

**Agenda Item 15b**

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**Board of Directors – 12 March 2008**

**Draft Decision Notes of the Special Meeting of the Regional  
Assembly Board of Directors Meeting held on 22 February 2008**

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**Chairman: Cllr David S Smith**

**Present:** Cllr John Lines, Cllr Jo Jones, Cllr Roger Phillips, Cllr Keith Austin, Cllr Terry Dix, Cllr Chris Saint, Roger Stone, Sarindar Singh Sahota, Frances Beatty, Elizabeth Newman.

**In attendance:** Olwen Dutton, Rose Poulter, Sharon Phillips, Sian Clark (WMRA)

It was confirmed that the meeting was quorate.

**Chairman's Welcome**

The Chairman opened the meeting by thanking Board members for attending the special meeting which had been called to solely discuss the draft business plan and budget. However, prior to commencing the discussion, the Chairman formally expressed his thanks to both officers and members for the resounding success of the Regional Assembly Annual Conference that was held on 28 January 2008.

**1. Apologies for non attendance:**

The following apologies were noted:

Cllr Paul Tilsley, Cllr Bob Badham, Cllr Steve Eling, Cllr Serena Croad, Cllr Rex Roberts, Cllr Sir Albert Bore, Rt Rvd John Hall, Roger McKenzie, Roger Evans and Barrie Williams.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

Cllr Chris Saint reminded colleagues that he held the Planning Portfolio position in Warwickshire County Council.

### 3. **Draft Business Plan and Budget 2008-11**

The Chairman advised the Board that difficult decisions needed to be reached with relation to the Draft Business Plan and Budget as following discussions with GOWM on 21 February, additional budget cuts would need to be undertaken.

Prior to detailed discussion on the draft business plan and budget, Members **agreed** to the following:

- (a) That the Chairman writes to the Regional Minister, Liam Byrne MP and John Healey MP Minister of State for Local Government to express considerable disappointment that funding for the Regional Assembly had been dramatically reduced.
- (b) That John Healey additionally be made aware that recent his statement to the House in which he referred to the possible early transfer of Assembly powers to the RDAs (and specifically referred to the West Midlands) was misleading and that as no discussion had been held regarding this issue the Assembly continued to progress on the basis of ensuring an orderly transfer of functions by 2010, and no earlier.

#### Government Publication and STG Meetings

The Chairman advised the Board that the guidance expected from Government was still awaited. This being the case the Board considered the validity or otherwise for holding meetings of the Strategic Transition Group currently scheduled for 1.04.08 and 20.05.08. Members were of the view that whilst there was a need to avoid local government being accused of 'stalling' progress, the speed in which meetings were being scheduled was queried, especially as it was now not expected that the guidance would be published until close to the Easter break. [It was informally understood that the Treasury was identifying additional costs, which may delay the introduction of legislation until October 2008.]

There was sectoral consensus these meetings should be postponed as the meeting scheduled for 1.04.08 would be too premature to provide detailed consideration to the guidance received (as it would not allow discussion with stakeholders) and the 20.05.08 meeting would be held too soon following the Local Government elections scheduled for 1 May 2008. Additionally, Members were keen to be advised further of other regions progress and pace.

Rose Poulter, Director of Policy (currently on secondment to AWM) advised Members that meetings of the STG immediately following the publication of the consultation document would consider how

SNR should be rolled out regionally and nationally. Concerns regarding the dates of the STG had been expressed to the Chief Executives Task Force and the point relayed to GOWM who expressed surprise that the timings of the meetings were considered premature as it was their view that as consultation would commence in mid March, the STG should meet to consider initial views on 1.04.08 with the May meeting would/could sign off a regional response..

It was **agreed** that the STG be advised that it was the Board's view that the meetings scheduled for 01.04.08 and 20.05.08 be postponed.

The Vice Chair (Business Sector), Dr Sahota stated that the West Midlands Business Council (WMBC) were appalled that, as one of the three sectoral partners on the West Midlands Regional Assembly the WMBC were not a full member of the STG and therefore not formally engaged in the formal transition arrangements. It was acknowledged that the WMBC were involved with the STG as an alternate member, however this position was not as engaged as a full member.

#### Future of Staffing

The Chairman advised the Board of Directors that the Assembly had been approached by AWM to initiate discussions with Regional Assembly staff to discuss with them aspects relating to the future prospects; however it was the Chairman and Members view that formal discussions with AWM would be too premature.

Members were advised that whilst the Assembly's staff appreciated the support of the Board, colleagues would welcome an opportunity to have informal conversations with AWM as there was a certain amount of disquiet amongst colleagues anxious about their future and in particular arrangements around TUPE etc

Members recognised that in times of uncertainty, providing reassurance to staff was important. However it was **agreed** that any programme of contact must be initiated and undertaken by the Regional Assembly (via OD) and AWM be invited to contribute and engage as appropriate. It was essential that the collectively the future of the staff was protected leading up to 2010 and beyond. Concerns were expressed about the need to make sure that any lessons learnt about previous transfers of staff had been taken into account.

#### Role of English Regions Network

The Board were advised that the Chief Executives of the English Regions Network would be meeting on 4 March 2008, with SNR

being the focus of the meeting. The meeting would provide an opportunity to further explore the ways in which each region are progressing and a report would be made to the next meeting of the Board on 12 March 2008.

#### Draft Business Plan and Budget 2008-11

The Chief Executive advised the Board that the final submission for the Draft Business Plan and Budget 2008-11 would need to be submitted to GOWM by 3 March 2008.

The Assembly's original submitted Draft Budget indicated that £2,447,938 would be required to deliver on the work programme for 2008/09, this being a reduction on 2007/08. Certain 'non core' activities had been severely reduced in the draft budget, this included, amongst other work streams; reduced funding to partners, communications, internal audit, staff training. Members were advised that the Assembly's staffing profile to deliver the work programme already provided what was considered to be a minimum level of support. The Board was advised that the CLG guidance was that the Assembly core functions were considered to be planning, transport and housing, with scrutiny not formally recognised as a core activity (although it was the first statutory function of the Assembly).

However, following a meeting with GOWM on 21 February, it was reported to the Board that a further reduction of £105k would be required in addition to that shown in the draft budget (to meet a 6.7% reduction). The Chief Executive advised the Board that currently she could not recommend further reductions in budgets allocated to defined work areas, and that to meet this further reduction as matters stood elements of the work programme would have to be cut out or rescheduled, which would have a direct impact on delivery

The Chief Executive stated that no she would be very reluctant to reduce the level of SLA funding to local authorities for planning advice as it was acknowledged that as a collective, the Assembly received more value with these agreements than was reflected in the than current true cost. The Board was advised that reconsideration of all options would need to be made when considering the budget, including planning agreements and staffing.

The Board was advised that quarterly reporting on the budget and work programme would need to be undertaken, and whilst, through ERN and though individual Assembly's, Government had been asked to reconsider this reporting burden, CLG would insist on the quarterly reporting. Additionally, budgetary spend would

need to be allocated to work programmes within quarters, with the danger that if the allocated budget was not spent in the defined quarter it may be lost.

Following the meeting with GOWM, clarification had been given that any redundancy payments (should they be required) would be based on the statutory figure only, however this would not allow the Assembly to would not allow agreed employment terms and conditions to be met. This was further disappointing news and the Board expressed their concern.

Members expressed the strong opinion that scrutiny was an integral function that would be required to continue and strengthen for the remaining life of the Assembly.

The Board of Directors agreed the formal recommendations as follows:

- (i) **Approved** the general approach taken in developing the Business Plan and associated Budget and noted the need to reconsider the business plan and budget in light of the review meeting with GOWM on 21<sup>st</sup> February.
- (ii) **Agreed to delegate authority** to the Chief Executive in consultation with the Chairman and Vice Chairs to finalise the plan for submission to GOWM on 29<sup>th</sup> February for onward submission to CLG on 3 March.

Additionally, the Board requested the following actions and agreed that:

- (iii) That the Chairman writes to the Regional Minister, Liam Byrne MP and John Healey MP Minister of State for Local Government to express considerable disappointment that funding for the Regional Assembly had been dramatically reduced
- (iv) That John Healey additionally be made aware that his recent statement to the House in which he stated the possible early transfer of Assembly powers to the RDAs (and specifically referred to the West Midlands) was misleading and that as no discussion had been held regarding this issue the Assembly continued to progress on the basis of ensuring an orderly transfer of functions by 2010, and no earlier.
- (v) The STG be advised of the Board's view that meetings scheduled for 01.04.08 and 20.05.08 be postponed.

- (vi) That any programme of contact must be initiated and undertaken by the Regional Assembly (via OD) and AWM be invited to contribute and engage as appropriate.

Concerns were also expressed by Members of the uncertainties surrounding the future of regional cultural consortiums which provided a regional lead on, amongst other issues, 2012 and the cultural Olympiad.

**4. Dates of Future Board Meetings 2007/08**

The Board of Directors were reminded that future meetings would be held on:

12 March 2008

18 June 2008

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**Chairman**