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FREE • April/May 2020

SPECIAL EDITION



## Life after lockdown

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## Birmingham Business

# Welcome

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intro



By **HENRY  
CARPENTER**  
Editor

**This edition was meant to examine the measures laid out in the Spring Budget by a chancellor who had only just found himself in the job.**

The Budget was big, meaningful news at the time with very real consequences for businesses. It seems like a lifetime ago now, but it was only in March.

The storm clouds in the form of the virus were gathering, however, and in the space of only a few days, as the enormity of the pandemic's effects began to sink in, the country – the world – went into collective shock. And with it, the business world went into paralysis.

The hospitality industry was the first casualty, as we were instructed to avoid visiting bars, pubs and restaurants, and they were ordered to shut down. The lockdown was real, and suddenly tumbleweed was blowing through the world of business and commerce. The chancellor was back on our television screens pledging a £330 billion fiscal stimulus to keep the nation at work, if not actually working.

Those workers went home – signing up to Zoom, House Party and the rest – by the millions, while keeping one eye on the news, as the NHS staff and other front-line workers battled tirelessly to try to control the situation in the

face of extraordinary pressures.

The grim statistics worsened by the day. Workers and businesses across the land have been left in a state of limbo, weighed down with the uncertainty of what life would bring. On the face of it, the picture could barely be bleaker.

But delve below the surface and little glimmers of light could be found in an otherwise dark and frightening world.

Stories of selflessness and contributions to the cause have reverberated against a welcome silence of greed, egotism and petty politics. Businesses large and small, as well as individuals, have been playing their part.

A sense of resilience, of hope, of we're-all-in-it-together solidarity has come to the fore. If you want to read positive words from some of the region's industry leaders, turn to our report on COVID-19 fallout.

We were also – and indeed are – running a special supplement on life sciences in the region, as well as shining a light on some of the West Midlands' many and varied success stories. That we have been able to print at all is down to the backing of some key supporters for which they have our immense thanks.

We can do this, has been the battle cry. Yes, of course we can. And we will.

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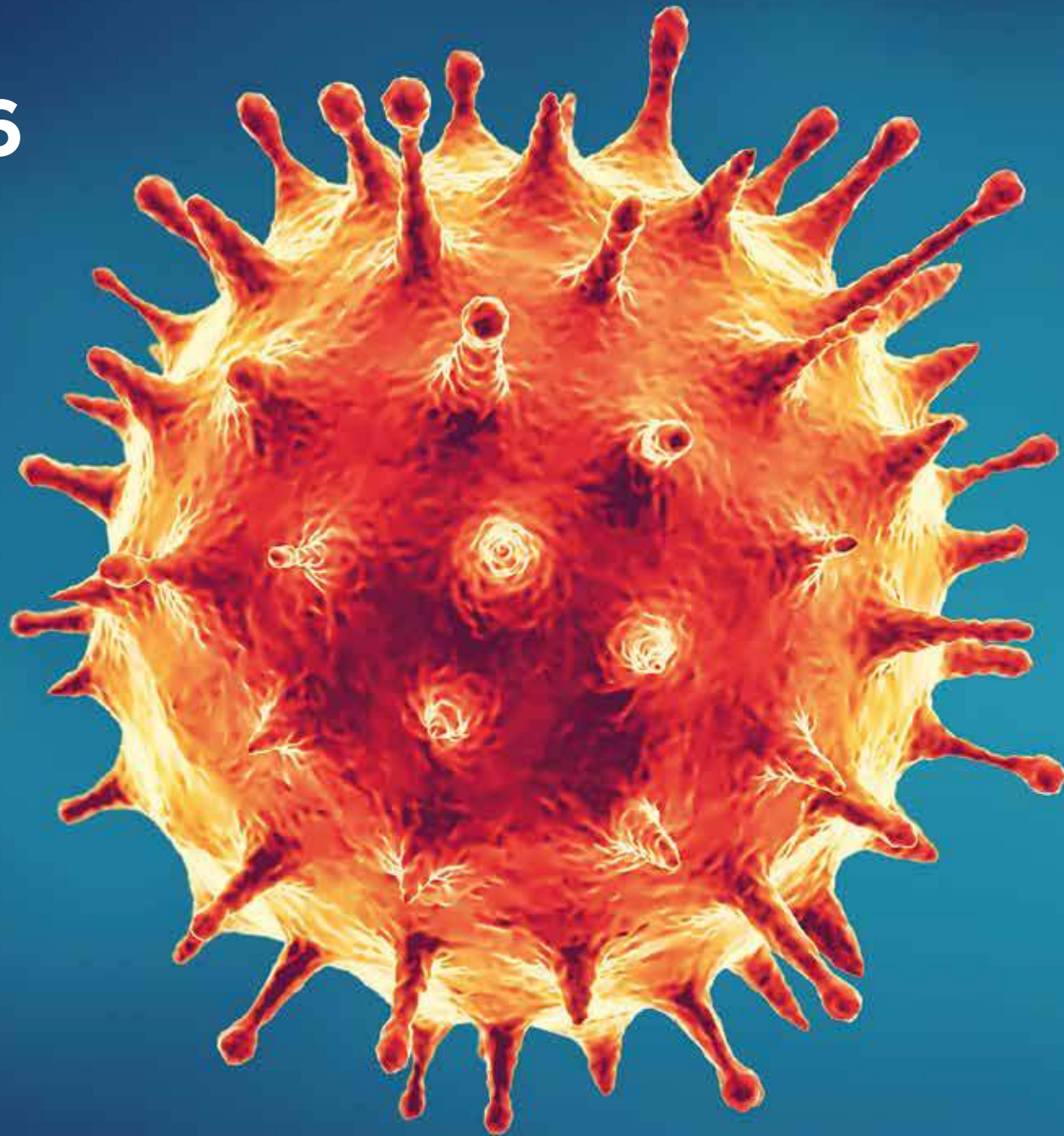
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# Coronavirus: the fallout

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Little can be predicted with any sort of certainty on what lies ahead for business after the pandemic.

The effects of coronavirus and the subsequent lockdown will continue to be felt right across the commercial spectrum for months, years and probably decades.

We ask expert voices from some of the key sectors in the region to offer their thoughts on what the crisis might mean for their particular industries, not just in the short term but looking further ahead to the future as well.



**These are sombre times. With self isolation, a broken economy and families losing loved ones to an invisible enemy, the future looks bleak. But together, we will get through this and then we can start work on a better future.**

The world is changing because of this global pandemic, COVID-19 (coronavirus). We are rapidly re-thinking the systems we live by – economy, education, health, technology, transport. When this crisis is over, some things will return to how they were before, but many are changed forever.

I have been asked to set up a West Midlands Health Technologies Cluster. In our region we have the science, the enterprise and the precision engineering to make a success of it. I am impressed that the automotive industry is helping make ventilators for the NHS. I am proud of the universities helping with research and testing.

As we see with the massive response to the call for NHS volunteers and #clapforcarers, support for health and social care services is higher than ever. A better future demands greater investment in the resilience and the capacity of our NHS and other public services.

A better future will be one where we keep today's fighting spirit and turn it towards fighting the climate crisis and reducing poverty. We also have existing known threats to tackle, such as meeting the needs of an ageing population and beating diseases related to lifestyle like obesity and diabetes.

To be ready to meet these challenges, we need:

- **Surveillance**, identifying dangers early = identifying market opportunities
- **Testing**, on a scale that meets the challenge = quantifying the need
- **Research**, from invention to



**By David Kidney**

Chief executive of UK Public Health Register and chair of the West Midlands Health Technologies Cluster



products and services = drawing on our assets to identify solutions and how to deploy them

■ **Immunisation and vaccination**, providing protection against infection = develop products and services that are fit for purpose

■ **Capacity**, organisations like the NHS need to be able to flex to meet demand = create innovation in both supply and demand

■ **Technology**, the digital tools for all sectors and all communities = sharing expertise and knowledge across the partnership to nurture innovation and deliver growth

■ **Enterprise**, industries and service providers capable of meeting our region's needs = make West Midlands a great place to do business

■ **Skills**, attracting talent both within and to our region = West

■ **Midlands** a great place to train, work and live

■ **Transport**, a critical part of our infrastructure as we are now seeing = 5G underpinning a transformation of services and connectivity

We are in this together. The collaboration in our society now is something I want to tap into for how I envisage the Health Technologies Cluster will work. COVID-19 has impacted on every sector of our West Midlands economy. Businesses need support to make it through the worst, and afterwards they must thrive

for our economy to be restored. In health technologies, my aim is to set up a Cluster Organisation that works with businesses to help them be more innovative, more productive and more competitive.

Health is so much more than hospitals and GP surgeries, more than doctors and nurses. It is more than the NHS. For example, at the Public Health Register, I regulate the UK public health workforce. Public health workers work alongside colleagues in national and local government, NHS and communities to keep us safe and beat the virus. They are brave, they are strategic and, of necessity, they communicate clear and consistent health messages in their communities.

Pre-crisis the 'prevention is better than cure' message was possibly not heeded as much as it should have been. It will be different now. I foresee public health will be a crucial component of our preparations for future readiness. Public health can benefit just as much from the work I am doing to set up the West Midlands Health Technologies Cluster.

The West Midlands is a great place to live and work. We are creative and we are inventive. We are home to world-class businesses, universities and talent. I want to help our region thrive in a way that is fair and balanced.

**“Pre-crisis the ‘prevention is better than cure’ message was possibly not heeded as much as it should have been. It will be different now.”**

**“I don’t think that there is yet a ‘new normal’, but I might dare to suggest that the shock of the sudden disruption might see us return to a more pre-2008 economic model of local production.”**



**By Mark Smith**

Executive director of business engagement at Aston University



**As I write this, Aston University is complying with the Government's guidelines and remains open for business. We have swiftly managed – like many other businesses – to use technology to allow our support of students and organisations to continue, drawing on the massive dedication of our in-house ICT team.**

Reaction from our clients has been very positive, and it is pleasing to see how the Birmingham business world has rallied to support the current 'business as usual' ethos.

Although universities can and are assisting with vital work to counteract the pandemic, their primary role is to ensure a flow of qualified people that will be so important to the recovery is maintained.

One immediate challenge is to ensure that the degrees awarded this summer are fair and reflective of the talent of those coming through the system, giving employers the confidence to recruit 2020 graduates.

We also know that we will need to offer extra support to the young people coming into our institutions to help them adjust to the needs of the new economic landscape.

Finally, the university needs to be a steadying influence in turbulent times, supporting growth potential by applying our research expertise to the practical problems our private and third-sector colleagues will face.

I don't think that there is yet a 'new normal', but I might dare to suggest that the shock of the sudden disruption might see us return to a more pre-2008 economic model of local production. There is no doubt that the world will recover after the pandemic, but to expect past behaviour to return would be wrong.

I would like to suggest that the business community will be changed positively in three key ways.

The first significant change is in

attitudes towards enterprise. We are already adapting to a shifting economy with the state taking a more significant role in society. Although the temporary changes may be challenging to undo, they will not be impossible, and the reality is going to be that the Government will seek to restart the private sector economy as quickly as possible.

They will do this by encouraging people to start and grow businesses, creating a favourable taxation environment supporting the rapid growth of productive output. Sectors will re-grow at different speeds, and aside from ICT services which will continue to surge, the personal service economy may be the fastest to grow. This is because the experience of digitisation during the lockdown will open pathways to new consumer markets from an expanded demographic.

In my university, the Aston Centre for Growth – under the leadership of Professor Mark Hart – has already anticipated this shift by making support materials available now to help people having to pivot existing businesses as well as assist those looking to create a new future for themselves through enterprise. For those businesses looking to shift from product to service provision, Aston's Advanced Service Group is already working on a range of services to help support their transition.

The second significant change will be to the shape of international trade. It is unlikely that we will return to the global supply chain economy which characterised the last two decades, perhaps much to the joy of the climate change lobby who have seen the impact that COVID-19 has had on pollution. While we can all appreciate the efficiencies that just-in-time practices provide, the pandemic has proven that alongside these benefits,

there is an inherent lack of resilience.

This is especially apparent when events cause countries to deny trade and travel across their borders. Europe, one of the most advanced global JIT markets, will need to learn the lessons from the pandemic very quickly to ensure that it is much better prepared for future turbulence when it occurs. Already my colleagues, such as Professor Ed Sweeney at the Aston Logistics and Supply Chain Institute, are looking at how those patterns will shift and how to advise businesses.

The final change will be to how and where we work, and the skills that we use while in work. The COVID-19 experience taught us all that we do need alternative places to work. It also reminded us that we could continue to work productively if we have the ICT – and digital skills required – to access and operate the correct tools. We may, therefore, see a shift to more telecommuting and use of home or local touch-down offices, as the work-life benefits of remote working stay with us.

As remote working skills become more important, people will invest in their personal digital development, bringing a resurgence of attendance at West Midlands FE colleges and dedicated private training providers.

In closing, perhaps the big hope I have is that the positive outcome from the pandemic will be in the attitude of the population at large, that positive behaviours seen in the crisis are sustained, and that we build a more collaborative, cohesive society that is better able to ride out future storms.



**“We know that the move to defer VAT payments was popular amongst our members in the West Midlands, but whether a rebate on last quarter’s returns to help businesses with cashflow issues will be available, remains unclear.”**

The coronavirus crisis continues to paralyse the country as we come to terms with the impact it is having on health, the economy and our way of life.

People are rightly concerned about their own wellbeing and their loved ones too, and are following government advice to stay at home. This has had a knock-on effect on companies of all sizes, and businesses in the West Midlands are no exception.

At ICAEW, we recognise coronavirus is not just a global health emergency, but an economic one too. Our members are already telling us that the effects of the nationwide lockdown are hitting businesses hard, and we are continuing to monitor the situation closely.

For example, there are serious concerns from members about the manufacturing sector in the West Midlands. It has experienced severe turbulence recently after coronavirus fears took hold and infringed on supply chains. While the overall impact is not yet known, manufacturers are calling on the Government to step in and mitigate the damage.

Cashflow is another issue keeping business leaders up at night. The Chancellor’s furlough scheme was unprecedented and a good start in the battle to keep the economy moving, but businesses will be



**By Dr Sophie Dale-Black**

Regional director at ICAEW, Midlands



concerned about being able to pay salaries before the funding becomes available.

The implications for the West Midlands professional and financial services sector are also worrying. These multi-disciplinary businesses may be reliant on short-term contracts and can have one function thriving while another struggles, though the high demand for insolvency practitioners and employment specialists may help mitigate the impact on other parts of the firm.

There’s no doubt some businesses will have to make tough decisions in the weeks and months to come.

We are pleased to see the Government already announce schemes to help businesses in this unprecedented time. However, members have told us they would like to see greater clarity on which businesses are eligible, how to claim and whether job shares are covered, and we are working to provide detail where we can.

We know that the move to defer VAT payments was popular amongst our members in the West Midlands, but whether a rebate on last quarter’s returns to help businesses with cashflow issues will be available, remains unclear.

While businesses and staff were being handed these generous support packages, it initially appeared that the self-employed would be overlooked. Fortunately, this was not to be the case.

The income support scheme announced was game-changing, and “among the most generous and comprehensive packages to support those who are self-employed in the world” according to Rishi Sunak.

While we recognise the complexities involved in setting it up, waiting until June for the grants to arrive will be a big concern for many.

The immediate future is uncertain, but we will continue to provide support to businesses across the West Midlands, and I wish them all luck.

**“This is not the first global pandemic nor, unfortunately, will it be the last. Just as with previous outbreaks, COVID-19 is proving a catalyst for transforming how our economy functions.”**



**By Charlotte Horobin**

Midlands & East England director, Make UK, The Manufacturers’ Organisation



The current COVID-19 outbreak underlines the importance of our industrial base in maintaining our national prosperity and wellbeing, putting paid to the oft-repeated misconception that Britain no longer makes anything. Through ingenuity and innovation, UK manufacturers have been at the forefront of the national effort to tackle the outbreak.

Automotive makers have switched to building ventilators for our NHS, clothing and textile companies have re-purposed to make medical gowns and facemasks, and food and drink factories are making hand sanitisers and ensuring our household supplies continue.

Manufacturing is operating at the cutting edge of science and technology: whether by using the latest 3D printing techniques to produce critical components for medical equipment or working at speed to produce the medicines and vaccine we urgently need.

Developments in industry – from robotics to 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science and energy storage – are all enabling innovative new products and also creating new business practices.

As countries around the world have gone into lockdown, firms have begun to explore new ways to keep their workers safe from infection,

while ensuring their goods can still get to the customers who need them. Though we are very much now in the eye of the storm, when we emerge from this tragedy, policymakers must look to the future, to the new world of work that is emerging built on new digital technologies.

For every medical mask manufactured or item of food on supermarket shelves stand a line of companies each producing vital components which enable that finished product to be made available.

These supply chain companies have adapted their ways of working to encompass the Government’s social distancing measures, keeping their employees protected by adapting their production processes to enable those products to be manufactured and available.

Manufacturers are already working in partnership with government on the national COVID-19 response and they stand ready to continue working with government: to improve our

education system to equip existing employees and a new generation with the skills and abilities they need to thrive in the fourth industrial revolution; to increase UK exports and drive our global trade; to drive forward a comprehensive industrial strategy that delivers the levelling-up our cities and regions desperately need; to create the right tax and regulatory conditions for industry to grow; and to invest in innovation so that together we can help ensure that Britain remains the best place in the world to do business.

This is not the first global pandemic nor, unfortunately, will it be the last. Just as with previous outbreaks, COVID-19 is proving a catalyst for transforming how our economy functions.

The adaptability, innovation, and resilience demonstrated by businesses across the country this month shows that with the right policies and practices, UK manufacturing can be at the heart of the next industrial revolution.

**At the time of writing, the business world is still coming to terms with changes in the way it operates to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.**

The impact of this virus, of course, has been far more widespread than employees being told to work from home.

Events, trade shows and other gatherings have been cancelled all over the world, while retailers, bars, restaurants and theatres are closing, and manufacturers have ground to a halt. The impact on West Midlands businesses has been stark.

Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce began surveying local businesses on the impact of



**By Paul Faulkner**

Chief executive, Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce



coronavirus several weeks before it had fully taken hold in the UK.

Even back then when business was still operating under relatively normal circumstances, firms reported that they were feeling the impact of cancellations and supplier disruption. That seems light years away now as face-to-face business has since been put on hold altogether.

It has been an extremely tough period for businesses, who have had to manage both the fiscal impact of the pandemic and the physical and mental wellbeing of their staff. But while COVID-19 has kept people indoors, there is still business to be done.

It has forced most of us to re-assess the way we work and one wonders

if the crisis may change some of our practices forever.

Resilience has been a fulcrum of the Greater Birmingham business community over the past few years and we’ve seen that in abundance in the last few weeks.

We’ve seen some of our member businesses reaching out

to help others adapt to practices such as remote working and video conferencing, events and conferences have been delivered online, and others have rallied to support the NHS.

Throughout the COVID-19 disruption, the Chamber has adopted a mantra of ‘Keep Business

Moving’. There has been plenty of appetite from businesses to do just that, with many embracing different ways of communication such as our daily #GBChamberChat virtual networking hour.

Undoubtedly, though, the pace of change and progress our region was enjoying a few months ago has been interrupted by COVID-19.

Right now, it is difficult to gaze too far into the future. When this crisis is over, many areas of business life will no doubt have changed beyond recognition.

However, I’m confident we will pick up that pace again – and that resilience I talked about earlier will come to the fore once more.

**“We’ve seen some of our member businesses reaching out to help others adapt to practices such as remote working and video conferencing . . . and others have rallied to support the NHS.”**



Entering 2020, the property industry was awash with predictions for the year ahead with some common themes: Boris Johnson's victory in the December election and the subsequent departure from the European Union had provided some certainty, and it was hoped that this would lead to more investment; retail would continue to struggle as the high street sought to reinvent itself, and the industrial and logistics landscapes would continue to perform well, driven by increasing e-commerce.

No one predicted a global pandemic that would require those in the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors to close their doors, forcing their staff to work from home and grind construction sites to a halt.

Aside from certain operations spanning supermarkets, medical equipment and e-commerce – which have seen increased demand for their products or services – the short term will see substantial disruption and uncertainty for most corporate occupiers.

Emergency legislation in the Coronavirus Act 2020 prevents leases being forfeited for (at least) the next three months for non-payment of rent, reducing risk of eviction in the short term. Yet, that does not stop the rent from falling due and could simply postpone the unavoidable for many occupiers, leading to risk of eviction after the moratorium expires.

Landlords are also in an unenviable position. Many will have their own debt covenants and will depend on regular payments of rent, with some taking hard stances with their tenants and threatening court proceedings or insolvency.

We are however seeing many landlords accept rent concessions of varying degrees, often offering monthly payments instead of



By Robbie Turner

Real estate specialist at Mills & Reeve



quarterly to help tenants manage cashflow, payment holidays or suspension, and even waiver in some cases.

On deal volumes, existing transactions are still being completed, but we expect a marked reduction in appetite for new deals over the coming months. We have seen that in the context of new office space.

After the restrictions are lifted, high-street vacancies are likely to increase, yet wider real estate impacts might be less severe as the movement of people and business activity return to 'normal' levels. Occupiers are however likely to have less capital available, either having spent the war chest or having accrued more debt.

If banks are unwilling or unable to lend, there could also be a credit crunch, with the prospect of higher interest rates looking likely if quantitative easing measures have an inflationary effect.

These factors could put the brakes on investment in new projects or initiatives such as an office move or a new production line, which could put downward pressure on deal volume, demand and commercial property values.

While there are challenges, there will be plenty of opportunities, particularly in the West Midlands. HS2 and the 2022 Commonwealth Games will create tangible opportunities for growth, raising the profile of and driving investment in the region.

The relief packages made available to businesses have offered some hope for the high street. This may also lead to the sought-after review of how business rates are charged to create a more level playing field between businesses with a high street presence and those trading solely online.

Longer term, the need for decent tech and reliable connectivity has become even more apparent as the nation works from home, so technology is likely to be embraced even more across real estate. Birmingham's tech sector is well placed to meet these changing requirements.

Health and the health economy are also likely to have greater focus. The importance of providing the NHS with sufficient resources will be fresh in the mind of the nation, and will no doubt be a key political issue for years to come, creating opportunities for companies within the health economy.

The pandemic may also create a greater reluctance to rely on global supply chains, perhaps placing more emphasis on local supply chains, even more so for the West Midlands if the Government follows through on commitments to 'levelling up' regions outside London.

While it is too early to predict what the future will bring for real estate, it is clear there are not only challenges ahead, but opportunities too.

Like thousands of other like-minded business owners, I'm convinced we can get through this. We're thinking differently, coming up with new business ideas and battling on, determined to enjoy more prosperous times.

We take pride in being a small part of a healthy West Midlands creative sector with hundreds of small agencies, freelancers and self-employed consultants creating stories, photography, videography, film making, illustrations, digital marketing services and PR.

During the coronavirus outbreak much emphasis has been placed on the difficulties faced by independent hospitality venues and what we can do to support them. These are fantastic places adding vibrancy and personality to our towns and cities, and a huge number of people rely on them for their livelihoods.

It is great to see so many



By Stacey Barnfield

Founder of Edwin Ellis Creative Media



independents thinking creatively and collaborating with others to offer home deliveries, gift vouchers, future event bookings and a host of ideas to survive this difficult period.

Now, using the same mindset, perhaps Birmingham's big businesses – those household names we celebrate relocating to the city – could think about using small businesses to help bolster their marketing, PR and creative content.

Locally commissioned work could have a huge impact on the creative

sector and hundreds of writers, consultants and photographers across the West Midlands. It could mean survival or closure in the coming months, and any national or international agencies could still be used for long-term marketing support.

Now, more than ever, businesses need to communicate with staff, customers, clients and stakeholders through words, pictures and clever content.

The creative skills are there, ready and waiting to get involved.

STEPHEN DREW, professional services managing partner at Smith & Williamson's Birmingham office, offers advice on how to protect your business in these extraordinary times



# Cash is king



Stephen Drew,  
Professional Services  
Managing Partner  
Birmingham, Smith &  
Williamson LLP



The speed at which coronavirus has struck at the heart of the global economy has been overwhelming. With a public health crisis and an invisible enemy, businesses all over the UK are waking up to a daily dose of unwelcome change and uncertainty. In some cases, businesses will be faced with an almost total loss of demand, while for others demand will soar.

In these extraordinary times, it's important to remember that normality will return. While nobody can predict the timetable, the focus for all of our entrepreneurs and business owners must be to protect their businesses and, wherever possible, the livelihoods

and wellbeing of their employees.

There is a saying: "Revenue is vanity, profit is sanity, but cash is king". Put another way, businesses don't fail because of a lack of short-term profitability, they fail because they run out of cash.

The good news is that our Government is fully aware and alert to this challenge. A series of unprecedented measures have already been announced and these will be amended and fine-tuned as we go along. One way or another, there is a multitude of ways in which businesses can both create and conserve additional cash, and we are setting out some suggestions here.



## Review your business plan, identify short-term goals

If you are experiencing a lack of (or even increased) demand which could lead to future cashflow challenges, long-term ambitions may need to be set aside to protect your business in the short term. Consider your business plan and decide which elements need to be changed, accelerated or curtailed. Do this now! Make sure that every member of your team is focusing on your key priorities, making every moment count.

## Review banking arrangements and covenants

Your bank is an essential trading partner, so you will need to keep it on side. Highlight any challenges or the likely need for support as early as possible. Be professional, plan ahead for meetings, and ensure that any presentations or proposals are clearly set out, detailed, accurate and realistic. Know what is due and when, maintain regular communications and be mindful and respectful of any covenants. Finally, remember that banking relationships are built on trust.

## Reforecast likely sales and cashflows for both the short and medium terms

Be realistic about the likely impact on future sales and costs, and work with your finance team or external advisers to reforecast your short to medium-term cash flows. Talk to your suppliers, fine tune your buying, examine your day-to-day costs. Remember that falling sales may reduce your working capital requirement (eg debtors, stocks) and generate additional cash. Given the fast-moving situation, make this a weekly activity.

## Review capital commitments

If you have recently committed to acquiring new assets for your business – cars, computers, machinery etc – can you put these on hold to conserve cash? Remember that cash always takes precedence over short-term profitability.

# ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT-BACKED FUNDING

## Business interruption loans

The Government has recently launched the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS). Loans of up to £5 million are available to UK-based businesses in eligible sectors, provided that their turnover is no more than £45 million.

This support is only for 'viable' businesses and is at the discretion of

the lenders, who will be comforted by the Government's 80% guarantee but still wary of the risks they will be assuming on the remaining 20%. Finally, the Government has agreed to cover the first 12 months of interest payments.

This is a great scheme for those that need it and can gain access, and

will kick in where businesses have a sound borrowing proposal but insufficient security.

For further information visit [www.british-business-bank.co.uk](http://www.british-business-bank.co.uk) and view the detailed pages on the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme to find accredited lenders.

## Job Retention Scheme

The Government's plans to protect jobs have led to the introduction of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

This allows employers to claim back 80% of the salary of employees who are temporarily 'furloughed'. Broadly, this means that the employer will ask affected employees to cease their duties for a temporary period, as there is no work, but retain them as employees. The amount that can be claimed per employee is 80% of their salary, capped at £2,500 per month, plus employer's NICs and minimum auto-enrolment employer pension contributions on that sum.

The funding for this will be unlimited and all UK businesses, small or large, charitable or non-profit, are eligible for the scheme. The scheme covers part-time employees, employees on flexible/zero-hour contracts and agency workers. It also covers employees who were made redundant after February 28 of this year but are then rehired. Only workers who are paid through PAYE can qualify; other workers may need to rely on the separate scheme for the self-employed.

In order to claim, employers will need to designate affected workers

(those who would have been laid off but for the introduction of this scheme) as 'furloughed workers' and notify them of this change. Employment law will continue to apply, so legal advice and/or negotiation may be required.

Once agreed, employers will need to submit information to HMRC about the relevant employees and their earnings through a new online portal which is expected to be set up by the end of April 2020.

HMRC are working urgently to set up their systems, which are not currently able to facilitate payments to employers.

## Other Government support

### Grants

Small businesses may be eligible for cash grants. The Government has proposed a 12-month business rates holiday for all retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in England. All businesses in receipt of small business rate relief or rural rate relief can claim small business grant funding of £10,000, rising to £25,000 for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses with property with a

rateable value between £15,000 and £51,000. Any enquiries on eligibility for, or the provision of, the reliefs and grants should be directed towards the relevant local authority.

### VAT deferral for all businesses

All businesses are now able to defer their VAT payments for three months. This deferral will apply to VAT due for the period from 20th March 2020 until 30th June 2020 and any accumulated deferral will not need to be paid to

HMRC until the end of the 2020/21 tax year. This deferral is automatic and no application is required.

### Income tax deferral for all self-employed

All self-employed taxpayers can now defer their self-assessment payments due on July 31, 2020 until January 31, 2021. No application is required and no penalties or interest will be charged in the deferral period.

## Alternative funding opportunities

Asset-based lending options can also be a useful source of short-term financing. It is possible to borrow against invoices issued but not paid, for example. Businesses can also borrow against equipment and other assets.

Perhaps the cheapest way to borrow may be against your main residence. This can have some tax planning advantages.

## HMRC time to pay

Small businesses can make arrangements to defer payment of their VAT or PAYE. HMRC has a dedicated phoneline for coronavirus-related challenges to help businesses unable to pay their taxes on time (corporation tax, income tax, PAYE, VAT) with options to defer or delay payment. The number to call is 0800 024 1222. Assuming that HMRC accept your application, this can be a hugely valuable and fast route to conserving your cash.

In addition to the above, if you think you may be due a tax refund or tax credits, it will be worth getting your various returns in quickly to begin the refund process.

## Accessing funding from pension schemes

In certain cases, businesses can borrow from their pension scheme, but this is subject to strict rules. Loans must be for investment growth only, rather than being used to prop up a business in difficulties. They are limited to five years or less and must not be more than 50% of the assets of the pension scheme.



## Government SSP support for businesses with less than 250 employees

The Government will cover up to two weeks' statutory sick pay per eligible employee who has been off work because of COVID-19. This relief is available to employers with fewer than 250 employees. A rebate scheme is being developed.

## Reducing employee costs

For many businesses this will be a last resort and will come with some legal implications. Tread carefully. Consider part-time working, sabbaticals or job sharing as well as lay-offs, but make sure you consult with a lawyer first so you don't incur even bigger bills further down the line.

## Directors' responsibilities

The Government has announced flexible insolvency rules to prevent businesses unable to meet debts due to the impact of coronavirus from being forced to file for bankruptcy.

However, if it looks as if you can't continue, or you know or ought to conclude that your business can't survive, remember your responsibilities and take advice. Sharing the burden may open up unexpected avenues to help you protect your business.

Want to know more? With the high levels of uncertainty caused by this crisis affecting individuals and business, Smith & Williamson has launched a dedicated coronavirus hub – a single platform for all related information and resources.

Please visit the hub at [www.smithandwilliamson.com/covid-19-hub](http://www.smithandwilliamson.com/covid-19-hub) and email [stephen.drew@smithandwilliamson.com](mailto:stephen.drew@smithandwilliamson.com) if you have any queries.

*Government and Tax legislation, sourced from HMRC and gov.uk, is that prevailing at the time, is subject to change without notice and depends on individual circumstances. Clients should always seek appropriate tax advice from their financial adviser before making financial decisions.*

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*Disclaimer: By necessity, this briefing can only provide a short overview and it is essential to seek professional advice before applying the contents of this article. No responsibility can be taken for any loss arising from action taken or refrained from on the basis of this publication. Details correct at time of writing.*



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By ANDY STREET  
Mayor of West Midlands Combined Authority



# Facing the biggest peacetime challenge

17 column

Coronavirus is the gravest public health threat our nation has faced in generations.

There can be no doubt that the second city's business community is facing its biggest peacetime challenge. In the space of a few weeks the economic landscape here and across the world has changed dramatically, with businesses told to close their doors and most of the population in lockdown. Chancellor Rishi Sunak correctly described what we are facing as an "economic emergency".

While the decision to close so many businesses was a difficult one, it was unquestionably the right thing to do given the advice provided by our leading scientists and medics. The financial measures announced by the Government represent an unprecedented package of support for the business world.

I know that across many business sectors, there will have been a huge sense of relief when the Chancellor announced the Government would cover 80% of the wages of employees who are sent home, along with the deferment of VAT bills. Huge effort is being put into new loans and business rate holidays being delivered very quickly, in particular to help larger businesses make their cash payments to small suppliers.

The £9 billion bailout for the self employed, announced more recently, will also have brought some peace of mind to so many in our business community.

Some questions still remain – such as concerns over support for people

who run small limited companies and pay themselves mainly through dividends. This is one of a number of issues I am raising with the Chancellor, which I am confident will be addressed, as the Government has shown that it is willing to be flexible in trying to help all kinds of businesses.

Policy makers are having to move quickly and often without perfect information to hand. Economists are now working to model what the ongoing economic effects of the virus may be.

It is clear that this will be the sharpest economic downturn we have ever experienced. However, while that downturn could be deep, it is also expected to be relatively short, unlike the financial crisis of 2008 where the shortfall was prolonged. So, if the plan is to bridge what may be a deep but hopefully short dip, then current policy moves are right.

The challenge now is to deliver financial support quickly to businesses. To enable this, we have also seen an unparalleled level of direct communication between the Government and industry. We have seen ministers reach out to industrialists to build the ventilators needed to treat those worst affected, or for tradesmen to build emergency hospitals.

Then there is the West Midlands Regional Economic Contingency Group, which unites business, community leaders and politicians to feed opinion directly to the Government. This forum has

provided me with clear messages on the virus's economic impact, which I fed directly to ministers, while also providing feedback for policy makers on the measures they have already announced.

I have also been struck by the determination I have seen within the business sector, which gives me confidence that Birmingham will not only endure this, but bounce back afterwards.

I believe the strong economy we have built in the West Midlands will survive if cash is delivered to where it is needed. As we entered this crisis, the West Midlands had reached record employment levels, with 75% of people in jobs. This is a robust economy. I have confidence that the innovation and expertise that exists in our business sector can provide the flexibility to see out the crisis.

And, above all, I know that Brummies have the resilience and fortitude to overcome this challenge.

From World War Two to the horrors of the pub bombings and the mass lay-offs of de-industrialisation, the people of Birmingham have shown they will always overcome adversity.

This crisis has, in many ways, shown us at our best. Whether that's through the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who have signed up to help the NHS or the people who stood on their doorsteps offering a symbolic round of applause for carers of all types. The UK has united in a way seldom seen in peacetime.

As I write, the businesses and tradespeople of the West Midlands are being set a new challenge to help us overcome coronavirus – a Dunkirk moment for our times. Government is reaching for help in building, equipping and staffing the vast Nightingale emergency hospital that is being created at the NEC, ready to supply the extra beds that could be needed when the outbreak hits its peak.

I know that Birmingham and the West Midlands are ready to meet this challenge.

**"I have been struck by the determination I have seen within the business sector, which gives me confidence that Birmingham will not only endure this, but bounce back afterwards."**





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profile

# The value of waste



**Coal-burning power stations are soon to become defunct in the UK so does this spell the end of a Sutton Coldfield company which has carved a niche for itself harvesting their ash by-product and exporting it around the world? Far from it, its bosses say, it has just created another opportunity.**

**CHRIS AUSTIN reports**

Earlier this year saw a major landmark in how the UK's power is generated.

In February, the huge Drax Power station in Yorkshire announced that it would stop burning coal by next year as it completes its switch to next-generation sustainable power generation.

By far the UK's biggest power station, Drax provides a significant portion of the nation's electricity, and has ambitions to become carbon negative by 2030. But while Drax's energy output helps power some of the second city's business sector, it also provides another lesser-known product – and it's a Birmingham firm that ensures its delivery across the globe.

From its HQ in Sutton Coldfield, Power Minerals Ltd – or PML – oversees a vast supply chain delivering fly ash from power

**Main picture: PML finds a sustainable use for the by-products of coal-fired power generation**

**Below: The ash PML supplies meets the exacting standards needed for use in different kinds of cement and concrete products and undergoes rigorous testing before use**

stations to the construction and manufacturing sectors.

The ash, a by-product from the coal-burning process, is one of modern life's secret ingredients.

"Ash is everywhere," explains PML's managing director Nigel Waldron. "It goes into cement products, breeze blocks, flyovers, motorways, into concrete piles and is even pumped underground for building stabilisation.

"People don't realise how much it is used in their own houses. It's in your concrete steps, foundations, paving slabs, roof tiles, mortar, grout and bricks. When you drill a hole in your wall at home, that grey stuff that comes out . . . chances are it was once power station ash."

When PML was founded by Waldron and partner Peter Brannan in 2003, it was an ambitious two-man start-up with two desks and two telephones. The fledgling firm's mission was simple – to find sustainable uses for the mountains of ash left over by power generation at the UK's coal-burning power stations.

Today, it is a national market leader, employing 14 people across three sites, working to direct millions of tonnes of ash by-product from power stations for re-use in manufacturing and many of the key infrastructure projects that are reshaping our country.

The firm went global in 2010 when it was bought out by German energy company STEAG, marking the creation of an international network.

While PML's sales and distribution team are based at Drax, it remains a resolutely Brummie firm. Waldron is a familiar face on the city's business scene, was the founding president of the Sutton Coldfield Chamber of Commerce and now serves as its chairman. The firm supports local charities including Ronald McDonald House and sponsors the annual #Brumfeeds foodbank campaign. Even the company's logo proudly sports the claret and blue of Waldron's beloved Aston Villa.

Accolades at the Birmingham Post Business Awards – for Excellence in Industry and Manufacturer of the Year – have given wider recognition for the sheer breadth of PML's work in the region.

"We are a national company in terms of our partnerships at power station sites, and an international company when you consider our German connections and import-exports network," says Waldron, who grew up in Sutton Coldfield.

"However, Birmingham is our base.

The Birmingham business community is incredibly strong and diverse, and we're proud to call the second city our home.

"It's always been a hotbed of innovation and, as an ideas-led company that bridges so many different sectors, it's the perfect place for us to be."

Considering its links to fossil fuel power, perhaps the most surprising aspect of PML's work is the company's green credentials, with its supply network providing an environmentally friendly use for the by-products from coal-burning power stations.

Manufacturers and infrastructure projects using ash can boast much better 'green' credentials because they are re-using secondary minerals instead of cutting up the countryside to mine virgin aggregates. What's more, cement made using ash as an ingredient also eats up less power and resources in its manufacturing process, reducing its carbon footprint.

PML's distribution network, through partnerships with power stations like Drax, has helped British industry avoid releasing millions of tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere – a remarkable feat given the coal-fired origins of the ash itself.

"We are proud of the part we play in providing a sustainable use for ash and are the UK's number one independent supplier," says Waldron.

"When I first started, power stations were actually paying companies to take the ash away, but now it has completely turned around. Our mission has been to create a supply chain that always delivers ash where it is needed, when it is needed, to the right quality.

"I've always believed that in business you've got to be true to your word and never let a customer down. That's our ethos – we will always go above and beyond, even if it costs us."

The ash PML supplies meets the exacting standards needed for use in different kinds of cement and concrete products and undergoes rigorous testing before use. Drive across the UK and you'll find yourself unwittingly surrounded by it in the built environment.

"Our products have been used as structural fill for bridge abutments and slip road embankments for the huge A50 project in Staffordshire," says sales and technical director Ivan Skidmore.

"Our ash products are in the concrete structures of the

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A14 improvement scheme in Cambridgeshire and were used to stabilise the ground where the M8 has been widened in Scotland.

“Millions of tonnes of our ash have also been used to stabilise old mines beneath the Black Country.”

So, as the UK switches away from coal power, what does the future hold for PML?

“There is no question that coal-fired power generation is coming to an end – that is a reality – and we have been preparing for it for years,” explains Waldron.

“The fact is that after so many years of power generation using coal, there are huge stockpiles of ash left that will allow us to keep supplying industry for decades to come. So, in order to deliver quality ash to our customers, we are now extracting from those stockpiles and looking to access and process more.”

The best example of this can be seen at Fiddlers Ferry, the north west power station which announced its closure last year. While generation may have halted at the site, PML continues to market ash from historic deposits, extracting and shipping the millions of tonnes of ash left there. PML, working together with SSE who own the site, currently excavate over 350,000 tonnes of ash from Fiddlers Ferry per year.

“Four years ago, a decline in the coal-fired energy sector affected



**Despite fossil fuels being phased out in favour of more sustainable material, the UK has vast stockpiles of ash left over from years of coal-fired energy creation**

the reliability of the UK’s ash supply chain,” Skidmore says.

“Our strategy since has been to create a robust and reliable supply chain by investing in our own infrastructure, importing from our international network, developing ways of tapping into the significant legacy stockpiles we have in the UK, and investing in research on future solutions.

“The UK has a huge stockpile of ash trapped in landfill sites and we have been lobbying government – through bodies such as the UK

Quality Ash Association – to have these areas reclassified as Strategic Pozzolanic Reserves.

“This would allow urban mining of the stockpiled ash which, with the cutting-edge technology we are developing, could see the UK become a world leader in exporting quality ash products around the globe.”

There are a wide variety of processes called ‘beneficiation’ technologies. PML trialled and commercially operated one of these technologies at Rugeley Power

Station in Staffordshire prior to its closure, utilising an ultra-sonic separation process to remove quality cementitious particles from old ash.

This process, along with other technologies, is likely to be a game changer for the industry, creating a long-term sustainable supply of low-carbon material for making environmentally friendly cement and concrete. This would not only create jobs nationally – by giving new life to legacy stockpiles across the country – but would also remove the UK’s reliance on imports and provide

millions of tonnes for potential export to western Europe, where such legacy stockpiles are less accessible. Investment, research and development of this type is key to the success of PML and its future operations.

As the power sector moves away from coal, PML’s technicians are now looking for ways to recycle and reuse the by-products of the sustainable fuels that are replacing it.

Now the firm stands on the cusp of a new era. After years of preparation, research and investment, this year

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will see the launch of significant manufacturing operation that represents major expansion.

Over the last four years, PML has invested heavily in applying its expertise to the by-products of new forms of power generation. Its Biolite division takes the by-products of modern biomass power generation processes to create pioneering agriculture products such as fertilisers.

This ground-breaking process turns what was a hazardous waste into a low-carbon product that helps both the UK agriculture sector and the environment, by removing the need for farmers to import expensive fertilisers from abroad.

“We are excited by the prospects for our new fertiliser product because it represents the natural evolution of what we do,” says Waldron. “While we are continuing to access ash to supply industry, it’s important that as the power sector changes, we change too – and this is a great example of finding a use for next-generation power generation by-products.”

With a new era of infrastructure construction now expected, he predicts there will be more demand than ever for ash, both nationally and across the Midlands.

Infrastructure projects such as sea wall defences, London’s Crossrail, the M6 Toll and HS2 all rely on power station ash as a vital ingredient.

“Once we have fully understood the economic impact of coronavirus, we’re expecting the previously announced infrastructure projects to roll out,” he adds.

“HS2, major road building and a new era of NHS construction will all require the products that we provide, and we’ll be working to ensure that there is a continuous, reliable flow of ash to underpin manufacturing and construction.

“Coal-powered energy may be coming to an end, but it is our mission to ensure that its most beneficial legacy – millions of tonnes of valuable ash – is accessible for sustainable manufacturing and construction projects of the future.”

As the Birmingham of tomorrow takes shape, it seems it will still contain plenty of PML’s secret ingredient.



**Sales and technical director Ivan Skidmore**



**The PML team picks up the award for Excellence in Manufacturing at last year’s Birmingham Post Business Awards**



**Managing director Nigel Waldron at work at PML’s HQ in Sutton Coldfield**



# Call for nominations

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news

The search is on for the most inspirational women across the Midlands, as applications open for one of the UK's longest running annual awards.

Now in its 38th year, the Women of the Year Luncheon & Awards celebrates the achievements of exceptional women, highlighting individuals who have made an outstanding contribution to their business, chosen sector or the wider community.

Due to take place at the Birmingham Hilton Metropole on October 16, the Women of the Year Luncheon & Awards has two exclusive categories open for applications, Business Woman of the Year and Woman with Edge.

Colleagues, family and friends can nominate entrepreneurs or business leaders from across the private and

public sectors, or applicants can simply nominate themselves.

The Business Woman of the Year award is designed to celebrate the success of an individual making transformational changes within their organisation or sector, while the Woman with Edge award shines a spotlight on someone who challenges the status quo and who understands that the road to success is not always straight.

An additional award for Woman of Achievement is presented to an individual or group of women from across the country who have strived to achieve the remarkable, often for the benefit of others and in some cases against the odds. The winner of this category is selected by the board of directors of Women of the Year Luncheon & Awards.

All proceeds from the event go directly to charity, with more than £500,000 raised to date. For 2020, the event will support The Prince's Trust: Women Supporting Women Initiative, a group of supporters who are committed to changing the lives of young women, and Elle for Elle, a charitable foundation that connects a wellbeing programme to refugees in the UK.

Zalena Vandrewala, chair of Women of the Year Luncheon & Awards, said: "For 38 years these awards have been dedicated to profiling and recognising the most inspiring women across the UK. We are excited for this year's applications as we encourage successful and strong women to showcase their talents and celebrate their achievements with us."

**To nominate or submit an application, please visit [www.womenoftheyear.org.uk/nomination-form](http://www.womenoftheyear.org.uk/nomination-form)**



**From left, Anita Robinson, Emma Elston MBE, Jennie Johnson MBE, Business Woman of the Year 2019, Mark Smith of sponsor Aston University, and Anthea Fosti at last year's awards**

## Recruitment company creates a new division



**Rebecca Simkiss and Richard Guy**

Birmingham-based SimkissGuy Recruitment has expanded the business with the creation of a new division.

The team is now set to provide non-clinical frontline healthcare professionals across the Midlands.

The new specialist healthcare division has been established after approaches by potential clients to ask if the team could diversify its recruitment offering in order to support the healthcare sector.

Co-founder Rebecca Simkiss said: "Despite welcome support from the

## Training schemes at risk

Thousands of apprenticeships and hundreds of jobs are at risk after the Government refused to guarantee funding for independent training organisations during the coronavirus outbreak, a senior executive has warned.

Chris Luty, chief executive of BCTG, a Black Country workforce training and apprenticeship organisation, is now pleading with local MPs to back a call for a rethink at the Department for Education.

While the DfE and its Education Funding Skills Agency have said they will continue to fund apprenticeships, youth training and adult education through the FE college sector, hundreds of independent providers have been told there will be no similar support for them.

Private training providers work with employers to provide apprenticeship training in class and in the workplace, with most of their funding coming from the DfE. They currently handle seven out of 10 apprenticeships.

But the DfE says its policy "does not allow payment for services in advance of delivery", so private providers will not be paid until training has taken place, despite on-the-job training being put on hold because of COVID-19.

Mr Luty said: "Many private providers are at imminent risk of failure, which in turn means many thousands of apprentices will lose their jobs and training."

"Training providers are being signposted to the Treasury's business support measures, but for us these won't work by themselves."

Government with the new option of furloughing staff, we have seen a sharp rise in approaches from candidates who have sadly been made redundant.

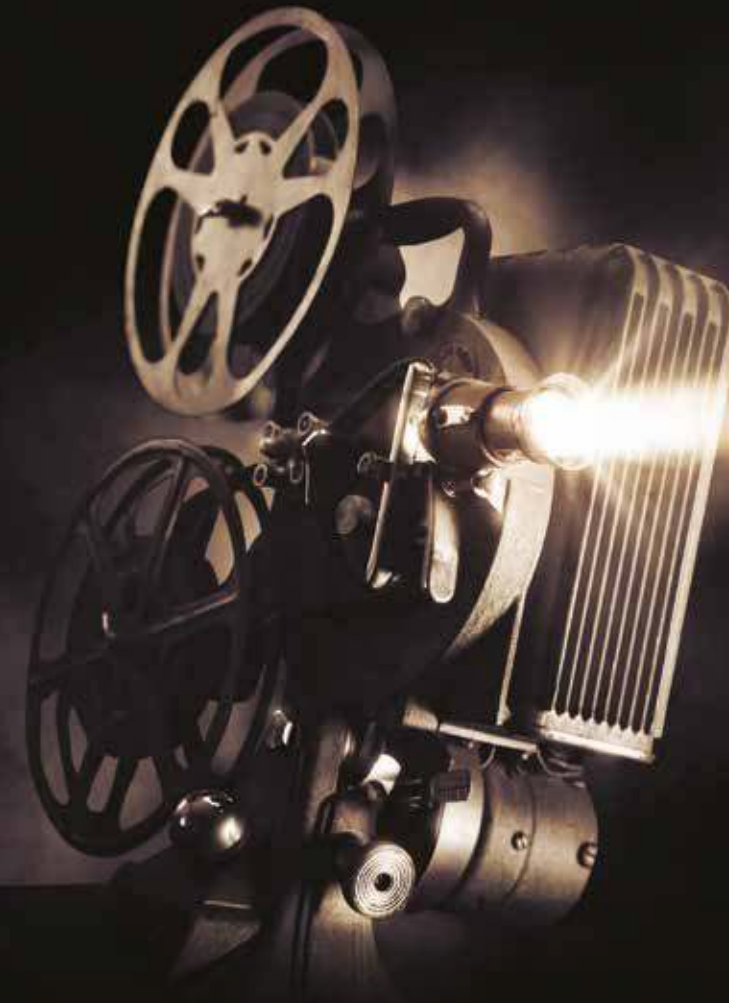
"At this time of challenge we want to help in every way we can, especially for those for whom furlough has not been an option."

"In particular, we are keen to support those from the hospitality sector who have unfortunately found themselves out of work through no fault of their own, but are keen to work in a new sector."

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interview

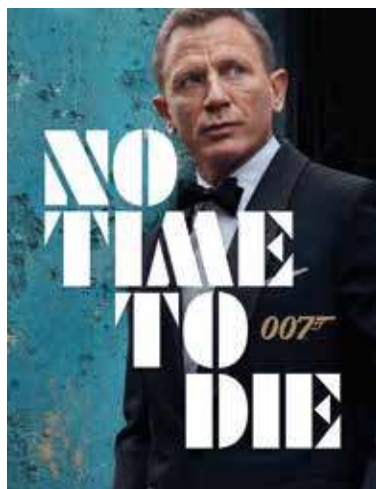
# Licence to recruit

**CARL JONES meets a Birmingham-based director who is helping young people gain a foothold in the TV and film-making industry**





## 24 interview



The name's Yau . . . Yen Yau.

And one of her latest missions has involved recruiting young film industry hopefuls to work on the set of the new James Bond movie.

Birmingham-based Yen has more than two decades of experience in the screen industries, primarily helping young people to get a foothold in the business.

She is currently director of training programmes for the Grierson Trust, and heavily involved in careers and skills development for young people in the film and TV industries.

For the latest 007 movie, No Time to Die, Yen got the chance to work with the movie's creators, Eon Productions, to look after its trainee scheme.

She explains: "It involved recruiting 21 young people who had never worked on a major feature film before, drawing them from schemes such as the BFI Film Academy and ScreenSkills' Trainee Finder, and giving them the opportunity to get involved with this amazing production.

"My involvement was recruiting the young people, then supporting them while they were working on the film."

Of course, this isn't just any old

film – it's one of the biggest, most celebrated movie franchises in the world.

Yen says: "On a Bond film, you are talking about hundreds and hundreds of people.

"We were able to put these young people into lots of different departments. They worked in casting, visual effects, the assistant director's department, production, costume, set decoration, the art department – so many different aspects of the movie.

"It was amazing, fantastic, and a bit surreal really – even for me – so I can only imagine how the young people felt.

"I remember as a kid going along to my local ABC cinema for Saturday morning film club, and the excitement which would come with release of a James Bond movie.

"It's amazing the way things have now gone full circle and ended up with me working on one of these films. It's a very fulfilling job."

She adds: "Being at Pinewood Studios is iconic, but a production like this actually looks a bit like a giant car park – lots of cherry pickers and building work going on everywhere.

"When people think about the film

**"What you are trying to do is push at doors which are already open, because the screen industry – film and television – currently faces a huge skills shortage."**

industry, they picture the directors, camera operators and the actors. But you have to also remember the other important jobs, like scaffolders, plasterers, electricians, and people constructing the incredible sets where the magic happens."

For budding film and TV workers here in the West Midlands, the bright lights of London, with star-studded studios like Pinewood, Elstree and Shepperton, can often seem like a world away.

But that's one of the myths which Yen is keen to dispel.

"Even if you are based somewhere which is far from the centre of where lots of film and television production happens, it doesn't stop you from following your passion, meeting people, and putting yourself and your skills out there," she says.

"When I first started off in the industry we were talking about 35mm cameras, and the use of expensive software which was proprietary – the majority of people weren't able to get access to those sort of things. There's no such excuse now."

So how exactly did Yen get her own break in the film world? Was it by following the kind of advice she is

now sharing?

She laughs: "Well, I actually came to Birmingham to study, and started doing some voluntary work at the Birmingham International Film and TV Festival. That's where I met people in the industry, and first got my foot in the door.

"One of the things I'm always keen to dispel when I talk to people is the preconception that, to work in this industry, you need a film and media degree. It's simply not the case.

"Basically, film and TV producers are looking for people with passion, and important soft skills – like turning up on time, being a team player and a level-headed problem solver.

"The workforce in many specialist areas is ageing at a time when new technology is being introduced, and it's important that they are able to pass on their skills to a new generation. There's a really important balancing act here."

And talking of this new young generation, Yen has been involved with the Grierson Trust for around 15 years. The registered charity exists to promote documentary film making and commemorates the work of John Grierson, widely regarded as the

father of documentary.

Her programme of work seeks young people who are passionate about factual television, from nature documentaries to reality TV, short-form content to feature documentaries, and everything in between.

Yen explains: "My responsibility is for the Grierson Trust's outreach programme, so I recruit young people aged between 18 and 25 who want to work in factual television – it's a hugely rewarding thing to do.

"What you are trying to do is push at doors which are already open, because the screen industry – film and television – currently faces a huge skills shortage.

"We are looking for individuals who have ideas about how they can contribute to the industry and who can offer fresh perspectives that are not currently reflected on-screen or behind the scenes."

The trust is particularly keen to attract people currently under-represented in the industry, including women, people with a disability, BAME people, plus those from the LGBTQ community, and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

## 25 interview



Some Grierson DocLab trainees at the Midlands Arts Centre on a shoot/edit training weekend



Yen giving a talk on her involvement with the No Time to Die trainee scheme



Laura O'Connor from Sutton Coldfield, front row centre, was a member of the 2019 Grierson DocLab cohort





A group of the James Bond trainees, recruited by Yen to work on the set of No Time to Die

Netflix is one of the latest companies to back the trust's work, and its support is allowing Yen and her team to increase the number of young people it can support each year from 12 to 16.

This year, one of Yen's targets is to help develop two new specialist courses – one for production management and one for editing.

"These are areas where the skills shortages are currently the greatest," she says. "A good production co-ordinator is like gold dust right now – so if young people are undecided about what area of the industry they are interested in, this may be a good one to pursue."

**"A good production co-ordinator is like gold dust right now – so if young people are undecided about what area of the industry they are interested in, this may be a good one to pursue."**

The Grierson Trust recruits come from all over the UK, but one of the most recent success stories, Laura O'Connor, is from Sutton Coldfield. She is now working with Full Fat TV, a factual entertainment specialist, based right here in Birmingham.

Yen says: "Birmingham is a very creative city, and we have some big

companies here in the West Midlands. The gaming industry here is massive, for example, with companies like Codemasters, and there are a lot of very transferable skills.

"Many people who work in the business have what I call portfolio careers, using their skills to jump between a wide range of projects, from music videos to corporate productions, or commercials.

"I am a jack of all trades – here to facilitate and encourage people to reach their potential, realise the opportunities, and ensure equality of opportunity and access to the information they need."

Like many in the creative industries, Yen admits she was disappointed when Birmingham lost out to Leeds in the bid to host Channel Four's new headquarters.

But a positive spin-off from this has been the launch of Create Central, a brand-new screen industry body for the West Midlands.

It has brought together some of the UK's most creative thinkers and change makers in film, TV, games and other creative content sectors, to work with national and regional partners to create what it describes as 'an agile and responsive network to turbo-charge the screen sector in the heart of the UK'.

Yen is part of a power-packed membership panel which also includes the likes of Peaky Blinders creator Steven Knight, Bafta and Emmy award-winning writer and director Debbie Isitt, and Ed Shedd, founder member of Monkey Kingdom,

the company behind Made in Chelsea.

She says: "Yes, not getting Channel Four was certainly a blow, but this has risen up like something of a phoenix to combine many people's efforts for some exciting projects."

For example, Create Central is working in partnership with the West Midlands Combined Authority on a new skills bootcamp, a pilot scheme to help the region's screen industry discover new talent and encourage people from other careers to switch to the TV industry.

Solihull College & University Centre will help to provide the skills training, and the bootcamp will consist of an intensive five-week programme and three-week real-to-life work placement in one of the region's top TV companies.

For the time being though, many such initiatives are on an indefinite pause, while everyone wrestles with the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

And like so many other sectors, the TV and film making industry has been brought to a juddering halt.

Yen is viewing this as a time for strategic planning, however, and "breathing space to take stock and think".

"It's a time when people will be able to do a lot of development, which means that when we do finally get back to normal, there are going to be a lot of ideas around.

"And you know what that means? There will continue to be plenty of opportunities for new, young, skilled workers."



The team from LightBox

# LoveBrum fundraiser

More than £16,000 was raised at the Big Quiz fundraiser organised by LoveBrum to support projects across Birmingham. Approximately 30 businesses from across the regions entered teams, but first prize – and bragging rights – went to CAB PR. Paul Mitchell, executive director at LoveBrum, said: "The Big Quiz was a fantastic evening. it's amazing to raise such an incredible amount of money – every penny of which goes to help local causes. A massive thank you to everyone who attended."



Emma Tronsen, Abby Goldie, Daniel Kendrick and Sarah Hartley



Host Ed James



Bellagio Dance Studio entertain the audience



Samantha Faulkner, Jasper Carrot and Tim Andrews



28  
social



CAB PR, winners of the Big Quiz



Tank Top Media



A great night was had by all



The team from FleetMilne shared a table at the quiz



The HDY table

29  
social



The Mazars team getting in the spirit



The quiz was the latest in a string of LoveBrum fundraising events



The team from Higgs & Sons



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# Life sciences

## SPECIAL REPORT

Greater Birmingham's long-held reputation as a life science and healthcare cluster of global standing remains undimmed.

Organisations and businesses from both private and public sectors continue to innovate, embrace the very latest technology and attract investment.

In this special report, we hear from some of the key figures behind the region's success in this highly complex world who help to explain why the West Midlands deserves its reputation as a national powerhouse in the life sciences sector.







By GRAHAM SILK

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# State of health

**No one is better qualified than Graham Silk to assess the progress of Greater Birmingham as a life sciences and healthcare centre. Five years after publishing his eponymous report which became a bible for governments and health chiefs, it is shortly to be updated with the overriding conclusion that although the sector in the region has its many strengths, it still has a long way to go to realise its full potential**

Back in 2015, the intention of the original Silk Report was to overview the areas where the West Midlands could best contribute to delivering life sciences economic success within the UK health economy and its world-renowned scientific standing.

Since then, while much general progress has been made, in terms of economic or industrial sector metrics we haven't seen an increase in terms of jobs, new businesses relocating to the region or indeed a significant increase with pharma engagement internationally.

As a consequence, I have been asked to update the report which will be completed shortly. What follows is a flavour of the areas of focus which will hopefully act as a catalyst in terms of driving the industrial sector both for sustainability, not only economically, but also in terms of health benefits.

In 2015, I identified important assets such as large population and datasets, the growing number of medical institutions, training facilities and obviously the many universities involved in life sciences research.

The report considered areas of urgent focus and action where the potential for improvement could help drive the sector in a more sustainable and commercially relevant manner. Public sector incentivisation, novel ways of accessing finance, and the balance of commercial opportunities and barriers were among the key areas identified.

In making a number of recommendations, I looked to try to steer the many players and partners within the region towards areas that would help drive the sector – both generally and also in specific areas of excellence – that the region has become famous for.

These included developing a stronger link with the world-class basic science emanating from Oxford University, the opportunity to link directly into the national accelerated access review, and joining with government to drive greater public and academic sector incentivisation.

So, if we look at the situation today, we see a number of evident successes within the region.

There are a number of new and evolving trial acceleration programmes being developed beyond the original model developed within haematology. There are examples now in brain cancer, where Birmingham leads; excellent progress within lung cancer; and encouraging joined partnership activity with Oxford

University in arthritis and rheumatism, as well as advances in stem cell transplantation.

In general, we are seeing progress on an increasing scale. There is growing cross-regional academic activity with many universities coming together and developing relationships to create an academic ecosystem which should help stimulate start-ups and attract SME companies.

Examples of current activity include a cancer drug, out of Wolverhampton University, and breakthroughs in preeclampsia treatments from Aston. At the University of Birmingham there are new developments within areas such eye disease, bone growth stimulants, and the utilisation of AI and machine learning in the fields of retinal imaging in ophthalmics as well as cardiovascular treatments.

However, when talking to key players within potentially developable commercial opportunities, there remains a worry that there are still too many barriers slowing the process down. This is leading to a reinforcement of the view that significant changes in approach to successfully commercialising research opportunities are required if we are to truly deliver new jobs and successful businesses economically, as well as crucially delivering improved patient benefit.

This view has been highlighted by comments from Sir John Bell and other well-respected leaders who, while highlighting the UK as a global leader in invention and early innovation, overtly point to the

nation possessing a poor record in successful commercialisation.

We saw this 30 years ago with the internet when Tim Berners-Lee tried to get Britain to lead in this emerging technology. He created the original idea, but the hugely tangible economic benefits in terms of jobs, industrial successes and tax revenue have become resident in Silicon Valley rather than the UK. The same opportunities now reside within life sciences and we have to ensure we do not make the same mistake again.

The main barriers seem to be lack of speed in commercial action, especially in accessing finance and a lack of knowledge of how to run a business.

It is clear that in general, investors look to back a plan that demonstrates a strong investment case that will generate target returns. This requires a focused and deliverable business plan which frames market opportunities, competitive advantage, and is led by a management team with the right balance of technical, commercial and finance skills.

The secret to success in commercialising a product is marrying the management team to the research genius. These management skills must be complementary but are not widely available in the NHS or universities. This process needs a bridge and is the most essential element to creating deliverable plans. It is overly simplistic and indeed plain wrong to expect talented scientists and clinicians to take their expertise in the development of scientific advances and then have to set up

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life sciences



**Medtech continues to make huge advances in the sector**



and run a commercial business.

Simply put, there are very few James Dysons in this world. Having been involved in three of these 'lab to factory' businesses myself, including a £100 million sale to Smith & Nephew, potential opportunities require a smooth pathway via the right professional business leadership to drive the business forward to commercial viability. One of the biggest challenges will be to allow those with experience in the business sector to become part of the team in order to enable their genius to convert into tangible patient and economic benefit.

Very encouragingly, we are also seeing investment and progress in the development of several life sciences parks. The first is planned around land adjacent to the University of Birmingham, which will deliver a purpose-built state-of-the-art facility to bring academics, researchers and scientists together with SME businesses, as well as linking into large pharma activity.

The space will be designed for research development, clinical trials, pharmaceutical and medtech manufacturing, and is intended to create a one-stop hub ideal for expanding SMEs, both locally and internationally. In addition, Warwick University is developing a new science park to drive development and research emanating out of autonomous vehicular technology, which will utilise massive new data and informatics breakthroughs into health around telemetrics, wearables and the digital health economy. The key here will be to embrace the accelerated translational successes of the ecosystem, for which the West Midlands has become famous, in order to most optimally drive business creation and growth.

However, perhaps the major difference in the economic and political landscape of today,

compared to five years ago, is the growing impact of regional devolution out of Westminster, led by the elected mayor.

The devolution agenda unlocks many possibilities to deliver much greater innovative health and care solutions that not only create commercial opportunities but also deliver early intervention to health problems. These will drive sustainable approaches to 21st-century health delivery not only in terms of the explosion of new drugs and devices, but also through empowering public-sector, university and science leaders to take ownership and deliver success.

This should then create an environment to allow a better and more sustainable health delivery system for direct patient benefit as well as a growing economy, thereby reinforcing the entire offer.

We have the significant support of the mayor, Andy Street, who is keen to work with all partners in this region. The goal is to create an environment that will allow the region to offer world-class services within life sciences in a 'better cheaper faster' manner, acting as a magnet globally to academics, researchers, SMEs and big pharma.

But, I repeat the message that has been espoused by many eminent life sciences leaders: that this can only be achieved if people in the academic and research fields have the confidence to be truly bold, and are then supported in their desire to drive exciting innovation.

In the original report, I looked at novel methods of creating finance to help drive the scale and range of opportunities forward. One of the recommendations was to look at the potential to utilise innovative bonds, backed by government, to create an at-scale, sustainable and increasingly commercial environment.

This needs to embrace the

strengths of both the public and private sector. The evolution of many big projects is better started and incubated in the public sector and when they begin to grow, they can be shaped and developed in partnership with the private sector, where relevant, and have the potential to offer a greater social and economic return.

So, why not utilise the support and opportunities coming forward from devolution to develop a more innovative environment to drive the industrial life sciences economy? This means we need to help the public sector do the opposite of what usually happens when we allocate money regionally – it simply gets spent – and instead utilise the new devolution powers to test and develop new approaches to regional investment.

Over the last six months, I have been working with people in Westminster – including the former life sciences minister George Freeman – to utilise this region to identify current health opportunities. The cost of our current model of late diagnosis and treatment is threatening to bankrupt us – indeed it can be said to be literally killing us.

The potential to drive a health bond around a regional prevention partnership would allow us to demonstrate considerable savings by investing in a number of relevant life science technologies.

Together with social care improvements, this will both deliver savings via early detection intervention and prevention, as well as act as an incentive to scientists and researchers to commercialise their work.

The real bonus is that the significant savings in an area such as obesity would then be split between Whitehall and the West Midlands government, thereby driving greater investment.

# Intellectual assets: at the heart of what you do

**Success for life science and healthcare businesses requires finding innovative solutions. To ensure that your business secures its return on investment it is essential that you have a strategy in place to protect these solutions.**

**HGF's JENNIFER BAILEY and CHRIS MOORE discuss**

The West Midlands is home to a growing number of healthcare and biopharma businesses. One of the six recently-announced Life Science Opportunity Zones will be located in Birmingham at the Life Sciences Park, opening in 2022. This, together with the existing network of universities, hospitals and science hubs, will firmly establish Greater Birmingham at the heart of the UK's healthcare map. Many SMEs will be hoping to capitalise on the unparalleled facilities and support available in the region. However, in addition to excellent infrastructure, in order to flourish companies need an IP strategy which complements their commercial goals.

SMEs that have filed at least one intellectual property right (IPR) are 21% more likely to grow, and 10% more likely to become a high growth company.\* These numbers increase to 26% and 17%, respectively, for SMEs with a European IPR. In the life sciences field, the high cost of developing new therapies, running trials, and obtaining regulatory approval makes it critical for companies to protect their investments with robust IP. It is therefore essential that life science businesses review their commercial strategy and assess how IP maps onto that.

Firstly, consider whether existing IP adequately covers your commercial product, process or brand in your key markets. The direction of the business may have changed since the IP was filed, so it is important to check that any registered rights are still relevant.

If rights exist which are not directly relevant, could these be used to generate income through sale or licensing out? If the business only operates in the healthcare field, consider whether the technology could be licensed for use in related sectors, such as agriculture. Providing a further income stream is preferable to abandoning rights and



**Dr Jennifer Bailey is a Patent Director specialising in life sciences and Dr Chris Moore is a Partner specialising in chemistry and medical devices based in our Birmingham Office**



may generate new partnerships.

Your IP strategy should be forward-looking and track your business plan, keeping both short- and long-term goals in mind. For example, for a business based on a key platform technology, a few core patents could be filed while specific knowledge, e.g. of a production processes, is best retained as a trade secret. In the therapeutics field, a patent filed in the early stages of commercialisation may protect a novel group of compounds. As trials progress, subsequent filings can focus on lead candidates, new therapeutic indications, and novel formulations. By strategically spacing filings over time, the term of protection can effectively be extended.

SMEs which use bundles of different IPRs are even more likely to achieve high growth than those which rely on a single type of IPR.\* For a business that designs and manufactures a wearable healthcare device, a broad portfolio of patent, design and trademark rights could protect different aspects of the technology while presenting an attractive package to a future buyer.

The purpose of an IP portfolio is to extend your commercial advantage by making it as difficult as possible for competitors to benefit from your innovations. Securing protection for your IP also gives investors confidence that your business will provide a financial return. However, investors may require reassurance that your product or service does not infringe third party rights which could undermine your commercial activities, or worse, lead to litigation. Freedom-to-operate should therefore be an integral part of your strategy.

Developing a unique offering in the life sciences field can be a lengthy and expensive undertaking. To give yourself the best opportunity of translating your research into becoming a market leader, it is essential to protect your intellectual assets. A periodically-reviewed, forward-looking IP strategy will provide the best foundation for growth and continued success.



**Commercialising products is not always easy**

\* Report "High-growth firms and intellectual property rights", published by the European Patent Office and the EU Intellectual Property Office, May 2019





By **RICHARD STONE**  
Chief executive, Medilink West Midlands

# The importance 36 of collaboration

life sciences

I am writing this article at home, socially distancing in line with current instructions, and during such extreme circumstances I am reminded of the end results of all the work done within the medical technologies sector.

I think of the creation and delivery of healthcare products and services that save people's lives every day, not just during these unprecedented and scary times, but day in, day out. Going about our usual daily business, it is sometimes easy to forget the importance of the work of our sector.

As I write, the combined resources of the Medilinks of East and West Midlands are working with numerous agencies to try to identify and collate potential suppliers of urgently needed products and services to help with the current crisis.

As membership-based representative bodies providing specialist support to help boost economic output by overcoming barriers to growth, Medilinks have comprehensive industry knowledge and networks across the medical technologies and other life sciences sectors. Providing the key industry innovation gateway service to the region's academic health science networks, the Midlands Medilinks help form the links and collaborations needed to drive development through key industry relationships, matched with appropriate clinical stakeholders, in order to assist innovation evolution forward through the NHS.

Issues like the one we are currently experiencing create urgency and significantly magnify the need for organisations across the sector to collaborate and work together. The ability for a life-critical product or service to navigate quickly and efficiently through the current environment is paramount and yet, without expert support or signposting, any progress to the frontline is likely to be much slower; a significant problem within the current climate. Clearly the ability to identify, contact, corral and collate

established expertise across a broad and technology-voluminous geography into a unified response, delivered directly to the most appropriate agencies, is presently a critical commodity.

And though extreme circumstances currently exist, the sound principles of continual, constructive, collaboration-driven activity supported by a knowledgeable and informed regional network, thereby shortening and improving innovation pathways, are clear to see.

Across the Midlands there are more than 1,100 life science businesses providing products and services across almost every discipline. There are 27 universities, 25 of which deliver courses connected to health. There are seven schools of medicine, each working closely with NHS trusts. There are 25 science parks helping to incubate the technologies of the future and there are 50 NHS trusts conducting a wide range of research, testing and trialling.

Add to this the fact that the Midlands is the UK's centre for trauma and defence medicine, with the tri-service Royal Centre for Defence Medicine located at University Hospitals Birmingham, the headquarters of the surgeon general together with the Joint Medical

Command at Lichfield, and the Defence and National Rehabilitation Centre located at Stanford Hall near Loughborough, and it is clear to see that the Midlands contains world-class assets offering the ability for world-class collaborations.

But too often research and development and innovation activities are not fully integrated, and they do not have the necessary scale and scope to realise the full potential benefits that could and should be gained.

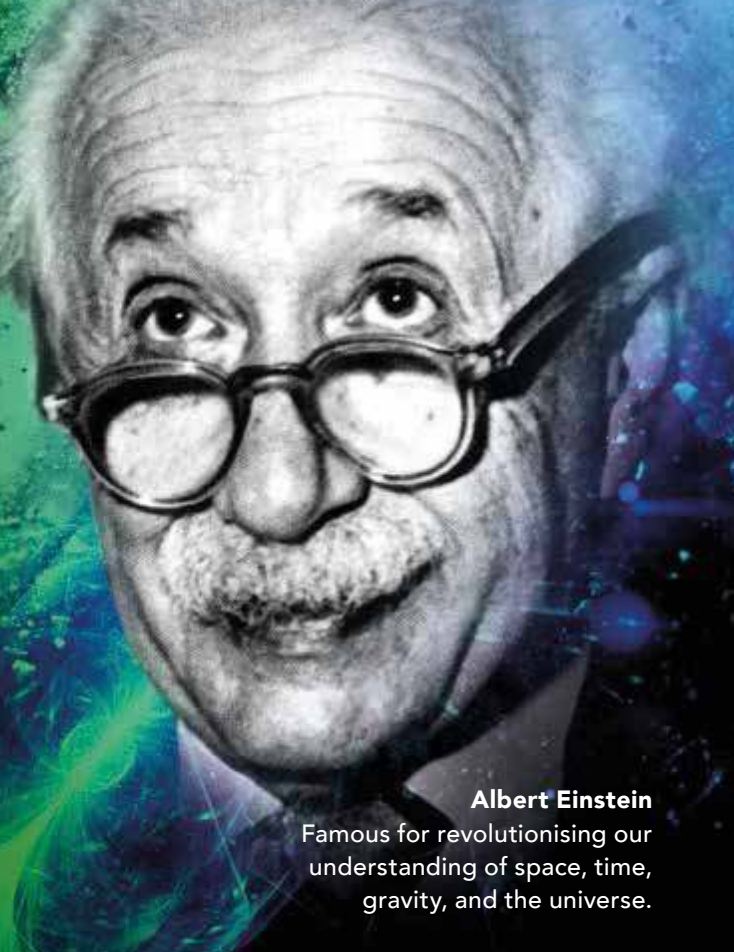
Such comprehensive assets require a pan-regional, multi-stakeholder system supporting them. Supporting SMEs to rapidly realise new medical technologies and their production processes – by linking them with the capability-enabling academic and clinical assets that already exist across the Midlands region – would be a game-changing initiative and one that should be pulled together and implemented as soon as possible.

From such an initiative, pan-regional collaborative working at scale can be realised and can be a springboard for future inward investment, further supporting regional economic benefit and cementing the Midlands' part in the UK's leadership in medical technologies and life sciences.

**“The ability for a life-critical product or service to navigate quickly and efficiently through the current environment is paramount and yet, without expert support or signposting, any progress to the frontline is likely to be much slower.”**

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Famous for revolutionising our understanding of space, time, gravity, and the universe.

## Science 2 Industry's purpose is to solve technical challenges for businesses based in the Midlands.

Funded by the **Bridging for Innovators** programme we have access to over 2,000 brilliant minds and some of the world's best technical facilities, Science 2 Industry (S2I) can bring the deep expertise needed to solve technical problems faced by businesses.

S2I has a track record of working with SMEs to engage with leading scientists quickly to identify solutions.

S2I works across all industrial sectors including but not limited to: Engineering and Manufacturing, Business, Professional and Financial services, Health and Life Sciences, Education, Transport and Logistics.

Whilst today's highly advanced scientific and technical landscape might seem daunting, its correct application becomes highly relevant in assisting industry to innovate, challenge, change, and push boundaries.

## S2I is the Midlands centre for businesses to access the UK's best science and technology.

\*100% funding is available for eligible businesses. T&C's apply.

The S2I team is ready and waiting to offer real collaboration and strategic focus to solve the technical challenges faced by your business.

For more information about how we could help you:

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# Diamond Light Source shows the way

**The UK national synchrotron facility pushes the boundaries of what's possible for its Life Science clients**

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Diamond Light Source was set up as a joint venture between the UK government (through UKRI – STFC) and the Wellcome Trust.

Diamond generates infrared, ultraviolet and X-ray beams of exceptional quality and brightness and makes use of these to enable state-of-the-art materials characterisation across a wide range of techniques. The experimental techniques available at synchrotron sources like Diamond are a step above the standard – one might consider them the 'Formula 1' of characterisation techniques.

They are typically used by scientists who have exhausted the capabilities of lab-based techniques and are searching for analytical tools that are higher resolution, faster, more chemically specific and more sensitive than achievable in a home laboratory.

Located near Didcot in south Oxfordshire, approximately 10,000 scientists from the UK and overseas make use of Diamond every year.

Commercial activity plays a very significant role at Diamond and 10% of the facility operation time is dedicated for proprietary use by industrial clients.

Clients range from the large multi-national household names through to SMEs and start-ups with over 170 companies making use of Diamond's facilities in their R&D programmes by 2020. While clients represent a wide range of sectors,

from aerospace engineering through to battery research and with samples as diverse as aerospace alloys, antibodies and chocolate, proprietary use of Diamond continues to be heavily dominated (~75%) by the pharma and biotech industries. We support our pharma clients in all stages of the drug product life cycle from early stage drug discovery through to formulation development, root cause analysis and trouble shooting and even patent litigation.

Structural biology enables scientists to look in detail at the structure and behaviour of cells and their macromolecular components, such as proteins and nucleic acids, enzymes and viruses. Diamond is internationally recognised as a centre for excellence in structural biology research and our synergistic approach teams world leading experts with a wealth of experience with a wide and complementary range of state-of-the-art research infrastructure all under one roof.

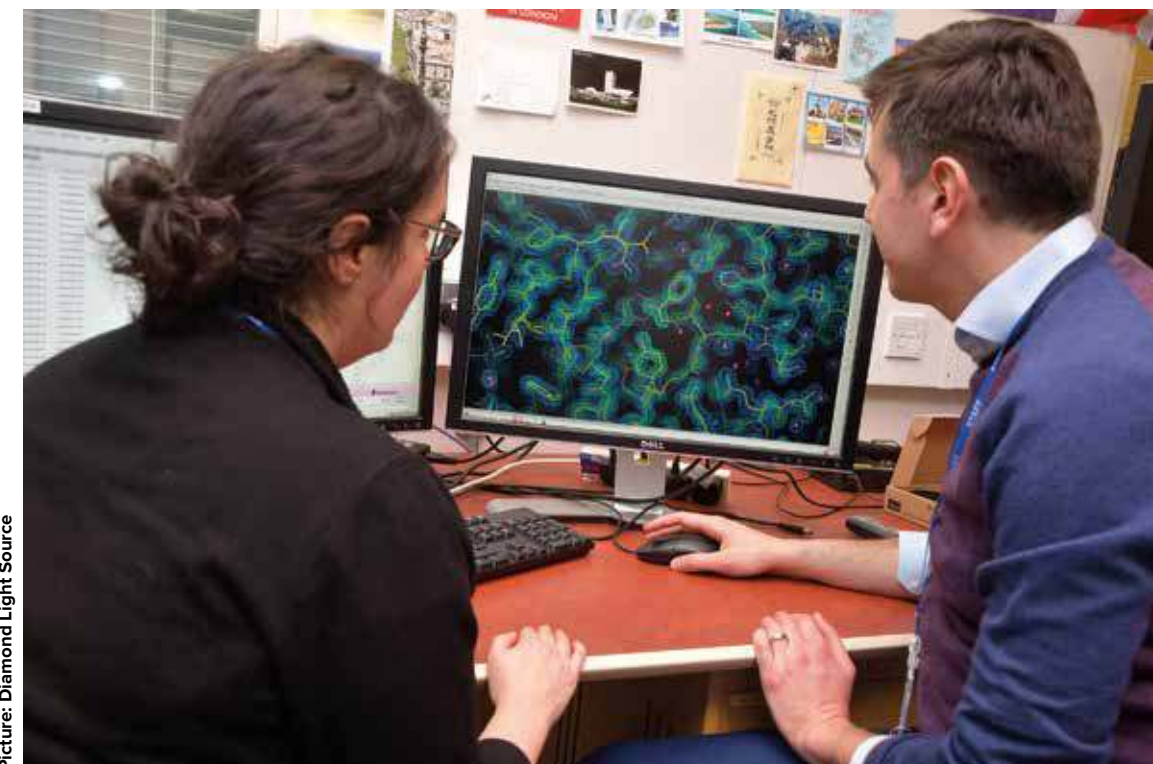
We provide clients with access to the very latest generation of electron microscopes and high-performance X-ray instrumentation (called beamlines) along with the expertise of our dedicated team of scientists. Our unique integrated structural biology facility enables users to combine a range of approaches using multiple techniques, across one site. So whether your samples are in crystal form, in solution or in their native state, we can help you

to determine the best techniques/or combination of techniques to meet your research needs and support you at every step of the process.

Diamond's world-class macromolecular crystallography (MX) facility provides cutting-edge capabilities to determine the 3D structures of biological targets, at atomic level. It enables pharmaceutical, biotech and agrochemical companies to accelerate the identification and validation of lead compounds, whilst giving a clear picture of the interaction between ligand and its target. This precise information helps to orientate the design of new drug candidates in order to improve their potency and selectivity.

Our instruments incorporate advanced robotic systems with software for automated sample handling, crystal centring and data collection and are continually upgraded as technology advances. In addition, microfocus beamlines are perfectly suited for studying small or challenging samples. Tools for serial crystallography and in situ data collection are in place for users to optimise their research. We have also developed high performance automated processing pipelines for integration, scaling and phasing data in real time for immediate structure analysis.

Fragment-based lead discovery is a drug discovery process that has revolutionised the pharmaceutical



Picture: Diamond Light Source

industry, providing valuable and cost-effective insights for rational drug design in the early stages. Our fragment screening platform, XChem, is co-located with the I04-1 high throughput MX beamline and provides a streamlined, secure and effective route to highly automated fragment screening campaigns. Screening of up to 700 compounds a day is now achievable, significantly reducing the time to hit identification. Our unique processes, tailored software, and automated systems enable us to record and track data seamlessly from initial crystal cultivation through to data analysis, providing fast, robust and cost-effective structural determination.

While X-ray crystallography remains a key tool for the characterisation of macromolecules, small molecules, complexes and ligand binding, complementary techniques such as electron microscopy, and small angle X-ray scattering are increasingly leading to a more complete understanding of the process in question and these techniques are also accessible within our integrated structural biology portfolio.

Recent technology advances have dramatically improved the resolution of macromolecular structures achievable with cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) and seen a rush to adopt the technique in rational drug design and vaccine programmes. The electron Bio-Imaging Centre (eBIC) for Industry is an integrated facility at Diamond providing pharmaceutical and nanotechnology companies with access to state-of-the-art research equipment and expertise in the field of cryo-electron microscopy.

Our preparation facilities,

dedicated screening and high-resolution data collection microscopes, automated data processing systems and expert scientific support provide a comprehensive analytical service, complementary to the other structural biology techniques. A partnership with ThermoFisher (the instrument manufacturers) allows us to jointly offer access to dedicated microscopes for industrial clients. A key advantage of eBIC for Industry is the opportunity to leveraging this powerful technique to solve difficult-to-crystallise and dynamic proteins of therapeutic interest without the need for a large upfront investment in in-house equipment and expertise, lowering the barrier to entry.

Biological small angle X-ray scattering (BioSAXS) is a powerful probe for characterisation of macromolecules and macromolecular complexes in the solution state. The technique is complementary to crystallography and cryo-EM, providing solution state structural information from macromolecules and macromolecular complexes.

BioSAXS is particularly useful for examining multi-subunit complexes and conformational changes upon ligand binding and has to date proved very popular for characterising antibody complexes. Additionally, access to infrared (IR) and cryo-soft X-ray tomography techniques can provide further information about API interactions with, and subsequent effects on, cells and cellular structures with super high-resolution microscopy correlated to 3D high resolution X-ray imaging of cells. Chemical specificity is also addressed using infrared spectroscopy to evaluate influence of chemotherapy on live cells.

Supporting all of these state-of-the-art facilities is the Industrial Liaison Office, comprising a team of highly experienced scientists dedicated to supporting our industrial clients in accessing Diamond.

We offer services ranging from full service – a bespoke experimental design, data collection, data analysis and reporting service, right through to providing facilities for you to conduct your own experiments.



**We're always happy to discuss any enquiries or talk about ways in which access to Diamond's facilities may be beneficial to your business so please do give us a call on 01235 778797 or send us an e-mail to [industry@diamond.ac.uk](mailto:industry@diamond.ac.uk)**

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## Boost to charity thanks to accountancy firm

Birmingham Children's Hospital Charity is £18,500 better off thanks to the efforts of a Midlands accountancy firm.

Staff at Prime Accountants Group, which has offices in Birmingham, Coventry and Solihull, challenged themselves to emulate the Tour de France cycle race by riding the distance of the famous event in 24 hours.

A team of 50 volunteers took to the saddle in Solihull's Touchwood Shopping Centre and their collective pedal power saw them beat both their

£10,000 fundraising target and the daunting 2,092-mile distance.

Helen Rawnsley, corporate partnerships officer at Birmingham Children's Hospital Charity, said: "We are so grateful to all of the volunteers from Prime for taking on such a huge challenge.

"Their support helps enormously, and the money raised will go towards helping us deliver expert care to the 90,000 children and young people from across the country who need us every year."



# Healthcare fund open to applications

West Midlands Academic Health Science Network has opened the applications for its 2020 Small and Medium Enterprise Health Innovation Fund.

The fund was developed in partnership with MidTECH Innovations and Mercia Asset Management to support start-up businesses in the healthcare sector from across the region.

Applicants are given the opportunity to be awarded convertible loans of up to £50,000 as well as access to future investment capital, mentoring workshops from industry experts and access to a network of key contacts within the NHS and healthcare sectors to support the development of their ideas.

The fund, which is being led by Peter Dines, chief operating officer and head of life sciences at Mercia, is open to applications from SMEs who are currently collaborating with a West Midlands based NHS organisation.

Move it or Lose it, an organisation which provides FABS (flexibility, aerobic, balance and strength) exercise classes to older adults and those with long-term health conditions, was awarded the loan in 2017.

The number of over 65s in the UK is steadily increasing and will likely form a quarter of the population by 2037. With the average person now spending approximately 16 of their later years in poor health, finding viable solutions to improve health and wellbeing in later life will also help lessen the burden on our healthcare providers.

Move it or Lose it received funding

to develop technology and routes to market to help educate and enable older adults to take control and monitor their own activity levels, thereby reducing demand for clinical services.

Joe Robinson, director of research and innovation at Move it or Lose it, said: "The fund has helped provide us with the capital needed to increase our service offer, which otherwise would not have been possible.

"Through this scheme the company has been able to grow and reach more older people – helping them live healthier, happier and more active lives."

Tammy Holmes, head of innovation exchange at WMAHSN said: "We are thrilled to announce the return of the SME Innovation Fund and be in

the position to support businesses dedicated to transforming the healthcare landscape of the West Midlands.

"To date, the scheme has successfully supported over ten SMEs, helping them bring their ideas to life and spark great collaboration between innovators and NHS organisations.

"We can not wait to see what innovations organisations in the West Midlands have to offer and work together to help make sure our region is healthier, more productive and delivering the best possible clinical outcomes for patients."

**For more information around the SME Innovation Fund application process and requirements or to submit an application, visit <https://meridian.wmahsn.org>**



Peter Dines

# In praise of technicians

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our technical staff here at Aston University and at other universities and research institutes across the country have been absolute heroes behind the scenes.

In response to the pandemic, Aston University, like many others, made the decision to move all face-to-face teaching online. Our IT technical colleagues worked extraordinarily hard to ensure that the transition went smoothly. Their contribution was essential as without their expertise we would not be able to deliver our teaching programmes online and support our students remotely.

Technical colleagues across Aston's laboratories have been working extremely hard too. They enabled the safe and successful shutdown of both teaching and research labs, and utilised their technical expertise and 'make it happen' attitude to manufacture hand sanitiser and collect and deliver PPE and medical supplies to the NHS. These latter activities, in direct response to the combined effort to tackle COVID-19, have really boosted the morale of the academic and technical community during these challenging times.

The hand sanitiser manufacturing process involved our technical colleagues in Pharmacy manufacturing sanitiser using the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recipe and distributing the sanitiser across campus and beyond.

My personal highlight, and one which meant a lot to me, was the donation of PPE to our NHS friends and colleagues. As our laboratories are closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to collate

## Jiteen Ahmed, from the School of Life and Health Sciences at Aston University, has written a personal account of the work his colleagues have been doing in response to COVID-19

our supplies that we felt would be useful to the NHS. Technical colleagues collected PPE from across the university, along with medical supplies including saline IV bags, paracetamol and Calpol. These were all personally delivered to the Birmingham Women's and Children's hospitals.

This was of personal significance to me as I was a patient of the Children's Hospital as a child, and the Women's Hospital has provided so much support to myself and my wife, so to give something back meant a lot.

During the shutdown, our technical colleagues will still be working hard. We're keeping essential operations at Aston University going. Colleagues will be performing vital checks, such as ensuring that our cell banks and NMR equipment are filled with liquid nitrogen, and technical colleagues from IT, estates, engineering and science will be involved in keeping our critical activities under way, albeit remotely in some cases.

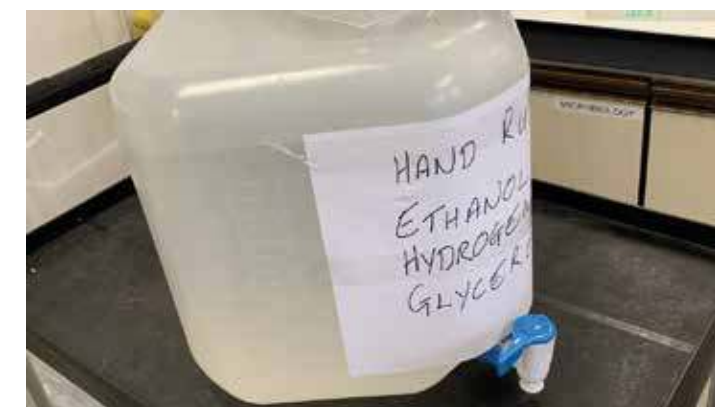
In addition, technical colleagues have volunteered to support the students who are living on our campus on their own. This is essential support and I am so proud of the way we have pulled together as a community.

Technicians really are the heroes of our sector. Their 'can do' approach and perseverance has made what seemed impossible possible.

The movement of face-to-face teaching to online, the manufacture of hand sanitisers, the donation of PPE and medical supplies to the NHS – all this shows one thing . . . technicians STILL make it happen, no matter what!

**Above: Essential PPE items have been donated to the NHS by staff at Aston University**

**Below: The university's laboratory staff have been manufacturing hand sanitiser to a World Health Organisation recipe**





# Under pressure

CARL JONES looks at why it pays for Birmingham employers to look after the mental health of their staff

"Stress? You people don't know the meaning of the word. Being forced to work down the mines as a 14-year-old, like young boys did in my day – that was stress!"

This was a totally genuine and rather alarming exchange I overheard between a particularly bombastic line manager and a shell-shocked young recruit, not so long ago.

Having said his piece, the boss in question rolled his eyes, turned on his heels, harrumphed and marched off, leaving the shattered teenager to fight back tears and skulk slowly off into the shadows.

Who knows what sort of psychological damage it caused? Because if there's one thing designed to make things worse for those suffering from anxiety, it's being surrounded by people who don't understand and aren't prepared to listen.

We've made huge strides in recent years in making it OK to say that you're not OK, and the awareness and importance of mental health in the workplace has never been higher.

The coronavirus pandemic has added yet another dimension, as millions wrestle with the fish-out-of-water challenge of working from home – and the pressures this unfamiliar social isolation can bring.

The incentive for companies to get mental health support right is huge. Latest analysis by Deloitte says poor mental health now costs UK employers up to £45 billion each year. This is a rise of 16% since 2016 – or in pounds and pennies speak, an extra £6 billion a year.

The research found that for every £1 spent on supporting their workers' mental health, employers get £5 back on their investment in reduced absenteeism and staff turnover.

The report, Mental Health and Employers: The Case for Refreshing Investment, says highest return on investment is achieved by early interventions, such as organisation-wide culture change and education – rather than more in-depth support that may be needed at a later stage when a person is struggling.

As our ways of working evolve, so do the expectations of employers about how we should support our people.

There is certainly a greater

openness in discussing mental health at work by larger employers these days, and more provision of support overall.

However, research also finds that despite this progress, costs continue to climb. Deloitte believes this can be attributed largely to a significant rise in mental-health-related 'presenteeism', where employees work when they are not at their most productive.

The analysis describes a complex picture in which more people with poor mental health are continuing to work rather than take time off – highlighting leaveism and presenteeism as characteristics of an 'always-on' culture, enabled by technology.

Elizabeth Hampson, Deloitte director and author of the report, says: "Understanding more about the relationship between mental health and work is in all our interests.

"Our research finds that, while an increased use of technology can enhance working practices, having the ability to work outside normal working hours can add to the challenge of maintaining good mental health, and make it hard for some to disconnect from an 'always-on' culture."

The report suggests higher prevalence of problems among younger people, who emerge as the most vulnerable to poor mental health.

Young people are also less likely to disclose mental health problems to employers and more likely to use their holiday instead of taking days off

work, it is suggested.

In today's hectic world there is immense social pressure to always be 'busy'. The value placed on achievement and productivity forces us to constantly be achieving things.

In contrast, resting, taking time off, day-dreaming or relaxing are often seen as lazy pursuits, not to be openly discussed or encouraged.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that 'burnout' is on the rise.

Kay Heald, an HR expert who operates across the West Midlands, says: "It is a growing problem for the modern workplace, having an impact on organisational costs as well as employee health and wellbeing.

"A 2018 Gallup study found that 23% of employees felt burnt out at work very often or always and burned-out employees were 63% more likely to take a sick day."

The World Health Organisation now views burnout as a recognised occupational syndrome 'resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed'.

Heald says: "It is hoped that this revised definition will help burnout to be taken more seriously and encourage employers to regard it as a legitimate and chronic workplace condition that needs tackling.

"Burnout is not the same as stress. Although stress can be one of the early warning signs that may lead to burnout, stress tends to be associated with 'too much' - too much pressure or too many deadlines and demands.

"Burnout, however, is associated with 'not enough' - not enough energy, or no hope and no motivation.

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life sciences

**"Employers cannot afford to ignore the symptoms of burnout and need to recognise that their working environment and management culture can have a profound effect on how people cope with work demands and how they feel about their jobs."**





Kay Heald



David McCormack



Katie Buckingham

When burnout takes hold, the ability to tackle obstacles disappears, life loses meaning and small tasks can feel huge.

“Psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety and panic disorders can affect a person’s ability to function at work, but burnout is a condition that stems directly from the work itself when demands of a job outweigh the rewards and recognition. Therefore, tackling burnout has to address the intricate relationship between an individual and their work.”

And this, Heald says, is where Birmingham’s employers can really come into their own. How they approach the situation, and how quickly they recognise what’s happening, is crucial.

“Recovery time from burnout can mean months off work and may be associated with additional longer term mental and physical health problems.

“Employers cannot afford to ignore the symptoms of burnout and need to recognise that their working environment and management

culture can have a profound effect on how people cope with work demands and how they feel about their jobs.”

There are lots of low and medium cost interventions that organisations can adopt to provide more supportive and healthier workplaces, she says, including investment in people management skills training, setting objective and monitoring workloads, and giving consistent performance feedback:

Heald also suggests promoting wellbeing initiatives including exercise, good nutrition and financial education, and considering the provision of mental health first aider training

Fewer than half of employees think their boss would notice if they were struggling with mental health, according to the most recent Workplace Wellbeing Index.

It’s a statistic which Julia Fitzsimmons of law firm FBC Manby Bowdler says should prompt companies to examine whether their policy and culture really does match up to best practice.

“Research among workers by MIND, the mental health charity, found that a continuing culture of fear and silence around mental health was adding up to a big cost to employers, with more than 20% reporting they had called in sick to avoid workplace stress, and 30% saying they did not feel they would be able to speak openly with their line manager about the issue.

“We would urge employers to listen to what charities like MIND are saying, and develop strategies focused on mental health as part of employee wellbeing.

“Companies should be undertaking a risk assessment and acting on it. And where an employee is suffering from a mental health condition which has a long-term effect on day-to-day activity, this may be classed as a disability, requiring the employer to take positive action under the Equality Act 2010.

“Best practice is for employers to have clearly stated policies that are reflected in the company’s culture, so that a manager who notices a change in personality, evidence of low mood or periods of increased absence, will feel equipped to enquire if any workplace support is needed. It needs to happen in a supportive environment where the employee feels comfortable in opening up and asking for help, if needed.”

SF Recruitment, in Birmingham’s Gas Street, is listed in the Sunday Times 100 Best Small Companies to Work For list, and places huge emphasis on the mental wellbeing of its team.

In addition to flexible working options, it offers benefits and incentives which allow staff to reduce their hours and enjoy an early finish on a Friday – all aimed at achieving the right work/life balance.

Chief executive Saira Demmer says: “In our day jobs, we are obsessed with matching the right people with their ideal roles, and for us to achieve this, we knew we had to make sure that all of our people were coming to work every day excited to be in their own ideal roles.

“Being part of a team of engaged, successful people is what we believe makes a business an employer of choice.

“We have provided options for our people to focus on their physical, mental and financial wellbeing, at a time and in a way that suits them and their individual circumstances.

“In addition to healthcare plans and gym memberships, we have regular visits from a mindfulness consultant and an anonymous counsellor is also available to employees who would like to discuss personal matters in a safe environment.”

For decades, mental health has been a taboo subject in many a workplace; but since poor mental health is now the number one reason for staff absence, can employers afford not to talk about it any longer?

The statistics speak for themselves. According to employee engagement specialist Hive360, on the city’s Hagley Road, almost two-thirds of workers in Birmingham and 60% of staff across the West Midlands say that poor workplace technology is having a detrimental effect on their work/life balance.

In Birmingham, 46% say poor technology at work has a bad effect on their mental and financial wellbeing, and 31% believe workplace technology and their digital skills are holding them back.

More than 1,000 workers, from senior decision makers to support staff and temporary workers, took part in the research.

Stigma and taboos around mental health appear to still exist in the workplace, it found, with one in three Birmingham workers saying they would be uncomfortable speaking with their employer about their mental health issues.

David McCormack, chief executive of Hive360, explains: “Growing numbers of staff are looking beyond financial gain from an employer, and we know that more and more people are actively looking for a positive work/life experience.

“How much employees are engaged with the business and their employer plays a significant role in their overall health and wellbeing.

“If employers offered actual tangible support on issues such as mental and physical health as well as financial wellbeing, the impacts on employee productivity levels and the overall performance of the business

**“An engaged and happy workforce can transform a business. The positive link between engaged employees and improved productivity is proven and well documented.”**

would increase significantly.

“Access to information and support about finances and pensions, and to resources that help maintain good mental health, is key to happier, healthier and more engaged employees.

“An engaged and happy workforce can transform a business. The positive link between engaged employees and improved productivity is proven and well documented.”

Coronavirus, of course, has added yet another layer of pressure, and Altruist Enterprises, based at iCentrum in Holt Street, is currently advising Birmingham businesses on the best way they can support employees with mental health issues related to the pandemic.

The business is part of the NatWest Accelerator programme in Brindleyplace. Driven by social entrepreneur Katie Buckingham, it was born out of her frustration at the lack of mental health and stress awareness in the workplace, and desire to achieve the ‘parity of esteem’ between physical and

mental health at work.

She says: “Mental health in the workplace is being talked about more and more which is a good thing, but some organisations don’t understand the best way to bring it into their organisations so that it aligns with their corporate strategy.

“Having the right resources in place can be vital when something like the Coronavirus hits.”

Former Government minister Sir Norman Lamb is a supporter of Altruist Enterprises.

“In my time, first as an employment lawyer and then as a Member of Parliament, I have been faced with so many examples of failure – where someone’s health slowly deteriorates and no one does anything about it,” he says.

“The good news is that it doesn’t have to be like this. We can do something about it. We now have plenty of evidence of things we can do in the workplace to reduce this massive burden on individuals and to improve the bottom line for companies.”



**Younger people are least likely to disclose mental health problems to employers**



**SF Recruitment celebrates its listing in the Sunday Times list**





# Locked up in celebration

A city centre conference centre hosted a Peaky Blinders themed breakfast to celebrate Alzheimer's Research UK's Birmingham Lock-Up fundraiser.

The breakfast event took place at Conference Aston after 17 volunteers spent a night in Birmingham's Steelhouse Lane Prison to raise money for the charity. Those taking part had their fingerprints and mugshots taken before being locked up in Victorian cells dating back to 1892.

Members from Birmingham's business community joined in with the fundraising efforts, with Conference Aston's Edwin Williams also locked up for the night.

Conference Aston's appointed charity is Alzheimer's Research UK, with the venue producing a special Peaky Blinders' style breakfast menu to celebrate those that had taken

part in the challenge. Participants and members from the Alzheimer's Research UK team were treated to themed dishes such as bone marrow, lamb kidney and black pudding.

"Alzheimer's Research UK is leading on breakthrough research into dementia, and fundraising activities like the Birmingham Lock-Up provide a critical boost to its efforts," said Mr Williams.

"The lock-up was a unique experience, with all those involved gaining an insight into Birmingham's history and the people jailed at Steelhouse Lane Prison."

**Pictured: Edwin Williams of Conference Aston**

## Second of top achievements for Midlands company

The Manufacturing Technology Centre has been named in a list of the top 75 companies to work for in the Midlands.

The MTC, which was co-founded by the University of Birmingham, is number 57 in the list, having its workforce engagement and teamwork recognised.

The achievement comes hot on the heels of the Sunday Times 100 Best Companies to Work For in 2020, which listed the MTC at number 77 nationally and gave the centre a coveted two-star accreditation.

The Midlands list, compiled in association with Insider Media, shows the companies with the highest regional best companies index scores after a detailed survey covering all aspects of employee satisfaction.

MTC chief executive, Dr Clive Hickman, said the accolade reflected the efforts taken to make sure the MTC is a great place to work and that employees are engaged, highly valued and looked after.

"The MTC employs more than 800 talented people, including some of the best science, engineering and manufacturing brains in Europe, and we go to great efforts to make the MTC a happy and satisfying place to work, while at the same time challenging our people to fulfil their potential," he said.

## National PR campaign won by Birmingham consultancy

Birmingham-based communications consultancy Rewired has won the national PR and social media brief for the Handmade Festival, which is hosted by TV presenter Kirstie Allsopp.

The Rewired team has pledged to deliver a comprehensive strategy of media relations, influencer outreach, social media content creation, as well as live event support.

The Handmade Festival is due to take place at Evolution in Battersea Park, London, for the first time in the

festival's seven-year history from September 11 to 13.

David Westman, marketing manager at Brand Events, said: "We are delighted to be working with the Rewired team on the Handmade Festival for the fourth year. They have a great approach to the way they work and clearly have a love for what they do."

**Pictured: Kirstie Allsopp cutting the ribbon at the 2019 Handmade Festival**



By **KIM LEARY**  
CEO Squibble

Digital & Creative Business of the Year 2017



# Three ways your B2B brand can power through the crisis

Your brand is the key to your company's success, especially during these unprecedented times. It has therefore never been more important to lead with a clear and concise message.

Whether you have a small or large team, they and your customers need leadership. Your team and customers alike will be looking to you to help

navigate them through this period.

Jeff Bezos is widely quoted as saying: "Your brand is what other people say about you when you're not in the room." How do you want your company to be remembered when all this is finished?

Therefore, I am urging all business owners to reflect on their company values and consider the three Ps:

Purpose, Personality and Potential.

By reviewing the three Ps you can ensure that your company's marketing efforts are not wasted. Our brands are living entities and should continuously evolve to meet market demands. Make sure you communicate your services clearly, use the right tone of voice and use this downtime to identify opportunities.

## 1. Purpose

Why did you start the business, who did you set out to help and why is it different to your competitors? Then, you can look at how this benefits your customers. That list of benefits will then be like gold dust in your marketing message and will create a powerful proposition. By really delving into this, you can identify the best way to connect, on an emotional level during these uncertain times. Has the emotional connection changed and does your current messaging reflect this?

As the 2017 Edelman Earned Brand Study reported: "Fifty per cent of consumers worldwide consider themselves to be belief-driven buyers and 67% bought a brand for the first time because they agreed with its position on a controversial topic. By defining your purpose you can align yourself with your target audience."

## 2. Personality

Although it seems obvious, your tone of voice will likely need to be adjusted. Whilst many will be re-aligning their values and updating their marketing, don't forget about your personality. After all, your authentic personality is your USP. The ability to clearly portray your business's personality in an inspiring and engaging way is often the difference between standing out from the crowd or blending in.

## 3. Potential

The business landscape is changing daily and whilst some businesses are booming others are left with cancelled projects and delayed start



dates. Don't be afraid to engage with these customers now. Ask them if there are other ways you can support them. If cashflow is a concern, can you offer a reduced rate or longer payment terms?

Also engage with your sales teams and ask them to look back at the company values. What can they do to make sure the company is living up to its name? What help can be offered or what value can be shared?

If you can get your team on board, it will reduce the pressure on you so you don't have to face it alone.

## Food for thought

I'm aware that many people are unsure about selling right now and I understand this sentiment. However, our economy needs to keep moving and bills still need to be paid. So, as long as your messaging fits with the moment, there's no reason why you

should stop. That's why it's important to continuously review the three Ps.

And let's not forget, the current climate provides a great opportunity to get creative and look at new possibilities. Here is just a few of the companies that were started during our last recession (2008-2010): Uber; Airbnb; Slack; Pinterest; WhatsApp; Square.

## Don't hide away

Be seen and be visible. Share your view on what's going on and be honest about what it means for you. Now more than ever, ethical brands make the world a better place.

I'm immensely proud of how Birmingham has united during this period, and I look forward to seeing you on the other side!

**#BetterTogether**





By JON GRIFFIN

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column

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column

# The China connection

No foreign country has had a greater influence on the West Midlands business world than the Far Eastern superpower. From Longbridge and LDV vans to some of the region's most recognisable property developments and Premier League football clubs, Chinese investment has had a profound effect on Greater Birmingham's commercial landscape.

Former Birmingham Mail business editor JON GRIFFIN reports



## 50 column

In the course of more than 17 years on the business desk beat for the Birmingham Mail, few press releases resonated with me more than the words of eminent economist Professor Leslie Young which dropped into my email inbox back in late 2010.

The professor, from the Asia Pacific Institute of Business within the Chinese University of Hong Kong, argued in a fascinating speech at Aston Business School, that the western world had effectively been outwitted by the Chinese.

He said at the time: “The US economy has been fatally hit by the iceberg that is the Chinese, state-owned, market-driven economy. Under capitalism, the normal mechanism controlling growth is shareholders taking out capital and spending it.

“That’s not happening in China because the state-run, market-driven economy there just keeps reinvesting the capital and there’s no appetite to devalue the dollar. The crux of the problem is America needs to manufacture goods and export them.

“Contrast that with China which is running an export surplus because Mao Tse Tung had a simple but brutal answer – he wiped out landlords and capitalists.

“So it’s not cheap labour fuelling China’s economy. It’s the fact that the state controls the capital and reinvests all surpluses back into China that makes the difference.”



The front of the march in support of the Longbridge car factory



The Chinese market was hugely important in the resurgence of Jaguar Land Rover

## “MG Rover died in early April 2005. But by late July there were genuine hopes of rebirth under new Chinese owners.”

It’s now more than nine years since the professor’s address at Aston Business School. But it seems to me, all these years later, that his words succinctly encapsulated just why China has been able to exercise such an economic and cultural influence on both the West Midlands and the UK as a whole in the 21st century.

It’s the business model, dictated by the state, which powers the world’s leading communist superpower’s extraordinary growth. And that growth has changed the face of large parts of the West Midlands’ industrial and sporting landscape to a remarkable degree, for better or worse.

Consider the fate of Birmingham’s best-known factory, Longbridge, for example. Exactly 15 years ago, MG Rover finally ran out of time and money, weighed down by colossal losses of £2 million a day.

The very last throw of the dice for John Towers’ Phoenix consortium was a failed joint venture with the Chinese car maker Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation, which bit the dust after the Far Eastern car giant expressed alarm at the size of the Longbridge car maker’s pension deficit.

The ending of the talks with the Chinese was to have profound implications for around 5,500 workers at Longbridge, countless thousands more in the supply chain and the West Midlands economy as a whole. It was the end of volume car making after around a century at a factory forever associated with Herbert Austin, the Austin Seven, the Mini, Sir Michael Edwardes, Red Robbo, British Leyland and so much more.

MG Rover died in early April 2005. But by late July there were genuine hopes of rebirth under new Chinese owners. Nanjing Automobile snapped up the assets of MG Rover for £53 million in a deal which raised optimism of a new dawn for Longbridge.

In fact, that Chinese venture into the West Midlands flattered

to deceive. I have vivid memories of driving up to Longbridge to quiz Nanjing executives over their intentions.

Former Longbridge hero-turned-villain John Towers helped broker that meeting and the Chinese bosses talked openly of production ambitions of 100,000, or even 200,000 cars a year. It was, to say the least, wildly speculative, although I dutifully reported their claims.

Nothing of any note happened for several years amidst a plethora of Chinese whispers. To cut a long story short, Nanjing never came remotely close to fulfilling its grandiose prophecies.

It was, in due course, taken over by SAIC amid long years of inactivity at Longbridge. A ‘lift and shift’ operation removed part of the factory’s assets to China, and a kit car assembly operation was eventually launched.

But the last time I checked, MG UK was effectively a marketing and design exercise for the site’s paymasters over in China. A huge part of the industrial fabric of the West Midlands had been reduced to a bit-part player in the UK automotive sector.

Van maker LDV is another classic example of a distinctive slice of West Midlands manufacturing which ended up in Chinese hands, with another dubious outcome.

LDV, a much-loved presence on the region’s industrial landscape for decades, had finally collapsed in June 2009, when the van maker fell into administration amid debts of £75 million. The firm’s Drews Lane site, at Washwood Heath, boasted a proud industrial heritage pre-dating the LDV era and was home to the luxury Wolseley car company from the 1920s.

The plant had previously been mothballed for six months, with production at a standstill as the 2008-09 recession bit. The demise of the van maker cost 800 jobs at the factory and several thousands more in the supply chain.

The assets of LDV were



subsequently bought by Chinese businesswoman Qu Li in October 2009 – who had close links to the Phoenix Four – although original plans to relaunch the firm at an unnamed site in Birmingham making eco vans failed to progress.

But the LDV name was duly revived thousands of miles from its Birmingham roots when SAIC – owners of MG UK – forged a deal to launch export drives of Maxus vans to a range of markets, including Australia, Chile, South Africa and South East Asia. A UK distributor was later appointed to bring the LDV V80 range back to its original home market.

It was a clear sign of China’s remorseless emergence as an economic superpower that SAIC – an industrial giant in Far Eastern terms – had chosen to pick off the carcasses of two stricken Birmingham firms, with proud manufacturing heritages, who had sadly fallen on hard times. It was also a crystal-clear indication of China’s designs on other prime assets in the West Midlands.

At Coventry, body parts maker Covpress helped create up to 5,000 new jobs in Shandong province with a new half a million square feet factory, a year after a £30 million China-UK buyout. Sadly, the body

## 51 column





**“The Chinese have also targeted our very own football clubs, again with varying degrees of success.”**



panel maker subsequently fell into administration before being bought out by Liberty House in January 2017.

But two years before the financial crisis at the Coventry parts firm, I had witnessed first hand the unstoppable rise of the Chinese, flying out to Dongying province in northern China to attend the launch of the new £300 million body parts factory in January 2015.

I filed a report from China to the Birmingham Post which read: It couldn't happen in the UK – and it illustrates just why the Chinese economy is growing by seven per cent a year.

The new £300 million body parts factory at Dongying is a classic example of the unstoppable march of the world's most populous nation of 1.3 billion people.

Today it is home to a factory which Chinese and UK bosses at Coventry hope will develop into the best press shop in the world, supplying car companies globally with components which owe their design and reliability to Coventry engineering expertise.

The engineering ingenuity is supplied by Covpress UK at Canley, the investment is made possible through a joint venture between China and the UK, but the sheer will to build a vast factory in just over a year is virtually exclusively Chinese.

The facts are astonishing. A £300 million factory plan will have gone from concept drawings to operational use in just 15 months. That would be impossible in the UK. Such a scheme would still be in the planning stage, mere sketches on an architect's desk.

There would be objections, delays, possibly public inquiries. The dead hand of bureaucracy continues to stifle much of the UK planning regime. China's ability to think on its feet and act swiftly can teach the west so much, as exemplified by the launch of a factory which will help create 5,000 jobs.

Given the sheer will of the Chinese to build such a factory in that short timeframe, it is hardly surprising that the West Midlands is littered with a myriad of projects and investments which owe their origins to the enterprise and work ethic of the Far Eastern giant.

In recent years, the single biggest economic success story here in the West Midlands has been the rise of Jaguar Land Rover, which created thousands of jobs on the back of a new model range and intensive export drives. Many of those jobs

were made possible by the luxury car firm's sales drive in China, albeit that the more recent slowdown in the Far East has severely dented JLR profits.

But before the slowdown, the JLR sales drive helped the UK amass a large export surplus with China. Back in 2013-14, for example, the West Midlands sold £1.74 billion more goods to the Chinese than it imported, with the JLR expansion accounting for around half that growth. Meanwhile, Chinese car maker Geely bought the collapsed Coventry black cab maker Manganese Bronze for £11 million, while Guandong-based NVC unveiled a new £5 million lighting factory at Rubery in 2011.

There have been so many other prominent examples of Chinese influence on the West Midlands economy in recent years. Chinese buyers signed up for slices of Birmingham city centre real estate in unprecedented numbers; 30% of buyers at the Cube development were a mix of mainland nationals and Hong Kong Chinese, while 43% of purchasers of the Hive in Eastside were from China.

On the High Street, an 89% stake in the House of Fraser group – including stores in Birmingham's Corporation Street, Solihull, Sutton Coldfield, Leamington Spa and Wolverhampton – was sold to Chinese conglomerate Sanpower Group as part of a £480 million deal, although controversial tycoon Mike Ashley later took over the group.

And, of course, the Chinese have also targeted our very own football clubs, again with varying degrees of success.

Aston Villa, West Bromwich Albion, Birmingham City and Wolves have all been subject to Far Eastern takeovers in recent years, while China seeks to attract the top playing talent worldwide to its own Chinese Super League by offering mind-boggling salaries.

As I write this, the world is in the grip of an unprecedented global health crisis, with China ironically the unwitting export of the deadly coronavirus.

But the world will recover in due course, and that Chinese business model summed up so adroitly by Professor Leslie Young at Aston Business School almost a decade ago will resume its remorseless path.

The China syndrome is here to stay, both in the West Midlands and further afield.



# Charity fundraiser

Erica and Nicholas McKensie, Kim and Dan Lowe, Dave Lowe and Marie Hogan



Parm Rai, Paula Graham and Steve Worrollo



Simon Dulk, Susie Mollan and Anthony Fong



Paula Gittos and Tim Graham



Kamal Yakoub, Erica McKensie, Kim Lowe, Karen Cooke and Stephanie Goundry



Henry Wong in Harbourne was the venue for a fundraiser for Fisher House UK. The charity – a 'home away from home' for military patients and their families on the site of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham – opened in 2013 and has since offered free accommodation for thousands of military patients and their families.



Beena Salhan, Becky Ison and Indrani Venkatadasari

Karen Cooke, Maureen Mackay, Lauren Cooper, Conor Bentley and Alastair Beaven



# Plastics company invests in future

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news

A plastic injection moulding and toolmaking specialist is looking to the future with a £250,000 investment in new presses and robots.

Barkley Plastics, which employs 120 people at its Highgate facility in Birmingham, is celebrating 55 years

of business by increasing capacity to help take on new orders for interior parts and lighting in the automotive sector.

The latest installation takes its total capital machinery spend to over £800,000 in the last five years, and reflects the firm's desire to move into more cosmetic and technical products.

It marks another shift in what has been a colourful history for the manufacturer, which started life after founder John Barkley placed a job advert for four toolmakers in the Birmingham Evening Mail.

In the 55 years that followed, the company has remained a strategic supplier to the automotive sector whilst also building a reputation in the domestic products, construction, electrical and leisure sectors – not to mention producing 20,000 plastic baubles for the world's largest chandelier which was used at the Winter Olympics in Sochi.

"Things have never been quiet over the last 55 years, but I suppose that's UK manufacturing for you," said Mark Harwood, managing director at Barkley Plastics.

"We've already tried to stay one step ahead of what the customer wants and this is reflected in the latest process that gives us additional capacity and production control to take on more automotive work. There will also be news of a ground-breaking development in injection moulding before the end of the year.

"The £250,000 investment is a perfect birthday present for us and will immediately be put to use supporting a new project that will see

us manufacture a selection of small, high-volume JLR parts to go across its range of vehicles."

Barkley Plastics, which is IATF16949 accredited, has one of the largest toolmaking facilities in the UK, producing high-precision tools capable of delivering 50 million mouldings for distribution worldwide.

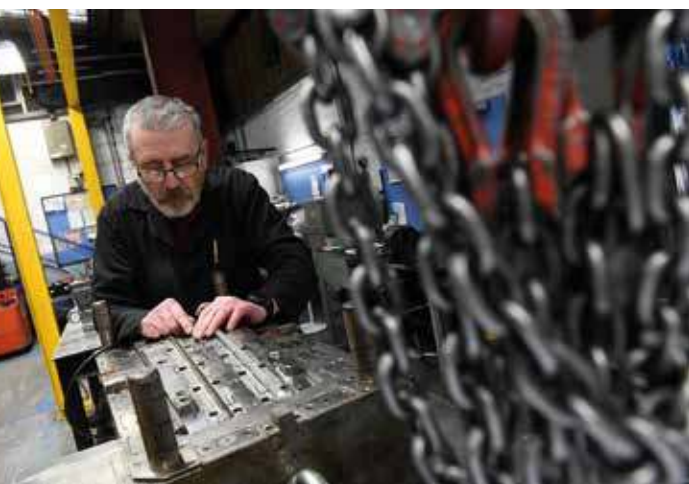
Technical director Pete Tedd, who will take over as MD when Mr Harwood becomes chairman in April, said: "The increasing range of new electric and hybrid vehicles presents exciting opportunities that suit our expertise, whilst work is being undertaken to increase our share of the construction, electronics, medical and retail sectors.

"This is an exciting year for Barkley Plastics and I'm looking forward to moving into the MD role next month.

"Succession planning is a priority for the business and we have been working hard to develop our senior management team, which will culminate in a number of new directors being appointed in October to support our ambitious growth plans."

Barkley Plastics is a founder member of the Manufacturing Assembly Network, a ten-strong collective of sub-contract manufacturers and a specialist engineering design agency.

**Barkley Plastics employs 120 people and has been in business for the past 55 years**



## Supply and demand for two Midlands companies

A family-run Birmingham coach business has invested in lifting and testing equipment supplied by Halesowen manufacturer Totalkare.

Endeavour Coaches provides vehicles for day trips, educational transport, airport transfers and accessible travel for disabled people.

The firm's skilled in-house mechanics maintain its 20-strong fleet and also deliver servicing and maintenance contracts to other customers, meaning access

to reliable in-house heavy-duty workshop solutions are vitally important.

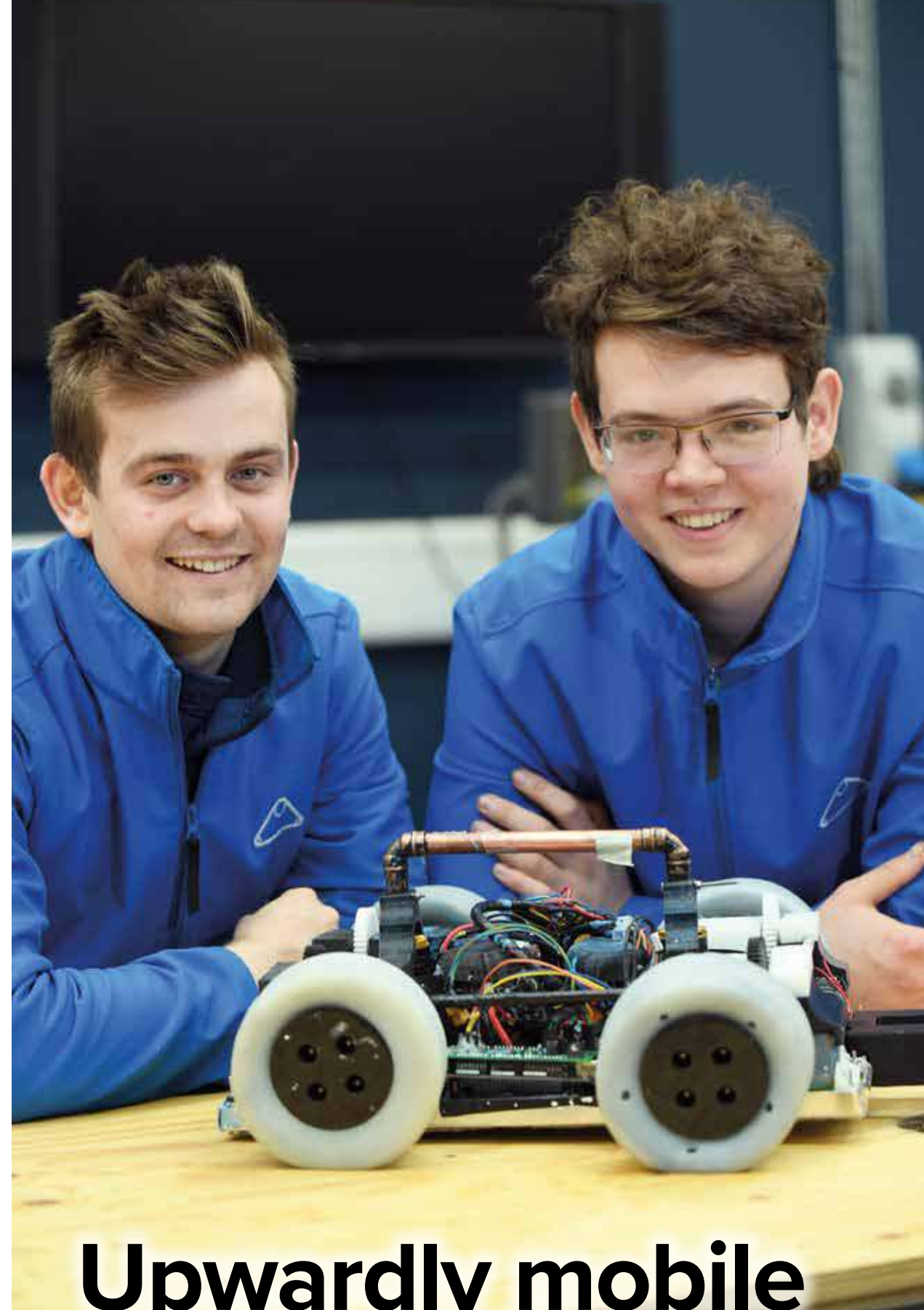
With this in mind, it recently added a Totalkare mobile brake tester to its workshop.

Sean Mitchell, managing director at Endeavour Coaches, said: "Our relationship with Totalkare spans many years, so we knew we would go straight to the company when the need for an in-house brake tester arose."

George Georgiou, area sales

manager at Totalkare, said: "This is the first time we have been able to offer non-lifting equipment and the response from clients has been fantastic. Our testing equipment is high quality and extremely versatile, and the brake tester will help Endeavour Coaches achieve new efficiencies and a host of cost savings."

Totalkare had already worked with Endeavour in the supply of its T8AC mobile column lifts, which provide a 7,500kg lifting capacity per column.



## Upwardly mobile

**Digbeth's reputation as a hotbed of innovation and entrepreneurship has been on the rise for several years. Two former school friends have based their business there to create a wall-climbing robot which might just be the next big thing to come out of the area.**

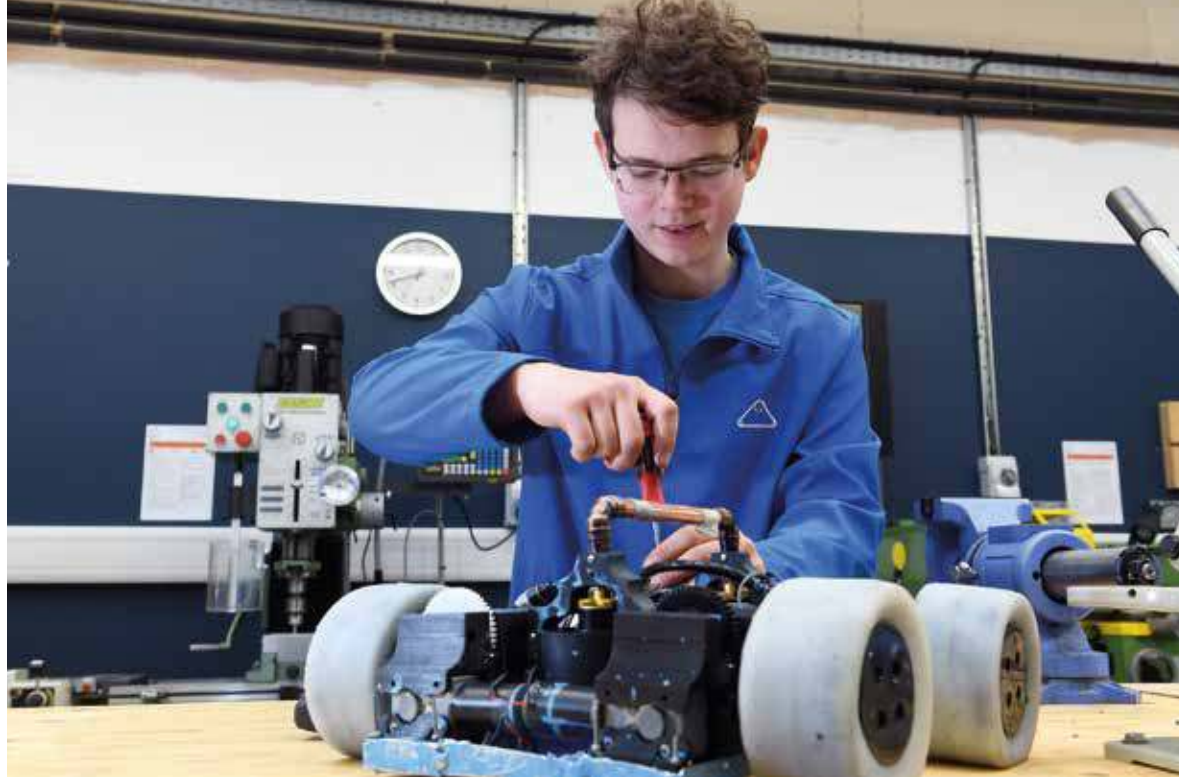
HENRY CARPENTER meets them

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profile

**Pictured: Jack Cornes and Harry Smith, co-founders of HausBots**



## 56 profile



**Harry Smith, a self-confessed ‘mad scientist’, in the STEAMhouse workshop**

It all started with a teenager being asked to paint the living room by his parents.

That “soooo boring” request by Mr and Mrs Smith of Rutland led their engineering-minded son, Harry, to disappear to the garden shed to devise a contraption which would take the boredom out of the chore.

The result, four years and countless iterations later, is a wall-climbing robot which might just revolutionise the way large-scale painting, particularly on the exterior of buildings, is carried out. It will also do away with the expense and health risks attached to using scaffolding.

Smith and long-time friend and business partner Jack Cornes are the co-founders of HausBots. While their office is in the Custard Factory, they prefer to use the facilities of the STEAMhouse – Birmingham City University’s co-working centre for innovators and collaborators – for the practical side of the operation.

And it is here that we meet one wintry afternoon.

It is clear from the outset that Smith and Cornes – both aged 21, and a brighter and more affable pair you would be hard pressed to meet – are blessed with two very different sets of skills, but ones which dovetail neatly.

“I have always been passionate about engineering and have always built stuff,” explains Smith, the self-confessed ‘mad scientist’ of the two. “Before I designed the robot I built a cordless hairdryer and when I was 13 I rebuilt a Land Rover,” he says, when pressed on examples.

“I entered the Young Engineer of the Year Award on a whim when I was 16 with the earliest prototype of the wall-climbing robot. I went all the way and won!”

You get the feeling that while Smith

is as happy as a pig in muck when focusing on concepts, invention and engineering, when it comes to the commercial side of things he is delighted to leave that part of the business to Cornes.

“Jack is much more commercially minded than me,” he confirms. “While I was at Loughborough University, doing bits of a degree, Jack went to London to work for IBM.”

If there wasn’t mutual recognition and respect, there would be no business partnership. Cornes, who was well versed in the talents of his mate, heard news that Smith was planning to ditch the robot and move onto something else.

“I thought it was his best idea yet,” says Cornes. “I was fed up with London and that’s really how the business started.”

So there they were then, two lads from Rutland with a product to refine and take to market. They called the business HausBots (so called, Cornes tells us, because their original preference of HouseBots didn’t work while the German version coincides with that country’s reputation for efficiency and accuracy).

Now they just needed to find a home for their business.

Smith explains: “While Jack was in London I was developing the idea of the wall robot much further and was considering where the best place in the country would be to set up.

“We looked in what was our home county of Rutland and also at London, but it was just phenomenally expensive.

“We came to the conclusion that Birmingham would be the best place for us and we don’t regret that decision one bit. We took our office in the Custard Factory about 18 months ago and it was a really

inspiring environment. It is also so handy to have the facilities here at STEAMhouse just a short walk away.”

Financial providence came in the form of a cash boost from the British Robotics Seed Fund. It amounted to £200,000, and gave them the essential footing they needed, though they are currently going through another investment round.

HausBots isn’t all about its two founders though; they also employ a software engineer and a mechanical engineer – “both very smart people with masters degrees in robotics,” says Cornes.

Let’s get back to the robot though.

“If you look for wall-climbing robots on the internet through a search engine, it’s obvious that there are quite a few out there,” explains Cornes.

“When we applied for the patent, it was based on the actual way that the robot climbs and sticks to the wall. There are magnetic and suction-based systems but our system relies on neither.

“We move air around in the same way that Formula 1 cars create downforce. It’s a similar principle. Harry developed a new climbing process which would allow the robot to cover all sorts of surfaces, such as brick and rendering, which had previously been impossible.

“We quickly learned there was no mileage in an indoors climbing robot. This is all about taking away the need for scaffolding. Not only can using scaffolding be really dangerous, it is also very expensive. So it works from both a health and safety, and financial point of view.

“We’ve proved that it ‘does what it says on the tin’. It works and it climbs. It reaches higher heights quickly and it does a good paint job.”



**The HausBots team**

**“We quickly learned there was no mileage in an indoors climbing robot. This is all about taking away the need for scaffolding.”**

I’m interested to know how speedily and accurately the robot can paint a surface.

“The linear speed of applying paint to a wall is pretty much the same as if done by a professional. However, because it removes the need for scaffolding, the whole project is about three times quicker.

“In terms of accuracy, we’re not going to pretend it can paint intricate designs or even successfully paint a Georgian fascia, but it is ideal for council and social housing.

“It’s pretty accurate though. We use one attachment for the main body of the walls and another for the finer details.”

The couple have been engaging with the painting and decorating industry, which is very much their market, and the feedback has been extremely encouraging. These next few months are pivotal for HausBots and will go a long way to determining whether the robot is a success or not.

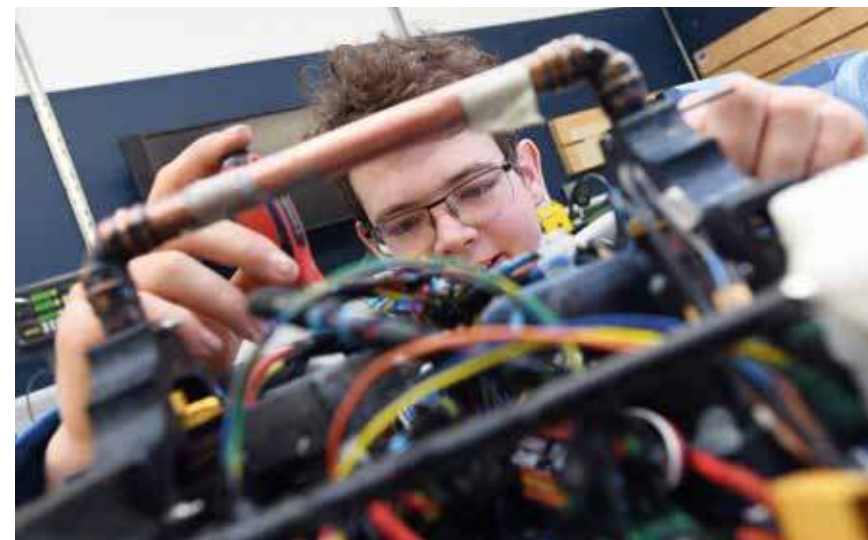
“We’re crisis testing and risk assessing at the moment, making sure that all eventualities are covered. We are making sure it behaves itself in certain circumstances,” says Cornes.

“The fundamentals are there: it works, it climbs, it paints. Before it goes into the wild though it needs to be thoroughly de-risked.

“We have chosen a path of least resistance in that the robot isn’t for sale or even for hire. We will operate it ourselves in partnership with our clients.”

It would be wrong to think that they are limiting their aspirations for the wall-climbing robot; it is merely the current focus and potentially the first of many pioneering products.

But if it does take the market by storm, Smith’s parents must surely take just a tiny bit of credit for unwittingly driving him into a bubble of invention all those years ago at home.





# BT to move in to Three Snowhill

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property

Construction work on Birmingham's largest single office development, Three Snowhill, is now complete – almost four years after starting on site.

Earlier this month telecoms giant BT announced it is taking 283,000 sq ft of the 420,000 sq ft building on a 20-year lease, the largest office letting in a single building in Birmingham. Up to 4,000 BT staff will move in from summer this year following a fit-out programme.

The completion of Three Snowhill also marks the finishing line for the Snowhill Estate, a 17-year project by Ballymore.

Ballymore acquired the four-acre site in 2003 and has built 1 million sq ft of office space across three buildings. In addition, Ballymore has delivered the viaduct, which enabled the tram extension from Snowhill to the wider city centre and provided pedestrian access to the Jewellery and Gun Quarters and Snowhill Station via the new 'high level' entrance.

Three new areas of public realm – Colmore Square piazza, the Metro boulevard and public space facing St Chad's – have also been created.

One Snowhill, completed in 2009, comprises 263,000 sq ft over 11 floors and is let to Barclays, KPMG and DWF. Two Snowhill is a 310,000

sq ft 14-storey building and home to HS2, Gowling WLG and HS2. It was completed in 2013.

Three Snowhill comprises 17 storeys of Grade A offices with floorplates of up to 25,000 sq ft. It has 86 car parking spaces, a gym and shower facilities on all floors.

Designed by Sidell Gibson, the £200 million building boasts a full-height atrium, the tallest in Birmingham.

Richard Probert, project director for Ballymore, has worked on the Snowhill Estate since its inception.

He said: "Three Snowhill is the largest speculative office development outside London.

"As such, its development was a massive vote of confidence in Birmingham by Ballymore. Our faith in the building and our product has been rewarded with BT taking more than two thirds of the building for a new regional hub.

"But the Snowhill Estate is more

than the sum of its parts. It has successfully extended Birmingham's prime business district with some major brands calling it home. This, along with the improvement to transport links and connectivity to the Jewellery and Gun Quarters, is its – and Ballymore's – real legacy."

Main contractor BAM will remain on site at Three Snowhill to complete internal snagging works.

Stephen Crichton, director at Gleeds which advised on project management and quantity surveying at Three Snowhill, said: "Gleeds has a long and successful relationship with Ballymore and we are proud to be working with a business with such vision.

"The Snowhill Estate is a game changer for the city and is an impressive example of how a derelict site can be transformed to become a significant iconic landmark. Three Snowhill represents the final piece of the jigsaw."

**"Our faith in the building and our product has been rewarded with BT taking more than two thirds of the building for a new regional hub."**



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property

## Building on success

Birmingham property consultancy MK2 Real Estate has boosted its headcount with the appointment of three new members of staff.

Ross Cuthbert has joined the firm's investment team as an associate director from Gerald Eve, where he worked for three years. Prior to that, he spent two years in the capital markets team at Deloitte Real Estate in London.

Chris Rice has joined MK2's building consultancy team as a senior surveyor from Savills in Birmingham. His appointment takes the number of people in the team to three and comes on the back of a number of new project wins, including being

instructed as employer's agent on the Cat B fit-out of a 180,000 sq ft new industrial unit in the West Midlands.

MK2's property management team has also welcomed a new senior surveyor, Renu Suthi, who has joined from Workman. Renu will assist with day-to-day management of the team's £400 million property portfolio, including rent collection and service charges.

Mark Johnson, director and co-founder of MK2, said that 2019 had been a solid year for the business.

"We have continued to build on that success in 2020 – winning a number of new clients and instructions – which has resulted

in us needing to bring in extra resources to service the increased workload," he said.

"We are seeing continued growth across all service lines and looking at new areas of the business to expand into, particularly in asset management where we can add real value for our clients through our multi-discipline approach."

**From left, Mark Rooke, director and co-founder of MK2, with new recruits Chris Rice, Renu Suthi, Ross Cuthbert and fellow co-founder Mark Johnson**



## Strong year for commercial property company

Birmingham-based Real Estate Investors plc has delivered growth across the board in what was a flat year in the commercial property market in 2019.

The AIM-listed company said it benefited from a strong business model, with a diversified income and no material reliance on any tenant asset or sector.

Paul Bassi, chief executive officer of REI, said: "In a flat market place, we have delivered portfolio, revenue, earnings and dividend growth.

"Our economies of scale drove underlying profits to £8 million, up 11.1%, and earnings per share to 4.3p, up 12.2%. Our portfolio now stands at £228.9 million and has delivered total dividend payments to our shareholders of £29 million since the commencement of our dividend

policy seven years ago.

"Certainty on HS2, the Commonwealth Games in 2022 and Coventry City of Culture next year, all represent a significant boost for the region and will underpin an increase in investment and acceleration on decision making.

"Re-location of people and corporate offices adds fuel to the local economy and we expect these trends to accelerate. However, all these outcomes are subject to the unknown outputs of the coronavirus impact that cannot be predicted at this stage."

REI had strong occupancy throughout the year at 96% with a well-balanced portfolio and completed two acquisitions for £9.25 million, net of costs, and made disposals of £2.1 million, which saw its portfolio grow to £228.9 million

up 1.8% from 2018.

The company increased its investment in Royal Leamington Spa during the autumn, acquiring a mixed-use block on The Parade for £7.45 million, consisting of 31,660 sq ft let to tenancies including McDonald's, Tiger UK, Moss Bros, Timpson Ltd, Oxfam, Clydesdale bank, Savers Health and Beauty and EE – generating rental income of £639,500 per annum.

Mr Bassi said market sentiment towards retail assets had been reflected in the most recent portfolio valuation.

"This does not recognise that REI's retail assets are made up of convenience and neighbourhood stores which continue to perform well. We have no exposure to department stores or out of town standalone retail," he said.



Paul Bassi



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property



# Double accolade

Bulleys has been named as the Most Active Agent of the year in the West Midlands.

The Black Country based property consultancy has also been named the Most Active Industrial Agent for the region.

The double accolade, based on the number of deals accomplished, came in a national report in the trade magazine Estates Gazette.

Rod Spiby, a partner at Bulleys, said: "We are delighted by this high-profile recognition of our ability to deliver for our clients."

"This reflects both our wealth of experience across the West Midlands and Shropshire, and the hard work of our strong team who continue to be determined to provide the best service."

Established in 1965, Bulleys specialises in industrial and commercial property.

The consultancy, which has offices in Oldbury, Wolverhampton and a subsidiary called Bulleys Bradbury in Telford, has clients ranging from private individuals to UK and international corporates.



**Pictured: The winning team – Steve Perriton, Richard Bradbury, Noel Muscutt and Rod Spiby**

## Preparations to convert landmark into apartments

West Midlands-based construction company mac-group has won a £17 million contract to convert a landmark 1960s office building in Birmingham into more than 200 apartments.

The 10-storey Equipoint building, next to the Swan Centre development in Yardley, closed in 2019. Landlord/owner Urban Village Group is now preparing to transform the site into 247 apartments for rent and to buy in a £36 million scheme.

With its UK headquarters in Solihull, mac-group will undertake a £17 million renovation including the installation of all M&E services, new thermal-efficient windows, insulation and lifts. It will also add a roof-top extension to be used for additional apartments.

Ray O'Sullivan, director at mac-group, said the firm was working with Urban Village Group and architects D5 Architects to ensure the smooth delivery of the scheme.

"This is a significant development, transforming a well-known office building in a very prominent and well-connected location into much-needed homes," he said.

## May auction cancelled

Property auctioneers Bond Wolfe have cancelled its May auction in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The decision comes after Bond Wolfe Auctions achieved record results in its February auction – raising over £20 million, with 200 lots sold out of the 212 offered and a 95% sales success rate.

Chief executive officer Gurpreet Bassi said: "The health and safety of clients, staff and the wider public are at the forefront of our decision and a priority over our commercial objectives."

"While we are fully able to operate a 'remote bidding only' auction or even a full online sale, it is doubtful that we would achieve the best possible price for our vendors."

"Additionally, it is completely unreasonable for us to expect potential purchasers to buy property without the possibility of carrying out their full due diligence to include internal viewings and surveys."

"It is disappointing for us as a business because we are on a roll, but it is the correct decision."



**Gurpreet Bassi**



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property

# Glassworks regeneration

Plans have been revealed to bring one of the Black Country's most historic industrial sites back to life – thanks to a £25 million regeneration project.

The former Chance Glassworks in Smethwick, which in its prime employed 3,500 people and supplied specialist lenses to 2,000 lighthouses across the world, is set to be transformed into a new urban village with the potential to unlock over 20,000m<sup>2</sup> of development space for business, leisure and housing.

Driven by the vision of the Chance Heritage Trust, the scheme could bring 2.2 hectares of derelict land and buildings back into use over the next five years, with 500 jobs set to be created if the plans are realised.

The overall scheme will include 160 two-bed apartments, a small conference facility, café, retail space, heritage educational centre, enterprise space and an iconic 30-metre tall lighthouse – a reminder of the world-class work that was once carried out on the site.

The CHT has launched a share option to give people locally, nationally and overseas the opportunity to take a share in the project for as little as £20.

"The gates on Chance Glassworks closed in 1981 and the buildings have remained derelict and are fast decaying – we needed to find a solution, as it is such a waste of one of the West Midlands' most historical sites," explained Mark Davies, chair of the Chance Heritage Trust.

"We have had the plans drawn up and have backing from a number of key stakeholders, including the local authorities."

"It used to be such a vibrant site and played an important part in the

Black Country's industrial heritage.

The dream is to create a modern-day urban village that can drive jobs, investment and become a tourist destination we can all be proud of."

The first phase will see the transformation of the seven-storey building, along with new build development.

Acting on behalf of Chance Heritage Trust, Birmingham property consultants Vail Williams LLP recently provided property valuation advice, which will inform the acquisition of the building and phase one development works.

The second phase will focus on the rest of the nine-acre site and include the restoration of canalside buildings, a number of new builds and the iconic lighthouse that could feature an original lens loaned by the Scottish Museum of Lighthouses.

Tonia Flannagan, a director on the board, said: "Smethwick has

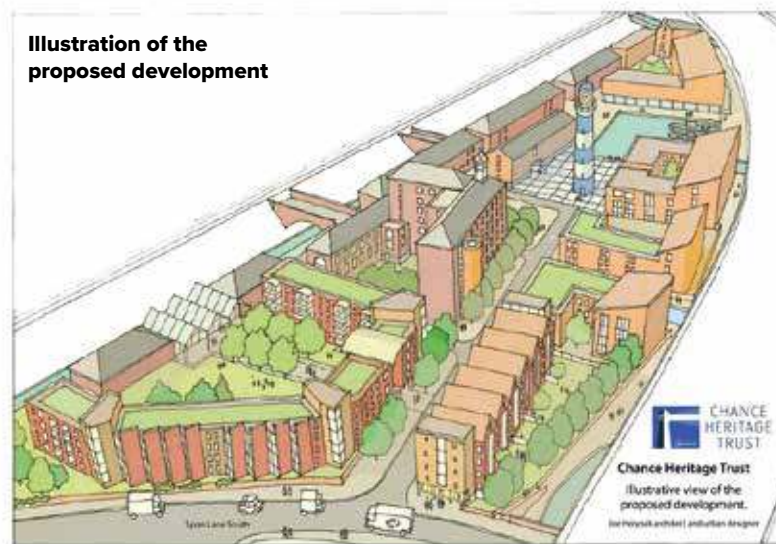
suffered from a lack of investment and continues to struggle with high unemployment and a lack of skills.

"Bringing the glassworks site back to life gives us the perfect opportunity to address some of these issues and we are already looking at innovative ways where we can team up with a construction company to deliver employment and training opportunities."

"We can protect our heritage by developing our future, but we need local people, former employees and individuals passionate about Chance's industrial history to come forward and play their part in the journey."

Chance Heritage Trust has been supported so far by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, George Cadbury, Lyndon SGB and History West Midlands, with the latter helping to pay for the creation of two promotional videos.

**Trustees:**  
**Mark Holden,**  
**Tom Haydon,**  
**Olivia Hewkin,**  
**Mark Davies,**  
**Madelene Schofield**  
**Whittingham,**  
**John Pye,**  
**Nicki Collins,**  
**Marianne Munroe**  
**and, kneeling,**  
**Henry Chance**





# Marking a milestone

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property

Timber Yard, a new residential apartment development in Southside, Birmingham, has officially topped out one year after construction started.

The Galliard Homes and Apsley House Capital scheme comprises 379 apartments as well as ground-floor commercial space.

To mark the milestone Cllr Ian Ward, leader of Birmingham City Council, filled in the last section of cement. He was joined by Cllr Gareth Moore, Conservative member for Erdington, Don O'Sullivan, chief executive of Galliard Homes, and Gerard Nock, chairman of Apsley House Capital.

Cllr Ward said: "The topping out of the exciting Timber Yard development represents another important step in the re-emergence of Birmingham's Southside and our efforts to provide homes for Birmingham's young and growing population.

"We need 51,000 new homes in Birmingham by 2031 and I am determined that the city council will continue to play a major role in meeting that housing challenge. But we also need committed partners on this journey and, by forging successful partnerships with developers such as Galliard Homes and Apsley House Capital, we are helping to deliver the new homes the city so desperately needs."

Timber Yard is the first development in Birmingham by the two partners. Located on Pershore Street, the development also includes a range of on-site amenities, such as a concierge service, gym, screening room, residents' club lounge and undercroft parking.

Gerard Nock, chairman of Apsley House Capital, said: "This is the first development we are building

in partnership with Galliard Homes and we are pleased with how well it has been received by buyers.

"With a development pipeline of some 3,000 new homes, we are committed to helping the council deliver the housing the city so desperately requires, while also helping to create and shape new communities through positive urban regeneration."



From left, Cllr Gareth Moore, Gerard Nock, chairman of Apsley House Capital, Cllr Ian Ward, leader of Birmingham City Council, and Don O'Sullivan, chief executive of Galliard Homes



## Vast warehouse space available for rent

An industrial space of nearly 83,000 sq ft was on course to become available in the Black Country this March.

Property consultancy Bulleys is letting the warehouse on Waterfall Lane Trading Estate in Cradley Heath for up to £275,000 per annum, although part lets will also be considered.

The well-established and spacious trading estate lies behind security

gates with 24-hour security, and is less than three miles from Junction 2 of the M5 motorway.

Max Shelley, an associate at Bulleys, said: "This warehouse measures 82,997 sq ft and is likely to be highly sought after as there are very few units available of this size in the Black Country."

The property is made up of 79,637 sq ft in the warehouse areas – which

include a 1,606 sq ft canteen – and 3,360 sq ft in the two-storey offices. These spaces include toilets and kitchen areas, with forecourt servicing and parking spaces outside.

The warehouse area has concrete floors, fluorescent strip lights and a clear working height of approximately four metres, along with a fitted crane and roller shutter doors leading onto the estate's circular road.



Alan and Katherine Strang



Craig and Samantha Gibbs



Phil Innes

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social

# Hedge House launch

A champagne reception marked the official launch of Hedge House, a luxury property in Knowle which is priced at £3.5 million.

Not only were guests invited to explore the property, which sits in six acres, but they were treated to champagne by Loki Wine, canapés by The Butchers Social and live entertainment by Elegant Entertainment.

Hedge House has been built by 10M Group and is being marketed by property firm, Centrick.



Jodie Tipper, Monica Price, Hattie D'Souza, Barry Tomes, Olly Attfield and Tara Tomes



Russell Townsend and Natalie Beaver



The Centrick team



## Further growth at Birmingham office of Smith & Williamson

**Financial and professional services firm Smith & Williamson has continued to grow its Birmingham office with the appointment of partner David Yewdall.**

He is the latest in a series of new appointments at Smith & Williamson in Birmingham, and joins as a partner in the employment tax and incentives team, having previously worked in the Birmingham office of PwC.

His core specialism involves handling international employment tax matters in various jurisdictions, as well as UK domestic employer compliance issues.

Having worked with a range of corporate clients across all sectors ranging from entrepreneurial and owner-managed businesses to listed companies, David has extensive experience in successfully managing a number of global mobility programmes, as well as advising clients on the various tax and social security planning opportunities surrounding the movement of their people on an international scale.

"I was very impressed with Smith & Williamson's tax offering and I'm really excited to be strengthening the team of experts in Birmingham at such an exciting time of growth," he said.



From left, Jordan Lowe, Amanda Lowe and Dani Wiggins

## Team at PR firm growing fast

**Midlands PR agency Story Comms has added new talent to its team in the form of two account executives.**

Jordan Lowe joins the firm after three years in a content role at the Institute of Directors, while Dani Wiggins has arrived from the University of Sheffield where she studied history and politics.

Amanda Lowe, managing director at Story Comms, said: "Story is growing fast, thanks to some incredible clients who trust us completely, and the relentless ambition of our talented team."

"We are proud of our roots and are deeply passionate about the Midlands and its continuing success story. Half of our briefs are now

national and international – many of those supporting Midlands businesses to grow into new markets. We are looking forward to helping them even more as we continue to expand."

The B2B specialist firm is celebrating its strongest year since its inception in 2015, with 40% revenue growth secured in 2019 due to a range of regional, UK and global property and placemaking client wins.

The latest additions to Story's client roster includes real estate advisors Avison Young, tech firm Movement Strategies, and logistics and industrial space specialist Goodman UK.

## Senior manager joins college

**Distance learning college Oxbridge has appointed Paul Dixon as its new head of student operations.**

The role was created to add a new level of senior management after a record-breaking December period for student enrolments, which echoes the college's year-on-year growth in the last four years.

Paul joins the college, which is based in Birmingham, with 20 years' advisory and consultancy experience after a 16-year career with Halifax. In his new role, Paul's aim is to improve collaboration across the college to maximise the student learning experience.

"I've been helping people make good decisions for two decades in the finance and mortgage sector," said Paul.

"I want to make positive industry changes, supporting my team to

deliver real value and opportunity that helps everyone achieve their ambitions with maximum satisfaction."

Clair Birch, Oxbridge's head curriculum manager, said: "Paul's arrival is positive for the college's growth in consolidating course advisers. With better advisers on board, we'll be more efficient at providing the right advice and support that enables learners to make better decisions when choosing the right course."



## New board member at Heart of England Community Foundation

**The Heart of England Community Foundation has appointed a new trustee.**

An expert in property and construction, Russell Bailey will support in procurement, property and construction, leading on the Building Better Lives programme and other projects supported by the foundation.

"I am delighted to be joining the board at the Heart of England Community Foundation," said Russell.

"The continued work that the foundation is undertaking makes a palpable difference across the breadth of our region and I look

forward to helping support as many people as possible."

The appointment will see Russell assist with overall strategy, performance and governance of the charity – all whilst providing specific expertise where needed.

He will also help to drive new grants by seeking out companies within the West Midlands.

Chief executive Tina Costello said: "We could not be happier to welcome Russell to the team. We've got so many plans for our 25th year so there is no better time to come on board than now. He will be a great asset."



Phil Ewing, chairman of HoECF, Russell Bailey and chief executive Tina Costello

## Property agency welcomes new team leader

**Property advisers Vail Williams LLP have appointed acquisition and disposal associate Charlotte Fullard to lead the firm's agency team in Birmingham.**

Charlotte specialises in advising landlords, developers and tenants on the acquisition and disposal of office premises in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands. She has previously worked with clients including Birmingham City Council, Horton's Estate Limited and Real Estate Investors plc.

She joins Vail Williams to lead the firm's acquisitions and disposal work which was formerly headed up by agency specialist Carole Taylor.

As regional managing partner

for Vail Williams' operations in the Midlands, Carole will now focus on client relationship management and the growth of the firm's Birmingham office.

Charlotte said: "I'm delighted to join Vail Williams and excited about the opportunity to lead the firm's agency team here."

"The firm works with a number of prestigious companies across the Midlands and I'm very much looking forward to bringing my agency expertise to these accounts, whilst developing new business across the region."

**Charlotte Fullard, left, pictured with regional managing partner Carole Taylor**



## Group director joins services consultancy

**Engineering and professional services consultancy WSP has welcomed Dan Bishop to the Birmingham office as group director for its stations team.**

Dan joins from Atkins, where he has spent the previous 12 years, most recently as practice director in Birmingham. In his new role at WSP, he will oversee the delivery of a broad portfolio of stations – including the firm's work on HS2's Curzon Street Station and Birmingham International Station.

Operating out of WSP's Midlands headquarters in The Mailbox, Dan will lead the stations team which has around 150 staff across the UK.

"WSP is at the leading edge of transport infrastructure development both in the Midlands, nationally and internationally," said Dan.

"I am delighted to be joining at such an exciting time as the firm is currently working on a range of transformative projects which will revolutionise the way we all live and travel."

"From our Birmingham base, I am aiming to help WSP pursue emerging opportunities in the Midlands Engine and across the UK, supporting the rail team's long-term growth plans."





# 5 minutes with...

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insight

## Very briefly, what does your company do?

West Midlands Combined Universities brings together Birmingham City University, Coventry University and the University of Wolverhampton in a formal partnership to deliver more by working together. We look for and act on opportunities to collaborate, making the most of our combined research and training capabilities, innovation and skills base: with over 80,000 students and 8,500 staff contributing to the West Midlands economy. We harness this to drive inclusive education, economic growth, social mobility, place shaping and prosperity in the West Midlands.

## How long have you been in your current job?

The partnership formed in October 2016 and I have been in the post since October 2017.

## Explain a typical week in your working life.

My time is split between developing opportunities, building partnerships, managing teams, representing the WMCU partners and attending regional and national meetings.

I lead, support and contribute to strategy and policy documents, as well as funding applications. I spend time convening working groups across the three universities to ensure we are best placed to take advantage of emerging opportunities, briefing the institutions' leaders, academics and management on areas of work where WMCU can generate value. I read – a lot – to stay plugged into our key sectors, and chair meetings across relevant markets and industries.

## What is the biggest challenge facing your industry right now?

Keeping pace with the changes and myriad of opportunities that the three university partners are pursuing. Each WMCU partner is

## Wayne Langford

Director of West Midlands Combined Universities

developing and delivering world-class programmes and there is huge potential for higher education around research and enterprise – and we need to constantly rise to the challenge of working out how best to capitalise on local, national and global opportunities.

## And what are the big opportunities?

The continued growth of digital is driving innovation across all of WMCU's traditional strengths and provides a chance to use our partners' combined research, skills, assets and student populations to benefit programmes like West Midlands 5G. We also see the potential to build on and expand our civic role, more and more often coupling our research and innovation with local needs – hence a recent focus on energy, inclusive growth and construction technologies. We see the current push from Government to increase spending in R&D as a positive opportunity for the HE sector, and WMCU will be well represented in these discussions in the region.

## How do you get the best out of your staff?

For me it's about generating interest and excitement, communicating clearly why the WMCU agenda is important and fostering buy-in. WMCU fits within an interesting landscape of partners and being able to adapt into this, and where appropriate lead, is key. If the partnership was too rigid and limited, it would fail. We therefore encourage flexibility, creativity and openness in the team.

## What was your last meeting about, how long did it last, and was it productive?

It was with a regional consortium of partners submitting a funding bid to a national body. It lasted two hours and was very productive as we were finalising the application before submission.

## How many emails do you get in a day, and how much time do you have to read them?

Usually around 40 that need actioning. I tend to spend around 30 minutes at the start and end of the day catching up, and unless I'm expecting something important I'll respond as soon as I can.

## Do you answer work calls or emails at home? What's the right work-life balance?

I do, and I think this is pretty common now. For me the right balance is ensuring you have time to complete your goals for the day, while making sure you have time to pursue

your interests outside work. Being pragmatic is key, accepting that sometimes this needs to flex both ways.

## How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

Loyal, creative, reliable, inclusive and empathetic.

## Highlights of your career so far?

The most recent highlight has been to build WMCU into a well-known university partnership in the West Midlands and to have influenced the development of some key programmes such as WM5G.

## Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

I once sang 'Fairytale of New York' to around 350 colleagues at a Christmas party. I am still reminded of it from time to time.

## Pet hates?

Bad manners.

## If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

Study harder and believe in yourself.

## How do you relax away from work?

Making things and sport. My work is intellectually demanding so I like to do something physical outside work. What do you believe is special about the Birmingham business community?

Its ability to constantly evolve and strive to be better – it has changed so much over the last decade. There are so many networking groups sharing knowledge – Birmingham is uniquely collaborative in that respect. It's not just Birmingham though, there's a real coming together of partners from across the region that I haven't seen before.

## Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.

I've played at Wembley – on the trumpet!

## You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

The book would have to be A Clockwork Orange, the film Goodfellas (I'm not a violent person, honestly!), and the CD would be OK Computer by Radiohead.

## Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Richard Pryor, Bob Mortimer, Jimi Hendrix, Mohammed Ali and Leonardo Da Vinci.

## What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

My macaroni cheese – it's the best I've ever tasted! Accompanied by a nice bottle of Chablis.



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