



# Looking Forward: The Black Country in 2033



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# **LOOKING FORWARD: THE BLACK COUNTRY IN 2033**

*Britain's Venice...*

*City of Communities...*

*European Capital of Culture...*

*Transport Revolution ...*

*A Learning City... Technology Driven ...*

*Entrepreneurial Economy... Desirable Housing for All...*

*King's Award for Sustainable Environment...*

*Youth Culture Rules OK...*

*Safe, Secure, Healthy and Addicted to Sport...*

*From Youth Parliament to Black Country Assembly*

## INTRODUCTION

This report, **Looking Forward: The Black Country in 2033** presents the main findings from a series of workshops attended by over 150 civic and business leaders, community representatives, educationalists and young people. In these workshops we identified several alternative futures for the Black Country and a preferred vision.

Through this process we tried to define **our aspirations for the Black Country over the next 30 years**.

This Vision is the starting point for the comprehensive **Plan** for the renaissance of the Black Country. We are preparing this development strategy during 2003/04; it will show *how* we will realise our Vision and our key investment priorities with a step change in urban renaissance delivery. The need for this Plan was identified in late 2002 by the Panel, which examined draft Regional Planning Guidance – our Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands on behalf of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Over 1m people now live in the Black Country - and will do so in 2033 - in the heart of one of Europe's major conurbations. Today we face many social, economic and environmental problems. Yet, in defining our Vision we attempted to look *beyond our immediate horizons* because we believe that we must set the long term direction for a Black Country future as one we aspire to, within which we will address our current challenges.

Our starting point for our Vision is to understand the Black Country as it is today. Therefore in **section one** we outline some of the key characteristics and key challenges facing the Black Country today. In **section two** we set out where we want the Black Country to be in 2033. Finally in **section three** we outline the final steps that we are making towards realising our vision for the Black Country.

# 1. THE BLACK COUNTRY TODAY

The Black Country comprises the four boroughs of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and the City of Wolverhampton. Around **1,080,000 people live in the Black Country**; 15% of which are ethnic minorities – twice the proportion in the UK as a whole.

## ECONOMY

Considerably more Black Country businesses (17%) are **manufacturing companies** by comparison with the UK as a whole (8%). Similarly, 27% of the workforce is employed in manufacturing compared with 15% in the UK as a whole. Conversely, a lower proportion of our companies and our workforce, are in the service sector than in the rest of the UK. Fewer people work in skilled, knowledge based and professional occupations with consequential lower average wages.

Business start-up rates in the Black Country are in line with the national average but business survival rates are lower. Even though employment levels increased over the past few years, **unemployment** in the Black Country (at 4.9% in early 2003) is significantly higher than the UK rate (at 3.3%).

## SKILLS AND EDUCATION

Positions requiring higher level qualifications and skills are harder to fill in the Black Country than those for plant and machine operatives. 41% of the working age population in the Black Country has no, or modest, qualifications

compared to the national average of 30%.

Our **educational attainment** at Key Stages 3 and 4 is low. In England in 2000, the percentage of pupils with 5 GCSE passes A to C was 49% - but in the Black Country this figure is 39%. However there are wide differences within the Black Country; attainment by students in schools in some communities regularly exceeds the national average.

## TRANSPORT

The Black Country is at the **heart of Britain's motorway network** and is served by two **inter-city rail stations** with frequent services to London and other major UK cities. Yet, the M5 and M6 motorways that run through the Black Country and the M5-M6 junction are some of the most utilised and congested roads in Europe. Improvements to the motorway network are under construction and extensions to the Metro are planned.

## PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

An extensive industrial heritage is evident across the Black Country. In parts this has a negative impact with 20% of all derelict land in the West Midlands Region in the Black Country, however it offers much that is positive in terms of town scape and tourism potential especially the canals. The Black Country has an intensive canal network extending to some 100 kilometres, and includes 63 locks and 3 tunnels. A series of areas and centres operates across the Black Country with a complex web of inter-connections both physical

and cultural. Readily available land comprises a smaller share of the total supply (27%) compared to the rest of the West Midlands (40%).

## **HOUSING**

According to a recent study, almost two thirds of the Black Country's local authority **housing stock** (some 77,000 homes) is 'non-

decent'. In some communities, the cost of improving a home to modern standards exceeds the value on completion. In many communities, the range of choice of middle and higher priced housing for sale is limited. As a result, many residents move out of our communities to 'move up the housing ladder' outside the Black Country.

## 2. OUR VISION

*In 2033 the Black Country is a confident, 'we can do it' place. We are proud of our skills, our proficiency and our work ethic – these are key to our prosperity.*

*The Black Country is now a truly Polycentric City – made up of four thriving and distinct retail and commercial 'City' centres - each one playing a unique role. West Bromwich is home to the C-PLEX, Walsall is known for its culture and Wolverhampton for its Universities and R & D base and Brierley Hill for its shopping. In addition the traditional centre of Dudley will have been transformed into a national icon for urban living with its strong family focus and its recreational and leisure facilities.*

### **BRITAIN'S VENICE**

*The newly re-juvenated Black Country Canal Network is now a UN World Heritage Site. Attractive housing, pubs, cafes, and studio offices front the canals, and water taxis link the main tourist attractions together. Our canal network defines the image of the Black Country and attracts visitors from all over the world. Fishing has now become a leading local sport and Kuoni's Black Country canal 'boat weeks' are in high demand.*

*Tourism is a primary sector of the Black Country economy in 2033 – boasting a variety of key attractions: **Brierley Hill**, now the best retail destination in the West Midlands; **the Black Country Park** featuring the first holographic entertainment centre; and the*

*'**Dudley Centre for endangered species**'.*

### **EUROPE'S FIRST TRUE CITY OF COMMUNITIES**

*The Black Country is an inclusive, integrated, and multicultural city. Our differences in ethnic background, religious beliefs, age, gender and sexuality are cause for celebration, not tension.*

*Our 'Inspiration Day Carnival' on Nelson Mandela's birthday brings together Black Country people in Walsall to share our different beliefs, dancing, rituals, arts and sports. All major religions and cultural festivals are included in the school curriculum and are celebrated as regional holidays. The Black Country was Europe's Capital of Culture in 2024 – official acknowledgement of our unique multicultural strengths.*

*The Black Country attracts people from all backgrounds. Our 'one world sphere', on top of the Rowley Hills, symbolises the rich variety of galleries, music festivals, clubs, performing arts centres and 'cultural quarters' we have in the Black Country.*

### **TRANSPORT REVOLUTION**

*Key to the Black Country's prosperity was the creation of a new public transport system – BCX, the Black Country Express. BCX knits together metro, heavy rail and electric bus networks to provide a seamless transport service for all. Most people now make their journey to work and to learn by public transport. As a result, average car usage in the Black Country has steadily declined.*

*The BCX serves all the town centres, all major employment sites and residential areas. Local feeder bus services take 85% of residents to within seven minutes walk of their homes. It is possible to access Birmingham International Airport and the five intercity railway stations within twenty minutes of any community in the Black Country.*

*In parallel with other transport investments, there has been a steady investment in improving the Black Country's road network.*

### **A TECHNOLOGY DRIVEN ENTREPRENEURIAL ECONOMY**

*The Black Country is now highly attractive to companies serving UK and European markets. At the heart of the UK motorway and rail freight networks, companies find they can serve more customers faster from the Black Country than from any other UK location. Within the Black Country, the road network provides ready access to key motorway junctions, rail freight depots, and the new inter-modal logistics hub, all of **which flow freely**.*

*Companies in the Black Country are known for their willingness to develop and adopt new technology. The Black Country now rivals Silicon Valley as a location for companies developing new technical applications in a wide range of industries. Leading companies like Microsoft and Sony are opening new design facilities here to pursue joint projects with Black Country companies.*

*There is a vibrant R & D community. Whilst some manufacturing still takes place in the Black Country, most products*

*designed here are manufactured in the Far East.*

*The Black Country is now popular with entrepreneurs seeking a good place to start their business. New business formation and survival rates are above UK rates. In 2033, there is full employment in the Black Country and wage rates are amongst the highest in the UK.*

### **A LEARNING CITY**

*By 2033, attainment in all primary and secondary schools and colleges in the Black Country is consistently in the top 15% of all schools in the UK. Our schools are widely respected as 'centres of educational excellence'.*

*Schools in some Black Country communities are supporting home tutoring schemes alongside traditional school based learning. These individually designed learning programmes are partly responsible for our educational success. We have been able to nurture talent and build confidence amongst our young people, by enabling them to pursue traditional maths or English as well as subjects such as archery, "Bollywood" dance, or Chinese.*

*By 2033, we have two strong universities in the Black Country. In 2015, the University of Wolverhampton became the Black Country University (BCU) clear recognition of the value of the 'Black Country brand'. In 2020, Peking University joined with Georgia State to establish the PUGS Black Country Campus to meet the needs of their students. Successful 'engineering innovation faculties' exist both at BCU and PUGS and they both have strong*

*links with companies throughout Europe.*

*By 2033, we have created a true culture of life long learning. Every adult is engaged in learning in their workplace, at college or university, or at home. Most people retrain for a new occupation two or three times during their working lives; all learning leads to a qualification.*

*By 2010, all employers in the Black Country sign an employer–education compact, ensuring every young person undertakes four weeks work experience with a local company. By 2015, all employers are accredited Investors in People.*

*By 2020 the Black Country workforce is known throughout the world as highly motivated, skilled and ambitious. Those with vocational qualifications are as well respected and as well paid as those with academic qualifications.*

### **DESIRABLE HOUSING FOR ALL**

*Economic prosperity, the high quality education system and the renovation or replacement of unfit dwellings, has created strong housing markets in the Black Country. Sufficient affordable housing for rent and for sale is now available for all age and price ranges and to suit all needs.*

*This is the result of the UK’s most ambitious housing redevelopment programme, with 7,000 new homes built each year between 2005 and 2025.*

*The Black Country now offers a wide choice of re-built living environments for all incomes and lifestyles, including town centre living for young and old, canal heritage apartments and houses,*

*hill side towns with panoramic views, lifestyle complexes and retirement villages.*

### **THE KING’S AWARD FOR A SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT**

*In 2005 the largest urban park network in Europe was built in the Black Country – now we can ‘get away from it all’ on our doorsteps. We have succeeded in making the most of our hidden treasures – our hills, valleys, rivers and urban heritage for urban living and leisure. To celebrate our success, the promoters of the Chelsea Flower Show moved to the Black Country between 2020 and 2025.*

*In 2025 the Black Country won the Kings Award for Sustainable Landscapes; this represents true international recognition of the Black Country’s commitment to investing in a sustainable future. Our park network symbolises how we brought our derelict land back into beneficial use, our improvements in air quality, our commitment to waste recycling and our progress towards low energy costs. The Black Country now hosts the permanent secretariat of the Earth Summit Conference.*

### **SAFE, SECURE HEALTHY – AND ADDICTED TO SPORT**

*By 2033, our communities are the safest in the UK. Drug abuse, racial and ethnic conflict, and anti-social behaviour have virtually disappeared. We believe our addiction to sport is the key to our success. Sports facilities throughout the Black Country are the best in Europe; we have high levels of participation in all sports. Our sports academies are seen as ‘centres of excellence’ and bursaries bring the best sportsmen and women to the Black Country to*

*play, train and coach. The Black Country is bidding to host the Commonwealth Games.*

*This addiction to sport means that residents of the Black Country are amongst the healthiest in Europe. We suffer from fewer illnesses and we live longer. Of course, our improved primary health care system, with a strong commitment to prevention and early diagnosis through our on-line G.P. services and personal health care advisors, our emphasis on healthy eating at school - with organic food cooking classes, and the ban on smoking in public places, have also helped. This coupled with general improvements in services means the Black Country is one of the healthiest regions in Europe.*

### **YOUTH CULTURE RULES OK**

*We have a strong sense of community in the Black Country. This is most obvious in how we value our young people. It is impossible to overemphasise how the energy and spirit of our young people has brought a new vitality and dynamic to communities throughout the Black Country. It started back in 2004 when we started the annual 'Youth Expo' – our showcase for young people aged 9 to 19 to demonstrate how their culture, drive and commitment is at the heart of our communities. Now our young people – working with many retired people – run a network of youth clubs throughout the Black Country. The clubs work together to organise regular festivals, such as 'Bhangra' dance workshops, multicultural recipe sharing events, and circus fairs with local young artistes sharing the big top with performers from around the world.*

*All youngsters can join the Black Country Adventure. This includes both the Residential Centres in Walsall and West Bromwich where they can develop team building skills, self-esteem, confidence, and independent living skills, and expeditions to South East Asia, Africa and the West Indies.*

*Of course, the C-PLEX – based in West Bromwich is our lead cultural venue; it's a true celebration of youth culture in the Black Country.*

### **FROM YOUTH PARLIAMENT TO A BLACK COUNTRY ASSEMBLY**

*The most remarkable aspect of the Black Country over the past thirty years has been the role of our young people in setting out our vision for the future. Young people from throughout our communities set up the first Black Country Youth Parliament in 2004. In itself, this has become an important political institution.*

*Many 'graduates' from the Youth Parliament move into local government. As a result, the four local authorities in the Black Country decided to establish the Black Country Assembly to take the lead in realising our Vision for the Black Country.*

### **3. REALISING OUR VISION**

The Black Country Consortium has started the process of realising our vision.

**The Plan for the Black Country** will cover the four Black Country Boroughs as an integrated polycentric urban area. It will put into practice the challenging Urban Renaissance policies of the Regional Spatial Strategy as set out in the Draft Regional Planning Guidance.

The Plan will provide the strategic framework for a distinctive Urban Renaissance creating a new context for urban development and living that will compete on the European stage.

The spatial strategy will test options for the use of population and employment levels, difficult issues of employment and accessibility issues within the Black Country. The focus of the strategy will be on accessibility and stopping the current population decline. It will set out a radical change in the physical form of the Black Country building upon the best of its centres, heritage, topography, and communities.

**The Black Country Education and Learning Strategy** will define a single, Black Country-wide initiative to raise education and skill levels and attainment. A holistic approach will be adopted – encompassing Early Years, Primary, Secondary, Post 16 and Higher Education as well as Workforce Development and Adult and Community learning.

A Consortium Programme Board will be established in May, which will oversee the production of an Education and Skills Programme Action Plan. The key outcome will be a fresh Education and Skills

Vision Statement and Action Plan. This will include a new 14-19 strategy, a common approach to raising standards of teaching and learning, a review of all Black Country education and learning provision, clearer engagement of all parts of the learning and skills sector and a new creative and innovative approach to learning and skills.

**World Heritage Status Bid for the Black Country Canal network and Environs** - in recognition of the unique role canals have played in the creation in the Black Country of an urbanised industrial community. This bid – made with Birmingham will be used as a catalyst for change in the Black Country with investment in both the canal network and in its environs to promote both heritage and new uses. The Black Country Canal strategy will complete existing canal network initiatives and promote a comprehensive investment programme for the network as a whole.

**The Youth Inclusion Strategy** will ensure young people have a part to play in shaping their future. As part of this process, an event will be held in July at Bescot for 13-19 year olds from all ethnic backgrounds and ability groups. Issues to be addressed include time out of school, transport, parental consent, child protection, supervision of young people and managing attendance.

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