

**Agenda Item No. 10**

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY  
Assembly Meeting – 16 January 2008**

**Submission to House of Commons Modernisation Committee  
Report of the Regional Scrutiny Manager**

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1. **Purpose**  
To inform Members of the submission made by the Assembly to the Modernisation Committee in respect of its enquiry into regional accountability.
2. **Recommendation**  
That the submission is noted.
3. **Background**
  - 3.1 As part of its four enquiries into the Governance of Britain green paper, the Modernisation Committee Select Committee is looking at regional accountability from the parliamentary perspective. Submissions were invited by 23 November 2007 regarding the following:
    - what models of accountability might work;
    - what the role of the House should be in regional accountability; and
    - what resources would be needed to make regional accountability work in the House of Commons.
  - 4.1 The attached submission was developed by the Strategic Review Group based on previous discussions at both member and officer level. It was signed off by Roger McKenzie, Chair of Strategic Review Group and Assembly Vice Chair.

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## **Introduction**

As you will be aware Regional Assemblies currently have a statutory role in scrutinising Regional Development Agencies. In the West Midlands the Assembly also examines how regional partners work together to address issues of importance to the region. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate about the form of parliamentary accountability and believe that regional partners could play a significant role in assisting MPs to assess the effectiveness of Government and its agencies at the regional level.

The comments below are based on five years experience of scrutinising regional bodies and have been developed following discussions with Assembly Members from all sectors.

We have identified three underlying principals for the development of parliamentary arrangements.

- Form follows function - this is an opportunity to create a new parliamentary model that has been designed specifically for the purpose of enhancing regional accountability.
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities - both of the parliamentary model created and linkages with the already complex accountability arrangements of many regional bodies.
- Complementary – arrangements should not replace or duplicate scrutiny arrangements at regional, sub regional or local level but make use of the different powers in Westminster for looking at the actions of central government in delivering policy within the regions

## **What Models of Accountability Might Work**

Democratic Accountability – Structures should be part of the House of Commons rather than part of any revision of roles, responsibilities and membership of House of Lords

Format - We would urge the establishment of one committee for each region. This will ensure workloads are manageable and reflect the differing needs of the regions. Regular meeting of the Chairs of the Regional Committees will provide a mechanism to confer with and challenge Government in respect of common issues/barriers.

## Membership

- All regional MP's should be offered the opportunity to join their regional committee. Each Committee should consist of all regional MP's. National political balance should be reflected by the allocation of Committee Chairs.
- Flexible quorate arrangements will address concerns regarding MP's existing commitments thus allowing individuals to attend for specific sessions/ areas of interest.
- Members of the Government should not be full voting members but be encouraged to attend in order to benefit from discussions.
- Committees should also include a minority of members drawn from structures within the region including acknowledged local and regional leaders. These should not be drawn exclusively from local government but include representatives from business and other stakeholders including social and environmental partners
- Consideration should be given to a flexible approach with the identification of a broad framework within which different models can be developed for individual regions. These could be developed following discussions chaired by the Regional Minister

Location – Committees should meet at varying locations within the region as often as in Westminster. Regional meetings would allow the collection of evidence and those in Westminster to hear from Government and deal with process issues.

Co-ordination – clear links are needed with Departmental Select Committees in order to prevent duplication. Although it is essential for each Regional Committee to be able to control its workload, mechanisms are required to enable sharing of good practice so all committees are performing to the same standard.

## **The Role of the House in Regional Accountability**

### Suggested Aims

- To scrutinise the effectiveness of government and its agencies in delivering joined-up results at the regional level.
- Improve the synergy between different government departments responsible for different aspects of policies and funding within the region.
- To enable both MP's and regional partners to raise particular issues.
- To raise awareness of regional concerns with government and the media.
- To monitor progress made in implementing recommendations and their outcomes

### Responsibilities

- We believe strongly that Regional Committees should have similar powers to those of Select Committees, particularly to set their own agendas (while considering issues of duplication), require attendance from Ministers and regional agencies, produce reports and receive responses from Government or regional agencies as appropriate.
- Committees should hold regional question times within the region with Chairs/Chief Executives of key regional organisations.
- Both quantitative and qualitative evidence needs to be considered in order to assess progress within the region
- Although Regional Development Agencies play a key role, Committees should also hold to account a wider range of non-departmental public bodies and other institutions active within regions. Regional Development Agencies do not operate in isolation and are not the highest spending body within a region.

### Co-operation

- Committees should be informed by and inform accountability arrangements within the region both now and post 2010. Consideration should be given to holding joint hearings with regional structures.
- Every effort should be made by all involved to prevent contradictory recommendations being made by accountability structures at the national, regional and local level.
- While it is appropriate for Committees to question Regional Ministers, hearings should also inform the Ministers' actions. It is suggested that the Regional Minister becomes an ex-officio Committee Member who could still be questioned at certain sessions for example at regional question time.
- Regional Committees should inform appropriate Departmental Select Committees of relevant regional issues or concerns.
- Committees will also need to consider the locality scrutiny of statutory bodies and agencies through the duty to co-operate as detailed in the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act.

### **What Resources would be Needed?**

#### Officer Support

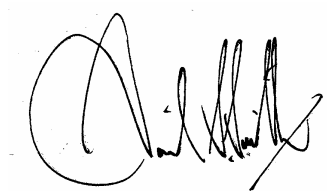
- One of the lessons from both regional scrutiny and local authority overview and scrutiny is that dedicated officer support is crucial to making accountability work.

- Support staff are needed who have an understanding of how the region operates. This could be achieved by use of a regional specialist advisor as opposed to subject specialist.
- Parliamentary clerks at Westminster will need dedicated resources within the region to provide policy and administrative support. These could be directly employed as part of the Government Offices or be provided by a regional body on contract basis e.g. Regional Local Government Associations.

#### Budgetary Support

- There needs to be a sufficient revenue budget to cover meeting accommodation within the region. Currently Select Committees meeting away from Westminster have venues offered free of charge. It would be inappropriate to expect this on a regular basis.
- Committees will need a base within the region to act as a point of contact with regional organisations and interested parties, including the media. This is linked to the provision of dedicated officer support and would also provide a location for a regional reference library.
- A research budget is also required. This could be used to commission appropriate research or to enable access to existing research resources including Regional Observatories.

I hope that the above comments will be useful and would welcome the opportunity to discuss these further. For clarification or further information please contact Dagmar Waller, Regional Scrutiny Manager on 0121 678 1054 or via [d.waller@wmra.gov.uk](mailto:d.waller@wmra.gov.uk)



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