

# Birmingham: A Global Future

The Centre held its Annual Conference on Wednesday. First delayed and then moved online by the novel coronavirus, it was nevertheless a large and successful event with over 300 registered virtual attendees. Being able to do this was a remarkable feat: a tribute to the skill and resourcefulness of our communications officer Bethan and the technology that made it possible. The day's discussion led to far much material to cover in a single blog post, so here I focus in particular detail on some of the points raised in our first panel.

What became clear very quickly was that Brexit and the pandemic are both having (and will continue to have) a profound impact on the lives of people on this island. Whatever our views on the subject, Brexit is happening and there is thus a need for pragmatism as well as research moving forward – as noted by our first keynote speaker, Professor Beer.

Birmingham was historically known as the “workshop of the world” and we will need to draw upon this legacy more than ever. Given the youthful and diverse demographic of the city, it is perhaps inevitable that at least some of this focus will be towards deepening ties with Commonwealth partners.

The first panel session therefore investigated the potential impact of hosting the 2022 Commonwealth Games in some detail. In particular, two avenues were noted as potential drivers of longer term regeneration by Paul Faulkner – the chief executive of the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. Firstly, the sheer volume of physical development. Not only will this support jobs in the interim (during a period when they are likely to be scarce) but it will also leave a legacy of enhanced infrastructure, both sporting and transport.

Secondly, it offers an unparalleled opportunity to shape and change perceptions of Birmingham, both around the world and domestically. It was noted that Birmingham does not always have the domestic reputation that it perhaps deserves. Moreover, as important as any physical “legacy” is the enhanced skills-base that the Games will leave. David Grady (CFO of the 2022 Games) pointed out that much of this will come in unsung sectors such as finance.

The role of volunteers also came under scrutiny. Not everything left by the Games will be measurable in strictly pecuniary terms – there is promising evidence that it will enhance and draw together communities in the city. Moreover, as noted by Professor Harris of Glasgow Caledonian University, there will be learning opportunities from previous iterations, notably Glasgow and Manchester. What's less clear is how the narrative of the Games will play out in the media across each of the four nations in the UK.

Professor Jones of Cardiff University sounded a note of caution around this, noting that Wales was likely to see little or no benefit to the Games with benefits being likely to be local in scope. Indeed, more broadly, the difficulty of coming up with a balanced evidence base on which to assess some of the claims made for large sporting events was pointed out.

Whilst the pandemic has had (and continues to have) a devastating impact on hospitality, the panellists all sounded a note of very cautious optimism over prospects for the Games. There was also unity in wanting to avoid “heavy handed” intervention from Westminster, pointing out that subnationally, areas (like Birmingham) can project a unique identity that departs from a national narrative centred on Brexit.

The devolution agenda came up repeatedly throughout the day, with panellists dealing with subject matter from the Games to HS2 to the impact of Brexit on manufacturing all suggesting that this was a key issue. More and more, it appears that one of the things that Brexit has demonstrated is the alienation that many feel – not necessarily from Brussels but from Westminster. This appears to straddle the Leave-Remain divide, suggesting that meaningful devolution might help to contribute to healing some of this.

This was followed by a keynote speech by Sir Vince Cable before a fascinating, if deeply sobering, panel on the post-Brexit future of manufacturing in the region. Much of this will be discussed at length in future blogs, but suffice it to say that many of the challenges remain daunting and are likely to prove a particular challenge given the short timeframe.

The afternoon was kicked off by Professor Anand Menon (of King's College London and director the UK in a Changing EU research initiative). His wide-ranging discussion touched on a huge array of Brexit-related subjects, with the current Internal Markets Bill unsurprisingly raising interesting issues. Ultimately, it seems that the concessions made by the government to its own backbenchers will not be enough for the EU to be satisfied that the UK will abide by the treaty it has signed. As a result, the EU will initiate legal proceedings, although this is likely to be a long process.

One interesting possibility floated by Professor Menon was that this would ultimately be superseded by events. After all, if the Joint Committee can establish protocols then the offending provisions in the Bill might never come into play. Similarly, a trade deal would avert this, particularly if accompanied by fresh legislation on the British side that removed the problematic clauses. In a certain sense, therefore, if an agreement is reached then we may move forward notwithstanding the Internal Markets Bill.

Of course, this has huge ramifications for a trade agreement with the United States. If the Irish are not satisfied, then the chances of any agreement become vanishingly small. In contrast, if they *are* ultimately satisfied then Professor Menon posited that there is a reasonable likelihood of an eventual US-UK agreement. Of course, whatever happens this will be some way off and we should expect no favours from the US – they will drive a hard bargain.

The next panel addressed HS2 and its prospects for Birmingham. A lively debate ensued, with notable disagreements between some panellists on whether the project should go ahead. Nevertheless, the one area that all panellists agreed on was the need for further devolution and enhancement of local transport routes. Without this, even its supporters fear that HS2 could end up a “white elephant” that exacerbates regional inequalities in the UK. Put simply, it *must* be accompanied by supporting infrastructure and further local control over this.

The final panel then considered Birmingham's global future. Again, the need for further devolution took centre-stage. Some interesting discussion ensued around the prospects for business growth via social media and the digital world. Nevertheless, as Henrietta Brearley

of the Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce pointed out, there is a degree of “crisis fatigue” amongst businesses, and particularly SMEs.

It was also noted that business support needs to be made much easier to access: many elements have their own “language” posing an extra accessibility barrier for hard-pressed firms. These need to be ‘joined-up’: at present we have a patchwork of support (local, national and through tertiary education).

However, there are positives that we can build on. The “kickstart” scheme de-risks taking on a young person and the need for employers to invest in skills helps employability, even if they ultimately end up seeking a job elsewhere. Concerns were raised, however, over the length of the scheme and the support in place for older, more experienced workers.

Many in their 50s have a skill-set specifically developed for a particular industry. Helping these individuals retain work (and particularly skilled work) is a potential challenge that we will need to overcome.

The final keynote speech from Fiona Allan of the Birmingham Hippodrome, which has some of the largest audiences of any theatre outside London, dealt with the potentially existential threats faced by the creative sector. Although often seen as something of a minnow in purely pecuniary terms, this contributes an enormous amount to the “liveability” of an area and the UK’s soft power more generally. Brexit will be a challenge, particularly as regards visas for touring.

Although less obvious than in the case of tradable goods, there is a delicate balance between commercial operators and not-for-profits. Many of the “big names” rely on a network of not-for-profits to showcase their work on tour. Similarly, those who are subsidised can afford to take risks on novel work, which are often then bought by commercial operators.

A great deal of talent is nurtured and many well-loved shows are developed outside of London. The development of Matilda here in the West Midlands is a case in point. Brexit has the potential to affect the

free flow of ideas and individuals, many of whom have careers that span multiple countries.

There will be challenges associated with both touring in Europe and getting stars into the UK. One issue is the responsiveness of the visa system (at present it is possible for a performer to fly to the UK from France to cover an absence due to illness) and the cost burden this will place on smaller operators (whose viability is crucial to the sector).

However, whilst Brexit might present challenges, the pandemic poses previously unimaginable threats. Nevertheless, the talk concluded on a note of optimism: the show must go on. Ultimately, the day as a whole made clear that Birmingham will have to draw on both its heritage and global links more than ever as we move beyond Brexit.

***Footage from this year's online Annual Conference will be available to watch soon on the Centre for Brexit Studies [YouTube](#) channel.***