

WORKING TOGETHER FOR A BETTER WEST MIDLANDS

A Manifesto

This manifesto concerns everyone who has an interest in the economic, social and environmental well-being of the West Midlands. It has been produced by Futures Network West Midlands. We are a voluntary body of people who live and work in the region and care passionately about its future.

We contend that in order for the West Midlands to be prosperous and sustainable its governing bodies and their partners need to work together to frame and deliver policies 'beyond the local'.

We call for:

- *A 'wider than local' strategic approach to delivering prosperity in the West Midlands;*
- *Improved measures to enhance the economic performance of the region and assist the rebalancing of the national economy;*
- *The development of a framework to ensure that the benefits of investment are shared by communities in all parts of the region;*
- *Increased investment in infrastructure particularly for transport, energy and broad band connectivity;*
- *More effective co-ordination of housing policy to ensure that the region's housing needs are met within sustainable communities;*
- *The better championing of the region's historic, cultural and natural environment.*

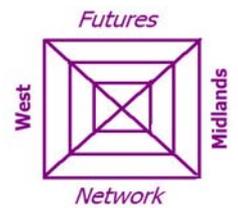
To achieve this, we believe that 'localism' needs to be enhanced by better strategic planning and policy co-ordination. It should involve political and business leaders, alongside third sector social and environmental champions to provide the region with an effective and unified 'voice'.

What exactly is the Problem?

The West Midlands faces a number of serious challenges. These include:

- Accommodating an increasing population;
- Improving economic performance and connectivity;
- Tackling inequalities of health and well-being in different parts of the region;
- Protecting natural resources; and
- Responding to climate change.





Yet, the current arrangements for agreeing and approving policy priorities and developments within the region are inadequate.

- There is little co-ordination of economic policy across functional economic areas, leading to the inefficient use of limited public resources through duplication and counter-bidding;
- Decisions about priorities are still being driven by central government. Collectively, the West Midlands is not succeeding in making the case for the resources required to maintain and improve its strategic transport and other infrastructure;
- The Duty to Co-operate on local plans between local authorities is not working well with few agreements, particularly on housing provision, and many plans not being approved;
- The greater emphasis on investment in areas of opportunity is not being balanced by measures to improve less favoured urban and rural areas;
- Co-ordination of economic development, environment, housing and transport policy is limited;
- LEPs lack the accountability, geographic scale and capability to effectively undertake this coordination role;
- There is a failure to fully tackle environmental degradation and to respond effectively to the impact of climate change;
- A shared, up-to-date evidence base to facilitate coordinated policy and decision making is not available.
- These problems are made worse by Government departments and QUANGOs displaying very different levels of commitment to decentralisation and lacking coordination in how they operate at a sub-national level.
- The Government's current localism agenda overlooks the interconnections between key economic, environmental and social issues that are not local and do not fall neatly within the boundaries of individual local authorities.

In these circumstances, there are a number of long term dangers facing the West Midlands:

- Uncoordinated and unsustainable forms of development with, in some cases, housing and other needs not being met;
- An unbalanced region with a variable speed economy;
- Limited urban and rural regeneration and renewal leading to an under-use of human and economic potential;
- A failure to realise the potential of the West Midlands to develop as a prosperous region and help rebalance the UK economy.



What is the solution?

The principle underpinning the 'localist' approach is that 'places' are paramount - 'places' are where people live and work and where strong local economies and communities can be developed. But places do not exist in isolation. There are many inter-relationships, linkages and interdependencies between them. Greater co-operation is needed to ensure that desired outcomes are achieved and reach communities and people right across our diverse region.

- Over many previous decades, the West Midlands has worked well in addressing region-wide strategic issues and has demonstrated the value of 'bottom up' co-operation. Such an approach could be successful again by:
 - Supporting localism to realise its full potential;
 - Helping local authorities, LEPs and other government bodies work better together;
 - Creating a framework for implementing the Duty to Co-operate;
 - Providing a clearer vision as a basis for negotiation with Government.
- Other parts of England are becoming better organised to promote their collective needs and priorities - why not the West Midlands?

KEY PRIORITIES

The West Midlands needs sustainable growth and prosperity to serve its own citizens and help rebalance the UK economy.

We need to:

- Co-ordinate strategic policies and investment priorities avoiding duplication and wasteful counter bidding for resources;
- Identify strategic employment sites (such as i54 near Wolverhampton) and provide the essential infrastructure to unlock them;
- Realise the wider opportunities and benefits of strategic investments such as HS2 for the whole region;
- Work effectively together to provide the skilled and educated workforce that meets the needs of present and future employers.

The West Midlands needs investment in transport and other forms of infrastructure including energy. It needs an integrated and sustainable transport system that provides good connectivity at all levels.

We need to:

- Attract public and private investment to develop new infrastructure and make best use of what we have already;
- Join up planning, housing and economic development policy with transport provision across a wide area;
- Create new arrangements to deliver better integration of transport policy;
- Deliver sustainable transport priorities which are supported across the region and provide a robust case for future investment;
- Address the energy needs of the region and the sustainability of the plans to meet them.

The West Midlands must meet its housing needs within sustainable communities.

We need to:

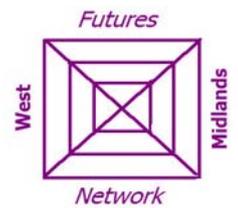
- Build a shared evidence base across housing market areas to underpin housing and planning policy;
- Develop a comprehensive housing strategy for the region encompassing new build and housing renewal;
- Coordinate housing proposals with a range of economic, social and environmental policies and objectives;
- Strengthen the capacity of local authorities to fulfil their Duty to Co-operate;
- Create high quality housing in communities across the region to attract and retain the skilled workforce that we need;
- Ensure that the public sector and social housing providers increase their role in providing rented housing.

The West Midlands needs to better champion the protection and enhancement of its built, historic and natural environment.

We need to:

- Protect nature and use its resources responsibly to build resilient, healthy communities;
- See the environment as a vital resource on which economic prosperity and human development depends;
- Develop a joined up evidence base to ensure that the environmental impact of policies and developments can be properly assessed and understand the interdependency of food, water and biodiversity;
- Provide stronger and better resourced leadership to coordinate environmental protection;
- Ensure that the environment is properly valued in all policy areas and decisions.





Working Together in the West Midlands

At the heart of our proposals is the need for more effective strategic planning and policy co-ordination. This is needed, not only across administrative boundaries, but also across policy and professional divides. We believe this can be achieved without creating another burdensome level of bureaucracy.

There are options for the scale at which better co-ordination and devolution of resources might be achieved. At present, government interest is focussed at the sub-regional and city-region level. Implementing these arrangements in the West Midlands would represent a significant initial step forward.

We recommend:

Interim measures

- The establishment of combined authorities to jointly meet housing need and their Duty to Cooperate on local planning issues more effectively;
- The evolution of LEPs to better work together and take account of the functional economic geography of the region;
- The establishment of new arrangements to achieve integrated transport planning at city-region or regional level;
- The establishment of a new partnership to oversee the development of a region-wide environmental data base and promote its use in development decisions.

Delivery and leadership

Whatever governance and delivery arrangements are chosen, they will not succeed without the effective engagement of the business and voluntary sectors.

Under any arrangements, we will need imaginative collaboration. This may well require the establishment a new 'regional forum' to enable the leaders of local authorities, LEPs and other partners to work together 'beyond the local'.

Longer term proposals

There is a compelling case for developing a long-term West Midlands-wide approach.

We believe that local authorities, along with the LEPs, third sector and other key interests, must collaborate at the regional level:

- To build a shared understanding of regional needs and priorities related to economic, environmental, housing, transport and infrastructure provision;
- To monitor change in the region and assess emerging problems and opportunities; and
- To develop a shared strategic framework to determine and champion key policies, proposals and priorities.

The 'framework' should:

- Be prepared for the region by the region;
- Only focus on an agreed agenda of strategic issues of more than local interest;
- Provide greater coherence in the preparation of local plans and strategies;
- Add certainty for investors and those bidding for central government funding;
- Assist the development of 'coalitions of interest' between local authorities and others and enable the duty to cooperate to work effectively.

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Futures Network West Midlands (FNWM) is a voluntary network of professionals and academics with experience of and a commitment to strategic and spatial planning in the West Midlands.

A background Working Paper which informs this Manifesto can be viewed on the FNWM website <http://futuresnetworkwestmidlands.co.uk>