

## **AFFORDABLE RURAL HOMES TO REBUILD COMMUNITIES**

### **LEADER FUNDED PROJECT**

### **FINAL REPORT**

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## Project Background

- 1.1** The project was developed in response to a requirement to generate accurate community level data for housing needs in small rural communities across Dumfries and Galloway. The Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust is a relatively new organisation that aims to bring about the development of affordable housing in small rural communities in order to address local needs. Whilst there was considerable anecdotal evidence of high levels of housing need this would not be sufficient to justify for rural affordable housing investment or to argue for changes in planning and housing policy. Dumfries and Galloway Council do, periodically, carry out housing needs research in the region in order to inform planning and housing policy. However, the results of the research do not give sufficient detail at a community level in rural areas.
- 1.2** Historically planning and housing policy, both nationally and locally, have tended to view small rural villages as inherently unsustainable and this has favoured new affordable housing investment larger settlements and restricted land supply in rural areas. As a result of this trend and other factors including high level of inward migration of older and, in many cases, retired people from urban areas, small rural communities have suffered from disproportionate price increases for both rental accommodation and housing for sale. This, coupled with a loss of many social rented houses, has led to the situation that those on local incomes, especially the young, struggle to find a place to live that they can afford with many left with little choice than to move away, further reducing the social sustainability of communities.
- 1.3** Conventional methods of providing affordable housing focus usually involve homes to rent built by Housing Associations utilising government funds. The reality is that developments of less than 12 houses or, more commonly 20 houses, are not considered economically viable. This is often too large a scale for smaller villages. Furthermore, schemes to provide low cost housing for sale are almost always limited to larger settlements. The open market functions less well in rural communities, especially for first time buyers, as there can be a very limited supply of housing. Furthermore there is almost no flatted accommodation. This means that the lowest priced housing on the market are houses which can be more expensive than flats even in cities such as Edinburgh. In many parts of the county finding reasonably priced private rental accommodation in good condition can be extremely difficult. Even when it can be found it is almost always let on a 6 month revolving short assured tenancy, giving very little in the way of security. The majority of open market homes for sale or for rent are older properties that are hard to heat and difficult to insulate resulting in the compounding problem of high levels of rural fuel poverty.

- 1.4** It was clear to the Trust and its partners, the Council, and local housing associations that there was an urgent need to quantify the level of need in a large number of communities in order to target housing development in the right places. The data would inform the further work of the Trust to enable housing development of the correct mix of tenures and the right size to tackle local need. Furthermore the data would provide individual communities with a clear picture of housing needs to inform their responses to development proposals and to be able to build local support for appropriate housing developments.
- 1.5** The development of the project was largely lead by the staff at the Trust ( Jamie Dent, Peter White and Miriam Owen) but it was informed by discussions and input from Council staff both the Strategic Planning and Housing Services, primarily Shona McCoy (planning) and Derek Anderson and Jim O’Neil (housing).
- 1.6** Once funding had been secured the Trust approached community councils across the region and received expressions of interest from several communities. This was narrowed down to the following 19 places:

Auldgirth  
Balmaghie  
Buittle  
Closeburn  
Dundrennan  
Ecclefechan  
Eskdalemuir  
Garlieston  
Glentroll  
Kelton  
Langholm  
Moffat  
Moniaive  
Monreith  
Sandhead/Stoneykirk  
Springfield & Gretna Green  
Standingstone (a group of local individuals seeking to build affordable housing near Auchencairn)  
Templand  
Twyholm

- 1.7** The project aimed to work with local people to uncover local housing needs with a view to enable the provision of affordable housing by the most appropriate

means. This information was intended to increase local awareness of the problem, and to build support locally to address the issue. Furthermore the project aimed to provide accurate data that could further inform planning policy and to support any future planning applications. Each community where a demand was identified would be provided with a local action plan that would:

- a) report the findings
- b) identify possible local groups that might be willing to engage with the Trust to look at ways of meeting local needs
- c) assess planning and housing policy
- d) identify physical constraints (flood risk areas and safeguarded land) that would restrict where housing might be sighted
- e) identify appropriate mechanisms to fund housing to meet local housing needs.

- 1.8** The cost of carrying the project on the necessary scale was beyond the capacity of the Trust's core funding from the Scottish Government Housing Voluntary Grant Scheme and so it was therefore necessary to seek other funding. The Trust was able to allocate £26,920 to the project as well as office accommodation. To carry out the project at this level of funding would have meant it was a part time post that would not have been able to reach the number or geographical range of communities surveyed. LEADER funding was crucial to the viability of the project as it provided an allocation of £26,920, 50% of the total estimated project costs of £53,840. By the end of the project there was a slight underspend of £2,849 with a total project cost of £50,990.68. This meant that we were able to create a full time post for two years and cover all areas in the region.

### **The Project Experience**

- 2.0** The project took place between September 2009 and August 2011. The first piece of work was to identify communities willing to take part. This was done in a number of ways. The Trust was aware of some communities who were already keen to be involved. Approaches also were made direct to other community councils and to forums where it would be possible to reach several community councils in one presentation such as local Local Rural Partnership meetings and local federations of community councils. Contact was made with elected council members and press releases were made to the local media resulting in several articles in the local press.
- 2.1** Once a potential community had been identified as presentation was made to them at normal meeting. In many cases there was a degree of local suspicion about the whole idea of affordable housing as it was often seen as likely to bring

undesirable social problems to the village as there was a common perception that occupants would not be local and would be shipped in from larger settlements. Considerable efforts were made to ensure that it was understood that the purpose of the survey was to identify local needs.

If they were willing to proceed then discussions were held as to how survey forms might be distributed. Our preferred method was to distribute the form with a local news sheet. This had two advantages in that the news sheet contained an article explaining the purpose of the survey and it kept postage costs and staff input to a minimum. Where this was not possible we would look for local volunteers to post forms through letterboxes or to carry out a mailing exercise. Surveys were returned using a Freepost address. A Survey Monkey online survey form was also set up to maximise response rates.

Publicity for the surveys varied from community to community. If there was a local news sheet then an article was placed in each one to promote the survey and to explain its purpose. In some instances it was possible to get coverage in local newspapers to further promote the survey. In all cases posters were put up in shops and on notice boards throughout the community council area.

- 2.2** The detail of the survey responses are contained within the action plans and although the numbers may not seem large in every community these represent households that are in housing need. The fact that, in some communities, there were low levels of response actually supports the concept of the project as conventional affordable housing is even less likely to be built if the numbers required are low. The follow on project from this seeks to find alternative methods to provide small numbers of houses that would not otherwise be built.

In some communities there was no housing need identified at all. This is not considered a failure as it means that the Trust can concentrate its resources in areas where there is known demand.

The communities that took part benefit as they have an accurate picture of local housing need that enables them to respond to planning applications from an informed position. The survey data also allows communities to play a more proactive role in consultations on Dumfries and Galloway Council's emerging Development Plan as they have good quality information on the level of local need.

An example of this was in Closeburn where the survey highlighted local needs at a time when a new social housing development was under construction. The survey recorded a high demand for rental properties. There was a perception that local people would not be able to access the housing as they would not have sufficient points. Furthermore many of the respondents had not applied to be

on the waiting lists for the new housing. The Trust was able to feed this information to both the community and to Loreburn Housing Association. A concerted effort was then made to engage with respondents and to encourage the housing association to put in place assistance with the application process for housing. As a result a particularly high number of the houses were allocated to local people.

- 2.3** The benefits for those who responded to the survey are that they were able to access advice on their current housing needs giving them information on housing options in both the social and private let sector and in the owner occupier sector.

Respondents details have been kept on file and as the follow up projects commence respondents will be kept informed as to progress and encouraged to take an active part in the decision making process. As the housing becomes available respondents will be contacted to encourage them to apply for the housing on offer. The time delays involved from the survey to the provision of housing are likely to be significant and it must be acknowledged that some household will have found alternative solutions in the mean time.

- 2.4** The real benefits of the project will be seen once the current project reaches its end and has resulted in the development of actual houses. That said there have already been a number of successes. In Monreith, funding has been secured for a mixed development of 13 houses made up of grant funded low cost self build plots as well as a range of low cost rental properties to be built by DGHP and suitable for a mix of family sizes as well as two houses ideally suited to older people. The size and make up of the development was informed by the data gathered. The data provided justification for the funding allocation in a national and highly competitive bidding process. We are currently awaiting planning consent and if granted, construction will commence in the next few months.

The Trust has secured funding to work with 5 of the surveyed communities (Moffat, Langholm, Moniaive, Twynholm, and Closeburn) and one more that was surveyed later) to develop local solutions to housing needs. Work is currently underway on this follow on project and this would not have been possible without LEADER support.

It is hoped that all participating communities where a housing need was quantified will benefit in the long term as it gives the Trust accurate data to inform future actions. We are sharing this information with other housing providers and the Council to maximise the possibility of development occurring.

The project has also informed our responses to the consultation on Dumfries and Galloway Council's Local Development plan, currently being written by the

council. This has contributed to an important shift in policy that is likely to mean that planning policy is far more flexible as regards provision of land for affordable housing specifically in rural settlements. As a result this is likely to benefit small communities across the county for many years to come and not just those that took part in the survey. Without the data provided by these surveys the strength of our argument would have been undermined.

- 2.5** The project costs came to a total of £50990.68, £2849.32 less than the original project total of £53,840 and has left us with an extremely useful legacy. Through the course of the project we have developed our survey method, both in terms of the survey form itself and in distribution. The Trust has also learned how to avoid many of the pitfalls involved in dealing with what can be a very contentious issue. These include working to build a consensus amongst local people and to ensure that the real purpose of the survey, to meet local needs rather than imported ones, is fully understood.

It was never the intention of the project to continue in its original form but instead to develop and move to the next step so the question of an exit strategy is less relevant. What it has left us with is an effective survey method that we intend to incorporate into all future community surveys. The Trust does not intend to continue to conduct surveys in the same numbers as we did in this project but it will (and does) form a core of our activity. We are currently working on a further two communities utilising the methodology we developed in this project.

Most importantly the project has led directly to our project to work with the 6 communities to develop community led housing solutions. Housing development is a slow process at the best of times and developing innovative mechanisms takes even more time, especially in the current economic climate. What LEADER funding has provided is a solid foundation for the next stages. Without doubt this project has assisted in the development of affordable housing solutions.