [to ensure] that they are receiving quality nutrition and living longer lives. In that sense, we are on a totally different planet to our competitors."



Standing Out From the Crowd

This quality-led ethos has paid off in spades for World Feeds, who are recognised throughout the industry as being the very best at what they do. Courted by the likes of SeaWorld, National Aquarium of Abu Dhabi, Monterey Bay Aquarium, Shedd Aquarium and other clients in places as far afield as the United States, Japan, Singapore and Australia; their products are shipped all over the globe. They even supply diets to an impressive 1 million litre fish tank in King Abdulaziz International Airport in Jeddah.

While they have evidently done a lot to distinguish themselves, Peter chalks much of this success up to pure common sense.

The managing director tells us: “We use high-quality, bioavailable ingredients that are sourced all over Europe and beyond, while our competitors may be looking for cheaper materials that do the job but in our view, but are simply not as good for the fish.

“The big clients like Abu Dhabi SeaWorld need to be assured that they are buying the right products and that their exhibits are going to remain healthy for a long period of time. Animal welfare is critical. After all [they] would be the ones on the line if they decided to feed animals with inferior diets, so that’s why they come to us.

“We’re placed under a lot of scrutiny by [those clients] and they have teams of full-time vets inspecting our mixes but, in the end, they recognise that we are doing things in the right way.”

This is all down to the company’s original founder, and current Technical Director, Mark Wilson. With a background in ornamental aquaculture and breeding programmes, he developed the world’s first-ever commercial clownfish hatchery in the early 1990s, aiming to meet the increased demand from aquariums for that particular species (this was around the same time that Finding Nemo was released).

And it really started to take off, with Mark forging industry connections and quickly establishing himself as an authority in the sector. Yet as his business venture grew, he soon came to a startling realisation.

About this, Peter explains: “While he was breeding these species over the course of many, many years, Mark [grew

increasingly] frustrated with how he could never feed them in the way that he wanted to. He knew that different types of fish have different dietary needs, and that the catch-all approach in the marketplace at that time was just not working.”

So, identifying a problem that needed to be solved, he then began dabbling in-house, producing his own food to use in the hatchery business. It was here that the idea for World Feeds ultimately took root, and Peter later came along as an investor (with experience in finance, international sales and marketing) to help get it off the ground.

Understanding the company’s origin in this way enables us to fully appreciate why it does things in the way that it does. As a professional fish breeder, Mark had witnessed first-hand the shortcomings of the feed industry all of those years ago and resolved to enact meaningful change. Everything that his team does now is a direct consequence of that.

They use bioavailable materials, modify the presentation of wet mixes to appeal to specific species, add valuable minerals to diets, and have even designed and developed their own extruders to get superior results.

Speaking about the latter, Peter clarifies: “All of the feed industry — that includes cattle, poultry, sheep, pigs and fish — revolves around existing, traditional machinery.”

He is specifically referring here to twin-screw cooker extruders, which are ubiquitous in the sector and churn out pellets at incredibly high speeds and in incredibly high volumes. Unfortunately, they also have the unintended effect of ‘de-naturing’ ingredients, by cooking them at temperatures of 150-160°C.

Peter continues: “So you end up with pellets that are hard-baked, crunchy and full of air. That’s not something that fish want to eat.

“[Conversely] our single-screw extruders don’t exceed 100 degrees. The mix doesn’t burn, it doesn’t cook and none of our ingredients are denatured in the process. It’s all held together with just enough compression, but not so much that it turns into a hard block. It’s much better for the fish and it can be quickly broken down in their stomachs.”



Making A Big Splash With An Award-Winning Innovation

Not content with conquering the aquarium market, World Feeds has recently set its sights on the salmon farming industry as well. Although they haven’t been in this field for very long, they have managed to successfully translate everything they’ve learned from decades working with aquariums over to this latest venture. And they are receiving tons of adulation for their efforts.

Most notably, they scooped up the “Judge’s Special Recognition” prize at this year’s Scottish Aquaculture Awards. This prestigious accolade was bestowed on the team for an innovation they pioneered that has been widely adopted across the Scottish highlands (where salmon farming is especially prevalent).

“When looking for a way to break into the salmon industry, we discovered that there is a rather commonplace issue”, expounds Peter. “Sea lice are an endemic problem here, and will latch onto the body of livestock. If ignored, these parasites can cause massive damage and even mortality, which in turn takes a financial toll on the farmers.

“They’ve never really been able to find a great [mitigation] for this either. Over the years, farmers have tried various chemical treatments, but that’s hardly ideal. They also have mechanical treatments for washing the salmon through hot water baths, but that entails pushing the fish through tubes under quite intense pressure. So, again, it’s not what we want.”

Luckily, a biological solution presented itself in the early 2010s, involving the use of so-called “cleaner fish”. In a nutshell, species like Ballan Wrasse and Lumpfish have a kind of symbiotic relationship with salmon, whereby they will eat the lice off their scales. It’s a win-win arrangement, as the cleaners get to fill their stomachs, while the salmon are rid of those pesky parasites.

“Of course, the issue [that arose] from this was that you now had to introduce another species into the cage ecosystem, which is way outside of the comfort zone for most farmers”, continued Peter.

“They’re used to feeding one type of fish and one type of fish only, yet now they’re suddenly having to look after Wrasse and Lumpfish as well. And, guess what! You can’t feed them the same

pellets that are meant for bulking up the salmon, because if you do that then they will [inevitably] bloat and no longer be interested in the lice.”

That’s where World Feeds came in, providing a way to keep the cleaner fish nutritionally-replete without also killing their appetites. Their big idea? To develop a bespoke feeding station that the salmon would completely and utterly ignore.

With these blocks strategically deployed around farms, the Wrasse and Lumpfish get to periodically graze on a more appropriate diet for them, while the salmon will continue to wolf down their usual pellets. Everyone gets the food they need, and the feeders will still have room left over for those delectable sea lice.

It might sound relatively simple on paper, but this elegant solution has utterly revolutionised the industry: bringing down mortality levels; reducing the need for costly treatments; and improving fish welfare too.

Across Scotland, farmers like Bakkafrost, Loch Duart, Wester Ross, Scottish Sea Farms, and Mowi have all converted to World Feeds’ ingenious method. But the team is eager to take its product further still and to expand overseas, with development work and trials currently underway in Norway and Canada.

When asked what it means to be flying the flag for Doncaster in such a big way, Peter said: “Of course, it’s wonderful to be internationally recognised for what we do and to receive prestigious awards. But for us, our work is just second nature. It’s mostly common sense.”

While that’s certainly a modest assessment, it’s surely downplaying all of the amazing things that this business does. After all, if these innovations do truly come naturally to them, then it’s no wonder that they’re making such massive waves in the industry.