



Dudley Economic Regeneration Strategy

March 2024

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Executive Summary

Dudley's new **Economic Regeneration Strategy** (ERS) sets out an ambitious economic 'route map' for the next ten years. The ERS will shape a more prosperous, more equitable and more sustainable economy across the borough, and it will enable businesses and communities to thrive.

Economic challenges and opportunities

The ERS is founded on the borough's progress in the context of **profound economic and technological developments**. The **scale and sectoral composition** of Dudley's economy has changed markedly. Although there has been some growth over the last decade, the overall number of jobs in Dudley is lower now than 20 years ago. Moreover the borough has lost almost 20,000 manufacturing jobs since 1991 and the **manufacturing sector has restructured**; however, while smaller in size, it remains a distinctive and important part of the economy which is now underpinned by a number of important **innovation assets**. In parallel, other sectors have grown to 'fill the gap'. The borough's economy is now **substantially service-based**; it has strengths in business service activities, activities related to the visitor economy, and in health and social care. This long-term structural change has also been affected by the UK's departure from the EU and the ramifications of the pandemic.

Looking ahead, there will be **both opportunities and challenges for businesses, places and communities** across the borough. These need to be navigated effectively, and this ERS distils the actions that will need to be taken in response.

Local drivers underpin a new narrative which defines the core of the ERS:

- **connectivity is improving.** Historically, connectivity has been very poor, but the borough currently benefits from a good digital infrastructure and there is the prospect of further metro/light rail extensions and other investments which could also help to drive transformation.
- the borough is already benefiting from **new forms and sources of investment and greater investor interest**, much of it from the private sector; however **the supply of land (for both employment and housing)** continues to be a major challenge to address through the Local Plan process and in ongoing discussions with neighbouring authorities.
- the borough is now a strong **focus for learning** and huge strides have been made in this context over the last decade, even if local attainment levels still need to improve.
- the borough is increasingly recognised as a hub for **innovation and creativity**, both through the role of established businesses in supply chains, and through locally seeded enterprise and innovation.

- the borough is recognisably a place of **recreation, leisure and wellbeing**, benefitting local people as well as visitors; all three will characterise vibrant local economies in the years ahead and the borough is well placed to be part of this changing narrative.

Vision

By 2034, the borough of Dudley will be recognised nationally for its thriving local economy. With specialisms in advanced manufacturing, it will be a focus for innovation, particularly in respect of the net zero transition, and it will also have a growing profile in ‘new economy’ sectors. It will be far better connected and it will function as a hub for business – both those formed locally and those that have relocated to the borough. It will be playing a full role in driving the West Midlands as a whole forward. It will be an aspirational place in which individuals, families, communities and businesses thrive.

Consistent with this Vision, by 2034, Dudley will be a place where:

- new businesses are formed and existing businesses grow – including in new sectors (e.g. digital, gaming, etc.)
- inward investors choose to locate
- local people develop new skills and are able to ‘pivot’ as new opportunities come to the area
- town centres are vibrant and sustainable, and attractive both to local people and visitors
- the quality of the natural and built environment (including heritage assets) are recognised at the heart of the visitor economy and more generally
- communities and businesses are connected by a high quality transport infrastructure across the borough
- significant progress is being made towards net zero carbon
- everyone can reach their potential.

This Vision is bold and audacious. **It is concerned with reversing decades of relative decline, changing perceptions of the borough and its economy, and rebalancing the growth narrative of the West Midlands more generally.** The west of the region has huge potential. Dudley will be at the vanguard.

Themes and transformational opportunity

The ERS is structured around four main themes. Their delivery should be facilitated and accelerated by the designation of a **Levelling-Up Zone** (across much of the borough):

- **Theme 1: Unlocking enterprise and innovation**

- **Theme 2:** Investing in **people** and building **skills** for tomorrow
- **Theme 3:** Creating a vibrant **creative and cultural environment**, and supporting the **Visitor Economy**
- **Theme 4:** Reinventing **town centres** across the borough.

In addition, we will advance a major **transformational opportunity** – which is concerned with **connectivity**. We will maximise the economic impact of the first phases of Metro Extension (within and as part of the Levelling-Up Zone). We will also make the case for subsequent investment in later phases and in other connectivity improvements.

In so doing, **we will redefine Dudley's role in the wider region**. Dudley will come to be known as a borough of aspiration; a borough of beauty; a borough of learning; and a borough of connectivity.

Delivering the ERS

To achieve this Vision, the ERS will need to be delivered at both pace and scale. This will be a substantial undertaking. Dudley MBC is fully committed to it, as are its principal stakeholders and partners. Delivering change means action on three fronts:

- putting **strategic capacity** in place for long-term change and planning, marshalling a wide range of resources
- the **whole Council working together** to deliver the changes that lead to visible progress on the ground
- ensuring that **local communities and businesses benefit** throughout the regeneration process.

The ERS must succeed. It matters for current and future generations of residents in the borough. It matters for businesses and for those looking to invest locally. It also matters for the West Midlands as a whole – and indeed the UK more generally.

1. Introduction

Our new Economic Regeneration Strategy (ERS) is informed by evidence and it has been developed in consultation with stakeholders. It sets out an ambitious 'route map' for the borough over the next ten years. It is an important statement for the borough. The intention is that it will shape a more prosperous, more equitable and more sustainable economy in which businesses and communities thrive.

This document presents a new **Economic Regeneration Strategy (ERS)** for the borough of Dudley. Based on robust evidence, it provides **an ambitious economic 'route map' for the borough, focusing on the next ten years.** It recognises that the borough is facing some economic challenges, but also that it has real assets and potential. It sets out a positive plan for economic growth that is founded on these assets and opportunities, looking to the 2030s and beyond.

Context for and purpose of the ERS

The ERS is founded on the progress of the borough in the context of profound economic and technological change. This has been ongoing for decades but two 'black swan' events (the UK's departure from the EU and the ramifications of the pandemic) have prompted a stock-take, as have institutional changes at a regional scale, most especially the maturing role of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA). Looking ahead, there will be both opportunities and challenges for businesses, places and communities across the borough. These need to be navigated effectively, and the ERS distils the actions that will need to be taken in this context.

How the ERS has been developed

The ERS has been developed by **Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (Dudley MBC)**, supported by SQW, over the period between July and December 2023. It has involved:

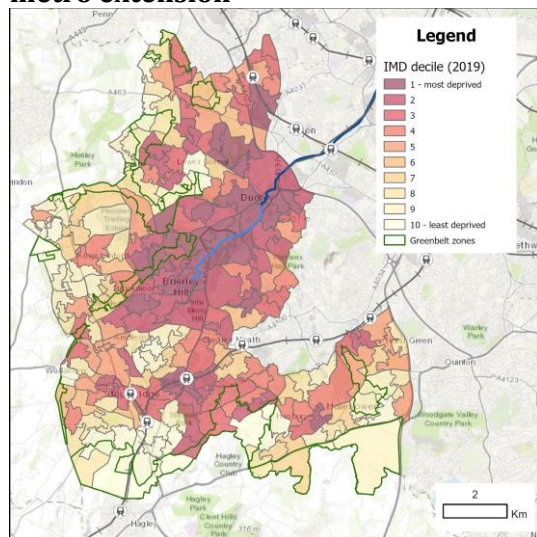
- a review of baseline evidence and data, including in relation to the borough's changing roles in a region that is itself evolving quickly
- officer workshops and member consultations to develop a high level strategic framework
- workshops with partners and stakeholders – and with businesses from across the borough – to flesh out the detail and start to define more specific actions and interventions.

Key priorities for the ERS

In high level terms, **the new ERS is committed to sustained – and sustainable – economic growth.** The intention is that there should be **more, and better, jobs** across the borough. In order to increase economic resilience, overall **productivity** must increase too. Both jobs and productivity need to be

underpinned by **investment** – particularly from the private sector, but also from government and public bodies.

Figure 1-1: Understanding the borough through the Indices of deprivation – and the route of the metro extension



Source: Produced by SQW 2023. Licence 100030994. Contains OS data © Crown copyright [and database right] [2023]; English indices of deprivation

In the round, the borough must take positive steps to build on the progress of recent years and ensure that it functions as a thriving economic hub in its own right. It must provide opportunities for its residents – particularly its young people. It must enable them to fulfil their potential and realise their dreams locally. It must, in other words, foster ambition and aspiration, and it must make provision for both progression and social mobility borough-wide. In so doing it must aim to achieve high levels of social inclusion across the borough as a whole. As it stands, there are high levels of deprivation in parts of the borough – particularly in the broad ‘corridor’ between Dudley and Brierley Hill, as the map above highlights.

At the same time, **the ERS must respond to growing environmental imperatives.** The UK is committed to achieving net zero carbon by 2050, and the borough – and the businesses and communities within it – must be fully part of this journey. There are real assets on which to draw and through its supply chains, the borough’s businesses have the capability and opportunity to help shape the transition to net zero carbon nation-wide.

In framing the ERS, the borough’s spatial diversity must also be recognised. The emerging Local Plan highlights regeneration corridors which connect the main centres and the transport network. There are multiple strategic/ town/ district centres – including Dudley, Stourbridge, Brierley Hill, Lye and Halesowen – and each has a different economic character and form. There are also local centres that will be important in the future economic vitality of the borough. In the south and west, there are areas of greenspace and countryside, some within the Green Belt. Throughout, there are heritage assets and amenities – from the 11th Century Dudley Castle to the Stourbridge old town gasworks (part of the wider Geopark). Each of these ‘faces’ of the borough has a role to play in the years ahead.

While the borough is fully part of the Black Country and the West Midlands, its perspective increasingly needs to be broader – as do its horizons. Most immediately, it should look south into Worcestershire and west into Staffordshire (and then Shropshire). It should recognise that it is (just about) midway between Bristol and Manchester,

two thriving cities with big markets and big ambitions. Dudley is not only part of the West Midlands; this broader vantage point needs to become a formative part of the area's economic character and potential.

Over the decade ahead, the borough needs to be confident and outward looking. The ERS crafts a new narrative in this context. Whilst this is (and should be) wholly recognisable, it is also intended to be quietly radical. **The intention is that it shapes a more prosperous, more equitable and more sustainable economy in which businesses and communities thrive.**

Five local drivers to underpin a changing narrative

Five local drivers are underpinning the new narrative which defines the core of the ERS and is set out in this document. While evidence of greater economic prosperity is not yet apparent from the baseline data – and whilst there is much more to do – the borough of Dudley has the opportunity to chart a good path, for five main reasons:

- first, **connectivity is improving.** Historically, connectivity has been very poor, but the borough currently benefits from a good digital infrastructure and there is the

prospect of new metro links and other investments which could also help to drive transformation.

- second, the borough is already benefiting from **new forms and sources of investment and greater investor interest**, much of it from the private sector.
- third, the borough is now a strong **focus for learning** and huge strides have been made in this context over the last decade, even if local attainment levels still need to improve.
- fourth, the borough is increasingly recognised as a hub for **innovation and creativity**, both through the role of established businesses in supply chains, and through locally seeded enterprise and innovation.
- fifth, the borough is recognisably a place of **recreation, leisure and wellbeing**, benefitting local people as well as visitors; all three will be characteristic of vibrant local economies in the years ahead and the borough is well placed to be part of this changing narrative.

Dudley is a borough with 21st Century ambition and potential. It is this that the new ERS seeks to capture, unlock and accelerate.

2. Strategic context

The ERS has been developed at an uncertain moment in terms of medium-term national policy priorities. Regionally, the new Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal (DDD) that is being agreed between WMCA and government is important – and potentially, this offers important opportunities to the borough. At a local level, our emerging Local Plan provides a clear framework for our ERS.

National context

The ERS has been developed at an uncertain moment with political and economic uncertainty creating a challenging environment locally, regionally and nationally.

Politically, there is, in practice, some agreement between the main political parties in terms of economic development and regeneration priorities at a local level. Although expressed in different ways and with some differences in detail, these include:

- enhancing productivity, including through the use of digital technologies
- supporting clusters and place/area-based economic assets
- achieving net zero carbon and green growth
- addressing the housing crisis
- recognising the role of towns within local economies
- reducing spatial disparities across the UK through a process of levelling up

- recognising the importance of tourism and culture to economic regeneration
- advancing opportunities for devolution (albeit at different rates and to different extents across local areas within the UK).

Regional priorities

Dudley MBC is one of seven constituent members (with full voting rights) of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), which is led by the Mayor of the West Midlands. At a regional level, the maturing role of the WMCA is increasingly important.

Modelling completed by Oxford Economics suggested that GVA per head (a key measure of wealth) is forecast to grow more slowly across the West Midlands than nationally in the period to 2040. Focusing on primary and nascent clusters and technologies, the *West Midlands Plan for Growth* is essentially both WMCA's response and its core economic strategy.

The *West Midlands Plan for Growth* provides a basis for greater integration across six key interventions which, in combination, are designed to effect a step change in regional competitiveness. The

six are: direct competitive funding (including through the West Midlands Innovation Accelerator); the development of a future skills pathway; a co-ordinated response to foreign direct investment; an early growth fund (focused on the supply of growth capital for business); a land assembly and infrastructure fund; and a transport and infrastructure fund.

In practice, many of the main themes from the *West Midlands Plan for Growth* have subsequently been formalised within the West Midlands Combined Authority *Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal* (DDD) – which was published in draft form by WMCA and UK Government in March 2023.

Within it, provision was made for six Levelling Up Zones, one of which is *Dudley Metro Corridors* (including the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill link). Levelling Up Zones are essentially targeted growth zones with some fiscal and other tools (including the retention of business rates over 25 years). The draft DDD states further that “*The government has committed to devolve £100 million brownfield funding to WMCA, subject to a final business case, to deploy across the region to drive placemaking including Levelling Up Zones, housing and urban regeneration. The government will also invest £60 million in the proposed metro line extension from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill*” (paragraph 53). As we consider later, these are potentially very important measures for the borough of Dudley.

Innovation is another key theme from the draft DDD – through Innovation Accelerators, a Strategic Innovation Partnership and new approaches to innovation adoption and diffusion. In

parallel, there are wide-ranging proposals linked to the devolution of adult skills and the delivery of priorities identified in Local Skills Improvement Plans. Transport interventions feature strongly too: alongside commitments to the metro, there is reference to the scope for very light rail innovation (with proposals developed in Coventry and tested in Dudley). The transition to net zero is also a clear priority and there are proposals to pilot the devolution of net zero funding, including for buildings’ retrofit.

Culture and tourism is also recognised in the draft DDD for its crucial role it can play in giving people pride in the places they live, supporting a vibrant local economy and in promoting wellbeing. There are ambitions to increase funding (including Commonwealth Games legacy funding), developing heritage actions zones, and rolling out a new accreditation system for local destination management organisations.

In short, the draft DDD is significantly important for the borough of Dudley and the wider West Midlands. In advancing the ERS, full account has been taken of it – while recognising both that the borough of Dudley needs to focus on ‘what really matters for Dudley’ (given its particular circumstances), and that it needs to look in other geographical directions too.

Local policy

The emerging Local Plan for Dudley (which looks to 2041) is being developed; this will be a key policy statement for the ERS.

The emerging Local Plan is 'urban led' – which means that it is focused on re-using Brownfield Land.

The vision is to ensure that by 2041 Dudley will be a borough which meets the needs of its local residents and businesses, with a strong focus on community, town centre living, enterprise, shopping, tourism, heritage, leisure and education. Beyond that, the plan will: allocate land for 10,876 homes; allocate 25ha of land for employment land to generate additional jobs in the borough and boost the local economy; regenerate the town and district centres; enhance connections for public transport, walking and cycling; protect and enhance the biodiversity and geology of

the borough; improve the quality of green spaces for the wellbeing of residents; and set out targets and policies to help tackle climate change.

The ERS comes at a time when the Council's resources are increasingly stretched, so ensuring that these are strategically prioritised to maximise their potential effect is critical. A recent Local Government Association Peer Review for Dudley Council¹ identified a need for an Economic and Regeneration Strategy to identify a pipeline/programme of actions that can be developed to support the inclusive growth of the Borough's communities and the financial sustainability of the Council.

¹ Available to view here:
[https://www.dudley.gov.uk/council-](https://www.dudley.gov.uk/council-community/your-council/local-government-associations-peer-review-2023/)

[community/your-council/local-government-associations-peer-review-2023/](https://www.dudley.gov.uk/council-community/your-council/local-government-associations-peer-review-2023/)

The borough of Dudley in numbers...



323,500
people



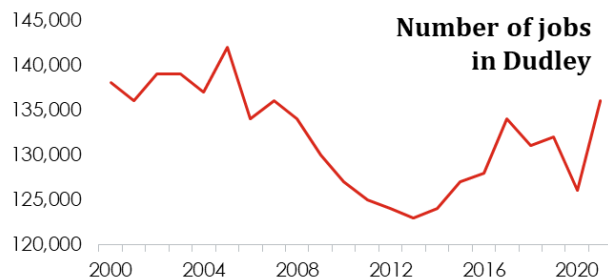
136,000
jobs



10,215
businesses



Productivity **18%** below
national level, but
comparable to other Black
Country boroughs



35% of residents
qualified to degree-level
– highest in Black
Country



Dudley is the **second** least
deprived local authority area
in the West Midlands, but
there are challenges in some
neighbourhoods



82% of residents
economically active –
higher than Black
Country & WMCA



Dudley has **bounced back** from the pandemic
the best in the Black Country – number of jobs and
unemployment rate have already returned to pre-
pandemic levels

3. Understanding the borough's economy

The borough of Dudley has a sizeable local economy and it has the scale of a city. Over recent decades, it has seen profound restructuring and as jobs in the manufacturing sector have disappeared, service sector employment has grown. However the economy has seen limited overall growth, and virtually none over a 20 year time frame. The population has increased and the consequence has been increased net out-commuting. Creating new employment opportunities within the Borough is important, particularly as overall net job loss is projected in the period to 2040 on baseline (business as usual) assumptions.

The borough of Dudley is currently home to over **320,000 people**. Within the borough, there are about **10,000 enterprises** and **136,000 jobs**. On all three metrics, the borough is similar in scale to Coventry and larger than Wolverhampton, two of the three West Midlands' cities. **The important and obvious point is that Dudley must be recognised regionally and nationally as a sizeable local economy.**

The pages that follow describe key aspects of the borough's economy and how this has changed (and is changing). A more detailed account may be found in an accompanying evidence base document, which is available [\[here\]](#).

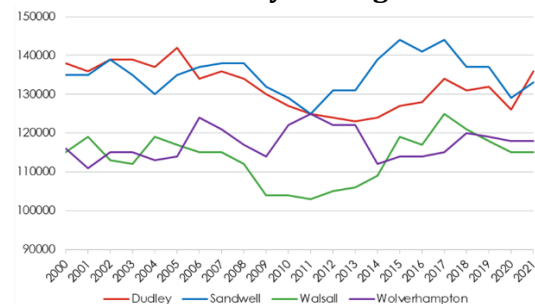
How the local economy has evolved

As a local economy, Dudley has seen substantial change over recent decades. The clearest evidence of relates to **the scale and the sectoral composition of employment.**

The total number of jobs in the borough declined between 2000 and about 2014.

Subsequently, overall job numbers have recovered, particularly latterly. The net effect was that in 2021, the total number of jobs was very similar to the figure observed 20 years earlier.

Figure 3-1: Total jobs in Dudley and other Black Country boroughs



Source: ONS Jobs Density dataset

As Figure 3-1 shows, broadly similar patterns are apparent across the other Black Country boroughs. However, the picture elsewhere in the West Midlands is very different: between 2000 and 2021, Birmingham saw jobs growth of over 12%, Coventry saw 16% and for Solihull, the figure was in excess of 50%. Put another way, **whereas the Black Country accounted for 39% of regional jobs in 2000, this figure had fallen to about**

35% two decades later (based on data from the ONS Jobs Density dataset). The economic balance across the West Midlands has therefore shifted.

Over the 20 years from 1991, the borough of Dudley lost almost 20,000 **manufacturing jobs**, and employment in the sector halved. Subsequently, manufacturing employment has been reasonably stable; it has consistently accounted for around 17,000 jobs since 2011. This is about 15% of total employment in the borough and still double the national average – but it is substantially less than previously.

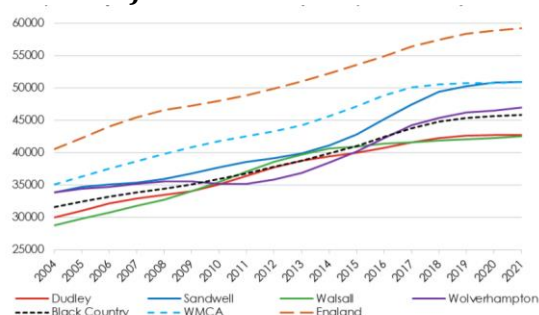
Overall, the total number of jobs in the borough has barely changed over the last 20 years. **The inference is that other sectors have grown and effectively ‘filled the gap’.** Data suggest that the last decade has seen jobs growth in some **business service activities; in activities related to the visitor economy; and in health and social care.** This means that like most other local areas, the borough of Dudley is now substantially service-based – and within this, as elsewhere, the retail sector has also seen significant restructuring and change.

In terms of the borough’s **economic output (measured through Gross Value Added (GVA))**, the consequences are important. In 2021, GVA summed to £5.5bn (in current prices). Over the decade from 2001-11, GVA grew at 2.0% per annum. This rose to 2.2% per annum between 2011 and 2021. Over both decades, Dudley saw the slowest rate of GVA growth amongst the seven Metropolitan Authority areas in the West

Midlands (Birmingham and Solihull saw the fastest growth).

Consistent with these observations, **productivity** data present a challenging story. Whether measured per hour worked or per filled job (as below), **the borough’s productivity performance has been consistently low and the gap has widened over the last two decades.** In 2004, GVA per filled job was 75.6% of the national average; and in 2021, it was 73.3%. This all needs to be understood in the context of national productivity performance which itself is poor by international standards.

Figure 3-2: GVA per filled job, smoothed, 2004-21, £ (current price estimates)



Source: ONS GVA data

Why this matters relates, fundamentally, to people’s quality of life. There is a strong correlation between productivity and earnings, which – for most individuals and households – is a primary measure of well-being.

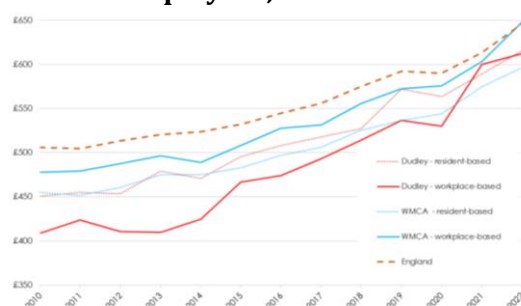
The chart below provides important insights in this context. It shows that:

- within Dudley, workplace-based pay has converged with the pay of working residents; this is important because it means that for full time employees, the

rewards from working locally are on a par (on average and overall) with those gained through out-commuting

- workplace-based pay across the borough and for full time employees has converged with the national and regional averages over the last decade.

Figure 3-3: Median weekly pay, gross, full time employees, 2010-22



Source: ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings

Why the narrative around pay is better than that relating to productivity is difficult to explain. One factor is that the former captures data for full time employees only whereas the productivity data relate to all filled jobs. It may be the case that part time work and/or self-employment have become more significant across the borough – particularly in sectors linked to the visitor economy, health and social care, and business services. **Part time jobs in service sectors replacing full time ones in manufacturing activities could explain the differences.**

In addition, changing commuting patterns may be a factor. Data from the 2011 Census² suggest large commuting flows, in both directions, between Dudley and each

of Birmingham, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and South Staffordshire. Among these, there was net in-commuting from South Staffordshire and substantial (and much greater) net out-commuting to the other three areas. As those local economies have changed – and we have seen that Birmingham in particular has experienced significant jobs growth – flows will have been affected.

In practice, amongst residents aged over 25 and in employment, the proportion working part time does not appear to have changed much over the last two decades: it has been 20%-28% with substantial year-on-year volatility and no discernible overall trend. **What has changed is the scale and age profile of the borough's employed population.** There are now over 50,000 residents aged 50+ who are in employment; 20 years ago the figure was under 40,000 and older workers account for almost half of the overall change. **With the number of employed people rising and the number of jobs staying the same, the implication is that net out-commuting is growing too.**

The **skills and qualifications profile of the borough's working age residents** has also changed. Among those aged 16-64, the number qualified to at least NVQ4 (degree level) grew from 39,000 to 67,000 between 2004 and 2021, an increase of over 74%. This change is important, but qualification levels within the borough continue to lag key benchmarks. In 2021, the proportion of 16-64 year olds qualified to NVQ4+ was 35% in Dudley; this compared to 40% in Birmingham and 44%

² The 2021 Census was conducted mid-pandemic when many people were working from home and it therefore does not provide a meaningful update.

nationally, so the borough was nine percentage points adrift. Importantly, the gap had actually widened since the early 2000s.

As a borough, the overall sense is that the economy is not creating the new employment opportunities required to address many of the issues addressed above. Dudley has more working residents, but many appear to be commuting to jobs elsewhere³. Within the borough, there has been a process of sectoral change and ‘tertiarization’.

...and how it is expected to evolve

Forward projections generated by Oxford Economics (for the Black Country Intelligence Unit) suggest that the journey of the past two decades is set to continue – with 3,100 fewer jobs expected in the borough by 2040.

According to OE, this is explained mainly by further jobs loss in the manufacturing sector. Whilst there will be some growth in service sector employment, this is insufficient to avoid a net decline overall (see Figure 2-4).

Figure 3-4: Modelled employment change in the borough of Dudley, 2022-2040



Source: Oxford Economics for Black Country Economic Intelligence Unit

While the overall assessment is quite challenging, one further point is important. The baseline projection is essentially ‘business as usual’ in terms of the assumptions it makes in terms of intervention in the local economy. It takes no account at all of recent or planned investments or the new ERS more broadly. Hence the potential impacts of (for example) the DDD are not factored in.

In practice, the borough has seen important investments and achievements over the recent past. These need to be consolidated and developed at the heart of the new ERS.

³ Note that data from the latest Census data (2021) on commuting is skewed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, but levels from the

2011 Census showed strong levels of out-commuting away from Dudley.

4. Key assets, opportunities and challenges

In framing the new ERS, the borough of Dudley has some key economic assets on which it can draw. These surround, in particular, its businesses, its learning institutions, its digital infrastructure, its location, its communities and its heritage assets. However there are major challenges too, relating to business investment and growth and to issues relating to connectivity.

Although the baseline data point to areas of underperformance, the borough has important economic assets and opportunities. Looking ahead, these need to be marshalled and used at the core of the ERS whilst also taking steps to address some key constraints and barriers.

Its businesses...

Most importantly, **the borough has a stock of enterprising and innovative businesses**. Many are ensconced within supply chains linked to automotive and aerospace, and they are at the core of the UK's **advanced manufacturing sector**. This plays a critical role in innovation more generally, for it often links research and development to larger scale production. In the context of the net zero transition, it is likely to pivot further – and potentially this is a real strength.

The Merry Hill Shopping Centre in Brierley Hill is one of the largest **retail centres** in the UK. It is a major hub in its own right, and further investment is planned (see below).

Within the borough, there are **some major companies**. JCDecaux's regional office for the West Midlands and Sandvik UK's

headquarters are, for example, based in Halesowen.

Within the borough, there are also **businesses across various 'new economy' sectors** which are doing well (e.g. motion simulation technology firm Simworx) – even if they are somewhat 'under the radar' and not well known.

One challenge in relation to the borough's businesses, surrounds the palpable sense of **fragmentation** – a theme that was mentioned repeatedly whilst developing the ERS. 'Local heroes' are thin on the ground – not because they don't exist, but because, in the main, they are not well known locally. In part as a result, the area lacks local investors – i.e. entrepreneurs who might have sold a successful business and are now looking effectively to 'recycle' capital, insight and experience, and to invest to support the 'next generation' locally.

...its learning and skills institutions

Over recent years, Dudley has emerged as a **hub for learning**. This is a long term venture, but it presents real assets and opportunities in the context of the ERS.

Dudley College of Technology in particular has attracted significant investment. It now enrolls around 12,000 students each year. It sits at the heart of two 'learning quarters' – one in Dudley and a second which is developing at Brierley Hill. It is the biggest provider of apprenticeships across the WMCA geography and close to 60% of its apprenticeships are studying STEM subjects. There is therefore a strong level of alignment between the work of the college and the sectoral specialisms that exist within the borough. **Halesowen College** in the south of the borough is smaller, but it has also been positively assessed by Ofsted and has achieved a good rating. Conversely, the closure of Stourbridge College (in 2019) and the transfer of students to Dudley and Halesowen colleges may well have been a challenge for the west of the borough.

In relation to **higher education**, the University of Worcester will shortly be delivering degree courses at **Health Innovation Dudley**.

...its commercial sites and premises

Across the borough of Dudley, there are constraints in relation to the supply of commercial sites of premises.

The emerging Local Plan suggests a need for 72ha for employment development in the period to 2041. Employment Opportunity Sites are identified which will contribute around 24ha in total. These have been used alongside housing and other key allocations to define Regeneration Corridors which will be the focus for most development across the borough. Further contributions to

employment land supply will come forward through "*the redevelopment, intensification, conversion and enhancement of existing employment areas and premises*" and through working positively with landowners and developers on windfall sites as they emerge. This will represent additional supply to the 24ha of employment land allocations identified. Demand will also be met through 'exporting unmet need'. This means that **some of the jobs linked to Dudley's economic assets will be seen in adjacent areas**. The jobs could still be taken by residents of the borough – but further net out-commuting is likely to be the consequence.

Evidence gathered previously provides some insights into the challenges surrounding the supply of employment land. Sites for industrial and logistics uses are generally small and fragmented, and there are major structural issues linked to land assembly and, as a consequence, viability. **The upshot is that the provision of employment sites is a key challenge for the borough. The Council needs to progress land assembly and development for employment uses** (alongside continued discussions with neighbouring authorities under the Duty to Cooperate for the provision of employment land within the wider functional economic area, in line with the emerging Local Plan). This will help to **attract inward investors and support the growth aspirations of local businesses. The provision of employment sites a major issue for the ERS.**

Across the borough, the office market has traditionally been quite limited. However, there are some out of town developments (such as The Waterfront (Brierley Hill) and Castlegate Business Park (Dudley)). These have attracted new investment – which confirms that there is demand if the supply side issues can be resolved.

It is notable that across the wider West Midlands, strategic employment sites are overwhelmingly located to the east of Birmingham – an observation which correlates directly and strongly with the shifting regional economic focus outlined previously. The provision of employment sites is a key challenge for the borough and for the ERS. The council is seeking to respond via the Local Plan process and in ongoing discussions with neighbouring authorities.

...its digital infrastructure

Dudley – and the wider Black Country – has seen significant investment in its digital infrastructure. There has been progress in Next Generation Access (NGA), and the whole area performs well when compared to the rest of the Midlands with NGA coverage of 99.4%. This in itself constitutes a significant asset and one which – as yet – is not fully used.

However the advantage might be a temporary one. **Looking ahead, there are some challenges in relation to digital connectivity** as expectations rise. Full fibre coverage is estimated to be 0.6% in Dudley compared to 11.5% across England. Dudley is identified further as

amongst the most poorly connected metropolitan areas in the UK for full fibre⁴.

...its wider connectivity

Large parts of the borough of Dudley have connectivity challenges that are more akin to sparsely populated rural areas than to a large, predominantly urban area within a major conurbation.

There is no railway station in Halesowen in the south (the nearest (Rowley Regis) is 1-2 miles from the town centre), whilst the closest stations to Dudley (town) are well over a mile from the town centre. Journey times by bus are lengthy, mainly because of congestion.

Movement for Growth – the current West Midlands Strategic Transport Plan – sets out an ambition for every resident of the metropolitan area to be able to travel from their home to a range of at least three main strategic centres and Birmingham, within 45 minutes in the morning peak. Currently, much of Dudley is substantially adrift of this ambition. It is also heavily car dependent. For these reasons, it features prominently within planned or proposed regional transport schemes (rail, light rail, tram and train lines, alongside bus journey speed improvements), some of which have been developed as part of an HS2 Connectivity Package.

Within this context, one particularly important venture is the Metro Extension. Part of this is currently under construction and the second phase to Brierley Hill Waterfront is now funded, but the case still needs to be made (and the funding

⁴ Digital Infrastructure Evidence Base, prepared for the draft Black Country Plan, August 2021

secured) for the extension to Brierley Hill town centre. Further connectivity to Stourbridge Junction should also be considered.

...its location and links

Nevertheless, the borough's location – within a large conurbation, flanked to the west and south by countryside, and also mid-way between Bristol and Manchester – ought to be a substantial asset. **There is a huge market literally on its doorstep and the borough ought to be reaping significant agglomeration benefits.**

Although connectivity is a challenge, there is some suggestion that parts of the borough are developing stronger functional links across the conurbation through commuting but also migration. **Effective partnership working between adjoining authorities and the West Midlands Combined Authority on place-based strategy will help to ensure that the Borough benefits from the ambitions, perspectives and resources that new residents will bring.**

...its heritage assets

The borough has substantial heritage assets of different forms, and these have become both economic drivers – and to some extent anchor institutions – in their own right. The Black Country Living Museum is a major attraction, as is Dudley Zoo which was developed in the grounds of Dudley Castle. The Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark is also substantially in the borough and the Dudley Canal Trust is a substantial attraction in its own right. All four of these attractions are of at least

regional significance, and they attract substantial numbers of visitors.

More locally, the borough also has a significant built heritage. Within the town of Dudley, a Townscape Heritage (TH) programme has been funded through the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) and has resulted in the repair, reinstatement and refurbishment of key historic buildings. There is more to do, but some historic buildings within the borough could be effectively repurposed in the context of wider regeneration ambitions and plans.

...its wider amenities and attractions

The borough of Dudley has many other wider amenities and attractions, some of which are being reinvented as patterns of demand evolve in response to changing lifestyles and aspirations.

For example, Merry Hill Shopping Centre (near Brierley Hill) was taken over by Sovereign Centros (following the collapse of Intu). Subsequently plans have been developed to re-position it as a vibrant family lifestyle destination which will be developed on net zero carbon principles. In time, it should be accessible by the Metro.

...recent investment into the Borough

The borough of Dudley has been successful in attracting new public and private sector investment into the area that is helping to reshape and develop the area's economy. Recent success stories include successful Levelling Up Fund bids for Halesowen and

Brierley Hill, and funding for a 'Long Term Plan for Towns' in Dudley. New investment into the metro, alongside private sector

development into new residential and commercial sites is all helping Dudley become a more attractive place.

5. Vision and Strategy

The Vision for the borough is bold and audacious. It will be achieved through a strategy that is structured around four Themes and one Cross-Cutting Priority. The delivery of the ERS is very important in relation to the businesses and communities of the borough, both now and in the future.

Vision for the borough

Our Vision is that by 2034, the borough of Dudley will be recognised nationally for its thriving local economy. With specialisms in advanced manufacturing, it will be a focus for innovation, particularly in respect of the net zero transition, and it will also have a growing profile in 'new economy' sectors. It will be far better connected and it will function as a hub for business – both those formed locally and those that have relocated to the borough. It will be playing a full role in driving the West Midlands as a whole forward. It will be an aspirational place in which individuals, families, communities and businesses thrive.

Consistent with this Vision, by 2034, Dudley will be a place where:

- new businesses are formed and existing businesses grow – including in new sectors (e.g. digital, gaming, etc.)
- inward investors choose to locate
- local people develop new skills and are able to 'pivot' as new opportunities come to the area

- town centres and local centres are vibrant and sustainable, and attractive both to local people and visitors
- the quality of the natural and built environment (including heritage assets) are recognised at the heart of the visitor economy and more generally
- communities and businesses are connected by a high quality transport infrastructure across the borough
- significant progress is being made towards net zero carbon
- everyone can reach their potential.

This Vision is bold and audacious. **It is concerned with reversing decades of relative decline, changing perceptions of the borough and its economy, and rebalancing the growth narrative of the West Midlands more generally.** The west of the region has huge potential. Dudley will be at the vanguard.

Economic Regeneration Strategy for the borough of Dudley

To achieve this Vision, the ERS will need to be delivered at both pace and scale. This will be a substantial undertaking.

Dudley MBC is fully committed to it, as are its principal stakeholders and partners.

The ERS will be structured around four main themes, and their delivery should be facilitated and accelerated by the designation of a **Levelling-Up Zone** across key parts of the borough:

- **Theme 1:** Unlocking **enterprise** and **innovation**
- **Theme 2:** Investing in **people** and building **skills** for tomorrow
- **Theme 3:** Creating a vibrant **creative and cultural environment**, and supporting the **Visitor Economy**
- **Theme 4:** Reinventing **town centres** across the borough.

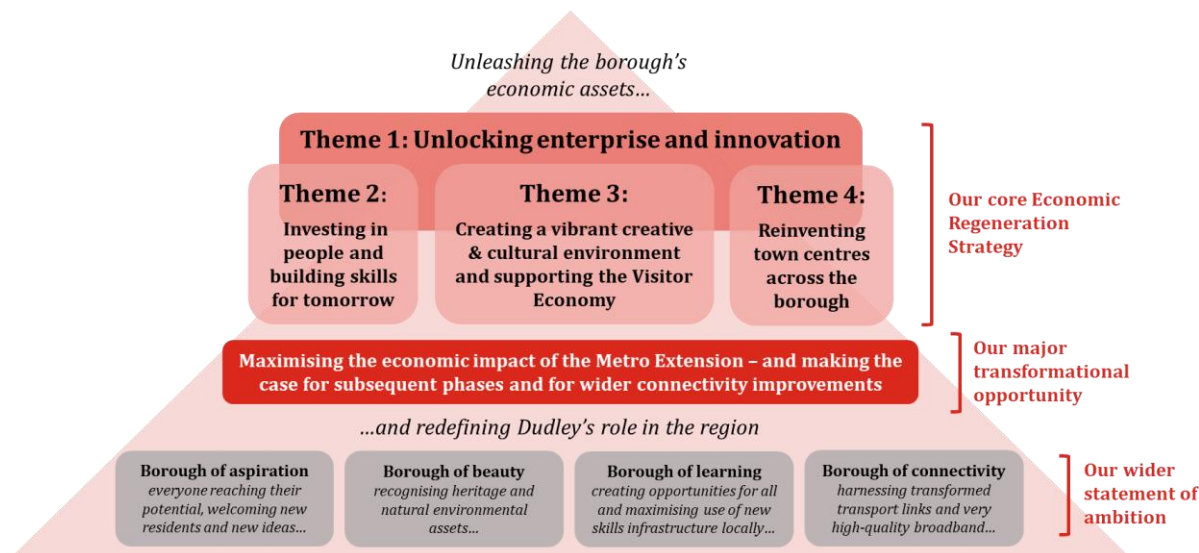
In addition, we will advance a major **transformational opportunity** – which is

concerned with **connectivity**. We will maximise the economic impact of the first phases of Metro Extension (within and as part of the Levelling-Up Zone venture). We will also make the case for subsequent investment in later phases and in other connectivity improvements.

In so doing, **we will redefine Dudley's role in the wider region**. We will come to be known as a borough of aspiration; a borough of beauty; a borough of learning; and a borough of connectivity.

The ERS must succeed. It matters for current and future generations of residents in the borough. It matters for our businesses and for those looking to invest locally. It also matters for the West Midlands as a whole – and indeed the UK more generally.

Figure 5-1: The Economic Regeneration Strategy for the borough of Dudley

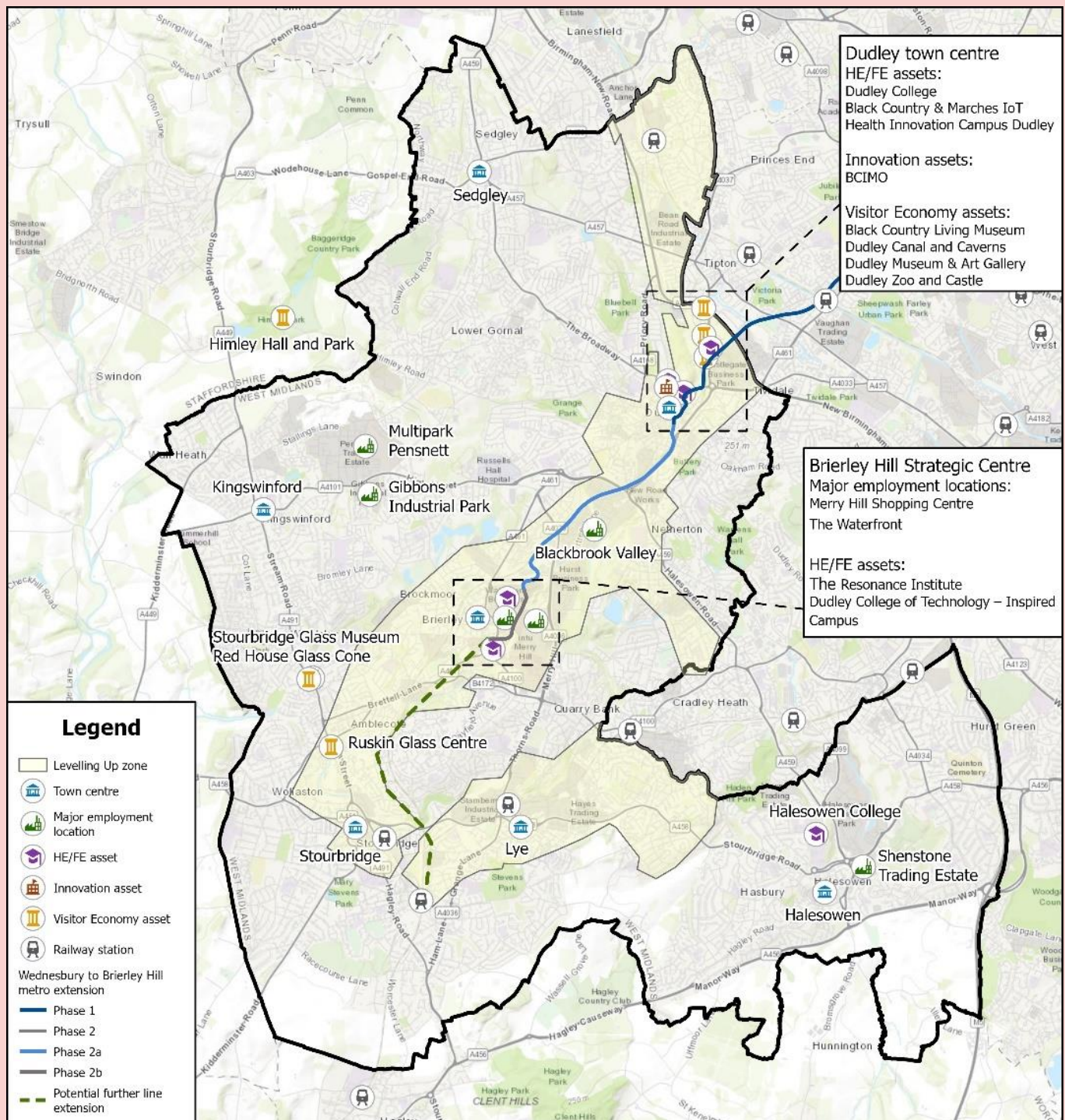


Box A: Dudley Metro Corridor Levelling Up Zone

Plans for Levelling-Up Zones were included in the **West Midlands Combined Authority Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal (DDD)** which was published in draft form in March 2023.

Dudley Metro Corridor is one of the six Levelling-Up Zones. It extends across parts of two Black Country boroughs (Dudley and Sandwell) and includes the area from Dudley to Brierley Hill (and beyond).

Figure A: Map of the borough of Dudley, with the route of the Metro Extension, the Levelling-Up Zone and key economic assets (linked to further and higher education, innovation, visitor economy and employment land)



The DDD brings with it the prospect of:

- **fiscal devolution and investment**, including the retention of business rate growth in defined ‘growth zones’ within Levelling-Up Zones for 25 years
- some £100 million of **brownfield funding** which will be deployed across the region, including in Levelling-Up Zones
- investment of £60 million in the proposed **metro line extension** from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill
- a trailblazing approach to **affordable housing**, which will be delivered with local partners and Homes England
- local flexibilities in relation to **Post-19 skills funding**, allowing for a better alignment of adult skills provision particularly with regard to priority sectors in Levelling Up Zones.

The designation of the Dudley Metro Corridor as a Levelling-Up Zone is a welcome initiative. It should be very significant for economic regeneration across the borough.

The Themes and Action Areas identified in the ERS will have a particular focus and expression within the Dudley Metro Corridor Levelling-Up Zone. Of particular importance is:

- the commitment to **brownfield land assembly to enable business investment and growth** – which is set out in Theme 1
- the **regeneration of strategic/district town centres** within the designated Levelling-Up Zone – which is described in detail in the context of Theme 4
- the intention to **deliver maximum economic impact from the Metro Extension**, and to make the case forcefully for further connectivity improvements (which is a cross-cutting priority).

In implementing the ERS, the proposal is to **explore options for new delivery arrangements**. These could be configured through a formal public-private partnership, or possibly a Special Purpose Vehicle which could resemble an Urban Regeneration Company in function. Dudley MBC will work through a process to consider both its form and its spatial footprint. There are two possibilities in relation to the latter: a geography that is contiguous with the Dudley Metro Corridor Levelling-Up Zone (in the borough) or a borough-wide footprint.

Further, as set out in the ERS the intention is to develop and test options linked to **innovative financing mechanisms**, potentially in the form of an Evergreen Investment Fund. This is a key venture for the borough and it will work in concert with other Levelling-Up Zone instruments, notably those relating to the retention of business rates growth over a 25 year period.

The ERS sets out the priorities for the borough; which complement the opportunities that may come with Levelling-Up Zones status. **The powers and resources that may come with it – would provide a significant fillip for the ERS. It would enable the strategy to be delivered at pace and scale such that the ‘dial could be turned’, both for the designated area and for the borough as a whole.**

Dudley MBC will work closely with West Midlands Combined Authority (and potentially Homes England and DLUHC) to bring these outcomes about.

6. Theme 1 – Unlocking enterprise and innovation

Over the lifetime of the ERS, we will reposition Dudley as a borough of enterprise and innovation at the heart of the West Midlands. This means creating new opportunities for businesses to start up, grow and invest, creating well-paid, sustainable jobs in both established industrial strengths and across a diverse, broad-based economy.

As the analysis in Chapter 3 demonstrates, Dudley faces a long-term challenge in ensuring a sustainable employment base. Jobs growth has been slow over the past twenty years, and the baseline forecasts anticipate further contraction. While there is relatively strong projected growth in vital public sector jobs in areas such as health and social care, **there is a risk of significant loss of private sector employment over time. Unchecked, this will impact on the borough's competitiveness and on opportunities available locally.**

New opportunities will come from an expansion of Dudley's business base – from new firms starting up, existing firms growing and becoming more competitive, and new investors seeing the potential and deciding to locate in the borough. **Over the next ten years, we want to make Dudley an increasingly attractive place to grow and expand a business, creating a dynamic environment for enterprise.**

Rationale and objectives

Objective

The objective of Theme 1 is to **reposition Dudley as a borough of enterprise and innovation, and ensure that existing**

businesses are fully part of this redefined role

Rationale

In 2021, there were over 10,000 businesses in Dudley. The business stock has grown: between 2010 and 2021, the number of enterprises in the Borough increased by around 20% – although the growth rate was substantially lower than the national and regional (WMCA area) averages, principally due to relatively low start-up rates. As elsewhere in the UK, the great majority of enterprises are micro and small businesses (about 88% employ fewer than ten people).

While Dudley lacks the very large 'household name' employers that are important in other parts of the West Midlands, there are many successful businesses that call the borough home. In the manufacturing sector, these include the long-established foundry and advanced castings firm Thomas Dudley Ltd., and the ventilation and air filtration equipment manufacturer Elta. Both these firms are family-owned businesses with a long history in the borough and trading internationally. These are just two of the largest of Dudley's 1,000 manufacturing enterprises, around 40% of which are

engaged in metal fabrication, machinery and equipment – sectors in which Dudley has a long history. Many of these have a vital role in the supply chain for the UK's advanced manufacturing capabilities (for example, MJ Sections in Netherton is a key supplier of precision components to the aerospace industry, including Rolls-Royce and Airbus).

Beyond manufacturing, the business stock is diverse, reflecting the Borough's transition to a service-based economy described in Chapter 3. While Dudley's manufacturing heritage is well-known, the Borough has rapidly growing, innovative businesses in other sectors too – such as the leading motion simulation technology firm Simworx, and Emmiera, the UK's largest furniture repair company.

Considering firms with high growth potential, the commercial data firm Beauhurst tracks some 131 companies in Dudley for indications of innovation, growth and investment: while these include all the manufacturing firms referenced above, some 70% are in non-manufacturing sectors, and over a third were established in the past decade⁵.

Overall, looking across Dudley's business landscape, there are: businesses that are leading in their field; established specialisms; and opportunities for growth in both established and new sectors. **But currently, there is insufficient scale to generate the higher-value employment and productivity that the Borough needs.** It is for this reason innovation and enterprise are central to Dudley's future prosperity.

Strategic priorities

To create '*a Borough of innovation and enterprise*', the ERS proposes action in four priority areas:

- creating space for business growth
- increasing productivity and innovation in Dudley's manufacturing 'core'
- developing a wider environment for innovation across the economy
- building stronger networks of support.

In addition, access to a **skilled, flexible workforce** is central to business growth – and in consultation as part of this Strategy, workforce skills pressures were highlighted by employers as a key constraint. We consider this further in the next chapter, relating to *People and Skills* (Theme 2).

Theme 1 Action Areas – and indicative actions

Theme 1, Action Area 1: Bring forward brownfield land for business expansion

Dudley enjoys some high quality business locations. These include the Pensnett industrial estate in Kingswinford (home to Elta and Simworx cited above and around 200 other tenants), Grazebrook Park industrial estate and the Waterfront office development at Brierley Hill.

However, as noted in Chapter 3, **there is a significant imbalance between the supply of employment land and anticipated demand.** A shortage of industrial space has been recognised as a

⁵ SQW analysis of Beauhurst data

challenge for many years⁶. In consultations for this Strategy, stakeholders described the high volume of investor enquiries that Dudley is unable to accommodate. This prevents the borough from securing new inward investment. It also limits the options for local firms looking to expand within Dudley and, as a consequence, reduces ‘churn’ in the market and the opportunities for firms to take up vacated units. While this presents a brake on growth, it also damages the resilience of the existing industrial base as firms have to use less efficient (and often less environmentally sustainable) stock in the absence of a viable alternative.

Resolving this shortfall is not just a planning policy issue. **There is a need for imaginative solutions to assemble and bring forward brownfield sites, where the market is unable to act alone.** This requires both investment (for example, in site acquisition and remediation) and specialist expertise.

There is a long track record of bringing forward major brownfield sites in Dudley: Brierley Hill Waterfront and Multipark Pensnett are both former industrial sites, and more recently, the Black Country Land and Property Investment Fund has sought to bring forward brownfield development. Over the lifetime of this Strategy, there will also be new opportunities. The **DY5 Enterprise Zone** covers 50 hectares of land for industrial, office and residential development with streamlined planning

processes. The recent designation of the **Dudley Growth Corridor Levelling-Up Zone** also incorporates many of Dudley’s key commercial development opportunities and is explicitly intended to “*open up significant areas of brownfield land*”⁷. This is complemented by the commitment in the DDD to devolve brownfield funding to the WMCA to “*be deployed at scale and pace to de-risk stalled and challenging housing, urban and commercial development sites*”, including in Dudley⁸. Bringing forward complex and often fragmented sites demands long-term investment and concentrated expertise – but there is a supportive policy environment in which the Council can take a leading role.

Theme 1, Action Area 1: Bring forward brownfield land for business expansion

We will take a proactive approach to the identification, assembly and development of brownfield sites, where they can be brought forward for commercial use.

We will make use of the Levelling-Up Zone designation and available powers and funding to bring together expertise and investment, working with the private sector to remove property constraints on growth.

Theme 1, Action Area 2: Supporting productivity and innovation in Dudley’s manufacturing ‘core’

As noted in Chapter 3, **employment in manufacturing in Dudley has fallen**

⁶ See for example from a major regional agent: Johnson Fellows (2017), [Black Country hit by industrial property shortage](#)

⁷ WMCA (2023), [2023 Investment Prospectus](#). See Chapter 10 for further details in relation to links with the Metro extension.

⁸ HM Government/ WMCA (March 2023), [West Midlands Combined Authority Trailblazer Deeper Devolution Deal](#)

sharply in recent decades: from around 35,000 jobs in 1991 to about 18,000 thirty years later. But over the same period, **the value of manufacturing output grew in real terms**, with the sector's *share* of output remaining broadly constant⁹. **The implication is that manufacturing productivity has grown substantially:** the sector generates well-paid, high-value jobs and is strongly rooted in the local community, with several established, locally-owned businesses.

Dudley also makes a vital contribution to the West Midlands' role as the UK's manufacturing heartland: the *West Midlands Plan for Growth* identifies local strengths in relation to the aerospace supply chain and the manufacture of modern, low carbon housing¹⁰, while the Borough has also seen investment in the development of new 'very light rail' technology for use elsewhere in the region.

The resilience and growth of manufacturing is vital to Dudley's long-term prosperity, and there is a strong business base on which to build.

There are some distinct challenges facing the sector locally. As well as physical capacity for growth and access to workforce skills, these include:

- the relative **fragmentation of the sector**, with a large stock of smaller manufacturers often highly focused on delivering for customers in a complex competitive environment, which can limit capacity for collaboration and long-term planning

- an absence of key **anchor institutions**. While the West Midlands enjoys a strong network of universities and research and technology organisations, there is a very limited physical footprint in Dudley itself.

This presents a long-term vulnerability, given the need for UK manufacturers to continually innovate, especially in the context of accelerating digitalisation and the possibilities and challenges of Industry 4.0.

Recognising this, significant investment has already been made in the Black Country Innovative Manufacturing Organisation (BCIMO), a major innovation facility, co-located with the new Institute of Technology just outside Dudley town centre. Over time, this offers the prospect of better access to technology, testing facilities, expertise and opportunities for collaboration for local firms and those from across the West Midlands. Building on this, a sustained strategy must ensure that local and regional integration, alongside industry leadership. This should also help to drive forward the work highlighted in the DDD to develop the West Midlands' innovation ecosystem.

Theme 1, Action Area 2: Developing Dudley's manufacturing innovation offer

Working with WMCA, the universities and industry, we will ensure a sustainable, integrated innovation offer for advanced manufacturing in Dudley. This will build on the major investment in BCIMO, as well as on links with key manufacturing support institutions and programmes across the West Midlands – ensuring that Dudley's innovative manufacturers link

⁹ Oxford Economics estimates

¹⁰ WMCA, [West Midlands Plan for Growth](#)

with the region's world-class offer, and that physical facilities *within* the Borough are an integral part of it.

Theme 1, Action Areas 3 and 4: Developing the wider environment for innovation

In the long run, productivity growth (and therefore the ability to offer higher pay and better opportunities in work) will come from innovation in some form – sometimes through the development of new products and services, but often through the introduction of new processes and ways of working.

Alongside the growth and resilience of the manufacturing sector, we want to support a wider culture of innovation and enterprise across the borough, with the aim of:

- *directly* increasing the number of firms in the borough that have the capacity and appetite to expand, especially those that are active in those sectors of the economy that serve demand beyond the borough, as well as locally
- *indirectly* creating a perception of Dudley as a 'place of possibilities' where there are opportunities to start and grow enterprises, and where these are visible and reinforce our commitment to Dudley as a borough of aspiration.

Theme 1, Action Area 3: Developing a network of innovation centres and hubs

We will develop a network of facilities for innovation across Dudley, offering access to flexible space, support and collaboration. While these could take a variety of forms for different parts of the market (for example, from 'maker space' through to office-type accommodation – they should play a key role in changing

uses in and perceptions of our town centres, linked with the strategy set out in Chapter 9.

Currently, while Dudley does have a 'stock' of innovative businesses as the analysis at the start of this chapter highlights, it lacks scale – reinforced by the absence of some key 'anchor institutions' referred to earlier. Over the lifetime of the ERS, we aim to address this.

Theme 1, Action Area 4: Developing the wider innovation and enterprise support offer

Dudley Council offers a range of services to businesses seeking to start up and expand, delivered through the Dudley First brand. Working together with Business Growth West Midlands, we will continue to offer an integrated support offer – linked with the Council's procurement, skills and regulatory functions to ensure that the 'whole Council' is working to support an enterprising Borough.

Theme 1, Action Area 5: Building stronger business and enterprise networks

Networks are important for local growth. Strong local supply chains can improve business resilience and a good understanding of the local business landscape can enable firms to come together – with the public sector where relevant – to tackle shared challenges. At the same time, in a centrally-located borough, there are outward connections too – across the West Midlands and beyond (and particularly to Worcestershire, Staffordshire and, further afield, towards Bristol and Manchester).

However, while some networks are organic and informal, they often need to be 'animated': it can be challenging to focus

on shared issues and opportunities for collaboration when core business activity is the clear priority.

Theme 1, Action Area 5: Building stronger business and enterprise networks

Linked with the actions set out above and working alongside business-led organisations such as the Black Country Chamber of Commerce, we will seek to build a stronger 'innovation and

enterprise network' across Dudley – enabling the Council and its partners to work with business in response to shared challenges and new opportunities and facilitating wider collaboration.

As part of this, we will develop an agenda for shared working with other regional institutions built around this Strategy – enabling Dudley businesses to fully benefit from the strengths of the wider West Midlands innovation landscape.

7. Theme 2 – Investing in people and building skills for tomorrow

Over recent years, there have been major changes across the labour market in the borough – in part as a result of economic restructuring. Local residents are more highly qualified than they were previously, but still employers complain that they can recruit neither the skills nor the number of people that they need in order to grow. A series of Action Areas is set out in response.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, **Dudley has made some progress in recent years in upskilling its population** to meet the evolving needs of local businesses, and to ensure that local people are able to benefit from opportunities available locally. The number qualified to at least NVQ4 (degree level) grew from 39,000 to 67,000 between 2004 and 2021, an increase of over 74%.

This is partly the result of **substantial investment into the skills infrastructure**, including the ongoing expansion of Dudley College of Technology. Further investment is being made into the borough, including the recent opening of the Black Country and Marches Institute of Technology (in collaboration with the Universities of Wolverhampton and Worcester), the recently announced funding (through Levelling Up Fund) for new college facilities in both Brierley Hill (transport technologies centre) and Halesowen (for vocational training programmes and adult education courses).

Critical to supporting the growth of businesses locally is ensuring an appropriate supply of both labour and

skills. Many businesses locally are complaining about labour shortages, particularly across the technical, health and social care sectors. This reflects Dudley's tight labour market (given high levels of out-commuting); Dudley has high rates of economic activity and low rates of unemployment.

However, **there are still major differences in life chances across the borough** and significant areas of deprivation (with 26% of Dudley's neighbourhoods among the 20% most deprived nationally).

Investing in people and building skills for tomorrow is critical in providing businesses with the labour force needed to succeed, supporting improvements in economic productivity, and improving the prosperity and wellbeing of local communities.

There are three key stages in this process:

- developing the **skills of young people**, so they leave school/college with skills that match the needs of local businesses

- developing the **skills of the existing workforce**, so they are agile and can adapt to changes within the labour market
- supporting those **currently out of the workforce** and supporting them to take up employment.

New entrants to the labour market

The relative youth and diversity of Dudley's population – and indeed the wider region – should mean that there is a future labour force that can **adapt and respond to emerging opportunities**. Currently there are challenges around youth unemployment: the level of NEETs (Not in Employment, Education and Training) in Dudley is higher than the national level (at 3.2% of 16-18 year olds in June 2023).

Dudley is home to **regionally-recognised skills institutions**, and there has been substantial investment in recent years to increase the range of courses available in close partnership with industry. Dudley College of Technology is one of the largest further education providers in the West Midlands, with around 12,000 students each year. It has recently invested in a new Black Country & Marches Institute of Technology, and Health Innovation Dudley, that will deliver new courses tailored to the needs of local businesses. Halesowen College also provides a range of further education courses, with new investment to deliver vocational training programmes and adult education courses.

There are challenges in Dudley **below key stage 4 level**, as flagged by Department for Education. Its current vision for Dudley is to 'raise attainment and progress from early years foundation (EYFS) to key stage 4 and to reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged pupils'¹¹. There are also aspirations to increase capacity in special education and alternative provision to improve outcomes for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people; this is currently under-provided in Dudley.

Improving the skills of the existing workforce

Dudley's 'traditional' sector strengths (i.e. manufacturing) are constantly evolving, **requiring new skills**. The *West Midlands Skills Plan* identifies the need to support employees in the manufacturing sector '**to adapt to modernisation in the form of increased automation and digitalisation**'.

The transition of economy towards net zero carbon should **create opportunities in new sectors**. The emergence of 'green jobs', particularly in the retrofit sector, will require reskilling and upskilling of the existing workforce to support in-work progression.

Supporting those out of the workforce to return to work

There are currently 9,115 people claiming unemployment benefits in the borough, with 15% of households (with a resident

¹¹ [West Midlands trust development statements \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/100444/West_Midlands_trust_development_statements.pdf)

aged 16-64) defined as workless. There are also structural challenges in some of Dudley's communities around long-term and inter-generational unemployment – **Dudley is a 'polarised' borough** in this sense.

There is a need to support these communities in **returning to work**, enabling them to participate fully in society, raising aspirations, and enabling them to progress into further learning and work. The importance of targeting this cohort of the population is grounded in the fact that the poorest adults with the lowest qualifications are the least likely to access adult training despite being the group that would benefit most from it¹². Developing a tailored offer, designed to improve work and pay prospects, supporting social and economic growth, will move towards addressing the root causes of these inequalities. There is already some activity taking place locally in relation to this; Dudley's Employment & Skills Team is already targeting and supporting residents (via key workers) who are furthest from the labour market to upskills and return to active employment. However the scale of the challenge is large, and further long-term funding is needed to support these activities.

Regional opportunities

There are emerging opportunities regionally that will influence the skills agenda moving forward:

- increasing devolution to the WMCA could give Dudley **a greater influence**

on the adult skills system (in particular around post-19 education and skills activity, and in relation to post-16 technical education, skills and careers)

- The West Midlands and Warwickshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (WMW LSIP) focuses on the cross-cutting themes of digital and greens skills, and associated leadership and management capabilities in the region.

Rationale and objectives

Objective

The objective of Theme 2 is to ensure that **people are equipped for economic life**, and that **employers can find the skills they need locally**.

Rationale

With technological and economic change, job roles are **evolving quickly**. It will be important that **skills and training provision keeps pace**.

Businesses in Dudley are currently **struggling to recruit** people to meet their growth ambitions, with skills shortages in technical, health and social care sectors. This will **limit the growth potential and productivity** of Dudley in the future.

Some of Dudley's communities have challenges around inter-generational unemployment and structural unemployment. Supporting these individuals to **(re-)enter the labour market** will address labour shortages

¹² State of the Nation 2023: People and Place, Social Mobility Commission, 2023

locally and help to improve prosperity and wellbeing amongst local communities.

Theme 2 Action Areas – and indicative actions

Theme 2, Action Area 1: Strengthen links between employers, schools and providers to equip people for changing jobs

There are currently **labour market shortages**, with businesses unable to recruit the people and skills they need. Dudley's economy is also in a period of transition, with the decline of 'traditional' manufacturing activities, and a shift towards more advanced manufacturing and business/ professional services, leading to demand for different skills. These changes need to be understood by providers.

Theme 2, Action Area 1: Strengthen links between employers, schools and providers to equip people for changing jobs

We will increase cross-collaboration across the Employment and Skills Board and Business Champions Group, to share insights on skills requirements locally.

We will work to consider potential incentives that can support businesses in becoming more engaged in the skills agenda (e.g. through open days and talks). This could be through incentives (e.g. business rates relief) or grants for time invested.

Theme 2, Action Area 2: Support local people to access skills, training and education opportunities, especially those currently furthest away from the labour market

Inter-generational unemployment is a challenge in some communities. Re-engaging and providing routes back to employment for those out of the labour force will support local businesses and raise aspirations / wellbeing amongst local people.

Theme 2, Action Area 2: Support local people to access skills, training and education opportunities, especially those currently furthest away from the labour market

We will look to identify long-term funding to continue current activity being undertaken by Dudley MBC (funded through UKSPF) to work with community organisations to get more people into Dudley's Dedicated Learning Centres.

We will work with public sector partners to streamline the process for recruiting individuals who are re-entering the labour market (e.g. making job profiles more relevant/applicable for those without qualifications).

Theme 2, Action Area 3: Leverage new investment coming into the borough to deliver skills and training opportunities for local people

There is investment coming into the borough (including the Metro, Levelling Up Fund investment, and private housing and commercial development), with more expected to follow. This investment has the potential to create training and job opportunities for local people if delivered in the right way.

Theme 2, Action Area 3: Leverage new investment coming into the borough to deliver skills and training opportunities for local people

We will work with developers to create employer-led Community Employment Plans for all major developments within Dudley (including the Metro), identifying opportunities for local people (e.g. apprenticeships, employment/training initiatives, school/college engagement activities). We will increase the inclusion of these as part of s106 planning obligations for significant developments.

We will work with employers to champion social value within the Borough, and co-ordinate social value activities so that they can generate maximum value for our communities. Look into potential for financial incentives to encourage more businesses to undertake social value and/or organise activities through local colleges (e.g. work experience days).

Theme 2, Action Area 4: Develop and actively promote Dudley's new and evolving higher education offer

The borough has historically lacked local higher education provision. However recent investment in the Institute of Technology Black Country & Marches, Health Innovation and Dudley College of Technology has led to a new higher education offer in the borough.

This new capital investment presents a local opportunity for learning at higher levels. There is a need to promote this to Dudley's residents and workers.

Theme 2, Action Area 4: Develop and actively promote Dudley's new and evolving higher education offer

We will work with local further and higher education institutions within Dudley to develop a promotional package that highlights the borough's new and evolving higher education offer to local residents.

8. Theme 3 – Creating a vibrant creative and cultural environment, and supporting the visitor economy

Dudley has substantial assets linked to heritage, culture and the Visitor Economy. These need to be seen as a key economic driver in their own right. More could be done with these assets – not least in giving them scale and visibility. A series of Action Areas has been defined in response.

Dudley's visitor economy is a key sector, and its cultural and creative assets are locally important. They generate economic value. They **bring together communities, deliver social value and support the health, wellbeing and a sense of identity for people locally**. They also attract people to local high streets and town centres and help to bring new investment into the area.

Key assets, opportunities, challenges

Visitor Economy

The borough is home to a number of **regionally-important visitor economy and cultural assets**, including the Black Country Living Museum, Dudley Castle and Zoo, Dudley Canal Trust, Red House Glass Cone, UNCESO Black Country Geopark and Dudley Borough Halls (in Dudley, Stourbridge and Halesowen). As of 2022, 9.4 million trips were undertaken in Dudley, generating a visitor spend of £402

million, and helping to support 4,380 tourism jobs¹³.

Whilst the pandemic was obviously a major challenge to the visitor economy, the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham was a major boost. Evidence from the West Midlands Growth Company (the official Destination Management Agency for the Black Country, Birmingham and Coventry) shows that in 2021, the West Midlands attracted more than 100 million visitors, a sharp rise of 72% of visitors compared to 2020 (albeit, the pandemic was then at its height).

The **arrival of the Metro brings new opportunities** for the visitor economy, with improved access to the borough and, potentially, between its visitor attractions. This should create the potential for further growth in the visitor economy.

Culture and creativity

The borough has numerous cultural spaces including museums (including the Black Country Living Museum and Dudley Canal

¹³

<https://www.dudley.gov.uk/business/regeneration/tourism-development/>

Trust), dance theatres (Dudley Evolve Theatre), concert halls (Borough Halls), creative-led hubs (CoLab Dudley, Artspace Dudley) and specialist facilities (The Basement Studios, David's Cave).

Dudley town centre has been recognised as one of five 'cultural clusters' within WMCA's *Cultural Infrastructure Study*¹⁴, with the study recommending that Dudley High Street is positioned as a hub for creativity and culture, that '*reflects on the region's industrial heritage*'.

The arrival of Resonance into Brierley Hill has also created an important opportunity. The music institute (created in consultation with 48 industry colleagues, including Roland, Focusrite, Korg, Yamaha, Marshall, Fender amongst others) provides degree-level courses in music technology. Other courses are provided by Dudley College of Technology in disciplines across music, performing arts, production and art and design. There ought therefore to be a **growing pool of local talent**.

Nurturing the creative and cultural sector is important for Dudley, particularly given **potential wider impacts on placemaking and image**. It is also important given the wider creative economy, with opportunities for the borough to attract creative businesses and people from more expensive locations in Birmingham and elsewhere.

Rationale and objectives

Objective

The objective underpinning Theme 3 is to **build the borough's creative and cultural sectors**, and to ensure that the borough is **culturally enriching for residents, workers and visitors**. The continuing **growth of the wider Visitor Economy** is therefore also a core element.

Rationale

Culture and creativity are central to a vibrant economy – and Dudley has important assets in relation to both. These need to be used and supported, and their wider role in economic regeneration and creating social value locally needs to be encouraged. This could help to **fuel innovation**, and **change perceptions of the borough** to one that **helps attract inward investment and new people**.

There are numerous examples (e.g. Bristol, Leamington Spa and Coventry) of areas that have attracted and developed creative clusters which have **revitalised local economies** and **changed perceptions of places**.

Maximising the impact of the borough's Visitor Economy assets and their value to the area will help the performance of town centres, the wider economy, and local communities.

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<https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/fwue1xwn/wmca-cluster-analysis-report.pdf>

Theme 3 Action Areas – and indicative actions

Theme 3, Action Area 1: Develop a stronger 'package' across different visitor economy attractions within the borough, helping to increase visitor numbers, dwell time and spend

Dudley's Visitor Economy assets are **fragmented**. Whilst their markets/ audiences vary, there is potential to create a combined offer. This could be promoted to attract more tourists, and to increase their dwell time and spend within the borough.

Theme 3, Action Area 1: Develop a stronger 'package' across different visitor economy attractions within the borough

We will develop a 'One Dudley' tourism offer that can be marketed externally to promote Dudley's combined tourism offer. Visitor economy attractions, local hotels, restaurants and town centre assets need to be involved in this combined offer.

We will identify the role that the Metro can play in supporting Dudley's visitor economy, potentially through a combined Metro and visitor economy pass.

We will explore options to improve signage and public realm between visitor economy assets, helping to raise awareness of other attractions locally (for those visiting) and also their proximity to Dudley town centre.

Theme 3, Action Area 2: Promote Dudley as a cultural and creative borough

Dudley has assets that play an important role in **inspiring creativity and**

delivering cultural enriching experiences to local people. These need to be used effectively to help drive wider regeneration priorities.

Theme 3, Action Area 2: Promote Dudley as a cultural and creative borough

We will support the delivery of a new Cultural Strategy that identifies Dudley's cultural offer and helps to support and develop cultural infrastructure locally.

We will position Dudley High Street as a hub for creativity and culture, building on existing activity within the area, and the activities of Co-Lab Dudley (particularly in re-purposing old retail units into different types of creative studio) [This links to Action Area 1 within Theme 4]

We will develop a public art / creative public realm strategy and commission a programme for the borough, that helps to embed Dudley's culture, art and identity within our town centres, and also support artists and creative businesses locally.

We will develop a Creative Enterprise and Skills programme – working with the local FE sector and regional HE sector to build technical and entrepreneurship skills in the creative industries.

We will identify and develop a range of suitable workspaces for creative businesses, which are both affordable for creative businesses, and also adaptable to their needs. Look to locate these in 'visible' locations (e.g. on high streets), which help to develop awareness and a 'buzz' around creative activity locally.

Theme 3, Action Area 3: Deliver more cultural events, particularly in the town centres, helping to change perceptions of the borough

Dudley's town centres are currently undergoing significant change and their role is shifting away from traditional retail uses towards a wider range of activity. The cultural and creative sectors are playing an **increasingly important role in place-shaping**, and also attracting people to visit our towns.

Theme 4 of the ERS provides more detail on the role that the cultural and creative sector can play in towns, and the importance of delivering more cultural events to increase footfall on the borough's high streets. A series of Action Areas is set out in that context (see Theme 4).

Theme 3, Action Area 4: Explore the feasibility of new sport and/or cultural infrastructures within the borough

The Commonwealth Games in Birmingham, and the regeneration activity

and investment that has occurred around Perry Barr (close to Alexander Stadium) has helped to effect regeneration locally.

Dudley does not currently have a regionally and/or nationally significant sporting or cultural asset that could attract people into the area, and act as a catalyst for further investment. If it was made available for local use, a facility of this nature could also bring local health-related benefits.

Theme 3, Action Area 4: Explore the feasibility of new sport and/or cultural infrastructures within the borough

We will undertake a feasibility study in collaboration with partners (including the West Midlands Growth Company) to identify the most appropriate type of sporting or cultural infrastructure for Dudley, both in creating potential demand for such a use in the Borough.

9. Theme 4 – Reinventing town centres across the borough

The strategic and town centres across the borough – principally Brierley Hill, Dudley, Stourbridge and Halesowen – are at the heart of the local economy. They differ from each other, but all face challenges, not least in the context of profound change across the retail sector. The strategic and town centres need to redefine their economic purposes, and a series of Action Areas is set out in response. Most of the strategic and town centres are within the Levelling-Up Zone, and potentially this offers further opportunities.

Key assets, opportunities, challenges

Within the borough of Dudley are **multiple town and local centres**.

The emerging Local Plan identifies one strategic centre (Brierley Hill) and three town centres (Dudley, Stourbridge and Halesowen). These are core building blocks within the wider spatial strategy. In policy terms, the four strategic/town centres are identified as the **principal focus for town centre investment, regeneration and for employment and housing growth borough-wide**.

In all four cases, similar priorities were reflected in Area Action Plans which were adopted between 2011 and 2017; one of these ran to 2021 (Brierley Hill) but the other three run to 2026 and are still extant. There is, in practice, much continuity with the key themes set out in the emerging Local Plan. This will provide a policy framework to replace Area Action Plans.

As reflected in the different planning policy statements, the four urban centres have **particular characteristics and**

opportunities, many of which are deep-seated. The major disjunction in the narrative around the town centres – certainly for Brierley Hill and Dudley – was linked to the formation of Merry Hill from the mid-1980s. This itself is now undergoing significant restructuring and repurposing in the context of major changes to patterns of retailing. With changing patterns of living and working post-pandemic causing a universal reconsideration of town centre functions and the possibilities surrounding Metro Extension creating a particular opportunity for parts of the borough – there is the scope, and the necessity, for another shift.

Dudley has had recent success in attracting place-based investment into its town centres, with Levelling Up Funding secured for Halesowen and Brierley Hill, and funding for a 'Long Term Plan for Towns' in Dudley, with aspirations to use this as a platform for attracting more funding into the area. Each of our towns need a place-based strategy, so that future investment can be prioritised to

complement the unique characteristics of each of our towns.

Based on a review of various planning policy documents and other evidence, the core characteristics of the four main strategic/town centres might be summarised as follows:

- **Brierley Hill:** With a local economy that has changed substantially over recent decades, Formally defined, Brierley Hill has a population of around 15,000 people: it is a small town/urban area, albeit with a strong sense of community and civic engagement. Within the emerging Local Plan, there is an emphasis on links between Merry Hill Centre and Brierley Hill High Street. Merry Hill itself is undergoing reinvestment and a broadening of purpose and focus – away from retail towards a stronger leisure offer. Two Priority Sites and Three Opportunity Sites have been identified for housing and/or mixed-use redevelopment and regeneration.
- **Dudley:** There are significant heritage assets in (or close to) the town centre, and there is also new education provision (e.g. linked to Dudley College) and leisure facilities (e.g. Duncan Edwards Leisure Centre which opened in 2022). Although physically separate from the town centre, there are major Visitor Economy attractions nearby (e.g. Dudley Castle and Zoo, Dudley Canal Trust, Black Country Living Museum). BCIMO and VLRNIC are also within walking distance. Importantly, Dudley has the Metro Extension which is providing improved links to the north and east (towards Wolverhampton and Birmingham). Within the draft Local Plan, two Priority Sites and four Opportunity Sites have been identified for mixed use regeneration and redevelopment alongside several housing-only allocations.
- **Stourbridge:** Located in the west of the borough, Stourbridge is a distinctive settlement and it functions more like a stand-alone market town. The town centre has parks and a canal network around which there are opportunities for investment and regeneration. Three mixed-use Opportunity Sites have been identified for regeneration purposes. In economic terms, Stourbridge has a strong leisure, heritage and cultural offer, with emerging strengths in the creative industries and specialisms linked to the Stourbridge Glass Quarter (which is also part of the Black Country Global Geopark). Stourbridge looks west as well as east, and links to Worcester are important.
- **Halesowen:** Located in the south of the borough, Halesowen has reasonably strong links to Birmingham. Although there is no railway station, there is good access to the motorway network. The population of Halesowen is around 60,000, so it is a larger and perhaps more distinctive town than some of the other urban centres. It is very close to the Green Belt and nearby countryside. Within the emerging Local Plan, five mixed-use Opportunity Sites have been identified for redevelopment and regeneration.

In addition, there are three district centres identified in the emerging Local Plan: **Kingswinford, Lye and Sedgley**; and a series of local centres which are important for local community inclusion.

Across these towns/centres, there is a **great variety of local circumstances**. Halesowen and Stourbridge are more prosperous and economically resilient. However, there are major challenges linked to deprivation in or close to Dudley, Brierley Hill and Lye town centres; all three of which are within the newly designated Levelling-Up Zone.

An important insight during workshop discussions surrounded the **strength of social capital** within some of the towns, and the importance of this in ‘getting things done’; Brierley Hill and Halesowen shone out in this context. **Local communities are very important in terms of the real vitality of town centres.**

Rationale and objectives

Objective

The objective underpinning Theme 4 is to **enable all of the borough’s strategic/town centres to evolve and flourish**, recognising their critical role in terms of the borough’s economic prosperity more broadly.

Beyond this, there is a need to **forge meaningful synergies across the strategic/town centres and the economy** across the wider Levelling-Up Zone which has been defined across much of the east of the borough.

Rationale

Town centres across the borough of Dudley – like many elsewhere – have seen significant change over recent years; some of it is related to the restructuring of retail and some to changing patterns of living and working. **A new vision is needed for the borough’s town centres.** This must recognise and respect the differences between the different urban centres, whilst re-inventing future roles which are defined in partnership with local communities and businesses. More generally, employers across the borough, including those in the public sector, need to recognise the role they can play in helping to sustain town centre economies.

At the same time, however, it must be recognised that regenerating towns across the borough of Dudley has been a clear priority for at least 20 years. The existing set of town-level Area Action Plans were adopted between 2011 and 2017. Prior to that, there was another generation of documents with similar ambitions: an Area Development Framework for Dudley town centre was, for example, adopted in 2005. It asserted that *“a positive and rejuvenating cycle of investment, a unique canvas for urban life and a firm basis for renaissance is within Dudley’s grasp”*. In practice, progress has been modest: there is much continuity in the underlying issues, albeit the scale of the challenge has grown.

However, **there is now an immediate opportunity to advance this agenda** – following the receipt of Levelling Up Fund monies, and through a funding award to Dudley (town) as part of UK government’s recently-published *Long Term Plan for Towns* (October 2023) and the emerging

focus of the Combined Authority on place-based strategy and investment.

Theme 4 Action Areas – and indicative actions

Theme 4, Action Area 1: Advancing a new economic vision for Dudley town centre through a Long-Term Town Plan

Dudley town centre has long been a regeneration priority. Dudley Area Action Plan was adopted in 2017, and much of it has continuing relevance – as has the Area Development Framework from 2005. Both emphasise the historic environment, the importance of the community, and the need for housing development as part of the mix. At the same time, **the arrival of the Metro Extension could be a game-changer**, as could the very different expectations surrounding patterns of living and working post-pandemic and, perhaps, the renewed importance attached to culture, heritage, creativity and well-being.

The new economic vision needs to be distilled quickly, **led by a Town Board** with both gravitas and clear local buy-in. Its first job will be to develop a **Long-Term Town Plan**, incorporating the new economic vision.

Elements that could be considered within the Town Plan include:

- measures to increase the links between the town centre and the major visitor attractions (Dudley Castle, Zoo, Canal Trust and the Black Country Living Museum), helping to support the renewal of our town

centres (particularly in Dudley town centre).

- taking steps to promote and to celebrate the arrival of the Metro Extension to Dudley Flood Street (which will open fully in 2024), particularly in investor conversations: as it stands, the Metro Extension is not the end of the story, but it needs to be recognised as a significant milestone and an achievement, and a source of momentum on which to build.
- exploring opportunities to increase provision for managed workspace and/or innovation within the town centre, perhaps through the repurposing of one or more historic buildings (and complementing provision linked to the VLRNIC and BCIMO).
- developing a clear delivery plan for Portersfield, the major site close to the Metro.
- accelerating housing development in and around the town centre; this will increase local spend, support businesses, and help make Dudley more attractive for potential occupiers.
- creating additional leisure/visitor facilities within the town centre, through redevelopment of brownfield land.
- working with local people to identify and define assets of community value, and then to ensure that these are preserved and respected as the economic vision is delivered.

In addition, within Dudley, consideration should be given to **forming a locally-led Urban Development Corporation** (LUDC). The provisions of the UK Government's *Long-Term Plan for Towns* allow local authorities to request to designate an urban development area and create a local urban development corporation to drive forward regeneration plans. This would clearly need discussion and consideration, but the case for Dudley town centre could be a strong one – particularly given the long history of regeneration strategies but also the (perhaps) unique moment that the arrival of the Metro Extension represents.

Theme 4, Action Area 1: Advancing a new economic vision for Dudley town centre through a Long-Term Town Plan (following announcement of new funding and toolkit of powers)

We will complete a programme of work – led by a Town Board – to develop and then implement a Long-Term Town Plan with a core economic vision for the town centre.

There will be many different elements to this as set out above. Their purpose, in combination, will be to effect economic transformation within Dudley town centre.

Theme 4, Action Area 2: Supporting partnership working in town centres across the borough to deliver change

Across all of the strategic/town/district centres there is a need to **support meaningful, locally-owned, partnership arrangements**. These should bring together community leaders (including faith groups), business people, and local

bodies who together might forge the future of their town centre.

These partnerships could take the form of **Town Boards** across the piece – although other structures are also possible. Whatever their structure, they need to be capable of engaging in place-shaping at a local level; securing high levels of community involvement; developing and committing to a long-term economic vision; and involving businesses throughout.

Employers in particular have important civic responsibilities in this context. The pandemic accelerated a shift to remote working, particularly amongst those in office-based jobs. This has been seen across both the private and public sectors, but it has generally been to the detriment of town centres which – in many cases – are struggling to function as employment hubs. **There is an urgent need to seed a new dialogue with employers.** Town Boards may be one vehicle for this across the borough, although local Chambers of Commerce (and other groups) could also have a key role to play.

In this context, steps should be taken to **re-establish the role of civic anchor institutions at town level**. In practice, this might mean key businesses – but it also needs to involve major public sector employers, including (for example) Dudley College and Dudley MBC itself. These ‘anchors’ are major local employers in their own right, but they also **influence local economic well-being** in many other ways – through their supply chains, their procurement practices, their travel plans, their decisions in terms of the use of community assets, their contribution to

social value (through, for example, staff volunteering), and so on. We know there is already embryonic work being undertaken regarding the development of a Dudley Anchor Institution Group, which is being led by the Dudley Health & Care Partnership; more collaboration across civic anchor institutions like this is needed.

Theme 4, Action Area 2: Supporting partnership working in town centres across the borough to deliver change

We will engage with town centres to strengthen local partnership working. This may take different forms in different places, but its purpose will be to secure consistent engagement from the private, public and voluntary/community sectors.

Theme 4, Action Area 3: Developing Business Improvement Districts

One route forward could potentially involve the **formation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)** in strategic/town/district centres. There are already some very active BIDs within the borough – including, for example, the Halesowen BID. On its website, this is described as *“created and managed by Halesowen businesses, for Halesowen businesses and organisations, to secure consistent interest and investment in Halesowen”*. Initiatives of this nature are needed elsewhere.

Theme 4, Action Area 3: Developing Business Improvement Districts

We will work with local strategic/ town/ district centres to explore the feasibility of establishing BIDs. Where there is support for the concept, we will work with local partners to implement BIDs

Theme 4, Action Area 4: Promoting cultural and creativity across the borough’s strategic/town centres

Across the borough, there is evidence that the **cultural and creative sectors are playing a growing role in place-shaping**. They have a major impact on well-being, and the attractiveness and vitality of urban environments, in all senses.

Rehearsing the priorities identified in the context of Theme 3, the ERS needs to make appropriate provision for cultural and creative activities at a town level. This could involve affordable workspace. Active local promotion – through social media and other channels – will also be a feature.

The aim must be to support local communities (and community groups) to make arts, music and other forms of cultural life (from beer festivals to farmers’ markets) a **core part of the experience of the borough’s towns**. Local sports and recreation activities (football, cycling, etc.) should also be encouraged as part of the mix. This suite of activities must resonate with people of all ages and with both newcomers and those who have never lived anywhere else. Town Boards (or equivalent) will have an important role in this context.

Theme 4, Action Area 4: Promoting cultural and creativity across the borough’s strategic/town centres

We will work with strategic/town centres and to nurture and support the cultural and creative sectors locally. Different measures will be introduced as appropriate – including the provision of affordable workspace, grants to community arts groups, ‘pop up’ markets,

support for festivals and so on. In combination, these actions will help to re-create the borough's town centres as creative and culturally enriching places, where both residents and visitors can have fun and enjoy themselves.

Theme 4, Action Area 5: Working with developers to forge constructive working relationships across the borough in respect of strategic/town centre regeneration, in the context of wider progress across the Levelling Up Zone

In delivering the ERS, there is a need for a far more **constructive and effective dialogue** with the development industry in respect of town centre regeneration across the borough. Here, there is a leadership role for Dudley MBC, working with the Town Boards as they emerge.

Three imperatives are especially important. They surround the need for:

- better, and more consistent, communication around a clear agenda for town centre regeneration
- a more creative and consistent dialogue in relation to passive buildings and retrofit (including in relation to the re-use of historic buildings), in the context of priorities linked to net zero carbon
- the development industry and Dudley MBC to work closely with local communities to understand the aspirations (and concerns) of local people, and for these insights to be

reflected in effective approaches to development gain.

This could all be linked to the provisions of the emerging Local Plan once it is formally adopted.

More generally, the same group of imperatives will apply across the wider Levelling-Up Zone: the major strategic/town centres are all within it, and they will be a core element of its economic priorities.

Theme 4, Action Area 5: Secure agreement with developers on the joint delivery of strategic/town centre regeneration in the context of wider progress across the Levelling Up Zone

We will seek to establish a developers' forum so that we can improve our dialogue with the development sector. This will help to improve channels of communication both with Dudley MBC and, potentially, with the wider community. It should also help accelerate development processes, and ensure that the interests of developers and communities across the borough are better aligned.

In addition, our thinking is that a closer and more consistent dialogue will help in terms of the journey to net zero carbon – whether through passive new builds or through retrofit processes, including with regard to historic buildings.

10. Cross-Cutting Priority – Maximising the impact of Metro and driving investment in future connectivity

Investment in the Metro extension to Brierley Hill will substantially enhance Dudley's connectivity, linking up key town centres and major developments and aligned with the Levelling Up Zone. Over the coming decade, we need to maximise the impact of this new asset. But we also recognise that this is the first stage of a journey towards a better connected Borough, not the end of the story – and we will continue to advance a compelling economic case for investment in the network.

Dudley's connectivity challenge

Dudley's relatively poor transport connectivity has long been a barrier to growth. Rail links across the borough are weak, with Dudley, Brierley Hill and Halesowen all lacking direct rail access. This in turn exacerbates road congestion, leading to lengthy car and bus journey times. As well as environmental pressures, this leads to significant negative economic impacts by:

- **Impeding the ability of local residents to access work** (and other) opportunities within a reasonable period. According to Transport for the West Midlands' 'place framework', communities around Dudley and Brierley Hill experience some of the worst transport accessibility in the region, with poor public transport options alongside low rates of car ownership¹⁵

- **Limiting town centre and visitor economy opportunities**, as key visitor attractions and retail and service centres remain largely car-borne
- **Reducing opportunities for new investment**, especially in leisure and to some extent residential schemes, and in the type of commercial space that is needed for a more diverse, higher value economy. This is especially the case as public preferences shift towards demand for more sustainable transport and better-connected places become increasingly investible.

The challenge of weak connectivity stands in contrast to Dudley's central, urban location. Across the 8.6 miles from Dudley bus station to Birmingham Centenary Square, the minimum current public transport journey time is 56 minutes¹⁶, with similarly complex and lengthy journeys required to destinations in the

¹⁵ TfWM (2023), [West Midlands Local Transport Plan: Area Strategy Guidance Tool](#)

¹⁶ Transport for the West Midlands

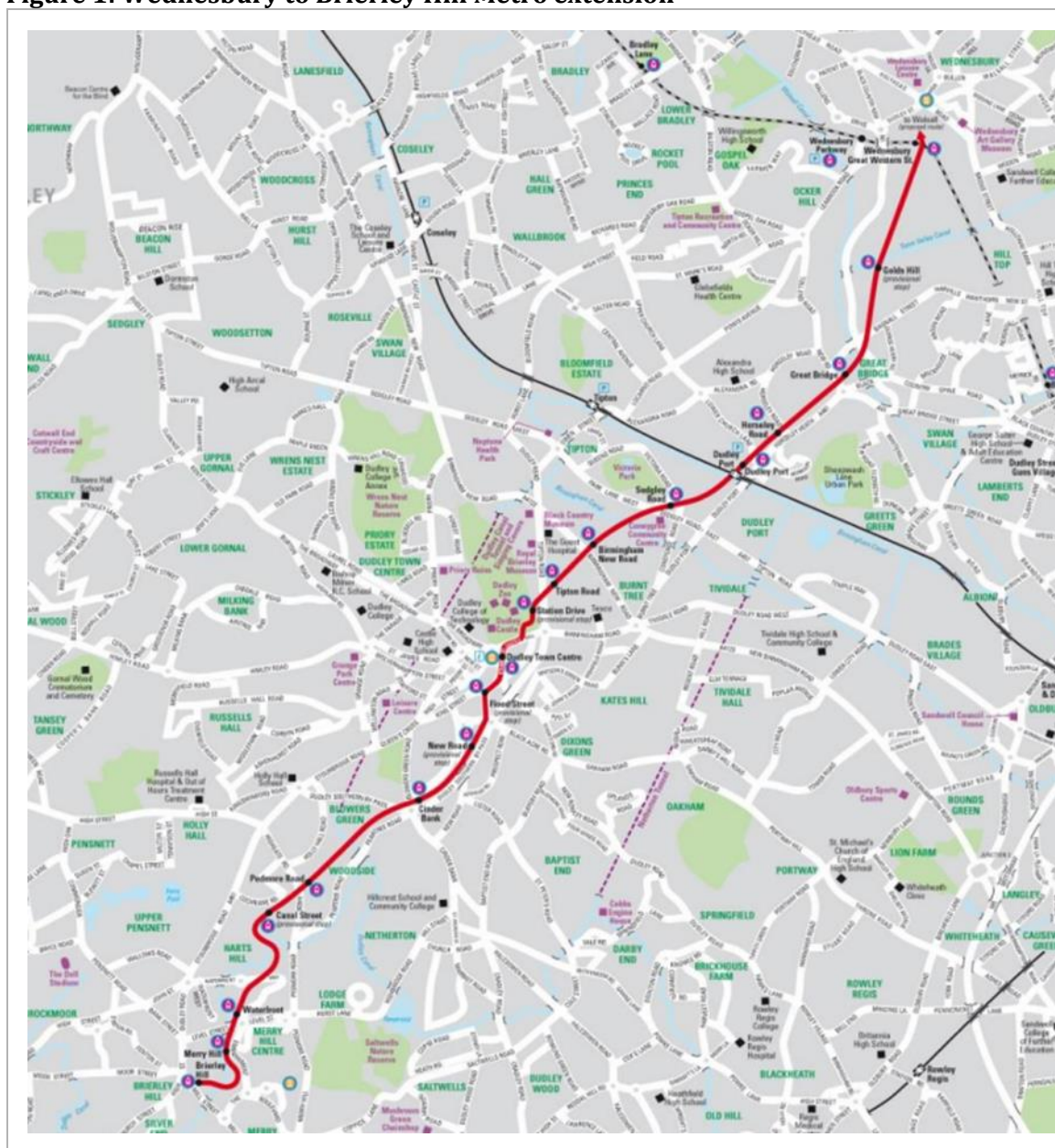
Black Country. So while Dudley is fully within one of Europe's largest urban agglomerations, poor connections mean that it fails to capture the benefits of this potentially advantageous position.

The Metro opportunity

In this context, the extension of the West Midlands Metro from Wednesbury to

Brierley Hill via Dudley is potentially 'game-changing'. In summary, the extension involves 10.7km of new tramway, running south from Wednesbury (where it connects with Metro Line 1), through Dudley Port (connecting with the Birmingham-Wolverhampton railway line), Dudley town centre, Waterfront, Merry Hill shopping centre and Brierley Hill.

Figure 1: Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Metro extension



Source: Source: Midland Metro Alliance (2017), [Wednesbury to Brierley Hill Economic Case](#)

The first stretch from Wednesbury to Dudley Flood Street will open in 2024, also providing direct connectivity to Dudley Castle and Zoo, the Black Country Living Museum, the new Health Innovation facility and the potential innovation district around the BCIMO centre. **In short, it provides an important transport spine through several of Dudley's key assets, alongside major development sites and communities that experience the poorest connectivity.**

The second phase through to Waterfront is also now funded, including through a contribution of £60 million from the DDD.

However, the final sections of the current planned scheme, from Waterfront through Merry Hill to Brierley Hill town centre, remain unfunded – but are vital to realise the full benefits of the route. Beyond Brierley Hill, there are also plans for a continuation of the line to Stourbridge, although a detailed scheme has yet to be developed.

Strategic significance

The delivery of the Metro will contribute to the success of all four of the Themes identified earlier. Over the lifetime of this Strategy, it will also be important to **make the most of the first phases of the Metro** as they come forward, ensuring that the economic benefits are felt locally; **demonstrate the economic and strategic case for continued investment** in the rest of the Metro link (including those sections of the existing planned scheme that are not yet fully funded); and

champion sustained efforts to secure better connectivity over the longer term.

Cross-Cutting Priorities – and indicative actions

Cross-Cutting Priority, Theme 1: Maximising the benefits of the first phases of the Metro extension

The original economic case for the Metro extension identified benefits relating to additional development (i.e., office and industrial space that would be accelerated as a result of investment), as well as a range of 'wider benefits', including the regeneration of Dudley and Brierley Hill town centres, improved access to the cluster of leisure and heritage assets in Dudley, and easier access to employment opportunities¹⁷.

Subsequent developments provide confidence that the economic benefits of the Metro extension will be achieved, and will be augmented by the other proposals outlined in this Strategy. For example, advanced works on the Metro in Dudley town centre have supported greater investor interest in the Portersfield site. Work since the original business case on the innovation assets on Castle Hill/ Tipton Road (i.e., BCIMO and the Institute of Technology) will be supported in their expansion by the adjacent Metro opportunity. **Overall, the case for the Metro remains very strong, and is reinforced by recent developments.**

¹⁷ In addition to 'user benefits' such as journey time savings. Midland Metro Alliance (2017),

As the Metro extension becomes a reality, we need to go further in making sure we maximise its potential. The new **Levelling Up Zone** provides a major opportunity, incorporating the Metro ‘spine’, alongside many of Dudley’s key development sites, within a corridor broadly the same as that envisaged in the Metro business case.

The Levelling Up Zone concept was launched by WMCA in 2023, as a way of bringing together a package of business rates retention, fiscal incentives and planning certainty alongside major capital investment to *“bring regeneration to those parts of the region that need levelling up more than others and improve accessibility through better co-ordination of transport and land use”*¹⁸. Importantly, it is not just a package of ‘Enterprise Zone’-style incentives to unlock a series of sites: rather, it involves the potential for a range of other spending flexibilities, use of compulsory purchase powers and the opportunity to create recyclable investment funds to drive forward integrated regeneration across a more complex geography. **Making the Levelling Up Zone ‘work’ will be at the heart of our benefits realisation strategy for the Metro.**

**Cross-Cutting Priority, Action Area 1:
Maximising the impact of Metro through
our Levelling Up Zone ambitions**

We will take a strategic approach in planning for the Dudley Growth Corridor Levelling Up Zone, with the aim of realising the Metro opportunity. That means a focused effort on unlocking key developments – but it also means

integrating our town centre priorities outlined in this Strategy to drive an integrated approach.

**Cross-Cutting Priority, Action Area 2:
Making the case for future phases of the
Metro**

The actions that we take to maximise the benefits of the first phase of the Metro will be important in making the case for future phases. Extending the Metro to Brierley Hill and, ultimately, to Stourbridge, will yield substantial economic returns for Dudley, through developments unlocked, access to employment and better strategic links to the rail network, as well as important environmental benefits.

But strategic transport investment is expensive, competitive and long-term. The business case must therefore be compelling:

**Cross-Cutting Priority, Action Area 2:
Making the case for future phases of the
Metro**

Building on the evidence of the impacts of the first phases of the Metro extension, we will ensure that there is a strong case for future phases – including the final planned section, which ought to be delivered in the lifetime of this Strategy, and future phases for which we need to plan now.

In the first instance, we will review the economic case for the extension, recognising that some projected benefits will have changed in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent changed working practices and in the light of more recent complementary investments.

¹⁸ WMCA (2023), [Levelling Up Growth Prospectus](#)

**Cross-Cutting Priority, Action Area 3:
Championing sustained efforts to improve
connectivity**

While the Metro is an essential, transformational investment, **Dudley needs sustained, long-term investment in its transport connectivity** if it is to truly realise the potential of its location. Even with the full Metro investment, Dudley's transport infrastructure will still be relatively weak compared with other parts of the West Midlands.

However, Transport for the West Midlands has ambitious plans. The *Local Transport Plan* sets out the need for a 'big move' in travel behaviours and the infrastructure needed to support this, setting an ambition that *"all communities have excellent walking, cycling and public transport access ... so that most local trips are made by*

*sustainable modes of transport"*¹⁹. Currently, Dudley is some way from realising this ambition – but the economic benefits could be significant, not least in changing perceptions of the Borough as a place to live and invest.

**Cross-Cutting Priority, Action Area 3:
Investing in sustained connectivity
improvements**

Looking to the longer term and working closely with TfWM and business leaders, we will make the case for further investment in public and sustainable transport, especially where it contributes to the reinvention of our town centres and our success as an business investment proposition – setting the groundwork for a transformation in Dudley's connectivity.

¹⁹ Transport for the West Midlands, [*Reimagining Transport in the West Midlands: Local Transport Plan Core Strategy*](#)

11. Delivering the ERS

Our Vision and Strategy are ambitious: equal to the scale of the economic challenge that Dudley faces and the opportunities that could be unlocked. Delivering the ERS means action 'at scale and pace': in ensuring that there is strategic delivery capacity for transformational change and in ensuring that people and businesses see tangible progress and opportunity in the shorter term.

Ambition – and the case for change

Our Vision is bold and audacious. The Economic Regeneration Strategy through which it will be achieved is similarly ambitious.

Although the borough as a whole has both assets and opportunities, the need for an ambitious growth plan is real. It is also urgent. Dudley needs to 'shift the dial' in relation to its economic fundamentals: there has been no net jobs growth over the last two decades and projections point to future jobs loss while the population of working age is growing. **Unless the ERS is delivered at pace and scale, there is a risk that Dudley will fall behind (compared to its neighbours), continuing an eastwards shift in the West Midlands' economic centre of gravity.**

Recent years have seen some progress – for example, through the significant investment in further education. But across Dudley – at the level of the borough and individual towns within it – there is much more to do.

There is a long history of strategies and plans and special initiatives that have

made only a limited impact relative to the scale of the challenge. **The need now is for something different and appropriate to the borough of Dudley's metropolitan scale and ambition.**

Delivering change means action on three fronts:

- first, ensuring that there is **strategic capacity** in place for long-term change and planning, marshalling a wide range of resources
- second, in the short-to-medium term, ensuring that the **whole Council works together** to deliver the more 'incremental' changes that show visible progress on the ground
- third, ensuring that **local communities and businesses benefit** throughout the regeneration process.

Ensuring strategic capacity

Dudley MBC is fully committed to driving the ERS forward, and to flexing its own resources in response. However the ERS is bigger than the Council and in delivering it, there will be a need to galvanise inputs

from the private sector and from other public sector partners and stakeholders.

Delivery will, in particular, rely on a strong working relationship with the West Midlands Combined Authority.

Many of the priorities within the ERS are aligned with different elements of the *West Midlands Plan for Growth*. They are also consistent with the various priorities set out in the *DDD* – which was published in draft form by WMCA and UK Government in March 2023. **WMCA needs to become, in effect, a core delivery partner.**

But there may be a need for more, and Dudley MBC will need to explore different and radical options too.

If there are two issues above all others that would make a difference across the borough they would be defined in relation to employment land and connectivity. These have been discussed in Theme 1 and in relation to Cross-Cutting Priorities. However they need further discussion, particularly in respect of delivery.

In relation to employment land, whilst there is supply proposed within the emerging Local Plan, there is no clear offer for the inward investors or growth businesses that the borough must both nurture and attract if it is to ‘shift the dial’. To create sites, the imperative is for brownfield land assembly – linked to investment – but this is complicated, costly and time-consuming.

Within the ERS, the possibility of a LURC is raised in relation to the regeneration of Dudley town centre. This follows on principles considered in ‘Our Long Term Plan for Towns’ (published by DLUHC in

October 2023), which includes provision for Town Boards to work with the relevant local authority to create a localised form of an LUDC. This needs careful consideration, but it could be significantly helpful.

But there is, in addition, a need for a wider delivery body – defined either in relation to the Levelling-Up Zone, or the borough as a whole.

There are many possible models which could be considered. These may be more or less formally constituted, and they bring with them different powers and resourcing implications. In principle, they range from local partnerships and local delivery vehicles through (potentially) to much more ambitious public-private partnerships, special purpose vehicles, Urban Regeneration Companies and Development Corporations (with planning powers).

The Levelling Up Zone – with the Metro Extension – presents an opportunity at scale. This could be linked to a focused approach to brownfield land assembly – and also, potentially, to innovative financing mechanisms, perhaps an Evergreen Fund of some form (linked to the retention of business rates). A package of this nature, as outlined in Chapter 10, could be transformational – but it would need strong leadership and significant resourcing.

Key interventions surrounding the delivery of the ERS

Within our Action Plan, we are advancing three critical actions linked to the delivery of the ERS. One is focused on exploring options for public-private partnership arrangements or a special purpose delivery vehicle – which could take the

form of a URC. The second is focused on new approaches to financing, perhaps through an Evergreen Fund.

Ensuring a 'whole Council' approach

Long-term strategic planning and delivery takes time, and the results are not always visible for several years. But support over the long haul will be galvanised by evidence of progress in the nearer term. Dudley has been successful in recent years in delivering tangible town centre environmental improvements, helping businesses to expand and developing the visitor economy offer – all important dimensions of the Strategy. This work needs to continue, and will be reinforced by the new Levelling Up Fund coming into the Borough.

Building on this, we recognise that economic regeneration is a mission for the whole of Dudley Council – not just a single core team. This includes planning, housing, transport, cultural development and the Council's estates function, as well as those parts of the Council that have a leading role in ensuring quality of life, from protecting the quality of the everyday environment to addressing anti-social behaviour. Ultimately, economic regeneration is about a shared ambition for the Borough, in which everyone working for the Council has a stake. This will help address the findings of the recent Local Government Association Peer Review.

Ensuring community benefit

The process of economic regeneration also needs to be inclusive. Dudley contains some of the West Midlands' most disadvantaged communities, many of which are encompassed by the Levelling Up Zone. We want to ensure that people and local businesses across the Borough benefit, by:

- **Consulting and engaging on long-term plans** for regeneration, alongside tangible, shorter-term change
- **Engaging young people in the vision for the future of the Borough** and the towns within it, demonstrating the stake that they will have in its new opportunities and linking this with the skills development offer
- **Ensuring social value throughout the regeneration process.** This means expecting contractors to offer supply chain opportunities for local businesses and employment opportunities to local residents. As part of this, we will use the Council's procurement power to secure opportunities for those for whom the Council has specific responsibilities, or who have greater challenges in accessing work. Working closely with DWP and local skills providers, we will ensure a joined-up approach.

Monitoring and evaluation

In delivering the ERS, a clear approach to monitoring and evaluation will be important. This will help Dudley MBC track progress – both for its own benefit, and as a basis for communicating with partners and stakeholders. It will also ensure that an ongoing process of learning and improvement is designed into the delivery process.

Contextual indicators

A series of Key Performance Indicators will be identified for the borough. These will be monitored over time to provide insights into overall progress. These are likely to include:

- jobs density
- GVA per job
- average earnings of working age population
- proportion of people qualified to NVQ4 or above
- unemployment rate
- economic activity rate

- business start-up and survival rates
- innovation active businesses
- provision of employment land
- town centre vitality
- public health
- child-friendly Dudley

Monitoring project delivery

In addition, the progress of individual projects will be monitored at the intervention level – focusing on key spend, output and outcome metrics.

Evaluation

The intention will also be to evaluate the schemes supported through the ERS. Major schemes will be subject to impact evaluation – partly to generate real evidence on what works. But the intention will also be to review the effectiveness of partnership arrangements, recognising that a system-wide approach to evaluation is likely to provide important insights.

An aerial photograph of Dudley, West Midlands, showing a mix of residential housing on a hillside and a large-scale regeneration project in the foreground. The foreground features a modern, multi-story building with solar panels on its roof, a parking lot filled with cars, and a large area of land under construction with heavy machinery like a yellow excavator and a concrete mixer truck. A semi-circular road and a green field are also visible. The background shows a densely populated residential area on a hill under a clear sky.

Dudley Economic Regeneration Strategy

Action Plan

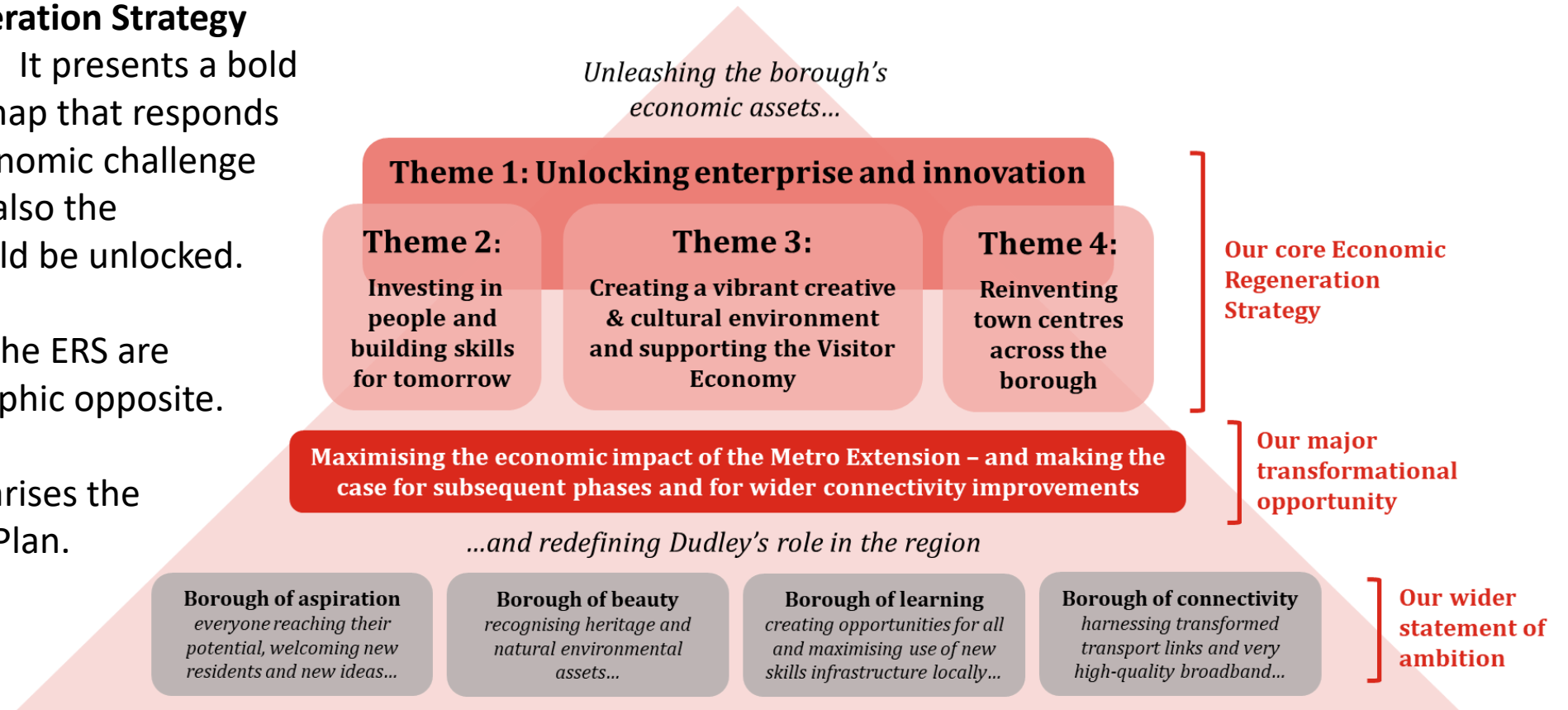
March 2024

Dudley's Economic Regeneration Strategy

Dudley MBC (DMBC) has developed a new Economic Regeneration Strategy (ERS) for the borough. It presents a bold and audacious route map that responds to the scale of the economic challenge that Dudley faces but also the opportunities that could be unlocked.

The core elements of the ERS are summarised in the graphic opposite.

This document summarises the accompanying Action Plan.



Introduction to the Action Plan

This Action Plan distils what now needs to happen to make headway in relation to the themes and priorities identified in the ERS.

Specifically, it outlines:

- the broad action areas and, indicatively, the specific actions that will be advances for each of the themes identified within the ERS
- how the ERS as a whole will be delivered, and the ways in which DMBC will work with partners
- roles and responsibilities moving forward.

There is an accompanying spreadsheet that provides further detail on action areas and actions.

As well as defining action areas/actions, progress is also needed in relation to the process of delivery:

- first, there is a need to ensure that there is strategic capacity in place for long-term change and planning, marshalling a wide range of resources
- second, in the short-to-medium term, the whole Council will work together to deliver ‘incremental’ changes that show visible progress on the ground
- third, DMBC will ensure that local communities and businesses benefit throughout the regeneration process.

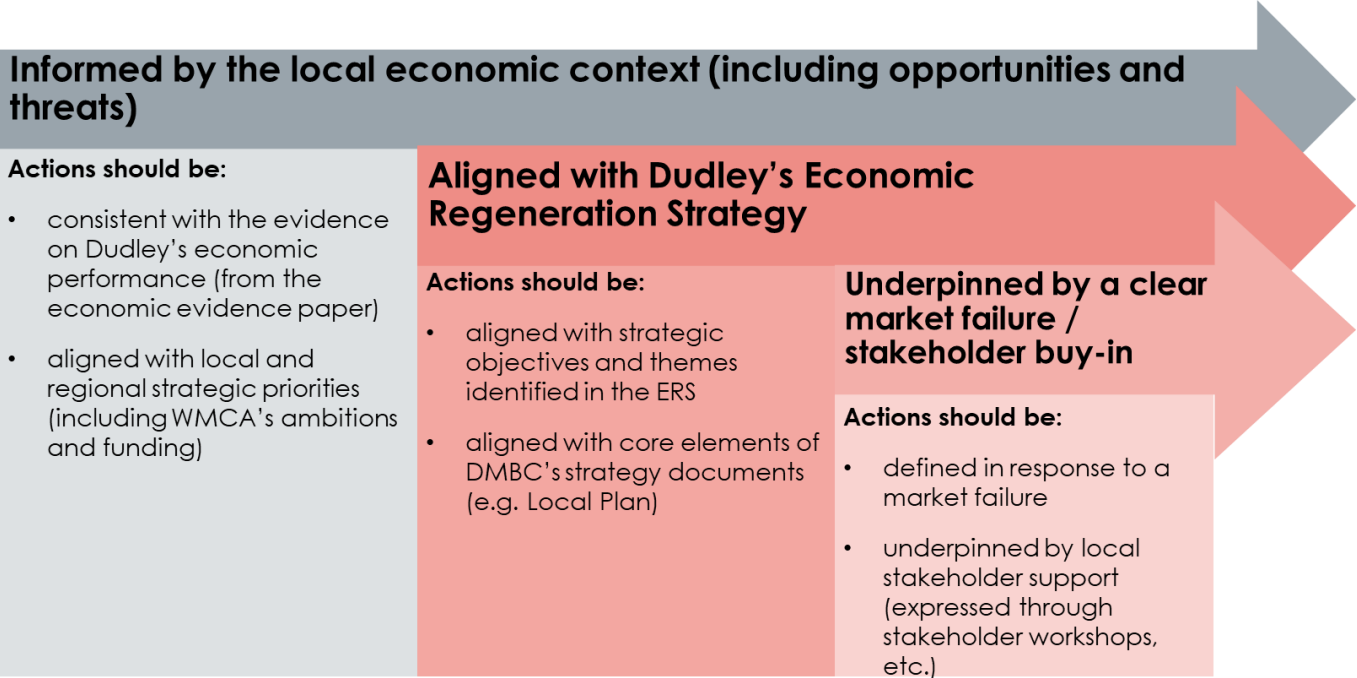
How and why specific action areas and actions have been identified

The broad action areas and the more specific actions within this Action Plan have been defined in response to the ERS.

As summarised opposite, all actions are

- informed by the local economic context;
- aligned with the imperatives set out in the ERS; and
- underpinned by a clear intervention rationale.

If these actions are delivered with pace and urgency, they should help to ‘shift the dial’ in relation to Dudley’s economic prospects. The Council will work with partners to deliver the actions and could have different roles depending on each individual intervention.



Action Plan

Theme 1: Unlocking Enterprise & Innovation

Local economic context

Evidence suggests:

- long-term challenge in ensuring a sustainable employment base
- slow jobs growth and baseline forecasts anticipate further decline
- number of enterprises in Dudley growing at slower rate than nationally / regionally
- insufficient scale to generate higher-value employment / productivity opportunities

Alignment with Dudley's Economic Regeneration Strategy

ERS calls for:

- new space for business growth and retention of employment land within Local Plans
- increased productivity and innovation in Dudley's manufacturing core
- the creation of a wider environment for innovation across the economy
- stronger networks of support to increase access to funding and sector collaboration

Clear market failure argument / stakeholder buy-in

Intervention rationale includes:

- imbalance between supply of employment land and anticipated demand, and lack of spaces available to support innovation
- the need for business models for innovation space that ensures commercial sustainability
- low awareness and engagement within the business community of business support / innovation opportunities that exist

Theme 1: Unlocking Enterprise & Innovation

Action Area	Action
1. Bring forward brownfield land for business expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop a strategic approach to site assembly and delivery of employment land
2. Develop Dudley's manufacturing innovation offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work towards a secure future for BCIMO/ VLRNIC
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strengthen links with the wider West Midlands manufacturing innovation support landscape
3. Develop a network of innovation centres and hubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deliver a series of facilities offering a combination of flexible workspace and innovation / business support geared to the needs of 'pre-start', start-up and early-stage growth companies.
4. Develop the wider innovation and enterprise support offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Work with regional partners (WMCA/WMGC) to facilitate access to a range of innovation and enterprise products
5. Building stronger business and enterprise networks	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deliver stronger business networks and partnerships

Theme 2: Investing in people and building skills for tomorrow

Local economic context

Evidence suggests:

- labour shortages across key sectors restricting business growth potential
- high level of youth unemployment
- low levels of attainment at key stage 4
- long-term unemployment in some communities
- growing volume of investment into Dudley (e.g. Metro, Levelling Up Fund investment, residential / commercial development)
- limited, although growing, higher education provision

Alignment with Dudley's Economic Regeneration Strategy

ERS calls for:

- investment in skills to reflect shifting job roles in response to technological change
- raising awareness of career opportunities within a modernising manufacturing sector
- reskilling and upskilling of the existing workforce to enable a transition to 'green jobs'

Clear market failure argument / stakeholder buy-in

Intervention rationale includes:

- mismatches between the skills of the labour force and skills needed by businesses
- lack of co-ordination / communication between employers and education institutions
- limited awareness of training opportunities available locally (especially around HE)

Theme 2: Investing in people and building skills for tomorrow

Action Area	Action
1. Strengthen links between employers, schools and providers to equip people for changing jobs	Increase collaboration between the Employment and Skills Board and Business Champions Group, to share insights on local skills needs.
	Identify incentives that can support businesses in becoming more engaged in the skills agenda (e.g. through open days and talks).
2. Support local people to access skills, training and education opportunities, especially those currently furthest away from the labour market	Identify long-term funding to continue activity being undertaken by DMBC (which is currently funded through UKSPF) to work with community organisations to get more people engaged in both formal and informal learning and training opportunities.
	Work with public sector partners to streamline the process for recruiting individuals who are re-entering the labour market (e.g. making job profiles more relevant/applicable for those without qualifications).
3. Leverage new investment coming into the borough to deliver skills and training opportunities for local people	Work with investors to create employer-led Community Employment Plans for all major developments within Dudley (including the Metro), identifying learning opportunities for local people (e.g. apprenticeships, employment/training initiatives, school/college engagement activities). Over time, look to make these form part of S106 planning obligations for significant developments.
	Work with large employers to champion social value within the Borough, and co-ordinate social value activities to generate maximum value for communities.
4. Develop and actively promote Dudley's new and evolving higher education offer	Work with local further and higher education institutions within Dudley to promote Dudley's new and evolving higher education offer to local residents.

Theme 3: Creating a vibrant creative and cultural environment, and supporting the Visitor Economy

Local economic context

Evidence suggests:

- Borough is home to regionally important visitor economy and cultural assets
- arrival of Metro brings new opportunities
- cultural and creative sectors are playing an increasingly important role in place-shaping and in attracting people to visit town centres

Alignment with Dudley's Economic Regeneration Strategy

ERS calls for:

- capital and revenue support for the borough's creative and cultural businesses and organisations
- a commitment to a 'culturally enriching' Borough for residents, workers and visitors
- recognition of the role of a cultural cluster in revitalising the Borough and changing perceptions of the place

Clear market failure argument / stakeholder buy-in

Intervention rationale includes:

- fragmentation across Dudley's visitor economy assets and hence limited critical mass overall (i.e. the whole is not currently greater than the sum of the parts)
- strong untapped local capacity in the sector that can be supported to deliver growth and value
- local ambitions to secure a major cultural / sporting venue

Theme 3: Creating a vibrant creative and cultural environment, and supporting the Visitor Economy

Action Area	Action
1. Develop a stronger 'package' across different visitor economy attractions within the borough, helping to increase visitor numbers, dwell time and spend	Develop a 'One Dudley' tourism proposition that can be used to promote Dudley's combined tourism offer to an external audience. Visitor economy attractions, local hotels, restaurants and town centre assets need to be involved in this combined offer.
	Identify and exploit/maximise the role that the Metro can play in supporting Dudley's visitor economy, potentially through a combined Metro and visitor economy pass.
	Deliver options to improve signage and public realm between visitor economy assets, helping to raise awareness of other attractions locally (for those visiting) and also their proximity to Dudley town centre.
2. Promote Dudley as a 'cultural and creative borough'	Support the delivery of a new Cultural Strategy that identifies Dudley's cultural offer, and helps to support and develop cultural infrastructure locally and provides the rationale for investment by regional and national agencies.
	Position Dudley High Street as a hub for creativity and culture, building on existing activity within the area, and the activities of Co-Lab Dudley (particularly in re-purposing old retail units into different types of creative studio).
	Deliver the public art / creative public realm strategy and commission a programme for the borough that helps to embed Dudley's culture, art and identity within town centres; also support artists and creative businesses locally.
	Develop a Creative Enterprise and Skills programme – working with the local FE sector and regional HE sector to build technical and entrepreneurship skills in the creative industries.
	Identify and develop a range of suitable workspaces for creative businesses, which are both affordable and adaptable. Look to locate these in 'visible' locations (e.g. on high streets), which help to develop awareness and a 'buzz' around creative activity locally.
3. Deliver more cultural events, particularly in the town centres, helping to change perceptions of the borough	Deliver more cultural events, particularly in the town centres, helping to change perceptions of the borough
4. Deliver a major sporting/cultural facility in the Borough	Develop the rationale and Business Case for a major attraction in the Borough that can support economic growth by taking advantage of regional and national opportunities.

Theme 4: Reinventing town centres across the borough

Clear local economic context

Evidence suggests:

- four strategic/town centres are identified as the principal focus for both employment and housing growth borough-wide
- there has been significant restructuring and repurposing of town centres in recent years, combined with effects of pandemic
- there is a variety of local circumstances and social capital available within each town

Alignment with Dudley's Economic Regeneration Strategy

ERS calls for:

- all the Borough's strategic/town centres to be equipped to evolve and flourish
- meaningful synergies across the strategic/town centres and the wider economy within the Levelling-Up Zone
- a new vision for the borough's town centres, recognising their differences whilst reinventing their roles
- maximising the return on investment from the Long-Term Plan for Towns in Dudley town centre

Clear market failure argument / stakeholder buy-in

Intervention rationale includes:

- a lack of co-ordination on town centre interventions, both in bringing communities together and across public sector partners
- the arrival of the Metro could be a game-changer, but public sector intervention is required to realise the opportunity
- support needed to take advantage of opportunities to develop Place Based Strategy for the Borough's five key towns

Theme 4: Reinventing town centres across the borough

Action Area	Action
1. Advancing a new economic vision for Dudley town centre through a Long-Term Town Plan (following announcement of new funding and toolkit of powers)	Establish a Town Board with both gravitas and local buy-in, and through this, work quickly to develop a Long-Term Plan for Dudley
	Introduce measures to increase the links between the town centre and the major visitor attractions
	Take steps to promote and to celebrate the arrival of the Metro Extension in Dudley town centre
	Explore opportunities to increase provision for managed workspace and/or innovation within the town centre
	Develop a clear strategy and delivery plan for Portersfield, the major site close to the Metro which is currently a surface carpark
	Accelerate housing development in and around the town centre
	Work with local people to identify and define assets of community value
	Explore options to form a locally-led Urban Development Corporation (LUDC) within Dudley town centre
2. Supporting partnership working in town centres across the borough to deliver change	Support meaningful, locally-owned partnership arrangements – and the preparation of Town Plans, to provide the framework for identifying priority actions and accessing funding
	Seed new dialogue with employers through Town Boards and other stakeholder groups (e.g. local Chambers of Commerce)
	Re-establish the role of civic anchor institutions at town level
3. Developing Business Improvement Districts	Consider the scope to set up Business Improvement Districts in strategic/town/district centres (including Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and Dudley).
4. Promoting culture and creativity across the borough's strategic/town centres	Make appropriate provision for cultural and creative activities at a town level, to support the Boroughs Cultural Strategy priorities, including the provision of capital and revenue funding, and investment in physical spaces to support their development.
	Support local communities (and community groups) to make arts, music and other forms of cultural life a core part of the experience of the borough's towns
5. Secure agreement with developers on the joint delivery of strategic/town centre regeneration in the context of wider progress across the Levelling Up Zone	Initiate a better, and more consistent, communication around a clear agenda for town centre regeneration, aligning with the Dudley Local Plan and AAPs.
	Animate a more creative and consistent dialogue in relation to passive buildings and retrofit (including in relation to the re-use of historic buildings), in the context of priorities linked to net zero carbon
	Facilitate a better dialogue between developers and local communities

Making the most of Metro Extension and making the case for future connectivity enhancements

Clear local economic context

Evidence suggests:

- relatively poor transport connectivity has been a barrier to growth: it impedes the ability of residents to access work, limits town centre / visitor economy opportunities, and reduces scope for investment by businesses.
- Metro presents a 'game-changing' opportunity to improve the transport spine which connects some of Dudley's key assets.

Alignment with Dudley's Economic Regeneration Strategy

ERS calls for:

- benefit maximisation in terms of the first phases of the Metro extension, so that economic benefits are felt locally.
- economic and strategic case for continued investment in later phases of the Metro link and other forms of light rail and public transport priority.

Clear market failure argument / stakeholder buy-in

Intervention rationale includes:

- the need for public sector intervention in transport to deliver Metro (given public good) and/or other forms of light rail
- the need for co-ordination to bring forward complex development sites adjacent to Metro

Making the most of Metro Extension and making the case for future connectivity enhancements

Action Area	Action
1. Maximising the impact of Metro through the Levelling Up Zone	Drive forward associated investment along the route of the Metro through the package of Levelling Up Zone investments and other WMCA Devolution Deal opportunities
	Support connectivity to the Metro, especially from communities with poor public/ active travel links
	Raise public awareness of the Metro and its anticipated benefits
2. Making the case for future phases of the Metro	Develop the strategic and economic case for the completion of the planned phase to Brierley Hill and the full longer-term metro (or light rail solution) scheme to Stourbridge
3. Investing in sustained connectivity improvements	Develop plans for longer-term transport priorities across the Borough

Delivering the Economic Regeneration Strategy (1/2)

The ERS is ambitious; some of the challenges across the borough are acute; and progress needs to be made urgently.

For all three reasons, **the process of delivery has to be accelerated.**

Over previous decades, there have been many different forms of intervention, some more successful than others. For example, the Black Country Development Corporation (BCDC) operated for about a decade from the late 1980s and it achieved some level of impact – particularly in relation to infrastructure improvements and land reclamation. At other points in time, intervention has been through national agencies (e.g. English Partnerships and Homes and Communities Agency), and also a regional development agency (Advantage West Midlands). However these

organisations have all been affected by political cycles and there have been a lot of stops and starts.

Dudley needs a long term and consistent response, that will unlock regeneration through the 2020s and beyond.

Within this context, the role of DMBC itself will be critical. The whole Council is committed to regeneration, and delivering the ERS has to be recognised as a cross-cutting cross-Council priority.

However the borough is facing major market failures, particularly in respect of land and transport. The issues are, in many respects, bigger than the Council and the resources available to it.

Delivering the Economic Regeneration Strategy (2/2)

For these reasons, DMBC will explore options in relation to delivery processes.

Key to this is developing strong relationships with partners and the development sector; establishing appropriate delivery vehicles – focused on place or Borough wide; and addressing internal governance.

Working alongside other partners, particularly West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), it will consider options for a different – and more focused – approach.

There are many possible models which could be considered. These may be more or less formally constituted, and they bring with them different powers and resourcing implications. In principle, they range from local partnerships and local delivery vehicles through (potentially) to much more ambitious public-private partnerships, special purpose vehicles, Urban Regeneration Companies and Development Corporations (with planning powers).

Moreover the appropriate spatial scale will need to be considered. In principle this could be at town-level (noting that ‘Our Long Term Plan for Towns’ (published by DLUHC in October 2023) includes provision for Town Boards to work with the relevant local authority to create a localised form of an Urban Development Corporation (LUDC)). Alternatively, larger spatial scales might be more appropriate – whether the Levelling-Up Zone; the whole borough; or possibly the Black Country.

In driving forward the ERS, DMBC is committed to examining these different possibilities and the risks/costs associated with them.

In so doing, its purpose must remain in sight: addressing some of the borough’s key challenges, particularly in respect of brownfield land and connectivity, to accelerate economic regeneration and growth. This in turn will help to deliver the ERS and ‘shift the dial’ for the people and businesses of Dudley.

Delivery Mechanisms

Action Area	Action
SV1: New approaches to delivery	Explore options for new delivery arrangements to drive regeneration across Dudley, especially within the Levelling Up Zone
SV2: New approaches to financing	Linked with the new delivery approaches set out above, explore new funding options associated within the Levelling Up Zone
SV3: Internal Governance	The ERS needs to be at the heart of everything the Council does in its communities - there needs to be a new internal governance structure that reflects that and enables DMBC to engage robustly with regional and national government