

Affordable Housing: The Homes and Communities Agency's Single Conversation

Purpose of the briefing

- to inform RCCs about the Homes & Communities Agency's Single Conversation;
- suggest ways in which RCAN members can become involved to help ensure rural affordable housing needs are considered properly within the process
- encourage RCCs to inform ACRE of their experiences of the Single Conversation
- inform RCCs what ACRE will be doing in response to the Single Conversation

Introduction

The Homes & Communities Agency (HCA) brings together the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships, part of the Communities and Local Government Department and the Academy for Sustainable Skills as the 'national housing and regeneration agency' for England. The HCA plans to invest £8.4bn in affordable housing from 2008-11.

Before and since it launched in December 2008, the HCA has consistently promoted its '*Single Conversation*'. This is the term it uses to describe its planned engagement with local authorities and their partners in the private, independent and voluntary sectors to inform its business plan and investment decisions. This Conversation aims to be co-operative and consensual to bring forward affordable housing and regeneration based on the needs of local areas.

Through the Single Conversation, the HCA has set itself apart from its predecessor body, the Housing Corporation emphasising the new 'place-based' model of operation and funding. The HCA's plan is to phase and pilot the new process.

The HCA and challenges of rural affordable housing

The challenges of delivering affordable housing in rural areas are becoming more widely understood. The Taylor Review 2008 – *Living Working Countryside*, found that house prices are significantly higher (driven up by demand from in migration) and wages lower than urban areas meaning that market housing is not affordable for most rural households.

The HCA shares the Taylor Report vision for 'flourishing vibrant communities that will be genuinely sustainable' and in response aims to develop programmes and investments that will 'secure the future of market towns and villages'. The HCA states that its overall aim is to increase the capacity to deliver affordable rural housing and to release surplus public sector land for the creation of rural affordable homes.

The HCA's work on rural affordable housing is partly informed by the [Rural Housing Advisory Group](#), a sub group of its Board. The Group set up in 2007 at CLG's request, is drawn from a variety of rural stakeholders including ACRE (Chief Executive, Sylvia Brown) and an RHE representative (Arlene Kersley, Community Council of Berkshire). Examples of other bodies represented are DEFRA, CLG, CPRE, Hastoe Housing Association and CRC and chaired by HCA Board Member, Candy Atherton. The group's aim is to advise Government on and seek ways to

improve delivery of affordable rural housing , promote joint working between key stakeholders through the provision of a forum for sharing good practice and encouraging innovation. It's work programme covers many key themes including community land trusts, surplus public sector land, older people and LAAs, MAAs and the Sub National Review.

How will the Single Conversation work?

The Single Conversation is the business process that the HCA plans to operate across local authorities in England. The HCA states that it wants to offer 'local and community partners a conversation about their range of ambitions for their area, across housing and regeneration, growth and renewal'. The process will cover a range of issues important to an area that previously required discussion with a range of different agencies and government departments. [The HCA's Interim Corporate Plan](#) sets out how the Single Conversation is envisaged to work.

Local authorities having the democratic mandate to lead place shaping in their areas and through the Conversation will be expected to put forward the shared ambitions and objectives on behalf of local strategic partnerships. The Conversation may be with one local authority or with many at the same time, if for example they operate jointly across a housing market area. Whatever the arrangement, it is critical to note that it will **dependent on each local authority to ensure that the right partners are at the table** to inform each conversation.

The use of the term 'Single' aims to encapsulate that the Conversation will be comprehensive across all the HCA's housing and regeneration activities. It is also intended to be regular and for the long term. The HCA's nine Regional Teams will take the lead having it is claimed 'an excellent understanding of the needs, market conditions and opportunities that exist in their regions'.

What will the Conversation include?

The Single Conversation will be tailored from place to place because different areas will want to engage with the HCA in various ways and the HCA will not have the same intervention capacity across all of its areas. The process will draw on priorities in the local authority's Sustainable Communities Plan and its supporting documents such as the LDF (Local Development Framework).

In all areas, the Single Conversation is expected to cover the following:

- Growth;
- Renewal;
- Affordability and
- Sustainability

Each of the above topics should incorporate strategy (a shared position on ambitions and objectives), capacity and skills (of the local authority and partners to deliver large programmes), investment and delivery (agreeing the projects and programmes that HCA investment will support).

The Single Conversation aims to, where appropriate; connect funding streams and intended outcomes joining with other partners and funding sources for mutual benefit including for example RDA investment or the Highways Agency funds.

How can RCAN become part of the Single Conversation?

Through membership of the national Rural Housing Advisory Group and its local and regional relationships, RCAN is relatively well positioned with the HCA. However this does not ensure a voice within the Single Conversation. As the HCA states, the only way for views to be effectively communicated is by being involved by respective local authorities. This raises two potential obstacles, being invited to participate in the Conversation in the first place and RCAN's capacity at local level to be involved.

These obstacles might appear challenging but as Network, we can go some way to addressing them.

Clearly the first obstacle is fundamental - to ensure RCAN has opportunity to feed into the process. ACRE would expect RCCs to be asked for their rural experience and expertise but because we are dependent on local authorities' selection, this cannot be guaranteed. Note - It will be interesting to see what evidence emerges from the HCA's Pilots' and ACRE's request to RCCs about which organisations are being consulted in rural areas.

The point on RCAN local capacity is made because each RCC does not have an RHE post and/or rural housing may form a limited part of their business plans therefore limiting their ability to contribute to the Single Conversation.

However if RCCs do not have an RHE post or strong housing focus, it might still be possible to become involved. This can potentially be with the support of the RCAN network, for example from other RCCs that share similar issues as their local authority or by the RCC supporting input from an RHE employed by local authorities from the same county.

ACRE's role

In respect of the above ACRE would encourage feedback on Rural Community Council's experiences of the Single Conversation and will support RCCs to become and remain involved and would welcome suggestions for resources to support RHEs long term in this process. In that respect, ACRE will write to the Local Government Association to explain our concerns that RCCs should be involved at local level and ask the LGA to encourage local authority members to involve them.

The regional relationships

Clearly the Single Conversation should accord to wider agendas. As the HCA states in its *Interim Strategy*, the Single Conversation should be influenced by and influence the regional picture. That lead role taken now by the Regional Assemblies until 2010 will then move to RDAs. The latter will include spatial planning in the preparation of new, single Regional Strategies covering the range of economic, spatial and housing issues facing the region, as announced through the Sub National Review.

Regional Strategies will need to reflect outcomes of Single Conversations and as such the HCA sees itself the bridge between local ambition and objectives and regional strategy. From the opposite perspective, Single Conversations will need to reflect what has been agreed at a regional level, ensuring that local areas make an appropriate contribution to regional targets.

Working with the private, independent and voluntary sectors

The HCA is keen to stress that private, independent (including especially housing associations) and the voluntary sector are their essential partners. It is these organisations, they say, that will deliver successful housing and regeneration and sustainable communities on the ground. The HCA will, wherever possible, deliver by enabling our local partners, rather than through direct project management.

The above is the stage on from the Single Conversation but indicates an opportunity and acknowledgement of for example the crucial work of RHEs. What is just as fundamental is recognition from the HCA and local authorities of the importance of involving RCCs from the start and within the Single Conversation.

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