

Consultation on the Regional Housing Strategy and Strategy for Allocation of the Regional Single Housing Pot

Response of the Vision 21 Malvern Hills Partnership

Vision 21 Malvern Hills Partnership is the local strategic partnership covering the Malvern Hills District. It is comprised of over 50 organisations that represent local interests and business together with local authorities, public organisations and agencies. The Partnership published the first Community Strategy for the District in November 2002 following extensive public consultation.

One of the key priorities identified by local people was "Housing To Suit Everyone's Needs". We therefore welcome the opportunity to comment on the draft Regional Housing Strategy (RHS) and Strategy for Allocation of the Regional Single Housing Pot. Others will no doubt comment on the detailed elements of the Strategy but we shall confine our response to the more strategic issues.

The Partnership welcomes the extensive research that underpins the new Regional Housing Strategy and considers this a model of good practice. However, our concern is what is happening on the ground within Malvern Hills. We see rising waiting and transfer lists, falling turnover in the social rented stock managed by RSL's and diminishing housing allocations in future years. Demand for homes is rising rapidly and evidence for this is available from the district Housing Need Assessment, October 2004. Section 4 of the RHS also identifies Malvern Hills as an area suffering high levels of homelessness.

House prices are far too high for the majority of new households in the District to enter home ownership and clear evidence of this is given in the data contained in Sections 2 and 3 of the RHS. Affordability is a major problem leading to loss of younger economically active people from the District and an ageing population profile, most notably in rural areas. There is little in the RHS that gives us confidence that these pressures will be relieved in the short to medium term.

Even in the longer term when out migration from the conurbations has been reversed the issue of affordability is likely to remain a significant challenge. Inward migration from other affluent parts of the country will continue, as the District is an attractive and safe place in which to live, and particularly in which to retire. This will perpetuate the problem.

The Vision 21 Partnership looks to the RHS and the Strategy for Allocation of the Regional Single Housing Pot to recognise the serious nature of the problems facing rural areas such as ours. We accept the need to make best use of the existing housing stock and to ensure Decent Homes standards are achieved, but urgently require investment in provision of new affordable homes for rent and low cost ownership.

Funding of rural schemes should remain a high priority for ADP allocation. To this end we do welcome the indication that ADP funding will be made available for acquisition of existing properties as this will be of benefit in our villages and places like Upton upon Severn where new development is constrained by the river flood plain. We would also ask that the eligibility criteria for schemes such as Homebuy are reviewed to make them as widely available as practicable to those in housing need.

Another aim of the Partnership is the creation of “Secure And Fulfilling Jobs”. Malvern is a key component of the Central Technology Belt and is building on the success of our major employer, QinetiQ, and high technology businesses based at the Malvern Hills Science Park. However, this success in promoting economic development adds to the inward migration of people to live in the District and fuels the rise in house prices.

Within the context of sustainable communities and development a balance must be struck between the often conflicting impacts arising from protection of the environment, promotion of economic development or job creation, and meeting local housing need. Housing developments should contain an appropriate mix of type and tenure to support sustainable communities and be of high quality design that is sensitive to the local environment and locality. The settlement hierarchy for development should also take account of the availability of facilities and services and accessibility by use of public transport.

The Regional Spatial Strategy identifies Worcester as a sub-regional foci for growth of both business and housing. If the City cannot accommodate this level of growth within its own boundary then the excess may impact on Malvern Hills and our neighbour Wychavon. Our concern is that this will add to pressure on the local housing market and soak up future housing allocations to the detriment of existing communities within the Malvern Hills District.

Our District is probably unique as a rural area in the West Midlands in that it is covered in part by both the Central Technology Belt and the Rural Regeneration Zone, and will be affected significantly by the economic growth of Worcester. The combination of these factors is likely to add further pressure on house prices and demand for social renting and low cost ownership. We consider that the RHS and the Allocation Strategy must recognise these issues in directing future housing investment within the Region. The mapping of housing investment against AWM's investment priorities in figures 2.4a and 2.4b shows a current mismatch and shortfall as far as housing investment in Malvern Hills is concerned. We feel this is a serious deficiency in linkage between strategic policies that must be addressed.

Another area of concern is that of linkage between investment in housing to complement the Supporting People programme. We know of the pressure being applied to limit the cost of implementation of Supporting People and look to the RHS to give due priority to this issue.

The Vision 21 Partnership has had some difficulty in forming a view on the Allocation Strategy for the RSHP as there are no details provided for the breakdown of investment across the sub-investment areas within the Housing Market Areas. Once this information is available we would welcome further consultation.

In conclusion the Partnership considers that the Regional Housing Board should do all in its power to promote to the Government the investment needs of the West Midlands so that adequate levels of funding and resources are made available. The strong evidence base is valuable leverage and to this end should give the West Midlands an advantage over other regions. We would also urge the Board to consider how local strategic partnerships might add their collective weight behind a campaign for improved funding and housing allocations to the Region.