

Business Priorities 2021

Rebounding for Business: Vision for the West Midlands Mayor

Executive Summary



Foreword

This document sets out the priorities and recommendations that we believe a West Midlands Combined Authority Mayor should deliver on in order to empower businesses and enable our region's economy to reach its full potential.

In May 2021, voters across Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton will once again head to the polls to elect the region's Mayor and chair of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) which consists of a partnership between 18 Local Authorities and 3 Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). The WMCA has the ability to make decisions and wield a selection of powers across a larger scale and wider, regional geography than the organisations within it can do alone. As specified in the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act of 2016, the first Mayoral term has lasted three years with subsequent elections due to take place every four years.

In this document we set out some of the key priorities and actions we believe will have the greatest positive impact on the business community as the region looks to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic on a surer footing. Some fall within the current scope of mayoral powers, others will require the Mayor to use their "soft powers" to influence others or seek further devolution deals. This document has been developed in close consultation with our members through surveys and engagement with our Chamber Councils.

Combined, our Chambers of Commerce represent almost 5000 members and have championed the needs of businesses for over 200 years. Today, our expert staff continue to help businesses form new connections, offer support and guidance and seek to help shape the region into being the best possible place to start, move and grow a business.



Paul Faulkner
Chief Executive

Greater Birmingham
Chambers of Commerce

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Corin Crane
Chief Executive

Black Country Chambers
of Commerce

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Corin Crane'.



Louise Bennett
Chief Executive

Coventry & Warwickshire
Chambers of Commerce

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Collectively, the three Chambers are embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the West Midlands. Our combined reach and influence continues to grow as demonstrated by:

At the Heart of Local Business:



5,000 Members

**53,000 Newsletter
Subscribers**

**81,000 Magazine
readers**

Connected Globally: Enabling Growth:



**44,000 Export
Documents Issued**



**13,000 Delegates attended
online events & workshops**

Across the three Chambers in 2020

Between September 2020 and February 2021, the three Chambers delivered Brexit advice and guidance supported by the WMCA. Highlights included:

- Free expert advice, guidance and signposting provided to over **900** businesses
- **26** Free of Charge Brexit & International Trade training courses delivered to **265** participants
- **16** Free of Charge Digital Workshops delivered to **317** delegates

Leading the region from pandemic survival to economic revival

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Will lobby central Government for a comprehensive package of support to help them survive and in due course thrive throughout 2021
- Works with regional and national stakeholders to put the foundations in place to ensure the region emerges from the crisis in a relative position of strength
- Grasps the initiative to formulate a strategy which will drive the creation of high-wage, high value-added private sector jobs across the West Midlands

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Bring together key regional stakeholders across the public and private sector to ensure a strategy is put in place to minimise any long term scarring of the regional economy
- Tackle the unemployment crisis head on by formulating a long term plan which will create employment pathways for young people and helping to upskill and retrain those impacted by Covid-19
- Work with the business community embed a culture of innovation and agility in order to help business grow organically as we adapt to the post pandemic landscape

Be the ambassador the region needs

the business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Has the appropriate diplomatic skills to act as a beacon for the region on a global level in order to make the West Midlands even more attractive to foreign investors as we emerge from the Covid-19 crisis
- Will ensure the WMCA is a lean and efficient organisation which avoids unnecessary bureaucracy and duplication
- Can articulate the growing importance of the WMCA to a national audience in a bid to showcase the strengths of the region and to position the West Midlands as a world leader in technological advancements – particularly in the fields of battery technology and wider green investment
- Has the required political nuance to partner with the Government in order to secure greater levels of funding and statutory powers for the WMCA
- Has the prerequisite persona that will cut across political divides and foster a culture of collaboration and partnership working in a bid to tackle the key issues of the day
- Restores the lustre of the West Midlands in order to compete with similar sized city-regions on the global stage

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Articulating in a clear and concise manner the case for further devolution on a regional level in a bid to effectively ‘build back better’ and enhance local accountability for strengthening the region’s standing at both local and national level in a bid to level up the West Midlands
- Work with key regional stakeholders to create an attractive growth strategy which will showcase the strength of the West Midlands on a global scale in a bid to drive up levels of foreign direct investment post Brexit and as national restrictions related to Covid-19 begin to ease

Make the West Midlands the most business friendly region in the UK

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Works with partners to effectively recalibrate the Local Industrial Strategy to reflect the changing dynamics of the region as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Ensures that the WMCA creates a competitive business environment which will not only attract new firms to the region but also encourage existing firms to innovate and expand
- Advocates the broader contributions that the business community make to our economy and wider society

Our recommendations are:

- Conduct an ongoing and continual evaluation of the success and effectiveness of the Local Industrial Strategy to ensure businesses remain at the heart of policy programmes designed to boost regional productivity levels
- Lobby central government to reform models of fiscal revenue generation and avoids implementing a business rate supplement in the current uncertain climate
- Create a strategy which will revitalise our ailing high streets centring on mixed usage partnerships, better transport connectivity and innovative methods of attracting customers

Developing a Transport Network which is fit for the 21st century

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Partners with key local and national stakeholders to ensure that firms are primed to secure the benefits that the construction of HS2 will bring to the West Midlands and urge policymakers in Westminster to deliver the project in full
- Lobbies central government for funding to support Midlands Engine Rail programme which includes the Midlands Rail Hub in a bid to unlock capacity and improve journey times between Birmingham and major town and cities including Nottingham, Coventry and Leicester
- Work with government to formulate a plan that will restore Birmingham Airport to its rightful position as an economic powerhouse in the West Midlands and reiterate UK Central's strategic importance as a regional economic hub
- Work with infrastructure stakeholders to secure additional investment in the region in a bid to spur job growth and create apprenticeship opportunities

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Derive the maximum value from the development of Phase 1 of HS2 – particularly in relation to the supply chain opportunities that businesses from across the West Midlands can benefit from
- Lobby HMT and the DfT for additional funding to encourage greater uptake of cycling and public transport usage as social distancing measures begin to ease
- Continue to explore innovative new methods of tackling ingrained congestion issues and effectively partnering with the business community throughout the process
- Committing to build the new Walsall to Wolverhampton train line along with the associated stations

Make the West Midlands the number one region to visit, work, invest and live

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Prioritise tackling the shortage of housing and employment land
- Champion the region's high quality cultural, sporting and entertainment offering as the sectors restrictive measures related to Coronavirus are relaxed
- Tackle the 'digital divide' in our region that has been compounded by the Covid-19 crisis and ensure all citizens in the West Midlands have access to high quality broadband services

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Maximise the benefits which will materialise from Coventry's tenure as City of Culture in 2021 and the Birmingham Commonwealth Games in 2022, and the continuing regeneration of towns and city centres across the Black Country
- Embed a legacy culture from these developments which will continue to benefit our citizens for decades to come
- Using the WMCA's Spatial and Investment Delivery Plan as a basis to accelerate the delivery of housing and employment land to meet the region's ongoing requirements whilst also exploring the possibility of retrofitting existing stock to create a raft of employment opportunities
- Support the development of the region's sporting and cultural landscape along with shaping a strategy that will revitalise the night-time economy post Covid-19

Helping the region adapt to a post Brexit landscape

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Put the needs of businesses (and by extension: their employees and the communities they sustain) before politics when engaging with central Government on the future UK-EU relationship
- Help restore business and consumer confidence in the region by championing the West Midlands on the national and international stage, supporting, facilitating and securing additional public and private sector investment and support.

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Campaign for the region to receive our fair share of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and other post-EU funding
- Campaign for changes to Government policy to help support businesses adapting to Brexit. This should include an immigration system that responds to employers' needs, a temporary SME Brexit tax credit, upscaling HMRC Time to Pay arrangements and financial support for viable businesses experiencing temporary cash flow issues due to Brexit disruption.
- Continue to support local Chambers of Commerce in our extensive efforts to help local businesses adapt to the post Brexit landscape and other local business support and economic development activity.
- Back increasing public funded support for businesses trading internationally and support the Chambers of Commerce in helping local businesses grow their international links.

Tackling skills gaps in the region

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Recognises the need to reduce ingrained skills gaps for inclusive economic growth particularly in light of the unemployment crisis caused by the fallout of the Coronavirus pandemic
- Considers investment in people management and leadership skills a key part of the productivity agenda
- Will lobby central government for further commitments to long-term and sustainable funding to support further education

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Place focus on the importance of delivering qualifications at NVQ Level 2+ and set out a clear strategy for the development of digital skills
- Investigate and work with relevant bodies – schools, colleges, businesses and training providers – to encourage uptake of apprenticeships, particularly at level 2, following the recent decline
- Work with businesses, other local stakeholders and National Government to simplify business engagement with education and initiatives such as Kickstart

Transforming the West Midlands through investment in the green economy and encouraging environmentally sustainable business practices

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Positions the West Midlands as the European capital of green technology centred upon the creation of a gigafactory in Coventry
- Formulates a Covid-19 economic recovery programme which is underpinned by a commitment to environmental sustainability
- Will set out a plan to support those businesses in the automotive industry (and their supply chains) as the Government progresses with its decision to ban combustion engine sales by the end of the decade

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Work with Government contacts to ensure the gigafactory is delivered to Coventry by the middle of the decade
- Lobby Westminster to improve the supply-side infrastructure for low carbon technology
- Work with relevant local stakeholders to identify the barriers that businesses in the region face in attempting to adopt low carbon technology
- Explore new and innovative access to finance models to ensure businesses have the finance they need to make the transition to net zero

Ensuring the Levelling Up agenda enables substantial budgets and powers to be devolved to the West Midlands Combined Authority and Metro Mayor

The business community need a WMCA Mayor who:

- Lobbies for the use of existing local business taxes and UKSPF Funds to be designed and delivered locally within the West Midlands CA area
- Will lobby central Government for the relocation of further government departments and other public bodies to the West Midlands
- Will encourage private sector and government co-investment in Chambers of Commerce to capitalise on local structures and enable simpler and better understood routes to business support and overseas export markets

Our recommendations for the successful candidate are:

- Work with Chambers of Commerce and key regional stakeholders across the public and private sector to ensure market led business support
- Ensure the successful implementation of the FE White Paper and a genuinely business led local skills system
- Partner with Chambers of Commerce to enhance the international profile of local businesses in global markets

Conclusion

In the run up to the election the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce, Black Country Chamber of Commerce and Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce will be working hard on behalf of our members to:

- Lobby the candidates, promoting the priorities set out in this document.
- Raise awareness of the election, who the candidates are and what their priorities are.
- Create opportunities for members to engage with the candidates.
- Encourage members to engage their employees and colleagues in registering and turning out to vote.

More information can be found on our respective websites and via the contact details overleaf.

About the Chambers

About the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce

The Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce (GBCC) is here to connect, support and grow local businesses. Accredited by the British Chambers, we have acted as the voice of local businesses since 1813. GBCC is headquartered in Edgbaston, Birmingham, and covers six geographic divisions and four themed Chambers, representing over 3,000 members

W: www.greaterbirminghamchambers.com

E: info@birmingham-chamber.com

T: @grbhamchambers

About the Black Country Chamber of Commerce

The Black Country Chamber of Commerce is the leading business support organisation for the Black Country region. Headquartered in Wolverhampton and providing business support to the four metropolitan areas we are the voice of the Black Country business community. The Chamber acts as the conduit for business and stakeholder engagement, driving meaningful change for businesses and facilitating regional growth.

W: www.blackcountrychamber.co.uk

E: website@blackcountrychamber.co.uk

T: @BCCCmembers

About the Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce

The Coventry and Warwickshire Chamber of Commerce is a business membership organisation with five branches across the region – Rugby, Coventry, Mid, North and South Warwickshire. We act as a voice for businesses but also offer a range of support services, including DIT international trade support from our trade hub at Chamber House.

W: www.cw-chamber.co.uk

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