

Agenda Item No. 7a
WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
Board of Directors – 9 March 2007

Strategic Review of the Region's Relationship with Europe

Report of the Panel Chair

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To inform the Board of progress with this strategic review and of issues that will be addressed by its recommendations.

2. Recommendation

- 2.1 That the Board note this report and that individual members submit responses during the consultation process as appropriate.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Region's relationship with Europe was identified as a topic for review by the Assembly's Strategic Review Group who agreed that its aim would be to "assess the effectiveness of the Region in securing and utilising European funding for the West Midlands Region". During the evidence gathering process the Review Panel identified the need to refocus the review on how engagement with the European agenda is taken forward within the Region.

- 3.2 The Review Panel, made up of Assembly and co-opted members, is as follows

Roger McKenzie	OSG (TUC)	Chair
Cllr Veronica Fletcher	Telford and Wrekin	
Cllr Paul Middleborough	Wychavon	
Cllr Mick Jones	Warwickshire	
Cllr Milner Whiteman	Bridgnorth	
Cllr Pauline Dee	North Shropshire	
Cllr Philip Atkins	East Staffordshire	
Professor Michael Clarke	Birmingham University	
Chris Newis	West Midlands Co-operative and Mutual Council	
Cllr Tony Ward	Sandwell	

- 3.3 Fifteen evidence sessions were held between 14 September 2006 and 2 February 2007 including a fact finding visit to Brussels by a small sub group of the Panel. These included formal evidence sessions and workshops with EIAP members, WMiE Board Members and European practitioners.

- 3.4 At the time of writing, the review report is being drafted with the Panel meeting to finalise this on 5 March 2007. A further update, including recommendations, will be provided to Board Members at the meeting.

4. **Key Issues**

- 4.1 It is the Panel's view that engagement with the European agenda is essential to the future development of the Region. However there are a number of issues that regional partners need to address.

Strategic Direction

- 4.2 While the Panel have noted the positive changes in how existing structures at a regional level have operated in the last twelve months, it is apparent that greater strategic direction is required. The current Regional European and International Strategy appears to be little known and used even less.

Governance

- 4.3 The existing governance arrangements are complex often leading to misunderstanding and confusion. The Panel understand why we have arrived at the current arrangements but believe that the opportunity should be taken to reduce duplication and provide clarity. There is no doubt that the region has benefited greatly, particularly from structural funds, but the Panel are unable to identify the extent to which this is attributable to a strategic approach within the Region.

Resources

- 4.4 The Panel believe that maintaining a regional presence in Brussels is an integral part of engagement with the European agenda. Similarly there needs to be resources within the region to act on intelligence from, and to inform a Brussels office. With the continuing financial pressures on all public bodies it is clear that no additional resources will be available to support European working at the regional level.

Intelligence

- 4.5 The Panel recognise the need for European specialists but are concerned with the lack of engagement with other specialists working at the Regional level. The European agenda is integral to all regional policy areas. There is a clear need for European specialists to understand regional priorities in order to help others to take account of the European dimension. Similarly there is a need for targeted intelligence that informs and engages the non European specialist.

Influencing Policy

- 4.6 Although the Panel was originally tasked with examining funding, it has become clear that influencing European policy is a critical dimension of engagement. This is due to the impact of European legislation and also crucially European funding is driven by European policy. There are a number of opportunities to influence policy at a European level that do not appear to be understood within the region and are under utilised.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1 The timetable for the remainder of the review process is as follows

5 March	Panel reviews draft report
12 March	Start of consultation period
13 April	End of Consultation Period
16 April	Panel reviews consultation responses
18 April	Final report available
25 April	Final report presented to full Assembly
26 April	Circulation of final report

- 5.2 It is anticipated that all recommendations will include timescales and an organisation or regional structure responsible for implementation. Progress reports will be submitted annually to the Strategic Review Group as part of the Assembly's scrutiny and strategic review monitoring arrangements.

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