

Summary and Response to ‘Future North West: Our Shared Priorities’, the regional document replacing RS2010: A Regional Strategy for England’s North West.

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report provides a summary of Future North West: Our Shared Priorities published for consultation by the North West Development Agency (NWD) and the Regional Leaders Board 4NW. A proposed Wirral Council consultation response is attached at Appendix 1. Members are asked to support the response for submission.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act in 2009 placed a statutory duty on 4NW (the Regional Leaders Board) and NWD to produce a single Northwest Regional Strategy which set out the long term strategic framework for sustainable economic growth. Cabinet has received reports on the development stages of RS2010 Northwest Regional Strategy process which are as follows:
- 23rd April 2009: Summary and response to RS2010: Principles & Issues Paper;
 - 4th February 2010: Summary and response to RS2010: Part 1 Higher Level Strategic Framework.
- 2.2 RS2010: Part 2: Detailed Policies and Implementation Plan was due for development and consultation in Spring 2010. In June 2010, the Coalition Government announced its intention to remove the statutory basis for Regional Strategies and transfer decision-making on planning and housing matters to local authorities. The North West Regional Strategy Advisory Group has however, agreed that there remains a need for a document presenting a shared vision and a set of integrated priorities for the region. As a consequence RS2010: The Northwest Regional Strategy had been redeveloped as a streamlined non-statutory, high level framework titled ‘Future North West’.
- 2.3 Future North West was published in August 2010 and is open for feedback and comments until 8th October 2010. The final version, taking account of feedback, is planned for publication after the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review. It is anticipated that partners could use Future North West as a basis to help deliver regionally shared priorities.
- 2.4 Future North West has been published in the context of changing spatial structures. The Government signalled its intention to create Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in the emergency budget on the 22nd June 2010. Local Enterprise Partnerships represent a functional economic footprint and travel to work area. The Liverpool City Region Cabinet agreed in principle at its meeting on the 30th July 2010 to submit an LEP proposal to Government, subject to formal agreement from each Local Authority. As part of the Government’s changes, Regional Development Agencies will be abolished and the LEPs will have a responsibility for improved co-ordination of public and private investment areas of economic development. In addition, funding for 4NW has ceased following the revocation by government of the Regional Spatial Strategy. Discussions are currently ongoing for a residual regional level body to continue in a supervisory capacity and support the integration between LEPs in the region and to effectively monitor residual

regional level issues such as planning and major transport schemes. Cabinet received a report on LEPs on 2nd September 2010 and endorsed Wirral's involvement in the Liverpool City Region LEP.

2.5 There is a need to address issues in the context of economic competitiveness at a regional level in the interim period before the LEPs are established. The current proposal by 4NW is to operate nine boards at the regional level to manage the transition from the removal of NWDA by March 2012 to the establishment of LEPs. These boards will include:

- RDA Assets and Liabilities
- Business Support
- Civil Contingencies
- Europe
- Planning
- Research Intelligence/Sectoral Development
- Inward Investment
- Staffing Issues
- Tourism

3. Future North West

3.1 Following the format of the two previous RS2010 documents, Future North West presents a vision of the region in 20 years time. The vision maintains the same content of RS2010 iterations condensed into the following statement:

'The quality of life for the people of the NW will be excellent and the area will become more prosperous, more equitable and low carbon. By 2030 it will be a better place to live, learn, work, visit and invest in with:

- *Job opportunities for all in a highly productive, well-skilled, internationally competitive, knowledge-based and resource efficient economy which is adapting to climate change and living within environmental limits; and*
- *High levels of health and social wellbeing, minimal deprivation and child poverty, good housing and excellent physical and digital connectivity.'*

3.2 The four overarching themes of RS2010 under which priority actions are proposed remain within Future North West. Each theme also retains consistent actions areas. The four themes are as follows:

- Capitalise on the opportunities of moving to a low carbon economy and society, and address climate change and resource efficiency;
- Build on our sources of international competitive advantage and distinctiveness;
- Release the potential of our people & tackle poverty;
- Ensure the right housing and infrastructure for sustainable growth.

3.3 The main area of difference in Future North West however, is the cementing of key spatial priorities and the inclusion of a definitive set of 'Big Ticket Issues' which are proposed as the 'absolutely fundamental issues for North West partners to put their collective weight behind.' Paragraphs 3.4 to 3.5 of this report provide a summary of these additions.

Key Spatial Priorities

3.4 Building on proposals in the development of RS2010, ten spatial priorities are presented within Future North West. Each spatial 'place' has a set of key priority areas for action. The spatial priorities are summarised as follows:

Greater Manchester as a key generator of wealth for the North West and driver of growth across the North:

- Expand and diversify the economic base through digital infrastructure, science and innovation;
- Improve transport connectivity including enhancement of public transport;
- Create quality places and housing to refurbish and/or replace obsolete stock;
- Achieve rapid transformation to a low carbon economy including retrofit of existing housing stock;
- Deliver critical infrastructure: digital, energy, water and waste;
- Consider the relationship with recreational destinations of the Peak District, East Cheshire and rural Lancashire;
- Support sustainable growth of Manchester Airport.

Liverpool as a world-class cultural city, a major driver of economic growth and international gateway:

- Development of low carbon sector including major initiatives such as tidal and wind power; biomass and waste-to-energy projects;
- Develop Liverpool Superport and associated linkages;
- Develop knowledge economy through international research and commercialisation;
- Develop culture and visitor economy including investment in infrastructure and new markets;
- Create quality places and housing to refurbish and/or replace obsolete stock including opportunities at Liverpool Waters and Wirral Waters;
- Deliver critical infrastructure: transport, digital, energy, and waste;
- Support sustainable growth of Liverpool Airport.

Develop international potential of the Liverpool-Manchester corridor through Atlantic Gateway concept:

- Develop cross boundary initiatives such as:
 - International trade through innovation in key sectors;
 - Create a globally connect gateway;
 - Create sustainable infrastructure;
 - Create places to attract and retain talent;
 - Create new Green Infrastructure;
 - Harness the role of Daresbury as world class research and innovation resource.

Capitalise on Preston's opportunity as a key regional growth centre:

- Encourage greater private sector investment as a key centre for the North West;
- Ensure higher education assets support growth;
- Enhance Preston's role as a public transport gateway to the North West.

Capitalise on Warrington's opportunity as a key regional growth centre:

- Expand Warrington as a business and commercial centre and capitalise on its Atlantic Gateway location;
- Promote Warrington as a regional public transport gateway and key hub.

Recognise Crewe, Chester, Lancaster and Carlisle's role as key sub-regional hubs:

- Reinvigorate the contribution of Chester to the cultural, heritage and visitor economy of the region and capitalise on residential and employment growth in Ellesmere Port;
- Promote Chester and Crewe as public transport gateways to the North West;

- Build on Chester, Wrexham and Deeside hub cross border relationships;
- Encourage growth and investment in Crewe to increase economic prosperity;
- Encourage growth and investment in Lancaster;
- Support Carlisle to achieve growth city aspirations.

Enhance the role of the Lake District and other outstanding natural and heritage assets:

- Improve the tourism offer through investment;
- Support the Lake District World Heritage Site case;
- Further capitalise on the landscape and heritage assets.

Recognise parts of Pennine Lancashire, Blackpool, Barrow and West Cumbria as well as areas of Manchester and Liverpool conurbations which face substantial economic and social challenges:

- Support for Lancashire's advanced manufacturing sector, linking opportunities to areas of need;
- Support Pennine Lancashire regeneration priorities;
- Develop Blackpool as a 21st century resort;
- Increase skill levels, participation and attainment in parts of Pennine Lancashire and the Fylde Coast;
- Improve rail connectivity between Pennine Lancashire, Preston and Manchester;
- Support Barrow and West Cumbria to strengthen and diversify their economies through the Energy Coast initiative;
- Provide high quality housing through replacement and refurbishment in the Manchester and Liverpool conurbations.

Recognise the contribution, challenges and opportunities of the North West's rural areas:

- Maximise economic potential of rural businesses;
- Ensure innovative NGA broadband solutions in rural areas;
- Support the delivery of social goods and ecosystem services contributing to climate change;
- Support the modernisation of agriculture;
- Address the social and economic needs and opportunities for rural communities.

Secure excellent physical and digital connectivity regionally, nationally and internationally including between:

- Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds/Sheffield;
- North Cheshire and Liverpool and Manchester;
- Pennine Lancashire and Preston and Manchester;
- Preston and Liverpool and Manchester;
- Rural areas and nearby towns/cities;
- North West and Scotland, Wales and West Midlands;
- North West and South East, Europe and rest of world.

Big Ticket Issues

- 3.5 Future North West contains an appendix of detailed issues and areas for focused action under each of the four themes subject to resources and commitment being available. It is proposed that these action areas can be progressed subject to the outcome of the Comprehensive Spending Review 2010. With a rationale that not everything can be tackled with equal priority, 12 action areas have been identified for North West partners to put their collective weight behind. These priority areas are referred to as 'Big Ticket

Issues,' fundamental to the achievement of an excellent quality of life and a world class sustainable economy in the North West. The 12 Big Ticket Issues (BTI) are:

- BTI 1: Develop the enterprising capabilities of our people through education and skills;
- BTI 2: Develop our world leading advanced manufacturing, biomedical and digital and creative industries;
- BTI 3: Develop our world class research, science and innovation capability, particularly at Daresbury;
- BTI 4: Develop our low carbon energy offer, especially in nuclear, and marine renewables, for example through the Energy Coast initiative;
- BTI 5: Develop Next Generation Access digital connectivity;
- BTI 6: Improve rail connectivity and tackle transport pinch points across the North West, especially the Northern Hub and securing High Speed Rail access;
- BTI 7: Improve international connectivity via Manchester Airport and Liverpool Superport;
- BTI 8: Reduce levels of ill health, health inequalities, poverty and worklessness;
- BTI 9: Increase the number of private and third sector jobs and social enterprise;
- BTI 10: Develop our sporting, cultural and quality of place offer, based on our world famous places, heritage and environmental assets, particularly Manchester, Liverpool, Chester and the Lake District;
- BTI 11: Enhance our natural environment and resolve emerging pinch points in our critical utilities and green infrastructure;
- BTI 12: Ensure high quality, energy efficient and affordable housing in the right locations.

4. Wirral Council Response to Future North West

- 4.1 The publication of Future North West raises some significant issues around potential replacement functions for Regional Strategies and Regional Development Agencies. This report updates Members at paragraphs 2.4 to 2.5 on the transitional arrangements proposed for managing the changes to the current regional infrastructure. However, in line with Government policy to improve the coordination of public and private investment at a more appropriate economic geography, we recommend that Wirral supports interim arrangements only and not continuation into the medium term. As outlined, the Future North West document is not statutory and therefore can only carry minimal weight if used as a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.
- 4.2 Members are advised that early work has been conducted on developing a Sub Regional Spatial Strategy for the Liverpool City Region. However, Wirral Officers are concerned how this document will add value to the Governments localism agenda. The role of the document will need to be more clearly defined. For example, it is not clear what weight it would carry in a planning appeal; is it a bidding document or simply a joint statement of existing or future aspirations? Members are advised that these proposals are at a very early stage and further updates will be brought to Cabinet in due course.
- 4.3 A full proposed response to Future North West from Wirral Council is attached at Appendix 1.
- 4.4 As with our response to the Principles and Issues Paper 2009 and RS2010: Part 1 Higher Level Strategic Framework 2010, we question the spatial approach proposed in the document which omits Wirral as a key priority area. We have emphasised the importance of acknowledging the wider City Regions as opposed to a focus on the inner centres of Liverpool and Manchester as key areas for growth. This includes promoting

the development of Wirral Waters as a key opportunity to tackle issues of decline whilst offering highly attractive growth potential for the region.

- 4.5 We clearly demonstrate the scale of the challenge and need in Wirral in relation to the worklessness challenge and present the statistical argument for the boroughs inclusion as a significant priority area for investment. As part of this we also promote Wirral Waters as a realistic opportunity to reverse decline in our neighbourhoods with the highest levels of worklessness.
- 4.6 We acknowledge and welcome the significant opportunities for economic growth that the move towards a low carbon economy offers but highlight the clear challenges that a shrinking public sector investment capability could present. This is particularly apparent for land remediation interventions to attract private sector investment and housing adaptation measures that have traditionally benefited from public sector incentives.
- 4.7 As with our response to RS2010: Part 1 Higher Level Strategic Framework, we highlight the important role of maritime as an internationally competitive sector of importance to the region along with the need to reference Wirral Waters as a significant planned development with the influence to attract investment from high value added sectors into the region.
- 4.8 In our response to RS2010: Part 1 Higher Level Strategic Framework, we highlighted empty homes issues which did not feature significantly in the RS2010 draft. We welcome the stronger reference to this issue in Future North West and highlight the extent of the challenge in Wirral. There is still a lack of recognition in the document of the needs of vulnerable people in the housing market and we demonstrate the scale of need in this area.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

6. Staffing implications

- 6.1 There are no staffing implications arising directly from this report.

7. Equal Opportunities/Equality Impact Assessment

- 7.1 Future North West will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.

8. Community Safety implications

- 8.1 There are no community safety implications arising directly from this report.

9. Local Agenda 21 implications

- 9.1 A sustainability assessment has been undertaken on behalf of NWDA/4NW.

10. Planning implications

- 10.1 Future North West has no statutory basis following the revocation of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS). However, the Government has advised that the evidence underpinning RSS is still capable of being a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

11. Anti-poverty implications

- 11.1 Future North West provides a regional framework for partners to tackle social deprivation and inequality.

12. Human Rights implications

- 12.1 There are no human rights implications arising directly from this report.

13. Social Inclusion implications

- 13.1 Future North West provides a regional framework for partners to promote social inclusion..

14. Local Member Support implications

- 14.1 There are no implications arising directly from this report.

15. Background Papers

- 15.1 Future North West and associated documents can be found at:
http://www.4nw.org.uk/whatwedo/?page_id=759
- 15.2 Cabinet Reports: Summary and Response to the RS2010 Regional Strategy for England's North West: Principles and Issues Paper, 23rd April 2010; Summary and Response to RS2010: Part 1 Higher Level Strategic Framework, 4th February 2010.

16 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 16.1 A cross departmental response to Future North West has been developed on behalf of Wirral Council. This response is attached at Appendix 1 of this report.
- 16.2 Members are recommended to:
- (1) consider the content of Future North West and endorse the proposed consultation response attached at Appendix 1 for submission to NWDA/4NW on behalf of Wirral Council.
 - (2) authorise officers to participate and support the transitional regional arrangements on a short term basis only and return further reports as appropriate.

K. ADDERLEY

Director of Corporate Services

Appendix 1

Wirral Council Proposed Response to Future North West

Regional arrangements

The national government has effected significant changes that will remove regional structures and transfer powers back to Local Authorities in establishing policy to empower local decision making on issues around planning and major development activity. This includes the removal of Regional Development Agencies (RDA'S), Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), and returning relevant housing and planning powers to local councils

Whilst Wirral recognises the need to make transition arrangements from the existing Regional architecture alongside the development of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) we believe that the Government decision to remove the regional infrastructure does not include developing replacement groups that influence local decision making processes. We fully support moves to improve the coordination of public and private investment in transport, housing, skills, regeneration and other areas of economic development at a more appropriate economic geography.

Therefore, whilst recognising these transitional arrangements and the proposed publication of Future North West as important steps to ensuring that these changes are managed in the most appropriate way, Wirral does not wish to see the creation of long term policy boards which contradict the Governments localism agenda. Any residual functions should remain only for a limited period of time to manage the transition.

We do recognise that it is important for LEPs to work together across the North West in a voluntary arrangement and to maximise efficiencies and avoid duplication of functions, when dealing with those functions that will remain following the closure of GONW and NWDA. We support the Liverpool City Regional membership of the following boards on an interim basis:

- RDA Assets and Liabilities
- Business Support
- Civil Contingencies
- Europe
- Planning
- Research Intelligence/ Sectoral Development
- Inward Investment
- Staffing Issues
- Tourism

To this end, we present our comments on the publication: Future North West – Our Shared Priorities for your consideration.

Key Spatial Priorities

As highlighted in our response to RS2010: Part 1 Higher Level Strategic Framework, we strongly feel the listing of specific places and omission of others creates inconsistencies in the spatial approach. Once again, Liverpool and Manchester are dealt with as single entities, with an occasional use of the term 'conurbations of Liverpool/Manchester' whereas key towns in other 'sub-regions' are specifically identified. This remains an issue for significant concern.

Specifically:

‘Liverpool as a world-class cultural city, a major driver of economic growth and international gateway.’ With the inclusion of Wirral Waters, the knowledge economy, critical infrastructure and the visitor economy within the descriptor priorities, we would expect, as a minimum, that this spatial area is referenced as the Liverpool City Region.

‘Develop international potential of Liverpool-Manchester corridor through Atlantic Gateway concept.’ In our response to RS2010 Part 1, we proposed a re-wording of the phrase ‘the international potential of the Liverpool-Manchester corridor through the Atlantic Gateway concept’ to ensure that the geographical scope of this concept includes the full extent of its focus. We resubmit this assertion in support of the ambition for Liverpool Waters and Wirral Waters to form the Western anchor of the Atlantic Gateway. The current ‘city to city corridor’ phrase in this document excludes Wirral unnecessarily.

‘Recognise parts of Pennine Lancashire, Blackpool, Barrow and West Cumbria as well as areas of Manchester and Liverpool conurbations which face substantial economic and social challenges.’ With a population of 308,500, 191,100 of whom are working age, the rationale and geographical extent of the term ‘Liverpool conurbation’ is unclear. At the very least, we would expect the accepted Liverpool City Region terminology here. This still conceals the extent of Wirral’s substantial economic and social challenges, clearly demonstrated as follows:

- The national indicator, NI 153 (rate of working age people claiming out of work benefits in the worst performing neighbourhoods) **nationally**, both Blackpool and Wirral have the highest and second highest rates respectively;
- Out of the 39 local authority areas in the North West region, Wirral is the third largest contributor to the worklessness challenge with 34,880 working age people claiming key out of work benefits;
- The 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation ranks Wirral as 8th worst nationally for its employment domain behind 7 English cities;
- Wirral has the second largest business start up gap in the North West;
- Wirral has the second largest business stock gap in the North West;
- Wirral has the third largest self-employment gap;
- GVA per head in Wirral is the lowest in England @ £11,257.

Cross border relationships. As an additional point of note we reiterate Wirral’s inclusion in cross border relationships with West Cheshire and North East Wales which remains omitted from Future North West, contrary to Mersey Dee Alliance commitments.

Big Ticket Issues

We are in agreement with the need to prioritise key issues and feel the 12 Big Ticket Issues are sufficiently broad to accommodate a range of activities as the need and opportunity arises. More detailed comments relating to particular action areas are covered on a theme by theme basis below.

Theme Specifics

We agree with continuing the use of the 4 key themes in Future North West as a structure for identifying priority areas for action. To further support our formal consultation responses to the previous stages of RS2010 development we would reiterate a number of points in each theme that we feel still require further consideration.

Theme 1: Low Carbon Economy & Climate Change

The inevitable focus on growing the economy and in particular a potential return to an increased level of 'manufacturing' of low-carbon solutions will have an impact on CO₂ emissions. North West companies will struggle to bear the full cost of this both in economic and environmental terms and there are economies of scale in undertaking a regional approach to supporting businesses to achieve this objective.

The recognition of the amount and variation of contaminated land and the potential contribution to the economy is made; together with the valuable role that cleaning it up will have. However, the environmental costs of dealing with the contamination are a significant issue for the North West. There is a risk that the private sector cannot realistically absorb the costs of such remediation and there is a tension between the need for investment and growth alongside reduced public sector financial intervention ability. This could result in a greater cost to the environment and the economy, together with the social implications inherent in the location of such land.

Similarly, the greatest CO₂ saving will be achieved in the future through the retrofitting and insulation of the existing housing stock. Emphasis is placed on the need to retrofit homes but this will depend on the private sector being willing to assist with the limited contribution to such initiatives that the public sector will be able to make in the future. Where incentives are not available, owner occupier investment in this area will also fall in an uncertain economic climate. Potentially, this could see CO₂ emissions rise if not addressed and facilitated appropriately.

This will also have implications for micro-generation and the development and take-up of potentially costly solutions to assist with adaptation and mitigation and may therefore have a significant negative impact. Assistance with adaptation measures will need to be focussed and provided in those areas disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change and also least able to contribute

We welcome the greater emphasis in Future North West to the importance of mitigation and clearer recognition of the various sustainable approaches and appropriate linkages. The document would further benefit from strengthening the following linkages:

- The significance and importance of transport plans in reducing CO₂ emissions needs to be more clearly linked to the aims of the objective;
- Working from home as a means to addressing need to travel and reducing CO₂ emissions needs to be emphasised more;
- In encouraging and promoting behavioural change, food security and reduction of food miles and the contribution this can make to the reduction of CO₂ emissions and adaptation is not specifically mentioned.

Theme 2: International Competitive Advantage & Regional Distinctiveness

Maritime is a key component of the Northwest economy and this isn't reflected enough as a key element of our regional distinctiveness and international competitive advantage. Liverpool City Region has a strong maritime heritage and the Port of Liverpool is the largest Freeport Zone in the UK, handling around 34 million tonnes annually. The Port of Liverpool is the top UK port for UK-USA and UK-Canada container trade and the UK's third largest container port overall. Additionally, Wirral's waterfront has seen massive investment at Twelve Quays Ro-Ro terminal carrying freight and passengers to and from Belfast and Dublin. We would expect maritime to feature prominently, particularly within Big Ticket Issue 2, as a world leading industry.

As highlighted in our response to RS2010: Part 1, planned development of high profile and high quality business locations warrant referencing as key actions to attract investment in higher value added sectors and higher value added functions (such as regional, national and divisional HQ functions). The creation of business locations with an international profile will attract and sustain higher levels of inward investment (domestic and FDI), securing expansion of the

regional economic base. As the largest planning application of this type in the UK, we would expect Wirral Waters to feature highly in this strand as a significant opportunity for the Northwest.

We agree that the Northwest's cultural offer is among the strongest, and as evidenced by the success of Capital of Culture in Liverpool, there are significant advantages to pushing this part of the offer. However we are disappointed that there has been no further debate on the omission of Birkenhead within the list of 'heritage cities' in this document. As highlighted in our response to RS2010 Part 1, Birkenhead was one of five 'Historic' towns and cities in the Northwest to be the focus of further study that looked into the town's potential to benefit from its wealth of cultural heritage. Birkenhead was identified in recognition of its superb industrial and maritime heritage - hailing its collection of warships, museums, green spaces and stunning architecture. Hamilton Square in Birkenhead has the greatest concentration of Grade One Listed Buildings in one place outside London and its park was the inspiration for New York's Central Park.

Theme 3: Releasing the Potential of Our People & Tackle Poverty

We welcome the greater emphasis on enterprise, business start-ups and the need to recognise the significant contribution high replacement demand occupational areas make to the growth potential of the North West in this document. We also welcome the recognition of the range of employment and skills opportunities from entry level through to higher skilled jobs. We feel that stronger emphasis and priority could be placed on linking areas of opportunity with areas of significant challenge in order to address employment and skills requirements within the most deprived communities. Complementary development that achieves both regeneration and economic growth by linking areas of opportunity and need should be supported.

As demonstrated within our response to the spatial priorities, both Blackpool and Wirral have the highest and second highest rates **nationally** for worklessness within their most deprived communities. It is essential for Future North West to identify these areas, acknowledge the significant contribution they make to the North West gap and make a continued commitment to address low/no skills and key employability skills to support workless residents from these areas into sustainable employment. Within the Liverpool City Region and the Northwest as a whole we also need to attract and retain skilled labour in order to meet core economic and regeneration objectives. Large scale ambitious developments such as Wirral Waters offer significant scope to create attractive, diverse and distinctive residential environments alongside an increased number, range and quality of employment opportunities which will attract and retain skilled workers in the region. As such, we feel there is a case for Wirral Waters to be referenced in this context, in addition to its current housing capability references in the document. This can be demonstrated through the key aspirations within the development of Wirral Waters which will create a wide range and high volume of opportunities for employment at entry, intermediate and higher levels underpinned with supportive action to maximise the impact for Wirral's most deprived communities which are in close proximity to the site. It is the scale and need of the challenge combined with the realistic opportunity to reverse decline in one of the most deprived and economically weak areas in the UK that identifies Wirral Waters as a priority strategic action for Future North West.

Future North West is weak on reference to accessibility to jobs, education and training opportunities to ensure that the North West Regions most deprived communities who face the most significant challenges can access the required services. Linkages with critical infrastructure are key to recognising that transport barriers must be removed to ensure that areas with high concentrations of worklessness can access major employment sites both within the locality, but also outside the North West Region. For example the electrification of the Wrexham to Bidston line and inclusion of the M53 as part of the strategic road network would

provide a major economic boost for the Liverpool City Region, enabling economic opportunities to be realised by significantly cutting journey times and access to employment opportunities in Cheshire West & Chester and North East Wales.

Theme 4: Ensure the Right Housing & Infrastructure

We welcome the reference to the need to tackle the number of empty homes alongside developing measures that improve the levels of under-occupation. The North West has the second highest number of empty properties in the country and represents a significant challenge for Wirral where the number of empty homes has increased between 2009 and 2010 by 19.9%. Whilst recognition of private sector vacants has been highlighted as an indicator to be tracked it is not currently a prominent feature in the key issues to be addressed.

It is good to see the recognition that housing plays a crucial role in a well functioning economy however there is no recognition of the need to ensure that there is a massive issue still to be addressed now and in the future in supporting access to home ownership, accessibility to appropriate mortgage and lending products and offering support to existing home owners; a significant factor in supporting economic growth and vibrant, mixed communities in places people choose to live.

It is good to see acknowledgement of the need for a substantial element of affordable housing in respect of growth numbers as we have seen demand for affordable housing in Wirral increasing significantly. Applications for social housing have increased in the last 4 years by 45.8% and last year alone 40.5% supporting the continued need for social housing.

There appears to be a removal of the explicit recognition of the private rented sector in meeting housing need and supporting economic mobility. Greater emphasis appears on empty homes to meet need alongside new provision. This may be due to the changes with the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and the introduction of absolute caps which LHA rates cannot exceed and the cuts which will be imposed for those on Job Seekers Allowance for more than 12 months. It is early days; however vacancy rates may become a greater issue for the North West in terms of seeing migration from areas considered to be more desirable due to the changes in the LHA.

There still seems to be a lack of recognition of the needs of vulnerable people and the impact and opportunities which can be gained from economic and housing growth to address this need. Considering the long term population changes in the North West (in Wirral older people have the fastest rate of increase at 36%, the largest increase being 122% for those aged 85 and above) there does not seem to be any recognition of older people or vulnerability related to housing. The number of vulnerable people living in the private rented sector has increased from 26,200 in 2003 to 28,000 in 2008 however the percentage of vulnerable households living in a decent home has increased from 55% to just over 60% suggesting a need to continue investing in interventions such as targeted energy efficiency measures, home improvement agency low level improvement works.

With regards to critical infrastructure, we also need to ensure new growth, and where possible existing development, minimises pressure on power, water and waste management infrastructure, through the use of sustainable design and development solutions. A critical factor for the delivery of economic regeneration is developing the North West as a place where business can thrive and which is attractive to inward investors. There will need to be complementary investment in the relevant infrastructure in terms of power supply, transport and the information & communications technology network. In Wirral, more work has been undertaken to determine the borough's infrastructure needs in relation to power. Better engagement is needed with the utilities companies at a local level to ensure that future infrastructure requirements are met.