



... Affordable Rural Housing

.....

RCAN Investment Programme – strategic influencing case studies

*Brian Wilson Associates with David Atkinson Consulting
November 2010*

Overview

The Rural Community Action Network (RCAN) comprises the 38 county-based Rural Community Councils, 8 regional RCAN bodies and the national umbrella organisation, Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE). Defra's RCAN Investment Programme provides funding to RCAN members and aims to ensure that the needs of rural communities are addressed effectively in public policy and delivery.

Most RCAN members have used some of their 2008-11 funding from Defra to undertake work that links rural affordable housing delivery with the housing strategies of local authorities in county-wide partnerships. The strategic aspect, on which these case studies focus, has been part-funded by Defra, while the delivery work on rural affordable housing is funded, in the main, from local sources.

Where the RCAN member is involved in direct delivery of affordable housing through the work of a Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) hosted within their organisation, there is a clear link between the local evidence generated and work to influence strategic housing policies. Evidence is gathered through community led plans, housing needs surveys and engagement with parish councils, developers and housing providers.

Case studies on this theme are available on the strategic influencing work being undertaken by RCAN members, each of whom also employ a rural housing enabler, in:

- *Essex* – where the Rural Community Council for Essex has used its track record on rural affordable housing development to lead an advisory group and to gain influence on the county's Housing Board
- *Lincolnshire* – where Community Lincs has been at the heart of work to develop a pioneering new rural affordable housing partnership for the county
- *Worcestershire* – where Community First has raised the profile of rural affordable housing needs and solutions with local authorities, and is part of the strategic response.

A number of common threads can be drawn from these three case studies:

- ***Combining strategic influencing with delivery***: the work of RCAN members on rural affordable housing has both a strategic and a delivery element. They help to identify housing need and to facilitate new affordable housing schemes, working directly with communities, parish councils, registered social landlords and developers.

.....

They channel information gathered through housing need surveys and community development approaches, to statutory bodies and to partnerships of which they are members. By doing so they are influencing the development of more integrated and coherent responses to affordable housing needs at the county level. The local authorities in these areas value this dual role from their RCAN members; they respect them for their practical help with delivery, whilst at the same time feeling they can engage them on strategic policy issues.

- **Increasing profile of strategic role:** in all three case study areas, a stronger and more strategic partnership role has developed from local action. Local RCAN members have helped to grow a county-wide response to affordable housing needs by raising awareness of needs and helping to identify and deliver solutions. They have helped bring together partnerships linked to Local Strategic Partnerships (LSP) and Local Area Agreement priorities. As a result, despite playing differing partnership roles, these local RCAN members have become part of a more joined up approach to rural affordable housing strategy development and delivery.
- **RHE work as an effective means of consultation:** the case studies clearly indicate that local authorities and other bodies see the RHE approach as a very effective means to consult and engage communities about rural affordable housing schemes. It is notable that all three case study areas have developed sophisticated toolkits and information packs targeted at parish councils and communities to describe the process of identifying housing need and to get involved in shaping and developing the schemes. In both Essex and Worcestershire this approach has helped to overcome initial resistance to schemes which, on completion, have been widely welcomed. Local authorities have recognised the value of this patient and inclusive approach to community engagement and have built it into partnership strategies.
- **Using the evidence base:** local authorities are using the evidence generated by RHEs to strengthen their approach to developing new affordable housing schemes. For instance, in Lincolnshire the RHE is working with each district council to adapt the way they collect information on their housing registers, in order to demonstrate more quantifiable evidence of need. This approach is based on the housing needs surveys undertaken by the Lincolnshire RHE and helps local authorities work more effectively through the planning system.

-
- ***Developing sound working relationships:*** each of the projects is influential and successful because of strong working relationships built up by the RCAN member with local partners. In all three cases, this has been a long process pre-dating the RCAN Investment Programme. The way that partnerships have evolved varies in each of the areas, from measured growth in Worcestershire to a step change brought about by policy reviews in Lincolnshire and Essex. But the pattern of building support for community empowerment work and raising awareness at both officer and political levels is repeated in each case. The local authorities view their RCAN members as trusted and knowledgeable partners with a track record.
 - ***Future financial uncertainty:*** in each of the case studies the strategic and delivery work currently faces some uncertainty. Typically national and local funding streams are up for renewal before next financial year and those decisions will be tough in the current economic climate. It is therefore not entirely clear whether or in what form these projects will continue. In both Essex and Worcestershire the withdrawal of LAA Reward Grant has already impacted on the proposed expansion of RHE work. However, the relevant local authorities value the projects and express a desire to see them sustained in some shape or form.
 - ***Adapting to the Big Society:*** these case studies were developed during a period when the local performance framework of Sustainable Community Strategies and Local Area Agreements, provided the main policy context. In both Lincolnshire and Essex, the rural affordable housing partnerships are linked directly to objectives of Local Strategic Partnerships. Since the 2010 General Election that policy context has altered considerably. The Coalition Government's vision for the Big Society, which seeks to encourage more citizen involvement and community action, is seen as an opportunity by many local RCAN members. RHE work potentially provides a good fit of skills and experience with this emerging agenda, but it will need to be accompanied by activities to influence the way that local authorities and others respond to the policy measures currently in development. As more detail of Big Society proposals emerge, local RCAN members will be looking to develop new community led responses to rural affordable housing needs, whether or not they employ the local rural housing enabler.

Case study 1 - Essex

The local RCAN member for Essex, RCCE, has built up a successful track record of affordable rural housing development. It has grown the project from localised delivery to being at the heart of a strategic and co-ordinated partnership responding to rural affordable housing needs across the county.

Context

The lack of affordable housing in rural communities has been a serious problem for many decades. From 2003, the Rural Community Council for Essex (RCCE) used funding from the former Countryside Agency and Housing Corporation to employ a Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) to bring forward affordable housing schemes for rural communities in the county.

Over the years RCCE has seen the problem worsen, because of house prices that continually outstrip local incomes by a very wide margin. In most parts of Essex – particularly those within commuting distance of London – RCCE points to serious affordability gaps, where a first time buyer will often need to borrow between 8 and 10 times their income to get a mortgage.

In response to this, RCCE has stepped up the strategic influencing aspect of its work to shape solutions to the problem at district and county levels. This was given impetus by the introduction of funding through the RCAN Investment Programme from Defra in 2008. The work is now a vital part of RCCE's strategic activities to influence the delivery of the Essex Strategy and the Local Area Agreement.

What happened?

Moira Groborz is the Rural Housing Enabler at RCCE. Together with a range of local stakeholders, she has helped develop an increasingly sophisticated set of responses to tackle structural rural housing affordability problems in Essex. The RHE work is now delivered through an Advisory Group, led by RCCE and including both registered social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities. The key aims are to:

- raise awareness of local housing needs and the means to tackle them
- facilitate the provision of affordable housing

-
- influence local, sub regional and regional strategies that impact on affordable housing.

Essex has had a county-wide Local Area Agreement (LAA) for over five years. RCCE recognised early the need to engage with this body at a strategic level, particularly around the lack of rural affordable housing in the county which has been a growing concern. Initial opportunities were limited, because measures to tackle rural affordable housing were largely missing from the LAA.

However, a review of the LAA in 2008 energised the RCCE to exert its influence. RCCE were able to present evidence to the Essex Partnership about the problems of rural affordable housing in the county and to draw on their experience of housing needs surveys to highlight some potential solutions. RCCE were involved in discussions with other partners about the issue and the result was that the Essex Partnership set up a new Housing Board, as part of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) to tackle the lack of affordable housing.

RCCE have been given a specific responsibility on the Board for leading a new rural strand of the action plan. They are working with the 12 district councils in Essex and their partners to overcome the lack of understanding, by parish and district councillors, about the principles of rural affordable housing. As part of this, RCCE are particularly keen to demonstrate that the success of schemes is dependent upon close consultation with local communities.

“The approach is to ensure affordable housing schemes are not ‘done to’ communities, but ‘done with’ them” – Moira Groborz, RHE at Rural Community Council of Essex

Recently, the Essex Partnership planned to allocate LAA Reward Grant to expand RCCE’s awareness raising work. Subsequently, with cuts to Reward Grant, this offer was withdrawn by the Council. The intention, nevertheless, illustrates the importance that the Partnership attaches to housing affordability and the value of RCCE’s approach.

Evaluating completed schemes

Uttlesford District Council has undertaken an evaluation of the rural affordable housing schemes developed in the district through the RHE route. It found 86% of tenants rated their housing as good or above, whilst 95% felt the housing scheme had benefitted their local community. All of the parish councils surveyed felt that the schemes had been a success and 75% felt there was a need for a further scheme in the future.

Impacts

The impact at strategic level is important. The strengthening relationship with Essex County Council is a key feature of the project and is marked by RCCE's new strategic role on the LAA Housing Board.

This represents a considerable journey from small beginnings and localised work, through to county-wide influence and multi-stakeholder partnerships. RCCE feels justifiably proud of the role it has played in raising the profile of rural affordable housing with its influence still spreading. Currently 8 of the 12 district councils are represented on the RHE Advisory Group. RCCE reports that Rochford District Council is also keen to work with the group. Rochford is largely urban, to the north of Southend but with a rural fringe, and is an authority that RCCE has been keen to do business with for some time, though it has struggled to find the best mechanism. The remaining three districts are urban.

It is clear that these activities are also opening up new audiences. This is evidenced by demand for information and events, and by requests for the step-by-step guide to developing rural affordable housing that it has put together specifically for parish councilors.

Parish Councillors Learn More About Affordable Housing

In April 2010 RCCE hosted an event for parish, district and county councillors from across Essex, which saw the launch of an information pack entitled 'My Village, My Home'. Presentations were given by the Rural Housing Enabler, a Registered Social Landlord (RSL) and local authorities, looking at the issues and going through the process of developing affordable rural housing. Three parish councillors spoke of their first hand experience offering peer perspectives. Both the event and the 'My Village, My Home' pack were funded by the LAA.

"The RHE project has steadily increased its impact across the County, through the use of effective and grounded evidence about what works" – Philip Wilson, Policy Analyst, Essex County Council

Resources

A portion of the £25k which RCCE allocated from the annual RCAN Investment Programme funding to influence the Essex Strategy and LAA has been used to support strategic development of the RHE work. The RHE post itself is largely funded through Essex County Council (£26k per year), district council contributions and from registered social landlords across the county (£19k per year). There is a small amount of contract generated income.

What worked well?

RCCE were able to bring timely local evidence, experience and knowledge to a debate at county level. This helped to establish the role of the Housing Board and in turn give RCCE specific responsibilities for raising awareness of the need to develop affordable housing.

The partnership on the RHE group is strong. RCCE have benefitted from support and knowledge around the table. In turn, RCCE has been able to bring its considerable local evidence and knowledge, and has seen that strong contribution recognised and valued by the group. The RHE group is well balanced. Having RSLs at the meetings is important, because it means that decisions are transparent and organisations trust the process. This has led to far greater co-ordination of effort and a sense that tackling rural affordable housing needs is no longer piecemeal.

.....

“The RHE Advisory Group has been successful, bringing a level of integration and coordination that was previously absent. It also means that developers and RSLs bring their business to the table and are not tempted to play off one stakeholder against another” – Moira Groborz, Rural Housing Enabler at RCCE

RCCE feel they have developed a ‘template’ for working with parish councillors. The process involves building up their knowledge and then engaging in joint work with the community, which leads to the councillors effectively becoming advocates for the scheme. The RHE’s role in this remains strong. Moira Groborz comments that, even after schemes are completed, she tends to be the main point of contact for parish councillors.

What could improve?

The withdrawal of LAA Reward Grant has been a blow to the wider ambitions of the project. Nevertheless, the funding that is in place allows a good proportion of the partnership and awareness raising work to continue.

There are shifting patterns and tensions around the tenure of the housing schemes. In the last 18 months, shared ownership has become less attractive to mortgage lenders, who see them as riskier propositions. This contrasts with parish councils, who see this tenure type as more desirable for their communities. Any upturn in the economy may resolve the issue.

Where next?

Essex County Council, like every local authority in the land, is reviewing its expenditure and commitments in a climate of severe public expenditure cutbacks. RCCE’s close working relationship with the County will at least ensure that it is fully consulted. RCCE is well placed to feed in views and evidence from the front line.

RCCE are also alive to possible opportunities through emerging proposals for the Big Society around community empowerment and the community right to build. Such initiatives, when more is known, could be a good fit with RCCE’s existing skills and role in the community. It is a case of ‘watch this space’.

Case study 2 - Lincolnshire

The local RCAN member in Lincolnshire, Community Lincs, has built up a successful track record of affordable housing work in the county. Community Lincs has developed this role so that it now forms part of a county-wide strategic partnership looking at rural affordable housing and feeding in to district LSPs and the county LAA.

Context

As with many local RCAN members, there is a long history of rural affordable housing work in the county. Indeed Community Lincs has employed a Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) since 2000, to work with communities to plan and deliver new affordable housing developments.

The introduction of the RCAN Investment Programme by Defra in 2008 moved the emphasis of Community Lincs' work towards more strategic objectives. Rural affordable housing work now contributes to three of Community Lincs' five RCAN strategic influencing activities at regional, county and district levels.

At the same time, statutory organisations were thinking about more joined up rural affordable housing delivery in the county. The Lincolnshire Rural Affordable Housing Partnership became the strategic response to this and aims to deliver a series of high level outcomes linked to the Lincolnshire Sustainable Community Strategy.

What happened?

Rising awareness of housing shortages in the county led to a recognition amongst all the major partners that a strategic response was needed. The drivers for this were:

- evidence of need and solutions, gathered through developing the rural element of the Lincolnshire Housing Strategy, to which Community Lincs contributed
- opportunities provided by the Homes & Communities Agency (the national body which provides grant funding for social housing developments), which wanted a more strategic approach to delivery
- the emergence of new rural housing delivery partnerships around the country.

.....

Community Lincs was at the heart of the housing partnership development: it looked at other rural housing delivery partnerships already in existence, brokered partnership discussions and brought extensive knowledge of rural housing affordability issues to the table.

The Lincolnshire Assembly agreed to support a Lincolnshire Rural Affordable Housing Partnership (LRAHP) in June 2009 for three years.

“As a group, we investigated other ways of working and other ways of delivering to see how we could adjust what we did in Lincolnshire to make it more proactive” – Bob Bowe, Rural Housing Enabler at Community Lincs

The objective of the LRAHP is to improve the quantity and quality of rural affordable housing in a cost effective manner, contributing to the creation and maintenance of sustainable rural communities, through organisations working together co-operatively.

The LRAHP Board comprises Lincolnshire County Council, Lincolnshire’s six district councils, the Homes & Communities Agency, three of the county’s largest housing developers and Community Lincs. West Lindsey District Council fulfils a secretariat role.

Significantly, each local authority member has a responsibility for embedding the work of the Partnership into their authority and for applying their resources to help meet the Partnership’s objectives.

“As a partnership, we are now much less piecemeal and more co-ordinated in the way we work with Community Lincs on rural affordable housing” – Andy Gray, West Lindsey DC (the partnership lead agency)

Impacts

Community Lincs’ role is helping to move the county’s response to the need for rural affordable housing onto a much firmer and evidence-based footing. One particular strategic development is their work to adapt the Housing Registers of each district council to provide more depth of evidence of housing need, drawing on the experience of the well-established Housing Needs Survey process.

.....

This enables the district councils to submit the registers into the process when planning consent is sought, whereas previously, the registers were given insufficient weight. The long term goal is to influence the planning system, so that it delivers better and more sustainable schemes.

The LRHAP is influencing the way that the Homes & Communities Agency is thinking about affordable rural housing delivery at the national level. There are on-going discussions between the two about the possibility of additional funding to commission affordable housing schemes which will test the advantages of their county-wide delivery model.

“The Homes & Communities Agency is really seeing the potential of county-wide rural affordable housing development.” – Jo Lavis, LRAHP project coordinator

Crucially, the partnership has agreed a common process for bringing forward affordable housing schemes. The performance framework has recast the way that sites are released for development and the core role of the RHE has shifted away from conducting housing needs surveys to focus more on the delivery of schemes. So far the framework is working well.

Community Lincs’ work at a strategic level within this partnership has had knock on consequences. It has recently been invited to join the steering group of a Department for Communities & Local Government sponsored initiative called Sustainable Futures, which is testing how well eco-towns are meeting their sustainability objectives. Community Lincs is bringing its rural housing and community development expertise to the group to help shape the development of that initiative.

Affordable homes in Bicker

The end product of this strategic influencing is new, sustainable affordable housing. Like those in Bicker, where Community Lincs worked with Boston Borough Council and Lincolnshire Rural Housing Association to identify need, consult thoroughly with the community and co-ordinate the delivery of two developments of 12 homes for local people on a rural exceptions site.

Resources

The strategic elements of Community Lincs' LRAHP work are supported by financial contributions from three areas of work under the RCAN Investment Programme. Funding of £51K per year for the RHE delivery work within communities comes from the local district councils and Registered Social Landlords who make up the partnership.

What worked well?

Community Lincs' profile and influence in the county has clearly benefitted from its central role in shaping the LRAHP. For example, the recent invitation onto the Sustainable Futures steering group has happened on the back of their affordable housing role.

Integration is a key part of the story. Whilst it is still early days, there are already signs that the participation of all those who have expertise and responsibility for meeting rural housing needs is important in developing a bespoke approach. This means that across the county there is a co-ordinated response to tackling the specific challenges of delivering affordable housing in rural areas.

The partnership is beginning to bring together evidence of housing needs, site supply, planning policy and decisions, social housing funding, and community and political engagement into an integrated process.

The partnership has been reviewing the first year of operation. Important findings are that there is no single model for a rural housing delivery partnership and membership and operation need to be tailored to the circumstances of each area. The value of Community Lincs' strong evidence base has also been very apparent. This enables better performance management of scarce resources, so they can be applied where needs are greatest across a sub-region or county.

Interestingly, scale has proven to be an important feature of the partnership's approach. By working at a sub-regional/county level, the delivery programme builds up a critical mass and is significant enough to attract interest from the Homes & Communities Agency and larger registered social landlords.

.....

For Community Lincs, the partnership demonstrates its continuing ability to use local knowledge and community engagement skills in a strategic and influential way.

“Community Lincs is seen as an equal partner, a strong collaborator and a brilliant operational supporter” – Jo Lavis, LRHAP project coordinator

What could improve?

Securing consistent political support for local schemes remains a challenge across a large county with varying party political control. Support for the role of the Partnership at strategic level is very strong, nevertheless, some proposals highlight tensions at the local level about what is felt to be the most appropriate development on particular sites. The Partnership is rising to this challenge by allowing for a more strategic approach and by investing in community engagement. Indeed Community Lincs is allocating even more of the RHE’s time to engaging with communities to explain how sensitive and sustainable housing schemes can be an asset.

Where next?

The Partnership has only completed its first year. Whilst a lot has been achieved, it continues to grow and evolve. Specific commitments in the LRAHP business plan beyond March 2011 will be subject to decisions made following the Spending Review in Autumn 2010.

One development being considered is how Community Lincs’ rural housing role can specifically exploit opportunities afforded by the Coalition Government’s plans for a Localism Bill in Autumn 2010 and the wider thrust to deliver a ‘Big Society’ of devolved services and community action. Community Lincs’ core skills around advocacy, allied to their strategic role within the partnership could provide a close match with emerging proposals for a Community Right-to-Build policy, which aims to give people more say over how their local area is developed (and which extends beyond affordable housing).

“My job is often about hearts and minds – talking to communities about what they want and how it can be achieved realistically. What we are hearing now about Big Society proposals just makes this all the more relevant” – Bob Bowe, Rural Housing Enabler at Community Lincs

Case study 3 – Worcestershire

The local RCAN member for Herefordshire and Worcestershire, Community First, has built up a successful track record of affordable housing developments in Worcestershire. The project is well established, and has adapted and grown in response to frequent changes to funding and economic conditions. Community First now occupies a more strategic role at the heart of a county-wide partnership, which feeds into district LSPs and the county LAA

Context

Community First has been delivering the Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler (RHE) project for over 10 years. Since its inception, the principal aim has been to drive forward the provision of additional affordable housing in rural areas. However, the changing nature of housing issues and the tough economic conditions have demanded that the project is frequently reviewed and revised to meet the shifting needs of the community.

In addition, the introduction of funding through the Defra RCAN Investment Programme in 2008 moved the emphasis of Community First's overall work towards more strategic objectives. As a result, the housing enabling work became an important aspect of Community First's activities to achieve strategic influence within the Worcestershire Local Area Agreement (LAA). The RHE work also feeds into strategic influencing activities within the district level Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in the county.

What happened?

The county's rural affordable housing activities are hosted and managed by Community First and part of the Worcestershire Affordable Rural Housing Steering Group. This is drawn from seven housing associations, four District Councils, Worcestershire County Council, the Homes & Communities Agency (the Government agency responsible for investing in new affordable homes across England) and the Worcestershire association of parish councils).

Community First's activities have grown over a number of years from small, localised impacts to the current strategic role within an influential county partnership. This has happened through growing recognition about the problems that local people face in accessing affordable housing.

.....

Community First have been able to force this to become a higher priority in the county by brokering discussions between partners based on their evidence of local housing demand and practical responses that are rooted in community engagement.

This approach has helped to build the Worcestershire Housing Partnership and has brought not only focus, but also commitment from statutory partners.

Economic context

Demand for rural affordable housing schemes in the area is high. Community First has found that prices remain generally high and people are often forced to move away in order to find a suitable home. Over time, social networks and village services are lost, and the demographic profiles of villages are changed. The current financial crisis has resulted in mortgage lenders applying greater restrictions on prospective house purchasers, leaving many people unable to obtain a mortgage.

Most recently, the strategic impact of Community First’s work was recognised by the county Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) when it allocated resources from the Local Area Agreement Reward Grant to fund an additional enabler post. Unfortunately, before that could be implemented, a tranche of Reward Grant funding was withdrawn as part of a package of public spending reductions.

Those prevailing public sector funding circumstances, together with a need to take stock of changes in policy by the Homes & Communities Agency on its investment planning, have prompted the partners to review the way that rural affordable housing enabling is being delivered across the county.

Recommendations of the review will be considered by the Steering Group during Autumn 2010. The strategic nature of the review demonstrates the increasing importance of rural affordable housing in the county. This reflects well on the efforts of Community First.

“The project has highlighted some excellent good practice at local level about the challenges and opportunities associated with developing affordable rural housing schemes” – Elaine Salter, Wychavon District Council

Impacts

The strategic influence has been achieved through slow burn, rather than explosive developments. These activities have gradually shaped the involvement of district councils in rural affordable housing to the point where they are now very active, engaged and ambitious. Community First picked up the rural affordable housing baton when no other agencies were interested in running with it. Tackling this need has since developed to the point where local councils like Wychavon are providing funding and contributions in kind, as well as land to allow schemes to progress.

This has had a knock on effect in Community First's profile with both the County Council and district councils. The partnership is seen as a regional and national exemplar. The Homes & Communities Agency has used the Worcestershire experience to demonstrate good practice, most recently in the HCA West Midlands booklet 'Picking the Best Solutions for Rural Housing'. There have also been national publications, such as HRH Prince of Wales's Affordable Rural Housing Initiative and local guides such as Rooftop's Sharing Positive Practice in Rural Development, which highlighted best practice in Worcestershire.

These activities have been instrumental in parish councils playing a much more significant role in developing local affordable housing needs schemes and in making them more successful. An affordable homes toolkit has been produced, aimed at elected members, to help them identify need and consider whether new, affordable homes are required in their area.

And, not least, thirteen affordable housing schemes have been completed in rural communities in Worcestershire since 2006, comprising over 160 dwellings for rent or shared ownership.

"Partnership is the key. The working relationship between the twelve partners is the glue that keeps the project together" – Nigel Potter, RHE at Community First

Eckington case study

Eckington is a rural village in Worcestershire. The parish council had identified a need for affordable housing, but was unsure how to develop a local scheme. Through working with the Worcestershire rural housing project, the community agreed the plans, land was bought, a developer was appointed and the scheme has since been completed. The parish council like it and want more – but it took seven years of patient work to overcome the fears of the community. This kind of timescale is often necessary to deliver a successful scheme. The previous investment in patient community engagement means that if there is another scheme it will be delivered much more quickly.

Resources

The strategic elements of the RHE work are funded out of two RCAN Investment Programme budget lines, with some coming from the £9.7k per year allocated to influence the Worcestershire LAA and some coming from the £11k per year allocated to influence the strategic focus of district councils in that county. The RHE post and its delivery work are funded by annual contributions of £19k from Worcestershire local authorities and £49k from Registered Social Landlords, to which just £6k of the RCAN Investment Programme funding has been added.

What worked well?

The higher profile and publicity for affordable rural housing needs and solutions, and the increased involvement of local authorities is judged to be a success. Deployment of local evidence of needs, solutions and community engagement has driven this. In addition, initiatives like the toolkit and conference, and other local events, have all opened up access to new geographic areas and to new audiences.

The steering group works well. Whilst the principle aim of the project is the delivery of local housing schemes, each of the partners involved can see that there are additional benefits for them. This 'added value' includes meeting their social obligations for registered social landlords, connections with local communities for the district councils and a focus on young people, sustainability and transport issues for the County Council.

.....

The investment in community engagement has been crucial to the success of Community First's role in the Partnership. Having the RHE employed by the local RCAN member means that there is a level of credibility and impartiality with the role. This helps when communicating with rural communities, identifying problems or barriers and working with them to find a way through.

"Communities should be engaged with and listened to. They all have their own time scale and it can't be pushed" – Nigel Potter, RHE at Community First

What could improve?

Although the partnership works well and has consistently been central to the success of the strategic influencing activities, there remain things which could work better still. In particular, there is scope for the partnership to work more strategically and draw on the combined skills and strengths of the group. The current review of rural affordable housing delivery in the county should help to address this.

Where next?

The review will lead to proposals to re-model and fund the project from Spring 2011. Whatever the conclusions, the success of Community First in shaping the county's rural affordable housing strategy bears testament to skills in partnership building, using local knowledge and evidence, and applying the principle of patient community engagement.