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DRAFT RURAL HOUSING STRATEGY FOR THE WEST MIDLANDS

Following our meeting earlier today, I agreed to set out my comments on the draft RHS, which is currently out for public consultation. I will try as far as possible not to repeat comments made about the Issues and Options paper, though clearly some of the points there have not been carried forward through this draft document and may merit further emphasis.

My overall impression is that the draft RHS **has** taken the rural issues into account, though there is an overwhelming urban-centric 'feel' to the document. This must be recorded as a point of concern. I am also concerned that the policies in the consultation document were drafted before the results of the rural research was available. The conclusions to the rural research, which is now available, make some comments and recommendations for the RSS and RHS, which I support.

The introductory chapter to the draft RHS refers repeatedly to the aim to *create* [support] *mixed, balanced and inclusive communities* (paragraphs 1.2; 1.10; 1.16). It is not clear from the draft how this long-term aim will be achieved. Indeed, it could be argued that the policies and approach of the draft RHS militates against the fundamental principle, because it fails to recognise the dispersed nature of settlement patterns in rural areas.

There is a lack of clarity in many instances about what the drafted text actually means. For example, the last four lines of paragraph 1.16 refer to household formation changes in rural areas, and suggests a 'culturally' based solution. Does the strategy really mean this? If not, what is it really saying? There are many places throughout the document that lack clarity. The document itself, at 150 pages, is long, and could arguably benefit from more concise treatment of some of the issues, eg paragraphs 1.16, 2.5, policy box on page 47; policy box on page 61. These are examples only, because there are many instances when questions will be asked about how the words of the RHS will be converted into practice on the ground.

The urban-centric nature of the draft is well illustrated in paragraph 1.19. The empirical evidence produced for the RHB, and the anecdotal evidence from stakeholders, points to an overwhelming case for the provision of affordable dwellings in the rural areas of the Region. This part of the Strategy (and the associated draft RHIS), suggests a bias towards the MUAs and the Central and North HMAS.

Paragraph 1.42 suggests 'low demand characteristics across North Staffordshire'. Some unpublished work by the Countryside Agency (2004), suggests that hitherto, in this area, lower demand meant that housing was most affordable. However, the picture in North East Staffordshire is changing quickly as it becomes an increasingly popular destination for in-migrants from the North West urban area as well as within the West Midlands.

Paragraph 1.44 could helpfully be re-drafted to at least give some credence to the contribution that the Region's rural areas make to the overall regional economy. Available figures suggest a 66/33 split in the contribution for urban and rural areas. Whilst the greatest contribution is undoubtedly made by the conurbation, the increasingly regional economic significance of the Region's rural areas should at least be acknowledged.

Paragraph 2.15 refers to the growth in single person households, running across both urban and rural areas. The draft RHS though does not give a clear lead about the need for a more balanced approach to the provision of housing types in rural areas, eg the provision of single-bed accommodation for young people and the elderly.

Paragraph 2.16 *et seq* seek to deal with the ageing regional population, but does not do justice to the acute nature of this phenomenon faced by rural areas. According to the 2004 Rural Strategy (Defra), there are nearly 750,000 people (nationally) over 50 living alone in rural areas, of which over 300,000 are 75 and over. Of these, 25,000 are in sparsely populated rural areas. This has an impact on the point made above in respect of paragraph 2.15.

In the West Midlands Region 18% of the rural population is aged 65 or over, compared to 15% in the urban areas. In Shropshire, all the Districts show a higher proportion of people over 60 than the rest of the Region or the average for England. The 2001 Census shows that of the population living in settlements below 1,500 people, nearly 24% are over 60 years old.

I believe that the draft RHS should give more extensive consideration and treatment to the ageing population phenomenon in rural areas.

The issue of the high proportion of older residents in rural areas presents a dilemma, which is highlighted in paragraph 2.22. The paragraph as written makes sound sense from a sustainability viewpoint. However, there are some social consequences that cannot be ignored. The logic of the RHS is that new development to meet the needs of older residents should be in sustainable locations, with good access to public

transport and a range of local services. This leads to the inevitable question about older people living in sparse villages etc.

The RHS needs to give clarity in particular about investment in smaller rural communities. I understand fully the tension between sustainability and the aspiration to meet local needs, however, the effect of proposed policies may be to act as a strait jacket.