

Policy H9: Rural Exception Sites

1. Proposals for small-scale rural exception sites providing affordable housing to meet identified local housing needs will be permitted on land adjoining, adjacent to, or well-related to existing settlements where:
 - a. There is robust evidence of an identified local affordable housing need that cannot be met through existing housing stock or other planned housing delivery;
 - b. The scale, type and tenure mix of development reflects the identified local need and is proportionate to the size and function of the settlement;
 - c. The development can demonstrate that it will not result in unacceptable impacts on landscape character, heritage assets, residential amenity, or other environmental considerations;
 - d. The proposal provides safe and convenient access to community facilities, services and public transport opportunities where available;
 - e. Where the site is within the Green Belt, the proposal would preserve the openness of the Green Belt and would not conflict with the purposes of the Green Belt;
 - f. The affordable housing will remain affordable in perpetuity through planning obligations or other appropriate legal mechanisms.
2. Affordable housing shall comprise the predominant element of any rural exception scheme. However a small proportion of open market housing may be supported where it is demonstrated through an independently assessed viability appraisal that such provision is essential to enable the delivery of the affordable housing. In all cases:
 - a. Affordable housing must remain the primary purpose of the development;
 - b. The number of market dwellings shall be limited to the minimum necessary to secure viability;
 - c. The market housing element must not undermine the rural exception nature of the scheme.
3. Occupancy of affordable homes delivered through this policy shall be prioritised through a local lettings cascade mechanism, secured through a Section 106 agreement.

Reasoned Justification

Without a specific rural exception sites policy, there is limited local policy support for delivering affordable homes in smaller settlements where conventional development opportunities are constrained. The policy is justified because it enables a controlled and evidence-led approach to meeting local affordable housing needs, while safeguarding the rural character of settlements and ensuring that affordability and local occupancy benefits are secured over the long term, even in Green Belt locations.

Key Considerations

Rural exception sites are intended to address specific local affordable housing needs that cannot reasonably be met through existing stock, allocated sites or market-led development. Proposals must therefore be supported by robust evidence, remain limited in scale, relate well to an existing settlement and avoid unacceptable harm to landscape character, heritage assets, residential amenity or environmental quality. The scale, mix and tenure of homes should respond directly to the identified need and to the size, role and accessibility of the settlement.

In Green Belt locations, rural exception schemes will be subject to the additional tests set out in national policy. Such proposals must demonstrate that the development would preserve openness, would not undermine the purposes of the Green Belt, and would remain genuinely limited and necessary to meet identified local affordable housing need. The inclusion of this criterion ensures that the policy supports rural affordable housing only where it can be delivered without compromising the strategic function of the Green Belt.

Affordable homes delivered through this policy will be secured through appropriate legal agreements to ensure that they remain affordable and available to households with a qualifying local connection. Priority on these sites is first given to households with the strongest local connection before being widened in accordance with the agreed mechanism. This approach is necessary to ensure that the benefits of the policy are retained for local communities in perpetuity.

Aims of the Policy

This policy provides a clear basis for considering small-scale rural exception sites where they are necessary to meet evidenced local affordable housing needs. It recognises the role of Rochford District's villages and rural settlements in supporting sustainable communities, while ensuring that any release of land outside normal housing allocations is justified, proportionate and locally responsive.

Evidence Base and Guidance

The policy is consistent with national planning policy, which allows for rural exception sites where they meet an identified local need for affordable housing. Evidence may include parish-level housing needs surveys, housing register data, information from registered providers, local housing assessments or other proportionate evidence accepted by the Council. Early engagement with the Council, parish councils and local communities will help ensure that proposals are appropriately located, justified by need and capable of being delivered.

