

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



Report for High Weald Joint Advisory Committee

by AONB Director based on a survey carried out by ESUS Forestry
and Woodlands Ltd working with Debbie Bartlett (Independent
Consultant)

June 2009

The High Weald Joint Advisory Committee's Research Programme

Furthering understanding of one of England's Finest Landscapes

The High Weald Joint Advisory Committee's management aims and priorities for the AONB are firmly based on an understanding of the fundamental and defining character of the whole area – that is, those components of natural beauty that have made the High Weald a recognizably distinct and homogenous area for at least the last 700 years and that will continue to define it in the future. It develops its understanding through undertaking work itself, through its specialist team, the AONB Unit, or by commissioning independent reports from others.

The primary purpose of its research programme is to better understand the components of natural beauty. The key components are:

- Geology, landform, water systems and climate: deeply incised, ridged and faulted landform of clays and sandstone. The ridges tend east-west and from them spring numerous gill streams that form the headwaters of rivers. Wide river valleys dominate the eastern part of the AONB. The landform and water systems are subject to and influence, a local variant of the British sub-oceanic climate.
- Settlement: dispersed historic settlements of farmsteads, hamlets and late medieval villages founded on trade and non-agricultural rural industries.
- Routeways: ancient routeways (now roads and Rights of Way) in the form of ridge-top roads and a dense system of radiating droveways. The droveways are often narrow, deeply sunken and edged with trees, hedges, wildflower-rich verges and boundary banks.
- Woodland: a great extent of ancient woods, gills and shaws in small holdings, the value of which is inextricably linked to long-term management.
- Field and heath: small, irregularly shaped and productive fields, often bounded by (and forming a mosaic with) hedgerows and small woodlands and typically used for livestock grazing. Small holdings and a non-dominant agriculture. Distinctive zones of heaths and inner river valleys.

By researching the key components – their history, development, distribution, special qualities, deterioration, damage and loss – we can develop an evidence base for the AONB Management Plan and other AONB policy and guidance.

The JAC's secondary purpose is to better understand how the High Weald landscape can contribute to society – food, energy, water provision, flood protection, recreation, biodiversity and fisheries – without damage to its natural beauty.

Further Information

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Housing needs survey of rural workers in the Weald: Forestry and coppice workers, September 2008

Report for the High Weald AONB Joint Advisory Committee June 2009

Compiled by AONB Director

Summary of key findings

- 94% of coppice workers feel that lack of affordable housing is 'definitely' a problem for their industry
- 89% need additional outside storage for work related tools, materials or machinery at their home
- 78% need additional parking for work related vehicles, mostly trucks and trailers at their home
- Over 50% of coppice workers earn less than half of the median monthly pay for full time workers in the UK
- Only 8% of coppice workers surveyed could afford a house over £175,000. For 80% of coppice workers the most they could afford to pay for a house is £125,000. *The average price of a house in the South East is £234,008. A semi-detached house in the Weald ranges between £179,252 in Rother to £266,076 in Tunbridge Wells (Source: UK House prices, BBC, May 2009).*
- 46% of coppice workers can only afford rents up to £400/ month, well below the usual rent for any property with parking in the High Weald.

View the testimony of Tom Sumner, a young coppice worker in the High Weald



Click on the link to the [High Weald website](#) to view Tom's testimony

Tom is a 21 year old coppice worker with 2 young children. He was brought up in Kent and learnt his trade from his father before working under an experienced coppice worker. He currently lives in north Kent commuting each day to the High Weald to work in the woods.

Filming and interview by Chris Tizzard

Background and context

About this survey

Very little work has been done on this small, hard to reach yet vital sector of land based workers in the South East. This housing needs survey of forestry and coppice workers was undertaken during September 2008. Industry advisors ¹ made face to face contact with coppice workers during September 2008 at events such as Bentley Wood Fair. 37 surveys were carried out representing an estimated 15% of coppice workers active in Kent and Sussex.

Local authority duties under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 with regard to AONBs

Under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 there is a duty on all public bodies to have regard to the purpose of AONB designation in exercising or performing any functions in relation to AONBs. The LDF process is covered by this duty together with associated housing policy documents. To demonstrate compliance local authorities can assess policy and actions against the objectives for AONB management set out in the [AONB Management Plan 2009](#), a statutory document adopted by all fifteen local authorities covering the High Weald AONB.

The need for dedicated provision of affordable housing for key land based workers is identified under objective S1d) of the AONB Management Plan. In order to achieve objectives for woodland in the AONB W1 – W4 a thriving industry with skilled coppice workers is critical.

About ancient woodland in the High Weald and the need for skilled management

Woodland covers over one quarter of the High Weald with 75% of these classified as ancient woodlands. These woods exist mostly as small woods on farms with occasional large estates. The AONB's ancient woodlands are an irreplaceable heritage of national importance; are unique to the High Weald in terms of their ecological make-up and support extensive survival of archaeological features. Many aspects of the ecology of these woods have developed in tandem with human use and many of the species and habitats best represented in British woodland depend for their persistence on the continual turnover of open and shaded areas in a mosaic that is dependent upon management.

Over the human history of the Weald woodland was seen as a resource - domestic, agricultural and industrial - and this has shaped the woods in both direct and indirect ways. This continues today with resurgence in the industry generated by a demand for renewable building materials and energy supplies. Studies by the AONB Unit suggest that woodlands in the High Weald, if harnessed sustainably, could supply up to 15% of residents' heat and hot water needs. To achieve this without damaging the unique ecology and archaeology requires skilled woodland workers.

About woodland workers in the South East

The legacy of coppicing in High Weald woods means that woods are frequently dominated by established coppice stools which have been cut and re-cut over generations. Efficient management of these woods which are often small and relatively inaccessible requires different skills to the management of forestry plantations. A remnant

¹ ESUS Forestry and Woodlands Ltd and Debbie Bartlett, Independent Consultant, working together since 2001 to support woodland workers in the South East

coppice industry has survived in Kent and Sussex as a result of the continued use of coppice timber for fencing and logs.

The industry mostly comprises individuals working alone or with others, and small businesses. These are labour based operations using chainsaws and small scale machinery such as tractors, peelers, chippers and mobile sawmills. A few larger businesses exist tending to have a higher capital investment in mechanised forestry operations and more suited to larger woodlands and estates.

A report on the coppice industry in 2004 interviewed over 180 coppice workers active in the South East. The survey suggests that the industry is dominated by older, more experienced individuals with nearly half those surveyed born before 1960 and only 10% under 30 years old. However, numbers of young people registering for nationally recognised chainsaw training remain consistent. Anecdotal information suggests that many of these trained young people opt for a career in landscaping or arboriculture rather than woodland management since these are considered to offer greater financial security.

Coppice workers produce primarily fencing, garden products, hedgelaying materials, woodfuel, building materials and charcoal with a few focusing on specialist markets such as musical instruments, trugs, indoor furniture and sculpture.

Report conclusions and recommendations for policy

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 is essential specialising in the management of small scale broadleaf, particularly coppice, woodland. Fortunately these skills have survived in a small but vibrant coppice industry operating across the South East. However with 90% of coppice workers unable to afford accommodation in the High Weald, or in much of the rest of South East England, the future of this industry, and hence the health of the woodlands that depend on it, is uncertain.

Support for the industry in terms of affordable housing suitable for coppice workers is urgently needed. New entrants to the industry face particular problems to secure appropriate housing. Local authorities and housing associations may need to challenge accepted principles in terms of the location and design of affordable housing and their definition of key workers. The historic dispersed settlement character of the High Weald may offer alternative locations 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.

The AONB Unit have proposed a definition and eligibility criteria for land based key workers in the High Weald which recognises the crucial role coppice workers play in sustainable management of the AONB landscape (Appendix1).

This approach would be complimentary to PPS7 which states 'Planning policies should provide a positive framework for facilitating sustainable development that supports traditional land-based activities' adding that local development document policies should support countryside-based activities which contribute to rural economies and provide for the sensitive exploitation of renewable energy sources in accordance with the policies set out in PPS22. It is also in line with draft PPS4 Policy EC4 which encourages

local planning authorities through their LDF's to positively encourage sustainable economic growth based on a proactive locally specific vision.

Housing needs survey of rural workers in the Weald: Forestry and coppice workers, September 2008

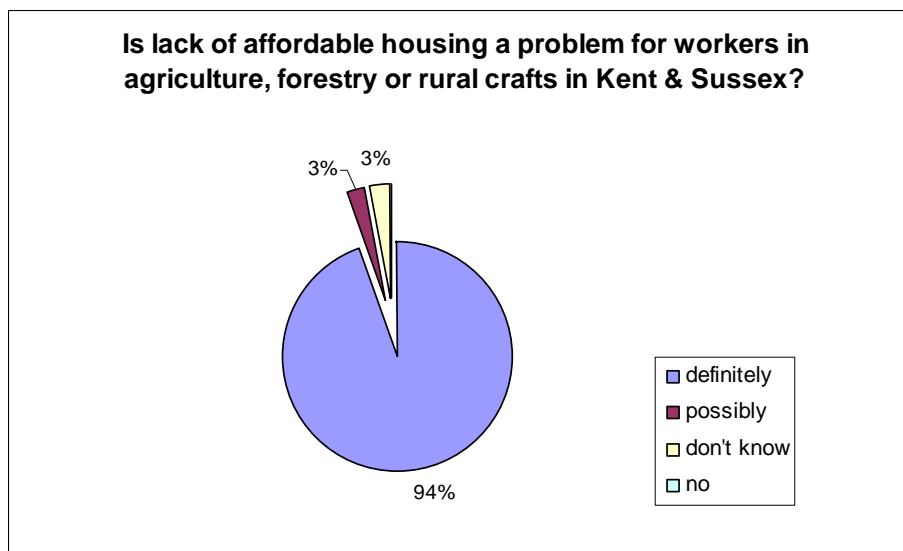
Main findings

1. Affordable housing

- **94% of coppice workers feel that lack of affordable housing is 'definitely' a problem for their industry**

Explanation

There is a housing crisis for rural workers in the South East and woodland workers are no exception. Wages have not kept up with the cost of rural housing and whilst many workers have in the past relocated to larger urban areas where accommodation is cheaper, rising costs of fuel and longer journey times are putting pressure on businesses.



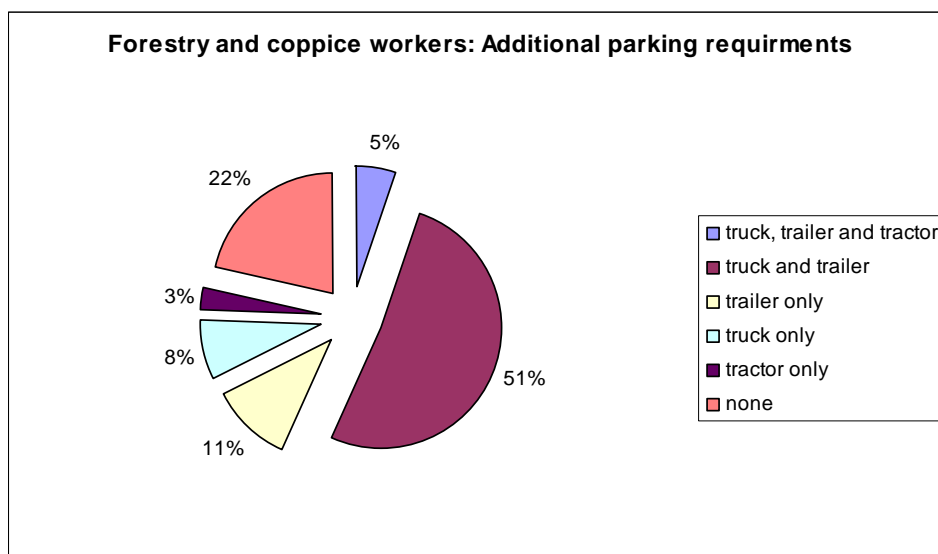
2. Housing needs

- **78% need additional parking for work related vehicles, mostly trucks and trailers at their home**

Explanation

The nature of woodlands in the High Weald – the majority being small, traversed with steep sided gills and with difficult access – favours small scale labour based management. A significant amount of wood is moved out of woodlands by 4W drive vehicles and trailers after being loaded by hand. These methods are flexible enough to deal with small scale management objectives, seasonal variations in soil conditions and protection of the extensive archaeological resource. In contrast large woodlands on even terrain with surfaced access tracks frequently employ more mechanised felling and extraction e.g. standard forwarder units (tractors and trailers with a grab) to load timber onto haulage lorries.

Amongst Kent and Sussex coppice workers 4-wheel drive trucks and trailers are the most commonly owned vehicles. These do not suit the standard parking bays provided in most modern housing estates or by social housing providers.



- **89% need additional outside storage for work related tools, materials or machinery at their home**
- **81% need access to a workshop or yard near their home.**

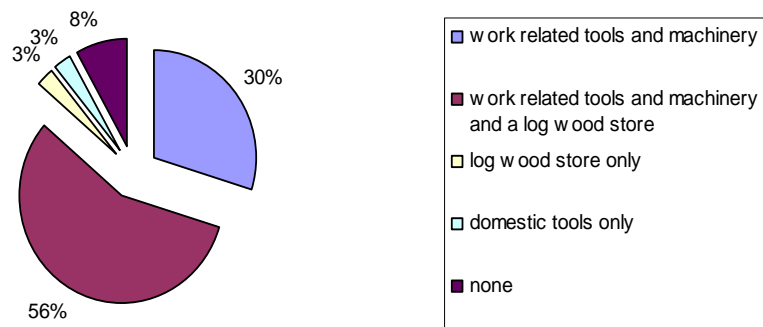
Explanation

Security is a key concern for coppice workers. Their businesses rely on hand tools, chainsaws and small machinery. Margins are tight and businesses are vulnerable to damage or loss of equipment.

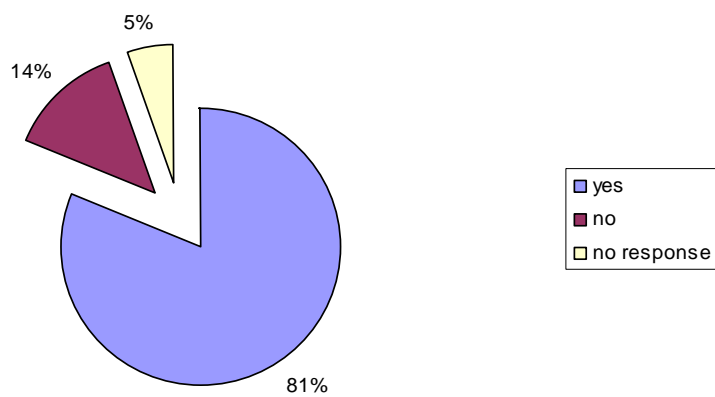
Many small businesses will combine felling timber and moving it off site with processing firewood, fencing and other green wood products. Small yards with a covered area to stack timber and operate processing equipment will be needed. Security is again a key concern.

Most coppice workers have access to logs and will heat their homes with a wood burner. Easy access to fuel will go some way to mitigate generally low wages and most workers will be looking for space to stack and store wood.

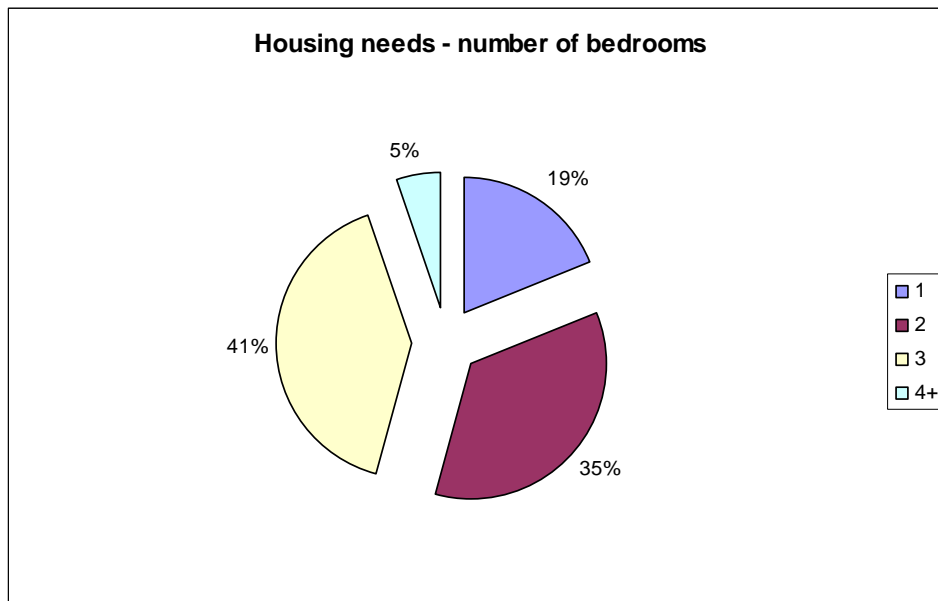
Forestry and coppice workers: Additional outside storage requirements



Do you need a workshop or yard near your home?

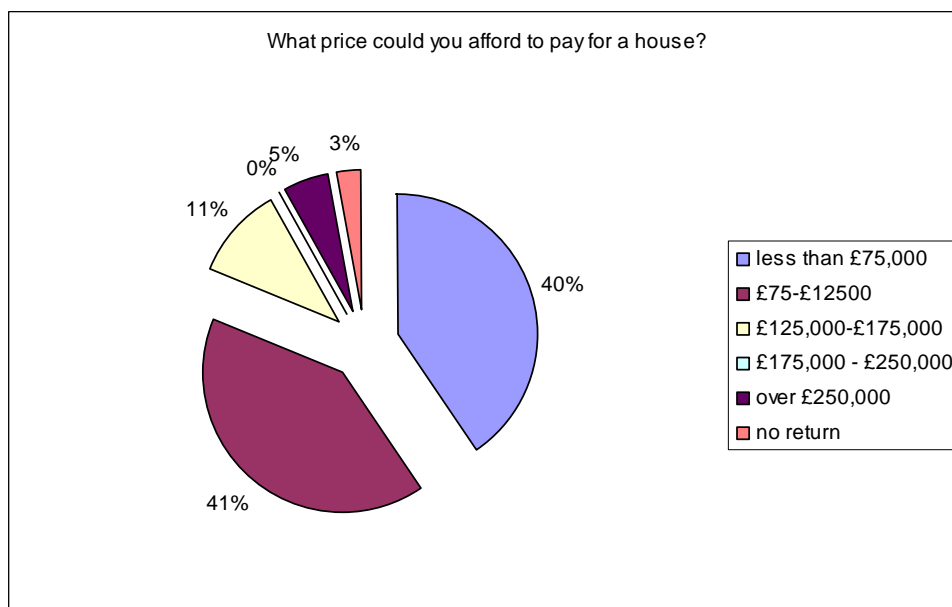


- The majority of coppice workers need properties with more than 1 bedroom.

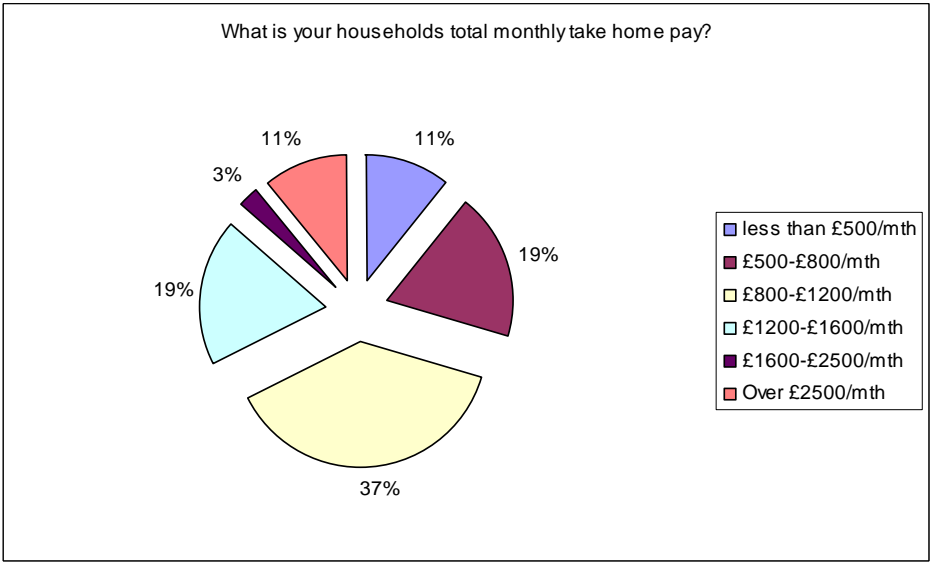
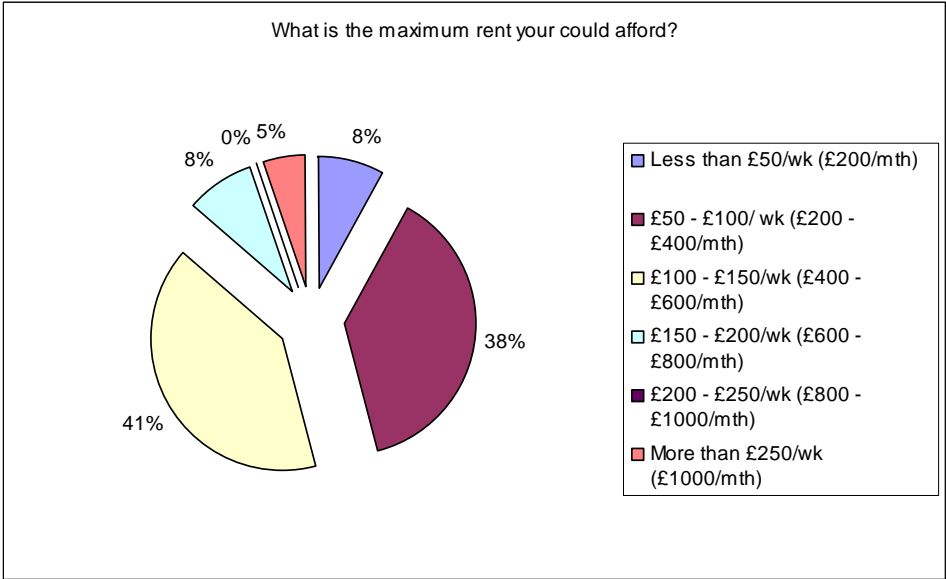


3. Wages and housing costs

- **81% of coppice workers can only afford a house up to £125,000.**
- **Only 13% can afford rent above £600/ month, the minimum likely to secure a property with parking in the Weald**
- **Over 50% of coppice workers earn less than half of the median monthly pay for full time workers in the UK ²**



² www.statistics.gov.uk 14th June 2009



Appendix 1

A proposed definition of land based key workers in the High Weald AONB

Definition

Land based key workers in the High Weald AONB are workers in agriculture, forestry or rural craft industries whose occupations directly manage and conserve the special character of the High Weald as identified by the AONB Management Plan.

These may include:

1. Forestry and coppice workers and manufacturers of local coppice or woodland products such as fencing;
2. Agricultural workers;
3. Contractors and advisors providing technical and specialist land management services in line with the objectives of the AONB Management Plan;
4. Craftsmen, trades and skilled 'artisans' utilising local products derived from sustainable management of the AONB landscape.

Eligibility criteria

Workers in these industries who can provide corroborated evidence that:

1. They are fully or mostly employed in land based occupations that directly manage and conserve the special character of the High Weald AONB as identified by the AONB Management Plan.
2. Qualifying land based activities provide their primary source of income.
3. They possess the necessary minimum qualifications to meet industry standards and to be compliant with Health and Safety requirements for the job they do.

APPENDIX 2 : Copy of survey form

Housing needs survey of rural workers in the Weald

The High Weald AONB Unit is investigating the needs of rural workers whose occupations are essential to conserving the outstandingly beautiful landscape of the High Weald. Essential occupations include forestry and coppice workers; agricultural workers and contractors; rural craftsmen.

Please be assured this questionnaire is completely confidential and anonymous.

Thank you for your time

1. What is your occupation?

2. In your view is the lack of affordable housing a problem for workers in agriculture, forestry or rural crafts in Kent and Sussex? (Tick one box only)

Definitely [] Possibly [] No [] Don't know []

3. Have you or anyone you know working in these industries experienced difficulties finding suitable affordable accommodation in Kent and Sussex? (Tick one box only)

You [] A close family member [] A relative []
Friends [] Others []

4. As a rural worker what are your housing needs?

Number of bedrooms 1 [] 2 [] 3 [] 4+ []

Location Village [] Town [] Rural []

Outside space None [] Garden only [] Allotment []
Other

Parking spaces None [] Car [] Truck []
Trailer [] Other

Outside storage None [] Tools for domestic use []
Work related tools, materials or machinery []
Wood storage [] Other

5. If you wished to buy a home, what total house price could you afford? (Tick one box only)

Less than £75,000 [] £75,000 - £125,000 [] £125,000 - £175,000 []
£175,000 - £250,000 [] Over £250,000 []

6. If you wished to rent a home, what is the maximum rent you could afford? (Tick one box only)

Less than £50/wk (£200/mth) []	£50 - £100/ wk (£200 - £400/mth) []
£100 - £150/wk (£400 - £600/mth) []	£150 - £200/wk (£600 - £800/mth) []
£200 - £250/wk (£800 - £1000/mth) []	More than £250/wk (£1000/mth) []

7. What is the total monthly take home pay (after deductions) of everybody who is responsible for the cost of housing (rent or mortgage) (Tick one box only)

Less than £500/mth []	£500 - £800/mth []	£800 - £1200/mth []
£1200 - £1600/mth []	£1600 - £2500/mth []	Over £2500/mth []