



OFFICE OF THE
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Sustainable communities in the West Midlands

Building for the future



Foreword

We are transforming our communities and reversing the legacy of decades of under-investment.

We have achieved a great deal, but we need to do more. In some parts of the country there are still areas of acute deprivation where demand for housing has collapsed. In others, demand for housing continues to outstrip supply, leading to rising house prices and shortages of affordable housing. We need a step change in our approach to tackle these problems. We need to work together to build sustainable communities in which people want to live. Central government must play its part, which is why we are changing our approach to housing, regeneration and planning: investing some £22bn England-wide over the next three years. But delivery depends on a change of approach at the local, regional and national levels. That is why we want to move away from the old, top-down policies of the past where decisions were taken for local communities rather than by them.

Our focus is on building partnerships for change, providing the regions with the tools and resources to make a difference, and making sure we link what we build and how we build with plans for public services, transport, and jobs.

We have already strengthened regional policy and devolved decision-making for economic development and planning. Now, for the first time, we will decentralise housing policy and give the regions a real say in how we invest in our communities.

This Regional Action Plan – together with our national document – sets out the policies, resources and partnerships we will put in place for successful, thriving communities in every part of the country.

Our aim is to carry this action plan forward with regional partners and local government to ensure that together we can build sustainable communities that we can be proud of and that will stand the test of time.



John Prescott, MP
Deputy Prime Minister

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Prescott". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Introduction

Sustainable communities: Building for the future (a national plan of action) marks a step change in our approach to sustainable communities, creating places where people want to live and where they will continue to want to live. We want to build and support communities that:

- ◆ *are economically prosperous;*
- ◆ *have decent homes at a price people can afford;*
- ◆ *safeguard the countryside;*
- ◆ *enjoy a well-designed, accessible and pleasant living and working environment;*
- ◆ *are effectively and fairly represented and governed, with a strong sense of community.*

The Regions' White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice*, set out the Government's plans to decentralise power and strengthen regional policy. It provided for directly elected assemblies to go ahead in regions where people want them, and for strengthened arrangements in all regions to improve strategic planning and delivery. The national plan of action is a further step in this direction with a substantial shift in responsibilities for the use of housing resources. People in the regions will in future have the responsibility for deciding how the available resources can best be used to meet the needs of the region, a substantial further devolution of responsibilities. We need to make the most of this opportunity in the West Midlands.

This regional plan sets out proposals for implementing the national plan of action in the West Midlands. It does not attempt to cover all the issues of importance to communities. It highlights actions to address housing, neighbourhood renewal issues, planning, transport, economy, employment and skills. The Government Office for the West Midlands will be working with regional and local partners over the coming months to build on these proposals, to link them with other relevant programmes, and to turn policies into action.

Communities in the West Midlands

A key characteristic of the West Midlands is its diversity. It is home to 5.3 million people and at its heart lies a conurbation with a population of 2.55 million. However, 70% of the land area of the West Midlands is agricultural and within the region's extensive, attractive and accessible countryside there are four areas of outstanding natural beauty, a world heritage site (Ironbridge) and many historic towns and cathedral cities.

Birmingham and the Black Country are among the most densely populated areas of the country, while parts of Shropshire and Herefordshire are among the least densely populated. Both bring particular challenges for building sustainable, cohesive communities and in delivering high quality public services.

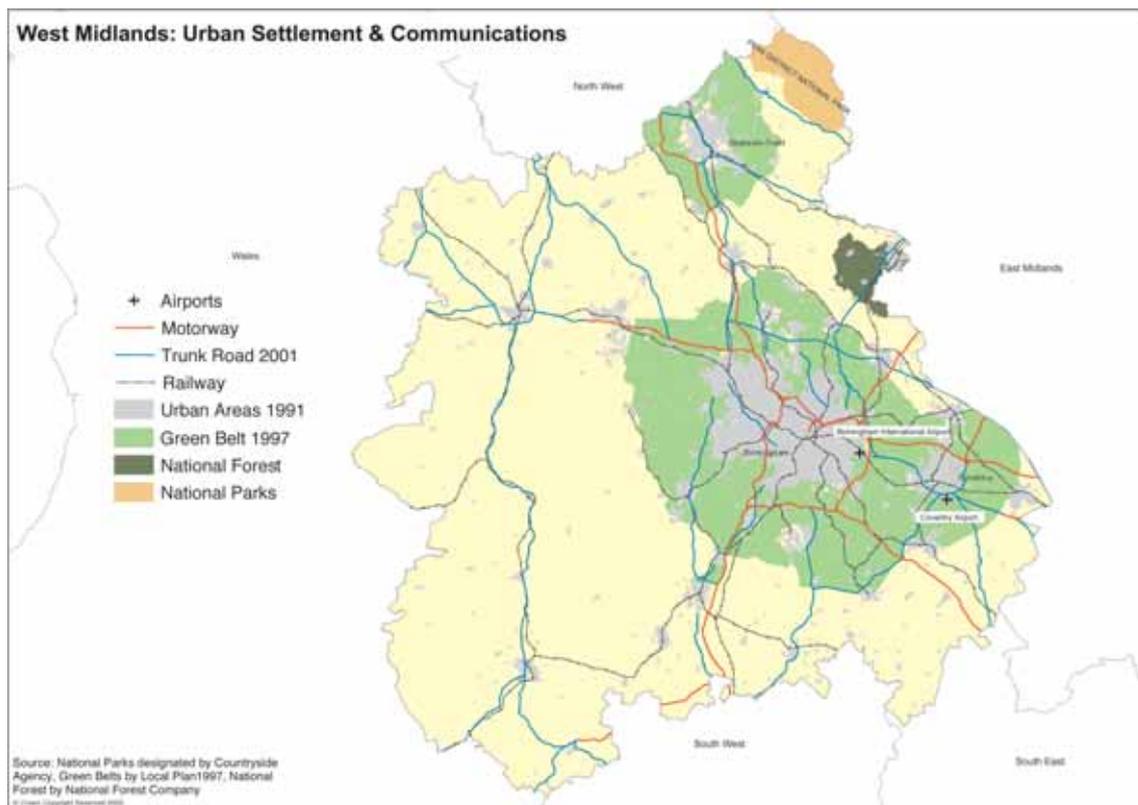
Some 10% of the population of the West Midlands region are members of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities – only in London do the BME communities form a higher proportion of the regional population. More than 80% of the region's BME population live in Birmingham, Coventry, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

In implementing the national plan of action in the West Midlands we will need to respond to the four key issues identified by the Regional Planning Body and its regional partners. These are:

- ◆ **Urban Renaissance** – *developing the major urban areas in such a way that they increasingly meet their own economic and social needs, countering the unsustainable outward drift of people and jobs.*
- ◆ **Rural Renaissance** – *addressing more effectively the changes which are challenging the traditional roles of rural areas.*
- ◆ **Diversifying and modernising the region's economy** – *ensuring that opportunities for growth are linked to meeting needs and that they help reduce social exclusion.*
- ◆ **Modernising the transport infrastructure of the region** – *to support the sustainable development of the West Midlands.*

We have a tradition in the West Midlands of effective partnership working. We need to ensure that proposals within this document are also implemented within this context of regional partnership. This will ensure that we make the most of the opportunities the national plan of action presents to make a real, positive impact on the quality of life in our communities. We will ensure that

appropriate links are made with other regional strategies, such as the Regional Economic Strategy, Regional Planning Guidance, Regional Cultural Strategy and the European Objective 2 Single Programming Document, so that the resources available have the maximum effect.



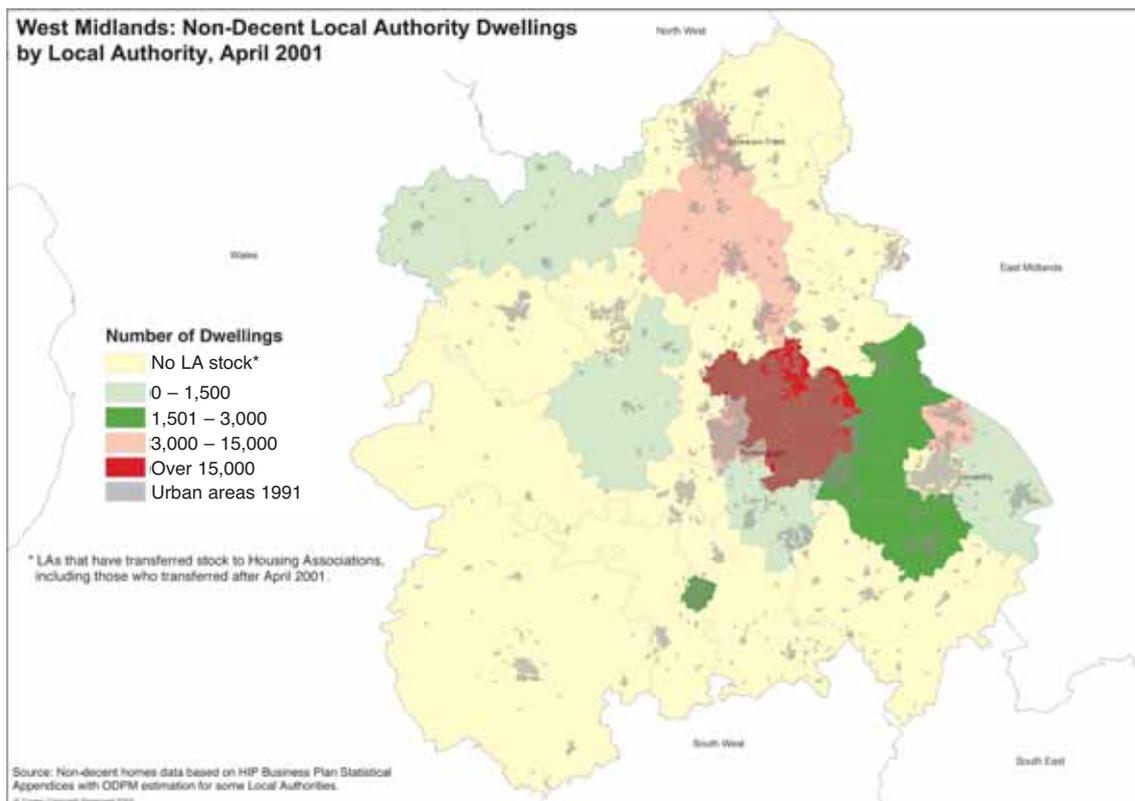
Strategic challenges for the West Midlands

Housing

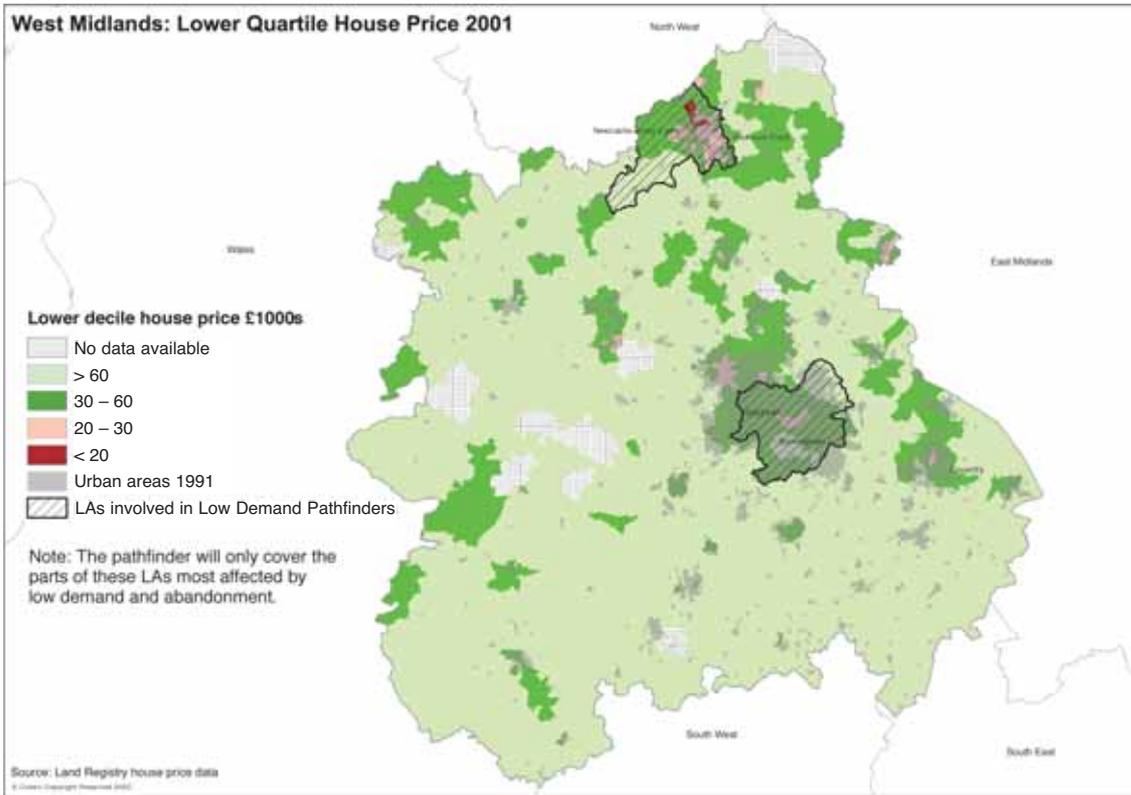
The challenge

- ◆ **Tackle poor housing conditions in the social and private sectors.** Around 15% of all households in the region live in housing that is either unfit or in disrepair. Most of the poorest housing is concentrated in the major urban areas with a disproportionate impact on communities already facing significant levels of deprivation.
- ◆ **Ensure effective action towards meeting the Decent Homes standard in the social housing sector.** There are 20 local authorities with housing stock in the West Midlands, managing almost 300,000 dwellings in total. Around 60% have been categorised as failing the Decent Homes standard with the majority concentrated in the major urban areas.

- ◆ **Improve more non-decent homes in the private sector, especially those occupied by vulnerable households.**
The life of the private sector stock has been prolonged by programmes of incremental investment over the years, but benefits have often been short term and in some areas there is now a need for further investment.



- ◆ **Support urban and rural renaissance by arresting the shift of population from the conurbations to the rest of the region.**
Parts of the former have weak housing demand and relatively low prices. For example, the average price of a semi-detached house in Worcestershire is now estimated to be more than double that in Stoke-on-Trent.
- ◆ **Tackle the problems of low demand.**
Research by the University of Birmingham into changing patterns of housing demand in the West Midlands has highlighted parts of Birmingham, the Black Country and North Staffordshire, as having a heightened risk of market failure.
- ◆ **Ensure optimal development of brownfield sites in urban areas.** Although the region has a target of achieving 65% of housing development on previously developed land and buildings (Regional Sustainability Framework), wide variations exist within the region, from 28% in Hereford to over 90% in Coventry and Sandwell.



◆ **Ensure provision of sufficient affordable homes in areas of shortage.** In the south east of the region and rural areas adjoining major transport routes, house prices are high. In the remote rural west house prices are high relative to local incomes, which tend to be lower than elsewhere in the region. The shortage of affordable housing in these areas coupled with the continuing loss of affordable rented housing means that local households are often unable to enter the housing market.

◆ **Tackle the factors that cause homelessness.** During 2001/02, 14,887 households were classified as homeless, an increase of 7.8% on the previous year. Despite this, problems of homelessness are not prevalent throughout the region and the use of bed and breakfast accommodation is relatively limited. Nearly half of the homeless households in the region were in Birmingham and Walsall alone. However there are signs of increasing homelessness in some rural centres and also to some degree in towns closer to the conurbation.

The plan for action

A new regional approach

◆ We propose to set up a new West Midlands Housing Board to ensure the delivery of policies set out in this document. Chaired by the Regional Director for Government Office West Midlands, it will include representatives of the Regional Assembly,

the West Midlands Local Government Association, the Housing Corporation, the Regional Development Agency – Advantage West Midlands (AWM) and English Partnerships. The Board will:

- Ensure that the Regional Housing Strategy, now being developed by the Regional Housing Partnership (a strategic housing forum with a wide representation of key stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors), is consistent with and supportive of other regional strategies for land use, transport and economic development. The Strategy will build on the key issues identified in the West Midlands Regional Housing Statement 2001.*
- Advise Ministers on how best to allocate government funding for housing in the West Midlands region. Key regional priorities under the new Single Regional Housing Pot will be to secure decent homes, and affordable homes for those who need them.*

Decent homes – social sector

- ◆ Nationally, the Government will be providing around £2.8bn over the next three years to help improve council housing.*
- ◆ Fourteen of the 34 housing authorities in the region have already transferred their council stock to Registered Social Landlords and a further six authorities hold places on the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) programme.*
- ◆ The national plan of action announces the removal of unnecessary barriers to stock transfer, the launch of the third Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) bidding round and plans to make it easier to refurbish council houses through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). The Government Office, along with the Community Housing Task Force, will continue to work closely with local authorities to ensure that Decent Homes targets are delivered to provide better living conditions for local people and to help those that have not already developed a strategy to upgrade their council housing to the decent homes standard to decide which of these options is best for their stock.*

In September 2000 Coventry City Council transferred the whole of its council housing stock (over 19,000 homes) to the Whitefriars Housing Group. Whitefriars have now embarked on a six-year programme of £240m investment in the housing stock and broader regeneration projects. Projects so far include plans to demolish eight unpopular city centre tower blocks, obtaining £180,000 in grants for anti-social behaviour and crime-cutting initiatives, and focusing on working directly with a BME company to refurbish a number of empty homes.

Decent homes – private sector

- ◆ *The Government Office will work with West Midlands local authorities to develop effective Private Sector Renewal programmes to enable them to make use of the greater freedoms now available.*

ART Homes is a not-for-profit company and subsidiary of Aston Reinvestment Trust. ART Homes aims to provide affordable loans to low-income homeowners for repair and maintenance of their properties; a market seen as uneconomic by mainstream lenders. ART Homes is working with Birmingham City Council through its House Proud scheme and has received grant support from the city, opening up leverage for other funding from financial institutions.

Low demand

- ◆ *The Government Office, along with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) colleagues, will work closely with Low Demand Pathfinder authorities to develop effective strategies and programmes to reverse market decline and secure a long-term and sustainable future for the communities affected.*

£500m has been allocated over the next three years in the national plan of action to launch nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinders. The two Low Demand Pathfinder areas in the West Midlands, in North West Birmingham/Sandwell and North Staffordshire will get a share of this pot. Taken together the two areas contain over 120,000 homes and populations totalling around 300,000. Both areas have established high level, widely based Partnerships. Work is in hand to identify projects for early action on the ground while the long term prospectuses are developed. In addition, early consideration is being given in Birmingham/Sandwell to rationalising administrative arrangements within the Pathfinder area. Access to Capital Modernisation Funding of £2.6m will enable early work to proceed.

Affordable homes

- ◆ *The Single Regional Housing Pot funds will tackle affordable housing needs as identified by the West Midlands Housing Board. Schemes are likely to focus mainly on providing housing for rent with support too for those seeking to become homeowners. Key factors will be the long term sustainability of communities with respect to transport, reasonable access to centres of employment and retail activity as well as wider social facilities such as education and medical centres.*

- ◆ *The Housing Corporation has a target to deliver 1,600 affordable homes in small rural settlements throughout England in 2003/04. This will be increased to 3,500 over the two years 2004/05 and 2005/06.*
- ◆ *We are in the process of removing the restrictions on the Cash Incentive Scheme so that councils are free to assist tenants to buy their own homes wherever this is a good value for money way to free up a council home.*

Wentnor Housing and Shop Development is the result of an innovative approach to providing affordable homes for local people in a deep rural area of Shropshire. South Shropshire Housing Association, supported by funding from South Shropshire DC, the Countryside Agency, and the Post Office Rural Enablement Fund, were able to achieve the development of eight homes. This was done through a Section 106 agreement preserving the properties in perpetuity for local people with clear criteria to ensure that local people were beneficiaries of the new homes. The scheme included a shop unit which is now the centre of a flourishing business which has created a small network of rural shops/Post Offices as well as opportunities for employment.

Homelessness

- ◆ *Local Authorities are required to produce Homelessness Strategies by April 2003. The Government Office will work with authorities and monitor their progress in developing new responses to tackling homelessness.*

Housing supply

- ◆ *We will consult on powers to enable local authorities to lease compulsorily properties that have been empty for more than six months so as to bring them back into use.*
- ◆ *We will legislate to allow councils to charge up to 90% of the full council tax on second homes and to end completely the discount for empty homes.*

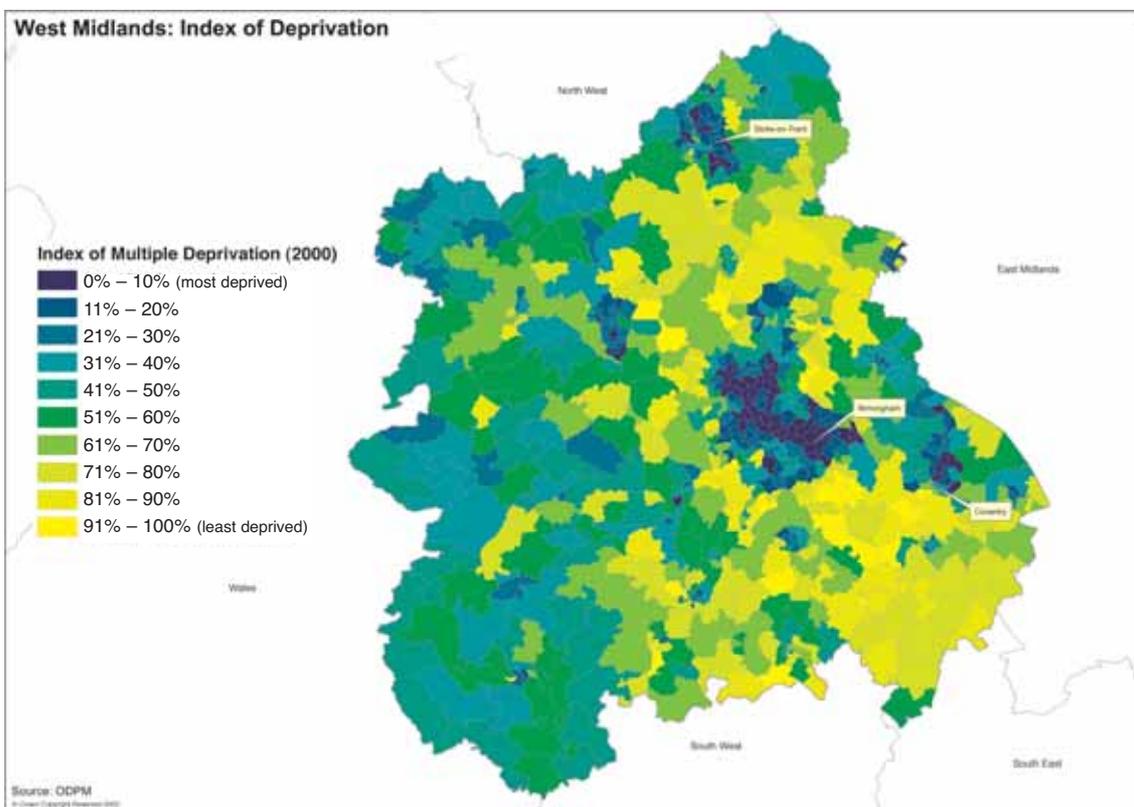
Neighbourhood renewal

The challenge

◆ **Reduce the level of deprivation in the region's communities.**

The West Midlands has areas of severe deprivation, with 69 of the region's 789 wards (covering 19% of the region's population) ranked within the most deprived 10% in England. Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Stoke-on-Trent, Walsall and Wolverhampton are all among the 88 most deprived districts in England and are therefore eligible for Neighbourhood Renewal Funding.

◆ **Address the challenges of crime and drug abuse for delivering sustainable communities.** *Total recorded crime in the region rose by 8.4% during the last financial year. Robbery and burglary saw rises of 19.4% and 4.9%, and pose particular challenges for delivering sustainable communities. Drug abuse is a similar challenge.*



The plan for action

◆ *The Government's neighbourhood renewal programme in the West Midlands includes:*

- *New Deal for Communities (NDC) in six severely deprived communities, which is making £50m available over 10 years for Sandwell, Wolverhampton, Birmingham (Aston), Birmingham (Kings Norton), Coventry and Walsall.*

- Support for neighbourhood renewal in Birmingham, Coventry, Stoke, Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton through funding of £121.8m over three years provided by the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.
- Neighbourhood Management Programmes in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Burton-on-Trent, which are running small seven-year programmes testing models of neighbourhood management.
- 64 Sure Start programmes in the West Midlands including rural schemes and Sure Start Plus pilots, which address the needs of teenage parents. Total funding is £100m over 10 years.
- The Children's Fund programme which is developing preventive services for children and young people aged 5-13 at risk of social exclusion. Over £13m has been allocated to the West Midlands in 2002/3 rising to £20m for 2003/4.

AWM intends to concentrate 70% of its resources for the foreseeable future in six Regeneration Zones (five urban and one rural). These are areas where communities are in the greatest need but also where opportunities can be identified.

- ◆ *The Government will provide £201m over the next three years for schemes to improve liveability throughout the country.*
- ◆ *We will be working to ensure that the West Midlands European Structural Objective 2 funding (the largest in the country) is spent to the greatest benefit of communities in the eligible areas.*
- ◆ *We are actively engaged with our 34 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships and 14 Drugs Action Teams; supporting their action through funding programmes and helping them to share information. On drug misuse we are focusing on effective action for treatment through to enforcement. All police forces in the region are operating Arrest Referral Schemes. West Midlands Police have established a national pilot project to tackle the supply of drugs within the West Midlands.*
- ◆ *We are supporting specific work to ensure that Neighbourhood Renewal funds are properly linked to the work of the local Crime & Disorder Reduction Partnerships and to raise the profile of neighbourhood safety in the business planning of Local Strategic Partnerships.*
- ◆ *We are leading a national pilot to introduce a single pot for community development funding in Wolverhampton and Herefordshire during 2003/04.*

We are working with our emerging Regional Centre of Excellence for Regeneration and finding new ways to meet the training needs of regeneration practitioners in LSPs, NDCs, neighbourhood management initiatives, local authorities and other public agencies.

Planning

The challenge

◆ ***To create the variety and choice of high quality living and working environments required for urban renaissance.***

To deliver this, a range of issues will need to be addressed together, including:

- More efficient use of housing land and better use of previously developed land and buildings;*
- Improving urban design, with increased accessibility and reduced crime;*
- Provision of high quality health, education, cultural, leisure and other services;*
- Integrated renewal strategies to deliver mixed tenure neighbourhoods incorporating social and market housing;*
- Provision of well designed and safe open spaces, close to communities, for formal and informal recreation.*

The plan for action

- ◆ *We are now considering the report of the Panel which held a Public Examination of draft Regional Planning Guidance (RPG) and will publish the Secretary of State's proposed changes shortly.*
- ◆ *We are continuing to support the Regional Planning body on delivery and monitoring mechanisms, so that when RPG is adopted the processes are in place to ensure effective and integrated delivery of policies.*
- ◆ *We will work closely with Local Planning Authorities to help them ensure a smooth transition from Development Plans to Local Development Frameworks by 2006 and to perform at or above best value targets for development control by 2006.*
- ◆ *An additional £350m nationally over the next three years will be provided to speed up the planning system and improve the quality of what we build and where we build it.*

Telford and Wrekin – East Ketley Millennium Village, funded by English Partnerships, AWM and Telford and Wrekin Council, will provide 800 housing units, together with a school, community centre and a new retail centre on a 34 hectare urban brownfield site. The project is being taken forward through active community involvement and will create an energy efficient and environmentally responsible development with sustainable public transport and a high density community at the heart of Telford.

Transport

The challenge

- ◆ **To address the poor personal mobility of many of the region's communities.** In the West Midlands many of the transport networks serving local communities are also key parts of the national road or rail network.
- ◆ **To improve the ability of communities to travel to work.** The WM Metropolitan area has a longer average travel to work time than any area outside London.
 - Average daily flows on built-up roads are higher than any region except London.
 - Average peak traffic speeds are lower than any region except London.
 - Public transport suffers from both poor performance and perception. Less than half of all trains are on time on some lines. Even on the most reliable routes a fifth of trains are late. Bus passenger satisfaction is the lowest in the country.

The plan for action

- ◆ The 10-Year Plan for Transport is starting to deliver a real increase in funding for local authorities, enabling them to deliver integrated transport schemes across the region. Between 2000/01 and 2003/4 the regional allocation for small schemes has increased from £34.7m to £86m.
- ◆ Additionally, more than 20 major schemes (over £5m) have been provisionally or fully approved since 2000 including:
 - Birmingham & Sandwell – Outer Circle Bus Showcase, improving bus services
 - Centro – Metro extensions to Five Ways and Brierley Hill
 - Staffordshire – Biddulph Bypass, to relieve and regenerate a deprived community
 - Warwickshire – Nuneaton Development Project, regenerating a town centre
 - Worcestershire – Wyre Piddle Bypass, relieving a community of heavy traffic
- ◆ Multi-Modal Studies for the M6 corridor and the West Midlands Metropolitan conurbation have recommended a range of measures to improve movement on the trunk road network. Many of these measures involve action at the local level, to encourage changes in behaviour amongst the travelling public, improving the accessibility and integration of local bus and train services. The Government

has announced that the M6 between Birmingham and Manchester will be improved. It is planned to widen it to four lanes, together with junction improvements and new safety measures.

Worcestershire – Easylink Service, funded by Rural Challenge, provides high quality rural services linking to health, education, shopping and leisure facilities in the main urban areas of the county. Further funding will provide two fully accessible minibuses to supplement and complement existing services. As part of the ACTIVATE project, also initiated through the joint partnership, smart card ticketing is to be introduced.

Economy, employment and skills

The challenge

- ◆ **Tackle the wide variations in unemployment within the region's communities.** Although at its lowest level for many years unemployment varies from below 2.5% in parts of the south and west of the region to above 5% in Birmingham and Sandwell.
- ◆ **Improve performance in existing sectors of the economy while attracting new high value-added activities.** The region's productivity lags behind national levels and this is reflected in regional Gross Value Added (GVA) per head which is 8% below the national average.
- ◆ **Enhance competitiveness by improving the skills of the region's workforce.** The region is among the poorer performers in terms of qualifications attainment at all levels, yet in the new economy employers increasingly need workers who are adaptable and who have modern skills.

The plan for action

- ◆ We will work with AWM and other partners to implement the Regional Economic Strategy (RES), by for example, the use of European Programmes. The RES aims to develop a diverse and dynamic business base, to promote a learning and skillful region, to create the conditions for growth and to regenerate communities.
- ◆ We will support the Agenda for Action, published by AWM in partnership with the West Midlands Regional Assembly. This defines 60 key actions for delivering the RES and making the best use of around £30bn of resources available over the next 10 years. They focus on six Regeneration Zones, covering the most disadvantaged parts of the region; 10 Business Clusters; and three High Technology Corridors.

- ◆ *We will support the regional framework for employment & skills action (FRESA), which aims to address skills shortages & encourage employers to the region to boost job opportunities.*

Other key actions

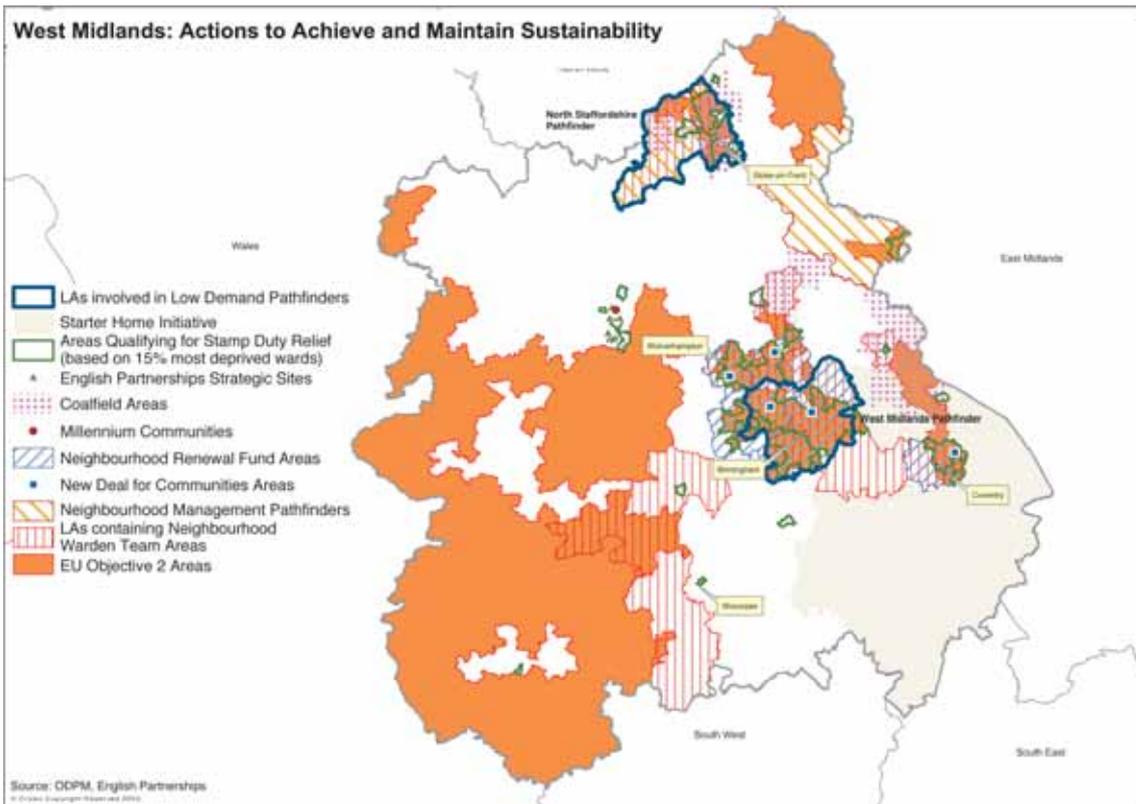
Rural regeneration

- ◆ *Twenty per cent of the West Midlands population lives in the 80% of the region which is rural. The Marches in particular suffer from the problems of a widely dispersed ageing population which has been highly dependent on agriculture. Rural regeneration will focus on:*
 - *supporting existing businesses and encouraging diversification*
 - *developing the role of market towns*
 - *improving public transport access to jobs and services*
 - *providing affordable housing to meet local needs.*
- ◆ *We will continue to support the work of the region's Rural Accord, a concordat between key regional stakeholders. The signatories to the Accord have jointly funded a Co-ordinator to help take this work forward.*
- ◆ *We will continue to provide the Secretariat for the regional Rural Affairs Forum, which ensures that the voice of the region is heard at the centre of government.*
- ◆ *We will work with AWM and other regional stakeholders to develop a regional delivery plan for the Government's Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy.*

Health and inequalities

- ◆ *We will work with regional partners to improve the quality and design of existing and new housing stock, in order to tackle cold and dampness. We will also focus on safety both inside and outside the home.*
- ◆ *We will continue to work with local authorities and the 30 Primary Care Trusts to tackle the high rate of teenage pregnancies across the region, and with the Housing Corporation to ensure housing provision for teenage parents.*
- ◆ *We are supporting work to map access to the fruit and vegetable outlets which are a key aspect of healthier communities.*
- ◆ *We will also work with regional partners to ensure that communities have access to exercise facilities, including leisure and sport. We will continue to support travel wise co-ordinators in*

promoting green travel plans, walking to school and other walking initiatives. Work is also underway with Sport England in the development of Local Exercise Action pilots and Sport Action Zones.



Summary of key Government programmes in the West Midlands

European Structural Funds⁺

European funding used to stimulate economic development in the EU's least prosperous regions. Amounts include the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the European Social Fund (ESF). ERDF of £430m and ESF of £374.5m for 2000 to 2006

Advantage West Midlands

Advantage West Midlands development agency co-ordinates economic development and regeneration to improve the relative competitiveness of the region. £141m spent in 2001/02 and £222m projected for 2002/03

Housing Corporation (ADP)

Housing Corporation administered annual housing capital fund allocated to housing associations. £59m for 2001/02, £65m for 2002/03 and £79m for 2003/04

Housing Investment Programme (HIP)

Programme to provide housing capital funding for local authority housing. Amounts include Annual Capital Guidelines and Private Sector Renewal Grant. £99m for 2001/2, £100m for 2002/03 and £79m for 2003/04

Major Repairs Allowance (MRA)

Resources to meet the ongoing capital costs of maintaining the current condition of local authority housing stock. £165m for 2001/02, £164m for 2002/03 and £155m for 2003/04

Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (NRU)

The NRU funds various programmes in the region to narrow the gap between deprived neighbourhoods and the rest of the country. £122m for 2001/04

New Deal for Communities (NDC)

A community led partnership based around renewal in communities including pioneering approaches to neighbourhood management. £320m over 10 years

⁺ at £1:€1.65

Next steps

The aim of the proposals set out in this Plan is to make our communities places where people want to live and to work. Success in this will make a real and lasting improvement to the quality of life of people in many parts of the West Midlands – urban and rural – where communities daily face the problems associated with social exclusion and deprivation.

We can only achieve this goal by bringing the collective resource and experience of all regional partners to bear on the issues we face in the fields of housing, neighbourhood renewal, planning, transport and health. Regional Partners must now convert these proposals into an Action Plan. The Government Office for the West Midlands will play a full role in facilitating this but the resulting plan must be the region's plan and not one imposed by central government.

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