

The Right Honourable Hazel Blears MP
Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government
Eland House
Bressenden Place
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21st December 2007

Dear

West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy: Phase Two Revision Draft

It gives me great pleasure to submit to you, on behalf of the West Midlands Regional Assembly, the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy (WMRSS) Phase Two Revision Draft.

The Phase Two Revision Draft has been prepared in accordance with Government guidance and is submitted under the Town and Country Planning (Regional Planning) (England) Regulations 2004. In preparing the Revision, the Assembly has worked very closely with all its regional partners and communities in an open, transparent and inclusive manner. This has included all local authorities from across the Region but particularly the Section 4(4) Strategic Authorities who, in line with the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, have had an important advisory role in helping to shape the policies and proposals submitted herewith.

Background - maintaining the strategy - responding to Climate Change

In publishing Regional Planning Guidance for the West Midlands in 2004 (now the approved WMRSS), the Secretary of State supported the overall strategy of Urban and Rural Renaissance but requested that an early revision should be undertaken of a wide range of matters. The Draft WMRSS Phase One Revision has already addressed a number of these issues relating to the Black Country Sub-Region and the Assembly looks forward to the final approval of that phase of the Revision early in the New Year.

The Phase Two Revision Draft has now addressed a further set of issues on a region-wide basis and these have covered housing, employment land, centres, transport and waste.

As acknowledged in the original Project Plan, one of the key starting points for Phase Two was an agreement that it should constitute a 'revision' of the existing WMRSS and not a 'review'. It was particularly recognised that, if the

Region is to develop in a more sustainable direction and respond to the challenge of Climate Change, this means that the unsustainable outward movement of people and jobs away from the Major Urban Areas must continue to be countered. It was also recognised that the fundamental principles of Urban and Rural Renaissance must be maintained if the Region is to grow and prosper in the most sustainable way.

Climate Change considerations have also been at the heart of the development of the Phase Two Revision and accordingly a new policy, building on that proposed in Phase One, is recommended along with further new policies on Creating Sustainable Communities and Sustainable Design and Construction. Together with the recently published West Midlands Regional Climate Change Action Plan, the Assembly is confident that the WMRSS Revision policies will provide an appropriate policy framework to address this major challenge, one which was made only too evident within the Region by the flooding earlier this year.

Housing

In developing the policies and proposals for housing in the Phase Two Revision, the Assembly has responded positively to the Government's aim to improve housing affordability and the need to increase substantially the number of houses built, including the provision of more affordable housing. In this regard, we have not only followed the guidance set out in PPS3 but have also acknowledged more recent Government policy intentions as set out in the Housing Green Paper. Officers of the Assembly have also met on several occasions with the National Housing and Planning Advice Unit to discuss the emerging work of the Unit and how it relates to the West Midlands.

Following from this, our proposals submitted to you today aim to provide a minimum of 18,300 dwellings (net) p.a. 2006-2026. With a front loading of 19,000 p.a. net 2006-2016, this significantly increases the rate of development within the Region from the existing proposals in the approved RSS of around 12,500 dwellings (net) p.a. – an increase of approximately 46%.

The Assembly has worked hard with its regional partners to meet the Government's housing objectives and it believes that it has achieved this in a way that maintains the current strategy emphasis on Urban and Rural Renaissance, so important to the future of this Region. The proposals are not only in line with the broad scale of projected household growth thereby meeting the housing needs of the people of the West Midlands but, most importantly, they are also consistent with the economic prospects of the Region as reflected in the recent West Midlands Economic Strategy Review with which the Phase Two Revision is aligned.

In developing the housing proposals in the Revision, the big issue that has consistently concerned people has been the balance of housing development and infrastructure. If the Region is to provide the proposed high levels of growth, it is crucial that there is adequate investment provided for supporting

infrastructure. This applies particularly in the Major Urban Areas where there is a need for major economic and physical restructuring and environmental enhancement if the potential redevelopment capacity of brown field sites is to be realised and they are to remain places where more people will choose to live and work in the future. The Phase One Revision proposals for the Black Country have identified the scale of this challenge.

It is equally clear that, in order to meet the anticipated scale of housing demand, considerable growth will also be required beyond the Major Urban Areas especially in the towns and cities that have now been identified as Settlements of Significant Development. In these and indeed other locations, further investment in supporting infrastructure will be essential if the settlements are to be developed as truly balanced and sustainable communities.

Economy

Whilst a major focus for the Phase Two Revision has been on revised housing policies, it is important to stress these have not been developed in isolation but have been closely joined up with policies for providing more jobs and services across the Region. This has involved very close working with Advantage West Midlands to ensure that WMRSS Revision policies, particularly in relation to employment land provision and for the future development of our town and city centres, are fully aligned and consistent with the principles of the recently reviewed West Midlands Economic Strategy.

A central concern in this relationship has been the need to achieve a balance between housing and employment land provision with the aim of helping to reduce the need to travel and thereby to limit greenhouse gas emissions. This has been a key underlying principle in the development of a new employment land policy within which detailed proposals for each District are specified to assist authorities in the preparation of their Local Development Frameworks.

Centres

The Phase Two Revision proposes that the strategic town and city centres identified in the WMRSS should continue to provide the focus for retail, office and leisure development with detailed proposals for future comparison retail and office floorspace set out for each of these centres. Over recent years, monitoring has indicated that a reasonable balance has been achieved between in-centre and out-of-centre retail development but this has not been the case with regard to offices where a greater tendency towards out-of-centre development has been evident. In line with Government policy, the draft revised policies submitted herewith therefore encourage a move towards more in-centre office developments and also place greater emphasis on the need to link public transport access to the strategic centres identified within the WMRSS.

In line with the WMRSS Phase One Revision, the network of Town and City Centres has been revised so that Brierley Hill will replace Dudley as a strategic centre in the Black Country.

Transport

The WMRSS currently identifies Transport as one of the major challenges facing the Region. This remains the case and the housing and economic development proposals within this Phase Two Revision will create new pressures and demands for further investment in transport infrastructure and services. As requested by the Secretary of State when the WMRSS was approved in 2004, the Revision has focused on amendments to Strategic Park and Ride, Car Park Standards, Demand Management and Airports policies and these have thereby further strengthened the Regional Transport Strategy within the WMRSS. The opportunity has also been taken to update the Regional Transport Priorities for Investment to reflect the designation of Settlements of Significant Development.

Waste

Major changes are necessary to ensure the most sustainable management of waste with a need to provide sufficient opportunities for new waste management facilities of 'the right type, in the right place and at the right time'. In developing the policies put forward in this Revision to achieve this aim, the Assembly has sought to ensure that the Region is able to continue to be self sufficient in managing its waste and that the requirements for new capacity are identified.

Conclusion

The Assembly believes that the WMRSS Phase Two Revision Draft submitted to you today represents a further example of how all interests in the West Midlands are able to work together in partnership to build a consensus around challenging issues. This includes the close alignment of the Revision with the recent West Midlands Economic Strategy Review which bodes well for the future, a first step towards developing a Single Integrated Regional Strategy.

Undoubtedly, one of the most sensitive of these issues in the Revision has been the level and distribution of new homes that should be provided across the Region and particularly the need to deliver more affordable homes. In examining this matter, a key theme has been to build on and strengthen the existing strategy and, in particular, its emphasis on Urban and Rural Renaissance. This is seen as crucial if the Region is to develop in a more sustainable direction and respond to the challenge of Climate Change.

Overall, we believe that the policies and proposals put forward represent an ambitious growth strategy for the Region but one that is well balanced taking into account all the above considerations. It is clear that significant efforts will certainly be required to deliver these renaissance-based growth aspirations, not least through the provision of supporting infrastructure and services – an

area where the Region will be looking to Government to support, particularly through its New Growth Points initiative.

I therefore commend the WMRSS Phase Two Revision Draft to you.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Rex Roberts
Chairman – Regional Planning Partnership
West Midlands Regional Assembly

