

# COTSWOLDS CONSERVATION BOARD

## POSITION STATEMENT ON AFFORDABLE HOUSING

### ***Background***

The quality of the landscape has made the Cotswolds a desirable place to live, and improvements in road and rail communication have encouraged both week-ending and daily commuting.<sup>1</sup> As a result, the housing market no longer reflects the income of those living and working locally. In 2006, the ratio of average house price to average gross income in Cotswold District was over 16:1, the third highest in the South West Region.<sup>2</sup>

This is unsustainable both economically and socially. Lower-paid workers who are unable to find homes close to their places of work are forced to waste resources commuting unnecessarily into the area,<sup>3</sup> while the inability to find homes close to families and friends weakens community networks and makes it more difficult for people to access essential services.

Building more open market housing would not solve the problem, since this would simply encourage further migration into the area, and the impact on affordability would be negligible.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The role of the Cotswolds Conservation Board***

The Cotswolds Conservation Board has been set up to promote the conservation, enhancement, understanding and enjoyment of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and to foster economic and social well-being. It is consulted by local planning authorities and other public bodies on matters affecting the AONB.<sup>5</sup>

As the quality of the landscape is one of the main causes of high housing demand while the need to protect it means that opportunities for new development are limited, the question of affordable housing is one the Board needs to address. This position statement identifies some of the key issues and recommends the adoption of consistent policies across the AONB.

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1 3.41% of homes in Cotswold District are second homes, compared to an average for England of 1.08%.

2 Figures from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings 2006 and HM Land Registry data 2006 (information from Cotswold DC).

3 30% of the workforce in Cotswold District resides outside the district. (Census 2001)

4 See the worked example of Reading in *Affordability Targets: Implications for Housing Supply*: Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005), p.45-46.

5 Public bodies are under a statutory obligation to have regard to the purposes of AONB designation under S.85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

## **Issues**

- The Government's strategic housing policy objectives are set out in paragraph 9 of Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3). They include creating sustainable, inclusive, mixed communities and ensuring high quality housing for those who cannot afford open market housing.
- The rural nature of the AONB and the environmental constraints that apply within it mean that there are few opportunities for the large-scale mixed-tenure housing schemes that could be used to secure a significant number of affordable homes through legal agreements.
- The demand for housing is such that the value of any site thought to be suitable for housing development is likely to reflect the hope that at some time in the future permission will be granted for open market housing. As a result, landowners may be reluctant to release it for affordable housing.
- Some communities are said to be resistant to the provision of affordable homes, possibly because of misunderstandings about the nature and purpose of affordable housing or concerns about design quality.
- Market pressures mean that most of the historic cottages that help give the Cotswolds its distinctive character are no longer affordable by local people. This has had the effect of excluding them from an important part of their own heritage. At the same time, a significant number of historic buildings, listed and unlisted, are empty or derelict.<sup>6</sup>

## **Recommendations**

1. Strategic Housing Market Assessments covering the AONB should draw a clear distinction between the housing needs of local communities, including people in the specific groups identified in Annex C to PPS3<sup>7</sup>, and the demand for market housing from people wishing to move into the area or to acquire second homes within it. Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessments should give full weight to the need to protect the AONB from inappropriate development.
2. Where there is land suitable for development within the AONB, local planning authorities should take full advantage of the flexibility proposed in paragraph 29 of PPS3 to adopt low site-size thresholds for requiring affordable housing in housing developments, and a high proportion of affordable homes.
3. In settlements where there is very little land suitable for development, local planning authorities should consider allocating it solely for affordable housing rather than relying on "exception" sites not allocated for development. This is envisaged in paragraph 30 of PPS3, and follows one of the recommendations of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission's Final Report in 2006. Such a clear indication that open market housing would not be permitted would have the effect of reducing the

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<sup>6</sup> 3.3% of the housing stock in Cotswold District is empty.

<sup>7</sup> These include homeless households, Black and Minority Ethnic groups, first time buyers, disabled people, older people, Gypsies and Travellers and occupational groups such as key workers, students and operational defence personnel (*Planning Policy Statement 3*, Annex C).

“hope value” of the land and encouraging its release for affordable housing.

4. In areas designated under Section 17 of the Housing Act 1996, which cover most of the AONB, local authorities should ensure that any affordable housing can be retained as such in perpetuity.
5. The new Homes and Communities Agency should maintain the funding provided by the Housing Corporation for rural housing enablers, since their independent role has proved invaluable in gaining community support for affordable housing and identifying suitable exception sites.
6. Parish councils should be encouraged to work with housing enablers to integrate local housing needs surveys with parish plans, village appraisals and village design statements, actively seeking out suitable sites for affordable housing.

### ***Protecting and enhancing the Cotswolds landscape***

7. Like any development within the AONB, new affordable housing should respect the character of existing settlements. This does not mean historical pastiche, but it does mean paying careful attention to the density and form of existing buildings and the relationships between them, and exercising sensitivity in detailing and the use of materials.
8. The use wherever possible of locally-sourced materials will help maintain and enhance local character and distinctiveness.
9. Traditional Cotswold buildings, with their thick walls, stone roofs and comparatively small windows can be very thermally efficient. New design should meet or exceed the Government's aspirations for sustainable construction.
10. Cotswold villages have traditionally been mixed-tenure communities. New affordable housing should be indistinguishable from market housing in character and design quality, and should be fully integrated into the village fabric.

### ***Empty homes and historic buildings at risk***

11. Local authorities should make more use of their powers to acquire empty homes and historic buildings at risk, and should work with local historic building trusts and social housing providers to rehabilitate them as affordable homes. Funding packages should be put together using a creative mixture of historic building grants and housing finance.