

# **Affordable Rural Housing: A practical guide for parish councils**

from the Rural Housing Alliance

**Building a future for your rural community**



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**‘The average rural house price in England is now more than twelve times the average salary of people living in rural areas. In order to obtain a mortgage, a person living and working in the countryside would need to earn £66,000 per year. As we all know, the average rural salary is far below that – in fact, it is around £20,000.**

This affordability gap is pricing our children out of the villages they grew up in. It also has grave consequences for the services we rely on, like the local school, shop or pub. A lack of young families means fewer people requiring their services, and makes their existence less viable.

Fortunately, something can be done. We believe just a few suitably designed affordable homes in the right location can make a real difference to the viability of village services. As a parish or town councillor, you are in an ideal position to influence this.

That’s why the National Housing Federation’s Rural Housing Alliance – a practical group of over 40 housing associations that develop or manage rural housing in England – has developed this publication, designed to answer the questions we are frequently asked by parish and town councillors. I hope you find it useful.’

**Sue Chalkley**

Chair, National Housing Federation’s Rural Housing Alliance  
Chief Executive, Hastoe Housing Association

# The basics

## Why be involved?

Most successful affordable rural housing developments are initiated and supported by active and committed parish and town councils. Often the first to hear the concerns of local people, you can offer an insight into the housing needs of the local community and take the first steps to tackle the housing problem.

Whilst this publication will refer to parish councils throughout, we recognise this includes town councils who often represent rural communities.

This guide seeks to give you a picture of what generally happens at each stage of the development process, answer your initial questions, show how you can be involved and what

roles and responsibilities the other partners will take.

You might also want to seek advice from other parish councils who have already developed affordable housing, perhaps even arranging a visit to see what can be achieved firsthand as well as hear about the challenges and how they can be overcome.

Crucially, community consultation is at the heart of any affordable housing project and this is where you the parish council can act as the catalyst for action and future success.

## What is affordable housing?

There is no blanket definition but the aim of affordable housing is to provide homes for people on modest incomes, who can't afford to buy or rent a home on the open market. The term includes rented and low cost home ownership properties.

New affordable homes help sustain communities by offering local families, couples and single people the chance to stay living in the place where they have strong connections.

Winner of the Ashford Borough Council Design Award 2010.



'We feel so fortunate to have an affordable home given the demand in this expensive village. Both my partner and I are trained South East Coast Ambulance Community Responders, which means we volunteer to respond to emergencies in Smeeth and the local area whilst ambulances are dispatched from further afield. Our new home allows us to continue to give something back to the local community which has given so much to us.'

Mr Wratten, resident at Fortescue Place, Smeeth, Kent where 11 homes were provided for the community.

'We are delighted with our new homes and it's a relief to know we have a secure future here as well as get a foot on the property ladder - we were living in tied accommodation for many years.'

The house looks good, suits our needs and has improved our health; the amount of natural light indoors is fantastic. Our dogs love watching the world from the large windows! It's been lovely and warm and the eco-heating system has been easy to understand and use. We are very happy and look forward to being here long into our retirement.'

Residents Mr & Mrs Rayner at Jarvie Close, Sedgeford, Norfolk.



### | Jargon buster |

#### Low cost home ownership

– people who cannot afford to buy on the open market purchase a share in a home and live in it as their own.

### What do you mean by local?

'Local' generally means a person who is:

- Currently resident in the parish
- Was previously resident in the parish
- Is permanently employed in the parish
- Is connected by close family still living in the parish.

You can read more about how the homes would be allocated on page 26.

### How long will it all take?

It will always depend on the individual scheme and how long each part of the process takes. As a general rule of thumb, from the first discussions of a project to residents moving into their new homes takes upwards of two years.

Patience and determination are required but the benefits of new affordable homes will support your village community for years to come.



'We are thrilled with the design and quality of the homes and impressed with the high standards they have been finished to. It goes to show that rural development can be done in a sensitive, considered and successful way.'

Sedgeford Parish Council, who helped provide 10 homes for rent and low cost home ownership in the village. Since completion the scheme (featured above) has won three regional awards for excellence in affordable housing.

# The partners

## Who does what? Partnership working and what it means

Providing affordable housing in rural locations often starts with the parish council but will require involvement of local, regional and national partners, each of whom has an established role and responsibility in the development process.

Successful partnership working means being clear about how each partner will contribute to the project and acknowledging their unique or specialist role.

Here are some brief introductions to the key partners with a description of their primary role:



### Parish council

You can provide specialist local knowledge and ensure community consultation is at the heart of the process, helping to facilitate communication and deal with local concerns. Not only do parish councils initiate projects, they help measure local housing needs, identify sites, comment on the design and layout and can offer valuable support as a statutory consultee on any planning application.

### Rural housing enabler (RHE) or enabling officer

A rural housing enabler will work independently with local communities, parish councils, local authorities and housing associations, where funding is available for their post. A big part of their role is to liaise with the partners in the process, helping to assess housing needs and potentially suitable sites for development. This role is generally supported by a development officer from a housing association or may be

carried out in full by the association or local authority where there isn't a RHE in place.

In this publication, the use of the term enabler refers to either a RHE or an officer from a housing association or local authority with a similar role.

### Local authority

Local authorities have an enabling role for housing and are responsible for making sure that housing needs in their rural areas are met. Many of them will have policies that recognise

A view of fourteen affordable homes built for the community in Ashill, Norfolk.



the need for, and support initiatives to provide, rural affordable housing. The local authority is also usually the planning authority.

The housing department will ensure a project fits in with the overall housing strategy for the area and support the project by for example, providing data on the local demand for housing. It will also help make sure that the homes are allocated to the people most in need and who meet the local criteria.

The team will also advise and influence the Homes and Communities Agency (see page 9) on its local funding priorities and the authority itself has the power to release funding, if available, to support specific projects.

The planning department will give guidance on planning proposals before an application is made as well as process the application once it has been formally submitted. The planning department advises on the selection of a potential site, working with the enabler, housing association and parish council to consider which ones are most acceptable in planning terms.

Once the application is made, the planning department will then make a recommendation to a planning committee, made up of cross party local councillors. This committee makes the decision about whether to grant or refuse planning permission.



Barraclough Fold, Glenridding, Cumbria where nine affordable homes were provided as a priority for local people.

### **County council or unitary authority**

The county council is primarily involved in new housing through the highways department, where it will make sure that any road access to a development meets all health and safety requirements.

In recent years, county councils have been able to make funding contributions to new rural developments and the parish council often has a role in encouraging the release of land for a project.

A unitary authority will carry out the role of both the district and county council.

### **Landowner**

A crucial contributor to any project, the landowner could be a local individual or family, a farmer, the parish, district or county council, a utility company or large estate.

To date, land for rural housing has come from a wide variety of sources.

### **Housing association**

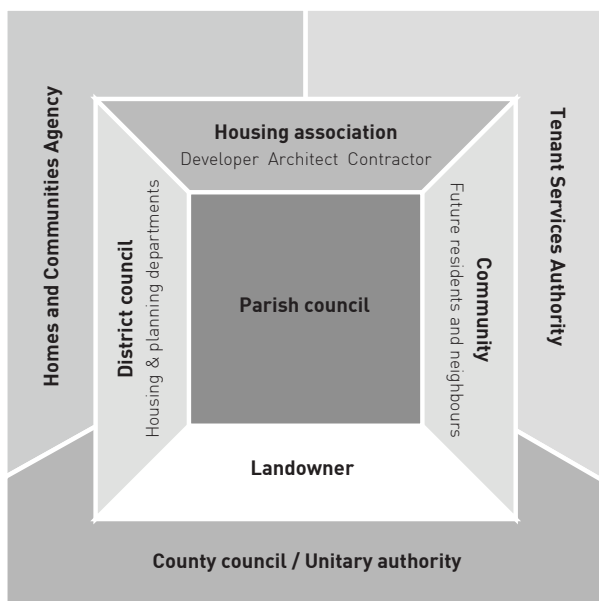
Housing associations are not-for-profit organisations, including charities and friendly societies, dedicated to providing affordable homes to people in need. Legislation requires associations to be registered with a Government body, currently the Tenant Services Authority, so that service standards and the use of public money for housing can be monitored.

You will also hear the term 'Registered Provider' which is used for housing associations and all other organisations with an affordable housing remit for example, companies set up by local authorities to help manage housing.

Housing associations are not only able to bid for public funds to help pay for new affordable homes but are committed to managing the homes to a high standard and providing a high quality service to all its residents, particularly through community investment (see pages 30 to 31). Regulatory requirements are in place to ensure that all associations perform to a set of national standards including customer service and empowerment, financial viability and value for money.

Some housing associations specialise in rural housing development and have experience of providing new affordable homes in consultation with local communities.





Working at the heart of the process, the parish council can shape an affordable housing project through local, regional and national partnerships.

### Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)

This is a Government body which provides public funding to housing associations. Its role was previously carried out by the Housing Corporation which divided into two bodies, the Homes and Communities Agency and the Tenant Services Authority.

Rural housing is a strategic priority for the HCA and there are targets set for how many homes need to be provided in villages and small market towns. The money available for new housing is allocated to the HCA from the Government as part of its National Affordable Housing Programme.

### Tenant Services Authority (TSA) (role is under review)

This is a separate Government body. Its role is to regulate the service standards within the housing sector and make sure

the needs of residents are met at all times. It also regulates rent levels, monitors the financial viability of housing associations and ensures value for money.

### Other parties and consultees

There are a number of statutory consultees for any planning application, including the parish council, and the housing association will work with relevant bodies like the Environment Agency to identify any issues or challenges early on in the development process. The Environment Agency for example is charged with helping to protect the environment, manage water resources and protect communities from flooding risks.

Construction partners such as the architect and builder will also be involved, usually appointed by the housing association based on experience.

You will be informed when these discussions and decisions are taking place. A private developer may also be involved should a 'quota site' be progressed, there is more about this on page 14.

### Your first step?

You will need to contact your local authority housing department to find out who your enabler is and how to contact them.

You can also request a list of housing associations working in your area. Sometimes this information can be found on the local authority website. The parish council may wish to consider the rural credentials of these housing associations before deciding who to contact.

# The process

## Where do we start? Find out about local housing needs

Any affordable rural housing should be tailored to its community and environment. It should reflect the needs and aspirations of the people living in your community. The whole process is evidence based and evidence led.

Before any potential site is considered, it is essential to determine how many people are in need of affordable housing, what type of housing will help them and what they are able to afford. This information, used throughout the development process, will show that new homes are being provided in the place they are needed most.



### How do you find out about housing need?

Some of the information about local housing needs can be gathered through a survey. This would be done by the enabler and they are likely to ask for your help in advertising or distributing the survey to local households and providing local information for the report, to ensure it has a local context.

In some cases, the local authority may have already conducted local surveys as part

of its district wide assessment of current and future housing needs and an additional local survey may not be needed.

### Who decides whether to go on with a project?

The enabler will analyse the data and make a recommendation on whether there is enough evidence of local housing need to proceed.

You will then be involved in identifying suitable pieces of

land where any new homes might be built.

Local people will have the opportunity to register their name and address from the start of a project, if they are interested in hearing more about the opportunity of an affordable home. This list, managed by the enabler, will be kept up to date and new households can be added at any time. It ensures that the project will reflect the up to date needs of the community.

'We worked closely with the enabler to conduct a local needs survey and by hand delivering and collecting the survey were able to ensure a really good response from the community as well as explain its purpose right from the word go. Our survey revealed that many local people were in need of housing and in partnership with the enabler and housing association, we helped deliver eight new homes for the village.'

Tingewick Parish Council, Buckinghamshire.



Local people will also be encouraged to register with the local authority if they haven't already done so, the importance of this is explained on page 26.

More often than not, as a project progresses, interest will grow and a greater need will be revealed than was uncovered by the initial research.

### | Jargon buster |

#### Enabler

– offers key liaison between the project partners, working closely with you at a local level. It could be a rural housing enabler or an officer from the housing association or local authority.

#### Housing needs survey

– a local evidence gathering process to establish how many people are in need of affordable housing and whether a project should progress to the next stage.

#### How you can be involved:

- Ensure you all have a broad understanding of the issues – you will have a local leadership role.
- Make affordable housing an agenda point at the next council meeting, to discuss the survey or invite the enabler to do a Q&A session.
- Your role could include advertising, distributing and/or providing information for the survey.
- If a project progresses, you will be local spokespeople helping to keep consultation with the wider community open through events as well as dealing with ongoing local questions, comments or concerns.

## Where to build? Finding and choosing a site



A popular scheme at Lapraik Grove, Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire where twenty eight homes were provided for local people. A rural exception site was found only two minutes from the village centre and connected by means of an already established footpath.

**‘There is absolutely no land here even if we wanted to build affordable housing.’**

Just one comment often heard at the start of a housing project that is far from true! There is almost always land for small developments in and around rural villages and towns. These pieces of land are not likely to have been allocated for development by the local authority but this doesn’t mean it’s a dead end.

Pieces of land known as exception sites have been successfully developed in conservation areas, National Parks and in those considered an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), on Greenfield sites and land in the Green Belt as well as land owned by large

estates like the National Trust, the Church of England and the Crown Estate.

More often than not a local farmer or family agree to make some land available for development, because they care about their local community and want to help to address the need for affordable homes for local people. These sites can only be considered under a well established planning policy called the rural exception site policy.

### **What is the rural exception site policy?**

It is an exception to normal planning policy. Planning permission is only granted on sites where it has been demonstrated that housing is needed and the homes provided

will be affordable and reserved for local people as a priority in perpetuity ie now and in the future.

Land value on restricted sites like this does not compare to commercial sites where open market homes can be built. Its value is lower and acquiring land at a more affordable rate helps the housing association to deliver an affordable scheme to local people.

You will be able to find reference to the exception site policy in your local authority’s local plan under ‘local needs policies’. If your local authority doesn’t have a rural exceptions policy in its local plan, ask them why and lobby for them to introduce it. Most rural local authorities do have this policy in place.

Eight local needs homes provided at Clifford Close, Matching Tye, Essex for rent and shared ownership.



### **How are the planning conditions enforced?**

They are enforced through a legal agreement under Section 106 (S106) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. A S106 agreement is signed by the housing association and the local authority and ensures that the homes are kept affordable for local people in the community. It also defines what the specific local connection criteria are.

### **So, can the houses be built near the village centre?**

Yes, although it is unlikely rural exception sites will be found in or around the village centre. Any small sites for development here, especially brownfield sites, are likely to have been earmarked for open market

development by the local authority. This makes the land too expensive given its development potential and not a feasible choice for a new affordable rural scheme.

Rural exception sites tend to be found on the edge of the village where the homes would still feel like a natural extension of the community.

### **How do you go about finding a suitable site?**

It is useful to include a question in any housing needs survey asking local people to suggest places they think new housing should go. Whether you have this information or not, it is normal practice to 'walk' the village with the enabler and/or housing association to start to

identify possible development sites and discuss any immediate problems or benefits. As the parish council, you can often provide local information about who owns the different pieces of land and the way they might like to be approached about the proposal.

The next step would then be for the enabler and/or housing association to talk to the planning department about the potential sites and get some informal advice on the most suitable in planning terms.

### **Who talks to the landowner?**

This will always depend on which site is preferred and who the landowner is. If it is a local landowner, well known to the parish council, it may be

appropriate for you to have a more informal conversation before the enabler organises a meeting. If it is another landowner or large estate, the experience of the enabler and/or housing association may make them better placed to put forward the proposal. The formal discussions will happen between the association and the landowner with whom the contract is signed.



Sixteen homes for rent and low cost home ownership provided on a quota site at Okeford Row, Shillingstone, Dorset.

### **Are there any other opportunities for affordable housing?**

Yes. Your local authority will have carried out an exercise to identify pieces of land suitable for future development ie open market development.

If open market houses are to be built in your area, it is likely that some affordable homes will be required as part of the development, known as a 'quota site'. Local authorities have guidelines in place to dictate that schemes of a certain size need to include a proportion of affordable housing. The number of homes that triggers this 'quota' varies from area to area. Normally they will be managed by a housing association and built to the high standards as described on page 20.

Some communities find that other options suit their particular circumstances. A growing number of communities are forming Community Land Trusts – not-for-profit organisations set up to provide and manage affordable housing or other facilities for the benefit of the community. They hold the value of the land in trust, meaning homes can be kept affordable into the future for the benefit of local people.

### **Can quota sites give local people priority?**

In some cases a similar legal agreement, also called a S106, can be drawn up to make sure that the affordable housing on the site is reserved for local people first. This will depend on negotiations between the developer and the local authority and what can be agreed. If the parish council wants to ensure that the affordable homes on this site are reserved for local people it is important that you work with the local authority, perhaps involving your local ward member to help influence and lobby for such an agreement.

Your enabler will be able to tell you about any opportunities like this in your area.

#### **How you can be involved:**

- Walk the village with your enabler and help identify suitable pieces of land.
- Help facilitate and advise on contact with the landowner(s).



'The new affordable homes in the village provided us with the opportunity to stop in the place we call home, alongside our family and friends. Without them, we may have been forced to leave in order to find somewhere more affordable.'

Residents Mr & Mrs Cottrell at Turnpike Close, Churchill, Somerset who both work in the local community.

### | Jargon buster |

#### Rural exception site

– a piece of land that will only receive planning permission for affordable local needs housing. It is an 'exception' to the development sites detailed in the local plan.

#### Quota site

– an open market development where a proportion of affordable housing must be provided if the total number of homes exceeds a set number. These homes could be subject to local connection criteria.

#### Greenfield site

– land that has not been developed before.

#### Green Belt

– land governed by a policy used in planning to retain areas of undeveloped, wild or agricultural land surrounding or neighbouring urban areas. This policy does not apply to all agricultural or undeveloped land.

#### Brownfield site

– a piece of land that has been developed before eg paved parking area or site of a demolished building.

#### Conservation Area

– an area that is awarded protected status because of its special 'architectural or historic' interest which as well as buildings means public and private spaces.

#### Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

– a designated and protected area of countryside that is considered to have significant landscape value.

## How many and what type will be built?

The evidence of local housing need will help decide how many homes to build. The aim is to make sure that the number of homes provided is sustainable ie by not building too few and by not building too many. It is important that there will be recurring demand for the homes.

The type of homes will reflect the households who are in need of affordable housing. On most rural developments, there is a need for both homes for rent and for low cost home ownership. The need for two and three bedroom homes is particularly prevalent but bungalows, flats and larger homes have all been provided in small rural communities when the need is evident.

### **How affordable will the rent be and for how long?**

Housing association rents are regulated and will always be at below open market value and affordable. If occupants are unable to pay the rent in full, it is likely that they will be entitled to housing benefits which will help them.

Rents are calculated using a specific Government formula and each housing association will charge roughly the same amount. There are also strict controls on when rents can be increased and by how much.

### **What happens if a housing association goes bust?**

Housing associations are very stable and highly regulated

organisations and, to date, no registered housing association has been allowed to fail. In the unlikely event that an association did fail, the regulator would use its powers to transfer the homes to another association. The rents would continue to be controlled at an affordable rate and the S106 agreement in place will ensure they remain as a priority for local people.







'This home has made such a difference and has given me security and affordability in the face of changing circumstances. I'm so pleased to still be on the property ladder in the village where we have lived for 23 years and I couldn't be happier!'

Ms Taylor, resident at Redwood Terraces, Ufford, Suffolk. You can read more this project on page 32.

### **How do you prevent tenants exercising the right to buy on exception sites?**

There is no longer the right to buy on new houses built by housing associations. There is a modified form of the right to buy called 'right to acquire' but this does not apply to homes built in 'protected' rural areas, which are typically settlements with populations below 3,000, although some larger settlements are included.

### **What is low cost home ownership?**

There are a number of low cost home ownership opportunities but for new developments, New Build HomeBuy is the official name for new homes giving people a part-buy, part-rent option also known as shared ownership. Shared ownership is an opportunity for those on

modest incomes to get a foot on the property ladder and is generally taken up by younger households who may be social tenants, first time buyers or key workers.

The majority of shared ownership homes are sold under a long lease. The purchaser will buy a share of the equity in the property and the housing association retains the remaining share. Most housing associations charge a rent on the unsold share. The occupier has rights and responsibilities as if they owned the property fully and is responsible for all repairs and maintenance.

On first sale, the share offered can be between 25% and 75% of the open market value and will depend on the individual project.

The shared owner can then buy further portions of the equity in their home as and when they can

afford to do so - this is called staircasing.

In protected rural areas, occupiers can only purchase additional shares in the property up to 80% so the home remains affordable for future purchasers.

Housing associations have staff to help applicants through the buying process. They can put applicants in touch with independent financial advisors to get up to date advice and help with obtaining a mortgage. Some associations can offer a panel of solicitors who are familiar with shared ownership leases and sales.

When the occupier sells the house, it is re-valued and they receive their share of any change in value (which can go up or down).

Two of 10 homes built in two phases at Brook Lane Cottages, Widecombe-in-the-Moor, Devon



When a future resident wishes to move, they will sell the same percentage share that they own. The value of their share can go up or down and is subject to the same market conditions as an open market property. The housing association will usually guide the sales process, instructing an independent surveyor to carry out the valuation (paid for by the seller) and then market the property locally to identify a new local buyer.

You might also wish to get involved in this local marketing by mentioning the home for sale in the village newsletter or displaying posters in prominent

areas like the notice board, village shop, community hall or pub. The important thing to remember is that the housing association jointly owns the home and as such will need to approve the new buyer and make sure that they meet the local occupancy requirements detailed in the S106 agreement and the lease.

#### **Who values the home and on what basis?**

The property is valued as if it is on the open market without any restrictions and is done so, each time, by an independent qualified surveyor, not an estate agent.

#### **Can the owners buy 100% of the equity?**

In protected rural areas, there is a clause in the lease that only allows purchasers to 'staircase', that is, buy further portions of the equity, up to a maximum of 80%.

There is sometimes an option that will allow purchasers to staircase to 100% but when the property is resold, it will be 'bought-back' by the housing association and offered to local people at an affordable price.

In this way, the property will always be affordable and never be sold for full open market value.



### What if a local person doesn't come forward?

There will be a framework within the S106 agreement to allow the association to 'cascade' the advertisement and allocation of the property to particular areas, normally adjacent parishes. This will have been agreed between the parish council, local authority and housing association. This is to make sure the opportunity is taken up by a household in need from the local area in the rare event that a person from the immediate parish cannot be found. When the property is resold, priority would again be for those applicants from the immediate parish.

### | Jargon buster |

#### Protected areas

– defined settlements, protected by statute, that are not affected by 'right to buy' or 'right to acquire' legislation.

#### Cascade

– the timeframe and process by which a property can be advertised and allocated outside of the parish boundary to surrounding communities.

#### Leasehold

– an ownership interest in a building for a given length of time. Housing associations usually offer leases in excess of 100 years. Freehold is outright ownership of the land and the building on that land.

#### Staircasing

– the process of buying further shares of equity in a property.

#### New Build HomeBuy

– the official name for low cost home ownership homes provided on most new developments, also known as shared ownership.

#### Lease

– document which details the leasehold arrangements and the local occupancy criteria set down in the S106 agreement.

### How you can be involved:

- Ensure that you can explain these details about tenure to local residents who need to feel confident about the affordability and availability of the homes in the long term.

## Design: why affordable doesn't mean cheap

### Who chooses the architect?

Once a site has been identified and the landowner has agreed to make the land available, the housing association will commission an architect to design the development. Often, it will be an architect with whom they have worked before and who appreciates the sensitivity needed in rural development. The housing association can normally provide examples of their work and you should be able to visit an already completed scheme.

The architect will also be required to take into account any planning obligations laid down by the local authority and any instructions or recommendations set down in a local/village design brief.



### Will the 'affordable' factor compromise the quality?

No. Generally speaking, new affordable housing is produced to a higher standard than private sector open market housing. For example, rooms are likely to be bigger as well as the space around the property and provision is always made for private parking.

Many housing associations have their own high design and build standards but all associations must comply with a range of standards to ensure that the new homes are eligible for public funding. These are contained within the *Capital Funding Guide* published by the Homes and Communities Agency.

New homes will meet a set of minimum environmental criteria and often, other best practice domestic standards:

### Code for Sustainable Homes

The Code is a single national standard for the design and construction of green and sustainable homes. Typically housing associations will need to minimise the environmental impact that new homes have by

incorporating renewable energy sources, ecological features and reducing water usage.

### Lifetime Homes

Housing associations are guided by best practice and aim to provide properties that are designed to make life as easy as possible for as long as possible. The homes are designed to be adaptable for everyone, from young families to older people and individuals with a temporary or permanent physical impairment.

### Can the parish council influence the design?

Yes, your local knowledge is a useful resource. The parish council will be consulted on the design and are welcome to make suggestions on the site layout, external materials, landscaping and other design features.

It's important to note here that stringent cost limits are applied to housing schemes which use public funds and associations must use their experience to make judgements on what is financially possible within the project requirements.

Ten homes at Conway and Sycamore Cottages, West Dean, West Sussex with the latter phase a winner of a Sussex Heritage Trust Award 2009.



### | Jargon buster |

#### Capital Funding Guide

– contains the rules and procedures with which housing associations must comply in order to receive public funds for new social housing.

#### Code for Sustainable Homes

– the single national standard to guide the industry in the design and construction of sustainable homes.

#### Lifetime Homes

– this standard is a set of 16 design criteria that provide a model for building accessible and adaptable homes.

You can read more about the funding process on page 23.

#### **Does that mean design comes second to cost?**

No. A careful balance is sought. The houses must be pleasant to look at and to live in. The success of any project is linked

to how it fits in with the existing local architecture. You will see through some of the case studies used in this guide that design is crucial and should allow the development to become a natural extension of the village.

#### **How you can be involved:**

- You can provide feedback on the design and ensure local design features have been considered.
- Help organise a consultation day so the community can see and comment on the plans.

## Community consultation: involving local people

Community consultation is at the heart of developing new affordable rural homes. Local support is hugely beneficial and keeping your community informed of progress is the best way to do this.

You will have already been involved in promoting the need for affordable housing at the start of any project and explaining why and how local housing needs have been identified. Once the proposed development has been designed and plans are available, it is time to hold a consultation event and invite comments and feedback from the community.

Consultation events are normally attended by the enabler, the housing association, representatives from the parish council, the local authority and even the architect.

### Why is this meeting important?

The meeting can go a long way to allay fears and misconceptions about affordable housing. People will want to hear who the houses are for and how they will be kept available to local people and not fall onto the open market.

It will also show that this project is intended to benefit the community, there is nothing secret going on and that their views are welcome.

Not all objections will be based on misconceptions and often local concerns can be accommodated within the proposals, so long as the housing association is aware of them. Local people can become champions of the project too.



'We need young families to stay in the village and affordable housing has to be built. There are always people who don't want it, but they or their families might be very glad of it themselves one day. We all need to think ahead.'

Neighbour to a new development of 14 homes in Swindon, South Staffordshire.

### | Jargon buster |

#### Consultation

– meeting and discussing the project with local people on a regular basis as well as ensuring that there is an information flow between the project partners and the community.

### How you can be involved:

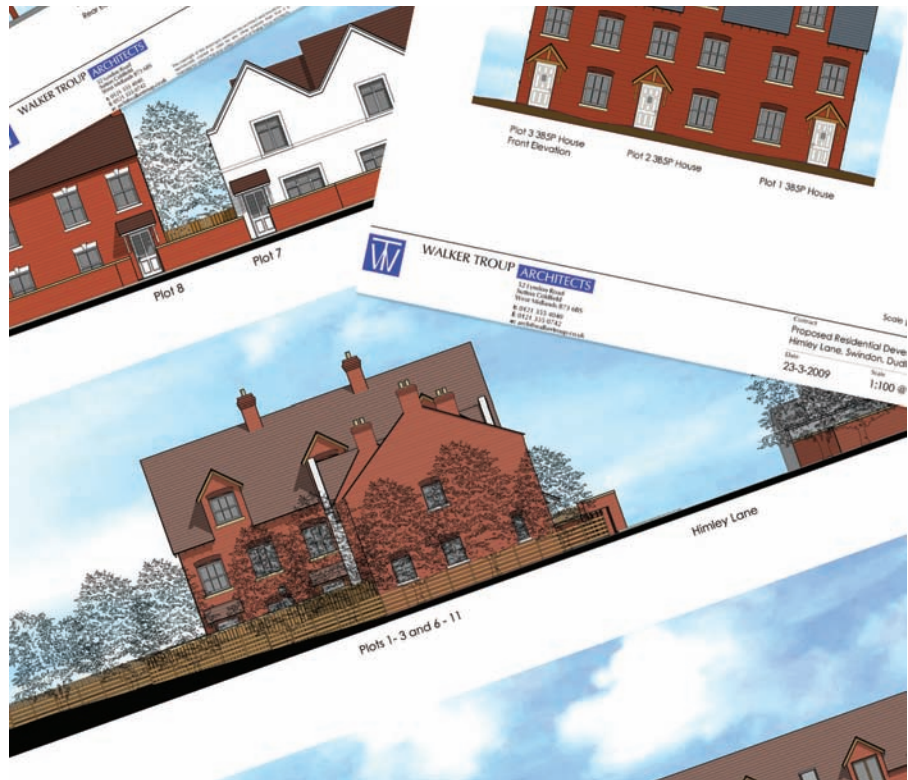
- Help to organise a meeting and publicise it locally.
- Ensure that people unable to make the consultation meetings are invited to give feedback through the council.

## What can we do about objectors who continue to oppose the scheme?

Keep the channels of communication open and be consistent in the message you deliver, which is why it is so important to understand how a project will develop right at the beginning. This leaves less room for miscommunication and also means you are entering into the process with your eyes wide open and can turn to fellow councillors for support.

If some members of the community can't be won round by the wider objects of the project, don't be too upset. Do try and understand that they don't want new homes on land, which according to the current plans, was never intended for development.

The partners in the project will be able to give you continued support and help you answer questions that you don't feel able to answer in full.



## Funding: who pays?

### How is a scheme funded?

In most cases, some public money is needed to subsidise affordable housing schemes and housing associations make applications to the Homes and Communities Agency for grant funding. These applications are considered in the context of the area of where the homes are being provided, so that a balanced view is taken on value for money.

There are limits on the funds available and any project put forward will have to qualify for public grant so the total scheme costs must not be too high. This is why acquiring land through the exception site policy for a lower than market price is

essential to make sure a development is viable.

Grant funding covers only part of the overall cost, housing associations also invest in new schemes using their own reserves or securing private loans and depending on the needs of individual developments, the local authority or county council could also make a contribution.

### Will it cost the parish council anything?

No, your time and input is a valuable investment in the project. Sometimes parish councils have contributed by making land available for development.

## Planning application to planning permission on an exception site

Preparing for the planning application is one of the most time consuming elements of the process. There are numerous and often lengthy consultations needed between all partners to make sure the evidence, design, cost and location of the development deliver the right homes in the right place.



Twenty homes for rent under construction at Colyton, Devon.

### Is it difficult to get planning permission on exception sites?

It should not be considered easy, but provided that there is a local policy and the proposed site can meet all of the necessary and strict criteria, then 'exceptional' planning permission may be granted. Briefly:

- There must be a proven need for affordable housing for local people
- The proposed homes must help meet this identified need
- There must be a mechanism to keep the homes at below open market prices and permanently available to local people
- The housing association is prepared to enter into a S106 agreement
- The site and designs comply with all other planning policies
- The site is well related to the village or close to the village boundary.

The rural exceptions policy is a widely accepted method of delivering homes in rural areas and has been successful in helping thousands of new homes for local people to be built across England.

### Who submits the planning application?

The architect on behalf of the housing association.

### How long does the decision process take?

Typically between 8 and 13 weeks depending on the size of the application and the decision is normally taken by the planning committee given the 'exceptional' nature of planning consent. In some cases, the decision could be delegated by the committee to a planning officer.

The planning committee meeting is a public one where people can speak in favour of or in objection to the scheme. As the parish council, you will always be consulted on planning applications but you can also make a significant contribution by speaking at the meeting and demonstrating additional support for the scheme.



Ten homes for rent and shared ownership at Taylors Corner, Waddesdon, Buckinghamshire.



## Building works

### How else can the parish council promote the application?

In the interests of consultation and transparency, it is appropriate to let the community know that a planning application has been submitted for example, in the parish newsletter. This gives local people the opportunity to write to the planning department with comments, in favour of or in objection to the scheme.

### What if the answer is no?

An appeal can be made. This is not normally needed so long as all the preparation has been done thoroughly and all the planning criteria have been understood and met.

The time it takes to build a development will vary but on average for a rural scheme it will take around 12 months. There can be delays due to unforeseen works and of course, the weather.

### Will the contractor be mindful of residents?

Yes. It is in everyone's best interests to establish a good working relationship with the community during the construction period.

You are encouraged to speak to the housing association with any concerns that local residents might have about the building works. They will also be able to let you know about any road works or local disruptions that local residents would need advance notice of.

Housing associations usually require their contractor to be signed up to the Considerate Constructors Scheme. This means builders make assurances to be clean, safe, responsible and establish full and regular communication with site neighbours. In some cases, the firm will run a health and safety campaign with the local school(s).

### | Jargon buster |

#### Considerate Constructor Scheme

– initiative that encourages constructors to be considerate and good neighbours as well as clean, respectful, safe, environmentally conscious, responsible and accountable.

### How you can be involved:

- Reporting anything of concern to the housing association.
- Helping to advertise that the application process for the homes is open when the homes are nearing completion – if local people do not apply, they cannot be allocated the houses!

## Allocating the homes: who decides?

The allocation process is one of the most important stages of the process. The likelihood is that not all those who need a new home will get one. You will be shown, or can ask for, the housing association's allocation criteria and procedures.

The allocations process may vary slightly depending on the housing association and local authority partners so it's worth asking how the process works early on to make sure you fully understand what is involved.

Candidates will need to qualify under the local connection criteria set down in the S106 agreement. See page 4 for what is local? Then they will be assessed against the association's allocation policy and procedure which will decide who is in greater housing need.

Ultimately the responsibility for deciding who should live in the houses lies with the housing association, but the local authority also plays a pivotal role by providing nominations for the homes through the Choice Based Lettings (CBL) system.

### How is the decision made?

The allocation is made using a point based system which will look at the housing needs of the local people who apply. For shared ownership properties, they will also need to have sufficient finances in order to meet the commitment of owning their own home and be able to secure a mortgage for their share of the property.

### How do the applicants apply?

They will always need to be registered on the local authority's housing register whether they want to rent or part-buy a home.

Rented properties will be advertised by the local authority on their CBL system. This system provides regular information to registered applicants on the available lettings in the area. It invites potential applicants to apply or 'bid' for properties for which they qualify.

Information about the application process will be conveyed at an early stage in the project but needs to be repeated throughout.

### Consultation in action: How you can be involved

- You might be asked to verify the names and addresses of applicants and confirm whether they have a local connection
- Make sure that people know how to apply and register their name with the local authority

It's essential to make sure local people register so that they can apply for a property. After all, local people will have priority!

Those interested in shared ownership also register with the local HomeBuy agent, usually a housing association, who also advertises all the low cost home ownership opportunities available within a particular area.

Again, the housing association will work with you to make sure that local people, including those who have already replied to the original survey, understand how to apply for the homes. Some parish councils have used their village website or monthly newsletter as a way of keeping everyone updated about progress and ensuring that everyone understands the application process.

Five affordable homes at Brayford, Devon provided local families with the opportunity to stay in their community. Collectively, they have over 130 years' residence in the village



### **Who checks the local connection?**

Some housing associations will involve you in helping to check the local connection claims made by applicants, but it is important that the actual allocation decisions are made by a body outside of the village. In this way, the decisions are impartial, the confidentiality of applicants' details is maintained

and the position of the parish council isn't compromised.

The housing association will always ask for written evidence to support an applicant's claim. If they claim to work in the village, they will need a supporting letter from their employer or if they live in the village, examples of utility and council tax bills.

### **| Jargon buster |**

#### **Allocation**

– the process by which applicants are prioritised for housing.

#### **Choice Based Lettings**

– a system where available properties to rent are advertised to all registered applicants who are invited to apply or 'bid' for suitable homes.

#### **HomeBuy Agent**

– an organisation, usually a housing association, who keeps a register of those people looking for shared ownership homes and advertises opportunities within a specific area.

## What now? Managing the homes into the future



The housing association manages all future vacancies at the scheme as well as addressing issues raised by individual residents or the community as a whole.

### What happens when there is a re-let or re-sale?

The resident will inform the housing association of their intention to move. The association should contact you to let you know about the vacancy and ask for your help in publicising the opportunity locally whether through posters or the village newsletter or similar. If you hear of a vacancy first, you don't have to wait, get in touch and find out how you can help get the word out to local people.

'We have been here for over two years and feel well looked after. It's a lovely home with great neighbours and there is a real sense of community.'

Residents Mr & Mrs Burton at Rookery Rise, Buckland St Mary, Devon.



As before for rented and shared ownership homes, local people will need to make sure they are registered with the local authority. Available rental properties will be advertised via the Choice Based Lettings system and low cost ownership homes via the HomeBuy Agent for the area.



The authority or HomeBuy agent will pass a list of nominated households to the association who will then allocate the homes against strength of local connection (using the criteria in the S106 agreement) and their housing need (as detailed in the association's policy and procedure). Additionally, in the case of shared ownership properties, the applicant's financial situation will be taken into consideration. The process will be the same as the first time the homes were allocated.

It is of great help to make sure that local people know how to express an interest in affordable housing. If they need rented or

shared ownership housing, always encourage people to register on the local authority housing list. If they would like a shared ownership home, be ready to give them details of the local HomeBuy agent. You could even run an annual feature in your newsletter or magazine.

### **What safeguards are there for the S106 agreement?**

If you believe that the terms of the S106 have not been adhered to, the first thing to do is get in contact with the housing association and request more information. It can happen that misunderstanding or a lack of communication can cause

innocent mistakes. There are confidential reasons why one applicant's housing need will be prioritised over another and these cannot be revealed, but the housing association is responsible for ensuring that the local connection of applicants is checked and that they meet the requirements of the S106 agreement.

If you do not receive a satisfactory first response, you can use the housing association's complaints procedure to request that the matter is looked into again.

As a last resort, you can get in touch with the planning authority and register your concern.

However, disagreements can usually be avoided. It's in your best interest to understand how the allocation process works before setting out on any project and the housing association should make the allocations policy available early on and explain the process.

Remember, new parish councillors are elected and staff at housing associations will change so it's important to keep a channel of communication open and records of important documents.

### What else does the housing association do?

Housing associations not only allocate the homes in the correct way but are committed to making new developments 'sustainable communities' and often invest heavily in improving services and community development.

This means that residents will have a housing officer that they can contact about any financial or domestic issues. They have peace of mind that their accommodation is secure and the rents will continue to be affordable. Housing associations have a range of policies and procedures that will help people should they experience, for example, financial difficulty or disagreement with their neighbour.

Residents, whether they rent or purchase a share in a property, are encouraged to get involved, as much or as little as they like, to shape future services. They can get involved at any level of the organisation from being a member of the board, setting up a residents' association for where they live or giving feedback on service via surveys or focus groups.

Associations want to improve the communities and the homes they manage and will often want to work with residents to find out what their priorities are. Examples could include improving car parking



arrangements or helping to secure play equipment for any communal space.

The housing association is also responsible for ensuring that the development continues to provide decent accommodation for those living in the homes. It will be responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of the rented units and also work with shared owners to ensure that their homes are maintained to a high standard.

Some developments may have areas of communal planting and the housing association will put a contract in place to maintain these.

Make sure you know who the dedicated housing officer is for the development so that you can make them aware of any local issues.

#### How you can be involved:

- Ensure people are aware of the project and continue to register their interest with the local authority or HomeBuy Agent.
- Help display posters and advertisements when vacancies occur.
- Be the local eyes and ears and report any issues you think the association should be aware of.

# Introducing community strategies

## The aim

Housing associations develop community strategies to provide a clear set of priorities and a shared purpose with residents in developing and building the community. The strategy will help to set local standards shaped by residents' needs and an action plan will be drawn up to make sure local priorities are addressed.

The strategy will also enable other organisations at a local level to develop their services in response to local priorities.

All of the work is done in line with the regulatory framework on service standards developed by the Tenant Services Authority.

## The purpose

A strong and cohesive community is one where residents take an active part, respect one another, and contribute to a safer, cleaner and greener environment.

Community development aims to empower residents to take collective action on issues that matter to them, build confidence and improve skills to shape their own futures.

To do this, associations prioritise engagement with residents, to listen to their concerns and ensure that services meet their needs. Getting ideas from

residents will also help galvanise local projects and partnerships and housing associations can then work with other organisations to make this happen.

Local community strategies play an integral role in fulfilling the regulatory framework which requires local priorities to become agreed local standards. Associations are committed to involving residents in shaping local delivery and taking into account the needs of all.

## Developing the strategy

Before an action plan is drawn up, the following information is looked at with a particular focus on the diversity of community needs and where resources should be targeted to maximise impact:

- Community profile
- Residents' profile
- Diversity information
- Services currently provided and performance; looking at the future quality of the homes as well as management
- Resident involvement
- Regulatory framework standards – including tenant involvement and empowerment, home and neighbourhood and community.

In depth investigations will also be carried out in consultation with the following:

- Residents; through surveys, meetings, visits or focus groups
- Local organisations; the parish council and local authority, the police, charities and other housing associations
- The association will also identify published research which sets out priorities for the community (eg parish plans) and joint working initiatives. This helps the association identify opportunities for working in partnership to support the wider community.

The priorities identified from this local partnership work forms the basis of an action plan which clearly sets out the future for service provision and defines how regular performance reports will feedback actions and progress to the community.

Community strategies are an integral part of the management of any affordable housing and will support residents as well as local people, inside and outside of new homes, to ensure a sustainable future.

# The result: **thriving** local communities

**Case study:** Redwood Terraces, Ufford, Suffolk

## A rural exception site providing homes for local people



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<b>No of properties</b>	6 affordable homes
<b>Property types</b>	1 x 2 bedroom bungalow 3 x 2 bedroom houses 2 x 3 bedroom houses
<b>Tenure type</b>	3 for rent, 3 for shared ownership
<b>Start on site</b>	October 2008
<b>Completion</b>	July 2009

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### The community

Ufford is three miles north of the market town of Woodbridge, Suffolk. Surrounded by open agricultural land and water meadows, it has around 420 households and a population of about 950. The lower part of the village is a conservation area, with an attractive collection of traditional buildings.

### Partners

Ufford Parish Council

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Rural Housing Enabler, Suffolk  
ACRE (Action for Communities in  
Rural England)

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Hastoe Housing Association

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Suffolk Coastal District Council,  
who also made the land available

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Homes and Communities Agency

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Architect

---

Employer's Agent and Surveyor

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Contractor

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### The project

The drive for this project came from the local community, starting with the parish council. Local partners including Hastoe were able to build on the community's initiative and bring forward a small exception site to completion.

In 2004, a survey carried out by the Rural Housing Enabler at Suffolk ACRE identified a housing need in the village.

There was clear feedback from members of the community that they were unable to rent or purchase on the open market.





A follow-up survey in 2006 confirmed that sixteen households were in need and as the project progressed, a greater need was revealed.

At an open day in 2007, a further ten people registered their interest in the homes and positive comments were received on the design and aims of the project.

The scheme was funded through grant from the HCA, investment from Hastoe and income from shared ownership sales. The S106 legal agreement ensures that the homes will be available in perpetuity for local people at an affordable price.

### **The parish council**

The parish council's enthusiasm for this project was vital and they acted as the local voice for the development, channelling community feedback into the plans.

### **Best practice in design and construction**

At Ufford, the following standards were achieved:

- Building for life
- Secure by design
- Code for sustainable homes level 3
- Lifetime homes.

'We are very proud to have been closely involved with this very successful project which has provided much needed housing for our community.'

Ufford Parish Council

The site, an unused piece of land, was suitable for development and made available by the district council. Residents now enjoy the benefit of already established footpath links to the local playing fields and village centre. The mature trees and established hedgerows were preserved and new additions have been made such as bird, bat and insect boxes.

## Case study: Redwood Terraces, Ufford, Suffolk



'I have lived in the village for nearly 93 years and in the same home for most of that time. Now I have moved into my wonderful new bungalow, I'm very happy and comfortable, and can carry on living here in the community I know and love.'

Mrs Keeble, resident at Redwood Terraces.

From site selection to design, every effort was made to make sure that the new homes would look and feel like a natural extension of the village and reflect the traditional building design. Sympathetic facing bricks and roof tiles were used to help achieve this and

renewable energy technology including solar panels made a modern but complementary addition.

### **Celebrating success**

For any successful project, there should be a celebration.

At the official opening of the scheme in September 2009 all of the project partners met with residents to tour the homes and see the difference that a much-needed scheme had made.

'We are particularly pleased with the high standard to which these homes have been built and also the use of renewable energy sources.

These new homes show how organisations can work together to bring about real changes to improve the quality of life for people in rural villages.'

Ufford Parish Council



Redwood Terraces was shortlisted for the East of England RICS Awards 2010 in the category of Community Benefit.

### **Why consider an affordable housing project?**

The project at Redwood Terraces, Ufford is just one example of how community concern can result in an attractive, sensitive, well planned housing scheme that

offers a lasting solution to the affordable housing problem.

**You, the parish council, can take action to stop the decline of rural communities and provide affordable housing for future generations.**



With special thanks to the Rural Housing Trust, who completed 350 affordable housing projects, and to their former Chief Executive, the late Moira Constable, for her campaigning work and commitment over three decades. Their literature made a valuable contribution to this guide.

This publication has been funded by:



# Members of the National Housing Federation's Rural Housing Alliance

Through regular meetings, Alliance members are able to share learning, develop solutions to help improve the delivery of affordable housing and be a clear and collective voice on the issues that affect rural communities:

Brampton Rural Housing Society

Cambridgeshire Cottage Housing Society

Chorley Community Housing

Cheshire Peaks & Plains Housing Trust

Cornwall Rural Housing Association

Cottsway Housing Association

Derbyshire Dales District Council

East Dorset Housing Association

Eden Housing Association

English Rural Housing Association

Falcon Rural Housing Association

Five Villages Home Association

Flagship Housing Group

Franklands Village Housing Association

Freebridge Community Housing

Hastoe Housing Group

Housing Plus

Howard Cottage Housing Association

Island Cottages

Leicestershire Rural Housing Association

Limehurst Village Trust

Lincolnshire Rural Housing Association

Longhurst Homes

Lune Valley Rural Housing Association

Midland Rural Housing Association & Village  
Development Association

Mount Green Housing Association

National Housing Federation

New Forest Villages Housing Association

North Devon Homes

Northamptonshire Rural Housing Association

Oxford Citizens Housing Association

Peak District Rural Housing Association

Radian Group

Rural Housing Association

Rural Housing Trust

Saffron Housing Trust

Shropshire Housing

South Devon Rural Housing Association

Sovereign Housing Group

Stafford & Rural Homes

Synergy Housing Group

Test Valley Rural Housing Association

Warwickshire Rural Housing Association

West Devon Homes

Wiltshire Rural Housing Association

## Other sources of help and advice

### **Action with Communities in Rural England**

Action with Communities in Rural England is the national umbrella body of the Rural Community Action Network (RCAN), which operates at national, regional and local level in support of rural communities across the country. Many ACRE members employ Rural Housing Enablers that undertake housing needs surveys in rural areas. See [www.tinyurl.com/ruralhousingenablers](http://www.tinyurl.com/ruralhousingenablers) for details of Rural Housing Enablers near you.

[www.acre.org.uk](http://www.acre.org.uk)

### **Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)**

CPRE has over 200 district groups and a branch in every English county. They offer advice on local planning issues, including the delivery of affordable homes.

[www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)

### **Commission for Rural Communities**

The Commission for Rural Communities is a statutory body funded by government to help ensure that policies, programmes and decisions take proper account of the circumstances of rural communities.

[www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

### **Community Land Trusts**

Resources for those interested in Community Land Trusts.

[www.communitylandtrust.org.uk](http://www.communitylandtrust.org.uk)

### **Faith in Affordable Housing**

Faith in Affordable Housing is a free web-based resource, giving practical and technical information to assist churches in providing affordable housing.

[www.fiah.org.uk](http://www.fiah.org.uk)

### **Homes and Communities Agency**

The Homes and Communities Agency is the national housing and regeneration delivery agency for England. Our role is to create thriving communities and affordable homes.

[www.homesandcommunities.co.uk](http://www.homesandcommunities.co.uk)

### **National Association of Local Councils (NALC)**

NALC is the nationally recognised membership and support organisation representing the interests of around 9,000 local councils and their 80,000 local councillors in England.

[www.nalc.gov.uk](http://www.nalc.gov.uk)

### **Rural Housing Information Centre**

A learning, networking and sharing good practice website designed for all those involved in planning for and enabling rural housing. One of the outcomes of the Rural Affordable Housing Project, a joint initiative between Defra and the HCA, to increase and accelerate the delivery of affordable housing in rural areas.

[www.ruralaffordablehousing.org.uk](http://www.ruralaffordablehousing.org.uk)

You might also like to request copies of the National Housing Federation's publication 'Affordable housing keeps villages alive' for use at your meetings or consultation events; it is designed as an introduction to affordable housing for everyone. Copies are available from the Federation on 020 7067 1010 or [info@housing.org.uk](mailto:info@housing.org.uk).



This guide has been produced by the National Housing Federation's Rural Housing Alliance to help answer some of the frequently asked questions about affordable rural housing and the development process, dispel common misconceptions and champion the role that parish and town councils play.

The National Housing Federation represents 1,200 independent, not-for-profit housing associations in England and is the voice of affordable housing. Our members provide two and a half million affordable homes for more than five million people.

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