

Executive

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

3 August 2009

Report of Head of Housing Services

PURPOSE OF REPORT

To advise Executive of the outcomes of the additional recommendations that Executive agreed as part of the initial consideration of an Improvement Plan to deal with the bringing forward of rural affordable housing on Rural Exception Sites

This report is public

Recommendations

The Executive is recommended to:

- (1) Note the outcomes of actions arising from each of the three additional resolutions made at the Executive meeting of 11 May 2009 following its consideration of the Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites
- (2) Endorse a revised Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan that incorporates the research and activities undertaken following the additional actions agreed at the Executive meeting of May 2009. (Option 1 in paragraph 3.2)

Executive Summary

Introduction

- 1.1 Following its consideration of the Overview and Scrutiny report on Rural Affordable Housing Exception Sites in May 2009, Executive agreed the following recommendations:
 - To note the work of the Task and Finish Group scrutiny review into rural affordable housing and exception sites
 - To agree the Overview and Scrutiny recommendations regarding rural affordable housing and exceptions sites.
- 1.2 The above recommendations were agreed subject to the additional resolutions:

- That officers be requested to produce a further report on the potential advantages and disadvantages of employing directly an Enabling Officer
 - That officers be requested to produce a further report requesting relevant outside bodies to release land for rural exception sites
 - That officers be requested to produce a further report explaining how the work of the Rural Housing Trust has been taken up by other organisations.
- 1.3 Officers have concluded the development of the additional resolutions and the actions taken and outcomes are being shared with Executive.

Proposals

- 1.4 That the outcomes of the three additional Executive resolutions are noted.
- 1.5 That the Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan be updated as attached in Appendix A – the changes being highlighted in bold for clarity.

Conclusion

- 1.6 That the revised Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan is finalised and promoted, which includes circulation to all Parish Councils within the District.

Background Information

- 2.1 This report develops the issues raised in the Executive report of 11 May 2009 covering rural affordable housing. Executive will recall that the matter was subject to a full review by Overview and Scrutiny Committee following initial consideration by the Cherwell Parish Liaison meeting in November 2008. At the subsequent Parish Liaison meeting in June 2009, the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing reported back with the outcome of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee as agreed by Executive. The report received strong support from the Parish Liaison meeting, although the issues of effective communication and increased delivery were reaffirmed as instrumental to the successful implementation of the Improvement Plan.
- 2.2 The Improvement Plan agreed by Executive has been used to continue the development of rural affordable housing within the District. In particular, Executive should be aware that a number of key developments are worthy of note before the additional three recommendations are considered:
- The Head of Housing Services and her team have met with senior representatives of Oxford Citizens Housing Association (OCHA) (as part of the GreenSquare Group) to share with them the outcomes of the Executive report of May 2009. As a result of this meeting OCHA, as the District's lead Registered Social Landlord for Rural Exception Sites (as part of the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership) has designated a single point of contact for Rural Exception Sites – Ms Marita Ford, Development Project Manager. One point of contact from OCHA is intended to improve communication with and accountability to all parties, provide greater project ownership and to secure improved delivery. The Council does have the opportunity to reselect partners RSLs in the future, but the emphasis at this stage has been to develop the relationship with and secure the increased commitment from OCHA in the pursuit of rural affordable housing delivery.

- Further, in terms of the RSL input into Rural Exception Sites, the active RSL requires a degree of surety in terms of the resource investment. The RSL can invest a great deal of time working with parishes on schemes which in effect do not always come to fruition. This work requires front-resourcing, and to justify such investment officers would consider it to be inappropriate for other RSLs to become involved unless there exists very good reason. This principle requires effective communication and delivery to support it, and the agreement of the Improvement Plan should help to apply this principle effectively.
- The Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council's (ORCC) new Rural Housing Enabler for the District has taken up his post. Mr Tom McCulloch has met with officers from the Council, and the outcomes of the Executive Report and the importance of the Improvement Plan have been reinforced to the ORCC. As part of the ongoing negotiations with the ORCC (within the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership) the Council has taken a lead role in developing a Service Level Agreement and comprehensive annual work plan which provides details of the Rural Housing Enabler spending some regular working time within the Council's offices to build enhanced working relationships with housing and planning officers. In addition, the post will now report directly to the ORCC's Chief Executive Ms Linda Watson to ensure more senior support and monitoring is given to the post – this reflects the prioritisation given to affordable housing in the ORCC's Strategic Plan 2009-11.
- Council Officers have met with Mr Dan Berlin of the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) who is co-leading the HCA's Rural Housing Project which has been established to help increase delivery in rural areas – especially settlements under 3000. Mr Berlin confirmed that a network of HCA rural champions has been established and the Council's champion is Ms Cate Ison, Regional Investment Manager. This relationship will be developed by officers to help progress the Improvement Plan and to increase delivery. On a positive note, Mr Berlin commented that the Council is “tied up and joined together” in its pursuit of urban and rural affordable housing.
- The Council and its partners have implemented the new communication system with “active” parish councils to furnish them with regular progress reports on rural affordable housing initiatives within their respective parishes. Early positive feedback has arisen from this system – for example Wiggington Parish Council commented that the report was excellent and a great help.

2.3 Executive's additional resolutions

a) Rural Housing Enabling Officer

What we have

The Council currently funds jointly with West Oxfordshire District Council, Oxford Citizens Housing Association and Cottsway Housing Association, the post of Rural Housing Enabler. This is a shared service between the Cherwell and West Oxfordshire Districts, employed by the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council. Central government funding for such posts across the country was withdrawn last year, which meant that alternative options have been considered by authorities. The interim position is that all partners have increased their contribution to approximately

£11,250 for 2009/10 so the post can continue pending a further review during 2009/10. The contribution through the partnership secures a 0.5 Full Time Equivalent post within the District, which is less expensive than employing such a post directly.

This Rural Housing Enabler project is part of the ORHP partnership – the partnership ran initially from 2004-09; and has now been extended to run from 2009-14 based on the independent ‘critical friend’ research of De Montfort University that the ORHP is good practice. The wider project brings forward benefits to the District such as allocation of tasks to certain partners to save resources.

Advantages and disadvantages of employing a Rural Housing Enabler directly	
Advantages	Disadvantages
The post holder can be – and be seen to be – as independent of the local authority and Registered Social Landlords (RSL) and hence an advocate for individual parishes. This is particularly helpful if intercession is needed between different parties.	The line management of the post lies with the ORCC, and officers need increased targeting and control of work. A service level agreement is being devised and tighter work programmes have been developed but this is largely untested at this stage.
The costs are low as costs are shared between partners – there is high leverage from the existing two RSL partners to support the OHP. Management costs are reduced.	The ORCC is not a specialist rural housing provider and may not always have the skills that such a provider would have.
The post holder creates clear links into other rural support services (such as shops, employment and parish plans etc...) providing a holistic, sustainable and community-led approach to bringing forward schemes.	A relatively low salary and limited opportunities for the post holder can lead to higher staff turnover with less opportunity to build skills and capacity than employment with a local authority could offer.
The ORCC has established expertise in undertaking Housing Needs Studies and in local awareness-raising – e.g. A contract with Radio Oxford for publicising work.	The ORCC is ‘neutral’ and would not necessarily support the Council’s strategic objectives and actions. For example, a Parish Council may not support affordable housing, when the Council may believe there is clear need and opportunities.
The ORCC has established links to other independent Rural Housing Enablers and networks offering sources of shared good practice and specialisms.	The ORCC does not have capacity to undertake a rolling programme of needs surveys so the Council would have to identify capacity in-house for a proportion of this work.

Where we want to be

- The post holder should support and be pro-active in the pursuit of rural affordable housing through Rural Exception Sites.
- The post holder needs to support and contribute towards the implementation of the Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan and help to secure increased delivery and better communication with Parish Councils – issues which are of utmost importance to the Parish councils.
- We want to respect the need of the ORCC to have independence, and believe the need for affordable housing delivery and effective community

engagement can be reconciled effectively by the Rural Housing Enabler understanding fully the needs of all the partners and customers he serves.

- Greater accountability of the RHE post holder's work is being developed which is necessary to secure the Council's strategic objectives.

How do we get there?

- Funding for 2009/10 has been agreed as part of the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership, and the new RHE officer is in post.
- This position will be reviewed by officers within the ORHP during 2010/11 in terms of future options being identified with full consideration of resource implications.
- New arrangements could become effective from 1 April 2011.
- The Council could agree to note the position above and to seek assurances from the review of the rural housing enabling function that the disadvantages identified are addressed. Further, that officers are tasked with liaising with the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing on the outcome of the review.

b) Land release for Rural Exception Sites

Through its partnership meetings the Council is working with Parish Councils to identify opportunities for bringing forward land opportunities that will support Rural Exception Sites. This action is identified in the Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan. Reinforced by the discussions at the Executive in May 2009, the Council has written to the major landowners of sites within the District requesting that site is considered as Rural Exception Sites – the letter was sent jointly by the Council Leader and the Chief Executive. This correspondence is attached as Appendix B to this report for information.

c) The work of the Rural Housing Trust.

The role of the Rural Housing Trust (RHT) had been to develop, manage and enable affordable housing within rural communities. However, because of the withdrawal of DEFRA funding and the major economic downturn the RHT made the decision to wind up its development arm and to cease trading with effect from January 2009. In this context, the recommendation of Executive in relation to the RHT is not pursuable directly. The general principle is that the Council should work closely with an effective RSL partner with clear capacity to undertake the role.

Key Issues for Consideration/Reasons for Decision and Options

- 3.1 The first option presented is to consider the outcomes of the three additional recommendations outlined above covering the rural housing enabler, land release for rural exception sites, and the work of the Rural Housing Trust. The revised action plan in Appendix A is updated to reflect the above developments. This option supports the outcome of the Overview and Scrutiny Review, and incorporates Executive's additional recommendations. The infrastructure and capacity to take forward rural affordable housing as a Council priority has been significantly developed over recent months, and the results of this increased capacity – from the Council and its partners – are beginning to materialise. There is greater officer satisfaction with its partners and it is felt that the action plan in Appendix A is given time to roll out and deliver.

- 3.2 The Council could revise its working relationship with the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership. This would involve implementation of any alternative arrangements by 2011/12 given the need to plan, resource and build partnership working outside of the current ORHP arrangements within which the Council works which run from 2009-14.
- 3.3 The preferred option is set out in the recommendations.

Option One	Endorse the revised action plan in Appendix A with increased attention to the items highlighted by Executive.
Option Two	The Council should work towards a more fundamental change in its rural housing partnership arrangements and implementation would be in 2011/12.

Consultations

Oxford Citizens Housing Association (part of GreenSquare Group)	OCHA have reinforced their commitment to the District's Rural Exception Sites and made specific resources available as outlined within this report.
Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council	Ongoing consultations on the development of the Rural housing Enabler post as outlined within the report.
Major Landowners	No specific comments at this stage, but correspondence circulated.
Rural Housing Trust	Confirmation of reduced services as outlined within the report.

Implications

Financial:	There are no direct financial implications arising from this report at this stage as Cherwell's share of the costs are included in approved estimates. Comments checked by Eric Meadows, Service Accountant PHE 01295 221552
Legal:	There are no direct legal implications arising from this report. Comments checked by Liz Howlett, Head of Legal and Democratic Services 01295 221686
Risk Management:	The bringing forward of an Improvement Plan for Rural Affordable Housing assists the Council in its strategic housing functions, and reduces the risks and consequences of failure to deliver rural affordable housing. Comments checked by Rosemary Watts, Risk Management and Insurance Officer 01295 221566
Equalities	The Improvement Plan and the additional

recommendations of Executive help to minimise the negative impact of a lack of rural affordable housing for rural communities and promotes the housing and related needs of these rural communities.

Comments checked by Claire Taylor, Corporate and Community Planning Manager 01295 221563

Wards Affected

All

Corporate Plan Themes

Cherwell: a District of Opportunity:

Help and support Cherwell's residents through uncertain times
Deliver 100 affordable homes

Cherwell Housing Strategy:

Increase provision of new affordable housing

Executive Portfolio

Councillor Michael Gibbard
Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing

Document Information

Appendix No	Title
Appendix A	Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan
Appendix B	Correspondence to Major Landowners on Rural Exception Sites
Background Papers	
Executive Report – Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites, 11 May 2009	
Report Author	Martyn Swann, Strategic Housing Manager
Contact Information	01295 221743 martyn.swann@cherwell-dc.gov.uk