

Moving the Midlands

Improving connectivity between this region's towns and cities will be crucial post-Brexit. **Ian Halstead** asked a trio of infrastructure specialists about the way ahead

For decades, it's been impossible to coax the disparate elements of the West and East Midlands into thinking and acting like a single and cohesive region.

It didn't help dissolve entrenched attitudes when two regional development agencies (RDAs) were created, and years of squabbling about the name of the West Midlands Combined Authority underlined the ongoing challenge for those seeking to end the discord.

The tensions have impacted infrastructure, as it can only be effective if designed and delivered to address region-wide needs, so it's refreshing to discover that a new mindset has emerged.

Maria Machancoses, programme director at Midlands Connect, is credited as the catalyst for the collaborative approach, which saw a 25-year pan-Midlands transport strategy published in March 2017.

The organisation was created by bringing together almost 30 local authorities and 11 local enterprise partnerships, so she's well aware of the challenges ahead.

"The economy of the Midlands has been punching below its weight for a long time, not just because of infrastructure capacity, but because it has failed to provide the basic connectivity to give businesses confidence to invest," admits Machancoses.

"We have also failed to persuade successive governments about our needs, and haven't made it clear which roads, railways and even motorway junctions our economy requires, and to provide the data and evidence to underpin our analysis."

It's hard to believe you're talking to someone from the public sector, but there's not a cliché in earshot as Machancoses discusses her regional role with passion and pragmatism.

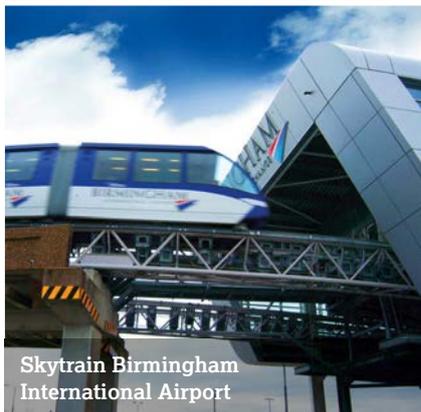
"When I first come to an area, I take train journeys to see how connectivity works – or doesn't. It was immediately clear that the connections between, for instance, Wolverhampton, Nottingham, Derby and Leicester, or Birmingham and Hereford, needed to be much better," she says.



Birmingham International Airport



Maria Machancoses



Skytrain Birmingham International Airport



East Midlands Airport

"The Midlands reflects what we see elsewhere; the infrastructure works best between north and south, but not east and west. For a long time businesses – and towns and cities – simply haven't had the connectivity they require to establish links across this region.

"Now we've been empowered to deliver an infrastructure strategy for the next 15 or 20 years. We may not get the decisions we hope for until the 2019 Strategic Spending Review [SSR], so we need to be resilient and realise that major projects do not move forward in real time."

The region's two major airports have also embraced collaboration. Chris Hayton, head of corporate affairs at East Midlands Airport (EMA), and Simon Richards, acting managing director at Birmingham Airport, pay tribute to the pan-Midlands approach.

Hayton says that EMA is the UK's largest dedicated cargo airport and a provider of short-haul leisure services, running at around 5 million passengers a year.

"We've just enjoyed a record year. For the first time, cargo traffic worth more than £12bn came through here, mainly exports, and that's only to non-EU countries. If we could include traffic to the EU, the figure would be significantly higher.

"Our rural location means we can operate 24 hours a day, and we've got a great symbiotic relationship with Heathrow."

He says that EMA's long-term strategic ambition is to handle ten million passengers and one million tonnes of cargo a year by the late 2030s through sustainable growth and increasing inward passenger traffic.

Hayton adds: "Although we compete with Birmingham Airport in a commercial sense, we have complementary offers, because they specialise in long-haul business traffic."

For the first time, the two airports had a joint presence at October's major party conferences, reflecting the realisation that they belong to the wider Midlands, not merely East or West.

New transport links risk by-passing local communities



The Midlands is situated at the centre of the UK's transport network, and therefore new investment such as HS2 will be a catalyst for the development of new regional industry and infrastructure.

Crucial to that are better connections between the West and East Midlands, with Midlands Connect's proposed rail hub linking places as far apart as Hereford and Lincoln.

While better transport links can drive growth and new jobs, they should also discourage standalone communities and aim to increase flows between places. Without locally improved transport, some communities risk missing out on growth opportunities.

Regeneration projects require a concentration on 'place', making the area attractive to business, bringing inward investment, ensuring that the area is attractive to live, work and play, with effective public services.

Recent reports describe the planning system creating housing estates dependent on the car: that is not sustainable or desirable.

The Midlands has always had a love of the car, but many communities now are investing in cycle lanes, walking areas and electric charging - therefore creating more sustainable environments that are healthier, safer and more desirable places to live.

The integrated approach is recognised by the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Midlands Engine that together represent dozens of councils, combined authorities and local enterprise partnerships.

For them, however, funding remains key. The Government has incentivised local authorities through the ability to retain business rate increases for their areas.

The cost of creating isolated communities is too great a risk to ignore. The Midlands understands strategic transport well, but must not lose sight of local initiatives.

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Caribbean aid supplies leave East Midlands Airport

“At East Midlands Airport we’ve got a great symbiotic relationship with Heathrow.”

Chris Hayton

“It was a symbolic moment, but also a strategic recognition that we are working together, especially against a backdrop of the uncertainty created by Brexit, for the good of the region,” says Hayton.

The East Midlands Gateway, a 700-acre scheme with planning consent for 6 million sq ft of logistics space, including a 50-acre strategic rail freight terminal, within sight of EMA, will also be a major asset for companies across the region.

“It will be the first rail-freight-air interchange in the country – a catalyst for sustainable growth by taking HGVs off the roads,” says Hayton.

“But we can’t ignore other connectivity challenges. There are pinch points; the A453 in particular needs to become a priority so it can be dualled.

“Like Midlands Connect, we are hoping that next year’s SSR brings news that the government has recognised the crucial importance of this road, and its urgent need to be upgraded.”

Richards also believes the innovative approach to the party conference season worked well and his views are also closely aligned to those of Midlands Connect.

“We don’t know what will happen with regard to Brexit, but our new masterplan will be in place shortly, because we realise that new and different trading partnerships will evolve around the world,” he says.

Richards adds that the airport already generates more than £1.5bn GDP, and is “hugely important” in making people decide to live and to work here.

“As Maria has said, the existing connectivity across the region isn’t good enough. I have long been a passionate advocate for improving connectivity to the airport, whether by road, rail or metro, because our infrastructure is at capacity. It doesn’t take much more than the smallest thing to go wrong, and we see long delays on the rail network or traffic jams on our motorways.

“Saying that, I think the region is now far more connected than it has ever been, and I share the views of everyone at EMA that we are stronger when we stand together. EMA is an enormously important freight hub for the whole Midlands.”

Richards is understandably enthused by HS2, with the interchange at Birmingham International, but stresses the critical importance of other transport modes.

He says that the new Metro link will be a “huge asset”, not just for passengers coming to and from the airport, but for “increasing employment mobility and stimulating investment and regeneration, from Digbeth and right out along the line”.

Richards is also optimistic that the airport will be able to again offer direct flights to the US.

“We hope they will come back. The numbers certainly show that the demand is there. The challenge in the past has been partly been about the model, because business travellers tend to want more than just one daily service.

“I think the latest generation of jets will enable viable low-cost US flights to be started, and elsewhere, the services to and from India are proving very popular.” ■