

# HM HOMETGROWN

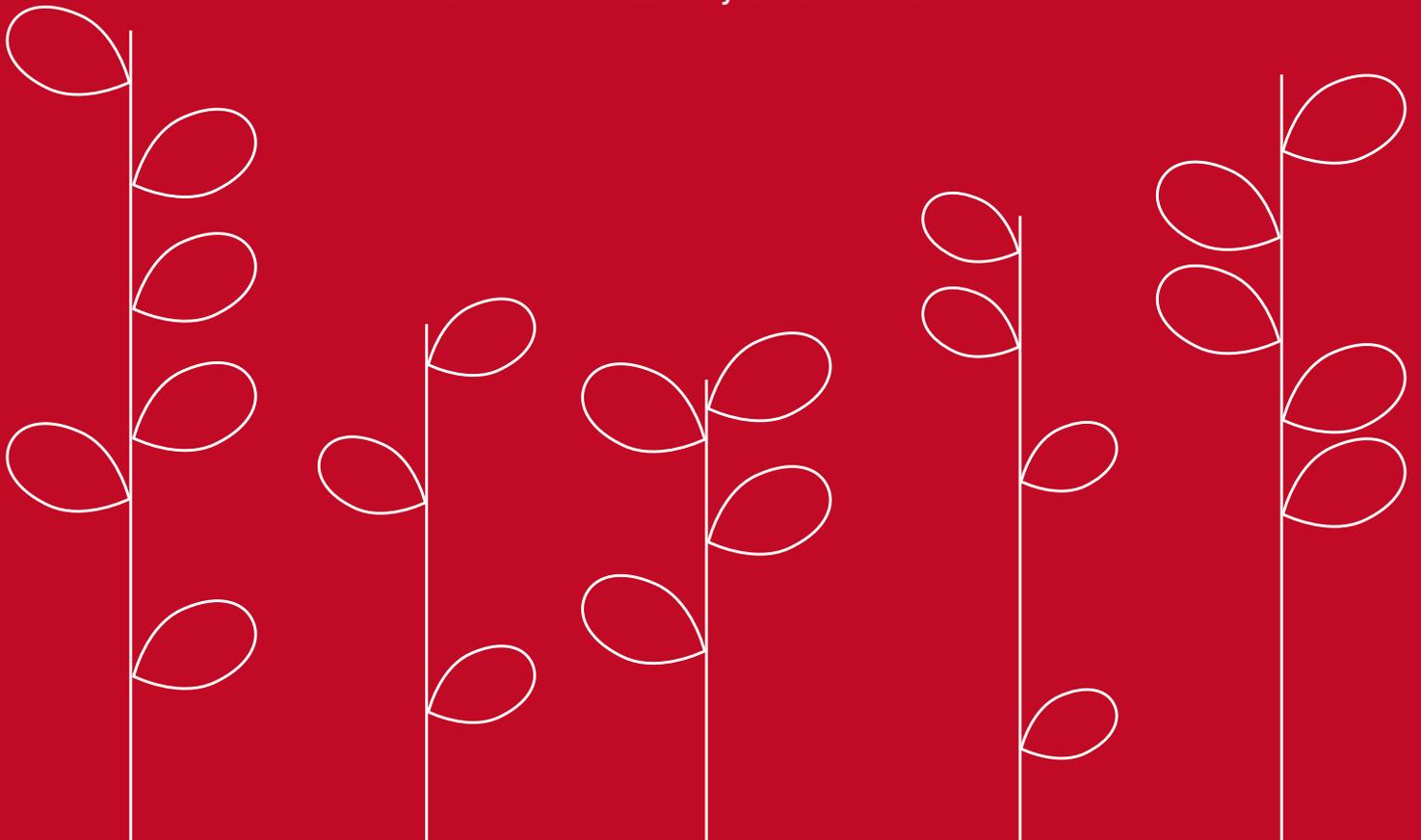
TOP 50

2019

Highlighting the Importance of  
Homegrown SMEs in Northern Ireland



Brought to you by Harbinson Mulholland in partnership  
with Ulster University Business School



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**hm** harbinson  
mulholland

**Darren McDowell,**  
Senior Partner

Whether it's something in the soil or maybe just the mindset of the people, Northern Ireland is home to its fair share of homegrown businesses. Hard work, endeavour and knowledge have seen these businesses grow into respected local and internationally acclaimed organisations that have maintained a commitment to Northern Ireland and its people.

At Harbinson Mulholland, we have cultivated the Homegrown initiative as it encapsulates all we stand for as a firm. For over 20 years we have been at the root of NI business, providing sound advice to help SMEs grow in all conditions. This is why we have decided to partner with Ulster University in bringing the Homegrown initiative to life, celebrating these businesses and their vital contribution to the NI economy.

The list confirms that the entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well in Northern Ireland, which boasts more homegrown businesses per head of population than Wales, Scotland and all regions across the North of England. If we could bottle the entrepreneurship that led to the establishment, growth and development of these organisations we would have a powerful elixir for future economic growth.

At Harbinson Mulholland we are committed to raising the profile of this sector by highlighting the pivotal role that it plays in our economy.

It is notable that a number of our own clients have made it onto the list and this underlines our ongoing commitment to provide the very best of professional advice to the local business community. As a homegrown practice ourselves we are uniquely positioned to share the vision and culture of this sector. Our firm has the advantage of being able to provide clients with a breadth and depth of accountancy services in areas such as audit, corporate tax, personal tax and corporate recovery. Above all else we are focused on providing commercial and straight talking advice to our clients in order to play our part in helping them to achieve their goals.

With the outcome of Brexit still putting a question mark over how we do business in the future, we understand that it is more important than ever for us all to play to our strengths and ensure that we support Homegrown businesses of all sizes. May I offer my heartfelt congratulations to all those companies featured on this list and my very best wishes for their continued success.

# HM HOMEGROWN

## TOP 50

### 2019

- |  |                                     |                                      |
|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 Bawnbua Foods NI Ltd                         | 18 A.J. Power Ltd                   | 36 Mulgrew Haulage Ltd               |
| 2 Shelbourne Motors Ltd                        | 19 Dowds Electrical (Holdings) Ltd  | 37 Woodvale Construction Company Ltd |
| 3 Regency Carpet Manufacturing Ltd             | 20 Kilwaughter Holdings Ltd         | 38 John Mackle (Moy) Ltd             |
| 4 Doherty & Gray Ltd                           | 21 Hannon Transport Ltd             | 39 Magowan Tyres (N.I.) Ltd          |
| 5 Edgewater Contracts & Specialist Joinery Ltd | 22 T.G. Eakin Ltd                   | 40 Pat Kirk Ltd                      |
| 6 Ballyrobert Service Station Ltd              | 23 Component Distributors Group Ltd | 41 Westbank Business Park Ltd        |
| 7 Western Building Systems (Hld) Ltd           | 24 Harvey Group Plc                 | 42 MMD Communications (Holdings) Ltd |
| 8 John Hogg & Co, Ltd                          | 25 LW Surphlis & Son Ltd            | 43 Turkington Holdco (NI) Ltd        |
| 9 Prentice Portadown Ltd                       | 26 O'Reillys Wholesale Ltd          | 44 Dixons Contractors Ltd            |
| 10 JMW Farms Ltd                               | 27 Wilsons Of Rathkenny Ltd         | 45 Germinal Holdings Ltd             |
| 11 John Mulholland Motors Ltd                  | 28 Novosco Group Ltd                | 46 Regen Waste Holdings Ltd          |
| 12 CB SME Holdings Ltd                         | 29 PRM Group Ltd                    | 47 Glasgiven Contracts Ltd           |
| 13 Frylite Ltd                                 | 30 Michael Nugent Ltd               | 48 Marcon Fit-Out Ltd                |
| 14 Uni-Trunk Holdings Ltd                      | 31 K. Hughes & Co. Ltd              | 49 Alpha Marketing Holdings Ltd      |
| 15 James F McCue Ltd                           | 32 Oakwood Door Designs Ltd         | 50 Andrews Group Ltd                 |
| 16 John McQuillan (Contracts) Ltd              | 33 BSG Civil Engineering Ltd        |                                      |
| 17 River Ridge Recycling (Portadown) Ltd       | 34 Willowbrook Foods Ltd            |                                      |
|  | 35 Tracey Brothers Ltd              |                                      |

The Top 50 list is based on Turnover and the selection criteria applied was: up to 250 employees; NI is listed on the primary trading address; and SMEs owned by larger companies (either from within or outside NI) were excluded. The data was sourced from the FAME (Financial Analysis Made Easy) database and therefore it is possible that not all companies have been captured in the analysis.

Independently produced by Ulster University Economic Policy Centre.

For the more detailed list please visit [harbinson-mulholland.com](http://harbinson-mulholland.com)



## JOHN MULGREW, EDITOR, ULSTER BUSINESS

**There's a very clear and understated strand that runs through the economic foundation of Northern Ireland – fuelled by the often unheard-of, multi-generational success stories of our SMEs.**

The HM Homegrown Top 50 list is another fresh look at the strength of locally-owned and family run firms – many of which fly under the radar, and just get on with doing business. It's something which has been echoed across Ulster Business, through the Next 200 list of SMEs.

Take manufacturing, for example – a sector which Northern Ireland has flourished in. While giants of agri-business such as Moy Park get bigger headlines due to equally large ten-figure turnovers, there are a raft of firms showcased on this HM Homegrown list which have targeted specific global export markets, in which they thrive.

Craigavon's AJ Power builds and sells generators, and exports many of them to Scandinavia and the Middle East.

John Mulholland Motors also makes the list – an expanding family-owned car dealership business with sites in Randalstown and Campsie.

Topping the list is Bawnbua Foods of Lurgan, which operates in the meat processing sector, with a turnover of £43.36m.

And while there are familiar long-running family firms, rapidly expanding companies are also making the list. Novosco is a cloud computing business with a workforce of around 300, and announced a £20m expansion just last year.

Breaking down the figures, around 75% of the overall list operates across three main areas, from construction and manufacturing to retail and wholesale. Geographically, there's a reasonably healthy spread of firms with the largest number in Co Antrim, Down and Tyrone. Although, there's still significant work to be done in areas such as Fermanagh, but particularly Co Londonderry – with just one firm making the list.

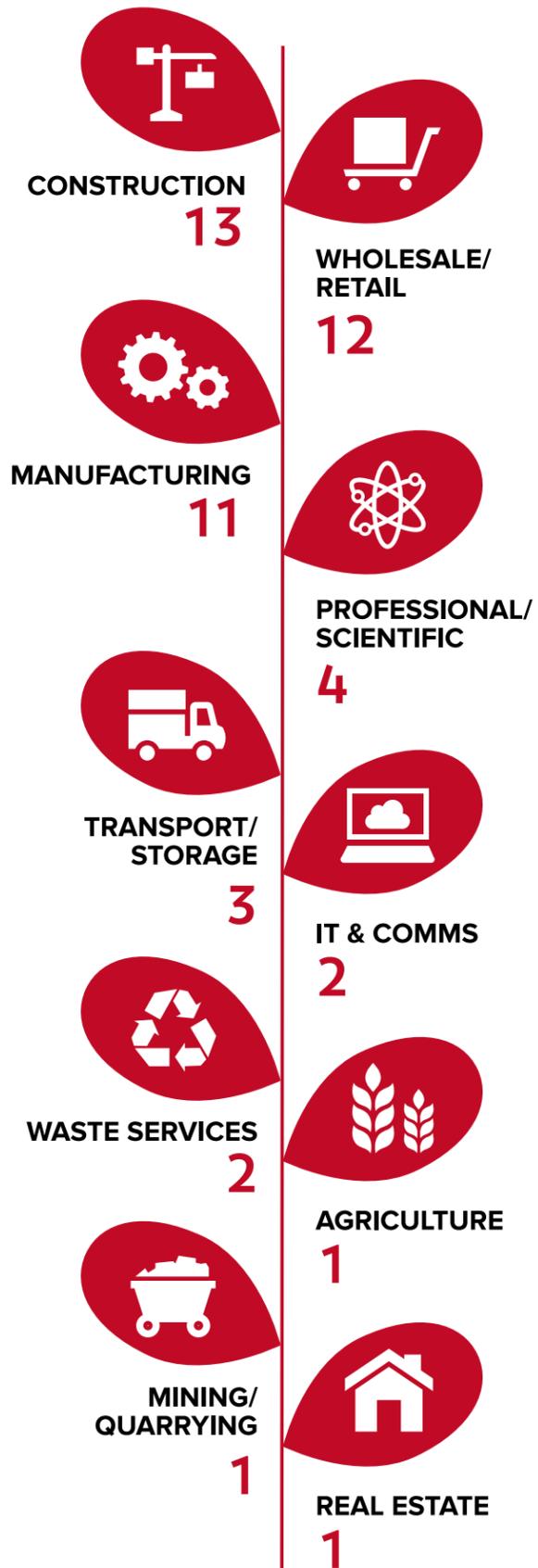
The latest news that the city and surrounding areas are to benefit from a £105m 'city deal' certainly couldn't have come any sooner.

Businesses are, however, still operating in a vacuum of political uncertainty, and the wider concerns around a lack of agreement on how the UK exits the EU. It's those hurdles which will have to be scaled in order for Northern Ireland's business landscape to continue to prosper and grow. Let's hope this latest talks process brings forward a positive outcome for everyone.

*The HM Homegrown Top 50 list is another fresh look at the strength of locally-owned and family run firms – many of which fly under the radar, and just get on with doing business.*



# BROADER BUSINESS SECTORS

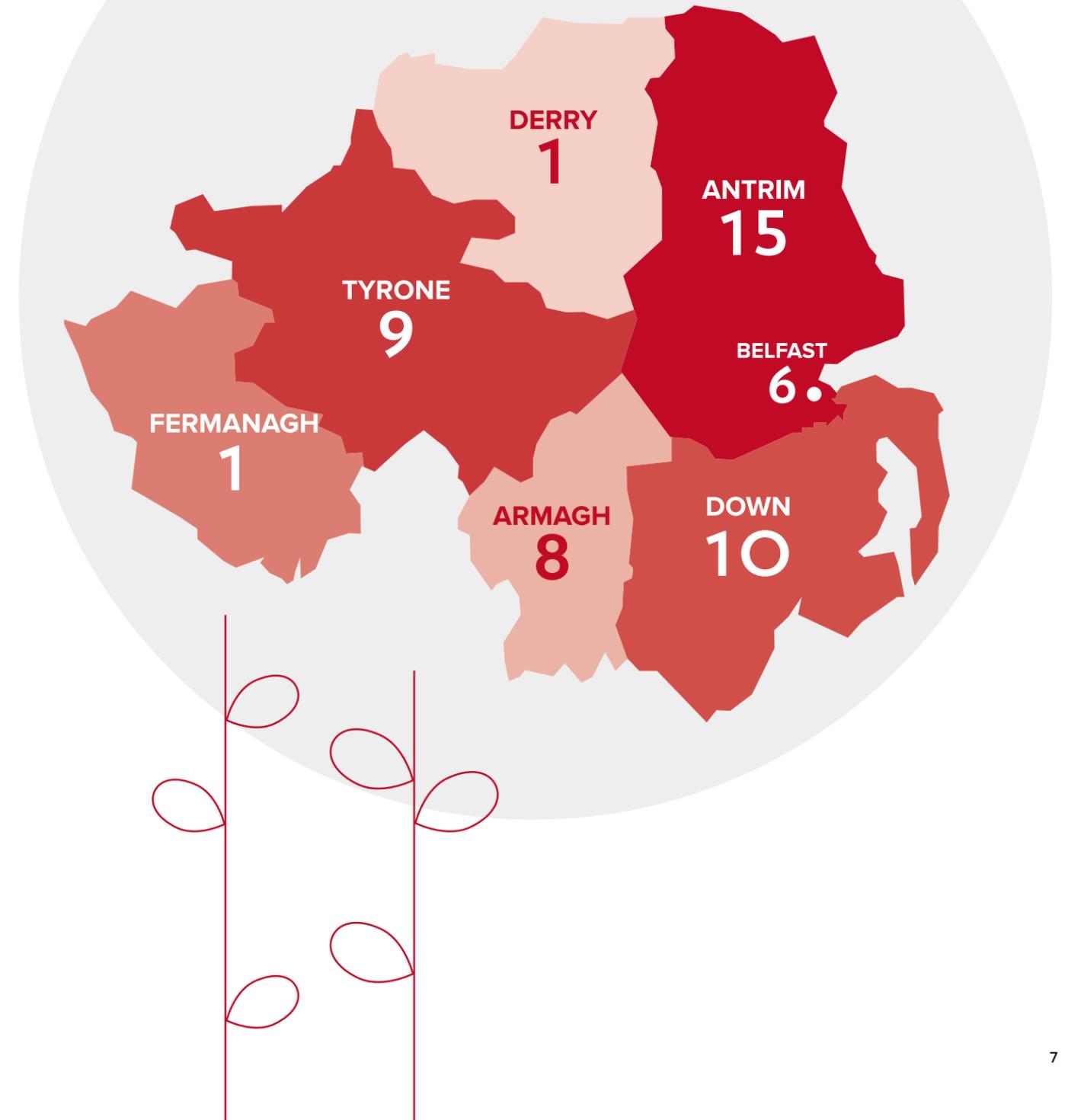


TOTAL WAGE BILL  
JUST UNDER  
**£170M**



FAMILY CONTROLLED  
BUSINESSES  
**32 OUT OF 50**

# LOCATIONS BY COUNTY



# SMEs REMAIN THE BACKBONE OF THE LOCAL ECONOMY

By Steve Pollard,  
Ulster University Business School



Although they rarely capture the headlines, Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of the Northern Ireland economy. We typically define SMEs as businesses with no more than 250 employees and this report takes a closer look at our SME sector and in particular those that are locally owned.

These businesses make up over 99% of the total number of businesses in the local economy, a proportion very similar to all other regions in the UK. Furthermore, the entrepreneurial spirit appears to be alive and well in Northern Ireland, as we have more businesses per head of population than Wales, Scotland and all regions across the North of England.<sup>1</sup>

As a predominantly rural based economy, it is unsurprising that the agriculture sector and the farming community in particular, is responsible for a quarter of all businesses registered here. But it is not the only sector which 'punches above its weight', both the manufacturing and construction sectors also have higher numbers of businesses, on a per capita basis, relative to other parts of the UK.

These broader economic trends are also reflected in the new HM Top 50 SMEs.<sup>2</sup> Almost three quarters of all the firms on the list operate in just three sectors – manufacturing, construction and wholesale/ retail.

The top 50 firms earned just over £100 million in operating profit in their last reporting year on turnover of £1.6 billion and paid out almost £170 million in wages and salaries in the same period. This further underlines the vibrancy of this group of companies and the spending power they give to their local communities in which they are based through the employment they provide.

Top of the list is Bawnbua Foods Ltd, based in Lurgan and operating in the meat processing sector. Second placed is Shelbourne Motors Ltd, one of several motor vehicle dealers on the list, which is based in Portadown and third placed is Regency Carpet Manufacturing Ltd, in Bangor.

*The top 50 firms earned just over £100 million in operating profit in their last reporting year on turnover of £1.6 billion and paid out almost £170 million in wages and salaries in the same period.*

This list shows the continued importance of traditional businesses and industries to the local economy and the extent to which they can be successful when often attention is focused on other sectors. Although a diverse economy with successful businesses across many sectors is important, a small economy such as Northern Ireland cannot be world-class in every area.

This raises an important point for Government regarding the need to focus limited resources on sectors which are most likely to succeed. Northern Ireland has demonstrated its ability to sell its agri-food, manufacturing and construction products and services successfully overseas.

Internationally successful companies also tend not to emerge in isolation. As this list shows, groups or clusters of companies tend to emerge who can be successful both locally as well as nationally and

internationally. Domestic competition drives innovation, efficiency and productivity improvements which in turn develops businesses which can take on any competitor across the world. As a result, there is merit in calling on Government to identify the most appropriate ways to support the continued growth of successful clusters in Northern Ireland to help power the economy forward in the future.

In recent years it has become increasingly popular to refer to innovation clusters as "entrepreneurial ecosystems", a concept that Mason and Brown discussed in 2013 as part of the broader question of what types of policy initiatives should be taken to promote the creation and maturation of high growth firms ("HGFs").<sup>3</sup>

This has led policymakers to consider adopting support programmes for high growth entrepreneurship that are more "systems-based" and which rely mainly on "relational" forms of support including building connections and networks among entrepreneurs, prioritising development of "blockbuster entrepreneurs" with significant economic potential and institutional alignment of priorities.

A key feature of the (draft) Programme for Government or NICS delivery plan is its dependence on collaborative working between organisations and groups, whether in the public, voluntary, or private sectors. Invest NI's current strategy makes a strong commitment to this recognising that to deliver the sort of transformation needed 'will demand higher levels of collaboration and partnership than in the past.'

*In fostering the conditions for success it will be essential that the business community in collaboration with partners work to ensure that development of our entrepreneurial ecosystems remains a high priority and that policy is holistic encompassing all areas of the ecosystem.*

Given our findings it is clear that economic transformation requires that we build from existing industries and that we encourage growth across all industry sectors including low, mid and high-tech firms.

This requires a continued focus on growing existing industries building on their foundations, skills and capabilities to encourage sustainable, growth oriented and innovative firms.

<sup>1</sup> Source: DfE Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR). 37.8 businesses per 1,000 population in NI, compared to 32.2 in Scotland and 32.8 in Wales. The North East of England has proportionally the lowest number of business across all UK regions at 26.4 per 1,000 population.

<sup>2</sup> The Top 50 list is based on Turnover and the selection criteria applied was: up to 250 employees; NI is listed on the primary trading address; and SMEs owned by larger companies (either from within or outside NI) were excluded. The data was sourced from the FAME (Financial Analysis Made Easy) database and therefore it is possible that not all companies have been captured in the analysis.

<sup>3</sup> C. Mason and R. Brown, "Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Growth Oriented Entrepreneurship" November 7, 2013, International Workshop on Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Growth Oriented Entrepreneurship Organized by OECD LEED Programme and Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs Workshop; Background Paper (Final Version: January 2014)



# HOMEGROWN STORIES

Over the next five pages, we profile five businesses on the inaugural HM Homegrown Top 50. We interviewed the owners of these businesses, asking them to share their stories of how their businesses were founded, how they grew, recognised opportunities and dealt with challenges.

We are also very proud to call three of these businesses our clients – who the team at Harbinson Mulholland have worked with for many years, helping them to grow and continue to thrive.

## THE ALPHA GROUP

Headquarters: Belfast  
People employed: 110

*“We don’t only supply furniture...we see ourselves now as being part of a solution for businesses, particularly supporting employee wellbeing and staff retention, two major areas of concern for almost every employer.”*

Paul Black, CEO, The Alpha Group

When Paul Black’s father Robin set up Alpha Group in 1971 he could not have imagined how his core business of supplying furniture to other businesses, would become part of a generational revolution – one that now acts as a crucial factor for a 21st century workforce, helping employers create appealing workspaces and giving themselves a competitive advantage when recruiting staff.

Now trading for 48 years, the Alpha Group is in the hands of Robin’s son, Paul and employs 110 people across offices in Belfast, Dublin, Glasgow and Oxford. They supply contract and office furniture to commercial, education and the public sectors as well as in hospitality.

A true family business, Paul sees himself as a custodian for the company his father created. When asked what he attributes to the success of Alpha Group he is very clear on two key factors that have had a major impact.

“Our people are crucial to our success, through their loyalty and their determination to deliver an outstanding service. Also, our supply partners and their ongoing product development that helps Alpha always lead from the front,” he says.

In his years at the helm, Paul says that although there have been lots of challenging times, particularly throughout the global financial crash of 2008, there has been nothing that would ever make him want to quit. This is particularly notable when you consider how Alpha was founded by Robin – when his then employer, Romeo Vickers closed their Belfast Operations due to the deteriorating political climate in 1970/71, he started a business of his own.

He is very clear when it comes to supporting SMEs across Northern Ireland though, saying “it’s difficult to know whether the sector is given sufficient support across all areas, but one thing is for sure – the value these businesses create aren’t given enough recognition, especially when it comes to recognising the number of local people employed directly within these businesses”.

“As many of the businesses in this sector are family owned and operated, I think there is also a risk associated with sound, well planned succession within family businesses which also needs to be addressed,” Paul says.



*“Our people are crucial to our success, through their loyalty and their determination to deliver an outstanding service. Also, our supply partners and their ongoing product development that helps Alpha always lead from the front.”*

He does see a bright future for Alpha and intends to continue to focus his priorities on continuing to run an efficient and profitable business, delivering a service that exceeds expectations and providing a safe and stable environment for his staff.

“It’s normal now for potential employees to look at their surroundings and compare notes with friends who work in other firms. It’s only natural that those with more appealing space, particularly with a younger workforce coming through, will find a benefit in helping hold onto their more precious commodity – their people.”

# O'REILLYS WHOLESALE LTD

Headquarters: Newry  
People employed: 78

*"SMEs are the forgotten many and the lack of Government is our biggest threat to help propel this small province forward. Imagine what would happen if everyone in the business world just stopped communicating."*

Derek O'Reilly, Managing Director, O'Reillys Wholesale Ltd

**There was a time during the 1990s that forced Derek O'Reilly to question whether he should continue working or close his doors. After two major robberies at their wholesale operation in Newry, he received so much support from customers and staff he realised he couldn't give in. In fact, this fuelled a long and steady drive to bring O'Reillys Wholesale to where they are today.**

Formally O'Reillys 'The Sweet People', the business has been the benchmark of convenience since Robert O'Reilly, known as Bob, opened his business in 1959. Sixty years on and employing 78, the business which has been positioned as a specialist in the wholesale of confectionery and soft drinks, has opened up new avenues and now provide a more robust range of goods incorporating grocery, household and health and beauty products.

To highlight the ethos and longevity of the business, Derek quotes Henry Ford – 'coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success'.

O'Reillys are the champion of independent retailers, helping them to remain competitive, and emphasise the power of the great working relationship they have with their suppliers. Most importantly for Derek are his employees, whom he sees as propping up the company and crucial to its seamless running.

Derek says: "Some of our employees have been with us for a long time, between 20 and 35 years. They are loyal to the company and our customers. It's not easy to find that balance but they continue to do so, every day so it's crucial that we continue to look after them."

The company continues to grow and invest in new technology, having created a bespoke web ordering solution allowing them to push their best promotion to the fore of their digital platform giving their customers a competitive edge. They stay on top of trends to make sure they can identify the products of the moment "before the moment happens".

But although the company are doing all they can to ensure their ongoing success. Derek feels more can be done to help SMEs in the North of Ireland.

"We currently have no ministers sitting in government to make good decisions to propel our small province forward. We are in a very



*"Some of our employees have been with us for a long time, between 20 and 35 years. They are loyal to the company and our customers. It's not easy to find that balance but they continue to do so, every day so it's crucial that we continue to look after them."*

unique position geographically to grow all types of businesses and attract major investment. Unfortunately, a lack of communication between our local parties has put a halt to that."

And O'Reillys are looking to the future – Derek and his team are currently developing their own symbol fascia store, One2Shop which will be rolled out soon, helping to fuel plans for the next successful 60 years.

# UFORM

Headquarters: Toomebridge  
People employed: 230

*"The recession hit us hard. We were days away from potentially being liquidated. Turnover fell, our cashflow was severely impacted. But with strong leadership, resilience and determination and a cash injection from re-mortgaging our homes and cashing in our pensions, we carried on. We are proud to be a company who has ended our most recent financial year with a turnover of £35m."*

Eamon Donnelly, Managing Director, Uform

**Uform is an award-winning family business located in Toomebridge, Co Antrim, manufacturing and distributing a range of doors and accessories to kitchen retailers across the UK and Ireland. Initially Oakwood Door Designs, the company was founded by Eamon's late father Eddie Donnelly together with Eamon and his brother Paul.**

Now, celebrating 26 years in business, the business has a team of 230 people and offers one of the most diverse product portfolios in the marketplace. Their consumer brand 'Kitchen Stori' was launched in 2006 as a means to market to the end consumer on behalf of retailers supplying Uform products.

The cornerstone of the Uform brand is focused on a real understanding of the customer – crucial for the company to be able to deliver quality, value, service and choice. "We operate in a very saturated marketplace which does feature a lot of commoditised product," Eamon says. "However, our continual focus on product research and development ensures that we are quick to market with a product that is innovative and more importantly, a product that is of the highest quality and that adds value for our retailers".

Uform are a true family business with family values and these values are extended to their customers as well, the retailers who they also consider to be part of the family. Being their trusted partner and helping them succeed, prosper and grow is deep rooted in their DNA.

Eamon is a firm believer in the importance of strategy and having a clear, defined business plan in place to provide a clear sense of direction and measurable goals to ensure success – as this helps drive day to day decisions and helps evaluate progress going forward.

And asked whether he believes SMEs in Northern Ireland are given enough support he says: "Yes. Invest NI are there to support with a diverse range of programmes and initiatives, but I don't think enough businesses actually make best use of these first class services."

He sees a reduction in corporation tax as a means to tackle long terms problems in the local economy as it could result in companies being able to keep more of their profits for re-investment and further growth but also recognises the uncertainty around Brexit at this time and its potential impact overall.



*"Those who reach for the stars land on a tree and those who aim to land on a tree, land on the ground."*

A man who looks to the positive, Eamon advises anyone with an itch to scratch to just scratch it –ambition requires hard work, focus and a willingness to learn from successful people.

"Those who reach for the stars land on a tree and those who aim to land on a tree, land on the ground," he says.

# FRYLITE

*"I always felt I was providing a product and service that our customers wanted. I also felt a duty to my employees not to quit. I knew if I kept plugging away the business would be a success. I owe a lot to my family for supporting me through those challenging times."*

Eamon McCay, Managing Director/Founder of Frylite

Headquarters: Strabane  
People employed: 240

**In 1988 Eamon McCay visited his first customer with a simple idea – to deliver a quality product by way of exceptional service. It's an approach that is second nature to the firm now and one that has been central to their incredible success.**

The Frylite Group supplies, collects and recycles cooking oils for customers in Ireland, Britain and Europe with more than 7,000 food industry businesses across Ireland alone. With depots in Dublin, Galway, Cork, Strabane and Coleraine, they have easy geographical reach to their customers who range from local independents to multi national brands.

In addition, Eamon developed a ground-breaking complete supply and waste collection service that is the first choice for more than 60% of Ireland's food industry.

Commenting on their success to date, Eamon says: "Our market leading success is grounded in ways of working and delivering for our customers that have, even through incredible growth and change, remained constant over the last 30 years and I would like to thank all of them for their loyal business as well as recognising our talented and hardworking staff who do a fantastic job ensuring we remain number one in our industry".

With 240 employees, Eamon works hard to ensure the culture of the business is strong, to keep the team motivated. He believes that what makes Frylite different is an insistence on quality, competing on value and not price, being friendly, reliable and professional and always delivering what they say they will.

It hasn't all been plain sailing though – Eamon faced many difficult days, particularly in the early years but never once thought about quitting.

"I always felt I was providing a product and service that our customers wanted. I also felt a duty to my employees not to quit," he said. "I knew if I kept plugging away the business would be a success. I owe a lot to my family for supporting me through those challenging times."

And does Eamon think SMEs are being given enough support? He believes there is support out there, but that a lot more could be done, including the return of the Stormont institution, a competitive tax rate



*"I'm a big believer in giving back to our communities. In 2018 we celebrated 30 years in business and raised £30,000 for a number of charities through our gala ball. Charity is important to Frylite."*

to have a level playing field with the Republic of Ireland and more encouragement for new start up businesses in Northern Ireland. He also mentions the importance of protecting investment in further and higher education and apprenticeship schemes as well as increasing practical vocational education.

His plans for the future are to ensure the business continues to be profitable and cash healthy and acts as a key local employer for the areas in which they are located. His advice to his 18-year-old self – carpe diem, seize the day, do not be afraid of failure and learn from your mistakes – just don't make the same one twice.

# LW SURPHLIS & SON LTD

*"I took over the business when I was 32 – that was 40 years ago. I have worked and grown it. Once you get a business to a certain size, then the business seems to grow on its own."*

Maurice Surphlis, Managing Director, LW Surphlis & Son Ltd

Headquarters: Omagh  
People employed: 71

**Maurice Surphlis has worked for one company during his entire 55-year career – that's the family business which he still heads up today.**

Starting off working for his father Lowry's small grocery business in Newtownstewart, Co Tyrone, aged just 17, he has grown his family firm LW Surphlis & Son Ltd into an animal feed firm with a £31.4m turnover.

The business began in 1948, when his father – originally from Co Fermanagh – started his small shop. That grew into a business with around three lorries, burgeoning to a fleet of around 45 trucks in 2019.

"We have grown the business in the past 30 odd years to around 100,000 tonnes of feed a year, and approximately 15,000 tonnes of fertilizer," Maurice says. "We also design and produce agricultural buildings for the farming community – silo pits and cattle sheds."

The 72-year-old says the main bulk of the firm's sales are in Co Tyrone, Fermanagh, Donegal and Londonderry. But the firm also sells further south, and elsewhere in the UK – transporting wood pellets to a major supermarket.

"I have been with the company for 55 years, and started when I was 17. Now I'm 72. Agriculture has come a long way in those 55 years, and is very different to what it used to be. In those days, people didn't have more than 30 to 40 dairy cows, whereas now they could have 200 to 400."

The progress and growth of the firm in the last few decades has been steady – the company building its own feed mill, and developing into blending animal feeds, which Maurice says has "taken off dramatically in the last 20 years or so and has kept growing and growing."

"I took over the business when I was 32 – that was 40 years ago. I have worked and grown it. Once you get a business to a certain size, then the business seems to grow on its own. It's been based on word of mouth, and how your feed is doing for a farmer.

Looking at the Northern Ireland business landscape as a whole, Maurice says the agri sector and farming in general is "coming through a rough patch". "The price of beef cattle is down, and price of milk is down, and eggs are not as good as they were. We don't know how Brexit will affect us, but we definitely wouldn't want a hard border."



*"I would like it to stay in the family, but I wouldn't stand in the way if they wanted to develop it further... I would like to step back a bit, and let them step up to the mark."*

As for the firm's overall success, Maurice says it's down to the whole team, and a lot of commitment from management. But he stresses that "it's not a nine to five job", and that work doesn't stop just because the office is closed for the day.

Of course, the business remains very much a family affair, with Maurice's two sons, Colin and Adrian, working for the company and likely to take up the reins in the future.

"I would like it to stay in the family, but I wouldn't stand in the way if they wanted to develop it further... I would like to step back a bit, and let them step up to the mark."



# ATTRACTING AND RETAINING TALENT IN HOMEGROWN BUSINESSES



By Steve Pollard,  
Ulster University Business School

**Recent research by Ulster University Business School to identify the HM Top 50 SMEs led to some interesting findings. Almost three quarters of all the firms on the list operate in just three sectors – manufacturing, construction and wholesale/ retail. The top 50 firms earned just over £100 million in operating profit in their last reporting year on turnover of £1.6 billion and paid out almost £170 million in wages and salaries in the same period. This list shows the continued importance of traditional businesses and industries to the local economy and the extent to which they can be successful. Despite this more often than not they are not the businesses attracting the attention of the public.**

Northern Ireland has enjoyed great success in attracting new investors. Most particularly in the technology, financial services and legal sectors. Invest NI cite that in recent years almost 900 international companies have chosen to locate in the region between them employing around 100,000 people. Of the 900 companies almost 80% of new inward investors have already reinvested in Northern Ireland. These new companies offer attractive and exciting careers. These are sectors that have long standing experience of having to find ways to attract potential employees as well as retain the ones they have. Tight

labour markets elsewhere have shown them the value of investing in attracting and retaining talent.

Public perception however wrong may well be that more traditional businesses are places where relatively little innovation and change happen compared to what may seem like more glamorous opportunities. Excellent businesses offering wonderful opportunities can suffer from this stereotype. Attracting and retaining talent in a tightening labour market requires businesses to directly address these stereotypes by proactively promoting themselves highlighting why they are great places to work.

Increasingly HR Professionals in traditional industries are embracing Employer Branding in order to differentiate what they offer in the labour market. According to the CIPD “Employer branding presents HR professionals with an opportunity to learn from marketing techniques and apply them to their work. It’s important that HR works collaboratively, for example with colleagues in marketing, public relations, internal communications and corporate responsibility, to share expertise and reap maximum benefits from developing an employer brand.”

In SMEs where you may well not have all these functions the key is to focus on your unique qualities and strengths. For employees that want to feel like their work makes a difference an SME provides a

great opportunity to have significant impact. SMEs tend to have much stronger links with their local community. They will most likely have less hierarchical bureaucratic structures. The opportunity to be less specialist and develop a range of skills, try new roles and try new ways of working is something that is likely to prove very attractive. Related to this but distinct is the concept of the employee value proposition. Think of this along the lines of the more usual value proposition to customers with a focus on employees.

A focus on employer brand does not have to be expensive or complex. Have a look at your website as this is often the first point of contact with potential candidates. You may be a great company and a great place to work but are you shouting about it on your website? To what extent does your messaging address the factors that are central to employee choice about where to work? More broadly it can be worth thinking about how effectively you use technology to build effective recruitment channels.

Companies improving their employer brand can also attend career fairs or networking events. Engagement with the education system is a great way to embed your brand with a pool of prospective employees.

Universities and Colleges are open to working with businesses to promote career opportunities and will welcome opportunities to collaborate. The opportunity to learn and grow is of great importance to employees and so offering learning and development opportunities and supporting career development is embraced by progressive employers. Engagement with Universities and Colleges is also a great way of shaping the learning in these institutions to improve alignment with your needs whether that be attracting new talent or developing your existing workforce.

Focus on company values and team culture. Employees are attracted to companies with values that align with their own belief systems. They want work that provides challenges and makes a positive difference to others, is valued and where there are opportunities to improve things. They will often need flexibility. Organisation culture, values and opportunities for career growth are really important. This requires effective Leadership and Management culture and Practice. An investment in the development of your team’s leadership and management capabilities is something to consider.

Of course pay is a major factor and one that cannot be ignored. For some sectors, where pay has traditionally been lower, the tightening of the labour market will be something that has to be considered. Not least those sectors with a high reliance on attracting employees from other parts of the EU. Over and above pay however though there’s lots that can be done. If you can’t compete on wages then you must focus on other factors to create a more desirable and engaging place to work.

For the people and institutions working to support business continued recognition of the vital role of SMEs in what we have termed traditional industries is of vital importance.

Economic transformation requires that we build from existing industries and that we encourage growth across all industry sectors including low, mid and high-tech firms. This requires a continued focus on growing existing industries building on their foundations, skills and capabilities to encourage sustainable, growth oriented and innovative firms. To deliver the sort of transformation needed will demand higher levels of collaboration and partnership than in the past.



**“for employees that want to feel like their work makes a difference, an SME provides a great opportunity to make an impact.”**



# COMMENTARY: MANUFACTURING NI

By Stephen Kelly, CEO, Manufacturing NI

*“If we were to choose anywhere in the world where we should manufacture the products we manufacture, you wouldn’t choose Northern Ireland”. Quite stark words from a CEO of a major, exporting firm.*

*However, he went on “but this is the place where we are from. This is where we were founded. Our feet are in the soil. What makes us great is who we are and where we are from. That outweighs all the additional costs and burdens we face”.*

However, they are not relying on this loyalty to place. They are learning from the workplaces, the ones with the pool tables, in creating great places to work too. They are investing in their people as much as in product and market development, sharing the success in working conditions and wages and creating great places to work as well as great products.

It is this commitment, despite the challenges, to keep moving, investing and innovating which has seen employment in manufacturing grow faster than other parts of the economy and sales in and outside of Northern Ireland grow.

We should cherish and celebrate our great homegrown manufacturers. We should be thankful for their commitment to communities in towns and townlands across Northern Ireland and we should create the conditions which would allow them to be successful now and in the years ahead.

There is no doubt that being at the beginning and end of every supply chain, the burden of the extra costs of transport, having the second highest electricity prices in Europe and the challenges faced by Brexit and no decision making in Stormont weighs heavy on firms who try to be competitive in markets at home and abroad.

But, despite what some claim, our local manufacturing entrepreneurs are not simply motivated by profit. They established their business because they are from this place and want to make a contribution. They want to be successful and the people around them from their community successful too.

Making a contribution to their local community through generating wealth and work is hugely motivational, particularly in manufacturing where firms tend to be in more rural communities not usually in the sights of multi-national foreign direct investors nor tech firms who want to be in city centre offices with pool tables and Soda Streams.

Creating jobs in places which people want to call home, where they can build or buy a house, send their children to their old school, socialise in their local, buy their bread in their independent retailer and participate in community clubs and groups is important to keep these rural communities strong. This is where our manufacturing firms are overwhelmingly located.

This commitment to ‘place’ is critical for our manufacturing firms. It is the secret ingredient alongside innovation, endeavour and an ability to sell which makes them successful. It is the commitment to the great people around them that drives their effort to make great products and sell them to happy customers across Northern Ireland and across the globe.



## HM HOMEGROWN TOP 50 2019

**The HM Homegrown Campaign 2019 was officially launched on 12th March with a celebration lunch at Titanic Belfast.**

The team at Harbinson Mulholland were joined by many of those businesses on the list who were presented with a certificate as well as a Homegrown “Tree-mendous” Card to plant at their businesses, to signify their continued growth.

The campaign aims to throw the spotlight on Northern Ireland’s SME sector and over the coming months we shall be developing more Homegrown initiatives and events.

If you would like to be kept updated on our plans please email: Treena Clarke – [tclarke@harbinson-mulholland.com](mailto:tclarke@harbinson-mulholland.com)



## HELPING HOMEGROWN BUSINESSES GROW FOR OVER 20 YEARS

At Harbinson Mulholland we have cultivated the Homegrown initiative as it encapsulates all we stand for as a firm.

For 20 years we have been at the root of NI business, providing sound and beneficial accounting and business advice to SMEs across Northern Ireland, helping them grow in all conditions.

Homegrown – it's where we work best.

To find out more about our work with Northern Ireland's SME sector, visit:

[Harbinson-mulholland.com](http://Harbinson-mulholland.com)

