



## West Midlands Rural Community Council: Policy Papers Executive Summary

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

RCCs have a considerable understanding of rural issues borne out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.

As part of the Regional Strategic Engagement Programme managed by RAWM with funding from Advantage West Midlands, the West Midlands Rural Community Council Network has produced position statements on four areas of interest: transport, housing, social enterprise and voluntary sector infrastructure support. These papers are a culmination of research within the rural areas of the West Midlands, the views expressed to RCC's within each county through a series of events across the region and knowledge accrued from contact with existing networks and communities. They are not intended to be a definitive statement incorporating the views of all agencies across the West Midlands. Copies of individual papers are available from Network Co-ordinator at Community First.

**RCC's have a key role to play as enablers and facilitators of the 'rural voice'**

### Rural Strategic Engagement Fund

*The Rural Community Council Network was successful in its bid to the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) under the health and regeneration theme for funding of £35,000 for one year from 1 April 2002. Managed by RAWM and funded by Advantage West Midlands the purpose of the RSEF was to provide capacity building support to regionally and sub-regionally significant communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development. The fund recognised the impact that the work of RCCs locally has on the health and regeneration of rural communities and provided support to enable the RCCs to work collectively to increase the participation of rural communities in shaping and informing the rural agenda across the region.*

# Transport

**Transport has been a high profile issue for government in recent years. Issues of social inclusion, particular problems for rural communities, pollution, global warming and safety have all been clearly recognised and to a greater or lesser degree acted upon. During the last few years new initiatives to address rural transport problems have been introduced including Rural Bus Grants, the Rural Bus Challenge scheme, Rural Transport Partnerships and the Parish Transport Grant scheme. This has meant that the funding allocated to rural public transport has increased significantly. The same period has seen the advent of the Strategic Rail Authority and the development of Community Rail Partnerships and the Rail Passenger Partnership schemes. The latter schemes are relevant to all areas but there are notable examples of take up in rural areas. Research by the Countryside Agency found that transport continues to be the single most important concern of people living in rural areas.**

**There are many examples of good practice in developing innovative solutions to rural transport problems including Dial-a-ride and community minibuses, Wheels to Work schemes and taxi voucher schemes. Many of these are included in the Countryside Agency's good practice guide "Great ways to go".**

## What needs to be done?

Whilst considerable progress has been made in improving rural transport through both conventional and innovative approaches, in many areas this was starting from a very low base. A great deal still needs to be done if rural communities and in particular socially excluded people are to have adequate access to services and facilities on a sustainable basis. It needs to be recognised that local community based transport initiatives can sometimes take a long time to get off the ground. If real needs are to be catered for then a community development approach needs to be used. Adequate development time and sufficient and consistent support need to be available. Substantial efforts need to be put into publicising new services and encouraging people to use them. In some cases this requires a culture change.

- Continuity of funding - many innovative services which have proved to be effective and which cater for people suffering from social exclusion are by definition unlikely to be commercial
- Active spreading of good practice - there are lots of good schemes which deserve wider implementation and which in terms of equity should be available to more people
- Consideration of public transport provision when planning decisions are being made
- Promote policies which help to create sustainable rural communities where homes, work and other services and facilities are in proximity. The provision of a mix of housing types in new development is important here.

Residents of "social housing" are more likely to make use of public transport.

- Public transport needs to recognise the move to more flexible patterns of employment - greater need for unconventional and flexible services.
- "Transport proofing" of service providers - prime example is the health service
- Much more integration of transport modes and integration within modes
- More regional planning of transport - currently Centro only covers the central part of the region and there is a need for more regional planning and delivery of transport services
- Wide Concessionary fare schemes - current district based schemes are inadequate and discriminate against people who live in three tier local government areas and on the edge of local authority areas
- Major improvements in public transport information (fares as well as services - many people do not realise what services are available or how competitive with car travel many fares are) both in advance of and during journeys - combined sources of information on rail, bus and unconventional transport through a national portal and real time information
- Importance of pedestrians and cyclists - their needs must be catered for and there need to be improved facilities for integrating cycle and bus and train use (facilities for cycles on trains are particularly poor and inconsistent in the region)

- Role of the rural railway - there is still a significant network of railways serving rural parts of the West Midlands (although some lines had their intermediate stations closed many years ago) and they perform an important function for local as well as longer distance journeys.
- Reopening of railway stations on existing lines should be encouraged and made easier. Cost issues need to be addressed here.
- Encouraging modal shift by promoting use of cars in conjunction with other modes
- More liaison between community transport operators and commercial transport operators
- A standard test should be available for all volunteer drivers rather than different systems in different areas
- Local provision of services and facilities (non transport) including multi-purpose centres and mobile services
- Study of the effectiveness of conventional bus subsidies compared to spending money in alternative ways including the provision of local services and facilities rather than transport. The Commission for Integrated Transport has recently carried out work on this issue

Advocacy of the significance of transport especially for socially excluded people

To a large extent society, particularly in rural areas, can be divided into those who are transport rich and those who are transport poor. People with access to cars fall into the former category and people reliant on public transport into the latter. In between there are people such as those in households which have only one car mainly used by one person, and low income households who have a car but cannot really afford to keep it on the road. This inequality is largely a function of income but also reflects age and gender. There is a generally low level of awareness of the difficulties for the transport poor by the transport rich. Also the transport rich are often unaware of what public transport is available and, even if they are, never use it. Raising awareness of the non public transport user is important both as a contribution to reducing traffic and greenhouse gas emissions and as a means for securing better public transport as a result of use by a wider spectrum of the community.

## **Transport cont...**

### **Other issues and opportunities**

- The role of integrated public transport in relation to tourism. Increased use of public transport by tourists can bring environmental benefits and offer better services for local people.
- Importance of solving capacity problems on railways - this is of regional significance. Capacity restraints in the West Midlands conurbation, in particular between Coventry and Wolverhampton and at Birmingham New Street, have knock-on effects which spread out to the rural network causing unreliability and delays. These can be particularly serious where services are less frequent and connections (to rail and other modes) crucial.

The government is currently consulting on future airport developments. The scale, impact and costs of many proposals are immense and contrast markedly with the situation of socially excluded people in rural areas

There is a great contrast in the government's willingness to allocate very large sums to motorway widening schemes arising out of Multi Modal Studies (MMSs) and the lack of dedicated funds for railway schemes. These billions of pounds also contrast strongly with the comparatively small sums allocated to rural public transport.



### **Conclusion**

Rural Community Councils have been effective advocates for transport issues in rural areas, both in supporting the development of innovative transport solutions and in raising awareness of the particular transport needs of people living in rural areas. Continued active participation in Rural Transport Partnerships and in the preparation and monitoring of Local Transport Plans gives the RCC Network a strong base from which to relay information and ideas into the transport group of the Regional Rural Affairs Forum. Thus local needs can directly influence transport planning at a regional level.

# **Social Enterprise**

***The potential of social enterprise and its contribution to economic regeneration and impact on social and financial exclusion is being widely recognised and promoted at national, regional and sub-regional level.***

***Nationally, the creation of the Social Enterprise Unit and the launch of its strategy has signalled the government's commitment and support for social enterprise. Advantage West Midlands is supporting social enterprise through initiatives such as the West Midlands Social Economy Partnership, and has recently commissioned the development of a regional strategy for social enterprise.***

### **Definition**

There is no single definition for the term 'social enterprise' and much time and energy is being expended in trying to establish a common understanding of the term. For the purposes of this paper, we will be using the Department for Trade & Industry (DTI) definition: 'A social enterprise is a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners. They include local community enterprises, social firms, mutual organisations such as co-operatives, and large-scale operations operating nationally or internationally. There is no single legal model for social enterprise. They include companies limited by guarantee, industrial and provident societies, and companies limited by shares; some organisations are unincorporated and others are registered charities.'

The West Midlands Social Economy Partnership (WMSEP) further defines social enterprise as an organisation where more than 50% of its income is earned, and not grant dependent. 'Whilst social enterprises aim towards self sufficiency they are often making use of a whole range of funding sources which can include

- Income generation from sales
- Contracts from government and other



procurers

- Government programmes such as New Deal
- Help in kind such as free workspace or peppercorn rents
- Voluntary activity
- Donations and grants

Many start off dependent on grants or financial support and move towards self-sufficiency - for some this will be difficult to achieve and there will always be some reliance on subsidy because of the nature of the work.

### **Social Enterprise Activity in the West Midlands RCC Area:**

There is little information on the range or number of social enterprises in the RCC network area. West Midlands Social Economy Partnership (WMSEP) identified a possible 3,300 'incorporated social economy organisations in the West Midlands. WMSEP acknowledges that the difficulty with these figures is that they were extracted from conventional data sets such as records filed at Companies House, which do not distinguish between charitable and grant forms of income from earned income. For this reason it is likely that the figure is lower.

Twenty one support agencies were identified by WMSEP, including Co-operative Development Agencies, local authorities, Business Link services and Councils for voluntary Services. It is recognised that infrastructure support is

# Social Enterprise cont...

fragmented and patchy.

The West Midlands also has a variety of networks, comprised of practitioners or agencies or both that are starting to address the needs of social enterprises. In addition to business advice, such networks are able to support the development of supply chains and inter-trading, spread best practice and understanding of policy developments, provide peer support and mentoring and generally raise the profile of social enterprises.

Phase 2 of WMSEP's baseline research, due to be completed in March 2004, will aim to:-

- Map social enterprise activity across the region and agree definitions to be used
- Agree models of good practice and develop a framework for impact assessment
- Identify the drivers and barriers to growth for social enterprises and also examine the future potential

See the full report for examples of Social Enterprise projects and support agencies in the West Midlands.

## FUTURE NEEDS

### Research:

In order to understand trends and development needs, baseline research will need to be undertaken to scope the sector. It is the intention of the DTI to commission research to establish baseline data about the social enterprise sector and to create guidance on mapping social enterprise that will be circulated to government departments, local government, Regional Development Agencies and research bodies. It is not clear at this stage when this guidance or the commissioning of research will become available.

Whilst there has been considerable research nationally on support needs for social enterprise, it needs to be set in the context of a sub-regional framework, with particular reference to rural issues. There is an opportunity currently available through Co-operation Black Country's Social Enterprise Infrastructure Project, funded by WMSEP, to 'create a regional support infrastructure for social enterprise development, connecting 6 sub-regional partnerships which determine how social enterprise is best delivered and managed within these areas'.

### Business Support

Current support structures are loosely (if at all) connected, and whilst is not likely that

one single support agency will fulfil the needs of the range of social enterprises, there needs to be a more coherent approach in planning services. The key to strengthening the intermediary bodies offering support is to map further what is available, build on existing provision, ensure that it is accessible and appropriate to need, and improve networking and information exchange.

The West Midlands RCC network is well placed to take a lead in rural areas on developing business support for social enterprise, with its strong tradition of working in the sector and providing organisational development and business support.



A successful social enterprise will have a strong internal understanding and consensus about the business's mission and strategy, which enables it to remain focussed on what it is trying to achieve. It will also have robust staff development and training programmes and a commitment to community participation and an entrepreneurial approach involving good marketing and business skills.

The support needs of community enterprises include the fact that they:

- are likely to require a high level of on-going support and hand-holding
- are not likely to have a conventional business approach
- will have multiple aims, both commercial and social
- will vary significantly in the type of enterprise and in their different circumstances
- may still need some subsidy, for example in the form of a soft loan or start up grant

Support agencies will need to ensure that:

- ideas are financially viable
- they take into account the wider community benefits of the proposal

- social enterprises have clear aims
- prospective social enterprises have good business advice including advice on appropriate legal structures
- there is some form of accountability to the wider community and relevant stakeholders
- there is scope for the business to be supported through change or expansion as it develops

### Finance Initiatives:

Finance for social enterprise can be particularly difficult since banks know relatively little about the sector and the unit transaction costs can deter banks from lending. Furthermore the fact that part of the return is social rather than financial can mean that concessionary funding is required.

Support will need to ensure that community enterprises have an appropriate financial structure and are able to assemble a workable funding package consisting of:

- grants, especially for capital
- loans, especially on concessionary terms
- bank facilities to manage cash flow
- other financial input or help in kind

There are a range of organisations called Community Development Finance Institutions that have been set up to provide loans tailored to social enterprise. Feasibility work and effective business planning will need to underpin any application for support.

### Conclusion:

Although social enterprise will not always be the most appropriate means of tackling regeneration and social exclusion issues, it can provide real benefits to the community in creating employment for those who are hardest to employ, delivering sustainable and community-led neighbourhood renewal, ensuring the provision of goods and services that are under-supplied or inaccessible to people living in certain areas and supporting the creation of new markets and economic opportunities.

Crucially, by applying the principles of 'social enterprise' as a way of doing something rather than as a description of a type of organisation, it can help existing projects become more sustainable and develop beyond grant-dependency. It is possibly in this area that the RCC network may have most influence.

# Voluntary Sector Infrastructure

## What is Infrastructure?

Voluntary sector infrastructure, according to NCVO "includes all those [organisations] playing a supporting, co-ordinating or development role within the sector. Infrastructure bodies may also be known as umbrella bodies or 'second tier' voluntary organisations – that is they exist to support the 'first tier' organisations whose role is to deliver services or give advice direct to individuals or communities or who campaign and advocate on specific issues. Infrastructure bodies exist at local, county, regional and national levels. They may be generic – they provide support to the full range of voluntary organisations operating within a particular geographic area – or they may be sub-sectoral – they provide support to a particular part of the voluntary sector, for example childcare organisations or organisations dealing with homelessness".

Within the shire counties of the West Midlands, there are a number of voluntary sector infrastructure organisations. These range from Rural Community Councils (RCC), Councils for Voluntary Service (CVS), Volunteer Bureaux (VBx), who are all generic infrastructure bodies, to Associations of Parish Councils, Racial Equalities Councils (RECs), Councils for Voluntary Youth Services and other specialist support agencies. These bodies are also sometimes known as local development agencies or LDAs.

## Difficulties and challenges for local voluntary sector infrastructure organisations

A key issue, which faces voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, is that of resourcing the infrastructure. Most non-statutory funders are interested in funding the delivery of services, rather than funding the infrastructure to support organisations that deliver services. The notable exception to this is the Lloyds TSB Foundation, which is one of the few non-statutory funders willing to fund voluntary sector infrastructure support.

Statutory funders are generally more willing to resource voluntary sector infrastructure. However, there is generally a wide gulf between what networks and

infrastructure bodies see as needed in terms of good practice levels of consultation, information dissemination and accountability back to the sector, and that which can be resourced. Too often the best that can be achieved, with the resources available, is just enough to be unsatisfactory to both parties.

Many statutory partners have difficulty in understanding and valuing the size and diversity of the sector.

Statutory organisations would prefer the voluntary and community sector to have a single voice. The sector, however, sees its main strength lying in its independence and diversity, in its commitment to campaigning for a multitude of different causes and in its ability to articulate with many different voices. This makes for a richness but an "untidiness" which statutory partners tend to find difficult to handle. It also means that full participation and involvement of the sector is a time-consuming, challenging and resource hungry process.

Within rural areas this problem tends to be compounded. Research undertaken by NCVO on Organisational Relationships and Networks in the Voluntary Sector: The Rural Analysis' suggests that networks and infrastructure support is key to rural organisations, however, from their research NCVO found, that of the organisations surveyed:

- 80% of respondents had no contact with their CVS
- 67% of respondents had no contact with their RCC and
- 82% of respondents had no contact with their local volunteer bureau.

Similar research in urban areas conducted by NCVO, found that the level of contact amongst most organisations was higher overall than in the rural survey.

Further findings from the research in rural areas suggested that:

- "voluntary organisations based in rural areas are less likely to influence the development of public policy than some of their counterparts in towns and cities
- these organisations tend to display low levels of awareness of the 'big' issues for the voluntary sector at large

- many voluntary organisations working in rural areas felt isolated and under-represented and found it difficult to make their voices heard.

Lack of influence, lack of negotiating power and lack of recognition are repeatedly raised by rural organisations as areas of frustration. It seems likely that the lack of networks and paucity of organisational relationships amongst voluntary organisations working in rural areas are significant factors in this lack of voice."

Recent seminars on the issue of the engagement of rural voluntary sector organisations in the West Midlands have indicated that some of the issues arise because rural voluntary organisations are smaller comparatively, making it more difficult for them to engage with infrastructure organisations. Infrastructure organisations then become relatively more important in translating complex regional, national and European funding opportunities for organisations, but find it difficult to obtain funding for this vital work.

Within rural areas, infrastructure support agencies will continue to play a vital role for small voluntary and community sector organisations without the staff time or resources to engage with policy makers. Increasingly, infrastructure organisations will need to engage with statutory authorities to explain the sector, and to act as a facilitator between these agencies and the voluntary and community sector.

Infrastructure support agencies play an essential part in creating networks linking small local organisations. These networks enable the sharing of ideas, issues and resources and work to break down the barriers which isolate organisations from each other and from other sectors. Some of the government agendas will only make sense and become relevant to small organisations once these organisations understand that they are part of a sector.



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## ***Voluntary Sector Infrastructure cont...***

Some urban areas within this rural setting often experience the sorts of disadvantage associated with inner city areas. However, they receive no assistance through inner city type renewal programmes nor from programmes targeted at rural deprivation. This can mean that the local authority becomes the only realistic source of either core or project funding, with no alternative sources available.

Examples of good practice in infrastructure support delivery around the region are detailed in the full paper.

### ***The Way Forward***

The sector is learning to present itself to funders and partners in a more assertive way as the means to achieve partners' and funders' objectives. In addition, voluntary organisations are embracing quality requirements such as PQASSO, Investors in People and other quality standards where they can appreciate the appropriateness. Voluntary sector infrastructure organisations are seeking to be models of good practice, however, this is made more difficult by the lack of funding available to undertake such quality initiatives.

There is increasingly an understanding that capacity building includes helping the statutory sector to engage with the voluntary and community sector and not just vice versa. Similarly, accountability is not just something imposed on the voluntary sector, which is accountable for public money, service delivery etc. Statutory partners, too, need to think of their own accountability to the sector in terms of feeding back the results of consultation, and in reporting how policy has been influenced by sector representation. As local partners develop and implement COMPACTs, the understanding between different sectors should increase. Within Warwickshire a countywide COMPACT has been agreed and funding has been made available by the County Council to appoint a Compact Officer to drive forward work associated with the COMPACT.

At a regional level there is also a growing recognition that capacity building is needed to ensure that the voluntary and community sector effectively influences and engages with the developing regional agenda. In a phase 2 of the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund, Advantage West Midlands (the regional development agency) has made an in principle commitment to continue its support to a number of embryonic regional voluntary sector networks established in a first phase of funding.

## ***Conclusions***

The advent of Community Strategies and Local Strategic Partnerships and the expectation of energetic participation by voluntary and community organisations will only reinforce the need for capable and facilitative intermediary bodies such as local CVS's and county based Rural Community Councils. However, concern has been expressed that local infrastructure arrangements have to have the flexibility to meet local needs, and still have independence from government. Concerns are more significant, when the question of who funds voluntary sector infrastructure organisations is considered. Will the Treasury Cross Cutting Review lead to a change in the current funding regime? Will there be a more structured, but less independent arrangement? Will funding come from Local Authorities, and be tied to their outcomes, or will a variety of agencies fund infrastructure organisations to differing degrees? Given the importance of infrastructure support to local groups, these questions are key to the future of the sector.

There are a number of key partnerships developing across the West Midlands Region amongst infrastructure organisations, to ensure that adequate support can be given to local organisations to enable them to participate in and influence key local, sub-regional and regional developments. The availability of the NACVS/VDE/ACRE Partnership Development Fund has enabled much of this joint work to begin, and this is to be welcomed. Our experience from this fund shows that with adequate resources, infrastructure organisations can work together effectively to reflect the voice of rural communities to key relevant policy makers. The continuation of this funding to further develop partnerships between LDAs would be welcome.

The Government's Cross Cutting Review of the Voluntary and Community Sector is also to be welcomed as this will help to raise awareness and understanding of the sectors key role in civil society. The review tends to emphasise the sector's effectiveness in service delivery - just one of many roles the sector plays in today's society.

There is a real danger that other important functions will be overlooked including the part played by voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, whose role is to build capacity rather than to deliver services directly. In addition the infrastructure support needs of Black & Ethnic Minority organisations and communities also needs further consideration in relation to a rural context.

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# Housing

## Background

The lack of affordable housing for local people affects all rural parts of England and has been of increasing concern for rural communities for well over thirty years.

With the dramatic rise in house prices and demand that occurred in the 1970's, areas that were accessible by those with access to resources became wider. We could see the 'ripple' effect, which occurred in the south east of England become commonplace across the country. Not only were commuters moving away from London, but also the same effect was being recorded around other metropolitan areas such as Manchester and West Midlands conurbations.

Government policy continued to promote home ownership with various legislation being passed to allow council house tenants and latterly housing association tenants the right to buy their own property. This "right to buy" legislation had a significant impact upon rural areas where tenants recognised the value of the housing which in general was of good quality and substantial size making them attractive purchases. The government push towards home ownership using the "right to buy" legislation was not accompanied by an investment programme in rented or low cost housing. This resulted in a dramatic loss of rented housing across the country, which was felt more so in rural areas where the availability of land to build new homes was always at a premium.

The extent of housing need across the region is difficult to measure, as it is commonly recognised that there may be significant hidden homelessness problems, particularly in the very rural areas. Due to the lack of suitable accommodation, extended families continue to offer support perhaps beyond that which would be expected in the urban areas.

Recent housing need surveys in Shropshire have estimated that in one district alone there is a need for approximately 1500 affordable homes in the area over the next 5 years. When compared with the Housing Corporations funded rural schemes in 2002/2003, which amounted to 148 new affordable dwellings in the whole of the region, this clearly demonstrates that there is much further work to be done.

## THE ISSUES

There are a number of complex inter-related issues, which affect the availability and development of affordable housing in rural areas, including:

- Property prices
- Land prices
- Land availability
- Lack of rented accommodation
- NIMBYism (the 'not in my back yard' syndrome)
- Planning
- Green belt
- Small development viability
- These are covered in detail in the full housing position paper.

The lack of affordable homes in rural areas has a considerable knock-on effect for rural communities, which may manifest itself in many different ways. The population profile of rural settlements changes due to the exodus of young people to the towns, and the in migration of both the elderly and the affluent to replace them. It can affect the sustainability of villages undermining the viability of local services such as the local shop, schools, transport etc. The visual appearance of villages can change with traditional small housing acquired and enlarged, putting them beyond the reach of local people when resold.

There are many different ways in which the rural housing issue has been tackled in the past, with some innovative examples of good practice including a Rural Housing Enabler in Worcestershire, a land bank scheme in Staffordshire and the formation of a Housing Officers Group in Shropshire. Details can be found in the full report.

## THE WAY FORWARD

It is now recognised that the government proposes to strengthen regional policy as set out in the document 'Your region, your choice'. The recent government publication 'Sustainable communities in the West Midlands, building for the future' sets out an action plan which the government wishes to carry forward. In it the government identifies 4 key issues around urban and rural renaissance, diversifying

and modernising the region's economy and modernising the transport infrastructure.

They recognise that there is a need to arrest the shift of population from the conurbation to the rest of the region, that they need to tackle the problem of low demand in some areas, that there is evidence of increasing homelessness in rural areas and, more significantly, that there is a shortage of affordable housing in the rural areas where house prices are higher relative to income.

Their plan for action includes:

- A new regional approach by the setting up of the recently appointed West Midlands Housing Board to deliver their policies.
- To ensure that the new Regional Housing Strategy is consistent with, and supportive of other regional strategies for land use, transport and economic development. That this strategy represents the views of all key stakeholders, including the voluntary sector.
- That there will be a Single Regional Housing Pot fund to tackle affordable housing needs as identified by the Housing Board. Key factors will be the long term sustainability of communities with respect to transport, reasonable access to centres of employment and retail activity as well as wider social facilities such as education and medical centres.
- That the Housing Corporation has a target to deliver 1,600 affordable homes in rural settlements throughout England in 2003/4, increasing to 3,500 over the 2 years 2004/5 and 2005/6.

The draft regional housing strategy recognises these key issues and identifies the need for more affordable housing in rural areas of high demand as one of the priorities of the region. It also recognises that the voluntary and community sector have a critical role to play in challenging and complementing the activities of others to ensure that the strategies adopted and housing provided is appropriate.



## Housing cont...

The Housing Corporation also recognises affordable housing in rural areas as a key issue. Within its Rural Action Plan for the region it recognises that it needs to be involved with local communities to ensure long term sustainability and the delivery of rural projects. It needs to commission a development programme across rural areas, to work closely with the Countryside Agency and that it needs to encourage the use of Rural Housing Enablers across the shire counties of the region.

In its Regional Investment Strategy for 2003/4 the Housing Corporation recognises the difficulty in achieving schemes to meet the needs of rural communities. It is keen to work with both the local voluntary sector and statutory organisations to achieve the most effective targeting of resources. It again recognises the need to have Rural Housing Enablers in place to produce a rural programme which meets needs across the rural areas of the region and to have funding available through the forward allocations pool to enable schemes to be worked up.

At a sub regional level it again recognises the need for Rural Housing Enablers to be in place in Warwickshire, Staffordshire and in all the shire counties in the West Mercia sub region.

The West Midlands Housing Network-Rural Sub Group recently held a rural housing conference to present the findings of the research into the rural housing markets in the West Midlands and the issues surrounding it, carried out by the research unit of the University of Birmingham. The conference was organised jointly by the Countryside Agency and the Housing Corporation



In terms of planning, the important role which the Countryside Agency's Parish Plan programme can make, not only to the identification of local housing need but the new planning process, should be recognised and supported.

Many of the issues already identified in the housing paper were recognised and a rural action plan proposed to tackle these issues.

### Conclusion

Affordable housing is a complex and sensitive issue but one that is key to the sustainability of rural communities. Thus it is essential that those communities become more actively involved in and engaged with the development of housing policies and strategies, both at district, county and regional level, including the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy.

The Rural Community Councils have a key role to play as enablers and facilitators in ensuring that the views of rural communities are fed into the appropriate policy making bodies and in promoting housing needs issues which are particular to rural areas. They also have a practical role to play in supporting and promoting the development of affordable housing in rural areas through the Rural Housing Enabler posts. The RCCs' particular position as "honest broker" enables them to bring together all stakeholders; existing residents, those in housing need, local authorities and potential developers. Consideration should be given to how this knowledge and expertise gained from grass roots activity can inform rural housing policy and the Countryside Agency's rural proofing policies and practices.



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