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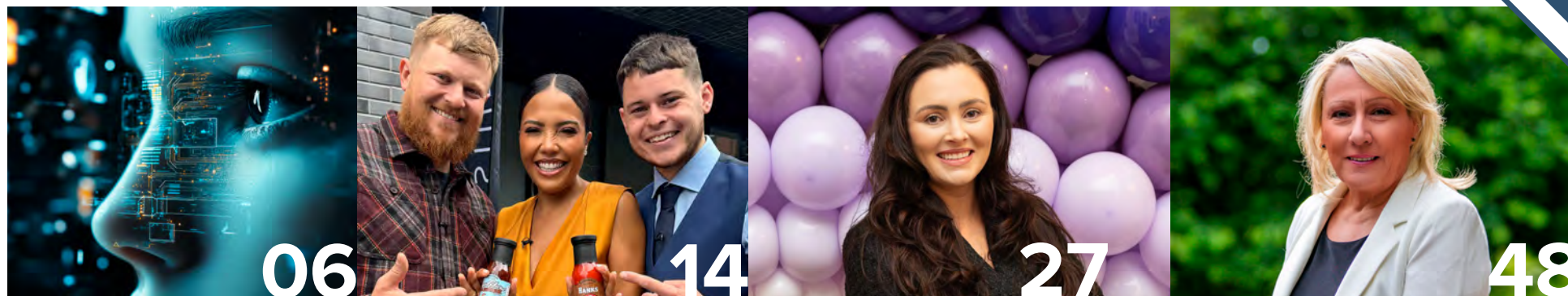


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# Birmingham Business

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By HENRY CARPENTER  
Editor

### Is Birmingham maximising its potential as a commercial powerhouse fitting of its size?

Is the city succeeding in untapping and nurturing talent, and encouraging it to prosper?  
And what of its credentials in unearthing the business leaders of tomorrow?

These themes run throughout this edition, and are analysed in round-table discussions, exemplified in interviews, and assessed in commentary.

The names of Santina Bunting and Gabriel Imevbore will be well known to those associated with GBCC's Future Faces fraternity as winners of Birmingham Young Professional of the Year awards over the last couple of years.

It's fascinating to hear their take on what Birmingham is doing right and where it can improve in bringing leadership talent to the fore; these are the people seemingly destined to follow in the footsteps of leaders past and present.

And this forms the crux of this month's cover story – Gabriel and Santina comparing their stories with the likes of Alex Bishop (who hosted the group at her Shoosmiths office), Nicola Fleet-Milne and Ruth Pipkin – a formidable trio of business leaders who represent the cohort forged at the start of the 2000s.

Sitting at the head of the table – both literally and figuratively – is John James. If they didn't know it already, everyone in the room is left in no doubt of the impact of John's contribution to Birmingham's professional services over the last half a century.

With his 80th birthday this year, and bowing out of Birmingham corporate life after 55 years (he started work here in 1970), this relentless force for positive change can reflect on a job well done.

Elsewhere we meet other stars of the future, starting with the Manders brothers whose inspiring story – not to mention their BBQ rubs and sauce – persuaded an investor on Dragons' Den to invest in their business, Lumberjaxe, in front of an audience of millions.

Although still young in age, Emma Jones is a firmly established fixture in Birmingham's business panoply. The founder of AllinAll Events, she has been responsible for staging some of the highest-profile gatherings in the region, not least Birmingham Tech Week, but she is showing no sign of resting on her laurels.

And Jon Griffin meets Diane Vernon, the founder of the charity EmployabilityUK which does so much to improve the prospects of young people, many of whom are disadvantaged, to find their way onto a fulfilling career path.

As John James said in his parting line at the end of our round-table discussion, the future does indeed look bright in Birmingham.

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# THE FUTURE with AI



**CHRIS MEAH, the founder and CEO of School of Code, paints a picture of how society might be impacted by artificial intelligence in the not-so-distant future**

I spend my life studying and applying AI, so you might have thought that writing an article on it would be second nature.

Yet I had a thousand ideas of what to write. I can say this for certain though – the future is . . . big.

Ultimately, I decided to build from a core premise whereby we'll take a wildly optimistic view of the short to medium term, assuming we maintain our current trajectory and all goes well. Let's now discuss various aspects of our lives and how we might be impacted.

## Transport

Leonardo Da Vinci originally sketched a concept for a self-propelling cart (sometimes referred to as the world's first robot) capable of autonomous driving in 1478.

It feels as though we've been waiting for self-driving cars ever since then. The promise is transformational – over one million people die globally each year in road accidents, and that's not counting those who are involved, injured, or have their lives affected. Humans are terrible drivers. Maybe you aren't, but drive one stretch of motorway and it's hard not to come to that conclusion. Even if we aren't 'bad' skill-wise, some drive drunk, high, tired, angry, or on the phone, eating, telling the kids to be quiet, or just plain daydreaming.

What if, instead of relying on humans to keep 100% concentration and a high skill level to keep roads safe, we could delegate that to robots? We would dramatically reduce road accidents and road rage incidents. We'd also see traffic evaporate since these autonomous vehicles could be connected and communicate, they could effortlessly avoid each other, go at the fastest speed possible safely, and reroute automatically before coming to a blocked path.

Well, even though we've been waiting a while for self-driving cars, for many people, they are already here.

**“The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed.”**

**William Gibson, writer and essayist**



In many cities worldwide, particularly in the USA, you can see autonomous vehicles regularly driving around the streets. They are still being tested, but it's at scale and in the real world. The likely outcome is that companies like Tesla, Waymo, or the UK's Wayve continue to push forward and progress in the adoption of this technology, and we continue to see more journeys taken in these robots on wheels.

In the West Midlands, the automotive industry has great historical, cultural, and economic significance – we should be paying a lot of attention to this direction of travel, and try not to get distracted no matter how many debatable Jaguar adverts get made.

The fact that the cars will be autonomous will have secondary effects. Not only will travel be dramatically safer, but it will be more accessible since you don't need a driving license to be able to benefit. There would be no need for a steering wheel, since you won't drive. So, the car would become a system optimised for entertainment, work, or sleep rather than driver comfort.

In fact, there would be no need for many things we associate with a car today – even wing mirrors, although there are non-obvious effects through redesigning the car and removing these features, such as how blind people use wing mirrors to know where the front of the car door is and navigate around to a door handle.

Cars would be more efficient and able to minimise fuel consumption. There'd be little need for huge multi-storey car parks. You could be dropped off exactly where you wanted to go, and the car could drive off

anywhere until you beckon it back.

Many think you won't own a car but will use a service (similar to how you travel by air – you think of the airline, not the plane). Cars are typically parked for around 95% of their lifetimes so it doesn't make sense to own one if you can grab a ride anytime, companies like Uber are prime candidates to shape this future. If you did own a car, you could easily have it join a ride-share fleet whilst you weren't using it – the car becomes an actual asset, earning you money whilst you aren't using it. Tesla believes this will be a reality for many.

Imagine this future for a second. What could we do with all the space currently taken up by eye sores known as car parks? How much happier would we be without having to stew in traffic or deal with idiots on the road? What else may change? On-street parking? There's no need for it. Signs? Mainly for humans anyway. Garages? Everyone will suddenly be installing home gyms they never use. You'd need fewer and narrower lanes since autonomous vehicles require less space and wiggle room.

That is, if humans are removed from the transportation loop, of course. If not, it's likely to be a slow crawl to change rather than all at once. Even then, small changes year-on-year compound into dramatic changes over a decade. But it's hard to imagine that if accidents trend to zero with this technology and we see the main cause as human input, we won't adapt as a society. We might look at human driving in the future like we look at drunk driving now: “How reckless? I can't believe they'd do that.”

The contradiction to keep in mind here



is that there are tremendous technological challenges to solve before this becomes reality, but it's also not that far-fetched or potentially that far away. There are also some consequences we should take very seriously.

What happens to all the jobs that rely on driving? There may be more demand for other services, such as cleaning ride-share cars or new types of signalling and network design. But truck drivers, lorry drivers, taxi drivers, delivery drivers, bus drivers . . . they are dramatically reduced or disappear entirely. What about all the jobs in the driving supply chain? Mechanics look very different as a service. Wider public transport would take a huge hit. The car manufacturing industry and supply chain would completely change. All in all, if self-driving cars hit, then millions of jobs will be lost immediately or impacted immeasurably.

## Health

Healthcare looks very different in the near future. Doctors and medical professionals are often busy, tired, hungry, distracted, in a rush to judgement or just lacking curiosity . . . and that's once you've waited a few weeks for an appointment and can still be bothered to investigate things yourself.

AI will mean there's a doctor in your pocket, 24/7, completely and utterly devoted to you and your health. It can know everything about you – not just what the current worry or ailment is, but your diet, your lifestyle, how you've slept for the last few weeks, what stress you have at work, the extent to which your kids are impacting your sanity, and your medical history. And not just your medical history – also that of your immediate family and anyone you're related to.

It can know all relevant medical research, all treatment pathways that are potential candidates, and how effective those treatments were for people with your genetic make-up. It has all the time in the world for your questions, and what's more, if you ever do want to talk to a human doctor, then your conversations can be digested into a transcript and summary, meaning you don't need to repeat yourself and they can be up to date with minimal effort.

I say "if" you want a human doctor involved. For the short term, there's little question that most people will. That's the reality that Microsoft and others are working on. They are looking to use AI to

**“AI will mean there’s a doctor in your pocket, 24/7, completely and utterly devoted to you and your health. It can know everything about you.”**



make doctors' and nurses' lives easier by having AI take care of the clinical pathway paperwork, communication, admin, and more. That will mean your medical professionals should have more time and attention dedicated to you, which is transformational for you as a patient and for the medical profession.

However, there is no guarantee you will always want the 'human in the loop'. Let's imagine AI keeps improving from where it is today. One study showed diagnosis accuracy rates for complex diseases of 74% for human doctors, but when they had access to ChatGPT for help, they increased to 76% accuracy. That's great – AI as a co-pilot for doctors improves efficiency (slightly). What's really interesting, though, is that if you were to trust ChatGPT alone, removing the human from the loop, then the diagnosis accuracy went to 94%. Human professionals held the AI back.

The other side of this is bandwidth. How many diagnoses can you get right, and how quickly can you do them? With

AI, you have almost immediate feedback. With humans involved, you introduce multiple bottlenecks. Someone needs to review case notes. They need to make recommendations. These often need sign-off from others. All of this takes time and resources. Having the human as part of the process is a very comfortable thought for us, but how long will it survive when it costs time and money?

This tension between AI efficiency and human oversight isn't unique to healthcare – it represents one of the fundamental questions we'll face across every industry transformed by AI. When does human involvement add critical value, and when does it merely slow things down? This balance is what many refer to as the 'human in the loop' problem.

## Human in the loop

While keeping humans in the loop sounds reassuring and practical, there's a fundamental challenge: computers think 20,000 times faster than humans. By

involving humans, you incur additional time and costs. Does that mean you shouldn't involve humans? Not at all – it should always be necessary in many domains. But will it be the case? The problem is that if you keep a human in the loop and a competitor doesn't, they decrease costs and increase convenience – two massive advantages in any market.

But can these systems be trusted to that extent? Despite God-like abilities, they are also weirdly and deeply flawed. You should picture their capability as Swiss Cheese – impressive but with random holes, and many of them. Without significant workarounds, they are also only trying to predict what is plausible, which is very different from what is true. You absolutely cannot trust them for now – we'll discuss why this is in-depth another time. In future, these flaws will likely trend to zero with the skill and scaffolding of software engineering around them.

The truth is, though, that the human bottleneck is likely why change occurs

**“The AI revolution promises a different world, where the interface is simply language. That opens the doors to everyone who can talk to access all services and benefits – incredible.”**

slowly and then all at once. After all, despite our having God-like technology, a lot of the NHS still runs off Windows XP. Inertia and legacy are real. So, I can buy the version of events that small changes year on year lead to a huge transformation over a decade.

## Human-computer interactions

As AI transforms transportation and healthcare, it will also fundamentally change how we interact with technology itself. It's hard to know the effects of a generation of people growing up thinking that when a machine makes a mistake, it means they just need to talk to it more. Back in our day, if a machine made a mistake, you'd give it a whack, turn it off and on, or throw it out completely. Now? If it gives you the wrong answer, you keep chatting and negotiating until it gets it right.

Relationships with AI and the way humans interact with computers will undoubtedly change, and some of this change will be incredible.

The digital revolution left people behind. If you couldn't access forms easily, navigate websites, or were uncomfortable with email . . . well, you struggled to access even the basic benefits everyone else took for granted.

The AI revolution promises a different world, where the interface is simply language. That opens the doors to everyone who can talk to access all services and benefits – incredible. But what about those who can't use language? Well, AI is now capable of reading brain waves from scans to understand thoughts. Yes, you heard that right. AI can read your mind. The average accuracy of brain-wave-to-word translation is around 50%. That is incredible, and it will only get better.

What's more impressive? This is all from the same technology – neural networks. We've learned that, despite our yearning for beautiful theory and discipline expertise, if we throw enough compute power, data, and a neural network at the problem, it will tend to figure it out. The current hypothesis dominating strategic investment is that more compute power gives more intelligence.

All countries in the world are currently in the race to AI, including the UK which is dedicating billions in its AI Opportunities

Plan. I can give my critiques of the plan separately, but my biggest is: let's imagine they succeed. What then? There is no discussion of a vision for the world where those plans actually work. What happens to jobs? To the economy? To the human experience? This is the job of government, and many top AI labs are warning of imminent artificial general intelligence. We should at least plan as if that were a real possibility, but nobody has seemed willing to so far.

It's part of the work I've done in the West Midlands, which I'm stepping down from and I hope whoever leads next will continue. In our Economic Case for AI, the feedback was that we were the only strategy people had heard taking seriously addressing job losses. That is worrying.

## AI unlocks the doors

So, what else can we expect to see? Well, what's your favourite sci-fi film? Picture the tech in that film. That's what we'll get, more or less. We're already capable of most of it. The only difference is that the film will be the Instagram version of the tech. Highlight reels only. You don't see the messiness. The no make-up wake-up. The rubbish. Our technology experience over the next few years will feel like a sci-fi movie, just more crap. We'll have machines capable of so much, yet that are also so stupid at the same time.

There is a convergence of technology that makes progress even more exciting and unpredictable. Along with those leading the AI chase (OpenAI, Anthropic, Google, X.AI, Meta) are surges in progress across quantum computing (Google, Microsoft, D-Wave), bio-technology (Neuralink, Microsoft, Meta), space travel (SpaceX, Blue Origin, Firefly), robotics (Tesla, Figure, NVIDIA) and more.

Advances from these other fields will wildly change our human experience, though each presents significant challenges on its own. I can see a path for AI to be the key to figuring out the rest, meaning a crescendo of activity around unlocking powerful AI. That had better come with wild progress in cyber security, or your email being hacked is the least of our issues.

The future is unknown, but I bet three things. One – I'll be wrong. Two – it will happen faster than anyone is ready for. And three – it will be wild.

Are you ready?





# Report warns of cyber security risk for businesses

The British Chambers of Commerce has warned that businesses face increased cyber security risks without stronger engagement with government.

Among the recommendations in a new report, the BCC is calling for ministers to:

- Carry out a cyber security awareness programme for businesses, particularly smaller firms
- Update the National Cyber Strategy
- Reform cyber security insurance to provide firms with better protection
- Address the shortage of UK cyber security professionals and support more training in all workplaces
- Engage directly with businesses to strengthen confidence in the UK's digital infrastructure

The report, which has the backing of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, has been produced by the BCC's Digital Revolution Challenge Group,

drawing on expertise from businesses of all sizes and sectors, academia and think-tanks.

It advises that the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill, due to be published this year, must be developed in full consultation with businesses. This is to avoid creating 'an unnecessary burden for businesses' and to ensure that firms are 'actively incentivised to report cyber breaches or attacks'. This will then support the Government's growth agenda by strengthening cyber resilience.

Changes to working environments have created more IT challenges for businesses. BCC research has revealed more than half of firms believed working from home left their computer systems more exposed.

The report highlights an urgent need to tackle the current shortage of cyber security professionals, and the digital safety skills gap facing over half a million businesses.

Alex Veitch, director of policy at

the British Chambers of Commerce, said: "Cyber threats against businesses are growing, and without co-ordinated action many SMEs will remain at risk. Our report outlines some immediate actions for ministers to engage directly with firms.

"There's a lack of specialist digital security knowledge in many smaller companies. Government needs to take the lead and proactively engage with business to raise awareness.

"Businesses are keen to see the detail of the Cyber Security and Resilience Bill in the coming months. The legislation must send a signal of confidence to the UK's SMEs and not create unnecessary costs and reporting burdens.

"Cyber resilience isn't just about protection; it's about trust, innovation, and supporting the long-term growth of businesses."

## New CEO set to take the helm at TechWM

A cybersecurity expert with 20 years' experience in the industry is set to replace Yiannis Maos as CEO of TechWM, the organisation representing the region's tech sector.

Entrepreneur Andy Hague is set to take on the role in April, with Mr Maos remaining on the TechWM board as chief strategy and innovation officer.

Mr Hague is an expert in cybersecurity, with in-depth knowledge and understanding of investment funding, and his appointment at TechWM is expected to herald a new era of growth for the West Midlands tech ecosystem as AI and cybersecurity continue to thrive.

Since being founded by Mr Maos in 2019, the organisation has helped businesses raise over £100 million and inspired thousands of people to get into the tech sector. It has also become known for its showcase event, Birmingham Tech Week, the UK's largest regional tech festival.

"Leading TechWM, an organisation aligned with my values and my work throughout the last two decades, became an irresistible opportunity after my recent work in industry and government," said Mr Hague.

"My priority is maintaining TechWM's momentum and strategically focusing the team's immense dedication to maximise impact. Strengthening its 'can-do' reputation is vital for solidifying TechWM



Pictured from left are Jason Sahota, chair of the TechWM board, Andy Hague, incoming CEO of TechWM, and Yiannis Maos, current CEO and founder of TechWM

as the key player in public-private tech partnerships."

He added that this next chapter of the region's journey to becoming a global tech superpower holds promise as the nation continues to expand support for tech businesses and startups – reaching out beyond London and into the regions.

Mr Maos said: "As we transition to CEO

leadership, our focus will be strategy, innovation, and preserving our agile spirit.

"We'll continue creating opportunities for local talent, ensuring they don't need to move to London. This is about building a thriving, collaborative community, recognising our collective strength is key to unlocking the West Midlands' tech potential."

# The evolving role of AI in cybersecurity

## RISKS, CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming cybersecurity, offering both groundbreaking advancements and new threats. While AI-powered tools help detect and respond to cyber threats faster, they are also being used by hackers to launch more sophisticated attacks. With tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Copilot becoming commonplace, organisations must stay ahead by understanding the risks and setting clear AI use policies.

This article explores the benefits and risks of AI in cybersecurity, alongside recommendations on best practices for businesses to stay secure in this evolving digital landscape.

### AI-powered cyberattacks: when machines go rogue

AI's potential in cybersecurity is enormous, but it also offers new opportunities for cybercriminals. AI is now being used to:

- **Craft realistic phishing scams:** AI-generated emails can mimic human language, making it difficult to identify fake messages.
- **Create deepfake impersonations:** AI can generate convincing voices and videos, perfect for fraud and deception.
- **Enhance hacking attempts:** AI-powered malware evolves quickly, learning to bypass security systems.
- **Target AI Systems:** Hackers are trying to exploit AI platforms, aiming to steal sensitive data stored within them.

### AI to the rescue: the cybersecurity superhero

Despite the risks, AI is also playing a crucial role in defending against cyber threats. AI-driven cybersecurity tools can:

- **Detect suspicious behaviour:** AI monitors network activity, flagging unusual actions before they escalate.
- **Predict and prevent attacks:** Machine learning algorithms can anticipate threats and neutralise them quickly.
- **Strengthen authentication:** AI-powered biometric scans and behaviour tracking enhance security.
- **Automate security monitoring:** AI continuously analyses logs, relieving security teams from constant surveillance.

### AI's hidden dangers: proceed with caution

While AI is a powerful tool, it poses several risks:

- **Data privacy concerns:** Employees might unknowingly feed sensitive data into AI tools, which could be misused.
- **AI as a hacker's back door:** Cybercriminals can exploit AI tools to access confidential information.
- **Lack of clear AI guidelines:** Many

businesses lack official policies governing AI use, leaving room for potential security breaches.

### Setting the ground rules: AI security policies

To keep AI secure, businesses need clear policies:

- **Define AI's limits:** Specify what types of data employees can and cannot input into AI platforms, such as confidential customer details.
- **Regular employee training:** Educate staff on recognising AI-generated scams like phishing and deepfakes.
- **Monitor AI interactions:** Use security tools to track AI use and flag suspicious behaviour, while implementing endpoint security to prevent unauthorised access.

### AI: The cyber battlefield of the future

Cybercriminals are getting creative, using AI for various attacks:

- **Stealing AI credentials:** Hackers gain access to AI accounts to extract sensitive data.
- **Manipulating AI responses:** Cybercriminals can trick AI systems into giving harmful advice.
- **Scraping AI-generated data:** Hackers use AI to gather confidential information from compromised accounts.

### Meet CyberQ group: your AI cybersecurity bodyguard

As cyber threats evolve, businesses need expert guidance to stay secure. CyberQ Group is a global cybersecurity leader, helping organisations defend against AI-driven attacks. CyberQ offers:

- **Custom AI security policies:** Tailored policies to align with business goals and keep AI use in check.
- **Real-time threat intelligence:** Tools to detect and neutralise cyber risks proactively.
- **Penetration testing & vulnerability assessments:** Identifying and fixing security gaps.

- **24/7 monitoring & incident response:** Real-time response to emerging threats.

### CyberQ Group's AI advisory board and Q product

To stay ahead of emerging AI risks, CyberQ Group has launched its **AI Advisory Board**, bringing together industry experts to develop cutting-edge strategies for AI security. They've also introduced **Q**, a proprietary AI model designed to enhance proactive threat intelligence. Q uses Large Language Models (LLMs) to help businesses anticipate and mitigate cyber risks, reflecting CyberQ's commitment to innovation and proactive cybersecurity.

### Staying one step ahead of AI cyber threats

AI is revolutionising cybersecurity, but it's a double-edged sword. To stay protected, businesses should:

- **Establish clear AI security policies:** Define clear boundaries for AI use in the workplace.
  - **Educate employees:** Regularly train staff to understand AI risks and best practices.
  - **Leverage AI to strengthen defences:** Use AI's capabilities while being cautious of its potential risks.
  - **Partner with cybersecurity experts:** Collaborate with specialists like CyberQ Group to stay ahead of threats.
- The future of cybersecurity is AI-driven, so staying informed and proactive is essential. Is your business ready for the next wave of AI-powered cyber threats?

### Take control with CyberQ Group

AI-driven cybersecurity challenges require expertise. CyberQ Group offers tailored solutions to help businesses improve cyber resilience. From custom AI security policies to advanced threat detection, CyberQ ensures that organisations stay protected from emerging risks. Contact CyberQ Group today to build a safer, more secure digital future.



Email: [theteam@cyberqgroup.com](mailto:theteam@cyberqgroup.com) Phone: **0800 0614 715**

CyberQ Group, Alpha Tower, Alpha Works, 21st Floor, Suffolk Street, Queensway, Birmingham B1 1TT



# LOCKED OUT

## How cybercrime is holding UK businesses hostage

By cyber insurance specialists MELANIE HOLLAND and CHARLOTTE TAYLOR of global risk firm Willis Towers Watson

Imagine arriving at your office to find the doors locked—not by a traditional key, but by an unseen force demanding payment before you can resume business. Or discovering that a trusted supplier's cyber breach has left your operations exposed to regulatory fines and reputational harm. This isn't a scene from a dystopian novel; it's the reality for UK businesses navigating an increasingly hostile digital landscape.

The misconception for many UK businesses, that cybercriminals only target large corporations, is dangerous.



Attackers often view such organisations as prime targets—big enough to hold valuable data and financial assets yet lacking the defences of a multinational enterprise. Cyber risk is no longer just an IT problem; it's a business survival issue.

In a world where technology underpins almost every operation, a single vulnerability can trigger financial losses, supply chain disruptions, and regulatory scrutiny.

**“With high-profile breaches becoming routine headlines, all businesses must rethink their approach to resilience—not just through defence but through preparation, response, and strategic risk transfer.”**

Melanie Holland, Business Specialist, WTW

### Key cyber threats businesses face

Understanding the threats facing businesses today is the first step in developing an effective resilience strategy. The most pressing cyber risks include:

#### 1. Ransomware: a growing and costly threat

Ransomware attacks have surged in frequency and severity, with criminal groups deploying advanced techniques to encrypt data and demand exorbitant ransoms. Beyond the immediate financial cost, these attacks disrupt operations, erode stakeholder trust, and can even lead to regulatory penalties. Double extortion tactics – where attackers steal sensitive data before encrypting systems—

add another layer of risk, exposing organisations to data breaches and reputational damage.

**Case study:** In 2022, a UK-based law firm suffered a ransomware attack that paralysed its case management systems for weeks. The firm ultimately had to pay a significant ransom to regain access to its critical client data, incurring additional legal and compliance costs.

#### 2. Systemic risk: the domino effect of cyber incidents

Interconnected IT environments, cloud-based operations, and reliance on third-party vendors have increased systemic risk. A single cyber event, such as a software vulnerability exploit, can ripple across entire supply chains, affecting multiple businesses simultaneously.

**Case study:** In 2021, a UK logistics company fell victim to a supply chain attack when a major software provider was breached. The result was widespread shipment delays and a backlog that took months to clear, significantly impacting revenue and customer trust.

#### 3. Human error: the persistent weak link

Despite advancements in cybersecurity technology, human error remains a leading

cause of breaches. Phishing attacks and social engineering tactics continue to exploit employees' trust and trick them into divulging sensitive credentials or executing malicious commands.

**Case Study:** A mid-sized manufacturing company in the Midlands was targeted by a phishing campaign that compromised payroll details, resulting in fraudulent payments exceeding £500,000. The breach highlighted the critical need for ongoing staff training and stringent internal controls.

#### 4. Regulatory scrutiny: increasing compliance burdens

Governments and regulatory bodies in the UK are tightening their cybersecurity mandates, requiring businesses to adopt stronger protections and disclose cyber incidents more transparently. Regulations such as GDPR and the upcoming UK Online Safety Bill place greater accountability on organisations to manage cyber risk effectively. Non-compliance can result in significant fines, reputational damage, and legal repercussions.

### Proactive steps for businesses

With cyber threats becoming more pervasive, businesses must take proactive steps to strengthen their defences and mitigate the impact of inevitable attacks. A robust cybersecurity strategy includes:

#### 1. Strengthening cybersecurity governance at the board level

Cyber risk is not just an IT issue—it is a business-critical challenge that requires board-level oversight. Leadership teams must ensure cyber resilience is integrated into their enterprise risk management frameworks. This includes appointing dedicated cybersecurity leadership, conducting regular risk assessments, and fostering a security-conscious culture across the organisation.

##### Recommended actions:

- Establish a cybersecurity committee within the board.
- Regularly review cyber risk policies and response strategies.
- Conduct cyber risk workshops with leadership teams.

#### 2. Investing in resilience strategies

A strong cybersecurity posture extends beyond technology. Businesses must implement comprehensive resilience strategies, including:

- Employee training – Regular awareness programmes to educate staff on phishing threats and safe cyber practices.
  - Third-party risk management – Evaluating vendor security controls and contractual risk transfer mechanisms.
  - Zero trust architecture – Adopting a security model that verifies every access request, reducing reliance on traditional perimeter defences.
- Recommended actions:
- Conduct bi-annual cybersecurity awareness training.
  - Implement a Zero Trust framework to strengthen access controls.
  - Perform continuous penetration testing and vulnerability scanning.

#### 3. Understanding risk exposure and implementing robust incident response plans

A well-defined incident response plan ensures businesses can react swiftly and effectively when an attack occurs. This involves:

- Conducting cyber risk quantification to measure financial exposure.
- Performing tabletop exercises to test response readiness.
- Establishing communication protocols to manage regulatory reporting and stakeholder expectations.

##### Recommended actions:

- Develop a comprehensive incident response playbook.
- Partner with cybersecurity firms for threat intelligence insights.
- Establish a crisis communication team to handle breach disclosures.

### Bringing it all together – the role of cyber insurance

While preventative measures are essential, risk transfer remains a critical component of a comprehensive cyber strategy. Cyber insurance plays a vital role in helping organisations recover financially and

reputationally from a cyber event.

#### How cyber insurance supports business resilience

- **Financial protection** – Covers costs associated with ransomware payments, business interruption, forensic investigations, and legal fees.
  - **Incident response expertise** – Provides access to crisis management specialists, forensic analysts, and legal advisors.
  - **Regulatory support** – Helps navigate compliance obligations and breach notification requirements.
- At WTW we offer tailored cyber risk solutions designed to address evolving threats. Our services include:
- **Cyber risk quantification** – Benchmarking and analytics tools to assess potential financial impact.
  - **Insurance optimisation** – Aligning coverage with industry best practices and emerging threats.
  - **Advisory services** – Expert guidance on cyber risk mitigation and transfer strategies.

### Assess your cyber resilience today

Proactive resilience strategies, combined with a strong risk transfer programme, ensure organisations can withstand and recover from cyber incidents more effectively.

**“We invite UK businesses to assess their cyber resilience and explore risk transfer solutions with our expertise. Whether through benchmarking tools, risk quantification, or a tailored consultation, we help**

**businesses navigate the complexities of cybersecurity with confidence.”**

Charlotte Taylor, Cyber Insurance Expert, WTW



### Contact us today to strengthen your organisation's cyber defences and prepare for the inevitable

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

For more information or to speak to a WTW specialist, contact any of the following:

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# Rubbing shoulders with Dragons

**Brendon and Jaydon Manders won the hearts of viewers, and an investor, on a certain BBC reality TV show which aired in February. JON GRIFFIN catches up with the genial brothers and hears about their methods and motivations for continued success.**

At just 32 and 22 years of age respectively, Brendon and Jaydon Manders are, quite understandably, basking in the limelight that goes with TV stardom.

But stardom in an age of omnipresent screen celebrity can often be fleeting, and the brothers from Bartley Green, on the western fringes of Birmingham, are determined that's not going to be their fate.

"A lot of people go on Dragons' Den and you never hear about them again, even if they do get investment," says Jaydon.

"I think we can be like Levi Roots, where you go into the Den with nothing and your brand can end up one of the most recognised on the shelf.

"We want to be in a position where our brands are available everywhere."

It's a bold ambition, though the Manders brothers are determined that their Lumberjaxe venture can stay the course and prove a long-term winner in the highly competitive sauces and seasonings market.

But the brothers are far from overnight success stories. They've been working on their food enterprise for nearly five years – and their appearance in February on the popular BBC show proved the icing on the cake for a business recipe which had its roots in the Covid era.

"We were on a walk in the days of Covid and Jaydon said he wanted to start a business – he has always been business minded. I was 26 at the time, and he was 16," says Brendon.

Despite the 10-year age gap, the Bartley Green brothers – two of four siblings raised by a single mother – had always been close, sharing a strong work ethic largely inherited from their grandfather.

"Our ideas always came back to food," says Brendon. "We would go round to my nan and grandad's house for family gatherings, where he would often be cooking on his brick-built barbecue.

"Our grandparents were heavily involved in bringing us up. Our grandad is a maintenance man in a paint factory and



Brendon, left, and Jaydon Manders in the Dragons' Den

is still working at 75. Growing up, he was our male role model, he just likes a day's graft. He was best man at my wedding.

"I think me and Jaydon have probably got a lot of his traits. We can't sit still for five minutes because we would rather be out working."

Inheriting their grandfather's work ethic, the brothers had worked together on car boot sales, making candles and concrete statues while Brendon landed an apprenticeship at an insurance broker and Jaydon worked at a Korean restaurant and McDonalds.

But the pair were increasingly impatient for greater control over their own destinies. As Jaydon says: "I learnt that a job working for others will only get you so far. It's the whole thing about being limited and not putting a ceiling on yourself.

"If you run your own business, there is no ceiling. The sky's the limit, literally. I always knew I wanted to run a business at some stage. Then Covid happened, which gave us the idea at the right time."

The UK's worst medical emergency for

more than 100 years proved the catalyst for the brothers' joint venture into the world of sauces and seasonings – but it would be four long years of relentless hard graft before the Manders' Lumberjaxe enterprise would be featured on Dragons' Den.

"We launched it in October 2020 during the pandemic after I'd asked Jaydon what he thought about seasoning and sauces.

"We both looked into it and found this barbecue community online. It gave us a platform to be able to launch the right products at the right time."

The brothers had at last found the niche they had been seeking and Lumberjaxe, named after the duo's admiration for US-style outdoor cooking, was born.

"We had no cooking qualifications background," says Brendon. "When we first started it was just through passion and enjoying food."

Jaydon recalls: "We used to add different herbs and spices to what we were cooking anyway and were struck on the idea of making a seasoning. We ordered



bags of different herbs and spices, sat there with a bowl and tried to make our own barbecue seasoning.

"In October 2020 the outdoor living community was really booming on social media, but we didn't see much that we wanted to eat. So we thought let's make a Kansas-style seasoning, and see what happens."

The seeds for a sauces and seasonings innovation which would eventually lead to an appearance on national TV for the two brothers had been sown, but Dragons' Den was far from their thoughts as they experimented in the kitchen with herbs and spices.

"When it comes to the UK palate and barbecue sauces, they are probably pretty sweet heavy," says Brendon. "Our Kansas style is nice and sweet but it is also smokey and robust – there's loads of pepper in there. We went for something that maybe the UK public hadn't already had."

As with so many ingredients of modern life, social media proved a vital tool in enabling the brothers to promote their new venture and its piquant wares online.

"We started an Instagram page on social media and began following all these barbecue people," says Brendon. "We built up a little bit of a following. I still remember us getting 200 followers on social media. We were just liking and commenting on everyone's pages. At the time we didn't have a website – all we had was a picture that said 'coming soon', and the fact that we were selling the seasoning."

With an initial investment of just £100 each, they forked out to buy 100 tins, engaged the services of a Selly Oak label printer and put their products up for sale online.

Jaydon recalls: "We were selling them without a website, messaging people on Instagram asking them to PayPal us £5 and we would ship them a seasoning, as crazy as that sounds, and people said yes. They were our first customers, individuals who were posting about outdoor cooking online, who we still speak to today."

The early incarnation of Lumberjaxe revolved around just one seasoning sold online with the brothers working round the clock to meet a growing demand.

Jaydon recalls: "Before we went on Dragons' Den we made everything ourselves, all the sauces and seasoning. It was just me and Brendon running the business."



Jaydon and Brendon with Lumberjaxe rubs and sauces

"At the height of last summer we would ship orders out, get wholesale customers, ship those orders out and then come Friday we would go and sell products at a show . . . and then we would have no stock."

After years of toil, the brothers had effectively become victims of their own success, and were struggling to keep up with the increasing clamour online for their distinctive flavours.

"It quickly became apparent that we needed to go to a co-manufacturer to really elevate the business," says Jaydon.

"Now we work with two companies that help us make our products. We are always discussing new flavours and new recipes with them, and how we can make something taste better."

From an initial annual turnover of just £5,000, Lumberjaxe was gradually finding its feet in an extremely crowded market as the brothers worked to tickle the taste buds of a UK public faced with an often bewildering array of condiments and spices on the shelves.

The brothers had driven up and down the UK selling their wares at barbecue shows, craft fairs, Christmas markets and the like, working seven days a week to establish Lumberjaxe as a thriving enterprise and permanent presence in UK retail.

It was proving a hard slog as Jaydon confirms – "we try to have the occasional Sunday off but it very rarely happens".

However, the decision to go it alone and chase their culinary dream was slowly paying off for the Manders brothers.

Jaydon says: "As the years have gone by, we were getting higher turnover being a start-up. But last year we seriously found our feet, really making waves in the barbecue and outdoor living industry."

"We started branching out into home cooking, using our products in the pan and in the oven. We started partnering other companies and did lots of collaboration projects. Social media exploded and we had our best year at shows."

By last year the brothers had grown their turnover to around £150,000, selling products direct from their Halesowen warehouse to online consumers, to the wholesale market and at a wide variety of shows.

The brothers' vision for Lumberjaxe had been realised after years of effort – and then Jaydon decided to take a punt on applying to Dragons' Den.

"I went on the website, put one-sentence answers to the questions, thought there was no way on earth that we were going to get accepted and pressed submit."

A month later he received a call from a member of the Dragons' Den team to say the BBC show wanted to learn a little more about Lumberjaxe.

"At this point Brendon didn't even know I had applied – he had no idea that I had been on the phone to anyone!"

Brendon interjects: "He chose to tell me when I had just started four days at the BBC Good Food Show at the NEC, our biggest show of the year. He dropped the bombshell just as we were about to start."

The brothers were asked by the team at Dragons' Den to do a mock-up pitch to camera, which they filmed in their back garden.

Jaydon recalls: "We had three to four weeks to put the pitch together and remember the numbers."

The call from TV proved a pivotal moment in the Lumberjaxe story, as Jaydon outlines.

"We needed investment. For all the time Brendon and I were manufacturing products, it was time that we weren't out on the road trying to actually sell it. And we needed a little bit of guidance as well."

"A lot of people go on the show for publicity reasons but for us it came at the perfect time. You get huge things out of it – investment, the advice of the dragon and of course more people looking at your brand."

The brothers' dream of success and recognition on national TV was eventually realised when guest Dragon Emma Grede, a Los Angeles-based Londoner who runs high-profile clothing brands, chose to back the Manders with £90,000 of investment.

"We were very lucky that her episode landed on the day we were going on, and she now owns 20 per cent of the business," says Brendon.

"She lives in LA but comes back to London to see family or on business. We have met her in London a few times, and

**"A lot of people go on the show for publicity reasons but for us it came at the perfect time. You get huge things out of it – investment, the advice of the dragon and of course more people looking at your brand."**

we are very active on text messages. She's been great."

The brothers say their success on the show has taken Lumberjaxe to a whole new level.

Brendon adds: "From the advice of the Dragons and the advice of Emma, and the hard work since the show, we are now in a position where we feel we have got great co-manufacturers. We can really turn on the gas and do what we believe will be a success. Post Den, we have had thousands of orders through the website."



Selfridges is now a client

Lumberjaxe currently produces six different seasonings and a variety of sauces, including a Kansas-style backyard barbecue, Moonshine Mango and a Louisiana hot sauce, selling to over 200 outlets, including garden centres, farm shops, butcheries, and even Selfridges stores in Birmingham and London.

Now the Manders are looking to broaden their horizons still further by targeting the big supermarkets. As Jaydon says: "We have to increase our distribution and that will be done through supermarkets."

Brendon adds: "It is definitely on the cards, and we are working out the best way."

The brothers have even generated transatlantic trade following their Dragons Den appearance, pulling in nearly 200 orders from customers in the likes of Texas and California.

"There has been no marketing in America or anything like that, so to see that sort of interest off the back of the show has been great," says Brendon.

"They are paying over the odds for shipping just to get something from the UK. I think that proves the business model for us," adds Jaydon.

"We are going to expand in America but we are not going to stop there."

"Australia, Canada, European countries, anywhere where we can get our products into people's hands."

It seems the sky really is the limit for the Bartley Green brothers who took a gamble to launch their own niche products in a highly saturated market.





## PANEL MEMBERS

**Alex Bishop**

Senior partner at Shoosmiths

**Santina Bunting**

Apprentice at Arup and overall winner of the 2024 Birmingham Young Professional of the Year awards

**Gabriel Imevbore**

Director of Z Digital and former BYPY category winner

**Nicola Fleet-Milne**

Founder and CEO of FleetMilne, and chair of Colmore BID

**John James**

Co-founder and CEO of Birmingham City 2000, and former partner of law firm Edge and Ellison

**Ruth Pipkin**

Founder and managing director of Rewired PR

The discussion was hosted by Henry Carpenter, editor of Birmingham Business

# A CITY *in safe hands*



Three generations of leaders from Birmingham's business world gathered at law firm Shoosmiths' chic offices on Colmore Row to assess the state of health of the city's commercial scene. The discussion coincided with the 55th anniversary of Birmingham's ultimate cheerleader, John James, first starting work in the city, as the former lawyer prepares to bow out of corporate life.



**Henry Carpenter:** One of the threads which connects you all is the Birmingham Young Professional of the Year awards. All of you apart from John have won at least a category, and John, it could be argued that as the co-founder of Birmingham City 2000, which went on to spawn Birmingham Forward, Birmingham Future and the Birmingham Young Professional of the Year awards, everyone here owes you a debt of gratitude for their awards and thus their careers. Alex, when you started your career in Birmingham, what was the culture and atmosphere like in the city centre, and how has it changed?

**Alex Bishop:** I started work in Birmingham 30 years ago this year. The culture was very, very different and the city was very different. I think there was one wine bar in the city centre at the time, and no supermarket.

It was starting to emerge from its cocoon, in large part thanks to the efforts of John and his contemporaries, but it was still very much a concrete jungle within a ring road which limited the size of the city.

City-centre living didn't really exist as a concept back then, and working life was very different.

**HC:** Was there a support system in place for young professionals?

**AB:** As a young trainee I joined the Birmingham Trainee Solicitor Society, but it wasn't until BYPY that I started to find my tribe in the city.

At my first BYPY awards the age limit was 40. I was in my 20s and I remember having massive imposter syndrome, wondering why I was there alongside partners in law firms. I think the age limit dropped the following year.

I was then approached by someone who said they would like me to get involved with Birmingham Future in some way. The rest is history. I went to events, joined committees, chaired some, and the friendships that I made through the network are still the most important in my life.

**Ruth Pipkin:** It was absolutely Birmingham Future that got me on my road to meeting other people and provided opportunities to go along to events.

I was involved in the Graduate Retention Committee, which I went on to chair. We understood as an organisation that we had to keep this talent in the city because there was a real brain drain going down to London.

The connections we made went very deep and while I might not have realised it at the time, when I look back I realise how important it was.

**Nicola Fleet-Milne:** When I started working city centre in 2001 it was very property based and I didn't know about Birmingham Future. My early days were with Young IoD and the Matrix which was the young RICS cohort.

But in 2006 I went to an event and the first person I ever met from Birmingham Future was Beth, who is now joint head of



**John James and Gabriel Imevbore**

office here at Shoosmiths with Alex.

I was so fearful going to that first event. I didn't know anyone, but Beth was so welcoming.

Then I was invited to BYPY and that year I watched Ruth win. I thought, we're the same age, I can do this, this is something I can go for.

I have to say, I think Birmingham Future was one of the things that kept me anchored in the city. Also, I think it became such a force that employers realised that if they didn't get people involved in this, they were going to be missing out as a firm.

It became so powerful in that there was such a strong cohort doing truly amazing things. They were not also-rans, they were fronting launches and lobbying groups and speaking on behalf of the city.

**AB:** What I remember clearly is that key stakeholders like the city council started to recognise the energy and the importance of what this cohort was doing.

At the launch of the Big City Plan, for instance, I remember being on stage with [former BCC leader] Mike Whitby and he recognised that when you're building a city for 2020 it was my generation that would be inheriting it, so what did we want?

What Santina and Gabriel want is not necessarily what we want. And what we want is not necessarily what John's generation might have wanted.

**HC:** John, perhaps you could outline the city centre's evolution in your experience which provided the environment for Alex and her generation to build on.

**John James:** When I came to Birmingham in 1970 to work as a company secretary for a big international conglomerate it was very much a manufacturing city. The service sector here was actually quite small.

And then Maggie Thatcher arrived as prime minister in 1979 with a programme of austerity which almost decimated Birmingham's manufacturing industry. Things like apprenticeships went out the window and many of the companies were just not very good or well run.

So in the 1980s, Birmingham was in a pretty poor state and [now Sir] Albert Bore decided that the city had to get a grip of itself. We did two things in the 80s. First of all, we made a bid for the Olympics. We stood no chance and everyone thought it was daft, but it started to get people talking to each other and believing in themselves a bit.

Then Albert had the brilliant idea of holding a symposium, or think-tank conference at Highbury, attended not only by lawyers and accountants and business people, but also people from education, the church and the police, every sector of society, to try to see what we needed to do to become a leading city. We had the size, we were the second largest city in the UK

then, but we weren't punching our weight.

So Albert came up with the 'quarters' concept which included the Professional and Financial Services Quarter in and around Colmore Row.

We also created Birmingham City 2000. The purpose of that was to give us ten years to change how people used professional services in the city, and to get the world to know about us and to use us. For instance, when there was a complex commercial process such as a joint venture or a flotation, there wasn't the need to go to London. You came to Birmingham as we had the skills.

The world was changing fast. Manufacturing was going backwards and one of the benefits we got out of creating Birmingham City 2000, was that we realised that this was a young city with lots of talent and we needed to somehow get young people to buy into it.

There was a change in belief and the focus of business in the city also altered. The leading business sector in Birmingham was now professional financial services, and that was something we were able to build upon.

**HC:** Santina and Gabriel, what are your thoughts on Birmingham as a place to do business? Do you feel you're in the right place to fulfil your ambitions and reach your goals?

**Santina Bunting:** When I joined Arup it was based in Solihull, but the firm felt that it needed to be in the heart of the city.

The move to Birmingham gave me the opportunity for me to meet people and network. It was how I got involved with Future Faces, and I immediately felt incredibly welcome. I felt part of the community and it was so nice seeing people from different industries through going to events.

When I won the BYPY award I felt like the city lifted me up. Everyone embraced me and I just feel really encouraged.

My mum has always says the world is my oyster, but being in Birmingham and seeing



**Nicola Fleet-Milne**

so many big firms and people coming together, I feel that there's a huge amount of support to help me on my journey.

**Gabriel Imevbore:** Just listening to the points made so far, and now knowing some history, I feel like I'm standing on the shoulders of giants.

If I look at my journey in the city, going through homelessness and overcoming that, being the youngest trustee for the YMCA in 180 years, I think that was a great example of what had been instilled in the city in terms of forward thinking.

However, I don't think enough of our young people in the city are in positions of leadership. I've challenged Future Faces on that, in terms of creating more opportunities for young people in the city in board member positions.

I feel that my knowledge of being on a board has shaped my way of doing business and also allowed me to gain a stronger foothold and gain respect, as well as put my opinion across in terms of where I think we can go.

If we want to say that we're supporting our young people and supporting our city to be one of the economic powers in the country, then let's put our money where our mouth is.

I want to see my peers negotiating with corporate organisations and winning at a high level. If we want to compete with cities like London, we need to put our leaders in those positions and allow them to grow and get that experience.

**JJ:** What needs to be done to achieve that?

**GI:** It's about opening up routes to tangible opportunities.

One great thing that's happened with myself and Z Digital is I've now started getting involved with the global chamber which is putting together a plan for me and my organisation to be able to do business across the world.

That is where I believe we can really start to shine a light on Birmingham and say, you know what, we empower our young entrepreneurs to be in these positions. You



**Right: Santina Bunting**



**Alex Bishop**

**Left: Ruth Pipkin**



don't need to be in London to be doing business with America, Mexico or China. We can do it right here and I'm a plain example of that.

**NFM:** What's so great about this is the energy. Passion comes from frustration and anger – when something's not good enough or big enough or there aren't enough opportunities – and they fight for change. JJ did it for Birmingham, others do it for opportunities for women or whatever sector they might be in.

**SB:** It's also about the willingness of the people surrounding you. When I started at Arup, even though I came in so young I made myself known to the leadership team and started to organise networking events, both internally and externally.

The leaders were willing to give me the opportunity because they could see my passion. We can see how passionate people like Gabriel are, but there's also a lot of passion from young people within big companies who want to get to leadership positions. Having the willingness of the people to support them is really encouraging.

**GI:** We need to be unafraid to empower our young people. There is a massive opportunity if we step up and say we're going to put our young people in these positions of leadership first.

It's the same mindset that we've heard from John, asking how we can disrupt and be different.

We can look at the statistics and say our young people are in these positions of leadership, but we have got to do it on a larger scale.

**NFM:** And consistently.

**AB:** While I wholeheartedly agree with you, not everybody's necessarily ready to take on a position of leadership. What Birmingham Future did was provide people with an opportunity to develop their skills in a safe space with a safety net.

I can absolutely hand on heart say that it was the skills and the networks that I developed through my work with Birmingham Future, that enabled me to leapfrog my peers and get a partnership position.

In order to scale up though, we've got to upskill.

**HC:** You all take a wider viewpoint than just success in your workplace, and see the massive benefits of a thriving Birmingham. Do you feel a responsibility to give back by giving a leg-up to the likes of Gabriel and Santana?

**NFM:** I think there has always been an altruistic mindset, as well as an understanding that succession doesn't suddenly materialise overnight. You need to have developed people.

But you guys make this easy for us, by waving your flag and saying I'm here and ready, I'm going to do this.

Our challenge now, and your future challenge, is spotting something in people who might not have the belief that they can be a future leader, and investing time in them.

You [to SB and GI] will both go very far because you've got the right attitude, but you've already got the belief and the confidence. We as a city need to make sure we're finding those who are less confident, and then help them by, in a way, upskilling their personalities.

**RP:** We can be in an echo chamber where we're talking to ourselves about these great opportunities.

I think something else these networks have succeeded in doing is reaching out beyond the people who already know and actually look at those opportunities.

We can't get away from the fact that there is enormous deprivation in Birmingham, so we have to take the success of the city and everything that has been built up and then share that opportunity.

**AB:** And raise the aspirations. Young people need to see people they can relate to.

**JJ:** I think there is a slight problem about giving back to the city in a wider context. When I was running Birmingham Forward, most of the companies were run by

Birmingham people.

Nowadays a lot of firms are controlled from London. They send someone up here to work for three years as managing partner, and then they go away again and do something else.

There's nothing wrong with that in career terms but it means that people like that are not minded necessarily to care about Birmingham long term.

It's an ongoing job to get people who come to this city to learn that they have got to commit their business and their staff to it as a long-term project.

**SB:** Just on the previous point, visibility is key. When I go into schools and I talk to young people, I'm three or four years older than they are and they see someone that looks like them, who's young, who's ambitious. And that alone empowers them and motivates them.

So I think companies investing in the visibility of their staff is a great marketing tool that they can use and hopefully filter down to schools.

**NFM:** It gives you permission as well, doesn't it? If there has already been a female in that position of my age, I'm obviously allowed to go for it.

**RP:** I hope that when my son's old enough he'll have people to look up to because he'll probably be working in the world of technology or AI which I might not understand.

That's why role models are so important and you're absolutely right, businesses need to invest in their young people to be those role models – it's the future.

**AB:** Just hearing from Santana and Gabriel and their enthusiasm and excitement for the future of Birmingham gives you such great hope, and it's brilliant to feel that energy. I utterly relate to your fire and your hunger and your anger. Harness it. Use it.

**NFM:** I think one of the wonderful things about Birmingham is that it's honest and it does understand that when it hasn't done something well, it must improve.

**HC:** I would like to wrap up by asking you, John, how you feel when we chat to these two generations below your own. A sense of pride?

**JJ:** I have a deep sense of pride, not in myself but in my city, because the transition to what it has become since 1970 is so huge.

The people here are passionate. Employers care more now, and it's a young and bright and inclusive community.

I just think it's fabulous the way the city has evolved, but Birmingham is doing what it has done for 300 years – it's constantly reinventing to cope with the challenges of society and in the way the business world changes.

So yes, I really do think the future is bright for Birmingham.

By PAUL FAULKNER



# Take a chance on youth TOMORROW'S BIRMINGHAM

According to the much-quoted statistic, Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe.

Whether or not that is actually true – a bit like the 'more canals than Venice' line – doesn't really matter, as it is a good stat when the point being made is that the youthful profile of Birmingham's population is a virtue. Which it really is, so long as everybody really embraces the youthfulness.

From a business perspective I would suggest that the key to success is to ensure that one gives our young people in the early stages of their careers chances and opportunities to shine. We need to trust them to step up and perform in roles, and give them the support required to succeed.

My own career path was very much shaped in this way, as I was fortunate to be around senior figures who provided me with a number of opportunities to accelerate my career development.

At 22 years of age, MBNA Bank took a chance on me and relocated me from Chester over to the East Coast of America to lead some of their affinity programmes. Five years later I was part of the American team that bought Aston Villa from Doug Ellis, and not long after that become CEO.

By the time I took over as CEO of the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce in 2015, at the age of 36, I was still being trumpeted as the youngest CEO in the Chambers' 200-year history. I recall finding that strange at the time as having already been CEO of Villa and Nottingham Forest I certainly didn't feel young anymore. Rather, I felt battle-hardened from holding such roles that operate in the fierce glare of the public eye.

The point being that age is very much



Paul Faulkner in 2007 after the takeover of Aston Villa

just a number, and yet it is strange how it is focused on so much and often made into a 'thing'. With that said, I am sad to report that in recent times references to my age do seem to have stopped, and so there is certainly a sense of nostalgia for having that back (note to the Editor . . . is it too late to be called the youngest columnist in the history of Birmingham Business?!)

I certainly feel blessed to have been taken out of my comfort zone on numerous occasions throughout my career and given these opportunities. In hindsight it was brave of those who made such decisions to do so, and, while life and business are never plain sailing, I hope that I have always repaid them with my efforts and results. The old adage that 'there is no such thing as bad experience, only experience' certainly rings true and

it is amazing what can be achieved when people are trusted and given the support and tools they need in order to succeed.

The quality of dynamism of young professionals in Birmingham's business scene is very palpable, with brilliant talent scattered across the city working in a host of sectors. This was very much in evidence at the Future Face's Young Professional of the Year Awards, run by the Chamber, last autumn. I was privileged to be a judge for certain categories, and was absolutely blown away by the personal and professional quality and depth of those who were up for awards.

In some ways it was almost intimidating, as I sat there judging and wondering how on earth these young professionals managed to squeeze all of their various roles and achievements into their lives. Yet it was also inspiring, and, as someone who very much subscribes to the maxim that in business you should always surround yourself by people who are better than you, left me feeling extremely upbeat and positive about the future prospects for Birmingham's business community.

What these young professionals now need more than anything is a chance. For those businesses wondering if they should take a risk and promote that bright young person, then I would suggest that the answer should always be yes. Of course they will need support, guidance, mentoring and the benefit of experience, but the positives of trusting in talent and making bold moves far outweigh the negatives.

While the world remains as crazy and uncertain as ever, let's remain optimistic and believe that 'the future is bright – the future is Birmingham'.

\*John James is marking 55 years with a lunch raising funds for United by 2022, the charity set up to continue the legacy of the Commonwealth Games by supporting people and communities in the city.



\*Paul Faulkner is co-founder of business consultancy Element45. He is the former chief executive of Nottingham Forest and Aston Villa football clubs, and Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce. He also held a senior role with the Richardson family group.





**Stanley Hiew and James Wong**



**Aman Rai and Manjeet Rai**



**Qasim Ali and Ayesha Ali**



**Samuel Lockwood, Fozia Fazel and Megan Stephenson**



**Chris Walklett, Paul Faulkner and Oliver Hayward**

# Signature Awards

Hundreds of business people from the West Midlands and beyond gathered at the Vox in the NEC for the annual Birmingham Signature Awards. Host Ninder Johal – the CEO of the Nachural Group which organises the awards – gave an upbeat address, and the guest speaker was Peter Wadell, the founder of Big Motoring World. Acorns Children's Hospice was the designated charity for the evening. Pictures by Edwin Ladd – Mr Ladd Media



**Ninder Johal**  
addressing the  
audience



**Sandip Jhoo and Manjit Jhoo**



**Safaraz Ali and Mohammed Fiaz**



**Kasim Choudhry and  
Denise Myers**



**Carl Beardon, Narinder Dhandwar  
and Mohammed Fiaz**



**Jaseep Bhogal, Narinder Nijjar  
and Vic Younis**



**Matthew Taylor-Savage and  
Philip Brooks-Stephenson**



**Monica Ghai, Amina Hussain and Prabhjot Saini**



# Research into medicinal cannabis to be based in Birmingham

Medicinal cannabis company Cannim has announced that its UK operations will be based at Birmingham's Precision Health Technologies Accelerator as part of a partnership aimed at furthering its research and improving patient outcomes.

Cannim was established in Australia in 2017, curating products from across a network of EU GMP manufacturers, and aims to develop medicinal cannabis to the highest pharmaceutical standards through the Lumir Clinic.

The collaboration with PHTA will focus on expanding the understanding of the endocannabinoid system which helps maintain balance within the body. Phytocannabinoids – compounds found in the cannabis plant – are reported to have shown promise in treating a variety of conditions such as chronic pain, stress and sleep disorders, by interacting with this system.

Through their partnership, PHTA and Cannim's Lumir Clinic will launch a series of observational clinical trials, initially focusing on veterans suffering from PTSD. These studies will lay the groundwork for future randomised controlled trials aimed at further exploring the therapeutic potential of medical cannabis.

The research will also extend to women's health issues such as dysmenorrhea and menopause, as well as age-related conditions like Alzheimer's.

The PHTA is the University of Birmingham's signature health and life sciences research facility, providing approximately 70,000 sq ft of state-of-the-art laboratory, incubation and collaboration space.

Professor Gino Martini, CEO of PHTA, said: "This partnership highlights the unique role of the University of Birmingham and PHTA as leaders in medical research, bringing together academia and industry to address important gaps in knowledge about medicinal cannabis and its potential to improve lives.

"Cannim and PHTA are excited to push forward on this initiative, positioning Birmingham as a future research hub for medical cannabis and cannabinoid studies in the UK and beyond."

Medicinal cannabis was legalised in the UK in 2018 but remains a 'specials'

prescription treatment. Despite this, there is still a significant knowledge gap within the medical community, with many doctors and patients unaware that medicinal cannabis is prescribable in the UK.

"We are thrilled to be collaborating with PHTA and the University of Birmingham to further explore the transformative potential of medicinal cannabis," said Stuart Marsh, chief growth officer of Cannim.

"By combining our scientific expertise with the university's cutting-edge research, we aim to improve patient outcomes and build a comprehensive understanding of how cannabis can best be used to treat a range of conditions."



## Business commits to helping young people



Steve Rigby

The charitable arm of a Midlands family business has announced a £3 million commitment to help raise the aspirations of disadvantaged young people in Birmingham.

Through its charity The Rigby Foundation, Rigby Group – which is in its 50th year – has launched a social mobility project called Inspiring Futures. It is aimed at 11 to 25-year-olds from low-income backgrounds.

The programme pairs 10 schools and colleges from the city with the same number of leading charities who will provide support with activities such as maths and English attainment, mental health, debating skills and preparing for employment.

Steve Rigby, chair of The Rigby Foundation, said: "In keeping with Richard Parker's West Midlands Youth Employment

Plan, we are focused on nurturing and supporting our region's young people into work.

"That starts with a good education and we hope by bringing together schools, colleges and charities, we can raise the aspirations of our city's students.

"Inspiring Futures is the result of many months of research, meetings with more than 30 potential charity partners, and mapping the secondary school systems alongside Birmingham City Council.

"We hope that our funding of this programme will allow disadvantaged young people in Birmingham to strive and succeed in education, and to go on to sustainable and meaningful careers."

Working alongside the WMCA and Birmingham City Council, the foundation will offer £1 million per year, for three years, of support.

interview

# Small but MIGHTY

**AllinAll Events has forged a formidable reputation in the West Midlands for staging some of the most high-profile events in the region. HENRY CARPENTER catches up with its founder, Emma Jones, to find out what makes her tick and the company thrive in this most competitive of industries.**



If Emma Jones is feeling the stresses of running a burgeoning business in a notoriously fraught industry, while also looking after two young children, she does a superb job in hiding it.

With the boss and her staff relaxed and chipper, dogs snoozing in baskets and banter flying around the office, there's a good vibe at AllinAll Events.

Their headquarters might not be based in Birmingham – they operate from a quiet spot near Cannock – but they don't need to be, despite the majority of their events taking place in the city. The majority of the team all live nearby and the location suits them fine.

It just feels right. Come to think of it, it seems that Emma has got most things right so far.

With a broad grin she says she considers herself a 'yam-yam' – referring to her Black Country upbringing – with a Brummie twang, and while she is young in outlook she is an experienced and highly respected practitioner in the corporate events world.

"We might be small, but we're mighty," she says, some 12 years on since launching the business.

Indeed. Birthday parties and weddings are left to others, but awards evenings, company bashes, industry festivals, charity fundraisers . . . you name it, there's little in the corporate world the team hasn't turned its hand to.

If questioned on AllinAll's biggest gig, Emma points to Birmingham Tech Week – which of course is a series of events in one annual helter-skelter week every October. The team was taken on by BTW's founder, tech supremo Yiannis



AllinAll put on this Strictly Come Dancing corporate gala

Maos, for the first event six years ago, and the relationship has continued ever since.

"It is now the largest tech festival in the UK and anyone who has seen the size and breadth of the events which comprise BTW, and the diverse range of venues in which they take place, will know that serious work and professionalism must have been used for staging them.

"What's been lovely about Tech Week is that I've been involved from the start and it's been really nice to be part of its growth throughout," says Emma. "It's a proper multi-event festival, culminating in the awards gala on the final evening."

So where does it all come from? Was event management a lifelong dream?

Not really. The seeds for Emma's career were sown at university, even though there was little to suggest when she enrolled for the business management course at Birmingham City University that it would lead to running a company staging all manner of corporate events.

She freely admits that she studied for the degree at BCU because she was unsure what she wanted to do professionally, but her third-year dissertation involved opening up a business in which she had to personally

invest in a brand . . . and that was AllinAll.

"I took the plunge straight away, even though I was advised that I had yet to put on a single event," remembers Emma.

"However, a venue group, formerly Town & Country Inns PLC which I worked with as part of our second year event module approached me to join them after completing my degree to look after their marketing and sales.

"I thought I would go into employment for two years whilst also running the business. My employers fully knew about the business and were really supportive."

During this time she was running AllinAll as well, and continued to do so in tandem with a spell working at Trinity Mirror where she was part of the team developing an app for the media group.

When asked to name her first big event, Emma takes her time to answer. But she reckons that if there was one event which put her and AllinAll on the map it was a fundraiser organised by LoveBrum founders Tim Andrews and PJ Ellis in aid of the Help Harry Help Others charity.

And her favourite? Again, she chooses her words carefully but the sense is that she loves events where she and her team can exercise some of their creative prowess.

Here Emma thanks Dr Jason Wouhra, the boss of Lioncroft Foods who, she says, gives her latitude to be as creative as possible with his events.

"AllinAll do all of Lioncroft's annual parties, and Jason always likes to do things that nobody's done before. He encourages me to push boundaries.

"For instance, we put on a spices festival in West Brom when Lioncroft was East End Foods. This was very much a community event. I think 24,000 people turned up for that.

"It was run as a sort of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory experience with the community going through the whole factory and seeing how everything was made.

"Since then we've put on galas for Jason at the ICC with Paddy McGuinness and some really quirky entertainments, once with live F1 simulators for the whole room to get scored on.

"We also put on a Strictly Come Dancing event for No5 Barristers' Chambers. We brought professional dancers in who trained people up so they could compete. That was a great event."

Emma has undoubtedly been canny in

**"We just love the buzz of the big occasions, especially during the event itself. You know how much work has gone into it and then it comes to life – and that's incredibly rewarding in itself."**

her employment of staff – she's had to be. For busy periods she's brings in more freelance, and pre-Covid the workforce was greater than it is now.

When the pandemic struck, the events industry was one of many which went over a cliff. For AllinAll though, there proved to be a silver lining to what was at the time a very dark cloud.

"I honestly believe Covid was actually good for us," admits Emma.

"It gave me the head space to have a good think and work out where the business was going, what we should be prioritising and so on.

"It was ultimately about streamlining our focus. We stripped everything back and are focusing more on the physical work than just trying to be everywhere and running everything.

"We had a freelance structure which we've modified as more and bigger events have come our way since the pandemic. The restructure saw the team bolstered by the arrival of Paige Jackson a year ago, who joined as a full-time events manager, Luke Gadd in June last year who is our internal graphics lead, and events assistant Sarah Palmer in September."

We can expect to hear of two more appointments before long, with both operational and business support roles needing to be filled.

In terms of determining strategy, Emma insists that this is very much a team effort with input from all staff both sought and valued. A key collaboration has come in the form of taking Paul Faulkner of Element45 on as a consultant. The former head honcho of Aston Villa FC and Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce has been supporting Emma with the strategic growth of the business, with discussions between the two taking place on a bi-monthly basis.

There is something very straightforward about Emma and the way she runs the company. In terms of financing, this is solely down to operational revenue – she hasn't borrowed a penny and there are no investors. Work hard, enjoy it, do a good job and the rest will look after itself. That seems to be the mantra at AllinAll.

Surely easier said than done, though. There are several well-established and respected West Midlands players in the industry, but the atmosphere in the office, the events in the pipeline and



Above and overleaf: events including charity fundraisers, awards and industry festivals are all within AllinAll's sphere of expertise







Team AllinAll Events



the consistent 25% year-on-year growth since Covid point to success and a niche in which AllinAll seems to have settled comfortably.

Perhaps this is down to the fact that they are professional, dependable and basically very good at what they do.

Emma reckons that part of their success lies in what events they enjoy managing most – as far as she’s concerned, the bigger the better.

“There are plenty of firms out there delivering brilliant events as well, but they don’t necessarily like the big stuff, whereas we absolutely love it,” she says.

“We just love the buzz of the big occasions, especially during the event itself. You know how much work has gone into it and then it comes to life – and that’s incredibly rewarding in itself.”

But there must be more to it than that. “Well, we do have a really good reputation for what we do,” she concedes. “We do deliver good events. I think we’re honest and transparent and people see that straight off.

“There’s no BS with us and I think that’s really important in our industry because they’re high-cost events. I do think we have the expertise and the capability to stage any type of event and we also have the experience and the know-how of being able to manage different industries and personalities.

“But ultimately we love what we do. It’s really fun for us, and we’re passionate about putting on great events – and I think

clients can see that.

“It sounds immodest but we are able to do it all, from concept to delivery. Companies ask us to provide event consultancy in building their calendars for them because we know when they’re best placed to launch them.

“For me, if it’s not right at the time and if there’s not a purpose behind it, it needs to be looked at again.”

All that said, there are areas which she is looking to strengthen and strings which need adding to the AllinAll bow. An improvement in the digital marketing capabilities, for instance, will be a priority.

Emma is eager to point out that while volume is important to keep the bank manager happy, it really isn’t the be-all-and-end-all. It’s about striking a happy medium.

She reckons that while it would be feasible to stage, say, 100 events in a year, the benefits would be mixed. Currently, AllinAll are responsible for approximately 50 each year but she sees 70 as perhaps being an optimum level, and getting to that level will be a focus over the next year or two.

There’s something else though, and a clue lies in the sounds of the office – laughter and gently snoring dogs.

AllinAll is a happy place to work and that means a huge amount to Emma Jones.

A strong order book plus a plus a genuine passion for the work equals a content team . . . it’s a simple but telling equation.



From left, Mike Lowe, Steve Walters and Chris Jones

## Steel manufacturer secures funding

An historic West Bromwich manufacturer of steel forgings is looking to the future following funding from business investment specialists UKSE.

Brockhouse Forgings has secured a six-figure funding package from UKSE to support the company’s top line growth and expansion into new markets.

Established in 1885, Brockhouse Forgings manufactures and supplies forged steel components to a range of industries including mining, oil and gas, railway, nuclear, automotive and defence.

Director Steve Walters said: “UKSE have been very supportive throughout the whole process. It’s great to know that there

is funding out there for the steel-related industries.

“Whilst we have deep roots in the region, our business is known globally and as we enter our 140th year in business we look forward to utilising the funding to grow our customer base to secure the business for the future.”

UKSE area manager Steve Grice said: “Brockhouse Forgings are a great example of a traditional manufacturing business looking to innovate and grow. We wish them all the success in their 140th year in business and are delighted to support Steve and the team with their growth plans.”



At the networking event, from left, are Chris Eigelaar, Robert Richardson, Jake Armston, Alistair Sandall, Steve Locklin and Kevin Goodger

## UCB networking event

Business leaders and alumni of University College Birmingham gathered to discuss the growing challenges in hospitality and the need for collaboration among employers and seats of education.

UCB hosted the networking event marking its 20-year partnership with the Institute of Hospitality.

Among the guests was Dan Lee, a University College Birmingham alumnus and MasterChef: The Professionals winner.

He said: “The future of the hospitality sector will be tough with increasing

costs, but it is a field filled with creative individuals who will evolve and find new ways to adapt.”

He stressed the importance of employers supporting young professionals by providing opportunities and mental health support rather than adding excessive pressure.

Chris Eigelaar, chair of IoH Midlands and managing director of The Belfry Hotel and Resort, presented awards to outstanding students Oliver Herrington and Sachini Rodrigo, who have demonstrated dedication to the hospitality sector.

## Firm becomes patron

A financial services firm, which started the year by announcing its expansion into Birmingham, has become a patron of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce.

Bishop Fleming currently has offices spanning from Worcester in the Midlands to Truro in the south west.

In January, the firm announced plans to open a new office in the Colmore Business District. The office will become Bishop Fleming’s ninth and is expected to eventually be one of its largest.

Bishop Fleming is currently ranked fifth in the Accountancy Age Mid-Tier Power Index and is also the largest provider of audit services to multi-academy trusts in the academy sector.

Managing partner Andrew Sandiford said: “We are delighted to be joining the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce as a patron member, and will be seeking to further build our brand and presence in the Midlands market following the recent announcement of our expansion into the city.

“Our engagement with the chamber, its activities and fellow members will be central to those aims.”

Henrietta Brealey, CEO of the GBCC, said: “Bishop Fleming’s plans to accelerate their growth in Birmingham and across the wider Midlands region are bold, ambitious and exciting.”



Pictured from left are Mark Taylor, Henrietta Brealey and Andrew Sandiford



# Region's businesses urged to consider alternative lenders



Dr STEVE WALKER is chief executive at ART Business Loans, a Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) which provides business loans in the Midlands and surrounding counties.

"Last month, new research from Time Finance reported that 60% of SMEs are not considering alternative finance options. The survey found that six in 10 UK businesses choose their main bank for commercial finance solutions, and only 27% of those turned down by their banks look elsewhere.

"Following the challenges of Covid-19, many SMEs are now seeking funds to either accelerate future growth or to refinance their pandemic loans. As a lender, we've seen an upsurge in demand for refinancing, which is often due to organisations struggling to obtain funds from banks or other finance sources. Last year - for the first time - research confirmed that banks were not the major source of finance for small and medium-sized businesses in the UK.

"It's therefore disappointing to see that more than half of UK SMEs are curtailing their opportunities for growth by not exploring alternative routes to finance. To meet their financial needs, it's critical that business owners consider all possible funding options, particularly if they're not able to secure a loan from their existing bank.

"We know that many SMEs struggle to find appropriate finance to help fuel their future growth, and in a challenging climate, businesses are facing new and increasing cost pressures. To best respond to evolving business demands, it's important for SMEs

to consider all lending options on the table. A refusal from their bank doesn't have to signal a financial dead-end.

"Intermediaries and banks have an important role to play in signposting businesses to alternative routes if needed. For example, if a traditional lender says no, businesses can speak to their local Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI) to explore alternative options for finance.

"It is also vital that businesses source the most appropriate source of finance which can involve considerable cash flow and cost benefits."

## Supporting businesses and communities to thrive

"CDFIs are specialist financial institutions focused on supporting businesses and communities that are underserved by traditional banks. Unlike mainstream lenders, CDFIs prioritise social impact over profit, aiming to help stimulate economic growth in deprived areas and fund businesses that may be considered higher risk.

"CDFIs offer a range of financial services but mainly loan finance filling the gap left by traditional finance providers, offering not only funding but also tailored advice and support to ensure businesses thrive.

"Many businesses, particularly those in disadvantaged areas or with unconventional business models, face

significant barriers when attempting to secure traditional financing. Banks often have strict lending criteria, which can exclude many smaller or newer businesses, or those with a poor credit history.

"CDFIs are prepared to lend in three key scenarios: 1) when other lenders say 'no'; 2) when other lenders have already lent all they can; or 3) when they can lend as part of a package alongside other banks or finance sources, which is becoming increasingly important."

## Relationship-based funding solutions

"As well as providing additional avenues to finance, CDFIs such as ART Business Loans offer a relationship-based approach designed to meet both a business' immediate financial needs and long-term plans.

"In commercial finance, there's no 'one size fits all', and as a result, we offer loans ranging from £10,000 to £150,000, as well as partnering with other organisations should further funding be required. It's therefore vital for local SMEs to consider the full scope of finance options available to them. By exploring alternative funding routes, such as CDFIs, businesses across the Midlands and beyond can benefit from specialist financial support tailored to their unique requirements - setting them on the right track for future growth."



Details of CDFIs across the country, many operating in targeted geographic areas, can be found at [www.findingfinance.org.uk](http://www.findingfinance.org.uk)

## Sketching out success: C&S Design

ART Business Loans has a mission to ensure businesses and social enterprises across the region can access appropriate loan finance tailored to their specific needs.

C&S Design secured a five-figure loan from ART in 2022, helping the business to draw up plans for future growth. The company, launched in 2019 by founder and director Tim Johnson, designs and manufactures eco-friendly backpacks.

With a strong focus on sustainability and innovative design processes that create products made to last, C&S Design backpacks use natural, bio-degradable materials, and are handmade in the company's own workshop near Delhi, India.

Tim is committed to ethical business practices and delivering community impact through his work. As the business has grown, he has taken the opportunity to support and work with local creatives, suppliers and contractors from the business' base in Warwickshire.

Following its initial launch to market in 2019, C&S Design attended its second major trade show in early 2020, supported by a personal investment from Tim. This proved to be a vital launch pad for the business and within the first five months of trading, customer feedback was overwhelmingly positive and there were immediate requests for stock.



Tim Johnson, founder, C&S Design

With more demand than supply, C&S Design needed a cash injection to help fulfil its orders and pursue continued growth. After his initial attempts to secure funding through traditional lenders were unsuccessful, Tim was recommended to contact ART Business Loans.

With the support of Graham Donaldson, business loans manager at ART, Tim secured a loan in 2022.

Tim says: "ART's personal approach and sector expertise immediately set them

apart from other lenders. I only work with people that I genuinely enjoy working with, and Graham had a deep understanding of both the operations and aspirations of the business - which made a huge difference for us, as a small but rapidly growing company.

"My expertise and skillset is in product development, so Graham's support was invaluable in helping me to better understand the financial needs of the business, and the process for submitting a funding bid. His mentoring and guidance helped me to secure crucial investment which not only met the business' immediate needs, but also set us on course for future growth."

Initially launched as a wholesale business, C&S Design now sells to independents across the UK and has an e-commerce site to support its expanding product range - which now encompasses travel bags, wash kits, pet accessories and socks.

The business has secured major partnerships with leading brands and organisations including David Hockney at Tate Britain, the V&A Museum, The National Trust, and the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh, with more exciting projects in the pipeline - both in the UK and internationally.

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# A true celebration

Kasim Choudhry, left, and Edwin Ladd



**The support and exposure of International Women's Day has seen a huge surge over the last decade, but nowhere in the UK is its profile higher than in Birmingham. This is largely down to the efforts of two prominent figures from the city's business scene who wanted to pay tribute to the role of women in the region. HENRY CARPENTER reports**

The International Women's Day Conference and Expo in Birmingham's Millennium Point is the largest event celebrating IWD in the UK – fact.

Also not in question is that the plaudits for this remarkable celebration should go to the very people it is spotlighting: the wealth of female trailblazers, leaders, mentors and workers across the region's business, cultural and social landscape, not to mention the wives, mothers, sisters, grandmothers and aunts who do so much within the family.

The first people who would acknowledge this are the event's organisers, Edwin Ladd and Kasim Choudhry.

You have to hand it to them. In the space of four years, the two friends – the former a photographer and media entrepreneur, while Choudhry holds senior positions at the Pathway Group and Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce – have contributed hugely to IWD reaching genuine festival levels in the region.

This global recognition of women's rights and equality, which celebrates their achievements across all walks of life, and contribution to family, business and society in general, has been in existence for over a century. But it is really only in

the last decade that it has gained massive prominence with rights issues in general coming more to the fore and extra impetus given by the #MeToo movement.

The number of businesses choosing to mark the event has also increased dramatically over the last few years. Given that the number of female business leaders has also increased in line with that,

maybe that's not surprising.

In Birmingham, no two individuals have done more to boost IWD's profile than Ladd and Choudhry. Whilst the day itself is held in the UK on March 8 every year, the IWD Conference and Expo at Millennium Point is held beforehand, and this year it was staged on February 25 with some 900 people attending.





**“I co-founded this event to champion gender equality, empower women, and create meaningful opportunities – but most importantly, to encourage more men to actively support the cause.”**

But really the celebrations started back in early January, with Ladd conducting his now-familiar week-long photo shoot at the Grand Hotel during which 450 people were captured – the vast majority obviously being women – and social media played its part in providing the platforms to show the pictures in all their glory.

It is quite some undertaking, and what started as a kernel of an idea in the early days of the pandemic has blossomed considerably, with massive corporates and several more local brands keen to be involved and have their names associated with the event.

So how did it all start?

“I held an IWD photoshoot in the 2021 lockdown to celebrate and thank all the women that had helped and supported me when I started my business,” says Ladd, a popular and ever-present figure on the awards and corporate event circuit.

“That year I managed to capture 48 people, but those involved asked me to do it again in 2023. That photo shoot was held at Park Regis where the number reached 136.

“After this event the people I captured asked if there was somewhere they could meet up, see each other’s photos, and network. So I spoke to Kasim Choudhry, my good friend who works in events.

“Last year we decided to put on the first IWD event but we wanted it to be the biggest one in the UK . . . which it was.

“We held it at Millennium Point over three floors, the mayor at the time Andy Street opened it, designer Karen Millen was headline speaker, and we had a further 50 speakers.

“This year’s event was even bigger, with 88 speakers in total with 21 sessions and panel discussions. It was sponsored by Amazon, we had 30 exhibitors, and the headline speaker was Kirat Assi from Netflix’s Sweet Bobby who was interviewed by Nitisha Patel.”

Some of the topics covered included: challenging abuse and empowering survivors, the importance of a work-life balance, women in digital transformation, navigating careers in tech and STEM, empowering girls for career success, excelling in your space as a minority, ED&I in the office, and understanding

neurodiversity in women.

“My goal is to grow this event and hopefully run it over multiple days,” says Ladd, looking ahead to the future.

“Next year 2026 we plan to have the photoshoot in both Birmingham and Manchester.”

If you were at Millennium Point in February, or you’ve scanned through the photoshoot pictures, either individually or in one of Ladd’s vibrant collages, while they are mainly populated by women, they are not exclusively so. And that is important.

As Choudhry says: “I co-founded this event to champion gender equality, empower women, and create meaningful opportunities – but most importantly, to encourage more men to actively support the cause.

“True progress requires allyship, and we aim to foster a growing community of men who advocate for women’s rights.

“Our goal is to create lasting change, strengthen women’s position in society, and expand our impact each year, inspiring more men to stand alongside women as allies in the fight for equality.”



**Speeches and panel discussions were among the sessions staged at Millenium Point in February**



## Top award reclaimed

A Midlands highways contractor has scooped top prize at the Royal Sutton Coldfield, Lichfield & Tamworth and Cannock Chase Chambers of Commerce awards for the second time in three years.

Crown Highways won the Large Business of the Year award in a ceremony at the Belfry Hotel & Resort, supported by headline sponsors Amazon and South Staffordshire College.

Eight category winners were announced, with Crown Highways reclaiming the award it previously won in 2022.

The firm manages and delivers all specialist activities including detection, technology, motorway communications, lighting, signs, civils and cabling for its clients on smart motorways, highway sector framework and term contracts.

Public and private sector clients include National Highways, Tarmac and Kier.

Meanwhile, the Young Professional of the Year award went to Ark Media’s Graham Allsopp, capping a successful night for the video production firm, who were also named Royal Sutton Coldfield Small Business of the Year.

## Company donates to charity for refugees

A Birmingham outsourcing firm has donated laptops to a West Midlands charity which is dedicated to helping disadvantaged refugees and immigrants across the region.

Sigma Connected – which provides contact centre services across several industry sectors – has given 20 laptops it no longer uses to the Refugee and Migrant Centre charity.

The donation, which also includes new replacement hard drives paid for through the firm’s community foundation, will give the charity much-needed IT equipment and help its clients find jobs and further their education prospects through online training courses. Two of the laptops will also be used by the charity for administration purposes.

Peter Hopgood-Gravett from Sigma Connected said: “The volunteers at the centre do an incredible amount of often



**Left to right, Valdas Labutis, Steven Bayliss, Haroon Aagah, Stuart King (Sigma Connected), Karzan Kawani, Mam Ceessay and Rajwinder Kaur Bhandal**

unseen work to support their clients across the region. I have known them for over three years now and their compassion and empathy is unbelievable.

“Through our community foundation we have supported the charity in previous years with financial and even office furniture

donations, but being able to donate useful IT equipment is something totally different.

“It’s a real gamechanger as it will help not only their working environment, but will also keep their clients connected, help with training and development, and enhance their job searches.”



### ■ Solihull shopping centre

Touchwood has partnered with a local school to sponsor its football team kit.

The sponsorship marks a new chapter for Solihull Academy’s football players.

David Turner, assistant principal at Solihull Academy, said: “This partnership isn’t just about sports – it’s about fostering leadership, teamwork, and ambition in our young people.

“With the generous support of Touchwood, we can show our students what is possible when local businesses and schools unite to invest in their future.”

Solihull Academy prides itself on being an innovative and therapeutic school that ensures all students across the borough have access to a high quality, alternative educational provision.



# Legal services for businesses and private clients

In association with



## A firm punching above its weight

KAREN MOORES, senior partner at Sydney Mitchell, explains why she thinks the law firm is set fair for the future

According to Karen Moores, there are a number of reasons why Sydney Mitchell is not only still operating as an independent law firm after 260 years – making it one of, if not the oldest, legal practice in the region – but is actively flourishing in a fiercely competitive market.

“We are a forward-thinking ambitious law firm that blends traditional values with a progressive outlook. Our deep understanding of our clients is the cornerstone of our 260 years of success with a talented team, many of whom have come from larger firms,” says Karen Moores, the firm’s senior partner.

“I also think that our size makes us quite unique as a law firm.”

In May 2019, Karen made Sydney Mitchell history by becoming the firm’s first female senior partner having joined the firm in 1998. In addition to her responsibilities as senior partner, she remains actively involved in her fee-earning role, co-leading the family law team alongside partner, Mauro Vinti.

“These days there are not many firms in between the small high street set-up, and those with a turnover of £20 million plus.

“Our size creates some real positives for our staff and clients. From the clients’ point of view, we are big enough to operate some very specialist teams. That means they are getting the level of expertise that you would get from a much bigger firm as opposed to a more generalist one.

“But we are not slaves to the hamster wheel, and that means we can afford to give a more personal and empathetic service.

“It also means that our colleagues know one another much better than they would in a much bigger firm and this enables us to provide a collaborative approach across the teams. This holistic approach provides a more cohesive and cost-effective service for our clients.”

The words are backed up by the facts. A broad spectrum of services operate from its three offices in Solihull, Sheldon and Birmingham city centre, and the firm is a regular award winner. Furthermore a number of its lawyers consistently find themselves in the Legal 500, including

Karen herself, a hugely respected family law practitioner. In order to continue to thrive as it has, Sydney Mitchell has had to evolve and adapt throughout the last two and half centuries against changing societal conditions and ever-growing competition.

Until relatively recently, its main focus was on residential property – it was a regional powerhouse in the sector – but one of Karen’s predecessors as senior partner had the foresight to insist the firm diversify in its range of services in the event that the conveyancing market went over a cliff.

That coincided with bringing in Karen in the late 1990s to help spearhead the firm’s family team, but there are numerous other teams which have since been either set up or strengthened over the last 20 years.

In addition to its highly regarded private client team, the firm has been enjoying a record-breaking phase of growth since opening its new Birmingham office two years ago. The firm is expanding its corporate services in Birmingham while showcasing outstanding expertise across multiple areas including litigation, personal injury, contentious probate and immigration. These talented teams are attracting high-quality and complex work that rivals that of larger law firms.

Not only has the firm diversified in the breadth of services it offers, but it has come a long way in modernising its processes since Karen joined.

“There has been huge investment in technology since I joined with the introduction of an integrated case management and accounts system, digital dictation, virtual conferencing and the ability to work from home.”

The firm now has specialist IT developers to create bespoke solutions for the teams so that processes that can be carried out more efficiently and effectively by fee-earners. Many standard documents and file opening processes have been developed/streamlined saving fee-earners time and clients’ money.

“Whilst home working rarely occurred prior to Covid, with the announcement of lockdown in March 2020 our Birmingham

city centre office was literally mothballed overnight and our superb in-house IT team facilitated an entire office being able to work from home almost instantaneously.”

“Whilst this is not an experience that I would wish to repeat, it demonstrates just how agile the firm is and that we have the ability to proactively adapt to changing circumstances.”

There have been many other changes, both at Sydney Mitchell and the legal world in general since she joined the firm 27 years ago, having previously worked at a firm in Sparkhill which focused largely on publicly funded legal aid work.

“When I was a trainee solicitor, you trained at a practice, tried to move up in the firm and possibly moved once in your career,” she says.

“That’s not what modern lawyers do. I do not think this is isolated to the law, it’s across all industries, but it does not make it easy because we want a reputation for being really high quality within our individual fields. We want to train and nurture people to our standards and so keeping them with us is important and a real challenge.”

So what of the short to medium term – are there any plans to grow the firm or further diversify its offerings?

“We are always looking for opportunities to grow, and for good new people,” says Karen.

“I do not believe we need more offices because that would mean we’re bigger just for the sake of being bigger. If that means that the bottom line is smaller, there’s no point. But we are always alive to opportunities to expand with the addition of teams and other firms if there is a strategic advantage.”

The clients are obviously important to Karen and the partners at Sydney Mitchell – but so are the staff.

“Good people are approached by other firms and head hunters all the time, and so we try to engender a family atmosphere whereby our staff matter to us and they feel valued,” says Karen.

“That is when we come back to the benefit of working in a firm of our size. If you stand out, the sky’s the limit.”



# Location, reputation and motivation

**Sydney Mitchell's Birmingham office joint managing partners share their thoughts on the advantages of businesses being based in Birmingham city centre.**

**Its location at the heart of the city's business district remains the perfect place for one of Birmingham's longest established law firms to deliver its award-winning services to its regional and national corporate and private clients, alongside developing the next generation of talent, driving growth, and realising its ambitions. Birmingham Business spoke to the joint heads of Sydney Mitchell's Birmingham office to discover more about the firm's more than 200-year history, its goals for 2025, hopes for its home city of Birmingham, and what being part of the city's thriving professional services sector means to them.**

Sydney Mitchell's history stretches back more than 260 years, making it one of the West Midlands' oldest law firms. Established in 1763, the firm has served the local community and met its personal and business legal needs for generations.

Its central Birmingham location just off Colmore Row has long been a firm fixture of Sydney Mitchell's regional office network, with a growing headcount, expanding legal services portfolio, and corporate and high net worth private client base, which includes entrepreneurs, business owners, banks, bridging lenders, accountants, agents, SMEs and PLCs, from across Birmingham, the Midlands, the UK, and Europe.

The office has been jointly led by partners Dean Parnell and Leanne Schneider-Rose since 2021. A litigation specialist, Dean is head of commercial litigation and Leanne is head of the restructuring and insolvency team. Interestingly, both are also qualified to act as supervising solicitors on Delivery Up and Search Orders – an unusual role for a solicitor, but even rarer to have two supervising solicitors in one regional law firm.

"It is all about location, location, location and Birmingham's geographic location is perfect for any business," says Dean.

"The city provides a gateway to the North, the Midlands and the South thanks to its excellent location which is supported by fantastic rail, road and air links and infrastructure networks.

"Being a major city with such a great location and avoiding the significant overheads associated with London are the reasons why Birmingham has always been regarded as the UK's second city. Having confidence in Birmingham and its ability to continually attract new businesses is important for us as a law firm as it means that our potential client base will continue to

grow as Birmingham continues to grow.

"Of course, this will soon be enhanced once the new high speed HS2 rail line is complete and up and running. HS2 is already proving a great boost for the city and region's economies and its employment."

## City growth

"There's a real sense of Birmingham developing, growing and truly going somewhere which may in part be due to the Big City Plan (one of the UK's most ambitious and far-reaching development projects). The amount of construction in Birmingham is breathtaking, and the skyline and landscape seem to change on an almost weekly basis.

"New residential and commercial builds are beginning and completing at lightning speed, with many attracting some high-profile businesses from elsewhere in the UK, as the spotlight on Birmingham grows and organisations see the strategic advantages of being based in the city. Despite all of this development work across the city, Birmingham still manages to operate a very successful clean air zone which has been running for almost four years.

"As well as for newcomers to the city, this evolution for Birmingham is also exciting for businesses already based in the city, including professional services firms. The city is recognised as a legal and financial powerhouse that can rival any city in the UK and this is the main reason why there has been such an influx of leading law firms, banks and financial institutions coming into the city over recent years.

"Competition is healthy as it means that as a firm we can't afford to standstill or become complacent; we have to keep developing and changing how we do things. Whether it is to do with our working



**Dean Parnell and Leanne Schneider-Rose**

environment, our technology, our people, our offices or our culture. This constant challenge is what makes being in business so exciting as we are always being kept on our toes and thinking about how we can do things better than we did them last year, last month or even yesterday!

"As a firm, we have developed and expanded organically rather than merging with other law firms. This has ensured that we have avoided any clash of cultures which often comes with law firm mergers. As a consequence, our culture has been fairly consistent over many years with the focus on getting the job done. There is no room for egos at this firm as we are all one team and everyone just rolls up their sleeves in order to get on with the job.

"One of the advantages of having a well-established 'can do' culture in a regional law firm is that we can be quite dynamic which enables us to move in new or different directions in response to client needs or the shifting of local or national economic pressures, changes and/or opportunities.

"Our ability for a 'rapid response' allows us to change direction quickly with no compromise on the service we provide to clients."

## Client service

This culture of agility and adaptability is also evident in Sydney Mitchell's growing legal services portfolio and recruitment strategies, as Leanne explains.

"Client service is top of the agenda and

is delivered by talented and experienced lawyers, with the support of an operations team and IT systems comparable to those of much larger firms. We are always on the lookout for new people to join the firm so long as they have not only legal aptitude but also the right professional and personal characteristics.

"Underpinning our hiring strategy is adding the right individuals to the team. Our culture and vision are fundamental to what makes the firm tick, and it's essential for our immediate and future plans and operations that we add talented lawyers and individuals who are the right cultural fit, a rounded individual, with good interpersonal and tech skills, and who care and are passionate about what they do. Essential is evidence of ambition to deliver not only high-quality legal work but also the best possible service and outcomes for clients.

"This commitment to exceptional client service and going the extra mile whenever necessary runs deep across the firm, both here in Birmingham and at each of our other offices. If a client has to chase me or a member of our team, then we are simply not doing the job they are paying us to do.

"If we discover someone who is right for the firm, then we recruit them, and if necessary, we would create and build a new team around them. A good example of this is when we had the opportunity to recruit one of the UK's leading immigration lawyers, who we supported to establish this highly specialist service and build the necessary team around him. Today, our Immigration Law team works with individuals and businesses, and has been listed as Top Tier by Legal 500 for several years, with this respected legal directory naming the team's head André Minnaar as a leading partner and Melissa Southall as a leading associate.



**A line-up of the partners at Sydney Mitchell**



## Development and diversity

"Treating our colleagues and peers in the same way as we do our clients is embedded in our ethos and we are proud of our supportive, collaborative and professional team, which willingly shares knowledge, experience, best practice and learnings," explains Leanne.

"The firm is also committed to promoting equal opportunities and embracing diversity. Karen Moores continues to lead the firm as senior partner, and 50% of the partnership is women, and over 34% are from ethnic minority backgrounds".

## Culture and growth

Leanne explains that Sydney Mitchell's enthusiasm and appetite for change is what enables it to effectively compete with larger firms in terms of both the type of work – and its value – and client service.

"The firm's culture plays a pivotal role in this aspect of its strategy, and the firm encourages influence and input from the whole workforce," she says.

"Of course, the firm needs a structure that will enable effective guidance of its operational and strategic performance, but to fully optimise and nurture growth, it's vital every member of the team is engaged and feels part of the future vision.

"We have multi-level cohorts each responsible for driving business development, marketing, HR and finance, which has resulted in an energetic, structured approach to these aspects of our operations, with results that speak for themselves, and an engaged workforce that is excited to play a part in steering and sustaining growth."

As well as supporting and nurturing the firm's teams, Sydney Mitchell is committed to working in ways that protect the environment.

"We are some way along our journey to reducing our carbon footprint," says Dean.

"In fact, this was a big part of our decision to move to our current Waterloo Street premises in 2022, as well as to facilitate the firm embracing new ways of working post-pandemic.

"We feel proud of where we are at with our environmental policy and our



The entrance to Cavendish House

efficient use of energy. We use the 1750 square foot of open-plan office space to maximum effect.

"We have adopted paperless working, dramatically reduced the volume of physical client files held in storage, significantly reduced the number of printers and copiers on-site, have motion sensor-lighting and timed heating and air conditioning systems, and recycle everything possible including coffee pods.

"We have invested in our tech infrastructure with high quality video conferencing and phone systems, which in turn reduce the need for non-essential travel to other offices and client premises, combined with a hybrid working policy that is bespoke to the firm and is regularly reviewed and tested to ensure it truly meets the needs of the business and our clients."

## Now and next

"Sydney Mitchell is undergoing an exciting phase of growth. The firm is enhancing its corporate and commercial services in Birmingham, and continues to demonstrate high levels of expertise in numerous fields including litigation, personal injury, contentious probate, immigration, and corporate law. The reputations and talent of the people who make up our teams and their ability to regularly deliver the results expected by our clients ensures a good flow of high-quality work that can rival that of larger law firms.

"What truly sets Sydney Mitchell apart from many competitors is the familial atmosphere among our staff. Every individual is regarded as being an equally

important cog within the Sydney Mitchell machine and we recognise that it is the collective efforts of everyone within the firm that has helped us to achieve and maintain our success over the years."

And Sydney Mitchell is not a firm standing still, but one that is ready to adapt and act to embrace opportunities and recruit new people.

"Top of the agenda are the employee experience for the firm's workforce, and our use of technology – including AI – so that we are able to find even more efficient ways of working and delivering our high quality service to clients," Dean explains.

## A greater Birmingham

Birmingham is known for so much, from its thriving, talented professional services sector, its entrepreneurship, high tech and digital expertise, to its universities, accessibility, culture and diversity, but what of its future?

"Honestly, Birmingham is a really exciting place to be," Dean says, "but maybe the time is right for a more joined up leadership approach where Birmingham works much closer with the Black Country and surrounding areas such as Solihull so that we act, move and operate more as one region as this will ensure we are even more competitive on the national and international stage.

"Whatever might happen, in Birmingham and the wider UK and global economies, by being an independent, full-service law firm, Sydney Mitchell is able to weather most economic storms and has and will continue to in the directions its clients need."

\*With offices in Solihull, Sheldon and Birmingham, Sydney Mitchell LLP's specialist team portfolio spans employment, commercial property, company and commercial services, Shareholder disputes, contract law, dispute resolution including commercial litigation, personal injury, restructuring and insolvency, family and child law, residential property, immigration, wills and probate and tax and trusts.

Sydney Mitchell LLP is a Top Tier Legal 500 firm, Lexcel accredited, seven-times winner of the Birmingham Law Society Firm of the Year (5-15 partners) / Regional Law Firm, and won the Excellence in Professional Services award in the Nachural Signature Awards 2025 Birmingham.

For more information, visit [www.sydneymitchell.co.uk](http://www.sydneymitchell.co.uk)



# Legal wisdom that never forgets and trusted by generations

For over 260 years, Sydney Mitchell LLP has provided expert legal services, locally, nationally, and internationally. We pride ourselves on being approachable and dependable, treating every client as an individual with unique needs.

At the same time, we are confident in our expertise and commitment to delivering excellence. Our knowledge and skills are industry-leading, and we are dedicated to achieving the best outcome for every client, every time.

## Our specialist areas include:

Employment	Commercial Property
Family	Corporate and Commercial
Immigration	Debt Recovery
Personal Injury	Dispute Resolution
Residential Conveyancing	Insolvency
Wills, Trust and Probate	







# Awards get lift-off

**The countdown for the 2025 Innovation Awards began with a guest-packed launch event at the Hotel du Vin in Birmingham's city centre. HENRY CARPENTER talks to those behind the awards and we also hear from past winners on the value they place on walking away with prizes**

Woo-hoo!

Richard Fallon's trademark call to attention means something is up – and in this case it's the official launch of an awards celebration he co-founded four years ago.

The driving force behind the Innovation Awards played host at the event of this year's festival, attended by past winners, sponsors, patrons, entrepreneurs, business leaders . . . all coming under the umbrella description of 'innovators'.

In four short years it has already become a fixture in the West Midlands' business calendar – and on Friday November 21 the awards will once again be taking place at the Eastside Rooms.

They have come a long way in the last five years.

"The awards have grown massively since their inception in 2021," says Fallon.

"They recognise not only innovative companies and individuals but also the businesses and organisations, such as universities, trade bodies and catapults that support them."

"Nominations are open until 16th May

so nominate yourself or others today. It takes less than five minutes."

The Innovation Awards, organised by the One Thousand Trades Events, has established themselves as the premier platform for highlighting innovative individuals, companies and organisations across the UK.

From manufacturing, sustainability and technology to life sciences, defence and the creative industries, these awards celebrate innovation in its many forms, including the invaluable contributions of individuals, universities and catapults.

Co-founder Paul Cadman said: "It is inspirational to see all the incredible things that are happening in the West Midlands and across the UK."

"The UK has a world-renowned reputation for innovation. We are delighted to recognise, reward and celebrate the companies, individuals and organisations dedicated to innovation through the awards."

Fallon and Cadman are well known in Birmingham's business world. The former is the founder and CEO of the Technology

Supply Chain, a membership group, while Cadman is the chief executive of Starting Point Recruitment as well as a board member of numerous organisations.

Together, they are part of the One Thousand Trades Group, which also includes Walk Through Walls, founded and headed by former MP Gary Sambrook and an events division, One Thousand Trades Events. Watch this space, too, for Life Sciences Week – a week-long festival in September celebrating one of the region's most vibrant industry sectors.

Both Fallon and Cadman are keen to stress that the Innovation Awards is not a flash-in-the-pan event which exists solely in its own bubble for one night a year.

It is more about developing a community of like-minded innovators and disruptors who see the potential in the region as somewhere to maximise the potential of their businesses.

■ Visit [innovation-awards.co.uk](https://innovation-awards.co.uk) to nominate individuals and organisations who you think deserve to be recognised for their achievements.

## Case studies of past winners at the Innovation Awards:

**Jo Birch, winner of Female Innovator of the Year award, has been working in the region for 25 years. A key part of the team behind BCU's STEAMhouse facility she has now joined Woodbourne Group as the regeneration firm's CIO and set up GROWTHINK Associates, an innovation consultancy.**

### Why do you think you won your category against stiff competition?

I have spent the last 10 years studying innovation across the globe, understanding how people, infrastructure, spaces and activity can work harder to deliver improved outcomes. The results underpinned the thinking for STEAMhouse – a collaborative centre for innovation bringing STEAM and the arts together to support and create more businesses to use innovation as a fundamental plank for growth.

Collaboration has been at the heart of everything I have done - creating networks globally, nationally and regionally. From my early work in the creative industries,

creating ideas, networks and lobbying campaigns for change to my participation on boards to drive strategic change, I try to give my total commitment to supporting inclusive growth.

I see many things are possible if you work outside your immediate network. Being open minded has been a real asset to learning and appreciating the power of seeing opportunities through multiple lenses, to create vibrant impactful programmes that deliver material results.

I think this approach has created tangible results that many have benefited from, and I think the judges noted the impact of my work which has had a tangible impact on the city.

### What did winning the award mean to you and your business?

I launched GROWTHINK Associates in September 2024. The business is all about unleashing innovation to support businesses and business leaders to grow.

I think any award is life affirming but to receive the award recognizing my passion for innovation and the impact I have made on the region reinforced the impact the business can make.

To me the awards highlight the importance of innovation in unlocking growth and shine a spotlight on user cases that allow businesses to clearly see how this is achieved.

Since winning the award I have gone on to support a range of highly innovative large infrastructure projects, including my work with Woodbourne Group and our work in the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter. I have also been busy supporting new organizational strategies for growth and facilitating a range of leaders to reimagine how to unlock innovation capacity in their business.

### Do you believe the region is holding its own as a hotbed of innovation?

Our region has a proliferation of small and medium-sized businesses. They have the potential to be agile and respond to major shifts in the economy. There is work to be done on accelerating models to support this, unlocking commercialisation, building in the leadership capability to understand how to unleash market growth through improved customer insight and marketing.

New technology will further galvanise growth provided we equip our institutions and businesses to proactively lean into it. New significant infrastructure projects like the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter, the region's med-tech, clean-tech and crea-tech accelerators have real potential to unlock the skills, know-how and commercialisation around these spaces. I believe collaboration and investment in cultural transformation will be central to realise the huge potential available.





Darren Washbourne and James Fellows are from Beeswift, winners of the Sustainability Innovator of the Year award. The firm's Envirowear collection is 100% recycled and recyclable. It goes through a special machine and is turned back into commercial grade rPET, ready to be made back into yarn or used in injection moulding.

#### Why do you think you won your category against stiff competition?

We believe Envirowear stood out against stiff competition because it represents a true step forward in sustainable workwear. Many industries rely on high-visibility and protective clothing, but traditional garments often contribute to landfill waste. Envirowear disrupts this cycle by offering a fully circular solution, garments designed for durability, recyclability, and reduced environmental impact. Our commitment to innovation, combined with practical,

high-performance workwear, made a compelling case for the judges. The industry is demanding sustainable change, and Envirowear delivers a solution that doesn't compromise on quality or safety. It is the only workwear collection that is 100% manufactured from recycled post-consumer waste and then at end of life gets recycled to generate the raw material to reproduce another garment or moulded into another long-life product.

#### What did winning the award mean to you and your business?

Winning this award is a huge achievement for Beeswift and a testament to our commitment to innovation and sustainability. It validates the hard work our team has put into developing Envirowear and reinforces our mission to drive positive change in the workwear industry. Sustainability is no longer a trend; it's a necessity and this recognition highlights our role in leading that shift.

For our business, it strengthens our position as a forward-thinking supplier, giving our customers confidence that they are partnering with a company that prioritises both performance and environmental responsibility. It's also a proud moment for our team, motivating us to continue pushing boundaries and developing more sustainable solutions for the future.

#### Do you believe the region is holding its own as a hotbed of innovation?

Absolutely. The region has long been a hub for manufacturing and industrial excellence, and it's now proving itself as a leader in innovation. Businesses here are embracing sustainability, technology, and new ways of thinking to stay ahead in competitive markets.

Events like the Innovation Awards Birmingham showcase the incredible talent and forward-thinking solutions emerging from the area. It's easy to see how collaboration and investment in innovation are driving real change.

With a strong network of businesses, research institutions, and skilled professionals, the region is well-positioned to continue leading in sectors like workwear, safety, and beyond.



Co-founder Paul Cadman



The awards are now a firm fixture in the region's business calendar



Richard Fallon addresses the audience



A team of award winners head of the stage

Mitch Barnes is the founder and CEO of RYSE 3D, which won Engineering Innovator of the Year, and he also scooped the Young Innovator of the Year award. RYSE is a 3D printing company with particular expertise in the automotive sector. It has seen 100% year-on-year growth since it was founded seven years ago.

#### Why do you think you won your category against stiff competition?

This recognition is a testament to our commitment to engineering excellence and groundbreaking innovation in additive manufacturing.

At RYSE 3D, we didn't just adopt existing 3D printing technologies – we engineered our own. By developing custom-built 3D printers, we overcame industry limitations in speed, precision, and material capabilities, allowing us to produce high-performance parts with unparalleled efficiency. Our proprietary printing technology has disrupted traditional supply chains, reducing costs and lead times while offering a flexible, scalable manufacturing solution. This award acknowledges our ability to push the boundaries of engineering by not only refining 3D printing processes

but also creating the very machines that drive innovation. We're shaping the future of manufacturing through cutting-edge technology, smarter production methods, and true engineering ingenuity.

#### What did winning the award mean to you and your business?

Winning the award is an incredible milestone for both me and RYSE 3D. As the founder, this recognition validates years of dedication, problem-solving, and bold decision-making that have gone into developing our own advanced 3D printing technology.

For me personally, this award is proof that our vision of reshaping additive manufacturing is making a real impact. Creating our own high-performance 3D printers was a challenge, but seeing them revolutionise supply chains, improve

efficiency, and push the boundaries of engineering makes it all worthwhile. It fuels my passion to keep innovating, pushing limits, and redefining what's possible in manufacturing.

For RYSE 3D, this award is a symbol of what we stand for – engineering excellence, innovation, and progress. It motivates our team, strengthens our reputation, and opens doors to new opportunities. Most importantly, it reinforces our commitment to pioneering the future of manufacturing technology.

#### Do you believe the region is holding its own as a hotbed of innovation?

The Midlands has always been at the heart of British engineering, and today, it is proving that it can compete on the global stage as a leader in innovation. Once known as the engine of the Industrial Revolution, the region has transformed into a hub for cutting-edge technology, advanced manufacturing, and digital innovation.

The Midlands is not just keeping up with technological advancements – it is pioneering them. From automotive and aerospace to additive manufacturing and automation, the region is home to businesses that are pushing boundaries, streamlining supply chains, and redefining engineering possibilities.

Supported by world-class universities, research institutions, and a highly skilled workforce, the Midlands is proving that British innovation is thriving. By embracing new technologies and forward-thinking manufacturing solutions, the region is cementing its reputation as a global centre for engineering excellence and industrial progress.





# A careers woman

**When Diane Vernon stepped away from a secure job to launch her own charity, she set in motion a process which would go on to improve the prospects for disadvantaged young people by making them more employable. JON GRIFFIN chats to the founder and CEO of EmployabilityUK.**

Fiercely proud Brummie Diane Vernon MBE – a rare individual who can claim to have set up her very own charity – is in full conversational flow as she looks back on her life and career.

Understated and innately modest by nature, the product of a Longbridge shop-floor father and a Cadbury shift worker mother is recalling the day she chose to quit a secure well-paid director of business development charity role to follow her own destiny.

“I was divorced and my son had grown up. I was very lucky to be able to make those decisions for myself. Even then I knew there was more to life than money and the trappings that come with a really good job.

“Everyone said don’t set up a charity, it’s really difficult and will take you ages. You know your stuff. Become a consultant – you would be amazing and make loads of money.”

But more than 10 years down the line since she set up EmployabilityUK – and in the process helping 4,000 young people prepare for adult life – Vernon’s career priorities remain a far cry from chasing the profit motive or concentrating on the bottom line.

“I just said it is not about the money, it’s about the legacy, it’s about building something from scratch that doesn’t exist in quite the same way I want to do it . . . having that as a legacy, if you like, to make a difference.”

Few people can have taken the plunge to plough up to £15,000 of their own savings after quitting a senior management role to launch their own charity venture, but Vernon already had form in turning her back on the corporate world.

Earlier in her career, she had called time on a 25-year stint with BT and O2 when she decided she had had enough of the unforgiving corporate treadmill.

“It was enjoyable but the moment came when I was in a traffic jam in the car on the M6 on a Friday evening at about 7pm. It was chucking it down with rain, I was starving hungry, it was taking me three hours to do a one-hour journey and I just thought there has got to be more to life than this.

“It meant giving up a company car, a great salary, private health insurance and so on. But I thought I don’t know what I want to do with the rest of my life, but I do know that I don’t want to work in the

corporate sector any longer. I had done my time.”

Many overworked executives with myriad corporate responsibilities in today’s fast-paced 24-7 workplace will surely recognise Vernon’s sentiments as she recalls: “It was really long hours, really hard work, the pay and conditions were very good but increasingly they would move the goalposts. Things would change unexpectedly and there was a lot of stress.”

With her previous corporate career now firmly behind her, this proud Brummie who currently lives in Hinckley but still calls Birmingham home, is keen to extol the virtues of EmployabilityUK, her own concept for improving the lives of often disadvantaged young people.

But it’s been a long – and at times – hard road for Vernon’s vision of a regional charitable venture aimed at improving the lot for youngsters struggling to get a firm foothold on the career ladder and embrace adult life.

That vision, in all probability, owes quite a lot to her own personal background when she found herself leaving school at 16 with ambitions of joining the police force.

“I wasn’t a great scholar, I was a middle achiever, bright and capable but bored and uninspired. I didn’t excel at school.

“I wanted to be a police officer. When I left school, I went for an interview and had to do an aptitude test, which I passed. But I had to go for a medical assessment, and I was under the height and weight limit.

“So I was rejected. I was so disappointed because that was all I wanted to do.”

Family circumstances meant Vernon had to earn her own money by getting a job.

“I wouldn’t say we lived in poverty by any means, but there wasn’t a lot of money to spare. It was case of if I wanted clothes and makeup and all the things young girls want, I had to earn the money to pay for them. So I had to get a job and that focuses the mind.”

The teenage Vernon worked for a short spell in an electrical retail store before landing a job at 18 as a clerical officer with the GPO, later moving on to pursue a career with what became BT.

“I had several jobs at BT. My very first job was in the catering office doing the admin and switchboard. Then one of the bosses saw something in me and encouraged me to go on a number of training courses.

“That led to me undertaking a course of study so I was able to get an NVQ 5, a management diploma and a post-grad management diploma, all sponsored by the employer, which was really unusual at the time.”

Armed with suitable qualifications,



**Presented with the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service in 2021, with former Lord Lieutenant Sir John Crabtree and EmployabilityUK’s vice chair of trustees, Lynn England**



Vernon found herself on the corporate ladder which would steer her career trajectory towards the educational sector – and sow the seeds for her own charity.

But that was still many years in the distance as she made a name for herself in the world of telecoms corporate relations.

“I was the education manager, running BT’s educational and community programmes for a number of years in the Midlands. It was working with schools and colleges, facilitating the relationship between education and business.

“We now call it corporate social responsibility and, more latterly, ESG. I loved that role – it was very fulfilling and it felt as though it was always making a difference. I was very privileged.”

Vernon later switched to O2 where she found herself in a national role going out into the community explaining the need for new infrastructure such as masts and antenna equipment as the unstoppable internet revolution gathered pace.

“The public want all the benefits of mobile technology but they don’t like masts and antenna, particularly in areas of outstanding natural beauty. I used to have to go to parish council meetings, try and deal with the objections.”

After a quarter of a century with the GPO, BT and O2, Vernon took voluntary redundancy – “the package was too good” – to take a year out and work out her own future.

“Then I joined what is now called Career Ready, a London-based charity, to take their then London-centric programme out across the whole of the country.



**Vernon’s MBE investiture at Windsor Castle in 2023**

“I loved the job, and I loved what we were doing. I became director of business development for them. In the end, the direction of travel for the charity was very much the use of technology, online portals, video conferencing.”

The charity’s trend towards greater use of technology clashed with Vernon’s own ideas of the best methods for helping youngsters prepare for adult life.

“I had very clear ideas on what I thought worked best for young people. There is no substitute for face-to-face employability skills provision, mentoring and coaching.

“I thought, well, if I have got such clear ideas of what I think works well, the only thing I can do is do it myself. I left my job in August 2014 and set about researching how to start a charity.

“I funded it myself and didn’t have any pay or expenses for two years. It was a case of either make this work or, in my own words, get a proper job, and that focuses the mind. I was determined to make it work.”

With assistance from her family and husband – a graphic designer and photographer who helped with “collateral input” to save costs – Vernon says she was quickly punching above her weight with her new charity venture.

“To start with, it was just me and volunteers. It was probably just under two years before I was asked by Coventry Building Society to design and deliver an employability skills programme for them. I developed a programme which I piloted in six schools across Coventry, and it went really well. We had to make pupils better prepared for adult life and working life.”

Several years down the line, Vernon’s Coventry Building Society blueprint for helping youngsters make the jump to adulthood remains integral to EmployabilityUK’s business model.

“It is a very balanced approach. I try to find out what’s at the heart of what a young person really wants. I believe the way to help them realise their full potential is to find out where their comfort zone is, what

coming out of their comfort zone feels like, encouraging them to achieve more and excel at whatever they want to do.

“There is a seed of potential in everyone, and in some cases it’s just a case of finding it.”

Central to the charity’s vision over the last decade has been the work of “hundreds and hundreds” of volunteers, as Vernon cheerfully acknowledges.

“We have had some fabulous volunteers over the years – lots and lots of people are still in touch. Even if they are not actively involved in the charity, they cheer on from the sidelines.

“I get feedback from volunteers all the time. The reason why we punch above our weight in terms of both the calibre and quality of volunteers that we have is because we are authentic – we do make a difference.”

And that difference has earned EmployabilityUK – and Vernon – national recognition. In 2021 the charity was awarded the Queen’s Award for voluntary service whilst the Coventry Building Society project won the Business in the Community responsible business award in 2018 as an example of good practice in education-business partnerships. And the chief executive herself was made an MBE in 2022.

But any charity is always a work in progress – and Vernon remains as passionate as ever about the aims and objectives of EmployabilityUK.

“The real driver for me is the fact that employability is not on the national curriculum, and I think it should be. It

**“This year I am going to introduce a National Employability Week based in Birmingham. It’s a brand new concept, small to start with. It will be city-focused this year, regional next year and national the year after.”**

should be mandatory for everyone at some point between the ages of 16 and 21.

“I believe strongly that one of the reasons why there is economic inactivity and challenges in young people’s attitude to work is that they don’t have the right grounding in terms of attitude, workplace behaviour, ethics, and the need to work.”

Vernon admits today’s world for youngsters seeking to find their niche and earn a living is scary, whilst also emphasising the crucial need for self-respect.

“It’s about self-respect, respect for others, where you fit into society, how you should behave, making the very best version of yourself.

“I believe that young people are growing up in a world that people like me don’t recognise. It is so different to the world that I grew up in. It is a very scary world for young people.

“I don’t envy parents. It must be a heck of a big job these days raising teenagers in the world they are living in with some of the pressures they face. Young people are growing up in a world with a fear of terrorism and crime, the cost-of-living crisis, lack of opportunities.”

Vernon cites the hundreds of thousands of NEET youngsters – those not in employment, education or training – as a terrible waste of young talent.

Faced with those sorts of grim statistics, she steadfastly believes the role of EmployabilityUK in helping young people has never been more needed – and is keen to raise the Birmingham-based charity’s profile with new initiatives.

“We have helped over 4,000 young people. You never know the ripple effects of what you have done. There are relationships and partnerships that were developed that have lasted well into young people’s adult life.

“This year I am going to introduce a National Employability Week based in Birmingham. It’s a brand new concept, small to start with. It will be city-focused this year, regional next year and national the year after.

“The purpose of it is to really raise the profile of the importance of employability skills for young people. I think that everyone should have to undertake a recognised employability programme at some point, between 16 to 21 at the most.”

It’s abundantly clear that the Vernon vision – remaining true to her long-standing principles of what works best for young people in an increasingly bewildering world – continues to drive the aims of EmployabilityUK.

“There should be a recognised, accredited programme. Youngsters should be able to deal with adult life in a more comfortable and informed way. This is about getting people ready for adult life, not just work.

“We are still having the same conversations about young people not being ready for the workplace that we were having 30 years ago, and I think that is terrible.”

Or, as she succinctly sums up: “There are apprenticeships and traineeships – everyone should have to take an employabilityship.”



**The team at EmployabilityUK hosting various sessions designed to improve the prospects of young people in the region**



# Office launch party

celebration



Guy Winfield, Justin Sheldon and John Hawkins



Tim Hurdiss and Deborah Doyle

Regeneration firm Harworth Group celebrated the launch of its new offices in 1 Colmore Row with a party. Guests, largely from the property world and local business district, were treated to canapes and wines supplied by Loki Wines. Pictures: Dave Warren



Vicky Hogan, Andrew Pexton and Stuart Murray



Francesca Hodson, Will Arnold, Gemma Blacker and Dan Rudd



Masego Nxumalo, Fab Brice and Soraya Hemming



Left: Stuart Smith, Soraya Hemming, Natasha Titshall and Oliver Ward



Graeme Berry, Ethan O'Brien, Jonathan Wood and David Lewis



Matt Timmins, Henry Carpenter and Andy Schofield



Pippa Caulkin, Heather Woodhouse and Katy Paddock



Peter Monks, David Cockcroft, Luke Thacker and Nick Barnes

celebration



# Bears kick off in style

networking



Rian Doherty and Martin Elwell

The Bears Business Club kicked off the year in style with a city networking event at Sixes Social Cricket in the Mailbox. Over 70 delegates from various sectors connected on the night, in what was the business community's first event of a new networking programme. Guests had the opportunity to test their cricket skills in a 'beat the pro' challenge against Bears stars Jake Lintott and Georgia Davis. Pictures: Dave Warren



Caroline Marsden, Fiona Ahearn, Billy Harris and Rosalind Wilson



Matt Bell, Cal Haynes and Mark Connell



Jake Lintott and Zen Malik



David Ogun and Peter Chana



Martyn Pilley, Mark Hitchcock and George Shakespeare



Damon Andrews, Rob Wormald and Emma Robinson

# EMPLOYEE OWNERSHIP TRUSTS

## An option for business owners planning their exit

EOTS



**Graham Spalding, partner and head of the business services group at law firm Lodders, explains the advantages of an EOT and the role it can play in business succession planning**

For any business owner who has developed their vision and has something unique and significant to pass on, succession planning is a key consideration. There are various succession options to suit different situations, including sale to trade, private equity or private equity-backed businesses, a vendor-supported buyout or an Employee Ownership Trust.

### What are Employee Ownership Trusts?

EOTs can be a compelling option for business owners seeking to sell or partially exit. They are a specific type of employee benefit trust, which is created to enable a trading company to become owned by its employees.

The existing owners of the company set up the EOT, with a newly formed trustee company typically handling the purchase of shares on behalf of the trust. Employees, former employees, and select relatives and dependents can benefit from the trust, although they don't directly own the shares. These are held by a trustee company, with employees designated as beneficiaries.

Meeting certain requirements is necessary for both owners and employees to take advantage of the EOT. There are several qualifying conditions that must be met for this structure to work and for the tax relief to be available to the sellers - and these conditions were enhanced in the government's Autumn Budget. Breaching the qualifying conditions can have consequences

for both the seller and the Employee Ownership Trust so it's important to take specialist legal advice.

### Key advantages of Employee Ownership Trusts

The Employee Ownership Trust model offers many advantages, particularly in fostering a strong sense of ownership among employees. One of the key benefits is that employees become genuinely invested in the future success of the company, leading to better engagement and higher staff retention.

Employees who are part of an employee ownership structure are also eligible to receive tax-free bonuses. They can be paid bonuses of up to £3,600 each per year, subject to national insurance contributions, creating an attractive compensation package that goes beyond traditional bonus schemes in being tax-free.

There are significant financial and tax benefits for business owners associated with transferring ownership to an EOT. One key benefit is that there is no Capital Gains Tax on the transfer of shares to the trust, providing it acquires a controlling interest in the trading company and the transaction meets the qualifying conditions.

In addition, the Employee Ownership Trust offers shareholders a clear exit route without the need for a third-party purchaser. This can be particularly advantageous for business owners who may not want to sell to a competitor or external investor. By not having to rely on external buyers, business

owners can retain greater control over the sale process and achieve a smoother transition of ownership. For owners who are not ready to fully exit the business, the EOT structure allows for a gradual transition. Owners can map out their path to retirement, without needing to fully exit straightaway.

Lastly, shareholders can sell their shares at market value, with greater certainty regarding the completion of the transaction. Since the employees in the trust control the major aspects of the transaction, there is less risk of delays or complications typically associated with third-party buyers.

### Navigating a successful business exit

The Employee Ownership Trust model can provide a balanced approach to succession planning, offering benefits for both employees and shareholders alike. A sale to an EOT is not the right solution for some businesses - generally it proves most effective when motivated by a focus on the future needs of the business and a desire for greater employee participation and alignment with business success, rather than solely the appeal of the attractive tax regime for the sellers. Lodders' Business Services group provides expert legal advice to business owners, helping them to navigate a broad range of successful succession planning and exit strategies. For practical advice or a confidential conversation on appropriate exit routes that could work for you and your business, please get in touch.

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**[www.lodders.co.uk](http://www.lodders.co.uk)**

Graham Spalding, partner in law firm Lodders' Business Services group.





## Insurance broker opens new central hub for early careers programme

Global insurance broker Howden has consolidated multiple Birmingham offices into a central hub for more than 120 insurance advisors.

The new office, on Church Street in Birmingham's business district, will welcome and train apprentices as part of Howden's early careers programme, providing opportunities for school and university leavers.

Carl Shuker, CEO Howden UK&I Retail, said: "Howden has an established network and strong relationships with clients and communities across the Midlands. We are committed to continuing our growth story by investing in the next chapter, which has brought colleagues together to form a city centre hub.

"Meaningful growth is only possible with talented people, which is why we are dedicated to attracting and retaining the best local talent to drive sustainable business growth. We welcome anyone with an interest in or an established career in insurance to learn more about our opportunities."

John Cotton, leader of Birmingham City Council, said: "Birmingham has spearheaded the West Midlands' evolution into the UK's largest regional



**Howden Birmingham's ribbon-cutting led by CEO, Carl Shuker**

professional and financial services cluster, which saw a staggering 30% increase in growth over the last five years.

"Howden is supporting this drive by choosing Birmingham as the base for its new city centre hub and is investing

in the next generation of talent by supporting local people to develop rewarding careers in the industry."

In Birmingham, the firm has grown organically and through the acquisition of insurance businesses such as Jobson James Rail and Guncover.



■ Birmingham-based land promotion company Richborough Commercial has promoted Matt Dugdale to planning director.

This senior position will see him solely focused on the firm's planning strategies, applications and appeals, while supporting its progress in the industrial and logistics sector. Matt also has key roles on various industry committees and bodies. Having just completed his tenure as 2024 chair of the Royal Town Planning Institute North West, he has been elected onto the RTPI General Assembly for 2025/26. Richborough Commercial group director Nick Jones said: "I am pleased that Matt will be a dedicated member of the team at an exciting time for us.

"He has been integral in developing our strategy so far and will now lead on all our planning matters. He brings an excellent pedigree, not only as an expert in complex planning situations but also as an industry champion."

## Alexander Stadium under new property management

Commercial real estate firm Avison Young has been appointed as property manager for the Alexander Stadium in Perry Barr.

Following the successful hosting of the Commonwealth Games in 2022, Birmingham City Council is now focused on enhancing the facility as part of its legacy business plan and ongoing development programme.

A £72 million investment was made to upgrade the stadium for the games, followed by a series of further enhancements to support the community and legacy business plan.

The stadium's transformation includes the creation of commercial function spaces in the new West Stand, flagship sporting facilities and tenanted areas in the West and East stands.

In 2024, Birmingham City University relocated its sport and exercise science campus to the stadium, using its own capital funding to fit out the spaces. The move included repurposing the areas beneath the East and West grandstand seating, which has now already been established as office and teaching spaces.

The development has created two multi-let commercial buildings that stand on their

own exclusive estate. Current occupiers in the stadium include Birchfield Harriers, Corporate Sporting Events (CSE), UK Athletics, and Birmingham City University.

Avison Young has been appointed to provide guidance in establishing an appropriate management framework for a service charge strategy, and will provide surveying and accounting services to effectively manage landlord and tenant relationships.

Guy Thompson, principal at Avison Young UK, said: "We are proud to be involved in supporting the legacy of the Commonwealth Games and contributing to the long-term success and evolution of Alexander Stadium."



**Guy Thompson, principal at Avison Young, left, and Mark Byrne, senior sports manager at the Alexander Stadium**



**Ross Fittall, MEPC, left, and Simon O'Neill**

## EY relocates to Paradise development

EY has agreed heads of terms to relocate to a new office in Birmingham at Three Chamberlain Square – part of the Paradise development.

The office move is scheduled for 2026 to coincide with the end of EY's current lease at One Colmore Square, where it has been based for the last 20 years.

The firm employs more than 1,200 people in Birmingham, including 55 partners. In 2024 it welcomed over 50 graduates, school leavers and interns to its Birmingham office through its student recruitment programmes.

Three Chamberlain Square is a 10-storey, 189,000 sq ft Grade A office building. EY's new office space is on the top three floors, occupying 70,000 sq ft with potential to expand further.

Simon O'Neill, office managing partner at EY in the Midlands, said: "The new office will provide a high-spec working environment in a low-carbon building with great transport links."

Ross Fittall, commercial development director at Paradise asset and development manager MEPC, said: "As the first commercial letting for this landmark new building, EY's move is yet another vote of confidence in Paradise and we're looking forward to seeing a further 1,200 staff on site and enjoying all the estate has to offer."

## Strong year for Birmingham's office market



Last year saw Birmingham's city centre office market deliver its strongest year since 2017, according to the findings of a new report carried out by commercial property agent KWB.

The Q4 2024 Birmingham Office Market Review revealed a 23% increase in the take-up of office space in the city on the five-year average.

A total of 843,218 sq ft of city centre office space was adopted across a total of 96 transactions in 2024, marking the third largest annual take-up of office square footage over the last 15 years.

The market's success was led by landmark deals for BBC Birmingham's new home at the 84,000 sq ft Typhoo Wharf in Digbeth's creative quarter, and Aston University's adoption of 189,053 sq ft at 10 Woodcock Street. The latter is now home to Aston Business School, Aston Law School, Aston Vision Sciences and the university's new state-of-the-art Aston

Integrated Healthcare Hub.

Average transaction size also reached a four-year peak of 8,784 sq ft – the largest the city's office market has seen since 2020.

Notable within the report's findings was the emerging trend for large, high-profile deals being supported by several mid-range transactions, which KWB reports contributed to consistently strong performance across all four quarters last year.

Malcolm Jones (pictured), director of office agency at KWB, said: "The performance of the office market in Birmingham last year shows just how well the city's commercial property market has bounced back since being decimated by the impact of the pandemic.

"Ending the year with a seven-year high shows just how much consistency and confidence there is in this market, which provides a healthy platform for further growth over the course of this year."





## Team celebrates property management deal

Commercial property consultancy Johnson Fellows is celebrating after being instructed to provide property management services at a major office development in Birmingham city centre.

The Birmingham-based consultancy will provide a full range of property management services at Quay Place – a canalside development near Brindleyplace comprising more than 101,000 sq ft across six office buildings.

The development has recently been purchased by a private client of Philip King & Co. The property management services will include rent and service charge collection, service charge budgeting, asset and lease management, tenant liaison,

facilities management and compliance.

Johnson Fellows' property management partner Ian Starbuck said: "Our property management team is really energised after securing the instruction at Quay Place.

"Our client base includes a wide mix of landlords, property companies, pension funds, private investors and national multiple retailers. To add Quay Place to our portfolio is a major achievement for us."

The site currently has nine tenants, with the main occupier being The University of Wales. With vacant space totalling circa 24,000 sq ft there are opportunities for asset management and to add to the existing diverse mix of occupiers.



The Johnson Fellows property management team at Quay Place in Birmingham is, from left, Charlie Scott, Ian Starbuck, Maria Lazenbury and Rob Scott



■ A five-storey office block in the Black Country has come onto the market with a price tag of £1.2 million.

The building at 178 Birmingham Road in West Bromwich was the former regional headquarters for Green Square Accord housing association, and it is being sold through commercial agent Bond Wolfe.

James Mattin, managing director of Bond Wolfe, said the property has a total floor space of 14,966 sq ft and a 47-space car park, and it could be let as a whole, on a floor-by-floor basis, or other alternative uses.

"This property offers excellent flexibility for either continuation as office use or repurposing for alternative use," he said.



■ A prominent office building at Longbridge Technology Park has been sold in a £3.75 million deal.

Two Devon Way is a 29,479 sq ft office building which has been acquired by UKO Serviced Offices, a subsidiary of UK Land Limited. The property was sold by MK2 on behalf of St Modwen.

Built in 2007, the property boasts green credentials – including an EPC 'A' rating – and is let to St Modwen Homes and Wardell Armstrong.

Mark Johnson, director in MK2's investment team, said: "Longbridge is emerging as something of a hotspot in the M42 office market, with occupiers favouring its fast transport links, good local labour supply and excellent ESG credentials. Product doesn't come up too often here, so interest in this freehold investment opportunity was keen."

Harris Lamb advised UK Land on the acquisition.

The purchase reflects a net initial yield of 10.06% and an anticipated reversionary yield of 15.74% once the remaining 10,000 sq ft of space is let.



## New arrival at Mills & Reeve

Law firm Mills & Reeve's education team has been boosted by a new arrival.

Catherine Savage has joined the firm from Shakespeare Martineau where she gained 15 years of experience in education litigation. She specialised in contentious matters, ranging from student claims to judicial reviews, immigration disputes, consumer protection claims and commercial litigation.

Working in conjunction with partners Richard Sykes and Helen Tringham, Catherine will be leading on disputes work, including student litigation cases and commercial dispute claims. She will also advise on disciplinary and fitness to practice investigations, hearings and appeals.

Martin Priestley, head of the education sector at Mills & Reeve, said: "Catherin's extensive experience will be an invaluable asset to our education clients in these challenging times."



## Fresh faces on the Black Country Chambers of Commerce board

The Black Country Chamber of Commerce has a fresh look to its board after some new appointments.

Lynn Wyke, senior business development manager at BCRS Business Loans has joined the board, while Amy Brokenshire, partner, training principal and employment law specialist at George Green LLP, has been re-appointed.

Lynn has worked for business loan provider BCRS since 2018, having previously been employed at NatWest as director for the Black Country, Herefordshire and Worcestershire. She has credentials in team engagement, having achieved development qualifications along with a chartered

banker certificate and a diploma in credit skills.

Amy, who has been a partner at Black Country law firm George Green LLP since 2022, has more than 18 years' experience having practised as a qualified lawyer specialising in employment law and HR matters for 16 years.

Chamber CEO Sarah Moorhouse said: "The chamber has a leading role to play as the most established regional business support agency for Black Country firms, so I am delighted to have board members with the calibre of Lynn and Amy.

"In the year ahead we will continue to deliver on our key theme of strengthen and grow."



Lynn Wyke, left, Sarah Moorhouse and Amy Brokenshire

## Senior consultant solicitor joins Averta

Averta Employment Lawyers has announced the appointment of a new senior consultant solicitor.

Martin Chitty brings nearly four decades of practice in employment law. Having begun his career at Pinsent & Co in Birmingham, he qualified in 1986 and went on to hold senior positions at Wragge & Co where he served as a partner for over 25 years.

He is listed in the Legal 500 Hall of Fame and as a senior statesperson in employment law by Chambers UK.

Martin's career has been rooted in Birmingham where he has specialised in complex employment matters. His work spans business protection, restrictive covenants, employment tribunal claims,

collective rights, TUPE transfers, and service agreements, particularly in the context of private equity transactions.

"He has also advised professional services firms, law firms and senior executives on sensitive and high-profile matters, including investigations and strategic employment issues.

Averta's co-founder and director Alan Jones said: "I know from being on the other side of cases, Martin's unparalleled experience and deep understanding of employment law make him a perfect fit for Averta and our clients.

"We are excited to have him on board to strengthen our offering to senior executives and businesses alike."



## New CEO at engineering firm

**Birmingham engineering firm adi Group has announced the appointment of Paul Smith as its new chief executive officer, succeeding founder Alan Lusty.**

Paul, previously the firm's COO, steps into the role following a period of expansion for the Kings Norton-based business.

He has more than 25 years' experience in business management and delivering large-scale, high-tech projects across industries such as oil and gas, nuclear, chemicals, and biotechnology, managing contracts with contract values up to US\$2.5 billion globally.

Paul said: "I am excited to continue building on Alan's legacy and drive the company forward, focusing on high-value, technologically advanced manufacturing solutions within the rapidly evolving sectors we specialise in.

"For me, it's all about the future and the opportunities we have for growth. What excites me is the chance to deliver truly life-changing engineering solutions – from energy migration and the decarbonisation of the industry to working with R&D companies developing cures for cancer."

Alan, who led the business for over three decades, will take on the role of chairman.

"After 35 years of leading adi Group, this is a natural progression for the business," he said.

"We've built a fantastic team and I look forward to seeing Paul take the company forward, carrying on the values, vision and mission of our organisation, which has always been to engineer a better future."



Pictured from left are Andrew Wylde, Dawn Oliver and Paul Mourtton

## Lodders boosts senior leadership team

**Midlands law firm Lodders has announced the appointment of Andrew Wylde and Dawn Oliver to boost its dispute resolution and private client departments.**

Head of the dispute resolution team at Lodders, Andrew joined Lodders in March 2021 and was promoted to partner in July 2022. He specialises in resolving contractual and commercial disputes, shareholder disputes and insolvency matters, and is primarily based in Lodders' Birmingham office.

Dawn is an experienced private client lawyer and joined Lodders as a partner in May 2024. Recognised as a leading

individual in the West Midlands in the 2024 Legal 500 directory, she works across all areas of private client law with specialisms in lifetime and estate planning.

Managing partner Paul Mourtton said: "We are delighted to welcome Andrew and Dawn as equity partners and recognise their efforts and the roles they play within the firm.

"They each bring significant experience and dynamism to the senior leadership team as well as a fresh perspective. They will play a pivotal role in supporting our growth strategy and also our focus on becoming the employer of choice in an ever-competitive regional legal market."

## Spearheading a new department

**Law firm Fieldfisher has appointed partner Mandy Luckman to spearhead a new personal injury and medical negligence team in the firm's Birmingham office.**

Mandy joins from Irwin Mitchell, and has more than two decades' experience running catastrophic injury and complex medical negligence cases, including birth and spinal injury, misdiagnosis, delayed diagnosis and fatal incidents.

Joining her in Birmingham will be former colleague Marcos Eleftheriou, a director at Fieldfisher, relocating from London to support the team's launch. Marcos brings 15 years of extensive experience representing catastrophically injured claimants, particularly involving neurological and spinal injuries,



amputations, delayed diagnoses and fatalities.

Iona Meeres Young, head of Fieldfisher's PIMN team, said: "Mandy's appointment begins a new era for the team, enabling us to fully support our clients in the West Midlands and beyond. She and Marcos will create a formidable team."

## Second promotion for manager

**Birmingham-based asset management firm Switch Management has promoted Kevin Walker to group asset director.**

With over 14 years' experience in maintenance and facilities management, Kevin joined Switch in 2021 as regional maintenance manager and later progressed to the role of group property asset manager.

In his new role, he will have responsibility for maintenance teams across the business, ensuring that all properties within the Switch portfolio are well maintained, safe and compliant.

One of Kevin's key focuses will be driving forward the Switch Housing division, which recently launched a new programme to source safe and secure residential accommodation for vulnerable families across the UK.

To support this, he will oversee all ongoing maintenance and facilities management of Switch Housing properties, including regularly collecting and responding to resident and landlord feedback.

Alongside his promotion, he will also join the board of directors, helping to shape the business's future growth plans.

He said: "Switch Housing will be a significant area of growth for the business, and my key focus is to drive forward our programme to help tackle the UK's affordable housing crisis. I am proud to play a part in this meaningful work, and to help ensure that vulnerable families across the UK have a safe and secure home."



## Law firm expands specialist department

**Gateley Legal has expanded its specialist residential development team in Birmingham with the lateral hire of partner Simon Robinson.**

Simon joins the firm with almost 20 years of experience advising housebuilders, land promoters and developers on housebuilding and urban residential development matters. He also specialises in strategic land, regeneration and complex joint venture schemes.

He has previously spent seven years as a partner at Trowers & Hamlin, as well as holding roles with firms including Gowling WLG and Eversheds Sutherland.

Simon maintained his Band 3 Real Estate ranking in the Chambers and Partners 2025 legal guide for the fifth consecutive year.

Callum Nuttall, partner and national head of the residential development team at Gateley Legal, said: "Simon's appointment brings our Birmingham-based team to a total of seven partners in the Midlands alone, cementing our position as the largest specialist residential development department in the country.

"His strong pedigree will play a key role in bolstering our offering for clients."

## Two appointments to strengthen team

**Birmingham business consultancy Curium Solutions has announced two appointments to strengthen its leadership team.**

Emma Taylor has been formally appointed as executive director on the operational board, while Nick Brown steps into the role of chief operating officer.

Emma has been carrying out the role of chief people officer for several years, and her appointment is in recognition of her

contribution during more than 11 years of service.

Nick's journey with Curium began in 2011, and after a short time away, he returned in 2021.

Emma said: "We are blessed to have an amazing group of talent in Team Curium, and having Nick as our COO now too presents a great opportunity for us all to work together to help build the shape of Curium for now and into the future. Exciting times ahead for sure."





# Five minutes with...

Ben Marton

Finance director, Cordia UK



downtime

## In one sentence, what does your role involve?

My job is to keep it all together when it comes to finances: from budget setting and investment appraisals all the way to the nitty gritty day-to-day finance tasks.

## How long have you been in your current job?

January this year marked the four-year anniversary.

## Please give a brief summary of your professional career to date.

After leaving university in Budapest, I went to work for PwC Hungary as an auditor where I started my professional qualification to become a chartered accountant. This lasted close to three years, after which I made the decision not only to change jobs but to change countries altogether.

In 2015 we moved to the UK with my now husband and I continued being an auditor at BDO Birmingham, fully qualifying in 2016. I stayed at BDO for a little more than three years, and in 2018 I made the move into 'industry' (so not practicing anymore).

In 2018 it was time to make the move and as I realised very early on that it was real estate that interested me the most, I knew I wanted to find a job in that sector. After BDO I joined a PBSA provider, Student Roost, as a finance accountant to later become a finance manager. It was invaluable experience, but I also knew this was not the end of the road, as student accommodation was not the part of the sector that grabbed my attention the most. So, at the end of 2020, a recruiter approached me with an opportunity to work for a company whose parent was actually based in Hungary – it was Cordia, and as luck would have it, I knew quite a lot about the group as I used to audit them back in Hungary. I don't think anyone could make this up even if they tried.

## Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?

One hundred per cent. Whilst you constantly question why you need to learn those useless formulae at university, it's never about that. It's about completing your studies and having that piece of paper that opens all those doors for you to get a job. Having said that, since moving to the UK, I see the other side too – getting an apprenticeship and working your way up, in my case, in finance. Experience is too valuable to ignore this route and I am very much in favour of it. I may have done it myself, had I grown up here.



## How is your job impacted by uncertainties in the economy?

In quite a few ways: forecasting and appraising projects became more difficult not just from a numbers perspective but also time-wise due to delays. This in turn has put extra pressure on our management company and it is a constant struggle keeping the numbers where they should be.

## What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?

In terms of work it is definitely an opportunity – it can create efficiencies we never dared dream of. I believe we all need to get on the bandwagon otherwise it'll be too late. However, it is also a threat – a major one that threatens our independent ideas and our ability to think for ourselves. We already see it with so many CVs being drafted by AI.

## Social media platform of choice, and why?

I try not to use these too much, the last post I put on FB was in 2023, but even that one came via Instagram, so I guess Instagram has become my choice – the reels keep me entertained when I need a pick-up.

## How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

I would like to think they would say I am sociable, empathetic, helpful and most importantly blessed with a good taste in music.

## Highlights of your career so far?

Professional: becoming a trainer at BDO and teaching the next generation of auditors, leading one of the best finance teams in the world at Cordia and

recently becoming the finance lead of our management company of the estate where I live on a voluntary basis. Personal: raising two great boys and qualifying as an RHS gardener whilst working full time.

## Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

Winning 'best dressed person in the office' a few years in a row at BDO, and receiving a vanity mirror and a mankini as a prize.

## Pet hates?

Quite a lot comes to mind, but to mention a few: bad grammar, rudeness, people putting general waste in recycling bins, people shuffling when walking and bad customer service.

## If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

Don't give your time to those that don't deserve it. You're better off focusing on those that do.

## How do you relax away from work?

Gardening and running. Both are excellent at clearing my mind – I either do arithmetic calculations or reminisce about my high school years whilst doing either of these activities.

## Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know.

I learnt all the swear words from my grandma who, still to this day, is one of the funniest people I know.

## You can take one book, one film and one CD onto a desert island – what would they be?

For its entertainment values the book would be Who's afraid of Virginia Wolf by Edward Albee. The film would be any of the Star Wars movies (ok, not any, just one of the first six). And a CD? Who does CDs anymore? One CD is not enough to satisfy my love for music – I'd need to take Spotify's entire content as even one genre is too little, let alone one album.

Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive? Janis Joplin, Stanley Tucci, Ricky Martin, Monty Don and Tchaikovsky.

## What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

Seabass ceviche with tiger's milk (a newfound favourite from last year's trip to Spain), followed by stuffed cabbage to remind me of home. Dessert would no doubt be Halawaat's creamy pudding which, if there is still anyone in Birmingham that hasn't tried it, I suggest making a trip to one of their sites and trying them!



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