

PRODUCING ROBUST AND INFLUENTIAL RURAL HOUSING NEEDS SURVEYS

Introduction

Local people have never had more opportunity to help shape the future development of their community. They can influence the Local Plan or bring forward their own Neighbourhood Development Plan. Communities can directly engage in development activity through community-led housing schemes such as rural exception sites and Community Land Trusts. Or individuals can simply comment on planning applications.

The key to effective engagement is having a robust evidence base that provides an assessment of the scale of need and an understanding its characteristics in terms of, housing tenures, house sizes and types, affordability, household characteristics and bespoke adaptive requirements.

Rural Housing Enablers have been at the heart of providing this evidence base for over 25 years. This document draws on their collective experience from across the country. It sets down ten core principles that should underpin any local Housing Needs Surveys and explains what you should expect from a robust Housing Needs Survey.

As such, this document provides a standard to which all housing needs surveys should adhere rather than a rigid template for the process and form of a Housing Needs Survey.

This guidance is endorsed by the Rural Housing Alliance.

Contact details

For further information on this document please contact your local Rural Housing Enabler or Sarah Brooke-Taylor, Rural Housing Enabler, WRCC, Warwick Enterprise Park, Wellesbourne CV35 9EF; tel 01789 842182; email housing@wrccrural.org.uk

National Network of Rural Housing Enablers

The National Network of Rural Housing Enablers is a voluntary membership group comprised of rural housing professionals in England, specifically Rural Housing Enablers and other professionals directly involved in working with rural communities to identify local housing needs and enable development of affordable housing to meet local needs.

The Core Principles

Identifying the nature and extent of housing need is the founding block of any scheme that provides homes to meet local housing needs. The mechanisms used to assemble this information are varied, but underpinning all of them are ten principles. All Housing Needs Surveys (HNS) undertaken by Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) adhere to these principles.

- 1.** The goal of all Housing Needs Surveys is to provide an objective evidenced overview of the scale and nature of the full range of housing need in a specific locality, usually a village or parish.
- 2.** Housing Needs Surveys are independent and balanced and seen to be so.
- 3.** The process for collecting the data is open, fair and transparent.
- 4.** Any secondary data used as a principal source of information or to augment data collected from households is up to date and relevant to the geography of the survey.
- 5.** Data is analysed and anonymised, and confidentiality and data protection statements are clear and correct.
- 6.** The local community, which is wider than just the parish council, is informed of the reasons for the survey, invited to participate and able to access the results or a summary of the results.
- 7.** The reports are written in plain English with clear explanations of how the findings and conclusions are drawn, including any caveats, and noting sources of data.
- 8.** Housing Needs Survey reports, or a summary of the report, may be made publicly available once the commissioning body has agreed and signed off the survey.
- 9.** Housing Needs Surveys are a snapshot in time, their 'shelf-life' is stated and a process for updating the data is available.
- 10.** A Housing Needs Survey is only the start of the process. Once it is completed ongoing liaison should be maintained with the local community, housing association or other developer, local authority, and landowner to take an affordable housing project forward.

What to expect from Housing Needs Surveys undertaken by Rural Housing Enablers

What are Housing Needs Surveys?

Housing Needs Surveys are an objective tool principally used to gather factual information on the scale and nature of housing need at the local (community) level.

This is achieved through a range of survey techniques to gain information on the attributes of households seeking accommodation whose requirements are not being met by the current housing stock. This may be a consequence of housing not being available or the respondent not having the necessary income to buy or rent a home that meets their needs. In particular Housing Needs Surveys should, at a minimum, identify the need for:

- affordable housing to rent
- affordable housing to buy
- First Homes
- downsizing
- adapted and/or housing with care support

Why are Housing Needs Surveys carried out?

To provide **communities** with the evidence they need to:

- Have an informed dialogue with:
 - any type of developer
 - the staff from the local authority housing enabling, allocation and planning departments
- Promote and gather the support of the community for a local housing development

To provide **housing associations** and other developers with the information they require to:

- Determine what they can offer for the land. Price is directly affected by the costs of development and the level of income from sales and rents from the different types and tenures of housing
- Design a scheme that contributes to meeting the housing needs of the community
- Support the planning application for the scheme

To provide **landowners** with information that will inform:

- Whether to dispose of the site
- How much they might achieve for the site

Housing Needs Surveys and Neighbourhood Plans

Neighbourhood Plan site allocations and policies for the type of housing to be developed in a community must be supported by robust evidence. There are two elements to this evidence base:

- 1) A housing needs assessment sets the broader housing market context. It will provide an analysis of the headline characteristics of current housing market operating within the Neighbourhood Plan area, within the context of relevant economic and demographic data. It will primarily draw on existing data available from a range of established resources.

- 2) A Housing Needs Survey supplements this evidence by providing a more detailed picture of the nature and extent of housing need that exists within the local community, drawing on the analysed results of a household survey. Data from the local authority housing register may also be included with the survey report.

Who undertakes Housing Needs Surveys?

Housing Needs Surveys are primarily undertaken by Rural Housing Enablers as part of their broader role of assisting communities to provide housing that meets their identified needs and facilitating its delivery.

Rural Housing Enablers may be commissioned to undertake a survey by a community group, parish council, local authority, housing association, landowner, or private developer.

Publicity and engagement

It is essential to publicise a forthcoming Housing Needs Survey to ensure engagement across the whole of the relevant community including, where appropriate, those who work locally. This may take the form of articles written for a community or parish council website, parish or school newsletter, or local newspaper; social media such as Facebook or Twitter; posters to be displayed in prominent places around the community; communication with local employers; and attendance at community events such as Warm Hubs, coffee mornings or similar.

What is the content of a Housing Need Survey?

There is no one single form of Housing Needs Survey. The survey may be paper or web based, electronic, or involve direct contact with a household or individual. Ideally, to ensure accessibility across the whole community, a mixture of these methods should be used.

Whilst the actual questions in a survey will vary they will universally collect information to establish:

- How many households/people have a housing need
- The age/s of those in need
- The composition and size of the household in need
- Current housing circumstances and why they require alternative accommodation
- The type and size of housing they are seeking
- What tenure they are seeking
- What they can afford (including income, equity and savings)
- The nature of their connection to the local community

The survey could put this into the context of the housing market of the community by using relevant secondary data specific to the community on the tenure makeup of the housing stock. An assessment should be made of the affordability of the current market and what the respondent is able to afford, with a clear explanation of how the calculation is made and details of the data used.

Affordability of the current market

The lack of published data on incomes at a community level make it difficult to assess how affordable market housing is to people living in the community. However, a headline view may be provided using the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Live Tables on lower

quartile income to lower quartile house prices, but with the caveat that this is district level data which provides the wider context for the community specific results.

This may be supplemented by working out the lower quartile house price from recent sales using one of the commercial residential property sales sites. The low level of sales in rural areas necessitate at least a year's worth of data, then working out the income that would be needed to buy such a home. This is conventionally done by dividing the derived house price by 3.5, which is generally the lower end of the multiplier used for mortgage purposes. This can then be compared with the income of those who responded to the survey.

Alternatively, a similar calculation may be made using the actual cost of a particular type and size of home that meets the identified need. In some villages such properties may not have come onto the market for some time, if at all; a point in itself worth making.

Reference should also be made to the affordability of the local rental market, with examples of available properties or lack of.

What can the respondent afford?

Using the reverse process, the incomes quoted by respondents can be multiplied by 3.5 and the resultant house price that could be afforded is then compared with actual sales values in the parish. This approach provides a reasonable estimate of affordability for any local community. Clearly, any household actually seeking to purchase will be subject to more rigorous scrutiny from potential lenders.

Assessing levels of support

Surveys may also be used to take a measure of the level of support for a housing scheme to meet local needs. It can only be measured from the responses to a specific question that probes opinion.

How are the results reported?

The analysed results of Housing Needs Surveys will be presented in a balanced and objectively written report. It will set out the findings and conclusions of the survey and how these were reached, including any caveats. It will also provide information on the methodology and reference the data sources.

As the household data is collected on a confidential basis actual households will not be identified. In very small communities this may prove difficult but at the very least anonymity will be preserved.

Once the report is complete and signed off by the commissioning body a summary of the data or the full report itself may be placed in the public domain with the agreement of the commissioning body. Responsibility for this is often left with the parish council.

Rates of return

The rate of return is the percentage of replies to the number of surveys sent out. It is only of significance when assigning weight to the responses to the questions asked of all households, such as whether they favour development of affordable housing.

The rate of return is not relevant when reporting the responses to the questions relating specifically to individual housing need. The survey is solely seeking, and only able to report on, how many people expressed a need and what type, size, and tenure of housing they require.

As an example, a survey that includes general parish or housing-related questions may receive a 35% return rate, whereas a survey that only considers housing need may receive a 2% return rate. The sometimes low return rates, and the lack of information on the representativeness of the returns to the whole population, means that housing needs data should not be aggregated.

How can the evidence be kept up to date?

Housing Needs Surveys are only a snapshot and will become out of date as individual housing circumstances change. The rule of thumb is that the results have a shelf life of five years, or three years where there have been significant changes in the community or surrounding area.

Where a scheme is progressing, and subject to acceptance by the local planning authority, updating and verification could take place through further community engagement to allow households to re-state their interest or identify new housing need. This could, for example, be a drop-in 'surgery' or an online consultation. However the process is conducted it should be open to all those who think they have a housing need. It can provide an opportunity to remind households to formally register with their local authority or express their interest in a home for shared ownership or purchase.

What happens next?

A Housing Needs Survey does not automatically mean a scheme will be built. It does mean both the commissioner of the survey and the community (where these are not the same) should be in possession of a robust piece of evidence that sets out in clear terms the scale and nature of the housing need in the community surveyed. On the basis of this an informed discussion can proceed with those organisations responsible for delivering affordable housing, principally housing associations, the local authority housing enabling and planning staff and within the community.

Endorsement

The Rural Housing Alliance is made up of a group of Housing Associations who work in rural communities building and managing homes for local people. We work in partnership with the Rural Services Network and the National Housing Federation to share innovation and good practice, provide a unified voice on key issues and make sure that the need for quality affordable homes which meet the needs of rural communities is kept at the forefront in policy making on housing and rural infrastructure. We support the need for a long term housing strategy to solve the current housing crisis, end rural homelessness, meet the needs of families unable to live in the place where they were born and grew up and contribute to the creation of a thriving rural economy.

Angela Gascoyne, Chairman
Rural Housing Alliance
www.ruralhousingalliance.net

