

'Councils' Role In Promoting Economic Growth'

Councils in the West Midlands are focussed on stimulating, encouraging and supporting economic growth in our local communities. Notwithstanding the range of activities that each Council is undertaking to support economic growth, of most concern is the low level of private sector job retention and creation across the West Midlands.

The West Midlands has very significant challenges to overcome in respect to creating jobs in the private sector. The 10 years to 2009 has seen the West Midlands as the only region to see a net loss of private sector jobs. In addition for the 12 months from June 2010 the West Midlands lost 26,100 public sector jobs and a further 13,500 from the private sector.

Similarly increasing GVA is just as challenging - GVA per hour worked in the West Midlands is the third lowest in the UK with only Wales and Northern Ireland's lower. In 2009 manufacturing accounted for £14bn or 15% of Region's GVA, compared to 12% for the UK as a whole. Also in 2009 8.5% of the UK workforce was employed in manufacturing, the comparable figure for the West Midlands was 11%, down from 22 % in 1996.

Faced with these challenges Councils are working to secure the right conditions for business to develop, establish and thrive. Councils want to give confidence to business, LEAs, partners and Government that they can and do work together to provide the right environment to create jobs. Within tight fiscal constraints Councils are providing the following services to support economic growth:-

- Provide a responsive, balanced and fair planning system to support business including co-operation with neighbouring authorities to support investment and growth
- Assemble land for business opportunities and infrastructure development
- Ensure the regulatory framework for which Councils are responsible is accessible and transparent e.g. trading standards, waste collection and disposal, environmental health, etc.

- Procurement of services and products from local suppliers
- Joining up services at the local level
- Provide intelligence and strategic context for local decision making
- Supporting LEPs

Councils will also lead strategic discussions with partners to:-

- Ensure transport infrastructure providers such as Network Rail and Highways Agency deliver schemes that enable business to get goods markets and employees to and from work.
- Work with schools, academies, colleges, Universities and business to plan for and provide the workforce of the future.
- Secure energy supplies, mitigate flood risk, guide the location of waste processing facilities and mineral extractions.
- Free up liquidity and investment capital – use of pension funds etc.
- Explore new financial mechanisms.
- Ensure effective business support.

Where the above involves cross boundary working or the main funding body has a different or larger spatial footprint, Councils will work with the neighbours or work via West Midlands Councils¹. This approach acknowledges the variable economic geography at play for different issues and how other infrastructure and service providers including developers, universities, energy providers, Highways Agency or Network Rail etc are organised. Working together Councils will collectively provide a stronger position from which to lobby with partners for enhanced powers and devolution of funding streams from Government, secure European funding and shape relevant national and international debates.

Councils will develop working arrangements appropriate to the issue in hand. In most instances these will be informal and light touch. Where bilateral arrangements are required these will be agreed locally, clusters of Councils will meet as ad hoc partnerships and regional dialogue will be facilitated by West Midlands Councils. Overleaf we illustrate what this means by looking at transport infrastructure:-

¹ West Midlands Councils (WMC) is a voluntary organisation of the 33 local authorities in the West Midlands established to provide the voice on local government matters at a regional, national and international level. It provides services which reflect the issues local authorities agree are important and where there is value in working together on shared agendas and cross boundary activities.

Transport - In an area with a high proportion of manufacturing businesses connections to markets and suppliers, internationally, nationally, and locally by road, rail, air and sea, are of key importance. In a recent exercise Councils identified important transport infrastructure which would contribute to positive economic outcomes. Many of these will be taken forward at the local level such as improved bus routes, road junction improvements and cycle paths; but a significant number require cross boundary working if they are to be successfully taken forward. In addition investments in many key local schemes will have a positive effect on the regional and national networks. For example from the list below M1 J19/M6/A14 improvements will have local, regional and national benefits, and require funding from Councils and the Highways Agency/DfT.

The following are illustrative examples to demonstrate the need for cross boundary working at different spatial levels:-

- Bi Lateral
 - Supporting improved local connections and movement of people and goods between local centres
 - For Example
 - i54 road links
 - A5 dualling Shrewsbury to Ruabon

- Clusters of Councils
 - Enabling improved connections between centres
 - For Example
 - Congestion hotspot eg A46/Toll Bar Island

- Regional
 - Facilitating connections and movement of people and freight between cities and into/out of the West Midlands
 - For Example
 - Rail franchises- West Coast Mainline 2012 and London Midland 2014 (?)
 - Motorways – M1 J19/M6/A14, M54/M6/M6Toll Link, Managed Motorway extensions, Junction improvements eg J5 – 8 M6 managed motorway phase 3
 - Access to Birmingham Airport by road, rail and other public transport
 - Access European funding opportunities for transport infrastructure on a regional basis

- High Speed 2²
- National
 - Lobbying for a reliable motorway and trunk road network
 - Enhanced rail connectivity between citiesFor Example
 - Reliable and efficient rail network – services to London are a particular priority.
- International
 - Airports - Access to worldwide destinations especially from Birmingham, also Manchester and other European Hubs
 - Access to ports for goods M1 and A14 improvements
 - Connectivity to HS1

² High Speed 2 – the authorities which are supportive of HS2 will want to work with like minded authorities and organisations, those who do not support it will similarly want to work with like minded authorities and organisations