

Rural Housing Project – Exmoor, North Devon and West Somerset
Steering Group Meeting
Tuesday 23rd January 2007 – Exmoor House

1. Introductions and Apologies

Attending

Susan Ayre (SA)	Rural Housing Project (notes)
Anjie Devine (AD)	West Somerset Council
Cllr. John Edwards (JE)	Exmoor National Park Authority and Somerset County Council member
Ruth McArthur (RM)	Exmoor National Park Authority (chair)
Colin Savage (CS)	Rural Housing Project
Barbara Venn (BV)	North Devon District Council
Cllr. Roger Webber (RW)	Exmoor National Park Authority and West Somerset District Council member

Apologies

Jennifer Gould	Magna
Anne Harries	Hastoe
Trevor Ives	Housing Corporation
Vaughn Lake	Hastoe
Graham Mansbridge	North Devon Homes
Tony Murray	Magna West Somerset
Justin Roxburgh	Falcon Rural Housing
David Wyborn	Exmoor National Park Authority

2. Minutes of the Last Meeting

JE asked about the mechanism for informing potential occupiers of affordable schemes. RW expressed concern that there was a risk of people getting frustrated with being asked to complete lots of forms and questionnaires. CS informed the group of consultations/drop in events that are planned for several parishes – Simonsbath, Exford, and Carhampton. RW suggested that people could be informed via a press release that reassures people that questionnaires are a means to an end. RM indicated that articles will be circulated in parish newsletters and Across Exmoor magazine informing people of events and the importance of completing questionnaires. It was suggested information related to specific parishes and schemes can go in parish magazines, and more general information e.g. registering with the district council can go in the appropriate district council publications.

3. Matters Arising

No matters were raised

4. Parish Updates – Please see parish update document prepared by CS.

CS ran through parish update documents for North Devon and West Somerset districts.

It was highlighted that a parish housing needs survey will be carried out in Chittlehampton parish (North Devon). RW raised the concern that it had been agreed at previous steering group meeting that the project would concentrate on delivery and no further surveys would be conducted for the time being. RM informed the group that it had previously been agreed that Chittlehampton would be an exception to this to allow the new RHE to gain experience of the survey process, (RHP steering group minutes 12th Sept 2006). BV indicated that NDDC anticipate that a commuted sum is likely to be available for an affordable development, if it is required, from redevelopment of a toilet block site they own in the village for two open market homes.

BV also informed the group that North Devon District Council have ring fenced £1 million for affordable housing from the Council's capital pot, Right to Buy receipts, received through claw back on properties sold by North Devon Homes Ltd. It is anticipated that there will be £1 million available per year for the next 5 years.

With regards to the Hobbs Yard development in Lynton, BV said that the allocation process is almost complete and that it would be possible to provide ENPA with an anonymous list of the circumstances and reasons for allocation for successful households.

RW suggested that it may be helpful to have an update at each steering group meeting of how many affordable housing planning applications, approvals and completions there have been.

Action 1 – CS/SA to provide updates to steering group on affordable applications, approvals and completions
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The importance of open communication between all parties involved in parish/village affordable housing schemes was emphasised.

There will be a meeting between ENPA and WSDC on 1st February at which allocations for West Somerset local needs affordable homes will be discussed. The process of allocation for the Magna properties in Dulverton has begun and it is anticipated that they will use a similar model to that used for Hobbs Yard in Lynton. Those that are eligible will be from within Dulverton or adjoining parishes. RW asked for an explanation of the reasoning behind allocations. RM indicated that the process has to comply with Local Plan policies. Local connection to the parish is a priority and those that comply are then prioritised in terms of housing need. BV then explained the allocation process in more detail. As the housing has been secured with public subsidy they must be allocated to those in housing need. The process needs to start 3-4 months before the development is finished on site. Further discussion took place regarding housing need and the allocation process, during which it was emphasised that there needs to be confidence that the allocations process is fair as councillors have to justify it to the parish. BV indicated that it is possible to indicate the circumstances of those households allocated properties in order to fully understand the process and reassure members that allocations are going to the right people. It was emphasised that the process should be as straight forward as possible.

Action 2 – BV to provide steering group with NDDC letting policy and feedback on allocations for Hobbs Yard.

Discussion took place on the role of the National Trust as landlords for some properties in Selworthy and Luccombe including issues of local connection, properties being let to people from outside the area, rent levels, and condition and maintenance of their residential properties.

Action 3 - CS to contact National Trust to discuss these issues regarding their properties. National Trust to be an agenda item for next steering group meeting.

5. Feedback from Trevor Ives Meeting

CS ran through the notes from the meeting that was held with local authority officers and members on 12th December 2006. As the National Park Authority are not a housing authority TI came to inform the attendees on the process of bidding for Housing Corp funding for affordable housing projects and give some background contextual information. TI ran through the anticipated bidding round process and timetable for 2008/10, and indicated that there was some uncertainty as the Housing Corporation does not yet know how much funding the Treasury will allocate to them. There are likely to be inter-round bids to which approximately 40% of the funding will be allocated. It is also anticipated that the bid process will eventually change and become less deadline driven. RM highlighted that it is important that schemes are progressing, and the site, RSL, planning and supplementary funding has been organised. There is concern that mixed messages are coming from the Housing Corporation. BV informed the group that the bidding round is also very paper/form intensive. It is important to ensure that the pro-formas are completed in as much depth as possible and that the RSL involved can provide the necessary information. AD emphasised the importance of ensuring that the process is smooth and this element of the process should be discussed with RSL's.

6. Polycentric Housing Market Area (HMA)

RW enquired as to how HMA affects affordable housing. Funding from the Housing Corporation is dependent on the completion of a Housing Market Assessment and a robust HMA is required to support bids. It was suggested that just because money is going to growth area of Taunton that West Somerset shouldn't be receiving less funding. However Taunton is considered a priority growth area and is therefore likely to receive a larger proportion of the available funds. Therefore West Somerset may have a better chance if not in competition with Taunton. Trevor Ives recommended keeping a foot in both the polycentric and Taunton Deane camp, but leaning towards the polycentric HMA. Ruth McArthur is the ENPA's officer presence at the Polycentric HMA meetings and can provide a clear indication of the questions that need answering and ensure that the issues that are relevant to our area are included in discussion. Involvement is necessary in order to be in a position to bid for Housing Corporation funding and to satisfy Audit Commission requirements. AD indicated that the HMA issue should be embedded into the work of the Rural Housing Project as it can bring together information to feed into the Polycentric HMA. BV emphasised that it is important that the steering group are kept involved and informed.

7. S.106 agreements

RM informed the group that s.106 agreements are about ensuring affordable housing remains so in perpetuity and can affect RSL's and those wishing to build their own home. JE asked whether there was a standard format s.106 agreement. RM indicated that ENPA has a standard agreement which has no Mortgagee in Possession clause in it, as this is considered inappropriate in a National Park and in conflict with its policies. RW highlighted that this issue had not been addressed by the Affordable Rural Housing Commission. JE emphasised the importance of ensuring the policy is watertight. RM suggested that National Park Authorities have the capacity to be able to send a message to higher levels of government about the difficulties that are being experienced. RM went on to explain that there is no clear view from the Housing Corporation or RSL's, but there are lenders out there and lending opportunities for individuals. The ENPA solicitor would like to have a standard s.106 but there needs to be a clause that is appropriate for the tenure. There is also the risk of landowners selling for a nominal price then the land/property being sold on at an increased price. Ensuring affordable housing for local people remains so in perpetuity and the availability of lenders including on shared ownership schemes will be discussed at the ENPA Affordable Housing Group meeting. Moira Constable, chief executive of the Rural Housing Trust will be attending this meeting to discuss these issues and provide us with the benefit of her experience. This will take place at 11.30am on Thursday 8th February 2007 at Exmoor House. RW expressed concern that the s.106 and mortgagee in possession issue has gone to the government, but very little has happened. If affordable homes are getting onto the open market then even more have to be built to address the shortfall. There are several National Park Authorities that have no Mortgagee in Possession waiver clause. BV informed the group that North Devon were initially adamant that they would not incorporate a Mortgagee in Possession clause into the s.106 agreement. However now they include one, written in conjunction with Nationwide Building Society, which allows the District Council first right of refusal on a property when it comes up for sale.

Action 4 - BV to talk to planners and NDDC solicitor re: s.106 agreements
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CS indicated that although RSL's deliver the majority of affordable housing ENPA policies also encourage private developers and self build schemes. It was suggested that this should be considered in more detail. Promoting the possibility of bringing in more investment to the area may be particularly helpful in light of lower funding allocation for rural areas. These properties would also be controlled by a s.106 agreement. Need to consider how to manage the process to ensure what is being built remains affordable in perpetuity.

8. AOB

Funding is available due to under spend by the project during the gap in RHE post between Jo Cox and Colin Savage. If the money is not used Devon County Council are likely to want to claim it back so it needs to be safeguarded or used. Research into retaining properties in perpetuity, including mortgagee in possession clauses, and considering an Exmoor wide Community Land Trust was suggested. RW suggested a leaflet setting out the benefits of landowners releasing their land. If the land is released for no fee, when they retire for example, rather than paying tax on it, they are receiving a small regular amount of rent for their land. Unfortunately people are not bringing forward sites at the current prices. It was suggested that ideas for encouraging landowners to part with some land for local needs affordable housing be bounced off interested parties for example – Exmoor Trust and Society. RM suggested that CS

initiate contact with DC officers, Exmoor Trust and Exmoor Society. BV suggested the possibility of a landowner event to help get the message across. CS suggested that the under-spend money could be used for such options. RW emphasised the need to consider the issue carefully and suggested that someone independent of the Rural Housing Project could make the case for keeping the funds and carrying them over. There may also be a scheme that may require a bit of money to bring it on, which could also be considered. It was suggested that BV could talk to relevant Devon County Council members who could make a case for the money to be kept to the relevant people at County Hall. AD suggested that a list of priorities – research or individual projects for the under-spend, could be circulated once BV has spoken to DCC members of NDDC.

Action 6 – BV to speak to DCC members of NDDC – Cllrs. Joe Tucker, and Andrea Davis

Action 5 – CS to circulate list of suggestions/priorities for the under spend

9. Date and Location of Next Meeting

Thursday 22nd March, 9.30am – Exmoor House