

**REGIONAL RURAL AFFAIRS FORUM CHAIRS' MEETING 5 JUNE 2006****REGIONAL SPATIAL STRATEGIES AND AFFORDABLE RURAL HOUSING****Summary**

**This paper sets out brief details of work currently underway in Defra to contribute to the development of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS), and on the related issue of affordable housing in rural areas.**

**Regional Spatial Strategies**Background

RSSs provide the broad development strategy for their regions for the next fifteen to twenty years. Incorporating the regional transport strategy, RSSs identify the scale and distribution of housing development and the developmental priorities for the environment, transport, infrastructure, minerals, and waste treatment and disposal. All of the regions are currently in the process of transition from old-style Regional Planning Guidance to new-style RSSs, and all of them are at different stages in this process. The most advanced of the RSSs is that for the East of England which has completed its Examination in Public (EiP) stage.

Current/next stage of RSS

London	Internal consultation
South East	Public consultation to June
South West	Draft being considered by Government
West Midlands	Black Country Study being considered by Government
East Midlands	Draft being prepared for public consultation in September
East	Panel preparing report of EiP findings
Yorkshire & Humber	GO considering responses to public consultation
North East	Panel preparing report of EiP findings
North West	Public consultation to June

Defra's role

Defra contributes to the Government response to the draft RSSs, compiled by the Government Offices for the Regions, usually during the consultation period. So far this year we have provided comments on the Yorkshire and Humber, North West and South East RSSs.

We are currently discussing with the GOs the most effective way to ensure that sustainable development across England is at the heart of the emerging RSSs. This covers a range of interests, including:

- support for regional rural economies in conformity with RESs;
- adequate supply of (affordable) housing in rural areas;
- natural resource protection – especially landscape, biodiversity and water resource management;
- resource efficiency – waste management, support for renewable energy development;
- promotion of sustainable transport;
- and adaptation and mitigation to climate change at the regional level.

As a starting point, we have provided general advice to Government Offices (in the form of a “Core Script”) to help them ensure that the full range of sustainable development issues are reflected in the draft RSSs at an early stage. In recent months we have also been working to produce a “Rural Script” to clarify the national objectives for sustainable rural communities which the RSSs need to translate into regional policy. In addition, we are providing detailed comments on the draft strategies as they emerge and will be providing support to the GOs at the Examination in Public stage of the process.

#### Rural concerns

Government Offices prepare a Governmental response to draft RSSs based on input from all interested Departments and Defra’s comments on rural policy issues form only one part of that.

The issues raised for rural areas by RSSs will vary from region to region, but to give a sense of some of those, brief details of some of the comments we provided to GOYH on the draft RSS for Yorkshire and Humber during the public consultation are set out below.

#### ***The Yorkshire & Humber Plan – Defra’s comments on rural issues***

We welcomed the positive effect that many of the proposals set out in the Core Approach of the RSS would have on the Region’s rural areas, particularly:

- **diversifying rural economies** to help deliver a better performing and more competitive economy;
- focusing development and investment on **improving the connection with excluded communities and areas requiring regeneration**;
- the **proposal to reverse the trend of population and investment** dispersal away from the Region’s cities and major towns by making such areas more attractive places to live; and
- to an extent, **the role of market towns as the local development and service focus** for meeting the needs of rural areas.

However, we had concerns about the extent to which these proposals will be supported by the **housing policies** in the RSS. We were content that the emphasis on affordable housing, and particularly the requirement that 33% of total housing provision should be affordable, but we were concerned that the policies proposed are not sufficient to deliver.

Our other main concerns were:

- The RSS would not allow sufficient land to come forward for the provision of affordable housing through Section 106 agreements.
- The policies do not appear to reflect current or draft guidance on how RSS should address need by providing targets and be guided by Housing Market Assessments.
- The Y&H RSS does not sufficiently adapt the sustainable approach in a rural context to meet the requirement in PPS1, PPG3 and draft PPS3 that to be suitable for development, a site should offer a sustainable option for development and contribute to the creation of sustainable urban and rural communities.

The approach adopted in the RSS places significant reliance on the Social Housing Grant to provide affordable housing - not allocating sites which would provide affordable housing through Section 106 agreements raises concerns about how the targets for housing provision in the RSS will be met.

## Affordable Rural Housing

### Affordable Rural Housing Commission

Last year, Government set up an Affordable Rural Housing Commission to examine the full range of issues around the problem. The Commission launched its report on 17 May. The report makes a series of detailed recommendations to address the shortage of affordable housing in rural areas.

The Commission also expressed concern that the sustainability appraisal criteria which are used for each RSS to determine policies for rural areas do not currently give sufficient weight to social issues. It recommended that the Government should review the criteria currently used.

The Government has welcomed the report and agrees with the Commission that more social housing is needed in rural areas and is currently considering the report in detail.

### Background to the issue

Evidence shows that in most rural areas, housing is unaffordable to people on low or even modest incomes. It is particularly problematic across the southern part of England, but with hotspots in other areas too. There are a number of causes – increasing demand for housing in rural areas from people already living in rural areas or seeking to move from urban areas, and limited building of new housing due to a focus on urban regeneration and policies of environmental protection.

Without a range of affordable housing in rural communities, those dependent on low incomes do not have an opportunity to live in the countryside. This affects the social and economic mix of rural communities, it undermines social support networks and the viability of rural businesses.

### What is Defra doing?

Defra has been pursuing a range of activities to address the problem, including:

- ***Influencing the work of other departments***  
The key policy levers to tackle this problem are held by ODPM. Defra works to influence ODPM policy, and the soon to be published *Planning Policy Statement 3: Housing*, is an example of where we have worked together successfully.
- ***Supporting regional and local action***  
As set out above, Defra also assists Government Office colleagues to rural proof Regional Spatial Strategies. The draft RSSs we have seen to date vary in their approach to and emphasis on meeting affordable housing need. Our experience (as seen in the Y&H example above, and broadly echoed by the ARHC's inquiry) is generally that RSSs could do significantly more to ensure that the districts / sub-regions have sufficient land for the local authorities to respond to the Local Housing Assessments and consequently to meet adequately local rural need. Greater endorsement will be required by RSSs of the raft of policies being put forward by the draft Planning Policy Statement 3 (PPS3), so that local authorities are able to secure the maximum amount of affordable housing from developments

in their area, and much closer complementarity between the RSS and Regional Housing Strategy.

Rural housing needs also feature as a priority in the regional rural delivery frameworks developed over the past year by the GOs.

- ***Rural Housing Enablers***

Under the Rural Social and Communities Programme we provide funding that is being used to support forty Rural Housing Enablers. RHEs work closely with rural communities to assist them to identify their housing needs and find appropriate solutions by helping them build links with local authorities, housing associations and landowners.

**Defra Sustainable Communities Division  
June 2006**