

Cherwell

DISTRICT COUNCIL
NORTH OXFORDSHIRE



**Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites
Volume 1**

Overview & Scrutiny Committee

April 2009

Membership of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

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- Councillors Lane and Hobbs, Barford St Michael and Barford St John Parish Council
- Other Parish Councils who responded to the request for comments
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- Ms Nicola Ball, Rural Housing Enabler, Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council
- Mr Roger Freeman, local builder
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Contents

Membership	2
Acknowledgements	2
Executive Summary	3
Recommendations	4
Introduction	5
Context	6
Evidence	11
Conclusions	16
Annex 1: Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan	17

Appendices: See separate volume	
Ref	Title of document
A	Glossary of terms
B	Scrutiny Scoping Document
C	Parish Council Replies
D	Background Briefing Documents
	D 1: Rural Exception Site Leaflet
	D 2: Rural Affordable Housing Process Map
	D 3: Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership Diagram
	D 4: Cherwell District Council Rural Housing Completions
	D 5: Overview and Scrutiny Letter to Parish Councils
	D 6: Roles and Responsibilities for Members of Cherwell's Delivery Improvement Group
	D 7: Performance – Rural Housing Delivery Since 2004
E	Rural Exception Site Policy
F	Independent Review Report of Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership
G	Range of Policies to be Considered in Housing Proposals
H	Allocation Scheme

1 Executive Summary

"This [rural affordable housing] is done to us, not for us"¹

The provision of a new housing development in any community is always an emotive issue. This is never more so than when the development in question is for social or affordable housing in a rural setting. This is an important matter for any parish and inevitably opinions can become polarised and strong emotion will be displayed.

So in undertaking this scrutiny review we have tried to focus on the principles and policies of the overall process and not become too embroiled in the detail of individual schemes. In reviewing the evidence before us we have tried to stick to the facts and to address the general themes and issues that have emerged.

Primarily our review has focused on the initial stages of the process, and the challenges and frustrations of identifying and delivering the land on which to develop rural affordable housing units. The Committee touched only briefly on the sensitive issue of the housing allocations policy.

There has been one common theme underpinning all of what we have seen and heard: the desire for a closer working relationship between the District Council and its partners and the parishes seeking rural affordable housing.

Put simply the parishes would like to be fully involved and they want to see quicker results, a willingness on the part of the District Council to take a more flexible line, improved communications and new homes for local residents at the heart of their community.

We hope that as a result of our work on this scrutiny review those parishes who engage in the search for rural affordable housing in the future will find it a simpler, swifter, inclusive and ultimately successful process. Time will tell – but to be sure we will be tracking the progress of one or two new schemes and we will be contacting all the Parish Councils again to find out if they have seen a difference.

Cllr John Donaldson
Chairman, Overview and Scrutiny Committee

¹ Steeple Aston Parish Council, March 2009

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That Cherwell District Council should encourage a more pro-active approach to rural affordable housing and exception sites and that the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing be invited to fully investigate all opportunities for the provision of rural affordable housing through the Local Development Framework. This should include a review of the relevant policies for the location of general rural affordable housing (including the potential to generate opportunities for some integral affordable provision), and of the criteria against which exception sites are assessed.

Recommendation 2

That Cherwell District Council should encourage an open and transparent approach to communications associated with the delivery of rural affordable housing and exception sites.

Recommendation 3

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee endorses and recommends the proposed Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan to the Executive.

Recommendation 4

That the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing should be asked to present the conclusions of this scrutiny review and the Executive/Council response at the Parish Liaison meeting in June 2009.

Recommendation 5

That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee should monitor progress against each of the above recommendations and review the situation, initially in September 2009.

3 Introduction

Objectives of the review

In December 2008 the Portfolio Holder for Planning and Housing invited the Overview and Scrutiny Committee to review the Council's policy and procedures for the delivery of affordable housing on rural exception sites. The topic had been raised at the Parish Liaison meeting in November 2008 by a number of Parish Councils who were concerned and frustrated by their experience of the process.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to focus their review on the following issues:

- Customer satisfaction with the process
- The service offering (performance, costs etc)
- The partnership interface with the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council and the lead Registered Social Landlord (Green Square Group - previously Oxford Citizens Housing Association)
- The implications for future planning policy (the Local Development Framework - LDF)

Gathering the evidence

The review was conducted on a committee basis as the members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee felt that this approach was more appropriate than a Task & Finish Group study. The Committee met in January 2009 for an initial briefing and to review specific case studies and background documents. This was followed by a "witness" session to gather evidence in March 2009.

In December 2008 the Chairman of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee wrote to all Parish Councils in the district asking for their views and inviting them to comment on their experience of the Council's approach to rural affordable housing and exception sites. The Committee received 17 responses.

The Committee invited representatives from three of the Parish Councils to give evidence at a committee meeting on 10 March 2009:

- South Newington Parish Council
- Steeple Aston Parish Council
- Barford St Michael and Barford St John Parish Council

The Committee also invited a local property developer and representatives from the Oxfordshire Rural Communities Council and Green Square Group (previously Oxford Citizens Housing Association) to give evidence.

Appendix C contains details of the Parish Council responses and other background briefing documents are included in Appendix D.

4 Context

Rural Exception sites should be small, solely for affordable housing and on land within or adjoining existing small rural communities which would not otherwise be released for general market housing. The affordable housing provided on such sites should meet local needs in perpetuity.²

Since the early 1990s, national and local government has recognised the importance of having adequate housing provision in rural areas to meet the needs of local people and contribute to the survival of rural communities and services. All local planning authorities were encouraged to develop policies to assist the provision of affordable housing in rural areas where there was a genuine shortage of existing or new affordable homes for local people. Current national government policy is contained in Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3) which was published in 1996.

Existing local planning policies

The main method of providing affordable rural housing has been through the “exceptions” site method noted above. It is however noted that the allocation of general housing development to rural areas can be of a scale sufficient to generate a proportion of affordable provision.

The Cherwell District Council planning policies for Rural Exception Sites are Policy H6 in the adopted Cherwell Local Plan (1996) and Policy H8 in the non-statutory Cherwell Local Plan (2011). These policies, detailed at Appendix E, are based on national planning policy guidance.³ In summary they allow for small-scale, affordable housing development within or immediately adjacent to villages provided that it:

- meets a specific and identified local housing need that cannot be met elsewhere
- is supported by a local housing need survey
- is economically viable
- must comply with other policies e.g. those which seek to protect the countryside, highway safety, conservation areas and achieve good design
- restricts occupancy to meet local needs in perpetuity

² Rural Exception Policy, Affordable Housing on Rural Exception Sites, A Practical Guide for Parish Councils, Landowners and People in Housing Need, Nov 2006, Cherwell District Council

³ Planning Policy Guidance (PPPG) 3 and Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3)

Corporate priorities

Secure more affordable housing...

"Increase choice, care and social housing provision through the flexible design, funding, planning and co-operation between agencies"⁴

Theme 5 of the Cherwell District Council Community Plan, written in 2005/06, addresses the need for affordable housing in the district, sets a very ambitious target for affordable homes and identifies a number of specific actions. However, it does not make any direct reference or set a specific target relating to the need to deliver affordable units in rural areas.

The Cherwell District Council Housing Strategy 2005 - 2011 (written at roughly the same time as the Community Plan) has two actions relating to the specific provision of rural housing. These are 1) to complete at least four housing needs surveys in rural areas each year and to bring forward two rural affordable housing schemes; and 2) to review the rural affordable housing site thresholds for rural housing as part of the Local Development Framework.

More recently, the Cherwell District Council Rural Strategy 2009 – 2014 (Theme C: Provide Village Homes and Secure Village Infrastructure) further recognises housing as a corporate priority. This includes the provision of rural affordable housing as part of the Council's enablement of general affordable housing delivery.

Rural Strategy 2009 – 2014

Theme C: Provide Village Homes & Secure Village Infrastructure

Objective 9 – Provide Good Quality, Affordable Rural Homes

- Aim: 9.1: Secure housing growth that meets Government targets and the needs of the District through an appropriate mix of market and affordable housing
- Action: Increase the number of affordable village homes available to people with a local connection
- Measure/Target: Review rural exceptions delivery and report to Parish liaison meeting during 2009. Further actions to follow in subsequent years.

Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership

Cherwell District Council works in partnership to deliver its housing commitments. The Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership (ORHP) was established in 2003 to tackle the shortage of affordable housing in the county. It brings together the four district councils, four Housing Associations, the Oxford Rural Communities Council (ORCC) and locally based construction contractor and consultants. During the Committee's work it soon became apparent that the partnerships widely recognised as an

⁴ Cherwell Community Plan, Action Plan 2006 – 2011, Theme 5

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

example of good practice – and this is an important context for the Committee's conclusions.

The partnership was set up to run to 2009 with a target to achieve 500 affordable housing units across the county. This has proved to be ambitious. It is estimated that by September 2009 some 310 affordable housing units will be confirmed as deliverable across the county.

Rural Affordable Housing Results		
Year	Number of Completions	
	Rural completions total	Rural completions through ORHP
04/05	3	3
05/06	0	0
06/07	16	8
07/08	51	31
08/09	24	0
Total	94	42

On behalf of the ORHP, the Oxford Rural Communities Council employs two Rural Housing Enablers (RHE's) who provide independent advice and are critical to the delivery of the housing projects. One RHE provides dedicated support to Cherwell and West Oxfordshire; the other to the Vale and South Oxfordshire. Their role is to assist the parish in undertaking the housing needs survey and to liaise with District Council's planning and housing teams and the relevant housing associations. The RHE plays a pivotal role and will stay involved in the project from the outset until completion.

In early 2008 government funding supporting the RHEs was withdrawn. The ORHP partners elected to continue to provide funding for the RHEs equivalent to 3 days per week per district. The need for local replacement of national funding has been a significant issue to tackle in maintaining the capacity of the partnership and it should be recognised that this is an example of continued commitment to deliver a good service in Oxfordshire.

Independent review of ORHP

There is a strong commitment to continuous improvement in partnership working. At the beginning of 2008 the Leicester Business School was commissioned to undertake a critical friend review of the ORHP. The key findings and conclusions of the review were that the original target of 500 new homes between 2004 -2009 was too optimistic; that rural affordable housing should be more strongly prioritised through the Local Area Agreement; that the profile of the work of the ORHP should be raised; the links with landowners and planners strengthened; and a database on available land should be developed and landowners encouraged to consider making land available. The findings of the review are set out in more detail at Appendix F. This has now become the basis of an Oxfordshire wide

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

action plan to renew and improve the ORHP after its first five years of operation and Cherwell is contributing to this plan.

Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan

In mid 2008, (as a response to the growing pressures to deliver rural affordable housing and changes in the partnership funding position), the Planning and Housing Portfolio Holder had commissioned some officer work on a Cherwell improvement plan for rural affordable housing performance within the district. It was the launch of this improvement initiative, in the form of a new promotional DVD, that led to parish feedback and the suggestion of the scrutiny review. The draft improvement plan formed part of the initial evidence base for this scrutiny review and the Planning and Housing Portfolio Holder asked the Committee to suggest any further refinements and recommend an improvement plan to the Executive following their review. As the scrutiny review progressed the Committee identified a number of practical actions and suggestions that have been incorporated in the latest version of the improvement plan (Annex 1). It is intended that this will be implemented alongside the improvements to the ORHP as a whole.

Financial Assessment

It is difficult to estimate the full costs of Cherwell District Council's work to enable the delivery of rural affordable housing. This is because the input of most of the District Council staff is part of a wider, "normal" role (e.g. planning and housing policy, development control and housing funding advice and liaison) and they do not keep specific records of the time spent directly on rural affordable housing.

However, as part of the evidence base for this scrutiny review the Strategic Director, Planning, Housing and Economy prepared the following indicative annual cost breakdown:

Cost of "grant" funding ORCC enabling team for work in the Cherwell District	£12,000
Housing staff <ul style="list-style-type: none">policy development / advice, funding advice / liaison and needs assessment (based on 30% time of one staff member plus support)	£15,000
Housing needs research <ul style="list-style-type: none">based on 10% officer time, plus support	£5,000
Planning and Affordable Housing Policy staff <ul style="list-style-type: none">planning policy development /advice (based on 20% time of one staff member)	£7,000
Planning (Development Control and Major Developments) <ul style="list-style-type: none">site assessments (based on 20% time of one staff member. Needs to be a senior post due to complexity and political sensitivity of cases.)	£12,000
Total	£51,000

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

It should be recognised that costs will vary dramatically from year to year depending on how many initiatives or schemes are active. This breakdown is for the “enabling” costs only. Once a live rural affordable housing project is created, the Housing Association partner assumes responsibility and all costs (from planning application to build) are attributed to the capital scheme. At this point Cherwell District Council support becomes part of normal planning and housing business processes and is not costed individually.

The funding support for ORCC noted above is roughly double that provided pre 2008/09; this is to compensate for the withdrawal of the central Government grant from DEFRA.

5 Evidence

Communications

"We feel that the difference between rural exception sites and affordable housing needs to be clearer."

"We believe that clarity, good communications and acknowledgement of and respect for the Parish's role... would help to promote successful outcomes."

Overall the process was good and a satisfactory outcome obtained because of local involvement."⁵

All of the written and verbal responses from the Parish Councils made some reference to the importance of good communications to the success of the rural affordable housing process. The Parish Councils shared a common frustration about the length of time it took for the District Council and the partner organisations to respond on particular stages of the process. Also highlighted was the lack of information being passed on to Parish Councils, particularly with regard to issues which involved third parties such as the Highways Authority or other parts of Oxfordshire County Council.

Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan:

1. April 2009: issue quarterly progress reports to all active parishes.
2. Sept 2009: produce bi-annual report on District wide delivery on all rural affordable housing projects.

The Committee acknowledged the importance of maintaining the interest and commitment of the Parish Council, parish residents and potential landowners to the scheme through regular communication and direct involvement. They felt that if the Parish Council was not sufficiently involved in the rural affordable housing process then their detailed knowledge of the parish was not always utilised to best effect.

The Committee agreed with the Parish Councils suggestion that the literature and supporting documentation about the rural affordable housing process could be shortened and simplified. There was potential confusion with regard to the terminology used in the documents. Often parishioners are against rural exception sites as they did not realise the developments would be only for local people/people with a local connection, and could include the provision of starter homes for young families and retirement properties for older residents wishing to downsize.

Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan:

- August 2009: Update Affordable Housing on Rural Exception Sites, a Practical Guide for Parish Councils, Landowners and People in Housing Need.
- Develop further communication material and update website information.

⁵ Extracts from the written responses from Parish Councils.

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

"... would suggest that a dedicated planner to look at rural exception sites might be beneficial to the Council."

The case studies revealed and officers acknowledged that in the past there had been resource constraints within the District Council, particularly in the planning team, which had contributed to the slow response times regarding site appraisals.

Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan:

- In January 2009 the Cherwell District Council allocated a specialist planning officer to work exclusively on rural exception site appraisals.

A common Parish Council suggestion for a process improvement was the appointment of a single point of contact for each Parish at the start of the process. The Committee supported this suggestion but noted that this was in fact the role that the Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) fulfilled. However, given that funding cuts had reduced the level of support provided by the RHE to three days per week, they suggested that there would be benefit in identifying a lead contact from the Planning and Housing teams from the outset to aid communication.

Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan:

- Appoint a designated planning and housing contact at start of process, to complement the Rural Housing Enabler.

Planning Policy

Some of the most vociferous comments received from Parish Councils concerned the apparently inflexible and inconsistent application of planning policies by Cherwell District Council planning officers in rural exception site appraisals.

The Committee recognised that this would always be a controversial aspect of the rural exception site process as it inherently involved the consideration of sites which would not normally be released for housing development. Such site appraisals involve the professional judgement of officers who must consider and weigh-up all the relevant planning policies and other material considerations. Each case needs to be considered on its merits. Inevitably there would be occasions when the decision would not meet with the expectations of the Parish Council or individual parish residents.

The Committee acknowledged the possible misconception amongst parishes that a "rural exception site" was exempt from all planning policies. In fact the local and national policies make it clear that the only exception is to consider the possibility of a local needs driven affordable housing development. The policies clearly state that the proposed exception site must comply with other

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

policies such as those which relate to highway safety or environment agency conditions. A list of the applicable policies is set out at Appendix H.

In discussion with the Committee the Planning officers acknowledged that there was now a national move to encourage a greater flexibility in the application of general planning policies to exception sites. It was also noted that it would ultimately be the Council's Planning Committee that would need to make the sometimes difficult decisions about the balance between housing need and rural environmental change. There were often opposing representations from local residents on such issues. Some parishes would not wish to support schemes because of local environmental objections.

The Local Development Framework (LDF) provided an opportunity to review policies on both general rural housing allocations (which can be of a scale that justifies a requirement for a proportion of affordable provision) and rural exceptions. It will be possible to reconsider the criteria against which the proposals are assessed. This could provide parishes and landowners with more certainty on the types of location that might be acceptable, could help focus the search for potential sites, and could allow for some additional flexibility in releasing land in the interests of adopting a "positive and proactive" approach to providing affordable housing in rural communities.

Such a policy review would also present the District Council with an opportunity to define more clearly the role it wished to see for rural exception site policy in meeting corporate objectives for increasing the delivery of affordable housing.

The Committee noted that the officers and councillors were currently working on the Local Development Framework Core Strategy document due for adoption in 2010. This would be the appropriate vehicle for a thorough review of the planning policy for rural exception sites, building on the evidence and findings of this scrutiny review.

Land availability and site identification

"The main problem has been identifying a suitable site that would be available."

"The biggest problem has been in obtaining land."

"We feel that improved incentives to landlords could improve the situation."

From the outset of the review the Committee were advised that the major stumbling block to the delivery of a successful exception site rural affordable housing scheme was the identification and release of suitable land.

A number of the Parish Councils felt that the only realistic chance of getting land for rural affordable housing was from the District Council, philanthropic organisations or charities and not from private landowners. Finding a match between a suitable site and a willing landowner was cited as the fundamental

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

challenge in the process by the Housing Association representatives. It was generally agreed that it was easier to obtain land from public organisations with a strategic commitment to rural affordable housing than from private landowners.

The Committee learnt that in many cases the land identified for a rural affordable housing exception site had been in family ownership for many generations and there was no pressure to sell. In addition the prospect of realising the “hope value” (that eventually a site might be accepted for open market development) had a more direct and immediate impact on reducing the availability of suitable land in the district. This scenario had become more pronounced with the production of the Local Development Framework, as many landowners were believed to be hedging their bets and waiting to see if their land might be adopted for market rate development in the Local Development Framework.

The Committee noted the work that the OHRP was doing to develop a better understanding of the land holdings throughout the District which might be suitable as rural exception sites.

Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan

- Ensure information about possible rural exception sites is collated as part of Local Development Framework
- Review publically owned land in Cherwell
- Continue to build relationships with Oxford Colleges, Duchy of Cornwall and other landowners to promote affordable housing

Exceptions sites

Planning Policy Statement 3 makes it clear that local planning authorities are expected to be active housing enablers, and where it is inappropriate to allocate land for development in or close to an existing settlement then seeking out exceptions sites is the alternative way forward. It is important to clarify that the Government has no intention of allowing market housing to be built on rural exception sites as this would undermine their very purpose. However, we think that now is the time to show a degree of flexibility to encourage and incentivise landowners to come forward to provide land for rural exception sites. We are therefore going to set up a practitioners' Working Group which will examine the Review's proposals for landowners to have nomination rights for affordable housing units or retaining an interest in their land.⁶

The Committee believe that the real problem in the delivery of rural affordable housing will always be finding landowners willing to release land for exceptions site development. The Committee reflected on the scope and advisability of offering “incentives” to landowners to release suitable land. They recognised the need to safeguard the “affordability” element of a rural affordable housing exception site and that this might not always be compatible with the commercial desires of a landowner.

⁶ Government response to the Matthew Taylor Review of Rural Affordable Housing and Economy

Rural Affordable Housing and Exception Sites

Their conclusions were in keeping with those expressed in the Government's response to the Matthew Taylor Review of Rural Affordable Housing and Economy, and they agreed that this should be kept under review until further guidance and details of new initiatives became available.

Housing Allocations Policy

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

"We would like assurances from the District Council that the Parish Council's recommendations on occupancy would be respected."

The Committee concentrated its work on the initial stages of the rural affordable housing process as this was what generated the most comments and complaints. However, a few Parish Councils did raise concerns about the final stages of the process when the housing allocations are made. Perhaps not surprisingly the Parish Councils expressed a desire to have some input into or control over that sensitive and confidential exercise.

The Committee agreed that although the Parish Council views should be considered ultimately the decision on housing allocation must be based on the professional judgement of the officers applying the agreed and published allocation scheme (Appendix H).

The Committee felt that the situation might be eased if the rural affordable housing guidance documentation could contain a more explicit explanation of the initial housing allocation criteria and also set out the perpetuity rules that would apply.

6 Conclusion

In providing for affordable housing in rural communities, where opportunities for delivering affordable housing tend to be more limited, the aim should be to deliver high quality housing that contributes to the creation and maintenance of sustainable rural communities in market towns and villages. *This requires planning at local and regional level adopting a positive and pro-active approach which is informed by evidence, with clear targets for the delivery of rural affordable housing.* Where viable and practical, Local Planning Authorities should consider allocating and releasing sites solely for affordable housing, including using a Rural Exception Site Policy. This enables small sites to be used, specifically for affordable housing in small rural communities that would not normally be used for housing because, for example, they are subject to policies of restraint.⁷

This scrutiny review has given the members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, some of whom had only a passing knowledge of planning and housing policy and services, a valuable insight into the complexities of delivering rural affordable housing on exception sites. This lack of prior knowledge proved helpful in so far as it obliged the Committee to take a lay person approach and insist that the officers and experts present the information in simple terms. In that regard their initial introduction to the process was not dissimilar to that of a Parish Council embarking on the process.

The recommendations and much of the body of this report focus on the practicalities of delivering a successful rural affordable housing programme. The emphasis is on what actions the District Council officers and its partners can do to improve the process.

However, there is another group of people who can make a valuable contribution. The local ward councillors for Cherwell's rural parishes can also play a part in bridging the communication gap. On the one hand they can present and promote the needs of the parish and at the same time they should be able to explain the District Council's position to their constituents. The Rural Housing Improvement Plan proposes holding a councillor event to give support to ward councillors in this role.

Similarly there is a role for the Executive and Chief Executive and other senior managers to promote the importance of rural affordable housing and the difficulties in identifying suitable land, especially in their interactions with county wide organisations.

All of which suggests that there is scope for this Council to give rural affordable housing greater recognition within and to adopt a positive and pro-active approach and set with clear targets for delivery.

⁷ Planning policy statement 3 (PPS3) Housing

ANNEX 1: Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan

Action	Desired outcome	By When	Progress/Completed
Communication <i>“this is something that is done to us, not for us”</i>			
Produce an annual report detailing progress made throughout the District (schemes delivered /units on site/ housing needs survey undertaken/case studies etc)	Raises profile and builds confidence in Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership locally	1st production Sept 2009	
Issue quarterly reports to all active parishes and District Ward Councillor to update on progress	Parish and Ward Councillor kept informed of progress and obstacles	From Apr 2009 onwards	
Single point of contact for the Parish to be identified at the start of the process – additionally a designated housing and planning contact to be assigned to the parish	Improved communications	Apr 2009	
Increased promotion of activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> through Local Development Framework newsletter Cherwell link 	Greater awareness of rural affordable housing issues	Throughout 2009-10	
Improve Cherwell District Council website content	Greater awareness and information sharing	Apr 2009	
Ensure parish plan process fully encompasses affordable housing	Affordable housing gains priority in Parish Plans	Achieved	Parish Councils are being encouraged to undertake a housing needs survey alongside parish plan questionnaires
Produce DVD to explain the benefits of affordable housing to villages	Increased interest in Affordable Housing	Achieved	
Update rural affordable housing booklet and other documents ~ with clarification of definitions and distinction between rural affordable housing and exception sites	Increased interest and better understanding of rural affordable housing	Documents produced by August 2009	

ANNEX 1: Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan

Investigate if scrutiny can undertake a review of rural housing and exception sites	Addresses Parish Council concerns and District Councillors more aware of rural housing issues	Achieved	
Raise the profile of rural housing issues with District Councillors	Increased commitment from elected members supported by increased knowledge	June 2009 Throughout 2009 -10	
Raise rural affordable housing issues with parishes at all available opportunities			
Working Smarter <i>“would suggest that a dedicated planner to look at rural exception sites might be beneficial to the Council.”</i>			
Put together a Service Level Agreement/Protocol for all Delivery Implementation Group members about role/tasks and timeframes for these-this should include ensuring appraised sites are ranked in order of preference	Sites progressed in a timely fashion	Achieved	Roles and responsibilities of group members re-clarified in January and service standards produced for publication in new booklet
Planning to identify additional staffing resources to carry out site appraisals	Improved response times	Achieved	Specialist officer designated to undertake this work in Jan 09 for 6-9 months and then work to be shared between 3 Senior Planners
Cherwell District Council to identify targets for delivery of rural affordable housing	Greater priority and scrutiny of rural affordable housing delivery	To be confirmed	Being considered as part of the proposals to bring forward the Local Development Framework. Working with Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership to establish new targets for 2009 onwards.
Site identification <i>“The biggest problem has been in obtaining land.”</i>			
Use the planning system to proactively identify possibilities for exception sites	A supply of possible rural exception sites is gathered	In line with Local Development Framework	Initial trawl of identified sites provided Jan 2009.

ANNEX 1: Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan

	for targeting land owners where local need is demonstrated	timescales	
Investigate other rural exception sites policies, keep abreast of government changes and consider revisions to rural exception sites as part of Local Development Framework	A policy framework that enables the delivery of rural affordable housing	In line with Local Development Framework timescales	Local Development Framework not yet at detailed policy making stage. Emerging housing need evidence, further Local Development Framework work on village policy and best practice elsewhere will inform review of rural exception site policy.
Review of publicly owned land within Cherwell	May identify land that could be targeted	Apr 2009	Consider sites through the site identification process
Continue to build relationships with Colleges/Duchy of Cornwall and other landowners where land owned by them may be suitable	Release of suitable land	On going	Work currently being undertaken by Sanctuary with Duchy at Weston on the Green and will use this as opportunity to discuss any other possible sites. Approaching Corpus Christi college as part of site identification at Lower Heyford. If not successful consider a higher level strategic approach.
Discuss with parishes other options for providing affordable housing other than new build – acquisitions, empty homes?	Small amounts of affordable secured where no land available	On going	Rural Housing Enabler following up through usual engagement with Parish Councils so this option can be considered. Revise housing needs survey documents to remind respondents this might be another option Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership could take forward.

ANNEX 1: Rural Affordable Housing Improvement Plan

<p>Ensure housing needs survey carried out as part of a rolling programme in order to evidence need for rural exception sites. Need to ensure Cherwell District Council can resource this. Surveys will run alongside site identification work to allow good targeting of resources</p>	<p>Council will have up to date info to justify need for rural affordable housing</p>	<p>2009/10</p>	<p>Need to look at where this approach may be needed – if a site opportunity exists or where there is likely to be high need (e.g. larger settlements).</p>
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