

# Pre-Budget Report

## The strength to take the long-term decisions for Britain:

### Seizing the opportunities of the global recovery



The Government's economic objective is to build a strong economy and a fair society, where there is opportunity and security for all. The Pre-Budget Report sets out the next stage of reforms the Government is taking to strengthen economic growth, and promote flexibility and fairness in all the regions and nations of the UK. The Pre-Budget Report also details the policy areas in which the Government will be consulting Advantage West Midlands, along with the other Regional Development Agencies, in the run up to Budget 2004.

### Maintaining a stable economy

The Government's economic reforms have helped the UK to maintain economic stability and steady growth through a challenging period for the global economy. The UK is now well placed to benefit from the opportunities that the global economic recovery will bring:

- the economy is forecast to grow by 2.1 per cent this year as the world economy recovers. The economy is expected to accelerate next year, growing by 3 to 3½ per cent in both 2004 and 2005;
- inflation is set to remain low and stable. The Pre-Budget Report announced that the Bank of England will move to a new inflation target based on the Consumer Prices Index (CPI). The new target will be 2% CPI; and
- the public finances remain sound and the Government is on track to meet its fiscal rules. Borrowing will be £37 billion this year and is then expected to decline, and debt is lower than in any G7 country.

### Regional Policy

Building on this stability, the Government has made significant progress towards establishing the framework for a modern regional policy designed to strengthen regional productivity and employment and, therefore, to reduce regional disparities. Key to this regional policy agenda is the Government's high-level target to make sustainable improvements in the economic performance of all English regions and, over the long term, reduce the persistent gap in growth rates between the regions.

The Government believes that it is not possible to run economic policy or to deliver strong public services that meet public needs from the centre using a one-size-fits-all solution. To enable each region to meet its objectives, the Government's approach is to establish and develop efficient, innovative and accountable sub-national institutions with real freedoms and flexibilities.

Advantage West Midlands (AWM), established in 1999, is the key strategic leader of economic development in the West Midlands. Since its creation, AWM, along with the other Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) has helped promote employment, entrepreneurship, skills and regeneration. The Government is committed to strengthening the RDAs and other regional and local bodies, and to helping them build partnerships with the local Learning and Skills Councils and Small Business Service.

## Pre-Budget Report 2003: the regional agenda

Advantage West Midlands (AWM) plays a central role in driving economic growth in the West Midlands. In recognition of this, AWM, along with the other Regional Development Agencies, **has been asked to contribute to the development of Budget 2004 in 5 areas:** barriers to business start-ups; provision of government services to small businesses; access to finance for small and medium sized firms; barriers to skills provision; and knowledge transfer between regions and between businesses and universities. This builds on the successful contribution the RDAs made to Budget 2003.

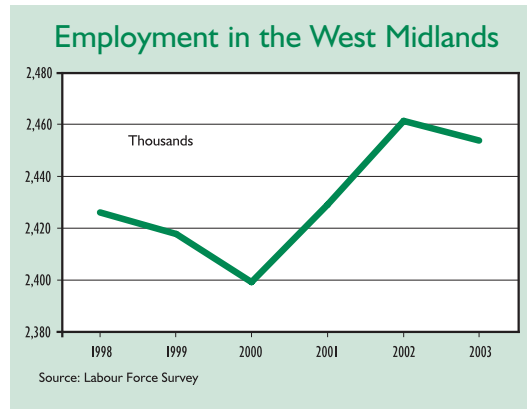
Towards ensuring that the regions have the capacity to deliver, AWM, along with the other RDAs, has also been asked to **identify the top ten institutional barriers that it believes are currently hindering effective coordination of policy-decisions and service delivery at the regional level.** This will inform the devolved decision making review announced in the last Budget.

As an important contribution to the Government's high-level regional growth target, the Government has commissioned two independent reviews. The independent review of public sector relocation, being led by Sir Michael Lyons, will report in March 2004. Sir Michael will shortly publish evidence which demonstrates that relocation can have a positive economic impact on those regions receiving Government activity. **The Government has committed to taking forward relocation as a key strand of the public service reform agenda.**

Christopher Allsopp's independent review of statistics required for economic policymaking published a first report alongside the Pre-Budget Report. A key part discusses the regional information and statistical framework needed to support the Government's regional economic performance target.

## Delivering employment opportunity for all in the West Midlands

The Government's long-term goal is employment opportunity for all. The Government has introduced measures to promote a dynamic and flexible labour market in the West Midlands in which everyone can take advantage of opportunities to achieve their full potential. Since 1997, the New Deal has helped over 93,000 people in the West Midlands into work. This has contributed to a 1.8 per cent rise in employment and a 10.4 per cent fall in unemployment in the region in this period.



The Government has introduced a number of measures to improve work incentives and provide support for those on low incomes. The Working Tax Credit, introduced in April 2003, helps to make work pay for people on low incomes and has already helped over 164,600 families in the West Midlands. As announced in the Budget 2003, the National Minimum Wage was increased to £4.50 an hour in October 2003. The Government is now taking further steps to deliver high employment in the West Midlands by:

- **enhancing help for lone parents through increasing the number of work-focused interviews** that lone parents with children aged 14 or over are required to attend, which will build on the help and support already received by 22,040 people in the West Midlands through the New Deal for lone parents;
- **giving greater discretion for Action Teams**, including the teams established in Birmingham North, Birmingham South and Wolverhampton, to use their resources in innovative ways to address the specific local barriers to work for the long-term unemployed and inactive in disadvantaged areas, from April 2004;
- **giving extra support for sick and disabled people** by enabling Jobcentre Plus personal advisers to support Incapacity Benefit claimants who want to move into work. This will build on the help and support that sick and disabled people in the West Midlands have already received through the New Deal for disabled people;

- **an extension of eligibility for the New Deal for partners** and enhancement of the help available through it; and
- **introducing further reforms to ensure that housing benefit** does not act as a barrier to work.

Further details on employment in the West Midlands can be found in the HM Treasury / Department for Work and Pensions paper *Full employment in every region* published alongside the Pre-Budget Report.

## Productivity and enterprise in a flexible West Midlands economy

Britain has high employment levels but the amount of output produced per worker – productivity – has historically been lower than in other major economies, such as US, France and Germany. Faster productivity growth, alongside higher levels of employment, will help to deliver greater economic prosperity and rising living standards in years to come.

### Skills

In the West Midlands, 17 per cent of young people are not in education or training at age 16 and, in 2002, 18.9 per cent of the working age population were without any qualifications compared to a UK average of 15.7 per cent. To raise the region's skills levels, which is crucial to productivity growth, the Government is:

- **extending the Employer Training Pilots**, currently running in Birmingham and Solihull, for a third year, and establishing a new pilot in Shropshire; and
- **publishing alongside the Pre-Budget Report a discussion paper, *Delivering an incentive for membership bodies to provide workforce development***, on the tax treatment of fees and subscriptions to professional and other approved bodies, to establish whether the current system makes a sufficient contribution to the wider training and skills agenda.

## Research & development

In the West Midlands, business spending per head on R&D is £131, compared with a UK average of £221. To encourage an increase in R&D investment in the West Midlands, the Pre-Budget Report announces a newer, clearer and more accessible definition of R&D tax credits, and a broadening of qualifying costs. This could potentially benefit over 1,100 businesses undertaking R&D in the West Midlands.

To help ensure that the UK can realise the commercial benefits of its excellent science base, the Government asked Richard Lambert to undertake a review to examine whether the links between universities and businesses in the UK can be improved. Published alongside the Pre-Budget Report, the Lambert Review's recommendations include a proposal that the Regional Development Agencies should play a greater role in facilitating knowledge transfer in their regions. The Government will make a full response to the Review's recommendations by summer 2004.

## Enterprise

The small business start-up rate is 34 per 10,000 population in the West Midlands, compared with an England average of 39 per 10,000 population. To raise productivity through promoting an enterprising economy, the Pre-Budget Report announces:

- **reforms to reduce the regulatory burden**, including improvements to the VAT flat-rate scheme; 57,300 businesses in the West Midlands are currently eligible for the scheme;
- **a package of measures to overcome barriers to raising finance for small businesses**, including a pathfinder round of Enterprise Capital Funds and proposed enhancements to Venture Capital Trusts and Enterprise Investment Schemes;
- **details of a scheme allowing local authorities to retain a proportion of increases in local business rate revenues** to spend on their own priorities, to be finalised in Budget 2004; and
- **an independent review of the effectiveness of the Small Firms Loan Guarantee** to ensure that it is having maximum benefit for small firms seeking debt finance, and that it builds on the 279 guarantees already issued this financial year in the West Midlands.

## Investment in infrastructure

Building on reforms of the planning system that are already underway, the Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister jointly commissioned Kate Barker to lead a review of the factors affecting housing supply in the UK. The Government welcomes the **interim report of the Barker Review, *Securing our future housing needs***, published alongside the Pre-Budget Report, and looks forward to the final report in spring 2004.

The Government is committed to a comprehensive programme to improve the functioning of the UK housing market to ensure a better match between the supply and demand for housing. Under this programme, £22 billion is being invested over the next three years in housing, planning and regeneration, £5 billion of which will be made available for affordable housing, including for key workers.

## Building a fairer society in the West Midlands

The Government wants to build a fairer society in which everyone can contribute to and share in rising national prosperity. The Pre-Budget Report sets out the steps the Government is now taking to support families with children, to tackle pensioner poverty, and to build a modern tax system in which everyone pays their fair share.

The Child Tax Credits, introduced by the Government in April 2003, are supporting families with children and helping to tackle child poverty. By October 2003, 399,300 working families in the West Midlands were benefiting from the support it provides. The Pension Credit, introduced in October 2003, provides extra help for low and modest-income pensioners and rewards those who have saved modest amounts for retirement. Around half of all pensioner households are entitled to the Pension Credit.

In the Pre-Budget Report, the Government takes further steps to promote a fairer society, including:

- **increasing support for families with children**, through an increase in the child element of the Child Tax Credit by £180 to £1,625 a year from April 2004, equivalent to a weekly increase of £3.50;
- **providing extra help for employer supported childcare** in order to help parents balance their work and family lives; and
- **reforms to promote fairness in the tax system** through measures designed to close tax loopholes and tackle fraud, including the introduction of measures to help reduce levels of alcohol fraud.

## Delivering high quality public services in the West Midlands

The Government is committed to providing new investment in Britain's public services. Spending on public services will be £59 billion a year higher by 2005-06 compared with 2002-03. Increases to spending are being targeted at the front line public services priorities of education, health, transport, housing and the fight against crime. Spending on the NHS will rise by 7.1 per cent a year in real terms up to 2007-08. The Government will set out spending plans for other departments for

2006-07 and 2007-08 in the 2004 Spending Review, which will conclude in summer 2004.

The Government is determined to secure value for money for the taxpayer. In each area of public service delivery, the Government is tying resources to reform and results. The Pre-Budget Report:

- describes the action the Government **is taking to drive efficiency and cut bureaucracy in the public sector**, releasing resources for front-line services;
- confirms that to meet the UK's international commitments, including in Iraq, the Government will carry forward **the special contingency reserve, adding £0.5 billion this year and allocating £0.3 billion for next year**; and
- announces an increase of **£340 million in Government support to local authorities in England** in 2004-05.

## Protecting the environment in the West Midlands

The Government believes that economic prosperity must be achieved while protecting the environment to ensure a better quality of life for everyone, today and for future generations. It is committed to tackling global problems, such as climate change, and to improving the local environment in the West Midlands' towns, cities and rural areas.

The Pre-Budget Report sets out the Government's plans for further action to improve the environment, including:

- **a new framework to ensure that duty incentives for alternative fuels** reflect their environmental benefits and provide stability for producers;
- **consultation on reforms to climate change agreements** that will provide better incentives to encourage energy efficiency;
- **plans to recycle landfill taxes to businesses**; and
- **consultation on plans for tackling diffuse water pollution.**

