

Agenda Item No. 9 (a)

WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Assembly Meeting – 5 April 2006

Advantage West Midlands Support for Rural Renaissance – Scrutiny Review Final Report

Report of the Panel

1. Purpose of Report

To present a copy of the recommendations arising from this scrutiny review to the full Assembly for information. The complete report and Advantage West Midlands' formal response can be accessed on the Assembly's website.

2. Recommendation

That the Assembly discuss and endorse the recommendations of the scrutiny report.

3. Background

3.1 The review aimed to examine:

- Advantage West Midlands' initiatives in relation to the Regional Economic Strategy
- how the needs of other areas including pockets of deprivation outside Market Towns and the RRZ will be addressed
- the interrelationship between economic and environmental and social goals
- and to contribute to how Advantage West Midlands addresses its new rural responsibilities

3.2 The evidence gathering stage of the review commenced in October 2005 and included sessions in each of the five County areas. Officers from Advantage West Midlands attended all sessions as observers. In total over 70 individuals participated in this aspect of the review process. The formal hearing with Advantage West Midlands was held on 18 November 2005.

3.3 The Review Panel was chaired by Cllr Claude Bodenham, WMLGA Rural Portfolio Holder with Elizabeth Newman, Association of Parish Councils, as Vice Chair. The Panel also included Rev Nick Read, WMRAF Chair and Malcolm Kimber, representing Rural Community Councils as co-opted members.

4. Report Recommendations

4.1 The Panel made nine strategic recommendations and eight improvement recommendations of a more specific or process related nature. The rationale for each recommendation is

discussed within the main body of the report. The strategic recommendations include one for the WMRAF (SR3) and one for DTI (SR8). WMRAF discussed and welcomed this recommendation at its last meeting held on 9 March 2006.

4.2 Strategic Recommendations

- SR1 That Advantage West Midlands, work with partners to ensure that the next revision of the Regional Economic Strategy identifies how social and environmental issues contribute to the achievement of sustainable economic development, and makes a clear unambiguous commitment to rural renaissance.
- SR2 That Advantage West Midlands involve partners in open discussions regarding the principals behind the successor programmes to the socio-economic schemes transferred from the Countryside Agency. The outcome of these discussions should then inform the forthcoming revision of the RES.
- SR3 That WMRAF facilitate a regional debate resulting in an agreement that a specified and independent body within the region should champion social issues within rural areas, and the development of a more holistic method of working.
- SR4 That Advantage West Midlands reappraise their approach to strategic working in respect of rural renaissance in particular how they discharge their role within the Rural Accord Group and their relationship with WMRAF. This should be clearly articulated within the next iteration of the RES.
- SR5 That Advantage West Midlands actively work with partners to implement the recommendations from the West Midlands Mid Wales Cross Border Issues: Framework for Action report and investigate how these can be applied to working with neighbouring English Regional Development Agencies.
- SR6 That Advantage West Midlands provide existing and prospective partners with clear information regarding its role, constraints and methods of working, and should clarify the relationship between economic development and wider regeneration goals. This should be completed by September 2006 in order to form part of the information circulated to partners to inform the option development stage of the RES revision.
- SR7 That Advantage West Midlands ensures that the evidence base for the revised Regional Economic Strategy to be completed by July 2006, includes an assessment of the impact of the Rural Regeneration Zone, Market Towns Initiative and other recent rural regeneration programmes in the West Midlands, which

informs how the Strategy addresses those regeneration needs as well as how other partners might contribute to regeneration goals.

- SR8 That the Department of Trade and Industry, as the sponsoring department for Regional Development Agencies, work with the National Audit Office and the Treasury to renegotiate a more realistic revenue capital split.
- SR9 That Advantage West Midlands works with partners to explore how existing and future small grants schemes can be easily accessed by rural businesses and that this is reflected in the continued development of the Business Support Mode to be implemented from April 2007.

4.3 Improvement Recommendations

- IR1 That Advantage West Midlands increase the number of staff within the current Rural Renaissance Team in order to assist in the development of the new areas of responsibility and to improve communications in respect of rural policy within the Agency.
- IR2 That Advantage West Midlands develop and consult widely on a rural proofing mechanism to be used during the development of options as part of the revision of the Regional Economic Strategy. This should include clear monitoring and reporting to regional partners including Rural Accord and WMRAF.
- IR3 That Advantage West Midlands work closely with Natural England to develop a co-ordinated approach to the development and delivery of the Regional Implementation Plan for the next Rural Development Programme.
- IR4 That Advantage West Midlands, as part of the current and any future restructuring process, draws on the knowledge and experience of existing staff and partners to provide and ensure a clear understanding of rural issues, organisations and current structures by staff transferred or appointed to work involving these areas.
- IR5 That Advantage West Midlands enables the Rural Board Member to have an increased level of engagement in regional and sub regional working with effect from September 2006.
- IR6 That the Midlands Way Steering Group ensures that rural issues form a key element within the revised plan for Smart Growth: the Midlands Way to be completed within the second quarter of 2006

IR7 That Advantage West Midlands examine the current process for approving projects and granting funding by December 2006 in order to identify efficiency improvements.

IR8 That clear monitoring arrangements are developed in respect of RRZ projects by September 2006

5. **Advantage West Midlands' Response**

5.1 A formal response to the recommendations has been received from Advantage West Midlands and is available on the Assembly website. In summary seven of the nine strategic recommendations have been accepted with the remaining two, SR3 and SR8, made for other organisations, being noted. Seven of the eight improvement recommendations were agreed with IR2, relating to rural proofing, not being agreed.

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