

RSN Cheltenham Conference – 10 January 2012
Workshop Notes

Jo Lavis and Matt Dodd - "Delivering rural affordable housing: a new dawn"

The current planning regime perpetuates the problems around rural affordable housing by limiting housing growth in small settlements too much. There is an argument for a more sophisticated settlement planning approach if some of the problems restricting supply are to be addressed.

Poorly designed housing in terms of energy efficiency and rising fuel costs mean that many rural dwellers are living in significant and distinctive fuel poverty. Homes and Communities Agency should take a lead on addressing this issue. Sustainable housing is not necessarily delivered by simply thinking about energy efficiency coding systems for houses – a far broader and more holistic assessment of the role housing has to play in the broader context of sustainable settlements is required.

The recession and the impact of changes to HCA funding regimes are changing, for the worst, the challenges around providing affordable housing and demonstrating that schemes which might access funding are “viable”.

The new neighbourhood planning provisions of the Localism Act provide an opportunity for Parish and Town Councils to have a more significant impact on the provision of affordable housing, but will many use it? Do they have the “know how”? and if not how might it be provided?

The new proposed cap on housing benefit is likely to have a major impact on the availability of affordable housing in rural areas.

Councils with retained stock and stock transfer reserves should be freed up to become much more active in the provision of new affordable housing in rural communities.

With the very significant diminution of HCA funding the pressure to make rural affordable housing work is falling heavily on Housing Associations – this is inevitably going to manifest itself in rising rents. These pressures can have an urban bias, three new urban social homes can be built from the average proceeds arising from the sale of 1 rural housing unit.

Whilst it might be characterised in some quarters as “dancing with the devil” there is a need for a more detailed and insightful engagement with private housing developers to bring new affordable stock forward, by local authorities and other strategic housing interests.

Faith in Affordable Housing - using churches' land and building for rural affordable homes" – James Derounian and Tracey Bessant

The new coalition organisation landscape is helpful for the development of asset led approaches to converting properties in terms of rural housing. Local Enterprise Partnerships have funds through the “Growing Places” budget which focuses on housing as well as economic development.

The Localism Act and its housing related provisions are particularly useful and important.

The “Green Deal” could also be adapted to provide energy efficiency support for conversion of key buildings to provide affordable housing.

The Church Commissioners and individual agents working with local authorities can make accessing land or buildings, to convert for affordable difficult. The key to unlocking the problem is getting senior decision makers such as Bishops and Council Leaders enthused.

Other key public sector bodies are also challenging to deal with in terms of issues linked to bringing forward affordable housing from assets in their control – a very strong example is the MoD.

There is scope to negotiate with the private sector about accessing assets, but they invariably will want something back in return for any support they give. Land banking by a number of big players both housing developers and retailers is a challenge in terms of accessing appropriate housing resources. This needs to be tackled through a national response. The development of capital gains tax benefits in return for the provision of rural affordable housing is well worth considering as one element of such an approach.

Pressure to innovate over the provision of facilities is being driven not solely by the recession but also has a locus in the impending demographic challenge of the “silver tsunami”- exacerbated by problems linked to transport and heating price rises.

Second homes are a particularly iniquitous issue in making rural settlements less viable/sustainable.

Holly Sims – Calor Fuel Poverty Initiative

The learning from the Calor pilot should be rolled out more generally as it identified some real deliverable changes that could be implemented in any local authority area.

Auditing the fuel poverty challenges in specific communities and then intervening to help local people address them with support – accessing national funds – is a really powerful and effective way of doing things.

There is clear evidence of the development of fuel oil cartels operating driving up the cost of fuel accessed as part of the bulk oil buying approaches. There is a need for the regulatory regime to look at this issue in some detail and to intervene to address it.

The mapping approach to look at levels of fuel provision and challenges linked to them, used for the calor project – see slide pack – should be used more widely and the maps made available as easily and straightforwardly as possible.

The direct link between fuel efficiency and rural affordable housing is very important and not thought of or acknowledged sufficiently in the development of policy on each theme individually.