

Villages need more affordable housing to survive

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Cheshire East's attractive rural communities are under threat from a lack of affordable housing, *writes Paul Williams.*

The 2008 Taylor Review highlighted a shortage of affordable housing for rural communities as one of the greatest challenges for the planning system. Significantly, this issue now affects people on average incomes, not just those on lower incomes traditionally requiring social housing.

Cheshire East contains a number of affluent villages within which people, particularly the younger generation, are being priced out of the property market. They may therefore have to leave the community, eroding its vitality and making it more difficult to sustain services. The 2010 Cheshire East Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) states that there is a net annual requirement for 1,243 affordable units across Cheshire East until 2014.

National policy *PPS3: Housing* encourages local authorities to allow affordable housing on sites within or adjoining small rural settlements which would not otherwise be released, using a 'rural exceptions' site policy.



New housing completed recently in Tattenhall

The situation in Cheshire East is complicated by separate local plans for the three previous authorities of Crewe & Nantwich, Congleton and Macclesfield, pending progress with the replacement Local Development Framework.

Cheshire East Council did, however, adopt an Interim Planning Statement on Affordable Housing in February 2011. This includes guidance on the circumstances under which planning permission may be granted for Rural Exception housing.

Mosaic Town Planning has worked with housing associations such as Arena, Great Places and Plus Dane to gain planning permission for a number of Rural Exception schemes. We are also looking at several sites in Cheshire East and have a current application in Wrenbury.

Our involvement in such schemes has highlighted the challenges that they present.

Firstly sufficient evidence of need has to be established. Whilst expressions of interest from potential occupiers can be sought, surveys are also used. In addition to the SHMA, a number of smaller-scale studies have been published for particular parishes in Cheshire East.

Once this evidence is obtained, the main challenge is gaining the support of local residents. The first priority is consultation with the parish council prior to submitting an application, so that it has the chance to comment on and influence the design, scale and layout of the proposals. While it always going be difficult to eliminate objections from immediate neighbours, there is often scope for gaining valuable support from the wider community through undertaking such consultation.

In order to ensure that the housing serves its purpose, occupancy must be restricted. This is typically controlled through a Section 106 legal agreement, with a cascade system ensuring the housing is first offered to those with a local connection.

To date the Rural Exception approach has failed to bring forward the scale of affordable housing required in rural areas. The Coalition's hope is that the Localism Bill will enable an increase, by passing the powers back to the communities through the creation of neighbourhood plans and right-to-build powers. However, there is little consensus that this will be effective in achieving the necessary supply. The forthcoming change in the definition of affordable rent may have a greater impact on delivery.

In the meantime, the interim guidance on Cheshire East provides a framework for developers and landowners to work alongside housing associations and parish councils in beginning to tackle the shortfall.

- **Paul Williams is a director of [Mosaic Town Planning](#), based in Manchester**