



Rural Affordable Housing
Project

Parish Council Experience

3 case studies facilitated by National Association of Local Councils

June 2010



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Context

Understanding more the perceptions and experiences of rural communities in relation to the enabling process as a whole is something local authorities would benefit from. The data analysis demonstrates that the relationship between parish councils and local authorities is integral to garnering support and enabling development; with many good examples of engagement and empowerment strategies and policies.

The Rural Affordable Housing Project has worked closely with the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) to help inform ways of further improving communication and understanding - so enabling parish councils and communities themselves to be a full partner within an enhanced rural enabling process.

As a result of this collaboration, we have three accounts of Parish Council experience of the process of enabling affordable housing. These accounts can be used as a learning tool to help build better understanding, communication and co-operation between local authorities, rural housing partnerships and communities.

NALC asked the 3 Parish Councils a series of questions relating to rural affordable housing in their parish, including the roles of the parties involved and the impact on the village. This is not framed as a robust data for analysis, but can be used as a snapshot of how 3 local councils view the process and so use as a learning tool to build on. The three summarised accounts consist of quotations that are the parish council's own views and perceptions.

Opening statement from the National Association of Local Councils

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) believes that the Rural Affordable Housing Project is very worthwhile because it is only by studying these issues in detail will we be able step in the right direction towards more vibrant and sustainable local communities.

NALC is a strong advocate of real localism in action where some of the key issues that society faces are solved or at least influenced by people living in local communities. Nowhere is this better illustrated than by the work of the affordable housing case studies of Cawthorne Parish Council, Slayley Parish Council and Wingham Parish Councils. These three councils worked very closely with their local communities (through parish planning, housing needs surveys or village design statements), housing providers and principal authorities to find solutions to their local problem of a lack of affordable housing.

We know all the main political parties, think tanks and commentators are exercised by the issue of affordable housing and NALC agrees with them in that part of the solution to these problems should be community led with local parish and town councils playing a central role.

Case Studies – Parish Council Experience

1. Cawthorne Parish Council.

Cawthorne is five miles to the west of Barnsley.

Response to questions about the process and impact of a rural exception site in Cawthorne:

- “Cawthorne Parish Council has been the initiator and driver for this housing project.”
- “Whilst there has been little financial investment apart from the costs of the Housing Needs Survey, the Village Design Statement and the Parish Plan, there has been considerable investment in terms of [parish] councillor’s time.... Without the will and drive of the [parish] council this project would neither have proceeded, nor come to fruition”
- “[There was] positive, constructive liaison and negotiation continued with Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council... [the] allocation criteria was set by the partnership, this was after full consultation with Cawthorne Parish Council. All of Cawthorne’s recommendations were accepted”
- “Without affordable housing in the village then people leave the area and therefore whatever local services are there suffer and decline. This has already been happening. However the local museum, farms, local bus services and public houses in the village continue to thrive at least in part to the construction of local affordable rural housing.”
- “Yes we would [consider future exception sites] but...the logistics of site identification, geographical space and possible number of housing units are real barriers. So up to now we have not identified any new areas”

2. Slayley Parish Council.

Slayley is a large rural parish six miles south of Hexham in Northumberland.

Response to questions about the process and impact of a rural exception site in Slayley:

“One of the identified needs in the Parish Plan was affordable housing for young people of the parish to remain living and working in the parish. I personally know the landowner and a Parish Council letter was sent asking for possible interest in providing green belt land for affordable houses for local young people to remain in the parish.”

“The Planning Department [Tynedale Council] played an important role to steer the idea through a green belt planning application. The landowner and the Parish Council met several Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) and were given a presentation on strengths and weaknesses. The landowners made the final decision of their preferred RSL”

“Many were in favour of the application having family who needed accommodation. A very small minority were against affordable housing and thought such houses unnecessary in an affluent area. There were feelings that the houses would become homes for unemployed non-locals.”

“Affordable housing was needed to keep young families in the area, Slaley could not become a dormitory village with wealthy people living in Slaley but working and schooling their children elsewhere.”

“The Parish Council worked very hard with the planning department on producing a Local Letting Policy and a 106 agreement. Unfortunately lettings are still governed by the points system within District Councils; which meant that many of the young people because they were in work, not married or had 2.5 children had no points and were not considered eligible”

3. Wingham Parish Council.

Wingham lies between Canterbury and Sandwich.

Response to questions about the process and impact of a rural exception site in Wingham:

- “The Rural Housing Trust and the Parish Council held an Information Day at the Village Hall and residents were invited to comment on the proposed plans for the development. The overwhelming majority of responses was positive and were also keen that the housing was for local people.”
- “Yes it has [contributed to sustaining local services]. Facilities as wide ranging as the local fire station and local bakery have been kept open and are thriving because of local people staying to live in the area.”
- “Yes [we consider Wingham sustainable] because it has a plethora of services and attractions for people to connect to in the local area.”
- “Yes [we would consider another exception site]. The Council [Dover District Council] and the Rural Housing Enabler are in negotiations and discussions [with us] on how to get another ... exception site in the village.”

Comment and reflection from the National Association of Local Councils

NALC has long argued that England's 9,000 local councils should have more influence with regards to local housing matters. The three case studies above show how communities that come together under the leadership of local parish and town councils can really make a difference in working with other local partners such as housing providers and/or principal authorities.

We have recognised that, in order to address the differing needs of our rural areas, this must be tackled through targeted responses at local level in conjunction with local people. Community led planning highlights the needs and opportunities for affordable housing in local areas and where local people can see their own hopes and visions come to fruition.

It is important to give local (parish and town) councils the opportunity to follow the wishes of their residents and demonstrate community leadership in providing homes for people who would not otherwise have these opportunities.

These case studies can be used as a learning tool to enable better communication, knowledge and capacity building. They are, though, a 'snap shot' of Parish Council experience. The Rural Affordable Housing Project would recommend local authorities and NALC collaborate to produce a better and stronger understanding between local authorities and parish councils (and the communities they represent).