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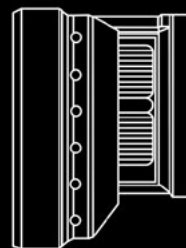
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ON THE COVER

22 Resounding success
Celebrating with all the winners and guests at our first Best Places to Work Awards



FEATURES

06 Dear Andy
We implore the new prime minister to provide some business cheer across the region

10 Invictus Games
Jon Griffin meets the man aiming for a perfect delivery

16 History
Carl Chinn charts the career of Charles Geach – one of the region's great financiers

COLUMN

35 Paul Faulkner
What makes a great leader?

61 Andy Horkan
The rise of operational cyber

SPECIAL REPORT

38 M&A
Charting mergers and acquisitions activity in the West Midlands. Plus we interview the head of M&A at Heligan Group and gain insight from a number of other sector leaders

NEWS

78 Property
Key developments from across the commercial property market

80 Appointments
Career moves from the region's businesses

DOWNTIME

82 5 minutes with
Johnny McGrath



By HENRY CARPENTER
Editor

Birmingham Business Welcome

Does this edition feel heavier than usual to you? It should do – it is the largest we have ever published.

Part of the reason for its size is that we have devoted a substantial section to a review of our Best Places to Work Awards. Much has been written on this inaugural event, both here and on social media, but suffice it to say, it went down a storm.

The picture gallery we have put together over several pages will help tell the story that this was an event which resonated in both concept and delivery. We will be forever indebted to our sponsors, judges, nominees, and all those who grasped the fact that the leaders and workplaces who have excelled in their people-focused culture deserve recognition.

"We're already looking forward to next year", was a refrain mentioned several times. Well we're keeping it easy: same date, same venue – June 11, University of Birmingham has already been earmarked for 2027.

But we kick off this edition with a plea to the new administration in central government. In an open letter format, we voice the concerns and suggestions of a handful of representatives from different industries, imploring the prime minister in waiting (at time of writing) and his new chancellor to take a more business-first approach.

It is fair to say that a number of industry sectors have felt let down over recent years – support and understanding of what businesses need to thrive and contribute to the economy have been in short supply. Might this be about to change? We keep our fingers crossed.

In the next instalment of a look at the commercial pioneers of our past, Professor Carl Chinn profiles Charles Geach, the trailblazing manager of Midland Bank and one of the region's great financiers. It's a really interesting read.

Followers of cricket might well remember Tim Munton, a stalwart player for Warwickshire in the 1980s and 90s – and good enough to earn a few England caps as well. The former fast bowler is now the chief marketing and commercial officer for the Invictus Games 2027 which are being held in Birmingham. Jon Griffin – a cricket lover himself – enjoys meeting him.

We are also running two special reports in this edition – looking at M&A in the region, and that fascinating area of law, intellectual property – and are previewing Life Sciences Week in an industry spotlight.

Have a great summer.

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FAO the prime minister

From the heart

In the style of an open letter – and with the input of several industry leaders – we implore the new prime minister and chancellor to provide cheer to businesses across the region with some much-needed policy changes.



Matt Beckley



Ann Tonks

Dear Andy,

Forgive us if it seems too informal a way of addressing you, but at the time of going to press you hadn't yet taken on the role of PM – but this is surely an inevitability.

This letter is as much for your new chancellor as it is for you, but we would be grateful if you would first have a good read of it yourself, and absorb the concerns laid out below.

It represents the views of business leaders across the West Midlands – people who invest, employ, innovate and generate prosperity. They understand the pressures on the public finances and the difficult inheritance facing any incoming government. They are not asking for favours. They are asking for a government that sees business as a genuine partner in rebuilding the economy.

Across the region there is a growing sense that successive governments, regardless of political colour, have expected business to carry an ever-increasing burden while receiving diminishing support in return. The prevailing feeling is not simply frustration – it is bewilderment.

How can the economy grow if those responsible for creating jobs, investing in communities and paying taxes are continually squeezed?

Nobody underestimates the scale of the fiscal challenge. The national debt is substantial and many of the factors behind it have been beyond the control of any single administration. But sustainable economic growth cannot be achieved by asking businesses to do more while making it harder for them to succeed.

What follows is not a political broadside. It is a collection of practical recommendations from respected industry leaders who want your government to succeed – because if business succeeds, the country itself is well on the way to succeeding.

It'll come as no surprise to you or the chancellor-in-waiting that one of the biggest gripes has been levels of taxation and where they have been aimed.

Matt Watts is a tax specialist with financial services firm S&W, and his is a respected voice on the subject in these parts.

He starts off by saying that many businesses based in the region are both capital and labour intensive.

"Consequently, the recent tax changes increasing the cost of employment, notably the increase in employers' national insurance in 2025, have hit the

region hard," says Matt.

"Businesses in manufacturing, retail and the entertainment sectors are all struggling with the ever-increasing cost of employing people. This has inhibited, rather than encouraged, growth in the region.

"Reversing the increase to NI would be a powerful way to help get the region and country growing again – and boosting tax revenues in the process to make up the shortfall."

Makes sense so far, but Matt's not finished yet.

"Uncertainty is also negatively impacting private sector growth. Recently we have heard rumours yet again about increasing capital gains tax rates for individuals and aligning them with income tax rates.

"This would further undermine the prospects of growth in the medium term.

"Any short-term gain realised from increased tax receipts would soon be more than offset by private investment leaving the UK for more favourable jurisdictions overseas.

"We must seek to build an environment and ecosystem that encourages private investment into our brilliant tech and manufacturing businesses in the region. A

rise in CGT would do the opposite."

In a similar vein, Matt suggests the increases to stamp duty in 2025 are harming an already challenging housing market.

He admits that it's far from the only factor impacting this vital part of our economy, with interest rates and the number of mortgages approved also critical. But stamp duty remains a significant hurdle, making it hugely expensive for anyone to move house.

"We should be looking at ways of reducing it or abolishing it altogether. Stamp duty impedes the efficient functioning of the housing market, discourages mutually beneficial moves, and prevents properties from being held by the people who value them most."

It is fair to say that some industries have suffered more than others. Take hospitality for instance. Pubs, cafés, bars and restaurants have been closing with shocking regularity in these parts, due to a toxic combination of surging overheads, a labour shortage and cautious consumer spending during this prolonged cost-of-living squeeze.

Increases in the national minimum wage and hikes to employer National Insurance



Matt Watts

“And over the next 12 months we need a proper root-and-branch reform of business rates. We can no longer accept a system which punishes retail and hospitality.”

contributions have significantly increased the payroll burden. Furthermore, venues are facing higher commercial property taxes and licensing fees.

Andy, the industry is on its knees, and it is so sad to see the nighttime economy – part of the West Midlands’ very soul – damaged in this way.

We have sadly got used to the news of popular venues closing with owners simply unable to make ends meet, but perhaps the most emblematic was when Simpsons, a Michelin-starred restaurant and a stalwart of the fine-dining scene in affluent Edgbaston, closed after 30 years.

Just a few hundred yards away is the excellent Chapter Restaurant in the heart of Edgbaston.

Ann Tonks, veteran of the hospitality scene behind several city centre restaurants over the years, is its owner. She’s been around the block, you might say, and is as well placed as any to offer her considered thoughts. She isn’t one to mince her words, if you’ll pardon the pun.

“Our industry is in an existential crisis due to eye-watering taxation that has particularly hit labour-intensive, low-margin businesses like ours,” she fumes.

“The next chancellor must grasp the fact that hospitality matters fundamentally to the health of this nation.”

And if you think that people like Ann haven’t thought about ways to remedy the situation, you can think again.

“Our industry needs one immediate measure: VAT reduction to 10%,” she says.

“There is a misconception that VAT is added to the price that the restaurant or café or pub needs to sell their goods for – in fact we are swallowing this 20% in order to be competitive and thus giving 20% of our sale away to HMRC. This is unsustainable.

“And over the next 12 months we need a proper root-and-branch reform of business rates. We can no longer accept a system which punishes retail and hospitality.

“One example is the higher rates for ground floor occupation – the ground floor being where the magic happens. Why are we being punished in favour of offices above?

“Another is the punishment of successful businesses by increasing the valuation of a property on the strength of the hard work the occupier has put in!”

We would love to hear your thoughts on these points.

You will no doubt be aware of the West



Tom Mander

Midlands’ rich heritage as a manufacturer.

As you know, it was one of the key regions of the Industrial Revolution. Abundant coal and iron ore, combined with an extensive canal network, allowed factories and workshops to flourish. Birmingham wasn’t known as the City of a Thousand Trades for nothing.

So it continued, although the demise of the heavy industries and car production in particular ripped the guts out of the manufacturing and engineering sector. Happily some top-quality, globally respected manufacturers remain – but they need a hand.

You could do worse than have a natter with Tom Mander, managing director of Alloy Wire International, a wire manufacturer based in that former hotbed of industry, the Black Country.

Tom’s firm, which employees 30 people and has a £16 million turnover, seems to be succeeding despite the obstacles placed in its way, a key one being challenges to its export operation.

“As an exporter of precision wire to more than 75 countries, it’s fair to say ‘international trade’ is a lot more complex in 2026 than it was ten years ago,” says Tom.

“Whatever your stance on Brexit, it has undoubtedly made shipping high-quality wire to customers in the EU more complicated and more expensive and that’s something that AWI, and thousands of other SMEs, have had to overcome.

“We would ask the new chancellor to take positive steps in restoring the practical benefits of the customs union.

“There is also a massive elephant still in the manufacturing room, with UK steel trade measures set to have a major impact on material suppliers and the downstream supply chain.

“To be honest, the original plans looked like they could cause a few headaches, with a 50% tariff set to hit certain raw materials that aren’t made in the UK. It would only have affected a handful of our 60 alloys, but it still felt like pressure the supply chain didn’t need.

“After pushback from downstream manufacturers, the government has eased things a bit. When the new measures kick in next month, tariff-free quotas will drop by 51% instead of the 60% first floated, with anything above that still facing a 50% tariff.

“The set-up will be reviewed in 12 months, and ministers will need to keep

an eye on how things unfold – and step in again if the quotas still feel too tight for manufacturers.

“Over the last 12 months we have invested £1 million into upgrading our factory and bringing in new technology, all self-funded and with very little help from the government.

“It would be helpful if politicians could focus on practical support for growth, not just the commitments made in manifestos.”

One sector which has been on an upwards trajectory over recent years is tech. There is a growing start-up base, established scale-ups, engaged universities, industrial depth and clear opportunities in applied AI.

But it still feels like it’s not being allowed to reach its full potential.

Let me introduce you to Andy Hague who, as CEO of the West Midlands tech cluster body TechWM, is as well placed as anyone to offer an objective, overarching viewpoint on the impetus needed to allow it to take the next step and be competitive on a national, or even international, scale.

This is where your administration comes in: to help remove the barriers that too many promising firms face in moving from early innovation to proper commercial traction.

“Better access to customers, growth capital, procurement routes and commercialisation support would help more start-ups and scale-ups grow from the region, rather than having to look elsewhere,” explains Andy.

“AI is central to this opportunity. The real value will come from helping businesses adopt AI responsibly and practically, supported by strong data foundations, cyber resilience and workforce capability.

“For the West Midlands, the prize is a more productive regional economy where entrepreneurs, SMEs and established firms use frontier technologies to grow, compete and create high-value jobs.

“The UK’s future competitiveness will depend on whether technology growth reaches beyond a small number of places and into the real economy.

“The West Midlands has the assets and ambition to play that role, but the conditions for start-up growth, AI adoption and regional scale need to become easier, faster and more joined up.”

Following on from what Tom mentioned earlier, we would beg of you, Andy, to follow through on your pledges in a way that your (probably by now) predecessor

“We must seek to build an environment and ecosystem that encourages private investment into our brilliant tech and manufacturing businesses in the region.”



Andy Hague

failed to do so.

‘Build, baby, build’ was the political mantra issue to tackle the national housing crisis, aiming to resolve affordability, revive the dream of home ownership and boost economic growth.

Sir Keir’s ministers specified a target of 1.5 million new homes to be built in the period between 2024 and 2029. It will be lucky to achieve half of that at the current rate.

Matt Beckley, partnerships director at Keon Homes, the West Midlands firm building out phase 3 of Port Loop in Birmingham (a massive development) and due to start work on the Tower Ballroom site in Edgbaston, is wary of the positive rhetoric which has emerged from Westminster.

His main ask is stability – he’s saying that if housebuilders are given certainty and the opportunity to plan, then they will be able to create the quality and volume of homes required.

“The continuation of the long-term, ten-year affordable homes grant programme is an absolute must, and we would also champion far greater investment in brownfield land, so that we can unlock

even more troublesome sites without having to touch the much-cherished green belt,” he points out.

“In 1988, there were approximately 12,500 SME housebuilders, who delivered 39% of all homes built in England. Today that figure is down to less than 2,500, providing less than 10%.

“I would encourage the government to do more to encourage and actually support more SME developers to enter the market. Greater flexibility on planning and reviewing Section 106 requirements could also accelerate much-needed growth in our sector.”

Thriving businesses are vital for the success of the country. It’s business that delivers growth and a sound base for generating income and raising the funds needed for infrastructure, health services and defence.

Andy, you and your neighbour in Number 11 will have the opportunity to change things for the better.

We ask that you consult. We pray that you listen. And then it is up to you to act. Yours in expectation,

Birmingham Business magazine



Aiming for the perfect delivery

Next summer the Invictus Games will be coming to Birmingham – bringing legions of remarkable competitors with them. JON GRIFFIN meets the former cricketing star responsible for maximising the commercial opportunities of this unique event.

Tim Munton's long and distinguished career in professional cricket brought him an enviable string of honours, from international recognition to county championship and Lord's finals glory.

As temporary captain during the summer of 1994, the former England, Warwickshire and Derbyshire bowler helped steer the Bears towards their greatest ever season, picking up an

unprecedented treble of championship, Benson and Hedges Cup and Sunday League success.

His name is etched in Edgbaston folklore as one of the mainstays of a Bears title-winning side which swept all before them more than 30 years ago, long before T20 and the Hundred dramatically changed the landscape of an English county summer.

Now, over three decades on and sitting in the inner sanctum of a corporate suite at his beloved Edgbaston, Munton is just as keen to talk about his latest sporting challenge as he is to reflect on a cricketing career which saw him twice selected for England against Pakistan in the test match summer of 1992.

Today, Munton, at 60, is contemplating a new sporting destiny with a significant

Main picture: Tim Munton, left, and colleague Alex Chamberlen

difference – as the commercial brains behind an extraordinary sports spectacular which will see the eyes of the world once again focus on Birmingham.

Munton is leading the commercial team behind the Invictus Games, the international sporting festival for wounded, injured and sick service personnel and veterans, and their families – and the original brainchild of none other than HRH Prince Harry.

It's another high-profile career opportunity for the genial Munton, who readily admits that his life has often been dictated by chance and happenstance as much as by raw talent.

"This is probably the highlight, if I'm honest, of my post-cricketing career," he says.

"I wasn't expecting it at this stage of my life. This conversation about the games started around three of four weeks before my 60th birthday just at a point in my life where I was talking about doing less and stopping chasing dream commercial roles in sport – and then this opportunity arose.

"It reinvigorated me really from a personal level. It has given me new energy and ambition. The games will be one of my proudest events to have worked on and helped deliver."

The Invictus Games – to be held over eight days at the NEC and Sandwell Aquatics Centre next July – may not be quite on the same scale as the acclaimed Commonwealth Games of 2022. However, the long-lasting benefits to around 550 competitors from up to 26 nations – including competitors from the current conflict in Ukraine who will line up in the West Midlands in the summer of 2027 – are virtually incalculable.

The Birmingham games – secured for the region after the Midlands capital beat off Washington DC to win the rights to stage Prince Harry's concept – are expected to bring more than 20,000 people a day to the city, with the consequent economic benefits for hotels, restaurants and bars.

And even in his seventh decade, his new commercial role with the Invictus Games has given Munton himself a fresh perspective on the transient nature of life in elite sport . . . and the stark realities after playing days are over.

"The perspective is massively different," he says. "What these competitors do and achieve is way beyond anything I ever achieved.

"I was lucky. I was an able-bodied



Munton playing for England

sportsperson who happened to play professionally, earned a living and loved it.

"The competitors at the Invictus Games may not be elite, professional sportsmen or women but they are just as passionate and equally, if not more committed. They see the importance of sport and the role it can play helping them to recover from physical and mental injuries caused serving their countries.

"But it also becomes an engager with friends, families and other competitors, giving them renewed purpose and supporting their journey of recovery – that



is the power of sport."

Or, as founder Prince Harry himself memorably said in a statement welcoming the games to Brum: "We have no doubt that the people of Birmingham will join in celebrating the unwavering respect and admiration we have for our veteran and service community, showing the world how their courage ignites hope and unites us all – something your city knows well."

That courage will see wounded, injured and sick, military personnel and veterans – from amputees, wheelchair-bound competitors and many with hidden



Wheelchair basketball at The Hague in 2020

“This isn’t about elite sport. We don’t call the competitors athletes, we call them competitors. This is all about their endeavour, some of them very visibly wounded, others less so, baring invisible wounds from their service. It’s their endeavour, their commitment and their use of sport – whatever sport it might be – to both help them recover physically and mentally.”



Cup success! With Dermot Reeve in 1994

wounds – battle it out for medals glory next summer in a string of adaptive events including athletics, archery, cycling, indoor rowing, laser run, pickleball, powerlifting, sitting volleyball, swimming, wheelchair basketball and wheelchair rugby.

As the official Invictus Games website proclaims: “Here, effort matters as much as outcome. Every throw, stride and lift is a victory in its own right.”

It’s a sentiment shared by Munton, whose experience of elite sport has given him an invaluable insight into the mental challenges all sportsmen and women face at the end of their playing days.

“It’s really interesting, this synergy if you like between sport and the military. I have always been aware of that. Military careers do tend to change at a similar time to sporting careers.

“There are many from the forces background who in their 30s are looking for something different, wanting to move to another career, or sometimes forced into that. In many ways it is similar to the challenges faced by retiring sportsmen and women, albeit very different and more challenging for the service men and women leaving military careers through physical and mental injuries.

“I started (with Warwickshire) as a 19 year old. After three years I had had two consecutive seasons playing most of the first-team games, but I knew that wasn’t

something that was going to be there forever – every sports person has the same challenge.

“I genuinely think I am lucky – you make your own luck, I do understand that, you have got to drive it. But there are plenty of better cricketers than me and there are plenty of better people than me in terms of commercial experience who haven’t had the opportunities that I’ve had.”

Munton’s latest career opportunity with the Invictus Games might never have come his way had he not decided to future-proof his life back in his 20s when he was first making his name in the precarious world of English county cricket as a promising fast bowler.

“I played in an era many years ago when we were six months on, six months off. In the context of that we would go and find something else to do in the winters or go overseas to coach and play.

“I had ten winters working with Bass Brewers. I took the view that I ought to try to start preparing myself for life after cricket whether it was at the age of 25 or 45. I did sales and marketing work for ten winters in a row, sometimes selling beer, marketing beer, or working with pubs and hotels.

“That gave me a grounding and a knowledge and experience of sales and marketing. When I eventually finished playing cricket I worked with

the Professional Cricketers’ Association, mainly on the commercial partnership side.

“I did that for three or four years and then went into other things. I have worked for 23 years now on commercial partnership programmes in sport, particularly in cricket, football, golf and rugby.”

That background in sales and marketing first explored by Munton as a rookie county pro with Warwickshire ultimately landed the ex-cricketer with the opportunity of a job of a lifetime with the Invictus Games.

“It was the rugby role that I did that led me to a meet with the chair of the games, Vicky Gosling, in her role as chief executive of GB Snowsports. When she mentioned she was also the chair of the games I asked ‘where is the next one?’. She knew I was an adopted Brummie and said ‘crikey, if you don’t know where it is, we might have to think about doing things differently’.

“I started critiquing – not to get the job, but just sharing some thoughts about how they could do things differently. Six



Rowing at the Vancouver games



Volunteers play an important role at the Invictus Games

weeks later came a call asking if I would be prepared to consider putting a team together and deliver the ideas I had shared.

“I was honoured to be asked and put a group together, with particular Birmingham and Midlands experience, to approach the commercial opportunities around the games in a different way. I have no direct military experience but nonetheless huge respect and gratitude for the men and women who serve, and believe there is an opportunity to raise the profile of the games through educating the world of sport, competitors and fans alike.”

Now Munton is bracing himself for a new sporting challenge – arguably just as invigorating as taking on Pakistan in test matches in 1992 or leading the Bears to domestic glory with the treble-winning side of 1994.

“I started in September, and at the beginning it was a case of getting to understand it all, putting it all together and making some adjustments to what the commercial programme should look like. My job title is ‘strategic lead, commercial and marketing for the Invictus Games’.

“Broadly speaking, I lead the commercial team. I have a responsibility to make sure the numbers and the monies that are needed to deliver the games are achieved. It is mainly a sales role, selling the different opportunities for businesses and individuals to engage with the games to fund the delivery and leave a lasting legacy, particularly in Birmingham and the West Midlands region.”

Munton says his priority is putting together commercial sponsorships and partnerships, seeking brands and partners from the supply chain to the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces alongside more mainstream operators who will see the games showcasing “the amazing endeavour, the social impact and the amazing achievement of the competitors”.

“When I first got into the role it became apparent that lots of people were like me. I knew about the Invictus Games but I only knew it was happening when Prince Harry was being interviewed the news launching the games,” he says.

“Invictus is all about how sport enables the recovery of wounded, injured and sick sportsmen and women. I hadn’t properly understood what that meant and the impact sport is having on so many lives on a journey to recovery. It is an amazing event.

“This isn’t about elite sport. We don’t



Wheelchair rugby – Team GB v France

call the competitors athletes, we call them competitors. This is all about their endeavour, some of them very visibly wounded, others less so, baring invisible wounds from their service. It’s their endeavour, their commitment and their use of sport – whatever sport it might be – to both help them recover physically and mentally.

“Some of them have been in comas for months and taken years to recover from horrific injury. Some are double or triple amputees, many have more hidden wounds, but they all have amazing resilience. A lot of them also have a great sense of humour that helps them cope – you feel increasingly humbled being around them when you see their ability to get on and do, in spite of their challenges.”

Munton attributes Birmingham’s successful bid for the games largely to its close links with the military world, particularly to the Selly Oak and Queen Elizabeth hospitals where the wounded, injured and sick from the likes of Iraq and Afghanistan are treated. Also in the heart of the QE site is Fisher House, an amazing home from home for battlefield veterans and their families – so important when often the journey to recover requires many months of time in hospital.

“This is the only Fisher House outside America. Built because of the focus in the city of the work at the QE Hospital to treat

the most severely injured from military conflict around the world,” says Munton. “It has had a strong connection with the Invictus Games over many years and were the first to be a commercial partner of the games in Birmingham.”

As the clock ticks towards a sporting spectacular unlike any other previously held in the Midlands, Munton is looking forward to playing his part in delivering a successful games.

“It was very much Prince Harry’s original idea, launched in London in 2014. He created something that is just amazing. I have met him only once, very briefly, but his passion and commitment is clear and infectious.

“It is still very much his baby. He very much deserves all the plaudits for creating it and for his support. It’s the reason it is where it is – he is a real driver of the foundation and the games.”

Munton, who combines his full-time Invictus Games role with other wealth management and agency work, is now looking forward to another busy schedule as he contemplates a year leading up to the Birmingham games.

“When I took it on, I thought this could be great. Two or three months in, it grabs you because you realise quite what this means.

“With the sad state of the world at the moment, it is more and more relevant.”



Brandauer targets European growth with key technical appointment

A Birmingham-based metal stamping specialist is targeting £2.5 million of new EU opportunities after appointing a new European technical specialist.

Brandauer, which provides precision components for more than 15 high-value sectors, has brought in Jürgen Wollbold to increase its presence in France, Germany and Spain.

The industry veteran has more than 30 years' experience in the automotive and medical sector and brings with him significant technical knowledge of new product development, stamping and tooling.

He is being charged with nurturing and strengthening existing relationships in the EU, alongside building new opportunities with clients who will benefit from the Birmingham firm's capability in automotive connectors, power grid infrastructure components and EV/thin gauge laminations.

Rowan Crozier, CEO of Brandauer, said: "We are defying current market trends by actively going out and securing new opportunities in Europe, proving that UK companies can be competitive against rivals in France, Germany and Spain.

Birmingham architects wins AJ100 title

A Birmingham architects firm has been celebrating after being named AJ100 Practice of the Year 2026.

Donald Insall Associates scooped the award organised by the Architects' Journal.

The firm's Edgbaston studio works on some of the Midlands most significant heritage and conservation projects, including the Grade II listed Moseley Road Baths and the Birmingham Botanical Gardens.

The judges praised DIA's 'exciting attitude to future-facing conservation work' and its ability to demonstrate that heritage-led architecture is not a niche discipline but an essential part of the profession's response to the climate emergency and wider societal challenges.

Dorian Proudfoot, chief executive of Donald Insall Associates, said: "This award is a testament to the collective effort of our colleagues past and present."



"Jürgen is an industry expert with experience in sectors where our capabilities can really make a difference. He also has significant technical knowledge, which means he can work with customers from initial enquiry into product introductions and scaling into medium to high volumes."

Beacon leadership programme returns

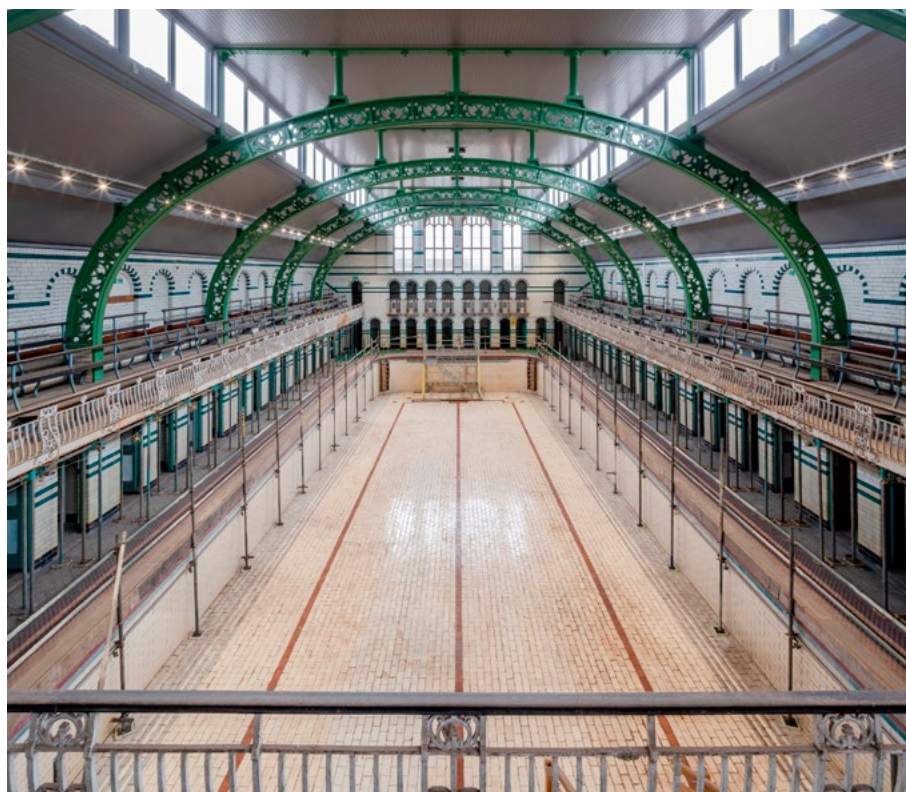
Leader development organisation Common Purpose will be hosting its flagship Beacon programme in Birmingham in September.

The three-day programme, which starts on September 15, aims to bring together high-potential professionals from across sectors to develop the skills, perspectives and networks needed to lead in a rapidly changing world.

By using the city as a live learning environment, the programme will showcase Birmingham's diverse organisations, communities and leaders while creating opportunities for collaboration and leadership development.

Louise Teboul, Birmingham-based partnerships director at Common Purpose, said: "Every time we bring a programme to Birmingham, I am reminded what an extraordinary city it is for learning.

"Participants get to see leadership through different lenses; meet people they would never normally encounter and gain insights that simply aren't available in a classroom."



Priory Hospital rated outstanding by CQC

Priory Hospital Solihull has been rated 'outstanding' overall by the Care Quality Commission, following inspections earlier in the year.

The hospital supports up to 31 adult males with complex mental health needs in partnership with the NHS, providing both high dependency and community rehabilitation and recovery services.

It has been recognised for delivering personalised, holistic and recovery-focused care that has an "incredible impact" on people's wellbeing and outcomes, with the rating placing it among the top 3% of mental

health hospitals in the country.

Aimee McCooley, director at the hospital, said: "I am incredibly proud of our team for achieving the rating and for the way they approached the inspection. There was a real sense of pride across the service, with colleagues fully engaged and committed to showcasing the care we provide.

"We are a values-driven service and that positive culture runs through everything we do, supporting people to live their best lives and achieve meaningful progress in their recovery. This recognition is a testament to the dedication and compassion of our team."



School of Coding & AI launches new degree partnership

Computing and AI educator School of Coding & AI has announced a partnership with a specialist university to open a new urban hub in Birmingham.

School of Coding & AI is working with Harper Adams University to offer a new digital business management degree.

The degree will be delivered at SoC's Birmingham campus and is designed to equip students with the knowledge, skills and mindset needed to navigate business and technology in a rapidly evolving digital economy.

Successful students will be awarded a bachelor's degree with honours from Harper Adams University, which is based near Newport in Shropshire.

Suki Gill, director of education and quality at School of Coding & AI, said: "Employers today are looking for individuals who not only understand business fundamentals but can also confidently apply digital tools and technologies to solve complex problems.

"This programme has been designed to bridge that gap, giving students the skills, mindset, and real-world experience they need to thrive in the modern economy. We are proud to launch this degree."

AI start-up secures backing

A Birmingham-based AI company helping businesses make better strategic decisions has raised £885,000 to accelerate the development of its decision intelligence platform.

Unloq secured the cash from the West Midlands Co-Investment Fund, with backing from Future Planet Capital Regional, Mercia Ventures and Haatch.

Founded by Yiannis Maos and Satyen Fakey, Unloq is building AI software that helps organisations move beyond dashboards and retrospective reporting.

Its platform connects internal business data with external market signals to predict likely outcomes, recommend practical actions and help leadership teams improve performance with greater confidence.

Dr Maos, the founder of Birmingham Tech Week and a prominent figure in the region's tech sphere, said: "Most

businesses are surrounded by data, but still rely on backward-looking reports to make decisions about the future.

"We started Unloq to change that. Our ambition is to help organisations predict what is likely to happen next, understand why, and take the right action at the right time.

"We are proud to be building from Birmingham with global ambitions. The West Midlands has the talent, industrial base and entrepreneurial energy to produce world-class AI companies, and this investment gives us the platform to prove that."

Dr Maos said the funding will be used to grow Unloq's product and engineering capability, expand its commercial team, and accelerate development of its decision intelligence platform, designed to support AI-enabled growth.



Satyen Fakey, left, and Yiannis Maos

A banker's destiny

Professor Carl Chinn charts the career of Charles Geach, manager of the Midlands Bank and one of the region's great financiers.

A Cornishman though he was, yet was the destiny of Charles Geach to be intertwined not with that of his county but with that of Birmingham. Both served each other well.

Geach was to prosper in the town in which he made his home, whilst Birmingham prospered because of his commercial endeavours.

His working life began as a clerk with a draper in St Austell, but through the influence of relatives, in 1826 he gained a position as a junior clerk with the Bank of England in London.

He was just 18, but Geach swiftly gained favourable notice. According to Eliezer Edwards writing in 1877, "his quickness, accuracy, and ready grasp of complicated matters, soon proved to his superiors that he was no ordinary youth" and within two years he was included in the staff of the new branch established in Birmingham.

Geach worked assiduously and rapidly rose in position so that within three years he had become second inspector. Yet despite his later success, he never forgot his beginnings. Indeed, later when he was an MP, he spoke at a meeting of the Provident Clerks' Association, making it clear that mercantile clerks were "a body for whom he should always feel sympathy; a class to which he felt it to be an honour to have once belonged, and from which he himself had only so recently emerged".

The habits of industry, prudence, diligence, and observation were those to which he held fast and which impressed the businessmen with whom he dealt at the Bank of England in Birmingham. They were also impressed by his courtesy, wisdom and knowledge – so much so that in 1836, when he was still only 28, he was engaged in the setting up of two local banks.

Geach then became of the manager of one of them, the Birmingham and Midland Bank.

Cleverly overseeing the financial affairs of the Bank and working closely with the

Bank of England, he avoided too many bad debts and succeeded in keeping the new bank afloat when others were failing. He also showed personal courage in protecting the bank's interests. In 1839 during the Bull Ring riots, many business premises were attacked by supporters of Chartism, a movement campaigning for the vote for working-class men. To protect his bank in Union Street, Geach placed his staff on the roof and armed

them with missiles, whilst he himself rode through the mob to fetch support from the barracks.

According to Edwards, "the tact and energy of the manager, and the shrewd business capacity of the directors, soon secured a very large business". This did not satisfy Geach, who was eager to extend his interests and become involved in commercial ventures. He did so with spectacular results.



The 'Villa' Cross' pub in 1910, and on the right is the Lozells Road. Soon after Geach came to live in Birmingham, he took lodgings in Handsworth. Edwards writes that "an attachment soon sprung up between him and the daughter of a Mr. Skally, who kept a school at Villa Cross. After a short courtship, the young couple were married, Mr. Geach then being about 24 years of age. The house in which he wooed and won his wife is now an inn. It stands at the angle formed by the junction of the Heathfield Road and the Lozells Lane; and is known by the sign of the Villa Cross Tavern." Of course, Aston Villa Football Club began in the same spot. One of its founders, Jack Hughes, recalled that in 1874, he and three others "met in conference under the glimmer of a gas lamp at Villa Cross" to discuss the features of association football and "with one accord they decided to start on the Association game the following Saturday. Thus humbly was how the mighty Aston Villa born".

Charles Geach, Founder and First Manager of Midland in 1836, by J. Partridge. Reproduced courtesy of HSBC Archive



An aerial view of the Patent Shaft in Wednesbury in the 1930s



On the left of this photo of Geach Street are the boarded-up premises of Halladay's Pressings. Founded in 1886, the company later moved into drop forgings and as Halladay's Drop Forgings relocated to Tame Road, Witton, in 1921, where pressings also continued to be produced. Halladay's had a very high reputation and made specialist forgings for high-profile companies like Rolls-Royce, Jaguar, and JCB amongst others. Sadly, Halladay's drop forges have fallen silent.



Geach Street and Geach Tower in Hockley both recall Geach the banker. Running from Summer Lane to Guildford Road, Geach Street lies just south of the Hockley Brook and the old border between Aston and Birmingham. This photo shows numbers 38-52 in the 1950s, a few years before these houses and the rest of the buildings were cleared away.

In about 1842, he became the owner of the Park Gate Iron Manufacturing Company in Rotherham. Most of the previous shareholders had been leading Birmingham men but had sold their interest because of a rapid and marked drop in the price of iron.

Then came what was known as the 'railway mania' of 1844 and 1845, when a speculative frenzy drove both a massive investment in railway companies and a rise in the price of the iron that was so necessary for the building of railways.

The economic bubble burst in 1846 and many companies collapsed without building any lines. But in the interim the price of iron doubled and Geach 'took three orders for 30,000 tons of railroad iron, at £12, which did not cost over £6 per ton'.

His massive profits propelled him into the premier league of businessmen, a position he consolidated with a shrewd eye for investments that had potential for profits.

One such related to an invention by the Reverend James Hardy of Wednesbury. Intrigued by all things mechanical, in 1835 he had devised a most valuable method of forging railway axles, which became essential for the expanding railway industry. Until Hardy's innovation, locomotive axles were made as they had been for coaches, by forging or welding them from a faggot of flat strips of iron. Because they were of uneven strength through irregular heating these axles often sprang apart.

It is said that Hardy came upon the solution to this problem by looking at the segments of an orange when it was cut transversely. This led him to the concept of a central bar around which were smaller bars, the outer sides of which were round and not angular. Thus, equal strength from a more uniform heat transfer was produced.

Led by Geach, in 1838 several Birmingham businessmen purchased Hardy's patent and small-scale iron-axle works in Wednesbury. Six years afterwards, the company was reconstructed and Geach bought out his partners just before the 'railway mania' erupted.

That year, 1844, the patent axle was adopted by the London and North Western Railway. A great manufacturing venture began and the Patent Shaft and Axle Tree Company was transformed into a massive concern by the increase in demand for

its products that were so essential to the running of trains.

Like so many successful businessmen in this period, Geach entered public life. A Liberal in politics, according to his obituary 'his love of liberal legislation arose from a dislike to class privileges or restrictions, rather than from any theoretical notions of abstract right, and in this sense, he advocated the widest extension and the freest exercise of the franchise'.

Geach was deeply involved in the campaign to repeal the Corn Laws. This protectionist measure prevented the entry of cheap foreign corn into Britain and thus safeguarded the incomes of landowners. The Corn Laws were loathed

by manufacturers and businessmen in the industrial districts because they kept the price of bread high, which meant that working people needed higher wages than that which their gaffers were often prepared to pay.

A staunch advocate, then, of free trade, Geach was made an alderman of Birmingham in 1844 and three years later was chosen as the town's mayor. During his office he overhauled the corporation's accounts and bookkeeping procedures. Having to resign as manager of the Midland because of his civic duties, Geach joined the board as managing director.

In 1851, following his nomination by the National Parliamentary and Financial

Reform Association, he was elected MP for Coventry.

Three years later he died after a short illness. At the time of his death, he was a director, as he was one of the chief promoters, of the Crystal Palace Company. Little remembered in our city today, yet did he play a vital role in the making of modern Birmingham.

As for the 'The Shaft' in Wednesbury, it went on to diversify into the making of girders and bridges that were put up in India, China and elsewhere. It gave work to thousands and justifiably had a world-wide reputation.

Unhappily, it closed in 1980 and three years later, the works were demolished.



Looking up New Street from the junction of Corporation Street on the right. On the left, at the top of Stephenson Place, is the statue of Thomas Attwood, the banker and leader of the Birmingham Political Union which played such a vital role in the campaign that led to the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. In the later 20th century, it was re-sited in Larches Park, close to Attwood's home in Sparkbrook. However, for several years now it has been in storage, despite the campaigning of Honorary Alderman Matt Redmond MBE and others for it to be re-sited in a prominent place. Behind the statue on the left is the magnificent building of what had become the London, City and Midland Bank – formerly the Birmingham and Midland Bank.

Dance studio salsas to success following five-figure business loan boost

A family-run dance studio owned by former UK professional dance champions has transformed its operations and grown its customer base since securing a £50,000 funding package from ART Business Loans.

Solihull-based Aura Dance Studios, established by former ballroom and Latin American dance champions Martin and Carol Cutler, offers ballroom, Latin American, salsa, and modern sequence dance lessons for beginners to World championship level.

In 2018 Martin and Carol approached ART Business Loans to secure a £50,000 investment, alongside a bank loan to relocate and purchase a new dance studio which would allow them to increase their student numbers and dance classes.

Since opening, Aura Dance Studios now run in excess of 25 classes and 100 private lessons each week for more than 125 children, 300 social dancers and 200 competitive dancers for all ages, abilities and occasions.

The growth has also created employment opportunities, with the studio expanding its team of qualified dance instructors from 10 to 33 to meet increased demand.

Martin and Carol's children, Charlotte Cutler and James Cutler, have gone on to achieve successful professional dance

careers and now also teach at the studio.

The studio's 250-seat theatre has become a hub for the local community, hosting dance workshops, Strictly Come Dancing rehearsals and utilised by dance schools for performances throughout the year.

Aura Dance Studios owner Martin Cutler said: "The funding from ART Business Loans in 2018 has enabled us to transform our business.

"Purchasing the new studio has given us space to grow, expand our timetable and provide the community with a welcoming space to discover their passion for dance.

"Eight years on and we're incredibly proud of what we've achieved. We have grown our teaching staff from 10 to 33, many of whom are former students who we have watched grow and helped them to qualify as teachers through the International Dance Teachers Association.

"There is nobody better than ART. They listen and give you honest, transparent advice and feedback. We like that they share our family values and understand our vision for the business."

ART Business Loans manager Graham Donaldson added: "It's been a pleasure to watch Aura Dance Studios grow and reach their full potential following investment from ART Business Loans.

"Martin and the team have worked hard to make Aura an inclusive studio for all

ages and abilities and continue to think of ways to diversify and grow the business."

ART Business Loans is a community development finance institution (CDFI) which seeks to ensure viable businesses in the West Midlands and adjoining counties can access the finance they need.

With loans available for any business purpose from between £10,000 and £250,000, ART Business Loans takes a personal approach to assessing applications.

In the last 10 years ART has lent over £25 million to 600 businesses that have created or preserved 4,290 jobs.

ART Business Loans was one of four CDFIs to recently travel to the US to gain knowledge on the impact of community lending on the other side of the Atlantic.

Supported by JP Morgan Chase and Responsible Finance, the national membership body for CDFIs in the UK, ART Business Loans finance and operations manager Yasar Irfat travelled with the group to attend the Opportunity Finance Network Small Business Finance Forum in Austin, Texas.

There are more than 1400 CDFIs currently operating in the US, compared to just over 50 in the UK.

Yasar said: "During the visit, we got to see how the US CDFI sector operates at a very different scale to the current level in UK, but many of the opportunities available and challenges they face were familiar.

"I was pleased to spend time with our US CDFI counterparts to discuss common issues such as the ways of raising market awareness, the best methods of supporting small businesses unable to access mainstream finance, as well as the growth technology and automation to build capacity while maintaining a relationship-led approach.

"We were treated to US hospitality by our hosts and took part in an amazing learning experience which has given us plenty of ideas on how we can further support Midlands businesses on their growth journeys.

"A big thank you to Opportunity Finance Network, JP Morgan Chase, Responsible Finance and the many US CDFIs who so generously shared their experiences with us."

■ For more information on ART Business Loans visit: www.artbusinessloans.co.uk



Aura Dance studio owner Martin Cutler with ART Business Loans manager Graham Donaldson and Martin's daughter and dance teacher Charlotte Cutler

Vet practice enjoys rapid growth after ART Business Loans backing

An independent vets practice has seen significant growth since securing a five-figure loan funding package from finance provider ART Business Loans.

After receiving funds from Birmingham-based ART Business Loans in 2022, The Market Town Vet now operates three centres while increasing its head count from five employees to more than 35 staff.

Managing Director Rob Tulloch launched the business with one practice during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, opening another site soon after.

When cashflow became challenging he looked to borrow funds to support the business during its growth phase but was unable to get the backing he needed from his approaches to mainstream lenders.

A broker recommended Rob speak to ART Business Loans, who were able to fund the next phase in his journey.

Rob said: "The Market Town Vet was growing and I wanted to employ more people as we capitalised on the opportunity for an independent vets practice to deliver



Martin Edmonds of ART Business Loans, left, with Rob Tulloch, Managing Director, at The Market Town Vet in Oswestry

affordable, high quality services.

"We needed a cash injection but as a small new business we could not get the interest of high street bank lenders, even though I could see we were going in the right direction.

"In many cases I was not given the opportunity to explain our plans in person so I appreciated the support of ART Business

Loans, who offered a straightforward application process and gave me the chance to talk about our business and the way forward.

"They took a risk supporting us as a new business but it was a breath of fresh air to speak to somebody about the long term vision."

Adding to the practices in Shrewsbury and Oswestry, a third recently opened in Whitchurch.

ART Business Loans manager Martin Edmonds said: "We are proud to have played a part in the success of The Market Town Vet, which is not only creating jobs but providing an essential independent service to communities across Shropshire.

"Rob had a clear vision and a viable business model yet he could not get the help from mainstream lenders as the company was in its infancy.

"By taking the time to look beyond the balance sheet and listen to the long-term strategy, we were able to provide the support needed to unlock that potential."

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Time to celebrate

The inaugural Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards proved to be a resounding success, bringing together some 250 business leaders and shortlisted finalists for a memorable evening in the magnificent Great Hall at the University of Birmingham.

One of the evening's highlights was a fireside chat between Birmingham Business director and event host Carl Jones and Moneypenny CEO Jesper With-Fogstrup. Their discussion explored topics including the integration of technology and AI in the workplace, as well as innovative approaches to fostering a people-first culture.

At its heart, however, the event was about recognition – celebrating the organisations and individuals setting the benchmark for outstanding workplace cultures. Winners were presented with

bespoke trophies, designed and crafted in Birmingham, in recognition of their achievements.

Henry Carpenter, editor of Birmingham Business and founder of the awards, said inspirational leaders and workplaces deserve to be celebrated, particularly at a time when organisations face an increasingly complex range of challenges.

He said: "It was clear that everyone in the room embraced the concept of these awards wholeheartedly, which was hugely gratifying.

"We saw an exceptional calibre of businesses, organisations and individuals shortlisted, and I know the judges faced some really difficult decisions in several categories.

"Every winner was thoroughly deserving, and many congratulations to them all."

*The Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards will return to the Great Hall at the University of Birmingham on June 11 2027, with organisers confirming the same venue and date for next year's celebration.



Justine Howl, Steve Walker and Emma Fox



John James and Santina Bunting



Keynote speaker Jesper With-Fogstrup in conversation with host Carl Jones



Paul Faulkner, speaking on behalf of the event's charity partner, Kids' Village



Jas Rohel and Yetunde Dania



Elation for S&R Construction after winning their category



Gomolemo Makolomako-Shirley, Tamina Greaves, Aniah Ferdinand, Inez Brown, Rose Morgan, Deirdre LaBassiere, Ravinder Dhariwal, Daphne Mitchell, Kiren Butoy and Kulsum Miah



Alex Cole, Tru Powell and Alex Tross



Paul Cornick



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I was proud to be a finalist as inspirational female leader in the Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards 2026, reflecting my commitment to valuesbased leadership and creating psychologically safe, inclusive environments where boards and teams can thrive.

For non-obligatory discussion, feel free to contact me at
inez@mckenziebrown.net or +44 7771 728904



Lis Lewis-Jones and Eman Al-Hillawi



Deidre LaBassiere and Inez Brown



Louise Teboul



Henry Carpenter and Ann Powell



Joel Blake, Carl Jones and Anton Clarke-Butler



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Major accolade

‘People first’ approach sees S&R Construction take Large Employer title at Best Places to Work Awards

advertisement feature

A Kingswinford-based firm's drive to change the face of the construction sector 'by putting people first' has claimed a major regional honour.

S&R Construction, which now employs over 350 people at its Dawley Brook Road HQ, beat off the challenge of BDO LLP, BMet College and FBC Manby Bowdler to be named 'Best Large Employer' at the first ever Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards.

Hosted by Birmingham Business, the competition highlighted companies who are going above and beyond to promote wellbeing, social impact and personal development across the West Midlands.

Judges praised the firm's 'open door' policy where employees feel safe to speak up and ask for help, whilst also highlighting the host of initiatives that have been introduced, including 'sip and paint sessions', team building activities and the

launch of its own football team to bring people together.

Putting health first, S&R Construction's £8 million build of its home in Kingswinford also featured a fully equipped on-site gym that is free for staff and their families to use.

So far 250 people are already benefiting from this employee benefit, a benefit that potentially saves staff £50 per month on gym fees. The firm believes this is an important saving with the current 'cost of living' crisis being experienced in the Black Country.

"Wow, just wow! We've always tried to place our people at the heart of the business and this recognition – secured against some high-profile competition – reinforces the belief that our approach is working," commented Tracey Sankey, director at S&R Construction.

"The business has grown rapidly in recent years, but we want to ensure that

we continue to be a fun place to work and that we are creating an environment that encourages commitment, passion and gives our team members the opportunity to develop and progress."

She continued: "This win is for everybody who put their heart and soul into what we do. Thank you, it means the world."

More than 250 people were present at the Best Places to Work Awards at the iconic Aston Webb Grand Hall at the University of Birmingham.

They heard how S&R Construction has donated more than £50,000 to 15 local charities and supported Combat Hub Wolverhampton with all its official kits so that young people and women, who have been in abusive relationships, can train in mixed martial arts.

The company, which provides multi-utility services, groundworks, traffic management and open market housing development, has created 50 new jobs since 2025 and continues to invest heavily in training and development - especially backing young people and mature learners who are looking to explore new careers.

Through partnerships with local colleges, it has welcomed ten apprentices and developed clear career pathways supported by mentoring and structured progression and external courses.

A £400,000 training academy reinforces this commitment, ensuring employees can grow and succeed within the business.

Jamie Sankey, director at S&R Construction, concluded: "This is a real milestone moment in our journey and shows how far we have come since my mom and dad started with just a van and a few lads.

"Today, we employ over 350 people, and turnover has gone past £50m for the first time. Encouragingly, the same principles of hard work, transparency and commitment that we launched the business on are still at the heart of how we operate.

"I think the judges really liked this and I'm sure it played a big role in their decision."



Pictured from left: Kerry Carter, Lauren Sankey, Jason Bradley, Jamie Sankey, Tracey Sankey, Jemma Kimbley, Bethany Watts and Tracey Watts celebrate with the 'Large Employer' Award.

For further information, please visit www.srconstructionltd.co.uk or follow the company across its social media channels.

THE WINNERS

at a glance

Best Company Overall – Large
(100+ employees)
S&R Construction

Best Company Overall – Medium
(20-100 employees)
OWB Creative

Best Company Overall – Small
(up to 20 employees)
KSB Recruitment

Best Company for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
Warwickshire County Cricket Club

Best Company for Training, Education and Apprenticeships
Heligan Group

Best Company for Health & Wellbeing
Entec SI

Most Inspiring Leader (Female)
Elisabeth Lewis-Jones

Most Inspiring Leader (Male)
Wayne Horkan

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We are enormously grateful to those businesses who made the awards possible by giving so generously.



What makes a great leader?

PAUL FAULKNER poses the question in the aftermath of the Best Places to Work Awards

Firstly, I must congratulate everyone who was involved in the inaugural Birmingham Business Best Places to Work awards that took place in June.

As I am sure the pictures printed elsewhere in this edition will illustrate, this was an absolutely brilliant celebration of the many things, firms and folk who help to give the Birmingham business community its sparkle, and ensure that the city and wider region are indeed great places to work and to build a career.

In many ways the awards were a brave move by the team behind Birmingham Business magazine, as the world needs another awards ceremony as much as the UK needs yet another prime minister. However, these awards absolutely managed to cut through the cynicism and formulaic approach that can mar such ceremonies, and really did feel different, innovative, engaging and full of heart.

It was a privilege to have judged some of the categories and I had an absolute blast on the night itself. I very much suspect that the awards will go from strength to strength and become an essential fixture on the Birmingham business calendar – keep your eyes peeled for details about the 2027 edition and get entering!

A couple of the Best Places to Work awards were focused on individual leaders who others find inspiring. Lis and Wayne were unquestionably worthy winners and recipients of the dazzling trophies (shout out to Dual Works who designed them) in the female and male categories, with both truly embodying many of the traits that I believe are required to make a leader.

Whenever I am asked about leadership or what makes a great leader in my opinion I generally recount a story about my first boss from when I started my career at MBNA Bank. That individual – General Charles C Krulak (worthy of a look-up on Wikipedia) – was a decorated

military figure who, upon his retirement from the US Marine Corp, had embarked on a second career leading a credit card company.

He had led men and women into battle, both in Vietnam and in the first Gulf War had had literally written books on leadership. So, when he spoke I listened, especially when he was sharing thoughts and insights on leadership.

Distilling his teachings down somewhat, for The General (as he was known to everybody), leaders were simply men and women 'of character', with character being defined as possessing moral courage, selflessness and integrity.

While unquestionably somewhat broad in their definition, I have held onto those traits as my touchstones for the qualities that make a leader throughout my career, and also measured myself against them whenever I have had to make a touch decision or choice.

Am I acting with integrity? Am I being selfless in my decision and not driven by choosing an outcome that is simply easiest or best for me? Am I being brave and taking the right path, even if it seems to be the harder thing to do?

For me personally, if I can check my actions off against that mental list then I always trust that I am leading in the right way, or at least making decisions in the moment for the right reasons. Over the years, and in any number of leadership positions, it has become somewhat second nature for me to do that, and a helpful guide when having to make big decisions or choose a course of action quickly without much thinking time.

Villa fans amongst the readership may recall that The General later became a director at Villa for a period when I was CEO. While his wisdom and guidance were always welcome, one of the things he enjoyed doing was jumping on fan message boards and interacting directly

with supporters.

In many way this was brilliant – fans were getting to hear from a director of the club in a direct and unvarnished way, and could flag all sorts of bits of feedback and issues they were having which The General could bring back to the club and get fixed. Customer experience in action!

Unfortunately, over time, and as results got a little worse at the club, fans having a direct line to The General started to cause a few issues and him some headaches as he was challenged on matters where he couldn't give a clear answer. In the end it was my duty to speak with him and to request that he stop posting on the message boards, something he loved doing and had been good at for a number of years.

Having worked together for over a decade and always having had only the utmost respect for The General having to have that conversation was not something that was easy or I was looking forward to doing. But, using his own teachings and ensuring I was acting with some moral courage, selflessness and integrity, I did just that and the situation was resolved.

It wasn't quite Darth Vader confronting Obi-Wan Kenobi in the famous apprentice/master scene in the Death Star, but, put into a leadership role, The General's own words did help me to know that I was at least acting appropriately and leading as I was expected to do.

Ultimately, leadership is difficult and circumstances can certainly challenge your ability to be an effective leader. I would say that I think about leadership every day, thanks to The General, and am constantly striving to be better in all facets of leadership where I have the opportunity.

On that note, congratulations again to all of the winners (and leaders) at the Best Places to Work awards, and I look forward to seeing these awards go from strength to strength.

*Paul Faulkner is vice chairman of the Midlands region for Barclays, and co-founder of Element45

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Chris Recker

The Birmingham lawyer at the centre of modern litigation

When fast-growing law firm FBC Manby Bowdler opened its Birmingham office, it made clear that it intended to build something significant.

The arrival of litigation partner Chris Recker has been one of the strongest signals yet that this ambition is already taking shape.

His appointment brings a specialist skillset that is rare in the Midlands – and one which has already created precedent on the national stage.

During four and a half years in London, Chris developed an impressive reputation as a disputes and investigations lawyer with a particular focus on fraud and digital assets, blockchain and Web3.

His work around the crypto landscape, advising on asset recovery and protection and complex commercial disputes, placed him at the centre of cases that have helped define how English courts approach crypto-related claims.

He led the solicitor team in the landmark *Osbourne v Persons Unknown* matter, the first in England and Wales in which Non-Fungible Tokens were made the subject of a proprietary injunction and thought to be the first worldwide where service by NFT was permitted as the sole method of service in an NFT fraud case. It remains a reference point for lawyers working in this fast-moving area.

Alongside this, Chris built extensive experience in global counsel coordination and multi-jurisdictional investigations, earning recognition as a key lawyer in the Legal 500 2026 directory as well as previous editions.

His expertise – spanning commercial litigation, arbitration, civil fraud, freezing orders, proprietary claims, emergency relief, digital asset disputes and internal and external investigations – is in huge demand as blockchain technology continues to advance.

“As the number of disputes involving digital assets and crypto matters soars, we are now ideally placed to offer class-leading advice nationally and internationally from Birmingham.”

For Chris, the move back to Birmingham – where he spent eight formative years – was the right opportunity at the right time.

He and his wife Joanna, who is part of the firm’s Commercial Litigation team in Redditch, have two young daughters. Being closer to home mattered, but so did the vision set out by chief executive Neil Lloyd.

“The move to FBC Manby Bowdler was focused on being part of a firm that had a big ambition to grow and where I could come in and be part of the building of that team from the ground up. To shape it the way I wanted and be supported in doing that by a company which believed in that work.”

The firm had recently become a founding member of the Adeptio Law Group, backed by a £30 million investment from Horizon Capital, and that only added to Chris’s excitement at the opportunities the move presented.

“When I spoke to Neil and others they talked about growth, the private equity backing and the group wanting to get much bigger. The plans he outlined were hugely exciting. Neil has done a brilliant job in pulling the Birmingham office together. All the new hires are good people. We all get on. That’s no small thing when you’re hiring from different places.”

The Birmingham litigation team initially started with Chris, and property litigation partner Victoria Khandker. Since they both joined, the team has grown to six, which includes the recruitment of two solicitors and two paralegals.

“The focus will be on giving practical, commercial solutions and offering high quality work at a very competitive price. I want us to be doing a variety of work,

at a variety of levels and at a variety of complexities and for us to continue punching above our weight in the market,” said Chris.

“In the long term, we want the firm to be one of the first names people think of when a complex litigation, fraud or digital asset issue arises.”

His arrival has already had an impact. The firm has seen an increase in digital asset enquiries through its website, and Chris’s international profile continues to grow. He recently participated in an event in Paris in April 2026 alongside Paris Blockchain Week, and is due to speak at a fraud and asset recovery conference in Jersey in June 2026.

His ambitions for the litigation team certainly match the wider ambitions of FBC Manby Bowdler. The firm has expanded significantly over the past year, opening three new offices including Birmingham and turnover has grown to more than £19 million. It has now set its sights on doubling in size in the coming years.

For Chris, this is just the beginning of a fantastic journey for both himself and the firm.

“It’s so exciting because we are only at the start of it. In a few years’ time I’m sure we’ll look back and say, look at us now and how far we have come.”



Chris Recker, partner in the Litigation team at FBC Manby Bowdler, Birmingham



M&A activity in the West Midlands

By BEN DAWSON, M&A director at BDO

overview

M&A

SPECIAL REPORT

Over the past 12 months, mergers and acquisitions activity in the West Midlands has reflected wider UK trends, demonstrating resilience despite a challenging macroeconomic backdrop.

Higher interest rates, inflationary pressures and ongoing geopolitical uncertainty initially dampened activity, but the market has adjusted, leading to greater stability and, more recently, signs of renewed momentum. We have certainly seen a clear uptick in deal activity both regionally and nationally, pointing to improving confidence among buyers and sellers alike.

The West Midlands has maintained a steady flow of M&A activity, supported by the diversity of its economy. Core sectors such as advanced manufacturing, automotive, professional services and technology have continued to attract both strategic and financial buyers. This breadth has proved crucial in sustaining deal flow, even as certain industries faced cyclical or cost-related pressures.

Mid-market transactions have been the backbone of activity in the region. Strategic acquirers have continued to pursue bolt-on acquisitions, often targeting complementary capabilities, geographic expansion or operational efficiencies.

At the same time, private equity investors have remained active, though with a sharper focus on asset quality than in previous years. Businesses demonstrating strong margins, recurring revenues and clear growth potential have commanded the greatest interest.

International buyers have also played an important role, with overseas investors recognising the value proposition offered by the region. Compared with London and the south east, West Midlands businesses often present more attractive entry valuations while still benefiting from strong infrastructure and a skilled labour pool. This has ensured continued inbound interest, particularly from North American and European acquirers.

Green Frog Connect, an independent connections provider specialising in high-voltage grid infrastructure was acquired by Hanab Energy Solutions in June, one of the Netherlands' leading electricity infrastructure contractors. The deal strengthens Hanab's position in the growing UK energy sector, where there are major opportunities for investment and expansion.

Across the UK, the M&A market over

the last year has been characterised by adjustment. Following the peaks of 2021 and early 2022, deal activity slowed as borrowing costs rose and valuation expectations diverged. A surge in deals followed in 2024 as sellers anticipated Capital Gains Tax increases announced in the 2024 Autumn Budget. However, over the past 12 months, the market has begun to find a new equilibrium.

While aggregate deal volumes remain below recent highs, they are still well above historic activity levels, with the five-year average for deal volumes ramping up by 25% in each subsequent period. Moreover, execution rates have improved. Buyers and sellers are increasingly aligned on pricing, and processes are progressing more efficiently.

Corporate acquirers have remained consistent participants, driven by strategic imperatives including diversification, capability acquisition and supply chain resilience. Carve-outs have also featured widely as corporate reshape their portfolios.

For example, BDO has advised Hill & Smith on several carve-out transactions recently, including the sale of Parking Facilities to Stretton investments and its Australian road safety rental business to Onsite Rentals, also the carve-out of Grafton's plastic pipes manufacturing business to Austrian group Wienerberger.

Meanwhile, private equity firms continue to hold significant levels of undeployed capital, creating ongoing pressure to invest. This has contributed to competitive dynamics, particularly for high-quality assets.

Anochrome, the Midlands-based provider of high-quality surface coatings, corrosion protection and threat-locking sealant services was acquired by private equity firm Endless LLP in June. This transaction represents a transition from long-standing family ownership and the start of a new phase for the business, with Endless' investment supporting the next stage of development and growth.

Debt markets, though still more conservative than in prior years, have shown signs of improvement. Greater lender confidence and increased availability of financing have supported deal activity, albeit with more disciplined underwriting standards and tighter covenants.

Within this evolving landscape, BDO has observed a notable uptick in optimised M&A activity, both in the West Midlands and across the UK. This trend reflects a market

that is becoming more comfortable with current conditions. Participants are adapting to a "new normal," where higher interest rates and more rigorous due diligence are accepted as standard.

Crucially, the recent increase in activity is not simply a function of volume, but also of quality. Sellers are approaching transactions with greater preparation and a more sophisticated understanding of value drivers, while buyers are demonstrating clearer strategic intent. This combination has led to more robust deal processes and improved outcomes.

The result is a healthier transactional environment, with fewer failed deals and stronger alignment between counterparties. This positions the market well for sustained activity in the coming year.

One of the most significant emerging drivers of M&A activity is political uncertainty. With an upcoming change in prime minister and the prospect of broader fiscal reform, many owner-managed businesses are reassessing their strategic options.

In particular, concern around potential changes to capital gains tax is prompting action. Historically, anticipated tax increases have triggered waves of transaction activity, as business owners seek to crystallise value under existing rules. This trend is already becoming evident, with an increase in early-stage discussions and pre-sale planning.

For many entrepreneurs, tax is not the sole motivation for a sale. However, it can serve as a powerful accelerant, bringing forward decisions that may otherwise have been deferred. This is especially relevant in situations where succession planning, retirement, or partial exit strategies are already under consideration.

As a result, the coming months are likely to see heightened levels of engagement from owner-managers, particularly those keen to mitigate potential tax exposure.

In summary, the past 12 months have marked a period of transition for the M&A market. After a phase of uncertainty, both the West Midlands and the wider UK are now experiencing a gradual recovery.

As the political landscape evolves and tax considerations come into sharper focus, the year ahead is likely to present both opportunities and urgency.

For owner-managers, early preparation and engagement are more important than ever and will be key to navigating a more active and increasingly competitive M&A environment.

Trust in youth

interview

Heligan Group is one of the most specialised corporate finance houses in Birmingham with a heavy emphasis placed on top-level research and sector experience. HENRY CARPENTER meets Simon Heath, the firm's M&A head, who also sees tech-savvy graduates as a vital cog in the firm's aspirations going forward.

Simon Heath is reflecting on Heligan Group's success at this magazine's Best Places to Work Awards.

The firm scooped the award for the Best Company for Training, Education and Apprenticeships category at the inaugural awards and Heath, Heligan's COO and corporate finance managing partner, explains why he thought it had a good chance when submitting their entry.

"A core part of our values is that investing in young talent is absolutely critical to the successful growth of any business," he says. "There are some exceptional graduates out there, and our continuous investment in young talent means more than half of our team are graduate analysts.

"Generally, the larger financial services firms including accountancy and investment banking, have significantly curtailed graduate recruitment in 2025 and 2026 because they believe that AI can replace people at more junior grades.

"And to a certain degree they can. However, I think you're cutting your nose off to spite your face because we are in the midst of a fast-moving technology revolution. The people that are best equipped to use that technology are not, frankly, the grey-haired members of the team. The younger team members that have grown up using AI are the ones that are going to be the greatest exponent of it.

"In general, graduate recruitment is down across the financial services sector. This provides a fantastic opportunity for businesses like us to recruit a higher quality of graduate because of a scarcity of graduate roles."

We're really here to talk about Heligan's M&A division – which Heath heads – but the firm's stance on its graduate-friendly employment system is, in a way, emblematic of how it views business: innovatively.

Heligan is a relatively small but specialised financial services boutique with approximately 50 staff spread

across its divisions. As well as corporate finance, Heligan offers private equity investment, strategic advisory and wealth management services to work with clients.

Heath commented that Heligan's M&A team is the largest in the Midlands and at its heart – and in his view the future of the M&A market – is what he calls a "dedicated sector-led proposition".

The firm focuses on three core sectors: security technology, led by Matt Croker, healthcare, led by Ramesh Jassal who has joined from Clearwater, and infrastructure services which is led by Andy Dickinson. A fourth sector which is being developed is financial services, focused on IFA and wealth management transactions.

"It's very easy for a corporate finance advisor to claim to be a sector specialist, but we really do have a genuine understanding of each of our chosen sectors – the trends, the people, buyer audience and key determinant factors within each of them," says Heath.

"Beyond domain knowledge, we have people in our advisory team that have been there and done it."

He mentions that within Heligan there are ex-military and intelligence that support the security technology activities, while Ramesh Jassal is a PhD in biochemistry and has led a healthcare team with another advisor. Martin Baines who was the CEO of the largest listed wealth management group, provides great insight for the financial services team, according to Heath.

"We're able to bring that expertise of understanding to target companies that we build relationships with, beyond just saying 'we're a specialist in that space'.

"And that is really gaining a lot of traction, because if you can build that trust and understanding with a prospective client, they're much more likely to select you as their advisor.

"Our focus is working with owner managers who are often seeking an exit. It's the classic retirement, death, divorce

or tax that triggers these transactions – and these are once-in-a-lifetime events. Placing your trust in an advisor that understands the market in which you operate, can present the business in the best light and structure a transaction to drive competitive tension to achieve the highest value for any particular business.

"It doesn't just stop there. Because we've got the wealth management piece, we can make sure that we're helping them invest their proceeds in the most efficient and low-risk way possible. This holistic approach is designed to make sure we're giving the best solution to clients through a process."

Heath is clearly proud of his 20-plus M&A team. As mentioned, many are graduates – and are young, hungry, good with numbers and able to adopt AI quickly.

But what about their boss – what sort of a pedigree does he bring to the table?

Born and brought up in Solihull, Heath went to secondary school at King Edward's in Edgbaston.

A degree in geography and economics at the University of Leeds followed, and then after going travelling for 12 months, he joined the 'big four' member, KPMG, where he remained for 18 years.

His work there took him for a stint in London, and also in Aberdeen where he was part of the oil and gas team, and following the global financial crisis in 2008, a 12-month secondment at Barclays Bank in Birmingham before returning to KPMG.

He speaks with glowing terms about the financial services giant, describing it is a "great, great organisation and the mid-market leader for M&A transactions".

However, with the size of the business come the higher levels of compliance and administration – which had a stifling effect on opportunities in Heath's view.

Covid proved the tipping point. "The pandemic gave an opportunity for everyone to reflect on their lives and I thought it was the right time to hop across

to Heligan and so I joined in December 2020," says Heath.

Where does he stand on the current health of the M&A markets? It has been challenging for the last couple of years, he concedes, with deal volumes down in both years.

But this is where having a point of difference is more than important – it is crucial.

"In my view the days of the generalist – the person just capable of transacting deals – are pretty much over. Sector specialism is the way forward now, as M&A services have become increasingly sophisticated.

Clients these days have a much higher or greater understanding of what a corporate transaction is and have a high expectation of what an M&A advisor will provide.

"It's very easy for a corporate finance advisor to claim to be a sector specialist, but we really do have a genuine understanding of each of our chosen sectors – the trends, the people, buyer audience and key determinant factors within each of them."

interview





Recent recruits **Trixie Taroni, Dan Burgham and Jude Miranda**, flanked by people leader **Holly Rabin**

Picture: Lorentz Gullachsen

“Where you can provide a point of difference is having a fundamental understanding of a particular sector – who the buyers are, what the market dynamics are, what are the key trends at play how that how those factors influence pricing for any specific company.

“Having a proper understanding of all of those factors will enable you to position your client’s business in the best light, with the best prospective buyer audience.”

While it has been a lacklustre couple of years for the M&A sphere in general, Heath says it has “perked up” since Easter.

As he says: “There is only so long that corporate buyers and private equity investors can avoid transacting, particularly private equity. You can’t give the money back. If you raised a big fund, you only get 10 years to invest, grow and exit.”

Dramatic geopolitical events such as recessions and wars notwithstanding, Heath is cautiously optimistic over the M&A outlook for the next cycle with sentiment generally on the up.

And what does the future hold for Heligan?

Here he seems to have even more confidence, expecting the firm to grow geographically and in personnel.

The firm will remain headquartered in Birmingham but the aim is to extend its geographical coverage by creating a defined triangle between here, London and Bristol, largely to support its security technology prowess with proximity to the special forces in Hereford, GCHQ in

“Someone at a point in the distant past believed in my potential when I was a graduate, and at Heligan we want to give that opportunity to others to help propel them along on their career, because the talent out there is outstanding.”

Cheltenham and tech firms in the Reading area.

“Longer term, the plan would be to internationalise the business, again playing on the fact that with security technology piece, the biggest market for that is the US.

“So, at some point, we would love to move into the US.

“The beauty of a business like Heligan is that it’s small enough to be nimble but it’s got enough scale and profile to be influential.

“We have moved from start-up to scale-up, and we have got the business divisions that we want. So it’s about increasing the size of each of those business divisions and increasing the influence that we can have.”

He also points out that any investment business like Heligan has got to keep innovating or risk falling by the wayside.

Which brings us back to how our conversation started – employing and trusting younger people, and adopting

new technologies as they emerge.

“I’m not quite in the camp of AI is going to solve everything and make us all redundant,” he says. “It should be seen as a tool rather than a replacement, and I think there’s a risk that some companies see it as a replacement for human capital.

“I don’t take that view. It should be seen as another tool, another aid to help improve outputs and efficiencies of the team. Be AI-enabled rather than AI dependent.”

So human capital investment – particularly in young talent – will remain an ongoing focus for Heath and his team to enable the firm to maximise the potential of new technologies.

As he concludes: “Someone at a point in the distant past believed in my potential when I was a graduate, and at Heligan we want to give that opportunity to others to help propel them along on their career, because the talent out there is outstanding.

“The youth is the future.”



Why preparation will define successful exits in 2026

By **DAN MARCHINGTON**, director at Cavendish

For business owners considering an exit, the question is often framed as one of timing: is now the right moment to sell? In reality, the answer is more nuanced. Market conditions matter, but in 2026 outcomes are increasingly driven by preparation, optionality and the ability to present a business in a way that builds buyer confidence. In practice, the gap between well-prepared and underprepared businesses has never been wider.

These observations are grounded in Cavendish’s recent transaction experience across the Midlands and wider UK market.

Readiness over market timing

There is no single “perfect” window to exit. Strong businesses continue to transact in a range of conditions, while weaker or less well-prepared assets can struggle even in more favourable markets.

Across a number of recent processes, we have seen businesses engage with the market before all of the key building blocks are fully in place. In these cases, early interest can give way to increased scrutiny as due diligence progresses, particularly around forecasting, cash dynamics or management bandwidth. If performance then tracks below expectations during a live process, buyers can become more cautious and timelines can extend. In our experience, outcomes in these scenarios are often not a reflection of the underlying quality of the business, but of how ready it is to withstand the level of scrutiny that a transaction inevitably brings.

Separately, challenges can emerge where performance expectations are set ahead of what a business ultimately delivers. Where forecasts prove ambitious, particularly in areas exposed to external dependencies, can prompt buyers to shift their focus toward downside risk and the durability of key revenue streams. Once that confidence is challenged, it can be difficult to rebuild momentum, with implications for valuation and certainty of outcome. Credible and resilient projections are therefore critical to maintaining buyer conviction.

These examples underline a consistent

theme: timing matters, but preparation matters more. Value is rarely lost because of market timing alone; it is lost where preparation does not support the level of scrutiny a transaction brings.

Keeping the IPO option open

IPO activity has been subdued in recent years, but in 2026, there are clear signs that conditions are improving, supported by improving liquidity, regulatory reforms and renewed appetite from institutional investors to deploy capital.

For the right business, an IPO should therefore be considered a credible exit route alongside private M&A and an option that is often under-utilised for Midlands businesses.

One of the advantages of an IPO is flexibility. It can offer partial liquidity for shareholders, access to growth capital and a platform for future acquisitions. However, it is rarely an alternative that can be pursued in isolation. Leading processes increasingly involve dual-track approaches, where an IPO is developed in parallel with a private sale, allowing shareholders to assess real-time investor appetite and maximise competitive tension between public and private market routes.

This approach highlights an important consideration for business owners: keeping all options open until late in the process can materially enhance outcomes. It also reinforces the importance of working with advisers who can genuinely assess and execute across both private and public market routes.

Looking beyond a full sale

Not all exits involve a full sale. For many founders and shareholders, succession planning – whether through a partial sale, management buy-out or minority private equity investment – offers a practical route to de-risk or raise capital to support future growth.

In recent transactions that Cavendish has advised on, we have seen that when businesses operate in attractive markets and engage with potential buyers from a position of control, even an initial bilateral

approach can be leveraged effectively. By grounding discussions in a clear view of valuation benchmarks and maintaining credible alternatives, companies can create upward pressure on pricing while preserving flexibility should a wider process be required.

There is rarely a one-size-fits-all approach to succession decisions. The optimal route depends on the specific dynamics of the business, its market and the shareholder objectives. Tailoring the process accordingly, whether that involves selectively introducing competition, running parallel workstreams or carefully sequencing engagement, allows momentum and tension to be managed more effectively. This more considered approach to process design is often a key driver of value, deal certainty and negotiating leverage, particularly when compared to more formulaic, volume-driven approaches.

Planning ahead to protect value

Across all exit routes, the common themes are clear: buyers are focused on quality, predictability and credibility. Anything that creates uncertainty around these factors can quickly erode value or delay a transaction.

For business owners, this means that exit planning should begin well in advance of any formal process. Strengthening financial reporting, addressing potential due diligence issues, building out management capability and articulating a clear equity story are all levers that can materially influence outcome.

Equally, considering the full range of exit options is increasingly important. The optimal route will depend on the specific characteristics of the business and the objectives of its shareholders, but maintaining flexibility and competitive tension is key.

Ultimately, in a market where buyers are increasingly discerning, preparation, optionality and intelligently designed processes are no longer advantages; they are essential to achieving the right outcome.

Bridging the gap

BRADLEY QUIN, corporate partner at Lodders, shares his perspective on the West Midlands M&A market and what privately owned businesses should consider

insight

The West Midlands mergers and acquisitions market remains active, but it is no longer a market in which momentum alone is enough to get deals done.

For privately owned and owner-managed businesses, the picture is best described as resilient but selective: there is appetite, there is funding, and there are willing buyers and sellers, but the gap between ambition and execution has widened.

Across the region, the fundamentals remain encouraging. The West Midlands has a deep pool of entrepreneurial businesses, strong sector specialisms and a sophisticated adviser community, particularly around Birmingham, which boasts a strong boutique corporate finance offering.

Private equity and inward investment remain solid, and challenger banks continue to show willingness to support transactions. However, dealmaking is taking longer and buyers are applying far greater scrutiny than they might have done 12 or even six months ago.

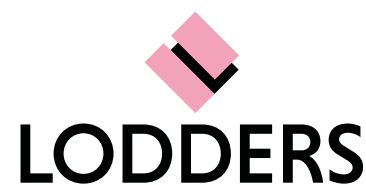
That caution is particularly visible in privately owned businesses. Many vendors are motivated by familiar succession, retirement or derisking drivers, with recent and anticipated changes to the tax environment also prompting some owners to consider a sale.

But while there is a healthy supply of willing sellers, buyers have become more risk averse. They are less prepared to overlook weaknesses in financial reporting, customer concentration, management depth, contractual arrangements or unresolved operational issues.

A buyer's market?

The result is not quite a buyer's market. Quality assets will always attract interest, and strong, cash-generative businesses with clear growth prospects can still command competitive valuations.

For less prepared businesses, the market is unforgiving. Deals are falling over for reasons that may not have stopped a transaction a couple of years ago. Due diligence requirements are more detailed, funding is more disciplined and buyers want to build more protection into deal structures.



A key challenge is valuation. Some sellers remain anchored to expectations formed during a more buoyant market, while buyers are pricing deals against today's cost of capital, economic uncertainty and more conservative growth assumptions.

This disconnect between what owners hope to achieve and what acquirers are prepared to pay is one of the main barriers to completion. Bridging that gap often requires realism, early advice and creative structuring, including earn-outs, deferred consideration or vendor-backed arrangements.

Alternative structures

For management teams and family businesses, alternative succession routes are also gaining traction. Vendor initiated management buyouts, or VIMBOs, are increasingly being explored where owners want to preserve the culture and continuity of the business, while passing ownership to the next generation of leadership.

These structures can be attractive for all parties, although sellers may need to wait longer to extract full value. Family investment companies are also attracting interest as part of wider succession and tax planning discussions.

Preparation is key

For owners considering a sale, the message is clear: preparation matters more than ever.

A decent runway is essential. Businesses need to get their house in order well before going to market, ensuring that financial information is robust, management responsibilities are clear, contracts are tidy and potential issues are addressed rather than discovered under diligence. In the current climate, buyers will not proceed – let alone pay a premium price – if there is unresolved risk.

For buyers, the market presents opportunity. There may be less competition for some acquisitions, particularly where vendors need support to reach a realistic position on value or structure. But this does not mean owners are giving businesses away. Well-run companies with strong management, defensible margins and a credible growth story will continue to attract interest.

Looking ahead, the health of the West Midlands M&A market will depend heavily on confidence: local, regional, national and international. The ingredients for activity are present, including funding, advisers, entrepreneurial businesses and buyer appetite.

What is needed is greater certainty and a continued narrowing of expectations between buyers and sellers. Until then, the market will remain active but disciplined. There will always be a market for a well-run (and well advised) business, but in today's environment, preparation, realism and resilience are what get deals over the line.

Legal support for your business

Lodders' experienced Business Services group offers expert legal advice to owner managers and business owners looking to divest, grow and raise finance, and is focused on advising owner managers on acquisitions, disposals, and other corporate change, with typical deal values ranging from £3 million to £30 million. For most business owners, your business is your legacy and your pension. Whether your aim is to grow, sell, or pass it on, proactive planning is always key when it comes to future-proofing your business.

SEALING THE DEAL FOR FOILCO

How 'immaculate' documentation helped secure a perfect fit sale

In April this year, the Lodders Corporate team worked with family-owned Foilco to navigate its sale to Japanese family business, Washin.

Foilco supplies the world's widest range of stamping foil shades and finishes to the packaging and print industry, with a customer base across 70 countries,

including premium brands such as Burberry, Gucci and Fortnum & Mason to name just a handful.

As part of the Washin family, Foilco will remain under its existing leadership, as the two family businesses combine manufacturing strength with global reach.

It was a tight timescale for the deal,

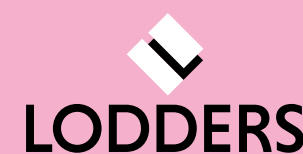
made tighter by the changes to the tax rules on 6 April. The Foilco team however were immaculate with their documentation, making the due diligence process as smooth as it can possibly be. And, through hard work and good communications on both sides, we were able to secure a successful completion on April 1.

"Lodders supported us throughout. This was our first and, most probably, last deal, and we had no real idea what was involved with the sale process. I could contact them, any time of day or night, and they never made us feel like our questions were daft ones!"

Paul Hornby, Foilco

For more information, visit:
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insight



DEAL DONE

We've been dealmaking for decades and, whilst much has changed, plenty has remained the same – including the legal clarity and true human understanding that you can expect from the experienced Lodders team.

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Leonard Curtis

Why a formal M&A process matters in the lower mid-market

Demand for high-quality, affordable M&A advice has grown steadily over the past few years, especially among founders preparing to exit. An ageing base of owner-managers, the search for succession solutions and a need for liquidity are all bringing more good businesses to market.

Yet larger advisory firms are increasingly reluctant to act in the lower mid-market, worrying that deal values are too small to meet their fee targets. Where they do engage, owners are often unwilling, or unable, to justify the fees involved. This leaves a clear gap and a clear need for advisers who can run a rigorous process at a sensible cost.

Despite this need, many owner-managed businesses remain wary of running a formal process at all. The hesitation is usually rooted in cost, coupled with uncertainty about what a process actually delivers.

Whilst understandable, in our experience that caution is misplaced; a well-run process consistently recovers its cost many times over and is one of the most reliable ways to protect and enhance value on exit.

Much of that value is created before a business ever reaches the market. Owners are understandably keen to move quickly, but good preparation is what underpins a strong valuation. Today's buyers are selective and cautious, and rightly so given market conditions.

Without a clear equity story, polished financials and well-prepared diligence materials, a buyer will likely reduce their potential offer or walk away entirely. Time spent preparing alongside dedicated advisers is rarely time wasted.

“Private equity still remains a key player in the market. Significant levels of dry powder, combined with increased pressure to deploy it, will continue to drive future activity.”

A formal process also widens the field. It brings a business to the attention of a far broader buyer universe, including institutional investors an owner may never have encountered. Importantly, it allows several parties to be run in parallel, soliciting multiple bids and creating the competitive tension that drives value upward. A single unsolicited approach, by contrast, almost never represents the best market price.

It also keeps deals moving. Misalignment between buyer and seller continues to slow and often kill transactions. A structured process narrows that gap early by testing market appetite and validating pricing against real offers rather than assumptions. Defined timelines and organised diligence maintain momentum and materially reduce execution risk.

A further dynamic to note is that accountancy and advisory firms increasingly use M&A to cross-sell their wider services, and a business's existing advisers can occasionally be reluctant to recommend a specialist process for fear of being replaced.

Whilst it is important for firms to cross-sell, a dedicated M&A team should complement, not compete with, a client's trusted advisers. The skills are supplementary, and the best outcomes come from working alongside the wider team rather than around it.

In terms of the current market, significant uncertainty still remains as result of UK government policy, wider geopolitics and the unknown impact of AI. Buyers have become more selective which has meant fewer deals, though arguably ones of better quality.

At the lower mid-market level, the disruption has been slightly less pronounced, and over recent months we have seen confidence begin to return. We expect buyers to continue to be selective, but that growing confidence should develop into an up-tick in activity across the remainder of the year.

Private equity still remains a key player in the market. Significant levels of dry powder, combined with increased pressure to deploy it, will continue to drive future activity.

Buy-and-build strategies remain a major focus, especially in professional services, both accountancy and more recently, legal practices. The lower mid-market is particularly attractive for these types of strategies.

In summary, there is capital available and there are buyers that are active, they're simply more selective about where they commit that capital. Therefore, the quality of the sales process is what will separate a successful exit from a disappointing one.

A formal process is not an unnecessary cost. It is the single most effective lever an owner has to maximise value.

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**Leonard
Curtis**



By STEVE FOULGER, director of organisational transformation and people services at NFP, an Aon company

From deal rationale to deal reality: why people make or break M&A success

insight

insight



Most deals have a compelling rationale. The numbers stack up. The market opportunity looks attractive. The combined business should have greater scale, stronger capability, broader reach or improved resilience. On paper, it makes sense.

But businesses do not integrate on paper. They integrate through people: leaders making decisions, managers translating strategy into action, teams learning new ways of working, employees deciding whether they still believe in the organisation and customers feeling the impact of all of that. That is where many M&A deals move from deal rationale to deal reality. It is also where many begin to lose value.

The red flags are often visible earlier than people think

I spend a lot of time helping businesses fix problems after a deal has completed. Some of those problems are unavoidable. Most transactions involve uncertainty, emotion and disruption. But some of the most damaging issues could have been identified earlier. In the worst cases, a post-deal discovery reveals something that, if understood properly before completion, would have been a serious red flag - possibly serious enough to change the deal, delay it or stop it altogether.

That is not an argument for making M&A slower or more cautious for the sake of it. It is an argument for making it more honest. The commercial case for a deal may be strong, but if the leadership capability is weak, the culture is incompatible, the workforce is unstable or the future

operating model is unclear, the value case is already under pressure.

Acquirers need to ask different questions earlier. What culture are we buying? How does this organisation really make decisions? Which individuals are critical to performance? What would happen if they left? Are managers capable of leading through change? What do employees believe about the business, its leadership and its future? Where are the tensions that do not show up neatly in a data room?

Culture is a strategic choice, not a slogan

Too often, the people and culture implications of a transaction are not given the same weight as the financial, legal and commercial workstreams. Organisations will spend significant sums understanding the balance sheet, contracts, liabilities and deal structure, but they do not always apply the same discipline to the questions that will determine whether the combined business actually works.

When you acquire or merge with a business, there are essentially four choices. You can ask the acquired business to adopt your culture. You can adapt to theirs. You can deliberately build a new culture. Or you can keep the businesses operating separately. All four options can be valid. The problem is not choosing one of them - the problem is failing to choose at all.

When there is no clear and deliberate cultural decision, people make their own assumptions. Some continue doing exactly what they have always done, even when the business needs them to change. Others start changing things that should have

been protected, because those strengths were part of the reason the business was acquired in the first place.

This is where:

- Value leaks
- Productivity drops
- Good people leave and talent becomes harder to attract
- Tension builds between teams

The first 90 days are not really the starting line

The first 90 days after completion are often treated as the critical window for integration. They can be. But they can also be far less dramatic if the right work has already happened.

The first 90 days are won by knowing what you have bought, understanding how you want the combined organisation to work and engaging carefully, long before the transaction is completed. The same applies if you are selling, merging or separating a business. The more clearly you understand the future organisation, the less likely you are to spend the early months, post transaction, firefighting avoidable issues.

That means developing a clear future organisational design. Not a theoretical chart that sits in a slide deck, but a practical view of how the business will operate: roles, responsibilities, decision rights, reporting lines, leadership expectations, workforce capability, reward considerations and the experience you want employees and customers to have.

It also means putting a proper change programme around that design. Organisational change cannot be reduced

to a few announcements and a new structure. People need to understand what is changing, why it is changing, what it means for them and how they can contribute. They also need leaders who are equipped to listen, respond and adapt as the integration unfolds.

Leadership alignment is not optional

One of the most common mistakes in M&A is assuming that leaders are aligned because the deal has been approved. Approval is not alignment. Leaders may agree on the transaction while holding very different views about integration, pace, culture, people, risk and control.

Effective change leadership starts with a significant amount of upfront work. The leadership team needs to reconnect with the reasons the organisations are combining and translate those reasons into a clear, credible vision. That vision needs a narrative people can understand. Not corporate language. Not a slogan. A practical explanation of what is intended, why it matters, how it will benefit the business and what it means for the people involved.

From there, leaders need the right analysis, incentives, resources and action plan. They need to be clear on what must happen quickly and what needs to be handled carefully. They need to know where there is room to adapt and where consistency is essential. Above all, they need to communicate in a way that includes both sharing and listening.

Financial services has particular pressure points

These issues matter in any sector, but financial services can bring particular complexity. Regulated environments, client trust, specialist skills, governance requirements and risk management expectations all raise the stakes. A poorly managed integration can affect not only internal morale, but also service continuity, compliance confidence and the ability to retain people with hard-to-replace expertise.

In that context, organisational design is not just about efficiency. It is about control, accountability, capability and client experience. Leadership assessment is not just about personalities. It is about whether the people responsible for delivering the future business have the skills, credibility and capacity to do so. Culture is not simply about values. It is about how people behave when pressure, uncertainty and competing priorities collide.

This is why the people agenda should sit alongside the commercial agenda from the beginning. If the transaction thesis relies on growth, synergy, cross-selling, new markets, operational improvement or service continuity, then the workforce and leadership implications should be tested with the same seriousness as any financial assumption.

The better question

The question for buyers, sellers and advisers is not whether people issues will appear in an M&A process. They will. The better question is whether those issues are understood early enough to shape the deal and managed well enough to protect its value.

That means moving people, culture and organisational design out of the "post-deal integration" box and into the heart of M&A planning. It means recognising that successful integration starts long before completion. It means choosing deliberately what culture you want to build. It means aligning leaders before asking employees to follow. It means communicating with enough clarity and humility to bring people with you.

The organisations that do this well are not being soft, but commercially disciplined. They understand that the spreadsheet may justify the deal, but people deliver it. The clear message is that you can reverse engineer where the transaction will leak value, fail to achieve new value and ultimately will not achieve what was intended. Bringing in the people specialists early, long before the transaction can make a massive difference to the overall value achieved. If you think the people side is nice and fluffy, think again!

NFP: here to help you maximise your M&A success

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An M&A man to his fingertips

HENRY CARPENTER interviews Iain Lownes of professional services firm S&W

The firm he works for might have gone through its fair share of iterations over the last few years, but for Iain Lownes it has remained business as usual throughout.

S&W is one of the region's largest professional services firms. It was part of Evelyn Partners before the accountancy and advisory firm demerged in March 2025 – acquired by private equity investment firm Apax. It took on the S&W branding, reviving the Smith & Williamson heritage of previous years. The corporate finance business brands as Oaklins S&W reflecting the international network for M&A the firm is part of.

As Lownes puts it with a smile, "I've been bought and sold a couple of times."

Ever since Lownes joined the firm 14 years ago, mergers and acquisitions have always been part of the firm's make-up, but more than ever M&A is a core part of its growth strategy.

And the man at the helm of its M&A department in Birmingham and Bristol is Lownes, whose growing team has been busy implementing the firm's acquisitive strategy. He is a major player in the corporate finance sphere in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands.

"We've probably doubled in size in the last two years and have completed a range of transactions," he says from his home in Moseley.

"We are a team of 12, out of about 52 in the UK overall. .

"Last year was probably our best year – or certainly my best year – and our biggest

deal was a €40 million sale of an egg farm in Leicester called Sunrise Eggs.

"We mainly sell, but we also do buy-side and fundraising. A good example of a recent fundraise was raising capital for Little Adventures, a South West and Midlands-based nursery and soft-play provider.

"Almost all our sale transactions have been to European buyers over the last year. For instance, we sold a business called OMS, which creates software to manage people in warehouses, to a Swedish buyer just before Christmas."

Business before pleasure

After school in his home town of Kidderminster, Lownes went on to study at Oxford University, where he read history.

Feeling he needed a business qualification, he trained with Price Waterhouse – before it became PwC – in its audit division, and this began a career path that eventually led him to S&W.

A move to corporate finance at Albert E Sharp – which went on to become Old Mutual – followed. One of the more high-profile projects he was part of was the float of Aston Villa FC. "Those were the days when Doug Ellis was still there – that's how old I am!" he says.

He then worked at Andersen followed by Deloitte before moving to a boutique finance house. That was where he was immediately before joining S&W in Birmingham.

Over the years, Lownes has worked across a range of sectors on diverse

projects, concentrating on mergers, acquisitions, management buyouts, finance-raising and disposals.

He's seen significant success at S&W, playing his part in growing its business. He has led a buy and build for Suez, for instance, acquiring six companies in the water testing and laboratories market over an 18-month period. More recent transactions include the £34 million sale of panel manufacturer Coverworld to Kingspan, advice to management on the £60 million sale of Panthera Bio to LDC, and the sale of cyber security specialist to Grove IT Solutions to Integrity 360.

So what's the market like at the moment, particularly in the West Midlands?

"There's plenty of stuff going on," he says. "Locally we run our consumer team from the Birmingham office, and my colleague Sab Hanif heads that up. He has just completed the buyout of a beauty business, and last year he acted for Ambala, an iconic sweets business.

"But while we have a regional base, it is more about the connections we have with lawyers and other professionals locally than it is about the businesses we deal with, which can come from across the country.

"The businesses care much more about your sector experience than they do about where you're located these days.

An acquisitive business

S&W doesn't just help others with M&A.

Since buying the professional services business from Evelyn Partners, Apax Partners has made no secret of the fact that it wants S&W to pursue strategic acquisitions to expand its service offerings, geographic footprint and sector expertise. The firm has since completed several, including Beechwood Partners (Ireland), MC2 Accountants, ClearViewIP, and Haines Watts Scotland.

"S&W is acquisitive," confirms Lownes. "We've been buying businesses for a while. For instance, we recently bought a specialist French accounting business, Vachon. We are looking both in the UK and Europe for bolt-ons.

"That's more for the accounting business than the M&A operation, though. From our point of view, we are also seeking to grow both here in the West Midlands and in other regions, but by looking to strategically hire individuals to help us grow both.

"So, watch this space."



A guide to buying and selling a business

By HAYLEY SIMONDS, a corporate partner at
Birmingham law firm Mills & Reeve



Buying or selling a business is often one of the most significant transactions a company or owner will undertake. Whether pursuing growth through acquisition or planning an exit, success depends on early preparation, clear strategy and disciplined execution.

While economic uncertainty continues to shape market conditions, M&A activity remains an important driver of growth. In the Midlands, for example, recent data points to a more measured deals environment, with lower transaction volumes and increased scrutiny from buyers. However, appetite remains strong for high-quality businesses, particularly among private equity investors with capital to deploy.

Against this backdrop, achieving the right outcome requires more than simply finding a buyer or target – it demands a structured and well-managed process. Drawing on Mills & Reeve's corporate and transactional experience, this guide highlights the key stages.

Starting the process – where to begin

The starting point for any transaction is clarity of objective. Buyers should define what they want to acquire and why – whether to access new markets, strengthen capabilities or achieve economies of scale. Sellers, meanwhile, need a clear exit strategy and a realistic understanding of how their business will be perceived.

Preparation is critical. A well-organised business, with its legal, financial and operational affairs in order, is far more likely to maintain value and progress smoothly through negotiations. Transactions rarely complete quickly – often taking 18 to 24 months from initial planning – so early groundwork is essential.

One of the most common pitfalls is allowing the deal process to distract from day-to-day operations. If performance dips at a critical stage, it can weaken negotiating power and lead to a reduced

valuation. Maintaining strong operational performance throughout the process is therefore vital.

Engaging advisers early can also make a significant difference. Corporate transactions involve legal, financial and commercial complexities, and experienced advisers can help shape the structure of the deal, manage risk and keep the process on track. Involving legal advisers from the outset is particularly valuable, enabling potential issues – such as gaps in contracts, shareholder arrangements or compliance matters – to be identified and resolved before they become obstacles. Addressing these early can prevent delays, protect value and reduce the risk of last-minute renegotiation.

Confidentiality must also be addressed at an early stage, typically through non-disclosure agreements, to protect commercially sensitive information.

Take a good look at the target

For buyers, a central principle is simple: know your target. This is achieved through detailed due diligence – testing the business's claims and examining its financial performance, contracts, intellectual property, compliance and operational risks.

In the current environment, this scrutiny has intensified. Buyers are examining every aspect of a business to ensure it aligns with their strategic objectives and to identify potential liabilities. Findings from this process can directly influence valuation and deal structure, including price adjustments and the use of warranties and indemnities.

For sellers, the same level of preparation applies in reverse. Preparing the business for scrutiny – often referred to as sell-side preparation – can significantly strengthen a negotiating position. This includes ensuring records are complete, contracts are documented and compliance issues are addressed in advance.

A key part of this process is the

preparation of a data room, which contains all the information a buyer will need. Typically, this includes:

- Financial statements and statutory accounts
- Customer and supplier contracts
- Employment and HR documentation
- Property and asset information
- Tax and compliance records
- Details of debt, financing and insurance

Being “data-ready” not only speeds up the process but also builds confidence with potential buyers and reduces the risk of late-stage disruption.

Early involvement of legal advisers is also valuable at this stage, helping to identify and resolve issues in contracts, corporate structure or compliance ahead of the due diligence process. Taking proactive steps in this way can streamline negotiations and avoid value erosion.

Some sellers also commission vendor due diligence reports—covering financial, tax and increasingly legal matters. These independent reviews provide an objective view of the business, identify risks early and allow sellers to retain greater control over how the business is presented to the market.

How much is the business worth?

Valuation is both an art and a science. While owners and advisers may have a target multiple in mind, the reality is that a business is ultimately worth what a buyer is willing to pay.

In today's market, that value is often more closely tested. Economic uncertainty and reduced visibility over future earnings are leading to more cautious pricing, particularly for larger or more complex transactions.

Value is shaped by a range of factors, including:

- Profitability and cash flow
- Growth prospects and market positioning
- Strength and stability of customer relationships
- Intellectual property or unique assets



■ Risk profile, including legal and regulatory exposure

Buyers will also consider how the target fits strategically within their existing operations – for example, whether it offers synergies, cost savings or access to new markets.

For sellers, presenting the business in the best possible light while remaining transparent is essential. Attempting to conceal problems can undermine trust and jeopardise a deal. Addressing issues upfront, by contrast, helps preserve value and supports smoother negotiations.

Where gaps arise between buyer and seller expectations, these may be bridged through negotiation or creative structuring. If alignment cannot be achieved, buyers may ultimately walk away.

Structuring the deal and reaching completion

Flexibility is often key when structuring a transaction, particularly in owner-managed businesses with multiple shareholders. Agreement must be reached on how value is realised and distributed.

Pre-sale tax planning is a critical consideration at this stage. Taking advice well in advance can help ensure that the business and its shareholding structure are as tax-efficient as possible, potentially maximising post-tax proceeds. This may involve reviewing how shares are held, assessing eligibility for reliefs or making structural changes ahead of a sale. Leaving these issues too late can limit available options and lead to unnecessary tax leakage.

The consideration payable to sellers

may take several forms, including:

- Upfront cash payments
- Deferred consideration
- Loan notes
- Earn-outs linked to future performance

Buyers will also require a robust sale and purchase agreement (SPA), including warranties and indemnities to allocate risk appropriately.

Completion is the point at which ownership transfers from seller to buyer. In some cases, this coincides with signing the final agreement; in others, there may be a gap while certain conditions – such as regulatory approvals – are satisfied.

At completion, key steps typically include:

- Execution of final agreements
- Payment of consideration
- Transfer of shares or assets
- Delivery of supporting documentation and filings

However, completion is not the end of the process. Post-completion activities – such as integration, stakeholder communication and fulfilment of contractual obligations – are critical to ensuring a smooth transition and realising the full value of the deal.

Another feature increasingly seen in UK M&A transactions is the use of warranty and indemnity (W&I) insurance. This enables buyers to insure against losses arising from breaches of warranties in the sale agreement. For sellers, it can facilitate a cleaner exit by limiting ongoing liability, particularly where proceeds are distributed across multiple shareholders. For buyers, it offers additional protection and can enhance the competitiveness of a

bid. Its use also reinforces the importance of robust due diligence and well-prepared documentation.

The value of a trusted team

Buying or selling a business is a complex undertaking, and having the right team in place can make a significant difference. This typically includes legal advisers, accountants and corporate finance specialists with experience in managing transactions.

A strong advisory team not only increases the likelihood of completing a deal but also ensures the process is handled efficiently, compliantly and in a way that maximises value. In many cases, expert advice can also deliver financial benefits by identifying risks early and avoiding costly mistakes.

Final thoughts

Despite ongoing economic challenges, the fundamentals of M&A remain strong. Businesses continue to view acquisitions and disposals as key tools for growth, succession planning and value realisation.

The consistent message is clear: preparation, transparency and expert guidance are essential. By investing time upfront, addressing issues early and maintaining focus throughout the process, buyers and sellers can successfully navigate even a more cautious market.

For those willing to plan carefully and engage with the process, there are still significant opportunities to unlock value—whether by acquiring the right business or achieving a successful exit.

Thinking about buying or selling a business? Contact Hayley Simonds at hayley.simonds@mills-reeve.com for tailored legal advice.

This article from Mills & Reeve LLP contains general advice and comments only and therefore specific legal advice should be taken before reliance is placed upon it in any particular circumstances. If you'd like to speak to us about your own legal requirements, please contact one of our expert lawyers.

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Gearing up for summer conference

think tank



Ed Cox in conversation with Suzanne Virdee

Summer is shaping up to be a busy season for the Centre for the New Midlands.

Preparations are well under way for the regional think tank's annual Connections for Prosperity conference, which returns to Edgbaston Stadium on July 16 with an impressive line-up of speakers.

Now in its fourth year, the conference will bring together influential leaders from business, government, academia and the third sector to explore the opportunities and challenges facing the Midlands.

Chris Smith, founder and chief executive of the Centre for the New Midlands, has promised an action-packed programme. He revealed that the opening session will feature Birmingham City Council's new leader, Councillor Roger Harmer, alongside the city's new deputy leader, Councillor Julien Pritchard.

Hosted by BBC broadcaster Phil Upton, the discussion will examine the significance of the recent local election, the formation of Birmingham's new Liberal Democrat-Green administration, and the priorities that will shape the council's agenda in the years ahead.

After lunch, delegates will hear from Sir Andy Street, founder and co-chair of Prosper UK and the West Midlands' first elected mayor.

Mr Smith said: "Andy will reflect on the achievements and challenges that defined his time in public office, from securing investment and driving regeneration to leading the region through periods of political and economic uncertainty."

"The conversation will then turn to his ambitions for Prosper UK and how his experience of regional leadership is helping to shape a broader mission to unlock economic growth and opportunity across the country."

"Delegates can expect candid reflections, practical insights and a forward-looking discussion on leadership, place-based growth and the evolving role of public-private collaboration in the UK."

Ahead of the conference, the Centre welcomed members of its Reimagining the Region network to Chaophraya

Birmingham for its annual summer reception, bringing together leaders from business, local government, academia and the third sector for an evening of networking and discussion.

The highlight of the event was a fireside conversation between broadcaster and journalist Suzanne Virdee and Ed Cox, chief executive of the West Midlands Combined Authority, who offered a frank assessment of the opportunities and challenges facing the region.

From the outset, Mr Cox struck an optimistic note, describing the West Midlands as one of Europe's most significant growth opportunities. He highlighted the region's £77 billion economy, its population of three million across the metropolitan area, and transformative developments including HS2 and the continued regeneration of its city centres.

Together, he argued, these strengths give the West Midlands a unique combination of scale, diversity and youthful dynamism unmatched elsewhere in the UK.

"The potential for this place is massive," he said, describing his role as that of "a conductor of an orchestra" – bringing together the organisations, institutions and partners needed to unlock the region's full potential.



Louis Pearson



Adriana Klincova, Chris Smith, Beverley Nielsen, Ailin Zerafat and Rana Musa



Beverley Nielsen and Adriana Klincova



Harbinder Singh Birdi and Rich Bishop



David Brown



Ewa Truchanowicz



Nadine Kubalek

think tank

Major brands support Life Sciences Week

The University of Birmingham and SAH Diagnostics are among the major brands supporting this year's Life Sciences Week.

The programme of events, taking place in and around Birmingham and the West Midlands, runs from September 21 to September 25.

Now in its second year, Life Sciences Week 2026 promises to have a greater national and international focus, mirroring the mindset of the sector leaders it attracts.

The UK life sciences sector employs over 300,000 people across nearly 7,000 businesses, generating around £100 billion annually in economic contribution. Total turnover reached £146.9 billion in 2023/24, accounting for 17% of all UK business R&D spend.

The rapidly expanding sector currently contributes around £6 billion in GVA to the Midlands' economy. It is forecast to need to fill around 10,000 more roles by 2030, a rise of more than a third.

Professor Neil Hanley, pro-vice-chancellor and head of the College of Medicine and Health, University of Birmingham, said: "The West Midlands region is quietly transforming itself as a major life sciences hub for the British healthcare industry and beyond, delivering clinical trials and device production, and drawing in innovative start-ups to a health and life sciences district in Edgbaston-Selly Oak with a £1 billion, five-year cycle of new R&D awards.

"But don't take my word for it. Come and see for yourselves what's happening here by registering for Life Sciences Week 2026."

Feroz Agad is the CEO of SAH Diagnostics, one of the private healthcare businesses set to attend Life Sciences Week.

He said "The NHS and government have a real opportunity to harness private sector innovation to improve patient outcomes and help meet the growing pressures on our healthcare system.

"Screening programmes should be delivered more equitably across conditions, from breast, prostate and skin cancer to other major diseases, so that patients have fair access to early diagnosis and intervention.

"We also need to move away from short-term thinking. Three-to-five-year

funding settlements and commissioning arrangements, rather than annual budget cycles, would give the NHS and its partners the stability to plan effectively, invest in innovation and prevention, and deliver sustainable improvements instead of continually responding to immediate pressures.

"By focusing on prevention, partnership and long-term thinking, we can build a more resilient healthcare system that delivers better outcomes for patients."

The event's co-founder, Professor Paul Cadman, CEO of the One Thousand Trades Group, said: "The UK's life sciences sector is brimming with innovation and ambition, and we need the Government to match

this in its approach to fiscal policy and regulation. We have the talent. We now need to create the right environment for the health tech and biotech pioneers of tomorrow to flourish.

"The UK life sciences sector represents 17% of all UK business R&D spend and is the country's third largest goods export, but since 2017 we have slipped from second to eighth globally for life sciences investment, costing around £15 billion annually in lost competitiveness. Life Sciences Week is our way of shining a spotlight on the world-leading ingenuity and expertise that exist in this sector in the UK."

■ **Registration for Life Sciences Week 2026 is open at lifesciencesweek.co.uk**



Paul Cadman, co-founder of Life Sciences Week

Two pharma execs join board

Earlier this year, Life Sciences Week appointed two senior pharmaceutical industry figures to its advisory board.

Amjad Khan, a former senior leader at Pfizer, on being appointed to the advisory board as executive partner, said: "I am thrilled to join a team building on the strong foundation laid by last year's inaugural Life Sciences Week. Life Sciences Week 2026 will have a very clear focus that will offer real value to participating brands."

Shabnam Raja, who spent seven years at GSK and joined the advisory board as an advisory partner, added: "This event is the most exciting development in the UK life sciences sector right now, with a distinct focus on delivering outcomes for the people and companies who participate."



Feroz Agad, right, of SAH Diagnostics at the Life Sciences Week roundtable breakfast



The roundtable breakfast at Hotel du Vin in Birmingham

Health Secretary urged to attend event

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has been urged to attend Life Sciences Week 2026 to see for himself "what is being built here."

James Murray MP must come and see for himself the vast and already-delivering potential of Birmingham and the West Midlands.

That is the message from the advisory board of Life Sciences Week, which set out three recommendations for the Government, likely under the leadership of Andy Burnham, that they argue are essential to the future of UK life sciences.

Paul Cadman, co-founder of Life Sciences Week, Amy Deakin, its managing partner, David Kidney, the board's chairman, Dr Richard Fallon, co-founder, Amjad Khan, executive partner, and Shabnam Raja, advisory partner, sent the letter to Mr Murray following a roundtable business breakfast held in Birmingham, sponsored by the University of Birmingham and SAH Diagnostics.

"Come to Birmingham. See what is being built here," writes Mr Cadman in his letter.

He added: "This is a golden opportunity for the health secretary to see the strength of UK life sciences here in the West Midlands, particularly as the country prepares for a new prime minister and the need to boost the UK's growth sectors."

The event, titled 'Shaping the Future of Life Sciences,' brought together more than 20 leaders from academia, the NHS, private healthcare, regional government and research and development.

The first recommendation calls on the Government to treat collaboration between the public and private sectors not as an exception but as standard practice. The letter cites SAH Diagnostics as a working example of the model in action, with the

company already partnering alongside NHS Trusts to reduce patient waiting lists. Ms Deakin writes that if the public health system is to withstand the pressures it faces, that kind of partnership must become the new normal.

The second recommendation urges the medicines and healthcare products regulatory agency to liberalise its approach to clinical trials and speed up routes to market for new drugs and medical devices. Life sciences leaders at the roundtable warned that without reform, innovators would take their work to the United States or China.

The West Midlands, the letter argues, has the advanced manufacturing capability to make the UK a genuinely attractive destination, but only if the regulatory environment keeps pace.

The third recommendation addresses what attendees described as a stop-start policy environment created by four prime ministers in five years. The letter calls for three and five-year public health contracts to become standard, giving both NHS bodies and private innovators the confidence to plan and invest.

Ms Deakin's letter frames the invitation as a direct challenge to Murray, noting that Life Sciences Week falls the week before the Labour Party conference in Liverpool.

She points to the University of Birmingham's Health Innovation Campus and its proximity to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the Harborne Hospital and the Centre for Defence Medicine as evidence that the region is ready to scale.

Attendees of the Life Sciences Week roundtable breakfast held in Birmingham on June 25 were:

Professor Neil Hanley - Pro-vice-chancellor and head of the College of Medicine and Health, University of Birmingham

Feroz Agad - CEO of SAH Diagnostics

Dr Richard Fallon - Co-founder, Life Sciences Week

Amjad Khan - Executive partner, Life Sciences Week

Shabna Raja - Advisory partner, Life Sciences Week

Paul Cadman - Co-founder, Life Sciences Week & CEO of the One Thousand Trades Group

David Kidney - Chair of the Life Sciences Week advisory board

Paul Moss - Deputy head of College of Medicine and Health, University of Birmingham

Jamie Clyde - Strategic advisory, West Midlands Growth Company

Richard Phillips - Executive director, policy & partnerships, ABHI

Catherine Cochrane - Director of RSSD, University of Birmingham

Liam Grover - Head of the School of Chemical Engineering, University of Birmingham

Sarah Windrum - Head of Cluster Development, HORIBA MIRA

Graham Combe - Life Sciences Week advisory board & BioSell UK Founder

Kaushik Trivedi - Founder of the Drug Diaries podcast

Steven Heales - West Midlands Combined Authority

Masood Nazir - Medical director, NHS Birmingham and Solihull

Tom Congdon - Tech transfer, representing SPARK the Midlands, Aston University

David Aldulaimi - South Warwickshire NHS Trust CMO

Craig Webster - Director of pathology & consultant clinical scientist, University Hospitals Birmingham

How to get clinical trials insurance right and avoid delay costs

insurance

Before many clinical trials can begin, the right insurance arrangements must be in place. Even simple mistakes can prompt significant delay costs. Our specialists share how to avoid missteps and get the right cover. By OWEN PRATT and SARA FARDON of WTW.



The world over, the West Midlands is known among the medical community as a major centre for high volumes of clinical trials, driven by our diverse population, clustering of medical technology organisations and track record of innovation.

Clinical trials insurance can decide whether the many trials occurring every year in our region start on time or run into costly delays. If your policy contains even small mistakes or fails to meet more significant local ethics committee expectations, your trial can sit ready to go while costs keep running.

Daily delay costs can range from hundreds of thousands to the millions, according to research. So, to help you better prepare for your next clinical trial, we share the inside track on understanding clinical trial insurance and how to make sure securing yours goes smoothly.

What does clinical trials insurance cover?

Clinical trials insurance provides financial compensation if a participant suffers bodily injury or mental anguish linked to the trial.

Typically taken out by the trial sponsor on behalf of clinical investigators and others, policies can include indemnity for medical expenses; loss of income and compensation linked to injury or illness.

Cover can also include an extended cover that reflects how some side effects may only appear years later. So-called 'long-tail' protection helps protect participants beyond the end of the trial.

Why can clinical trials insurance mistakes delay your start date?

Each country involved in a clinical trial has its own approval process. For example, if you've previously won approval for a trial

that happened in Spain and want to run the same trial here in the UK, that approval won't apply.

Insurance sits within the approval process. Your trial may follow the same design across several countries, but insurance requirements can change at each location. And if your documents miss those local details, an ethics committee can stop the trial before day one.

Before you recruit participants or move into day one, the ethics committee in each country must approve the trial documents, including the insurance policy. That approval acts as a go or no-go decision.

You submit the policy; the committee reviews it and can then approve the insurance or return it with questions and required changes. If the policy comes back, your broker and underwriter may need to 'manuscript,' or edit, the wording before you resubmit.

Your trial can't start until the committee approves the insurance. We sometimes think of the approval point like air traffic control: you either get cleared to take off or you stay grounded.

Approval often stumbles on getting small detail wrong. Even marginal errors can trigger an immediate rejection. Common issues we've seen halting trials include things as simple as an incorrect site address, misspelled names of researchers or doctors, or participant numbers that don't quite match the policy.

How much can clinical trials insurance delays cost?

According to some commentators, daily delay costs can range from around £450,000 to £6 million, depending on the trial.

Clinical trials carry large fixed and running costs. A paused trial may still incur charges for facilities, people and logistics, even when no participant activity can begin.

Your organisation may still need to pay for holding laboratory space in multiple countries, travel and accommodation for participants, operational staff, site management and time lost against funding or investor expectations.

Costs can continue while your business waits for revised wording, updated certificates or committee approval. Every correction takes time, and if your broker takes weeks to return revised documents, your organisation can keep paying costs significantly over original expectations.

How can you get clinical trials insurance that matches your trial?

Two companies may test similar drugs and still need different insurance. Trial phases, participant numbers, countries, sites, protocols and drug-specific risks can all change the policy wording.

Your insurance should reflect the nuances, the structure of the trial phases and the specific protocol risks. You need to carefully shape the policy around the trial, which usually means working closely with underwriters to manuscript the wording, refine the documents and reflect both the trial design and the local approval process.

You'll want to understand exactly what the policy covers, where conditions apply and what triggers the cover.

Speed and precision both matter here. Each lost day can carry major costs, but rushed documents can create a fresh delay.

A specialist broker can act like a third-party risk manager. They check the wording, explain what it means in plain English and help make sure the documents fit the trial. They can also highlight the processes and controls your insurer expects you to have in place for the cover to be valid and support you in making sure you can execute and evidence those measures.



"We sometimes think of the approval point like air traffic control: you either get cleared to take off or you stay grounded."

CLINICAL TRIALS

- Around 590,000 clinical trials take place globally each year, according to the World Health Organisation.
- Only around one in ten clinical trials reach the stage where the product can enter the market, research indicates.
- Naval surgeon Dr James Lind started what's widely recognized as the world's first recorded controlled clinical trial in 1747. While working aboard the British Royal Navy ship HMS Salisbury, he successfully used citrus fruits to treat and cure scurvy.

A good broker should also review policy wording against your trial design, work with underwriters to adjust documentation and support you through approval and revisions and help if a claim arises.

They should also be ready to help you understand exclusions, conditions and claims steps before you ever need them. Also, your research team should feel able to ask them basic questions to avoid getting the key details wrong and running into delays you could have otherwise avoided if they'd felt able to ask their broker for clarity.

How should you choose a clinical trials insurance broker?

You'll want to choose a risk and insurance broking partner that can balance speed with accuracy, because delay and error both cost money. Slow service costs time, but fast, careless service creates wrong addresses, wrong names or wording that fails committee review. Both can leave your trial grounded while costs continue.

So, look for:

- Proven experience in clinical trials insurance
- Strong relationships with underwriters
- The ability to revise documentation quickly

- A structured process for reviewing and checking accuracy
- Clear communication and willingness to explain detail and clarify queries.

You also need people and processes that can respond when timelines tighten. Strong market relationships, specialist knowledge and streamlined placement arrangements can shorten the route from a committee question to finalised policy documents and the green light for your trial.

What questions should you ask before placing clinical trials insurance?

Before you place cover, ask:

- Does the policy reflect the full design of my trial?
- Does it meet requirements in each country where I will operate?
- Do participant numbers and details align with the policy?
- How quickly can revisions be made if my trial changes?
- Who will handle communication with underwriters if approval fails?

What support can you expect after buying clinical trials insurance?

Clinical trials insurance should support the full trial lifecycle. Your broker should help you tailor your cover to your specific trial's nuances, help you buy your cover at the right price and the right speed; they should lead document revisions, ethics committee responses, as well as claims advocacy and future product liability needs if the drug reaches market.

Knowing you have that all-round support can give your trial teams and your investors' confidence someone is checking the detail, explaining the practical impact and acting when the risk and insurance needs attention to prevent issues from derailing your trial's success.

Authors

Owen Pratt, senior associate – internal casualty, London Willis Direct & Facultative
Sara Fardon, regional director, WTW

UPCOMING WEBINAR

From lab to market: Managing clinical trials risk with confidence

Clinical trials insurance is a critical part of bringing new treatments and technologies to market. Drawing on our experience supporting clinical trials across the life sciences sector, our specialists will break down key insurance challenges, including

ethics committee expectations, and share practical strategies to minimise risk, avoid costly setbacks and keep trials on track.

The webinar will also explore wider considerations that can affect clinical trial success, including governance, cyber and data exposures, and risk management throughout the development journey.



Scan the QR code to register
22 September
at 10:00am.

Contact sara.fardon@wtwco.com

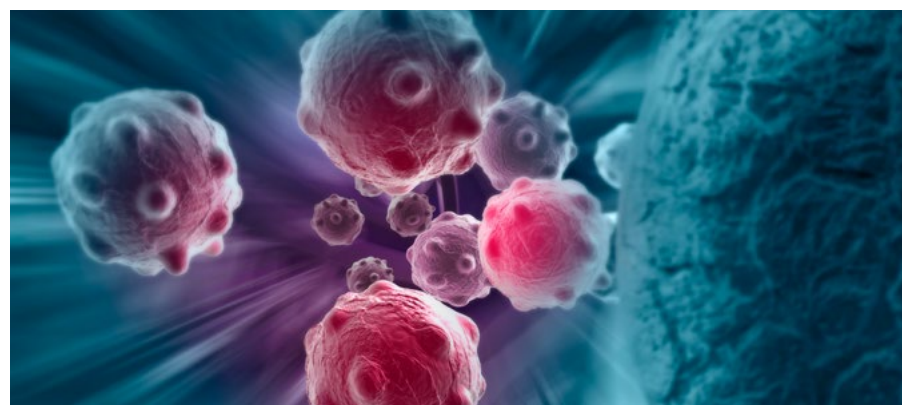
Aston University leads European cancer research project

Aston University has secured €1.2 million from the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Staff Exchanges programme to lead an international project developing cancer-fighting 'magnetobots' made from naturally occurring magnetotactic bacteria.

The MagBIO project brings together 18 partner organisations to explore how the bacteria could be used to diagnose and treat solid tumours associated with pancreatic, breast, lung and colorectal cancers. The technology combines diagnostic imaging with targeted therapies in an emerging field known as theranostics.

Magnetotactic bacteria naturally produce magnetic particles called magnetosomes, enabling them to navigate using magnetic fields in low-oxygen environments such as lakes, rivers and sediments. Researchers hope to harness these properties by attaching therapeutic 'payloads' – including anti-cancer drugs, drug-loaded liposomes and immune-stimulating materials – to the bacteria. External magnetic fields could then guide the bacteria directly to tumours while MRI scans track their progress.

The project is led by Dr Alfred Fernandez-Castane, reader in chemical and biochemical engineering and principal investigator at Aston Institute for Membrane Excellence and the Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute. Researchers will investigate how the bacteria grow, produce magnetic particles and can be modified, drawing on expertise



in biology, chemistry, engineering and medical imaging.

At Aston, the team will focus on growing and producing the bacteria reliably using bioreactors similar to those used in biotechnology and pharmaceutical manufacturing. Researchers will study how oxygen levels, nutrients and growth conditions affect production, with the aim of developing scalable manufacturing methods.

The university will also examine the sustainability of the process by improving yields, reducing waste, introducing digital monitoring tools and exploring opportunities to reuse by-products. Reliable, large-scale production is considered essential if the technology is to progress towards clinical use.

MagBIO will involve up to 67 researchers and provide training through secondments across the 18 partner organisations, supporting 34 early-stage researchers and 33 experienced researchers.

Dr Fernandez-Castane said: "We are incredibly proud that MagBIO represents one of the first co-ordinated Europe-wide efforts to bring together leading experts in magnetotactic bacteria with specialists from complementary disciplines to explore living magnetobots for cancer theranostics."

"The field is still at an early stage, but the potential is truly exciting. By building on a strong foundation of pioneering research, MagBIO aims to create the interdisciplinary momentum needed to advance next-generation theranostics based on living bacteria."

PHTA signs partnership with Maytal

The University of Birmingham's Precision Health Technologies Accelerator has joined forces with a leader in regulatory consultancy to support companies developing the next generation of medical devices and in vitro diagnostics.

Maytal specialises in helping medtech companies navigate the complex landscape of product regulation, design and certification across the UK, EU, USA and other international markets. Its multidisciplinary team provides continuous support throughout the product lifecycle, from regulatory strategy and market access through to post-market surveillance and ongoing compliance.

The collaboration will see Maytal work with PHTA's SMEs and innovators, providing access to device certification and validation services, training, skills development and knowledge exchange in areas including materials testing, diagnostics and advanced manufacturing.

Professor Gino Martini, CEO of PHTA, said: "This exciting partnership brings together PHTA's medtech design, optimisation and prototyping expertise with Maytal's extensive track record in helping pioneering businesses to overcome regulatory and market entry barriers."

"It reflects PHTA's commitment to providing expert commercialisation support to our residents and collaborators, and we're looking forward to pursuing joint initiatives in the field of medical device development and registration."

Maurizio Pantaleoni, founder at Maytal, said: "For many medical device innovators, regulatory readiness is one of the greatest hurdles on the journey to market. Drawing on extensive sector expertise, we help companies to better understand this process and build strong foundations for development, validation and commercialisation."



Professor Gino Martini

"We see enormous potential in the companies already working within PHTA and the wider Midlands medtech market and are excited about the benefits to patients that will result from their innovations."

The rise of operational cyber

By ANDY HORKAN, CEO, Cyber Tzar

When most people think about cyber security, they picture hackers, ransomware or stolen data. While those risks remain very real, they only tell part of the story. Increasingly, cyber is no longer just about protecting information. It is about keeping businesses running.

For a region like the West Midlands, that distinction matters.

Our economy has always been built on making things. From advanced manufacturing and automotive to aerospace, defence, life sciences and logistics, the industries that define our region depend on factories, laboratories, production lines, medical equipment and increasingly connected supply chains, not simply office IT. Manufacturing is now one of the world's most targeted sectors for cyber attacks, while increasing digitalisation means disruption can spread rapidly through interconnected supply chains.

This is where I believe we need to start thinking differently.

Rather than thinking of cyber as a technology discipline, we should start thinking of it as 'operational cyber'. It is the practical application of cyber security to the people, systems and supply chains that keep businesses operating every day.

It may sound like a subtle distinction, but it fundamentally changes the conversation.

Operational cyber isn't about the latest headline. It's about keeping production moving, hospitals operating, supply chains flowing and businesses trading.

As a CEO, I don't see cyber as an IT issue but as a business issue. Every investment in resilience protects our customers, our people, our reputation and the trust placed in us. That mindset is becoming essential for every leadership team.

Across the West Midlands, this is already reality. Manufacturing plants, hospitals, logistics centres and laboratories all depend on connected operational systems. Even businesses that would never describe themselves as technology companies now rely on digital infrastructure to keep operating. As a result, operational resilience and cyber resilience have become inseparable.

The West Midlands economy is built on interconnected supply chains. Manufacturers, healthcare providers, logistics firms and defence programmes all

depend upon networks of suppliers, many of them SMEs. Every organisation is part of somebody else's supply chain. Attackers know this and frequently target suppliers as the easiest route into larger organisations.

Supply chain resilience is therefore no longer a procurement issue or a compliance exercise. It has become a business necessity.

The biggest improvements often come from getting the fundamentals right. Cyber essentials, strong identity management, secure backups, multi-factor authentication and supplier assurance remain among the most effective investments any organisation can make. Operational cyber isn't about perfection. It's about progress.

No single organisation will secure the West Midlands on its own. It requires businesses, universities, public sector organisations and specialist cyber providers working together to raise capability across the regional economy.

One of the most encouraging developments over recent years has been the growth of genuinely collaborative initiatives that focus on practical outcomes rather than simply raising awareness.

That is why we established the West Midlands Cyber Hub: to bring together businesses, educators, innovators and cyber professionals to help organisations improve their resilience, develop talent and create new opportunities for growth. Its purpose is simple: strengthen the cyber capability of the wider regional economy.

Alongside the hub, the West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre continues to play an invaluable role helping organisations, particularly SMEs, understand their cyber risks and take practical steps to improve their security. Their work shows that resilience grows through trusted, practical support.

Partnerships with academia are equally important. Working with the University of Wolverhampton, we have already helped more than 35 SMEs improve their cyber resilience through practical cyber clinics, providing straightforward support that organisations can implement immediately. We are delighted to be continuing this work.

If you're wondering where to start, don't overcomplicate it. Start the conversation. The West Midlands Cyber Hub and the West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre

are there to help businesses navigate the journey, connect with the right people and turn good intentions into practical action.

As this edition goes to print, the West Midlands Cyber Hub is launching its Student for Student programme, connecting students with regional businesses. Whether you're a business, a student or an organisation looking to collaborate, you'll find a growing community at WMCyberHub.com. We'll also shortly publish the Cyber in the West Midlands Strategic Review, helping shape the region's next phase of cyber growth.

The West Midlands has always succeeded because brilliant businesses rarely innovate alone. Manufacturers, universities, entrepreneurs and engineers have spent generations solving practical problems together. Cyber should be no different.

As artificial intelligence, automation and connected infrastructure continue to reshape every sector of our economy, the demand for Operational Cyber capability will only increase. The future belongs to people who understand operations and cyber together: engineers who understand security, healthcare professionals who understand resilience, manufacturers who understand digital risk and leaders who recognise resilience as a competitive advantage.

That is an enormous opportunity for our region.

The West Midlands isn't simply adopting cyber. It is becoming a region where cyber enables every industry that matters.

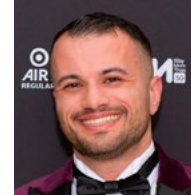
The West Midlands is uniquely positioned because cyber is woven throughout advanced manufacturing, defence, life sciences, financial services and critical infrastructure. It underpins today's economy while enabling tomorrow's.

If we continue to invest in practical cyber skills, strengthen collaboration and help more organisations adopt the fundamentals of good cyber resilience, we can establish the West Midlands as the UK's leading region for operational cyber.

The West Midlands has spent generations building things that matter to Britain and the world.

Now we have the opportunity to become the region that protects them better than anyone else.

That is the opportunity of 'operational cyber'.





Why high performance cultures break down under pressure in life sciences organisations

By OLIVER DEASY, people development partner at NFP,
an Aon company

High performance in life sciences organisations rarely breaks down because people aren't capable. It breaks down when scientific, regulatory and commercial pressure increases, but the systems supporting performance don't evolve with it. What looks like a talent or execution issue is often a design issue.

Why this matters

Life sciences organisations are operating in one of the most demanding environments of any sector. You are balancing complex research pipelines, rising clinical trial costs, intense regulatory scrutiny, commercialisation pressures and constant pressure to innovate.

At the same time, talent shortages, evolving skill requirements and workforce expectations are stretching people and organisations further.

In response, the instinct is often to push harder. Accelerate timelines. Increase output. Drive teams to maintain progress despite constraints. But pressure alone is not a strategy.

And in life sciences environments, where complexity is already high, pressure tends to amplify existing weaknesses rather than solve them.

The illusion of sustained performance

There is a version of high performance that life sciences organisations often hold onto. Programmes progress. Trials advance. Milestones are met. Funding is secured. Products move closer to market. On the surface, performance looks strong, but this view focuses almost entirely on outcomes.

It rarely reflects what is happening

beneath the surface; the intensity required to maintain pace; the trade-offs between speed and quality; the increasing burden on regulatory, clinical and research teams.

When performance is judged purely on outputs, it creates a false sense of stability. It suggests that what is working now will continue to work, even as complexity, regulatory demand and resource pressure increase.

In reality, those conditions are changing faster than most systems are designed to handle.

When pressure exposes the system

Pressure is not inherently negative in life sciences organisations. In the right context, it sharpens focus, accelerates decision-making and drives scientific, clinical and commercial progress.

But when the system around performance is not designed to support that pressure, behaviour begins to shift. Teams become more siloed, focusing on their part of the pipeline rather than the end-to-end outcome.

Researchers prioritise speed to meet programme milestones, sometimes at the expense of knowledge transfer or collaboration. Regulatory and quality functions become reactive, dealing with volume rather than shaping process design.

This is not a failure of effort. In many life sciences organisations, effort actually increases under pressure. The issue is that effort becomes misaligned, and when alignment breaks down, performance fragments.

The reality of life sciences pressure

The pressure facing life sciences employers is both structural and sustained.

Organisations are navigating:

- Increasing clinical trial complexity and operational burden
- Regulatory environments that demand more traceability, oversight and documentation
- Funding constraints and cost pressures slowing innovation cycles
- Persistent talent shortages and skills gaps across specialist roles
- Growing expectations to integrate digital, data and AI capabilities across research, clinical development, operations and commercial teams.

At the same time, teams are expected to move faster, innovate more and deliver better outcomes for patients.

These pressures are not temporary; they are part of how the sector now operates, and without deliberate design, they create environments where performance becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

The system behind the behaviour

One of the most common mistakes organisations make is misdiagnosing performance challenges.

In life sciences environments, where expertise is highly specialised, it is easy to attribute issues to capability, experience or individual performance. But behaviour is shaped by the system.

If research teams are measured primarily on milestone delivery, they will prioritise speed.



If regulatory timelines are compressed without additional support, teams will become reactive.

If workloads increase without adjustment, fatigue will build across critical roles.

Over time, these patterns create environments where:

- Knowledge sharing reduces
- Decision-making becomes shorter-term
- Collaboration declines across functions
- Performance becomes inconsistent

In highly complex scientific environments, these effects compound quickly, and what looks like declining performance is often a system struggling to cope with growing demand.

Why intensity alone is not sustainable

In the short term, life sciences organisations can maintain performance through sheer intensity.

Teams work longer hours. Scientists push programmes forward under pressure. Regulatory teams absorb increasing workload.

This often works for a period, but can trigger a costly domino effect:

- Sustained intensity leads to fatigue
- Fatigue leads to errors, slower decision-making and reduced engagement
- And over time, this undermines both productivity and innovation
- In a sector where precision, collaboration and long-term thinking are critical, this creates significant risk

What once appeared to be a high-performing environment begins to feel unstable.

The additional risk of talent pressure

The challenge is compounded by workforce dynamics across life sciences.

The supply of specialist talent is not keeping pace with the sector's rapid growth, and many organisations are already struggling to fill roles or retain experienced professionals.

At the same time, workforce expectations are shifting. Flexibility, development and purpose are increasingly important in attracting and keeping talent.

When high pressure environments are combined with limited talent pipelines, organisations become more sensitive to performance disruption.

Losing key individuals or overloading critical teams can have outsized impact on delivery timelines, compliance and innovation.

This makes sustainable performance design even more important.

Four tips for designing performance that lasts

The life sciences organisations that sustain performance take a different approach - they recognise that pressure is inevitable. However, how their system responds to that pressure is a design choice.

1. This starts with clarity - clear priorities across research, regulatory and commercial functions reduce friction and misalignment. When teams understand not just what they need to deliver, but how their work connects to the wider system, performance becomes more coordinated.

2. It also requires alignment. Incentives, targets and measures need to reinforce collaboration rather than competition between functions. In complex pipelines, no single team delivers outcomes alone.

3. Workload design is equally critical, ensuring that pace is realistic, and that teams have the capacity to absorb complexity, is essential for maintaining quality and consistency over time.

4. Finally, organisations need to recognise that workforce diversity is a strength, in terms of both skills and behaviours. High-performing life sciences systems are designed to support different ways of working, different expertise and different contributions across the lifecycle of innovation.

Moving from effort to design

The core shift is simple, but often overlooked. Sustained high performance is not about continually asking more from your people, but about building systems that allow people to perform consistently under pressure.

In life sciences organisations, where the stakes are high and complexity is unavoidable, this shift is even more important.

Because when systems are well designed:

- Pressure sharpens performance rather than distorting it
- Collaboration improves rather than fragments
- Innovation accelerates rather than stalls
- And most importantly, performance becomes repeatable.

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Carmen Watson, Phil Innes and Lachlan Roach



Mark Taylor

Barclays in Birmingham

Guests were treated to top-notch drinks and canapes as city centre restaurant Trillium played host to a 'Barclays in Birmingham' event earlier in the summer.

Barclays' regional vice-president Paul Faulkner and the senior team outlined the bank's plans for growth, commitment to the West Midlands, and its aim to deepen its engagement with the regional community.

Business leaders from the West Midlands were among the guests, who heard that Barclays has extended its lease at One Snow Hill for another 10 years.



Paul Faulkner, Jason Wouhra and Doug Wright



Henrietta Brealey, Charlie Blakemore, Mandy Haque and Andy Dawson



George Romanenco, Saty Kaur, Ian Reynolds and James Bruton-Gibney



Nasir Awan, Derek Anderson and Doug Wright



Neil Rami in conversation with Lachlan Roach



Stuart Foster and Paul Faulkner



Shantel Claire and Jayne Hussey



Narinder Paul and Dan Whiting

Paul Faulkner and Phil Innes addressing the guests



Why IP matters

By NATASHA CHICK, director of enforcement, business and international at the Intellectual Property Office

Every venture starts with an idea. But turning that idea into something customers value, takes judgement, persistence, and hard work. In doing so, businesses create valuable assets worth protecting.

In Birmingham and across the West Midlands, those valuable assets can be seen in businesses of every kind. Whether you run a manufacturing firm in Smethwick, a tech start-up in Digbeth, a food business in the Jewellery Quarter or a professional services firm elsewhere in the region, what you create deserves to be recognised, and protected.

That is where intellectual property comes in. Intellectual property is a way of describing the creations, ideas and distinctive assets that help give your business its unique identity and value. Understanding what you have, what can be protected and what to do next can help you safeguard what makes your business different and build a stronger foundation for growth.

As the UK government body responsible for trade marks, patents, designs, and copyright, the Intellectual Property Office supports organisations of all sizes across the country, including many here in the West Midlands, to understand and protect their IP.

For many business owners, thinking about IP doesn't feel like a priority and can be easy to put off, especially when there are so many day-to-day demands competing for attention.

But taking the time to think about your intellectual property, understand what you have, and decide how best to protect it is an investment in your business. It can help you turn the products, business identity and know-how that set you apart into valuable assets that support your business to grow and bring in revenue.

The good news is that there is a range of practical support available to help firms recognise their IP, protect what they have built, and plan their next steps with confidence.

Here are a few points every business should know.

You probably have more intellectual property than you realise

Every business owns or uses some form of IP. Your name and logo, website and images, product designs, software, distinctive processes and know-how may each be protected by IP rights in different ways.

A useful starting point is to look at the parts of your business that customers, suppliers, or competitors would recognise. That might be your trading name, packaging, website, product shape, software, recipe, process, or training materials.

Some of those assets may be protected automatically, some may need registration, and some may be best protected by keeping them confidential. The important thing is to identify them early, so they can be managed like any other valuable business asset.

Copyright, for example, arises automatically when an original work is created. That means your website content, product photography and marketing materials may already be protected from the moment they are made. Trade marks can protect more than names and logos; they can also protect slogans, distinctive colours and even sounds. The appearance of a product can be protected through a registered design. A technical invention may be patentable. A formula, recipe, method, or customer insight that gives you an advantage may be a trade secret, protected through confidentiality agreements and the law of confidence.

Think about everything that makes your business distinctive. Much of that may be intellectual property.

Once you have identified what you have, the next step is to ask some practical questions: who owns it, how is it protected, could someone else be trying to use it, and could anyone try to stop you using it?

The business case is strong

Your business may have more valuable ideas, designs or know-how than you realise. Understanding your IP can help you turn them into income – by licensing a product to another business, building

trust through a stronger brand, keeping know-how away from competitors, or giving others confidence that your business is worth backing.

This matters for any business thinking about its next stage of growth. Investors increasingly look at IP as an indicator of business value and future potential. For small business owners, that might mean being able to show that their brand is protected, that a new product design is registered, or that a key process is documented and kept confidential. These steps can help show that the business has valuable assets under control, giving others greater confidence.

Common misconceptions can be costly

A Companies House registration does not give the same protection as a registered trade mark. Although you may have some rights in a business name, they can be harder to prove and rely on. If your name is important to your business, it is worth thinking about registering a trade mark. It gives you clearer rights and can make it easier to stop others using a similar name or logo. It can also become a commercial asset – you may be able to license, sell or use it as part of the value of your business.

Another consideration is ownership when working with freelancers and contractors. If you commission a website, logo, software or other creative work, the copyright does not necessarily transfer to your business automatically. Without a written agreement assigning the IP, the copyright may remain with the creator. A simple agreement at the outset can avoid difficult and expensive questions later.

It is also sensible to check that you are not infringing someone else's rights before investing heavily in a brand name, product design, or invention. The IPO maintains searchable databases of registered trade marks, patents and designs, and early due diligence can prevent much bigger problems later on. If in any doubt, you should always seek advice from an IP professional.

These checks do not need to slow

a business down. In many cases, they are simply part of good housekeeping, making sure contracts say who owns what, checking whether a name or design is already in use, and keeping confidential information secure before it is shared.

Thinking about selling overseas?

For businesses with international ambitions, it is important to remember that IP protection is territorial.

A UK trade mark protects you in the UK; it does not protect you overseas. If you are considering selling into the EU, the US or further afield, it is crucial to think about IP protection in those markets before you enter them. This is especially important before attending overseas trade shows, appointing distributors, launching a website aimed at those customers, or entering supply agreements in new markets.

The IPO has a network of international IP advisors who can offer guidance on local IP issues in key countries around the world. Seeking support early can help businesses avoid problems that are much harder to resolve once trading is under way.

Support is closer than you think

Starting to understand and protect your IP does not have to be expensive or time-consuming. The IPO offers guidance and a number of free online tools for businesses.

Our new 'Get IP' step-by-step guide is designed to cut through the complexity

and help you answer three simple questions: what do I have, what can I protect, and what should I do next? It is free to access and written without legal jargon, so anyone can use it with confidence.

The Business & IP Centre at the Library of Birmingham offers free or low-cost one-to-one guidance, workshops and access to IP professionals. The IPO also runs events across the country, including Birmingham and the West Midlands, where businesses can speak directly with our trained advisers.

Our IP masterclass is a two-day, accredited course delivered by IPO specialists. It gives you practical knowledge to protect your ideas and avoid costly mistakes. Ninety eight per cent of attendees said the course improved their understanding of IP.

We also work closely with regional business support providers like Business Growth West Midlands to make sure small businesses can easily access IP guidance when they need it.

We would always recommend seeking advice from a qualified IP professional, particularly if you've got specific or complex issues. The Chartered Institute of Patent Attorneys and the Chartered Institute of Trade Mark Attorneys are recognised UK professional bodies that can connect businesses with qualified specialists based across Birmingham and the West Midlands. They can help you access practical advice on how best to protect, manage and make the most of your IP.

Start making your intellectual property work for you

Your brand, ideas, product designs and know-how are a vital part of what makes your business yours. Understanding your IP is one of the most practical ways to look after what you have built, create commercial value and unlock new opportunities.

And if your business is already up and running, it is never too late to start. Taking stock of your IP now can help you protect your most valuable assets, reduce risk, and help find new ways to generate income.

The IPO's business engagement team works with people running businesses at all stages, from early start-ups to established companies, helping them understand their IP and find the right support. If you are not sure where to begin, we can help you work out what to do next. If this article has prompted a question, contact business.engagement@ipo.gov.uk – we'll be pleased to talk you through the help available.

■ The IPO helps UK businesses to protect their ideas and make the most of opportunities at home and overseas.

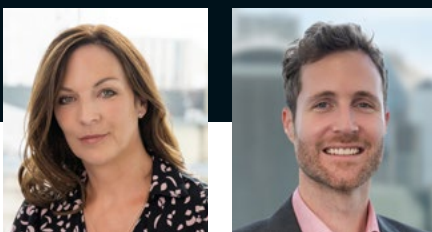
With more than 20 years' experience across IP and wider economic policy, Natasha Chick brings a practical understanding of how IP can support growth, innovation and trade. Her role includes helping businesses develop IP skills, navigate international markets, and respond to the threats of counterfeit goods and piracy.





The value of IP

Ten things every SME should know about intellectual property



By REBECCA TEW and ADAM GILBERTSON,
partners at Mathys & Squire

In 1971, graphic design student, Carolyn Davidson was paid 35 dollars to design a logo for a small sports shoe company. That logo was the Nike swoosh, and the brand it represents is now estimated to be worth tens of billions. Not a bad return on 35 dollars!

The swoosh is a striking reminder of something many business owners overlook: the most valuable things a company owns are often intangible. Your brand, your inventions, your designs, your know-how. Collectively, these are your intellectual property (IP) rights, the value of which lies with the power to exclude others from a market. The bigger and more lucrative that market, the more that power is worth.

That is why IP is best thought of not as legal paperwork, but as a commercial tool. It can protect your sales, deter competitors, attract investors, generate licensing income and even reduce your tax bill. Equally, if left unprotected, it can be copied, stolen or inadvertently given away.

So, whether you are a founder sketching

out your first prototype or an established business eyeing new markets, here are ten things worth knowing about IP.

1. You own more IP than you realise

Every business creates IP, often without noticing. Your company name and logo (trade marks), the shape and appearance of your products (designs), your inventions and technical improvements (patents), your website, software and marketing materials (copyright), and your internal processes, and know-how (trade secrets) may all be valuable assets. The first step in any IP strategy is simply taking stock of what you have.

2. IP is a commercial tool, not a legal formality

A patent is not a trophy for the office wall. It is a public statement of innovation, ownership, a deterrent to competitors, a negotiating tool in licensing discussions, and

an asset that can be bought, sold, licensed or even mortgaged. Investors understand this well: robust, protected IP is often one of the first things they look for as an indication that a business is defensible. If you are planning to raise investment, expect your IP position to come under the microscope.

3. File before you disclose

This is the one that catches people out most often. In most countries, any public or non-confidential disclosure of an invention before a patent application is filed will destroy its patentability. That includes investor pitches, trade shows, academic papers, demonstrations and that enthusiastic post on LinkedIn. A handful of countries (notably the US) offer a limited grace period in limited circumstances, but you cannot (and should not!) rely on it everywhere. The golden rule for any company with international ambitions is simple: file first, talk later. And if you must talk first, do so under a confidentiality agreement.

4. Your brand may be your most valuable asset

Customers buy from brands they recognise and trust. A reputation can take years to build, but days to lose if someone starts trading under a confusingly similar name. Registering a trade mark gives you far stronger rights than relying on use or reputation alone, and it is one of the more affordable forms of registered protection. For the price of a decent laptop, you can secure the exclusive right to your name in the UK market. Few investments offer better value.

5. Do not overlook registered designs

Design rights protect the visual appearance of a product, its shape, configuration and ornamentation, and they are relatively quick and inexpensive to obtain compared to patents. If the look of your product is a USP and matters to your customers, a registered design can be a highly cost-effective way to keep imitators at bay. Most countries allow filing for a period of 6 – 12 months after you first publicly disclose it, essentially giving you time to test the market before registering the design. Any businesses that assume they have "nothing patentable" are sitting on perfectly protectable designs.

6. Not everything should be patented

Sometimes, the best protection is silence, especially as registering IP rights puts information into the public domain. A patent application is published for all (including your competitors) to read. Where an innovation cannot easily be reverse-engineered, such as a manufacturing process or certain algorithms, it may be more valuable kept as a trade secret. A famous example is the Coca-Cola recipe, still confidential after more than a century. The right answer depends on your technology and your market, which is exactly the sort of judgement call worth discussing with an adviser early on.

7. Check who actually owns your IP

Inventorship is a question of fact: who actually devised the invention? Ownership then flows from there, and the chain of title can be surprisingly complicated. IP created by employees generally belongs to the business, but the same is not automatically true of consultants, agencies or freelance

developers. If an external developer built your software or a freelancer designed your logo, you may not own it unless your contract explicitly says so. So, founders and business owners need to ask the question and consider whether background IP developed during a previous job or research role belongs to a former employer or university? Investors will certainly ask during due diligence, so it's worth having a good answer.

8. IP rights stop at the border

There is no such thing as a worldwide patent. IP rights are territorial: e.g. a UK patent or trade mark registration protects you in the UK only, and each country has its own application, examination process and associated costs. The good news is that international filing systems can make life easier. For example, a single international (PCT) patent application holds your place in over 150 countries and defers the expensive country-by-country decisions for around 30 months, while the European Patent Office allows one European application to access protection across the majority of Europe. Similarly, a trade mark can be protected with a single application across all of the EU countries.

The question of obtaining registered IP rights is not just whether to protect, but also where. Costs scale with the number of territories, and even the largest multinational companies don't file for protection everywhere. It is generally advisable to focus on filing where your largest markets are or are likely to be, where your product is made, and where your competitors sit. A focused portfolio in the right territories is typically worth far more than thin coverage everywhere.

9. IP can generate revenue, not just prevent losses

Licensing, franchising and strategic partnerships can all turn protected IP into recurring revenue, and some businesses earn substantial sums from technology they never manufacture, or even use, themselves. A well-managed portfolio also strengthens your hand in negotiations and can materially increase your company's valuation when the time comes to raise funds or sell.

10. IP can cut your tax bill

Patent Box is a scheme that reduces corporation tax on profits attributable to patented inventions. Interestingly, the most useful patents for Patent Box purposes are

not always the most technically impressive ones; sometimes a modest patent covering a pervasive product feature delivers the greatest benefit. If your business pays UK corporation tax and produces/sells innovative products, this alone can justify the cost of obtaining a patent.

The big picture

Intangible assets now account for around 92% of the market value of the S&P 500, according to Ocean Tomo's long-running Intangible Asset Market Value Study, and IP forms a significant proportion of that figure. Fifty years ago, this relationship was almost exactly reversed. Value has migrated from what can be touched to what can be thought. Businesses that thrive over the next decade will likely be those with the best products while simultaneously recognising their ideas as assets, protecting them deliberately, and putting them to work commercially.

So, to get started with IP:

- Audit what you have: brands, designs, inventions, software, know-how
- File patent applications before any public disclosure
- Clear and register your trade mark early; it is cost-effective protection
- Check contracts with freelancers and consultants transfer IP to you
- Protect where it matters commercially, not everywhere
- Ask whether Patent Box could reduce your corporation tax

Bonus fact: Carolyn Davidson did rather better in the end. In 1983, Nike gave her a gold swoosh ring and shares in the company. Proof, perhaps, that good IP has a habit of rewarding those who value it!

*Mathys & Squire is an intellectual property (IP) powerhouse that puts its specialist knowledge to strengthen and secure one of the most valuable strategic assets to any modern business – intellectual property.

Mathys & Squire has over 100 attorneys (both training and qualified) and a dedicated IP consulting team across offices in Birmingham, London, Cambridge, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford, Luxembourg, Munich and Paris, as well as teams based in China and Japan.

Located on Colmore Row, our Birmingham-based attorneys bring expertise in all areas of IP and offer tailored services across the Midlands region, supported by the depth and range of technical and legal expertise across the wider firm.

Contact our team today

Rebecca Tew | Partner
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Mathys & Squire

A new chapter in Forresters' 140-year story

profile

Forresters has been a part of Europe's intellectual property scene for almost a century and a half. Change is nothing new to the firm; things certainly looked a lot different when their first office opened in Birmingham in 1884.

Since then, Forresters has expanded, with offices in London, Liverpool, and Munich, whilst proudly maintaining their presence at home in Birmingham.

The latest change came earlier this year, when in April, Forresters relocated their Birmingham office to a new home at 45 Church Street. For a firm that prides itself on supporting clients at the forefront of innovation, it was important to maintain the presence in the heart of Birmingham's business district.

The stylish new office space symbolises growth and modernisation across the region, and its central location underlines the firm's commitment to their clients across the West Midlands.

Forresters has worked closely with many of Birmingham's biggest innovators: both driving the development of technology and building household brand names. For Birmingham's thriving community of start-ups and SMEs, Forresters' evolution is a reminder that intellectual property has been central to our region's story.

A heritage rooted in British innovation

Since the firm's founder, Charles Ketley, first opened his doors, the firm has worked alongside Birmingham's industry through periods of technological change, from steam power to semiconductors, and heavy machinery to machine learning.

Over the decades, Forresters has supported inventors, engineers, designers, and entrepreneurs through industrial shifts, globalisation, and the digital revolution.



The firm's archives contain stories of early digital pioneers, manufacturing innovators, and consumer brands that shaped the 20th century, many of whom still rely on Forresters to safeguard their innovations.

Times are changing, and a city that once took a lead in automotive and manufacturing technologies, now boasts an array of universities and technology parks. A growing scene of innovation in computer science and medical technology has developed, with artificial intelligence now commonly being key to advances in these spaces.

The modern entrepreneurs

It is not only technology that has seen significant change over the life of the company; the nature of entrepreneurship

has changed dramatically. Supported by modern software platforms, and with an ever-expanding knowledge base available at the click of a button, the rate of innovation is increasing sharply across most sectors.

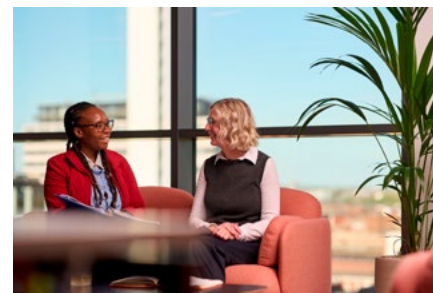
New products and services originate from all walks of life, and inventions are no longer solely the domain of academic departments or large R&D teams. The team at Forresters engage with inventors from all backgrounds, from those at multinationals with research departments, to hobbyist inventors and students developing project ideas. With an approachable ethos, they can regularly be found 'out and about' in the city, attending events across all sectors, and aiming to seek out and support Birmingham's future entrepreneurs.

A new home designed for collaboration

Forresters' new office represents a significant investment in people, culture, and the way modern professionals work.

The space blends contemporary design with subtle nods to the firm's heritage, including books with an original signature and a historical stamp of their founders. The result is an environment that is both professional and welcoming, a place where clients and colleagues alike feel at ease.

Oktra, a renowned workplace design company, was appointed to lead the fit-out. Oktra worked closely with Forresters' Business and Projects Executive, Chrissy



McKenzie, who coordinated the project internally alongside a working group. Together, they designed a workspace tailored to the firm's needs as they are now, while carefully considering what the future holds.

Andy Burke, project director at Oktra, said:

This project has been a total collaboration from start to finish, with our design and commercial teams working closely with Forresters and their working group, to understand how their new workplace needed to perform to support Forresters as they continue to grow and succeed into the future.

This collaborative process has been a key factor in the success of the project, and we are delighted to have worked with Forresters to create their workplace for the future.

A space that reflects a modern culture

The nature of intellectual property work has changed dramatically in recent years. Hybrid working, digital collaboration, and increasingly complex technologies require new ways of thinking and working. The new office is designed with these points in focus.

Highquality video conferencing facilities support seamless communication with clients and colleagues across the UK, Europe and beyond. Flexible workspaces allow teams to adapt to different project

“Innovation has always been Birmingham's strength. With its new home at 45 Church Street, Forresters is ready to help the next generation of innovators protect their ideas and shape the future.”

needs; a blend of open plan areas and quieter zones allows colleagues to choose an environment suited to the task at hand.

The office has a large glass frontage at either side, and it was important to make the most of the natural light. Care has been taken to align open plan areas with the brightest sections of the floorplan, to ensure that everyone benefits, and sharing the impressive views of Birmingham's evolving skyline.

The layout has been designed to encourage interaction, with walkways through the office being designed purposefully to lead colleagues into contact with each other as they move between areas. Perhaps most importantly, the office reflects the belief that the best ideas emerge when people feel connected, supported, and inspired, working together as one team.

An important factor in the new office's design was actively promoting employee well-being. With features such as live plants, natural timber finishes, and a soothing interior palette of neutral colours, including terracotta, charcoal and aubergine, the decor creates a positive, calm and comfortable space for employees and visiting clients. The new Wellbeing Room is a key part of this: a quiet, comfortable place for private conversations, moments of reflection, or for Forresters' Mental Health First Aiders to offer support to colleagues facing challenges.

Sustainability and giving back

Sustainability and community support played a major role in the transition from Forresters' previous home at Rutland House. In addition to recycling furniture and equipment, the firm donated office furniture to local charities and organisations, including Girlguiding (Wombourne & Blakeley District) and Reynolds Cross School in Solihull, a special school for pupils aged 3-19 with severe learning difficulties and life-limiting conditions. Headteacher Dawn Brettell at Reynolds Cross School said:

We were so grateful to Forresters for thinking of Reynolds Cross School when they were looking to re-home furniture from their Edmund Street offices.

The difference this furniture has made to our working environment is amazing and, more importantly, it has ensured that essential funds can be re-directed to where

it is needed the most and can be used for crucial equipment and resources for our pupils to ensure they continue to flourish.

People at the heart of the firm

Forresters' managing partner, Matt Shaw, is proud to be at the core of the Birmingham team. He said:

I've been with Forresters since the start of my career, over 30 years ago, and I've seen many changes, along the way – but whilst the turnaround times and the technology we use would be unimaginable to a trainee back in 1994, some things have stayed the same.

Chiefly, that's the importance we place on all of our staff (many of whom have also been with us for decades), in whatever role they play: we simply couldn't do what we do without a loyal and experienced support base, and the new office design has everyone firmly in mind.

Specifically (and unusually!) we located most of the internal offices away from the large windows, so that as many people as possible benefit from the plentiful natural light. We also worked hard on the open, communal spaces – which I'm delighted to say has encouraged much more interaction between us, on both social and professional levels.

The firm invests heavily in training, particularly for trainees working toward qualification as patent or trade mark attorneys. This commitment ensures that Forresters continues to attract and develop top talent; people who combine technical expertise with the confidence to speak plainly with clients to provide clear advice.

The new Birmingham office strengthens this culture. Its open, flexible design encourages conversation and knowledge sharing, while quiet spaces support focused work.

A landmark move for a historic firm

Forresters' new Birmingham office is a bridge between their 140year heritage and the opportunities that lie ahead. Investment in Birmingham continues to soar, and Forresters is proud to be part of the city's growth.

Innovation has always been Birmingham's strength. With its new home at 45 Church Street, Forresters is ready to help the next generation of innovators protect their ideas and shape the future.

profile



Using intellectual property to grow and scale your business

By EMMA JOHNSON, a partner at Forresters

In today's knowledge-driven economy, Intellectual Property can be one of the most powerful tools available for business growth, market expansion, and long-term value creation. Whether it's a brand, invention, design, software platform, or proprietary process, intellectual property, if carefully managed, can help businesses build competitive advantage and unlock new opportunities.

An asset for growth

Intellectual property should not be viewed simply as a legal safeguard. When managed strategically, it becomes a powerful commercial asset that supports expansion, creates new revenue streams, strengthens franchising opportunities, attracts investment, and enhances overall business value.

Registered rights provide evidence of ownership and exclusivity, demonstrating that a business has created something unique and has taken steps to protect it. This can reduce competitive risk and increase confidence among customers, investors and acquirers.

IP may represent a substantial proportion of enterprise value; a strong portfolio can strengthen valuation during fundraising, mergers and acquisitions, or succession planning.

Small businesses and start-ups may develop and manage IP in a somewhat passive way. As a business expands, a proactive strategy becomes essential, for protection and sustainable commercial growth.

Knowing the IP a business has, needs or wants, is an important part of analysing the strength of the business, understanding possible opportunities, risks and threats, and future planning. Carrying out regular IP audits can help to verify that the business is on track to meet targets.

IP permeates every aspect of a business and may underpin significant commercial decisions. Involving personnel from across the organisation when developing IP strategies is beneficial, to ensure that all departments are aware of developments and challenges that could boost or hinder growth or progress.

*Emma Johnson is a Birmingham-based partner at Forresters who specialises in complex patent drafting, freedom-to-operate reviews, and high-stakes opposition work before the European Patent Office. She has been recognised as a leading IP practitioner by World IP Review in both 2024 and 2025.

Attracting investment and partnerships

A strong IP portfolio signals innovation, market differentiation, and growth potential. It demonstrates that a business has invested in developing assets that competitors cannot easily replicate, making the business attractive to strategic partners.

Investors usually undertake due diligence checks, assessing whether intellectual property is properly owned, registered, and protected. Businesses demonstrating ownership of a well-managed portfolio and a coherent IP strategy often find themselves in a stronger position when negotiating investment terms.

Using intellectual property as a revenue stream

Many businesses overlook the potential of IP to provide income. Licensing IP allows a business to grant permission for others to use assets in exchange for commercial benefits. This enables revenue generation without the costs and risks associated with manufacturing, distribution, or entering new markets directly. It can also accelerate growth by leveraging capabilities, networks, and resources of third-party partners.

Licensing may provide access to markets that would otherwise be difficult to reach and can create recurring revenue streams that improve profitability.

Supporting franchising models

IP is fundamental to most successful franchise systems. Often, a franchise's value is built on the strength of its brands, operating methods, marketing materials and business processes - all of which may be protectable.

Strong IP rights help to increase franchisee interest and confidence. Without robust protection, franchisors may struggle to maintain consistency, quality, and brand reputation across locations.

Businesses considering franchising

should ensure their intellectual property assets are properly identified, protected, and managed before launching a network.

Expanding overseas

Expanding into international markets presents exciting growth opportunities, but also introduces new risks. Many IP rights are territorial - registration in one jurisdiction generally does not provide automatic protection elsewhere. Before entering a new market, businesses should review their IP strategy and secure appropriate protection in the countries where they intend to operate.

An international IP strategy can make market expansion smoother by providing legal certainty when working with distributors, partners, manufacturers, etc. Businesses that invest in protecting their intellectual property before expansion are often better positioned to build trust and establish a strong market presence overseas.

Freedom-to-operate checks are important when considering entering new markets. Existing IP rights may present barriers to entry; therefore, a search should be carried out and the level of legal and commercial risk presented by rights discovered in the search carefully assessed. The results may be used in further developing a growth model and business plans.

Monitoring of third-party activities is vital, and appropriate enforcement action should be taken, when necessary. Effective management may involve customs registrations, online monitoring tools, consulting local legal counsel, and coordinated litigation, where appropriate.

Whilst there is no single solution that suits every organisation, businesses seeking to grow should treat intellectual property as a strategic business function rather than an afterthought. Early planning, market-specific protection, robust contractual frameworks, and ongoing enforcement can significantly reduce risk while strengthening international competitiveness.



V-IP treatment

The growing importance of intellectual property in corporate transactions

Intellectual property is an intangible asset. You can't touch it, feel it or often see it: yet intellectual property is absolutely critical to the DNA of any business both for gauging future earnings and preventing others from copying or infringing on a company's ideas, products or services.

Most commonly recognised as copyrights, patents and trademarks, these are actually the mechanisms to protect IP. Intellectual property is much broader and can capture anything created 'by the mind', such as digital assets, design rights, processes, logos or proprietary knowledge. It is wide ranging and the true value is often overlooked, particularly as all these factors contribute to create a brand, the customer facing recognition of any company.

As companies increase in scale, internationalise and operate in a highly competitive global market, ensuring businesses own and protect their IP has never been more important. This importance is now being assessed and valued in corporate transactions through dedicated diligence programmes.

IP due diligence never used to be a thing

Historically, IP due diligence was wrapped into legal workstreams to check what IP was held by a company, however today it now forms a distinct workstream often provided by specialist providers that can analyse the form of the IP.

IP due diligence is increasingly critical to any corporate transaction, in part because of a seemingly renewed recognition of its importance to the brand of the business



By SIMON HEATH

but also as a risk mitigation strategy. With data and technology at the heart of many businesses, the IP landscape is also becoming increasingly complex which requires analytical investigation.

The process is much more than a simple audit of what IP is held. It is an investigation into the strengths and weaknesses of the IP, who owns it, how it is applied and how it is protected. In addition, the diligence focuses on how robust the protections are and whether they can be challenged domestically or internationally.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery

Whether its Aldi 'copying' M&S for its Colin the Caterpillar cakes or Apple vs Samsung which led to \$5 billion damages in favour of Apple, IP protection is being taken very seriously. Breaches can obviously be extremely costly but trading reliance on unprotected IP can be the most expensive and lead to the fundamental collapse of a business. Kodak didn't protect digital cameras, MySpace didn't protect the

concept of a social media platform and the inventor of the magnetic stripe on cards incorrectly filed his patent.

Furthermore, all the protections in the world are sometimes not enough. There has been an increasing trend of state-sponsored IP theft that involves foreign governments seeking to gain a competitive advantage by using espionage and forced technology transfers to circumvent IP law. Russia, Iran, North Korea and China have had accusations of co-ordinated state-sponsored programmes in recent years.

Diligence, diligence, diligence

Corporate transactions are now subject to a deluge of due diligence work streams and IP diligence is becoming increasingly important component of the wider legal process. With technology evolving at an almost exponential pace, the importance of ensuring that companies own their tech IP is perhaps the catalyst of increased IP due diligence as most companies are as a minimum tech-enabled, whilst for others, it is their business.

IP is an important asset for companies and its correct application and protection should not be undervalued. Buyers are often more focused on mitigating deal risk than value creation as a consequence of high profile failures, so companies seeking to enter into a corporate transaction should consider IP due diligence as a critical work stream and therefore prepare accordingly.

IP isn't just important, its appropriate protection is essential for the sustainable future growth of any business.

*Simon Heath is COO and corporate finance partner at Heligan Group

Protecting intellectual property in an AI-enabled world

By DIEGO BLACK and MARK CADDLE, partners at IP specialists Withers & Rogers

AI is changing the way that businesses operate in many different ways, including the way they innovate and protect their innovations.

But do businesses understand how to make use of time-saving generative AI tools and still benefit commercially from what they produce?

Almost every business, regardless of size, has cottoned on to the value that off-the-shelf AI tools can bring in terms of speeding up processes and adding value to their proposition. With more sophisticated tools becoming available, comes greater opportunity to harness their capability to improve efficiency or give products or services a competitive edge.

Whether you are using AI tools to improve R&D processes, for example, by integrating in-process simulations, or using customer data to train new models, innovation workstreams can be completed more quickly and routes to market shortened considerably.

Using the latest AI tools to generate outputs for your business more quickly and easily than would have been possible just a few years ago, could seem a no-brainer. However, if your business model is centred on achieving differentiation through innovation and building a portfolio of intellectual property (IP) rights, there could be hidden risks to take into account.

To commercialise your innovations, the first step is to protect them by registering IP rights. For example, seeking patent protection for a technological innovation could give the business 20 years of commercial exclusivity to leverage its market value. As the patent owner, the business could sue third parties for infringement if they look to reverse engineer or copy the innovation. There are other forms of registered IP that businesses can use to protect technological innovations and other intangible assets – for example, trade secrets can be valuable for AI inventions, registered designs and trade marks.



How inventive is it?

To secure patent protection for a technological innovation in the UK, and in many other countries, it is important to demonstrate that it is truly inventive – this is sometimes known as the ‘inventiveness test’.

Patents are used to protect technological innovations, so anything that represents a significant step forward in the evolution of a functional product or process that is helping to solve a technical problem. Innovative processes and the software embedded in them, as well as any novel pieces of equipment that might be required to deploy an end product, may also be patentable in their own right.

Whilst AI is an enabler of innovation, the use of AI in an invention may not be enough to demonstrate inventiveness before a patent office. This is particularly relevant when using off-the-shelf AI tools in a way that is essentially just using them as intended. If the AI was used to help create a new product, then it may be possible to protect the product.

Problems can arise if you are hoping to secure patent protection for an innovation produced by a readily available AI tool, such as ChatGPT or Microsoft CoPilot. Using off-the-shelf AI tools in the way they were intended to be used, is unlikely to be regarded as inventive by patent office examiners. Inventors should demonstrate what else they have done, over and above the use of the tool to drive improvements.

For example, it may be that the AI has been integrated in a system to solve a technical problem in a new and improved manner.

To ensure your AI-enabled innovation is patentable, businesses should consider what they have done over and above simply using a readily available tool to answer a question. The key to patentability lies in appreciating the benefit that an innovative product or solution brings compared to what existed before, and how you got to that point. Put simply, the business should consider the following questions: ‘what are you doing differently to make something better than what existed before? And ‘how is it better than what existed before?’

With legislation related to the use of AI tools still taking shape, businesses should also consider what might change in the future. Following a recent ruling at the UK Supreme Court in *Emotional Perception AI Limited (Appellant) v Comptroller General of Patents, Designs and Trade Marks (Respondent)*, it is clear that the law is starting to catch up with the change in innovation. Many IP professionals believe that further changes to how AI based innovation is likely to occur with some jurisdictions, such as the USA, requiring greater focus on identifying the human user of the AI tool, the purpose it was used and the outcome. Taking this more detailed approach now, could ensure that the company’s IP portfolio is robust and built to last.

Don’t ignore brand protection

With so much focus on investment in R&D, it can be tempting for early-stage, innovation-led businesses to treat brand development as an afterthought. However, in today’s fast-moving markets, establishing a strong brand presence quickly and surely is key to commercial success.

It is not unusual for startups to look for shortcuts when coming up with a new



name and brand identity for their business – and AI-powered tools designed for this purpose can seem a quick and easy solution. However, there are risks to consider when taking this approach. For example, can you be certain that you own the copyright for all aspects of your brand identity? There is a grey area in copyright legislation in the UK, and in some other countries, which could bring into question whether it is possible for the business to own the copyright for something generated without human input.

When deciding on a new name and logo for the business, it’s important to take a robust approach to due diligence, and this is especially important where AI tools have been used. As well as conducting all the usual trade mark searches, you should identify risk areas that could infringe third-party rights. It is also important to bear in mind that AI-generated brands could be difficult to protect if they lack distinctiveness.

If the need for due diligence is ignored, the owners of AI-generated brands could face costly legal challenges from third parties, potentially requiring the business to rebrand and relaunch. This disruption could undermine the company’s stability in a fast-developing market, stymieing growth before it has established a market presence.

For early-stage, innovation-led businesses, one advantage of registering trade marks at the outset to protect a new business name and logo is that they are likely to be granted more quickly than patents. This means the business can start to develop an attractive IP portfolio, even if patent applications are pending. This forward-looking approach can boost investor and market confidence, helping to get the business off to a strong start.

Developing a winning IP strategy

At a time when many markets are evolving quickly due to advanced technologies and IP legislation is in catch-up mode, a forward-looking IP strategy, which is closely aligned to business goals and takes account of the direction of travel, is vital.

Businesses should take a holistic and considered approach when assessing where intellectual property exists and its commercial potential and developing an IP strategy that is fit for purpose. For example, many technology businesses are innovating at pace; drawing on vast quantities of data from a variety of sources, and training bespoke AI innovative models to sift and identify refinement opportunities or candidates with development potential, but publishing

the workings of such models may not be necessary or advisable, particularly if they are hidden from view and difficult to copy anyway. For these AI-enabled innovators, critical coding and methods could be retained as ‘trade secrets’.

At a time when AI tools are proliferating and their use in innovation processes is widespread, a DIY approach to IP protection might seem justified. This couldn’t be further from the truth, however. Using AI tools to improve innovation processes and drive new product development has proved to be a gamechanger for businesses across industry sectors, and this can’t be ignored. However, embracing AI tools brings risks for businesses when it comes to commercial rights ownership, and this should be factored into their IP strategy from the start.

In an AI-enabled world, adopting an IP strategy based on what you have done in the past may not be a sensible approach, and it could end up limiting your company’s commercial potential even before you have had chance to make a mark.

Diego Black, partner and patent attorney, and Mark Caddle, partner and trade mark attorney, are intellectual property specialists at European IP firm, Withers & Rogers.

For advice on developing an IP strategy for your business, visit www.withersrogers.com or ring 01926 310 700.

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Protecting what you've built

By FELICITY LUSH and CLAIRE O'BRIEN, Mills & Reeve

Businesses need to create at pace, something we've seen across the UK, particularly in the Midlands where the region is building a globally recognised innovation hub.

Central to innovation are intellectual property (IP) rights which protect inventions, brands, designs, original works (such as literary works), confidential information and know-how. If IP is not protected, R&D investment goes unrewarded and valuable assets can be lost. IP strategy can make the difference between building lasting value and losing it. This article highlights some key areas of IP protection including confidentiality, ownership, contractors and AI-generated content.

Identifying what you've built

IP is a group of rights protecting different assets. Start by identifying your business assets, which IP rights may apply and whether registration is needed.

Whether to disclose what you've built

Deciding whether to disclose an invention or keep it secret can be crucial. Disclosure before filing a patent application may destroy novelty and invalidate the patent. If you need to discuss an invention with funders, testers, suppliers or collaborators, do so only after entering into a non-disclosure agreement (NDA).

Patent protection involves a trade-off: a monopoly right for 20 years in return for publication of the invention. Some businesses prefer secrecy. Trade secrets are a specific type of confidential information – think Coca-Cola and KFC's recipes. Not all businesses have trade secrets, but most have valuable confidential information, such as customer lists, pricing models, business methods and technical know-how.

Confidential information is protected

only while it remains confidential so safeguards matter: policies, training, access controls, audits and contracts. Be clear about who can receive confidential information, when and why. Disclosure should happen only after an agreement is signed, such as an employment contract, NDA, supplier or collaboration agreement.

Owning what's built by contractors

IP ownership is where businesses often get caught out, particularly with copyright. In the UK, copyright works created by an employee automatically belong to their employer if the work is created in the course of employment. This applies even if work is done at home, outside business hours or on a personal device, provided it's part of the employee's normal duties. Disputes can arise so:

- Keep employment contracts and role profiles updated
- Include an IP assignment in the employment contract for extra certainty

Contractors and freelancers are different. Paying someone to build a website, take photos or create a logo doesn't mean you own copyright in the deliverable, in the absence of a contractual provision to the contrary, copyright ownership stays with the creator. To change the position, obtain an assignment of copyright, or a clear licence setting out exactly what you can do with the work. Remember payment doesn't equal ownership, you need a contract to clarify the position.

Protection in an AI world

AI is changing how businesses work, but UK copyright law hasn't caught up. The Government recently considered reform but has decided to adopt a wait and see approach. This leaves uncertainty for creators and AI developers on issues like using copyright works to train AI systems, legal risk in AI-generated outputs, and how creators are paid for their content.

Businesses adopting AI can manage this uncertainty through strategy, training, policies and contracts. Before adopting an AI tool, decide what it will be used for and assess risks. Check your data won't be used to train the system but ask what data the tool was trained on and whether relevant IP assignments/licences were in place. Use contracts to allocate responsibility for use of the tool and align this with your risk appetite.

Give staff clear rules on using AI, for example prohibiting confidential information from being inputted into open AI tools. Encourage staff to check AI outputs carefully and edit as necessary – the outputs are not a substitute for human judgement and experience. This reduces the risk of reproducing generic or duplicative content that may be protected by copyright or too similar to material generated by third parties using similar tools.

To protect what you've built, make sure you can identify your business assets and the IP right/rights that protect them. Check whether those rights need to be registered and whether secrecy is needed.

Don't assume automatic ownership; contracts must be in place with contractors. If staff use AI, ensure it's used responsibly, documented properly and aligned with policy.

These steps can help businesses keep innovating whilst reaping the rewards from what they've built.



Felicity Lush, left, is a solicitor and professional support lawyer, Mills & Reeve LLP. Claire O'Brien is head of IP litigation, Mills & Reeve LLP

If you have questions about protecting your intellectual property or would like advice on developing an IP strategy, please contact Claire O'Brien at claire.obrien@mills-reeve.com

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Barberry starts £17m warehouse development

Construction of a £17 million warehouse development at Quinton Business Park in Birmingham has begun.

Developer Barberry Industrial has appointed main contractor Caddick to start work on the 78,335 sq ft distribution and manufacturing facility – known as Barberry Midbox 78 – with the scheme scheduled for completion in January 2027.

Barberry development director Jonathan Robinson said: “Breaking

ground at Midbox 78 marks an important milestone for this scheme and reflects our confidence in the continued strength of the midbox industrial sector.

“This development has been designed to meet the evolving requirements of modern businesses, combining strong ESG credentials with the flexibility needed to support long-term operational growth.

“We have seen strong interest and are in advanced discussions with a prospective occupier.”

Jewellery Quarter office let

A fast growing serviced apartment business has taken office space in the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham.

Number 33 Powell Street has been let by construction firm Del Bosque Group to Nuvo Hotel Group.

The property extends to 4,534 sq ft across two floors and has been let on a five-year term off a quoting rental of £75,000 per annum.

Nuvo Hotel Group provides luxury residential short-term homes, including studio flats, apartments, luxury penthouses, to a houses with garden, for short-term and longer stays.

Commercial property agents Bond Wolfe acted for Del Bosque Group.



Coventry warehouse comes to market

A large warehouse and industrial unit located in the ‘golden triangle’ logistics hub of the West Midlands is on the market to let.

Unit 9, Progress Way, covers 53,950 sq ft on the Binley Industrial Estate on the outskirts of Coventry.

Mark Booth, senior surveyor at letting agents Bromwich Hardy, said that the property – which has a yard and ample loading bays – is currently undergoing an

extensive refurbishment, including a new roof.

He said: “This is great opportunity for a company to rent a large, quality space in an excellent Midlands location.

“The property is a self-contained, fully fenced and high bay logistics facility, with both ground and first floor offices.

“The site benefits from excellent transport links and a number of local

amenities, making it a convenient and attractive location for businesses and employees.”

The property is considered suitable for light industrial, general industrial and warehousing use.

The main warehouse extends to around 47,558 sq ft, with another 4,078 sq ft of office and ancillary areas, plus 2,314 sq ft on the first floor.

South Birmingham investment up for grabs



A prominent mixed use investment opportunity in south Birmingham has gone on the market for £6.245 million.

Maypole Retail Park, which is in the Maypole area, includes a Travelodge hotel and a purpose-built retail development constructed in 2007.

It currently produces rental of £516,122 per annum, reflecting an initial yield of 7.75%.

The investment opportunity includes the 22,344 sq ft, 60-bedroom Travelodge, and a parade of six retail units with tenants including Ladbrokes, Poundstretcher, InHealth and Subway.

The six retail units total 16,175 sq ft, have rear loading and a 64-space car park incorporating EV charging points let to Swarco Smart Charging. The development totals 38,519 sq ft.

The sale is being co-handled by commercial property agents Bond Wolfe and Lewis & Partners.

James Mattin, managing director of Bond Wolfe, said: “The scheme occupies a highly prominent position on the Maypole roundabout, benefitting from strong roadside visibility, good parking and surrounding national retail provision including Sainsbury’s and Aldi.”

Property lawyer joins Sydney Mitchell

Commercial property law expert Ben Lyons has joined Midlands law firm Sydney Mitchell as a partner.

Having practised across the West Midlands since 2011, he joins Sydney Mitchell from Knights LLP where he was a senior associate in the commercial real estate team based at the Solihull office.

Ben is based at the firm’s Birmingham city centre office, and will advise on the acquisition, disposal, and management of commercial property assets.

He is working alongside commercial property team which is headed by partner Shilpa Unarkat.

Shilpa said: “Our team is known for being dedicated and proactive, and always committed to understanding our clients’ businesses thoroughly.

“Ben has these qualities in spades as well as proven commercial property law expertise, and represents a strong addition to both the team and the firm as a whole.”

Pharmacy changes hands



A pharmacy in Handsworth has changed hands for an undisclosed price in a deal handled by Christie & Co.

Soho Pharmacy, which sits within a health centre on Soho Road, was sold to Hardial Uppal over ten years ago, but was recently brought to market to allow him to retire.

Following a confidential off-market sales process, it has been purchased by husband-and-wife team Mo and Faiza Rafiq, who currently own an online pharmacy business in the area and wanted to expand into a community pharmacy.

Carl Steer, director at Christie & Co, said: “We have gone full circle in 11 years. From selling the pharmacy to Hardial in 2015, we have now had the pleasure of completing the sale to allow him to retire.

“Hardial and I had been meeting for a few years, providing advice and keeping him up to date with the market at various times.

“We launched the sale off-market, approaching 12 potential buyers and a sale was agreed in just 22 days. A great result and swift conclusion to what was three to four years in the making.”

Claritas Tax bolsters advisory team

Claritas Tax has announced the appointment of Hannah Tipper as partner.

She joins the with over 20 years' experience as a chartered accountant specialising in business and asset valuations, particularly in relation to capital taxes, inheritance tax planning, and the design and valuation of complex equity and management incentive arrangements – including those used in private equity backed businesses.

Based in the Birmingham office, Hannah will work with entrepreneurs, shareholders, investors and sponsors and private businesses, providing valuation expertise alongside the firm's broader advisory services. Her remit will cover the Midlands, London and the south.

Founding partner Iain Wright said: "Hannah's depth of technical expertise and experience advising on commercially significant and often high-profile matters will be hugely valuable to our clients, particularly as businesses navigate increasingly complex tax and succession planning considerations."

Pictured from left are Iain Wright, Elliott Morrell, Hannah Tipper and Alex Hall



Azets expands Birmingham partnership

Accountancy and advisory firm Azets has appointed a new partner at its Birmingham office.

Edith Yagoh joins with more than 20 years of audit and assurance experience at some of the largest industry firms.

Having graduated in Cameroon, Edith joined Deloitte and worked there for almost a decade across Africa, North America and the UK. She then moved to Ernst & Young in Birmingham where she spent almost nine years and became an audit director.

This was followed by two years at Forvis

Mazars where she worked with privately owned and PE-backed businesses.

She said: "I bring diverse experience across large and middle market businesses as well as family-owned businesses.

"I have worked with businesses in a wide range of sectors including manufacturing, automotive, consultancies and service providers.

"I am a fluent French speaker, having worked across Africa in French-speaking countries, so am well positioned to help clients with operations in French speaking parts of the world."

Lodders names new family head

Law firm Lodders has announced the appointment of family law specialist Mark Hands as head of its family team.

Mark – who has also been made an equity partner – brings many years' experience and joins Lodders from a Top 50 UK law firm. He is ranked as a Band 1 lawyer in Chambers & Partners and a 'leading partner' in the Legal 500 rankings.

He is one of only four family lawyers in the Midlands to be recognised by the DoYLES Guide as 'preeminent' and one of only two lawyers practising in Birmingham to be admitted as a fellow of the International Academy of Family Lawyers.

He has built up a niche practice advising families from Asian backgrounds, often instructed by those from the Sikh and Islamic communities for his understanding of the unique family dynamics and the legal implications that can arise.

Mark also has a strong reputation in acting for professionals, sportspeople, footballers and their partners.

Managing partner Paul Mourton said: "We are delighted to welcome Mark to



Lodders. He is inarguably the best family lawyer in the region, and is one of only a handful of family law specialists outside of London with genuine expertise in the most complicated financial and children matters."

Mark Hands, left, with managing partner Paul Mourton

Heligan Group makes partner promotion

Investment bank Heligan Group has promoted Matt Croker to partner within its corporate finance team.

The appointment is the latest in a series of internal promotions at the Birmingham-based M&A advisory firm.

Matt joined Heligan in 2019 from BDO and was the first M&A advisor recruited to support the founding partners.

He has since advised on 22 transactions, across multiple sectors, ranging from owner-managed companies through to complex mid-market work.

Alongside his M&A activity he has served as investment director for Landguard Systems and led the business though the sale to Chemring Group Plc for £20 million, delivering Heligan's first exit from its inaugural fund.

Simon Heath, head of corporate finance at Heligan Group,

said: "Matt joined us at an early stage and has been central to some of the most significant work we have done.

"His track record across M&A speaks for itself, and his work in the defence and national security sector has become one of the most active parts of our business. This promotion has been well earned."



Board adviser steps up as Eyoto interim CEO

Birmingham-based med-tech company Eyoto has appointed a new interim CEO.

Tony Veverka has stepped up after serving as a board advisor for Eyoto since 2025, and brings a wealth of experience in the med-tech and healthcare sectors.

He has held senior leadership roles across both the UK and US, starting his career at Bupa before going on to lead laser eye surgery specialist, Ultralase Eye Clinics, as CEO during its rapid growth in the early 2000s. Alongside his role at Eyoto, Tony also serves as chair at BioID Health, a company specialising in personalised bioidentical hormone therapy.

Founded as a spin-out from Aston University's School of Optometry in 2013 – and still based in Aston – Eyoto is a specialist in optical innovation whose flagship device, Aetheia,

is the world's first digital tele-slit lamp with remote control and auto-optometry.

Tony said: "Eyoto is transforming the way eye care is delivered and it's fantastic to be leading the company during this exciting stage in its journey as we scale the business ever further.

"Our ambition is to expand access to high-quality eye examinations globally, and we've already been making waves in both the UK and US markets."



Five minutes with...

Johnny McGrath

Birmingham-based client advisor at Brown Shipley, a Quintet private bank



downtime

In one sentence, what does your role involve?

I've been a private banker for 38 years looking after private clients and advising on their investments, lending, cash management and overall holistic wealth planning.

How long have you been in your current job?

Five and a half years.

Please give a brief summary of your professional career to date.

I was at Lloyds Bank from 1988 to 1996, and then Allied Irish Private Banking until 2012. I then went to UBS until 2021 and have been at Brown Shipley since.

Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?

Yes it has been very beneficial. I studied management science at Trinity College, Dublin, which provided me with a strong foundation and helped me secure multiple job offers after graduation. I chose to join Lloyds Bank through their management training programme, which was an excellent starting point for my career.

I am also a firm believer in continuous development and ongoing learning. I have since become a chartered wealth manager with the CISI, further strengthening my expertise in the field. Also, I achieved EPA Level 3 qualification for leadership and management development in 2022.

How is your job impacted by uncertainties in the economy?

Economic uncertainty is often a hot topic and something clients are keen to discuss with me, particularly with market fluctuations over the past few years. It's really important that I stay fully informed about market conditions, volatility and broader economic trends.

At Brown Shipley, we have a wide team of investment specialists and economists who provide us with insights, investment commentary and viewpoints along with the latest update on our asset allocation, which is aligned to Quintet, our parent company. These insights, along with my daily reading from financial press enables me to provide clear, considered guidance to clients, helping them understand how different scenarios may affect their individual circumstance.

This can span a range of areas, including investment performance, tax implications and political developments. Being able to interpret and communicate these factors clearly ensures clients feel informed and supported in making confident decisions despite changing conditions

What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?

I see AI primarily as an opportunity to enhance insights, productivity and efficiency. In my role, it allows me to spend more time focused on clients and understanding their individual needs, while streamlining more routine processes.

Used well, AI can support more informed decision making, and improve the overall client experience supporting in-person meetings. However, it is important to be mindful of the potential risks of AI including data protection and accuracy.

Overall, I believe AI is a powerful enabler if we learn how to use it responsibly. It will complement human interaction and judgement rather than replacing it.

Social media platform of choice, and why?

I tend to use Instagram, primarily to connect with friends and family because this is their platform of choice.

How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

I would hope my colleagues would see me as diligent, approachable, hardworking and genuinely supportive. I would also expect them to highlight the range of interests I bring to conversations, from cricket and rugby to horse racing and most sports, which helps create connections and adds a personal dimension to our working relationships.

Highlights of your career so far?

I helped grow a private bank at Allied Irish Bank in Berkeley Square from a low base into a business making a strong contribution to their GB profitability. More recently, I'm particularly proud of the progress we've made at Brown Shipley in continuing to sustainably grow the client book.



Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

I once took a colleague out to late drinks with clients and a firm of lawyers. It turned into quite a late evening and, unfortunately, this colleague overslept and missed an important meeting the next morning. Thankfully I can say he is still a colleague today!

Pet hates?

Sayings and clichés that mean nothing including: 'it is what it is' and corporate jargon like 'reach out' and 'to be fair'.

If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

Don't rush, be more patient, read more and enjoy yourself like you have.

How do you relax away from work?

I enjoy staying active through playing sport, in particular cricket and getting fit again through running. I enjoy following rugby and national hunt horse racing. Outside of that, I like to unwind by watching films, cooking and spending time with family and friends.

Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.

I've been a mentor with Action Tutoring, a national charity which partners with schools to help tackle educational inequality and support disadvantaged children. I volunteer across local schools in Birmingham and have also completed the Birmingham 10k for the past three years, raising more than £10,000 in support of the charity.

In my younger years, I represented Ireland in cricket at every level from schoolboys to universities through to Irish U23s, before I moved to London. In Irish Universities, we won the British Universities tournament twice in my four years and became the 1st Irish cricket team to win an overseas tournament.

You can take one book, one film and one cd onto a desert island – what would they be?

Book: Crossing the line – Autobiography of Willie Anderson. Film: Good Will Hunting. CD: Thin Lizzy.

Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Richie Benaud, Joanna Lumley, Cliff Morgan, Saint Peter and Robin Williams.

What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

Mushroom risotto to start, seafood linguini for main and chocolate profiteroles for pudding, all accompanied by a good Chablis.

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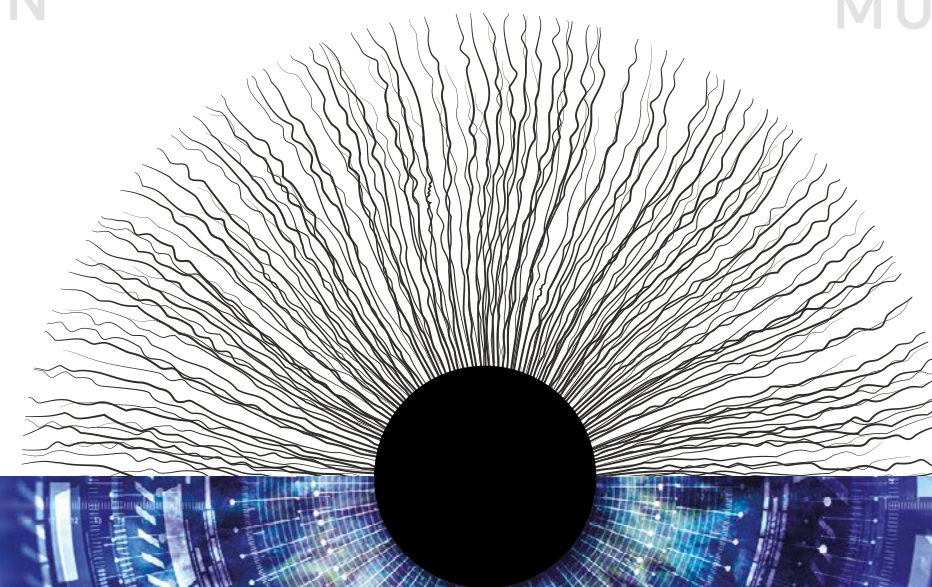
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