2 Informing the framework

The policy context

‘A clear vision and a co-ordinated strategy guided by and informing the statutory planning processes’.

RPG11 and the Dudley unitary development plan

A core aim of the regional spatial strategy (RPG11, Regional Planning Guidance for the West Midlands, Government Office for the West Midlands, June 2004) is to cultivate a dynamic network of places across the region, all important in their own right and with distinct characteristics reinforcing economic, cultural and social functions (RPG11, paragraph 3.11).

Regional policy reinforces the concept of complementary rather than competing roles for town centres, including the 25 strategic town centres identified within RPG11, of which Dudley is one. Dudley is also identified as one of a number of centres which are ‘vulnerable’, warranting targeted improvements in order to rejuvenate and fulfil regeneration potential. Through preparation of the UDP and this ADF, Dudley council are responding to this challenge.

In common with the national trend, Dudley, like many small and medium sized towns, has been the victim of increasing polarisation within retailing; prime locations and the largest centres have flourished taking more and more market share with an increasingly adverse impact on smaller centres and secondary locations. For Dudley this decline was intensified by the emergence and rapid expansion of Merry Hill, just a couple of miles away, during the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The status of town centres has for several decades been determined primarily by retail performance. The marked decline of retailing in Dudley has for a long time coloured the perception of the town as failing and vulnerable. There is no doubt that the legacy of retail demise presents a particular challenge for the future of the centre; an issue which is directly addressed by this ADF. It has also over-shadowed the inherent strengths which distinguish Dudley from other centres. These provide a basis for rejuvenation and for a more broad based measure of vitality, which is not dependent upon trying to counter an inexorable structural change in the retail sector.

In the adopted UDP (2005) Dudley council has carefully considered the role of each of the centres within the borough and sought to define the future of its town centres by more than just retail function.

Merry Hill has effectively supplanted Dudley as the principal retail centre within the borough. This is now accepted as an irreversible change. Dudley council are seeking to establish a new policy framework in which Merry Hill will in time be accepted as part of a new town centre at Brierley Hill. The new centre will be allowed to build upon its economic strength to expand and attract major regenerating investment.
The UDP vision for Dudley is one that builds upon its assets as a historic and attractive market town. Its function is to be broad based meeting the needs of local people for shopping, leisure, community, culture, housing and local government. Retail is still to play an important part in the future of the town but will reflect the changed pattern of retailing across the borough and the sub-region. The retail studies which informed preparation of the UDP reveal scope for additional retail floorspace within the borough. Much of the potential lies at Merry Hill but there is also scope for significant new investment in Dudley. The UDP plans for a decrease in existing stock of retail floorspace in Dudley town centre by 20-25% (18,600-23,225 square metres/200,000-250000 square feet) through changes in secondary and fringe areas as long as new, modern retail development including a new food store of 5 - 8000 square metres and 10 -15,000 square metres of comparison goods retailing is introduced.

In parallel with this retail allocation, the UDP sets out a comprehensive, but flexible proposal for a mix of land uses, in addition to retail, across the town centre. Support for high quality office development is emphasised and the scope for town centre living is also recognised, with developments within the town centre expected to yield 360 dwellings within the lifetime of the UDP.

The proposals set out within this ADF have been prepared within the policy framework set by the RPG and adopted UDP.

Community safety and the Dudley towns report

In preparing the ADF regard has also been given to a number of other policy initiatives, guidance and strategies which impact upon the town centre. In particular:

- a study undertaken for the council by the Civic Trust (Draft Dudley towns report, January 2004) which evaluates the role of the each of the town centres in Dudley borough and outlines a broad strategy for each over the short, medium and longer term. The ADF is consistent with the approach recommended by the Civic Trust and moves forward a number of their recommendations for action.
- The Dudley council strategy and the related supplementary planning guidance on Designing for Community Safety (DMBC 2004). These documents promote best practice in mitigating crime, anti-social behaviour and the fear and perception of crime. The urban design principles which are core to the ADF fully accord with this guidance.

Dudley is located within a regeneration zone (arc of opportunity) which is supported through the Regional economic strategy. The potential for public sector funding through Advantage West Midlands is explored in more detail in the accompanying implementation plan and the final chapter of this report.
The Black Country urban park

Careful consideration has also been given to work in progress for the Black Country Consortium on defining a new approach to describe and cultivate the qualities of the urban environment. The concept that is emerging under the banner ‘The Black Country – See it in colour’ is for an urban park with three key structuring elements, that build upon the striking topography of the Black Country:

Beacons

By creating ‘beacons’ the intention is to celebrate prominent features within the landscape. The buildings/structures associated with the beacons are to incorporate LEDs or striking illumination to provide prominent visual reference points, during the day and night. The beacons have potential to become key nodal points within the broader structure of the public realm and key vistas.

Corridors

This element involves the reinstatement of the canals and waterways as primary thoroughfares for movement, a focus for development and a framework in which to expand biodiversity.

Communities

The final element combines the desire to define communities and reinforce local distinctiveness. It is suggested that this is implemented through community led regeneration of key areas of the public realm and environmental enhancement of the streetscape.

The emerging concept for the Black Country urban park and the ways in which it is to be implemented have still to be resolved in detail, consulted upon and then integrated into the planning policy framework and appropriate guidance. Nevertheless, some aspects of the concept resonate particularly strongly with the ADF objectives. Opportunities which exist within Dudley town centre and specific proposals which are already in the pipeline have potential to contribute, perhaps even as early demonstration projects, to realisation of the urban park initiative. These potentials are identified and explored in sections 6 and 7 of this report.

“The consortium welcomes the incorporation of the anticipated outcomes of the Black Country Study within the area development framework. This is one of the first examples of making the urban park concept a reality.”

Stewart Towe the Chairman of the Black Country Consortium
Dudley - past and present

'A special place with unique assets'

A proud and important history

Dudley town centre has a diverse and fascinating history. The topography and coincidence of natural resources (silurian limestone, coal, clay and iron ore) attracted and sustained early settlement and shaped the expansion, success and considerable influence of the town through the medieval period, the industrial revolution and into the modern era.

The castle, certainly the most iconic feature of the town, was in evidence by the Doomsday survey (1086) though much of what can be seen today is of 14th and 16th century origin. The cluniac priory and the town were positioned at the foot of the castle mound.

The latter was initially planned by the 12th century Lord of Dudley, Gervase Paganal, with a series of burgage plots extending along a single route aligned to an elevated spine of ground, still evident as Castle Street/High Street.

Local innovation in mining and industrial processes, including early smelting, the production of quick lime and the first application of Newcomen’s steam engine, put Dudley right at the heart of the early industrial revolution. It brought a rapid influx of people. Many were to end up living in slum conditions on the south side of the town, which prevailed well into the 20th century. It also brought the canal in the 1780s, including the longest canal tunnel in the UK, under Castle Hill, which connected with the extensive subterranean waterways that provided access to the vast caverns and tunnels where limestone was extracted. This extraction not only fuelled industrialisation but revealed incredible geological forms and fossils of international importance; some unique to Dudley.
A gritty and industrial layer had been rapidly added to the medieval footprint of the town. In the early twentieth century social conscience brought improvements in roads, housing, health and education; new civic buildings were the outward display of this new facet of Dudley’s diversifying role. Although the shadow of war loomed large Dudley’s hard working population also found time for recreation. Priory park and a new sports centre opened in 1932 (one of Dudley’s daughters, Dorothy Round, won Wimbledon in 1934) and the 2000 seat Odean cinema and Dudley zoo opened in 1937. In its form, location and modernist architecture (Berthold Lubetkin’s ‘Tecton’ designs showcasing the use of reinforced concrete) the zoo once again put Dudley in the national spotlight.

This is only the briefest of glimpses into Dudley’s past but there can be no doubt of its importance. For most of its history wealth, confidence and ingenuity have been defining features. Recent decline and uncertainty must be viewed within this broader context. The relevance to the ADF is that Dudley’s history has shaped the place in such a unique way; it is proudly recalled by local people and the survival of such an extraordinary co-incidence of natural and man-made features of regional, national and international importance, is a legacy that sets Dudley apart. It can also help to attract new investment in the future. The Black Country Consortium (a sub-regional partnership of public, private, voluntary and community sector organisations) has recently adopted the slogan ‘The Black Country – See it in colour.’ This very effectively encapsulates the ambition, expressed through the ADF, to cultivate a vibrant, progressive town centre environment in which the historical legacy can be enjoyed by residents and revealed to visitors.
Built form and heritage

The long history of development in Dudley has left an impressive and diverse legacy of buildings and a substantial area of the town (the ‘old town’ north of King Street) where the medieval town plan is still very much evident in the pattern of streets and ‘entries’. This fine grained network of routes and blocks was effectively extended north and west over later periods and remains as a coherent grided plan which has enduring qualities as a compact and permeable urban environment.

Also noteworthy is the skyline and roofscape of Dudley town centre, accentuated by the topography, and defined by bold forms such as church spires of the ‘top’ and ‘bottom’ churches, the clock tower on the town hall and pediment features on many of the more modest buildings. The castle provides a quite magnificent backdrop and outlook from numerous viewpoints around the centre. These features are important local landmarks which help people to navigate or identify with a particular location, by providing a unique or locally distinct element within the townscape.

The quality of the historic environment is not fully appreciated by the community at large and not exploited to the full. The quality of the streetscape and public spaces could in many areas be greatly enhanced to emphasise and set off the quality of the buildings. The operation and appearance of street traders and vendors, signage and street furniture also detracts from the quality of the environment in some areas, particularly the Market Place.

There are currently two conservation areas in Dudley town centre; the Castle Hill conservation area and the Priory Street conservation area. The boundaries of the conservation areas have recently been reviewed and it is proposed to significantly enlarge the coverage. The conservation area character appraisal for Dudley town centre (October 2004) which informs this process provides a very good overview of the history, development and special character of the town centre.

The historic environment north of King Street is perhaps the town centre’s greatest asset and it provides important lessons in terms of creating attractive and humane new urban environments elsewhere within the town centre. Sensitive intervention to restore, repair and enhance the historic fabric of the town centre and replicate its qualities is a central plank of the ADF. This very clearly correlates with the intention to extend the conservation areas and the policies and proposals which flow from that. The separate strands of work on the future of the conservation areas and the ADF, which have been progressed in parallel, are mutually supportive.
Access and movement

Most journeys into Dudley town centre are by bus or by car.

Public transport

Dudley is currently very accessible to bus users; the town functions as an important hub within the bus network. Realising the ADF visions will inevitably place increasing demand on all modes of access. In line with current national government policy, as expressed in planning policy guidance note 13: Transport, and promoted through the West Midlands local transport plan, priority is to meeting this need through improvements in public transport. The introduction of Midland Metro and redevelopment of the bus station are the two key elements of this approach.

Vehicular access and car parking

Currently, Dudley town centre is served by a signed strategic outer route utilising the southern by-pass to the south and east and The Broadway to the north. Some congestion occurs to the west with over capacity at the Stafford Street/Wellington Road/Southalls Lane traffic signals, HGV turning problems at the Stafford Street/Wolverhampton Street junction and excessive queuing at the Wolverhampton Street/The Parade roundabout.

The consequence of the above, particularly the Stafford Street/Wolverhampton traffic signals has meant through traffic is penetrating inner areas leading to unnecessary increased traffic movement and congestion through the centre of Dudley.

The local inner routes through Dudley also carry more traffic than is necessary. The main problem is to the south and west around Flood Street and New Mill Street. This compounds the strategic route problem of increased traffic movement through the town centre.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Car park</th>
<th>Capacity</th>
<th>In Use</th>
<th>Reserve Capacity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Britannia</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flood Street</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Street</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitfield St</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priory Road</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stafford St</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trident Centre</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wolverhampton St</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1813</strong></td>
<td><strong>1076</strong></td>
<td><strong>737</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey 9/7/04 11 am – midday
A further problem is the majority of local traffic to the east of the southern by-pass using Blackacre Road to access the by-pass and Flood Street car parks. Prior to construction of the by-pass this was a quiet residential street. The location of car parks and the existing car parking strategy does not assist good traffic movement around Dudley town centre as the majority of space is located around the Flood Street area and visitors choose to penetrate the inner regions of the town centre, looking for free on-street parking. As this is limited, vehicles circulate around the town centre adding to congestion.

In summary, there is an existing strategic routing problem which has led to a congestion problem through the town centre. When compounded with the inner route issues, the aim should be to remove unnecessary through traffic movements and improve the inner and outer routes.

A survey of car park usage was undertaken in July 2004 between 11 am and midday. This showed that 59% of all car park spaces were in use leaving 41% reserve capacity. This would appear to show there is currently plenty of spare car parking capacity in the town centre however it is clear that the distribution of usage is unbalanced. The Flood Street car parks were 56% full (360 spaces taken), Priory Road was 80% full (240 spaces taken) and Stafford Street 55% full (166 spaces taken).

There is also anecdotal evidence that many visitors looking to park, drive around the town centre looking for free on-street parking before using the car parks as their second choice. This leads to increased traffic congestion and the perception there are not enough parking spaces provided. This could be countered and better managed by introducing a consistent on-street / off-street charging and enforcement regime.

Shopping

In the mid 1980s Dudley was the primary retail centre within the borough with two department stores, Beatties and Cooks, and good multiple retail representation including Marks and Spencer, Woolworths, Littlewoods, BHS and C&A. In addition Sainsbury’s, Tesco and Kwik Save operated major food stores.

Since the 1980s the town has experienced a period of significant change in the retail offer.

Retailing in the town is now dominated by independent retailers with only a small number of national multiples, many of which are discount orientated. Comparison retailing now accounts for around 5% of total floorspace, which is notably lower than the national average for town centres, which is around 53%. The market, which operates every day except Sunday and offers a good range of comparison and convenience goods, remains a strong feature of the retail offer.

The main food stores in the centre are Kwik Save, Farmfoods and Netto. In addition there are a broad range of smaller specialist retailers, many with a long tradition in the town. The town centre lacks a large food store capable of fulfilling bulk food shopping needs and capable of offering an alternative to stores which are located in out of centre locations. More then one national supermarket operator has expressed interest in a town location, if a suitably large and accessible site can be identified.

There is a higher than average amount of vacant floor space in the town centre. In July 2002 it stood at around 18%, which equates to around 12,000 square metres of floor space, more than double the national average. Since mid 2002 the picture has improved somewhat, with some take up of vacant space, notably within the Trident Centre, and growing evidence of retailer demand.