

## Agenda Item 15

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

#### Headline Issues for West Midlands Regional Assembly

#### Report of the Director - Policy

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#### 1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To update the Assembly on key issues undertaken by the Secretariat on behalf of the Board and Assembly Partnerships over the last quarter that are not subject to other reports on the agenda.

#### 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 West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy is currently undergoing a partial revision in three Phases:

- Phase One: focused on developing a long-term strategy for the Black County
- Phase Two: has focused on a range of issues including housing figures, employment land, centres, and transport, waste and identifies the towns and cities where development should be the focused.
- Phase Three: the initial stages of the process started in November 2007 and will be looking at Critical Rural Services, the provision of Gypsy and Traveller Sites, Culture, Minerals and Environment Policies.

- 3.2 Reports have been submitted to Assembly Members on a regular basis to update and inform them of the progress. Agenda Item 7 sets an update for Assembly members on the progress of each of the three phases.

#### 4. DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN

- 4.1 Following consultation a draft Climate Change Action Plan was endorsed by the Regional Assembly in October 2007. This was launched in December and will be taken forward by the GOWM with partners. The Regional Minister has also included climate change in his list of key regional priorities and will be

updated on progress. Meetings with partners are continuing on the development of the draft actions and potential climate change projects to be incorporated into the business planning process of partners for 2008/09.

## **5. HOUSING**

### **Regional Housing Pot 2008-2011: Final Advice to Ministers**

- 5.1 The intended split of housing funding between the Regions' has been made known by CLG on 16 October 2007 and final advice sought from the Regional Assemblies. The announcement sought further advice by 2 November on how the funds should be allocated. In summary the West Midlands is posed to receive **£679M** over three years, 20% more than the Region received in 2006-2008. This is for the Housing Corporation's National Affordable Housing Programme and for capital funding to local housing authorities.
- 5.2 Whilst this is welcomed, the use of this money will be very challenging for the Housing Corporation, RSLs, and others developing social rented and intermediate tenure housing. There are challenges too for Local Authorities, especially the development of equity release loans for the improvement of private sector homes. It is pleasing to see the West Midlands Kickstart model is presented as the exemplar model for the rest of the country to follow.
- 5.3 This funding is intended to deliver the commitments given in the Housing Green Paper (July 2007). In the West Midlands, the Housing Corporation have to achieve an annual average output of minimum of 2400 social rented homes a year, (averaged over the three years). They also have to deliver 1200 low cost home ownership (intermediate tenure) properties. The challenge here is that currently in 2006-2007, the Housing Corporation is delivering 1400 social rented homes a year (and 1100 low cost home ownership). So as well as very substantially increasing the number of homes for rent, higher sustainability standards are being required, as well as efficiency savings. To meet these minima targets over the 2008-2011 period, the WM Region was required to make a substantial change to the high-level split which had previously been recommended to CLG by the Regional Housing Executive in the Summer of 2007.
- 5.4 Consequently, the new high-level split will see 69% of the total funding being allocated to NAHP and 31% to local authorities, in comparison to the existing split of 48% to NAHP and 52% to local authorities. As a result, concerns in relation to the potentially adverse impacts this may have upon existing local authority programmes has been expressed and WMRA's Housing Team has requested a meeting with Ministers, at which the full implications posed by its strong drive for affordable housing can be explored.

## **6. WEST MIDLANDS RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM**

- 6.1 The West Midlands Regional Assembly, together with a number of other partners, sponsored this year's WMRAF Conference focusing on Sustainable Rural Communities – Our Future in Your Hands. Held at Dunchurch in Warwickshire, the conference provided an opportunity for rural stakeholders to identify the essential ingredients of a sustainable rural community, the

challenges faced and explored solutions through a number of case studies. Alongside speakers from Defra and the Commission for Rural Communities, our Chief Executive, Olwen Dutton, gave an impassioned speech from the regional rural perspective.

- 6.2 The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum held a Specialist Seminar on Rural Proofing on 6th December 2007 which helped raise awareness of rural proofing, demonstrate how to apply it to policies and strategies and discuss how it might affect the Local Area Agreements.

### **Central Wales – West Midlands Cross Border**

- 6.3 Following on from the successful cross border event held in Ludlow last March, and the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding by the Welsh Assembly Government and the West Midlands Regional Assembly, a Core Officers Group has been established to take forward the collaborative work between Central Wales and the West Midlands.
- 6.4 The role and purpose of the Officers Group is to implement the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), taking direction from the Strategic Forum. The group is developing and coordinating action programmes and working groups that seek to realise the aims set out in the MoU. It is anticipated that this group will continue to meet about 3-4 times per year.
- 6.5 Over 25 people attended the initial meeting of this group on **28<sup>th</sup> November 2007** in Shrewsbury where the meeting covered the Terms of Reference for both the Strategic Forum and the Core Officers Group, the membership and make-up of the groups, and proposals for the formation or alignment with Task Groups. This was in order to address future work and key areas of collaboration, so far identified as being: Health and Social Care; Community Safety; Access to Services / Transport; Skills and Business Support; Housing; and Environment.
- 6.6 The demise of the Assembly in 2010 raises questions as to the future of the MoU. A report on the matter will be prepared for a future meeting of the Board.

## **7. CULTURE**

### **RSS Revision Phase 3 - Cultural Input**

- 7.1 The draft Project Plan for Phase 3 of the RSS Revision is due to be launched on 27th November and Culture will feature as a key Revision topic. This Revision will help to strengthen RSS policy to meet cultural, sporting and tourism needs, and through this, support urban and rural renaissance.
- 7.2 Ultimately, the cultural aspect of the RSS Revision will contribute to:
- Improving physical and mental well-being by encouraging healthier more active lifestyles and greater and more inclusive access to, and participation in, cultural activities;

- Making the Region more attractive to residents and in-movers as a result of the cultural offer; and
- Supporting the growth and diversification of the regional economy to create a 'world class' visitor destination.

7.3 The technical work required to support policy development is now underway. Consultants have just been appointed to undertake a 'Mapping and Gapping' of the Region's significant cultural assets that will also include identification of any strategic gaps in provision and potential mechanisms or policy approaches that could ensure/facilitate appropriate provision at regional and local levels.

## **8. EQUALITIES AND DIVERSITY**

8.1 The Partnership last met on 18<sup>th</sup> October, the agenda and minutes of the meeting can be found at [www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities](http://www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities). One of the key discussions at this meeting was around the affects of the Sub-National Review on equality and diversity and social cohesion in the region, as well as the commencement of the Equality and Human Rights regional hub on 1<sup>st</sup> October, and the end of funding for the post of Equality & Diversity Director in January 2009. As a consequence, the Equality & Diversity Partnership held an "away-day" on 15<sup>th</sup> November, to discuss the future options of the Partnership, including where it would best sit post-2010. An initial report on the findings of this event will be available shortly. In addition, a large element of the Partnership's 2008/09 work-plan will be the setting-up and running of a sub-group to look at, and discuss with, key stakeholders how the work of the Equality & Diversity Partnership is taken forward.

8.2 The Partnership continues to work with others and is looking at developing further work with:

- RAWM around the Civil Partnership and Social Inclusion agendas;
- Destination West Midlands in mainstreaming equalities in the Third Sector;
- Key stakeholders in consultation events on RSS Phase 3, RES Delivery Framework, and the regional European strategy;
- Local Authorities in capacity building and peer reviews to raise the Equality Standard of Local Authorities to at least Level 3; and
- Continues to work towards the West Midlands becoming the first UK region to sign-up to the European Charter on Women and Men in Local Life.

## **9. EUROPE**

9.1 Following the Assembly's Strategic Review of Regional European Working, a Project Board was established under Prof. Michael Clarke to take forward all of the reviews recommendations

9.2 During the past quarter the draft regional European has been out to consultation. The document 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

9.3 Work has also started to look at the delivery arrangements for the strategy.

9.4 The project board has as part of its remit, the responsibility to make proposals for regional European working beyond SNR.

## **10. SCRUTINY AND STRATEGIC REVIEW ANNUAL PLAN 2007/8**

### **Strategic Review of the Regional Approach to Post 16 Education, Training and Skills**

10.1 The Learning and Skills Council has requested that the timescale of this review be extended to enable the range of evidence that has been collected to be analysed by an expert advisor to ensure that the Panel have a full understanding of the issues and to provide an opportunity to interview witnesses again or to speak to other witnesses. This was approved by the Panel and a number of potential expert advisors have been approached. It is hoped that an appointment will be made by 23rd November.

10.2 The revised timescale for the review is therefore as follows

Evidence collection	early Feb 2008
Drafting of report	late Feb 2008
Consultation on draft report	March 2008
Finalisation of report	early April 2008
Presentation of report to Assembly	23 April 2008

### **Strategic Review of Transport**

10.3 The aim of this review is to assess how transport policy within the West Midlands contributes to the Region's success in integrating economic, environmental and societal needs.

10.4 The Review Panel received its initial briefing in September 2007 which included an introduction to the strategic review process and regional transport issues. Subsequently, a call for evidence was issued requesting that individuals or organisations indicate willingness to be involved by submitting written evidence or participating in evidence sessions.

10.5 Although the review will contain the following stages Members should be aware that anticipated timescales may change as the review progresses.

Evidence Gathering – will continue until May 2008. Meeting dates are currently being scheduled.

Consultation – on a draft report including recommendations for future action is expected to take place from July to September 2008. The responses to this will inform the final report.

Endorsement– It is expected that the final report will be submitted to the full Assembly for endorsement on in October 2008.

## **11. FLOODING: LESSONS LEARNT REVIEW**

- 11.1 Following this summer's floods an independent review was set up to see what lessons could be learnt. The Review is being chaired by Sir Michael Pitt, Chief Executive of the South West Strategic Health Authority and former local authority chief executive. Its focus is to examine how the risk and impact of floods could be reduced and how the emergency response could improve.
- 11.2 `The *Flooding Lessons Learnt Review* team including Sir Michael and Bruce Mann the Cabinet Office Head of Civil Contingencies Secretariat met with some forty Assembly members, local authority councillors, officers and other partners following the Assembly meeting in October. It is understood that this was the only regionally arranged meeting and the Review team have valued the opportunity to hear the experiences and opinions of the region first hand.
- 11.3 Following this meeting an officer response to the Review was submitted. This covered a wide range of issues including improving the preparedness for flooding, the clarity of processes, structures and roles and responsibilities, communications with the public, the impact on businesses, communities and rural areas and long-term prevention and mitigation measures.

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