AT THE HEART OF THE NEW DATA REVOLUTION

Russel Smith, Sales Director at Portal Data Centres explains how new digital infrastructure in Birmingham could put the region's businesses in the fast-lane

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Birmingham has a proud history of being a well-connected city. In the 18th and 19th centuries, its extensive canal network enabled it to become the hub of the industrial revolution. Today, an investment in a world-class digital infrastructure could once again provide the City and businesses across the region with the opportunity to become a central force in the UK and global economy.

The City currently generates £2 billion revenue from its creative and digital industries, which employs over 38,000 and there is already a high reliance on high speed data networks. However, to ensure that this growth continues, a new Internet Exchange Point and a world-class data centre in the City is needed to support and attract new data-hungry businesses; not only to Birmingham but to the Midlands as a whole.

In May, over 60 people from 30 different national and local businesses attended a 'Digital Day' at The Birmingham Innovation Centre to bring this vision a step closer. Co-sponsored by Portal Data Centres, the consultation meeting, hosted by LINX (London Internet Exchange), a non-profit organisation that was behind the first UK Internet Exchange Point established in London in 1994, provided the opportunity for both businesses and internet service providers (ISPs) across the region and beyond, to discuss and learn more about the possibilities of Birmingham furthering its national and global position as a 'Digital City'. The event was also supported by Birmingham City Council and Digital Birmingham with Councillor James McKay speaking about the City's aspirations to fulfil its Smart City vision.

Why is data connectivity so important to business?

Imagine you want to courier a letter to a client two miles away from your offices in Birmingham. Instead of just crossing the City, the courier drives to London, hands the letter to another courier who then drives back to Birmingham before finally delivering it. Unthinkable? Well many of you may not realise, but that's exactly what happens to most of the data that you send across our region; it travels to London and back, even if you are just sending an email to a colleague across the street. Whilst with data this happens much quicker than our imaginary dispatch rider, delays still occur, as the demands on network capacity expands. This can have both significant implications on costs and quality of service, especially for businesses that are reliant on large volumes of data to run their operations effectively. Not only can it have a detrimental effect on local businesses but it can also detract from inward investment from a new breed of digital companies, who will choose to locate elsewhere.

However, with an Internet Exchange located in Birmingham, together with world-class data centre facilities we have the potential to address this issue. Head of Digital Birmingham, Raj Mack commented "An Internet Exchange point will play an important role in underpinning our digital economy. The region has become host to a growing number of high tier modern, more energy efficient data centres that when networked together will allow Internet service providers (ISPs) and other network operators to exchange traffic locally and more cost effectively, which can help lower end-user costs, speed-up transmissions, increase Internet performance, and decrease international Internet connectivity costs."

New infrastructure is predicted to support regional businesses by encouraging investment from large multi-national organisations. These would like join existing world-class companies such as Jaguar Land Rover, BBC and Sega, along with many others, and take advantage of the thriving and talented pool of skilled workers and commercial infrastructure that already exists in the Midlands.

How can you get involved?

Creating a local Internet Exchange can only happen if enough regional businesses support the initiative. Digital Birmingham and LINX are playing a central role in co-ordinating support and interested parties should register their interest with them. In turn this will foster the strong community of like-minded regional partners (including those you wish to offer regional peering) that can help to make the Exchange a reality.

We are playing our part too by investing in a new centrally located, 30,000 sq. ft co-location datacentre in Aston which will open later this year. This highly flexible and secure data hall space will tap in to existing high speed fibre links in the City, and could provide the underlying infrastructure to support a new local exchange if it were to go ahead, as well as house the data for regional business.

Councillor James Mckay, summed up the possibilities, "By investing in a world-class digital infrastructure that will deliver super-fast connectivity, Birmingham has the opportunity to become the powerhouse of the data revolution.

"This is a very exciting opportunity, and it is important that the business community acts now to make it happen. This approach has been very successful in Manchester and Leeds where they now boast super-fast regional connectivity (both of which now have their own Internet Exchange Points). As the latest digital infrastructure expands beyond London's borders, it's critical that The Midlands is driving in the fast lane, not stuck on the hard shoulder.
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