

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

### **END OF YEAR REPORT TO 31<sup>ST</sup> AUGUST 2010**

The job-sharing personnel, Miriam and Pete, in the post of Development Officer sustained by the support from LEADER started work on this project in September 2009 after carrying out the work necessary to meet the conditions attached to the offer of financial assistance from the Dumfries & Galloway LEADER programme.

Using the format of the Housing Needs Survey used previously by this Trust in communities elsewhere in the region we responded to invitation from the Community Council in Buittle Parish (centred on the village of Palnackie) by distributing the form to 128 houses in the area. We also established an online version of the survey to enable responses in a paperless manner and also for those outwith the area who may have heard about the survey and who may feel they have sufficient connections with the community to explore the possibility of returning in due course.

A poor initial response to this survey brought about a review of the process and it was agreed within the Trust that the existing survey form was not easy to use and in itself was a barrier to wider engagement and response due to its length (11 sides of A4) and the detail some questions demanded. In its place we devised a much simpler single question initial survey form which asked "Are you in need of affordable housing within this area, either in the near future or in a few years time?" This fitted onto an A5 leaflet which included a FREEPOST return option. The idea was that we would then make contact with all respondents to go through their housing needs in greater detail either in person, on the phone or online.

We had not appreciated the time it would take to make progress with the various community councils who expressed an interest in participating in our project. The community council elections in October 2009 left many communities in an ineffective state until December just in time for the Christmas break. It was also the case in Eskdalemuir that whilst the Community Council were keen to engage with the project they did not want to do so until they had made as much progress as possible with their application to be part of the Village SOS competition.

By the end of January 2010 we had received confirmation of involvement in the project from four community councils. Miriam and Pete promoted the project at Third Sector Forum and Rural Partnership meetings across the region with a view to broadcasting the survey option as widely as possible. Once again we were disappointed by the lack of any definite response to the project even though all the meetings involved were positive at the time.

The new simpler survey form was then used on a Housing Needs Survey in the Springfield & Gretna Green Community Council area and the local newspapers carried a small feature to promote it. To date there have been 15 household responses out of over 250 forms printed.

Housing Needs Surveys have since been started in five other communities and these are still active judging by the occasional response form returned to the Trust offices. There has been a very poor engagement with the online version of the survey form to date.

In an effort to improve the response rate contact was made with the two main Registered Social Landlords in the region, Dumfries & Galloway Housing Partnership and Loreburn Housing Association, to ask if they would be willing to distribute our short survey form to all the people on their waiting lists expressing an interest in living within the area where we had been invited to carry out housing needs surveys. As part of data protection good practice we could not have access to the lists themselves to have depended on the constructive co-operation of these organisations. This has now been done in Buittle Parish area leading to a 100% improvement in the response rate in that community. We are hopeful this improvement will be evident elsewhere.

Coming to the end of the first 12 months of the project we have further reviewed our progress against our expectations. We acknowledge that there is some confusion in the public's mind regarding the meaning of the term 'affordable housing' and in some cases it is regarded as being a means by which 'undesirables with no local connections' can be given preference in the allocation of social housing provided by the registered social landlords active in the region to the detriment of the local community and local house prices. In meetings where this has been an issue it has proved possible to explain the purpose of this project as being distinctly different from this perception although there have been times when this has involved robust debate. In an effort to raise awareness of the purpose of affordable housing we have decided to allocate half the Development Officer post (Miriam) to this side of things for the immediate future whilst the other half (Pete) pursues all the data required to define the housing needs in the communities involved to date. This should not only bring the project programme back on track it should also improve response across the region as the second half of the project progresses.

*Pete White*  
*Development Officer*  
*Dumfries & Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust*

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