

Regional Strategic and Policy Engagement Study

Executive Summary

*Report by Centre for Voluntary Action Research
www.cvar.org.uk*

17th December 2001

Part A: RAWM and this study

This is a summary of the Study carried out by the Centre for Voluntary Action Research at Aston Business School, Birmingham, for Regional Action West Midlands (RAWM) between April and October 2001. The Centre was asked to:

- i. Assess from the perspectives of local, sub regional and regional voluntary and community sector infrastructure agencies, networks, a sample of individual local voluntary and community groups and a sample of other sectors involved in regional issues:
 - Their view and understanding of the regional agenda
 - The actual and/or potential role they play or could play in influencing the regional agenda
 - Associated key learning skills and related resource needs of the sector and other partners
 - Their view and experience of cross-sector working relationships
 - The current and future role of RAWM
- ii. Identify priorities, approaches and potential funding sources enabling the engagement of the voluntary and community sector in the West Midlands regional agenda. [Section 1]

RAWM was formally established in June 2000 as “a network of voluntary and community sector networks in the region.”

RAWM's mission is:

“To promote and maximise the contribution of the voluntary and community sector in improving the quality of life for disadvantaged communities in the region”. [Section 2]

This Study was carried out against the backdrop of the Government's complex regionalisation agenda. As part of this agenda, there has been a strong desire on the part of central and local government to bring voluntary and community organisations into a structured process of consultation on a variety of issues, including regional and local plans. This reflects an ever-increasing public policy interest in the role of voluntary and community organisations in service delivery, policy development and civil society.

To respond to this agenda, RAWM recognised the need to develop within and outside the sector a clearer view about the sector's role in regional development and to develop the ability of those working in the sector to engage effectively with it. In addition, RAWM recognised that this engagement raises issues relating to the sector's interests in the regional development agenda, the development of its skill base and the way it and other sectors relate to each other. [Section 3]

Part B: The Study Findings

The Study involved semi-structured telephone interviews with 34 local, sub regional and regional voluntary and community sector infrastructure agencies and seven representatives of other sectors active at a regional level. In addition, 21 postal questionnaires were completed by individual local voluntary and community organisations. [Sections 4 and 5]

The fieldwork identified a number of key issues in relation to voluntary and community sector engagement in the regional agenda in the West Midlands, including:

- Low levels of awareness within the voluntary and community sector of the content, relevance and significance of the regional agenda [Section 6]

- Serious practical barriers to engagement in the regional agenda for voluntary and community organisations [Section 7]
- Significant opportunities for further engaging the voluntary and community sector in the regional agenda and for improving cross sector partnership working [Section 8]
- A general lack of understanding within other sectors of the distinctive features and challenges of voluntary and community organisations [Section 9]
- The significant progress made by RAWM in establishing itself as an effective and influential regional body [Section 10]

Part C: Emerging Themes and Issues for Consideration by RAWM

i. Approaches to enable the engagement of the voluntary and community sector in the regional agenda [Section 12]

In response to the issues raised in the Study, we suggest an integrated development process, comprising five interrelated elements:

- Developing an understanding of the regional agenda amongst the voluntary and community sector, including information about its significance and relevance
- Demonstrating the tangible benefits and rewards of involvement
- Promoting an understanding of the distinctive features and characteristics of the voluntary and community sector within other sectors active at a regional level
- Overcoming practical barriers to engagement with the regional agenda amongst the voluntary and community sector, eg. time, location and process of meetings
- Developing an understanding of partnership working between the voluntary and community sector and other sectors

ii. Priority areas of action for RAWM [Section 13]

RAWM's role in coordinating this process is crucial and we suggest three priority areas for action:

Creating the conditions for voluntary and community sector engagement with the regional agenda

This would involve more opportunities for direct and focused contact between RAWM staff and its individual members which are likely to yield significant benefits, including:

- Promoting an understanding of the content, relevance and complexity of the regional agenda
- Demonstrating the potential benefits of engagement with the regional agenda
- Gathering "local" intelligence about relevant issues and concerns, ensuring that, throughout its work, RAWM is better able to reflect the impact of regionalisation on the voluntary and community sector

In addition, this would involve facilitating or brokering a dialogue between the voluntary and community sector and other sectors active at a regional level about individual and shared interests and expectations, and the potential benefits of joint working

Consolidating RAWM's legitimacy and authority: "Facing both ways"

In essence, RAWM is faced with the challenge of "facing both ways". In other words, it has to build its legitimacy and authenticity with its members and constituents, as well as building its legitimacy as an authoritative voice with other sectors active at the regional level.

The evidence of this Study is that the foundations are in place for RAWM to achieve this delicate balance. The trust and confidence of its own members and constituents will be enhanced, in part, by an effective response to the issues raised in this Study. This will include:

- Increased and focused direct contact with members and constituents
- A clearer distinction between areas in which RAWM will become directly involved (as expert), and areas in which RAWM will enable the involvement of its members and constituents (as facilitator)

The respect and recognition of other sectors may be developed through the facilitation of more productive cross-sector working relationships and the demonstration of the potential mutual benefits of the "exchange" with the voluntary and community sector.

RAWM's relationship to the regional agenda: "Policy taker" or "Policy shaper"?

Earlier research highlights the choice available to bodies such as RAWM: they can either be "policy takers" or "policy shapers". In other words, RAWM can choose to play a generally passive role - scanning and interpreting the environment, participating in consultation exercises, and disseminating information as appropriate to its members and constituents. Alternatively, it can choose to be more proactive by trying to influence, "shape" and "re-shape" relevant policy at a regional level.

The evidence of this Study confirms that there is not significant enthusiasm or initiative for regional issues amongst the voluntary and community sector. For RAWM, therefore, the challenge is clear. Does it want to work with the regional agenda as defined (and imposed) by government? Or does it want to work to shape the regional agenda around the interests and aspirations of its members and constituents?

The development of a policy shaping role clearly connects to some of the other challenges facing RAWM. First, it will require more direct and focused contact with members and constituents. Second, it will involve an opening up of relationships with other sectors and the exploration of respective concerns. Third, it may illuminate the relevance and benefits of engagement for the voluntary and community sector. Finally, its success will be partly linked to RAWM's ability to "face both ways".