

**BUSINESS PLAN FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS  
VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR  
HOUSING NETWORK**

**2005/2006- 2006/2007**

**April 2005**

## **Contents**

<b>Purpose of the Business Plan .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The Regional Agenda.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>The West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Why The Network is Critical to the Region and The Benefits of Contributing to the Network .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>The Network’s Vision .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Network’s Key Aims .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Organisational and Governance Structure .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What the Network achieved in 2003/2004 -2004/2005 .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Network – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Future Direction and Priorities for Action .....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Financing the Network .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Appendix 1 - Objectives of the Housing Network.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Executive Committee Members.....</b>	<b>10</b>

## **Purpose of the Business Plan**

This Business Plan: -

- Outlines the context within which the Housing Network operates.
- Provides a background to the Network; its vision, key aims and organisational structure.
- Reviews achievements over the period 2002/03- 2004/05.
- Identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the Network along with the threats and opportunities that it faces (a SWOT analysis).
- Outlines the future direction of the Network and its key priorities.
- Covers the financing of the Network and the level of resources required over the Business Plan period.

## **The Regional Agenda**

The government is placing increasing importance on decision-making at a regional level. Decisions made at the regional level already help shape the priorities for funding across the region and how money is spent at a local level by local authorities and regional agencies.

The West Midlands is a diverse region with both urban and rural areas. Along with areas of economic growth and high housing demand as well as areas requiring regeneration and experiencing low demand for housing. It is important that this diversity is not only recognised by regional decision-makers but also by central government in developing its policies and in allocating its resources. If this does not occur the region will lose both resources and influence and will be less able to address the needs and challenges facing the region.

All stakeholders have a responsibility to ensure that the needs and opportunities offered by the West Midlands region are taken into account. This requires collaborative working within stakeholder sectors and between sectors. A wide range of regional and sub-regional partnership networks have been established to foster collaborative working between stakeholder sectors and to take forward the West Midlands regional agenda, for example, the Regional Housing Partnership, the Social Inclusion Partnership and the Supporting People Regional Implementation Group.

Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) was established in 2000 in response to the increasing importance of the regional agenda. RAWM focuses on helping the voluntary and community sector become involved in regional decision-making and strategies that impact upon communities. It has four key areas of work: -

- Sharing good practice
- Promoting collaboration
- Unlocking regional funds
- Influencing change

RAWM has played a significant role in ensuring the voluntary and community sector can contribute to and influence regional policy and strategic decision-making. More specifically, the support offered by RAWM, particularly during the initial

development of the West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network and through the provision of Regional Strategic Engagement Funds (RSEF) has played a vital role in establishing the West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network as a credible, influential and effective network.

### **The West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network**

The West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network (Housing Network) was established in 2001. It is a regional network for voluntary and community sector groups which have an interest in housing and the development of sustainable communities in the West Midlands. It includes organisations where 'housing' is their core purpose as well groups where housing is just one part of their remit, who often, prior to the formation of the network did not have the opportunity to influence housing policy making. In fact, a key objective of the Network is to provide a voice for groups who have no other way of having their voice heard.

The Housing Network has three levels of membership: -

- **Full Members** – voluntary and community sector groups with an interest in housing and the development of sustainable communities in the West Midlands.
- **Supporters** – relevant regional (or large bodies with a regional presence or interest) umbrella bodies that wish to share information, reduce duplication and support the aims and objectives of the Network.
- **Individuals** – Affiliate membership is open to individuals who support the aims and objectives of the network.

The membership of the Network has continued to increase and there are now 82 full members and 19 individual affiliate members/supporters. The Network membership reflects the diversity of voluntary and community sector.

It includes a wide range of groups in terms of size, service area, community of interest and organisational structure. It also includes groups working in both urban and rural areas.

### **Why The Network is Critical to the Region and The Benefits of Contributing to the Network**

The Network plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration between voluntary and community sector organisation with an interest in housing issues and ensuring that the views of the sector are reflected in the various regional partnerships and influence the development of regional strategies and policies. The Network is a recognised as consultation conduit to the wider voluntary sector on housing and related issues by the West Midlands Regional Assembly, other government agencies and regional partnerships. The Network provides an opportunity for voluntary and community sector groups to influence regional and sub-regional decision-making and raise the profiles of issues. In turn, this has a knock on effect in terms of influencing local strategies and services. It acts as a means for raising the profile of the sector and ensuring it is treated as a serious partner. Involvement in the Network also offers the opportunity not only to influence the agenda but also to gain and share knowledge, information, expertise and good practice.

## **The Network's Vision**

The Network's vision is to bring a voluntary and community sector perspective to regional initiatives and influence the development of key strategies.

## **The Network's Key Aims**

The overarching aim is to build a sustainable, informed, inclusive and influential regional Voluntary & Community Sector Housing Network. To achieve this the Networks aims to: -

- Build on its inclusive approach to engagement and interaction with members, ensuring that the Network reflects the diversity of the sector and engages in particular with those voluntary and community sector groups least represented in regional decision-making processes.
- Strengthen its existing influence base in relation to the development of regional strategies and services, particularly the regional housing strategy, and in its relationship with regional and sub-regional decision-makers.
- Ensure that effective practice is built into the policy process and that 'good practice' is promoted and shared.

## **Organisational and Governance Structure**

The Network has an adopted constitution and is structured around an Executive Committee, an Annual General Meeting and at least three general meetings a year. The General Meetings are open to all members of the network.

The nine Executive Committee members are elected by a ballot of the Full Members of the Housing Network. The Executive Committee is able to co-opt up to a further three people on to the Executive Committee with the aim of ensuring that the Executive Committee membership reflects the diversity of the sector; in particular, to ensure it includes groups from both urban and rural areas, black and minority ethnic groups and small groups. The Executive Committee also appoints the Network Convenor, Deputy Convenor and Treasurer. The Members of the Executive Committee are detailed in appendix...

The Network does not currently directly employ staff, having made the decision that, at this point in the development of the Network, commissioning support services, (secretarial and administrative support) and consultancy / research services was a more effective use of resources and capacity.

## **What the Network achieved in 2003/2004 -2004/2005**

The Network was successful in securing RSEF funding, through RAWM, for the period up to 2005/2006 to support its work. The Network in its RSEF bid identified a number of milestones and outcomes to be achieved over this period to support its three key aims. This section identifies the achievements against these key aims, milestones and outcomes.

## ***Engaging and Inter-acting with Members***

- The network directly enabled over 70 voluntary and community sector member groups to be involved in influencing the regional housing strategy and indirectly,

through partner networks, enabled over 200 other groups to be involved in influencing the strategy.

- The Network has developed a database of members, their interests. The Secretariat service for the Network was put out to tender, and Community First was appointed.
- During 2004/2005 the Housing Network in partnership with RAWM established its own website ([www.housingnetwork.org.uk](http://www.housingnetwork.org.uk)) which provides information on: -
  - The network and its work, including Network responses to consultation documents etc.
  - The regional agenda and on-going regional developments/strategies
  - Links to other relevant organisational websites, documents and research
  - A directory of member organisations.

This has enabled the Network to disseminate information effectively and to provide a resource to exchange practice.

- The Network has regularly produced information briefings and newsletters on a range of issues, including the Regional Agenda and Supporting People; along with a membership pack for new members.
- The Network has made some steps in supporting members/ networks that wish to build up the capacity of their network to engage with the regional agenda. A small grants pot (grants of up to £1,000) has been established to help fund this activity. An example of a network that has received funding is the West Midlands Domestic Violence Refuge Providers group, which received a grant to hold a seminar for refuge providers and to conduct research on building capacity and engaging with the regional agenda.

### ***Influencing Regional Strategies, Services and Decision-makers***

- The Network had a major influence on the first Regional Housing Strategy. In particular, a number of the 'next steps' identified in the strategy reflect the concerns raised by the sector, including the need to develop regional homelessness and regional supporting people strategies.
- A key action point for the Network over the period was to become more proactive in terms of its engagement with the regional agenda. The Network, in fact, led on commissioning and project managing the Regional Homelessness Strategy. In November 2003, a half- day round table discussion on homelessness was held leading to the development of a brief for the Regional Homelessness Strategy. In addition, the Network has made a significant contribution to the Regional Supporting People Strategy. A consultation event on the Draft Regional Homelessness and Supporting People Strategies was held on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2004. The final Strategies were produced in 2005.
- The Network submitted a response to the initial consultation on the development of the latest Regional Housing Strategy and organised a special event for the voluntary and community sector to discuss the Regional Housing Strategy Issues and Options Paper and thus influence the final Regional Housing Strategy.
- The Network also influenced the development of Regional Spatial Strategy and was invited to represent the Regional Housing Partnership at the Regional Planning Guidance Examination in Public.

- The Network also submitted responses to a number of national policy documents, including the Baker report on planning issues and the provision of affordable housing.
- The Network has developed its role as a consultative forum acting as a key consultation conduit for a number of strategies and government organisations.
- The Network has developed alliances/ links/cross- membership with a number of other networks, in order to both facilitate engagement, share representation on partnership bodies, exchange and disseminate information and increase the joint influence of the Networks. Working links have been developed with the following networks: - RAWM, the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Network, the Rural Housing Network, the Regional Rural Community Council, the Disability Network. The Refugee Network and the Age and Experience Network. In the case of the BME Network administrative support has also been provided by the Housing Network secretariat.
- The Network strengthened its links with the Housing Corporation through identifying a number of areas where the Network could contribute to and provide added value in developing Housing Corporation policy and implementing initiatives.
- The Network commissioned research to identify the key partnership fora that it needed to influence. The Network is now represented on a wide range of strategic partnerships which are developing regional policy including: - the Regional Housing Partnership, the Social Inclusion Partnership, the Regional Health Partnership, Supporting People Regional Implementation Group and the West Midlands Domestic Violence Network.

### ***Turning Effective Practice into Policy***

- The Network has placed considerable emphasis on developing its structures and systems to ensure accountability to the wider sector. It held its first AGM on 27 September 2004, where it gained formal endorsement to its Constitution and elected the current Executive Committee. It also agreed the powers and duties of the Executive, and the roles, responsibilities, job descriptions and person specifications for the Executive Committee members.

### **The Network – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT analysis)**

As part of the process of developing the business plan a SWOT analysis was carried out. The results of this analysis are outlined in this section.

#### ***Strengths***

- Substantial and increasing membership which to a significant extent reflects the diversity of the sector
- Track record as a credible, effective, accountable and influential network
- Research and project management skills
- Skills, knowledge, expertise, grass-roots information, good practice examples and experience of members

### ***Weaknesses***

- Lack of sustainable funding beyond RSEF
- Difficulty in engaging with groups under-represented in the Network

### ***Threats / Risks***

- Failure to reflect /address the needs of the diverse voluntary and community sector
- Seen as unaccountable by wider sector
- Loss of independence of the Network
- Inability to secure sustainable funding
- Regional agenda seen as irrelevant by significant part of the voluntary and community sector

### ***Opportunities***

- Build on the Network's current track record
- Strengthen role as a consultation conduit
- Strengthen and develop links with other networks and partnerships
- Commission and project manage influential research projects
- Gain recognition as a key Network and secure sustainable funding

### **Future Direction and Priorities for Action**

Based on the Network's key aims and the SWOT analysis the following priorities have been identified for the next two years.

### ***Engaging and Inter-acting with Members***

- Increase engagement with under-represented groups – the 19<sup>th</sup> May 2005 meeting will focus on engagement. The Network will contribute to research already being carried out on how the voluntary and community sector engage with local authorities and housing associations.
- Implement improvements to IT links to facilitate engagement with groups under-represented in the network.
- Implement initiatives to ensure information is easily accessible to members including producing a Newsletter and circulating Executive Committee and AGM minutes to wider membership
- Assist in developing the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to engage at a sub-regional and regional level through continuing to operate a programme of small grants.
- Formulate a Communications strategy.
- Enhance the website, to include for example a facility for Network members and policy makers to interact.

### ***Influencing Regional Strategies, Services and Decision-makers***

- Develop the Network's role as a consultation conduit for government bodies to the wider voluntary and community sector – including hosting conference/ seminars.
- Become recognised as an 'expert' advisory body / sounding board for government bodies in developing research proposals and regional and sub-regional policies/strategies.
- Develop the Network's role in 'proofing' strategies and policies from a voluntary and community sector perspective.

- Assist in the monitoring and implementing of both the Regional Homelessness and regional Supporting People Strategies.
- Build on the research and project management capacity of the Network. Secure a research budget for the Housing Network or gain access to research funding administered by other bodies. Identify, commission and seek funding for specific voluntary and community sector research in order to influence regional strategies. An initial priority is to secure funding for research on 'Establishing the impact of the Supporting People programme on marginalized groups throughout the West Midlands'.

### ***Turn Effective Practice into Policy***

- Develop, promote and share good practice, including exploring the use of IT as a way of exchanging good practice.
- Provide training /information sessions specifically geared to the needs of network members and capacity building.
- Ensure Network representatives on partnership fora have the skills and knowledge to be effective

### ***Taking the Network Forward***

- Review annually the aims, objectives and constitutional structure of the Network to ensure they are 'fit for purpose.'
- Secure sustainable funding beyond the three year RSEF period and ensure effective mechanisms are in place to manage funding. The funding to cover as a minimum management and administrative costs (for example, venue, stationary, telephone, attendance allowances), secretarial support, development and maintenance of the website, information dissemination and promotion of the network. Ideally, sustainable funding would also be acquired to cover: - research, policy development work, and consultation events in order to extend the level of influence of the Network.
- Explore the potential for securing sustainable funding with the Regional Housing Board and the Regional Housing Partnership and identify/ explore other potential funding sources.
- Discuss with potential funders and partners the contribution the sector can make in taking the regional agenda forward and how the partners/funders could assist in supporting the Network.
- Commission a report reviewing member and partner satisfaction with the Network.
- Establish with Network members both their future aspirations for the Network and the potential future scenarios facing the sector.
- Conduct a review of the business plan during 2005/2006.

### **Financing the Network**

The table overleaf sets out the outturn expenditure for 2003/2004 and the estimated outturn expenditure for 2004/2005, along with the budgeted expenditure for 2005/2006.

**Table 1: Financing the Network - Income and Expenditure**

	<b>2003/2004</b>	<b>2004/2005</b>	<b>2005/2006</b>
	<b>£</b>	<b>£</b>	<b>£</b>
<b>Income</b>			
Carry in	2,930	214	57
Payment from Saint Basils		1,500	
Grant from NHF			5,000
Grant from RSEF	15,000	22,000	30,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,930</b>	<b>23714</b>	<b>35,057</b>
<b>Expenditure</b>			
Administration by Community First (fixed fee)	1,625	3,364	3,364
Administration by Community First (extras) PO Box, Insurance etc	106		300
Equipment	6,472		
Website maintenance by Community First		630	630
Website maintenance by RAWM			50
Accountable Body Fees (Doorway)	1,500	2,200	3,000
Conference & Events	500	4,490	6,000
Expenses incl room hire, refreshments, personal expenses.	53	98	500
Access incl interpreters, childcare etc			500
Network development & capacity building – developing policy and exchanging information	2,000		3,000
Producing information & publicity – Briefing papers, annual reports, literature for events.		5,000	1,500
Research & Policy Development	5,460	5,875	15,000
Draft Business Plan		2,000	
Reserve			<b>1,213</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,716</b>	<b>23,657</b>	<b>35,057</b>

## **Appendix 1 - Objectives of the Housing Network**

- To commission research to identify the capacity of, barriers to and recommendations for the engagement of those groups under-represented in the Network, in particular Black and minority ethnic groups, rural groups and small voluntary and community groups. To examine their access to IT and to consider cost effective approaches to improving access.
- To establish a range of communications and feedback routes suited to all concerned and including: face to face contact, newsletters, IT access including email and website, meetings based on themes of interest or location e.g. sub-regional, use of community media, use of existing networks, partnering/buddy arrangements.
- To identify relevant decision-making fora at regional and sub-regional level and convince those responsible that the Network should be represented.
- To establish an accountable means for appointing nominees to consultative fora and introduce fair means of support for those representing the Network including expenses, information, feedback routes and any necessary training.
- To map members' interests and seek out new members with expertise in areas of policy and housing need under-represented within the membership.
- To explore alternative sources of funding the Network beyond the term of the project with key partners engaged in the Regional Housing partnership. Options may include charitable sources, applications for appropriate grants, secondments, membership contributions, selling out services, benefits in kind and lobbying for continued funding as a result of the broad benefits of the Network evidenced during the period.

## **Appendix 2: Executive Committee Members**

### Executive Members

David Heslop

Duncan Miller (Treasurer)

Maureen Connolly

Gary Clarke

Jean Templeton (Convenor)

Clare Rowntree

David Brown (Deputy Convenor)

Alan Saunders

Kath Rees

Disability West Midlands

Birmingham Habitat for Humanity

Birmingham Womens Aid

Dorcas Housing Association

St. Basils

Centrepoint

The Bethany Trust

Community First in Herefordshire and

Worcestershire

The Haven Wolverhampton

### Co-opted Members

Clare Dayley

Martin Kinsella

To be confirmed

Refugee Network

P3

Valuing Age and Disability Network