

D2 EXPANDING THE FOUR STRATEGIC AND OTHER TOWN CENTRES

THE CURRENT POSITION

D2.1 The strategic centres including Brierley Hill/Merry Hill have a crucial role to play in achieving the 30-year Vision. In order to provide a sound evidence base for developing strategy BCC initially commissioned a major independent study - to analyse the present characteristics of these centres and give guidance on their future evolution. The study¹ reported in August 2005 and provides the foundation for our proposals, but adapted in the light of a subsequent study undertaken at the regional level² together with a number of studies of specific issues which the Consortium also commissioned³.

(a) Shopping

D2.2 Thirty years ago, the Black Country comprised a dense network of centres, collectively achieving a turnover comparable to Birmingham, Solihull and Sutton Coldfield combined. Wolverhampton was the second largest centre in the West Midlands with a comparable number of shops and a turnover of approximately 60% that of Birmingham (see **Table D2.1** below). Walsall, Dudley and West Bromwich were smaller but significant centres serving the needs of their boroughs. Merry Hill had not been built.

D2.3 Since then, the current network of centres has undergone radical change as a result of the emergence of Merry Hill, falling relative incomes in the Black Country, lack of investment in the public realm, and the increasingly high quality retail offer in Birmingham. In retail terms, notwithstanding the introduction of Merry Hill into the hierarchy, the Black Country is **leaking retail trade** to neighbouring towns and cities elsewhere in the region and beyond. While the Black Country Consortium would expect Birmingham, as the regional centre, to draw trade from the Black Country, the Centres Study indicates that this leakage is excessive, and is increasing. **Figure D2.1** shows how the continuing growth of Birmingham has been at the expense of the Black Country Centres, providing a graphic illustration of the ongoing polarisation of retail activity to fewer, larger centres.

¹ *Study of Black Country Centres*, GVA Grimley, August 2005.

² *West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy - Regional Centres Study*, Roger Tym and Partners, March 2006.

³ (a) *Investment Analysis and Future Investment Potential of the Black Country Retail Centre*, Chase and Partners, March 2006; (b) *Economic Impact of the Expansion of Merry Hill/Brierley Hill*, Regeneris Consulting, April 2006; (c) (i) *Assessment of Major Out-of-Centre Retail Outlets in the UK*, White Young Green, May 2006; and (ii) *Assessment of Future Market Shares and Accommodating Future Needs*, White Young Green, May 2006.

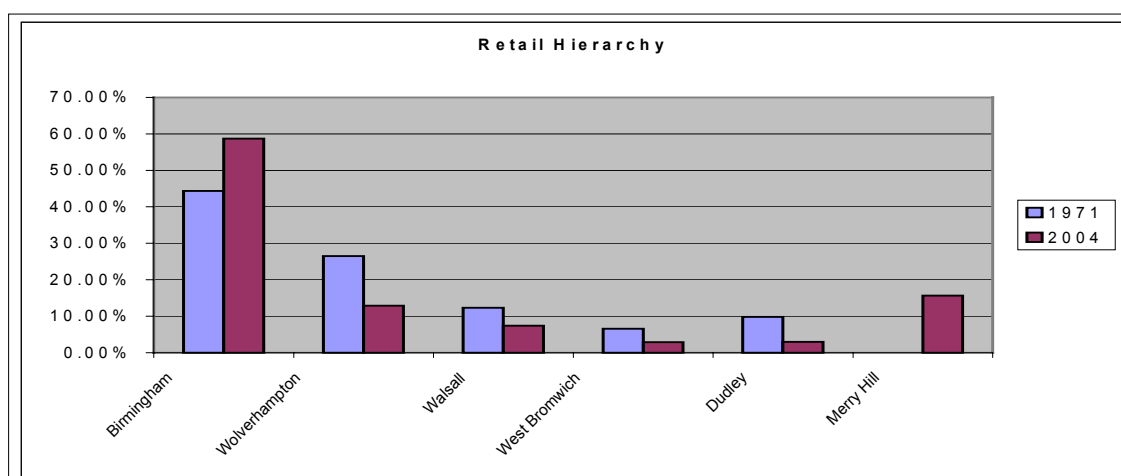
White, Young, Green³ have assessed the implications and scale of additional leakage that will occur if the Black Country fails to provide sufficient indigenous retail growth. The research also estimates the potential increases in leakage that would occur if Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is not enabled to grow as a key contributor to fulfilling indigenous growth.

Table D2.1: Retail Hierarchy 1971 – Central Area Statistics

	Total Shops	Turnover [£m]	Persons Employed	Floorspace [000sq ft]
Birmingham	557	76.11	12,310	1,862
Wolverhampton	548	45.31	6,651	1,008
Walsall	301	21.03	3,185	483
Dudley	240	16.78	2,668	428
West Bromwich	257	12.47	2,089	299
Bilston	221	7.02	1,075	141
Stourbridge	173	6.87	1,125	168
Halesowen	122	5.56	802	113
Bearwood	179	5.07	820	106
Cape Hill	161	4.58	747	100
Wednesbury	131	3.86	601	81
Bloxwich	87	3.65	587	72
Great Bridge	74	3.58	574	91
Blackheath	152	3.53	706	84
Cradley Heath	143	3.51	641	91
Brierley Hill	95	3.19	465	70

Source: Census of Distribution (1971), West Midlands County Structure Plan Report of Survey 'Shopping' (1978). Includes all centres with 1971 turnover above £3m.

Figure D2.1: Changing Market Shares, Birmingham and the Black Country, 1971-2004



Source: CACI's Retail Footprint 2004

- D2.4 A particular concern highlighted in the Centres Study is that the highest earning (A/B) groups in the Black Country generally spend their money outside the Black Country. Retail in Black Country Centres is relatively low value, reflecting the income distribution of local consumers.
- D2.5 Wolverhampton's turnover is now only around 20% that of Birmingham, while Walsall, and more particularly Dudley and West Bromwich, have all seen their status in the region decline. Merry Hill is the strongest retail centre but limited public transport means it has been accessible mainly to local people or those with private transport, rather than the sub-region as a whole; access has been particularly poor from Wolverhampton and Walsall.
- D2.6 Over the last 20 years the relative decline of retailing in the traditional Black Country centres has been compounded by out-of-centre development, and not only influenced by Merry Hill. Much of the other comparison retail investment that has taken place has been in the form of 'retail parks', which have diversified well beyond their traditional 'large foodstore' and 'bulky goods' roles. Stricter planning policies in recent years have curtailed such developments however, and those that have taken place recently have tended to be located edge-of-centre, as at Crown Wharf, Walsall.
- D2.7 In consequence there is some evidence of renewed market interest in major in-centre schemes. The 'core expansion' project in Wolverhampton, including 46,500 sqm of comparison retail in a mixed use scheme extending southwards from the Mander and Wulfrun centres, now appears to be imminent. In Walsall permission has been granted for a 23,000 sqm retail redevelopment in the Digbeth area, and Tesco's proposals for rejuvenating West Bromwich town centre will shortly be submitted for planning permission.

(b) Other Town Centre Activities

- D2.8 Of course, town centres are not just places for shopping, they are also places for people to work, to live and to take part in leisure and cultural activities.
- D2.9 '**City Living**' has been a concept more familiar to larger cities and towns in the UK. Since 1991, Birmingham has established itself as the major centre for 'City Living' in the West Midlands, and over 3,500 new dwellings have been constructed in the city centre with strong growth in sales values. The market for smaller units has seen the strongest growth, and this trend is expected to continue, reinforced by the strength of the city centre as an employment base, and its retail, leisure and cultural offer.
- D2.10 According to the Centres Study⁴, three of the key centres – Wolverhampton, Walsall and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill – are now seeing signs

⁴ Study of Black Country Centres, GVA Grimley, August 2005.

of expansion of homes allied to retail, offices and leisure. In Wolverhampton a number of projects have come forward within the City Centre, including the Market Square development, and Redrow has commenced a phased scheme in the Canalside Quarter. The indicators are that within the St John's Urban Village and the Canalside Quarter, Wolverhampton is likely to see a sustained interest in growth in mixed use residential and leisure development, capitalising on the cultural attractions of the centre and its improving communication links.

- D2.11 In Dudley and Walsall the city living market is less well developed. However both centres have begun to attract interest in residential and mixed use developments. In Walsall, there is increased interest in residential conversions. However, the market for large scale purpose built residential schemes in these centres is at a much earlier stage. In Dudley, proposals associated with initiatives at Dudley Zoo and Castle include almost 300 housing units, and there are also proposals for mixed leisure and residential development on the edge of the Walsall Town Centre.
- D2.12 It is evident that the national trend towards high density city living, and the creation of genuinely mixed use residential and leisure developments within and on the edge of city centres, offer significant potential for Wolverhampton, Walsall and Dudley. However, the process could be described largely as embryonic. There are currently insufficient quality homes, jobs and amenities to attract people back into our urban centres. Again, the lack of investment in the public realm and poor quality of the environment have been major constraining factors.
- D2.13 In the **office sector**, analysis of the regional and local office market by GVA Grimley (2005)⁵, illustrates a growing disparity between the dominance of Birmingham City Centre as the key regional office centre, and the limited role performed by the Black Country Centres. Over the next 5 – 10 years, a number of opportunities and development projects in Birmingham city centre could provide a further 464,500sq m i.e. an increase of circa 50% in the current stock.
- D2.14 In the Black Country there has been limited development in the traditional centres of Walsall, Dudley and Wolverhampton. There is no significant office development pipeline in these centres, and the existing accommodation is generally dated and falls short of current occupier requirements in terms of parking, technology, floor to ceiling heights and floor plates layout.
- D2.15 The main exception is at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill where the Waterfront at Merry Hill represents a successful integration of a retail centre with Brownfield "business park" provision. The Waterfront at Merry Hill has been developed since the late 1980s and is now an established office location with rentals significantly above comparables in the traditional

⁵ Study of Black Country Centres, GVA Grimley, August 2005.

Black Country Centres. Reflecting its growing stature as a significant office location, over 300,000 sq m of B1 space is proposed at Brierley Hill as part of the Vision to 2031, which would significantly strengthen the position of Brierley Hill as the most significant 'central' office location within the West Midlands conurbation after Birmingham City Centre.

- D2.16 The **culture, sport and leisure offer** in town centres insufficiently meets the needs of local people and families. The new Art Gallery in Walsall town centre shows what can be achieved. More projects like this are needed to offer people greater choice. In the evenings, there are few options in terms of eating out, going to the theatre or cinema. Many people feel that evening entertainment is limited to bars and clubs for young people. There is also insufficient provision to enable the promotion of the Black Country as a major cultural and sport tourism destination, whether this is in the regional domain or in international events and competitions.
- D2.17 The scale of retail, leisure and office development currently planned within the Black Country centres will not deliver the Vision for 2031. Without significant new development, the implication is that key centres will decline further in relative terms, and fail to meet needs and aspirations. In making additional provision, the opportunity exists through policy intervention to develop a more balanced polycentric network of centres.

THE SCALE OF THE CHALLENGE: CREATING A POLYCENTRIC NETWORK OF CENTRES

- D2.18 Under the Vision the four strategic city and town centres will be fuelling the growth of the Black Country; providing high quality office space for knowledge-based companies, and vastly improved retail, leisure and tourism offers. New homes supporting 'city living' and a higher quality public realm will bring more people into the key centres, adding to the level of economic activity.
- D2.19 The Vision is for the four centres to seamlessly link together and with their catchment areas, creating a 'polycentric network of centres'. This will only be achievable with a modern, integrated transport system enabling the free movement of goods, services and people. With an integrated network of centres, the assets and strengths in each centre will be accessible to all people in the Black Country.
- D2.20 The technical evidence has demonstrated the need to focus much investment effort on **four strategic centres - Wolverhampton, Walsall, West Bromwich and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill**. These centres present the greatest opportunity to attract growth and have the physical capacity to do so, and will have a major catalytic role to play in sub-regional renaissance.
- D2.21 Four centres – Wolverhampton, Walsall, West Bromwich and Dudley have long been dominant in the Black Country, providing the main focus for comparison shopping, business, leisure and culture, and administration. However studies have advised that the time has come to recognise a

major change in this network. The Merry Hill/ Waterfront complex at Brierley Hill has now reached the point where it is not only the single largest retailing location in the Black Country but also, *de facto*, the dominant provider of strategic retail, leisure, and offices in the west of the sub-region. Given both the market and physical constraints on the expansion of Dudley town centre and the positive benefits that further investment in the new centre can bring, BCC is satisfied that 'Brierley Hill/Merry Hill' can and should formally supersede Dudley within the Black Country (and regional) network of strategic town centres.

- D2.22 Retailing, and in particular comparison retailing, underpins the function of most major centres across the UK. It acts as the catalyst for investment in infrastructure, commercial/residential and cultural facilities (as illustrated by Brierley Hill/Merry Hill). Thus, attracting more comparison retail investment will also reinforce non-retail functions.

Figure D2.2: Strategic Town Centres in the Black Country (2003-2031)

Centre	Wolverhampton	Walsall	West Bromwich	BH/MH	Total
Comparison Retail (including commitments) (000 sq. m.)	83 (57)	68 (45)	53 (35)	80 (51)	284 (186)
Office Floorspace (000 sq. m.) NB(i)	325 (186)	325 (186)	325 (186)	325 (186)	1.3 m (744)
Dwellings (minimum) 2001-31	2,000	1,900	1,100	2,700	7,700

NB (i) includes 100,000 sq. m floorspace for A2 use, distributed equally between the 4 centres

(ii) Retail and office figures in brackets = growth to 2021.

- D2.23 The technical evidence in the Centres Studies highlighted the need for growth of the strategic centres which is of sufficient **scale** and **quality** to meet anticipated needs and to compete effectively with neighbouring centres, in particular Birmingham. The Centres Study indicated the need to create some 467,000 sq.m gross of additional non-food retail floorspace up to 2031⁶, of which about 378,000 sq.m. would be required across the four strategic centres. Overall this scale of retail growth would have supported about 7,000 more jobs.
- D2.24 The Centres Study, however, highlighted a particular area of uncertainty, namely the extent to which the amount spent in shops may be reduced as a result of ordering goods via the internet. Some experts believe that this could increase from the present 7-8% of retail sales to as much as 20%. Consortium felt it prudent to make some allowance for this trend. Therefore, the Consortium took account of new forecasts in the Regional Centres Study, which allows for an increase in Internet trading. On this basis the Consortium assessed that the total need for comparison retail

⁶ After allowance is made for some 77,000 sq.m of growth which we assess is attributable to parts of the Study Area which lie outside the Black Country boundary.

floor space in the Black Country up to 2031 would be reduced. The recent assessment by Experian that e-tailing could grow but “tail off” by 2014 is referred to in D2.39. Clearly the growth of e-tailing and how far it continues to impact on floorspace needs in the period both to 2021 and 2031 will be a central element of regular monitoring. The total target figures for the Black Country used in RSS Phase One Revision reflect Option 6B of the Regional Centres Study which, of 11 options assessed in that Study, represented the quantum of floorspace which best met the needs of the Vision, whilst at the same time being compatible with growth in other strategic centres in the region. It is important additionally that the level of retail growth reflects the needs of a substantially growing population as required under the approved RSS.

- D2.25 In addition, to deliver the Vision of creating a knowledge-based economy, there is a need for circa 1.45 million sqm of office floorspace, accommodating nearly 80,000 jobs by 2031. Growth to 2021 is 844,000 sq m and 45,000 jobs including 100,000 sq metres of committed schemes which are out of centre. Given the recent level of take up (only 37,000 sq metres in total over the past three years), this scale of new development is highly ambitious. The office market in the Black Country is currently strongest at the Waterfront (Brierley Hill/Merry Hill) and Wolverhampton; effort is needed to develop an acceleration of momentum in promoting investor confidence in Walsall and West Bromwich also.
- D2.26 To bring more people back into the urban centres, there is a need to build more quality homes in attractive locations such as alongside our canals. The Housing Capacity Study indicates that up to 7,700 additional dwellings could be accommodated in the four centres up to 2031, within which there are attractive canalside opportunities.
- D2.27 What is clear is that all four centres will need to expand beyond current boundaries in order to accommodate the necessary scale of growth in retail, office and leisure uses. There is evidence that physical capacity exists in all four centres for this to happen. Failure to do so will see the Black Country’s market share continue to decline. Early planning policy development in each borough will be essential to guide, and provide certainty for, the extent and location of each centres’ change.

MAKING IT HAPPEN: THE TEN POINT PLAN FOR CENTRES

Centres Action Point 1 - Designate Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a Strategic Centre
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- D2.28 The capacity projections in the Centres Study and Regional Centres Study indicate that without further development at Brierley Hill, there will be a significant shortfall against forecast needs. These needs will not be matched by opportunities in any other Black Country centres individually or collectively.

- D2.29 It is clear from the evidence that Brierley Hill/Merry Hill should be designated a strategic town centre in order to confirm that further expansion in retail, office and leisure use can take place in accordance with PPS 6. Although the original retail and office development at Merry Hill/the Waterfront was facilitated by the favourable circumstances of the Enterprise Zone, it is clear that there is a market for further investment, subject to the confidence that designation as a strategic centre would bring. Furthermore there are indications that retail growth in this centre has in the past acted as a catalyst, stimulating Brownfield recycling, job creation, growth in office and leisure and, now increasingly, residential development. This catalytic role needs to continue in future to pump-prime the wider regeneration of the local area, and Dudley, and make a key contribution to Black Country regeneration as a whole. The growth requirement for Brierley Hill/Merry Hill has to accommodate the needs of the rest of the sub-region since Dudley town centre is not capable of meeting growth needs of that part of the Black Country.
- D2.30 Of course, the expansion of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is not open ended. It is critical to ensure that its growth complements that of Wolverhampton, Walsall and West Bromwich. This will require sufficient public transport provision to support retail, offices, leisure and residential uses and ensure that Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is enabled to grow, in a controlled and sustainable manner. It is for this reason it is proposed that the recognition of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a strategic centre at the regional level should be accompanied by conditions that any retail expansion should not take place until:

- Adoption by the LPA of an Area Action Plan for Brierley Hill, prepared in parallel to the Black Country Joint Core Strategy, which will define the centre, and provide a clear framework for mixed use development, including residential and employment uses, environmental priorities, public transport and phasing of development.
- The implementation of improvements to public transport, including completion of extension of the Metro from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill, or a range of other public transport initiatives of equivalent effectiveness, to improve accessibility to the centre by non-car modes;
- Introduction of a car parking management regime at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill, including the use of parking charges, compatible with those in the Region's network of major centres;

and in order that balanced growth of our strategic centres is maintained:

- Growth in retail floorspace for comparison goods will be limited to 36,000 sq.m gross in the period 2004 to 2016.

- D2.31 If the expansion of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill does not take place, the potential contribution it could make towards economic growth will be severely hampered. Furthermore, regeneration of the Brierley Hill area will be compromised, since there will be insufficient growth to compensate for job losses in manufacturing and the changing job needs of a growing and changing local community. Likewise failure to provide growth and quality shopping plus creation of additional jobs will discourage retaining and attracting back higher income/skilled households to the Dudley area which is a key for meeting housing needs of these groups in the Black Country.
- D2.32 The early recognition of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a strategic centre is therefore critical. The Brierley Hill Area Development Framework, to guide the long term development of up to 80,000 sq.m of comparison retail, 325,000 sq.m of B1 (a) offices and 2,800 dwellings up to 2031, will be prepared with speed in parallel with preparation of the Joint Core Strategy for the Black Country.
- D2.33 There have been previous proposals for the recognition of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a "town centre", in particular:
- As advanced in support of the 1994/5 planning application to extend Merry Hill by 41,805 sq.m gross, refused by the Secretary of State in 1997, when the Inspector concluded that *"Merry Hill is not a town centre, at least not yet"* (our italics).
 - In the proposal to support the emergence of a new town centre at Merry Hill/Brierley Hill and the Waterfront in Draft Regional Planning Guidance (2001), when the Panel concluded that the lack of integration of the various uses at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill militated against its recognition as a town centre. (Although they took the view that further retail growth "could be justified" - on regeneration grounds - as an exception to normal Government policy on out-of-centre development).
 - In proposals in the Draft Dudley UDP (2002) to name Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a Town Centre and allocate major retail development to take place in the period to 2011; effectively pre-empted by the decision not to identify the centre in RPG at that stage.
- D2.34 That formal recognition is now justified as being essential if the Vision for the transformation of the Black Country is to be achieved, for the following reasons:
1. **An action programme is being implemented in a manner which overcomes the objection that Brierley Hill/Merry Hill does not comprise an integrated town centre.**

The close proximity of the retail, leisure, and office developments to each other and to the nearby Brierley Hill town centre and

increasingly residential uses is providing the opportunity for their integration as a single functioning strategic centre. Through the Brierley Hill Area Development Framework and the Brierley Hill Master Plan considerable steps have been taken to bring this about. However the full achievement of this integration and the further diversification of uses are dependent upon an expansion of the core retail and office-based activities. This expansion can only be brought about in a controlled and integrated manner in the context that recognition as a strategic centre will bring. Such recognition will provide the necessary confidence for investment to take place and will trigger the substantial private sector financial contribution to Midland Metro.

The agencies for planning and delivery of an integrated town centre were originally faced with the adverse geography and topography of the area which militated against earlier integration of uses and connectivity between them. The strategy for connectivity includes breaching those physical barriers and distributing future land uses in a manner which emphasises mixed use, being a characteristic of more traditional and long-standing town centres.

2. **The Black Country Centres and Regional Centres Studies both support designation as a Strategic Centre.**

Both of these studies, specifically undertaken to inform the current RSS Phase One and Two partial revisions, have concluded that further retail development at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is required in order to meet current and future Black Country needs. They have also shown that this expansion can take place within a balanced development of the network of strategic centres, both for the Black Country and the Region as a whole, and have provided a basis for defining the parameters of this balance.

In respect of this balance, the Centres Study⁷ has highlighted a key difference from the situation when these issues were last examined in depth – i.e. the 1996 Inquiry. New investment in Birmingham City Centre and other centres (which were then seen as fragile) has now been completed or committed, with these centres in most cases “expanding strongly”⁸. The choice now for the Black Country is “.. whether to capture new investment and retain current market shares, or witness continued decline of the Black Country sub-region as Birmingham City Centre continues to grow and dominate the sub-region.”⁹.

⁷ Study of Black Country Centres, GVA Grimley, August 2005

⁸ Study of Black Country Centres, GVA Grimley, August 2005

⁹ Study of Black Country Centres, GVA Grimley, August 2005

It is important to note that the Study reached these conclusions within a context where a 43,500 sq.m gross comparison retail expansion at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill was treated as a "commitment", for implementation before 2011. The Study took the view only that any "further major expansion of retail/leisure facilities beyond this level of growth" (our italics) should not be supported until the further growth of the other strategic centres has been secured"¹⁰.

The Regional Centres Study broadly reflects the conclusions of the Black Country Centres Study. It varies only in respect of the phasing of development at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill, to the extent that "further development in the retail and commercial leisure sectors (should be) postponed until after 2011 so as to allow existing centres to further progress their investment plans". Nevertheless the Study is satisfied that "it is essential that the investors in Brierley Hill/Merry Hill are given the confidence that the centre will be confirmed as a strategic centre in this partial review of RSS"¹¹.

In practice this variation between the two studies is not material. The Consortium is satisfied that retail expansion (subject to the proposed criteria in respect of car parking and public transport infrastructure), is an essential catalyst for the overall changes we are seeking to bring about. However, the Consortium is also satisfied that implementing the necessary changes through the regional and local planning processes, and securing planning consent, would mean that retail expansion could not, in any event, come on-stream before 2011 at the earliest.

The Regional Centres Study recommending town centre status was prepared on the assumption that Dudley town centre would continue to maintain its strategic role. However, regardless of this assumption, the RSS Revision has identified that Dudley town centre will not continue its strategic role in the future and that essentially, Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is replacing it in the town centre network of strategic town centres in the Region.

This principle of replacement, possibly unique in the United Kingdom, further reinforces the case for recognition, and early recognition of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a strategic centre in its own right.

¹⁰ Study of Black Country Centres, GVA Grimley, August 2005

¹¹ West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy – Regional Centres Study, Roger Tym & Partners, March 2006.

3. **No other centre would have the capacity to meet the needs generated in the south western part of the Black Country**

The retailing studies (adapted to e-tailing growth) identify a potential demand for as much as 80,000 sq.m gross of comparison retail floorspace at Brierley Hill/ Merry Hill over the next 25 years, at least 75% of which is attributed to spending by Black Country residents. Historically the needs of this area have been met in Dudley town centre, and to some extent in smaller centres, most notably Stourbridge and Halesowen.

The Dudley physical capacity study¹² identifies limited physical capacity in Dudley, Stourbridge and Halesowen up to 2031. Most of the potential land for retail growth land is unsuitable for modern comparison retailer requirements, without redevelopment of a scale that would compromise the distinctive character of the centres concerned. Only the Flood Street site in Dudley town centre, where there is a commitment including 15,000 sq.m of non food retailing could contribute effectively and this appears to be committed to a 'retail park' form of development rather than 'high street' comparison retailing.

Furthermore, other evidence indicates that, with the lowest rents and highest yields amongst Black Country strategic centres, Dudley Town Centre would not provide a market for comparison retail development, and, if this is true of Dudley, it would certainly be true of Stourbridge and Halesowen¹³.

Therefore, with major out-of-centre retail development no longer being acceptable under national and regional policy, there is no alternative but to meet the needs of this part of the Black Country at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill. The Masterplan for Dudley Town Centre which confirmed a change in its strategic role is now adopted SPG.

4. **Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is well located geographically to meet the retail and other town centre needs arising in this part of the Black Country.**

Brierley Hill is central to the built-up area of the south western part of the Black Country. It is 4 km further from West Bromwich, from Wolverhampton and from Walsall than is Dudley town centre and is therefore well placed to fulfil a role within a balanced 'four-centres'

¹² [Complementary Centres Strategy, Dudley MBC, May 2006.](#)

¹³ [Investment Analysis and Future Investment Potential of the Black Country Retail Centres, Chase & Partners, March 2006.](#)

strategy, with each centre meeting the majority of needs within its own 'segment'.

5. **Brierley Hill/Merry Hill is located within a relatively disadvantaged area in need of regeneration**

The immediate catchment area of Brierley Hill includes most of the more deprived wards of Dudley borough. At the same time its wider catchment, both within and beyond the Black Country embraces a wide social mix, enabling the centre to sustain a broad range of services from which all can benefit.

6. **Merry Hill/the Waterfront already exists as a strategic retail, leisure and office location**

Whilst the origin of the development was undoubtedly contingent upon the closure of Round Oak Steelworks and the declaration of the Enterprise Zones(s) it is now clearly a key strategic location with its own growth dynamic. It is the second largest retailing centre in the West Midlands and one of the biggest concentrations of public and private sector office activity outside central Birmingham; a situation that quite clearly provides a foundation for sustained and continuing growth.

7. **Brierley Hill/Merry Hill will materially help to prevent further leakage of retail spending from the Black Country.**

White, Young, Green have assessed the implications upon leakage under scenarios which included and excluded growth at this centre. (16a). They concluded that:-

- The other three Black Country strategic centres could not realistically accommodate the scale of the retail growth intended for Brierley Hill/Merry Hill.
- The absence of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill growth would materially increase leakage of retail spending from the Black Country.

D2.35 There may be concern by some that the formal recognition of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a 'town centre' could set a precedent for national policy in respect of other out-of-town centres. For this reason the Consortium commissioned an extensive review of the 'top 10' out-of-centre Regional Shopping Centres nationally and their relationship to planning policies.¹⁴

D2.36 It concluded that the only reasonable parallel, i.e. a centre embedded within a major urban area and with associated regeneration potential, is Brent Cross in north-west London. Here 1996 proposals for retail

¹⁴ Assessment of Major Out-of-Centre Retail Outlets in the UK, White, Young, Green, May 2006.

expansion were eventually refused (December 2003) on grounds similar to those at Merry Hill – i.e. Brent Cross did not currently function as a town centre (and sequentially preferable sites were available). However the final London Plan (2004) now recognises the wider Cricklewood/Brent Cross area as an 'Opportunity Area' to include "the redevelopment of Brent Cross as a town centre". These proposals are being carried forward through the medium of the Barnet Unitary Development Plan (for adoption in mid 2006) and in the Brent Cross and West Hendon Development Framework which will be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance. Meanwhile the owners of Brent Cross and Cricklewood Regeneration Ltd are working together to prepare a comprehensive planning application for the regeneration of the area, embracing, in addition to the expansion of the shopping centre, a wide mix of uses; enhancement of the public realm and of public transport access; and improved integration with surrounding areas; an approach wholly reflected in the ongoing initiatives at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill.

D2.37 There are close parallels with the framework that is being put in place at Brierley Hill. The White Young Green Report¹⁶ draws clear distinctions between Brierley Hill/Merry Hill and most out of centre shopping malls included in their Study. The circumstances of Brent Cross and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill are similar in respect of the opportunities existing and being created for urban integration and regeneration as well as the roles performed by the town centre uses involved. This report identifies key initiatives and arguments which apply to both Brent Cross and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill, namely:-

- Both lie adjacent to/surrounded by residential areas where travel to shops by foot is possible;
- Key infrastructure improvements are capable of funding derived from justified retail growth;
- Both centres have strong, central and catalytic roles in local and wider regeneration;
- Both lie within established metropolitan urban areas;
- Both have retail as an integral component of local mixed use development;
- Growth is contingent upon provision of improved public transport and accessibility;
- Early retail growth helps to meet need, secures sustainability improvements and funds infrastructure;
- Criteria to be met to achieve town centre status include need; a defined scale of growth that relates to other relevant centres need; public transport improvements and pedestrian penetration;

The key differences between Brent Cross and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill are:-

- Brent Cross maintains free car parking. (Brierley Hill/Merry Hill will shortly introduce parking charges and a Vehicle Management System that facilitates parking efficiency).
- Brent Cross' town centre status is being endorsed via strategic and local development plan frameworks. (Brierley Hill/Merry Hill town centre status is sought initially through RSS which in itself forms part of the development plan, but is supplemented by a locally-accepted action framework and a forthcoming Area Action Plan that will reflect the policy context of the RSS Phase One Revision.

Centres Action Point 2 - Define the Scale of Future Growth for each of the Strategic Centres

D2.38 It will be vital that the potential long term scale of growth in the strategic centres be kept under regular review. However it is essential that key guidelines in respect of retail and office growth should be introduced into the Regional Spatial Strategy and in particular it identifies what scale of development would be acceptable at Brierley Hill/ Merry Hill in the short term, consistent with the four-centres strategy.

Retail

D2.39 The Black Country Centres Study includes projections of the need for comparison retail floorspace up to 2031, both for the strategic centres and for the Black Country catchment area as a whole. In interpreting its results a cautious approach was adopted in order not to overestimate potential demand generally, and at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill in particular:

- In its detailed calculations the Black Country Centres Study assumed that internet spending will remain constant as a proportion of all retail sales. However, it has now been decided to assume that this form of trading will in fact increase, to claim a 20% of comparison spending by 2021 (see **Para. D2.24** above).
- This scale of growth in e-tailing is regarded as optimistic (i.e. at the higher end of its potential growth). Insofar as this level was used in the Regional Centres Study, as a basic assumption, the Consortium has adopted it for calculations of future floorspace need. However, even more recent work by Experian has concluded that e-tailing growth may level off at 12% by 2014. The consequences of this assumption as an alternative are contained in the White, Young, Green Report.¹⁶

- This reflects both the material impact that different assumptions on e-tailing may have on retail floor space growth, and the need for continuous monitoring of e-tailing to ensure that floor space assumptions can be adapted in response.
- The Study, with its Vision-led (but market sensitive) approach, also predicts a particular concentration of demand in the largest Black Country centres including Brierley Hill/Merry Hill. It indicates that 34% of potential demand (2004-31) in the four centres combined will accrue to Brierley Hill/Merry Hill under a high growth scenario, with an even higher proportion (43%) if current trends continue. This was unlikely to be consistent with the balanced pattern of growth being sought. Given the extent to which the core catchments of the various Black Country centres overlap it was considered that some re-allocation of growth should be feasible, with Brierley Hill/Merry Hill's share reduced to 28%, and with the smallest centres, Walsall and West Bromwich significantly strengthened. (**Table D2.2**). Thus while Wolverhampton and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill will remain the largest retail centres in the Black Country, the amount of new growth allocated to Walsall and West Bromwich is greater than their present size would justify and the gap between the four centres is intended to narrow materially.

Table D2.3: Shares of Retail Floorspace Growth (%), Strategic Centres, (2004-31)

Centre	BC Centres Study		Policy Adjusted %
	Trend %	Vision %	
Brierley Hill/Merry Hill	43	34	28
Wolverhampton	30	26	29
Walsall	19	21	24
West Bromwich	8	19	19
Total	100	100	100

Source: Black Country Consortium/Various

D2.40 In order to quantify the actual amounts of retail growth to be accommodated in each centre, account was taken of projections in the parallel Regional Centres Study. This assumes a greater proportion of retail spending via the internet than did the GVA Study. However, with this divergence allowed for, the regional study predicts a somewhat bigger growth in floor space demand across the Black Country centres during the period to 2021 than does the GVA Study (under comparable scenarios corresponding to the Vision). Given that the regional study was undertaken more recently and incorporated some more up-to-date assumptions, the Consortium decided to adopt its overall growth figure as a 'control' on allocations to the four centres. The effect, as far as Brierley

Hill/Merry Hill is concerned, is to temper somewhat, (but by no means cancel out) the cautious effects of e-tailing and adjusted market share assumptions. Thus the amount of growth being anticipated at Brierley Hill/ Merry Hill remains substantially less than initially forecast in the GVA Centres Study.

- D2.41 The overall outcome in terms of the amount of growth allocated to each centre is summarised in **Table D2.4**.
- D2.42 Any formal redefinition of the status of Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a town centre will at an early stage reactivate proposals for retail expansion. The Consortium have therefore proposed shorter term guidelines for an acceptable level of retail expansion to be incorporated into the Regional Spatial Strategy up to 2016. These guidelines need to be:-
1. Consistent with the level of growth (up to 51,000 sq.m gross of comparison shopping) allocated to Brierley Hill/ Merry Hill for the whole period to 2021.
 2. Of a scale that would not impede the early implementation of planned comparison shopping developments in Wolverhampton, Walsall and West Bromwich, where progress towards growth is well under way.
- D2.43 The Consortium were satisfied that a limit of 36,000 sq.m gross by 2016 - broadly equivalent to a pro rata stage in achieving 51,000 sq.m gross by 2021 - would meet these criteria, providing that it was accompanied by a requirement that further growth (beyond the specified 2016 level) would be subject to review within the development planning framework, and in the light of the strategy as a whole.

Table D2.4: Strategic Centres Summary of Spatial Implications (net additions 2004-21 + 2021-2031)

	Wolverhampton	Brierley Hill / Merry Hill	Walsall	West Brom	Total Centres	Rest of Black Country
Comparison retail ('000 sq.m gross)						
2004-21						
2021-31	54.0	51.0	45.0	35.0	185.0	50.0
	29.0	29.0	23.0	18.0	99.0	44.0
Total 2004-31	83.0	80.0	68.0	53.0	284.0	94.0
Offices (1) ('000 sq.m)						
2004-21						
2021-31	187.0	187.0	187.0	187.0	748.0	125.0
	138.0	138.0	138.0	138.0	552.0	20.0
Total 2004-31	325.0	325.0	325.0	325.0	1,300.0	145.0

Source: Black Country Consortium/Various

(1) Includes allowance of 100,000 sq m of A2 floorspace to be divided evenly between the 4 centres.

Offices

D2.44 Assessment of potential office demand, is derived from the GHK Economic Strategy and subsequently endorsed by the Employment Land Availability Work.¹⁵ This indicates a potential requirement, under the Vision scenario, for some 1.45m sq.m of new office accommodation over the Black Country as a whole by 2031. The Consortium have taken a relatively simplistic approach to allocating this growth, taking the view that in support of the strategy and for reasons of sustainability it is desirable that the great majority of the office development should be concentrated in the strategic centres. There is approximately 100,000 sq.m already committed, almost all out-of-centre; nearly half of which is on the northern periphery of Wolverhampton. The Consortium assumed that all of these commitments will be implemented by 2021 and that remaining potential (other than a relatively small allocation of 'Class A2 offices' - offices to which the public have regular access like banks and building societies) will all be located in the strategic centres. Any B1 (a) office development at I54 lies outside the Black Country although the sites development is to be of considerable economic significance to the sub-region.

¹⁵ Black Country Employment Land Capacity Study, GVA Grimley, June 2005.

- D2.45 The Regional Centres study includes office growth (up to 2021) under various scenarios. These identify between 42% and 44% of the total growth region-wide to the 26 strategic centres. That Study however, in respect of office growth, was founded upon both trends and market assessments. The extent of B1(a) office development in the Region that is being developed out of centre currently represents 76% of the total floorspace, largely on greenfield business parks.
- D2.46 Whilst this emphasis reflects current market circumstances, the Black Country Strategy seeks to reflect Government Policy, as embodied in PPS6, to promote office development in centres as part of mixed use and multi-functional centres' renaissance.
- D2.47 Thus the Consortium, as reflected in the RSS Phase One Revision, seek to promote over 85% of future B1(a) offices floor space in the four strategic centres. The ultimate success of this ambitious approach will rely upon market confidence in these locations and complementary policies across the Region.
- D2.48 The allocation between centres on an equal shares basis, adapts the Regional Centres Study, whose assumptions for offices in the four Black Country centres (under a Black Country growth scenario) range from 33% in Wolverhampton to 15% in West Bromwich. However, the Consortium felt that both were reasonable aspirations against which to test capacity, reflecting the more detailed and locally-sensitive work carried out for the Black Country Study.

Centres Action Point 3 – Develop a USP for each Centre

- D2.49 To shape the development of the strategic centres, the Consortium propose to develop key specialisms and new complementary roles. In doing so, the whole of the Black Country will offer more than the sum of its parts. Each of the four strategic centres will have a 'unique selling point' (USP):

Centres USPs:

- Wolverhampton as 'the City in the Black Country', its traditional capital with its University and administrative functions; a learning hub complemented by major cultural, sport and leisure facilities.
- Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a major shopping centre and commercial leisure destination. Young, growing and restructuring itself with exciting developments.
- Walsall with its industrial heritage, blend of historic architecture and new developments, vibrant evening economy and cultural offer: traditional and specialist.
- West Bromwich – reborn as a new centre with sub-regionally significant retail and commercial leisure, which also serves as a major office and employment location.

Centres Action Point 4 – Implement a Comprehensive Strategy for Each of the Four Strategic Centres

Wolverhampton City Centre

- D2.50 To acknowledge **Wolverhampton** as the City in the Black Country with its expansion complementing Birmingham (Eastside) and Coventry (Swanswell) as a key focus of regeneration in the City Region.
- D2.51 Wolverhampton is distinct from the other Black Country centres in a number of regards: the headquarters of a daily newspaper, professional theatre, served by main line rail and with its own University – on an in-centre site. The strategy will build upon these characteristics and the potential for Wolverhampton to parallel Coventry to the east as 'second cities' within the Birmingham City Region. Birmingham, with its 'Eastside' project, is embarking on a further major phase of city centre expansion and Coventry likewise in the Swanswell area.
- D2.52 The centre strategy should reflect Wolverhampton's city status and its role as the traditional capital of the Black Country. The masterplan should incorporate up to 80,000 sq.m of retail, 325,000 sq.m of offices and new dwellings. A major image enhancement package is also required, prioritising improvements to the environment and public realm.
- D2.53 Wolverhampton will help drive the transformation of the Black Country towards a knowledge-based economy, leading on innovation and learning. Both will require the University to be a much more significant driver of change; in particular, by enhancing its research capabilities and attracting more students from outside the Black Country.

D2.54 Unlocking the potential of Wolverhampton City Centre, also needs the centre to break out beyond the ring road which currently acts like a collar around the centre, constraining growth. A major expansion of the retail core within the ring road is imminent but there are major opportunities for other central area uses including offices and leisure in areas beyond, in particular the canalside quarter on the eastern side of the centre. Here, in a belt extending from the former Royal Hospital in the south via the ex Low Level Station to the former Springfield Brewery there are major opportunities in close proximity to the enhanced rail station and associated public transport interchange.

Brierley Hill/Merry Hill Centre

D2.55 Implementing the Brierley Hill Masterplan through an Area Development Framework to consolidate a town centre for the southern Black Country. With over 150,000 sq.m of retailing, 70,000 sq.m of offices, a multiplex, eating and drinking venues, a major hotel and nearly 12,000 jobs the Merry Hill/Waterfront complex is already *de facto* a major strategic centre. The Area Development Framework, adopted as supplementary planning guidance within the Dudley UDP and the Brierley Hill Partnership's subsequent masterplan seek to ensure that further evolution is seamlessly integrated with the nearby Brierley Hill High Street and with surrounding (existing and new) uses to form a genuine 'town centre'. This will be further reflected in the forthcoming Area Action Plan.

D2.56 Considerable strides have been made – the enhancement of the canal corridor, pedestrian links to the Waterfront, the introduction of housing and the consolidation/replacement of surface parking in multi-storey form. Further development must ensure a major contribution to a) integration and b) wider diversification of uses. Through the Partnership and other means, the centre will genuinely meet the needs of local communities, both in terms of the facilities provided and of access.

D2.57 Midland Metro, serving both the Waterfront and Merry Hill, and terminating at Brierley Hill High Street will make a major contribution to this integration. It is for this reason as well as enhancing modal choice that it is essential that Metro should be in place before any significant retail expansion comes on stream. Other developments in public transport access (e.g. a new bus station) need to be integrated for maximum interchange with Metro.

D2.58 New development/redevelopment must be in a form which promotes mixed uses – in particular residential (there is scope for 2,700 dwellings to 2031) and leisure/culture related - and to increasing the permeability of the centre.

Walsall Town Centre

D2.59 Walsall town centre has the potential to consolidate itself as a sub-regional centre serving a relatively self contained catchment area in the north

eastern sector of the Black Country, in the form of a traditional market town.

- D2.60 The Walsall Urban Regeneration Company has a masterplan based on the attraction of £600m public/private sector investment to the central area over the next 10/15 years, including a Business and Learning Quarter and the Waterfront development.
- D2.61 The retail property market is reasonably buoyant and there is market interest in major redevelopment and remodelling in the area of Old Square, Digbeth and High Street, potentially anchored by a new large foodstore and to include a new and larger department store.
- D2.62 An updated masterplan will need to guide the anticipated expansion by around 68,000 sq.m of comparison retail and the incorporation of up to 325,000 sq.m of office space over the next 25 years. There is also a growing market for central area housing.

West Bromwich Town Centre

- D2.63 Implementing the West Bromwich Masterplan. Of the four strategic centres West Bromwich faces the biggest challenge in establishing a stronger role as a strategic centre, given that it is only 5 miles from Birmingham city centre and has a predominantly low income catchment area. However, its high accessibility gives it significant potential. A new approach is required. A regeneration company ('RegenCo') has been established and will take forward the schemes in its masterplan including the new Town Square, retail expansion and office developments. A retail development anchored by Tesco is imminent and other key proposals for the centre have included 'The pUBLIC' – a ground breaking interactive arts centre in a new iconic building, and the new Sandwell Central College.
- D2.64 The masterplan will need to be extended to accommodate the 53,000 sq.m of retail, 325,000 sq.m of offices and new dwellings, which could be accommodated at the centre over the next 25 years.

<p>Centres Action Point 5 – Support Residential and Tourism Development in Dudley Town Centre</p>
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- D2.65 In contrast to Brierley Hill/Merry Hill, Dudley Town Centre's role has diminished and its capacity for expansion without damaging the local heritage and environment is limited. A clear strategy for the centre is needed to reflect its changing role following its formal replacement by Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as the strategic centre in the south west of the Black Country. This will include a major tourism package for repositioning Dudley's role within the Black Country economy. It must build on existing strengths including tourism assets such as Wrens Nest (Britain's first urban National Nature Reserve), Dudley Zoo and the Black Country Museum.
- D2.66 Existing commitments in Dudley Town Centre will meet local shopping needs at least through the RSS period. There is a potential retail element

within the proposed remodelling of the Zoo area but this will be in a form that contributes to Dudley's leisure/tourism role.

- D2.67 The proposed routing of the Brierley Hill Metro line on-street through Dudley town centre is a key element both in enhancing accessibility and in contributing to environmental improvement. It will contribute fully in both ways.
- D2.68 The promotion of further housing use in the centre is a key element of the strategy. The masterplan for Dudley Town Centre adopted as SPG is being implemented.

Centres Action Point 6 – Create an Integrated Transport System

- D2.69 Proposals for a new public transport network – 'Black Country Express' – will integrate metro, rail and bus services, enabling the Black Country to become a true polycentric network of centres. Transport plans are outlined in more detail in **Section D7** of this report. Improved public transport to and between the four key centres is a key focus within the transport strategy.
- D2.70 Birmingham and the Black Country is the largest European city-region not to have a comprehensive light rapid transit system. The existing Metro 'Line 1' between Birmingham and Wolverhampton has played a key role in improving communications, and plans to extend the network are a high priority. The development of the branch southwards from Wednesbury through Dudley to Brierley Hill is vital to consolidating Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a strategic centre as well as consolidating the changed role of Dudley town centre. The further extension northwards from Wednesbury to Walsall and then via Willenhall and Wednesfield to Wolverhampton (the 5-Ws route) will mean that all the Black Country's key centres are linked by this mode – both with each other and with Birmingham.

Centres Action Point 7 – Provide New Cultural, Sport and Leisure Facilities for the Black Country's 1m plus Residents and the Wider City Region

- D2.71 The Black Country contains major cultural facilities significant to the whole Birmingham City Region – the Walsall Art Gallery, Dudley Castle & Zoo, the Black Country Museum, University of Wolverhampton's English Institute of Sport Judo Centre, and the emerging "the pUBLIC" cultural and learning centre in West Bromwich. However the overall range of leisure and cultural facilities available to our residents is limited. There is no provision of major multi-dimensional facilities spanning a range of culture, sport and tourism activities in shared locations which if provided would expand the choices required to meet future needs of diverse peoples. Even taking account of proximity to Birmingham the opportunities are less than the area could and should sustain, and certainly inadequate to support the major economic and social transformation that we intend to bring about.

- D2.72 The area of leisure/sport/culture is one where forecasting is notoriously difficult. The GVA Centres Study highlighted a number of key trends:
- Technological innovation - multi channel TV, the internet - leading to more home-based leisure (and learning);
 - At the same time more eating out – fuelled by more people in employment, higher incomes and long working hours;
 - Growth of some shared activities particularly those with an 'individual' clientele - visits to the cinema, to health and fitness centres, for example.
- D2.73 The Centres Study quantifies two sectors of 'commercial leisure' – demand for cinemas and for casinos. In the cinema sector it is estimated that under a growth scenario, the population of the Black Country boroughs alone will generate capacity for a further 50 cinema screens by 2021 and another 20 by 2031, on top of the current total of 56. Merry Hill contains a multiplex but elsewhere provision is largely out of centre, with Wolverhampton, Walsall and West Bromwich all having lost their remaining in-centre cinemas in recent years. The introduction of a major cinema complex into each of these three centres should be seen as a key ingredient of their future roles. It is understood that a multiplex is likely to be incorporated within Wolverhampton's core expansion. The Regional Centres Study has named Walsall and West Bromwich amongst the three centres region-wide where a major new cinema is most urgent and master planning exercises for these centres should identify suitable sites, well integrated with other uses and with public transport. In addition, it would be consistent with the role envisaged for Wolverhampton, that this centre should be capable of sustaining also at least one specialist 'arthouse' cinema.
- D2.74 New cultural and leisure facilities generally should be concentrated in the strategic centres including Wolverhampton, in keeping with its role as 'City within the Black Country' and a learning hub, and Brierley Hill/Merry Hill to reflect its increasing role and popularity as a leisure destination. Brierley Hill/Merry Hill should be capable of providing a major quality and sustainable multi-dimensional facility to meet the variety of family and individual demands, building upon the proposed National Youth Theatre. Quality sports facility provision within the strategic centres should be of an indoor specialist nature. They should at least serve the needs and aspirations of the 1m plus Black Country residents and workers, but also they should aim to be of city region and regional status, attracting national/international competitions and training facilities and nurturing the development of Black Country sports performers.
- D2.75 The strategic centres will also be promoted as key locations in the further development of the tourist appeal of the Black Country, including Wolverhampton and Walsall with their concentrations of historic buildings and cultural facilities. However, Dudley town centre is also a key focus, given its central location within the Black Country and its already

established attractions – the Black Country Museum, the Castle/Zoo complex and Wren's Nest in particular. Tourism plays a key role in establishing a new role for Dudley town centre.

- D2.76 The step change in the Black Country economy will also generate much more business tourism. The sub-region is well placed to tap into the business tourism market of Birmingham, including international business tourism, which continues to grow. This means quality hotels in accessible locations where the visitor can make use of local services and visit local attractions. Predominantly this must mean location in the strategic centres.

Centres Action Point 8 – Create new centre-based residential environments to contribute to population growth and diversity

- D2.77 Based on the current market and demographic profile, there will be sustained growth in city living in Wolverhampton and over time, in Walsall, Dudley and the wider Brierley Hill area, and West Bromwich. The scope to attract city living as part of West Bromwich town centre is likely to be more dependent on the changing nature of its catchment, and on improving its retail and leisure functions to improve market perceptions as a place to live.

Centres Action Point 9 – Support to smaller local centres

- D2.78 The smaller centres – e.g. Bilston and Bloxwich, Wednesbury and Cape Hill – have experienced a long process of change: polarisation of comparison shopping towards the strategic centres in the 1960s and '70s; subsequent competition from out-of-centre stores; and the general decline of Black Country market share. Those in the south of the area, like Halesowen and Stourbridge, Cradley Heath and Blackheath, have had the added pressure of adjusting to the nearby presence of Merry Hill. However, most have now achieved a measure of stability, concentrating on the convenience shopping and other service needs of local communities. Traffic and other environmental conditions have been improved and in several cases large foodstores have located within the centres, reinforcing their retail role.
- D2.79 Strategy of concentrating key investment in the four strategic centres will not lead to neglect of these smaller places. The 'residual capacity' for comparison shopping being available to these centres (*see Table D2.3*) may appear relatively modest. In reality however, except possibly for a few centres close to the motorway network, 'the market' would be very unlikely to bring comparison shopping or office development on any significant scale. Nevertheless, all the smaller centres will experience growth in terms of their core functions, in particular making day-to-day provision for local needs. Proposals will therefore support the organic growth of smaller centres rather than rapid expansion.

Centres Action Point 10 – Recognise the City Region Relationships

- D2.80 Underpinning many aspects of the approach to centres - and indeed of the strategy generally - is an explicit recognition of the Black Country's relationship with Birmingham. The Black Country is quite clearly part of a 'Birmingham City-Region', a dynamic entity of nearly three million people embracing not just the Birmingham/Solihull/Black Country 'conurbation' but including Telford in the west and Coventry in the east.
- D2.81 Birmingham is quite clearly a 'Core-City', in a context where such places are more and more recognised as key drivers of growth nationally and internationally. To the extent that there has been a transformation in the West Midlands over the past two decades it is very much associated with the city's role generally and that of its city-centre in particular. This is quite clearly articulated through the regional spatial strategy, which promotes Birmingham as "a major regional capital of European and international standing" and thereby gives Birmingham city centre a unique role within the region's network of strategic centres.
- D2.82 At the same time the Black Country has a distinctiveness based on its industrial base and heritage, and a proud history of separate administration. In recent years this distinctiveness has generated an increasing feeling of coherence across the area; a clear sense that 'the Black Country' constitutes an entity in its own right, with its own commonality of interest. This is reflected in the creation of the Black Country Consortium and the development of the Black Country 30 year Vision and Black Country Study – a distinctive strategy for the urban renaissance of the Black Country with an emphasis on the growth and inter-connectivity of its centres and a requirement for transformational environmental renewal involving significant restructuring of its traditional industrial land base.
- D2.83 As a contiguous urban area of 1.1 million people focused around its own network of long established town centres, the Black Country's relationships with Birmingham are two way in nature. Indeed the prospectus of the City-Region Forum to which the Black Country subscribes emphasises the benefits of interdependence and of exploiting the polycentric nature of the Birmingham city region.¹⁶
- D2.84 This is quite clearly the context within which the strategy for centres has been developed. Birmingham by virtue of the scale and nature of its market can sustain a level of speciality retailing, of business and professional services and of leisure and cultural facilities which cannot be replicated at individual Black Country centre level. Indeed all benefit from

¹⁶ [Creating a Distinctive European City Region, A First Prospectus for the Birmingham City Region, Birmingham City Council and other Member Authorities, 2003.](#)

having these facilities concentrated in a regionally accessible location. However there are major benefits to be derived from maintaining a healthy network of centres in the Black Country to meet the majority of needs locally. These include promoting sustainability and minimising the need to travel; consumer choice; and the pivotal role that growing Black Country centres can play as multi-purpose catalysts for regeneration and transformation. Indeed it is part of the philosophy of the polycentric city region that the sum of a number of individual poles of activity, of learning and of entrepreneurship, will be likely to be greater than if they were all concentrated in one location.

D2.85 Thus while the Consortium recognises that some leakage of retail trade, reflecting the highest level of specialisation will continue, increased leakage can and should be minimised in order to maintain a network of complimentary yet competitive centres, a network within which the emerging 'new centre' at Brierley Hill/Merry Hill has a key role to play. Likewise in the offices sector, although the most specialised financial, business and professional services may remain concentrated in Birmingham, the Solihull and Coventry areas demonstrate that other poles of activity can be sustained within the City Region. Whilst other factors – proximity to Birmingham Airport and to the 'South East' – no doubt play a part, there is no reason why a similar situation cannot be replicated to a degree to the north and west of Birmingham in the Black Country. Indeed it is essential that this be so if the transformation of the Black Country is to come about.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

D2.86 The overarching aim to **accelerate the growth of the knowledge-based economy** has already highlighted the key priority of focussing investment on the growth and transformation of the four strategic centres. The Consortium has identified certain priority action in order to accelerate the growth of retail, leisure and office-based activity in each centre. Likewise as one of the key objectives in pursuit of **building a high quality housing market** the aim is to promote urban living by securing more residential growth in all four strategic centres - and in Dudley.

D2.87 Analysis of the centres themselves, and the ten point plan, endorses all of these and highlights the following for early action:

- Designate Brierley Hill/Merry Hill as a strategic centre through the RSS Phase One Revision process.
- Prepare and implement master plans in, Wolverhampton, Brierley Hill/Merry Hill, Walsall and West Bromwich to provide the detailed implementation framework for the scale of mixed uses and their connectivity.
- Implement the masterplan for Dudley to guide its adaptation to a new role with a strong tourism offer.

The process of the Borough's individual or combined Local Development Plans via Joint Core Strategy will be central to the Implementation Plan.