

Heads of Planning



4 November 2011

Dear Sir/Madam

OCCUPANCY RESTRICTIONS AND RURAL HOUSING

I am writing to clarify the Scottish Government's views on the use of conditions or planning obligations to restrict the occupancy of new rural housing.

Occupancy restrictions are typically used in Scotland to limit the occupancy of new houses in the countryside either to people whose main employment is with a farming or other rural business that requires on-site residency, or to people with a local connection. Sometimes new houses are tied to particular land holdings, preventing them being sold separately. Such restrictions have been applied either through planning conditions or Section 75 planning obligations.

A number of issues have arisen with the use of occupancy restrictions, some of which have been exacerbated by the current economic situation. Some people have found it difficult to get a mortgage to buy a house with an occupancy restriction. Others have found it difficult to sell the house, or have the restriction lifted, when they are forced by necessity to move. While it may be possible to include provisions in the condition or obligation that attempt to address these issues, any use of occupancy restrictions introduces an additional level of complexity (and potentially expense) into the process of gaining consent for a new house. Occupancy restrictions can also be intrusive, resource-intensive and difficult to monitor and enforce.

Scottish Planning Policy promotes a positive approach to rural housing. It states that development plans should support more opportunities for small scale housing development in all rural areas, including housing which is linked to rural businesses. It does not promote the use of occupancy restrictions.

The Scottish Government believes that occupancy restrictions are rarely appropriate and so should generally be avoided.

In determining an application for a new house in the countryside, it may be appropriate for the planning authority to consider the need for a house in that location, especially where there is the potential for adverse impacts. In these circumstances, it is reasonable for decision-makers to weigh the justification for the house against its impact, for example on road safety, landscape quality or natural heritage, and in such circumstances it may be appropriate for applicants to be asked to make a land management or other business case. Where the authority is satisfied that an adequate case has been made, it should not be necessary to use formal mechanisms to restrict occupancy.

The Scottish Government believes that a vibrant populated countryside is a desirable objective and that new housing to realise this aim should be well sited and designed, and should not have adverse environmental effects that cannot be readily mitigated. In areas, including green belts, where, due to commuter or other pressure, there is a danger of suburbanisation of the countryside or an unsustainable growth in long distance car-based commuting, there is a sound case for a more restrictive approach. In areas where new housing can help to support vibrant rural communities or sustain fragile rural areas, planning authorities should seek to support suitable investment in additional provision, focussing on the issues of location, siting, design and environmental impact rather than seeking to place restrictions on who occupies the housing.

Where sites are considered unsuitable for new housing, more acceptable locations will often exist elsewhere on the same landholding or nearby, and planning authorities can assist applicants by advising where these are.

Yours faithfully



JAMES G MACKINNON