Brexit, Birmingham and the 2022 Commonwealth Games: an opportunity for regeneration and rejuvenation?

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This article explores the awarding of the 2022 Commonwealth Games to Birmingham in the context of Brexit and Regional Devolution and Development.

A mixed methods approach of qualitative data collection supplemented by desktop research was undertaken. The underpinning research philosophy was that of Pragmatism (Morgan, 2014) – triangulating differing ontological & epistemological perspectives. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted between July 2018 and December 2018

The article critically assesses the potential of the 2022 Games to support regeneration, finding that various factors will continue to impinge on the ability of the 2022 Games to fulfil their promise of a shared vision post-Brexit.

Much has been made of the potential for major international sporting events to provide a stimulus to areas in need of regeneration, for which Glasgow is often cited as a classic example in the UK, having hosted the Games in 2014 (Scottish Government, 2015). However, Brexit adds a new piquancy to this debate given the desire by senior UK Government figures to rejuvenate ties with the Commonwealth. ? Is there anything distinctive about Birmingham (e.g., the presence of significant "Commonwealth Diaspora" communities) that could assist in this regard?

Keywords: Commonwealth games, Brexit, legacy, urban renewal, tourism

> It's an extraordinary opportunity for the city and region to showcase itself to the world at a time when we will be leaving Europe and the relationship with our Commonwealth neighbours will be even more important"

Ian Metcalfe, head of Commonwealth Games England (BBC Sport, 2017).

Introduction

This article aims to assess the extent to which the 2022 Commonwealth Games can assist the host city (Birmingham) to build and deepen economic ties with the Commonwealth in light of the UK's decision to leave the EU. Major sporting events such as the Olympics have been seen as vehicles to help drive regeneration in deprived city areas suffering from post-industrial blight (Cook & Ward, 2011). The debate on such event-led regeneration is also intimately linked to discussions on regeneration (sic. public-private) partnerships, the link between policy networks and policy success and in turn wider issues around regional governance and development - see Christie & Gibbs (2015) for a discussion.

As such, these types of examples could be argued to illustrate an example of how structural change has served to facilitate the emergence of the "post-industrial city" (Gospodini, 2009). As the forces unleashed through globalisation and technological change have combined to effect structural changes to mature industrial economies, cities and regions traditionally reliant on manufacturing have particularly struggled to overcome the effects of plant closures over the past 30 years and the more recent impact of the 2008 economic downturn (Bailey, Bentley, De Ruyter & Bailey, 2014). As such, the impacts of these forces have been felt unequally across the UK, with London and the South-East, and some "Core Cities" (e.g., Bristol) generally benefitting, whilst other urban areas (particularly in the Midlands and North of England), coastal communities and countryside feeling "left behind" (Fothergill, 2009). This in turn has reinforced calls by academics and commentators to

embrace urban revival (van Winden, 2008), reiterating our starting point above of the potential catalytic effect that major sporting events can have on cities.

However, the disparities described above have also been linked to the outcome of the 2016 referendum on the 23rd June asking voters whether the UK should continue to be a member of the European Union, or to leave. On a margin of some 4%, that is, with a majority of 51.9% to 48.1% Remain, 17,410,742 people voted Leave – around 37% of the total electorate (Electoral Commission, 2016) – with the attendant result that Prime Minister May enacted the Article 50 provisions to leave the EU on March 31st 2017. The result, christened "Brexit" by the media, has been widely interpreted as a reaction against globalisation and so-called "metropolitan elites" (Pidd, 2016) – an example of a phenomenon that has also resulted in the election of Donald Trump, with "America First" and a resurgence in right-wing populist movements in other European countries, most notably the Orban regime in Hungary (Korkut, De Ruyter, Maganaris, & Bailey, 2017).

Interestingly, this has recently led to populist commentators such as Goodhart (2017) even positing that events such as those above are leading to more individualist outlooks based upon culture and identity which challenges traditional politics of left and right. Instead, this new outlook is rather creating divisions within societies between those with as Goodhart describes a mobile "achieved" identity of people from "Anywhere" or more traditionally, many would categorise as members of the elites and the marginalised roots based identity of the people from "Somewhere" who are placed based and often now described as the "left behind" within globalisation (Goodhart, 2017). Suffice to say, the Brexit result therefore, poses a major challenge to conventional theoretical narratives that would posit the city-region made up by the individuals and groups within it as the pre-eminent conceptual unit in the global economy (such as the "post-industrial city" mentioned above), and downplay the significance of the nation-state.

There is an inherent tension brought about by the dis-junction between the economic necessity for cities to continue to be operators in a globalised economy, as opposed to political imperatives that would seek to re-impose borders, or seek to substitute one set of international economic relationships with another. Regional stakeholders experience particular challenges having to operate between competing national agendas on the one hand and differences of opinion amongst their own constituencies on the other. Brexit in the UK has thrown these tensions into sharp focus, placing a particular set of pressures upon conventional approaches to place leadership (Liddle, Potluka, Quinn, Anderton, & Bartling, 2017), with bodies such as Chambers of Commerce, Local Authorities and Higher Education Providers seeking to fulfil their core missions amidst conflicting views on the result amongst their own members and constituents.

In this sense, the conventional perspective of the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in 2022, as a major sporting event, would analyse the hosting of them in terms of the purported multiplier effects on the regional economy and more prolonged potential for legacy effects. The current global (SARS-CoV2) pandemic further complicates any such analysis along these lines, with the UK amongst the worst affected (and by some metrics *the* worst affected) countries in Europe. Naturally, the impact upon the events and hospitality sectors has been devastating with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics postponed alongside hundreds of other sporting events. Within the UK, during the second quarter of 2020, the hospitality industry saw an estimated 87% fall in sales (Vines, 2020).

Setting the agenda

The Commonwealth is a voluntary grouping of 54 independent states. Although the organisation originally grew out of the former British Empire, it has evolved substantially and its role today is primarily one of loose voluntary cooperation and intergovernmental support.

Indeed, some recent new members were never part of the British Empire (Rwanda and Mozambique being former colonies of Belgium and Portugal, respectively). Commonwealth membership covers a rather diverse array of countries. Whilst a majority are small (and many are island nations) and many are developing nations, the organisation includes some of the largest countries on earth (India, Pakistan and Nigeria)[1] as well as some of the most prosperous (Singapore, Australia and Canada). The nations of the Commonwealth[2] take part in a multi-sport event – known as the Commonwealth Games – every 4 years. Like the Olympics, places bid to host these quadrennial events, of which the most recent have been hosted in the National Capital Territory of Delhi (India – 2010), Glasgow (Scotland – 2014) and the Gold Coast in Queensland (Australia – 2018). The city of Birmingham is due to host the next Games in 2022.

With the advent of Brexit, the hosting of the 2022 Commonwealth Games now could be seen as emblematic for those who desire to reorient the UK's trading relationships away from the EU, and towards the Commonwealth. In this context, the example of the Commonwealth Games as a mega-event could be seen as a means to exploit the "soft power" of sport to "further wider political agendas" (Harris, 2015: p. 964). Increased trade with the Commonwealth has been a clear part of the UK Government's agenda after Brexit (Blitz, 2017), and the hosting of major sporting events has also been seen as a vehicle to foster some sense of, or promote/re-brand, a certain *national* identity (Harris, 2015; emphasis added). However, equally so, such arguments could be used regarding fostering, or re-branding regional identities.

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1 A rather comprehensive list of members and information about the organisation is available via the Commonwealth's website.

2 Confusingly, many countries comprise more than one nation and these compete separately. Thus, for example, Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland compete as individual nations.

In this context, it could be seen as of some significance that the city of Birmingham[3] was the only "core city" in the UK to record a majority vote for "Leave" (albeit very slightly so) and as such, could be regarded *in extremis* as the capital of some incipient "Brexitland" (see Bielenberg (2016) for an example of an article positing the West Midlands and North of England as being at the "Heart of Brexitland") - or as Goodhart would have it, "the capital of the people from somewhere".

However, this would be an extreme and unfair view, and a rather simplistic interpretation of the result in Birmingham (and the surrounding peri-urban areas, where the Leave vote was much stronger). Against the narrow majority Leave vote is a city with a highly varied, multicultural demographic makeup with significant South Asian, Afro-Caribbean, Irish, Chinese, Polish and Romanian communities that belies a narrow Leave vote as necessarily being some type of white working class "protest vote" of people rooted in place. Indeed, there is significant evidence of a substantial spatial pattern in the results in the West Midlands even *after* controlling for a large number of demographic factors (Hearne, 2020).

As such, there are prominent "Commonwealth Diaspora" communities in Birmingham. Whilst a clear majority of such BAME voters voted Remain (see Appendix 1 for vote analysis by ethnicity), there is evidence of some voting to leave the EU (as evidenced by a significant Leave vote share in council Wards with a high BAME population, such as Handsworth Wood (ibid.). Anecdotal evidence suggests that for such people, a vote to leave the EU was cast in the belief that it would lead to improved economic and social links to their own ancestral (Commonwealth) countries.

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3 i.e., "city of Birmingham" being synonymous with Birmingham City Council, rather than the greater West Midlands Metropolitan Authority area (now superseded by the West Midlands Combined Authority, or WMCA). As a comparison, "Greater Manchester" is equivalent to the WMCA.

Certainly, Birmingham's recent history at first glance lends itself to this interpretation. The 'city of a thousand trades' saw rapid growth during the 19th and early 20th centuries and the wider West Midlands metropolitan area increasingly specialised in skilled metalwork and automotive manufacture, the legacy of which remains visible today. Hard though it might be to envisage today, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Birmingham also had a growing investment banking sector as London banks sought to establish themselves (Overman, 2013) and service sector employment grew faster there than anywhere else in the UK. Yet such was the speed and scale of the area's fall from grace that its closest comparator is not the North of England but rather Detroit. In 1971, nominal disposable income per capita in the West Midlands standard statistical region was amongst the highest in Britain, behind only the South East standard statistical region[4] (Office for National Statistics, 2016). By 1981, it was the poorest region in England (*ibid*) and the West Midlands metropolitan region, which Birmingham is at the heart of, is the poorest NUTS2 region in the UK today (Office for National Statistics, 2020).

However, it is not the purpose of this article to posit a normative evaluation of the voting sympathies of particular groups. Rather, its focus is primarily economistic in the sense of Brexit as an economic rupture with the preceding period of EU membership. As such, the article proceeds on the premise that there will be an economic cost to the UK, under any plausible alternative relationship (Dhingra, Ottaviano, Sampson, Van Reenen, 2016) – and therefore that given this, that diversification of trade and production links are necessary, and that the presence of significant Commonwealth country ethnic groups in the West Midlands *might* assist in this regard. Hence, this article seeks to critically evaluate the proposition that

4 Although long since deprecated, this region is made up of London and the salubrious Home Counties, as well as a handful of less well-off areas in Essex, Kent and southern Hampshire.

the 2022 Commonwealth Games will provide particular opportunities to pursue an agenda of increased links with the Commonwealth.

Today, in common with other 'core cities' central Birmingham is a regional hub for a host of professional services firms, notably in law, accountancy and architecture. This is responsible for around 6% of the city's economy (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Perhaps less widely appreciated is the fact that financial services makes up over 9% of the city's economy (*ibid*), having seen rapid growth over the past decade with HSBC's UK headquarters as well as a significant insurance and pensions sector (mostly actuarial services). Education makes up approaching 8% of the city's economy, anchored by its universities (*ibid*). Away from Birmingham's centre and prosperous southern fringes, manufacturing continues to play an outsized role, making up 14% of the city's economy, compared to just 3.4% in Manchester, 5.9% in Leeds and a mere 1.8% in London (*ibid*). This is predominantly accounted for by metalworking and automotive, legacies of the city's industrial heritage.

In the discussion that follows, we use Brexit as a lens to examine this in the context of Birmingham and its successful bid for the 2022 Commonwealth Games. The article next examines the economic arguments around the Games from the conventional perspectives of regional multiplier and legacy effects, before turning to the current Brexit context and desire to build stronger relationships with Commonwealth countries. The final section articulates a research agenda to explore these issues, proposing to gather primary data taken from interviews and focus groups with various local and regional stakeholders (businesses, government, individuals and community groups).

Understanding the impact of "Mega-Events" in a Brexit context

The impact of Mega-Events as a spur to urban renewal and regeneration has largely been

discussed in terms of the immediate potential for regional multiplier effects and the prolonged potential for legacy effects. Indeed, the utter dominance of this approach in conventional discourse on the subject led Matheson (2010: p. 12) to comment that "[s]ustainable and positive event legacies, within major and mega-events have run like an obligato within recent policy discourses" (ibid.).

Sporting mega-events also present unique opportunities for cultivating an "international brand" – something that is likely to be important in a post-Brexit environment in which the UK's international standing has taken a significant hit. Indeed, there is increasing awareness of the possible "brand boost" to be had from hosting such events, with South Africa explicitly targeting such an approach in 2010 (Knott, Fyall, & Jones, 2017). Similarly, one study found significant positive benefits to perceptions of China amongst the US student population in part as a result of the hosting of the 2008 Olympic Games (Gibson, Qi, & Zhang, 2008). Perhaps unsurprisingly, they found a significant relationship between destination image and intention to travel (ibid), suggesting the potential for growth in both tourism and business links. The challenge for Birmingham will be to leverage this branding potential at the city level and adequately capitalise on it, particularly given that brand-building is a long term endeavour and evidence that even in the case of Beijing, the 2008 Olympic Games had only a limited impact on the city's brand (Zhang and Zhao, 2009). Moreover, even in the event of significant trade liberalisation, taking advantage of business opportunities in many large Commonwealth markets is likely to be extremely challenging (Hearne, De Ruyter, & Davies, 2019).

In this context it is important to distinguish between the *additionality* arising directly from investment in the event itself (i.e., would the growth have occurred anyway if there had not been the additional investment?), as opposed to indirect legacy effects from related activities (Christie & Gibbs, 2015). Emphasising the importance of "actors" and "networks"

as underpinning the impact of Mega-Events, Holman (2013) argues that "key to network success is the interconnectivity of partnerships, and their embedding within, rather than detachment from, broader local governance decision-making structures" (cited by Christie & Gibbs, 2015: p. 872). Related to this are any "backwards linkages" (Jones & Munday, 2004: p. 119) to other sectors via the purchasing that firms in the tourism sector do (ibid.). However, legacy effects are path dependent, in that as "the urban system optimizes around previous responses, the capacity for structural change from within becomes increasingly constrained over time" (Dobson, 2015: p. 946).

However, perceptions of the economic and social impact of a major sporting event on disadvantaged areas are mixed. In concert with the narrative that post-industrial cities are emblematic of a "shift from production to consumption" (Harris, 2015: p. 966), production historically could be seen as more rooted in a local community, whilst consumption could serve (or largely exclusively serve) outsiders from the regenerative locale in question, so much so that locals feel pushed out. Mooney McCall and Paton (2015) noted this in conducting research on the impact of the Glasgow 2014 Games on the East End of Glasgow, a highly deprived area. They found that some residents welcomed the Games as an opportunity for investment, and changing outside perceptions of the area. In contrast, others only served to feel more marginalised, and somewhat intimidated by the heavy security accompanying such events, or otherwise of the view that the Games used up resources "better spent elsewhere", such as tackling homelessness (ibid. p. 28; see also Matheson (2010) for a discussion of "community issues"). Indeed, an opportunity cost analysis suggested that the

£425 million of public money spent on the 2014 Games could have generated similar economic effects if it had been spent on other activities such as roads and bridges[5].

As such, it has been argued (Jones & Munday, 2004) that the proponents of event-led regeneration "often misuse multiplier-type analyses to exaggerate benefits" (ibid. p.129). This is not an unimportant criticism, as the most immediate beneficiaries of mega-events tend to be the construction companies commissioned for the initial redevelopment work. For these firms, the temptation would be that the claiming of legacy effects would be only of direct interest to the effect that their postulation thereof shores up their commercial tenders. Or as Bent Flyvbjerg, expert on mega-projects, including sports events, has sardonically commented: "[a] budget reserve is to contractors as red meat is to lions, and they will devour it" (as cited by Wigmore, 2017). In this context, Olympic hosts such as Sydney or Barcelona were cities that could well in actuality have incurred losses of many millions of dollars (Flyvbjerg & Stewart, 2012), whilst some have suggested that the cost of the Athens Olympics could have been as high as €9bn (e.g., Malkoutzis, 2012).

In addition, in the context of large-scale events such as the Games, there could also be wider economic displacement effects on other regions in the UK (Jones & Munday, 2004). Evidence available from past Games, suggest that provided the host(s) harness(es) existing infrastructure, and any new infrastructure is effectively utilised post-Games, there might actually be a net benefit. However, this is with the significant caveat that provided the desire to indulge in political prestige projects is constrained and the focus on sports remains paramount.

5 However, this did not include any legacy effects with respect to the purpose-built facilities and the flow-on effects for the community in terms of sport and recreational activity (Scottish Government, 2015).

Of course, it may be that changing the socio-demographic profile of a locale might be seen as desirable, in order to avoid the poor being lumped into urban "ghettos" and to encourage social mixing. Indeed, central and local government often attach provisos pertaining to a minimum ratio of affordable housing as part of any residential redevelopment (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). However, in accordance with the previous paragraph, the practical record of commercial developers fixated on maximising property yields in providing truly "affordable housing" in this regard often leaves a lot to be desired (Lloyd, 2014). Although, the notion of breaking down "urban ghettos" and encouraging their dilution or dispersion, in itself could be construed as an "elitist" attitude towards communities that though they might be "deprived" according to conventional orthodox metrics, could still display solidarity and social cohesion.

Perceptions of marginalisation and exclusion in turn could equally apply to the attitudes of those for whom Brexit was a statement of defying purported "elites", or otherwise in a similar fashion, an expression of frustration on the part of those communities feeling excluded from decision-making. In this context, Brexit poses a challenge to traditional notions of governance (Stoker, 1998) in that governance "is ultimately concerned with creating the conditions for *ordered rule and collective action* (ibid. p.17, emphasis added). Collective action in itself though requires some semblance of community and solidarity in the pursuit of basic shared objectives (Ostrom & Ahn, 2009). As governance has become more complex with the emergence of home nation, regional and supranational units, the sense of community and connection with government has become more difficult for many to coalesce around.

As such, the 2016 Referendum result has highlighted deep divisions in the fabric of UK communities and regions - and indeed between the four constituent nations of the UK (Savage & Cunningham, 2016; Menon, 2018). As such, Brexit adds a new twist to the

provocative post-modernist preconception of the fragmentation of society and demise of universal grand narratives of history; that in their present guise are almost teleological in their positing of globalisation and internationalisation as being essentially irreversible (Steger, 2011). Savage and Cunningham (2016) argue that the nature of one's personal and professional networks (sic. social capital and cultural capital) were key determinants of the voting result – with the key point that these networks amongst Remain "urban liberals" and Leave "little Englanders" [our term] were to all purposes mutually exclusive from each other[6].

Over four years after the event, these ruptures have shown few signs of diminishing. If anything, they have only served to become further entrenched as the current UK Government (at the time of writing) struggles to articulate a coherent post-Brexit stance to the EU and the rest of the world – including the Commonwealth - in the face of its own internal divisions (Cowley & Wager, 2018). It is in this context, then, that we now turn to the Birmingham bid, and the prospect of the 2022 Commonwealth Games in a post-Brexit context. Is the 2022 Commonwealth Games a contributory means to rebuild cohesion and opportunity around a new post-Brexit "shared vision" for the West Midlands and wider UK, or is this an "impossible dream"? In the discussion that follows, we outline our methodology before presenting findings of the research and then discussion the implications for the city and wider West Midlands region.

6 Although this runs the risk of over-simplification if to vote Remain means one is an urban liberal who reads *the Guardian* and whose possession of "cultural capital" is determined by "highbrow" or "elite" measures (sic. Bourdieu) such as whether or not one likes classical music. It could also be argued that their analysis appears to suffer from omitted variable bias – the occupational status of one's social contacts is highly collinear with one's own occupational status and education.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach of desktop research, supplemented by some exploratory (pilot) qualitative data collection was undertaken. The underpinning research philosophy was that of Pragmatism (Morgan, 2014) – triangulating differing ontological & epistemological perspectives. The qualitative research consisted of four semi-structured interviews, conducted between August 2018 and November 2018 exploring respondents' views on Brexit, the 2022 Games and whether the Games could serve as a means to secure new opportunities in the locality (Perry Barr) and surrounding areas after Brexit[7]. The sampling technique was that of "convenience" sampling, whereby gatekeeper individuals and organisations such as the local Chamber of Commerce were used to promote the research and obtain interview subjects.

The respondents were drawn from across a range of different traits and comprised a mix of those who voted Remain in the 2016 referendum and those who voted Leave. Details of the interview subjects are provided in the table below. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes and were subsequently transcribed using the services of a professional transcription business.

Table 1: Interview respondent details
[Table 1 here]

The interviews explored respondents' views on the following (research) questions:

- Do you think that the Commonwealth Games would be beneficial to Birmingham in the short term?

7 We also undertook a series of focus groups in the form of "town hall meetings" during this period, exploring participants' attitudes to Brexit and related regional development issues. However, as these did not focus on the Commonwealth Games, the findings of these sessions thereof are not reported in this article.

- Do you think the Commonwealth Games will have any long-term benefit?
- Do you think the Commonwealth Games will help bring the City together after Brexit?

The interviews were conducted in accordance with the strict ethical tenets of anonymity, confidentiality and fully-informed voluntary participation. In the material that follows, the Brexit context of the Games is examined, before turning to the findings of the qualitative research.

Hosting the 2022 Games: from Winning the Bid to Brexit (and beyond..)

At face value, in terms of hosting the 2022 Games, it has been estimated that over 70 nations will participate, competing in over twenty different sport categories that contain 250 specific events. Within this, over 5,000 athletes will compete during the Games, utilising 12 venues (Birmingham Organising Committee 2022 Commonwealth Games Ltd., 2020a). One Price Waterhouse Cooper's study has projected that there would be an increase of between 500,000 and one million visitors to Birmingham on each of the 11 days of the Games (Kelner, 2017). The direct local/regional costs to Birmingham City Council have initially been officially estimated at approximately £180 million (Kelner, 2017). The total cost of the Games has been recently estimated at £750 million, but the balance of this will be provided by the UK Government; effectively meaning a 25-75% split on current projected costs. However, there is no indication of who would be liable for any cost overruns. That said, the local/regional component is meant to be in part funded by a Birmingham hotel tax introduced at an equivalent of £2 per night (Kelner, 2017), whilst it is argued that some 95% of facilities have been calculated to be already in place (Birmingham City Council, 2017a).

In the lead-up to the bid, it was argued that winning the right to host the 2022 Commonwealth Games would generate £1.1 billion to the UK economy, with approximately

half of this in the West Midlands and an "average of 4,526 jobs in Birmingham each year until 2022" in addition to "training opportunities in areas like construction, engineering, sport and tourism" (Elkes, 2017). Beyond 2022, is has been noted by commentators of claims that the Games would continue to generate approximately 950 jobs per annum for a number of years afterwards (see Wigmore (2017) for a critical evaluation of these claims). As part of the proposed package, in terms of wider regeneration benefits and improvements in public transport, it has been stated that approximately 1,000 new homes will be constructed in the Perry Barr suburb in the north of Birmingham (Birmingham City Council, 2020). This is a relatively deprived area, also containing the former site of one of the city's universities, and the surrounding wards of Perry Barr and Oscott had a high Leave vote result from the 2016 referendum, as shown in Table 1 below (see Appendix 1 for a breakdown of the Brexit vote for all Wards in Birmingham City Council).

Table 2: 2016 EU Referendum Vote result: Birmingham Perry Barr Constituency (Wards)
[Table 2 here]

Source: Birmingham City Council (2018); Census data (2011)

As part of measures to counter this (and of course the availability of a brown-field site arising from the loss of the university to the area), these new homes would be the legacy of the proposed Athletes' village to be based there. In addition, a new aquatics centre would be constructed in the neighbouring Sandwell municipality. Suffice to say, the legacy effects relating to these developments will be undermined if wider infrastructure issues pertaining to the area are not addressed (most notably, the lack of a frequent, rapid rail service between the area and Birmingham city centre). The current (pandemic) context has the potential to further undermine potential legacy effects via its chilling impact on national and international tourism, travel restrictions and a global economic downturn. This also raises the related

issues of community cohesion and social exclusion if the redevelopments solely cater to incomers. Reiterating the earlier point about the Glasgow 2014 Games, it does raise the question whether such monies would be better spent improving the basic modicum of physical and social infrastructure to all disadvantaged areas, rather than just focussing on one or two locales via a Mega-Event. With this caveat noted, we now turn to the potential of the Games to serve as a catalyst for increased ties with Commonwealth countries.

Growing Links with the Commonwealth?

There was a clear intent to postulate increased links to the Commonwealth in the current Brexit context as part of Birmingham's Games bid. This was evident from key stakeholders in the Games through the use of Brexit-related terms such as "Global Britain" on the official 2022 Games bid website[8]. As such:

> "Sitting at the heart of the UK, and standing for the diversity of the Commonwealth, Birmingham is perfectly positioned to attract people to the Games and to ensure that the benefits of hosting extend from the city and region, to the UK and the Commonwealth." *(ibid.)*

And therefore, that:

> "Birmingham demonstrates the very best of Global Britain to the world with this exciting bid, which showcases its strengths of: being connected and accessible; youth and inclusivity; and a focus on regeneration and rejuvenation." *(ibid.)*

In this context, the 2022 Commonwealth Games, in our view, does provide a contributory means to *potentially* provide opportunity around a new post-Brexit world for part of the West Midlands and especially, Birmingham. However, it revolves more around a "shared vision" we would argue, with the objective of putting on a successful event, rather than the creation

8 Accessed on January 25th 2018 at http://www.birmingham2022.com/

of a “shared narrative”. Nevertheless, the indirect outcome of which might be to provide greater cohesion and opportunity for all its constituents but, driven by different motivations and from different viewpoints.

Certainly, there have been efforts to build on the Games in several regards. Firstly, built into the bid itself is a ‘Business Expo 2022’, explicitly focussed on markets outside of the EU (Birmingham City Council, 2017b). Unsurprisingly, local business organisations have sought to capitalise on this, with Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce launching a ‘Commonwealth Chamber’ in 2017 and holding a ‘Commonwealth Expo’ in February 2020 (Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, 2017; Greater Birmingham Chamber of Commerce 2019). Nevertheless, academic evidence suggests that closer economic and trading ties with even the largest and most prosperous Commonwealth countries combined is highly unlikely to even partially compensate for the loss of frictionless trade with the EU (Hearne, De Ruyter and Davies, 2019).

Locally, the launch of an ‘Inclusive Commonwealth Legacy Programme’ has been designed to support Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic businesses in bidding for contracts relating to the Games (Birmingham Organising Committee 2022 Commonwealth Games Ltd., 2020b). Whilst not explicitly focussed on the Commonwealth diaspora, the makeup of the local population suggests that they will be the chief beneficiaries of the programme. What is less clear is whether this ‘diaspora’ retain much link with Commonwealth countries. Many are second and third generation British citizens with deep roots in the UK (and within their local communities).

The hosting of the Commonwealth Games does also provide more depth and complexity to the more binary populist narratives such as Goodhart’s (2017) categorisation of the “Anywheres”, who are mobile with no real affinity or ties to place and the “Somewheres”, who are rooted to place and are often described as the “left behind”. Indeed,

there exists within that complexity a new category of those that are rooted to more than one place and are mobile enough to move between them for political, socio and economic gains. These could be termed as connectors or "in-betweeners" for whom opportunities present themselves from the Commonwealth Games to strengthen ancestral Commonwealth links. Thus, the event itself and the lead up to the event presents a coincidence of interests for individuals and groups as much as it does for the city and its wider devolved government in the West Midlands as well as for the business community. Of course, this is not to under-estimate the degree of difficulty in achieving this – particularly post-Covid-19, or public scepticism involved. Accordingly, the final part of this article reports on some preliminary interview work, which specifically sought to explore participants views on whether the Games would be of benefit to Birmingham and the wider region, and also whether the Games would help bring people together across the Brexit divide.

Assessing the appeal of the Games: some preliminary findings

In this penultimate section we now report on findings from the qualitative work with our four respondents. The interview data was coded under two particular themes; the potential benefit of the Games to the region, and; the potential for the Games to bring people together across the 'Brexit divide'. Evidence from these has indicated a high degree of scepticism of the value of the Games, both in terms of the perceived value of the Games, and their potential for bringing people together. In terms of assessing the benefit of the games to the region, only Respondent 4 thought that this would be significant. The others were more sceptical, for example, Respondent 3, who thought that in terms of their potential benefit:

> "probably not…. I think the new [athletes'] village, whatever they're building, will be a ghost town as well. I think at least with the Olympic Village you've still got tourists coming in because the Olympics is a big event, whereas the Commonwealth Games isn't

> necessarily that big an event. Well, in my eyes anyway, I wouldn't necessarily tune in especially to see it" (ibid).

Or this comment from Respondent 1, who thought that hosting the Games would be trivial in their benefit to the Region relative to the economic disruption caused by leaving the EU:

> "I'm sorry for saying it that way but it, there's good, bringing the Commonwealth games to Birmingham, is a good thing but in terms of improving trade business to Birmingham [but] it's almost a joke. It's laughable because the best thing to bring business to Birmingham is to remain in the European Union. Erm, if you're gonna say well we've actually downgraded by 1,000% by leaving European Union but yeah okay, we'll bring the Commonwealth games, yeah, that'll downgrade it to 950 instead". (*ibid*.)

Respondent 3 also felt ambivalent towards the Games in terms of their unifying ability:

> "It's gone a bit tribal, hasn't it? Yes and no. I think it will bring unity in the sense that everyone in Birmingham obviously will come together and support it, at least while it's on. But I think ultimately it's just a distraction from it [Remain vs. Leave], rather than a bridge between the two". (ibid.)

For Respondent 2, the shock of the vote was intensely personal and she regarded it as portraying a real divide between the young and the old:

> "I felt heavy like something really bad was happening, like I had a stone in my heart for weeks afterwards; my son was upset too, he blamed my generation…but not me as he knows I don't hold those views….
> I help run coffee sessions at a local church and I felt anger resentment at them [fellow churchgoers] when I found that nearly all of them voted to leave, I still help run the coffee sessions but still feel that anger towards those people". (*ibid*.)

In contrast, Respondent 4, who voted Leave, took the view that the Games would bring people together, because "I don't really think that a large sporting event and the independence vote are really connected. I think people sort of put a distance between sport and politics, which is right" (ibid.). However, the same individual (who referred to the act of

leaving the EU as "independence") did think that the potential for a post-Brexit UK to "make its own trade deals" might lead to increased business with Commonwealth countries:

> "I'm pretty sure it will…. Maybe people from some of these countries, who've never been to the United Kingdom before, maybe some of these business people, they may think that now that the United Kingdom hopefully is fully out of the EU and making its own trade deals, "well I like what I've seen here and spent a few weeks enjoying the games and I' like to put some business into the United Kingdom" - so I think yeah there's a chance that could work" (Respondent 4).

Hence, these preliminary findings tentatively point to the notion that the Games will struggle to 'heal' the divide between those who voted for and against Brexit. This is not to suggest that these (very preliminary) findings are necessarily representative (indeed off a small sample, this would be problematic to state, at best) of wider sentiments in the region. However, they are indicative in terms of the continued division between 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' and a certain cynicism of the perceived benefits that the Games could bring to the city-region. Thus, the connections that people have, and indeed the "connectors" or "in – betweeners" within the communities both the governmental, institutional, organisational and individuals will be crucial to meeting the shared vision of creating a successful Games.

Conclusions

This article has provided a preliminary assessment of the potential of the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham to provide a catalyst to rebuilding cohesion and opportunity around a new post-Brexit "shared vision" for the West Midlands and wider UK. It was posited that the traditional approach to such Mega-Events was to judge them in terms of their multiplier-effect potential and also for legacy effects in a region. Also argued was the top-down nature of decision-making in such events on communities affected could fuel notions of them being part of an "elite-agenda", favouring large commercial interests at the

expense of individuals. It was argued that such feelings of lack decision-making ability could also underpin “anti-elite” sentiments in the 2016 Brexit vote.

Similar to these sentiments are notions that regions outside of London are overlooked in terms of infrastructure spend. In this context, the notion remains that Birmingham, at the centre of a land-locked region in the UK, is particularly reliant on efficient road, rail and air connections to elsewhere in the UK and beyond, and these require significant upgrading (Forrest et al., 2017). Whilst transport links between the south-east and north-west of the Region are reasonable, that between the south-west and north-east require significant upgrading. In addition, further upgrading and expansion of the Region’s broadband capacity is needed (ibid.). Moreover, the notion that continued division is evident between differing camps on Brexit suggest real challenges remain in terms of constructing a shared narrative post-Brexit. All of these factors will continue to impinge on the ability of the 2022 Games to fulfil their promise of a shared vision post-Brexit.

In order to explore these issues further, it is necessary to undertake further primary data collection, in order to ascertain the views of key stakeholders, and the communities affected by the Games.

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Appendix 1: 2016 Referendum vote result by Ward, Birmingham City Council

2011 ward	% Leave Vote	% L3 plus	% L4 plus	% Students	% White	% Under L1	Mean Age	Median age
E05001178 : Acocks Green	55.09	29.6	18.1	5	63.3	46.1	35.4	33.0
E05001179 : Aston	32.21	30.6	15.3	19.4	13.3	46.8	29.1	25.0
E05001180 : Bartley Green	66.46	28.7	16.3	5.4	81	48.0	37.3	36.0
E05001181 : Billesley	59.98	29.6	17.8	4.1	77.6	46.8	37.8	37.0
E05001182 : Bordesley Green	37.92	22.2	13.3	9.1	14.5	53.7	29.1	26.0
E05001183 : Bournville	41.99	45.7	34.5	4.8	84	34.0	39.3	39.0
E05001184 : Brandwood	50.35	37	25.5	4.4	77.4	40.9	37.9	37.0
E05001185 : Edgbaston	33.34	65.4	37	32.8	57.8	18.6	34.0	27.0
E05001186 : Erdington	58.19	33.3	21.4	4.4	77.9	42.9	38.8	38.0
E05001187 : Hall Green	44.45	39.5	27.3	5.2	55.8	36.8	37.8	37.0
E05001188 : Handsworth Wood	42.90	36.7	24.6	9.9	22.9	37.7	35.2	32.0
E05001189 : Harborne	34.05	58.9	48.7	11.8	65.6	24.8	37.6	34.0
E05001190 : Hodge Hill	53.88	24.4	13.8	6.1	44.5	51.2	33.5	30.0
E05001191 : Kings Norton	60.84	30.5	18.6	3.9	85.4	46.2	37.7	37.0
E05001192 : Kingstanding	71.13	22.8	12.1	4.4	79.5	54.4	35.5	34.0
E05001193 : Ladywood	28.93	60.8	45.8	23.2	49.4	20.6	30.8	27.0
E05001194 : Longbridge	65.64	29.9	17.1	3.7	89.2	46.3	37.2	36.0
E05001195 : Lozells and East Handsworth	35.44	27.3	16.3	11.3	10.8	48.3	30.6	28.0
E05001196 : Moseley and Kings Heath	22.98	57.1	46.3	6.1	61.4	26.6	37.0	35.0
E05001197 : Nechells	39.32	35	18.2	23.3	27.1	42.6	28.8	25.0
E05001198 : Northfield	61.96	32.2	19.4	3.8	88.8	43.4	39.3	39.0
E05001199 : Oscott	69.66	27.7	15.3	3.6	81.9	47.3	38.6	38.0
E05001200 : Perry Barr	54.08	35.6	20.4	10.9	53.4	39.3	35.8	33.0
E05001201 : Quinton	53.95	38.4	27.4	4.8	69.9	39.7	37.7	36.0

E05001202 : Selly Oak	30.83	71.7	29.2	53.2	71.2	15.5	30.3	22.0
E05001203 : Shard End	75.64	19.9	9.4	3.2	81.9	57.3	36.7	35.0
E05001204 : Sheldon	67.51	25.9	14.4	3.3	84.9	49.6	39.9	40.0
E05001205 : Soho	43.08	28.1	17.4	10.3	20.6	46.3	31.4	29.0
E05001206 : South Yardley	55.43	26.3	16	5.2	52.1	48.5	33.5	31.0
E05001207 : Sparkbrook	30.88	25.6	15.8	10.8	12.4	52.0	29.7	26.0
E05001208 : Springfield	35.26	30.2	19.7	8.8	21.2	46.1	31.4	28.0
E05001209 : Stechford and Yardley North	62.77	25.6	15.1	4.6	68	50.8	36.4	34.0
E05001210 : Stockland Green	54.58	32.8	20.6	6.1	59.9	42.5	36.2	34.0
E05001211 : Sutton Four Oaks	49.64	49.4	37.8	3	89.3	28.2	43.1	44.0
E05001212 : Sutton New Hall	55.49	44	31.9	3.1	89.2	33.0	42.9	45.0
E05001213 : Sutton Trinity	53.58	45.6	33.5	3.2	89.6	32.3	40.9	42.0
E05001214 : Sutton Vesey	48.29	48.6	36.3	3.3	86.5	29.3	42.2	44.0
E05001215 : Tyburn	67.83	24.2	13.4	4.6	75	52.7	36.7	35.0
E05001216 : Washwood Heath	37.22	20.3	11.7	9.3	12.3	56.8	28.5	25.0
E05001217 : Weoley	58.32	34.1	23.3	5.3	80	43.8	37.0	35.0