



Black Country Canals Strategy 2024-2029

Changing perceptions



Contents

- 05** Foreword
- 07** Strategy development
- 10** Introducing the strategy
- 12** The vision
- 14** Changing perceptions
- 18** The Black Country canal network
- 20** Nine ways canals can help to tackle climate change
- 22** Strategic fit
- 26** Key themes of the strategy
- 28** Active network
- 38** Active people and communities
- 48** Active places
- 58** Progressing the strategy
- 60** Playing your part to unlock the potential
- 62** Acknowledgements



Foreword

This document reflects extensive collaboration between partners and stakeholders, highlighting our shared commitment to unlocking the full potential of the Black Country's waterways. It is a living framework that will evolve with new opportunities and challenges.

The canal network is at the very heart of the Black Country, playing a pivotal role in its industrial growth and now serving as a vital cultural and environmental asset. Our strategy aims to enhance these waterways, ensuring they continue to benefit the community, economy and environment.

Our vision is for a thriving, accessible and well-maintained network of canals as dynamic public spaces offering opportunities for recreation, transportation, tourism, heritage, nature recovery and environmental conservation, improving the quality of life of communities across the Black Country and beyond.

The strategy's development is a true partnership between the Black Country local authorities and other key stakeholders. This collaborative approach ensures the strategy is comprehensive, inclusive and aligned with regional and national plans.

Engagement with the local community has helped shape a strategy that responds to the needs and aspirations of those who live, work and play along the canals. Continued community involvement will help deliver real benefits and meaningful change.

Improving canal infrastructure and accessibility can attract new businesses, enhance the visitor experience and support community regeneration and economic growth.

We are committed to making these waterways accessible to all, creating spaces where people can connect with nature and engage in cultural and social activities, thus promoting healthier lifestyles and a better quality of life.

The canal network is integral to the Black Country's natural environment, and its conservation is a key priority. The strategy includes actions to enhance biodiversity, create wildlife corridors and improve environmental quality. By adopting sustainable practices and working with environmental partners, we aim to protect these vital green and blue spaces for future generations.

Our heartfelt thanks to everyone who contributed to the Black Country Canals Strategy. Your dedication and expertise have been instrumental in creating a strategy that will shape the future of our canal network. Together, we can ensure that the Black Country's canals continue to be a source of pride, economic growth and natural heritage.

Henriette Breukelaar
Regional Director, Canal & River Trust

Ian Carey
Chief Executive, Active Black Country



Strategy development

This strategy has been developed as a result of collaboration across the Black Country.

It has been produced by Active Black Country and the Canal & River Trust, in consultation with the four local authorities of Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. It came from direct agreement that the value of the canal network was greater than the sum of its parts and that to deliver investment and outcomes, a strategy needed to be created. This strategy is a signal of the commitment to delivering continual improvement across place, economy, health and environmental outcomes and long-term achievement of the vision.

Taking the strategy forward

Contained in this strategy is a high-level summary of the current and potential priority areas for action.

It is a live document where new opportunities will be explored and progressed. Each local authority area will focus on a core set of actions to be developed collaboratively by partners and stakeholders.

Governance and management

It is important to ensure that momentum is maintained in order to deliver current and future actions. This includes the management of the

network as a whole and more localised action to ensure that the relevant parts of the network are fit for purpose to make a necessary contribution. This will, in most cases, require investment of time and money.

To deliver on the principles of the strategy, a Steering Group which sits as part of a Healthy Placemaking Forum of Active Black Country will be created to shape the delivery across each local authority and the Canal & River Trust.

This Steering Group will involve representatives from:

- Each local authority in the Black Country
- The Canal & River Trust
- Black Country Transport
- Integrated Care Board
- West Midlands Combined Authority
- Transport for West Midlands
- Sustrans

The final governance will be developed through discussion with partners and stakeholders.

**The Black Country
features more than
110 miles of canals**

**More than 80%
of Black Country
residents live within
one mile of a canal**

Introducing the strategy

The Black Country is often described as an endless village with a rich variety of towns, settlements, and a varied landscape. The canal network is the thread that binds the various elements into a connected landscape.

Canals have always made a significant contribution to the Black Country. The canals and waterways are part of the region's foundations, born out of the Industrial Revolution where they were bustling arteries of commerce and transport.

More than 80% of Black Country residents live within one mile of a canal. Built for trade, today they are a place of leisure and pleasure – and crucial for biodiversity. They were key to the development of the Black Country as an industrial powerhouse in the past and continue to offer transformational potential for place, economy, health and well-being, and the natural environment.

The network is also a vital feature of the Black Country's thriving visitor economy, increasingly used by local communities and marketed as a tourist attraction.

Today, canals feature prominently in many environmental strategies, addressing policy, investment, and place-shaping to make the Black Country a better place in which to live, work, invest and visit.

The West Midlands Natural Environment Plan recognises the importance of improving canals and other green and blue spaces to promote biodiversity net gain. In this plan, the West Midlands Combined Authority's priority actions include support for the canal network to enhance wildlife corridors and to explore opportunities for greater community engagement with nature.

Canals are integral to the future of many of the strategic centres, offering regeneration and positive outcomes. They link to walking and cycling and physical activity strategies, and in plans for developing sustainable communities and revitalising town and city centres.

It is essential that there is a vision and strategy to enhance the accessibility and quality of the network and secure its contribution to the ambitions for the area. This strategy, which has been developed with the four Black Country local authorities and Canal & River Trust, is intended to do just that.

In considering what is most important to the future of the canals, a vision has been developed. This has been drawn from the myriad strategies which exist across the Black Country partners, and which are highlighted in the next section of this document. This vision sets the scene for the canals' contribution to regeneration and place-making.



The vision

Our shared vision is to create the conditions for a vibrant and accessible network of spaces which promotes active and healthy living, a thriving natural environment and an attractive offer for residents and visitors.

It will help to:



Unlock economic benefit.



Encourage a sense of community along the canals to increase use.



Help connect people with nature along green and blue corridors.



Bring the local heritage of the canal to the forefront of modern-day local planning.

These ambitions are reflected in the themes which have emerged as a result of dialogue with partners and a suite of existing strategic documents.

Changing perceptions

Breaking this vision down into core ambitions, it draws together five strands across the canal network. This in turn supports local priorities and aspirations and provides clear direction for how developments to the canal network can:



Contribute to the distinctive **sense of place and community** across the Black Country.



Support the drive to improve **health and well-being** and reduce health inequalities.



Form a distinctive feature of **large-scale regeneration** opportunities for investment.



Be centre stage in the **heritage and visitor economy** offer.

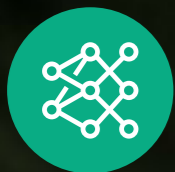


Contribute to action to tackle **climate change** and protect wildlife and natural assets.



This strategy highlights some of the positive work that has been delivered to date and sets out where further action can be taken.

It identifies the key ingredients and opportunities for success which, if delivered effectively, will achieve greater community and place outcomes. It has a range of short-, medium-, and long-term actions which require investment and coordination under three main themes:



Active network

A distinct unique and connected asset.



Active people and communities

Integrated and connected for greater community cohesion, health and well-being.



Active places

Supporting strong and vibrant places.



The Black Country canal network

There are over 110 miles of canals in the Black Country including sixty-three locks and several tunnels.

The canal network is one of the area's most distinctive historical and environmental assets. The network contains Grade I and Grade II listed structures and beautiful lock flights in conservation areas, and more canals than Birmingham. It is a major feature of engineering and helped shape the physical, economic and social development of the Black Country in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries.

It is a unifying feature and the canal routes have created distinctive landscape corridors

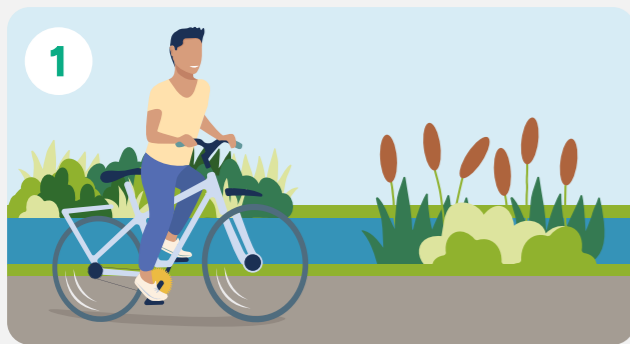
reflecting the industries and activities each route served.

Just over half of the network has survived, and many of the disused parts have naturally regenerated with significant ecological and biodiversity value.

The waterways are a core feature of Black Country Global Geopark, an area recognised by UNESCO. The network has a number of recognised geosites and is identified as one of the most important industrial heritage sites in Britain.

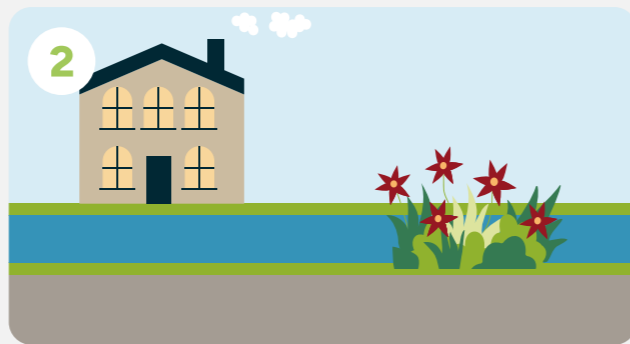


Nine ways canals can help to tackle climate change



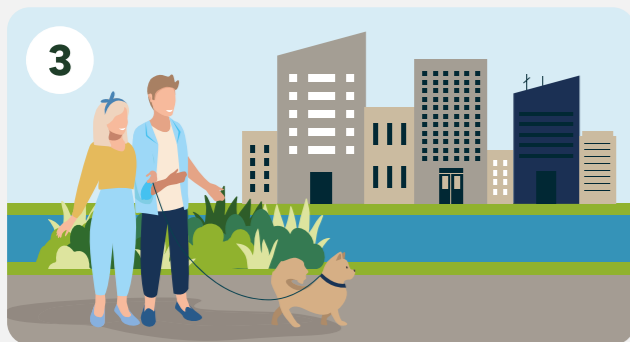
Active travel and low-carbon transport

Towpaths are ideal for walking and cycling. The lowest carbon and equitable forms of transport, and moving freight on larger commercial waterways remains a green alternative to lorry journeys.



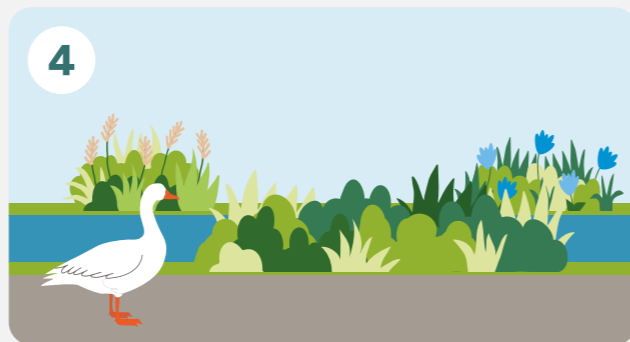
Heating and cooling buildings

Canal water is being used to heat and cool buildings. **Up to 350,000 homes** could benefit, saving **1+ million tonnes of CO₂ per year**.



Reducing urban temperatures

Our waterways can play a role in keeping cities cool by a reduction of up to **1.6 degrees centigrade**¹.



Helping nature recover

As climate change leads to biodiversity loss, our waterways will become an even greater asset for our wildlife.



Providing doorstep destinations

Visiting local destinations, rather than travelling in your car to an attraction, reduces your carbon footprint.



Low-carbon boat energy

We are installing eco-moorings which enable boats to utilise electricity for power. This reduces their reliance on diesel which releases more CO₂.



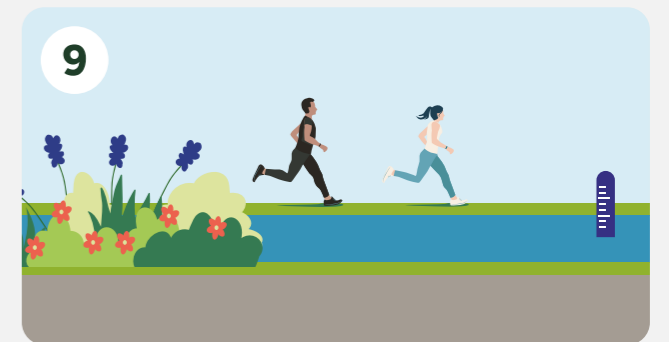
Transferring water around the country

Canals are used to move water supplies around the country. **They supply enough water for 5 million homes** as well as supplying water for industry and for agricultural irrigation.



Utilising hydropower

Hydropower from our waterways generates **20 million kWh** which equates to powering around **6,200 homes** and **saving around 9,500 tonnes of CO₂**.



Addressing increased flooding

Our waterways can play a role in mitigating the impact of flooding, which is predicted to become increasingly common as the planet's temperature increases.

Strategic fit

The core ambitions created as part of this strategy come from a cross-section of strategic planning and policy documents produced by a range of stakeholders.

The table summarises the contribution the canal network makes to each of these ambitions and links back to the relevant strategy documents. Over time, there will be additional policy and strategic development which further contribute to the canal network.

In most cases the relationship described through these strategies is two-way, with the canal network benefiting from its wider contribution




(through for example investment as part of a wider regeneration project) and requiring attention or investment in order to be able to contribute (such as the existence of accessible, signposted towpaths to form part of a walking network).

The range of strategies which link to the ambitions of the canal network demonstrate the centrality of it. The extent to which canals feature in the current suite of strategies is tangible evidence of that.

The Canal & River Trust has released its impact report which clearly demonstrates the value canals can bring to places.
(canalrivertrust.org.uk)



Read the Canal & River Trust's Impact Report

Ambitions	Contribution of the canal network	Strategic framework
 <p>Sense of place and community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A distinctive feature of many places in the area. • An important element in developing a wider offer for town and city centres. • Key to the biodiversity and accessibility of residential development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garden City & Active Design principles • Seizing the Moment
 <p>Large scale regeneration</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A distinctive contribution to large scale regeneration in areas such as the Bilston Corridor and the Smethwick to Birmingham Corridor. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smethwick to Birmingham Corridor Framework • Bilston Corridor Area Action Plan • Wolverhampton City Centre Area Action • Walsall Town Centre Action Plan
 <p>Health and well-being</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on mental health of green and blue infrastructure. • An important part of a network of accessible routes for walking, cycling, and wheeling which aims to encourage residents to not use private vehicles for short journeys. • Improve physical health and well-being of residents through cleaner air and increased physical activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating an Active Black Country • Local physical activity strategies • Walking and cycling plans • Black Country Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (BC LCWIP) • Black Country Playing Pitch & Outdoor Sport Strategy Overarching Strategic Framework • Sport England: Uniting the Movement • Local Health & Well-being Strategies • Active Design Guidance
 <p>Heritage and visitor economy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The waterways as a valuable holiday activity. Currently, over 35,000 boaters use the Trust's network of canals every year. Canals are at the heart of the formation of the Black Country, and a key feature of its history, heritage and environment/landscape. • Key features of important attractions – such as the Black Country Living Museum and the Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seizing the Moment • UNESCO Global Geopark strategy • Heritage/visitor economy plans
 <p>Climate change and nature</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A key part of nature recovery networks and flood alleviation. • Supporting heat pumps, generating hydro-electric power, contributing to temperature reduction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Midlands Natural Environment Plan • WM2041 (the WMCA climate change strategy) • West Midlands Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2021-26 • Defra Local Nature Recovery principles • LA Climate Commitment Plans



**Waterways
can reduce
temperatures by
up to 1.6 degrees
centigrade.¹**

Most of these strategies have delivery or action plans but it is important to stand back, test the coherence of the overall ambition for the canal network and ensure that there are arrangements in place to deliver.

To that end, this strategy has also captured a set of actions which can deliver positive outcomes across the canal network, and which will be agreed and taken forward with partners. This action list will be updated and reprioritised over time.

By delivering this strategy, the canal network is also expected to further contribute to action to tackle climate change by:

- **Reducing urban temperatures:** for example, waterways can reduce temperatures by up to 1.6 degrees centigrade.¹

- **Mitigating the impact of flooding;** by intercepting drainage, holding up flows and moving water away from towns and properties at risk.

- **Transferring water around the region** and maintaining water in the canal system, helping to supply water to homes, industry and agricultural irrigation.

- **Protecting and encouraging green spaces** which are known to improve air quality and oxygen levels.

¹McDonald et al, 2019 Canals, cooling and replicable models – Summary report to the Canal & River Trust. Manchester: The University of Manchester.

Key themes of the strategy

This strategy seeks to promote local canals as a distinct unique and connected asset that can help deliver on key local priorities.

Combining the core priorities together, opportunities across the canals have been grouped into three themes:



Active network

An asset, connecting 2,000 miles of canal infrastructure.



Active people and communities

Integrated and connected for greater community cohesion, health and well-being.



Active places

Supporting strong and vibrant places.

Each theme sets out its main objectives, current projects, key ingredients for success and actions to deliver these. It also provides an opportunity for each partner to identify their own individual priorities and improvements across the canals landscape.

In this section, we set out the range of current plans and programmes as well as future ambitions under each of the three themes identified. These all support the ambition to deliver an overarching canal strategy for the Black Country. They have the potential to deliver outcomes to bring forward vibrant places and enliven local communities.

In each of the themes, there is a collection of examples where investment in the network has delivered impact and value for money.





Active network

Canals can achieve a continuous system which promotes and supports the active travel agenda. The canals can connect communities and create essential links between places, businesses and services, functioning as a network through the Black Country and beyond.



The canal network provides a distinctive setting for future development with high-quality and accessible paths for pedestrians and cyclists. In order to do this, work must focus on creating a destination which is safe and more accessible.

A key task is to ensure that any new developments along the canal network enhance its wider potential, protect its key features and secure environmental and nature conservation benefits, ensuring it is well-known as a Black Country asset. By focusing on these priorities across the network, it will deliver strong, vibrant and healthy places.



Current plans and programmes

The ambition is that a set of Garden City principles (Town and Country Planning Association) will drive action to improve the quality of the built environment and open space, establishing the Black Country as an exemplar of sustainable urban living. It capitalises on the Black Country's designation as a UNESCO Global Geopark.

The canals are an extremely important component of the Garden City concept which will encourage more people to use them as visitors, for leisure purposes, on and off water, to walk or cycle, or to learn, shop or work.

Canals are relevant to each of the 10 principles that underpin the Garden City concept:

- To **revive and enhance** the Black Country's under-used land assets, particularly brownfield sites.
- To **maintain** and make the most of the Black Country's existing assets.
- To **integrate** open green spaces, planting and home food-growing into homes and neighbourhoods.
- To **ensure connectivity** via all modes of transport, particularly public transport, walkability and cycling.
- To ensure **easy and convenient access** to local facilities and services, such as schools, healthcare and shops, and preventing isolation.
- To **have a clear identity** and be distinct from the surrounding developments.
- To **support and encourage growth** in current and new business.
- To give **residents the voice** to manage and build their community.
- To **harness technical innovation** on a small and large scale within developments.
- To **promote and encourage** living healthy lifestyles.



More sustainable transport

The overall ambition of the Black Country partners is to enable more sustainable transport and accessibility by increasing cycling, walking, wheeling and the use of better public transport as well as a good network of electric vehicle charging points.

The latest version of the Black Country Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (BCLCWIP) stresses the potential of the canal network to supplement what it refers to as a limited cycle network.

It proposes eight cycle routes, one of which includes a section on a canal towpath and another three include proposals for better integration with the canal network. The plan also proposes four walking zones all of which have opportunities for better integration with and/or improved signing to the canal network.

The zones are intended to be designated areas where walking, cycling and wheeling can be used as a preferred choice for shorter trips such as to access education facilities, local high streets and employment zones.

Development of new walking and cycling infrastructure will utilise the cycling infrastructure design from the Department for Transport (LTN 1/20) where possible, but Active Travel funds will not be restricted to these cycle routes.

The Black Country local authorities are also delivering improved cycling and walking infrastructure along major corridors across the Black Country such as the A4123 (Wolverhampton to Birmingham), A461 (Sandwell and Dudley) and the A454 (Wolverhampton to Walsall) to complement the localised schemes of the BC LCWIP and ensure cohesion among the overall active travel network in the Black Country.

Future ambitions

A future ambition across the Black Country is to secure a national reputation for local action on energy which delivers business, environmental and community objectives.

One way in which the canal network could contribute is through heat pumps, using the canal to heat and cool buildings. Nationally, Canal & River Trust has calculated that up to 250,000 homes could benefit, saving over 1m tonnes of CO₂ per year.

The Black Country canal network could provide opportunities for developments to incorporate innovative technologies to make use of canal water such as the abstraction of water for cooling and/or heating purposes where there is a sufficient flow of water to sustain this use and the canal towpath is suitable for the running of pipelines.

There are two examples of the use of heat pumps on the canal network in the West Midlands:

- They are one of the environmental features incorporated into the design of the Portal, the Dudley Canal & Tunnel Trust's visitor and education centre.
- The government committed to funding a heat pump in the canal in the Smethwick to Birmingham corridor to serve the Birmingham City Hospital and a neighbouring large-scale residential development.

In addition, the Wolverhampton City Centre and Bilston Corridor Action Plans identify the extensive network of canals in the area as a suitable location for the use of heat pumps.

Examples of outcomes

A number of examples show where investment in canals across the country has delivered local place-based outcomes. They demonstrate the value of investment and a plan which can bring forward results for local communities.

Better energy

The evaluation of the Bridgwater & Taunton Canal restoration identified that the canal project provided improved CO₂ emissions through the support of a range of green initiatives.

This included the installation of renewable energy systems and the development of more sustainable sourcing procedures. Canal & River Trust research has also suggested that the canals of England and Wales can provide enough latent thermal energy to support the heating and cooling needs of around 250,000 homes.

Transportation

The Kennet & Avon Canal restoration has led to an increase in the use of towpaths for commuters, as well as leisure users, which has positively impacted congestion.

Additionally, the evaluation of the Scottish Canal Network identified that the canals were transporting over 200,000 tonnes of freight annually. This in turn removed thousands of 'Heavy Goods Vehicles' (HGVs) from roads, which contributed to a reduction of congestion, pollution and CO₂ in the environment.

Using canals to heat and cool buildings could save over 1m tonnes of CO₂ per year



Aim	Ingredient for success	Priorities for partnership group (local authorities, Active Black Country, Canal & River Trust)
<p>Use of the canal towpath as a valued means of transport and connection for an active Black Country community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Measures to ensure physical safety, community safety (real and perceived) and accessibility, including for people with disabilities in order that residents and visitors feel safe. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Canal & River Trust, in consultation with Black Country authorities, will identify local investment needs on their canals. Including restoring and improving canal banks, towpaths, access points to waterways and improving lighting. Authorities will look to secure additional discretionary regeneration funding from government initiatives as and when such opportunities present themselves. Co-design with local communities.
<p>The contribution of canals to support local action on energy objectives and reduction of overall levels of pollution and CO₂ emissions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuing the creation of a wide and diverse habitat for wildlife, including the eradication of invasive plant species to protect surrounding habitats. Maintaining the network including integration with each LA Surface Water Management Plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with Canal & River Trust and Black Country authorities to develop a substantive heat pump initiative. Managing woodland areas and creating wildflower meadows to improve biodiversity and the amenity value of open spaces.
<p>Comprehensive wayfinding and navigation on the canal network.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing new infrastructure for greater boat and water use across the areas. Co-design with local communities Use of digital mapping to ensure users can view the route in advance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing key partnerships with boater community organisations. Canal & River Trust will identify local investment needs for boater infrastructure and improved navigation. Improved signage across the network with local communities ensuring wayfinding is relevant and appropriate.



Active people and communities

People and communities can make use of the canals as a thoroughfare, an attraction and destination, a centre of activity and as a unique recreational space.

The canal network should strive to be a multifunctional historic asset valued by everyone in the community.





A shared objective across the Black Country is to develop an integrated, connected and sustainable network to get more people walking, cycling, and wheeling, thereby reducing carbon emissions, addressing health inequalities and supporting greater community cohesion.

The only way to achieve this is through working with people, communities and their partners. This will require the identification of behaviour change measures to improve infrastructure for activities. The aim will be to increase the uptake of walking and cycling as well as fishing and other water-based activities across the Black Country where appropriate.

Access to green space and green infrastructure is proven to improve mental and physical health and reduce health inequalities – a core priority of the Black Country partners. Research conducted by Kings College London showed that the real-time effect of spending time on canals comes with a 6% improvement in mental well-being, compared to just green spaces alone³. The use of the canal network can therefore enable many residents and visitors to take positive steps to greater well-being.

³Going with the flow: study shows canals help boost your mood (kcl.ac.uk)

Current plans and programmes

At a national level, the government announced its Environmental Improvement Plan 2023. This sets out that every household in England is to be “within 15 minutes of green spaces or water”.

The West Midlands Combined Authority’s Natural Environment Plan 2021-26 includes a commitment to supporting the enhancement of the area’s “world-famous canal network”. It also supports the idea of a new national walking trail in the West Midlands, a considerable proportion of which would involve canal towpaths.

One of the priorities set out in this strategy is the creation of wildlife corridors to enable wildlife to move safely from one area to another. It is committed to focussing on six corridors, but also commits to working with the Canal & River Trust to support the use of canals as “nature recovery networks”.

The Black Country canals also have an array of Green Flag Awards, including:

- Revolution Walk, along the Main Line Canal, was awarded in 2019 and covers between Birmingham and Sandwell.
- The Tame Valley Canal was awarded in 2022 and covers Birmingham and Sandwell.

- The Walsall Lock Flight and Basin was awarded in 2022.
- The Wolverhampton Lock flight was awarded in 2022.

Additionally, the Stourbridge Canal and the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal, which is 46 miles long and part of which runs through Wolverhampton, also received awards.

Much of the canal network in the Black Country is designated and protected for its wildlife and historic value.

The City of Wolverhampton stretch of the Wyrley & Essington Canal has undergone improvements to help it achieve Local Nature Reserve status. The scheme covers four miles of the Wyrley and Essington Canal corridor from Wolverhampton city centre to the Walsall border, and areas of open space alongside it.

The Environmental Improvement Plan sets out that every household in England is to be “within 15 minutes of green spaces or water”



Community action

The canal network can also act as a focus for community initiatives and activities to enhance health and well-being, assist in the maintenance of canals, and deliver parts of the current tourism offer.

There are a wide range of local canal trusts, societies and charitable and community groups who provide valuable support, including:

- The Dudley Canal & Tunnel Trust, a charitable trust who lease the space from the Canal & River Trust, has the objective to preserve and safeguard the mines, tunnels, caverns and waterways at Dudley and to educate and inform people about the area and its history.

- The Birmingham Canal Navigations Society, formed in 1967 and based in Langley, Sandwell, has a mission to conserve the heritage waterways, educate and raise their importance and encourage people to use them.
- The Friends of the Galton Valley Museum assist Sandwell Council to run the museum.
- The Wednesfield Canal Festival is attended by local people, visitors and waterways enthusiasts and organised by Hands on Wednesfield.
- The role of the Land Trust in being responsible for public open spaces in Bilston Urban Village.

Examples of outcomes

There is potential to deliver outcomes and impact across active people and communities.

Well-being study of waterway users

A 2018 study by Simetrica looking into the impacts of waterways in England and Wales found that their usage is associated with higher levels of well-being and life satisfaction.

In this research, frequent usage resulted in a higher life satisfaction score than moderate or rare usage, implying that the more people using waterways, the more satisfied they are with their lives. This translated the well-being value of a visit to £6.63 of benefit. Across all waterways in England and Wales, this is estimated to be a well-being value of £3.8bn per annum.

Natural environment

Black Country Blue Network is an innovative project to improve habitats and ecological connectivity on several sites associated with the Black Country's waterway network.

The project rehabilitated 11.8 hectares of greenspace and supported 18.8 hectares to attain better conservation status. The project

also helped in catalysing additional works alongside project activity as well as bringing in significant community and volunteer engagement with several of the project elements.

Overall, the project helped in increasing biodiversity within the targeted sites and improved the natural beauty of the area.



Active lifestyle

A rigorous academic study conducted by Benton et al. published in 2021 found that green space improvements on an urban canal brought increases in walking and vigorous physical activity, social interactions, and people taking notice of the environment.

The research was conducted on improvements made to an urban canal in

Salford. The improvements were associated with a statistically significant increase in measured aspects but more notably in the number of people using the canal towpath.

These increases were observed immediately (one month post-improvement) with the largest effects observed at 18 months post-improvement, suggesting that the use of the canal towpath increases immediately and continues to increase over time.

Aim	Ingredient for success	Priorities for partnership group (local authorities, Active Black Country, Canal & River Trust)
<p>A welcoming, clean and accessible public realm which connects people and communities with nature and the natural environment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A range of community projects to improve the canalside environment and deliver waterside community attractions. • Developing wildlife corridors to encourage active use of the canals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review opportunities for areas close to the canal to increase canopy cover across the Black Country in line with government aims. • Reviewing housing development pipeline to identify canal opportunities and instigate action to ensure they are pursued. • Recognising the value of the canal network as part of the emerging West Midlands Nature Recovery Network and linked potential to capture biodiversity net gain from developments to enhance the biodiversity of canals.
<p>A network which listens and responds to people's real lives and circumstances and that is used in ways that are important to them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for people and communities that have traditionally been left behind by removing the barriers of access to the canal network. • Continual engagement with communities to understand their needs for the canals and co-creating the most appropriate service or experience for that community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying and engaging with community projects where canal infrastructure can benefit them. • Canal & River Trust will work with partners to identify local investment needs on their canals. Including restoring and improving canal banks, towpaths, access points to waterways and improving lighting where needed.
<p>Continual appreciation of the canal network as a community asset.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater collaboration and opportunities to work with voluntary and community sector organisations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Canal & River Trust to promote new and existing volunteer opportunities for local people and community groups, with support of each Black Country authority where appropriate.





Active places

By creating canalside residential, business and retail developments, encouraging the visitor economy, leisure pursuits, and promoting the unique heritage of the canal, the canal infrastructure will be brought to the heart of placemaking.



A scenic view of a canal in the Black Country. In the foreground, a metal truss bridge spans across the canal. A paved path runs alongside the canal, where a cyclist in a bright green and orange jacket is riding away. The canal is surrounded by lush green trees and vegetation. In the background, a concrete road bridge crosses the canal. The sky is clear and blue.

Helping to create better places to live, visit or invest in is important to the Black Country.

The canal network has its role to play in achieving that ambition and encouraging new opportunities for local businesses, while bringing more tourism to the area. The accessibility, heritage and beauty of the canals can provide investment and higher profile for businesses to provide greater opportunities locally. Through this, the canal network can provide job and skills opportunities for local residents and help promote economic security within the Black Country.

The Black Country is committed to leading the way and enabling town and city centres to pivot from being primarily retail-led locations to places which are known for a wide range of retail, leisure, cultural, heritage, educational, tourism and other uses. Canals are an important heritage and historical feature in many of the local centres, encouraging greater local pride, a sense of place and access to the numerous waterfront benefits.

Current plans and programmes

Walsall Waterfront, on the Walsall canal, is close to the town's railway station and retail core.

The New Art Gallery is the anchor of an extensive canalside development that includes housing, a hotel, a cinema, bars and restaurants. Future development will include office, mixed-use residential and retail developments.

In Wolverhampton, the Canal Locks Conservation Area acts as a gateway to the city centre. Significant residential development has already taken place in the city's Canalside Quarter which also includes the University of Wolverhampton's Springfield Campus – home to the National

Brownfield Institute. The latest planned developments include a £65m scheme including over 350 new homes and commercial space. The scheme also includes new pedestrian access to the towpath, restoration of canalside properties such as the Union Mill and biodiversity improvements.

At Brierley Hill, the canal provides an attractive and distinctive setting for the Black Country's most significant office location at the Waterfront, and extensive new and planned residential development served by the proposed new Metro line. The Waterfront is within easy walking distance of the Merry Hill retail centre and has a wide range of hospitality venues.



Future ambitions

Visitor economy

A longstanding Black Country aspiration is to develop a more integrated tourism offer for residents and visitors, building on the concentration of assets in Dudley town centre including the pioneering Black Country Living Museum, Dudley Castle & Zoological Gardens and Dudley Canal & Tunnel Trust.

There is a direct canal route from this tourism hotspot through to Bumble Hole (Geosite), The Waterfront, Delph Nine Locks, Red House Glass Cone (Geosite) and the Glass Quarter and beyond to Stourton and Stourport. This is a prime corridor for tourism and the Black Country's industrial

heritage is a core element of that offer, with the canal network a key feature of it.

The network also offers opportunities for visitors to use it to access other attractions in an environmentally friendly way such as holiday activities. The tourism offer can be integrated with improvements to waterways and boater facilities to establish a waterway community. The strategy supports the development of new canal boat moorings and water space where appropriate, including both a residential and commercial offer.

The tourism offer can take advantage of the Black Country's position in the heart of the country, with major canal arteries connecting cities across England including London, Manchester, Birmingham, Gloucester and Liverpool.

Examples of outcomes

There is potential to deliver outcomes and impact across active places.

Stourport Canal basin - Heritage

The restoration of the Stourport Canal Basin was completed in 2008.

A 2010 heritage report from Historic England estimated that Stourport Canal Basin would generate between £7.4m and £11.5m for the

heritage sector within the first 10 years of restoration.

The benefits of restoration included ease of access to cultural and recreational activities through better towpaths and walking links.

Commonwealth Games

The 2022 Commonwealth Games welcomed over five million visitors to the region and the event was broadcast worldwide.

The canal network became the backdrop of many TV shows and interviews and was at the heart of many of those visits. The canals

played a key part in active travel routes to multiple venues, including Sandwell Aquatic Centre, a stage for many of the cultural events, and a wonderful experience as part of the visitor/tourist offer.

The initiatives resulted in a 65% increase in use of Birmingham's already well-used canal network.



Aim	Ingredient for success	Priorities for partnership group (local authorities, Active Black Country, Canal & River Trust)
<p>A destination which celebrates its major assets, including the history and heritage of the canal network.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships with retail and cultural offers where the canal and waterfront benefits can become a key feature. Developing a compelling tourism offer using the significant heritage locations across the Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark, Canal & River Trust heritage green and blue spaces and other partner tourism attractions. This could include the Black Country Living Museum and the Dudley Tunnel, the Wolverhampton Locks Conservation Area, Stourbridge Wharf, and the Galton Valley. Promoting the canalside heritage as an educational area for children and young people to learn about the history of the Black Country. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capturing lessons from tourism attractions, conservation areas and other partners such as the Black Country Living Museum, Dudley Canal Trust, Wolverhampton Locks and Bilston Corridor Conservation Areas. Explore other significant canal-related, heritage-led regeneration opportunities at Chances Glassworks, Soho Foundry and Langley Maltings. Secure additional discretionary regeneration funding from government initiatives.
<p>A positive contribution to nature conservation and the visitor economy of the whole network.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved pedestrian towpath access in significant tourism or commercial areas. Greater safety and accessibility for local residents and visitors to view or walk to green spaces and the canal network. Engaging with canalside property owners to begin creating appealing public spaces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying and developing new canal boat moorings and water spaces. Improving and developing canalside facilities for residential and visitor boaters and non-boaters e.g., toilets, seating, social spaces, and lighting. Canal & River Trust will identify local investment needs on their canals, in consultation with Black Country authorities.
<p>The waterfront benefits of canals become an in-demand opportunity for local investment and business opportunities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Well-promoted canalside buildings and facilities with a focus on active frontages which create welcoming, interesting and appealing public spaces. Promoting the multiuse opportunity of canals for tourism and economy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying potential locations that make the most of canalside assets and promoting as opportunities for investment. Identify high-quality opportunities for business and inward investment at regional and local level.



Progressing the strategy

A set of actions have been identified by local authority partners and represent local delivery ambitions. Investment in canal rejuvenation could:

- **Support economic development** across the Black Country by providing opportunities for businesses, local high streets and places of work.
- **Deliver benefits for physical, economic and social well-being** through improved access to cultural, physical and social activities.

- **Develop a sense of community** and pride of place that contributes to raising the profile of the Black Country as a significant cultural asset to the UK.
- **Further develop a vibrant network of natural spaces** which contributes to behaviour change around environment and sustainability.

Theme

Local authority – current actions/projects/programmes



Active network

- Maintaining and developing the Sandwell section of the canal, which is the historic canal link between Birmingham and the Black Country, and runs through one of the most significant areas of brownfield renewal in Europe.
- Restoration of the Bradley Arm Canal in Bilston to reconnect the Birmingham Main Line and Walsall Canal Line, whilst creating the existing active travel route along the corridor and ensuring that restoration does not sever existing connectivity between communities on either side of it. This will create a significant urban ecological corridor restoration project, linking with Moorcroft Wood Local Nature Reserve, which is a geosite in the Black Country Global Geopark.
- Work to understand the investment need required to deliver restoration of Lapal Tunnel.
- Encouraging sustainable movement for short trips in Rowley and in Smethwick by making walking and cycling easier, safer, and more attractive. Sandwell has successfully bid for two tranches of Towns Funding, all of which were being implemented from 2023.
- Improvements on the Smestow Valley aimed at improving the network and creating a figure of 8 walk from Castlecroft through to Dudley plus refurbishment of the Meccano Bridge.
- Pursue the development of Grove Lane (in the Smethwick to Birmingham canal corridor as a trailblazer).



Active people & communities

- Delivering a Management Plan for Wyrley & Essington Canal Local Nature Reserve in Wolverhampton and Walsall.
- Developing the proposed Walsall Town Centre to Sandwell Valley Park cycle route, parts of which use the canal towpath.
- Residential development in line with Garden City principles: Friar Park (Sandwell), Saddlers Quay (Walsall) and Canalside Quarter and Bilston Urban Village (Wolverhampton).



Active places

- Delivering key regeneration projects in the Canalside Quarter of Wolverhampton City Centre.
- Develop and promote the canal heritage centre by Bradley canal and its link to the Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark.
- Pursuing the heritage-led development of Galton Bridge as a trailblazer.
- Creating a high-quality business environment at the Wolverhampton Science Park which is enhanced by its proximity to the canal.
- Rolfe Street canalside is one of Sandwell's Towns Fund projects that will assist in the delivery of 115 new homes adjacent to the canal.



Playing your part to unlock the potential

We invite all public, private and voluntary sector organisations and individuals to share and understand the vision for how the local canal network can help the Black Country thrive and develop over the coming years.

Although the network delivers many benefits now, with the help of local authorities, the Canal & River Trust, businesses, cultural organisations and other partners, we can do more to provide a network that the Black Country is truly proud of. We ask that:

- The Black Country authorities, the West Midlands Combined Authority, key stakeholders, and communities work together to value, make use of, and support the role that the canals and waterways play in making the Black Country a better place in which to live, work, invest and visit.
- In partnership with key stakeholders and community groups, existing engagement continues with the waterway users to build a network which listens and responds to those people. This way canals will reflect the real-life needs of the community by creating a welcoming, clean and accessible public realm which inspires a sense of local pride.
- The canals are placed at the heart of Black Country decision-making and are regarded as an important part of recreation, education, volunteering and skills development opportunities in the area. Through partnerships, we want to develop the appreciation of the canal network as a community asset which connects people with nature and the natural environment.
- Investment in the canal towpaths and structures can support more people to use them as areas for active and sustainable travel. The canal network has historically been a foundation of the Black Country. With the right investment, the canal network can return to being a highly valued and central part of the transport infrastructure connecting an active Black Country community.
- As a valued means of active transport, the canals can continue to support valued local action on energy objectives and reduction of overall levels of pollution and CO₂ emissions for a healthier Black Country environment. Additionally, we want to realise the potential that the waterways have for a green future.
- All partners and major local investors consider the aims of this strategy in all future planning and investment decisions in the Black Country. We want the waterfront benefits of canals to become an in-demand opportunity for local investment and business opportunities.
- As both a boating destination and a means of transport for walking, cycling and wheeling, the canals have the power to increase the attractiveness of the Black Country for visitors. Well-connected canal routes and well-kept towpaths can increase footfall for the major high streets and tourism destinations in the area.
- The canal network is further recognised as one of the Black Country's most distinctive historical and environmental assets. In partnership with local authorities and culture and heritage partners, the aim of the strategy is to ensure that the network not only connects communities to heritage sites but is also valued as a cultural asset in itself.

Acknowledgements

We value the input provided to design a strategy for canals in the Black Country.

In developing this strategy, it was important to ensure that its contents resonated with all major stakeholders, and it aligned with other strategies across the local area and at a regional and national level. We would like to thank everyone that took part in this process.

We would specifically like to acknowledge the organisations that supplied information and feedback. This includes, but is not limited to:

Dudley Council, Sandwell Council, Walsall Council, City of Wolverhampton Council, Black Country Transport, Environment Agency, Sustrans, Walsall Housing Group and Sport England.

We would also like to acknowledge the following strategies and documents that have helped shape the priorities for this strategy:

Garden City Principles, Smethwick to Birmingham Corridor Framework, Bilston Corridor Area Action Plan, Creating an Active Black Country, Black Country Walking and Cycling Plan, West Midlands Strategic Transport Plan, Wolverhampton Playing Pitch Strategy, Sport England: Uniting the Movement, Sport England: Active Design Guidance, West Midlands Natural Environment Plan, WM2041 – the WMCA Climate Change Strategy, West Midlands Climate Change Adaptation Plan 2021-26 and Defra Local Nature Recovery principles.





www.activeblackcountry.co.uk



www.canalrivertrust.org.uk

