

Barker Review Of Housing Supply Submission of Uttlesford District Council

Issue 1 – Is the supply of land overly constrained?

Shortage of suitable land for development? Factors which reduce a landowner's willingness to sell?

In terms of RPG 9 requirements there is no shortage of suitable land for development in Uttlesford. There is an up to date local plan with sufficient appropriate proposals sites to meet the Structure Plan housing requirement for Uttlesford to 2011 comfortably. The area is one of strong market demand and there is competition between developers for allocated sites or opportunities on previously developed land. This does lead to representations from developers who do not have a site that a broader spread of sites should be identified, but normally large sites are parcelled up by developers and serviced building sites are sold on to other developers as schemes are implemented. Developers tend to have established partnerships with particular registered social landlords. RSLs seeking to expand their operations into the district which are not involved in a partnership with a developer with a site in Uttlesford, find it difficult to secure opportunities. RSLs also are finding it difficult to obtain exception site opportunities as landowners, unrealistically for the most part, attach hope value to their land on the edge of villages because of the inclusion of Uttlesford in a Communities Plan Growth Area.

Problems associated with land assembly?

There have been no particular problems with land assembly locally. Some of the large green field sites and town centre brown field sites allocated embrace a mixture of landholdings. It has been generally possible to overcome the issues of multiple ownerships by assembling the larger parcels and securing planning permission for a scheme involving the majority of the proposals sites, ensuring that minority holdings can be incorporated at a later date. This requires inter developer/ landowner agreements to secure the delivery of comprehensive developments, for example where a new school or other facility serving the whole development is provided on one developer's land, which can delay implementation.

Land allocated sufficient to meet housing need?

Yes, in terms of household change forecasts, which include provision for net in migration into Uttlesford. Indeed, the most significant component of growth in the number of households in the district to 2011 is net in migration. However, our household needs assessment based on a survey of residents indicates that the number of households needing affordable housing will grow substantially over the next five years. This is because of the rapid increase in house prices in recent years relative to household incomes. Because most of the land that will be developed over the period to 2011 already has planning permission, it is important to try and find other ways of increasing the affordable housing element within committed development.

Is the RPG housing shortfall explained by a shortfall in the number of appropriate planning applications?

Essex as a whole is exceeding its RPG annual rate requirement. Uttlesford is not however meeting the related Structure Plan annual rate requirement. There are several reasons for this. Some large sites need to be phased in whole or part until the new A120 is open. Although now

in prospect by December 2003 (western section) and July 2004 (eastern section), repeated delays in the programme by Governments have meant that sufficient capacity has not been available to accommodate the traffic generated by residential development. Other large sites controlled by volume housebuilders have not progressed as rapidly as they could because of a lack of responsiveness to potentially strong market demand, the need to assemble a skilled construction workforce, the need to increase the density of some schemes to comply with PPG3 particularly in the light of the Greenfield Land Direction, the expiry of options and the need for interdeveloper agreements as a new developer became involved. The fact that employment opportunities at Stansted Airport have not materialised as expected in development plans may also have been a factor. The shortfall is not explained by a lack of planning applications.

Issue 2

Shortages of essential skilled workers? Alternative production methods?

Some housebuilders have a very conservative attitude to construction techniques and, indeed, it is a matter of pride to the housebuilder on the largest development site in the District that it builds traditional homes to a very high standard. The company's practices have been endorsed by the industry with national awards. This is its "unique selling proposition". It is understood that this company has had difficulties assembling a large enough skilled workforce meeting its quality standards to support other than a limited annual production of houses, although it has now succeeded in recruiting to its requirements and can now significantly increase production.

Particular problems to developing brown field land?

One of the four very large development sites in the district involves the redevelopment of a sugar beet factory site. In the context of strong market demand, development of this site has proved to be viable and is producing new homes. Brown field land should not be more expensive for a developer, because the value of the land should reflect any exceptional costs of reclamation and remediation of contamination. Redevelopment of this particular site has encountered some unforeseen problems, but solutions have been found to the issues arising.

Issue 3

Interpretation of planning guidance?

Circular 6/98 Planning and Affordable Housing is a continuing problem. The problem is that the types of affordable housing that meet the objective of providing housing for people unable to meet their housing requirements in the local housing sector market are more limited than the circular anticipates. Because of the relationship between housing costs and incomes in Uttlesford they are effectively:

- units for rent (the main group)
- shared ownership with grant, or
- shared equity where land value is retained to provide housing for sale at below market levels and where control of the equity discount can be retained in perpetuity.

Circular 6/98 lacks clarity particularly regarding low cost market housing. Small starter home units that are provided without subsidy to meet the needs of households with income levels just adequate to access the new homes market, are not affordable homes in terms of the above objective. Low cost market housing provided with subsidy does have a role in meeting housing needs. Small starter homes have a role in helping to achieve mixed and balanced communities,

but are needed in addition to affordable homes. It is hoped that revisions to PPG3 and cancellation of Circular 6/98 will address this problem by defining affordable housing in terms of a range of types from social renting to intermediate housing and recognising the role of different products in high and low demand areas respectively.

Aspects of planning policy which do not properly reflect the wider social and economic cost and benefits of housing?

Planning policy does recognise the importance of meeting housing needs.

Planning system incentives to develop brown field land?

In an area of high market demand like Uttlesford, the development industry will seek out all development opportunities including brown field land. It has not been necessary to put in place phasing policies to ensure that brown field sites are developed before green field sites.

Current planning system reform programme

Expectations of the reforms speeding up the system significantly are likely to prove optimistic. Whereas the current system allows for consensus building, there are signs that the pace and lack of local engagement in the regional and sub regional planning process will prove counterproductive in terms of adopting local development documents expeditiously.

S106 agreements - an effective means for mitigating the impact of developments?

Yes.

Issue 4 – Why has the industry not expanded provision of affordable housing or housing for rent?

The industry manages to give the impression that providing affordable housing runs counter to its objective of a profitable market housing business, that it is in its interest to minimise the amount of affordable housing it has to provide, and that it only provides affordable housing because it has no option under Government planning policy. It is acknowledged though that the industry now expects to provide an element of affordable housing and is geared up to meet that obligation, provided the requirement meets the established norms of about 25% affordable homes, a split of rented and shared ownership, and at TCI. It remains to be seen how the industry reacts to and accommodates requirements that 40-50% of units should be affordable on sites in high demand areas, which are now beginning to appear in adopted plans.