

Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership Review

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1. Purpose of Report

This report provides an update to members on the outputs, achievements and challenges facing the Oxfordshire Rural Housing Partnership (ORHP).

2. Background

The ORHP was commissioned by the four Oxfordshire District Councils in 2003. Four Registered Providers (RP); SOHA Housing, Cottsway Housing, Sovereign Housing Group and Oxford Citizens Housing Association (OCHA) formed the successful partnership selected by the Commissioning body. The partnership was extended to include the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council (ORCC) and subsequently Leadbitter Construction as our partnering contractor and Fry Binks as our Employer's Agent.

An Architectural competition was held and 2 Architects were selected as our preferred design panel.

3. Governance

For the first three years the ORHP reported to a Steering Group that comprised of representation from the District Councils, both at Officer and Member level, the ORCC, the RPs, the contractor and Employer's Agent.

Programme delivery was delegated to the ORHP Delivery Group and comprised the RPs, the District Enablers, the Rural Housing Enablers (RHE), the contractor and Employer's Agent.

Reporting into the ORHP Delivery Group, at District level, sat the District Implementation Groups (DIG) that looked at very detailed level at local delivery. The idea being that they would build up working relationships with planning and highways authorities for their given area.

At the outset it was agreed that an RP would be the lead provider within each District, OCHA for Cherwell DC, Cottsway for West Oxfordshire DC, SOHA Housing for South Oxfordshire DC and Sovereign for The Vale of White Horse DC. However this was not an absolute rule and we worked with some flexibility, for example where one provider already had a significant stock presence or to meet the needs and/or aspirations of particular Parish Councils who preferred to make a selection.

In 2006 the Governance arrangements were altered with the disbanding of the Steering Group with the ORHP effectively becoming part of the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership (OHP), which in itself was the delivery partner of the Strategic Planning and Infrastructure Partnership (SPIP).

4. Critical Review

In July 2008 De Montfort University were commissioned to carry out a 'Critical Friend' review of the ORHP. The findings were reported back to the OHP in October 2008. This focused on five broad areas to improve around processes and delivery: review of original target and methodology, better monitoring regarding inward investment, improved planning and housing delivery, local delivery vehicle and taking a strategic role. In January 2009 an action plan was agreed to take these actions forward.

An update against this Action Plan is attached at Appendix 1.

5. Key Successes

Since its inception the ORHP has completed 238 homes and currently has:

- 16 units nearing completion
- 56 units on site
- 52 units on five sites coming to contract
- 74 units on eight sites in the pipeline

Our original five year target was 500 homes. This figure was purely guesswork arrived at when the consortium first got together. De Montfort has now confirmed that this was overly ambitious and unachievable. We therefore set a three year target from 2009 to 2012 of 150 units, with a 'stretch' target of 200 units. We are currently on course to complete 185 units. We have been told by the HCA that our track record in delivery of affordable rural housing is 'extremely good' and the best in the South East.

In terms of innovation the ORHP has:

- brought forward land that would otherwise not have been available through partnership approaches to nominations

- constructed 116 units to achieve an Eco Homes Very Good rating and all other units are built to a minimum Code 3 for Sustainable Homes
- installed Solar panels on all units since April 2008
- sourced alternative heating technologies in locations without mains gas
- trialled grey water recycling

Marketing

Much of our work over the last year has been about promoting the ORHP and making contact with other providers and partnerships. As a result over the past year we have:

- been to Clarence House to join His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales in launching his Affordable Rural Housing Initiative Guide, which features an ORHP scheme
- joined the National Housing Federation's Rural Alliance where we meet and share best practice with other providers
- compared notes with the Hampshire Alliance for Rural Affordable Housing
- started a project to lead on a national benchmarking exercise looking at the cost of provision of rural housing
- played an active role in the National Housing Federation's Save Our Villages Campaign
- have had direct feedback from the Homes and Communities Agency that stated that our case studies were "of outstanding quality", which are being included in their Rural Viability Toolkit, launched on 13 July in Birmingham

District Authority Benefits

The Districts have put time and effort into supporting the partnership and are keen to see what specific benefits the partnership realises for them. It is difficult to draw a fair comparison as to what would have been delivered without the partnership but following consultation with the partners these are our suggestions:

- we estimate that through working in partnership we have delivered 30% more affordable rural homes, this is from a combination of reducing costs through partnership working and from streamlining the processes
- the Partnership has developed a brand that is known and respected across the south east. As a result this has enabled:
 - Access to more funding through the Homes and Communities Agency
 - Access to some sites that otherwise may not have been available.
 - Enhanced the reputation of the participating Authorities, particularly in relation to partnership working
- by forming the partnership the District Authorities have been able to share the costs of Rural Housing Enablers with the RPs
- strong relationships have been built on the ground using the 'District Implementation Group' model that has significantly contributed to refining and improving the process for the delivery of rural housing

6. Key Challenges

6.1 Land

In response to the Matthew Taylor Review, we took part in the consultation exercise on Incentivising Landowners to bring forward land for affordable housing carried out by the Department for Communities and Local Government. This highlights the difficulties there can be in bringing forward sites and accorded with our experience. For the ORHP this remains a significant problem.

6.2 Development

We are all aware that rural housing is very much needed, particularly if we are to maintain sustainable and vibrant rural communities. However we also know that rural housing can be difficult to develop for a variety of reasons.

For the first time in Oxfordshire we are seeing private developers whose specific aim is to secure rural sites in an attempt to profit from developing them out on our behalf. From the perspective of the ORHP this adds an unnecessary third party and potentially pushes up land prices. Through the ORHP we have developed the skills required to bring forward and develop rural housing, however we are seeing sites that we have been involved in for some years being optioned by developers who then attempt to sell them back to us. We are addressing this by pursuing options ourselves sooner than we might have, however it generates additional expense and work.

6.3 Economic

Following the election the housing world is changing rapidly. It is very likely that there will be major cut backs in public expenditure. This is undoubtedly going to impact on affordable housing. Although there is a strong political will to support rural housing in terms of value for money we suspect there will be a strong focus on more strategic sites. There has been suggestion that while funding is likely to be cut there may remain support for rural housing, but even so we are likely to see a scaling back in size of programme.

Many RPs are scaling back their development activity and many will be reliant on more commercial activities in the future, such as house for sale, to subsidise their affordable programmes. This requires a greater degree of focus and there exists the risk that rural housing may be marginalised as a result.

6.4 ORHP Brand

The ORHP works hard to protect its brand, however this may ultimately may not be in its own best interests. Currently only schemes executed by the partners and using the partnership framework can be branded as ORHP schemes. Potentially this excludes a number of rural schemes within Oxfordshire that are being delivered by other partners, or by partners but developed outside of the partnership framework.

This has resulted in underplaying the delivery of rural housing in the County. While partners are keen to protect the ORHP model and brand it is becoming increasingly difficult to engage all the partner members in further developing the ORHP. Indeed more might be achieved by developing an ORHP 'light' model that brands all rural schemes and lessens the control by its members. We could develop the ORHP more as a good practice unit that promotes and shares best practice amongst RPs working on rural housing within the County, and indeed beyond. For example, this past year has seen Cherwell District Council carry out a review of the delivery of rural housing and has resulted in a range of improvements that other local authorities could benefit from.

7. Recommendations

That SPIP are asked to:

- recognise the considerable achievements of the ORHP over the period and, in principle, supports its continuation.
- support the revised approach that the partnership is proposing taking, but also taking special account of the increasingly constrained public sector funding context.

Appendix 1
ORHP improvement plan

Objective 1	Actions	Participants	Timeline	Monitoring activity
<p>Establish new target for affordable housing delivery between 1 April 2009 to 31 March 2012</p> <p>OHP (23 Jan 09) agreed target of Minimum of 150 units with stretch target of minimum 200 units to be completed over the three years</p> <p>With at least one new scheme per year in each District</p>	<p>Target agreed by review meeting 24-04-09</p> <p>Count units as and when completed, where they are provided by one of the ORHP RSLs.</p> <p><i>Check completions against target / stretch target each quarter.</i></p>	<p>Core Group to plot programme delivery and oversee progress.</p> <p>SB to lead on programme / year / schedule</p>	<p>04/09 to 03/12. 12 baseline units completed per year per district. 4/5 stretch units per year per district.</p> <p>For each Delivery Group</p>	<p>Quarterly reports to SPIP /OHP via ORHP Chair – AS.</p> <p>Current Targets are challenging.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completions 2009/10 - 16 units • Currently on site - 56 units • Currently coming to contract - 52 units (5 sites) • Current pipeline - 74 units (8 sites). <p>To be reported to delivery / core groups</p>
<p>Target to include 30 additional via non-planning route e.g. empty homes or CLT</p>	<p>LOTS, Empty Homes and Rural P&R</p>	<p><i>Work to progress this stretch target yet to commence. As at 06/2010</i></p>	<p>At least 10 units / year</p>	<p>6 monthly updates as above route</p>

Objective 2	Actions	Participants	Timeline	Monitoring activity
Improve systems and procedures for monitoring programme delivery	Establish more sophisticated format for presenting cash spend, allocations and delivery	All RSLs – see action 3 <i>Currently data kept up to date by SB</i>		
Objective 3	Actions	Participants	Timeline	Monitoring activity
Improve systems and procedures for evaluating and demonstrating cost effectiveness	<i>Review; contract value, cost of abnormals, land cost, on-costs, grant funding & RSL loan finance</i>	<i>SB to review all completed projects Database of historic project costs</i>	<i>August 2010</i>	Quarterly reporting to the Chair of ORHP / SPIP
Objective 4	Actions	Participants	Timeline	Monitoring activity
Raising the profile of the ORHP	Improved reporting; between all levels of partnership, giving clear reasons for non-progression etc publicise success.	<i>This objective part of Chair's strategic function to drive improvement of the partnership year on year.</i>	<i>Establish new PR and website project group – 08/2010</i>	<i>Report to HCA, SPIP and LA's quarterly from 09/10 and Parish Councils annually.</i>
	Marketing & PR group to develop plan utilising internal resources to create continuity of methods across Oxon – target landowners etc	<i>AK to lead on this with AS to ensure consistency of information via range of media (leaflets and web)</i>	Plan agreed and implemented following summer holidays in September 2010	Feedback to SPIP and other stakeholders / commissioning bodies by ORHP rep 6 monthly on progress

	Consider how to improve links between SPIP (spatial Planning Implementation Partnership) and ORHP e.g. Examine possible role of 'champion'	<i>Chair of ORHP has completed first phase of this objective.</i>	Lead of SPIP passes to County Council June / July 2010.	<i>Implement new reporting structure July 2010</i>
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Objective 5	Actions	Participants	Timeline	Monitoring activity
Improved delivery	Dedicated planning officer in each District attending DIGs	Planning lead has been identified in each district	Continuous	ORHP to liaise with LPA reps as necessary – via DIG initially.
	Establish improved site delivery policy to include consideration of land values, review of process for site finding, landownership and key contacts database.	<i>ORHP contributions to HCA Good Practice guide that includes rural affordable housing toolkit.</i>	HCA launch of rural good practice guide Birmingham 13-07-2010	<i>All info to be reported to Delivery Group, and SPIP</i>
	Refresh design requirements and quality standards	<i>This work now completed by partnership.</i>		