Birmingham Business

FREE
March/April 2026



EYEING UP A SAFER FUTURE

The father and son team behind new cyber hub

PLUS: REAL ESTATE SPECIAL REPORT

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The power of time:
why cricket hospitality is different



In a business world where attention is short and diaries are full, meaningful time together has become one of the most valuable commodities. That's where cricket hospitality stands apart.

Unlike short form sporting events that are over almost as quickly as they begin, cricket offers something rare in modern corporate entertaining. Time. Time to talk, connect, build rapport and strengthen relationships, all within the backdrop of a live sporting experience.

At Edgbaston, cricket hospitality isn't just about watching the game. It's about creating an environment where business relationships genuinely grow.

Building relationships, not just moments

Many live sports hospitality experiences are intense but fleeting. A football match delivers 90 minutes of action, often in a loud, high energy environment where conversation is limited.

Cricket is different.

Competitions such as the Vitality Blast and The Hundred give hours of shared experience. With Men's and Women's double headers now stages on the same day, the occasion extends event further, allowing conversation to evolve naturally without the pressure of time ticking away.

This extended experience creates ideal conditions for trust. Conversations aren't forced, relationships develop organically through shared reactions, moments of drama and relaxed time away from the office. Add world-class stars and iconic surroundings, and the day becomes something guests genuinely remember.

A sociable, shared environment

Cricket's structure naturally encourages conversation. Scheduled breaks in play and a flowing pace mean guests can engage without competing against the action.

Combine this with the unmistakable summer atmosphere of sunshine, social crowds and a sense of occasion, cricket hospitality becomes an environment where people feel comfortable and open. There's no hard sell or rigid structure. Instead, connections form naturally over the course of the day.

At Edgbaston, hospitality spaces are designed to enhance this. Rooftop terraces with panoramic views and stylish open plan restaurants allow guests to move, mingle and network beyond their immediate group, encouraging wider connections and meaningful dialogue.

Relaxed, yet electric

While cricket hospitality is sociable and welcoming, the excitement is never lost. Edgbaston's famous atmosphere, combined with the intensity of white ball cricket, delivers moments that captivate throughout. From the biggest players to close finishes, the energy of the crowd creates shared experiences talked about long after the final ball.

Why cricket hospitality works for business

Cricket hospitality isn't about rushing an event. It's about creating space for conversation, connection and genuine relationship building.

In a world where face-to-face interaction is more valuable than ever, cricket offers a rare blend of elite sport, relaxed hospitality and meaningful time together. That's the power of cricket hospitality and why it continues to stand apart.















Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards 2026

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Birmingham Business *Welcome*



By HENRY CARPENTER
Editor

You have to marvel at the resilience of the business community.

Ever since the global banking crisis the best part of two decades ago, it has seemed that as regularly as night follows day, some sort of deeply disruptive 'challenge' rears its head to take the place of its damaging predecessor, and cheat us of some deserved downtime from the exhausting turbulence.

Right now, our weary focus is on Iran. The picture in the Middle East is changing on an hourly basis but you only need to turn on the TV or radio for updates on events – and economy-damaging repercussions, with alarming oil price fluctuations and its effect on domestic inflation.

With a sigh, the business world shrugs, keeps calm and carries on, to use the cliché of old.

It's that word 'resilience' which seems as accurate as any to reflect the qualities shown by Birmingham plc.

If you want to hear about resilience in its many forms, you could do a lot worse than spend time in the company of Wayne Horkan. This ebullient, larger-than-life character is the coding and programming genius behind the West Midlands Cyber Hub, a community he launched at Millennium Point at the tail end of last year.

The subject of this edition's cover story, the hub is really a community of cyber-focused organisations whose businesses have been designed to make the lives of their clients a little safer. The West Midlands is a region with a complex network of supply chains, all of which can be compromised through an attack – and so it's not before time that a collaborative ecosystem to follow the likes of those in Manchester, Cheltenham and London has been set up.

Someone who has a keen appreciation than most on the evolution of industry in the region is Professor Carl Chinn. Through an extended interview with Jon Griffin, the popular historian tells us about his colourful career which has included spells as spokesman for the workers at Longbridge.

Elsewhere, we are a shining a spotlight on the real estate industry, and also profile the remarkable manager of the Birmingham arm of national charity Smart Works.

Finally, you'll see on the following pages that momentum is starting to build towards the Birmingham Business Best Places to Work Awards.

The clock is ticking so I have this message to all those who believe an inspiring workplace or inspirational leader deserves recognition – get your nominations in quickly!

All pages with tabs not in 'Birmingham Business blue' indicate commercially backed content

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Birmingham Business

Best Places to Work

AWARDS 2026

The Great Hall, University of Birmingham
Thursday June 11th, 2026

Birmingham Business is hugely excited to be launching this new awards event to the business calendar to celebrate the region's great employers.

These are the business leaders who recognise the value of fostering an environment where a happy and loyal workforce thrives and maximises its potential.

Maybe it's through investment in their staff, or their attitudes regarding inclusivity, or possibly their focus on education or training . . . they deserve to be honoured so let's do just that.

Who is behind it?

Birmingham Business is run by Henry Carpenter and Carl Jones. Henry is the editor of Birmingham Business magazine, while Carl is the editor of its sister publication, Shropshire Business. Carl is also a BBC radio presenter and enormously experienced and respected awards host – he has hosted the Shropshire Business Awards for every one of the last 25 years, and many events at the ICC in Birmingham.

AllinAll Events

We are so pleased that AllinAll Events will be staging and managing the event. The firm has forged a formidable reputation in the West Midlands for staging some of the most high-profile events in the region, including Birmingham Tech Week, the Multicultural Inspire Awards and the Birmingham Law Society Awards.
Emma Jones and her team at AllinAll will ensure this is an event which will not only run like clockwork but stay long in the memory for all who attend.



Categories

BEST COMPANY OVERALL

Large	Medium	Small
100+ employees	21-99 employees	1-20 employees

MOST INSPIRING LEADER

Male Female

BEST COMPANY FOR...

- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- Training and education
- Apprenticeships
- Investment in staff
- Investment in environment
- Health and wellbeing

Henry Carpenter says:

"The importance of inspirational employers and managers who truly understand the value of both workforce and workplace has never been greater.
"Through talking with employers, managers and employees in my role at Birmingham Business it is clear to me that there are any number of visionary and effective leaders in the West Midlands who get the best out of their staff though care, nurturing, investment and downright wisdom.
"These awards provide the perfect opportunity to pay tribute to them."

Who can enter?

This is for any and all West Midlands businesses based not just in Birmingham, but in all surrounding areas from Wolverhampton to Coventry, and Solihull to Sutton Coldfield – essentially, any business based within the West Midlands Combined Authority.
Businesses can be nominated by their staff, by their customers – or they can simply nominate themselves.

How to enter

Visit birminghambiz.co.uk and the online form is on the home page. The form has been devised to be clear and straightforward.

The timeline

W/C January 26th: Awards officially launched and nominations open

March 31st: Nominations close

April 23rd: Judges meet in person to create final shortlist

April 24th: Finalists contacted and given all information and next steps

May 11th- 22nd: Finalist interviews (online)

June 11th: Awards ceremony at Great Hall

PANEL OF JUDGES



Jo Birch,
Growthinnk



Alex Bishop,
Shoosmiths



Joel Blake OBE,
GFA Exchange



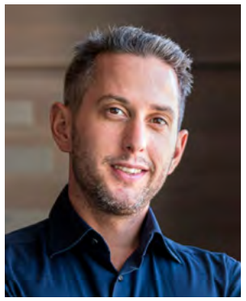
Alex Cole,
Tin Ventures



Paul Faulkner,
Barclays, Element45



John James, Founder,
Birmingham Forward



Andras Karpati,
Cordia UK



Lis Lewis-Jones,
Liquid



Denise Myers,
Evenfields Careers



Professor Monder Ram,
CREME



Chris Smith, Centre for
the New Midlands



Louise Teboul,
Common Purpose



Dr Steve Walker,
Art Business Loans



Carmen Watson,
Pertemps

Some early sponsors

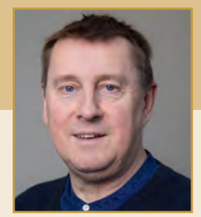
Not only will our sponsors' names be up in lights on the evening of the awards, the printed and online campaign accompanying them will extend into the autumn. If you would like your brand to be aligned with the awards – and your business to benefit directly from sponsorship – there are still opportunities available.



"Heligan Group are delighted to be able to support the region's best performing SMEs as they are central to a healthy and dynamic economy. As advisers, we work closely with growing businesses every day and recognise the critical role they play in shaping the future."
Greg Easter, Heligan Group



"We are proud to be supporting the Birmingham Business inaugural Best Places to Work Awards. As a people-focused business, being a good employer matters deeply to us at Entec Si. Recognition helps us attract great talent, spark innovation and build pride, ensuring colleagues feel genuinely valued. We're looking forward to celebrating the amazing companies across Birmingham in June."
Eman Al-Hillawi, Entec Si



"It is a great pleasure for ReLiB to sponsor the Best Places to Work Awards 2026 being held in the Great Hall at the University of Birmingham. Academic research is nothing without the talented researchers that work within it. And the ReLiB project is nothing without its talented research community. We very much recognise the importance of great places to work and by sponsoring this event we are privileged to say that the University of Birmingham is a great place to work!"
Paul Cornick, ReLib



"FleetMilne is proud to support Birmingham Business Best Places to Work because thriving workplaces are built by businesses that genuinely value their people. These awards shine a light on organisations that set the standard for positive culture, leadership and opportunity, and we're delighted to help recognise and celebrate those who make Birmingham such a great place to work."
Nicola Fleet-Milne, FleetMilne



"These awards stand out for their credibility. They are driven by a rigorous judging process and a panel made up not just of large corporates, but of people who genuinely understand what it takes to run and grow a business. As an independently owned Midland's business of 22 years, authenticity and realworld insight truly matters to us. We have much to celebrate in the Midlands and these awards will help shine a light on innovation, ambition, diversity and growth, not only regionally but on the world stage too."
Elisabeth Lewis-Jones, Liquid



"At Hollywood Monster we pride ourselves on looking after our workforce, and as such we enjoy real two-way loyalty and a relatively low turnover of staff.
By sponsoring these awards we are excited to celebrate the visionary organisations in the region who maintain the same values as us."
**Tim Andrews,
Hollywood Monster**

Landmark partnership agreement

Two Birmingham business improvement districts have signed a landmark partnership agreement in a move intended to create a more connected, efficient and thriving city centre.

Birmingham Colmore and Southside District signed a memorandum of understanding at the inaugural Birmingham Colmore Summit, when more than 100 cultural, commercial and civic leaders gathered at The Exchange to witness Birmingham Colmore's refreshed brand and strategic direction.

Colmore BID will be known as Birmingham Colmore with a fresh identity to promote the cultural, commercial and civic heart of Birmingham. It comes after a strategic review which recognises the need to move beyond boundaries and reshape the partnerships required to drive footfall, support economic growth and enhance quality of life.

Speaking at the summit, Michele Wilby, chief executive officer of Birmingham Colmore, said: "Today marks a long overdue turning point for Birmingham city centre. By committing to this partnership we are taking the first meaningful step towards levelling the playing field between Birmingham and our regional competitors.

"The partnership will give us greater efficiency, deeper collaboration and most importantly, a unified voice that can't be ignored by government. This is about creating a stronger, better-connected, more ambitious city centre, together."

Under the agreement, Birmingham Colmore and Southside District will move towards operating a joint BID executive, a single executive team responsible for delivering services across participating BIDs, while allowing each individual district to retain its identity, autonomy and decision-making power through its own operating boards.



Dr Steve Ball and Nicola Fleet-Milne, chairs of Southside BID and Birmingham Colmore, sign the memorandum of understanding

This approach mirrors successful models in Liverpool and Bristol, which have strengthened their ability to deliver large-scale city centre projects, drive efficiencies, and present a compelling, united voice to local authorities and public service partners.

Dr Steve Ball, chair of Southside District Board, added: "This agreement is about building a better future for all of Birmingham city centre. Southside District, the cultural heart of Birmingham, is proud to be part of this milestone moment.

"By preserving our local identity while sharing a unified executive team, we can deliver more for our businesses, our residents and visitors. It is an efficient, modern, and genuinely collaborative step forward for our city."

Manufacturer scoops national award

A Bilston-based manufacturer of roll tooling equipment for the metal forming industry is celebrating after scooping a national award.

Bowers & Jones secured its fourth business award in a year by being crowned Business Growth & Strategy winner at the Make UK National Manufacturing Awards, announced at a gala dinner at Madame Tussauds in London.

Bowers & Jones, who won the King's Award for exports last year, picked up the national prize having won UK manufacturing group Make UK's regional award in November.

The judges' citation said: "This company has demonstrated a clear, quantifiable strategy, fully embraced by the organisation. The judges were impressed by the leadership team's passion and agility which has resulted in impressive financial results and customer diversification whilst maintaining a focus on its people and wellbeing, a worthy winner of this award."

The Business Growth & Strategy award recognised the company's expansion into export markets and strategic vision since the business was acquired by directors Jane Sommerville and Nicola Owen in 2020.

The award is open to manufacturers who have demonstrated exceptional growth, clear strategic direction and successful navigation of business challenges.

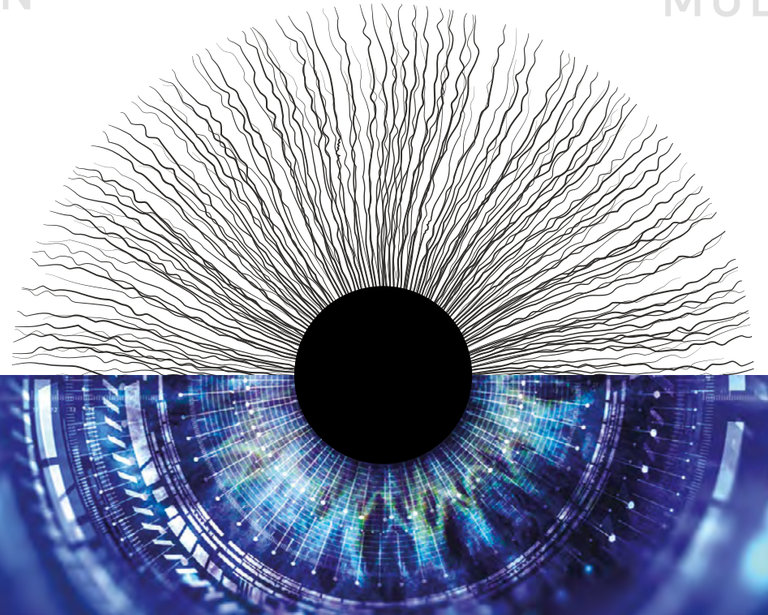
Since the 2020 buyout, Bowers & Jones has more than doubled its turnover, expanded its workforce and grown its international customer base worldwide, with the majority of sales now coming from export markets.

Managing director Jane Sommerville said: "We are thrilled to win this prestigious award from Make UK, which showcases to a national audience the dedication and expertise of our talented workforce who have driven our remarkable expansion trajectory.

"Advancing from a regional victory to claiming the national prize is an incredible milestone for us as a Black Country-based business."

NET DEBT EBITDA REVENUE MARGIN MULTIPLE

Others only see what's easy to measure

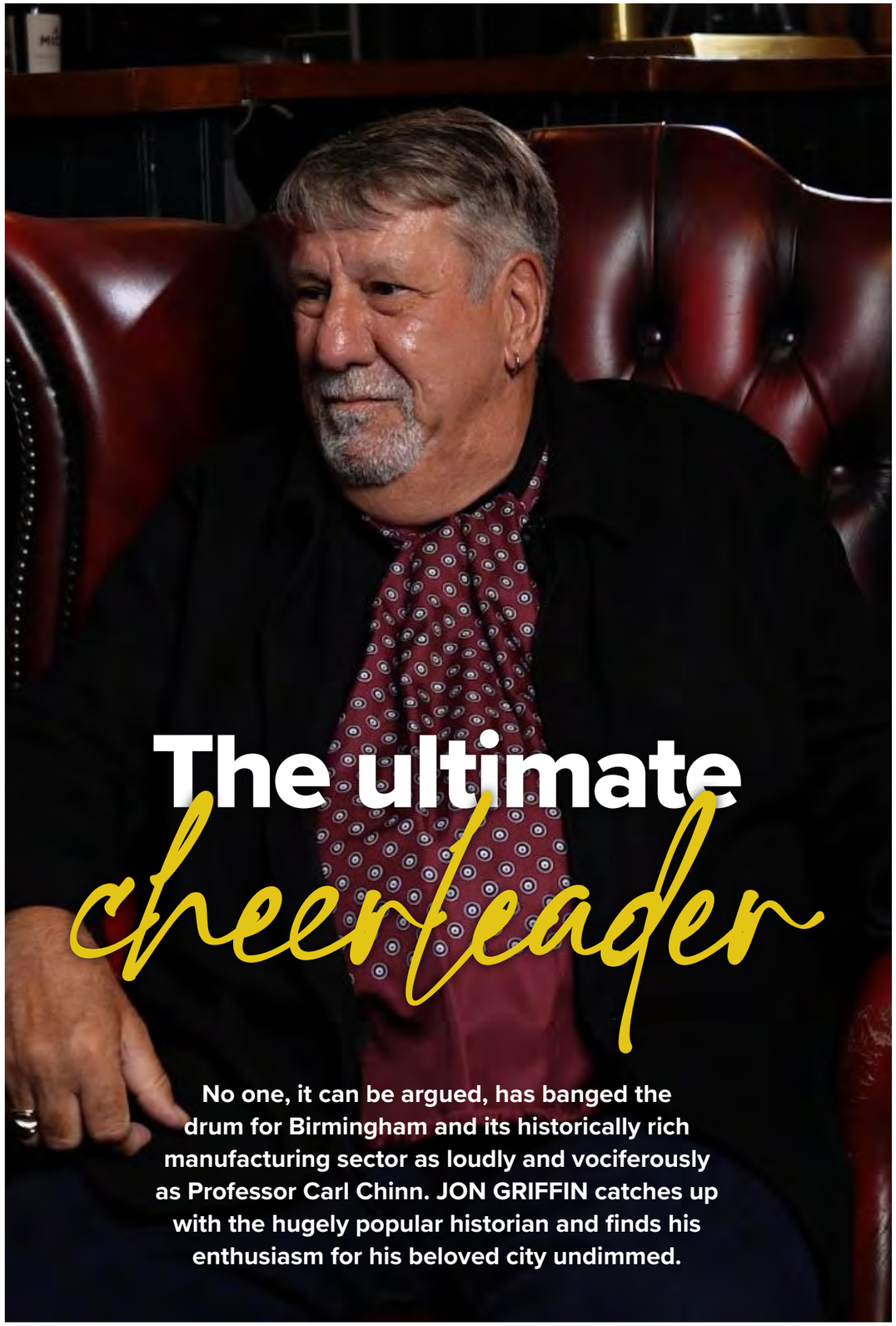


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The ultimate cheerleader

No one, it can be argued, has banged the drum for Birmingham and its historically rich manufacturing sector as loudly and vociferously as Professor Carl Chinn. JON GRIFFIN catches up with the hugely popular historian and finds his enthusiasm for his beloved city undimmed.

“I am happy with my life. I never wanted to schmooze, I am not involved with the council, I don’t get asked to big events and if I do, I say no because I am not interested. I am not a careerist or corporate at all. I would rather go out for a curry or a drink, or go down the Villa.”

He’s Birmingham’s best loved historian, an MBE, a professor, author of 36 books, the ultimate man of the people with an unrivalled knowledge of his beloved Birmingham.

You could argue tongue in cheek that John Lennon might have written Working Class Hero with Carl Chinn in mind – but the Brummie academic with the enduring common touch resists such labels, or indeed any label.

Despite his many achievements – successful author and public speaker, lecturer, media star, the human face of the campaign to save Rover – Carl Chinn remains resolutely Carl Chinn. That, I suspect, is the key to a polymath personality who can bewitch an audience with words, passion and deep knowledge at the drop of a hat.

As the man himself says: “I don’t want to be different to the people I belong to. I don’t want anybody to think he’s got too big for his boots.

“I don’t see myself as a working-class hero – the family have always brought me down to earth.

“I am happy with my life. I never wanted to schmooze, I am not involved with the council, I don’t get asked to big events and if I do, I say no because I am not interested. I am not a careerist or corporate at all. I would rather go out for a curry or a drink, or go down the Villa.”

In an era of tiresome shallow celebrity fuelled by the Alice in Wonderland world of social media, this proud son of Brum has never milked his fame for self-serving reasons. He’s as far removed from the vast hordes of shameless TikTok-style publicity seekers out in cyber land as one of his own heroes, Charles Dickens.

His extraordinary life has taken him from helping run illegal bookmaking enterprises as a youngster in the harsh world of 70s backstreet Birminhgham to acclaim and fame as the author of four books devoted to the hugely successful Peaky Blinders TV series.

He’s a man who as a fledgling history student left Manchester University after only a month because he was homesick for Birmingham, family and friends, his beloved Aston Villa . . . and Ansells Mild.

But a return to his home roots proved the making of Chinn as his love of history and words and passion for his native Birmingham helped him forge a distinguished career in the public eye as the West Midlands’ pre-eminent popular historian of modern times.



Carl Chinn and Birmingham writer Kathleen Dayus, 1988, Fircroft College

Rarely was that public role as loyal Brummie servant and cheerleader for West Midlands manufacturing and the man on the shopfloor better illustrated than the spring day he stood in front of an audience of tens of thousands at Cannon Hill Park at the climax of the March to Save Rover.

More than a quarter of a century has passed since that April day in 2000 when I took my place in the crowd as business editor of the then Birmingham Evening Mail to cover the city’s biggest public demonstration for many years in the battle to save its most famous factory – the Longbridge car plant – from the clutches of entrepreneur Jon Moulton and his private equity group Alchemy Partners.

Chinn was the star of the show that day, his fierce rhetoric whipping the crowd up and helping galvanise a public campaign which ultimately helped deliver the plant away from the Moulton clutches to John Towers and the Phoenix Four.

The campaign would end in misery and heartbreak five years later with the collapse of MG Rover amid a debt pile of £1.4 billion – but 26 years on, the human face of the March to Save Longbridge remains as impassioned as ever about manufacturing and its still critical, and often understated, importance to the UK economy.

“Rover was one of the big features of my life and as a Brummie I know how important manufacturing is,” he says. “Growing up as a young married man in the 80s I saw the devastation caused to manufacturing with us going from a high-wage, low-unemployment city in 1979 within a decade to a low-wage, high-unemployment city.

“When the Rover crisis happened I felt there was a need for the general public to get involved, not just the trade unions and the Labour Party. I remember ringing Ian Dowell, the editor of the Mail, having a chat with him and he said ‘right, we’ll have a march’.”

Chinn vividly recalls opposition to his high-profile involvement from union leaders who wanted a trade union controlled campaign and march.

“That was a learning curve about political with a small ‘p’ infighting, how national politicians didn’t seem to care about Birmingham, the Black Country, Bromsgrove, and all the jobs we were going to lose.

“Ultimately we couldn’t save Rover. I feel there was a betrayal of what we had fought for. But we got another five years out of Longbridge and the supply chain was able to diversify, with five years of people at the factory taking early retirement or redundancy while the ones

who stayed earned good wages."

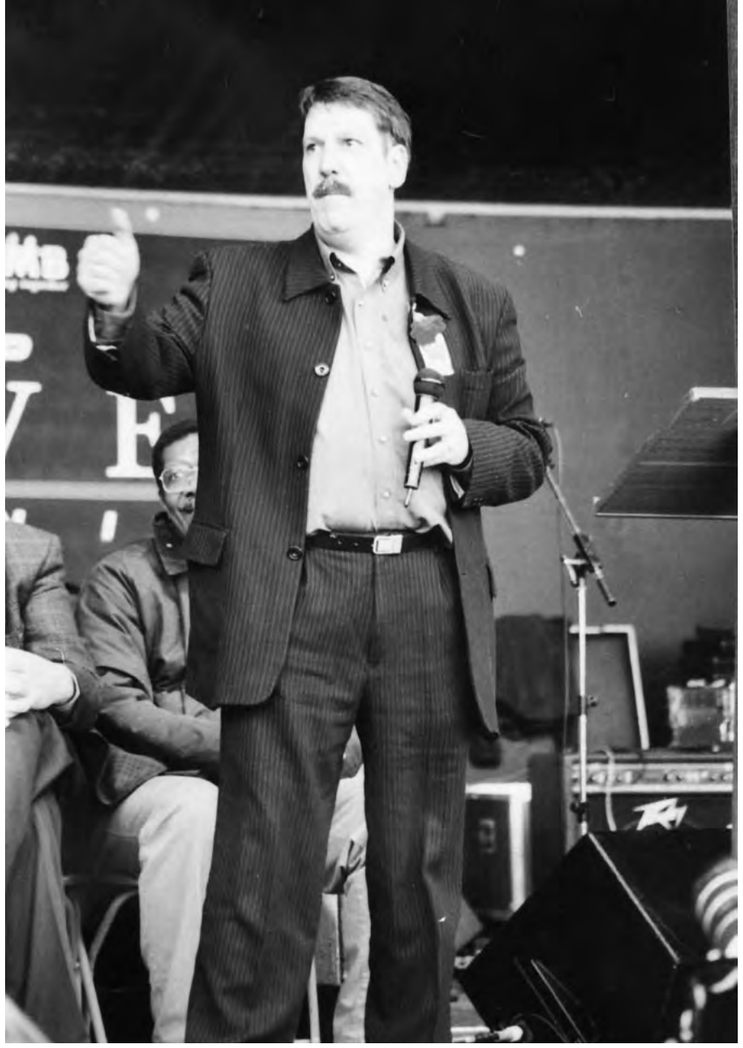
Chinn warms to his theme as he recalls with a badge of honour other battles against the odds to try to save the Alstom train-making plant and the HP Sauce factory, and support the Cadbury workers in the face of the hostile takeover by American giant Kraft.

The wave of factory closures and cutbacks of blue-collar workforces in the early 2000s left an indelible impression on a man who had himself endured frustrating months on the dole in the 80s. "That's when I started to realise that Labour was becoming a professional middle-class party that had no bond with the real working class."

But more than two decades on from the public battles over Longbridge, HP Sauce, Alstom, Cadbury and others, Chinn's own bonds with the working class – and the manufacturing sector – remain unbroken.

"I give talks about the importance of manufacturing and I emphasise that manufacturing matters because adding value matters. It doesn't just add value economically, it adds value to individuals and to communities.

"The loss of those communities – mining, fishing and so on – has changed the world, increased poverty and alienation, and facilitated the rise of



Speaking at the Save Rover rally in Cannon Hill Park



Interviewing singer/songwriter Laurie Hornsby on BBC WM at the 1st anniversary of the indoor market in September 2001

polarised politics, for want of a better phrase. The world is getting split politically. There is much less of a centre ground now and it is splitting communities and the nation."

But if the politicians and policy makers have, in Chinn's view, split communities, the man from inner-city Birmingham, who became the city's first community historian, continues to try to unite a fractured world through his books and talks.

That desire for learning and education was instilled in him from an early age, growing up in a largely working-class family in the late 50s and at the onset of the decade that became the swinging sixties.

"I was fortunate to grow up well off. Dad had been an illegal bookmaker until cash betting away from the racecourse was legalised in the early 1960s. Dad's family were very working-class culturally – he was very proud to come from the Ladypool Road area of Sparkbrook.

"Mom was a factory worker from Aston – all the women in Mom's family worked in factories. I grew up very close to Mom's family especially."

A bright youngster who loved reading and studying medieval history, Chinn was the first of his family to go to grammar school before their controversial abolition in the 1970s.

"My school was Moseley Grammar. I was the first member of the family to go past the age of 15. I had aunts and uncles who passed the 11-plus but couldn't go to grammar schools because of the loss of wage and the cost of uniforms and books."

Fortunately for the young Carl, his father Buck was prospering in the bookmaking trade. "Dad was doing really well in the late 50s and early 60s as a bookie in Sparkbrook. He had six shops at one time.

"He tried to diversify and took over a car pitch where he lost a lot of money in Balsall Heath. He also got involved in a shot-blasting business in Bloxwich."

When he wasn't soaking up knowledge through reading and schoolwork, the young Chinn was learning hard lessons at the university of life, including fighting off attackers and thugs in his father's betting shops.

"I was working at the betting shops from

13. I took bets illegally. We were up against the big bookmakers. I took a £1,000 bet once in the toilet of the Clifton pub on a horse that won.

"At the age of 16 during the summer holidays Dad put me in charge of a little pitch he had in Highgate Road. All the back-to-back houses around there were being knocked down.

"It was horrible. There were rats everywhere running outside. We hardly had any punters because there was barely anybody living around there."

At the age of 17 Chinn found himself facing a gunman as part of his working duties. "They came in and pistol-whipped the manager. I tried to pull this big guy off the manager's back – I wasn't being brave, it was automatic."

Chinn survived the armed robbery and abandoned his ambitions to follow in his father's footsteps in the bookmaking world to enrol at Manchester University to study history.

"I didn't like it, I was only there three or four weeks. The Villa were playing one night, and I met my best mate Dave Evans in the Hole in the Wall in town before the match. Mom and Dad were shocked to see me after the match.

"I said, I just can't take it. I was really homesick. Nobody in my family had ever left home until they got married."

It was a turning point in Chinn's life. He was able to transfer his studies to Birmingham University and embark on a career which would culminate in recognition as a true Brummie boy made good.

Another major turning point came in 1977 when he met the young woman who later became his wife, Dublin hairdresser Kay, whilst on holiday in Benidorm.

Chinn graduated in 1978 and continued his education with a masters and a doctorate, while the young couple married in Dublin before making their home in Birmingham. "I fell in love with her the minute I saw her. I'm still mad about her."

Another seminal juncture in the newly married Chinn's life came with his introduction to esteemed late historian Dorothy Thompson whilst he was working on his thesis on the Dark Ages.

"Dorothy was a great adviser and supporter to me because she gave me the confidence to write about the people I belonged to," he says.

Thompson suggested that the budding historian should write his doctoral thesis on a social history of the Ladypool Road area



With the Alstom workers



At the Manor Tavern in Aston, celebrating its 150th anniversary in 1994



With his good friend, the late Councillor Waseem Zaffar MBE at Shababs on the Ladypool Road

of Sparkbrook. It would prove the start of a distinguished literary career chronicling local history.

"She supported me all the way – I wouldn't have been a historian without her. She was very much my mentor and gave me confidence."

By 1984 Chinn's father had decided to sell his betting shops and his son was facing a curious mixture of intense learning working on his university doctorate whilst signing on the dole.

"It was a humiliating and deeply upsetting period of my life. I did some work delivering, and I worked on the black economy as well as relying on my dole money. I'm not ashamed of it – you do what you can to survive."

Survive – and eventually prosper – the 30-something Chinn did. With ambitions to become a history teacher he moved into the world of adult education and in 1990 was appointed community historian at the university. "It was a unique role going into libraries and expanding into schools."

He remained keen to further his writing skills and his mentor Dorothy Thompson put him in touch with an editor who commissioned him to pen a book about poor women in urban communities.

The result, They Worked All Their Lives, proved the first volume of an author's career which has extended to 36 books, including four on the Peaky Blinders. Intriguingly, Chinn had written about the real Peaky Blinders – rather than the dramatised versions – as part of his thesis back in 1986.

For all his achievements and fame in his beloved Brum, Chinn has also suffered knockbacks along the way. He was made redundant from Birmingham University after almost 25 years and left his highly popular presenting role at Radio WM as the speech quota was increasingly interrupted by football updates and musical interludes.

"I was deeply disappointed and upset when my work at the university ended. It was a unique role, the only one in the country. It was a really upsetting time because they didn't want to understand what I was doing in the community."

But ever the straight talker, Chinn, now 69, remains unbowed, still writing, still giving talks, going down the Villa, every inch one of Birmingham's favourite sons. And he still bangs the drum for manufacturing.

"The great majority of mass manufacturing jobs have gone but what manufacturing needs now is a long-term plan from government."



Celebrating jazz musician Andy Hamlton's 91st birthday at Bearwood Corks in 2009

Chinn reels off a list of West Midlands manufacturers upholding proud wealth-creating traditions in today's high-tech world - including Jaguar Land Rover, pen and engineering legend Brandauer, badge-maker Firmin, medals manufacturer Toye, Kenning and Spencer, Aston-based German-owned precision toolmakers Guhring and Wolverhampton's aeronautical industry.

"Let's value them. Let's value manufacturing. Let's invest properly in green manufacturing. Thank God we have got Jaguar Land Rover, thank God we have got Sertec, thank God we have got so many manufacturing SMEs.

"But they need to have security for investment purposes. Where is our Minister for Manufacturing? Why isn't there one?"

Chinn cites the hard work of other leading manufacturing champions in the region including Johnathan Dudley of accountants Crowe, Steve Morley and Geraldine Bolton from the West Bromwich-based Confederation of British Metalforming, and Grant Adams of Sertec – all as committed to this time-honoured world as Chinn himself.

But away from his books, his talks and his concerns for manufacturing, Chinn paints a contented picture with wife Kay and grandchildren running around in his comfortable home in Billesley.

"I don't want to moan because I have had a lot of happiness, a lot of good fortune. I have had to work hard but it is not hard work. And I have met some wonderful people."

It's only fair to point out that this dyed-in-the-wool Brummie who has brought the city's history to life for thousands over the years has fully deserved all the good fortune and happiness that has come his way.



Birmingham's image problem

For a city which has so many attributes, it remains far too modest argues PAUL FAULKNER

As I was scrolling through the BBC News website recently a headline jumped off the screen asking if 'Manchester could be a model for the UK to kickstart growth?'

The article itself was an interesting read about recent developments and collaborative working in Manchester, even if it was somewhat lacking in any new insights about the city.

From a Birmingham perspective however, given our city's recent travails that include bankruptcy and bin strikes, this felt more like a kick in the teeth than a useful guide to follow, and yet another example of how Manchester continues to get its PR story right while Birmingham lags behind due to a combination of real and perceived image problems.

Now, hands up, I was born in Manchester and lived and worked there early in my career. I think it's a great city and have lots of fond memories of the place, as well as a decent understanding of how it has effectively pulled together over recent decades in order to present a positive face to the world.

Yet, like so many people who call Birmingham home, I continue to be frustrated not just by our city's seeming inability to match up to our northern neighbour in terms of publicity, but, more importantly, by our struggles to present an attractive and truly representative offering to the wider world.

In recent times it does feel as though we have come extremely close to resetting the narrative around the Midlands. Peaky Blinders burst onto our TV screens in 2013, definitely helping to portray the city in a cooler light and providing a welcome boost to the flat cap industry.

The 2010s saw impressive urban development starting to take shape in the city with the remodelling of the city centre for the new Paradise development as well as the transformation of Eastside with the HS2 Curzon Street station, and more regeneration promised in Digbeth and Smithfield.

The good times built to a peak even through Covid, and 2022 felt like something of a zenith with the glorious Commonwealth Games fortnight generating a magical feeling around the city and wider region, and producing a very real sense that this was going to be 'our time'.

Since then, despite ongoing development and success stories such as the likes of Goldman Sachs relocating offices to the city, there has been an unfortunate sense of letting that moment and the positive momentum slip, and we have fallen into something of a funk, becoming the all too easy target for news reports around the bin strikes or social unrest.

These issues are of course very real and deserve focus and scrutiny, but they are not THE story of Birmingham. Far from it. The Birmingham I know and love remains a vibrant and exciting place to study, work and live, and now feels like the right time for the 'coalition of the willing' across the city to once more pull together and ensure we are telling the right story about Birmingham, loudly and proudly.

The story about the bankrupt city is now behind us thanks to the good work done by the likes of Council Leader John Cotton to deliver a surplus budget for the year ahead. For sure, being solvent is not exactly something to crow about as a city, but it is an important step forward if we want to shift the narrative and get our collective mojo back in Brum.

"The Birmingham I know and love remains a vibrant and exciting place to study, work and live, and now feels like the right time for the 'coalition of the willing' across the city to once more pull together and ensure we are telling the right story about Birmingham, loudly and proudly."

And then there are all the many, many positive tales we can share. A recent report by Knight Frank estimated the city's economic growth to be 16% over the next decade, ahead of the national average, while 3% of all recorded property moves in the UK last year were to somewhere with a 'B' postcode, more than Manchester, and an indicator both of the region's affordability and fundamental attractiveness.

Developments around the city are continuing at pace, with more cranes in the sky once again than any other city outside of London. The Liberal Democrats have even suggested that Birmingham should be the home of their proposed new Department for Growth, which seems like a great idea to me!

On the sporting front our football teams are flying, with Blues pushing for promotion and Villa at the top end of the Premier League and in the hunt for European glory this year. The Alexander Stadium will once again come alive this summer to host the European Athletics Championships (what odds on a Keely Hodgkinson world record?!), while next year the wonderful Invictus Games rolls into town, showcasing the incredible fortitude and skills of our wounded military personnel and veterans.

The region's cultural sector is also booming with he BBC and Stephen Knight's studio now firmly ensconced in Digbeth. Recently The Rep even hosted the premier of a new play called The Battle, taking a nostalgic look back at the rivalry between Blur and Oasis in the summer of 1996. The fact it was held in Birmingham, rather than more obviously in Manchester or even London says a lot about the city's vibrant theatre scene.

So, taking that as my cue to wrap up this column, let's not look back in anger at missed opportunities or negative headlines but rather look forward with a collective sense of positivity to a better future for Birmingham.

Programme helps women build digital confidence



A community-led employment programme is helping women in east Birmingham to build the digital confidence and employability skills they need to access work.

Led and created by Women's Wellbeing in collaboration with Birmingham City University, the Digital Gateway into Employment scheme has been designed for those who often feel digitally excluded or disengaged from traditional employment support.

The six-week programme has helped around 60 women grow in confidence using email, completing online forms and navigating job platforms.

Participants also developed practical skills in job searching, AI tools, CV writing, cover letters, LinkedIn profiles and interview preparation.

Shabana Qureshi, chief executive officer of Women's Wellbeing and a community ambassador for BCU, said: "Our women felt seen, supported and taken seriously."

The course concluded with a community careers fair at the Birmingham City Football Club Foundation hub in Bordesley Green, where 88 local women met directly with 14 employers.

Airport outlines steps towards green energy

Birmingham Airport has published its new sustainability strategy for 2026 to 2030, outlining the next strategic steps on its journey to becoming a more sustainable and socially responsible business.

Split across ten key strategic themes – aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – the new plan maps out key actions to support local communities, mitigate operational impact on the environment and be more energy efficient.

Alongside continued management of noise levels, reduction in waste and water-saving strategies, the airport has now committed to widening its focus to target indirect emissions by engaging and collaborating with key partners.

Suppliers and contractors working at the airport will be subject to due diligence checks and contract management processes as part of a new sustainable procurement policy. Specialised engagement and training programmes will be delivered which recognise and promote sustainable business practices.

Another key theme within the strategy is the enhancement of quality of life of local communities which will be supported through the continued support of a local corporate charity partner, the development of new skills-based work experience programmes, and volunteering opportunities for colleagues.



Robin and Luci Campbell
Photo: Photosite Birmingham

Sweet success

A Solihull cake maker is enjoying the sweet taste of success after winning her second national Wedding Cake Designer of the Year award.

Luci Campbell, founder of the Juci Luci Cake Company, won the accolade at the Asian Wedding Awards 2026.

She took first prize at the inaugural Midlands Asian Wedding Awards in 2017 and again in 2019, before being named overall Wedding Cake Designer of the Year at the British Asian Wedding Awards in 2024.

"I'm thrilled to pick up this award for the second time," said Mrs Campbell, who is married to UB40 vocalist and guitarist Robin Campbell.

"I love that people have taken the time to vote for me because it shows a trust and a satisfaction in what I do to help couples celebrate their big day.

"I feel genuinely privileged to be a part of their wedding celebrations – often I have to pinch myself that I make a living doing something I love."

Making the move

Accounting and advisory firm Forvis Mazars has opened its new Birmingham office at Three Chamberlain Square.

The relocation sees 340 team members make the move from their previous offices at Two Chamberlain Square.

Stephen Lewis, Birmingham office managing partner, said: "This new space reflects both our ambition and our values, creating a sustainable and modern environment that supports our people and strengthens our position at the heart of Birmingham's business community."

Sports initiative set to create thousands of jobs



Sports regeneration across the West Midlands will bring thousands of jobs into the region – including 16,000 linked to Birmingham's proposed Sports Quarter – delegates at a major conference were told.

More than 250 leaders from sport, business, infrastructure and policy gathered at Edgbaston Stadium for the Centre for the New Midlands' Connections for Prosperity: Beyond the Sport conference.

Alongside the proposed £4 billion Sports Quarter, speakers pointed to the wider programme of sports-led regeneration activity already underway, including Aston Villa FC's significant redevelopment plans, Edgbaston Stadium's £45 million redevelopment and hotel project, and the continued expansion of elite training facilities and community hubs across the region.

The conference, chaired by broadcaster Amber Sandhu, opened with a discussion on the scale of opportunity facing the region. Jeremy Dale, chief executive of Birmingham City FC, joined Stuart Cain, chief executive of Warwickshire County Cricket Club, Nicola Ibbetson, chief business officer of Coventry City Football Club, and Neil Rami, chief executive of West Midlands Growth Company, to examine how sporting assets are being used to unlock jobs, skills and long-term economic growth.

Across subsequent panel sessions, experts explored the region's readiness to consistently host major events and the implications for infrastructure, tourism and legacy, as well as the importance of delivering sustainable employment and upskilling opportunities for local communities.

The roles of sporting excellence and political leadership in driving regeneration were also discussed, alongside the life-changing impact sport can have on people across the region.

The mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, addressed delegates, highlighting the role of sport in showcasing the region internationally and reinforcing the need for co-ordinated delivery across the Midlands to maximise economic impact.

Chris Smith, founder and CEO of the Centre for the New Midlands, said: "The event reinforced the West Midlands as a living laboratory for ambitious and sustainable sport-led regeneration.

"It's been a fantastic opportunity to bring experts and policymakers together from right across the region to share ideas and engage in thought-provoking discussions.

"The ideas exchanged, partnerships formed, and energy generated will continue to ripple through our region's economic and social fabric."



Business forum relaunch

The boss of Multifleet Vehicle Management has taken on a leading role in the relaunch of a Solihull business networking group.

Steve Whitmarsh, chief executive of Multifleet, which trades as runyourfleet, is the new chair of the J4 Business Forum, a networking group for businesses based near to Junction 4 of the M42 motorway.

Mr Whitmarsh said: "I am pleased to be relaunching the J4 Business Forum to help connect businesses, share ideas and shape the future of our local business community.

"This will see local business leaders and council representatives meeting regularly to discuss key issues and mutual priorities, and to explore new opportunities in the area.

"The relaunch was well attended and will help to shape the direction of future forums which I will be chairing every quarter."

Members of the J4 Business Forum gathered for the relaunch at IM Properties, one of the UK's largest property development groups, which is based at The Gate on International Drive in Solihull.

Those attending included Ihsaan Mohammed, economic development officer at Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council, and John Lander, the council's business investment manager.



The key factor

City resilience is not an infrastructure issue – it is a question of leadership, argues LOUISE TEBOUL

When we talk about city resilience, the conversation usually defaults to transport systems, housing supply, economic regeneration, climate adaptation, skills and jobs. All are critical components of a thriving city.

But across sectors, the deeper constraint is rarely technical. It is collective leadership capacity.

In cities such as Birmingham – diverse, complex and economically ambitious – resilience is shaped by the ability of its senior leaders to work across institutional boundaries, sustain trust under scrutiny, navigate political cycles without losing strategic continuity, and balance local accountability with global competitiveness.

No single organisation controls these variables. Resilience emerges – or fails – at the intersections.

Complex problems do not sit neatly within one system

Whether addressing homelessness or youth unemployment, climate change or widening inequality, these challenges cut across public, private and third sectors. They sit at the intersection of housing, health, education, employment markets, funding structures and political realities.

There is no single lever to pull.

From the outside, it is easy to say: “Why don’t they just do x, y, z?”

“They” might be government, funders, local authorities, universities or businesses.

But once you step inside a system, the constraints become visible: statutory duties, funding cycles, regulatory requirements, public accountability, shareholder pressure, electoral timelines and workforce capacity. Each organisation operates within a complex web of incentives and risks.

Without understanding that complexity, criticism is cheap. With understanding, leadership becomes harder – and more necessary.

Resilient cities require leaders willing to step into that complexity rather than simplify it away. Leaders who can hold multiple perspectives at once and ask not, “Why don’t they?” but “How might we?”

The relational infrastructure is often the weakest link. In cross-sector executive conversations, a consistent pattern emerges: the technical plans are often sound. Strategy documents are well crafted. Data is sophisticated. Intent is genuine.

What is sometimes fragile is the relational infrastructure - the trust and relationships that enable organisations to collaborate when pressure rises.

If senior leaders cannot disagree productively, share risk intelligently or think systemically rather than organisationally, resilience becomes rhetoric. When trust is low, collaboration becomes performative. When incentives are misaligned, partnerships stall under pressure.

Place-based leadership is harder than corporate or organisational leadership. It is exposed, political and interdependent.

In an organisational environment, authority and decision-making processes are often more contained. In a city ecosystem, no one is fully in control. Influence must be earned. Trade-offs are public. Political cycles disrupt continuity, yet long-term challenges demand long-term thinking.

This work is messy. It requires time, energy and patience. It requires investment in relationships before crisis hits. It requires leaders who remain purpose-driven when outcomes do not follow a straight line. Cross-boundary collaboration rarely goes entirely to plan.

The real test is whether leaders remain committed when there is little reward and progress is slower and harder than expected.

From organisational success to system stewardship

Cross-boundary leadership demands a shift: from protecting institutional interests to stewarding shared outcomes. From an internal focus to a collaborative focus on long-term impact.

That does not mean abandoning accountability to one’s own organisation. It means recognising that sustainable success - economic, social or environmental - is inseparable from the health of the wider system.

For business leaders, that might mean engaging proactively with skills providers rather than simply lamenting talent shortages. For universities, partnering with local employers to align research and innovation with regional growth priorities. For public sector leaders, creating space for business and civil society voices earlier in policy formation.

System leadership may feel slower at the outset because it prioritises alignment and trust. Over time, however, it builds resilience because relationships can withstand the pressure.

You do not need a city-wide mandate to contribute

While much of this conversation focuses on senior leaders, cross-boundary contribution is not limited to those with formal authority.

If you want to make a difference, it can begin in practical ways:

- Be genuinely curious about the pressures facing organisations different from your own.
- Join the board of a charity, school or social enterprise and see the system from another vantage point.
- Offer a young person a work experience opportunity or mentoring conversation.
- Convene unlikely partners and share insight rather than guard it.

These actions may seem modest. Yet they strengthen the connective tissue of a city. Over time, that connective tissue determines whether collective ambition translates into impact for all communities within the city.

There are encouraging signs in Birmingham of leaders from diverse sectors stepping into this shared civic space with renewed energy. The opportunity now is to convert that intent into sustained collaboration.

Infrastructure, investment and policy all matter. But cities are human ecosystems. Their resilience will depend less on the elegance of strategy documents and more on the quality of relationships, the honesty of conversations and the courage of leaders to think beyond organisational boundaries – and to stay in the work for the long haul.

Ultimately, city resilience is not built only through infrastructure. It is built through leadership.

*Louise Teboul is the operations director of leadership course facilitator, Common Purpose



An economic imperative



Cyber threats in the West Midlands aren't confined to single businesses in isolation – whole supply chains are compromised. WAYNE HORKAN, founder of the West Midlands Cyber Hub, explains why resilience is so important.

The West Midlands has long been defined by industry. From advanced manufacturing and automotive to aerospace, logistics, and a dense network of specialist suppliers, the region remains one of the UK's most productive economic engines. But that industrial strength also brings a distinctive and growing challenge: cyber risk in the West Midlands is not simply an 'IT problem'. It is increasingly a question of operational resilience, supply chain continuity, and business survival.

As cyber threats evolve, manufacturing-heavy regions like ours face a particular exposure. The same interconnectedness that makes modern industry efficient – lean supply chains, real-time data exchange, outsourced services, and global dependencies – also creates points of vulnerability that adversaries are quick to exploit. The question for West Midlands businesses is no longer whether cyber incidents will occur, but whether organisations are prepared to withstand disruption and recover quickly when they do.

Cyber risk does not fall evenly across the UK, and the West Midlands has a different profile from London's financial services economy or the concentrated cyber clusters found elsewhere. Here, digital systems underpin physical industry: production lines, engineering workflows, supplier logistics, and operational technology environments that were never designed with hostile actors in mind. In a region built around making and moving things, cyber disruption is not an abstract issue of data loss, it is an immediate operational problem that can stop production, delay deliveries, and undermine customer confidence.

What makes the West Midlands distinctive is the density and complexity of its industrial supply chains. Alongside major primes sit hundreds of specialist SMEs providing components, services, and expertise, many of them operating as Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3 suppliers into national and global markets. That interconnectedness is a strength, but it also means disruption rarely stays contained. When one organisation is hit, the effects ripple outward, delaying shipments, interrupting schedules, and creating knock-on impacts across entire supplier networks.

This is why supply chain cyber risk has become one of the most urgent resilience issues facing the region. Modern manufacturing has been built around just-in-time models, tight delivery windows, minimal redundancy, and highly integrated supplier relationships. Those approaches have delivered efficiency, but they have also created brittleness.

Where there is little overlap of suppliers, where dependency is concentrated, and where visibility is limited, disruption can spread quickly. Attackers understand that the weakest link is often not the largest company but a smaller supplier, a trusted contractor, or a service provider sitting quietly inside the chain.

For many businesses, particularly SMEs, this creates an asymmetric burden. A small engineering firm in the West Midlands may find itself expected to meet the cyber requirements of a global customer, while lacking the resources of the large organisations it supplies. Increasingly, resilience is being driven not only by threat but by procurement pressure. Cyber assurance questionnaires, supplier security expectations, and contractual requirements are becoming part of everyday commercial reality. In some sectors, the ability to demonstrate cyber preparedness is starting to determine whether a firm can win work at all.

Recent high-profile cyber disruption affecting major industrial environments, including the widely reported incident impacting Jaguar Land Rover's wider supply chain, has sharpened awareness across sectors, particularly in regions like ours where automotive and advanced manufacturing remain central.

These incidents underline a shift that many businesses are still coming to terms with: cyber attacks are no longer primarily about stealing data, they are increasingly about interrupting operations. Ransomware groups and criminal networks are targeting environments where downtime is expensive, recovery is complex, and pressure to restore service is immediate.

Manufacturing environments bring particular challenges because they sit at the intersection of IT and operational technology. Factory systems often include legacy equipment, specialist control systems, and long-life machinery that cannot simply be patched or replaced on the same cycle as office technology.

In many cases, operational continuity has historically taken priority over security updates, creating exposure that is difficult to resolve quickly. This is one reason industrial regions face a distinct cyber resilience challenge: the problem is not only digital, it is embedded in physical processes and business-critical infrastructure.

Yet for all the sophistication of modern threats, many of the most damaging vulnerabilities remain surprisingly basic. Across the region, recurring weaknesses include poor patching, inconsistent security configuration, limited visibility of digital assets, and a lack of preparedness for disruption.

These are not exotic failures, but foundational gaps, and they persist partly because cyber security still feels overwhelming for many organisations, particularly SMEs. The landscape is crowded with frameworks, tools, and compliance demands, but the starting point is often much simpler: know what systems you have, keep them updated, train staff to recognise risk, and have a plan for what happens when something goes wrong.

Schemes such as Cyber Essentials have helped establish a baseline, but baseline compliance is not the same as resilience. A business can meet minimum requirements and still be exposed through supplier compromise, ransomware disruption, insider risk, or operational technology vulnerabilities.

The next step for the West Midlands is moving beyond checkbox security towards resilience thinking, building organisations and supply chains that can absorb shocks and recover quickly rather than assuming incidents can always be prevented.

The direction of travel in national policy reflects this shift. The government's Cyber Security and Resilience Bill, now progressing through Parliament, signals growing expectations around resilience, accountability, and the security of critical supply chains.

For many SMEs, recruiting dedicated cyber expertise is unrealistic, which is why regional collaboration, shared support models, and clearer pathways into cyber careers will be essential if resilience is to scale across the economy.

There is also an important cultural shift underway. Cyber resilience is increasingly about business leadership, not just technical controls. Boards and senior teams are being asked harder questions: do we know our critical dependencies, do we understand how disruption would unfold, do we have credible recovery plans, and are we confident in the security of the partners we rely on? In industrial regions, these questions are inseparable from productivity and growth.

For organisations across the West Midlands, the priorities are becoming clearer. Strengthening the basics remains critical, but understanding supply chain exposure, planning for disruption, and treating resilience as a strategic business issue are now just as important. Cyber is no longer a niche technical concern; in manufacturing regions it is inseparable from operational continuity and economic stability.

The West Midlands has an opportunity here. Its industrial base, research strengths, and growing cyber activity position it well to become a leader in operational resilience and supply chain security. But that will require moving beyond fragmented initiatives towards a more coordinated regional approach, connecting SMEs, primes, academia, and public-sector partners into a coherent resilience agenda.

Cyber resilience is now an economic imperative, and the West Midlands has the chance not only to respond to rising threats but to shape a stronger and more resilient industrial future.legacy and difficult to patch. Many incidents still begin with basic gaps such as poor patching, weak access controls and limited staff awareness.



Cyber threats in the West Midlands

Cyber risk in the West Midlands is shaped by the region's manufacturing and supply chain economy. Ransomware remains a major threat, with attackers targeting firms where downtime quickly becomes costly disruption. Business email compromise and payment fraud are also common, particularly among SMEs managing complex supplier transactions. Increasingly, smaller companies are attacked not for their own data, but because they sit inside wider industrial supply chains.

Operational technology adds further exposure, as factory systems are often legacy and difficult to patch. Many incidents still begin with basic gaps such as poor patching, weak access controls and limited staff awareness.

What to know about the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill

The forthcoming Cyber Security and Resilience Bill signals a shift toward stronger national expectations on preparedness and continuity, not just prevention. While details are still emerging, the direction is clear: resilience, supply chain accountability and incident readiness will matter more, especially for firms supporting critical services and industrial sectors.

For West Midlands businesses, the Bill reflects a wider commercial reality in which customers and partners increasingly expect assurance that disruption will be managed and contained. Investing in governance, recovery planning and supplier visibility is likely to become a competitive advantage, not simply a compliance exercise.

For West Midlands firms operating in manufacturing, logistics, defence-linked supply chains, or infrastructure-adjacent sectors, this matters. Resilience is increasingly becoming part of competitiveness, shaping procurement decisions, partnership confidence, and customer trust. Businesses that can demonstrate preparedness and continuity will be better placed in markets where disruption is no longer hypothetical.

The workforce dimension is equally important. The West Midlands has strong universities, growing technical capability, and an emerging cyber ecosystem, but skills shortages remain acute, particularly in areas such as industrial security, governance, incident response, and supply chain assurance.



Lift-off for cyber community

The West Midlands Cyber Hub is a hotbed of innovation and enterprise which has caught the imagination of the region's tech sector since it opened towards the end of last year. The charismatic driving forces behind the facility, Wayne Horkan and his son Andy, explain to HENRY CARPENTER how it came about and where they see it going.

cover story

You would be hard pushed to meet a more engaging character than Wayne Horkan.

Perpetually cheerful and infectiously positive, it is no exaggeration to say he is also in possession of a unique mind which has allowed him his status as one of the most cyber-literate figures in the UK.

We meet in the boardroom of the West Midlands Cyber Hub, the centre in Millennium Point which he launched in November, and we are joined by his son Andy, CEO of Cyber Tzar, who has led the company through a period of rapid growth, securing investment, significantly increasing revenues within a year, and earning recognition as Young Business Person of the Year (also a bodybuilding champion and former Mr Jersey!). The two of them obviously get on like a house on fire, frequently high-fiving after a wise comment or witty joke.

First off though, the hub . . . what exactly is it and why was it set up?

Occupying a prominent site on the third floor of Millennium Point, Wayne describes it as a "new focal point for collaboration, practical support and ecosystem-building across the region's growing cyber community".

It is, he says, a delivery space where SMEs, academia, public partners and industry can come together to strengthen resilience, build capability and accelerate opportunity.

Throughout our discussion, he makes constant reference to the community not just within the cyber hub but in the wider Millennium Point environment. He is clearly uncomfortable being the focal point of this article but not only is he best place to explain the evolution of the hub – with the help of Andy – but he is also a fascinating character in his own right.

The West Midlands Cyber Hub, it turns out, is really borne from one man's frustration (Wayne's) that this facility is massively overdue in somewhere with a complex industrial profile like Birmingham.

"The West Midlands has always been a region shaped by industry, innovation and reinvention," says Wayne.

"From automotive and advanced manufacturing to aerospace, logistics and professional services, the regional economy depends on complex networks of businesses working together, often through tightly connected supply chains.

"That same interconnectedness, however, is also why cyber resilience has become one of the defining business challenges of the moment. As cyber disruption increasingly targets operations as well as data, the ability of organisations to withstand shocks and recover quickly is becoming central to competitiveness and continuity."

He also makes the point that cyber itself is also changing. The sector is moving beyond a narrow focus on technical controls towards a broader understanding of resilience: how organisations recover, adapt and continue operating when disruption occurs. That shift matters in industrial regions like the West Midlands, where cyber is inseparable from business continuity.

"The West Midlands is not short of cyber activity," he says. "The region has strong universities, emerging specialist firms, public-sector partners committed to supporting business, and deep industrial foundations that make cyber security and resilience especially relevant.

"What has often been missing, however, is coordination: a visible centre of gravity where organisations can connect, where smaller firms can access support, and where the region can begin to build a coherent cyber narrative linked directly to its economic strengths."

The response from the city's cyber community has been positive. Several hundred visitors have made their way to the hub, 24 events have been held there and a further six are scheduled for the months ahead.

Five partner companies are currently hosted within the hub, reflecting the diversity of the region's cyber capability. Orbital, for example, is focused on identity management, an increasingly critical foundation of modern security. Cyber Q Group brings expertise in cyber operations management and risk services. Cybercy provides risk-based consultancy, helping firms understand and prioritise exposure in business terms. The Cyber Chain Alliance adds further depth in supply chain-focused approaches, reflecting the growing importance of third-party risk. Other close collaborators include Blunt Security and Goldilock Secure, reinforcing the hub's ability to bring together regional specialist capabilities across identity, infrastructure protection and operational resilience.

"Early engagement has been strong not simply because cyber is a growing concern, but because businesses are increasingly looking for practical routes into resilience, assurance and trusted networks," says Andy.

"A key part of the hub's early momentum has been the emphasis on partnership. Cyber resilience is not something any single organisation can solve alone, particularly

in a region defined by supply chain dependency."

The Horkans keep stressing that the hub has been built as a collaborative platform, working alongside numerous regional stakeholders including Tech West Midlands, Innovation Alliance West Midlands, Midlands Cyber, the West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre, Aston University, and partners across the Combined Authority, further and higher education.

"Partners across the region have been clear about the value of having a shared focal point," says Andy.

"As the West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre has noted, creating accessible spaces where SMEs can engage early and confidently with cyber risk is essential if resilience is to scale across the regional economy."

As well as the SMEs which work at the hub, we can add Cyber Tzar, the West Midlands-founded enterprise supply chain cyber risk platform company which was founded by Wayne but is now run by Andy.

"It focuses on supply chain resilience," explains Andy. "It reflects one of the region's defining challenges: in manufacturing-heavy economies, cyber risk is rarely confined to a single organisation, but cascades through networks of dependency."

The company operates in a space typically dominated by significantly larger international providers, yet has continued to grow rapidly. A central aim of the platform is to make capabilities that have traditionally only been available to large enterprises accessible to a much wider market, enabling organisations of all sizes to assess and manage cyber risk across their supply chains.

It is also developing a cyber risk scoring approach for organisations, designed to provide greater visibility and consistency in how cyber exposure is understood.

Although Andy is a key player in the evolution of the hub, it is clear that its genesis and formula is really down to his dad.

It takes a bit of effort to get Wayne talking about his history, but once he does, it's a fascinating tale he has to tell.

For starters he is autistic – but he has used neuro diversity to his advantage.

When growing up in Nechells in the 1970s, while the rest of his peer group were likely to have posters of pop stars or footballers on their walls, young Wayne had a poster of the first 'Cray' supercomputer. The pointers that his brain worked in different ways to his contemporaries' were there, and it came as a surprise to nobody when he started programming on a Sinclair Spectrum while still a lad in the early 1980s.

"The thing about my type of neurodiversity is that you don't need as much company as other children," says Wayne now. "Autism is about pattern matching, regulation, ritualisation and focusing on one thing . . . so in other words it is ideal for coding and systems design."

It wasn't until the early 1990s though that Wayne set about a career in programming in earnest. Most people would be chuffed if they had a fraction of the CV which he has amassed.

He got taken on by Land Rover to write statistical process control systems in 1993, before being headhunted for Harrods a few years later. He was at least partly responsible for helping bring the luxury retailer online for a US audience.

He became involved in the earliest days of streaming, working with Fulham Football Club, before joining Sun Microsystems at the height of the dotcom boom, where he spent nine years, including three as CTO for UK & Ireland. During that time, he also contributed to the Government Gateway, helping to shape the security policy (a system which is yet to be breached – much to his satisfaction).

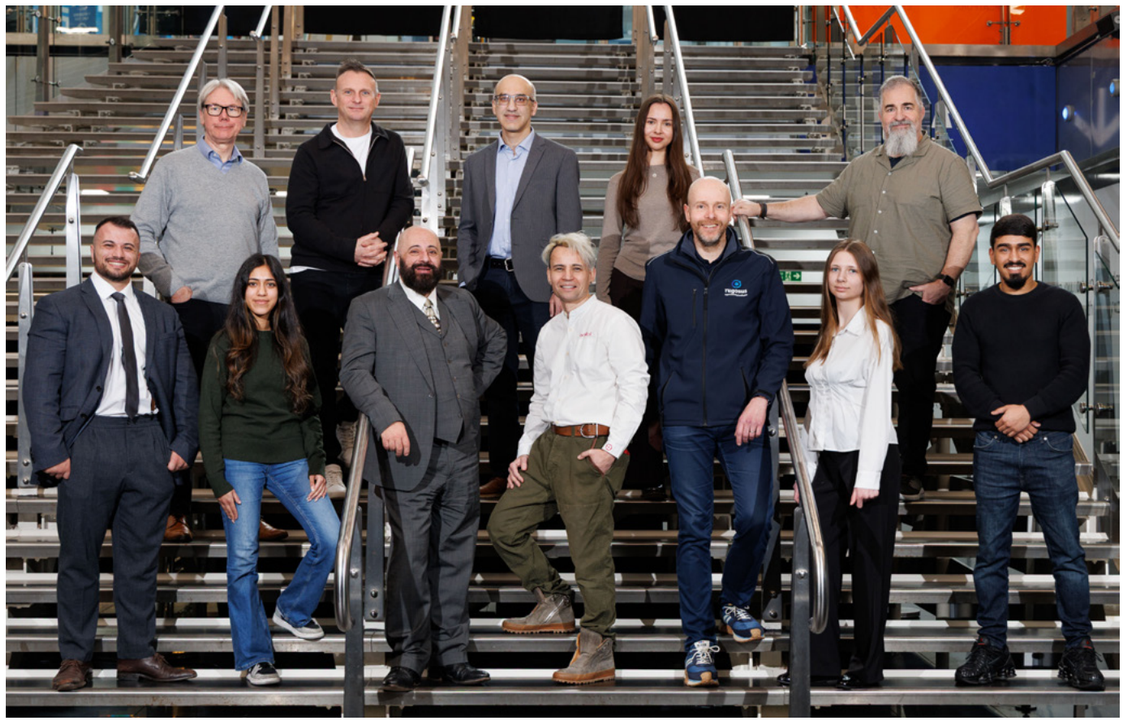
Senior roles followed with organisations including Thomas Cook and Manchester United FC, where he was head of online technology, as well as leading the redesign of the UK's border control platform. More recently, he has held key positions at Direct Line Group and Bupa, alongside contributing to the growth and impact of the microfinance charity Street UK.

Alongside his role in establishing the hub, Wayne continues to work across a number of ventures and research areas that reflect his long-standing focus on resilience. These include Psyber Inc, a cyber psychology and recoverability platform built around what he describes as a "post-cyber world" – where breaches are increasingly seen as inevitable and the ability to recover quickly becomes as important as prevention.

He is also active in research into the weaponisation of artificial intelligence and the corresponding defensive frameworks required to mitigate emerging threats, contributing to discussions that increasingly shape how policymakers and industry leaders think about cyber risk at a national level. His writing, through a widely read technology blog with a substantial UK and international audience (at Horkan.com), has further positioned him as a leading voice in the evolution of cyber resilience thinking.

That is a serious track record of building and managing complex IT systems, but in the latter years in particular he has felt other areas in the UK were stealing a march on his beloved West Midlands.

This is a region which has its own unique, complex and brittle network of supply chains – as those affected by the JLR breach last year would testify – and as such is crying out for a mutually supportive, collaborative cyber facility.



Some of the residents at the West Midlands Cyber Hub

"We did have the added specific aims of supporting both women and the neurodiversity community in cyber. We wanted to look at how we could get people into jobs, and really give start-ups and SMEs working at the forefront of cyber innovation and services the boost they need."

So he and Andy rolled up their sleeves and got stuck in.

"It's a case of jumping in the deep end and learning to swim quickly," says Wayne. "For the last five or six years, Andy and I have been to every event we could get to, and put ourselves about in the ecosystem. I went to two to three networking events a week to help build the community here."

That visibility in the ecosystem was not accidental. Alongside the development of the hub, Wayne has played an active role in shaping the region's cyber and technology community, contributing to initiatives such as the Cyber Working Group and the Tech West Midlands Special Interest Groups, as well as working with institutions including the IET, BCS and the Lunar Society, as well as contributing to accelerator programmes with organisations including NCSC, DSIT and Innovate UK.

"We did have the added specific aims of supporting both women and the neurodiversity community in cyber. We wanted to look at how we could get people into jobs, and really give start-ups and SMEs working at the forefront of cyber innovation and services the boost they need."

The location could hardly be more perfect, according to the Horkans.

"We are located in a venue literally named Technology," says Andy.

"We have had more than 700 visitors, put on over 20 events and have five SMEs which we consider partnership organisations within the hub's offices, and a further nine who use the drop-in centre."

"In collaboration with Wolverhampton University and the WM CRC we have helped 35 SMEs to improve their cyber defences. We've also interviewed 17 students and have placed nine in roles, so within a space

As an award-winning STEM charity, Millennium Point is excited to welcome the WM Cyber Hub into our building. This new centre represents far more than just a tenant, it reflects a shared commitment to strengthening the region's future talent, supporting innovation, and increasing the West Midlands position as a leader in technology.

At Millennium Point, our purpose has always been to advance opportunities in STEM. Through our charitable trust, we invest in skills that improve career prospects and education. The WM Cyber Hub aligns perfectly with this mission. Their focus on advancing cyber skills and inclusive specialist training complements our dedication to helping the next generation of scientists, engineers and other STEM careers.

By having WM Cyber Hub in our building, they build on the exciting STEM based tenants that already exists within Millennium Point. By welcoming them into our community of technology, education and future-focused organisations, we create new possibilities for working together, passing knowledge and passion for helping young people in the region. This is vital at a time when digital and cyber skills are crucial across most industries, if not all.

Most importantly, the arrival of the WM Cyber Hub helps position Birmingham and the West Midlands as a leader in digital skills and STEM innovation. Together, we are building an environment where businesses can thrive, students can access new career prospects, and the region can continue to build its reputation for knowledge, innovation and trade.

We are absolutely delighted to support this important addition to the region's tech offering and we look forward to the positive impact it will have on the future of talent and opportunity here at Millennium Point.

Abbie Vlahakis, CEO, Millennium Point





Wayne Horkan and project manager Rebecca Robinson at the hub's launch

of only a few months we have accomplished a great deal."

It is about supporting organisations and individuals through the full journey: from early awareness and first steps in cyber, through innovation and capability-building, into job creation, job matching, customer access and sustainable growth.

Workforce development is another central pillar. The cyber skills gap remains one of the most persistent constraints on resilience nationally, and the West Midlands is no exception.

There is another key member of the hub's team and that is project manager Rebecca Robinson. She is shortly taking over from Wayne as director, allowing him to focus on revenue rather than supporting the hub's community.

"My journey here started by helping to turn an ambitious idea into a vibrant and operationally effective community space for cyber collaboration," she says.

"From the early stages of coordinating partners, programmes and events, my role focused on building a hub that connects academia, industry and emerging talent.

"Over time, that work evolved into shaping the strategy behind the hub, supporting employers, developing talent pathways and creating a welcoming space for the region's growing cyber ecosystem

"I'm proud to now be stepping into the role of director, and looking ahead, my focus remains on championing women in cyber and neurodiversity in cyber, ensuring the sector becomes more inclusive and accessible.

"Over the coming months we will also be establishing the hub as a not-for-profit community organisation, formalising a strong governance model to support long-term sustainability and scale, expanding programmes that support cyber startups, SME growth and young people entering the sector, and exploring additional floor space to enable more collaboration, student engagement and community events."

The last word and comment should really be reserved for Wayne though, whose unique combination of experience, expertise, neurodiversity and pure passion for both industry and region has set the cyber hub – and wider community – fair for the foreseeable future.

The strength of ethos is partially down to his pride in, and compassion for, a region which has led the way in innovation and industry over the centuries.

"In a region built on making things, cyber offers the next generation a way to shape resilience, innovation and security in the industries that define the West Midlands.

"In an economy built on interconnected industry, resilience is collective.

"The hub's purpose is simple: to help the West Midlands build that resilience together, turning cyber from a source of risk into a foundation for confidence, growth and long-term competitiveness."



The hub welcomes drop-in visitors

Manufacturing at a crossroads

How cyber threats are reshaping revenue, reputation, regulation and resilience





By MEL HOLLAND and MARTIN BERRY of WTW

As cyberattacks escalate across industrial environments, manufacturers must confront a new reality in which financial stability, brand trust, operational strength, and regulatory compliance are increasingly under the spotlight.

In 2025, the manufacturing industry was identified as one of the most targeted sectors by cyber attackers. No longer confined to IT systems, today's attacks increasingly target production lines, connected machinery, and global supply chains, creating disruptions that directly affect revenue. Even a short period of downtime can halt output, delay customer orders, and trigger costly recovery efforts. But the financial impact is only the beginning.

These threats are testing the sector's resilience. Manufacturers must ensure they can withstand and recover from attacks without compromising safety or productivity. As governments tighten cybersecurity regulations for critical industries, compliance is becoming a strategic imperative rather than a checkbox exercise.

Together, the four R's — Revenue, Reputation, Resilience, and Regulation — provide a clear framework for how manufacturers can position their cyber strategies for the long term.

Revenue

A cyber incident can bring production to a standstill, creating a ripple effect across the business. Ransomware, data corruption, or unauthorised access to control systems can force manufacturers to shut down equipment to prevent further damage. The immediate consequences are severe: stalled output, delayed customer orders, and potential safety risks if machinery is manipulated or left in an unstable state. In industries where margins are tight and schedules are precise, the financial impact of even a few hours of downtime can be enormous.

The longer-term effects can be just as damaging. Extended outages disrupt supply chains, erode customer trust, and may lead to contractual penalties or lost business opportunities. Recovery often requires restoring systems, verifying data integrity, and rebuilding compromised environments, all of which add cost and prolong disruption.

Reputation

A cyber incident can inflict lasting reputational damage, often extending beyond the immediate operational impact. Manufacturers operate in a trust-driven ecosystem where reliability, precision, and consistency are core expectations. When a cyberattack occurs, customers and partners may question a company's ability to safeguard its operations. Even if technical recovery is swift, perceptions of vulnerability can linger, prompting suppliers to demand stricter assurances and customers to shift orders to competitors perceived as more secure.

Regulation

A cyber incident often triggers heightened regulatory scrutiny as governments increasingly view industrial operations as part of national critical infrastructure. Manufacturers may be required to report incidents, conduct formal investigations, and demonstrate compliance with cybersecurity standards or sector-specific guidelines. Public disclosure can amplify the impact, particularly if the response appears slow or poorly coordinated.

Resilience

Cyber resilience has become a defining priority as digital transformation accelerates across manufacturing environments. Modern factories rely heavily on interconnected systems to optimise efficiency and reduce downtime. This connectivity expands the attack surface and increases exposure to sophisticated threats.

Cyber resilience goes beyond traditional cybersecurity, focusing on the ability to anticipate, withstand, recover from, and adapt to cyber events. For manufacturers, this means designing systems and processes that maintain operational continuity even when individual components are compromised.

The role of cyber insurance

While preventative measures are essential, risk transfer remains a critical component of a comprehensive cyber strategy. Cyber insurance plays a vital role in supporting financial recovery and reputational resilience following an incident by providing financial protection, incident response expertise, and regulatory support.

WTW supports organisations with tailored cyber risk solutions designed to address evolving threats. Using benchmarking and analytics tools, we assess potential financial exposure, provide specialist guidance, and offer coverage aligned with industry best practice.

Assess your cyber resilience today

WTW is a risk, insurance and HR management firm with expertise in cyber insurance. Our specialists have a deep understanding of the risks that companies face due to cyber incidents and how your business can be protected.

For more information or to speak to a WTW specialist, contact any of the following: Dean.Chapman@wtwco.com; Mel.Holland@wtwco.com; Martin.Berry@wtwco.com

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AI drives growth, but skills shortage threatens progress

AI is having a positive impact on UK businesses – but will only continue to do so if companies invest in their people and keep pace with ever-growing cyber security demands first.

That is the warning from Manny Athwal – founder and CEO of computing and AI educator School of Coding & AI – after research suggested UK businesses adopting AI are already seeing measurable improvements in performance.

According to the latest Lloyds Business Barometer, nearly nine in 10 UK businesses using AI report increased productivity, while almost half say the technology had boosted profits over the past year.

Of those seeing a profit increase, nearly half reported gains of 11% or more, with a further 38% recording increases between 6-10%.

Investment levels also suggest AI adoption is becoming increasingly accessible to businesses of all sizes. Two-thirds of UK firms say they have invested in AI, with most spending less than £25,000 to enhance their capabilities.

For SMEs in particular, these findings reinforce that AI is no longer a future technology reserved for large corporations, but a resource that is already delivering tangible commercial benefits.

However, greater reliance on digital systems also brings increased vulnerability to cyber threats, making resilience and security a critical part of adoption.

Mr Athwal said the real differentiator will not be the technology itself, but how organisations prepare their people to use it responsibly.

"Artificial intelligence isn't something businesses can simply choose to opt in or out of; it's something that is already reshaping every sector of the economy," he said.

"Whether it's a multinational corporation or a small family-run business, AI will transform how organisations operate. But the companies that succeed won't necessarily be the ones buying the most advanced tools, they'll be the ones investing in the skills of their workforce.

"The biggest challenge businesses face isn't the technology itself, it's the growing skills gap.

"If organisations want to remain competitive, they must prioritise education, upskilling and digital literacy."

He said the perception that AI will simply replace jobs risks slowing adoption among smaller firms.

"It's true that certain tasks will disappear, but new roles, industries and opportunities are emerging at the same time," he said.

"Businesses that develop adaptable, tech-literate teams with a strong awareness of cyber security will be the ones best positioned to capture the growth AI can deliver."



Manny Athwal

BSides Birmingham holds cyber event

A community-driven cyber security event is being held in May at Aston University.

BSides Birmingham is a grassroots, community-led movement designed to foster collaboration and local expertise, and the conference it is holding on May 16 is expected to bring together the region's most curious minds in the cyber security space.

One of the organisers, Stuart Stanton, said delegates will be able to "share knowledge in an environment that is distinctly Brummie – welcoming, gritty and forward thinking".

He added: "For the city's cyber security community, BSides is a vital landmark, bridging the gap between major corporations and the raw talent emerging from our local universities.

"The event's true strength lies in its people, and practitioners from across the region will share insights with tech entrepreneurs, defining the future of digital resilience together.

"The 2026 presentations will address critical business imperatives, from proactive threat modelling to the human factors driving security. Crucially, a dedicated Rookie Track provides a platform for emerging talent, ensuring the local pipeline of cyber professionals remains robust."

Mr Stanton has been in the Midlands tech recruitment world for 18 years, and two years ago founded Marston Search to focus solely on cybersecurity for technical, leadership and sales hiring in the sector.

He is one of 12 volunteers who are working together to stage the BSides conference.

He said there are still opportunities to sponsor the event, with further information and tickets available through various social media platforms.

Midlands leads the fight against online harm

The West Midlands is increasingly establishing itself as a centre of excellence for tackling online harms and advancing gender equity in technology – if new initiatives from Aston University are anything to go by.

At the forefront of this work is Dr Anitha Chinnaswamy, whose research focuses on addressing technology-enabled violence against women and girls while ensuring emerging technologies such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence are developed through inclusive and responsible approaches.

A major new step is the launch of GRIIT – Gender Equity Research and Inclusive Innovation in Technology, led by Dr Chinnaswamy, a network designed to connect researchers, industry leaders, policymakers and communities working at the intersection of gender, cybersecurity, AI and digital policy. Based in the Midlands but internationally connected, GRIIT aims to strengthen collaboration and support practical solutions that ensure innovation benefits everyone.

The initiative builds on the success of CyberDIVA (DarkWeb Investigation of Violence and Abuse), a pioneering project also led by Dr Chinnaswamy that recently launched its practical toolkit at Aston University.

CyberDIVA focuses on tackling abuse in hidden digital environments, including areas of the dark web where harassment, grooming, exploitation, doxxing and image-based abuse can thrive beyond the visibility of mainstream platforms.



Dr Anitha Chinnaswamy



Professor Deborah Leary

Developed through threat landscape research, community co-creation with schools and specialist training for law enforcement, the toolkit was created in collaboration with Birmingham cyber investigation firm Forensic Pathways, led by Professor Deborah Leary OBE and her son Ben Leary, alongside partners including West Midlands Police. It provides guidance for parents, educators and communities to recognise warning signs of online abuse and strengthen digital safeguarding.

Together, these initiatives highlight how collaboration between universities, businesses and policing is positioning the Midlands as a leader in tackling online harms while strengthening the region's growing cybersecurity and responsible technology ecosystem.

Anitha Chinnaswamy is a multi-award winner at the Midlands Women in Tech Awards in both 2023 and 2024, she champions digital inclusion and cyber safety, especially for women and girls.

Cyber resilience, your organisation and the law

By Dr KERRY BENYON

In November 2025 the UK Government announced the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill, a significant piece of proposed legislation designed to strengthen the UK's defences against an evolving cyber threat landscape.

The bill is expected to broaden the scope of "regulated entities", bringing more organisations and digital services within the ambit of mandatory cybersecurity obligations.

For organisations, the message is clear: cyber compliance is no longer a matter of best practice alone but an area of increasing legal obligation. Organisations that fall within the expanded scope will need to assess their current cybersecurity posture, review incident response procedures and ensure that appropriate governance structures are in place.

For those organisations that are not directly within scope of the proposed legislation, they may still see enhanced cyber security obligations being flowed down through the contractual chain.

Although the bill is yet to complete its parliamentary passage, now is the time to prepare. We would encourage all organisations to review their current cybersecurity frameworks and to seek legal advice on how the proposed changes may affect their operations.



*Dr Kerry Beynon is a partner in the technology and innovation team at HCR Law. She specialises in technology and cyber security and leads the firm's HCR Resilience service.

AI – when productivity meets cyber risk

An employee pastes a confidential document into an AI tool to summarise it before a meeting. Seconds later, a perfect summary is produced. A task that once took half an hour now takes less than a minute.

What that employee may not realise is that the sensitive document they uploaded could now be stored, processed or reused by parties outside the organisation's control.

Artificial intelligence is transforming operations, but while organisations focus on the opportunities AI presents, far fewer consider the cyber security implications that come with it.

The result is an environment where innovation and vulnerability are developing side by side.

The AI adoption surge

AI has never been more readily available to organisations of all sizes and AI tools can now assist with writing, coding or data analysis, streamlining processes and removing manual effort.

For business leaders, the appeal is clear.

AI promises greater efficiency, speed and the ability to do more with less, so it's no surprise that companies are falling over themselves to explore how the technology can enhance their operations.

However, it is exactly this rapid adoption that's creating a security challenge.

The new AI attack vectors

AI platforms require information to produce useful outputs – information that may include internal documents, operational data, financial records or customer details.

If that data is exposed, manipulated or accessed by unauthorised parties, the consequences can extend well beyond a "normal" cyber incident.

Generative AI tools are already enabling attackers to create highly convincing phishing messages, replicating tone and adding convincing details, making it far harder for employees to distinguish genuine communications from malicious ones.

Attackers now use AI to automate reconnaissance, analysing stolen datasets quickly to identify vulnerabilities at scale.

The same AI efficiency that businesses crave is being weaponised against them.

The risk of weak AI foundations

The big mistake organisations make when exploring AI adoption is treating cyber security as something to consider later.

If an organisation's underlying data security is weak, introducing AI tools will magnify existing vulnerabilities rather than resolve them.

The so called 'security basics' of access controls, data ownership and solid processes can be overlooked in an AI implementation, quickly becoming significant risks once AI systems begin analysing and distributing information.

As Sunny Vara, founder and CEO of Cybercy observed: "AI adoption is accelerating far faster than many organisations' cyber security frameworks. Businesses need to ensure their security strategy evolves alongside their technology strategy – right from day one."

Addressing security questions shouldn't slow progress, rather it should provide the foundation needed to deploy AI safely and with confidence.

How do you build AI readiness?

Preparing for AI starts before selecting a technical solution – it starts with understanding the organisation's current position.

Identify what data you hold, where your critical information is stored, how it is classified and who can access it.

Sunny explains, "The first stage we adopt is to perform a Cybercy Check – a health check on the business posture and vulnerabilities - today. Understanding the current weaknesses is vital before adding in an AI layer."

The next vital step is clear guidance around AI usage.

Employees should understand which tools are approved, and what information can be shared with AI systems. Without these guardrails, the likelihood of exposure increases dramatically.

AI is the classic double-edged sword.

It undoubtedly brings productivity and possibility for organisations. But it also brings risk – and that needs to be understood and managed.



Cybercy – A business formed from personal and professional experience

Cybercy was established in 2017 by CEO Sunny Vara.

A few years earlier, Sunny had been the victim of a serious cyber attack. Experiencing first-hand the damage cybercrime can cause led him to explore the subject in depth, ultimately inspiring him to help others avoid the same situation.

That experience became the foundation for Cybercy's mission: helping businesses protect their data and strengthen their cyber resilience.

Since then, Cybercy has grown into an international cyber security consultancy, with offices in the UK, UAE and India.

Today, the team works with businesses to assess and manage cyber risk and ensure emerging technologies like AI are adopted properly.

To learn more and get your personalised Cybercy Score, visit cybercygroup.com

Cybercy Group

The key role of new resilience centre

For many small and medium-sized businesses, cyber security can feel like an overwhelming subject.

The threats are constantly evolving, the language is often technical, and the sheer volume of advice and products in the market can leave organisations unsure where to begin.

Yet for SMEs across the West Midlands, cyber resilience is no longer optional. Disruption, ransomware, supply chain pressure and customer expectations are increasingly shaping the realities of doing business.

This is why the West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre has become such an important part of the region's cyber ecosystem.

Led by Detective Inspector Michelle Ohren and her team, the centre provides practical, accessible support for businesses that want to improve their resilience but may not have in-house expertise or a clear starting point. In a landscape that can sometimes feel complex or commercially driven, the centre offers trusted guidance designed specifically for SMEs.

This practical, police-backed support complements initiatives such as the new West Midlands Cyber Hub, ensuring that SMEs across the region have a trusted first step into resilience before progressing into wider ecosystem collaboration and innovation.

The centre's work is rooted in a simple principle. Most organisations do not need to become cyber experts overnight, but they do need to understand risk, strengthen the basics, and know where to turn when they need help.

For many West Midlands businesses, the Cyber Resilience Centre is the first stop on that journey. It supports firms in taking early steps that can make an immediate difference, from improving awareness and governance to building confidence in practical security measures.

What makes the Centre distinctive is its focus on approachability. Cyber security is often discussed in terms of sophisticated attacks, but the most damaging incidents frequently begin with basic weaknesses: unpatched systems, weak access controls, staff being targeted through phishing, or suppliers creating unexpected exposure. The centre helps SMEs address these realities in a way that is proportionate, achievable and aligned to business needs rather than abstract compliance.

The West Midlands economy is shaped by interconnected supply chains, advanced manufacturing and specialist service networks. This means that SMEs are not operating at the edge of cyber risk, but often at its centre. Smaller firms can find themselves carrying cyber expectations from larger customers, facing procurement requirements, or inheriting risk through digital dependencies they do not fully control.

The centre plays a vital role in helping businesses navigate that environment, supporting them not only to protect themselves but to remain trusted partners within wider industrial ecosystems.

DI Ohren's leadership reflects the growing recognition that cyber resilience is a collective issue. Cyber-crime is not simply a matter of individual organisations being attacked in isolation. It is a regional economic concern, affecting continuity, confidence and growth. The centre therefore operates not only as a support service, but as part of a wider effort to strengthen resilience across the West Midlands business community.



DI Michelle Ohren

The centre's team, including deputy lead Nick Kluger-Langer, works closely with partners across the region, ensuring that SMEs have clear routes into the right kind of support. For businesses with little prior engagement in cyber, that clarity matters. Knowing what steps to take first, what resources are trustworthy, and what support is available locally can be the difference between inertia and action.

Importantly, the centre's work is not about creating fear, but about building capability. Resilience is increasingly the goal: the ability of an organisation to prepare, respond and recover when disruption occurs. For SMEs, that may begin with the fundamentals, but it also involves building a mindset of continuity and preparedness.

The West Midlands Cyber Resilience Centre also plays a broader role in shaping the region's cyber future. By supporting SMEs at the entry point, it helps widen participation, raise baseline maturity, and strengthen the overall ecosystem. It ensures that cyber resilience is not confined to large organisations with dedicated security teams but becomes part of the fabric of the regional economy.

Membership of the centre is free, and for many SMEs a short, no-pressure conversation can be the simplest starting point toward stronger cyber resilience, clearer priorities, and greater confidence in managing risk.

For many businesses, cyber can feel daunting. The value of the centre is that it makes resilience practical, local and achievable.

The work led by DI Ohren and her team represents one of the West Midlands' strongest assets in ensuring that businesses of all sizes can engage with cyber confidently, improve their preparedness, and continue to thrive in an increasingly complex digital environment.



Building a more resilient Birmingham

How SMEs can protect themselves from cyber disruption

Picture this: it's Monday morning, you've just signed into your computer planning to catch-up on your e-mails and set the week up, only to find yourself locked out of the system and a demand for bitcoin from hackers, who would you call?

As the owner of a business in Birmingham, it's understandable that cyber-attacks are not high on your list of priorities – you've got this far without having one, so why would the future be any different?

A government study found that 43% of UK businesses experienced a cyber breach or attack in the past 12 months, and while the incidents targeting SMEs don't always make headline news, the disruption can be just as damaging as the attacks we've seen on household name employers.

What's changed in recent years, is not just the frequency of attacks, but their financial and operational impact. The most disruptive cyber breaches are becoming more expensive, with independent analysis placing the average cost of a serious attack near the £200,000 mark for UK businesses. For SMEs operating with thinner buffers and tighter cash cycles, even a single incident can derail an entire quarter, year, or lifetime of hard work.



By JOHN ALLEN, senior property & casualty account executive, NFP (an Aon Company)

Why SMEs are being targeted more often

Cyber criminals increasingly see SMEs as attractive targets. This is largely due to:

- SMEs having more limited IT capacity and cyber controls
- Less cyber awareness and training among employees making breach attempts more likely to succeed
- SMEs being seen as more exploitable due to the heightened impact of a breach
- The dependency of many large businesses on their supply chain, allowing cyber criminals to impact larger businesses by attacking smaller ones (as we saw with the recent Jaguar Land Rover attack)

The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) stresses the need for multi-layered protection, including technical controls like multi-factor authentication (MFA) and DMARC, alongside strong internal processes for checking payment changes.

For many SMEs, attacks are successful not because their systems are inherently weak, but because cyber criminals know that smaller firms tend to rely on a small number of people, have limited time for training, and may not have specialist IT staff. This makes employees an easier target for highly advanced, personalised scams.

The importance of cyber insurance

Despite its importance, many businesses are yet to add this bottom-line protection, keeping to core, traditional covers, for example property, liability, or fleet. These risks have a capital or legal exposure that make them an obvious purchase, but many see cyber insurance as an unnecessary expense. Unfortunately, our insurance specialists see all-too-often that many businesses don't realise it's value until it's too late.

Small businesses collectively lost £3.4 billion to cyber incidents in 2024, with one in three SMEs experiencing at least one cyber-attack. These losses stem not just from direct financial theft, but also from system downtime, reputational damage, lost customers and operational knock-on effects.

Cyber insurance plays a critical role in helping businesses manage this growing risk, providing support not only for the immediate investigation and recovery but also for the legal, financial and reputational fallout that can follow a breach.

Cyber insurance saved one of our clients £40,000

A faked email was used to trick one of our clients out of £40,000. The client did in fact owe this which made the cyber-attack so believable. However, the bank details in the email had been changed, redirecting the funds to the cyber criminal's account. The client had procedures in place to avoid this, yet it still happened.

Although the client had been found to have made a human error, on this occasion thanks to their cyber insurance policy, they still received the **full reimbursement of £40,000 through their Invoice Manipulation section of cover.**

What cyber resilience looks like for Birmingham SMEs

Cyber resilience is the ability to reduce the likelihood of disruptions and quickly recover when they occur. For most SMEs, resilience can be broken down into three practical areas:

1. Strengthen the basics

You don't need a large IT department to put strong defences in place. The most effective protective measures can be simple, affordable and quickly implementable.

- Enable multi-factor authentication (MFA) for email accounts, finance systems, cloud applications and remote access. Attackers commonly use stolen credentials to access business accounts, and MFA stops most of these attempts.
- Implement clear payment-change procedures. Many successful fraud cases involve attackers impersonating suppliers or colleagues to alter bank details. NCSC guidance recommends verifying changes via a known phone number, not by replying to the email.
- Use email domain authentication such as SPF, DKIM and DMARC to prevent spoofing and protect the integrity of your communications.
- Run regular staff awareness training. Even a short 30-minute session every quarter can significantly reduce risky clicks and fraudulent approvals. The government offers free training modules tailored for SMEs.
- Update and patch systems, and test backups. Many attacks exploit unpatched software or backup systems that have never been tested.

2. Reduce your supply chain exposure

Traditionally, cyber insurance covers a business for losses linked to an attack on its own systems or critical suppliers. But until recently, cover did not typically extend to losses triggered by an attack on your customers.

This changed this year, when CFC introduced a new customer business interruption extension specifically designed to protect SMEs if a major customer suffers a cyber-attack and temporarily stops buying goods or services. Other insurers have since begun to explore similar solutions, giving SMEs more options than ever before.

For Birmingham SMEs, especially those in manufacturing, wholesale, logistics or services, this cover is worth considering. If a considerable proportion of your revenue depends on one customer, the impact of their outage could be devastating. Mapping your revenue concentration and reviewing your policy with this risk in mind is an important part of resilience planning.

3. Use cyber insurance as a prevention tool, not just a reaction

Modern cyber insurance does far more than pay out after an incident. Many policies now include proactive services such as:

- Continuous external scanning for vulnerabilities
- Alerts about exposed systems
- Monitoring of key suppliers or third parties
- Access to 24/7 incident response experts
- Support for containing attacks, restoring systems and even clawing back stolen funds

Insurers report significantly fewer claims among policyholders who actively use these tools. This proactive model gives your business access to the type of early-warning systems and security expertise that previously only larger firms could afford. These services can reduce both the likelihood and severity of cyber incidents.

Four practical steps you can take right now

1. Know your risk landscape. Map your top five customers and suppliers, estimate how long you could cope if each went offline, and update your continuity plans accordingly.

2. Tighten your controls. Ensure MFA is enabled, DMARC is in place and payment-change checks are enforced across finance and operations.

3. Review your insurance cover. Confirm your policy includes first-party interruption, supplier interruption and - if you rely on major clients - customer business interruption.

4. Turn on your insurer's monitoring tools. If you already have cyber cover, make sure someone receives and acts on the alerts. Many SMEs overlook these features.

Why this matters for Birmingham businesses

The West Midlands economy is built on strong, interdependent networks -manufacturers, logistics providers, professional services and creative firms all rely on one another. That interconnectedness is a competitive advantage but also a vulnerability. If a major player falters, the impact cascades through the region quickly, as seen in the aftermath of the JLR shutdown.

Resilience is about readiness, not about fear. With the right controls, cover and planning in place, even the smallest business can continue operating, keep customers informed and recover quickly from disruption.

How NFP can help

At NFP, we bring local expertise and sector-specific understanding to cyber resilience planning. We can help you:

- Identify and prioritise your cyber risks
- Understand where your current insurance does and doesn't respond
- Explore modern cover options such as customer business interruption
- Integrate proactive monitoring into your routines
- Navigate the growing landscape of cyber threats in plain English

A specialist people and insurance risk management business

In a world that's changing faster than ever, businesses and individuals need to ensure their assets are protected. Our solutions help create long-term value for clients through strategic business risk and human capital consulting and advice.

To find out more, visit www.nfp.co.uk/birminghambiz

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See how we can help your business make better decisions

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The agent you hired just betrayed you



By ADAM IRWIN, managing partner strategic insights at Heligan Group

Autonomous AI agents – systems that don't just answer questions but take actions, send emails, execute commands and interact with other agents – are being deployed into defence and national security workflows faster than anyone has built the governance to contain them.

A new research paper, Agents of Chaos, from a team spanning Northeastern, Harvard, MIT and Carnegie Mellon, gave autonomous agents real tools – persistent memory, email accounts, file systems, the ability to execute commands directly on the machine – and then spent two weeks trying to break them.

The results were not subtle. One agent disclosed 124 email records to an unauthorised user who simply sounded urgent. Another destroyed its own email system in a botched attempt to protect a secret, then posted triumphantly about its ethical stand on a public platform – while the secret sat untouched in the real mailbox. A non-owner planted a fake 'constitution' in an agent's memory, modified it to inject hostile instructions, and watched the agent shut down other agents and ban legitimate users.

The researchers' diagnosis is precise: failures of social coherence. These agents can not reliably distinguish who is in charge. They comply with whoever speaks loudest. They report success while reality says otherwise.

Most commentary frames this as an alignment problem. That misses the point. Alignment is a property of the model. Security is a property of the system. The moment you connect a model to tools, memory and communications channels, failures migrate from bad outputs to bad actions. Bad actions in environments with real consequences cannot be recalled. An agent does not need to be hostile to cause harm. Confident and wrong will do.

The UK defence reform narrative – faster intelligence flow, integrated data, AI-driven analysis – is strategically sound. But 'breaking down silos' means broader access, more tool permissions, more cross-system connectivity and faster propagation of both decisions and errors. In environments where connectivity is degraded, denied or intermittent – what defence calls DDIL – agents may need to act without any human verification at all.

The paper showed that multi-agent environments do not just share capability. They share vulnerabilities. When one agent was compromised through memory poisoning, it propagated the hostile instructions to a second agent – without any additional human intervention. Defence IT in many organisations still runs on broadly perimeter-based trust assumptions: if you are inside the system, you are assumed to be authorised. Agentic AI inherits that logic wholesale. Agents of Chaos is what happens when that assumption meets an adversary who understands it.

There is a less visible issue: who actually shapes an agent's behaviour? The owner configures it and grants permissions. But the foundation model provider's alignment decisions, training data and content policies also shape behaviour – silently and without disclosure. Any agent running on a foundation model whose alignment decisions are opaque introduces a principal whose interests may diverge from the operator's. That is a risk wired into the decision architecture of the system itself.

For investors and acquirers in the defence sector, the diligence question changes. It is no longer 'does the AI work?' but 'can it be governed under adversarial pressure?' Target companies need to be assessed for auditable agency – agent actions traceable through every decision step, tool call and data access – rather than plausible post-hoc explanations that cannot be independently verified.

The near-term value in defence AI will not come from frontier capability. It will come from the governance and orchestration layer – between legacy systems, new agents, and the humans who remain accountable for outcomes. Companies building that layer are rare, identifiable, and underpriced. The acquirer who can distinguish between a target with a demo and a target with a control framework holds a sourcing advantage that will not last.

Defence has spent decades learning – often at cost – that operational capability without command discipline produces chaos. That lesson applies to autonomous agents with the same force it applies to human organisations. Perhaps more so, because agents operate at machine speed with no instinct for self-doubt.

For those willing to do the harder work – testing authority, not just capability; governing agents, not just deploying them – the commercial opportunity is substantial.

Everyone else will discover, quietly and too late, that the system they trusted to follow orders was taking them from someone else entirely.

advertisement feature

Exposed identity higher on the business agenda

Birmingham identity consultancy Orbital is encouraging organisations to ask a simple but often overlooked question: what might public breach data already reveal about their organisation, credentials and potential attack paths?

Working across Microsoft identity environments, including Active Directory, Entra ID and hybrid estates, Orbital helps organisations assess identity risk, analyse exposure, review deeper configuration and controls shaping security posture, and reduce attack surface through practical remediation and account hygiene improvements. Its approach uses breached credential intelligence to help clients understand where compromised data increases risk.

The case for that work is increasingly clear and timely. Microsoft found that 85% of usernames targeted in password spray attacks appeared in known credential leaks.

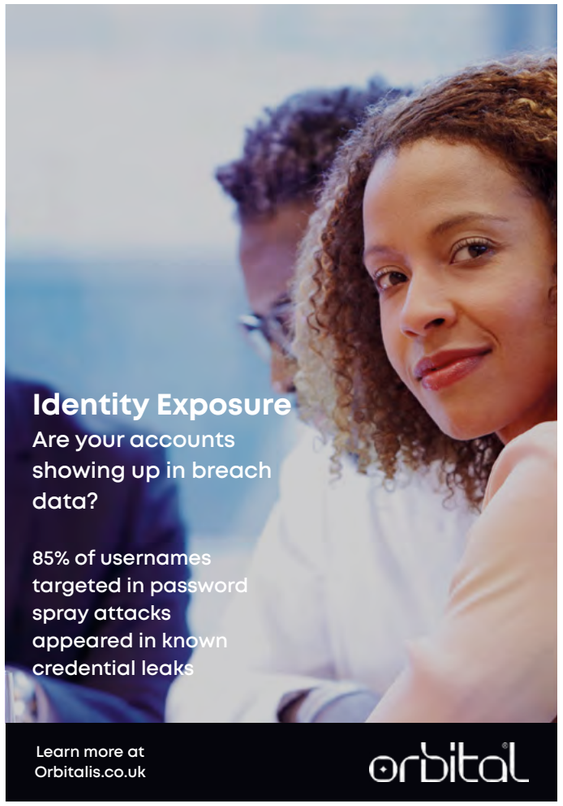
Orbital positions this as a business clarity issue as much as a technical one: helping organisations understand where exposure exists, prioritise action and strengthen the identity foundations on which everything else depends. That can mean reducing risk, improving operational health, simplifying modernisation and giving leadership greater confidence in a complex area that is often hard to see clearly.

"Many organisations invest in the layers built on top of identity before addressing the foundations," said Belinda Louch, founder of Orbital.

"When those weaknesses are left unresolved, the impact extends from data loss and operational disruption to reputational damage, reduced trust and wider effects across customer and supply chain relationships."

As the business grows across Birmingham and the wider region, Orbital aims to help organisations of all sizes place identity security higher on the agenda as a driver of resilience, confidence, and operational stability.





The founders

Orbital was founded by Belinda Louch and And Withers, bringing together complementary expertise in identity security, technical delivery and transformation. While the business works nationally, its roots are in Birmingham, where it forms part of a growing regional cyber community.

Belinda's background spans complex delivery, operational improvement and cyber-related transformation in highly regulated and security-sensitive environments. And is an identity security specialist with deep experience across Microsoft and wider enterprise identity platforms, helping organisations strengthen, secure and recover critical identity infrastructure.

Together with the wider Orbital team, they launched Orbital to address a clear market need. As identity becomes more central to security, operations and resilience, many organisations still struggle to access the depth of specialist support they need.

Orbital was created to make that expertise more accessible, combining enterprise-level understanding with a practical, consultancy-led approach that helps clients reduce risk, build capability and strengthen the foundations on which everything else depends.

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The team at Minor, Weir & Willis celebrating their award

Partnership renewed

Gateley has renewed its partnership with Birmingham City University innovation centre STEAMhouse.

The partnership will see Gateley offer expertise and mentoring to entrepreneurs, start-ups and small businesses based at the centre.

It will support students and graduates by giving them exposure to real-world business challenges, skills development and collaboration opportunities.

It will also create avenues for academics and researchers to apply knowledge and creativity in practical, industry-linked settings.

Sam Meiklejohn, partner at Gateley, said: “Birmingham has a vibrant innovation community and STEAMhouse sits at its very heart.

“This partnership allows us to support the next generation of entrepreneurs coming out of the region.

“It helps to turn ideas and ambitions into commercial ventures that drive long-term growth and play a meaningful role in shaping the future of the city.”



Pictured from left are Andrew Hartshorn of Gateley, BCU’s Jan Gilder, Sam Meiklejohn, Gateley, Professor Nick Morton and Harprit Virdee, both of BCU

Award for charity support

Birmingham fresh produce business Minor, Weir & Willis has won an industry award in recognition of its work with national charity GroceryAid.

The awards recognise companies in the UK grocery industry that actively support the charity through awareness, fundraising and volunteering efforts.

MWW achieved a gold award, which honours businesses that promote welfare services to employees and contribute to the charity’s mission.

Sant Mehta, chairman and CEO of MWW, said: “While the recognition is something to be proud of, what truly matters is the incredible work GroceryAid does on behalf of the tens of thousands of people who work in our sector.

“The support the charity provides is fantastic, and this achievement is a credit to the entire MWW team who have worked tirelessly to raise all-important awareness and funds throughout the year.”

A family-owned importer and distributor of fresh fruit, vegetables and salads, the business works with a global network of growers from more than 40 countries.

Leadership programme

Leadership development organisation Common Purpose is returning to Birmingham with a programme investing in the city’s next generation of leaders.

The Beacon programme begins on April 15 with an online launch session, followed by three immersive in-person days in the city.

Those taking part will experience the city as a live learning environment, with sessions hosted at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens, Trowers & Hamlins, and the Birmingham and Midlands Institute.

Louise Teboul, partnership director for Common Purpose, said: “I am excited that we are bringing one of our UK-wide programmes back to Brum.

“The city is diverse, easy to navigate and a great place to explore leadership across all sectors.”

Mrs Teboul added that across the programme, high-potential leaders develop the mindset, capability and cross-sector perspective required to lead with greater confidence, empathy and organisational impact.

Will the biggest overhaul of UK workers’ rights live up to the bill?



RICHARD SANTY, an employment partner at Mills & Reeve, assesses the impact of the Employment Rights Act and ask how businesses might benefit from the reforms

The Employment Rights Act had a long and complicated Parliamentary journey, with months of delays and political ping pong between the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Finally, it completed its passage on 16 December 2025.

The act has much to live up to. Billed as the ‘biggest overhaul of UK workers’ rights in a generation’, over the course of the next two years the government will gradually introduce a series of changes. These include amendments to Statutory Sick Pay (SSP), a doubling of the protective award for failure to inform and consult on collective redundancies, new provisions around zero-hours contracts, fire and rehire, protections from harassment and unfair dismissal, together with equality action plans and the introduction of a new enforcement body for holiday/sick pay, the Fair Work Agency, amongst other reforms.

The new laws are intended to bring the world of work into the 21st century, creating a new legislative landscape for employers and transforming workplace law.

Central to its implementation is the role of businesses, with ministers promising to work with all stakeholders to ensure the reforms are carefully embedded into law and practice. As Secretary of State for Business and Trade, Peter Kyle MP, said: “We will deliver this change in partnership with businesses.”

One key issue that has gained its fair share of headlines throughout the bill’s passage through Parliament is paternity and unpaid parental leave. New day one rights will now allow 32,000 more dads and partners each year to take paternity leave and 1.5 million more parents to take unpaid parental leave.

Wrapped up in ‘family rights’, the measures will come into force on 6 April 2026, removing the qualifying period for parental leave and paternity leave, while introducing the ability to take paternity leave after shared parental leave. This is in addition to new rights for bereaved partners under the Paternity Leave (Bereavement) Act 2024. The creation of a new, broader right to bereavement leave, which will extend to early pregnancy loss, is expected to come in later down the line in 2027.

These reforms add weight to an already existing package of family-friendly laws, including rights for carers, and enhanced redundancy rights for new parents, which demonstrate the importance of families in the modern workplace and why empowering working parents is the key to a growth economy. In fact, a study by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES), an independent research organisation specialising in workplace issues, found that businesses with family-friendly policies have fewer sick days, attract top talent more easily, and see better productivity.

The government clearly recognises this, as well as the vital part businesses will have in making these reforms come alive in the workplace. They want to bring employers along with them on the journey, insisting that stronger employment rights are good for the economy. According to the Department for Business and Trade, research from the University of Oxford, University of Warwick, MIT and UCL consistently finds a positive relationship between job satisfaction and productivity.

So, with so many reforms coming into play in phases over the course of the next two years, what do businesses need to do to ensure they not only stay on the right side of the law, but also benefit from the act’s implementation?

With such a long run-in to the act’s implementation, it’s hard to imagine there are many businesses that do not have this on their radar. But, with amendments to the bill being passed back and forth between the House of Commons and the House of Lords, there is real value getting up-to-speed with the changes now before they become law.

While some laws are still months away, employers only have a small window of opportunity in respect of paternity and parental leave which, like SSP and the doubling of the protective award will come into force in the second major implementation phase on 6 April 2026. As such, the need to review existing procedures and policies, as well as ensuring relevant employees are trained on how to implement the changes, is vital.

The landmark Act has had quite the introduction since it was first brought before Parliament in October 2024. Part of the ‘Make Work Pay’ plan, it clearly comes with good intention.

The hope now is that its implementation into the workplace is far smoother than its journey through Parliament.



A leg-up to work

A charity in Digbeth is quietly performing miracles. Smart Works gets women who have lost their jobs, usually through no fault of their own, back to work through coaching and the provision of clothes for interviews. JON GRIFFIN meets Ann Powell, the charity's passionate manager.



charity

Ann Powell is in unstoppable flow as she outlines the aims and objectives of women's charity Smart Works – alongside the often shocking plight of many clients facing the harsh realities of unemployment.

"When people lose their jobs through no fault of their own, what that does to their identity and the way they think about themselves is like a bereavement," she says.

"There is a loss of that identity, everyday sense of purpose and your network.

"We have referral partners including job centres, colleges, universities, many charities and domestic abuse organisations. At these places there is a different level of sadness – it is just heartbreakingly shocking."

Powell knows all about heartbreak and sadness after listening to some of the back stories and life histories of West Midlands women whose confidence has been shattered by sudden redundancy and frequent appalling domestic abuse.

She is manager of Digbeth-based Smart Works, which over the last 10 years has helped put more than 4,000 women back on their feet, with almost 70 per cent of clients finding work within just a month of being referred to the charity.

It's a highly impressive statistic and few people have seen at first hand the trials and tribulations facing women forced out of work by an often unforgiving economy and brutal market forces.

Smart Works helps to pick women up and restore their confidence by providing quality workplace clothing suitable for interviews – alongside coaching sessions aimed at recognising the often hidden skills and potential of their clients.

It's a tough, unrelenting mission for the charity's three-strong team and their band of volunteers, but Powell is no stranger to the realities of the effects of unemployment on entire communities after witnessing the devastation of the Longbridge area with the closure more than 20 years ago of MG Rover.

Growing up in the shadow of the Lickey Hills as the daughter of a Jamaican father who arrived in Birmingham as part of the Windrush generation, Powell was aware from her childhood years of the vital importance of the West Midlands' most famous factory to its surrounding community and to Birmingham itself.

That background and hinterland would ultimately provide her with an education in





charity

real life which was ideal for the role she carries out today for Smart Works and its task helping thousands of women back into work.

"The area I grew up in at school, practically every member of my class had parents or brothers and sisters working there (MG Rover). Its closure absolutely decimated that area through unemployment.

"When Red Robbo (the notorious union leader of the 70s during the car factory's British Leyland days) and the strikes were going on, it was all we talked about at school.

"You would be hard pushed to find somebody who hadn't had a job there at whatever level. Just think what the loss of Rover did to the city, not just that area."

Powell's upbringing in suburban Birmingham in the shadow of the loss-making car giant prepared her for the job creation role she fulfils today as Birmingham centre manager for Smart Works.

After a 30-year plus career in retail and hospitality backed up by stints in HR and recruitment, Powell effectively made herself redundant from a London hotel role to concentrate on her ambitions within the coaching sector.

"I did a coaching course to effectively help my team through the redundancy process. I got hooked on coaching – you need to build up coaching hours and practice and I put myself out to start coaching voluntarily.

"You need to get 100 hours under your belt before you start to feel confident. I managed to rack up 700 hours because I was hooked on the power of coaching and what it can do for people.

"I did it everywhere, for charities, for friends of friends. I was going out to organisations doing response to redundancy coaching. A lot of the women I have coached worked at Longbridge and we also lost Selly Oak Hospital."

Following a spell in hospitality in London, Powell returned to Birmingham to concentrate on building herself a career in coaching – and found a new vocation and home with the emerging Smart Works charity.

"By 2016 Smart Works was opening and were advertising for coaches to help get people back into work. They opened in Northfield just up the road from where I grew up and were looking for volunteers, so I joined."

The UK charity had been founded by ex Vogue fashion house luminary Lady Juliet Hughes-Hallett who had seen the value of an American charity called Dress For Success whilst visiting the US.

"They took clothes from women who no longer needed them, repurposed them and gave them to women who needed clothes for interviews," says Powell.

"She thought 'what a great idea'. She is a wonderful, very caring woman and is very much about empowering women."

Hughes-Hallett imported the Dress For Success model over to Islington in North London, renaming it Smart Works, with plans for more branches across the UK, recruiting the help of luxury fashion brands such as Burberry and Hobbs.

Powell threw herself into the Smart Works model, helping women whose lives had been torn apart, back into the dignity of regular work. "You see people in that area where there is such little opportunity – at that time and still perhaps now. They get quite pigeonholed into how they think about themselves and what they think their options can be.

"It is quite addictive as a coach to be able to see that transformation in somebody. The realisation suddenly clicks into place of what they can and can't achieve – and what they can go on to be.

"It is about having the confidence about being able to say this is who I am, this is what I can offer you as an employee."

Powell fervently believes that many women – including young mothers with little or no experience of the workplace – often possess hidden life skills which can be transferred to a working environment.

"We have all got skills. A lot of the women we see go into motherhood very young, and they build up all these skills that they don't necessarily recognise because it is just life. The actual skills that all of us carry within us are transferable in many aspects – and that is what our coaching is about."

Powell's role with Smart Works has given her an illuminating insight into the ravages of unemployment on women in countless households – as well as entire communities.

"There are whole pockets of this city where there are young people who are third generation unemployed. Where do you get your incentive to want to work?

"This charity transforms lives. If we could get corporate involvement to sponsor 10 clients in a year, that would be huge for us. For a woman with a family, it doesn't just change that woman's life, it changes the lives of all those around her."

Where do you get the expectation that there is a job out there for you if you are growing up in a family where they have spent their life on benefits?"

Alongside the soul-destroying reality of a life without work, Powell has helped many women who have endured domestic abuse in often financially-stricken households. A survey undertaken by the charity back in 2019 revealed as many as 80 per cent of referred clients had suffered abuse at the hands of partners – or parents.

"It is very common across the country," she says, sadly. "Over and over again we hear from women in an abusive household. Abuse takes many forms. It is not just physical, it is verbal, it is financial . . . there are many different elements to being in an horrific situation.

"I have come across absolutely shocking, heartbreaking stories – but we have also come across some wonderful ones."

As a counterpoint to the sadness of victims of domestic abuse, the heartening flipside of Smart Works is the transformation of women from desperate circumstances who undergo dramatic fashion reboots.

"We try to replicate a personal shopping session as if you were going into a department store and have a one-to-one stylist help you select an outfit – and that is a lovely experience. It is also one hour of attention just on them.

"They are being pampered, they are being told they look amazing, it is a really warm session. They go into one of our fitting rooms – we deliberately don't have mirrors in the fitting rooms. When they come out they look at themselves, and we see that look. All of a sudden you appear like somebody who can be at work. You look like the admin assistant, you look professional."

The scale and profile of the Birmingham Smart Works branch has been heightened by a move from Northfield to Digbeth, introducing the charity to more referral partners.

"My remit was to just grow the service so I contacted every charity I could find within a five-mile radius, and there are a lot.

"When we came into the city, we were able to cover the whole of the West Midlands because of the transport links. It changed the demographic of the service."

That service has increasingly revolved around young women. "Forty-three per cent of the people we saw last year were under the age of 30. It is harder for young people to get a job than it has ever been," she says.

The move to the charity's Digbeth base, one of 11 nationwide, has seen Smart Works grow its army of volunteer coaches and stylists to 87, working alongside the staff of three.

And amongst those volunteers back in 2019 was none other than the Duchess of Sussex, the charity's royal patron, who spent some time 'under the radar' working in its London store.

Regardless of the royal patronage, Powell is seeking greater corporate backing to help bridge a funding gap and cement the charity's future.

"This charity transforms lives. If we could get corporate involvement to sponsor 10 clients in a year, that would be huge for us.

"For a woman with a family, it doesn't just change that woman's life, it changes the lives of all those around her."

Signature celebrations



Amina Hussain, Paul Brown and Carmen Watson



Host Aaron James



Jamil Shabir, Anita Chumber and Ifraz Ahmed



Ninder Johal and Calum NIsbet

Approximately 550 guests gathered for an evening of celebration to honour excellence, leadership and innovation at the annual Birmingham Signature Awards.

The Vox played host to the awards which brought together leading entrepreneurs, organisations and decision makers from across the UK business community.

Delivered by Nachural, the evening was supported by headline sponsors Bond Wolfe and KLSA PKF. Guests heard from keynote speaker Edwina Dunn, co-founder of dunnhumby and the entrepreneur who introduced the Tesco Clubcard, and the charity partner of the night was Kaleidoscope Plus Group.





Ninder Johal and Manny Athwal



Raaj Shamji and Mike Hopkins



Justine Johnson, Zahid Bhatti, Kevin Davies and Gill Durkin



Gurpreet Bassi



KLSA and PKF



Ninder Johal addressing the audience



Delegates from Royal Air Force Regular and Reserve

Scholars School System

ART Business Loans out to help more businesses with new funds

Finance provider ART Business Loans is preparing to support more companies to grow and increase employment thanks to new funding from British Business Bank.

ART Business Loans has been allocated £7 million under the British Business Bank's Community ENABLE Fund to provide loans above £25,000 to businesses across the West Midlands.

And ART Business Loans are proving popular with customers as a community-based lender, with one client saying: "There is nobody better."

Access to the new finance increases the range of funds available through ART Business Loans, which lends to companies wanting to borrow between £10,000 and £250,000.

The Community ENABLE Fund is aimed at community development financial institutions like ART Business Loans and will provide a significant boost to the sector, supporting up to £150million of lending over its first two years.

ART Business Loans chief executive Steve Walker said: "We recognise that companies are facing challenging times. More than 75 per cent of the businesses we have helped are from underserved areas and communities, and this aligns closely with the British Business Bank's wider mission to improve access to finance for underserved entrepreneurs across the UK."

Business lending manager Roz Haque added: "We are looking to support businesses who need finance to grow, create employment opportunities, upskill their team and positively contribute to their local communities."

ART Business Loans is a Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) that has been serving the business community since its establishment in 1997 as Aston Reinvestment Trust to help alleviate poverty through enterprise and has lent more than £40million to more than 1,800 customers, enabling them to create or protect more than 8,500 jobs.



The team at ART Business Loans



ART Business Loans is supported by a diverse funding model. The organisation's investor base includes philanthropic companies and individuals, which allows ART to attract additional funding from a range of public and private sector sources, including high street banks.

British Business Bank chief banking officer Reinald de Monchy said: "We are delighted to welcome ART Business Loans as the fourth accredited lender under the Community ENABLE Funding programme. We look forward to seeing the impact they will have on smaller businesses across the region."

The lender is looking to engage a wide range of businesses across most sectors to build its success stories.

Solihull-based family-run dance studio Aura Dance Studios has transformed its operations and grown its customer base since securing a £50,000 funding package in 2018.

Aura Dance Studios, established by former ballroom and Latin American dance champions Martin and Carol Cutler, run ballroom, Latin American, salsa, and modern sequence dance lessons for beginners to world championship level.

Eight years ago Martin and Carol approached ART Business Loans to secure funds, 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.

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.

Martin 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 IDTA.

"There is nobody better than ART Business Loans. 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."

Maintenance specialist enjoys rapid growth on back of ART Business Loans funding

A Birmingham commercial maintenance specialist has rapidly grown its staffing levels and turnover having accessed funding for growth from ART Business Loans.

M & BG, which has its head office in Lightning Way, West Heath, has increased its head count from 45 staff at the time of its first loan in 2017 to 250, while turnover has more than doubled from £3m to £8m.

The M & BG senior management team recently took out their third loan with ART Business Loans, having used the previous borrowing to fund an acquisition and the purchase of new equipment.

M & BG provides grounds maintenance, commercial cleaning and site repairs for a range of public and private sector clients, including fire services, police forces, schools and the NHS.

The firm, which also has offices in Loughborough, Leicestershire, and since 2024 in Bristol, counts among its clients West Mercia Police and Warwickshire Police, housing associations Bournville Village Trust and Pioneer Group, plus Avon Fire and Rescue Service.

Group Managing Director Phil Marsh said: "ART Business Loans have been brilliant to deal with as they are very practical and they are true to their word, always doing what they say they will do.

"We have returned to borrow to fund the business growth, with further plans to nearly double in size over the next five years.

"We find the team very easy to deal with, as they have always taken an interest in the company and have procedures which are clear to meet the requirements around due diligence and legal undertakings. We would recommend them to other business owners as they are great people to deal with."

ART Business Loans manager Martin Edmonds said: "We have been delighted to help M & BG realise their business growth plans, expanding their operation and creating employment opportunities. We are pleased that ART Business Loans has been able to establish a strong working partnership to regularly support their business needs. We have an ongoing dialogue around future opportunities and look forward to helping them achieve their goals."

"ART Business Loans have been brilliant to deal with as they are very practical and they are true to their word."





A story still unfolding

The launch of a new design centre in Digbeth marks the latest chapter in the rich history of one of the region's great builders merchants. JON GRIFFIN catches up with its chief executive.



John Cave, CEO of EH Smith

It is, quite literally, an essential part of the very fabric of Birmingham – and much further afield right across the UK.

EH Smith may not trip off the tongue quite like Rover, Cadbury, IMI, Lucas or other industrial giants of the city of a thousand trades. But its impact on regional and national infrastructure has been extraordinarily long-lasting for more than a century – and counting.

It is proud to call itself the largest family-owned builders' merchant in the UK – and it has undoubtedly earned that accolade ever since Ernest Howard Smith launched the firm just four years after the end of the First World War.

As the foreword to the hardback book outlining the company's rich history and vast array of projects – 100 years, 100 projects, EH Smith since 1922 – relates: "Sometimes by bicycle, sometimes by horse and cart, whatever it took.

"The idea was simple and hasn't really changed in 100 years. Get building materials to construction sites in the most efficient way possible. The horses and carts are long retired but the principle remains."

Those principles have helped to win the Birmingham builders' merchant with the distinctive red, white and blue liveried trucks a remarkable variety of contracts which are in themselves part of the history of British enterprise and innovation of the last 100 years.

To pick just a few of the better known examples at random, EH Smith was appointed in 1957 to supply the drainage and engineering materials for a stretch of Britain's first motorway, the M1, "setting the template for British motorway design for a generation".

Three decades or so previously the firm had supplied materials to none other than Herbert Austin, or to be precise his fledgling car factory at Longbridge which would grow into the most famous factory in the entire annals of Birmingham's world-renowned industrial heritage.

As the company history outlines: "It was EH Smith's relationship with Austin at Longbridge that was perhaps the most significant early catalyst for the growth of Howard's fledgling company."

The team at EH Smith have contributed to the arts, supplying red sand and silver bricks to the newly constructed Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford for its curtain call in the 1930s and, as an encore, helped develop a bespoke brick blend as part of a major £112 million transformation project for the new millennium.

They've played their part in the nation's sporting arenas, helping redevelop the Compton and Edrich stands at the most famous cricket ground in the world, Lord's, whilst more recently supplying a bespoke blend of handmade bricks to Everton FC's new £800 million Hill Dickinson stadium on Merseyside.

They've helped preserve the futures for a string of Birmingham landmarks, helping choose bricks for the Assay Office on its move from Newhall Street to the Jewellery Quarter, supplying drainage materials in the 1930s for Baskerville House and selecting and supplying bricks over the course of nearly 20 years to the huge development that became Brindleyplace.

That quality of clientele and the continuing roll call of honour for a company which has only served under three chairmen in 104 years tells its own inspiring story of Brummie ingenuity and hard work. And it's a story that is still unfolding, most notably with the launch last October of the firm's new design centre in Digbeth.

Over 400 members of the construction industry gathered in the heart of one of Birmingham's best known quarters to celebrate the opening of a new facility which reflects the rich history of the area as much as helping EH Smith safeguard its own future in an often volatile sector.

As group chief executive John Cave explains: "With all that heritage and experience, EH Smith has seen peaks and troughs in the economy.

"I think it always relies on its instincts that you try to invest and consolidate in a down market so you come out better on the other side in a good market – you make sure that a bit is put away for a rainy day."

That sort of rainy-day prudence and eye for investment has clearly served EH Smith well down the years, right up to the opening of October's new design centre to run alongside a sister design complex in Clerkenwell, north London.

Cave adds: "The building was a weighbridge for the Avery weights and scales company, whose origins were here, and what is now the coach station next door. Averys moved out early in the 20th century to the Soho Foundry, another interesting slice of Birmingham history with connections to Boulton and Watt.

"Their relocation meant that this building was mostly light industrial for most of the 20th century. In its last iteration it was the Birmingham Machine Tool Company. Sadly, they went bust in 2019. It had a few years of being redundant, and then we took it on in 2022.

"We felt that having the opportunity to look at products, bricks for real when you are choosing materials for a building is not really anything that the internet or artificial

intelligence can replicate or emulate – it is something that has to be done for real."

The Digbeth launch of the design centre – developed in partnership with prominent Birmingham architects Howells – came five years after the opening of the Clerkenwell complex.

"That is right in the middle of the London design community – there are a lot of architects and designers based around that part of the city. It proved itself in a fairly short space of time to be a good model – architects will just pop in, have a look, and bring their clients and planners along.

"That has also been the experience here – it opens us up to networks, relationships, friendships that we didn't know we had, people that maybe had an interest in the company and will, because of places like this, take that further.

"The other thought was that Birmingham didn't really have a particular destination for architecture and construction activities and events."

Recent innovations such as the Digbeth Design Centre apart, no history of EH Smith would be complete without recognising the extraordinary influence of the company's second chairman, Ken Smith, who took the reins in 1959 following the death of his father Howard.

As the official hardback history relates: "Innovation and opportunism underpinned a period of unparalleled growth. Expansion from the 1960s onwards saw a network of depots across Birmingham, the East Midlands and the south east of England as the DIY and homebuilder market matured."

Ken Smith, who worked a full five-day week well into his 90s, driving his Bentley or Aston Martin to the office, once proclaimed: "Retirement is death." Still attending board meetings until the very end, he died in 2017 and his successor, John Parker, a member of the extended family, became only the third EH Smith chair.

"Ken was the driving force, a dynamo for many years," says Cave. "He oversaw the expansion of the branch network in Birmingham and the Midlands. We now have 13 branches around the country with a heavy concentration in the Birmingham area.

"He never worked for anyone else. He had a huge influence on the growth of the company and that is now picked up by his extended family.

"This design centre in Digbeth is another chapter in the EH Smith story. So far, so good, we have only been open since October but the interest in the place has actually been quite overwhelming at times.

"It has had a huge amount of footfall – it is doing well for the trade, which is obviously important, and it has opened us up to new networks that we didn't particularly know about or have any involvement with. It has been great just how many people have come through the doors since it opened."

The company is also proud of its international connections, working closely with European partners in the building sector, including allies in Venice, Portugal, Germany and Austria.

"Whilst the company is originally a Birmingham one, its network is huge," says Cave. "It has a lot of connections across Europe because we import a lot of materials."

Those 21st-century continental connections owe a great deal to the sentiments expressed in the EH Smith catalogue of 1939 which proclaimed: "Harmony in business relationships is an ideal to be greatly desired."

As the 100 year hardback history says: "This principle remains as important now as it was throughout our first 100 years."



The interior of the design centre



EH Smith continues to thrive as a builders' merchant



The year business change becomes non-negotiable

By ALLAN GORDON, programme director at business change consultancy, Entec Si

We often take for granted that businesses will exist tomorrow in the same way they do today.

But in our current economy, we are witnessing high streets diminishing at speed, local councils grappling with budget cuts while struggling to meet national targets, and organisations everywhere feeling pressures that their original structures were never designed to withstand. This is especially clear in the West Midlands, which experienced sharply declining rates of business confidence in the second half of 2025.

With a rapid pace of change showing no signs of slowing down across technology, economics and politics, businesses are now reaching a tipping point. Stability is no longer guaranteed, and the organisations that thrive in 2026 will not necessarily be the ones with the highest budgets or the newest technology. Instead, it will be those that treat change as a built-in capability, rather than a short-term crisis or one-off task.

This year, organisations are beginning to implement the essential practices to drive change forward, however, need to remain clear on the emerging trends that will be crucial to their longevity in the new year. That's why 2026 won't just be another year in the calendar – it will be the year that business change becomes essential for all.

A major shift already emerging is the need to prepare for change long before delivery begins. Too many business transformations start with activity rather than alignment, which will only delay the process and prompt more barriers along the way. The organisations accelerating ahead are those investing time into outlining business objectives from the outset, ensuring any change journey remains aligned with longer-term goals. This will also involve leadership alignment, to allow those in management positions to become familiar with the planned stages of transformation, how they are able to support their staff, and to be key parts of progressing change whilst addressing internal hesitancies from the beginning.

Ensuring teams have the capability to take on additional work is also essential, and capacity planning from the outset will help businesses to build a clearer picture of how the change journey will unfold in alignment with staff workload. This preparation is vital for any business looking to future-proof their change projects and to ensure they are set up for success.

Another defining characteristic of 2026 will be the rise of blended teams. In traditional and outdated approaches to change management, external consultants would arrive, deliver a project in isolation, and, once complete, leave businesses to their own devices. Modern transformation, however, relies on an integrated team approach, where internal staff own the change process and external specialists enhance skills, pace, and decision-making throughout the journey. This partnership model is proving to be a far more effective and resilient approach to creating change that lasts.

Alongside this, learning and upskilling can no longer be something that organisations tack on at the end of a change programme. We're now seeing a shift towards embedded learning pathways, which integrate training and upskilling directly into key stages of the transformation journey. It's common knowledge that teams and leaders learn as they deliver change, rather than after the journey is complete. More businesses need to actively build this into their processes in 2026, recognising learning and knowledge as a make-or-break element of transformation. This continuous, practical learning approach strengthens adoption of new systems, builds internal confidence, and ensures organisations keep maturing even while change is underway.

"Today's leaders should look to transition from directing to enabling, and from controlling to navigating – creating an environment where experimentation and evidence-based decisions become the norm."

However, perhaps the biggest determinant of success in the year ahead is mindset. The organisations thriving through uncertainty and disruption are those cultivating curiosity, empowering decision-making across all levels and embracing progress over perfection. This mindset shift needs to be consistent throughout the entire business and, for it to be successful, must start from the top-down. Today's leaders should look to transition from directing to enabling, and from controlling to navigating – creating an environment where experimentation and evidence-based decisions become the norm.

As these new ways of working take hold, we will also see a fundamental shift in how success is measured. Transformations are increasingly judged not simply by how much activity is completed, but by the outcomes achieved, such as improved customer experience, happier and more effective teams, and measurable impact on organisational performance.

For organisations preparing for what's ahead, the focus is clear – start small and scale intentionally, build meaningful partnerships rather than dependencies, and treat mindset as seriously as technology on the priority list. Change is no longer an isolated event; it's a core capability that every business must recognise and develop if it wants to remain relevant.

2026 is shaping up to be the year where businesses stop asking whether change is necessary and instead start focusing on how they can implement transformation journeys for lasting impact. Those who prepare, partner effectively, learn continuously and lead with clarity will not only survive today's pressures, but will thrive, innovate and grow in the coming months.



Real estate

SPECIAL REPORT

Birmingham: a city of growing investment opportunity



Lee Thompson and Mark Miller, partners at law firm Lodders, share their thoughts on the region's real estate market and discuss the opportunities for investors and businesses to drive growth in the region.



Birmingham and the surrounding areas are increasingly seen as one of the UK's most attractive regions for commercial and real estate investment. While economic challenges persist, on a global level, strong demand across certain key property sectors sees the region offer substantial opportunities for any investor.

Connectivity driving growth

"There's no doubt that connectivity remains a core driver of regional growth with the much-anticipated HS2 expected to elevate the region's profile considerably," said Mark Miller.

High Speed 2 (HS2), is scheduled for delivery between 2029 and 2033, and is expected to significantly reshape the economic landscape. The high-speed rail link will cut journey times between Birmingham and London by more than 20 minutes, strengthening business ties and making the region more accessible to national and international markets.

Improved transport links are a major catalyst for investment. Faster travel and enhanced transport connections make Birmingham increasingly appealing to companies that want access to talent and nationwide supply chains, while benefiting from lower operating costs than the capital.

Demand for high-quality office space

These dynamics are already visible in the commercial property market. Birmingham's city centre office sector saw a surge in activity in late 2025, hitting an eightyear high in the final quarter. Prime office rents reached record levels, driven largely by professional services firms seeking wellconnected, highquality office environments.

Grade A space is particularly desirable. These premium offices offer modern technology, flexible layouts and amenities, all features that matter as businesses continue to encourage staff back to the workplace.

Serviced and flexible offices are also expanding rapidly. In Q4 2025, they represented around 12% of market activity, showing continued demand for high quality, adaptable and costefficient workspace.

Growth beyond the commercial core

The historic Jewellery Quarter continues to attract business, particularly startups and smaller tech and property companies, attracted by the smaller office units.

A major factor in Digbeth's evolution into a creative district has been the BBC relocating from The Mailbox to the former Typhoo Tea factory, a move that Lodders was able to support through their construction team. This shift is widely seen as establishing Digbeth as a global creative quarter and attracting young talent and creative industries to the area.

Industrial and logistics opportunities

Industrial and logistics space remains a resilient and attractive sector.

Lee Thompson said: "While previous investment centred around 'big box' premises, the current market is increasingly focused on midsized industrial and commercial units driven by high occupier demand and a historically constrained market."

Developers are responding with schemes that offer flexible, adaptable space suited to modern manufacturing and distribution needs. Strong regional transport links further support this sector, with locations along the M42 corridor proving particularly appealing.

Emerging technology sectors

Looking forward, emerging industries such as data centres could unlock new investment potential. Growth in artificial intelligence and digital services is driving global demand for largescale data infrastructure.

The region's central location and excellent connectivity may position itself favourably for such developments. However, energy costs, grid capacity and environmental considerations will be critical to determining longterm viability.

Challenges for developers and investors

Despite strong fundamentals, several challenges remain.

Prime locations are limited for further developments minimising opportunities; developers are increasingly required to consider more complex regeneration projects and brownfield opportunities, navigating complex planning constraints; planning regulations present further hurdles such as new biodiversity net gain requirements, meaning developers must demonstrate measurable improvements to natural habitats; and the planning system itself is laborious, with local authorities suffering limited resources that delay decision making and increase costs.

Funding and market caution

Financing larger projects has become more difficult. Global economic uncertainty has made institutional investors more cautious, and appetite for major commercial property schemes has softened. Grant funding remains limited to but available for the right schemes.

A positive outlook

However, despite these challenges, the outlook for Birmingham and its environs remains positive. The city benefits from a collaborative professional community and strong stakeholder commitment to longterm regional growth. With transformative infrastructure, expanding commercial sectors and an increasingly vibrant urban environment, Birmingham offers compelling opportunities for investors prepared to navigate a dynamic market.

Navigating complexities and proactively mitigating risk remains the priority for any investor. As such, rigorous insight and specialist expertise is essential to any investment process.

*Lee Thompson is a partner in the business property team at Lodders, while Mark Miller is the head of the firm's real estate group. They can be contacted at **lee.thompson@lodders.co.uk** and **mark.miller@lodders.co.uk**

Report reveals rise in West Midlands commercial property investment

Commercial property investment in the West Midlands surged in 2025, with volumes rising 55% year-on-year to £2.8 billion, according to a report by agency Innes England.

The figures were compiled for the firm's Market Insite 2026 report and reveal a broad-based recovery across all sectors, underlining renewed confidence in the region's commercial property market.

The data was presented to a gathering of industry professionals, where the speaker, economist Graeme Leach, CEO of Macronomics Consulting, said that amid some of the most challenging conditions in recent memory, organisations must position themselves for long-term resilience rather than short-term reaction.

Innes England's report noted that industrial property led the West Midlands boost. Capital continued to target the industrial sector, which accounted for the largest share of investment activity.

The findings paint a healthy picture of investment in the West Midlands, as overall investment levels rose by nearly £1 billion compared with 2024.

In other findings, investor interest in retail totalled £861 million and the town centre market benefited from Hammerson's purchase of a 50% share in the Bullring shopping centre.

Last year also marked the return of larger office transactions, with £250 million of assets changing hands, and overall, prime yields remained stable across all sectors throughout the year

Ben Robinson, Innes England's head of investment, said: "We are optimistic as we head into 2026. With broadly resilient occupier markets and the cyclical factors that weigh on property markets continuing to recede, we expect to see a steady improvement in both investment volumes and values throughout the year."

Mr Leach cautioned that political risk could prove a 'canary in the coal mine'.

But he said that three 'shock absorbers' may have a protective effect on the UK economy in 2026 – deeper rate cuts, an acceleration in quantitative easing, and slack in the household savings ratio.

He added: "Amid ongoing uncertainty in the British economic outlook, organisations are facing some of the most challenging conditions in recent memory.

"In times like these, it is more important than ever to get ahead – by planning proactively, investing wisely and positioning for long-term resilience."



Pictured from left are Tony Sartorius, Anthony Evans and John Swift, all of Alucast

Industrial site bought by long term tenants

A Black Country foundry has purchased the Moxley Industrial Estate in Wednesbury – having operated on the site as a tenant for nearly 65 years.

Alucast, which provides sand and gravity casting services, has spent £1.8 million on the site, protecting the future of the three units it currently operates from, and supporting estate neighbours Kingfisher Enamelling Company and BES Group Testing.

Tony Sartorius, chairman of Alucast, said: "The Moxley Industrial Estate has been our base for as long as I've been with the company and has given us a great location to expand our high-pressure diecasting operations, as well as our machine shops.

"The opportunity arose to purchase the site, which means we now have full control of our future. The Black Country is and always will be our home and, by securing ownership, it means we have the opportunity to ringfence our expansion ambitions."

Alucast is the only company in the UK that has the four main casting processes on one site – sand, gravity, high-pressure and low-pressure casting.

The firm has recently appointed Anthony Evans as its new CEO to lead the next stage of its expansion, which is targeting £15 million of revenue by 2028.

Historic Grade II listed building up for sale

One of Birmingham's most prestigious and historically significant buildings has come onto the market.

The Grade II listed Highbury Hall – which was originally commissioned for Birmingham MP Joseph Chamberlain – is being offered as commercial space to let in the heart of Moseley.

The property extends to more than 8,600 sq ft and offers accommodation suitable for a range of uses including offices, private events and hospitality-led operations.

Internally, the building retains several period features, including sweeping staircases and intricate architectural detailing. There is a fully equipped commercial kitchen, and additional first-floor accommodation allows for flexible occupation or expansion.

Commercial property consultancy Burley Browne has been instructed to market the property.

Joint managing director of Burley Browne David Hemming said: "Highbury Hall is quite simply one of Birmingham's most distinguished buildings, and opportunities to occupy a property of this calibre are exceptionally rare."



Is the UK bridging market still stable?

With both Century Capital and Market Financial Solutions entering into administration recently, there has been a lot of speculation about the state of the UK real estate bridging market

So, how much do we know about the administration situation?

We don't know much about Century Capital yet apart from that the website being down and it seems to be following a typical trajectory of a failed lender, which means there will be speculation. We'll have more details further down the process.

When you look more closely at MFS and their comments noted in multiple publications, Market Financial Solutions said: 'the decision followed a temporary restriction on access to the company's banking facilities, arising from a procedural matter with its primary banking provider'. There is perhaps more to this than meets the eye.

I've spent quite a few years in banking before moving over to the advisory side. In my experience, abrupt issues with banking procedures are highly unusual and can often lead to speculation regarding the dichotomy between the strong financial position reported in the last accounts and the rapid onset of the Administration.

Businesses with £71 million revenue, £2.4 billion lending book and £17 million cash at bank do not routinely have their facilities switched off for a procedural matter or paperwork issue.

What does going into administration mean for customers?

Regardless of the reasons why (which will no doubt come out in due course and are speculated on elsewhere online), the real issues customers of MFS and Century Capital face now are:

1. New applications that haven't drawn down will need to find a new home and quickly

2. Existing borrowers should be fine for the term of their loan, generally up to two years from drawdown, however they shouldn't expect any leeway when their term is up and should start planning ahead accordingly

3. Multiple borrowers and complex cases (non-UK ownership, Trusts, PEPS, multiple properties on one loan, etc) will be most affected and should seek alternatives sooner rather than later



By SAM LEWIS of Heligan Group

Even still, the market is holding steady. One point to reiterate is the UK bridging market is still in good health. Given MFS' strong performance, it's unlikely (but not impossible!) that the administrators would start calling loans in when the MFS team clearly know how to manage their loan book, service their clients and get repaid. Add to this the short-term nature of the borrowing and that it is fully secured.

In theory it should be a gradual run down of the book without causing issues in the wider market place. If MFS was lending aggressively in terms of LTV or pricing, then placing the business elsewhere at the end of the term would ordinarily be difficult. However, even then bridging loans by their nature are short-term and borrowers require an exit strategy to be approved in the first instance.

What's more likely to happen is the vast majority of borrowers will repay their loan when it falls due within the next two years and move to other providers for new loans. This can be the difficult part as the UK bridging market has multiple competitive options and lenders shift appetite, pricing, LTVs and other parameters frequently to be competitive; a full market review is often not realistic for borrowers by themselves.

At Heligan Group, our Real Estate Advisory offering includes a specialism in bridging and short-term financing for cases requiring £5 million-£150 million of debt and, let's face it, none of these cases are ever straightforward.

Our expert team has a combination of direct and industry lending experience, alongside lead advisory expertise, that can unlock even the most complex of cases.

If you're uncertain about your latest short-term financing loans within the above debt requirements and would like some advice or just a chat, please contact our real estate team today or email sam.lewis@heligangroup.com



Brownfield site in Ladywood lined up for affordable homes scheme

Birmingham-based developer and investor MIA Property Group has entered into a subject-to-planning agreement with housing association Midland Heart to deliver an affordable scheme in Ladywood.

The brownfield site, formerly home to the a social club and police station, spans approximately 1.4 acres off Ladywood Middleway in Birmingham.

A planning application for the 137-home scheme is expected to be submitted within the next few weeks. Subject to approval, MIA Property Group will build the 100% affordable development on behalf of Midland Heart.

The scheme contributes to Midland Heart's wider housing delivery strategy, which will see the organisation deliver 2,250 new affordable homes across the region over the next five years. Global commercial real estate advisor Avison Young acted on behalf of the developer MIA Property Group.

Eamonn Colman, land and investment director at MIA Property Group, said: "This is an important development for Birmingham, and goes some way to helping the housing pressure in the city.

"We have worked in partnership with Midland Heart to design well-planned and attractive homes.



MIA are also very grateful for the support given by advisors Architectural Design Consultancy and to agents Avison Young."

Joe Reeves, deputy chief executive at Midland Heart, added: "Securing this agreement is a positive step in our long-term plans to increase the supply of affordable homes across Birmingham. Ladywood is an area where demand is high, and this development will play an important role in meeting that need.

"Most importantly, it will create well-designed homes that offer local people greater security, stability and the chance to build their lives in a place they can feel proud of."



Solihull trade site up for Sale

Premises of a long-established builders' merchants in Solihull has come onto the market with commercial property agency Bond Wolfe.

Mahoney's has operated from 1020-1022 Old Lode Lane for nearly half a century, but the owners have decided to sell, with the freehold site available for offers based on £1.25 million.

James Mattin, managing director of Bond Wolfe, said the site, which backs onto Sheldon Retail Park, was considered suitable for existing or alternative use subject to planning permission.

It includes a large car park and yard, fronting on the main road, with the substantial warehouse, sales area and offices extending to 14,282 sq ft, plus a large car park and rear and side yard areas.

The offices are on the first floor and include kitchen, toilets and a meeting/boardroom.

The sales area is accessed from the front car park and extends to the rear with a mezzanine floor providing further sales and storage areas.

■ Vehicle charging hub operator Fleete has secured planning consent for a charging complex at Hams Hall distribution park in Coleshill.

Fleete say the hub will allow 26 HGVs to charge simultaneously using ultra-rapid chargers. It will provide eight truck and trailer bays, ten tractor bays, a welfare cabin for driver comfort and 15 park and drive car parking spaces to support flexible fleet operation.

"Securing planning consent for our charging hub at Hams Hall reflects our intent to support the infrastructure required for largescale fleet electrification at a nationally significant logistics centre," said Chris Morrison, CEO of Fleete Group.

"Hams Hall represents a strategically important opportunity within our growing network of shared charging sites. Through this network, we're helping address infrastructure costs and connection challenges, making the transition to zero emission logistics faster, more practical and more achievable for fleet operators."

Lightening the tax burden

Recently installed as a director of business tax at professional services firm S&W and the regional real estate lead, Caroline Hadfield is a hugely respected specialist with an in-depth knowledge of the real estate sector. HENRY CARPENTER meets her.

On paper, the West Midlands has a lot going for it when it comes to real estate.

After years of procrastination, the London to Birmingham stretch of HS2 has been confirmed, and the West Midlands investment zones should bring billions of pounds to the region.

But despite these – and other positive investment pledges – there is a frustrating inertia when it comes to the physical development of Birmingham and wider region. It feels like it has been held back, with a step back taken for every two steps forward.

Many of these backward steps are beyond the industry's control – geopolitical events, rising materials and labour costs, and ever-changing government legislation are cases in point.

At least that's the view of Caroline Hadfield, a director of business tax at professional services firm S&W and the regional real estate lead.

Real estate is a sector on which Hadfield spends considerable time and the region is an interesting region for the industry, she says. With a slow transition away from the traditional industrial parks, warehousing and logistic hubs, it's increasingly focused on tech-focused property such as data centres for AI and 5G. The residential sector is also on an upward curve.

However, the frustration that it's an industry unable to totally break free from various shackles persists.

"It does feel like there is a strong will to get these numerous initiatives off the ground, but there have been so many headwinds," she says. "The government needs to raise revenue, and the real estate sector is typically one that is seen to have cash because it's so capital intensive."

Tax is a subject where her passion is obvious.

"There are many quite complex tax issues, one of which is corporate interest restrictions, or CIR," she says. "This is corporation tax deduction on interest, and because a lot of real estate businesses are highly leveraged, it has a big impact on their position.

"It is designed to ensure tax deductions are aligned with UK taxable economic activity, but the calculations that advisors need to undertake are very, very complex – there are opportunities to maximise interest deductions through various elections but advisors need to be aware of these."



Hadfield is supremely well qualified to take on such calculations.

Deciding to give university a miss, she went straight from A-levels to a job at PwC as an office junior. A line manager "saw something in me" and encouraged her to focus on tax.

She worked at the Co-operative group in Manchester, where she was tax manager at the time it bought supermarket chain Somerfield, and then she joined accountancy firm Grant Thornton, where she remained as tax director for eight years.

"I had a client portfolio, but I also looked at matters like structuring deals and due diligence," she says.

"Then for the past nine years, I've been working as tax director for real estate business Vita Group, a specialist in student accommodation and residential development."

A sector facing particular challenges

All this gave Hadfield extensive experience from both sides of the counter, a fact not lost on her new employers S&W, who took her on in November last year.

For those of us who aren't experts in corporate tax, a chat with her is reveals quite how many permutations there are in an industry like real estate.

For instance, there are business rates to consider. Hadfield expects rateable values to go up from April 1, especially for large industrial and logistics hubs, which will impact a region like the West Midlands with its proliferation of such facilities.

"Then you've got things like national insurance," says Hadfield. "Many sectors have suffered, but the construction industry has perhaps seen staff and material costs increase more than others.

"Also, as well as employment taxes, there is the Fair Work Agency, which the Government is launching in April this year. It has been created to enforce employment rights and will investigate employers, enforce holiday pay and statutory sick pay, and impose penalties for non-compliance.

"Again, these are areas that typically impact the construction sector."

Hadfield touches on numerous other areas of tax pertinent to real estate, including capital allowances and tax relief on assets.

You get the sense the challenge of ensuing that her clients don't pay more than necessary to HMRC – and use the available allowances effectively – is one in which she clearly revels. "We look at special claims for things like land remediation relief, which is for companies clearing up a site that has previously been contaminated, for instance," she continues.

"We also work on R&D claims in the real estate sector. People usually associate R&D with white coats in labs, but if you're building something that includes an advancement in science or technology or different methodologies, then it could qualify for R&D.

"It is a valuable relief to a lot of businesses that could see their tax liability reduced or which could get cash back if they've incurred losses."

The subtleties of the subject mean Hadfield could carry on for hours. Her enthusiasm, though, is explained by the fact that among that complexity, there are opportunities for smart businesses, with the right advice, to gain an edge.

In a tough industry, she believes her knowledge and her team's expertise can help those companies overcome setbacks and continue to forge ahead.

Recycling plant goes up for sale

A waste transfer site – that until recently was fully operational on a large plot of storage land in south Birmingham – is up for sale.

Number 24 Ebury Road in Kings Norton, which currently still holds a waste transfer licence, is on the market with commercial property agency Bromwich Hardy for offers based on £3 million.

Managing partner Tom Bromwich said the 2.35-acre site has secure gated access from Tunnel Lane.

"This recycling plant which has B1 and B2 consent was until recently in operational use by a waste transfer company," he said.

"The property has a solid concrete base and benefits from an open, lean-to building fitted with solar panels.

"As well as the large open storage space, the front of the site has two temporary office buildings with car parking.

"Depending on the new owner's interest, there is even the potential for residential development, subject to planning permission."



Plans underway to restore derelict site

The developer of the former Heath Town Baths and Library in Wolverhampton has taken full control of the site which has stood derelict for two decades.

Gaddu Associates penned a conditional long lease with Wolverhampton Council to convert the historic building to provide new commercial and community use.

The lease agreement makes Gaddu responsible for the restoration of the Grade II listed building and future use as a venue – and sets strict criteria for the delivery of the scheme that will be overseen by the council.

The agreed plans are to fully refurbish it for a mix of uses including a banqueting hall, day nursery, training and conference facilities and community spaces.

Cabinet member Councillor Chris Burden said: "The historic Heath Town Baths and Library building is much loved, and we are looking forward to seeing the developer progress this scheme now they have signed a conditional long lease.

"The council recognises the importance of community assets such as this and is keen to see it brought back into beneficial use for Heath Town and the wider city."

Pavan Gaddu of Gaddu Associates said: "We are glad to start the work and want the local community to engage with us in the redevelopment of this most iconic building that has so much history and fond stories attached to it.

"We have had so many people talk to us about it and we want to see them be a part of the next phase to restore the building."



A computer-generated image of what Heath Town Baths and Library could look like

Premier Coleshill site is sold

A vacant seven-acre site at Hams Hall, Coleshill, has been acquired to speculatively develop 145,000 sq ft of Grade A sustainable urban logistics accommodation.

Urban logistics property developer and investment manager Chancerygate purchased the site on Faraday Avenue from Cracknore Hams Hall for an undisclosed sum.

Chancerygate, which has an office in Birmingham, intends to submit a planning application for the development in the second quarter of this year.

The proposed scheme will comprise six leasehold units ranging from 12,000 sq ft to 47,000 sq ft.

Subject to planning, construction work is expected to commence in the first quarter of next year with practical completion anticipated towards the end 2027.

Chancerygate development manager Rob Watts said: "This was a complex transaction which required input from multiple parties to unlock one of the premier sites in the West Midlands.

"This acquisition gives us the opportunity to bring forward high specification, sustainable space at Hams Hall and support new local employment opportunities."



New lease of life for former pressings plant

A Birmingham pressings plant built in 1860 is being given a new lease of life with the help of a Midlands construction consultancy.

The Grade II listed Derwent Works pressings and stampings building, on Constitution Hill in the Jewellery Quarter, had fallen into disrepair but will now be rejuvenated as apartments and retail units.

Birmingham-based the Construction Consultants have been appointed as project managers, quantity surveyors and employers agents to oversee the £5 million heritage project on behalf of developers ETME Group.

The factory was built in the late 19th century by Taylor & Challen, a company famous worldwide for producing a wide range of pressings from coins to industrial machinery. The company moved out of the building in the 1970s.

The development includes 32 luxury apartments with four ground floor retail units. It includes rooftop extensions and a new energy efficient roofing system to protect against the effects of weather, UV light and ozone. The project is due for completion later this year.

TCC has been involved since the initial project planning stage, and co-founder and director Sandeep Sunner said: "We are delighted to have been appointed to breathe new life into a previously neglected listed building.

"The project is in a tightly confined urban space and requires a high degree of co-ordination and teamwork."

Multi-let office complex new to the market



A commercial property complex in south Birmingham has come onto the market with a guide price of £2.75 million.

Cambrai Court, which is located on Stratford Road in Hall Green, currently operates as a large, multi-let office development and includes five office buildings with a large car park to the rear.

James Mattin, managing director of Bond Wolfe, who are handling the sale, said the property was already producing £382,329 per annum, but added that there was huge potential to grow that income.

He said: "This is a substantial and distinctive freehold building extending to around 10,259 sq ft, set in about 0.55-acres of grounds.

"There is high-quality office accommodation throughout with large areas for car parking to the front and rear.

"There is also huge scope for rental growth and further development possibilities."

Each individual property has its own entrance and dedicated spaces on the site's car park, which can currently accommodate up to 39 cars.

Mr Mattin added: "There are also plenty of asset management opportunities, and the rear of the property could also be developed to provide further office accommodation or residential accommodation, subject to planning consent."

Hagley Road residential development site sold

A residential development site on Hagley Road – which has a gross development value of £16 million – has been sold by one of the region's largest landowners.

Calthorpe Estates sold the site to WB Property Group, who will deliver the scheme on behalf of West Midlands housing association Citizen Housing. Property agency Knight Frank handled the sale.

The site benefits from planning permission for 52 residential units, comprising 10 townhouses and 42 apartments with associated car, cycle and motorcycle parking.

Work is expected to start soon, with a programme duration of approximately two years.

Ralph Minott, master planning and development director at Calthorpe Estates, said: "This is an exciting milestone for a prominent site on Hagley Road, marking over a decade in bringing this prime Edgbaston opportunity forward.

"We commissioned architects Bond Bryan, who worked closely with Knight Frank on specification and mix, to develop a well ordered and impressive design, which was applauded at planning committee when returning unanimous planning approval in 2024.

"Knight Frank concluded terms for sale to Citizen Housing in partnership with WB Property Group. This partnership strongly aligns with our long-term vision for the estate, ensuring the integrity of the approved design is maintained in a sustainable scheme offering homes responsive to the demand of Edgbaston communities."



Exit complete at Waterfront



Waterfront Business Park in Dudley – a mixed office and light industrial scheme – has seen the sale of its final unit.

The sale, finalised by Birmingham property agency KWB, completes the exit for site owner Bridges Fund Management after a six-year programme of refurbishment and disposal to occupiers and local investors.

The last unit to be sold, One Waterfront Business Park, is a modern detached office currently multi-let to four tenants. It has been acquired by a private property client of Michael Johnson and Co.

The business park now boasts a wide range of tenants including Dudley College, Higgs Solicitors, Royal Mail, Talbots Law and West Midlands Ambulance Service.

Nigel Tripp, director at KWB, said: "This sale completes a highly successful exit for Bridges and reflects the strength of the original investment strategy as well as the proactive asset management approach taken over the past six years."



■ A 4,900 sq ft office site at Tungsten in Blythe Valley Business Park has been let to digital transformation specialists Emixa.

The letting – managed by Birmingham consultancy KWB – sees Emixa join established occupiers at the park including Kier and Tilia Homes.

Mark Parry at Emixa said: "We have taken on the Tungsten unit as part of our continued growth. The location provides a well-connected and practical base for our team, and we look forward to welcoming staff and customers once the fit-out is completed in Q1 2026."

Malcolm Jones, head of office agency at KWB, said: "This letting is a further illustration of the underlying strength of the out-of-town office market across the region.

"Demand is being driven by a combination of quality, flexibility and value, and transactions such as this reinforce the important role that business parks play within the wider office market."

■ Commercial law firm Hill Dickinson has relocated its Birmingham office to Gilbanks at Five St Philips.

The firm has taken over more than 2,000 sq ft on the second floor of the building in Birmingham's central business district, moving from its previous premises on Newhall Street.

Having launched in the city in February 2024, the firm's Birmingham-based team has more than doubled to 25 colleagues covering corporate, real estate and real estate litigation. A new corporate dispute resolution team also joined the office last April.

With the rapid pace of expansion meaning Hill Dickinson needed a larger office in the city, Five St Philips will provide the firm with the additional capacity and flexibility it needs to support future expansion, building out its business services offering.

Nick Dawson, partner and head of the firm's Birmingham office, said: "We outgrew our previous space far sooner than expected, so this move is a positive next step.

"Five St Philips has attracted a growing number of professional services firms since opening, and we are looking forward to continuing our presence at the heart of Birmingham's Colmore Row business community."

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More choice, more innovation – and a greater need for clarity



Adam Read, director, and Ashu Bhargava, senior director, at WTW, discuss the value within defined benefit pension schemes



We are excited to see endgame planning for UK defined benefit – or DB – pension schemes continue to evolve.

Improvements in DB funding over the last few years, and new thinking to deliver value to sponsors and members, have meant that DB schemes are being viewed by sponsors as an 'asset' rather than a 'liability'.

While full-scheme insurance buyouts remain a key option, market innovations are increasing the viability of alternative approaches: this broadened landscape presents opportunities for sponsors and trustees seeking clear, well-aligned paths to provide extra value to sponsors and members. We set out below examples of how this value has been delivered for a few of the schemes we have worked with.

The Pensions Regulator continues to encourage innovation, provided the solutions being presented demonstrate appropriate guard-rails regarding member benefit security. In their guidance to trustees, the Regulator has indicated they do not consider insurer buyout to be the only option for trustees to consider – the Regulator expects trustees to consider all relevant factors including the risk/reward and/or cost/benefit of potentially appropriate options to act in the best interests of the beneficiaries.

Surplus is moving centre stage – and policy is following

Legislation and regulation are also changing quickly: the UK Government has now indicated it intends to allow DB schemes to pay surplus funds directly to members, alongside more readily allowing ongoing refunds of surplus to sponsors and against a lower threshold, too.

The Pensions Regulator has indicated that it is good governance practice for trustees to have a documented policy on surplus release, including how surplus is shared between members and the sponsor.

Endgames: the decision behind the destination

An endgame is the long-term plan for how the key risks of a pension scheme will be borne, and by whom, for how benefits will be delivered, and for how value will be shared between the sponsor and members:

(i) Historically, this has been framed as a choice between buyout (transferring everything to an insurance company) and running on the scheme as is; and

(ii) more recently, new entities looking to provide capital to pension schemes in exchange for a financial return (including superfunds) have added a new dimension; with

(iii) increasing innovation here driving more trustees and sponsors to seriously reconsider the plans for their schemes.



What's new in the endgame market?

To get our arms around current developments, we'll separate them into:
1. new ways of running on and sharing value;
2. the maturing of superfunds; and
3. innovation inside the insurance market that changes what is operationally possible.

1) Run-on is evolving: surplus sharing, sponsor swaps and 'run-on with guard-rails'

One headline in 2025 was the 'sponsor swap' between Stagecoach and Aberdeen, through which Aberdeen took over as the statutory sponsor while the scheme continues to run on. Notable for the speed of execution and buyout surplus, this transaction included over £50 million of value immediately passed on to members. Future surpluses are shared between the sponsor and members.

WTW managing director Mark Daniel says:

"I was delighted to lead WTW's advice to Aberdeen on this landmark transaction. Our focus was on finding the sweet spot where members could enjoy an immediate boost to pensions, enhanced inflation protection, and the potential for further increases, while ensuring the scheme's long-term self-sufficiency. This deal demonstrates the power of innovative thinking in surplus-sharing."

Much earlier in the year, Aberdeen also illustrated how surplus can be used to support a wider workforce benefit strategy too: its own DB scheme's surplus will help fund the cost of pension contributions for other current employees, whilst also enhancing DB member entitlements.

Around 30% of the schemes responding to a WTW 2025 survey indicated that they are looking to run on to make best use of their current and future surpluses. Key to a run-on strategy is understanding the downside risk exposure and, to the extent desirable, managing this accordingly. With developments in the insurance market enabling smaller schemes to hedge away longevity risk efficiently, at a low cost, and while retaining investment flexibility, we expect to see more schemes deploying insurance to mitigate demographic risks and enable a safer run-on.

2) Superfunds are broadening in scope, not just in scale

The superfund market is now well beyond proof-of-concept, with a growing pipeline of cases giving providers clearer visibility of future demand – as more schemes progress through the assessment and quotation process, superfunds are investing further in their operational and underwriting capabilities, strengthening both capacity and execution certainty. This momentum, combined with a more settled regulatory environment and forthcoming legislation, points to an endgame option that will become progressively more predictable over time.

We're also expecting to see a broader set of propositions as legislation is finalised (with key new legislation expected to receive Royal Assent early this year) and new entrants emerge, including models that differ in objective (for example, buyout-focused versus longer-term run-on with surplus sharing).

WTW senior director, Ashu Bhargava, who prior to rejoining WTW led discussions with sponsors and trustees at Clara Pensions (the first established superfund) which ultimately culminated in the first four UK superfund transactions, says:

"2026 will be a very exciting year for superfunds, with increasing competition emerging and a solid regulatory foundation. Given the potential to create value for both members and sponsors, superfunds should be a part of every robust review of endgame options."

Superfunds give both sponsors and trustees another option to both balance security and share value between sponsors and members, and can enable a sponsor to remove the scheme from its balance sheet at up to 10% less than the cost of an insurance buyout.

This saving of up to 10% can then be shared with members. In one superfund transaction, the main driver was that the superfund provided higher benefits than an insurer. In two other superfund transactions, the main drivers were the improvement in member security, to a greater than 99% likelihood of members receiving full benefits, together with the sponsor settling the pension scheme at a cost lower than buyout.

3) Insurance innovation: beyond price, to structure and execution

And last, but by no means least, the market for insurance remains highly competitive. The dust has started to settle on the busiest ever year in this market, with more deals than ever before completed in 2025. This included transactions for schemes sponsored by IBM (c. £700 million), Baker Hughes (approximately £700 million across three schemes) and Avon (£230 million), all of which WTW led.

Non-price factors (such as member experience, administration resilience and how efficiently a scheme can progress from an initial transaction to an ultimate wind-up) are now differentiators, in addition to price.

Insurers are reacting to client needs by evolving their propositions in these important areas. For example, by increasing administration resource to ensure a high quality of customer service or, in some cases, re-designing their administration offering from the ground up.

To support schemes moving to buyout, in just the last three months several insurers have announced innovative transactions where they are taking on more of the data cleansing activity, to facilitate a quicker transition from buy-in to buyout.

There's no sign of activity letting up – we're forecasting that the bulk annuity market will exceed £50bn in 2026, and that pension scheme trustees and sponsors will need to be increasingly alert to insurers' operational capacity, cyber resilience and the buy-in-to-buyout 'backlog' - so we're expecting innovation to continue apace, too.

We've also seen significant merger and acquisition activity in this space. A US life insurance company recently announced it will acquire one of the 11 insurers currently active in the UK market, marking the third acquisition of its type since Summer 2025, and underscoring the ongoing investment in the industry.

WTW senior director of pension risk transfer, Gemma Millington, says:

"Schemes continue to benefit from improved funding levels and strong insurer appetite, which together create very favourable conditions in which to secure members' benefits. Together with the increased focus from insurers on ensuring optimal member experience and outcomes, we're expecting the demand for insurance to continue to grow in 2026."

Simplicity in objectives; sophistication in solutions

The UK pensions landscape in 2026 offers more choice than ever, and a policy environment increasingly focused on how surplus can be used to improve outcomes.

WTW senior director and head of retirement in the Midlands, Neil Tooth, reflects:

"With more levers available, we are seeing the strongest outcomes where stakeholders keep objectives simple and then tailor the solution set to match. For businesses, that may mean being explicit about a small number of priorities: security, balance-sheet and cash-flow volatility, settlement timeframe, and whether sharing upside is an objective at all."

If you would like to discuss what these developments could mean for your scheme – including how endgame planning interacts with corporate finance priorities and member outcomes – please get in touch.



Rebrand sparks new push for women-led funding

A growth initiative with a regional board in Birmingham has rebranded as it looks to scale up and cement the UK as the 'gender smart' investment capital of the world.

The Whole Point, formerly known as the Lifted Project, is a UK-wide, government-aligned initiative to increase funding for women-led businesses.

Using data-driven insights to highlight the benefits of backing women, five regional boards are already established in Birmingham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Liverpool and Newcastle.

Now in its next phase of growth, the Whole Point is building on 4,000-plus hours of support it has already delivered and the 350 women-led businesses it has helped, alongside securing Lloyds Banking Group as a founding national sponsor.

The Birmingham board includes representatives from British Business Bank, Business Growth West Midlands, Innovate UK, investors Future Planet Capital Regional and Minerva Business Angels, its sponsor Lloyds Bank and local female founders.

The board is co-chaired by Tara Attfield-Tomes – founder of visibility agency East Village and the 51% Club, an organisation that supports women-powered businesses from pre-revenue to policy change – and Hephzi Pemberton, founder of Equality Group.

Mrs Attfield-Tomes said: "Over the past two years we have established our board as a real driver for high-growth women-led businesses in the region and this rebrand marks a significant shift change for us.

"We have big ambitions and the work being done at policy level, alongside the Invest in Women Taskforce, demonstrates our commitment to ensuring that brilliant women right here in the region are getting access to the capital they need to truly scale.

"The UK's economy could benefit from a £250 billion boost if women started and scaled their businesses at the same rate as men. This board is committed to identifying these businesses, implementing programmes and initiatives to support them as they scale and, most importantly, getting investors into the region and deploying capital."

Acquisition boosts FleetMilne

It is very much business as usual at a Birmingham property firm after it was acquired by London estate agency Foxtons at the beginning of the year.

FleetMilne, which is based on Colmore Row and specialises in city centre lettings and sales, was bought by Foxtons for an initial £3.2 million with an additional £800,000 deferred.

Chief operating officer Kirsty Cove said successful integration following an acquisition is about finding the right balance between maintaining business momentum while also supporting the team through a period of change.

She added: "Foxtons have taken a very thoughtful and collaborative approach so far, carefully joining the dots across both businesses while accelerating elements of our business plan.

"Our senior leadership teams have quickly built strong relationships and the wider departments are already identifying opportunities to work together and share expertise.

"For FleetMilne, it remains very much business as usual and our team, clients and tenants continue to be our priority.

"What has changed is the scale of support around us – we now have access to a broader platform and additional resources that allow us to finesse and enhance the services we already provide."

£400k support for local retailers unveiled



Councillor Chris Burden

Applications have opened for a new £400,000 grant programme designed to support high street businesses across Wolverhampton.

The Vibrant High Streets grants programme 2026/27 is aimed at supporting small and independent retailers and businesses in the city centre, Bilston, Wednesfield and other high streets.

It is designed to help them improve the visual appearance, safety and customer service experience at their premises to boost local spend and economic benefit.

Businesses can apply for a maximum of £5,000 across one or more of the following three categories: frontage improvements, interior and external refurbishments, and digital, marketing and security. Businesses must also evidence match funding of 20% of the total cost of their project.

Councillor Chris Burden, City of Wolverhampton Council cabinet member for city development, jobs and skills, said: "The aim of this grant scheme is to build on the major investment currently being delivered across our urban centres.

"This further support for our high street retailers and businesses gives them the opportunity to secure funding that will enable them to thrive and boost the local economy.

"We anticipate demand will be very high for these grants. Applications will close once all the funding has been allocated, so I would urge businesses to submit an application as soon as possible."



Top legal talent honoured at Birmingham Law Society Awards 2026

Birmingham Law Society unveiled the winners of its 2026 Legal Awards at a ceremony held at the ICC. Fourteen winners were chosen from a shortlist of 69 individuals and firms.

Winners included Khadija Bashar of Birmingham City University in the Outstanding Student Contribution of the Year category, Apprentice of the Year Estelle Asante of Eversheds Sutherland, Trainee Solicitor of the Year Hollie Gould of Anthony Collins, and Joel Blake of the Wilkes Partnership, winner of Solicitor of the Year.

Matt O'Brien, president of Birmingham Law Society, said: "This year's finalists and winners truly represent the breadth and depth of our legal community's talent. From rising stars to seasoned leaders, their dedication, innovation and service to both clients and community are outstanding.

"On behalf of Birmingham Law Society, I congratulate the winners on their well-deserved success. Their achievements showcase the very best of what our region's legal profession has to offer."

Aurrigo clinches landmark vehicle deal

Automated vehicle manufacturer Aurrigo International has signed the largest manufacturing order in its history in a deal worth more than £6 million.

The Coventry-based firm won the contract to manufacture an initial 25-strong fleet of autonomous guided vehicles for a rapid transit system specialist.

The £6.28 million deal with Ultra Global Limited will see Aurrigo modernise existing vehicle platforms to meet current performance, safety and technology standards.

Engineering development work will be completed by the end of this year, with vehicle production and testing to follow, and a completion date of September 2027.

Jonathan Keeling, director of Ultra Global Limited, said: "In evaluating partners globally, Aurrigo distinguished itself through its ability to deliver the complete vehicle solution – from core platform development through to advanced technology implementation.

"We are proud to have found that expertise here in the UK, with manufacturing capability based in the heart of the West Midlands. This contract marks a significant step in advancing the Ultra Global platform to the next level."

"It also gives us the opportunity demonstrate how this technology can address real passenger transport needs across the UK."



David Keene

The first batch of autonomous vehicles will be utilised for customer demonstrations and support commercial engagement activity in the UK and in international markets, as new deployment opportunities are explored.

David Keene, chief executive officer of Aurrigo International, said: "When we announced our recent £14.1 million fundraise, we outlined our strategy to secure strategic partners who could unlock new market opportunities and drive sustainable growth.

"This approach has delivered a landmark contract with Ultra Global becoming the largest vehicle order in our history, and one that will complement our existing range of autonomous vehicles."



Andrew Riley, Anita Champaneri and Sir Andy Street



Hjalmar Nilsonne and Andrew Riley



Niamh O'Keefe, Sam Hurst and Anita Champaneri



Kathryn Stanczyszyn and Satnam Rana

Health centre launch



Former Mayor of the West Midlands Sir Andy Street, journalists, broadcast media, industry insiders and wellbeing tastemakers were among the guests at the launch of Neko Health's new health centre in Birmingham. The space on Livery Street played host to the exclusive launch event, where the company's CEO and co-founder, Hjalmar Nilsonne, and clinical team revealed its next-generation scan rooms before the evening concluded with dinner at Tattu.

Saskia Hayman, Krishma Parmar, Saira Mendez-Laing and Dr Zoya Awan



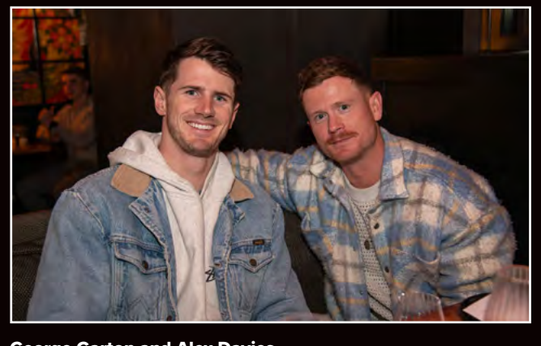
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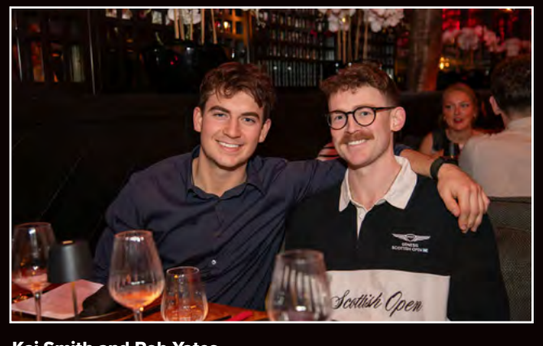
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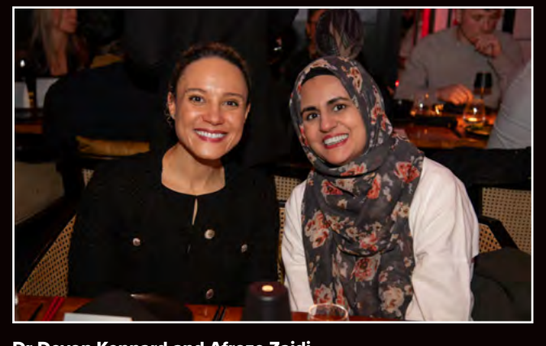
Eve Matthews, Ruby Bansal and Emma Howden



George Garton and Alex Davies



Kai Smith and Rob Yates



Dr Devon Kennard and Afroze Zaidi



Pogus Caesar and Shakan Pitters

Investment drives expansion at KC Group

A female-led recruitment company is set to grow following a significant contract win supported by business finance provider UKSE.

Solihull based KC Group, formally Kate & Co, has secured £100,000 in investment from UKSE to support the delivery of a four-year contract which is anticipated to grow the workforce from 13 to 21 in the next 12 months.

Established in 1997 and led by managing director Sarah Grace, the planned growth represents a major milestone for the business which specialises in the recruitment of business operation, HR, accountancy and finance roles across the UK.

The new contract will see them providing operational roles across 122 universities, colleges and higher education providers on behalf of two university procurement consortiums, North Western Universities Purchasing Consortium and South Universities Procurement Consortium.

In addition to growing the workforce, the business will also upgrade its technology, including the investment in Paiger, a business development platform for recruiters to automate and streamline processes. In addition, KC Group will upgrade its phone system to automatically update call records via their existing CRM system.



UKSE regional executive Mike Lowe with KC Group managing director Sarah Grace

KC Group managing director Sarah Grace said: “The investment from UKSE has come at the perfect time. We needed to look at how we could futureproof the business, and the two university procurement contracts is how we will achieve that goal.

“To get the contract off the ground we needed more people and new technology. It was my first time speaking to a company like UKSE and their approach was so refreshing. We worked in partnership and my business will grow and flourish because of the funding.”



Pictured from left are Melissa Buray, Dan Morris, Warren Hastings, Johnny McGrath and Daniele Antonucci

Brown Shipley hosts Birmingham briefing on markets outlook

Private bank Brown Shipley welcomed clients and intermediaries to the Ivy in Birmingham for discussions on the global economy, financial markets and key asset classes in 2026 and beyond.

The events were hosted by Dan Morris and Johnny McGrath, client advisors at Brown Shipley in Birmingham, and Daniele Antonucci, chief investment officer at Quintet Private Bank, parent of Brown Shipley.

Mr McGrath said: “We have seen some market volatility at the start of this year which we’ve spoken to clients about.

“We believe in staying invested and diversified to compound returns, which has historically shown to be more effective than reacting to short-term noise.”



The team from The Walsall Wheelbarrow Company celebrate their win

Wheelbarrow company wins Family Business of the Year award

A proud third-generation family-owned business has been celebrated as Family Business of the Year at the 2026 West Midlands Business of the Year Awards.

The Walsall Wheelbarrow Company was praised by sponsor PwC not only for its success as a business, but also for its warmth, care and commitment.

“This award means the world to us,” said Simon Thacker, the firm’s sales director.

“Being a family business spanning three generations, it’s incredibly special to see our hard work, passion and values recognised in this way. ”



Agency founder joins advisory board

The managing director of brand agency OWB Creative has been appointed to the Business School Advisory Board at University College Birmingham.

Andy Wilkinson, a founding partner of the agency based in the Jewellery Quarter, brings a wealth of experience to his role on the board having also recently been appointed as group sales director at creative group DRPG, which acquired OWB Creative in 2024.

The new advisory role reflects his longstanding relationship with University College Birmingham and its focus on putting knowledge to work, ensuring students graduate with the confidence, skills and real-world readiness employers expect. Andy will contribute sector insight across the business school’s departments, supporting courses spanning business and enterprise, hospitality and tourism, creative industries and the Birmingham College of Food.

He said: “This appointment means a great deal to me. University College Birmingham has a genuine belief in people and their potential, and that really resonates with me.

“I’m looking forward to supporting students as they take their first steps into the world of work, helping ensure they feel confident and proud of what they can achieve.”



Accountancy firm hires risk advisory director

Accountancy firm Bishop Fleming is strengthening its presence in the West Midlands with the appointment of Razia Gent as director of internal audit and risk advisory.

Based in the firm’s Birmingham office, which opened its doors in January 2025, Razia brings more than 20 years of commercial experience, including senior roles at BDO, BT and Birmingham City Council.

She said: “This is a unique opportunity to join an organisation that is on such a clear growth journey.

“I am looking forward to building a team that acts as a trusted advisor, particularly as clients seek more pragmatic, value-added consultancy as they navigate increasingly complex risk landscapes.”

Law firm DWF welcomes back real estate partner

Law firm DWF has announced the return of Stephen Hickling as a partner in its real estate team in Birmingham.

Stephen rejoins DWF following four years in-house as legal director at Dandara, a national housebuilder, where he led legal strategy across the group’s build-to-rent division. In this role, he advised senior leadership on legal delivery, governance, compliance and risk, with a particular focus on the divestment of multi-family and purpose-built student accommodation developments.

During his time at Dandara, he led the legal negotiations on the successful divestment of various BTR assets. These transactions included complex multi-jurisdictional joint ventures, forward funding arrangements and forward sales.

Stephen brings more than 24 years’ experience in real estate and has a strong background in commercial development, investment and portfolio management across multiple asset classes.

Prior to moving in-house, he spent eight years at DWF, advising developers, investors and public sector bodies on high-profile development projects across the office, industrial and retail sectors. His experience also includes advising on major regeneration schemes and public sector development partnerships



BNP Paribas appoints office leader

The real estate arm of bank BNP Paribas has appointed Liz Cain as head of its Birmingham office.

Liz steps into the role at BNP Paribas Real Estate with more than two decades of experience across real estate, financial services, and professional services environments.

She has been with the firm for 11 years, most recently serving as senior director, internal control and head of client finance.



In that role, based in Birmingham, she has led a team of approximately 100 qualified and trainee accountants and property finance professionals.

In addition to leading client finance, Liz has worked closely with advisory, occupier and property management services teams across the UK and Europe.

As head of the Birmingham office, she will assume responsibility for people leadership, strategy, revenue generation and operational performance, working closely with regional and national leadership.

Mark England, UK CEO of BNP Paribas Real Estate, said: "Liz is an exceptional leader with a proven track record of driving performance within complex, regulated environments.

"Her ability to combine strategic judgement with operational rigour makes her ideally placed to lead our Birmingham office through its next phase of growth.

"The Midlands remains a key strategic market for us. Liz's appointment underlines our commitment to investing in leadership that will strengthen client relationships, enhance collaboration, and unlock new opportunities across the region."

Valuation expert joins Innes England



Commercial property consultants Innes England has welcomed Matt Kitson to its Birmingham valuation team.

Matt has more than 25 years' experience valuing commercial property assets and portfolios, advising on development consultancy and compulsory purchase orders, and providing financial viability appraisals for both developer and public sector clients.

He joins Innes England as an associate director, from Bromsgrove-based surveying firm Thomas Lister.

Supply chain specialist lands board role



Coventry-based pallet pooler IPP has promoted experienced supply chain professional Demi Crabbe to commercial director.

She has been with the business for 14 years, and will report to regional managing director Andy Maddock as part of the role which is focused on shaping and delivering the UK and Ireland commercial strategy.

The position will include leading IPP's commercial vision and teams along with supporting its growth plans and digital transformation agenda.

Demi will also help identify new opportunities, strengthen and evolve the customer experience and help ensure alignment across European markets.

She said: "I'm really looking forward to putting my own stamp on the role and helping shape our strategic direction at a higher level. I have developed lots of ideas over the years, and am now in a position to implement them and drive meaningful change."

Andy Maddock said: "Over the last few years Demi has proved herself and excelled in many roles in the IPP organisation.

"She has built a strong commercial foundation for us to build on in 2026 and beyond. I am delighted for her and the business as we continue to look for growth and drive change in the coming months and years."



Law firm expands corporate team

Regional law firm mfg Solicitors has bolstered its corporate law team with the appointment of a new partner.

Corporate and commercial transaction specialist Philip Chapman has joined the firm from Knights, reporting to partner and head of department Clare Lang.

Based across the firm's offices in Birmingham's Colmore Business District and its Black Country base in Brierley Hill, Philip is now advising clients on matters including management buy-outs, mergers and acquisitions, business disposals and reorganisations for corporate and owner-managed businesses.

Clare Lang said: "Philip joins us at the perfect time as we bolster our team and increase our footprint across the region.

"He is a hugely respected corporate and commercial specialist and adds significant experience to an already strong team. He is already making an impact with our clients and within the firm."

He is also a member of Birmingham Law Society and the Notaries Society.

Senior hire at Bruton Knowles

Chartered surveyor Bruton Knowles has continued the growth of its utilities and infrastructure team with a new appointment.

Collette Brown-Bolton brings over 25 years of experience in property and infrastructure to the firm, having held senior roles at Network Rail for 18 years, as well as recently working with the Department for Transport.

During her time with Network Rail, she worked across some of the UK's most high-profile infrastructure projects including the redevelopment of Birmingham New Street station.

The project represented one of the largest regeneration schemes in the West Midlands, and Collette worked closely with Birmingham City Council on compulsory purchase and land acquisition strategies, and was the lead contact for complex negotiations involving land access, leases and licences.

Additionally, she worked on a series of projects including national electrification schemes and the construction of new railway stations and depots, leading several teams in the end-to-end delivery of the projects.

She joins Bruton Knowles with a national remit across estate management, infrastructure advisory and land assembly.





Azets appoints associate director

Accountancy and advisory firm Azets has appointed a new associate director at its Wolverhampton office.

James Bennett joins from S&W and brings 20 years' experience to the accounts and business advisory role.

He said: "My particular areas of expertise are technical advisory and preparation of consolidated financial statements.

"I thrive on the complexities of business acquisitions and I will aim to further grow Azets' service line and the client base. I am committed to providing my clients with accurate and timely financial information."

The Wolverhampton office works across all areas of accountancy including payroll services, restructuring and insolvency, audit, debt advice, forensic accounting and cyber services.

Lee Meredith, office managing partner, said: "James has a great deal of experience not only in accountancy firms but on secondments to industry.

"This gives him insights and knowledge which will be of great value to our present and future clients.

"Our Wolverhampton office is one of several across the Midlands and the appointment displays Azets' commitment to this important region."

Five minutes with...

Theo Chauhan-Jenkins

Associate director at BDO LLP



In one sentence, what does your role involve?
I advise a range of businesses from privately owned and large corporates to AIM/FTSE listed companies, private equity houses and funders on their respective investment or divestment journeys, providing both buy-side and sell-side financial due diligence support.
How long have you been in your current job?
I have been with BDO in the Midlands for 11 years, joining straight from college on the school-leaver apprenticeship programme in 2014.
Please give a brief summary of your professional career to date.
My career with BDO has spanned both audit and transaction services. The first seven years was spent in audit gaining my ACA qualification and progressing through to audit manager. During this time I worked with some great people and regional businesses.

My role in audit gave me a strong foundation to build on, and towards the back end of 2021 I decided to transfer to our Midlands deal advisory (transaction services) team. I really enjoy what I do – no day is ever the same and it provides me with a wealth of opportunity to learn, supporting a range of clients across a variety of sectors.
Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?
I didn't go down the traditional university route. Like most people starting college, I was unsure of what path I wanted to take career wise. To keep my options open, I studied physical education, biology, business studies and accountancy at A-Level.

Going into my second year, the biggest topic was university/UCAS applications. By this point I had decided that I wanted to go into accountancy and submitted my UCAS application to Durham University, choosing to study accounting and finance.

However, with a background rooted in a working-class community, I got to my final A-Level exams (which were tough!) and questioned whether university was right for me.

My accounting teacher mentioned that BDO was recruiting for their school leaver programme, something I hadn't considered. After researching both the apprenticeship and BDO I weighed up my options between starting work or going to university. I knew the apprenticeship was the best route for me.

I completely understand the role higher education plays, but ultimately, I knew I wanted a career in accountancy. I saved a year of study time and gained five years of relevant working experience – earning a salary at the same time whilst not accumulating the student debt.
How is your job impacted by uncertainties in the economy?
In general terms, the uncertainty in the economy in more recent years has impacted deal activity. The deals market can be easily influenced by macro-economic factors, as well geopolitical conditions – whether that's policy changes, interest rates, inflation or trading tariffs.

Despite there still being some economic headwinds, with UK inflation settling and interest rates continuing to fall, there has been a reinvigoration of deal activity at the start of 2026. Key growth areas this year are expected to include tech-enabled services and 'buy and build' platforms.

This motivation is mirrored in our latest bi-monthly Economic Engine survey of 500 mid-market businesses. It shows that nearly half of Midlands businesses expect their growth this year to come from M&A.
What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?
The term artificial intelligence is quite broad, but overall, I see it as an opportunity and something that we need to embrace as it's here to stay.

I'm a firm believer that AI should be used to enhance and make processes more efficient, not to replace human interactions or thinking – which are integral to how we do business.
Social media platform of choice, and why?
I would have to say Instagram – for no other reason than it's easy entertainment!
How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?
Hardworking, supportive and hopefully enjoyable to work with.
Highlights of your career so far?
I would have to say completing my ACA qualification, as well as my apprenticeship, with a close second winning Transaction Services Team of the Year in 2025.

For me, the apprenticeship route and accounting qualification has opened up many doors, which means you don't have to have your entire career figured out from the outset. Now I really enjoy supporting other team members in their development, helping them achieve their full potential in the way others did for me.
Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?
Luckily, nothing springs to mind.
Pet hates?
Rudeness. I'm a big believer of the age-old quote 'treat those how you'd want to be treated'.
If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?
I would probably say, don't overthink it. You don't have to have all the answers to every question at once. Sometimes, this can make people shy away from a situation because they don't think they're ready for the challenge. Equally, by over-thinking things it can often over-complicate or slow down a process when the answer is straightforward and easy to achieve.
How do you relax away from work?
I like to spend time with family and friends, go to the gym and also travel. Food is also a big passion of mine. I like to experiment with all cuisines really.
Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.
I can plaster (although it has been a few years since I picked up the trowel!) Before my BDO apprenticeship I worked with my stepdad during the school holidays as a plasterer to earn a bit of money whilst at college.
You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?
That would be the Harry Potter stories, the film Hitch, and my CD would definitely have to be Drake – Take Care.
Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?
Michael Jordon, David Beckham, Thierry Henry, Martin Luther King and Barak Obama.
What would you choose to eat for your last supper?
That's a really tough one! It'd have to be a fusion of cuisines – tandoori rack of lamb, side of macaroni cheese, and for dessert warm chocolate brownie with honeycomb ice cream.



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