



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel**

**The future of rural Wales -
Grass roots heritage and affordable homes**

Annual General Meeting - Election of the Chair and Secretariat

Launch of the Adfer Ban a Chwm ([ABC](#)) Report into views on affordable housing and using derelict vernacular buildings to help address this need in rural communities.

Present:

Chair:

Llyr Huws Gruffydd AM (PC)

Secretariat:

Cat Griffith-Williams - The Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (CPRW)

Present

Assembly Members

& AMSS:

Russell George - (Con),

William Powell – (LD)

Mark Isherwood – (Con)

Alun Ffred Jones - (PC)

Gareth Llewellyn – Office of Leanne Wood AM (PC)

Invited speakers:

Joanie Speers, ABC founder/director introduced the work of ABC, the story behind the project, and what ABC hope to achieve by this launch.

Nico Jenkins, ABC programme development officer shared the key findings of the project.

David James, Rural Housing Enabler for Monmouthshire talked about his experience of the need for affordable housing in rural areas.

In attendance:

Moira Lucas - Swansea Council

Karen Anthony – CLA Cymru

Edward Holdaway – Alliance for National Parks Cymru



Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel

Cat Griffith-Williams – CPRW
Peter Ogden – CPRW
Carys Matthews – CPRW
Julian Preece – Powys CC
Stuart Davies – Powys CC
Joanie Speers – ABC
Roger Mears – ABC
Nico Jenkins – ABC
Anjuli Quartermaine – ABC
Helen Whitear – ABC
David James – ABC
Lee Cecil - Asiant Capital
Kate Biggs – Monmouthshire CC
Judith Leigh – SPAB (Wales)
Richard Keen – APT AHF (Wales)
Roisin Willmott – RTPI Cymru
Helen Fry – BBNPA
Ryan Greaney – BBNPA
Helen Roderick – BBNPA
Carys Howell – HLF
Cllr Geraint G Hopkins – BBNPA
Mark Major – AMSS Suzy Davies AM
Roger Belle – Pub is the Hub

- 1** **Llyr Huws Gruffydd** AM opened the AGM and thanked everyone for attending. He explained that it is a requirement of the National Assembly for Wales to annually elect a Chair and Secretariat. As current chair, Llyr passed on the procedures to Peter Ogden who proceed to explain the protocols of operation of a CPG. He asked for proposals for chair from the floor, as there were none, he asked the attendees to vote on Llyr Huws Gruffydd AM re-election. Alun Ffred Jones AM voted in favour. Llyr was re-elected as Chair of the Cross party Group on Rural Affairs.
- 2.** **CPRW** expressed their contentment to continue for another year as secretariat, Llyr asked for a vote to accept CPRW as secretariat. Attendees and Alun Ffred Jones AM voted yes. CPRW will continue as secretariat of the CPG on Rural Affairs.



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
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3. Llyr opened the main meeting and welcomed ABC and the founder **Joanie Speers** to the group.

3.1 Joanie thanked Llyr, and the CPG, for inviting ABC to discuss their report and launch the report on affordable housing and vernacular buildings.

The session has been called 'The future of rural Wales: grass roots heritage and affordable homes' and this is why. There are two things that can be said with total confidence:

- 3.2.1 There are many derelict vernacular buildings in the Welsh countryside
- 3.2.2 There is a need for affordable housing in rural Wales.

Adfer Ban a Chwm was set up in 2008 as a building preservation trust to address these two issues together, by turning disused farm houses into affordable homes for local people in perpetuity. The idea was to focus on unlisted buildings, those that slip through the cracks with little or no statutory protection. These buildings are packed with history, heritage, stories, and literally local materials and the application of traditional building skills, and critically, embodied energy. What better way to put these buildings back to use than to house those from the local community who are unable to buy or rent on the open market – to help support dwindling communities, to help keep the countryside alive and to help reverse rural depopulation. What seemed like an easy task in 2008 has proved to be a complex challenge. ABC gave themselves 4 years, by which time the problem was solved however the reality was a bit different.

In order to make this happen, ABC talked with a great number of organisations, individuals and agencies. They held public meetings, ran seminars, made presentations, have been the catalyst for a housing needs survey and applied to many sources of funding for support. And although they got very close, they have yet to do what they have set out to do.

With the help of the Brecon Beacons National Park Authority's Sustainable Development Fund in Spring 2014 ABC went out to the public in Carmarthenshire and Powys within the National Park boundary to find out what people think about affordable housing and helping to address this need by using existing redundant buildings. They wanted to hear their views, their perceptions. ABC wanted to hear



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
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Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel**

their concerns, their prejudices, and what the barriers might be. The plan was then to follow their collective lead. Again, not so simple. ABC have spent the last year listening, learning, explaining, presenting, interviewing and running a survey to find out what people really think, what they are worried about, what they care about, and if they think ABC should keep going, and if so, how.

After this presentation Nico Jenkins then explained the findings, what the issues are or what people think the issues are (and this is really the key), and what might get things to move forward. It is something that we cannot do alone. Joanie brought the attendees attention to the loop of images showing a range of derelict vernacular buildings in the Welsh countryside. Just in a 5-mile radius around Llanddeusant in Carmarthenshire, there are 35 such buildings. Some too far gone to save, and some easily salvageable. She challenged the attendees and AMs to take a look in their local areas, where one will probably notice at least as many, or maybe even more.

So why care about these structures

Vernacular buildings not only form a valued part of Welsh cultural heritage, and contribute substantially to the character of the historic landscape, but each building that survives is the physical manifestation of the economic and social history of the community to which it belongs. Thus 'grass roots heritage. Derelict vernacular buildings represent an existing, but much underutilised resource. Not only are traditional materials and building methods more sensitive to the aesthetic of an area prized for its natural beauty, but they are more environmentally sensitive than conventional building materials and techniques. And contrary to what people think traditional buildings perform much better in relation to heat loss, than previously assumed, and more (it is in the Report).

Why care about affordable housing

More and more people are in need of affordable homes; many people have to leave the communities in which they grew up because they cannot afford to buy or rent. Many people want to live in a rural environment and contribute to the communities there. The need for affordable homes in rural areas is not being comprehensively addressed.

Following this presentation David James talked about this great need.

So, what does ABC want to achieve today?

ABC need individuals and AM help and this is what they ask. 3 things, very simple:



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
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- 3.3.1 Help get these two issues together on the Assembly's agenda and ensure the Heritage Bill and the Planning Bill support this combined approach
- 3.3.2 Help the ABC recommendations, though ambitious, to be taken seriously
- 3.3.3 Help ABC show that this can work, and that means endorsement, commitment, and of course financial support.

Joanie introduced, Nico Jenkins, ABC's programme development officer, who has undertaken the majority of the work that has gone into the ABC report, She presented the key findings and recommendations.

4. **Nico Jenkins** delivered her presentation.

- Nico thanked Joanie all attendees for coming this afternoon. She said the aim of this report was to identify people's perceptions - views, concerns, prejudices, barriers and experiences of affordable housing and the value of vernacular buildings and whether these two issues can fit together to help address the need for affordable housing in rural Wales. From the point of view of: Local farmers, local residents of the BBNP, parish councils, community councils, local authorities, local societies and agencies, voluntary sector organisations, The Brecon Beacons National Park Authority, housing associations and any other interested parties. The way she collected this information was firstly, through semi structured interviews mainly with professionals in either the field of housing or traditional building and also farmers in the BBNP. Secondly through a questionnaire or survey aimed at farmers, land owners or anyone that lives within the National Park within Powys or Carmarthenshire. She interviewed 34 individuals from across the stakeholder groups. The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and then transcribed and analysed for emerging themes. The survey was conducted with any residents of the BBNP who live within Carmarthenshire or Powys. The survey was conducted face to face with residents at four agricultural shows in the summer: The Royal Welsh Show, Brecon Agricultural Show, Llandeilo show and Sennybridge show. An online version of the survey was also created and distributed via e-mail to a large number of local groups, societies, and interest groups, social media and the ABC website. They collected a total of 152 surveys responses.

4.2 Nico went on to present some of the key findings



Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
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Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel

4.2.1 Vernacular buildings

- 70 % of respondents to the survey are aware of vernacular buildings in their community and 91% of respondents believe that vernacular buildings do have a value. The most frequently cited type of value placed on vernacular buildings was historical value.
- The first question asked in the interview is about what type of value people place on derelict vernacular buildings within the Brecon Beacons National park and as you would imagine all interviewees did place a value on these buildings which was linked to understanding our history and heritage within the landscape.
- ***'...they're part of our tradition our history, architectural heritage and they are what creates the landscape and I think it's vitally important that things like that are preserved because once they are gone they are gone and there is no replacing them...'***

4.2.2 Affordable Housing

- 80% of respondents to the survey believe there is a need for affordable homes within their community and 62% of respondents so far have themselves or know someone who has not been able to buy/rent housing locally due to affordability and the consequence for the majority of these was that they had to either rent if they could not afford to buy or move out of the area.
- There is undoubtedly a need for affordable housing within the BBNP. It is stated in the BBNPA's LDP that there is an assumed need across the National Park area.
- Affordable housing comes in many different forms, this was highlighted when both interviewees and respondents to the survey were asked: 'What does the term 'affordable housing' mean to you?' the huge range of responses to this question illustrates the issues around people's perceptions and beliefs on the definition of affordable housing.
- The most common themes that emerged from the survey were: affordable housing should be for young people, local people and those on average to low incomes.
- Some of the themes that emerged from the interviews around affordable housing were: the perceived misconceptions and stigma that people often attach to affordable housing, the effect of in-migration to rural communities and the type of people that require affordable housing.
- Both interviewees and respondents to the survey were asked what they thought were the main barriers to providing affordable housing within the BBNP. The



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel**

majority of respondents to the survey (49%) believe that the main barrier to providing affordable housing within the Brecon Beacons National park is: planning

4.2.3 The perceived barriers that emerged from the interviews were:

- planning
- land value
- finance and viability
- suitable sites
- local objection
- lack of services in rural communities

4.2.4 Using vernacular buildings to provide affordable housing

- 86% of respondents to the survey said they would support a venture that uses derelict vernacular buildings to provide affordable homes within the Brecon Beacons National Park.
- The most frequently cited (66%) potential use for derelict vernacular buildings was that they should be restored as affordable homes.
- Advantages and disadvantages of using derelict vernacular buildings to provide affordable housing are many and varied:
 - The advantages include: solving two problems with one solution, utilising existing resources, the BBNPA's planning policies, opportunities for training and employment.
 - The disadvantages include: cost of renovation and maintenance, meeting spatial and energy efficiency standards, planning and limited access to amenities and services.

In the report they present the start of a discussion about barriers, advantages, and disadvantages. But there is scope for a proper full scale debate on these. They also set out a series of wide ranging and rather ambitious recommendations for WG, HAs and RSLs, BBNP and other authorities, and for ABC.

These include:

- For the BBNP: Work with derelict vernacular building owners to establish what sort of incentives would encourage them to allow these buildings to be used for affordable housing in perpetuity.
- For the WG: Create a separate and distinct ACG for rural affordable housing to allow more SHG to be used for affordable developments in rural areas of Wales.
- For HAs: Lobby the WG for extra SHG for rural affordable housing developments.



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel**

- And for all: Work in partnership to tackle the issues of affordable housing and ensure realistic planning policies and long-term strategies to safeguard the future of vernacular buildings.
- For ABC: additional research ideas and then among other things partnering with a RSL which could access funding from the BBNPA (commuted sums) or other funding sources.

She hoped that gave a good indication of what the report contains. There wasn't enough time to give a more comprehensive view, so she invited questions at the end and encouraged attendees to take a copy of the report as they leave and get in touch with ABC further about the issues...

She then handed over to David James, Rural Housing Enabler for Monmouthshire, to tell the audience about what the need for affordable housing in rural Wales really means...

5. **David James** delivered his presentation.

He thanked ABC for the invitation to speak in support of their work and their report, to all those AMs present who have given their time to attend today and everyone else in attendance.

David felt it was apt to come to speak about the need for affordable housing on the same day as the Homes for Britain rally is taking place in London. Supporters of the Homes for Britain Campaign believe that everyone has a right to a decent affordable home to call their own. He explained that they are campaigning for all political parties to end the housing crisis within a generation. In rural Wales, for every home not built or brought back into use, more services will disappear. There is a real problem that there is an increasingly aged population in rural Wales and these will become even more isolated if we fail to provide sufficient housing.

5.1 In 1971 13.8% of Wales's population was aged 65 and above but in 2013 it is now 19.5%. That is the Wales average and rural counties such as Gwynedd, Powys and Monmouthshire the over 65s make up 23% of the population!

When young people move away, there is a breakdown in the family support network. If this is not addressed we will become more reliant on the state to provide



Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel

care, instead of family carers doing it for free. He urged all attendees and AMs to show support for the Homes for Britain Campaign.

There are very few rural areas where there isn't a need for affordable housing. Even in the most remote rural areas with dispersed settlement patterns there is a need, even if is only for one or two homes. Derelict vernacular buildings could be ideal to fulfil that need and should be explored further. This could be an ideal opportunity for what ABC proposes to meet some of that need. For example in the Llanthony Valley in the Brecon Beacon's National Park area of Monmouthshire a visitor to the area might think very few people live there, but David knows numerous families who need to live there for work, but can't because they cannot afford to and planning policy doesn't allow. He's aware of families with young children living in caravans and mobile homes, that is not acceptable in 2015! So planners have to listen to housing experts and be willing to work with partners to facilitate the delivery of affordable housing. David has helped deliver upwards of 50 affordable units in the BBNPA, yet there is now no housing expert working with the authority. Yesterday the BBNPA held a meeting with RSLs to discuss how to allocate commuted sums, which they have decided to hold themselves, but the local authority housing officers were excluded. The BBNPA's draft SPG CYD LP1 has recently been out for consultation. The practical implication of this policy would mean an additional sum of £120,000 required for the privilege of being granted planning permission for open market housing. I can assure you this is not viable and will deliver no affordable housing.

David highlighted a point directly from ABC's report, which is a quotation from an interview that was carried out as part of the project.

*"The National Parks Authority is under no illusion that this policy will promote affordable housing development from such building to developers. **If we don't get a single affordable housing dwelling through this policy this wouldn't mean the policy had failed.** The success of the policy relates to the extent to which it prevents the creation of more market housing from redundant vernacular buildings, without contribution towards the affordable housing need in the area. If we enable open market conversion we are adding to the problem."*

He felt this is a very naive statement; we have to provide additional open market housing to create a churn in the housing market. In Monmouthshire on the other hand there is a policy in place where sites have been allocated to deliver 60% affordable housing and a lot of these sites are progressing well. David recently went



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel**

to a lecture given by John Punter, Professor of Urban Design at Cardiff University and he said the key to delivering affordable housing is a cap on land prices and this is exactly what this policy sets out to achieve. He presented some startling facts that he's picked up from the Devolution, Democracy and Delivery White Paper – Reforming Local Government – Power to the People.

- 5.2.1 There are no towns with a population over 25,000 in mid Wales, or west of Colwyn Bay in the North or west of Llanelli in the South.
- 5.2.2 According to the City Regions Task and Finish Group established by the Welsh Government to investigate city regions in Wales, our cities generate only 33% of our wealth. However, almost 69% of the Welsh population lives within the city regions identified by the Task and Finish Group.
- 5.2.3 So the 31% of Wales's population that lives outside the City Regions generates 67% of our wealth.
- 5.2.4 Rural Wales really is the powerhouse of the Welsh economy! We need people living in rural Wales to sustain the economy, working in tourism and farming. We also need people to work in care services as rural Wales has a very vulnerable population, which I've already pointed out.
- 5.2.5 We need people to manage the landscape, it is a beautiful landscape and if it is not managed by people it will soon deteriorate.
- 5.2.6 But rural wages are very low and house prices are very high so unless there is a supply of affordable housing, both the economy and landscape will suffer. For example, although Monmouthshire might appear to be a wealthy local authority as it has the highest average incomes of all the local authorities in Wales, in 2013 weekly earnings for those people living and working in the county were the second lowest in Wales.

Although he talked about homes planning and the economy, he stressed that we mustn't lose sight that people are at the centre of all this. Housing impacts on health, wealth, well-being, educational attainment and much more, so the more emphasis we put on delivering good quality affordable housing the greater the positive effect it will have on other service areas such as the health service and social services. David briefly gave a couple of case studies, Broadstone and Llanarth, which are both in rural Monmouthshire. In Broadstone there were very vocal objectors to the project, saying it was not needed and making claims about lack of public transport and no local services. The planning application even went to judicial review. But the 6 homes were built and they have made a massive difference to people's lives. One of the new tenants told David she was previously living in private



Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel

rented accommodation in Tintern with her children and when they were in the bathroom, rats would often run across the floor. That is not acceptable!

Broadstone is an example where there were a lot of objectors to the project, Llanarth on the other hand it had the full support of the community council. Both David and his predecessor were heavily involved with the community council at all stages of this project; identifying and consulting on sites and then consulting on the design of the new homes. What a difference those homes have made to the village, a village without any services, although there is a bus service about half a mile away. One of the new tenants has started a play group in the village hall with the help of a grant from Monmouthshire Housing Association, the first time there's been one in the hall for 25 years. But the thing that sticks in his mind on Christmas Eve in the local supermarket he bumped into the clerk of the community council and asked her how the new tenants had been received. She said that it was brilliant to see the school bus stopping and see children having snow ball fights, it had given the village life again. Although these projects differed because one had community support and the other didn't, both projects had the same result, affordable housing for local people which has helped revitalise these rural communities in Monmouthshire.

In summary, he urged the CPG to study ABC's Report and recommendations and find a way to achieve their goals. There is a real housing crisis in this country and he sincerely hopes all commit support to the Homes for Britain Campaign. Planners are the key, there has to be a pragmatic flexible approach to policy and they must listen to the housing sector and professionals if we want to increase the delivery of additional homes. If a policy isn't working, change it or accept departures from it. Rural Wales is a managed landscape and the importance of its economy to Wales cannot be over-emphasised. And never lose sight that people's lives are at the centre of all this. If we can provide more good quality affordable homes it will reduce pressure on other services and make Wales a happier and healthy place to live.

6. Joanie thanked David and before she opened the floor for questions, she stressed the need to ensure the future of rural Wales by both saving the grass roots heritage and helping provide affordable housing for local people, she reiterated what ABC want to achieve;

6.1.1 ABC need the members help to achieve 3 things, very simple:

6.1.2 Help get these two issues together on the Assembly's agenda and ensure the Heritage Bill and the Planning Bill support this combined approach



**Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel**

- 6.1.3 Help ABC recommendations, though ambitious, to be taken seriously
- 6.1.4 Help ABC show that this can work, and that means endorsement, commitment, and of course financial support.
- 7. Questions were received from the CPG members in attendance.

As a small nation why do we over complicate issues?

Joanie felt that more communication was needed. There's always a huge gap between what people think and reality. It shouldn't be difficult, but is! Joanie asked Llyr why we can't get this to work?

Llyr responded by saying the Government needs to see this as a serious problem. People should lobby government, raising back bench support and keep discussing it with Ministers. Government needs to get a grip of the issues.

On affordable housing David was asked how he would like to see it operating. David felt that unless you are working on the ground with local communities, it is very difficult to tell the planners what is needed. When you're working with local communities it's easier to gauge the need. Strategic Housing officers in the LA's know where the money needs to be spent and know the waiting lists etc.

Helen Fry from BBNPA stressed the need for evidence to develop affordable housing within the National Park.

William Powell AM said he would like to help the process.

Peter Ogden highlighted that legislation is not linking together and subsequently how it's affecting rural Wales. Wales needs an overarching Government approach which links everything together. Rural Wales is the support system of Wales. Need to think about strategies to build on all the issues which affect rural Wales.

Karen Anthony agreed with Peter. She felt there's a lack of cohesion in Welsh Government and Local Authorities. However there will be instances where these buildings are impractical to be used.



Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel

Helen Whitear (ABC trustee) said that contrary to what people think old traditional buildings are proving to be more energy efficient than previously thought and there is a fantastic opportunity to train local people in how to maintain these old buildings properly.

Joanie pointed out that Wales is quite often at the forefront of exciting things – why can't we be at the forefront of this?

Cllr Geraint Hopkins shared his experiences of his locality, there has been lots of local services being lost including two primary schools. He was also concerned that the highways budget will also be cut so local roads won't be maintained.

Members discussed the need for the Welsh Government to address these problems as the affordable housing problem will only become a small part of a huge problem. Skilled jobs could be brought in to rural areas to restore these buildings. Moira Lucas from Swansea Council asked if we should be employing local people as tradesmen. People working and training in their locality. How we train planners and architects could be key to the issues.

Mark Isherwood AM recalled the JRF report produced in 2008 on rural housing. He felt the Issue is now higher on the political agenda than it was then. He advised that it's a good time to be speaking with political parties as they will be creating their 2016 manifestos so it's a good time to be bringing up this agenda. Local housing need is often hidden by the fact that people are living with relatives etc, and so need may not obviously be seen.

7.1 Joanie directly asked the CPG for help in driving these messages forward. Peter Ogden suggested that **the CPG will come up with five key messages and then take them into the political arena.**

8. The five key messages are:

1. Recognise that unlisted vernacular buildings are a highly valued heritage and cultural asset and that saving this grass roots heritage can offer opportunities of homes and employment in rural areas, which will help keep the countryside alive and help reverse rural depopulation.

2. Recognise that traditional buildings perform much better environmentally (particularly with relation to heat loss through fabric) than previously assumed, and



Minutes for the ninth Cross Party Group on Rural Affairs
Tuesday, 17 March 2015
12.15 – 13.15
Conference Room 24, Ty Hywel

that if maintained properly will outlast new build. Therefore owners of *all* traditional buildings should be informed/ trained so that they understand how best to maintain their properties effectively and sustainably. And there needs to be a comprehensive required training scheme so that any builder must work to an accepted standard on traditional buildings and must have this accreditation in order to do so.

3. Create incentives (eg tax or grants) to encourage owners of derelict vernacular buildings to make these available to schemes such as ABC to turn them into affordable housing.
4. Recognise that addressing the rural affordable housing need requires a different approach to regulation and restrictions than urban affordable housing (eg ACG and social housing grant etc need to be adapted accordingly)
5. Reinstate the critical role of Rural Housing Enablers in all rural areas of Wales to help identify and address the often hidden need of affordable housing in these areas
9. Llyr Huws Gruffydd closed the meeting thanking the speakers, contributions from the attendees and thanked Peter Ogden for taking responsibility for the action from the floor.

The meeting ended on the second bell for Plenary.