

## C4 THE PREFERRED STRATEGY

- C4.1 The Black Country Consortium have made rapid progress over the last three years in formulating a strategy which will **deliver the Black Country Vision**. What has become evident is the scale and importance of the challenge; the vision will only be achieved by fundamentally changing the approach to providing the opportunities to live, work, learn and move within the Black Country. If agencies actions are insufficient to meet the challenge, trend-based forecasts predict a widening of the gap with more prosperous UK and European counterparts.
- C4.2 The evidence for conclusions is based on a series of technical reports commissioned on the **economy, town centres, housing, education, the environment and transport**. The Consortium also commissioned a report on the role of **diversity** in the present and future Black Country society, which drew upon the evidence of these technical reports and experience elsewhere. Each of these studies analysed the Black Country's position today and identified the key interventions required to meet objectives for 2033. They have reinforced belief that many of the challenges facing the Black Country are **interlinked** and highly complex, meaning that intervention in one area can be far-reaching, but also dependent on success in another.
- C4.3 For example, to stem the loss of retail expenditure, the public realm in town centres must be improved to make them attractive places to shop. Improving the public realm will also encourage more knowledge-based industries to locate in centres and persuade more people to live there, thus fuelling further expenditure. At the same time, all these outcomes are dependent on vastly improved access to the town centres, high quality homes where people can live, and an economy which is creating well-paid office jobs. These interdependencies have convinced the Consortium that the **holistic approach** adopted is the optimal way forward.

### **Accelerating Growth of the Knowledge Economy**

- C4.4 The Strategy starts with the **economy** in recognition of its vital role underpinning many of the objectives; without a prospering modern economy generating high value-added employment, the Black Country cannot expect to raise incomes or grow the population. The key challenge is for the Black Country to move from a comparatively low skilled, low income economy where comparative advantage in manufacturing is fading, to a high skilled, well-paid knowledge economy where the service sector is expanding.
- C4.5 The Economic Study (GHK/OEF) identified opportunities for growth in financial and business services, high value logistics, and high tech manufacturing in the Black Country. As many as 160,000 new jobs (gross) will be required in these sectors over the next 30 years. This scale of growth, and the level of restructuring it requires, has profound implications. To begin with, a major overhaul of land use and transport structure to create **modern, fit for purpose, employment sites**; there is a need to

retain and improve 2,200 hectares of employment land of which at least 1,600 hectares must be transformed into competitive, high quality, well-serviced and accessed sites required by modern industry. In addition, a much more **highly skilled, entrepreneurial workforce is needed**; a **high quality environment** to attract world class, innovative companies and their employees; and a better **choice of housing** including more homes suitable for higher income groups.

- C4.6 If these challenges are met, the Black Country Consortium can expect to see more knowledge-based companies choosing to relocate or to start life in the Black Country. Where will the Black Country's new companies be located in 2031? First, four **key corridors** are identified with concentrations of high quality employment sites most suited to high tech manufacturing and technology parks. The location of these 'investment corridors' is shown in **Section D1, Map D1**; this also highlights areas with fast and efficient access to the motorway network suitable for logistics.
- C4.7 Second, and most crucially, the majority of office based companies should establish in the **town and city centres**. The four Strategic Centres will lead out the economic competitiveness of the future Black Country. This is part of wider strategy to bring renewed vibrancy and urban renaissance to the Black Country. Only by creating vibrant, well-connected town centres where people choose to work, live and visit, will the trends of population out-migration and decentralisation be reversed.

### **Expanding Four Strategic Town and City Centres**

- C4.8 By 2021, the four town and city centres will be fuelling the growth of the Black Country; providing high quality office space for knowledge-based companies, and vastly improved retail, sport, leisure and tourism offers. New homes supporting 'city living' and a higher quality public realm will bring more people into these centres, adding to the level of economic activity.
- C4.9 The Black Country Centres Study indicates that the four centres with the greatest capacity for growth are: **Wolverhampton, Brierley Hill/Merry Hill, West Bromwich and Walsall**. While still an important centre for the Black Country, Dudley Town Centre has seen its strategic role diminish and its capacity for expansion without damaging the local heritage and environment is limited. Dudley will be repositioned to focus on residential and tourism growth. In contrast Brierley Hill/Merry Hill has become one of the most important retail and office locations in the Black Country. Further expansion has the potential to act as a catalyst for growth, and it should therefore be recognised as a strategic centre.
- C4.10 All of the four strategic centres will need to expand beyond their current boundaries if they are to fulfil growth ambitions. In terms of the scale of development, the target to 2031 for **378,000 sq.m of additional comparison retail floorspace**. 75% will be distributed across the four strategic centres and the rest between smaller centres. With respect to **office space, 1.45 sq.m of net additional space** is needed by 2031 to support the aspiration for 101,000 more jobs in the service sector. Of this

figure for 2031, 1.3m sq. m. will be located in the four key centres, accommodating 71,000 service sector jobs (748,000 sq. m. and 41,000 jobs at 2021). Strategic Centres should also provide a focus for sport and leisure development of a scale to meet the needs of +1m people and support the attractiveness and competitiveness of the wider city region.

- C4.11 Reflecting the key role the strategic centres play in the Strategy, they will be priority areas for immediate investment. Three of the four strategic centres already have or are actively preparing **masterplans**; key schemes within these must be implemented with speed and ways established as to how further growth can be accommodated. In doing so, the centres – the places that local people identify with the most – will be areas where the early transformation of the Black Country is most visible.

### **Building A High Quality Housing Market**

- C4.12 The Black Country housing market does not sufficiently meet the needs of local people; insufficient private and social housing, low-grade residential environments and a lack of choice, are all contributing to out-migration. Strategy aims to overturn this trend, starting from the basic premise to **accelerate the rate of house building and home improvement**, and ensure that new homes and residential environments provide greater **quality** and **choice**.
- C4.13 Since 1990, house building has fallen behind household formation for the first time in the post-war period. By 2031, this trend will have been overturned, creating a total of 71,000 additional households and raising population by 125,000 (For 2021, 44,000 households and 61,000 people are proposed). Achieving this scale of housing growth will require a significant change in the pattern of land use; old industrial areas will need to be redeveloped to create new housing environments. Informed by the Housing Capacity Study it is estimated that up to 1,700 ha of currently designated employment land will need to be converted to residential use by 2031 (c1,100 ha by 2021).
- C4.14 All new and existing residential areas in the Black Country need to be within sustainable communities; by this it is meant ensuring they provide access to employment, local services, retail, leisure and a high quality environment. In line with this approach, **strategic centres** and nodes along **public transport corridors** provide opportunities for higher density housing development within walking distance of stations and Metro halts (**see Section D3**). These new residential areas should offer a more diverse range of housing types and densities. In particular, more quality, mid and upper market homes are needed for higher income and highly skilled households, currently leaving the Black Country to find such homes elsewhere.
- C4.15 Finally, housing market studies have identified the need to prepare a major **programme of progressive renewal** to raise the quality of homes and residential environments across the Black Country. Many of the worst affected housing areas are in the most deprived core of the Black Country, of which many are monolithic, sometimes isolated, council estates,

stigmatised as undesirable places in which to live and where homes often do not meet the decent homes standard. Many BME communities are housed in older mixed residential and industrial areas around Centres. These localities are popular as being accessible and providing a rich concentration of community facilities. However, they offer poor quality housing with limited choice and overcrowding. These areas too should be subject to progressive renewal to provide greater quality and choice.

- C4.16 Such programmes of progressive renewal will require sensitive implementation working closely with the diverse range of existing communities, together with the creation of new residential environments from former industrial land, thus providing more space and choice for these communities.

### **Creating a Workforce for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

- C4.17 Economic strategy for the Black Country aims to create a more diverse, knowledge-intensive economy with higher average incomes. This can only be delivered with a highly skilled workforce. The Black Country Study's Education and Skills Plan aims to raise the skill levels of the adult workforce and of children and young people. Existing communities provide tremendous potential for growth in the competitiveness of the Black Country. The current waste of talent arising from poor educational and skill attainment, poor health and other barriers to opportunity must be eradicated. In addition, by creating a more upmarket housing stock, improving the environment, and by creating better-paid jobs, the Study aims to attract more highly skilled people to the sub-region and to retain those who currently leave.
- C4.18 The Black Country Education and Skills Plan is embedded into all Community and Education Plans. In terms of immediate action, prioritising investment in Colleges is under way to add to the knowledge-base of the strategic centres. Wolverhampton University has a key role to play, especially in developing its research base and enabling it to attract more students from outside the sub-region. Creating more extensive research and development capability in businesses, the University, Colleges and in new facilities and institutions forms a key strand of Preferred Strategy.

### **Creating Prosperous, Diverse and Harmonious Communities**

- C4.19 Integral also to the economically driven strategy is the need for upskilling and economic participation to be achieved throughout the diverse communities which choose to live in the Black Country. Creating successful communities, eradicating poverty, enabling participation in social and economic life, and building a harmonious society are integral activities within the preferred strategy to achieve the Black Country Vision.
- C4.20 The diversity of communities provides a wide range of opportunities which will be encouraged as an engine of economic growth. This will only be achieved if barriers to equality are removed and structural inequality is addressed. A workstream is being developed which will specifically address issues of diversity, social cohesion and poverty. The establishment of a

partnership with government will be explored to examine, from the perspective of each diverse community group, each of the themes and action plans which make up preferred strategy to achieve the Black Country Vision. This is not just a BME issue. It affects all communities, particularly those which are becoming alienated through deprivation and increasing divergence of economic opportunity and performance. The aim is to develop a strategy to tackle structural inequality in the fields of education, housing, labour market, health, policing and the criminal justice system, and to put in place positive measures to create the social conditions which will bring communities together through an equal sense of belonging and enable people to maximise their potential. Communities will be genuinely inclusive and integrated in residential, social and economic terms.

### **Transforming the Environment: Black Country as Urban Park**

- C4.21 Creating a high quality sustainable environment is one of four key objectives. The need for radical change has been identified in both the Economic and Housing studies. High quality urban, residential and working environments will be critical for attracting knowledge-based industries and their workers.
- C4.22 'Black Country as Urban Park' is the strategy to transform the environment. It identifies the opportunities to make the Black Country a national exemplar for urban living and sustainable urban renaissance. In doing so, the Black Country is of sufficient size to make a major contribution to national sustainability targets, such as on carbon emissions. The sub-region has many environmental assets including its canals, geology, wildlife and open spaces, but too many are hidden or inaccessible. These assets must be made more use of; in particular, 'Black Country As Urban Park' aims to highlight the area's distinctive topography, communities and connections.
- C4.23 The Urban Park Design Study has identified three principle design layers which will be used to guide future development. First, **beacons** to highlight most distinctive characteristics of the Black Country; these might include physical objects such as sculptures and buildings or flagship events and festivals. Second, **corridors** for sustainable movement around the Black Country using environmental assets, including canals, walkways and cycle routes and encouraging physical activity. Third, the environment within **communities** – emphasising past and future community areas by their distinctive character.
- C4.24 **A Black Country Landscape Action Plan** will define the physical form of the Black Country in accordance with the 'Urban Park' principles of Beacons, Corridors and Communities. It will provide the framework for driving the transformation of the environment across the Black Country changing its image and legibility, building on existing natural, built and heritage assets. Implementation of the Landscape Plan will underpin the creation of new residential environments and employment land investment for knowledge-led business.

### Developing an Integrated Transport Network

- C4.25 An efficient transport system is essential to ensure the free flow of people, goods and services across the Black Country. Transport Strategy outlines the vision for a new **integrated public transport system** to underpin the polycentric network of centres. '**Black Country Express**' will revolutionise the way people travel between centres and outside the Black Country, by providing integrated bus, Metro and rail services. It is considered the only practicable way of delivering the bus component of the integrated transport system through Quality Bus Contracts with a franchising system similar to that operating in London. One of the flagship projects of Black Country Express will be an extended Metro network, linking the Black Country's communities together and to Birmingham.
- C4.26 Transport Strategy identifies the priority **highway/junction** investments to support land use transformation, economic and household growth. The core objective will be to unlock economic growth; either by enhancing the existing network, creating new roads and junctions to release new employment land, or reinforcing the economic vitality of key centres.
- C4.27 To achieve the best use of existing strategic highway network, a widespread application of Red Routes, decriminalised parking enforcement and improved urban traffic control is proposed.
- C4.28 Key investments are highlighted to improve **external connectivity** to UK, European and Global markets. For example, to ensure there is capacity for fast and reliable access to Birmingham International Airport, City Region and the rest of the UK and better local services within the Black Country, four tracking the mainline railway from Wolverhampton to Birmingham and Coventry is needed.

### Summary of the Preferred Spatial Strategy for the Black Country to 2031

- C4.29 The spatial strategy for the Black Country proposes to achieve the Black Country Vision to 2021 for sustainable growth and competitiveness focused on development on **Centres and Corridors**. This direction will be further reinforced towards 2031 and beyond. The Strategy proposes a 100% Brownfield land development pattern which aims to protect the existing Green Belt within the Black Country. ***Its key proposals comprise:***

**The Black Country Spatial Strategy - Centres:**

- **Focus of retail (comparison goods ie non-food) and office growth**, coupled with leisure and the development of 'city living', on four Strategic Centres in the Black Country operating as a network connected to each other and to Birmingham.
- The **four Strategic Centres** for growth and expansion will be:
  - Wolverhampton City Centre.
  - Walsall Town Centre.
  - West Bromwich Town Centre.
  - Brierley Hill/ Merry Hill.
- Through the Phase One Review of Regional Spatial Strategy the designation of **Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a new Strategic Centre**, will replace Dudley Town Centre which will, however, have an important future role based on tourism, its cultural assets and residential development.

**Corridors for Housing Growth:**

- To achieve the house building minima targets set out in RSS, housing growth in the Black Country will be focused on **Public Transport Corridors** with concentrations within walking/cycling distance of railway stations, metro halts and existing local centres. The primary provision of land for housing growth will come from the **restructuring of poorer quality employment land** for residential led mixed development with encouragement given to higher housing densities close to key public transport interchanges, and opportunity to accommodate a wider mix of housing types including homes to meet the needs of higher income and higher skilled households.
- These **Corridors will be developed as a network** connecting the Black Country Strategic Centres to each other and to Birmingham City Centre along existing passenger rail lines, existing and planned Metro network and in other areas with opportunity for residential growth arising from employment land restructuring (where the provision of high volume public transport will be essential)

**Corridors for Employment Land Provision:**

- In addition to the focus of office development on strategic centres, provision of high quality, accessible employment land required for knowledge-led businesses (in particular high technology led incubation and growth companies) will be made in **four Employment Land Investment Corridors**. These Corridors will be linked to the strategic centres, be accessible by public transport and have reliable fast links to the national highway network.
- The four proposed **Employment Land Investment Corridors** are:
  - 'Black Country North'**: Wolverhampton Centre – Stafford Road Corridor (incorporating Wolverhampton Science Park and Wobaston Rd i54/MIS).
  - 'Black Country Central'**: Walsall Centre – Darlaston – Wednesbury Corridor (incorporating Darlaston SDA, Hill Top, the Black Country Route, and Wednesfield Way, Wolverhampton).
  - 'Black Country West'**: Pensnett – Brierley Hill Centre – Dudley Town, Dudley Port Corridor (incorporating Pensnett Estate).
  - 'Black Country East'**: Oldbury – West Bromwich Corridor (incorporating M5 Junctions 1 and 2 and Sandwell & Dudley Station).

**Other Centres:**

The strategy also recognises that, to support sustainable growth, development and environmental enhancement should also be provided for:

- Supporting the retail and leisure role of the network of existing local centres serving local communities, accessible by public transport.

C4.30 The RSS Phase One Revision submission proposes policy changes to set the strategic planning framework to facilitate the implementation of this strategy primarily in the form of additional Urban Renaissance policies specific to the Black Country.

C4.31 The broad distribution and scale of growth and land use change in the Black Country to 2021 and 2031 proposed through this strategy is set out below:  
**Table C4.1. Preferred Spatial Strategy: Scale of Growth**

	2001 to 2021	2001 to 2031
<b>NEW HOMES:</b>		
Strategic Centres	5,500	7,700
Public Transport Corridors	30,100	53,900
Other (e.g. commitments, intensification)	8,500	10,100
<b>Total New Homes</b>	<b>44,100</b>	<b>71,700</b>
<b>Additional A/B households to be accommodated</b>	<b>32,000</b>	<b>50,000</b>
<b>EMPLOYMENT:</b>		
<b>New Jobs</b>		
Strategic Centres	45,500	76,700
Employment Land Investment Corridors	*21,700	*49,800
Other (Local Centres, off-Centre Commitments, Employment Opportunity Areas)	12,800	34,300
<b>Total New Jobs</b>	<b>**80,000</b>	<b>**160,800</b>
* includes 7,000 planned commitments on periphery		
<b>** Net new jobs accommodated after allowing for manufacturing restructuring</b>	<b>65,000</b>	<b>95,000</b>
<b>LAND IMPLICATIONS:</b>		
<b>Transfer of Employment Land to Residential led Mixed Use</b>	<b>-1,100ha</b>	<b>-1,700ha</b>
<b>Retained Employment Land</b>	<b>2,800ha</b>	<b>2,200ha</b>
<b>Provision o High Quality Employment Land</b>	<b>1,000ha</b>	<b>1,600ha</b>
<b>NEW FLOORSPACE BUILT:</b>		
<b>Offices:</b>		
Strategic Centres	0.75m m2	1.30m m2
Other ( incl commitments)	0.12m m2	0.15m m2
<b>Total Offices (B1a &amp; A2):</b>	<b>0.87m m2</b>	<b>1.45m m2</b>
<b>Retail:</b>		
Strategic Centres	0.19m m2	0.28m m2
Other Centres	0.05m m2	0.10m m2
<b>Total Retail (A1):</b>	<b>0.24m m2</b>	<b>0.38m m2</b>