



Report title:

Housing needs survey of rural workers in the Weald: Forestry and coppice workers

Commissioned by: High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee (JAC)
Commissioned from: Report compiled by the AONB Director from a survey carried out by ESUS Forestry and Woodlands Ltd working with Debbie Bartlett (Independent Consultant) during September 2008.
Funded by: n/a
Status and date: Final report, July 2009

Research purpose: Evidence gathering to inform district affordable housing policies about the needs of this hard to reach group who are essential to the management of the AONB landscape, particularly woodland, and support objective S1 of the AONB Management Plan.

Research aims:

- To gain an understanding of the specific housing needs of coppice workers and those in craft industries related to woodland management;
- To understand the everyday issues facing individuals in the industry through recorded interviews.

Research findings: The report findings show that for the majority of coppice workers earnings in the sector are well below average and consequently only 8% could afford any kind of housing accommodation in the Weald at the present time. The specific requirements of coppice workers particularly space to park 4WD and trailer, essential kit to manage the High Weald's characteristic small, inaccessible ancient woodlands, means that most designated affordable housing schemes are not suitable for their needs.

AONB Unit comment: The report conclusions suggest new entrants to the coppice industry face an uphill if impossible task to find suitable accommodation close to the areas they work. Local authorities and housing associations may need to challenge accepted principles in terms of the location and design of affordable housing if they are to meet the housing needs of coppice workers. Given the specialist needs coppice workers have for parking it may be that an urban fringe or rural location is more suited to their needs. The historic dispersed settlement character of the High Weald may offer opportunities for affordable housing schemes focused on rural workers allowing housing associations to explore the detailed design of affordable units to accommodate the storage of 4WD vehicles, trailers, wood and equipment.

In order to satisfy the increasing demand for woodfuel to meet renewable energy targets without compromising the unique ecology of ancient woodlands, their rich archaeological resource and their landscape and recreation value, a strong local woodland industry, specialising in the management of small scale coppice, is essential. With 90% of coppice workers unable to afford accommodation in the High Weald, or in much of the rest of South East England, the long term future of this industry, and the health of the woodlands that depend on it, is uncertain.

