

Building a sustainable future.

In working towards wealth, creating sustainable development is very important. As the birthplace of the industrial revolution, the region shows what can happen if the creation of wealth and access to opportunity for all is not promoted or managed in the right way. None of us want more pollution, crime, or traffic problems. Many of the issues this strategy tries to deal with, such as competitiveness, the quality of our environment, regeneration and social exclusion are the symptoms of unsustainable development. We will try to make sure that we do not make the same mistakes and that creating wealth and access to opportunity for all is balanced between the economy, community and environment.

This new approach is one of our duties. The national aims that we will follow are set out in the UK Government strategy for sustainable development as:

- maintaining high and stable levels of economic growth and employment,
- social progress which recognises the needs of everyone,
- effectively protecting the environment and
- careful use of natural resources.

This strategy and the activities will help a more sustainable future for the West Midlands by:

- focussing on the economic priorities for future regional action plans and programmes which will contribute to maintaining high and stable levels of economic growth and employment for the West Midlands. And also demonstrating the economic benefits of considering the environment;
- including social priorities that are related to economic growth, such as spreading economic growth across different areas and providing training opportunities, which will contribute to social progress and recognise the needs of everyone in the West Midlands;
- looking to promote economic and social activities and places that will contribute to effectively protecting the environment and using natural resources carefully within the West Midlands.

- identifying areas for regional partnership work which will help improve the context and understanding of the region that we work in, especially the wider social and environmental areas. This will include:
 - setting up a long-term regional vision and manageable aims for the West Midlands;
 - monitoring and reporting structures and
 - close working to regional planning guidance.

The resulting partnership work will try to build on the existing foundations provided by the Regional Sustainability Action Framework, the West Midlands Round Table for Sustainable Development, European Funding Working Groups and other relevant regional work and organisations. This will also need to build on some of the new and creative work that is being done at the local level especially on Local Agenda 21.

The draft Regional Economic Strategy had an independent sustainability assessment which lead to an improved document. In the following action planning stage there will be more opportunities to work with stakeholders to make sure that the actions will contribute to sustainable development. Advantage West Midlands plans to ask the West Midlands Round Table to carry out a formal sustainability review of the final strategy to give us advise about the strategy and action programme.

A practical example of this approach is work we are doing with the Environment Agency and other partners to identify and measure the ways in which the environmental strengths of the West Midlands support and benefit the economic and community development of the region. Part of this work will be to find ways of developing the regional environmental business sector.

Developing a new and creative culture

Many studies, including our own Regional Innovation Strategy, have shown that regions can only gain competitive advantage by constantly developing new and creative projects, approaches and solutions - the process of innovation. From a business point of view, successful innovation is an increase in profit caused by using a new idea. In this



context, the term innovation has a broader meaning than just introducing high-technology products. Innovation is also about developing new forms of managing organisation and working practices, new markets and new sources of supply. And it is not just businesses that benefit from innovation. New ideas and new ways of doing things can change all aspects of society, from communications to health. They can increase access for people who are currently excluded, for example, in remote areas in the country. Innovation is equally relevant to all sectors in the way they think, design and deliver their activities.

Supporting links between urban and rural areas

Urban and rural areas are becoming linked and so are the people who live there. Economic activities in rural areas are becoming increasingly similar to those in urban places, with a wide range of service and manufacturing companies based there. Urban regeneration projects often include ideas to improve the quality of life and environment for example, by increasing and improving green spaces for leisure activities. More and more people live in rural areas but work in urban areas. Cities are centres of education with many young people studying there and staying on to work there. Many people with children move to rural areas to live and travel to towns and cities to work. Others retire to the countryside. Urban areas naturally depend on rural areas for food, and people who live in towns and cities use the countryside for tourism and leisure purposes.

Tourism is part of the overall cultural attraction of the region. The history of the West Midlands has provided a unique cultural legacy, which needs to be further built upon and strengthened. There is the quality of the built and natural environment; the industrial heritage (including agriculture); sporting and leisure facilities. The whole region can benefit from a co-ordinated approach to developing these opportunities through better marketing and creating new facilities.

These developments mean that relationships between urban and rural areas are becoming more varied and complicated, and they are relying on each other far more. These patterns lead to a shared interest in economic development, housing and transport issues.

Advantage West Midlands is developing an action programme with our partners to develop action to promote this link. This work will include:

- the process of encouraging greater awareness and understanding of needs and issues,
- exchanging best practice,
- food supply issues,

- considering making the most of the links in 'the urban fringe', where the urban and rural areas meet,
- tourism and leisure patterns and needs,
- transport patterns,
- the role of market towns.

One example of this is the developing activity around the food supply chain in the region. We can provide this by improving links between rural producers and urban customers, (for example through having country markets in the cities), and developing the West Midlands' Regional Food Network. The approach recognises the role of Small & Medium Enterprises as part of wider training networks. We are developing measures to improve the ability of Small & Medium Enterprises to respond to the pressures within their existing supplier chain. They can use the resources of a wide range of public providers, including higher- and further-education institutions. These links would cover processing, catering, retail and tourism and leisure industries.

In many cases the needs of businesses, communities and individuals in the country are the same those in the towns and cities. However, there are differences, especially in the remoter rural areas, where we are concerned by the economic situation.

The economies of the remote rural areas give cause for concern. The main problems generally include the following:

- too much reliance on farming and forestry;
- lack of a broader range of businesses and job opportunities;
- poor public transport, access to employment and training opportunities;
- shortages of affordable housing in some areas leading to imbalanced communities.

The late 1990's have seen serious difficulties in the agricultural sector with the collapse of farm incomes, especially livestock farming. At the same time agriculture is an integral part of most rural communities and is vital to preserving local environments and economies.

We will try to promote the continued diversification of rural economies. The market towns will play a key role as centres of economic and cultural activity in rural areas. There are also opportunities to redevelop brownfield sites for economic activity on farms and in more remote villages. There are also possibilities to further use ICT to develop the skills base in rural areas and to foster business links between areas.

Innovative solutions for improving access to training and work

Kington is a small market town on the Welsh border. Kington Connected Community Company (KC3) is a community-owned company with public and private-sector sponsorship. It was developed to show the effects that providing modern computing and communications technologies can have in promoting economic activity and social integration in remote communities. Among their many activities is a dedicated training centre which provides a number of different local ICT training courses.

Since its development KC3 has delivered a range of training courses, particularly in developing and using IT skills. It has also drawn on the expertise of staff to help stimulate new and existing businesses. In this way it is helping to build the future of remote rural areas.

Valuing equal opportunities

We can only achieve economic success in the region if we use the skills and build on the contribution of all the people who live here. Positive economic success will not be worth very much if particular individuals, groups or communities are prevented from sharing that success. We plan to make sure that this framework is used in all the policies, action plans and programmes that develop from this strategy.

To move towards this, in the context of our aim of becoming a multi-cultural society for Europe, we will need to build on the unique strength of the West Midlands, as a multi-cultural society, with distinct local characteristics.



We need to recognise in our future development the contributions that different ethnic and social groups make to the region, each with their own history, culture and future. The region's record of multi-cultural working is good, but we can do more to make it better, by fully involving people from all communities in the process.

To make sure that we truly value equal opportunities, it is essential that we are clear about which groups and individuals are currently at a disadvantage, and develop strategies to help them. The 'Mainstreaming Equality for Disadvantaged Groups' is a group of regional partners set up to identify the action that is needed to overcome disadvantage, has carried out a detailed analysis of the disadvantaged groups within the labour market. The groups identified as being disadvantaged were:

- women (especially single parents and those returning to work);
- people from an ethnic-minority background, especially Bangladeshi and Pakistani people, young African-Caribbean men;

- young people in the labour market (under 25);
- older workers (50 and above) and
- people with disabilities.

There is also concern that people living in remote areas, homeless people and ex-offenders may also be disadvantaged in the labour market.

The group has gone on to identify the specific factors that we need to look at and what we need to do to sort out this problem. This work will influence how we develop this framework.

Taking action to deal with Equal Opportunities

Advantage West Midlands will set up a representative 'Equality of Opportunity Forum' to provide the focus we need. Their role will be to make sure that the issues are included and dealt with in all the action plans that are being developed. Developing this framework will provide a way of assessing and monitoring the way the partners involved in the action plans consider 'priority issues'. They will concentrate on:

- mapping issues and activities;
- developing networks;
- agreeing priorities for action and
- building on proven approaches.

Existing equal opportunities legislation on discrimination because of race, sex or disability controls all organisations. However, improving equal opportunities will mean more than just meeting basic legal requirements. All action leading to employment and training opportunities should make sure there is no discrimination of any kind in the design of the project.

Developing a diverse and dynamic business base



The West Midlands has a tradition of inventing new products and coming up with new and creative ideas. Much of the wealth and many of the jobs in the region are a result of this spirit of 'innovation'. However, in recent years the competitive advantage of region has been eaten away. Faced with worldwide markets we can no longer compete against economies where labour is cheaper, regulations are less stringent or in sectors where our production techniques are not using the latest, most productive technology and skills. We need to renew the creative and innovative traditions of the West Midlands.

The West Midlands has a broad economic base. But employment is still heavily concentrated in manufacturing sectors, some of which are having difficulty keeping competitive advantage. There is a need to branch out and take advantage of the opportunities for growth. Growth can come from a number of sources:

- Some of the industries that have experienced high growth nationally are still under represented in the region. There is some potential for increasing the number and size of firms in these industries in the region.

- We can attract overseas firms to set up in the region. The West Midlands has an excellent track record of 'Foreign Direct Investment' (FDI) based on international recognition of the strengths and opportunities the region has to offer.
- Existing overseas investors can be 'embedded' into the economy by linking them into the local supply base, or developing the supply base to meet the needs of inward investors.
- Existing business can grow or new ones can start. These can be in industries that are already strong in the region or new industries producing new products.

To encourage new growth we need to improve the support for firms of all sizes - helping existing large employers keep their competitive position and encouraging small and medium-sized firms. This Strategy provides the framework for offering better and more coordinated access to business support.

Aim 1

To increase wealth and make the most of competitiveness within West Midlands businesses through innovation.

Economic growth and competitiveness are no longer driven by just labour and capital. Technology has become equally, if not more important. Innovation - continuously using technology and generating new ideas in the production process and upgrading of products - has become central to maintaining competitiveness and creating wealth. This has been recognised by central Government and was the central theme of the 1998 Competitiveness White Paper - Building a Knowledge Driven Economy.

The West Midlands recognised the importance of innovation early and has already put in place a framework for developing innovation in the business sector. Launched in June 1999, the Regional Innovation Strategy (RIS), is the result of two years' work by partners within the region. The process was part funded by the European Union who also recognise the central role of entrepreneurship and innovation to the creative process of the economy. The European Union will also be

providing funding to carry out the work outlined in the RIS.

Work on implementing some of the RIS has already begun but there needs to be a continual promotion of the business benefits of innovation and learning from others.

At present the region's knowledge is often not used to its full potential. Within the region's universities, higher education institutes, further-education colleges, regional technology organisations (including CERAM, RAPRA, MIRA, DERA) and the European-funded Midlands Innovation Relay Centre, there is a huge amount of knowledge, in terms of leading research and development, new technology and people with world-class skills. This knowledge is often not used to its full potential. The problem is not generating new ideas, but in turning these ideas into commercial business plans. As a region we need to develop these links by doing the following:

- providing business with the people to help them innovate;
- increasing entrepreneurship;
- encouraging business to business networking (within Business Growth Task groups);
- enabling access to finance at all levels (for example access to European Innovation funding - a new project at Coventry University called EPICENTRE has been set up to help with this, and UK Research council funding);
- increasing market intelligence.

High-technology Clusters

Linked to carrying out the RIS proposals Advantage West Midlands and regional partners will be exploring developing high-technology clusters within the West Midlands. This will be based around high technology companies, engineering design and research facilities and centres of academic and technical excellence. To begin with we will look at the existing strengths within the central and south-east parts of the region. But we will work towards recreating the conditions that attract high technology firms across the region.

Using ICT to improve awareness of the region's research and development resources - developing a 'knowledge exchange'.

The West Midlands' higher-education institutions have joined together to create a source of information on the web known as 'CONTACT' <http://www.contact.uk.net>). This gives details of specific areas of research, development and teaching. It needs to be developed to include other sources of expertise and become a complete 'knowledge exchange' - a central point and managed network for all sources of research and development and other knowledge.

Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

One of the most wide-ranging parts of innovation is the using information and communication technologies. Millions of pounds have been invested in regional communications within the last five years. This has varied from the commercially-driven activities of the telecommunications operators, to publicly-funded schemes such as the National Grid for Learning (NGfL), the libraries' Wolfson Challenge Fund and ERDF-funded projects such as MidMAN. Broadly speaking the effect of these activities has been to give Birmingham and the metropolitan areas a considerable communications capacity, whilst most rural communities are still limited to a basic phone and fax service provided over the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN). This is a bad sign for the future economic development of the region as a whole.

Developing an ICT strategy.

In November 1998, an ICT framework for the West Midlands Region was agreed by a wide partnership of public and private-sector organisations. In May 1999 Advantage West Midlands took over the 'chair' of a broadly-based ICT steering group. This group is responsible for developing the framework into a full-blown strategy with associated actions. Supported by Advantage West Midlands resources, the group will carry out



consultations and research to deal with the conclusions of the framework. We will develop this to provide a basis for future investment in ICT within the West Midlands.

The Regional E-Portal

Working with regional partners Advantage West Midlands has gained ERDF funding for a regional electronic portal (e-portal). This will do the following:

Provide an electronic first point of contact for regional activities, including and supporting existing regional and sub-regional web-sites and information providers.

Give Inward Investment services a new opportunity to promote and market regional aims at a national and international level.

Provide the foundation on which we can build a regional information service.

Help the growth of the regional e-economy by providing a platform on which we can share business knowledge within sector groups, and through which national and international organisations can trade with regionally based firms.

E-business is already worth \$12 billion throughout the world (OECD figures) and is set to grow to between \$350 and \$500 billion by 2002. It is creating new trading models that will alter:

- products and services;
- the way supply chains are run and
- pricing.

West Midlands small and medium sized enterprises are not presently well placed in understanding and using e-business and we cannot afford for them to stay like this.

Advantage West Midlands is working with partner organisations to review the best way to take forward the e-business models and applications into West Midlands SMEs. This includes looking at the feasibility of setting up a dedicated e-business support unit within the agency, to take a lead role in helping spread understanding across the whole of the West Midlands business community. Indeed, we see presentation of the e-business model to the business community as an area where the West Midlands can become a centre of excellence in its own right, bringing new opportunities for inward investment and business diversification.

Aim 2

To transform the West Midlands economic base by supporting the development of new and existing sectors to meet the demands of the future.

Creating wealth starts with successful businesses. We need to work with the business community to build wide-ranging and dynamic manufacturing and service sectors. We know that the task is a large one. There are some existing sectors that can create high growth and high value. These are:

- engineering design (mainly high-precision engineering activities based on high design content found in sectors such as aerospace, motor sports and control systems, including environmental control and telecommunications);

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- food and drink (covering the supply chain from producing primary goods through to processing, distribution and final use);
- medical technology (medical instruments, materials and telemedicine);
- the creative industries (including music, ICTs, software, interactive leisure software and design, including fashion, film and media production, jewellery, architecture and advertising); and
- tourism and leisure (including sports and activity-based leisure, culture, business tourism and exhibitions, facilities this sector includes heritage professionals and advisory services).

There is also a need to support and improve the value added in three established sectors by building on the work already going on within established groups and organisations such as:

- the motor industry (including products such as electronics, rubber, plastics and so on);
- ceramics and
- engineering (for example, foundries and castings, forging, machining and structural steel).

The sector based approach to business development provides the focus for prioritising and use of scarce resource. In using it, we will need to target the traditional tools of economic development (for example, improving access to finance, exporting, developing supply chains and transferring best practice, inward investment and developing the workforce).

To introduce a sector-based focus to allocating scarce resources, a series of Business Growth Task Groups will be developed to set up the strategic framework for each of the sectors.

Developing Business Growth Task Groups

Each Business Growth Task Group will be different, depending on the industry, its problems and opportunities. There will be some common practices.

The group will be made up of some main players from both the sector and the business services community, chaired by a representative of the industry.

The agency or appropriate partner organisations will supply the administration staff.

The group will be responsible, to the agency, for agreeing strategic priorities, ordering studies, building on existing best practice projects, developing strategic action plans, considering bids for funding and reporting on progress.

The task groups will work with the other regional thematic steering groups (for example, RIS, ICT, and so on) and share good practice between groups.

As well as promoting the businesses in their sector, all task groups will be expected to make sure that the benefits of the wealth they are creating are passed on to the community, and that their businesses play a full role in the community and are aware of the environmental impacts of the sector.

There may be opportunities for developing clusters as the networks become established. Its members (including sub-groups) may work on joint projects which have an end product. They would then be considered to be a 'cluster' (Regional Policy Economics, DTI, July 1999). A force for converting to a cluster may be the action plans developed by the earlier networks.

Advantage West Midlands will play a leading role in these groups. However, they will need to be business-led and need people at senior level to take part, from both the private and public sector. In developing these groups we will, wherever possible, build on existing groups of business such as trade associations. We will also work with the support



institutions of the public sector, for example, universities, local government and colleges.

By identifying the priorities for their sector, these groups will direct the action that needs to be done and make sure that developing funding proposals meets strategic aims. This will help overcome criticism from business that too often, funding proposals are too provider-led and uncoordinated. It will also be very important for each group to be linked into the various supporting strategies that cover innovation, ICT, workforce development and sustainability. Sector priorities will also need to be included in the tools for developing a wide-ranging and dynamic business base.

Inward investment

We are one of the most successful regions in Europe in attracting inward investment and continuation of this success is one of the keys to achieving the region's aims.

Public and private sector partners in the region have developed the region's inward investment strategy which focuses on those sectors which offer high-added value to the region's economy, and help to widen our

business base. We have achieved our success through developing a competitive offer to companies, which matches their requirements. This needs to be further developed and the actions in this strategy will improve the quality of the offer.

One measure of the success of our inward investment is the way in which companies who have come to the region have stayed, prospered and helped to improve the region's economy – for example, 60% of all investment in the region from foreign-owned companies, comes from companies already here.

Ricoh (UK) Products Ltd, Telford.

In 1983, after successfully marketing Japanese Manufactured products in Europe, Ricoh decided to set up a European Manufacturing facility. The following year Ricoh started with a workforce of 14 people in Telford. They were the second Japanese company to establish a facility in the region and today they have a site of 50 acres and employ 800 people manufacturing photocopiers.

Ricoh have recently given a significant vote of confidence in their Telford facility by deciding to produce digital photocopiers.

Ricoh have won a Queens Award for the Environment for their pioneering recycling programmes as well as several Queens Awards for Exports. They are fully integrated into the local and regional community and their staff are involved at board level with the Chambers of Commerce and Regional CBI.

Strengthening the regional economy through inward investment.

In a highly-competitive and world investment market, the business strengths of the West Midlands need to be continually promoted to make sure everyone is aware of them, for example, building on the success the West Midlands First campaign. Also, we need to involve existing investors in the regional economy by linking them, where appropriate, to the local supply base. This

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has been achieved by targeting sectors which build on existing strengths and help to widen the region's economic base.

Spreading best practice and developing the supply chain.

Spreading best practice between businesses is a way of improving competitiveness, as shown by pioneering work to develop supply chains in the motor industry in the West Midlands, (for example, SMMT Industry Forum and Accelerate). Business Growth Task Groups will develop new action to spread best practice. The Regional Supply Team of Advantage West Midlands will play an important role in this process. We will also work with other projects such as the 'Networks for Change' ERDF-supported scheme and provide the regional link between national and local delivery by encouraging businesses to take part in schemes like 'Inside UK Enterprise'.

Improving access to finance. It is important that we deal with the funding gaps that some smaller companies experience. While this is most acute in high-risk areas such as innovation, there are also problems with access to basic finance and banking facilities. We will look at developing appropriate answers to these issues through the existing private sector-led Regional Finance Steering Group. A main feature of the approach will be the creation of a regional venture capital fund to look at specific equity gaps below £250,000 experienced by Small and Medium Enterprises (as identified in research carried out for the Regional Finance Steering Group in 1998).

Improving the region's international trading performance. The West Midlands is responsible for around 25% of the UK's manufacturing. However, around 80% of the region's exports come from 20% of the region's companies. We need to find new and creative ways to help more businesses, in particular Small and Medium Enterprises, through international trade. We will lead the current Regional Export Forum to set the strategic direction for developing a range of new and creative policies on international trade, working with British Trade International.

Improving the effectiveness of business support services. We have a very important role in achieving a wide-ranging and dynamic business base. We will be building on our current review of the way services are provided in business to make sure the system can offer support to meet business needs while dealing with areas of market failure. If necessary, business support must look outside the region for new standards and ways of working and for more working across boundaries.

The sector-based approach to developing business provides a focus for developing a wide-ranging and dynamic business base. However, we also realise that different sub-regions will have particular priorities that reflect the business 'make up' of their area. Similarly, new and creative proposals for improving the regional economy are likely to come from many different sources outside the selected sectors, (for example, existing trade associations or self-formed business groups and business park associations). We need to encourage these businesses to take part in these plans and programmes.

Promoting a learning and skilful region



People are the link in the strategy. We need highly-skilled and adaptable people to attract the high-value jobs and to build the wide-ranging and dynamic business base of the region, to attract inward investment as well as to improve communities. Learning and skills are equally as important in improving the quality of life in communities as they are to meeting the needs of business. Providing lifelong learning opportunities means that everyone should have the chance to make the most of their learning, starting from pre-school and continuing through into retirement. The responses to the strategy broadly supported the aims for this section, in particular the focus on workforce development.

To meet the challenges of the next 10 years (the world market, technological changes, increasing complexity and rapid change in business practice) we must support the people of the West Midlands to create the next generation of innovators and entrepreneurs. Skills are the basis for competitive advantage, and by using their knowledge, employees can improve business processes, productivity, customer satisfaction and ultimately, profit.

A strong education framework

The West Midlands is fortunate in having a strong educational and training system. There are 12 higher education institutions and 57 further education colleges, with local, regional, national and international reputations. As well as 14 local education authorities, with about 3000 schools, there are Group Training Associations, voluntary and private-sector providers that we can use to create both academic and vocational excellence. The diversity in the region is a strength, which we must build on.

Advantage West Midlands will work with existing partners and new organisations such as Local Learning Partnerships, University for Industry (Ufi) and the Learning and Skills Councils, to deliver the regional strategy and action plans. Many organisations within the region are involved in workbased training, including the Training and Enterprise Councils, Chambers of Commerce Training Enterprise, the Chambers of Commerce, National Training Organisations and businesses, as well as colleges and universities. We must build on this skill and knowledge. The education and business sectors are working together to make the best use of their resources.

Aim 3

Develop a workforce that is highly skilled and can adapt to meet the challenges that will face businesses in the next 10 years.

There are certain skill shortages, skill gaps and recruitment difficulties across the region. We will develop actions to meet these shortages where they are common across the region, and support partners in dealing with the skills that are needed in the sub-regions. The strategy is targeting resources at the needs of the eight core business sectors that are identified in the 'Developing a wide-ranging and dynamic business base' section.

To develop these target sectors to world-class levels, we need to increase a range of high-level skills in the region. We need customer

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care and foreign language skills across a wide range of sectors but particularly to support tourism and export activities. We also need specific regional skills to meet present and future business needs. High-level skills in engineering, advanced technologies, managing design, ICT and research will help our companies to compete in the world market. Skills in the creative industries will help us increase new businesses and encourage our talented young people to develop their careers in the West Midlands. Creativity is important in developing skills to encourage innovation and entrepreneurial flair. Developing skills in the knowledge economy is about gaining and using knowledge in new and different ways to make your business different from others. We will encourage strong links between the learning and innovation sections of the strategy.

In recent years, the Department for Education and Employment has introduced a range of policies to improve work-based training, have more people taking part in learning and to respond to customers needs. The Department of Trade and Industry also recognises the need to develop a learning workforce. The 'Learning to Succeed' White Paper provides a new framework for funding, planning and delivering learning at a local level.

The West Midlands has a history of low educational achievement. Given the evidence from regional studies on weaknesses that affect economic development, it is essential that as a first step, we improve qualification and skill levels in the region to achieve the aim of the strategy. We plan to work with Local Learning Partnerships to meet the local and regional targets to support the achievement of the National Learning Targets for England for 2002. In doing so, we will encourage employers to invest in developing their workforce to improve their profit and meet the specific vocational skills gaps and needs. As well as the specific skill needs of the main business sectors, we will aim to achieve the following:

- make sure that children leaving school have basic skills (literacy and numeracy) and at least basic level (NVQ1) qualifications;
- increase the number of people who have already left school without these skills but later achieve NVQ1;
- meet the local and regional targets to support the achievement of the National Learning Targets for England for 2002;
- develop important skills (communication, problem solving, teamwork, IT, numeracy and improving own learning and performance) to improve students' chances of getting a job (a continuing concern of employers in the region);
- achieve high standards of ICT within the workforce;
- increase management skills within Small and Medium Enterprises;
- increase the number of people continuing to learn at college, university and through work-based training programmes, such as Modern Apprenticeships, National Trainees and Graduate Apprenticeship;
- increase the number of people with NVQ levels 3 and 4 who are employed in the region, particularly in Small and Medium Enterprises;
- set up business learning networks in the eight main business sectors to begin with;
- to keep and attract the highly-skilled people the region needs to offer a higher quality of life and opportunity, including higher-paid, interesting and challenging jobs and careers and opportunities for personal and family development;
- we need to build on the work of the West Midlands First marketing campaign to improve the image of the region. We are considering a regional learning awards scheme to support the national learning awards scheme.



taking this forward, we will need to work with both local and national partners, including other RDAs, DfEE and the National Skills Task Force so that together, we develop a strategy that allows sub-regions, the English regions, the UK and European regions to be compared.

Aim 4

Develop a culture of lifelong learning and continuous improvement.

Lifelong learning means continuously developing the skills, knowledge and understanding that are essential for work and personal fulfilment. The aim of our learning and skills strategy is to promote lifelong learning in this broad sense. We want to encourage everyone to take part in learning from their earliest years and throughout their life. To encourage people who have felt excluded from learning opportunities to go back into learning we need to create new and creative learning opportunities. To do this, we plan to work with partners, particularly Ufl and the Campaign For Learning, to produce a West Midlands' strategy to promote the West Midlands as a learning and skilful region, to raise hopes and encourage individuals to take part in learning, whatever their age and learning level.

As people improve their skills, they have more career choices and become more mobile. Research shows that people with the highest skill levels are most likely to find and keep employment and enjoy higher earnings. It is estimated that compared to those with no qualifications, people with:

- GCSEs earn 25% more;
- A-levels earn 45% more and
- degrees earn 75% more.

The other benefits of developing learning, and getting more skills and qualifications are as follows:

- individuals - improved self esteem, confidence, raised hopes, increased employment and career opportunities and fuller and more creative lives;

There is a lot of excellent training activity going on within the region but it is split up. We need to make sure that there is value for money from public-sector spending on projects. We plan, with our partners, to:

- keep track of the existing activity;
- identify, promote and spread best practice;
- identify gaps in the existing provision;
- develop project funding strategies to fill these gaps and
- achieve the best regional effect from the funding.

The 'Skills Agenda for the West Midlands' report produced by the West Midlands Regional TEC and CCTEs, identified that there was a lot of information about the labour market but 'good intelligence at the regional level' was missing. The report recommended that we should, with our partners, agree a strategy-coordinated approach for analysing labour markets. In

- communities - contributes to being part of a community, social integration, and develops a sense of belonging and identity;
- business - develops the skills and intellect that will give the region its competitive strength.

The region has poor levels of achievement and a low number of people who stay in education after 16. This reflects the culture and resistance to learning. There are several reasons why people may not want training, including family commitments, lack of time and childcare facilities, and households where no-one has a job. Another factor is the region's craft tradition, which has meant that it has been possible to go into low and unskilled jobs straight from school. The number of these jobs are reducing and the jobs which have taken over need higher skills. We must make sure that everyone in the region knows about and is encouraged to improve their skills to take advantage of the new job opportunities.

To achieve this aim we are going to work with partners to develop a culture of lifelong learning in the region. We need society to value all learning routes - academic and vocational, in traditional education centres or in new centres that the Ufl will set up, in urban or rural communities, or at work. The centres must meet the learning needs of individuals. To have an effective regional learning culture, we need routes through the education and learning sectors and into employment that individuals and employers can easily understand.

The action plan will take advantage of national schemes to develop and promote access to learning and careers advice services throughout the West Midlands. We will work with regional partners to develop strategies to deliver the recommendations in the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education report 'All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education' and the Sustainable Development Education Panel's 'First Annual Report 1998'.

Learning providers need to respond to changes in the market and customers who are becoming more demanding. To achieve this, learning providers in the region need to build on existing best practice and develop

new and creative learning material and systems of delivering this material. This includes partnerships working to deliver specialist training, improving information, access and childcare facilities, and to make learning available at times and costs to meet customer needs. To support education sectors in achieving this national funding, systems need to provide a flexible framework to support local needs and priorities and encourage new and creative content and the way it is delivered. We, with other Regional Development Agencies, will continue to lobby ministers and officials to make sure that national funding systems support the regional strategies.

e-learning network

As part of the e-portal project, we would like to see the region develop an 'e-learning network' to improve access to information through linked databases and spreading information on best practice. This would include existing and planned IT projects such as the Training and Enterprise Councils and Chamber of Commerce, Training and Enterprise 'West Midlands Business Education' website, and the Confederation of British Industry 'Growth Advantage' website. A planned early trial project would be to develop a regional 'virtual centre for management'.