

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**Assembly Board of Directors  
3 December 2008**

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

**Report of the Chief Executive**

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**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To update the Assembly 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 Assembly 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.

**RSS Phase Two**

- 3.2 Covered separately under Item 8

**RSS Phase Three Revision**

- 3.3 The topics to be addressed in the Phase Three revisions of the Regional Spatial Strategy are Rural Services, Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople, Culture, Sport and Tourism, Environment and Minerals. The first stage of the revision process was the publication of

a Draft Project Plan for consultation in November 2007 which outlined the issues to be covered in the revision.

- 3.4 The second stage of the revision is the development of an Options document that will identify choices as to the nature and content of new or revised policies. Work on developing the draft Options consultation document is currently underway. At the Options stage new or revised policies are not fixed and everybody will have a chance to say what they think during the consultation period which will commence in July 2009. In the light of comments received during the Options consultation a Preferred Option will be developed which will then be submitted to the Secretary of State.
- 3.5 Under the proposed new operating arrangements of the Regional Assembly the Phase Three Options consultation document will need to be signed-off by the Assembly Board on 25<sup>th</sup> March. This will follow consideration of the first draft by the Regional Planning and Environment Executive on 30<sup>th</sup> January and the final draft on 4<sup>th</sup> March.
- 3.6 The timetable for progressing the Phase Three revisions following publication of the Options consultation document in July 2009 will be considered by the Assembly, GOWM and AWM shortly, following announcements on the Sub-National Review (SNR). The Assembly's intention is to ensure that the Phase Three revisions are not only completed but also to ensure that sufficient progress is made to enable a dovetailing of relevant issues with an emerging Single Integrated Regional Strategy (SIRS).

### **RSS Implementation**

- 3.7 In order to show that the RSS Preferred Option is deliverable, a draft Implementation Plan was prepared to support the WMRSS Phase Two Revision submission to Government. In submitting the Plan, it was always acknowledged that it would need to be further developed and updated on an on-going basis, particularly in time for the Examination in Public (EiP) in Spring 2009. To this end, a new RSS Implementation Group has been established to oversee this work and to ensure that the Assembly is able to present a clear case at the EiP. In practice, individual sub-regions have now been asked to prepare Sub-regional Implementation Frameworks by the end of year, not only updating the infrastructure needs of their areas, but also demonstrating that mechanisms are in place to ensure effective delivery. Whilst assisting the EiP, if successful, it is hoped that this will

also provide a clearer basis for considering regional and sub-regional investment priorities in a more integrated way on an on-going basis.”

### **Conformity**

- 3.8 Details of decisions made by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in respect of three Public Local Inquiries that were held in the summer of 2007 have been brought to the attention of the Assembly’s Secretariat. Three Public Inquiries resulted from appeals made to a number of planning applications that were either refused or not determined by South Staffordshire District Council (SSDC). All of these proposed significant amounts of new housing outside of the Black Country MUA.
- 3.9 When the applications were initially submitted in 2006/7, SSDC consulted the Assembly as they were all classified as regionally significant planning applications. In line with our Protocols, the Regional Conformity Advisor for Staffordshire presented Assembly Members with advice on the general conformity of the proposals with the WMRSS, which were duly accepted as the basis for the Assembly’s response back to SSDC.
- 3.10 The Sec of State’s decision to dismiss the all appeals and refuse planning permission partly on the basis of harm and conflict the policies and objectives of the WMRSS with regard to assisting the urban renaissance of the Black Country MUA is a firm endorsement of the WMRSS and the Assembly’s conformity advice. The refusal of the proposals will restrict significant new peripheral housing development that could attract out-migration from the Black Country.

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## **4. RURAL**

### **West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum**

- 4.1 Over 100 delegates at the sixth annual West Midlands Rural Affairs Conference, held in Bromsgrove, came together to debate the future of the region and to share examples of this year's significant achievements. Discussions at the Conference were led by local BBC Radio presenter Eric Smith and a keynote speech was made by Nick Paul Chairman of Advantage West Midlands. WMRAF Vice-Chairs, Alison McLean Board Member of The Commission for Rural Communities and David Collier Regional Director of the National Farmers' Union helped to direct the day.

### **Rural Proofing**

- 4.2 Work is ongoing to produce a Rural Disadvantage Indicator that will help to produce the most effective statistics to help with the monitoring of the WMES Delivery Framework. AWM has prepared a tender brief to progress this work further.
- 4.3 Rural proofing of WMRSS Phase Three is underway with representation on the WMRSS co-ordination Group and is involving the help of WMRAF and the Rural Renaissance Working Group (RRWG). The technical work for Critical Rural Services has been largely completed and options are being drafted. The next RRWG Meeting is scheduled for 19 January 2009.

### **Rural mainstreaming and WMRAF Sub Group organisation changes**

- 4.4 Mainstream approaches enabling more effective rural proofing have been adopted. The terms of reference for the West Midlands Rural Business and Economy Group have therefore been updated to include Local Authority representation. Currently there are two WMRA/WMLGA representatives, but no active Local Authority members and therefore no direct engagement with sub-regions; this will be kept under review
- 4.5 The new West Midlands European Strategy established a single agenda for the region with new priorities and structures. The European Strategy Environment and Rural Group's terms of reference have been developed and updated and the rural rationale strengthened. The work programme is being developed and rural mainstreaming features across the European strategy.

### **Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)/Leader**

- 4.6 The Rural Enterprise Grant and the Strategic Investment Grant were launched in October in North Shropshire. The Rural Enterprise Grant is being administered by Herefordshire Council. They have received 102 enquires in the first 2 weeks of operation, although already they are seeing the affects of the credit crunch with businesses finding it difficult to match fund the grants available.

The larger Strategic Investment Grant has three main strands:

- Fruit and vegetable processing
- Livestock processing
- Collaborative grain storage

A fourth strand is being considered around resource efficiency - wood fuel and winter water harvesting. Packages of advice, training, facilitation support and marketing activity will be run by specialist delivery partners such as Business Link.

- 4.7 With regards to Axis 2 funds, money from the £38 million budget for this year is still available. Natural England is calling for good quality Higher Level Scheme and Capital projects to come forward. Environmental Stewardship is to be revamped in 2010. Meanwhile there has been good commitment under all England Woodland Grant Schemes with significant increase in woodland creation take-up.
- 4.8 LEADER - All Local Action Groups are developing their Local Development Strategies. Each has been offered RDPE funding to assist with the capacity to develop the strategies with older groups helping new. 8 Groups with a total of £10.22m are being funded.

#### **Cross Border working with Wales**

- 4.9 A meeting of the Cross Border Strategic Sub Group took place on 17<sup>th</sup> October reviewing progress to date. Additional funding is actively being sourced to finance a Co-ordinator/Facilitator Officer post as support for the Memorandum of Understanding is still strong and work areas are continuing to develop.
- 4.10 The Town & Parish Councils Event was held in Knighton with health and transport featuring high on the agenda. Elsewhere, the consultation response to the Mid Wales Draft Regional Transport Plan has been submitted. The Health and Social Care Group continue their robust work on the health agenda and are currently awaiting the final report from the House of Commons' Welsh Affairs Select Committee on cross border public services. The Environmental Group are identifying and prioritising the main issues of concern which will enable their work programme to be developed. A soundbite-style newsletter is being developed as a communication mechanism to feed back the work of the Cross Border Groups.
- 4.11 The next Strategic Forum is being planned for March 2009 - open to everyone, both representatives of those organisations that have signed up to the Memorandum and those who have yet to do so.

#### **Trees, Woods & Forestry - Regional Forestry Framework**

- 4.12 Now well into the fourth year of implementation the Regional Forestry Framework is scheduled to be reviewed and refreshed in 2009. With

the imminent launch of the England Trees, Woods & Forests Strategy Delivery Plan 2008-2012, it means that we will have the opportunity to align our thinking with the national and other regional priorities.

- 4.13 The West Midlands Woodland and Forestry Forum met in Ludlow on Wednesday 19 November.

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## **5. HOUSING**

### **Regional Funding Advice (RFA)**

- 5.1 WMRA's housing team has been working with AWM, the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships to formulate advice to HM Treasury, in relation to the Region's long-term investment priorities for elements of transport, housing, regeneration, skills and economic development in order to support economic growth. To ensure robust housing input, WMRA's housing team is working through the Sub-Regional Housing Market Area Partnerships to identify key programmes and schemes for future development. This information is currently being collated and will be reviewed in relation to the priorities identified by the other policy areas. The deadline for the submission of final advice to Government is February 2009.

### **Housing Sector Response to the 'Credit-Crunch'**

- 5.2 In response to the changing housing market conditions, the National Housing Federation (NHF), in partnership with the Housing Corporation and WMRA's housing team have held two cross-sectoral meetings in the WM Region. These have explored how the market can be supported to allow the delivery of new homes to continue throughout the economic downturn. An Action Plan is being produced and a commitment made by all partners, to ensure that a 'Regional dialogue' is maintained, to enable organisations in the Region to respond to opportunities as they arise.

### **RSS Revision Phase 2: Examination in Public**

- 5.3 WMRA's housing team has been involved in the general preparatory work being undertaken by the Regional Planning Body (RPB) for the Phase 2 EiP. A joint meeting of the Regional Housing Executive (RHE) and Regional Planning Executive was held on 18 November 2008, at which the formulation of an Assembly response to the Nathaniel Lichfield Partnership report was discussed. Valuable comments from a housing perspective were made by both former Regional Housing Partnership members (now known as the Strategic

Advisory Panel) and RHE members and these, along with other comments will be used to shape the final version of the response to the NLP study.

### **RSS Revision Phase 3: Provision of sites for Gypsy and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople**

- 5.4 WMRA's housing team has continued to progress the Gypsy and Travellers element of the Phase 3 Revision process and is currently undertaking work in relation to the development of potential Options for the accommodation of additional pitches. Government advice suggests that a range of Options should be considered for public consultation and further technical work and advice from the Section 4 (4) authorities and RSS Gypsy and Travellers Reference Group will be sought to enable Options to be worked-up. Communication aspects of the Gypsy and Travellers Review are also being currently discussed and work to raise awareness of the Gypsy and Travellers Review, in advance of the consultation period being undertaken, for example the production of an 'info-leaflet' for distribution to local authority sites.

### **Gypsy & Traveller Site Grant Programme – Bidding Round 2008-2009:**

- 5.5 The Regional Housing Executive met on 25 September 2008 and received the seven bids submitted by local authorities and an RSL from within the Region. The Executive reviewed the bids from a Regional perspective and in light of the appraisal undertaken by CLGs consultant's and was able to identify bids for support. Consequently, the Assembly submitted advice to the Minister on 30 October 2008, which if agreed would see the total allocation to the West Midlands (£2.5m) for the 2008-2009 period, being utilised.

### **Regional Gypsy & Traveller Seminar**

- 5.6 WMRA's housing team, in conjunction with GOWM held a Regional Seminar on 20 November 2008, to provide support to local authorities on the delivery of sites for Gypsy & Travellers and Travelling Showpeople. The Seminar programme featured presentations from CLGs Gypsy & Traveller Unit (GTU) and Royal Vale BC, which has been identified as an example of good practice, in terms of successfully tackling barriers to site delivery.

### **Regional Housing Research Programme**

- 5.7 WMRA's housing team has been working to move forward the refresh of the shared evidence base (RSS and RHS), with the following research commissions having been progressed to date:
- Most recent occupiers in new build housing. A field survey for 2005-2008
  - Credit Crunch implications for the West Midlands and for the long term implications for recovery
  - A Regional overview assessment of various affordable housing estimates in preparation for the RSS 2 Examination in Public next April – June 2009.
  - Development of a planning constraints and opportunities based option for the RSS 3.
  - An update on Regional House Price change and analysis.

### **Capital Allocations to Local Authorities: Kick Start Partnership**

- 5.8 WMRA's housing team continues to work closely with the Kick Start Partnership, in moving towards securing its Delivery Plan aims. Immediate priorities for the remainder of the 0809 period include finalising the details of the private finance agreement (which will fund affordable equity share loans from April 2009) and providing guidance and support to those authorities who are planning to join the Partnership in the next 2-3 years.

### **Existing Homes Retrofit Workshop**

- 5.9 As part of their input into the West Midlands Regional Climate Change Action Plan, WMRA's secretariat and AWM have commissioned an important project to assess the current level of refurbishment in existing housing (social and private sector), assess the impact on CO<sub>2</sub> reduction; and recommend how the Region can support households, housing managers and industry in meeting the challenges of regional carbon reduction targets. Initial findings from this Regional assessment will be presented at a workshop on 4 December 2008.

### **Regional Affordable Housing Group (RAHG)**

- 5.10 The Regional Affordable Housing Group has been re-formed, with a successful first meeting of RAHG being held on 22 September 2008, which was well attended by officers from local authorities, RSLs and other housing agencies such as the National Housing Federation (NHF). RAHG identified a number of key issues for the short-term (e.g. future of intermediate rented market, waiting list trends, data on migration trends, links between homelessness and worklessness, best practice in community involvement in CPO) that are likely to be taken

forward on a 'task & finish' group basis, with a second RAHG meeting is planned for early December 2008.

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## **6. TRANSPORT**

### **Regional Spatial Strategy**

- 6.1 Preparation for the RSS Phase 2 Examination in Public continues, including consideration of the potential implications of housing growth on transport and preparation for the Examination in Public next year.

### **Transport Challenge- Regional Transport Priorities Action Plan**

- 6.2 The Regional Transport Priorities Action Plan will be launched by the Regional Minister on 15<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

- 6.3 The Assembly, AWM and the RTP Chair have provided the strategic lead for developing the Action Plan, working in close cooperation with a wide range of partners and stakeholders from across the region.

- 6.4 This work provides the information required to map out how the priorities can be sequenced for delivery. The Action Plan will identify the key actions that need to be progressed over the next 12-24 months.

### **Regional Funding Advice (RFA)**

- 6.5 The Regional Transport Partnership will consider the emerging transport advice at a 'special' meeting with Local Authority Cabinet leads on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2008 and provide input to the broader RFA process and the Joint Strategy and Investment Board.

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## **7. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN**

- 7.1 The West Midlands Regional Climate Change Action Plan was launched last January. One of its 30 actions is to scope out the potential to improve energy efficiency to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from existing housing stock. This is important as while environmental standards are improving in new build developments, a significant challenge remains with regards to the existing housing stock. The Assembly in partnership with AWM commissioned in August Faithful+Gould to undertake a baseline study on the existing housing stock, in terms of current funding streams and the resulting outcomes. The report will be available in February with a launch event in March 2009.

- 7.2 A further action focuses on transportation and the Assembly will be commissioning a study on how to move towards a more sustainable low-carbon transport system in October. This is a priority area as there is an upward trend in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the transport sector.
- 7.3 A report on climate change issues was received by the Regional Minister and a regional; seminar on climate change is planned for early 2009

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**8. QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

- 8.1 Halcrow Consultants have been to carry out 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 draft report has now been received and following consultation with the Environment Agency will be finalised .
- 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 now been commissioned to investigate the positive uses of land around the conurbation and Stoke on Trent. A key part of the work will be engagement with local authority partners in developing the approach.
- 8.3 Treweek Consultants are working with URSUS to carry out a Regional Habitat Regulations Assessment. 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 also being carried forward to support the Examination in public process.
- 8.4 Consultants have been appointed by English Heritage to develop a draft of the Regional Historic Environment Strategy supported by the Assembly.
- 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.

- 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.
- 8.7 A 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 will begin soon on the examination statements for the cross cutting climate change policies and the regional waste strategy within RSS Phase Two.

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## 9. CULTURE

### Culture Update

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.

Detailed work on the development of 'Options' is now underway and over the coming weeks we will be looking to ensure appropriate input from the region's cultural sector. Consultation on the Options will take place next year.

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.

Early work to ensure culture is fully embedded within a new Single Integrated Strategy is also underway.

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## 10. EUROPE

- 10.1 During October and November we have completed our application for Euros 1.5m to AWM which will enable the EU Connects team to cover more funds and help partner across the region access them, the outcome of which is expected at the beginning of December

- 10.2 The Chief Exec took part in an ITV News broadcast to publicise the EU Connects Service
- 10.3 The four priority groups of the European Strategy continued to develop their work plans
- 10.4 We welcomed Silvia Tomescu a Romanian fast track civil servant to the RPC for 4 months to work specifically on an ESF transnational project involving training services for offenders, and to support the social cohesion group in it's policy development activities.

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**11. LIVING WELL**

- 11.1 The first Annual Conference of Living Well West Midlands was attended by more than 170 delegates from across the region. During the day delegates had the opportunity to provide their thoughts and feedback on what will be needed to continue work in the three key areas of the portfolio – physical activity, healthy eating and mental well-being – and what the delegates believed would be the key priorities to be addressed as we move into the future.
- 11.2 Consultation by commissioning bodies before projects and programmes were devised and launched was an area that many delegates felt was important. Indeed, ensuring commissioners know about community ill health prevention initiatives' and considered bringing them into mainstream delivery was vital for future sustainability. It was recognised that services should be available at the point of need and that a robust evidence base be in place to support the need for projects or programmes. Many delegates also believed that PCTs in particular would need to be more flexible when working with the local community sector.
- 11.3 Another priority identified as vital for taking projects forward beyond the two years of this portfolio, and indeed for any new projects in the future, would be the need to establish multi-sectorial partnerships. Telford & Wrekin's project, Women In Motion, explained during their presentation just how important partnerships had become to the success of their project so far and how establishing these partnerships at the beginning would play an important role in securing sustainability.
- 11.4 "The theme that seemed evident throughout all of the feedback that we received from delegates, during both the round table discussions

and the workshops, was that there is a need for shared solutions and that groups be it, PCTs, Local Authorities,

11.5 Third Sector Voluntary organisations and even the government, need to be working together to find the solutions to the problems we face going into the future," said Paul Winterbottom, Director of Living Well West Midlands.

11.6 This Conference provided a great opportunity to bring people who are involved in decision making together with those who deliver projects on the ground to discuss the issues facing us in the coming years.

## **12. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY (SOCIAL INCLUSION)**

12.1 The Partnership met on 23<sup>rd</sup> June and 16<sup>th</sup> September, the agendas, minutes and related papers for these meetings can be found at [www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities](http://www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities). It is due to meet next on 4<sup>th</sup> December.

12.2 The Partnership continues to work on the following items:

- Regional Minister's 'Equalities Challenge' with GOWM and EHRC;
- Social Capital Equality and Diversity Programme (SCED) – supporting a Voluntary Community Services (VCS) related event which will be hosted by RAWM and SWM to take place early in the new year; second annual SCED conference being planned for Spring 2009;
- Preparing to work with the Economic Inclusion Panel and the Regional Transport Partnership commissions to undertake some work to address the wider implications of demographic change within the region;
- Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Partnership's advisory role and capacity building in the region;
- Working with the WM Regional Late Life Forum address worklessness in later life;
- Hosting a number of events with EHRC, GOWM and AWM, on the following matters, religion and beliefs (with WMFF), disability (with RDN), Muslim women, and the Equalities Bill;
- Continue to promote the social agendas with WRSS Phases 2 and 3;
- Providing support on the WMES Delivery Framework;
- Acts as an advisory body to West Midlands Economic Inclusion Panel on equality and diversity issues – several of the Partnership members have seats on the Panel;
- Acts as an advisory body to AWM in delivering its Equality and Diversity Action Plan;

- England Volunteering Development Council: West Midlands (EVDC) working on the impact of volunteering with LAs, business and the economy in the West Midlands through NI6 and LAAs;
- Community Empowerment, Cohesion and Equalities Programme – members sit on the Programme’s Advisory Body ;
  - Local Authorities in capacity building and peer reviews with District Councils to raise the Equality Standard of Local Authorities to at least Level 3, as well as the on-going work with the CAA; and
- With the European Social Cohesion Group, whose Chair is a member of the Partnership.

12.3 Further details of on-going work can be found in the Equality and Diversity Partnership Action Plan.

12.4 The Equality and Diversity Partnership continues to contribute to the GHK Partnerships Review and is focused on securing its future in the light of forthcoming end of its present Director’s post.

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