

The case for a Scottish rural housing enablers programme

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Summary

- Over the last ten years, rural housing enablers have shown themselves to be effective catalysts for the assessment of housing need, overcoming barriers to development, and engaging communities in new housing supply.
- However, in comparison to other parts of the UK, the work of rural enablers in Scotland is fragmented: patchy in coverage; inconsistently funded; and lacking any central support.
- New initiatives by the Scottish Government on housing supply and policy provide a unique opportunity for rural housing enablers to help deliver on the Government's agenda.
- A programme supported by the Scottish Government, in partnership with local authorities, could be implemented at very modest cost.

Rural housing enablers

'Rural housing enablers' is a term used to describe work which engages with rural communities in order to better chart their housing needs and to bring forward solutions to meeting those needs. Enablers are seen as local brokers of housing solutions, bringing together communities with expressed housing needs and potential providers of solutions such as landowners, housing associations and public bodies. This briefing sets out a case for their work to be put on a firmer footing in Scotland.

Rural housing enabling work has been around in Scotland for at least twenty years, but has only become more prominent in the last ten. The recent housing discussion paper, 'Firm Foundations' recognises, '*In remote areas, price increases can have a magnified effect due to sparse supply in those locations*'. Typically, these areas have very little social housing, either because, historically, none was built or because it has been sold through Right to Buy. As a result people in housing need tend to be displaced to other areas – nearby towns, for example. In addition, in these smallest communities it is often more difficult for local councils and housing associations to have an active presence, so people are unaware of what housing options might be open to them, whether in the form of social housing, private housing or grants that might help with home ownership.

Rural housing enablers help to demonstrate hidden housing needs and also to bridge the gap between those needs and possible solutions. A project may carry out some or all of the following functions:

- Community-based surveys, in tandem with community groups, to assess local housing needs.
- Identifying sources of housing supply: in particular, identification of sites or empty properties.
- Providing information and advice to individuals: for example, on access to grants.
- Building community capacity to develop housing solutions for themselves.
- Feeding into wider area housing strategy or needs assessment.

To date, the first of those tasks – carrying out community-based needs assessment¹ – has loomed largest. However, the role of any one enabler can be adjusted to focus more fully on other tasks: most obviously, the practical task of identifying land for housing, which is a major theme of the Housing Supply Task Force.

Shelter has run one such project – Shelter Housing Action with Rural Communities (SHARC) – in the south west of Scotland, between 2000 and 2007. Over the period it carried out 24 community surveys and was instrumental in setting up Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust, only the second trust of its kind in Scotland. SHARC also acted as a signpost for common queries like planning and access to grants.

The Rural Housing Service is a national service which provides advice and support on housing issues, free of charge, to rural communities and helps deliver new housing opportunities for local people. As well as offering a national service the RHS has developed two area-based Rural Housing Enabler projects. These projects in the Argyll Islands and in Aberdeenshire have demonstrated the crucial role that local housing enablers can play in increasing affordable housing opportunities. They have utilised a **toolbag** of housing options to meet the need for affordable housing; such as Rural Home Ownership Grants, Rural Empty Property Grants, community housing initiatives as well as housing association development. The funding for the projects has come from a number of different sources: Aberdeenshire is funded by a partnership between statutory bodies and voluntary funds. Argyll was funded by a one-off grant from the Nationwide Foundation as a pilot.

There are a few other instances of this kind of work – Highland Small Communities Housing Trust, for example – but most parts of rural Scotland do not have access to a locally-based service.

Rural housing enablers elsewhere in the UK

The fragmented pattern of provision in Scotland is in contrast to that in England where the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) supports a rural housing enabler programme. This includes core funding for posts, training, information exchange and development

¹ Highland Small Communities Housing Trust has recently decided to develop another form of community engagement: locally-based surgeries. These are anticipated to add more qualitative information to supplement the quantitative information gathered from community surveys.

of shared tools such as survey forms and software. There are over 40 Rural Housing Enabler posts in England.

The influential 'Affordable Rural Housing Commission' report in 2006, said '*We have been particularly impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of RHEs*' and recommended their expansion. In this it echoed the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Rural Housing Policy Forum, also in 2006, which described rural housing enablers as '*the essential requisite*' for all of its other policy recommendations. A recent review of land and planning policies for the Scottish Executive concluded that rural housing enablers could be relevant in parts of rural Scotland².

A recent report from the Scottish Consumer Council, 'Rural Advocacy in Scotland', documented current weaknesses in capacity building at community level in rural areas, particularly outside the Highlands and Islands. In the study, housing issues were a major concern for younger age groups. We believe that rural housing enablers can help to address those concerns.

Rural housing supply

The Scottish Government's new Housing Supply Task Force reinforces the value of the work that rural housing enablers carry out. The Task Force has already identified tension within communities as one potential barrier to increased housing supply. Because enablers work with communities to identify housing needs for themselves, they are essential to the process of building support for new development and heading off opposition. Further, by working at community level, enablers are often able to secure land that otherwise would not be on the market³. Finally, the very locally-specific nature of the housing surveys that enablers carry out complements wider market information to ensure that housing is built exactly where it is needed.

The Task Force has identified rural housing shortages as one of its main themes. A rural housing enablers programme could be a very cost-effective way of unlocking new housing supply and making effective use of mechanisms such as Rural Empty Properties Grant, Rural Home Ownership Grants and shared equity.

An important point in relation to the Housing Supply Task Force's remit is that housing enablers are as relevant to home ownership and private rented initiatives as they are to provision of social housing. Indeed, in some areas, these private sector initiatives may be most important.

Developing a Scottish model

Shelter believes that there is a strong case for rural housing enabling to put be put on a firmer footing in Scotland. We recognise that this case needs to be developed more fully, if and when, support in principle is secured. One of the consequences of the weak funding framework in

² "Allocation of Land for Affordable Housing through the Planning System", Scottish Executive Social Research 2006.

³ This is very important in rural areas, where the focus is on allocation of small sites, either through "exceptions policies" or identifying sites specifically for affordable housing.

Scotland is that no formal evaluation of rural housing enablers has taken place to date. As we outline below, it would be important to address this as a more co-ordinated programme takes off.

Central Government could play a key role in establishing rural housing enablers as a priority. 'Firm Foundations' offers positive signals in this respect, saying:

'We feel that more can and needs to be done to assist delivery, to encourage innovation and to address obstacles that currently exist. There are lessons to be learned from the good practice that is being promoted elsewhere...'

Central Government should:

- Set a series of core objectives⁴
- Identify a funding stream to cover set up and core costs. See implementation below.
- Develop a support infrastructure – either directly or through a contract with a third party – which would pool some of the development and delivery mechanisms.
- Set a monitoring and evaluation framework.

Local government is the lynchpin to the programme delivery on the ground. A good working partnership with local authorities across a range of functions – housing, planning, estates and corporate services, for example – is essential for the potential of enablers to be realised in full. For this reason we think that it is important that the local authority has a direct stake in the programme delivery in its area. We suggest that this should include a financial stake, with the local authority providing, say, 25 per cent of core costs, from sources such as additional council tax revenue from second homes or developer contributions from commuted sums in planning policies.⁵

The question as to whether rural enablers are or should be **employed** by local authorities arises frequently. In our view, there are significant advantages in enablers being independent of local authorities or, indeed, any major housing provider. If one of the aims of the initiative is to build community support for development, then that is much more readily achieved when the enabler can be seen to be working **with** the community and detached from direct interest in the funding,

⁴ The initiative as it initially evolved in England has had 7 core objectives:

- a) To raise awareness of the need for affordable housing in rural areas;
- b) To enable the provision of affordable housing in a geographical area;
- c) To influence regional and local housing strategies;
- d) To provide information to address national policy issues on affordable housing;
- e) To work with local authorities to provide information and advice;
- f) To address particular issues of local concern (eg empty homes; supported housing)
- g) To undertake research to contribute to local solutions.

These core objectives need not be replicated in Scotland; nor should it be assumed that they are all of equal priority. In relation to the current context in Scotland, we suggest that something along the lines of objectives b) and c) are particularly relevant.

⁵ The recently announced 'Strategic Housing Fund' in Argyll and Bute, which pools second homes income and developer contributions, among other sources of income, provides one example of a local funding source.

planning or delivery of homes. Further, we recognise that, in hard-pressed local authorities and housing associations, it is easy for enabling posts to get pulled away from specific objectives into more immediate development needs⁶.

In our view, the optimal arrangement is for rural enablers to be independent of local authorities and the main housing providers but to forge strong working relationships with both. A variety of models might be adopted. For example, a rural housing enabler post could be employed and managed by a local body such as a trust, while drawing on central support services from a national body. Alternatively, a single agency could act as employer for all or most of the local posts, with these in turn being guided by local advisory boards. In either of these models, we recommend that advisory boards draw from the range of other organisations active locally: for example, local authorities, RSLs, community councils (and other community bodies) and landowners. There may also be a role for economic development agencies and major employers.

Implementing the programme

Provisionally, we estimate the cost of such a programme to be around £500,000-£600,000 per year⁷. Some of these project costs at a local level could be shared with local authorities. This level of funding would allow for a number of 'field' posts to be created or sustained as well as developing a contract for central provision of services to support the programme as a coherent whole. We recommend that the programme is placed on a three year footing.

The programme could be overseen by the Housing and Regeneration Directorate and/or the Rural Directorate within the Scottish Government. The programme could either invite local organisations or partnerships to bid for core funding from a central pot, or seek tenders to run a core programme as managing agent. In line with our recommendation on the key role of the local authority, we suggest that, typically, central funding should cover 75 per cent of costs, with the remainder being sourced locally. The Scottish Government could also set up a separate contract with a third party to provide the central services, either separate from or linked to the role of managing agent.

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⁶ An additional issue is whether it is right to have enablers focused specifically on rural housing. Other programmes, such as 'Initiative at the Edge' have supported generic local development workers. While it is certainly true that, in practice, rural housing enablers do pick up views on other aspects of development, it is important to send a strong signal on the importance of housing. Since a housing enablers work in any area is always community-led there is little prospect of inappropriate priorities being pursued.

⁷ These costs would support around 6-8 local projects as well central overheads such as management fee; training and events; website development; standard materials.

⁸ We are grateful to the following people for providing comments: Derek Logie, Chief Executive of the Rural Housing Service; Di Alexander, Development Manager, Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust; Professor Mark Shucksmith, Professor of Planning at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne.