

Wednesday 25 April 2012

NFU Offices, Newmarket CB8 7SN

East of England Rural Forum

“Housing in Rural Areas”

Minutes

Attendees

Becky Ashley	Claire Astbury	John Buchanan
Steve Clarke	Keith Davis	Marie Francis
Jim Gledhill	John Goodwin	Moirra Groborz
Suzanne Harris	Pat Holtom	Samantha Jones
Jasmine Joolia	Mags Lambert	David Matthews
Julie Nelson	Mick Page	

Apologies

Laura Beardsell-Moore	Frances Bedding	Kate Belinis
John Carrick	Rachel Carrington	Philip Cowen
Gareth Dalglish	Philip Eden	Rosemary Farmer
Alex Francis	Brian Hayes	Philip Hayes
Greg Luton	Jo Middleton	Stuart Pile
Chris Tombs		

Speakers

Becky Ashley, Homes and Communities Agency
Claire Astbury, National Housing Federation
Steve Clarke, Community Land Trusts

1. Welcome – Pat Holtom

Pat welcomed everyone to the meeting. She explained that with all the regional governmental changes and regional identity is no longer recognised or supported, the Forum's secretariat, Rural Action East was winding up at the end of August. Pat thanked Mags and Jasmine for their work with the Forum and asked that if any of the members knew of any suitable vacancies to send details of them to Mags and Jazz. The Rural Community Council for Essex would be taking over the secretariat function.

Pat explained that the new Food, Farming and Rural Network East (FFRNE) was developing and the next Forum meeting in September was likely to be a joint event with the Food and Agriculture Board who formed the FFRNE with the Forum.

As part of the new network's focus, we wanted to take key issues for rural communities directly to Defra and Pat asked the members to think throughout the course of the meeting what the main issue was for rural housing and how we can move it forward.

The minutes of the meeting held in January (joint meeting with Essex Rural Partnership) were agreed with no changes.

2. Homes and Communities Agency – Rural Champion Project and Regional Update

Becky Ashley, Rural Champion of the Homes and Communities Agency acts as the communicator between communities and the Agency. She explained the focus on the investment programme on housing covered 4 main areas – affordable housing, renewal of existing social housing stock, land and regeneration and the economic assets programme.

There was a total grant of £4.5 billion over four years and 80,000 new homes will hopefully be developed from that. £70 million was allocated for empty properties and bringing them back into productive use. There is also money allocated to make decent homes (ie weather tight, warm homes with reasonably modern facilities) as these are essential part of creating sustainable communities.

So far as investing in rural areas goes, 9.7% of the programme went to rural areas (London is now part of the national figures). There are opportunities for delivery in rural areas such as community led funding, Empty Homes (although last round just completed) and the Get Britain Building programme which is designed to assist home builders experiencing difficulties to get construction re-started. On the HCA website you can see what land the HCA holds and disposals can be accessed by smaller groups now.

The Localism Act focusses on community involvement and power. There is a community engagement toolkit available on the HCA website to provide advice and support. HCA has also simplified the processes and procedures for community led projects and to aid access to Affordable Homes Programme funding. This allows the HCA to determine early in the process whether a community group is eligible or not to save time wasting.

The Rural Housing Advisory Group, with Professor Peter Roberts as the new Chair, has been established by HCA and advises the government on making improvements to the delivery of affordable rural housing. A new workplan is being put into place and the membership is being broadened.

There is a website to with a learning tool to help understand opportunities and issues in rural housing and to point you in the right direction: www.learnathca.co.uk.

The HCA is under the DCLG and reports to them and also has dialogues with Defra.

3. National Housing Federation – Home Truths, How Housing Need will be Met in the Future

Claire Astbury, Lead Manager for National Housing Federation (NHF) for East of England took to the floor. Claire explained that the NHF represented Not for Profit Housing Associations. She handed out the Home Truths 2011 brochure which contains various interesting statistics on housing markets throughout England.

The average house price in England is £240,000 whilst the average salary is £22,000. If you wanted a 75% mortgage you would need to have a deposit of £60,000 and an income of £51,000 which is not accessible to the majority of people. Aspirations to become a home owner have therefore changed and have dropped to 71% of people hoping to become an owner/occupier and that figure is likely to drop to 64% in the next year.

The Save our Village campaign proved that when you lose young people and families from rural areas, you lose services in those areas too.

Welfare Reform is taking place that will have a huge impact on communities as local housing allowance will be capped. If, for example, you are under 35 the way your benefit is calculated will only accommodate shared housing rather than a 1 bed house/flat. This will affect single under 35's already in accommodation and leave them open to under occupancy charges

meaning higher rent or the need to move to a smaller/shared accommodation. For some people their personal situation may not allow such a move (shared custody of children etc.) and it will be especially difficult as the type of housing in rural areas may not suit such steps.

These under occupancy rules will come in from April 2013 and mean that if you have a spare bedroom you will lose 14% of your benefit and 2 spare rooms will mean a reduction of 25%. If you have two same sex children under 16, or two under 10's of any sex they only qualify as 1 bedroom. Localism and planning should mean that communities are given opportunities to develop what they need. For information, there are case studies on the website www.insidehousing.co.uk.

We watched a short video that highlighted the problems that one lady faced in her community. The link for this is <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMetaOPh8ME>

4. Community Land Trusts – Foundation East activity across the East of England – opportunities for Communities

Steve Clarke, Director of Foundation East said that the Community Land Trusts national network had been set up in 2010.

Community Land Trusts (CLT) were established to further social, economic and environmental interests of a local community by managing land and assets for the benefit of local communities. Asset locks could be applied so that they did not drift off into other ownership and all profits must solely benefit the local community. The CLT was controlled by members who must all live or work in the area.

As CLTs operate on a bottom-up approach they are able to respond to what a community really needs. They are run by existing or new organisations and are controlled by members who elect the board which in turn acts as the steward of the assets. Directors normally come from three groups – beneficiaries and future users of the community; non-local but with useful skills; and broader community or public interest stakeholders. There are over 80 CLTs in the UK with 7 regional CLT support umbrellas. Due to the time taken to get to this stage, 225 homes have actually been built with 250 mid process.

Due to technical issues we were unable to see video links for case studies but the website has them at www.clteast.org/resources.

5. Questions and Answers

Julie Nelson asked what the definition of affordable homes was. There is a national rent formula for social rent properties and the HCA website under the Housing tab will give a breakdown. (<http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk/housing>)

David Matthews of NALC commented that district partnerships are vanishing and he asked how they maintain communication with councils. The HCA have people at county level that will go out to villages, etc but there could be improvement in communication. Resourcing was an issue but there are Rural Housing Enablers, for example, who can help communities.

John Buchanan asked how you qualify to get into social housing. Primarily you need to be in one of the priority groups – elderly, vulnerable or family. There is opportunity for single people to part own/part rent property.

Jim Gledhill commented that in his area there were 91 families in need but only a small proportion of those have been met.

Key Issue

Pat asked the attendees what the key issue was that should be raised at the next Defra meeting

of the Food, Farming and Rural Network East (FRNE) on the forum's behalf as mentioned at the start of the meeting. It was felt that there were huge impacts on the rural economy if people cannot work and live in the same area. CLT (and other) support networks are vital as local communities need help. Planning issues need to be addressed, eg considering cross subsidies from market housing to affordable houses (rent/shared ownership). Are there enticements to landowners to allow land for for development for communities?

Keith Davis raised the point that many tenant farmers are living below the minimum standard of living and are being evicted from their homes despite working there for many years.

6. Update on the Defra Rural Food and Farming Networks from Farming Food & Rural Network East (FFRNE)

Marie Francis, the chair of FFRNE, told the meeting about the first meeting which had been held the previous week with Defra. There were twenty different groups in attendance and mostly they were rural focussed as opposed to agriculture based.

Jim Paice said he would like us to be proactive and encouraged two way communications with the networks. He was keen to know what effect policy had "on the ground". Groups overlap in areas (eg East of England and Essex groups) but Defra are going to allow the networks to grow organically.

Marie mentioned that the bureaucracy time was wasteful and this comment was acknowledged. Richard Benyon discussed his desire to see more application of grey water systems/porous drives in new homes. On the topic of insurance for flood risk, the government was the last resort for flood risk but this will stop in the near future. The ministerial visit to the East of England is scheduled for September/October 2012 and Marie will confirm a date as soon as she knows it.

Pat thanked the NFU for the use of the conference room and reminded members that the next meeting will be held on **14 September 2012** and it was likely to be a joint meeting with Food and Agriculture Board. The venue is again at the NFU offices, Newmarket.

Close of Meeting