

**'KEEPING IT REAL'**  
Conference held on 17th March 2003

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### BACKGROUND TO THE CONFERENCE

#### The Regional Level - Why it is Important

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 the way

money is spent at a local level, by regional agencies and local authorities. Engaging with and influencing at the regional level will have a real impact at the local level.

The West Midlands is a diverse region. It does not have the problems of the uniform high demand for housing and the affordability problems associated with the wider south-east nor is it characterised by demographic decline and low demand for housing associated with some parts of the north of England. There is a danger the West Midlands is seen simply, as a 'buffer zone', which sits somehow halfway between these two extremes and can effectively be ignored. It is vital that this does not happen, 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 between stakeholders and a clear vision for the region. Without this the region as a whole will lose resources and influence and will be less able to address the needs and challenges facing the region.

#### The Communities Plan

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's recently launched its Community Plan, 'Sustainable communities: building for the future'. The Communities Plan 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. It is responsible for implementing the Communities Plan and securing the preparation of a Regional Housing Strategy against which strategic housing investment decisions will be made. The conference was aimed at influencing this strategy.

The plan also identifies a number of major new growth areas associated with the South East economy just outside the boundaries of the West Midlands region. The Growth area associated with Milton Keynes will pose a particularly important challenge for this region. A new, high quality, buoyant market will compete with the West Midlands. It may become an attractive area for businesses to locate in and for people to live and could draw both of these activities away from alternatives in the West Midlands. The challenge for the region is to ensure that this does not happen and that the West Midlands region benefits from the increased economic activities just beyond its boundary.

#### The Conference and the Role of the Voluntary and Community Sector

The Conference acknowledged the vital role of the voluntary and community sector. As Lord Rooker commented,

"The voluntary sector can not afford to be a spectator, a mere bystander, it needs to set and shape the agenda"

The Conference focussed on: -

- Identifying the medium to long term housing needs that should be included in the Regional Housing Strategy
- The process for developing and delivering the strategy.

It provided an opportunity for voluntary and community sector groups to become directly engaged in developing the Regional Housing strategy.

The West Midlands Voluntary and Community sector Housing Network (Housing Network) will be using the outcome of the Conference to: -

- Determine the content of its input into the regional housing strategy and the sub-regional partnerships
- Develop the way in which it engages with the Regional housing Partnership and its members.

The conference was organised by the Housing Network and its sister network the Black and Minority Ethnic Regional Housing Network.

The Conference was held on 17th March 2003. The seminar focussed on a number of topics: -

- Lord Rooker, the Minister of State for Housing, Planning, Regeneration and Regulatory Reform, outlined the Government's housing agenda for the regions.
- Professor Anne Power, from LSE and Chair of the Birmingham Independent Commission on Housing, provided answers to the question 'What is a Sustainable community and what are the lessons for the region?'
- Steve Gregory, the Chair of the West Midlands Regional Housing Partnership, talked about the partnerships and processes set up to take forward the regional housing agenda and the development of the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy.
- Ian Brady, from the Homelessness Directorate, focussed on the Homeless Act 2002 and the need for a regional dimension to tackling homelessness.
- Barrington Billings, from HAMAC/Black Star Housing, outlined some of the issues for black and minority ethnic communities that need to be considered within a regional housing strategy.
- Professor Alan Murie, from the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, Birmingham University, highlighted the housing trends and challenges for the region.

A number of workshops were held which focussed on: -Young People, Sustainable Communities, Supporting People across The Region and Community Capacity. This provided delegates with the opportunity to highlight issues and the priorities for action.

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The context to the development of the West Midlands Housing Strategy along with the key themes recurring during the day are outlined below.

#### The West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy - The Process So Far

In the West Midlands, the Regional Housing Board has asked the Regional Housing Partnership, a multi-agency partnership, to lead on taking forward the development of the Regional Housing Strategy. The Housing Network is represented on this partnership, which gives the sector a head start in terms of influencing the 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 the Regional Housing Strategy.

The first draft of the Regional Housing Strategy will be out for consultation at the end of April 2003. A regional consultation event is planned for May 2003. In addition, sub-regional consultation events are also planned. The first strategy has to be produced by July 2003 but the Partnership see the development of the strategy as an on-going process and expect it will take a number of years before a comprehensive strategy is developed. The emphasis needs to be on quality rather than speed.

The Regional Housing Partnership has stated its commitment to ensuring that the process of developing the strategy, both this year and over the longer term is inclusive. They recognise the need to ensure that everyone feels they can sign up to the strategy. As the Chair of the Regional Housing Partnership commented:

"The success of the region is dependent on us recognising we are all in it together, we need to work collaboratively. We need a strategy we are all signed up to- a single vision for the region."

The strategy needs to reflect the priorities set out in the 'Communities Plan' and link in with the other regional strategies, such as Regional Planning Guidance and the Regional Economic Strategy. It also needs to highlight the particular issues and priorities facing this region.

#### CONFERENCE FINDINGS AND ACTION POINTS- NEEDS AND ISSUES

##### Vision and Approach

There is a need for a regional Vision, which crosses service areas, strategies and organisational boundaries. It needs to emphasise the inter-dependency of the various strategies, which it was felt still contain contradictory policies, particularly in relation to housing and the Regional Economic strategy.

The vision needs to focus on the long-term rather than on the short-term. The changes required will take time to achieve we should not be looking for the 'instant factor' but thinking medium and long term.

Strategies need to be turned into action plans, which make a real difference. They need to be monitored to ensure they are delivered and do achieve the changes required.

All Stakeholders need to change the culture of the way they do things. They need to think regionally and be more creative, innovative and ambitious. They need to work collaboratively rather than competitively. To an extent this is a new journey for all partners, including local government and it requires radical change.

Issues shared across a number of local authority areas, for example, affordable rural housing, and meeting the needs of young people, need cross authority working. Supporting people issues, in particular, need to be looked at and addressed on a cross-boundary basis.

The interdependency of rural and urban areas needs to be more adequately recognised. A solution to the problems facing rural areas can only come when there is a vision for the urban areas.

Partners need to ensure that the best use is being made of the limited resources, not just financial resources but also buildings and people resources. There should also be an acceptance that problems generated on a large-scale need large-scale resources.

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##### Sustainable Communities- a Joined Up Approach

The Regional Housing Strategy needs to be about more than just, 'bricks and mortar, housing on its own will not address the issues facing the region. The development of sustainable communities requires a 'joined up approach'; housing needs to link in with the economic agenda and vice versa. It needs to help tackle the problem of social exclusion.

The joined up approach needs to be a two -way process. The housing strategy needs to be influenced by other strategies but equally other regional strategies also need to recognise the importance of housing to the delivery of their strategies - housing is a shared issue across the board.

Transport is integral to sustainable communities and urban renaissance. It needs to be seen in this light and not merely as a technical issue.

The link between housing and employment is particularly crucial in terms of meeting the needs of young people. If the housing strategy and the economic strategy don't work together then it will be to the detriment of the young people wanting to enter the workforce.

##### Sustainable Communities - a Community Focussed Approach

Community is something that is defined by the people who live there. It will change over time as people and circumstances change. Crucially the people must control the resources that their community has and must be able to influence the resources that others invest in their communities.

Funders should acknowledge the need to provide resources for community development and add-ons. They should accept that the outcomes from this might not be easily measurable.

A key priority, for the development of sustainable communities, should be the devolution of decision-making, budgets and other powers

There is a need to build on spontaneous community development, for example, faith groups, school community service schemes etc and to support community initiatives.

Housing Network member organisations need to demonstrate real and practical commitment to sustainable communities

Planners and decision-makers need to have a better sense of how people perceive their community.

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Housing needs to be provided which fits their needs and aspirations and to offer a choice of tenures. There was a particular emphasis on adaptable, flexible housing, which young people can grow into along with a focus on new, cheaper, methods of construction to make the accommodation more affordable.

Many young people are seen as in low priority need by local authorities and housing associations. It was felt that local authority and housing associations allocation policies often discriminate against young people and need to be reviewed.

Many young people are unable to manage a housing tenancy and increasing numbers are being evicted. Additional emphasis needs to be given to floating support, including support to young people in the private sector, to ensure sustainment of the tenancy/home. Support needs to cover a range of services including debt counselling, personal development etc.

Move on accommodation needs to be provided for young people leaving hostels, care, youth offenders etc. In addition, more housing schemes, which can be managed specifically for young people, should be considered.

The housing benefits system and rent restructuring are posing difficulties for young people. It is suggested that landlord forums are set up to highlight and resolve issues around housing benefits.

There must be more consistency around affordable housing policies and how they affect young people. This should include the sharing of market intelligence.

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**CONFERENCE FINDINGS AND ACTION POINTS - DEVELOPING AND DELIVERING THE STRATEGY**

**Effective Consultation**

Professionals need to review their consultation structures to ensure they are not inhibiting and exclusive. Consultation needs to be a continuous process right from the start that can build and change. It should be an open and transparent process with feedback to participants on how their views have been taken into account. Any approach should also allow for varying levels of involvement. The community also need to have the opportunity to 'dip in and out' of any consultation process, so that it is meaningful for them.

**Housing Choice: Needs and Aspirations**

The conference highlighted the need to focus on providing choice and meeting aspirations. This meant maintaining and creating communities and areas where people wanted to live and offering choice to meet housing aspirations.

The Voluntary Sector, in particular, it was felt could provide evidence and information on needs and aspirations, particularly in relation to:

- Cross local authority boundary needs, particularly around supporting people issues.
- So called 'hidden needs' or 'ignored need', such as rural homelessness. Needs may be smaller in number but it is equally important that they are addressed.
- Emerging needs and aspirations, in relation, for example, to the growing black and minority ethnic population and asylum seekers

These issues need to be prioritised and taken notice of by government and local authorities.

The conference also recommended that a number of sister strategies and action plans are produced to support and develop on the Regional Housing Strategy:

- The Regional Housing Partnership, the Housing Network and the Homelessness Directorate should develop a Regional Homelessness strategy and action plan.
- A Regional Supporting People Strategy and action plan should be produced which can help inform the Regional Housing Strategy. This needs to be integrated with the strategies being prepared by the Supporting People commissioning bodies.
- The Regional Housing Partnership should consider the potential for producing a Regional Black and Minority Ethnic strategy and action plan in conjunction with the Black and Minority Ethnic Regional Housing Network.

**Housing and Young People**

There is a lack of opportunities for young people to get onto the housing ladder, particularly in rural areas. This means they move away from the rural area, thus threatening the long-term sustainability of the community.

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The voluntary and Community sector needs to be more effectively engaged with the work of the Sub-regional Housing partnerships. Whilst the Housing Network has nominated representatives for each of the four partnerships their engagement has been patchy. The Sub-Regional Partnership leads need to ensure that they do engage with the nominated Housing Network representative.

Views varied in the options in relation to the voluntary and community sector's position in relation to the Regional Housing Board:

- A number of delegates felt that the membership of the Regional Housing Board should be reviewed. If this was where the 'real decisions' were going to be made then the voluntary and community sector, as well as other stakeholders, needed to be represented on the Board. Linked to this was a concern that the Board, as it was presently constituted, had no accountability to wider stakeholders or the people directly affected by the decisions made.
- Other delegates felt the Regional Housing Board should be seen as purely a Commissioning Body and it should only include Commissioners. With the Regional Housing Partnership in effect becoming the wider inclusive forum for the Regional Housing Board, acting as the Core Strategy Group with wide representation, which develops and recommends priorities for investment. Below this would then be the various interest networks.

Young people should be included in decision-making processes. Do decision makers know what their aspirations are? How do they get their views heard? This is an issue for all stakeholders and partnerships/networks.

**The Housing Network- Engaging with the Wider Voluntary and Community Sector**

Some voluntary and community sector organisations are finding it difficult to gain access to discussions and consultation on housing issues. The Housing Network could offer a potential route for these groups. The Network needs to:

- Consider the best ways of both disseminating information to and enabling members and the wider sector to raise issues through the network. One suggestion was that as a starting point each active member of the network could undertake to tell a number of key people in their area about the Housing Network and the Regional/sub-regional housing strategies
- Find ways of 'reaching down' to member organisations and the wider sector.

Individual groups in the sector also need to recognise why they need to think and act regionally. This is a challenge, which needs to be met by government agencies, the Housing Network and the sector.

**Addressing the capacity issue**

Capacity to engage with the regional and sub-regional agenda is an issue across all sectors. This needs to be recognised and addressed. Government, the Regional Assembly and other funding bodies need to consider how resources can be released to provide this capacity across all sectors. Specifically, in relation to the voluntary and community sector this means providing: -

- Sustainable funding for the Housing Network and wider voluntary and community sector network infrastructure.
- Funding for community capacity building to enable people to participate and to gain additional knowledge and skills.

**The Challenge**

The challenge for the Regional Housing Partnership and the Regional Housing Board is to facilitate an inclusive approach to developing the Regional Housing Strategy. The approach needs to facilitate effective engagement with the voluntary and community sector so that it can help shape and set the agenda and bring into play the energy and expertise held within the sector.

The ultimate aim must be the development of a realistic and meaningful Regional Housing Strategy, which can be truly owned by all concerned.

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**NEXT-STEPS- TIMETABLE AND CONTACTS**

So what are the next Steps in producing the Regional Housing Strategy and how do I get involved?

**The Timetable:**

- **May 19th 2003 Consultation Event** -on this year's Regional Housing Strategy is planned- For details of this event contact Emma Kiteley at the West Midlands local Government Association (Tel: 0121 678 1010) or one of the Housing Network members whose details are below.
- **July 2003** -The First Regional Housing Strategy has to be submitted by the Regional Housing Board to the Minister
- **During August and September 2003** - the Minister will consider and discuss the Regional Housing Strategy with the Regional Housing Board
- **November 2003** - The Minister will announce regional allocations
- **During 2003/2004 and beyond**- The Regional Housing Strategy will be developed through the Regional Housing Partnership and other partnerships.

**Housing Network Contacts:**

Network Convenor and the Housing Network representative on the Regional Housing Partnership

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Sub-Regional Housing Strategies - Housing Network Representatives

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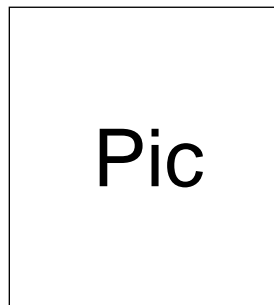
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**APPENDIX 'A'  
 SEMINAR PROGRAMME**

**Influencing the Regional Housing Strategy  
 "KEEPING IT REAL"**  
 17TH March 2003  
 Bethel Centre, Kelvin Way, West Bromwich

09.30 - 10.00	<b>Registration</b>
10.00 - 10.10	<b>Welcome &amp; Introduction by Chair:</b> Jean Templeton, Convenor of the Housing Network
10.10 - 10.30	<b>Key note Speaker - What is the Government's Housing Agenda for the regions?</b> Lord Rooker, Minister of State for Housing, Planning, Regeneration and Regulatory Reform
10.30 - 10.50	<b>What is a sustainable community and what lessons for the region?</b> Professor Anne Power, LSE and Chair of Birmingham Independent Commission on Housing
10.50 - 11.10	<b>West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy</b> Steve Gregory, Chair of Regional Housing Partnership
11.10 - 11.25	<b>Tea &amp; Coffee</b>
11.25 - 12.30	<b>1st Workshop: Informing the Regional Housing Strategy - Choice, Change and Development. Choice of :</b>  <b>1. Young People - Where will the young people from your area live?</b> Professor Alan Murie, University of Birmingham  <b>2. Creating sustainable communities - What does it really mean in your area?</b> Professor Anne Power, LSE  <b>3. Supporting People across the region - People don't stay within administrative boundaries!</b> Steve Rafferty, SITRA  <b>4. Community Capacity - How serious are we?</b> Jon Stevens, Director, BCHA
12.30 - 13.15	<b>Lunch</b>
13.15 - 13.35	<b>Homelessness - The need for a Regional Dimension</b> Ian Brady, Homelessness Directorate
13.35 - 13.55	<b>Black and Minority Ethnic Strategy - The Regional Context</b> Barrington Billings, HAMAC /Black Star
13.55 - 14.15	<b>Housing Trends and Challenges for the Region</b> Professor Alan Murie, Centre for Urban and Regional Studies, University of Birmingham
14.15 - 15.15	<b>Workshops repeated</b>
15.15 - 15.30	<b>Final Questions and What Next</b>
15.30	<b>Close and Tea/Coffee</b>

**APPENDIX 'B'  
 DELEGATE LIST**

<b>Mary Aston</b> Evesham & Pershore Housing Association Development Officer	<b>Mary Aston</b> Evesham & Pershore Housing Association Development Officer
<b>Jas Bains</b> Ashram Group Director	<b>Jas Bains</b> Ashram Group Director
<b>John Barnabas</b> Radical Routes Co-op Ltd Bursar	<b>John Barnabas</b> Radical Routes Co-op Ltd Bursar
<b>Kaye Berry</b> Connexions Manager, Herefordshire	<b>Kaye Berry</b> Connexions Manager, Herefordshire
<b>Barrington Billings</b> HAMAC / Black Star Housing Executive Director	<b>Barrington Billings</b> HAMAC / Black Star Housing Executive Director
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<b>Karen Brown</b> Jephson Housing Association Housing Services Officer	<b>Karen Brown</b> Jephson Housing Association Housing Services Officer
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<b>Sinead Butters</b> Aspire Housing Ltd. Regeneration Manager	<b>Sinead Butters</b> Aspire Housing Ltd. Regeneration Manager
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<b>Jane Clarke</b> Churches Housing Association Dudley & District Chief Exec.	<b>Jane Clarke</b> Churches Housing Association Dudley & District Chief Exec.
<b>Maureen Conolly</b> Birmingham Women's Aid Chief Exec.	<b>Maureen Conolly</b> Birmingham Women's Aid Chief Exec.
<b>Steve Corton</b> North Lincolnshire Council Supporting People Lead Officer	<b>Steve Corton</b> North Lincolnshire Council Supporting People Lead Officer
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<b>Pat Devereux</b> Advance Housing & Support Limited Service Manager	<b>Pat Devereux</b> Advance Housing & Support Limited Service Manager
<b>John Dickinson</b> Government Office for the West Midlands	<b>John Dickinson</b> Government Office for the West Midlands
<b>Chris Downes</b> National Housing Federation Regional officer (West Midlands)	<b>Chris Downes</b> National Housing Federation Regional officer (West Midlands)
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<b>Sue Kruze</b> Beth Johnson Housing Group Supported Housing Coordinator	<b>Sue Kruze</b> Beth Johnson Housing Group Supported Housing Coordinator
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<b>Geraldine Long</b> Association for Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Area Advisor	<b>Geraldine Long</b> Association for Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Area Advisor
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<b>Abigail Robson</b> Birmingham City Council Project Planner	<b>Abigail Robson</b> Birmingham City Council Project Planner
<b>David Rogers</b> Mencap (Birmingham) Chief Executive	<b>David Rogers</b> Mencap (Birmingham) Chief Executive
<b>Bahlool Salen</b> Muath Welfare Trust Centre manager	<b>Bahlool Salen</b> Muath Welfare Trust Centre manager
<b>Alan Saunders</b> Community First Hereford & Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler	<b>Alan Saunders</b> Community First Hereford & Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler
<b>Ian Stuart</b> Black Country Housing & Community Services Group Housing Manager	<b>Ian Stuart</b> Black Country Housing & Community Services Group Housing Manager
<b>Christine Thorpe</b> South Staffordshire HA Research and Information Officer	<b>Christine Thorpe</b> South Staffordshire HA Research and Information Officer
<b>Joyce Tierney</b> Accord Housing Association Regeneration Manager	<b>Joyce Tierney</b> Accord Housing Association Regeneration Manager
<b>Yvonne Tucker</b> Housing Corporation	<b>Yvonne Tucker</b> Housing Corporation
<b>Gurmeet Virdi</b> Focus Housing Association Operations Manager	<b>Gurmeet Virdi</b> Focus Housing Association Operations Manager
<b>Lisa Waring</b> Centrepoint	<b>Lisa Waring</b> Centrepoint
<b>Betty Watson</b> Wychavon Tenants' Association Treasurer	<b>Betty Watson</b> Wychavon Tenants' Association Treasurer
<b>Jeanette Weir</b> Wychavon Tenants' Association Co-ordinator	<b>Jeanette Weir</b> Wychavon Tenants' Association Co-ordinator
<b>Helen Wilkes</b> South Staffordshire District Council Principal Housing Officer	<b>Helen Wilkes</b> South Staffordshire District Council Principal Housing Officer
<b>Jeni Williams</b> Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Principal Policy Officer	<b>Jeni Williams</b> Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council Principal Policy Officer
<b>Caroline Williamson</b> Caroline Williamson & Associates Principal Learning Consultant	<b>Caroline Williamson</b> Caroline Williamson & Associates Principal Learning Consultant
<b>Chris Winter</b> Telford & Wrekin Council Business Manager - Strategy & Development	<b>Chris Winter</b> Telford & Wrekin Council Business Manager - Strategy & Development
<b>Joan Woodley</b> South Worcestershire Family Support Team Manager	<b>Joan Woodley</b> South Worcestershire Family Support Team Manager