

Redundant Rural Buildings

An untapped resource

Thursday 1st October 2009, Llwynywermod

Summary Notes

Edward Holland, Projects Adviser, The Prince's Regeneration Trust

Supporting the Sustainability of Rural Communities Through the Historic Environment

The Prince's Regeneration Trust works throughout the UK to support both urban and rural communities through the historic environment. The Trust is involved in two of HRH's rural initiatives, the North Highland Initiative and the Cambrian Mountains Initiative. Both of these look at supporting the economy and character of rural communities by taking a holistic approach, bringing together working groups that each focus on farm produce, ecosystems, tourism and the built environment.

The Rural Development Plan for Wales 2007-13 has the following strands known as Axis 1,2,3 and 4:

1. Improving the competitiveness of the agriculture and forestry sectors
2. Improving the environment and the countryside
3. Enhancing the quality of life in rural areas and the diversification of the rural economy
4. Adopting the Leader approach for community regeneration

Axis 3 allows for physical works to historic buildings.

One of difficulties of delivering heritage projects supporting rural communities is that funding streams favour urban regeneration where it can be demonstrated that more people will use, see, and therefore benefit from a restored historic building.

Research has shown that nationally only about 5% of rural accommodation is affordable to the local community yet redundant rural buildings could offer an opportunity to address this issue. Ownership is a key issue in being able to take forward these projects. Local authorities have a key role in being able to obtain ownership. Need to be willing to use statutory powers to enable viable projects.

Judith Alfrey, Inspector of Historic Buildings and Landscapes, Cadw

Rural Buildings and Local Distinctiveness

Buildings are at the hub of the rural landscape. They provide tangible evidence of history and of the labour of individuals that went into their construction. Each building contributes to local distinctiveness. Cadw wanted to document how these buildings contribute to a sense of place through characterisation surveys focussing on farm buildings. Cadw is working with The Prince's Regeneration Trust on this task and has funded the first part of the characterisation work for the Cambrian Mountains. These surveys draw out regional themes and local variations.

Cadw found that most of the historic rural buildings surveyed were constructed before the end of the 19th century from local materials such as cob or clom earth in Ceredigion and timber framing in Powys. Buildings built from stone are common throughout Wales. Other key characteristics are the slate roofing pattern and the use of limewash.

Older buildings (pre 19th century) are uncommon in Ceredigion but more common in Powys.

Building types and function and materials are part of the character of the area.

Technologies of construction are affected by access to materials and the wealth of owners. These buildings are as eloquent as written documents in telling us about the history of the area and the people that lived there.

It is therefore important to sustain the character & historical diversity of the area.

Joanie Speers, Executive Director, Adfer Ban a Chwm

Phil Roberts, Chief Executive Officer, Warm Wales - Cymru Gynnes

Redundant Rural Buildings and Affordable Housing: helping to make rural life more affordable and sustainable.

Derelict vernacular buildings can be reused to provide affordable housing in rural Wales.

These disused but important buildings are deteriorating because they are redundant. There is a need for local affordable housing and these buildings can contribute to meeting that need. Adfer Ban a Chwm is a Building Preservation Trust set up in 2008 to bring the need to rescue important historic buildings together with the need for affordable rural housing. The method is a rolling programme on a project by project basis that can be replicated across Wales.

Why bother with an old derelict building? "It's just an eyesore, nobody really cares about it anymore, who would ever want to live there anyway?" " No one will sell it to you, it's in the middle of the farm."

- it defines and gives the area its own special character
- it was built and lived in by local people
- it has a local history and culture
- it has archaeological history
- it represents 'embodied' energy
- it can reclaim its former character

What really is the point? "It's just too much trouble. You won't get permission from the National Park." "It will be far too expensive. Then someone from outside the area will step in and make a fortune out of it."

- rural communities are dwindling
- reuse resources
- cooperate with the National Park
- revive the local skills/expertise
- once gone these buildings will take all their stories with them
- these structures are beautiful and will last the test of time
- high cost outweighed by social return

And most critically of all

- these buildings belong to and have grown up out of the landscape
- everyone should have a place to live and thrive
- we need to look at every possible way of providing affordable housing for local families in rural Wales

To save and renovate these important buildings for affordable housing has many benefits. It ensures local people that have lived in the area for generations can continue to do so by enabling residents on lower incomes to acquire an economic interest in the success of their community. This also helps to provide a local labour force and give opportunities for new entrants to farming.

When building new houses in rural areas, it is important to adhere to the vernacular tradition in their design. Otherwise the character and distinctiveness of the area is lost and homogenised 'rural suburbs' appear. Retaining existing historic buildings provides a precedent or a pallet of vernacular architectural features to contribute to the design of new buildings.

Using redundant rural buildings for affordable housing requires the creation of a delivery partnership, the procurement of the buildings and acquiring planning consent, using traditional methods of construction and promoting craft skills and reducing carbon emissions.

To implement the projects requires funding, construction on site, setting up a management regime (either community control or RSLs), provision for future management and ownership options such as equity share; shared ownership and deferred shared ownership.

Keith Jones, Environmental Practices Adviser (Wales), The National Trust

Old buildings, New Technologies: making rural buildings energy efficient in a time of climate change.

Listed buildings can accommodate the implementation of new technology, it is important to address efficiency first and be aware that new standards can be applied to old buildings. The research undertaken by the National Trust has found that there is a lack of confidence in the potential for these buildings to be made more energy efficient, however the building type is not a weakness. Design studies, heat loss understanding and the willingness of individuals all contribute to reducing energy consumption.

It is important to understand that one size does not fit all, ventilation and passive control can be applied to each building with low-tech solutions. It is important to get the energy load down first before considering installing high-tech solutions such as photovoltaics.

Optimisation is key to choosing the right solution for the building and understanding that building fully beforehand. Building occupants must be in control. Management strategies for buildings with multiple occupants and a maintenance plan are also essential. The right thing in the right place, based on a thorough knowledge of the building and how it performs.

Question and answer session

What is the biggest challenge to be overcome when reusing historic buildings for affordable housing?

Persuading people to sell at a reasonable cost. The planning system is also prohibitive but ideally should support such initiatives. Obtaining finance is also a hurdle and often the varying type and location of these buildings requires a different solution for each project.

Welsh Assembly Government Draft Technical Advice Note 6 planning for sustainable rural communities is out for consultation, with a response date of 16th October. This could be good news in terms of Planning, it is important to respond before the deadline.

Balance to be struck between cost and social need, it is important to have the end user in mind and look at the macro context initially. Additionally, sustainability may add cost.

Jocelyn Davies, Deputy Minister for Housing, Welsh Assembly Government

Closing remarks

The Minister expressed her support and that of her colleague Jane Davidson AM the Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing for the approach adopted at the seminar. This approach takes as its starting point existing communities and existing buildings and then applies principles of sustainability to both.

The Minister also stated her belief in access to housing as being key to the long-term sustainability of any rural community. Addressing redundant buildings and empty homes is an important part of this and can increase access as well as improving our built environment.

To strengthen existing communities the Welsh Assembly Government is implementing a number of initiatives. The new National Housing Strategy called Sustainable Homes will soon be launched which sets out the vision for the years ahead. Sustainability refers not just to the environment but also to economic and social sustainability of housing and communities. The draft National Housing Strategy sets out delivery of six key priorities.

- An adequate supply of affordable homes including in rural communities
- High quality accessible homes
- Support for those in need
- Improved Health and Well being
- Stronger communities
- And a reduced environmental footprint

To help deliver the 6500 extra affordable homes, as agreed in the One Wales Agreement, by April 2011, the Welsh Assembly Government has put an additional £42 million Social Housing Grant into affordable housing over a three year period. They are on track to achieving this target.

In 2008 the Rural Housing Development Fund was set up to promote the expansion of Community Land Trusts across Wales and to assist in paying for Rural Housing Enablers, many of whom were present at the event. The number of Rural Housing Enablers will increase from 4 to 10 throughout Wales. Rural Housing Enablers are key to identifying sites in local areas which may be appropriate for affordable housing and working with the local community.

Recent research has highlighted potential barriers to rural housing where key issues include:

- Land availability and land prices
- Planning policies
- Fewer developers being available in rural areas
- Political and resident opposition to some schemes

Specific recommendations have been made for the Welsh assembly Government to act upon, these include:

- To make WAG land available and work with the public and private sector (e.g. the land release protocol)
- To work with finance institutions, RSL's and Planning Authorities
- Continued support of Community Land Trusts and Rural Housing Enablers

The new draft Technical Advice Note 6 aims to get Planning Authorities to look at the sustainability of rural communities and for them to adopt a positive, enabling approach to development in rural areas.

The use of redundant rural buildings is an important potential source for increasing housing supply and at the same time supporting communities. It is important not to neglect historic buildings and to fully utilise existing structures. The seminar provides an opportunity to increase joint working between the organisations present.

This event will help to build effective links to tackle the barriers to delivering affordable housing and the Minister stated her support for the concepts proposed by Adfer Ban a Chwm.