

Local rural communities show how to deliver affordable homes

Belinda Eastland, National Housing Federation with Steve Vaux, Chair of Seend Community Land and Asset Trust (SCLAT) and Trevor Cherrett, Wiltshire Community Land Trust.

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The affordable homes crisis has been with us a long time, especially in rural areas. From the boom in post war commuting and retirement, to right-to-buy and restrictions on council housing and housing associations, the supply of homes for people who cannot afford the open market has been continuously squeezed.

In rural areas there have been generally two ways to tackle this crisis. Firstly, by doing deals with developers to provide a proportion of affordable housing, and secondly by building social housing on 'exception sites' that would not normally get planning permission for housing.

But within the last few decades another approach has been tried out. Local communities themselves can set up bodies such as community land trusts to acquire land and develop housing schemes that they themselves decide will meet local needs and fit in with the local environment.

In England and Wales there are over 350 community land trusts (200 of them in rural areas) with over 200 in the pipeline, delivering 1,711 homes and a further 5,413 on the way. With the right policies and support community land trusts could build 30,000 more homes on rural exception sites alone.

And not just affordable homes but genuinely sustainable ones too. In the village of Seend, Wiltshire (population 1,132) 10 affordable and sustainable 'passive haus' homes have been planned and developed by the residents of the village through its community-led Community Land and Asset Trust. Due to be completed in November 2023, this scheme on the edge of the village shows how local communities can themselves deliver low energy homes for local people, ensuring they will also have affordable heating, lighting, hot water and cooking when the cost-of-living crisis is affecting so many.

Steve Vaux, Chair of Seend Community Land and Asset Trust (SCLAT), describes how they did it:

In about 2015/16 Seend Parish Council started to think about developing a Neighbourhood Plan. This process focused minds and developed thought on what the actual community needs were, if those needs included housing and where any housing might be built.

The Seend Parish Neighbourhood Plan group spawned a splinter group to set about delivering the obvious benefits of a community land trust and finding locally acceptable solutions to emerging housing need.

Very dedicated and purposeful people of the community set about recruiting subscribers to the community interest company, while evangelising a community-led solution to local housing need. During this process SCLAT came across local landowners who could be persuaded to join the cause and to allocate land at reasonable cost.

SCLAT had support from Wiltshire's spatial planning department who seemed to really understand and welcome the ideas of local enthusiasts intent on doing housing development for themselves. Most significant was funding from the Community Housing Fund administered by the government's 'housing accelerator' Homes England.

SCLAT made a clear decision to build energy efficient housing from the outset. From our point of view it was socially unacceptable to build anything other than passive low energy homes. We found a vibrant architectural practice, (PKA Architects of Potterne, who had a recently trained passive housing team) who produced the design in collaboration with the partnership. This had been developed together with a relatively small rural housing provider, White Horse Housing Association. White Horse Housing Association understands rural housing issues, is customer-focused and achieves high satisfaction rates. White Horse Housing Association has gone on to support several community-led housing projects.

The submission of the planning application generated the usual localised objections to development. The apparent existence and availability of multiple alternative development sites within the local plan gave hope and purpose to those seeking to deflect development to another of those sites. Sound local consultation with housing association, architect partners and community members all participating in the process, proved to be both essential and empowering.

Crucial to the project was White Horse Housing Association, who undertook the development of the scheme Operations Director Belinda Eastland takes up the story:

It is now July 2023 and as Rural Housing Week approaches, this development comes to mind as the epitome of the very best in rural housing brought forward by a community, for the community. We have lifted the lid on our groundbreaking £2.8 million low energy homes development in Seend Cleeve almost a year after work commenced on site. The homes have been built to rigorous 'passive haus' standards – which mean they will be incredibly energy efficient, resulting in lower costs for the new residents in a time of high energy prices.

The homes have been shrouded under a protective canopy, known as a 'top hat', while work was underway to make the one, two and three-bedroomed timber framed homes airtight. The homes arrived on site in 'kit form', comprising pre-cut timber frames which were then assembled, insulated with sustainable wool, and sealed with

airtight wind and waterproof tape before the exterior was cladded. Thanks to this, and the triple-glazed windows, the homes are completely draught proof and will need just one modern efficient storage heater downstairs and a towel rail upstairs. A mechanical ventilation system regulates the home's temperature so that it is cool in summer and warm in winter, and solar panels on the roof will further reduce energy costs.

Both the rental and the shared ownership homes will be occupied by families and people with a local connection. The allocation's plan we have developed with SCLAT ensures that local people in need will benefit from these homes forever.

White Horse Housing Association is the development's main funder but it has also been partly funded by Homes England's Affordable Homes Programme, together with a contribution from Wiltshire Council.

This development shows how affordable and sustainable homes can be delivered by local people in partnership with supportive bodies (in this case Wiltshire Community Land Trust and Wiltshire Community First providing an umbrella hub of advice and support). Community land trusts need good advice, strong support and reliable funding, locally available. The former national Community Led Housing Fund helped to provide this and, in our view, urgently needs to be reinstated.

Source : Blog from the National Housing Federation.