



SAVE FOR LATER

# Rural exception sites could help us build more affordable homes for rural communities

Rural housing

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We know that the current housing crisis is the result of decades of not building enough homes – specifically homes that are suitable and affordable for local people. The impact of this is felt acutely in rural communities.

We've seen housing waiting lists grow faster in rural areas than anywhere else in the country and [more people finding themselves homeless](#) in rural areas too.

We also know that when people can't afford to stay in their local area, [vital services are gradually lost](#) and when a shop, pub or post office closes in a rural area, the whole community suffers.

## Research by UCL for the Rural Housing Network

A new study by University College London (UCL), commissioned by the [Rural Housing Network \(RHN\)](#), has uncovered a striking under-use of Rural Exception Sites across England. These sites, crucial for alleviating the rural housing shortage, have seen alarmingly low usage since their inception in 1991.

## What are Rural Exception Sites?

Established in 1991, the purpose of [Rural Exception Sites](#) is to proportionately facilitate the provision of affordable homes for local residents, whilst preserving the character of the community.

Rural Exception Sites are small sites located on the edge of existing rural settlements. They allow land to be provided below market value for residential development – provided it is used to build affordable housing for local people.

Rural Exception Sites are allocated outside of the local authority's development plan – so homes delivered via Rural Exception Sites represent additional affordable housing for the local community.

Any kind of affordable housing can be delivered, including affordable rent, intermediate housing (including first homes), or social rent, provided there is adequate evidence of local need.

The study has identified a range of possible factors contributing to the under-use of Rural Exception Sites, including:

- **Budget pressures:** planning authorities struggle to compete with salaries in the private sector, resulting in a loss of senior, experienced staff.
- **Recruitment and retention of senior staff** are huge challenges for many, with 80% of planning authorities surveyed reporting vacancies in their planning departments.
- **Uncertainty** and lack of clarity around policy change contributes to high stress levels within planning authorities.

The study also highlights areas that are more successful in delivering affordable housing through Rural Exception Sites. Some of the key factors identified:

- **Strong, positive engagement** from delivery partners with the local community, including working closely with landowners.
- The presence of an active and experienced **Rural Housing Enabler** based within a local authority or independently.
- **Strong leadership and strategic direction** from local government on the need for more rural affordable housing.
- **Collaboration** between planning authorities, development (non-profit or private), community and landowner partners helps to ensure smoother delivery.

The Rural Housing Network has outlined a series of proposed actions for various stakeholders which would help increase the supply of affordable housing through the Rural Exception Sites scheme.

[Executive summary](#)

[Full report](#)

**Who to speak to**

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