



How to...

*involve the community in  
rural housing development*



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## involve the community in rural housing development

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CIH and Rural Services Network (RSN) are working together to support our members working in rural housing. In a [joint survey](#) in 2012, we asked members if they thought the National Planning Policy Framework, and in particular the introduction of neighbourhood plans, would encourage rural communities to accept more development. Whilst the 'jury was out' on that one, the responses demonstrated that, whilst community resistance can still be a barrier, community support can also be a critical success factor in achieving new rural homes.

This briefing has drawn on the example of successful rural housing providers to identify how to work effectively with local communities, so that more homes that are affordable for local people can be built. It looks at how a leading local authority and its partners have harnessed the neighbourhood plan to gather support for new homes with local residents.

Developing rural housing with the local community requires time and resources to be committed up front and, specifically, investment in ongoing community involvement/consultation, as the timeframe for developing in rural areas can be significantly longer than in urban areas. Organisations need to work with local communities to find the right place and develop the right housing, and to follow through in ensuring the letting and management of homes also supports the successful integration of homes into the locality. The small scale of the development and numbers of the community mean that development staff need to be people orientated, as they will be developing long term relationships with the parish council and often with the households that will benefit from the local homes being delivered. A lot of good will can be won or lost through the management of the affordable rented homes in the longer term – influencing whether the community will allow future development and which organisations they will support to do it.

### Key success factors

**Go where you are invited** - Resources are finite and a lot of time will be taken up in effective community engagement. It is better to target limited resources where the parish council/community members have expressed a desire for new affordable homes rather than increase the risk of abortive work.

Local authorities, parish councils and others have a number of tools at their disposal to identify local issues and determine potential solutions including neighbourhood planning, the wider development plan framework and community style appraisals.

### Learning from others

**Hastoe Housing Association** has a commitment always to work with the parish council, even when they have been initially invited by the district. This has included working to re-engage where a parish council, initially in favour, changed its approach after local elections. Hastoe also recognises the importance of local champions in supporting the sometimes lengthy process of consultation and delivery.

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## Learning from others

**Eden District Council** has the country's first neighbourhood plan - the Upper Eden Neighbourhood Plan - formally adopted as part of Eden's Development Framework on 11 April 2013.

A Neighbourhood Area application came from Brough Parish Council, acting as lead for the Upper Eden Community Plan Group (an association of the 17 parishes) in May 2012. The area was designated by the Council after an eight-week consultation period, which gave the Group the right to produce its neighbourhood plan.

The draft went through the process of being published, independently examined and put to a local referendum in March 2013, at which 90% voted in favour and the Plan was subsequently incorporated into the development framework. The Plan includes policies focussed on helping:

- to provide affordable housing in rural areas for those who can through converting existing buildings or building on low impact sites
- farmers and rural businesses to provide housing for their families' and business needs
- older people to find suitable housing in settlements or where they can reasonably build within their gardens.

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**Know the community and identify champions** - In many cases there will be a key individual or group who will champion the work throughout the process; these will also be key visible local figure(s) pursuing the scheme, often but not only parish councillors. It is crucial that these individuals are kept at the centre of developments as they progress, and that their contacts and networks are used in the process of engagement. A forthcoming publication from Hastoe celebrates the role of community champions in achieving their development programme.

Following these guidelines mean that resources are targeted at the locations most likely to deliver a successful outcome and, effectively, community involvement is already well underway. Effective working with communities can help in relation to: getting the right mix of homes, good design, achieving planning consent at the first attempt and generally improving the experience and outcomes.

This does not, of course, mean that all elements of the local community will be supportive. Never underestimate the need for constant communication through a range of mechanisms to engage as many as possible. But it provides a more robust footing to be able to deal with localised issues and objections which may arise, and reduces the potential for unrepresentative or isolated voices to dominate.

## Learning from others

**Cumbria Rural Housing Trust** (CRHT) provides survey evidence of housing need and supports communities and agencies in the delivery of affordable housing. Some of that is focused specifically on support to Community Land Trusts (CLTs) as one mechanism to enable effective and sustainable community involvement in the delivery of rural affordable homes. This approach developed as:

- communities have expressed a preference for this approach
- through local networks, CLTs can bring sites forward that would not otherwise be brought forward at affordable levels
- it engenders land owner confidence about protecting affordable homes in perpetuity
- it creates community confidence and support through membership and communication

- it emphasises local affordability and avoids 'rent on unsold equity' in shared ownership
- it generates significant re-investment income for the community once loans are repaid
- it benefits from specialised funding and support via the CLT Network and local enablers.

Examples include:

- the Lyvennet Community Trust development of 10 rented homes, 2 shared ownership and 7 self build plots, to address the need identified the Lyvennet Valley Community Plan. The scheme involved a range of partners including: the CRHT CLT Officer, Eden District Council, the CLT Fund, HCA and Eden Housing Association and opened in October 2012.
- the Cumbria & Beyond CLT Project provides specialist officer support from initial idea through to start on site. As a result Cumbria has a number of schemes in development including 11 homes by Keswick Community Housing Trust. The Trust formed as a result of a community exercise led by Keswick Churches Together which identified a pressing need for additional locally affordable accommodation. With business planning support from the CLT Officer, the Trust acquired a £1.1m development loan from the Cumberland Building Society, plus housing grant from the Homes and Communities Agency. It also met some of the costs through a community investment share offer which raised £60,000 by April 2013.

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**Be clear about level and nature of housing need** - District councils may already have clear evidence of needs from a housing survey or through interrogation of choice based letting registers. Some parish councils may have needs registers, and communities/champions will know households with specific needs. Where evidence is patchy or anecdotal, consider jointly commissioning a robust assessment to provide evidence for planning and community consultation. Discussions with communities throughout the process can refine the housing being developed and offered, in ways that can maximise use of housing throughout a village (e.g development of adapted homes, or suitable for older people wanting smaller homes, but in the same area, staying near to family and friends).

Not all of the identified needs may be addressed at one time, as the organisation will need to manage risk, address capacity issues and deal with the challenge of getting grant and funding. The experience of development, and ongoing management of rented homes plays a significant part in developing a good relationship with local (and by reputation other) communities, so that they are more likely to agree to further building in future.

**Identify the best site with the local community** - Identifying and agreeing levels of need is generally relatively straightforward. Agreement on where to build new homes is more difficult. Finding ways to involve the community in site identification is a mechanism for gaining maximum community endorsement for the site ultimately chosen. In some cases this approach can help to unlock potential sites from landowners who wish to assist the local community/their local workforce.

## Learning from others

In Keswick, land in the ownership of the church was released to **Keswick Community Housing Trust** as a direct result of a detailed community exercise involving Keswick Churches Together.

**Hastoe Housing Association** walk the village with the parish council and any other key stakeholders to look and assess site options and agree on the best site, often an exception site. This process allows all potential sites to be looked at, whether previously considered or not. **Lyvennet CLT** took a similar approach with the parish council and planners.

**Utilise Rural Housing Enablers where available** - Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) have a key role in facilitating the development of rural affordable housing schemes, providing critical capacity to facilitate communication and liaison between parties, engaging with community groups and gathering information to support proposals. Their role has provided a valuable additional resource for developing associations to meet the additional workloads often associated with rural schemes.

These posts are diminishing as public expenditure retreats to core services and where they remain they are increasingly subject to a development levy, so ongoing investment depends on identifying the benefits in relation to the costs incurred. A rounded assessment of these benefits should be encouraged both in terms of the benefits to housing providers and the benefits to the local authority in achieving its wider objectives.

**Quality, sustainability and innovation** - In many cases there is a requirement to build using vernacular style and materials. However, taking this approach can also encourage support for the development, as it will 'fit' with the existing appearance. Using locally known contractors or those who will provide employment or training opportunities for local people is also a significant factor. The right contractors are important in supporting/participating in the process of community engagement (speaking at consultation meetings, making connections with local schools, supporting local community group visits). Use of traditional materials or green build methods can increase costs so need to be balanced with viability and impacts on deliverability.

Some community groups want to develop sustainably, using measures that minimise environmental impacts during the build process and for the lifetime of the homes, which will benefit the whole community, and play a part in encouraging acceptance of future development. Fuel poverty is a significant problem in rural areas (18% of households being in fuel poverty compared to 16% in urban areas, in 2010). The incidence of fuel poverty increases with the level of rurality, as dependency on higher cost types of fuel increases. So measures that utilise sustainable energy sources are often critical in helping households on lower incomes to sustain their tenancy or home ownership.

## Learning from others

**Hastoe Housing Association** are focused on addressing local rural need, increasing innovation, and improving the environmental and financial benefits of their developments. Addressing the issue of fuel poverty and affordable warmth are a key considerations. Approaches across a range of schemes in very different rural settings include: ground source heat (including in a market town apartment scheme); air source heat; solar thermal biomass heating; 'PassivHaus' (code level 4 and estimated to reduce bills by 90%); straw bales (expected to deliver reductions of 60%).

The passivhaus scheme at Wimbush arose due to the commitment of the parish council and community to developing a more sustainable and affordable approach to energy efficiency in new homes, and was a key factor in choosing the association as their partners.

Rural communities offer great opportunities to take new and innovative approaches to key features of the scheme, or investment (for example Keswick's community investment share above) due to the level of commitment, enthusiasm and skills in the community. The approach becomes increasingly more of a partnership in what is being achieved with and for the village and its community.

**Develop and implement local lettings priorities** - This is a fundamental issue across rural communities who want to see local homes built to meet local need. If communities perceive that new homes are being used to meet need from other areas it is unlikely that they will wish to encourage further affordable development. But where local need is clearly being met this is likely to raise the confidence of the community and, potentially of others, to seek additional development in the future.

## Learning from others

**Eden District Council** has adopted a policy within its Core Strategy (Policy CS7) which states that it may impose a legal agreement on new affordable housing to ensure that it only goes to local people in the first instance, and stays affordable over time. This is known as the local occupancy clause and the definition of 'local' is set out in the Core Strategy.

**Celebrate success with communities** - The development may be only part of a wider programme for the housing association, but it is a major event for the households who now have a home, for the other residents and for the facilities of the village which may have a more sustainable future as a result. It is important to take time to learn the lessons for future work, but also to celebrate with the village and neighbours. Celebrating the opening of schemes provides a great opportunity to invite people and councillors from neighbouring communities, but also further afield with leaders in other communities where you are hoping to build.

**Quality housing management and maintenance** - The quality of the development needs to be reflected in the quality of long term maintenance and the effectiveness of housing management to address any issues early on. The dispersed nature of rural development makes this difficult and means that organisations need to consider their geographical presence and spread, or partnerships with other rural specialists for development/management. It is important because it demonstrates the ongoing commitment of the organisation to the local community and itself contributes to the willingness of that community to accept/initiate further building when needed. In some cases, such as CLTs, they are able to manage their own homes or choose to use experienced housing managers.

Support for wider community initiatives may also be an appropriate investment – in one village Hastoe and the parish council provided a new village sign on the green, which has been a source of pride for all the residents. The reputational impact is important in enabling the housing provider to access new villages and communities for future work.

**Leadership** - Community leadership, through the parish council, local landowners or key local figures is important in engaging local communities. But there also needs to be clear leadership and direction from the Board and senior management in the housing partner. It would be very easy to ignore rural communities and concentrate on larger centres of population where bigger numbers and clear economies of scale can be delivered. The commitment needs to be followed through at all levels, as working to deliver rural homes requires development staff to form good working relationships across the community as well as with stakeholders and contractors, and to maintain those contacts through a long delivery process.

## What happens when you get things right?

Affordable homes can be delivered in rural areas with support and buy-in from local communities. It is worth it:

- local people have a home and can remain in their village
- support networks of friends and families are sustained
- local services and facilities are supported and more sustainable – including schools, shops, community groups
- it can support local rural employment
- communities are encouraged to request and accept development of affordable rural homes.

For housing organisations, developing small numbers across several villages can add up to a significant programme of work. Being positive, investing time in building effective relationships and delivering homes that are of good quality and sustainable all help to initiate future opportunities across rural communities.



Hastoe Housing Association Limited (Hastoe) is an independent, registered housing association. Hastoe is a not-for-profit organisation, and strives to experiment and find creative solutions to housing issues. Hastoe is focused in two specialist areas of work – rural communities and environmental sustainability.



*Marsh Gibbon*

Hastoe has provided good quality, affordable homes for over 200 villages and currently owns and manages more than 5,000 homes in southern England. We provide homes for rent, shared ownership and sale, depending on the needs of the each community. We always collaborate closely with residents to provide sustainable homes that people can afford.

Working in partnership with 62 local authorities across the south of England, we've developed an excellent reputation as a specialist rural housing provider. We're the Homes and Communities Agency's leading investment partner in rural development and a member of the Rural Housing Advisory Group. We were also a founder member of the National Housing Federation's Rural Alliance and a founder member of the Passivhaus Trust - Passivhaus being an international, low-energy design standard.



*Wimbish Passivhaus*



*Ditchingham Passivhaus*

Hastoe is a multi-award winning housing association. Two of our schemes (Crawley Down and Ditchingham Passivhaus) have recently been featured in [Inside Housing's Top 50 UK Affordable Housing Developments](#). From 2012-13, [Hastoe has won a total of 16 awards](#), including the coveted *Green Apple Award* for Wimbish Passivhaus and two *Affordable Home Ownership Awards* for Marsh Gibbon and Wimbish Passivhaus.

## Useful resources and information

### **CIH/RSN partnership**

[www.cih.org/ruralpartnership](http://www.cih.org/ruralpartnership)

### **CIH/RSN survey results**

[www.cih.co.uk/resources/policy/CIH briefing papers/rural housing Oct 2012.pdf](http://www.cih.co.uk/resources/policy/CIH_briefing_papers/rural_housing_Oct_2012.pdf)

### **RSN website**

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

### **Defra (2013) Fuel, energy and fuel poverty in rural areas**

[www.gov.uk/government/publications/fuel-energy-and-fuel-poverty-in-rural-areas](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fuel-energy-and-fuel-poverty-in-rural-areas)

### **Hastoe Housing Association**

[www.hastoe.com/page/289/Annual-Reports-and-other-publications.aspx](http://www.hastoe.com/page/289/Annual-Reports-and-other-publications.aspx)

### **Coming soon**

LGA guide for elected members on rural development

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