

# West Midlands @2021

## Planning for Regional Renaissance

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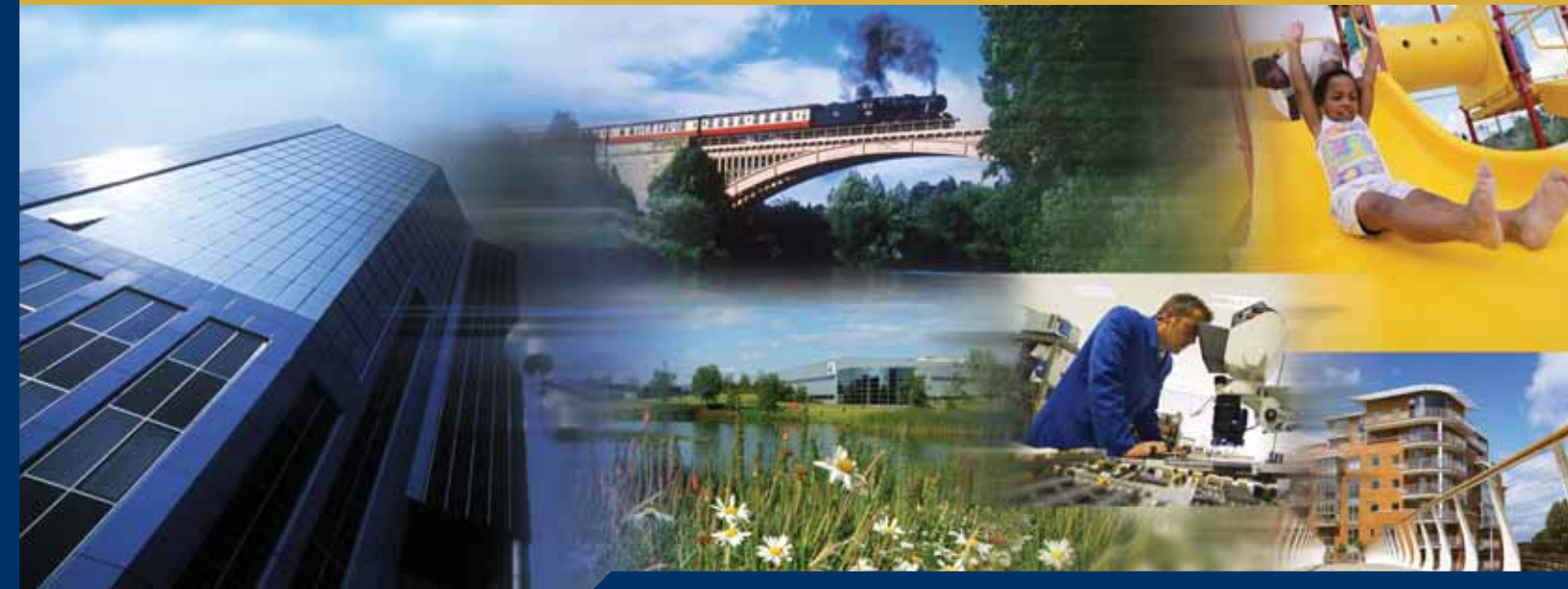
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Do you have an interest in the Renaissance of our urban and rural areas?

Are you ready to take the Renaissance challenge?

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**West Midlands**  
**Regional Assembly**  
Speaking out for the region

# A Regional Renaissance

The West Midlands is changing. Its cities, towns, villages and countryside are undergoing a renaissance driven by the Regional Spatial Strategy.

## The Regional Spatial Strategy

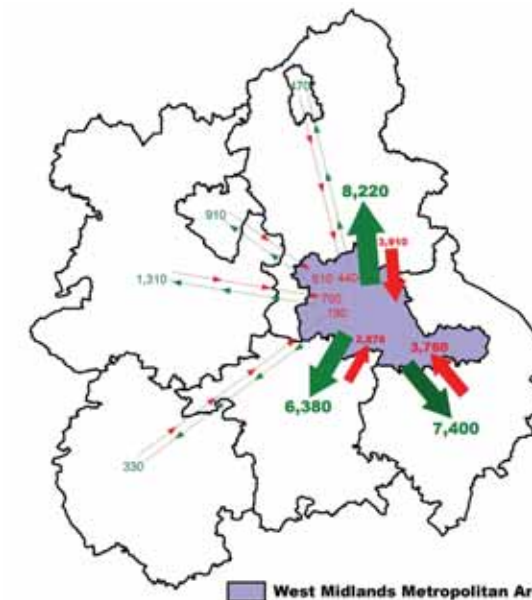
- Is government policy but devised by the Region
- Is the Statutory framework for development within the Region until 2021
- Identifies four key challenges facing the Region and the policies to tackle them:
  - **Urban Renaissance**; major urban areas increasingly meeting their own economic and social needs to counter unsustainable decentralisation.
  - **Rural Renaissance**; tackling the major changes which are challenging the traditional roles of rural areas.
  - **Diversifying** and modernising the Region's economy
  - **Modernising** the transport infrastructure of the West Midlands.

The Spatial Strategy integrates actions and decisions on transport, the environment, housing, the economy, health, education, social inclusion, service delivery and culture. Joining up all these decisions is at the heart of successful urban and rural renaissance, and helps to create attractive and sustainable places to live and work.

The West Midlands is a multi-centred or polycentric region. The diversity and interdependencies between centres and places, both urban and rural, make the Region greater than the sum of its parts. There are many interdependencies between urban and rural areas including commuting, need for international transport gateways, shopping, tourism, cultural facilities, leisure facilities, waste disposal and economic links like food and drink.



**Urban and Rural Renaissance** are two sides of the same coin. Although there are differences, many of the issues facing urban and rural areas are similar. Tackling them will mean taking different yet complementary approaches that recognise the different circumstances and the particular relationships between places.



N.B. Figures in GREEN indicate Gross Migration Flows FROM the West Midlands Met Area.  
N.B. Figures in RED indicate Gross Migration Flows TO the West Midlands Met Area.

## What if we don't do anything?

Unless we actively work to improve the quality of our major urban areas as places to live, work and enjoy, they will continue to decline. At the same time the pressure for development in many of our town and village communities will continue to increase with potentially damaging effects on their distinctiveness and character.

At the moment people and investment are leaving our major urban areas<sup>(1)</sup> for towns and villages. Our population is split roughly 50:50 but historically **two homes have been built outside our major cities for every one inside!**

<sup>(1)</sup> Birmingham, Black Country (Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall & Wolverhampton), Coventry, North Staffordshire and Solihull.

## Still a Green and Pleasant Land?

Wealthier urban households moving to market towns and villages and those moving from other regions push up house prices and squeeze out local people. This has led to calls for more housing, which means more pressure on greenfield sites, greenbelt and even knocking down existing houses to redevelop the land at higher housing densities (an issue that also affects some urban areas). Alongside the houses comes pressure for incremental road building. We need to build to match **local needs** rather than encouraging further migration and commuting.

Pressure is particularly high in parts of the region. More people increase demand on the historic, built and natural environment and pressures on local services, transport infrastructure and town centres.

But the flow is not all one way. Many people cannot afford to live near their family home and young people may also find there are few job opportunities and leisure facilities to keep them in rural areas.

## City Life?

While the environment in the rural areas is under pressure from more people and development, in parts of our **major urban areas** the problem is lack of investment in places, green spaces, recreation areas, services, public transport and new development. Many parts of our cities are unattractive to young families, affluent workers and businesses. As people and employers leave these areas, a cycle of decline can set in, causing symptoms of dereliction, abandonment and social polarisation.

With more people moving to rural areas, and then commuting back into the cities for work, leisure and shopping there will be increasing demands on the urban road and rail networks, contributing to congestion.

# Take the Renaissance Challenge

The situation is not irreversible. Many parts of the Region, urban and rural, are successful. We need to spread this success to areas of need and create new successful areas.

## Better Places to Live

Urban renaissance means making our urban areas more attractive places to live so that more people choose to live in them. For **housing** the emphasis is on:

- Increasing the quantity and choice of quality housing.
- Creating more residential areas that are attractive to families and those in professional or managerial work.
- In some cases, large scale redevelopment<sup>(2)</sup> of unpopular housing areas suffering from abandonment and requiring restructuring.
- Reversing building trends – so that almost twice as many houses will be built in our cities compared to the rest of the West Midlands.

- Providing sustained improvements by properly integrating development with access to jobs, transport and services.

- Creating high quality urban environments that integrate green space for people and wildlife.

Rural Renaissance emphasises matching development to local needs, improving the lot of local people without encouraging migration from the cities. This means:

- More locally based initiatives that make the best use of local knowledge.
- Less pressure on the environment, services and infrastructure from new housing.<sup>(3)</sup>
- The challenge of providing affordable housing from fewer new houses overall.

**Affordable housing** in rural areas is a complex problem and one that is not just for planning. The important roles for planning will be in identifying sites and requiring developers to build a proportion of affordable homes alongside open market housing.

There are no easy answers and although numbers may be relatively small, problems can be acute. It is important that all agencies, including local authorities, developers and social housing providers, co-operate to provide affordable housing in priority areas.

## At Your Service

If we are to have popular cities and viable, balanced rural communities, there needs to be significant improvements to the quality, accessibility and availability of services including skills, training, education, health and transport as well as job opportunities.

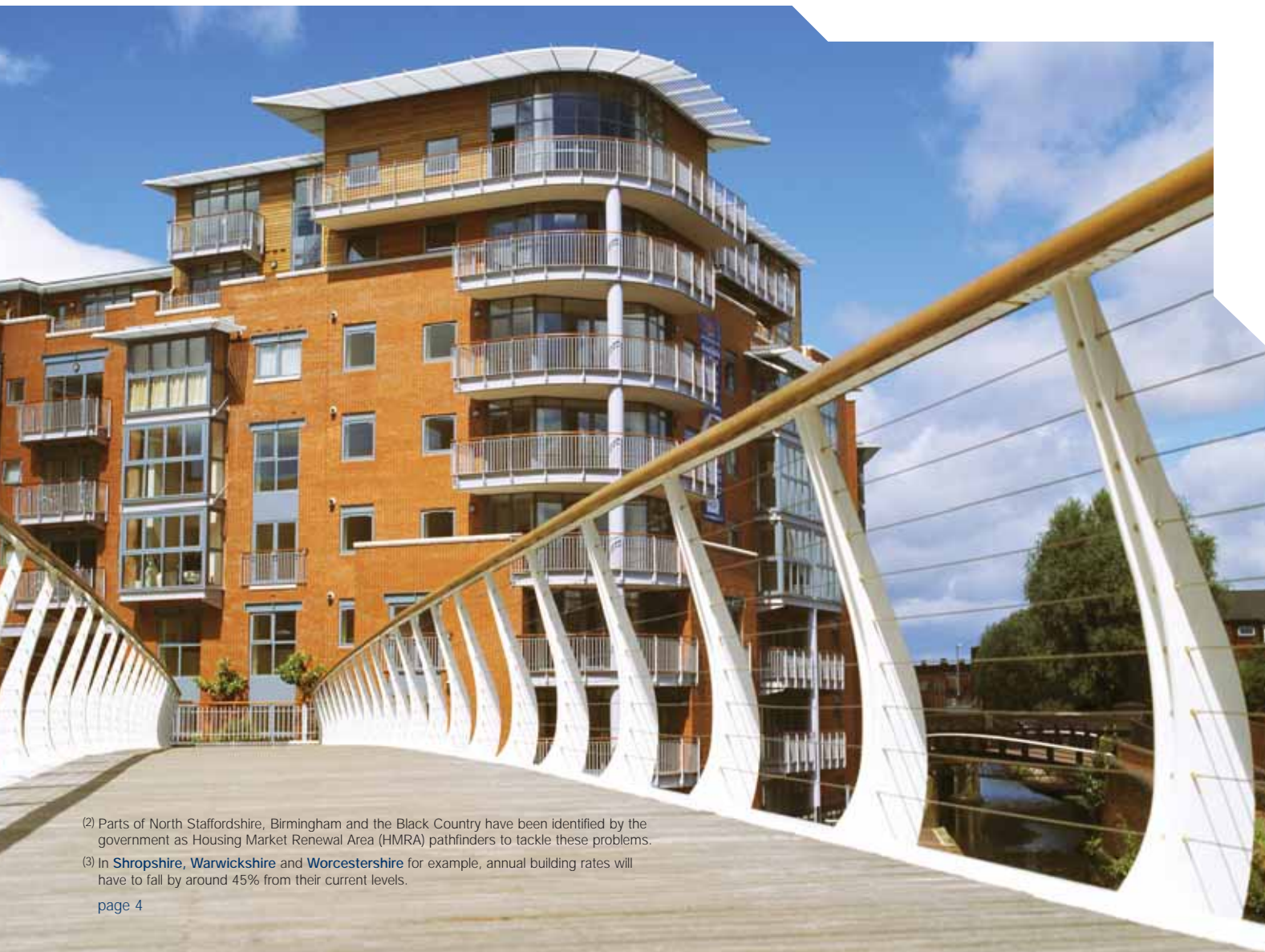
Across the Region the new planning system, and its links with the **Community Strategies** produced by **Local Strategic Partnerships** (LSPs), provides a potentially powerful way of coordinating land-use with

the location and delivery of these services so that they support both urban and rural renaissance. In rural areas these can be backed up by **Parish Plans** and **Village Design Statements**.

By and large the range and scale of services available will depend on the size of the settlement. The major urban areas will generally have the greatest choice and the most specialised facilities and services. However, it is important that they are made as accessible as possible, with transport links connecting them to other areas.

Not everyone in our **villages and smaller towns** has access to a car. Therefore innovative service delivery methods such as mobile, ICT based, shared delivery and multi-purpose centres, supported by efficient public transport, are needed. Access to key services is a significant issue, and will depend upon the links with other places that can provide these services.

As part of taking forward the Spatial Strategy, further work is being undertaken to define the critical services for different rural parts of the Region.



<sup>(2)</sup> Parts of North Staffordshire, Birmingham and the Black Country have been identified by the government as Housing Market Renewal Area (HMRA) pathfinders to tackle these problems.

<sup>(3)</sup> In **Shropshire**, **Warwickshire** and **Worcestershire** for example, annual building rates will have to fall by around 45% from their current levels.



## Town and Country

Overall most large-scale activity will be directed to the **major urban areas** where they are more in tune in scale and character, have better public transport and can better contribute to the renaissance challenge. These are the most accessible locations for many people, including those from surrounding towns and villages. Across the Region, the most significant, office, leisure and retail developments will take place within a **network of twenty-five Town and City Centres**.<sup>(4)</sup>

**Rugby, Hereford, Shrewsbury, Telford and Worcester** perform similar roles at the **sub-regional** scale to the major urban areas, while **other large settlements**<sup>(5)</sup> like **Kidderminster, Leamington, and Stafford** do the same for their local areas. In more rural areas, **market towns** and **larger villages** may also act as the focus for the surrounding communities – providing vital services, housing, employment, leisure and shopping. Echoing the Regional arrangement, in some cases groups or networks of villages and towns may work together to provide the widest range of opportunities possible for the local communities.

## Landscape, Townscape and Places to Escape

The environment is a major asset for the Region's economic, social and regeneration aspirations. Improvements to the public spaces in our city centres have led to greater vibrancy and demand from both businesses and home owners. At the same time, our varied landscapes and historic towns and villages provide attractive places to live, work and visit. It is in everyone's interests to protect, enhance and create new high quality environments.

The ultimate test for urban renaissance will be whether over time more people choose to live in cities. Environmental improvements, including greening programmes and the conservation of the **natural, historic and built environment**, will play an important part in this, as will improving the quality of urban design, architecture, public art and open spaces.



<sup>(4)</sup> Birmingham, Burton-on-Trent, Cannock, Coventry, Dudley, Hanley (Stoke-on-Trent), Hereford, Kidderminster, Leamington Spa, Lichfield, Newcastle under Lyme, Nuneaton, Redditch, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Solihull, Stafford, Stratford-upon-Avon, Sutton Coldfield, Tamworth, Telford, Walsall, West Bromwich, Wolverhampton and Worcester.

<sup>(5)</sup> Stafford, Rugeley, Burton on Trent, Cannock, Lichfield, Tamworth, Nuneaton, Leamington Spa, Stratford upon Avon, Redditch, Bromsgrove, Droitwich and Kidderminster.

To accommodate more people without spreading out into the **Greenbelt** will mean higher densities and the need to use derelict sites, redevelop some areas and reclaim contaminated land. This presents a substantial challenge and opportunity. The Spatial Strategy sets a target of 76% of housing across the Region to be built on "**brownfield land**".

The **edge of a built up area** can often be under pressure for development, but for many people it represents the nearest bit of countryside and is a valuable resource for leisure and recreation as well as nature conservation. Improving the physical links between urban and rural areas along **river valleys, canals, other landscape features and open space networks** brings benefits to both town and country. Such recreational spaces not only improve the quality of life, spread biodiversity and enhance the environment but might also create new business opportunities.

The quality of our landscapes and historic towns is a major contributor to the rural economy. Tourism and leisure activities support the diversification of many farms and agricultural businesses. Our rural areas are also important centres of leisure and recreation for people from the cities and large towns.

Across the Region, town and country, each place has a role to play in adding to the overall cultural and environmental variety of the Region, making the whole of the West Midlands a more attractive place to visit, invest and live in.

Cultural attractions such as the **RSC at Stratford upon Avon** and the **Royal Ballet** in Birmingham sit alongside visitor attractions like the **RAF museum at Cosford**, the **World Heritage Site at Ironbridge and Warwick Castle**. Developments like these can contribute to the local economy and make use of redundant historic buildings and together add to the network of destinations, both for the people of the West Midlands and for visitors from further afield.



## New Roles for Old

The vitality and quality of life in our urban and rural communities are dependent upon a thriving economic base providing accessible and suitable job opportunities.

The traditional manufacturing and agricultural activities of the Region have recently been complemented by emerging sectors such as media, medical technologies, tourism and food and drink. However, our economic performance still lags behind other regions of the UK and Europe and the challenge is to develop new forms of economic activity that improve the region's productivity.

As set out in the West Midlands Economic Strategy, the **diversification of the Region's economy** is a key challenge for rural and urban areas alike. This means both ensuring existing industries focus on higher value added activity and encouraging new opportunities within the knowledge economy. This twin tracked approach will provide the Region with the strength to reduce economic threats such as the decline in farming or car assembly, and be in a better position to exploit

new opportunities, such as environmental technologies. In support of this approach, the Spatial Strategy identifies:

A network of **town and city centres** providing locations for major office development and acting as the main drivers of the regional and sub-regional economies.

Five **Urban Regeneration Zones**<sup>(6)</sup> where there is concerted effort to strengthen and diversify the urban economy and increase employment and wage levels.

A **Rural Regeneration Zone** covering much of **Shropshire, Herefordshire** and parts of **Worcestershire** providing the focus for growth in the west of the Region.

Three **High Technology Corridors**, each spanning urban and rural areas where there are strong links between economic activities or there is potential to create them. The emphasis is on encouraging higher value manufacturing, research, development and innovation.



Many workers who live in rural areas within commuting distance of the cities and larger towns will take up jobs here. The approach to the modernisation and diversification challenge in the rural areas does need to reflect local circumstances. This requires broadening the range of job opportunities in the rural areas and in the more remote towns and villages to make them more able to meet their own employment needs. However, in many ways the structure of the rural economy mirrors that of the rest of the region, with for example manufacturing accounting for over 20% of employment.

In the rural West Midlands **market towns** have a key role in providing jobs for the local and neighbouring community. Economic activities strongly linked to rural areas are the most appropriate, particularly where they respect the local character and environment. Businesses such as food and drink processing, tourism and leisure, the environmental economy and businesses linked to agriculture, farming and forestry will all be important, but other new and existing businesses also need to be catered for.

In many places the potential of the historic, built and natural environment also offers regeneration opportunities and the chance to enhance and restore buildings and landscapes. At the same time it is important that the cumulative impacts of economic activities such as tourism and leisure do not damage local character or environment.

The issues and choices relating to economic development are often local and distinctive in nature, requiring grass roots knowledge and understanding. Local people and organisations should have the opportunity to contribute directly to decisions about the future of their area.

## Get Connected

Urban or rural, people and goods need to be able to move around the Region. Transport and access to services and job opportunities are critical to achieving the high quality of life and prosperity needed to underpin renaissance.

In rural areas the emphasis is on access to services and market towns, with local, flexible solutions. Within urban areas there is a need for a much improved transport network – bus, rail, metro and road – to help it retain its population, reduce congestion and minimise impacts on the local and global environment. Across the Region people and businesses need high quality and reliable transport connections and gateways – air, rail and road – to the wider world.



<sup>(6)</sup> East Birmingham and North Solihull; North Black Country and South Staffs (Future Foundations); North Staffordshire; Coventry and Nuneaton; and South Black Country and West Birmingham (Arc of Opportunity).

## Urban and Rural, a Shared Future for the West Midlands

The recent emergence of City Region initiatives have led to concerns that rural parts of the West Midlands will be sidelined. However, while there is much diversity in the Region, there are great interdependencies too. The West Midlands cannot improve and flourish unless there is an acknowledgement of the links between urban and rural, and recognition that the Region is greater than the sum of its parts.

Regional renaissance is about creating a better region for all its people, across both rural and urban areas. Only by concentrating on the renaissance of both urban and rural areas can the West Midlands fulfil its promise and potential.

