

Rural Housing Project Steering Group Meeting
Tuesday 13th June 2006, Exmoor House

1. Attendance and Apologies

Attending:

Ruth McArthur (RM) (Chair) – ENPA
Susan Ayre (SA) (Notes) – Exmoor, North Devon and West Somerset Rural Housing Project
David Wyborn (DW) – ENPA
Chris Blake (CB) – Government Office South West
Mike Bellamy (MB) – SCC (Highways)
Cllr. Roger Webber (RW) – ENPA and WSC
Cllr. Julia Clark (JC) – ENPA and NDDC
Cllr. John Edwards (JE) – ENPA and SCC
Rachel Webdell (RaW) – NDDC
Graham Mansbridge (GM) – North Devon Homes Ltd
Jennifer Gould (JG) – Magna Housing Group
Anjie Devine (AD) – WSC
Justin Roxburgh (JR) – Falcon Rural Housing

Apologies:

Cllr. Mary Crowley - WSDC
Anne Harries – Hastoe HA
Tony Murray – Magna West Somerset

It was agreed that the Highways item should be moved to the top of the agenda.

2. Highways – Cf Highways Discussion Document

Mike Bellamy from Somerset Highways attended the first part of the meeting to explain the issues Somerset Highways needed to address when consulted on schemes and to answer queries from members of the steering group. Somerset Highway's twin objectives are sustainable transport and highway safety.

Sustainable Transport Objectives

RW explained that when local communities and partners are trying to progress affordable housing schemes that they often find themselves in a frustrating situation, and feel restricted by Highways requirements.

MB noted that the County Council has to support the delivery targets within the Draft Regional Spatial Strategy while co-operating to help deliver affordable housing. Sustainable transport objectives (whereby most development in the region should be directed to major towns where better public transport infrastructure exists) and which are considered when making a recommendation was discussed:

- The question that Highways consider is whether development in a specific location will achieve sustainable transport objectives (i.e. offer opportunities for the use of sustainable modes of transport)? Does the need for housing in that location outweigh these objectives?

MB recognized that there is a balancing act in abiding by various Local Plan policies and also ensuring that the highway department acknowledges wider strategic policies. It was pointed out that the draft Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) sets out 20 units a year for Exmoor National Park which must meet a local social/economic need. The strategic objective is therefore for small numbers of local needs housing. Highways have their key objectives but their comments on planning applications are recommendations only. When determining planning applications for local needs housing, Local Planning Authorities can look at whether the need for such housing outweighs sustainable transport objectives.

DW emphasised the need to take a holistic approach and to develop a wider view of what sustainable means in the context of rural communities. RM highlighted that there needs to be recognition that there are other policies taken into account, not purely transport and to make the public more aware of the process. The Affordable Rural Housing Commission has highlighted as a recommendation that new development for local needs in rural settlements should not be precluded purely because of traditional planning notions that such locations were less sustainable in transport terms than urban areas as there are other sustainability considerations including social and caring networks, and local services and jobs. MB indicated that, when responding to planning consultations, the letter that sets out Highway's recommendations can be worded to take into account other policies and issues.

<p>Action 1: MB to look at wording of letter, make suggestions for redrafting as per discussion and to consult steering group on proposed wording.</p>

It was also suggested that sustainable transport objectives in rural communities such as those in the Project area should not be a big concern (JR) as delivering local needs affordable housing is not bringing an influx of people and vehicular movements into a village, as those people are, in most cases, already resident in the parish and have their family and social networks within that community. The key issues that needed to be discussed are that of highway safety and access. RW felt that in sustaining communities that the Local Planning Authority should deal with sustainability options and the key issue for Highways was safety.

Concerns were also expressed (JE) regarding public perception of Highways, who are considered by some to be providing a barrier to development. This perception issue needs to be addressed. MB explained the reasons why Highways representatives may not have been able to attend committee meetings and indicated that resources should be made available to enable this to happen. Greater interaction with applicants and members could be achieved through:

- Highways representatives attending planning committee meetings where highways issues arise to aid understanding and explain the reasoning behind recommendations.

- Member workshops

Joint Structure Plan policy

MB – Policy 49 of the Structure Plan requires that there should be no direct access from new development onto county routes unless an exception is warranted – local needs housing could warrant an exception.

Highway Safety

Visibility splays were discussed. Their width is set out in Government guidance and based on vehicle speed. On Exmoor speeds are not that high, and visibility splays can reflect this. The visibility splay requirements would be driven by the anticipated traffic speeds. It is assumed that most affordable development would be located within existing settlements where traffic speeds could be lower in any event, in which case the visibility splays will be set at an extent that would reflect lower traffic speeds. There is some room for manoeuvre, but highway safety is paramount. SCC could be liable if there was an accident.

JR suggested that it would be useful for developers to talk to highways before their application is submitted in order to consider their options regarding safe access (e.g. removal/realignment of sections of hedgerow, signs). The importance of working as a team to deliver affordable housing with Highways having an input at an early stage was emphasised. Equally it was felt that attention should be given to sites with the most potential to ensure Highways were not overburdened with consultations, rather than at the beginning of the process when there may still be several sites being considered. There are time constraints involved in the 21 day consultation process and not all sites can be visited. MB advised that even if highways issues are thought to be minimal it is a good idea to consult Highways (provide map/explanation of site and its location) as it can save time further along in the planning process.

MB indicated that Highways appreciate the demands of trying to deliver affordable housing and acknowledged that improvements could be made regarding their involvement in the planning committee and consultation process.

Action 2 – RSL's to gain pre-application advice from Highway Department (RSL's)
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Concern was expressed (GM) regarding a perceived lack of consistency in responses from Highways. It was agreed that it would be useful to go through the reasoning behind recommendations to indicate how a decision was reached.

3. Project Priorities and Recruitment

Cf – Future of the Rural Housing Project document (circulated with agenda).

Actions agreed upon at a previous meeting of steering group representatives were discussed amongst the group.

- 1) Discussion regarding the 2006 bids.
- 2) National Parks are more high profile politically

- 3) Meeting with ENPA and Trevor Ives from Housing Corporation (SW).
- 4) Susan continuing with placements.
- 5/6/7) No objections were received regarding the proposal for RMc to re-advertise the RHE post. Advert been reworded to place emphasis on ‘people’ and communication skills and less emphasis on housing experience. The post will be advertised in The Guardian and use of recruitment agency. RM also received short listed applications for Devon RHE post.
- 8) Highways representative (MB) invited and attended this steering group meeting.
- 9) Actions for member’s document discussed. Went through list of parishes and established which RSL’s are attached to them. This document will be amended before being sent to members. It was considered important that West Somerset have sufficient attention. Other settlements suggested for inclusion as a priority for the project are Cutcombe and Carhampton.
- 10) Cross subsidy – Could Planning gain money from open market housing in districts as housing authorities be used in the National Park, working cross boundary to fund affordable housing? It was considered that the steering group should consider the process of funding. It is important that at the next bidding round that sites that need funding have planning permission and are ready to go. It was thought that the gap in the RHE post could be problematic with regard to preparing bids.

It is hoped that when a new RHE is appointed they could attend the next steering group meeting.

4. Affordable Rural Housing Commission Report

Discussion about the recently published ARHC final report. David Wyborn, Ruth McArthur, and Arabella Amory attended an ARHC feedback event in London on 17th May 2006. RM wrote a committee report on the ARHC findings.

Action 3 – Ruth McArthur’s committee report will be circulated to steering group members. (SA)

Action 4 – JR to prepare précis of the ARHC final report and circulate this to steering group.

Action 5 - ARHC report will be added to the agenda for the next steering group meeting. (SA)

5. AOB

RW requested more copies of the ARHC report.

Action 6 – RM to order more copies of the ARHC report.

6. Date and Location of Next Meeting.

A meeting about recruitment, ensuring there is a clear steer from the group, and clarifying the role of the RHE, may need to be held in the interim period. (Likely to be in August). Steering group members will be informed if and when this will occur.

The next steering group meeting will begin at 1pm to ensure that there is sufficient time to run through the agenda.

The next Rural Housing Project Steering Group meeting will take place on;

- Tuesday 12th September 2006 (1pm – 4pm), Exmoor House Committee Room