

The North East's star potential in booming TV industry

The North East is “rich territory” for film companies looking to make compelling TV programmes.

That's the thinking of Andrew Eastel, creative director at Middlechild – an independent production company that has just opened a Newcastle office on the back of a BBC commission.

“The decision to open in Newcastle wasn't just a business one – it was emotional,” says Andrew, who leads a team that's made programmes such as Fare Dodgers, aired on Channel 5 and Saving Britain's Wildlife.

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“It's just lovely up here – the landscape is really nice and the people are so friendly and enthusiastic. And between its urban and rural areas there's great scope for developing factual TV that tells interesting stories. It wasn't a difficult choice.”



Middlechild's creative director Andrew Eastel

A few years ago the Middlechild team was operating solely out of expensive London offices when it made the decision to open a second office in Brighton. The move proved to be something of a revelation for Andrew and the team, who discovered you didn't have to be in the capital to make TV.

"Most of our pitching is done by Zoom these days, which means channels and commissioners have become more accessible," he says.

And now they've opened an office – Northern Child – that will employ six people in Hoults Yard, ahead of filming for its daytime Northern Justice series – a 10-episode run of half hour shows that will follow North East law firms and their clients.



The Northern Child logo

(Image: Supplied by Middlechild)

Andrew explains: “We’ve already got a number of law firms on board. It’s going to be about ordinary people who are facing some of the extraordinary times in their lives, and it’s about the lawyers who are there to help them. It’s going to deal

with issues such as intellectual property theft, financial fraud and civil litigation.

“The idea is to show these things can happen to anyone, but if they do, there are lawyers out there that care and aren’t necessarily getting paid big bucks.”

The series will use first-person testimony from both lawyers and clients to tell personal, emotional, and compelling stories of people in dire straits and the legal professionals that step in to find ways the justice system can save them.

Each episode will explore two or three different stories, which will help viewers better understand the intricacies of the British justice system. Away from the law, the series will also reveal the human stories behind legal cases, with clients disclosing the background to each situation and the impact it has had on their lives.

Northern Justice, Andrew hopes, will be the first of many factual and observation programmes to come from Northern Child. He thinks the region is ripe for this type of TV – which is typically much faster and cheaper to produce than scripted shows that require more resources such as costume and set design.

Channel 4’s Geordie Hospital – an emotive behind-the-scenes series following staff and patients at Newcastle’s RVI and Freeman hospitals – has shown there is a national appetite for North East stories. Last year notable production firm Fulwell 73 set up offices in the region on the back of its Sunderland ‘Til I Die Netflix series and twentysix03 – the makers of BBC Three’s Angels of the North – operates from Gateshead.



Middlechild's Andy Smythe, series director and Lesley Duncanson, series producer, and Rosie the dog

(Image: Supplied by Middlechild)

“There’s loads of talent from the region but a lot of people have had to move south – particularly if they want to make documentary films,” Andrew says. “It doesn’t have to be that way. I think what the region needs is more people making hours of TV, and with that comes steady work for professionals and further opportunities for work experience and training.”

And to attract more of the production companies that enable it, there are several ingredients needed – chiefly flexible business premises that offer up-and-coming outfits the chance to grow and shrink headcount as projects require.

He also suggests that shared, high quality post-production facilities – which can be costly for smaller companies – would help retain talent in the region by making sure teams don’t move off elsewhere to edit film captured here.

Northern Child is also recruiting for development staff who Andrew says will help drive the business by securing new commissions. “We really bought into the excitement from the BBC and Northern Film and Media,” says Andrew. “Everyone is really positive and pulling in the same direction.”

It’s a signal of long-term commitment to the region – helped by the BBC pledging to invest £25m over the next five years to fund network TV production and talent development.

Alison Gwynn, chief executive of Northern Film and Media, says Northern Child is “gold dust” for the North East because it’s keeping talent local, for longer.

She explained: “When we had Indiana Jones being filmed in the region it was great – but that’s a matter of weeks, whereas Northern Child’s series will be months in the making.”

The screen industry was booming even before lockdown brought on TV bingeing, and now demand for programmes has reached new heights. But with just 2% of content produced in the North

East, there's a much bigger market share to grab.

Alison added: "I must be talking to at least half a dozen other companies that want to make content in the North East, which is fantastic. That's why the BBC investment is so important because to qualify, companies need to commit to the region by opening offices and developing talent."

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