

East of England Rural Forum's Housing Sub-group
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East of England Rural Forum

EERF Rural housing Sub-group
Minutes of meeting: 2.00pm, 4 June 2008

Flagship Offices, Histon
Cambridge

Present:

Graham Hedger (Chair), Andrew Budden, Martin Aust, Sandy Cruickshank (minutes), John Lefever, Moira Groborz, Darryl Smith, Becky Ashley, Joanne Webb.

Apologies:

Ulrike Maccariello, Tim Isaac, Tim Lucas, Graham Tomlinson, Peter Fletcher, Louise Wilby, John Yates.

1. Introduction

Graham Hedger welcomed members and visitors, in particular Becky Ashley. Becky has taking over from Peter Fletcher as the HC representative following his move to a new post.

2. Minutes from the last meeting (10 March 2008) and matters arising

Matters arising: all to be raised under agenda items.

3. Review of recent activity

3.1. EERF 5 March Conference.

The sub-group approved the conference report and confirmed approval that it be published. Initial publication will be direct to EERF Members, conference attendees and invitation list and other RRAF secretariats. The report will be placed on EERF website.

Action: John Yates will seek opportunities to present the report Ministers and Government Officers.

3.2. EERF/CLA Report

The report has been circulated to:

- housing sub-group and members:
- all who received invitations and attended the EERF Conference
- Regional housing delivery advisory group

- Regional sustainable communities delivery group
- EERA members and appropriate officials
- Appropriate officials at EEDA.
- Housing Corporation at national and regional level.

From John Yates:

- Rural Housing Advisory Forum.
- Chairs of other RRAFs.

Action: Andrew Budden will ensure rural housing is included in the EERF's discussion on social inclusion on 12 December to provide an opportunity to draw together findings of CLA/EERF report, EERF Conference report, Hastoe Report and the Matthew Taylor Review Report.

3.3 Rural housing Enablers Up-date

Graham thanked Martin and John for drafting the proposal for discussion with the RCC network. The proposal has been sent to David Wood of RAE and a formal response is awaited. However, informally the sub-group's interest and support for RHEs is welcomed.

The Sub-group now waits to be asked to assist in enabling RCCs to adopt the proposed funding model.

John and Martin, on behalf of RSLs, have offered their time to discuss with RCCs the practicalities of implementation.

Moira Groborz updated current coverage of RHEs:

Bedfordshire: hoping to continue current coverage by negotiating higher contributions from LAs and RSLs.

Cambridgeshire: nobody in post but post is being advertised.

Essex: Moira's post is now secure for at least a year.

Hertfordshire: Understood to have avoided RHE redundancy but only 2 days per week being provided.

Norfolk: Advertising for community development officers, one to be a housing specialist.

Suffolk: One full-time post (Louise) and one part-time.

Action: Graham to maintain contact with David Wood to ensure the proposal is progressed.

3.4. Matthew Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing.

Following Matthew Taylor's visit to the region on 19 March, the Sub-group prepared and submitted an evidence paper, supported by; initial findings from the conference; the EERF proposal for a RHE funding model and the EERF/CLA report. On behalf of EERA, the EERF's response was endorsed by the Regional Housing Advisory Group to confirm a whole region agreement on the issues raised.

Action: SC to circulate MT Review when published.

4. Sub-group action plan for 2008/09

After a busy period during last year, the Sub-group wished to develop a coordinated approach to taking forward activity in the near and longer term.

Issues to consider:

1. What is the sub-group's reason to exist and therefore what are the terms of reference.

Action: SC to circulate terms of reference prepared in 2005 for discussion and updating at next meeting (attached).

2. Being the voice for rural affordable housing in the region by:
 - a. sharing best practice;
 - b. identifying evidence gaps and seeking partners to carry out research;
 - c. advocacy, influencing and rural proofing of policy.
3. Opportunity to work with Institute of Housing on a conference focussed on planning issues around market towns and rural issues.
4. What are the messages the group needs of wants to raise? Which are the agencies in the region and nationally that we need to influence? For example:
 - a. support for RHE function
 - b. continued use of exception site policies.
 - c. support for market element to assist funding of exception site development.
 - d. RSLs wish to apply modest rent increases to reflect additional capital cost of building high energy efficient homes.
 - e. Rural fuel poverty issues.
5. Develop a robust evidence base from recent activity e.g. re-visit CLA/EERF report to identify whether there has been progress or whether the same (or different) barriers continue to prevent land coming forward.

Action: ALL to provide SC with comments on all the above points to draw together a discussion paper for next meeting.

5. Housing Corporation Up-date.

The sub-group, Graham Hedger recorded its thanks to Peter Fletcher for his contribution to the group's activities and asked Becky to pass on best wishes for his new post.

Action: Becky Ashley to follow up on email to Peter F asking for details of HC bidding round outcomes.

Action: SC to include analysis of bidding outcomes as an item on next agenda.

6. AOB:

6.1 Round Table update on effects of economic conditions on the house building industry and rural affordable housing in particular.

- Volume home builders offering substantial discounts to RSLs to move units as City focus this financial year is on units sold performance not necessarily bottom line profits. Next year focus will be different and will be very much on bottom line.
- Medium builders having difficulty in obtaining funding and looking to share risk with RSLs.
- Major planning applications are being withdrawn or not submitted as expected. This causes concern for RSS housing delivery targets.
- As volume home builders stop work on site, sub-contractor tender prices are edging downward.
- Agricultural land values continue to boom despite economic situation driven by higher agricultural commodity prices and investment speculator activity. Land for exception sites is struggling to show good value.
- Market collapse is particularly significant in the one bedroom flat developments, especially in inner city locations and includes shared ownership property.
- This is causing capital release issues for builders as all capital tied up in unsold blocks of flats.
- Shared ownership houses continue to show a reasonable market.
- Rise in number of home owners in financial difficulty. Sectors of private rented market.
- RSLs identifying sudden increases in rent arrears. Analysis indicates that the majority are properties with oil heating and occupier has filled tank and been faced with massive increase in cost.
- RSLs continue to be committed to building high energy efficient homes. However, their scope to do this is considerably hampered by inability to raise rents to reflect additional capital cost.

6.2 SC reported a meeting with Richard Lloyd, new regional manager of EST. He is keen to work with RSLs on energy efficiency in domestic property.

Action: SC to forward Hastoe and Flagship contact details to EST.

Action: SC to investigate a briefing from EST at a future meeting.

7. Date of future meetings

2.00pm, 2 September 2008 at Hastoe's Offices, Little Chesterford.

2.00pm, 3 December 2008. Flagship office, Histon

Sandy Cruickshank
Secretary, East of England Rural Forum's Housing Sub-group.
8 August 2008