Some fifty retail requirements were identified in March 2004 including a broad range of convenience goods operators, though there is limited evidence of a significant qualitative step change. Prime retail rental and the investment yield profile of the town suggest that high end retailers remain reluctant to invest in Dudley. This in part reflects the lack of larger, modern, well serviced units on offer and the limited impact on the overall retail profile that a piecemeal change in occupiers will have.

Shopping and particularly the Market Place have been and will continue to be a vital function of Dudley town centre. The demise in retailing has been keenly felt, the legacy of vacancy, instability and dominance of low order retailing is still is a key issue. The loss of quality retail operators, symbolised for many by Marks and Spencer leaving the town, was a recurring theme in comments made by residents during the consultation process on the draft ADF proposals.

There is a strong sense, however, that in terms of retail function Dudley has reached a turning point. There is a strong undercurrent of interest from investors and operators. It seems that working within the constraints of what Dudley has to meet this demand, in terms of retail units, may well reduce vacancy but is not going to substantially lift the quality of the retail offer. A ‘big hit’ in the form a comprehensive development of new modern retail units, of sufficient scale to effectively establish a new retail profile for the town, is likely to be the only way to exploit the potential to the full.

The UDP identifies the area south of King Street, around Flood Street, as an appropriate location to accommodate substantial new retail development. The ADF explores in more detail the nature of this opportunity and the important principles that will ensure any new development helps sustain the town centre as a whole.
Living and learning

Historically, Dudley was a town centre in which homes existed cheek by jowl with the factories, businesses and services which sustained the population. Slum clearance, which began in earnest between the wars, displaced much of the population, mainly from the south and south-eastern side of the town, to peripheral housing estates. Rather grander villas and houses of eighteenth and nineteenth century have survived on the northern side of town, particularly around the Ednam Road area, but most are now converted to office or commercial use.

In the last five years or so the government’s urban renaissance agenda, which strongly promotes a move back to living in mixed use environments, accessible by public transport and where day-to-day needs can be met without the need to travel by car, has begun to impact upon the pattern of land use in Dudley; people are once again living within the town centre. Redundant buildings, such as the former telephone exchange on Parsons Street and the Old Court House on Priory Street, have been converted to residential use and have achieved strong sales and good values. There is now considerable market interest in identifying more of these types of opportunities.

The town centre offers very considerable benefits in developing a strong residential market:

- It has a wealth of historic and interesting modern buildings many of which would lend themselves to conversion and which are capable of offering distinctive homes ranging from urban lofts to town houses.
- The centre is compact and walkable, with a good range of uses and facilities and scope to attract the leisure, night time economy and café culture that tends to emerge in tandem with urban living.
- Dudley is reasonably well connected with key centres of employment including Birmingham, the Waterfront at Brierley Hill and more locally Castlegate Business Park. Accessibility will be further improved with completion of Midland Metro.
- While there is certainly room for environmental enhancement in many areas of the town, the ‘old town’ and the castle mound create a very attractive setting for residential development.
A place with a strong history and loyal community adds to the character of the physical environment. For many people deciding where to live is first and foremost a lifestyle choice. An authentic, historic sense of place adds to the attraction.

In providing new housing careful consideration will be given to the need to meet local housing needs, as expressed in national, UDP and other council policy, and the requirement to create sustainable, mixed communities through the provision of a broad range of housing types, sizes, tenures and affordability (from small flats/apartments to large family homes). In seeking to provide the right balance of housing types and tenures particular emphasis will need to be placed upon creating a mixed market. This is essential if population decline in the Black Country is to be reversed and wider economic benefits are to occur.

The quality and availability of schooling is a vital consideration in seeking to create the right conditions to establish a robust residential market. In progressing implementation of the ADF engagement with education providers will be essential, possibly through The Dudley town centre regeneration partnership, to put in place an appropriate forward plan to meet the needs of an expanding population.

The location of the technical college within the town centre is a major asset. It’s a dynamic land use which attracts some 2000 students into the town centre and 1200 employees. It also supports a range of adult education and business development initiatives. A student population is an important source of patronage for local businesses, which is not fully exploited at present, and could be more actively engaged as a youthful and creative dimension to cultural activities in the town. Business development through links to the college is a well established practice in Dudley. Opportunities to seed and support new small business ventures in the important sectors which underpin the ADF strategy, such as the establishment of independent cafes, bars and restaurants, through specific initiatives with the college should be explored.
The college has ambitions to expand by reconfiguring the car parking to the south of the main buildings to create the space for new buildings. This offers the potential to better connect the college with the core of the town centre, particularly the Tower Street area, and introduce additional built frontage along the Broadway. This approach is to be welcomed.

Any further expansion of the college would be a welcome addition to the land use mix within the town centre, particularly if it could be accommodated as part of a mixed use development in one of the principal opportunity areas.

Industry and business

National decline in heavy industry in the 1970s hit Dudley and the wider black country hard. A few cherished, traditional industries survive on the periphery of the centre, notably west of Flood Street, but it is the service and civic functions which now provide the dominant activities outside the retail core.

There is currently very limited supply of good quality office accommodation and a significant amount of vacant, low quality office space within the town centre. Some new office development has occurred close by at the Castle Gate Business Park. The lack of any significant commercial office sector is due largely to the dominance of the occupational market by the council, by far the largest employer in the town and other public sector occupiers.

Development at Castlegate demonstrates that where modern office accommodation is provided, within the right environment, it will be attractive to private sector occupiers, although it is apparent that Castlegate has absorbed much of the local requirement and has potential to fulfil significant demand in the foreseeable future. Cultivating a more diverse professional sector is a policy priority identified in the UDP, but the anticipated nature and rate of growth in this sector must reflect competing opportunities at Waterfront and Castlegate and the lack of established market within the town.

It must therefore be recognised that establishment of a stronger office representation will be a slow process. It can be nurtured by providing a better range of modern accommodation concentrating initially on smaller floorplates as part of flexible, mixed uses schemes. Attracting professional people to live in the town will greatly improve the potential for indigenous growth in small enterprises from which a more robust office market can evolve.
Leisure and tourism

The castle, the limestone promontory on which it sits, the palaeontological interest and the rich industrial heritage have provided the foundation of unique tourism attractions in the immediate vicinity of the town centre. While the fortunes of the zoo have waned in recent years, it is still fondly regarded by the people of the town, and together with the Wrens Nest, Seven Sisters, the castle and nearby Black Country Living Museum have ensured that the town’s profile as a tourist destination belies its size and recent mixed fortunes.

Although the castle provides a stunning backdrop for all that goes on in the town the major tourist attractions have little direct impact on the town centre itself. Physical links are poor and there are no obvious mutually reinforcing functions which would encourage visitors to the museum or the zoo to make a journey into the heart of town centre.

At the time of preparing this ADF, Dudley council was in preparation DMBC were considering a comprehensive proposal from St Modwen Developments Ltd for mixed use redevelopment and conservation of Castle Hill, including the zoo. In collaboration with the development control officers at the council a number of broad principles were defined to ensure the ADF and the St Modwens proposals evolve in a way that is mutually beneficial wherever possible and avoid any potential harmful impacts:

- The range of uses should be complementary to those that already exist within the core of the town centre and should not undermine or draw trade from other local business.
- Physical linkage between the core of the town centre and the development should be maximised.
- As the castle mound provides the single most important statement about the history and character of the town, the design of any new development must not detract or compromise its qualities in any way.
The ‘old town’ contains interesting buildings, a museum and art gallery and the town hall which is also used as an event space. DMBC have promoted a heritage trail around this area, but the character of the streets and spaces is more an incidental attraction (a very pleasant environment in which other town centre activities occur) as opposed to a tourist attraction in its own right. There is however potential for the town centre to function as a ‘hub’ for tourist attractions in the near vicinity and across the Black Country. The creation of a facility that provides information, orientation and showcases what the area has to offer to visitors would meet this need. Ideally the facility would be within a building or space that is in an attraction in its own right and can be marketed as the ‘front door’ to the Black Country. This approach would accord with the vision and strategic framework for the Black Country visitor economy (March 2004) prepared for the Black Country Consortium by Locum Destination Consulting.

Within the town centre, beyond the castle, tourism and leisure provision is limited, particularly in terms of the range of evening economy activities (restaurants, cafes, bars, clubs and entertainment venues) and health and fitness provision. New development including these sorts of uses has occurred at Castlegate and as part of the Village Hotel complex, but they are distant from the centre and adopt an ‘out-of-town’ format. Market appraisal suggests that there is limited scope for new large scale leisure/evening economy uses (such as a cinema or bowling alley) to underpin redevelopment within the town centre but there is recognition that smaller scale activities are an important component of the mixed use - urban living experience and should be brought forward with or in tandem with retail and residential led schemes.
The civic function

Since the fortification of the castle, Dudley has been a seat of social and political power. The important role survives to this day. The presence of Dudley council’s principal functions and other public services within Dudley is a defining characteristic of the town in terms of:

- the employment profile
- support for local business and services
- the occupation of space and the contribution of fine buildings, particularly those built in the 1920s
- status as ‘capital’ of the Borough and the black country
- a long history of municipal events and pageantry

Maintaining the principal civic function in Dudley town centre is vital as is realising and exploiting investment by the council to maximise the wider regenerative benefits. The council has identified the need for new office accommodation to house a number of council functions. The site selection, scheme design and procurement process is only at an early stage but the project has potential to showcase high quality, sustainable, town centre development and provide a direct catalyst for wider regeneration.