

## **Affordable Housing meeting – 22<sup>nd</sup> June Bigbury**

**In attendance:** Sue Hitchcock – Rural Housing Enabler for the community of Devon, Debbie Holloway Affordable Housing Officer South Hams District Council, Malcolm Elliott – Chief Planning Officer SHDC, Cllr Mike Saltern, councillor responsible for housing SHDC, members of Bigbury Parish Council.

The meeting was opened by Cllr Terry Edgcombe Chair, who asked for a show of hands to indicate whether there was support for affordable housing in the parish. Votes were not counted but there was a positive response .

Cllr Carson explained that the project had come about firstly because a piece of land was now on the market that could fit the bill for a small development in St Ann's Chapel. He quoted a survey that had been done in 2008 for the whole of the South Hams by the council, which showed that in the Charterlands ward the top priority for improvement was affordable housing (in common with our three neighbouring wards.) He also noted that the second priority in this ward and one neighbouring ward was Public Transport, and commented on some of the other priorities.

Secondly, regarding developments at the Pickwick Inn, the planning permission that had been granted there would not be the sort of houses that would be suitable for the kind of family/working people occupation under discussion, but that the planning permission had been granted under the '106' agreement that meant that approximately £104 thousand pounds would have to be paid by whoever developed the site towards affordable housing. He added that it was not the intention to build in front of existing houses, and stressed that a need for affordable housing for local working people had been identified, and these were the reasons for the proposals.

Sue Hitchcock, the Rural Housing Enabler for the community of Devon (who works alongside 5 local authorities and a number of Rural Social housing Landlords –e.g. Tor Homes) took over to explain that a needs survey had been carried out in October 2010 for Bigbury parish. She stressed that the survey had identified the need at a moment in time for this parish only, and that the need at that time had been for 24 homes.

She then described at length how an earlier scheme where farmers could receive between £5 to 10 thousand pounds a plot to release land on exception sites for affordable housing had been replaced by the Village Housing Initiative scheme where the farmer and the developer would receive one house each instead of the cash payment. This had been successful in releasing more land for the village housing projects. She pointed out that the maximum number of houses that could be built in any one village was fifteen.

A question was raised regarding the serious concern that these houses, like others in the area would simply be sold on, at a great profit to the vendor, to outsiders as second homes because of the very high value of houses in the area. Sue Hitchcock explained that a legal clause of the 106 agreement ensured that the houses would remain as affordable houses for local people in perpetuity, and that they would always be held either wholly or in part by the Housing Association, and could not legally be sold on to anyone else.

It was then remarked that many people in the village had not received the 2010 survey. Discussion at this point and again later in the meeting revealed that there had been a misunderstanding regarding the distribution of the survey – the intention had been that it go to every household, but it had, in fact been mainly given to people who either had a housing need, either now or in the near future, and to people who had family who had moved away because of lack of affordable housing. There had also been a misconception that the survey was for the young people of the parish and it was in fact a much broader survey. Sue Hitchcock indicated that in view of this she would be happy to receive comments after the meeting from anyone who had objections to the development or who would wish to support it.

Then it was pointed out that the 2010 survey of needs was at odds with the Parish Plan of 2009. In the former, a return of 28% had revealed a need for 24 houses which might suggest that the need is in fact larger, whilst in the latter, a return of 50%, only 10 said yes when asked if they had a need for housing, which would suggest that the need is smaller. This raised the question as to what exactly was the true need. Sue Hitchcock said that she had only been able to work on the figures from her own survey.

A question was raised regarding the value of houses, and how an ‘average’ price was calculated. It was explained that the figure was reached using the price of houses on the market in an area at a given time.

A parishioner spoke on behalf of his son, a skilled worker, and partner, also skilled and working locally who had had to move to Modbury because of the shortage of affordable houses in the parish; he expressed 100% support of houses being built in the parish.

The next question asked for a definition of ‘housing need’ given that at least some of those people who had returned the survey were presumably already in a house. It was explained that a wide number of reasons were given, examples being the need for a larger or smaller house according to changes such as increasing or decreasing family, or the need to care or be cared for, the unaffordable prices of the private sector, a job in the area etc.

The next question asked where the houses would be, adding that if a need for 24 had been identified did this mean that now 24 would be built. It was reiterated that 15 was the maximum number of houses that could be built on the Village Initiative scheme. The question was then repeated as to the whereabouts of the proposed houses, with the added objection that it seemed that the location had already been identified.

Further heated discussion revealed a variety of concerns including:  
the specification for the two open market houses for the landowner and developer – they would match the specification of the other houses in the development;  
would these two houses be within the development or separate – within;  
would the landowner get both the £5-10 thousand per plot *and* the house - it was reiterated that the house was *instead of* the money;  
had any other farmers been offered the opportunity to have the houses on their land – this piece of land had been proposed because it was known to be available: the need

for land for these schemes has been extensively advertised in the county with little result;

the location of these houses would inflate their value, making them unaffordable – we have to provide affordable houses under the terms of the initiative.

The next question asked what would be the criteria for obtaining one of the houses. Sue Hitchcock explained that it was vital that anyone interested in being housed here must register with Devon Home Choice, where they would be banded according to need. The first criterion would be connection to the parish, and this would allow them to bid for the houses once they became available. The nature and urgency of their housing need would be the next criteria considered. She also took the opportunity to explain that, should the project move forward, further survey would establish the nature of the houses needed, be they 1,2, or 3 bedroomed etc., and that establishing the need was the first vital step in the project moving forward.

A parishioner commented that the Community Council of Devon is a very reputable organisation, that we all want community cohesion and a varied flourishing community, and expressed strong support for the project. Another suggested that it was rich outsiders who were gazumping the prices of our properties thus making them unaffordable and that a tax should be levied on second home owners.

A serious concern was expressed regarding the danger of the road and junction at St Anns Chapel, which is made worse in summer by holidaymakers: this therefore would be a bad place to put more houses and more traffic. Malcolm Elliott explained that these would be the sorts of issues that would be addressed at the workshop meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> July when the relevant agencies would be present. He commented that this meeting seemed to be establishing the need for houses, and the will for them, and that there was land available. He pointed out that the meeting on 6<sup>th</sup> July could not cover the same ground as the present meeting. People should register the nature of their need in order for the right houses to be put into the right places.

There followed strong contention regarding who would attend the workshop meeting. There had been confusion as to whether it was an open or a closed meeting – originally it was to have been closed in the interests of efficiency, but then concern over openness had led to the feeling that more people should be allowed to attend.

It was then pointed out that the most serious point of contention was the location of the houses, which had not yet been divulged in detail, that people would not be able to vote on anything until they knew the actual site of the houses, and that the perceived site was not sensible because it was in the AONB and on a dangerous road. A question followed asking whether people had been invited to this meeting to vote on the principle of affordable houses in the parish or on the site proposed – as they were two very different questions.

The next question asked what procedures would be in place to monitor who would be benefiting or profiting from the building of the houses. This was taken to imply that perhaps Cllr Edgcombe and Cllr Carson might receive backhanders – a response that was strongly felt to be most unfair since the question was general and not personal. It

was specifically requested that this be minuted in view of the fact that the minute taker was Cllr Carson's wife

Following on from this it was pointed out that all this was being driven by the Parish council, and how was it that there had never been a vote within the parish council regarding the proposals. There was confusion about this because some councillors said that there had been a vote, but it had not been minuted

Malcolm Elliott replied that profit could not be made under the terms of the '106' agreement, and agreed that the site had been led by the parish council.

It was reiterated that no consideration of alternative sites had been carried out, and Cllr Carson agreed, saying that it was the availability of the land that had started the process.

A question was asked regarding the Pickwick Inn development, and Malcolm Elliott replied that it complied with planning policy and that its relevance here was to do with the fact that when those houses were built £104 thousand would have to be paid towards affordable housing.

A parishioner remarked that we are a community strangled by second home owners, and we need to establish in the meeting firstly whether the community does want affordable houses to be built, and secondly the whereabouts of the houses. Clarity was needed on the purpose of the meeting. A second parishioner made the same points.

Councillor Mike Saltern of SHDC pointed out that the point of the Village Housing Initiative was that it was to be community led. He described how one scheme that is in progress has taken 2 years to get to the planning stage, and that it has required many meetings to get there. He emphasised that if there was no need for houses the process would end, and that if there was no site it would end – only the parish could decide whether or not it would move forward.

A response to this was that a fuller survey needs to take place before we can move forward, but another was that there should be a vote. The chairman had been reluctant to take a vote because many of those present were from outside the parish. Malcolm Elliott said it seemed that there was majority support for affordable housing in the parish, but that a minority would support the site under discussion. He said that the 6<sup>th</sup> July meeting would be the site selection process, and that alternative proposals would need to be submitted before that date, emphasising that they would have to be *deliverable* sites.

Cllr Watts of Bigbury PC suggested that the project had been too rushed and pointed out that the Parish Plan questionnaire had asked about support for housing development: only 7% had been in support of a large group of houses, and 51% would support individual development: he remarked that this site was out of scale and proportion. Mr Elliott replied that only a viable plan would go forward.

It was suggested that since the survey seemed to have been flawed, the parish council should reassess the need by ensuring all households were included in the survey adding that it seemed possible that the need may be even greater than already identified. In the meantime other land in Bigbury should be identified for possible development. Debbie Holloway pointed out that there would be no more money from

the council for surveys in this parish, but that as far as she was concerned a definite need had been identified.

The discussion then became disjointed, some of the views being that the process had been too rushed, that there was an issue about information since the exact location of the site was still not clear, that the Parish Plan displayed different information, and that there were people at the meeting who needed affordable homes.

The Chairman suggested that the meeting be closed so that the Parish Council could go back and clarify matters, especially with regard to the 6<sup>th</sup> July meeting, and this was agreed.