

A National Park Promotes Affordable Homes

The Challenge

One of the major challenges facing Dorset is the provision of affordable homes for young people, key workers and others with needed skills. Without such homes we will continue to have difficulty in attracting and retaining such people, creating more balanced communities with a better inter-generational mix, and growing our economy.

The [South Downs National Park](#) faces a similar issue, as the following extract from its Partnership Management Plan 2014-2019 (PMP) (*1) shows:

“An important issue is that current property prices are above the national average and there are relatively low numbers of smaller homes, so accessing affordable housing is a challenge for those on lower incomes. This particularly impacts on young people and young families.”

The Government Framework

The Government sets the framework within which National Parks operate and has said the following about National Park Authorities:

“The Authorities have an important role to play as planning authorities in the delivery of affordable housing. Through their Local Development Frameworks, they should include policies that pro-actively respond to local housing needs.” (*2)

What is the SDNPA’s approach?

The South Downs PMP builds on this and states that it “seeks the creation of more balanced communities (communities with a diverse range of age, socio-economic and social groups).”

It backs this up through a key policy statement:

“Policy 50: Housing and other development in the National Park should be closely matched to the social and economic needs of local people and should be of high design and energy efficiency standards, to support balanced communities so people can live and work in the area.”

Its Affordable Housing Options Paper (*3) states:

“The SDNPA’s Duty to “foster the social and economic wellbeing of the local communities within the National Park” includes the need to ensure residents can afford the costs of a decent home. There are many types of affordable housing models, and SDNPA should aim to deliver truly affordable and sustainable accommodation for its communities.”

The NPA’s definition of Affordable Housing reflects its commitment to the provision of genuinely affordable housing which continues to be available at affordable rents, as follows.

Affordable Housing means:

“Social rented, affordable rented and intermediate housing, provided to eligible households whose needs are not met by the market. Eligibility is determined with regard to local incomes and local house prices. Affordable housing should include provisions to remain at an affordable price for future eligible households.”

Dorset and the SDNPA face similar problems in relation to rental policies, as the SDNPA’s Affordable Housing paper (para 4.4 et seq) indicates:

Affordable rent formulas are controlled by the Homes & Communities Agency “and set at up to 80% of market rent value. This is potentially unaffordable in the National Park where property prices are among the highest in the UK. Affordable rent levels also increase by RPI+0.5% each year, adding cost pressures to tenants if inflation rates rise significantly.”

Hence different rental models are available in the SDNPA and other National Parks, such as social rent where additional funding is possible (including from S106 commuted funds).

Implementing the policies

The South Downs NP Authority has been actively implementing these policies. It approved more homes in the 4 years since its inception than were approved by the local authorities in the previous 4 years. Approvals include two major developments each of over 400 homes. In one case this involves the regeneration of a significant brownfield heritage site near Midhurst, another involves 40% affordable homes (for rent through a Housing Association) on another long-standing brownfield site in Lewes.

The South Downs NPA has a policy that 40% of all homes built should be affordable and available for local people. Looking to the future, they would aim where possible to work with housing providers which specialise in rural affordable housing and have opted out of the “Right to Buy” (RTB) policy. The SDNPA also notes that not all affordable housing is built by registered providers (housing associations) and so a range of possible partners is available.

Conclusion

Not only would a National Park conserve and enhance our greatest economic asset (our environment) and provide a stimulus to the economy, including promoting through the NP brand our largest economic sector (tourism.) As the Planning Authority, it could also promote the development of the homes, and particularly affordable homes, that local people need. Dorset has to grow its business base, attract and retain young, skilled and key workers, and through partnerships with local communities, provide for local housing needs. Evidence from the South Downs suggests a NP is well placed to deliver affordable homes as part of its remit to foster the social and economic well-being of its communities.

As the Government has said in its policies on National Parks, ‘The Authorities have an important role to play as planning authorities in the delivery of affordable housing. Through their Local Development Frameworks, they should include policies that pro-actively respond to local housing needs.’

Dorset & East Devon National Park Team

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*1 SDNPA Partnership Management Plan Shaping the future of your South Downs National Park, 2014-2019

*2 English National Parks and the Broads: UK Government Vision and Circular 2010 para 76

*3 SDNPA Affordable Housing in the South Downs National Park, December 2015

