

WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Assembly Board of Directors

10 June 2009

**Regional Policy Partnerships' Activity for West Midlands Regional
Assembly**

Report of the Chief Executive

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update the Board on key issues undertaken by the Secretariat on behalf of the Board and Assembly Partnerships over the last quarter.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Board considers the report and **notes** progress made.

3. REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY (RSS)

- 3.1 Members will be aware that the Assembly, as the Regional Planning Body, is bringing forward the partial phased revision of the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy. In addition, ongoing work is being conducted in relation to RSS implementation, monitoring and conformity. Reports have been submitted to Assembly Members on a regular basis to update and inform them of the progress.

3.2 RSS Phase Two – See Agenda Item 9

3.3 RSS Phase Three – See Agenda Item 10

RSS Implementation

- 3.4 The Draft Implementation Plan was prepared to support the WMRSS Phase Two Revision submission to Government. In submitting this draft, it was always acknowledged that it would need further development and updating on an continual basis, particularly in time for the Examination in Public (EiP) in Spring 2009. To this end, a new RSS Implementation Group was established to oversee this work and, with the help of strategic authorities, a 'supplement' to the Draft

Implementation Plan was prepared (as reported to the last meeting of the Board). This 'supplement' has now been submitted to the EiP and, in practice, this is forming a useful framework and evidence base for advising the Panel on RSS implementation and infrastructure issues.

Conformity

- 3.5 The Regional Assembly has provided advice to Rugby Borough Council concerning a planning application submitted to them by Advantage West Midlands for a High Technology Park at Ansty. The site is located to the north east of Coventry and is designated as a Major Investment Site in the current WMRSS. However, in the WMRSS Phase 2 Revision Preferred Option the Assembly is promoting this site as a Regional Investment Site that can be occupied by multiple users with a clear focus on providing accommodation to facilitate the diversification and modernisation of the Region's economy. The site is well positioned to serve the Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire High Tech Corridor as well as the Coventry and Nuneaton Regeneration Zone.
- 3.6 The proposals also seek to increase the amount of developable floorspace within the boundary of the site so as to make more efficient use of the land available. In providing advice to Rugby Borough Council that the application is in accordance with the WMRSS and Phase 2 Revision, the Assembly's advice was subject to any planning consent having a condition or legal agreement attached to it to ensure that the detailed development of the site is controlled so that any office floorspace allowed is ancillary or clearly associated with the research and development and light industrial uses proposed. It is understood that rugby Borough Council has resolved to grant planning permission for this development.
- 3.7 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council has recently resolved to grant permission for the extension of the runway at Birmingham International Airport and the Secretary of State has confirmed that she does not wish to 'call in' the application for further consideration. In resolving to grant permission Solihull has specified that it will be subject to stringent conditions and mitigation. The proposal and the need for conditions and mitigation was something that the Assembly advised Solihull upon when the Council consulted on the application. The extension is clearly supported in the WMRSS (Policy T11).
- 3.8 Members of the Conformity Panel have endorsed advice presented to them that the Publication version of the Coventry Core Strategy Development Plan Document is in general conformity with West Midlands RSS. The Core Strategy also sets out the additional scale of growth associated for the city as proposed in the WMRSS Phase 2

Revision Preferred Option currently subject of the Examination in Public in Wolverhampton.

- 3.9 It should be noted that the Coventry is the first of the former Metropolitan Authorities to have reached this stage in the preparation of their Core Strategy.

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4. RURAL

West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum

- 4.1 The 30th Meeting of the West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum is being held on 11th June 2009 at Uttoxeter Racecourse under the new Chair, Bob Forster. Proposals for re-structuring/refocusing being prepared to ensure that it is fit for purpose within these very challenging times. The full proposal will be presented at Forum Meeting on 10 September with a period of consultation to follow. The outcome will be ratified in December and implementation early 2010.

Transitional arrangements

- 4.2 SNR: Continuing dialogue with Rose Poulter on matters rural and how to strengthen the transitional arrangements from a rural perspective.

RSS

- 4.3 RSS Phase Two: EIP “back-up” for Matters 2b, 3b and 4b with Jake Berriman and Dave Wallace. Assistance has also been offered to the WMRAF representatives for Sub-Regional Matters 8Eii (Warwick District) and 8H (Shropshire and Herefordshire).
- 4.4 RSS Phase Three: Final tweaks have been made to Draft Policy Options – Critical Rural Services and the preparation of the background Technical Report is nearing completion.

Rural Proofing

- 4.5 Following CRC Meeting with Gill Payne, Acting CEO, on 10 March, we were offered opportunity to use new Defra Rural Proofing Toolkit. Work has started – with seven out of the thirteen RSS Phase Three policy areas have been rural proofed to date.
- 4.6 Transforming places changing lives: Taking forward the regeneration framework – the Government’s response is disappointing in terms of targeting, resources and flexibilities. Mention is made of taking the

needs of rural areas into account when developing policies but little more.

Rural mainstreaming

- 4.7 RDPE in the West Midlands: We are hopeful that programme will start delivering very soon. Intermediaries – Business Link (pending), Lantra, Rural Hubs, Herefordshire Council all in place but await contracts from AWM. Meanwhile Axis 2 is awash with money for the next couple of years and the challenge will be encouraging take-up.
- 4.8 European Strategy Environment & Rural Group: Terms of reference have now been amended with mechanisms being put in place to challenge the work of this and the three other groups in respect of rural communities and rural areas.
- 4.9 The Rural Regeneration Zone Conference is being held at Ludlow Racecourse on Friday 02 July 2009

Cross Border working with Wales

- 4.10 On behalf of the West Midlands Regional Assembly and the Welsh Assembly Government, the Cross Border Strategic Forum Event was held in Newtown on 2nd April 2009. With over 100 people in attendance the Welsh Minister, Alun Ffred Jones, and Cllrs David Smith and Roger Phillips re-affirmed the commitment and support for the Memorandum. There was a strong contingent of Regional Assembly Members and we look forward to the publication of the Annual Report later this month.
- 4.11 Meanwhile the work of the thematic task groups continues and, in particular, the Offa's Dyke Regeneration Strategy Study is nearing completion. Together with the findings from the Forum Workshops, interviews with major stakeholders and local authorities up and down the border, and some 190 responses to the web questionnaire, the consultants have drafted an overarching framework for sustainable development. A series of further consultations is planned with zonal workshops being held in Abergavenny, Ludlow and Wrexham.
- 4.12 Additional funding has been secured from the Welsh Assembly Government and AWM to finance a Coordinator/Facilitator Officer post as support for the Memorandum of Understanding is still strong and work areas are continuing to develop. Recruitment, through secondment, is underway and it is hoped to have someone in post by 01 September.

4.13 With the end of the West Midlands Regional Assembly by 2010 and a new regional governance structure being put in place, we have begun looking at successor arrangements for the MoU.

4.14 The next Community, Town & Parish Council's Cross Border Meeting is scheduled for Monday 06 July in Herefordshire.

Trees, Woods & Forestry - Regional Forestry Framework

4.15 Monitoring and evaluation of the 2008-2009 Delivery Plan is underway. Additionally this year we have carried out a re-run of the Business Health Check that was completed last year, capturing the detail of the economic downturn and opportunities for increased intervention or support. The Annual Report 2008-2009 will be presented at the next Regional Woodland & Forestry Forum Meeting.

4.16 The "refresh" of the Regional Forestry Framework is in an early phase. Not only will it inform participants of its achievements in the last few years, and the current context for trees, woods and forests in the West Midlands but it is hoped that it will re-enthuse participants of the value of joint/partnership working to increase the profile of the trees, woods and forests sector.

4.17 The West Midlands Woodland and Forestry Forum meet next in Hereford on 01 July.

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5. HOUSING UPDATE

RSS Revision Phase 3 Public Consultation – Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople

5.1 Arrangements for the consultation stage of the RSS Phase 3 Review are currently being finalised, with the formal RSS Phase 3 consultation document to be officially launched on 29 June 2009. The consultation is about the number and distribution of new pitches required. Apart from those aspects of the process which will take into account of the views of Local Authorities, the settled community, and those of Travelling Showpeople, a series of sub-regional 'Focus Groups' are planned to engage the various Traveller communities across the Region. The consultation process is being supported with a range of awareness raising activities, for example, at the Gypsy and Traveller History Month events and distribution of an information leaflet / audio version of the consultation document. The consultation period will end on 14 August 2009. A Preferred Option for new RSS Policy on Gypsy and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople pitches is to be developed subsequently.

Gypsy and Traveller Site Grant Programme 09/10

- 5.2 As last year the Region has £2.5M allocated to contribute to the funding of new pitches provided by RSLs and Local Authorities. The deadline for bids in this 2009/10 round is 30 June 2009, with the Regional Housing Executive due to make recommendations to the Minister via the new Homes and Communities Agency in September, with an announcement on successful bids expected in October 2009.

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The Kick Start Partnership

- 5.3 The Kick Start Partnership administering an enhanced programme of private sector home improvement through equity loans and other financial products is lead by Birmingham City Council as accountable body on behalf of the local authorities in the Region. The Kick Start Partnership continues its roll out of the programme of expansion with new groupings of local authorities joining in order to improve the efficiency of service delivery. Whilst the current economic climate and the take over of HBoS by Lloyds' Banking Group has unfortunately led HBoS to withdraw their proposed private finance support to the equity loan model. The Partnership continues to deliver with its public funding and CLG are committed to its success and eventual roll out to other regions. In addition to this brief update, the Assembly Board have a separate activity report specifically on the HBoS decision.

Sub-Regional Housing Market Area Partnerships (HMAPs)

- 5.4 The HMAPs continue to meet on a regular basis and progress Regional Housing issues sub-regionally and locally. Key activities currently include early work around the development of sub-regional Housing strategies, updating the Strategic Housing Market Area Assessments (SHMAs) and engagement with Homelessness and Supporting People work. Recent changes of note include the first meeting of the re-formed joint Central Housing Market Area held on 21 May 2009, chaired by Kerry Bolister (Wolverhampton CC) and the intended introduction of an 'Affordable Housing delivery vehicle' by the South Housing Market Area Partnership.

European Funding for Energy Efficiency in Social Housing

- 5.5 Together with AWM, and a range of interested parties, the potential for European Regional Development Funds has been explored to finance energy efficiency investments in social housing, where economic benefit can be demonstrated. The National Housing Federation (NHF) and Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) have expressed firm support for ERDF funds being used within the social housing

arena, with a positive focus on 'Retrofit' measures to the existing social housing stock. This is an area in which ERDF funding could make a significance difference in terms of contributing to the low-carbon / climate change challenge for existing housing. Discussions are currently on-going, with recommendations to be presented to AWM for consideration in July 2009. This work complements the recently launched AWM / WMRA Low Carbon Housing: Developing a baseline for refurbishment in the West Midlands and also the work of the Sustainable Housing Action Programme (SHAP) 4 which is looking at 'Beyond Decent Homes' to share best practice in refurbishment work aimed at meeting climate change mitigation requirements.

Research Programme

5.6 The Regional Housing Executive has commissioned updating work to inform the RSS Phase 2 Public Examination, and in refreshing the joint shared evidence base (for the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Regional Housing Strategy) is putting in place some of the essential Regional Housing contribution to the forthcoming Regional Strategy. The following research commissions have been let so far:

- Most recent occupiers in new build housing, survey for 2005-2008 and written report;
- An update on Regional House Price changes and geographical analysis;
- Analysis of the implications for housing affordability in the West Midlands of the NHPAU's proposed housing supply range;
- Additional work to provide a regional overview of the Strategic Housing Market Assessments;
- Updated figures for affordable housing need using the 2006-based household projections;
- A literature review on the contribution of new housing development to the delivery of Urban Renaissance; and
- Development of a planning constraints and opportunities based Option for RSS 3.
- Credit Crunch implications for the housing market in the West Midlands Region. This commission is in two parts; a full report and a report specifically for the RSS Phase 2 Revision Examination in Public Panel (completed). The commission looked at impacts of the economic downturn on the West Midlands housing market up to February 2009, including an analysis of the potential long-term implications for the market under a range of potential scenarios for recovery. A seminar was held on 20th April at the Orange Studio, Birmingham, to share the report's initial findings and discuss how the work may be taken forward. Information was gathered from delegates on how they were responding to the change in economic

conditions. The full Credit Crunch report will be available early June 2009.

The following commissions have been signed off and are available http://www.wmra.gov.uk/Housing/Publications_Guidance_and_Research/Research_Programme_200810.aspx

- Affordability and Housing Supply - A review of the implications for the West Midlands of the National Housing and Planning Advice Unit recommendations.
- Analysis of Strategic Housing Market Assessments in the West Midlands: Stage 1 Technical Report.
- Housing demand and need in the West Midlands: 2009 revision to regional estimates for 2006 to 2026 April 2009.
- The Implications of the Economic Downturn for Regional Housing Targets (Credit Crunch Planning report).

Monitoring of the Regional Housing Pot

- 5.7 Lead LA Strategic Housing Officers will shortly be receiving a request from WMRA's Director of Policy to report on their use of the capital housing allocations they receive as part of the Regional Housing Pot. The Regional Housing Executive in its capacity as Regional Housing Board for the Region is required by CLG annually to monitor use of the Regional Housing Pot (RHP). CLG have also advised that short clear narrative alongside quantitative information is valuable to enable Ministers to have a clear understanding of the added value of the RHP resources to local authorities.

6. TRANSPORT Change Management Update –

- 6.1 See Agenda Item XX

Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS)

- 6.2 The RSS Phase 2 Examination in Public (EiP) continues with regional transport issues being considered on 27th and 28th May 2009 (the EiP concludes on 26th June 2009).

Regional Transport Priorities Action Plan (RTPAP)

- 6.3 On 11th May 2009 the Regional Minister announced the publication of nine detailed documents that set out the important short-term milestones that need to be achieved. The transport priorities' progress is being monitored by the shadow Joint Strategy and Investment Board (JSIB).

Regional Funding Advice (RFA)

- 6.4 Since the submission of the RFA a number of discussions have taken place with the Department for Transport (DfT) and key partners to discuss the RFA transport programme and specific issues (Selly Oak Relief Road and Wolverhampton Bus Station).
- 6.5 The DfT is expected to provide a response to the RFA before the Parliamentary recess in July 2009.

Delivering a Sustainable Transport System (DaSTS)

- 6.6 See Agenda Item XX

EU Connects

- 6.7 In May 2009 regional partners proposed two potential projects (Smarter Choices and Capacity Building) for funding from the European Union's (EU) Intelligent Energy Europe programme. Several partners from EU member states have shown an interest.
- 6.8 Dependent on partners' agreement this work may be taken forward later in June 2009.

Regional and Improvement Efficiency Partnerships (RIEPs) - DfT Funding

- 6.9 In April 2009 DfT informed RIEPs that a total of £1.8m funding has been set aside to enable all RIEPs to undertake work to support the improvement and efficiency of transport services. There is £0.2m available for the West Midlands.
- 6.10 The West Midlands RIEP is in the process of bidding for funds to support capacity building to develop major scheme business case, by improving the linkages between transport and land use planning and between the planning of transport and other services.
- 6.11 The proposal has to be made by 12 June 2009 and the DfT aims to make a decision and inform RIEPs by 31 July 2009.

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7. REGIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN

- 7.1 The West Midlands Regional Climate Change Action Plan was launched in January 2008. Progress on its 30 actions is continuing and progress reports has been presented to the Regional Minister. In respect of the specific Planning and Environment actions work has been completed on a report to scope out the potential to improve energy efficiency to reduce CO₂ emissions from existing housing stock.

- 7.2 A further action focuses on transportation and the Assembly have calculated the CO₂ emissions from the Region's transport schemes to support the Regional Funding Allocation (RFA) work.
- 7.3 A new Climate Change Adaptation Partnership has had its first meeting and it has published a report on Climate Change Adaptation in the West Midlands: A Framework for Progress.
- 7.4 Further work is proposed on developing a communications plan and increasing awareness and understanding of the implications of climate change based on the results of new national research on the impacts of a changing climate on the West Midlands. A joint project with Natural England and other partners is to promote the adaptation potential provided by green infrastructure in moderating the impacts of a changing climate on urban areas.

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8. QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT

- 8.1 Consultants have completed an update on the Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA). This spatial understanding of flood risk issues will incorporate the latest national guidance as well as the substantial regional and sub-regional flood risk work that has been undertaken since the original RFRA was published and the outcome of the Pitt Review. A presentation has taken place to the Regional Environment Group
- 8.2 Mott MacDonald have carried out a stage 1 Green Belt study to map the present state of the green belt within the West Midlands. This is the first stage of a process to consider how more positive uses of Green Belt could contribute to the achievement of the WMRSS and its aims for Urban and Rural Renaissance. A stage 2 Green belt study has been completed to investigate the positive uses of land around the conurbation and Stoke on Trent that will feed into the development of the RSS Phase 3 preferred option work
- 8.3 Treweek Consultants are working to carry out a Regional Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA). This will identify whether there is a 'likely significant effect' on any European sites arising from the WMRSS Phase Three Revision process. Where there is a 'Likely significant effect' and adverse effects cannot be excluded this assessment will identify the avoidance or mitigation measures required to avoid any adverse effects on site integrity. Further work on the existing RSS Phase Two HRA is complete and this has supported the Examination in public process and the development of a new policy: Safeguarding the

Integrity of European sites. in consultation with the statutory environmental bodies and the GOWM.

- 8.4 Consultants have been appointed by English Heritage to develop a draft of the Regional Historic Environment Strategy supported by the Assembly that will go out for public consultation in June 2009.
- 8.5 Work has been completed on guidance on enhancing biodiversity across the West Midlands prepared by a task group lead by Natural England and supported by the Assembly. Treweek Consulting were appointed in July to update the regional habitat targets and a regional seminar has been carried out with partners a final report draft regional habitats targets will be incorporated into the consultation draft of the RSS Phase Three .
- 8.6 RTAB are working with AWM to develop the first Waste Infrastructure programme in the Region which has set up a Waste Infrastructure Board. Consultation with local authorities and other agencies is continuing to develop a accelerated programme of new waste infrastructure facilities. RTAB has also been involved in preparing for the EIP and the submissions to the Panel.
- 8.7 An Environment working group has developed draft Policy Options for the RSS Phase Three public consultation for all the Quality of Environment topics, except waste policy which was considered in RSS Phase Two. Preparation of the examination statements for the cross cutting climate change polices and the regional waste strategy within RSS Phase Two has been completed and examined by the Panel.
- 8.8 The Regional Environment Group is proposing to respond to the Severn and Humber draft River Basin Management Plan consultations and input into the new Regional Landscape Partnership. The partnership is proposing to develop pilot Action Plans to take forward the requirements of the European Landscape Convention.
- 8.9 A European Life plus bid is being developed by a task group of the Biodiversity Partnership for submission in September 2009

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9. CULTURE

- 9.1 The Cultural element of Phase Three of the WMRSS revision is looking to identify the Region's most significant cultural assets, identify any strategic gaps in provision, establish priorities to address any shortfall

and identify policy approaches that could facilitate appropriate provision in the future.

- 9.2 We anticipate the cultural section of this revision will help to strengthen WMRSS policy to ensure development encapsulates cultural, sporting and tourism needs to support urban and rural renaissance.

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10. EUROPE

Bringing the Policy back in: May 14-15 2009 Birmingham University

- 10.1 This was a major international conference hosted by the European Research Institute at Birmingham University, linking academics, practitioners, and Brussels based policy thinkers. The conference looked at key issues facing the EU, with topics based on the West Midlands European Strategy priorities of the Single market Climate change, Social cohesion and Migration. The conference was attended by the EU Vice President Commissioner Margot Wallström; the speech to the conference dinner was given by Cllr Sir Albert Bore, Chair of the Regional Assembly's European Strategy Board.

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European examples of integrated strategy development

- 10.2 West Midlands in Europe are undertaking a piece of work for the Joint Strategy and Investment Board and the European Strategy Board examining best practice in integrated strategy development and delivery. Initial findings will be reported to the ESB in July and fuller findings to the JSIB in September.

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ERDF for Energy Efficiency in Social Housing

- 10.3 In a change of policy, and in its' response to the economic downturn, the European Commission has opened up European Regional Development funding eligibility to cover energy efficiency measures in social housing. Housing policy and European specialists are working with regional partners to develop a set of criteria to guide potential applicants for demonstrator projects.

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Committee of the Regions Automotive group

- 10.4 At the European level Chair of the European Strategy Board is taking the role of vice chair of a group of automotive industry regions - supported by Interreg and ERDF priority 4 funding bids.

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European Institute of Innovation and Technology

- 10.5 AWM continue to coordinate a bid for a Knowledge Innovation Community that would give the region the potential to act as a catalyst linking key climate change developments in the region with EU regions and cities in the same field, focussing particularly on domestic housing and transport.

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11. HEALTH

- 11.1 The next Health and Well-being Partnership meeting will take place on 2nd July 2009.
- 11.2 Among other things, the Partnership will consider the on-going development of the Action Plan to support the delivery of the Health and Well-Being Strategy.
- 11.3 A significant amount of activity is being undertaken to implement the Strategy in parallel to developing the Action Plan. One of the key focuses has been about inter-professional learning. Strategic discussions with key partners continue to be undertaken to further develop the Action Plan and increase ownership.
- 11.4 The next Excellence in Public Health conference on 9th June 2009 is focusing on Work, Wealth and Health. This will include a number of key note speeches including one from Ian Austin and Masterclass / workshop sessions, including a workshop session on supporting communities covering the impacts of the recession and the local responses. This will be led by Mark Barrow, Chief Executive of Newcastle-upon-Lyme and chair of the Regional Ministers Economic Task Force Workstream on Supporting Communities and Individuals.

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12. LIVING WELL

- 12.1 The figures for the various types of session – Physical Activity, Healthy Eating and Mental Health – have seen strong increases since the last quarter. The figures for the engagement of volunteers have also grown significantly (by 50). (Moreover, these figures are most likely to

be somewhat underestimated as projects have only reported against selected indicators, rather than on the whole of their activity). The headline outputs are:

- 2,370 physical activity sessions
- 1,100 mental wellbeing sessions
- 540 healthy eating sessions
- 490 professionals engaged in training activity
- 400 partner organisations contacted / engaged
- 150 volunteers recruited and / or trained
- 110 sessions relating to consultation / research and scoping activities
- 20 sites improved
- 9000 beneficiaries to date

12.2 It is clear that lessons generated by projects will add value at regional level if they are shared within a purposeful and supported framework. A sub group 'Living Well Workplace Health' meeting has already been formed and they have scheduled in networking meetings and are supporting the Workplace Health workshop at the forthcoming Work, Wealth and Health conference.

12.3 We are looking at the overarching issue of project sustainability and further developmental work will be carried out following the commissioning workshop we have planned, scheduled for the 5th of June. This will cover the areas of world class commissioning, joint strategic needs assessment, third sector baseline entry standard and partnerships and consortia.

12.4 The development of criteria for any re-allocation of any potential under spend funding has begun, the proposal is, that if any funding is available, that this is used to benefit the whole portfolio in terms of development, but the projects themselves lead on this development and bid for the funding accordingly.

12.5 Sir Clive Booths (Chair of the National Lottery) visit to Coventry Body and Mind on May 24th, gave us a great opportunity to highlight the need for community based initiatives around mental and physical wellbeing.

- 12.6 The Living Well Stoke on Trent Conference 'A Recipe for Wellbeing: Nutrition for Health and Happiness', on the 14th May focussed on the links between food and mental wellbeing and the commissioning workshops, and was a great success. There were over 200 participants ranging from Primary Care Trusts, Childrens Trusts through to members of the community.
- 12.7 Continuous planning for our two main events to be held later this year is gaining momentum. We have secured project involvement in the form of health checks for the Taste of Birmingham event from Coventry Body and Mind and SHINE in Solihull. We have also secured Sue Baker – Director of Time to Change and Karen Newbigging - Joint National Gender Equality and Women's Mental Health Lead from the University of Lancashire to speak at our annual conference in October this year. The Annual conference, entitled 'Mental Wellbeing and Commissioning', will be held on the 22nd October at the Centennial Centre. We are hoping to attract commissioners as well as representatives from all sectors to attend.

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13. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY (SOCIAL INCLUSION)

Staffing

- 13.1 Laird Ryan commenced his duties as Strategic Adviser (Equality and Diversity) on 30 March on a six month contract. Following interviews, Dally Panesar was appointed to the post of Policy Officer, also on a six month contract, and commenced her duties on 27 April.

Future Role of Partnership

- 13.2 Following a highly-productive facilitated workshop session on 19 March, discussions are proceeding to identify how partnership working in this field can make the best contribution to the West Midlands' post 2010 governance arrangements. Other key factors likely to influence how these arrangements would work include the Single Equalities Bill, now before Parliament, and the role of social inclusion in leading the West Midlands out of recession. A recommended way forward will be discussed at the next meeting of the Partnership on 11 June.

OPEN Project

- 13.3 OPEN is a partnership between the West Midlands, Marche (Italy), Aragon (Spain) and Sachsen (Germany). Marche are the lead partner. The overall project funding of €574,792, divided between the four partner regions, has been awarded under the European Commission's PROGRESS regime. It aims to promote debate on how best to tackle poverty and social exclusion make focused recommendations for the EU to take appropriate action. This will be achieved through a series of

themed seminars, based around the "OPEN" method of communication, in each of the partner regions over the next two years and disseminating the results of this to policymakers.

13.4 The project "kick-off" meeting took place in Birmingham on 28/29 April, at which the overall methodology was agreed and the partnership agreement signed. Between September and December 2009, the Assembly will organise 6 seminars on the following areas listed below. Each of the other partners will be organising a similar set of events in their own regions at the same time.

- Conditions, rights and protection of children
- Fighting human exploitation, particularly in the labour market
- Family policies and the right to decent housing for all
- New pathways to social and job inclusion for people with disabilities
- Actions to support tolerance and respect for immigrants and ethnic minorities and
- Health and long-term care for the elderly

13.5 To raise awareness for the seminar series, Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) will be organising a conference entitled "Everyone Matters in a Sustainable Community" to be held on 7 July at St Peter's Centre, Coventry. This free event will focus around the 6 OPEN seminar themes.

13.6 Between May and July 2010, a second round of seminars will focus on delivering the messages from the first round to politicians, senior decision-makers and the media. These will focus on social inclusion and social protection respectively. A wrap-up event will take place in Ancona, the capital of Marche region, at the end of 2010.

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