



England's national park communities face severe housing pressure

Research published today shows how National Park Authorities have been actively addressing the problem of providing affordable and supported housing to meet the needs of their communities, despite the tension which can exist between National Park Authorities' responsibilities to protect the landscape and their duty to foster the economic and social welfare of their communities.

Up to 175,000 people live in homes within national parks, which contain some of the country's most beautiful and valued countryside. These communities face significant housing pressures, due to the shortage of affordable housing, very high housing market prices compared to local wages, and the damaging effects of sales of registered social landlord stock under Right to Buy and Right to Acquire policies.

The research report is called *The Provision of Affordable and Supported Housing in England's National Parks*. It is being published today by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC) and the Housing Corporation (HC). It calls for National Park Authorities to pay much greater attention to their duty to foster the economic and social welfare of local communities and it applied more rigorously.

Planning policies in national parks are generally restrictive, but most national park authorities allow small developments of affordable housing, where they can be shown to meet proven local need. Many NPAs have been working with partners to develop innovative ways of addressing the problems. Both the Lake District and Yorkshire Dales National Parks have a policy to secure new developments for local occupancy. The Peak District National Park carried out a number of public consultations to develop their emerging Local Development Framework.

The importance of joint working in national parks, where planning and housing responsibilities lie within different authorities, is emphasised in the report and the researchers identified some good examples of successful collaborative working between national park authorities, local housing authorities and housing associations. In particular, national parks attach a great deal of importance to the role of Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) in the Parks, which is shown to produce positive results, encouraging collaborative working between partnerships and working within communities.

Prior to the launch of the research, the CRC and the HC, held a joint seminar with the English National Park Authorities Association and a range of enablers and providers of affordable housing in National Parks. The seminar was extremely positive with discussion around key issues facing organisations working to provide affordable housing in national park areas such as: ensuring properties are kept affordable in perpetuity; making the best use of available housing stock; integrating sustainable constructive and conservation purposes for new developments; spreading best practice; targeting of housing corporation funding; and the growing burden of proving housing need. The CRC will facilitate annual seminars to build on these discussions and report on progress on joint solutions to identified barriers in the report.

Dr Stuart Burgess Chairman of the Countryside Agency (the CRC's parent body) and Rural Advocate said "As the millions of us who visit national parks each year know, they are some of our most beautiful and treasured landscapes. We all agree that these landscapes need proper protection, but we should not forget that the communities within the parks are their lifeblood. So, this means making sure that those people who live and work in the parks have access to housing that is affordable to them. National Park Authorities are doing a great deal to make this happen and we will continue to work with them to ensure good practice is shared and developed further."

Jon Rouse, Housing Corporation Chief Executive said: "Affordable housing in national parks is a successful product. It looks good and local people recognise the impact and positive effect of affordable housing on sustaining their community. More affordable housing is needed for local people with low incomes whose ability to find somewhere to live has been steadily eroded by rising house prices, second and holiday homes and by increases in retirement, commuting and the ability to work at home. The overall policy of restraint in the Parks should not be at the expense of a duty of fostering social and economic well being. We should use this report as a focus to plan how we go about achieving the affordable housing that our Parks need."

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NOTES FOR EDITORS:

1. Three examples of best practice identified in the research within National Parks are given below:

Community Housing Investment Scheme, A Home Equity Fund for the Upper Dales

The lack of affordable home ownership is perceived as having a negative impact on employment and business in the Upper Dales. This was identified in the Upper Dales' and Two Dales' Community Investment Prospectus. A mechanism to make existing housing affordable to local people and key workers prompted the establishment of the Community Housing Investment Scheme (CHIS), initially with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Research identified the scope to develop an investment product – termed 'Affordable Home Equity' - to enable local investors to hold interest bearing shares and assist with the provision of affordable home ownership. Affordable Home Equity (AHE) is the working title given to the concept of stretching 'Homebuy' through the use of an interest bearing equity loan. The Homebuy product offers affordability by enabling the purchaser to borrow a percentage of the purchase price via a conventional mortgage and fund the remaining amount with an interest free equity loan. An example of an Affordable Home Equity loan might comprise:

- 50% of the property purchased with a conventional mortgage;
- 10% funded with a Homebuy style grant backed with interest free equity loan; and
- 40% funded with an Affordable Home equity loan charged at around 4%.

Exmoor National Park Rural Housing Enabler

Exmoor is the only National Park Authority with a dedicated Rural Housing Enabler

covering the Park.

The RHE's role is to increase the provision of affordable housing for local needs across Exmoor by:

- providing advice to local communities on the process of securing affordable housing;
- working with the local community and parish councils to assess their local housing needs, by assisting with surveys and collating their results;
- helping to identify potential sites and buildings;
- liaising with relevant organisations, such as local housing and planning authorities and housing associations, to explore development options;
- acting as an 'honest broker' between all parties; and
- increasing awareness of issues affecting rural housing.

Town centre affordable housing in the Peak District National Park

This innovative scheme in the centre of Bakewell, Derbyshire, consists of ten one-bedroom flats, as well as two two-bedroom flats specifically for wheelchair users. All the units have an area for home working. The 2.5 storey development is in keeping with the local building tradition, following advice in the, then, Peak Park Joint Planning Board's (now National Park Authority's) Building Design Guide. There were extensive discussions on detailed design matters, including the use of building materials. Traditional limestone walling on the inner courtyard has been used to ensure a higher level of light reflection on this compact site.

2. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act establishes the Commission for Rural Communities as an independent statutory body with three main roles:

Rural advocate: the voice for rural people, businesses and communities.

Expert adviser: providing evidence-based, independent advice to government and others.

Independent watchdog: monitoring and reporting on the formulation and delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.

Until 1 October 2006 the Commission will continue to operate as a distinct division of the Countryside Agency.

See also the website: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk

3. **The Housing Corporation** is the Government agency responsible for investing in new affordable homes and regulating over 1,500 housing associations across England. Its biggest ever investment programme of £3.9 billion for 2006-08 will fund 84,000 homes; 49,000 of these will be for affordable rent, and 35,000 will be for affordable sale through the Government's new HomeBuy initiative, helping people to get a foot on the property ladder.