

TONBRIDGE & MALLING BOROUGH COUNCIL

STRATEGIC HOUSING ADVISORY BOARD

20 July 2009

Report of the Director of Health and Housing

Part 1- Public

Matters for Information

1 THE SINGLE CONVERSATION

Summary

This report informs Members of the Homes & Communities Agency's (HCA) proposal to introduce "the single conversation". This is the new way the HCA intends to communicate its funding intentions to local authorities and partner agencies.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Members will recall that in December 2008 the Housing Corporation was transformed into two new bodies; the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and the Tenant Services Authority (TSA).

1.1.2 The HCA is the new housing and regeneration agency for England, and assists local authorities and communities to deliver the ambitions we have for our area. It joins up the delivery of housing and regeneration under one roof, bringing together the functions of English Partnerships, the historic investment functions of the Housing Corporation, the Academy for Sustainable Communities, and key housing and regeneration programmes previously delivered by Communities and Local Government (CLG).

1.1.3 The idea behind this integrated approach is that it will enable the HCA to hold a 'single conversation' with local authorities and other partners on the specific housing and regeneration needs of our individual areas. It is argued that this will ensure that communities receive the best outcome and make it easier to resolve potential stumbling blocks to regeneration and suitable development in a particular locality whilst meeting national targets.

1.1.4 The HCA describe the purpose of the single conversation as to:

- bridge local ambition and national targets;
- achieve local vision through a shared investment agreement;
- agree and secure local delivery; and

- achieve positive outcomes for people and places.

1.2 What Does The Single Conversation Cover?

- 1.2.1 The term “single conversation” refers to its comprehensive coverage – including the full range of housing, infrastructure, regeneration and community activities that are within its scope. The single conversation is aimed at being an “ongoing, iterative, dynamic process over time and at any point will reflect the maturing relationship between the parties engaged”.
- 1.2.2 The single conversation covers the totality of housing and regeneration priorities in a local area, including growth, renewal, affordability and sustainability, with a strong focus on the relationship of these at the local level. Regional priorities for housing growth and renewal will need to be reflected in the Single Regional Strategies (SRS) being brought in following the Sub National Review. For this reason it is claimed, it will be important that the HCA is strongly linked into regional structures to be able to play a part in influencing the Single Regional Strategies and to ensure that regional strategies reflect the region’s housing and regeneration ambitions.
- 1.2.3 The HCA will also influence the Regional Funding Advice (RFA) that each region makes to Government periodically on major expenditure in the region, alongside the contribution of the Regional Development Agency, Government Office and local authorities.

1.3 The HCA list the benefits of the this new approach as:

- the tailoring investment strategies to the needs of places, rather than developing them on a “one size fits all basis”;
- underpinning mutually shared and agreed priorities, which are based on local ambitions;
- ensuring investment is used to deliver national programmes for growth and renewal in ways which work effectively in different local contexts;
- seeing funding from a variety of public and private sources linked to achieve maximum impact; and
- ensuring local authorities and their partners can develop proposals against a stable understanding of how funding decisions will be taken, thereby building long term relationships with places;

1.4 Who Will Engage In The Single Conversation?

- 1.4.1 Local authorities lead the spatial planning and place-shaping in their areas. The Council is expected to put forward the shared ambitions and objectives on behalf

of their Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) which covers the full range of partners. The HCA's expectation is that the single conversation will always be between the HCA, and a local authority (or local authorities).

- 1.4.2 By adopting this approach the HCA's aim is to make community engagement integral to all forms of delivery. The Council will have the responsibility for community involvement, including ensuring that all sections of the community have the opportunity to be heard such as vulnerable people, ethnic minority groups and gypsies and travellers.
- 1.4.3 The HCA's role is building relationships with other key regional bodies, such as the Government Offices and Regional Development Agencies, who are also central in the development of regional and local strategies. Through national and regional strategic relationships the single conversation is designed to engage other organisations such as government agencies (for example Highways and Environment Agencies). The discussions with local authorities will determine how partners might best be involved.
- 1.4.4 For Tonbridge & Malling the single conversation will be conducted with three other local authorities which comprise the proposed west Kent sub region. Those authorities are Sevenoaks District Council, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, and Maidstone Borough Council. The aim of working at the sub regional scale is to better reflect the economic geography of places, and therefore provide a more effective basis for planning housing and regeneration investment.
- 1.4.5 The Council's current operational understanding of west Kent is shown through its joint working with Sevenoaks District Council and Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, but not in the same degree and to a level of detail with Maidstone Borough Council. This is reflected through current adopted joint policies such as the West Kent Homelessness Strategy, and commissioning of joint studies such as the West Kent Strategic Housing Market Assessment, which are both currently void of Maidstone Borough Council's input.
- 1.4.6 The addition of Maidstone Borough Council to the HCAs understanding of west Kent will likely require changes to the attendance of various active boards, such as the West Kent Development Forum, and West Kent Housing Sub Group, both of which do not currently include a Maidstone contingent. It is clear that an increased level of focus in working with Maidstone Borough Council in matters of Housing Strategy & Enabling will be required as the influence of the single conversation increases upon investment into the borough from the HCA.

1.5 Local Investment Plans (LIPs)

- 1.5.1 Local Investment Plans (LIPs) are the way the Council informs the HCA about possible resource allocation to the sub regions described above. The single conversation will provide the opportunity for partners to build programmes of investment to deliver a range of outputs. LIPs will help to build up the Regional

Investment Plans by setting out all the needs for an area to deliver the agreed vision and objectives and identify anticipated outputs and outcomes.

- 1.5.2 Draft LIPs will be subject to high level strategic appraisal before the HCA will agree Local Investment Agreements (LIAs), which set out the HCA's proposed investment for an area. This is followed by a rolling three year investment allocation to an area based on the proposals.

1.6 The Timescale For The Single Conversation

- 1.6.1 The single conversation process will build on existing relationships, knowledge and agreements, and it is hoped it will increase as the capacity develops across the partnership. Therefore the single conversation initially will ensure that the prerequisites for investment, in particular the development of Local Investment Plans, are in place by 2011, when unallocated resources are first anticipated to be available.
- 1.6.2 The HCA's intention is to have begun the process of the single conversation in all areas by April 2010. A programme detailing the priority for roll out of the single conversation has yet to be made available to each sub region. I will update Members as more details become available.

1.7 Legal Implications

- 1.7.1 The Council needs to secure a sufficient supply of affordable housing to meet its statutory duties.

1.8 Financial and Value for Money Considerations

- 1.8.1 None arising from this report.

1.9 Risk Assessment

- 1.9.1 Failure to secure sufficient investment in affordable housing could mean that the Council is unable to deliver its local strategic housing priorities and meet its statutory obligations to the homeless and others in housing need.

Background papers:

contact: Chris Knowles

Nil

John Batty
Director of Health and Housing