

**Agenda Item No. 14b**

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**23 April 2008**

**Update on Regional Funding Advice Centre  
"EU Connects" Progress on Pilot Project**

**Report of EU Connects Manager,**

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**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update WMLGA on the progress made with the pilot project to establish a region-wide EU funding advice centre - "EU Connects" and outline the succession planning for the unit.

**2. Recommendations**

- 2.1 WMLGA is asked to note progress.

**3. Background**

- 3.1 Following approval from the European and International Affairs Partnership, the Regional European Strategic Advisor submitted a funding application under ERDF technical assistance for 2007-08. This was successful, with the "EU Connects" unit launched in September 2007 with an initial funding allocation from ERDF technical assistance, and match funding from AWM and WMRA, to last until December 2008.
- 3.2 The remit of the unit is to offer practical support, advice and guidance to organisations in the region, in order to successfully apply for EU trans-national funding streams. The success will be measured on the increased number of successfully funded projects.
- 3.3 The unit was asked to work within existing structures to maximize the potential of partners already operating in the region to offer some support, e.g. WMiE, WMEN, Europe Direct etc.
- 3.4 The long-term objective of the initiative is to prepare the region for the post-2013 world where indications suggest there will be little or no structural funds allocated. Organisations therefore need to build their capacity now during this 7-

year window if they are to be ready to compete for trans-national funding sources after 2013.

#### **4. Progress**

- 4.1 During the first six months, EU Connects has recruited a full team, established a recognisable brand and profile, as well as co-ordinated four bid-writing events linked to immediate funding deadlines.
- 4.2 So far a total of 202 potential projects have registered to use the service, receiving regular updates, monthly training calendars and advice. 118 participants attended practical training sessions to develop projects. Bids worth a total of €10 Million have been submitted to deadlines, with results pending.
- 4.2 EU Connects has given feedback on over 738 draft bids, and spoken to 51 different regional networks and audiences to spread the news about trans-national funding opportunities. 18 Partner searches have been assisted, of which 4 applied for external funding.
- 4.3. Feedback from “customers” has been very positive with over 80% of participants rating our events as Good/Excellent. We are receiving word-of-mouth recommendations, and have a diverse customer base including local authorities, NGOs, charities, organisations from the voluntary sector, SMEs, further and higher education partners and schools.
- 4.4 A research exercise has mapped a “baseline” of previous trans-national funding for the region for the period 2000 – 2006 published in March, revealing that a total of 919 projects worth €50 Million were delivered in the West Midlands during the previous 7 – year funding programme. The current EU Connects projects have also been mapped to analyse geographic location, sector and fund type, to assist with targeting strategies for under-achieving areas. See annex 1.
- 4.5 The unit has established a strong working relationship with colleagues at WMiE, AWM, WMEN, British Council network and the national agencies of funding streams (Ecotec, INTERREG contact points).
- 4.6 Other UK regions are monitoring our progress with interest. We are currently the only region in the country to have established this service, but there is considerable interest in replicating the unit in other regions in the future.
- 4.7 Appendix One contains the March monthly update report and Appendix Two contains a map which indicates the location of the projects across the region.

#### **5. Challenges**

- 5.1 Demand for the service is significant. The baseline and mapping exercise has revealed gaps in SRGs / other support mechanisms, where additional support is

- required to increase engagement in the private sector and in the South West rural part of the region.
- 5.2 The initial remit of the unit was to cover the three trans-national funds of INTERREG (strategic regional policy exchange); the Life Long Learning Programme (skills / professional development) and the Competitiveness & Innovation Programme (SMEs, ICT and Sustainability). However interest is wider than these themes, with additional gaps in provision identified around the LIFE+ Programme (Environmental funds); Marie Curie FP7 (Mobility of academic researchers) and Culture/Media and other smaller trans-national funds across the European Commission's policy areas.
- 6. Scale and Scope of Project**
- 6.1 The current pilot project with three staff supporting three trans-national funds will expire in December 2008 under the technical assistance of ERDF from the previous funding period.
- 7. Future Planning**
- 7.1 The unit plan to submit an application for succession funding to the new funding programme (2007-2013) for ERDF technical assistance. Match funding has been sought from AWM for the same period.
- 7.2. It is hoped to enlarge the scope and scale of the unit to encompass the additional funding streams identified above, to a team of 5-6 staff.
- 7.3 The new bid will be submitted in May to secure the continuation funding for post-December 2008 to ensure a smooth transition. It is hoped to maintain the resource alongside the full seven-year funding period until 2013.
- 7.4 Given the changing role of the WMRA it may be more appropriate for the match funding for this project to be secured via the support of alternative regional agencies such as the WMLGA. Currently this level of support amounts to management time of the Regional European Strategic Advisor.
- 7.5 Supplementary bids may be made to additional EU funding streams (e.g. Europe Direct) to secure additional resources for information officers to boost the capacity and co-ordination role of the unit.

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### EU Connects Monthly Report – March 2008

(Julia Speht, EU Connects Manager. [J.speht@euconnects.org](mailto:J.speht@euconnects.org))

#### Progress

**Budgetary Expenditure** for the financial year has been calculated and we have maximized our spend to reach our AWM targets (beyond the £37,500 allocation) and are on target for our ERDF expenditure for the third quarter, despite the project starting 3 months late.

**Successful event (11/03)** with 37 participants in Worcester on Grundtvig In-Service Training and Transversal Study visits (Lifelong Learning Programme) and very positive engagement by staff at Ecotec. **3 funding deadlines** to the Life Long Learning programme saw a total of 9 bids submitted worth €850, 600 to the Leonardo Development of Innovation (29/02); Transfer of Innovation (14/03) and Grundtvig In-Service Training (31/03) funds.

Staff attended **Ecotec's briefing session for "Networking Organisations"** for programme updates and privileged information on applications, selection processes and information campaigns. **Successful 2-day visit for full team to 'West Midlands in Europe' Brussels office** and meetings with Brussels-based networks, MEPs' offices in the European Parliament; co-ordination with the British Council for our annual event; and met with the Executive Agency for Lifelong Learning.

#### Preparations for future events include:

in Birmingham (15/05).

- Daphne Application seminar in Birmingham for NGOs (07/04)
- Introductory seminar on LIFE+ environmental funds (17/04)
- "Best Practice" event with practical workshops
- Grundtvig In-Service Training Application Seminar (June tbc)
- Smaller workshops for "Absolute Beginners" (July tbc)

**Staff within EUC unit** have chosen their areas of specialism and training has begun for: Manager – specializing in INTERREG (participated in INTERACT training seminar 01/04 to disseminate); Senior Officer – specializing in Life Long Learning; Marketing officer – specializing in CIP. The temporary staff have completed their contracts with the end of the busiest funding deadline period (28/03) and **two graduate student placements** have been organised for the period June – September to contribute to INTERREG support and events PR/comparative research. EU Connects participating in WMRA display at LGA annual conference, July.

#### Challenges

The Baseline Research report was delayed in its wider distribution as it has been revised to incorporate comments from partner organisations before final reprinting.

Following discussions in Brussels the service level agreement between WMiE and EU Connects has been clarified to ensure consistency when communicating to customers the services offered, particularly when marketing the Brussels' office and its facilities. This will be the subject of further discussions and clarification for the bid for future funding. This **future bid for 2009-2011** will now be the focus of much preparation and discussion with partners before submission in the summer.

#### Feedback

Future events will aim to offer separate advice to **beginners** (with no prior knowledge of EU funds) before more detailed briefings to “multipliers” (specialists funding officers in large organisations) bringing them up to speed on new funding opportunities. **Analysis** of EU Connects activity revealed that 19 submitted bids came from events, 2 from emails and 5 from meetings, thus leading to development of future events for identified specialist audiences as above.