

This briefing note looks at why it is important for the voluntary and community sector to engage with and influence the regional housing agenda. It provides information on the new regional structures, the regional government organisations and the networks and partnerships involved in developing housing policy and making investment decisions.

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

We are a network of voluntary and community groups who have an interest in housing. We aim to bring a voluntary and community sector perspective to regional initiatives and influence the regional organisations and key regional strategies.

The Housing Network already has a place on the Regional Housing Partnership and also has places on a number of other relevant networks and partnerships, for example, the Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Network and the Rural Housing Network. It is currently reviewing how it can best link in with the networks and fora being established by, for example, the Regional Assembly.

Established in 2001, the Network currently has over 75 members and has achieved a number of successes in terms of influencing the regional housing agenda. These are outlined in the Network's Annual Report.

### **Why is the regional agenda important?**

The government is placing increasing importance on decision-making at a regional level. Did you know that decisions made at the regional level already help shape the priorities for funding across the region and the way money is spent at a local level, which in turn affects the services, you can deliver? Next year, for example, the Housing Corporation will be spending around £80 million on housing schemes in the West Midlands.

Where regional agencies and your local authority spend their money and what they spend it on will be influenced by a new Regional Housing Strategy for the West Midlands, the Sub-Regional Housing Frameworks and other regional strategies, such as the Regional Planning Guidance and the Regional Economic Strategy.

## The West Midlands Regional Assembly

The West Midlands Regional Assembly, formerly known as the Regional Chamber, is already up and running. It is currently a voluntary institution, which includes representatives from: - local authorities, the business sector and other stakeholders including the voluntary and community sector. The recent White Paper 'Your Choice-Revitalising the English Regions', gives each of the English regions the opportunity, if they wish, to establish a directly elected assembly in charge of issues like, housing and planning. People in the West Midlands could vote on whether they want their own regional Parliament as early as 2006.

The Assembly has a number of aims including: articulating a regional voice on important issues, lobbying for the region, co-ordinating and endorsing regional strategies and contributing to and scrutinising the work of Advantage West Midlands. In April 2003 it will take on a new role as the Regional Planning Body for the West Midlands and will be focussing on taking forward the implementation of Regional Planning Guidance when the Secretary of State signs it off this autumn.

The Assembly is reviewing its structure for working with partners in the region. The Regional Housing Partnership is already linked to the Regional Assembly. A number of other fora or partnerships are being developed or already established, including a Social Inclusion Forum, Public Health Policy Partnership, the Planning Partnership and the Rural Affairs Forum.

## Regional Government Organisations

There are already a number of government organisations working at a regional level, such as: -

- The Government Office of the West Midlands - brings together the regional activities of the key government departments
- The Housing Corporation Central Field Office - which funds and regulates Registered Social Landlords
- Advantage West Midlands - the Regional Development Agency, which is responsible for producing the Regional Economic Strategy
- Countryside Agency- It has three main aims: - to conserve and enhance the Countryside, to spread social and economic opportunity for the people who live there and to help everyone to enjoy the countryside and share in this national asset.

The White Paper intends that these organisations should have a stronger regional focus. It sets out plans to devolve more functions to the Government Offices and give regions more say in the policy making process.

## Regional Housing Board and the Regional Housing Strategy

The latest Communities Plan, 'Sustainable Communities: building for the Future', sets out the Government's proposal to establish a Regional Housing Board in each region.

The Regional Housing Board for the West Midlands has now been established. The Board includes: The Government Office, the Housing Corporation, Advantage West Midlands, English Partnerships, West Midlands Local Government Association, the Regional Assembly and the Regional Housing Partnership.

The Regional Housing Board will be responsible for implementing the Communities Plan and securing the preparation of a Regional Housing Strategy. The first strategy has to be produced by July 2003.

The Regional Housing Strategy will be used as the basis on which the Board advises Ministers on strategic housing investment decisions; including the proportion of public sector housing resources which should be allocated to local authorities to fund, for example improvements to existing homes, and the proportion which should be allocated to the Housing Corporation to fund major new housing development. The Regional Housing Strategy will set out the housing priorities for the region and it is likely to identify the key geographical areas for investment against the identified priorities. It is vital therefore that the voluntary and community sector influences the process of developing the strategy.

## The Regional Housing Partnership (RHP)

This is a multi-agency partnership, including: -local authorities, the National Housing Federation, the West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network, the House Builders Federation, Advantage West Midlands, Government Office of the West Midlands, the Housing Corporation, and a representative from the Private Sector. The RHP is now one of the Regional Assembly Forums. It is leading on the development of the Regional Housing Strategy.

As part of the process of developing the Regional Housing Strategy, four Sub-Regional Housing Partnerships have been set up, these are:

- West Mercia
- Staffordshire
- Solihull, Coventry, and Warwickshire
- Birmingham and the Black Country

These sub-regional partnerships are leading on identifying the sub-regional issues and priorities, which will feed into the development of a regional housing strategy for the West Midlands. The Housing network has identified representatives to work with each of these sub-regional partnerships.

## Other Regional Housing Networks

There are four other regional housing networks, which are focussed on specific interests/topics, these are:

- The Rural Housing Network
- The Black and Minority Ethnic Regional Housing Network
- Supported Housing Sub-group
- Economic and Demographic Growth Sub-group

The West Midlands Voluntary and Community sector Housing Network has already developed strategic alliances with the Rural Housing Network and the Black and Minority Ethnic Network.