

Factors in the effective delivery of rural exception sites (RES) in England

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Guiding questions

What factors advance or impede the progress of rural exception sites?

Dual focus on planning support and RES success factors:

- How does LA resourcing of the planning function affect the success of RES?
- Besides planning resourcing, what other factors / practices / policies underpin successful RES schemes?

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Project components

1. Review of what other studies, and steering group say
2. Collation of data on RES delivery and planning performance for last 5 years
3. Survey of 150 rural planning authorities, focused on resource constraints, impacts of constraints (for broader planning function and for RES or small rural site delivery), and mitigation strategies
4. Case studies of 6 rural authorities with strong RES track-records and particular approaches towards delivery

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What other studies say

Community support	Community support is key to the success of small rural housing projects
Land cost	Rising land costs (and landowner expectations) impede RES
Landowners	Working with landowners to secure land at the right price is critical to success
Parish councils	This is where the case for affordable housing is won, and where land-owners interface with communities
Rural housing enablers	Their knowledge, experience, and their capacity to be honest brokers, drives RES projects
Funding regime	A flexible funding regime that recognizes the challenging economies of scale, and build costs, of rural projects
Planning policy	Its clarity and stability gives certainty to local projects. Policy needs to flex to different situations
Planning resources	Lack of plans and out-of-date plans impede RES. A resource crisis in planning that coincides with the laying of new duties on local authorities.

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Available data (case study selection)

Top 10 Local authorities	Total units delivered, 2017-2022
Cornwall*	1,097
Shropshire*	264
Sedgemoor	185
North Norfolk*	101
Derbyshire Dales*	93
South Cambridgeshire	89
Cheshire West and Chester	86
East Hampshire	85
Winchester*	68
Stroud	65

Roughly 3,600 affordable homes were delivered on RES nationally between 2017 and 2022 / * denotes case studies + **North Yorkshire**

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National survey

Roughly 40 responses from rural local authorities and national parks

Regional responses	Total	District	Unitary	National Park	Within combined
East of England	7	5	2		
South East	8	4	2	2	
South West	9	2	5	2	
North West	3	1	1	1	
North East	2		2		(2)
Yorkshire and the Humber	3		1	2	
East Midlands	2	1		1	
West Midlands	6	5	1		

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National survey

Big issues include:

- Officer recruitment and retention – many authorities have vacant posts
- Pressure on staff – endemic, linked to recruitment and new policy duties
- For RES, staff pressures may result in a refocusing on plan-led activities (the ‘bigger wins’) and a reduced pre-app service

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National survey

Split / mixed views and experiences:

- Planning struggles to engage with multiple partners on slow-burn RES **versus...**
- Case officer time only at key points: site walkabout, pre-app, application, committee – so planning’s interaction with RES not a huge burden?
- Mixed views on (planning) capacity to support RES
- View that resource constraints affect other parts of LAs and other partners – there’s a bigger resourcing picture

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Case studies

Authority	Type	NPA	Region	Focus
Cornwall	Unitary (mainly rural)		South West	Cross subsidy on RES; and HRA direct-delivery
Shropshire	Unitary (largely rural)		West Midlands	General, with some focus on smaller schemes
Derbyshire Dales	District (mainly rural)	*	East Midlands	National park interactions; small schemes, no cross-subsidy
Winchester	District (largely rural)	*	South East	Focus on use of RHEs and HARAHA programme
North Norfolk	District (mainly rural)	*	East	General (emergent focus on 'linked schemes')
North Yorkshire	County (7 districts and 4 unitary authorities)	**	Yorkshire and Humber	Strategic partnership in support of rural housing enablers

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Headlines

1. Centrality of local political support for rural affordable housing: *clear messaging in support of affordable housing and its vital importance to rural communities at an authority level*

2. Critical role of enabling: *dedicated funding for rural housing enabling within local authorities plus consistent funding to the independent enabling network*

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Headlines

3. Adaptive cross-subsidy arrangements:

issuing of guidance to RES partners on viability, cross-subsidy, incentives, and land values – forming part of a broader RES toolkit

4. Building delivery partnerships:

resourcing to rural authorities to reflect the challenges of working with multiple under-resourced partners, and incentives for RPs to extend their reach into under-served rural areas

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Headlines

5. Working with communities:

an RES toolkit addressing practices and engagements, including via social media, that help win support for rural housing projects, whilst illustrating good practice in evidence gathering

6. Funding flexibility and clarity:

advice on mixed funding packages, including in a RES toolkit, and work with Homes England on giving ‘start up’ support to RES in under-served areas.

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Headlines

7. Supportive planning and spatial development strategies: *NPPF to give clearer support to RES, stressing its value to rural communities and economies. NPPF to reference a future RES toolkit and underscore the sustainability arguments for a dispersed development approach in many rural areas.*