

Agenda Item No. 11

WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Board of Directors – Friday 10 March 2006

WMRA response to Regional Sustainable Development Framework (RSDF) consultation

1. Purpose

- 1.1. To seek Board members' approval for the draft Assembly response to the current consultation on the revised Regional Sustainable Development Framework (RSDF).

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. That the draft response is approved and submitted to Sustainability West Midlands.

3. Background

- 3.1. Version 1 of the Regional Sustainable Development Framework was prepared by Sustainability West Midlands and published by the Assembly in January 2005. The Framework is currently under review in order to incorporate learning from experience of the Framework's use in practice by partners in the region and to reflect developments in national policy in the light of the new UK Sustainable Development Strategy, launched in March 2005.
- 3.2. The Assembly has been an active member of the Task Group leading the review and via officer contributions has had a significant role in producing the consultation draft. However, the Assembly has been formally invited to respond to the consultation and as a key user of the Framework it is considered appropriate to do so.
- 3.3. A draft response to the consultation is appended for consideration by Board members.

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6th March 2006

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Dear Mark

Regional Sustainable Development Framework

The Assembly welcomes the current consultation on the revised Regional Sustainable Development Framework, and the opportunity to respond formally to the consultation in addition to our contribution to date via the Framework Task Group.

The Assembly endorses the decision to review the Framework in the light of emerging national policy, and equally is pleased that the emphasis on the specific needs of the West Midlands region, based on learning from use of the Framework in practice, has been retained.

At its October 2005 meeting the Assembly formally adopted sustainable development, as the route to maximising quality of life and wellbeing for all, as the central principle of all of its work. We are committed to using the Framework in the development of all our strategies and policy. The current consultation draft has been used to inform the briefs for Phase 2 of the current partial review of the Regional Spatial Strategy, and has also been used as the basis for the Framework for the accompanying Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SA/SEA). The Assembly's Policy Partnerships will also be using the Framework's scoping checklist as a template for reporting to the Assembly's Annual General Meeting on how their work has contributed to sustainable development in the West Midlands.

The proposed web format is an innovative development that the Assembly agrees will allow a more dynamic process and iterative update. However, this must be supported by printed material to ensure accessibility and to assist with awareness-raising. If the web format is to be successful it is essential that the website is kept up to date with policy developments in the region and at national level, and with contemporary best practice. It might also be useful to provide links to examples of good practice outside the West Midlands to enable the Region to learn from elsewhere.

The Assembly welcomes the more explicit reference in the current version of the Framework to Chapter 2 of the Regional Spatial Strategy, "Towards a More Sustainable Region". It is helpful that the Framework illustrates sustainability issues with particular reference to the West Midlands, both in terms of identifying challenges and providing case studies of good practice. These sections of the Framework could be expanded to include wider issues such as skills and waste.

The objectives set out in the Framework are comprehensive and link well with commitments in key regional strategies. It might be useful to build on the links with regional strategies via an explicit reference to the core regional policies of urban and rural renaissance.

The links between the process set out in the Framework and the statutory SA/SEA process are welcomed. This will remain an area for development as experience and expertise in the region improves. The role of the Framework in providing a single source for generic baseline data for SA/SEA is potentially very valuable.

In its current wording the scoping stage of the process may provide something of a get-out clause by asking which of the objectives a particular piece of work should contribute to. It might be more informative to ask users to state the potential impact of the work on each of the region's sustainable development objectives and whether this impact will be positive, neutral or negative. Some consideration should be given to how users can be enabled to identify potential impacts and encourage to be open about potential negative effects without attracting censure.

The consultation element of the process section should be clear that the submission to the Assembly of SWM's analysis of a strategy's contribution to regional sustainable development objectives is for information only and does not imply that the Assembly will take punitive action – indeed, it is not in a position to do so. It might be more appropriate to say that SWM's response will be submitted to the Assembly *where appropriate*.

Overall, the Assembly warmly welcomes the consultation draft as representing a positive review of regional sustainable development policy in the light of regional experience and national policy developments.

Yours sincerely,

Fran Austins
Sustainable Development Policy Officer