



## **Policy Position Paper: Housing**

### **ACRE's rural vision**

Our vision is that rural communities will increasingly take a leading role in ensuring the social, environmental and economic well-being of all their residents. They will do this in a way that provides for the present generation and also plans for future needs and future challenges. RCAN members will be there to stimulate their thinking, support their work and help turn their aspirations into a reality.

### **ACRE's vision for housing in rural areas**

ACRE wants to see thriving communities supported to develop in sustainable ways. A key factor in this is the provision of a suitable mix of affordable housing to enable local people to stay in their community. It is our vision that this will help support local services and facilities and ensure better quality of life for all.

As highlighted by the *Taylor Review 2008*, sustainable rural communities for the future require solutions to providing a better mix of housing and support for local economies. This will enable more people to stay in their own community and reinvigorate local business and services. Barriers often exist in the inappropriate use of planning constraints by local planning authorities, coupled with the reluctance of communities to embrace the need for more building development.

Affordability is an issue for many people, with the high cost of open market homes caused by strong demand compounded by the shortage of supply. Lower wages for rural workers add to the problem. The situation is most pronounced for affordable rented accommodation that comprises only 13% of stock in rural areas compared to 21% in urban. Other challenges include the growing need to build energy efficient housing in areas often lacking mains gas supplies and the need to provide supported housing for an increasingly ageing population.

ACRE supports the recommendations of the Taylor Review, 2008, which recognised the benefits of community led support for generating more sustainable communities. We believe that affordable housing should be considered as an essential component of the infrastructure that underpins the development of sustainable rural communities. Local people need to explore a vision for their own future through the process of community led planning which has been shown to change attitudes on accepting more housing development (see also ACRE's position paper on Community Led Planning).

We want to see the powers given to local authorities within Planning Policy Statement 3 actively used such as clear targets and a proactive and positive approach at local and regional level. We want to see proposals for small scale housing development fully considered, particularly where local communities have planned to bring them forward.

### **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 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 needs assessments and are expert in undertaking the critical brokerage role between communities, landowners, developers and the local authority to bring forward sites for affordable housing. Often supporting delivery of Local Area Agreement targets on rural 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. For example Little Hadham in Hertfordshire is a village comprising eight hamlets spread over a wide area. This dispersal and the changing lifestyle of the population made it increasingly difficult to sustain community spirit. The Community Development Agency for Hertfordshire supported the undertaking of a Community Led Plan for all those living in the area. The aims were to help the community build and sustain a feeling of togetherness, provide a better understanding of current and future hopes and aspirations of the community and sustain and access local businesses and services. The plan supports aspects of the wider agenda of the district and county councils. For example, the district authority assisted with an affordable housing survey, which arose directly from the parish plan.

### **Issue: communities backing their own solutions**

Community Land Trusts, exception sites and the change of use of redundant buildings provide local people with the opportunity to support their community's sustainability.

### **Solution: Partnership working**

Devon's RHEs are working with the parish and district Council to provide affordable homes in Pancrasweek, North Devon. Pancrasweek is an unusual community, having no centre and widely dispersed housing. The RHEs have provided a wide range of help to bring this scheme to fruition including conducting a parish housing need survey in partnership with the Parish Council. They met with individual landowners, held a consultation open day and conducted a thorough site appraisal exercise with the support of Torridge District Council. This work has led to the District Council issuing further guidance to interpret an existing housing policy to allow landowners to build local affordable housing that can be allocated to their sons and daughters if they have a local connection and are in housing need. This project is ongoing with sites identified and it is hoped that homes will be constructed over the following 12 months.

### **Issue: lack of suitable housing for an ageing population**

There is a need to plan for the future needs of an ageing population who may require supported housing.

### **Solution: Housing for all the communities needs**

Given the relatively small number of units needed on any site in a rural community, it is vital that the mix of housing and the appropriate support services are put in place. Capel St Mary, Suffolk is a large village with good facilities but a growing number of older people living in the parish

with an upcoming need to move into sheltered accommodation and no local provision. With the support of the parish council, a housing need survey was sent to approximately 1200 households by the RHE for Suffolk ACRE that identified a significant requirement for sheltered housing.

With funding from the Homes & Communities Agency, Orwell Housing developed a scheme of 32 units on a rural exception site for completion in 2010. The sheltered housing will allow older residents to remain in the parish long term, near to family and friends and continue their participation in community. The housing development has also provided benefits to the village - helping maintain a balanced community and maintaining local services and social interaction. It is anticipated that many of the properties vacated by the older people will be sold to younger families who can contribute to the continued sustainability of the local community. It has also provided local employment opportunities at the scheme for care workers and other domestic staff.

### **Issue: communities reluctance to accept more housing**

Evidence now shows that the attitudes of local rural communities towards new development can be a significant barrier to improved housing provision.

### **Solution: Community involvement in planning**

Communities can be encouraged to explore local needs and the sustainability of their community, its facilities and services through undertaking a Community Led Plan (see also ACRE's position paper on Community Led Planning). The result is a greater willingness to seek out acceptable solutions and find suitable local sites for affordable housing projects.

Member organisations within the Rural Community Action Network manage many of the country's network of RHEs. RCAN rural housing enablers have the ability to act as independent negotiators with local groups who are often out of the reach of local authorities. This helps rural communities gain confidence that affordable housing schemes will actually benefit their communities and remain accessible to local people. Building the trust of communities is a key factor in the success of any scheme.

Concept statements are a clear expression of the type of place that a community envisages in language that everyone can understand. They are usually just two pages of A4, describing a communities future housing wishes.

Concept statements arise from debate between the community, developer and a local planning authority explaining how the development should contribute to the local planning authority's position. They have the benefits of helping to unlock sites that have proved difficult, involving the key stakeholders at a early stage to agree a shared approach, they are quick to produce and easy to understand. The excellent *Guide to successful concept statements* produced by Derbyshire Dales District Council with Derbyshire RCC is a DVD illustrating how to go about producing a concept statement and the benefits for housing in communities it can bring.

### **About ACRE**

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. We aim to promote a healthy, vibrant and sustainable rural community sector that is well connected to policy and decision-makers who play a part in

delivering this aim. ACRE is nationally recognised for its expertise in ensuring rural community-led solutions are central to public policy debate.

ACRE is a member of:

- Homes & Communities Agency Rural Housing Advisory Group
- Age UK Rural Advisory Group
- Ministerial Task Force on climate change, the environment and sustainable development
- The new national rural coalition, under the chairmanship of Matthew Taylor MP, which aims to take forward his 2008 proposals to government on a Living, Working, Countryside.

## **RCAN Rural Community Action Network**

The Rural Community Action Network comprises 38 Rural Community Councils (RCCs) at local level, RCC regional groupings and their national arm in ACRE, providing coverage of all rural areas throughout England. RCCs are county-based, independent, local development agencies that, for decades, have been delivering support on the ground to enable rural communities to improve quality of life for all. They act as a strategic voice for rural communities, allowing grassroots issues to be championed and solutions worked out in partnership between statutory, voluntary and private sector providers. Their strength lies in their ability to work within communities in an inclusive and holistic way, helping local people to develop local solutions and identify unmet needs through a unique approach to community-led planning. Alongside this, RCCs provide a trusted local support network for rural community groups, including dedicated expertise in arenas such as transport, housing, the management of community-owned facilities, social enterprise and rural services.

## **RCAN National coverage, local reach**

Members of the Rural Community Action Network have a long history of supporting communities to find solutions to their needs. We do this by supporting all sections of the community to plan for the future and by developing relevant services that meet the needs of all generations. We do this with a passion for social inclusion, and high standards throughout the network.

Network members

- Provide genuine reach into rural communities across England, linking national, regional and local policy with community action at the grassroots
- Promote and develop local solutions that benefit the social, environmental and economic well-being of communities
- Act as a focal point for partners across statutory, private and voluntary sectors, working together to benefit rural communities
- Tackle disadvantage by ensuring their work within rural communities reaches out to marginalised groups and encourages the development of local services for those least able to travel

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**This document is one of a series covering the following topics, Rural Challenges, Community Led Planning, Climate Change, Rural Community Buildings, Housing, Rural Services, Transport, Sustainable Communities, Social Inclusion, Older People, Children & Young People, Healthcare and Digital Inclusion.**

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