Previously I was Manager and Rural Housing Enabler for a small rural housing charity in Cumbria, working with rural communities throughout the county for 7 years. Prior to that, I have worked for various rural organisations in Cumbria since I moved to the county 40 years ago.

I have the strong concern that with the reduction of working-age population in Cumbria, tourism & rural businesses and rural communities are going to be less viable, and we need government funding to provide more truly affordable homes to keep younger people in these areas.

- Cumbria overall has a forecasted reduction of its working-age population over the next 5 years and beyond, with the impact likely to be especially severe in the rural areas in east & south Cumbria and the Lake District National Park. As evidence, see all the information on the website of Cumbria Intelligence Observatory. This reduction in available workforce will have an impact on many of the tourism businesses in rural Cumbria.
- In my opinion, the lack of truly affordable homes combined with the low local wages and high house prices have meant that rural Cumbria has been losing its young people for the last 30 years. The high house prices have been caused by the high % of second homes, holiday lets and incoming older richer households who have pushed up the prices in the attractive landscapes of rural Cumbria, even more than in other areas of the North. Few young people have been able to stay or move into these rural areas due to these factors.
- This loss of young people over decades is now evident as a high % of the present workforce is older and is going to retire in 10-15 years. And as the population is not forecast to increase in size, this means we will have an increasing % of older residents (many with no family nearby to give support) combined with a reducing workforce. Many tourism businesses in the rural areas are likely to struggle to find staff, skilled or unskilled.
- We need more government subsidy to allow truly affordable homes to be built in most areas of Cumbria, rural and urban, and freedom from policies such as Right to Buy or Starter Homes which will not help provide a future workforce for the county.

Further evidence -

Looking at the recent Cumbria LEP Skills Investment Plan 2016 - especially the end of the Exec Summary -
"The Skills and Employment Challenge in Numbers

An estimated 66,500 jobs will need to be filled in Cumbria between 2016 and 2021 inclusive as a result of replacement demand, i.e. retirements, occupational mobility and outward migration. On top of this, the number of new jobs in the nuclear sector – driven by the proposed new build programme at Moorside – is likely to be around 7,300 over the same period, whilst a further 6,500 new jobs could be created through general economic growth and other (non-nuclear) programmes of investment. In total therefore, an estimated 80,300 jobs will need to be filled in Cumbria between the start of 2016 and the end of 2021.

As things stand, Cumbria is not well placed to meet this challenge. By way of illustration, if the county achieved an employment rate of 78% (making it one of the highest performing LEP areas in the country) and if we maximised the employment potential of the young people that we expect to
enter the working age population over the next five years, we would be able to fill an estimated 24,000 jobs. That is just 30% of the total challenge.

Fundamentally, Cumbria needs more residents of working age to sustain current levels of economic performance and to provide the foundation for growth."

There is also the issue of Brexit and its possible impact on many workers in areas like Eden who have come from the EU. Rob Johnston, Chief Executive of Cumbria Chamber of Commerce, said in a recent email -

"Since the referendum many businesses have expressed concern over the future status of their existing EU workforce. These hardworking people are absolutely vital to the success of businesses, and must be retained – we can’t afford to lose talented and skilled workers."

In my own District the present unemployment rate in Eden is around 0.4%, and from the 2011 census information in our Local Plan we ‘import’ around 1,400 workers into Eden from elsewhere in Cumbria every day to do the existing jobs. Bigger tourism businesses often ‘bus’ people in from west Cumbria as there is a shortage of potential employees in Eden. It is great that Eden DC wants to bring new business into Eden with hopefully higher wages, but we will have the issue, with so many of our present workforce being older and retiring in the next decade, of how to find people to do the existing low wage jobs.

Overall in Cumbria, the rural areas of east and south Cumbria and the Lake District National Park have a higher % of older residents, and combined with reducing rural bus services and the increased cost of commuting, rural businesses including tourism are likely to be worse hit due to the reduction in the working-age population. Tourism businesses in places like Patterdale and Glenridding with over 45% second homes and holiday lets, very high house prices, low local wages and few available affordable homes, are likely to struggle to find staff, and the communities may be less vibrant and sustainable. And many businesses in central Lake District and elsewhere in rural Cumbria rely on staff from the EU and beyond, so the uncertainties of Brexit are adding to the concerns. A business survey which has been done by Cumbria Intelligence Observatory recently could show the impact of the lack of staff, skilled and unskilled, in the county. The report is only in draft form at present.

In my opinion, the reduction in government subsidy for building truly affordable homes in rural Cumbria means we have fewer affordable homes being built, and our communities and businesses are becoming less viable. We need to look at many methods to help create more truly affordable homes in both urban and rural Cumbria to provide the workforce we need in the future. More government grant to subsidise affordable homes (not Starter Homes!) is key, as well as reducing the implications of policies like Right to Buy. Policies that may work in central London do not work in places like rural Cumbria, and we need subsidy to provide the homes we need in the county, not the 3-4 bedroom expensive executive houses that the developers may want to provide.

September 2016