

case study 2

Northumberland County Council – supporting community-led housing

Innovation topic: Community land trusts supported by the local authority

Summary

- By supporting community enterprises Northumberland County Council is adopting a positive approach to planning for, and delivering, affordable housing – including for areas in which there are high concentrations of second or holiday homes.
- The Council's support for community enterprises has included the use of commuted sums from section 106 contributions where on-site provision of affordable homes is not possible.
- At the start of 2017 it was expected that there would be approximately £5 million worth of commuted sums available during the following five years, a portion of which would be allocated to community enterprises such as community land trusts. In addition, the Council has secured an allocation of £1.3 million for 2016/17 under the Government's Community Housing Fund, designed to tackle high levels of second-home ownership.
- The Council is working with partners such as the Glendale Gateway Trust, a local housing and community development charity with capital assets of nearly £3 million and a staff of eight and which has developed a portfolio of 18 affordable homes.

'The starting point is that the money [from the commuted section 106 sums] should be used to meet the identified need for affordable homes and to deliver affordable housing on alternative sites within the wider county, and improve or make more effective use of the existing housing stock for affordable housing purposes.'

Northumberland County Council Planning Services Cabinet report

Introduction

Northumberland County Council is a unitary authority in North East England. The county is England's most northernmost, and stretches from the Scottish border in the north and west to Tyneside and County Durham in the south. Northumberland County Council is the largest yet most sparsely populated unitary authority area in England, and is home to approximately 316,000 people. The county is largely rural and has the largest area of green belt falling within any local authority's boundaries.

The Council's draft Core Strategy highlights the need for suitable and affordable homes for older people. It expects new housing development to contribute to balancing the housing market, providing a mix of housing types and sizes to meet the needs of all households. The Council has also been looking at other ways to support affordable housing delivery, including facilitating the establishment of community land trusts.

Housing and planning context

The draft Northumberland Core Strategy states that affordable housing need varies markedly across the county, but that the inability of many people to enter the housing market is a problem. The capacity of registered providers to deliver homes has become uncertain since the 2016 Housing and Planning Bill heralded a reduction of social rents and the extension of the Right to Buy policy. As a result, new models of housing delivery are emerging.

Many homes in Northumberland are used as second or holiday homes, especially in the north of the county. Along with rising house prices, this has had the effect of making many smaller properties unaffordable to the local population.

The county's housing needs survey has found that the private rented sector offers limited opportunities to meet need because the majority of homes are short-term lets for the holiday

market.²¹ The draft Core Strategy states that 'where there is acute affordability pressure and an identified need, the Council will seek to address this issue by adopting a positive approach to planning for and delivering affordable housing for local people in areas where there are high concentrations of second or holiday homes'.²² Although there is a county-wide target of 30% affordable homes in new developments, this is difficult to achieve because of viability factors.

How is it innovative?

The provision of affordable homes in isolated rural areas has been a growing issue in the county. Community land trusts are well placed to tackle this problem, and can help with the re-use of derelict buildings. The Council wants to support the growth of community land trusts as much as possible.

The county has seen the growth of community organisations such as the Glendale Gateway Trust, based in Wooler, in the north of the county, which has been assessing local housing needs and working on ways of meeting it.

The Glendale Gateway Trust runs a community and business centre and a number of commercial units on Wooler High Street. The Trust describes itself as 'a significant partner in the effort to expand affordable housing provision in Glendale'.²³ It has developed a portfolio of affordable housing properties, all designed for people aged over 55 and with good proximity to local amenities. Part of the Trust's strategy has been to re-use empty and derelict buildings in the centre of Wooler.

There have been a relatively large number of planning applications in the county in recent years. The council uses funding generated by developments where on-site provision of affordable homes is not possible to support other ways of providing affordable housing. A paper outlining examples of projects that may be considered for funding was approved by the Council's Cabinet in January 2017.

These examples included:

- building new affordable homes;
- improvements to existing homes to make them affordable and sustainable;
- initiatives that support the development of sustainable, long-term affordable homes;
- funding the affordable element of supported-housing schemes;
- buying houses offered to the Council under the 'right of first refusal' and letting them at affordable rents; and
- buying land for affordable housing.

Applications for funding can be made by not-for-profit organisations, such as registered providers, community land trusts, and other housing providers approved by the Council.

Lessons

Northumberland County Council's innovative approach demonstrates how a local authority can support community organisations in order to create affordable housing. This is particularly relevant in rural areas, where affordable housing can be difficult to secure through the planning process, and in instances where government grant is unavailable. The use of section 106 funds to build capacity in local organisations is helping to transfer use of the community land trust model to parish councils and thereby stimulate the re-use of empty buildings for local people's benefit.

The Northumberland experience demonstrates the importance of councils identifying new approaches and working in collaboration with local stakeholders as part of their role as housing enablers. In Northumberland, this targeted approach is helping to meet the need for more homes suitable for older people.

Contact

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Notes

21 *Northumberland County Wide Housing Needs Survey*. Final Report 2012. Northumberland County Council, Amended Jul. 2013. <http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Studies%20and%20Evidence%20Reports/Housing%20Studies/4.%20Housing%20Needs%20Survey/Housing-Needs-Survey-2012-Final-Report.pdf>

22 *Northumberland Local Plan Core Strategy – Pre-Submission Draft*. Northumberland County Council, Oct. 2015, para. 6.76. http://northumberland.limehouse.co.uk/portal/planning/core_strategy/cspsd?pointId=1444289404543

23 See the Glendale Gateway Trust website, at <http://www.wooler.org.uk/glendale-gateway-trust>