



# Housing

An appropriate mix of housing is essential to a community's sustainability. Ensuring affordable housing is available means local people can stay living in their community

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## Introduction

An appropriate mix of good quality housing is essential if a community is to evolve in a sustainable manner. Affordable housing plays a large role in achieving this by providing financially accessible housing for those wishing to stay in their community who might otherwise have to leave. ACRE believes that having a vibrant mix of people in a community will help support local services and facilities and ensure better quality of life for all

## Overview

Most people would agree that the provision of a good mix of market, private rented and affordable housing will help to deliver a balanced and inclusive community.

Enabling people to stay in their own community can reinvigorate local businesses and services, and help keep local schools open. However, barriers to sustainable development often exist, such as inappropriate use of planning constraints by local planning authorities, the reluctance of communities to understand the need to build a mix of housing and changes made by central Government to housing planning.

But affordability is the key issue for many people, especially with the cost of open-market homes increasing due to strong demand compounded by years of a shortfall in house building. Add to this the lower wages for rural workers, and the gap of being able to afford even rented accommodation widens to the extent that local people are priced out of their community. A report from the Department for Communities and Local Government shows that people in rural areas, on the lower end of the wage scale, are faced with house prices over eight times their annual wage.

There are clear pressures on the land available in rural communities for development. In the current

financial climate, small-scale developers need to maximise profits to stay solvent and will often look to build as much market housing as they can – sometimes at the expense of the need for affordable housing.

Other challenges include the growing need to build energy efficient housing in areas that don't have mains gas supplies and the need to provide supported housing for an increasingly ageing population.

ACRE and its members have long promoted

communities taking action for themselves and have provided support to groups looking to develop appropriate housing for their community.

We believe that affordable housing is an essential component of any rural community that seeks to be vibrant and inclusive. Local people need to explore a vision for their own



future through the process of Community Planning which has been shown to change attitudes on accepting appropriate housing development.

We want to see Government policy that realises the ambitions of rural communities by providing the necessary support and funding through established support agencies such as ACRE; to enable the provision of appropriate housing development, clearly supporting the need for more affordable housing.

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## Issue: Identifying local housing needs

There is a need to capture the housing aspirations and requirements of local communities in a way that communicates these effectively to the wider community in question and the local planning authority.

## Solution: Local needs assessments

In addition to advocating the use of Community Led Planning, ACRE also manages the national network of Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) who work in rural communities to generate new housing projects.

RHEs support communities to undertake local housing needs assessments and are experts in the critical brokerage role between communities, landowners, developers and the local authority to bring forward sites for affordable housing.

RHEs then work with communities, planning and housing authorities, registered social landlords (RSLs) and landowners to design schemes that meet local needs.

There are many examples of how communities can capture



their aspirations effectively and communicate these to their local authority.

Gloucestershire Rural Community Council (GRCC) played a vital role in enabling a small development by a housing society in Gretton, Gloucestershire.

It came about after GRCC's RHE carried out a local needs housing survey, with the support of the parish council. The survey identified a critical need for more affordable homes in the village, a site was identified and GRCC was key in advising the community about the scheme.

The homes are enabling local people, such as Laura Davis, pictured, to bring up their own families in the village where they grew up.

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## Issue: Communities want to develop own solutions

Communities require expert, local help to exploit all the sustainable housing development opportunities available to them

## Solution: Partnership working

ACRE Network members are becoming increasingly involved in Community Land Trust (CLT) activity.

Action in Rural Sussex (AiRs) has set up a CLT umbrella organisation which is providing support to emerging CLT groups. AiRs is working with Slaugham Parish CLT group on a mixed development on Parish Council owned land and providing advice and support to this and other newly forming groups.

Dorset Community Action supports the Devon, Dorset and Somerset CLT project, through publicity, assisting with presentations and lobbying. Planning permissions for four schemes are in the pipeline.

New schemes are emerging, including the two "built" schemes in Buckland Newton and Worth Matravers. There are now a total of nine CLT projects operating in Dorset.

Cheshire Community Action is currently running a CLT enabling project across the county. Funded by five local Registered Providers and supported by the local authorities in East and West Cheshire and the Homes & Communities Agency, the project aims to help communities develop their own community-led housing by providing advice, legal and business planning support to get things moving.

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## Issue: Changes to local authority allocations policies

The recent changes to local authority allocations policies will mean that some people living in communities will now be excluded from accessing social housing that was meant to enable them to continue living in their community

## Solution: A process which makes an exception for rural communities

The Localism Act of 2011 has brought about significant changes to local authority Allocation Schemes. These are schemes which decide how much need a person or family is in when allocating housing. People are placed in a 'band' according to their need for housing.

The government's focus is to prioritise those in greatest need of housing and this has caused local authorities to change their 'banding' system. As a result, those that are in 'less need' have been taken off the housing lists. This has had a negative impact in rural areas where local people, who often have intermediate need, may not now be able to access houses that were intended for them.

Development of rural housing can be very complex but via an 'exception site' local communities can secure affordable housing for their area. An exception site is one that would not usually get planning permission for housing, for example farm land next to but not within a local settlement area.

A development plan or **Development Plan Document** may allow for the development of small sites within rural areas solely for affordable housing, which would not otherwise be released for general market housing.

Restrictions may be placed on an exception site via 'section 106' which empowers the local authority to stipulate certain conditions on the development. One of these is that eligibility for the housing is restricted to ensure that local households are given priority. This condition is often placed on rural development by the local authority to ensure local people are able to stay living in their community.

While local authorities are expected to cut waiting lists, they have the flexibility to incorporate policies that "prioritise applicants who can demonstrate a close association with their local area".

ACRE Network members have been monitoring the impact of changes to choice-based letting policies

and their own local authority policies on allocations to rural exception schemes. Our survey work reports that some authorities are taking some local rural households off the waiting lists which mean they may have to leave their community if, for example, rents increase or house/land prices continue to rise.

Rural housing need surveys usually identify the greatest need from people who are either in the private rented sector, or are living with extended family. Because these people have a 'roof over their head' they are no longer likely to be eligible for a rural allocation, despite other requirements.

The original intention of the rural exception site was to promote more sustainable rural communities by enabling local people to access local housing. The new policies have the potential to stop rural exception sites in their tracks, by allocating homes to people with no connection to the community, who would be better served by allocations in more urban areas, with better access to services.

Development of rural exception sites is dependent upon the support of the local community.

It can take a significant amount of time gaining that support for homes that are meant to be for an identified local need and affordable in perpetuity. The changes could potentially have the effect of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, if these communities feel that they have been misled.

There are 'Best Practice' examples reported in Dorset and West Berkshire where distinct allocations policies for rural exception sites are in place. The Rural Housing Enabler at ACRE Network member Community Impact Bucks has done significant work to influence local authorities, where lower bands on their lists have been removed, to recommend a process for nominations on exception sites. Closer working relationships with parish councils who can maintain their own local lists are one of the recommendations.

