

## Getting the ‘single conversation’ flowing...

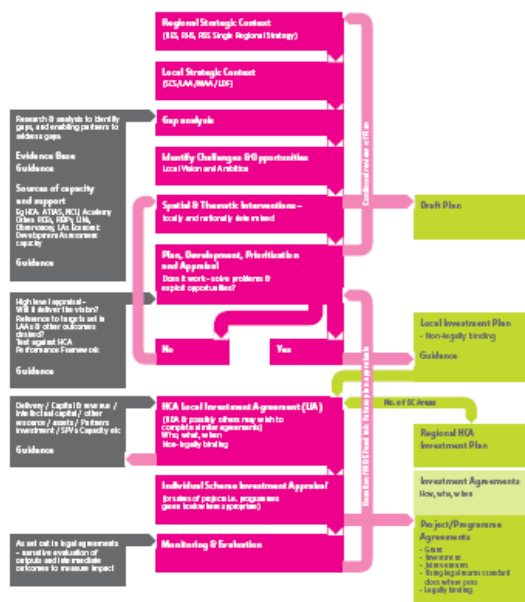
The “single conversation” is a great idea. The concept that HCA - the national regeneration agency, local authorities, and their key respective partners, can develop and agree a shared investment programme that delivers many of the ingredients of success for priority places is both attractive and important. HCA are certainly to be commended for putting this business process at the heart of their planning and management decision-making. And, in my experience, local authorities are approaching this endeavour seriously and purposefully.

However, there are two things that the “single conversation” is not – i.e. “single”, and a “conversation”!

The single conversation sits within numerous instruments and processes for “joining up” approaches to developing successful towns, cities, sub-regions and regions. Sustainable Community Strategies (SCS) and Local Development Frameworks (LDFs) at their best can be powerful statutory approaches to place-shaping. Local Area Agreements (LAAs) and Multi-Area Agreements (MAAs) incentivise public bodies to agree priorities/targets for an area and then collaborate “seamlessly” to achieve those. And there are a host of other attempts at coherent and cohesive area-based working by multiple agencies – the government designation for City Regions (and formerly city region development plans); “Total Place” pilots; NRF/NDC and various other neighbourhood management approaches arising from this for smaller scale communities; are three obvious recent examples. Within the East of England we developed “Integrated Development Programmes” (IDPs) for the regional cities and other large growth areas. All these types of initiatives have their counterparts for rural areas and market towns; and “parish plans” and “community audits” have a lengthy tradition that pre-dates many of today’s regeneration and “place-shaping” approaches.

As things stand, then, the single conversation may be (or may become) “single” for HCA, but it is only one of many, many investment and service planning processes facing the local authority and other partners involved in place-shaping.

Nor is the process in any sense “conversational”. Indeed, as the extract from the guidance note below shows, the process is rooted in detailed and lengthy analysis and negotiation. In this respect it is particularly encouraging that agreement on the Norwich partnership was reached, apparently, after just four months of the conversation!



So, given the ambiguous badging of the initiative, are there any key considerations on how to make the most of this process, and how to reduce the amount of overlap and duplication that it potentially entails. Below I highlight three fundamental issues, requiring bold, decisive and sometimes innovative thinking and practice by local authorities themselves which, I consider, are prerequisites for making the most of the single conversation:-

1. **Getting the economic geography right:** This is a far from easy proposition. Should the conversation be limited by

administrative boundaries, or cover coherent sub-regions (and if so how are those sub-regions defined)? To take one area with which I am involved. Should Central Bedfordshire have one conversation with HCA or up to three – as parts of the borough fall in each of the Luton Gateway, Bedford and Milton Keynes growth areas, and the growth and development of these parts of central beds only makes sense when part of a coherent approach with Luton, Bedford and MK respectively, The same issue arises with Plymouth and its city region hinterland in South East Cornwall and West Devon.

2. **Getting the scale and scope of the investment plan right:** Should the conversation focus on homes and regeneration, or how far should the scope be expanded? In most single conversations, at the minimum the RDA and economic development agenda is being involved in the process. But this could also potentially be extended to skills, transport, culture, environment, health etc.
3. **Getting the right partners involved:** The choices made for the first two issues will largely determine who should be integral to the conversation, and it is probably right that, in the first instance, the LA(s), HCA and RDA should determine their approach on this question. But the more partners involved the greater the complexity of reaching agreement, and perhaps the greater degree of lowest common denominator compromise that will be entailed.

Getting the geography right is probably related to the pattern of LAA and MAA working that an area has already developed; and the presence of any special purpose vehicles (e.g. URC, EDCs etc) established to pursue economic, housing and/or regeneration purposes.

In terms of the scale and scope of the investment plan, to make the most of housing and regeneration-led growth, at the very minimum the local investment agreement needs to sit alongside and complement investment in an area from all the major public bodies (e.g. including measures like BSF, health, transport etc). And given that most of the economic and housing regeneration is public/private in character, the business sector needs to be involved too.

But once one begins to adopt these approaches, the optimum single conversation begins to look very much like a well-working LAA or MAA partnership arrangement. In which case, the single conversation needs very much to be conducted on the local authorities' terms; and perhaps the HCA will need to get used to a lot more conversations than their original vision implied.

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