

# Birmingham Business

**FREE**  
March/April 2023

## Shattering the glass ceiling

**How our female business leaders have overcome the odds**

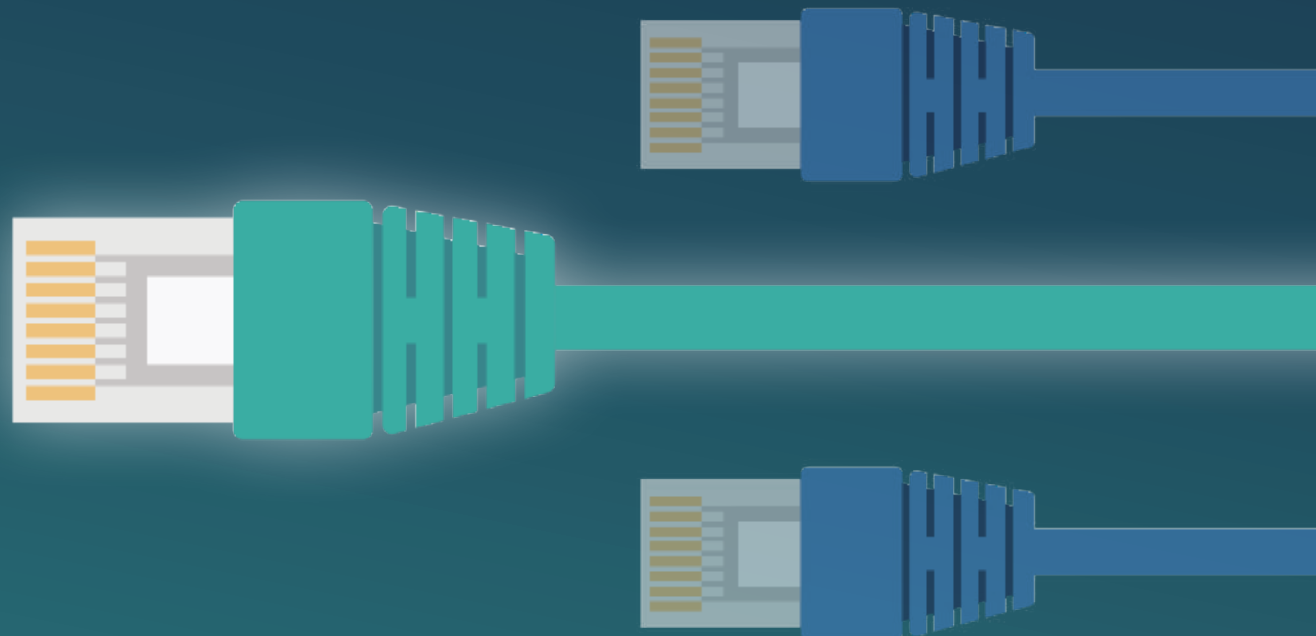
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# Mission to bring Birmingham on-net

High-speed internet connectivity supports economic growth and powers innovation. It fuels businesses, improves access to learning and empowers whole communities. Yet, the current delivery model for business connectivity is fragmented with not enough businesses able to harness the potential of fibre connectivity.

Neos Networks Metro Access Networks removes the complexity of network provision for businesses.

Currently, business connectivity is typically delivered through partnerships with BT and third-party network providers who own the 'last mile' of infrastructure that goes direct to each premises. By installing over 60km of Neos Networks' owned Access Tails in key metropolitan areas across the country, we reduce the reliance upon these third parties instead providing businesses with an end-to-end service that delivers fibre directly into their premises, enabling more competitive choice for businesses across the regions. As a result, companies can then take advantage of our full range of products and services, as well as:

- Faster timescales to get connected
- High-speed Ethernet connectivity with capacities up to 10Gbps
- Lower costs and a higher quality service
- Access to gigabit capable exchanges

## Who are Neos Networks?

We're renowned for offering high capacity, robust, reliable business connectivity across the UK, thanks to:

- 34,000km business only telecoms network
- 676 Points of Presence
- 90+ national data centres
- 20+ years of industry experience

Our new Access Network sees us bring direct fibre connectivity to local companies and regional offices across Birmingham as well as three additional UK metro cities; Liverpool, Manchester and London. For end users, this means they no longer have to rely on connectivity delivered via multiple providers.

But why is this important? Currently when a fault occurs, it depends on which part of

the network is broken as to which provider is responsible for managing the fix. This can cause timely delays in repairing the issue, due to the management required of several stakeholders. By moving to a single provider who supplies the end-to-end connection, this risk is mitigated.

## Why is a Metro Access Network important?

Full fibre connectivity provides companies with a competitive edge. From improved speeds and reliability, to enhanced security and employee productivity; when a business is better connected it can achieve more.

The UK currently lags behind many of its European neighbours for business fibre access. The government is keen to change this, transforming the UK into a world leader in connectivity, by rolling out its £5 billion Project Gigabit initiative.

The government's 'Levelling Up' white paper, published in February 2022, set out an updated target: for gigabit connectivity to be available to 99% of premises by 2030. And yet, as it stands, when it comes to businesses, as of January 2022, just 40% of businesses premises had access to gigabit capability.

Our aim is to help UK businesses level up. This full fibre, last-mile investment will help regionally based businesses and offices keep pace with their national and

international competitors. It goes a long way towards our aim of bringing high capacity 100Gbps connections within reach of more UK businesses, as well as facilitating the rollout of advanced 5G services and other next-gen technologies.

We understand the importance of delivering reliable, robust connectivity to help cities meet their connectivity ambitions. We believe that, through the deployment of our network we can support these key metro cities in meeting their digital-first goals by providing high capacity, class leading connectivity solutions that will enable a better digital experience.

In Birmingham, our goal is to help organisations compete on a level playing field with their European counterparts through the deployment of our Access services. We'll be deploying fibre across 7.1km of the city and providing access in three gigabit capable exchanges:

- Birmingham Central
- Birmingham Aston Cross
- Birmingham Midland

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# Birmingham Business

## Welcome

There are any number of adjectives which could be used to describe the group of business leaders on this issue's front cover – successful, driven, formidable, passionate and influential to pick just a few.

Perhaps the most overtly obvious common denominator is that they are all female.

They gathered to debate and discuss the various challenges they have had to overcome to get to where they are in an in-depth panel discussion hosted by Unity Trust Bank for our sister arm, Birmingham Business TV.

The event was to mark International Women's Day. Now, it is of course absurd that women should be celebrated on one earmarked day of the year, just as it is that mothers should only be acknowledged on Mother's Day and partners on Valentine's Day.

But the value lies in shining a spotlight on an issue or a societal group – and in the case of IWD in particular, it gets an important conversation going.

We should salute those women on our cover, as well as all those other female leaders in the region, not just for what they have achieved in their own place of work, but also for their input into improving the lot of their fellow professionals and society in general.

Birmingham is lucky to have them and if you want to watch the debate, which we are using for our feature, it is easily available on YouTube.

Elsewhere, Jon Griffin has been showing his journalistic repertoire for this issue. He meets a couple who have started business as rum producers, literally from the burning embers of their family barn, and he also celebrates the 25th anniversary of one of the region's most ardent ethical lenders.

It is no surprise that Jon has won so many awards over the years, as he takes a retrospective look at a dark period of a British institution. We are all aware of the strikes and unrest at Royal Mail over the recent months, but this pales in comparison to turbulent and tragic time not long ago which Jon – who covered the front-page stories at the time for the Birmingham Mail – looks back on those days with the help of one of the people in the eye of the storm.

And in the world of higher education, I had the good fortune to spend some time with Aleks Subic at Aston University.

There are a lot of very good things going on in Birmingham, and if this new vice-chancellor's ambitions come to fruition – and why wouldn't they – he is most certainly one of them.

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# Is our property market reaching new heights?

We see the cranes on the skyline. We read the reports of deals in both residential and commercial property arenas. We hear of investors queuing up for a slice of Birmingham real estate. But how healthy is the region's construction sector and property market?

HENRY CARPENTER finds out from some of those best placed to give an opinion.

On a crisp late-winter morning, a trio of Birmingham property professionals are chewing the fat on the top of a 35-storey apartment block on Broad Street.

The development – the Square – is the latest in the build-to-rent sector, and as the final workman leaves, it will offer 440 high-end apartments to prospective tenants with the sorts of amenities provided by swish hotel complexes.

It is still several months off completion but it is the week before it is topped out and is a handy symbol of what appears to be happening in the Birmingham property market.

From this unparalleled viewpoint, Ben Davidson, of Davidson Estates, is able to look down on both the central business district and Edgbaston – his residential sales agency has offices in both areas. And Alex Tross is one of the city's most authoritative commercial property professionals, heading that division at

property firm Centrick.

They are here to talk all things property for this magazine's TV arm, Birmingham Business TV.

Yes, it's a beautiful morning and everyone acknowledges the views are extraordinary, but there is another reason they are chipper – they all agree that that the Birmingham property market is in a good place. And the reason for that is the city itself has stepped up as a place which now deserves its billing as the country's second city.

Davidson and Tross are joined by a man largely responsible for the success of the Square, Sam Ginda, of Future High Street Living, who has had a key role to play in devising, planning and constructing the development.

"Due to the shortage of brownfield sites in the city, the only way is up," he says. "We are designing developments which are about inclusive communities, about

the wellbeing of tenants and are future-proofed."

As the deputy chair of Colmore BID, Tross is also an ardent cheerleader for Birmingham and everything it has to offer, not just to business and investors, but to residents and visitors as well.

"The Commonwealth Games was a massive success and meant there were lots of eyeballs on the city," he says. "It was a driver for regional consolidation and inward investment, and we think that is going to continue."

"Birmingham just needs to be a bit more vocal and shout about itself a little more. People from further afield perhaps don't realise quite how sophisticated it really is."

With reference to his role in commercial property, he points to the take-up of square feet as a yardstick to gauge the vibrancy and attraction of the city centre as a place to do business.

"In Q4 of this year we were 31% ahead of the same time the previous year," he says.

"That is a very positive trajectory, and rents have gone up in spite of the economic challenges posed by the pandemic and other headwinds."

"People want quality buildings these days – quality space in which to work. They want something at the end of the

commute which is worth getting to.

"It's an ecosystem. The residential offering has to work and flourish, as does the commercial."

Davidson agrees, suggesting that these days developers need to provide the best amenities, which people will be more than happy to pay for.

He also points to another feature of the city which has improved markedly, subsequently making it all the more attractive as a destination.

"We have now got the infrastructure," he says, pointing down to the metro linking Edgbaston village through to the city centre.

"I also think that HS2 is key. But I

strongly believe that it is living up to its label as the country's second city, the place to be, and actually I think it has for a while now."

From the lofty position several hundred feet above street level, there is a bird's eye view of cranes dotted across the region.

Is there a danger that the city is going to be flooded with residential developments which will remain at least partly unoccupied?

Not at all, says Ginda, who argues there is still a massive shortfall in property to cater for the influx of people coming from elsewhere in the country.

Whilst much of this discussion has been anecdotal, financial services giant Deloitte has been crunching numbers and providing analysis on the construction industry.

Its annual Birmingham Crane Survey monitors construction activity across

**"Birmingham just needs to be a bit more vocal and shout about itself a little more. People from further afield perhaps don't realise quite how sophisticated it really is."**



a range of sectors including office, residential, hotels, retail, education and student accommodation.

And according to its latest survey, 2022 was a great year for Birmingham as construction activity continued to set new records.

Some of the key findings include: the number of new homes coming onto the market broke the existing record with 2,398 homes delivered in 2022; office space under construction bounced back with a 40% increase under construction; the residential sector observed the largest uplift in total construction activity with 32 schemes currently under construction; and the number of schemes under construction increased by just over a quarter in 2022, up to 43 compared to 34 in 2021.

Indeed, it describes the city as entering a 'golden decade' of opportunity following the success of the Commonwealth Games. It also witnessed the city break its own record for the number of new residential homes delivered onto the market.

"The year 2022 will be remembered as a phenomenal one for the city," says Juliet Halfhead, practice senior partner at Deloitte Midlands.

"Not only did it seamlessly deliver the Commonwealth Games to a global audience, it also showcased the very best of the city and what it has to offer – which is reflected in this year's report.

"Development confidence is a key indicator for economic health, and despite current headwinds and market uncertainties over the last few years, construction in the city has remained resilient."

All of which chimes with our panel of interviewees. The report also indicated that with premium space in the city centre becoming scarcer – and a sustained demand for large, well-located schemes remaining strong – residential projects are on the rise, not only in the number of developments breaking ground, but also in terms of scale.

As with previous surveys, there was a real spread of residential activity across the city. The Jewellery Quarter led the way with 13 developments under construction followed by Digbeth, Southside and Westside, all of which have a number of schemes underway.

Whilst it has been an exceptional year for the residential sector, office



From left: Carl Jones with Ben Davidson, Alex Tross and Sam Ginda

developments also continued to gain pace, a fact echoed by Tross.

Halfhead adds: "Both the residential and office markets have dominated development activity within the city over the past few years and this is set to continue.

"Whilst opportunities for new-build and office regeneration projects are becoming rarer, the pipeline looks steady.

"Developers and investors continue to compete for key, strategic sites as demand for Grade A office space continues at pace with occupiers looking for flexible office space to accommodate hybrid working patterns."

It is this demand for flexible office space which has seen the number of lettings grow over the past year with

Juliet Halfhead



some key deals including Goldman Sachs' agreement to occupy 110,000 sq ft at One Centenary Way – the largest deal to complete in the city in 2022.

"Last year stood out for Birmingham on many levels," says Halfhead. "The Commonwealth Games presented a once in a lifetime chance and kick-started a golden decade of opportunity for the city.

"The improved connectivity of the city with the wider region will also reap benefits. Birmingham is geographically well-placed and there will be a continued focus on improving the inter connectivity with its suburbs and neighbours, which is evident in the ongoing investment into the metro system and HS2.

"However, it is not just about city centre development activity. There is a wealth of construction activity across every sector which falls outside the crane survey's boundaries.

"For the whole region to prosper, construction activity in Birmingham also needs to be reflected in the surrounding areas. The move towards a carbon-zero economy in Birmingham by 2030 and across the West Midlands by 2041, will see an uplift in office refurbishments, carbon-zero housing as well as increased connectivity via green transport.

"Last year all eyes were on the West Midlands. Now it's the time for the region to be bold, bullish and deliver a legacy that will see the region prosper for many years to come."



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# Support for apprenticeships

news

An organisation providing financial help to Walsall businesses is looking to support employers offering apprenticeship opportunities to young people.

Walsall Business Support aims to provide financial investment to businesses wishing to increase job prospects in the borough, with apprenticeships being a great foundation to train and upskill.

The support group sees apprenticeships as a great opportunity to fill skills gaps in small businesses, bringing valuable new perspective and helping to improve productivity in the workplace.

The Leather Skills Centre received a £5,000 funding boost from Walsall Business Support to buy specialist equipment for learners to hone new skills. The centre provides apprenticeships in the leather making industry, teaching the next generation of saddle, bridle and leather goods makers.

Walsall Business Support board member Rob Colbourne said: "The specialist tools and other resources paid for via the grant will ensure that the Leather Skills Centre trains apprentices to the highest standard so that Walsall's reputation for high-quality leather products continues to grow."

"Apprenticeships not only benefit businesses, but also give the local economy a boost during challenging economic times."



## Chamber's drive for global opportunities



Mark Smith

A new drive to create international trade opportunities for Greater Birmingham businesses was announced at the Chamber's Global Trade Conference.

From April 1, the Greater Birmingham Commonwealth Chamber of Commerce will evolve into the Greater Birmingham Global Chamber of Commerce to provide opportunities for chamber members in more international markets.

Mark Smith, president of the new GBGCC, made the announcement to delegates at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Mr Smith, the executive director of business engagement at Aston University, said: "We need to evolve to allow greater opportunities to members including all countries."

"So from April 1 we will enhance the Commonwealth Chamber division to incorporate further markets for the purpose of bi-lateral trading opportunities."

"This will add great value to the division and as an existing GBGCC member the benefits to you expand across the globe, not just the Commonwealth."

"We look forward to speaking with you in the coming weeks and seeing you at the Greater Birmingham Global Chamber of Commerce events."

## Encouraging robotics in manufacturing

The Manufacturing Technology Centre will host a two-day conference in May to drive the uptake of robotics and automation across UK manufacturing.

The Robotics and Automation – A New Perspective 2023 event at the MTC on May 10 and 11 will explore the future of automation in UK industry and demonstrate the opportunities available.

Delegates from a wide range of industries from construction to agriculture and food production will have the chance to share insights into the transformational benefits of cutting-edge robotic technologies and learn how automation can improve productivity and drive global competitiveness for our businesses.

The free event, which follows the successful conference in 2022, will build on the recommendations of a report by MTC robotics experts and the Industrial Policy Research Centre at Loughborough University.

The report called for more knowledge-sharing across the robotics community, the need for support for developers and early

stage adopters, an emphasis on skills, as well as a greater understanding among the investor and finance community of the business benefits of automation.

Mike Wilson, chief automation officer at the MTC and author of the report, said: "This isn't just a typical manufacturing conference. It's an opportunity to meet, discuss and address the challenges with the adoption of automation and robotics."

"Delegates can listen to inspiring talks by industry experts, join educational workshops, discover innovative technologies or simply network with like-minded individuals."

"The event aims to instil confidence in our companies to transform their future. It will enable SMEs and supply chain companies to explore ground-breaking and innovative industrial robotic solutions so they can understand how their manufacturing operations would benefit."

"Pioneers of robotics will be on hand to highlight successful projects which have reaped the benefits of intelligent automation, and help people make the

right decisions. It's all about the sharing of best practice. At the MTC we aim to create an ecosystem for everyone from SMEs to major industrial players and academics, to work together to encourage greater use of automation in UK industry."



news

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- Hybrid event and live streaming capabilities
- City centre location



# Debtor engagement service

Midlands debt recovery law firm Flint Bishop – which has an office in Birmingham’s city centre – has announced the launch of a new B2B debtor engagement service.

FBConnect is targeted at supporting creditors and their customers in the industrial, commercial and SME sectors.

With over 100 field-based operatives, the service includes visiting customers at their premises to resolve disputes and negotiate repayment plans where there has been no response to letters and calls.

It will also be able to help creditors identify any potential sensitivities or adverse PR issues likely to arise in relation to the accounts within debt recovery and collection processes.

“We are excited to launch FBConnect,” said head of debt services Niall Gilhooley.

“Our nationwide field service can be utilised as a stand-alone service or to complement our wider debt recovery process, providing meaningful site visits to provide additional contact options and insight for creditors.

“Engagement visits can be an effective step forward in liaising with our clients’ customers and facilitating a dialogue to seek a resolution in recovering overdue debt.

“The service will leverage the latest technology and data analytics to provide clients with accurate and timely information to help them make informed decisions and will operate in compliance with industry regulations and guidelines to ensure the highest standards of professionalism and ethical behaviour are met and maintained.

“We believe it will provide significant value to our clients by delivering efficient, cost-effective and personalised field engagement services.”

Newly appointed field services manager Ian Brick will be responsible for managing the day-to-day operations of FBConnect.



Niall Gilhooley, left, and Flint Bishop  
CEO Qamer Ghafoor



From left, PJ Ellis, Tony Simmons and Rob Pollard

## Marketing agency lands mega new client

Birmingham-based digital marketing firm Lightbox Digital is celebrating after landing a new client in the form of coach operator megabus.

This partnership is aimed to help megabus create further traction in the UK consumer travel sector. The firm operates journeys to over 90 destinations across the UK.

Rob Pollard of Lightbox Digital said: “For some time we have wanted to work with a travel specialist in the UK and in megabus we believe we have found a long-term partner that not only thinks big but wants to enjoy the journey just as much as we do.

“From the moment we met Tony Simmons and the team we knew we wanted to work with them.”

■ Commercial property giant M Core has acquired Chelmsley Wood shopping centre in Solihull – the main retail centre in the town – as it continues its investment drive.

Anchored by an ASDA superstore, the centre comprises 461,012 sq ft of open convenience retail, with stores including Wilko, Iceland, Home Bargains, New Look, Sportsdirect, Poundland and Boots. The scheme, which is in the Solihull borough, enjoys an annual footfall of 7.5 million people.

Offices and leisure accommodation include a library, community housing offices and an advice centre, and there is also a multi-storey and surface car park for a total of 583 vehicles, making it the primary parking provision in the town centre.

Danny O’Keefe, founding partner of Evolve Estates, which is part of M Core, said: “This is a superb acquisition that I’m pleased to introduce into our joint venture with LCP. Chelmsley Wood Shopping Centre is the main convenience shopping offer in the community and is surrounded by homes.

■ Environmental consultants Tyler Grange have partnered with Hockley’s Burning Soul Brewery to launch two seasonal low-carbon and environmentally conscious beers – Bramble and Solstice.

Burning Soul’s Chris Small said: “Tyler Grange came to us with the idea of creating a low carbon beer to gift to its clients and partners free of charge. It’s not often that we brew beer for no profit, which has made the collaboration even more interesting.

“The very nature of beer brewing makes it difficult to stay completely environmentally friendly. The challenge set by Tyler Grange to do as much as we can to offset any harmful impacts provided us with some creative license to experiment with new, carbon saving methods, whilst making excellent beer at the same time.”

# THE FIGHT



# GOES ON

**Birmingham is not short of successful female business leaders, many of whom are respected nationally in their fields. International Women’s Day provided the perfect opportunity for Birmingham Business TV to get some of them together and ask if the gender-related challenges of the past still exist, and question if they have succeeded in spite of the system, or because of it.**



Debbie Hazell reflects for a moment before answering the final question of an insightful, robust and captivating panel discussion.

She has just been asked what, if given a magic wand, she would like to happen to improve attitudes towards women in the workplace.

"I would hope that we try to put ourselves in other people's shoes," says the CEO of Unity Trust Bank, the ethical bank which is hosting and sponsoring this event in its offices in Brindleyplace.

"If we can get more men recognising what women's experiences are, I think that would be a big step towards understanding what needs to happen in order to get a more even playing field."

It has been a wide-ranging interview for Birmingham Business TV, in which Debbie is joined by: Diane Benussi, the esteemed divorce lawyer whose matrimonial law firm Benussi & Co is now in its fifth decade; Rosie Ginday – the founder of social enterprise company Miss Macaroon who has been awarded an MBE for her mentoring work; and Nicola Fleet-Milne, the founder of her eponymous property company and current chair of Colmore BID, complete the panel.

It is a formidable line-up of prominent, respected business leaders, whose work and influence goes far beyond the confines of their own organisations. In the audience are three more interviewees: Denise Myers, founder of Evenfields Careers and the Black Talent Awards; Eman Al-Hillawi, the co-founder of change management company, Entec Si; and Fidelis Navas, currently community director

**"There were 25 of us in the room, and apart from me there was only one other female. One of the guys turned to me and gave me his empty coffee cup after he'd dispensed with it. When I told him I wasn't staff and was part of the meeting he was so embarrassed."**

for Warwickshire Country Cricket Club and one of the most experienced and respected operators in the charity sector.

The discussion coincides with International Women's Day, a global event to mark and celebrate the role of women in society. The focus at Unity Trust Bank is on that societal microcosm, the workplace.

So it seems sensible to start with the question put by interviewer Carl Jones, of BBTV, to Diane Benussi – in many ways the matriarch of the region's legal scene and, as a founder member of Birmingham 2000 (which became Birmingham Forward), the business scene in general.

Would this sort of event with a female line-up of business leaders of this calibre have been possible when she founded her practice 40-odd years ago?

The short answer is no. She remembers the occasion when, soon after she launched her business, she saw men

pointing at the polished brass plaque outside her office, astounded at the fact that it had the names of two women on it.

"It was like we were creatures from the zoo," she says. "I don't think that would happen any more."

It is not just the role of women – and their standing – that has changed, she says. "I think the environment has in general. The reason I had the

arrogance to set up a business when I had only been a solicitor for two years was that the offices I worked in were awful. We thought we could do better."

This is a theme picked up by Nicola Fleet-Milne. She set up her business 19 years ago wanting "to create a really lovely, comfortable working environment, something to benefit staff as well as clients".

She adds: "I wanted to spend a lot more time bringing women up through the ranks. It's about putting down extra ladders and helping people come up."

"I had a burning desire to change the system. I decided it wasn't going to happen by sitting on the sidelines – I felt I had to kick the door down and make it myself."

And what about the environment – would she find it easier to set up her business now?

She believes so. "Twenty years ago there weren't the right levels of support," she says. "Better support systems are in place now and mentoring, for instance, was much harder to access than it is now."

## Bias

So are systems and attitudes still antiquated? The general feeling in the room is that things are better . . . but there is still a long way to go.

And much of this is down to bias – predominantly, one hopes, unconscious.

"I went to a meeting only three years ago," says Nicola. "There were 25 of us in the room, and apart from me there was only one other female."

"One of the guys turned to me and gave me his empty coffee cup after he'd dispensed with it. When I told him I wasn't staff and was part of the meeting he was so embarrassed, I was amused by his embarrassment but also devastated that it was his natural presumption."

Eman Al-Hillawi makes the point that bias, unconscious or otherwise, is sadly still rife – and not just in working



From top: Davies Okeowo puts the questions to Denise Myers, Eman Al-Hillawi and Fidelis Navas

environments.

She became used to going to meetings with her male Entec Si co-founder, at which deference was almost always paid to him while she bit her tongue and felt uncomfortable.

"I see it in personal situations as well," she says. "I am a qualified pilot and every time I land, if there's a male partner in the scenario, when I go and pay the landing fee they defer to him and assume he's the pilot."

"It feels like we have to work extra hard and prove ourselves again and again."

What does she feel can be done about it? "There is a lot we can do as business leaders and owners," she says. "We have to be mindful in terms of helping people in the office. We are in a great position to be role models."

"The other thing we can do is call it out – be upfront and say this is who I am. Until we do that, it's always going to be a challenge."

Rosie Ginday says that so much extra work has to be put in by women to overcome these biases.

With regards to International Women's Day, she says it is "incredibly useful as a time to stop and reflect".

"The glass ceiling is still there," she adds. "Women will smash through one, then get to another and then another. We just have to keep pushing."

Nicola adds: "But we have to check ourselves – every day we should be challenging ourselves to make sure we are doing things better."

One of the key shifts in mindsets over recent years – probably accelerated by the pandemic – is accepting that new patterns of working are important, overdue and are here to stay. It is part of the wider responsibility business leaders have in looking after their staff – and this perhaps applies more to women than men.

"We are a bank which is focused on a double bottom line," says Debbie. "You have got to take care of the people in your organisation."

"We cannot expect people to give their full selves to us if we are not giving ourselves to them and their personal lives."

"How people are at home is so important to what they bring to the office, so if there is anything we can do to create a better environment for them at home, then we would want to do that . . . and we would get it back tenfold."

"I am very clear. It is about output – I just don't care how people use their time. We have our targets, strategies and plans, and it's up to everyone individually to deliver."

"It is completely possible to run a strong business through hybrid working and doing what works for the staff."

Nicola agrees. "Our firm operates in a way which is more understanding to



Carl Jones chats with Diane Benussi and Rosie Ginday



female challenges. If there's a single parent with three kids, I am not going to insist she comes in to the office.

"Guys might not have the same pressures on their time at home."

And waving her imaginary magic wand, Nicola thinks there should be more pressure for companies to increase diversity in their organisations, possibly through a quota system which can be finessed.

"I would love to see a greater requirement to have more breadth across the board. How can we possibly think we have got a good view of how everything is working if everyone is looking through the same lens?"

## Equality in the workplace

So where does inequality lie in the workplace? Is there an imbalance across the board weighted towards men?

The overwhelming response across the panel is a resounding 'yes'.

As Rosie says: "Miss Macaroon has been going for 12 years and as a social enterprise it's pretty equitable – about 50-50 of men and women.

"We work with a lot of corporates to make sure that equity and inclusion permeates through these organisations as well."

Diane points out that gender inequality doesn't just exist in the workplace.

"I deal with people and their relationships all the time," she says. "On this panel we have 'made it' and are in a bubble, but in society I look at how people conduct their lives, and quite honestly women's lives haven't changed in 40 years.

"Women still don't have the conduct of the finances of their family, and have to defer to their husbands.

"They need to be brought on in their relationships. Women are suffering from being women. It's a societal problem."

In business spheres, Diane says she knows of several women "whose

**"Gen Z aren't standing for any of it. The next thing which needs to happen is action being taken by organisations. They need to put strategies in place for how they are going to tackle it, especially in cities like Birmingham where the minorities are the majority."**



From top, Nicola Fleet-Milne and Debbie Hazell

husbands won't allow them to mortgage their house – they don't want to take the risk. That wouldn't be the case if the situation was the other way round. Women don't find it so easy to use the matrimonial assets because the husband won't agree to it".

The discussion moves on to inequality in terms of the so-called gender pay gap. Does it really exist?

Indeed it does, says Debbie, because men occupy the higher jobs.

"Women's talent is not recognised and they aren't promoted as quickly as men, even though they have lots of skills they can bring to leadership," she explains.

"When you look at the numbers, the ratio of women to men entering an organisation is about 50-50, but only 10 % of women get to the very top levels.

"There are a lot of

excuses out there, but the real issue is that the talent isn't being recognised by the people who are doing the promoting and the paying. That's why the gender pay gap exists."

As the founder of a recruitment firm, and also the brains behind the Black Talent Awards, Denise Myers knows a thing or two about inequality.

"We have come far in terms of gender equality – but not far enough," she says. "The dial is moving in that respect, and we are seeing improvements.

"However, when you put ethnicity and gender together, we haven't scratched the surface.

"Gen Z aren't standing for any of it. That is good and that is positive. The next thing which needs to happen is action being taken by organisations. They need to put strategies in place for how they are going to tackle it, especially in cities like Birmingham where the minorities are the majority.

"People need to work out how to overcome barriers. There is a lot of reading out there, and good advice from relatable role models. I advise finding someone who

has made it and following their lead."

What about in the charity sector? After all, to the outsider it seems like it has its fair share of women occupying decent roles.

Fidelis Navas agrees that the sector is predominantly served by women. There's a big 'but' though.

"I've sadly seen that we haven't been helping and supporting each other as much as we should have been," she says. "Also, in the top jobs there are too many men in my opinion, in so far as if you really want to be a leader in the charity sector, you tend to be male – women tend to be in the lower jobs."

What holds women back, does she think? "Maternity leave and the gender pay gap," she says. "Things are definitely changing, thankfully."

Fidelis also says that Covid has accelerated the benefits of flexible working.

"I want every organisation to understand the benefits of flexible working. We need to have an equal workplace so that everyone benefits. That's what would happen if I was to wave my magic wand."

## Mentorship and role models

"I have been very lucky," says Diane. "I have had people in my life who have said things I have remembered. That has been very good and guided me along.

"I remember a senior partner saying they would never have a female partner. I was grateful because within two years of qualifying I knew I had to do it myself!"

Rosie points out the Make a Difference programme run by Miss Macaroon, in which a diverse range of speakers inspire others with their stories of how they have overcome barriers.

"It's about being able to home in on everyone's strengths and value so they feel that they can become role models themselves," she says.

"I do think it's really important to provide leadership opportunities. It is incredible for workers to move into leadership roles quickly – that's what we can do. We can all open doors to bring junior people in, and

that breeds confidence."

Debbie admits that for the first 20 years of her career she was oblivious to her ability to be a role model. The switch came when she took on her second leadership role.

"I was greeted by a lot of women in the organisation," she says. "Seeing that reaction made me realise I had a responsibility.

"I won't say I mentor but I always make myself available – the door is always open.

"When contacts reach out to me for help after they've lost their jobs, I always do what I can. Women have got to help women because other people don't."

It seems odd that in the 2020s we are still talking about gender inequality.

However, it appears that in Birmingham at least those with much of the influence – the female business leaders – are determined to do something about it.

■ To watch the full video, visit the **Birmingham Business TV channel on YouTube.**



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**Noel Cramer, Ninder Johal and Matthew Hammond**

The Vox Conference Centre at Resorts World was the host venue for the Birmingham Signature Awards, organised by the Nachural Group.

There were 600 attendees who enjoyed a night of dining, awards and networking, as well as speeches from Nachural CEO Ninder Johal, WM mayor Andy Street and Sukhi Singh, managing director of Aerotyre and GB Tyres.

A keynote interview was conducted with Surinder Arora, founder and chairman of the Arora Group. Approximately £13,000 was raised for the charity of the night, Acorns Hospice.



**Chantelle Grant and Louise Brown**



**Dr Rakhee Paw, Dr Rupa Parmar, Claire Robinson and Raj Bassi**

**Left, from top: Megan Bromage and Andrew Dawson**

**Dan Lee and Laki Kooner**

**Sandie Lehal and Jaz Kaur**

# THE Signature

# AWARDS

**Right: James Wong, Martin Lord and Raaj Shamji**



**Above: Jay Singh, Kulwinder Shoker, Sukhi Singh and Satpal Singh**

**Right: Gilly Dolphin and Elizabeth Ingram**

**Below: Manjit Jhooty, San Jhooty and Ninder Johal**



**Above, from top: Tara and Olly Attfield-Tomes**

**Gurdas Singh and Omar Rashid**

**Sukhjot Grewal and Arun Sohunta**



# Man *with a* plan

Aston University has a new vice-chancellor at the helm – Professor Aleks Subic who began his role at the start of this academic year. As HENRY CARPENTER discovers, he is not afraid to implement radical new strategies – with a particular focus on technology – to ensure his legacy both at the university and the city in general is a transformative one.





The view from the sixth floor of Aston Business School, in the heart of the Aston University campus, has more meaning than just being a pleasant outlook.

It is a reminder both that the Birmingham skyline is changing, rapidly, and also quite how central the university is. The view tells us that this university is an intrinsic part of the city, not some sort of ringfenced organisation divorced from society and business in the surrounding area.

This thought keeps springing to mind in a conversation with Professor Aleks Subic as his beliefs on the importance of the relationship between university and the wider social and industrial community becomes increasingly apparent.

The new vice-chancellor and CEO at Aston is a passionate, driven, inevitably sharp-minded individual who was previously employed at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in Australia. His position at RMIT was deputy vice-chancellor of STEM and vice-president for digital innovation at a university with 100,000 students and 7,000 staff with operations in Australia, Asia and Europe.

It will therefore come as no surprise to hear that arenas such as technology and digital transformation are repeatedly mentioned by Subic as key drivers in his plans to take Aston University forward.

Perhaps the most direct way to summarise his quest is to ask what he hopes his legacy will be when he decides the time is right to leave the post, whether that is in five or 10 years' time.

"I would like to be remembered as playing a key transformational role," he replies.

"This is both in respect of the way I lead the organisation but also the contribution to major socio-economic transformations in Birmingham and region. I believe this is at a time when industry, business and innovation ecosystem in the city and surrounding region needs a major growth and transformation strategy.

"I want the university to play a key transformational role and leave a legacy in that regard, but for that to happen we need to transform ourselves first."

The challenge clearly gets his blood pumping, as does the heritage of both the West Midlands region and the university itself.

When the university was first established in its original guise in 1895, by champions of industry and community, it was the main technical school for Birmingham.



It then grew into the principal institute of technology, becoming an advance technology college.

As Subic says: "Technology is deeply, deeply ingrained in the DNA of this organisation, and the tech agenda is a key factor in transformation in every sector and domain in our society."

Engaging with industry and society beyond the campus is also a key motivation for Subic, as it has for generations of his predecessors.

"Bringing the outside community in has shaped my decades of leadership experience," he says.

"My approach has always been the

triple-helix approach [the interactions between academia, industry and government to foster economic and social development] – that's where the magic happens. That's where we create impact, by engaging with external stakeholders who see fit to work with us."

He points at the university's new 2030 strategy as an area of focus where change can be effected, one which can make a significant contribution to the wider innovation ecosystem.

But he is quick to deflect credit for the strong community-minded culture at the university.

"That platform has been here for many

decades," he says. "That culture takes many years to shape by generations of leaders and staff.

"What I've also found is that the university has to step up to the task and transform itself because the world around it has changed. The focus on tech-led transformation is possibly more profound than it has ever been before.

"We need to partner with industry and business in ways we have never done before. That's what the 2030 strategy – which we are launching at the beginning of the academic year in September – is really about.

"It's about embedding industry and innovation on campus, blurring the boundaries between the university and the real world.

"It is also about developing elaborate systems and workforce strategies, accomplished by bringing industry into the university and taking the university into the city and community to drive post-Covid regeneration."

Engagement has started, and these strategies are starting to be implemented. He is keenly anticipating bringing industry and innovation leaders to the university to co-design and co-deliver programmes and incubators.

The value of these, he insists, will not just be seen by the organisations and innovators on campus, but for the city and wider region as well.

A good illustrative case, he says, can be seen in the health sector, and how digital health solutions can be established at the university's new health services hub where new innovative health technologies are tested and then implemented into the healthcare service at pace.

It will surprise no one to hear that Subic is a recognised global leader in technology and innovation in higher education, leading on Industry 4.0 strategy and digital transformations across the university sector and with industry and governments both in Australia and internationally.

The history of technology is a passion of his, and played a part in him accepting the job at Aston in the first place.

"Where we are sitting right now – this was the heartland of the first industrial revolution," he says.

"Let's skip the second and third iterations – we have now come to the fourth industrial revolution. It is in its rightful home.

"I don't believe we will have fifth and sixth industrial revolutions. I believe we will have continuous digital transformations, which will see technologies advancing at breakneck speed. We are about to see the next wave of transformation evolve on the back of quantum technologies and new generation wireless technology networks.

**"We need to partner with industry and business in ways we have never done before. That's what the 2030 strategy – which we are launching at the beginning of the academic year in September – is really about. It's about embedding industry and innovation on campus, blurring the boundaries between the university and the real world."**

"It is vital for Aston University to become a learning organisation. That is the only way it can continue to adjust to the continuous change in the outside world. Indeed, it needs to set the agenda and be on the front foot, at the forefront of change and bring society with us. That's the important re-set."

By the end of 2023 the university is set to have launched its Digital Futures Institute. The ADFI has an express intention which is to grow research capability and capacity in the digital futures, particularly in the areas of AI in health, data science and bioinformatics, gamification and digital society.

Subic believes it will contribute to helping to solve what he sees as the biggest issue facing industry and society – the digital skills gap – which he believes will hold back not just Birmingham and the West Midlands, but the whole of the UK.

"We will be working with the city and businesses in the private sector to bring digital skills at various levels and in various areas at pace and scale.

"That will lead to jobs and more fruitful and more secure career paths, as well as fuel economic growth.

"When tech firms come into the country there are many ingredients that they

will look to find here. One of these is an availability of digital skills at a scale and level of sophistication that we currently don't have."

Perhaps 'obsessed' is too strong a word to describe Subic. Maybe laser sharp, focused, passionate and determined do more justice to apply to a man who has taken on the role with relish.

"When I was approached for the position and engaged with Aston and its stakeholders and students, I just felt that this was the place for the last trimester of my working life.

"That deep technological DNA, that deep commitment to the community, that appetite to reinvent itself and find its rightful home in the fourth industrial

revolution . . . that all appealed to me. I thought this is the place I can make an impact."

He's clearly thriving on the challenge he has set himself, colossal though it is.

It is not all easy, and he gives the impression that there was a much greater connection and level of understanding between the university sector and government in Australia than there is in this country.

However, he is far more enthusiastic about local government partnerships and engagement, which he says is "exceptional".

Colleagues talk of a man who rolls his sleeves up, someone who engaged with them even before he landed from Melbourne. There is nothing 'arm's length' about Aleks Subic.

If Subic has his way, his tenure at Aston will indeed be a massively transformational period – perhaps more so than the university will have experienced before.

The university itself – as well as stakeholders such as industry, innovation partners and government – would do well to buckle up for what looks like a hell of a ride, which will undoubtedly be interesting but also, hopefully, bear fruit for all.





# Striking a perfect balance

advertisement feature

When it comes to choosing the right school for our children, securing academic success is, for many, the most important consideration but often measured in the narrowest of terms.

With Birmingham's educational landscape dominated at secondary level by some of the finest grammar schools in the country and, in King Edward's School, one of the leading independent schools, the pressure for gaining such coveted places is well and truly on.

By the end of the 1990s, the city's traditional 3 – 13 prep schools had evolved into 1 – 11 schools in response to changing parental attitudes and, during an eighteen year tenure as Head of West House School, I have only seen the pressure grow and the city's prep schools increasingly viewed as vehicles for eleven plus success.

In the same period, the culture of tutoring has also become thoroughly embedded with some children spending up to five hours at the weekend honing their verbal and non-verbal reasoning skills. It has become extremely difficult for anxious parents not to get caught up in the trap of measuring the success of a prep school education by eleven plus outcome alone and taking whatever steps they can in the belief that they are doing what is best for their child.

It is also a reality that the very existence of Birmingham's prep schools contributes to the fervour that surrounds this educational eco-system with demand for places remaining consistently high and questions about examination results never



By **ALISTAIR M J LYTTLE**  
Headmaster,  
West House School

far from the lips of prospective parents. As a result, academic rigour, targeted eleven plus preparation and a healthy pass rate are, for the vast majority of parents, key factors when seeking a school for their child.

And so, the balancing act begins. It is impossible to deny that the eleven plus system fuels the success of schools such as West House but to rely on results alone and consciously present such a narrow view of academic success would not only be a mistake but would be

doing prospective parents a significant disservice. For some, talk of the other important aspects of school life and mention of the fact that grammar schools might not provide the right environment for every child are, sadly, minor considerations.

Certainly, a frustration exists when the contribution of languages, sport, art, music and drama is not fully acknowledged and it is the job of the school to demonstrate unequivocally the impact that these areas have on the educational outcome, or success, of individual pupils.

In promoting our schools, often in highly competitive circumstances and against this backdrop, it is essential that we recognise what we are and remain true to our values. While it is tempting to 'tailor the tour' to individual parents based on initial perceptions and on what other schools within the locality might be offering, a confidence in our own brand and a passionate belief in the work we are doing will, in my experience, ring the bell of authenticity and be well-received. I actively encourage prospective parents to be aware of this and to explore what exists beyond the narrow measurement of academic success.

A prep school experience should be a fantastic journey and schools have an obvious duty to deliver what is presented at the outset. Parents should feel entirely comfortable in asking questions that require a school to articulate clearly what it stands for and how it goes about preparing pupils for their future lives – not only at the age of eleven but far beyond. While local circumstances will undoubtedly influence parental views of what should be expected from an independent prep school education, every school has a set of values and an approach to teaching and learning that should be consistently communicated.

At West House, we work tirelessly to ensure that academic rigour exists within a broader educational context and that the value of a broad range of subjects, taught by specialists from Year 4 onwards, is appreciated. A recent review of the curriculum resulted in the teaching of languages and, more specifically, linguistics to be reappraised in light of what was expected of pupils as they moved from primary to secondary environments. What was immediately apparent was that Year 7 pupils tended to start studying a modern foreign language



from scratch at secondary level, regardless of what had been taught previously. It was also clear that the mechanics of language being taught within the context of a foreign language were not fully understood or, indeed, effectively taught in respect of the English language. The conclusion reached was that teaching French in Years 3 – 6 was isolated and its impact minimal.

The school began to explore alternative approaches to teaching languages at primary level and the answer came in the form of 'WoLLow' – World of Languages and Languages of the World. Introduced to the school by John Claughton, former Chief Master at King Edward's, Birmingham, the programme has been constructed for pupils in Key Stages 2 and 3 and has a number of key aims. Chief amongst these is the notion of encouraging curiosity about language and languages, where they came from, how they developed and how they are related. The WoLLow approach also helps pupils to understand how languages work in terms of grammar and thereby provide a foundation for the study of specific languages at secondary level.

While the programme is currently in its infancy, it brings with it an air of excitement, relevance and evolution to the teaching of languages that has been lacking at primary level in recent years. What it also does is make a huge contribution to the process of eleven plus preparation in a manner that complements other areas of the curriculum and underpins longer term development.

In keeping with the evolution of language teaching, the West House philosophy is that academic results should not come at the expense of pupils being afforded opportunities to engage in a rich learning journey and an enjoyment of childhood. It is vital that the West House experience allows the boys not only to get involved in sport, drama, art and music, but to appreciate the extent to which these subjects contribute to their overall enjoyment of school life and personal development.

At the heart of the school's ethos lies the view that boys should be allowed to be boys and that they are at their most productive when an appreciation of the balance between work and play

is achieved. Sport, in particular, plays a key role in the curriculum with two full afternoons a week being devoted to PE and games.

Again, it is important that parents build a clear picture of what a school offers and how various aspects of the school life and ethos knit together. In communicating the clear message that competitive sport is important to us and our pupils, we have recently invested in the outdoor basketball, football and cricket facilities. As in all schools, there were other areas in which funds could have been directed but we have a clear vision of what we want West House boys to experience.

At West House, our academic record speaks for itself but it does not come at all costs. It is possible to be successful while not being test driven; it is possible to be successful by staying true to what you stand for; it is possible to prepare for important examinations while playing the clarinet and cricket; it is possible to be ambitious and a nice person. Indeed, it could be argued that those who are active, fulfilled and nice are happiest and most successful.

For more information please contact:  
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Birmingham B15 2NX**

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## Consortium secures grant

Colleges West Midlands has secured a share of a £2.5 million grant designed to improve fin-tech educational opportunities across the region.

The consortium, which comprises of 18 of the region's colleges, was supported by Birmingham-based SuperTech, which is dedicated to the greater adoption of technology in professional and business services.

The initiative will see colleges engage with SuperTech and major financial firms including BNP Paribas Personal Finance, Wesleyan and Paragon Bank to develop new industry focused fin-tech courses.

The move follows the results of last year's Kalifa Review of UK fin-tech, which established Birmingham as a major hub and identified improvements in FinTech focused further education nationally, as a way of ensuring continued growth through access to talent.

A study by independent research firm White Cap Consulting in

2020 revealed that the West Midlands fin-tech sector contributes £411.7 million GVA to the regional economy and employs more than 7,000 people.

The initiative is being led by SuperTech and BMet, home of the Greater Birmingham Professional Services Academy, with funding provided by the Department for Education's Skills Development Fund, supported by fintech insight specialists Whitecap Consulting.

Hilary Smyth-Allen, SuperTech executive lead, said: "Fin-tech is one of the region's fastest growing sectors, with a high number of scale-up businesses.

"To attract further investment and ensure firms can continue to grow we need to ensure we are upskilling the workforce.

"This strategic partnership will create courses that are closely matched to the needs of businesses to help fulfil high value jobs and provide opportunities for West Midlands citizens."



Hilary Smyth-Allen

■ National law firm Clarke Willmott LLP is strengthening its housing management division with a new team at its Birmingham office.

The new joiners – an associate, a solicitor, and a chartered legal executive – will provide legal services and advise on all aspects of tenancy management to registered providers and social landlords.

Clarke Willmott's head of housing management, Lindsay Felstead, said: "The decision to strengthen the housing management team follows several recent client wins.

"We are delighted to have extra people in our regional teams who will be a great asset to us and to our wider social housing line-up."



Lindsay Felstead

## High Street guru recruited to help Midlands town

Sutton Coldfield Business Improvement District is enlisting the help of 'queen of shops' Mary Portas to address local businesses at a seminar in the town centre this June.

Bosses from the BID are hoping that the businesswoman, broadcaster and high streets guru will help invigorate the heart of the town.

BID chair Alison Clack, managing director of Cerda Planning, said: "We are very excited by the prospect of Mary Portas coming to Sutton Coldfield and sharing her knowledge and expertise in a way that will inspire local businesses.

"The BID understands that Sutton Coldfield town centre, like most towns and High Streets across the UK, is going through a period of change and we simply cannot ignore the concerns expressed in the media and on social media.

"We feel that an inspirational seminar from a renowned expert in this field will help to bring local businesses together with a renewed sense of resilience and pride in their town centre.

"High Streets and town centres are changing and, at the seminar, businesses from all sectors will hear first-hand how they can work together and overcome the challenges they face.

"As a BID representing hundreds of local businesses in the town centre, we want to change the narrative that Sutton Coldfield is more than just retail and be as proactive as possible. Bringing in Mary Portas to share her knowledge and expertise will go some way to help in these challenging times."

Businesswoman, broadcaster, author and activist Portas is the UK's best known retail guru who, in 2011, conducted a review of the future for high streets for the British government.

After becoming a board member at Harvey Nichols at the age of 30, she founded her creative consultancy Portas, going on to work with some of the biggest names in global retail.

Her BBC series – Mary Queen of Shops and she has presented on television and radio for the BBC and Channel 4 ever since. Mary's current podcast series include Beautiful Misfits and #1 business podcast The Kindness Economy.

As Chair of the Better Business Act



Mary 'Queen of Shops' Portas is being recruited by Sutton Coldfield BID to help reinvigorate the heart of the Royal Town – by inspiring local businesses at a major seminar.

campaign Mary remains very relevant and responsive to the changing business agenda.

Sutton Coldfield town centre is the Second City's second biggest shopping and business area, second only in size to Birmingham city centre, and its BID delivers year round events to boost footfall such as the monthly Farmers and Craft Market and Christmas events.

Last year the BID commenced its new 5-year term by launching a vibrant new 'Visit Royal Sutton Coldfield' brand – with special events, competitions and improvements designed to make it a destination to spend time, eat, drink, shop and relax.

The programme of events has seen a significant upturn in footfall for the centre, and more are planned throughout 2023.

BID Manager Michelle Baker said: "Bringing an expert of Mary Portas's stature to Sutton Coldfield for this seminar is the next step in the renewal of our town centre, which the BID is driving

through investment in special events and improvements.

"We know there are exciting regeneration plans for the town centre and until that gets underway we will continue to play our part and host events to boost footfall and support local businesses.

"We encourage businesses to attend this event with Mary Portas, to hear how town centres are changing and how we can all play our part."

The seminar, which will be held on Wednesday 7th June at Sutton Coldfield College, will be free to BID Members – but will be invite only.

■ To find out more about the event, inquire about attendance and discover sponsorship opportunities, contact Michelle Baker, Sutton Coldfield BID Manager, by emailing: [bidmanager@suttoncoldfieldtowncentre.co.uk](mailto:bidmanager@suttoncoldfieldtowncentre.co.uk).



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# ESG

## SPECIAL REPORT

**ESG – environmental, social and governance – is now one of the main priorities for many businesses, from the major corporates to SMEs and even start-ups.**

**The goal of ESG is to capture the non-financial risks and opportunities inherent to a company's day-to-day activities.**

**Investors, regulators, as well as consumers and employees are now increasingly demanding that companies should be good stewards of natural and social capital and have the necessary governance framework in place to support this.**

**In this commercially backed special report we look at the challenges and opportunities that implementing effective ESG strategies provide.**





# Why prioritising ESG and purpose is more critical than ever

With so many day-to-day challenges confronting your business, there may be a temptation to put environmental, social and governance (ESG) priorities on the backburner.

But from improving access to talent and finance, to curbing energy costs and shoring up supply chains, ESG is key to addressing many of the immediate issues you face.

The progress you make on ESG now will put you in a strong position to capitalise on the eventual recovery ahead by prioritising purpose at the heart of your business, building trust in ESG numbers, appointing a chief sustainability officer and focusing on ESG - even in periods of distress.

2023 looks set to be another tough year. More than eight out of 10 of the UK business leaders taking part in PwC's latest Global CEO Survey (84%) believe that UK growth will decline over the coming 12 months. But the need to keep pace with longer term disruption and change haven't gone away. Nearly a quarter of UK CEOs (22%) believe that their business won't be economically viable within a decade on its current course, while 10% believe they have less than three years.

As we highlight in our 'Act Now to Recover: Priorities under pressure – the hidden cost of haste report', few if any priorities better exemplify the need to balance short-term urgency with long-term change than ESG.

## Purpose and profitability

At a time when competition for talent, customers and investors has rarely been more intense, standout ESG credentials can help you to attract all three.

And your record on ESG could even be a matter of survival as thousands of companies seek to secure refinancing in 2023. It's notable that nearly three-quarters of the investors (74%) we interviewed for 'Priorities under pressure – the hidden cost of haste' still assess ESG when extending finance.

Businesses need to reframe and reprioritise ESG from being an additional consideration that adds value, to being the purpose at the heart of a business. The way that we do business has changed with commerciality and responsibility being intrinsically connected. Not only are businesses realising the benefits of ESG through greater access to capital, increased employee engagement and enhanced reputation but they are also increasingly playing a key role in the ESG debate more broadly. Profitability and purpose go hand in hand so it is now crucial that businesses get ESG right.

## Measuring up

Your ability to address these short and long-term ESG issues come together in the difficult but critical arena of measurement and disclosure. Clear and credible ESG measures are essential in meeting ever more stringent regulatory reporting demands and getting ahead of regulatory requirements, demonstrating a true commitment to and delivery on ESG.

The ESG performance and risks within your supply chain are clearly among the most challenging to measure and manage. But where businesses have been able to make progress in this area, many find that it can provide valuable insights into supply chain efficiency and potential vulnerabilities. The results are not only helping to cut emissions, waste and energy demands, but also reduce costs and speed up lead times. They can also help detect poor working conditions, use of child labour and other unacceptable employment practices.

## Progress slows

So what level of progress are we seeing on ESG? The answer is mixed, though some organisations are continuing to make significant headway with increased investment in areas such as decarbonising business models and technology to support ESG efforts.

It's encouraging to note that 31% of UK CEOs have implemented and 34% are making progress on a measurable data-driven strategy to reduce emissions. But for many others, measurement is the area of ESG that is most likely to have stalled. Some notable exceptions aside, ESG data is rarely of the same quality or reliability as would be expected within financial reporting. This can create a credibility gap when competing for business, talent and investment. It also makes it more difficult to develop and track data-led ESG strategies.



By ED IRWIN, partner at PwC

## On track to deliver

How then can your business use ESG to bolster your position in the short-term while building for the future? Four priorities stand out:

### Putting ESG and purpose at the heart of your business

ESG can no longer be viewed as a nice-to-have. Given how much is at stake, it's time to put purpose and ESG at the heart of your business. As profitability and purpose are now so interconnected, prioritising ESG in this way will improve your business strategy, performance management, marketing and investor relations. The foundations for progress are adopting ambitious but realistic targets, organising ESG data and taking tangible steps to fulfil your commitments.

### Build trust in your ESG numbers

Both your ESG decision-making and ability to build stakeholder trust depend on the credibility of your ESG measurement and disclosure. This can be challenging given the continuing sparsity of data, reliance on third-party information and inconsistencies in regulatory reporting and rating agency evaluation. But the progress being made by a number of front-runners shows what's possible when there is the commitment to drive it.

In the absence of regulatory consistency, the rewire. earth framework offers a valuable standardised data platform for ESG impact reporting. To improve supply chain data, you can include verifiable ESG information in your tender and procurement criteria.

### Appoint a dedicated chief sustainability officer

This is a growing trend, especially among larger groups. Appointing a dedicated chief sustainability officer at board level can help to embed ESG considerations into your strategic planning, accelerate progress on reporting and help hold the business to account.

### Keep up the ESG focus even in distress

ESG is quite understandably less of a priority if your survival is at immediate risk. Nonetheless, a compelling ESG strategy and the data to back this up can still be valuable in increasing access to finance and enhancing the value of operations being put up for sale.

### Act now to reap the benefits

ESG shows how you can improve your chances of success in the short-term while keeping a fixed eye on the future. Measurement is critical in targeting investment, tracking progress and securing the rightful rewards for your commitment to ESG.



## Focus on net zero delivery increases

West Midlands smaller businesses are increasing their focus on supporting net zero delivery as investment continues in the region.

This is according to figures revealed by the British Business Bank's Small Business Finance Market Report 2022/23.

There has been a total of £137 million invested in net zero related deals between 2018 and Q3 2022 in the West Midlands, equating to 4% of deals across the UK.

According to a survey undertaken by Ipsos Mori for the report, just over four in 10 West Midlands-based smaller businesses who prioritise environmental sustainability state that access to external finance is one of the main barriers they face to achieving that objective.

Six in 10 of those businesses also stated the current economic climate as their main obstacle.

There has been a total of 43 announced

equity deals in the region so far between Q1-Q3 2022, equating to £166 million of investment value. This represents a decrease in investment by 47% on the same period in the previous year, with 17% fewer deals taking place.

Demand for external finance has seen a considerable drop nationally in the demand for external finance. In Q3 2022, only 33% of smaller businesses were using external finance compared to 44% the year prior. This was also reflected across the West Midlands, with 32% of small businesses using external finance in the third quarter of 2022, compared to 45% the previous year.

Sophie Dale-Black, UK Network director, Midlands at the British Business Bank, said: "The report shows promising signs in the net zero deal sector in the West Midlands as equity finance markets respond to the growing demand for investment in green innovation, a trend seen across the UK."



Sophie Dale-Black

## Partnership takes off for long-term ambitions in hydrogen-powered air travel

Zero-emission, hydrogen-powered air travel is the aim of a new partnership between ZeroAvia and Birmingham Airport.

The companies have entered into a long-term partnership to enable on-airfield hydrogen refuelling and regular domestic passenger flights of zero-emission aircraft.

ZeroAvia specialises in zero-emission technologies including hydrogen-electric engines for aircraft.

Hydrogen-electric engines use hydrogen in fuel cells to generate electricity, which is

then used to power electric motors to turn the aircraft's propellers. The only emission is water.

The firm is currently working on bringing to market a zero-emission system capable of flying 20-seat aircraft 300 nautical miles by 2025.

This opens up the possibility of green air travel from Birmingham to destinations such as Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Belfast, Isle of Man and Dublin by the middle of this decade.

ZeroAvia is aiming to get an emissions-

free 80-seat aircraft flying up to 1,000 nautical miles by 2027.

For BHX, the partnership with ZeroAvia sits alongside its own journey to become a net-zero-carbon airport by 2033, as outlined in its 'carbon roadmap' published in 2022.

The airport plans to use an area on its airfield for hydrogen refueling infrastructure, testing and operations.

"Birmingham Airport can be a central hub in a green flight network in the UK, given that any domestic mainland destination will be reachable from the airport using our first systems in 2025," said Arnab Chatterjee of ZeroAvia.

"Given the commitments of the Jet Zero Strategy on domestic aviation, it is fantastic to engage with forward-thinking airports that want to be early innovators and developers to deliver the vision of bringing truly clean, quiet and pollution-free flights to the UK."

Simon Richards, chief finance and sustainability officer at BHX, said: "We are pleased to partner with ZeroAvia on creating solutions to the main challenge of our generation – protecting the future of our planet."

"We could, quite conceivably, see the first hydrogen-powered domestic passenger flight taking off from BHX in the UK in the next few years."

Sergey Kiselev, of ZeroAvia, left, and Simon Richards of Birmingham Airport



# Why businesses need to look beyond social purpose in 2023

Success should never be measured by shareholder value alone. At Anthony Collins, we judge success by the social impact of our work. How have we helped our clients improve the lives of individuals, communities and society.

This year marks our 50th anniversary and we're delighted that this commitment to social purpose has been recognised with a prestigious B Corp accreditation.

B Corp is a global scheme that recognises commercial businesses for their ability to improve society and reduce the impact on the environment. Companies are evaluated on how their business success is measured, shifting the focus more to people and the planet, as well as profit. Their standards are rigorous. Of the five million businesses in the UK,

only a thousand are accredited as B Corporations. Anthony Collins is just the fourth law firm in the UK to achieve the accreditation, joining global brands like Patagonia and Innocent.

**"You cannot have a successful business where wider society or the environment loses out – and that is what creates a more profitable and sustainable business model."**

Peter Hubbard, senior partner at Anthony Collins

The accreditation proves that we're not simply marking our own homework when talking about social purpose. It means our

advice, our culture and our commitments, align with the work and aspirations of our clients.

Becoming a B Corp commits us to plan constant improvements in our environmental impact. While we work on many green projects with our clients, we recognise that there's more we can do to be a more sustainable business ourselves – we have committed to join the B Corp Climate Collective and seek to become carbon neutral by 2030. As part of this collective and community, we benefit from support and resources to help us develop a plan for the future of the planet as well as the future of the business.

Our B Corp accreditation score was largely reflected in the work we do with our community and the lives that we help to improve. In 2021, we increased our charity partnerships to further reflect the sectors that we work with including Child Brain Injury Trust, Cauda Equina Champions Charity, Sepsis Trust, St Basils homeless charity and mental health charity, Birmingham Mind. This means not only a lot to the charities we support but also to our staff who choose to work with us.

For the team at Anthony Collins, B Corp accreditation means that we are firmly committed to a more inclusive and fairer workplace. We subscribe to policies such as blind recruitment, a living wage, profit share, and a triple bottom line that measures financial, social and environmental performance.

This is just the start. B Corp has given us a benchmark to build on in future years and fully align our actions and our business with our goals to improve lives, communities and society.

Felicity Butler



If you'd like to talk to Anthony Collins about B Corp certification, contact Felicity Butler [felicity.butler@anthonicollins.com](mailto:felicity.butler@anthonicollins.com)







Mark Jones, left, and Andrew Wood

## Fit-out starts on Paradise property

Sustainable development consultancy Arup has started the fit-out of its new Birmingham office at One Centenary Way in Paradise.

The project is being delivered in partnership with fit-out specialists Overbury.

This office will play a significant part within the Arup ambition to reach Net Zero Carbon target by 2030.

Working closely with developer MEPC, One Centenary Way will be the first building in the Paradise development with all-electric heating.

Overbury will install a suite of SMART sensors to enable dynamic monitoring and future learning around utilisation, comfort, and energy use in workspaces throughout the office.

Mark Jones, Arup's Birmingham office leader, said: "Our new office will be a brilliant showcase setting new standards for excellence and encapsulating our passion for sustainable development."

Andrew Wood, managing director of Overbury said: "We are proud to be working with Arup on an adaptable workspace designed in a sustainable way which reflects the company's core values."

## A world first created by Midlands firm

The world's first purpose-built, mobile laboratories designed to test a pioneering new carbon-capture technology have been created by an Aldridge-based containers firm.

# Blueprint designed to boost economy

A prominent voice for the foundry industry has released a five-point blueprint that will help the castings sector deliver a £10 billion boost to the economy.

Published by the Cast Metals Federation, the Net Zero roadmap is urging the Government to create a stable policy environment that focuses on reforming energy markets and providing clean energy.

It suggests offering incentives for capital investment in zero carbon furnaces and production equipment, and ensuring UK trade policies support customer demand for low carbon products from global markets.

It also calls for Whitehall to encourage and enable the release of land for modern, zero carbon foundries and associated zero carbon energy generation facilities.

Adam Vicary, CEO of Castings PLC and chairman of the CMF Net Zero Advisory Panel, said: "This blueprint sets out how UK casting manufacturers can lead globally – growing the industry, decarbonising our components, providing strategic resilience to UK supply chains, creating jobs and wealth and making the components required for a modern economy."

"Our industry can be part of the solution for the UK, making use of recycled metal to produce locally sourced components and leading the way in the supply of low carbon, cast metal components and finished products, including those needed for greener technologies."

"Reversing the leakage of economic strength for the casting and foundry industry is no easy task, but it is the ambition we have set out in this roadmap."

"To return £10 billion of GVA to the UK



and support our national transition to a net zero future, a partnership with Government is what our industry wants, aligning foundry sector investment with national industrial decarbonisation strategy."

The Cast Metals Federation works to foster development, collaboration and innovation in the UK foundry and casting sector, representing the interests of industry to Government.

Its 100-strong foundry membership produces 85% of all domestic castings, contributing over £2bn to the UK economy and underpinning strategic national supply chains, such as aerospace, automotive,

defence, marine, medical and power generation.

Dr Pam Murrell FICME, Chief Executive of the CMF, added her support: "UK foundries know how to compete internationally and deliver low and zero carbon components into strategic supply chains. Importantly, they can also secure investment in new production facilities and optimise sites to maximise the benefits of on-site energy generation."

"However, like any other industry, we look to the Government to set a clear and stable policy framework that allows our sector to compete."

be shipped around the world to help demonstrate the effectiveness of the new technology.

Rob Palmer, head of emerging technology at UNDO, said: "To enable the work at UNDO to be scalable, it seemed like a natural choice to opt for containerised laboratories that could move around the country to whichever site we need it."

"As well as conducting our own research, we fund other environmental research projects so having a lab space that is portable means we can provide resources for third party teams to conduct

their research too."

Andrew Capella, conversions general manager at S Jones Containers, said: "Converted shipping containers are well suited for remote scientific projects and industrial facilities."

"Not only do they offer flexibility in regard to design, but they are sturdy and can be transported between sites. A bricks and mortar building doesn't offer much in the way of flexibility, and it certainly can't be moved around, so containerising a lab makes perfect sense for researchers out in the field."



# Solving the battery conundrum through the application of science – Recycling Lithium-ion Batteries (ReLiB)

advertisement feature

With the explosion in the use of electric vehicles, a major challenge has arisen: how to recover and recycle the valuable metals used in making lithium-ion batteries whilst also providing solutions for how to recycle low value materials such as binders and plastics. Researchers from the University of Birmingham are at the cutting edge of research providing the technological solutions to this this problem, underpinning the security of supply of critical materials in the UK.

Across the world there is a drive to reduce fossil fuel usage and reduce emissions in order to tackle climate change.

In the UK, the government has set out to reach net zero by 2050 with the automotive industry being a key part in achieving this, with a ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030. Such fossil fuel vehicles will be superseded by electric vehicles, which are already seeing a rise in sales.

Compared to 2018, the number of electric vehicles on the road were triple the amount in 2021, putting the number of electric vehicles globally at 16.5 million. With coming ban on sales of fossil fuel cars, there is an expected substantial increase in demand for Li-ion batteries. The Faraday Institution has forecast EV battery demand will reach nearly 200 GWh in the UK alone.

The required increased demand on the production of Li-ion batteries will result in a strain on virgin resources, including elements already deemed as critical elements – cobalt, lithium and nickel.

Therefore, it is important that materials in these batteries are recovered and recycled to support the EV revolution. By recycling these materials, it will not only support supply chains, but also reduce



By DR ABBEY JARVIS  
University of Birmingham

waste going to landfill. To support the recycling of Li-ion battery materials, the EU has proposed mandatory minimum levels of recycled content e.g. 12% cobalt, 4% lithium and 4% nickel from 2030. Therefore efficient recycling to produce suitable materials for new Li-ion batteries will be needed to fulfil this legislation.

Recycling of Li-ion battery materials is the focus of the Recycling Lithium-ion Electric Vehicle Batteries (ReLiB) programme, one of the Faraday Institution projects. The ReLiB project aims to ensure the sustainable management of Li-ion battery materials.

A particular focus of some of the work on ReLiB is the recycling, regeneration and upcycling of Li-ion battery materials in the chemistry department at the University of Birmingham.

The chemistry department at the University of Birmingham can be traced back to approximately 1875. It is home

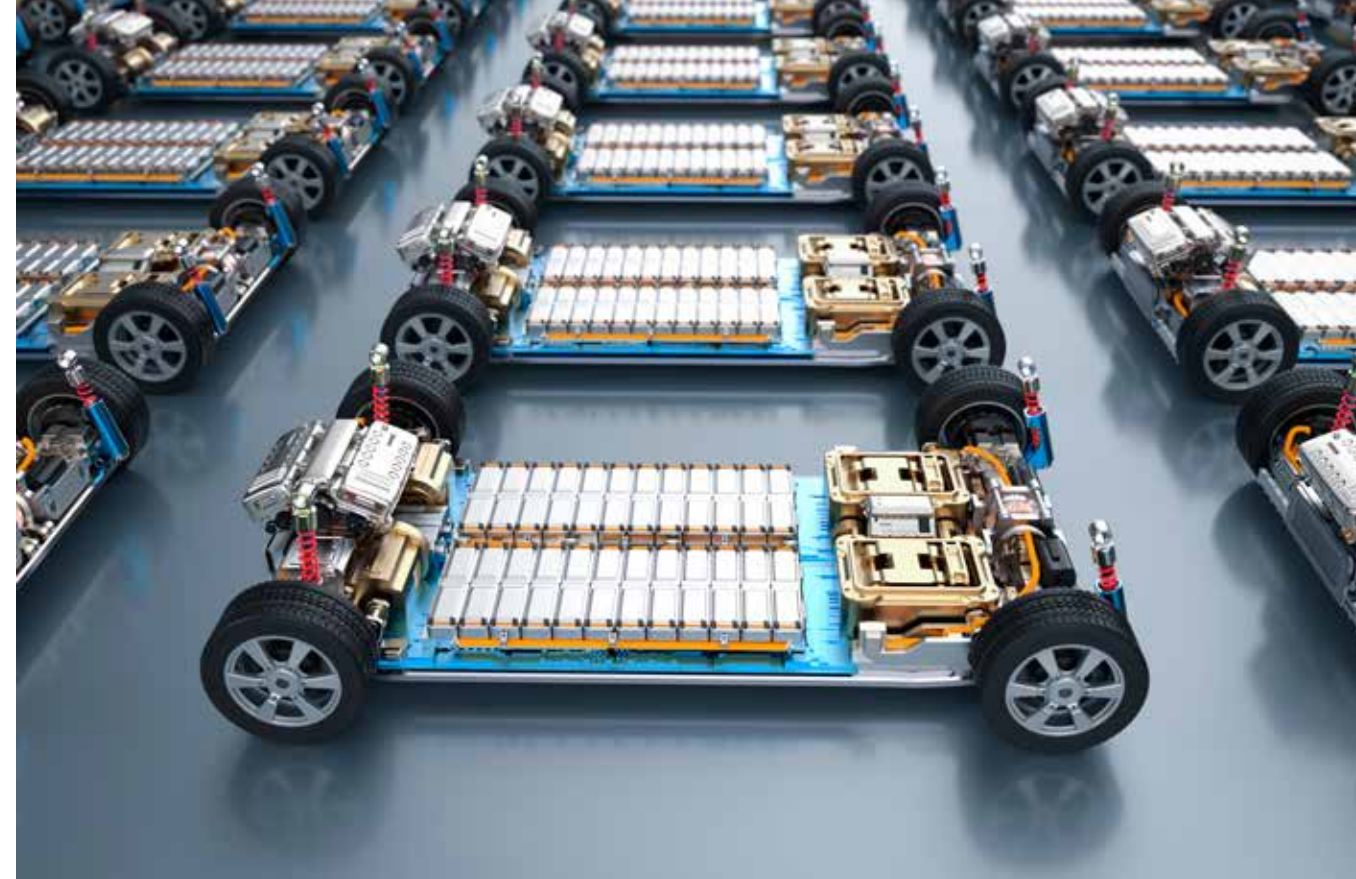
to a number of Nobel prize winners. Sir Norman Haworth was the director of the Department of Chemistry between 1925-1948. He was awarded (jointly) the Nobel prize in chemistry in 1937 for his investigation on carbohydrates and vitamin C. More recently, in 2016 Professor Sir J. Fraser Stoddart (University of Birmingham – 1990 to 1997) was awarded (jointly) the Nobel Prize for their work into the design and synthesis of molecular machines carried out in the 1990s.

The School of Chemistry hosts researchers in a wide range of research areas including several research groups focusing on energy materials. This includes a number of battery research projects as part of the Faraday Institution, where research is not only developing new materials for Li-ion batteries, but also recycling materials from Li-ion batteries.

A particular focus of the research on ReLiB at the University of Birmingham is selective leaching of cathode materials. Currently recycling methods commonly focus on the recovery of metals, such as cobalt and nickel, using methods such as pyrometallurgy or hydrometallurgical leaching. Many of these processes result in the loss of valuable and critical materials such as lithium.

Commonly, hydrometallurgical processes use strong acids which leach the desired metals from Li-ion battery cathode materials into solution. This process focuses on producing metals salts which can be used in the synthesis of new cathode materials. At Birmingham we are using milder hydrometallurgical processes, where organic acids are used to allow phase selective leaching. Phase selective leaching is where a desired phase is leached from mixed or blended materials.

This process avoids all metals being leached into solution, allowing for simpler regeneration of cathode materials. A patent has been published (Patent no. (WO/2022/084668)) on this phase



selective leaching and regeneration processes. Our process has been shown to successfully separate Mn-rich phases from Ni-rich phases in cathode materials from both quality control rejected and end of life electric vehicle batteries (for example, generation 1 Nissan Leaf cells).

By avoiding leaching all phases into solution, we are able to achieve a shorter loop recycling process. Importantly for this work we have shown selective leaching for not only Gen 1 Nissan leaf materials, but the patented processes show selectivity over a range of compositions. As a result, the process is adaptable for different chemistries which allows us to recycle not only current generation materials, but also next generation materials.

These recycling methods developed on the ReLiB project have been demonstrated to be able to not only regenerate cathode materials, but also upcycle to next generation materials. The methods provide a solution to recycling not only quality control rejected materials, but also end of life materials.

As a result, it will allow us to avoid these materials to go to landfill while also providing a potential source of valuable

critical materials for new Li-ion batteries. While these processes are only one part of the ReLiB project, they highlight the importance of recycling research in the drive for net zero.

Dr Abbey Jarvis, pictured below, is a Research Fellow in Chemistry (ReLiB) at the University of Birmingham



For more information, please contact:  
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UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

advertisement feature



# Number of green jobs on the rise

The number of green jobs advertised in the West Midlands has almost doubled in the last year, providing encouragement that the economy is becoming greener.

This is according to the second edition of PwC's Green Jobs Barometer, which revealed there were 24,044 green opportunities advertised in the region in 2022, compared to just over 10,000 in 2021.

Green jobs accounted for 2.03% of total overall roles in the region in 2022, compared to just 1% in 2021, with an overall increase of almost 135%.

The Green Jobs Barometer, which first launched in November 2021, tracks movements in green job creation, job loss, carbon intensity of employment, and worker sentiment across regions and sectors.

In the year to June 2022, every region of the UK saw green jobs accounting for a greater share of the job market, and the number of green jobs at least double in absolute terms.

Green jobs are growing around four times the rate of the overall UK employment market, with 2.2% of all new jobs classed as green. However more than one-third of these roles are now



Matthew Hammond

based in London and the South East, with a dominance of professional and scientific roles.

Matthew Hammond, PwC UK Midlands regional market leader & Birmingham senior partner, said: "The West Midlands has seen a surge in green jobs in the last 12 months and it is encouraging to see the

region becoming greener.

"When we launched the green jobs barometer in November 2021, green jobs in the West Midlands accounted for just over 1% of total opportunities. This has now more than doubled in absolute terms, to 2% of all adverts, illustrating how the region is developing to become greener and more sustainable.

"That said, London and the South East continue to dominate with more green professional and scientific roles.

"Employers in the West Midlands have an opportunity to innovate and consider how their operations can become greener, particularly in the manufacturing sector that represents a high proportion of the West Midlands economy.

"Embracing new, greener technologies and investing in skills will provide benefits for business operations and more employment opportunities in the region, as well as making a difference to the environment."

Green jobs are defined by PwC as roles that seek to either produce or provide environmentally friendly products and services or adapt work processes to become more environmentally friendly or use fewer natural resources.

## Law firm relocates to Colmore Row



National law firm Weightmans LLP is to relocate its Birmingham office to 103 Colmore Row after being impressed by the building's ESG credentials.

The firm has signed a 10-year lease on the 9th floor of the 26-storey building, and the deal will see Weightmans' 168 staff move from St Philips Point, on Temple Row, where it has been based since 2006.

Jawaid Rehman, partner and head of Weightmans' Birmingham office, said: "In recent years we have really embraced ESG principles and worked hard to embed sustainability into our 'business as usual'.

"The Birmingham office move is part of this plan, as the new site offers low impact environmental footprint and a host of other ethical and emission reducing benefits.

The building benefits from WiredScore Platinum rated digital connectivity and is the first commercial building in the central business district to connect to the District Heating System, with electricity generated from renewable energy.

# ART deal goes ahead

By JON GRIFFIN

## Lender seals three-way agreement with US tech giant and Birmingham ethical bank

It is one of the biggest financial deals in the 25-year plus history of one of Birmingham's most durable financial institutions – and Steve Walker couldn't be more delighted.

As chief executive of ART Business Loans, Walker has spent a quarter of a century as the public face and driving force at the helm of a loans outlet which in the last 10 years has lent over £24 million and created or safeguarded 4,000 jobs.

ART, with a current portfolio of over £6.5 million covering 170 businesses, has helped a wide variety of businesses take that vital first step or seek growth, from manufacturers and tech companies to service providers and restaurateurs. It has thrown financial lifelines to the likes of 2022 Queen's Award for innovation winner KPM Marine, the culinary start-up which became Michelin-starred Purnell's restaurant and Chelmunds Fish and Chips, the UK's first community-owned chip shop.

Now the Aston-based lender stands on the cusp of a brand new era after sealing a tripartite agreement with Birmingham's

Unity Trust Bank and American hi-tech tycoon Jack Dorsey's US-based Block Inc, a global technology giant with a focus on financial services.

The deal, which will see Block make its first social impact investment in the UK by providing £2 million capital to the Birmingham loans company with a matching sum from ethical lender Unity Trust Bank, has been announced following months of negotiations and legal discussions.

The bare bones of the transaction have already been outlined in the financial press and national and international media – but Steve Walker is keen to emphasise the new opportunities now available to many businesses in the West Midlands currently struggling to access finance from traditional High Street banks and lenders.

"I am absolutely delighted that we have got this deal over the line. It has taken months of negotiations to dot the Is and cross the Ts but we are now finally there and ready to write the next chapter in the

story of ART.

"It's a genuine game changer for us and a great vote of confidence from such well-established institutions as Block and Unity Trust Bank. With the backing and support of these two allies, we have never been in a stronger position to continue what we do best, lend money to organisations which may be in need of a financial lifeline."

Walker says the three-way agreement could have far-reaching financial implications for many West Midlands businesses in underserved and disadvantaged communities which are unable to get the right deal - or sometimes any deal - from traditional banks.

"It's no secret that life is tough out there for many businesses. In the last few years industry has had to cope with a perfect storm of crises and major developments, from Brexit to Covid, the Ukraine war and the energy crisis to the cost of living crisis.

"All this has had an impact on the lending market in some cases and surveys frequently show that it can be very difficult for firms to access the cash they need in the current climate, maybe just to get over the next few months or to take them on the next stage of their journey."

Walker, who spent 27 years with Barclays before launching the then Aston Reinvestment Trust in tandem with the late Sir Adrian Cadbury in 1997, has been around the West Midlands financial block many times in a career which has survived recessions, the 2008-09 financial crisis, the shrinking of the region's manufacturing sector and the onset of the digital era, Covid and much more.

But through it all, the only child of working-class parents from Acocks Green, Birmingham, who once harboured ambitions to be a sports journalist, has remained true to the values which caused him to reject the banking sector's move to target-driven operations in the 1980s and 1990s and opt to throw in his lot with a new social enterprise venture in the shape of Aston Reinvestment Trust.

Since those early days, ART has enjoyed exponential growth with the



From left: Deborah Hazell CEO at Unity Trust Bank, Dr Steve Walker, chief executive at ART and Helen Prowse, head of international corporate communications at Block Inc





The ART Business Loans team

average loan increasing post-Covid from £35,000 to £65,000. All loans are to enterprises unable to obtain their requirements from banks and range from £10,000 to £150,000.

Walker firmly believes the post-Covid landscape will continue the trend towards online banking – with clear implications for the future of traditional High Street branches.

“The banks have not only reduced branches substantially over the years but have moved away from providing relationship banking services to small businesses. ART is an additional source of finance lending after a bank decline and we believe that demand will go up.”

Against that background and the continuing closures of High Street bank branches, the tripartite £4 million deal has been welcomed with open arms by UK trade association Responsible Finance, whose chief executive Theodora Hadjimichael praised the role of the Aston lender as a ‘talent-spotter’.



Steve Walker toasting a young Glyn Purnell

**“The ART team are looking forward to the challenge of finding the right businesses to support in the months ahead and continuing to work with a wide network of partners.”**



Steve Walker with Sir Adrian Cadbury

“Block’s investment breaks new ground for the entire CDFI (Community Development Financial Institution) sector. ART and other CDFIs are business talent-spotters, nurturing entrepreneurs who can’t otherwise get the capital they need to grow.

“An investment like Block’s has been unprecedented until now in the UK, despite our sector’s unique and well-evidenced track record over more than a quarter of a century. Nine out of 10 of the viable businesses which borrow from a CDFI have been turned down for the finance they need elsewhere, yet most thrive and succeed with CDFI support.

“This breakthrough investment complements Unity Trust Bank’s valued and long-term commercial relationships with many CDFIs and will unlock business innovation in the West Midlands.”

Deborah Hazell, CEO at Birmingham’s Unity Trust Bank, which is a long-standing supporter of CDFIs providing ART with £20.4 million in funding since 2005,

hailed the new deal as a ‘significant development’.

“Financial inclusion is a key focus for us and we are committed to providing access to fair and affordable finance through intermediaries such as ART. This new co-lending partnership is a significant development and we welcome the addition of a corporate investor supporting this underserved sector.”

Amrita Ahuja, chief financial officer at Block, said: “We are thrilled to be making our first UK social impact investment. ART’s efforts to help underserved groups access fair and responsible finance is completely aligned with Block’s mission of economic empowerment.

“We believe fair access to finance is what unlocks opportunities for individuals and communities and are pleased to invest in local programmes that further this mission.”

ART has long been recognised as a pioneering lending model and over the years has attracted visits from non-

profit-making organisations from far-flung fields including the likes of South Korea, China, Australia, Russia, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere to discuss its business model.

Closer to home, the last word, appropriately, comes from Steve Walker, the man who walked out on a senior job with Barclays over 25 years ago because he didn’t fancy life as a target-driven banker with business decisions dictated by computer.

“The ART team are looking forward to the challenge of finding the right businesses to support in the months ahead and continuing to work with a wide network of partners.

“We believe that demand for loans will increase as banks find it more challenging to support smaller businesses in the current volatile economic conditions.

“We are currently lending around £3 million a year and have been striving to raise additional funds for lending. This new agreement will allow us to do just that – we are very much open for business.”





# LOOKING TO PRODUCE YOUR NEXT **LIVE EVENT**?

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During these uncertain times, high quality communication with clients, teams and colleagues is vital. Rather than postponing your next event, why not live stream it, either from your own premises, or why not use our fully equipped TV style studio here in the West Midlands?

Our team is also ready and waiting to produce live events in person as and when you're ready to do so.



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By MARTYN JAMES

# Are the robots automating customer service?

The robots are coming for your jobs – and this time they want to get creative too. Well, at least according to the news which has been full of stories lately about artificial intelligence.

All of this can be a bit scary, though many of the stories feature frankly clunky art generators to excitable engineers who think the machines have reached consciousness (which they haven't).

Most of the news has focused on ChatGPT, a 'thinking' bot that can apparently write convincing poetry, do the kids' homework and impersonate pop stars' writing style . . . though Nick Cave begged to differ.

Should we be worried? That all depends on how you feel about human interaction.

For years now, excitable executives have been telling me about how the chatbot is the future of customer service. I think we all know how that's worked out. Clunky, largely useless and frustrating to use, the chatbot is reviled by people everywhere. So while technological developments

like ChatGPT are potentially a huge leap forward, they will only operate within the parameters set by the business. And if they don't want to talk to you about difficult things like complaints, nothing will change.

But we hold the power when it comes to customer service. You just have to complain if you can't speak to a human.

The most common question I get asked is: 'how do I get a business to listen to me?' Sadly, it's often a challenge – especially in certain sectors like travel or retail. But there are a few tactics you can try.

**THINK STRATEGICALLY.** If there's a phone number, then the time you spend on hold is likely to be much, much longer due to the volume of people trying to get help and the reduced number of staff available. Go for off-peak hours, with mid-afternoon being one of the better times with standard opening hours, and during the evening prime time TV slots for 24-hour helplines.

**CONFUSE A CHATBOT.** For all the industry excitement surrounding chatbots, they're pretty low tech. Most are

programmed to follow certain questions and patterns – and that isn't going to change even with advances in technology. Many people give up when faced with this option but keep questioning the robot. Some bots default to actual customer service teams if you persist or respond randomly. Type in 'blancmange' if you're feeling random, until it gives up.

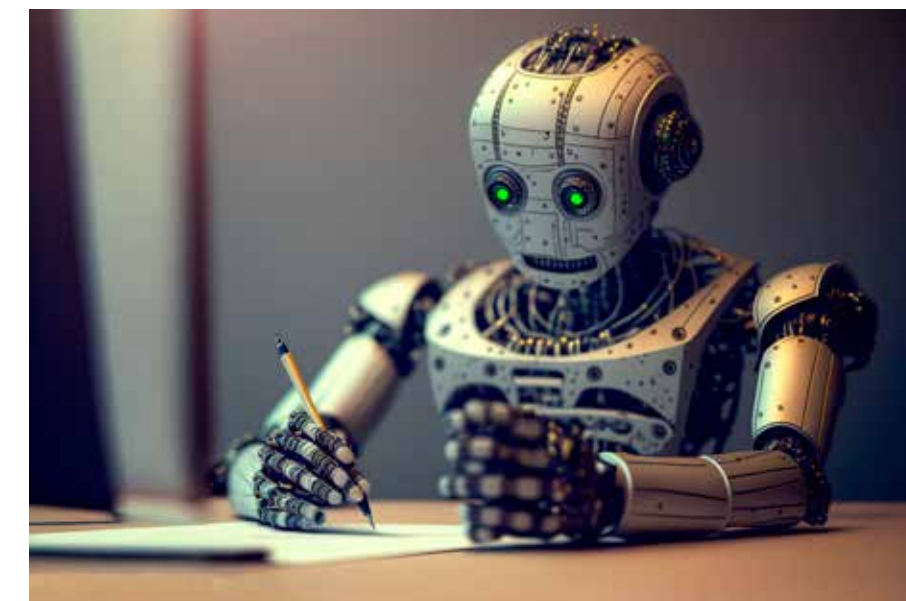
**SOCIAL MEDIA.** We really shouldn't be forced to use social media, but it is a good way to get a business to notice you as the teams monitoring the tweets and posts are usually actual people. If you sign up to Twitter, it's the most effective way to get attention (but don't engage with the angry, shouty people).

**FIND A FORUM.** Remember them? Back in the early days of the internet, forums were the places to be for getting information on businesses that were reluctant to communicate. There are loads still out there. Type a question in to a search drive if you're struggling to contact a firm and see if any pop up. The MoneySavingExpert forum has hundreds of thousands of users, for one.

**MAKE LIKE YOU'RE CANCELLING.** If you have any kind of agreement with a business and they aren't responding, see if you can start the process of cancelling it. That often prompts a person from a different team to contact you to talk you out of it.

**COMPLAIN ABOUT CUSTOMER SERVICE.** All businesses should respond to written complaints, so make them and take the matter further. You can notify regulators if a business makes it hard to contact them or won't give you a human response.

Increasingly, pre-empting problems is the best way to avoid them. So before you buy or sign up to anything, go online and check out the 'contact us' section of the firm's website. If you can't call or email, consider going to a competitor – after all, if they don't want to talk to you, why give them your cash?



\*Martyn James is a consumer rights campaigner, TV and radio broadcaster and journalist.

[birminghambiz.co.uk](http://birminghambiz.co.uk) | 43



# Crisis talks

Our writer Jon Griffin covered many headline-grabbing stories during his time as a journalist and business editor at the Birmingham Mail. One of the hardest hitting – and certainly the most tragic – concerned a series of events at Royal Mail, one of the region's biggest employers and an institution in our daily lives. With industrial unrest bringing the organisation to the front pages again over recent months, Jon reflects on those troubled days of the late 1990s and early 2000s.



It is now well over 20 years ago – but the lurid headlines still tell their own shocking story of bullying, occasional racism and downright anarchy in one of Birmingham's most prominent workplaces.

*"The Royal Mail today condemned the 'utterly shameful' action of some managers who drove postman Jermaine Lee to commit suicide following years of bullying."*

*"A Birmingham postman has been suspended after being accused of donning a homemade Ku Klux Klan mask in front of Asian colleagues."*

*"Two workers have been switched from their jobs at the Royal Mail Birmingham sorting office following disclosures about alleged Mafia-style gangs."*

*"A Royal Mail union representative has been suspended from his job at the Birmingham Mail Centre after being accused of insulting Turks."*

All of the aforementioned were news stories which featured prominently in Birmingham's daily newspapers in the years 2001 to 2002, and there were many others of a similar nature over a period of several years.

The Royal Mail – still state-owned back in those days – was not just a loss-making drain on the taxpayers' purse, it seemed, but a hotbed of appalling workplace practice.

In the worst instance, the 'utterly shameful' actions of some managers who drove Birmingham postman Jermaine Lee to commit suicide, aged 26, following years of bullying were condemned by the Royal Mail, who lamented a 'macho culture' at the Mail Centre.

An undisclosed substantial cash sum – reportedly £100,000 – was paid to the

Lee family following a year-long Royal Mail investigation. Careers of some senior managers came to an end as fear and paranoia stalked the Mail Centre in Birmingham.

The extraordinary stories filtering from there more than 20 years ago seemed to owe more to those famous sepia-tinted tales of British Leyland workers paid to sleep on the job at Longbridge rather than an organisation which aspired to be a key pillar of the UK economy.

In a brutally candid interview back in

**"I think that privatisation was seen as a means to an end. I left before privatisation but the whole time I was there, there was this constant move towards a more commercial organisation."**

November 2004, then Royal Mail chief executive Adam Crozier – a man with his own reputation for confrontational management – told me that the Royal Mail had failed to stamp out the 'worst bullying record' in British industry.

Crozier pulled no punches. "We started with the worst record of any company in Britain. But this is something we are absolutely determined to stamp out," he admitted.

Sitting alongside Crozier that day in the interview at Birmingham's International Convention Centre was a man who had found himself in the eye of the media storm surrounding the tragic case of Jermaine Lee, the-then Royal Mail Birmingham-based head of regional public relations, Mike Dalton.

Dalton spent 14 years in the thick of the corporate PR world, often defending the indefensible – as he now freely admits. He was the first port of call on the postal PR beat for the Birmingham media at a time when the Royal Mail was chalking up losses of up to £1 billion a year in those distant days of pre-privatisation.

More than 20 years down the line, Dalton, who now runs two coffee shops and a low-alcohol drinks business in

genteel Shrewsbury, can still recall the Jermaine Lee case and its effects on the workplace with sympathy and feeling, alongside an insider's perspective on the tragedy.

"It was absolutely awful," he says.

"Anybody who was around at the time, certainly who was involved in any shape or form with the case would say the same thing, that it was probably the worst time.

"The thing I took away from it, more than anything, was the tragedy for the family. After the Royal Mail investigation

was complete it was humbling to meet Jermaine's dad."

Dalton admits his years with the Royal Mail often saw him having to defend management decisions he instinctively knew were wrong.

"In a professional sense there was that element of 'scepticism is very healthy'.

"Even when you are told things by very, very senior people always be willing and able to put

yourself in a position to question what you have been told."

Dalton admits the Royal Mail had to hold their hands up over Jermaine Lee's suicide.

"I honestly don't know whether innocent people were caught up in it. As soon as the investigation started the local people, people such as myself, anybody who was employed or based locally, were taken to one side and the investigation was handled by headquarters.

"That was specifically so there could be an objective view taken, which I totally understood. It was very difficult at the time because you did see people who maybe weren't treated as they could or should have been but then again it was against the backdrop of somebody who had lost their life. I certainly wasn't in a position to know all the facts that came out."

Whilst the Jermaine Lee tragedy was the worst and most high-profile incident during Dalton's 14-year career with the postal giant, the headlines were never very far away – from Ku Klux Klan masks and Mafia-style gangs, to race rows and frequent wildcat strikes.

Back in June 2007 an investigation by the Birmingham Evening Mail revealed

what the newspaper called 'bullying, racism and a worrying lack of security' within the Birmingham postal service.

During this time a Mail reporter went undercover to work at the city's Newtown centre sorting office for two weeks, and reported how he found staff were untrained, unchecked and at times unable to cope. The reporter landed the job using fake references, which were never checked. Within days, he found himself sorting out police documents, city council mail and new credit cards passing through the centre every day. After just five hours in the job, he was asked to train three new casuals.

Years on from the Ku Klux Klan masks and the undercover probe, Dalton can offer considered retrospective views on the dying years of a state-owned postal monolith which gave way to a new privatised organisation currently beset by strikes and cash losses.

"It was fascinating," he remembers. "It was a bit of a case of all human life is there. Partly because of the size of the organisation and the sheer number of people who worked for it, we are talking about tens and tens of thousands of people, nearly 200,000 employees in the UK.

"Given the size and the urban communities it covered, I would say there were about 20,000 employees across the Midlands."

Like any good PR operator Dalton was always on the lookout for, as he puts it, 'good' stories. But the nature of news – in an era of mass circulation newspapers and specialist correspondents pounding the beat and digging out well-informed contacts – would inevitably always see the 'bad' stories rise to the top of the editorial schedule.

"With that phrase 'all human life is there', the other side of that means both good and bad. I would always look for good stories to promote with the local media but equally, for as many good stories that were thrown up, there would be the bad stories.

"When you have got that sheer number of employees there is always going to be, to use that awful cliché, rotten apples. And because the organisation was so prominent in the public eye, clearly there were newsworthy stories when something went wrong."

Today the Royal Mail is an entirely different beast to its oft-maligned



Jon Griffin

**"When you have got that sheer number of employees there is always going to be, to use that awful cliché, rotten apples. And because the organisation was so prominent in the public eye, clearly there were newsworthy stories when something went wrong."**

predecessor of 20 years ago, a slimmed-down privatised organisation fighting on all fronts against increased cut-throat competitors and the unstoppable march of the internet, which has driven entire battalions of coaches and horses through the centuries-old art of letter-writing, with

all the consequences for revenues.

But the headlines still won't go away, even after all these years. Since last August the Royal Mail has been hit by a series of damaging strikes over a pay dispute and plans to cut thousands of jobs. Christmas cards arrived weeks late in the New Year as the Communication Workers Union fought tooth and nail with management to protect jobs and win a meaningful pay award.

In January the postal group forecast losses for the financial year to March 31 of between £350 million and £450 million. It seems all too reminiscent of the financial crisis facing the postal giant back in the days when a Labour Government was still at the helm and a privatised postal sector



Mike Dalton



was years ahead in the distant future.

Robert (not his real name) has worked for the Royal Mail in the Midlands as a postie (in today's parlance 'operational postal grade') for 20 years, encompassing both the nationalised group and today's privately-owned successor. Like Dalton, he can add perspective and insider knowledge to the fortunes and performance of an organisation which dates back to its foundation in 1635 in the reign of King Charles I.

"Everything has changed massively," he tells me. "Twenty years ago there were hardly any parcels. It was all letters. Today the volumes of letters have died, there are hardly any."

"There is a huge turnover of staff and the organisation is massively short-staffed. It's like a revolving door, in and out, in and out. We are issued with a postal digital assistant device which tracks you for how long you are on the round."

"If I go over by half an hour or 45 minutes they moan when I get back to the depot. It's tough manual work and you are out in all weathers. I work hard but they try to make out I am parked up somewhere in a lay-by, cutting corners."

Robert says he has lost £1,000 after taking part in the CWU strike action.

"Morale is at rock bottom. They expect you to do nine hours work in an eight-hour day. If they lose 10,000 jobs nationally there will be nobody left to do the job."

The veteran postie says the Royal Mail has historically habitually relied on the goodwill of its postmen and postwomen, often through skipping meal breaks or starting shifts early, against CWU advice.

"Many OPGs don't follow the CWU advice and managers favour these people, they pit them against the allegedly slow people who follow the advice of the union."

Robert's recent experiences at the sharp end – with the increased pressures of daily deliveries and the mounting workloads against a backdrop of greater competition – echo Mike Dalton's views of Royal Mail's run-up to privatisation.

Dalton reflects today: "I think that privatisation was seen as a means to an end. I left before privatisation but the whole time I was there, there was this constant move towards a more commercial organisation."

"When you look at the more senior appointments, people like Allan Leighton



and Adam Crozier were seen as people who knew business and knew how to operate a business in a commercial fashion whereas I think, traditionally, Royal Mail was always seen – rightly in my opinion – as a public utility. The problem, of course, is often public utilities are not run efficiently."

Today, in a harsher era of digital dominance with the likes of DPD, Amazon, UPS and the rest all grappling for a share of the parcels market – with letters now a throwback to a more cultured, civilized age before the advent of social media – the Royal Mail would once more appear to be fighting for its life.

"Personally, I think it was run well as a public utility," says Dalton. "If you look at the prices people were paying for the products, the quality of what they were getting in terms of the times of delivery, it was far, far better."

"Having said all that, it was a massively changing environment so whether or not that could have continued, I really do not know."

As the CWU continues to argue with the 2023 management over the future of the Royal Mail in the digital age, Dalton looks back on his time with the postal group with considerable fondness.

"I did 14 years, and overall my career with the Royal Mail group – it was Post Office as well – was enormously interesting."

"They were a very good organisation to work for. You were extremely well looked

after. That isn't just me talking as a former senior manager, the shopfloor people were well looked after, and the pension was excellent. A lot of that positive stuff got lost."

It's fair to conclude that in the late winter and early spring of 2023 any positivity factor currently remains in short supply at the Royal Mail following months of strikes and union disputes over pay and job cuts.

As Dalton says: "The thing that hits me with all the strikes that have been going on is that nothing has really changed. You are still talking about an organisation that alleges it wants to change but doesn't seem able to bring its people with it."

"I kind of feel that the old business model was better. But it was for that time and times have changed. It is not going back to what it was."

Nevertheless, intriguingly, Dalton believes the Royal Mail can still survive and prosper in the modern era of hybrid office workers and home working for millions.

"It's ironic because although they are facing massive challenges, you have also got at the same time massive opportunities."

"So many people are now shopping from home and Covid sped that up immeasurably. You are talking about a real opportunity to take a massive slice of what is a huge and growing market . . . but only if you can get your own house in order."



## New division for land promoter

Land promoter Richborough Estates has launched a new commercial division to answer increasing demand for consented land for business use.

The change comes after the Birmingham-based company signed a landowner promotion agreement to bring forward a 65-acre site on Lichfield Road adjoining Junction 9 on the M42.

Nick Jones has been appointed group director of the division, moving from his role as Midlands' regional director.

Paul Campbell, chief executive of Richborough Estates, said: "This exciting opportunity to bring forward a major industrial and logistics development is the latest in a string of commercial schemes in our portfolio, so the launch of our new commercial division is a natural evolution for us."

"Since forming in 2003, Richborough's main focus has been on promoting land for new residential sites. But we are also promoting over 500 acres of consented land for industrial and logistics, employment, retail and leisure uses."

"We are delighted to be strengthening our offering for landowners while answering increasing demand from commercial developers looking for high quality, build-ready land with planning permission."

"Nick Jones is the perfect fit to take the helm due to his extensive experience of planning and development as well as his contacts in the commercial property world."

Mr Jones added: "Richborough is one of the first land promoters to diversify with a dedicated commercial land division and I'm thrilled to be heading it up."

"In particular we have seen a surge in demand for industrial and logistics space due to the rise of online retail and introduction of new energy efficiency standards for buildings."

"As with our residential schemes, our in-house team will design high-quality, oven-ready schemes that can be quickly delivered."



## Recruitment companies join forces

Two West Midlands recruitment organisations have announced a joint venture aiming to create the region's largest logistics jobs firm by 2028.

Workforce solutions specialist the Jarell Group has finalised the partnership with logistics recruitment firm Temp Source, with the aim of offering hundreds more permanent and temporary roles to professional drivers, managers and warehouse staff within the transport and logistics sectors.

The announcement from the Birmingham-based agencies will see the Jarell Group's James Cronin becoming executive chairman, working closely with Temp Source's joint managing directors, Josh Allen and Aaron Hillman.

The partnership will also see a series of new recruitment roles created in 2023 – with over 500 professional HGV and light vehicle drivers registering in

the past quarter alone.

Mr Cronin said: "Josh and Aaron are rightly turning heads in the recruitment sector as they have ambitious plans and want Temp Source to be the number one logistics jobs provider."

"It is an exciting venture for us and I am delighted to be playing a key role in the strategy, development and delivery of the business going forward."

Mr Allen said: "It has always been our ambition to not only provide jobs and careers, but place the best people with the right companies, whilst widening out opportunities."

"It has been a successful start but through our new joint venture with James and his team, we are certain it puts us on a road for further growth."

"Ultimately, we want to be the region's largest logistics recruitment agency within five years."





**Left: Olivia Benussi, Diane Benussi and Helen Benussi**

**Below: Philippa Pickavance and Paul Farrow**



# Celebrating 40 years

Fifty guests from the region's legal and business world were invited to Hotel du Vin to celebrate the 40th birthday of Birmingham law firm Benussi & Co.

Founder Diane Benussi (pictured right) – a nationally respected divorce lawyer – gave an amusing speech referring to some of the ups and downs of running her business, and guests enjoyed drinks and canapes in the hotel's atrium.



**Kevin Nagle and Stephen Gilmore**



**Eileen Schofield and Anja Potze**



**Olivia Benussi, Claire Burrows and Nicola Fleet-Milne**

**Left, from top: Henry Carpenter, Jane Arnold and Amanda Grace**

**Janice Anslow, Huw Jones and Juliette Allen**

**Paul Farrow and Johnathan Dudley**

**Right: Dominic Roberts and Denise McKenna**





# Out of the ashes



**A family food business destroyed by a devastating fire would knock the stuffing out of many entrepreneurs. But on a farm in rural Solihull it proved the catalyst for the birth of a flavoured rum business which has been catching the eye of investors and retailers alike.**

JON GRIFFIN reports



Katherine and Harry Jenner

More than seven years on, Katherine Jenner is recalling in detail the morning a devastating fire sent 30 years of hard work in the family business up in smoke.

The fateful blaze in September 2015 wrecked her father-in-law's barn adjoining his flourishing toffee apple business.

But it was a day that ultimately inspired a highly distinctive start-up on the very same site.

Remembering that day, Katherine says: "There was a malfunction on one of the machines.

"The barn was still full of sugar, which is obviously highly flammable, and it went up really quickly – the whole thing was flattened in a few hours.

"In terms of the business everything was in there – machinery, all of the accounts, customers' details, it all went. It was very much a case of rebuilding the business from scratch."

For nearly three decades Katherine's father-in-law Simon Jenner's fruit farm in the rural idyll of Hampton in Arden in the borough of Solihull had been a thriving concern.

"Everything you see here he has built and planted himself," she says. "He had a range of pick-your-own fields, strawberries and raspberries, and then he founded the apple orchard, so he had apples as well."

However, the juggernaut-style rise of supermarkets in the 1990s – which would ultimately permanently change the face of the High Street – had priced Simon out of the 'pick your own' sector, leading him to diversify into toffee apples.

"You could buy a punnet of fruit here that you picked yourself – it would take you an hour to pick, or you could go to the supermarket and buy it for the same price.

"That was the turning point really. He decided to diversify into toffee apples which proved really successful. He now has some major supermarkets as clients and he supplies millions of toffee apples a year in a seven or eight week season, ripe for Bonfire Night essentially.

"The fire happened just as the season was starting. It was absolutely devastating for my father-in-law. In those early days and weeks it was difficult to see a way forward."

But the Solihull fruit farmer was determined that all his work was not going to go to waste.

"He managed to rebuild the barn," Katherine says. "He had his old customers back and was supplying them again the following year, so it was a really impressive turnaround. It took him just one year to get back to full strength.

"It took loads of determination and hard work to get to that point. He looks back now and doesn't know how he did it. It was that response that inspired my husband and myself to do something with our idea."

After seeing at first hand Simon's farming business rise literally from the ashes within just a year, son Harry and daughter-in-law



Katherine decided to follow his example of steely determination and enterprise, and launch their own business.

"We thought why are we twiddling our thumbs in our late 20s while Simon has started again in his early 60s? I had worked for a wine trading platform in London and then at Lidl where I was buying beer, wines and spirits. Harry was an officer in the army for 10 years.

"We had always wanted to start a business – and I had always wanted to launch one in food and drink specifically. Really, it was a combination of having an idea, seeing the opportunity and wanting to forge something positive from this negative event in the family history."

That positive attitude crystallised into a highly unusual idea for a start-up project – a rum company.

"My husband is a rum drinker and he saw all this innovation in gin and craft beer. He was aware that the rum and gin markets were very similar percentage-wise but there just wasn't the same innovation in rum as in gin."

As the old saying goes 'out of darkness cometh light' and Hampton in Arden's very own rum company was launched in the shape of Burning Barn Rum, the trading name being a highly personal family tribute to the rebirth of the Jenner family toffee apples farming business less than a year on from the wreckage of the blaze.

Katherine continues: "Everything was really inspired by the fire so the flavours we started with – smoked rum and spiced rum – were prompted by the flavours of the fire with the burning sugar and the smoke that was generated.

"We wanted to tie everything back to this site so we use apple wood from the orchard here to smoke the rum, and the



In action on Channel 4

honey for our honey rum comes from the site here as well."

Burning Barn Rum was toasting its first sale by October 2017 with the Jenners determined to take their idea into a market traditionally dominated by mass-produced brands such as Captain Morgan, Havana and Bacardi, introducing their very own new premium-style products.

"We are trying to offer a progression point, just like in craft beer where you drink Heineken and Fosters when you are younger and have got less disposable income," explains Katherine.

"Then, as you get more disposable income and your tastes mature, you start drinking more craft beer from smaller breweries and you support local."

The Jenners were effectively taking on

the big boys in an era of mass-produced branding which had so frequently seen independent retailers forced out of the High Street, bringing their own approach to an increasingly corporate sector.

"Our first sale was just down the road at a farm shop. We started local by going to farm shops, delis and independent retailers. We also targeted premium retail and sent samples to all sorts of different buyers. Within a month of launching we got a listing in Harvey Nichols and later Selfridges."

From London's upmarket department stores to the farm shop down the road, Burning Barn Rum was soon blazing its own inimitable trail.

"It was really fun seeing those early sales coming in. We did some great trade shows in the first year and had lots of feedback – it was a really encouraging start to the business."

The Burning Barn Rum business model was gradually taking shape, with the Jenners importing the dark rum, which was already aged for a full three years in the sun-soaked climate of Guyana.

"We flavour it with natural ingredients. We roast the spices whole, we smoke it with apple wood and blend it with English orange blossom honey. We are adding value, adding the flavouring to that already really good quality aged rum."

That aged rum is distilled by the Diamond Distillery in Guyana, the Jenners' choice of imported goods. But the couple have yet to jet over to view the raw materials at source.

"We wish we could have gone over to Guyana – it would have been great but we couldn't justify it. We just love the rum and we felt it was a really good quality base for what we wanted to do. We have got three core rums – our spiced rum, smoked rum, and honey and rum liqueur, and then each year we do a limited edition."

The Jenners chose to target their rum

at premium retail, independent retail and grocery sectors as well as some bars, pubs and restaurants, using wholesalers as well as also delivering themselves.

And as the Burning Barn Rum story unfolded, the fledgling business received a significant financial tonic in 2018 when it won the Richardson Brothers Foundation New Venture Award, bringing in £30,000 of investment from the renowned Black Country developers.

In November, the business made its national TV debut with an appearance on Channel 4's hit show, 'Aldi's Next Big Thing'.

Presented by Anita Rani and Chris Bavin, the show features craft food and drink producers from across the country pitching their products at judges in the hope of securing a contract that will see Aldi stock their product throughout their 1,000 UK stores.

Now the Solihull rum enterprise is looking ahead to the next phase of its growth, with a crowdfunding scheme to support its development.

"This is a second round which we are raising via private individuals through crowdfunding," says Katherine. "We hope to raise £250,000 and will be investing primarily in sales and marketing."

So where do the Jenners see the future for quite possibly the only West Midlands business brand ever inspired by a fire?

"We would like to be a household name – our mission is to be the UK's first choice for premium flavoured rum."

"In a few years' time we plan to be in more of the major multiples in the UK, so national listings rather than just regional listings, as well as in more export markets."

"That is the reason we are raising this investment now, to help us accelerate growth. We have seen really good traction, we have built a great foundation and we just need to build on that now. We currently have one staff member – operations and warehouse assistant Louis Edge – but we definitely want to multiply the effort and bring more people on board."

Burning Barn Rum had already managed to survive the Covid years by focusing on its online business through its website, which saw a 500% surge in growth following the shutdown of bars and restaurants. Post Covid, the Jenners are poised for the next phase of one of the West Midlands' most intriguing start-up stories.

"This is our heartland. All our direct retail and most of our wholesalers are in this region," says Katherine.

And unsurprisingly, the co-founder of Burning Barn Rum admits to enjoying the odd tippie of rum herself.

"My favourite would be the honey and rum liqueur. It is really a rum for everyone. If you're not quite sure if you like rum, we are pretty confident that if you try that one, you will enjoy it."



## A very special thank you

A Birmingham company has used reclaimed material from the Commonwealth Games – including dismantled gym floors – to create presentation boxes containing special thank you gifts to each of the 72 countries and territories who took part.

The boxes, made by Nechells-based Birmingham Case Makers Ltd, hold giant pin badges bearing the countries' own flag.

A special commemorative ceremony was held in Birmingham when the badges were presented on behalf of the people of the city.

Birmingham Case Makers managing director, Shaun Adams, said: "This is such a fitting legacy, a little piece of Commonwealth Games history that we have been able to preserve."

"These materials were actually part of the games, giving the cases the ultimate provenance."

Mr Adams said the presentation boxes were deliberately left in their raw state, showing the taped court markings to highlight the origin of the materials.

"We didn't want to disguise it or tidy it up too much, otherwise if could just be made from anything," he said.

Councillor Ian Ward, leader of Birmingham City Council, said: "It is really pleasing that a local firm has been able to benefit from the Commonwealth Games through this gifting idea."

"The presentation cases look stunning and are an innovative way of ensuring the sustainability of the Games is extended in a novel and creative way."

**From left, Dean Reilly, commercial director, Dean Chamberlain, production director, and managing director Shaun Adams, all from Birmingham Case Makers. Picture Birmingham City Council**

## Games has lasting effect on city events venue

Events venue Conference Aston has reported a strong start to its new financial year, exceeding pre-pandemic levels of business.

Buoyed by major events in the city and the bounceback of in-person conferences, the venue has announced that throughout quarter one, which runs from August to October, business was 116% up on 2021, which was also ahead of the curve of the pre-Covid period.



Across the whole of 2022, the venue welcomed more than 66,746 visitors, supported 28 industries and hosted 737 events.

This was led by the busiest August on record following the success of large catering and accommodation contracts for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games with the month 125% up on August 2019.

Quarter two also started positively, with the November result also ahead of expectations, finishing 16% compared to November 2019, with December continuing to be steady for the venue.

Samantha Brown, head of Conference Aston, said: "Birmingham became the heart and soul of the events world when it hosted the Commonwealth Games back in August. The success of the games and the long-lasting effect it had on the city allowed us to bounce back quicker than we anticipated."



# Which start-ups should we be watching in Birmingham?



DAVIES OKEOWO has some suggestions . . .

In recent years, Birmingham has become increasingly famous for its bustling start-up scene.

The city is really brimming with exciting new businesses, many of whom I encounter daily in my various capacities.

With entrepreneurs drawn from diverse backgrounds, working on different businesses, across a wide range of industries, solving local and global problems; I have no doubt that Gymshark will be welcoming a few more businesses into the unicorn club over the next few years.

That said, I am a firm believer in the fact that building such successful businesses is not just a factor of the entrepreneurs, a lot also depends on the support they are able to harness from the ecosystem – such as business support organisations, corporate organisations, policy makers, the media, tech infrastructure providers, investors/funders, universities, incubators/accelerators, research organisations, and many more.

As such, I caught up with a few start-up founders and challenged them to make a generic pitch to introduce themselves to the ecosystem by answering a set of nine questions.



## Ethco Group Ltd Surayyah Ahmad

### What is the problem you are solving?

Ethco is using AI to solve the value chain problem within the independent and ethnic stores market while giving customers convenient access to their ethnic food.

### Describe your business in one sentence?

Ethco provides ethnic communities with a taste of home and helps store owners manage their stores easily.

### How did you come up with the idea for the business?

I came up with Ethco when I experienced an issue while working for Ocado UK. I could get normal groceries from Ocado but had to make the journey to my ethnic store where I usually make 60% of my shopping. We conducted a survey where we discovered that store owners are mostly low-tech skilled and find it difficult to go digital and be accessible online to customers like us. We decided to use AI to solve the biting problem.

### How big is the market opportunity?

The market is over £13bn in the UK and servicing just 10% of the market is over £1bn in market size

### How do you make money?

Ethco makes money from a monthly subscription fee we charge storeowners, and a small fee we charge customers shopping on the mobile application.

### What stage is the business at today?

Ethco Launched to customers in Birmingham in January 2023 and have received over 100 orders since then. We are planning to do our pre-seed round in Q3 2023.

### What are your top 3 business goals for this year?

Our top 3 business goals include 1) Onboarding 100 stores in the midlands within the year 2) Increase the number

## Rapid Pack Fulfilment Ben Slater

### What is the problem you are solving?

Removing the headache of scaling for fast growth brands

### Describe your business in one sentence?

Rapid Pack is a game-changing third-party logistics fulfilment partner that combines cutting-edge technology, coaching, and data-driven insights to unlock growth and success for online brands, all while providing scale solutions and an immersive community of support to help clients achieve their full potential.

### How did you come up with the idea for the business?

I have founded and worked in many brands over the past 15 years, I always knew a fulfilment partner could unlock the growth potential but never found the right one. Now is the perfect time as automation, data/machine learning and website integrations are now achievable and able to be swiftly built and offer these technologies to clients to advance quicker than before.

### How big is the market opportunity?

The 3PL market alone in the UK is worth

tens of billions, we are looking to expand on this with our data, finance & marketing support services.

### How do you make money?

We provide fulfilment services (picking & packing), a monthly account growth & management package and soon launching our data insights packages.

### What stage is the business at today?

Revenue making, started trading in July 2021

### What are your top 3 business goals for this year?

Bring in our initial warehouse automation, expand our fulfilment facility and launch our data insights platform.

### What help do you need if any?

We are opening a funding round so any advice around this and regarding M&A.

### Why are you the right person for this business?

I have been in the industry for many years and mix logistics, data & entrepreneurial insights to our clients benefit.



of orders to 500/month 3) Raise our pre-seed round.

### What help do you need if any?

We need help engaging with potential investors within the ecosystem as well as working with government organisations that aim to help businesses like our store owners go digital to increase enlightenment and education within the sector.

### Why are you the right person for this business?

I will answer this from a team perspective. We have a widely experienced and diverse team and I personally come from an ethnic minority community, have founded a company previously and sold it within 5 years and have worked for e-commerce companies such as Just Eat and Ocado solving a similar problem for a different niche.





## Bueno Europe Ltd *Felix Hughes*

### What problem are you solving?

The integrated financial ecosystem for property owners, especially foreign and second homeowners, is fragmented and poorly served (many tools, poor integration, high fees). Customers want simplification, everything in one place, a bundled solution.

### Describe your business in one sentence.

Bueno: Property Banking Simplified aims to make buying and running a property easy, with an initial focus on second-property owners and expats – one app for all your property banking needs, insurance, electricity, taxes etc. Everything in one place, at your fingertips.

### How did you come up with the idea for the business?

The founders personally experienced the challenges of running property in Spain. Foreigners can feel especially vulnerable when they do not speak fluent Spanish or are unfamiliar with local 'ways of doing things'.

### How big is the market opportunity?

Bueno's Serviceable Available Market is worth €24Bn to Bueno given 220m European homes.

### How do you make money?

Bueno makes money from monthly €9.90 or annual €99 subscriptions, premium services

including tax and introducer rewards for insurance, currency exchange etc.

### What stage is the business at?

Early growth phase

### What are your top 3 business goals for this year?

With a 94% customer promoter score and registrations from 15 countries, Bueno targets profitability during 2023 along with launching an upgraded v2 platform and surpassing 20,000 customers.

### What help do you need if any?

Currencies Direct became a Strategic Partner in Spain and further mutually beneficial partnerships building out a full-service property ecosystem and services to affluent customers are welcomed. Given Brits and Scandinavians buy the most property in Spain, extending brand awareness and further partnering with groups of Spanish property owners, those looking to buy, estate agents etc are all helpful.

### Why are you the right team for this business?

Bueno's team includes repeat entrepreneurs who previously co-founded and scaled

Monobank and a CTO who built a B2B platform with 17,000 users including blue chips.

## GoodPAYE *Steve Lovell*

### What is the problem you are solving?

We're helping to solve the current cost-of-giving crisis, by making it easy for employees to donate to charity in the most impactful way, whilst providing organisations the opportunity to make huge social change.

### Describe your business in one sentence?

A tech-for-good startup that enables organisations to offer employees a hassle-free way to make tax-free donations to any UK charities directly from their salary.

### How did you come up with the idea for the business?

The concept of payroll giving has actually been around since the 80s but has been hugely underutilised. So, in 2021, after 5 UK charities collaborated, GoodPAYE was formed to rewrite the status-quo and bring it into the 21st Century.

### How big is the market opportunity?

Even though any UK company can offer payroll giving, less than 20% do - and only 4% of employees use it. The market opportunity is huge.

### How do you make money?

Charities pay an acquisition fee for every

new employee that signs up and supports their charity.

### What stage is the business at today?

Having launched in 2021, we're now just past the 6-month period – so very much still in our start-up phase.

### What are your top 3 business goals for this year?

- To welcome more mission-driven companies
- To partner with more UK charities
- And to grow our brand awareness

### What help do you need if any?

Join us! Whether you're a team of 10 or a team of 10,000, we need help in getting as many employees donating to charity this way.

### Why are you the right person to lead this business?

There's currently three of us in the team with myself leading the marketing and flying the flag for Birmingham. Having unfortunately experienced quite a bit of loss in my 32 years, I have huge admiration for the charity sector and therefore an enormous drive to make GoodPAYE a success.



## Supabite *Janani Prasad & Harish Annam*

### What is the problem you are solving?

Collecting client testimonials is even harder. Short form video is the most popular way of consuming content today yet many businesses find it difficult to generate more content for these platforms.

### Describe your business in one sentence?

Supabite helps businesses to send and collect short videos from their customers with a simple link.

### How did you come up with the idea for the business?

My co-founder and I rely a lot on reviews like everyone before picking a place to eat / shop / or anything. Text testimonials are boring and do not effectively capture emotions. With the increased popularity of short-form videos, we thought it could be great for businesses to collect video testimonials in place of text testimonials which can also be used as a social proof for their brand.

### How big is the market opportunity?

Although there are 5.5million businesses in the UK with less than 5 employees, we are targeting a niche sector of coaching, consulting, and service businesses to start with, which adds up to a total of about 700,000 businesses.

### How do you make money?

Our business runs on a subscription model. Businesses need to subscribe to a paid plan to enjoy all the benefits that Supabite has to offer.

### What stage is the business at today?

Currently we are in a piloting phase with few businesses across the UK trying our platform. We are actively collecting feedback to improve the product as we progress.

### What are your top 3 business goals for this year?

- Onboard 250 businesses
- Process 1000+ videos
- Bootstrap to £1000 MRR

### What help do you need if any?

Supabite is for businesses who are trying to build a customer focussed brand. So we are looking to get connected with brands that consider customer testimonials as an important part of their journey.

### Why are you the right person for this business?

Storing and streaming videos is an expensive process. This will require extensive technical knowledge to optimise it right from the start. Considering the combined knowledge of 20+ years of Software Development experience of both the founders, we believe we are the right people for this business.



## Syntropy Partnership LTD *Allie Joy & Gavin Andrews*

### What is the problem you are solving:

Syntropy helps you de-stress and re-balance quickly through the power and beauty of digital art and music.

### Describe your business in one sentence:

Syntropy is a unique wellbeing app, we empower international artists & musicians to collaborate and co-create artworks for the purposes of relaxation and meditation.

### How did you come up with the ideas for the business?

Syntropy was born during the Covid lockdown. We wanted to create new ways of artistic collaboration across international boundaries with the aim of creating beautiful art and music that would help people manage their wellbeing.

### How big is the market opportunity?

Revenue in the Digital Fitness & Well-Being Apps segment is projected to reach US\$576.70m in 2023 in the UK, \$5bn in Europe and \$28.93bn Globally.

### How do you make money?

Through monthly and annual app subscriptions. We also license Syntropy to other healthcare and educational programs.

### What stage is the business at today?

We are in the start-up stage.

### What are your top 3 business goals for this year?

Securing an investment, growing our customer base and moving Syntropy into the B2B space, for example, employee wellbeing programs.

### What help do you need if any?

We need help with finding the right investor and developing marketing opportunities in the B2C and B2B space.

### What are you the right person for this business?

I (Allie) am the creative director, curating and commissioning the art/music and liaising with Syntropy's artists and musicians. I am an artist myself and have exhibited internationally, while also being the artist in residence at Birmingham Open

Media and Pervasive Studio at Watershed, Bristol. Gavin Andrews has extensive experience in the biofeedback wellbeing space which he brings to the business.

**Which of these startups are you most excited about?**  
**Let me know via LinkedIn**  
**@Davies Okeowo**



## Bond Wolfe secures new owners for Portman House

A private investment company has bought a building overlooking St Philip's Square in Birmingham city centre for £1,425,000.

Swali Investments & Holdings Ltd purchased Portman House at 5-7 Temple Row West, which extends to an approximate total space of 6,200 sq ft.

Commercial property agents Bond Wolfe acted for the buyer, and have been retained by Swali to market the vacant floors of the property, with offers based on a rent of £15,000 per annum being sought for each floor.

James Mattin, agency managing director at Bond Wolfe, said: "We are delighted to have secured this prime mixed-use investment on behalf of a retained client.

"The property is in a superb location directly opposite St Philip's Cathedral and provides the buyer with ample asset management opportunities.

"The investment is anchored by a highly profitable ground floor retail tenant, and we are already in advanced talks with potential tenants for the two void upper floors."



**Tim Bloomer**



**Rob Smith**

■ Two new directors have joined the Birmingham office of property agency CBRE.

Valuation expert Tim Bloomer is now part of the firm's operational real estate team, after moving from Lambert Smith Hampton. In this new role he will specialise in the hospitality, healthcare, leisure and education sectors.

Robert Smith started his career at CBRE in 2000. After a decade in Avison Young's rating team and three years living in New Zealand, he returned to join the CBRE valuation team last year. He has now crossed the floor back to rating.

## Art gallery is latest addition at Touchwood

Gallery Aura Fine Art is the latest addition to the Touchwood shopping centre in Solihull.

Spanning two floors, the gallery is Aura's third branch in the Midlands, with others in Nottingham and Stratford-upon-Avon.

The gallery brings together original artwork and collectible limited editions, and owner Elizabeth Parnham worked for the largest art publisher in Europe before realising her dream of starting her own business.

She believes that art should be available to all and aims to guide prospective buyers on works in which to invest. Some of the

most notable artists sourced by the group include Banksy, Damien Hirst and Andy Warhol.

Among the artists at the gallery is Nigel Cooke, who has used the streets of Solihull as inspiration for some of his work, Birmingham-born artist Gary Benfield, and Dale Bowen from Staffordshire, who is well known for his harbour scenes.

The opening of Aura Fine Art has created three new jobs so far. Gallery manager Bastien Da Silva said: "We are excited to reintroduce an art gallery back into Touchwood and be able to bring local as well as renowned artists to Solihull."



# Consultancy makes move to city centre

Mechanical and electrical consultancy CPW has taken on new office space in the heart of Birmingham city centre.

Located at x+why in 103 Colmore Row, the office has been designed with a focus on sustainability and to suit hybrid working by offering flexible spaces, meeting pods and call booths.

The firm said that expanding into the business district from its headquarters in Solihull was a natural next step with several major city centre projects underway, spanning the education, residential, healthcare and commercial sectors among others.

Antonios Agapakis, director at CPW, said: "A city centre office was something our clients have asked for and we've listened and acted on it.

"The new Birmingham space gives us the opportunity to work with current clients and meet new ones, generate new business and friendships, and expand our current relationships. Post-pandemic, we realised how important these face-to-face relationships really are."



**The CPW Birmingham team**

## Fashion house expands into Jewellery Quarter

Several jobs are set to be created by the expansion of an Indian fashion house into Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter.

Commercial property agency Siddall Jones has arranged the letting of a 3,000 sq ft retail space at 90 Great Hampton Street to Frontier Raas UK Ltd.

Frontier Raas, which is headquartered in Delhi, designs and supplies luxury saris, gowns and other traditional Indian clothing.

The company is expanding into the West Midlands after the success of its first UK branch in Southall, London, which opened in 2019.

Ryan Lynch, director at Siddall Jones, said: "We are delighted to have found such

a great tenant for the space.

"This will provide an active frontage to generate even more footfall to an area that is fast developing as the place to live, work and do business."

Tushar Batra, a director of Frontier Raas, said: "There is a big Asian market in Birmingham, which is why we have chosen the city as our second location in the UK.

"It is not just about the Indians but Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans who all love wearing ethnic Indian outfits for special occasions."

**From left, landlord Tom Leeman, Tushar Batra, director at Frontier Raas, and Ryan Lynch of agents Siddall Jones**







**Neha Pandeya, Divesh Anand and Shamim HM**

Guests attended a night of live entertainment at the re-imagined Five Rivers a la carte restaurant in Walsall.

The award-winning Indian restaurant held the VIP night to celebrate its new look, with guests sampling tasting canapes from the menu and cocktails such as Tamarind Margaritas and Chilli Martinis.

Group director Shamim HM said: "We were absolutely thrilled to reveal the new look Five Rivers to our guests old and new. We had some wonderful feedback – it was a heart-warming night to remember."

**Kindi Sunner**



**Sunny Nandra and Monifa Bobb Simon**



**Sureet and Steve Kular**



**Rebecca Clougher and Gemma Morris**

# VIP night at Five Rivers

**Heidi Kaur and Nikita Chumber**



## MTC appoints new chief executive

**The Manufacturing Technology Centre has appointed Graham Hoare to succeed Clive Hickman as its new CEO.**

Dr Hoare brings more than 35 years' top-level industrial and commercial experience to the role.

He is a former chair of Ford of Britain, having spent two decades with the carmaker in a variety of senior roles. He was also executive director of European powertrain engineering and in 2018 was awarded the OBE for services to the UK motor industry.

Previously, he was the chief engineer for transmissions and driveline at BMW and chief engineer, powertrain engineering, at Land Rover.

More recently, Dr Hoare briefly acted

as interim CEO of Britishvolt, appointed to secure the future of the business, which has recently been acquired by Recharge Industries.

Dr Hickman, who has been CEO of the MTC since its creation 12 years ago, said: "I am delighted to report that the MTC is now a £120 million, 900 employee business with operations across the UK, and is supporting businesses large and small, regionally, nationally and internationally.

"I know that Graham, with his vast experience in the sector, will propel the organisation to the next phase in our ambitions."

**Pictured: Dr Clive Hickman OBE, left, and Dr Graham Hoare OBE**

## Addition to the team at HIVE360

**Birmingham employee benefits and outsourced payroll provider HIVE360 has recruited Adam Joyce to its senior business development team.**

With 18 years' experience in the employee benefits and rewards industry, and has held senior positions at several specialist employee benefits providers including Sodexo, Personal Group, Wrkit and most recently, Vivup.

He joins HIVE360 to support clients with the customisation and integration of the company's digital mobile employee benefits and rewards solution, Engage.

CEO David McCormack said: "The team is committed to and focused on building on our customer experience, data and offerings for all clients. Adam is a highly knowledgeable addition to the team."

Adam added: "This is a fantastic opportunity to join the team at HIVE360 at such an exciting time."



"The Engage app really is the only truly all-encompassing employee engagement solution, from payroll and pension, through to benefits and wellbeing. To be able to provide such a valuable tool in up to 120 different languages is a game changer. I'm thrilled to be a part of the team."

## Triple boost at accountancy firm

**Accountancy firm Azets has given its Birmingham office a boost with two senior appointments and one promotion.**

Steve Tennant joins as wealth management COO, and Helen Parks as director of public sector audit. Meanwhile, Claire Purbhoo has been promoted to regional head of outsourcing.

Steve joins Azets Wealth Management from Mitie where he was the customer experience and operations director. He has worked in wealth management for more than 20 years, starting his career as a financial planner before moving on to regional, national and international roles.

He was responsible for establishing the Barclays Financial Planning Academy which created careers in wealth management for over 100 planners.

Helen has over 10 years' experience auditing public sector organisations, having trained with the Audit Commission before joining the dedicated public sector assurance department within Grant Thornton. She has also worked with blue-chip companies such as TNT Logistics and HSBC UK.

Claire specialises in accountancy outsourcing, systems and guiding businesses with the impact of legislation on their operations.



**Helen Parks and Steve Tennant**





## Promotion at marketing group

**Marketing group Cogent has announced the appointment of Ian Gathard as its new CEO.**

Formerly the firm's managing director, Ian has held a number of senior positions across the creative and production industry at agencies including Junction 11, OLIVER, Bloomberg LP and Tag.

The business has also named Marcus Husselby as its non-executive chairman and Penny Buckley as deputy chair.

Marcus said: "Ian is an experienced, visionary leader who is the perfect choice to drive forward the overall strategic direction and development of the group."

Ian added: "The last four years have been full of challenges that have not just impacted our industry, but the entire world. As we navigated these, I could not have wished for a better group of colleagues and clients by my side."

As an integrated marketing group, Cogent brings together brand, advertising, PR, social media, content, performance marketing, film, photography and employee communications. Clients include Bacofoil, Virgin, Volvo, Stellantis, Wolseley and Mitchells & Butlers.

## Trio of hires at Birmingham law firm

**Law firm Shakespeare Martineau has added to its Birmingham-based banking team with a trio of hires.**

Associate Mariam Mansoor developed her debt finance experience in Leeds before relocating to the Channel Islands to specialise in financial services law for a Guernsey-based magic circle firm.

There, Mariam provided legal advice from a Guernsey law perspective for corporate and private clients, financial institutions and intermediaries worldwide involving banking, regulatory, funds and corporate transactions.

Also newly appointed to the team is Noreen Khan-Ghalib, who takes on the role of chartered legal executive. From a real estate and commercial property

background, Noreen has acted for a variety of clients – particularly in the retail sector – with some renowned law firms.

Joining as a paralegal is Tina Sehmar, who spent the last 12 months as part of the in-house legal team for a global accountancy and professional services firm.

Naomi Tudor, head of corporate banking at Shakespeare Martineau, said: "We are thrilled to have three exceptionally talented people join our growing team."

"We have increased instructions from existing clients and have recently taken on new clients, so Mariam, Noreen and Tina will help us as we deal with this growing demand. I look forward to all three of them building their careers with us."



From left, Noreen Khan-Ghalib, Tina Sehmar, Naomi Tudor, and Mariam Mansoor



## Digital marketer hired at Higgs

**West Midlands law firm Higgs has hired experienced digital marketer Michelle Hughes to drive business growth.**

With a track record in the legal sector she joins the Higgs team as head of digital marketing from law firm Wright Hassall.

Michelle was previously head of digital at

Pertemps and also spent a number of years heading up digital communications for Oxford, Cambridge and RSA Examinations.

She will now take on responsibility for boosting the profile of Higgs and bringing her innovative and data-driven expertise to the business.

## New partner joins commercial team

**Chartered surveyors Johnson Fellows have bolstered their commercial agency team with the arrival of commercial property specialist Richard Bache.**

Richard joins as a partner, having

worked in Birmingham and the Black Country over the past two decades for companies including Bulleys, Cushman & Wakefield and, most recently, Pennycuik Collins where he was associate director.

He brings to the agency team a wealth of experience in all aspects of commercial property including sales, lettings, acquisitions, valuations, rent reviews and lease renewal.

As a partner in the commercial agency department – working alongside Chris Gaskell and Mark Fitzpatrick – he will deal with all aspects of marketing for lettings and sales, as well as search and acquisition work.

Richard gained a degree in estate management at Birmingham City University, and his career in property began in 1999 at James and Lister Lea.

With over 20 years' experience, he has acted for landlord investors, developers and occupiers including A&J Mucklow, Langtree Developments, Standard Life Trustee Company and Securitas, as well as various charities and private individuals.

## Communications professional joins PR agency

**Birmingham-based communications consultancy Liquid has strengthened its senior leadership team with the appointment of Fiona Woolston as account director.**

In her new role, Fiona – who has eight years of communications experience in both consultancy and in-house roles – will support the team to enhance their stakeholder engagement, community relations and social value offering to clients, as well as bolster new business development.

With previous experience working with organisations such as the University of Birmingham, National Grid Properties and National Highways, as well as multiple contractors for complex, large-scale projects like High Speed 2, Fiona brings extensive knowledge of the property, regeneration and infrastructure sectors.

She has obtained the Chartered Institute of Public Relations professional PR diploma and is now studying for a psychology MSc, focusing on social and organisational behaviour. Fiona is also a visiting lecturer at Birmingham City University's Birmingham School of Media.

"I can't wait to get stuck into some exciting projects, as well as building great relationships with our existing clients and future partners," she said.

"I am also passionate about supporting the next generation of communications professionals, working with students at Birmingham City University and the University of Birmingham, so I look forward to sharing this knowledge with our junior team at Liquid."



## EY welcomes a new director to the Birmingham office

**EY has strengthened its private team in the Midlands with the appointment of new director Anisha Patel.**

Anisha, who has more than eight years' experience working in mergers and acquisitions and growth capital markets, will work with new and existing clients in the privately-owned business market.

She joins from BGF, a growth capital investor where she was responsible for leading on origination across the central and east of England regions.

Tom Addyman, EY's head of private in the Midlands, said: "Anisha's appointment and the growth of our Midlands private

team aligns with the investments we are making across the rest of the country.

"We are seeing an increased demand for privately owned businesses seeking relationships with partners who understand their needs. I am looking forward to working with Anisha and developing these client relationships further."

Simon O'Neill, EY's managing partner for the Midlands, added: "I am pleased to welcome Anisha to the Birmingham office. Her experience and expertise will support the development of our business relationships as well as our own continued growth ambitions."





# Five minutes with...



## Denise Myers

Founder, Evenfields Careers and Black Talent Awards



### In one sentence, what does your role involve?

Careers, opportunities and connection – I connect black talent with inclusive employers who have amazing career opportunities that they want to share with everyone.

### How long have you been in your current job?

Evenfields Careers was founded in 2019.

### Give us a brief summary of your professional career to date.

Recruitment has been my life's work, really. Before setting up Evenfields, my current agency, I founded Murray Myers Recruitment in 2014 – an agency still going strong, focusing on engineering and commercial roles in the West Midlands. Before that, I worked for a training organisation placing apprentices into engineering jobs. I was also a recruitment branch manager for Kelly's and held consultancy posts for other organisations.

### Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?

Yes and no. Did I need a degree to be successful as a recruiter? No, but from an internal confidence perspective does the fact that I have a degree help me to relate to the senior level clients and candidates that I work with daily, yes.

### Has the fallout from the pandemic presented any opportunities?

Yes, and in particular when the news of the murder of George Floyd hit the world. This highlighted the disproportionate toll on the black community in every walk of life especially work, health, policing and education.

Although organisations were interested in talking before, this wasn't a priority. I saw a definite shift to action during this time.

### Can online meetings successfully take the place of face-to-face contact?

I think there is definitely a place for online meetings in respect of time and money saving. But especially for recruiters it is always good to meet our clients face-to-face and visit their sites – it adds a whole new dimension to a 'know, like and trust' relationship.

### How do you get the best out of your staff?

Being clear on expectations and what good looks like – communication is key; supporting and knowing my team, and understanding that every team member needs something different from me; giving them a job because they are highly

capable, and letting let them do it – I don't micro-manage; accepting that mistakes are part of the learning process, we all make them; and stretch assignments, so they are continually learning and developing.

### How many emails do you tend to get in a day, and how much time do you have to read them?

Probably around 80. My PA goes through and flags anything that needs my attention – so I read those at set times during the day, as I can get easily distracted.

### How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

Honest, authentic, passionate, knowledgeable, professional, welcoming, funny and very good at what I do – someone they like to be around (I like to think I'm good fun).

### Highlights of your career so far?

Black Talent Awards – showing the world that we have a wealth of black talent in the UK. These are showcasing people who have overcome great challenges to not only get where they are today, but they have made efforts to bring others from their community along with them and open

doors. I'm not a proud person, but this achievement makes me so proud.

### Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

My heel got caught in the hem of my trousers on a client visit. I nearly fell down the spiral staircase on top of the client (but I didn't), just ripped one of my best suits.

### Pet hates?

I have too many to list here – but if we are talking about at work that would be leaving the photocopier with no paper.

### If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

Do it, you are more than capable – don't wait for permission to be a success.

### How do you relax away from work?

This is something I am working on. I am discovering a love for the outdoors, walking and meditation. I have had a few golf lessons and dream of making this my new hobby, but time is a problem.

### What do you believe is special about the Birmingham business community?

The area is quite small so you usually know at least one friendly face at every event. The Birmingham community is very down to earth and the multi-cultural element adds to the uniqueness.

Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.

That I am an introvert – I have to force myself to be out there, networking, public speaking and as the face of Evenfields. People think that it comes naturally, it takes a lot of hard work and talking to myself to turn up.

### You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

The book would have to be the bible if I was stuck on a desert island – spiritually I would need that support.

The film would be Dirty Dancing – my all-time favourite.

The CD would be The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.

### Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

My dad (dead), my mom (dead), Barak Obama (my parents didn't live to see a Black President of USA), Oprah Winfrey and Samuel L. Jackson.

### What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

West Indian Christmas dinner. Chicken, mutton, rice and peas, mac cheese, vegetables – with the English trimmings.



## 25 years supporting the local economy

As ART Business Loans (ART) celebrates 25 years in business it is encouraging that through credit crunch, recession and pandemic, ART has remained true to its mission.

ART continues to provide access to appropriate finance supporting enterprise and targeting job creation and preservation in underserved areas and communities.

ART provides loans of between £10,000 and £150,000 across the Midlands, with a mixture of

private sector funds and public sector support where banks have been unable to fully meet the customer's needs

The customer base is very well spread across many sectors and ART remains committed to supporting viable businesses to give them the opportunity to grow or trade through challenging times.

To apply for a loan, see ART's website:  
[www.artbusinessloans.co.uk](http://www.artbusinessloans.co.uk)







MERCEDES GLEITZE



LINDSEY VONN



GARBIÑE MUGURUZA



SONYA YONCHEVA



GRACE KELLY



SYLVIA EARLE



LEXI THOMPSON



KHOUDIA TOURÉ



YUJA WANG

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## “CLASSIC”?

“A classic timepiece, designed for a lady.” This is how some may describe our Oyster Perpetual Lady-Datejust. Maybe they’re right. Since the early 20th Century, Rolex has designed and crafted watches suited for all women’s wrists, with the same standard of excellence as for all the models that have built its legend. Always pursuing a higher standard. So, if “classic” means perpetuating tradition while combining elegance and precision, grace and resistance, beauty and performance, it is indeed a classic timepiece, designed for a lady. **The Lady-Datejust.**

*#Perpetual*



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