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## **Village Homes for Village People: An Evaluation of Affordable Housing in Derbyshire Dales**

### **Executive Summary**

The following comments summarise the findings of the *Village Homes for Village People* research. More detailed key findings and conclusions can be found in the full report and appendices which accompany it. All of these can be found on the Derbyshire Dales District Council website.

*Village Homes for Village People* records the results of research carried out by Glen Gidley of Oakdene Consulting into 'Affordable Housing' schemes located in rural settlements within Derbyshire Dales and built between 2003 and 2007. The 13 schemes are sited in 9 parishes, 6 of which are also within the boundaries of the Peak District National Park. The main field work was completed between December 2008 and April 2009.

As part of its ongoing housing strategy programme, Derbyshire Dales District Council engaged Oakdene Consulting to carry out an evaluation study of these schemes to explore some of the following questions:

- Are the objectives for developing affordable housing schemes met?
- What are the benefits of such schemes for residents and neighbours?
- What impact have such schemes had on the local communities?
- Were the processes for creating them adequate and successful?
- By looking at how they have worked, can we learn any lessons to inform and influence housing and planning policies in the future?

The researcher gathered information from a variety of sources to answer these questions and to examine key issues faced by people in housing need living in rural areas. To gain deeper understanding discussions were held with planners, developers and housing managers who have been involved in creating the 13 new schemes covered by this research. Crucially *Village Homes for Village People* records for the first time

- The housing experiences of the *residents* of the new schemes,
- The views of *neighbours* who live near each of the schemes, and
- The ideas of *Parish Councils* in the 9 Parishes with new schemes.

### **Brief Summary of Key Points**

## **Objectives**

The primary objective of all parties in developing these schemes has been to create 'affordable local housing for local people' that is of good quality and will help to maintain sustainable communities within the rural areas of the Derbyshire Dales. This research suggests that these objectives have been very successfully achieved.

## **Benefits for residents and neighbours**

All of the rural affordable housing schemes in this research appear to have been a ringing success for the majority of local people involved in the process. This is clearly shown by the **YES** response given to the question - '*Overall, do you think the scheme has been a success?*' - 91% of residents, 77% of neighbours and all of the responding Parish Councils.

According to a range of respondents (residents, neighbours, parish councils, housing and planning staff) the overwhelming benefit of the new affordable housing schemes has been to give a much needed home to people in need. The research revealed that many residents who have been housed in the new schemes had wanted a home for a long time. 27% of respondents had been 'actively looking' for a new home for over 5 years and 57% had been seeking one for at least a year.

As these figures show not only had people been looking for a home for long periods of time but also over 50% of residents were doing so as a result of previously living in unsatisfactory or overcrowded conditions. Not only were the new homes beneficial to individuals and families but the research revealed that the majority of respondent stated that their scheme had been beneficial to the wider local community.

## **Impact on the local communities**

Many of the new housing schemes appear to have had a significant impact on their village community. A large number of residents and neighbours made reference to the scheme residents helping to create a more 'balanced population' in their village and thus giving them hope for the future. But more significant to many was the impact they felt the new scheme had had on the village's ability to sustain community facilities and services. Many made reference to the affect the new homes are likely to have on keeping their local shop and school viable. This is born out by the use that residents make of facilities such as the Village Shop (93% visit at least weekly). It is also indicated by the numbers of householders (61%) who are members of village groups and organisation. The scope of this involvement ranges from being Parish Councillors, running children and young peoples organisations to playing darts and bowls for the local pub.

## **Sustainable Communities - Wider Community Integration and Benefit**

When considering whether or not new homes and their residents affect the sustainability of villages it is appropriate to ask how well these homes have integrated into the wider community. To gain views on this issue we asked both neighbours and residents: Do you think the development has integrated into the existing community? 82% of Neighbours responded positively to this question. Residents were even more positive with 91% stating that their scheme had integrated into the existing village.

To gain a wider perspective and further insights on the benefit of the new schemes we asked residents one key test question: Do you think that your housing scheme has benefited the local community? 93% were positive and gave additional comments as to why they felt this. The key issues are summarised and are a testimony to the positive benefits of the new rural housing schemes in this study. Key issues:

- Keeping the village alive
- Brought people who were born and brought up back to the village
- Affordable housing for local people
- Enabled family care and support networks to flourish
- Supported the village and wider local economy
- Encouraged community involvement in village affairs
- Assisted 15% of neighbours family or friends to find new homes

Significantly when we asked residents the ultimate ‘sustainability’ test question 98% said their home and scheme was a ‘*Good Place to Live*’.

### **Processes - Current practice**

Much of the literature suggests that a key ingredient of successful delivery of an adequate supply of ‘affordable’ housing’ in rural areas is the development and implementation by the local authority of a robust housing strategy. ‘Strategy development and enabling’ are key roles in this activity. To evaluate how well these roles are being played by Derbyshire Dales DC reference was made to the strategic approach and enabling provision *Key Line of Enquiry Questions (KLOE)* that are posed to local authorities by the Housing Inspectorate of the Audit Commission. Details of these can be found in the main report.

This research has revealed that since the transfer of its housing ‘stock’ in 2002 Derbyshire Dales DC has invested a great deal of effort in trying to gain deeper understanding of the diverse dynamics of its housing market. Much of this has concentrated on building an excellent data base. We feel that the comprehensive nature of its housing market data base has given Derbyshire Dales DC a full understanding of:

- the diverse housing needs of its residents
- the condition of all its private and social housing
- sufficient contextual housing information to allow it to consider the impact of these factors on the housing market
- the availability and capacity of land and the availability of grant funding to address the areas of housing ‘imbalance’ and need.

This understanding has allowed the council to develop a ‘fit for purpose’ Housing Strategy. The Strategy contains ambitious and challenging aims, objectives, priorities and plans for action across all sectors. Importantly it also states what outcomes will be and how progress and success will be measured and monitored. In particular it sets out three key priorities:

- improving the supply of and access to affordable housing
- creating new supported housing services for vulnerable people

- remedying poor housing conditions.

Trying to provide homes for its local population has been a key task for Derbyshire Dales DC over the past seven years. Their track record indicates that they have adopted a proactive approach and been innovative in their assessment of available resources to meet aims and achieve priorities. Not only has this meant the building of strong and effective relationships with key partners it has also brought significant additional external resources, especially from the East Midlands Regional Housing Board. £1.5 million was allocated in 2002-03, just over £4 million for 2004-06 and £11.2 million for 2006-09. Along with the use of their own funding and land resources this has enabled Derbyshire Dales DC to have an affordable housing development programme of 781 homes for the period up to March 2011. To achieve such a significant rise in external funding to deliver this programme is a tribute to the hard work carried out by the Council and its partners.

We have noted that Derbyshire Dales DC has adopted a range of good practice strategic approaches. In effectively maximising external resources for delivering its plans it has enabled the provision of a good range of high quality affordable housing. Its strategic planning also appears to have given the council knowledge of the type and numbers of affordable homes it wants to continue to develop and has sound policies and procedures in place to enable this to happen. All of this activity has been carried out from a relatively small resource base. Members and officers of Derbyshire Dales DC now need to consider whether or not it has sufficient staffing capacity to continue to meet the high standards it has set itself. In our view increased staffing capacity will need to be found in both 'strategic' and 'enabling' activities. We **recommend** that Derbyshire Dales DC take appropriate steps to fill these capacity gaps. As a starting point we **recommend** that the temporary Rural Housing Enable post be placed on a permanently funded basis.

In its 2006 report the Affordable Rural Housing Commission stated that "*We cannot stress enough how complex and interrelated the machinery of providing affordable housing in rural areas has become*". A thing that has impressed us has been the ability of the personnel involved to fully understand these complexities and to try to make this machinery work for the benefit of residents within the district. Long may this continue.

### **Thoughts on the Way Forward**

As the research shows Derbyshire Dales DC and their partners have built some very successful affordable housing schemes in recent years. We have also noted that the demand in many rural areas for affordable homes is still outstripping the supply provided by new homes. Currently the council and its partners are delivering approximately half of the new homes required to meet current yearly demand. Without a significant increase in funding this is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Major studies have recognised that the solution to the current shortages in affordable housing in rural areas is unlikely to be found in simply building new homes. Our research in Derbyshire Dales has confirmed these national findings. To meet this challenge we believe that the council will need to continue a robust 'new homes' programme, find alternative supply routes and to look at ways of using the

existing housing stock more effectively. Some ideas for consideration are presented here.

## **New Housing Supply**

The capacity to create new affordable housing developments is an issue that needs urgent consideration by Derbyshire Dales DC. As noted high land and material costs are major inhibiting factors in creating affordable housing in the Dales especially within the National Park. This coupled with an impending shortage in the availability of the council's own land will mean that suitable sites maybe in short supply in the future. As a result there is likely to be a greater emphasis on exceptions and windfall sites and a need to find other ways to increase land supply. To help achieve these goals we **recommend** that the council work with its current and potential public, private and voluntary sector partners to encourage the development of new affordable and low cost 'market housing'.

Although most public sector bodies have powers to use their own land and other resources for 'community benefit' Derbyshire Dales DC is currently the only agency putting their land into helping to create affordable housing schemes. To meet the needs of lower paid public sector workers and others and to help create a larger pool of 'affordable housing' land we strongly **recommend** that Derbyshire Dales DC begin dialogue with other public sector bodies e.g. Derbyshire County Council, Derbyshire Police and the National Health Services with a view to gaining further resources and 'buy in' from these services to tackle affordable housing problems across the district in line with the 'Single Conversation' expectations of the HCA.

To help meet the needs of people working in agricultural and tourism related activities it seems appropriate to involve and engage the private sector in helping to create more low cost and rented housing. To aid this we **recommend** that Derbyshire Dales DC seek to create Strategic Partnerships with private landowners. Given the nature of the area we suggest that the council initially aim to work with the Country Landowners Association (CLA) and target three 'Landed estates' - Chatsworth, Haddon Hall and Sudbury - in this endeavour.

To meet shortfalls and to stimulate land supply at the local level we **recommend** that the council work with groups like the Parwich Village Action Group, Parish Councils and RSL partners to investigate the creation of a 'Community Land Trust' (CLT). Such a 'Not for Profit' initiative to cover the district could give people a stake in creating affordable homes in their locality. A CLT might also appeal to local landowners looking to release land and wanting affordable housing to be retained in perpetuity for the local community. The Rural Housing Enabler could enable people to gain the skills and confidence needed to successfully launch and manage this type of community -led initiative.

Putting the RHE post on a permanent basis would help to give life to this recommendation.

Another potential source of land and property that we **recommend** should be explored by Derbyshire Dales DC is that owned by faith bodies. We suggest that the council start this exploration by looking at examples of using church land and converting

redundant Churches and other buildings outlined by the *Faith in Affordable Housing* initiative.

### **Using Existing Property**

Our research suggests that one of the solutions to getting more affordable housing is to be found in utilising existing properties more effectively. We **recommend** that the following options are looked at in more detail:

- Tackle Empty Properties - consolidate existing activities and carry out village surveys to identify all empties and develop schemes with both RSL's and private sector bodies to convert unused/underused industrial /commercial properties into housing.
- Under Occupation - To help 'free up' properties for families projects like Age Concern HOPS should be supported to work with older people and others who are currently 'under-occupying' to assist them to move into more suitable accommodation. Further ways to create more bungalow type properties to enable and encourage this activity should also be considered.
- Private Sector leasing - To help increase supply of affordable rented properties DDDC should work with Private Sector landlords and RSL's to create a leasing scheme for homeless people.
- Second Homes - we applaud the actions taken to utilise Council Tax monies from second homes to assist in resolving affordable housing problems. We now urge Derbyshire County Council and Derbyshire Dales DC to examine further options to increase the amount of money made available from this source to tackling these issues.
- Repurchase RTB properties - DDDC and RSL's should consider creating a repurchase scheme of homes purchased under 'Right to Buy' legislation.
- Retention of Existing Social Housing - whilst we recognise that 'Right to Buy' legislation has enabled many people to become home owners we also recognise that its has had a disastrous affect on the supply of affordable homes in many rural areas. To help maintain housing we **recommend** that Derbyshire Dales DC consider lobbying the HCA to withdraw Right to Buy discounts in smaller settlements.

### **Final Thoughts and Key messages for the Future**

- Affordable Housing shortages cannot be solved by just building new homes -local authority policy makers, strategists and their partners also need to continue/expand homelessness prevention, housing advice and range of supported services as key 'enabling' parts of their strategy.
- Small Local Authorities are beautiful and can deliver!
- Clear Corporate Vision, Strategy and Action are vital for success
- Investment funding - in people/places is critical for long term viability
- Good teams are important - wide partnerships are essential
- Quality products are important but shouldn't override all other things
- People need housing - Villages need people -balance/diversity essential

- Sustainable development is about action, not just maintaining the status quo, and it's about more than just the environment, it has to address environmental, social and economic issues together.
- Rural Providers have to be
  - Inventive
  - Inclusive
  - Determined to Succeed!

In submitting the *Village Homes for Village People* report we believe that not only have Derbyshire Dales DC and its partners proved themselves to be effective deliverers of affordable housing in rural areas they have also gone a long way to endorsing comments made by David Page that

**“The providers of social housing have a responsibility not just to build houses, but to build a community that can enjoy and care for its neighbourhood”  
(Building Communities, 1993)**