

Please reply to Malvern Office



**in Herefordshire & Worcestershire**

Mr Ian Thompson  
Vice Chairman  
On Behalf of Hanley Castle Parish Council  
Laburnum House  
Welland Road  
Hanley Swan  
Worcester  
WR8 0DA

30 June 2008

Dear Mr Thompson

Thank you for your recent letter raising issues regarding the work of the Rural Housing Enabler in Hanley Castle Parish. It is valuable to have your comments as we seek continually to improve the service we give: this is work to which we are strongly committed and whose benefits are very clear. I have investigated the situation you have brought to our attention, in order that we can learn all we can from this, maintain or rebuild good relationships, and move forward with our work in this and other parishes, for the benefit of people in housing need and their communities.

The Rural Housing Enabler programme has enabled us to work widely across Worcestershire to promote and support the provision of affordable housing for local people in housing need. Nigel Potter began work with us in March 2006, following the retirement of Alan Saunders, his predecessor who had worked on the programme for 5 years. Since then Nigel has actively worked with 70 Parish Councils and two Market Towns, and has completed 17 housing needs surveys, with a full programme of 10 more confirmed to be carried out. Although affordable housing often raises strong views locally, understandably so because of the wide range of interests involved, no other parish to my knowledge has raised an issue with the level of survey data supplied to them. It has been standard practice for some years to provide a summary written report of the findings, in a similar format, typically about 3 pages in length, and this has been found helpful and informative as a guide to decision-making by the Parish Councils we have worked with.

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We accepted that you wished to see a fuller report and to satisfy yourselves of the validity of the analysis, and although this had not been done previously we agreed to provide this. The survey data was at that time not manipulated electronically - as you know we have very recently begun to use software that enables us to do this - so the survey results were analysed manually and a more detailed report provided. We have apologised for any errors or confusion in the data presented. A difficulty seems to have arisen because there is a discrepancy between the data in the Common Housing Register Waiting List (which had some inaccuracies and repeat entries, and included people not having the strict "local connection" criteria) and the survey data. It is quite understandable that not everyone in housing need who comes forward in the survey has registered on the waiting list, so the two sets of data will not match exactly. This led to a lack of clarity. This useful learning for us and we will avoid making the same mistake in the future.

The report was presented at the open meeting by Nigel's colleague, Keith Parry, by prior arrangement, because Nigel was attending a meeting of Chaddesley Corbett Parish Council that same evening, fulfilling a longstanding appointment. The subsequent meeting at Community First offices was attended again by Keith, as Nigel was awaiting the breakdown service when his clutch and gearbox failed as he was driving here. We regret this but unfortunately it was unavoidable.

I understand that arrangements are now well under way for a fresh housing needs survey to be carried out in the Parish. We agree very strongly with your desire to see rural affordable housing addressing local need and allocated to people with a strong local connection. We seek to work conscientiously to develop appropriate schemes, based on evidenced need, that meet with support in the community, and to maintain good relationships with all the parties involved.

As a charity committed to rural communities we aim to tackle disadvantage, and support the development of stronger communities providing a good quality of life for everyone. We would like to discuss with you further the issue of the privacy or anonymity of people who complete the housing needs survey, and the Parish Council's access to those returns. This is an area where a careful balance needs to be maintained. You find confidentiality a "dubious reason" for withholding the full content of the survey returns. We find from our experience that if local people are to have the confidence fully to complete a survey about their housing needs, which might arise from a range of private and sensitive reasons, they need to know that their anonymity will be safeguarded within their community. We would be uncomfortable with a process that allowed the Parish Council open access to responses that could be tracked back to individuals. We have no difficulty, however, with aggregated data being provided, with appropriate safeguards. I feel this issue might be easier to discuss and resolve in a face to face meeting than by letter, and would I would be happy to meet with you and Nigel to discuss possible ways forward here. For example, one suggestion could be to arrange an independent scrutiny of the analysis (perhaps by the County Research and Intelligence Team) to give some reassurance that the analysis had been done fairly and accurately.

Thank you again for your feedback. I hope this response goes some way to addressing your concerns. I would be happy to meet with you if you wish to discuss these issues further or if you have further comments to make.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elspeth Rolls". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Elspeth Rolls  
Director of Capacity Building and Service Development