

West Midlands Regional Planning Partnership - 24th September 2007
Regional Spatial Strategy Phase 2 Revision

Communiqué

The Regional Spatial Strategy plays a key role in determining the future shape of the Region and is a crucial policy document for ensuring that the West Midlands develops in a sustainable direction and responds effectively to the challenge of Climate Change.

The Regional Planning Partnership (RPP) of the WMRA, acting as the Regional Planning Body, is responsible for Phase Two of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) Revision which is examining a range of issues including future housing and employment land provision and a number of other matters relating to strategic centres, transport and waste.

The agreed programme for the Revision envisages a submission to Government by the end of 2007 and this will require the approval of a Preferred Option by the RPP at its meeting on 22nd October, 2007. As a lead up to that meeting, the RPP met on the 24th September 2007 to consider a key report prepared by officers outlining an emerging Preferred Option along with an associated set of draft policies.

Central to this was the level of housing provision that should be made in the Region over the next 20 years. With regard to this issue, the RPP had previously asked officers to liaise with authorities across the Region on whether a 40,000 'gap' between initial estimates of demand (i.e. 380,000 net dwellings as implied by Government household projections) and potential supply (i.e. 340,000 net dwellings) might be filled. At the meeting, Officers reported back that, on the basis of positive responses being received from the City-Region authorities of Birmingham and Coventry, it was possible that the Region could accommodate around 363,000 net dwellings without undermining the current strategy based on urban and rural renaissance.

In discussing this matter, a number of key issues were raised by Members of the Partnership, including the need to ensure that

- adequate investment is provided for transport and other infrastructure to support the housing proposals;
- proposed phasing policies are strengthened to maintain the emphasis on development within the Major Urban Areas (MUAs *) and on brownfield land;
- a strong case is made for 'windfall sites' provision to be included in housing land assessments;
- the right type of housing is brought forward, including affordable housing and appropriate housing for the elderly;
- adequate opportunities are provided for employment growth and that important employment sites are protected from housing development;
- appropriate policies are put in place to limit the risk of flooding
- the Green Belt policy should be amended to stress that adjustments to boundaries will only occur where exceptional circumstances can be demonstrated

Following a wide ranging discussion, the RPP concluded that, although final decisions would not be made until its meeting in October, the proposals presented by officers should be taken forward as a basis for the Preferred Option, particularly to

ensure that the housing needs of the Region, in both urban and rural areas, could be met.

This will result in provision being made in the Region for just over 18,000 dwellings each year (comparable to the recent rate of development) with the emphasis retained of building on brown field land, particularly within the MUAs in order to support Urban Renaissance.

Beyond the MUAs, it is intended that growth should be focussed in 'Settlements of Significant Development' (**) representing towns and cities that are capable of balanced and sustainable development. In these locations, provision will equally be made for adequate new jobs and supporting infrastructure to ensure that they are not developed as commuter settlements.

At the meeting, Cllr Rex Roberts the Chairman of the Regional Planning Partnership stressed that, all the points raised by the Members would be addressed by officers before the Preferred Option is finally presented to the RPP in October.

He subsequently indicated how pleased he had been with the open, wide ranging and responsible discussion stating

"Today's meeting has once again demonstrated how the local authorities, with their other Assembly partners, can work together effectively to address the challenges facing the Region. We would hope that, in whatever new arrangements are brought forward by Government in the future, the opportunity for this positive partnership working will be retained"

The Preferred Option, as well as setting out new housing proposals, will also incorporate a range of other revised policies including:

- policies relating to Climate Change, sustainable communities and sustainable construction
- proposals for employment land provision, with a five year reservoir of supply and indicative longer term estimates of need identified at District level;
- policies to encourage more office developments to be located within strategic centres rather than in out-of-centre locations, with a scale of provision identified for each strategic centre;
- adjustments to current RSS Transport Policies relating to Park and Ride, car parking standards, demand management and airports
- a range of policies for waste management reflecting the move away from landfill provision;

Along with the conclusions from the September RPP meeting, these policies will be shared with regional partners and communities at a 'briefing' event to be held in Birmingham on Friday, 28th September. Comments made at this event will be reported to the RPP when it meets on the 22nd October to consider and 'sign off' the RSS Revision for submission to the Secretary of State by the end of the year.

Following a formal 12 week consultation in the New Year, an Examination in Public in to the Phase 2 Revision will be held in the Autumn 2008.

If you require any further clarification in relation to any of the above or wish to discuss any matters relating to the Phase 2 Revision, please do not hesitate to contact Rose Poulter, Director of Policy (r.poulter@wmra.gov.uk) or David Thew, Head of Planning (d.thew@wmra.gov.uk) at the West Midlands Regional Assembly

(* The Major Urban Areas are Birmingham/Solihull, the Black Country, Coventry and the North Staffordshire conurbation)

(** The proposed 'Settlement of Significant Development' are Worcester, Telford, Shrewsbury, Hereford, Rugby, Burton upon Trent, Stafford, Nuneaton, Warwick/Leamington spa and Redditch)