

Responding to Growth Network Conference on Rural Housing Tuesday 23 February 2021

For a video recording of this event, please visit <https://youtu.be/v5nxJULspGQ>

Bishop Robert welcomed participants and introduced the evening.

Lord Gardiner, DEFRA

Lord Gardiner, DEFRA Rural Affairs Minister, gave a recorded message of encouragement, emphasising the need for good quality development in local villages and rural communities to help them flourish socially and economically. He spoke of the Government's commitment to "level up" and said that affordable housing underpins community vitality, providing homes for young families, key workers, and older people, with a multi-generational approach being particularly important.

He spoke about the Affordable Homes Programme of Homes England (25,000 new homes between 2011 and 2020) and said that £12 billion was being invested in affordable housing over 5 years. He said that of the 180,000 new homes across the country, 10% are in rural settlements.

Lord Gardiner referred to the Government's Planning White Paper. The Government's ambition is to improve the environment and increase land suitable for new homes, while also involving local communities in neighbourhood planning and helping shape the direction of local development in ways which emphasise quality and match the local vernacular.

Paul Miner, CPRE

Paul Miner spoke about the importance of design quality and true affordability of new housing in rural areas. The key issue, he said, is the provision of genuinely affordable housing.

"Developers are currently required to build affordable homes on sites with more than 10 units. Current proposals will lift this threshold to 40-50 units. With this proposal expected to remain for a minimum of 18 months, it will leave many areas without the affordable housing they so desperately need for many years to come.

But even on the larger schemes, communities aren't getting the kind of new homes they need. Sir Oliver Letwin recommended several changes to planning law and policy to solve this: giving local authorities more powers to influence how new development comes forward and to decide on the mix of new homes built. The Government's changes don't address the main issue: developers can largely build what they like (large detached houses) and where they like.

This means even fewer homes for people on lower incomes, including many key workers. A CPRE study last year found that over 90% of key workers in rural areas are priced out of their communities due to the lack of affordable housing. We believe that:

- Everyone needs a secure, stable, and affordable place to live.
 - Communities in the countryside need a healthy mix of homes, including affordable housing such as for social rent.
 - Housing affordability in the countryside is getting ever worse, pushing young people out of rural areas, as well as the essential workers who make up 33% of the rural population.
 - 9 out of 10 rural areas are currently unaffordable for many essential workers living in private rented accommodation.
 - Social housing rents are affordable, but delivery of social housing is slow while demand is high, and at current build rates, it will take 154 years to clear social housing waiting lists in rural local authorities.
 - This is only set to get worse if the raising of the affordable housing threshold to sites of 40 or 50 homes goes ahead as proposed in the Planning White Paper.
 - Building a development of 10 affordable homes can not only help tackle the affordable housing crisis, but can also help to create sustainable rural communities, by boosting the rural economy by £1.4 million, supporting 26 jobs and generating £250,000 in government revenue.
 - The government needs to invest money into homes people can afford to live in, as part of its levelling up agenda. Our overall top line policy ask is that Government to commit to an investment of £12.8 billion per year for 10 years to help fund the construction of 1.45 million homes in social housing and other affordable tenures, with a fair proportion allocated to rural areas.

In our vision, the planning system will meet local need by improving Section 106 and the Community Infrastructure Levy to ensure all developments provide the right amount of affordable and social housing. More specifically, we know that the Church has already helped provide affordable homes for rural communities on land it owns. There is great potential for it to continue doing so. That is why we welcome the Church's new thinking on rural housing, and we look forward to working further with you.

He spoke about the importance of local democracy and raised serious questions about the Government's proposed planning reforms. In a poll commissioned by the Built Environment Communications Group in September, only 4% of elected councillors stated that they believed the government's proposals would make the planning system more democratic.

Since then, over 2000 councillors have signed an open letter to the Secretary of State calling for the proposals to be revised.

Our 'Vision for planning' calls for a planning system that gives communities a legally guaranteed say on specific planning projects, as well as involving them in the wider planning of their areas.

He also stressed the importance of involvement in Neighbourhood Planning.

Paul spoke about the need to protect and enhance our countryside and local green spaces.

“During lockdown, we have seen how crucial our local green spaces are for our health and well-being, and over two-thirds of people polled by CPRE and the Women’s Institute last

year felt that protecting these spaces should be a higher priority for the government when lockdown ends.

However, the government’s proposals to introduce a zonal planning system would weaken protection of green space within growth or renewal zones and offers no additional safeguards in those earmarked for protection zones.

It is already too difficult to designate new areas of local green space, even where this might be urgently needed. Also, our precious countryside – Green Belts, AONBs and large areas of countryside with no designation – continues to too often be nibbled at to meet arbitrary local housing targets and satisfy developer profits.

We envisage a planning system that both protects and enhances local green spaces in communities, and ring-fences funding to secure a high-quality natural environment close to where people live.”

Rowena King

The Revd Rowena King then reflected on the two addresses, asking: “What questions does rural housing ask of faith? How does faith speak into issue and work out in practice?”.

St John’s Gospel refers to “the Word” becoming “flesh” – the idea of dwelling – “he came and camped (the Greek word) among us” – set up his tent. The nature of God is relational and communal, so local relationships – between people, developers, planners – are at the heart of this involvement. Relationships are slow and messy, but how we participate in positive constructive ways, is so important. This includes responding to NIMBYism, stressing affordability, challenging the impact of second homes and absentee owners, and acting as good stewards. The God “who dwells among us” makes community relations sacred and central.

Group discussion and plenary feedback

The conference then split into groups to respond to two questions:

- What has struck us?
- What do we need to be saying to Government, our communities, ourselves, and the Church?

In the plenary feedback, and in the chat, some key issues arose:

- Communication with local communities is vital.
- The Church should be actively involved in Neighbourhood Plans.
- The geospatial mapping system the C of E is doing will help.
- Social sustainability is key.

- Second homes are a real problem in places like the Cotswolds. They erode community infrastructure.
- Affordable mustn't mean cheap and nasty.

- Communities should be truly diverse in terms of size, tenure etc – which makes them more resilient.
- Invest in community facilities (including schools) at the start and not the end of building out a development.
- Church – don't just flog off your land. Develop it well. Work with others.
- Some developers are committed to building not just houses but communities (NB work of Thakeham with the Plunkett Foundation).

Paul Miner and Rowena King – final comments

Paul welcomed the comments and said that we really must stop building “dormitories” and create inclusive communities. Rowena said local ownership and residence are vital, to avoid absentee homeowners undermining community life. Working together to achieve good results is at the heart of community development.

Next Zoom conference: 20 May at 6pm

The next Zoom conference will be on the report *Coming Home*, with the Bishop for Housing, Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani and two members of the Archbishops' Housing Commission (now serving on the continuing Advisory Group), David Orr, former Chief Executive of the National Housing Federation, and Revd Lynne Cullens, Rector of Stockport and Brinnington and Chair of the National Estate Churches Network.

To register for a place, please