

EXETER CITY COUNCIL**EXECUTIVE
23 MARCH 2010****THE “SINGLE CONVERSATION” –
THE NEW PROCESS FOR SECURING INVESTMENT
BY THE HOMES AND COMMUNITIES AGENCY
IN HOUSING AND REGENERATION****1 PURPOSE OF REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to advise members of the Homes and Communities Agency’s “Single Conversation” process, and to obtain their approval of the proposed arrangements for preparing a Local Investment Plan, and of the proposed form and content of that Plan.

2 INTRODUCTION TO THE SINGLE CONVERSATION

- 2.1 The Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) is adopting a process known as the “Single Conversation” as its key business process to determine its investment priorities in relation to housing and regeneration across an area. The parties to the Single Conversation will in each case be the local authorities for the area, the HCA, and the Regional Development Agency (RDA), in addition to which other stakeholders and service providers will be engaged during the course of the process. The intention is that housing will be set in the context of the wider Local Area Agreement (LAA) objectives, and that the Single Conversation will provide the framework for delivery of sustainable economic growth.

- 2.2 There are two formal outputs from the Single Conversation Process:-

- a Local Investment Plan, which will:-
 - identify priorities, both spatially in terms of sites comprising or including housing, and thematically in relation to issues such as rural housing, gypsy and traveller provision, and low carbon development;
 - identify the level of investment necessary, potential sources of funds, and funding gaps and other obstacles to delivery;
 - identify the necessary interventions (principally HCA funding) to enable delivery;
 - determine the level of HCA investment in affordable housing projects and the renovation of the existing public and private stock to “decent homes” standards;
 - cover a fifteen year time span overall but give most emphasis to development which is deliverable within a three to five year period.
- a Local Investment Agreement (a “non-legally binding memorandum of understanding”), which will:-
 - set out the proposed investment by the HCA (and to a lesser extent the RDA), based on the interventions identified in the Local Investment Plan.

- 2.3 Within the geographical county of Devon, four Single Conversation areas have been specified:-

- Exeter, East Devon and Teignbridge (the “Exe Authorities” Single Conversation);
- Torbay;
- Plymouth;
- Rest of Devon (ie. the districts of North Devon, Torridge, West Devon, Mid Devon and South Hams).

2.4 A large part of Dartmoor National Park (DNP) is within the Rest of Devon Single Conversation area (as is that part of Exmoor National Park that is within Devon), and it is proposed that the part of DNP that is in Teignbridge should be included in the Rest of Devon rather than the Exe Authorities Single Conversation area.

2.5 The HCA’s target is for the Local Investment Plan to be agreed, and the Local Investment Agreement to be in place, by the end of March 2011. In practice it is anticipated that the Local Investment Plan will take about six months to prepare, whereupon the Local Investment Agreement can be drawn up.

3 THE PROPOSED APPROACH TO A LOCAL INVESTMENT PLAN

3.1 Governance

A working group of officers from the four local authorities within the Single Conversation area (Exeter, East Devon, Teignbridge and Devon County) has been established, and it is proposed that it will draft the Local Investment Plan and Agreement. It is envisaged that it will report periodically to the Exeter and East Devon New Growth Point Steering Board, which in turn will make recommendations for consideration by the Executives of the four authorities, by whom decisions will ultimately be taken.

3.2 The Steering Board was set up in January 2007 to provide a governance structure for the work of the New Growth Point Delivery Team in progressing the growth agenda for Exeter and East Devon. The membership and work of the Steering Board have since expanded to include the potential south west expansion of Exeter in Teignbridge. It would therefore be a suitable forum for guiding the preparation of the Local Investment Plan and Local Investment Agreement. On 28 January 2010, it resolved to recommend to the Executives of the relevant Councils that it (the Steering Board) should be responsible for scrutinising and informing preparation of the Single Conversation documents, and recommending actions to those Councils.

3.3 On 29 January the Newton Abbot New Growth Point Steering Board likewise resolved that Teignbridge (outside Dartmoor National Park) should be included in the Exe Authorities Single Conversation, with the Exeter and East Devon New Growth Point Steering Board overseeing the process.

3.4 Timeline for the Local Investment Plan

The Plan is intended to set out the basis of a rolling three year programme of investment for inclusion in the Local Investment Agreement. It is therefore proposed to divide the Plan priorities into the following categories:-

- immediate, with a horizon of 0-3 years;
- medium term, with a horizon of up to 5 years;
- longer term, with a horizon of up to 10 years;
- distant, with a horizon of up to 15 years.

3.5 Priorities for delivery and investment

It is proposed that the Plan will concentrate on housing and regeneration projects which are known to be deliverable in the immediate to medium term, ie. in the Plan's first five years. Using evidence primarily from existing documents such as the emerging Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) and Infrastructure Study, schemes will be prioritised according to their deliverability, assessed with reference to the existence or otherwise of planning permission, and the presence or absence of obstacles to delivery, such as infrastructure needs. Longer term and distant proposals and aspirations (ie. up to 15 years) will be covered in more general terms.

3.6 Delivery plans – spatial approach

Having identified the priority sites, the Local Investment Plan will include a collection of delivery plans for each of those sites, setting out what is proposed (principally allocations of housing and employment land), what is required in terms of infrastructure and services including the projected cost, and what known sources of funding exist. In this way funding gaps can be identified, so for example a particular site might be deliverable with a developer contributing a proportion of affordable housing, provided that the HCA forward funds a piece of infrastructure. In a departure from its familiar role of providing grant to Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), the HCA intends to move towards a system whereby it provides forward funding, to be repaid later as developer contributions, or as an alternative it might acquire an equity share in development.

3.7 Delivery plans – thematic approach

The HCA has made it clear that it expects Local Investment Plans to address certain themes as well as site-specific proposals. These would include, for example, low carbon development, gypsy and traveller provision, and support for rural communities. This approach could also be used to develop a generic delivery plan for rural housing sites in East Devon and Teignbridge, in situations where it is more difficult to predict which sites will come forward.

3.8 Stakeholder engagement

Members of the general public are likely to be most interested in the spatial distribution and planning of new development. The Single Conversation is not a vehicle for bringing forward new proposals, so to involve the general public in its preparation would involve duplicating their engagement in the LDF, which is the correct vehicle for that process. Therefore it is proposed that a Stakeholder Engagement Strategy is prepared along the following lines:-

- stakeholders in the Single Conversation are identified, including (but not necessarily limited to) the following:-
 - RSLs;
 - service units within the constituent local authorities;
 - other local government bodies (eg. Town and Parish Councils, neighbouring Single Conversations);
 - providers of transport and health services, energy, water and sewerage;
 - Devon Strategic Partnership, Local Strategic Partnerships, Exeter and Heart of Devon Partnership;
 - business groups;

- community organisations;
- each group of similar stakeholders is asked to appoint a lead member, to deal directly with the Officer Group;
- the Officer Group prepares a draft document, under guidance from the Steering Board;
- engagement of each group of stakeholders is tailor-made to their role – rather than holding regular, large meetings, it is envisaged that this will involve regular contact through the lead members, and in some cases workshop sessions to deal with specific topics contained in the draft.

3.9 Evidence base

The HCA has made it clear that the purpose of the Single Conversation is to build upon, not duplicate, the work that has been done elsewhere. It is anticipated that the Local Investment Programme will draw heavily on the following (although this is not an exhaustive list):-

- the emerging LDF for each Council;
- the emerging Infrastructure Study;
- the Housing Strategy for each Council;
- the Exeter Strategic Housing Market Area study;
- the Devon Employment Space Strategy;
- the green Infrastructure Study.

3.10 Risk management

At an early stage the Officer Group will carry out a risk assessment of the Single Conversation process, to be reviewed and acted upon as necessary during the lifetime of the process.

3.11 Equality and diversity

Likewise, the Officer Group will carry out an equalities impact assessment in relation to the process, and ensure that its conclusions are acted on.

4 CONCLUSION

- 4.1** Following the above process, the objective is to have the Local Investment Plan signed off by the four Councils, the HCA and the RDA, and to enter into a Local Investment Agreement setting out a rolling three year investment allocation based on the Plan.

5 RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1** It is recommended that Executive resolves that:-

- (a) A “Single Conversation” is developed as required by the Homes and Communities Agency, across the districts of Exeter, East Devon, and Teignbridge (excluding Dartmoor National Park), with the Exeter and East Devon New Growth Point Steering Board scrutinising and informing preparation of the Single Conversation documents, and recommending actions to the Councils for those districts and to Devon County Council;
- (b) The Local Investment Plan and subsequently the Local Investment Agreement are prepared by the Officer Group in accordance with the broad principles

outlined in section 3 of this report, for approval in each case by the Steering Board;

- (c) A Stakeholder Engagement Strategy is prepared by the Officer Group, for approval by the Steering Board's Principals, as set out in paragraph 3.8 of this report;
- (d) The Officer Group reports periodically to the Steering Board.

Ross Hussey
Projects and Business Manager

John Rigby
Director Economy and Development

ECONOMY AND DEVELOPMENT DIRECTORATE

Local Government Act 1972 (as amended)

Background papers used in compiling this report:-

HCA Guidance on the Single Conervation, Local Investment Plans and Local Investment Agreements.