



Alison said that the Government has now also introduced a 1% rental cut for the next four years so housing associations now have to reduce rents charged by 1%. This could reduce the amount of rental received across all the ERHA stock by £1 million. The Government is now giving housing associations around £15,000 grant per new shared ownership dwelling. There is no Government grant for rental units. ERHA do wish to continue to offer rental units and, in order to do this, a small element of open market housing may have to be included in the development. This would provide cross subsidy to fund the rented units.

ERHA has now introduced a discounted local sale scheme where homes are sold at 70% of open market value, offering the home to people with a local connection for the first twelve weeks of marketing. Alison said that ERHA is now finding that small bungalows for older people are needed in villages. ERHA has developed a small development of twelve properties including six bungalows in Wickham Bishop. In Seal, the Parish Council identified a range of sites, held a public consultation, and invited local people to vote for their preferred scheme. The process ensured consultation at an early stage and demonstrated transparency regarding the local needs housing project.

Alison said that the average scheme that ERHA undertakes is six to eight units. The cross subsidy element (open market housing) could be one unit on a development of that size depending upon a financial appraisal. An alternative option to the provision of one open market dwelling is self-build, and ERHA could in this instance sell a serviced plot which is of low risk to them financially. Cross subsidy is national planning policy, and ERHA would have to prove that the scheme is unviable without an element of open market housing. SDC may accept this, at the moment they are considering it but have not yet made any decisions.

Alison suggested that the Parish Council considers carrying out a site search to identify sites which are close to existing amenities, and ERHA will then talk to the landowner and discuss potentially buying the land at a multiple of agricultural value. Sometimes, landowners have unrealistic ideas on value. The Parish Council and ERHA would discuss the potential site, the scheme and the design of dwellings and preliminary plans will be drawn up ready for a parish consultation exercise. Economies of scale is important. ERHA has in the past provided schemes of four dwellings but probably this would not be possible now due to cost. Six units would probably be the minimum number, however ERHA is flexible and it will depend upon the site. The project would normally take a couple of years to develop, and it is important to spend time discussing the scheme with any objectors. ERHA's programme is set for the next three years but schemes come and go in the programme depending upon their progress. If a scheme is financially viable it is easy to slot in. Once the site has been found, the timescale can be tied down.

Richard declared an interest as he owns a site that he will put forward for consideration for affordable housing. He said that if the Parish Council is able to identify three sites in three villages, and is able to split their housing need of 11 units into, say two developments of 4 units each and one development of 3 units, then the impact on each village is not high and new residents integrate into the community easily. It would be hoped that the sites chosen would offer the potential to increase the number of affordable housing units in future years, allowing the villages to grow in a sustainable and sympathetic way.

Alison said that she has read Chiddingstone Parish Council's Housing Needs Survey report, and said that it is good evidence and independently carried out, which is important when seeking planning support on an exception site. The results of the survey will have a shelf-life of five years and it is not necessary to carry out a second survey. If the Parish Council wishes to undertake a second, more site-specific survey, it would be good to have the housing association on board so that they could have their input. Applicants have to be on the Sevenoaks Housing Register. ERHA interview applicants for the units, and give a list of applicants to the Parish Council for them to confirm the local connection. ERHA will then allocate depending upon need. In rural areas, household income to be eligible for a shared ownership dwelling is £60,000, and a maximum household income of £40,000 is required for rental units. This criteria is included in the planning agreement (S.106) which is set by SDC. There will be a cascade system so that if a unit is not filled from within the parish, a list of named neighbouring parishes is included in the S.106 to allow the housing association to seek an applicant from an adjoining parish. The planners will want to see that the housing association has looked at all possible sites in the parish, and it is important to have a good list of sites drawn up even if land might not be available.

Alison said that she is going to attend a training event on Community Land Trusts in March, which will be interesting. CLT does give more control to the Parish Council and, if the Parish Council own the land, it will not be possible to sell the units under the Right to Buy because the housing association does not own the freehold. Iden Green Parish Council set up a trust and developed a scheme on land that they own, leasing land to ERHA but retaining the freehold themselves. These are rented units and rent levels are 80% below open market rents. Rental levels are set within the Local Housing Allowance (LHA). ERHA sets its rental levels below the LHA. Housing values are high in Chiddingstone so ERHA will be able to borrow against a new development – usually the lending term is 40 years now because the lack of Government grant. Housing benefit will fill the gap between qualifying tenant’s income and the rental level if necessary.

Alison said that the Housing & Planning Bill should be finalised in the summer. It is currently being debated in the House of Lords. The focus is on affordable shared ownership units.

Alison said that ERHA has a policy on maintenance. This is important. Each house is externally decorated every five years and each scheme has a dedicated housing manager who regularly visits the development.

Richard thanked Alison for coming along to talk to the Parish Council, and undertook to be in touch again in due course.

The meeting closed at 8.40pm

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