

Agenda Item No. 9(b)

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
Board of Directors - Friday 8 December 2006**

Scrutiny and Strategic Review Update

Report of the Regional Scrutiny Manager

1. Purpose of report

To advise the Board of Directors of substantive matters considered by the Strategic Review Group at their meeting on 22 November 2006. The agenda and accompanying reports are available via the Assembly's website: <http://www.wmra.gov.uk/page.asp?id=234>

2. Recommendation

The Board are requested to note the content of the report and offer comments as appropriate.

3. Details

The Group considered reports on the following items:

Proposed Strategic Review: The Regional Approach to Post 16 Education, Training and Skills

- 3.1 At the "Skills Conversation" held by the Assembly on 25 October 2005, David Cragg, Regional Director, Learning and Skills Council (LSC) invited the Assembly to review the contribution of the LSC to the skills agenda in the West Midlands region.
- 3.2 This additional and joint activity, between the Assembly and the LSC, would take place during the 2006/7 scrutiny year and require additional resources both in terms of officer support and budget. The LSC have agreed to contribute up to £20,000 to support the process and also provide relevant data and analytical expertise.
- 3.3 The Group was recommended to defer its scrutiny review of Advantage West Midlands' support for the skills agenda, due to commence in Feb 2007, until Autumn 2007. It was anticipated that the LSC focussed review would inform this subsequent review.
- 3.4 It is anticipated that the review would broadly follow the format of a Strategic Review with a panel made up primarily of Assembly members

or alternates, with co-opted representation from the Learning and Skills Council and others as appropriate.

- 3.5 Following initial discussions with the LSC the provisional timetable is as follows:

December 2006 – January 2007	Preparation
February – June 2007	Evidence Gathering
July 2008	Draft report
July – September 2007	Consultation
October 2007	Final Report to LSC/Assembly

This proposed timetable will also allow an input into the development of the revised Regional Economic Strategy.

- 3.6 Further discussions with the LSC would be required in order to develop this potential remit into an achievable review that adds value to regional working arrangements.

- 3.7 The Group:

- (i) agreed to the request to carry out an additional joint Strategic Review during 2006/07 subject to additional funding being made available to support the process.
- (ii) agreed to postpone the scrutiny review of Advantage West Midlands' support for the skills agenda which had been planned to commence in Feb 2007.
- (iii) welcomed the Learning and Skills Council's willingness to engage the Assembly in this activity; and were keen to ensure the integrity of the scrutiny process
- (iv) acknowledged the impact of this additional work on the capacity of the Scrutiny team and potential Panel Members.

Regeneration Zones Revisited – Action Plan

- 3.8 The Assembly at its July meeting endorsed the assessment of how Advantage West Midlands have responded to the recommendations of the 2004 Scrutiny Review of Regeneration Zones. In its report, the Panel identified a series of areas that they would wish Advantage West Midlands to address.
- 3.9 Advantage West Midlands was requested to submit an action plan to the Strategic Review Group which addressed the areas identified.
- 3.10 In order to give this matter due consideration, the group deferred consideration of the action plan until its next meeting.

Independent Performance Assessment of Advantage West Midlands – Self Assessment element

- 3.11 The concept of Independent Performance Assessment was introduced in the 2005 Budget. This consists of a 3 yearly assessment of all Regional Development Agencies by the National Audit Office (NAO).
- 3.12 Advantage West Midlands formally requested the Assembly's involvement which is being led by the Strategic Review Group and the Regional Scrutiny Manager.
- 3.13 A number of "work in progress" drafts of the self assessment document were circulated to a sub-group of the Strategic Review Group for comments. Partly as a result of this input a number of key changes were made in the resulting consultation draft. The Assembly's formal response to this was based on the comments received on earlier drafts and discussion at the consultation event. This was discussed and approved by the Assembly Board on 6 October 2006.
- 3.14 In addition, the Assembly co-hosted a consultation event attended by over 50 individuals including senior officers and a Board Member from Advantage West Midlands. Midlands Excellence facilitated group discussions around three of the Key Lines of Enquiry – Prioritisation, Capacity and Performance Management. A report from the day is available on the Assembly's website - <http://www.wmra.gov.uk/page.asp?id=272>
- 3.15 Whilst there were benefits of having frank discussions regarding Advantage West Midlands performance with senior officers present, the group recognised the concern that this may have inhibited debate. The National Audit Office workshops held as part of the formal assessment process will not have an Advantage West Midlands presence and will therefore address this concern.
- 3.16 Advantage West Midlands have now published the final self assessment document which addresses the majority of issues raised by the Assembly in its formal response.

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