

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY**

**Board of Directors – 24 September 2008**

**Regional Policy Partnerships' Activity for West Midlands  
Regional Assembly**

**Report of the Chief Executive**

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**1. Purpose of Report**

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

**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 Assembly, as the Regional Planning Body, is bringing forward the partial phased revision of the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy. In addition, ongoing work is being conducted in relation to RSS implementation, monitoring and conformity. Reports have been submitted to Assembly Members on a regular basis to update and inform them of the progress.

**RSS Phase Two and RSS Phase Three Revision**

- 3.2 Covered separately under Agenda Item 14.

**RSS Monitoring**

- 3.3 On Monday 8<sup>th</sup> September 2008 a RSS Stakeholders Conference was held to discuss the findings and implications of the latest (statutory) Annual Monitoring Report and the portfolio of Supplementary Reports (Housing, Employment Land and Green Belt). Intended for those not directly involved in the current RSS Phased Revision, the event was intended to help:

- In the two-way communication between those responsible for developing the Regional Spatial Strategy and the wider regional community; and
  - Establish a shared view of how RSS is progressing across the region in advance of next spring's Examination in Public (EiP).
- 3.4 The event was attended by over a hundred people with delegates coming from a wide range of private, public and voluntary sector organisations and succeeded in generating a good level of debate. The reports, presentations and workshop reports are available on the website from Tuesday 23 September 2008.
- 3.5 The data collection process for the next Annual Monitoring Report is progressing well. This document and the data it contains will be particularly important in the run up to the RRS2 EiP.

### **RSS Implementation**

- 3.6 The Regional Assembly prepared a Draft Implementation Plan to be considered alongside the Phase 2 Revision Draft RSS Preferred Option.
- 3.7 In order to update this plan in readiness for the EiP and to address RSS Implementation issues at both regional and sub-regional level, the Assembly supported the setting up (or in fact the revival of) a RSS Implementation Group. This met for a very successful first meeting on 9 September with the Regional Assembly, GOWM, AWM and representatives from all the sub-regions of the West Midlands all present. There are plans to extend engagement to other key regional stakeholders and to have a follow up meeting in early November, and further information will be provided to the next meeting of the Board.

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## **4. RURAL**

### **West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum**

- 4.1 The Forum met in September to receive a number of updates; West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy Phases Two and Three Revisions, EU Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE) and Cross Border Memorandum of understanding. Discussion and debate on the Sub National Review, Regional Funding Advice, the work of the CALC Network and Parish Councils, and Transforming places; changing lives – a framework for regeneration - Consultation. The next quarterly meeting will be held on 11 December in Birmingham. The afternoon seminar featured business support with presentations from Business Link and the WM Chambers of Commerce.
- 4.2 Meanwhile final preparations are underway for the WMRAF Annual Conference; this year being held at the Bromsgrove Hotel, just outside Bromsgrove, on Wednesday 12 November. “Building a Stronger Rural West Midlands” is the theme – celebrating the successes that are out in the region and taking a look forward into the future.

### **Rural Proofing**

- 4.3 Work has continued with the Regional Observatory to produce a Rural Disadvantage Indicator that will help to produce the most effective statistics to help with the monitoring of the WMES Delivery Framework. Meanwhile, other detailed quantitative analysis has been carried out by a number of other agencies, including CRC and local authorities. AWM is currently preparing a tender brief to progress this work further.
- 4.4 Other rural proofing work includes the Wyre Forest District Councils draft Rural Economic Strategy: 2008-2014 and the West Midlands Historic environment Strategy.

### **Rural mainstreaming and WMRAF Sub Group organisation changes**

- 4.5 WMRAF has agreed to close the European Rural Group (ERG), the Rural Business Advisory (RBAG) Group and the Rural Skills Development Group (RSDG) in favour of mainstreamed arrangements which will cover the same policy areas, but firmly within the region’s mainstream structures. It is firmly believed that mainstream approaches will enable more effective rural proofing.

- 4.6 ERG is to be merged into the new European Strategy Theme Groups with the lead taken by the Environment Group, to be re-named the Environment and rural Theme Group. RBAG and RSDG are to be merged into the West Midlands Business council Rural Policy Group

### **Rural Development Programme for England (RDPE)/Leader**

- 4.7 The first three years of RDPE expenditure has been approved and all Action Plans for Axis One and Three agreed with a one-stage application process. The offer includes Strategic Investment Grants for collaborative projects over £62k, Grants for individual businesses of under £62k and other rural packages. The first RDPE Grant has been awarded to Certainly Wood in Herefordshire.
- 4.8 With regards to Axis 2 funds, money from the £38 million budget for this year is still available. Natural England is calling for good quality Higher Level Scheme and Capital projects to come forward.
- 4.9 The LEADER Programme was launched in June. There are now eight Local Action Groups covering 70 per cent of the rural parts of the Region and all are busy preparing their business plans.

### **WMRSS Phase Three Revision**

- 4.10 Rural proofing of WMRSS Phase Three is underway with representation on the WMRSS co-ordination Group and is involving the help of WMRAF and the Rural Renaissance Working Group (RRWG). The technical work for Critical Rural Services has been largely completed and Section 4(4) responses are being considered. The next RRWG Meeting is scheduled for 02 October.

### **Cross Border working with Wales**

- 4.11 Facilitated by the Welsh Assembly Government and the Assembly, the good work continues with border proofing opportunities and an increasing number of specialist thematic groups and ambitious work programmes:

- Transport - Trafnidiaeth Canolbarth Cymru (Mid Wales Transportation) TRACC– four meetings: in Newtown, Shrewsbury and Hereford
- Health and Social Care – three meetings: in Ludlow, Newtown and Builth Wells. Jointly sponsored conference with Institute of Rural Health: The Edge Effect 30 September in Ludlow
- Environment – one meeting: in Shrewsbury
- Sustainable Tourism – two meetings to date in Knighton and in Craven Arms. A scoping study is about to be commissioned.
- Town and Parish Councils – conference 15 October in Knighton.

4.12 However, following a meeting between WAG, GOWM, WMRA and AWM, a cautionary approach is recommended particularly in terms of capacity and resource levels available to co-ordinate, facilitate, support and monitor this important work.

4.13 Because of difficulties with ministerial diaries it has not been possible to fulfil our commitment to hold the Strategic Forum during 2008. We have started planning the March 2009 event - open to everyone, both representatives of those organisations that have signed up to the Memorandum and those who have yet to do so. The aim being to get the message about the work of the MoU to the widest possible constituency.

### **Trees, Woods & Forestry - Regional Forestry Framework**

4.13 Now well into the fourth year of implementation the Regional Forestry Framework is scheduled to be reviewed and refreshed in 2009. With the imminent launch of the England Trees, Woods & Forests Strategy Delivery Plan 2008-2012, it means that we will have the opportunity to align our thinking with the national priorities.

4.14 The next meeting of the West Midlands Woodland and Forestry Forum will be held in Ludlow on Wednesday 19 November.

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## **5. HOUSING PARTNERSHIP UPDATE**

### **Regional Homelessness Strategy: Refresh**

- 5.1 WMRA's Housing team has continued to ensure the agenda of the Regional Homelessness Strategy Implementation Group informs the Regional Housing Executive (RHE) and is part of the Steering group which is overseeing the refresh of the existing Regional Homelessness Strategy. The refresh will review and update the original evidence base, as well as identifying themes in homelessness which have subsequently emerged since the original strategy was published in 2005, for example the linkages between homelessness and worklessness. The findings from the refresh are likely to be published in October 2008.

### **Capital allocations to local authorities – expansion of the Kick Start Partnership**

- 5.2 WMRA's Housing team continues to work closely with the Kick Start Partnership to ensure its roll out across all local authorities in the Region during the period 2008/2011. As the Government's expectation is towards the expansion of private sector home improvements initiatives such as Kick Start, the Programme was allocated £42.38 million from the Regional Housing Allocations Strategy 2008/2011. A key output from the Programme is the provision of private finance to support the funding of affordable equity share loans, negotiations on this are currently ongoing. The Kick Start Partnership will regularly report on its programme to the Regional Housing Executive.

### **Regional Housing Research Programme**

- 5.3 Fran Gilbert has recently joined the housing team as Regional Advisor: Housing Monitoring and Research. Fran has been a member of the Assembly policy team for over six years prior to which she worked in social research for a private sector consultancy. Fran will be responsible for co-ordinating and delivering the Regional housing research programme, to support the implementation of the Regional Housing Strategy and for supporting the joint monitoring activity for the Regional Spatial Strategy housing policies and the Regional Housing Strategy. Any suggestions for research issues which would benefit the Region are welcomed.

### **Climate Change**

- 5.4 The West Midlands Climate Change Action Plan sets out 30 actions that key regional partners will take in response to climate change over the next three years. One action is to assess the baseline and potential for reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from existing housing stock in the Region with the purpose of

identifying key future priority areas for investment. The brief for this work has very recently been commissioned and it will also identify and quantify all the different funding streams which contribute towards energy efficiency measures and tackling climate change.

**Sub-regional Housing Market Area Partnerships and Regional Funding Allocations (RFA):**

5.5 In July 2008 HM Treasury published "Regional Funding Advice: guidance on preparing advice". The current RFA exercise offers the opportunity for regions to provide advice to Government on long-term investment priorities for elements of transport, housing, regeneration and economic development in order to support sustainable economic growth. The published guidance sets out the following:

- Indicative long-term regional funding allocations for transport, housing, regeneration and economic development
- Guidance for regions on how advice should be prepared, including how regions should incorporate skills priorities (not included in the first RFA process)

5.6 Regions need to submit their RFA advice to Government via their Regional Minister by February 2009. It is important that the Region responds collaboratively on RFA and WMRA will be working closely with the Sub-Regional Housing Market Areas to incorporate their advice into the Region's response.

**Gypsy and Traveller Site Grant Programme 2008-2009:**

5.7 The deadline for bids to the single 2008-2009 Bidding round was Thursday 31 July, when Government Office for the West Midlands forwarded submitted bids to Communities and Local Government for appraisal by its consultants. This initial appraisal will be followed by a Regional assessment, when recommendations for funding will be presented to the Regional Housing Executive, which is due to meet on Thursday 25 September 2008.

**RSS Revision Phase 3: Provision of sites for Gypsy and Travellers and Travelling Showpeople:**

5.8 A second meeting of the RSS Gypsy & Travellers Reference Group was held on Monday 8 September 2008, at which several new members were in attendance, most notably representatives from the WM branch of the Showmen's Guild. The advice

received from the Section 4 (4) authorities was discussed and next-steps, in the process to develop Options for the accommodation of additional pitch numbers agreed. Consequently, further advice will be sought from the Strategic Planning Authorities to fill the gaps in existing advice and a supplementary piece of technical work commissioned by the Assembly, to identify the environmental 'constraints' and opportunities for each District. Work will be undertaken to develop potential Options during Autumn 2008, with a third meeting of the G&T Reference Group anticipated sometime in Winter 2008.

### **Re-forming of Regional Affordable Housing Group:**

- 5.9 The re-formed Regional Affordable Housing Group will meet for the first time on Monday 22 September 2008 and five 'Task & Finish' groups are proposed
- 1) Rural Affordable Housing - inc future use of rural exception sites
  - 2) Urban Affordable Housing - inc barriers to delivery on Brownfield sites
  - 3) Tenure Options - inc Intermediate and LCHO products
  - 4) Future for S106 and alternative Delivery vehicles
  - 5) Examples of Joint Housing and Planning activity

Key tasks and timelines, along with the possibility of other 'Task & Finish' Groups being established, for example a BME affordable housing needs group will also be discussed.

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## **6. TRANSPORT**

### **Regional Spatial Strategy**

- 6.1 Preparation for the RSS Phase 2 Examination in Public is underway, including consideration of the potential implications of housing growth on transport.

### **Transport Challenge- Regional Transport Priorities Action Plan**

- 6.2 Over the course of the last two months there has been significant progress in producing the Regional Transport priorities Action Plan and we are on course for the December 2008 publication date.

While the Assembly, AWM and the RTP Chair have provided the strategic lead for developing the Action Plan the process relies on the close cooperation and efforts of a wide range of partners and stakeholders from across the region

Work has been commissioned which sets out a clear process for enabling us to understand:

how the priorities support the delivery of national and regional objectives; and

the opportunities for, and challenges and hurdles to, delivering and funding the transport priorities.

This work will provide the information required to map out how the priorities can be sequenced for delivery. The map will take the form of a 'ganttt' chart providing an overview of all of the region's priorities. To support this, a supplementary statement will be produced for the component elements of each priority which sets out the decisions and actions required by a range of stakeholders to progress the priority.

This information is key to making the Action Plan a robust document which can be used to influence Government and other national, regional and local organisations who are key to supporting their delivery. The inclusion of clear milestones, actions and timelines, together with a detailed understanding of the alignment to objectives, and deliverability and funding risks will enable resources to be focused where they are most needed.

The Action Plan methodology has been discussed with colleagues from across the region and has received significant buy in. While the DfT cannot comment on specific details of any regions RFA process they have indicated that as the Action Plan process takes account of the objectives set out in "Towards a Sustainable Transport System" then the methodology is suitable for developing our RFA transport advice for February 2009.

This information is being gathered in a series of workshops, hosted by the priority lead organisations. In order to achieve the Regional Minister's December 2008 deadline we need feedback from the workshops by early October 2008. The Regional Minister has indicated that he would like to meet with regional partners within the next few weeks.

### **Regional Funding Advice**

- 6.3 The Regional Transport Partnership's refresh of the RFA priorities, in conjunction with the work being carried out to produce the Regional
- 6.4 Regional Transport Priorities Action Plan and the Climate Change Action Plan will be used to inform the region's transport element of the RFA2 response, for February 2009

### **Community Infrastructure Fund 2**

- 6.5 In July 2008 the government announced two new growth points in the region – the Black Country and Stafford. The Department for Transport and Communities and Local Government have asked the new growth point areas to submit expressions of interest for transport schemes that will support their housing growth. The government requires the Assembly (and AWM) to provide advice on the expressions of interest. On 15 September 2008 eight expressions of interest were submitted, these are now being assessed and the findings will be shared with the Chairs of Planning, Transport and Housing, to enable the region to provide it's advice later in September 2008.

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## **7. IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REGIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN**

- 7.1 The West Midlands Regional Climate Change Action Plan was launched last December. One of its 30 actions is to scope out the potential to improve energy efficiency to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from existing housing stock. This is important as while environmental standards are improving in new build developments, a significant challenge remains with regards to the existing housing stock. The Assembly in partnership with AWM commissioned in August Faithful+Gould to undertake a baseline study on the existing housing stock, in terms of current funding streams and the resulting outcomes. The report will be available in February 2009 with a launch event in March.
- 7.2 A further action focuses on transportation and the Assembly will be commissioning a study on how to move towards a more sustainable low-carbon transport system in October. This is a priority area as there is an upward trend in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the transport sector.

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## **8. QUALITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT**

- 8.1 Halcrow were commissioned in July to carry out an update on the Regional Flood Risk Appraisal (RFRA). This spatial understanding of flood risk issues will incorporate the latest national guidance as well as the substantial regional and sub-regional flood risk work that has been undertaken since the original RFRA was published and the outcome of the Pitt Review.
- 8.2 Mott Macdonald have carried out a Green Belt study to map the present state of the green belt within the West Midlands. This is the first stage of a process to consider how more positive uses of Green Belt could contribute to the achievement of the WMRSS and its aims for Urban and Rural Renaissance. This second Phase brief is in preparation.
- 8.3 Treweek Consultants are working with URSUS to carry out a Regional Habitat Regulations Assessment. This will identify whether there is a 'likely significant effect' on any European sites arising from the WMRSS Phase Three Revision process. Where there is a 'Likely significant effect' and adverse effects cannot be excluded this assessment will identify the avoidance or mitigation measures required to avoid any adverse effects on site integrity.
- 8.4 Consultants have been appointed by English Heritage to develop a draft of the Regional Historic Environment Strategy supported by the Assembly.
- 8.5 Work has been completed on guidance on enhancing biodiversity across the West Midlands prepared by a task group lead by Natural England and supported by the Assembly. Treweek Consulting were appointed in July to update the regional habitat targets.
- 8.6 RTAB are working with AWM to develop the first Waste Infrastructure programme in the Region which has set up a Waste Infrastructure Board.
- 8.7 A Environment working group is developing draft Policy Options for the RSS Phase Three public consultation for all the Quality of Environment topics except waste policy which was considered in RSS Phase Two. Preparation will begin soon on the examination statements for the cross cutting climate change policies and the regional waste strategy within RSS Phase Two.

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## **9. CULTURE**

### **Culture Update**

- 9.1 The Cultural element of Phase Three of the WMRSS revision is looking to identify the Region's most significant cultural assets, identify any strategic gaps in provision, establish priorities to address any shortfall and identify policy approaches that could facilitate appropriate provision in the future.
- 9.2 Technical work to underpin the revision was commissioned last year and a final report is nearing completion. Its findings; in conjunction with the detailed planning advice from the section 4.4 authorities will help us shape appropriate planning choices which will go out for public consultation next year.
- 9.3 Preliminary work on the development of these 'Options' is now underway and over the coming weeks we will be looking to ensure appropriate input from the region's cultural sector.
- 9.4 We anticipate the cultural section of this revision will help to strengthen WMRSS policy to ensure development encapsulates cultural, sporting and tourism needs to support urban and rural renaissance.

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## **10. EUROPE**

- 10.1 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
- 10.2 At the end of February the Europe and International Affairs Partnership agreed the projects board's recommendations for delivering the Regional European Strategy.
- 10.3 The principal features are an enhanced EIAP –to be called the European Strategy Board, supported by a strategic European group of senior officers – and four priority working groups reflecting the priorities of the regional European strategy:
  - Engaging with the single market, led by UKTI
  - Becoming a more successful player in the Research and Development arena, led by AWM

- Responding to the challenges of Climate Change and Environmental Protection, led by GOWM
- Engaging with social cohesion, led by WMRA

These groups are preparing outline work plans in advance of the first European Strategy Board meeting on June 27th

These proposals are for regional European working beyond SNR.

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**11. HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

11.1 Covered separately under Agenda Item 12.

**12. THE FUTURE OF REGIONAL SCRUTINY**

12.1 The principles to underpin future regional scrutiny agreed by the Assembly at the Annual General Meeting in July 2008 will be used to inform the arrangements being developed as part of wider regional governance structures. More detailed work will be undertaken following completion of the WMLGA review and discussions by the Regional Forum of Leaders and Advantage West Midlands.

12.2 The establishment of Parliamentary Regional Select and Grand Committees as proposed by the Select Committee on the Modernisation of the House of Commons is expected to be debated soon after the summer recess. The outcome of this will have a significant impact on both current and future scrutiny and accountability arrangements at the regional level

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**13. EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY (SOCIAL INCLUSION)**

13.1 The Partnership met on 23<sup>rd</sup> June and 16<sup>th</sup> September, the agendas, minutes and related papers for these meetings can be found at [www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities](http://www.wmra.gov.uk/equalities). It is due to meet next on 4<sup>th</sup> December.

13.2 Following a very successful Regional Leaders' Summit on Equality and Diversity on 9<sup>th</sup> June, at which speakers included Cllrs Diane Rayner and Alan Rudge, Tim Wainright the Director for English Regions (EHRC), Aaron Reid of DiverSity and Prof. Carl Chinn, MBE, and chaired by George Marsh, Chair of SWM and WMCEE, a short report on the findings from the Summit has now been prepared and will be circulated shortly. Findings will be

used to inform the future work of the Partnership. Meetings have been arranged to take forward the planning of the Regional Leaders' Summit on Equality and Diversity 2009.

13.3 The Partnership continues to work on the following items:

- Liam Byrne, MP, 'Equalities Challenge' with GOWM and EHRC;
- Social Capital Equality and Diversity Programme (SCED) – supporting a Voluntary Community Services (VCS) related event hosted by RAWM and SWM to take place on 9<sup>th</sup> October; second annual SCED conference being planned for Spring 2009;
- Responded to the Transport Scrutiny consultation and has agreed to Recommendation 13 i.e. that the Equality & Diversity Partnership, along with the Economic Inclusion Panel and the Regional Transport Partnership commissions some work to address the wider implications of demographic change within the region;
- Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the Partnership's advisory role and capacity building in the region;
- Key stakeholders in consultation events on WMRSS Phase 3,
- Providing support on the WMES Delivery Framework and Regional Health and Well-Being Action Plan;
- Acts as an advisory body to West Midlands Economic Inclusion Panel on equality and diversity issues – several of the Partnership members have seats on the Panel;
- Acts as an advisory body to AWM in delivering its Equality and Diversity Action Plan;
- England Volunteering Development Council: West Midlands (EVDC) – supporting a EVDC and GOWM conference on 3<sup>rd</sup> November on the impact of volunteering on business and the economy in the West Midlands;
- Community Empowerment, Cohesion and Equalities Programme;
  - Local Authorities in capacity building and peer reviews with District Councils to raise the Equality Standard of Local Authorities to at least Level 3, as well as the on-going work with the CAA; and
- With the European Social Cohesion Group, whose Chair is a member of the Partnership.

13.4 Further details of on-going work can be found in the Equality and Diversity Partnership Action Plan.

13.5 The Equality and Diversity Partnership has also contributed to the GHK Partnerships Review and is focused on securing its future in the light of forthcoming end of its present Director's post.

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