



The Assembly in its role as Regional Planning Body welcomes this opportunity to present an opening statement to this Examination in Public.

The key messages the Assembly would like to convey are about the positive outcomes from the process:

- We have sought to be open and inclusive in engagement;
- Draft Regional Spatial Strategy (Draft RSS) provides a sound, robust and concise strategy for sustainable change and economic growth;
- Constructive debate on Draft RSS structure;
- Strong commitment to monitoring, implementation and review
- Draft RSS is part of a suite of key regional frameworks

### **Timeline of Process**

In direct response to a request from Government<sup>1</sup>, preparation of Draft RSS formally started in July 2004, with the publication of an Issues Paper<sup>2</sup> for consultation, alongside the Project Plan<sup>3</sup>. Over the next 18 months (partly in parallel with the Partial Review of RPG13), Assembly officers worked extremely hard and very closely with a wide range of organisations to develop the detailed policies in the Draft RSS, which was submitted to Government in January 2006<sup>4</sup>.

Although set a very challenging timetable for the review as a whole and for the initial drafting in particular, the Assembly has always recognised the importance of delivering Draft RSS on time, to ensure that development plan processes are supported. Despite the constraints, in 18 months the Assembly made rapid progress, delivering Draft RSS on time, with a broad consensus of support. This included:

- Working in partnership with “Forum for the Future” / “Dialogue by Design” to deliver a series of engagement exercises<sup>5</sup> including web-based questionnaire responses, as an input into developing Issues, Strategic Options and commenting on a pre submission Interim Draft RSS – with nearly 4,000 people and organisations being invited to take part.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Rt Hon Keith Hill MP, Minister for Housing & Planning to Cllr Tony McDermott, North West Regional Assembly re Regional Spatial Strategies & the Northern Way”, dated 11<sup>th</sup> June 2004.

<sup>2</sup> “The North West Regional Spatial Strategy - Issues Paper”, North West Regional Assembly, September 2005

<sup>3</sup> “North West Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) Project Plan” North West Regional Assembly, 2005. Nb the initial Project Plan was revised in April 2005, after GONW agreed to a 3 month extension of the RSS timetable.

<sup>4</sup> The North West Plan – Submitted Draft Regional Spatial Strategy for North West England” North West Regional Assembly January 2006

<sup>5</sup> See “The North West Plan – Pre-Submission Consultation Statement” North West Regional Assembly January 2006

- Consultation in September / October 2004 on an issues scoping paper which received 188 detailed responses, which are now available for anybody to view on the dedicated website<sup>6</sup>.
- Holding a successful one day conference in November 2004, reporting back on the issues consultation<sup>7</sup> and then helping through workshop sessions to shape the next stages of engagement on Options with stakeholders<sup>8</sup>.
- Developing an evidence base to underpin RSS building upon a shared evidence base with the Northwest Regional Development Agency (NWDA), existing research / sources of evidence and commissioning a range of new research.
- Consultation in Spring 2005 on an Options Paper, which received 126 detailed responses and a similar exercise in Autumn 2005 on a presubmission Interim Draft RSS which had 267 responses (2,652 individual comments). All of which are now available for anybody to view on the dedicated websites<sup>8</sup>. These stages were supplemented by a mix of sectoral and sub regional workshops.
- Consultants Entec appointed to undertake Sustainability Appraisal \ Strategic Environmental Assessment process.

It is important to note that the preparation of RSS has not started from a “blank sheet of paper”. We have built upon the existing RSS for the North West - RPG13. In doing so, we have sought to avoid duplication with national and local policy, whilst providing sub regional expression where appropriate. The principles of sustainable development continue to underpin RSS in the same way that they influenced RPG13.

The Assembly was keen for the preparation of RSS to be open, transparent and inclusive. So from the start, representatives from a wide range of organisations were invited to play a part in developing RSS through our web based engagement, workshops and specific meetings (including work with RTPI's North West Planning Aid).

In January 2006, the whole Assembly - local planning authorities, and social, economic and environmental partners, formally and unanimously approved the draft for submission to the Secretary of State as the basis for formal public consultation.

Drafting at times has been challenging for all, particularly for the Assembly's staff and RSS Steering Group representatives, who have provided helpful comments and advice on a number of informal drafts. It has taken place within the context of a review of the Assembly's Business Plan priorities, supporting governance and staffing structures. The Assembly would like to place on record its thanks for the valuable assistance, contributions and commitment that individuals and organisations made during that period.

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://nwra.dialoguebydesign.net/dbyd.asp>

<sup>7</sup> See [http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group\\_id=109&expand=78](http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group_id=109&expand=78)

<sup>8</sup> See [http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group\\_id=108&expand=78](http://rpg.nwra.gov.uk/documents/index.php?group_id=108&expand=78) and <http://rssnwra.dialoguebydesign.net/dbyd.asp>

## **Positive Outcomes**

From the process, the Assembly would like to highlight a number of positive outcomes.

### **a) An Inclusive and Open Process**

The Assembly has sought to involve as many people with an interest in Draft RSS as possible. However some organisation's - particularly local groups - may well feel that the process has not always been fully inclusive. Wherever possible, the Assembly has sought to focus consultation on regional or sub regional umbrella groupings - for example, of Civic Societies or Parish Councils.

Nevertheless, the Assembly's consultation database now extends to over 4,000 organisations and individuals, while supporting material has been made available on the Web. Publicity from regional and local press has also been instrumental in raising awareness. This level of interest and response is gratifying, if not always comfortable. It means that the Examination in Public is able to consider a wide range of viewpoints expressed, often of course diametrically opposed.

The Assembly considers that, taken as a whole, it is not only possible but desirable to provide for a high level of direct input into the preparation of Draft RSS, whilst managing the process to meet tight deadlines and providing a high quality of output - although of course others may not agree with the last assertion! Continuing involvement from stakeholders should continue to characterise the process in future, and the mechanisms and relationships established will continue to develop and improve.

The work with Forum for the Future and Dialogue by Design and the use of the pioneering innovative workshop and web based engagement approach has greatly assisted this process, allowing more time to be focussed on policy development and refinement. It is therefore welcome news that this element of the process has recently received national recognition, with the Assembly being named as a finalist in the 2006 RTPi National Planning Awards.

### **b) A Sound, Robust and Concise Strategy for Sustainable Change and Economic Growth**

Again, the Examination in Public will hear plenty of views expressed on all sides. But the Assembly would forcefully argue that the strategy put forward in Draft RSS - while not perfect, as this is difficult to achieve even where consensus is established! - is basically sound.

It provides a robust and coherent strategy to support economic growth in the North West in a sustainable way. It tackles important spatial issues dealing with climate change, economic development, increasing housing provision, transport priorities, making best use of environmental resources, waste management and renewable energy provision.

It identifies ways in which necessary development can take place sustainably, where sensible patterns of development, which will benefit all parts of the region (not, perhaps, equally) can be established, and investment in infrastructure, which supports these patterns, can be encouraged to happen.

Parts of the strategy are challenging, whether for developers asked to continue to consider brownfield locations in urban areas for land uses which have, in the past, gone elsewhere: or for environmentalists asked to accept the possibility of higher levels of housing growth than overall current policy might indicate. The Assembly considers that it is right for the strategy to be challenging in these ways. If it were not, it would indicate that Draft RSS was trite or expressed as a lowest common denominator. Increasingly, acting together, the region is being asked to avoid this pitfall.

The draft has been developed as a rounded and comprehensive document, befitting its role as a broad spatial strategy and framework for a number of other strategies and plans. It is variously argued that some parts are too detailed; or are not detailed enough - or that some things should reflect government policy, while of course not simply repeating it, let alone varying from it - even though it should be regionally specific.

### **c) Constructive Debate on the Draft RSS Structure**

The Assembly would argue that the structure of the Draft RSS reflects the broad consensus of stakeholders during the 18 month period of preparation. Draft RSS is as simply and concisely expressed as we have been able to make it in the time available. There is perhaps no right or wrong way to express complex and inter-related ideas such as those covered in RSS. One is often forced to the conclusion that, in spatial planning, everything is everything else. In this respect the Assembly welcomes the alternative approach put forward for debate at this stage by GONW.

Many of the points being expressed by participants in the next few months will undoubtedly lead to amendments to the draft. The Assembly would simply point out that throughout the drafting process we were exhorted to make the document shorter rather than longer. The clear test for the Panel and for the Secretary of State will be whether, on balance, including additional material in the RSS itself will add value.

### **d) A strong Commitment to Monitoring, Implementation and Review**

As a general principle, the Assembly has attempted to be as comprehensive as possible at this stage of preparing RSS. However, there are a number of issues on which information is not currently available or where it is expected shortly. In these cases, again, we have tried to set out some general principles whilst acknowledging that full regional specificity, including broad locations, and criteria for development, will need to be incorporated into a future review of RSS.

The Assembly is committed to this approach, and will continue to take forward a number of studies - for example on Gypsy & Traveller accommodation and other service provision needs. These will all be inputs into partial reviews of the RSS, and subject to public consultation.

However it should be noted that pending the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR07) no funding currently exists beyond 31st March 2008, to support the Assembly's RPB function (including the employment of staff). Therefore the Assembly is only able to commission new research that will be completed by 31st March 2008.

Until the medium - long term funding situation is resolved, the Assembly is also unable to give a firm timescale commitments on undertaking a future review of RSS, as it may not be possible to comply with all the procedural process requirements of PPS11 over next

18 months, to ensure submission of a Draft RSS to Government before 31st March 2008.

**e) RSS as Part of a Suite of Key Regional Frameworks**

The past two years has been a busy time not only for the Assembly in preparing RSS, but also for the NWDA in developing and putting into effect the Regional Economic Strategy. The North West has not gone down the route of preparing an overarching regional strategy which subsumes the economic, spatial and other potential strategies. However, there is a clear understanding between the three main regional bodies - the Assembly, the NWDA and GONW - about our continuing efforts to work in partnership for the benefit of the region as a whole. This is not to say that there are not legitimate disagreements between us - and this Examination in Public will consider examples of these issues. But there is an understanding that over time the key regional strategies can build, into a coherent whole. This is entirely in accordance with the approach required by government, of iterative strategy development.

The Examination in Public debate contributes to that process and the Assembly looks forward to the recommendations of the Panel and hopes that the Final version of RSS reflects the outcomes of that.

**Finally**

The Assembly would like to place on record its thanks for all the effort and high quality of work delivered by its staff (both past and present) who have contributed to the preparation of Draft RSS.