

Committee: ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
Date: March 13th 2008
Title: Rural Excellence final report
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Planning Policy Manager. 01799 510543

Agenda Item

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Summary

1. This report advises Members of the recommendations made in the Rural Excellence report.

Recommendations

2. That the recommendations are noted by the Committee
3. That Officers research and provide proposals from the following recommendations (b, d and f) and report to the next meeting.

Background Papers

4. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.

IDeA Memorandum of Understanding
Rural Excellence final report

Impact

5.

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Communication/Consultation | Communication/consultation will be completed at the Rural Excellence Conference on 13 th March |
| Community Safety | None |
| Equalities | None |
| Finance | None |
| Human Rights | None |
| Legal implications | None |

| | |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Sustainability | None |
| Ward-specific impacts | Across whole District |
| Workforce/Workplace | Staff time in implementing findings |

Situation

- 6 Uttlesford District Council were successfully selected to take part in the Rural Excellence Programme for Strategic Housing and Affordable Rural Housing. This has involved working with the Regional Development Agency, Government Office and Town and Parish Councils to solve the most important housing issues for the locality. It has also provided Uttlesford with the opportunity to lead the way in the development of rural housing.
- 7 Five mentors were selected by the IDeA with experience of delivering rural affordable housing. These included the Chief Executive of South Holland District Council, the Leader of South Somerset District Council and a Rural Housing Enabler. Four objectives were agreed :
 - Publicising the evaluation of affordable rural housing schemes in order to gain wider engagement and support for such schemes.
 - Development of Parish Planning.
 - Understanding of how, and ability to, influence the Housing Corporation to access funding.
 - Relationship with Parish Councils to enable the communities to influence the Planning Policy Frameworks.
- 8 Mentoring activities included workshops with Councillors, Parish Councils, Partners and Council Officers and a visit to West Berkshire (Beacon Council for Improving Rural Services)
- 9 Throughout the programme, Officers were learning about good practice in delivering affordable rural housing. It has enabled us to adopt a model for evaluating affordable housing schemes on exception sites, develop closer links with the Sustainable Communities Strategy, work with partners to ensure that affordable housing features as a target within the new Local Area Agreement and also organise a rural housing conference on 13th March to highlight good practice to Parish Councils.
- 10 The final report has now been published and the mentors put forward the following recommendations:
 - a. We invite UDC to consider strengthening the future governance arrangements for the Housing Strategy and Affordable Housing. At present there is a Housing Task Group but this has no decision making powers. The decision making powers lie with the Community

Committee which we believe has a large remit and is limited in the amount of time it can devote to strategic housing and affordable housing. It is understood that the present arrangement is due for review in May 2008 and it would be our recommendation that if affordable housing is to be a priority need in UDC then opportunity should be taken to recognise this through strengthened governance arrangements. UDC operates under the “fourth option” and there is therefore no Portfolio Holder for Affordable Housing and we therefore recommend the appointment of a member champion for affordable housing. In the event of UDC adopting an Executive/Scrutiny model of governance, we would recommend that housing should figure prominently in a single Portfolio.

- b. Following the review of governance arrangements (see above) the member body responsible for affordable housing should consider a report from the officers on selecting a preferred Housing Association/RSL who will work with UDC to deliver affordable housing for renting.
- c. We recommend that members are given the opportunity to debate and clarify their commitment to affordable housing and this be reflected in the refresh of the UDC Corporate Plan
- d. There is no universal or transparent mechanism for Parish Plans to be received and adopted by the Council and we recommend that this be resolved by an agreed procedure whereby Parish Plans are received by elected members and performance is subsequently tracked and reported upon.
- e. As part of the ongoing training of the new administration we recommend that training is introduced to improve the capacity of members to give leadership on strategic and affordable housing issues
- f. Through the planning process UDC is requiring a percentage of affordable housing. Like many local authorities there is a legacy of permissions with lower percentages of affordable housing. This policy needs to be kept constantly under review and within the affordable component to require a significant contribution to rented rather than shared equity housing. Access to skills and expertise in negotiating with developers and challenging financial models is important. We found a concern and consequential barrier to affordable housing that it would be taken up by people moving into UDC. More awareness-raising of the mechanisms for restricting housing to local people should be done in order to dispel this concern

Risk Analysis

| Risk | Likelihood | Impact | Mitigating actions |
|---|------------|--------|---|
| The recommendations are not implemented | 4 | 2 | Implementing the Rural Excellence mentors' recommendations will be given a high priority in workload planning |