

Report of the Gower AONB Team Leader

Gower AONB Partnership Steering Group – 5 October 2015

AFFORDABLE HOUSING ON GOWER

A POSITION STATEMENT BY THE GOWER AONB PARTNERSHIP

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past year, the AONB Partnership has been debating the issue of “affordable housing on Gower”, believing that this issue has a major impact upon the future of Gower, and on its communities. The partnership would like to state their position on “affordable housing on Gower”, as a contribution to the LDP process.

The Gower AONB Partnership and local people have discussed the issue of affordable housing on Gower, and have made a number of recommendations which they believe will go some way to addressing the issues highlighted by the local community.

The Gower AONB Partnership (‘The AONB Partnership’) is an advisory group to the Council, convened by them, to facilitate the management of the Gower AONB, in fulfilment of their legal responsibilities and duties with regard to the Gower AONB.

Designated in 1956, Gower was the first Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in the UK. The Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 places the highest level of protection on AONBs and National Parks. The Act also places a statutory duty on relevant authorities to have regard to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB when exercising or performing any functions affecting land in the AONB. “Relevant authorities” are any public bodies including local and statutory authorities, parish councils and statutory regulators.

The European Landscape Convention confirms that this protection includes the communities which have helped to create and maintain the landscape and its special features.

2. LOCAL NEED FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Planning Policy Wales (7th Edition, July 2014) defines “affordable housing” as: *“Housing where there are secure mechanisms in place to ensure that it is accessible to those who cannot afford market housing, both on first occupation and for subsequent occupiers.”* This definition includes Social Rented Housing and Intermediate Housing.

Like many rural areas of Wales, the availability of affordable housing for local people is a serious issue, affecting the future of the communities which underpin the character and special qualities of Gower.

Gower is particularly affected because of its well recognised outstanding landscapes, and its proximity to Swansea and the M4. House prices rose dramatically during the post 2000 housing market “boom”, effectively putting the price of properties beyond the reach of many local people. This is leading to a shift in the demography and nature of the communities living on Gower.

The current CCS Local Housing Strategy (underpinned by a Local Housing Market Assessment (LHMA) carried out in 2007, and recently reviewed) identified a “massive gap between supply and demand”. This LHMA highlighted that some 500 dwellings would be required (up to 2025) within the Gower and Gower Fringe areas (approximating to Gower AONB).

Recent public meetings held by the AONB Partnership have emphasised this need, with local people speaking about how the shortage of affordable housing is impacting on their lives, and on the special qualities of Gower.

3. ISSUES RAISED

The AONB Partnership believes that the following issues need to be addressed through the provision of affordable housing:

- There is a demonstrable shortage of affordable housing on Gower, and this is having an adverse impact on the communities and special qualities of Gower.
- Both residents and the AONB partnership want to see socially balanced communities on Gower, and in a recent survey, a significant majority of local people would welcome more affordable housing on Gower.
- There was widespread agreement that all new housing development on Gower should be affordable as there is sufficient other housing available.
- It was agreed that, in general, when new affordable houses are built, they need to remain available as affordable housing. There need to be secure mechanisms in place to ensure this.
- Some affordable houses have been extended and developed, with the result that they are no longer affordable. It was suggested that mechanisms be considered to prevent this, such as Section 106, in the future.
- Families involved in agriculture and the rural economy are essential to maintaining the character and special qualities of Gower AONB as a protected landscape. Local young families (particularly couples wishing to start a family) are often unable to find affordable accommodation - the importance of policies which acknowledged and prioritised local (specifically Gower) need was agreed.
- The conversion of redundant farm buildings to affordable residential accommodation should be permitted, as this can be a means of meeting agricultural need, subject to appropriate agreements. It may also provide a sustainable use for buildings, in an appropriate setting, instead of a new build property.

- While Section 106 Agreements are often seen as positive, in that they enable farming families to build homes necessary to support their family farm, there was also agreement that these have sometimes been abused in the past. Many homes have been built in the past under a Section 106, but have later had these lifted, leading to ill-feeling and cynicism in the community. Yet there is also recognition that the need for farm diversification may make the agreements too restrictive, and that a certain amount of flexibility is necessary.
- Second homes have a very negative impact upon local communities, contributing little, but often occupying what were once affordable homes. The option of charging full Council Tax was widely supported.

4. PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

Increasing the supply of affordable housing is a key policy goal of the Welsh Government, with the Wales Spatial Plan (2008) setting out a broad vision for the provision of affordable housing. One of the key priorities is the building of sustainable communities with more affordable housing for sale or rent.

The essential role of affordable housing in contributing to community regeneration and social sustainability is recognised by Planning Policy Wales, Edition 7, July 2014. Technical Advice Note (TAN) 2 – Planning & Affordable Housing (2006) provides practical guidance on the role of the planning system in delivering affordable housing.

Local planning policy is set out in a number of City & County of Swansea policies and strategies, which set out how affordable housing will be provided in Gower. These include Swansea UDP/LDP, Swansea Local Housing Strategy, Swansea Community Strategy, and Planning Obligations (SPG March 2010).

All these documents provide support for the provision of affordable housing in Gower, and the Gower AONB Partnership supports the implementation of these policies. There is wide spread agreement that the rural communities living and working in Gower, upon whom much of the character and special qualities of the AONB depend, are at risk if affordable housing is not available.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Following the public discussions, and in the light of the issues raised, and being aware of the planning policy context, the Gower AONB Partnership makes the following recommendations regarding the future provision of affordable housing on Gower.

- The City & County of Swansea and Registered Social Landlords should ensure that planning and housing policies affecting Gower sufficiently acknowledge the pressing need for affordable housing on Gower, so as to support sustainable local rural communities on Gower, and to protect the character and special qualities of Gower AONB.

- All new housing developments on Gower should be overwhelmingly affordable, with a balance of affordable housing for sale and rent.
- The use of “staircasing” or “shared ownership” schemes should be encouraged where this may enable occupiers to move to “market housing” at a later date. However, it is important that secure arrangements are in place to retain these properties as affordable housing for subsequent occupiers.
- The conversion of redundant farm buildings to residential accommodation should be permitted where appropriate, with secure arrangements in place to retain it as affordable or agricultural housing in the future.
- The use of Section 106 mechanisms to provide affordable or agricultural housing should continue, but with robust and secure arrangements in place to retain properties as affordable housing for subsequent occupiers.

6. IN CONCLUSION

The landscape of Gower is part of the Welsh cultural inheritance, and is protected through UK and European legislation for future generations. Its character and special features have been created, and are maintained, by its local rural communities.

There is a demonstrable shortage of affordable housing on Gower, and there is wide spread agreement that the rural communities living and working in Gower, upon whom much of the character and special qualities of the AONB depend, are at risk if affordable housing is not available.

The Gower AONB Partnership and local people have discussed the issues arising from this need, and have made a number of recommendations which they believe will go some way to addressing the issues highlighted by the local community.