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A prosperous future

With an integrated services model leading the way, TrinityBridge has spent 30 years putting clients first.

"Keeping clients at the heart of what we do remains the only way forward as we manage the current market, industry and geopolitical landscape together," says Ben Staniforth, managing director Midlands and South West.

TrinityBridge, once Close Brothers Asset Management, offers a wealth management proposition across the UK – and is proud to have a base in the Midlands, in the heart of the Birmingham business community. This proposition not only underpins its business model, but also its new name.

"The name TrinityBridge underpins our approach to every client's need, as our business is based on relationships – the relationships between our clients, their investment managers and their professional advisers. A clear focus on this three-pronged relationship is what sets us apart from other wealth managers and what makes us uniquely TrinityBridge," Ben says.

This is evident in the Birmingham office, located in St Philip's Place, one of the few to provide holistic wealth management services, with an integrated team of financial planners and investment managers offering integrated financial planning and bespoke investment management services to clients across the Midlands. These relationships offer more than meets the eye as each one is built upon years of experience, research and trust.

"Our clients know that when they meet with us it goes beyond a one-on-one meeting with a financial planner, we offer investment management and financial planning services under the one roof, backed up by a strong professional network across the UK to aid thoughtful management of their wealth for generations to come."

But it's not one size fits all at TrinityBridge. With a distinctive integrated proposition of wealth management services, TrinityBridge provides clients options for managing their finances.

"All the services we provide give our clients choice and control. Each client is

unique and has different ambitions for their money. Our role is to provide them with the tools they need to make the right decisions for their families, businesses and their future. These tools often come in the form of clarity; a clear outlook of their money to give them confidence in their financial decisions. Whatever life or career stage our clients are at, we have an option and meaningful advice for them."

Clarity is a rare commodity in the current market, with geopolitics creating an atmosphere of uncertainty.

"I do get asked by clients all the time whether our model and services change as the world changes; our advice may change to stay ahead of market trends but our focus on clients will always stay the same. Focussing on their plans, wants and needs provides a roadmap that market ripples can't wash away. It is during these precarious times we find ourselves in, that our focus on deep, long-lasting relationships becomes so fruitful for us and our clients," Ben says.

Indeed, the people of Birmingham may be worried about how their nest egg is faring as the markets oscillate each day. Ben believes his team has the right blend of those who have seen the markets move in every direction and those with an ear

to the ground on the next generation of tools and technology that combat market movements.

"We have carefully crafted a talent pool in Birmingham and the Midlands that prioritises relationships and experiences, resulting in an excellent mix of those who have come through our school-leaver internship programs, some from university and others from years of practice in financial services and business to give the right balance of experience and education to our clients.

"Each of these individuals has our clients front of mind with every step they take so when a client meets with their respective financial planner, we are providing a true holistic wealth management service."

This diverse group of wealth managers is easy to find in the heart of Birmingham at 4 St Philip's Place, where they will be providing clarity to clients in challenging times.

With deep roots, a client-first ethos, and an integrated model, TrinityBridge is poised for a prosperous future in Birmingham.

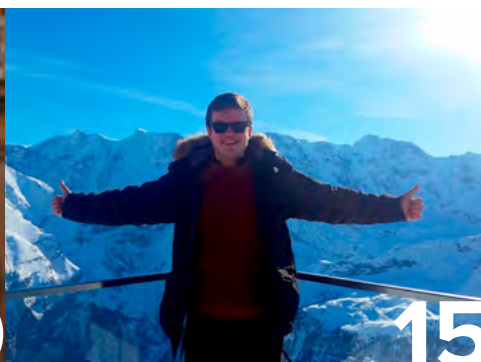
Offering clients clarity, confidence and access to enduring relationships helps them navigate uncertainty and build lasting financial legacies across generations.



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Birmingham Business

Welcome

In terms of pagination this is, by some distance, the largest edition we have printed since we launched in 2018.

That fact in itself is telling. We rely on commercial partnerships and this issue is heaving with collaborations. These businesses have messages and services and products they want to shout about. That's great news – and that they choose this magazine from which to do so is extremely gratifying.

Take mergers and acquisitions for example. It has barely had a pulse over the last year or two. Our bumper special report would suggest that activity is absolutely returning to the M&A market.

And that's where we are lucky. Exciting things are happening in the West Midlands across so many industries. Finding inspiring people and businesses to write about isn't a problem.

Our cover story charts the remarkable career of Tim Grasby, who flipped his career as an academic and consultant, to found investment bank Heligan Group, which is celebrating its 10th birthday this summer. As you'll discover, he has much to thank the Waterstones café for – if that doesn't sound too cryptic.

There can be few more inspiring stories than that of Angus Drummond. The former banker has created a fast-growing, highly successful travel business for those with mobility issues, prompted by his own diagnosis of muscular dystrophy.

And how well do you think you know Jo Birch? She is surely one of the most respected and dynamic mainstays of so many business institutions – but where does her drive come from? What makes her tick? Read on.

So much of what the city enjoys today can be attributed in part to the tireless work of leaders, often in the background. This is perhaps typified by the colossal contribution Stephen Goldstein has made to both commercial and charitable sectors over the last half century or so. Jon Griffin enjoyed meeting him.

We love to see restaurant groups expanding into Birmingham and Jon was also able to catch up with the ambitious and forward-thinking boss of Cow & Sow.

And then there are the organisations such as the think tank Centre for the New Midlands, and the collective of businesses, One Thousand Trades Group, both of which, in their own ways, are focused on the improvement of the region.

All of this and so much more, including news items, insight and commentary. We hope it's a cracking read.

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By HENRY CARPENTER
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Is Birmingham's reputation really on the rubbish dump?

First, its council goes bust. Then continued strikes cause rubbish to mount up in many residential areas, a situation which is ongoing. But is there a balanced perception of what Birmingham is really like? Is the tirade of criticism justified or are there reasons for optimism and celebration which seem to be unfairly buried in the media? Two of the region's most ardent cheerleaders answer these and other questions.



Headlines such as "UK's second city drowns in rubbish as bin strikes continue" (Financial Times) and "One month in, the Birmingham bin strike is causing a real stink" (Guardian) are not the kind of press exposure that Birmingham needs now – ever.

Contrast them with those of just three years ago at the height of the 2022 Commonwealth Games: "Birmingham feels like the city for the future", said the BBC; "Bold and beautiful games open in Birmingham", said Singapore's mass circulation Strait Times. The Guardian went further: "A hugely successful festival of sport showcased a diverse, optimistic city to the world".

How times have changed. Once again all too sadly, Birmingham is portrayed as a city that is on its knees and up to its armpits in detritus.

Those of us on the ground know the reality to be different. In Birmingham's city centre, there's not a bin bag to be seen – if anything, it is even cleaner than normal (well done city council). Contrast that with my recent visit to London's West End where in the early evening, bulging bins and bags littered the capital's streets.



David Clarke

awaiting collection.

But let's be clear – it is not the reality that matters, it's the perception. And the perception is that for several weeks, Birmingham has become an unsafe environment plagued by 'rats as big as cats' (Daily Mail) with worldwide media highlighting the dispute's implications to public health and the city's governance. German and Italian media have linked the issue to broader financial mismanagement and political tensions between local and national authorities.

So what's to be done?

Ultimately, the dispute has to be resolved. And it will be. At some point.

Eventually, Birmingham City Council's finances and/or its structure will be put in order and on a firmer footing (I'm the eternal optimist but it will be done.)

But those are local and national government responsibilities, and whilst I don't doubt that experts from the private sector are supporting the City Council in achieving resolution and sustainability, Birmingham's reputation is an issue that should concern us all – no matter the part we play or have played in the city.

That's why I advocate thinking big.

Birmingham has to think and plan beyond the current industrial dispute and the Council's financial crisis. It has to set longer-term, big picture ambitions that give the city a firm goal – what one of my friends and colleagues called a BHAG: a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. (If you are wondering who that was, it was the late Richard Brennan, former chief exec of Birmingham Forward which did so much to promote Birmingham as a business and professional location).

Birmingham always does better when it thinks big: the NEC, ICC, Symphony

Hall, Grand Central/New Street Station (remember it was previously voted Britain's worst railway station in 2014), Library of Birmingham, its international links, the Bullring and more. All of these were delivered despite the ridicule often expressed by outsiders.

Birmingham is not a 'can-do city' – it's a 'will-do city' – and it has the heritage to prove it.

Birmingham's Big City Plan of 2010, that advocated many of the positive changes that have now been realised, was born in part out of the Highbury Initiative of 1988 which in itself spawned several other summits at which representatives of Birmingham's communities (business, faith, voluntary, young people and others) discussed what they wanted from their city and how those desires could be achieved. It was a coming together of disparate minds into a unifying force and those discussions helped position Birmingham as a city with an ambitious future.

More recently, consultations have helped develop Birmingham's ambitions for 2040 and 2045. But do they go far enough? Are Birmingham's aspirations on



The trials of Birmingham City Council have been well documented



The Jewellery Quarter has led to Birmingham gaining World Craft City status

the lips of every one of its citizens? Most likely not!

Birmingham needs a visible objective; a stated goal that we can all subscribe to.

The modern-day equivalent of "Europe's meeting place" (Birmingham's strapline in the early years of this century conceived by Birmingham Marketing Partnership as it was then; it was a strapline that some laughed at but which became a self-fulfilling prophecy).

We need to bring together the great developments that are being unfolded in the city (sport, media, drama and the arts) and counter the stories of dirty streets - by being audacious in our goals.

Whether it is to establish Birmingham as the UK's greenest city (in defiance of those images of waste-filled streets) or perhaps the City of Festivals (to reflect our vibrant arts and diversity) or Europe's youngest city - a title for which we vie with Bradford.

We need also to capitalise on Birmingham's elevation to World Craft City status for its remarkable Jewellery Quarter and for the recently announced investment of £2.4 billion in the first phase of a new mass transit system from East Birmingham to North Solihull.

We should not though be defensive by simply citing what we are doing. We

should instead go on the offensive by not denying problems but instead framing them as challenges being addressed.

And whilst we should be mindful of what the media say, we should also rise above it. Birmingham it seems to me, is the equivalent of a movie that does well at the box office but is decried by the critics.

Speak to those who have visited, and the response to Birmingham is invariably positive. Take Jessica Boak, for instance. Jessica is regional editor and sustainability lead at The Lawyer magazine who, after a recent visit, posted on LinkedIn what she loved about Birmingham:

"How friendly everyone was! It's like every coffee shop, restaurant and receptionist was briefed to impress me; the secret garden at the top of the library . . . (a) free-of-charge gem - and how everything was a 10-minute walk away."

She went onto say she was surprised by . . . "the lack of bins and rats; how much regeneration and opportunity there is in the city - and how the station has a better selection of shops than my local airport in Leeds".

Like our well-loved Bull, Birmingham needs to have broad shoulders and show we are built for power and dominance. And it needs the weight of business and its citizens behind it.

David Clarke is the former chair of Birmingham Forward and several other organisations besides. He is also co-author of the first visitor guide to the city, The Rabbit Guide to Birmingham, and founder and MD of his eponymous, long-established public relations and communications agency.

The bin strikes have gifted Birmingham's critics a grimy metaphor - piles of rubbish as a symbol of dysfunction - and, predictably, the headlines followed.

But a much more accurate picture of the city is one of resilience, reinvention and raw potential.

And business is paying attention. Just ask professional services giants such as Goldman Sachs, HSBC and Deutsche Bank who saw the potential here.

Likewise, huge investments in TV and film production - driven by Steven Knight and the BBC - and the ambitious sports quarter from Birmingham City's owners Knighthood Capital will create exciting new opportunities in the coming years.

These aren't just symbolic gestures - they're shrewd business decisions based on talent, connectivity and ambition.

In fact, there are announcements almost weekly about businesses who either plan to expand or set up new headquarters in Brum - the latest at the time of writing being life sciences consultancy Cambridge Healthcare Research and business advisory firm Sedulo Group. They'll collectively bring around 80 jobs to the city.

So, businesses are cutting through the noise and seeing the potential of the real Birmingham.

And we could create a list as long as the canals of the opportunities to come here and experience world class culture, entertainment, sport and food over the next couple of years - from Black Sabbath to the Invictus Games.

The bin strike will pass. So will the inevitable jabs from those who've never set foot beyond the M25.

Birmingham, meanwhile, will keep doing what it always has - building, making, welcoming and surprising.



Henrietta Brealey is CEO of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce

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Portrait of a city grandee

The body of work Stephen Goldstein has steadily accumulated across both commercial and charitable sectors is almost unrivalled in the region – and his appetite to add to it, even in his ninth decade, shows no sign of diminishing. JON GRIFFIN meets this fascinating proponent of business, charity and community.

On his LinkedIn profile Stephen Goldstein CBE lists his education as ‘university of life’ – and what a life it’s been.

That tongue-in-cheek reference provides a telling insight into the character and mindset of a former Moseley Grammar schoolboy who many would argue has graduated in various subjects several times through the decades, often with first-class honours.

Champion of the underdog, stalwart charity supporter, friend of royalty, former co-developer with ‘Deadly’ Doug Ellis, Goldstein has been a mainstay of the West Midlands business and charitable sectors for longer than he cares to remember.

At one point in a fascinating, and rare, interview with this descendant of a late 19th-century Jewish immigrant, he says: “I have done lots of things but half of them I can’t remember.”

But posterity will surely always recognise Goldstein’s contribution to the West Midlands and further afield even if the man himself claims – not entirely convincingly – that his power of recall isn’t always reliable.

Many of a certain vintage would argue that Goldstein, now into his ninth decade after celebrating his 80th birthday earlier this year, helped change the face of property development in the region, encouraging investment into the West Midlands and safeguarding the future of Birmingham’s treasures such as St Paul’s Square and the Jewellery Quarter.

Whilst his track record in business over the years speaks for itself, Goldstein has rarely sought publicity for himself. He gives the impression that he generally prefers to work diligently in the background, allowing others to broadcast their achievements across the various

virtual soapboxes and 24-7 social media platforms available to anyone with access to the internet and a desire to be noticed.

Even the surroundings for the interview are rarefied, as we meet in his 600-year-old office at the Grade II listed Malvern House on the fringes of Solihull town centre, resplendent with historic wooden beams, oil paintings and antique furniture.

But the man himself is no museum piece, even if he’s happy to throw in the occasional self-deprecatory line for good measure – “I have found in business and life, don’t take yourself too seriously, you are not that important.”

But Goldstein has undoubtedly been an important and influential figure over many years, not just in the West

Midlands property sector, but in the lives of countless children with special needs that he and his wife Stephanie have helped support through many charitable endeavours.

The Goldstein saga, a genuine rags-to-riches fable which would in time leave an indelible mark on the West Midlands, begins as far back as the late Victorian era – and Stephen’s grandfather, Jewish emigre Cecil Alexander Goldstein.

“In 1896 my grandfather came from Lithuania and somehow appeared in the Jewellery Quarter. In that period Lithuania was part of Russia and the Cossacks were coming, taking the young men and putting them in the army for 30 years. He didn’t really fancy that.



Stephen Goldstein is chairman of trustees at the Lord Mayor of Birmingham's Charity

"I don't know a lot about the history. We don't know what he had to do to survive and get here. He came on his own and brought over the lady who became his wife.

"He built up a business, starting in the Jewellery Quarter going out on the knocker buying old gold and bringing it back into Betts [bullion dealers]. We still have the records of his transactions.

"He escaped persecution, he was successful and finished up in a massive house in Trafalgar Road off Moseley Road.

"My grandfather had two sons. My dad was the older son and he had a brother who was always a bachelor. My dad, Jack Goldstein, was a real character – five feet high and five feet wide. He was a lovely man who was very community-orientated and that taught me a lot.

"We lived in Russell Road, Moseley, which for me was idyllic because I had Reddings Rugby at the top of the road and Warwickshire cricket ground at the bottom of the road. I was a typical lad with a bicycle. I had a home with a lot of love and food."

His father ran a retail jewellery shop in Temple Street, but died of cancer at the age of just 60 in 1970, leaving son Stephen at a crossroads in his life.

"I found myself with a widowed mother, 56, and I had to grow up. I was 25 at the time."



Goldstein at Chateau Le Mortier (Tours)

By now married to wife Stephanie, he had ditched ambitions to become a barrister or enrol at the London School of Economics, turning his attention to training as a chartered auctioneer and surveyor. It was a career move which would reap considerable dividends for the budding property entrepreneur.

At the same time he was developing a taste for charitable work as he embraced the traditions of the Jewish community and beliefs instilled by his late father.

"The things he did in the community sort of rubbed off on me - it was second nature. Charity work was paramount. It wasn't the big charities, it was always the smaller ones. For me, less is more."

The 'less is more' mantra would serve Goldstein well over the years as he gradually built up a reputation in the Birmingham property world, initially training at Lawrence and Wightman in Waterloo Street before working on building projects with a family



Citizen's ceremony, 2017

acquaintance in the shape of none other than Doug Ellis, the man who made his fortune in the package holiday travel sector before eventually buying Aston Villa.

Goldstein recalls: "I worked with Doug for three or four years. I built some houses, did stuff, and made some money. He had a reputation as Deadly Doug, but deep down he was a pussycat."

After an illuminating few years with Ellis – "I learnt a lot" – Goldstein branched out on his own to launch a commercial property agency called Alexander Stevens.

"I built up a pretty good business and got asked to chair the redevelopment of the Jewellery Quarter, which was successful," he says.

He was later appointed chairman of the Jewellery Quarter Urban Village development board, proudly showing Prince Charles around the area, before getting involved in the creation of the Jewellery and Silver Centre which became known as the Big Peg.

Eventually selling Alexander Stevens to public company Hanover Druce, Goldstein was also making a name for himself in the world of charity, a sector long dear to his heart fostered by his lifelong ties with the city's close-knit Jewish community.

As he reflects today on his Jewish roots, he says: "Friday night is still precious to me – it is not spiritual, it is just traditional. I love the traditions of my religion.

"I am a proud Jew, I am not Jewish on a Tuesday when it suits me. I am also proud to be a citizen of the world and a citizen of the West Midlands where I have grown up."

Goldstein's burgeoning reputation in the business sector, allied to that community-spirited mentality, provided the impetus for notable charity work with organisations as diverse as the Variety Club of Great Britain, the Duke of Edinburgh Awards scheme, the Lord Mayor of Birmingham's charity and his very own charitable incarnation, the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.

But no profile of his dedication to charity



With the Prince of Wales in Stourbridge

would be complete without reference to wife Stephanie, who first encouraged him to help youngsters with special needs when they were teenage sweethearts.

"This is going back to the beginning. My wife came from London, we met when we were 17 on a youth trip to Israel. We became boyfriend and girlfriend and I used to go down to London.

"One day she said to me we are going to this place, a special home for children who aren't well – we are going to take them for a walk in the country, give them tea and give the staff a bit of respite.

"I said to my 18-year-old girlfriend, what do I do? She said they are kids. I honestly had this epiphany that I realised I was the odd one out, not them, and I had a great time. They were fun, they were a bit high-spirited and they were quite strong, but it was great. And it was great to see how happy she was."

That teenage epiphany for a young Stephen Goldstein proved the forerunner for a lifetime helping youngsters with special needs alongside other charitable ventures. But he never forgot his young sweetheart's devotion to the cause. "We have done it ever since. She has done it her way, I have done it my way.

"My wife is still my best adviser, because she tells it as it is." The couple have two sons living in France and Israel, and six grandsons.

Years after his London epiphany, Goldstein would become co-chairman of fundraising nationally for the Variety Club, the national children's charity, a close confidant of Prince Edward through the Duke of Edinburgh's Awards scheme, and also launch the Mad Hatter's Tea Party.

"I found myself in New York in Central Park where there is an Alice in Wonderland statue with all the characters. I said to the long-suffering Mrs Goldstein I am going to put a party on at the Botanical Gardens in Birmingham, and theme it Mad Hatter's. It was a one-off 17 years ago and that is how my charity was born."

The charity helps children with special educational needs and disabilities,

"But I haven't forgotten where I have come from. I am unbelievably grateful to this country. If my grandfather hadn't left Lithuania, either the Cossacks or the Nazis would have got him . . . and maybe I wouldn't have been here."

organising fun days out to fundraising events. It was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, the highest award given to local volunteer groups across the UK to recognise outstanding community work.

"It is just to put back. They are so innocent and I do it for the smiles on the kids' faces. It's a lovely thing to do."

Goldstein is also proud of his relationship with Prince Edward – now the Duke of Edinburgh – through the long-running awards scheme. "Prince Edward was lovely. I formed the Women in Business Duke of Edinburgh Awards, and his wife Sophie chaired it. I am proud to say she still does.

"I got invited to Prince Edward's 40th birthday at Buckingham Palace. How many people in the world get that invitation? I was really excited about it, not at all blase."

More recently, Goldstein has been chairman of the trustees of the Lord Mayor of Birmingham's charity, which supports a wide range of local, not-for-profit organisations and smaller local charitable groups.

In tandem with his charitable work, he has continued to embrace his

entrepreneurial spirit over the years, helping develop golf courses and hotels in France, launching a joint venture with the former Ansells brewery to create new pubs, and winning Birmingham's first full licence for the Wellington pub, removing the shackles imposed by the big brewers.

It has been a full and varied eight decades for a man who admits life has not always run smoothly. "I have had lots of companies. Some have failed – I have had plenty of failures – but that is where you learn. I have learnt the hard way.

"But I haven't forgotten where I have come from. I am unbelievably grateful to this country. If my grandfather hadn't left Lithuania, either the Cossacks or the Nazis would have got him . . . and maybe I wouldn't have been here."

If Stephen Goldstein hadn't been here, the West Midlands would have been deprived of the tireless vision and entrepreneurial drive of a man who has managed to sup with princes whilst retaining the common touch.

"People are people, regardless of background, colour or religion," he says.

It's surely fair to suggest that Stephen Goldstein owes that sort of insight to that aforementioned university of life.



With Prince Edward – chairman of Special Purpose Committee



Addressing guests at a Peak Blinders themed fundraiser for the Lord Mayor's Charity



Receiving the CBE Award, 2015



The Made Media team

Recognition of achievement

Five 'entrepreneurial, innovative and inspiring' companies in the West Midlands have been announced as recipients of the coveted King's Award for Enterprise 2025.

The awards are presented annually for outstanding achievement by UK businesses in innovation, international trade, sustainable development and promoting opportunity through social mobility.

In recognition of their achievements, the West Midlands winners of the 2025 awards are: KPM Marine Ltd of Birmingham for Innovation – for its Predator Failsafe long-life run-dry emergency pumps for commercial and naval vessels; Bowers and Jones Ltd of Bilston for International Trade – for supplying high-quality, high-performance tooling to the global steel and copper industry; Exol (Holdings) Limited of Wednesbury for International Trade – as the UK's largest independent lubricants company, supplying automotive, agricultural, rail and industrial applications

to more than 40 countries; Made Media of Birmingham for International Trade – as a global leader in digital products and design for arts and cultural organisations; and RunFlat International of Cradley Heath for International Trade – as supplier of run flat inserts, military wheels and complete wheel solutions.

It is the second innovation award for KPM Marine in just three years following their success in 2022 for their shock mitigation seating.

Nationally, there are 199 recipients in the 2025 awards with 161 receiving an award for international trade, 46 in innovation, 27 in sustainable development and ten for promoting opportunity.

The Lord-Lieutenant of the West Midlands, Derrick Anderson (inset), congratulated each of the companies and said he was looking forward to visiting the recipients to present their awards.

"The King's Award for Enterprise is



recognised worldwide as the ultimate and greatest business accolade," said Mr Anderson.

"Each of the five companies is able to demonstrate with this award that they represent the very best in

business and whilst each of their stories and backgrounds are different, they share a common goal of being the very best in their field.

"Each company is inspiring – to their staff, their suppliers and to their customers – and all serve as an endorsement for the hard work, creativity and ingenuity of the West Midlands. All of us in the West Midlands can be proud of their achievements."

Law firm opens its first Birmingham office



From left, Neil Lloyd, Charlotte Clode, Kimberly Mears and Blake Thomas

A law firm with branches across the Midlands has opened its first Birmingham city centre office.

FBC Manby Bowdler said the office on Bennetts Hill will offer legal expertise to a diverse range of businesses and private individuals.

The new premises follows the recent opening of a second office in Wolverhampton, to complement those in Knowle, Shrewsbury, Telford, Bridgnorth, Church Stretton and Redditch.

Chief executive Neil Lloyd said: "Our ambitious strategy for growth through acquisition and expansion, supported by a £30 million investment from Horizon

Capital, continues at pace and we are delighted to bring a team of specialists to the UK's second city.

"The West Midlands Combined Authority has been instrumental in catalysing Birmingham's economic transformation in recent years and we are excited to be a part of it."

In the last year, FBC Manby Bowdler turnover topped £17 million and the firm has plans to double its size in the next 12 months. It is the founding firm of the new Adeptio Law Group established to create a leading national legal services platform through the strategic acquisition of high-quality regional law firms.

Making the impossible

possible

Angus Drummond is an entrepreneur who has drawn on his own circumstances to set up a travel company which gives clients with limited mobility the experiences they would otherwise be excluded from. HENRY CARPENTER meets him.

You might wonder where Angus Drummond would be had he not been diagnosed with muscular dystrophy almost 15 years ago.

Most of us, on hearing the devastating news of the degenerative disease, would probably spend some time licking our wounds, working out how best to manage the incurable condition.

Not so many would have the resolve and clarity of purpose to set up a business almost wholly influenced by the disease – and then make such a success of it that investors are clambering over each other to get involved.

For this is what Drummond did, and the resulting firm, Limitless Travel – which organises holidays for people with restricted mobility – now has a staff count of around 40, has just received a £6.5 million cash injection, and reports an even higher turnover figure.

It's an inspirational journey whichever way you care to look at it.

Although Limitless is based in the Custard Factory in Digbeth, time pressures – in the form of an impending and all-too-rare 'a deux' holiday with wife Lucy – mean we are having to meet online. No matter, Drummond is an open and articulate interviewee, and it's quite some story which is told without an atom of self pity.

Drummond first realised that something was amiss with his mobility when he was in his early 20s.

He was working as an investment banker at RBS in London at the time, specifically in its technology department where he was fascinated by the potential of tech in financial services.

"I noticed a decline in my mobility, and after various checks with doctors I was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy," he says.

"This is a progressive muscle-wasting condition which meant that my mobility would decline.

"The diagnosis was very hard to take at the time and made it difficult for me to focus on work. I couldn't see where my future lay and I looked at the world quite cynically.

"What I did know was that I didn't want to be in a bank in ten years' time. I also knew that I needed to do something about it, something to really help me come to terms with what that condition had in store, and working all day long wasn't giving me that opportunity to do so."

Drummond didn't spend long deliberating. He quit his job and set off for a trip around the world with his partner Lucy.



This was in the autumn of 2014, and they returned in the summer of 2015 having got engaged in the Maldives towards the end of the trip.

It seems remarkable that having been given such a devastating diagnosis on his condition, someone could have the strength of character and mind to immerse themselves into not only enjoying the trip of a lifetime but also embrace the future by getting engaged to his partner and setting up a business.

Where did he find this drive and purpose to move forward so positively in his life?

"It's an interesting point," says Drummond. "At the time of the diagnosis, the condition wasn't affecting me too much

physically, but to be honest I was quite angry. I was very self-conscious, particularly about how people looked at me.

"I was quite angry when I was at the bank, and I found it difficult to talk about it, as did everyone else. I was enormously frustrated and not dealing with the condition that was gradually getting worse. I wasn't looking after myself in terms of what I ate and drank, and I would decline social events because I didn't want to be exposed.

"So travelling was an eye-opening experience because I suddenly had this space to just think about things and talk things through with Lucy. It gave me the chance to decompress and try to

understand what the future had in store and how to deal with that. But at the same time it gave me a renewed sense of perspective.

"I came back to the UK with a new feeling of optimism because having seen how people in different parts of the world had to deal with challenges like poverty and social inclusion, I felt I had a lot to be grateful for."

During the trip, an idea had been fermenting in his head. A practical observation during his trip overseas was that there was a marked lack of focus on accessibility for people with mobility issues. It was a topic which the travel guides and media omitted from their pages.

There was no website or software which really empowered people with restricted mobility to travel, and no travel company offering an inspiring service and experience for these customers.

The topic was frequently discussed with Lucy on the trip, and Drummond returned with a clear mission and vision of how he wanted to fill this glaring gap in the market.

After the initial head-scratcher of what to call the company, Limitless Travel was born.

"I wanted a name which evoked a feeling of unlimited possibilities, and that the world was really our oyster – but in a way that wasn't patronising or tied to disability," says Drummond.

It's clear from our chat that the value and support of fiancé Lucy should not be underestimated. A willing sounding

"I came back to the UK with a new feeling of optimism because having seen how people in different parts of the world had to deal with challenges like poverty and social inclusion, I felt I had a lot to be grateful for."

board and a sage and trusted advisor, she was also the couple's breadwinner when they returned as Drummond looked to get Limitless Travel off the ground.

The prospect, at first, was daunting. The analogy Drummond uses is that it was like stepping into an ocean with no land in sight. But he felt that if he kept swimming, eventually he would reach land and safety . . . and so it proved.

A key early step was when he was accepted onto a three-month programme called DotForge which focused on the utilisation of technology to solve a problem – a field Drummond was well acquainted with during his time working in financial service.

"We spent the next year and a half trying

to build a platform which we could scale, one which would list products and people could operate through an online booking service," he says.

"These were for people with the highest level of need who had literally no other options, and those with the lowest level of confidence because they were just so nervous about travelling by themselves. So the service needed to look after everybody in an all-encompassing way.

"We had to demonstrate to the industry that disability travel was a viable product and was profitable and commercially successful."

The first product Limitless launched was a group tours operation, which involved taking small groups away and taking care of everything for the clients – the transport, accommodation and excursions. It also meant establishing a core team of excellent and trusted carers.

As well as using the website and imagery to catch the interest of prospective customers,



Iceland



Schitthorn, Switzerland



Bourton-on-the-Water



Blackpool Beach

Limitless Travel organises holidays all over the world for people with restricted mobility

a key focus, Drummond explains, was to get people to trust that Limitless really did understand their challenges and the difficulties that they faced.

This demographic included people who had suffered from strokes, and diseases like dementia and Parkinson's.

"These are disabilities which people acquire later on in life, but we also have a lot of customers who are simply older with reduced mobility," says Drummond.

"They wouldn't regard themselves as disabled but do have mobility challenges."

The business moved from Manchester to Birmingham in 2016 when it was part of NatWest's Entrepreneurial Spark programme. Two years later it joined the entrepreneurial network Barclays Eagle Labs at iCentrum, in the Innovation Quarter, before settling in the Custard Factory in 2019.

This was the year which heralded the pandemic, but as with so many other seemingly desperate businesses who had to stop and think and adapt, Covid forced Drummond to rebuild Limitless Travel from scratch.

"We launched the cruise product in 2022 which has scaled in a way our other products couldn't. And I think that's when we knew that we had something that would drive the commercial success of the business.

"We now run approximately 100 cruise departures in a year, and about the same number of UK coach holidays. We operate between 30 and 40 short-haul trips and between five and ten long-haul holidays."

The holidays and experiences on offer are enormously varied in their breadth and scope, varying from zip-wiring in the rain forest of Costa Rica, safaris in South Africa, and trips to Caribbean islands, to more genteel short sojourns in Devon.

The numbers are encouraging to say the least. Forecasts are promising, both in terms of bookings – which he expects to double – and revenue, which is projected to rise by 75%, from £5 million to £8.5 million.

The £6.5 million cash boost from a series A investment round will be used to scale the business, Drummond says, by securing cruise cabin allocation for several years down the line, and also investing in people and growing the Limitless team.

"We have 44 members of staff in our office. But we're looking to expand and bring in some more senior leadership talent, people who are financially and commercially experienced," he says.



Drummond was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy nearly 15 years ago

While the cruise side of the Limitless operation is clearly the most lucrative at the moment, and the one which Drummond suspects will allow the business to scale at speed, no less attention will be paid to the tours – it's just a case of making them more commercially viable.

"We did shift more towards cruises because there is a lower level of fixed costs," he says.

"When it comes to UK coach holidays, because we have a coach that we have to pay for, we have to reach a certain level of occupancy to make it break even."

Tech and the possibilities it provides has always been a fascination for Drummond, ever since he plied his trade in financial services, and it is something that he is keen to exploit for Limitless Travel.

"We are massively focusing on how we can utilise technology across the business to automate and streamline all of our processes and delivery, and also how we can use AI to improve the sales process."

The final question is the personal one revolving around Drummond's own state of health.

"My body gets weaker and weaker," he says. "I am still mobile but I avoid walking long distances unnecessarily, and I'm prone to falling over and tripping. You know, it's difficult to manage a declining health condition and the levels of fatigue brought on by the demands of managing and running a high-growth scaling business.

"Mentally, the challenge there is not giving myself the space to deal with it all. I'm very good at just getting on with things, but not really paying enough attention to the problem.

"I also have to be conscious of how much time I'm giving to Lucy and the boys, so it is difficult to manage all the pressures. I always think it will get easier further down the line, but it never does."

Sometimes at the end of an interview, one is left truly inspired not so much by a particular talent someone might have, or success they've achieved, but more through their humility, drive, positivity and sheer character, often in the face of adversity.

This is one such occasion.



A passion for governance

Respected lawyer and prominent member of the business community, INEZ BROWN, explains why she created the Midlands Governance Appreciation Luncheon



Dr Inez Brown does not do things by half measures – a statement backed up by the success of an event she staged earlier in June.

A distinguished lawyer, she was a partner at Harrison Clark Rickerbys, head of its clinical negligence team nationally and the first black president of Birmingham Law Society.

A prominent businesswoman, she set up her consultancy McKenzie Brown Consultancy and is regional chair of the Institute of Directors.

A key focus in recent months has been the staging of the inaugural Midlands Governance Appreciation Luncheon – an event to celebrate those unsung heroes who drive real impact in the Midlands through governance, compliance, regulatory and risk.

"I wanted to shine a light on the unsung heroes who work diligently behind the scenes to safeguard organisations, prevent crises, and drive transformative change," she explains.

"Too often, those responsible for upholding governance and ensuring stability go unrecognised, despite their vital contributions to the success and resilience of our institutions."

The event took place on June 9 with more than 80 guests. Former Mayor of the West Midlands Sir Andy Street was the keynote speaker, and he gave an address on 'leadership, legacy, and the future of governance'.

Other luminaries and planning committee members included Deirdre LaBassiere, an award-winning governance consultant, who chaired a panel discussion focusing on 'governance in action – behind the headlines' – alongside Dr Karl George, CEO of the Governance Forum.

The event provided a platform to celebrate individuals and teams who have not only protected organisational systems but have also led restructures for

greater effectiveness and demonstrated remarkable resilience during challenging times.

"It was a privilege to see their dedication acknowledged publicly, and to foster a sense of community among governance professionals across the Midlands," says Dr Brown.

Other figures taking part in the discussion included Parm Sandhu, former police superintendent and diversity advocate, John Browett, former CEO of Dixons, Tesco.com, and Monsoon Accessorize, and Derrick Anderson, senior government advisor and public service leader, who all shared invaluable insights from their varied experiences.

Several outstanding individuals were recognised with awards at the luncheon, highlighting the breadth of talent and commitment within the governance community.

"I am delighted that the Midlands Governance Appreciation Luncheon will return next year, building on the success of its inaugural event," says Dr Brown.

"It is my hope that this annual celebration will continue to inspire, connect, and elevate those who play such a crucial role in the fabric of our organisations and society as a whole.

"I would like to extend my sincere gratitude Dr Karl George, CEO of the Governance Forum, Simon Osborne, founder and director of Conseo Board Review, and Deirdre LaBassiere, head of governance and company secretary at Parasol Homes.

"I am also grateful to members of the planning committee for their invaluable contributions in bringing the inaugural Midlands Governance and Appreciation Luncheon to life.

"Their dedication and expertise have been instrumental in shaping this event into a success. I would also like to thank our generous sponsors, TULA Medical

Experts, Sandringham Properties and Jamaya Restaurant. We are truly grateful for your commitment to excellence in our community."

Dr Brown set up her consultancy, McKenzie Brown, because of her passion for governance and what she calls "transformational leadership".

She adds: "Throughout my career as a pioneering lawyer and in my capacity as regional chair of the Institute of Directors, I have consistently championed these principles. Establishing my own consultancy felt like a natural progression, allowing me to share my expertise more widely and support organisations in realising their full potential."

Dr Brown says her focus is on working closely with boards of directors, trustees, and both aspiring and executive leaders who are committed to a growth mindset. She is particularly drawn to those who value personalisation and collaboration, and who are keen to foster dynamic, mutually rewarding relationships within their teams.

"By helping leaders unlock their true potential and cultivate a strengths-based approach, I aim to drive productivity and sustainable growth," she says.

"At McKenzie Brown Consultancy, I employ the ACE principle: A – Accelerate growth engagement; C – Build confidence and help leaders overcome barriers; and E – Ensure visible progress and measurable return on investment.

"The value I bring to my clients lies in my ability to blend strategic insight with hands-on experience. I offer a tailored, results-driven approach that not only addresses immediate challenges but also lays the foundation for long-term success.

"My clients benefit from my deep understanding of governance, my commitment to empowering leaders, and my proven track record in delivering transformational change."

Boosting employee retirement savings



SEVEN PROACTIVE STEPS FOR EMPLOYERS

By NEIL TOOTH and GEMMA BURROWS
of global risk and pensions advisory firm
Willis Towers Watson



Retirement adequacy is hugely topical and an issue that impacts us as a society as well as individually.

For businesses, it can be as much about workforce planning as about providing a benefits package that will attract and retain talent. For individuals, it's about the standard of living in retirement and financial security in case of 'rainy day' costs. Moreover, pension adequacy underpins overall economic stability by enabling retirees to continue contributing to the economy through their spending and reducing the reliance on state benefits.

What is retirement adequacy?

Put simply it's having enough savings to meet income needs throughout retirement – whatever that might look like and however long it might last. This is a changing landscape where income needs are unlikely to be linear over time and there are numerous challenges that contribute to this changing landscape:

- For people joining the workforce, Defined Benefit pensions in the private sector are all but gone. Employers are opting for often outsourced pension provision where costs and risks are reduced. People starting out in the labour market are likely to accrue savings on a defined contribution (DC) basis only, with little understanding of what outcomes to expect and how to navigate the choices (and risks) now placed on their shoulders.

- State pensions are becoming increasingly difficult to fund, having been financed on the premise of those in the labour market outweighing those in retirement. With people living longer and other pressures on the government's finances, the age at which people receive their State Pension will continue to rise.

- The proportion of homeowners is falling, with younger generations more likely to still be renting in retirement; the so called "generation rent".

- With increased life expectancy, money needs to last longer with potential health and social care costs to factor in.

- The ability to make good financial decisions now needs to extend into the future, with more choice and fewer people taking a guaranteed income in the form of an 'annuity' at the point of access.

In today's economic climate, waiting for the government to address adequacy concerns through increases to minimum contributions might be a way off, perhaps something of a relief to businesses grappling with other cost increases.

What proactive steps can an employer take?

It's becoming apparent that employers are looking at broader ways of tackling this ticking time bomb in a cost sensitive environment and thankfully, there are proactive steps they can take to help their employees and businesses.

1. It's important not to let employees believe that default contribution levels are the 'right' amount to save. Employers could consider changing the default level of contributions to start enrolling new employees at higher contribution levels, particularly if there is a matched contribution structure that would mean higher levels from the employer too. Encourage them to use modelling tools, usually available from the pension provider, to understand what they're on track to achieve and what their retirement could look like. The key to doing this effectively and doing more than just providing education, is to remove friction between the employee deciding to contribute more and being able to put this into action. Including a link or QR code in employee communications or enabling this functionality through a high-quality provider app can all help achieve this means.

2. Prompt employees to reconsider how much they can afford to save at particular trigger points, such as when their pay is about to rise. This can be especially relevant when a large part of any pay rise would be swallowed up in tax or by the tapering away of benefits.

3. As reward packages are reviewed, consider rebalancing compensation towards pensions, especially now that the National Insurance rise makes employer pension contributions cheaper relative to salaries. Operating salary sacrifice for pension contributions is another way of making the amount paid more affordable for both the employer and employee. If you don't operate salary sacrifice for pension contributions, consider getting advice to put this into place, the cost of that advice is likely to be far outweighed by the cost savings for as long as this remains.

4. Examine the default investment strategy or fund design of your pension plan to ensure enough risk is taken when members are young and that de-risking as they approach retirement does not go too far, too fast. It is not unusual to have 95%+ of members staying in the default investment, despite having lots of choice. This makes understanding how your default investment stacks up against its peers crucial. With

investment being a key driver to outcomes for DC pensions, effective and robust monitoring of investment performance may help you identify when change is needed.

5. Facilitate access to guidance at an age where it is not too late to respond by saving more. This can be done cost-effectively and on a wide scale through mechanisms like introducing it as a flex option. In this case, the guidance can be employee or employer funded, and pension focussed guidance/advice qualifies for National Insurance savings. The value of guidance or advice at the point of access is also crucial and can help employees make the right decisions at a time when unintended consequences of their actions could be significant, for example ending up with a hefty tax bill that could have been avoided.

Pensions director Gemma Burrows says "The Pension Advice Allowance allows an individual to withdraw up to £500 from their pension pot up to three times in their lifetime to fund pensions advice. This makes obtaining advice more cost efficient and is a feature which many employees are not even aware of. Publicising this option to employees can be very beneficial to them"

6. Understand the options your workplace pension provider makes available to employees as they approach retirement and what support they offer. Providers differentiate in their approaches, with some being better in this area than others.

7. Benchmark the charges that your employees pay and ask your provider to review them when they appear to be higher than is necessary. DC charges have reduced dramatically over the last 10 years and effective challenge will keep you in line with the market.

Don't underestimate the role of being an employer

Adequate pensions help individuals avoid financial hardships and provide peace of mind knowing that their future needs will be met. "The role that employers can play is not to be underestimated and these steps can help in a time when financial resources are strained," says senior pension director, Neil Tooth.

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The touch of an innovator

Her string of meaningful successes for over 30 years across a broad spectrum of industries suggests that whatever Jo Birch applies herself to tends to work. HENRY CARPENTER finds out what makes this hugely respected business figure tick.

If it wasn't for Jo Birch's input, would STEAMhouse – the much-admired innovation centre at Birmingham City University – even exist?

Just how many young people in the Black Country benefited from Birch's vision while she was working at Merry Hill?

Going back even earlier in her life, how many students do what she did, and create game-changing systems for employers?

And finally, how on earth has she managed to lead a hugely successful but sometimes fraught professional life whilst also being a dutiful mother, wife and daughter?

These are just some of the questions that linger after a fascinating hour spent in her company.

Birch is one of Birmingham's more respected business leaders, and also one of its most prominent, seemingly involved in endless organisations and projects.

In September last year she launched her own business advisory service, Growthinnk Associates, which gained serious traction from the get-go. But she's also on any number of boards, including Technology Supply Chain and Tech WM, she leads on a multitude of other projects, is the chief innovation officer at property developer Woodbourne Group, advises a wide range of businesses, including corporations and multinationals, and coaches CEOs.

If she has a watchword, it is probably 'innovation'. It is her feel and drive for this which has been the strongest link between all her professional endeavours.

Tangible monuments during her career to date include the STEAMhouse at BCU and the Flying Anvil sculpture at Merry Hill. But it's fair to say that since her placements at university, she has made her presence felt in the most positive of ways at the likes of Royal Mail, Chelsfield, Reuters and Bass Inns.

You also won't hear a bad word said against her. This is perhaps largely down to her possessing a perpetually open, socially conscious mind – and her childhood must at least have been partially responsible.

Because when you wonder where it all comes from, it is at least partly rooted in her past. Her life story is quite something.

Born into a male-heavy family in London in 1970, she had a loving and fascinating, if unconventional upbringing.

"It did make you speak up a little louder to be heard, and learn how to articulate," she says. "I also made sure I ate my food or one of my three brothers would have polished it off!"



Jo Birch is a well-known figure in Birmingham's business circles

Hers is one of the more peripatetic childhoods, determined by where her parents' work would take them, which saw her move from London to Bristol, to Montreal – after her mother had re-married – before coming back to the UK, or Cardiff to be exact where she went to secondary school. And then back to Chicago . . .

It is fair to say that her young eyes were opened to different cultures and societies at a far younger age than most.

"In Montreal, we moved to a Jewish community and it was a real eye-opener for me. Everyone was so welcoming. I befriended the other kids, learning about Hanukkah and Sabat, and the different disciplines. One of my friends was Chinese-Canadian, another was Afro-Caribbean and two of my best friends were from devout Jewish families. It was a really eclectic mix."

The experience provided the best grounding for going to school in Cardiff – a school which was predicated on multiculturalism with a high number of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children.

Now a teenager, she was also keen to use her voice and make a difference, and the ideal opportunity arose when, on hearing that the school might be closed down, started a campaign trying to demonstrate why it was valuable and what role it played in the community.

"In the event it was closed down," she says. "I realised later in life that it was because it was sited on really valuable land

which they could sell for development. At the time, the governors were told it was the performance of the school. I learnt a lot about understanding agendas."

That Birch was wordly wise beyond her years at this point is beyond question, but she attributes this as much to her adored parents as the multinational circumstances.

"When I look in a rearview mirror, my mum was a remarkable woman. In Chicago she was teaching Chinese women to speak English, there were always people coming to the house. She was extremely empathetic and endeared herself to different communities.

"My father is incredible and still a force to be reckoned with. He became an advisor to the Bank of England in Margaret Thatcher's premiership and was a real force for business in the 1980s.

"He was always very driven, very innovative, highly entrepreneurial and very well travelled.

"So along with these two fascinating people, I had an upbringing which was constantly changing and evolving.

"While it was really stimulating I'm not going to pretend that sometimes it wasn't completely discombobulating, but I think it gave me a thirst for life and a very appreciative view on the world."

After a brief sojourn to Chicago, Birch returned to the UK in 1988 to begin a course in business studies at Leeds University.

Highlights in her much-enjoyed three

years included working for Bass Inns and Taverns on placement – and the pub group probably couldn't believe its luck as the resourceful student set up a spreadsheet monitoring landlords' expenses and analysing trends.

She was not averse to rolling up her sleeves in more practical matters. For instance, she was tasked with checking out pubs' pythons – or cooling systems – to ensure the tenanted pubs were cleaning them properly.

This was back in the late 1980s, remember, when this was very much a man's environment. There were a few adventures along the way, such as herding the staff of one pub into a cupboard when it was besieged by hammer-wielding criminals.

The next placement was a spell at Reuters in London where, again, she applied her prowess in adapting systems and processes.

The news agency brought in a freelance accountant who taught her about how to account for everything, and how to make sure that if you innovate you have to make everything pay.

“I am prepared to work hard and account for myself, but I always want to be mindful of others less privileged than me. And I always want to be present for the people that I show up for.”

That word innovation again. Birch has gone on to become one of Birmingham's great innovators, applying creative thought to provide new opportunities at almost everything she's turned her hand to.

She innovated at her first long-term job at Royal Mail which she first joined through its graduate scheme, before being recruited to its HR department.

As soon as she was installed as HR manager in the Northampton postcode, Birch was looking at how the firm could improve efficiency.

She worked shifts across all disciplines to really understand the postmasters' issues, and worked out why some of the services were floundering.

Before long she was invited to run strategy in the area.

"I wanted there to be a more alignment in the strategy around first and second-class delivery. So we introduced more specific targets and set up a database where we could performance-manage those targets better.

"What we started to see was a real turnaround in first and second-class

performance delivery."

But it dawned on Birch that the Royal Mail culture wasn't for her. Her time there had more than served its purpose, giving her both strategic and operational experience, as well as a period working in comms and marketing.

She moved onto property company Chelsfield as its marketing manager based at Merry Hill.

A pattern was emerging with Birch – her achievements always seemed to go beyond her original remit. She ended up running a travel shop, a Post Office and a creche, as well as rebuilding the bus station there.

She developed the first website, as well as a new gift voucher scheme for shopping centres. Again, always innovating.

This was a period which also allowed her to make that little bit of difference to those living in the community.

"I worked with schools in the Pensnett area and developed a community art competition," she says. "I also commissioned some sculptures, one of which is the flying anvil which is now at Merry Hill.

"We were able to give the young children

in Dudley and the local area a real sense of pride in what they were doing, and I think that experience enhanced my passion for understanding about communities and about advancing people's chances.

"I would go into schools and see these brilliant young bright students who had everything ahead of them if they were given the right chances. And you could see what might happen if those chances weren't realised and that really got under my skin."

While she was in sculpture commissioning mode, Birch started working with universities – "which frustrated the hell out of me" – but professional life was interrupted, temporarily, by motherhood. Not that 11 weeks could be described as prolonged maternity leave.

When she returned to work, she was forced to re-evaluate due to the hours, and that led her to engaging with BCU.

"When interviewed I basically told them that the system didn't work, they needed to change it and this is what they needed to change. They seemed a bit stunned by the time I'd finished!

"I got the job, but it took me a while to get used to the educational setting. I struggled to understand its pace and processes which were at the antithesis of commercial.

"But I persevered in my role. My job was essentially to build relationships with business, and I did create opportunities but then delivery was a real problem. The commercial machinery just wasn't there."

The birth of another child intervened once again, and this time Birch was determined to make something meaningful happen for the university.

It came in the form of the New Generation Arts Festival, for which she was by and large responsible, and involved revered names across the arts such as Philip Pullman, Germaine Greer, Erin O'Connor and Julian Lloyd Webber.

The next few years saw the development of STEAMhouse, allowing Birch to connect the dots between creativity, innovation and skills.

"I felt we weren't reaching enough young people and at a national level I was really worried about the agenda where creativity was being taken out of the curriculum," she says.

Applying her mind to resolve this issue resulted in STEAMhouse, BCU's innovation facility on the eastern fringes of the city. This five-storey, 100,000 sq ft property on the site of a burnt-out former cycle and tyre



Winner of the Innovator of the Year Award in 2024

factory is a flourishing ecosystem of offices, digital labs, a makerspace, creative studios and co-working spaces.

A succession of supportive vice-chancellors were involved, as well as architects, planners, local government, the mayor and the wider university community. The driver though was Jo Birch. There was only one person whose fingerprints were on the project, from concept to delivery, and they were hers.

It's hard to think of all the setbacks, not least the global pandemic, Birch and her team had to contend with, but contend with them they did, and the facility opened to great fanfare in November 2022.

It wasn't long after though that Birch approached the university's current vice-chancellor, David Mba, with some news

"I always have a five-year plan," she says. "I'd stayed at BCU way longer and in my next chapter I wanted to set up my own business. So I spoke to David and said that's it, I think it's time for me to leave, I've done my piece here.

"He was the most fantastic of people. He said he didn't want me to go but he recognised that I had made a decision."

Throughout our chat Birch is enthusiastically generous with her compliments when referring to many of those she worked with.

There's Anita Bhalla, repeatedly, the former LEP bigwig and colleague at BCU, who she considers "an incredible force for good".

Then there are BCU vice-chancellors Julian Beer – "an enormously supportive, entrepreneurially focused leader who drove material change" – and David Mba again – "the opportunity to work with someone like that doesn't come around every day . . . I knew he was going to be a real force for change with his drive for diversity".

As for Tani Dulay at the Woodbourne Group, "he's got a depth of soul and an ambition for society which takes your breath away".

But most significantly of all there's her husband – "an extraordinary man and teacher" – who along with her beloved children comprise the pillars who allow her professional life to blossom.

"I try to be a good role model for my children," she says. "I try to provide for them, to care for them, to connect with them and to challenge them.

"I am prepared to work hard and account for myself, but I always want to be mindful of others less privileged than me.

"And I always want to be present for the people that I show up for."

Mission accomplished, I think to myself, as our chat ends.



At Royal Mail in 1992 before she got married



Birch was a winner at the Women in Tech Awards in last year

PHTA gets lift-off

It has been one of the most keenly anticipated openings of any facility in the West Midlands for years, but the fact that the Precision Health Technologies Accelerator is now open for business provides a massive boost to both the region's life sciences sector and its economy in general. HENRY CARPENTER reports.

It has not been without its setbacks, but the PHTA is now not just completed, but it is officially up and running.

This is big news for the region. It's also a blessed relief for Professor Gino Martini who has been forced to draw on reserves of patience he probably didn't realise he possessed. It's fair to say that he's now in the most chipper of moods.

Completion on the PHTA – the state-of-the-art facility occupying the top three floors of the first phase building at Birmingham Health Innovation Campus – took place in May, and its doors were formally opening to tenants as this edition was being printed.

"If I could summarise how I feel right now," says Martini, "and combine it with my current focus, the six words I would choose are: excitement, excitement, excitement, delivery, delivery, delivery."

It has been a long haul for Martini and his team, since he was taken on by PHTA's owner, the University of Birmingham, to steer the project.

There have been – almost inevitably in this day and age – setbacks (a global pandemic and its aftermath don't help),

but what we now have is the largest, most significant accelerator in the UK for the life sciences industry, a 70,000 sq ft facility which is the anchor tenant of No. 1 BHIC.

"A bit like a toddler finding its feet, so will the PHTA," says Martini. "And it will emerge as the region's solution to scaling up large life science and healthcare SMEs which are of vital importance to the UK economy."

The views – with the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, and 'Old Joe', rising above the University of Birmingham's main campus, both within a few hundred yards – leave no doubt that this is a facility located firmly in the city's medical and academic heartlands. This is important.

Step inside, and there is a thriving network of cutting-edge spaces to meet the needs of organisations and their practitioners, from branches of international corporations to small start-ups.

The Makerspace provides the opportunity for ideas to be tested and refined before going into production, with small-batch manufacturing and prototyping capabilities, and technology including 3D printing, in-silico design and VR.

Wet and dry laboratories have been

designed by scientists for scientists and provide ample room for growing companies and spin-outs. All lab modules are within 40 metres of key shared amenities.

Then there are business incubation and flexible workspaces. The former provides access to specialist support, knowledge and facilities to allow business to scale up, including intellectual property protection.

The workspaces vary from virtual tenancy to hot desks and office space, with access to all BHIC amenities.

But this is before the human involvement – the clinical expertise, the talent pool, the commercial experience – which when combined with the environment is expected to create a world-class ecosystem.

One of Martini's key lieutenants is Louise Stanley, the team's comms manager who has been involved in the project from the start.

She makes the point that while the physical environment, and its positioning within the city, is one huge draw for current and prospective tenants, the importance of access to human resources is similarly appealing.

"Tenants aren't just renting space," she says. "At PHTA they are able to tap into the expertise of a thriving cluster of health excellence, infrastructure, clinical leadership and entrepreneurial skills."

"Gino often says he isn't a landlord to our resident businesses, but a concierge – helping them to harness the power of existing partnerships between the NHS, academia, citizens and industry to deliver innovation in therapies, diagnostics and devices at pace and scale."

"What we're trying to do is create a national and international resource where people come and work together."

"It's about collaboration, with businesses of all sizes from the worlds of biopharma and med-tech partnering with PHTA's clinical-academic teams to integrate, analyse and interpret data sets and basic science."

"PHTA will allow our industry partners to rapidly develop, test and validate new products and services."

Tenancy contracts were steadily increasing prior to opening, but its anchor tenant is emblematic of how an organisation can benefit from making this



Members of the PHTA team outside BHIC

Rhys Coldrick, Makerspace technical advisor

Design, prototyping and iteration are key stages in the development of any product. However, these stages are also some of the hardest and most costly for small and medium sized companies.

Basic prototyping equipment is expensive and the experience and expertise to run this equipment can be even more expensive and take a long time to gain. This all means that often these stages are what halts, and in some cases ends, the product development lifecycle.

The PHTA Makerspace aims to solve this problem providing not only access to a wide range of basic and advanced machines but also access to experienced operators to guide users through training and use of the machines.

Available equipment includes FDM 3D Printers, an SLA 3D printer, a laser cutter, hand tools, power tools, a small lathe and mill station, soldering stations, electrical testing stations, a digital microscope, a 3D scanner, a micro printer and most excitingly a digital anatomy printer.

From this equipment you can make anything from simple PLA, TPU or PETG 3D parts on the FDM printer to high accuracy rigid, flexible or biocompatible 3D parts on the SLA printer.

The laser cutter allows for 2D profile cutting and engraving of perspex, plywood, rubber, fabrics and card and

the rage of hand tools aid with the assembly of manufactured parts into final prototypes.

Basic machining capabilities using the small lathe and mill unlock the potential for some metal work to be completed allowing some components to be pushed past the initial prototype stage, using material that are more representative of the final material.

For some systems electrical components are essential for the operation of the device. To aid in the development of these systems the space features soldering stations including soldering, desoldering and hot air reflow equipment and electrical test stations including power supplies, oscilloscopes and function generators.

In some cases part inspection or even reverse engineering may be required which can be achieved with the use of the digital microscope or even the 3D scanner. This enhances the ability to ensure parts produced are to the required standard but also allows for the integration of new parts into older or existing systems.

Micro parts, including micro channels for microfluids, are made possible with the inclusion of a micro printer.

Finally, the addition of the digital anatomy printer to the Makerspace will allow for printing of models in near anatomically accurate materials, making it possible to print models for surgical skills training or surgical development.

flagship research facility its home.

The university's Clinical Immunology Services has signed up to occupy approximately 10,000 sq ft of the research facility.

The CIS receives more than 100,000 blood, marrow, urine and other samples per year and, according to Stanley, it provides a comprehensive range of lab services to diagnose autoimmune and neuro-immunological conditions.

She adds: "The CIS is the only service of its kind to be embedded within an academic environment, creating a unique bridge between translational and clinical research groups, the NHS, and the pharmaceutical and bio-diagnostic industries."

The PHTA became something of a labour of love for Martini, but his faith in what it could bring to the city and the wider economy was unshakeable.

A champion of the SMEs, and what they bring to wider economy, he says that they account for nearly two-thirds of total employment and around half of turnover in the UK private sector.

However, he believes that what is stagnating the growth of healthcare companies in the UK and particularly in West Midlands is access to high quality, category 2 laboratory and office scale-up space.

This former chief scientist of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, experienced academic and industrial pharmacist who held senior positions at Scherer Drug Delivery Systems and SmithKline Beecham, has a better understanding than most on what is needed to turbocharge the industry.

"Without scale-up space, SMEs cannot grow, meaning that innovative companies leave the UK," he says. "What happens is that patients suffer because they cannot access innovative treatments and both the UK and West Midlands economy also suffers.

"So we must hail this fantastic development. It has been an investment in excess of £60 million, and has been specifically designed to stop the leakage of innovative companies and highly skilled jobs overseas. Once fully developed, BHIC is estimated to generate £400 million GVA and 10,000 jobs to the local economy.

"But this development did not happen by itself. Many people have been involved from the beginning, such Louise who is the longest serving member of the team.

"I would also like to acknowledge the rest of my team, some of whom are seconded in supporting this important endeavour – Natasha, Mark, Becky, Andrew, Shar, Rhys, Kay, Magda, Sallyann, Gianmarco, Richard and Dan."

It's little wonder there's a buzz about the team.

As Martini says though, now it's about delivery.

Sharjeel Kayani, laboratory specialist

The launch of the PHTA Makerspace marks a bold and much-needed step toward transforming how medtech and healthtech innovation take root in the West Midlands.

Purpose-built to bridge the critical gap between breakthrough ideas and real-world impact, the Makerspace offers early-stage companies, researchers, and clinicians the tools, space, and support to develop, test, and iterate medical technologies in a regulated environment.

Unlike conventional labs or co-working spaces, the Makerspace is engineered for momentum. It brings together state-of-the-art equipment, embedded technical expertise, and regulatory know-how under one roof – creating a launchpad where proof-of-concept doesn't get stuck, but accelerates. This is a space designed for the often-overlooked innovators in the health ecosystem: startups with deep tech, clinicians with practical insights, and academics with game-changing ideas ready for application.

The West Midlands is rich in talent and ambition, but access to suitable

facilities has long been a bottleneck. The Makerspace is our answer.

It's where making, scaling, and commercialising healthcare innovation can finally happen in the same postcode. For the West Midlands, the economic upside is obvious: a magnet for high-value jobs, investment and IP that might otherwise migrate south or overseas.

For the UK's life sciences sector, it's a scalable blueprint for levelling-up innovation nationwide. And for patients, it means faster access to smarter, safer, more personalised care. We're proud of what this will mean for regional growth, UK life sciences, and most importantly, patients.

At the heart of the new PHTA-BHIC ecosystem, the 13,000 sq ft Makerspace is a proving ground where bright ideas stop being PowerPoints and start becoming prototypes. That 'bench-to-bedside without the baggage' approach is what sets us apart. In short, you can design, print, test and iterate all in one place.

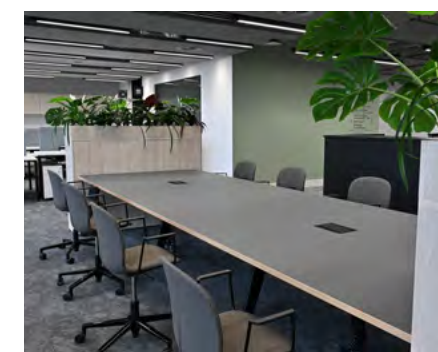
Why does that matter? Because the real limit on med-tech innovation isn't imagination – it's infrastructure. Every

day a startup spends bouncing between subcontractors is a day a patient waits for progress. By collapsing that development cycle into a single, open-access hub, we expect to cut timelines, offering game-changing support for SMEs navigating their first critical milestones.

But machinery alone doesn't make a movement. The Makerspace is deliberately porous to the region's talent pipeline, wiring in graduate placements, research fellowships and CPD sprints so that a robotics PhD can trade ideas with a surgical registrar and a product-design student – before lunch. Those collisions are where the next generation of inclusive, human-centred medtech will emerge.

Personally, I'm feeling six very loud words right now: think, create, collaborate, iterate, manufacture and impact. That's the journey the Makerspace makes possible – and I can't wait to see the first breakthrough roll off the printer.

Massive credit to the PHTA team for making sure we launch with everything certified, calibrated, and coffee fuelled.



UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM

Precision Health
Technologies Accelerator

Funding to help hundreds of West Midlands businesses cut energy costs and carbon emissions

advertisement feature



Central Mailing Services



Instinct Hardware

Approximately 1,300 businesses across the West Midlands are to get a share of £15 million of new funding to cut their energy usage and bills.

The Business Energy Advice Service (BEAS) pilot scheme is being led by Business Growth West Midlands, West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) and the Department for Energy Security & Net Zero (DESNZ). It is one of several regional schemes that have already helped 2,400 businesses to identify measures to decarbonise and reduce energy demand, with match funded grant support available to implement actions.

If fully implemented, they would save £16 million a year in gas and electricity costs and reduce their annual carbon emissions by 34,000 tonnes – the equivalent to the amount produced by 20,000 cars each year. The new funding will save businesses a further £8 million in annual energy costs and cut 17,000 tonnes of carbon.

With the UK's highest concentration of energy-intensive businesses, the West Midlands was chosen to pilot BEAS. The scheme identifies the most effective ways to help businesses reduce gas and electricity usage and cut carbon emissions.

In 2024 alone, BEAS conducted nearly

Mayor of the West Midlands, Richard Parker, said:

"High energy costs are holding businesses back. That's why I'm taking action to make them cleaner, greener and more competitive.

"We've already helped more than 2,000 businesses cut millions of pounds off their gas and electricity bills and reduce their carbon emissions thanks to this expert advice and funding. I'm helping to power up businesses so they can invest in their own future and take on more staff. That's part of my plan for a stronger and more prosperous future for everyone."

Minister for Industry, Sarah Jones, said:

"As part of our Plan for Change, we are continuing to provide support for businesses of all sizes to transition towards a more sustainable future - cutting costs and emissions.

"The BEAS pilot has already supported 2,000 businesses across the West Midlands, and this £15 million boost will help many more businesses slash their carbon emissions and save millions on energy bills."

1,000 in-depth energy assessments, identifying opportunities to cut around 33,000 tonnes of carbon - the equivalent of driving 82 million miles in a typical petrol car.

Looking ahead to 2025, BEAS aims to expand its reach, strengthen its support network for SMEs, and continue contributing to the UK's journey toward net zero.

What's on offer?

Eligible SMEs can apply for:

- A free energy efficiency audit
 - The opportunity to secure between £1,000 and £100,000 in match funding to implement energy-saving measures
- These measures may include:

■ Building insulation

To reduce heat loss with a range of insulation options, including cavity wall insulation loft insulation, solid wall insulation and room-in-roof insulation

■ Heating system upgrades

Replaces outdated or inefficient heating systems with modern alternatives, such as high-efficiency boilers, to reduce energy consumption and improve performance.

■ PV solar panels

Install photovoltaic (PV) solar panels to convert sunlight into electricity. This allows businesses to generate their own renewable energy on-site, reducing reliance on the grid and cutting electricity bills.

■ Heat pumps

Uses air, ground, or water-source heat pumps to provide low-carbon heating and hot water. These systems are highly efficient and can significantly reduce emissions compared to traditional heating methods.

■ Smart heating controls

Implement intelligent heating controls to monitor and manage energy use more effectively. These systems offer greater control, automate temperature settings, and help optimise energy efficiency across business premises.

■ Education

Many businesses are unaware of the small, everyday actions they can take to lower their electricity and energy use. BEAS also can provide education to help businesses understand how energy is consumed and managed, so organisations can make smarter decisions that lead to immediate savings.

Who can apply?

Applicants must meet all the following criteria:

- Be classified as a Small or Medium-sized Enterprise (SME)
 - Operate as a commercial entity or profit-seeking enterprise
 - Be based at a commercial address
 - Have been in operation for at least 12 months
 - Be responsible for paying the business's energy bills
 - Have a minimum annual energy consumption of 25,000 kWh (gas and/or electricity)
- Use our BEAS energy calculator to quickly estimate your business's energy usage.

Where is BEAS available?

Within the WMCA area:

- Birmingham, Solihull, Sandwell, Dudley, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Coventry
- Outside the WMCA area:
- Staffordshire & Stoke-on-Trent, Warwickshire, Worcestershire, The Marches (Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin)

How it works

- 1. Register** – Sign up at businessgrowthwestmidlands.org.uk/beas
- 2. Assessment** – A free energy assessment will be arranged
- 3. Report** – Receive a tailored report with energy-saving recommendations
- 4. Implementation** – Choose which recommendations to act on, BEAS partners will support installation

Once your business receives an energy report, you may be recommended to apply for a grant. However, applying for an energy grant is not mandatory and you have the flexibility to choose which recommendations to implement based on your preferences.

BEAS in action

Birmingham-based craft beer maker Attic Brew Co was awarded funding to help install new energy efficient beer making equipment as well as a more efficient boiler, double glazing and lighting for its brewery in Stirchley, cutting annual carbon emissions by 65 tonnes and fuel bills by around £30,000.

Managing director Sam Back said: "The support we've had means we've been

able to reduce equipment running costs, the level of heating we need and the co2 we produce. It has also unlocked additional support to help find future avenues for improvement.

"Without this help it's likely we'd have had to scale down our plans to maintain the fantastic growth we've seen since we began brewing commercially in 2018."

What other Birmingham Businesses are saying

Nil Chohan, technical & production director, Instinct Hardware:

Partnering with BEAS was invaluable. The assessment showed us how much we could save in energy and costs by investing in smarter machinery. Thanks to their support, we've improved quality, reduced costs, and made our processes much more sustainable.

Richard Morrow, director, Central Mailing Service:

Joining BEAS has been transformative. Their guidance was instrumental in identifying savings and shaping our sustainability strategy. Any business serious about a greener future should absolutely consider this programme.

Ready to apply?

Whether you operate in the manufacturing sector or are a hospitality business aiming to lower energy bills or adopt greener practices, register today to start your journey towards cost savings and business growth.

Register now at: businessgrowthwestmidlands.org.uk/beas

You'll need:

- Your Companies House number (for Ltd companies) or company registration number (for CICs)
- Your energy bill or usage details



Attic Brew

BEAS is being delivered by WMCA and DESNZ through Business Growth West Midlands in partnership with Aston University, Coventry City Council, Black Country Industrial Cluster, Birmingham City Council, Warwickshire County Council, Staffordshire County Council, Worcestershire County Council and Pro Enviro.



advertisement feature



Funded by
UK Government



Business Growth
West Midlands

Unlock grant funding of
up to £100,000* for energy
efficiency upgrades with **BEAS**

Are you...

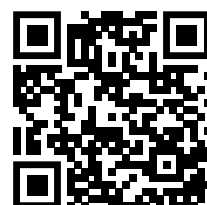
Running a small-to-medium business?

Using 25,000 kWh of energy annually?

Looking for ways to save on energy costs?



Find out if you're eligible and register today at
businessgrowthwestmidlands.org.uk/beas
or scan the QR code to learn more



Business Energy
Advice Service

* To be eligible, businesses must have been operating for at least 12 months, be based at a commercial address, and be responsible for managing their own energy costs.



Expect the unexpected

PAUL FAULKNER, whose fondness and fascination with the US stretches back to the start of his career, offers his thoughts on 'Trump Mark 2'

"Never bet against America" – so said Warren Buffett, the 'Sage of Omaha' and chairman of Berkshire Hathaway when responding to a question about the attractiveness of America to investors in the face of the Great Financial Crisis back in 2008.

For a long time, both pre and post that economic crisis, these words have seemed like wise advice. Whatever challenges and troubles it may have faced, the US has always very much been a land of fantastic opportunity, growth and prosperity, with the largest economy in the world and the energy and attitude to maintain that position despite the surging growth in China in recent decades.

However, sentiment towards the US has undoubtedly shifted for many since the election of President Trump for his second term at the end of last year. A gift for the media and headline writers, Trump's presidency and leadership have yet again dominated the news agenda and caused many to openly question their relationship with America and how they view the country.

While that is absolutely understandable given the deliberately confrontational and provocative approach the president and his team seem to adopt as their natural position, for me, Buffett's words and optimistic long-term view on the US continue to ring true.

I have always had a fascination and 'love-affair' with America. I grew up obsessed with American sports such as baseball and American Football, and was thrilled when at nine years of age, my aunt married an American serviceman in the US Navy – how cool to have a genuine American relative!

My first 'real' job was with the American

firm MBNA, and after surviving their graduate programme (or should that be program?) in the UK I was then offered the opportunity to move to their corporate HQ in Delaware. In total, I spent three years living on the East Coast of the US, gaining a good understanding of how much of the country ticks.

Don't get me wrong, America is far from perfect. It has some serious and fundamental inequalities that lie at the heart of its society, but the eternal sense of optimism and hope, to borrow a phrase from President Obama, ultimately 'trumps' all. When you live in the States you really do get a sense that anything is possible and that, with the right work ethic, spirit of enterprise and a touch of luck, that one can achieve anything.

Back to the here and now, I found myself in Washington DC on a business trip in early April, in the run up to President Trump's 'liberation day' announcement with his tariff board in the White House's Rose Garden. The sense I got from a series of meetings around the nation's capital was that nobody really knew what to expect.

Echoing back to Donald Rumsfeld's 'known unknowns', in the president's second term there is clearly an expectation for the dramatic and unconventional amongst commentators and the business community, although Trump clearly does revel in still surpassing them.

It strikes me that is a key point to understand and appreciate about Trump. His style is to create noise, grab headlines and dominate the news agenda in a way unlike those who have come before him. It

may not be to everyone's taste, to say the least, but that is what he does, with a view to then progressing his agenda amidst the noise of the drama he has created.

The tariff announcement is a good case in point. The moves clearly rattled the stock markets, with the Dow Jones Index falling significantly in the days following. Yet, as at the time of writing, the Dow is now back above the levels seen in early April. One could say there was short-term drama and chaos with Trump leading every news channel, but ultimately little long-term impact and the president able to establish import tariffs to address America's balance of trade in a style that suits his hard negotiating style.

As time passes, it increasingly feels as though business folk in the US are increasingly starting to adapt and factor the president's approach into their thinking. There remains a confidence that the American economy, and their system of government, is strong enough to withstand anything one occupant of the White House can throw at it. And as a worst case, people are prepared to ride out the next three-and-a-half years and then vote for somebody else!

What will be the long-term impact of Trump Mark II? That remains to be seen, although it is unlikely to be dull, and will probably continue to chafe many sensibilities.

With all that said, America remains a fantastic country and a great place to do business, which is something to never lose sight of whatever crazy stories maybe dominating the news at any given time. After all, 'never bet against America'.

*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.

Business awards announces sponsor

The Black Country's largest business awards have been boosted with the news that the University of Wolverhampton will be this year's headline sponsor.

The Black Country Chamber of Commerce Business Awards, which this year takes place on Thursday November 20 at The Halls, is an annual highlight in the local business calendar, celebrating the achievements of companies and entrepreneurs in Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

For 2025 and in a 'first' for the competition, the headline sponsor will be responsible for selecting the Business of the Year from the winning firms across 12 different categories.

"Our relationship with the Black Country Chamber of Commerce is vital in



Pictured from left are Professor Prashant Pillai, Nat Rushton, Vikki Potts, Helen Sargeant and Professor Zeeshan Pervez, all University of Wolverhampton, at last year's chamber awards

strengthening links between academia and the regional business community," said Vikki Potts, head of the Business School at the University of Wolverhampton.

"It seemed a natural progression for us to move our sponsorship of the awards to the next level and we look forward to being a headline sponsor that proudly champions the companies and entrepreneurs who make our area so special."

Pertemps chair recognised for lifelong dedication



Carmen Watson, left, with daughter Rebecca at the ceremony at Goldsmiths Hall, London. Picture: Rachael Barron

Pertemps Network Group chair Carmen Watson has been inducted into an exclusive international group of experts recognising her lifelong dedication to promoting learning and development.

Being presented with a Fellowship to the City and Guilds London Institute is the highest honour the world-renowned skills organisation can bestow.

Mrs Watson, who has been with Pertemps since 1976, was awarded the honour by the Princess Royal at a ceremony at Goldsmiths Hall in London.

It is conferred on individuals who have made a significant contribution in their field through practical application of technical education and skills development. There are fewer than 500 fellows worldwide.

Mrs Watson, who attended the ceremony with daughter Rebecca and Pertemps people development director Andy Long, said: "This is a huge honour to be inducted into such an elite group of learning and development professionals."

"Of course, the hard work of all those I have worked with over the years has been a massive contributing factor to this, so I thank my colleagues and encourage everyone to keep doing what you are doing in the learning and development space."

"Our people are, and will always remain, our greatest asset."

Australian expansion

A Birmingham comms agency has increased its presence in Australia by opening an office in Melbourne.

Liquid, which already has an office in Brisbane, said the new office aims to consolidate its operations in Australia.

The expansion allows the firm to support industries such as food and agriculture, while the free trade agreement between the UK and Australia creates more opportunities for cross-border collaboration, it said.

Elisabeth Lewis-Jones, CEO at Liquid, said: "Australia has long been a market we're actively interested in. The country's robust economy and consistent growth offers a wealth of opportunities for many businesses, especially as Brisbane is set to host the 2032 Olympics. This is why we made a strategic decision to further strengthen our foothold in the region."

As part of the expansion, Liquid has appointed Ellie White (pictured) as account director and country lead. With over six years' experience fulfilling a variety of PR and marketing roles at London agencies, she will lead Liquid's Australian operations from the new office in Melbourne, with support from an extended team based in Brisbane.



In-Comm Training urges industry to back its 'I'M INCLUDED' INCLUSIVITY CAMPAIGN

A high-profile campaign celebrating inclusivity and diversity in industry has been launched by one of the UK's specialist training providers.

'I'm In-Comm, I'm Included' is the message being championed by apprentices, learners and staff at In-Comm Training as they look to break down some of the barriers faced by women, ethnic minorities and hard to engage groups considering an apprenticeship and career in engineering and manufacturing.

The powerful message is featured in a new 90-second video that uses the personal narrative of more than 15 people from the company's two technical academies in Aldridge and Telford.

It will be the focal point of a campaign that is calling on individuals, ambassadors and companies to get involved, act on their own inclusivity campaigns and reach out to engage with their communities to tell their story.

This will be amplified via the #imincluded hashtag across all social media channels, with the plan of hosting special networking events and a dedicated 'inclusivity and diversity' day every year.

"There have been major strides made, but this is just the start . . . we want to accelerate the good work and help industry bridge the major skills gap we face by



Nteokan Egopija

being even more inclusive," said Bekki Phillips, executive director at In-Comm Training.

"A lot of firms talk about it, that is true. However, the message needs to be louder, and we felt that we wanted to seize the moment and launch a campaign that everyone associated with industry can get involved in."

She continued: "We spoke with learners, employers, apprentices and our Skills Steering Group and the unanimous decision was made to launch 'I'm In-Comm, I'm Included'. The video will kickstart the campaign and then it is all about getting people and organisations involved to tell their own stories."

In-Comm Training has spent the last eight years raising the profile of apprenticeships and upskilling opportunities across hard-to-reach groups and areas across the West Midlands.



It has been a concerted campaign that has paid off, with nearly 17% of its apprentices now female and a similar number coming from a Black Asian or Minority Ethnic background – both above the national averages.

Bekki went on to add: "Progress has been made, but these figures are still nowhere near high enough. Industry is for everyone, regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, religion and beliefs and we are working hard to prove that!"

In-Comm Training has already enlisted the support of 20 IC Ambassadors and its 75-strong workforce to spread the message, whilst several employers and partners have also pledged their support.

This includes Made in the Midlands, the Confederation of British Metalforming, Aldridge and Brownhills MP Wendy Morton and various members of its Skills Steering Group, including Accura Engineering, Always Engineering, Brandauer, FBC Manby Bowdler, Frederick Cooper Birmingham, Gestamp, Guhring, and Metsec.

The aim is to also take 'I'm In-Comm, I'm included' to the corridors of powers at Whitehall and get Jacqui Smith, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, involved.

Nteokan Egopija is one of the faces that appear in the campaign video having started her Level 3 Machining Technician Apprenticeship at a leading aerospace company in September 2023.

"From the minute I stepped into In-Comm Training's Technical Academy in Telford I felt welcome. If you throw yourself into the course you'll get so much respect, help, advice and friendship – I'd recommend it to other girls who are practical and good problem solvers."

"This is one of the reasons why I was so keen to be involved in the 'I'm In-Comm, I'm Included' video. It's important to get the message out there that manufacturing doesn't discriminate on age, gender, ethnicity or religion – in short, industry is for all!"


If you would like to take part in the campaign, please use #imincluded and visit www.in-comm.co.uk for more details.

Watch the campaign video here



M & A

SPECIAL REPORT



Mergers and acquisitions play a crucial role in business growth and competitiveness. They enable companies to expand their market share, access new technologies, reduce competition, and achieve economies of scale. M&A can also improve financial performance by streamlining operations and increasing efficiency. The interviews, insight, analysis and news in this bumper special report indicate that this is a region rich in expertise in all disciplines relating to M&A.

The M&A market in 2025



Justin Kyriakou, regional director of the North West & Midlands, ICAEW, and David Petrie, ICAEW's head of corporate finance, assess the health of the M&A sphere both nationally and in the West Midlands

In October 2024, there was a flurry in the mid-market mergers and acquisition activity. This was particularly the case for privately owned businesses whose owners were concerned about likely changes because of the Autumn Budget.

This was driven by two groups: those who wanted to get deals done, and founders who were looking to retire. Certainly, several family businesses hoped to take money off the table, possibly by selling a minority stake. To a certain extent, it is fair to say this continued through to the first quarter of 2025.

While there was initial optimism surrounding the US elections, this changed as geopolitical issues began to surface. For businesses with complicated international supply chains, concerns around the impact of tariffs have had an impact on investment activity and in some cases, they are acting as a driver to either strategic investment or actual acquisition and M&A.

Some British companies are looking at using acquisitions in the US for example, as well as partnership agreements to manufacture inside the US, to ensure they maintain a strong market position and that their products continue to be sold

competitively in that market. While there has been interest and activity as the tariff situation continues to evolve, there have also been instances which have resulted in the slowdown of deals.

In the manufacturing sector, for example, this uncertainty means the net impact has typically been to slow down transactions rather than to switch them off altogether, with the upshot that we are seeing transactions taking longer than previously has been the case. With Asia Pacific related supply chains, particularly from China, there has been uncertainty as to whether that might result in the lower cost in goods coming into the UK.

So, the geopolitical position remains an important driver in the M&A market and that has certainly been the case in the first half of 2025.

Putting this into context, business confidence, as evidenced by ICAEW's Business Confidence Monitor (BCM), has been falling. In Q1 2025 it turned negative for the first time since 2022 because of tax rises, increasing inflation, weak UK growth and increased global uncertainty.

In the West Midlands, this sentiment is reflected in a fall in business confidence

to -8.6 in quarter one, which is significantly below its historical average (+4.8) and the quarter's UK average of -3.0. Increasingly, businesses in the region are increasingly worried about how tax rises will affect them across the rest of the year.

Businesses in the West Midlands reported exports growth of just 2.1% year on year in Q1 2025. This increase is relatively weak compared to the rest of the UK, lagging behind the national average of 2.8%. According to the BCM, companies anticipate that exports will increase at a slightly faster pace of 2.2% over the next 12 months. However, this will be the slowest expansion in the UK and weaker than the projected national growth rate (4%).

The demand for UK goods from abroad has fallen significantly in recent months, with the knock on that it has affected the region's large manufacturing base. The announcement of a 10% tariff on UK exports to the US for exporters and car manufacturers in the region. The West Midlands is particularly vulnerable, with exports to the US accounting for a higher share of total exports compared to any other UK region.

So going back to the M&A market in the

UK, the general feeling is that it remains difficult. In certain sectors, including healthcare and technology there is more interest, due to consolidation. Capital markets transactions are generally very subdued with the number of new listings on the Stock Exchange having been relatively small.

Private equity's influence

In the other direction there are, however, a steady flow of companies delisting and being taken private by private equity. Shareholders feel these companies are undervalued on the capital markets. There has also been a long-term trend by British pension funds to reduce their holding of equities compared to 20 or 30 years ago, when it was probably close to 50% of pension fund monies that would be invested in equities. Now it's probably about two or three per cent. And that has had a profound impact on the attractiveness of share values in the UK and mid-market companies.

While institutional investors have been reducing their holdings, interestingly, the same institutions often become part owners of these businesses through the private equity funds that they have invested in.

So, institutions continue to invest and take equity stakes in British companies. But rather than buy the shares through the capital markets, they are holding the investments indirectly, through the intermediaries and private equity companies, which they have also invested in. In this form of ownership, the investment is being held and managed in a different way.

There is still a significant wall of private equity money available to invest in established businesses in particular sectors.

Investment into the accountancy sector

Investor interest has picked up for the professional and business services sector including accountancy, which conventionally has had little M&A activity. There have been several accounting firms that have moved from a traditional partnership model to taking additional investment for expansion and development of new technologies from private equity houses.

Notable examples include Grant Thornton, which received external

“Institutions continue to invest and take equity stakes in British companies. But rather than buy the shares through the capital markets, they are holding the investments indirectly, through the intermediaries and private equity companies, which they have also invested in.”

investment from CINVEN and Evelyn Partners, which had significant investment in its accountancy and advisory business from APAX last year and has now rebranded itself as S&W.

MHA undertook a successful stock market listing on AIM in April this year – the largest AIM IPO in the business support services sector in the past five years. They brought additional equity capital into the business for growth and for investing in and using AI to deliver a greater range and level of service for clients.

While MAH successfully demonstrated that the AIM market is open for business, trading at the time of writing shows nearly a five per cent increase in its [share price] since listing, nonetheless, the number of AIM listings remains very subdued compared to its heyday in the mid-90s through to the early 2000s, when there were a significant number of them.

Automotive sector focus

The automotive sector is on the radar as mentioned, and with the sector's complicated supply chains involving goods being shipped in and out of the country for further finishing, it remains particularly sensitive to changes in tariffs. Raw materials might come into the country at the first stage of manufacturing and then be exported to another country for further work, then imported and exported again.

Jaguar Land Rover is a case in point, with the 25% tariff imposed on imported passenger vehicles. While we don't know how this will end, companies in the sector

will be carefully looking at their supply chains and thinking about the best way to react. Whether to offshore, onshore or near-shore is a question they will be considering closely.

Various capital investment strategies might involve strategic M&A to improve the efficiencies of the supply chain and mitigate the impact of permanent shifts in the levels of tariffs. But it's unclear now as to how that will unwind. The question of what a modern day, optimum supply chain looks like continues to be debated by many a business school.

Looking ahead

In the next 12 months, certain sectors will continue to remain attractive. While there remains a significant amount of private equity money and institutional capital available for established businesses in certain sectors such as healthcare and technology, others, such as retail and leisure, are likely to remain subdued. Transactions are patchier and it will all come down to the markets they serve.

Interestingly, there is also a lot of interest around the development of the National Wealth Fund, which is currently in its transitional phase. Once a new chief executive has been appointed, their strategy will become clearer, and the market will be very keen to understand or work with them to get infrastructure projects underway.

Looking ahead, while the M&A market will continue to be tough, overall, it is more likely to be a buyer's rather than a seller's market.



A QUESTION *of insight*

Dr Tim Grasby left a lucrative career as an academic and consultant to form Heligan Group, a highly specialised, intelligence-driven financial services provider. Now, with the business celebrating its 10th birthday, he reflects on his unique career path with HENRY CARPENTER

Tim Grasby will always look at Waterstones in the city centre differently from the rest of us.

For the best part of six months the book shop – or more specifically its cafe – served as Grasby's de facto office while he took an enormous leap of faith in his career.

It wasn't so long ago that this electronics expert and advanced scientist – whose knowledge and expertise were much sought after in the worlds of both academia and commerce – had been sitting pretty with a lucrative career, a hugely supportive wife and a first baby on the way.

We'll come to the reasons why later, but Grasby resolved to flip his career by forming an investment bank – over several months and many hundred cups of tea at the Waterstones coffee shop.

Heligan Group, is celebrating its 10th birthday in June, and is one of the most specialised and respected financial institutions in the region, standing out in its expertise in fields such as national security, crime prevention and public safety. As the oft-used saying goes, if you know you know.

The work at Heligan is based on intelligence and insight, gained through a combination of intelligence collection

through a range of channels, research and experience, very much in the mould of its quietly spoken and unassuming founder.

We meet in the Heligan offices in St Philip's House, overlooking the cathedral in the city centre, and Grasby has taken time out to reflect on a career path which took him from a quantum physicist to heading a boutique investment bank which looks to be on the verge of significant expansion.

It can be argued that his success, and the position in which he finds himself now, all stems from a fascination with electronics.

Born in Kingswinford in the West Midlands, and having left school at the age of 16 to join the family metal-bashing business with a view to eventually taking it over, it dawned on the young Grasby that this was not the career for him.

"I always had a passion for electronics and I just found it fascinating," he remembers.

"From a very early age I was always messing with electronics, be they remote control cars, TVs or video machines, and fixing everything that I possibly could as a youngster."

The die was cast. This interest led him to focus on the sciences, particularly maths, physics and chemistry. He went

back to school to complete his A-levels, a gruelling period as he attended night school, but nonetheless he achieved the grades to gain him entry to University of Warwick to study electronics. Three years later he emerged with a first-class degree.

"I was always very interested in the next generation and what made things go faster. So I went on to do a PhD at Warwick in semiconductor quantum physics – essentially manipulating materials to make electricity go faster through its carriers.

"You can't find these materials in nature, they don't occur. So, you have to change the materials at the atomic level, which is what we did at Warwick, and we had large contracts with all of the big labs globally. I was also a visiting research fellow at Stuttgart University as well on the same subject."

This was in the early noughties, so where and how did he cross the bridge from academia to the financial services sphere?

While he was an academic at Warwick, he had his own consultancy working for both trade and private equity firms, advising on technical due diligence. He also helped a lot of students to commercialise their ideas and was on a government peer review panel for

commercialisation of research into the UK market.

"I found all of it fascinating. But what I did find, especially with the private equity firms, was that they were looking for me to concentrate on technical due diligence.

"Does it do what it says on the tin? Can the patent be circumvented? These were the questions I was being asked – or at least thought I was.

"But it suddenly dawned on me that this wasn't the question. The question was, can you help us to circumvent patents? That made me very uncomfortable. I wasn't going to do that.

"But it did make me think, well, actually there's a better way of doing this. You know, in finance you can make an awful lot of money and still do the right thing.

"In all walks of life, whether in business, research or academia, success is all about the people. And if you don't get on with the people, if you don't trust the people, your reputation is gone very quickly.

"I thought I would really like to set something up which would be doing the right thing by all parties – the staff, the company that you're buying from and the company you're selling to.

"It is perfectly possible to have an ecosystem where you can do the right thing . . . and that's when the idea to start

"We always want to become the experts and then branch out on that discipline from a position of strength. So we might start looking at healthcare as a route for investment."

Heligan kicked in."

Aware that his credentials were hitherto very much academic, Grasby trained and worked at PwC, finishing his time there working in restructuring, followed by a stint at KPMG concentrating on corporate finance.

A directorship at a small regional investment firm followed, and the foundations were in place to launch Heligan, firstly as a one-man band in his lounge at home, before deciding he needed to be in the city for networking and more scope for meeting people.

"I started with a pretty much blank piece of paper at Waterstones coffee shop in Birmingham . . . and it was fantastic," he says.

"You could get a pot of tea which would last for several hours. I was there pretty much all day, every day for the first six months, before deciding that I needed an office."

It's one thing to have the knowledge from both a formidable academic and practical background, but it's quite another to take your knowledge-based service to market.

In the 18 months or so it took Grasby to gain regulatory approvals (many hours were spent in Waterstones filling in forms), he was forced to work on a pro bono basis.

It says something that many of those clients became paying customers and have remained loyal over the last 10 years.

"We've just sold a business for one of those clients and made him an awful lot of money," says Grasby.

Heligan has grown steadily since the firm's inception, with revenue now in the millions, a constantly growing headcount and offices in Mayfair and Dubai to add to the HQ in Birmingham.

But the sense is that while the stats are impressive, what gives Grasby particular pleasure as the firm celebrates its 10th anniversary is the composition of its people, and the specialist niches it occupies when it comes to investment.

The two, as Grasby explains, go very much hand in hand.

"We've got a fantastic partner group, and on the investment side we are massively focused on national security, crime prevention and public safety.

"We always wanted a sector that was aligned to our personalities but also subject to fantastic market dynamics and high barriers to entry."

It's now that Grasby name-checks Keith Bristow, Heligan's executive chairman, whose roles prior to joining the group indicate breadth of experience which must be unsurpassed in the UK.



“How we set up Heligan is very different from the norm. We have got scientists, we’ve got accountants, we’ve got private equity practitioners, we’ve got ex-operational people – and we’ve got sector experts who are recognised globally.”



Bristow enjoyed a 32-year career in law enforcement with roles including chair and director general of the UK’s National Crime Agency, chair of what was the G8 – now G7 – Law Enforcement Group, head of crime for the UK’s police chiefs, and director of the UK’s National Criminal Intelligence Service.

Heligan has been set up around the broadly termed security sector, and it is one in which the group is more than comfortable investing. It also commands the high barriers to entry which Grasby enjoys.

As he points out, the partners at Heligan have to go through various levels of security clearance – with Keith Bristow needing the highest possible.

“It’s not just security clearance. It’s knowledge and networks and understanding. We don’t do anything involving men with guns or bombs. It’s all defensive technologies.

“For instance, we look at digital forensics, we look at secure communications and we look at anti-jamming technologies.

“We are interested in technologies that offer counter countermeasures, as well as countermeasures. It is all about keeping people safe.”

Talent attraction is clearly a key focus for Grasby and the partners.

“How we set up Heligan is very different from the norm. We have got scientists,

we’ve got accountants, we’ve got private equity practitioners, we’ve got ex-operational people – and we’ve got sector experts who are recognised globally.

“We also decided in the early days that we wanted a full holistic offering for clients. So, for example, we go and help a client with a value creation plan.

“We advise on where they might take it from where it is today, to where they want to get it to from a value perspective in five years’ time. We work with them not only on that journey, but also post the sale of the business.

“That’s why we bought a wealth management firm, Hay Hill, and set up Heligan Wealth Management.

“The client might well want to invest as well, so we’ve created this fluid ecosystem which also includes private equity.

“It’s good to have these pillars, but if you haven’t got more intelligence or more understanding than everybody else, your results and your returns will only be up to the average standard. So we’ve set up a business intelligence department operated by ex-security professionals.”

Grasby believes the firm is at an inflection point whereby it has the most solid of foundations – but the time is ripe for it to ‘push on’. After all, there are few more dynamic sectors to have cornered than national security, what with Ukraine, Gaza and seemingly endless cyber security breaches.

With this in mind, he anticipates adding to its current offices with one in North America, to serve both the US and Canada, and perhaps one in Ireland as well. Staff levels will inevitably increase to operate these offices.

He’s proud, too, of the firm’s graduate programme – “it makes us feel quite grown up!” – with four accountants taken on each year from an application list of more than 1,500 this year.

M&A is another cause of Grasby’s good mood, with the group seeing a “big uptick” this year with five deals completed already and several more in the pipeline.

Identifying key sectors is a priority at Heligan, but on the proviso that it has expertise to support them.

“So on the M&A side, for example, we’ve taken on Ramesh Jassal from a competitor, who is a healthcare specialist and will look after life sciences M&A.

“We always want to become the experts and then branch out on that discipline from a position of strength. So we might start looking at healthcare as a route for investment.

“Our motto is ‘we see things differently’ and that’s because we’ve got very good insight. We’ve also got a lot of intelligence which is not really out there in the public domain.”

Insight, intelligence – and you can add integrity . . . it all comes from the top at Heligan.



Through the buyer’s eyes

TIPS FOR PREPARING YOUR BUSINESS FOR SALE

Serial entrepreneurs aside, most business owners will only go through one sale in their lifetime – and selling your business can be a complex and sometimes emotional process with much to consider. But, with the right preparation and by taking a critical look at your business, you can navigate it smoothly and maximise the value you can extract.

A key part of preparing for a sale is understanding the assets, people and processes that will add the most value in a sale and, conversely, identifying any potential ‘skeletons in the closet’ that are best dealt with well in advance of the sale negotiations. It is advisable to take a step back and look at your business through the eyes of a potential buyer: what would they see that would either motivate or concern them? After all, it’s always easier to fix problems before the sale process begins than deal with them during negotiations.

Key considerations

There are a number of considerations to make when preparing to sell your business. These include:

- 1. Contracts:** The value of a business often lies in its contracts with its customers and suppliers. All industries are different but ideally make sure all important contracts are in writing, properly drafted, contain the correct provisions, been signed, and actually exist! Long-term contracts with long notice periods and the ability to pass on costs or implement price rises can add significant value. If you are currently operating on handshakes and goodwill, now is the time to start formalising your important relationships.
- 2. Employees:** If the value of your business is tied to its employees, consider implementing incentive schemes like EMI (Enterprise Management Incentive) schemes. Aligning key employees with the company’s success can help ensure they stay motivated during the sale process and beyond. In addition, having long notice periods and restrictive covenants, stops



STEVE HALKETT,
corporate partner in the
Business Services Group
at Loddors, shares his
advice for business owners
considering a future sale.

key employees leaving with little time to replace them and also prevents them from approaching and potentially stealing important clients, suppliers and employees.

3. Intellectual property: Ensure that your business owns or has the ongoing legal right to use all its IP assets, such as copyright, licences, software, code, know how, trademarks and patents. Also, keep a detailed log of all open-source code used (if any) and adhere to the terms of its use. If these rights are not protected and secure or you have incorrectly used open-source code, the value of your business could be significantly reduced.

4. Location and premises: If the location of your business is crucial to its ongoing success, ensure you have secure tenure on your property, whether through ownership or a long lease, and that there are no unfavourable terms for a potential buyer.

5. Change of control clauses: Review your commercial contracts for change of control clauses that could allow suppliers or

customers to terminate agreements if your company’s ownership changes. Address these clauses early to avoid complications during the sale process.

6. Financial obligations: Check for any bank facilities, grants, or debt that may become repayable upon sale. Ensure these obligations are managed well in advance.

7. Pensions: Be sure to check all employee pension paperwork is in order and compliant and contributions are up to date.

Specialist legal advice

Selling a business can be an emotional experience, especially if you’ve built it over many years and have long-term loyal relationships with employees, suppliers and customers. At Loddors, we have extensive experience in guiding business owners through the sale process. We recognise that for many business owners, this may be their first (and only) business sale. Crucially, we understand the importance of discretion whilst also working to maximise the value of your business. With a corporate team of three partners and five associates, we are big enough to deliver, but small enough to care.

Integrated wider, legal support

Loddors specialises in representing individuals, whether in a private client capacity or in relation to their owner-managed businesses. This unique focus allows us to assist business owners at every stage of their journey. With top-tier and highly respected private client, family, and business services teams, we provide comprehensive support throughout the entire lifecycle of business ownership:

- Estate planning: Wills, trusts, and Family Investment Companies (FICs);
- Asset protection: Trusts, pre-nuptial and post-nuptial agreements; and
- Business growth, acquisitions, and sales: Investments, commercial and IP contracts, employment advice, reorganisations, and sales and acquisitions.



LODDERS

Get in touch

Steve Halkett is a partner in Loddors’ Business Services Group and specialises in corporate and restructuring work, including business sales. For specialist support with preparing your business for sale, contact Steve via the details below.

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For more information, visit: www.loddors.co.uk



New partner at financial services firm

Experienced dealmaker Andy Moore has been appointed partner at financial services firm Headpoint Advisors.

Mr Moore brings over 30 years of corporate finance and M&A experience to the Solihull-based firm.

Throughout his career, Mr Moore has advised on numerous mid-market transactions, including the sale of Apollo Chemicals to US-listed HB Fuller.

His clients include owner-managed businesses, private equity-backed firms, and corporate groups looking to divest non-core operations.

Previously a founding partner at Clearwater and the sole founder of Bracebridge Corporate Finance, he has built and led advisory firms from the ground up.

Mark Wilson, managing partner at Headpoint, added: "We are thrilled to welcome Andy to the team."

"His track record, values and deep experience advising owners and management teams align perfectly with Headpoint's direction."

Faulkner joins investment committee of Jasper Equity

The former chief executive of Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce and Aston Villa FC has been appointed to join the investment committee of Jasper Equity.

Paul Faulkner – who is the founder of advisory business Element45 – will work closely with the Jasper team to help assess opportunities and subsequently engage with partner businesses.

"We've worked closely with Paul in his role as chairman of Ellisons, a Jasper partner business, over the past year and are excited to have him alongside us as we continue to grow and build our

portfolio," said David Tucker, partner at Jasper.

"His experience at navigating complex situations and building high performing teams across a broad range of industries will add significant value to our partner businesses."

Mr Faulkner added: "I've enjoyed working closely with the Jasper team through my involvement with Ellisons, and am looking forward to deepening that relationship further through this role on their investment committee as the business seeks out future opportunities."



Pictured from left: Paul Faulkner, David Tucker, Chris Taylor and Adrian Lamasz (all Jasper Equity)

Heavyweight heads up new Birmingham office

Investment banking firm Cavendish has announced the launch of a new office in Birmingham to be headed by a well-known industry heavyweight.

Set to open this September, the office at Five St Philips will be led by M&A veteran Darren Boocock.

Mr Boocock has been tasked with driving Cavendish's expansion into the regional mid-market. He has a history advising entrepreneurs, owner-managers, and investors, and previously

led Deloitte's mergers and acquisitions team in the region for over a decade.

"Cavendish shares my passion for providing dynamic, ambitious businesses with a compelling blend of locally based advice, backed by true sector expertise and global connectivity," said Mr Boocock.

"We also share a belief in building long-term, trusted relationships, based on adding real value to private companies, their shareholders and investors."



Man with a growth plan

Stephen Drew is the Midlands regional managing partner of professional services firm S&W, which earlier in the year separated from wealth management group Evelyn Partners following new investment from Apex Partners. He tells HENRY CARPENTER what this means for the business – and it's all positive.

To many – colleagues and clients alike – the separation of the accountancy and business advisory business at Evelyn Partners to create S&W has seen it 'come home'.

Because the launch of S&W, which took place at the end of March and was big news in the industry, has in some ways seen the professional services firm come full circle.

The S&W brand is a respectful nod to Smith & Williamson, whose heritage stretches back to its formation in 1881. In more recent years, in 2020, it joined with wealth manager Tilney before re-branding as Evelyn Partners. S&W is one of the fastest-growing UK accountancy firms.

All of this is explained by Stephen Drew, S&W's regional managing partner, who oversees the Birmingham office in Colmore Row, as well as its Cambridge team.

A few months down the line from the launch of S&W as an independent business, and Drew seems happy in the knowledge that the separation of the two businesses was the right move, with clients responding positively and an ambitious growth plan firmly in place.

"We have a clear model for growing our business which, very simply, is based around four pillars," he explains.

"The first is recruiting and bringing in senior hires to grow their own individual practices within the overall business. As a consequence, they will need to bring people in to support them as they deliver that revenue growth.

"Then there are strategic team hires where we can find specialised departments to bring in.

"It is also around the M&A activity – but only where there's purpose. We are a true integrator, not just a consolidator, so we are looking at finding acquisitions that add value to our existing profile.

"And the fourth strand is about building our digital services capability. In other words, we'll be investing in a team that can help to grow in areas such as fractional services, cyber services, digital services, and automation and robotics."

S&W's growth plans are ambitious. In Birmingham – one of the firm's fastest growing offices – Drew believes that the professional services team's current headcount of 150 will grow significantly over the next four years, as S&W looks to build homegrown talent but also bring in suitable hires from elsewhere.

When Drew talks about the growth plans, the recurring theme is people. When bringing professionals into S&W, this applies to teams as well as individuals. For example, it welcomed an international disputes team from KPMG to bolster its existing Forensic Services practice.

While he believes S&W can boast depth and breadth in terms of its service offerings, it will continue to add to its local specialist offering.

"The local team is a full service office, covering off all areas of accounting, assurance, tax and advisory services, including specialists in international M&A

and restructuring," he says.

"The challenge is to get the right people to do the right things, and that's why we have this focus on bringing the right senior hires into the team."

When it comes to market positioning, the auditing team concentrate on privately owned, rather than public entities, particularly at the mid-market level, which can loosely be defined as those within the £50 million to £200 million revenue range. They might be under private ownership or ones acquired by venture capital or private equity organisations.

"We like businesses that are high growth and have complexity because often they need more support," said Stephen.

"Our strapline is 'navigating complexity, creating opportunity' – and that's what we want to be doing with mid-market corporates. That's where we think we can add the greatest value.

"Historically, we have always been good at focusing on businesses' life stages, and M&A is very much part of that conversation – understanding how to get the structuring and financing right.

"We are acting for a lot of local businesses keen to increase their international activity, while navigating some of the geopolitical challenges.

"This is a core strength of ours – navigating that complexity and creating the opportunity for clients to be winners in that changed environment."

It can be said with some certainty that the 14th floor of 103 Colmore Row is an exciting place to be right now.



MAXIMISING M&A SUCCESS

The five things I wish somebody told me sooner

MATT PAWLEY, president of NFP in Europe, recalls his experiences growing a business through an acquisition-based model and shares the key lessons he has learnt along the way.

My journey with NFP has been a story of acquisitions – as both the acquirer and the acquired. The very reason I joined NFP was because they acquired Mackenzie Taylor Benefits Consultants in 2015 – a business I established in 2008. A decade and many M&A lessons learned later, we've gone from a 35-person business in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter to a business with over 600 people across the UK and Ireland that was recently snapped up by Aon, one of the biggest insurance companies on the planet with over 60,000 people worldwide.

Established in the US, NFP (an Aon company) is a specialist people and insurance risk management business that focuses on creating sustainable solutions – both locally and internationally – for organisations and their people.

I have been at the helm of our UK and Ireland operation since 2018 and, through our acquisition-based growth model, we have since acquired some exceptional businesses and people that have been integral to our ongoing success. Not only have we experienced numerous acquisitions ourselves, but we also provide support to some of the world's largest private equity houses, helping them and their clients review the employee benefits and HR policies within potential acquisitions.

We also have specialists that work with businesses post-acquisition to help them manage any organisational or employee benefits restructuring. We've not just been there and got the t-shirt, we also specialise in helping other businesses get their own t-shirt.

Acquisition-based growth can be an effective way of enhancing your market position. However, we only know the benefits of M&A because we've learnt from the mistakes and challenges along the way. As is expected when you're trying to combine two different entities, the consequences of going into deals without weighing up key considerations and having a robust plan can be damaging.

Consider this a 'what I wish somebody told me sooner' style confessional, to help you truly maximise the benefits of acquisitions earlier in your journey than we did.

1. "Don't buy a business just because you want to be bigger"

It may sound condescending to say, but bear with me. Whether it's your first deal or your 100th, being in the position to grow by acquiring a business is exciting and affirms that all your hard work to get to this point has paid off. That being said, it can be easy to let this excitement lead you into the trap of buying a business for the wrong reasons, however innocently or unintentionally.

When we're looking at buying a business, there's one fundamental question

that I need to be able to say 'yes' to before I can proceed – "will this deal make us stronger?". For us, that comes in the form of either deepening our expertise in one or more areas, or broadening our suite of client solutions. The best of us can have our judgement clouded at times, so always have a plan and a watertight rationale as to how the business you're buying adds value to you and your customers, and how your business can add value to them and theirs.

2. "Have the difficult conversations before writing the cheque"

For everyone's sake and in the interest of good outcomes, transparency and effective communication is vital throughout the M&A deal process, especially before money changes hands. There may be details that you're anxious to raise because you think bringing them up may ruin the deal. Just think, though, if certain things are potential dealbreakers, is it not better to raise them early in the process rather than after you've spent a considerable amount of money?

Even small things can get blown out of proportion if they don't come to light until late in the deal, and once the seller feels they have been deceived or a promise has been broken, it can be hard to regain the trust that is so influential to the future success of the partnership.

3. "How you communicate to employees can make or break your deal"

I've stood in front of numerous groups of employees post-acquisition to notify them of a deal and welcome them to the NFP group, and this experience has taught me one key thing. When a company gets bought, its people instantly assume the worst. I hate the thought of people seeing me as the villain, even temporarily, which is why it's so important to effectively allay their fear of changes, articulate your plan for the future and outline how they fit into it.

So much of what a business does, how they do it, and the growth that made them attractive in the first place is down to their people. Reassuring them of their future is pivotal in helping you better retain the experienced talent that can help make an acquisition a success.

Sometimes, buyers feel like they should leave the new employees to settle in – in my experience, the opposite is true. My recommendation would be to always implement a 100-day plan that you share upfront with focusing people, focusing on everything they can expect in the coming months. The fewer surprises, the better.

4. "Do the hard stuff first"

Your IT roles and responsibilities are a necessary yet potentially disruptive part of the M&A journey. This is especially true for data; it's one of the most powerful tools for doing business effectively in the modern world, and failing to get it transferred efficiently can be a real momentum killer.

With anything that stops both businesses working as one post-acquisition, do it first and invest in doing it quickly and well. If you don't dedicate the necessary time and resource to the more arduous jobs, they can hang over you and quickly become a very real, stubborn barrier to progress. In my experience, the quicker you can get your partnership operationally up and running, the better.

5. "When it comes to gauging culture, ask questions and trust your gut"

This applies to businesses on both sides of the deal. Due to the confidentiality of the M&A process, you're naturally unable to speak to the employees of the other party until the deal has closed. Cultural alignment is vital when it comes to merging two businesses, and it can be difficult to get an insight into what it's truly like to work for the company you're negotiating with before you're stood in front of its people.

That being said, I've found that you can tell a lot about the culture of a business from its leadership. As well as assessing whether you get along with them personally, ask the other business' representatives about their people and the employee initiatives they offer; listen to the type of language they use when they talk about their people and pay attention to any possible red flags.

Identifying cultural differences at the preliminary phase is much better than having the penny drop when you're trying to merge two culturally incompatible businesses.

Practical takeaways

A winning strategy for growing through acquisitions is most definitely a case of quality over quantity. To recap, here are some key pre- and post-deal considerations to help you maximise the success of your future M&As:

Pre-deal

- ✓ Have a clear rationale as to why an M&A makes sense and the value the deal can bring to both businesses
- ✓ Address and talk through potentially difficult topics before money changes hands
- ✓ Assess cultural compatibility early; if something feels misaligned, dig deeper before committing to anything

Post-deal

- ✓ Have a 100-day plan ready to go on day one and communicate it with everyone in the acquired business
- ✓ Communication should be top of your list – getting this wrong could cost you valuable talent
- ✓ Don't underestimate the importance of system and data integration – do the hard stuff first and invest in doing it right

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Private equity's potential to turbocharge M&A activity in the West Midlands

STUART SEWELL, head of M&A for the Midlands at KPMG UK, discusses how private equity can unlock growth and drive strategic M&A in the West Midlands

Private equity has long been a catalyst for business transformation, enabling companies to grow, evolve and weather disruption. But in 2025, its role has never been more vital particularly when it comes to enabling M&A that delivers real strategic impact.

In regions like the West Midlands where ambition and resilience are plentiful, true progress now demands more than just drive. It calls for partnerships focused on strategic acquisitions, digital enablement and long-term value creation.

According to KPMG UK's latest Private Equity Review, the Midlands saw a modest increase in deal volumes in 2024, rising from 157 in 2023 to 160. However, the total investment value declined by more than a quarter to £13.3 billion.

While some may view this as a sign of cooling investor appetite, I see it differently. The region is holding its ground in a changing landscape and has the potential to outperform in the years ahead especially if businesses recognise the role private equity (PE) can play in turbocharging M&A activity.

On the surface, a drop in investment value may suggest contraction. But when considered against the national backdrop, with UK-wide deal volumes up just 4.4%, the Midlands' stability speaks volumes.

What it signals is that investors are still engaging with businesses but they are doing so cautiously in light of a fast-changing economic landscape. Deal sizes may be smaller but the ambition remains. And, increasingly, that ambition is channelled into using M&A to scale smartly:

acquiring niche capabilities, entering new markets or modernising digital infrastructure.

This is where private equity can play a transformative role; not just through funding but by helping to source, structure and execute strategic acquisitions that redefine what these businesses can offer.

Growing investor confidence

An uptick in deals in late 2024, spurred by anticipated Capital Gains Tax changes in the Autumn Budget, reflects how policy clarity can drive business decisions. But it also highlights a deeper trend: growing confidence among entrepreneurs and management teams to take bold steps when the path forward is clearer.

Private equity can fuel that momentum by providing not just funding but also vision. For business leaders looking to futureproof their companies, acquisitions are increasingly the most effective way to accelerate digital transformation, add scale or expand reach. PE firms that can bring acquisition pipelines and integration know-how are fast becoming the preferred partners for growth-focused founders.

Looking beyond London

London still dominates UK PE investment, with total deal value reaching £78.1 billion in 2024 but the Midlands accounted for 8.3% of all new PE backing. That figure has room to grow. Investors willing to look past postcode bias will find a region full of untapped potential.

From manufacturing innovation to cutting-edge software and clean energy startups, Midlands-based businesses are already punching above their weight nationally and in many cases globally. With the right strategic acquisitions and backing, these businesses can become market leaders in their fields.

A private equity resurgence

Looking ahead, the conditions for a resurgence in regional PE activity are building. Political stability, renewed trade relations, improving valuations and easing interest rates are aligning in a way we haven't seen in years. Institutional appetite to deploy capital into mid-market opportunities is also rising.

What those investors are looking for are strong fundamentals, ambitious management and a clear, credible route to value creation. In today's environment, that route increasingly runs through strategic M&A. And the Midlands has businesses that fit the bill - businesses that with the right acquisitions and investment partners can scale significantly and sustainably.

At KPMG, we're already working with many such businesses, helping them get investor-ready, prepare for sale and pursue M&A opportunities that unlock real value. We see firsthand the ambition across the region.

What's needed now is boldness both from business leaders and from investors ready to deliver their own growth and in doing so support that of the West Midlands economy.



Promotion at finance firm

Jerroms Group has announced the promotion of Chasz Coulsting (pictured) to head of corporate finance.

The Solihull-based corporate finance firm said Mr Coulsting has expertise in a range of disciplines including mergers and acquisitions, transaction support and due diligence.

He also has experience in a broad range of advisory services including valuations, forecasting, business planning and financial restructuring.

"I am excited to step into this leadership role and continue to work alongside our team and clients," said Mr Coulsting.

"My focus will be on delivering corporate finance and transaction solutions that support businesses in achieving their ambitions."

Private capital plays significant role in the Midlands economy

A new report has found that businesses backed by private capital generate £19 billion for the Midlands economy each year.

Private Capital in the Midlands, which was launched by the British Private Equity and Venture Capital Association in Birmingham, showcases the industry's importance to growth in the nations and regions of the United Kingdom.

In 2024 alone, private capital invested £1.18 billion into businesses in the Midlands. Private capital employs an active ownership model which is a hands-on approach that helps drive value creation in portfolio companies through strategic and operational improvements, whilst supporting wider economic development.

As of 2025, private capital supported 905 businesses in the region, a 15% increase compared to 2023. Venture capital firms are playing a significantly larger role in the Midlands economy compared to a couple of years ago, backing 455 businesses, around 20% more than in 2023.

Private equity currently backs 250 businesses in the region consistent with 2023. These businesses are major employers in the region, supporting over 302,000 jobs in the Midlands – a 32% increase compared with 2023.

As part of the report, the BVCA also made a number of recommendations to the Government and local policymakers.

One of these was increasing proof-of-concept funding and introducing enhanced support measures such as high-quality entrepreneurship training and improved collaboration between academia and investors. These actions would help to overcome commercialisation delays and ensure regional spin-outs receive the necessary support, it said.

Furthermore, BVCA pointed at the need for skills development initiatives like the West Midlands Digital Skills Consortium,



BVCA chief executive Michael Moore

which can improve the investment climate and leverage regional strengths in key sectors such as manufacturing and digital technology.

The report also said the Apprenticeship Levy should be opened to fund non-apprenticeship programs, focusing on STEM skills to create the domestic workforce needed for the economy of the future. Where there is a skills shortage, it said, British visas for top global talent should be simplified with clear criterion for recruiting talent into portfolio companies that recognise the role of venture capital and growth equity.

The new report was launched at the BVCA's Invest Midlands Forum earlier in the summer. The forum, which sponsored by Aon, featured discussions on supporting scale-ups and spin-outs, and on how local

leadership and planning reforms can make the Midlands a more attractive destination for investment.

BVCA chief executive Michael Moore said: "The Midlands is an exciting destination for private capital, whose investment is supporting the development of over 900 businesses in the wider region. These businesses bring real value to local communities through the 302,000 jobs they support.

"However, while there is much to celebrate about the scope and scale of investment in the region's businesses, it could be even more substantial and close the gap with other parts of the country.

"Policymakers, regulators, and industry all have a role to play in helping to facilitate greater levels of investment in the region, to ensure that opportunities are not lost."



Identifying the right exit strategy

ASHLEY KERR, associate at Mills & Reeve law firm, assesses some of the considerations for business owners planning their 'end game'

In the dynamic world of business, every entrepreneur or investor eventually faces the question: "What's the endgame?". Whether driven by financial goals, strategic shifts, or personal reasons, choosing the right exit strategy can significantly impact the future of the business and its stakeholders.

Below are the most common types of exits, each with its own considerations:

■ **Merger or acquisition:** In a merger, two companies combine some/all of their assets in a new company to form a new entity, while in an acquisition, one company purchases another. This is one of the most common exit strategies, especially for startups and growth-stage businesses. This offers immediate liquidity and the potential for strategic alignment.

■ **Initial public offering (IPO):** An IPO involves offering shares of a private company to the public via a stock exchange. It's often seen as a prestigious milestone and a way to raise significant capital. This offers access to public capital, increased visibility, potential for high returns, but in turn gives rise to regulatory scrutiny and market volatility.

■ **Management buyout (MBO):** In an MBO, the business' existing management team purchases the business. This ensures a continuity in leadership and a smoother transition. MBOs can be financed by a variety of methods, including:

■ **Private equity:** A private equity funder may be prepared to back the management team of a firm that has the potential to grow with the benefit of the funding and broader business expertise that the private equity house can bring; or

■ **Vendor:** Some sellers may be prepared to loan the purchase price to the buyer, allowing them (or effectively, the business) to pay the price over a number of years. The seller will be exposed to the future performance of the business, and will want to obtain assurance that proceeds will be taxed as capital.

A buyer will usually require a seller to provide contractual assurances as to many legal and operational aspects of the business, covering areas such as employment, litigation, contracts, real estate and tax (although if the buyer is already involved in the business this might not always be appropriate). Dealing with any issues before a buyer conducts due diligence investigations can reduce the extent of such assurances being required. All businesses have exposure to a range of legal risks – demonstrating an awareness of these and showing that there's a strategy for dealing with them gives sellers a stronger negotiating position. Below are common issues which arise on an exit:

■ **Share history and ownership:** All companies must keep registers and make filings at Companies House regarding their shareholdings. We frequently encounter companies that have no registers evidencing share ownership or have registers that are outdated or inconsistent. Who owns the shares goes to the heart of value and can quickly stop a deal in its tracks. Addressing such issues before a buyer identifies them can make it far easier to find a solution.

■ **Contracts:** Missing contracts, verbal agreements and onerous clauses in contracts are common. Depending upon the importance of the contracts, this may be a concern for the buyer as it's often the contracting arrangements that underpin a company's business operation and performance.

■ **Employees:** Are staff engaged on terms acceptable to a buyer? Are they compliant with employment law? We often find that many contracts for key/senior staff don't contain restrictive covenants preventing them from poaching customers and staff. You may want to keep an exit process confidential, at least initially, and that's much easier to do if any changes are made ahead of commencing the process.

■ **Intellectual property ("IP"):** Whether it's the website or the secret recipe for your widgets, IP is often sitting in the wrong place, such as with employees, business owners or even third-party contractors. Buyers need to know that the company it's buying owns the IP that it relies upon to run its business or has sufficient arrangements in place for its use. Assignments of IP and/or licences of IP may be required and should be sorted out well in advance.

Choosing the right exit strategy depends on the company's size, growth stage, market conditions, and the goals of its stakeholders.

Whether aiming for a high-profile IPO or a management buyout, planning ahead and understanding the implications of each option is key to a successful transition. Equally, having a good understanding of the potential issues that can give a buyer cause for concern and rectifying them ahead of commencing the exit process, means that a buyer is less likely to seek to reduce the price to account for legal issues in the business.

The important point is to take the initiative, speak to your advisors and kick the tyres of the business now – it's never too early!





It pays to be diligent

KIM KLAHN, of law firm Clarke Wilmott, assesses the importance of verification, investigation and audit of a potential deal in today's volatile economic environment

Due diligence, whether that be commercial, financial or legal (to name a few), is important for any acquirer for it to assess the commercial viability of the transaction, to reduce its exposure to risk, to negotiate the purchase price from its findings and to smooth the transition process post completion. However, the importance becomes heightened in a volatile economic environment.

The market is currently experiencing uncertainty and volatility due to a number of factors including a change in government, geopolitical tensions and instability and rising inflation. As such, acquirers should be keen to identify potential adverse impacts and legal risks by conducting thorough due diligence processes.

First and foremost, an acquirer needs to conduct a risk assessment on the target to fully understand the implications the market may have. Economic downturn can see a financially stable business turn quickly into a distressed business so a full understanding of the financials and its

current trading situation is required.

Borrowing can be more expensive and the opportunities with lenders can decrease so a deep understanding of the capital and cash requirements are a necessity. Geopolitical events, such as the implication of tariffs, could have a significant impact on businesses where material costs and supply chain efficiencies could affect competitiveness and production lead times.

It is usual as part of a legal due diligence exercise to review a business' contractual commitments. This becomes more robust with market uncertainty as a full review of what those commitments entail and how the market will affect those commitments is required.

For instance, particularly long-term commitments with limited flexibility on price alterations may not be welcomed with rising inflation. Also, if businesses have committed to meet certain levels of supply, in a downturn with tariffs affecting production times, businesses can be at risk of breaching contractual obligations which

could cause the loss of the contract and other financial penalties.

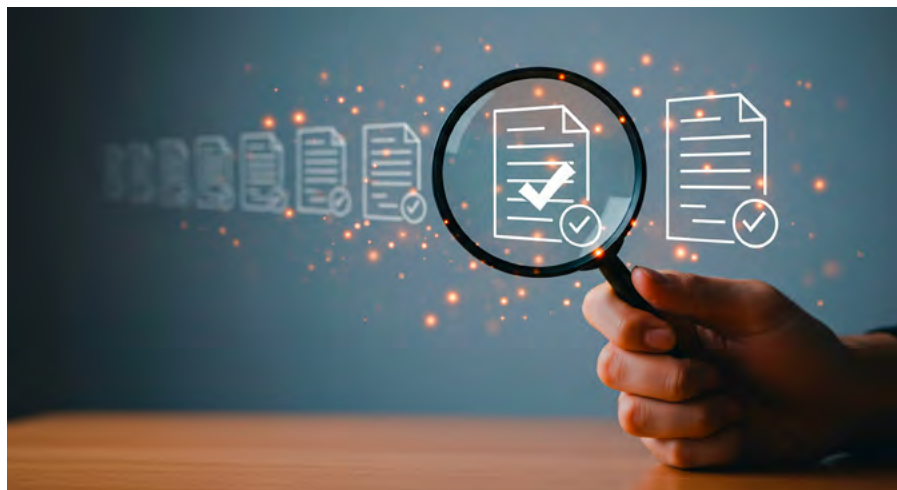
In times of uncertainty, we often see a more litigious culture as stresses mount. A thorough investigation should therefore be conducted into matters where the target could be subject to litigation as the potential costs, damages and reputational harm could be substantial for the acquirer. Matters where parties may have turned a blind eye, including compliance matters, are not so easily forgiven in a difficult market.

It has been reported recently that a few big brands on the high street have been subject to cyber extortion and cybersecurity breaches resulting in substantial losses.

Smaller, owner managed businesses do not escape either. In tough times investment into security decreases, increases in human error occurs and cybercriminals take advantage of the vulnerabilities created by the market. Therefore, with the threat of cyber attacks, acquirers should audit the security measures and systems in place to assess the risk of attacks and any investment that may be needed.

Talent is also a consideration. Does the target have key personnel who could be a flight risk if acquired? Does the current management of the target have the skills to navigate a volatile market? Will the acquirer be able to integrate personnel for the strategic fit?

If the acquirer has conducted strategic assessments to look at the issues, including the market, on the target business, instructed accountants to carry out in-depth reviews of the target's financial position and solicitors to look at the legal risks affected the target business and the transaction, the acquirer can go into the transaction with full knowledge of potential risks and an understanding of the real transaction value.



*Kim Klahn is a partner in Clarke Willmott's Birmingham office where she works in the corporate department.



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A common purpose

What do a membership organisation, a lobbying firm, a new digital media platform, an awards event and a life sciences festival have in common? The answer is, they are all operated by the One Thousand Trades Group, a collection of companies united by shared values. HENRY CARPENTER meets its main players.

It's a Wednesday morning and a group of formally dressed men – and a woman – are finishing a meeting over a cup of coffee in Birmingham's Hotel du Vin, as is their weekly custom.

At first there seems little to connect them except the fact that they evidently get on as individuals. There is clearly room for light banter amongst the more serious discussions.

Dig a little deeper though and there is much more to this gathering than a get-together between pals.

The ensemble comprises representatives of the One Thousand Trades Group, a collection of different companies and ventures referencing the moniker for which Birmingham was once renowned. The natures of their businesses are also hugely contrasting – which, as its members explain, is rather the point.

Paul Cadman is one of the region's more high-profile characters from the business world, with active participation in numerous companies and charitable organisations.

The CEO of Starting Point Recruitment, he is a NED on several boards. He's what might be called an 'enabler'.

He is also the CEO of the group, and he explains the ethos of the group and how it came to be formed.

"We represent a number of different

companies and entities with varying offerings, but we all come from a position of good will," he says.

"For me, being a proud Brummie who is probably best known for supporting businesses and making things happen, it's about commercialising that shared vision."

He looks around the table, starting with Richard Fallon, the founder of membership group, the Technology Supply Chain, and the mastermind behind the Innovation Awards.

"I've worked with Richard and the TSC since 2019, and bumped into Gary and Josh in about 2017. They were an enormous help for the Art4Charity project which I ran during the pandemic. I first met Amy back in 2012, so we all go back quite a long way."

The 'Gary', to whom he refers, is Gary Sambrook, the former MP for Northfield who narrowly lost his seat at the last general election. He has since set up his consultancy, Walk Through Walls, to help break down barriers for businesses, through his political and policy acumen. 'Josh' is Josh Moreton, Sambrook's right-hand man both currently and when he was active in Westminster.

Amy Deakin is, one suspects, the oil in the OTTG cogs, ensuring that all elements are running smoothly. She is also taking a lead in organising Life Sciences Week, a

pioneering festival for the West Midlands which is taking place in September to celebrate the region's thriving life and health sciences industry.

The table is completed by Simon Evans, a former journalist and head of comms at Birmingham Airport who has taken on the editorship of West Midlands News, the group's new digital media platform . . . more of which later.

But back to Cadman, an ebullient, glass-half-full character with a nose for opportunities. If there is one particular driving force in the room, it is him.

"We have these different companies and it made sense to bring them all together," he says.

"There is a commonality between us in that everything that we do is for the good. We promote things, we make things happen, we work hard for the region and the people in it.

"Commercially we very astute and we do well – but it's within moral boundaries. Everything we do has a charitable angle to it, and that's incredibly important to all of us. If you're not interested in that you won't be around our breakfast table. We've reached £100,000 in raising funds for charities across the group companies."

"It's interesting," says Fallon. "We are all very different personalities. But we have the same values as individuals which are

also adopted by the group – honesty, integrity and loyalty.

“The bulk of our revenue is made outside the region, and we are very International looking. But this chimes perfectly with the ethos of the ‘city of a thousand trades’ label; Birmingham was the workshop of the world making things right here to be exported abroad.”

Moreton makes the point that the groups has been working together individually some time before they coalesced under the OTTG umbrella.

It made complete sense practically, he says, to share costs and save on duplications when paying for human resources.

He also explains how the company is structured. The five components of the group are Technology Supply Chain, Walk Through Walls, One Thousand Trades Events – which operates Life Sciences Week and the Innovation Awards – and West Midlands News.

The majority of the shares are held by the OTTG, so it has a controlling interest as an entity, but each of the individuals has equity in the group.

Nor is the group pulling up the drawbridge any time soon. It currently has three more businesses close to joining the group.

I wonder if he can be more specific.

“We’re attempting to acquire a London-based public affairs agency and also a recruitment firm, and then there’s a Liverpool-based web and SEO agency which we’re in talks with,” says Moreton.

“We want to become a one-stop shop for businesses to grow and overcome barriers.

“Someone might come to one of us with a brief, and while one of the individual companies might not be able to oblige in



Paul Cadman

“There is a commonality between us in that everything that we do is for the good. We promote things, we make things happen, we work hard for the region and the people in it.”

full, we would be able to point to one of our colleagues. It’s about being able to offer a holistic package to help people overcome their problems.”

Sambrook concedes that there are gaps in the group which they would like to fill.

“We are looking at two other areas in particular,” he says. “The first is a bigger marketing offer and the other is about public-sector procurement.

“The procurement rules are constantly changing. We want to follow policy by looking at how SMEs and local businesses can tap into the potential of growing from a public-sector context.

“And then there’s the global space as

well, trade investment and accessing new markets, particularly in Africa.”

Despite Sambrook’s party affiliation, the group is politically agnostic.

“It’s about that expanded footprint,” he continues.

“The way we work is through an associate model. We have about 20 associate partners who all have individual different skills and experience which they can bring in.

“One of our partners is based up in Edinburgh. He used to be the SNP Chief Whip, so it’s about how we open up a cross-party look as well. We’re really focused on that.”

We come now to West Midlands News, the online platform the group launched in the spring.

It was created, Cadman explains, to shine a light on some of the really positive things which are happening in the region, but which aren’t necessarily being picked up by other outlets.

All it needed was an editor, and fortunately one was ready-made in the form of Evans who, while working at Birmingham Airport, had got to know Sambrook.

The former journalist got wind of the fact that Cadman had registered the domain name, and offered his services, particularly when he heard what OTTG had in mind for it.

“The point of West Midlands News is to counter clickbait and negativity with trusted news, views and interviews,” he says.

“Sensationalist clickbait is a commercial move – the more clicks on a pay-per-view page, the better for the advertiser and the platform, but not the reader. We’re putting the reader first.”

Business, tech and life sciences are



Amy Deakin

“We are looking to run approximately 50 events across the region during Life Sciences Week, and the schedule is starting to fill up nicely.”

three of the main headings on the website, but it also covers events and viewpoints.

“We also reserve the right to talk about anything going on in the world, whether it’s news, politics, sport or whatever,” says Evans.

“We only launched in the spring and it’s been a case of so far, so good. We’ve got SEO guys helping us with the rankings, but the main thing is, we’ve got lots of articles which we think are worth reading.”

Moreton, who along with Cadman is one of the other regular editorial contributors from the group, makes the point that there is no agenda to the site, and that it prides itself on being balanced.

He adds: “Because we have the viewpoint section, if we post an article which someone disagrees with, they are very welcome to write a viewpoint disagreeing with us, and we’ll publish it . . . as long as it’s not absolute rubbish.”

One of the quieter members of the group so far has been Richard Fallon. As well as founding and running the Technology Supply Chain, he is also known as the exuberant driving force behind the Innovation Awards, which is operated by the group’s events arm.

The awards, which this year are being staged on November 21, are now a firm fixture in the business calendar, despite only being three years old.

They pack out the Eastside Rooms with innovative businesses and individuals from this region and beyond, and this year it is already shaping up to be another great event, according to Fallon.

“We’ve done very well for nominations – much better than at the same point in time last year – we’ve also got some great new sponsors. We now need everyone to start voting.”

Before the Innovation Awards though, the OTTG has another event – or rather series of events – to organise, in the form of Life Sciences Week which is taking place September 15 to 19.

This is as much Amy Deakin’s domain as anyone else’s – and, inevitably given this is the augural event, it’s a daunting proposition.

No matter, at time of going to press the preparations are well underway, with an advisory board appointed, scores of events lined up and a handful of prominent speakers from the industry already booked. Several sponsors have also come forward, seemingly only too happy to have their brands associated



Simon Evans

“The point of West Midlands News is to counter clickbait and negativity with trusted news, views and interviews.”

with the event.

“We are looking to run approximately 50 events across the region Life Sciences Week, and the schedule is starting to fill up nicely,” she says.

“However, we would still welcome some more events and I would like to appeal to any professionals from this amazing sector to consider hosting one.”

One wonders what next for OTTG. Perhaps it’s best left to Cadman to neatly summarise.

“We are constantly looking at opportunities to expand, and that’s not going to stop,” he says. “But we are choosey.”



Gary Sambrook

“The way we work is through an associate model. We have about 20 associate partners who all have individual different skills and experience which they can bring in.”



Josh Moreton

“Someone might come to one of us with a brief, and while one of the individual companies might not be able to oblige in full, we would be able to point to one of our colleagues.”



Richard Fallon

“We are all very different personalities. But we have the same values as individuals which are also adopted by the group – honesty, integrity and loyalty.”

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Clients include the University of Birmingham, No5 Barristers Chambers, In-Comm Training & Business Services, Stoford, Lioncroft Wholesale, the Black Business Magazine, Birmingham Law Society iSE, Bushell Investment Group, Bowbrook Financial Planning, Simmer-Down Arts, Point S UK and National Association of Jewellers. AllinAll has also been the official event management partner for Birmingham Tech Week since its creation six years ago, the UK's largest regional tech festival and conference.

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What Do Our Clients Think?

Dr Jason Wouhra OBE
CEO Lioncroft Wholesale Limited



Having worked with Emma and AllinAll events a number of times over the years in a variety of different types of events such as Festivals, Corporate Gala Dinners and Private parties, I must say that her approach is wonderful and she is great to work with. Emma and her team have a sincere, sensible and efficient way of working which blend modernity, creative flair and bring a point of difference to the events which she organises. She always brings events in on budget and adhering to time constraints.

Having worked with Emma on many of our events before, be it personal parties and corporate events for many years I wouldn't want to work with anyone else as she does a wonderful job every single time.

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Charles Rapson
Strategic Lead West Midlands Combined Authority
(Social Economy Growth Programme)



AllinAll Events managed an intensive week long series of events across the region in November 2024 as part of the Social Economy Drive. The main events they managed exceeded even my ambitious expectations. The team were incredibly professional, tremendous focus on detail, highly flexible in dealing with all eventualities and all done with humour and generosity. I'd highly recommend AllinAll and will certainly use them again.

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Tim Lloyd

Successful first quarter

Midlands quantity surveyors CQS Solutions saw turnover rise by nearly 30% in the first quarter of the year, driven largely by increased demand from private-sector construction clients.

The firm, which has bases in Birmingham, Telford and Welshpool, says March was the strongest month of a hugely successful opening quarter, which saw sales growth of 28.5%.

Company owner Tim Lloyd said the success was helped by the construction sector responding quickly to the Government's new housebuilding targets.

"We are pleased with the start we have made to the year, with all three of our offices reporting strong demand and healthy sales books," he said.

"There have been clear signs of an uplift in private sector construction investment from the start of the year, largely as a response to the Government's call for 1.5 million new homes to be built over the next five years.

"But we have also seen plenty of growth in the education sector, where we have secured work on school projects."

Creative agency takes Pride back to its roots

A city centre creative agency has been working with Birmingham Pride 2025 to help reconnect the two-day festival to its roots and protest work.

Studio 3.5, formed 12 months ago by creative and marketing specialists Laura Hanlon and Adam Smith, were brought in to carry out the project.

The team developed 'No Pride without protest, no protest without Pride' after a series of deep-dive discovery sessions, giving equal weight to its activist roots, serious advocacy work and the joy of celebration.

A new campaign – 'pride makes it possible' – captures the power of the

Pride movement to bring people together and celebrate progress.

"As a relatively young agency, we were delighted to be given the huge responsibility to rediscover what makes Birmingham Pride so special," said Laura Hanlon.

"It is a movement that does so much for the Midlands and raises so much money for charity.

"The team got to the heart of what the movement stands for and delivered what we believe is a creative campaign and new brand story that brings the organisation's advocacy and activism to the centre of the celebrations."



Adam Smith and Laura Hanlon

Partnership announced

The Greater Birmingham, Black Country and Coventry & Warwickshire Chambers of Commerce have announced a partnership with an early-stage tech firm to gather insights on software development in the region.

B13 specialises in venture mapping, a methodology that enables non-technical innovators to clearly define what software needs to be built to meet business goals with minimal risk.

Research by the Business Commission West Midlands found that, in 2024, 52% of firms were expecting to increase their investment in technology and artificial intelligence, with AI and digitisation identified as one of five key levers for economic growth.

This new project aims to understand how businesses across the WMCA are faring in developing new software solutions and the challenges they face.

For the purposes of the research, software development can include activities such as building a mobile app, developing new digital tools, developing bespoke CRM systems, creating customer portals or automating internal processes.

Raj Kandola, acting deputy chief executive of GBCC, said: "Software development presents a vital opportunity for businesses across the West Midlands to innovate, improve efficiency and support economic growth.

"To fully realise this potential, this research aims to produce a clear picture of the outlook for software development in the region, the challenges firms are facing and future needs in software development."

Transport tech firm reports growth

A West Midlands transport tech firm has reported a 34% increase in revenue, with ten of its autonomous vehicles now operating across the world.

Aurrigo International plc, which employs more than 110 people at its Advanced Engineering Centre and across technical offices in Canada, the US and Singapore, has seen sales for its last financial year hit £8.9 million.

The firm says this has been boosted by several commercial agreements with airports to deploy its digital simulation platform Auto-Sim and its Auto-DollyTug electric vehicle for moving luggage and cargo around terminals.

Growth in its autonomous division – up 433% – was the highlight of 2024 and was supported by another strong performance in automotive, where the company continues to supply precision components and wiring harnesses to a host of car makers.

David Keene, CEO of Aurrigo International, said that 2024 was another year of real progress, supported by significant revenue growth in the autonomous division.

"Awareness around the benefits of autonomous technology across airside



operations is growing rapidly, helping to support our progress and the long-term outlook for the business," he said.

"Both our product and commercial teams have worked tirelessly this year to expand our customer base and improve and broaden our product range. With first mover advantage, a growing range of proof points and industry support, our go-to-market capability is stronger than ever."

April saw the global unveiling of Auto-

Cargo, the company's largest autonomous vehicle which can carry a total payload of 16,500kg using precision automation, advanced obstacle detection and real-time fleet coordination to optimise on-the-ground performance.

Backed by funding from Innovate UK and CCAV, the new vehicle's next stop is to move heavy cargo loads to and from aircraft at the UPS hub at East Midlands Airport, the UK's second largest cargo terminal.

Bishop Fleming wins at Tolley's Tax Awards



Accountancy firm Bishop Fleming has scooped the Best Tax Practice in a Regional Firm accolade at the Tolley's Tax Awards 2025.

It follows a year of sustained double-digit growth and the launch of an office in Birmingham city centre.

Chris Walklett, partner and head of corporate tax, said: "Winning this award is recognition of our tax team's expertise and dedication.

"It also reflects our ongoing investment in our people and the business.

"Over the past year, we have strengthened our team with senior hires from the 'big four' and other top 10 firms, and have enhanced our client experience through technology and process innovation."

Picture: Telling Photography

Successful launch of Midlands SME finance collaboration

advertisement feature

Businesses unable to secure finance from high street banks and loan companies for growth and job creation can now gain support from a groundbreaking collaboration of Midlands funders.

Midlands SME Finance has been organised by six leading West Midlands finance providers who specialise in lending to small to medium-sized enterprises to fill a gap in the region's lending market.

Community development financial institutions ART Business Loans, BCRS Business Loans and Coventry & Warwickshire Reinvestment Trust have joined forces with invoice finance lender FlexABL and community-based lenders UKSE and Frontier Development Capital to leverage their collective strengths to inform companies and key players in the local economy.

Promoting their services under the Midlands SME Finance banner, the partners want to raise the collective profile of lending options in the market as alternatives to taking short term loans at high levels of interest from online lenders.

The Midlands SME Finance providers each have a flexible approach in determining the viability of a business and a different risk appetite to banks, which allows them to lend to business who are otherwise excluded.

Their partnership comes at a time when companies are navigating a complicated economic environment, fresh from the increases in National Insurance which came into effect soon after recent shocks such as the Ukraine invasion and high levels of inflation.

Each of the partners is passionate about

the impact they can make for smaller enterprises, many of whom feel unserved by mainstream lenders.

The Bank of England reports that SMEs account for 60% of the total employment and 50% of the turnover of the UK private sector but relative to large businesses, they tend to have more limited access to finance.

A Bank of England survey completed by 2,885 SMEs found that after concerns about uncertainty in the economic environment the most popular reasons for businesses to invest too little was the inability to self-fund from cash reserves cited by 29 per cent of respondents, followed by the inability to access finance on reasonable terms cited by a further 20 per cent.

The six finance providers behind Midlands SME Finance all offer debt finance and support through a relationship-based approach, with particular emphasis on supporting economic growth in disadvantaged areas.

Paul Stokes, of FlexABL, explains the goals set by the partners in joining forces. He said: "We all want to help businesses as they face the challenging economic environment as we have shared approaches around understanding businesses looking for finance, so coming together as Midlands SME Finance seems the perfect way to showcase the opportunities available to business owners and a network of professionals."

While there is overlap in their approach to lending, the six partners believe each has a complementary strength or specialism which allows them to work with the widest range of SMEs, referring enquiries to the appropriate specialist on a case by case basis.

Steve Walker, CEO of ART Business Loans, explains: "The time has never been better for the six partners to work together to present the many options out there for lending under the banner of Midlands SME Finance as we are meeting the market need in greater ways than ever."



From left, Steve Grice UKSE, Steve Walker ART Business Loans, Sheridan Sulskis CWRT, Stephen Deakin BCRS Business Loans, Andy Green Frontier Development Capital and Paul Stokes FlexABL

To launch Midlands SME Finance with a splash, the new partners hosted 120 delegates at a launch expo at Edgbaston Stadium in Birmingham on May 20.

The lunchtime expo enabled attendees to speak directly to the partners about the finance opportunities available for businesses struggling to access funds from traditional sources. Attendees were able to network with delegates and enjoy the complimentary lunch.

Keynote speaker Rhys Herbert, senior economist at Lloyds, briefed the audience on the financial outlook, including the forecasts for growth and the impact of US tariffs on international trade.

The latest Lloyds survey of businesses showed the West Midlands was the second most confident UK nation or region behind only the North East, he said.

Stephen Deakin, chief executive of BCRS Business Loans said: "The success of the Midlands SME Finance expo validates our collaborative approach to providing accessible finance."

"We hear often from businesses like those attending who are unable to access traditional lending so we look forward to helping them achieve their growth ambitions."

"We are working together to provide accessible finance to SMEs unable to get the help they need from high street banks and loan companies, supporting economic growth in disadvantaged areas."

Another CDFI, Coventry & Warwickshire Reinvestment Trust, delivers business

loans and support for startups as well as established businesses.

CEO Sheridan Sulskis said: "We know from the local market that there are businesses out there who want to access finance for growth plans, job creation or to stabilise so we aim to show the range of help available locally from the partners and their connections."

"The enthusiasm we have witnessed confirms what we have long suspected, that there is significant demand for alternative finance options."

Following the success of the inaugural event, the Midlands SME Finance partners are discussing plans to hold further information sessions and networking opportunities.

Paul Stokes, of FlexABL, said the response to date had surpassed the partners' hopes, giving a positive outlook for future success.

He said: "The turnout for our launch expo exceeded our expectations and reinforces our belief in the importance of collaboration."

"By coming together as Midlands SME Finance, we have demonstrated the comprehensive range of funding solutions available to businesses navigating today's challenging economic landscape."



**Midlands
SME Finance.**

ART
BUSINESS LOANS

BCRS
BUSINESS LOANS
We believe in you

CWRT

fdc
Frontier
Development
Capital
part of Mercia Asset Management PLC

flexabl
we make cashflow

ukse.50
years

advertisement feature



Cow & Sow is a high-end steak restaurant which has opened in the Paradise estate, much to the delight of meat lovers in the city centre. The entrepreneur behind this distinctive and growing brand learnt his trade the hard way, as JON GRIFFIN discovers when meeting him.

Pictures: Faydit Photography

Mark Warburton is contemplating the first six months of his £1 million restaurant venture in the heart of Birmingham.

"It's the best thing I have ever done. I love a brand – building a brand is the best," he says.

That brand is steak restaurant Cow & Sow, one of the latest culinary incarnations in a city which has transformed itself as a dining destination over the past 40 years.

Back in the 1970s, Birmingham had little to offer the discerning diner other than the Plough and Harrow on the Hagley Road, an oasis in a culinary desert.

Four decades later, the city centre and beyond is dotted with Michelin-starred restaurants alongside a vast array of ethnic choices to satisfy the most demanding of taste buds – including steak lovers.

It's a far cry from the staple dining experience of many who lived through the 60s and 70s, when a pleasant night out at a Berni or Schooner inn invariably revolved around a prawn cocktail starter, steak and chips and Black Forest gâteau. Life has moved on for today's more sophisticated palates since those more innocent times.

And one of the newest entrants into this often cut-throat culinary landscape is West Country native Mark Warburton, a man who has been steeped in the hospitality trade for as long as he can remember.

"I was six months old when my parents moved above a pub near Bristol. It was called the Old House at Home at Burton, near Castle Combe," he says.

"Back then, the pub trade was really tough but if you really engaged with it – and we lived it – you could do quite nicely.

"We were renowned for food. Where every other pub was doing chicken in a basket, they were doing alligator steaks or kangaroo. They were amazing steaks and they got a real reputation."

Rapidly learning at his late father David's knee, son Mark soaked up the many tricks of the pub trade, an often-unforgiving business sector.

"The hospitality trade funded my private education but I was never very academic to be honest, so I skipped university and got my hands dirty.

"I worked full-time with my dad and managed that pub for a bit. I got fired by my dad when I was 17 for turning up late and probably flirting with the waitresses, not taking it seriously. He reinstated me the following week but it taught me a lesson."

Warburton has been learning how to survive in the hospitality trade ever since those distant days – and looks back on his father with poignant memories as he sits in the plush interior of his Chamberlain Square Cow & Sow eatery all these years later.

"My dad was awesome but sadly he died of heart disease in 2017. He was a character and was switched on, really good at what he did. My grandparents had a pub and my uncle has a brewery. It's in the blood.

"Everything I do is from experience. I am bred into it and have lived it since I was a toddler. There are not a lot who can say they have stuck at it for that long because it's a tough old trade."

Notwithstanding the round-the-clock demands of the pub sector, Warburton had found his vocation, ending up with four award-winning gastro pubs with rooms in the Bristol and Bath area, all five-star rated.

"From a young age, I was driving it with dad as a mentor. I think that is what set me up because he was a calming influence."

That paternal influence would prove crucial as the Warburtons negotiated the alarming credit crunch of 2007-08.

"I remember the bank pulled the plug and dad and I would max out £20,000 worth of credit cards overnight. Those were the days when I could put a credit card through the card machine and it would drop in the account the next day.

"I would pick up the bills, get the



weekend takings in, and then I would pay us all back, so we were juggling cash constantly.”

But Warburton junior found himself at a crossroads when his father fell ill.

“On my 30th birthday I found myself on my hands and knees scrubbing bathroom floors in bedroom enstutes. I made breakfasts and cleaned rooms six days a week.

“The business has been my life. I know it inside out, it’s really in my blood, I am probably unemployable now.”

After surviving the credit crunch, Warburton again found himself in the eye of the storm when Covid forced pubs and restaurants up and down the land to close their doors during lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.

“Covid was the turning point for me because I put 70 people on furlough across the four pubs. I was on my own making decisions.

“I decided overnight to sign-write a van and did home deliveries of food and drink from an online shop. I helped my butcher out, sold some meat through him and the veg man as well. In the first lockdown, just in my van alone, I turned over £120,000.”

With the lessons of Covid under his belt, Warburton took time to reflect on his future.

“I put some cash in the bank, kept me busy and it also gave me time to think. I realised that I was exhausted, drained because of the firefighting.

“Operating a hotel business was a constant battle with breakdowns, cracked mirrors, broken beds, soiled sheets and so on. You are also battling with the customer demands. A client in our village pub would want a completely different experience from the person sat in our suburban pub business.

“It was never about building a brand, it was always about adapting to please and survive.”

Warburton’s pub firefighting days were finally drawing to a close as he set his sights on an entirely new business vision – his own steak restaurant group.

“I had wanted a steak restaurant for years and I was convinced that I could compete in Bristol. I knew I really wanted to build a brand.”

Warburton defied the grim realities of lockdown to plough around £500,000 into his pub empire in readiness for a sale – and offloaded two pubs to West Country brewing outfit Butcombe for a cool £4.6 million.



“It paid off my Covid loans, paid off all my debt and the tax due on the sale. I felt like it was me, I didn’t have a family legacy on my shoulder.

“I had already started Cow & Sow as we came out of Covid. I knew that was my direction, so I had all my focus on that. I had got something with Cow & Sow that was just mine – no one can ever say that it came from my parents.”

Warburton launched his first steak restaurant in Bristol city centre in January 2022. “I had to max out plenty of credit cards to get it over the line and renovate it. I spent about a quarter of a million pounds on that one. Those credit cards were paid back within six months, which was great.”

Warburton, today a 42-year-old father of two, is refreshingly upfront about many of the challenges he has faced, from scrubbing floors in family pubs to running his own plush steak restaurant in the heart of the UK’s second biggest city.

“Every mistake I have made has actually

impacted me and my family – not just the owners of a company – because it has always been me. It has always been my mortgage or my rent on the line. I am not trying to please a board and spend their money.

“Every penny I spend is mine and I think that is the difference. At the same time I can make decisions with the click of my fingers because it stops with me.”

Within 12 months of launching his first Cow & Sow outlet in Bristol city centre, Warburton had opened a second site in the city’s fashionable Clifton district – and then turned his attention to Birmingham.

“We opened in December 2024. I had spent well over £1 million here. I didn’t know the city but a couple of people mentioned that I could do well in Birmingham and that made me ponder.”

Warburton predicts that the Chamberlain Square diner – which has already created between 30 and 40 jobs – will prove a ‘slow burn’.

“I am expecting this one to take off

over time as we have got to build our reputation outside of our homeland,” he says.

“At our latest training day I openly apologised to the teams across the group for the timing of our opening here. We were originally due to open spring 2024, then it moved to June and eventually got pushed to November.

“When this got pushed to early December I had a tough decision to make – scramble and rush to open pre Christmas or stick to the training and launch schedules and delay to January?

“Unfortunately the cash was running

“We pioneer grass-fed British beef. We are meticulous about the seasoning, the cooking on a hot gas chargrill, the basting and most importantly, the resting of the meat. We let the meat do the talking.”

thin and I needed to open in December, to the detriment of the training and the brand standards. We were stretched upon launch and we didn’t quite hit the mark in Birmingham until well into the new year.

“For that I took sole responsibility, but we are in a really good place now. Lesson learned!

“We pioneer grass-fed British beef. We are meticulous about the seasoning, the cooking on a hot gas chargrill, the basting and most importantly, the resting of the meat. We let the meat do the talking.”

Single cut steaks vary from flat iron, sirloin and ribeye to fillet, pork ribeye

and pork tomahawk, while sharing steaks include picanha, tomahawk, porterhouse and chateaubriand.

In tandem, Cow & Sow has also already chalked up a notable industry accolade, a certified B Corporation plaudit, recognising that the company meets high standards of social and environmental impact.

“We are very proud of this. There are only a handful of hospitality companies in the country which have got a B Corp. It took over a year to get it. You have to apply and prove you are a sustainable business that puts purpose before profit.

“It is all about people, the environment and social issue, and that is what we are all about. It is huge for us.”

Warburton is also keen to reward the efforts of his staff in his still nascent steak group.

“We are developing share options in our business. I am ring-fencing 19% of the entire business.

“For the operations team, plus any general manager or head chef, after two years in that role they get a share of up to 1% of the business in share options from that ring fenced pot. It’s a game changer.”

Warburton says his Birmingham restaurant is already busier than the two Bristol sites, with solid feedback from a growing customer base.

“I am comfortable in saying that we are heading in a really strong direction. We know what we are doing, we just need people to know it, and they will. It just takes time but it’s early days.”

Warburton says annual turnover across the three sites is already nearing £7 million, while he sees expansion into other cities such as Manchester and Edinburgh as potential goals over the next five years.

He has even had discussions around opportunities to franchise the model overseas, which he is keen to explore further.

He says his current leadership role at Cow & Sow revolves around mapping out the company strategy.

“The work I am doing through strategy is more intense than it has ever been.

“I enjoy that more but it is harder because there is a lot more on the line. I just need to be working, I love the buzz. I have always got to have a project, and that is why I am now looking at Manchester quite closely.”

This is a story which might just run and run.





John James and Lord Digby Jones

Paying tribute

Shoosmiths in Colmore Row was the venue for a special lunch organised by John James who has decided to step away from corporate life in Birmingham 55 years after his first job in the city.

Some of the region's most prominent figures from the worlds of business, politics, entertainment and sport gathered at Shoosmiths to pay tribute to the former lawyer and networker supreme.

John has helped hundreds of young professionals over the last half century, largely through his work with Birmingham City 2000 and the organisations and awards evenings it has spawned.

United by 2022 – the legacy charity of the Commonwealth Games – was the beneficiary of approximately £16,000 raised through the event.



Nicola Fleet-Milne on stage with John James



Nicola Turner explaining the United by 2022 charity, with Ellie Simmonds



Sir Albert Bore and Tim Andrews

Gabriel Imevbore, Steve Walker and Ninder Johal



Gary Taylor, Suzie Branch-Haddow, Stacey Barnfield and David Martin



David Clarke and Sir Albert Bore



Santina Bunting and Gabriel Imevbore in conversation with Sir Andy Street



Alex Neale and Sir Andy Street



Suzie Branch-Haddow and Anita Bhalla



Nicola Turner, Alex Bishop, Ellie Simmonds and Ed James



Graham Nicoll, Michelle Leavesley and Anne Brookes



Lord Digby Jones and Kate Bailey



Left: Henry Carpenter, Harriet Moynihan and John James



Tim Andrews and Ellie Simmonds



Bob Warman, Jasper Carrot and Gary Newbon



Jasper Carrot and Eileen Schofield



Stuart Cain and Matt Hammond



Gary Baldwin, Derek Inman and Iain Hall



Pictured from left are Joel Blake, Rosie Ginday, Maxine Laceby, Yiannis Maos, David Plumb and Pam Sheemar

Celebrating a decade

Businesses from across the West Midlands gathered at the NatWest Accelerator in Birmingham to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

The Birmingham hub, which is based at NatWest's offices in St Philips Place, has supported 755 businesses which have raised £28 million in investment and created 480 jobs.

The keynote speaker at the event was Levi Roots, below, the food entrepreneur who officially opened the hub 10 years ago.

The schedule included a panel discussion hosted by regional director Pam Sheemar. Prominent entrepreneurs from the accelerator – including Joel Blake, Maxine Laceby, Yiannis Maos and Rosie Ginday – discussed how being part of the scheme has helped them scale their businesses.



First Birmingham office for law firm Ward Hadaway

Law firm Ward Hadaway has opened an office Birmingham, marking its first location outside the North of England.

The new office, which adds to the organisation's bases in Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle, is situated in Chamberlain Square. It is the firm's first new office opening in over a decade.

A key member of the team is social housing specialist Joanna Lee-Mills, formerly of Shakespeare Martineau and a well-known figure in the region's legal and business circles.

"My decision to join the team was very much driven by the firm's existing strength in affordable housing, and the firm's expansion into Birmingham represents in my view, not just growth, but a very dedicated and strategic long-term commitment to the Midlands region and beyond," said Mrs Lee-Mills, who joins as an equity partner and heads up the social housing development team.

"With my fellow partners, we immerse ourselves to fully understand our clients' goals and how they operate. It's this mentality that will help create the perfect environment for innovative legal solutions that are needed to develop the region further.

"Certainly for my area of specialism, I'm confident the team will establish a solid platform where legal expertise can facilitate connections between housing, employment, sustainability, and community development."

Steven Petrie, Ward Hadaway's managing partner, said: "When I announced

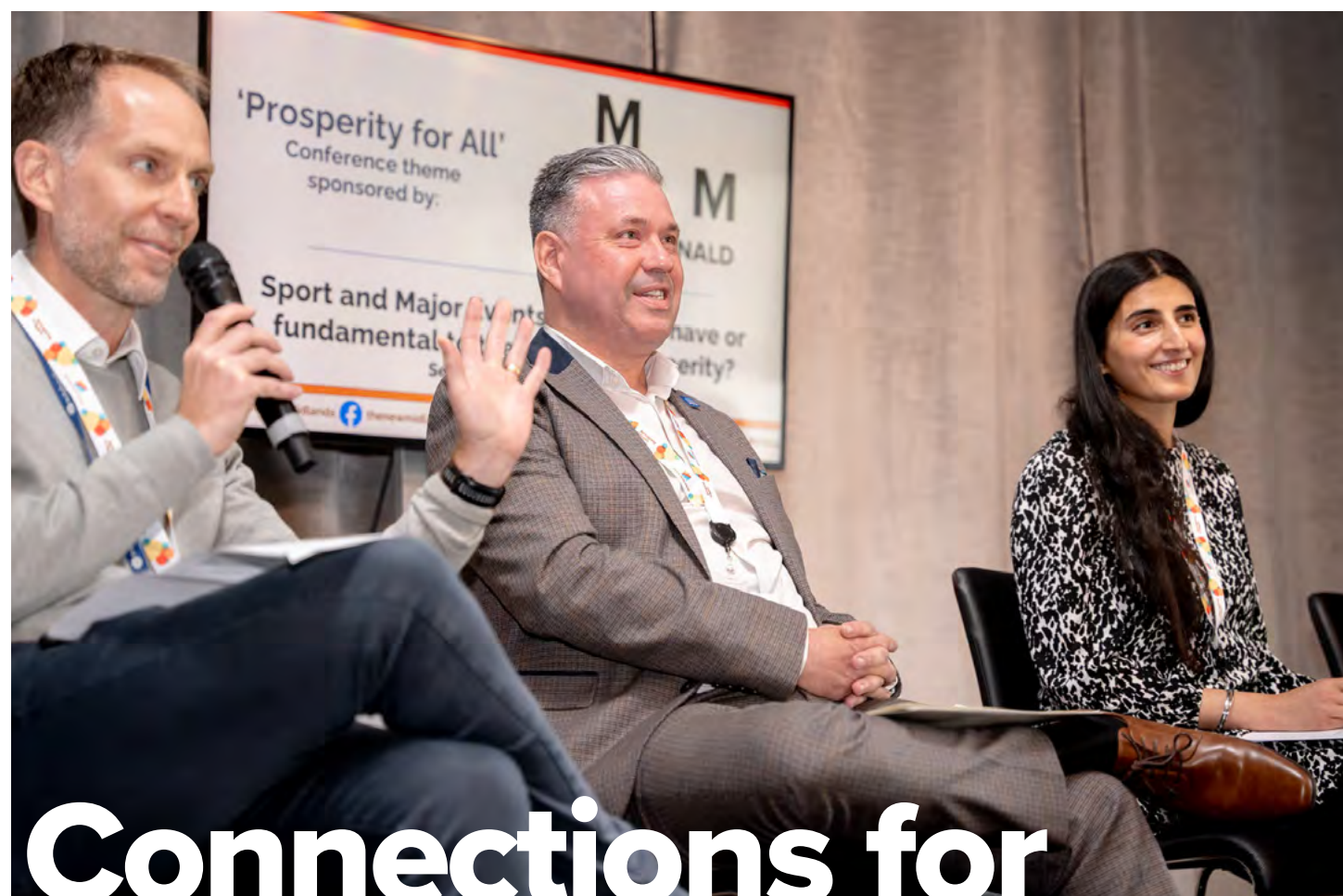


Joanna Lee-Mills

our ambitious growth plans, we knew that expanding geographically was going to be a key part of our strategy.

"Birmingham is a thriving legal hub, home to an active business community. Its strong industrial heritage, reputation for technological innovation and robust service sector align with the challenges and opportunities we are accustomed to.

"As a firm, we are proud of our strong presence in each of the regions where we operate. This expansion is no different. We are recruiting talented and experienced professionals for the Birmingham office who are eager to better support the ambitions of businesses across the region."



Connections for Prosperity 2025

EDGBASTON STADIUM, JULY 17

As the devolution agenda is once again gathering pace across the UK with the English Devolution White Paper, the West Midlands along with Greater Manchester as trailblazers are in an extraordinary position to show how devolution can work for the country and be an exemplar of best practice.

With the spotlight once again shining on the West Midlands, it is now more important than ever to highlight the major issues facing the region and make the most of the opportunity devolution provides.

As the region's only independent think tank, the Centre for the New Midlands aims to tackle these difficult topics and improve lives by supporting policymakers with evidence-based research. From this the concept, the Annual Connections for Prosperity conference was born.

Entering its third year, Connections for Prosperity aims to unite the region, bringing together key policymakers, businesses, community groups and academics, to discuss and debate the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the West Midlands.

With the conference this year set around the four main themes of People, Place, Productivity and Innovation, the scope of topics discussed are as varied as they are numerous. From social value to young people, the climate crisis to the crisis facing cultural industries, building homes vs retrofitting, devolution vs decentralisation,

AI, the Commonwealth, infrastructure and much more, there is something for everyone on the days agenda.

Furthermore, set over a range of formats including panels, workshops, debates, fireside chats and Q&As, these topics will equally be as engaging as they are diverse.

Public policy also takes a front seat throughout the day. For the second consecutive year the West Midlands Mayor, Richard Parker will open the conference. Combining with Andy Street speaking in 2023, this means that West Midlands Mayor has given the opening plenary for all 3 Connections for Prosperity conferences.

Dr Julie Nugent, Joanne Roney CBE and Tim Johnson, the Chief Exec, MD and Chief Exec of Coventry, Birmingham and Wolverhampton Councils respectively, will discuss improving lives and services, considering the challenges and opportunities for local government.

Parliamentary representation is not lacking either. In a debate between business and politics, Mark Garnier MP the Shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury and Dan Boardman-Weston

the CEO of BRI Wealth Management, will address what the 'real' impact of global tariffs are on the West Midlands.

Events such as CFP25 are incredibly important in bringing together key leaders and stakeholders from across the region. In total there will be 50-plus speakers on the day, which will include the best and brightest of academia, the highest level of regional business and truly inspirational community leaders.

As you can imagine for a conference that has 'connections' in the title, networking is a key aspect of the day. With a lunch and a closing drinks reception provided, and with breaks staggered throughout, attendees are encouraged to network, build relationships and make lasting beneficial connections from the day's agenda.

It is here where the conference hopes to have its biggest impact, and where the attendees are as, if not more important than the noted speakers. With 300 like-minded delegates set to descend on Edgbaston stadium, there is real scope to build on the day's agenda, form partnerships, and work towards creating lasting change and a 'better' West Midlands.

To be a part of this mission, and to make sure you are at 'THE Policy event for the West Midlands' at Edgbaston Stadium on July 17, get your ticket from the QR code on the next page.

“THE policy event for the West Midlands!”



When I started the Centre for the New Midlands, I noticed that there was a real need for a cross-sector event to bring together likeminded businesses and organisations from around the West Midlands.

We have been lucky enough to have buy-in from politicians and policymakers, as well as businesses and academia since we started Connections for Prosperity in 2023, and after a successful event last year, we are excited to return back to Edgbaston Stadium.

Having insight and input from the communities that represent the West Midlands is incredibly important to us.

For each Connections for Prosperity conference a diverse steering group made up of leaders from the public, private and third sectors sets the agenda for the day, and we have attempted to make sure that attendance for this year's event is as accessible as possible for community groups and businesses alike.

I am particularly pleased and looking forward to being able to provide a platform for speakers and attendees alike to discuss the major issues facing the region.

After each conference I have taken away a few new insights or viewpoints that I had not considered before, and it is always interesting to hear what topics get brought up.

Chris Smith, founder and director of the Centre for the New Midlands

Sponsorship opportunities are available for CFP25, and members of our Reimagining the Region network get a complimentary ticket. To enquire about sponsorship or joining the Centre for the New Midlands network, contact Chris@thenewmidlands.org.uk



ED JAMES DL

Broadcaster, BBC WM

Conference Host



RICHARD PARKER

Mayor of the West Midlands



DR JULIE NUGENT

Chief Executive
Coventry City Council



JOANNE RONEY CBE

Managing Director
Birmingham City Council



TIM JOHNSON

Chief Executive
City of Wolverhampton Council

Keynote Speakers



Connections for Prosperity programme

08:45- 9:30 Registration and Refreshments

09:30-10:20

Leadership: Leading a region – Fireside chat with Richard Parker (Mayor of the West Midlands)

Innovation (Sponsored by NatWest) – Embracing the AI revolution: What's happening in reality across the West Midlands?

Place: Ethical leadership and sustainability: Rebuilding trust and confidence in our public institutions.

10:30-11:10

Productivity: Global tariffs – what is the 'real' impact on the West Midlands?

People (Sponsored by PHTA Ltd): How do we make the West Midlands the training capital of the UK?

11:10-11:30 Morning break

Productivity: 1.5 million homes or retrofitting a nation's housing stock? Can we do both?

People (Sponsored by PHTA Ltd) MedTech – the West Midlands leading the Life Science revolution

11:30-12:10

Place: Why are vibrant creative and cultural industries essential for the regional economy?

Innovation (Sponsored by NatWest): Introduce yourself – creating momentum through personal connections

12:20-13:00

Place: Following the Commonwealth Games 2022, what does the Commonwealth mean to the West Midlands?

People (Sponsored by PHTA Ltd): Is the West Midlands meeting the needs of its young people?

Innovation (Sponsored by NatWest): Social value – is it working for our communities?

Productivity: Understanding the productivity challenges for the region

13:00-13:40 Lunch

13:40-14:20

Leadership: Improving lives and services: the challenges and opportunities for local government

14:30-15:10

Place: Beyond PFIs: Ushering in a new era of public & private partnerships

People (sponsored by PHTA Ltd): Can we ever really end or design out homelessness?

Productivity: In the midst of a climate crisis and limited resources, has the time come for the West Midlands to adopt a degrowth agenda?

Innovation (Sponsored by NatWest): Utilising digital technologies to support inclusive talent development

15:20-16:00

People (Sponsored by PHTA Ltd): Birmingham as a 'global majority' city: issues of race across the region

Innovation (Sponsored by NatWest): Devolution or 'decentralisation' – which is actually happening?

Place: Progressing a decent neighbourhood standard

Productivity: What should the region's priorities be for our transport infrastructure – can we have it all?

16:00-16:20 Afternoon Break

16:20-17:00 Leadership

17:00-19:00 Drinks reception



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PRIVATE BOXES



Funding boost to two businesses

news

Two West Midlands businesses are poised to grow after funding boosts from grants provider Walsall Business Support.

A wholesale bakery based in Bloxwich has been able to install a new software system which was supported with a £20,000 investment.

Bakery Mazowsze's new management system links up all aspects of the business – from ordering through to production, packaging, sales and delivery.

Launched in 2006 with one employee, the bakery provides work for 90 people by producing traditional Polish-style bread and confectionery products for sale in 300 stores. The management team hopes the new system will unlock further opportunities to supply leading retailers, thanks to the increased transparency of the information generated.

The business owners predict it will streamline their processes and allow the bakery to operate more efficiently.

Company secretary Joanna Podolak said: "The installation of the new software will make a big difference to us as the whole process will come under one system rather than several set-ups, which had been the biggest pain point for our operation.

"We will be able to meet the increased demand for traceability in baking, which involves tracking ingredients and the finished product from source to consumer, ensuring transparency and food safety to meet the expectations of the market."

Meanwhile, a manufacturer of custom



Rob Colbourne of Walsall Business Support, left, with Bakery Mazowsze company secretary Joanna Podolak

school badges is set to expand its product range following a £12,000 investment from Walsall Business Support.

Based in Aldridge, School Badges UK specialises in the design, manufacture and supply of high-quality custom badges and related items for the education sector.

The investment will allow the company to purchase an industrial twin head embroidery machine, enabling it to

expand into branded school uniforms, leavers' hoodies and sports kits to meet growing demand from schools and clubs nationwide.

The investment in the new machine is expected to create additional job opportunities in areas such as production, sales, customer service and logistics, contributing to local employment and economic growth in Walsall.

Call to join climate change agreement



Geraldine Boulton

Manufacturers are being encouraged to take part in a climate change agreement that has saved metalformers £100 million over the last 25 years.

The Confederation of British Metalforming – based in West Bromwich – has successfully passed this major milestone based on the money claimed back against the climate change levy tax applied to all gas and electricity bills.

It has now reopened its window for new applications to be considered for the next phase currently being negotiated which will run from January 2026 until 2033.

Firms can sign up to become a member of the CBM to access the agreement. Then by declaring that they are willing to work towards environmental improvements, they will be able to access the 100% tax rebate on costs associated with metalforming, such as forging, drop forging, stamping, punching and precision bending.

"Our CCA is a fantastic resource for high energy use manufacturers, who want to save money that they can channel into making their operations greener and more efficient," said Geraldine Bolton, chief executive of the Confederation of British Metalforming.

"The CBM agreement has been in place for 25 years and, on average, saves our members between £3.5 million and £4.5 million every year that they would otherwise be paying in CCL tax.

"We are currently negotiating with the Department for Energy, Security and Net Zero for the next phase, with new entrants now able to apply.

"If you are not already a member of CBM and operate the qualifying processes, speak to us about this opportunity and take advantage of our expertise and the savings. The window closes on August 31st.



Computer-generated image of Port Loop

Keon Homes hits major housing milestone

development

One of the UK's leading developers of affordable homes has hit a major construction milestone, with work recently starting on its 1200th unit.

Keon Homes, which was only formed six years ago, made the announcement at the high-profile UKREiF event in Leeds, the UK's largest real estate investment and infrastructure forum.

The company's ability to unlock complex parcels of land and strong supply chain management has seen it throw off the shackles of industry disruption and rising costs to deliver sixteen completed sites across the Midlands, with a further nine projects currently underway.

Construction of the 1200th home is taking place at its landmark £35m Port Loop urban regeneration scheme in Birmingham.

Working in partnership with sister company Cameron Homes and housing association Midland Heart, Keon Homes is building phases 3A, B and C on the prestigious Icknield Port Loop Development, delivering 124 units over the next two years.

These phases will involve construction of two, three and four-bedroom homes, alongside a small apartment block that straddles the canal corner and will be sympathetic to the heritage of the site.

"It is somewhat fitting that our 1200th home is on Port Loop, the largest development we have worked on to date, both in terms of size and importance to urban regeneration," explained Richard Williams, Managing Director of Keon Homes.

"To have achieved this number in just six years is some achievement, especially considering we have done this against

the backdrop of Covid-19, unprecedented material shortages and rising inflation."

He continued: "Our approach has always been 'do the right thing', whether that is bringing brownfield land back into use or ensuring each development places the individual and family at its heart - building communities not just housing.

"This has seen us forge strong partnerships with over 10 housing associations and these relationships – with the likes of Midland Heart, Housing Plus and Sanctuary – have been pivotal in our growth."

Richard Williams provided an insight into Keon Homes' journey at UKREiF, taking part in a West Midlands' Housing Delivery panel session.

The industry expert explored in detail how the firm has made Port Loop a success where other developers have failed, highlighting the importance of public/private delivery models and partnerships.

He also discussed the company's move into extra care schemes and its recent appointment as lead on the £1billion Wolverhampton Housing Development Framework.

The affordable housing specialist has preferred contractor status on all sites over 20 plots in the city and surrounding areas and is already building out schemes in New Park Village and Lincoln Green in Bushbury.

The latter will involve the construction of 99 new energy-efficient council bungalows to replace 93 post-war prefabs and is an important part of the City of Wolverhampton Council's strategy to identify solutions for 4,100 homes built by out-dated, non-traditional construction methods.

To date, 21 properties have been

demolished and the first phase will see 36 bungalows built by summer 2026.

Richard went on to add: "The Housing Development Framework was a big moment in our journey and gives us a guaranteed pipeline of sites that we can bring back to life to support urgent housing needs.

"It also includes a Direct Award, which provides authorised users and local authorities outside of Wolverhampton with a streamlined process to procure works until 2028.

"The next few years promise to be a very exciting time with the government keen to accelerate the number of units being built in a concerted attempt to start solving the shortage we've got in the UK. We'd urge the powers that be to go brownfield first and look at how we can repurpose land that has laid dormant for years, sometimes even decades."



First bricks have been laid at Lincoln Green in Bushbury

For further information, please visit www.keonhomes.co.uk

NHS takes former Halfords site

A new NHS healthcare centre will open in south Birmingham, thanks largely to a property rental agreed by Real Estate Investors.

The Birmingham-based real estate investment trust has sealed the deal for the South Birmingham Community Diagnostic Centre to open this summer in Maypole at the former Halfords unit.

The centre is a partnership between NHS Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust, and InHealth, the UK's largest specialist provider of diagnostic solutions.

It aims to give patients easy access to diagnostic tests closer to home, reducing the need for hospital visits and providing quicker delivery of care.

Ian Clark, a director of Real Estate Investors Plc, said: "We are delighted to have finalised this property rental to provide a space for such an important initiative.

"This will bring a vital new diagnostic centre to Maypole that will directly benefit the health and wellbeing of the local community."

The 4,542 sq ft space is the final vacancy let by REI at the property on the A435 Alcester Road South, a major arterial route running into Birmingham city centre.



Developed in 2007, the property already hosts a 60-bed hotel and six ground floor shop units, with tenants including Travelodge, Poundstretcher, Ladbroke's and Subway.

The new health centre will offer a wide variety of diagnostic tests in one place including MRI, CT and ultrasound scans, X-rays and other health screening services.

It will be one of three such centres in Birmingham and Solihull, with others in Washwood Heath and Chelmsley Wood.

Faith Button, chief delivery officer at NHS Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board, said: "This will be a fantastic resource for local people, helping to get the diagnosis and care they need as soon as possible and close to home."

Relocation of manufacturer's headquarters



A supplier and manufacturer of automatic doors is relocating its Midlands headquarters to an industrial estate in Coleshill.

Record UK has signed a 10-year lease on a 11,325 sq ft warehouse unit at Forge Mills Park in Station Road, after the deal handled by commercial property consultancy Burley Browne.

"We are pleased to announce that we have completed the letting to Record UK," said Ben Nicholson of Burley Browne.

"These were quite complex negotiations involving three parties – the exiting tenant, the new tenant and the landlord that we were acting on behalf.

"The property consists of two adjoining modern units with two-storey office accommodation, and is in a very popular location."

Record UK manufactures, supplies and installs pedestrian automatic doors and entrances.

Its products are in prominent buildings including high street banks and shops, and are used by many local authorities, NHS Trusts, airports and hotels.

Team at Johnson Fellows relocates

Commercial property consultancy Johnson Fellows has started a new era after relocating its team to new offices in Birmingham.

The company has moved its national headquarters just a few doors up the road, from 163 Newhall Street to 180 Newhall Street in the city centre.

Johnson Fellows, which celebrated its 40th anniversary last year, is now in a single, open plan, ground floor unit which, it says, better suits the needs of a modern property consultancy. The space has been fully refurbished and will allow for more inclusive working

between the company's various teams.

Partner Ian Starbuck said: "As we enter the company's fifth decade, we are excited at the prospect of growing our business from our new environment at 180 Newhall Street.

"We have moved from a four-storey building to an open-plan office, which better suits the way we want to work."

Johnson Fellows, established in 1984, also has offices in London and Manchester. Services include agency, lease advisory, property management, building surveying and valuation.



Principle Estates Management expands with acquisition of lettings portfolio

A West Midlands estate management firm has announced the acquisition of the residential lettings and block management portfolio of Pennycuik Collins, a Birmingham-based property consultancy.

The acquisition by Principle Estate Management has increased its managed portfolio to 25,000 leasehold units and 600 lettings units.

Principle's founder Brett Williams said: "This deal is particularly special to me as it brings my career full circle, having worked in this business earlier in my career. It is a proud moment being able to integrate it into the business we've built here.

"The acquisition aligns with our mission to blend experienced people, smart systems and client-focused service. There is real talent in the team, and we're excited about the opportunities to further enhance service quality with the structures we already have in place."

Joe Jobson, co-owner and joint managing director at Principle, added: "As part of the acquisition, we have welcomed Lucy Roberts as our new director – head of residential asset management.

"With over 20 years of industry experience, she brings a wealth of knowledge and a trusted team alongside her. This ensures continuity of service for our existing clients while strengthening our offering for new ones."

Following the sale, Pennycuik Collins will focus exclusively on its

core commercial property and building surveying services. As part of the restructuring, the business has relocated to Foundry at 6 Brindley Place.

Pennycuik Collins owners Adrian Roddick and Charles Gillett also expressed their confidence in the transition.

In a statement they said: "We have been seeking the right home for this part of the business and we are confident we have found it in Principle.

"Our team is excited about the move, and we know our residential clients will be in great hands."



Pictured from left are Charles Gillett, Adrian Roddick, Brett Williams and Joe Jobson



■ Real estate developer Woodbourne Group has announced the formal launch of the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter – a 210-hectare innovation district expected to rival London's Knowledge Quarter and the Oxford–Cambridge Arc.

Backed by the Government as a designated investment zone, the estate is set to deliver 580,000 sq m of cutting-edge commercial space focused on life sciences, artificial intelligence and advanced manufacturing.

It is expected to unlock £4 billion in private sector investment, create over 22,000 high-value jobs and deliver 4,800 new homes.

The official launch of B-KQ, as it is abbreviated, took place at UKREiF in May.

Woodbourne Group is supported in the project by a partnership with Aston University, Birmingham City University, Bruntwood SciTech and Birmingham City Council.

Tani Dulay, CEO of Woodbourne Group, said: "Birmingham Knowledge Quarter is recognised by the Government as a nationally significant innovation district and it has every hallmark of a world-class investment destination.

"This isn't just about competing, it's about leading a new generation of innovation districts – more inclusive, more agile and built for the industries shaping our future in one location."

Firm expands its city base

A mid-tier business advisory firm has announced its expansion in Birmingham by opening a new regional base at Cornwall Buildings.

Sedulo Group's new base of 5,000 sq ft in the Grade II-listed city centre innovation hub – owned and operated by Bruntwood SciTech – will support up to 40 people.

The business first established a presence in Birmingham in March 2024, through the acquisition of R&D tax specialists BTA Services.

Sedulo aims to double in size over the next three years, and a new Birmingham base represents a key step in its national growth strategy.

The move to Cornwall Buildings is

expected to help it develop and scale the business, including investing in increasingly sophisticated R&D processes.

Rob Valentine, regional director for Bruntwood SciTech, said: "Birmingham continues to be a big player in business, professional and financial services.

"Sedulo joining Cornwall Buildings underlines the benefits the city can provide for firms seeking out opportunities for growth – offering an environment that supports their momentum and affords extensive networking opportunities.

"We also know the importance of choosing a workspace where people will want to spend time and feel comfortable."



■ Property developer Westbeech Group has brought a 4,298 sq ft Black Country unit to market.

The Wolverhampton-based firm is selling Unit 19, Strawberry Lane, Willenhall, for offers based on £485,000.

The property is on a secure estate and has offices and its own private yard.

Ian Houghton, managing director of Westbeech Group, said: "With further interest rate cuts hopefully on the horizon, many businesses are looking to invest in their own properties.

"We feel this is the right time to bring such a property to market to meet an increasing demand for this kind of unit in the area."

Engineering firm appoints MD

Engineering firm adi Group has announced the appointment of Tom Jennings as the new managing director of its electrics arm – adi Electrical.

Tom's journey with the Birmingham-based business began 19 years ago when he joined as an electrical apprentice at the age of 18.

After graduating from the firm's apprenticeship team he has progressed through various roles including electrician, electrical supervisor, project engineer, operations manager and, most recently, operations director at adi Electrical.

As operations director Tom was instrumental in leading the team, driving operational excellence and ensuring the successful delivery of projects.

He said: "If you'd told me almost two decades ago I'd progress the way I have, I wouldn't have believed you. I am so proud of the journey and I hope my story is one that can be replicated in years to come."

Paul Smith, adi Group CEO, said: "Tom's journey is a perfect example of how dedication and hard work can lead to success within the group.

"We are incredibly proud of what he has achieved, and his promotion is a testament to the opportunities we provide for personal and professional growth."



New manager leads lending team

Birmingham-based ART Business Loans has bolstered its lending team with the appointment of Richard Steele as the department's manager.

With over 20 years' experience in financial services, Richard has built an extensive career working within high street banks, and the responsible finance and commercial finance broker sectors. His previous roles include senior business relationship manager at Barclays Corporate Bank, where he supported SME clients with turnovers up to £25 million.

Roles within the alternative finance market led to Richard establishing his own finance brokerage in 2019, specialising in helping business start-ups, business acquisitions, cashflow finance and business growth.

In his new role as lending manager at ART, he will focus on supporting both businesses and introducers seeking finance for growth, cashflow and acquisition purposes across the West Midlands, Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Shropshire regions.

Steve Walker, chief executive at ART Business Loans, said: "We are so pleased



to welcome Richard to our lending team. He has significant experience in providing finance solutions and also an extensive business network of introducers built over his 20-year career in financial services.

"He also shares ART's belief in funding as a partnership, with a personal motivation to build a deep understanding of client needs. Richard will be a real asset to the team moving forwards, as we continue to increase our lending over the next 12 months."

Law firm welcomes dispute specialist

Law firm Shakespeare Martineau has appointed experienced higher education disputes specialist Nicola Bradfield as a partner in its Birmingham-based dispute resolution team.

Nicola, who qualified as a solicitor in 2003 and has 24 years' experience, will head the firm's contentious education practice.

She joins from Coventry University, where she was associate pro vicechancellor and general counsel, and before that founded and led the contentious universities team at Pinsent Masons.

Throughout her career Nicola has advised universities and further education colleges on complex, highvalue and reputationcritical disputes, ranging from student litigation and regulatory investigations to multi-millionpound commercial claims.

She is nationally recognised for authoring Universities UK's sector guidance on student misconduct that underpins the Office for Students' current E6 condition of registration.

Nicola will lead a growing group of specialists advising on student and staff disputes, regulatory challenges, crisis



management and highstakes litigation.

Tim Speed, partner and head of dispute resolution at Shakespeare Martineau, said: "Nicola's arrival is a significant milestone for our team and for our national education practice.

"Her track record in resolving reputationthreatening issues and guiding boards through urgent, highly regulated scenarios is second to none."



Promotion at Indian restaurant

Birmingham city centre restaurant Asha's, which will be celebrating its 20th birthday next year, has promoted Nouman Farooqui as director.

Nouman joined Asha's 14 years ago and has been a mainstay of the business ever since.

He said: "I am honoured to step into this new role and continue the legacy of Asha's. Our goal remains to serve the finest Indian food in a vibrant, welcoming atmosphere and to

showcase the rich culinary heritage of India.

"I am also passionate about inspiring the next generation to pursue careers in hospitality and to share their talents with the world."

Asha's, in Newhall Street, holds the unique honour of being the only restaurant in the UK to be awarded a certificate by the Government of India for its outstanding contribution to the promotion of Indian cuisine.

New corporate audit partner

Accountancy firm Crowe has appointed Hayley Lavery as corporate audit partner.

Based in the firm's Midlands office in Oldbury, Hayley supports owner-managed businesses, large corporates and UK subsidiaries of global groups, particularly within the manufacturing industry.

She joined Crowe in 2006, and has more than 24 years' experience in providing audit and accountancy services to businesses across manufacturing, distribution, wholesale, and retail and leisure industries.

Hayley said: "The rapid pace of change in global business, such as US tariffs imposed on UK steel imports, has the potential to have a significant impact across the UK's manufacturing sector.

"I look forward to continuing to support manufacturing businesses, collaborating with business leaders and those shaping the sector to help this crucial part of our economy, and navigate the challenges and opportunities ahead."

Nigel Bostock, chief executive at Crowe, said: "It is a pivotal time as businesses grapple with uncertainty while striving to boost productivity and accelerated growth. Hayley's promotion signifies our continued commitment to meeting our clients' growing and evolving needs."



Pictured with the firm's senior partner Karen Moores, centre, are from left Kiran Athwal, Lorna Payne, Gemma Whitchurch and Charlotte Jones

Multiple senior promotions at Sydney Mitchell

Midlands law firm Sydney Mitchell has announced a string of senior promotions, including new partners for its private client and family teams.

The 260-year-old firm, which has offices in Birmingham, Solihull and Sheldon, has promoted private client specialist Lorna Payne and family law expert Gemma Whitchurch to salaried partner, taking the firm's partnership to 16.

Gemma has practised exclusively in family law since qualifying in 2008, specialising in financial remedy advising clients in high net-worth matters alongside

low-level asset positions.

A specialist in trust law, tax and estate planning, Lorna joined Sydney Mitchell as an associate in the private client department in 2021, being promoted to senior associate less than two years later.

Homegrown talent Charlotte Jones – a qualified trusts and estates practitioner – is promoted to senior associate in the private client team, while Kiran Athwal, who was appointed head of Sydney Mitchell's personal injury and clinical negligence practice in October last year, is also promoted to senior associate.

Bringing a wealth of experience to financial services firm

A financial services firm has strengthened its presence in the Midlands by appointing a new business development director to support its continued growth.

Carl Perry joins Reward Funding's Birmingham office, bringing over 25 years of experience in the financial services sector across the region. He spent the majority of his early career in commercial banking roles before moving into senior lending roles within challenger and alternative finance organisations, where he delivered both asset-based lending and structured credit facilities to SMEs.

Carl will be focused on expanding Reward's network of introducers, as well as providing asset-secured funding solutions across the Midlands to help entrepreneurs and businesses achieve their goals.

Steph Brown, Reward's regional director in the Midlands, said: "We are building a hugely talented team here in the Midlands, and Carl is a fantastic addition.

"It is great to welcome someone with his



Carl Perry and Steph Brown

extensive and diverse lending experience, strong professional connections and the ability to support the entrepreneurs and businesses we work with.

"I am looking forward to working with him to strengthen and grow our relationships with professional business advisors, brokers and accountants across the Midlands."

Team bolstered at Gateley Legal

Gateley Legal has bolstered its specialist residential development team in Birmingham with the appointments of partner Natalie Edwards and legal director Laura Murphy, both joining from Eversheds Sutherland.

Natalie joins Gateley Legal following 25 years at Eversheds Sutherland where she spent the last two years as national head of residential development and co-head of its living sector group.

Throughout the last two decades, Natalie has worked extensively with housebuilders, promoters, landowners and master developers. Her expertise spans immediate and strategic land development, sustainable urban extensions, large-scale consortium agreements and single-family build-to-rent schemes.

Laura Murphy brings almost 20 years' experience to the team, with previous roles at Eversheds Sutherland and Shakespeare Martineau. She acts for national housebuilders and promoters on major residential development schemes across the UK, including immediate and strategic land acquisitions and promotion and development agreements.

Callum Nuttall, partner and national head of the residential development team at Gateley Legal, said: "It's brilliant to have Natalie and Laura on board with us in Birmingham. They bring impressive track records and will play valuable roles in both new and long-term client relationships."



Natalie Edwards, left, and Laura Murphy

Roythornes Solicitors appoints CEO

National law firm Roythornes Solicitors, which has an office in Birmingham city centre, has appointed experienced banker Adam White as its new CEO.

Adam was with Barclays for 15 years, working with a diverse portfolio of clients including SMEs, corporate enterprises and real estate businesses. He latterly headed agriculture and landed estates.

He will work alongside Roythornes' managing partner Vember Mortlock, who believes that his banking background is not just a progressive decision for the firm, but one which will bring a tactical shift into the firm's future.

Vember said: "We have a strategic plan for the next five years that aims to significantly expand the business.

"We look forward to Adam's insights, and with his many years in professional services we knew he was the right candidate for the CEO role.

"Instead of appointing from within or from another law firm, we were keen to bring in Adam with his external perspective to support the strong performance of the partners."



Five minutes with...



Tim Andrews

Founder and chairman, Hollywood Monster

downtime

In one sentence, what does your role involve?

I started Hollywood Monster in 1991 alongside my father, and have carried out most jobs within the business, but since the passing of my father I have undertaken the role of chairman. This is fundamentally an overarching role working alongside my directors while still ensuring my clients get what they want.

How long have you been in your current job?

Five years, however the previous 34 were spent running the business. Give us a summary of your professional career to date.

My first job was a technical engineering apprenticeship with aerospace company Hymatic Engineering in Redditch which gave me the insight into how a business is run. I firmly believe the experience gave me the very basic tools to start my own business at 21.

My first sales call I made was to Birmingham City Football Club, winning the contract to become their signage supplier,

and still supply them today. The business now has a turnover of £10 million and a headcount of 55.

In 2011 I became involved in Birmingham City women's football club, eventually becoming their CEO and a sabbatical away from my family business. My last game in charge was at Wembley in front of 50,000 fans watching my team from the royal box lose the 2017 FA Cup final to Man City. The team actually won the cup in 2012, beating Chelsea 3-2 in a penalty shoot-out. We were also on the end of three defeats in the League Cup final and a semi-final in the Champions League during my involvement. So a very successful stint at professional football.

I returned to Hollywood Monster in 2017 as CEO, eventually becoming chair in 2020.

I have enjoyed NED/mentor roles at various businesses, from VR immersive education tech to funeral planning, carbon capture, a construction project management business and also digital marketing. I really enjoy working with other CEOs who are starting out, and using my experience and knowledge to prevent them from making the same mistakes I have made. And there are a lot!

I co-founded the charity LoveBrum in 2014 with colleagues Dave Maclean and PJ Ellis. We are all custodians of our city but we felt it needed some loving. The civic pride in our city was not the same as others, and we don't punch our chest quite like others do.

There are many volunteer-led projects that are working on the ground to improve the city. But they lack funding. This is why LoveBrum exists. It amplifies their voice, it gives them a platform, it connects them to the corporate world. It donates to them and gives them the support they deserve.

Did further/higher education set you up well for your particular vocation?

My apprenticeship was fantastic. Coupled with the 'on the job' experience I had, it was phenomenal.

How is your job impacted by uncertainties in the economy?

Hollywood Monster has had to navigate many obstacles along the way. The financial crash in 2008/9 caused huge market issues due to our dependency on the property market. Covid hit us because of our earlier pivot into the events sector, and the recent interest rate increases have made it difficult to continually invest in the latest technology.

What's your view of artificial intelligence – an opportunity, threat, or bit of both?

I have witnessed many advances in my lifetime. Computers and mobile phones in the 1990s, and social media in the 2000s. I have embraced them all, and believe AI is something we should all take on board, and so an opportunity without a doubt. Social media platform of choice, and why? Horses for courses. Facebook for personal, Instagram for glossy photos, LinkedIn for business and Twitter to rant.

How do you hope your colleagues would describe you?

This is a tough one, but in truth I hope they see me as humble, selfless, fun and ambitious. Oh, and approachable.

Highlights of your career so far?

Being recognised by the Queen in her last birthday honours list before she passed is without doubt my proudest. The icing on the cake was being able to take my mum to receive the medal. I have won many business awards but being crowned Brummie of the Year in 2018 and the overall IoD of the year winner in 2016 have to be mentioned. The creation of LoveBrum sits very close to my heart.

Any particular faux pas or embarrassing moments in your career you would prefer to forget?

No regrets but lots to forget. We are human, we all make mistakes!

Pet hates?

Flaky people.

If you could go back and give your younger self some wise advice, what would it be?

Know your numbers, spend 80% of your time on the business and 20% in it and make time for yourself and your family. It's not all just working.

How do you relax away from work?

Boating, eating, drinking, running my farm and watching the Blues.

Tell us something about you that most people probably wouldn't know. Probably my FA Cup story – but I do tell a lot of people!

You can take one book, one film and one disc onto a desert island – what would they be?

I rarely read or watch films, so can I take my girlfriend instead?

Your five dream dinner party guests, dead or alive?

Prince, Donald Trump, the Queen, George Michael and my mum.

What would you choose to eat for your last supper?

Chicken jalfrezi and a Chinese chicken curry chaser (with extra mushrooms).



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