



## Reving Up the Engine

***Hot on the heels of its last Spring Budget, writes Robert Pritchard, and in good time for the 2017 West Midlands Mayoral elections, the government has published its strategy for the Midlands Engine (MES).***

In terms of cash commitments, £392 million is promised for the Midlands through the Local Growth Fund. An additional £4 million is committed to support the operation of the Midlands Engine Partnership which brings together Local Enterprise Partnerships, local authorities, businesses, academic institutions and others into a voluntary, regional partnership with the aim of driving growth across the Midlands.

According to the MES the Midlands economy suffers from three key weaknesses:

- Skills shortage - a high proportion of graduates are lost to the region after completing their studies
- the region's economy is fragmented into small, poorly connected areas
- MES suggests that the Midlands is lacking in 'entrepreneurship and economic dynamism'.

### **So what is to be done?**

Taking its cue from the recently published Industrial Strategy, the following key objectives are identified in the MES:

- Improving connectivity in order to raise productivity;
- strengthening skills in order to make the Midlands a more attractive location for businesses
- supporting enterprise and innovation in order to foster a more dynamic regional economy
- promoting the Midlands nationally and internationally in order to maximise trade and investment
- enhancing quality of life in order to attract and retain skilled workers, as well as to foster the local tourist economy.

Turning to infrastructure, Midlands Connect, the proposed Sub National Transport Body is tasked with developing proposals to improve connectivity across the region and maximising the benefits associated with HS2.

Away from purely physical infrastructure, the MES highlights the fact that the Midlands has comparatively strong digital infrastructure and should therefore be well placed to develop enhanced digital technology in the future as a key priority.

### **Spatial strategy required**

One apparent omission from the MES is any spatial element to the strategy – which is particularly unfortunate given the Midlands' geographical location at the centre of the UK and its connectivity to the wider UK economy.

Those tasked with taking the project forward may want to take note of what is happening further up the M1 where work is well underway on the formulation of a Great North Plan. This includes a vision for the North, a set of collaborative strategies, a prospectus for investment and a programme for

action. As the MES acknowledges, the Midlands has the benefit of some of the most renowned natural, historical and cultural sites in the country and recognising and harnessing the distinctive attributes of particular cities, towns and areas within the region is key to its future success.

A Midlands Engine spatial strategy could go some way to addressing the economic fragmentation identified in the MES and also assist with issues of connectivity both within the region and beyond. A spatial plan could also operate as prospectus for the region and encourage the international trade and investment required to ensure the region punches its economic weight in the future.

#### **Garden City concept**

On a more positive note, the recent revival of interest in the garden city concept - which is reflected in the Housing White Paper - also features in the MES with £12 million from the Local Growth Fund earmarked to support the development of the Black Country Garden City.

The publication of the MES represents another significant step in the journey towards rebalancing the UK economy away from an over reliance on London and the South East. However, ensuring that the strategy becomes reality is dependent on continued support from the business and academic communities and strong civic leadership from the incoming Mayor of the West Midlands working effectively with the local authorities in the region.



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