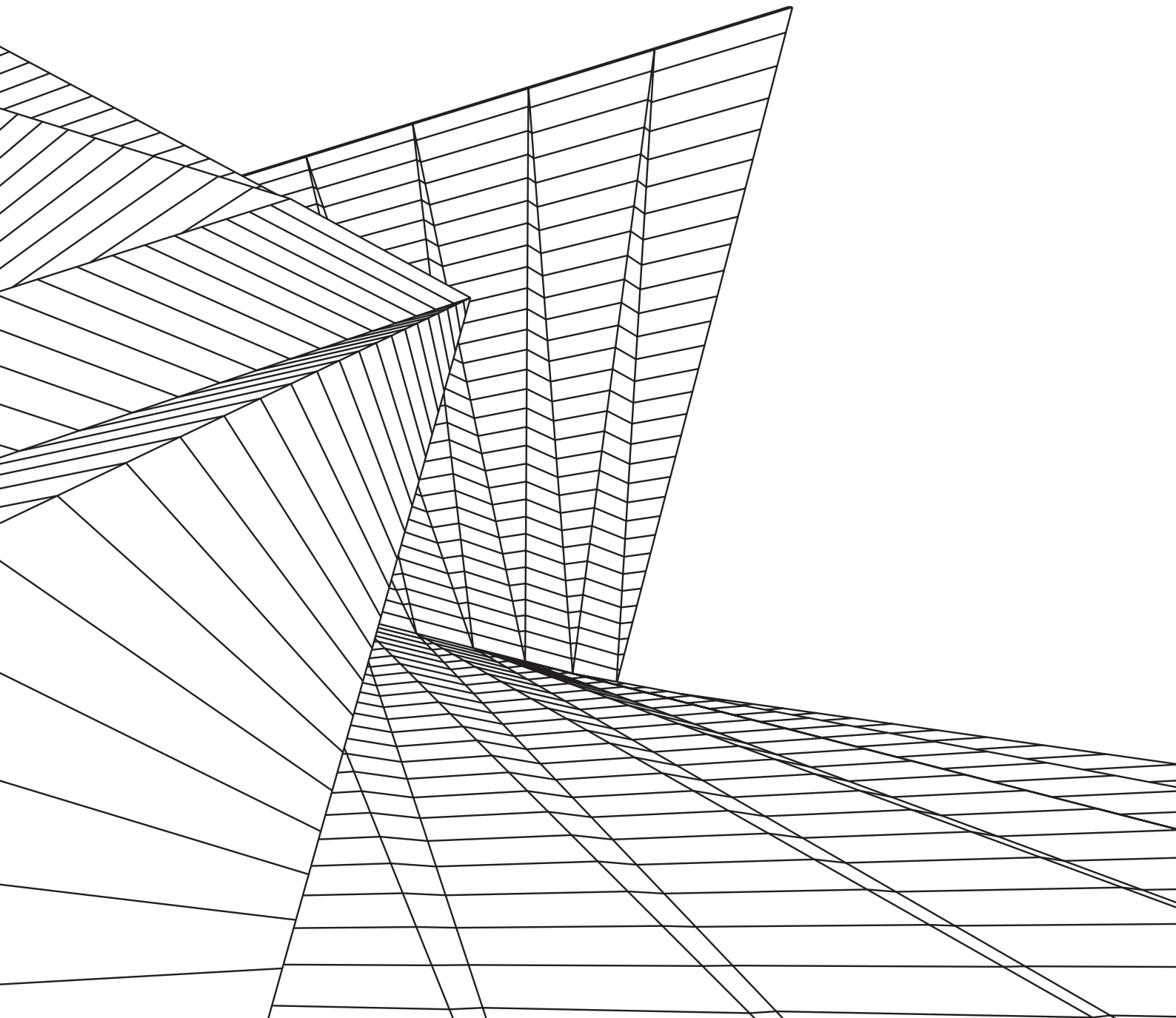


REGION IN RENAISSANCE

A vision for business in the Midlands

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Contents

- 3 Foreword
- 4 Roundtable event
- 6 Regional collaboration
- 8 Geography and quality of life
- 11 Embracing technological change
- 12 Pooling talent and diversity
- 15 Conclusion

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“A huge amount is happening in the region. There’s a lot of investment, from HS2 to the Commonwealth Games, to 5G. There is a lot of opportunity and there’s nothing more exciting for us. The potential is huge; it’s a diverse region with a great sense of community, and massive pride. It’s a region with a big heart. This helps in wanting to grow with it.”

Eman Al-Hillawi, Director, Entec Si

Foreword

The West Midlands is undergoing almost unprecedented change and growth.

The region is home to the UK's first urban testbed for 5G technology and autonomous vehicles, placing it at the cutting edge of the fourth industrial revolution, and will welcome the completion of HS2 in 2026. With a £102 billion economy that has grown by 22.4% in the last five years, the future is looking bright for the West Midlands.

With the implementation of new technologies and infrastructure combined with its geographical position, the region is a significant economic hub on the national, European and global stage. Birmingham was voted the UK's most investable city by 500 of Europe's top real estate investment experts, suggesting a new narrative is emerging. With Coventry hosting the UK City of Culture in 2021 and Birmingham hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2022, all eyes are on the region.

Under the West Midlands Combined Authority, established in 2016, the region is already making a collaborative effort to advance transport, economic development and regeneration. The region's recent successes appear to promise a step change for businesses, institutions and citizens.

There has never been a better time for the region's businesses to embrace opportunity through diversity, technology and structural change.

This report looks at the ways in which business leaders have harnessed opportunities and their vision for the future of the region.



Amardeep Gill

Partner and Head of
Trowers & Hamblins Birmingham office
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Roundtable event

Attendees

BJSS	Andrew Squire – Senior Manager
Black Country Consortium	Iain Mansell – Programme Director
Crypto currency expert	Joe Dakwa – Co-founder
Entec Si	Eman Al-Hillawi – Director
Finance 4 Business	Mike Kelly – Business Development Manager
Glide	Richard Price – Sales Director
Innovation Birmingham Limited	David Hardman MBE – CEO
Lucid	Jason Langford-Brown – Managing Director
Miss Macaroon	Rosie Ginday MBE – Founder
Nachural Group	Ninder Johal – CEO
Optima Hair	Peter Murtha – Director
ORB	Robert Bloxham – Founder and CEO
RDS Big Data Solutions	William Taafe – Director
West Midlands Women’s Voice	Sharonjit Clare – Co-founder

Hosts

Trowers & Hamlins	Amardeep Gill – Partner
Trowers & Hamlins	Helen Briant – Partner
Trowers & Hamlins	Vijay Bange – Partner
Trowers & Hamlins	Chris Plumley – Partner





Regional collaboration

Collaboration across the region is essential for Iain Mansell, programme director of Black Country Consortium:

“As a collaborative unit, as the West Midlands, we’re the second biggest economy outside of London. We’ve got West Midlands 5G and proposals that we first submitted to DCMS as Birmingham that haven’t happened, but have as the West Midlands collectively.”

“There’s power in collaboration, there’s power in that we’re a team, we’re not just Birmingham. Yes Birmingham is a big city, but we’ve also got the Black Country, Coventry and Warwickshire that are very up and coming and they greatly contribute to the region’s narrative.”

The importance of collaboration and working with local businesses is evident from business leaders across sectors. William Taaffe of RDS Big Data Solutions suggests strengthening the region by utilising what it has to offer:

“In many ways I think confidence in the region is key, as is shouting about businesses that are doing well. In no way should we discount global corporates, but we should try to be using what’s around us and grow the region through utilising and collaborating with innovative local businesses.”

Mike Kelly, of Finance 4 Business, shares this view:

“It is vital for businesses in the region to integrate with other businesses. The danger with any business is they can be silo-based, and have a tunnel vision focused in what they do. I think where the region has a real advantage is that businesses will reciprocate business on a regular basis, especially in the professional sector. We like to give deals to solicitors in the region, accountants in the region; they like to give deals to us. Anyone coming into the city or the wider region needs to be part of the wider business community.”

Kelly advises businesses to “work” the region’s business community: “Be a part of it. Join the relevant business groups, the chamber of commerce, the Institute of Directors, all of the professional networks that are going on. Refer business locally and enjoy being in the region.”

Jason Langford-Brown, Managing Director of Lucid, a consultancy that specialises in management and leadership development, agrees. **“We need to be exploiting what’s on our doorstep, there’s so much already here. I see people spending a lot of time travelling all over the country, overseas, to connect and do things that they can do here. Just look what’s in front of you.”**

The collaborative spirit appears to be reaping results, with the West Midlands region being the fastest-growing UK region for goods exports with 27% growth between 2015 and 2017. Under the Combined Authority, the West Midlands has the UK’s second highest ambition for house building – 16,500 new annual completions by 2031. 14,500 additional new homes were built in 2018, up 93% on 2011 and 21% on 2017.

Sharonjit Clare, Co-founder of West Midlands Womens Voice, says:

“What I am hearing here is that there is a lot of regional pride, which has really come to the fore in the past five years, helped by these most recent wins which include national government turning its attention in this direction and recognising it needs to invest in regional hubs across the UK.”

The region has committed to becoming a world leader in modern methods of construction, with 51% of new homes using advanced methods by 2031 and with 145,000m² of prime office space being developed across the region, the West Midlands is set to be well equipped for residents to live and work.

Trowers' Partner Chris Plumley agrees:

“Conviction is a word I'd use to describe the region. It was a big gamble for the public sector to say we would get this combined authority. We will grasp it and we will have the confidence and conviction to take that forward. The strategy that the region has adopted in terms of its physical built environment started many years ago and it is now we're seeing the successes of that strategy.”



Geography and quality of life

What else is boosting the region's success? Mike Kelly believes that "the region's come a long way in the past 15 years. If you look at the infrastructure now, it's not just about buildings; it's about nightlife, it's about lifestyle. People now enjoy living and working in the region's city centres. There are now options for dinner, for theatre whereas ten years ago we never had that. It's a great place to be".

Helen Briant, Partner at Trowers & Hamlins, echoes Kelly: "I've ended up staying here because the West Midlands is a place to have do phenomenal work and also have a life", while Peter Murtha, Director of Optima hair specialists, highlights the quality of the workforce in the region: "The work-ethic of the local people here is second to none."

Geographically, the region is undeniably in a strong position. 90% of the UK population is within a four-hour drive and the region is within four hours by road of nine of the UK's 13 major ports. Two new HS2 stations will connect the region with London in 38/47 minutes, with journey times to Heathrow Airport cut to just one hour, quicker than from many parts of London.

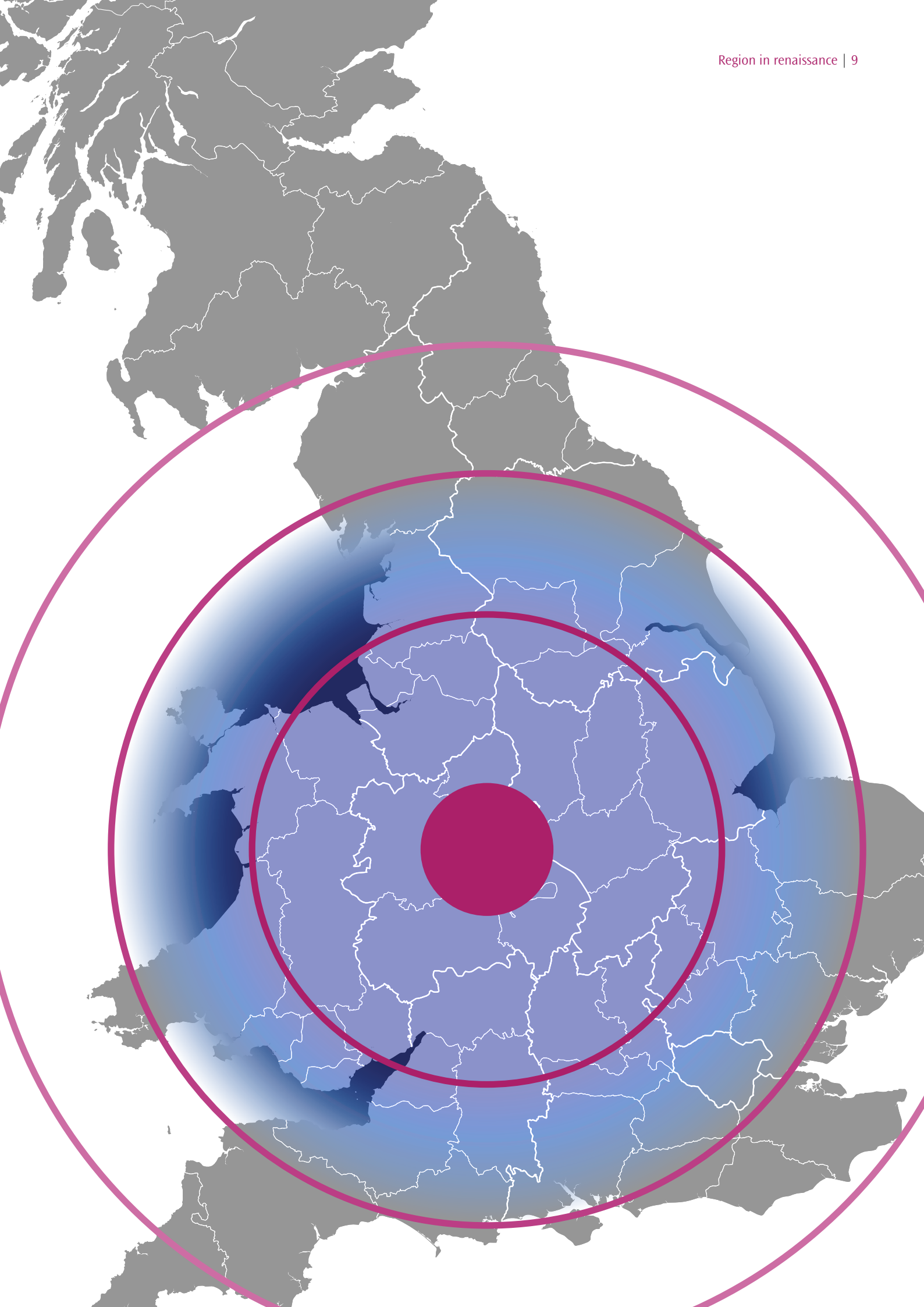
David Hardman MBE says:

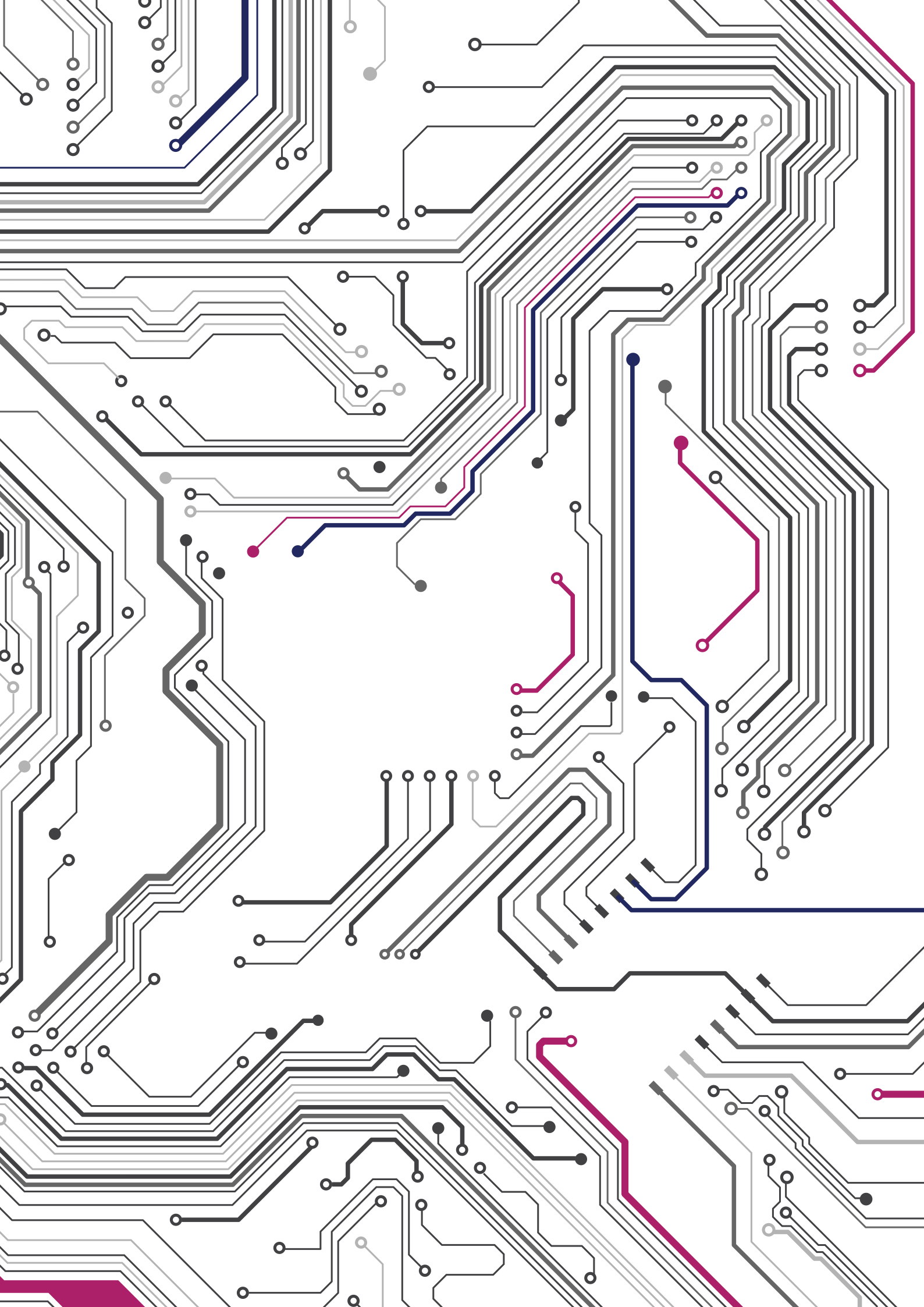
“Businesses flourish in this location, if you're doing anything that you need to travel around the country for, it is perfect, well connected with trains, cars and planes. You're in the second city, certainly in terms of scale. The standard of living is good. It all adds to being just the right place to be.”

This is set to improve further. Birmingham Airport is spending £500 million in improvements over the next 15 years, growing passenger numbers by 40% from 13 million per year today to 18 million per year by 2033, and has direct flights to over 130 destinations in 49 countries with 50 airlines.

Taking advantage of the region's connectivity is imperative for Sharonjit Clare of West Midlands Women's Voice: "There's a desire here to be not just inward looking, but outward looking."

“We should be open to learning from others who do things well. Let's not reinvent the wheel where there is no need, but adopt or adapt policies and mechanisms we know deliver results and pioneer in spaces where a blueprint does not exist. Furthermore, if the aspiration is to be a truly global city then we need to embrace global link. We need to marry existing local and national expertise with new thinking, fresh faces and talent to constantly challenge us. Only then can you get real innovation.”





Embracing technological change

David Hardman, CEO of Innovation Birmingham, which supports the city's tech and start-up community, highlights the region's transformation and the importance of embracing technological and structural change:

"I think, given what I do, which is to help tech businesses get going, Birmingham and the West Midlands is a fantastic opportunity. I've been here 11 years now, and I think in the last 5 years the city has woken up; the number of start-ups, the growth, all the cranes, just the buzz of the place. If you want to engage with the knowledge economy and help the knowledge economy grow, there's no better place to be."

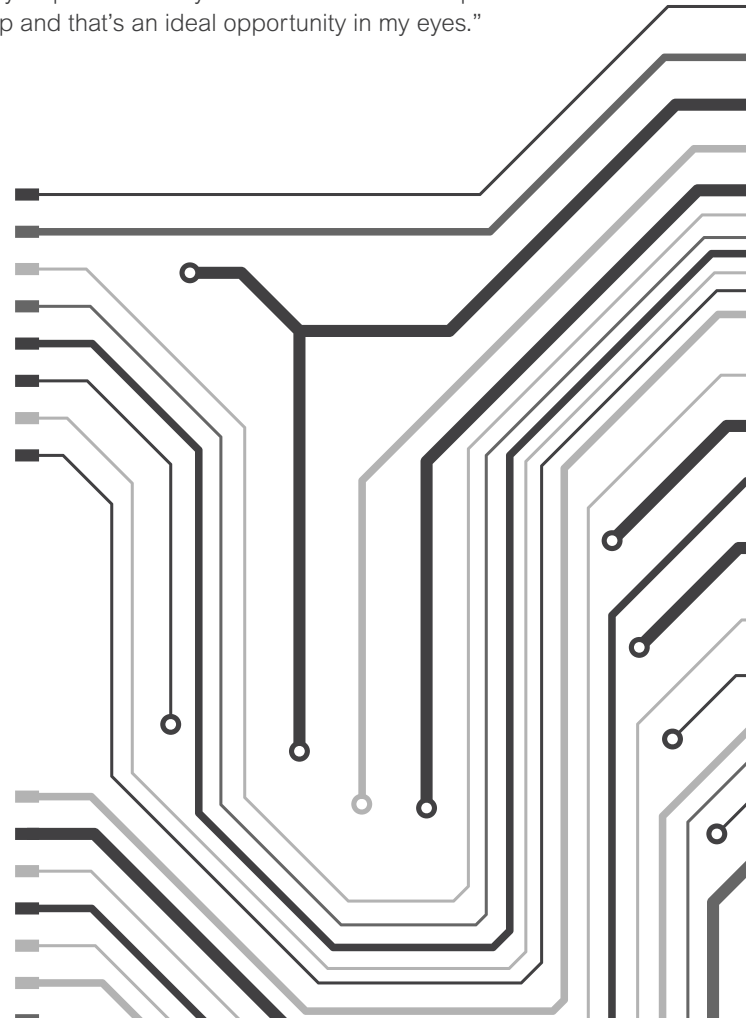
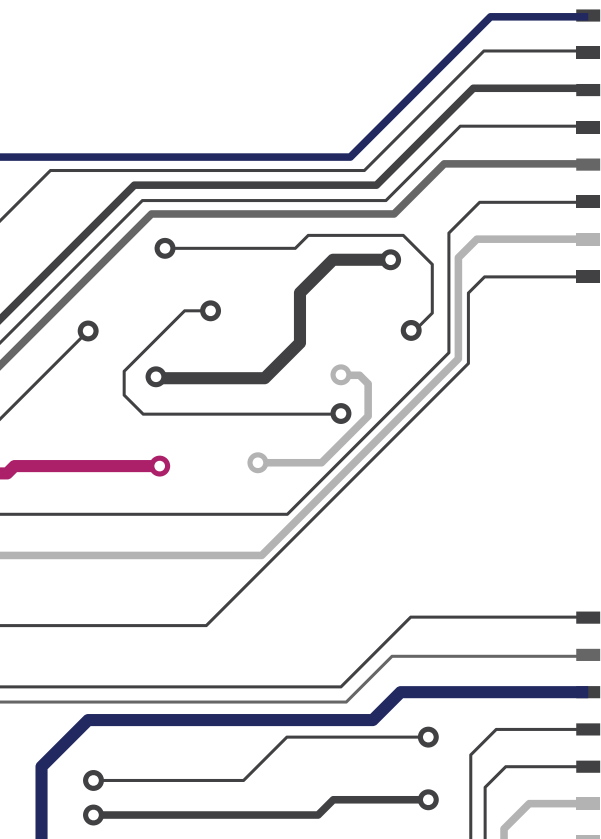
The technology sector presents challenges and opportunities for the region. Joe Dakwa, crypto currency expert, says:

"Birmingham is well renowned for being a huge technological hub outside of London. In relation to block chain technology, the area that we're involved in, this is an area that I think we can build upon, and certainly tune into the established and up and coming network that we have within the region."

Clare shares the view that there is untapped potential in the sector.

"The region has a phenomenal legacy in manufacturing and we must build on that, but also we need to look at worldwide trends that are currently driving growth. There is room here for more research and development where we don't have strengths."

"We must be innovative. I'm passionate about fintech and my background is asset management and I don't see any of that here. Looking at growth opportunities of the last five years, they've predominantly been in the boom tech place. There's a gap and that's an ideal opportunity in my eyes."



Pooling talent and diversity

Hardman suggests taking advantage of the region's 1.3 million residents under 25, one of the youngest populations in Europe, to enhance the tech sector and progress the city's diversity and inclusion culture:

"There's a significant issue around gender diversity in the digital space. The tech sector is around 17% female, and closer to 10% in terms of CxO level people. The positive benefits diversity brings are huge and we need to be getting it right."

"A lot of that is about the language we use when we're talking to schools and colleges. We need to embrace the fact that everyone is innately digital these days and not think we have to train young people to be digital; they are digital. You've got to actually drive that interest in the application. We are in one of the most diverse cities in the Europe, we're in the youngest city in Europe and the opportunities around that for workforce development are powerful."

Rosie Ginday MBE, Founder of Miss Macaroon, believes in tapping into this potential too, holding that Birmingham reflects the UK's reputation as a world leader in social enterprise but that young people's talents are often overlooked by big business.

She says: "We have this fantastic group of people that are being ignored by big business. We have pools of incredible talent and if we had a little bit of support around them then we could get them involved in these great things like the City of Culture and Commonwealth Games."

"Britain is one of the world leaders in social enterprise. But as a region we could do more to recognise this as a growth area."

"We are one of few cities outside London that has many Michelin-starred restaurants and they offer a fantastic way to build skills and confidence in people who don't have many skills or qualifications. Restaurants and street food places alike can increase the skill level among young people. We have a fantastic opportunity with these global events to put resources and money into doing that."



The tech sector is around 17% female

ORB CEO Robert Bloxham shares the view that the region's diversity brings opportunity for businesses and individuals:

"I run an agency that works on brand. Brand is looked at in so many different ways, from so many different perspectives. Birmingham is a cosmopolitan society and the things that people give, in terms of where they're from, the way they speak, their history and their experiences, for me, is exactly what we need. We can't look at a brand from one perspective; we look at it from multiple perspectives. We look at it from an international perspective and that's why diversity in this region is such a positive thing."

Ninder Johal, CEO of Nachural Group, a West Midlands based B2B events and media production company, regards diversity as crucial for businesses to take into account:

"We now live in a world where competition is international. Increasingly products are being commoditised, so they're all looking the same and in order to differentiate yourself from the competition, you need diversity of thought, you need diversity of concept and you need diversity of creativity."

"You can only get those things, that diversity, if you have a workforce that is diverse. That workforce can mirror not just your local community, but the international community. So, if you're going to come up with new ideas and new ways of competing and have a culture that's vibrant, then you need that diversity. I always say, go and seek people who look different from you. I guarantee if they look different from you, you will learn something from them."

Langford-Brown also believes that embracing the region's diversity holds a business case:

"Socially, it's just the right thing to do. We should be looking at bringing more gender diversity and social diversity into the mix. But ultimately there's a good commercial reason, because when you do that you get much more diverse thinking in groups and teams and that drives high performance."





Conclusion



The level of opportunity across the West Midlands is reinforced by the talent and business acumen already thriving in the region. This places the entire region at the forefront of national economic and technological advancement. Businesses within the region are at the forefront of this push, understanding and championing the need for, as Dakwa articulates, a “forward-thinking, open-minded cohesive unit.”

It is clear that there is an appreciation for forums that give a voice to the region’s businesses, as Trowers partner Vijay Bange expresses: “We need these forums to voice what we are doing and how best to work together. It’s a platform for us to effect change for the region.”

Ultimately, pushing the region forward into a new era of growth is high on the agenda for business leaders. The combination of the region’s natural connectivity, the collaborative scope of its business communities and the diversity of its workforce look to enable the region to continue its progress.

Collaboration on a local level and integration on a global level is of paramount importance to the success of the West Midlands going forward, according to business leaders and it is vital to promote innovation through diversity. The region has the raw materials it needs to harness new talent and experience and, fundamentally, the desire to utilise them.



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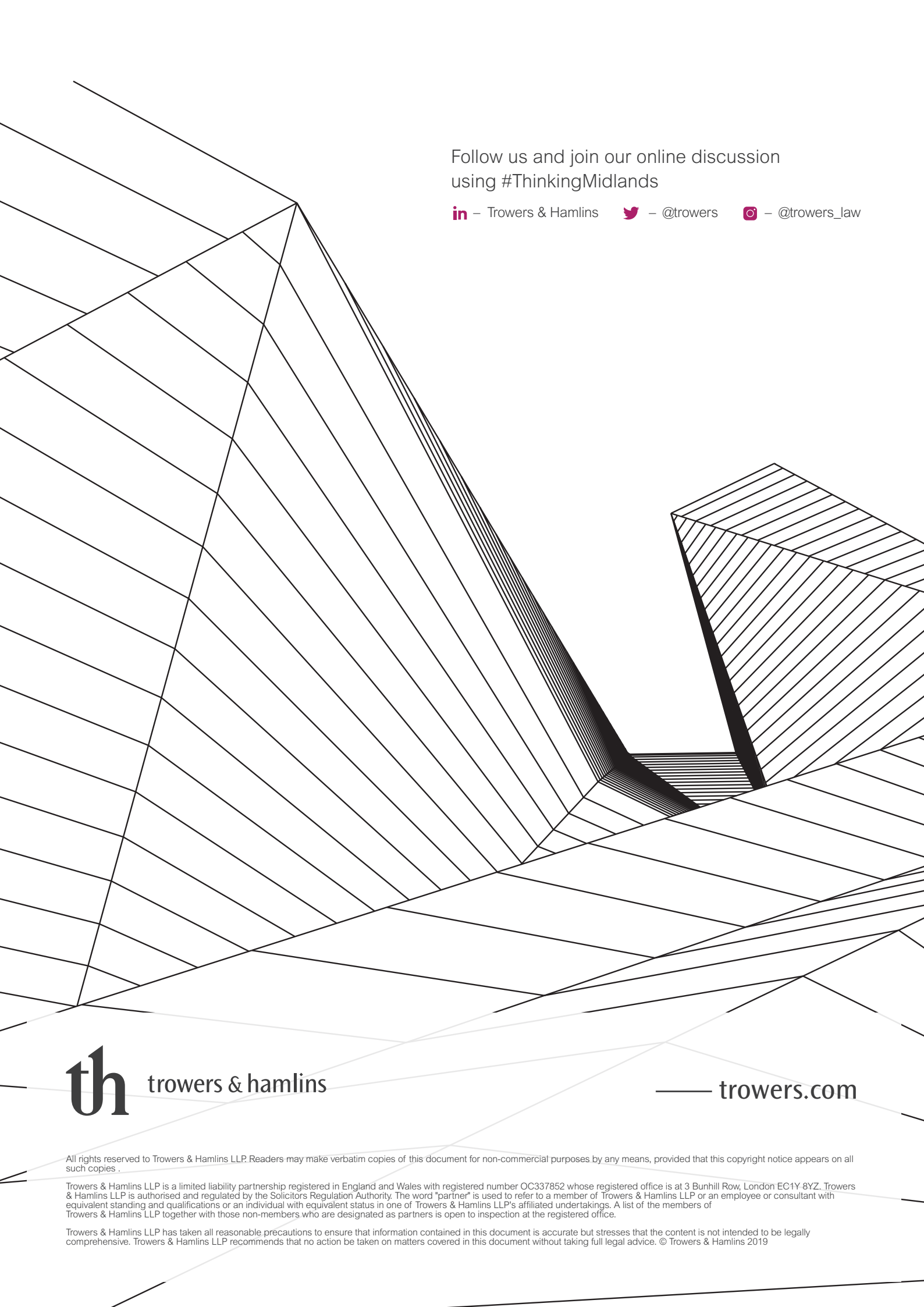
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