

**WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY
Board of Directors – 26th September 2007**

Headline Issues for West Midlands Regional Assembly

Report of the Director - Policy

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 Progress is being made on each of the three phases of the RSS Revision: -

3.2 Phase 1 – the Black Country

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

3.3 Phase 2

The Phase 2 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 will be reported to RPP on 24th September where further guidance will be sought from Members on the final shaping of the Preferred Option (including all policy issues being addressed – housing, employment land, centres, transport and waste). A verbal update on the deliberations of that meeting will be provided to the Board on 26 September. The aim will then be to present a final Preferred Option for the RPP's approval at its meeting on the 22nd 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 2 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 3**
Phase 3 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. REGIONAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 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 further report will be prepared for the next Board meeting.
- 4.3 **'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.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION PLAN

- 5.1 The consultation period closed on the 14th September and a revised draft will be considered by the Climate Change Executive Group on the 4th October before being submitted for approval to the Regional Assembly meeting on the 24th October. 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.

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 Midland's advice on Regional Housing Allocations 2008-11 is awaited and is pending the outcomes of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2007.
- 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.
- 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:
1. Signing up by partners and organisations
 2. MoU to be placed on both Assembly Websites
 3. Establishment of a Central Wales-West Midlands Strategic Forum
 4. Establishment of Core Officer Group
 5. Setting up specialist task and finish groups to address specific issues
 6. Establishment of a sub-group of the Strategic Forum to monitor and annually review the effectiveness of arrangements -
 7. 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

10.1 Regional Culture Strategy

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.

10.2 'Black Country as an Urban Park'

These are exciting times for the Black Country with sweeping plans for aspirational regeneration already moving apace.

- 10.3 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

- 10.4 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.
- 10.5 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 can share good practice and look 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 will be out to 4 weeks consultation during October

- 12.3 As part of reviewing our relationship with regional European Elected representatives, the Assembly and AWM are holding a workshop on Friday October 12th, at which Malcolm Harbour MEP will be guest speaker, further details from e.knight@wmra.gov.uk

13. TRANSPORT

- 13.1 To ensure that concerns about provision of transport infrastructure are conveyed to Planning Partnership as part of the Phase 2 revision of RSS, a special Regional Transport Partnership (RTP) meeting took place on 13th September. The outcomes of discussion at this meeting will be raised at RPP on 24th September to convey the importance of developing transport infrastructure to support growth in the Region.
- 13.2 Coordination of the Regional Funding Allocation process remains an ongoing priority. In advance of a further request for advice from DfT, RTP is working to develop a clear understanding of the 'evolving' process and to build upon its relationship with DfT.
- 13.3 In setting out his priorities for the future, Liam Byrne MP, Minister for the West Midlands urges the Region to identify its transport priorities and maximise the opportunities presented by the forthcoming Local Transport Bill, by December 2007. Regional partners are working together to identify the transport priorities via the RFA process, RES review and RSS revision.
- 13.4 The RTP has responded to the draft Local Transport Bill consultation, emphasising the need for alignment between local transport authority's Integrated Transport Strategies and Local Transport Plans with current regional strategies and the future Integrated Regional Strategy. RTP recommends that changes in legislation allow for flexibility in the approach, but requires all local transport authorities to adopt an inclusive approach and work with the diverse range of partners e.g. business and other stakeholders.

14. SCRUTINY AND STRATEGIC REVIEW ANNUAL PLAN 2007/8

- 14.1 The Strategic Review Group has developed the 2007/8 annual plan which identifies activities to be carried out from September 2007 to August 2008. This includes scrutiny of Advantage West Midlands' activities in respect of support for the skills agenda (to follow the current strategic review – see Agenda item 13), marketing the Region and Business Link West Midlands. Strategic review activities consist of an examination of transport (panel briefing held on 12 September 2007) and an assessment of the Regional Concordat.
- 14.2 The annual plan will be presented to the Assembly for approval at its meeting on 24 October 2007. The planned reviews have been re-assessed in the light of the publication of the Sub National Review (SNR) and they are still considered to be valid activities that will add value to regional working. The implications of the SNR will be considered as part of each review. The annual plan is a flexible document that can be amended by the Strategic Review Group in light of changing circumstances.

Rose Poulter

Director of Policy

0121 678 1024

r.poulter@wmlga.gov.uk