

# Localise West Midlands

Newsletter: December 2005

## Introduction

This is the newsletter of Localise West Midlands, a regional not-for-profit group which aims to promote the social, environmental and economic benefits of local trade, money flows and decision-making. We work by researching, supporting and encouraging examples demonstrating the benefits of local sourcing and local money flows and the replication of effective localisation ‘pilots’ so that they become mainstream.

This is our first newsletter. It contains reports of localisation activity that LWM has organised and others that have been promoted by outside groups, as well as future LWM future plans.

## Strategy review

In November 2005, LWM underwent a strategy review process, which re-examined our potential future priorities, and proposed ways of financing LWM in the future including a potential consultancy model and membership base.

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This newsletter outlines some of the outcomes of this process. One outcome was the production of a new vision statement which can be found on our website: [www.localisewestmidlands.org.uk](http://www.localisewestmidlands.org.uk).

## Current Activities

**Regional mapping of localisation** - Researching localisation activity, best practice and opportunities, in the West Midlands region.

**Production of policy statements** - on matters of key interest such as local finance, housing, international trade, and food.

**Promotion** Developing a network of interest, and holding conferences based on the above. We can also give talks and presentations on localisation.

**Consultancy** - on our four themes below. Recent examples include: work on the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative for Birmingham City Council; and an independent impact assessment for a retail development in Shirley, Solihull.

Our work fits mainly into the following four themes:

**Housing and Finance** - Working with tenant organisations and housing providers to promote local management and financing for social housing.

**Regeneration** - Working with communities to develop solutions to local needs that use local resources. LWM also chairs the Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group (Birmingham).

**Local food** - aiming to catalyse an essential shift from its niche status to become part of mainstream food supply, particularly through public procurement and regional support activities.

**Retail** - supporting independent retail in accessible local centres, and developing tools for strengthening local shopping; combating food and service ‘deserts’; and localising supply chain links.

## Mapping Localisation in the West Midlands

LWM is currently engaged in an exercise to research and map localised economic activity in the West Midlands region, in order to gain a clear picture of how localisation works and could work in the region, create networks, and identify recommendations for the future.

By localisation we mean mechanisms to:

- source local materials
- sell to local markets
- ensure that money flow circulates locally, and/or
- use local employment.

Localisation can be used for a variety of benefits corresponding closely to regional and national Government policy objectives, including: ensuring regeneration benefits those who need it; job creation; reducing transport and consequent CO2 emissions; and contributing to sustainable communities and land use.

The first stage report will outline current localisation activity in energy, food, retail, local finance, housing, and regeneration initiatives. This will be produced early in 2006. The focus will be on practical recommendations for mainstreaming good practice. This is a particularly exciting project for us as it will form the basis of our future work in the region. We will be in touch about follow-up events and activities.

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### Shirley study and retail developments

In November 2004, local people from Shirley, West Midlands, informally approached LWM and expressed concerns that a new retail and mixed use development in the town centre would destroy local shops and make them – in the New Economics Foundation’s parlance – a “clone town”. They wanted some information to help them as local people and

traders to make decisions and understand the impact on the local economy.

They asked LWM to undertake an independent study into the potential impacts on Shirley, including using case studies of similar developments elsewhere; a report on the public participation processes used; and some recommendations for both the council and local people to implement.

This study was then commissioned by Shirley’s Town Centre Partnership and the report, produced in February 2005, was endorsed by the Retail Enterprise Network based at Manchester University. The report can be found on our website.

### Proactive retail planning

The investigation showed us that a proactive element has been missing from the whole system of retail planning in the UK. Local developments are rarely instigated by those who live in and care about an area, but usually by developers whose best interests may not be served by the same as the local community. Inspired by work of the New Economics Foundation in the UK (Clone Towns and Ghost Towns) and the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in the US, LWM plans to develop resources and events to enable local people to take a proactive role in retail planning for their area and to raise awareness amongst local authorities and other local agencies.

The primary objective is to help communities to provide for their local retail needs in a way which strengthens their local economy; but there will also be benefits in combating food deserts and other exclusion; encouraging local food sourcing; decreasing car use; maintaining local diversity and character; and potentially pushing for wider changes in law and policy nationally.

## Local Food

Following LWM's conference on public procurement of local food two years ago, two groups have been taking this agenda forward in the West Midlands:

- the practitioners' group, which has focused on training for procurement officers;
- the regional strategy group, led by the region's Farming and Food team (FFT), which has met to discuss how to take the agenda forward.

These partnerships have undertaken various projects including a wholesaler project in Shropshire and Worcestershire, a pilot linking Sandwell procurement with Herefordshire producers, and another in Warwickshire looking at establishing producer clusters and a viable, efficient distribution network that meets the delivery criteria and schedules demanded by schools' catering operations. There have also been regular local public procurement training events.

The Farming and Food Team has just appointed a sustainable food network coordinator to offer support to the pilots and to investigate the scope for a West Midlands Food Links organisation. More information on the FFT's work can be found at

<http://www.farmingandfood-westmidlands.org.uk>

The public procurement (local food) agenda has become an active and effective localist project over the year. At the same time the predicted impact of further liberalisation and the Single Farm Payment is of another huge round of losses in smaller-scale farming. Thus whilst public procurement is increasingly geared towards local sourcing, much more still needs to be done in the face of the predicted loss of thousands of livelihoods, the rural culture and economy, greater intensification, and increased food miles. LWM remains a partner in the region's local food partnerships and will be gathering a body of evidence via our mapping project in order to identify the most effective next steps for the local food agenda.

## Local Finance for social housing

LWM has been proposing local municipal bonds as a way of meeting the funding shortfall for social housing. 'Brummie Bonds' could also help solve part of the pensions problem by providing somewhere for pension fund money to be safely invested at low levels of risk. This innovation has the potential double benefit of funding an improved local infrastructure that can be used by many of the investors before they actually retire, as well as more generally connecting local investors with local needs.

Meanwhile as Britain's largest local authority, Birmingham is responsible for around 85,000 council properties. This responsibility is likely to be a continuing one following the rejection by tenants of a proposal for all the properties to be transferred to the Housing Association sector.

In November 2005, a meeting of local housing activists warmly supported further exploration of the idea of bonds as a potential solution. The conference report can be found on our website; but progress requires support for the bonds idea from both central and local government. A local champion is the key to this process, and LWM member Colin Hines is currently looking at using the growing call for different funding sources for solving the problems of public housing, as seen for example at the recent Labour Party Conference, as a test case for this idea. Various Birmingham Councillors have expressed interest in the idea, although some are proposing that it is instead used for funding prestige projects such as the new library.

LWM is now aiming to offer assistance in implementing various similar localist solutions, to social housing and other community groups in the region, as part of our consultancy work.

## **Eastside Sustainability Advisory Group (ESAG)**

Eastside, on the edge of Birmingham city centre, is currently reported to be one of the biggest regeneration projects in Europe. LWM currently chairs ESAG, a group of 18 organisations promoting sustainable development in the Eastside area.

The network is seeking to ensure that the social and economic aspects of sustainability are not ignored and that inclusive regeneration is achieved. A particular success of the advisory group in the last year has been work on participation by local people in the process, including two events. A subgroup is also investigating a social and affordable housing development in the Digbeth area. For more information see the ESAG website hosted at [www.birminghamfoe.org.uk/ESAG](http://www.birminghamfoe.org.uk/ESAG).

## **Local Enterprise Growth Initiative**

The Government's Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI) offers an opportunity to concentrate on strengthening local economies, but conversely could operate a 'business as usual' policy that would allow any wealth created to be sucked out of the targeted local area. LWM hopes that the initiative will be used for real local benefit by re-orientating its emphasis as one that across all sectors has an emphasis on 'looking to the local'. LWM has produced a report for Birmingham City Council on how LEGI might best be linked to and cater for local needs, networks and people.

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## **Localism issues at large**

There is a burgeoning interest in localism, regionally, nationally, and internationally. In the West Midlands we have seen one of the clearest signs of fatalism on the part of national and decision makers in the face of the downsides of globalisation, with the

demise of Birmingham's Rover plant. Politicians have not had any convincing vision or set of policies to illustrate what the future holds for the region in a world trading system emphasising international competitiveness based on low labour costs. All the region's future eggs have been put in the basket of re-skilling for a shift in the economy to hi-tech production and exports. While efforts to retrain and re-employ workers in other activities have been welcome and helpful for local people, the issue still remains that Rover is only one of many threatened industries across the region and the impact of Chinese competition in both traditional manufacturing and new hi tech areas and Indian competition in white collar services has not been adequately considered. Indeed these issues have not been seriously analysed or perhaps even understood by those who extol "high technology" as the saviour of West Midlands' manufacturing.

There is a growing gap between policy-makers' vision of a competitive future and what real people want their lives to be. This is reflected in recent EU referenda and elections across Europe, South America and India, where the phrase "flexible workforce" is gradually being recognised for the euphemism it is and the societal costs of this definition of competitiveness are becoming clear.

Returning to the West Midlands, the Rover crisis has led to a call from activists in Northfield and Nuneaton (Birmingham Post Sept 26<sup>th</sup>) for public services to "buy British" – not just for food, but for manufacturing. Whilst these activists' main concerns are the protection of British manufacturing for, understandably, their own livelihoods, LWM would also draw attention to the additional benefits in reducing transport and increasing community cohesion, when government bodies and businesses can source materials and goods as locally as possible.

## A Sustainability Manifesto for the Region

The West Midlands Regional Sustainability Forum, a partnership of sustainability organisations working at the regional level in which LWM is involved, recently produced a manifesto for the region.

The manifesto, *Enriching Our Region*, is a challenge to everyone in the region to take our global and environmental responsibilities to the heart of decision making and enable the region to develop in a way radically different from the policies that led to our current unsustainable position.

It highlights four areas where action is particularly needed, calling for:

- land use and transport policies to be in tune with environmental concerns – a key aspect of localisation;
- greater effort to resolve global environmental issues;
- policies which stop the unsustainable drift from cities to the shires;
- greater emphasis on protecting and enhancing natural assets such as woodlands and waterways.

It also sets out specific actions that could be undertaken by central and local government, the business community and individual people to achieve the change needed.

*Enriching Our Region* can be found at <http://www.cprewm.org.uk/envmanifesto.htm>.

## Sustainable Communities Bill

The Sustainable Communities Bill is a proposed piece of legislation that will empower local people to improve their local communities by changing the balance of power between central government and local communities. Currently 7000 individuals, 200 local organisations and 235 Members of Parliament support the campaign.

Public meetings have recently been held in Yardley and Moseley, at which local MPs Lynne Jones and John Hemming, Local Works representatives and local energy specialist Phil Beardmore spoke on various aspects of the Bill and how it might work.

LWM is a member of Local Works, the campaign for this Bill. For more information [http://www.localworks.org/index.html/](http://www.localworks.org/index.html)

## Sustainability Networking in Birmingham

A meeting was held in Birmingham in Spring to discuss the setting up of a network of local groups working on sustainability issues to enable them to work more closely together, and to share information, representation and resources.

Localise West Midlands has now been commissioned by Birmingham Community Empowerment Network to undertake the establishment of the network, with the aim that after a few months' initial activity the network will be self-sufficient. The network's embryonic website is at [www.bcen.net/bsn](http://www.bcen.net/bsn).

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## LWM Links

Here are details of a few of the diverse collection of organisations working on localisation – locally, nationally, and in other countries. A links page for our website is being developed to include these and many others.

**Common Ground** <http://www.commonground.org.uk/> An organisation celebrating local distinctiveness.

**Global Issues Local Lives (GILL)** Details can be found at [www.voscur.org](http://www.voscur.org)'s organisations directory. A small Bristol-based support organisation for neighbourhood-based activists, resisting globalisation by building more cohesive communities.

**Green Economics Institute** [www.greeneconomics.org.uk](http://www.greeneconomics.org.uk) An new body set up to give a reliable structure for work on green economics as it grows in popularity and importance.

**Institute for Local Self Reliance**, USA - [www.ilsr.org/](http://www.ilsr.org/) Works with citizen groups, governments and businesses in developing policies that extract the maximum value from local resources.

**International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC)** [www.isec.org.uk](http://www.isec.org.uk) ISEC is a non-profit organisation concerned with the protection of both biological and cultural diversity.

**New Economics Foundation** [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org) An independent 'think and do' tank which 'believes in economics as if people and the planet mattered'.

**Via Campesina** [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org) Via Campesina is an international movement which coordinates peasant organisations of small and middle-scale producers, agricultural workers, rural women, and indigenous communities from Asia, Africa, America, and Europe.

**Wasteless Society** <http://www.wasteless.co.uk> A group in Bishops Castle, South Shropshire, encouraging a reduction in the use of finite resources in their local community, by projects for waste minimisation and energy efficiency.



## About LWM

LWM aims to promote the strengthening of local economies for social, environmental and economic benefits. We aim to gather information on and raise awareness of the benefits of local sourcing and local money flow, amongst decision-makers and the general public.

LWM was set up in 2002 by a group of individuals who were keen to propose solutions, as a positive response to what is currently going wrong in economics.

Our West Midlands focus is intended to make use the region's geographical balance of urban and rural; and also to encourage democratic accountability and a people-centred approach amongst regional bodies.

However we also look beyond the region, seeking to catalyse ideas across the UK and to make links with organisations all over the world working on a similar agenda.

For more information see our website as below.

**Localise West Midlands, 54 – 57 Allison Street, Digbeth, Birmingham B5 5TH**

[info@localisewestmidlands.org.uk](mailto:info@localisewestmidlands.org.uk), 0121 685 1155

[www.localisewestmidlands.org.uk](http://www.localisewestmidlands.org.uk)

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