
Meeting of the Executive Members for Housing and Adult Social Services and Advisory Panel

8th September 2008

Report of the Director for Housing and Adult Social Services

Review of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Estate Improvement Grant (EIG) Process

Summary

1. To consider proposals to revise the way suggestions are sought and decisions are made on the priorities for estate improvement grants each year.

Background

2. Each year the department goes through a process determining how £170,000 should be spent in various traditionally council housing areas around the city. The decisions on how the budget for each Resident Association (RA) area is prioritised, has historically been taken in consultation with RA's and individual tenants. Over the years the estate improvement system has been successful in introducing significant improvements to tenants lives. Schemes have been identified by the local community and in some cases they have been adopted by the council and mainstreamed within it housing capital and revenue programme, for example, door entry systems, smoke alarm and handypersons.
3. Over its history the way priorities have been determined has been adapted, recently there have been a number of new initiatives that have started to effect neighbourhoods and the way improvements are prioritised. York pride initiatives have lead to a number of significant improvements in communal areas, in many cases these would have been potentially covered by the estate improvement grant process, Neighbourhood Action Plans (NAPS) are also starting to shift the focus in areas to improvements that are based on empirical evidence.
4. Amongst Resident Association (RA) and York Federation members, officers and councillors there has also been a significant and growing level of concern with the EIG in its present format. Specifically they have identified the following issues.
 - a) **Timing** - RA's and the York Federation have raised concerns that each stage in the process was happening too late in the year, thus making implementation of schemes within the financial year problematic.

- b) **The way in which scheme suggestions are requested** - The format used for a number of years for inviting scheme suggestions is by asking for suggestions from residents without clarity about what the priorities are for the area. As a consequence many of the suggestions are ineligible within the EIG criteria, and to a large degree do not address known priority issues for tenants in the estate or neighbourhood concerned.
- c) **How many people take part** – Over the years due to the changes and in particular the problems identified in a) and b), the scheme attracts the direct involvement of fewer and fewer tenants.
- d) **Voting** - At present schemes are selected simply on the number of votes, rather than on any substantive merit. The difficulty in generating worthwhile or innovative suggestions in turn means that the voting response is poor. Consequently very few people are contributing to the scheme selection process.

When voting on schemes as part of RA Annual General Meetings was dispensed with, in favour of voting cards going to individual tenants, one outcome was that RA ownership of the process was significantly depleted, (It doesn't follow that this is a case for returning to the previous arrangements, which had their own problems; but nonetheless RA buy-in is a significant issue).

- e) **Officer time and commitment** - The amount of time required to process and then implement relatively small schemes, when set against other priorities, is disproportionate. There is a need to make the process more relevant to the wider needs of the area.
- f) **Criteria for schemes** – The main eligibility criteria for the estate improvements is clear in that it should be spent on improvements that benefit local tenants and they should not be targeted to benefit individuals except when part of a wider scheme. The criteria is still seen as open ended and needs to be more clearly defined.
- g) **Information and feedback to public** - The quality and visibility of feedback to the public about schemes prioritised and implemented needs further promotion to raise the profile of the process and encourage future involvement.
- h) **Information/feedback to RA's** – Resident associations report that during the year they would like more up to date progress of the improvements.

Consultation

5. There has been extensive consultation both with residents through individual RAs and discussions at the Federation. In addition there have been discussions with staff and other stakeholders such as Street Scene and Street environment officers. There is general agreement that the existing process

needs reviewing. Residents and officers would like priorities to be determined in a way that gives greater consideration to what the needs are for an area based on evidence. At the Federation meeting in August there was a significant majority the voted for Option 4.

Options

6. **Option One** - Abolish EIG scheme and take budget back into mainstream Housing budgets. Officers to determine improvement schemes. Decisions on priorities would involve discussions with other stakeholders.
7. **Option Two** - No change from pre 07-08 process, i.e. Individual tenants asked to propose possible schemes in December/Jan; List of proposed schemes for each RA area collated and mailed to tenants to vote priorities in Feb/March; Schemes then implemented according to votes received
8. **Option Three** - RA's and stakeholders in the area (ward planning teams) take part in estate walkabout which draws up long-list of schemes. Schemes are then implemented according to agreed priority, up to total budget. Details would be published to tenants, with an option to suggest or comment on priorities for the following year.
9. **Option Four** - Estate walkabout to draw up long-list of schemes (as in option 3) followed by public meeting for tenants run by RA, before which RA publishes its recommended shortlist of schemes. Tenants then vote for preferred schemes for funding, either at the public meeting or by postal vote. These schemes are then implemented, up to the agreed budget.
10. **Option Five** - As with Option 4, but with the added dimension of ensuring that there is greater connection made between the EIG budget, and Ward Committee, York Pride and other budgets, to ensure a sustainable approach and better solutions at community level.

Analysis

11. There are some areas of the city where the resident association has folded in those areas it is proposed that the annual estate improvement process should continue following the same lines of which ever option is adopted, but officers/stakeholders via the estate walkabouts with members of the ward planning team, will determine the short listed priorities. There are also small neighbourhoods that are not, and have never been represented by resident associations, in these areas it is proposed to adopt the same approach were housing officers and other stakeholders will determine the priority.
12. **Option one** –This would be the simplest system and would significantly reduce office time however it is not recommended as it would not involve the local community and would significantly reduce tenant engagement in decision making about things that impact on their neighbourhood.

13. **Option two** – The current process is not seen as serving anyone particularly well, for a number of reasons:
 - The process is seen to stretch too far into the year and as a result ends up with rushed schemes producing poor results;
 - The quality of suggestions from tenants is often poor and often ineligible;
 - The response level from tenants is poor;
 - It doesn't help to identify or address priority issues for estates;
 - The time commitment for officers is disproportionate to the benefits, and this option has the most significant time commitment of any outlined;
 - Schemes are not proposed or considered on the basis of any criteria benefiting estate or neighbourhood as such.
14. **Option three** – This option is simpler, shorter and quicker, leaving maximum time in the year for implementation of schemes. It will also help to focus on the main issues for each estate and result in having more thought-out schemes. Involvement of all stakeholders at an early stage via a walkabout will help to ensure that schemes are more considered, and offer better value for money.
15. However, this option doesn't involve significant participation from tenants in the proposal of schemes; individual tenants only get to influence the long-list for the following year, in the light of the schemes decided for the current year. It also doesn't encourage tenants and residents to be involved in their RA or area.
16. **Option four** – As option 3, but will result in RA's having a greater opportunity to be accountable to tenants. Tenants will have a say in priorities, though not in suggesting individual schemes, these will be via the estate walkabouts. As a result of the schemes been identified via the estate walkabouts tenants are asked to think about local issues, rather than focusing on personal benefit relating to their own property.
17. This option also gives an opportunity to have a wider debate about needs of the community and could develop into a mechanism that would support the government aims around the respect standard. As with option 3 it would result in better value for money, however it would require significant time commitment from officers.
18. **Option five** – This option has similar advantages and disadvantages to option 4 has the added advantage that it may offer greater flexibility in funding schemes with a social and neighbourhood content (ie not capital/equipment schemes only). However one would expect that some co-ordination of community needs would be established as a result of the joint estate walkabouts proposed in options 3 & 4.

Corporate Priorities

19. The estate improvement grant is intended to be spent on environmental improvement in predominantly council housing areas. By creating a more transparent process that involves the community and the various stakeholders the priorities will ensure that the funding contributes to the corporate priority: ***To improve the actual and perceived condition and appearance of the city's street, housing estates and publicly accessible spaces.***
20. Many of the potential schemes have a community safety aspect to them whether it be by improving door entry system or fitting security devices, the schemes will meet the safer city priority to: ***Reduce the actual and perceived impact of violent, aggressive and nuisance behaviour on the people of York.***

Implications

21. The implications arising from this report are:
 - **Financial** – To ensure that those areas that currently have no resident association representation receive the same level of funding as areas where there are resident associations, £19,000 has been allocated for these neighbourhoods. The proposals can be delivered within the existing budgets.
 - **Equalities**– Option 3, 4 and 5 ensure that the community have the opportunity to be consulted about the priorities for the area.
 - **Crime and Disorder** – The proposal in option 3, 4 and 5 are supported by the Police and Safer York Partnership. Equally by taking a more coordinated approach to environmental improvements this proposal will meet standards set out in the government Respect agenda.
 - There are no **Human Resources, Legal, Information Technology, Property or Other** implications arising from this report.

Risk Management

22. The risks involved in adopting any of the options are seen as insignificant and have been scored at less than 5 within the council's risk matrix. Monitoring of the risk will be periodic at officer level

Recommendations

23. Given the overwhelming majority of the resident and tenant federation have voted for option 4 the Executive Member is asked approve option 4.

Reason: To improve the way that the EIG budget is used ensuring that the suggested schemes meet identified local needs, create greater tenant and

stakeholder involvement in setting out priorities and consulting with the local community. The process will become more transparent, the priorities will have more strategic relevance and Resident Associations will have a more significant involvement

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Report Approved

Date 14th August 2008

Report Approved tick

Date *Insert Date*

Specialist Implications Officer(s)

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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