



## **Developing Waterside Investment Opportunities in the Black Country Urban Park**

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# **Developing Waterside Investment Opportunities in the Black Country Urban Park**

A Report

For

**British Waterways and Partners**

A report submitted by

GHK Consulting

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides some initial ideas for developing waterside investment opportunities in the Black Country Urban Park.

### **Strategic Framework**

The ideas are set by the broad strategic goal of attracting increased numbers of boaters to Walsall and Wolverhampton, where significant waterside developments are already planned, from the South (Birmingham Gas St, Black Country Museum, Merry Hill). This requires the possible development of attractions or amenities that boaters would appreciate and value, as staging posts along the Birmingham Canal and Walsall Canal, located between the destinations in the South and Walsall and Wolverhampton. The increased flow of boaters would subsequently enhance the returns to planned investments and support the long-term development of the Black Country Park through which the canals run, and the associated regeneration benefits.

### **Key Development Opportunities**

There are three types of development opportunity that exist:

- Boater amenities – development focused largely on the needs and interests of boaters, that might have subsequent local regeneration benefits (e.g. small scale retail, environmental improvements)
- Local development sites – development of mainstream commercial property or housing to meet local / sub-regional demand on sites that are adjacent to the canals, but where there are possibilities to enhance the attractiveness of the development for boaters and hence of the overall development
- Local regeneration schemes – development focused on meeting local community needs for improved amenities, access and green spaces, and where the canal adds some additional value to these schemes.

### ***Boater Opportunities***

The major opportunity to improve boater amenities as staging posts is the re-opening of the Bradley Arm to link the Birmingham Canal and the Walsall Canal and creating a 'figure of 8' between the attractions in the south and Wolverhampton and Walsall in the north. This would provide greater scope for boaters to explore the canals, avoiding the need to retrace steps and opens up a number of sites that could be used for various development opportunities but including scope to provide additional facilities for boaters. It may be the regional BW workshop for example might be a focal point.

### ***Local Development Sites***

The major development sites are located mainly on the Walsall Canal to the south and south west of Walsall town centre. Sites around Darlaston are especially attractive. There are a number of other opportunities including Hays Wharf close to Wolverhampton town centre.

### ***Local Regeneration Schemes***

There are a number of small scale schemes that might be considered, some of which have been the subject of specific proposals.

### **Next Steps**

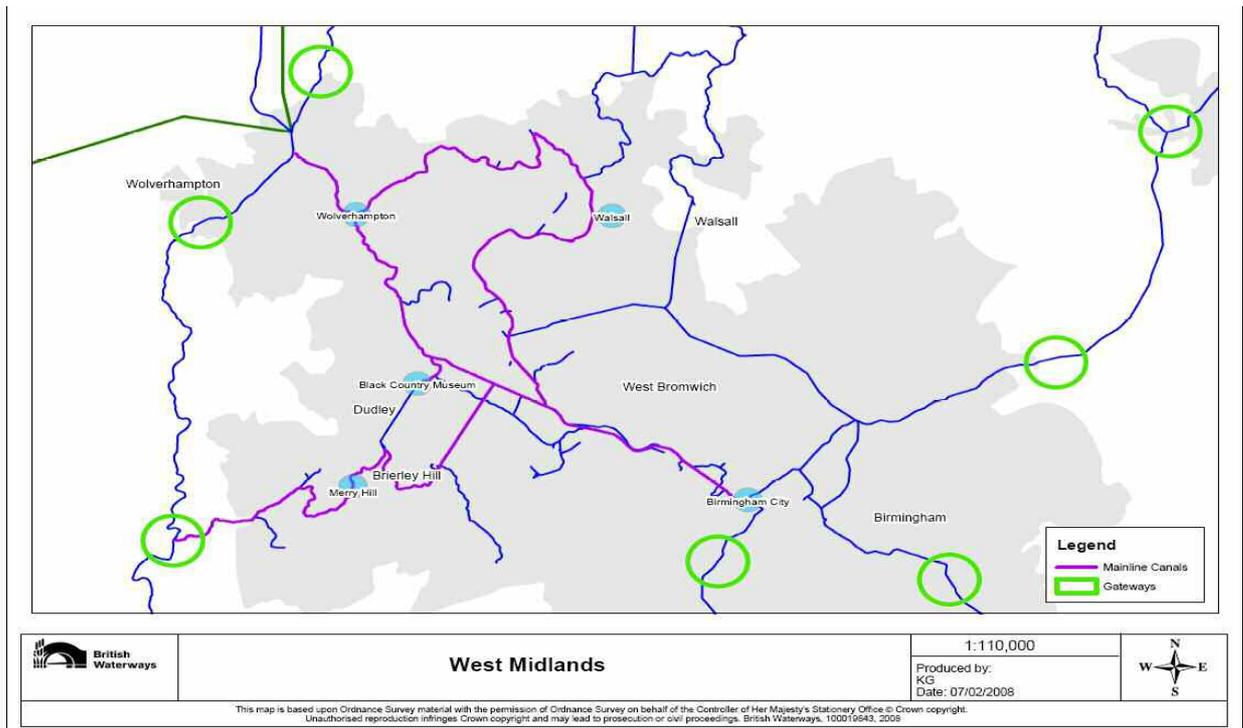
Following presentation of a the range of development opportunities around the relevant canal network, it is hoped to identify a small number of schemes of different types that might form the basis of a coherent investment plan designed to maximise the value of the canal network to boaters, developers and the local community.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 This Report

This report presents a strategic framework for waterside investment in the Black Country Urban Park. The broad goal is to encourage boaters that visit to the south (Birmingham, Black Country Museum, Merry Hill) to travel and visit Walsall and Wolverhampton by investing in staging posts along the Birmingham, Walsall and the Essendine Canals (Figure 1.1). Possible investment opportunities have been identified and are presented for discussion

**Figure 1.1: Canals in the Black Country Urban Park**



## 1.2 Structure of the Report

The report continues in the following sections:

- Section 2.0 – summarises existing strategic plans
- Section 3.0 – outlines the strategic framework for waterside development in the Black Country Urban Park
- Section 4.0 – describes the range of investment opportunities
- Section 5.0 – identifies the next steps

## 2 EXISTING STRATEGIC PLANS

### 2.1 British Waterways Strategy

#### 2.1.1 *British Waterways National Vision*

*BW Ambition: by 2012 we will have created an expanded, vibrant, largely self-sufficient waterway network used by twice as many people as in 2002. It will be regarded as one of the nation's most important and valued national assets. Visitors will be delighted with the quality of the experience and as a consequence many will become active participants.*

- Nationally 11million people use the canals every year, 32,000 boats are based on them. 3.3m people visit a waterway at least once in a typical fortnight
- **There are approximately 10,000 canal users per year in the West Midlands** (This figure was quoted during our “Tour” – BW to confirm)

#### 2.1.2 *British Waterways West Midlands Vision*

- Birmingham and the Black Country Canals to have five ‘super’ destinations – Birmingham City Centre, Merry Hill, the Black Country Museum, Wolverhampton and Walsall
- To provide uninterrupted single day navigation between the five sites, and to provide easy public access, good infrastructure for cycling and walking between these destinations
- To ensure these routes have enhanced bio diversity and heritage values that benefit all canal users

### 2.2 Black Country Strategy

#### 2.2.1 *A Million People: Black Country as an Urban Park*

There are 4 Flagship Elements in the Urban Park Business Plan and one key element – Black Country wide Community Engagement. The 4 Flagship Elements are:

1. Strata (development of Wren’s Nest Nature Reserve, underground limestone mines – including underground canal use)
2. Canals and waterways use (package of schemes for the five canals in the region: creation of education and interpretation centres, new moorings, improvement of open space and wildlife habitats)
3. Green Bridge Park (largest open air space in the region, low carbon footprint visitor centre at Barr Beacon, expansion of the existing RSPB Visitor Centre, pedestrian linking bridge)
4. Living Landscape (enhancement and access to network of natural areas around the canal network)

#### **The Black Country Joint Core Strategy**

The four Black Country Local Authorities (Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton) are currently working together to produce the BCJCS. This will be a ‘spatial planning document’ (dealing not only with land use but also environmental, economic and social issues) that will set out the vision, objectives and strategy for future development in the Black Country to 2026.

The Core Strategy will be a Development Plan Document and will form the basis of the Black Country Local Authorities' Local Development Frameworks. Currently the BCJCS is at the Preferred Option Stage.

### **2.2.2 The Joint Core Strategy - Preferred Option Stage**

The main features relating to canal/waterways development identified in the BCJCS are outlined below:

As part of the consultation stage at the Issues and Options Stage for the BCJCS the importance of the canal network in providing a "backbone" for most of the Regeneration Corridor network was noted. References were also made to the need for effective and consistent networks for walking and cycling, in addition to on-road routes the use of 'greenways', rights of way and canal towpaths.

The vision for the BCJCS is made up of three main "directions of change" Canal/waterways development is a contributory factor to both sustainable communities and Economic Prosperity and is given explicit recognition due to its central role in the Environmental transformation of the BC.

1. Sustainable Communities
2. Environmental Transformation
3. Economic Prosperity

#### **Wolverhampton**

- Vision: By 2026 Wolverhampton will be served by an established, confident City Centre with a wide variety of quality shops and cultural attractions, 21st century offices, urban living and a city-scale public transport interchange. A modern public realm network, **vibrant canalside quarter** and remodelled ring road will have made the compact City Centre attractive to walkers and cyclists.
- *Preferred Option:* The Canalside Quarter is a longstanding area of comprehensive economic and physical regeneration, taking advantage of canalside development opportunities and maximising the reuse of historic buildings and features. The preferred option for this area is to build on current initiatives to provide a wide range of sustainable land uses including residential, leisure and employment. Improved access links will be required to secure integration with the rest of the City Centre.
  - *Identified Opportunities:* To maximize the existing environmental quality of the City Centre, in particular the rich built heritage and canals
  - *Open Space/Environment Development:* Given a lack of green open space in the east of the City Centre, where new residential development will be concentrated, there is a need to create valuable amenity space for new residents, employees and visitors, maximising use of the canal corridor

#### **Walsall**

- Vision: By 2026 Walsall town centre will have been regenerated as a sub-regional focus for the local economy and the community. It will provide its catchment area with an attractive choice of comparison shopping and leisure, entertainment and cultural facilities, as well as supporting a thriving office market. Walsall will also support modern town centre living. The centre will bring all of these activities together in a vibrant, safe, attractive and accessible environment that combines local heritage with modern design
  - Preferred Option: Canalside. This area is largely vacant or underused. The preferred option is housing-led development with a strong leisure component.

Planning permission exists for a range of uses including residential, leisure, office and retail

- Opportunities: Canal side improvements, Site for leisure, residential and office development at Walsall Waterfront

The existing UDP provides broad support for canal led regeneration and in the past 10 – 15 years the local authority has worked with BW and others, using City Challenge and SRB funding for example, to invest in towpath and other improvements of nearly two-thirds of the canal network within the borough. The evolving LDF continues to emphasise the important role of the canal network, reflected in both the town Centre Strategy and the Strategic Regeneration Framework. Important regeneration initiatives on the network include:

- The Walsall Town Wharf waterfront development in Walsall town centre
- The Birchills Locks regeneration corridor
- The Gigaport office corridor
- Darlaston Employment Area
- Improvements to the Wyrley and Essington canal improving access in the BCCS Regeneration Area

More strategically, Walsall Council recognise that 6-7,000 boaters use the canal networks in the Walsall area and wish to see more of these attracted to Walsall as a destination and as:

- A major regional staging point linking the Black Country with the Staffordshire canal network – opening up the Cannock Extension and the Lichfield and Hatherton networks
- Improvement of strategic linkages within the BC network including the Wyrley and Essington, the southern reaches of the Rushall Canal to Sandwell and Birmingham and the reopening of the Bradley Arm link to the Birmingham canal.
- Other destination improvements within Walsall including Brownhills and the area around Longwood Junction to link into Walsall TC and Arboretum from the east

### **3 STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR WATERSIDE INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE BLACK COUNTRY URBAN PARK**

#### **3.1 Building on the Existing Strategic Framework**

In order to develop the North Black Country canals for both local resident use and boaters British Waterways has developed an approach aimed at increasing the attractiveness of the north of the Black Country to boaters; working with Walsall and Wolverhampton Councils to develop proposals that reconnect local communities with the canal network.

##### **3.1.1 Developing Staging Posts**

A key element of the BW strategy to develop destinations in the Black Country is the concept of developing staging posts as a mechanism for encouraging boaters to travel to Walsall and Wolverhampton. This approach recognises the value of the planned town centre developments and seeks to identify and develop smaller sites as desirable mini-attractions and/or service centres.

In addition to increased boating traffic canal side development in the north of the Black Country should seek to open up the canals to the communities that live nearby through increased access, enhanced safety measures such as improved lighting; better quality surfacing etc. Through the Big Lottery bid a number of sites were identified and detailed proposals have been drawn up.

The Big Lottery Bid included proposals that contained three types of development opportunity, with some proposals containing a mixture of all three:

- Boater amenities – development focused largely on the needs and interests of boaters, that might have subsequent local regeneration benefits (e.g. small scale retail, environmental improvements)
- Local development sites – development of mainstream commercial property or housing to meet local / sub-regional demand on sites that are adjacent to the canals, but where there are possibilities to enhance the attractiveness of the development for boaters and hence of the overall development
- Local regeneration schemes – development focused on meeting local community needs for improved amenities, access and green spaces, and where the canal adds some additional value to these schemes.

##### **3.1.2 Towpath Improvement.**

The focus of British Waterways canal development has been to develop towpath access where funding has been available, consistent with the view that canal development should provide benefits for those who live near the waterways. This has been delivered in the north of the Black Country on a piecemeal basis as funding has become available or through Section 106 agreements with developers.

This approach has enabled BW to develop stretches of the canal which are safer and easier for a range of users, with many access points compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act regulations. Some stretches of towpath still require improvement; BW has identified areas of greatest need and these are illustrated on Map 4.2 (page 11) Future site development may require towpath improvement priorities to be revisited in order to maximise economic and social development impact.

### 3.2 Current Use of the Canal Network in the Black Country

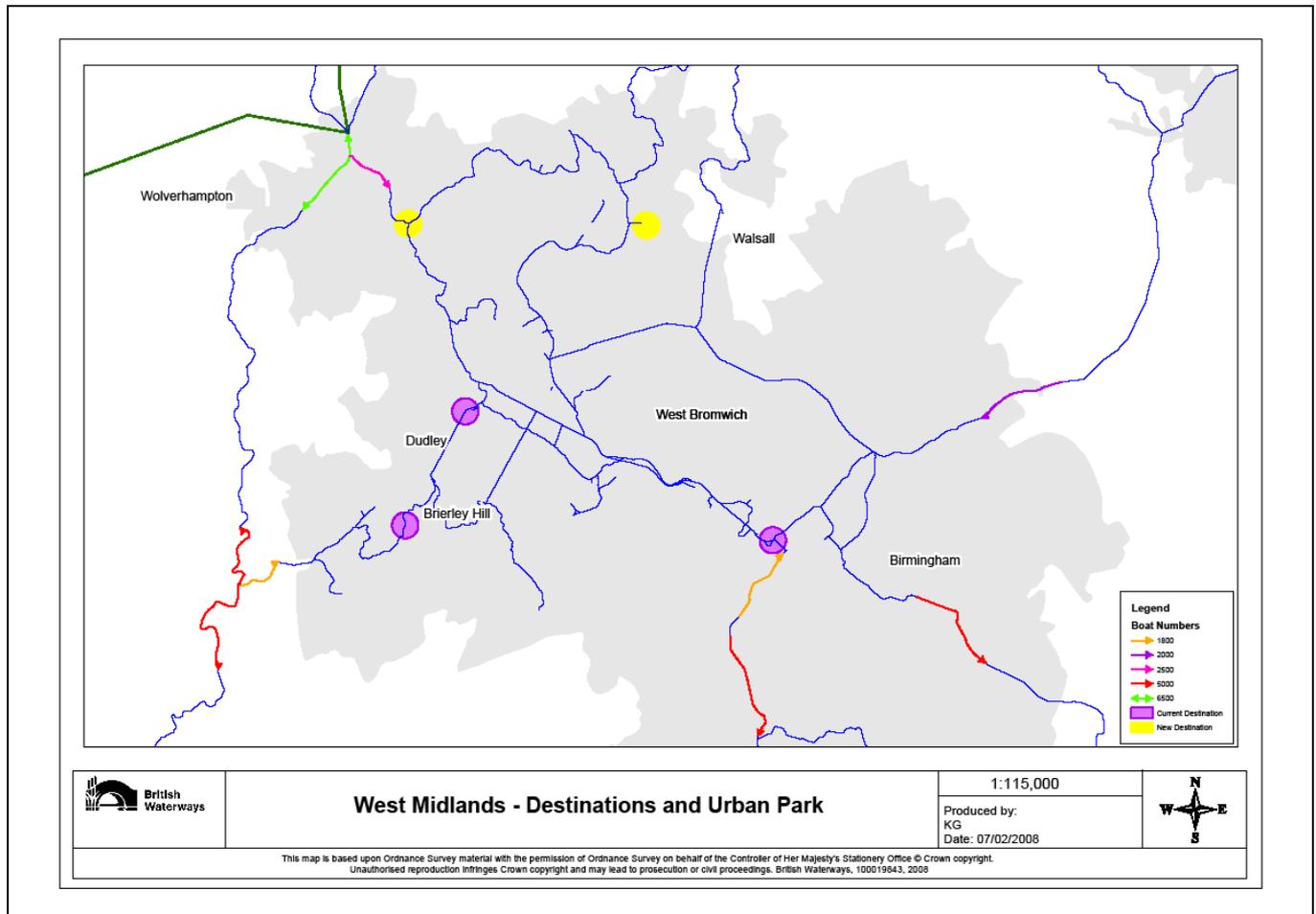
#### 3.2.1 Destinations

In order to understand the context for investment decisions it is first important to understand current canal usage by both boaters and pedestrians in addition to journey times between major destinations in the Black Country.

#### 3.2.2 Boating Trips Along Key Stretches

Figure 1.1 illustrates the available data for boater usage of the key gateways to the Black Country Network.

**Figure 1.1: Canals in the Black Country Urban Park**



The map illustrates that there are high volumes of boaters using the stretches of canal to the north and south of the Black Country Network. The Brindley Place area of Birmingham, Merry Hill and the Black Country Museum are recognised as the current major attractions for boaters in the region. Whilst data is not available to confirm the hypothesis that a sizeable proportion of canal users to the south of the Black Country are travelling north to these destinations, the working assumption of this interim report is that they are. This is supported through the stakeholder consultations held to date.

The map also illustrates that there is a high volume of boaters to the north of Wolverhampton. Interviews with Walsall Council also suggest that there is a large volume of boaters using the canal network to the north of Walsall, including the Cannock Extension.

The canalside development in both Walsall and Wolverhampton is intended to encourage boaters to visit the town centres travelling from both north and south. Figure 1.1 would suggest that in addition to attracting boaters visiting major attractions in the south of the Black Country, there is an opportunity to attract greater numbers of boaters from the north.

### 3.2.3 Trip Distances and Times

Table 3.1 presents a grid of travel times and distances between destinations on the Black Country Canal Network. The figures presented are estimates based on discussions with British Waterways and analysis of destination maps. The figures presented in black represent miles and those in red journey times in hours.

**Table 3.1: Travel Distances and Times for BCN Destinations**

	Birmingham		Walsall		Wolverhampton		Black Country Museum		Merry Hill	
	Miles	Hours	Miles	Hours	Miles	Hours	Miles	Hours	Miles	Hours
Birmingham			13	3	14	3	5	2	6	2
Walsall	13	3			8	2	9	4	10	5
Wolverhampton	14	3	8	2			6	3	9	2
Black Country Museum	5	2	9	4	6	3			3	1
Merry Hill	6	2	10	5	9	2	3	1		

Source: Adapted from 'Nicholson's Waterways Guide'

Travel times based on actual time taking account of locks etc, rather than average speeds

This overview of journey times reinforces the view that it is reasonable to expect boaters to travel to Wolverhampton and Walsall town centres if there is a compelling offer motivating them to do so. The close proximity of Birmingham, Merry Hill and the Black Country Museum make them easily navigable for visitors. The quality of the canalside environment also offers visitors an attractive route.

The proximity of Wolverhampton to the Black Country Museum and ease of travel through the Coseley Tunnel offers a good connection between Wolverhampton and the existing major attractions in the south of the Black Country.

As Table 3.1 outlines, journey times between Walsall, the Black Country Museum and Merry Hill are fairly lengthy at six and seven hours respectively. A staging approach to development of sites would obviously break journey times down to shorter stretches. A long term goal could be to extent the Bradley Arm, reconnecting the Bradley Link with the Walsall canal. The Bradley Arm Link is one of the sites contained in the long-list for discussion on page 9. This would substantially reduce journey times to Walsall.

### 3.2.4 Pedestrian use of the Black Country Canal Network

As outlined earlier in this report, in addition to encouraging increased use of the canal network by boaters there is recognition in the Black Country Joint Core Strategy of the value of the canal network to promoting sustainable communities. Integral to this is encouraging canals use by both resident and visiting pedestrians.

Table 3.2 shows the available figures for pedestrian canal users in Birmingham, Merry Hill, Wolverhampton and Walsall. This data is calculated using pedestrian counters at fixed points along the canal network, the table is not complete and is provided for indicative purposes only.

**Table 3.2: Pedestrian Flows per year by destination**

	Year		
	2006	2007	2008
Birmingham (Brindley Place)		274,993	310,388
Merry Hill			239,364
Wolverhampton	81,234	90,904	
Walsall	181,356	135,037	

Source: BW Pedestrian Count

The pedestrian flows illustrated above highlight the importance of the canal network for pedestrians in the Black Country and the opportunity to capitalise on existing pedestrian canal use. Towpath improvement carried out by British Waterways has increased access and ease of use for pedestrians to the canal network and some of the potential developments outlined in the next chapter of this report are largely environmental in nature; serving boaters and communities.

## 4 SPECIFIC INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

### 4.1 Project indicators Table

In order to understand the range of canalside development opportunities in the Black Country, a range of sites and proposals were discussed with British Waterways, the Black Country Consortium and Wolverhampton and Walsall Councils. Using evidence gathered and presented as part of the Big Lottery bid the proposed sites have been distilled into a long list for discussion. A number of the original lottery bids were eliminated as they had either been developed since the bid was rejected or they were unsuitable for the purposes of the study.

In order to provide a clear classification for project types this study has adopted the classification used in the *East Midlands Waterway Study, (2007)* which was prepared by Ecotec for the East Midlands Development Agency. Under this classification projects are classified under one of three categories:

- **Land and property projects:** these projects encompass the construction of new buildings or improvements to existing property that is located next to or close to water. Projects also include activity which brings land that is adjacent or next to water back into use in order to open it up for commercial or residential development.
- **Restoration or link projects:** these projects include the restoration of disused or underused waterways including the restoration of canals. These projects also include the construction of new stretches of waterway that link either existing waterways together or bring in a completely new waterway to a particular locality.
- **Destination projects:** these projects mainly relate to tourism activities that are found in a locality which is near or on a waterway. The projects mainly focus on those which develop a waterway as a visitor destination.

Table 4.1 is presented for discussion with the Steering Group. This table presents a factual overview of the projects.

Informed by the Steering Group discussion GHK will evaluate in more detail the feasibility and impact of development at a subset of sites and make recommendations for development in the final stage of this project.

**Table 4.1: Project Long List Indicator Table**

Black Country (North) Canal-Side Development Project Indicators									
Project	Canal	Classification	Footpath improvement (Y/N)	Landscaping Improvements (Y/N)	Associated Development (Y/N)	Accessibility Improvements (Y/N)	Wharfage / Moorings Provided? (Y/N)	Other Infrastructure Improvements (Y/N)	Improved links to other canals/facilities (Y/N)
Dixon Street	Birmingham	Land / Property	Y	Y	?	?	N	?	Y
Broad Street Basin	Birmingham	Destination	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Deepfields Junction	Bradley Canal Arm	Land / Property	Y	Y	?	Y	N	?	Y
Bradley Arm Link	Bradley Canal Arm	Restoration / Link	Y	Y	Y	Y	?	Y	Y
Birchills Improvements	Walsall	Land / Property	Y	Y	?	?	?	?	?
Darlaston Employment Link	Walsall	Land / Property	Y	Y	?	Y	?	Y	?
Wednesfield Park	Wyrley & Essington	Land / Property	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	?	Y
Holly Bank Basin	Wyrley & Essington	Destination	Y	Y	?	Y	Y	?	?
Sneyd Junction	Wyrley & Essington	Land / Property	Y	Y	?	?	Y	?	Y
Longwood Junction	Rushall Canal	Destination	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

	Located in Wolverhampton
	Located in Walsall

**4.2 Proposed Assessment Criteria**

The site assessment process will involve a more detailed assessment of potential project activity than has been undertaken to date. In addition to the assessment criteria outlined below other issues will be considered including; project feasibility; wider economic and environmental benefits; policy benefits and any potential conflicts between development proposals.

The sites contained in the long list are presented in Table 4.2 and mapped overleaf. This table outlines some of the proposed site selection criteria and will inform the sites selection.

**Table 4.2: Project Long List Assessment Criteria**

Black Country (North) Canal-Side Development Project Assessment Criteria													
Project	Canal	Focus of primary user	Of visitor interest? (Y/N)	Meets identified strategic policy objectives (Y/N)	Meets identified local policy objectives (Y/N)	In a BCCS regeneration Zone / other policy priority area (Y/N)	Meets specified funding programme objectives (Y / N and Fund)	Relocation of existing uses required (Y / N)	Improved land values for existing / new associated development (Y / N)	Benefits to brownfield land remediated (Y / N or Area)	Potential for private sector funding leverage (Y / N)	Jobs created / safeguarded (Y/N or No.)	Broad Order Cost Category
Dixon Street	Birmingham	Residents	N	Y	Y	Y	?	N	N	N	?	N	?
Broad Street Basin	Birmingham	Boaters & Residents	Y	Y	Y	Y	?	N	N	N	Y	Y	?
Deepfields Junction	Bradley Canal Arm	Residents	N	Y	Y	Y	?	N	N	N	?	N	?
Bradley Arm Link	Bradley Canal Arm	Boaters	Y	Y	?	N	?	N	Y	Y	?	Y	?
Birchills Improvements	Walsall	Resident Boaters	N	Y	Y	Y	?	N	Y	Y	?	N	?
Darlaston Employment Link	Walsall	Residents	N	Y	Y	Y	?	N	Y	?	Y	N	?
Wednesfield Park	Wyrley & Essington	Residents	N	Y	Y	Y	?	N	Y	N	?	N	?
Holly Bank Basin	Wyrley & Essington	Boaters & Residents	N	Y	Y	N	?	N	Y	N	?	N	?
Sneyd Junction	Wyrley & Essington	Boaters & Residents	N	Y	Y	Y	?	N	Y	N	?	N	?
Longwood Junction	Rushall Canal	Boaters	Y	Y	Y	N	?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	?

	Located in Wolverhampton
	Located in Walsall

**SEE LARGE MAP**

## 5 EVALUATING DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

### 5.1 Key Development Issues for Discussion

1. Based on the available boater numbers, which highlight high boater traffic in the south of the Black Country and in South Staffordshire, **there appears to be a clear rationale for the development of staging posts to encourage boater travel into Wolverhampton and Walsall town centres.**
2. An analysis of boater travel times suggests that **consideration should be given to developing a long-term strategy for the restoration of the Bradley Link.** Whilst this may be a long term issue it is important to understand the feasibility of this development as it may have an influence on the desirability of pursuing other proposed development sites.
3. The pedestrian flow data indicates that there is a very high degree of pedestrian traffic using the waterways. Continued towpath development is therefore important in order to connect communities to the canal network. **Consideration should be given to aligning towpath improvement priorities with any investment decisions resulting from this study.**
4. The directed focus of this study related to the feasibility of developing staging posts in order to encourage boat users to travel from existing major locations in the south of the Black Country (Merry Hill, Birmingham and the Black Country Museum) to Walsall and Wolverhampton. **Consideration should be given to widening the focus of the study in order to allow site assessment to consider development aimed at attracting canal users from north of the Black Country** (this would strengthen the rationale for developments on the Wryley and Essington and Rushall Canals).

### 5.2 Next Steps

- GHK will produce a note of the Steering Group Meeting outlining the agreed approach to site selection.
- Steering Group members will be contacted by GHK as part of the next stage of this work in order to provide greater clarity and inform the assessment of sites