

## **£1.2 billion for Birmingham 2022? The West Midlands Needs to Keep Going for the Big Prizes Even if They Come with Hefty Price Tags**

**By Chris Smith, Centre for the New Midlands**

I don't know about you, but as I sat in Coventry watching the Closing Ceremony of Birmingham 2022, I could almost feel the collective sigh of relief and the enormous sense of pride emanating from Birmingham as the UK's second city passed the baton for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Commonwealth Games on to the State of Victoria. Birmingham had delivered a truly global celebration of sport, with let's not forget just 5 years of planning, ever since Durban was stripped of the right to host the Games due to a series of missed deadlines and financial problems.

It's not surprising that finances clearly caused challenges for Durban. Birmingham 2022 is estimated to have cost £778 million to deliver (unofficial figures are believed to be closer to £1.2 billion) which does sound like an awful lot of money for 'just' 11 days of sport (however enjoyable those 11 days were). Well, within those 11 days you can also include the vastly enhanced infrastructure, the trade and investment opportunities as a consequence of the games, the reputational boost for the region and UK plc, the significant shot in the arm for tourism and hospitality across the region, the morale and general boost for civic pride....the list goes on but surely that's enough? Well, I would strongly encourage you to take a read (if you haven't done so already) of ['Our Legacy'](#) which spells out just how vast and intense the organisers' focus has been on embedding lasting impact within each and every aspect of the Games.

Perhaps it is not surprising given that legacy is always raised by critics of these large scale events and organisers always seem to get hammered by accusations that their projects won't leave sufficient legacy and are in effect, extremely expensive moments. With such a focus on legacy, do we expect too many different outputs and expect them to act as magic wands in alleviating some of society's biggest challenges that policy makers have failed to tackle? Or is it only right that we expect publicly funded programmes to tick the boxes of the political masters who write the cheques (most of which I am sure is with the best intentions). Surely infrastructure, the sheer thrill of the sport and the 'place' on the map will be more than enough to secure Birmingham 2022's legacy, alongside the image of Ozzy Osborne belting out 'Paranoid' during the Closing Ceremony obviously.

Whilst the organisers had the unenviable task of lacing legacy throughout all aspects of the Games (including the planting of 2,022 acres of new forest across the Midlands region in partnership with Severn Trent enabling the residual emissions of the Games to be rebalanced over time as an example), here are the key themes for me as to why Birmingham 2022 has already left such a huge impact.

### **Public realm and infrastructure**

In the same way that Coventry city centre is almost unrecognisable thanks to the vast investment it has received thanks to year as 'City of Culture', Birmingham 2022 has laid the foundations for the transformation of Perry Barr; it has rejuvenated, putting it mildly, the Alexander Stadium and delivered a new Sandwell Aquatic Centre which will be open to the public from 2023. At a time of such global unrest and economic uncertainty, the West Midlands region is extremely fortunate to have had these two major festivals of culture and sport to help kickstart the recovery. Quite simply, the Games has unlocked millions of pounds of funding to refurbish train stations, regenerate huge areas of Birmingham and create new and revitalised sporting facilities up and down the region. This investment and enhanced infrastructure should not be taken for granted.

### **Civic pride and community**

London 2012 provided the framework for the 'army' of volunteers (70,000 in its case) who would help to deliver Birmingham 2022. In the case of Birmingham 2022, the West Midlands enrolled 14,000 volunteers to form the 'Commonwealth Collective' with another 28,000 having put their hands up to participate. It remains to be seen how this programme is delivered as one of the legacy programmes post 2022 (the organisers intend to match charities to its database), but one shouldn't underestimate the enormous civic pride that such large-scale initiatives can promote across a city. This has to be one of London 2012's lasting successes and is certainly one of Birmingham 2022's.

### **Glasgow, Manchester and now Birmingham prove their credentials to deliver major global events**

In the age of 'Levelling Up', Birmingham 2022 was a very timely reminder that investment reaps rewards and that the world does not stop and start in London. Despite the train strikes threatening to 'de-rail' the celebrations, a staggering 1.2 million tickets were sold for Birmingham 2022 with a global audience estimated to be 1.5 billion.

Even at the alleged top end of delivery (i.e., £1.2 billion), I would argue Birmingham 2022 was money extremely well spent; an unbelievable success for a whole host of reasons for the 'second city', the West Midlands region and UK plc. Everyone involved in its delivery should bask in the glory of the Games which were an absolute triumph which has restated Birmingham's case (if it even needed doing) as one of the world's most progressive, enterprising and can-do cities.

The West Midlands needs to keep thinking big in its ambitions, even if they do sometimes come with what looks like a hefty price tag.