

11 April 2024

**Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark - Progress Update**

**Ward(s):** All

**Portfolios:** Wellbeing, Leisure and Public Spaces

**1. Aim**

- 1.1. The Black Country has geology spanning 428 million years and the area is well known for its exceptionally well-preserved fossils. The Black Country is also rich in coal, ironstone and limestone, resources which inspired discovery, invention and innovation and placed the region at the centre of the Industrial Revolution which continues to shape the modern world. The Geopark boasts a range of varied geosites including landscapes and viewpoints, disused mines and quarries, canals, national and local nature reserves, museums with spectacular collections, open air visitor attractions and many historic buildings. It connects the geology under our feet with cultural and industrial heritage.
- 1.2. The Black Country became a UNESCO Global Geopark on 10 July 2020 in recognition of the international importance of its natural and cultural heritage.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1. To note the work of the Black County UNESCO Global Geopark and to suggest ways in which the project can promote the tourism potential of the Black Country.

**3. Report detail – know**

- 3.1. The Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark hosted its first revalidation visit from the 14 to 18 July 2023. Following the visit a report was presented at the Global Geopark Network executive meeting which took place in Morocco in September 2023. The Network were very impressed with what the Black Country Geopark have achieved in its first three years as a geopark despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact. They concluded that the Black Country is performing well as a global geopark and particularly commended the work on environmental improvement and engagement of communities and volunteers.
- 3.2. They recommended a 'Green Card' pass, and this was confirmed following the Paris UNESCO General Assembly meeting in the spring of 2024.
- 3.3. The revalidation mission was a significant piece of collaborative work between all four local authorities, external partners and many community groups and local specialists. The partnership would like to record our sincere thanks to all those involved for making it such a successful visit.

### ***Revalidation mission recommendations***

- 3.4. As part of the revalidation assessment discussions were held about where the global network felt that the Black Country could improve and areas of focus for the next few years.
- 3.5. Three recommendations were suggested to the partnership by inspectors during their revalidation mission:
- That the partnership develops a Black Country ‘tourism strategy’ that is truly ‘Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark’ and that the group should engage with stakeholders via an annual forum/meeting. The inspectors thought that educational/lifelong learning connections were particularly important to develop.
  - The inspectors felt that the Black Country partnership could do more to promote local products/produce and make these products better connected to the heritage stories of the area.
  - Steps should be taken to strengthen the Black Country Geopark sustainability and capacity given the very modest dedicated resources.

### ***Update on actions to address these UNESCO recommendations***

- 3.6. The joint geopark management team which meets monthly has begun to address these recommendations. Key actions are:
- The group has formed a task group to draft a Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark tourism strategy. Dudley’s Tourism Development Officer is our most experienced visitor economy officer and is leading the project.
  - The Tourism Development Officer has consulted other UK geoparks and other UNESCO sites in the UK and has produced a first draft that has been circulated for discussion to the wider partnership.
  - The tourism strategy will specifically feature a section dedicated to ‘Geopark Geoproducts’ to drive the promotion of local products and their connections to the heritage story of the Black Country.
  - The group received the ABCA approval in principle for the recruitment/secondment of a permanent geopark team and took on board the 2023 UNESCO recommendations. The geopark management has revisited the previous proposals for improving the human resources. Further details on the staffing proposals are set out below.
  - The team has begun working with the UK National Commission for UNESCO on a HLF funded project called ‘Local to Global’. This project is providing free expertise and consultancy to the partnership in the areas of:

- fundraising opportunities
  - audience development and
  - the use of technology in heritage interpretation and promotion
- 3.7. The advice is helping the group to address the recommendations, with expert advice from external bodies at no cost to the Black Country and will also provide a small sum of up to £5,000 for a Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark project within one of the themes.

***Some other significant geopark achievements and applications***

- 3.8. Since revalidation, the geopark partnership has been engaged in several projects and has submitted expressions of interest for funding opportunities.
- 3.9. The group has hosted, (with the University of Wolverhampton), a post doctorate/early careers training course on the reclamation of brownfield sites and we currently have an application sitting with the UK research councils for hosting a two-day seminar on Nature Recovery best practice in urban areas.
- 3.10. The group has hosted a field trip for the International Symposium of ProGEO (International Association for the Conservation of Geological Heritage) held in Loughborough. A total of 41 delegates from countries as far away as Brazil, Tasmania, Canada, and from across Europe were in attendance. The feedback was that everyone enjoyed an excellent, informative, and well-organised visit to the Black Country UNESCO Global Geopark. This was event was promoted globally as it was the groups offering to the UN International Geodiversity Day global events register for October 2023.
- 3.11. The partnership has held meetings with the tourism and culture representatives of the West Midlands Combined Authority and expressed the importance of the Black Country Geopark to the forthcoming Local Visitor Enterprise Partnership and discussed how best to use the international profile for the region.
- 3.12. The four local authorities, led by Walsall MBC, submitted an expression of interest to the UK Fund for £3,000,000 over four years for a climate change behavioural project working with young people. Unfortunately, the bid was unsuccessful, however, a lot of useful work was undertaken developing the bid.
- 3.13. A date has been set for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UNESCO Global Geoparks Network (UGGp), with Walsall agreeing to host an event as part of Black Country month in July. The event, funded by the Black Country festival group, will celebrate Black Country products which was a key recommendation by the inspectors from UNESCO in 2023. There will be a music festival celebrating the Black Countries greatest exports in the music industry, there will also be produce stands and displays. This event will also tie in with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the Walsall Arboretum throughout 2024. The event is due to take place on 27 July 2024.

### ***Support and recommendations***

- 3.14. With the help of the UNESCO Global Geopark Network, the awareness of the Black Country as a heritage destination is growing and new opportunities are rapidly emerging. The group is seeing a significant rise in interest and opportunities for joint project working. The group is, however, beginning to struggle with capacity.
- 3.15. The partnership was asked to review the geopark staffing and bring details and costs to a future ABCA meeting for discussion. Having done the review, the previous proposals put forward for dedicated staff still seem to be appropriate for the emerging workload. They included:
- A fund-raising officer to coordinate funding and ensure that monitoring and reporting are adequately resourced to make the most of opportunities.
  - An education officer to coordinate learning opportunities across the Black Country.
  - A generic support officer to handle administration, promotion, and practical support at events, etc.
- 3.16. Specialist functions for geology, natural history and historic environment will continue to be provided by existing staff and guided by the management group for the geopark.
- 3.17. Job descriptions and person specifications have been drafted and will be sent to Dudley HR for evaluation. This work has been progressed on the approval of the Association of Black Country Authorities (ABCA).

## **4. Financial information**

- 4.1. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was agreed in 2019 for a contribution of £9,500 from each Local Authority to develop the Black Country Geopark and recruit to the posts. This figure was agreed with the approval of ABCA in 2020 to £35,000 per authority, but an MoU has yet to be signed for this sum. Walsall Council has agreed to pay this contribution towards this important international project.

## **5. Reducing Inequalities**

- 5.1. The development of the geopark as an important global brand, much like the World Heritage Site status has for Ironbridge, will provide the Black Country with a way of promoting the area on the back of its industrial past. The importance of the Black Country is based on the underlying geology of the area, and it is this heritage which will help to promote the region in the future.
- 5.2. The promotion of the tourism offer across the area will develop pride in place and will also provide people with more economic means for improving the area, which all helps in improving the difference in economic outputs for the town.

## **6. Decide**

- 6.1. The Black Country Geopark is an important partnership arrangement endorsed by UNESCO officers. There is an opportunity to endorse the work of the partnership by agreeing to support the development of the Black Country Geopark further through the appointment of dedicated officers and by supporting the events and activities taking place.

## **7. Respond**

- 7.1. The Committee is asked to discuss the Black Country Geopark and what it could mean for the region, particularly when considering the very positive endorsement from the International Geopark Committee for the great work that has already taken place.

## **8. Review**

- 8.1. The officers work together as a partnership and meet monthly to review progress on the development of the geopark. This progress will be brought to committee every time there is an important decision by the partnership to be made or if there is a change to the funding arrangement. Ideally, the Black Country Geopark partnership will be successful in recruiting to the staff and will develop strength because of full-time staff on board and will be able to provide a more detailed focus on.

## **9. Background papers**

None

## **Author**

Liz Stuffins  
Group Manager Healthy Spaces and Environment  
☎ 650835  
✉ [liz.stuffins@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:liz.stuffins@walsall.gov.uk)