

**STRATEGIC REVIEW GROUP – 5 APRIL 2006**  
**ACTION NOTES**

**Attendance**

Valerie Broom (Chair)	Other Stakeholders Group
Cllr Philip Atkins	Staffordshire Council County
Cllr David Beechey	Bridgnorth District Council
Cllr Mrs Margaret Begg	Warwick District Council
Cllr Terry Dix	Staffordshire County Council
Cllr Mrs Jo Jones	Shrewsbury and Atcham Borough Council
Fraser Mitchell	West Midlands Business Council
Chris Newis	West Midlands Business Council
Steve Mullaney	Advantage West Midlands (associate member)
Dagmar Waller	Strategic Review Officer - WMRA
David Clarke	Policy Officer – WMLGA/WMRA
Daryl Davies	Senior Regional Support Officer – WMLGA/WMRA

**Apologies**

Cllr Brian Douglas-Maull (Walsall MBC), Cllr Steve Eling (Sandwell MBC), Rev John Hall (Other Stakeholders Group) and Nic Cole (Government Office for the West Midlands - associate member).

During the course of the meeting, the Panel were advised that Cllr Mick Salih (Stoke on Trent City Council) had resigned from the Group. Cllr Terry Dix advised officers to seek a replacement from the Labour Group.

1. **Notes from meeting held 31 January 2006 and Matters Arising**

*Notes of last meeting*

The notes of the meeting held on 31 January 2006 were **approved**.

*Matters Arising*

None.

**Items for Decision**

2. **Selection of Vice-Chair**

Cllr Philip Atkins (Staffordshire Council County) was **appointed** as Vice-Chair of the Strategic Review Group.

3. **Programme of Future Reviews/Independent Performance Assessment**

The Group was informed of two key areas of work which would significantly impact on the planned reviews and their anticipated timescales.

The current review programme was due for completion by the end of August 2006. The selected topics - Regeneration Zones Revisited, Clusters, Advantage West Midlands Support for the Skills Agenda and the Region's Relationship with Europe were briefly detailed in the report.

(i) **Review of the Regional Economic Strategy**

AWM was leading the revision of the Regional Economic Strategy.

The first stage of which was developing a comprehensive evidence base and it was expected that the outcomes of completed scrutiny activities would inform this. A summary of the evidence base which would be created from work around five themes was set out in Appendix 1 of the report.

The Group had agreed at its last meeting that the 'Regeneration Zone Revisited' review would continue as planned and the other scrutiny reviews would be delayed in order to benefit from the evidence base currently being developed.

In addition, AWM had offered the group the opportunity to be involved in the development of the project briefs for the evidence base. Concerns were expressed that a direct involvement might compromise the independence of the scrutiny function. The project briefs were circulated to the Assembly Policy Team including the Strategic Review Officer and a combined response submitted to AWM.

(ii) **Independent Performance Assessment (IPA)**

The original timescale for AWM's assessment was set out in paragraph 5.2 of the report. Steve Mullaney (AWM) advised the Group that this had been revised to enable the National Audit Office to complete their on site work prior to Christmas 2006.

Indications from the IPA's currently underway were that Assemblies should play an important role in the self-assessment process. It was therefore proposed that officers explore ways in which the Assembly could assist in the preparation of the self assessment.

During discussion, it was suggested that the WMLGA Peer Assessors would be ideally placed to support this process. In addition, there was a need to engage with stakeholders around IPA and an event, facilitated by the Assembly, was suggested. Steve Mullaney restated the Agency's wish to have the Assembly play a full part in this process, recognising that it would not prejudice its direct role with the National Audit Office. A report would be presented to the next Strategic Review Group meeting detailing options for Assembly activity.

As a result the Group **agreed** that:

- i) the timing of planned reviews be amended as follows:
  - European - Strategic Review commence June 2006
  - conclude November 2006
  - report to WMRA Jan 2007

Clusters – Scrutiny Review	commence Feb 2007 conclude May 2007 report to WMRA July 2007
Skills – Scrutiny Review	commence July 2007 conclude Nov 2007 report to WMRA Jan 2008

- ii) scrutiny perspectives on the RES review be incorporated into a wider Assembly involvement; and that
- iii) the Assembly, through its scrutiny function, actively support Advantage West Midlands in the production of the self-assessment element of Independent Performance Assessment (IPA).

#### 4. **Scrutiny and Sustainable Development**

##### 4.1 **Promoting Sustainable Development through Scrutiny**

The Group considered a report which examined the extent to which regional scrutiny had applied the recommendations of the English Regions' Network's (ERN's) "Promoting Sustainable Development Through Regional Scrutiny" report. A copy of is available at [www.ern.gov.uk/page.asp?id=14](http://www.ern.gov.uk/page.asp?id=14)

It could be seen in Appendix A of the report, that reviews had incorporated a number of processes including inviting contributions from SD stakeholders (particularly SWM). In addition, a process to monitor the implementation of recommendations was also being developed.

On the other hand, Scrutiny Panels do not identify "crunch" issues, research briefs do not specifically mention SD, report recommendations that were important for SD were not reported to SWM as a matter of course, and Member training does not include an SD element. Also, scrutiny panels do not include an "SD Champion" as a matter of course. Following informal advice from SWM, it is not recommended that scrutiny panels adopt the "SD champion" approach as this encouraged the belief that SD was "someone else's responsibility".

It is suggested that in future reviews SRG should adopt, where appropriate, the following recommendations:

- "Crunch" issues – where there is a clear potential conflict between economic, social and environmental issues – should be the focus of selected future reviews.
- That there be a balance of future reviews examining not only policy development, but also implementation.
- Future research briefs should mention SD, or at least cross-check the policies / programmes under review against the RSDF checklist.

- In future, case studies or visits should be selected that represent “typical” rather than “exceptional” practice. Beacons of good SD practice should only be chosen as an illustration of what can be achieved, or as a contrast to standard practice.
- SWM ought to be informed of any review recommendations that are important to SD.
- SWM be requested to consider how SD training could be provided for SRG Members.
- When inviting stakeholder submissions to reviews, that it be made clear what is meant by the term SD.

CAG also considered the usefulness of “dedicated” SD reviews. CAG’s suggestions were summarised in Appendix B for information but, given the dedicated 2003/04 review, a further dedicated SD review in the foreseeable future was not envisaged.

The Group agreed to:

- (i) **note** the extent to which regional scrutiny in the West Midlands has applied the ERN’s recommendations relating to sustainable development, and
- (ii) **adopt**, where appropriate, the recommendations outlined in paragraph 3.7 of the report in future reviews.

#### 4.2 **SRG Contribution to Sustainable Development**

A draft submission for Sustainability West Midlands (SWM), indicating the extent to which the Scrutiny and Strategic Review process had embraced the principles of, and contributed to, sustainable development in the current financial year was considered. SWM will prepare an overall analysis of reports from all Assembly Partnerships for submission to the Assembly AGM.

Particularly attention was drawn to the potential conflicts that may make achieving sustainable outcomes more difficult:

- Although Regional Assemblies have statutory responsibilities to scrutinise RDA’s Economic Strategies, they have limited power and resources and must rely on the ability to influence the RDA.
- RDA’s are under pressure to maximise economic growth. However, SD requires a balance between economic, social and environmental objectives.

The Group **supported** the attached draft response; any additional feedback was requested by no later than 23<sup>rd</sup> May.

#### 4.3 **Regional Sustainable Development**

The Group considered a response to the draft Regional Sustainability Development Framework (RSDF).

A draft RSDF had been prepared for consultation by Sustainability West Midlands (SWM), the Assembly’s advisory partnership on sustainability issues. The framework defines sustainable development, and sets out the region’s SD objectives. Its aim is to help people that develop, review and implement strategies, policies

and plans it ensure that their work contributes towards a sustainable future for the Region. A copy of the draft RSDF can be found at [www.wmra.gov.uk/page.asp?id=155](http://www.wmra.gov.uk/page.asp?id=155)

SD is often treated as an "add-on" to strategy and policy development, therefore, the draft aimed to establish a process whereby the principles of SD would be central to all policy thinking prior to the commencement of strategy development or review, and be embedded throughout the process.

It was suggested that the SRG response focus on:

- (a) Relevant conclusions from the ERN report (see item 5.1 on the agenda) that could be adopted in the RSDF, and
- (b) The potential application of the West Midlands RSDF as a scrutiny tool to ensure that sustainable development was fully incorporated in AWM's regional strategies, plans, and policies.

The Group **endorsed** the attached response to the draft RSDF.

## 5. **Annual Report**

The Group was asked to agree the format for the 2005 Annual Report.

The report was due to be published in January 2006 but due to time constraints would now be completed in early May 2006. Comments received in respect of last year's report were generally complimentary and it was proposed that a similar format, reflecting the advice of the Assembly's Head of Communications and the content as set out in paragraph 4.3 of the report, be adopted.

In addition, it was suggested that photographs of the Scrutiny Officers be included in the report.

In last year's report, a questionnaire had been included. Although the Group recognised it's albeit limited success, felt that such feedback could be gathered via an email address.

The Group **approved** the proposed format and **agreed** that the final content and layout be approved by officers.

## **For information**

### 6. **Budget report**

The Group received an update regarding the final budgetary position for 2005/6.

The Assembly's budget for 2005/6 allocated a total of £52,927 to support scrutiny including £2,500 each from AWM and Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) to support the Equalities and Diversity Review. This was intended to cover all costs including external accommodation and VAT but excluding officer costs.

Expenditure up to 31 March 2006 was shown in Appendix 1 of the report and identified an under-spend of £216.05. Members were advised that the figures detailed may be amended slightly when the Assembly final accounts were produced.

The scrutiny budget for 2006/7 would be £30,000. An outline budget plan was discussed at the last meeting but would need to be revised in light of decisions taken in respect of the scheduling of future reviews.

The Group **noted** the final budgetary position for 2005/06 and **agreed** to receive a revised outline budget plan for 2006/07.

7. **Rural Renaissance – Final report**

The Group, whilst welcoming the Assembly's reception and Advantage West Midlands' response to the report, **requested** that the Chair seek clarification in respect of AWM's response to Recommendation IR2.

8. **Progress Reports**

**Regeneration Zones Revisited** – It was anticipated for this review to report to the Assembly's Annual meeting in July 2006.

**Region's Relationship with Europe** – The scoping for this review was currently on-going. The review was expected to be taking evidence in September 2006. Cllr Mick Jones (North Warwickshire) was suggested as a potential panel member.

9. **Dates of Future Meetings**

The next meeting was **confirmed** as Monday 10 July 2006 at the Regional Partnership Centre commencing at 2 p.m.

The future meetings - 25 October 2006, 24 January and 25 April 2007 (venues tbc) were **noted**.

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