

Rural Housing Network | Research Specification

MARCH 7, 2025: The impact of devolution on affordable rural housing delivery – key risks and opportunities

Introduction

The Rural Housing Network is a special interest group which represents a coalition of bodies that work in and for rural communities with an interest in the provision of rural housing of all tenures, but specifically affordable.

I. The Network's objective is to be a collective and national voice on affordable housing delivery, advising Homes England and the Government as they develop policies and systems. The RHN supports effective implementation by sharing good practice and encouraging innovation.

II. Specifically this involves:

- a) Facilitating an ongoing dialogue between rural housing bodies and Government - acting as a sounding board for policy relating to housing delivery and providing feedback and critique so that policy informs practice and vice versa.
- b) Monitoring progress and evidence around rural housing need and delivery to support Homes England's rural strategy and targets for rural delivery.
- c) Acting as a live forum for timely and robust rural proofing of policy.
- d) Where appropriate, acting as a collective voice and advocate for rural communities and the delivery of rural housing.

The RHN has identified the shift towards a more devolved government and greater local autonomy as detailed in the English Devolution White Paper as a change likely to have a critical impact on the delivery of rural affordable housing. To inform the RHN's response it is seeking to commission and publish research which will provide a sound basis on which it can develop and support a range of clear recommendations to Government, its agencies and local authorities. These recommendations specifically intended to safeguard and improve the delivery of affordable homes in rural communities with a population of less than 3,000.

The Brief

Objectives

1. To understand and evidence how affordable rural housing has or is likely to be affected through the different proposed forms of devolution. The research should consider existing and emerging devolution deals, as well as the planned for Strategic Authorities, Foundation Strategic Authorities and new Unitary Authorities as set out in the English Devolution White Paper. The tiered levels of decision making, around spatial planning and investment in affordable homes, including the arrangements for working with Homes England and the interplay with the role of local authorities considered should be a principal feature of this element of the research.
2. To identify and evaluate good practice and/or opportunities that safeguard and support the delivery of affordable rural homes through devolution, so that these can be promoted to national and local government. This should include:
 - How support for rural affordable housing has been included in previous devolution bids and deals.
 - Action that has been taken by English devolved authorities/new unitary authorities to support the delivery of rural affordable housing where they have rural areas within their geographies.
 - Input and feedback from a range of authorities at each stage of the devolution journey.
3. Provide a set of evidence-based recommendations that the RHN can use to ensure devolution both safeguards and improves the delivery of affordable housing in small rural communities.
4. Draft and publish a credible report that can be shared with national and local government and associated agencies, to influence their understanding and outline an approach that can be applied to embed the affordable housing needs of rural areas within their devolution work. This report acknowledging the wider societal and economic gains that affordable rural homes secure.

Methodology

The RHN would be interested to hear from those tendering for this work and how they would approach this research. However, as a minimum we would want the research to include:

- A review of relevant current devolution deals within England and wider literature review of relevant content that has, or is, exploring this challenge and experience of previous Regional Strategies.

- Collection and analysis of data to demonstrate the extent to which affordable rural housing has or has not featured within existing devolution deals, and sound hypotheses as to the reasons why. Including how delivery post-deal has reflected targets agreed pre-deal.
- An appraisal of the approach from Homes England into strategic place partnerships and the agencies approach to ensuring that rural does not get overlooked via their own role.
- A range of case studies from different tiers of devolved government that draw out learning points and good practice.
- Where the selected researcher finds or knows of good examples of devolved approaches outside of England, these should also be included as a point of reference.
- Input from a range of authorities at different stages of their devolution journey.
- Explore the impact of changes from the English Devolution White Paper in the context of risks and opportunities to affordable rural housing delivery, to inform the RHN's response to these.

Outputs

There will be three outputs from the research reflecting its objectives and the target audiences for its findings.

- A credible, evidenced and well drafted report suitable for open publication and that will enable thought leadership to inform debate with central and local government. This report collating research content, drawing together both quantitative and qualitative data to a level that can be relied on to evidence and support a series of clear recommendations, the basis of which will be to safeguard and improve delivery of affordable rural housing within the approach to devolution.
- A series of short case studies covering Strategic Authority and Principal Authorities, that illustrate good practice.
- A webinar style event aimed at all tiers of government. To be organised by the RHN at which the researchers will present their findings.

We would anticipate that as a minimum the research team will meet with the steering group at:

- Scheme induction / kick-off
- Presentation of interim findings and reports x2
- Final draft report stage

Steering and management arrangements

The project will be steered by an Advisory Group principally drawn from the membership of the RHN. We would be interested to hear how those tendering would want to draw on the expertise of this Group.

Advisor Group Members include:

- English Rural Housing Association
- National Housing Federation
- CPRE, the Countryside Charity
- Rural Services Network
- Connexus Housing
- Trent & Dove Housing
- Broadacres Housing Association
- South Downs National Park Authority
- Country Land & Business Association
- Rural Housing Solutions
- Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
- National Association of Local Council (NALC)
- National Community Land Trust Network
- Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution
- Rural Coalition

Day to day management of the project will be handled by English Rural Housing Association, who co-chair of the Rural Housing Network.

Budget

The RHN has secured £15,000 for this research, it is hoped that where additional sources of funding are known to the chosen research partner, that these will be leveraged to expand the reach of the research undertaken. Finances for this project will be handled by RHN member the Rural Services Network.

Timeframe

Stage One:	Project kick-off meeting	April 2025
Stage Two	Interim feedback – replay of data capture/analysis and good practice examples	July/August 2025
Stage Three	Draft Report	September 2025
Stage Four	Final Report	October 2025
Stage Five	Report Launch	October / November 2025

Tender submission and consideration

We are interested in receiving tenders from individual organisations and consortia where these add value to the research.

Tenders should specify :

- the methodology that will be used and the rationale for the choice of this approach
- the staff who will carry out the work and how their skills and expertise align with the research brief
- the assignment of staff time to the different elements of the research
- a timetable for the work to be undertaken (consistent with that detailed above)
- a budget, broken down by staff member and task,
- note of any other resources that the contractor will be able to bring to the project and how this
- will be used to extend the depth and/or breadth of the research
- previous examples of comparable work, ideally linked directly or closely to the research area

- names of two referees

The closing date for tenders is 7th April 2025.

Tenders will be assessed against the following factors:

- Meeting the research brief
- Rates and prices
- Quality of the proposal
- References

A decision on a shortlist of potential providers will be made by week commencing 3rd April 2025 with interviews to determine the successful tender on 10th April 2025.

Data Protection

Each of the Parties undertakes to comply with its obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 and the Data Protection Act 2018, and in particular must not disclose any personal data as defined by that legislation to any individual unless the relevant conditions permitting disclosure are met.

Background

The delivery of affordable housing in rural communities of 3,000 or fewer population has for decades fallen short of levels of need, rarely providing more than half that needed annually. The significant changes that will happen as devolution is introduced across England are felt to present both threats and opportunities, but to deliver on the latter and ensure rural communities are not further left behind forethought is needed at the conception stage of devolved changes.

A further briefing document providing greater context of affordable rural housing is also supplied for reference.

Enquires

Any enquiries about this work should be addressed to the research co-ordinator James Crawford-Smith – t. 02078207930 e. james.crawford-smith@englishrural.org.uk.

The Rural Housing Network is a group of independent organisations that work in, and for, rural communities, and with an interest in the provision of rural housing of all tenures. Its membership includes – The Almshouses Association, Action with Communities in Rural England, Chartered Institute of Housing, Country Land and Business Association, CPRE, the Countryside Charity, English Rural Housing Association, Housing Justice, National Association of Local Councils, National CLT Network, National Farmers Union, National Housing Federation, National Park Authority, Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, Rural Services Network, Rural Housing Solutions. It also has ex-officio representation from DEFRA, MHCLG and Homes England officials.