

There is a woeful lack of affordable homes in rural areas. Greater leadership from local authorities to encourage more locally-initiated sustainable development may offer a first step towards more affordable homes.

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*Faced with a growing population, one of the most important questions facing policy makers in the UK is: Where will people live? With some waiting decades for affordable homes in some towns, this question is as important to rural areas as it is to cities. **James Derounian** reflects on the difficulties facing local communities in providing more affordable rural housing and suggests that greater leadership and involvement of town and parish councils with housing associations and local and regional builders, may offer some light in an otherwise dark situation.*



At a recent housing conference arranged by the *Rural Services Network* (RSN, University of Gloucestershire, January 10th), long time rural housing specialist Jo Lavis referred to the “darkness before the dawn” in her description of the outlook for more affordable homes in the English countryside. Given the gloom surrounding changes to the planning system, the economic downturn generating fewer country properties, and a significant reduction in public grants, the prospects for building affordable rural homes look clouded in uncertainty. But Lavis also asked “why curse the dark, when you can light a candle?” In other words, yes, things are grim, but let’s try to use the various levers to generate at least some affordable homes. The Localism Act and draft National Planning Policy Framework, for example, could allow limited open market housing on rural exception sites (land on which exceptional planning permission is currently granted solely to build affordable homes).

The list of woeful reports on the current lack of affordable homes in the English countryside is legion. During 2006, Elinor Goodman fronted an Affordable Rural Housing Commission [report](#) that concluded “a minimum of 11,000 affordable homes should be provided per year in settlements of less than 10,000.” Then followed Matthew Taylor MP’s [report](#) to the PM which reinforced the point that the “destructive combination of high cost homes and low rural wages is putting rural housing out of the reach of many who work in the countryside.” The National Housing Federation Home Truths [report](#) also painted a stark picture, whereby “people applying for an affordable home in the ten rural districts with the longest waiting lists would face a wait on average of up to 90 years before enough new homes were built to clear the backlog”. The report went on to note that in “rural area homes cost 10.7 times local income on average.” So, the backdrop is dark indeed.

But as Lavis commented at the RSN conference “there are foundations on which to build”, pointing to five ingredients to lift the pall and let in the sunshine of recovery and hope:

- **First**, we mustn’t repeat the mistakes of the past by returning to the bad old days of *Key Settlement Planning*, whereby all development happens in local service centres, whilst villages wither. The function and relationship of rural settlements is more complex. Some operate as hubs, others in clusters, but both forms can deliver sustainable development. The way forward is for development to be tailored and sensitive to local circumstances in terms of scale, type and tenure.
- **Second**, forget the ‘big boys’ who are not interested in small sites, but look to regional and local builders – who bring added sustainability benefits, such as keeping money local, reducing travel to

site and providing jobs within the immediate locality.

- **Third**, viability is key. There are places where cross-subsidy will work, and there are others where grant aid still means the difference between new affordable homes... or none. Lavis urged local authorities to adopt 'strategic opportunism' and recast their relationships with housing associations and communities so that all opportunities can be grasped.

- **Fourth**, Lavis called for greater leadership from councillors in terms of informed and constructive involvement in decision making.

- **Finally**, Lavis pleaded with decision makers to ensure that "rural affordable housing doesn't fall off the political radar". The role of Rural Housing Enablers was also emphasised, where staff are employed to bridge across communities, housing associations, planners and others to get affordable homes built. In particular, Tracey Bessant and I highlighted *Faith in Affordable Housing* – the use of church land and assets to develop affordable homes. Tracey acts as a specialist enabler, helping congregations, communities, churches and others to convert church buildings, schools, Glebe land and community venues to affordable homes. The diocese of Salisbury has been particularly imaginative and effective in delivering low cost properties.

In this wide-ranging debate, there are a host of other possibilities to consider: Parish Councils precepting (taxing) to fund affordable homes chimed with Lavis's belief that there is now greater weight given to what communities can do for themselves, particularly via the Community Rights (to build, bid, buy challenge etc) enshrined in the 2011 Localism Act. Lavis also looked to local councils to step up to the mark: "Success comes from effective leadership – agreeing an objective and then making it happen." Others pointed to the fact that Not in My Back Yard NIMBY attitudes need to give way to IMBYism: In My Back Yard approaches that positively welcome and benefit from provision of appropriate levels of affordable units (e.g. through the *Community Infrastructure Levy*).

There was also a plea that housing and economic development must move in tandem – so that people have jobs plus a roof over their head. Similarly, landed estates and farmers could be persuaded to part with land for affordable homes, in exchange for a tax break.

But the storm clouds have not yet fully passed. Principal authorities 'sweating their assets' and getting the maximum return when they flog land or property does not square with communities being encouraged to take ownership of such assets. Is this delegation or off-loading? Furthermore, the impact of a 'silver tsunami' should be considered; older, affluent incomers continuing to force out the have-nots. A town councillor hinted at perhaps upwards of 40 per cent of properties in Dartmouth (Devon) being holiday or second homes!

Ultimately, I'm with Lavis: "why curse the dark, when you can light a candle?" If affordable homes in the countryside are to be built, then we have to combine forces and take action to make this happen.

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James Derounian is a practitioner-turned-academic. During the 1980s James was a rural community worker in Devon, and he also worked in Northumberland on a Rural Development Programme. James maintains strong work connections with agencies involved in community development and is a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute (MRTPI). He serves on the RTPI Rural Panel and undertakes action research for agencies such as the Carnegie UK Trust and Housing Corporation. He is an external examiner at the National University of Ireland and at the University of Bradford.

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