B THE BLACK COUNTRY THEN AND NOW

B1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLACK COUNTRY

B1.1 The Black Country represents an identified urban area, largely founded on coal mining – hence the name – and the development of iron and steel, metal manufacture and metal goods. Limestone and coal, allied to local peoples' skills and other raw materials provided the foundation of the area's wealth. Technology developed from the first use of minerals, and timber from woodlands, to the use of water power and thence to the Industrial Revolution, the age of iron and steel and of machines and manufacturing. The area's natural and geological heritage is inextricably bound up with its cultural heritage and economic development. The area developed around a series of market towns, and smaller communities, closely related to the plethora of coal mines and industrial complexes which were heavily dependent on coal, iron and limestone as basic raw materials.

Physical history

B1.2 The complex pattern of settlements in the Black Country subsequently merged to form a mini-conurbation, but with a series of highly valued green wedges of land. These wedges maintain some separation between towns and are highly valued by local people as links from the urban area to the countryside beyond. Their importance has been reflected in their Green Belt status in successive development plans.

B1.3 The people of the Black Country have a strong sense of community identity; they identify with the Black Country itself but also to the smaller towns in which they belong and which together make up the mini-conurbation.

B1.4 Whilst there is a clear identity to the area, its physical and functional links to the adjacent City of Birmingham are extensive with high levels of social and economic interdependencies. Indeed, three of the four Boroughs have boundaries with the City.

B1.5 The Black Country also has strong functional ties with a group of towns in southern Staffordshire, based around Cannock and Burntwood, which were also founded on coal and other mineral extraction. Lichfield, and to a lesser extent Tamworth, are additional communities which have acted as recipients of Black Country and Birmingham people over many years as they have grown into commuter settlements as well as free-standing towns, with many people commuting daily into the Black Country and Birmingham.

B1.6 In planning for the future of the Black Country, these inter-dependencies are critical; a balance needs to be struck between relative self-sufficiency in meeting housing and employment needs, whilst also exploiting the benefits of links to surrounding areas.

Socio-economic history

B1.7 The Black Country's strength in mining and metal manufacture and metal goods proved to be a major economic driver in the sub-region through the Industrial Revolution until the 1960s. At that time unemployment was very low and female activity rates were amongst the highest in the United Kingdom. The Black Country was an economic power-house of the region and the UK's export efforts.

B1.8 The process of structural change in the national economy, away from heavy industry to new technologies and knowledge-based industries, was not matched by the same speed of adaptation in the Black Country.

B1.9 Rationalisation of industrial activity produced large-scale site redundancy, notably steel and metal manufacturing plants (e.g. Patent Shaft, Bilston, Round Oak and Coombs Wood Steelworks). Such sites have provided major opportunity for land use transformation. However, recycling of industrial land has been a continuing process for over 200 years and each site yields highly and increasingly complex, extensive and expensive challenges for land reclamation.

B1.10 Since the 1970s, the Black Country has experienced a continuous net outflow of Black Country people driven by a number of "push" and "pull" factors. Areas beyond the Black Country, such as Telford New Town, have developed new housing in attractive and accessible locations, providing a focus for accommodating Black Country families (the 'pull' factor). Meanwhile, the lack of sufficient scale and variety in house building, more restricted job opportunities and the poor quality of the environment in the Black Country have combined as persuasive "push" factors in people's decision to leave.

B1.11 As a counterbalance, the Black Country has proved to be an attractive area for British Ethnic Minority groups, bringing diversity in culture, aspirations and economic activity.

B1.12 The process of radical change in the Black Country over the last 50 years has been met with new policy responses across the full range of social and economic services, with notable successes in the transformation of the area. However, the pace of change has been such that policy response now needs a scale of acceleration unprecedented in the area, and indeed, in many similar areas of the United Kingdom and Europe which experience similar processes of social, economic and physical change.