ACRE’s position on affordable rural housing

ACRE is concerned that communities are being undermined by a lack of affordable housing in rural areas, a consequence of high house prices and limited supply of homes built by housing associations and local authorities.

ACRE supports appropriate development in rural areas, especially the provision of affordable housing, so that communities can thrive. Appropriate development underpins local service delivery, helps local businesses to flourish and creates a local social framework; all fundamental to ensuring a good quality of life for those living in rural areas.

This policy position paper sets out the ACRE Network’s call for action to improve delivery and outlines how it can play its part at national and local level.
ACRE Position Paper
Rural Housing

Top four priorities for action by Government and national policy makers

1. Invest in technical support so that communities can share responsibility for meeting their own housing needs. For example, funding Rural Housing Enablers and community led housing advisers.

2. Provide capital grant funding to build affordable homes in rural areas recognising the higher costs of developing these homes. This includes funding for both conventional delivery, by housing associations, and community led housing funded through the Community Housing Fund.

3. Encourage forms of affordable rural housing that are truly affordable to local people on low incomes and which remain affordable in perpetuity by maintaining protection from the Right to Buy.

4. Invest in and support the development of Neighbourhood Plans so local communities can proactively engage in the planning process.

Evidence of the need for more affordable rural housing

ACRE promotes action that is informed by evidence and the experience of helping rural communities meet their housing needs.

The challenges that affect delivery of affordable rural housing

- A lack of suitable sites available at a price that makes it possible to build affordable homes.
- A lack of appropriate levels of funding for affordable housing.
- Lack of consideration of the distinctive characteristics and the requirements for the successful delivery of affordable rural housing in the design of national and local policy.
- Inconsistent political leadership and decision making at a local level which undermines the development of appropriate affordable housing schemes.
- Opposition to development arising from some rural residents, businesses and organisations not being fully and positively involved in the decision making process which will affect the future make-up of their community.

In 2015/16 3,696 affordable homes were built in villages of less than 3k population. Of these 1,020 were on rural exception sites. This compares with an estimated need of 7,500 new affordable homes per annum in these small communities. (DCLG).

There were 2,543 new affordable homes built with grant support in villages of less than 3k population in 2016/17. (HCA, July 2017).

The affordability ratio of lower quartile income to lower quartile house prices for rural areas is 8:3 (Defra, May 2017).

Average house prices are 25% higher and wages are lower (£4,600 - £19,900 less than in urban) in rural areas. (Halifax & Defra data).

The supply of social housing is significantly lower in rural areas; 8% in villages of less than 3k population compared with 19% for urban areas.
Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs)

Are employed by many Network members. The RHEs support communities to evidence the level and nature of their housing needs; identify potential sites, and engage in the design of the homes. RHEs specialist expertise means that they are a source of information and can act as an ‘honest broker’, building positive relationships with landowners, local authorities and housing associations. Together the RHEs have produced a ‘Principles and Guidance’ document to ensure consistent and robust collection of evidence through local housing needs surveys.

As budgets have been cut the number of RHEs has declined, but consistent research highlights that partners continue to value the crucial role they play.

Our ambition: is to ensure that there is a Rural Housing Enabler in every county and that funding is available to enable communities across rural England to draw on their expertise.

Supporting Community Led Housing

Some communities want to provide the affordable homes themselves. Through their links with specialist advisers ACRE Network members can help communities to decide whether this is an option for them and how to take this forward. The Community Housing Fund has ignited an interest in extending the availability of this advice, but it is currently confined to a limited number of areas.

Our ambition: is to ensure that ACRE Network members have strong links with organisations supporting community led housing groups, and that funding for community led housing continues and is available to all rural communities.

Assisting in the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans and enabling rural communities to have a say in planning decisions and to shape future development in their area

ACRE Network members have provided guidance and nurtured communities seeking to use the powers included in the Localism Act (2011) – such as the ‘Community Rights’ and ‘Neighbourhood Planning’. Through face-to-face support they have enabled communities to develop robust Neighbourhood Plans, facilitated the transfer of assets such as local libraries to local community groups and sourced appropriate funding.

Our ambition: is for Neighbourhood Planning support to be available in every ACRE Network member area, and that funded support is available to community groups wishing to progress and update a Neighbourhood Plan.

Expertise of the ACRE Network

The ACRE Network has a wealth of knowledge and experience that helps overcome these challenges. Network members are uniquely placed to provide grassroots support for communities and evidence gathering to help national and local leaders improve rural proofing of policy so that more rural affordable homes are delivered.

Using locally sourced information and evidence, collated through the 38 ACRE Network members ACRE is able to act as the ‘voice of rural communities’ either by acting alone or in concert as an active member of the following national partnerships and organisations:

- Rural Coalition
- Rural Services Network
- Rural England CIC
- Rural Housing Network

The National Housing Federation 5* Plan

ACRE has signed up as a partner to the National Housing Federation’s Rural Housing 5* Plan, which challenges the sector to increase delivery of rural housing and continue to contribute to a living and working countryside. For more information on the plan please visit the NHF website.
Broader context: the ACRE Network supporting local change

ACRE recognises that whilst improving the supply of affordable housing is a key component of a thriving rural community, wider associated action is needed for rural areas to be sustainable. Throughout the 90 year history of the ACRE Network our members have supported rural communities by:

- Providing advice and support to organisations, charities and businesses who run key community services such as village and community buildings, shops and rural transport.
- Supporting independent living for older and less mobile residents through developing and running local projects.
- Encouraging community led consultation and supporting residents develop an evidence base that can then be used to inform local decisions.
- Promoting intergenerational activity so that all residents are able to have a say in their community and access the services they need.
- Creating partnerships with politicians, local authorities, businesses, charities and social enterprises that provide services for rural communities.
- Sourcing funding and investment opportunities for local level activity and supporting volunteers and community based organisations to make quality applications.
- Promoting the good practice demonstrated by local projects and making this available through ACRE Network members across the country.

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