

The Amberley experience

A Rural Exception scheme of affordable housing can take a very long time. In Amberley the journey began in 2000 and at last the first tenants are moving in to the dwellings: four one bedroom flats, two two bedroom flats and two three bedroom houses for rent, and two two bedroom flats for shared ownership.



Amberley Parish Council proposed the scheme, with support from Action in rural Sussex, as part of an Action Plan for the Parish when residents agreed there was a need for more housing. A Housing Working Group was formed and, again with AirS help, a housing needs survey was completed.

This identified a clear need for some affordable housing and the project was launched. Perhaps uniquely, this scheme was initiated and progressed by the Parish Council through the Working Group which identified the site, chose Saxon Weald Housing Association to work with and had a significant role in the allocation process as well as



being the conduit through which the Parish was consulted and informed at every stage.

In our experience there are three things that are vital for a scheme to succeed:

Location – the development must fit into its surroundings in order to be accepted. The Working Group identified several potential sites which were discussed with the owners and with the Planners at Horsham District Council. An unused market garden in a secluded position was selected. This choice ran into problems with the County Council who were concerned about the access to the main road. Only after extensive negotiations was a road calming solution deemed acceptable. In the meantime, a local storm was caused by proposing an alternative site with better access, but which was seen to be much more intrusive.

This illustrates the importance of getting the site right.

Design – the design must be sympathetic to its surroundings. Saxon Weald chose an architect who took great trouble to look around the Village and to consult the Village Design Statement. As a result, the scheme won widespread approval from residents.

Allocation – it is essential to get this right. When the scheme was first mooted, rumours of anti-social elements being imposed on Amberley were circulated by opponents, largely because the nature of a rural exception scheme was not understood. Some hard bargaining took place to ensure that the allocation criteria prioritised key village workers and those with strong family connections to the Parish.

In order to maintain the support of residents, regular communication is also essential. The Working Group carried out frequent house to house leaflet drops, held public meetings and wrote articles for the Parish Magazine at each stage of the process. This effort was more than worthwhile in maintaining support. When the scheme was complete the developers, Saxon Weald, held an open day for local residents. This was much appreciated and received widespread approval.

One final piece of advice – never give up! There were times when the problems seemed insurmountable, but with the support of all parties they were all overcome and Amberley now has a facility which will serve it well for years to come.

James Tolson, Amberley PC

Housing Association commentary



The new homes in Newland Gardens, are a testimony to the dogged determination of Amberley Parish Council, and to Averil Harrison in particular. Years of persistence have paid off and this small development of attractive homes on the edge of the picture postcard village of Amberley will soon become part of the established landscape.

The ten year journey from initial vision to finished homes has been a great opportunity for Saxon Weald to learn about what makes a successful rural housing scheme. Using local materials, taking inspiration from the existing built environment and minimising the impact of new buildings are all vital elements.

Allocating the homes to local people is another; we worked long and hard to ensure that those moving in were doing so because they already had strong links with the Village.

Most important of all, however, was the knowledge that we were building with the support of the villagers, and the Parish and District Councils. Affordable housing in Sussex's villages is in perilously short supply. Building property that local people can



afford to live in is the only way to guarantee a sustainable future for our rural communities.

The scheme in Amberley shows that it can be done.

David Standfast,
Chief Executive Saxon Weald