

Commission for Housing in the North

Summary of Start Up Meetings

3rd September 2015

1.0 Introduction

In the two weeks between the 17th and 28th August 2015, NHC ran a series of six Start Up Meetings for the Commission across the North of England. These were designed to both secure early involvement of members in the work and to gather up to date information on views, ideas and possible changes to improve housing in the North. In turn it is hoped that this early foundation work will help inform that of the Commission and that the Groups will provide a valued source of support as this progresses.

In total, over 50 members attended the sessions held in Kendal, Manchester, Doncaster, Stockton, Knowsley and Castleford which were each chaired by the host organisation with NHC providing a secretariat function.

This paper provides an aggregated summary of the main points of discussion .

2.0 Initial views

Each meeting began with an introduction to the ideas behind the Commission, its membership, timeframe and hoped for outcomes. Members were encouraged to actively contribute to the work both through the meeting and by submitting evidence on the dedicated website.

Without exception, the meetings warmly welcomed the work of the Commission finding it both timely and potentially valuable in helping their organisations through a particularly volatile period of change. Whilst it was clear in each of the meetings that members are working out how best to adapt to a very different operating environment, it was equally clear that the resilience, appetite and commitment to bring about positive change for communities was exceptionally strong.

There was also a unanimity of views that the North needed a strong, new “narrative” for housing that went beyond the national headline, new build supply crisis to pick up on issues around existing stock, tenure, housing choice as well as bringing about appropriate development. There were concerns that the work of the sector was misunderstood or undervalued – members felt this may be because of its multi-faceted nature but they also recognised that the lack of clarity around their impact was an important communication point, as was the lack of profile with the ‘man in the street’.

The meetings were characterised by a strong sense of willingness to change– many organisations clearly felt they had been geared for different times and different economies and are now in the process of adapting and developing new partnerships to best serve their clients. In this, they saw particular value for the Commission in complementing the emerging work around the Northern Powerhouse and the devolution process.

3.0 Focal Points

The meetings each looked at housing’s role in four main areas – supporting economic growth & regeneration, supporting people’s aspirations, generating efficiencies and reforming public sector services. Following is a summary of the main points raised across each of these areas:

3.1 Supporting economic growth and regeneration

- There was felt to be a self-evident positive impact of good housing quality and supply on growth and productivity – the main question was how to make the case for this being a strategic priority and who to.
- In a few areas, members reported that employers were finding that a lack of suitable accommodation was impacting on their ability to attract staff. A more frequently raised issue,

however, was that the quality of the existing stock, especially where there were concentrations of Housing Benefit targeted private renting, were acting as a drag on local economies.

- There was a concern that the pressures to pursue growth in some weaker areas could, if not properly considered, have a unintended detrimental effect on adjacent neighbourhoods – one new development, for example, was described as “sucking the economic life” out of a nearby established community.
- Having a range of housing choices was seen as a key component in the new economy, in particular, access to good quality rented accommodation for younger workers was becoming more important because of flexible, mobile employment patterns.
- As the familiar types of public funding streams for regeneration and brownfield remediation have dried up, new forms of locally determined, strategic investment which take longer term positions on returns are required. This was starting to happen but on a limited scale and needed to be wider in scope.
- Many housing providers are involved in providing skills training to get people into work – this could benefit from greater co-ordination and “bulking up” to achieve greater economies of scale and partnerships with employers
- Some providers have become aware of the risk that their services are “helping keep people comfortable in their poverty” or “detached from the economy” and are now working to manage this better – not all may be aware of, or addressing, these risks.
- The direct economic benefit of housing investment was highlighted along with a view that providers were well placed to help work closely with SMEs in ways purely market driven approaches could not.

3.2 Meeting people’s housing aspirations

- The main discussion point was around a challenge to the accepted norm that aspiration was synonymous with ownership. It was felt in some cases that flexibility with security and quality were now the most important desired housing attributes.
- Having said this, there was a common view that home ownership remained an important ambition for many households. The North could have a competitive advantage in this regard as it should be more achievable here if initial mortgage barriers could be overcome.
- Help to Buy was recognised as valuable and successful in this regard and there was interest in finding ways to develop other simple, but more widely applicable, financial products to help people enter ownership
- Low quality, poorly managed private rented accommodation doesn’t meet anyone’s aspiration – tackling this growing sector was a priority for many but challenging with current resources. The recent DCLG consultation paper on this sector was seen as a positive step.
- The importance of providing aspirational housing across age groups was raised – there is a particular concern that there are shortfalls in appropriate supply for older households
- An area which may have seem aspirational in the past, digital inclusion, was seen as rapidly becoming essential.

3.3 Achieving greater efficiencies

- Without exception, the meetings recognised the importance of greater and faster collaboration and rationalisation. While there were some good examples of this happening, there was still too much duplication and missed opportunities to better procure
- One area that was seen as ripe for reform was around provider development – what were the barriers to having one large, spatially focused team rather than each organisation having this in-house? Similarly, are there better ways to work with private house builders to draw on their skills and purchasing power?
- There was some interest in exploring ideas around locally pooling new Right to Buy receipts to invest in locally determined housing priorities
- There were very mixed views on the potential of greater use of off-site construction – the lack of scale, certainty and the aversion to risk were all playing a part in limited use, however,

many agreed with the point that “if it was going to make a difference it would have done so by now”

- Providers have been considering how to scale back on some services which have grown in different economic times and how best to draw on the strengthened stock condition in future plans
- Outside of the immediate sector, the main area that was discussed was integration with health. There is already a great deal of work in this field making very significant health gains but a general frustration that it is extremely difficult to capture detailed cost benefits, especially in prevention. This point means that there is a real lack of understanding and awareness of the impact good housing makes on health, and as budgets tighten, a risk that integrated services could shrink.

3.4 Public sector reform

In each meeting discussion centred on devolution and its growing importance as local economies, housing markets and opportunities become ever more diverse. Among the points made were the following:

- Is there a greater role for housing or opportunities to improve provision? This links to the earlier point on making a clearer case and having a single voice on economic impact
- Where it has been included, it is primarily around new development – is there scope to widen this out?
- Is there more scope for dialogue between those responsible developing and delivering deals across the North? There are some valuable policy areas and new tools being developed but members felt there was a risk of wheel reinventing.
- There were concerns that the impact of devolution could be undermined by other areas of Government policy.

4.0 Summary and future engagement

Carrying out these meetings over an intensive period just ahead of the Commission has provided a valuable snap shot of the views of the Northern Housing Consortium’s members on current housing issues and opportunities.

The meetings were, without exception, positive and constructive in their wide ranging discussions. Whilst there were many different stand points and experiences there were some common messages that the Commission may wish to bear in mind as it begins its work.

Firstly, while those involved in housing may not yet have the message right on this or a consistent source of evidence to prove impact, a primary objective of their work is to deliver the good quality housing essential to growing the Northern economy.

Secondly, there is a need to develop a simple and strong narrative about the role of housing in the North and how to improve provision. In turn, this needs to be driven through strong leadership and all market, economically focussed housing strategies.

Finally, devolution was seen to present an excellent focal point to pull the many strands of housing work together under one common economic aim with a great potential role for the Commission in supporting this process.