

Devon Rural Network Policy Steering Group Minutes

Monday 15th December 2008, 10 am to 12 pm, Tedburn St Mary Village Hall

Present:

Philip Wagstaff (Chair)	Churches Together in Devon	Jay Talbot	Community Council of Devon
Jen Brogan	DRN	Pete Tansey	Devon Renaissance/BT
Tony Skeel	Learning Skills Council	Paul Gompertz	Devon Wildlife Trust
Martin Taylor	Devon Conservation Forum	Jim Masters	Devon Maritime Forum
Tom Langdon-Davis	Devon Towns Forum	Anthony Rew	NFU
Martyn Warren	University of Plymouth	Lynn Thorton	DCC/Community Transport
Leanne Crawford	DRN	Mary Ridgway	Devon Strategic Housing
Matthew Dodd	Homes and Community Agency	Ian Mercer	Dartmoor Commoners Council

Apologies:

Michael Cozens	South Hams DC	David Incoll	Devon CEX's Group
Sonia Thurley	Environment Agency	Charlie Plowden	East Devon District Council
Andrew Lightfoot	DCC	Julia Page	Devon PCT
Gareth Jones	Tor Homes	Gareth Walton	Devon Sustainable Building Initiative

1.0 Minutes of the last meeting

Tony will provide an update on section 5.0 Skills activities in Devon – no input was received after the meeting.

Meeting agreed the accuracy of the minutes.

2.0 Matters arising

None.

3.0 Matters brought forward at the chair's discretion

Rur@ct – Martyn Warren

A paper had been circulated previously, and the programme has arisen out of European Framework. Martyn explained that involvement in the programme was new and highlighted through research work, and Limousin had expressed a strong interest in Devon's involvement. The partnership will be operational online and could be a valuable database and methodological tool that could be tapped into. It could be a good opportunity to network – dependant on officer time, with initial signpost to website and further queries to be made.

Several points were raised:

- Fit in with debate around climate change agenda and food security – supply and demand from other EU countries
- Use as a learning exercise and increased visibility of Devon
- Would Devon County Council have to join and then ask DRN to act as its agent
- The benefit of awareness of EU practices
- The French case-study – better at rurality

Action: group agreed to action positively – work with DCC if the county has to join – this to be clarified

4.0 Housing – local perspective – Mary Ridgway

Mary looked at the impact of the credit crunch, and highlighted the big issues of affordability for local families and the falling price of houses combined with the increasing difficulty in obtaining credit.

She raised a number of points during her presentation:

- The picture was different across Devon dependant on the local economy – updates have been provided to the Government Office South West (GOSW)
- New affordable housing delivery linked to the private sector had been mothballed or in terms of S106, were being renegotiated. This had put Local Authority teams under pressure
- Initiatives from central Government with huge amount of funding attached increasing – especially around growth points; mortgage rescue; etc; however there was a £56 million underspend in Devon

- The Local Authority message overall – there was a huge challenge in delivery targets but that mechanisms should continue to be put in place for when the market did pick up. Each Local Authority was reviewing its own corporate response to the downturn and site details being shared.
- Need to be better at viability; grant levels were still challenging; continued need for efficiency; exploration of other potential investment mechanisms; land banking opportunities – both financial and political, associated issues and cash flow; a need to rethink how to work with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), particularly in rural areas; increased communication with RSLs, and others, needed; and a more integrated approach to investment under development needed.

Practically:

- Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) have improved the site register
- Over 300 properties were in the pipeline but realistically only around 16 of these looked deliverable
- Rural housing had been highlighted as a separate target in the Local Area Agreement – the Devon Strategic Housing Group (DSHG) was looking to get the issue pushed higher up in the political agenda
- Toolkit for Rural Sustainable Communities, led by Pauline Warner (DCC) <http://www.devon.gov.uk/index/environment/planning-system/planning-researchandstudies.htm> linked with LDFs and requirement for engagement and consultation with local communities. The Toolkit aims to identify gaps to help communities become more sustainable, both for officers and community members. This would be rolled out locally, regionally and nationally.
- The Homes and Communities Agency would have a rural champion in each region
- Work on Community Land Trusts (CLTs) was ongoing, with £25K of funding from DCC to support the setting up of an umbrella trust. There were two pilots – Chudleigh and Appledore
- The DSHG will be reporting to DCC in June to examine whether an umbrella trust would be feasible.
- Reports also available from the DSHG website <http://www.dshg.org.uk/downloads.htm> Downloads
- DRN should continue the message to maintain funding for the RHEs – only 4 of the 8 districts have committed funding for next year

5.0 The Homes and Community Agency (HCA) – Matthew Dodd

Matthew gave a brief background to the HCA (*presentation will be available on the DRN website*), and raised a number of points, along with group discussion:

- Market downturn – regionally exception sites were still being processed, it was the larger S106 sites that were failing
- Land – the HCA would be looking at buying land for future use
- Nationally £200 millions has been brought forward for investment in social housing
- There could be increasing flexibility in grant availability, but efficiency targets would still be in place
- There was a need to avoid loss of capacity brought about by redundancies, as previous recession highlighted
- CLTs – policy issues around grants, type of lease, restrictions, etc. Esme Fairbairn were looking at introducing a strand to address predevelopment costs of setting up CLTs
- Cyril Sweett research on cost of delivery available. It was agreed that quantifiable research and evidence of affordability of sustainable building needed to be produced <http://www.sustain.co.uk/categories/Insight/Insight-Quarterly-6/>
- The first four months of the HCA would look at operation and involvement
- The “single conversation” would be between government organisations, not single Local Authorities
- It was questioned why houses could not be returned to Local Authority ownership – i.e. houses built not for the open market
- A national Rural Housing Advisory Group would be maintained
- The HCA would be working with the Government on the Taylor response
- The HCA were looking at developing a package of site to market to developers – 25 sites at present

- Commission for Rural Communities – series of reports on alternatives to commissioning <http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk/themes/~affordable-housing>
- There was unlikely to be a central funding pot for RHEs
- It was requested that access as well as the actual built be considered under the umbrella of sustainability at policy level, and linked with employment space
- It was suggested that networking was much stronger in rural communities, with new comers having less linkages to enable networking

Action: Matthew to be invited to future meeting after Matthew Taylor reponse

Action: Paul Gompertz to present on sustainability and living landscapes

6.0 News Round up

- Devon Conservation Forum were meeting regularly and responding to government consultation and all District LDF documents. They were also in the process of setting up a Natural Environment Group
- Devon Towns Forum were to receive a further two years funding from the RDA, with further cooperation with other counties
- Tom was now also wearing a Torbay Coast & Countryside Trust hat, looking at a sustainability project and its linkages, with a future report to be produced
- Devon Maritime Forum – Marine Bill included in Queen's Speech, but planning process needed to be clarified – LDFs and infrastructure needed to be marinised to an extent. Integration of coast improving, and terrestrial planners need to increase the consideration for the marine environment
- University of Plymouth – due to funding difficulties, Plymouth is shedding 10% of it's staff and Martyn had opted for voluntary redundancy, finishing in July. Susie's role would be ending in January and she was starting a new externally funded post within the university. This had implications for the Rural Futures Unit, but Martyn would keep the group informed
- Peninsula Partnership for Rural Environment – underway and response to national consultation submitted. The website was now up and running www.ppre.ac.uk
- Environment Devon – hoping for catch up over Christmas
- Wildlife Trust – nationally the group were costing work in the context of living landscapes for more holistic thinking
- NFU – all farming sectors were under pressure and defra's handling of food security was an increasing concern. A number of issues were hitting farmers hard, including, NVZs, sheep tagging, TB, all of which were affecting morale. Concerns were also expressed over the CAP health check and its benefit to other EU countries over the UK
- Upland Entry Level Scheme – an announcement is expected. The Dartmoor Commoners Council had been used as a model for the 2006 Commoners Act
- Carbon Community Woodlands – needed to be upheld despite current vulnerability of South West Forest
- Napoli – Ian hoped to have the enquiry written off on the 15th December, with recommendations that highways reorganise planning around coastal zones, and first response agencies to consider local knowledge
- LSC response to recession – currently working on a recovery plan for redundancies and preparation, with agencies actively involved to drive the Government view in the region – to be signed off January 2009. Implications of the report fitting a national template to be considered, i.e. little around rural economy or SMEs. This linked into discussions around housing and affordable housing. Tony will report back at a subsequent meeting
- BT will be bringing forward the 21st Century Network Availability programme across Devon and Pete will update at the next meeting
- Devon Renaissance – the existing funding will end March 2009. DR will be managing Local Action Groups across the South West, not just Devon and is looking at creating a new fee earning model, which could be linked into discussions with North Devon +
- Annual CCD conference well attended, report available on website <http://www.devonrcc.org.uk/news.php?mode=2&nid=274>
- The first Community Sector Assembly (Devon Consortium) will be held on 25th February, to discuss boundary change issues and the effect on the voluntary sector
- There is a new funding pot for village halls, available through CCD, as a result of DCC airport

“invest in Devon” funds

- CCD projects underway – Heritage Lottery was funding a project to look at community histories in terms of adaptation to climate change; and home grown community owned, looking at increasing local produce.
- Transport Bill – has now been approved as an Act and will hopefully improve rural community transport; a review of Devon ring and rides had already taken place
- There were still part time posts looking at transport needs in the county
- The new DRN website was now live www.drn.org.uk
- Due to the popularity of the DRN newsletter, Dartmoor National Park had asked if they can include their own community news within it as a separate section. The news letter will now not only be going out to our own contacts, but also those of the National Park, include a large number of external media officers, giving an excellent opportunity for spreading the word of the network!
- It was confirmed that Leanne would be covering Jen's post as Acting Coordinator until a replacement was secured
- Phil was to take up a post on the South West Rural Affairs Forum, alongside Ian Mercer
- Churches Together in Devon had secured funding for a community based project worker to look at church space and community hubs
- Jen thanked the group for being a big support over her 2 years with DRN. She wished the network every success for the future.

7.0 Action Group Updates

Updates will be sent electronically – ***to be actioned (nothing to update as of 15th Dec)***

8.0 Date next meeting:

10am 2nd March venue to be confirmed