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WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGY PHASE 3 REVISION: OPTIONS CONSULTATION

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Summary

This paper outlines the consultation on the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy Phase 3 Revision Options, and presents an outline for an AONB Partnership response.

Recommendation

The Partnership is recommended to endorse the general approach of the proposed AONB Partnership response to this consultation.

Background

1. The Regional Spatial Strategy is an important level of planning policy, providing the lead for Local Development Frameworks on a number of topics including housing targets, transport, employment and the environment. The current Strategy is being revised by the West Midlands Regional Assembly in Phases - Phase 1 focused on the Black Country; Phase 2 focussed on housing, transport and towns. The current Phase 3 includes Critical Rural Services; Provision of Gypsy & Traveller sites; Culture, Sport & Tourism; Environmental protection and improvement; and Minerals. This phase is therefore the most directly relevant to the AONB.
2. The consultation runs until 14 August. The West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum held a seminar on the consultation (to which we were unable to send a representative), and are sharing draft responses with other interested respondents including ourselves. The questionnaire for responses runs to 31 pages of detailed questions, which carry little meaning without reading the main document. While it is not therefore practical to include a full draft response with this paper, a copy of this can be provided to any members on request who may have a deeper interest. Some general comments about the AONB Partnership's proposed response are made below.
3. Critical Rural Services. Our response here should take much the same line as that we recently made to the Shropshire Core Strategy on the rural rebalance issue.
4. Gypsy & Traveller sites. It is not proposed to respond to this section.
5. Culture, Sport & Tourism. The importance of the landscape and a sustainable approach to these topics will be stressed.

6. Environmental protection and improvement. This is a large section with relevant parts on 'an integrated approach to managing environmental resources', landscape, historic environment, biodiversity, forestry and woodlands, the water environment, flooding, agricultural land, renewable energy and the green belt. The analysis in this section is mostly good and the issues identified for RSS policies to cover generally supported. Our proposed response makes the case for the protected landscape policy element of the RSS to be included within the new overarching environmental policy QE1, rather than as proposed in the landscape section. This is to avoid exacerbating a commonly observed but unhelpfully narrow perception of what protected landscapes are about. Quotes are included in support of this from Natural England's Draft Protected Landscapes policy, referring to the broad range of environmental, social and economic benefits deriving from protected landscapes.
7. Minerals. This section has not yet been assessed in relation to a Partnership response. While there is active mineral working in the AONB, much of the content of this section will have little bearing on the area.

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| <p>List of Background Papers</p> <p>The consultation document and supporting documents are available at http://www.wmra.gov.uk/Planning_and_Regional_Spatial_Strategy/RSS_Revision/RSS_Revision_Phase_3.aspx</p> |
| <p>Human Rights Act Appraisal</p> <p>The information in this report is compatible with the Human Rights Act 1998.</p> |
| <p>Environmental Appraisal</p> <p>The recommendation in this paper will contribute to the conservation of protected landscapes.</p> |
| <p>Risk Management Appraisal</p> <p>Risk management has been appraised as part of the considerations of this report.</p> |
| <p>Community / Consultations Appraisal</p> <p>Some members of the AONB Partnership have been involved in this consultation in their own capacity.</p> |
| <p>Appendices</p> <p>Appendix 1 Pages from the summary booklet on WMRSS Phase 3 Options consultation</p> |



What is the West Midlands Regional Spatial Strategy (WMRSS)?

The WMRSS is a statutory document which provides a framework for the development of the West Midlands Region for the next 20 years. Amongst other things, it sets out how many new houses should be built and where, what improvements are required to the Region's transport network, what employment opportunities should be created and how the environment should be protected and enhanced.

Why is the WMRSS being revised?

When the existing WMRSS was published by Government in June 2004, the Secretary of State endorsed the principles but suggested several new areas that needed to be developed further. Given the range of matters to be considered, it was agreed that the WMRSS Revision should be taken forward in three separate phases.

Phase One of the Revision has been completed and set out a long-term strategy for the Black Country area.

Phase Two is still in progress. This phase has focused on housing figures, employment land, town centres, transport, waste and identifies the towns and cities where new development should be focused.

Phase Three, the current phase, is examining:

- Critical Rural Services
- Provision of Gypsy and Traveller Sites
- Culture, Sports and Tourism

- Environmental protection and improvement
- Minerals

Who is responsible for the WMRSS Revision?

The West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA) is currently the Regional Planning Body for the West Midlands and is responsible for preparing the WMRSS and revisions to it.

The Assembly established a Regional Planning and Environment Executive (RPEE) to agree planning policy and priorities for the Region and help the implementation of the WMRSS. The RPEE is made up of Councillors from local authorities across the Region and representatives from the business sector and from an Other Stakeholders Group.

WMRSS Phase Three Revision – Timetable

The first stage of the WMRSS Phase Three Revision was the publication of a Project Plan which set out the issues to be covered in the Revision. A copy of the Project Plan is available on the Assembly website at www.wmra.gov.uk/Planning_and_Regional_Spatial_Strategy/WMRSS_Revision/WMRSS_Revision_Phase_3.aspx

Because there are likely to be a number of choices as to the nature and content of new or revised policies, an **Options** document is now being issued for consultation. At this stage, policies are not fixed and everybody has a chance to say what they think about the Options before a Preferred Option is developed.



The **Preferred Option**, which is also called the 'Draft WMRSS Revision', will then be submitted to the **Secretary of State**. It is anticipated that the Preferred Option would then be subject to another period of consultation. Under current regulations, once the Draft WMRSS Revision has been submitted to the Secretary of State, management of the final stages of the process would be led by the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM). These regulations will be revised once the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill is enacted later this year.

In July 2007, the Government published a Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration. Among other things, the Government proposes to bring together the Regional Spatial Strategies and the Regional Economic Strategies into a single Regional Strategy for each of the English regions. The work completed to date as part of the Phase Three Revision will be reappraised to ensure it is taken forward into the single Regional Strategy in the most effective way.

The timetable shows how the Revision would be completed under the existing Regulations; but in these circumstances it can only be provisional. The Assembly and GOWM have agreed to review the situation following the Phase Three Options consultation. This review will agree how to take account of emerging legislative certainty and the Phase Two Revision's Panel Report. Regional stakeholders will be kept informed of this review as it progresses.

WMRSS Phase Three Revision Timetable

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| November 2007 | Draft Project Plan launched |
| May 2009 | Project Plan published |
| 29th June to 14th August 2009 | Options document issued for consultation. 7 weeks to have your say |
| Autumn/Winter 2009 (provisional) | Development of a Preferred Option |
| February 2010 (provisional) | Submission of Preferred Option to Secretary of State |
| Spring 2010 (provisional) | Consultation on the Preferred Option |
| Autumn 2010 (provisional) | Examination in Public |
| Spring 2011 (provisional) | Secretary of State's Proposed Changes to be issued for consultation with another chance to have your say |
| Autumn 2011 (provisional) | Final WMRSS Phase Three Revision to be published |

The Options consultation document is designed to help answer some very important questions and this is your chance to have a say and help us shape policies for the West Midlands.

The issues being examined in WMRSS Phase Three Revision are summarised in the following pages.



Issues Being Examined in the WMRSS Phase Three Revision

1. Rural Renaissance - Critical Rural Services

The WMRSS Revision objective is to identify the role of service provision in enhancing the sustainability of rural communities, whether particular services are critical to this process and whether the process itself, and consequently the policies required to address it, varies in different types of rural area.

Rural service provision is obviously a vital component of a sustainable rural settlement. However, defining a list of “critical rural services” is difficult. Various reports emphasise that rural service provision is not static but is a process that moves over time (due to demographic change, technical developments etc) and over place (services in “accessible rural” areas are different and are used differently, from services in “remote rural” areas).

A further issue which needs to be considered is whether opening the door to large amounts of development in rural locations – particularly settlements accessible to the Major Urban Areas – could seriously conflict with other WMRSS policies.

The WMRSS Phase Three Options consultation document seeks views on issues such as whether:

- Addressing service deprivation issues for people in “accessible rural” areas whose access to transport is limited should be a priority;
- New development should be allowed in settlements lacking a service base in order to reverse a cycle of decline in such places; and

- Policy should be driven by the needs and expectations of local people or by climate change considerations.

2. Communities for the Future - Provision for Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Showpeople

The four objectives of the WMRSS Revision are to:

- Increase significantly the number of pitches across the West Midlands in order to address existing under-provision as expressed in the sub-regional Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments;
- Ensure there are sufficient plots in the Region to meet the accommodation needs of travelling showpeople;
- Ensure that all revised gypsy and traveller and travelling showpeople policies recognise, protect and ensure their traditional travelling way of life, whilst also respecting the interests of settled communities; and
- Include fair, realistic and inclusive policies in relation to the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers and travelling showpeople, and that the potential for them to be evicted and thereby become homeless is avoided.

The Government is committed to increasing the levels of authorised site provision for gypsies and travellers and travelling showpeople and has established a new policy framework to significantly reduce the current levels of unauthorized camping. The Government expects local authorities to take a balanced approach by carrying out effective but fair enforcement of planning policies and by working to develop new sites and improve existing ones.



Within the West Midlands Region, the response to gypsy and traveller and travelling showpeople’s accommodation needs by local authorities has been mixed to date. Consequently, the pattern of current provision is fairly uneven, with some local authorities choosing to allocate and deliver sites and others choosing to respond mainly through enforcement.

Findings from sub-regional Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAAs) and outcomes from supplementary work undertaken by the Assembly suggests a regional need for:

- 660 additional residential gypsy and traveller pitches between 2007-2012
- 279 additional residential gypsy and traveller pitches between 2012-2017
- 244 additional transit gypsy and traveller pitches between 2007-2017
- 118 additional travelling showpeople pitches between 2007-2012

The WMRSS Phase Three Options consultation document seeks views on the:

- Number of pitches and plots to accommodate the needs of gypsy and traveller and travelling showpeople across the Region; and
- Distribution of those pitches and plots across the Region.

3. Culture, Sport and Tourism

The WMRSS Revision objective is to strengthen the current policies to support sustainable economic growth and to meet the strategic cultural, sporting and tourism needs of the Region. The Revision aims to:

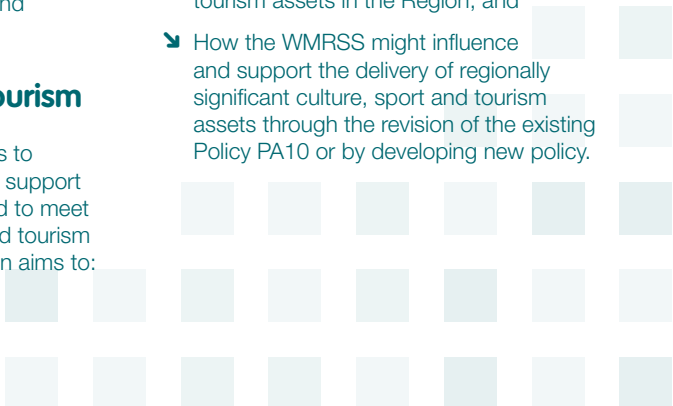
- Improve physical and mental well-being of our communities by encouraging healthier, more active lifestyles and greater and more inclusive access to, and participation in, cultural activities;
- Make the Region more attractive to residents, in-movers and businesses as a result of the cultural offer; and
- Support the growth, vitality and diversification of the regional economy to provide employment and create a ‘world class’ visitor destination.

The WMRSS currently has a policy on tourism and culture (Policy PA10) but its primary focus is on the benefits for economic growth. Culture, sport and tourism are, however, also vitally important for the delivery of sustainable communities as they contribute towards the creation of a better quality of life.

The focus of the WMRSS Revision is to clarify what culture, sport and tourism facilities and assets can be considered as regionally significant and then to identify where any “strategic gaps” in provision might exist.

The WMRSS Phase Three Options consultation document seeks views on:

- The portfolio of culture, sport and tourism assets in the Region; and
- How the WMRSS might influence and support the delivery of regionally significant culture, sport and tourism assets through the revision of the existing Policy PA10 or by developing new policy.





4. Quality of the Environment

The WMRSS Revision objectives are to:

- Update the existing Quality of the Environment policies in the WMRSS to ensure consistency with national guidance and other regional plans, strategies and initiatives;
- Develop a strategy for the protection, conservation, enhancement and management of environmental assets and resources;
- Consider flood risk and set out a strategy to manage that risk;
- Promote the development of renewable and low carbon energy; and
- Consider the need for guidance on the roles and specific uses of the Green Belt.

In particular, the Phase Three Revision seeks to update policies relating to:

- Restoring degraded areas and managing and creating high quality new environments;
- Greenery, urban greenspace and public spaces;
- Protection and enhancement of the historic environment;
- Conservation, enhancement and restoration of the Region's landscape;
- Protecting, managing and enhancing the Region's biodiversity and nature conservation resources;
- Forestry and woodlands; and
- Water environment

The Phase Three Revision also aims to develop a new "Integrated Approach to the Management of Environmental Resources" policy, in response to declining environmental assets, the impacts of climate change and the scale of growth proposed for the Region. A new policy on the management of environmental resources could be environment, growth or spatial strategy led.

A new regional policy on Flood Risk is required to reflect the vulnerability of parts of the Region to flooding from rivers and surface water runoff. The Regional Flood Risk Appraisal provides advice on a policy approach towards this issue.

Consideration is also being given about the need for a new Green Belt policy which would define specific land uses that could be encouraged within the Green Belt. The revision will not, however, review the Green Belt boundaries.

There are a large number of environment policies being revised and many issues relating to each policy. The approach has been to suggest issues that a revised policy could include, and then to seek views on these, including:

- Opportunities for biodiversity enhancement;
- Regional targets for renewable energy; and
- Securing positive uses of the Green Belt.



5. Minerals Policy

The WMRSS Revision objectives are to:

- Develop a policy for safeguarding brick clays, natural building and roofing stone and aggregates;
- Produce new sub-regional apportionments for aggregates for the period to 2026; and
- Examine the supply and demand for brick clays and to ensure that there is appropriate provision made in the Region.

The West Midlands contains mineral deposits which are of national, regional and local significance including gypsum, silica sand, limestone for cement, aggregates, natural building and roofing stone, shale, coal, brick clays and fireclays.

Minerals extraction is an important part of the Region's economy and an adequate supply is necessary to meet society's needs. For construction and maintenance of infrastructure (e.g. roads, flood defences). The relationship between mineral exploitation and the environment is an important one and due regard should be given to environmental issues.

To safeguard important mineral resources in the Region it is suggested that a new regional minerals policy be developed.

The West Midlands current regional requirement for aggregates is apportioned between the sub-regions through the WMRSS and covers the period to 2016. The Government will issue new revised national and regional requirements later this year and the regional provision needs to be rolled forward through the WMRSS to cover the period up to 2026 and apportioned sub-regionally to reflect the occurrence, accessibility and availability of resources across the Region.

Brick clays are found in many parts of England but only some are suitable for use in the manufacture of bricks, pipes and tiles, or for environmental and engineering uses. Some valuable clays (including etruria marl and fireclays) are scarce and only occur in limited locations such as the specific outcrops within the West Midlands. Security of supplies of brick clay over a period of 25 years is needed by operators to justify and secure the large level of investment required to set up, maintain and modernise existing brick making plant and tileries in the West Midlands.

The WMRSS Phase Three Options consultation document seeks views on:

- How to best safeguard the most important minerals in the Region;
- Apportionment of future supplies of construction aggregates across the Region; and
- How to meet the need for future supplies of brick clay in the Region.

As part of the WMRSS Phase Three Revision, a **Sustainability Appraisal** will be undertaken to look at the environmental, economic and social effects of the revised policies. A **Habitat Regulations Assessment** will also ensure that revised policies do not adversely affect European habitat sites within the West Midlands. In addition, **Rural Proofing** will be carried out to ensure that the needs of rural areas are adequately considered.