



Scrutiny of Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Parish Council replies

Updated on 4 March 2009

Parish Council	Date reply	Aware of the Council Rural Affordable Housing	Do you understand the policy /process?	Aspects of the policy /process that need further explanation	Affordable Housing in your parish	Have you tried to get affordable housing in your parish	Anticipate a future need for affordable housing in your parish	What has been your experience of the policy /process?	What do you think contributed to a satisfactory outcome?	What do you think were the main problems that you encountered	What aspects of the policy /process can be improved? And How?	What do you think the Council and its partners could do differently	What do you think that Parish Councils could do differently	General Comments
Adderbury Parish Council	06/02/09													see attached
Ambrosden Parish Council														see attached
Ardley Parish Council														see attached
Arncliffe Parish Council														see attached
Barford St John & St Michael Parish Council	05/02/09													see attached
Begbroke Parish Council														see attached
Blackthorn Parish Council	29/01/09													see attached
Blechingdon Parish Council	04/01/09													see attached
Bloxham Parish Council														see attached
Bodicote Parish Council	03/02/09													see attached
Bourton Parish Council														see attached
Broughton Parish Council														see attached
Bucknell Parish Council														see attached
Caversfield Parish Council	22/01/09													see attached
Charton-on-Otmoor Parish Council														see attached
Claydon with Clattercote Parish Council														see attached
Cropredy Parish Council	13/01/09	Yes	Yes		No	No	Yes							This Parish Council is conscious of a need for Affordable Housing but, to date, we have not been able to identify a suitable site.
Deddington Parish Council														



Launton Parish Council	06/02/09																			
Lower Heyford Parish Council	16/01/09	Yes	Yes	No	No	currently in process	Yes	Difficulty in acquiring land from Landowners	N/A	Getting land from Landowners	None	Quicker communication	Be more receptive to the concept							
Merton Parish Council																				
Middleton Stoney Parish Council																				
Milcombe Parish Council																				
Milton Parish Meeting																				
Mixbury Parish Meeting																				
Mollington Parish Council																				
Newton Purcell & Shelswell Parish Meeting																				
North Aston Parish Meeting																				
North Aston Parish Meeting																				
North Newington Parish Council																				
Piddington Parish Council																				
Shenington with Alkerton Parish Council																				
Shipton-on-Cherwell & Thrupp Parish Council																				
Shurford Parish Council	22/01/09	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Don't know	N/A	N/A	N/A										

see attached

CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL SCRUTINY REVIEW INTO RURAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND EXCEPTION SITES

Adderbury Parish Council would like to respond as follows:

The Parish Council would like to have more input regarding the allocation of affordable housing.

It would be preferable for the housing associations responsible for affordable housing to liaise with Parish Councils from the beginning.

The Parish Council would ask that local residents be given first consideration regarding affordable housing.

At the moment allocation of affordable housing seems to be decided and discussed with Cherwell District Council, even for exception sites, and not with the Parish Council.

The Parish Council would request that housing associations and Cherwell District Council consult with the Parish Council regularly.

If you require clarification on any of the above points, please do not hesitate to contact Pam Haynes, Clerk to Adderbury Parish Council.

6.2.09

From: Angela Jones [a.jones315@btinternet.com]

Sent: 17 February 2009 08:43

To: Catherine Phythian

Subject: Scrutiny Review into Rural Affordable Housing

AMBROSDEN PARISH COUNCIL

Reference letter dated 17 December 2008

I must apologise for the lateness of this response, an administrative error. I hope there is still time for the Council's response to be taken into consideration:

The Parish Council are aware of the Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites policy/process but it is not a policy that has been studied in depth but would be should the need arise.

Ambrosden Parish has a small number of Affordable Housing properties in the village, these have been built as part of new developments and not as part of a Parish Council initiative. Due to the high proportion of MOD & farm land in the village it is highly unlikely that Ambrosden could offer any land for development. Parish Councillor's attend the Liaison meetings and will continue to do so.

Hope this helps.

Angela Jones

Clerk to

Ambrosden Parish Council

**Cherwell District Council scrutiny review into Rural Affordable Housing
and Exception Sites.**

Response from Barford St Michael and Barford St John Quality Parish Council

Barford St Michael and St John Parish Council are committed to exploring all avenues to obtain exception site housing in the villages. Affordable housing is not appropriate for this parish and all responses here relate to exception site housing.

1. *Are you aware of the Council's Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Site policy / process?*

We are aware that a policy/process exists. There are no details on the CDC web site and no reference to the fact that information can be found on the ORCC web site. This site does make it clear as to what the process is but not the council's policy on this matter. The ORCC Rural Housing Enabler has attended one of our Parish Council meetings and outlined the process

2. *Do you understand the policy / process?*

Whilst we understand the theoretical process, reality seems to be very different, bureaucratic delays and lack of co-operation abound at every corner.

3. *Are there any aspects of the policy / process that need further explanation?*

Yes – how to make it work in practise.

4. *Do you have affordable housing in your parish?*

No – neither affordable or exception site housing.

5. *Have you tried to get affordable housing in your parish?*

We have tried for several years to get exception site housing in our parish without success.

6. *Do you anticipate a future need for affordable housing in your parish?*

We have carried out two housing needs surveys and demonstrated a clear need for affordable housing. The surveys showed a need for 7 to 8 houses and we believe that four should be built.

7. *What has been your experience of the policy / process?*

Carrying out the survey was straightforward, helped by the ORCC Rural Housing Enabler. There was an excellent response from village residents and others with strong village connections and a strong need was demonstrated. However it has been suggested that we carry out another survey. We consider this to be a waste of money and counter productive. We will lose the respect of village residents if we continually ask them to complete surveys and there is no satisfactory outcome.

Once the need had been clearly identified the process became increasingly frustrating. The ORCC Rural Housing Officer appeared to have no real power to help find a site and was of little help in liaising between CDC and the Parish Council to resolve difficulties. There also appears to be a major funding issue and she has only 1½ days per week for this work resulting in long delays. There was a 10 month delay between the Rural Housing Officer attending our council and her response in spite of several 'chasing' letters.

We identified a potential site in Barford St John but this was rejected by the planning department. We strongly disputed the arguments used to reject the site particularly in view that the same arguments could be applied to recent developments in Barford St John which had been readily granted planning permission. The only response was to repeat the same arguments over and over again. A meeting was arranged between the Parish

Council, the planning officer and several members of CDC. The planning officer maintained his stance but other council members appeared to accept our arguments. However nothing materialised.

Of the sites identified as potential sites for exception site housing we were disappointed by the attitudes of the planners. Sites that we think considered eminently suitable were rejected while others of dubious value were considered acceptable. No discussion between the planning department and the Parish Council is encouraged.

8. *What do you think contributed to a satisfactory outcome?*

Nothing – there has been no satisfactory outcome!

9. *What do you think were the main problems that you encountered?*

The biggest problem is in obtaining land. In this the Rural Housing Officer has no power to help other than to contact landowners on our behalf. Landowners are offered a low price for exception site land, little more than agricultural value. With the pressure to build houses few people are willing to let land go for such a low price when there is always the possibility that they may, at some stage, obtain permission for 'normal' housing and be able to sell the land for a vastly greater sum than they would get for an exception site. A reasonable solution would be to develop a scheme with a mixture of exception site and full price housing on the same site. This way the landowner would receive a reasonable return for his land and the village would obtain low cost housing. We have just this situation in The Barfords. Sites where much trumpeted schemes have been developed have been on land owned by the council, so readily available, or, as in Bletchington, the Duchy of Cornwall.

Another major problem is the attitude of the planning department. We have found them to be obstructive, inconsistent and unwilling to discuss matters. They do not acknowledge that Parish Councillors live in the village and therefore have an intimate knowledge of site locations.

Slow responses from the ORCC Rural Housing Officer have not helped.

10. *What aspects of the policy / process could be improved? And how?*

Paying attention to the issues raised in question 9 and listening to the Parish Council. Potential applicants for exception site housing must be registered on the District Council's Housing Register. We believe it would be more appropriate if potential applicants details were to be kept on a separate exception site register or annotated on the list held at CDC if deemed necessary on grounds of confidentiality.

11. *What do you think the Council and its partners could do differently?*

See answer to question 10.

Stop wasting money on DVD presentations that present a biased view of the process with the aim of presenting the Council in a good light when the reality is totally different.

12. *What do you think that Parish Councils could do differently?*

We have pursued the building of exception site housing for many years now, suggested sites, actually found a site and have involved CDC. We raised the matter at the last CDC liaison meeting and are pleased that, at last, our concerns are being taken seriously. We think there is very little else we could have done.

Summarising Barford St Michael and St John Quality Parish Council has been frustrated by the lack of co-operation from Cherwell District Council in pursuing exception site housing in our parish. We feel CDC do not understand the realities of the situation and pay lip service to the problem rather than addressing the difficulties head on so that a satisfactory outcome can be achieved.

John Donaldson
Chairman, Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Cherwell District Council
Bodicote House
Bodicote
Banbury
Oxfordshire
OX15 4AA

29th January 2009

Dear Mr Donaldson

I am representing the parish of Blackthorn in Cherwell, in response to your letter of 17th December 2008 concerning Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites.

As a Parish Council, we are aware of the District Council's policy on Rural Affordable Housing and Exception sites and we continue to reference it when appropriate. However, Blackthorn is a hamlet with no facilities and although relatively close to Bicester and the larger villages of Ambroseden and Launton, there are no cycling or footpath links to these villages and a very infrequent bus service to Bicester. Consequently, this creates a dependence on the use of a private car which for obvious reasons the younger generation or the less affluent can ill-afford. This makes it an unpopular location for such housing needs.

In June/July 2006, the Parish Council commissioned a Housing Needs survey through the ORCC who proved efficient and thorough. Whilst, this is obviously some time ago, the key factors and characteristics of Blackthorn have not changed in the intervening time so the obstacles will remain the same today. The outcome of the survey was to highlight such a minimal need that could be served by affordable housing, that it was felt untenable to pursue the process. Whilst conducting the survey, ORCC identified a handful of potentially appropriate sites, none of which, on further investigation with CDC Planning Department, proved unsuitable.

The process stalled at this point but the Parish Council minuted the intention to review the situation in the future. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, it is probable that until the facilities within Blackthorn are improved and our transport (bus, cycling or footpath) links with Bicester and nearby villages are developed that the isolated location will prove to be an insurmountable obstacle.

Whilst perhaps not as comprehensive a response as you were hoping for, this is our limited experience in the matter which we hope will be of value.

Yours sincerely

Morag Trilk
Councillor, Blackthorn Parish Council

BLETCHINGDON PARISH COUNCIL

Chairman: Mr C E Lane.

Tel: 01869 350257

Clerk: Mrs G Bickley
Kenwood
Oxford Road,
Bletchington,
Kidlington,
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4th February, 2009

Catherine Phythian,
Scrutiny Officer,
Member's Room,
Cherwell District Council,
Bodicote House,
Bodicote, Banbury,
Oxon. OX15 4AA



Dear Madam,

Re: Scrutiny Review into Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

With reference to you letter dated 17 December, 2008, my Parish Council responds as follows:-

- The Parish Council is aware of and does understand the policy/process regarding the above. It does not feel that any aspects need further explanation.
- We have carried out two affordable housing schemes - one with the Rural Housing Trust and one with OCHA. However, there is still a need for more affordable housing in the parish.
- Overall the process was good and a satisfactory outcome was obtained because of local involvement. During both schemes, especially the first, there was frequent liaison between the Parish Council and the Housing Trust.
- The main problem we experienced, mainly with the second scheme, was getting matters sorted with the Planning Officers before work could commence.
- The policy/process could be improved by having better liaison between the District and Parish Councils - especially regarding the location of sites.

Yours faithfully,

G Bickley

Clerk to the Parish Council

BODICOTE PARISH COUNCIL

Mrs V J Russell
Clerk to the Council

Tel. No.: 01295-256884

Mr J Donaldson
Chairman, Overview & Scrutiny Committee
Cherwell District Council
Bodicote HouseBodicote
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26 The Rydes
Bodicote
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3 February 2009

Dear Mr Donaldson

Cherwell District Council scrutiny review into Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Thank you for your letter of 17 December 2008.

We are certainly aware of the policy/process and had a presentation from the ORCC on this issue a few years ago.

However, now that the District Council has approved a large-scale housing development at Bodicote-Bankside - the vast majority of which is in our Parish - we feel very strongly that some affordable housing for Bodicote should be included in this development, as it would be if these fields had been considered as a Rural Exception Site.

As you may know, we are extremely angry that this site was put forward and considered as an urban extension of Banbury, when most of it is in Bodicote Parish. As such, it is against the District Council's own policies to consider this site for large-scale housing development. We feel the least the Council can do is allocate some affordable housing for Bodicote village. However, we understand it will only be dealt with by means of the usual waiting list, which will be comprised mainly of people from other areas, who will take precedence over Bodicote people.

We would be grateful if you would see if it is possible to allocate, say, 8-12 units solely for people with links to or family in Bodicote.

Yours sincerely

Valerie J Russell (Mrs)
Clerk to the Council

Duns Tew Parish Council

Mrs Sue Lee – Parish Clerk
19 Bradshaw Close
Steeple Aston
BICESTER
OX25 4SA

01869 347652

sue@steeple.eclipse.co.uk

9 January 2009

Dear Mr Donaldson

Scrutiny Review – Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Duns Tew Parish Council discussed this matter at their meeting last night and has the following comments –

- The Parish Council is aware of the process but not aware of CDC's policy.
- They do not feel that the process/policy is well understood and feel that there is confusion with regard to the terms Affordable Housing and Rural Exception Sites. This can often result in parishioners being against rural exception sites as they are not aware that they are only for local people/people with a local connection.
- There is no affordable housing in the parish at present however the parish council is currently arranging a meeting with Nicola Ball to discuss carrying out a rural housing needs survey.
- A future need is anticipated both for starter homes for young families but also for older residents looking to downsize.
- The Council has no experience of the policy/process to date.
- With regard to what could be done differently it is largely a matter of how details of the policy etc are communicated and the use of jargon which can be confusing. A longer session at the next Parish Liaison meeting would be helpful with some real examples - a parish with a rural exception site on land that has been bought and a parish with affordable housing to highlight the difference and to give details of how it was for them going through the process.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact the Parish Council.

Yours sincerely

Sue Lee

Parish Clerk

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GOSFORD AND WATER EATON PARISH COUNCIL

132 Cromwell Way
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Oxon
OX5 2LJ



Tel/fax: 01865 374236

21 January 2009

To : CDC Members Room (Cllr John Donaldson)

For attn. of Catherine Phythian

Dear Cllr John Donaldson

**CDC SCRUTINY REVIEW INTO RURAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING &
EXCEPTION SITES**

Thank you for your letter dated 17 December 2008.

The Council considered the questions you raised and reply as follows :

Yes we are aware of the policy/ process and understand them.

We attended the CDC LDP working party liaison meetings and have affordable housing being built in this Parish.

The Council might be prepared to look at some further but limited amount of affordable housing in the Parish, provided there was a need and justification identified.

From experiences there was concern that local well known families in neighbouring Kidlington seemed to be being excluded from affordable housing in this Parish, after family options in this Parish. However, would not be so happy for large towns to be included otherwise.

Under the process query about the complex use of awarding of the points system to families for housing allocation. There as a need to look at doing things differently into improving this process and allocation for rural families within say a radius away from sites.

I hope these comments are of some use.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carl Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above the printed name.

Carl Smith

Clerk to the Council

From: Ken Porter [kenneth_i.porter@virgin.net]

Sent: 15 January 2009 23:30

To: Overview & Scrutiny

Subject: Cherwell District Council scrutiny review into Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Dear Mr Donaldson

Further to your letter of 17 December 2008 we have given consideration to the questions you posed and would respond as follows:

We are aware of CDC's Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites policy/process

We fully understand the process

No

No we do not have AH in our parish

Yes - see below

See below

We have been attempting to have a development of Affordable Housing in the village for the past five and a half years and our experience has been one of increasing frustration. Our original choice of site was vetoed by OCC on the grounds of visibility on exiting [despite the fact that it is one of the easiest roads to exit in the whole of the village], we did not consider an alternative site suitable as it was next to the school and we believe it will be needed in the future if the school is to expand [but we made this clear from the outset]. We put forward a third site some two years ago and very little progress seems to be being made - the latest information we have is that arsenic contamination has been identified on the site and the partners are trying to see how this can be dealt with. So much time has now elapsed since the original housing needs survey that a further questionnaire will be necessary if we are to make any progress.

Ken Porter
Parish Clerk
Hook Norton Parish Council

HORNTON PARISH COUNCIL

Your letter dated 17 December 2008 refers. For ease I will respond to the questions in the same order as

We are aware of the policy / process

Yes, we understand it

No further explanation required

Not at present

Currently going through the process

Yes

Experience to date has been very good

The input of ORCC has been very good (initially James Alcock was particularly helpful and his replacement Nicola Ball has continued the process). The undertook initial surveys, looked at various sites, dealt with potential planning issues with CDC and arranged for a public meeting in the village. Harvey Pitt, Development Manager at OCHA has also been very helpful.

Main problems have been identifying a suitable site and making sure that potential affordable housing users register their interest. The process has slowed of late because of costs involved in developing the site where there is a steep slope at the rear. Richard Coulston of OCHA is providing regular updates.

We have occasionally had to chase for updates.

No direct contact with CDC Planners but presume that some flexibility has been shown as the site identified would not have obtained planning permission other than for affordable housing.

Communication to and from all parties is essential and Parish Councils need to push regularly for up to date information. Explanations should be obtained for the reasons for any decisions or problems re affordable housing.

I am happy to respond to any queries.

Alan Cater

Clerk to Hornton Parish Council

KIRTLINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

*Mrs R M Powles
Clerk to Kirtlington Parish Council
West House
South Green
Kirtlington
Oxfordshire
OX5 3HJ
01869 350995*

16th January 2009

Cllr John Donaldson
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Cherwell District Council
Bodicote House
Bodicote
Oxfordshire OX15 4AA

Dear John,

Cherwell District Council scrutiny review into Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Thank you for your letter of 17th December. The Parish Council discussed it at its meeting on Tuesday 13th January and agreed answers to your questions. We would like to stress that our answers refer to Exception Sites rather than any other kind of affordable housing.

- Yes, we are aware of the Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites policy.
- Yes, we understand the policy/process.
- No, there are no aspects of the policy/process that we feel need further explanation.
- No, we do not have affordable housing in the parish, in the sense of the provision of Exception Sites.
- Yes, the Parish Council has tried to get Exception Site provision in the village on two occasions.
- We cannot be certain that there would be a need as we feel it is inappropriate to ask this question of parishioners until we know that provision is possible. It is probable that there would be a need.
- Our experience has been unsatisfactory for various reasons.
- The main problem has been identifying a suitable site that would be available.
- We feel that improved incentives to landlords could improve the situation.
- We would like assurances from the District Council that the Parish Council's recommendations on occupancy would be respected.
- The Parish Council feels that it is powerless to act on its own.

The Parish Council would be interested in attending the meeting on 10th March and in sending representatives to the Parish Liaison Meeting on 17th June.

*Yours sincerely,
R M Powles*

Mrs R M Powles
Clerk

From: Sue Lee [sue@steeple.eclipse.co.uk]
Sent: 16 January 2009 11:13
To: Overview & Scrutiny
Subject: Lower Heyford Parish Council
Scrutiny Review of Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Lower Heyford Parish Council are aware of the process and policy relating to the above. They understand these but feel that the difference between rural exception sites and affordable housing needs to be clearer. There has been a recent scheme to try to get a RES in the parish and the feedback to CDC would be that this process was very slow with little communication between those involved. In particular they would highlight issues with lack of communication between housing and planning departments at CDC and would suggest that a dedicated planner to look at RES might be beneficial to the Council.

A need for rural exception housing has been identified in the parish but this need has not to date been met.

If you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me

Sue Lee
Parish Clerk

SOUTH NEWINGTON PARISH COUNCIL

10 February 2009

Cllr John Donaldson
Chairman
Overview and Scrutiny Committee
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Tel/fax: 01295 722181
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As email attachment

Dear Cllr Donaldson

Cherwell District Council scrutiny review into rural affordable housing and exception sites

Thank you for your letter of 17 December 2008. South Newington Parish Council (SNPC) are pleased that the scrutiny is taking place and hope that it will assist in achieving more rapid provision of affordable housing.

South Newington has been seeking a small amount of exceptional affordable housing for, I understand, some 15 years. There have been two initiatives by previous Parish Councils since 2000, both of which have not come to fruition because of administrative delays and difficulties in agreeing access to the proposed sites. The current Parish Council began to explore the possibility of obtaining some exceptional affordable housing in late 2007. I have discussed the two previous initiatives with the Parish Councillors who were involved and have drawn on their experience in forming the opinions expressed in this letter.

Answers to the scrutiny questions

For convenience I have tried to give the Parish Council's views and experiences as answers to the questions in your letter. In doing so I have tried to make a clear distinction between *policies* and *processes* because, as you will appreciate, they are very different things. Establishing good policies is largely a paper-based exercise. Putting them into practice requires the development and consistent management and monitoring of sound working procedures and practices, which may be more difficult.

The annex to this letter gives some information about population and housing in South Newington to provide context that may be useful to the scrutiny team.

Are you aware of the Council's Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites policy/process?

Policies - The Parish Council is aware of the policies set out in the Cherwell Housing Strategy 2005-2011, in the Draft Cherwell Rural Strategy 2009-2014, particularly Objective 9, and the Draft Local Development Framework (LDF).

There is a concern that the emerging policy in the LDF strictly to limit development in smaller villages may be at variance with the aim of providing affordable housing in these villages, even on an exception site basis. As parish councils have said repeatedly in LDF engagement meetings, this potential discrepancy can only be satisfactorily resolved by taking greater account of specific local circumstances and the views of local communities.

Processes – The publications such as ‘A Practical Guide for Parish Councils, Landowners and People in Housing Need’ clearly sets out the high level process that an affordable scheme should follow. However the experience of the current Parish Council, and the two previous councils that have attempted to obtain exceptional affordable housing in South Newington, suggests that there has been no clear process at the detailed level within Cherwell for facilitating the development of rural affordable housing or any joined up application of Cherwell's policies between the different departments of the District Council.

Do you understand the policy/process?

The policy – Yes.

The process – The high level, theoretical process between the various agencies is understood but the practical, detailed processes (if they exist) within and between the agencies, including Cherwell, are not understood.

Are there any aspects of the policy/process that need further explanation?

The policies – Yes.

- How will Cherwell resolve the potential discrepancy between the emerging LDF policy of limiting development in smaller villages and the need for affordable housing in those villages?
- What is the role of Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, in particular that of the Housing Enabler, how does the ORCC role differ from that of the Housing Enabler in Cherwell District Council, and how does either role add value that could not be achieved by an active Parish Council or local community group?

The processes – Yes.

- What are the detailed, practical processes, especially within Cherwell and between the various agencies? It would be helpful if Parish Councils considering an affordable housing project could be have the processes explained at an early stage of the project.

Do you have any affordable housing in your parish?

Yes – We understand that four two-bedroom bungalows and four three-bedroom houses are owned by Charter Housing. The bungalows and one of the houses were built in the late 1950s and the other houses in the 1920s. They are all ex-council houses.

Have you tried to get affordable housing in your parish?

Yes. The following activities have happened since 2000. The current Parish Council is told that there have been earlier attempts to obtain affordable housing, but we have not tried to verify this.

- In 2001-2003 the then Parish Council worked with The Rural Housing Trust until it was replaced with the current structure. A housing needs survey was carried out that showed a need for affordable housing. It is view of those members of the parish council who were involved that The Rural Housing Trust had greater expertise and vigour than the grouping of agencies that replaced it and that the limited village opposition to the proposed site, at the bottom of Sands Lane, South Newington, might have been overcome had the Trust remained the primary agency.
- In 2004 - 2006 an entirely different Parish Council carried out a new housing needs survey (June 2005) and sought to facilitate the building of four to six homes on a site owned by Cherwell behind St Peters Close, South Newington. The project was drawn out because of sustained obstruction from Cherwell officers and tardy activity by the ORCC Housing Enabler (who has since left) and Oxford Citizens Housing Association. As a result the householder who was key to access to the site withdrew his co-operation and the project had to be abandoned.
- In 2007 the current Parish Council, again with an entirely different membership from the previous council, consulted ORCC and was advised that the June 2005 housing needs survey could, in 2007, still be regarded as current. In early 2008 the Parish Council identified, with the help of the ORCC Housing Enabler, 10 potential building sites in the village. In February 2008 these were formally passed to ORCC to obtain an opinion on their acceptability in planning terms from Cherwell. No response was received, despite occasional enquiries by the Parish Council, until two weeks after the Cherwell Parish Liaison Meeting in November 2008. This project is now on hold until completion of the current Cherwell scrutiny review because we do not wish to raise expectations in the village or waste effort until we have a clear understanding of the new processes that may be implemented. We shall also now need to conduct a new housing needs survey.

Do you anticipate a future need for affordable housing in your parish?

The 2005 housing needs survey was completed by 32% of the 125 households in the parish and indicated a need for six affordable houses. It is thought that had confidential assistance with completing the survey form been available from an independent source, such as ORCC, a need for at least two more affordable houses might have been found. The Parish Council have no reason to believe that the need for affordable housing in the village has substantially diminished or that it will do so in the foreseeable future. However, to be certain we will have to conduct a further housing needs survey.

What has been your experience of the policy/process?

The policy – SNPC have no issue with Cherwell's policy aims for affordable housing. However, the policy of using multiple agencies to implement these aims does not seem to have been effective, at least in the case of exceptional rural affordable housing.

The process – The experience of the current and two previous Parish Councils has been very

poor since The Rural Housing Trust ceased to be involved. For example:

- The current Parish Council has suffered a lengthy delay in obtaining an opinion from the Cherwell Planning Department on 10 potential sites, effectively stalling the project for 12 months.
- The previous council encountered problems bordering on active obstruction from Cherwell planning officers and the then Housing Enabler and tardy responses for the then Housing Enabler in ORCC and officials from the Oxford Citizens Housing Association. From reading the file and discussing the matter with the parish councillors involved it is clear that at no time was any constructive thought or advice given by the paid staff involved in the process. All the impetus in the project was provided by the volunteer parish councillors, in the face of a largely negative attitude by Cherwell officers.

Overall there is strong evidence that the 'process' is failing to deliver the stated affordable housing policies of Cherwell on rural exception sites.

What contributed to a satisfactory outcome?

To date there has been a failure to build affordable housing in South Newington.

What do you think were the main problem that you encountered?

Those relating to the agencies in the process are outlined in previous answers. In summary they are:

- An apparent lack of ability in the Cherwell Planning Department's ability to coordinate the implementation of affordable housing policies on rural exceptions sites.
- An apparent lack of commitment by the Cherwell Planning Department and other officers to support the provision of affordable housing on rural exception sites.
- Unwillingness or inability of housing enablers and other paid officers in all the agencies involved to use constructive thought and proactive action to assist parish councils to overcome obstacles.
- Serious delays in responding to correspondence and enquiries causing projects to be unnecessarily extended, causing uncertainty in the parish, significant additional work for parish councillors, and offence to landowners. In at least one case the latter contributed to the failure of a project.
- Officials making comments, assumptions and judgements outside their remit or area of expertise which incorrectly influenced the actions or conclusions of other officials.
- Failure to appreciate that parish councillors are volunteers, usually with many other work and family commitments, who are rarely experts in housing provision or planning, and who are, in effect, looking for expert guidance from the paid officials charged with facilitating the provision of affordable housing. This leads to an apparent lack of service ethic amongst the staff involved.
- Failure to involve parish councillors in meetings.

What aspects of the policy/process could be improved? And how?

Neither any of the parish councillors consulted nor I have got close enough to the internal processes of the agencies involved to make detailed comments on specific parts of the

processes. In general terms we suggest that:

- Parish councils are given a more central role so that they can drive and monitor the process rather than being largely observers once the process has started. Parish councils and communities have the most direct interest in securing satisfactory outcomes and overcoming difficulties and are therefore more likely to set and maintain a good pace of activity.
- The overall process and its individual steps are examined and all non-added value steps and posts removed. (For example, do both the Cherwell and ORCC housing enablers add value or should only one agency provide this role?) This should simplify communications between agencies and with parish councils and speed up the process.
- Design a process that should be able to deliver the start of building within eighteen to twenty four months so that there is a reasonable chance of a project being completed in the four-year term of a parish council. This would provide an incentive to the parish council, reduce the risk of a change of policy or other hiatus at a change of council, and make it easier to maintain community interest.
- The objectives, responsibilities and boundaries of activity for all roles in the process should be clearly defined, publicised and adhered to. This should help to prevent, for example, planning officers commenting or making judgements without appropriate caveats on non-planning matters, such as the economic viability of a site, or housing association officials making assumptions about highways matters.
- All officials involved in the process should have appropriate professional knowledge and training for their roles and are monitored to ensure they have and maintain the personal and corporate motivation necessary to carry them out.
- Each parish affordable housing initiative, once established, should be treated as a project. Clear reporting procedures should be introduced so that district and parish councillors and the responsible managers in each agency are aware of overall progress against policy and progress on each individual project.
- All potential sites in a parish should be considered early in each project and ranked according to key factors such as availability, planning issues, economic viability, and community acceptance so that time and effort is not wasted on unviable sites.
- A communication strategy and plan is developed for each project to ensure that the support of the local community and other key stakeholders is gained and maintained.

What do you think the Council and its partners could do differently?

This is implicit in previous answers. In summary:

- streamline the processes;
- define the objectives and responsibilities of each role;
- choose and train well motivated, proactive staff;
- develop an effective project and overall reporting structure so the Cherwell and parish councillors and managers in other agencies can monitor progress;
- put parish councils at the centre of the process and increase their management role;
- treat parish councils as customers.

What do you think that Parish Councils could do differently?

We can only answer this from the experience of South Newington.

- Be opened minded about the site. Pursuing one site only from an early stage may result in a failed project and wasted effort.
- Be realistic about the likely timescale both within the council and with the community.
- Have a clear plan and stick to it.
- Have a communication strategy and plan to gain and maintain community and key stakeholder support.
- Explain and 'sell' the concept of exceptional affordable housing to dispel misconceptions about, for example, the design and quality of the houses or the people eligible to rent or part buy them.
- Be proactive in obtaining responses to the housing needs survey, including regular reminders and independent, confidential assistance with completing the form.
- If possible identify a champion and form a working group, including people outside the Parish Council, to plan and manage the project and to encourage community involvement.
- Obtain the active support of the local district councillor.

I hope these comments will be of assistance to you and the scrutiny team. As you will see I have not mentioned any individuals. While there have clearly been failings by some staff, we believe that the problems have been predominantly systemic.

I and, I am sure, previous parish councillors would be happy to discuss our experiences with the scrutiny team.

Yours sincerely

John Braithwaite
Chairman
South Newington Parish Council

Annex – South Newington Population and Housing Composition

South Newington has a population of just over 300. There are 125 houses plus two temporary dwellings in the parish, of which 115 are in the built-up area of the village. The remaining houses are scattering in the countryside around the village. People involved in farming or other land-based enterprises occupy the majority of these, including the two temporary dwellings.

There are only about 24 one or two bedroom houses in the village, including 10 bungalows that were built as social housing, of which four remain in the ownership of Charter Housing.

In addition there are eight three bedroom houses that were originally built as social housing. Six were built in the 1920s and two in the late 1950s. Four remain in the ownership of Charter Housing.

The majority of houses in the village, excluding the two categories above, would cost over £350,000.

The population make-up at the 2001 census is shown in the table below. At that time over half the population (54%) were over 45. The proportion has probably increased since. Within the village the majority adults either work in, or are retired from, profession occupations.

Category	Number of people	% of "All people"	Cum % of "All people" (Oldest first)
All people	302		
All males	154		
All females	148		
People aged 0-4	17	5.6	100.0
People aged 5-15	40	13.2	94.4
People aged 16-24	20	6.6	81.1
People aged 25-44	62	20.5	74.5
People aged 45-64	101	33.4	54.0
People aged 65-74	37	12.3	20.5
People aged 75 and over	25	8.3	8.3

Many of the older couples, now mostly retired, have brought up their families in the village. A number of their children would like to return to the village, or to move from their parents' home to independent accommodation in the village, but they are unable to do so because of the shortage and/or cost of suitable housing.

Scrutiny Review into Affordable Housing and Exception Sites Steeple Aston Parish Council Response.

Steeple Aston has already a development of 8 Affordable Housing units, completed on an Exception Site in 2003. We are at present hoping to develop a second site on a parcel of Exception land which has been approved by CDC Planning, Housing and Economy Dept.. Negotiations are ongoing at present. If this project is completed our Affordable Housing need in Steeple Aston should be satisfied for the foreseeable future.

To answer your questions:

We are aware of the Council's Rural Housing and Exception Sites policy and process. However we feel that it lacks clarity and may be difficult for a parish newly interested in affordable housing to navigate.

We believe that much closer contact and exchange of information between parishes and the several authorities involved in the process would be beneficial. We have had good help and support from Nicola Ball, ORCC throughout the initial Housing Needs Survey, and with site identification. At present however there appears to be a lack of impetus and information which is frustrating for the PC and for the residents who are naturally eager to see progress as they completed the Housing Needs Survey some months ago.

Parish Councils are very close to their parishes and, once supportive of a Housing initiative, could be much better used throughout the process. Their local knowledge is valuable and closer consultation with the parish would be beneficial to all parties.

There is a great deal of public confusion regarding the nature of Exception Sites and about the Allocation process. The CDC Allocations Scheme document is comprehensive, it runs to 20 pages, but may be difficult for an applicant to understand. It might be useful to produce guidance specifically for Exception Sites. Possibly it exists but we are not aware of any.

CDC is now partnered with other districts and organisations within the ORHP. OCHA was assigned to us as the preferred developer for our proposed site. The PC would have liked consultation on this.

Our existing site is managed by Sovereign which now appears to be an umbrella organisation including Vale. OCHA now appears to have become Greensquare. A certain amount of confusion inevitably exists as to what responsibility lies where, which is not improved by a lack of communication. In general it appears

that the parish and its Parish Council are not considered as significant partners within the process of developing an Affordable Housing site.

We believe that our original Shepherds Hill site had a satisfactory outcome and has been of great benefit to the village. During the process of its development we had a close working relationship with The Rural Housing Trust which was an excellent association, who worked closely with the parish. We achieved a sympathetic development which both architecturally and socially has been a success. The Parish Council contributed significantly and we believe very positively to the design process and were appreciated as supportive throughout the project. This close co-operation between the Rural Housing Trust, the developers, ourselves and also CDC's Landscape Services dept. was definitely instrumental in the success of the project.

The beginning of the process was swift and relatively easy as the site was owned by CDC who gave the land for the development. Later various difficulties arose with the Oxfordshire Highways Authority and the CDC Legal Department which were not resolved entirely until 2007. All these difficulties could have been resolved more quickly and satisfactorily if better communication between departments had existed. Possibly assigning a single officer to be a contact point and to have the responsibility of enabling the process from beginning would be beneficial.

A rural exception site within a village allows restriction of occupation to those who can demonstrate a strong local connection as well as fulfilling the District Council's criteria. This is of enormous importance and benefit to the village. However there appears to be confusion as to whether these local connections apply when a house swap is proposed. It is vital that its small number of affordable housing units is not lost to a village and to applicants who do have a strong local connection by the means of a house swap with applicants who may well wish to come to live within a village but cannot demonstrate strong local connections. This defeats the purpose of the policy and reduces the number of locals who may achieve vital housing within their own area.

Our Parish Council has sought through its relationships with the agencies involved in achieving affordable housing schemes to be helpful, efficient and proactive. We see it as an important part of our function to achieve affordable housing for our parishioners who are in need. We believe that clarity, good communications and acknowledgement of and respect for the Parish's role on the part of the other agencies involved would help to promote successful outcomes.

Margaret Mason - Chairman

From: Bob Jesson [r.jesson@btinternet.com]

Sent: 23 December 2008 09:57

To: Catherine Phythian

Subject: Rural Affordable Housing

Dear M/s Phythian,

This responds to your letter regarding the scrutiny of CDC approach to Rural Housing. Wroxton Parish is made up of two villages. Wroxton and Balscote. In terms of classification Wroxton is a "B" village and Balscote a "C".

We approached the council to seek a study into 2 exceptional affordable houses on land already owned by a Housing Trust on the western edge of Balscote. It would have been necessary to add a small piece of land to accommodate two small bungalows for either a young couple or elderly. The local farmer was prepared to release a small plot to accommodate the build. We were required to survey the whole of the Parish when the need was clearly in Balscote and in any case Wroxton is 2.5 miles distant and no need was evident. We asked to be released from a total survey but were refused and decided that no real interest had been displayed by CDC, ORCC or any body connected. We decided in view of the lack of interest displayed we would shelve the idea.

Given the project is hardly massive but there have been several cases recently where young or old of the village would have benefited from a small build. An inflexible approach and a lack of interest in small village projects was our main complaint Mrs Patricia Jesson Wroxton & Balscote Parish Clerk