

Monitoring seminar: Communities of the Future discussion

The discussion was split into two parts, with two sets of questions. These can be summarised as:

- i) Taking into account the findings from the 2008/9 monitoring round and early indications of outputs from the 2009/10 monitoring round, what actions could be taken now to increase the supply of new housing and new affordable housing?
- ii) With particular reference to housing issues, how we move the RSS monitoring framework forward into a framework that is suitable for the Single Regional Strategy?

In relation to potential actions that could be taken now, several issues were raised:

- i) Reconsideration of the viability of housing schemes and therefore the ability to attract resources for infrastructure provision, affordable housing and low carbon developments was seen by several participants to be the key issue. Flexibility needed to be incorporated into core strategy policies. Shropshire was cited as good practice, with activities covering the use of a new viability model, discussions with regional directors of national house building companies and an attitude that 'nothing is sacrosanct'. While recognising the imperative, the CPRE warned that we should be careful not to get into a 'recession only' mode of thought and that core strategy policies should be capable of dealing with an increase in section 106 contributions as the country comes out of the recession. Some participants advocated a regional approach to viability assessment.
- ii) Specifically in relation to low carbon developments, it was acknowledged that hefty costs were involved and that authorities should not try to introduce new standards too quickly or unilaterally for single local authority areas, but should await the introduction of building regulations (code 3 will become mandatory next April). Technology is moving incredibly quickly and there needs to be flexibility in core strategy policies.

The drive for energy efficiency in new and existing homes needs to be maintained.

- iii) The suggestion that the housing market might return to 2007 levels by 2014 was seen to be too optimistic by one participant from the housing association sector. We will need to see what transpires over the next three years. Increasing land supply would not counterbalance the shortage of mortgages. He felt that additional Government resources for affordable houses were being used to increase the amount of grant per dwelling and therefore the additional number of new affordable dwellings might not be as high as Government expected; and that the Homes and Communities Agency were running out of resources.
- iv) A local authority suggested that in the current downturn, having a five year supply of available land may not be achievable. It was suggested that this needed to be handled through the phasing policies in local development documents; however an issue arose if the phasing requirements had been set and there had been significant external factors which required a reassessment and therefore a revision of a local development document.
- v) The need for local planning authorities to continue to prioritise work on their local development documents, particularly core strategies.
- vi) The need to encourage greater use and upgrading of existing buildings, particularly listed buildings, for additional housing provision. The wider issue of the tax treatment of conversions was raised.
- vii) The need to maintain an adequate pool of workers with building skills. The adaptability of young workers was seen to be an advantage.

The group then moved on to discuss whether and how the RSS monitoring framework could be developed to encompass the requirements of the wider Single Regional Strategy and, in particular, the requirement to monitor both the 'big picture' and detailed implementation issues. The following issues were raised:

- i) One participant felt that the key was to have sensible sub-regions on which to base monitoring with strategic

conclusions highlighted at a regional level. The East Midlands have striven hard to develop this approach. Issues were raised about the difficulties of identifying and developing the use of sensible sub-regions in the West Midlands, with different geographies being more suited to different themes and administrative requirements.

- ii) A model was suggested for a Single Regional Strategy (SRS) comparable to the Local Development Framework model, whereby the SRS was the core strategy and further development plan documents for specific themes or sub-regions were developed beneath it. This would fit well with a forward looking implementation plan. Introduction of such a model might however be dependent on the final legislation and Government guidance
- iii) There is still uncertainty as to what an SRS should look like, given that some key elements of guidance are not yet available. The real test needs to be whether the inclusion of an issue in the SRS would serve a purpose or provide added value. Decisions should be devolved downwards as far as possible.
- iv) As the Single Regional Strategy will bring together the Regional Economic Strategy, the Regional Spatial Strategy and the Regional Housing Strategy, the scope of monitoring will be much wider than in the current RSS. The incorporation of the RHS will enable greater consideration to be given to issues concerning the total housing stock such as upgrading the quality of the existing stock, carbon reduction etc.
- v) It was felt that, as a whole, the Region could be more efficient in collecting and presenting monitoring data. However, it was felt that greater emphasis needed to be placed within the monitoring process on understanding issues, particularly sub-regionally, and on questioning and challenging the outputs and outcomes and the way forward. It was felt that links could be strengthened between the State of the Region report and the Annual Monitoring Report.