

District Councillor's Report

October 2020

ACRE – Action with Communities in Rural England

Over two thirds of rural communities in England may not be able to secure any new affordable houses in the future, a coalition of organisations, led by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) has warned.

We are deeply concerned that the government is looking to water down requirements to provide affordable housing – a change that will disproportionately disadvantage many living in the countryside.

For many years, affordable homes could be built in rural communities using two planning policies – as a requirement on open market developments and rural exception sites. However, these mechanisms could be lost because of changes proposed to the current planning system. Such a move would be catastrophic for smaller villages where property prices are already well beyond the reach of many households.

The change is in contradiction to the Prime Minister's pledge to “give the people of this country the homes we need in the places we want to live, at prices we can afford” as expressed in the Planning White Paper.

ACRE's Chair, David Emerson CBE said, “We are deeply concerned the government is looking to water down requirements to provide affordable housing – a change that will disproportionately disadvantage many living in the countryside. For communities already struggling to retain the employees and owners of local businesses this is a body blow, quite apart from its impact on the customers and providers of local services and the volunteers who provide the social support for vulnerable residents”.

Rural communities in England already suffer a chronic and acute shortage of affordable homes to buy and rent. Someone living in the countryside on low earnings needs to spend nine times their income to buy a home in the lower end of the market. Only 8% of the housing stock in social housing, compared with 19% in urban areas. And last year, fewer than 6,000 new affordable homes were built in smaller rural communities – equivalent to less than one new affordable home in each village.

The government is proposing to quadruple the size of residential sites that will require affordable housing. If this change is made, no new affordable homes will be provided on sites of fewer than 40 dwellings. Most residential sites in smaller rural communities are for 10 houses or fewer. There is a limited rural exemption from this change, but it will not apply in almost 70% of smaller villages. Equally harmful is the introduction of First Homes Exception Sites which will cause confusion, inflate land values and destroy the emphasis on local engagement. No longer will communities

benefit from the existing rural exception site policy. These provide a mix of affordable homes tailored to specific housing needs and design requirements of the local community.

ACRE, the Rural Housing Alliance, Rural Services Network (RSN) and Plunkett Foundation have written to the Secretary of State calling for rural communities with a population of 3,000 or fewer to be exempt from the new rules, with local councils able to set their own thresholds for affordable housing in these settlements.

The organisations claim that without these revisions – and just when the PM is pledging to make it easier for people to secure homes they can afford – the government will fail to deliver on its agenda to “Level Up” and secure a sustainable and vibrant future for the countryside.

**Councillors Martin Mooney & Tony Ganly
Northern Levels Ward**