

HOUSING CRISIS IN SMALLEST COMMUNITIES

The Commission for Rural Communities welcomes today's announcement by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), of the establishment of the new Affordable Rural Housing Commission. The Commission for Rural Communities' own inquiry into housing, also announced today, will inform the Affordable Rural Housing Commission, enabling it to reflect housing concerns of the most disadvantaged rural communities.

Many young people who have grown up in the countryside struggle to find a home they can afford near their families, their friends or their employers. As illustrated by the State of the Countryside Report, published today (July 20) by the Commission for Rural Communities, there is a huge gap between average local earnings and average house prices. The report concludes that the government objective to deliver a better balance between housing demand and supply is not being met in rural England.

In the smallest rural settlements, average house prices can be around 10 times local average household income. In the sparsely populated peripheral areas the problem is often compounded by high levels of second or holiday homes, which now make up one in ten households in the smaller settlements. In the more accessible central rural areas closer to the main urban centres, there is the added pressure from commuter homes.

Underlying this problem is rural population growth of one million people in the past decade. The population changes brought about by migration flows, bringing in older richer people but losing younger people, beg serious questions about the future sustainability of many rural communities.

Dr Stuart Burgess, Rural Advocate and Chairman of the Commission for Rural Communities, said: "The lack of affordable housing is an England wide phenomenon, but its impact on rural people and communities can be particularly severe and demands immediate attention."

"We have therefore set up an urgent inquiry to examine the impact of these housing problems on rural communities, and importantly, to find out what actions rural communities want to tackle this problem. We will engage directly with rural communities, businesses and local

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organisations to get their views. We will then use the results of our inquiry to inform the Affordable Rural Housing Commission, so it can build on the experience of those effected, as well as the considerable expertise we have developed over the years on this thorny issue."

"What is at stake is our ability to sustain thriving communities across rural England. The lack of affordable housing is not just a housing issue. The consequent social and economic segregation calls into doubt the sustainability of smaller rural communities. Who will take on local jobs? Who will use local services? And where will that community spirit be?"

State of the Countryside 2005 (CRC 05), published by the Commission for Rural Communities, costs £10 from Countryside Agency Publications, PO Box 125, Wetherby LS23 7EP, telephone 0870 120 6466; fax 0870 120 6467.

Ends

For further information please contact Nick McClelland, Commission for Rural Communities, on 020 7932 5814 or 07900 608 045.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. Following publication Defra's Rural Strategy in July 2004, the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, currently under consideration in Parliament, will establish the Commission for Rural Communities as an independent statutory body. Pending legislation, the Commission operates as a distinct division of the Countryside Agency from 1 April 2005, providing robust advice to government and others to ensure that policies reflect the real needs of people living and working in rural England, with a particular focus on tackling disadvantage. The Commission has 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 delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally.
See also the website: www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk
2. Defra has announced that once the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (ARHC) concludes its work, Elinor Goodman, chair of ARHC, will join the Board of the Countryside Agency.