

# Turning good ideas into reality

With weeks to go until the Post Business Awards, excitement is building. Here, **Innovation Birmingham Campus**, sponsor of the Business Start-up category, talks about its help for fledgling firms

**T**HE magnitude of the social, environmental and economic challenges related to climate change are daunting.

Whether it's major infrastructure vulnerable to flooding, rising energy prices or stifling air pollution, business as usual is not an option.

That said, there is a huge amount of opportunity in doing things differently, and at the Climate-KIC West Midlands Regional Innovation Centre at the Innovation Birmingham Campus, entrepreneurs, businesses and local institutions are offered the space and support to step up and shape the world's next economy.

Climate-KIC (Knowledge Innovation Community) is one of several KICs set up by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology to ensure sustainable growth and competitiveness for European countries.

The project is spread across the whole of Europe and focuses on city-regions, reflecting their added responsibility for 'greening' our energy supply whilst recognising too that most innovation

comes from our cities. As Birmingham steps up to its leadership role in a regional economy, being a Climate-KIC hub enhances its ability to do that by leveraging in support and resources in a strategic way.

At the West Midlands Regional Innovation Centre (RIC), the focus is on setting up partnerships and opportunities for knowledge transfer across academia, business and social enterprise.

"Our goal is to enable good ideas to become part of everyday life," explains Innovation Birmingham's senior project manager for EU projects, Katharine Fuller. "Innovation is only meaningful if it changes how our society and economy work."

To this end, formal Climate-KIC partners – including University of Birmingham, Birmingham City Council and Greenhill Sustainability – are invited to collaborate with other partners across Europe to take innovative ideas into the mainstream.

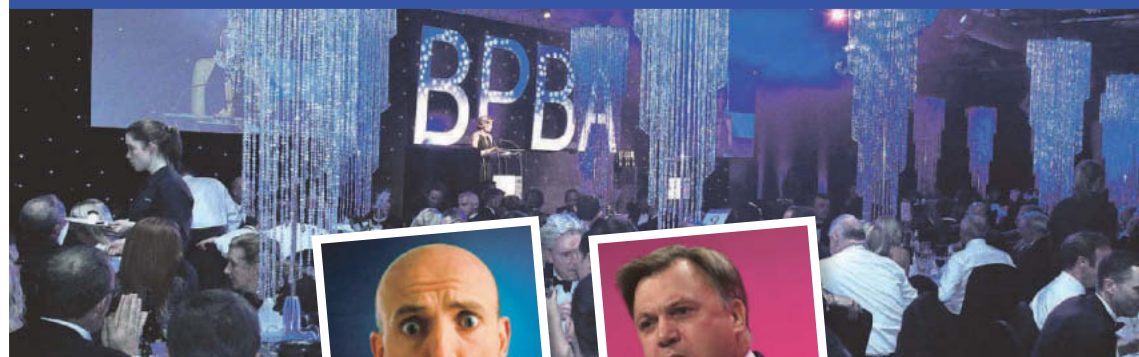
Birmingham City Council is currently leading a group of eight cities on one of these innovation projects, 'Transition



► Paul Adams, Ian French, Stephen Harris, Katharine Fuller, Richard Davies, Glenn Barrowman and Catherine Shelley at Innovation Birmingham Campus

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Cities', which aims to demonstrate how cities can develop effective low carbon clusters in energy, buildings and mobility and develop challenge-led, outcome-focused programmes to maximise the impact of their low carbon activity.

Transition Cities has also formed the basis of a Climate-KIC-sponsored PhD opportunity at University of Birmingham, which will build on the learning from the project and enable other cities to follow suit.

There are also annual structured programmes aimed at the region's experts and entrepreneurs.

Pioneers into Practice is one: a professional mobility programme which aims to create new partnerships and opportunities for knowledge transfer.

The programme works by placing a 'Pioneer' with a different host organisation for two four-week placements – one based in the West Midlands, the other at another Climate-KIC region: Hessen in Germany, Bologna in Italy, Valencia in Spain, Budapest in Hungary or Lower Silesia in Poland.

Past hosts and pioneers have reflected on the value that comes from using their skills and experience in a new context.

"It's genuinely win-win," says Innovation Birmingham's Pioneers into Practice co-ordinator Kate Martin. "The hosts get a qualified, experienced professional to advance an area of their work that they did not have the expertise or capacity to undertake alone, and the pioneers get to use their skills on something different, creating a new set of partnerships that will serve them throughout their career."

These partnerships – often multidisciplinary and cross-sector – put professionals in a better place to be bold and innovative when the time comes.

This clearly happens in practice: this year has seen some of the pioneers enter an idea for a workplace energy saving app into another Climate-KIC programme 'CleanLaunchpad', a Europe-wide competition for low carbon business ideas.

Another important part of Climate-KIC's activities in the West Midlands is the Accelerator programme. Here, low

carbon start-ups are taken through a three-stage business incubator, enabling them to improve the quality of their products and services before bringing them to market.

According to Catherine Shelley, who runs the West Midlands Accelerator, part of the knack is recognising the green potential in other ideas: "Innovations which improve existing technology often do so by using less energy, or by having more recoverable parts at the end of a product's life."

"Take start-up Petalite, which has created an external smartphone battery which charges in 15 minutes."

"As well as using energy efficiently, it contains no heavy metallic elements or lead poisons, making it much easier to recycle."

In this case, an efficient external battery meets the needs of people who rely on mobile devices – whereas the ability to recycle helps society to feed the circular economy and avoid unnecessary pollution and resource depletion.

Businesses that come out of Climate-KIC's programmes go on to thrive.

A recent piece of research revealed that 45 start-ups from the programme went on to raise an additional €59m in external investment.

Many of these business are still involved in Climate-KIC in one way or another. They may 'graduate' from a programme, but they are always part of the community, and looking out for opportunities for one another to develop, collaborate and share learning.

The term they coin for this is 'co-competition' – echoing concepts raised by Localise West Midlands in their work on localised economic development.

This approach is fundamental to success in an economy which has a wider environmental and social mission.

Being part of a regional institution like the Birmingham Post Business Awards enables the Climate-KIC project to celebrate the successes of the people and businesses it has nurtured since its inception in 2010, as well as sending a clear signal to the West Midlands that its future lies in a green, smart and sustainable economy.