

Rural Affordable Housing for Your Community

Why we need affordable homes

In rural Oxfordshire, house prices tend to be significantly more expensive than in towns. In some cases, average house prices are over 20 times the average local wage. Social affordable homes are being reduced through being sold off and the number of privately rented homes are also diminishing, pushing up rental costs. Wages in the countryside are also lower.

'The extreme (and growing) disparity between average house price and earnings is unsustainable for rural communities and is causing hardships for many families. For some, the lack of rural affordable housing can lead to homelessness which is on the rise across the countryside' - Campaign to Protect Rural England (2023).

But Parish Councils and communities can respond to these issues. This pamphlet provides you with an easy guide to the steps you can take to start to address your local housing needs.

In order to help guide communities through this process, Community First Oxfordshire has two Rural Housing Enablers.

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Step 1

Identify the housing needs and whether there is local support for affordable homes to be built to meet this need.

Contact the rural housing enablers (RHEs). They will talk you through the process and can come and talk to your Parish Council (or another community meeting) about your needs.

The RHE will draft the housing needs survey and talk to you about how best to publicise it and the timings. The printed surveys will be delivered out to you. The community will need to deliver the surveys to all homes in the Parish.

Surveys are posted back to Community First Oxfordshire in *Freepost* envelopes. Once the survey period has finished the RHE will analyse the results and provide a report which will identify the level of local need and support for a development.

The survey will be discussed with the Parish Council and – if there is an identified need – next steps identified.

Step 4

Delivery partner (RP/ Housing Association) gets to work.

They will undertake a viability assessment of the preferred site and have early discussions with the planning department.

They will negotiate with the landowner to see if they would be willing to sell the land at a price that makes development viable. This is usually well below the price of land that would receive planning permission through the usual route.

They will start to work up a planning application. The community should be able to shape the design before extensive design work is undertaken.

They will consult with the community on the emerging design. The RHE may also undertake an expression of interest exercise to check demand.

They will submit the planning application.

Step 2

Site Identification – the RHE will help with finding a site. This will likely be a location that could be developed as a Rural Exception Site.

This is often done through a village walk with the RHE, Parish Council, or other community members.

Consideration will be given to the location of the site, ownership (and likelihood of the owner releasing the site), past planning history, possible access points, and any obvious physical constraints such as contamination or power lines.

Together with the RHE you can make a shortlist of sites that might have potential.

Step 5

Constructor appointed and site built.

Once planning permission is granted, the RP will seek building costs from contractors. They will check that the prices are still viable for the RP to develop the scheme. They will also conclude any grant applications from Homes England or the other sources to subsidise the affordable homes.

The RP will let the RHE/Parish Council know which constructor was appointed and keep the Parish Council updated on progress towards a construction start date.

The scheme will start on site and the RHE/ RP will keep the Parish Council updated on progress and likely completion dates.

As the project gets closer to completion, the RP will advertise the homes to people on the Housing Register. Eligible applicants can express their interest in being considered for the homes.

During this period the Parish Council can help ensure that local residents understand the process for being considered for one of the homes.

Shared Ownership or other home ownership homes are sold through the market but people will still need to demonstrate they have a local connection and meet any other eligibility criteria.

Step 3

Consider your preferred delivery route – the RHE will talk you through the options.

Many communities will want to pass the site to a Registered Provider (also known as a Housing Association). The RHE has a list of providers who are interested in working with communities on small rural sites. The Parish Council can select who they would best like to work with.

Some communities may be interested in retaining the site. To do this they may consider setting up a Community Land Trust. The RHE can talk through this option and what it means for the community.

It is important at this stage for the Parish Council to understand how people will be selected to be offered one of the homes. The Local Authority will usually nominate people from their Housing Register but for Rural Exception Sites priority is given to local people. The District Council will usually have criteria identifying how they define a local connection. This will form part of the S106 legal Agreement for the site.

Step 6

Move in and celebrate!

The Local Authority (LA) will provide a shortlist of those eligible for the homes in priority order.

The LA make a nomination to the RP who will carry out their own assessment – if satisfied they will offer the homes to the applicant.

After people move in, the RP and Parish Council will often have a celebration for the new residents and wider community.

The homes are managed by the RP. Residents should have named contact for any problems.

If homes become available for re-letting or selling this should be done according to the Local Lettings Criteria as identified in the S106 legal agreement.

How long will all this take?

This varies but it's not unusual for schemes to take 3 to 5 years - from housing survey to new homes.

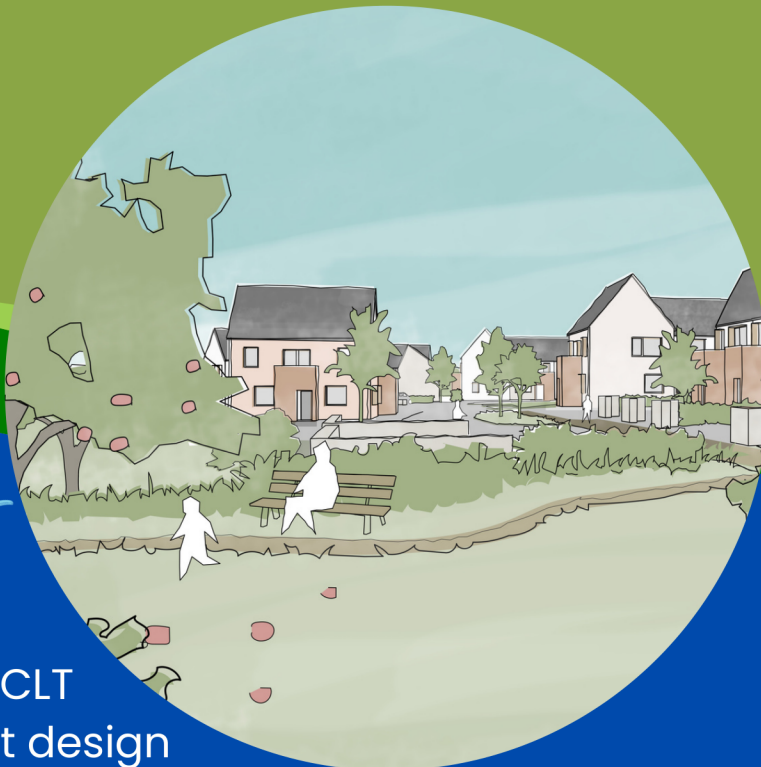
Building homes can get complicated. Sometimes things run smoothly and sometimes there are delays. Throughout the process, the RHE will keep the community updated and will do whatever they can to unblock things when they get stuck.

What's important to remember is that MANY communities have successfully delivered much-needed homes!

Hook Norton CLT housing



Ramsden Rural Exception Site



Thame CLT concept design



Scan here for more information

Jargon buster!

Affordable homes

Affordable housing has a specific definition in planning terms. It includes:

Affordable rent

Set at 80% of local market rents in an area. This is often capped at the Local Housing Allowance (maximum available housing benefit) rates.

Social rent

Social rents are set using a government formula at around 50% of average local rent prices.

Shared ownership

You buy a share of the property and pay rent to a landlord on the rest. Rents are usually between 2.5 and 3% of the unsold property value. Further shares can be brought over time.

Discount market sale

Homes are sold at a discount of at least 20% below local market value. The housing remains at a discount for future eligible households.

Community Land Trust (CLT)

These are democratic, nonprofit organisations that own and develop land for the benefit of the community. They typically provide affordable homes, community gardens, civic buildings, pubs, shops, shared workspaces, energy schemes, and conservation landscapes. Putting these into a Trust protects the benefits of these assets in perpetuity.

Registered Provider

Also known as Housing Associations, Registered Providers provide most of the social (affordable) housing and are regulated by the Regulator of Social Housing.

Homechoice / Homeseeker

Local Authorities in Oxfordshire use choice-based lettings systems. Applicants on the Housing Register can log onto the sites and see which properties are available. They can express an interest in the property so that they appear on a shortlist of possible applicants for the homes. Local Authorities then prioritise eligible applicants based on their housing need.

Housing Register

You apply for a council or housing association home by joining a housing register. The Local Authority will access your eligibility and level of need. You can also note your local connections to a parish, such as living in the parish for a certain amount of time, having immediate family living in the parish, or being employed locally. These criteria help to ensure that the affordable homes are occupied by people who have a connection to the community.

Rural Housing Enabler (RHE)

RHEs are specialists who can help rural communities consider the need for affordable housing locally and work with landowners, house-builders and planners to bring about suitable schemes.

Rural Exception Site

Rural exception sites are located on the edge of rural settlements, and are usually small in size. They are not allocated within the Local Authority's Local plan and would not normally be consented for residential development. However, they can be approved to deliver affordable housing with the aim of addressing local housing need and sustaining rural communities.

S106 Agreement

This is a legal obligation entered into if planning is agreed. On a Rural Exception Site, the S106 Agreement establishes criteria giving preference to local households when homes are allocated and ensures that the homes will remain affordable in perpetuity.

Homes England

Homes England is the government's non-departmental public body that funds new affordable housing in England and Wales.