



# THE NATIONAL TRUST

## THE REVIEW OF SUB-NATIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND REGENERATION

**An outline response from the National Trust to the Government's review  
August 2007**

### **Introduction**

1. The development of a sub-national approach to economic development and regeneration in recent years has enabled a more sophisticated approach to meeting regional and local needs that respects the different economic, social, cultural and environmental circumstances across the English regions and devolved countries. We welcome the continued commitment to a sub-national approach indicated by the *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration* and welcome the ambition to establish more devolved, better co-ordinated and more integrated approaches which reduce regional disparities and promote regeneration while recognising regional distinctiveness.

2. Drawing on our considerable experience<sup>1</sup> of regional and local institutions and processes across England as well as in Wales and Northern Ireland and our perspective as both a major business and conservation charity, we believe the Government's proposals could be further improved to make best use of third sector partners and help deliver the Government's commitments to more sustainable development and addressing climate change.

### **Delivering sustainable development – not a single focus on economic growth**

3. Integration of economic, social and environmental objectives is becoming an increasingly significant way of working for Regional Development Agencies, encouraged by growing recognition of the business benefits of a high quality environment and the need for an integrated approach to addressing climate change. Further changes at a regional level can accelerate this and promote integrated delivery of sustainable development.

4. The proposed integration of economic and spatial planning is important progress towards this approach. It needs to be clearly established within the framework of sustainable development. The proposed focus on economic growth as the overarching regional objective would be unhelpful and even on its own terms would not help address inequalities between regions. Equally, effective delivery of sustainable development needs to be built into the overall regional objectives and cannot be secured by simply requiring regional bodies to "have regard" to it during plan and strategy preparation.

5. The case for a broader objective for RDAs is all the more compelling if they are to become the Regional Planning Body. At present RDAs are only required to pursue sustainable development 'where appropriate', when it is both appropriate and necessary everywhere. As the Government has recognised in the Planning White Paper, the planning system is a critical tool for moving towards sustainable development. This means integrating environmental, social and economic considerations so that no single objective takes

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<sup>1</sup> The National Trust is Europe's largest conservation charity with 3.5 million members looking after some of the nation's most important environmental and cultural assets and a business with a turnover of £300 million, 5,000 staff and 49,000 volunteers. As a result, we have an important perspective and contribution to enhancing the quality of life of the nation. We have fully embraced the devolution and regionalisation of policy development and delivery over the past 10 years and have considerable experience of regional and local institutions and processes. This includes Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Regional Assemblies, Regional Cultural, Environmental and Rural Fora and Regional Planning Boards as well as of the devolved administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland. Our volunteer Regional Committee includes people with significant regional experience and profile.

precedence. We believe this integrated approach to sustainable development is also a more helpful duty to be placed on local councils, instead of the more narrowly drawn statutory economic duty proposed.

### **Dialogue and scrutiny**

6. We welcome the commitment to secure more effective dialogue and participation in regional policy development and delivery. This will require a stronger partnership approach, especially with the third sector and civil society, and attaching greater value to the expertise of various Government agencies – including Natural England, the Environment Agency and English Heritage. The quality of regional decisions depends on effective scrutiny and challenge and there are important opportunities to enhance this beyond the local authority role.

7. For example, the sub-national review provides a particularly valuable opportunity to meet the Government’s objective to enhance the contribution of the third sector by retaining a formal “seat at the table” for the sector in shaping regional policy and scrutinising its delivery on the ground. A crucial difference between third sector and local authorities is our regional perspective. Local authorities are – quite rightly – very focussed on their area and concerned with the benefits or disadvantages for their area from changes in regional policy or funding. The third sector can provide a truly pan regional perspective that is independent of government and built upon an understanding of local issues across a region. Existing arrangements for Regional Assemblies and RDAs have provided some opportunities to embrace the third sector’s contribution and these need to be strengthened in moving forward. Notably, it will be important to ensure the resources available for formal scrutiny of RDAs by local authorities are available to enable effective scrutiny to continue, both individually and collectively.

8. The establishment of Regional Ministers and new scrutiny arrangements for Parliament creates a welcome opportunity to enhance scrutiny of regional institutions and policy – and to recognise innovation. We look forward to working closely with the new Ministers and Parliament and it will be important that they are tasked and resourced to engage with a full range of regional partners to ensure a complete picture of the effectiveness of the new structures and approach – including from a third sector perspective.

### **Summary of recommendations**

9. In summary, we believe the opportunities provided by the sub-national review will be enhanced by:

- charging RDAs and local councils with the overarching objective of delivering sustainable development, rather than a skewed focus on economic growth;
- ensuring RDAs are tasked to deliver sustainable outcomes within a framework that encourages the integration of social, environmental and economic goals;
- enabling regional partners (statutory and non-statutory) to engage meaningfully in both the development and delivery of regional strategies by requiring RDAs to ensure effective participation at all stages of the development of the single integrated regional strategy and by creating opportunities for on-going engagement; and
- supporting the active participation and contribution of the third sector to shaping and delivering regional objectives, including through Regional Ministers and Parliamentary processes, and formalising its role in scrutinising RDA performance.