

LANCASTER CITY COUNCIL

NORTHWEST REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AGENCY CORPORATE PLAN 2008-2011 – CONSULTATION RESPONSE

January 2008

The City Council appreciates the opportunity to comment on NWDA's Corporate Plan and, in broad terms, supports the Plan's overall direction and the specified corporate objectives. As a general principle, we very much welcome the Government's proposals in the Sub National Review of Economic Development and Regeneration but appreciate that this leads us all into a period of change. We therefore emphasise the importance of consultation and involvement of Local Authority and other partners in the development of new ways of working together in the interests of the region. We look forward to making a positive contribution to this process over the coming years.

With regard to the Corporate Plan there are a number of specific points we wish to make:

1. Delegating decisions and programme approach

In line with the Sub National Review, we strongly support the move towards a programme rather than a project approach and the delegation of more responsibility for project funding decisions to local authorities or sub-regions. Reference is made at several points in the document to this new approach (eg under 3. Policy Context), but it is not entirely clear at what level NWDA sees this delegation taking place. Within the principles of the SNR, we believe that such delegation should be to the level most appropriate to economic and geographic circumstances and at which effective programme delivery is optimised. We would suggest that in some circumstance this might be to the level of a single local authority or Vision Board. As an example, Lancaster District is a relatively self-contained area and is one of the five recognised sub-areas within the Lancashire Economic Strategy. Consequently, a programme approach would be very appropriate for delivery of the Lancaster & Morecambe Vision. We would, therefore, hope that NWDA will seek to be flexible in its delegation arrangements and consider the potential to apply the programme approach to Vision Boards in particular.

2. Outputs

We welcome the rationale, under 'Setting NWDA priorities for investment', for development of a range of outputs to monitor progress on outcome delivery. However, we have some concerns on how this would work in practice, especially in linking outputs back to GVA/head for certain areas of activity, for example public realm. We would wish to see additional information, and perhaps consultation, as the outputs are developed.

3. Growth sectors

We feel some clarification is needed regarding target sectors in the section on Growth Sectors. The sectors listed under outcomes appear to be those which 'contribute to widespread employment' and include those (retail, construction, distribution) which are very reliant on the performance of other sectors of the economy. Whilst there may be a cross-reference to the Regional Economic Strategy, we feel there would be merit in reiterating, under Outcomes, the key internationally

competitive sectors such as digital and creative industries and energy and environmental technologies.

We also note the reference in the final bullet point under 'Activity' to public realm and the built and natural environment. This is important to coastal and heritage towns such as Morecambe and Lancaster and perhaps there should be reference to the NWDA work related to Coastal Resorts and Historic Towns and Cities

4. Enterprise support

We note the reference to the targeted nature of the Regional Start Up and Survivability project and would restate our view that there should be a universal one-to-one counselling service for all who seek such support, with enhanced and proactive support for under-represented groups. The current position has the effect of denying one-to-one counselling for, among others, males in the most deprived areas of Lancaster District including wards/SOAs in Morecambe which are among the most deprived nationally. It also seems contradictory that the RES is a growth focused strategy and yet support for business start up and entrepreneurship is being targeted away from areas such as Lancaster which have greatest potential for such growth. It also runs contrary to the objectives of the Lancashire LAA, which seeks to improve business start up activity for **all** residents of the county.

Whilst we recognise this is an approach that NWDA are firmly committed to, we would suggest that there is a need for some independent evaluation to assess the impact on business start up activity outside the targeted areas, and an appropriate review.

We welcome the Finance for Business programme and its aim to improve the availability of, and access to, finance for SMEs. This is a barrier which has been highlighted through the Lancaster and Morecambe Vision Board, and also InfoLab21 Advisory Group, but it will be essential that any additional finance is attractive to businesses, and especially high growth businesses, and that it is actively marketed if take-up is to be improved.

5. Competitive Business & Innovation

We welcome recognition of the continuing need to ensure availability of globally competitive broadband infrastructure and services. However, we would suggest that the reference to ICT support being focused on places currently experiencing low rates of broadband coverage, ICT adoption and exploitation, should be extended to include reference to opportunities to develop leading edge ICT networks which are capable of driving content development. We would also wish to see reference to support for sector networks and demonstrator projects to encourage adoption of new technologies.

6. Higher Level Skills Development

We are surprised there is no reference to graduate retention activities as this is critical if increases in student numbers are to impact on regional growth. It also underlines the importance of investment in science parks as a means of generating jobs attractive to graduates.

7. Size of the Workforce

We note with some concern the statement that ‘a large proportion of investment in this area will be focused to achieve the outcomes outlined in the three City Employment Strategies.’ The funding allocated to this objective is relatively limited and we would wish to ensure adequate funding is available to ensure a meaningful programme of worklessness activity can be undertaken throughout Lancashire. We would also wish to see some reference to the evaluation of worklessness activity to date and the potential to roll-out activity which has been shown to be most effective.

8. Employment Sites and Premises

We would expect to see the full list of strategic sites, including Lancaster Science Park, rather than a selected list. The subsequent comments in the Plan regarding potential NWDA support for delivery capacity is particularly important in this context to enable major projects to be developed to the point of implementation.

9. Conditions for Private Sector Investment

This is a critical objective for Lancaster District. We welcome the acknowledgement of public realm and regional parks. However, we feel there should at least be reference to the Coastal Resorts strategy and the potential impact on coastal towns of investment in public realm improvements.

We also welcome the reference to rural key centres but, in the absence of any statement regarding the priority that will be given to rural areas generally within the Corporate Plan, we are concerned that adequate resources would be available.

10. Climate change

We would suggest the possible inclusion of recognition of the need to monitor potential changes in the nuclear energy sector. We would also propose the inclusion of innovative pilot projects under Resulting Activity.

11. Rural matters

We note the reference to rural affairs being integrated and mainstreamed into the corporate plan (under Sustainable Development). However, we feel there is scope for the corporate plan to include a statement of NWDA’s approach to rural matters, including reference to its role in delivery of the Rural Development Programme for England.