

Making Rural Settlements Work – Planning and Affordable Housing Discussion Summary

What are the key ingredients of a sustainable rural community?

- 3 pillars: environment, economy and community. This balance isn't always right in the planning system which can favour the environment to the detriment of the local economy.
- You need to take a place based approach and recognise that 'sustainability' will vary among communities.
- Role of Local Enterprise Partnerships and businesses in rural areas.
- Settlement hierarchies used by planners deem some settlements unsustainable (e.g. fewer than 3,000 people).
- The Church of England has as many churches as post offices – the church is looking for shared uses for its buildings and there's potential to think about creative uses (e.g. housing, community space, worship, office/workspace). Many church buildings are listed so are not easy to convert but the potential is there.
- Applying planning to place making to work out how settlements can work best.
- There's sometimes too much focus on appearance/design and not enough focus on functionality/management. Places need to work well, feel right and look good in that order. Planners have to start thinking about connectedness and where people want to live and less on aesthetics.
- How can National Park Authorities set an example – developing employment in picturesque settings?
- Manufacturing, retail and services really struggle in rural areas because of national planning policy.
- Businesses, residents and visitors need broadband and mobile phone connectivity in rural places.
- How can small and micro-businesses get involved in the planning system? Through representative bodies such as the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and Country Land and Business Association (CLA)?
- There needs to be balanced demography within rural settlements – not rural settlements for old, rich people.
- How do we deliver rural affordable housing?
- The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust <http://www.hscht.co.uk/>
- How can we make housing available to local people?
- How can we bring forward the rental sector when all the focus is on buying and home ownership?
- Rentals at affordable rent are still out of many people's reach.
- The way planning works needs to be symbiotic so things develop and work together. However developer pressure is leading to dormitory settlements and a parasitic system.

Are neighbourhood plans a positive force or a NIMBY charter when it comes to involving local communities in the strategic planning process?

- Neighbourhood Plans are a huge amount of work.
- Communities with middle class, articulate backgrounds can do a Neighbourhood Plan but in a lot of rural communities there are a small number of people trying to keep lots of things going.
- Are Neighbourhood Plans a way for Town and Parish Councils to take on the planning system?
- They are a curate's egg – good in some parts and less good in others.

- Neighbourhood Plans are written by determined people in villages that don't want housing.
- The time it takes to work on a Neighbourhood Plan can dishearten communities.
- You need a Local Plan and a 5-year land supply in place to prevent a free-for-all by developers.
- It's chicken and egg with the Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan.
- Developers are trying to swamp rural areas – the National Planning Policy Framework is there to address a regional issue in the South East of England and not the rest of the country.
- People need support as to whether to engage in Neighbourhood Planning – they need to know if it's appropriate and worth doing and then have a document that they can use.
- Communities are not trained professional planners.
- There are some 1,700 Neighbourhood Plans underway involving some 8 million people. 80-90% are in rural areas.
- There is political and financial commitment from Government to Neighbourhood Planning.
- You can use Neighbourhood Planning to direct housing (e.g. to retain young people) – use your Plan to get the housing mix right and phase/incremental growth to make the settlement more sustainable (e.g. there's a shortage of 1 and 2 bedroom properties in many rural areas).
- What if you haven't got a Neighbourhood Plan? Not every community has to have one and it may not be appropriate. Very small rural villages could group or cluster together to produce a Plan.
- Why are you doing a Neighbourhood Plan? To stop a planning application isn't the right process as the application's already in.
- A Neighbourhood Plan can help you to think more holistically about where you live and address any issues.
- Allocating land use makes Neighbourhood Plans weightier documents in the longer term.
- There's a relationship between periurban and suburban in where Neighbourhood Plans are developing (i.e., around urban centres).

If the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act led to the nationalisation of the countryside; unlike coal mines, railways and telephones, why hasn't the process it ushered in been returned to the free market?

- Is planning now really planning or is it reactionary to prevent large housing developments?
- There isn't as much bureaucracy and policy for planning now.
- National planning is needed to protect the green belt and the beauty and amenity of rural areas – there need to be some planning rules and constraints.
- The needs of the comfortable and the well-off are put above those in housing need.
- The look of a place has become more important to planning than what it's like to live there.
- Planners should live in the houses they've planned.
- What happens without a 5-year land supply?
- Planning is policy based rather than site/place based.

Points raised during the morning session:

Housing Needs Surveys

- Many are out of date.
- Rural Housing Enablers used to be employed by Local Authorities to bring forward exception sites.
- Encouraging groups to do a survey at a local level doesn't take into account strategic/secondary data.
- Surveys can be used in developing Neighbourhood Plans.
- The survey can be aspirational "would you like to be able to buy a home in the next 3 years?" and is unrelated to how many people will realistically actually be able to buy a home in 3 years.
- The survey is important for getting people to think about what their local housing need it and making sure housing is a viable option.
- In practice, you could find when the housing is built you have more people wanting the housing than is available. Once built there is always demand. Many surveys are actually underestimating the number of dwellings needed.
- Not raising aspirations or expectations – matching needs to the right form of tenure.
- The survey omits the actual cost of the housing; the survey needs to ask if they could afford the property in 3-years.

Church land and property

- The Diocesan board of finance managing the budget versus meeting community needs.
- Moratorium for communities to raise money to buy buildings or land.
- Building starter homes on church land won't conform to the settlement hierarchy used by planners or the Local Plan.
- You're turning unused church land/buildings into a receipt and asset.

Social housing as an asset to rural communities versus obsession with home ownership.

Where people want to live and work – taking a whole landscape approach to planning and a longer term view.

Points raised during the afternoon session:

Transport

- Home to school transport – getting older children into secondary schools and colleges.
- Reduction in subsidies and lack of funding for rural bus routes. And lack of rural bus routes from private operators which want critical mass to run services.
- Planning focuses on 'public transport' not 'cars'.
- We need to provide social transport for people who need it.
- Planning needs to attend to transport and rural communities are becoming more car based.
- Should you have a right to an affordable car as well as an affordable housing and workspace in rural areas?
- How realistic is it to convert people going out of rural areas for work (higher paid professional jobs) and those coming in (unskilled and lower paid) – can we reverse this trend?
- The most sustainable form of transport is not having to commute.
- What about community use of the car rather than individual car users?
- We need to make electric vehicles more affordable and accessible.
- It's difficult to park in market towns and you have to drive as there isn't a bus.
- Rural affordable properties are difficult to let without public transport getting them to work and service centre.
- Buses are expensive and too infrequent.
- We need to make public transport better, not reduce provision.

Other points raised include:

- Lack of joined up thinking around planning, housing and economic development – identified by the OECD Review of Rural Policy in England <http://www.oecd.org/gov/regional-policy/oecd-rural-policy-reviews-england-united-kingdom.htm>
- Rural settlements are losing pub, shop, post office, GP surgery, school etc. and this impacts on housing and economic development.
- Development of workspace at Welbeck <http://www.welbeck.co.uk/work-live/work/welbeck-project>
- How to regenerate ex MOD bases to create communities.
- We need to think about how settlements relate to each other not just at an individual level.
- The title 'the rural economy' refers to yaws, cows and cream teas and does not reflect reality. It should be titled 'the economy in the rural area'.
- There needs to be connectivity to help rural businesses group – and generate local employment.
- There is a tendency to focus interventions on market towns and service centres rather than small rural settlements.
- Planning policy should not be seen as an entity in itself but as a means of achieving a purposeful outcome (i.e., not used as a means for people to say no).
- Is there a lack of commercial thinking by public sector planners?