

The Rural Housing Trust



10 steps to achieving affordable housing on rural exception sites

A very brief guide for parish councils

This is not a blueprint. Circumstances vary from village to village and from district to district. You will need a professional facilitator to steer you through the process. Rural Housing Enablers (RHE), district council Affordable Housing Officers and Housing Associations can help you.

Professional advice on a whole range of legal, financial, planning and construction issues is essential.

Public subsidy can only be obtained by working with a housing association and the local authority will have a list of those with whom it is happy to work. In some areas it is also possible to build schemes without public subsidy (we have built over 400 houses this way).

This advice is based on the RHT method of fieldwork, which we used to build 350 schemes on rural exception sites up to 2008.

Step 1: Get the rest of the Parish Council

'on side'. 'Exception site' schemes are best instigated by the Parish Council. The project will need to demonstrate community support so a partnership approach between the Parish Council, district council, landowner and developer is crucial to success.

Make sure you understand the project and why you are doing it so that you can explain it to those who do not share your views.

Step 2: Establish the local need. The professional facilitator you use will help you to research the scale and nature of housing need through a Housing Need Survey. Publicise the launch of the survey in the parish newsletter and elsewhere. Only proceed to Step 3 if the survey shows sufficient need and support!

Step 3: Find a suitable site. (Do not skip forward to this stage before the survey of need has been carried out. The site should fit the need, not vice-versa!). Make use of your local knowledge but use the facilitator to advise what kind of site is feasible and what is acceptable to the district council. A good facilitator has the skills required to approach and negotiate with landowners.

Step 4: Appoint an architect. This will be done by the organisation responsible for developing the scheme. A good developer will understand how to brief the architect to achieve attractive design, which is in keeping with the local style, within a tight budget.

Step 5: Consult local residents. There are many opportunities along the way for keeping residents informed of proposals and of the principles behind the project. Again, a good facilitator will advise on the timing of such consultation and information.

Once the first draft of the professional drawings and layouts for the chosen site are complete, it is very important that they are exhibited in the village hall so that residents have the chance to express their views.

Step 6: Gather Expressions of Interest. At the information session/exhibition (step 5) and throughout the rest of the process, the facilitator you are using to help you with your project will encourage local people to express their interest in being considered for one of the houses.

It may have been some time since your first survey, so this ongoing process helps to refine the level of housing need. More detailed information is collected (e.g. on income, local connection, household size and current housing circumstances) which enables decisions to be made on the tenure and size of the properties.

Step 7: Submit planning application. The housing association or developer will do this. It will mark the culmination of lengthy discussions with the Planning Officers and will reflect great attention to all local planning policies and planning guidance.

Sometimes the Parish Council demonstrates its support for the proposal by being a joint applicant – at no cost to the PC. Being a joint applicant does not remove the PC's right to be consulted in the normal way.

Detailed supporting evidence will strengthen the application. This evidence will include information about how the site was selected as well as details of housing need in the village.

Step 8: Get funding (not necessarily at this stage, may be sooner). Whether they are developing the scheme or not, the housing association as managers of the completed houses, will need to obtain Social Housing Grant in order to subsidise the scheme.

Step 9: Select a builder. This will be done by the developer. The choice of builder depends on many different factors, but every encouragement is given to the selection of local firms or, at least, to firms which undertake to try and employ local qualified staff or sub-contractors.

Step 10: Get on site. Assuming the planners have said “yes” and funding has been obtained, construction can begin.

Expressions of interest gathered over the previous years/months from people interested in a house will need to be renewed. Interviews will take place and houses allocated according to housing association policy and the terms of the S106 Planning Agreement.

It's all over?

Celebrate! The residents have moved in. Everyone is happy. Hold an Opening Ceremony to publicise the achievement and to inspire other villages to follow suit.

But hold on

It does not stop there! Continue to take an interest in the scheme. You will be asked to vouch for the local connections of people applying to live in the houses in the future. Make sure the housing association you are working with keeps you informed of re-sales and re-lets and don't let anyone forget these are homes for local people.