

Independent Review of the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership (ORHP)

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1. Purpose of Report

To inform Members of the Partnership of the findings of the Independent Review of the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership (ORHP) carried out by the Leicester Business School.

2. Background

- 1.1 As part of the agreed Work Programme of the Land and Planning Group the Leicester Business School (LBS) were commissioned to undertake a critical friend style Review of the performance of the ORHP. The Review was carried out by Dr Tim Brown and his Team at De Montfort University from February – June 2008, though publication of the final report was delayed owing to the Team Leader experiencing some health problems.
- 2.2 The brief issued for the Review included:-
 - An assessment of the effectiveness of the Partnership in delivering objectives and targets;
 - Looking at the processes and procedures associated with the operation of the Partnership and its capacity to overcome the challenges of delivering affordable housing in as cost effective way as possible;
 - Assessing the ability of the Partnership to overcome the particular difficulties of undertaking development of new affordable housing in rural areas;

- Identifying good practice and, most important successes to examine how the principles which these may establish can be consolidated to aid future delivery.

3.3 The research comprised of a desk top study of relevant documents, processes and procedures combined with in-depth interviews with a range of partners and stakeholders. This enabled the LBS Team to compile their report which is attached.

3. Summary of the Review Findings and Recommendations

Key findings and recommendations arising from the Review are summarised below:-

- (i) The innovative nature, quality of output, processes and learning culture of the ORHP were acknowledged by the Review Team as a good basis for moving forward.
- (ii) The original target of 500 new homes between 2004 and 2009 was aspirational and, with the benefit of hindsight, too optimistic. A more realistic target of completions per year should be agreed.
- (iii) More robust and sophisticated monitoring information is required to more effectively manage delivery and ensure value for money through appropriate benchmarking.
- (iv) Alternative ways of delivering affordable housing should be considered – eg use of empty properties/vacant floorspace and provision linked to other investment streams should be explored to ensure sustainability.
- (v) Affordable rural housing should be even more strongly prioritised through the Local Area Agreement.
- (vi) Understanding of the work of the ORHP amongst district council planners is variable and close working relationships need to be developed.
- (vii) The ORHP and the OHP itself should consider how best to ensure continued support for the role of rural housing enablers.
- (viii) Consideration should be given to the setting up of a small dedicated team to ensure that strategies and actions are developed and monitored.
- (ix) An improved data base on land available should be developed combined with a more targeted approach to encourage public and private owners to consider making land available.
- (x) The practice of involving local communities early in the process was found to be excellent and should be continued.

- (xi) Local communities should be made more aware of allocation and lettings issues to aid understanding.
- (xii) The potential of setting up a local delivery vehicle (LDV) to assist in bringing forward sites for affordable housing provision should be explored.

4. Conclusion and Way Forward

- 4.1 Generally the outcome of the review has been positive in endorsing the collaborative approach towards rural affordable housing which has been established through the ORHP. A range of recommendations have been made with which officers are broadly in agreement though some are likely to be of more immediate relevance than others in terms of strengthening the partnership approach. Priorities need to be established in responding to the report's recommendations.
- 4.2 Clearly there is a need to review the target for rural affordable housing and to strengthen the information available to manage delivery and ensure value for money. The profile of the work of the ORHP needs to be raised and the links with landowners/planners strengthened. Innovative approaches should continue to be explored and the rural housing enabling role needs to be reviewed and established on a more sustainable basis. This latter point is particularly pressing as we go into next year's budget making cycle. However other elements of the report e.g. utilisation of empty homes, is likely to be of less significance in Oxfordshire and is not something which should be pursued as a priority. Members may wish to express a view on which recommendations should be actioned as a priority.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that a small working group should be established by the Land and Planning Group, (to include appropriate representation from the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership delivery group) which will consider the recommendations in more depth, and prioritise actions for improvement with associated targets/timescales. Progress will be reported back to Members at the next meeting.