

COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE BRIEFING NOTE

HOUSING

House of Commons, General Debate

“Housing”

Tuesday 9 April 2019



Countryside Alliance position:

- The need for more housing stock is not just an issue in towns and cities. Many rural areas are also suffering from a lack of housing, especially affordable housing. Successive governments have attempted to tackle the challenge of delivering sustainable and affordable housing in rural areas with varying degrees of success.
- The shortage of affordable housing is one of the greatest challenges for communities across the country, including in rural areas. It is vital that the planning system is efficient and planning policies achieve a balance between delivering sustainable housing development, supporting local businesses, and protecting the amenity of the countryside. Development needs to be responsive to local need and sensitive to the local environment.
- We welcomed the Government's Housing White Paper in February 2017 which contained many sensible proposals to tackle the housing crisis. We were particularly pleased with the proposal to make more land available for homes in the right places by maximising the contribution from brownfield and surplus public land which is something we have long campaigned to see. The White Paper also proposed giving communities a stronger voice in the design of new housing to drive up the quality and character of new developments which is an aspect of planning policy that often gets overlooked.
- Some of the proposals in the White Paper have been taken forward by way of changes to the National Planning Policy Framework which should encourage the delivery of new homes in rural areas where the financial viability of development can be marginal. We welcomed the confirmation that local planning authorities should not require affordable housing to be delivered on development sites of 5 homes or less in designated rural areas as this obligation had the effect of making some developments financially unviable and therefore worsening the housing crisis. The changes only came into force in July last year and the policy changes must be kept under review to ensure they are helping to address the challenge in rural areas.
- As well as making the regular planning process more efficient and responsive to the needs of rural communities, we have also called for planning policy to be more creative through utilising permitted development rights and looking at ways of incentivising landowners to bring forward land for affordable housing.
- The last Labour Government consulted on a number of proposals to give landowners more options for developing affordable housing, including tax incentives and the option of retaining the freehold interest in the land and receiving a one off or annual rent from the local housing association. These proposals were never taken forward, but we believe that

incentives could play an important part in addressing the challenge in rural areas and we continue to urge the Government to consider them properly.

- We believe that permitted development rights can have an important role to play in delivering sustainable housing development and we called for an extension to Class Q permitted developed as part of the Government's Rural Planning Review in 2016. A small increase in the amount of floor space that can be converted was announced in April this year following the review, but further change is possible. In the short term, local planning authorities should receive clear direction from MHCLG that development under Class Q is a right and there should be a presumption in favour of prior approval. There is considerable variation in how the conditions of Class Q are assessed by planning officers in different authorities creating a large amount of uncertainty which needs to be addressed through improved guidance.

Countryside Alliance member survey:

- Last year the Countryside Alliance carried out a membership survey to inform the evidence we submitted to the House of Lords Rural Economy Committee, which is due to report at the end of this month. Our online survey results showed that 77 per cent of respondents thought 'rural housing and planning' was of importance, with 48 per cent of respondents stating it was of high importance. Suggestions on how to improve the availability of affordable homes in rural areas included: a tax or restrictions on second homes, policies to promote more self-build homes, and better access to finance. Below are a selection of some of the comments expressed in the survey.
- *"Better strategic planning. Just shoving up to 100 houses on a greenfield site on the edge of a village is not addressing housing needs. Better designed and locally tailored housing association schemes."*
- *"Allowing small scale development in rural communities rather than the current blanket restrictions. We end up with rural villages that stagnate until they are finally overtaken by massive housing schemes on the outskirts of nearby large towns that swallow them and effectively destroy the reason why people live there in the first place."*
- *"It is nearly impossible for first time buyers to purchase a property in a rural area - having lived in a small village / hamlet for 28 years, the only property I could afford to buy was in a town on a shared ownership scheme - it's unfortunate that these opportunities are not available in rural areas."*
- *"Policies to encourage rural self-build/ custom build this is the most affordable housing provision."*
- *"In rural areas flats/apartments are rare. Promote conversion of old buildings and use brown field sites (first time buyers and elderly don't always want gardens to maintain). Where a village is reluctant to lose its character underground parking with new builds could reduce the impact of change and reserve space for gardens. All new build and conversions should include renewable energy elements wherever possible as this helps to keep houses more affordable in the long term."*
- *"Banks could lend to farmers for housing development. At present the banks are useless."*
- *"Building small blocks of 2 bedroom houses rurally but not on good farming land, we need that for growing food for a growing population."*

- *“Listen to the views of the Parish Councils who have intimate experience of what works in small communities but who are so often over ruled by County Councils who are only interested in numbers.”*
- *“Planning permission and planners who actually understand the needs of rural communities are vital, and this is not happening at the moment.”*
- *“Permitted development for barn conversions should not be made difficult so that farming families can provide for the younger and/or older generations.”*
- *“The government needs to take a less punitive stance on landlords that are trying to provide affordable quality housing. Consider allowing landlords to claim VAT back on improvements to housing.”*
- *“Housing now looks alike wherever one is and does not relate to the local vernacular. Although planning control has rightly been relaxed a little, developments of more than one or two units are carried out by big developers.”*
- *“We need good quality social housing, built and owned by councils.”*

Countryside Alliance calls for:

- **Government to create a planning system that is efficient with planning policies that support sustainable rural life and businesses; including better use of permitted development rights.**
- **Government to implement measures to incentivise landowners to bring forward land for affordable housing.**
- **Government to incentivise the use of brownfield land to provide housing.**
- **Government to encourage locally led provision of affordable local housing to meet local need.**

For more information please contact:

Sarah Lee
 Head of Policy
sarah-lee@countryside-alliance.org
 0207 840 9250

James Somerville-Meikle
 Political Relations Manager
james-sm@countryside-alliance.org
 0207 840 9262