

Green Belts and affordable housing

Green Belts place stronger restrictions on development in their areas than in the wider countryside. Providing exceptions sites for local needs housing in villages in Green Belts can therefore be a particularly difficult problem. Research by the Planning Policies Research Group at Oxford Brookes University, which investigates the outcomes of the exceptions policy for Green Belts contained in the Government's Planning Policy Guidance note 3 (PPG 3), found that:

- f** Special provisions contained in government policy guidance allowing development of local needs housing in exceptions sites in Green Belt areas are not being widely implemented by local authorities.
- f** Half of Green Belt local authorities felt that guidance did not apply to them, either because they believed local housing needs should be met in nearby towns or because protection of the Green Belt was their overriding priority.
- f** Even those authorities adopting policies in this area did not follow government guidance. The majority of schemes which have been approved were on sites *adjacent* to villages rather than being *within* them, as stated in PPG 3.
- f** The guidance is widely thought to be unworkable. Most owners of potential infill sites within villages have high expectations of what return they might expect and are reluctant to sell at below market value for affordable housing.
- f** Many local authorities consider the development of sites within villages to be potentially more damaging to their character and local distinctiveness than developments on the edge.
- f** The number of Green Belt exceptions schemes built represent only around 4 per cent of the homes implemented under the Housing Corporation's Rural Programme since 1991.
- f** Only a few authorities are active in this area; 28 of the 49 approved schemes are concentrated in just seven counties.

There is a considerable need for more affordable housing in the rural areas of England. The possibility of providing for affordable housing, by the development of 'exceptions sites' in Green Belts, has been recognised in special provisions in PPG 3 *Housing*.

The guidance states that:

- authorities may define 'extensive areas of Green Belt away from the urban fringe', where such special provisions may apply; and
- within such areas the release, exceptionally, of sites for small-scale low-cost housing within existing villages may be allowed.

These provisions, which potentially apply to over 150 district, metropolitan and unitary authorities, were introduced in 1991.

The distribution of approved exceptions schemes

The severe restrictions on land availability caused by Green Belt policy have resulted in a more sparse distribution of exceptions schemes for housing in the countryside near towns than in the wider countryside. Approved schemes, numbering less than fifty, are concentrated largely in Green Belts in the South and the Midlands. Here Green Belt boundaries are at their tightest, and most villages are 'washed over' by the Green Belt rather than being excluded from it within 'insets'.

The approved schemes are almost exclusively in small villages of 500-1500 population, and the majority are within five miles of a major town or city. Local authorities that have been particularly successful in securing the approval of schemes are concentrated in certain counties; these include Hertfordshire and Surrey in the London Green Belt, and Cheshire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire and Hampshire. The average size of scheme approved is for six homes.

Take-up of the exceptions policy

Only half of the local authorities surveyed considered the guidance in PPG 3 to be relevant to their areas, and had taken it up. Reasons for non-take up placed authorities into two categories:

- those who, as a *reasoned policy argument*, had decided local needs housing would be provided exclusively in nearby urban areas, or those where the *settlement structure of the area was inappropriate* there being, for example, no villages in the particular Green Belt; and

- those who held a more *absolute or purist position*, arguing that local needs do not exist in villages close to major towns or cities, or arguing that planning restraint policies should override such needs.

The second of these categories was the largest with one-third of the sample taking this view.

Few authorities have divided their Green Belts into 'extensive areas ... away from the urban fringe', and other areas. Where Green Belt villages or parishes were identified in this way this was based on two rationales. They were:

- seen as capable of accepting limited further development; or
- were of sufficient size to contain supporting services and community facilities.

Most authorities who considered the policy guidance relevant had responded by proposing new policies in their development plans. However, more than half of the authorities are proposing policies allowing the development of sites adjoining villages as well as within villages. Government Offices for the Regions, and Inspectors at appeal, have, however, altered policies and rejected proposals for sites not within village boundaries.

Local authorities, however, consider the requirement that schemes be within villages to be difficult to operate in an unambiguous way. Many 'washed-over' villages in Green Belt have no clear-cut development boundary. Also few, if any, sites clearly within villages are available for low-cost housing.

Land development issues

The majority of the twenty-two sites investigated in detail are located on the edges of villages. Most are on land previously in private or church ownership. The sites within villages are predominantly on land previously owned by local authorities.

The schemes implemented have either:

- come forward in the early years of the exceptions policy, when the particular need to restrict sites to those within the developed area of villages was less strongly insisted upon; or
- been accepted by planning authorities as the most effective compromise if a response to local housing need problems in a particular Green Belt area is to be made.

Authorities argued that the requirement for sites to be located within villages could, in most areas, not be followed. The main reasons were:

- potential infill land in Green Belt villages has high 'hope values' for open market housing, thus leading to the exclusion of low-cost schemes (which rely on cheap sites as a subsidy);
- as a result, land agents are also reluctant to advise landowner clients to bring sites forward at prices significantly lower than market value;
- as potential sites for affordable housing are 'exceptions' to policy they cannot be allocated (ie reserved) in a development plan (in any case tenure is not seen as a relevant consideration in allocating land in development plans); and
- developing within villages may do more damage to village environments than building on their edges, and can clash with Government policies to retain local distinctiveness and improve rural design.

Securing implementation

Where schemes have been successfully implemented, the following ingredients are considered of importance:

- a constructive dialogue between planning and housing departments, in particular to identify appropriate sites and generally to assist in the speedier processing of schemes;
- the use of an internal liaison officer by some authorities has helped speed the process;
- the skills of the Rural Community Councils and the Rural Housing Trust in providing a useful enabling role, in particular with help on local needs surveys and the negotiation of planning permissions; and
- the active participation of Parish Councils to support provision for local needs in principle, and advise on future occupants.

Outstanding problems

The exceptions schemes studied were not, on the whole, well integrated in design terms with the remainder of the village or the surrounding environment. Although the Government pays a rural 'enhancement factor' for small schemes in villages, this does not include any allowance for extra design or landscaping costs.

The strict local occupancy requirements for the schemes studied limit the number of households eligible to occupy homes on completed exceptions sites. Costs of renting or part-purchase are also high in Green Belts. Delays in the development process can

lead to waiting lists becoming out-of-date, causing a need to find new potential occupiers.

The way forward

The study recommends the following main measures to assist with the provision of affordable housing in Green Belts:

- the exceptions sites policy should be the same in Green Belt and non-Green Belt areas of the countryside; that is, *sites adjacent to villages should, in special circumstances, be allowed for development*
- *applicants should be prepared to demonstrate that no other reasonable sites are available within the village or another village in the same parish, to help justify schemes*
- Green Belt exceptions sites are as valid in rural centres over 3,000 population as those below; *exemption from the proposed Purchase Grant Scheme outlined in the Rural White Paper (1995) should be extended to centres over the 3,000 population threshold;*
- *a pilot area-based study, designed to assess needs and site possibilities at the village level, should be developed for a selected Green Belt area;*
- ACRE and the Countryside Commission should co-operate to prepare *Village Design Statements for selected small and large villages in Green Belts*, as an example for others to follow; and
- *rural exceptions sites should be an award category in the RIBA-Department of the Environment design competition to be launched later this year.*

About the study

The study was carried out by Martin Elson, Caroline Steenberg and Nicola Mendham of the Planning Policies Research Group at Oxford Brookes University. Basic information on policy outcomes was obtained from a survey of 159 local authorities, which achieved a response rate of 93 per cent. Detailed case studies of the development process for 22 sites in 17 local authority areas were carried out.

Issues of village vitality were addressed by postal questionnaires of the occupants of nine completed schemes, interviews with 18 housing associations and correspondence with relevant parish clerks to obtain views on parish council involvement.

Further information

Further information can be obtained from Martin Elson, Caroline Steenberg or Nicola Mendham in the Planning Policies Research Group, Oxford Brookes University, Headington, Oxford OX3 0BP or on 01865 484067.

The full report of the study, Green Belts and Affordable Housing: Can we have both? is published by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (£11.95).

Related Findings

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- 110** New arrangements for land release and affordable housing (Mar 94)
- 113** Increasing the housing capacity of urban areas (Jun 94)
- 121** The relationship between land supply and housing production (Aug 94)
- 141** Evaluating rural housing enablers (Apr 95)
- 157** Housing demand and need in England 1991-2011 (Oct 95)
- 170** The re-use of 'brownfield' land for housing (Mar 96)

The following *Summaries* are also relevant:

- 3** Inquiry into planning for housing (Jun 94)
- 8** Future influences on housing (Apr 95)

For further information on these and other *Findings*, contact Sally Corrie on 01904 629241.



Published by the
Joseph Rowntree Foundation
The Homestead, 40 Water End
York YO3 6LP
Tel: 01904 629241 Fax: 01904 620072
ISSN 0958-3084

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