

Agenda Item 10a

WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

23 April 2008

Headline Issues for West Midlands Regional Assembly

Report of the Chief Executive

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update the Assembly on key issues undertaken by the Secretariat on behalf of the Board and Assembly Partnerships over the last quarter.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Assembly considers the report and notes progress made.

3. REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY (RSS)

- 3.1 Members will be aware that the Assembly, as the Regional Planning Body, is bringing forward the partial revision of the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy. In addition, ongoing work is being conducted in relation to RSS implementation, monitoring and conformity. Reports have been submitted to Assembly Members on a regular basis to update and inform them of the progress.

RSS Phase One Revision – The Black Country

- 3.2 Members will recall that a consultation on the Secretary of State's 'Proposed Changes' to the WMRSS Phase One Revision was undertaken between September – November 2007. In response, both the Regional Assembly and the Black Country Consortium welcomed the 'Changes' but jointly suggested that some further words be included to the Transport Section in order to provide a clearer steer on the transport issues facing the Black Country.
- 3.3 The final approval of the RSS Phase One Revision was published on 15th January 2008 and, whilst making a number of final policy adjustments, further words on transport have not been added. Although this is disappointing, the final approval continues to support the strategy for the Black Country's renaissance, focussing new development and investment in key corridors and centres, and should therefore be welcomed.

- 3.4 The final approval of the RSS Revision clearly represents a major achievement for both the Regional Assembly and the Black Country Consortium and its partners and the successful implementation of these policies and proposals will clearly now be crucial to the long term success of the Spatial Strategy. Whilst Phase One has now been completed, it will go on to form the framework for the Joint Black Country Core Strategy. Currently the four Black Country Authorities are consulting on the Preferred Option of the Joint Core Strategy and Officers of the Regional Assembly will be making informal views on this Document before the consultation ends on the 28th April 2008.

RSS Phase Two Revision

- 3.5 The Assembly formally submitted the Phase Two Revision Draft to the Secretary of State on 21st December 2007 and the formal 12 week consultation commenced on 7th January 2008. Members will be aware that the level of future housing provision will continue to be a high profile issue both within the consultation process and at the subsequent Examination in Public (EiP). This high profile is also likely to result from the fact that there are a number of on-going processes stemming from the Housing Green paper and related initiatives where the Government has yet to indicate its intentions.
- 3.7 Following the formal submission of the Phase Two Revision Draft, the Assembly has received a letter from Baroness Andrews, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State in the Department for Communities and Local Government. In her letter, dated 7th January 2008, the Minister expressed concern about the housing proposals put forward by the Assembly in light of the Government's agenda to increase housing building across the country. In view of this, the Minister has asked the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) to commission further work to look at options which could deliver higher housing numbers and this will be considered as part of the Examination in Public.
- 3.8 The Regional Planning Partnership (RPP) met on the 25th January to discuss the implications of the letter from Baroness Andrews. RPP members expressed considerable concern and disappointment at the Government's proposed intervention. In particular, concern was raised about the implied intention that certain of the underlying principles of the WMRSS could be open to question. Despite these serious reservations, Members agreed that the Assembly should constructively engage with the proposed study to ensure that the views of the Assembly are fully taken into account and requested that wider stakeholder engagement in the study should take place at the earliest opportunity. However, in adopting this stance, Members stressed that such engagement should not be interpreted as an endorsement of any approach adopted by the study or indeed agreement to any output that might be generated.

- 3.19 The Regional Planning Partnership approved a Revised Conformity Protocol in September 2007. This included revised criteria for regionally significant planning applications that the Assembly wishes to be consulted upon. The criteria are consistent with the new terminology and policies that have been submitted to the Secretary of State in respect of the Phase 2 Revision to the RSS. The Revised Protocol became operational on the 1st February and all Local Authorities in the Region have been asked to formally sign up to it. Officers are progressing the procedures for Shropshire County Council to be included into the conformity arrangements operating for the non Unitary Authorities in light of Local Government reorganisation in the County.
- 3.10 It is still not known exactly when the study will be completed and made available for consultation. However, as an interim measure, stakeholders have been informed that the RSS Phase Two Consultation period has been extended to 30th June 2008 although, in practice, it is likely that this will need to be further extended if adequate time is to be allowed for consultees to consider the study when it becomes available.
- 3.11 While the exact timing of the GOWM study has not yet been finalised, it has now emerged that the study may not become available until after 30 June 2008. The Regional Planning Executive (RPE) will meet on 15 April 2008 to discuss this matter. It is hoped that by that time the timetable for the GOWM study will be clearer so that the RPE can consider whether any further changes to the Phase Two consultation period are required (a verbal update on this matter will be presented to the full Assembly on 23 April).
- 3.12 It is inevitable that the extension to the consultation and any further changes will have implications upon the timing of the subsequent EiP. Once a final date for the consultation deadline has been agreed, the Planning Inspectorate will then confirm the date of the EiP which is now expected to take place in 2009. It should also be noted that the extension to the Phase Two consultation and delay of the EiP may have implications for the RSS Phase Three Revision timetable (see below).
- 3.13 In taking forward additional work on the housing options, the Government's study will probably take into account the recent submission for New Growth Points and Ecotowns. As regards Ecotowns, a separate report is included at Agenda Item 9b.

RSS Phase Three Revision

- 3.14 The consultation on the Draft Project Plan ran from 27th November 2007 until 18th January 2008. By the end of the consultation period, 116 responses were received from a wide range of individuals and organisations, including representations from regional organisations and local authorities, interest groups and developers/land owners as well as community groups and residents.

- 3.15 The RSS Policy Leads and the Assembly Secretariat have analysed the consultation responses and considered how the issues raised in the consultation should be taken forward. A report has been prepared which summarises key issues arising from the consultation and sets out the suggested response to those issues. The Phase Three Project Plan has been revised in the light of the consultation report and will be brought before the Regional Planning Partnership for sign-off on 24th April 2008.
- 3.16 In addition to work on the Project Plan, progress has been made in relation to the arrangements for input from the Section 4(4) strategic authorities. Following the Regional Planning Executive's decision to adopt an informal partnership approach, a letter has been sent to the Chief Executives of the S4(4) authorities seeking their formal agreement to this approach. Furthermore, officers have developed the S4(4) Briefs in the light of the final Project Plan. The Briefs will also be brought before the RPP for sign-off in April and will then be issued to the Section 4(4) authorities which will have 12 weeks to respond.
- 3.17 As regards the timetable for Phase Three, the delay of the Phase Two is likely to affect the Phase Three process. As explained above, it now appears that the EiP for Phase Two will take place in 2009. This has significant implications for Phase Three, as the consultation on the Options, scheduled for beginning of 2009, would now overlap with the Phase Two EiP. This is clearly of concern as it is likely to cause major difficulties for regional stakeholders to get involved in these two key stages of the WMRSS Revision at the same time.
- 3.18 Against this background, and similar concerns RPP and stakeholders expressed earlier, a letter has been sent to GOWM explaining that the Assembly would deem it appropriate to adjust the Phase Three timetable and align it with the revised Phase Two programme agreed with Baroness Andrews. In practice, this would mean putting back the launch and formal consultation on the Options by some four months. However, this timetable will need to be finalised and confirmed once the detailed timetable of the GOWM housing study has been confirmed. Technical work for Phase Three, including the advice from the Section 4(4) authorities, would nevertheless continue to be available in good time to inform the development of Options. A formal agreement from GOWM to this proposed timetable amendment is pending.

RSS Conformity

- 3.19 The Regional Planning Partnership approved a Revised Conformity Protocol in September 2007. This included revised criteria for regionally significant planning applications that the Assembly wishes to be consulted upon. The criteria are consistent with the new terminology and policies that have been submitted to the Secretary of State in respect of the Phase Two Revision to the RSS. The Revised Protocol became operational on the 1st February and all Local Authorities in the Region have been asked to formally sign up to it.

RSS Monitoring

- 3.20 The Statutorily RSS Annual Monitoring Report was submitted as required to DCLG on 28th February 2008 and can be downloaded from the website. Hard copies can be obtained from the Regional Assembly Secretariat.

RSS Implementation

- 3.21 As well as refining the Implementation Plan for the RSS in anticipation of the Examination in Public the Secretariat are considering appropriate delivery structure and or ways that the recent Community Infrastructure Levy can be utilised.

4. REGIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

- 4.1 A one day facilitated event was held on the 19th February to progress the action planning of the Regional Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- 4.2 The first quarterly return of the Living Well portfolio has been finalised and the quarterly review meeting with BIG in Newcastle Upon Tyne has taken place on the 10th March.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN

- 5.1 Following consultation a draft Climate Change Action Plan was endorsed by the Regional Assembly in October 2007. This is being taken forward by the GOWM with the WMRA and partners forming a virtual team. The Regional Minister has also included climate change in his list of key regional priorities and will be updated on progress in June and October 2008. Meetings of the Climate change Group have begun reporting into a Senior Climate Change Panel. Partners are continuing on the development of the actions and climate change projects for implementation during 2008/09.

6. QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

- 6.1 The Partnership has developed a significant revision to the draft Phase Two revision of the Regional Spatial strategy, to include three new cross cutting policies on climate change, sustainable communities and sustainable design and construction.
- 6.2 The Habitat Regulations Assessment has been completed and this has been incorporated into the Phase Two Revision across different chapters.

- 6.3 The Landscapes for Living project is nearing completion and a prospectus has been published which sets out the 50 year vision for biodiversity and calls for a prioritising of the a healthy ecosystem.

7. HOUSING

Regional Housing Pot 2008-2011: Final Advice to Ministers

- 7.1 The Regional Housing Executive has and will continue to support SHAPs contribution to the WM Regional Climate Change Action Plan. Two Regional publications, in relation to Low-Carbon and Carbon-Neutral Housing were recently launched at SHAPs 'Midlands 2016 Conference' on 18 March 2008.

RSS Revision Phase Three: Review of Gypsy and Traveller Planning Policy

- 7.2 WMRA's Housing Team has undertaken initial activity, to provide support to the Regional Planning Body in its review of existing G&T Policy. CURS at the University of Birmingham has been commissioned to provide expert guidance to the Regional Planning Body to work with a Steering Group on Gypsies and Travellers for the Review, creating a Communications strategy and producing a Regional overview of the six sub-regional Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAAs).

Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs)

- 7.3 WMRA's Housing Team has and will continue to provide support to the four sub-regional Housing Market Area Partnerships, to enable them to successfully complete their SHMAs. The majority of SHMAs are nearing completion and their findings will be utilised to inform regular market engagement with the Housing Corporation, on development through the National Affordable Housing Programme.

Roll-out of IDeAs Regional Improvement Programme

- 7.4 Following the WM Regional launch of the Improvement and Development Agency's (IDeA) Improvement Programme, to improve the Strategic Housing skills of both Officers and Elected Members will be rolled-out to each of the sub-regional Housing Market Area Partnerships and individual authorities where requested. The Regional Housing Executive (RHE) will continue to act as a Regional lead for the Programme and sub-regional events will be held throughout Spring and Summer 2008.

Climate Change: Sustainable Housing Action Programme (SHAP)

- 7.5 The Regional Housing Executive has and will continue to support SHAPs contribution to the WM Regional Climate Change Action Plan. Two Regional publications in relation to Low-Carbon and Carbon-Neutral Housing will be launched at SHAPs 'Midlands 2016 Conference' on 18 March 2008.

8. WEST MIDLANDS RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM

8.1 The Forum met at Barlaston, Staffordshire on 06 March 2008 holding a specialist seminar after the meeting on water resources and security of supply. The occasion was used to provide a number of updates; WMES Delivery Framework, RSS Phases 1,2 & 3, and RDPE. Informative presentations and discussion on Tranquillity and the work of the Food & Drink took place. The next meeting is scheduled for 12 June at Tarrington, Herefordshire with the September meeting being held in Lapworth.

West Midlands Rural Accord

8.2 The Rural Accord ceased to operate as a separate entity from March 2008. Outstanding issues have been reviewed and, whilst it was deemed appropriate for a number of tasks from the Rural Accord be subsumed into the work programme of the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum (WMRAF) a number of points were highlighted:

Progression of the MoU between Welsh Assembly Government and WMRA

8.3 The Regional Assembly Board has asked that a paper be presented at a future meeting outlining options post SNR.

Rural Proofing of key regional strategies and delivery frameworks/plans

8.4 The progress made to date is commendable and it was felt that rural proofing of regional strategies and policies was well within the gift of the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum Management Committee. Concern was expressed however about the ability and credence of WMRAF in taking rural proofing to sub-regional and LAA levels. The WMRAF cannot hold parties to account; neither do they hold a scrutiny function. This has highlighted a rising regional challenge but, it was decided, this was not directly as a result of the demise of the Rural Accord.

Co-ordinated approach to the implementation of the rural agenda

8.5 It was agreed that there was still a need for information sharing and a co-ordinated approach to issues that are likely to impact on rural areas and communities. Unlike the Rural Accord and not just specific to rural issues, it was deemed appropriate for a new senior-level public agency group be set up for strategic dialogue on a range of issues.

Rural Delivery Framework

8.6 The Rural Delivery Framework was still valid and had been used extensively in developing the key regional strategies and policies. It now needs to be reviewed and recast/subsumed in line with the developing Single Integrated Regional Strategy and as part of the implementation of the WMES Delivery Framework.

Rural Proofing

8.7 The West Midlands Rural Accord, together with the Rural Affairs Forum, has been actively involved in the review of the West Midlands Economic Strategy since its launch in March 2006. A series of studies have been commissioned

to examine the emerging proposals from a rural perspective and to highlight the implications for rural economies. These studies include:

Rural Commentary on the Policy Choices Document
Rural Perspectives on the Consultation Draft of the Strategy
Mainstreaming Rural – Commentary on the draft Action Plan
Rural Dimensions – Commentary on the final WMES

8.8 The findings in these reports represent a significant body of work that, alongside with the evidence base brought together by AWM and others about the nature and state of the rural economies in the region, provide a solid starting point for the implementation of the new Strategy.

8.9 A draft response to the Delivery Framework Consultation was prepared and we now look forward to close involvement with regard to rural proofing the WMES implementation.

RSS Phase III Revision: Technical Work - Critical Rural Services

8.10 Rural Community Sustainability - a study jointly commissioned by AWM and WMRA building on research that has been undertaken in the last year or so to synthesise evidence pertaining to eight key themes, all of which are materially relevant to development of economic and spatial policy to effect sustainable rural communities at regional and sub-regional scales:

- the links between housing, economy and demographic processes in rural communities
- the application of low carbon principles in rural communities
- the provision of employment land and premises (but not re-opening RSS/RHS issues)
- the adequacy and future provision of IT infrastructure
- economic inclusion in rural areas
- green infrastructure
- critical rural services
- rural economy

8.11 The findings have helped identify issues and questions for S4(4) Local Authority Briefs and the Rural Renaissance Working Group have been consulted at each and every stage.

Rural Skills

8.12 As part of the LSC Land-based and Environmental Skills Group we have overseen a comprehensive review of the training provision analysing current and future demand for skills, the current supply of training, identifying imbalances and overseeing the development of an implementation plan that will inform future planning of provision and capital investment. The paucity and robustness of data has severely hampering the work, as is LSC's lack of understanding of the nature of the land-based industries, including forestry and woodland, work.

Rural Shops & Post Offices Group

- 8.13 2008 will be marked as the year when the Post Office network changed fundamentally with up to 23% of the region's Post Offices marked for closure. Shropshire and Staffordshire numbers and locations are currently out for consultation. Our recent meeting reviewed the most important challenges that are ahead and councils aim to help address the changes that are being forced upon them.

Cross Border Working

- 8.14 A cross border working group was established by the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum following on from a piece of work that was carried out, to explore the potential for cross border co-operation, that would add value to the regeneration of the West Midlands/Mid Wales border area and explore and identify ways in which this could be achieved.
- 8.15 As a result of the work of the Group, a Memorandum of Understanding, was agreed and signed by representatives of the Welsh Assembly Government and the West Midlands Regional Assembly on 5th March 2007. Core Officers Group meetings were held in November at Shrewsbury and in February in Newtown; the next meeting is scheduled for May in Hereford. Terms of reference for both the Core Officers and the Strategic Forum have been agreed.
- 8.16 A number of border proofing opportunities have already risen with key regional strategies eliciting attendance by officers at consultation events: West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy Phase II Revision, West Midlands Economic Strategy and the Central Wales Spatial Strategy.
- 8.17 Meanwhile, a number of expert working groups with a common thematic and geographical connectivity have been set up, exploring the potential for cross border co-operation, adding value to the regeneration of the West Midlands/Mid Wales border area and exploring and identifying ways in which this could be achieved:
1. Transport - TRACC – three meetings to date in Newtown, Shrewsbury and Hereford
 2. Health & Social Care – first meeting 20 March 2008 in Ludlow
 3. Environment – first meeting 03 April 2008 | Shrewsbury
 4. Sustainable Tourism – first meeting 07 April in Knighton
 5. Town & Parish Councils – conference 09 June 2008 in Knighton
- 8.18 Other additions, including one concentrating on the economic drivers are planned. Meanwhile, the Strategic Forum will meet for a conference in June when it is hoped that regional ministers will be attendance.

Commission for Rural Communities

- 8.19 Empowering, influencing and strengthening the role of Local Councillors was the theme of the CRC – Launch of the Inquiry Report held in London on 31 January 2008. A series of ten recommendations emerged urging the Government towards greater democracy at local level.

9. CULTURE

RSS Revision Phase 3 - Cultural Input

- 9.1 The draft Project Plan for Phase 3 of the RSS Revision was launched on 27th November and Culture features as a key Revision topic. This Revision will help to strengthen RSS policy to meet the cultural, sporting and tourism needs, and through this, support urban and rural renaissance.
- 9.2 Consultation responses are now being analysed and a final Project Plan is due to be published in April/May 2008.
- 9.3 The technical work required to support policy development is now underway. Consultants have been appointed to undertake a 'Mapping and Gapping' of the Region's significant cultural assets that will also include identification of any strategic gaps in provision and potential mechanisms or policy approaches that could ensure/facilitate appropriate provision at regional and local levels.
- 9.4 Preliminary work has begun to help shape the cultural section of the 'Section 4.4 Briefs' which will be the mechanism for obtaining cultural planning guidance and information from the Region's local authorities. This will subsequently provide appropriate input into the development of the WMRSS Phase Three 'Spatial Options'.

10. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY

- 10.1 The Partnership last met on 24th January, the agenda and minutes of the meeting can be found at www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities. It is due to meet again on 28th March, where it will discuss planning for the Regional Leaders' Summit on Equality & Diversity on 9th June.
- 10.2 The Partnership continues to work with SWM on the Social Capital, Equality & Diversity programme (funded by Defra) which enables policy-makers and practitioners shared good practice and looked at the delivery potential of policy decisions. The Partnership provides a steering role for this programme.
- 10.3 The Partnership continues to work with others and is looking at developing further work with:
- RAWM around the Civil Partnership and Social Inclusion agendas;
 - Destination West Midlands in mainstreaming equalities in the Third Sector;
 - Key stakeholders in consultation events on WMRSS Phase 3, WMES Delivery Framework, and the regional European strategy;
 - Local Authorities in capacity building and peer reviews to raise the Equality Standard of Local Authorities to at least Level 3; and
 - Continue to develop the work the European Social Cohesion agenda.

11. EUROPE

- 11.1 Following the Assembly's Strategic Review of Regional European Working, a Project Board was established under Prof. Michael Clarke to take forward all of the reviews recommendations

- 11.2 At the end of February the EIAP agreed the projects board's recommendations for delivering the Regional European Strategy.
- 11.3 The principal features are an enhanced EIAP –to be called the European Strategy board, supported by a strategic European group of senior officers – and four priority working groups reflecting the four priorities of the regional European strategy:
- Engaging with the single market
 - Becoming a more successful player in the Research and Development arena
 - Responding to the challenges of Climate Change and Environmental Protection
 - Engaging with social cohesion
- 11.4 These proposals are for regional European working beyond SNR.

11.5 In addition the partnership received reports

- Outlining the work of EU Connects in assisting partners in bidding for non structural funds
- The structural funds available to the region for the 2007-2013 period.
- Upcoming Euro events in the region and Brussels
- The regions response to consultation on the 4th Cohesion report

All papers can be found at <http://www.wmra.gov.uk/page.asp?id=72>

TRANSPORT

Transport Challenge

12.1 There has been significant progress in responding to the Regional Minister's 'transport challenge'. An Executive Summary outlining the Region's transport priorities was presented to Liam Byrne MP in early December 2007. Since then, consultants have been commissioned to build the evidence base for these schemes and a series of Transport Conferences supported by the Minister have been planned. The first conference took place on 10th March 2008, the next is expected towards the end of 2008, with a 'summit' in June 2008.

RFA Refreshed

12.2 The Regional Transport Partnership has agreed to undertake a refresh of its RFA priorities in advance of advice from DfT on a second round of RFA (expected Summer 2008). Consultants have been appointed to produce an update of the regional transport priorities and undertake the prioritisation of the 40 plus proposals reported to the Regional Transport Partnership in October 2007.

Towards a Sustainable Transport System

12.3 A formal consultation on this document, which outlines the Department for Transport's response to Eddington and Stern is underway. The DfT is holding a series of regional events across the country, the West Midlands meetings took place in late March/early April 2008.

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