

Is Localism the answer to the lack of rural housing?



With all the doom and gloom surrounding the lack of funding for property development, you would be forgiven for thinking that the banks are on the forefront of every developers mind and, more to the point, what is the government going to do about it?!

OK, in all seriousness, this is a huge concern especially in light of the demand for housing across the country and the lack of funding available for development. So for once it is quite nice to realise that the new Localism Bill, which was introduced by the Secretary of State at the end of 2010, may actually help.

Development in rural areas has always been tricky; green belts and greenfield sites, lack of infrastructure and the, not inconsiderable voice of the NIMBY. The 'Not In My Back Yard' gang have been around for some time and, traditionally have made themselves heard above any other group in a community. However, times are changing and the daily news of another rural village losing its pub, shop, or school are becoming worryingly familiar and changing the minds of even the toughest of opponent.

So how will the announcement of the Localism Bill help? Well, although we don't yet know what final form the bill will take, its emphasis will be on devolving greater powers to councils and allowing local communities more of a say in housing and planning decisions going forward. Coupled with the announcement that on all new sites granted planning under the new coalition government, the local council will receive the first 6 years of council tax payments which will provide an additional income stream that was not available in the past, rural developments could finally be on the increase.

Traditionally, a lot of developments have halted before they have begun with objections to planning from people within the community. Local concerns have included 'any development will ruin the area' 'the impact on the environment will be a disaster' and 'social housing will decrease the value of my house'. And, to be honest, I do have some sympathy with these views. I live in a rural village myself and the prospect of any large scale development sends a shiver down my spine. Extra houses will equal extra cars and traffic speeding and parking are already major issues for our village. On the other hand, I have also been instrumental in the creation of our Parish Plan and the demand for certain types of housing were very apparent. Small scale development could be crucial to the continuing evolution and life-blood of our community – we already have an ageing population with nowhere to down-size too, can we afford to ignore the younger families as well?

So how do you allay peoples' fears? Well, by demonstrating that a project could actually enhance the area by regenerating what is often a run-down site, as well as gifting the community something they need, is a good starting point. In my professional life, I work for an asset management company that specialises in providing UCIS in the property development asset class. We see the announcement of the Localism Bill as an opportunity; many of our projects already have large community, or Localism, elements and we believe that it is this approach and, in particular, our philosophy of working with the local community, that is key to our success.

So many villages are dying due to the lack of development and the availability of houses for people to bring up their families in and, also, for the elderly to down-size. If you out-price young couples and their children, the primary school will suffer and, ultimately close. This in turn could lead to the end of the village shop and pub. How many local villages have already lost these valuable assets? So could the Localism Bill, with its power to give communities more of a say really help? Will there now be a power shift in rural villages with the majority being given a chance to be heard and housing once more being on the agenda? Personally, I hope so – traditional rural life is something worth fighting for. The simple pleasure of walking to the village shop to pick up a paper, saying “good morning” to a fellow villager and, if you are lucky, spotting a kestrel hovering above or its intended prey scurrying away to safety is something to cherish.

We all know that something has got to happen to stop the decline of rural life and that new, affordable housing is crucial. Whether it is the Localism Bill or the new 5% rate for purchases of residential property announced in the Budget that will help, let’s bring it on; the clock is ticking. We all know that, in the end, change is inevitable, except of course, from a vending machine...

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