

NEWS RELEASE



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Planning White Paper is a Curates Egg - Good in Parts

A starting point in a reform process - but one which must build on the progress made by Regional Assemblies and their regional and local partners. This is the view of the West Midlands Regional Assembly to the Government's Planning White Paper which was published on Monday (21st May).

As the Regional Planning Body, the Assembly is encouraged by several of the proposals. In particular it welcomes the Government's recognition of the need to ensure that development is accompanied by appropriate infrastructure, its continuing commitment to Green Belt, a less prescriptive national planning policy and the introduction of greater flexibility for local authorities preparing Development Plans.

However it does have serious concerns in some areas, for example the proposed removal of the 'needs test' for retail development, which has historically helped to control out-of-town development and to channel retail development into city centres. Town centres are the prime focus of retail and office development in the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy, as part of a holistic approach to urban and rural renaissance. The Government's proposed 'impact assessment' which would replace the 'needs test' looks unlikely to provide regions and local councils with a similarly effective tool for controlling out-of-centre development in the future.

It is also unconvinced about the proposed arrangements for major infrastructure projects, including the role of a new independent planning commission as Cllr Rex Roberts OBE, Chairman of the Regional Planning Partnership explains:

“Whilst we accept that there are a very small number of infrastructure projects of national importance which need to be planned for and decided on in a coherent way, Regional Assemblies, local councils and communities must be fully involved to make sure that any infrastructure decisions take account of regional needs and priorities and that their local impacts are properly considered.

“We are also concerned that the White Paper proposes separate national policy statements for different types of infrastructure. What is needed is a consistent and integrated national planning framework to ensure that infrastructure is planned for and provided in a coordinated manner, in line with spatial planning objectives. This type of integration already lies at the heart of Regional Spatial Strategies, and it is important that an integrated framework for spatial development is also put in place at national level.”

Finally, the Assembly is pleased that the Government has recognised the need to review both national planning policy to ensure it is fit for purpose and the current system of performance assessments in order to ensure that the speed of planning decisions is balanced with the quality of planning processes and outcomes. However the Government’s expressed commitment to high quality planning has to be more clearly reflected in and supported through the resourcing of regional and local planning bodies.

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Notes to editors:

1. The West Midlands Regional Assembly ('the Assembly') represents a wide range of democratic, social and economic interests throughout the West Midlands region.
2. The Assembly's membership consists of 100 nominated representatives, with 68 members representing the local authority, 16 representing the business sector and 16 representing other economic and social partners.
3. The Assembly provides a platform for organisations to consider matters of common concern including: regional planning, transport, economic prosperity, sustainability, culture and Europe. It also supports regional policy forums and task groups on social inclusion, faith, housing, life long learning/skills, health, rural and community safety/crime reduction.
4. The Assembly works in partnership with Advantage West Midlands (AWM) the regional development agency (RDA), the Government Office West Midlands (GOWM), Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) the West Midlands Local Government Association (WMLGA) and other regional and local organisations from across the West Midlands region.
5. The Assembly is the Regional Planning Body, and is also responsible for scrutinising the operation of the region's RDA, Advantage West Midlands.
6. For further information, visit our website www.wmra.gov.uk