



West Midlands Rural Community Council: Rural Housing

The West Midlands Rural Community Council Network draws together the four rural community councils (RCCs) which operate within the region. Each member RCC is an independent charitable organisation with a broad range of member organisations including parish councils, voluntary and community organisations and village halls, and has access through newsletters and mailings to over four thousand groups and individuals throughout the region. The RCCs have the common aims of promoting voluntary action and improving rural life. Across the West Midlands the RCCs have a combined turnover of over £3.75 million and employ over one hundred full time equivalent staff providing technical and professional support on issues and projects to people in local communities.

RCCs have a considerable understanding of rural issues borne out of a long involvement with rural communities. They provide a forum for voluntary and community organisations and a wide range of information and advisory services. They enjoy membership of many partnerships that encourage community development and capacity building in rural areas and that manage projects delivering benefits to rural communities. Part of the RCCs' effectiveness stems from the close relationships they have with networks including village hall committees, playing fields trusts and parish councils. Recently they have also developed relationships with regional structures, most notably through the West Midlands Regional Rural Affairs Forum, the West Midlands Rural Network, RAWM (Regional Action West Midlands - the voluntary and community sector network) and the West Midlands European Network.

Housing

Although the West Midlands contains some of the most densely populated metropolitan areas in England approximately 80% of the entire region is rural and the land is predominantly agricultural in nature.

These rural areas vary greatly in character, some such as Southern Staffordshire, North Worcestershire and Warwickshire are heavily influenced by their close proximity to the metropolitan areas of the conurbation and also share some of the same characteristics.

Others such as the rural west and parts of North Staffordshire are amongst the most remote and sparsely populated areas in England.

Depending upon the definition, the region contains approximately 2,300 villages. They perform an essential role in maintaining and enhancing the rural way of life by providing homes, jobs, services and other facilities for local people.

Despite recent economic pressures and the effect of BSE, and latterly Foot and Mouth Disease, agriculture still remains one of the most important activities in the region's rural areas. The outbreak of the Foot and Mouth Disease has shown the inter-dependency of many sectors and in the more remote areas of the region agriculture is still the major employer.

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Rural Strategic Engagement Fund

The Rural Community Council Network was successful in its bid to the Regional Strategic Engagement Fund (RSEF) under the health and regeneration theme for funding of £35,000 for one year from 1 April 2002. Managed by RAWM and funded by Advantage West Midlands the purpose of the RSEF was to provide capacity building support to regionally and sub-regionally significant communities of interest to enable them to engage in regional policy and strategy development. The fund recognised the impact that the work of RCCs locally has on the health and regeneration of rural communities and provided support to enable the RCCs to work collectively to increase the participation of rural communities in shaping and informing the rural agenda across the region.

This paper is one of a series of four papers produced by the West Midlands RCC Network covering rural transport, rural housing, social enterprise and voluntary sector infrastructure support agencies.

For an Executive Summary of all four or copies of individual papers contact Community First.

A summary of all activity undertaken under the RSEF programme is also available.

Agricultural wage levels are traditionally low and there is a predominance of part time working, multi jobs or self-employment in the agricultural sector.

The rural parts are very diverse in their nature and include;

- ***the Peak National Park and areas of outstanding natural beauty where house prices and demand are high,***
- ***areas near or abutting the major urban areas which are subject to intense pressure for commuters,***
- ***the more distant and remote rural areas including the Welsh Marches where access to market towns and services are the key issues.***

Housing Background

Much of rural England experiences problems of access to affordable housing. House prices have been driven up by the influx of the affluent. The already low level of provision of council housing in rural areas has been diminished by the high levels of “right to buy” sales.

The issue of rural housing and the lack of affordable housing for local people is one that affects all rural parts of England and has been of increasing concern for rural communities for well over thirty years. The population's increasing ability and acceptability to travel has increased the accessibility of many rural areas, by those who have in the past commuted from the suburbs or fringes of the urban areas.

With the dramatic rise in house prices and demand that occurred in the 1970's, the areas that were accessible by those with access to resources became wider. We could see the 'ripple' effect, which occurred in the south east of England become commonplace across the country. Not only were commuters moving away from London, but also the

same effect was being recorded around other metropolitan areas such as Manchester and West Midlands conurbations.

Government policy continued to promote home ownership with various legislation being passed to allow council house tenants and latterly housing association tenants the right to buy their own property. This “right to buy” legislation had a significant impact upon the rural areas where tenants recognised the value of the housing which in general was of good quality and substantial size making them attractive purchases.

This government push towards home ownership using the “right to buy” legislation was not accompanied by an investment

programme in rented or low cost housing. This resulted in a dramatic loss of rented housing across the country, which was felt more so in rural areas where the availability of land to build new homes was always at a premium.

The extent of housing need across the region is difficult to measure, as it is commonly recognised that there may be significant hidden homelessness problems, particularly in the very rural areas. Due to the lack of suitable accommodation, extended families continue to offer support perhaps beyond that which would be expected in the urban areas.

Recent housing need surveys in Shropshire have estimated that in one district alone there is a need for approximately 1500 affordable homes in the area over the next 5 years. When compared with the Housing Corporation's funded rural schemes in 2002/2003, which amounted to 148 new affordable dwellings in the whole of the region, this clearly demonstrates that there is much further work to be done.

FUNDING

The majority of new affordable housing in rural areas is provided by way of a registered social landlord (housing associations) who build rented or shared ownership accommodation.



Funding for such schemes, in the main, is provided through the Housing Corporation, which sets out its policies on a regional basis. Until recently local authorities were also able to fund schemes through Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG). This source of funding, however, will not be available for the direct funding of schemes from the 1st April 2003 but will become part of the Housing Corporation Approved Development Programme.

The Central England office of the Housing Corporation has identified the provision of rural homes as a key issue for the Corporation and uses its forward allocation pool to enable schemes to be worked up to the point of delivery. In assessing bids for funds the Corporation recognises the continuing difficulty for housing associations and local authorities

in identifying and delivering rural schemes. Across the West Midlands region in the year 2002/2003, the Housing Corporation approved schemes totalling 148 units in settlements of less than 3000 population.



The regional distribution of the Approved Development Programme provides a cash limit of £84 million for the West Midlands in 2003/2004. The target for rural units is 183. The Regional Investment Strategy for the West Midlands identifies five themes for investment these being; regeneration,

rural and market towns, supported housing, growth and meeting the needs of black and minority ethnic communities. Eleven per cent of the approved programme budget is allocated for the rural theme.

The Issues...

The provision of affordable housing in rural areas is a complicated process, which requires many pieces to be in place for a scheme to go ahead. Planning policies must be in place at a national, regional and local level. Land must be available at the right price for a scheme to be viable. Funding should be in place and most importantly; the community must be fully supportive and have carried out a survey of need.

Property Prices

Property prices have been increasing across the region by differing amounts, reflecting the situation occurring across the country. Property prices in Shropshire for example are rising at a rate of 15-35% above the current national average whereas those rural areas close to the north Staffordshire conurbation are rising at just below the national average. In the rural areas of Malvern Hills district the average house sale in 2001 was close to £165,000 and house prices in the area increased by 25% in 2002.

The attractiveness of the rural parts of the region have lead over the past few years to an increase in holiday/second homes particularly in parts of Shropshire and the Peak District in North Staffordshire. In the Peak District village of Alstonefield, holiday homes account for nearly 50% of the village housing stock.

These high property prices are resulting in young emerging households needing to move to urban areas where there is a greater choice of lower cost housing.

Existing employment in rural areas is still predominantly of a traditional nature i.e. agriculture, tourism etc. Incomes in these sectors are generally towards the lower levels and do not provide sufficient buying power for local people to compete with people moving in to the area, who are often in higher income brackets. In Warwickshire there are a significant number of households within rural wards that have

less household income than the average for the county of £24,700. In some areas over 20% of the population have a household income of less than £10,000 per annum. Recent indicators of affordability show that, when comparing average dwelling prices to mean income, South Shropshire, Malvern Hills and Herefordshire have the highest indicators at 7, 6.6 and 6.3 respectively.

Land Prices

The availability of land is often seen as one of the main issues around affordable housing, whether this is in the urban or rural areas. The National House Builders Federation (representing private house builders) have argued and lobbied for many years that the relaxation and speeding up of the planning system, allowing more house building to take place, will have the effect of reducing the price of houses. Their argument is based upon the principles of supply and demand.

It is true to say that in an overheated marketplace, land values increase significantly. At the height of the housing boom of the 1980's land values were known to increase on average by £10,000 to £20,000 per acre, per month. At the peak, in the West Midlands, land sales are known to have reached £1 million per acre in Stafford and is exceeding this in other parts of the region. It is not unusual for a building plot for one dwelling in Worcestershire to now realise £150,000 and even rural 'exception' sites on the edge of villages are now being valued at up to £20,000 per plot. This is making it increasingly difficult to deliver affordable housing schemes, especially where the preferred option is shared ownership (part buy/part rent)

It is common for the house builders, in their efforts to ensure a continued supply of land, to take out options to purchase land at a future date (subject to planning approval being granted). Traditionally the eventual purchase is made on the basis of a percentage of market value e.g. 75 % etc. In high demand situations it is not uncommon for some house builders to agree to purchase land at in excess of 100% of market value!

Land Availability

The availability of land is governed by many different factors, the most important being the planning system. However, other factors can affect land supply such as the willingness of landowners to sell and the willingness of local people to allow new development to take place.



The availability of land, or lack of it, is in many cases the major stumbling block to the provision of new affordable housing. There are many examples across the region and the country, where a community has produced a needs survey demonstrating a local need and a housing association has acquired the funding for it, only for the scheme to be held up or even abandoned because the land owner has had a change of heart or the planning application is turned down because of local opposition.

Lack of Rented Accommodation

A traditional source of good quality affordable housing, particularly in the rural areas, was that provided by local authorities in the form of rented accommodation. The government in the 1980's in its desire to provide the opportunity to a greater section of the population, expanded home ownership and provided existing local authority tenants with the opportunity to purchase their own home. This "right to buy" legislation proved a great success and was particularly popular in the rural areas where a greater proportion of rented property disappeared from the rented stock.

NIMBYism

The 'not in my back yard' frame of mind, commonly known as NIMBYism, has become an increasing factor in the development or non-development of housing schemes in rural areas. Whilst a great deal of support for local need housing can be generated within a community, the continuing change in the social make up of rural communities does mean that it is not guaranteed that all the community will see the benefits of providing housing for local people.

As the more affluent move into villages, they can bring with them a whole range of new skills including the ability to organise and campaign effectively against new development, even small schemes for local benefit.

In some cases parish councils can even be inactive in the area of promoting the benefits of local needs housing, possibly reflecting the sometimes difficult position they can find themselves in when faced with a vocal minority view.

Housing Need

People in housing need who wish to be considered for an affordable home do so by registering on the Housing Waiting list. This is usually administered by either the District Council or, where the housing stock has been transferred, by either the District Council or the Registered Social Landlord who has taken over the stock. Most lettings are allocated on the number of points each applicant has been given, based on their present housing circumstances, medical condition etc. As the social housing stock diminishes, any vacant properties are usually let to the applicant with the highest number of points on the list, irrespective of whether they are local to the area. Although most authorities do operate a local lettings policy, very few local people are being allocated properties in the village they grew up in. This practice is not viewed as satisfactory by local communities, especially Parish Councils, and makes them highly suspicious of carrying out their own parish housing needs surveys to identify local need.

Housing authorities are now moving towards choice based lettings schemes which are presently being piloted, these may improve the situation.

Local authorities are also required to carry out periodical housing need assessments across their area and have robust up to date information as a result, to support the local planning policies. In order for this, and other housing policies, to be effective they must be consistent across the region. This is clearly not the case, with inconsistencies in the definition of affordable housing and local need, in the enabling role carried out by individual authorities and in the accuracy and robustness of the housing needs assessments being carried out.



Planning

Planning effects the amount, type and location of any new housing development. Within the region, the planning route starts with Regional Planning Guidance, which sets out broad policies and strategies for all the West Midlands, including the rural and metropolitan areas.

It is the responsibility of the county council, metropolitan or unitary planning authorities to develop local planning policies to cater for the housing issues, including the distribution etc of any new housing allocations. In the shire counties surrounding the West Midlands conurbation it falls, in the main, to the county councils to provide overall policies for housing provision and distribution. In many, there are general policies to enable the provision of affordable housing in rural areas; with the onus falling to the district authority to implement these within their district wide local plans.

These district wide local plans not only set out policy in detail, but also define areas of new development. In the rural context, many district wide local plans, define development boundaries around villages beyond which no new development will take place. These are commonly known as village envelopes.

One of the most important documents, in planning terms, which deals with affordable housing, is the government Planning Policy Guidance note (PPG3). This guidance sets out ways in which local planning authorities can enable affordable housing schemes to be built. In terms of rural provision, planning authorities are allowed to grant planning consent for local needs housing on land that falls outside the village envelope, in what is termed "exceptional circumstances." Such schemes are allowed if a local need can be demonstrated and legal agreements (section 106) entered into to ensure that the houses built are available for local people in need in perpetuity.

Local authorities are also able to use PPG3 to enable them to require a builder to include an element of affordable housing as part of a larger development of market housing. Although PPG3 recommends that this will apply in rural villages with populations of under 3000 to developments of 15 or more, many recent district council plans have reduced this figure through supplementary planning guidance. In Malvern Hills the proposal is to provide one affordable home for every property built in the rural area. If the site is below 5 dwellings a financial contribution towards affordable housing has to be made by the developer. For sites of 5 or more, 50% of the dwellings have to be affordable.

The success of the above policies and any proposed revisions, has been mixed and to a large extent depends upon the commitment of the local planning authority. In some cases, this commitment exists within the policy section of a local authority, but this does not transfer across to those implementing the policy. This is particularly prevalent between the housing and planning departments.

Green Belt

The West Midlands, like many regions across the country, has the benefit of Green Belt designation around the large metropolitan conurbation. This restricts the growth of the urban area and protects the surrounding countryside. Within the green belt, very restrictive planning policies are applied which protect the area from over development. The green belt policies, in general, will also restrict the use of PPG3 guidance to enable rural housing to be achieved.

This very restrictive planning policy can have the effect of "freezing a village in time," preventing it from catering for any local affordable housing need.

Small Development Viability

It is commonplace in rural areas for affordable housing schemes to be small in number, for a variety of reasons; local survey shows a limited demand, land may not be large enough, local resistance to large schemes.

There are problems associated with providing a small number of homes scattered across a large rural area particularly from a management perspective. This can deter some providers becoming involved. Most local authorities are reluctant to provide affordable housing, even if a need exists, in communities which they consider not to be sustainable.

General

The lack of affordable homes in rural areas has a considerable knock-on effect for rural communities, which may manifest itself in many different ways.

The population profile of rural settlements changes due to the exodus of young people to the towns and the in migration of both the elderly and the affluent to replace them.

It can affect the sustainability of villages undermining the viability of local services such as the local shop, schools, transport etc.

The visual appearance of villages can change with traditional small housing acquired and enlarged, putting them beyond the reach of local people when resold.

Examples of good practice

There are many different ways in which the rural housing issue has been tackled in the past, with some innovative examples of good practice

RURAL HOUSING ENABLERS

Rural Housing Enablers are individuals who work closely with rural communities, housing associations, local authorities and landowners to identify and meet the housing needs of local communities. They are line managed within Rural Community Councils and funding is provided for the first three years of the post by the Countryside Agency (50%) and the Housing Corporation (33%). The remainder of the funding needs to be provided by local partners such as local authorities and housing associations.

The Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler has been in post for two years. He is presently working with over 50 Parish Councils in the rural areas of the county in all 5 rural district council areas and has carried out over 30 parish housing need surveys. As a result housing schemes are either complete or

have planning approval for over 80 properties in 8 different villages with other schemes in the pipeline.

The Rural Housing Enabler also has a major role in influencing both housing and planning strategies at district, county, regional and national level.

WORCESTERSHIRE YOUTH HOMELESS STRATEGY

The Rural Youth Worcestershire team has a housing section, which aims to increase the availability of existing housing provision to young people seeking to make futures within rural Worcestershire. The Youth Team, working in partnership with the Rural Housing Enabler, is exploring ways of providing affordable housing for young people on very low wages in their local situation using innovative building techniques. They are also working with both the Rural Housing Enabler and Centrepoint, the homeless charity, in the identification of young people in rural areas who are, or have the potential to become homeless.

COMMUNITY COUNCIL OF STAFFORDSHIRE LAND BANK

The Community Council of Staffordshire has created a land bank scheme using resources



provided by The Countryside Agency and local authorities. The Land Bank works with local landowners and communities, with the aim of securing options to purchase suitable parcels of land, which can be used by local communities to develop affordable housing schemes. The focus has been upon those parcels of land that could be used for exception policy sites; however, the scheme has also worked successfully on larger sites where the local planning authority was seeking a proportion of affordable homes.

SHROPSHIRE HOUSING OFFICERS GROUP

The Shropshire Housing Officers Group was established to address issues related to supported housing by developing closer working relationships between housing authorities in the county. Crucially the group has developed and become more effective by extending involvement in the group to social services, health and provider representatives in order to ensure that the problems inherent in the provision of supported housing in rural areas are more effectively addressed.



REGIONAL AND SUB-REGIONAL NETWORKS

The regional housing governance structure in the West Midlands is both fragmented and complex in nature. There are a number of networks that exist that are involved to varying degrees in the development of rural housing policy.

There is a certain amount of ambiguity in terms of the networks that exist, their roles and their relationships with each other. However the key agencies/networks in the region would be;

- The Regional Housing Partnership
- The Sub-regional Housing Partnerships
- The Regional Planning Guidance Implementation Group
- The Regeneration Zone
- The West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network
- The Regional Housing Networks

THE REGIONAL HOUSING PARTNERSHIP

This is a multi-agency grouping, which includes local authorities. The National Housing Federation, the West Midlands Voluntary and Community Sector Housing Network, the House Builders Federation, Advantage West

Midlands, Government Office West Midlands, The Housing Corporation, and representatives from the private sector. It is one of the Regional Assembly Forums and leads on the development of the Regional Housing Strategy.

SUB-REGIONAL HOUSING PARTNERSHIPS

There are currently four sub-regional partnerships in; West Mercia, Staffordshire, Solihull/Coventry/Warwickshire and Birmingham/Black Country.

These four groups lead on the development of sub-regional housing frameworks, which in turn, will feed into the development of a housing strategy for the region. Whilst in their early stages of development, these will play an important role in shaping strategy for the future.

REGIONAL PLANNING GUIDANCE IMPLEMENTATION

The Regional Planning Body identified two key priorities; housing and transport. The responsibility for acting as the Regional Planning Body is shifting from the Local Government Association to the Regional Assembly. The structures to inform the process have not yet been finalised; however, it may be that the Regional Housing Partnership may play an important role in the future.

THE REGENERATION ZONE

The Rural Regeneration Zone has been identified by Advantage West Midlands. This will be the main geographical focus for rural regeneration in the West Midlands Region. The zone covers parts of rural Herefordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire. Whilst the main thrust of the proposal, contained within the zone, is economic there is an encouragement for affordable homes in the market towns and the villages.

THE WEST MIDLANDS VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR HOUSING NETWORK

This is a network for voluntary and community sector organisations with an interest in housing. It aims to influence the development of regional strategies, policies and initiatives. There have been difficulties in the network engaging with the rural voluntary and community sector to date, although steps are being taken to improve this. This network has an important role to play in representing the views of the voluntary sector and has a membership of over 80 voluntary organisations.

WEST MIDLANDS HOUSING NETWORK-RURAL SUB GROUP

The Rural Housing Sub Group contributes to the work of the West Midlands Regional Chamber through the Regional Housing Network. The membership comprises The Countryside Agency, CPRE, Housing Corporation, National Housing Federation, local authorities, registered social landlords and other private and voluntary sector groups including representatives from the Rural Community Councils.

PARISH PLANS

GENERAL

Recent research undertaken by the Centre For Urban and Regional Studies for The Countryside Agency on rural housing issues in the West Midlands discovered that the fragmented and complicated pattern of networks created problems for engagement. Many networks are inadequately resourced and this lack of resources was a significant theme throughout the interview process of the research.

THE WAY FORWARD

It is now recognised that the government proposes to strengthen regional policy as set out in the document 'Your region, your choice'. The recent government publication 'Sustainable communities in the West Midlands, building for the future' sets out an action plan which the government wishes to carry forward. In it the government identifies 4 key issues around urban and rural renaissance, diversifying and modernising the region's economy and modernising the transport infrastructure.

They recognise that there is a need to arrest the shift of population from the conurbation to the rest of the region, a need to tackle the problem of low demand in some areas, that there is evidence of increasing homelessness in rural areas and, more significantly, that there is a shortage of affordable housing in the rural areas where house prices are higher relative to income.

Their plan for action includes:

- A new regional approach by the setting up of the recently appointed West Midlands Housing Board to deliver their policies.
- To ensure that the new Regional Housing Strategy is consistent with, and supportive of other regional strategies for land use, transport and economic development. That this strategy represents the views of all key stakeholders, including the voluntary sector.
- That there will be a Single Regional Housing Pot fund to tackle affordable housing needs as identified by the Housing Board. Key factors will be the long term sustainability of communities with respect to transport, reasonable access to centres of employment and retail activity as well as wider social facilities such as education and medical centres.
- That the Housing Corporation has a target to deliver 1,600 affordable homes in rural settlements

throughout England in 2003/4, increasing to 3,500 over the 2 years 2004/5 and 2005/6.

The draft regional housing strategy recognises these key issues and identifies the need for more affordable housing in rural areas of high demand as one of the priorities of the region. It also recognises that the voluntary and community sector have a critical role to play in challenging and complementing the activities of others to ensure that the strategies adopted and housing provided is appropriate.

The Housing Corporation also recognises affordable housing in rural areas as a key issue. Within its Rural Action Plan for the region it recognises that it needs to be involved with local communities to ensure long term sustainability and the delivery of rural projects. It needs to commission a development programme across rural areas, to work closely with the Countryside Agency and that it needs to encourage the use of Rural Housing Enablers across the shire counties of the region.

In its Regional Investment Strategy for 2003/4, the Housing Corporation recognises the difficulty in achieving schemes to meet the needs of rural communities. It is keen to work with both the local voluntary sector and statutory organisations to achieve the most effective targeting of resources. It again recognises the need to have Rural Housing Enablers in place to produce a rural programme which meets needs across the rural areas of the region and to have funding available through the forward allocations pool to enable schemes to be worked up.

At a sub regional level it again recognises the need for Rural Housing Enablers to be in place in Warwickshire, Staffordshire and in all the shire counties in the West Mercia sub region.

The West Midlands Housing Network-Rural Sub Group recently held a rural housing conference to present the findings of the research into the rural housing markets in the West Midlands and the issues surrounding it, carried out by the research unit of the University of Birmingham. The conference was organised jointly by the Countryside Agency and the Housing Corporation

In terms of planning, the important role which the Countryside Agency's Parish Plan programme can make, not only to the identification of local housing need but the new planning process, should be recognised and supported.

Many of the issues already identified in this paper were recognised and a rural action plan proposed to tackle these issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is an urgent need for the employment of additional Rural Housing Enablers in all the shire counties in the West Midlands Region following on from the success in Worcestershire.
2. The Rural Community Councils need to play a far more prominent role within the regional housing agenda and should be clarifying what role it has to play within the many networks and partnerships set up across the region but, most significantly, how it engages with the new Regional Housing Board. They should seek resources to enable them to engage.
3. The Rural Community Councils recognise affordable housing is now a key issue in the sustainability of rural communities and that

every effort is made to promote this in any development work carried out with such communities.

4. The Rural Community Councils consider how the voluntary organisations working in rural communities can become more actively involved and engaged with the development of housing policies and strategies, both at district, county and regional level, including the West Midlands Regional Housing Strategy.

Presently the 'rural voice' is not being heard and this needs to be urgently addressed. There is a need to consider how the RCCs assist the Countryside Agency in the rural proofing of policies and strategies.



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