

APPENDIX 2

West Midlands Rural Affairs Forum Specialist Seminar – Rural Affordable Housing 'A response to the Affordable Rural Housing Commission Report 2006' held on 8th March 2007 at Fulford Village Hall, Fulford Road, Fulford, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffs ST11 9QT

The Specialist Seminar was opened by Rev'd Nick Read (Forum Chairman), who welcomed Forum members and delegates drawn from regional partnerships and networks. Paul Shevlin and Brigid Carey set out the highlights of the report and gave an overview of the work undertaken by the Task Group. Delegates considered the Draft Final Report from the Forum's Housing Task Group in response to the Affordable Rural Housing Commission Report 2006 and in particular:

- The proposals made on the four recommendations of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission Report
- Who else should be targeted and why?

COMMENTS MADE BY DELEGATES

RURAL PROOFING

- Rural Housing developments are more challenged in meeting highest Eco-homes standards. Barriers and options need to be explored and solutions found. Housing Corporation should have a lead role in recognising and resolving the issues.
- Affordability includes energy costs and these costs have a role in contributing to housing affordability for rural households.
- We need separate rural sustainable development policy, and an understanding that sustainability is different for each settlement/community. Need a more subtle approach/understanding.
- We don't have an issue with urban renaissance but recognise individuality of rural communities and should not mean a blanket stop on any other development in rural areas. Does not undermine larger policy themes.

PLANNING POLICIES

- Leasehold situation - Clarification is required urgently re leasehold retention as affordable in perpetuity.
- Shifting sands of legislation and guidance means hard to guarantee provision of affordable housing.
- Leadership – Political will in local authorities is an issue if its the case. Whose will is lacking? Need to be honest that they reflect local views (and why?).
- Opposition from residents re location of affordable housing.

- Local leadership should also apply to Parish and Town Councils.
 - Raise education and capacity of these councillors and utilise village design statements.
 - Use tools to do this Quality Parish Councils
 - Need funding for Parish Plans to continue through Local Area Agreements (currently intensive and time consuming).
- Need community engagement to understand need for workers in rural communities and to engage positively about location and excellent design of affordable housing.
- Affordable housing not just delivered through exception sites but through local delivery frameworks as integral element, not just a bolt-on.
- Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) – Steer for RURAL AFFORDABLE housing could be useful. Regional Housing Strategy could have specified this – trick missed.
- Opportunities now within Regional Allocations Strategy and revisions of RSS.
- **KEY POINT** – Open market v Affordable Housing Element.
 - How would this be done, who would pay? Need a developer/housing industry viewpoint.
 - Landowners won't release land for less than market prices for affordable housing.
 - System not robust enough for affordable housing or nothing guaranteed.
 - Purchase powers – no precedent in rural areas v diff within communities.
- Need guarantees that social housing remains as social housing. Using existing housings is an option despite being more expensive.
- National Government perception on home ownership? Acknowledged that not a panacea and there is still emphasis in the region on social rented - Local housing assessments should, if appropriate, support this.

INCREASING AND TARGETING RESOURCES

- Local Authorities and Housing Corporation 'c £560m'? – sub-regional investment strategies informing divvy-up to rural areas BUJ ability to deliver as well as need/per capita £ influences the allocation.
- History suggests the lack of resources going into rural areas are not proportionate within the region and do not reflect housing needs and delivery costs, eg Moorlands v Stoke.
- NEED greater clarity of local targeting in the sub-regional strategies SO funding can follow and, if it doesn't, exposes urban bias.
- Housing Corporation Board should assess bids in the context of rural delivery mechanisms, costs and constraints.

- Rural bid quality needs to be reviewed to disseminate good practice and maximise chances in future, eg East Midlands and West Midlands split for Peak Park £ and enabling work.
- RHE funding is vulnerable and needs securing – Rural Housing Enabler role is critical in every stage from beginning of process to delivery, ie identifying land through negotiations, engaging the community, bids to delivering, occupation and forward monitoring.
- Private Sector lead on exceptions sites which have mixed tenure and don't exploit full land value, importance of resisting land owner pressure and encourage landowners who offer realistic land values.
- Share emerging examples.
- Use Compulsory Purchase Order powers selectively, ideally where agreement is reached with communities about affordable housing provision, eg absentee landowner.

EMPOWERING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

- Affordable housing as a source of conflict? People want to know about quality of design, location, occupancy (relevant to local need).
- What is affordable housing? Rented, shared equity, etc and/or affordable in relation to local incomes.
- What's an appropriate unit of activity? Districts, groups of parishes, etc.
- Initial survey may be an external (objective) assessment of need, not something the whole community owns up to.
- How to give relative weight to differing views so there is transparency and equity?