

# Response to Housing Consultation

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*We broadly support the emerging housing strategy. Housing policy has a major role to play in maintaining and enhancing the sustainability of rural settlements. The strategy should champion the ambitions of the Taylor Review to create a 'living, working countryside' and address recommendations 3 thru 8 of the National Housing Federation & CPRE Charter "Save Rural England, Build Affordable Homes".<sup>1</sup>*

## **1. Sustainability**

Housing policy needs to work to ensure that the county's rural communities are sustainable. We agree with the Council that the government and its regional agencies tend to approach sustainability through an urban framework. It follows that many of the planning and housing concepts inherited through national and regional policy need to be carefully examined before translation to Shropshire, with its small settlements and sparse population density. Particular attention needs to be given to ensuring that there is an adequate social mix and that settlements of all sizes can contribute to the economy. It is vitally important that the policy creates places for young people in the rural landscape.

## **2. Affordable Housing**

We agree with the statement that the "relative scarcity of services should not be used as a reason for preventing smaller housing developments in villages as well as market towns" (paragraph 2.24). Despite the accessibility issues and the car dependence that will result, very small numbers of houses are needed to sustain and revitalise the remoter rural settlements, which must not be consigned to a future as dormitory and retirement settlements. The policy should also recognise that there is growing potential to increase the supply of affordable rural housing through purchase and conversion of existing properties.

Affordable housing in rural areas should be supplied to meet local needs, not central, regional or county targets. The strategy should explicitly recognise that not only are the needs of the aging population growing, but also those of young families. This age group is currently poorly served in rural communities, despite their needs for affordable housing often being greatest.

Provision of affordable housing must be locally responsive. Policies that work in Shrewsbury will not necessarily be appropriate for the rural areas of the county. S106 agreements are a vital tool to ensure that affordable housing is rented or sold on only to people working locally or with local roots.

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<sup>1</sup> *Save Rural England, Build Affordable Homes*, National Housing Federation & CPRE September 2008.

New affordable housing should include live/work areas to accommodate home-based entrepreneurs.

### **3. Delivering Affordable Housing**

Mixed communities with a range of housing types and demographic groups are more economically and socially resilient. Planning policy should resist separation of market and affordable housing sites and developers should provide affordable housing within developments of market housing. There must be a clear target for this and we believe that a 40% is an appropriate target for all developments of 10 houses or more. For smaller developments an equivalent developer contribution towards affordable housing on the site or elsewhere is required. These targets should be foreshadowed in the housing strategy and set out in the Interim Planning Guidance due in April 2009.

The strategy should encourage Community Housing Trusts to bring forward proposals for small scale, locally responsive affordable housing developments.

Exception sites should be used only exceptionally. The character and community of small towns and villages will be degraded if market housing is built in prime central locations and affordable housing is relegated to the edges of a settlement.

Nevertheless, there are circumstances, particularly in the most sparsely populated areas, where exceptional use of greenfield sites will be the only option. Such sites should not, however, be intrusive to the character of the countryside or damaging to its environment.

Housing must be of high quality design and meet the highest levels of environmental excellence. It is vital that housing and settlement design reflects local distinctiveness across the county. A design at home in the suburbs of Shrewsbury will not necessarily be in character with rural settlements.

### **4. Allocating Affordable Housing**

We fully agree with the proposals in paragraph 8.18 "to permit priority allocation of a proportion of new affordable housing to households who may not be eligible for re-housing on the basis of priority housing need, but who cannot access open market housing and have a strong local connection with the existing community". It is particularly important not to move people to rural communities on a "needs" basis if there is no realistic prospect of local employment.

### **5. Maintaining the Supply**

The Right to Buy should be restricted in areas of acute rural housing pressure. Equity shares and part-buy/part-rent schemes should be considered as an alternative to Right to Buy to encourage home ownership.

The policy needs to explicitly address the issue of second homes. Part-time homes have a major impact on the social character of many rural settlements, while undermining local services and encouraging unsustainable commuting from major cities. Many affordable private rented homes are sold to become holiday homes. The policy should contain a clear statement that the current 10% discount on council tax for second homes must not be increased. Second home ownership should also be closely monitored. In the longer term, thresholds may need to be established, above which home owners may need to apply for planning permission for conversion from full time homes to part time occupation.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The Taylor Report proposes trialing this in the National Parks (Recommendation 21).