CASE-STUDY

Birmingham Innovation Precinct : A Case of University-Led Transformation Through Place-Based Innovation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP) represents a significant and ambitious undertaking aimed at establishing a globally important hub for science, technology and enterprise within the United Kingdom. Strategically located in a geographic area adjacent to Aston University, and building upon the university's strong vision, the BIP seeks to foster a vibrant ecosystem for entrepreneurship, advance research and development in high growth sectors, drive long-term economic growth while fostering a strong sense of community and build a brighter future for the city and wider region.

This initiative is a collaborative effort between Aston University, private developers including Bruntwood SciTech and Woodbourne Group, and Birmingham City Council, alongside other government bodies, industry partners and the local community, all working towards the shared goal of transforming the region into a leading center for innovation. The BIP encompasses a group of diverse initiatives and projects spanning academic research, business incubation and growth and urban development, all strategically aligned to create a synergistic and thriving innovation ecosystem.

The development plans for the BIP include state-of-the-art commercial and innovation spaces, advanced research facilities and a mixed-use environment designed to attract talent and investment. The precinct is projected to generate substantial economic and social benefits for Birmingham and the wider West Midlands region, including significant contributions to Gross Value Added (GVA) and the creation of thousands of high-value jobs.

While this innovation precinct holds immense promise, it also faces potential challenges common to urban development and innovation initiatives. Building on Aston University's vision and leveraging insights from leaders in the GFCC University and Research Leadership Forum (URLF), the BIP aims to become a key regional and national innovation driver.

2. BRIDGING THE SOCIOECONOMIC GAP

2.1. THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

Innovation precincts represent a powerful model for economic development in the 21st century, remarkably in a world driven by rapid technological advancement and the need for constant innovation. These geographically delimited areas, designed to concentrate innovation resources, foster collaboration and knowledge sharing among businesses, research institutions and other stakeholders, creating dynamic ecosystems that drive technological advancement and economic growth. However, their evolution reveals a transition from earlier models focused solely on economic output to more holistic approaches that prioritize place-making innovation.

Early models of innovation districts were research parks and industrial clusters, which were primarily driven by proximity to research institutions or manufacturing facilities. These models are focused on knowledge transfer and technological advancement but were not designed to be necessarily ingrained with surrounding communities. The **Research Triangle Park in North Carolina (RTP)**, established in the 1950s, exemplifies this early model. RTP is still a very successful research park that underwent a series of transformations. Its long-term success is a result of its bold vision and ability to adapt to technological and economic change overtime.

As cities evolved, the concept of place-based innovation gained prominence. This approach recognizes that innovation is not just about technology, but also about the unique assets, culture and social fabric of a location. It emphasizes leveraging local strengths and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

More recently, urban development has become a crucial element of innovation district development. This involves creating vibrant, mixed-use environments that attract and retain talent by offering a high quality of life. The "live-work-play" model integrates residential, commercial and recreational spaces, fostering a sense

of community and belonging. **Kendall Square in Cambridge**, Massachusetts exemplifies this evolution. While developments there were initially driven by proximity to MIT and focused on science-based businesses, the area has transformed into a vibrant urban mixed-use neighborhood with a diverse mix of commercial and residential units.

Place-making innovation, as originally coined by Prof. Aleks Subic (Vice-Chancellor, Aston University), is a concept centered on the notion that innovation can reshape and transform the local or regional economy and society. It goes beyond simply using the assets on hand; it involves actively creating the assets needed to foster innovation and drive economic transformation through future-oriented investment.

In general, innovation districts based on the place-making concept share a few common goals and characteristics that justify their growing importance:

1. **Strategic Asset Creation:** This involves the deliberate development of resources and infrastructure crucial for fostering innovation in selected industry verticals with significant growth potential. These assets include research facilities, advanced manufacturing hubs, ollaborative workspaces, talent pipelines, entrepreneurial networks, access to capital and a supportive regulatory environment.

2. **Coalition of the Willing:** Successful socioeconomic transformation requires key stakeholders – government, universities, research institutions, community representatives, industry and investors - who are willing to seek common ground for their ideas, forge a shared vision and commit to collaborative transformative action.

3. **Innovation Ecosystems:** Innovation flourishes more rapidly within ecosystems offering readily available research facilities, funding, mentorship and networking opportunities. **MaRS Discovery District in Toronto** provides this through its support of health, technology and other science-based companies, and by creating a place that enables those companies to better interact.

4. **Driving Economic Growth:** By attracting and retaining talent, investment and high-growth companies, innovation districts stimulate economic activity and create jobs. They serve as engines of regional and national prosperity. **Stockholm's Kista Science City**, once an industrial zone, now stands as a leading ICT cluster, significantly boosting the city's economy.

5. **Leveraging Existing Strengths:** Place-making innovation emphasizes both the creation of new assets and the leveraging of existing strengths to creatively build upon them. It acknowledges that each locality possesses unique characteristics and challenges to tailor development initiatives, accordingly, as seen in successful innovation hubs like Silicon Valley, Boston's Route 128, the Rhone-Alps bioscience center and the U.K.'s "Golden Triangle".

6. **Revitalizing Urban Areas:** Successful place-making also transforms underutilized urban areas into vibrant, mixed-use communities. They create a "live-work-play" environment that attracts and retains a skilled workforce. **Barcelona's 22@ district** showcases this, not only transforming a former industrial area into a thriving hub for technology, media and design but also bringing residential areas, green zones and many services and amenities for the people that live there.

7. **Adapting to the Modern Economy:** In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, place-making innovation districts provide the ideal environment for companies to adapt to changing market conditions and stay ahead of the competition. In the United States, places like the Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, have shown long term success in this adaptation.

In essence, innovation districts have evolved from being purely focused on economic output to more complex ecosystems intertwined with the communities they are connected to and are themselves environments embedded in those communities and vice versa.

2.2. POTENTIAL AND CHALLENGES IN A DIVERSE CITY

Birmingham, a tapestry of cultures, stands as one of the United Kingdom's most diverse and multicultural cities. With a population of 1.13 million people, it is the second-largest city in England and boasts one of the youngest populations of any European city. Approximately 34% of Birmingham's population is aged between 24 and 49 years old. This youthful demographic makes it a prime location for innovation, entrepreneurship and developing the workforce of the future.

The city's evolution from its Industrial Revolution roots, where it was a linchpin of regional trade, to a modern entrepreneurial hub is undeniable. Recognized by Start Up Britain in 2017 as the "most entrepreneurial" city outside London, Birmingham showcases a thriving startup scene. This spirit is illustrated in areas like Ladypool Road, a hub of independent businesses, and the Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP), which aims to accelerate the transition to a knowledge-based economy.

Birmingham also hosts major global players like HSBC UK's headquarters, Jaguar Land Rover Experience Centre and the expanding presence of firms like Goldman Sachs. Birmingham hosts a range of global companies that have a substantial impact on the regional economy. The city's economic size and scale position it as the region's economic leader, essential to the UK's

overall economic health, and globally significant.

Despite its growth and economic vibrancy, Birmingham faces multiple socio-economic challenges. One of the most pressing issues is the city's exceptionally high rates of unemployment and low levels of employment compared to other UK regions, particularly among young people. In April 2024, the youth unemployment claimant rate in Birmingham was double that of the UK average. However, there are clear differences between parts of the city [wards]. For example, Nechells Ward, where Aston University is located, holds the largest percentage of unemployed (6.8%).

While the average educational outcomes from Birmingham's schools are better than the national average, the city faces challenges related to qualifications. A higher percentage of the population has no formal academic qualifications, and Birmingham has a lower proportion of degree-level qualifications compared to any other large UK city. Less than 30% of Birmingham's population holds a formal academic degree compared to 46.7% of people in London holding a degree and 33.8% across the adult population in England and Wales. In addition to that, the skills of Birmingham's residents are often not well aligned with the demands of employers, which creates difficulties for both job seekers and businesses. A recent report by the West Midlands Combined Authority indicates that employers face persistent skills shortages, with around 1 in 4 vacancies classed as 'hard to fill'. In general, these jobs require advanced digital skills, a demand Birmingham is struggling to meet.

Birmingham's health indicators also paint a concerning picture. The city's infant mortality rate, at 7 per 1,000 live births, is nearly twice the national average of 3.9, according to Public Health England. Female life expectancy is notably lower, and preventable diseases like heart disease and type 2 diabetes are prevalent, contributing to worklessness and economic strain. For example, a study by the Birmingham City Council found that cardiovascular disease alone costs the city's economy an estimated £250 million annually in lost productivity and healthcare expenses. These health challenges are significant

barriers to economic participation and growth.

These data points clearly state the need for systemic interventions that not only drive economic growth but also address the underlying socio-economic gaps that hinder Birmingham's potential. They also signal the potential transformational impacts that initiatives such as BIP can have if successfully implemented.

2.3. BIRMINGHAM'S UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

In the United Kingdom, the government has placed a strong emphasis on fostering innovation and promoting regional economic growth through various initiatives. The establishment of the West Midlands Investment Zone in November 2023, a government-backed program designed to stimulate economic activity in the region, highlights this commitment. The Birmingham Innovation Precinct is strategically located within the Birmingham node of this Investment Zone, indicating its alignment with national priorities and its potential to benefit from government support and resources. This connection positions the BIP as a key element in the UK's broader innovation landscape.

More than simply revitalizing a city, the Birmingham Innovation Precinct is explicitly committed to socioeconomic inclusion, as is Aston University with its long-standing history of improving social mobility. The precinct aims to create opportunities for all segments of the population, ensuring that the benefits of innovation extend beyond economic growth to address social equity and uplift underserved communities. This focus on inclusive growth sets the BIP apart, positioning it as a model for how innovation can drive both prosperity and social progress.

Birmingham is currently undergoing a significant transformation into a modern, innovation-driven economy. It boasts a thriving economy with a substantial Gross Value Added, and it has a rich history of invention, now demonstrating leadership in sectors such as life sciences, financial technology (fintech) and digital technologies. This momentum in key technological areas positions the city

as an ideal location to establish an innovation precinct, building upon a foundation of economic activity and technological advancement. The BIP is a strategic initiative to capitalize on these strengths and further propel the city's growth as a leading hub for innovation, research and enterprise within the U.K. By creating a dedicated space for collaboration and innovation, in which the city and its community merge into the university, the BIP aims to solidify Birmingham's position at the forefront of the UK's innovation agenda.

3. BIRMINGHAM INNOVATION PRECINCT: ORIGINS AND STRATEGY

3.1. INCEPTION AND CONTEXT

The Birmingham Innovation Precinct is not an entirely new concept but rather an evolution of earlier efforts to foster innovation in the city. Its origins can be traced back to Aston University's increasing strategic presence within the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter, a recognized area of knowledge-based activities in the city. Initially known as the Birmingham Innovation Quarter, the initiative underwent a rebranding to become the Birmingham Innovation Precinct, a name that aligns more closely with the global movement of similar innovation districts. This renaming likely reflects a strategic decision from Aston to position the BIP's efforts within a recognized international framework, potentially enhancing its attractiveness to global investors and partners.

The development of the BIP has been a collaborative endeavor involving key stakeholders from the outset. As early as autumn 2022, discussions were held between Aston University, Birmingham City Council and Bruntwood SciTech, a property development company with a strong focus on science and technology parks, to discuss plans for creating an innovation district known as Birmingham's Innovation Quarter. This early engagement of local government and a private sector developer underscores the coordinated vision and multi-faceted approach to the precinct's development.

A significant milestone in the formal establishment of the BIP was the incorporation of "Birmingham Innovation Precinct Limited" on December 2, 2024. The company's registered office is located at Aston University, further highlighting the university's central role in the initiative. The nature of the company's business is listed under the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code 70100, which pertains to "Activities of head offices". This designation suggests that the company is intended to serve as the central coordinating

and strategic oversight body for the development and operation of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct, guiding its overall direction and ensuring the alignment of various activities and stakeholders. The recent formal incorporation signifies a concrete step towards realizing the vision of the BIP and marks a new phase in its development.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION: BIRMINGHAM KNOWLEDGE QUARTER AND INNOVATION PRECINCT

The Birmingham Knowledge Quarter (B-KQ) is a large-scale, comprehensive initiative to establish Birmingham as a leading global innovation district. It's a broad vision for a designated area within the city that aims to drive economic growth, attract investment and foster collaboration across various sectors, particularly life sciences and digital technologies. B-KQ involves a partnership between universities, the city council and private sector developers to create an ecosystem that supports innovation, from research and development to business growth and community development.

B-KQ is also a designated West Midlands Investment Zone node, offering significant incentives for companies that are located within its tax sites. These incentives include benefits such as business rates relief, enhanced structures and building allowances, stamp duty land tax relief, 100% first-year capital allowances and employer National Insurance contributions relief. These measures are designed to help businesses establish, build and resource their operations within the B-KQ.

Finally, B-KQ is also part of a plan to develop the Birmingham-London Innovation Line in parallel with the Oxford–Cambridge Arc, aiming to diversify the UK's innovation economy, accelerate R&D commercialization and strengthen the UK's global research reputation.

Within this larger framework, the Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP) represents Aston's strategic presence and role within the B-KQ. The BIP key component includes investment in new facilities and amenities, a specific emphasis on translational research and technology transfer for Aston's technologies and spinouts and a wide range of key initiatives aiming at skills development, sustainable solutions, inclusiveness and wellbeing.

3.2. CORE MISSION AND VISION

The BIP encompasses 3 different objects: a geographically defined area adjacent to Aston University and within the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter (B-KQ); a collaborative endeavor between Aston University, private developers and local and regional government; and a range of research, education, business and urban development initiatives and projects.

Based on the Aston University Enterprise Strategy and the Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP) materials, the following mission and vision statements articulate the core purpose and aspirational future for this initiative.

Mission:
To establish a globally relevant dynamic and interconnected ecosystem that fosters innovation, entrepreneurship and collaboration among academia, industry and the broader community. Driven by a commitment to generate groundbreaking ideas and technological advancements, our mission is to translate these into tangible economic growth and positive societal impact within the Birmingham region and beyond.

Vision:
To be a catalyst for significant positive socio-economic transformation in Birmingham and the West Midlands by cultivating a dynamic ecosystem of innovation. Through the Birmingham Innovation Precinct and Aston University's leadership, we will expand access to opportunity, foster entrepreneurship and ensure the commercial growth of innovative solutions, transforming challenges into opportunities for business, government and society, and solidifying Aston's position as a driver of inclusive growth.

4. KEY STAKEHOLDERS DRIVING THE BIRMINGHAM INNOVATION PRECINCT

4.1. ASTON UNIVERSITY: ACADEMIC ANCHOR AND VISIONARY

Upon his arrival in August 2022, Aston's new Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive, Professor Aleks Subic, conceived the idea of developing an innovation district led by the university. The initiative took a significant step forward in March 2023 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Aston University and Bruntwood SciTech—the UK's leading developer of innovation ecosystems with the largest dedicated property platform for the UK knowledge economy. This agreement marked the first concrete step toward executing the project.

As part of this agreement, Aston University and Bruntwood SciTech established a Joint Venture to support the university's development plans. Subsequently, Birmingham City Council joined the partnership as a landowner and governing body with significant influence over policy levers related to planning, economic development and infrastructure.

Aston University's vision for a university-anchored innovation ecosystem is deeply aligned with its 2030 Strategy, which seeks to maximise the institution's entrepreneurial DNA to deliver positive socioeconomic impact. This strategy envisions Aston playing a transformational role in the region—serving as a catalyst for economic growth, fostering digital inclusion, bridging skills gaps and developing a strong talent pipeline and job-ready workforce. Therefore, acting as an active participant in the development of a regional knowledge ecosystem, the design and implementation of the BIP leverages Aston's existing assets while serving as a critical step toward realizing its 2030 vision.

Aston University stands as the primary driving force and anchor institution behind the Birmingham Innovation Precinct. The BIP is strategically situated adjacent to the university's city-center campus, underscoring the close relationship and integration between the two. The university's vision and strategic direction are central to the precinct's development, with the BIP evolving directly from Aston University's established presence and role within the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter. The university's commitment to fostering innovation and driving socio-economic transformation is directly embodied in the creation and development of the BIP with several key initiatives within the BIP being spearheaded by Aston University. Aston University has hosted a wide range of local, regional and national government officials over the past two years to discuss plans for the innovation district, which further emphasizes the university's central role and leadership in this major undertaking.

4.2. GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC SECTOR INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

Government bodies at both the local and regional levels play crucial roles in enabling and supporting the development of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct. Birmingham City Council, as the local authority, has been involved in discussions and planning for the innovation district, which is essential to ensure that the BIP aligns with broader city planning strategies and benefits the local community.

Birmingham City Council's "*Our Future City: Central Birmingham Framework 2045*" highlights several significant benefits the BIP, located in the Central North region of Birmingham, will derive from other key initiatives and proposals. These include the Aston Link, which will enhance connectivity; the Curzon Gateway Growth Zone, leveraging the arrival of HS2 to create a vibrant mixed-use district; and the Green and Blue Web, focused on preserving and expanding green spaces.

At the regional level, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) is a key stakeholder, leading the West Midlands Investment Zone. The WMCA's "West Midlands Plan for Growth" emphasizes the role of local authorities and universities as anchor institutions, identifying key economic clusters and outlining various support mechanisms. To support the region's Advanced Manufacturing sector, the WMCA established the West Midlands Investment Zone, and selected 3 key sites: Birmingham Knowledge Quarter (B-KQ), Coventry & Warwick Gigapark and Wolverhampton Green Innovation Corridor.

As a key beneficiary of the West Midlands Investment Zone Programme (a result of the West Midlands Plan for Growth), the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter (B-KQ) and consequently the BIP will benefit from various support mechanisms for regional economic growth. These include direct funding, coordinated business location services, skills development initiatives, land assembly, infrastructure development and transport funding. Notably, the West Midlands Investment Zone has already allocated an initial £16 million to the Birmingham Knowledge

Quarter for early-stage preparations and infrastructure improvements aimed at attracting relocating investors and businesses. Additionally, businesses establishing themselves within the B-KQ will qualify for several tax incentives from 2024 until 2034.

In summary, the alignment between local and regional government levels and an innovation district initiative can yield significant benefits, fostering a more robust and impactful ecosystem for innovation and economic growth:

- **Coordinated Vision and Strategy:** prevent duplication of effort, provide a clear and consistent message to potential investors, businesses and talent, enhancing the district's attractiveness.
- **Streamlined Policies and Regulations:** create a more supportive regulatory environment tailored to the specific needs of innovative industries by streamlining the permitting processes, zoning regulations and other bureaucratic hurdles to facilitate the growth of businesses.
- **Enhanced Resource Mobilization:** leverage the collective influence and resources of the local and regional governments by coordinated investment in infrastructure, public spaces, and shared facilities.
- **Integrated Infrastructure Planning:** transportation networks, utilities and other essential infrastructure can be planned and developed in a more integrated manner to specifically support the needs of the innovation district and its connectivity to the wider region.

In essence, the synergy created by the alignment of local and regional governments with an innovation district initiative establishes a template for fostering innovation, attracting investment and driving sustainable economic growth at different levels. It creates a more efficient, supportive and attractive environment for the district to thrive and contribute to the overall prosperity of the region.

4.3. INDUSTRY AND BUSINESS PARTNERS: CATALYSTS FOR INNOVATION AND COMMERCIALISATION

The Birmingham Innovation Precinct is designed to be a collaborative ecosystem that embeds industry and business partners with the Aston University community to foster close interaction and facilitate the translation of research into commercially viable products and services. The BIP has a strategic focus on life sciences and digital technologies, key areas and industry verticals that align with both regional strengths and future economic trends. Located within the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter, BIP also seeks to attract businesses in advanced manufacturing and green industries, indicating its broader ambitions.

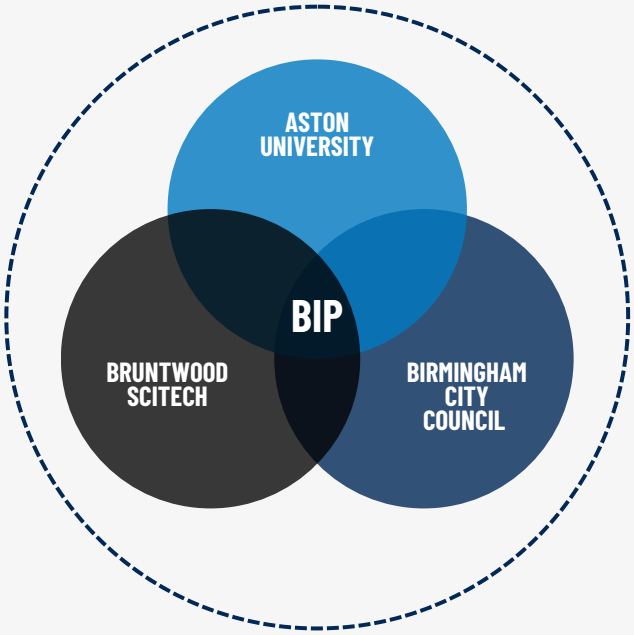
4.4. TOWARD THE QUADRUPLE HELIX MODEL

BIP was made possible through a formal collaboration between academia, government and industry designed to foster innovation and economic growth. It also recognizes in an explicit way the indispensable role of the local community and diverse stakeholders – such as the West Midlands Combined Authority and other universities located in the West Midlands – in achieving long-term sustainability and meaningful social impact.

A thriving precinct hinges on attracting and retaining a skilled workforce, which necessitates cultivating a high quality of life within the city. In line with that, the BIP's includes a variety of urban interventions that aim to create vibrant cultural and community spaces that encourage interaction and engagement. To ensure seamless accessibility, the precinct will feature diverse and efficient transportation options, coupled with pedestrian-

friendly, car-free zones that promote walkability. Additionally, a groundbreaking healthcare hub is planned, offering preventative care and comprehensive wellbeing services, while simultaneously serving as a showcase for cutting-edge medical advancements.

The precinct should become an integral part of the local community and enrich the lives of its residents. In that context, it's fair to say that the precinct's foundation is rooted in a quadruple-helix model, which explicitly acknowledges the critical and interconnected roles of industry, academia, government and communities in driving innovation and ensuring continued growth and prosperity. However, given its early stages of development, community engagement initiatives still are under development and not fully documented. As the initiative evolves, this will be a key area to keep an eye on.



COMMUNITY

Inclusive digital skills
Opportunity
Social mobility
Healthcare Hub

5. ASTON UNIVERSITY'S INNOVATION ECOSYSTEM

5.1. ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, SOCIAL MOBILITY AND FUTURE SKILLS

Aston University has one of the most diverse student populations in the UK, with a large proportion of students coming from the least economically advantaged areas. Its efforts to improve the overall quality of life of Birmingham's population and boost social mobility have had an effect. For four consecutive years, The English Social Mobility Index has ranked Aston as the second-best university in England for social mobility.

Aston has been awarded Triple Gold in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023, a testament to its teaching quality, learning environment and positive student outcomes. It was also recognized as the University of the Year for Student Success by the Daily Mail University Guide 2025 and named the University of the Year Runner Up for Graduate Employment in the Times and Sunday Times University Guide 2024, reflecting its dedication to ensuring students thrive. Its 21st ranking in the Guardian University Guide 2025 positions it among the UK's top universities based on factors such as teaching, student satisfaction and career prospects. Additionally, Aston is

one of only two universities in England to hold the Athena Swan Gold award due to its commitment to gender equality and inclusivity across all disciplines.

Of its 18,000 students, many are enrolled in STEM courses that directly align with the BIP's digital technology and life science priorities. By 2030, 1,500 additional students will be undertaking innovation-linked courses, as part of a strategic initiative undertaken to bridge the needs of the city and employer demands to programs and skills development efforts at Aston. An example of this approach is the Aston University Engineering Academy and Sixth Form (AUEA), which provides an employer-linked curriculum for 13–19-year-olds. Around 88% of AUEA students' progress to university and apprenticeship schemes, significantly higher than the national average of 48%. Building on this success, Aston will further expand its educational impact by opening a unit of the University Maths School adjacent to AUEA in 2025.

5.2. FOCUS ON LIFE SCIENCES AND DIGITAL SECTORS

The Research Excellence Framework 2021 rated Aston University at an impressive 79% of its research as either 'world leading' (4*) or 'internationally excellent' (3*) and 74% of the impact of the university's research has been rated 'very considerable' or 'outstanding' for reach and significance.

The university holds key institutes with cutting-edge research such as: **The Sir Peter Rigby Digital Futures Institute**, which pioneers advancements in digital technologies like artificial intelligence, data science and cybersecurity across diverse sectors; the **Aston Institute for Membrane Excellence**, a globally unique, cross-disciplinary institute to develop novel membranes for use in applications as varied as drug discovery and water purification; the **Aston Institute of Photonic Technologies**, focusing on the science and application of light through advanced research in photonics; the **Energy and Bioproducts Research Institute (EBRI)**, concentrating on sustainable energy solutions and the development of valuable bioproducts such as biofuels and biomaterials; the **Aston Institute for Health and Neurodevelopment**, delivering a child-focused research programme that delivers a new understanding of development and disease and the interventions that will make a difference; and the **Aston Institute for Forensic Linguistics**, which applies linguistic expertise to legal and criminal investigations, analyzing language in evidence and authorship.

Beyond these institutes, Aston University possesses significant strength in healthcare education and research, anchored by the Aston Medical School, Aston Pharmacy School and the School of Optometry and Audiology.

Complementing its research prowess, the Aston Business School stands as an elite global institution, holding the prestigious triple crown accreditation, the highest international standard for business education. Its strong standing is further reflected in its 8th position among UK institutions in the 2024 QS Business & Management Rankings. To foster entrepreneurship and growth, the **Aston Centre for Growth** delivers programs and practical support to entrepreneurs, SMEs, business leaders and students within the wider community. Notably, the Centre for **Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship (CREME)** provides specialized and leading expertise in supporting ethnic minority entrepreneurs.

5.3. DRIVING INNOVATION AND COMMERCIALIZATION

Aston University is actively engaged in numerous partnerships with businesses and government bodies to translate research into real-world impact across diverse sectors. A central element of Aston's innovation strategy is its role within Midlands Innovation (MI), a unique collaborative network of the eight most research-intensive universities in the Midlands. Through MI, Aston is a founding member of Midlands Mindforge, a patient capital investment company with an ambitious goal of raising £250 million. This initiative is specifically designed to accelerate the commercialization of science and technology innovations originated within the region. Aston Academics have spun out nine companies since 2013.

A significant early achievement for the BIP is Aston's role as the home of SPARK The Midlands, a pre-clinical accelerator program focused on advancing health technology innovations. This program is a key component of the West Midlands Health Tech Innovation Accelerator and marks the first UK branch of Stanford University's prestigious SPARK program. SPARK The Midlands equips researchers and innovators with expertise in drug and diagnostic development and connects them with funding opportunities to translate laboratory discoveries into tangible patient benefits. The initial success of the program is promising, with its first cohort of 20 projects generating over £10 million in follow-on funding and leading to the creation of 5 new companies.

The university actively cultivates entrepreneurial mindsets and translates research into real-world applications through long-term strategic collaborations with industry partners and government bodies. Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP), funded by Innovate UK, are an example. These partnerships not only provide valuable professional development for Aston researchers but also guarantee a strong return on investment for participating businesses. Aston is a sector leader in the volume and quality of its KTP applications, having successfully hosted over 130 projects with industry

partners, with 40 of these now valued at over £11 million.

In addition, Aston University and Birmingham City University collaborate on the Greater Birmingham and Solihull Institute of Technology (GBSIoT), an institute offering high-quality training and qualifications in STEM fields with a state-of-the-art facility, located adjacent to Aston University, that houses the largest Cyber Physical Manufacturing Rigs in Europe. A current project is underway to establish a new advanced manufacturing hub at Aston University, further supporting innovation in this sector. The Design Factory at Aston also brings together students, staff, industry partners and entrepreneurs in a state-of-the-art facility. This space is designed to inspire and facilitate innovation and design, offering creative design and digital innovation consultancy services to businesses and entrepreneurs.

6. EARLY MILESTONES AND EXPECTED IMPACT

6.1. SUMMARIZED TIMELINE

The following timeline highlights key milestones in the development and strategic direction of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP), showcasing Aston University's central role in its formation and growth alongside significant partnerships and initiatives aimed at fostering innovation and economic development in the region.

MARCH 2023

Aston University and Bruntwood SciTech sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to support the Aston University 2030 Strategy growth plans within the Birmingham Knowledge Quarter.
Aston University and Bruntwood SciTech partner on strategic developments in Birmingham Knowledge Quarter | Aston University

MARCH 2023

Aston University is awarded funding for three projects to be delivered as part of the West Midlands Innovation Accelerator including the Biochar Clean Tech Accelerator
Aston University to take part in West Midlands Innovation Accelerator to spark growth and innovation | Aston University

APRIL 2023

Midlands Mindforge Limited is launched.
Aston University establishes new independent investment company | Aston University

MAY 2023

Aston University announces partnership with Birmingham City Council and Bruntwood SciTech to create new Birmingham Innovation Quarter (B-IQ)
Aston University unveils plans for innovation cluster with Birmingham City Council and Bruntwood SciTech | Aston University

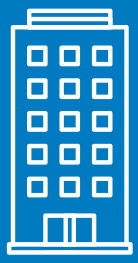
AUGUST 2023

Professor Aleks Subic is appointed to lead a new phase of the GFCC University Research Leadership Forum (URLF)
Aston University vice-chancellor to lead new international network of universities committed to place-based innovation | Aston University

SEPTEMBER 2023

Aston University launches new impact-focused 2030 strategy **(Aston University launches new impact-focused 2030 strategy | Aston University)**

NOVEMBER 2023



Aston University celebrates official opening of new city centre HQ.
Aston University celebrates official opening of new city centre HQ and launch of 2030 strategy

NOVEMBER 2023

Birmingham Knowledge Quarter announced as key site to drive growth in West Midlands, as Investment Zone announced for West Midlands in Autumn Statement | Bruntwood

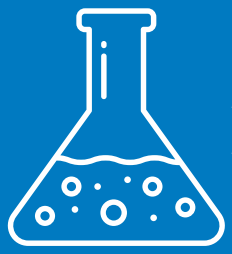
NOVEMBER 2023

Aston University announces strategic partnership with Queen's University Belfast to boost innovation ecosystems in Birmingham and Belfast | Aston University

NOVEMBER 2023

An Aston University-led consortium secured £4.095m in funding from the West Midlands Combined Authority's (WMCA) UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to support businesses to reduce their environmental impact and rising energy costs.
Aston University leads winning bid for funds to support businesses work towards net zero | Aston University

JANUARY 2024



Aston University receives £10m from Research England to establish the Aston Institute for Membrane Excellence | Aston University

FEBRUARY 2024

Aston University launches SPARK The Midlands to support health tech innovation | Aston University

MAY 2024

"Our Future City: CENTRAL BIRMINGHAM FRAMEWORK 2045"is presented (Central Birmingham Framework 2045 | Our Future City - Central Birmingham Framework 2045 | Birmingham City Council)

SEPTEMBER 2024

Aston University acquires Birmingham City Council's iconic 10 Woodcock Street Building for strategic expansion in Birmingham Innovation Quarter | Aston University

NOVEMBER 2024

Aston University hosts forum for global and national leaders to explore place-based innovation strategies | Aston University

NOVEMBER 2024

Spotlight placed on Birmingham Innovation Quarter | Aston University

DECEMBER 2024

The Registrar of Companies for England and Wales, hereby certifies that BIRMINGHAM INNOVATION PRECINCT LIMITED is this day incorporated under the Companies Act 2006 as a private company, that the company is limited by shares and the situation of its registered office is in England and Wales Given at Companies House, Cardiff, on 2nd December 2024.

FEBRUARY 2025

MEMetic Project, part of Aston's Institute for Membrane Excellence (AIME) with a mission to develop innovative biomimetic membranes to address today's most pressing water challenges, receives £6.1 million in funding - **MEMetic | Aston University**

FEBRUARY 2025

Aston University launches transformational Enterprise Strategy | Aston University

MARCH 2025

Aston University awarded £35.5m grant to accelerate transformation to Net Zero campus by 2028 | Aston University

MARCH 2025

Aston University launches Power Skills critical to the future of work | Aston University

MARCH 2025

Aston University hosts SPARK Europe showcase for preclinical healthcare innovations | Aston University

6.2. FLAGSHIP INITIATIVES

Recent collaborations are already shaping the BIP. The acquisition of a 220,000 sq ft facility on Woodcock Street, made possible through partnership with Birmingham City Council, will house the BIP's flagship initiatives which will be developed through the partnership Bruntwood SciTech. This central site will host the Aston Business Hub, Aston Business School, Green Energy Center and Aston Integrated Healthcare Hub.

The **Aston Business Hub** is designed to ignite entrepreneurial spirit and will provide a home for approximately 100 technology startups and innovative businesses. Offering state-of-the-art facilities, including flexible and collaborative workspaces, the Business Hub will also provide direct access to Aston University's academic expertise, mentoring opportunities and potential avenues for investment. This initiative aims to create a supportive ecosystem where early-stage ventures can thrive and scale.

The **Green Energy Centre** is another important project within the BIP that demonstrates its commitment to sustainability and the development of clean energy technologies. This center will drive the implementation of sustainable energy solutions across the precinct, with the ambitious goal of achieving net-zero emissions. The Green Energy Centre will not only power the precinct with renewable energy but will also serve as a living laboratory for cutting-edge research and education in sustainable technologies.

The **Aston Integrated Healthcare Hub** represents a forward-thinking approach to community healthcare and pharmacy services. This innovative hub will offer preventative health and wellbeing services while showcasing the latest advancements in digital healthcare. By integrating healthcare delivery with technological innovation, the Healthcare Hub aims to improve patient outcomes and drive efficiency in the healthcare sector.

These three flagship initiatives – the Aston Business Hub, the Green Energy Centre and the Aston Integrated Healthcare Hub – form the operational

core of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct, each contributing in distinct yet complementary ways to its overall mission of fostering innovation and driving regional development.

6.3. INFRASTRUCTURE: STATE-OF-THE-ART SPACES

The Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP) is located on the 20 hectares adjacent to the Aston University city center campus and outlines ambitious plans for significant commercial and innovation spaces to accommodate research spaces and businesses from startups to large enterprises. Beyond that, the BIP prioritizes a vibrant, mixed-use environment, a "city within a city", as stated in the BIP's brochure, with diverse arts, retail, dining and recreational amenities. The development plan includes:

- 1.35 million square feet of commercial and innovation space
- 2,200 homes (with 15% designated as affordable housing)
- 400 hotel rooms equipped with state-of-the-art conference facilities
- 15 hectares of public realm and open space
- 500,000 square feet of cultural and community space

The proximity between the BIP site, the Aston University buildings and the existing Innovation Birmingham campus, with facilities like the iCentrum (leased offices for digital and tech businesses) and Enterprise Wharf (modern office space near Aston University) presents opportunities for integration and connection between established businesses, startups, research facilities and university students and faculty. This concentration of innovation-focused spaces provides strategic clustering in this Central Birmingham area, which should evolve into a more comprehensive innovation ecosystem.

Furthermore, this approach to infrastructure, integrating residential, commercial, research and social spaces, aims to create a dynamic and interconnected environment that attracts talent, fosters collaboration and enhances Central Birmingham overall appeal as a place to live, work and innovate.

6.4. PROJECTED ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACT

Over time, projections estimate the creation of 10,000 high-value jobs in key areas through the BIP—particularly life sciences and digital technology—contributing to significant Gross Value Added (GVA) growth.

The BIP's plan to achieve these ambitious goals include, beyond the infrastructure and facilities for research and businesses detailed in the previous item:

- Collaboration with other local educational institutions (i.e. the GBSIoT) to facilitate skills development at scale to ensure the local workforce possesses the necessary skills for the evolving innovation economy
- Improved offer of enterprise skills development from the development of basic entrepreneurial knowledge and skills, through business ideas and viability all the way to business scaling led by the Aston Centre for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (ACEE)
- Extensive support for business founders, start-ups and scale-ups (such as the planned Aston Business Hub)

Projected Returns on Investment

According to Aston's estimations, for every £1 million invested in R&D at BIP, the expected impact includes:

- £5 million in additional private investment
- £10 million in additional public R&D funding
- £13 million in additional capital investment

The Impact of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct

The Aston 2030 strategy outlines the projected impact of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct, acting as a catalyst to achieve 2030 Enterprise performance targets, including:

- Midlands Mindforge raising £250M, with Aston spinouts receiving over £30M in investment.
- 50 spinouts, with at least one reaching a valuation of over £100M.
- Average seed investment for spinouts exceeding £2.5M.

- 100 graduate start-ups successfully incubated.
- Hosting at least two globally recognized accelerators.
- A sector-leading portfolio of 50 KTP projects.
- Aston's economic impact reaching £2.37bn GVA by 2030.

With an explicit aim to facilitate skills development at scale, the BIP intends to collaborate with other educational institutions, training providers and businesses to ensure the local workforce possesses the necessary skills for the evolving innovation economy. This focus on a sustainable talent pipeline will play a key role in attracting more students as well as retaining talented graduates and professionals within the region.

The BIP is expected to attract domestic and international investment by creating a hub for high-growth sectors, offering cutting-edge facilities, skilled talent and collaborative opportunities. If the expected outcomes are realized, the BIP will contribute to the region's reputation as a globally significant ecosystem for life sciences, digital technology and inclusive growth, ultimately making Birmingham a well-recognized destination for future economic development and innovation.

7. ADDRESSING CHALLENGES AND ENSURING SUCCESS

The development of the Birmingham Innovation Precinct (BIP), while holding significant promise, is not immune to the challenges inherent in large-scale urban development projects and the creation of complex innovation ecosystems. To secure its long-term viability, BIP leadership should draw upon existing knowledge to proactively address common criticisms of innovation districts and expect the multifaceted challenges that often surface as these initiatives progress:

- Recurring concern for mixed-use projects like innovation precincts is "introverted governance," where decision-making processes may bypass local planning frameworks and democratic channels, potentially compromising transparency and accountability to the local community.
- Global positioning and marketing prevailing over the concern of local issues where the focus on attracting global enterprises and investment could overshadow the needs and concerns of the local population.
- Innovation precincts can also struggle with "physical and social disconnection" if not deliberately integrated into their surrounding urban context, potentially becoming isolated enclaves that fail to connect with the existing social fabric and infrastructure. Critically, some argue that such projects may exhibit a "lack of public benefit," with profitability potentially taking precedence over delivering tangible advantages to the wider community.
- Beyond these general criticisms, technology and research-focused precincts like the BIP must remain agile and responsive to the rapidly evolving landscape of technology, market demands and global economic conditions to ensure long-term success and relevance.

In concrete terms, the BIP initiative has already met challenges as expressed by the initiative partners. As of 2025, lengthy approval processes for securing planning permissions have been a primary hurdle. Aligning all partners around a shared vision for a cohesive innovation ecosystem, while accommodating individual stakeholder objectives and timelines, has also proven complex. Further delays have arisen from leadership changes at Birmingham City Council and bureaucratic hurdles associated with integrating the BIP into the West Midlands Investment Zone. Moving forward, securing consistent R&D funding for the area and addressing potentially negative perceptions of Birmingham as place for investment will be crucial. Additionally, potential changes in political leadership and local government reform could introduce further delays to implementation processes.

Promisingly, the BIP has started strong by proactively planning and implementing crucial features for a successful innovation district:

- Unifying Leadership: A collaborative network of leaders from academia, government and the private sector is steering the BIP
- Pursuing a Holistic Growth Strategy: The BIP envisions growth across economic, physical and social spheres, capitalizing on the region's young demographic, industrial strengths and extensive network of universities and research facilities.
- Investing in Technology and Talent: The plan prioritizes strategic investments in both sophisticated infrastructure and the development of a highly skilled workforce.
- Driving Inclusive Opportunities: A key focus is on generating educational and employment pathways for residents in adjacent underserved neighbourhoods, specifically targeting digital and other essential skills for inclusive economic growth.
- Leveraging Strategic Positioning and Funding: Located within the B-KQ, a designated node of the West Midlands Investment Zone, the BIP will benefit from initial infrastructure funding and incentives for businesses and entrepreneurs, paving the way for further private sector investment.

Recognizing and proactively addressing these potential challenges will be essential for the stakeholders involved in the Birmingham Innovation Precinct to ensure the project delivers its intended benefits to the region and avoids the pitfalls that have affected similar developments elsewhere.

8. CONCLUSION

Together with other initiatives, the Birmingham Innovation Precinct stands as a promising and strategically important initiative with the potential to significantly reshape the economic landscape of Birmingham and the wider West Midlands region. Its key strengths lie in its close alignment with the research expertise and strategic vision of Aston University, its location within the government-backed West Midlands Investment Zone and its ambitious plans for state-of-the-art infrastructure and a vibrant mixed-use environment. Its focus on high-growth application areas and industry verticals such as health tech, digital innovation and green energy, coupled with its commitment to fostering skills development and attracting talent, positions it well to capitalize on future economic trends.

Ultimately, its success will hinge on its ability to deliver both significant economic prosperity and tangible social benefits to the local region. To realize its promise, opportunity and inclusivity will need to be at its core in practice, in such a way that graduates can be inspired to stay and contribute to their city's growth and entrepreneurs from other places, including overseas, are drawn to join a dynamic and supportive ecosystem. With strong, dynamic and visionary leadership, the potential to realize this ambition and create a truly impactful and sustainable innovation precinct for Birmingham seems to be within reach.

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