Housing, Regeneration and Planning

Review of Rural Housing Enablers
REVIEW OF RURAL HOUSING ENABLERS

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Scottish Government Social Research
2008
The views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Paul Tyrer and Elaine Crawford for their helpful comments during the writing of this report.

Special thanks are due to the respondents who contributed to this research.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1 The Scottish Government commissioned this research to review Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) across the UK, and to establish their activities and coverage in Scotland. The Housing Supply Task Force wishes to explore potential measures to ease housing supply pressures in rural Scotland, and Rural Housing Enablers have been cited as a possible mechanism to act as local brokers of housing solutions to increase housing supply.

Aims and objectives

2 A key aim for the research was to identify the activities and coverage of RHEs in Scotland. A further aim for the project was to draw out lessons from evaluations of RHEs carried out in other countries within the UK, examining conclusions on the impact of RHEs in England and Wales. The aims of the project gave rise to the following objectives:

- Describe the aims, activities, governance and financing of RHEs in Scotland;
- Explore the extent to which RHEs in Scotland have been able to meet their aims;
- Explore why RHE have been established in some rural areas in Scotland, but not all;
- Explore the role, operation and impact of RHEs elsewhere in the UK;
- Draw conclusions on the role of RHE in the UK and their activities and coverage in Scotland.

Methods

Analysis of documentation

3 An analysis of relevant documentation relating to the Scottish RHEs was undertaken, including the websites of key organisations. Information was drawn from a variety of sources including business plans, Annual outcomes and performance returns from Housing Voluntary Grants from the Scottish Government and other monitoring reports. Information was also drawn from existing reports and evaluations of RHEs in other countries within the UK.

Semi structured qualitative telephone interviews

4 Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen respondents. Four respondents in England and Wales were contacted to discuss the current situation with regard to RHEs in these two countries, and to describe the impacts of RHEs. Eleven interviews were conducted in Scotland, including representatives of agencies undertaking RHE type work or RHEs themselves, local authorities where RHEs are sited, and also two local authorities where there are no RHEs at present.
Findings

An overview of RHEs in Scotland

5 Shelter Scotland has provided a helpful definition of RHEs and the work that they undertake, noting that the term is used to ‘describe work which engages with rural communities in order to better chart their housing needs and to bring forward solutions to meeting those needs’ (Shelter, 2007, p1). For the purposes of this report, the following agencies and individuals were included as undertaking rural housing enabling:

- Highland Small Communities Housing Trust
- Dumfries & Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust
- Moray Rural Housing Enabler
- Aberdeenshire Rural Housing Enabler
- Rural Housing Service
- Development Worker for West Highland Housing Association (formerly Argyll Development Worker for the Rural Housing Service)
- Development Co-ordinator, Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot, Western Isles.

6 RHE activity in Scotland has helped to bring about new affordable housing across different tenures in rural and remote areas, including facilitating developments for social renting as well as low cost home ownership. For example, rural housing enabling on Colonsay identified levels of housing need that had previously gone unrecorded, prompting the development of a housing strategy for the island and contributing to the development of four affordable homes for rent. RHEs have also contributed to a more effective use of the existing housing stock, helping to bring empty dwellings back into use, and also utilising the potential of conversions and adaptations to achieve housing solutions for the residents of rural communities. An additional dimension to the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust, and which the more recent Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust aims towards, is a landbanking function. This function allows the Trust in the Highlands to buy land on behalf of communities and sell the land on for affordable housing to housing associations or directly to individuals. Rural Housing Burdens are used to ensure such housing remains affordable in perpetuity.

7 An emerging role for RHEs is working with landowners, as well as community buy outs, not only in relation to identifying potential sites for development for social rent or home ownership, but with regard to the development of affordable housing by private landlords as part of the Rural Homes for Rent scheme.

8 RHEs are pioneering innovative solutions to maximise the potential of the mechanisms that are available to meet the housing needs of rural communities, with the development of Rural Housing Burdens perhaps the most notable example.

9 RHEs have been financed in a number of different ways. Some RHEs received a single source of grant payment by charitable organisations. Other RHEs are
funded by a variety of local stakeholders. A crucial feature of the longer standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust has been part funding by the Scottish Government in the form of Housing Voluntary Grants Scheme (HVGS).

10 RHEs are operating either as individuals or as small organisations. The governance of RHEs is a reflection of the role that enablers play with regard to facilitating joint working and developing community led housing solutions. There was a strong focus on either boards or advisory groups at local level, comprising key stakeholders in the delivery of affordable housing within each RHE’s area of operation across all tenures. A feature of these agencies is the level of ownership by, and responsibility to, representative bodies of rural communities themselves.

The experience elsewhere: RHEs in England and Wales

11 National evaluations of RHE activity in England and Wales have consistently reported the positive impacts of these posts in helping to deliver housing solutions for rural communities, and key recommendations have revolved around suggestions for an expansion of these posts geographically. The evaluations highlight a number of features of RHE work, including:

- RHEs add value wherever they operate;
- Working with communities requires long timescales;
- The independent position of enablers;
- A considerable amount of the positive work that RHEs undertake can easily pass unnoticed, especially negotiating, brokering and mediating between all groups, individuals and agencies involved in affordable housing delivery.

12 Recent inquiries and Commissions have also endorsed the substantive conclusions of these evaluations and have supported the continuation and growth of these posts. However, these countries have gone down different funding routes in the last year. Wales has witnessed an expansion of its RHEs, with the Welsh Assembly Government announcing in 2008 that it is to provide part funding in partnership with local authorities, RSLs and other bodies such as national parks. In contrast, central government financial support for RHEs came to an end in England in 2008 after a number of years of support, and agencies such as ACRE are currently monitoring the diverse range of responses to funding RHE posts at local level.

13 Central government support in England has always been time limited, with the aim of demonstrating the value of RHEs to housing providers and local authorities. Although a number of models for the local funding of RHEs has developed, the Taylor Report (2008) pointed out that it was not clear how present policy was going to achieve wider coverage, given that funding for some of the RHEs that have been in post has ceased, and that many local authorities are not funding RHE posts at all. Further, reports emphasise that an underlying weakness of RHEs in England has been the funding structures that underpin these posts.
Barriers

14 One difficulty that RHEs face is the potential for becoming isolated, both in terms of isolation from local networks of key stakeholders, and also isolated from peer support. Even if RHEs were more widely adopted across the country, they would still constitute just a handful of individuals.

15 RHEs also need to be supported by training and personal development to achieve the broad range of skills required to undertake the variety of tasks and roles that they are expected to perform.

16 A network of peer group support needs to be adequately resourced at national level, not only to provide training, but to draw on the expertise already available in Scotland across all organisations engaged in RHE type activities, as well as elsewhere. An organisation such as the Rural Housing Service is ideally placed to undertake this role.

17 The type of governance structures that are in place can have a crucial role in reducing the potential for isolation. An RHE can retain an independent position by being based outside of public agencies, and yet benefit from very effective partnership working via local steering groups, and also from local cultures that support partnership working, as evidenced by approaches to joint working in the Highland Council area.

18 A consistent theme running through some of the comments from respondents in Scotland, and also the results of evaluations elsewhere in the UK, was a tension between the expectations of partner organisations and the actual activities of RHEs. Partner agencies tend to favour a focus on identifying sites for affordable housing, whereas RHEs’ attention may be focused on undertaking needs assessment and community development work.

Conclusions

19 There is no one blueprint in the way that RHEs can achieve their aims and objectives. An essential aspect of developing a RHE role within a specific locality is agreeing and setting priorities tailored to local circumstances and partnership working arrangements. The balance of tasks undertaken by a RHE will vary area by area. For example, the priority in one area may be site identification, whereas in another area, there may be more of a focus on establishing housing needs, prior to helping to deliver affordable housing – RHEs have a contribution to make to both approaches.

20 A necessary element in establishing and sustaining effective partnership working is that there is a shared agreement that the RHE adds value to the local housing system, and does not duplicate work done by other agencies.

21 The policy environment has a crucial role to play in enhancing the potential role of RHEs with regard to the mechanisms at their disposal for helping to deliver affordable housing. Consideration should be given to:
• Clarifying the future of key mechanisms for rural communities such as Rural Home Ownership Grants and Rural Empty Property Grant;
• Assessing the implications of changes to Housing Association Grant funding for rural areas;
• Broadening the range of mechanisms at the disposal of RHEs and other stakeholders in rural areas, for example by taking on board the potential of exception sites in local plan policies.

22 A challenge for organisations engaged in RHE activity is to develop income streams to potentially provide match funding, which is also an area in which the policy environment has a key role to play. In Scotland, an agency role for RHEs in promoting and administering a scheme such as RHOGS, or perhaps a future equivalent, could provide just such an income stream. If an RHE programme was taken forward then it would be necessary to assess the resource capacity of existing mechanisms such as, for example, the Rural Homes for Rent scheme, to sustain developing activity.

23 The core conclusion from this review is that rural housing enabling works. The evaluations of the impact of RHEs elsewhere in the UK have demonstrated the added value that RHEs have brought to rural communities. Evaluations from elsewhere in the UK also point to the value of some element of central government grant funding to underpin the successful delivery of housing solutions in rural areas by RHEs in the long term. In Scotland, the part funding of long standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust by the Scottish Government already shows how the long term sustainability of these organisations can contribute towards a continuous flow of affordable housing in rural communities.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 The Scottish Government commissioned this research to review Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) across the UK, and to establish their activities and coverage in Scotland. The Housing Supply Task Force wishes to explore potential measures to ease housing supply pressures in rural Scotland, and Rural Housing Enablers have been cited as a possible mechanism to act as local brokers of housing solutions to increase housing supply.

1.2 The difficulties entailed in delivering affordable housing solutions within rural communities means that considerable effort may have to be expended on meeting the needs of small numbers of households, and may require attention in delivering even just one or two dwellings in a single community. Whilst housing agencies such as local authorities and housing associations have responsibilities to all communities across their areas of operation, the starting point for rural enablers is the needs of these small communities, and recognition of the difficulties and expense in time and financial resources necessary to achieve housing solutions within these communities. However, such difficulties belie the significant positive impact that small numbers of affordable housing can have in rural areas. These impacts include not only meeting the immediate housing needs of households, but can also bring wider benefits for the community at large, by helping to sustain local services, local businesses, and also facilitate the maintenance of social networks which can be crucial in fostering informal care and support between households.

Aims and objectives

1.3 A key aim for the research was to identify the activities and coverage of RHEs in Scotland. A further aim for the project was to draw out lessons from evaluations of RHEs carried out in other countries within the UK, examining conclusions on the impact of RHEs in England and Wales. The aims of the project gave rise to the following objectives:

- Describe the aims, activities, governance and financing of RHEs in Scotland;
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- Explore why RHE have been established in some rural areas in Scotland, but not all;
- Explore the role, operation and impact of RHEs elsewhere in the UK;
- Draw conclusions on the role of RHE in the UK and their activities and coverage in Scotland.

Methods

1.4 The fact that the RHEs in Scotland have slightly different aims and objectives, as well the length of time that some of RHEs have operated for meant that the report was not asked to undertake an evaluation of the impact of RHEs.
Instead, the focus for the research was to examine the activities of RHEs in Scotland, drawing out views on the achievements of RHEs from the qualitative discussions, and identifying lessons on the impact of RHEs in other countries within the UK from existing evaluations.

**Analysis of documentation**

1.5 An analysis of relevant documentation relating to the Scottish RHEs was undertaken, including the websites of key organisations. Information was drawn from a variety of sources including business plans, Annual outcomes and performance returns from Housing Voluntary Grants from the Scottish Government and other monitoring reports.

1.6 Information was also drawn from existing reports and evaluations of RHEs in other countries within the UK. Key documents included:


**Semi structured qualitative telephone interviews**

1.7 Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen respondents. Four respondents in England and Wales were contacted to discuss the current situation with regard to RHEs in these two countries, and to describe the impacts of RHEs. Eleven interviews were conducted in Scotland, including representatives of agencies undertaking RHE type work or RHEs themselves, local authorities where RHEs are sited, and also two local authorities where there are no RHEs at present.
2 CHAPTER TWO AN OVERVIEW OF RHE ACTIVITY IN SCOTLAND

Introduction

2.1 This part of the report provides an overview of RHE activities in Scotland. The chapter defines the roles that RHEs can play, including an overview of the aims of these enablers. The chapter then moves on to describe key features of enablers in Scotland, in terms of the governance, financing and the types of activities that enablers have engaged in.

Defining Rural Housing Enablers

2.2 Shelter Scotland has provided a helpful definition of RHEs and the work that they undertake, noting that the term is used to ‘describe work which engages with rural communities in order to better chart their housing needs and to bring forward solutions to meeting those needs’ (Shelter, 2007, p1). Shelter Scotland elaborated further on the roles that RHEs can undertake, including:

- Community-based surveys, in tandem with community groups, to assess local housing needs;
- Identifying sources of housing supply: in particular, identification of sites or empty properties;
- Providing information and advice to individuals: for example, on access to grants;
- Building community capacity to develop housing solutions for themselves;
- Feeding into wider area housing strategy or needs assessment. (Shelter, 2007, P1)

2.3 A number of agencies and individuals within Scotland are undertaking some or all of the activities within this list, including a number of local authorities and housing associations that are working with local communities to develop affordable housing. A specific example is the Highland Housing Alliance that facilitates site identification for development by housing associations and private developers, and has the ability to land bank, with a £10 million revolving fund. It has a particular focus on helping to meet the needs of households who are priced out of the current housing market, but who also stand little chance of obtaining social rented accommodation. Since becoming operational in 2005, the Alliance has acquired eight sites, with 450 units under active development. However, the Highland Housing Alliance tends to focus on sites in larger, more urban, settlements. A feature of RHEs in Scotland is a focus upon empowering residents in small rural and remote settlements to bring about housing solutions in their own communities.

2.4 For the purposes of this report, the following agencies and individuals were included as undertaking rural housing enabling:

- Highland Small Communities Housing Trust;
- Dumfries & Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust;
- Moray Rural Housing Enabler;
• Aberdeenshire Rural Housing Enabler;
• Rural Housing Service;
• Development Worker for West Highland Housing Association (formerly Argyll Development Worker for the Rural Housing Service);
• Development Co-ordinator, Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot, Western Isles.

Aims of RHEs

2.5 The overall objectives of agencies and individuals engaged in RHE activities are broadly similar and relate to the roles identified in the definition above, although the mechanisms used to achieve results vary considerably between agencies. This section highlights the specific aims of agencies and individual RHEs, highlighting any differences in approach. A consistent theme running through the overall objectives of the RHEs is assisting in the development of community empowerment.

2.6 The Rural Housing Service was set up in 1993 by Rural Forum Scotland to enable rural communities to tackle local housing needs and to highlight the extent and nature of rural housing issues. As such, it is the longest running agency providing RHE services in Scotland. The overall objectives of the Rural Housing Service are to deliver affordable housing opportunities in rural communities by:

- providing practical support to rural communities;
- ensuring the housing needs of rural communities are recognised by government and its agencies through our campaigning and lobbying;
- undertaking research into rural housing.

2.7 The organisation comprises a full time Chief Executive, Rural Housing Enablers in Aberdeenshire and Moray and a part time Administrator. It provides a service which is national in coverage. Specific aims for the posts in Aberdeenshire and Moray relate to achieving an increase in the supply of affordable housing in remote and rural areas of Aberdeenshire and parts of Moray. This aim will be achieved by increasing knowledge of housing needs in small communities, involving rural communities in the development of solutions to their housing needs and developing partnerships between community, public and private sectors to deliver affordable rural housing. The Argyll Development Worker project aimed to benefit Atlantic island communities by increasing the supply of affordable housing to rent and buy to reduce homelessness and depopulation, and improving services to elderly people in the islands to help them remain in their own communities. The project also aimed to raise awareness of housing options and grants to help improve house conditions. Overall the project sought to empower these island communities to resolve their housing problems, helping them to increase awareness amongst housing agencies of the needs of these isolated island communities and of the crucial role of housing in sustaining their social and economic well being.

2.8 Similar to the RHE work in Argyll, the Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot also focuses on addressing the impact of depopulation and
improving the sustainability of rural communities through the development of affordable housing. The aims of the project are context specific to the particular housing system in the Western Isles, and focus on:

- the development of a methodology for successful community led housing initiatives in the Western Isles;
- facilitating the development of partnership working between local communities and public agencies on housing issues,
- developing innovative housing projects.

2.9 The Highland Small Communities Housing Trust and the Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust share similar broad objectives with other agencies and individuals engaged in RHE activity. However, in addition to the battery of mechanisms available for achieving affordable housing, such as, for example, Rural Home Ownership Grants (RHOGS) and Rural Empty Property Grants (REPG), the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust also has a landbank function that enables it to acquire land on behalf of communities, as an alternative mechanism for achieving affordable housing. The Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust, which was established in 2007, aims to develop a landbanking role, although at the moment it does not have the capital to achieve this aim.

Governance

2.10 The Rural Housing Service is a Scottish Charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee. It is a membership based organisation and has a Board of Directors drawn from its membership.

2.11 The Aberdeenshire project has a steering group made up of the project partners and communities including Aberdeenshire Council, Aberdeenshire Housing Partnership, Cairngorms National Park, Rural Housing Service, Scottish Rural Property & Business Association and Tenants First Housing Cooperative. A respondent noted that a spin off from the project was the closer partnership working that the steering group itself made possible, especially the input of the private sector. The priorities for the RHE are agreed with the steering group; the geographic areas that will be targeted, as well as the focus of activity. The post itself is line managed by the Chief Executive of the Rural Housing Service, and ultimate responsibility for the post rests with the Board of the Rural Housing Service.

2.12 In Moray, the RHE reports to the Strategy and Policy Manager on a monthly basis, where priorities are agreed. As with the Aberdeenshire RHE, the post is line managed by the Chief Executive of the Rural Housing Service.

2.13 The Highland Small Communities Housing Trust is directly accountable to its corporate membership which is made up predominantly of Community Councils (most of which are already members) but also includes the main housing and land-for-housing interest groups in the Highlands. The Trust is managed by a Board of Directors, which comprises eight appointed, six community-elected
and up to two Co-opted Directors, as well as a Company Secretary and
Advisers who also attend Board Meetings.

2.14 The Dumfries & Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust is also managed
by a Board of Directors, including community groups, a local housing
association, and the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association.

2.15 The Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot has a steering group
made up of a range of agencies including: Tighean Innse Gall; North Harris
Trust, the local authority (officers and councillor), Harris Housing Association,
HIE Innse Gall, and local businesses. The co-ordinator is line managed by
Tighean Innse Gall, who also provide office accommodation.

Financing

2.16 The Aberdeenshire RHE was funded by a number of partners including
Aberdeenshire Council (through Private Sector Housing Grant), Cairngorms
National Park, with smaller contributions from the Rural Housing Service and
the SRPBA. The RHE was funded for three years with the rationale that this
period of time would provide some stability and certainty to the post, with the
intention that, subject to review, this post might be rolled forward.

2.17 The Moray post was funded for one year as a pilot by Moray Council on part-
time basis, using the enabling budget from the Housing Revenue Account.

2.18 The Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot runs for three years (from
2006 to 2009) and has been funded by the Communities Scotland Wider Role
Programme, HIE Innse Gall, and the local authority.

2.19 Since the Rural Housing Service was established, funding has been drawn
from a variety of sources. For example, in 2007/08 the major funding sources
included the Scottish Government, the MacRobert Trust and Conference
income, with other funding sources covering the costs of the RHE in
Aberdeenshire, whereas the previous year funding was drawn from the Scottish
Government and the Tudor Trust, with again, other funding sources covering
the costs of the Aberdeenshire RHE. A consistent source of funding has been
the Scottish Government’s Housing Voluntary Grants Scheme (HVGS), which
in 2007/08 covered just over a third of this organisation’s expenditure.

2.20 The Highland Small Communities Housing Trust draws upon a variety of
sources for its revenue income. As with the Rural Housing Service, a consistent
source of funding has been the Scottish Government’s HVGS.

2.21 The Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust has
experienced difficulties in securing core funding for its development and also
capital funding to cover its aim to provide a land banking function. A potential
source of capital funding is the local Council Tax Second Homes Discount fund,
but the Trust has been unable to secure finance via this route. A respondent
highlighted that clarity over the position of non registered bodies gaining access
to this funding source would be welcome. However, the Trust does receive
funding from the Scottish Government HVGS. Its precursor, the Shelter
Housing Action with Rural Communities project (SHARC), was originally funded for three years by the National Lottery Charities Board in Scotland, and received follow-up funding from the Communities Fund.

2.22 A consistent funding source underpinning the activities of the latter three organisations (the Rural Housing Service, the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust, and the Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust) has been the Scottish Government’s HVGS. One respondent of these organisations emphasised the crucial nature of this funding in providing the means to allow staff to undertake their various roles. In some ways this funding has provided a model for assessing how far part-funding by the Scottish Government has facilitated the type of activities that RHEs can undertake in rural areas. The next section describes the activities that the various agencies have engaged in.

Activities

2.23 The activities of RHEs are described here in relation to the specific activities undertaken in the last financial year 2007/08 where possible. Also highlighted is the range of activities that have been undertaken throughout the lifetime of the longer running agencies, including, the Rural Housing Service, The Highland Small Communities Housing Trust. This section also describes the activities of the other RHEs, who have been in post for shorter periods of time, including projects that have come to an end such as the SHARC project, and Argyll Development worker for the Rural Housing Service.

Rural Housing Service

2.24 As noted earlier, the Rural Housing Service has been the longest running organisation engaged in enabling work, and this reflects the range of activities that have been undertaken. This section of the report gives a flavour for the current activities that the Rural Housing Service is engaged in (see table 2.1 overleaf for activities 2007/08 that directly related to enabling activity), as well as highlighting examples of the type of activity that this organisation has been engaged in previous years.

2.25 Examples of activities in previous years include:

- Providing housing advice to the Gigha community to support their purchase of the island and helping demonstrate housing need to secure 18 new affordable houses;
- Supporting the Laggan community to buy and renovate five cottages which had been empty for 20 years. The properties were leased to Highland Council, who let the properties to households on their waiting list;
- Helping the Colonsay community to secure four new affordable houses for rent by identifying levels of housing need that had gone previously unrecorded and developing a Colonsay Housing Strategy with the community and other key partners;
- A survey in 1993 in Durness provided the necessary information to convince (as was then) Scottish Homes to fund Albyn Housing Society to build six houses for rent;
• Using the Personal Housing Plans approach to identify needs in Glenelg, resulting in four properties for rent developed by Lochalsh & Skye Housing Association;
• Raising the need for a new service and supporting the establishment of the Care & Repair Service in Argyll & Bute;
• Assisting Sinclair’s Bay Community Council to undertake a need survey highlighting overcrowding in council accommodation in Keiss, resulting in extensions being built by the local authority in the houses where overcrowding existed to improve conditions and prevent households having to move out of the area;
• becoming the a stakeholder for the Scottish Government on rural housing issues;
• establishing the Rural Housing Service Annual Conference as the main rural housing conference in Scotland.

Table 2.1 Rural Housing Service activities by aim, 2007/08

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establish and maintain contact with rural communities across Scotland</td>
<td>Met and advised 34 communities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Work with rural communities to conduct action research into housing needs and devise solutions | - 4 housing needs surveys undertaken  
- research report into the use of croft land for affordable housing development undertaken  
- 2 further action research projects started                                                                                                                                                  |
| Provide advice and support to individuals to enable them to deal with housing issues | - Advice provided to 41 individuals on Rural Home Ownership Grants in Scottish Borders (on behalf of Communities Scotland);  
- 92 RHOG enquiries from elsewhere in Scotland  
- 21 enquiries from landowners about grants to provide affordable rented housing  
- 28 enquiries about grants to renovate housing  
- 121 further enquiries from individuals regarding issues such as housing options, planning for housing in rural areas |
| Encourage and support the development of inter-community networks which share information, ideas on good practice, and influence policy development | Held Annual Conference, (providing 12 community bursaries).                                                                                                                                 |
| Raise the profile of rural housing with Parliament, housing and development agencies and the media. | - Meeting with Minister for Communities and Sport to discuss rural housing issues                                                                                                                                 |

**Highland Small Communities Housing Trust.**

2.26 This section sets out in detail the recent activities of the Trust in the last financial year, 2007/08 (Table 2.2, overleaf), and also gives examples of the range of activities of the Trust in previous years, including innovative work that the Trust has engaged in.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communities assisted</td>
<td>Around 100 either on the basis of occasional contacts and visits and many with surgery and landbanking follow-work resulting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing needs surveys/surgeries -</td>
<td>16 surgeries held</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiative at the Edge Areas</td>
<td>Continued work in S.E.Caithness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites bought or about to be bought</td>
<td>6 sites bought, 8 sites secured for acquisition in 2008/9 and 3 more (where HSCHT had initiated the landbanking work and carried out full feasibility studies) were passed on to other social housing providers to secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites in pipeline/being feasibility studied</td>
<td>20 sites were, or were in the process of, being investigated/feasibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site sales to Housing Associations</td>
<td>5 sites were sold to Albyn Housing Society for the provision of 72+ rented and/or &quot;Homestake&quot; houses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| House plot sales                         | - 11 plots sold plus 9 legal offers made  
- over 100 potential plot purchasers assessed for Rural Home Ownership Grant and plot sale eligibility                                                                                      |
| "Stepping stone" housing for key incoming workers | One listed building ('Townlands Barn') bought for sale to the Highland Buildings Preservation Trust.                                                                                                    |
| Liaising fully with key agencies and other partners | - 40+ of Highland Council's 7 Area Housing Development Forums,  
- 5 Highland Housing Alliance Board Meetings,  
- 2 HC/HAs liaison meetings  
- 13 meetings of HSCHT's Development sub-committee                                                                                                       |
| Wider information and advice services    | Regular updates of the HSCHT website;  
- responded to the regular number of phone calls from a variety of community group and other sources seeking advice on various aspects of the Rural Housing Burden method.  
| Developing and delivering innovative housing solutions | - Rural Housing Burden  
- "houses in the forest" pilot project at Milehouse, Kincraig.                                                                                                                                  |

2.27 A feature of the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust is its ability to buy land on behalf of rural communities. Such land may be sold to Charitable Housing Associations to develop accommodation for rent. Alternatively, serviced plots are sold to individual households who are able to afford to build a home via Rural Home Ownership Grants. The Trust also helps to broker site purchases by housing associations. A further mechanism used by the Trust is to buy individual properties to meet the housing needs of households in exceptional circumstances, such as accommodation for key workers including teachers.

2.28 As well as bringing about a diverse range of housing solutions, a crucial aspect of the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust’s activities has been to develop innovative mechanisms to assist in the effective delivery of affordable housing in rural communities. Examples include the pioneering use of "Rural
Housing Burdens\textsuperscript{1} to ensure that properties for home ownership that are developed in rural communities remain available at below market prices for households beyond the first occupants.

2.29 Innovative work has included the Milehouse, houses-in-the-forest pilot. This project involves developing a new, but replicable, model for creating new affordable housing on afforested sites, on land with very little development value. The pilot aims to provide four environmentally sensitive, sustainable units, which local people will be able to buy with Rural Home Ownership Grant assistance. The application of the Trust’s Rural Housing Burden conditions would retain an element of affordability in perpetuity. If successful, the Trust plan to roll out the scheme, in essence facilitating the direct provision by the Trust of new affordable housing.

2.30 Further innovative developments have refined approaches to needs assessment, especially the use of ‘options surgeries’, rather than questionnaire based assessments of need. Options surgeries usually involve two meetings in community halls that allow local people to discuss their housing needs in confidence with Trust staff on a one to one basis. These discussions aim to enable people to reach an informed view of the range of housing options that are realistically available to them. In the Trust’s view, options surgeries are a better method of uncovering current levels of housing need, in comparison with the use of questionnaires. The use of options surgeries also allows a detailed profile of current needs to be built up, that can be matched against proposed affordable housing developments, bringing confidence that the housing solutions being proposed can be effectively tailored to meet the actual needs of a community.

**Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust**

2.31 The Trust has engaged with communities directly to assess local housing needs, meeting with six communities and carrying out three surveys in 2007/2008. Follow up work in two of the three communities, has included assisting residents in identifying sites, engaging with landowners and sourcing funding to purchase the sites. In the third case the Trust’s development officer has supported a proposed development by a housing association by working towards gaining community support for the proposed development.

2.32 One difficulty that Trust has faced is obtaining capital funding to develop a landbanking role. However, by making a virtue out of a necessity, this organisation has developed an innovative way of applying Rural Housing Burdens without having to acquire the land first. The Trust uses Rural Housing Burdens to secure the affordability of houses sold at a discount by private developers to satisfy local planning policy requirements for 25 per cent affordable homes. The Trust acts as a broker between private developers and the purchasers and the discount becomes an equity share held by the Trust.

\textsuperscript{1} The Trust attaches a shared equity, pre-emption right condition - known as a Rural Housing Burden - on the title of every house plot it sells. This condition ensures that the property remains affordable in perpetuity, as each seller can only get back a proportion of the open market value of the property, with the balance of the equity retained by the Trust.
with the result that the property will always be below market value regardless of the number of sales. This method adds value to the delivery of affordable housing in the local housing system because it is only used in rural situations where there is local demand, where RSLs are not willing to take up the allocation and where, without the Trust’s intervention, the properties would be lost to the open market.

**Shelter Housing Action with Rural Communities**

2.33 The precursor to the Dumfries Small Communities Housing Trust was the Shelter Housing Action with Rural Communities project, which came to an end in 2007. Shelter report that the RHE contributed towards the development of four schemes, and 64 properties in total. The RHE undertook 25 housing needs surveys. A key strand of the work was helping to set up two community led housing groups to develop affordable housing in their respective areas: the Glenkens Affordable Housing Group, and Isle of Whithorn Affordable Housing Group. A contribution to the work of these housing groups was joint working by the RHE with a range of local stakeholders which facilitated Affordable Housing Studies by Craigforth Consultants. The Glenkens Housing Group is now unoperational, having helped to achieve two of the new affordable housing schemes in Dalry and New Galloway.

**Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot**

2.34 The Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot offers an example of a very focused and discreet project to deliver affordable housing in the Western Isles. The project is just into its third year of a three year pilot. Activities so far have involved assessing the housing needs of communities using a variety of methods, either by drawing on existing sources of data, such as island-wide Housing Needs and Market Analysis by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, using a local expert opinion approach in one area, and a postal survey. The development co-ordinator has subsequently worked with communities to identify potential land through discussions with grazings committees, although individual crofters may also be willing to make land available via apportioned or in-bye land. A key aspect of the enabler’s current role is working with key partners to deliver affordable housing which is sensitive to the settlement pattern of crofting townships, rather than clusters or small estates which would look out of place, and also convincing communities of the value of affordable housing developments in the absence of local lettings initiatives.

**Argyll Development Worker**

2.35 The Argyll Development Worker was a part-time post for just over one year. This post was successful in tailoring a development of affordable housing to meet the specific needs of residents on Tiree, which necessitated a change from providing Low Cost Home Ownership to rented accommodation. The RHE also secured an Agency Agreement from Communities Scotland for the Rural Housing Service to provide Rural Home Ownership Grants advice, assistance and processing on Tiree, Coll, Jura, Colonsay. The RHE worked extensively with local communities and development trusts, including an ongoing initiative aiming to bring empty properties back into use.
Tenure of accommodation that RHEs have contributed towards

2.36 RHE activity in Scotland has helped to bring about new affordable housing across different tenures in rural and remote areas, including facilitating developments for social renting as well as low cost home ownership. RHEs have also contributed to a more effective use of the existing housing stock, helping to bring empty dwellings back into use, and also utilising the potential of conversions and adaptations to achieve housing solutions for the residents of rural communities. An emerging role for RHEs is working with landowners, as well as community buy outs, not only in relation to identifying potential sites for development for social rent or home ownership, but with regard to the development of affordable housing by private landlords as part of the Rural Homes for Rent scheme. Certainly an explicit aim for the both the Moray and Aberdeenshire RHEs is to pursue the potential offered by this route.

2.37 A crucial factor in meeting the housing needs of rural residents through low cost home ownership and property for rent is the flexibility offered by the use of mechanisms such as Rural Home Ownership Grants and Rural Empty Property Grants. Whilst these mechanisms may not grab the headlines in comparison with the larger scale developments of affordable housing that can be achieved in bigger settlements in terms of the number of units delivered, they nevertheless have allowed RHEs to achieve significant results at the scale of small rural communities.

Conclusions

2.38 RHEs in Scotland have contributed towards the delivery of a range of affordable housing developments in the areas where they have been active. A feature of the activities of agencies undertaking RHE roles is the diverse nature of the responses to the needs of rural and remote communities. The overall impression is one of using a ‘horses for courses’ approach, with responses tailored to the specific needs of individual communities from the variety of mechanisms that are available for developing community capacity and achieving affordable housing solutions. To take the Rural Housing Service as an example, its enabling role has not only contributed towards new accommodation for rent and sale, but has also facilitated improvements to the existing housing stock through adaptations, or bringing empty dwellings back into use can meet the housing needs of rural areas.

2.39 RHEs are pioneering innovative solutions to maximise the potential of the mechanisms that are available to meet the housing needs of rural communities, with the development of Rural Housing Burdens perhaps the most notable example.

2.40 RHEs have been financed in a number of different ways. Some RHEs, such as the Argyll Development Worker, and the SHARC project received a single source of grant payment by charitable organisations, although both RHEs developed exit strategies as their funding came to an end. Other RHEs such as the Aberdeenshire RHE are funded by a variety of local stakeholders. A crucial feature of the longer standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust has been part funding by
the Scottish Government in the form of Housing Voluntary Grants Scheme (HVGS). The activities and outputs of these organisations highlights what can be achieved in circumstances where funding allows continuity.

2.41 RHEs are operating either as individuals or as small organisations. The locally based RHEs in Moray and Aberdeenshire are part of the Rural Housing Service and benefit from line management and support from this organisation. Although either approach appears to work well, a danger is that RHEs can become isolated and the later chapters in the report will address this issue.

2.42 The governance of RHEs is a reflection of the role that enablers play with regard to facilitating joint working and developing community led housing solutions. There was a strong focus on either boards or advisory groups at local level, comprising key stakeholders in the delivery of affordable housing within each RHE’s area of operation across all tenures. A feature of these agencies is the level of ownership by, and responsibility to, representative bodies of rural communities themselves.

2.43 An important context framing the activities of RHEs is the gestation period often required to achieve practical solutions on the ground, and this point comes back to the inherent difficulties of developing affordable housing in rural communities. This factor has significant implications for the timeframes that underpin the type of work that RHEs engage in, and needs to be borne in mind when monitoring activities against the original aims of projects, and also with respect to the length of time that RHEs have been in post.

2.44 A key feature of the policy response in Scotland has been the diverse range of possible solutions that are available to communities and households in rural areas, and this response needs to be developed to ensure that it meets its full potential. An essential role for enablers is to be able to maximise the uptake of these current responses, tailoring the available solutions to the specific needs within individual communities. For example, mechanisms such as RHOG and REPG have allowed RHEs to achieve significant results at the scale of small rural communities.
3 CHAPTER THREE RURAL HOUSING ENABLERS IN SCOTLAND: PRACTITIONERS’ VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

Introduction

3.1 Chapter three draws on the views of respondents in Scotland to explore the reasons why RHEs were established in different parts of Scotland, including a consideration of why RHEs may have not been set up in other areas of the country. The chapter then examines how far respondents consider that RHEs have been able to achieve their aims, and also some of the barriers that may hinder RHE activity.

Geographic coverage of RHEs

3.2 One of the aims of the report was to explore why RHEs have been established in some rural areas of Scotland, but not all. This section describes the origins of agencies undertaking RHE type work in Scotland, and why they were established, before moving on to discuss perceptions of why RHEs may not have been established in other areas.

3.3 The Rural Housing Service has overseen the development of three locally based RHEs in Argyll, Aberdeenshire and Moray. These RHEs were established for a variety of reasons. The Rural Housing Service has a development strategy based on the creation of a number of locally based RHEs. The rationale for locally based RHEs is that such posts will be closely integrated with local networks, build up trust with communities and local stakeholders and develop a close knowledge of the local housing system. One of the overall objectives of the locally based enablers is to act as a demonstration project to highlight the contribution that this kind of post can make by working with rural communities.

3.4 The post of the Argyll Development Worker was established in response to the level of needs that had been uncovered amongst Atlantic island communities, reflected in the amount of time that the Chief Executive of the Rural Housing Service was spending in helping these communities to arrive at solutions to their housing needs. Although attempts to achieve funding from a range of agencies were unsuccessful, a part-time post was established with funding from the Nationwide Foundation.

3.5 The Aberdeenshire post was created in response to a number of agencies in Aberdeenshire wanting to take a more proactive approach to tackling the housing needs of remote and rural communities. There is a healthy forward land bank in Aberdeenshire, with more opportunities for affordable housing than funding available. However, these sites tend to focused on the larger settlements. There was a concern that the smaller rural communities should not miss out and it was felt that the RHE post would help to facilitate affordable housing solutions in these communities by drawing on a diverse range of funding sources.
3.6 Similarly, Moray Council responded to the concerns of councillors over the need for affordable housing in the rural communities of this area, which coincided with an approach by the Rural Housing Service putting forward the case for establishing locally based RHEs. The Moray RHE was established as a one pilot on a part-time basis, focused on the communities covered by the Speyside Local Development Forum of the Moray Community Planning Partnership.

3.7 The impetus for the Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot, Western Isles was concerned local residents, community groups and Tighean Innse Gall, who wanted to address the problems caused by the outmigration of population from communities outwith the Stornoway area. It was felt that the provision of affordable housing would be a cornerstone in helping in the wider regeneration of these fragile areas. A three year pilot project was established with funding from a range of sources to employ a development co-coordinator to provide an enabling role in the delivery of affordable housing.

3.8 The Highland Small Communities Housing Trust was established in 1998 by key stakeholders within the Highlands in recognition of the need to assist the smaller communities in the Highlands to achieve the best possible results from the housing system. Membership of the Trust reflects its emphasis on partnership working and engagement with small communities, and is open to:

- The Highland Council;
- Any Community Council in The Highland Council area;
- Any community association or similar locally representative community organisation based in The Highland Council area;
- Any housing association having its registered office and primary area of operation within The Highland Council area;
- Scottish Crofting Foundation;
- The Scottish Rural Property and Business Association.

3.9 The Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust was established in 2007 to develop the role undertaken by a previous project: Shelter Housing Action with Rural Communities (SHARC). The SHARC project was set up in 2000 and focused upon small communities (with populations of 1000 and under) in Dumfries & Galloway. One respondent in this area noted that a feature of the local housing market had been the rapidly worsening affordability of market housing within rural areas of Dumfries and Galloway. Rural communities had not been viewed as a priority for the local authority in the past, but the changing market conditions had altered this view, and the work undertaken by RHEs was valued in terms of delivering intelligence on housing needs at the level of rural communities.

3.10 Respondents were asked why they thought that RHEs had not been established in other areas of Scotland, and included the views of two respondents in local authorities where RHEs have not been established, as well as the impressions gained by agencies engaged in RHE activities. The
following points were raised in relation to perceived resistance to RHEs, above and beyond the fundamental issue of finding the funding for such posts:

- RHEs might raise the expectations of communities which cannot be matched through delivery;
- RHEs appear to duplicate work that RSLs and local authorities already undertake with regard to working in rural areas as part of community planning and development, and specifically in the delivery of affordable housing;
- RHEs would add another layer of bureaucracy to the community planning process;
- A disproportionate amount of time seems to be spent on undertaking assessments of housing needs and less on meeting those needs;
- RHEs can become isolated, and the position can be problematic with regard to turnover of staff, and covering absences through ill health or holidays.

Nevertheless, the two authorities who have not established RHEs noted that they remained open to the idea of RHEs, and enabling activity, although there may be a preference for undertaking enabling work in house.

3.11 A key point about the development of RHEs in some areas over others relates to the local impetus for this kind of post. A recent evaluation of RHEs elsewhere in the UK noted that the scale of the RHE programme in England was the result of local interest and need rather than a national policy on coverage (Hughes-Isherwood, 2006). An essential ingredient is the level of ‘buy in’ from key local stakeholders, not only amongst practitioners, but politically as well. One difficulty with community led developments is that potentially they may be initially disconnected from officer or councillor led networks that may hamper their development, or face resistance from organisations to the work of RHEs. In contrast, very strong traditions of partnership working can pay dividends for the type of work that RHEs engage in. An example here is the approach in the Highlands Council area, exemplified by the work of the Rural Partnership for Change, and the role of Housing Development Forums.

Achieving aims

3.12 RHE activity is a developing role in Scotland. The RHEs in Moray and Aberdeenshire are essentially pilots to demonstrate the value of locally based enabling work. The aims for the Moray enabler for example, reflect the short period of time that the pilot is funded for (although it is intended that the post should be rolled forward after the funding for one year has come to an end, subject to review). The aims for the year reflect reaching a stage in the ongoing process of achieving affordable housing on the ground and relate to intermediate objectives such as identifying priorities and possible solutions. Similarly, the Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot is part way through its term, and has achieved significant milestones in the process of working with communities and other stakeholders to achieve new affordable housing in crofting townships.
3.13 Two RHE posts including SHARC and the Argyll Development Worker have come to the end of their original funding, and their activities and achievements were highlighted in the previous chapter. Whilst the Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust was experiencing difficulties in finding the capital funding to develop its landbanking role, it was felt that a valuable role was being played in providing local information on the housing needs of rural communities to organisations such as the local authority, as well as developing community capacity. The Trust was also pioneering innovative solutions by brokering sales and using Rural Housing Burdens to achieve low cost home ownership in perpetuity for rural communities.

3.14 The organisations that have carried out RHE work for the longest periods of time, including the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust, and the nation-wide work undertaken by the Rural Housing Service, reached a maturity in terms of delivering against their aims some time ago, especially with regard to achieving affordable housing on the ground. There is an ongoing contribution to the diverse range of housing solutions for rural and remote communities that continue to flow from these agencies. Nevertheless, one respondent was keen to emphasise that there was no room for complacency, and that their organisation had to refine their approach to achieve more significant results. An important step would be to agree meaningful and realistic targets that would meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

Barriers to progress

3.15 Respondents highlighted a number of barriers that hindered RHEs from achieving their full potential. One of the dilemmas of RHE activity is that one of its perceived strengths, that of maintaining an independent brokering role, is also a possible weakness in terms of the potential for becoming isolated. There was widespread concern amongst respondents that the latter situation should be avoided. There are two aspects to this point about isolation. The first is that RHEs may be potentially isolated from local networks due to the nature of the job, which often entails working from home. As an aside, one respondent highlighted that trying to establish a broadband connection in rural and remote areas is still not what it might be in the twenty-first century. An important step to militate against this possibility of isolation was the essential role of local advisory groups. One respondent also noted that although the RHE in their area worked from home, they also had office space available in the local authority to facilitate face to face joint working with officers.

3.16 The second issue relates to peer group support. As noted earlier in the report, RHE activity in Scotland is a developing role, and even if RHEs were more widely adopted across the country, they would still constitute just a handful of individuals. A couple of respondents noted the value of networking between RHEs and suggested that a forum such as the Rural Housing Enablers Group should be taken forwards. A group such as this could provide an important focus for sharing best practice and experiences.

3.17 Linked to this point were the diverse range of skills and knowledge bases that RHEs require to undertake their roles effectively. These relate not only to housing related expertise concerning all the potential housing solutions
available, how the local housing system works, housing development and the local planning system, but also skills in community development, handling meetings and brokering solutions between stakeholders. Research elsewhere (Three Dragons et al 2005) has noted that it is unrealistic to expect one individual coming into post to be well versed in all aspects of the work that RHEs are expected to undertake – which is a back handed testament to the achievements of RHEs currently operating. Nevertheless, as one respondent pointed out, on the job training is a feature of how RHEs have to develop their capacity to undertake their roles. Again, a conclusion to draw is that a network of peer group support needs to be adequately resourced at national level, not only to provide training, but to draw on the expertise already available in Scotland across all organisations engaged in RHE type activities, as well as elsewhere. An organisation such as the Rural Housing Service is ideally placed to undertake this role.

3.18 Some concern was expressed that other agencies such as housing associations and local authorities were already delivering on the type of work that they felt a RHE would expect to undertake, and that RHEs focused too much attention on assessing needs and community capacity building. In contrast, a point made by respondents in two local authorities in Scotland was that prior to taking on a RHE, there was a gap in delivery by housing providers, such that small rural communities were missing out.

3.19 Further, other respondents with a background in rural enabling argued that by focusing on needs assessment, RHEs could contribute a more bottom up approach to affordable housing delivery, by matching identified needs with potential responses. For example, work on Colonsay by the Rural Housing Service identified levels of housing need that had previously gone unrecorded, prompting the development of a housing strategy for the island and contributing to the development of four affordable homes for rent.

3.20 Respondents contrasted this approach with the more opportunistic, site led approach, which was felt to characterise the response of housing providers (although in fairness the level of needs in many rural areas are such that any site for affordable housing that becomes available will address housing needs). There should be room for both approaches. Effective partnership working should be able to facilitate a pragmatic site led approach dovetailed with an approach that starts with a needs led assessment and matches these needs with the variety of housing solutions available. What examples from RHE activity in Scotland show is that communities can themselves contribute to the overall supply of affordable housing in rural areas by acquiring land through community buy outs, and through this route helping to facilitate the development of affordable housing.

3.21 A number of respondents also commented on the current policy environment and how this factor could enhance the role that RHEs can play:

- Clarity was required over the future of key mechanisms for RHEs such as RHOGS and REPG;
- Whilst the development of new initiatives such as Rural Homes for Rent was widely welcomed, there were concerns about other aspects of the
current funding environment. One comment was that bringing forward the timing of HAG funding to allow public sector agencies to work with private developers who wanted to develop sites for affordable housing in response to the credit crunch would direct funding to larger sites located in urban settlements and potentially leave small rural schemes ‘on the shelf’;

- As has been noted elsewhere (Tribal Consulting, 2007), the use of exception sites could add a significant dimension to the work of RHEs in bringing forward land for affordable housing. An exceptions policy in a local plan allows for the development of small sites in rural communities for affordable housing on land which would otherwise not be released for market housing. Its potential for small rural communities can be seen from the fact that in England, 57 per cent of all Housing Corporation funded affordable homes in communities under 1,000 population were on exception sites (Taylor Review, 2008, p94). However, a respondent also highlighted that the impact of this mechanism would be likely to vary in different rural areas of Scotland, and would perhaps be of greater value in more pressured rural housing markets, compared with remote, fragile communities, where land release for affordable housing may not be so constrained.

Conclusions

3.22 Current geographic coverage of RHE activity in Scotland may be partly explained by the fact that this role has developed in response to the concerns of local communities and other key stakeholders over the difficulties of achieving housing solutions in rural and remote areas. This point ties in with a recent evaluation of RHEs elsewhere in the UK that noted that the scale of the RHE programme in England was the result of local interest and need rather than a national policy on coverage.

3.23 Allied to the point about geographic coverage, there remains some scepticism in some quarters over the impact of RHEs with regard to the balance of their work, and how far they may add value to the work that is already being undertaken by local authorities and housing associations. However, respondents in the local authorities where locally based RHEs have been established pointed out that prior to the RHEs coming into post, there was a gap in delivery for rural and remote communities.

3.24 RHEs are a developing role in Scotland, and their achievements need to be set against the timeframes they have been active for, and the stages they have reached within pilot projects. However, where organisations have delivered RHE services for some considerable time, then an ongoing programme of achievements can be seen.

3.25 One difficulty that RHEs face is the potential for becoming isolated, both in terms of isolation from local networks of key stakeholders, and also isolated from peer support. There are a number of implications that flow from this issue. The first is the advantages and disadvantages that can accrue from where the RHE is based. If a RHE is based within a local authority or RSL, they are more likely to be effectively networked both in terms of officers and in terms of local political will for the post. However, there remains a question mark over the
perceived independence of RHE posts within organisations such as local authorities, and the way in which RHEs may be received, and trusted, by local communities.

3.26 The type of governance structures that are in place can have a crucial role in reducing the potential for isolation. An RHE can retain an independent position by being based outside of public agencies, and yet benefit from very effective partnership working via local steering groups, and also from local cultures that support partnership working, as evidenced by approaches to joint working in the Highland Council area.

3.27 Even if RHEs were more widely adopted across the country, they would still constitute just a handful of individuals. As well as addressing the potential for isolation, RHEs also need to be supported by training and personal development to achieve the broad range of skills required to undertake the variety of tasks and roles that they are expected to perform. A network of peer group support needs to be adequately resourced at national level, not only to provide training, but to draw on the expertise already available in Scotland across all organisations engaged in RHE type activities, as well as elsewhere. An organisation such as the Rural Housing Service is ideally placed to undertake this role.

3.28 The policy environment has a crucial role to play in enhancing the potential role of RHEs with regard to the mechanism at their disposal for helping to deliver affordable housing. Consideration should be given to:

- Clarifying the future of key mechanisms for rural communities such as RHOGs and REPG;
- Assessing the implications of changes to HAG funding for rural areas;
- Broadening the range of mechanisms at the disposal of RHEs and other stakeholders in rural areas by taking on board the potential of exception sites in local plan policies.
4 CHAPTER FOUR EXPERIENCES OF OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE UK

Introduction

4.1 Chapter four considers the role, operation and impact of RHEs in England and Wales. The chapter draws upon evaluations and other literature relating to RHEs, as well as discussions with key informants in these two countries.

Rural Housing Enablers in England

Role and operation

4.2 The Taylor report provided a review of the roles that RHEs in England were undertaking in 2008. These roles included the following:

- Help parish councils to understand the processes and options for achieving affordable housing;
- Identify housing needs which cannot currently be met by the market;
- Develop and maintain positive relationships with housing and planning authorities in pursuit of the provision of affordable housing;
- Identify potential sites and liaise closely with landowners and planning authorities over constraints and opportunities;
- Liaise closely with local housing associations and Housing Partnerships to facilitate a smooth handover from pre-development to development processes;
- Operate independently to achieve consensus among partnership stakeholders, and contribute to relevant strategies at national, regional and local level to deliver affordable rural housing;
- Identify potential means of funding.

4.3 With regard to financing, up until March 2008, the RHEs in England received funding, in part, via Defra’s Rural Social and Community Programme. On average the Defra funding provided 56 per cent of the total cost of the RHEs, with local matchfunding by housing associations and local authorities providing the balance (Brown and Kersley, 2008).

4.4 In March 2008 central government funding for RHEs in England came to an end, and from April 2008 funding devolved entirely to local level. The Rural Social and Community Programme was a short term funding programme with a clear vision that RHEs should eventually be funded at local level by local authorities and housing associations. The original guidance noted that all projects should have an exit strategy to identify how they would develop after the time limited programme came to an end (Hansard, 2008). One respondent was critical of the lack of exit strategies in place in a number of areas to take forwards the funding of RHEs. Nevertheless, a number of approaches at local level have been put forward as possible funding routes for the future:
• Employ an RHE within the local authority. This approach has been undertaken in areas of Yorkshire, the Isle of Wight and Cheshire. These areas are in addition to counties such as Shropshire and Cornwall which already employed enablers ‘in house’, within local authorities;
• Develop a commercial approach by costing services and charging back to funders, on the basis of a consultancy or a social enterprise;
• On costs approach, where an RSL pays a percentage of the final open market price per unit of a developed site to the RHE;
• Seek top up funding from a range of partners;
• Bring the enabler post to an end.

4.5 The Taylor Report (2008) favoured the approach of acknowledging that securing sites is part of the cost of the delivery of affordable housing. The Report suggested that the Government and Homes and Communities Agency could develop options for grant aiding (against delivery) programmes for the identification and delivery of Exception Sites with local authorities and housing associations as a way of funding community based rural housing enabling (p105).

4.6 Ongoing monitoring of the situation has identified that of the 52 full time equivalent positions in England, ten were assumed to have ended. Twenty five posts had identified funding through to March 2009, but possibly not beyond, and seventeen posts had not secured funding for the future at the time the monitoring took place (Kersley, 2008). On the face of it, this situation looks pretty bleak. Indeed, although some posts have been re-established, continuity in terms of individuals in post has been disrupted, as people leave to seek more secure job prospects.

4.7 The Taylor Report (2008) pointed out that it is not clear from current policy in England how the present situation would be expected to improve, given that funding for some of the RHEs that have been in post has ceased, and that many local authorities are not funding RHE posts at all. Indeed, the current uncertainty over funding for RHEs in England can be set in the context of the conclusions of the Affordable Rural Housing Commission who reported in 2006. This Commission concluded that even with the central government funding that was in place at the time, the funding of RHEs had resulted in a number of weaknesses, including:

• The available funding and long term career structure is not sufficient for a group of individuals who produce such a high level of output. This has often led to RHEs being recruited at too low a salary (such as £20,000) for the mix of community development and planning skills needed, and not being supported to an adequate level;
• Short-term funding means that many RHEs move on quickly to find more secure jobs, and have to spend time securing further funding rather than houses;
• They often work in relative isolation;
• They lack specific training or a career structure. (Affordable Rural Housing Commission, 2006, p79).
Impact

4.8 Whilst not evaluations of RHEs *per se*, a feature of recent inquiries and reports examining the delivery of affordable housing in rural areas in England has been the very positive support given to the role of RHEs. Indeed, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Rural Housing Policy Forum went so far as to say that their core conclusion was that the current number of Rural Housing Enablers should be greatly supplemented and resourced (Best and Shucksmith, 2006). This conclusion was endorsed by the Affordable Rural Housing Commission (2006), who recommended the consolidation and extension of the service provided by RHEs. The latest report to reflect on RHE roles was the Taylor Report (2008), which noted that:

“Significant numbers of representations to this Review strongly supported continued national funding to support and encourage the extension of this kind of enabling work, bearing in mind that it is not in place across much of the country” (p 104).

4.9 An assessment of the impact of RHEs in England was drawn from a number of evaluations that have been undertaken since this type of post was established in England in 1991. Three of the evaluations reviewed for this report (identified in the Methods section of Chapter One) were at national level, but the review also draws on the results of a local evaluation of RHEs in North Yorkshire. A consistent theme running through the evaluations has been the very positive assessments of the impacts that RHEs have been able to achieve.

4.10 The key finding from the evaluation by Lavis (1995) was that delivering affordable housing with rural communities required a long lead in time. Lavis (1995) noted that of the 210 homes that had reached construction stage between 1991 and 1994 with four part time RHE posts, 189 were developed in the final year of the evaluation, 1993/1994. Undertaking community development work slowed down the initial pace of delivery, but paid dividends later on in the process, and overall it was concluded that this aspect of the RHEs' work led to a faster turnaround for schemes in rural areas than would otherwise be the case. Furthermore, this evaluation also highlighted that the failure rate of potential schemes increased in cases where the RHE role had been reduced.

4.11 Chater and Hood (1999) undertook a further evaluation of the 16 RHEs in post at that time. This evaluation found that between 1990 and 1997 the work of the RHEs had directly resulted in 637 affordable homes. Crucially, given the point above about lead in times, the evaluation by Chapter and Hood (1999) noted that eleven of these posts had only been established in the previous two years. The evaluation also concluded that judgements on the success of RHEs should be based on a range of outputs and outcomes, reflecting the diverse role that RHEs undertake. In this regard, the evaluation noted that RHEs had:

- Created greater awareness and understanding of the rural housing issues;
- Provided practical support to parish councils;
- Acted as an independent broker and facilitator;
• Identified housing needs;
• Helped the process and provision of homes in rural areas;
• Provided advice and information to a range of agencies, including local authorities;
• Demonstrated how housing can as a 'springboard' for wider regeneration and social inclusion activity.

4.12 As well as noting the achievements highlighted by this evaluation, it is also worth setting out the key recommendations from the 1999 evaluation, which proposed:

• The changing and variable nature of the RHEs work points to a need for a degree of flexibility to enable the post to respond to local circumstances;
• Work should be undertaken with key partners to introduce more sensitive measures of achievements to cover the qualitative as well as quantitative aspects of the work of RHEs, recognising the long lead in time for rural schemes;
• There is a need for more effective community development support to be available to the RHEs, possibly through the Rural Community Councils;
• Greater clarification and agreement between partners is needed of the objectives of each post.

4.13 In 2005 a further evaluation of RHEs was published, reviewing the work of the then 40 RHEs in post at the time of the research (Three Dragons et al, 2005). This evaluation’s overall conclusion was that RHEs were adding value and should be continued and, where necessary, expanded. However, the evaluation also noted that at the level of individual RHEs, the list of objectives that RHEs were expected to deliver against was too broad and ambitious – ‘the task is too great and the skills required of one person are too diverse’ (p25). This evaluation also revealed a divergence in views over the priorities of RHEs. RHEs themselves placed more emphasis on community development and needs assessment, whereas host organisations placed greater priority on RHEs identifying sites for affordable housing.

4.14 The evaluation by Three dragons et al (2005) also identified an important point by assessing the views of other stakeholders, who commented that a lot of the essential work that RHEs performed went largely unnoticed and related chiefly to acting in a brokering and facilitating role, establishing trust between rural communities, local authorities and affordable housing providers. This point has implications for the way that RHEs should be evaluated, and how their impact can be judged.

4.15 The evaluation of RHEs in North Yorkshire by Lavis (2007) concluded that the RHEs added value to existing work and were essential for the provision of new affordable homes in rural communities. Furthermore, this evaluation went on to conclude that without the RHEs the work necessary to deliver rural affordable housing was not being done. However, Lavis (2007) also noted that RHEs could only work with the policy mechanisms that were available within their area of operation. In this respect, the local policy context was crucial in terms of
the commitment and will of key stakeholders to deliver affordable housing in rural communities, using the most effective mechanisms that were available.

4.16 One of the themes running through these evaluations was an emphasis on the independent position of RHEs in the process of delivering affordable housing with rural communities, one step removed from public authorities and developing agencies. Lavis (2007) also highlighted this issue of independence as significant in allowing them to undertake one of their most valuable roles with regard to providing open communication, facilitations and mediation between stakeholders and especially in facilitating positive discussions with communities and landowners. However, this latter evaluation also noted the positive work that one RHE was undertaking based within a local authority, on the back of a very proactive plan led approach to delivering affordable housing in rural communities by this authority (Lavis, 2007)

Rural Housing Enablers in Wales

Role and operation

4.17 In 2003 a pilot of four RHEs was established in Wales. The first post was established in August 2003, and thereafter posts were established in September 2004, January 2005 and August 2005. Local impetus for the development of these RHEs stemmed from housing associations, with the backing of a number of County Councils, and with the national support of the Welsh Assembly Government, the Welsh Local Government Association and Welsh Federation of Housing Associations.

4.18 In July 2008, it was announced that ten RHE posts would be established in rural Wales. The four existing RHE pilots would continue in the following areas:

- Pembrokeshire
- Rural Conwy and Denbighshire
- Gwynedd
- Monmouthshire and South Powys

Six new enabler posts will be established in the following areas

- Ceredigion
- Carmarthenshire
- Rural Wrexham and Flintshire
- North Powys
- Mid Powys
- Ynys Mon

4.19 The posts are funded jointly by a range of agencies, a key feature being funding by the Welsh Assembly Government. The Assembly Government is contributing £150,000 per year in total (£15,000 per year per enabler). The Assembly contribution will not exceed one third of the total costs of each project, with the balance made up from contributions from Local Authorities, RSL partners and other appropriate bodies such as the National Parks.
4.20 Each RHE project will be managed by a local steering group of local partners. At national level, a task and finish group was established in July 2008 to provide initial guidance and support to drive forward the Network’s development. The role of this group was to:

- Promote the work of RHE network;
- Provide overall guidance and direction while the RHE network is being established;
- Liaise with Assembly Government on grant arrangements;
- Develop common ‘branding’ for the network and consistency of role, pay and conditions and service provision across rural Wales;

4.21 The group also aims to coordinate the development of guidance and good practice to support the work of RHE’s by:

- Supporting the provision of induction and training;
- Ensuring that the wider network of rural authorities and RSL’s is kept informed of the development of the network;
- Guiding the work of the consultant;
- Providing practical support for the RHE steering groups in the early development phase.

Once the work of the Task and Finish Group is complete, responsibility will pass to a Rural Housing Network.

4.22 Further, the task and finish group set out that the best way to develop consistency across the network would be to develop templates and frameworks that could be customised by the individual projects. These would include:

- job descriptions;
- person specification;
- pay scale;
- role of the RHE and steering group;
- recommendations for common branding;
- designing induction and training programmes;
- designing a guidance manual of good practice.

A consultant was appointed to work with RHEs and steering groups to undertake the work and a report to the task and finish group was expected in September 2008.

**Impact**

4.23 The pilot scheme was evaluated in 2006 (Hughes Isherwood, 2006). The outputs of the scheme, based on 7.5 years FTE of the Welsh RHE time input was as follows (as at August 2006):
Table 4.1 Summary of outputs in Wales from the Hughes–Isherwood Evaluation, 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordable Housing (delivered)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sites under consideration (26)</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Planning Permission</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline planning permission</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Applications (10)</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Surveys completed</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys in Progress</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys Planned (06-08)</td>
<td>c.85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Combined Cost - £ 185.5K (Average cost all-in per RHE = £ 46.4K) (Hughes and Isherwood, 2006, p 21).

4.24 The evaluation concluded that the RHEs were making good progress in terms of outputs, given the timeframe in England for producing units on the ground of between 4 and 11 years, and that the RHEs in Wales at the time of the evaluation were focused on survey and site identification stages of the process of delivering affordable housing. The evaluation further concluded that there was a case for the considerable expansion of the scheme in Wales.

4.25 Two recent inquiries also lent considerable support to the role of RHEs in Wales. Firstly, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Commission on Rural Housing in Wales (2008) concluded that RHEs played a valuable role in responding to housing needs in rural Wales, and that RHEs had a proven track record of identifying previously hidden housing needs and facilitating the provision of land for small scale developments of affordable housing in village settlements. This Commission recommended the creation of a national network of at least 12 RHEs by the Welsh Assembly Government and local planning authorities (p44). Secondly, the Essex Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group (2008) endorsed the decision by WAG to fund additional RHEs in Wales, and recommended that housing enabler posts be extended to urban as well as rural parts of Wales (p86).

4.26 The creation of a national network poses a question over how far a programme of national coverage created by central government can fit with the local nature of the impetus for much RHE activity highlighted in Scotland and also England. The development of a national network would need to ensure that local
stakeholders, both at officer level and politically, were fully signed up and committed to working with RHEs and utilising mechanisms to deliver affordable housing in rural and remote communities. Although the development of a national network of RHEs would be a very positive development, and is likely to be viewed as such at local level, it could not be taken for granted that a RHE post would always be welcomed by all stakeholders. A lot would depend on the funding of the post, and also on initial groundwork to achieve a shared understanding and agreement over what a RHE is expected to undertake and deliver. An essential element of these discussions would be to arrive at a collective view on where a RHE would add value to a local housing system in terms of affordable housing delivery and housing focused community development in rural areas. It is important to stress that this comment is a hypothetical one, and is no reflection on the process in Wales. Indeed, it would be instructive to monitor how the development of a national network has been addressed in this country.

Conclusions

4.27 The various evaluations of RHEs that have taken place in both England and Wales consistently report very positive findings on the impact that RHEs have had in their areas of operation. The evaluations highlight a number of features of RHE work, including:

- RHEs add value wherever they operate;
- Working with communities requires long timescales;
- A considerable amount of the positive work that RHEs undertake can easily pass unnoticed, especially negotiating, brokering and mediating between all groups, individuals and agencies involved in affordable housing delivery

4.28 However, differing expectations between communities, landowners, RHEs, housing providers and local authorities as well as other stakeholders can lead to tensions in terms of the roles that RHEs are expected to perform. In particular, there is sometimes a tension between the focus of RHE activity on community development and needs assessment as opposed to identifying sites for affordable housing.

4.29 What emerges from these evaluations is that there is no one blueprint in the way that RHEs can achieve their aims and objectives. Instead, a feature of RHE activity is the very diverse roles that different RHEs play, responding to the localised priorities of key stakeholders, and the operation of local housing systems, and the different emphases placed on the various mechanisms that are available for achieving housing solutions. A key point from one evaluation was that RHEs can only work with the mechanisms that local policies will allow.

4.30 The recommendations of these evaluations tend to focus on ways of enhancing the capacity of RHEs to undertaking their roles by improving the funding, support and training structures that underpin RHE posts.
4.31 Various inquiries and Commissions in both England and Wales have been hugely supportive of RHE activities in both countries. In spite of the support for RHEs demonstrated in these publications, funding for RHEs in Wales and England has gone down divergent paths:

- In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government has provided part-funding for a national network of ten RHEs, building on the four pilot RHE posts in this country.

- In contrast, central government support for RHEs in England has come to an end, in spite of various inquires and commissions that lent their support to the development of RHE roles in England.

4.32 Central government support in England has always been time limited, with the aim of demonstrating the value of RHEs to housing providers and local authorities. Although a number of models for the local funding of RHEs has developed, the Taylor Report (2008) pointed out that it was not clear how present policy was going to achieve wider coverage. Further, reports emphasise that an underlying weakness of RHEs in England has been the funding structures that underpin these posts.
5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 RHE activity in Scotland has helped to bring about new affordable housing across different tenures in rural and remote areas, including facilitating developments for social renting as well as low cost home ownership. RHEs have also contributed to a more effective use of the existing housing stock, helping to bring empty dwellings back into use, and also utilising the potential of conversions and adaptations to achieve housing solutions for the residents of rural communities. An emerging role for RHEs is working with landowners, as well as community buy outs, not only in relation to identifying potential sites for development for social rent or home ownership, but with regard to the development of affordable housing by private landlords as part of the Rural Homes for Rent scheme.

5.2 As would be expected, RHE activity by the longer standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust have seen the most significant contributions, and highlights what can be achieved in circumstances where consistent funding allows continuity.

5.3 Respondents in local authorities where RHEs had been established noted the gap in delivery in small rural and remote communities that RHEs were helping to meet. Further, RHEs in Scotland were developing innovative and pioneering solutions to meet the specific housing needs of the residents of rural communities.

5.4 A key feature of providing affordable housing in rural areas in Scotland is the existence of the range of mechanisms for delivery. These mechanisms include for instance, Rural Home Ownership Grants, Rural Empty Property Grants, Rural Homes For Rent. One way that RHEs can add value to local housing systems is by facilitating the use of this diverse range of alternative sources of affordable housing that exists in Scotland.

5.5 The policy environment has a crucial role to play in enhancing the potential role of RHEs. Consideration should be given to:

- Clarifying the future of key mechanisms for rural communities such as RHOGs and REPG;
- Assessing the implications of changes to HAG funding for rural areas;
- Broadening the range of mechanisms at the disposal of RHEs and other stakeholders in rural areas by taking on board the potential of exception sites in local plan policies.

5.6 National evaluations of RHE activity in England and Wales have consistently reported the positive impacts of these posts in helping to deliver housing solutions for rural communities. The evaluations highlight a number of features of RHE work, including:

- RHEs add value wherever they operate;
- Working with communities requires long timescales;
• A considerable amount of the positive work that RHEs undertake can easily pass unnoticed, especially negotiating, brokering and mediating between all groups, individuals and agencies involved in affordable housing delivery.

5.7 Key recommendations from these evaluations have revolved around suggestions for an expansion of these posts geographically. Recent Inquiries and Commissions have also endorsed the substantive conclusions of these evaluations and have supported the continuation and growth of these posts.

5.8 However, funding for RHEs in Wales and England has gone down divergent paths:

• In Wales, the Welsh Assembly Government has provided part-funding for a national network of ten RHEs, building on the four pilot RHE posts in this country.

• Central government support in England has always been time limited, with the aim of demonstrating the value of RHEs to housing providers and local authorities. Although a number of models for the local funding of RHEs has developed, the Taylor Report (2008) pointed out that it was not clear how present policy was going to achieve wider coverage. Further, reports emphasise that an underlying weakness of RHEs in England has been the funding structures that underpin these.

5.9 A consistent theme running through some of the comments from respondents in Scotland, and also the results of evaluations elsewhere in the UK, was a tension between the expectations of partner organisations and the actual activities of RHEs. Partner agencies tend to favour a focus on identifying sites for affordable housing, whereas RHEs’ attention may be focused on undertaking needs assessment and community development work.

5.10 Following on from this point is the conclusion that there is no one blueprint in the way that RHEs can achieve their aims and objectives. An essential aspect of developing a RHE role within a specific locality is agreeing and setting priorities tailored to local circumstances and partnership working arrangements. The balance of tasks undertaken by a RHE will vary area by area. For example, the priority in one area may be site identification, whereas in another area, there may be more of a focus on establishing housing needs, prior to helping to deliver affordable housing – RHEs have a contribution to make to both approaches.

5.11 A necessary element in establishing and sustaining effective partnership working is that there is a shared agreement that the RHE adds value to the local housing system, and does not duplicate work done by other agencies.

5.12 Any future national scheme would require a formal evaluation to monitor and assess impacts. Although standardised targets and measurable outputs are valuable in drawing comparisons between posts, it would also be necessary to tailor any evaluation to reflect the priorities of each RHE post. In addition, any evaluation, including existing routine monitoring for funders, should also reflect
realistic but meaningful targets that are focused on meeting the key objective of increasing the supply of affordable housing in rural communities.

5.13 Targets need to reflect the context of working in rural areas, and the slow pace of development that that entails. Further, monitoring needs to be sensitive to the range of work that RHEs undertake which may be difficult to measure, but which nevertheless is an essential aspect of achieving their aims. It is also essential that there is a shared agreement about targets that reflect the realistic expectations of all partners.

5.14 A fundamental issue underlying these arguments is a financial one. Some element of local funding by key stakeholders can not only be an important source of funding per se, but is also a crucial demonstration of 'buy in' by local agencies, helping to embed RHEs within local networks of stakeholders.

5.15 A challenge for organisations engaged in RHE activity is to develop income streams to potentially provide match funding, which is also an area in which the policy environment has a key role to play. Recent research in North Yorkshire (Lavis, 2007) concluded that sustaining long term funding for RHEs in England depended on a combination of accessing grant funding in tandem with developing an income stream for RHEs.

5.16 In Scotland, an agency role for RHEs in promoting and administering a scheme such as RHOGS, or perhaps a future equivalent, could provide just such an income stream. If an RHE programme was taken forward then it would be necessary to assess the resource capacity of existing mechanisms such as, for example, the Rural Homes for Rent scheme, to sustain developing activity.

5.17 The core conclusion from this review is that rural housing enabling works. The evaluations of the impact of RHEs elsewhere in the UK have demonstrated the added value that RHEs have brought to rural communities. Evaluations from elsewhere in the UK also point to the value of some element of central government grant funding to underpin the successful delivery of housing solutions in rural areas by RHEs in the long term. In Scotland, the part funding of long standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust by the Scottish Government already shows how the long term sustainability of these organisations can contribute towards a continuous flow of affordable housing in rural communities.
REFERENCES


