
Executive

27 February 2007

Report of the Head of Housing Services

Sub-regional Approach to Strategic Housing

Summary

1. To advise the Executive on recent developments designed to enhance joint working on strategic housing issues across the sub-region and how this work will complement the work ongoing within the authority to meet the corporate priority to improve the quality and availability of decent, affordable homes in the city. To propose that the Executive recommend to Council that City of York participate in the proposed sub-regional partnership and governance framework and that the Executive Member for Housing represent the Council on the partnership.

Background

Recent developments

2. During September and October 2006 the Audit Commission carried out an affordable housing review of the district authorities within North Yorkshire. Whilst York were not directly involved, we participated through providing information and attended a number of workshops which were held on the 4th and 11th October. The review included “light touch” visits to each local authority (not York) and meetings with key stakeholders.
3. A report has been produced by the Audit Commission suggesting a number of interim recommendations aimed at improving joint working.
4. The Audit Commission’s interim recommendations can be summarised as follows :
 - That each authority takes responsibility for one of six broad subject areas for maximising the provision of or reducing the demand for affordable housing
 - That the lead / coordinating authority should consult other authorities and develop an improvement plan for that subject area
 - That the plans should have SMART targets relating to how key issues will be tackled in order to improve strategic housing services in line with Audit Commission key lines of enquiry
 - That the draft plans should be submitted to the Audit Commission by 31st December 2006

5. The six broad subject areas put forward by the Audit Commission where better joint working could bring benefits are summarised below:
 - The strategic housing role;
 - Local Development Framework and making the best use of planning tools;
 - Land assembly and the work of rural housing enablers;
 - Joint working and enabling the provision of more affordable housing;
 - Making best use of private sector housing;
 - Homelessness.

6. The workshop attendees on 11th October, some of whom were elected Members from the district authorities made the following response to the Audit Commission's interim recommendations:
 - That they agreed to the principle of local authority themed "champions" and improved joint working;
 - That a special meeting of the North Yorkshire Chief Housing Officers Group would be convened to agree which local authorities would lead on which subject areas;
 - Requested that the Audit Commission provide initial advice on key weaknesses so that the action plans could address those weaknesses;
 - That the role of the City of York Council be clarified as it had not participated in the mainstream review process;
 - That Political sign up would be needed to progress with the proposed approach.

7. A special meeting of the North Yorkshire Chief Housing Officers Group it was agreed to reduced the suggested subject areas from 6 to 5. The lead local authorities were agreed as follows:
 - The strategic housing role and joint working – to be jointly led by **York and Richmondshire**;
 - Using the LDF process and making the best use of planning tools to enable the provision of more affordable housing – to be led jointly by **Hambleton and Selby**;
 - Land assembly and the work of rural housing enablers – to be jointly led by **Harrogate and Scarborough**;
 - Making the best use of private sector housing – to be led by **Craven with support from Selby**;
 - Homelessness – to be led by **Ryedale with support from the North Yorkshire Homeless Forum**.

Sub-regional Governance Framework

8. Over recent years the importance of the sub-region, in housing terms, has become more prominent. Government Office for Yorkshire and the Humber (GOYH) have, over the last 18 months, encouraged local authorities to work more sub-regionally. The logic behind adopting a sub-regional approach is that, especially in housing terms, housing markets spread wider than local authority boundaries and that through joint working, as a sub-region, we will be better able to meet the housing needs and better placed to access regional funding.

9. Funding for private sector housing and Housing Corporation bids for Social Housing Grant now have to be submitted, and are assessed, on a sub-regional basis. Initial guidance from GOYH indicates that the Regional Housing Board (RHB) wishes sub-regional partnerships to take responsibility for investment programmes. North Yorkshire does not have in place a sub-regional partnership that can deliver or the governance framework to sign off sub-regional funding bids.
10. The lack of governance arrangements has caused concern for some time and decisions made at the sub regional level have lacked a proper political mandate. The sub regional investment bidding process for 2006/8, for example, required by the GOYH, highlighted these concerns whereby a bid for the whole of the sub region for housing resources was officer led with no formal political sign off. This could become a real issue in the future if tensions develop around which parts of the County get what resources.
11. Governance arrangements could be significantly improved by using existing arrangements to enhance the role of elected members in shaping and making strategic housing decisions. The North Yorkshire Housing Forum, already well established and chaired by an elected member, could form a Strategic Housing Board comprising one elected member, supported by the lead officer, from each of the eight local authorities one from the county council and one from each of the national park authorities.
12. This Strategic Board would use the North Yorkshire Housing Forum as it's main consultative body / sounding board. It would determine it's own terms of reference and suggestions are made later in the report in this respect.
13. It is proposed that the strategic housing board would sit as a sub group of the Association of North Yorkshire Councils with the elected Chair / Vice Chair reporting to the Association as and when required. Representatives from all local authorities in the sub-region attend the Association of North Yorkshire Councils. This arrangement would avoid further governance duplication by utilising an existing decision making structure via the Association of North Yorkshire Councils but would also achieve an appropriate housing focus by comprising the elected housing leads from each local authority..
14. The broad remit of the Board would include:
 - Approving sub regional housing investment bids;
 - Monitoring sub regional housing investment plans;
 - Considering moves towards a sub regional "umbrella" Housing Strategy;
 - Approving sub regional research projects and other associated initiatives
 - Maintaining and developing key linkages with regional decision making bodies
15. The Strategic Housing Board would, in conjunction with the Association of North Yorkshire Councils agree it's terms of reference. However a set of draft terms of reference for considerations has been drawn up by the North Yorkshire Chief Housing Officer:

- To provide a single and politically accountable “housing voice” for North Yorkshire;
 - To sign off key sub regional documents and initiatives, ensuring that such key documents have a proper political mandate;
 - Consult key stakeholders on sub regional housing issues and initiatives;
 - Co-ordinate sub regional responses to Government Bodies on housing issues, including the Regional Assembly, Regional Housing Board, Housing Corporation and Government Office;
 - Provide a forum for lead housing members to network on particular housing issues;
 - To inform and influence debate on housing policy issues at the sub-regional, regional and national levels.
16. It is also proposed that for the sub-regional board to reach a decision it has to be a unanimous decision.

Consultation

17. These issues have been discussed by chief housing officers from across North Yorkshire.

Options

18. Option 1 – To sign up to a sub-regional partnership for strategic housing .
19. Option 2 – To maintain the status quo.

Analysis

Option 1

20. There are a number of advantages to a sub-regional approach to strategic housing. Funding for private sector housing and Social Housing Grant is already allocated on a sub-regional basis, adopting a sub-regional partnership would provide us with the governance framework through which sub-regional housing issues could be agreed at the sub-regional level and investment bids can be signed off. It would better place North Yorkshire when competing for funding on a regional basis as well as recognising the fact that housing markets do not reflect local authority boundaries. It also has the potential to raise the profile of the sub-region, improve the sharing of best practice and in the long term, subject to further member approval, create opportunities for efficiencies through sharing resources.
21. It could be argued that the adoption of a sub-regional approach is the first step towards a sub-regional housing strategy. However, this report is not proposing a move to a sub-regional strategy, although the potential for this will be considered by the strategic housing board and any proposals would be subject to further member agreement.

22. However, the adoption of a sub-regional housing strategy approach does not have to mean that each local authority would lose its ability to determine what actions are best for its own area, blur the political boundaries or ultimately lose its own identity. This is not in any authorities best interests. Through informal discussions with colleagues in district authorities, individual identity and the ability to control ones own destiny is as important to them as it is to York and there is no desire to lose this. If a sub-regional housing strategy was proposed, critical to ensure that a local authorities individuality is not lost would be the approach taken and the format of any new sub-regional strategies. Whilst not being in a position to determine what any sub-regional housing strategy may look like, it is likely that it would be set out on a spatial basis at the sub-regional level, i.e. urban, rural and coastal with individual local authority action plans underneath which would complement the wider sub-regional issues whilst at the same time, reflect local issues. This approach would ensure that each local authority retains it's own action plan and as a result of being on a spatial basis, the urban theme would create opportunities for closer links to the Leeds City Region.
23. It is proposed that a sub-regional housing group be established as a sub-group of the Association of North Yorkshire Councils made up of the Executive Member for Housing from each local authority supported by the lead housing officer.
24. To enable the sub-regional housing board to function in a timely and effective manner without each executive member having to refer back to their executive or cabinet, it is proposed that the Executive Member for Housing is authorised in consultation with the Director of Housing & Adult Social Services to make decisions on sub-regional housing issues at the partnership meetings. The Executive Member would report back to the Executive on a quarterly basis following the sub-regional board meetings.

Option 2

25. It is not a statutory requirement to have a sub-regional housing partnership, however GOYH are strongly encouraging local authorities to develop a sub-regional approach. However, this in itself is not a reason to adopt a sub-regional approach. If this option is chosen, it may prevent the whole sub-regional agenda moving forward, or at least, if adopted by the district authorities, leave York on the outside of any sub-regional developments. It may also affect future assessments in relation to funding bids and our overall CPA rating.

Corporate Priorities

26. The development of a sub-regional approach to strategic housing issues will support the priorities outlined in the improvement priority
“Improve the quality and availability of decent, affordable homes in the city”

Implications

27. Implications arising from this report are:

- **Financial** – There are no direct financial implications
- **Human Resources (HR)** There are no HR implications
- **Equalities** – There are no equalities implications
- **Legal** – The Executive can authorise an Executive Member in Consultation with chief officer, to take decisions on behalf of the council. .
- **Crime and Disorder** There are no crime and disorder implications
- **Information Technology (IT)** – There are no IT implications
- **Property** There are no property implications
- **Other** – There are no other implications

Risk Management

28. The risks associated with not improving governance arrangements are:
- Our sub region falls behind other sub regions in terms of coordinating strategic housing initiatives with a possible adverse impact on future bidding rounds;
 - Joint working and investment plans across the sub region will continue to have little or no democratic legitimacy;
 - Elected members lose an opportunity to participate fully in the fast evolving regional and sub regional housing agenda.
29. The risks associated with adopting the new governance arrangements are:
- Lack of political consensus on the Strategic Housing Board causing problems in signing off key documents, bids and initiatives. This would be unlikely due to common housing issues and priorities shared across the sub region;
 - Member capacity issues i.e. “another Committee to sit on...”

Recommendations

30. The Executive is asked to recommend to Council that Council:
- Agree option 1 to participate in a sub-regional partnership for strategic housing and to appoint the Executive Member for Housing as the Council’s representative on the partnership;
 - Authorise the Executive Member for Housing in consultation with the Director of Housing & Adult Social Services to represent and take decisions relating to sub-regional housing issues at the partnership meetings on behalf of the City of York Council.

Reason: To develop a governance framework through which sub-regional housing issues could be agreed, investment bids, can be signed off, to better place North Yorkshire when competing for funding on a regional basis as well as raising the profile of York within the sub-region and the sub-region as a whole and improve the sharing of best practice.

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Specialist Implications Officer(s) List information for all

Legal
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Wards Affected: List wards or tick box to indicate all

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

Background Papers:

North Yorkshire (Districts) Affordable Housing Review

Annexes:

None