

**For information
Agenda Item 14**

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
Wednesday, 24 October 2007**

Headline Issues for West Midlands Regional Assembly

Report of the Director - Policy

1. Purpose of Report

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

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Assembly considers the report and notes progress made.

3. REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY (RSS)

- 3.1 Progress is being made on each of the three phases of the RSS Revision. A report setting out the details for the revision to the RSS is covered under Item 9. To summarise:-

3.2 Phase One – the Black Country

Following the publication of the Panel Report in March 2007, 'Proposed Changes' were issued by the Secretary of State on 10 September. These 'Changes' will be subject to consultation and the Assembly (through the Regional Planning Partnership – Regional Planning Partnership on 22 October) will therefore have the opportunity to respond.

3.3 Phase Two

The Phase Two Revision includes some important issues for the Region, of particular significance and of far reaching consequence is the new housing figure and distribution for the region for the period 2006-2026.

- 3.4 Following a 'steer' by the RPP in May, discussions have been held with authorities across the Region to explore whether emerging housing provision figures are in line with their growth aspirations.

- 3.5 The results of these discussions were reported to RPP on 24 September where further guidance was sought from Members on the final shaping of the Preferred Option (including all policy issues being addressed – housing, employment land, centres, transport and waste). The aim will then be to present a final Preferred Option for the RPP's approval at its meeting on the 22 October. This will enable submission of the Revision to the Secretary of State by the end of the year.
- 3.6 The development of the Phase Two revision has been undertaken at the same time as AWM have been reviewing the West Midlands Economic Strategy. This has provided the region with a unique opportunity to further align these two key strategies and ensure that the policies in both are mutually supportive, use the same language, are updated to reflect current thinking on climate change and work towards the sustainable development of the West Midlands
- 3.7 **Phase Three**
Phase Three will be considering a range of matters including rural services, environmental issues, culture, minerals and the provision of sites for gypsies and travellers. A Draft Project Plan will be presented to the RPP for approval on 22nd October with a formal commencement of the Phase 3 process thereafter.
- 4. CLIMATE CHANGE, ENVIRONMENT AND WASTE PLANNING**
- 4.1 The regional consultation on the draft Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP) has been completed. A separate paper is included on the agenda as item 7.
- 4.2 Work has continued on environmental and waste input to the RSS Revision process. Detailed new Climate Change, Sustainable Communities and Sustainable Design and Construction policies have been developed to act across all the other policy areas in the draft RSS. The statutory Regional Flood Risk Appraisal and Habitat Regulation Assessment have been able to feed into the process of policy development and inform the production of the Regional Implementation Plan. Work on the revised Regional Waste Strategy, which forms an integral part of the RSS Revision has been completed following the completion of two further studies.
- 4.3 The statutory Sustainability Appraisal (SA) report has been completed and the results informed the draft RSS Revision. The SA consultant has been involved at each stage of the RSS process to integrate SA matters as policies have been developed. The input to the draft RSS Phase 3 Project Plan has been completed which will focus on the review of the remaining policies in the Quality of the Environment chapter including energy and minerals.

- 4.4 Work on phase 1 of the regional Landscapes for Living has been completed. This advocates moving away from site based protection work towards landscape scale restoration across boundaries. A prospectus will be launched before Christmas. Draft guidance on the use of Biodiversity Enhancement areas has been produced for Local Authorities.
- 4.5 Work has began on the production of the Regional Historic Environment Strategy

5. REGIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

- 5.1 Work is continuing to analyse the responses to the consultation on this strategy, which ended in July 2007, with a view to a final document being presented at the Assembly meeting in January 2008. It is proposed that an outline three year action plan is produced alongside the final document. Work will be needed to ensure this strategy is integrated into a future single regional strategy.
- 5.2 The Policy officer – Health and the work of the Regional Health Partnership have to date been funded through a joint arrangement between Government Office / Dept. of Health and the Assembly. The former's funding will cease on 31 December 2007. As a consequence future support for this work, the impact on the current Policy Officer - Health and the Regional Health Partnership, is being reviewed. A report will be prepared for the next Board meeting.
- 5.3 **'Living Well in the West Midlands' £6.79 million Big Lottery Portfolio**
This portfolio will be managed by the West Midlands Regional Assembly over the next 3 years. Part of the role of the Programme Director (due to be appointed in October 2007), is to build sustainability for the programme and secure match funding where possible, which may extend the life of the portfolio. The Programme Director will report to the board on progress.

6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- 6.1 The new West Midlands Economic Strategy will be published in December 2007. Over the last few months the Assembly Secretariat has sought to work with AWM to ensure that the issues raised by the Board at the June meeting are fully incorporated in the new RES and action plan. A report on the latest draft new WMES appears elsewhere on this agenda.

7. BUSINESS SUPPORT SIMPLIFICATION

- 7.1 The Assembly has produced a response to the consultation by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform on business support simplification. The consultation ended on 14th

September. The response focuses on the national prescription of business products at a time when local flexibility and devolution is more important. Copies will be available on request.

8. HOUSING

8.1 A response from Government to the West Midlands' advice on Regional Housing Allocations 2008-11 is still awaited. This Regional Housing Allocations Strategy 2008-11 will be finalised when the financial details for the West Midlands have been issued following the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007 announcement on Tuesday 9 October 2007. This is expected shortly.

8.2 The Sub-Regional Housing Market Area Partnerships are working to complete Strategic Housing Market Assessments within their sub-regions and are also undertaking Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (the majority of GTAA's will be completed by the end of December 2007).

8.3 The Housing Secretariat has produced a Briefing Note for the Sub-Regional Housing Market Area Partnerships to provide an overview of the implications with regards to housing. The key messages in this Briefing Note highlight SNR's expectation that local authorities will develop a stronger strategic housing enabling role. Joint working across disciplines, particularly housing and planning is also highlighted along with continued encouragement of sub-regional partnership working.

9. CENTRAL WALES-WEST MIDLANDS MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING

9.1 Instigated by West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum, a Cross Border Working Group was set up to explore the potential for cross border co-operation that would add value to the regeneration of the West Midlands/Mid-Wales border area identifying ways in which this could be achieved. The border extends some 85 miles north-south and comprises 45 West Midlands' parishes and 15 Powys Community Council areas.

9.2 Tackling the practical issues of "adjoining communities" – often solutions have been/are developed at grassroots level and are dependent on informal working relationships not policy or organisational practice. The situation is exacerbated by lack of robust evidence and few formal mechanisms for identifying and resolving cross-border issues within organisations.

9.3 A key outcome of the work of the Cross Border Working Group in taking this work forward was the development of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that was launched at the Cross Border Event in March 2007 at Ludlow. The MoU aims to promote better

collaboration between partners and organisations across both sides of the border and a number of following actions will be/are being undertaken:

- (i) Signing up by partners and organisations
- (ii) MoU to be placed on both Assembly Websites
- (iii) Establishment of a Central Wales-West Midlands Strategic Forum
- (iv) Establishment of Core Officer Group
- (v) Setting up specialist task and finish groups to address specific issues
- (vi) Establishment of a sub-group of the Strategic Forum to monitor and annually review the effectiveness of arrangements -
- (vii) Annual Conference in 2008

9.4 Following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding there had been an enthusiastic response to the agreement and 29 sign-ups from lead organisations and partnerships from this side of the border. Welsh colleagues have agreed to produce a 'certificate' in recognition for those who had signed-up. Following the recent Welsh elections and new ministerial appointments, work has begun to agree partnership arrangements and reporting mechanisms, although there were questions over resourcing and capacity issues.

9.5 The 'Cross Border Steering Group' of original members will oversee the cross border work and will be meeting again in early October. Local lead partners are currently being identified to develop the 'issues on the ground' using themed Task Groups, a number of which were already in place. The proposed Task Groups:

- Health & Social Care: Herefordshire Partnership leading and providing support for the group
- Transport: TRACC leading group and members drawn from Mid-Wales and West Midlands.
- Community Safety
- Access to Services
- Skills & Business Support
- Housing
- Voluntary and Community Sector

9.6 AWM have also confirmed that they are leading on a Wales, West Midlands and South West England Cross-Border RDPE Leader initiative

10. CULTURE

RSS Revision – Cultural Element

10.1 The Regional Assembly, working closely with partners are seeking to ensure that culture is fully embedded within the RSS Revision

process. Culture forms a key topic area within Phase Three and we are working towards finalising the tasks and objectives for Culture within the draft project plan and are looking to ensure that the appropriate technical work is in place to support future policy development.

Formatted: Font: Not Bold, No underline

Regional Culture Strategy

- 10.2 Culture WM are planning to launch consultation to revise the Regional Culture Strategy in January 2008. A year long consultation exercise is proposed on a broad raft cultural issues is planned, during which Culture WM will develop and publish 3 main evidence papers- 'culture and prosperity', 'culture and places' and 'culture and people'. Responses to these and to associated seminars will underpin a brand new Cultural Strategy that is due for publication in January 2009.

'Black Country as an Urban Park'

- 10.3 These are exciting times for the Black Country with sweeping plans for aspirational regeneration already moving apace.
- 10.4 The Black Country now has a one off opportunity to accelerate plans earlier than expected as one of only six visionary community projects chosen nationally to bid for £50 million of BIG Lottery funding. The Region's bid called 'Black Country as an Urban Park' has already gone through to the second stage of the Big Lottery Fund's 'Living Landmarks: The People's Millions' and we will know in *mid October* if the Black Country's bid has been short listed for inclusion in a national TV programme to be screened in December 2007. The general public will then get the chance to decide who should win the single grant of up to £50 million
- 10.5 Proposals include opening up Dudley's underground canals and mines at the Wren's Nest National Reserve, enhancing the historic canal network around Wolverhampton City Centre and building a Green Bridge Park that will link communities, open spaces and facilities between the town centres of Walsall and West Bromwich.
- 10.6 The Regional Assembly is working in partnership with the Black Country Consortium and is fully supportive of the bid. Councillor Chris Saint, the Regional Assembly's Cultural Affairs portfolio holder and a member of the Urban Park Steering Group said "The Black Country as an Urban Park is a unique project on a human scale that offers the opportunity for focus on the natural world within a developed industrial area. I am confident it will help to play a key part in developing a truly sustainable urban community where people will choose to live, work and invest.

11. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY

- 11.1 During the summer period, the Equality & Diversity Partnership worked with others on the Discrimination Law Review [green paper] consultation, this included hosting an event for regional stakeholders with the Commission for Racial Equality at the Partnership Centre. A formal response has since been submitted to CLG. It also hosted a fringe event during the LGA Conference at which Michael Cashman, MEP spoke and regional stakeholders agreed that the Assembly should look to be the first UK region to sign-up to the European Charter on Women and Men in Local Life - further work is on-going.
- 11.2 The Partnership is currently working with SWM on the Social Capital, Equality & Diversity programme (funded by Defra) and will be jointly hosting an event on 27th September at the Niskam Centre, where policy-makers and practitioners shared good practice and looked at the delivery potential of policy decisions. The Partnership provides a steering role for this programme.
- 11.3 The Partnership continues to work with others and is looking at developing further work with RAWM around the Civil Partnership and Social Inclusion agendas.

12. EUROPE

- 12.1 Following the Assembly's Strategic Review of Regional European Working:
- 12.2 A draft strategy document was considered by EIAP on September 21st. This sets four key priorities for regional European working
- Engaging with the single market
 - Becoming a more successful player in the Research and Development arena
 - Responding to the challenges of Climate Change and Environmental Protection
 - Engaging with social cohesion

The document is now out to consultation until Friday, 26 October, responses to e.knight@wmra.gov.uk

- 12.3 As part of reviewing our relationship with regional European Elected representatives, the Assembly and AWM held a workshop on Friday, 12 October, at which Malcolm Harbour MEP was guest speaker.
- 12.4 The outcome of both of these will form the basis for taking forward the work of the project board, Chaired by Michael Clarke, to take forward all of the recommendations of the strategic review.

13. TRANSPORT

- 13.1 Further to the Minister's 'transport challenge', progress is underway to meet the December 2007 deadline. A number of meetings have taken place involving high-level representatives from key organisations who have formed a Core Group to consider how the challenge can be met. The 'challenge' was discussed at the Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) meeting on 8th October 2007. A special RTP meeting has been called for 12th November 2007 to enable Members to input to this process.
- 13.2 Coordination of the Regional Funding Allocation (RFA) process remains an ongoing priority and monitoring information continues to be collated on a quarterly basis. Further guidance regarding RFA not expected from DfT before Summer 2008. Progress has been made to ensure that the Region is prepared for the DfT's timetable. In the meantime, promoters have identified schemes which they would like to be considered for funding through the RFA Round 2 process.
- 13.3 Transport matters are prominent in the recently published Comprehensive Spending Review 2007. RTP will consider how best to incorporate these matters in due course.

14. Skills

- 14.1 In August Liam Byrne, Minister for the West Midlands, set out his priorities for the future giving the LSC and AWM the responsibility to produce a regional skills strategy by December 2007.
- 14.2 Rather than produce a new strategy, the approach being taken is to produce a Regional Skills Delivery Plan to add detail and value to existing regional strategies such as the RES. The intention is that this will be a living document which will be adaptable to forthcoming changes arising from, for example the Sub-National Review and the Regional Spatial Strategy.
- 14.3 The Board of the Regional Skills Partnership will have an important role in helping to shape the Delivery Plan and the AWM annual conference on 9th November will be used to collect ideas and to test out emerging thinking.

Rose Poulter

Director of Policy

0121 678 1024

r.poulter@wmlga.gov.uk