



Minister	YC BIRKHALL
Subject	HENRY CLEARY AND PETER RUBACK
Official	<i>Dear Minister</i>

6<sup>th</sup> August, 2007

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I just wanted to write and say how absolutely delighted I was that the recently published Eco Towns Prospectus contained the commitment to involve my Foundation for the Built Environment in the design competition. I appreciate more than I can say that my Foundation will have this opportunity to contribute its expertise to this important initiative on the vital matters of design and environmental sustainability.

If I might say so, I was equally encouraged that the Green Paper published the other week contained references to improving the provision of rural affordable housing, something we talked about when we met in March. I have seen from my visits around the country the real problems finding an affordable home cause for those on low incomes in the countryside – many of whom are carrying out essential jobs, such as farm workers, teachers, shopkeepers and health workers and on whom the future viability of rural life depends. As I know you recognize, the needs are every bit as acute as in our towns and cities.

You might be aware that in response to my long-standing concerns about these problems, I established my Affordable Rural Housing Initiative in 2003 through one of my charities, Business in the Community. The purpose of the Initiative is to encourage and demonstrate ways that businesses could be more involved in helping to find solutions to the provision of more affordable housing in the countryside. This is not just about altruism, although I do believe that business has a wider social responsibility, but it also makes sound business sense since businesses depend on customers who live and work in rural areas and they also need housing for their workforce.

A high priority for my Initiative was the production of a design guide, on which Business in the Community and my Foundation worked jointly. I enclose a copy for your information. I do believe that building these important principles into affordable rural housing makes the whole difference to their public acceptability. In addition, care needs to be taken to understand that small-scale housing schemes are what is often required

in villages to solve the problem, rather than something on a larger scale. Six well-designed houses in a hamlet or village are often all that is needed to make a small rural community viable. Equally, building fifteen homes or more can completely undermine the dynamics and character of the village – destroying the very thing which everyone is striving to protect. Small-scale developments which are in keeping with their surroundings and sympathetically designed, and which respect and enhance the local character and distinctiveness of the village are, I believe, critical issues.

My Initiative has focussed largely on encouraging landowners and other businesses to identify and bring forward small plots of land for development, and also to examine their own property portfolio to see whether there is scope to bring back empty or underused properties into use for affordable housing. It has gathered examples of good practice to enable others to learn from existing experience and produced a number of guides to help spread the lessons widely. I am particularly pleased that as a result of our work ten water companies, working closely with local Rural Housing Enablers and assisted by Hastoe Housing Association, are engaged on a pilot project to identify land and buildings in rural areas which may offer opportunities for development for affordable rural housing. I hope you will agree that this fits well with the aspirations of the Green Paper which makes it clear that there is a need to involve the private sector more closely if the housing ambitions in it are to be achieved. This is particularly relevant in rural areas where, for example, there may be limited public land available.

Where possible, my Initiative has worked with Government, local authorities and others; Emily Trevor who, at that time, led on rural housing within Business in the Community, was a member of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission and Business in the Community is a member of the Housing Corporation's newly-established Rural Housing Advisory Group. Inevitably, however, resources available for the Initiative are limited, yet I believe strongly that there is much more that it could do to help further this important agenda and I would very much hope that, with your support, it could play an important role in engaging the private sector and work even more closely with you, your Department and others. We stand ready to help in any way we can.

*Yours most sincerely*  
*Murray*



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- 3 DEC 2007

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Thank you for your letter dated 6 August 2007. I am delighted to hear of your support for the work that we are doing on eco-towns. It was a great pleasure to be able to speak at the Prince's Foundation event on eco-towns last week, which I believe was a very valuable debate. I am strongly of the view that the Prince's Foundation should play a significant role in encouraging and advising on the design elements of eco-towns, drawing on its well-established expertise and experience. I am also delighted that the Prince's Foundation has agreed to work with us on the design competition as it is vital that the new developments are high quality and have strong local identity.

As you will have seen from the Prospectus it sets out our vision for new towns of 5-20,000 homes, which will be exemplar "green" developments, and will be designed to meet the highest standards of sustainability, including zero carbon technologies and good public transport, as well leading the way in design, facilities and services, jobs, health, and community involvement. As set out in the Green Paper *Homes for the future: more affordable, more sustainable*, which I also launched in July, eco-towns will be part of the drive for more affordable housing.

I was also pleased to read about your support for what we are trying to achieve in rural areas. The type of initiative that you describe is precisely the sort of thing that we are keen to encourage and I am delighted that Business in the Community has agreed to be a member of the Housing Corporation's Rural Housing Advisory Group. When I asked the Corporation to set up the Advisory Group, it was very much with the intention of plugging into the knowledge and experience which organisations like Business in the Community can bring to tackling barriers to the delivery of affordable housing in rural areas.

As you rightly say, it is very important that local circumstances and sensitivities are taken into account in developing schemes to deliver rural affordable housing. It is for that reason that we devolved the detailed delivery on the ground to local authorities in their role as local planning and housing authorities. Central Government can set the framework - and I believe that the work we have done to change the planning context (through Planning Policy Statement 3 and its accompanying guidance) taken with the national target for rural affordable housing that we will be setting in the Autumn go a long way to ensuring that the right tools are in place. But the challenge going forward will be for local stakeholders to do their part and provide the local support, help and leadership which is so desperately needed if we are to succeed in safeguarding our rural communities.

I do hope that you will long be able to continue your work in this area and your encouragement to others to do likewise.

Respectfully,  
Yvette Cooper



YVETTE COOPER

17 MAR 2008

Official	
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8th March, 2008

Dear Caroline,

Thank you so much for coming to see me the other day. I was particularly glad to have a chance to talk about the issues which feature in your new portfolio and delighted that you may have an opportunity to visit Poundbury in the near future. As I mentioned, I know that the Chief Executive of my Foundation for the Built Environment, Hank Dittmar, would be very pleased to welcome you to the Foundation's headquarters at Shoreditch, or otherwise come to see you, if you ever had a moment. As we discussed, the Foundation is working closely with builders and developers and is now acquiring quite a bit of experience in dealing in a practical way with the problems that arise when putting policies into practice. I know that Hank would be happy to continue the dialogue with your officials on these matters. Do let me know, as well, if my charities can ever be brought in to help specifically in Doncaster...

It was very encouraging to understand how the Department is grasping the vital importance of exploiting the opportunity we now have to integrate better design and environmental principles into new housing in a way that reflects the local "story" and identity of a place and which causes the least impact possible on an environment that so many people look upon as precious. I will be particularly interested to see whether, following our conversation, there is any further thinking about innovative uses to which the Community Infrastructure Levy might be put or, indeed, whether the proposed cuts in funding for Rural Housing Enablers might be reconsidered... I know you share my concern that we should avoid repeating the mistakes of recent generations and take full advantage of the expertise now being developed in various quarters on the wider subject of sustainability. I only hope that others will also realize that this means building at a suitable scale and embracing principles of traditional urbanism and design, rather than merely adding technological "fixes" to the existing "business as usual", conventional mould...?

I am not sure if I managed to mention to you the enormous frustration my Regeneration Trust has experienced over the past fifteen years in relation to countless local heritage-led regeneration projects where progress has ground to an expensive halt because of the reluctance or inability of local councils to assert their powers at the optimum time to save historic buildings from complete dereliction at the hands of careless private ownership, when they could have become real community assets providing wonderful places to live and work? The terrible loss of value represented by decaying buildings such as Denbigh Hospital in Wales and Torr Vale Mill in Derbyshire, for instance, makes me weep! In both these cases my Trust has sympathetic developers and sponsors waiting in the wings and yet the Councils still prevaricate and countless opportunities for providing a mixed form of housing tenure in attractive surroundings are being tragically and scandalously lost. The more positive example of Anchor Mills in Paisley, now a successful mixed-use development after years of effort by my Trust and the intervention of Renfrewshire Council, shows what can be done. I do wonder if it might be possible for my Regeneration Trust to explore these issues with you and your Department at some stage?

If I may say so, I was so glad to find that we agreed on the potential we have in building template developments to make a contribution to the skills development agenda by giving people of all ages the opportunity to explore fulfilling and productive careers in traditional building crafts. After over thirty years of experience working with disaffected young people through my Prince's Trust, I have seen so often what a great difference it can make to encourage those with aptitude to work with their hands instead of forcing them down an academic route for which they may be unsuited. Again, if I may, I will make sure that my office keeps yours informed of the various projects we are developing in this field.

Finally, it would be wonderful, as we discussed, if we could establish an exchange of secondees. The Permanent Secretary, Peter Housden, kindly accompanied me on a visit to Upton at the end of last year and has been supportive of the idea in principle ...

*Yours most sincerely*

*Mandy*



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- 1 MAY 2008

*Your Royal Highness*

Thank you for your letter following our recent meeting, which was extremely valuable. We welcome the support of your Royal Highness and your charities in drawing together and disseminating the fundamental principles of sustainable communities, helping create new communities that are well-designed and connected, easy to maintain and inclusive, and are places where people want to live now and in the future.

We believe that there already exists a considerable depth of knowledge, experience and best practice for delivering large scale sustainable development. One example is of course Poundbury, and this and other relevant approaches that we and our partners are working on, such as English Partnerships' development at Upton in Northamptonshire, are a good foundation for the future. However, as we discussed, challenges remain and we must continue to inform, inspire and energise those responsible for delivery.

As you suggested in our meeting, I think that it would be beneficial for my officials to meet with Hank Dittmar and your Foundation for the Built Environment to discuss our programme of skills development, the practical difficulties that arise when implementing sustainable growth policies, and any opportunities to exchange learning and experience in this area.

Turning to our discussion about the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), you were keen for us to look at innovative uses of the CIL funds to ensure that they are used to best effect. This is certainly an area that we are actively working on as we design the detail of CIL, and further develop the policy. We are planning to consult on our draft Regulations setting out the whole of the CIL regime in the autumn and it would be very useful for my officials to meet Hank at that time to feed in your experiences and consider together how our proposals will work in practice.

With regard to rural housing, I am sure that you will welcome the Government's announcement of the target for the Housing Corporation to provide an additional 10,300 affordable homes in smaller rural communities over the next three years. This is supported by the Government's large increase in funding for the Housing Corporation's National Affordable Housing programme. My officials are working closely with those from the Housing Corporation to support them in the delivery of this target.




You raised concerns in our meeting about the decision on funding for the Rural Housing Enablers, which I do recognise. However, in establishing the Rural Housing Enablers, the desire within Government was ultimately to enable decisions about priorities to be taken at the local level, in response to local needs. Therefore, the long-term policy around funding of Rural Housing Enablers - ever since the first 'demonstration project' was launched over fifteen years ago - was that they should be supported at local level by the same local authorities and Housing Associations whose rural delivery they exist to support.

The closure by Defra of the Rural Social and Community Programme, which had supported the Rural Housing Enablers, was the outcome of this policy. To best enable local areas to plan for the future, this was flagged up from the beginning, and the guidance for the consortia seeking funding noted that all projects should draw up an 'exit strategy' to identify how the funding projects would develop beyond the two year period of that programme. In many areas a number of Rural Housing Enablers are now self-sustaining - either employed directly or funded through Local Authorities and Housing Associations.

I understand your concerns about listed buildings being left to decay with seemingly little action taken to find appropriate new uses for them. These buildings are irreplaceable, and their presence enhances the quality of our lives and sustains the sense of identity of local communities by their distinctiveness. There are powers enabling local authorities to intervene where such buildings are in a state of deterioration. They can serve repairs notices or, in the case of unoccupied buildings, arrange for urgent preservation works to be carried out themselves, and where appropriate commence compulsory purchase proceedings.

The issue is really one about the effective and timely use of the available legislation, and I know that Baroness Andrews has already been discussing this issue with Ros Kerslake and Simon Thurley at English Heritage, following your conversation with her at the 'New Buildings in Old Places' conference earlier in the year. She has corresponded with Rhodri Glyn Thomas about one of the buildings specifically mentioned in your letter, the North Wales Hospital at Denbigh. The other building you refer to, the Torr Vale Mill in Derbyshire, is clearly in a very poor state, and we shall certainly look at ways in which we might help authorities to use their powers to the best effect to ensure that historic buildings like this receive the protection they deserve. I can assure you of our willingness to explore the issues with the Prince's Regeneration Trust and all those with an interest.

My officials will be in touch with Hank Dittmar shortly to arrange an appropriate time for a follow-up meeting.

*Yours sincerely*  


CAROLINE FLINT