

Delivering Housing and Regeneration: Communities England and the future of social housing regulation

Consultation Response of South East England Regional Assembly

Overview

1. The proposal to create a single national agency through which Government's investment in housing and regeneration can be focused is welcomed in principle.
2. The proposed role, functions and powers for Communities England are supported in principle by the Regional Assembly, subject to the inclusion of much more robust arrangements to ensure accountability to local communities and stronger linkages with regional institutions (both existing and future).
3. We support the proposal to make it an objective for Communities England to increase the provision of social rented housing and low cost home ownership. However, Government must acknowledge that increasing current delivery rates to the level required in South East England will require an increase in the level of public sector investment.
4. The Regional Assembly supports the proposal that the Social Housing Regulator should be an independent body to Communities England. We strongly endorse the need for further consultation on detailed proposals for the Regulator and stress the importance of further consultation on such matters with relevant regional and local partners.

Accountability and Engagement

5. We support the proposal that all housing providers, including Communities England, should have a new statutory duty to engage constructively with local authorities in respect of their convening and place shaping functions. But this in itself does not go far enough.
6. The duty to engage constructively with local authorities should include a requirement on Communities England to align their programmes to regional strategies. More generally this is a matter that should be coordinated with ongoing work on the Sub-national Review. Due regard should also be had for Local Development Frameworks and Community Strategies.
7. Within the context of a plan-led approach to development we propose that the duty to 'engage constructively' be extended in statute to planning and development activities carried out by any new public or partnership bodies with planning functions and place shaping/delivery capabilities, including Communities England.

Institutional Arrangements

8. The transfer of the Regional Housing Board to the Regional Assembly reflected Government's acceptance of Kate Barker's recommendation that there was a need to improve the alignment of housing policy and housing delivery. The Regional Housing Board is a partnership board whose membership includes representatives from both the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships. The Board provides an appropriate forum in which the region's priorities for investment in the delivery of affordable housing can be determined.
9. In preparing its recent advice on funding priorities for the next three years the Board has ensured a much stronger alignment with the policy framework set out in the draft South East Plan; the Regional Spatial Strategy. The importance of this alignment was referred to by the Panel that completed the recent Examination in Public of the draft South East Plan. In addition to securing greater alignment with the draft South East Plan the Board also took explicit consideration of the investment being made through other elements of the Regional Funding Allocation, most notably the investment programme of the Regional Transport Board.
10. It is essential that the investment programmes of both the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships continue to be closely aligned with regional objectives and priorities as set out in the draft South East Plan and the Regional Economic Strategies. In this respect the national programmes of these agencies must be seen as an amalgam of regional priorities.
11. The Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration published by Government proposes that the planning functions undertaken by the Regional Assembly and the economic development functions undertaken by the Regional Development Agency are combined into a single regional body. The details of this proposal will be the subject of consultation later this year.
12. It is essential that the details of the proposed arrangements for Communities England are developed in parallel with the work underway to develop the details of the new regional governance arrangements. We strongly recommend that, given the critical nature of the relationship between the region and the work of both the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships, the institutional arrangements for the Communities England in so far as they impact on regional governance are the subject of further discussion and consultation.
13. We note that the consultation document appears to imply that there may be a need for separate institutional arrangements for the Thames Gateway. The basis for this is unclear. The Thames Gateway Strategic Partnership has developed an interim strategic framework which provides the mechanism for aligning the work of the key policy and delivery agencies involved in the Gateway. We note that the framework explicitly rules out the need for any new organisational arrangements to be established, instead it acknowledges the need to use existing arrangements.

14. Given that Communities England will have a regional presence, and given that the Strategic Partnership provides the forum in which regional activities are co-ordinated we do not believe that there is a case made to establish a specific 'regional' team for Communities England that covers the Thames Gateway.

Planning & Compulsory Purchase powers

15. We support the rationalisation of existing arrangements to establish special planning vehicles, into a single statutory instrument. This should address planning powers for Communities England or equivalent new bodies with a place-shaping agenda, encompassing those existing and proposed e.g. Growth Areas, Urban Development Corporations, New and Eco- towns. It should also enable partnership-based planning arrangements with local authorities and sub-regional groupings – provided there is local authority support.
16. Subject to the points made under accountability and engagement we would also support more extensive powers of Compulsory Purchase, including greenfield acquisitions – provided they are consistent with the statutory planning framework as set out in the relevant Regional Spatial Strategy/Local Development Framework - to enable delivery of established regional and local priorities.
17. We urge that where new delivery mechanisms are developed in partnership with Communities England this is done in a way that supports and reinforces work undertaken at the regional/local level. We are deeply concerned at the suggestion, for example, that Communities England might develop a national fund that is able to facilitate the forward funding of infrastructure in support of the delivery of planned growth.
18. We, in partnership with colleagues from SEEDA and colleagues in the South West, are bringing forward proposals that will enable our Regional Infrastructure Fund to provide a mechanism that will enable the forward funding of infrastructure. The Sub-National Review referred to above explicitly supports the work undertaken in the regions on this proposal. If national funding is to be made available to facilitate the forward funding of infrastructure this should be channelled through emerging regional mechanisms rather than through the creation of a new national mechanism. The creation of a separate national fund would run counter to the arguments in favour of rationalisation of funding streams as a means of improving the cost effectiveness of delivery. It would also run the risk of increasing unnecessarily the complexity of potential funding sources.

**South East England Regional Assembly
September 2007**