Experience training in the Black Country
There are four excellent schemes in this area located in:

- Dudley
- Sandwell
- Walsall
- Wolverhampton

Each locality acts as an independent Vocational Training Scheme (VTS) based on the local teaching hospital trust, but all four areas work collaboratively to ensure a positive and enjoyable training experience for our trainees.

**Dudley VTS**

The Dudley VTS for General Practice was founded in the mid-1970s as one of the first in the West Midlands by a forward-thinking local GP, Dr Derek Bloor. It is now one of the longest established in the country and regularly exports doctors to work in all parts of the UK. The Scheme has been built on the principles of excellence in education, flexibility and innovation.

The scheme has grown hugely over the years and we now have more than 60 trainees on the scheme working in over 20 training practices. In addition, we have 30+ training posts within the Dudley Group of Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and the Dudley & Walsall NHS Mental Health Trust which all have nominated clinical supervisors of consultant grade. We currently have over 60 GP trainees at all levels of training.

Our objectives are:

- To continue to provide high quality, learner-centred, training for those who have chosen General Practice as their career
- To help and support doctors in training to achieve success in the MRCGP examination
- To embed the principles of life-long learning into the doctors of the future
- To foster a lifelong, compassionate approach to patient care
- To equip our trainees with the necessary skills to maintain resilience
- To ensure Doctors trained on the scheme are fit for registration and licensing with the GMC and properly equipped to meet the requirements of revalidation

**Our TPDs:**

**Dr Manny Samra** - Has been a GP in Wolverhampton for the past 11 years and was appointed a TPD in 2006. She has responsibility for women’s issues and early stage training on the scheme.
Black country

Dr James Bullock - Has been a GP in Dudley since 2000 and was appointed a TPD in 2002. He was appointed Lead TPD for the Black Country School in November 2015. He was awarded FRCGP in 2006.

Dr Catherine Miller - Has been a GP in Birmingham since 2000 and was appointed as a TPD in 2010. She completed her GP training in the Black Country in 1998 and worked as a GP Associate in Dudley from 1998 to 2000.

Dr Shahid Merali - Completed his GP training on the Dudley Vocational Training Scheme in 2011. He was appointed as a TPD in 2015 and he is a GP in Walsall.

Sandwell VTS

Sandwell comprises of six towns of Oldbury, Rowley Regis, Smethwick, Tipton, Wednesbury and West Bromwich. It is a vibrant, diverse area with the challenges and joys that come from working in the inner city. Located centrally within the West Midlands, there is easy access to the great shopping and city life experience of Birmingham as well as the peaceful tranquility of the Shropshire and Malvern Hills.

We offer a wide variety of teaching methods; combining half day release with some modular courses throughout the three years as well as termly symposiums – for large group interactions.

Hospital posts are split across two sites: City Hospital and Sandwell hospital. There are a wide variety of hospital jobs offered, including specialties such as ENT, dermatology and ophthalmology, as well as medicine, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, psychiatry, accident and emergency and geriatrics. Our teaching sessions take place at Sandwell hospital.

Sandwell encourages self-directed learning for the development of our future independent General Practitioners. This is facilitated by clusters sessions throughout the year. Clusters sessions allow small group interactions and better TPD to trainee ratios to get the best out of your three years.

We have an active junior doctor forum, so enthusiastic young doctors can get involved in the teaching as well as have their say on teaching and training matters and ensuring that social events are organised throughout the year. The emphasis is on learning through enjoyment and active participation.

Our TPDs:

There are three TPDs who facilitate the half day release scheme and offer support throughout your training and they are: Dr Charanpal Sikka, Dr Roderick MacRorie and Dr Sarbjit Saini. Each trainee has their own TPD mentor for the three year.

Walsall VTS

Walsall VTS was created in September 2012 giving an opportunity to design and run a new VTS in the Black Country. We have recently had a favourable QA visit report and Walsall VTS was proud to win an RCGP Midlands faculty Quality Award for the scheme and its collaborative
Black country

approach to learning. We aim to foster an enthusiastic and learner centred ethos in which trainees can develop.

We like to describe our scheme light-heartedly as trainee led and TPD interrupted/ facilitated. We have a good team of TPDs who work to our strengths well and work well with the trainers to produce self-directed learners who we hope will be motivated for General Practice in the future.

Walsall VTS has 46 trainers in 24 training practices. Our registrars are split into three clusters which were based on the final practice they would spend their ST3 year in. Within these clusters we have developed smaller teams or families of three or four registrars taken from each of the training years to encourage vertical learning and peer support.

VTS sessions feature a mix of TPD facilitated and cluster facilitated learning sessions. TPDs run focus groups on topics or for CSA or AKT support. Innovations we have introduced are termly Movie VTS where we watch a film together with an idea of medical themes and questions that we should look out for and then after the film we break into clusters to discuss these. We have also experimented with ‘flipped learning’ and Balint group learning.

Each registrar hence has a named TPD lead (the lead TPD for their cluster) and point of contact although we like to adopt a friendly, informal approach and encourage the trainees to approach any of the TPDs with a query or difficulty.

We have an active Junior Doctors Forum and Trainee Committee which each meet at least once each term. The JDF is held by the registrars without the TPDs present so the group feels free to discuss any issues in private.

Wolverhampton VTS

The Wolverhampton Vocational Training Scheme has been established for many years. We foster a supportive, interactive environment where trainees are encouraged to shape and develop their own learning. Our aim is to produce informed, well rounded doctors fit for the challenges of modern-day General Practice.

Wolverhampton’s New Cross Hospital is a large teaching hospital with an excellent reputation for education and the majority of the scheme’s hospital posts are based there. The VTS meets on Thursday afternoon at the hospital’s Medical Institute which boasts great IT facilities and a well-stocked library.

The current Wolverhampton Training Programme Directors are Dr RobRinsted, Dr Saum Agarwal, Dr Isabelle Mantella and Dr Dilsher Singh who together have a wide range of experience in teaching and training.

Brief attractions of living and working in the area

Despite its name, the Black Country includes many beautiful parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty, modern and attractive architecture and a vibrant and welcoming population. It takes its name from the broad seam of anthracite coal which originally ran deep underground in the region and fuelled the early industries which grew up here. Although not marked on any map,
The region has a clear and independent identity with a rich and varied history dating back many centuries to the early Anglo-Saxon period. It is known for its unique dialect which dates back many centuries and is acknowledged as the closest surviving version of the language to Elizabethan English. The area was also the birth-place of the Industrial Revolution in the 17th Century and became the heart of British Industry from the Victorian period onwards.

The modern-day Black Country lies just to the west of the Birmingham conurbation and is comprised of the Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton localities with easy access to the central motorway system, air and rail services. Just to the west we also have the scenic ‘Green belt’ around the midlands, including areas of South Staffordshire and Worcestershire, which make ideal places to commute from, with journey times varying from only a few minutes up to an hour.

There are many advantages of living and working in the Black Country. There is a rich sporting history with easy access to both Warwickshire and Worcestershire Cricket Clubs. For football fans, we have Wolverhampton Wanderers, West Bromwich Albion and Walsall FC. For more artistic pursuits there is the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre and the Oldbury Rep. For history buffs we have Dudley Castle and Zoo as well as the Black Country Living Museum. For those who enjoy shopping, the Merry Hill Centre is based in Dudley and the Mander Centre in Wolverhampton. Access to entertainments and facilities in central Birmingham is excellent with direct public transport services available from the centre of each Black Country locality.

Overall, it’s a great place to live and work.
Black Country

Key Contacts

To find out more information about living and working in The Black Country contact:

**Dudley:** Dr James Bullock – TPD  
[james_bullock@me.com](mailto:james_bullock@me.com)

**Sandwell:** Dr Charanpal Sikka – TPD  
[c sikka@nhs.net](mailto:csikka@nhs.net)

**Walsall:** Dr Denise Dobie – TPD  
[denise.dobie@nhs.net](mailto:denise.dobie@nhs.net)

**Wolverhampton:** Dr Isabelle Mantella – TPD  
[i.mantella@nhs.net](mailto:i.mantella@nhs.net)

Information about the ST1 year

Black Country GP Trainees will spend 12 months in the ST1 year training in the hospital trust which forms the hub of their chosen VTS locality. During this period you will train in two specialities for a period of six months each. During this period you will receive clinical supervision from a nominated consultant in this department and educational supervision from the GP scheduled to be your trainer in your final training post. You will meet regularly with your ES through the year and they will also provide regular feedback through your ePortfolio.

On Thursday afternoons during the three eight-week teaching terms, you will be able to attend the VTS teaching sessions run by your local training programme directors. Outside of term time you will be encouraged to attend the self-directed and facilitated ‘cluster’ sessions instead. These are run by the trainees themselves and are integrated across the three ST years; usually being facilitated by an ST3. These teaching and learning events are specifically designed for GP trainees and appropriate to your career choice.

Information about the ST2 year

During the ST2 year you will train for six months in a hospital speciality training post in the local trust with the same arrangements for clinical and educational supervision as in the ST1 year. For the alternate six months you will train in one of the nearby GP training practices with an accredited GP trainer as your clinical supervisor. Your educational supervisor will remain the same trainer as before. You will train with anything up to three GP Registrar colleagues in the same practice and will be an integral member of the practice team. You will be given the necessary time and support to adapt to the new training environment and your trainer will ensure that you have an enjoyable and fruitful period of clinical experience. The VTS teaching and cluster sessions will continue in the same way as the ST1 year but you will be expected to attend a greater proportion of the sessions whilst you are training in General Practice.

Information about the ST3 year

In the ST3 year you will transfer to your final training practice for a 12 month period of clinical experience under the direction of your previously nominated educational supervisor. You will again be an integral member of the practice team and will be provided with extensive clinical
and management experience of Primary Care medicine in a supportive and nurturing educational environment.

By the end of the final training post you will be equipped with all of the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for a successful career as a GP in the UK. VTS teaching and cluster based learning arrangements will continue in the same way as the ST1 and two years. Most importantly, you will have benefited from an enjoyable and stimulating period of training in General Practice which will enthuse and energise you for your career ahead.

The teaching programme

There are three eight week VTS teaching terms per year commencing in September, January and May. These have an emphasis on the development of adult learning skills and are self-directed, with facilitation by the local team of training programme directors. Trainees are encouraged to set the agenda and run the training sessions themselves under the supervision of the TPDs. The method of learning is mostly small group format with an emphasis on multimedia learning techniques and the avoidance of the less effective ‘lecture’ method. Subject matter for the teaching sessions is guided by the RCGP Curriculum and is appropriate to the learning needs of the trainees.

In addition to the regular VTS terms, there is also an annual introductory course for all trainees, which is run in each locality in August/September, just prior to the commencement of term. This is a means of integrating the new trainees into the larger learning set and helping all trainees to transition into their new training year.

Cluster learning sessions are run on Thursday afternoons between each of the VTS terms. These are small learning sets of up to 15 trainees integrated across the three ST years and provide self-directed and self-facilitated learning in a practice-based setting, with each cluster being hosted in a local training practice (or sometimes the local postgraduate centre). Each cluster will have a nominated TPD supervisor who will attend occasionally to ensure that training is progressing and will act as an educational resource for their cluster.

Local support for MRCGP assessments

Clinical Skills Assessment: Each of the VTS localities provides a mock CSA course annually which is available to both ST2 and ST3 GP trainees. These are facilitated by the local TPDs under the supervision of an RCGP Examiner and are free of charge to VTS trainees. Role players from the communication skills department at Birmingham University act as ‘patients’ and the ‘examiners’ are local GP trainers who are briefed and monitored by the RCGP examiner.

Applied Knowledge Test: TPDs guide and facilitate the correct approach to the AKT in their locality via the VTS teaching sessions and by liaison with the local GP trainers at the regular trainers’ workshop. This ensures a consistent approach and the use of validated techniques. For those trainees who struggle with the AKT, the Professional Support Unit, based at the HEE offices in Birmingham, is available to provide help and advice as well as free dyslexia assessments for those who need them.
**Black country**

**Workplace Based Assessment:** WPBA is one of the 3 pillars of the MRCGP examination and is just as important as the AKT and CSA in terms of exam success. TPDs ensure that trainees are properly briefed and advised on how to approach these assessments via the VTS teaching sessions. In addition, all Black Country GP trainers are trained and validated to provide trainees with guidance and supervision in these assessments. TPDs ensure that the approach is consistent across all trainers in the locality and hold ‘calibration’ sessions at trainers’ workshops.

**Academic and other opportunities in the Black Country**

Funding is available for a number of academic opportunities in the BC-VTS localities which allow extensions to training of up to six months in order for trainees to study research and other techniques relevant to academic General Practice. These posts are linked to nearby university departments including Birmingham, Warwick and Keele and provide an opportunity for trainees to extend their academic skills and obtain academic postgraduate qualifications.

Some Black Country localities also have links to post-CCT salaried positions funded by the local CCGs intended to provide recently qualified GPs with specific skills in order to create ‘GPs with a Special Interest’.

**Career prospects as a GP in the Black Country**

The majority of trainees who train in the Black Country choose to remain living and working in the area and frequently become GP-trainers themselves. There are many high quality and innovative practices in the region and exciting career opportunities are plentiful in the area.

Black Country localities are at the forefront of innovation and improvement in the NHS and are actively involved in the new models of care being created, with Vanguard CCGs, GP Federations and Vertically Integrated Practices being features of the region. All of this means that the prospects for an exciting and stimulating career in Primary Care in the Black Country are excellent!

**Want to find out more?**

**Contact a current GP trainee:**

- **Dudley:** Dr Olivia Kenney  
  [olivia.kenney@nhs.net](mailto:olivia.kenney@nhs.net)
- **Sandwell:** Dr Dominic Williams  
  [dominic.williams3@nhs.net](mailto:dominic.williams3@nhs.net)
- **Walsall:** Dr Vai Tarpati  
  [vaitrip@gmail.com](mailto:vaitrip@gmail.com)
- **Wolverhampton:** Dr Saira Bano  
  [sairabano@nhs.net](mailto:sairabano@nhs.net)