



The Rural Services Network

# National Rural Conference 2024

Delivering for Rural – Unlocking rural prosperity

Tuesday 17th September

**Rural Affordable Housing & Planning Session**

## AI GENERATED SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

### **Rural Services Network National Rural Conference**

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, welcomed participants to the session and thanked sponsors for their generous support. Kerry gave a brief presentation outlining the RSN's campaign work asking for fairer funding for public services and rural-focused policy, highlighting challenges in affordable housing in rural areas and the implications of the new National Planning Policy Framework consultation.

### **Design Guide for Affordable Rural Homes**

Martin Collett, Chief Executive of English Rural Housing Association and RSN Executive Board member presented on a design guide aimed at promoting the construction of more affordable rural homes and overcoming barriers. The guide, produced in partnership is a non-technical resource using case studies and lay language, covering the whole of England. Kerry encouraged everyone to download and read the guide, highlighting its accessibility and inspirational content. The discussion emphasized the importance of building affordable housing for low-income households, designing homes with flexibility in mind, community involvement, good design, connectivity, and accessibility. Martin stressed the need for sustainable and environmentally responsible homes, incorporating eco-friendly materials, reducing energy use, and promoting nature and ecology.

### **New Connectivity Tool and Local Authority Planning**

Fergus O'Dowd, a senior planning advisor at the Department for Transport, discussed a new tool designed to assess and improve connectivity and its potential application in rural areas. The tool, currently in piloting phase, aims to provide evidence-based insights for local authorities to inform planning and policy decisions. It considers various modes of transport, including public transport, walking, and cycling, and can be used to identify areas that could benefit from improved connectivity. Fergus also mentioned that the tool will be updated periodically and that it will be launched for wider use in spring next year. The tool's potential to influence government funding for areas with poor connectivity was also discussed.

### **Affordable Housing Challenges and Successes in North Norfolk**

Nicky Debbage, Housing Strategy and Delivery Manager, and Anna Clarke, Community Housing Enabler from North Norfolk District Council discussed the challenges and successes in delivering affordable housing in North Norfolk. They set the scene by highlighting the district's rural and

remote nature, high housing costs, and the scarcity of registered providers and developers. The population is aging, with a third over 65, and the average house prices are high compared to local wages. The private rented sector is small and expensive, and the affordable housing supply is not meeting the needs of the district.

### **Rural Exception Sites Strategy and Funding**

Anna and Nikki discussed their successful rural exception sites strategy, which has led to the development of 5 sites and plans for 6 more. They highlighted the flexibility this approach offers, allowing for adjustments in the development program and procurement methods. The strategy also includes the use of government grants and community housing funds. Anna mentioned that they are working with Homes England and Broadland Housing to secure further funding. The team also emphasized the importance of their rural housing enabler role in facilitating these developments. Cllr Wendy Fredericks praised the housing strategy team's work and stressed the value of investing in quality, energy-efficient homes, as well as the importance of building relationships with developers and housing associations.

### **Rural Housing Challenges and Strategies**

The meeting discussed the challenges and strategies for building homes in rural communities. The speakers shared their experiences and approaches, emphasizing the importance of quality design, community engagement, and proactive planning. They also discussed the need for a broader range of tools to negotiate with landowners and the potential for rural exception sites to make a significant impact if more local authorities utilized them. The conversation ended with a discussion on the benefits of having a dedicated affordable housing planner, as demonstrated by West Devon and South Hams. The speakers also mentioned the ongoing NPPF consultation and the need for a strategic approach to rural housing development.

### **Rural Housing Issues and Policy Proposals**

The group discussed several rural housing issues beyond the planning system's scope. The RSN in partnership with the Rural Coalition will be writing to the government, arguing for a cross-departmental policy addressing affordability, finances, and tools for delivering rural housing needs. Kerry highlighted the formation last week of the Rural Services APPG which will enable rural MPs to focus on priorities like rural funding, affordable housing, the rural economy, healthcare access, and rural transport.

### **Next Steps**

- 1.** Rural Services Network to submit response to NPPF consultation incorporating member feedback.
- 2.** Rural Services Network to write to Secretary of State highlighting key issues around rural housing delivery outside of planning system.
- 3.** Department for Transport to continue developing the connectivity tool and consider adding functionality to model removal of transport links.
- 4.** Local authorities interested in piloting the DfT connectivity tool to contact [connectivity@dft.gov.uk](mailto:connectivity@dft.gov.uk).
- 5.** Rural Services Network to prepare briefings on key rural issues for new All-Party Parliamentary Group members.
- 6.** Rural Services Network to monitor upcoming local government finance settlement for treatment of increased council tax on second homes.