

Verification of Partners/Stakeholders Reported Progress Against Delivering Advantage

Final Report to Advantage West Midlands

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Executive Summary

Delivering Advantage, the second West Midlands Economic Strategy (WMES), was published in 2004. It replaced Creating Advantage and the subsequent Agenda for Action. Delivering Advantage has, itself, now been replaced by Connecting to Success, the latest version of the WMES. The purpose of this report is to verify the progress reported against Delivering Advantage over the four years since its launch.

Since the publication of Delivering Advantage an annual progress report has been produced. This has comprised two main elements – a self-assessment of progress made against each of the 45 identified actions, and an overall assessment of progress against the vision based on regional performance across the headline socio-economic outcome indicators identified in the Strategy.

ECOTEC was commissioned by Advantage West Midlands to verify the self-assessments of progress against actions for the final year of delivery for Delivering Advantage, 2007/08 and to check the validity of the progress described in the previous three reports, covering 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. In addition, the research aimed to identify any lessons that could be learned to inform the approach to future progress monitoring against Connecting to Success.

The verification/validation exercise comprised three main elements. First, and in common with the process adopted in each of the three preceding years, for 2007/08, partners were asked to complete a self-assessment of progress made in 2007/08 against the actions for which they were responsible. Second, structured interviews were undertaken with a number of the partners and Agency staff involved in the reporting process. Finally, for a selection of actions, a review was undertaken of the documentary evidence available to support the reported progress.

The Action Plan has evolved significantly between 2004 and 2007. Some changes were made to achieve greater strategic alignment at local, sub-regional and regional levels. Structural/organisational changes and the maturing of partnerships have been important change factors too. Actions also developed as and when the need for change was identified, including in order to meet new Agency requirements or to address limitations in actions. In this dynamic environment, partners assessed progress against the plan for that year, rather than referring back to initial plans.

Though annual self-assessment is an Agency requirement, partners recognise its value in assessing progress, reviewing the effectiveness of partnership and governance arrangements and in informing future direction. There are three main sources of evidence

for partners' self-assessments: AWM project/programme reporting mechanisms; strategic regional and policy documentation and reporting; and 'external' project reporting. The quality of data and information has improved over the four years of Delivering Advantage.

Reported progress against the 45 actions set out in Delivering Advantage has been good and shows a generally positive trend. In each of the four years, progress against the majority of actions has been reported to be either “progressing smoothly” or “on track with manageable issues to be resolved”. A minority of actions initially encountered difficulties in delivery and/or experienced difficulties in latter years; however in all cases these had been overcome by the fourth reporting year. The verification/validation exercise undertaken by ECOTEC supports the self-assessments of progress and gradings given to each action over the period since 2004. The four annual progress reports can be regarded as broadly accurate summaries of the progress made in delivering the 45 actions set out in Delivering Advantage.

Going forward, a number of lessons can be learned and should be used to inform the approach used to monitor progress against the new WMES, Connecting to Success. In summary:

- Undertaking at least an annual self-assessment of progress against the actions set out in the Strategy is seen to be a worthwhile and valuable process. This approach should therefore continue.
- Those involved in progress reporting would welcome greater clarity about the process and how it relates to other, related, monitoring and reporting activity. The feedback loop in terms of feeding back the overall progress report to all those involved in the process could also be strengthened.
- Related to the previous point, there is scope to rationalise and ensure greater consistency between a number of related monitoring and reporting processes, of which WMES progress reporting is one. Partners would welcome involvement in work to rationalise/clarify reporting mechanisms.
- There is potential for the information collected through the monitoring process to be more effectively used. As mentioned previously, it could be better fed-back to improve activity on an ongoing basis. It could also be used more effectively as a way of identifying and collecting information about successes that help to boost the profile of the region.
- Finally, an inclusive approach that nurtures and engages partners has underpinned progress against the economic strategy. This will remain important in the future, and will ensure partners are responsive to the Region's agenda.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Regional Economic Strategy and Action Plan

Delivering Advantage, published in 2004, is the second West Midlands Economic Strategy and Action Plan. It updated Creating Advantage¹, published in 1999 and the subsequent Agenda for Action² published in 2001. The latter sought to address the lack of agenda/strategy faced by the new Agency and new partnerships by giving some strategic form to action on the ground, in particular by setting out an intention to concentrate on three sets of activities – Clusters, High Technology Corridors and Regeneration Zones. Of course the Regional Economic Strategy has, and will continue to, change. The Strategy and Action Plan has now been revised, which takes into account broader changes in the policy context, other emerging themes and the experience of individual actions including any issues affecting progress. The new RES³ was published in 2007.

1.2 Monitoring Progress Against Delivering Advantage

Advantage West Midlands (the Agency) commissioned this research to fulfil a number of purposes. Since Delivering Advantage was launched in 2004 an annual progress report has been produced. In addition to producing the progress report for the year 2007/08, a key aim of this research was to verify reported progress in delivering the Region's economic strategy. In addition, the research aimed to identify the learning from four years of progress and monitoring against Delivering Advantage; in so doing it aimed to identify factors impacting on delivery and lessons to be learned from this. Learning from the research will also be used to inform the approach, currently being developed, to progress monitoring against the new strategy, *Connecting to Success*.

In summary, the objectives for the research were to:

- verify the self-assessments of progress for 2007/2008;
- check the validity of progress reported in 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07 progress reports;
- establish the factors behind, and lessons to be learned from, changes against proposed action (either partners involved and/or nature of actions); and
- assess the robustness of monitoring process and identify improvements for the future.

¹ Creating Advantage: West Midlands Economic Strategy, 1999, Advantage West Midlands

² Creating Advantage: Agenda for Action, 2001, Advantage West Midlands

³ Connecting to Success: West Midlands Economic Strategy, 2007, Advantage West Midlands and West Midlands Regional Assembly

In meeting the overall aim of the study and its constituent objectives, the research addressed a series of questions.

Table 1.1 Framework for the Study

| Key Questions to be Addressed |
|---|
| To what extent have the proposed actions remained the same/changed over the period 2004/05 to 2007/08? |
| What changes have been effected? |
| What factors influenced the need for change? |
| What are the lessons for the future? |
| In which instances have there been changes to the partners involved? |
| What were the key factors behind this and what lessons can be learned? |
| What progress has been reported by partners against the actions for which they are responsible? |
| To what extent does reported progress vary between pillars/across actions? |
| Are there any targets/baselines against which reported progress has been especially strong/weak? |
| What factors have influenced the progress of certain actions? |
| What documentary evidence is there to support the data reported by partners? |
| Are there any gaps in the evidence base? And how might these be addressed? |
| To what extent is there potential for double-counting of outputs/outcomes? |
| Does the progress reported by projects seem reasonable (compared to wider experience)? |
| Would it appear that the claims of partners reflect an appropriate attribution of effects to actions? |
| Overall, to what extent is reported progress verified/valid and where (if anywhere) do the uncertainties lie? |
| What steps might be taken in the future to ensure robust monitoring systems? |

1.3 Approach

A range of tasks were undertaken in the course of completing the research:

- **Partners' Self-Assessments of Progress**

In common with previous years, the Agency issued a self-complete pro-forma to each of the lead partners taking forward actions under Delivering Advantage (where actions had more than one lead partner, all were sent a pro-forma to complete). The pro-forma mirrored that used previously; it requested partners to 'grade' their progress over the past 12 months as follows:

- A – action progressing smoothly
- B – action is on track with a few manageable issues still to be resolved
- C – Difficulty is being experienced but progress is being made in taking action forward
- D – Experiencing extreme difficulty to progress action with critical issues unresolved

The pro-forma also provided space for partners to comment on progress and particular points of change. They could also comment on areas of work that have gone particularly well and practice should be taken forward and built upon, and/or identify any issues constraining progress.

Returned pro-formas were compiled as an Annex to the annual Progress Report. The gradings given by partners were reviewed and synthesised to provide a 'traffic light' report, which also formed part of the annual Progress Report.

- **Consultations with Agency Staff and Lead Partners**

As part of the verification/validation of reported progress consultations were undertaken with twenty three selected lead partners from across the Pillars and a range of actions. In addition discussions were undertaken with four policy leads within the Agency, a number of other Agency staff (to clarify points of information, sources of evidence and to further verify information gathered from consultations) and external bodies such as the Regional Observatory and Black Country Consortium. These consultations followed a semi-structured topic guide developed for the purpose, which addressed the questions as highlighted previously. The consultations were intended to inform appreciation not only of patterns of change in implementing the strategy, but the factors and learning behind this. Importantly too, they explored the approach to self-assessment and the sources of evidence applied, in order to reveal any associated issues that might impact on the validity

of reported progress over the whole period of the RES. The consultations also aimed to draw out lessons and implications for future monitoring and reporting of progress.

- **Review of Documentary Evidence**

Finally, further work was undertaken to scrutinise the evidence base utilised by partners. In consultation with the Agency, a total of four Actions and a set of Actions relating to Skills were identified for this part of the work:

- i. Action 7: Sustainable Social Enterprise
- ii. Action 15: Regional Sustainable Development Framework – also partly incorporated Action 14
- iii. Actions 17 – 24: Regional Skills Partnership
- iv. Action 27: Co-ordinate Upgrading of ICT Infrastructure
- v. Action 36: Deliver Regeneration Zone Initiative

Key documentation was identified and reviewed. The information was identified and/or provided by lead partners, Agency staff, external partners and through data available in web-sites or on the internet. The scope of the research did not include an analysis of the content of the data but instead an understanding of how the data related to self-assessment and particularly which information partners felt informed their self-assessments.

1.4 Report Structure

The research findings are presented in three parts as follows:

Section 2 discusses the progress made against Delivering Advantage. In addition to reviewing the results of partners' self-assessments of progress, this section considers how partners approached the task of self-assessment and the evidence base that they have drawn on. The extent to which partner self-assessments can be verified is also considered.

Section 3 is concerned with the evolution of the Action Plan and its delivery. It outlines the changing shape of the Delivering Advantage and the evolving role of partners in taking Actions forward. Factors impacting on the delivery of the Action Plan and the contribution of actions to the Economic strategy are also discussed.

Section 4 summarises the key findings from the research and, based upon these, proposes a number of recommendations for consideration by the Agency (and its partners).

2.0 Progress Against Delivering Advantage

2.1 Overall Progress Against Delivering Advantage

Progress against the 45 actions set out in Delivering Advantage is reported in the four annual Progress Reports produced by Advantage West Midlands, covering 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07 and 2007/08. Overall, the self-assessments provided by partners suggest a generally positive trend in delivery of the actions (as illustrated in Figure 2.2 below). The first annual report showed, of the forty-five Priority Actions, thirty-six actions on target, eight actions making good progress and one, Action 39, as experiencing serious difficulties. By the second annual report, remedial steps taken had moved Action 39 up, to join six other actions as making good progress, while thirty-five actions were on target (no update was available for Actions 32, 34 and 38). The third report showed that 41 actions were on target (graded A or B), and whilst the other 4 actions (graded C) were experiencing some difficulties they were making progress. This fourth and final round of self-assessment for Delivering Advantage shows that actions were on target. Actions received at least a grade B and 12 actions received a grade A.

Figure 2.1 Summary of reported progress 2004 - 2008
Pillar I: Developing a Diverse and Dynamic Business Base

| Action Priority Action | | Reported Progress | | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
| 1 | Develop an enterprise culture that encourages people from under-represented groups to be able to become part of this culture | | | | |
| 2 | Create a supportive environment that helps grow manufacturing enterprise | | | | |
| 3 | Integrate support to improve the uptake of e-Business applications | | | | |
| 4 | Implement a coherent programme to support rural renaissance | | | | |
| 5 | Develop a regional approach to tackling crime against business | | | | |
| 6 | Develop a strategy to encourage business start ups and to improve survival rates, including the use of business incubation | | | | |
| 7 | Ensure mainstream business support helps to develop a stronger base, raise the profile and support the growth of sustainable social enterprises | | | | |
| 8 | Increase the supply of Regional Risk Capital and improve access to finance for SMEs and middle-sized firms | | | | |
| 9 | Develop an integrated approach to increase innovation and knowledge transfer into the business base to create higher added value products and services, through implementation of an updated Regional Innovation Strategy | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|--|--|--|--|
| 10 | Implement the overall Cluster Action Plan through targeted interventions selected by business to improve the future prospects for Business Clusters | | | | |
| 11 | Implement a planned programme for the three High Technology Corridors to catalyse high technology development | | | | |
| 12 | Implement the Regional Inward Investment Strategy to ensure that the Region continues to attract new businesses in the ten Business Clusters | | | | |
| 13 | Deliver the International Trade Strategy by ensuring that businesses are supported to internationalise themselves | | | | |
| 14 | Create and deliver a regional approach to environmental business practice | | | | |
| 15 | Deliver strategic framework and approach to enable the West Midlands to gain competitive advantage from sustainable development technology | | | | |
| 16 | Implement the West Midlands Visitor Economy Strategy | | | | |

Pillar 2: Promoting a Learning and Skillful Region

| Action Priority Action | Reported Progress | | | |
|---|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
| 17 Develop and implement the Framework for Regional Employment and Skills (FRESA) | | | | |
| 18 Implement initiatives to increase basic skills, particularly in Regeneration Zones, to tackle barriers to employment and address recruitment shortages in key | | | | |

| | | | | | |
|----|--|--|--|--|--|
| | sectors | | | | |
| 19 | Design and implement a programme to address ICT skills shortages and gaps | | | | |
| 20 | Deliver a co-ordinated approach and programmes to address higher level skills shortages and skill gaps, and improve access to mature/adult apprenticeships in the workplace | | | | |
| 21 | Deliver a co-ordinated programme to meet skill needs in Business Clusters | | | | |
| 22 | Develop a co-ordinated approach to delivering improved innovation skills in Business Clusters and higher education institutions | | | | |
| 23 | Inspire and engage leaders and managers to develop the skills and competencies to stimulate a step-change in enterprises performance | | | | |
| 24 | Improve access to and suitability of training especially in management skills for SMEs to encourage greater participation and capacity to manage change (including not-for-profit organisations) | | | | |
| 25 | Implement an Entrepreneurship Strategy, especially to engage young people and other (traditionally excluded) groups in developing the skills required to start up a small business | | | | |

Pillar 3: Creating the Conditions for Growth

| Action | Priority Action | Reported Progress | | | |
|--------|---|-------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| | | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
| 26 | Champion the delivery of the Regional Transport Strategy and Regional 'Transport Priorities' | Green | Green | Green | Green |
| 27 | Co-ordinate the upgrading of ICT infrastructure - resources, networks, data and applications to make broadband available to all businesses and 97% of households in the Region by the end of 2004 | Green | Green | Green | Green |
| 28 | Implement a strategic land use programme | Green | Orange | Green | Green |
| 29 | Implement the Regional Planning Guidance framework and the WMES Actions ensuring alignment | Green | Orange | Green | Green |
| 30 | Develop and introduce design standards to improve the built environment in urban and rural areas | Green | Orange | Green | Green |
| 31 | Support and develop two Urban Regeneration Companies, one in Sandwell, one in Walsall, to co-ordinate redevelopment and secure new investment in declining urban areas; investigate the potential of other special purpose vehicles elsewhere in the Region | Green | Green | Green | Green |
| 32 | Develop the potential of the West Midlands canal network for rural development, urban regeneration and tourism | Green | White | Green | Green |
| 33 | Develop, implement and review the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy | Green | Green | Green | Green |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|--|--|--|--|
| 34 | Implement the Water Resources Strategy, as identified in the document <i>Water resources for the future: A strategy for the West Midlands</i> | | | | |
| 35 | Promote environmentally beneficial farming in the Region | | | | |

Pillar 4: Regenerating Communities

| Action Priority Action | Reported Progress | | | |
|------------------------|--|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
| 36 | Deliver the Regeneration Zones Initiative | | | |
| 37 | Implement Market Towns Initiative across the Region | | | |
| 38 | Address the issues identified in the <i>Economic Interventions in Towns</i> study | | | |
| 39 | Improve the provision of information and support to generate increased interest in and formation of social enterprises | | | |
| 40 | Develop the role of NHS and other large public sector bodies as key employers and providers of training | | | |
| 41 | Promote the effective engagement of the Region's voluntary and community sector in regeneration activity and decision making | | | |

Providing a Powerful Voice for the Region

| Action Priority Action | Reported Progress | | | |
|------------------------|--|---------|---------|---------|
| | 2004/05 | 2005/06 | 2006/07 | 2007/08 |
| 42 | Implement a marketing and image programme - selling our strengths nationally and internationally | | | |

| | | | | | |
|----|---|--|--|--|--|
| 43 | Deliver the agreed mechanisms to share information and intelligence between partners and strategies | | | | |
| 44 | Develop priorities for working with other regions on the key economic issues for this region | | | | |
| 45 | Implement the European Strategic Framework and Strategy | | | | |

| Key | |
|-----|---|
| | A - for Actions progressing smoothly |
| | B - for Actions on track but manageable issues to be resolved |
| | C - for Actions experiencing difficulties but progress is being made moving forward |
| | D - for Actions with extreme difficulties and unresolved issues |

There has, however, been some variation in trend within and across Pillars:

- Pillar 1:** Within Pillar 1 – developing a diverse and dynamic business base – there were a small number of actions (3 of the 16) that experienced difficulties in the first year. Broadly speaking however, the majority of actions made good progress with only a small number experiencing difficulties in one year and which were rapidly addressed moving forward. The Action relating to delivery of the International Trade Strategy is notable for having received an A grading in all four years. And 10 of the 16 actions received an A grading in either 1 or 2 years of the action plan.
- Pillar 2:** Almost all of the 9 actions under Pillar 2 – promoting a learning and skilful region – made good progress throughout the four years of the Action Plan. Though there was an initial difficulty in relation to addressing higher level skills shortages and gaps, this was addressed early on and subsequently the Action was on track. And in the third year of the Action Plan there were difficulties experienced in relation to ICT skills shortages and gaps, which were resolved for the final year.
- Pillar 3:** The actions under Pillar 3 – creating conditions for growth – had a very strong start, with 4 of the 10 actions receiving an A grading. This continued, with the majority of actions continuing to make good progress in the following and subsequent years; indeed one Action – to upgrade the ICT infrastructure received an A grading every

year. In 2005/06 there were 3 actions which experienced difficulties, though these were rapidly addressed and were back on track the following year along with one Action being completed. In the fourth year, all actions have reported good progress.

- **Pillar 4:** The most difficult start was experienced by Pillar 4 – regenerating communities – with all but one of the 6 actions experiencing difficulties in the first year. By 2005/06 though, and following various remedial steps, only two actions remained in difficulty. In the third year, it was only in the area of engaging the Region's voluntary and community sector that difficulties persisted. By the fourth year, all actions have reported good progress. Overall then, the actions under Pillar 4 evolved in such a way that they achieved the necessary progress and contributed to the strategy.
- **Powerful Voice:** The actions that were developed with a view to providing a powerful voice for the Region have, almost without exception, made good progress throughout the four years. There was only one Action that experienced difficulties – Implementation of the European Strategic Framework and Strategy – and these issues were overcome in the following, and final, year of the Action Plan.

2.2 Approaches to Self Assessment

Advantage West Midlands identified its commitment to monitoring the progress against Delivering Advantage within the RES. This has been articulated to partners in the annual progress report letter, which in 2007 also stated that the Agency would be "seeking third party verification" during the final year of the Action Plan. A key requirement of the Agency was that those partners with a lead role in delivering the Actions should undertake an annual self-assessment of progress

The research revealed that partners understood that the annual self-assessment of progress was part of the annual reporting requirement and were aware that this forms part of monitoring the *Delivering Advantage Action Plan*. In a number of cases the responsibility for self-assessment fell predominantly to project managers as it forms part of the contractual arrangements between Advantage West Midlands and the project funded.

It would also appear that partners have taken a measured and considered approach to self-assessment. In part this is on account of partners recognising the added value that the self-assessment process provides, i.e. it provides a discipline to reflect on progress and issues and therefore informs future decisions and developments. It is also evident that self-assessments against actions have formed part of the overall – or framework of - reporting

processes to stakeholders, partners and the Agency year on year, in relation to multiple funding sources.

A key finding from the research is that partners have adopted a 'real-time' approach to their assessments of progress. That is, year on year they have reflected on progress made in the previous year rather than reflecting on progress against the original action as defined in 2004. This would seem an entirely appropriate response to the inevitable evolution of actions and the fact that pro-formas often identified 'next steps'.

A review of the pro-formas completed for 2007/08 and previous years reveal significantly different levels of input, with some being much more detailed than others. It would appear that the level of detail in reporting is predominantly a reflection of the role the lead partner has in delivering against the action. Specifically, in those cases where the lead partner is also the project manager – and therefore where the level of 'operational' knowledge is considerable on account of the lead partner's closeness to day to day delivery – these pro-formas typically contained a higher level of operational detail. Conversely, where the lead partner is further removed from direct delivery – for example facilitating delivery through infrastructure, playing a monitoring role, or overseeing a portfolio of projects - the level of detailed knowledge is understandably reduced and is often of a more strategic nature, which in general terms this is reflected in the self-assessments.

The self-assessments form part of the variety of reporting that partners' are required to do in relation to multiple funding streams and output requirements, for example European Funding, Local Authority funding, etc. This results in what can be described as 'reporting frameworks' that partners work to during funding programme life-times. Having an overview of the different types of reporting required for these frameworks may provide a useful way forward for partners and the Agency in relation to coherent progress reporting.

It has also emerged that there is some variation between lead partners as to how they approach the task of self-assessment. This relates mainly to their role in relation to the action(s). In those cases where the lead partner is acting as project manager, their self-assessment tends to focus on outputs, process issues and targets. When the lead partner role is strategic however, the focus has been on vision, priorities and alignment with other activity they are involved with; in these cases it would appear that the action is seen as **part** of their overall agenda rather than **central** to it.

2.2.1 Factors Influencing the Approach to Self-assessment

As noted above, partners approached self-assessment in a range of ways. The research identified that a number of factors shaped partners' approaches:

- **Self-assessment as a tool for reviewing progress:** in those cases where the lead partner was also project manager for a particular action, self-assessment formed part of an internal monitoring tool. In particular, where outputs form part of the contractual arrangements between the lead partner and the Agency the self-assessment paid particular attention to outputs achieved.

Pillar 3, Action 27: Co-ordinate the upgrading of ICT infrastructure – resources, networks, data and applications to make broadband available to all businesses and 97% of households in the Region by the end of 2004. The approach to self-assessment has been based upon progress against targets. This has continued up until this year where 100% coverage has been achieved. To maintain this position – and given the very minor amount of reduction in coverage that would affect this target – a maintenance contract had been put in place between the project and the Agency to provide an on-going service in rural areas until March 31st 2010.

Pillar 1, Action 15: Deliver strategic framework and approach to enable the West Midlands to gain competitive advantage from sustainable development technology. The Midlands Environmental Business Co. (official regional branch of Business Council for Sustainable Development – UK Chief Executive Officer completed or directly oversaw the completion of the pro-formas for the projects they had responsibility for (Fuel Cells Programmes, Fuel Symbiosis Programme, Wind Supply Programme and the Environmental Business Opportunity Programme). The self-assessment formed part of the overall reporting process and progress review.

- **Self-assessment as a measurement of partners' and stakeholders' input and effectiveness in delivering the action:** where the vehicle for delivery either acts as a facilitation body bringing partners together, or to facilitate a programme or portfolio of projects, self-assessment helped maximise the effectiveness of partnership arrangements and/or governance arrangements, both of which affect delivery of the action.

Pillar 3, Action 36: Deliver the Regeneration Zone Initiatives has evolved in direct correlation to partnership working arrangements, with involvement and alignment with partnership agencies sub-regionally and regionally. Initially the focus was upon setting up six zones in the Region and developing the implementation plans. However latterly and directly in relation to self-assessment the focus has been upon improving partner engagement that is more formally recognised and alignment with other strategic partners and partnerships for example with the Urban Regeneration Companies. The North Black Country and South Staffordshire Regeneration Zone's 'next steps' for 2007/08 was to 'Strengthen Partnership Working Arrangements'. A zone consultee commented that "alignment of zone structures is already significantly improving the pace of delivery". It may be the case that this would have taken place regardless of self-assessment however we conclude that the self-assessment added momentum and provided a discipline to ensure that this did happen. Clear investment planning with the Urban Regeneration Companies (URCs) [3 in the Black Country] results in integration with the Black Country Investment Plan". The URC chairs are now members of the Regeneration Zone Board.

- **Self-assessment as an integral and influential factor of progress overall, bringing together internal (within the agency/partnership) and external (other agency/partnership) monitoring.** Throughout the consultations it has emerged that as the actions, Action Plan and 'next steps' have evolved, activity has changed in response to issues identified through the self-assessment. In section three of this report (**Factors Impacting on Delivery of the Action Plan**) a number of factors are identified as impacting upon delivery. Whether these are within the control of partners or are externally influenced, they emerged as being integral to and influential upon the approach to self-assessment.

Pillar 3, Action 33: Develop, implement and review the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy RHS illustrates the effects of changes in policy and strategy, with the move from a 'mini' Regional Housing Strategy in 2003 to the RHS in 2005 and the subsequent changes to housing market allocations. Self-assessment of this Action changed to reflect the move to the RSS 'proper', and the delivery of the priorities within this as opposed to an interim measure.

Pillar 1, Action 7; Ensure mainstream business support helps to develop a stronger base, raise the profile and support the growth of sustainable social enterprises, changes to the delivery and partnership arrangements in relation to delivering the Enterprise Framework through the introduction of the Enterprise Board has impacted upon the nature of reporting by the Social Enterprise Network. This additional and 'external' influence has created some challenges and tensions, particularly in relation to role and responsibility, however it does illustrate how the self-assessment is affected by different and changing factors.

- **Changes between self-assessment and evolving/new reporting mechanisms:** It is inevitable that over a number of years gaps and weaknesses will emerge in reporting processes. This is evident where there has been significant change or movement away from the original action and/or the context within which the action is delivered. It is important to note that there isn't evidence of 'no progress' but progress reporting that has evolved in a different way, for example due to external influences such as change to policy.

Pillar 2: Promoting a Learning and Skilful Region. All actions in Pillar 2 were effectively out of date in terms of their specific focus as soon as Delivering Advantage was published. This relates to the wider evolution of skills policy as reflected in the 2003 White Paper '21st Century Skills: Realising Our Potential' and subsequent iterations of the Government's Skills Strategy. As the Delivering Advantage Progress Report 2004/05 notes "The Regional Skills Partnership has developed a clear set of regional priorities and proposed actions over the last few months...future progress in this area will be monitored against the Regional Skills Partnership Action Plan." There is evidence that the six monthly reporting processes achieved exactly this, however it has resulted in some reduced connectivity between Delivering Advantage progress reporting and subsequent alternative reporting mechanisms. In this case however this is fully understood by partners and the direction of travel is agreed between partners and the Agency.

Providing a Powerful Voice for the Region, Action 42: Implement a marketing and image programme – selling our strengths nationally and internationally provides an illustration of how changes in roles and responsibilities have affected lead partners' approach to reporting. In this instance the Agency has increasingly played a greater role in this than the Regional Assembly; this has resulted in changes to self-assessment and monitoring progress, in relation to the extent that the Assembly feels able to report progress. In this case it has reduced.

- **Implications of self-assessment:** It is to be expected that in some cases partners have expectations of the implications of self-assessment. This is particularly in relation to Actions where the lead partner is also the project manager. Candid discussions with partners indicate an understanding that self-assessment must be realistic because it is open to internal and external scrutiny. They are, too, concerned over the resource and financial implications in relation to progress and reporting, such as resource allocations, claw-back and audits. These are real factors for some partners when self-assessing. It is clear however that the level of partners' experience, maturing of the process over four years and understanding and knowledge of self-assessment and project monitoring – as articulated in interviews and when discussing evidence – overwhelmed any intention to 'over' self-assess.

2.2.2 Strategic and Project Based Approaches to Self-Assessment

Two broad approaches to self-assessment have been identified: strategic- and project-based. The research suggests that the approach taken relates to the type of delivery vehicle or partnership arrangements in place to take forward the action(s). It has been reported that with both partners and stakeholders and the Agency there can be some confusion regarding the nature of roles and responsibilities of lead partners, which can create tensions in relation to project delivery and project management particularly.

Strategic approach and role: Many of the lead partners taking forward Priority Actions have a strategic role; this might be at a regional level (16 lead partner agencies) or sub-regional level (5 lead partner agencies). The Regional Economic Strategy, along with other key strategic documents, for example, the Regional Spatial Strategy and Regional Tourism Strategy underpin the focus and priorities of partners with a strategic role. Furthermore, these lead partners evidently adopt a strategic role working with other partners relevant to their areas of responsibility. The majority of partners operating and reporting at this level have reported very positively upon the consultation process for *Connecting to Success* and upon how their input has been represented in the published strategy. It is likely that the level of reporting at a strategic level will increase with the new RES.

The strategic approach relates to actions where the responsible partners or partnership either:

- i) acts as a **facilitation vehicle** bringing partners together to facilitate strategic discussions and takes an overview on suitable investment in the Region, for example the **Government Office for the West Midlands** (Actions 14, 40, 41 and 44¹) or **The Minority Ethnic Business Forum** (Action 1²) or,
- ii) is a formalised partnership body with role and responsibility overseeing a **programme of portfolio of projects** and ensuring delivery through formal governance, secretariat and working arrangements, for example **Regeneration Zones and Urban Regeneration Companies** (Actions 31 and 36³).

The **direct project delivery approach** relates to actions where the lead partner is also the project manager, **for example Midlands Environmental Business Co.** (Action 15⁴). In these cases there is greater day to day contact with the project and its activities and more involvement in relation to outputs, resources and funding.

These 'typical' approaches to self-assessment are consistent through the actions and indeed comments have been made at consultations that clarity regarding which category the delivery vehicle or partnership body falls into is important to reporting progress. A key lesson for the future is that partners need to understand and report progress against *Connecting to Success* keeping in mind these distinct differences and distinguishing between reporting processes.

¹ Action 14; Pillar 1: Create and deliver a regional approach to environmental business practice; Action 40; Pillar 4: Develop the role of NHS and other large public sector bodies as key employers and providers of training; Action 41; Pillar 4: Promote the effective engagement of the Region's voluntary and community sector in regeneration activity and decision making; Action 44; Providing a Powerful Voice for the Region: Implement a marketing and image programme – selling our strengths nationally and internationally.

² Action 1; Pillar 1: Develop an enterprise culture that encourages people from under-represented groups (including women, young people, ethnic minorities and disabled people) to be able to become part of the culture

³ Action 31; Pillar 3: Support and develop [two] URCs; Action 36; Pillar 4: Deliver the Regeneration Zone Initiatives.

⁴ Action 15; Pillar 1: Deliver strategic framework and approach to enable the West Midlands to gain competitive advantage from sustainable development technology.

2.3 Sources of Evidence

On the basis of the consultations undertaken with lead partners as part of this research, it is clear that a very wide range of evidence has been drawn upon to inform self-assessments and progress. There is considerable variation between actions in the types and sources of evidence. In broad terms there appears to be three main sources of evidence:

- **Project/Programme AWM Reporting Mechanisms**, with sources including:
 - ▶ Monthly project reports to AWM
 - ▶ Annual Reports, Self – Assessment Reports to AWM
 - ▶ Grant monitoring reports
 - ▶ External Reviews commissioned by AWM

- **Strategic Regional and Policy Documentation and Reporting**, for example:
 - ▶ Zone Implementation Plans
 - ▶ Black Country Implementation

- **'External' Project Reporting**, including:
 - ▶ Databases, maps and service provider data demonstrating physical evidence
 - ▶ External reviews, evaluation, commissioned by project
 - ▶ Minutes and records of meetings
 - ▶ Independent and external reviews

Figure 2.1 overleaf illustrates the range of evidence available to each of the actions (for those actions where a lead partner was consulted as part of the research).

There is evidence that some information has emerged or developed incidentally to the formal reporting process. This has been accumulated by partners and by the Agency as a result of the raft of reporting required by different funding bodies during the evolution of the actions and the Action Plan. Partners who accumulate this information include the Agency, Local Authorities, Government Office for the West Midlands, community and voluntary sector organisations, academic and research bodies and strategic partnerships.

The types of evidence that have emerged 'incidentally' relate to i) external project reporting and, to some extent, ii) strategic and policy regional and sub regional documentation and reporting. However this forms a key part of the evidence of progress as it relates both to project delivery and strategic alignment regionally.

Figure 2.2 Sources of Evidence: Some Examples

| | Project/Programme AWM Reporting Mechanisms | Strategic and Policy Regional and Sub-regional Documentation and Reporting | 'External' Project Reporting |
|--|--|---|--|
| Action 11; High Technology Corridors | Regular formal and informal business meetings with partner CEOs and Chairs | Reporting into other local groups, e.g. Telford Economic Partnership and Wolverhampton Economic Partnership Regional strategic documents, e.g. RES | External reporting mechanisms include SQW report on HTCs (David Blake, AWM) Networks/Forums within the Corridor structures Strategic Leadership Board, sets key priorities Steering Group Partnership Forum, strategic lead |
| Action 14; Business Council for Sustainable Development, Birmingham University | Monitoring Reports to AWM | | Business Resource Efficiency and Waste (BREW) programme independent review |
| Action 15; Business Council for Sustainable Development, Birmingham University | Fuel Cells Programmes; Evidence at BU and AWM Fuel Symbiosis Programme; Evidence, Commercial Agreement with AWM and final AWM audit E-BOP – Environmental Business Opportunity Programme; Evidence, Quarterly reports, targets now reported to AWM and TIC | | Wind Supply programme; Evidence, Quarterly Monitoring reports, Capability and Capacity website – www.windsupply.co.uk |
| Actions 17 – 24; Advantage West Midlands, Regional Skills Partnership | Board Minutes Work Updates Strategic/Policy Regional and | | |

| | Project/Programme AWM Reporting Mechanisms | Strategic and Policy Regional and Sub-regional Documentation and Reporting | 'External' Project Reporting |
|---|--|--|---|
| | <p>Sub-regional Documentation and Reporting, for example</p> <p>RSP 6 monthly reports</p> <p>Regional ESF Framework</p> <p>Skills Action Plan</p> | | |
| Action 22; West Midlands Higher Education Association | <p>Regular updates to officers at AWM and to the CEO</p> <p>Universities work in partnership with AWM to report progress of level 4 skills through data monitoring</p> <p>Regional Skills Partnership tends to focus on up to level 3 skills</p> | <p>Funding Council audit all reported progress through individual bodies and through the Black Country Observatory</p> <p>Higher Education Management Committee, due to meet again in July to address internal business relating to reporting, progress, communications</p> <p>Quarterly meeting of Pro-Vice Chancellors to discuss high level skills.</p> | |
| Action 27; Broadband Consultants | <p>Monthly Reports to AWM</p> <p>Annual Report to AWM</p> <p>Annual Progress, Self-Assessment Reports to AWM</p> <p>Quarterly Grant Report to AWM</p> <p>End of Project Report – which will include the Survey conducted in February</p> | | <p>Maps from 2004 to current showing coverage of broadband across the Region through the lifetime of the Project</p> <p>Take-up numbers available through BT and broadband service providers</p> <p>Regional Observatory, 'Point-Topic' data [www.point-topic.com]</p> |
| Action 28; West Midlands | | State of the Region Report | |

| | Project/Programme AWM Reporting Mechanisms | Strategic and Policy Regional and Sub-regional Documentation and Reporting | 'External' Project Reporting |
|--|--|---|---|
| Regional Assembly | | RSS, Phase I launched Jan 08, Phase II submitted to SoS Dec 07 | |
| Action 29; West Midlands Regional Assembly | | RES RSS | |
| Action 33; Housing Executive | | 'Mini Regional Housing Strategy' – 2003 RHS – 2005 onwards Regional Allocation Strategy | |
| Action 36; Regeneration Zones | Annual Reports to AWM Board Reports – AWM | WMES ZIP Black Country Investment Plan (BC) | Governance Audit (NS, AWM – Marie Greer) SRB Full evaluation (NS) Annual Report – European Fund (North Staffordshire) |
| Action 44; WMRA | | Smart Growth Midlands Way Action Plan Memorandum of Understanding | |
| Action 45; WMRA | | New European Strategy, in partnership with Advantage West Midlands | |

2.4 Review of Evidence

This part of the research identified early on the importance of clarity regarding partner roles and responsibilities. In discussions with Agency officers and partners we have identified three 'types' or categories of delivery vehicle. As described throughout this report there are **facilitation vehicles** bringing together partnerships – and developing these partnerships – in order to facilitate delivery in the Region; **direct project delivery** where agencies can point to direct project outputs and facilitating delivery of **programmes or portfolios of projects**.

It is not appropriate to suggest that the actions and the partnerships/vehicles involved in their delivery fall completely into these three categories as across the three there is overlap in relation to roles and responsibilities and project and programme delivery but it serves as a useful tool in relation to looking at evidence base for actions.

In order to further assess the evidence base, and specifically to inform the verification of reported progress, a detailed review of the evidence underpinning the self-assessments of a selection of Actions was completed. Selected in discussion with the Agency, the five Actions reviewed in this way were:

- **Action 7: Sustainable Social Enterprise** - Lead Partners, West Midlands Social Enterprise Network
- **Action 15: Regional Sustainable Development Framework** - Lead Partners, Birmingham University and Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD)
- **Actions 17 – 24: Skills** - Lead Partners, AWM and the Regional Skills Partnership
- **Action 27: Co-ordinate Upgrading of ICT Infrastructure** - Lead Partners, Broadbent Consultants (formerly West Midlands Networking Company)
- **Action 36: Deliver Regeneration Zone Initiative** - Lead Partners, Regeneration Zones and AWM

The findings from these detailed reviews are presented below.

2.4.1 Action 7: Sustainable Social Enterprise

Over the years, the West Midlands Enterprise Network in its capacity as lead partner, has reported varying degrees of progress with Action 7. Notably, in 2004/05 the Regional Social Enterprise Network self-assessed as a 'D' grading whereas by the end of 2007/08 progress was assessed to be a 'B'. These ratings and issues around progress were discussed with both the lead partner and the policy lead at the Agency. This revealed

different perspectives on the extent to which progress has been made, with the lead partner and policy lead identifying different issues, particularly in the early years. The Agency's policy lead agrees that the self-assessment of progress in 2007/08 – a grade 'B' is more reflective of progress. It is also evident that the lead partner recognises the challenges that have been faced and that these are now being addressed.

Against this background a range of evidence was made available to support the verification of progress. The Agency specifically has provided the following:

- Draft progress report from the social enterprise network
- A copy of the executive summary of the April 2008 West Midlands Social Enterprise Baseline Mapping study;
- An update report on SEWM's activity given at their June 08 meeting
- A extract on SEWM from a draft copy of a the work undertaken by GHK reviewing Agency's third sector infrastructure investment (this report is still being worked on with GHK)
- A copy of the National Action Plan which summarises activity across all Regional Development Agencies to deliver against OTS priorities for in-region social enterprise development.
- Extract from the Agency bid to the office of the third sector to deliver business support to social enterprise
- A copy of AWMs' Action Plan which is monitored by ministers last updated in June 2008.

Some further information was made available by the Enterprise Network consultees, however this mainly related to correspondence between the Network and the Agency regarding more general issues in relation to Social Enterprise in the Region.

Overall, the evidence indicates that while there have been some issues regarding resources and putting in place structures for the Network, there is wide ranging activity regionally that is being developed and supported both through the Enterprise Network and the Enterprise Board. The recent conference and promotional material is seen to be very successful both within the Agency and by Network staff and members.

2.4.2 Action 15: Regional Sustainable Development Framework

The two lead partners – the University and BCSD – have given similar gradings in their self-assessments, and which relate quite specifically to i) the success of projects – reflected as grade 'A' (2004/05 and 05/06) and ii) time taken up in relation to managing and monitoring processes – resulting in an average 'B' grade in 2006/07 and 07/08.

The University and the BCSD both identified a range of information available as evidence of progress during the last four years; this includes:

- Fuel Cells Programmes: Evidence at BU and AWM
- Fuel Symbiosis Programme: Evidence, Commercial Agreement with AWM and final AWM audit
- E-BOP – Environmental Business Opportunity Programme; Evidence, Quarterly reports, targets now reported to AWM and TIC

It is interesting to note that external factors are seen to play a particular role in relation to delivering against this Action. For example, measuring graduate retention and project production issues are affected by issues ranging from change in government policy, to personal lifestyle choices, fluctuations in the economy and product availability.

The evidence base indicates a consistent approach to reporting and where projects have 'moved' from one lead partner to another, for example the Environmental Business Opportunity Programme (E-BOP) relations and communications are in place to ensure effective reporting and monitoring.

Furthermore, the evidence base also reflects the strategic aspect of the Action through consultation with the University and the project base through consultation with the BCSD. This demonstrates that through viewing the Action from different perspectives (strategic and project management/delivery) the lead partners have shared understanding of the projects and the impact they have in the Region.

An interesting dimension to emerge towards the end of reporting is the connectivity between actions. Action 14; Create and deliver a regional approach to environmental business practice¹ and Action 15 have reported similar progress which was evident during a discussion with the policy officer at the Agency and the lead partner at the BCSD. This additional evidence demonstrates a level of cross agency and cross action working, which is good practice for the new Implementation Plan.

¹ A Summary of achievements of the BREW regional programme in the West Midlands 2005 -8".

Overall the gradings reflect the narrative within self-assessments and the discussions had with partners, and are a fair reflection of progress.

2.4.3 Actions 17 – 24: Skills

As outlined in section 2.1.2 earlier in the report, the RSP has developed a new set of skills related actions, set out in the form of an Action Plan, that supersede those set out in Delivering Advantage. While judgements continued to be made over progress against the Delivering Advantage actions, this assessment was based on related successor actions in the RSP Action Plan where appropriate, using the evidence base developed to judge progress against the RSP actions. Again this indicates that some flexibility was inevitably needed in assessing progress in line with the Agency's procedures, given that policy developments and changes in focus impacted upon the continued relevance of the objectives set out in Delivering Advantage.

Discussions with AWM staff indicate that there has been significant positive progress in more appropriately reporting and verifying regional skills progress within the new context established under the RSP Action Plan in several key ways:

- The fact that the RSP Action Plan and its objectives in themselves were more specific, relevant to national policy and measurable than the original Delivering Advantage objectives (which were derived from the FRESA).
- The change in reporting mechanism to the RSP 6 monthly reports acts as a mechanism for assessing regional skills progress, hence improving the evidence base upon which to verify progress against regional skills objectives.
- A move towards attaching more specific and measurable targets to regional skills actions, hence enabling progress to be measured more objectively and less subjectively.

Examining the reviews of regional skills progress, as set out in the RSP 6 monthly updates, indicates that more objective procedures along with a more developed evidence base has been established to assess developments in the skills arena in the region. This has now been further supplemented in the latest Skills Action Plan, published in March 2008, by a set of 'key measurable skills goals' which are related to the targets set out in the Leitch Report and Implementation Plan. As such, there is now a clear baseline position by which future progress against regional skills targets can be measured, assessed and verified.

2.4.4 Action 27: Co-ordinate Upgrading of ICT Infrastructure

Broadbent Consultants have consistently reported excellent progress, with a self-assessment of grade 'A' for 2007/08. This assessment relates directly to the level of Broadband coverage in the Region. The evidence base identified by the consultee is:

- Monthly Reports to AWM
- Annual Report to AWM
- Annual Progress, Self-Assessment Reports to AWM
- Quarterly Grant Report to AWM
- End of Project Report – which will include the Survey conducted in February
- Maps from 2004 to current showing coverage of broadband across the Region through the lifetime of the Project
- Take-up numbers available through BT and broadband service providers
- Regional Observatory, 'Point-Topic' data [www.point-topic.com]

Discussions indicate that delivery against this Action has been successful particularly in relation to broadband coverage. This has been further verified by the Regional Observatory and OFcom, who anticipate that coverage in the Region for 2007/08 will be 99.9% (contact details available). The Regional Observatory also uses data source Point Topic which measures business and residential take up, however in discussions with the Observatory it seems that this data is not drawn upon as part of the self-assessment or monitoring processes by the lead partner or the Agency. This is potentially a good source of information and a learning point for future monitoring would be to explore sources of evidence beyond that of partners and Advantage West Midlands.

Self-assessing as an 'A' grade is potentially high-risk. However this is based upon broadband coverage in the Region and the evidence available from the lead partner, the Agency, the Regional Observatory and OFcom support this assessment. Therefore it would seem to be a true reflection of process. The survey conducted by the lead partner to 'measure' coverage across the Region involved technical measurement of broadband availability as well as some qualitative research where users described the value to their business – particularly in very rural areas – of have reliable broadband access.

The self-assessments can therefore be thoroughly verified.

2.4.5 Action 36: Deliver Regeneration Zone Initiative

The self-assessment by lead partners attributed an 'average' 'B' grading to progress; consultations revealed that this grading was reflects progress made and also that the Zones activity is seen as very much 'work in progress'.

Progress reporting and self-assessments of the Regeneration Zones shows a direct correlation between reporting and evaluation and actions taken. A key finding is that the Zones have focussed largely on establishing effective infrastructures in order to move to delivery – which is now evident and this is reflected in the self-assessments. In consultations Zone staff and members describe a natural development process of the Zones which has been reported to the Agency and to their own Boards and Stakeholders.

Discussions with policy leads at the Agency support Zone lead partners' views of strategic fit and alignment with other sub-regional and regional strategy and that this has been endorsed by the Agency as part of progress reporting during the last four years. Some tensions have been identified in relation to the level of 'control' Zone secretariats have over expenditure however policy leads and Zone leads report that these issues either have been or are being addressed, and that greater partnership working is the key objective.

Evidence in relation to the Regeneration Zones is very diverse ranging from project related monitoring through to strategic reporting. Partners have taken a pragmatic approach to self-assessment, identifying progress within the context of issues that have emerged and been addressed since 2006, primarily infrastructure and partnership working arrangements.

It is our assessment that reporting is reflective of progress and partners and the Agency are clear about future requirements.

2.5 Quality of the Evidence Base

When considering the strengths and gaps/weaknesses in the evidence base it must be reiterated that during the evolution of the actions since the publication of the Action Plan in 2004 evidence available has varied and grown a great deal. The extent of evidence available as described in this report illustrates the raft of data and information that has emerged over the past four years. This data and information has been developed and produced within very different contexts in relation to developing and taking actions forward and then in relation to reporting upon them.

There is an evidence base dating back over the four years of delivering the Action Plan directly in relation to the actions and to the Strategy. It is also evident that data has and will continue to be improved as the issues affecting delivery continue to be better understood.

During consultations it is apparent that where partners have not reported directly upon standard Agency project outputs, i.e. where they do not have direct project delivery responsibility, the evidence base becomes more part of the 'incidental' evidence therefore it is more difficult to assess how actions are developing and being delivered, given the constantly changing context that partners are working within.

There are also some important contextual considerations in relation to assessing the evidence base, possibly the most significant of these is the 'Impact Evaluation Framework' currently being conducted by the Agency which is assessing the quality of evaluations of actions within the Strategy. In anecdotal terms findings from the Framework indicate that evaluations are either: high quality, effectively evaluating activity; mid-range, with some minor changes would produce high quality evaluation; lower quality evaluation where the findings provide less insight/resolution with the project being evaluated. The Impact Evaluation Framework is not yet completed; the Regeneration Zones impact aspect is complete, whilst the High Technology Corridor and Clusters continue to be completed.

There are factors that influence the evidence base, in terms of evidence used and how it has emerged/evolved. Some examples of this are:

Implement Updated Regional Innovation Strategy, Pillar 1, Action 9:

Lead partner Innovation Technology Council. In the first 18 months to two years of the ITC's work in relation to this Action reporting was complicated by limited co-ordination of reporting against multiple objectives. Over the lifetime of the Action the focus has been more concentrated upon the five themes set out in the Action Plan and relating them to cross cutting themes for example social inclusion or sustainability. This clarity of focus and of 'fit' with the broader themes of the Agency and the Region it is felt has led to better inclusion of ICT within the Agency and improved working and reporting arrangements.

Champion the delivery of the Regional Transport Strategy and Regional 'Transport Priorities', Pillar 3, Action 26: The Regional Assembly and AWM have worked together closely in relation to regional regeneration, and in relation to this Action, both specifically in relation to transport and in relation to the wider remit of the spatial and economic strategies. This strength of partnership working is seen to be evident in the new RES and action plan and in relation to the review of the WMLGA, WMRA partnership review, strategic review of transport by the WMRA and the connection and context of the Sub

National Review. The evidence base upon which this is built demonstrates the more strategic reporting processes that have been developed during *Delivering Advantage* that reflect the growth of the action during the four years.

Deliver Regeneration Zones Initiative, Pillar 4 Regenerating Communities, Action 36: Lead partners, the six Regeneration Zone Boards and Advantage West Midlands. The action as set out in 2004 was to agree and realise the Zone Implementation Plans and to create and implement a co-ordinated programme of 'bridges to success' in each Zone. In consultation it is apparent that in the early lifetime of the Zones the focus was upon setting up Boards with the associated infrastructure, governance and partnership arrangements and producing the Zone Implementation Plans, through a stage of strengthening and strategically aligning partnership arrangements in order to move to the present where the focus is upon having a small number of strategic priorities.

2.6 Verification of Reported Progress

As reported above the Agency's 'evaluation of evaluations' currently taking place will provide a key baseline in relation to evaluations conducted and the purpose and process of future evaluation that the Agency undertakes.

At this stage in the process and at a point of reflection the evidence base that has been made available – and the extent and range of this – reported progress can be positively verified. As reported, progress reporting in the main has been measured and relates to the evidence available. Evidence as it has emerged during the four years of the action plan has informed partners approach to delivering their actions. As described, the evidence and evaluations developed over the lifetime of the Action Plan have primarily fallen out of the 'next steps' part of the Agency's annual evaluation. **The Regeneration Zones, High Technology Corridors, ICT Steering Group, Higher Education Authority and cluster groups** are just some examples where the need to focus on growth and the way forward has been the key driver, with both the annual reporting process and the other reporting mechanisms described in this report shaping progress.

Self-assessments 'stand up' to the evidence identified, with the caveat that some of this is currently under scrutiny through the Impact Evaluation Framework. The evidence base is wide ranging and demonstrates a genuine approach to reporting upon progress against actions.

Availability of documentation has varied. For the purposes of this report considerable 'chasing' has been required to access evidence and action related information. We believe that this is not as a result of secrecy or wishing to withhold information but more, i)

evidence data quickly becomes unimportant once it is received and digested and the relevant action put in place to address issues identified and ii) in some cases the direct link between evidence and the *Delivering Advantage* actions is secondary to the purpose of the evaluation. Therefore it is worth reiterating that formalising an evidence base framework will assist measuring progress and reporting upon *Connecting to Success*.

Finally in relation to verifying progress in relation to evidence available possibly the strongest indicator of relevance and quality is that in the vast majority of cases more than one partner (often multiple) is involved in reporting progress and corresponding evidence. The nature of partnership working can lead to multiple priorities, targets and agendas and as a result significantly varied views on progress. The 'traffic light' and progress reports are based upon an amalgamation of gradings and comments made by partners of progress over the four years of the Action Plan. There have been some variants where reported progress has been influenced by frustrations of individuals where roles and responsibilities have changed outside their control. In our view this is to be expected and should be viewed in this light. In the main however progress reporting and the evidence bases used have been consistent.

3.0 Evolution of the Action Plan and its Delivery

3.1 The Changing Shape of the Action Plan

The Action Plan acted as a framework in 2004 to move forward innovative and strategic ways of delivering regeneration regionally. Whilst the Action Plan has not been refreshed or reviewed since 2004 (until 2007) there has been significant change to the Priority Actions. Partners, in conjunction with the Agency, have moved actions on in response to internal and external influences and to move into delivery from development of interventions.

There are a variety of reasons for the changes experienced in the Action Plan. Primarily change has been the result of lessons learned as the actions have been developed and delivered and, most significantly, as the delivery mechanisms have evolved. The maturing of partnerships, working arrangements, structures, delivery vehicles, priorities etc has enabled the Action Plan to move forward to the point where the new RES has naturally emerged from experience to date. On occasion, the factors causing change have been associated with improved performance; conversely, there are also change factors which are associated by lead partners with a detrimental effect on progress.

3.1.1 Improving Strategic Alignment

There is evidence that during the life-time of *Delivering Advantage* alignment has improved between local, sub-regional and regional level plans and strategies. Lead partners with a regional and national government remit have developed their Actions in response to changes in policy. They have worked closely with the Agency to ensure strategic alignment. The increased focus upon strategic fit is evident through the consultations where lead partners have an investment role in the Region, particularly through port-folios of interventions such as the High Technology Corridors, Regeneration Zones and Urban Regeneration Companies. The Regional Assembly is also a key partner in responding to regional economic development in relation to policy, for example in relation to Phase 2 of the RSS (housing allocations – action 28; Implement Strategic Land Use Programme and transport – action 26).

Improved alignment is significant in relation to *Delivering Advantage* as in a number of cases lead partners expressed a view that neither the Strategy or Action Plan were as inclusive as they could have been (though it was understood that as this was only the second regional Strategy and so issues of this type are inevitable). However, lessons have been learned and the majority of lead partners reported that they feel consulted, included and represented in *Connecting to Success*; moreover partners articulate a strong interest

in and commitment to the new RES. The concurrent launch of documents/strategies such as with the RES and RSS is also seen positively. The alignment of strategies has been a clear change to the Action Plan and a step-change in how partners work with each other and with the Agency.

Action 28, Implement a strategic land use programme: *emerging from the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), strategic land use in the Region forms a key strand of regional transformational change and therefore alignment with the RES. In relation to urban development it is about linking need with opportunity.*

3.1.2 Responding to Structural Changes

It is inevitable that during a four-year period, structures and infrastructures will have changed. Structural changes have broadly been in response to changing needs and often involve rationalisation of structures.

*Both the **Regeneration Zones** and **High Technology Corridors** secretariats and Boards have been changed to respond to progress in their localities and organisational structures, and internal restructuring has led to changes in personnel and/or changes regarding which part of the organisation is leading on the Action.*

Lead partner organisations, their partnerships and the Agency have all been affected by these wider changes and, on occasion this has resulted in changes regarding the lead partner.

Action 33 *the GOWM Regional Housing Board handed over to the Regional Housing Executive.*

Whilst there is no evidence that changes have been particularly detrimental, frustrations over staff 'churn' in partner organisations, partnerships and the Agency have been expressed by lead partners. There is a perception that churn of this kind does give rise to delays in progress against the Action Plan. This should be considered for future activity.

There are, too, examples of change in relation to organisational roles and responsibilities, both at a strategic intervention level, for example Marketing the Region (Action 42; Implement marketing and image programme), the Environmental Business Opportunities Programme (Action 15; Regional Sustainable Development Framework) moving from the responsibility of the Midlands Environmental Business Company (MEBC) to the Technology Innovation Centre. On occasion such change has led to limitations of how Actions have developed when changes occur beyond the control of the original lead partner.

Changes with key partnerships such as the Regional Skills Partnership have affected partner agency involvement and reporting against progress

Equally examples of change to organisational roles and responsibilities have been reported as beneficial to achieving progress against actions, for example the Fuel Cells Technology Project (Action 15) transferring from the MEBC to the University of Birmingham which, in the view of the consultee, is better placed to develop and deliver the project. For different reasons the HTCs, Zones and WMRA report greater 'weight' in their position in the Region where it is identified in the new RES.

3.1.3 Evolving Partnerships

In 2004 the Action Plan identified lead partners and in many cases multiple lead partners for each Action. At that stage partners describe that levels of partnership working were lesser than they are now. Again the fact that the Action Plan and the approach was relatively new is seen as the reason for this. As the partnerships and working arrangements between lead partners have matured the approach to delivering actions has also grown. Partners report closer partnership working and more effective relationships that can withstand challenges and differing priorities more effectively. This is reflected in some self-assessments this year for example the Black Country and South Staffordshire Regeneration Zone reports progress being made as a result of formalising the roles of Urban Regeneration Company on the Zone Boards.

Streamlining of partnership arrangements has also been a positive change, for example the North Staffordshire Regeneration Zone now forms part of the North Staffordshire Regeneration Partnership and the Black Country North and Black Country South into the Black Country and South Staffordshire Regeneration Zone. Consultees from the High Technology Corridors, universities, Tourism West Midlands and the Agency all confirmed improved partnership arrangements thus verifying this as part of progress and self-assessment and as critical to successful delivery. The working arrangements of the Regional Skills Partnership are seen as key to achieving progress against actions within the skills remit, further demonstrating the impact upon achieving progress of working arrangements.

There is some evidence of lack of clarity about partnership working and engagement, for example in relation to Regional Assembly and the Regional Marketing Board where partnership arrangements have changed and the Assembly plays less of a key role now.

Partnership working and engagement at all levels was considered by lead partners as fundamental in terms of successful progress in Delivering Advantage. Strong partnership working with AWM at a strategic level was reported as influential at a regional level. It has

emerged from the consultations with lead partners that the levels/success of partnership working between the Agency and stakeholders at officer level was mixed – good relationships tending to be associated with positive progress, whilst more challenged or frequently changing relations is reported to impact more negatively upon progress.

3.1.4 Responding to Identified Limitations of the Actions

In most cases the original Priority Actions have either been completed, largely completed or (due to other factors) changed. Limitations of, and changes to, the actions and the Action Plan are inevitable over a four year period. Partners identifying the need for change indicated that generally this was discussed and agreed with the Agency as part of the natural delivery process. Within the self-assessment process, the need for change was identified along with the 'next steps' that now proposed (and against which partners would later self-asses). Therefore there is evidence as to how actions have changed and the reason why. Moreover, no actions have been left to 'wither' and lead partners and the Agency demonstrate a commitment to delivering and importantly growing the Actions to ensure on-going progress and delivery.

Actions completed

Action 32; Develop potential of the West Midlands canal network for rural development, urban regeneration and tourism, and

Action 33; Develop, implement and review the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy

Actions largely complete

Action 27; Co-ordinate the upgrading of ICT structure – resources, networks, data and applications to make broadband available to all businesses and 97% of the households in the Region. Coverage is achieved, the fixed term continuation project for maintenance/enquiries is all that remains to be completed, and

Action 36; Deliver the Regeneration Zones Initiative

Actions that have changed

Action 41; Promote the effective engagement of the Region's voluntary and community sector in regeneration activity and decision making. One of the lead partners – EMBRACE is no longer in existence as a result there is a need to address a particular aspect of the

action that is, “Launch a five year programme to support the engagement of black and minority ethnic communities in regeneration activity within the Region’s seven Neighbourhood Renewal areas.”

3.1.5 Meeting Agency Requirements

There are a number of instances whereby change has come about as a result of efforts to meet Agency requirements.

It is evident that there has been an increased focus on those projects and interventions that have strategic fit. Over the years the strategic nature of actions has been enhanced, and it has also been a focus of self-assessment to ensure strategic fit is maintained and/or developed. It is well understood by partners that strategic intervention is central to Agency funding and support; partners too emerge as being committed to strategic action. Where plans and strategies have been refreshed or updated, then strategic fit with *Delivering Advantage* and even more so now with *Connecting to Success* is a key consideration for partners in relation to their own monitoring processes and in relation to self-assessment.

There is some evidence of tensions regarding what 'fits' with the Agency's core business - transformational change and regeneration versus socio-economic activity. Some lead partners commented that there is now "recognition" within the Agency that socio-economic activity does have a place in the core business; worklessness has been cited as an example of this change. This impacts upon self-assessments where there is a view that interventions and activity in relation to an action are seen to be outside Agency business by Agency staff.

Evolution and delivery (whether in relation to individual projects or as part of a portfolio of projects) has been influenced by the output and spend requirements of the Agency at the point of project approval. Contractual arrangements between projects and AWM in the main stand alone from delivery vehicles such as High Technology Corridors. This results in a direct correlation between project delivery and outputs, for example the project to co-ordinate the upgrading of ICT infrastructure (Action 29) to provide broadband access in the Region and allowing delivery vehicles to focus upon strategic impact over and above project outputs – the HTCs focus upon strategic investment and transformational change sub-regionally with central co-ordination and management at a minimum (the central corridor has a core team of 4) and Regeneration Zones report restructuring and 'streamlining' to maximise impact with more strategically focussed teams.

There is evidence that the Action Plan through 'next steps' has changed in response to funding and resource requirements and processes. This has proved to both create tensions with some projects and improve the delivery of others. Tensions tend to arise where partners feel a lack of control or influence of changes and view them as detrimental to the project. It is to be expected that this generally applies to projects where funding has been reduced or ceased and/or outputs have changed or increased. However where partners have felt consulted or included in the decisions and therefore understand the reasons for change it has been a much smoother process. There are some examples where the status of the project has changed from standard project to strategic project. This has been applied to projects where the action is fundamental to the Strategy and the Region but the outputs do not align to Agency standard outputs. An example of this is Action 27; upgrading and availability of ICT infrastructure. Self-assessments do tend to reflect these changes, and as expected grades do too.

It can also be seen that actions have been shaped on account of common/shared evidence and data bases, whether this sharing is across partner agencies that make up the lead partnership or between partners and the Agency. Shared information between the Agency and partners is also reported to be a strength.

***Regeneration Zones** reported that more recently – and in response to the need to strengthen partnership working arrangements in the last 12 months – shared information has greatly assisted them with agreeing and delivering interventions.*

3.1.6 Practical Considerations

There is a perception amongst lead partners that initially progress was slow; they attributed this to the 'setting-up' required to move to delivery. By years 3 (06/07) and 4 (07/08) however partners generally felt progress had increased significantly. The self-assessments do indicate year-on-year progress over the entire 4-year period, but the increasing speed of progress is indicative of the need for the structure, relationships, working arrangements and reporting mechanisms to all be in place before significant change can happen. The consultations with lead partners also suggest that the Action Plan has been a framework for progress, and that their responsibility for actions has focussed them. As described in this report the positive light in which Connecting to Success is viewed demonstrates continued growth and commitment to the Region's regeneration and economic development and verifies partners' involvement with Delivering Advantage.

'Speed' of processes has been a particular factor impacting on actions. The grant approval processes – particularly in relation to 'size' of grant – has emerged as a key issue since the process is the same regardless of potential investment. Large scale investments such as Birmingham University, Regeneration Zones, High Technology Corridors have the same status as small scale projects, creating tensions amongst partners about processes and leading to the need to escalate up the 'management chain' at the Agency relatively minor process issues that become major blockages to approvals

Furthermore, in relation to Infrastructure and physical projects, there is concern that the reality of the time it takes to get 'on-site' is not always sufficiently understood or recognised. This can lead to negative perceptions and related publicity of regeneration vehicles.

3.2 Developments in Delivery Partners

Organisational changes that have resulted in the hand-over of an action from one body to another, or the involvement of a different or new partnership or organisation, is the main reason why there has been change in lead partners for various actions over the years.

Key changes are:

- Actions 1, 6 - Enterprise Network and Enterprise Board
- Action 15 - Business Council for Sustainable Development, Birmingham University and TIC
- Actions 17 – 25; Regional Skills Partnership
- Action 33 - Regional Housing Board and Housing Executive

Other changes have been relatively minor and in the main have been the result of personnel change or restructuring. Only where partners have felt uninformed or uninformed have any issues been raised.

The key message here is once again consistency. As described in this report the partnerships and work arrangements have greatly matured and to a large extent this is due to broadly having the same partners in place throughout the evolution of the Action Plan. This relates to partner organisations, project managers and the Agency.

3.3 Shaping Connecting to Success

A number of lessons can be learned from the experience of evolving and changing actions. The key lesson is that where there are multiple drivers of change and need for progress, then actions will be taken forward either through formal mechanisms or informal. However for this to be successful, there are some fundamental requirements:

- **Consistent working arrangements and relationships between partners and the Agency:** Change has usually occurred within the context of agreements between partners and Agency staff. At a strategic level it has been very effective, though operationally there are examples of frustration in relation to process and perceived 'bureaucracy'. However close working arrangements and good communications are directly connected to change and the evolution of the Action Plan.
- **Influence and input:** Where partners have been able to influence and have an input into change, whether in relation to an action or a particular activity/intervention, the level of positivity expressed increases exponentially. Where it is perceived that there hasn't been an opportunity to influence or input or communications haven't been fully effective partners expressed high levels of frustration. Both of these considerations were evident in self-assessment and how self-assessment was approached.
- **Connectivity and communication between strategic and operational:** As the actions have developed and changed a gap has emerged between change at the strategic level and change at the operational level. This is particularly in relation to partners and the Agency. Where decisions are made at a strategic level that then impact at the 'front-line' of a project it is important to communicate the 'golden-thread' that connects the two. There is some evidence of either actual detachment or perceived detachment which has the potential to be detrimental to the delivery of an action. As before, this is also apparent when discussing self-assessment and progress and influences partners accordingly.

Whilst change in the Action Plan is clearly evident, because it had not been formally reviewed until 2007 there is a perception amongst partners that it has existed for a while in a level of isolation both strategically and in terms of delivery. Notwithstanding this, feedback from partners including the Regeneration Zones, High Technology Corridors and the universities, reveals a perception that alignment between strategic documents including the Regional Economic Strategy and the Regional Spatial Strategy has improved. Additionally, there is a view that partnership working and governance arrangements have changed significantly over the past four years. There is a consensus

that such evolution is having a positive impact in the Region, particularly in relation to looking forward to the new RES.

The research revealed a degree of 'growth' in relation to key factors; these will leave a legacy from Delivering Advantage in terms of shaping and informing Connecting to Success. These include:

- **Effective partnerships:** Almost all lead partners consulted believed that working arrangements and styles both across partnerships with their own stakeholders and also with the Agency had greatly improved. Working relations are seen to have matured, leading to more effective joint working and offering significant potential for the future
- **Prioritisation:** The need to focus on selected priorities and avoid having too many priorities for any one action or intervention
- **Creating the 'right' conditions:** Progress has been made in terms of developing the conditions and infrastructures for delivering Connecting to Success over and above the impact of individual actions; this becomes the added value of the action plan. Greater levels of compromise between partners, understanding individual and shared agendas and innovative working have all emerged as positive themes.
- **Understanding limitations:** Recognising that there will inevitably be factors that support/constrain delivery of actions (see section 3.3).

4.0 Summary and Recommendations

4.1 Approaches to Self-Assessment

The research examined how partners approached self-assessment. It revealed that partners have taken a measured approach, in appreciation of the importance of self-assessment. It is understood that self-assessment is part of the annual reporting requirement, but partners also appreciate the value that the process brings (i.e. it provides an opportunity to reflect on progress, issues and therefore informs future developments/decisions). Similarly, there is awareness of the 'audience' for the self-assessment, and that potential implications regarding reporting progress adds focus on delivery and being able to verify this. The process of completing the self-assessment proformas varies. In some cases the lead partner consulted was involved with this, in a number of cases an officer or project lead has done it and in a minority of cases individual and personal views were used to inform the self-assessment.

It is significant that the Action Plan has evolved considerably over the four years since it was launched; there have been changes to both actions themselves and the lead partners involved. Partners report against the action as it has been in the previous year, rather than the original Action. There are some variations in relation to connectivity from one annual self assessment to the next annual self assessment. The majority of partners discuss their understanding of progress in relation to interventions and focus on 'next steps'. As well as being informed by the self-assessment process this is also informed by the other types of reporting and sources of evidence set out in this report. That is, monitoring by the Agency, regional mechanisms and independently commissioned evaluations.

The research revealed that on occasion partners are not reporting against standard Agency outputs, rather they are reporting on a range of other outcomes such as whether processes have been put in place, or if strategies and action plans have been developed and implemented. In line with the point above, types of reporting and monitoring vary, and are required for a range of purposes for different partners. This has impacted upon delivering actions where partners have multiple funding streams or activities at times creating tensions within projects. The research identified four different types of reporting:

- Project and activity monitoring and reporting.
- Impact upon a locality or target group.
- Sub-regional/regional strategic alignment.
- 'Fit'/impact with the Regional Economic Strategy.

Partners' roles in relation to actions has a direct influence upon the nature of progress reported. Typically where partners are part of the delivery vehicle for a project, reporting is focussed upon monitoring the project. However where partners are members of a partnership or steering group, for example Regeneration Zones or High Technology Corridors and are not a direct delivery vehicle reporting is more generic and tends to relate to overall strategic impact of the programme of activities that the partnership oversees.

In the majority of cases partners discuss progress from the perspective of their own agency, partner agencies and Advantage West Midlands. Their reflections upon progress relate and refer to the activity, input and influence partners have had on either specific actions or the Strategy as a whole. Partners' knowledge of the activity taking place and the changes in that activity over the four years verified their inclusion and involvement in progress. The extent and consistency of contact and involvement with Agency colleagues is described as an influence upon partners' capability to deliver against their actions and is seen as part of the self assessment process.

4.2 Verification of the Self Assessment

In relation to the reliability of self assessment and the implications for future reporting, themes have emerged regarding reporting processes and purposes. It is apparent that there are different interpretations of the purpose of progress reports ranging from reporting on project progress and project impact, reporting upon partner input or influence or reporting upon the Agency's involvement with the project or activity (though this is a minority). The amount of information provided also offers insight into the different ways in which partners view the purpose of progress reporting. Some responses are very detailed with a great deal of information while some are very brief with little detail.

It is also apparent that as project reporting is conducted directly between the organisation funded to deliver projects and the Agency, strategic partners have limited knowledge of project outputs and impact. Generally they only become aware of progress if the project reporting reveals issues that need to be addressed.

Partners base their self-assessment on a range of sources - reports produced for the Agency, regional/sub-regional partners or for their own internal consumption. The evidence base for self-assessments is influenced by Agency staff involvement and input into the projects/interventions in relation to approval and agreement by the Agency and the weight that this carries. The variety of sources of evidence reflects the diversity of the Actions, the lead partners and the delivery vehicles involved with *Delivering Advantage*. Partners cited evidence ranging from project reporting monthly and quarterly to the Agency

through to strategic sub-regional and regional strategies and action plans as part of their monitoring processes.

In terms of validating progress against the Strategy it is therefore necessary to be aware of the diversity of the material produced and its purpose. The sources upon which the self-assessments are drawn are believed to be credible, and where possible have been verified by an external source. There is too a certain quality to these sources that gives confidence to the self-assessments made by partners – i.e. the information contained within these reports we would expect to be traceable, e.g. outputs achieved, financial monitoring or whether the processes, strategies/action plans actually exist. There is also an ongoing, informal, verification of the evidence contained within many of the sources. Many projects refer to Agency staff having given approval to reports. This gives further confidence to the results of the self-assessment.

On account of partners using the self-assessment process for their own purposes, to achieve the desired progress against actions and to spur themselves/others on, also suggests that partners would want to use accurate evidence. Based on the discussions with partners, we are content that there is a rationale/logic behind the gradings arrived at by partners over the four years of reporting.

There are a number of actions which have multiple lead partners, each providing self-assessments of progress. The self-assessments often reveal different perspectives on an action, reflecting the involvement/role of the partners with the action; this can result in different gradings. However, on these occasions, the verification does support the grading from the perspective of the partner. Moreover, the aggregation of gradings from a group of partners to a final, overall, grading does have a smoothing effect, to give a summary view of the progress of the action.

Based on the above, the verification work does support the self-assessments of progress and gradings over the four years of delivery. And therefore the progress reports have been broadly accurate. The conclusions and recommendations that follow however, reflect on the process and approaches to self-assessment and suggest there are ways in which the process could be further improved.

4.3 Evolution of the Action Plan

As delivery has progressed against the actions set out in *Delivering Advantage*, significant change is evident from the first year to the latter years. Initially the focus was on setting up, or restructuring existing, arrangements in order to be in a position to deliver against actions. Latterly there have been subsequent restructures to fine-tune delivery arrangements as a result of lessons learnt during the life-time of the Strategy.

There is now a greatly increased focus and setting of priorities as a result of experience in delivering actions. There are views that *Delivering Advantage* was trying to do too much, therefore not sufficiently focussed and at times overly complicated. However partners report that progress has improved in the last two years as priorities have been honed. It is widely agreed that *Connecting to Success* is more focussed with clear priorities setting a clear direction for partners; this demonstrates lessons learnt during the last four years and increasing ability to deliver.

During the life-time of *Delivering Advantage* the strategic approach taken by the Agency is viewed as highly successful. At a strategic level, through senior management, there is evidence of strong, positive relationships where partners have been and are confident to challenge the Agency. This was reported in the majority of consultations and seen as key to benefit the Region. The Agency is seen as a partner and leader, a view which has also strengthened through the last four years and is seen as key to continued improvement.

The approach to and level of investment is also highly regarded. In relation to major investment schemes through Birmingham University, the Zones and the High Technology Corridors the Agency is believed to have been prepared to take risks with investment and to investment on a significant scale, this has meant that *Delivering Advantage* is seen as an ambitious framework for regeneration in the Region and has been a stepping stone to the new WMES and a lever for increasing investment.

There is evidence of lateral thinking in progress and reporting progress of *Delivering Advantage* at a strategic level but reflecting the view of a 'gap' which has affected progress it is believed that adhering excessively to processes can overwhelm delivery at the frontline.

Through the lifetime of *Delivering Advantage* the profile and role of the Agency is reported to have developed very positively and therefore helped progress against Actions. Strong relationships mean that partners feel able to make progress and report this. This is evidenced in reports published by partners. Partners believe that positive press has helped progress and negative press has hindered it. As a learning point for the future

positive reporting by projects and partners is seen as important to continue and build upon progress made.

Partnerships and agencies responsible for progress have changed to different degrees. The reasons for change include; transfer of responsibility of projects, restructuring arrangements to be more efficient and external factors such as changes in Government arrangements. Where partners are clear about the reasons for change and can influence it progress has not been disrupted however in a minority of cases where partners feel that they are not able to influence change it is felt that this has significantly impacted upon progress and the reporting reflects this.

Leadership was reported to have an influence on progress and strong leadership by the Agency is seen as key for the future. But 'churn' of staff at the Agency has inevitably been reported as having an impact upon progress. Partners recognise that this is difficult to manage but do cite it as being a key challenge.

4.4 Conclusions and Recommendations

A series of conclusions can be drawn from this research and, going forward, a number of lessons can be learned which should be used to inform the approach used to monitor progress against the new WMES, *Connecting to Success*.

Partners are willing to engage in reporting progress because they have a high level of buy-in to the economic strategy and the associated actions. In the main they understand that self-assessment is an important part of progress reporting. Significantly, introducing a self-assessment process has been a constructive way of encouraging partners to reflect on progress and consider future direction.

Continue the self-assessment approach: Undertaking at least an annual self-assessment of progress against the actions set out in the Strategy is seen to be a worthwhile and valuable process. This approach should therefore continue.

Strengthen the process: Those involved in progress reporting would welcome greater clarity about the process and how it relates to other, related, monitoring and reporting activity. The feedback loop in terms of feeding back the overall progress report to all those involved in the process could also be strengthened.

Partners, and projects, generate diverse information and evidence for different audiences and purposes. Though this is used to support the project and drive forward progress, it also raises the issue of streamlining information and monitoring mechanisms.

Rationalise and clarify reporting mechanisms: Related to the previous point, there is scope to rationalise and ensure greater consistency between a number of related monitoring and reporting process, of which WMES progress reporting is one. Partners would welcome involvement in work to rationalise/clarify reporting mechanisms.

Make more effective use of the information collected: The information collected through the monitoring process to be more effectively used. As mentioned previously, it could be better fed-back to improve activity on an ongoing basis. It could also be used more effectively as a way of identifying and collecting information about successes that help to boost the profile of the region.

Finally, partnership has been, and will continue to be, central to continued progress against the economic strategy. Partnership working has matured over the past four years and contact and communications between the Agency and partners has improved.

Continue a partnership approach: The Agency should continue to nurture and engage partners. An inclusive approach will ensure partners are responsive to the Region's agenda.

Annex One: Delivering Advantage Consultations

Delivering Advantage Consultations

| Action | Agency | Representative |
|--------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 | Minority Ethnic Business | Mohamed Nazir |
| 3 | ICT Steering Group | Michael Sterling |
| 7 | Social Enterprise Network | John Mawson Kevin Maton |
| 9 | Innovation & Technology Council | John Banyard |
| 11 | Three High Technology Partnership | Roger Dowthwaite Sharon Newport |
| 11* | Three High Technology Partnership | Michael Norris |
| 11* | Three High Technology Partnership | Alan White |
| 14 | GOWM | Chris Marsh |
| 15 | Business Council for Sustainable | David Middleton |
| 15 | University of Birmingham | Michael Sterling |
| 16 | Tourism West Midlands | Brian Summers |
| 22 | W M Higher Education Association | Helen Brown |
| 27 | W M Broadband Partnership | Helen Foster |
| 28 | WMRA | Olwen Dutton Danny Lamb |
| 36 | Regeneration Zone Boards | Bill Fryer Nigel Eason |
| 33 | WMRA Regional Housing Partnership | Emma Kiteley |

| | | |
|-----|--------------------------------------|--|
| 36 | Six Regeneration Zone Boards | Aktar Choudhury |
| 36* | Regeneration Zone Boards | Graham Edwards |
| 36* | Regeneration Zone Boards | Nigel Eason |
| 1 | Advantage West Midlands ¹ | Liz Broome Mike Goodhall Iain Neville Alison Lawson |

¹ In addition a range of other AWM colleagues were contacted to gather maximum information and evidence