Birmingham Business

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Autumn 2026



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Birmingham Business *Welcome*

Just as winter heralds Christmas, and August the start of the football season, so autumn in Birmingham now feels like a particularly 'techy' time of year.

This is down, of course, to what has become a firm fixture in the calendar: Birmingham Tech Week – that five-day festival which draws in delegates from across the country, keen to take in the multitude of events at hubs across the city.

This edition is unashamedly tech-themed. We can do little more than scratch the surface of some of the great things happening in the region's tech world, but that says more about the size of this industry in the West Midlands than anything else.

However, we can at least give our readers a flavour of some of the remarkable tech stories that are coming to light in increasing numbers.

Take Manny Athwal, for instance. Wind the clock back a decade and you would have found a man seriously on his uppers, trying to make ends meet by taking a £50-a-day delivery job. He now presides over the UK's largest school of computer science and coding – School of Coding & AI – with multi-million-pound revenues and a staff of 300. It's a remarkable story, not only for the meteoric rise but also for its accompanying values. This is a firm that gives back.

And then there's our cover story. Here we meet Sunny Vara, the brains and driving force behind one of the most respected cybersecurity firms in this or any other region. Cybercy is on the up and up, helping the bosses of organisations across the country and overseas sleep a little easier.

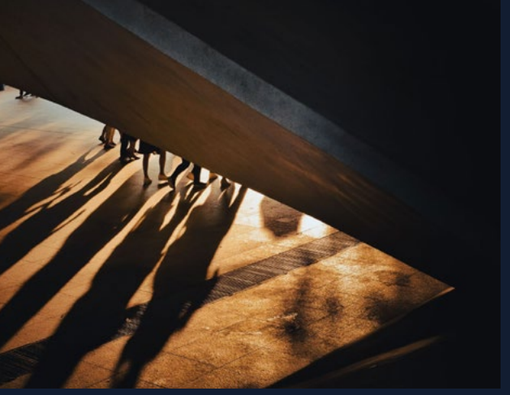
And it's always good to hear of quickfire successes for brilliant members of a younger generation. Hats off to Ben Ward and Jonathan Graham, who have sold their adaptive AI study platform to a US e-learning firm just a year after graduating from the University of Birmingham.

Elsewhere, Jon Griffin enjoys interviewing Jas Rohel, the founder of the nationwide Education Awards, as well as her own radio station in Solihull. A stalwart of the town's business community, we are looking forward to welcoming Jas as a columnist in our next issue.

With stacks of pages of news, insight, commentary and a spotlight on access to finance in the region, we hope this bumper edition provides real interest to all our readers.



By HENRY CARPENTER
Editor





BUDGET SPECIAL

In association with

Ballards







The real Budget starts when the chancellor sits down



With increases to the main rates of income tax, employee National Insurance and VAT ruled out, the Government will need to look elsewhere for revenue. MARTIN ADAMS, partner and head of tax at Ballards, considers where the pressure may fall and why the detail behind the headlines will matter most.

At roughly 12:30pm on October 28, the chancellor of the exchequer, John Healey, will rise to present his inaugural Budget. We expect a well-trodden narrative: pledges on growth and fairness, sober warnings about tough fiscal choices, and almost certainly a closing 'rabbit out of the hat' to grab the headlines.

The speech provides the overview; the supporting material determines the tax outcome. Those supporting documents are published shortly after he sits down.

Why the detail matters more than ever

What is a Budget? Is it an objective assessment of the economic health of the country and a statement of future fiscal policy, or is it also a major communications event for the government of the day?

In my view, it is both. We operate in an increasingly short-term environment, shaped by continuous news coverage, social media commentary and political volatility.

The UK has had six prime ministers in the past ten years, and the pressure to deliver measures that are immediately popular and easily communicated has intensified.

Taken together, these factors leave less room for the consistent, long-term fiscal planning that businesses and individuals need. They also lead to a greater focus on media-friendly, short-term announcements in the Budget speech.

In a world increasingly driven by headlines, it is easy to focus on the speech announcements, but it is the supporting detail that determines who pays the tax, how much they pay and when the change takes effect.

What to expect

The chancellor is materially constrained by the government's commitment not to increase the main rates of income tax, employee National Insurance or VAT.

Together, these taxes account for just under 60% of total government receipts.

Mr Healey is therefore between a rock and a hard place with his options to create material additional tax revenues.

The main areas of speculation for tax policy change are familiar, and recurring: further changes to capital gains tax, restrictions to inheritance tax or pension reliefs, property-related measures, sector-specific levies and an extension of stealth taxes through frozen thresholds.

Each is capable of raising revenue without increasing the main rates of the 'big three' taxes.

Tax policy often distinguishes between productive economic activity and passive wealth ownership.

The government has generally sought to encourage investment, entrepreneurship and business growth, while recent reforms have increasingly focused on taxing capital, wealth and passive returns.

Could we see further measures that preserve or enhance incentives for trading businesses and/or workers while increasing the tax burden on passive investment activities?

I think it is likely that we will see some form of property tax reform, with council tax reform representing the most plausible area for change. The prime minister, Andy Burnham, has been vocal in his criticism of the current system, arguing that it produces unfair outcomes as a result of outdated property valuations. Whilst recent commentary indicates that council tax is unlikely to be abolished in the near term, further reform of the existing regime remains a realistic prospect.

Timing matters

It has become increasingly common for significant tax changes to take effect from Budget Day itself, particularly in relation to capital gains tax.

This creates an annual panic to complete material transactions, such as business sales, before Budget Day. That is far from ideal from a commercial or tax-planning perspective, but it is the reality of the modern world.

We always urge caution with respect to undertaking transactions only for tax reasons. Tax should always be considered, but only as one aspect of the overall decision-making process.

Having said this, if a transaction is happening anyway, we typically advise that completing the transaction prior to the Budget provides certainty of your position and therefore is normally recommended from a tax perspective.

A word for the West Midlands

The regional agenda also merits attention. The government is pursuing greater devolution and local decision-making as part of its growth strategy.

For West Midlands businesses, the practical questions are which functions and funding streams are actually devolved, how consistently the arrangements and accountability requirements operate across regions, and whether the additional flexibility and funding certainty support investment and growth without creating disproportionate administrative complexity.

Before the chancellor rises

The wrong response to Budget speculation is to take irreversible action without a clear commercial rationale.

Any actions requiring a third party are now unlikely to be an option with the Budget only a few weeks away, unless the transaction is already in progress. There may, however, be opportunities to undertake internal or family transactions to secure the known current tax rates.

The areas attracting the greatest speculation all have something in common: they affect the points at which businesses, assets and wealth change hands. On the next page, my colleague Tim Lynch considers what possible changes to capital gains tax, inheritance tax, pensions and lifetime gifting could mean for business owners and families, and the practical steps worth taking before Budget Day.

This article is for general information only and does not constitute advice. Professional advice should be taken before making any decisions on the matters discussed.

It is not what you earn, it is what you pass on

As the shift towards taxing wealth gathers pace, the pressure is increasingly falling on the moments when assets change hands. TIM LYNCH, partner and head of private client at Ballards, on what that could mean for business owners and families, and what to do before October 28.

The focus of tax policy is increasingly shifting towards the transfer of wealth. With increases to income tax, National Insurance and VAT ruled out by the 2024 Manifesto, attention is turning to the points at which assets change hands.

The shift towards taxing wealth is already underway. The question is how much further it has to run.

These are not everyday events. They are some of the most significant financial decisions people ever make. The conversations I am having with clients this autumn are less about this year's tax bill and more about what happens to everything they have built. Increasingly, they are concerned about the prospect of tax on tax, with the same wealth potentially facing more than one tax charge as it passes between generations.

Tax influences behaviour. Changes to the taxation of business sales, pensions and lifetime gifting have the potential to affect investment decisions, succession planning and the timing of wealth transfers across the economy.

For businesses, these decisions go beyond tax planning. The way profits, investment and eventual exits are taxed influences whether entrepreneurs choose to expand, reinvest or realise the value they have created. Tax policy therefore shapes not only family wealth, but also business confidence and long-term investment across the wider economy.

Four moments

Most of the wealth tax measures currently under discussion can be distilled into four moments: selling, gifting, pensions and death.

Selling is the most obvious. Capital gains tax rates rose to 18% and 24% in October 2024, while Business Asset Disposal Relief now offers only a fraction of the benefit previously available under Entrepreneurs' Relief.

For many business owners, the reward for years of risk-taking, investment and job creation is already taxed more heavily than it was a few years ago. Any further increase would fall squarely on those planning an exit and funding retirement.

Death is the moment I would watch most closely. Assets are currently rebased for capital gains tax on death, meaning gains built up over a lifetime are effectively wiped out. If that relief were removed, the same wealth could face inheritance tax on death and capital gains tax when later sold, fundamentally changing estate planning.

Pensions are already changing. From April 2027, most unused pension funds will count towards an estate for inheritance tax purposes. A fund that once passed largely outside the inheritance tax net could therefore face inheritance tax on death and income tax when beneficiaries access it.

Giving is also under scrutiny. The inheritance tax system has long encouraged lifetime gifting through the seven-year rule and the exemption for gifts out of surplus income.

As the UK enters the largest intergenerational transfer of wealth in its history, these rules allow families to help children and grandchildren when support is most valuable. Unlike an inheritance, lifetime gifts allow donors to see the benefit of their wealth first-hand.

Not only the very wealthy

This is not just an issue for the very wealthy. Frozen inheritance tax thresholds, rising asset values and the inclusion of pensions from April 2027 mean many families with a home, pension savings and assets accumulated over a lifetime may find themselves within the inheritance tax net without ever considering themselves wealthy.

Business owners face an even sharper challenge as restrictions to business and agricultural property relief continue to reshape succession planning.

What to do before October 28

None of this calls for panic, and I would caution strongly against rushing into gifts or disposals on the strength of speculation. Decisions made in haste before a Budget have a habit of being regretted after it. But there is a good deal that can sensibly be done now, and most of it is simply good housekeeping.

Make sure your will reflects your current wishes and your current assets. Check who you have nominated to receive your pension, because after April 2027 that choice carries inheritance tax consequences it did not have before. If you own a business, know what it is worth and how much of its value would qualify for relief under today's rules. And if you are considering a sale or a significant gift, understand the numbers under the current regime and the likely alternatives, so that you are ready to act quickly and deliberately once the detail is known.

In my experience, the families and business owners who fare best after a Budget are rarely the ones who guessed the measures correctly. They are the ones who had already done the groundwork, and could respond calmly to whatever the Chancellor decided.

The next decade may be defined not by how wealth is created, but by how it is transferred.

The team reading the small print

Ahead of the Autumn Budget, meet the Ballards tax partners who will be watching every line on October 28. When the chancellor sits down after his speech, the tax team will already be working through the detail of what he's just announced.

Leading that response are MARTIN ADAMS, partner and head of tax, and TIM LYNCH, partner and head of private client. Together, they advise businesses, business owners and families on the questions a Budget can raise, from company structures and business sales to personal wealth, succession and estate planning.

MARTIN ADAMS
Partner and head of tax



I joined Ballards in 2016 following 10 years with a top-30 UK accountancy practice. I am qualified as both a chartered accountant and chartered tax adviser, which allows me to consider the accounting and tax implications of a transaction together rather than treating them as separate issues.

My work includes advice on company reorganisations, business sales, valuations, employee share incentives and property taxation. I also act as an expert witness in matrimonial and shareholder disputes.

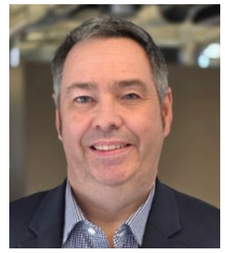
Clients often come to me when they are considering a significant transaction or facing a decision with long-term consequences. My role is to understand what they are trying to achieve, identify the tax and commercial implications, and set out the options available.

This approach becomes especially important around a Budget, when businesses need to understand what the published detail means for their plans, transactions and timescales.

I focus on presenting complex tax information clearly and in a structured way, helping clients fully understand their position and make informed decisions.

Away from the office, I enjoy rugby, cricket and boating with family and friends. I am also a keen supporter of grassroots sport.

TIM LYNCH
Partner and head of private client



I joined Ballards in January 2026, bringing 25 years of experience in accountancy practices. Before joining the firm, I spent 19 years in the private client team of a top 10 UK practice, including four years as a Tax Director. I am a chartered tax adviser and chartered certified accountant.

I advise individuals, entrepreneurial families, business owners and trustees on private client tax matters. My work includes personal tax, succession and estate planning, family investment structures, trusts and cross-border arrangements.

Tax rarely exists in isolation. A technically sound answer must also reflect a family's circumstances, business interests and long-term objectives.

I therefore focus on what clients want their wealth to achieve, both during their lifetime and for future generations. The aim is not simply to identify a tax-efficient option. It is to help clients reach decisions that are practical, sustainable and right for them.

"My approach involves getting a deep understanding of my clients so that I can provide advice tailored to their specific needs."

Outside work, I am a lifelong Manchester United supporter and enjoy sharing that interest with my son, Harry. I also recently joined colleagues for the Ballards Big Challenge, a 25-kilometre charity walk to the Worcestershire Beacon that raised more than £4,500 for Dementia UK.

Beyond the headlines

On Budget day, the Ballards tax team will watch the chancellor's speech together before working through the published documents as they appear. The team will share its first analysis that afternoon through the Ballards Knowledge Hub and LinkedIn.

The following morning, members of the team will record a special Budget edition of the firm's Sound Advice podcast, looking beyond the initial announcements at what the changes mean in practice.

In the weeks that follow, Ballards tax specialists will examine the implications for businesses, individuals and key industries. On Tuesday November 10, the team will host a post-Budget breakfast briefing at One Snowhill in Birmingham, helping attendees understand what has changed, who is affected and what they should consider doing next.

The team will return in the November/December edition of Birmingham Business with its verdict on the Budget, examining what the changes mean for businesses and families across the region and the planning priorities for the months ahead.

Banging the drum for others



Jas Rohel could legitimately claim the tag of 'the voice of Solihull'. After all, she is the founder and main presenter of the town's only dedicated radio station. However, in the education sector her reach and influence extends far beyond West Midlands, as the force behind the nationwide Education Awards. JON GRIFFIN meets Birmingham Business's new columnist.

She's the brains behind an awards scheme which has grown into a national platform for educational success stories, has her own radio show – and she's beaten cancer.

At 48 years old, Jas Rohel has established herself as the driving force and inspiration behind the Education Awards, a national initiative which has survived and prospered for a decade in an era of ever-burgeoning awards ceremonies across the UK.

For ten years the awards scheme founded by Rohel has helped highlight the many unsung heroes of an educational sector which frequently finds itself an unwitting punchbag at the hands of politicians amid a maelstrom of controversies over the curriculum, funding, teachers' workloads and much else.

And when she is not banging the drum for the largely invisible army of teachers, lecturers and the rest working across an increasingly pressurised sector, she sits behind a microphone in the tiny studio at On Your Radio Solihull, broadcasting to thousands of listeners every Friday.

It's been an eventful and often difficult journey for this irrepressible born-and-bred Brummie, daughter of Indian immigrants who grew up in inner-city Birmingham determined to make a name for herself in the ultra-competitive world of media.

"My mum is from Darjeeling in the foothills of the Himalayas where the tea is produced, while my dad is originally from the Punjab," she says.

"He came over with my grandfather, while my mum joined the family here when she married my dad."

As a youngster Rohel knew she wanted to work in the media – "I was always reading the newspapers out loud as if I was on the news" – but perhaps surprisingly given her gregarious disposition now, she admits that she used to lack confidence and "used to go along with everything".

"We moved to Kings Heath and I went to secondary school there and absolutely loved it. The community always looked after us – everyone knew everybody. There were no phones, no GPS systems. I remember I was so free, just to be able to ride your bike up and down the road.

"Back then it was a very different world. It was a lot safer – we used to sleep with the doors open."

By now, the adolescent Rohel had outgrown practising reading news items from her parents' Punjabi newspaper and threw herself into media studies at secondary school.

After completing her media and marketing degree at Staffordshire University she took a big gamble and moved to London, eventually landing a junior PR and marketing role with magazine heavyweights IPC Media.

"That was the real making of me. It was my first real experience of a large organisation with all their publications. It was such a fast-paced industry, such a buzzy environment."

But life for Johel away from the glamour of the London media world was far from easy. "The reality is you are not earning a huge amount of money. Everybody in London is always so busy – they are on a mission the whole time.

"I really felt after a few years that I was going to become one of those people not living life, just existing to go to work. I enjoyed my time in London but I wasn't really earning enough money."

After a six-year stint in the capital she returned to her Midlands roots with no definite plans for the future. "I felt deep down sometimes a bit of a failure after having to come back, but sometimes when you take steps backwards it is almost the making of you."

Those apparently retrograde steps from the London media world back to her Birmingham homeland proved a key career turning point as it prompted a life-changing switch to teaching.

"I decided to do a teaching qualification at Solihull College. My patience is the size of a peanut at the best of times – I didn't think teaching and I would go together – but I really enjoyed it and they asked me to start working there as soon as I finished the course.

"I started teaching in the marketing units, teaching PR, dabbling in a bit of media as well, and speaking to the media students. I loved it but I suppose there was an itch in me. Why am I doing just this? This is not enough for me."

Those frustrations with her early days in teaching coincided with a realisation that the education sector was also far from perfect, triggering a chain of events which would lead to the launch of the Education Awards.

"I realised when I was in education that actually – and this is my own opinion – the curriculum is not fit for purpose. By that, I mean it is very outdated.

"Industry sectors such as media and business are so fast-paced and moving so quickly that education can't keep up. For me, it was very much why are we doing this, why are we not letting businesses write the curriculum?

"Why are we doing it this way, in that process? A lot of amazing teachers, lecturers, people in education were leaving the profession. I thought why, and for a majority of the time it was very much due to a lack of recognition."

After a six-year stint in education, including teaching business at Solihull College, the seeds were gradually being sown for a regional initiative which would ultimately shine a light on the often anonymous but vital unsung heroes grappling daily with the many problems facing the education sector.

"One of the things for me was why are all



these amazing people leaving education? Back then, the awards culture was coming into place and I remember being sent by the college to some awards ceremonies, including the Birmingham Chamber awards.

"I remember thinking this is great but why are there no awards for people in education? There were the Times Higher Education Awards, the Pearson Teaching Awards, but they were not actually for the whole of education. I did a lot of research and realised very quickly that there wasn't anything representing regional education – and that was the birth of the Education Awards.

"There were no awards looking organically at regions. Every single region is extremely different – the make-up is different, the needs are different."

The catalyst for the launch of the Education Awards was a chance meeting at the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce annual awards night over a decade ago with former Birmingham City University deputy vice-chancellor Julian Beer, who agreed to back the Rohel awards brainchild as a headline sponsor.

Armed with support from other Birmingham business heavyweights including the then West Midlands mayor Andy Street and former Greater



Jas Rohel with chef Aldo Zilli in March 2025

Birmingham Chamber of Commerce chief executive Paul Faulkner, the Education Awards made their debut ten years ago, and have gradually extended their footprint into other big cities.

"These awards are national now. When we first started it was regional – just the Midlands – but we are now in Cardiff, Manchester, London, Liverpool . . . and I run them all. I have a very small team of people and we go up and down the country to put them on.

"The awards are free to enter and we recognise outstanding schools, colleges, universities and teachers. It is about the people and the teams of people that make education great.

"We are looking for the unsung heroes of education, the ones that really go above and beyond, the ones who never put themselves in for an award but who deserve the recognition.

"I didn't think it would ever grow like this – I just thought it would be a little tick in the box for me ten years ago. Our July awards for the Midlands was our official ten-year anniversary."

The Rohel blueprint for recognising the unheralded heroes of education has been vindicated with the growth across the UK of the awards scheme but she is not resting on her laurels, with plans for further expansion elsewhere in the UK.

"We have such a long way to go yet," she says. "We have so many plans and so many things I still want to do within the business. I am really proud that we have done a decade of the awards – it's a bit of a pinch me moment for that quiet little girl who wouldn't say boo to a goose.

"We have got some amazing stories out of education, people who never otherwise were going to get recognised."

In tandem with the decade of growth for the Education Awards, Rohel has reinvented her teenage dreams of media stardom with a broadcasting foothold as director/presenter at her own local radio station in the shape of online community station On Your Radio Solihull.

"I work on the radio every Friday doing the Talking Education Show and the Talking Business Show.

"Before lockdown we were involved with a different radio station locally and that shut.

"The need was still there for it, so myself and another two people put this together. We invested some of our own money and decided to launch the station. We had the backing of Tony Elvin, the general manager for Touchwood and were able to base our studio here.

"We have companies advertising, we promote local activities. It's a small station but it's big for Solihull. It's all voluntary, the presenters come in and do different

"You have to make the chamber work for yourself. I never thought for a moment that I would ever be on a board making decisions, helping to grow businesses and support businesses in the borough."



Presenting the Talking Business show

shows. In the past year we had 140,000 listeners."

To add to her roles as CEO of the Education Awards and her Solihull radio commitments Rohel also sits on the board of Solihull Chamber of Commerce.

"I have learnt so much being part of the chamber. It became my network and my family. I would ask does anybody know a legal person or an accountant and of course, they do.

"You have to make the chamber work for yourself. I never thought for a moment that I would ever be on a board making decisions, helping to grow businesses and support businesses in the borough."

But amidst the successes and recognition over the years, Rohel has fought – and won – her own arduous personal battle after being diagnosed with mouth cancer two and a half years ago.

"It was the most shocking time of my life. It really shook me, and not a lot of things do. I had a realisation that life is too short.

"I was so fortunate that it was found so early. Now I am 100 per cent over it."

With her health restored, Rohel is now looking to expand the Education Awards across further cities nationwide.

"We have got the blueprint, it works. It is quite easy to roll out elsewhere. I want the Education Awards to be in every single region.

"I feel like I am on a one-woman mission. If mouth cancer can't shut me up, then I think I'm in the right place."







Rohel is the brains and driving force behind the Education Awards which now have a national reach

The Feeneys of Birmingham

John Frederick Feeney's career path saw him become one of the region's great press barons and a serial benefactor in the latter part of the 19th century. As Professor CARL CHINN reveals in this fascinating family portrait, Feeney's son was no less successful or philanthropic.



The only known photograph of John Frederick Feeney, founder of the Birmingham Post

For a man whose business was public affairs and bringing the news to the attention of the many, John Frederick Feeney was a most private man.

Yet for all his modesty and shying away from the glare of attention, his vision, skill and endeavours made a major and positive impact upon Birmingham. For it was Feeney, a migrant from Sligo in the west of Ireland, who began the Birmingham Post in 1857, and it was his son who started the Birmingham Daily Mail in 1870.

Very little is known about this deeply private man, with no commercial and few family papers relating to him having survived. There are no glimpses of John Frederick's childhood, no hints as to his upbringing, and no tantalising leads about his teenage and early adulthood – other than a tradition that he had begun work as a compositor in a printing room.

In fact, there's little hard information about him at all until he came to Birmingham, although it may be that he'd been a journalist elsewhere. Indeed, there was a sizeable number of Irishmen writing on newspapers in England.

On the marriage certificate to his second wife, Feeney stated that his father, also John, was a bookseller, and what little else we know about him comes from information gleaned from an obituary to his nephew Alfred Feeny, whose name did not include the final 'e'.

His father, Patrick Mulvogue Feeny of Sligo, was John Frederick's older brother. Carrying the surname of their mother, Jane Mulvogue, Patrick was also involved in the newspaper business. He'd worked on the Connaught Telegraph, and later had a share in the Mayo Constitution and a leading position on the Morning News of London, where Alfred Feeny was born.

Feeny came to Birmingham in 1857 to work in the commercial department on his uncle's new venture of a daily newspaper, staying there until his retirement in 1904.

A major influence on the Post through the quality of his writing, his versatility and his journalistic flair, he was also the Birmingham correspondent for The Times and was involved in The Ironmonger, which focused upon the hardware trades of Birmingham and elsewhere.

Though a Liberal in politics, he was a staunch Catholic and was one of the best-known and most highly regarded members of the Edgbaston Oratory, attending mass daily at 8.30 in the morning.

By contrast, both the marriages of John Frederick Feeney and all the baptisms of his children took place in Anglican churches, and he is buried in the churchyard of the Anglican St Peter and St Paul, Aston Parish Church. It may be speculated that he converted to Anglicanism to avoid difficulties at a time when there was marked anti-Catholic prejudice and when there were very few Irish Catholics in positions of authority. This change seems to have related to the adding of a final 'e' to his surname, making it Feeney not Feeny.

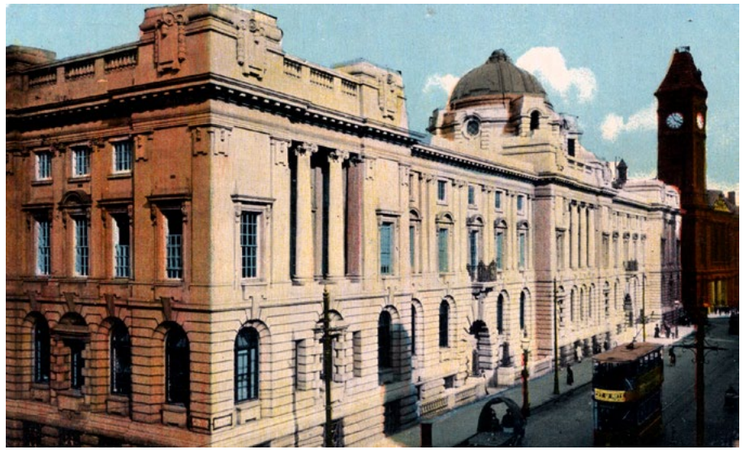
Feeney was young when he arrived in England, settling first it seems in or around London, as in 1833 he married Rebecca Sophia Purvis at St Peter's Church, Walworth. Then in a desirable location in Surrey, by the end of the 19th century, Walworth was one of the poorest parts of London where Charlie Chaplin lived as a child.

Two years later and aged 24, Feeney arrived in Birmingham to work on the Philanthropist, a radical newspaper championing the anti-slavery cause. He obviously took to the town, as it was then, staying for the rest of his life.

In 1837 he switched to the staff of the Midland Counties Herald, a four-page weekly publication. Politically neutral, it focused upon local and regional news within a 50-mile radius of Birmingham, boasting it had a "large gratuitous and special circulation among the wealthy classes".



The Art Gallery, with the Chamberlain Memorial in front and before its extension



The Art Gallery extension from Edmund Street, which John Feeney's magnificent bequest paid for

The 1841 Census recorded Feeney as a reporter living with his wife Rebecca in Graham Street, now in the Jewellery Quarter. With them were their three infant sons, a 15-year-old female servant and Feeney's sister Margaret. Interestingly she was of independent means, suggesting that she'd inherited enough whether in money or property to be able to live off her own income.

Feeney stayed at the Midland Counties Herald for seven years until he made a big move in buying the Birmingham Journal which operated from New Street.

Started in 1825 as a weekly supporting the Tory Party, within a few years it



John Feeney, co-founder of the Birmingham Daily Mail and benefactor to Birmingham

changed both ownership and tack, gaining a reputation as an important radical publication backing reform and especially the chartist movement, fighting for the rights of the working class. Now though, it was declining, but fortunately income increased greatly because of the railway boom of the early 1840s as the railway companies had to advertise the long Parliamentary notices about their routes.

Within a few years, weekly sales of the Journal increased tenfold to 12,000 copies. That success though was accompanied by tragedy. After having two more children, in 1849 Rebecca Feeney died of dysentery, a disease that killed the well-off as much as the poor. She was 39 and was buried at Aston Parish Church in March.

By then, the family was living on the Sparkbrook side of the Stoney Lane, on the edge of the countryside. Just over a year later, Feeney married Barbara Walden from Edgbaston. The daughter of a 'gentleman', meaning that her father was prosperous enough not to have to work, she was the governess of the Feeney children.

Soon after the wedding, the family moved to 145 Highgate. The house was probably one of the large Georgian buildings on the Moseley Road on the high ground above the River Rea.

Feeney's circumstances continued to improve. In 1853, the advertisement duty was dropped, followed within two years by the repeal of the newspaper stamp duty, a payment to the government on each newspaper sold. This tax on knowledge was class biased, aiming to stop the sale of cheap newspapers to the working class and hence stifle the spread of reformist ideas. In Birmingham, the repeal encouraged Feeney to make the Journal a twice-weekly publication. The Saturday edition was reduced to 4d (less than two pence), whilst the smaller Wednesday edition was 2d.

A hands-on owner, on publishing nights Feeney helped in the composing and in getting the paper to press. Then he went around the town's newsagents to ensure they had a sufficient supply of the bills announcing the contents of the edition, which encouraged sales.

In his History of the Newspaper Press (1871), James Grant stated that he didn't remember "whether it was the late Mr Feeny himself who mentioned the fact to me, but it was mentioned that the profits of the Birmingham Journal were for a long time not much under £5,000 per annum. This was a considerable sum for a weekly paper".

In 1844, Feeney brought John Jaffray to work with him as a writer. A Scot who'd benefitted from a very good education, he'd been working as a reporter in Shrewsbury on a newspaper owned by a relative, but he also possessed a smart business head. Eight years later he was taken into partnership with a third share, and in 1857, encouraged by the 23,000 weekly sales of the Journal, they decided to start a daily newspaper, the Birmingham Post.

Small with just four pages and six columns per page and costing 1d, it came out Monday to Friday with Saturday reserved for the Journal. In its first edition on Friday December 4, Feeney and Jaffray addressed the readers.

This long association with the public interests of the locality, and the weekly proofs we have given of the spirit in which events are recorded and discussed, relieve us from the necessity of accompanying the first issue of a daily candidate for public favour with a profession of faith, or an explanation of the mode in which it is proposed that the new journal shall be conducted. Fortunately for us we are the organ of no sect or party in politic, in religion, or in civic affairs, and can therefore exercise an independent judgment on all matters that come before us, without reference to the opinions of any individuals or parties . . .

The partners explained that the Journal and the Daily Post would differ in favour of the public as "many local matters which we have either overlooked, or, from the small space at our command, treated more summarily than their importance required, will now have ample justice done to them". With this in mind, the reporting staff was greatly increased "so as to ensure for the Post the same reputation for accuracy which has gained for the Journal the authoritative character it now enjoys as a chronicle of the sentiments of the public men, and of the occurrences of the town and district". Importantly, they would endeavour to maintain and enhance their political commentaries, and show that the business department of the paper would carefully attend to the interests of "the capitalist, the trader, and the manufacturer".

The Post was a success. Advertisements flowed in, new machinery was bought and it wasn't long before a Saturday Evening Post appeared. This included some articles from the daily as well as stories and light reading. Then in 1869, the Birmingham Daily Post became a six-day a week affair with the old Journal and Saturday Evening Post merging into the Birmingham Weekly Post.

Feeney was now a wealthy man. In the 1861 Census, he and his family were living in a large house on Kings Road, Brighton's promenade and carriageway facing the sea. His residence there may have been the result of the steady progress of a 'malady' which caused him to retire from active management of his newspapers. Still, he maintained his Birmingham home at Church Road, Edgbaston. He died there eight years later, leaving to his wife effects of less than £45,000 – a massive sum at a time when most poor men would be lucky to earn £52 a year.

Known as the 'Governor', for all he was self-effacing Feeney was a dogged and determined man who successfully came through severe difficulties in the newspaper business and who was resolute in his belief in toleration. On 13 May 1869, his partner Jaffray used the columns of the Birmingham Daily Post to praise his late colleague. He clearly stated that "the history of Mr Feeney's career in Birmingham is indeed the history of the later developments of newspaper energy amongst us". His thorough business habits, tact, unvarying courtesy and capacity for hard work speedily told upon the fortunes of his papers.

Away from his profession:

He lived a peaceful and uneventful life contented with the discharge of his private duties, and in the enjoyment of domestic happiness. It is not well that the personal relations of a newspaper proprietary should be obtruded upon the public, and our readers will bear witness that we do not often sin in this respect; but it may be pardoned if the writer of this brief notice, who has been associated in the conduct of this journal with his departed friend for the long period of five-and-twenty years, should for once forget the rule by paying this tribute to the memory of one of the purest minds that God ever created, and as kind a heart as ever beat in human breast.

Feeney was interred in a vault beneath the Erdington chapel of Aston Parish Church, to which he was a great benefactor, and it is thought that Frederick Road, Aston, was named after him.

After his death, his newspapers were run by his son, John Feeney, in partnership with Jaffray. The oldest son, Peregrine Mulvogue Feeney, had started work as a newspaperman but soon went to London to become an artist. His painting of 'Lyn Idwal' in Wales hangs in Birmingham's Art Gallery.

It was John Feeney and Jaffray who established the Birmingham Daily Mail in 1870. Nineteen years later they set up the Birmingham Mail Christmas Tree charity to raise funds for toys and cash to brighten the lives of poor children in hospital. In 1906 it began giving Christmas dinners to poor families and boots to unshod children. Tens of thousands of English Brummies, my own Nan and great aunts and uncles amongst them, owed the shoes on their feet to a charity set up by the son of an Irish journalist and newspaper editor.

Like his older brother, John Feeney had artistic leanings, especially towards industrial art, and he profoundly affected the provision of art in Birmingham through his extraordinary generosity.

When the Art Gallery was opened in 1885 he gave it the first instalment of an outstanding collection of works from abroad. It comprised Japanese enamel, porcelain, lacquer, silver, armour and swords, and Chinese bronze, silver and lacquer. This wonderful gift was later supplemented by work from Persia, Turkey, Scandinavia, Germany, France, Spain, Austria and Russia. By 1899 the liberality of John Feeney had led to a collection of 1,693 pieces.

Seven years later when he died, his generosity to the Art Gallery staggered the citizens of Birmingham when they learned of his bequest of "the magnificent legacy of £50,000". This huge sum was crucial for the building of a new picture gallery as an extension of the Art Gallery, recalled in the Feeney Galleries opened in 1912. His will also left £20,000 to fund the Feeney Chair of Metallurgy at the University of Birmingham, adding to the £5,000 given whilst he was alive; £10,000 to the General Hospital, which swelled the £1,000 handed over previously; and £1,000 each to nine other hospitals and charities.

In a local obituary, it was exclaimed that "it is hardly possible to exaggerate the importance of this final and signal recognition on Mr Feeney's part of the true duties of citizenship".

Whilst he lived, other donations included £1,000 each to the Women's Hospital, the Coventry and Warwickshire Hospital and the Birmingham Bishopric Fund.

In addition, he paid for the restoration of the Erdington Chapel and its monuments and the rebuilding of the chancel of Aston Parish Church.

For all his benevolence, John Feeney's name is little known in Birmingham today. The co-founder of the Birmingham Mail and a philanthropist of the highest order, he should be more widely remembered – and so should his father.



The Birmingham Mail and Birmingham Daily Post premises at 38 New Street in the 1950s. It was on the site of the Birmingham Journal. Just past the office is Cannon Street, site of the printing presses of the papers.



Two young lads receiving their Birmingham Daily Mail boots from the charity started by John Feeney

SPOTLIGHT ON TECHNOLOGY

The conversation around technology and the infinite possibilities it offers – particularly amid the dizzying explosion of AI – has never been more animated.

We're entering new territory. And whenever we venture into the unknown, caution – and even fear – inevitably accompanies the excitement about what well-governed technology can bring to business and society at large.

In this bumper special report, published to coincide with Birmingham Tech Week, we explore multiple facets of this rapidly evolving landscape, with insights from some of the region's most engaged and authoritative voices in technology.

The AI debate

IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FRIEND OR FOE?





By FIONA TEAGUE and PATRICK McCALLUM from law firm Mills & Reeve

Artificial intelligence certainly divides opinion. On the one hand, you have the optimists who believe that AI will create significant economic growth, solve global problems and greatly improve human life. On the other, you have those who are taking a more cautious approach to its use and development or resist it altogether.

Andrew Ng, the renowned computer scientist and technology entrepreneur, once famously described AI as the 'new electricity'. Meanwhile, Stephen Hawking, who was one of the most quoted AI sceptics, warned in 2014 that success in creating advanced AI could be the biggest event in human history.

Even as recently as September, AI CEOs called for the technology's development to be 'slowed down' to ensure public safety, with OpenAI chief executive, Sam Altman, stating that the world is right to be afraid of AI. Microsoft's head of AI, Mustafa Suleyman, went further by suggesting that the development of AI could lead to the emergence of a new 'silicon species' which competes with humans.

There's no doubt that it's divisive. But is it possible for AI to be both friend and foe, where businesses embrace its power and influence, while remaining reserved and cautious around its implementation?

Mills & Reeve's report **'The critical AI window: Moving from panic to play with confidence'** suggests that these two ways of thinking can co-exist. While the report highlighted that the majority of businesses surveyed as part of the research (93%) will likely use AI over the coming years, more than four in five senior leaders (87%) were concerned about safety.

The future of AI is complex and is a rapidly evolving landscape. But whichever side of the fence you sit on, it's clear that AI will play an increasingly important role in society and business moving forward, so it is something that regional businesses will need to embrace.

The future role of AI

While the hype around AI is real and engagement amongst senior leaders is high, everyday adoption and implementation remain a work in progress for most businesses. Companies sit in one of four camps: they are active users of AI and developing new use cases, they have a strategy for AI adoption, they are at the researching and sourcing stage, or they have not yet taken any steps to source and use AI.

While far from everyone has fully embarked on their AI journey – the Manufacturing Technology Centre stated in September at its AI Assurance Conference that only 35% of businesses with ten or more employees report using AI – we are well beyond the starting point of adoption.

Businesses are pressing ahead with AI and yes, there are understandable concerns around bias and inaccuracy, regulatory exposure and compliance, security and how it is reshaping workforce requirements. However, according to our research, nearly a third (31%) of all organisations surveyed are putting in place a risk mitigation strategy for AI, in an attempt to manage any potential threats.

The West Midlands has been keen to move forward with AI at pace and embrace the role it can play across all aspects of the regional economy.

In fact, it was only at last year's Birmingham Tech Week that the region laid down a defiant marker regarding AI, stating: "we don't want to be a follower; we want to set the pace".

At last year's event, the West Midlands Combined Authority launched its **Leading with AI – Blueprint for the West Midlands**, setting out recommendations and practical frameworks to support AI adoption, innovation and skills development across the region.

The blueprint identifies a number of priorities for strengthening the region's AI ecosystem, including:

- Positioning the West Midlands as a leading hub for responsible AI experimentation, innovation and adoption across both public services and business
- Supporting businesses across sectors to adopt AI responsibly and effectively
- Developing proposals for a region-wide AI Academy and skills programme designed to improve access to AI training and support workforce development

What's more, the West Midlands' wider ambition is to broaden access to AI skills and training across communities, businesses and public services.

The West Midlands is already one of the UK's most active AI hubs, with more than 140 AI companies employing over 69,000 people, contributing £5.5 billion to the economy each year.

The West Midlands remains ambitious and means business when it comes to AI: this year's Birmingham Tech Week will once again lean into the AI agenda, pivoting around the AI Symposium on Wednesday, with many sessions tipping their hat to artificial intelligence.

So with a seemingly unstoppable wave of momentum, how can businesses prepare for AI and ensure they balance both optimism and caution?

Preparation is key

From a legal perspective, there is currently no single statute in the UK governing AI, unlike the EU's AI Act, which applies to any UK company offering AI-powered services to EU citizens, regardless of where the business is based.

To date, the UK has deliberately avoided one comprehensive AI law, using existing legal frameworks around online safety, data protection and sector-specific compliance, that empower sectoral regulators to apply five cross-cutting principles: safety, transparency, fairness, accountability and contestability.

However, this is a fast-moving area and there is clearly a strong desire to mitigate risks.

At Mills & Reeve, we understand the need to put guardrails in place, providing assurances to those businesses and organisations that are looking to implement AI. However, in line with many in the regional tech community, we believe regulation and assurance must be implemented in the right way and the legal sector has a part to play in shaping the rules that govern AI. As Professor Chris Dungey, national AI Champion for Advanced Manufacturing, recently said, "regulation should be an accelerator and not a brake to innovation".

"It's a real challenge for us as on the one hand we need to be encouraging our teams/businesses to increase their sophistication and literacy in making the maximum use of the opportunities AI provides us, whilst on the other hand simultaneously providing education on the shortfalls, risks and guardrails and reinforcing why such guardrails are critically important in protecting the business, particularly as regulation in this space evolves."

Michael Pearson, general counsel, Life Science IMI Plc

The power of people

In 2025, Mills & Reeve appointed the firm's first head of legal AI, Iain Murdoch, followed by the creation of a transformation change team to build bespoke in-house AI solutions. The creation of dedicated AI leadership roles, which we are seeing across both the legal sector and beyond, reflects the view that AI is becoming a board-level strategic issue rather than an innovation project.

While technology sits at the heart of our overall vision to achieve outstanding results for clients, our people and wider communities, we also must not lose sight of the fact that adopting new technology is as much about people as it is about systems.

As organisations increasingly integrate AI into decision-making and service delivery, an important question to bear in mind will be which human qualities and skills will become more valuable. We consider that empathy will become a critical differentiator. It is empathy that enables leaders to build trust, professionals to understand client needs and organisations to consider the broader human impact of their decisions. In this sense, the rise of AI is not reducing the importance of human skills but rather amplifying it. The businesses that derive the greatest value from AI are likely to be those that combine technological capability with people who can listen, relate, exercise judgement and put human needs at the centre of decision-making and keeping a human in the loop when leveraging AI.

Iain Murdoch, head of legal AI, Mills & Reeve, said:

"AI and other technology initiatives help people work more efficiently, collaborate more effectively and deliver even greater value to clients. As such, firms must ensure staff feel empowered and confident with AI-powered workflows. At Mills & Reeve, we want adopting innovative technology to be a people-first journey as much as a technology initiative. We recognise that the successful integration of AI-powered tools into our firm depends on more than just purchasing the latest software: it requires consistent investment in our teams' skills and confidence."

Regardless of whether optimistic or sceptical, there are practical steps that all businesses should take as they adopt AI:

- Collaborate across teams to take a fresh look at current policies and procedures with today's AI challenges in mind
- Record why decisions are made, ensuring accountability for regulators, customers and stakeholders
- Get into the details of contracts for AI implementation and usage to spot red flags
- Continue to prioritise culture, as great people and their creative thinking are as valuable as ever
- Embed safe AI practices with training
- Treat every element of fast-moving AI, from compliance to accuracy to effectiveness, as a continuous, measured cycle

The risk for businesses is no longer adopting AI too slowly, but adopting it without sufficiently robust governance, transparency and safeguards.

Remember, AI is no longer a differentiator. Depth of AI integration and using AI responsibly and effectively, is what separates high-performing companies from those leaving the true value add on on the table.

In a fast-moving environment, filled with a myriad of reports, data and insight, taking a simple, more practical approach will help guide businesses through AI development, implementation and use, embracing the true potential of AI. One that is more about solving problems that we were unable to in the past or solve them in new ways rather than simply achieving efficiency gains.

There's no doubt that the debate about whether AI is friend or foe is far from over – neither is the AI journey. Technology, legislation, innovation and engagement will all continue to evolve at pace in a complex world where risk and reward will remain inseparable.

Mills & Reeve and HSBC will be co-hosting a fringe event during Birmingham Tech Week on 21 October 2026. RSVP HERE

Fiona Teague is a partner and Patrick McCallum is a principal associate in the national commercial and tech team at Mills & Reeve, both based in Birmingham.

cover story

Winning together

As Birmingham Tech Week brings the city's technology ambitions into focus, Sunny Vara believes the most important conversations concern people, opportunity and trust. CARL JONES meets the award-winning entrepreneur whose international career brought him back to Birmingham with a determination to help others move forward.

A robotic dog is an effective way of getting a conversation started.

On the shiny floor of an upper storey of Millennium Point, the small machine is being put through its paces. It can navigate its surroundings, avoid obstacles and reach places that might be difficult or unsafe for a person to enter.

The possibilities are easy to imagine. An inspection carried out differently, a hazardous task made safer, or perhaps a new way of supporting people at work.

Sunny Vara shares that interest. He is also concerned with the questions that a demonstration cannot answer.

Who controls the machine? Where does the information it collects go? What happens if someone interferes with its software?

"The biggest question with AI isn't what it can achieve," he says. "It's whether we can trust it to do the right thing, with the right data, within the boundaries we've set."

The subject is technology, but Vara's attention keeps returning to people: those making the decisions, those relying on them and those who may be affected without ever understanding how a system works.

It is a thread running through a career that has taken him from Birmingham City University to London and international consultancy, and eventually back to Birmingham to establish Cybercy Group. Only this year he was included in the CIO 100 Awards, so it's been quite a journey.

His ambitions now include bringing more people into that conversation, particularly in the region where he grew up.

His phrase for the approach is "winning together".

It helps explain why a discussion about autonomous machines soon becomes a conversation about local talent, professional relationships and the opportunities available to young people.

Vara grew up in Solihull. He is of Indian heritage, with a Ugandan mother and a Kenyan father, and a family background spanning East Africa.

He is married to Kam and is the proud father of a 13-year-old daughter. Questions about the technology that will shape working life therefore have a significance beyond his professional interests. They also concern the world his daughter's generation will inherit.

His own interest in privacy and security began with personal experience. He was a victim of identity fraud at an early age, an encounter that helped him understand how the misuse of information can affect someone's life.

He has since turned that experience into a business helping individuals, their families and organisations of all sizes around the world.

The experience was a starting point. What followed was a career spent examining how organisations use information, manage risk and decide whom to trust.

Before establishing his own business, Vara spent four years in London working for an established management consultancy. His wider career included work with banks, central and local government, and private-sector organisations, with assignments taking him around the world.

Those experiences introduced him to different organisational cultures, resources and expectations. They also helped him build networks across Europe, the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

In 2017, he brought that accumulated knowledge and experience back to Birmingham and founded Cybercy Group.

The decision gave his international



Shaiz Khan, Sunny Vara and Arun Kalsi with the Cybercy robotic dog

career a local base. The city where he had studied became the place from which he would build a business with a much wider reach.

Today, he supports clients with cybersecurity and AI in the UK and markets including India, Australia, Africa, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and the United States.

That geographical breadth informs his perspective, but the relationships within it matter just as much. Experience of another market can introduce a different approach to a problem. Knowing whom to ask can make it possible to explore an idea, find expertise or avoid repeating somebody else's mistake.

Closer to home, he has built strong connections with other technology leaders in Birmingham. His ambition is to bring that experience and those relationships into useful contact with the region's emerging talent.

There is already a practical expression of that commitment.

Vara has taken on talent from Birmingham's schools, colleges and universities, developing a local academy approach that pairs students and emerging professionals with experienced consultants.

The intention is to connect learning with the realities of professional work. Technical knowledge matters, but so does learning how to ask a useful question, explain a finding and recognise when more evidence is needed.

One example is Arun, who joined from Aston University. His route forms part of a wider effort to give local talent access to experienced people and a clearer understanding of where their abilities could take them.

For Vara, the relationship works in both directions. Those starting out gain guidance and professional context; experienced colleagues encounter fresh questions and perspectives.

"I have benefited from experience and relationships built over many years," he says. "I want to use those connections to help others move forward. If we can bring local talent, experienced leaders and businesses together, there is much more we can achieve."

His Solihull upbringing and Birmingham education give that ambition a personal foundation. He wants young people across the area to have opportunities to build careers with an international reach while retaining a connection to home.

Schools, colleges and universities provide a starting point. Bringing their students into contact with employers and experienced professionals can help turn potential into a practical route into work.

For someone whose own career took him far beyond the region, sharing what he has learned is one way of contributing to its future.

It also reveals something about his approach to leadership. The emphasis is on recognising what different people can contribute and creating opportunities for them to do so.

That matters in a field where no single discipline has all the answers.

Vara's early work centred on privacy and security. Over time, the circumstances in which those disciplines operate have changed considerably.

The pandemic moved work into homes, made cloud platforms essential and blurred the boundaries between personal and corporate technology. AI is now introducing another shift, as tools that help people produce answers become systems capable of taking action.

"AI can make organisations dramatically more efficient," he says. "I'm a huge advocate for it. But speed of adoption cannot be the only measure of success. Businesses need to understand what they are deploying, what data it touches and what happens when it behaves in a way they didn't expect."

An assistant that drafts an email leaves somebody to decide whether it should be sent. Give an agent permission to send the message, update a customer record and initiate another process, and its responsibilities change.

Each permission may appear reasonable when considered separately. Together, they give the technology influence over a relationship that people may have spent years building.

For Vara, this is where cybersecurity becomes part of the business decision about AI.

His work extends beyond assessment and advice. Through Cybercy Group, he also helps organisations implement tailored cybersecurity and AI solutions, connecting the recommendations made to leaders with the systems their people will use.

"AI is going to transform businesses, jobs and industries. That is incredibly exciting. But adoption at scale depends on trust."

That requires understanding how an organisation operates: its existing technology, the information it handles and the people who depend on it. The implementation needs to fit those circumstances, with security and accountability considered alongside the intended business benefit.

An organisation needs to understand what information a system can access, whose authority it operates under and which actions it is allowed to take. It also needs a way to examine its activity and intervene.

"Every permission we give an AI system is a business decision," he says. "If it can read sensitive information, change a record or act on someone's behalf, security has to be part of the design from the beginning."

The change can happen gradually. Someone discovers a useful application. A team finds further uses. What began as a convenience becomes part of the working day, sometimes before anyone has considered the full implications.

For a smaller business, assessing those implications may fall to someone already carrying several responsibilities. A larger organisation may have more specialists but also more suppliers, systems and departments to coordinate.

Both need clarity about what they have authorised and who remains accountable.

For Vara, trusted advice and practical delivery belong together. Understanding the purpose of an implementation, the pressures on the organisation and the limits of the available evidence helps turn an informed decision into a solution that fits the way people work.

"Being trusted means being prepared to have the difficult conversation," he says. "Sometimes that means challenging an assumption or saying we need more evidence. My responsibility is to help a customer make a decision they can stand behind."

There is a practical set of values in that description: honesty about uncertainty, willingness to challenge and accountability for advice.

Those qualities become particularly important when an organisation is enthusiastic about a new tool, under pressure to keep pace with competitors or looking for reassurance about an investment.

Confidence is useful only if it has a sound basis.

His experience includes cybersecurity and AI maturity assessments across central and local government, where the challenge extends beyond identifying technical weaknesses.

Leaders need to understand what the findings mean for the services people depend on, which improvements deserve priority and who should take responsibility for delivering them.

For Vara, an assessment needs to provide a basis for action. Examining security controls, information handling, accountability and readiness for AI establishes the starting position. The next task is to turn those findings into a practical programme of improvement.

Depending on the organisation, that could involve strengthening oversight of suppliers, clarifying access to sensitive information or establishing the conditions under which an AI application can be introduced responsibly.

Cybersecurity and AI maturity need to be considered together. A promising application still depends on sound information management, appropriate permissions and people who understand their responsibilities.

The outcome being sought is a clearer basis for decisions: leaders able to distinguish urgent weaknesses from longer-term priorities, assign ownership and assess whether the organisation is becoming better prepared.

That is how an assessment can help an organisation move from understanding a problem to addressing it. Its value becomes evident in the changes that follow, including how recommendations are implemented and how those changes are sustained.

"The organisations that get this right won't necessarily be the ones that use the most AI," Vara says. "They'll be the ones that can use it confidently because they understand it and remain in control."

He describes the wider challenge as 'The Trust Game'.

The phrase brings the discussion back to what a customer is trying to achieve. Introducing AI is a means to an end: perhaps reducing repetitive work, improving a service or giving people better information on which to act.

Winning means achieving that benefit while maintaining the confidence of the people affected.

"In The Trust Game, the customer wins when AI delivers something useful and the people affected have good reason to trust it," he says. "That might be time back for a team, a better service or a more informed decision. We should be clear about the benefit we are trying to achieve."

That gives the idea a practical test. An organisation should be able to explain the improvement it is seeking, who is responsible and how it will judge whether the change is working.

Security supports that ambition by helping protect the information, access and continuity on which the service depends. The work continues as systems change, new connections are introduced and people discover uses that were not part of the original plan.

The ability to stop, investigate and recover matters alongside performance when everything goes well.

His international experience adds another perspective. Even an organisation operating from a single Birmingham office may depend on technology providers, developers and infrastructure in several countries.

Understanding where information goes and who can access it becomes part of understanding the business itself. A customer's experience of a service may be straightforward even when the arrangements behind it are complex.

Robotics gives those dependencies a physical form.

At Millennium Point, the machine's movements are visible. Its software, permissions and connections are less apparent. As autonomous machines enter workplaces, questions about their operation extend to the people and equipment nearby.

Vara is exploring the security and compliance issues surrounding robotics through his work. As machines acquire greater autonomy, the boundaries around their actions become increasingly important.

"The more autonomy we give technology, the more important trust becomes," he says. "You need to know what it can do, what it can access, what boundaries exist and what happens if somebody compromises it."

His ambition is for Birmingham to help develop the expertise needed to answer such questions, alongside the capability to build and use the technology itself.

That is where his international experience and commitment to local relationships come together. He wants

cover story

the region to be recognised for the quality of its work in secure, responsible AI, with opportunities for local people to contribute to it.

Two initiatives he is working on, Birmingham's AI Foundry and AI Boardroom, reflect that intention.

AI Foundry is envisaged as a place where businesses, technology companies, students and academics can collaborate around practical applications. AI Boardroom is intended to involve decision-makers from professions including finance, law, risk and audit.

Both address a familiar difficulty. The people developing technology, those buying it and those accountable for its consequences do not always begin with the same questions.

A developer wants to understand what can be built. An operational leader needs to know whether it improves the work. A security specialist or lawyer may identify a responsibility that affects how it should be used.

Students and people entering the sector bring their own questions and ideas. Involving them creates opportunities to learn from the work while contributing to it.

For Vara, engaging local talent belongs within the ambition from the outset. A city's technology future depends on people having a route into shaping it.

"Birmingham was one of the key engines of the Industrial Revolution," he says. "We have universities, professional services, advanced manufacturing, financial services, technology businesses and an incredibly diverse talent base. There is no reason we should simply watch the AI revolution happen somewhere else."

The region has established industries with practical problems to solve and people who understand those problems in detail. That gives innovation a useful starting point.

For a manufacturer, an application might concern a particular production process. For a professional-services firm, it might involve handling information more effectively while maintaining a client's confidence.

The measure of initiatives such as AI Foundry and AI Boardroom will be whether they help turn those problems and connections into useful projects, shared learning and lasting expertise.

For Vara, the next generation has a significance closer to home than a workforce forecast. His daughter will enter a world in which many of today's emerging technologies are ordinary parts of life.



"Birmingham was one of the key engines of the Industrial Revolution. We have universities, professional services, advanced manufacturing, financial services, technology businesses and an incredibly diverse talent base. There is no reason we should simply watch the AI revolution happen somewhere else."

Helping young people find opportunities within that world sits alongside his concern that the technology should be used responsibly.

His own journey, from growing up in Solihull and studying in Birmingham to working internationally, shows that a career can take someone far beyond the region while strengthening their desire to contribute to its future.

"AI is going to transform businesses, jobs and industries," he says. "That is incredibly exciting. But adoption at scale depends on trust. I want Cybercy Group to play a part in solving that challenge, and I want Birmingham to be one of the places where the solutions are built."

The robotic dog is a memorable image of what technology can achieve. Vara's account of the future is populated by the people around it: business owners, colleagues, students, fellow technology leaders and families.

An international career has given him experience to draw upon. Birmingham is where he wants to help put more of it to work.

"Winning together" is his phrase. The ambition is to give more people a part in what comes next.

A question of balance

The benefits of AI to businesses are massive, varied and exciting, particularly with the right guardrails in place. But let's keep things in perspective, says Laurence Kiddle, head of the data and technology teams at professional services firm S&W. By HENRY CARPENTER

Half an hour spent with Laurence Kiddle goes by in a flash, especially when he's in full flow on his specialist topic – tech.

And get him on the subject of AI – its strengths, dangers and contexts for optimum use in the workplace – and it's tricky to keep up with him.

But as someone who has spent the last 25 or more years working variously with massive professional services firms such as Deloitte and S&W, where he is now, in industry with software companies, and then helping to scale up smaller businesses, his are words worth hanging on to.

Reassuringly for those of us with nightmares of machine-controlled societies, Kiddle brings the whole subject down to earth and is generally upbeat (with a few caveats) about AI's bewildering progress.

As he says: "The AI apocalypse hasn't happened. Fifty per cent of people haven't lost their jobs. People are basically just getting to grips with how they can use the tools they've got, and with the costs associated with them."

The key point for businesses is that we're still the ones pulling the levers, and here Kiddle offers an analogy for the use of AI.

"When the first aeroplane was delivered to the US military in 1909, it was the most cutting-edge piece of kit in the world at the time," he says.

"However, to get that aeroplane in the air, they needed a hot air balloon, and these had been invented a couple of centuries beforehand. And to get that onto the runway, they had to use a horse, because there was no paved road that an early motor car could use.

"The point is this: yes, AI is super cutting-edge in the same way that the airplane was at its first delivery, but it is surrounded by some fairly old technology.

"A lot of stuff still happens on email, on the phone, and sometimes using Excel sheets set up 20 years ago.



"The success of the overall business depends on getting all of those different things to work effectively together rather than having one super piece of automation that does everything."

We are all aware by now that AI can do extraordinary amounts of heavy lifting for business. But as Kiddle points out, whatever its lustre, AI is not infallible. It has to be used effectively, responsibly and, crucially, in context.

It's a useful tool that's bringing significant productivity gains, and in the future, potentially much more. But Kiddle warns that it could also be a massive distraction from the day job and, at worst, could cause severe problems without the right guardrails and safeguards in place.

So, he advocates a balanced view. AI is not a workplace panacea but a tool to help businesses and must be treated as such.

Taming the robots

Security is ever-present in conversations around AI. Vigilance is a key watchword, Kiddle advises. When installing guardrails, businesses need to think about their use of AI and what it is they are actually safeguarding, he advises – whether it's data, the internet, social media or anything else.

"Having the right cyber security is even more important now than it was a year ago," he says.

In the uncertain, fast-changing environment AI brings, one area of increasing interest is the second-mover advantage: the benefit a company can gain by entering a market after another has acted as the pioneer.

One of the main learnings from second-mover advantage is the importance of avoiding fragmented solutions, according to Kiddle.

"Much money and time have been wasted by businesses that have done some really good things with their tech but haven't necessarily got the right results," he says.

"It's almost like a whack-a-mole approach, where there's an issue over here, another over there, and we'll deal with them individually.

"But if you've got one problem being solved, say, by Google, for instance, in Gemini, and one being solved by something different, you end up with a real patchwork of solutions that don't tend to hang together, and all have different maintenance issues. Ultimately, they are dependent on the individuals who have built them.

"There's also a presupposition that AI is the answer, when perhaps the wiser route might be to begin with the problem, or the opportunity that you've got.

"The solution to that might be AI – but it's not the answer to everything.

"It might well be that returning the emphasis to people, and ensuring you're hiring the right talent for the right roles is the key. Not everything is going to be an AI solution.

"The emphasis is on the people, not the equipment."

What a Birmingham SME can do with AI

NICK HOLZHERR offers some step-by-step practical suggestions to save businesses time, effort and expense



Most business owners I meet in Birmingham have tried AI, got a mediocre answer, and quietly gone back to doing things the old way. Type ‘write me a marketing plan’ into ChatGPT and you get something written for nobody in particular.

It usually takes one or two use cases that feel like magic to change that. Once someone has had that moment, they lean in and start trying the tool on everything else.

Below are the tasks I think get people there fastest, each with a prompt you can copy.

After that, I’ve added some best practice for once you’re using AI regularly. A few items are more technical, and I’ve labelled those ‘advanced’.

Part 1: Six tasks to try today

1 Ask Claude to handle a website you find confusing or tedious

Claude has a Chrome extension that can see the web page you're on and click, type and read on your behalf. It also has the patience to read documentation that (very) few of us do. That means anything you can do in a web browser can now be automated.

Install it, open a website where you can’t work out how to do something (or don’t have the patience to) and **prompt:**

“I’m in [our accounting system]. Go through every invoice more than 30 days overdue, and for each one draft a polite chasing email in Gmail. Don’t send anything – I’ll review them.”

Or “I can’t file a complaint for my parking ticket – too complicated. Do it for me.”

A Birmingham business owner I know had been struggling to set up HubSpot (the CRM software his team uses to manage customers and sales) the way he wanted. He asked Claude in the Chrome extension to do it and it solved everything within an hour.

2 Review the contract you're about to sign

Upload the docx or PDF to GitLaw (git.law), which I built for legal work.

Prompt: "I was sent this contract, review it for me”

It will tell you whether it’s market standard, where the potential issues are, and if you want - it can mark it up with track changes / comments for you to start negotiating. You can also ask it to draft new agreements and help with most other legal tasks.

3 Find your next ten customers and put them in a spreadsheet

Prompt: “I run a [commercial cleaning company] in Birmingham. We do best with [offices of 50 to 200 people in the city centre and Solihull]. Research 100 businesses that fit, and give me a spreadsheet with the company, a named contact, their role and how to reach them.”

It might take 15 minutes. In my experience some of it will be wrong or out of date, but you’ll get a good number worth calling.

4 Prepare for a meeting

Prompt: “I [run an accountancy firm]. I’m about to meet [John Smith from ABC Manufacturing]. What should my objectives be? Any advice to make it a success?”

I’ve been surprised by how useful this is – it coaches me into better outcomes from meetings I’d otherwise have walked into with little preparation. I often run this five minutes before I turn up.

5 Transcribe a meeting and ask how you could have done better

Turn on the recorder in Teams, Zoom or Google Meet, or use Granola or Otter on your phone for in-person meetings. Then paste the transcript and:

Prompt: “What did I commit to, what did they commit to, and what did we leave unresolved? How could I have handled this meeting better?”

6 Ask it to rebuild your website, then read the reasons

You don’t have to ship the result. Go to Lovable (a website builder where you describe what you want in English) or use Claude Code, and:

Prompt: “Here is my website: [your address]. My goals are [more customers]. Rebuild the home page to perform better and list out key changes you made and why.”

Treat it as a free critique from a very fast, slightly overconfident consultant. If you have a simple brochure website you can go further: Lovable will publish the result as a live site, and Claude Code can push changes straight to your existing one.

Part 2: Best practice to meaningfully improve your results

If one or two of the tasks in part 1 worked, you’ll want more. This is where most people plateau.

A (simple): Write your business down

AI doesn't know your business. If you don't tell it, it guesses, and its guesses are generic.

Write concisely: what you sell, to whom, at what price, who you compete with and what you're trying to achieve this year. The more useful context you give it - the better it can do.

For example - if you’re asking AI to write for you - collect some examples of your writing that you want it to follow. If you’re asking it for help with sales - export your customer list with a line of context on each one.

A good test: “if I were onboarding a new employee to do this job, what would I tell them?”.

Then keep it somewhere you can reuse it:

1. A simple text file which you upload with the prompt
2. Put it in a "Project" in ChatGPT or Claude so every conversation starts with it loaded.
3. Best, but more technical: a private GitHub repository with all your context, plus a readme telling the AI where everything sits.

Once you have the first version, I’d recommend asking: “Here's a description of my business. Read it, then tell me what's missing that you'd need to know to help me with [sales, marketing and admin].”

Also, each time you catch it going off course and correct it, ask: “Look back through this conversation, work out what you got wrong and why, and save that to memory so it doesn’t happen again.”

(advanced): Build a folder the AI can read

For most people it’s a list of plain text files on your computer: an about-us, your pricing, your tone of voice, your standard terms, your best proposals, notes on what's worked and what hasn't.

It’s easier to set up if you combine task 1 (Claude in Chrome) with Claude Code in Claude’s desktop app: point it at this article, say “set this up for me”, and it will create the folder and the files with you.

Then use a tool that reads the whole folder before it starts, rather than one that only sees what you paste. This is how we run GitLaw. Everything about how the product works and who it’s for lives as files in a shared repository. Engineers, product and marketing all update it, and the AI reads those files before it writes code, drafts a press release or answers a question about pricing. The output goes from ‘plausible’ to ‘sounds like us’.

You don't need engineers to do this. A folder with five documents and a file called CLAUDE.md that says "read these before you do anything" is a working version.

Prompt: “Read every file in this folder. Then write a proposal for [client] for [job], using our standard pricing and our usual structure. Flag anything where you had to guess.”

B Ask it what you did wrong

The most under-used prompt there is. After any piece of work, or at the end of a week of using it:

Prompt: “Look back over how I've worked with you in this conversation. Where did I give you too little information, ask for the wrong thing, or accept an answer I should have pushed on? Be blunt. Then tell me the three things I should do differently next time.” By iterating on prompts this way you’ll get to a system that “just works” for you.

C Control your computer on the go

Claude Code runs on your desktop and in the Claude app on your phone, and the same session carries across both. You can control your computer on the desk from your phone so that all the processing and storage happens on your main machine – but you steer it while you’re on the move. It keeps going while you’re not looking, and it can run several jobs at once.

Prompt: “Go through the supplier quotes in this folder, build a comparison table, and flag anything where the price per unit has gone up more than 10% since last year.”

The mental shift is from “a chat window I type into” to “a colleague I can hand work to”. Once that clicks, the amount you can get done in a week changes.

D Understand the context window

Every AI conversation has a memory limit, called the context window. Everything you paste, every reply, every file counts against it. When it fills up, the AI starts forgetting the beginning, and answers get vaguer and less accurate. That’s the point where people say “it’s got worse” and give up.

Two habits fix it.

1. Basic: Start a fresh conversation for each new task rather than one endless thread. And when a conversation has been going a while, ask it to summarise before you carry on. Prompt: “Summarise everything we’ve decided so far in this conversation in bullet points, so I can paste it into a new chat and continue from there.”
2. Advanced: Watch how much of the context window you’ve used. In Claude Code, type /context and it shows you a breakdown. Once you’re past about half, type /compact and it will summarise the conversation so far and carry on from the summary. Don’t leave it: past about 50% the quality of what comes back drops noticeably.

The one thing I’d take from this

AI output is only ever as good as what you give it. A one-page description of your business, kept up to date, is worth more than any prompt you’ll ever write. Start there.

**Nick Holzherr has been building technology businesses for 20 years and AI products since 2013, when he founded Whisk.com, later sold to Samsung. He was a finalist on BBC’s The Apprentice in 2012, he holds an honorary doctorate from Aston University in Birmingham and lives in Edgbaston with his wife Priyanka and their two children.*

THE CYBER CONFIDENCE GAP

Are UK SMEs as resilient as they think?



resilience

New research reveals a cyber confidence gap

The latest NFP Business Resilience Report explores how prepared UK SMEs are to face an increasingly uncertain and interconnected risk environment. The research surveyed 250 UK senior decision-makers with responsibility for areas including business continuity, commercial risk, cyber, digital operations, supply chains, people strategy and financial resilience. It examines six connected areas of risk: cyberattacks and data breaches, supply-chain disruption, economic pressures, regulatory change, talent shortages and workplace safety.

Its findings reveal considerable confidence. Some 92% of decision-makers believe their organisation could maintain operations during a major disruption, such as a cyberattack or supply-chain failure. That is encouraging. However, the figures also raise an important question: how much of that confidence has been tested against what would actually happen if critical systems, data or suppliers suddenly became unavailable?

The distinction matters because confidence and resilience are not the same. Resilience is demonstrated through the ability to absorb disruption, continue critical operations and recover effectively. Nor can it be assessed within one company's walls. SMEs depend on networks of technology platforms, service providers, customers and suppliers. A weakness anywhere in that network can quickly become a problem for every connected business.

Confidence is high – but is it backed by evidence?

There are good reasons why SMEs may feel confident. Many have invested in



By JOHN ALLEN, senior account executive at NFP (an Aon Company)

security software, cloud systems, external IT support, backups or cyber insurance. Each can make an important contribution to protecting the organisation. But having controls in place does not necessarily prove that the business could continue operating through a serious incident.

Only 47% of respondents to NFP's research say they are **very prepared** to manage a cyberattack or data breach. The gap between this figure and the 92% who are broadly confident about maintaining operations does not mean SMEs are unprepared. It does, however, suggest confidence may be more widespread than deep, tested capability.

A business can have a written incident-response plan without knowing whether it works under pressure. It can back up data without regularly testing whether that data can be restored. It can outsource cyber security without clearly defining who will make operational decisions, contact customers or coordinate recovery if an attack succeeds.

Evidence-based resilience asks harder questions. Has the response plan been exercised using a realistic scenario? Can essential services continue without the main systems? How long would recovery take? Which employees hold critical knowledge? Who has authority to make urgent decisions? And are communications prepared for employees, customers, suppliers, regulators and insurers?

Cyber security aims to prevent and contain attacks. Cyber resilience goes further: it determines whether the organisation can keep moving when those protections are breached.

Are SMEs giving cyber threats enough weight?

The report highlights another point of tension. Although 77% of respondents regard cyberattacks and data breaches as at least a moderate risk, only 31% classify them as a **significant risk** over the next 12–24 months.

That assessment sits uneasily alongside the external threat environment described in the report. UK Government research found that 43% of UK businesses experienced a cyber security breach or attack during the preceding 12 months - equivalent to around 600,000 organisations. Separate research commissioned by the Government estimated the average cost of a significant cyberattack at around £195,000 for an affected UK business.

For an SME, the impact can extend beyond restoring systems. An attack can interrupt sales, delay payments, expose information and damage customer confidence. Smaller organisations may also have fewer specialists, less operational redundancy and greater dependence on individual systems or employees.

Cyber risk can be underestimated for understandable reasons. Leaders may believe attackers mainly target larger organisations, or assume that outsourced IT means responsibility has been transferred. Previous incidents may have caused little visible damage, while technical language can make it difficult to translate cyber threats into operational and financial consequences.

But avoiding a major incident so far is not evidence that a business could withstand one tomorrow. Resilience comes from understanding the potential disruption and preparing for it before it happens.

Cyber resilience does not stop at the company boundary

No SME operates in isolation. Its ability to function may depend on cloud and software providers, managed IT partners, payment and payroll platforms, logistics firms, manufacturers, professional advisers and customers with shared systems or data.

This creates two-way exposure. A business can have strong internal controls and still lose access to critical services because a supplier has been attacked. Equally, an SME with access to a customer's systems or information can become the route through which an attacker reaches other organisations. Cyber disruption can move through a supply chain just as quickly as data and services do.

The report's wider findings reinforce this concern: only 38% of respondents say they are very prepared to manage supply-chain disruption. Cyber and supply-chain resilience therefore cannot be treated as separate exercises. A technology outage at a supplier can become an operational crisis for its customers, while one compromised account can affect multiple connected organisations.

The right question is no longer simply, "How secure are we?" Leaders must also ask: "How resilient are the organisations and systems we depend on - and those that depend on us?"

How SMEs can turn confidence into capability

Closing the confidence gap does not require perfect protection or layers of unnecessary complexity. It requires a clear, tested understanding of how the business would respond, continue operating and recover.

1. **Identify what the business cannot operate without**
   Map the systems, information, suppliers, services and people needed to maintain the organisation's most important activities. This creates a practical basis for prioritising investment and planning recovery.
2. **Test realistic cyber scenarios**
   Exercises should assume that an attack has succeeded or a critical provider is unavailable. Leaders can then test decision-making, manual workarounds, communications and recovery rather than focusing only on prevention.
3. **Map critical third-party dependencies**
   Understand what each important provider supports, what data or system access it holds and what would happen if its service stopped. Look beyond direct suppliers to the platforms and subcontractors on which they depend.
4. **Challenge supplier assumptions**
   Ask critical providers about security standards, incident notification, backups, recovery times and their own supply-chain dependencies. Contracts should make responsibilities and communication expectations clear before an incident occurs.
5. **Build alternatives where practical**
   Document manual processes, alternative contacts and contingency providers. Not every dependency can be duplicated, but knowing the options in advance can reduce delay when rapid decisions are needed.
6. **Make resilience a leadership responsibility**
   Cyber disruption affects operations, finance, people and customers. Planning should involve leaders from across the business, not only IT. Insurance should also be reviewed so decision-makers understand the cover, its limitations and the insurer's requirements after an incident.

Resilience is shared

The NFP research does not show that UK SMEs lack cyber resilience. It indicates that broad confidence is considerably more common than strong preparedness, and that cyber threats may not always receive the weight their potential impact deserves.

Confidence is an important starting point, but it should be challenged with evidence. Organisations need to test how people, processes and technology perform when disruption is real – not assume that controls will work as intended. They must also look beyond their own operations. The ability to withstand a cyber incident depends on internal plans, but also on the resilience of the suppliers, platforms and partners around the business.

Tested resilience - across the organisation and throughout its supply chain - is what keeps an SME moving when cyber disruption becomes reality.

Get the full report

You can now request your copy of the NFP Business Resilience Report 2027, being released on November 11th. As well as cyber risk insights, it will include our complete findings across supply chains, economic pressures, regulation, talent and workplace safety. Scan the QR code to secure your copy.



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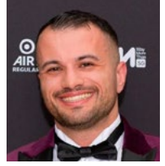


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By ANDY HORKAN, CEO, Cyber Tzar

A cluster fit for purpose

Building the cyber economy our industrial region needs

The West Midlands does not need another organisation that brings people together to talk about cyber. It needs a cluster that changes what happens next.

There is no shortage of organisations, networks, programmes and initiatives across the region. Many do valuable work within the remits they were created to serve. But having plenty of activity is not the same as having a functioning cyber economy. The challenge now is connecting the capability we already have to customers, procurement, investment and growth.

The evidence is compelling. The Cyber in the West Midlands strategic review mapped 147 cyber organisations across the region. Of those, 92 were micro-businesses, the median organisation had just three people, and only five were recorded as having external equity investment. That tells us something important: the West Midlands does not have a cyber capability problem. It has a progression problem.

A region containing that many small cyber businesses does not need more awareness days. It needs routes into customers and contracts. It needs to help talented practitioners build sustainable companies and help those companies scale. Students need routes into employment, employees into entrepreneurship, founders into customers and growing businesses into investment. The regional ecosystem is comparatively good at helping people enter cyber; the harder problem is helping them progress.

That matters because the West Midlands has an opportunity to build something genuinely distinctive. Cheltenham has developed around national security and intelligence. London has financial services and major corporate headquarters. Greater Manchester has significant enterprise technology and digital capability. We should not try to reproduce any of them.

Our opportunity comes from the economy we actually have: advanced manufacturing, automotive, aerospace, engineering, rail, logistics, defence-related industry, and the supply chains around them. Cyber runs through the rest of the regional economy too, but our industrial base gives the West Midlands an opportunity to build something genuinely distinctive.

For manufacturers, cyber resilience increasingly means protecting operational technology as well as traditional IT. When those systems fail, the consequences can become physical very quickly. Production stops. Logistics are interrupted. Suppliers disconnect. Deliveries are delayed. Cyber resilience is therefore becoming part of industrial competitiveness itself, not simply an IT concern.

The regulatory environment is moving in the same direction. The Cyber Security and Resilience Bill has completed committee stage in the House of Lords and continues its passage through Parliament. It will reform the UK's cyber resilience regime, including provisions affecting managed service providers, data centres and critical supply chains. Not every West Midlands company will be directly regulated, but larger customers increasingly need confidence in the organisations, technologies and services on which they depend. Cyber assurance is becoming commercial assurance.

That combination of regional capability, industrial demand and changing customer expectations is why we are building the West Midlands Cyber Cluster.

It is being built for the community, by the community: practitioner-led, commercially focused and delivery-driven. It is not there to replace organisations that already work. Where something works, the Cluster should connect to it. Where something is missing, it should build it. Where good cyber companies cannot reach customers, procurement or investment, it should help remove those barriers.

Buyer access and progression are therefore central. The West Midlands has enormous cyber demand on its doorstep, yet regional cyber-SMEs can still struggle to reach major buyers. Closing that gap creates benefits on both sides: industrial organisations gain access to capable suppliers and innovation, while cyber companies gain the commercial validation and recurring customers they need to grow.

We also need to broaden the people entering and progressing through the sector. That means better pathways for students, career changers and people leaving the Armed Forces, but also a much greater focus on women in cyber and neurodiverse talent. The cyber workforce of the future should draw on the full range of people and perspectives available in the West Midlands.

The West Midlands Cyber Hub has already demonstrated what happens when that community has somewhere to come together, supporting businesses, practitioners and emerging talent. In its first ten months, it helped more than 30 students towards placements or roles. The Hub is now expanding into a larger home in central Birmingham as the next stage develops.

But the Hub and Cluster have different jobs. The Hub is the front door. The Cluster is the economic layer around it. The Hub gives the cyber community a home; the Cluster is how we turn that community into a market.

Ultimately, success will not be measured by meetings, initiatives or logos. It will be measured by West Midlands businesses winning contracts, SMEs becoming scale-ups, investment reaching promising companies, talented people building careers here and industrial organisations finding the cyber capability they need.

The capability exists. The demand exists. The community exists. Now we need to connect them.

The West Midlands helped build industrial Britain. Now we have an opportunity to help secure it.

Andy Horkan is CEO of Cyber Tzar and leads the West Midlands Cyber Hub.

Birmingham TECH WEEK IS BACK!

The UK's largest regional tech festival returns to the region from October 19-23, with delegates from all over the country attending more than 35 events over the five days.

Run by TechWM, it brings together start-ups, established businesses, investors, universities, developers, policymakers and people interested in technology.

By way of a preview, Birmingham Business hears from some of those taking part this year, offering their expertise over a wide range of topics.



Before adopting new technology, West Midlands engineers need to ask why

By BEN WHITMARSH, co-founder of DevOps Society

There is no shortage of new technology for engineers to explore. AI, cloud platforms, automation and security tools all promise to help teams work faster or solve problems differently. The harder question is which of them will actually help.

Through my work in tech recruitment, I hear from engineers about the pressure to keep up with everything that is changing. Companies want to move quickly, but the teams expected to make that happen are often working with legacy systems, poor documentation and limited time. In those circumstances, adding another tool can make a difficult job harder.

The engineers who stand out are the ones willing to ask what a business is trying to achieve before recommending a solution. Do we need this technology? How will it work with what is already there? Who will maintain it? Those questions matter if an idea is going to become a system that people can rely on.

I see a similar distinction when looking at CVs. Many candidates list dozens of tools, but employers want to know what they have done with them. They want to hear whether a candidate has successfully automated a manual task, found the cause of a failure or helped a team make a sound technical decision. Being able to explain why something worked is more useful than simply listing the tools you work with.

AI makes that judgement more important. It can help generate code or infrastructure quickly, but engineers still need to check that the result solves the problem, that it's secure and will hold up when something goes wrong. Speed is valuable only if the team understands what it is putting into use.

Engineers can learn a great deal from documentation and courses, but there is particular value in hearing from someone who has tried an approach in practice. A conversation about what went wrong can save another team weeks of work. Meetups should give people room to test ideas together, while also allowing them to share their experiences.

The West Midlands has talented engineers, strong universities and major employers, yet people outside the region do not always recognise the strength of its tech community. What I notice most is how readily people give their time to one another. That openness helps engineers build the relationships and judgement they need when new technology meets the realities of an existing business.

The Engineering & Developer Conference is taking place at the ICC on Friday October 23.

Building the next generation of West Midlands digital talent



As technology reshapes the workplace, young people face fewer traditional entry-level opportunities, intense competition and uncertainty over what tomorrow's jobs will look like.

We spoke to Htet Yan Linn, a data science student at Aston University and associate of the Aston-Capgemini Centre of Excellence for Enterprise AI, and Janhavi Sawant (pictured), an international trade student at the University of Warwick and innovation fellow at Warwick Innovation District, about how the next generation can prepare.

Entry-level roles and work experience opportunities are becoming harder to find. How can young people gain the practical experience they need?

Janhavi: Experience does not have to come solely from a traditional job. University societies, hackathons, networking events and side projects can all help you build practical skills. AI has also made it much easier to experiment, create projects and teach yourself new things. Start-ups can be particularly useful because you are often exposed to different parts of the business rather than one narrow role. Internships and apprenticeships are valuable too.

Htet: I agree that exposure is key. You can learn a lot online, but there is no substitute for speaking to people and seeing how workplaces operate first-hand. That first step from school or university into a professional environment can feel daunting. But that is why insight days and networking opportunities are worth taking. Put yourself forward and get as much experience of those environments as you can.

How should we prepare young people for jobs that may not yet exist?

Htet: Learning how to learn is becoming one of the most important skills you can have. There is an enormous amount of information available, but you still need to work out what you want to learn and how to get there.

Janhavi: Rather than trying to predict exactly which jobs will exist, I think the focus should be on skills that transfer from one role to another. We have already seen new jobs emerge around AI, but they still rely on things like critical thinking and problem-solving.

Htet: People skills matter too. Being able to communicate, build relationships and work well with others is useful in any career.

How can young people build resilience in such a competitive, AI-driven job market?

Janhavi: AI is already part of working life, so it makes sense to learn how to use it well. I see it as an assistant: let it take care of tasks it can do quickly, while you concentrate on the work that needs human judgement and attention. We shouldn't be avoiding AI, we just need to get better at using it.

Htet: The job market has become a resilience game. There may be more applicants chasing fewer opportunities, but you have to keep improving and stay confident in what you can offer. Keep building your skills, keep putting yourself forward and do not let rejection stop you.

Future Leaders: Shaping Our Digital Future takes place at The REP Theatre on Monday October 19.



The strongest technology ecosystems are grown, not assembled

By KATHARINE FULLER (COO, Birmingham Tech Week)

Global technology hubs are not created because someone declares them. Talent, capital, research and infrastructure matter, but they are only the starting point. If those are the natural assets of an ecosystem, what matters next is how they are nurtured: the trust, relationships and shared behaviours that allow knowledge, investment and opportunity to move between them.

That matters particularly in technology, where ideas, IP, talent and capital are highly mobile, and where the speed at which they connect can determine whether innovation stays local or scales elsewhere.

Take the Basque Country as an example. Its innovation economy has grown over decades from existing industrial strengths, specialist institutions and close working relationships between business and government. It was not built by copying another region's model. It developed around the character and capabilities of the place itself.

That matters in Birmingham, a city whose identity was forged in the Industrial Revolution and whose economy has long depended on networks of specialist firms contributing different parts of the process. Technology now creates a new version of that interdependence. AI, data, software and digital capability increasingly cut across advanced manufacturing, health, professional services and the creative industries. The opportunity is not simply to grow a tech sector, but to connect technology into the wider economy.

We are good at counting the assets in a technology ecosystem: start-ups, patents, university research, accelerators and investment. The harder question is whether those assets connect. Can research become IP, IP become a company, a founder find specialist capital, an SME access technical capability, or a local business reach its first international customer?

There is an institutional question here too. Do the ways we fund and measure organisations encourage them to open doors for others, or to focus primarily on what they can own, control and attribute to themselves? There is a difference between institutional outputs and ecosystem outcomes. A mature ecosystem recognises the value organisations create through what they enable, not simply what they deliver themselves.

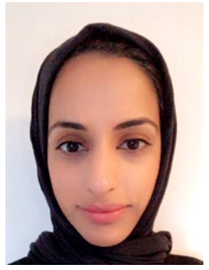
The West Midlands has areas of real strength. At this year's UK Global R&D and Science Investment Summit, the region was presented to international investors as a serious proposition in deep tech, life sciences and advanced manufacturing commercialisation. Those strengths give Birmingham something credible to build from, but their value depends on how widely opportunity circulates through the ecosystem.

International links widen those networks further. In June, the first Beijing–Birmingham Tech Week brought together more than 150 representatives from government, technology companies and investment organisations. The value of that kind of activity lies in what follows: customers, capital, talent, partnerships, knowledge and new markets.

Devolution creates an opportunity to think differently about this too. Its success should not simply be measured by how much power moves from the centre to the region, but by how much agency that creates within the region. The strongest ecosystems distribute leadership, allowing founders, investors, universities, businesses and public bodies to contribute where they are best placed to do so.

Assets get a region onto the technology map. What turns those assets into a genuine ecosystem is what happens between them: trust, introductions, shared knowledge and opportunity. The strongest technology ecosystems do more than produce successful companies. They create the conditions in which success feeds back into the system through experience, investment, customers, connections and talent, making the next success more likely.

The Global Village is taking place at The Exchange Assembly Rooms on Wednesday October 21.



A call for stronger AI governance

By AFSHAN SHEIKH, cyber practice director at Cyber Chain Alliance

For all its potential to transform productivity, innovation and decision making, artificial intelligence is creating a new challenge for organisations. The issue is no longer simply whether businesses can adopt AI. It is whether they can govern it effectively with a variety of products and software on the market.

Much of the conversation around AI focuses on cyber threats. However, focusing solely on the threat landscape risks overlooking a more fundamental challenge. As organisations accelerate their use of AI, they are introducing new risks, responsibilities and accountability requirements that extend far beyond traditional cyber security.

For many organisations, particularly SMEs, AI adoption is driven by clear business benefits. Greater efficiency, improved customer experience, enhanced decision making and operational savings are all compelling incentives. Yet these benefits can only be realised sustainably when governance develops alongside deployment.

Without adequate oversight, businesses risk creating blind spots around data usage, accountability, model outputs and regulatory compliance. The challenge is not purely technological. It is organisational.

Questions that were once confined to technology teams are increasingly becoming matters for boards and senior leadership teams. Who is accountable for AI decisions? How are risks assessed and monitored? What safeguards exist to ensure fairness, transparency and responsible use? Perhaps most importantly, can the organisation demonstrate that appropriate governance is in place if challenged by customers, regulators or stakeholders?

Trust is rapidly becoming one of the defining business issues of AI. As AI-generated content becomes more convincing and organisations increasingly incorporate it into products, services and client work, businesses must work harder to demonstrate authenticity, integrity and accountability. The ability to govern AI effectively may soon become as important as the ability to deploy it.

This is where structured governance frameworks become increasingly valuable. Standards such as ISO/IEC 42001, the world's first international standard for AI management systems, provide organisations with a recognised framework for managing AI risks, defining accountability and embedding responsible AI practices. Rather than seeing governance as a barrier to innovation, organisations should view it as an enabler that provides the confidence to adopt AI while maintaining trust, control and oversight.

The organisations gaining the greatest value from AI are not necessarily those moving the fastest. More often, they are investing in governance, assurance and oversight alongside innovation. By establishing clear frameworks, defined responsibilities and measurable controls, they are creating the conditions for sustainable adoption rather than reacting to issues after they emerge.

The truth is that no organisation can claim to be a complete expert in AI. The technology is evolving at an unprecedented rate, and governance, regulation and assurance frameworks are continually adapting to keep up. As AI capabilities develop, we are likely to see additional guardrails, standards and oversight designed to encourage responsible use.

Technology providers will also have a critical role in ensuring cyber security measures are built into AI platforms and services from the outset. Recent examples of unintended data exposure and unexpected AI behaviours have showcased the importance of strong security, accountability and oversight across the entire AI ecosystem.

For boards and leadership, lasting value will come not from adopting AI the fastest, but from demonstrating that it is being used responsibly, securely and with appropriate governance. Effective AI governance may become one of the defining characteristics of resilient and trusted organisations in the years ahead.

CyberVerse is taking place at Eastside Rooms on Tuesday October 20.

BTW

What it takes to scale with AI



For many businesses, the challenge with AI is no longer whether to experiment with it, but how to turn that experimentation into measurable commercial value.

Max Swinbourne, CEO of 4T2 Sensors, a West Midlands-based industrial tech company specialising in real-time fluid analysis, explains how his business has moved from ad hoc AI use to a structured development process, while cutting development times and costs.

What problem were you trying to solve when you first introduced AI into the business?

The main challenge was reducing the development time for an extremely complex product.

We mapped out the conventional development cycle, looking at the time, cost and human effort involved, then identified where AI could make the process more efficient.

Historically, it could take around three years to develop a product. We now have an AI-supported process that can reduce comparable development work to around four months.

What did it take to move from experimentation to commercial use?

The biggest issue was the lack of internal process. People were already using AI, but in an unstructured way.

We needed a clear development process that defined where AI was useful and where it was not. With AI-assisted design, there is a risk of relying on outputs that have not been properly peer-reviewed or independently validated.

It took around six months of focused work to establish that process, and we are still optimising it.

When did you know AI was delivering measurable commercial value?

The clearest signs were better design validation, lower costs and greater confidence in the finished product.

We have applied principles from aerospace, where digital twins are used to test designs before physical deployment. That has significantly reduced testing and validation times.

In some areas, we estimate AI has contributed to a ten to fifteen-fold reduction in development costs through lower labour requirements, faster research and more efficient testing.

We still use physical laboratory testing, but AI allows us to test simulated conditions that wouldn't be practical in the lab.

Where have you encountered the biggest limitations?

One of the biggest issues is customer trust in AI-derived data.

Our customers want confidence that results can be traced back to original sensor data. Our approach is therefore to provide that source data as the primary result, with AI used as an optional layer of interpretation.

Just because AI can add another layer does not mean customers necessarily want or trust it.

What does the West Midlands need to scale AI successfully?

There is a major opportunity to use AI to reduce time to market and improve cost efficiency, particularly for start-ups and scale-ups.

But AI should enhance existing skills rather than replace them. In our sector, that means continuing to invest in science, mathematics and engineering through schools, colleges, universities and workplace internships, with AI used as an accelerator rather than a substitute for expertise.

The AI Symposium takes place at the ICC on Wednesday October 21. The Scale Up Summit takes place at The Studio on Thursday October 22.

Success story with a conscience

School of Coding & AI has not only equipped thousands of students with career-defining digital skills, but it is also on an extraordinary growth trajectory destined to see it multiply many times over in size over the next few years. But the numbers only tell part of the story, as HENRY CARPENTER discovers when he meets its founder.

Before we delve deeply into the remarkable story behind School of Coding & AI, let's look at some current facts and figures.

SoC, as it is usually abbreviated, is the largest computer science and coding school in the UK, seeing tens of thousands of students passing through the doors of its various campuses and online programmes.

It enjoys strong partnerships with three universities and is reporting annual revenues touching multi-million-pound revenues. It has set up two offices in India, opened a £2.5 million state-of-the-art tech lab in Birmingham, redeveloped its Wolverhampton headquarters, and launched a new international campus in Dubai.

In November this year it is launching a new facility in Telford, Shropshire, and has its eyes set on opening several more in deprived areas across the country over the next few years. Currently employing 300, it is expecting to grow its workforce to 1,000 employees within the next five years as it continues its expansion in the UK and overseas.

I am told all of this – and a great deal more – by School of Coding & AI's founder and CEO Manny Athwal, a mild-mannered entrepreneur who, as we'll discover, has instilled what he learned through his humble origins and challenging life experiences into the ethos by which SoC operates.

We are sitting in a meeting room just a hundred yards or so from the school's Birmingham campus – Livery Place, on Livery Street in Birmingham's city centre.

"We used to have 4,500 sq ft at Livery Place but we outgrew that and took on all seven floors," says Athwal. "We are also taking another building in Birmingham city centre which will give us 120,000 sq ft in Birmingham."

It's obvious that this is some operation – certainly one of the most effective and respected coding and AI schools in this or any other region – offering tailored learning pathways and hands-on digital skills training. It's no stretch to say it has gone some way to address the UK's widening skills gap in technology, and been a key contributor to the region's digital economy. It comes as absolutely no surprise to hear that Athwal himself was recently named Education Leader of the Year at the West Midlands Leadership Awards.

All of this is a far cry from Athwal's situation no more than a decade ago. The transformation in fortunes from where he was then is one of the region's more remarkable success stories.

Back in 2016 he was at the lowest possible depth of what was a heck of a rollercoaster of a ride in anyone's eyes.

"I was a trained lawyer and worked for a hedge fund in New York," he recalls. "When I came back to London I lost my job working



Manny Athwal, founder and CEO of School of Coding & AI



The launch of the partnership with Harper Adams

in the City, and so came back to my home town of Wolverhampton to find work in financial services.

"But there was nothing. After a few months my money ran out, and I was down to my last £17.25 in the bank. My wife was pregnant with our first child and I had to take any job just to put food on the table.

"I found work picking up vans from one supermarket and dropping them off another for £50 a day."

He reached his lowest ebb when he was marooned at Shrewsbury Station at 5am without the ticket promised by the company he was working for, and unable to afford his train fare home.

He boarded a morning train, hiding in the toilet to avoid his ticket being checked, and it was during the long walk home from Wolverhampton Station that he decided that he needed to make a change and take control of his life by working for himself.

He takes up the story. "I went to my in-laws' house where there was a retired teacher tutoring to my niece and nephew in coding, and I asked him a question. Do you make money out of this? He said it was a hobby for him but surely there was a demand for it.

"On the way home, I picked up some books from the library on coding, and I locked myself away for a month. I fell behind with the mortgage and had to borrow money from my in-laws to buy food.

"I wrote the first curriculum for primary school kids on how to learn to code, and I learnt to code myself so I was able to teach them. I got some flyers printed at the library, put them through letter boxes in my local area, and then got a couple of customers to

"There is no barrier to age – we have people in their mid-50s on programmes so they have the skills to compete with the younger generations."



Presiding over the largest computer science and coding in the UK

teach kids coding for £20 an hour."

Trade slowly picked up, but it was given a real boost when Athwal saw the value of approaching tuition centres – places which, at the time taught the likes of maths, English and sciences, but not coding.

Suddenly the numbers swelled to about 50 children, but the real break came when he did a deal with a local primary school whereby for every child that did an after-school club with him, he would charge £6.50 and the school would get £3.

"We did a trial and immediately picked up 20 children. We quickly went from one evening a week to five evenings, but I realised that if I wanted to grow then I needed to get some staff on board.

"I hired final-year computer science

“We never see it as a business, but a platform, a platform to improve ourselves. Values of our staff are key and they must align with the SoC’s values: we want to make sure that people are always inspired by the work that we do, and also that the staff believe in what they are doing.”

students from University of Wolverhampton to become tutors and I gave them the syllabus to teach. Soon, at around 2018, we had built the largest after-school coding provision in the country, teaching 600 kids per week.”

Athwal decided to set up School of Coding (the AI came later), and one of his first missions was to improve what he believed was a pretty poor standard of computer science teaching in schools, with GCSE students in particular being failed.

“We put a proposal to a couple of schools and said we would do teacher training. We had a massive impact on the local school market.

“We also signed a contract with Shropshire Council to deliver digital skills programmes to those who are out of work. The deal was that we would train up 800 people who would then try to get an apprenticeship or a job. We got 600 people back into work as a result, and that made national news.

“At around the same time we put together a curriculum for GCSE and A-level students which we took into Europe. We contacted the British Council UK and the European Council in Brussels because they funded research projects on improving education across Europe. Consequently, we set up a research arm of the business.

“We applied to Ofsted to get a licence for an independent school with a focus on children with special educational needs, but we were also doing a lot of adult education.”

In just three short years from starting in a pit of despair, Athwal had created an enterprise which was doing meaningful, relatively lucrative work with a turnover of £400,000.



Winner of the 2025 LDC Top 50 Trailblazer Award



Athwal’s focus is on providing top-quality education for all SoC students

Then the Covid pandemic arrived, and all after-school provision was wiped out. However, Athwal took a decision which came to prove that nice guys can finish in first place.

“I decided that we would carry on delivering our coding classes to kids online for free. Parents who had paid us in the past needed our help. This made national and international news – and I even received a letter of congratulations from Her Majesty the Queen.

“Suddenly we had kids during the pandemic who were learning to code from us in France, Germany, Saudi Arabia and so on.

“We were teaching about 800 children every week and when the pandemic was over about 40 per cent of parents said they wanted to carry on and were happy to pay. So we picked up about 400 kids on a subscription model and we also had local authorities who respected our intervention for digital skills for adults and gave us further contracts.

“It was at this time that we really dug deep into technology and how technology can assist education, and as a result we changed our name to School of Coding & AI.”

The next pivotal move was partnering with universities to deliver computer science and other degree programmes. This really stemmed from Athwal’s instinct to help those who would not only struggle to get into university, but wouldn’t want to be there in the first place – people who, often through no fault of their own, were finding it hard to improve their lives through learning.

It worked brilliantly, first at Wolverhampton University who were staggered by the uptake; some 2,000 people applied to the programme and SoC were able to take 800 undergraduates in one go. New degree programmes were introduced, and the team introduced AI into traditional courses to make them much more fit for the modern world. It also opened its doors at weekends, allowing workers to carry out their degrees on Saturdays and Sundays when all public universities are closed.

It wasn’t long before Harper Adams and then Brighton University – both similarly impressed – also became partners.

Business, as mentioned at the top of this piece, has boomed. Athwal seems to have discovered a knack of making the right choices at the right time. However, he is quick to impress on his team the importance of never losing sight of SoC’s core identity.

“We never see it as a business, but a platform, a platform to improve ourselves. Values of our staff are key and they must align with the SoC’s values: we want to make sure that people are always inspired by the work that we do, and also that the staff believe in what they are doing. Titles here carry responsibilities, and our staff must never forget that.

“We also have a pledge. We give one per cent of our revenue – not profit – to our foundation, which then goes into communities and helps people out of poverty and onto the path of education.”

The plans for Athwal are relatively straightforward – to keep growing providing quality for students. The aim is to open more schools for children with special education needs, create more pathway programmes, and open campuses in areas where there’s a concentration of adults out of work.

“There are a lot of deprived areas in our country where we need to go focus to provide higher education, give people that right degree and set of skills, and we’re doing that in partnership with employers,” he says.

“There is no barrier to age – we have people in their mid-50s on programmes so they have the skills to compete with the younger generations.”

This is a success story with a very strong and clear conscience – all of which comes from its founder’s background.

“This is the DNA that comes from my childhood,” he says. “I lost my father when I was eight years old and we lived through real poverty.

“We know the value of education because education has given us everything.”



By MATT CROKER, M&A partner, Heligan Group

Attracting and retaining people is the challenge

Insight into the next generation of young talent within the defence technology sector

The West Midlands is known for its industrial heritage and rightly so. However, more can be done to raise the profile of the fast-growing technology companies in the region who have some incredible capabilities.

The single biggest factor holding these businesses back is not accessibility to capital (although this is partly an issue for very early-stage companies) but the ongoing challenge of channelling talent into tech companies in this region.

The ambition is here, the capability is here and the capital is increasing. The missing connection between all these factors is the young, skilled talent that’s needed to make the most of this opportunity and, more importantly, keep school leavers and university graduates within the region.

Defence and national security

Nowhere is the need for acquiring young talent felt more sharply than in defence and national security. Over the past couple of years, it has quietly become one of the most active parts of the regional economy.

A long period of underinvestment is being reversed, budgets are rising and there is a clear push to rebuild supply chains closer to home. All of this feeds into order books and into demand for exactly the kind of companies the West Midlands is good at producing.

It also helps to be clear about what modern defence looks like. When people hear the word ‘defence’ they tend to picture the big primes and the platforms they build. But a growing share of the value now sits with smaller technology firms working in software, cyber, data, sensing and communications, much of it dual-use and serving commercial customers just as readily as military ones.

Several of the region's most promising businesses sit in this space. What they are short on is engineers, developers and analysts, frequently security-cleared and almost always hard to find (and retain).

A region beginning to join up

The launch in May of the West Midlands Regional Defence and Security Cluster is one of the most important things to happen in the local ecosystem in years.

Its job is to line up the region's defence capabilities with national demand, help businesses of every size innovate and grow and bring industry, universities and the public sector around a common agenda. The focus is on technology just as much as ‘product’.

Working alongside it, the West Midlands Cyber Cluster is doing fantastic work of its own. It is practitioner-led and now covers roughly 150 cyber organisations across the region. It has put talent development at its heart, through university partnerships, placements and skills initiatives, as it builds the case for the West Midlands as the UK's home for applied industrial cyber resilience and supply-chain security.

Focus must continue to be on closing the gap

It is easy to underestimate the scale of the skills challenge.

Earlier this year, we welcomed the Government's £80 million investment in defence and technology skills which included £50 million to fund around 2,500 additional university places in engineering and computer science and £30 million for teaching facilities.

That momentum continued in September this year, when the Defence Secretary and industry leaders signed a significant agreement between government and business to expand routes into work, apprenticeships and training for young people in defence.

Building on the defence and technology skills package, the deal commits some of Britain's largest defence firms to offering 18-24-year-olds work experience and apprenticeships, with a target of 40,000 opportunities a year by 2030, rising to 50,000 by 2035; a much-needed step in the right direction.

Entry-level defence salaries struggle to keep pace with technology and financial services, and plenty of talented students still have no real idea what a career in defence or security actually involves day-to-day.

None of this is unique to the West Midlands. But the region is unusually well placed to do something about it, and it has started to.

Doing our bit at Heligan

As a specialist M&A advisory firm active in defence, security and technology, we see the skills question on both sides of every transaction we work on.

Our graduate programme has just returned for its third year with its biggest intake yet and welcome five new graduates joining us on a three-year programme. We would far rather develop the next generation of dealmakers and sector specialists than assume they will turn up when we happen to need them.

In the age where people are reducing graduate recruitment due to AI, we’re doing the opposite and are fortunate enough to have such fantastic young talent joining Heligan.

That is a small example, but it makes a bigger point. Everyone in this ecosystem has a part to play in building the talent pipeline, from the primes and the scale-ups to the universities and the advisers.

The objective should be to develop and retain great people within the region. Get this part right and even greater investment will follow along with new companies coming to the region.

AI adoption among top concerns for Midlands businesses

AI adoption remains one of the biggest challenges facing businesses in the Midlands, a new survey has found.

According to research from accountancy and advisory firm BDO, a quarter of businesses in the region rank AI adoption and technological change as one of their top concerns over the next six months, outweighing high employment costs and access to finance.

As a result, a third of Midlands businesses plan to accelerate investment in AI or automation to help improve productivity.

Earlier this summer, the Government published figures showing that 'self-reported' use of AI in UK businesses with ten or more employees has increased from around 12% to around 35% since late 2023, with larger firms more likely to have adopted AI.



Gareth Singleton

It follows the appointment of eight industrial strategy AI sector champions who will be responsible for setting a clear national vision for how AI should be adopted in their sector, while identifying practical steps to remove barriers and unlock investment.

Sectors include clean energy, professional and business services, advanced manufacturing, and digital and technology.

Gareth Singleton, regional managing partner at BDO in the Midlands, said: "As part of the Government's industrial strategy, ministers have set out ambitious plans to accelerate AI adoption across a raft of sectors, aimed at boosting productivity, supercharging economic growth and unlocking billions in added value.

"That ambition is shared by many regional businesses looking to develop, integrate and measure the effectiveness of AI, whether that's across information and communication, improving business operations, or administrative and clerical roles.

"However, given the rapid rate of technological change, there are clearly still significant challenges facing businesses when it comes to transitioning from legacy systems, scaling technology and sustaining new AI models, often hindered by workforce capability gaps.

"While the role of AI champions is a positive move, more support will be required to ensure Midlands businesses benefit from the positive effects of AI on businesses."

Midlands workers embrace GenAI

Almost two-thirds of workers in the Midlands have used generative artificial intelligence at work, according to research from Deloitte.

The findings come from Deloitte UK's inaugural GenAI Workforce Survey which reported that of the 63% of workers using the technology in general, 39% are using it at least weekly and 22% using it at least daily.

While this places the region close to the national average, an adoption gap with the capital remains. In London, 76% of workers have used GenAI at work, 55% use it at least weekly and 37% use it at least daily.

Based on responses from 25,000 workers across the UK, collected between May 7 and June 10 2026, the survey revealed how employees are using GenAI in their jobs and how organisations are responding.

The survey will be repeated every six months to monitor how usage evolves as the technology becomes more widely adopted.



James Hennigan

SCC lands four lots on new government cloud framework

IT giant SCC has been named on four lots of the Government Commercial Agency's newly launched G-Cloud 15 framework.

The framework gives public sector organisations a compliant route to access cloud hosting, software and support services from SCC.

The multinational firm, whose headquarters are in Tyseley, has been named on the following lots: cloud hosting, infrastructure software as a service, software as a service, and cloud support.

GCA is the UK's central commercial and procurement organisation, connecting public and private sectors to achieve the best outcomes for the UK and its citizens.

James Hennigan, managing director of SCC Digital, said: "Being named across four lots on G-Cloud 15 reflects the breadth of SCC's cloud capabilities and our commitment to helping public sector organisations modernise with confidence.

"Cloud is no longer simply an infrastructure decision. It underpins digital transformation, cyber resilience, AI adoption and the delivery of better public services.

"Through G-Cloud 15, organisations can access our expertise across cloud hosting, software and support services through a compliant route to market, backed by the governance, assurance and digital sovereignty needed to meet public sector requirements."

Operating across locations in the UK, France, Romania, Spain and Vietnam, SCC delivers cloud, digital workplace, cyber security, infrastructure and managed services to organisations across the public and private sectors.

Keeping business in control

How Iain Hall's new venture is helping SMEs navigate digital transformation, AI readiness and governance without importing enterprise-scale bureaucracy

For many small and medium-sized businesses, digital transformation has not arrived as a carefully managed programme.

It has accumulated: a cloud service here, a customer database there, staff experimenting with artificial intelligence, and important documents scattered across email and shared drives. The technology may be useful, but senior managers are increasingly asking a more difficult question: who is actually in control?

That question sits at the centre of IHMC Digital, a new consultancy founded by business leader Iain Hall. The venture helps SMEs understand their digital estate, organise information, prepare for responsible AI adoption and introduce proportionate governance.

Hall's proposition is practical. Smaller organisations do not need enterprise-scale bureaucracy or policies nobody has time to maintain. They need clarity: what systems and information they hold, where the greatest risks and opportunities lie, who is accountable, what staff may do with AI, and which evidence should be retained.

"We begin with the business problem, not with a technology product," Hall says. "The objective is to help management make informed, defensible decisions and turn improvement into a manageable programme."

IHMC Digital's developing service model brings together four connected strands. Its website presents the public face of the business and its focus on governance, readiness and transformation. Its information-management architecture provides a disciplined operational foundation.

A full body of knowledge contains structured briefing notes on digital governance, AI readiness, information assets, cyber and supplier risk, accountability, staff guidance and implementation. A governance programme converts that knowledge into client outputs, including digital estate reviews, information asset maps, AI use registers, responsibility matrices, risk logs, policy packs, and prioritised roadmaps.

This emphasis on usable outputs is important. Many SMEs know they should improve governance but are wary of consultancy exercises that produce a substantial report and little lasting change. IHMC Digital instead aims to establish a minimum viable governance system that existing staff can operate. Controls are scaled to actual exposure: a professional practice handling sensitive personal information will require a different approach from a similarly sized trading business with relatively low-risk data.



The venture draws on Hall's career in leadership, technology and international business. His experience includes IBM, senior responsibility within Lexmark's EMEA alliances organisation, law-enforcement service and international technology assignments. That background has shaped an approach combining commercial discipline with stakeholder engagement and operational realism.

Former colleagues and clients describe a leader focused on results without losing sight of people. One consultancy client recalled recognising early that Hall's experience and drive would make the assignment successful, adding that he ensured every stakeholder "had a voice and a contribution". The project, the client said, delivered an excellent and well-documented report.

Those recommendations matter because AI governance is not simply a technical discipline. It requires leaders to reconcile opportunity, risk, people, process and accountability. A policy alone cannot prevent sensitive information being entered into an unsuitable AI tool, challenge a supplier's claims, or determine when automated output needs human review. Governance works only when responsibilities are clear, and controls fit normal business routines.

Hall is also strengthening the venture's academic and strategic foundation through an MBA at Aston University. He is fully engaged with the programme, using it to test assumptions, refine the business model and ensure the consultancy develops from evidence rather than enthusiasm alone. The intention is not to present a predetermined framework as the answer, but to build a service informed by research, client discovery and measurable organisational needs.

IHMC Digital has assembled access to specialist expertise across technology, AI, governance and compliance. The model gives clients a single point of coordination while recognising when legal, cyber-security, data-protection, or specialist technical advice is required. That boundary is central to credibility: the firm offers independent judgement and implementation support without pretending one consultant can replace every regulated profession.

Timing is significant. AI tools are becoming accessible faster than many organisations can develop rules for their use. Employees can automate research, drafting, customer communication and analysis without a formal procurement project. The opportunity is substantial, but so are the risks of inaccurate output, exposure of confidential data, uncontrolled accounts, and inexplicable decisions.

IHMC Digital's message to local businesses is measured rather than alarmist: do not ignore AI, but do not adopt it by accident. Start by understanding the organisation, identifying the right business problems and establishing the few controls that matter most.

For Hall, the venture is the next stage of a career built around leadership, technology and delivery. Its ambition is straightforward: to help SMEs use digital technology and AI safely, profitably and defensibly – while keeping management firmly in control.

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Why cyber risk now demands board-level leadership



Cyber risk is no longer simply an IT problem. What can recent incidents, specialist insight and Willis research tell your organisation about stronger resilience and better recovery?

By SARA FARDON, regional director of WTW Midlands.

If a ransomware attack shuts down a critical system, the board's first questions are unlikely to be about the technical weakness that allowed it to happen. Leaders will want to know whether the business can continue operating, which customers and suppliers will be affected, how much revenue is at risk and how quickly the organisation can recover. They may also face difficult decisions about whether to pay a ransom and how to manage the cost of prolonged disruption.

Why is cyber risk a boardroom issue?

A cyberattack can quickly disrupt operations and cause serious financial loss. It therefore belongs alongside other major boardroom concerns, including cash flow, regulation and business continuity.

If systems go down, an organisation needs to keep customers informed, restore its most important services, manage suppliers, protect cash flow and make quick decisions without having all the facts.

This cannot be left to the IT team alone. Finance, legal, operations, risk and senior leadership all need to understand how a cyber incident could affect the business. That shared understanding helps the organisation decide where to invest, what must be protected first and how it will recover.

Willis' 2026 Cyber in Focus report found that ransomware incidents can sometimes disrupt organisations for weeks, with business interruption often accounting for a significant share of the loss. The 2025 cyberattack on Jaguar Land Rover lasted for 30 days and affected UK factories, overseas operations, suppliers, business partners and local communities.

Without proper preparation and senior-level support, businesses may find that manual workarounds cannot be sustained. They may also discover important supplier dependencies or gaps in their insurance only after an incident has occurred.

How is AI changing the threat?

AI is not necessarily creating an entirely new type of cyber risk. Instead, it is making familiar attacks faster, more convincing and harder to detect.

Willis' Cyber Claims in Focus Report 2026 highlighted how AI is increasing the scale and sophistication of both malicious cyber events, such as ransomware attacks, and AI driven social engineering and phishing incidents using deepfakes. social engineering, credential theft and deepfakes.

What should businesses do?

Businesses should focus on getting the fundamentals right rather than redesigning their strategy every time a new threat appears.

That means having strong authentication and identity security, sensible approval controls, well-informed employees and clear routes for escalating concerns. These measures can reduce the risks around the people and processes that attackers target every day.

Organisations also need clear accountability, regularly tested response plans and an agreed order for restoring critical activities. Supplier resilience matters too. Leaders should know which providers support essential services, what the business would do if one became unavailable and how long it could continue operating without that supplier.

Where does cyber insurance fit?

Willis' Cyber Claims in Focus Report 2026 highlighted how AI is increasing the scale and sophistication of both malicious cyber events, such as ransomware attacks, and AIdriven social engineering and phishing incidents using deepfakes.

However, its value goes beyond paying claims. The process of arranging cover can help a business put a financial value on its cyber exposure and understand how an incident could affect operations, revenue and recovery. This gives boards clearer information on which risks require the most attention.

To get the greatest benefit from cyber insurance, businesses should consider using risk analysis to select suitable limits and shape the policy around their actual operations. They should also work with their insurers and brokers to agree appropriate cover, identify approved specialist suppliers and establish how the response process will work.

Cyber resilience is ultimately about being ready to keep the business operating, make difficult decisions and recover when something goes wrong. That is why cyber risk now requires active leadership from the board, not simply oversight from the IT department.

For more practical guidance on getting greater value from cyber insurance, request a copy of Willis' Cyber in Focus 2026 report by contacting Sara Fardon at sara.fardon@wtwco.com.

*https://media.jlr.com/corporate/news/2025/09/statement-cyber-incident

Thirty years of transforming businesses

in the West Midlands



By EMAN AL-HILLAWI, CEO of business change consultancy, Entec Si

This year, Entec Si celebrates its 30-year anniversary, delivering digital transformation in an evolving landscape of technology, with people consistently at the heart.

Over the years, technology has undergone significant transformation, and businesses have needed to adapt to rising digital needs and customer expectations.

Implementing new technology has always required a holistic, end-to-end approach that incorporates the unique requirements of a business. As the pace of technological advancement increases each day, the organisations experiencing the most success won't be those simply implementing the latest technology. It'll be those adopting it with intention, and with the right change management processes in place.

This is what we have helped numerous organisations across the West Midlands achieve over the course of 30 years. As the digital landscape has evolved, we've supported transformations from start to finish – building the business case, conducting in-depth analysis of existing processes and systems, defining long-term goals and providing our digital expertise.

Culture has also remained a key factor to the success of any transformation, and bringing people along the change journey has been consistent in each project we deliver. That includes supporting workplace culture shifts, addressing internal hesitancies, providing targeted training and empowering employees to be drivers of change.

From the early days of the digital revolution through to today's advanced AI and automation systems – the story of business change is one of continuous adaptation. To understand what's next, it's worth looking back on how the waves of digital evolution have transformed organisations in the West Midlands.



The Entec Si team

Supporting Birmingham City Council through the delivery of an integrated HR & payroll system implementation

Entec Si was founded in 1996, in the midst of the digital revolution. Digital transformation in the early days of technology meant supporting businesses through a culturally significant, transitional time as systems moved from traditional paper to early desktop. The launch of the World Wide Web was still fresh in minds, and the introduction of software as a service (SaaS) in the late 90s was defining a new era of digital intelligence.

We delivered a standout project in this period for Birmingham City Council, in which we revolutionised its HR and payroll implementation. During this time, the council had approximately 60,000 employees, with HR and payroll being managed across over twenty departments. Relying heavily on manual data entry, information from multiple HR systems needed to be inputted into a single platform regularly, resulting in a system that was prone to errors, inefficiencies, along with being significantly time-consuming for staff.

The Entec Si team helped to optimise HR and payroll processes, working closely with stakeholders to identify inconsistencies, and develop more standardised ways of working from the very outset of employees' onboarding. Operations were integrated into one tech solution called Vidipay, and we provided technical expertise along with business analysis for effective implementation. From the start of the change journey, we understood the organisation's pain points, outlined clear objectives and mapped end-to-end business processes.

As businesses experienced major shifts in ways of working, bringing people along the change journey was essential. The Council, like many others at the time, needed guidance on how to implement new technology for returns on efficiency and tangible business value, as more organisations felt the pressure to keep up with digitalised processes. By empowering and upskilling team members throughout the transformation, we were able to support organisations including Birmingham City Council to introduce technology for lasting benefit.



90s IT

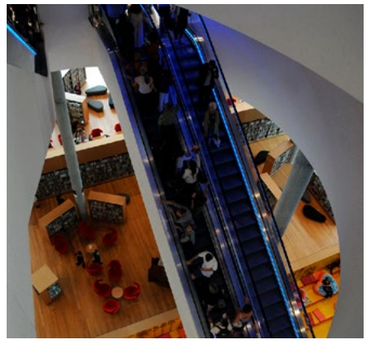
Reinventing the Library of Birmingham's services for the 21st century

As technology progressed through the new millennium, businesses were looking to further digitise their services to meet rising customer expectations. Entec Si experienced a significant spike in demand, as organisations enlisted our services to undergo company-wide transformations.

We delivered a major Transformation & ICT Programme for the Library of Birmingham, helping to respond to ongoing digital change through a more commercially-focused operating model that was built to last. We helped reinvent the library for the 21st Century, allowing services to be delivered in a more consistent, efficient, and connected way through dedicated customer experience staff, self-service channels and innovative digital solutions.

To integrate technical expertise with library and archive knowledge, we created a team which combined client staff with our own digital transformation and IT specialists. This blended team approach was crucial for success, allowing our team to work directly within operations and fully understand the organisation. We managed the procurement and implementation of four major new IT systems, along with the installation of the technology infrastructure itself.

A focus on people ensured a seamless transition within the workplace. Alongside the ICT programme, the project embedded significant culture change including a new organisational structure. Throughout the change journey, we empowered employees to adopt more agile ways of working, by guiding them through new, streamlined internal policies and procedures. The transformation was successfully delivered within set timeframes and outlined budgets, to great public acclaim.



Birmingham Library

Introducing a state-of-the-art robot for a West Midlands NHS trust

Over the past decade, our expertise has branched out into a wider range of sectors including local government, healthcare and charities. Digital needs and customer expectations are rapidly rising across industries, and the pace of technological advancement is showing no signs of slowing down. Today, technology holds immense value when implemented intentionally, especially for sectors like healthcare when it's used to improve patient outcomes.

At the Alexandra Hospital for Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, we successfully project managed the implementation of the da Vinci Xi robot – a life-saving robot designed to help surgeons perform complex procedures with enhanced precision and control. The project opened the door for elective urological surgery for men with prostate cancer, and also attracted more staff to the trust across a wider range of specialties.

We supported the development of the business case for the surgical robot and took control of implementation from beginning to end. The project required effective management of a number of critical pathways across workstreams; supporting the digital elements required for installation, coordinating the build works, organising recruitment and training, managing finances, overseeing clinical operations along with delivering internal communications throughout the change journey.

A blended, people-centred approach ensured each element of the transformation remained in sync and ran smoothly, as we maintained a holistic overview of its progress. The project was successfully delivered, with the da Vinci Xi robot being used in operations at the trust by the end of 2022.



Surgical robot project

Looking ahead in the age of AI and automation

Over the years, technology has progressed significantly and, in today's age of AI, the pace of digital advancement is faster than ever. Organisations are looking to adopt the latest systems, automate their services and drive efficiency with new technology. Business leaders across the region now understand that their digital landscape is fundamental to the way they function, grow and compete.

AI and automation are accelerating this shift, and leadership challenges are evolving alongside it. As AI becomes embedded into everyday systems and sets new expectations for both organisations and their clients, leaders today need to look beyond implementation alone. AI and automation hold significant value with their potential to support decision-making, analyse data and optimise customer service. The greatest value, however, will be the consistent thread that has tied business transformations together throughout the years of technology's evolution – adopting new systems with a long-term strategic vision, utilising effective change management for a seamless transition, and keeping culture and people at the centre.

During the many projects we've contributed to across the West Midlands, digital tools and systems have changed significantly, but our core learnings have remained clear – technology will always progress, but the fundamentals of successful business transformation will not. Today, organisations need help cutting through the noise as industries scramble to keep up with the race of implementing AI and new technology. It might feel impossible to predict what new systems are going to be introduced next – but that's not the question businesses need to be asking.

The right question is, 'How can we be intentional about implementing new technology, whilst keeping people at the heart of transformation?'.

In the West Midlands today, the businesses that continue to prioritise their people will see the most returns – rather than those which simply adopt the newest tech or have the biggest budgets.

portrait

Manufacturers urged to put business needs ahead of AI trends

Manufacturers should start their 'AI journey' by exploring what constraints it can help them overcome – and not simply fall into the trap of joining a trend because they feel they are missing out.

That's the message from the chief information officer of PP Control & Automation, the Walsall-based manufacturing outsourcing specialists.

Ian Knight, who has more than 30 years' experience in industry, said his business ignored the platform and technology noise and instead identified where its operations were being constrained.

He said: "For organisations looking to move from experimentation to impact, the starting question should not be 'how do we adopt AI'.

"Instead it should be 'where are we constrained, and what is the most effective way to remove that constraint?'

"When manufacturers answer that question first, the role of AI becomes far easier to define. More importantly, it becomes far easier to justify, implement and scale."

Mr Knight's engineering team focused on one of the most time-intensive and resource-heavy activities in electrical engineering – extracting structured data from unstructured documentation.

"Previously, this process required significant engineering time and manual effort," he said.

"Now, those same documents can be processed in hours, not days. And this is just the starting point.

"We've proven what you can achieve by embracing AI, not as a tool in isolation, but a system built around real manufacturing constraints.

"It has the potential to be deployed internally and also has a capability offered to customers and potentially the wider market."





Rudi Kesic

New tech firm launches

A tech entrepreneur has launched an AI business in Birmingham following a £1 million pre-seed raise, with plans to create 20 new jobs as it enters its next phase of growth.

Rudi Kesic says that ClearPath is targeting professional industries where complex work remains heavily dependent on people interpreting documents and data, communicating between organisations and manually progressing processes.

Its technology is designed to allow AI to understand the context of that work, undertake research and reasoning, perform defined tasks and determine what needs to happen next.

Mr Kesic said: "Most business software was designed in a world where systems stored information and people performed the work.

"AI fundamentally changes that model. Software can increasingly understand what is happening, reason over the information available and participate in getting the work done.

"We didn't start by asking how we could add AI to an existing product. We started with a blank sheet of paper and asked what the operating system for professional services should look like if artificial intelligence was part of the architecture from day one."

He said that ClearPath has also been designed to operate alongside existing business technology rather than requiring organisations to replace their core systems before adopting AI.

Air Ambulance turns to AI to boost online sales

Midlands Air Ambulance is using artificial intelligence to transform how donated goods are processed for sale online, helping to generate additional income for the charity.

The technology is being introduced across its retail network, which includes shops in Merry Hill, Tipton and West Bromwich.

Provided by Minimist, the new AI-powered listing system enables shop teams to create online listings across platforms such as eBay and Vinted by taking a single photograph of a donated item.

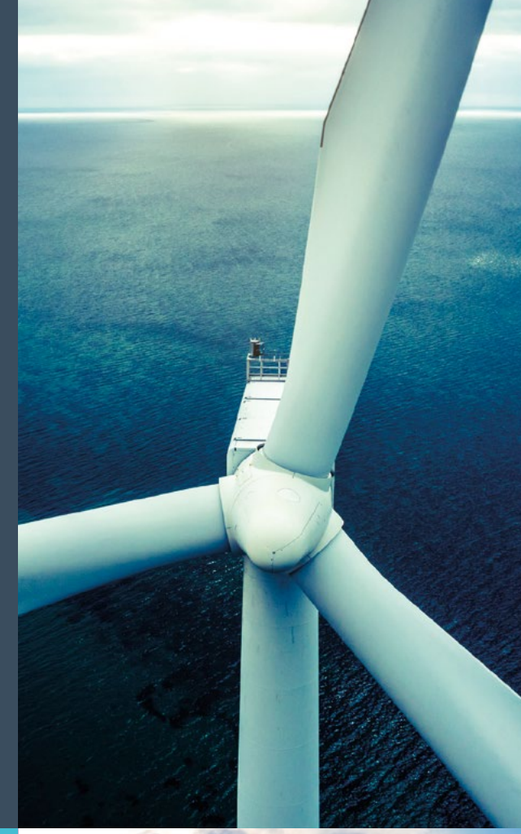
In under 30 seconds, the system can generate a complete listing, including a product description, pricing suggestion, size information and virtual model imagery where appropriate, giving donated goods access to a wider audience while helping retail teams process stock more efficiently.

Amy Petherick, regional manager at Midlands Air Ambulance Charity, said: "Introducing Minimist is a major step forward for our retail operation. It allows our shop teams to process more donated items, create professional online listings quicker, easier and reach more buyers through online marketplaces.

"Most importantly, every additional sale helps generate vital income to keep delivering our lifesaving service. This technology has the potential to make a real difference to our fundraising and, ultimately, the communities we serve."

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Three Midlands law firms secure Legal 500 recognition

Three Midlands law firms are celebrating after inclusion in a prestigious industry guide which was published at the end of September.

FBC Manby Bowdler has secured its first Birmingham rankings in Legal 500 2027 just a year after opening a dedicated office in the city centre.

The rankings recognise the firm's family and commercial property teams in Birmingham for the first time, while its Birmingham litigation team has been named 'one to watch' for civil fraud.

The recognition comes days after the firm, which is the founding member of the private equity-backed Adeptio Law Group, celebrated its first anniversary in Birmingham city centre, where it is now based at St Philip's Place.

Neil Lloyd, chief executive of FBC Manby Bowdler and Adeptio Law Group, said: "To secure our first Birmingham rankings within a year of opening in the city centre is a fantastic achievement and a real testament to the talented teams we have built here.

"The rankings are partly based on feedback from clients, so to hear our teams described as 'exceptional' and 'client-focused' is the best endorsement we could ask for."

Meanwhile seven lawyers from law firm Sydney Mitchell have been recognised individually in the latest guide.

The firm has also been ranked in ten practice areas including employment, immigration, commercial litigation, insolvency and corporate recovery, debt recovery, commercial property, family, personal injury, contentious trusts and probate, and personal tax, trusts and probate.

Karen Moores, senior partner at Sydney Mitchell, which has offices in Birmingham and Solihull, said: "The firm has maintained a strong Legal 500 presence across the Midlands again this year.



Karen Moores



Neil Lloyd

"Not only have so many of our specialist teams secured excellent rankings, but also seven of our lawyers – including partners, team heads and senior associates – are individually recognised for their exceptional work, client service and legal competence."

And RLK Solicitors – which has offices in Birmingham City Centre and Edgbaston – has also been ranked in the guide, progressing from its previous recognition as a Firm to Watch.

The ranking recognises RLK's work advising businesses, business owners and individuals on complex, high-value commercial disputes, including shareholder and director disputes, contractual claims, civil fraud, injunctions and insurance litigation.

CEO Satish Jakhu said: "Being ranked in the Legal 500 for the first time is an important milestone for the firm and, most importantly, recognition of the quality of the team we have built.

"We have been deliberate about developing RLK as a specialist disputes practice capable of taking on complex, high-value cases and well-resourced opponents. This year has also seen us expand into London, a strategic step that strengthens our national presence and supports our ambition to grow RLK as a leading specialist disputes practice.

"I'm incredibly proud of the team and grateful to our clients and professional contacts who continue to trust, support and recommend us."

The Legal 500 annual guide's rankings are based on a range of criteria including the quality, complexity and value of a firm's and individual's work, client endorsement and peer recommendation.



Satish Jakhu

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LIBBY HUBBARD, professional support lawyer and senior associate in the employment & pensions team at Anthony Collins law firm, tells businesses what they need to know



Changing flexible working rules

Six years after the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to remote work, hybrid and flexible working arrangements have become an established part of the labour market, and a consistent topic for discussion about how to strike an appropriate balance to meet business need and employees' changing expectations.

Flexible working is now more of an established part of life across the UK. It can take many forms, including changes to working hours, patterns and locations. For employees, flexibility can play an important role in helping people enter, stay in and progress in work. From employers' side, flexible working policies can support recruitment, retention and workforce participation.

Recognising the need to improve transparency and accountability, the UK Government has recently published its response to the consultation launched earlier this year on the Employment Rights Act 2025 reforms to the right to request flexible working.

For employers, the changes will bring greater scrutiny as to how flexible working requests are considered and refused. The question now is what this will mean for businesses in practice.

Through the ERA 2025, the Government committed to strengthening the flexible working framework and the Act includes a new requirement that employers must introduce a more structured consultation process around flexible working and only reject requests where it is reasonable to do so.

The eight existing statutory grounds for refusal remain the same, but the burden of proof is shifting. The grounds cover: the burden of additional costs, an inability to reorganise work amongst existing staff, an inability to recruit additional staff, a detrimental impact on quality, a detrimental impact on performance, a detrimental effect on ability to meet customer demand, insufficient work available for the periods the employee proposes to work, and planned structural changes to the employer's business.

In workplaces there will be an introduction of a 'reasonableness test', putting the onus on employers to explain the grounds for refusing a request, with evidence as to why the refusal is reasonable. It should be noted that employees will be able to challenge that decision.

In addition, there will be a statutory process which employers must follow to comply with the requirement to consult with the employee before rejecting a request. If the employer intends to reject a flexible working request, they must hold a meeting with the employee and consider the feasibility of the requested arrangements, address the challenges and, where necessary, explore suitable alternative arrangements.

The overriding purpose of the meeting will be to reach an agreement with the employee and not just to pass on the message that their request has been declined. The meeting must be held within the two-month period for making the decision and the employee must be given reasonable notice of the meeting and be informed of its purpose.

After the meeting, employers will have to provide written notification of the outcome of the meeting and the outcome of the request.

This is an important step and one which the Government hopes will result in fewer requests being refused. This new process builds on recent changes to flexible working regulations, including the introduction of a day-one right to request flexible working in April 2024. Regulations implementing the process will take effect in autumn 2027 and the reasonableness test will be introduced at the same time.

These reforms are likely to raise the legal bar when refusing requests, as managers will need to be able to demonstrate that they have: properly assessed the request, identified specific operational concerns, considered potential mitigations, explored alternative arrangements, and communicated their reasoning clearly

Whilst the remedy for noncompliance with the statutory scheme at tribunal is not being changed (an order for employer to reconsider the request and/or compensation of up to eight weeks' pay), tribunals will delve more deeply into the reasonableness of any rejection and hence the chance of a discrimination issue being identified is higher. The greater risk may be losing valuable employees to employers more willing to accommodate flexible working.

Flexible working requests are often closely linked to caring commitments, disability and other protected characteristics. As a result, employers will also need to consider their obligations under the Equality Act 2010.

These changes do not take effect until autumn 2027, so there are no immediate operational steps that need to be taken but workforce strategy will need to consider what changes these extended rights may have. Many employers will already be abiding by good practice, which involves meeting with employees, discussing concerns, considering alternatives and documenting decisions around flexible work.

However, employers should track for draft statutory guidance being published on the reasonableness test; this will be key and will give an indication of how decisions should be made and what training and information to provide to the relevant decision makers.

In the meantime, an audit of recent applications, percentage rejections and reasons may offer an overview of current practices and give an indication of where work may need to be done.

Going forward, teams should keep clear records of why requests are approved or denied. Forward thinking teams may take this opportunity to review working policies and their stance of the future more generally, as this reform is the latest signal of a clear direction of travel towards greater flexibility in the workplace.

These reforms do not create an automatic right to work flexibly, and they do not prevent employers from refusing requests that genuinely do not work for their business.

However, employers are likely to need a more structured and consistent approach to handling requests, supported by clear records. Right now, for businesses, the priority should be reviewing current policies and decision-making processes and considering whether their approach to flexibility remains fit for the workforce they want to attract and retain.

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Steven Hayward

Ward Hadaway boosts construction law expertise

Birmingham law firm Ward Hadaway has appointed Steven Hayward as partner.

Steven is a construction and engineering law specialist who helps organisations resolve disputes. His work covers contracts, professional appointments, adjudication, mediation, arbitration and court proceedings.

His appointment supports growing demand for specialist construction advice linked to planning and development, housing, funding, property disputes and wider project delivery.

He has particular experience in resolving disputes arising out of Building Safety Act matters, including remediation orders, remediation contribution orders and building liability orders, alongside project documentation and risk management services before issues escalate.

Birmingham Law Society welcomes new president

Guy Barnett has been sworn in as the 134th president of Birmingham Law Society – and has pledged to strengthen council, connect the city's legal community and ensure the society provides a strong voice for the profession across the region.

He formally took office at the society's AGM in September, becoming the latest custodian of a presidency stretching back more than two centuries to 1818.

With Calum Nisbet now appointed chief executive, Guy said his presidential focus will be on representing members, and ensuring BLS speaks up on the issues that matter to Birmingham's legal community.

"Birmingham Law Society must be a voice for the legal community it represents," he said.

"That means being prepared to stand up and speak when it is needed, but it also means listening. We need to understand what our members are experiencing, the pressures and opportunities facing the profession and where their society can make a difference.

"I want to strengthen council and our committees, and ensure the organisation is in an even stronger position when I hand over the Presidential chain next year to Sabina Kauser."



Pictured from left are Sam Ingram, deputy vice president, Guy Barnett, president, and Sabina Kauser, vice president of Birmingham Law Society. Picture: Dr Denise Maxwell, Lensi Photography.

Lodders promotes new head of corporate

Law firm Lodders has promoted corporate law and M&A partner Steve Halkett to the post of head of corporate.

Steve originally joined Lodders in April 2025 following a period of more than 18 years at Wright Hassall.

The firm said that his promotion to head of corporate, where he will lead a team of ten lawyers, is a natural evolution of the contribution he has already made.

The corporate team has advised on a range of significant domestic and international transactions over the last 12 months, including advising listed Swedish conglomerate Karnell Group AB on a number of UK acquisitions, acting for the sellers on the sale of regional oil distribution business Sweetfuels, and advising on the sale of packaging foils business Foilco to Japanese acquirer Washin Corporation.

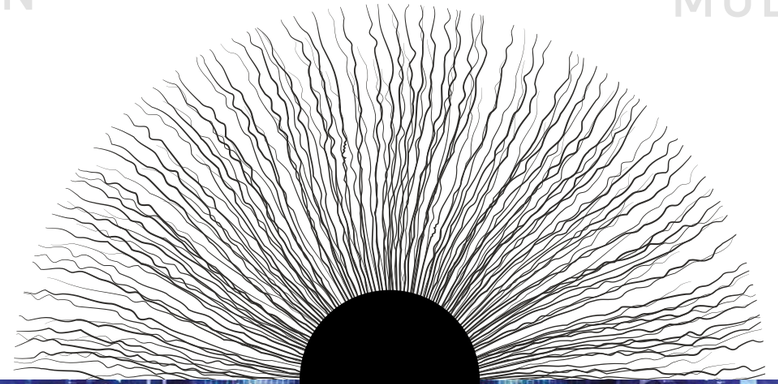
Graham Spalding, head of Lodders' business services group, said: "Steve has had an immediate and impressive impact since joining Lodders.

"He has a rare ability to build trust quickly with clients, with referrers and with the team, and has already become a real magnet for new client work. "Handing leadership of the corporate team to Steve is something I do with enormous confidence. He's the right person to take this practice to the next level and I'm looking forward to supporting him in doing so."



Steve Halkett, left, with Graham Spalding

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By TRACY LAKE, partner, corporate team at law firm FBC Manby Bowdler

Energy costs

Why pressures persist – and what businesses can do next

Energy costs remain one of the most stubborn challenges facing UK businesses in 2026.

Even with wholesale markets being calmer than during the dramatic peaks in 2022–23, the underlying pressures have not eased and new global issues, such as the conflict in the Middle East, exacerbate an already sensitive market.

The British Chambers of Commerce recently reported that more than a quarter of firms are still struggling to pay their energy bills and over half say rising energy costs continue to force price increases.

Meanwhile, a joint report from Make UK and Ecotricity says up to 13% of manufacturing firms think further energy price shocks could put them out of business – costing the UK economy some £85billion a year.

The report, From Crisis to Stability: A Future Energy System for Manufacturers, found 90% of companies surveyed had seen energy bills rise since 2022, while more than half named energy costs as their biggest challenge.

So, the immediate volatility may have passed, but the structural issues have not.

Much of this is driven by the same global dynamics that shaped the market earlier in the decade.

As we saw during the Iran conflict – and in the wider geopolitical tensions affecting supply chains – energy markets remain highly sensitive to disruption. The UK is particularly exposed because of its reliance on imported gas and the cost of transitioning to lower-carbon infrastructure.

In my work advising businesses on commercial planning and resilience, energy consistently emerges as a pressure point that affects investment decisions, supply chain stability and long-term competitiveness.

But while businesses cannot control global markets, they can take meaningful steps to mitigate the impact.

Strengthen procurement strategy

Energy contracts vary significantly in structure, risk and transparency. Businesses should avoid treating renewal as a routine administrative task and pay it real, strategic attention. Decisions made today could have a huge impact come the next big energy crisis.

In the short term, take a close look at your existing contracts to see if increased costs can be shared or passed on. With margins under constant pressure, anything you can do to ease the burden of extra costs will reap dividends.

In the longer term, it's worth considering seeking some professional advice over contract renegotiation. Fixed-term contracts can provide certainty, while flexible arrangements may suit larger users with the capacity to manage risk.

By reviewing contracts early with the help of a specialist lawyer with expertise in the area, you will be better placed to understand the different options open to you. The key is to review contract terms early and ensure procurement decisions align with wider commercial planning and give you as much energy security as possible.

Invest in efficiency and monitoring

Efficiency remains the most reliable way to reduce consumption. Even modest improvements – upgrading lighting, improving insulation or optimising equipment usage – can deliver measurable savings.

For energy-intensive sectors, smart monitoring and modern plant can provide clearer data, reduce waste and support long-term planning.

Explore lower-carbon alternatives

The transition to low-carbon energy is not simply an environmental decision – it is increasingly a commercial one.

Solar, heat pumps, battery storage and hybrid systems can reduce exposure to volatile wholesale markets. While upfront costs remain a barrier, businesses should monitor government incentives, grant schemes and local authority programmes that can offset investment.

In terms of supply, renewable-backed tariffs are becoming increasingly popular. They reduce reliance on imported energy and insulate against market volatility by building in cost stability over longer periods of time.

Build resilience into governance

Energy billing is complex and errors are common. Regular audits, clear accountability and proactive engagement with suppliers can help ensure accuracy and prevent unexpected costs.

For multi-site organisations, consolidating procurement and standardising monitoring can deliver greater control.

Integrate energy risk into strategic planning

Energy costs now sit firmly within the category of strategic risk and boards should be considering the issue accordingly. That means plenty of worst-case scenario planning and stress-testing of current arrangements.

And it's vital to now start building energy considerations into supply chain, investment and operational decisions, to ensure that resilience isn't just skin deep but feeds through the whole organisation.

The pressures facing businesses are real and they are unlikely to disappear quickly.

But with a clear strategy, strong governance and a proactive approach, businesses can reduce exposure and build resilience in an unpredictable market.

For expert advice on protecting your business from future energy shocks, contact Tracy on email: tracy.lake@fbcmb.co.uk or call 07708 080301

Study platform sold to US firm

An adaptive AI study platform has been sold to a US company by two University of Birmingham graduates in a deal reported to be worth several million pounds.

StudyStash has been sold by founders Ben Ward and Jonathan Graham to US e-learning firm Kortext, just a year after their graduation from the university.

The platform was created by its founders to help them with their own degrees and has since been used by tens of thousands of students at more than 160 institutions across three continents.

StudyStash uses neuroscience and AI to supercharge student learning and help slash dropout rates. Now, backed by Kortext and its network of more than 1,000 universities, it plugs directly into the world's biggest learning systems, including Canvas, Blackboard and Moodle.

Mr Ward, co-founder and CEO of StudyStash, said: "We designed the platform to solve our own problem but quickly realised we'd created a tool that could make a real difference to thousands of learners.

"We had so much traction that it was an easy decision to turn this into our first venture, and StudyStash was born. Since launch, we've raised equity finance, broken into the US market and now been acquired by one of the largest e-learning providers in the field."

Mr Graham, the firm's other co-founder and CTO, said: "Universities set a high bar and we built StudyStash to meet it from day one. That's been central to how quickly we've grown: combining the speed of a startup with the standards institutions expect of an established partner.



Ben Ward, left, and Jonathan Graham

"With Kortext, we can be even more ambitious. We're bringing our product and pace of development together with its experience, reputation and reach, giving us the backing to build faster and take the platform to many more universities."

Using existing course material, StudyStash builds personalised flashcards, practice tests, podcasts and more that adapt as the student learns, with insights that help institutions see how learning is happening across their whole student body.

Acquirer Kortext was founded in 2013 and works with thousands of universities worldwide, helping to enhance teaching, learning and student engagement through digital content, analytics and AI-powered workflow solutions.

As part of the acquisition, Mr Ward and Mr Graham – who met while studying computer science at the University of Birmingham and worked together on PwC's technology degree apprenticeship – will remain as CEO and CTO, respectively, and continue to lead StudyStash as a distinct brand.

Intercity expands into south west with Bristol Bears deal



Birmingham IT firm Intercity has signed a new sporting deal with Bristol Bears Rugby that will see it move into the south west for the first time.

The technology solutions provider, which marked 40 years in business in 2026, has become an official club partner of the Bears ahead of the 2026/27 season in an agreement that will see it support IT-managed services, cloud, cybersecurity and communications for the men's and women's teams.

Oliver Hayward, chief revenue officer at Intercity, said: "This is a major milestone for our business, giving us a new presence in the south west, whilst also extending our footprint in the sporting world, where we already have similar agreements with Birmingham City Football Club and Edgbaston.

"Bristol Bears and Bristol Bears Women are very ambitious and share our values of developing talent and delivering a major positive impact to the communities we both operate in."

Pictured from left are Bears Women's Daisie Mayes, Charlie Blakemore of Intercity, Tom Tainton of Bristol Bears and Intercity's Oliver Hayward



By PAUL FAULKNER

Tech Week ambition is good for all

Birmingham Tech Week returns this month (October), providing the city and wider region with a great opportunity to showcase itself as the vibrant and dynamic place we all know it to be to get business done.

Tech Week already feels like such an established part of the regional business calendar that it's almost hard to believe that it has only been running since 2019.

Speaking personally, the particular trait that Tech Week possesses that I especially like is the grand sense of ambition it has always displayed.

This was evident from the very first edition of the festival which landed with a 'big bang' just a few months before the Covid-19 outbreak. Rather than testing the water and easing itself into existence to see if there might be an appetite and audience for what was on offer, Tech Week instead went big with a whole week of activity and dozens of events all over the city.

The region's business community responded positively, and in 7 short years Birmingham Tech Week has now established itself as the largest regional tech festival in the UK.

Given the technology dominated world in which we all live – not least with the rapid development of AI and the developing debate around how humankind best harnesses that particular strand of technology, having such a festival is great for the city.

We all know good press has been hard to come by in recent times, and so this should continue to be embraced by the business community. Not only will the discussions taking place around Tech Week make your business smarter and more efficient, but the fact such this is all happening here can only help to make Birmingham even more of a 'tech honeypot' in the period ahead, with an associated benefit in terms of investment and jobs that can only be good for everybody.

Personally, I'd like to see the ambition around Tech Week continue unfettered. A couple of years ago there was talk of pushing to make it the UK's equivalent of the phenomenally successful 'South By Southwest' event that takes place each year in Austin Texas.

That is maybe best described as being more of a creative festival rather than just having a tech focus, and encompasses music, film, TV and gaming amongst other particular strands.

But with the Creative Quarter in Digbeth continuing to develop and evolve, with the likes of the BBC and Steven Knight's studio now established there, maybe a number of the ingredients are already in place to allow an even bigger and more ambitious version of Tech Week to emerge in the future?

After all, fortune favours the brave!

To close this column I'd like to take a moment to highlight two amazing young women who have driven the Future Faces Chamber of Commerce in recent years.

Take a bow Sophie Poduval-Morrell, who runs Future Faces from within the chamber, and Sarah Griffiths, the president for the past two years, who in her day job is a director of PMO at Intercity, the leading technology business based in Birmingham.

I was honoured to receive Sarah's 'President's Award' at the recent 'Greater Birmingham Young Professional of the Year celebration (AKA BYPY for readers of an older professional vintage), which was a lovely surprise on the night.

Suffice to say, finding the motivation and opportunities to support our regional young professional community is easy when it is being led by such talented individuals as Sophie and Sarah.

The awards ceremony this year took place at the magnificent Town Hall and was done with a different twist than a traditional black tie awards dinner, as befits an organisation such as Future Faces.

The depth and array of talent on show was phenomenal, which is testament to just how well Sophie and Sarah have driven Future Faces forward in tandem.

Lots of other people have also played a role in that ongoing success of course, and will pick up the mantle as and when Sophie and Sarah move on, but until then it is simply wonderful to see such authentic and inspirational leadership on display – well done both.

The future is indeed bright!



Paul with Future Faces president Sarah Griffiths

A crisis of confidence?

Are young people really lacking workplace-ready communication skills – or do employers now have unrealistic expectations? ADAM PRINGLE weighs up the evidence.



Young people in the West Midlands are entering the workplace at a moment of profound transition. Employers across the county are continually voicing concerns about communication, resilience, and readiness.

Meanwhile, many young people feel they do have the skills to succeed, yet are frustrated by what they see as outdated expectations or inconsistent support.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of that argument, the result is a widening perception gap: a 'crisis of confidence' that may not lie solely with young people, but within the relationship between modern staff and the workplaces they are entering.

So are employers simply struggling to adapt to a new generation whose expectations, behaviours, and communication styles differ from those of previous cohorts?

Let's look at the evidence. A landmark report from the Chartered Management Institute found that just six per cent of UK managers believe young recruits are ready for work, despite nearly half of Gen Z believing they already have the skills they need.

This mismatch is not just about technical ability. Managers say the biggest gap is resilience, with more than 90 per cent reporting that this deficit is affecting performance. Communication skills, workplace behaviours, and early leadership capability also feature prominently in employer concerns.

These findings echo broader research into essential workplace skills. The Skills Builder Partnership highlights communication, collaboration, self-management, and problem-solving as core competencies – yet educators and employers struggle to agree on how these should be taught, assessed, or demonstrated.

In Birmingham, employers frequently report that young people struggle with speaking confidently to customers or colleagues, handling difficult conversations or feedback, understanding workplace etiquette, and managing time, priorities, and self-motivation. For some of them, the thought of having to pick up a telephone and speak to someone is terrifying.

These concerns are not new, but they do appear to be intensifying.

At the same time, young people disagree with the oft-quoted narrative that they are under-prepared, and they are certainly not lacking ambition. The same CMI research shows that almost two-thirds of young people actively want to progress into management or leadership roles, and confidence-building is a top priority for them.

Many feel they are ready, but complain that employers misunderstand their communication style or fail to provide the support structures they need.

Young professionals in Birmingham are seeking opportunities to build networks, develop communication skills, and grow their confidence – and there are a growing number of platforms offering them just that chance.

For instance, Future Faces – the young-professional network of the Greater Birmingham Chambers Of Commerce – covers people across sectors and combines networking, professional development and social events. It is also the group which runs the annual Greater Birmingham Young Professional of the Year awards

Colmore Collective is particularly relevant for those in finance, law, corporate finance, investment or related professional services. It specifically targets emerging professionals and runs city-centre events designed to make networking less formal, while TAG Network Midlands is a business networking organisation with events aimed at young professionals across the Midlands.

Feedback from groups such as these show that young people in Birmingham and the West Midlands are not complacent. Far from it: they want to learn, progress, and contribute. But are they receiving the right guidance at the right time?

Let's start with changing communication norms. Gen Z communicates differently. They are digital natives, accustomed to rapid, informal communication, often via messaging platforms rather than face-to-face dialogue.



Guests at this year's Birmingham Young Professional of the Year awards

Employers, however, may expect more formal communication, greater assertiveness in meetings, traditional professional etiquette, and confidence in phone-based or in-person interactions. This mismatch can easily be misinterpreted as a lack of confidence, when it may simply be a difference in communication culture.

Another factor is the transition from education to work. CMI's research describes this transition as "broken", with structural challenges affecting both young people and employers.

Many young people leave education without meaningful workplace experience, while employers often lack the time or resources to provide structured onboarding. Here in Birmingham, this is something that our further education colleges are working hard to address.

Youth Employment UK's national benchmark report reinforces this, noting that more than one million young people are NEET, and that employers need clearer pathways, better partnerships, and more practical infrastructure to support early careers.

Without consistent preparation, young people may enter the workplace unsure of expectations – and employers may assume this uncertainty reflects a lack of confidence.

Managers themselves are also part of the equation. A striking insight from CMI's research is that 86 per cent of young people believe it is important that their line manager has received training on how to support someone at the start of their career.

Have you, or any of your line managers, received or even contemplated reaching out for help in coaching, mentoring, or developing young talent? Excellent operational leaders sometimes lack the skills to nurture early-career staff who need structured guidance, reassurance, and clear expectations.

This can create a feedback loop: a young person feels unsupported, their confidence drops, the manager interprets this as lack of readiness, expectations rise, and the relationship quickly becomes strained.

Complicating matters further is the reality that the workplace has changed dramatically, but expectations have not. Today's economy is more complex, more hybrid, and more emotionally demanding than ever.

Young people are entering environments where communication happens across multiple channels, remote work reduces informal learning, customer expectations are higher, and workplaces are more diverse and multi-generational. Yet many employers still expect young recruits to demonstrate traditional behaviours from day one: resilience, initiative, and polished communication. This expectation may be unrealistic without structured development.

Birmingham's business community is well positioned to address this crisis of confidence. Employers, educators, and networks already collaborate closely, and there is strong appetite for building clearer pathways into work.

Local initiatives – from chamber or FSB networking events to employer-led workshops and school partnerships – show that confidence can be built when young people are given the right environment to practise communication skills and develop workplace behaviours. But the challenge remains: how do we close the gap between what young people have and what employers expect?

Several actions could help strengthen confidence and communication skills among young people while also aligning employer expectations with modern workplace realities. Employers should invest in pre-employment experiences such as workplace visits, shadowing, short-term projects, and mentoring schemes.

These give young people a chance to practise communication in real settings, reducing anxiety and building familiarity. Youth Employment UK's benchmark highlights the value of "Explore" and "Experience" activities in preparing young people for work.

Confidence also grows when expectations are clear, so employers should provide structured onboarding and early-career support, offering detailed induction programmes, setting out communication norms explicitly, providing regular feedback, and pairing young recruits with trained mentors. This is not about hand-holding – it is about giving young people the tools to succeed.

Training front-line managers is equally important. Managers are the single biggest influence on early-career confidence, and young people value managers who are trained to support them. Investing in coaching skills, communication training, and youth development can transform workplace culture.

Employers should also recognise that communication styles evolve. Rather than expecting young people to immediately adopt traditional norms, workplaces can teach professional communication explicitly, encourage safe spaces for practising presentations or customer interactions, and blend digital and face-to-face communication training.

This helps young people adapt without feeling judged. Finally, employers should celebrate ambition and potential. Young people are not lacking ambition. They want to progress, lead, and contribute. Employers who recognise this – and provide pathways for growth – will build confidence naturally.

So, is there a crisis of confidence? Yes – but maybe not in the way it is often portrayed.

Young people are not entering the workplace devoid of confidence or communication skills. They are entering workplaces that have changed dramatically, with expectations that are not always clear, consistent, or aligned with modern communication norms.

The real challenge going forward is alignment: between education and employment, between young people's communication styles and employer expectations, and between the support young people need and the training managers receive.

topic

Superfood drinks brand lands Dragons' Den deal

The founders of a Birmingham-based superfood drinks brand were celebrating after receiving an investment offer and the backing of Dragons' Den investor Steven Bartlett.

The founders of Revibed – Ivor Patterson and his son Eugene – appeared on the hit BBC programme to pitch their range of functional drinks, which was created to encourage happier and healthier lifestyles.

After an emotional pitch and following discussions about the company's growth and retail listings, Mr Bartlett offered £50,000 for a 15% stake in the business, which the father-and-son team accepted.

Revibed was founded in the family kitchen, with its drinks inspired by Caribbean flavours including hibiscus, ginger and lime.

The business produces flavoured sparkling waters including Apple & Moringa, Raspberry & Acai, Hibiscus & Peach and Passionfruit & Ginger, alongside three superfood powders.

Ivor and Eugene say the backing will support Revibed's continued expansion in the functional drinks market and help it build its customer community.

The company has already secured retail listings and made sales across the UK, with further expansion planned.

Eugene said: "Appearing on Dragons' Den was an extremely exciting opportunity, and to have secured the backing of Steven Bartlett made it even better.



Father and son team, Ivor and Eugene Patterson

"Revibed is rooted in family values, and we launched in 2020 with the aim of sharing a positive message while also ensuring the products were healthy for both mind and body, vegan-friendly and low in sugar.

"Today, we not only offer a range of canned drinks, but superfood powders too.

"We're tremendously grateful for Steven's offer of investment, and we have exciting plans in place to bring Revibed to even more consumers across the UK.

"We can't wait to see what the future holds."



Marketing specialists OWB Creative are celebrating three substantial new client wins

Celebrating client wins

Birmingham marketing specialists OWB Creative are celebrating are landing three substantial new client wins.

The team at OWB have agreed new work with motorcycle and scooter brand Piaggio UK, AI-driven business strategy digital platform Unloq and Breeze Capital, a property finance lender.

OWB managing director Sara Lyddy said: "We are thrilled to be partnering with Piaggio UK, Unloq and Breeze Capital to craft high-impact campaigns that elevate their brands and drive genuine growth.

"Securing these three prestigious wins across such diverse sectors is a massive testament to our team, and the new partnerships highlight our commitment to achieving transformative, award-winning results."

Firms call for greater devolution powers

The majority of West Midlands businesses believe greater regional decision making and devolution will improve economic opportunities in the region, according to Barclays' Q2 Business Prosperity Index.

The findings, which were taken from the quarterly index which collates anonymised client data from over 900,000 UK businesses, suggested local firms see greater control over investment, infrastructure, skills and growth priorities as an important way to unlock the region's potential.

The study also pointed to a more positive national outlook, with 63% of UK businesses reporting confidence in the UK economy and 86% optimistic about their own prospects.

In the West Midlands, businesses continued to trade steadily during the second quarter. While overall money flowing in and out of firms fell slightly, the decline was smaller than the UK average, suggesting the region remained relatively resilient despite challenging conditions.

However, businesses remain realistic about the challenges ahead. Economic uncertainty, competitive pressures and rising operating costs were identified as the region's biggest concerns during the quarter.

Paul Faulkner, vice chair of the Midlands, Barclays, said: "It is encouraging to see strong support from West Midlands businesses for devolution. Greater regional decision-making can help ensure local priorities are better reflected in the decisions that shape growth across the region.

"That confidence reflects the resilience we continue to see across the West Midlands, particularly among smaller businesses that are continuing to operate and invest despite a challenging backdrop."

To celebrate the launch of the report, Barclays brought together dozens of leaders from the West Midlands business community to discuss the findings, and hear from guest speakers including Raj Kandola, deputy CEO, Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce.

Mr Kandola said: "The granular data Barclays' gathers from its thousands of customers is absolutely vital in painting a clear and accurate picture of the real time challenges facing firms right now.

"Nevertheless, there was a palpable sense of optimism in the room which bodes well for the future and opportunities that we need to grasp as a region."



Raj Kandola on the panel of speakers at the Barclays event



Pictured from left are Leigh Phillips, Louise Walsh and Matt Wellock of Light Up Christmas

Light Up Christmas secures new regional contracts

Birmingham-based lighting and decorating specialists Light Up Christmas have secured three new contracts to transform some of the region's best-known destinations for the festive season.

The company has been appointed to create spectacular seasonal decorations for three more venues: Bell Court Shopping Centre in Stratford-upon-Avon, Cadbury World and Arthrex Solihull. Millennium Point and Warwick Castle have also re-signed a three year deal to bring its bespoke Christmas installations to thousands of visitors throughout the festive season.

Louise Walsh, managing director of Light Up Christmas, said: "We have been delighted with the growth of Light Up this year.

"Our order book has increased by 12% and we have been working with high-profile venues across the country such including Harrods and Sky TV."



ACCESS TO FINANCE

SPECIAL REPORT



Making access to finance work at every stage of growth

A healthy finance ecosystem needs to offer businesses different routes to finance and support, depending on where they are in their growth journey, says the British Business Bank's MARK STERRITT

Birmingham has no shortage of entrepreneurial ambition. From new founders taking their first steps into business to established companies looking to scale and stay in the UK, having the right finance plays a vital role in turning ambition into growth.

Access to finance is not one-size-fits-all. The finance needs of a new business can look very different from those of an established firm seeking several million pounds to scale. For some businesses, the challenge can be finding finance at all, particularly where they have limited trading history or have been unable to secure funding through alternative lenders.

That is why having a diverse finance ecosystem matters.

The British Business Bank works to increase both the supply and diversity of finance available to smaller businesses, helping them to start, scale and stay in the UK. Across the West Midlands, a number of our programmes are helping businesses access finance at different points in their growth journey.

Fitness Worx is a good example of how access to finance can support a business as it moves through different stages of its growth journey. Founded by personal trainer Jack Gibson in 2014 with a single gym in Kenilworth, the independent gym chain has since grown to ten sites across the region.

Finance through the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II, including a recent £320,000 package, has helped the business continue investing in its expansion, most recently supporting the opening of a 12,000+ sq ft, 24-hour facility in Solihull. With further growth planned, Fitness Worx demonstrates how the right finance can help ambitious smaller businesses turn their growth plans into reality.

For entrepreneurs at the start of their journey, start-up loans can provide an important first step. Government-backed start-up loans of between £500 and £25,000 are available to those starting a business or businesses that have been trading for up to five years.

All owners or partners in a business can individually apply for up to £25,000 each, with a maximum of £100,000 available per business. The loans can be repaid over one to five years and successful applicants are also offered 12 months of free mentoring to support their success.

For a founder, access to that combination of finance and support can help turn an idea into a viable business. It also highlights an important point about access to finance: capital is only part of the picture. Understanding how much finance a business needs, what it will be used for and how it will be repaid can be just as important.

As businesses become more established, their requirements can change significantly. This is where the Midlands Engine Investment Fund II (MEIF II) comes in.

The £400 million fund, operated by the British Business Bank, provides a range of commercial finance options to smaller businesses across the Midlands. It offers smaller loans of £25,000 to £100,000, debt finance from £100,000 to £2 million and equity investment of up to £5 million, delivered through a network of appointed fund managers.

MEIF II has already invested more than £100 million into 225 businesses since its launch in 2024. More than £65m had been directly invested by the fund, alongside a further £38.6 million of private-sector backing.

However, improving access to finance is not simply about increasing the amount of capital available. It is also about ensuring that businesses that may not fit traditional lending models have routes to finance.

The British Business Bank's Community ENABLE Funding programme increases finance available through community development financial institutions (CDFIs) and other social-impact lenders, helping smaller businesses that may face barriers to accessing mainstream finance, particularly those in underserved communities.

In April 2026, West Midlands-based BCRS Business Loans was allocated £20 million through the programme to support smaller businesses across the West Midlands and Wales, with loans ranging from £25,000 to £250,000.

For Birmingham and the wider region, the opportunity is to ensure that businesses know these routes to start and scale with the help of appropriate finance.

The British Business Bank is determined to continue to play its role in supporting ambitious entrepreneurs across this region.

**Mark Sterritt is managing director of the local growth team at the British Business Bank.*



By SIMON HEATH, partner at Heligan Corporate Finance

SMEs
The beating heart of the UK economy



insight

In the UK, SMEs account for 60% of all private sector employment and generate over 50% of UK GDP, contributing around £2.8 trillion annual revenue. SMEs are the vast majority of companies, representing 99% of the total number of businesses in the UK. They are important, critical even, to the prosperity of the UK.

Despite the challenges that have been foisted upon them with increases in the National Living Wage, rising tax and compliance burdens, escalating employment legislation and endless regulatory red tape in the post-Brexit world combined with an inflationary economy and rising interest rates, SMEs are nimble and flexible, finding a way to survive.

Merely surviving isn't aspirational, so how do SMEs drive growth?

Most shareholders and management teams want to develop and grow their businesses, with aspirations to create a market-leading brand in their respective markets. Growth requires a strong product or service, an addressable market with significant opportunity and a clear strategy that can be implemented. This takes investment.

Balance sheet growth alone is often limited by access to capital, particularly for CAPEX intensive companies, so funding is becoming increasingly important to support future growth ambitions. As businesses expand, there is a requirement for additional working capital, capital expenditure and to support a greater cost base through additional recruitment and professionalising a business, all requiring cold hard cash.

Traditionally, a phone call to the relationship manager at the bank would provide the access to finance but times have changed and the high-street banks are not as approachable for SME lending. The risk profile of traditional lenders has changed and they are more focused on working with larger clients, outside of secured facilities such as asset backed lending.

There are two principal routes to funding depending upon the maturity of the business, either through the sale of equity in the business or provision of a debt facility. Beyond the traditional debt markets there has also been an expansion in alternative funding solutions focused on supporting growth.

Equity markets

Venture Capital ("VC") and Private Equity ("PE") investors offer access to capital in exchange for buying an equity stake in the business. VC investors target early-stage companies that can't access debt markets, whilst PE investors focus on more mature, revenue and profit generating companies. In return for the investment the funder would require equity, which is a shareholder's most precious asset, but often the funders bring an alternative mindset that can accelerate growth plans and professionalise a business. Shareholders can then assess the trade-off of a partial equity sale today versus a larger future company, and whether that equation generates a greater combined return.

Generally in the SME market, PE investors consider there to be a greater intrinsic risk given the lack of scale, diversification and corporate governance. Consequently, investors often seek a majority equity position to retain ultimate decision making, particularly where there may be underperformance. VC investors are predominantly minority investors with fewer control rights and protections, albeit 20% equity participation is an important threshold for a meaningful shareholding and Companies Act protections.

Debt markets

The larger, traditional funders have generally chased bigger clients and outside of providing debt banking facilities, consider the SME market to be significantly higher risk, particularly for cash flow lending. Asset backed lending is deemed lower risk given any lending is secured against company assets or supported by personal guarantees. The ABL market continues to be active but there are limitations on what can be lent and generally considered working capital facilities rather than funding for growth capital.

There are however, challenger banks, that have developed an SME lending strategy, such as Allica Bank or Metro Bank. They have taken the opportunity to replace the 'Big 4' with debt solutions that can meet SME shareholder needs for growth. These challenger banks are innovative and less risk adverse, recognising the importance of early engagement and support of SMEs can deliver long-term and more profitable relationships.

Alternative funding solutions

There is a plethora of alternative funding solutions to traditional high street banking. These solutions can range from pure debt to quasi-equity, short or long term, amortising or bullet structures. The advent of debt funds which have a longer-term horizon given they are often funded by pension funds, allows more flexible terms and tenure. The debt funds can also create structures that include warrants or 'equity kickers' to share in the upside but reduce the cost of debt, freeing up important cash flow for investment.

In addition to debt, there are government backed initiatives, whether grant-funding or more direct investment that can support SMEs on their pathway to growth. Probably the most high profile is the British Business Bank which was established to fill any void left by the nervous PE investors. They support through the company lifecycle, from start-up through to mature businesses and tailor their support to meet shareholder objectives. In total, the BBB has deployed £39 billion of debt and capital into the SME market.

UK Research & Innovation ("UKRI") and Innovate UK are two government organisations that are focused on research and development grants for commercialising innovative products and services, but there is a wider ecosystem of regional and national grant schemes designed to actively encourage growth across the SME market. All SMEs should regularly track the grant landscape as it is dynamic with new available packages regularly being deployed.

If there is so much capital available, why is it so difficult to access?

Whilst there is an ocean of capital available, the biggest challenge is that debt and equity funders have become increasingly risk adverse, particularly equity funders which given they are supposed to be risk capital investors is inherently contradictory. Access to debt and equity enjoyed a post-Covid bounce, but subsequently there has been a flight to quality following the growing awareness of UK economic vulnerabilities.

Beyond these macro-economic factors, artificial intelligence has also thrown a spanner in the works, potentially disrupting the traditional approach to business across an array of sectors. For example, Software-as-a-Service ("SaaS") companies have seen their business model disrupted or even replaced, and what was seen as a rock-solid recurring revenue market has the potential to be replaced by agentic AI at minimal cost. Technology innovation, such as AI, can therefore impact investor and lender sentiment.

It is therefore increasingly important for SMEs to improve the investability of their businesses through strengthening management teams and splitting responsibilities, enhancing corporate governance and management reporting alongside diversifying its customer base, product and service offerings, all in order to professionalise the company and mitigate traditional risk criteria.

Taking best practices in respective industries and being proactive in identifying risks and implementing a mitigation strategy, even if only delivered in part, will improve confidence across the debt and equity funders and make the likelihood of accessing this valuable capital greater.

In addition to improving the quality of the business, debt and equity funders will want to understand the return on investment in microscopic detail. How will the new capital be deployed, how will this investment generate additional sales or improved margins and ultimately how does the investor or funder can repaid.

These strategic points feed directly into the company's business plan and forecast model and is used as the basis of any investment or lending. Often companies undervalue the importance of the business plan and model which is where advisors come in to help secure the growth financing.

Conclusion

A healthy SME sector is not only desirable but essential for a fully functioning economy and ultimately, society.

There needs to be a multi-pronged framework of support to encourage the risk-taking entrepreneurs to drive additional growth and that includes available access to capital to recruit the next employ or purchase new equipment.

There is also an onus on SMEs to better prepare for capital and de-risking their proposition. It is only when there is an open debt and equity market combined with well-run businesses, that the capital liquidity will start to flow.

Government also needs to be central to this framework. Creating an environment that rewards entrepreneurship and aspirations for growth, reducing administrative and regulatory burdens, implementing grant and loan schemes to accelerate SME growth plans, combined with a macro-economic policy that stimulates growth.

Ultimately, companies blossom in growing economies with limited governmental friction where entrepreneurship is applauded, and success is celebrated. By limiting access to capital, whether intentionally or indirectly, it will cause harm and threaten the SME market, the beating heart of our economy.

**Simon Heath is a Partner at Heligan Group LLP, a UK financial services group with clients across the SME market, offering a range of corporate finance, risk intelligence, investment and wealth management services. Prior to Heligan, Simon worked at KPMG UK LLP for 18 years in their corporate finance division.*

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Leonard Curtis



By MIKE DINNELL of professional services firm Leonard Curtis

Planning ahead: The key to smarter access to capital

Most businesses that fall short on growth capital aren't unfundable. The approach to lenders usually comes too late or isn't thought through. Every business has room to grow; whether that potential becomes reality often comes down to how well the growth is planned and structured.

Raising capital is typically based upon the current performance of the business, but lenders want to understand its trajectory: where it will be in three to five years. If business owners do not understand a lender's mindset, they often leave funding as an afterthought.

Businesses that succeed tend to do two things differently. They start the conversation early, and they work with someone who knows what a lender is looking for.

There are usually three reasons a business needs capital, but the underlying requirement is the same: funding built around that business's own numbers and its future plan.

Succession is one of the most common drivers. A management team looking to buy the business from its current owners needs a facility built specifically for that transition, not a standard loan pulled off the shelf.

Growth is another, and it's rarely ambition running ahead of reality. More often, a business knows exactly where it wants to go and simply lacks the free capital to get there.

The third is mergers and acquisitions, where the ability to act on an opportunity depends on having finance already arranged, rather than starting the search once a target has been identified.

There's a common assumption that this kind of funding is complicated. In practice it isn't, provided it's planned properly. That starts with an honest look at the financials, including how the business has performed historically, and a forward plan stretching three to five years rather than the usual 12 months.

"Timing matters more than most people realise. Businesses often leave it too late, going to market under pressure and needing funding within weeks."

Lenders want a clear picture of strategy and the quality of the management team they're backing. It's not just what they're backing, but who, and whether that's organic growth, acquisition, or succession funding.

Timing matters more than most people realise. Businesses often leave it too late, going to market under pressure and needing funding within weeks. A better approach is almost the opposite: slow down, refine the proposal, and only go to market once it's completely clear what's being asked for and why.

Lenders respond best when they have time to work through a proposal properly, rather than being asked to move quickly because a request has arrived late. That isn't about adding complexity. It's about presenting the case so lenders can make an informed decision that fits their own policy and appetite.

When facilities fail, it's rarely the funding itself at fault. More often it's how the facility was structured: cash flow headroom too tight, covenants that didn't match how the business performs, or forward planning that simply wasn't there.

Getting it right from the outset avoids a lot of pain later. Where problems do surface, early intervention leaves more options for a workable fix.

Understanding the lending market matters too, including which lenders have appetite for which type of deal, and when.

Working with an adviser who has genuine experience on the lender's side changes how a proposal gets built. It means knowing what a lender needs to see before they see it, and presenting the numbers in language they'll respond to, rather than language that simply sounds persuasive.

Done well, structured debt and working capital let businesses grow and make critical decisions without worrying about running out of cash.

There should always be enough flexibility to manage working capital day to day, repayment terms that hold up realistically over several years, and covenants both client and lender are comfortable with. That's the difference between a facility that constrains a business and one that underpins its growth.

Ultimately, access to capital comes down to securing the right funding, structured correctly, at the point a business actually needs it, by starting early and involving people who understand both what the business needs and what a lender will require in return.

For further information and support please reach out to :
Mike Dinnell, structured debt manager at Leonard Curtis
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ART Business Loans looks to the future following strong year of growth

ART Business Loans is looking ahead with confidence after reporting a strong year of lending growth and continued support for businesses across the Midlands.

The Birmingham-based community development finance institution shared its latest annual report at its AGM on 25 September, highlighting another positive year for the organisation as it prepares to enter its 30th year in 2027.

During the 2025/26 financial year, ART saw lending increase helping businesses to grow, protect and create jobs, invest in their teams and make a positive contribution to their local economies.

ART provides loans of between £10,000 and £250,000 to viable businesses across the West Midlands and adjoining counties, particularly where they have been unable to secure all the finance they need from traditional lenders.



The annual report also highlighted ART's continued commitment to supporting underserved areas and communities, with more than 75 per cent of loans made in these areas. The organisation continues to support businesses across a wide range of sectors, while also seeing an increase in average deal size and the number of larger deals delivered in partnership with other lenders.

The AGM also marked an important moment for ART as Nick Venning stepped down as chair after 10 years in the role.

Reflecting on his time with the organisation, Nick said: "It has been a real privilege to be part of ART over the past 10 years.

"We have faced some significant economic challenges during that time, but ART has continued to adapt, grow and, most importantly, support businesses that might otherwise struggle to access the finance they need.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed my time as chair and I leave knowing ART is in a strong position for the future."

Graham Nicoll will take over as chair, bringing his experience to the Board as ART enters the next stage of its development.

Graham said: "I am delighted to be taking on the role of Chair at such an exciting time for ART. There is a strong foundation to build on and a clear opportunity to reach and support even more businesses across the Midlands and beyond.

"I am looking forward to working with Steve, the board and the wider ART team as we move into this next chapter."

ART has continued to strengthen its funding capacity during the year, including an allocation of £7 million through the British Business Bank's Community ENABLE Funding Programme, supporting lending above £25,000 to businesses across the West Midlands.

Demand has also remained strong into the new financial year, with lending during the first quarter exceeding ART's increased growth targets.

Dr Steve Walker, chief executive of ART Business Loans, said the results provide a strong platform as the organisation approaches a significant milestone.

He said: "As we enter our 30th year in 2027, there is a real sense of optimism about what comes next for ART. We have a strong team, growing demand and the funding in place to help more viable businesses access the finance they need.

"We are incredibly proud of what ART has achieved over almost three decades, but our focus is very much on the future.

"There are still too many good businesses struggling to find appropriate and affordable finance, and we want to make sure they know there are other options available. The future for ART looks bright and I am excited about what we can achieve together."

The Annual Report also reinforced ART's wider role in helping businesses understand their finance options and avoid unsuitable borrowing.

"With some businesses still turning to short term online finance at significantly higher interest rates, ART is continuing to work with partners, brokers, business support organisations and the wider CDFI sector to improve awareness of responsible finance.

As ART moves towards its 30th year, the organisation plans to build on the momentum of 2025/26, strengthen its partnerships and increase awareness among businesses and advisers across the Midlands and surrounding areas.

Dr Walker added: "For almost 30 years, ART has been about giving viable businesses another option when traditional finance cannot meet their needs.

"That purpose remains as important today as it was when ART began, and we are looking forward to helping many more businesses grow and succeed in the years ahead."

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

Unity Trust Bank launches £250,000 grants programme

Ethical funder Unity Trust Bank is celebrating 25 years of supporting the responsible finance sector with the launch of a six-figure grants programme.

Since 2001, the Brindleyplace-based bank has provided more than £143 million of funding to 22 community development finance institutions across the UK.

This has provided capital to organisations delivering positive impact in communities where mainstream finance has not been available.

As part of its 25th anniversary, Unity has committed to award over £250,000 worth of grants to CDFIs by 2030.

The CDFI innovation and transformation grants complement its wider support of the responsible finance sector at a time when the bank's role in supporting communities is growing from strength to strength.

Joshua Meek, chief customer and impact officer, said: "As a leading UK social impact bank, the sector is directly aligned to our double bottom line mission.

"Our CIT grants programme aims to provide capacity for CDFIs to explore innovations and transformations that best service their customers. We believe this support can deliver outsized impact where it matters."



Josh Meek

The 2026 CIT grants programme was launched in September and eligible CDFIs are invited to apply for one of two grants.

The first is £40,000 for an established impact lender. This is to support a practical innovation, transformation project, service improvement or capability-building activity that helps deliver more impact for customers.

The other is £20,000 to a micro enterprise lender providing loans under £25,000. This is to support investment readiness, evidence-building, market insight and practical preparation for growth opportunities in micro-enterprise lending.

Secure Trust Bank strengthens ABL team

Secure Trust Bank Business Finance has appointed a funding specialist with more than 30 years' experience in financial services as head of asset-based lending.



Nick Leitch

Nick Leitch has worked across areas including consumer lending, restructuring, debt advisory, private equity, ABL and leveraged finance, with a focus on supporting SMEs and mid-market businesses in the UK.

Beginning his career in a number of high street banks, Nick went on to lead business development activity for restructuring at EY. From there, he spent ten years working within private equity at Seneca Partners and Endless, working across origination, equity investment and portfolio strategy.

More recently Nick spent eight years at Shawbrook Bank, building the brand's UK market presence and growing total facilities to £1 billion.

"The STB team has built a highly regarded ABL offering, having supported a number of leading businesses right across the UK," he said.

"That's why it felt like the right fit to join as head of ABL, leveraging this reputation and team strength to help more mid-market businesses access the funding they need to grow.

"We are increasingly seeing how ABL is moving into the mainstream, with businesses and sponsors utilising it to diversify senior debt structures and unlock deals. Having worked across leveraged finance and private equity, I've seen where all these elements augment together."

Unlocking growth for Birmingham businesses



Julie Warren, marketing director at Propel Finance, sets out why straightforward, efficient access to asset finance is becoming a key enabler for Birmingham and West Midlands-based SMEs looking to turn ambition into action.

Birmingham's economy is showing resilience and ambition in 2026, with businesses across the region looking for ways to invest, scale and stay competitive. At Propel Finance, we've been working with businesses in Birmingham and the wider West Midlands for 30 years. Our local team understands what makes Birmingham a cornerstone of the UK economy: thriving sectors spanning advanced manufacturing, engineering, technology, logistics and business services - all primed to seize new opportunities, provided they have the right finance partner behind them.

Supporting Midlands investment and growth

For SMEs, stronger demand often means securing additional machinery, equipment or vehicles to fulfil orders and expand capacity and productivity. Asset finance can help businesses acquire the assets they need without paying the full cost upfront, preserving working capital while putting investment to use immediately.

Through hire purchase and finance leases, Propel supports businesses with timely, seamless funding towards a wide range of business-critical assets - from production machinery and commercial vehicles to IT systems, communications equipment, energy efficient upgrades and other essential equipment. Fixed repayments over an agreed term give SMEs clarity over costs and confidence to plan ahead.

Unlocking capital from existing assets

For businesses that already own valuable equipment, Propel can also support through asset refinance, offering another route to funding. This allows firms to release capital tied up in existing assets while continuing to use them - helping to support investment, strengthen cash flow or fund the next stage of growth without disrupting day-to-day operations.

Releasing £400,000 for growth: A Midlands manufacturer's story

One West Midlands-headquartered manufacturer demonstrates how asset refinance can release capital for expansion. The business supplies specialist equipment to organisations operating in safety-critical environments, producing low volumes of precision-engineered parts using advanced CNC machinery. Long lead times between purchase orders and payment, combined with the structure of its debtor book, meant invoice finance wasn't suitable.

Propel supported the business by refinancing its existing machinery, initially releasing £250k over a 12-month term, which was repaid in full. 24 months later, with the relationship established and route-to-title already completed, Propel released a further £150k over another 12-month term. The funding gave the business additional liquidity to meet the upfront costs of long-lead purchase orders, support ongoing manufacturing projects and continue fulfilling significant contracts without placing unnecessary pressure on day-to-day cash flow.



Aaron Khatkar, Propel's Midlands-based senior relationship director, who secured both transactions, said: "This was a great solution for a more complex business model. Refinancing valuable Tier 1 assets unlocked tied-up capital without impacting trading, with structured repayments aligned to their cash flow cycle. The transaction also demonstrates how asset refinance can be used more than once during an asset's economic life."

A lender for ambitious businesses

Growing businesses need a lender that understands what it takes to scale. Propel combines national lending strength with local relationship support, helping Birmingham and West Midlands SMEs access asset finance efficiently and confidently.

Having grown by 415% over the past five years and been named the UK's fastest sustained growth asset finance lender in the 2026 AFUK50 rankings, Propel is well placed to support ambitious businesses as they invest in the assets that move them forward.

Ready to unlock your growth potential?

Contact Propel today
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Birmingham entrepreneur wins top young professional award

The founder of a training firm that has delivered measurable behaviour change for employees through neurodiversity training has been named Greater Birmingham Young Professional of the Year.

Iveta Pudilova, founder of National Neurodiversity Training, was recognised for delivering bespoke neurodiversity training programmes.

Neurodiversity describes the natural variation in how people's brains work, think, communicate and process information.

It includes people with conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia.

National Neurodiversity Training helps organisations understand these differences and adapt their working practices so that neurodivergent employees can thrive.

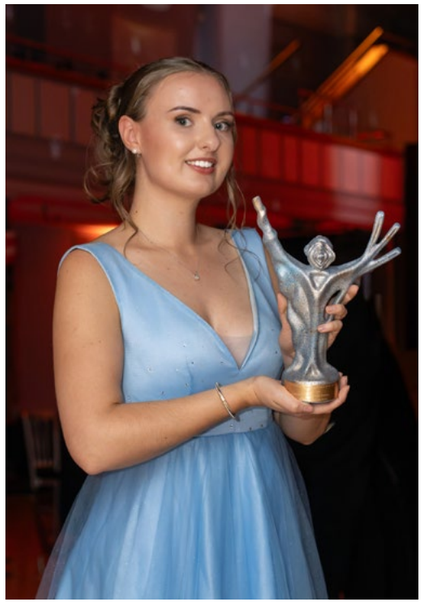
Iveta was named the 2026 Greater Birmingham Young Professional of the Year in front of 385 guests at Birmingham Town Hall, having also won the training and education category.

The event, organised by Future Faces, the young professionals' arm of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, was hosted by BBC Radio WM presenter PJ Ellis.

Chair of the judges, the GBCC's membership director Lillian Elekan, said: "It's wonderful to see how Iveta's journey as a young professional has developed, from winning a category award in 2024 to being crowned the overall GBYPY winner in 2026.

"She has gone from strength to strength, growing her businesses and using her lived experience to help organisations become more inclusive of neurodivergent people. This recognition is thoroughly deserved."

Other winners included Shalom Gallagher of Accenture (Greater Birmingham Apprentice of the Year), Carys Hanson of KPMG (Digital, Tech & Innovation), James Kid of XPS Group (Finance), Poppi Hall of Enoch Evans (Legal), Priya Jadav of Balfour Beatty VINCI (Built Environment and Engineering), and Emma Jones of AllinAll Events (Entrepreneurship). Paul Faulkner of Barclays won the President's Award while the Ambassador Awards was won by Prabjot Ragbotra of Mitchells and Butlers.



Iveta Pudilova



Outgoing CEO Sarah Moorhouse with Raj Kandola

Black Country Chamber names new chief executive

The Black Country Chamber of Commerce has appointed a new chief executive to take the organisation into its next stage of growth.

Raj Kandola, currently deputy chief executive of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, is replacing Sarah Moorhouse who announced she was stepping down in July to pursue a new opportunity in the United States.

She said: "I have known Raj for a number of years and have seen first-hand the skill, energy and integrity he brings to everything he does. There is no one I would rather hand this chamber to.

"We have worked together on projects that matter to businesses right across this region and I know he shares the same passion for the Black Country that has driven me throughout my time in this role. I am leaving the chamber in exceptionally good hands."

Raj brings more than a decade of experience working with the chamber network and supporting Midlands businesses to grow despite significant economic and global challenges.

Phil Purssey, chair of the Black Country Chamber of Commerce, said: "On behalf of the board, I want to thank Sarah for everything she has given this chamber over the past four years. Her drive and commitment to Black Country businesses have helped transform this organisation and she leaves us in a strong position.

"Raj is exactly the right person to build on those foundations. His experience across the chamber network, his understanding of this region and the relationships he has already built with our team and members gives the board complete confidence in his appointment."



Sports agency lands golf deal

Birmingham-based Sporting Group International has secured a valuable eSIM partner for the World Players Super League, the largest golf tour in the world.

The WPSL's two-year deal with Yesim, a Swiss-based provider of eSIM mobile data services for international travellers, is a global first that is said to be worth a substantial six-figure sum.

Yesim is the first eSIM company to sponsor a global golf organisation, with exclusive eSIM rights for all of WPSL's tournaments, estimated to be more than 1,800 a year worldwide.

SGI is a global sports agency specialising in high-value sponsorship and commercial partnerships, with its headquarters on Temple Street in Birmingham, and offices across the UK, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Adrian Wright (pictured), chief executive of SGI, explained that the WPSL brings keen golfers from around the world together to compete in a single, global competition.

Mr Wright said: "We're thrilled to have secured this premium, high-profile deal between Yesim and WPSL, which is a global first.

"There are more than four million golfers who have played, or who are currently playing, in WPSL-related tournaments.

"Players include everyone from your average amateur golfer to high-profile former top football players Robbie Fowler, Andy Cole, Lee Dixon and Teddy Sheringham.

"This profile is replicated internationally, creating an audience of unmatched scale who will see and experience Yesim's involvement."

Mother and daughter achieve utility qualifications together

A West Midlands mother and daughter are celebrating the next stage of their career development after completing a major 'utilities' diploma at the same time.

Julie and Alysia Totney both work in the multi-utility department at S&R Construction and worked together to achieve their Level 3 diplomas in network construction operations for the water sector.

The duo, who have worked with the Kingswinford business for eight and six years respectively, are now qualified to design and project manage the lay-out of complex water systems used in major residential, commercial and industrial schemes.

"We've got a very close relationship both at home and at work, so it was nice to support each other through the next stage of our personal development," said Julie, who has recently been promoted to multi-utilities projects director.

"It was great to pass the diplomas at roughly the same time, although Alysia's age meant she was quicker with the learning than I was."



Alysia and Julie Totney

Trade body urges support for manufacturers

The president of a UK trade body is calling on the new prime minister to back up his positive industry rhetoric with tangible support on the factory floor.

Stephen Morley, who leads the Confederation of British Metalforming, made the direct plea to Andy Burnham on the third day of the Labour Party Conference in the face of rising energy prices, stricter regulation and steel tariffs.

He believes a formal strategy is needed that delivers competitive energy prices, a skills system that develops the engineers and technicians of the future and planning rules that allow companies to invest without getting trapped in years of bureaucracy.

"Management teams can deal with difficult decisions, but what they struggle with is uncertainty," he said.

"When a manufacturer is considering investing in a new machine, expanding a factory or taking on additional employees, they need to know what the economic and regulatory landscape is going to look like tomorrow and in the future, not just today.

"If Andy Burnham's administration is serious about reindustrialisation, then our SMEs must be at the forefront of its thinking.

"He should look closely at Germany's 'Mittelstand' model, which has long demonstrated how sustained support for small and medium-sized businesses can drive regional economic success.

"It offers an example of the kind of devolved approach he has said he wants to encourage, and could be replicated in the UK."



Charlotte Cresswell and Hannah Cresswell



Jules Goodall and Lisa Heynes



Amy Langston and Bennel Brew-Koufie



Abi Hanson and Gemma Pearce

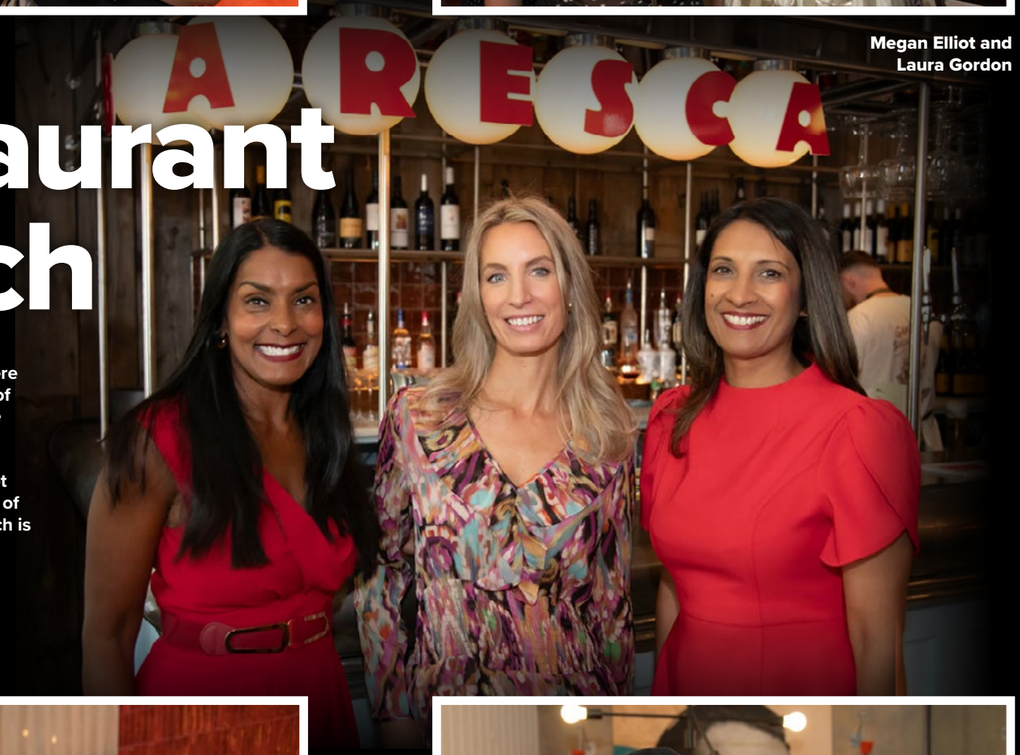


Matt and Pav Wellock

Restaurant launch

Business movers and shakers were among the guests of the launch of tapas restaurant Baresca in Mere Green Sutton Coldfield.

Cava, cerveza, sangria and tasty tapas were enjoyed on a hot summer's evening for the launch of the third Baresca restaurant which is owned by the Perkins family.



Arpita Anstey, Emma Howden and Anita Champaneri



Annabelle Rowlands and Prit Ladwa



Megan Elliot and Laura Gordon



Scott and Keshia Golborne



George Romanenco and Gail Aldridge



Anjola Ajoa, Soloman Ofoaiye and Bennel Brew-Koufie



Yusuf Tross and Alex Tross



Katrina Cooke and Doug Wright

Charity golf day

Insurance firms Hiscox and Howden joined forces to win the Riding for the Disabled Association's inaugural corporate golf event in Solihull, which raised £2,500 for the charity's work across the UK. The victorious team was made up of Michael Constanza and Alex Bailey from Hiscox Business Insurance, Andy Gouldbourne from Howden Insurance and his guest Toby Mitchell. The four fought off stiff competition from six other teams representing companies in the West Midlands region to take the honours at the RDA's first Charity Golf Day at Shirley Golf Club in Solihull.

Main Picture: Alex Bailey



Paul Cox



The competitors!



Andrew Howells, Gary Callow, Matt Thomas and Russell Heritage



Alex Rossookh, Paul Cox, Alex Lavery and Will Moss



Andy Goulbourne, Anna Heritage, Michael Constanza and Toby Mitchell



Gavin Wright, Adrian Wright, Tim Wright and James Fryer

Historic Methodist Central Hall sold to US investor

One of Birmingham city centre's most prominent heritage buildings has been sold, marking the start of a new chapter for the landmark property.

Methodist Central Hall, the Grade II* listed building on Corporation Street, has been sold to US-based investor and developer Civis, which plans to restore the historic asset as a major civic and cultural destination for Birmingham.

Built in 1904 by renowned local architects Ewan Harper and James A. Harper, the hall occupies a prominent position within Birmingham's Civic Quarter. Formerly home to the Que Club nightclub, the building has been vacant for more than two decades.

Savills and Lambert Smith Hampton acted on behalf of the vendor.

Michael Maguire, development director at Savills Birmingham, said: "The sale of Methodist Central Hall represents an exceptional result in what continues to be a highly selective development and investment market.

"This is one of Birmingham's most iconic historic buildings and its scale, listed status and complexity meant securing the right purchaser was critical.

"Civis demonstrated both a strong appreciation for the building's heritage significance and a compelling long-term vision for its future. We are delighted to have helped facilitate a transaction that safeguards the future of this important landmark and creates the foundations for a transformative regeneration project in the heart of the city."



Civis is currently refining its plans for the building, but has confirmed ambitions to bring the historic structure back into active use through a model that combines heritage preservation with cultural, educational and community-focused activity.

AC Hotel opens at Birmingham Airport



Pictured left to right are Nimisha Mehan, Frazer Callingham, Ivan Lynch and Paul Callingham, all of Starboard Hotels, the mayor of Solihull, Councillor Sardul Singh Marwa MBE JP, Daniel Gough of AC Marriott Birmingham NEC and Airport, and the mayoress, Satnam Kaur Marwa JP. Picture by Lucy Baker.

AC Hotel by Marriott Birmingham NEC and Airport has been officially opened after a multi-million pound investment and refurbishment programme.

The former ibis Styles hotel joined Starboard Hotels in 2018. It has been renovated and rebranded, it is the first Marriott hotel in the operator's portfolio.

The mayor of Solihull, Councillor Sardul Singh Marwa who conducted the launch, said: "The hotel will provide high-quality accommodation and create valuable employment opportunities. I wish the team every success as they begin this exciting new chapter."

Frazer Callingham, managing director of Starboard Hotels, said: "Years of planning, design and investment have led to this point, and we're thrilled to bring the AC Hotels brand to the thriving Birmingham Airport market.

"We chose the AC Hotel brand as we believe it is exactly what travellers are seeking – a premium, design-led hotel experience delivered by a passionate team."

Work starts on £22m Walsall industrial scheme



A CGI of the completed Central Point development

Work is beginning on a major multi-unit industrial development in Walsall with the help of a leading Midlands construction consultancy.

The £22 million Central Point development in Willenhall Road, close to Junction 10 of the M6, will provide almost 100,000 sq ft of modern industrial space across six units.

Birmingham-based The Construction Consultants have been appointed as project managers, quantity surveyors and employers agents to oversee the project on behalf of Henley-in-Arden project developers, Erdgard Developments.

Due for completion in early 2027, it will provide industrial units from 6,000 sq ft to 25,000 sq ft aimed at industrial, trade and logistics operators.

The main contractor for the site is the Warwick-based MCS Group, with lettings being handled by JLL and Newmark.

TCC co-founder and director Sandeep Singh Sunner said: “Central Point is exactly the kind of speculative development the Midlands needs just now.

“There is a shortage of developments like this in the area and we are delighted to be involved in this exciting project which will make a major contribution to Walsall’s regeneration.

“The units will be built to a high quality specification, providing sustainable industrial space in a great location.”

Office investment opportunity hits market

A prominent seven-storey office in Walsall town centre has gone on the market with a price tag of £1.45 million.

Townend House, which sits above the Park Place Shopping Centre, is a leasehold building providing a mix of traditional multi-let office floors and a number of smaller serviced office suites.



James Mattin, managing director of Bond Wolfe who are handling the sale, said: “The property has benefited from a significant refurbishment programme since 2005. Common area and WC lighting has been upgraded to sensored LED, as has the majority of the lettable office space.”

The 26,813 sq ft building produces a current rental income of £343,329 per annum, against an estimated rental value of £434,347 per annum once fully let.

It is held on a long leasehold for a term of 99 years from December 30, 1970, expiring December 27, 2069, at a ground rent of £20,000 per annum. The car park is held on identical lease terms at a ground rent of £10,250.

Kings Norton estate offers rental growth potential

A multi-let industrial estate in south Birmingham which offers scope for rental growth, has been brought to market with an asking price of £1.45 million.

Parkview Industrial Estate, on Pershore Road South in Kings Norton, is being marketed by Birmingham-based commercial property agents Shepherd Commercial.

The estate comprises eight units providing approximately 21,215 sq ft in total. One unit, of around 1,119 sq ft, is vacant, while the remaining are let to sitting tenants.

The site has 49 dedicated car parking spaces and direct access onto the A441, six miles from Birmingham city centre and within easy reach of the M42 and A38.

Shepherd Commercial said the mix of income, a vacant unit and leases due for renewal provide potential buyers with scope to add value through active asset management.

Kaine Arkinson, managing director at Shepherd Commercial, said: “Parkview represents a fantastic opportunity to acquire a multi-let industrial estate in an established Birmingham location.

“The mix of sitting tenants, one vacant unit and leases coming up for renewal gives a purchaser real scope to grow income over time.

“We are applying the same exit-focused thinking we bring to every instruction, looking at the estate’s long-term potential rather than treating this as a single transaction.”



Wavensmere expands technical team amid growth

Urban regeneration specialist Wavensmere Homes has appointed a technical manager to bolster the team.

Ryan Pritchard joins the Birmingham-based firm from Countryside Partnerships, where he worked for three years as a technical manager. Prior to that, he was a design co-ordinator at Bellway Homes, undertaking design management and having an active involvement with on-site construction.



Established in 2016, Wavensmere’s live projects have a collective GDV of over £400 million. The five major developments currently under construction are seeing circa £3.5 million per month spent on brownfield regeneration.

An additional three major Midlands schemes are at the planning or pre-construction stage, with a handful of land acquisitions on the immediate horizon.

Ben Clarke, development director of Wavensmere Homes, said: “The growth of our technical team is crucial to the smooth running of each of our live projects. Ryan’s expertise and passion for residential-led regeneration makes him the perfect fit for us.”



Pictured from left are Panko Sushi managing director Ed Clayton, Sandy Farar, senior client services manager of Praxis, and Benjamin Samson, brand executive chef of Panko Sushi

Panko Sushi to open first Birmingham restaurant

Japanese-themed independent food chain Panko Sushi has chosen Brindleyplace as the location for its first Birmingham home.

The chain will be taking just under 1,400 sq ft of space on the ground floor of Foundry, 6 Brindleyplace, on a 10-year lease. Customers are told they can expect authentic Japanese flavours including sushi, katsu, teriyaki and ramen.

Matt Long, senior asset manager for Praxis at Brindleyplace, said: “We are pleased to be welcoming Panko Sushi to Brindleyplace.

“Taking a prime position overlooking Central Square, this latest addition to our 26-strong food and beverage offering will provide not only another excellent dining experience but also a great grab and go option for office workers and visitors.”

Edward Cayton, MD for Panko Sushi, added: “Brindleyplace represents a great opportunity for our business. We hope it will quickly become our best-performing location due to the high footfall and its proximity to major venues including the Utilita Arena and ICC.”

MK2 Real Estate boosts property management team with four hires

Birmingham commercial property agent MK2 Real Estate has boosted its property management team with four new members of staff.

Three recruits have been added to the finance team. Amber Chatwin and Kiesha Gregory will manage client accounts, while Andrew Roche will run accounts payable. The trio have more than 20 years’ experience in the commercial property industry.

Carl Saunderson has also joined the firm and has been appointed facilities manager after moving from Avison Young.

Marcello Della Croce, head of MK2’s property management team, said: “Our management portfolio has grown considerably. With £1.5 billion of assets under management we need a skilled team and these latest recruits are a welcome addition to the firm.”



Pictured from left are Darren D’Amore, head of property accounts, Amber Chatwin, Kiesha Gregory and Andrew Roche

GBCC appoints finance director as long-serving CFO retires

Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce has announced the appointment of Naveen Gupta as finance director.

He succeeds long-serving chief financial officer Helen Bates, who is retiring after nine years in the role.

With three decades of experience in finance, Naveen has held senior positions at organisations including the Agriculture & Horticulture Development Board, the Royal Shakespeare Company, University of Oxford and B:Music.

He has also worked in finance roles at Jaguar Land Rover and Prudential.

Originally from the East Midlands, he studied at the University of Glasgow, where he gained a masters degree in International Accounting and Finance.

Henrietta Brealey, chief executive of the GBCC, said: "I am delighted to welcome Naveen to the chamber as our new finance director.

"He brings a wealth of financial, commercial and leadership experience, together with a strong track record of delivering sustainable growth and long-term value.

"As the chamber continues to grow its impact and support for businesses across the region, his expertise will be a real asset."





Pictured from left are Julie Mole, Mark Taylor and Jack Edmonds

Accountancy firm strengthens Birmingham team

Midlands accountancy firm Bishop Fleming has made two new appointments with Jack Edmonds and Julie Mole taking on senior roles.

Jack has been appointed a partner, while Julie is now a director in its accountancy team.

They join the firm after working together as a team in their previous roles at Crowe UK.

Jack has 15 years of experience advising owner-managed businesses and SMEs. His background combines compliance and accounts work with a broader advisory role, supporting clients with growth strategy, profit optimisation, leadership challenges and hands-on business decision-making.

Julie spent eight years in her previous role, helping businesses secure funding solutions. Prior to that, she worked in NatWest corporate and commercial banking for over 20 years.

Mark Taylor, Birmingham office lead and partner at Bishop Fleming, said: "Both are fantastic additions to our Birmingham team. They bring deep experience, strong market relationships and a highly collaborative way of working that will be of huge benefit to our clients."

Building consultancy boosts health and safety expertise

A Midlands building consultancy has strengthened its health and safety team with the appointment of a new associate director.

Richard Hardwick joins Birmingham-based The Construction Consultants after more than 25 years' experience in health and safety consultancy. He was previously an associate director at Tetra Tech Europe.

Before that he held senior health and safety roles at Faithful and Gould and the WT Parker Group, and has worked on complex and challenging construction projects across a wide range of sectors.

TCC co-founder and director Alex Pimley said Richard would be a significant asset to the business because of his wide range of experience.

"Richard is able to provide practical and cost-effective advice on a range of health and safety issues," he said.

"He is also able to deliver clear and pragmatic advice that supports compliance, reduces risk and promotes a safety ethos."



PR agency announces new deputy MD



A well-established Birmingham PR agency has promoted Rebecca Williams to the role of deputy managing director.

Joined the firm nine years ago as consumer PR director, and was appointed to the board as director of people and planning in 2020.

That role saw her take responsibility for every aspect of the team, from recruitment and retention to training and wellbeing. She also launched the award-winning NextGen initiative and introduced a DEI programme designed to champion protected groups within WPR and build an agency representative of the wider community by 2028.

As deputy managing director, she will continue to oversee people and planning, but will also take on responsibility for internal operational delivery and governance.

Managing director Jane Ainsworth said: "Bex brings energy and passion to everything she does – she's a truly positive force for the agency.

"We have ambitious targets and I know that, in her new role, she will excel at ensuring our plans and priorities reflect those targets and that we deliver on them."

Architecture practice bolsters emergency services team

Architecture practice HLM Architects has appointed Russell Geary as its new associate, emergency services lead.

Based in the Birmingham studio, Russell will play a key role in expanding the practice's emergency services capabilities while collaborating with colleagues across its national network.



Having joined the Architects Registration Board in 2011, he brings more than a decade of specialist experience in classified public-sector projects, developing and delivering award-winning 'bluelight' schemes for police forces throughout England and Wales.

Russell said: "HLM has one of the UK's only truly dedicated bluelight technical teams, offering the chance to work alongside specialists who understand the unique challenges of this sector.

"I am equally excited to collaborate with colleagues across healthcare, education, defence and justice, sharing knowledge to advance trauma-informed, neuroinclusive design and modern methods of construction for the benefit of the communities these facilities serve.

"I'm passionate about creating environments that prioritise staff and detainee safety, dignity, welfare and wellbeing through trauma-informed design, and I know the team at HLM share this passion."

Steven Lennon, head of justice and emergency services at HLM, said: "We are delighted to welcome Russell. He brings an exceptional depth of knowledge in the design and delivery of police and custodial architecture."

Manufacturing SMEs gain new industry advocate

The Confederation of British Metalforming has appointed one of the industry's most passionate advocates as its new ambassador for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Andrea Wilson recently left manufacturing business Hone-All Precision after the sale and successful completion of her five-year earn-out.

She will work closely with CBM members, industry stakeholders and policymakers in a bid to ensure the challenges, opportunities and successes of manufacturing SMEs are represented at the highest levels.

Andrea has become a leading voice for manufacturing, including her campaign calling for the appointment of a dedicated minister for manufacturing to provide stronger leadership and strategic support.

Geraldine Bolton, CEO of the CBM, said: "Andrea brings unparalleled passion, credibility and commitment to this important role.

"She has consistently demonstrated her dedication to supporting manufacturing SMEs and ensuring their voices are heard – using more than 20 years' experience of running her own business.

"Her tireless advocacy, particularly her campaign for a minister for manufacturing, reflects the determination and vision our sector needs. We are delighted to welcome her as our ambassador for SMEs, a new but increasingly important role for the CBM."



Five minutes with...

Naomi Nash

TechWM head of community & collaboration



In one sentence, what does your role involve?
Bringing the West Midlands tech community together to learn, grow, and help transform our digital cluster into a world-class tech hub.
How long have you been in your current job?
Four years officially, but I've been involved since TechWM was created in 2019.
Please give a summary of your professional career to date
After completing my A-Levels, I worked in retail and admin before joining the communications and membership team at an NHS Trust. Looking for a role closer to my daughter's nursery, I became assistant to a tech start-up incubator, Entrepreneurs for the Future, at Innovation Birmingham. Despite having no background in tech or business, I quickly learned and eventually became programme manager, supporting hundreds of start-ups.

When the programme ended in 2018, I joined Tech Nation as the Midlands regional manager, part of its first UK-wide entrepreneur engagement team, expanding my reach to both West and East Midlands, supporting tech start-ups and scale-ups.

During this time, I also became a founding board member of Birmingham Tech Week, having known founder Yiannis Maos since his time on the Entrepreneurs for the Future programme.

When TechWM secured its first long-term funding, Yiannis invited me to become the organisation's first employee. I said yes immediately – and four years later I'm still here, working with an incredible team, board and tech community. I feel very fortunate to be where I am today.
Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?
I think so. My A-levels were in communications, sociology and drama & theatre studies which I suppose gave me understanding on how people communicate, why, and how to interact with them. I reckon this has helped set me up well for bringing people together.
What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?
A tough question! Through running the region's AI special interest group and AI & Future Tech Forum, I've seen first-hand how AI is driving positive change in healthcare, sustainability and advanced engineering. From improving data analysis to making technology more accessible, its potential is incredibly exciting. Learn more at our Tech for All and AI symposium events during Birmingham Tech Week!
Social media platform of choice, and why?
I'm not a huge social media person, but I do like Instagram to keep up to date with my friends and family who live far away. I can be guilty of doom scrolling TikTok as my algorithm gives me clips of stand-up comedy, parenting satire and TV recommendations.
How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?
I would like to think they enjoy working with me and that I'm easy to work with. I'm fairly laid back, maybe too much sometimes, but I hope that I help to put things in perspective and bring stress levels down.
Highlights of your career so far?
My time at Tech Nation was incredible. The team, culture and experience it gave me will stay with me for a long time.
But Birmingham Tech Week has to be the highlight for me. Now coming into its eighth year, being a part of its success is a wonderful experience.
Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?
I may have already forgotten them or locked them away as I can't recall anything other than forgetting people's names, which I do very often!
Pet hates?
Emails. Email is high on my pet hate list. Or maybe email etiquette is what bothers me. Either way, I'm pleased AI is helping with some of that now.
If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?
One I always tell my kids: "In a world where you can be anything, be kind."
How do you relax away from work?
I'm very fortunate to have wonderful friends and family who enjoy hanging out and putting the world to rights over a glass of wine.

'Me time' is very important to me as well; a hot bubble bath, a gritty true crime documentary or a gaming session on Zelda is usually where you'll find me. Any tips on how to defeat a Lynel welcome! #iykyk
Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.
I do not have a sense of direction. At all. I can be walking down the street, go into a shop, come out and go the wrong way. Or when driving somewhere and I turn left into the destination, when I'm leaving I don't remember which way to turn out. I have no concept of where things are in relation to where I am. It's very frustrating and my family take the mick all the time.
You can take one book, one film and one record onto a desert island – what would they be?
Oof, film would be Clue I reckon, although Rat Race is a close second. Book, I don't think I've ever read the same book more than once so not sure I'd enjoy re-reading the same one (although I recommend If Cats Disappeared from the World by Genki Kawamura). I like books with twists and turns which only really give the full impact on the first read. Can I take a puzzle book? I like to keep my mind active with cryptic crosswords. And record . . . I think I'd have to go with the 10th anniversary edition of Les Misérables.
Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?
Johnny Depp. Easy. We'd drink mega-pints of wine. David Attenborough. I'd ask him all the questions about everything! Princess Di so we could gossip about the royal family. Can I have fictional characters? If so, I would also choose Titus Andromedon from The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt. One of my ancestors would be cool!
What would you choose to eat for your last supper?
Genuinely love a good cheese sandwich, followed by a banoffee cheesecake. Mmm.

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