



# Action with Communities in Rural England

## **ACRE Briefing: The role of CLP in generating community led housing**

This briefing covers the findings of research commissioned by the Homes and Communities Agency which has implications for future management and promotion of the work Community Led Planning (CLP) practitioners, Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) and relationships with housing delivery professionals<sup>1</sup>. It will also impact on ACRE's current review of the RCAN CLP toolkit.

The research was commissioned by the Rural Affordable Housing Project (a joint initiative between Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Homes and Communities Agency). It was carried out by the University of Reading in partnership with the Community Council for Berkshire (CCB). The aim was to explore existing practices, outcomes and possibilities for utilising Community Led Planning as a means by which communities can engage with the issue of housing development<sup>2</sup>.

Community Led Planning is holistic in scope, voluntary by nature and is the catalyst for a wide range of community action. The report addresses how and why it can, with care, act as a springboard for supporting higher levels of rural affordable housing provision. The research was conducted prior to the government's new agenda on decentralisation of planning and community action under the Big Society. This new policy landscape heightens the importance of the findings and recommendations, given that they cover the nature of support to communities and the 'bridging' structures and relationships between communities and statutory bodies. ACRE's recent briefing, **Community Led Planning can build the Big Society**<sup>3</sup>, explains how ACRE believes CLP can be a primary building block for initiatives resulting from the Right to Build, Right to Buy and Right to Build

### **Summarised conclusions and recommendations from the research report**

- Community Led Plans (CLP) already play a role in **developing awareness** and prompting action for affordable housing in many communities and **in breaking down initial barriers**, within communities and parish councils.
- **Care and flexibility** is needed in how and when housing is introduced within a CLP exercise, to avoid distorting the process and reducing the effectiveness of the outcomes for housing and the wider objectives of CLP. However, if handled carefully, there is clear scope to, at a minimum, deliver the impetus for Housing Needs Surveys.
- Sometimes, the more direct impetus there has been from statutory or other partnerships for rural affordable housing, the more local views may be entrenched. Concerns were expressed about **how communities respond to 'top-down' agendas**. Where possible, 'neutral' intermediaries develop communities and then trigger the timing and form of the direct involvement of the Local Authority housing delivery function as part of a more partnership-based approach.

<sup>1</sup> Parker et al (2010) *The nexus of Community Led Planning and rural affordable housing: towards an enhanced process*, University of Reading, Reading <http://www.ruralaffordablehousing.org.uk/further-information/community-led-planning.html>

<sup>2</sup> ACRE is grateful to Gavin Parker, Chair of the CCB, Arlene Kersley (CCB's Rural Housing Enabler) and Sarah Ward (CCB's CDW), as well as the many RCAN staff who participated in this research.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.acre.org.uk/resources\\_briefings.html](http://www.acre.org.uk/resources_briefings.html)

- Housing related questions in CLP survey exercises should perhaps be refined to a single question on the awareness of need for housing locally, with more detailed follow up on housing needs tackled separately, depending on the result. Even a small number of people indicating housing need should prompt an action plan point or other trigger for a Housing Needs Survey.
- There are clear areas where practice can be refined and stronger working relationships developed, particularly between CLP practitioners, Rural Housing Enablers and housing delivery professionals. This will improve housing outcomes and provide a seamless transition of what is normally a very different style of support.
- The RHE responses indicate that between 10% and 25% of sites brought forward are for mixed development, and these tend to be larger than exception sites limited to affordable housing.

### Research Project methodology

The project focussed on the South East region of England and detailed data was collected on Community Led Plans (CLPs) through the Rural Community Action network, Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) and housing delivery professionals in that region. The case studies were drawn from across England. The main aim was to understand the way that affordable housing finds its way into Community Led Planning action plans and how such actions are influenced by and transmitted into the Local Authority strategic housing function.

All of the CLP practitioners in the South East region who deliver facilitation within communities were interviewed, as were the Rural Housing Enablers and professionals involved in mediating the strategic housing function in the 33 rural districts of the South East.

In February 2010, the South East CLP database included 20,904 action points from 1,047 Community Led Plans of which 486 separate actions related to housing were identified. Of these actions, 220 were specifically on affordable rural housing i.e. over 20% of all the plans. These figures potentially underestimate the frequency with which affordable housing was discussed in the community, since, in some cases, previous work (e.g. a Housing Needs Survey) may have already been completed before the CLP exercise began. Only 27 of the housing related actions were negative towards new development in the community.

The research interviews debated the stage at which housing would first be mentioned by either the CLP practitioner or the CLP Steering Group within the community. The CLP process, as delivered within the Rural Community Action Network, comprises 9 distinct steps.

**Figure 1: Steps required for a community to complete a Community Led Plan**

Stage	ACRE 9 step process
Launch the plan	Getting started
	Establishing the steering group
	Taking stock and planning ahead
Evidence local need and aspirations	Consulting your community
Agree and prioritise actions	Prioritising and planning action
	Drafting the plan
	Finalising the plan
Deliver and monitor actions	Implementing actions

A number of CLP practitioners said that housing would often be mentioned at Stage 1, but most felt that it arose most frequently at Stage 4. Although there was a general concern that communities developed the process themselves, there was also acceptance that there were opportunities and means of ensuring that housing was brought to the attention of communities. If the discussions about the future of the community are done properly, then housing is very likely to arise indirectly. Success depends on how housing is raised as much as where in the timeline. If there was too strong a top down impetus, the community may think that CLP is over-centred on the planning and development process and respond negatively.

### **The respective roles of CLP practitioners and RHEs**

The Rural Housing Enabler is seen as separate to the CLP practitioner role, using different approaches to specifically address housing need. There is currently little co-operation or linkage between Rural Housing Enablers and CLP practitioners at the early stages of the CLP process – this normally occurs later on. The relationship between RHEs and CLP practitioners tends to be largely informal, particularly if they are housed within the same organisation. The point at which housing need is raised by the community itself is usually the first time a formal involvement of the RHE with the community occurs.

In research conducted with RHEs, they confirmed that, at present, the mainstay of their engagement came later in the process (i.e. stage 6 of the CLP process onwards) but some housing function interviewees did see how, if resources permitted, they could possibly engage earlier. A few RHEs also talked about how they often helped with the drafting of housing related questions for CLP questionnaires (i.e. stage 4).

Local Authority housing professionals may be involved directly and early on but some CLP practitioners feel that this can be counterproductive, *'because they have targets to meet'* and propose that more 'neutral' Rural Housing Enablers are first involved once housing issues have been raised by the community. Variations in views on this depend on the strength of the buy-in of local authorities to the CLP process and the relationships worked out between development workers and local authority housing professionals. One rationalisation would be to that housing needs should be established first, and prior to that, support should be limited to the CLP practitioners or RHE. This conserves scarce officer resources and develops understanding and recognition of housing needs in the community, prior to overt involvement by the relevant local authority.

There appeared to be a real consensus amongst those interviewed about phraseology, linkage and awareness of the relationship between housing and other issues or activities that were important to explain to communities (e.g. older, younger and key workers housing) and links to the viability of community services and facilities. In terms of the mix of housing brought forward as a result CLP and RHE activity, the responses indicate that between 10% and 25% of sites are for mixed development, the remainder being smaller and restricted to affordable housing provision only.

**ACRE comment:** *This is highly relevant under the government's new agenda which proposes communities have freedom to consider mixed developments on sites unallocated in the local plan.*

### **Housing Needs Surveys and Community Led Planning questionnaires**

The following is dependent on whether a formal, parish level Housing Needs Survey had already been conducted in the community. It was generally accepted that, if a question on housing was included in the CLP survey exercise, there was more chance that the process will result in an action to undertake a Housing Needs Survey. This can be a 'quick win' for the parish and may show how Community Led Planning can produce results. Practitioners or communities were likely to pass this issue immediately to the RHE if there were enough people identifying housing needs as an issue. However, this issue is not one of *quantity* of need and it would be inequitable to marginalise an important need expressed by a minority.

Most RHEs considered that a housing needs survey should not be 'imposed' **as part of** the plan process. They also highlighted that Community Led Plan questionnaire returns tended to be higher than Housing Needs Survey returns. However, if Community Led Planning surveys are carried out first, this may improve Housing Needs Survey responses. In terms of whether housing needs should be introduced earlier, this has to be considered on a case by case basis. In some instances the Needs Survey could be introduced very early on to remove the necessity of having to cover it in the questionnaire (i.e. stage 4). This research concludes that, at the very least, housing needs should be raised, and that communities are then encouraged to include a Housing Needs Survey Action Plan point in their Plans.

### **Does the CLP process change attitudes to housing need?**

Across all but one of the eight counties there was a clear belief from CLP practitioners that the CLP process had made a difference to the attitudes of parish councils to exploring housing needs. In the one exception, anecdotal evidence indicated that it may, in some cases, have had a negative impact on parish council views. Coincidentally, this was a county with a strong partnership of statutory and other agencies with a specific focus on rural affordable housing, indicating a strong top-down impetus on the issue.

CLP practitioners generally reported that many communities apparently learned about the principle of rural affordable housing provision through the CLP process - beforehand many did not really understand this label. This identifies both an educative and awareness-raising role for CLP. The feeling was that the CLP process breaks down barriers and ensures that the community is aware of local needs that may have been previously hidden. The role of a neutral intermediary is mentioned as helping avoid pre-existing tension between parish councils and district councils. However, RHEs provided a more mixed response as to whether CLP helped shift attitudes, with one of the eight claiming it had no impact at all.

### **The Future?**

The strategic housing role and individual elements of this, such as Housing Needs Surveys, and the Community Led Planning approach and associated roles (i.e. the CLP practitioner role) have developed independently from one another. However, there has been a progressive realisation that there is mutual benefit in co-operation, but it should be noted that there has not yet been any real effort to formalise or regularise the process/relationship between CLP and housing delivery.

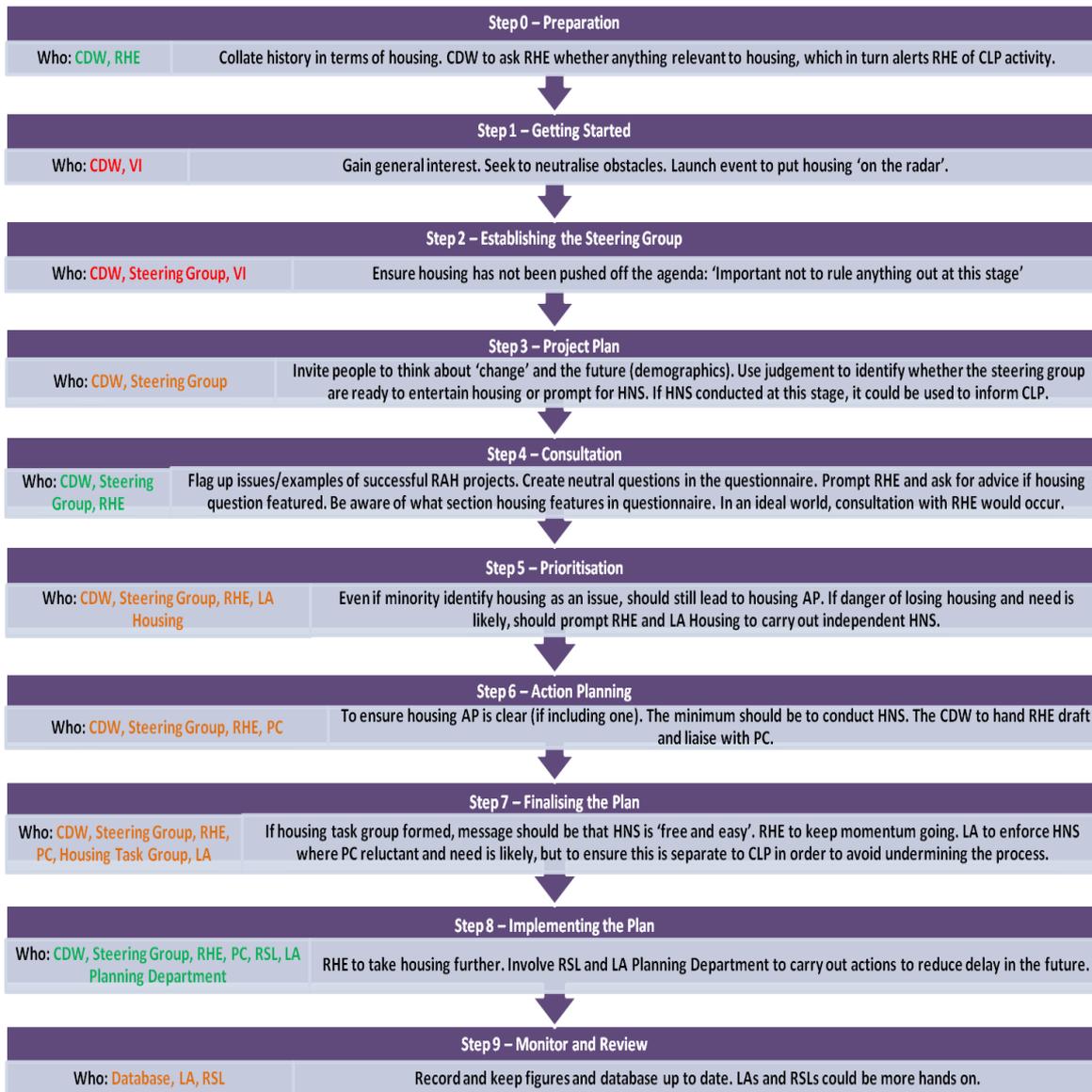
There is a perceived need to ensure that those involved in CLP facilitation and those focussed on housing delivery work together where possible, at the 'right' times and in the 'right' way. Furthermore, it is important that such partnership working leads onto and develops later action, for example; affordable housing site identification, negotiation with landowners, liaison with planners and others, including Registered Social Landlords and the maintenance of community support.

Existing multi-sector partnerships focused purely around rural housing have been reasonably successful in getting larger sites or easier sites to come forward. However, they may well struggle to deliver as 'harder to convince' communities who need bottom-up and Community Led Planning processes to develop understanding and awareness of the issue and of local need. It came up in almost all of the CLP practitioner and RHE interviews that a degree of independence from local authorities was a key to both the success of CLP and possibly in terms of the Housing Enabler role – some disagreed with this arguing that Housing Needs Surveys could be done effectively by local authorities. It is still true however that many communities view local authority promotion with some suspicion when topics such as housing are being discussed.

### **Recommendations for the CLP process**

The report's analysis has been structured to follow the Community Led Planning toolkit 9-stage process, with an addition of a preparatory 'stage 0'. The commentary represents an effort to identify and suggest ways of maintaining housing as a legitimate and live issue for communities and is also expressed in shorthand via the timeline diagram reproduced here as Figure 2.

**Figure2: Enhanced CLP toolkit timeline:** (Parker et al, 2010: 27)



Pages 27 - 32 of the research report gives a full explanation of processes recommended to put the enhanced timeline for CLP into action, and who should coordinate what with whom. The annex of the research report gives full details of 7 case studies from across England, where a clear pathway can be traced back to the community undertaking CLP.

### Conclusions from the research

Community Led Planning is not designed to focus on single issues and, moreover, it is expressly intended that communities self-identify relevant issues. It is impressive that affordable housing already features so widely in CLP action plans.

There is clear evidence of emergent good practices, and organic partnership working between CLP practitioners and those concerned with the delivery of rural affordable housing, but more could be done. This work has revealed that there is potential for more housing awareness and action to be promoted via CLP and through even closer working between CLP practitioners, parish councils and those professionals with a remit to fulfil the strategic housing function at the local authority level.

If the enhanced CLP timeline is followed, then, at a minimum, a Housing Needs Survey action should emerge from the CLP process in the vast majority of cases. The research concludes that this can be achieved without de-stabilising the CLP process overall. The key is to closer partnership working, access to good information and preparation early on in the CLP process.