



Building
Tomorrow's
Rural
Communities

A Design Guide

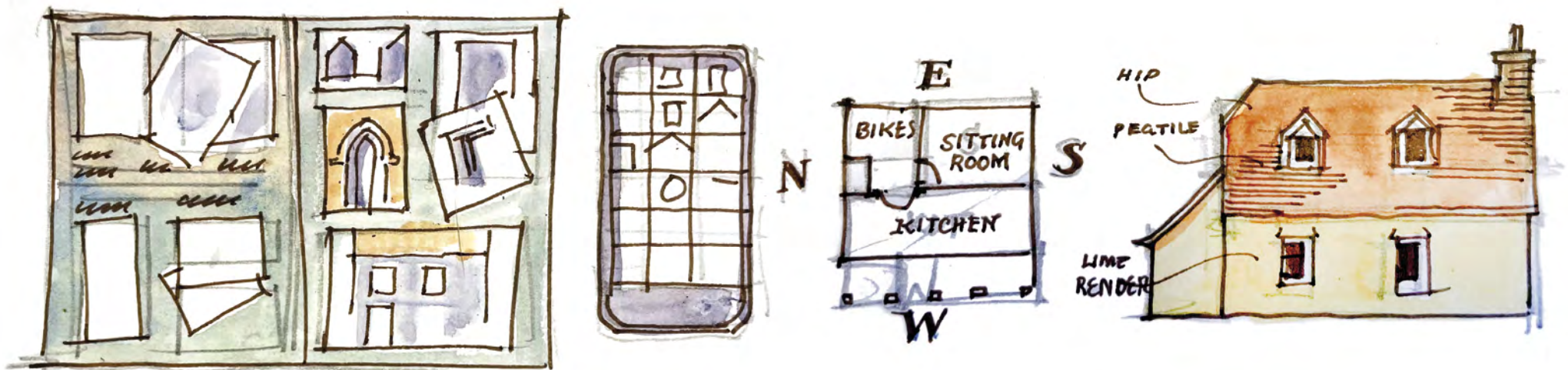
*Foreword by
HRH The Princess Royal*

*Featuring illustrations and contributions from
architectural illustrator and author, **Matthew Rice***

**“Study, dream, consult and discuss.
Plan and think again.
Resolve and agree.
Compromise and forge ahead.
Build tomorrow’s homes now.”**



Matthew Rice



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Foreword by
**HRH The
 Princess Royal**

HRH The Princess Royal - Patron, English Rural



BUCKINGHAM PALACE

Throughout the centuries, rural towns and villages have evolved, reflecting the ever-changing economic and domestic landscape. Houses and businesses, including workshops, factories, farms and shops, have been built to meet the needs of local communities, providing shelter, space, and security for people to live and work.

The distinct regional styles in buildings reflect the vernacular of an area, which is deeply rooted in its geography, geology and local economic conditions. At the same time, there has been growing desire for rural living, further enabled by changes in working practices that allow people to work remotely from where they wish to live, rather than where they are required to do so. This shift has brought a renewed focus on supporting wellbeing, connecting communities, enhancing rural economies, and being more environmentally conscious.

During my visits to various rural housing developments as Patron of the English Rural Housing Association, I have seen the diversity of new homes and how they aim to meet the needs of their residents. I have also observed how modern technology and construction methods are increasingly working in harmony with traditional approaches and planning.

It is pleasing to see a growing recognition that planning for the right homes in the right places and engaging the community in their development is a proven approach to creating imaginative and visual interesting homes, the impact of which are given careful consideration.

This guide highlights exemplary designs from across England. The efforts of all those involved in its creation reflect a growing respect for our rural heritage and a bold vision for its future. I hope that it will serve as a valuable resource for parish councils, planners, and developers.

Anne



How to Build Homes We Will Love

How can we make the best houses? How can we be more excited about a new house than an old building? (How indeed can it hold its value and not, like a new car, suddenly slump in price as it leaves the showroom?) What actually makes the design of a house good, good enough to turn into your HOME?



This guide explores what we might think of when we build, whether we are a developer, housing association or an individual homeowner extending their kitchen. It lays out points to consider while we dream and design. My own suggestion, whether you are building one or a thousand houses, is that you go and see what the local styles actually are. Make a mood board and use it as inspiration. It's worth the bother...

All too often we rely on stock designs employed with only the faintest variation from Deal to Durham. A single pitch, a single window and door specification, and a small number of variations perhaps locally inspired (or more likely specified in a local planning guide). But often, these feature a series of standard variants: a gable, a shallow bay (normally on the show house by the front of the estate) or some tile hanging.

We have a way to go to escape the low expectations we maintain for new builds. Poor building quality, cramped densities, an unimaginative series of closes and random curving lanes all represent the least desirable of modern building. But there is now so much more to consider: fuel efficiency, insulation, EPC rating. Also, and importantly how will we mix up housing and tenure types within a development?

In the past, council houses dominated the affordable sector, and their loss is much lamented in some quarters. But 'the council houses' were frequently built as a noticeably standalone terrace or crescent on the outskirts of the village and often of a lower specification than their privately owned neighbours. It is incumbent on us to wipe away that hierarchy and feeling that those tenants are somehow less important and less worth bothering about. We must ensure that tenants or part owners of affordable houses are treated the same as those in any other home and, as this guide shows, that those houses are afforded the same degree of attention and investment as any commercial property.



Whatever we are building - shop or factory, office, or home - let us not be shy about beauty, reticent about using local natural materials or indeed about charm. We need to learn from the past and think how to build homes to last two or three lifetimes, where people will be born, grow up and grow old and where their dreams will be dreamt, and plans made. It is not just about maximising profit, speed of payback and dodging planning restrictions.

Fifty years ago, there was little or no focus on environmental concerns, but this is now at the forefront of our minds and an essential part of the design process. How to harness natural energy, carefully guard our precious fossil fuels, use them wisely and economically, and how to minimise waste are now serious drivers as we plan and imagine new developments. Similarly, a realisation that we share not just our Blue Planet but our village and garden with animals and birds and that pollinating insects are an essential part of OUR life means this vital component must be considered.

This is an exciting time. We are building again, all over the country. Big builders, smaller local developers, housing associations and homeowners are all hard at work. It's a moment when we can either embrace a whole raft of ideas and build with imagination and joy or... plunge forward with faceless and low quality, short-life developments that will please neither owners, tenants or neighbours. Our amazing craftspeople - bricklayers and carpenters, ground workers, plumbers, electricians, and ARCHITECTS - must make the homes we and our children want to live in, better, happier, and more beautiful all over the country.

Matthew Rice
Architectural illustrator
and author



Our Village, Our Future

The future of our rural communities depends on the development of affordable homes that cater to the diverse needs of residents, while fostering a strong sense of community. By focusing on affordability, flexibility and variety in housing options, we can create vibrant and inclusive villages that thrive for generations to come. The following principles should guide our efforts to build homes that not only provide shelter but also enhance the quality of life for all who call our villages home.



Homes for our community

1. Affordable: thriving rural communities urgently need new homes that cater to a wide range of income levels. Families, remote workers, retirees and downsizers, doctors and nurses, carers and caterers, and those employed directly in the countryside all require access to suitable and affordable housing.

2. Flexible: homes should be designed with flexibility in mind, allowing living spaces to be easily adjusted over time. Considerations for growing older at home, multigenerational living and accessibility are crucial aspects of this adaptability.

3. Vital variety: offering a diverse mix of housing types and sizes, including terraced cottages, detached homes, flats and bungalows, helps foster a balanced and inclusive community.







"Thriving rural communities urgently need new homes that cater to a wide range of income levels. Families, remote workers, retirees and downsizers, doctors and nurses, carers and caterers, and those employed directly in the countryside all require access to suitable and affordable housing."

Getting totally involved

1. Community input: engaging residents, the parish council and other stakeholders in the planning process from the outset leads to better results. Regular consultation ensures that local input informs the layout and design of new homes. These are people who know their community and whose insights can be valuable in informing the layout and house design of a development.

2. What do we need?: Setting up a local taskforce that includes the parish council, housing association or developer, local planning authority and rural housing enabler (where available) to identify and meet the community's diverse housing needs, will result in interesting, mixed and inclusive neighbourhoods.

3. Addressing broader concerns: the process of planning new homes often highlights broader community concerns. Community engagement enables local leaders to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these issues.



Designing for life

1. The best homes: a quality home prioritises comfort, energy efficiency, affordable running costs, and beauty. Thoughtful layouts, plenty of natural light, and outdoor spaces contribute to residents' happiness and wellbeing. Adhering to the government's national space standards ensures that homes should provide adequate space for comfortable living.

2. The community on our doorstep: new housing developments should be located near existing amenities where these exist and it is feasible to do so. Easy access to local shops, pubs, village halls, surgeries and schools is valuable. It enhances residents' independence, reduces isolation and keeps us out of the car.

3. Ramping up accessibility: incorporating features such as step-free access, wider doorways and adaptable layouts creates inclusive homes that help residents with mobility challenges without diminishing their appeal to others.



Getting about

1. Walk this way: well-connected footpaths and cycle routes help active travel to local facilities. Prioritising walking, mobility vehicles and bicycles reduces reliance on fossil fuels, unnecessary car journeys, noise and air pollution, while promoting physical and mental health.

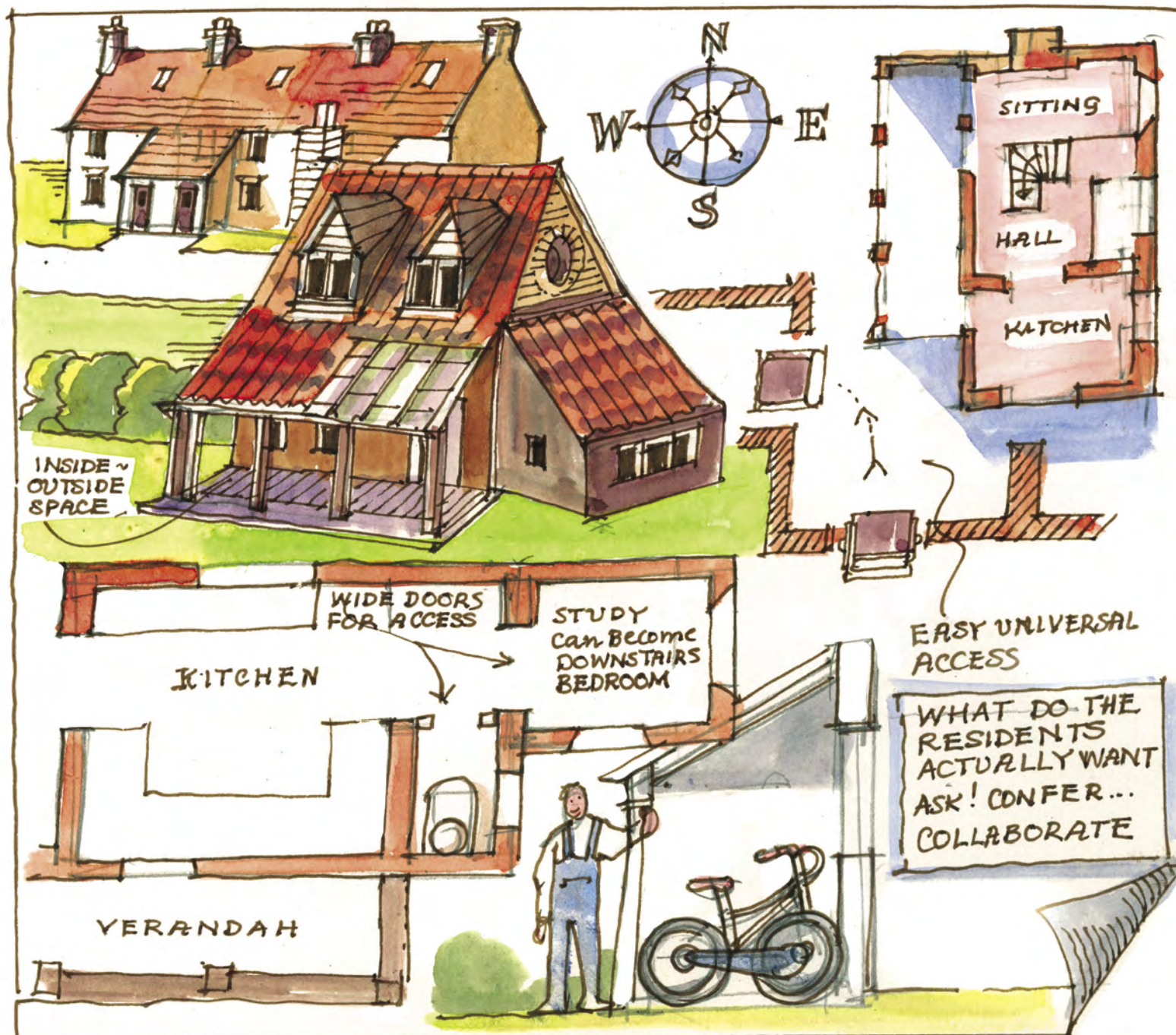
2. Buses and trains: convenient access to public transport

encourages more sustainable travel choices and influences where people choose to live. When rural public transport is limited, considering proximity to existing or potential routes is beneficial. A twenty-minute walk to the bus is better than no bus at all.

3. Shops, schools and surgeries: ensuring new housing developments can connect into

surgeries, shops and village halls will help to sustain, and potentially grow, these vital services. Pubs, cafes and green spaces promote community self-sufficiency, which is increasingly important as more people work from home. Supporting the local rural economy and businesses should also be a priority.





Our House is a Very, Very, Very Fine House

The layout of our homes significantly affects our daily lives. Understanding the requirements of a family, such as a busy kitchen, a quiet bedroom for a sleeping baby, or a porch large enough for bikes or some Wellington boots, should inform the design of individual houses and the relationship between the house and garden. A veranda or porch creates an indoor-outdoor space that encourages venturing outside and helps keep the house clean. It provides a place for messy games, geraniums, pets, or hanging out the washing when it's wet outside.



Everything is beautiful and everything works

1. The good life: regardless of size or style, a well-designed rural home should be attractive, comfortable and functional - the foundation for a happy daily life. This principle applies equally to rented studio flats, small-scale affordable homes and larger family houses.

2. Clever layout and design: compact, yet efficient, layouts that create functional living and working areas, optimise storage and make effective use of natural heat and light ensure the best use of space and land. Regulated minimum

space standards should be treated as a baseline, not a target.

3. Think local: intelligently incorporating local materials, such as stone, brick, colourwash, or timber cladding, can create a strong sense of place. The natural variations in these materials define our regions and characterise our villages and towns. Designing with this in mind adds texture and familiarity, while making it easier to integrate new developments into the existing built environment.

4. Architects matter: too often, developments are built with minimal or no input from an architect, which leads to other problems. Designing a new part of a village is a serious undertaking that requires professional involvement at every stage. Choosing an architect with an interest in domestic buildings and a proven track-record in creating beautiful houses is crucial. Well-designed estates are worth visiting to reassure us that it can be done well.





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Let in the sunshine

1. Bright ideas: harnessing natural light through effective design can transform spaces and create bright, happy rooms. The lower densities and heights of most rural homes make it easier to maximise daylight.

2. Sunny side up: carefully orienting homes to capture sunlight not only lifts our spirits but also provides benefits from solar gain, while controlling overheating. For example, an east-facing bedroom allows morning light to flood in, while a kitchen or sitting room, more frequently used in the afternoon and evening, benefits from warm westerly evening light. Well-placed skylights can illuminate central areas; however, proper installation and maintenance are crucial to prevent potential leaks.

3. A room with a view: windows, even small ones, should be positioned to capture views of open fields, a beautiful tree, a church tower, or local feature, connecting us to the surrounding landscape. The window behind your kitchen sink is particularly important, as it's where we often spend time looking out.



Westfields is a small development on a rural exception site at the edge of the North York Moors National Park. This scheme is the culmination of years of effort by the housing association, architects, local councils, and the community to address the acute shortage of affordable homes in the area. Following agreement on the site, community consultation events were held in Osmotherley to engage and inform neighbours and the wider community from the outset. The architect ensured that the scale, massing, and design of this small development mirrored the historic village vernacular, featuring residential and agricultural buildings with formal 'farmhouses' and 'converted barns' primarily constructed in etched stonework and clay pantiles, complemented by brickwork, stone lintels, timber boarding, and windows.

Changing needs, now and in the future

1. What's around the corner?:

clever design can anticipate changing needs, such as the arrival of another baby, a grandparent moving in, or other household changes. Where possible, flexibility allows residents to remain in their homes and communities, even as their requirements evolve, rather than being forced to move away. Today's home office may become tomorrow's playroom or granny flat. However, building a development with genuinely varied house types may be more practical, allowing for very local moves to accommodate these changes without compromising the design. Proximity to care services may be as important as being near a school.

2. Welcome home: the most successful schemes incorporate features that accommodate all ages and abilities. Wide doorways, step-free entrances and accessible bathrooms enhance usability for everyone. Young families benefit from pushchair-friendly pavements, while older residents may require surfaces designed for visual impairment and dementia.

3. Stronger together: thriving rural communities rely on the strength of their social connections. The most vibrant and sustainable neighbourhoods offer a diverse range of housing options, catering to the various needs of the community. By designing homes that are 'tenure blind', where affordable and market-rate properties are indistinguishable from one another, we can reduce stigma and ensure that every resident feels valued and equal. A cohesive visual style across the neighbourhood fosters a shared sense of belonging and pride in the community.



THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-DESIGNED AFFORDABLE RURAL HOUSING:

Balancing Preservation & Progress

Over time, rural settlements have evolved to meet the changing housing needs of those who live there. However, development and housing policies have primarily focused on the expansion of metropolitan and urban areas. While this approach has preserved the look and feel of the countryside and supported urbanisation and its immense potential, this has also led to unintended consequences.



In recent decades, the appeal of rural living, whether that is the aesthetic, nature amenity or allure of the general way of life, has driven an increasing demand for wanting to live in the countryside. Coupled with a constrained housing supply, this has made accessing a home in villages and market towns unaffordable to many. This, together with the loss of rented housing through the Right to Buy scheme, has had a severe impact on the ability of those on lower incomes to remain near friends, family, and work. As a result, rural communities have been hollowed out with local services such as pubs, shops, and schools closing at alarming rates.

Data shows that rural populations have become older, wealthier, and less diverse. Traditional family and support networks have disappeared. This has damaged societal wellbeing and at the same time inhibited rural economic productivity and innovation. The lack of affordable housing options has forced many residents, particularly younger generations, to move away from their communities in search of more affordable living arrangements and better employment opportunities. A pattern that has compounded the differences between urban and rural areas, which are too often viewed by national and local policymakers as separate rather than co-existing and dependent on one another.



To address these issues, we need to build more homes of all types in the countryside and find a better balance between conserving what is valued, whilst also delivering for immediate and future needs. Currently, the greatest housing need in rural communities is for affordable homes. Research shows that increasing the supply of these, even on a small scale, can achieve significant societal and economic impact, keeping support networks together, securing a workforce, creating jobs, and helping local businesses and services thrive. Imagine the scale and impact nationally, if each village embarked on building even ten new affordable homes. It is such a simple and achievable idea, which would be transformative.

The success of new rural homes heavily relies on their design. Careful consideration must be given to factors such as the location, visual appeal, and how well the homes meet the needs of residents while respecting the surrounding natural and built environment. The perception of inferior quality affordable housing is a strong motivator for opposition to new developments. It need not be though. There are increasingly more good examples than bad ones, highlighting what can be achieved with the right engagement and approach to design.

This guide will help rural communities and those of us developing new homes in the countryside to get it right. By doing so, we can better serve communities and, most importantly, build beautiful, warm, safe, and affordable homes for the households who need them.

Martin Collett
Chief Executive, English Rural

Our Village Landscape

Traditional village layouts reflect historical roots, with buildings clustered around focal points like village greens or arranged along main roads. These organic patterns create a distinct sense of place and community. When designing new housing developments, drawing inspiration from these layouts is essential to maintain the village's character and cohesion. For example, introducing a new village green can create a vibrant heart, echoing traditional focal points.



Fitting in

1. Harmonious design: new homes should sensitively integrate into the existing fabric of the area by respecting local architectural styles, materials, and building forms. The scale of new houses should match that of neighbouring buildings. By strategically placing homes to overlook public spaces and creating clear, well-defined routes for both people and vehicles, a strong sense of safety and security can be achieved while maintaining a clear distinction between public and private areas.

2. Local materials: using locally sourced materials ties new housing to its context, weathers gracefully and blends harmoniously with the rural landscape. This approach also supports local businesses.

3. Respecting the village rhythm: when designing new rural homes, it's important to consider not just the number of homes per acre, but how they are arranged. While rural areas typically have around 12 homes per acre, the key to creating a harmonious development is to respond to the existing village layout.





Connecting the community

1. Good neighbours: the most successful new developments seamlessly connect with the existing locality, creating walkable links in all directions by following the lines of existing lanes and footpaths. Where possible, these routes should accommodate mobility aids like wheelchairs and be punctuated by comfortable benches on which to pause. Some of these links should provide easy access for all to bus stops, pubs and shops, while all should serve to stitch the new into the old.

2. Village pathways: connections that link different parts of a village are important. They should be easy to use and, where appropriate, well-lit (but sensitively, as a streetlight outside a bedroom can be quite annoying). If paths are illogical, people will create alternative routes, known as 'desire lines,' so there is a need to be mindful of excessive kerbs and unnecessary street furniture, as they dilute the rural character. Planting sweet-smelling shrubs and small trees along paths, such as lilac, mock orange blossom, winter sweet, witch hazel, apple, and pear trees can enhance the environment. Subtle bends and varying widths along streets help to suggest a natural, organic character that mimic the gradual evolution of the village over time.



3. Keeping fit: well-designed developments can significantly influence people's choice to make short journeys by foot, bicycle, or car, promoting active lifestyles and healthier communities. By minimising the visual impact of parked cars and providing dedicated cycle storage for each home, active travel can be encouraged and made more convenient.

4. Community hubs: village halls and public spaces provide flexible venues for events, workshops, and gatherings, strengthening the community and building cultural vitality. If a village needs one, build it! However, most villages already have a variety of spaces, such as halls, churches, or repurposed buildings, which can be used for community events. The key is to make the most of these existing spaces, ensuring they are accessible, welcoming, and adaptable to serve the diverse needs of the community.

5. The digital highway: fast home broadband and reliable mobile network coverage allow residents to access local online services and community information, attracting more people to enjoy rural life. As more individuals opt for remote working arrangements, there may be a requirement to repurpose existing spaces into co-working environments to accommodate the shift in workplace dynamics.



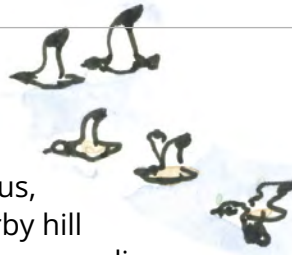
Green and pleasant views

1. Framing views: facing the view may seem obvious, but it is a priority often ignored. Focusing on a nearby hill or tree might even encourage us to walk into their surroundings. Windows need not be large. Some of the best landscape paintings come in the smallest frames and a large south-facing window can quickly make a room unbearably hot and blindingly bright.

2. Embracing nature: integrating gardens, orchards, allotments, and other green spaces provides endless physical and mental benefits. These communal provisions allow all residents to enjoy leisure time and grow food in natural surroundings.

3. Friends and neighbours: larger developments can include communal spaces like village greens, sports fields, playgrounds, or access to public footpaths that promote physical activity and neighbourliness. A sunny shelter will quickly become a gathering place.

4. Plant your village: planting trees and shrubs should not be an unimaginative afterthought. All public spaces benefit from trees. All old trees and existing hedges should be incorporated into any new



development. Figs and plums, damsons and crab apples, and apple and pear trees should accompany any new street - if not to feed the humans, they will encourage the birds. Larger trees, such as oaks, sycamores, scots pines and limes should be accommodated, and multi-stem specimens or cultivars designed to stay small avoided. Trees matter a lot: they breathe green life and broadcast birdsong into a village.

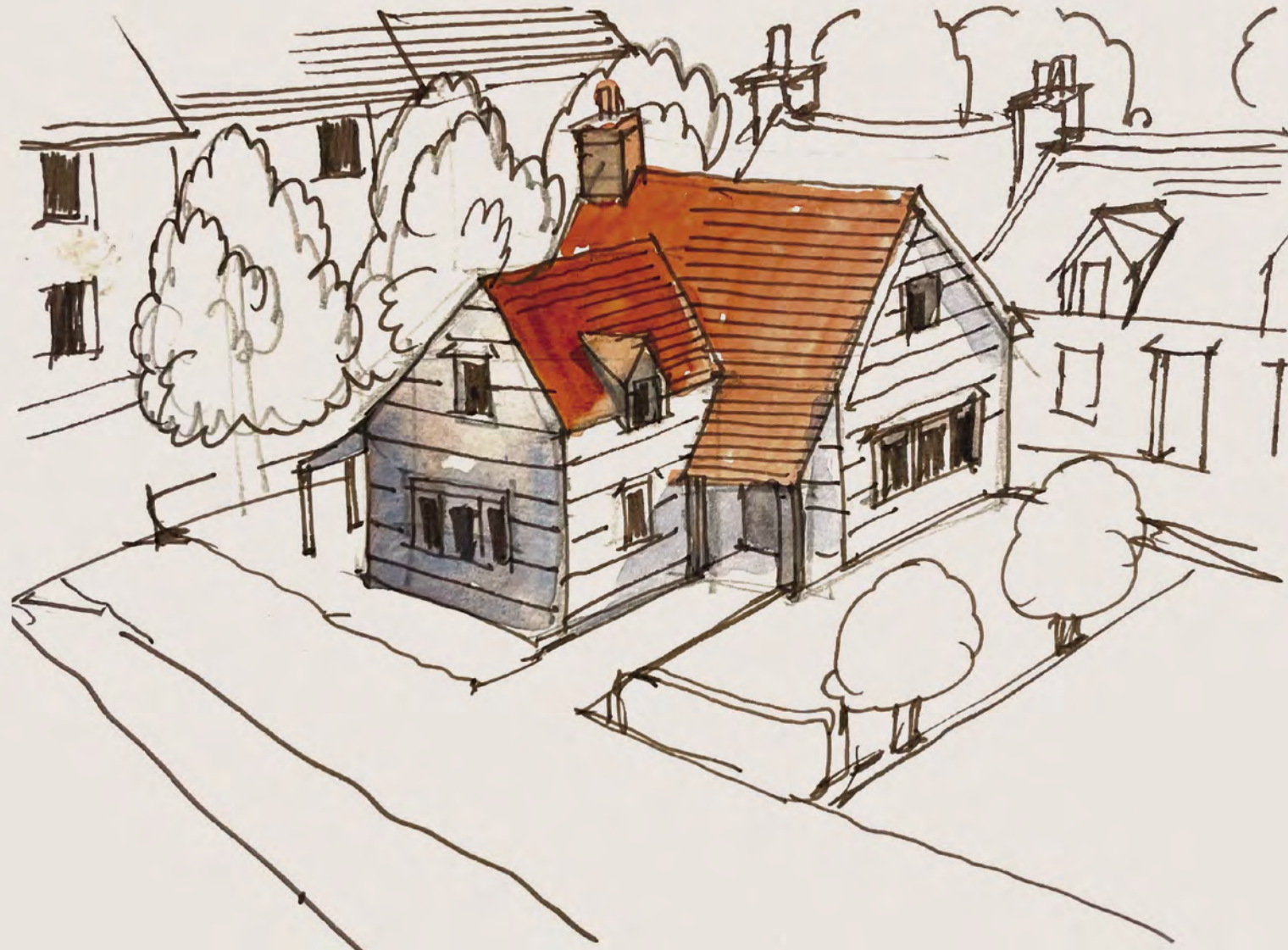
"When designing new housing developments, it is essential to draw inspiration from these organic layouts to maintain the character and cohesion of the village. In some cases, introducing a new village green that serves as a safe, well-overlooked space for children to play or dogs to run can create a vibrant new heart around which to centre the development, echoing the traditional focal points of the past."



DELIVERING WELL-PLANNED AFFORDABLE RURAL HOUSING: The Role of Planning Policy

Creating well-designed affordable housing in rural areas requires several factors to come together, with planning policy and decisions playing a crucial role.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) requires Local Planning Authorities to be responsive to housing developments that meet the needs of rural communities. This includes using “rural exception sites” for affordable housing - small sites within or next to existing rural settlements that wouldn't normally be used for housing. These sites are granted planning permission because they provide affordable housing that will always be available to meet local needs, housing people connected to the community.



The NPPF also requires Local Plans to have a clear design vision for their area, developed with input from the community, reflecting local aspirations and based on an understanding of each area's defining characteristics. This vision is described in a Local Design Code following the National Design Guidance and National Model Design Code.

These codes go beyond aesthetics and include ten features of well-designed communities and spaces, as shown in the circular chart below:

When these codes are applied to individual housing developments, the result should be visually appealing homes that fit in with the local character while allowing for innovation, creating safe and inclusive places with access to green and open spaces.

Local communities and Parish Councils can play a significant role by identifying and prioritising the use of local materials and key design features that reflect the community's character and heritage. These may be specified in their Local Design Codes or Neighbourhood Plans, which can carry weight as part of the Local Plan for an area. Alternatively, but with less weight, they may produce a Village Design Statement. Through these mechanisms, communities and Parish Councils can ensure that new developments, including affordable housing, blends seamlessly with the existing built environment and contribute to the preservation of the area's unique identity.

As a scheme is beginning to take shape, planners work closely with developers to ensure the proposed development meets the requirements of the adopted Local Plan and its Design Codes, or any adopted Local Design Codes. This involves pre-application discussions

with developers, drawing on the expertise of housing, design and conservation officers, as well as other technical experts. During these discussions, careful consideration is given to various design aspects. These include how the site relates to the existing settlement and fits into the landscape, the protection or enhancement of important natural features, the size and mix of housing types, and the overall layout and design, including materials.

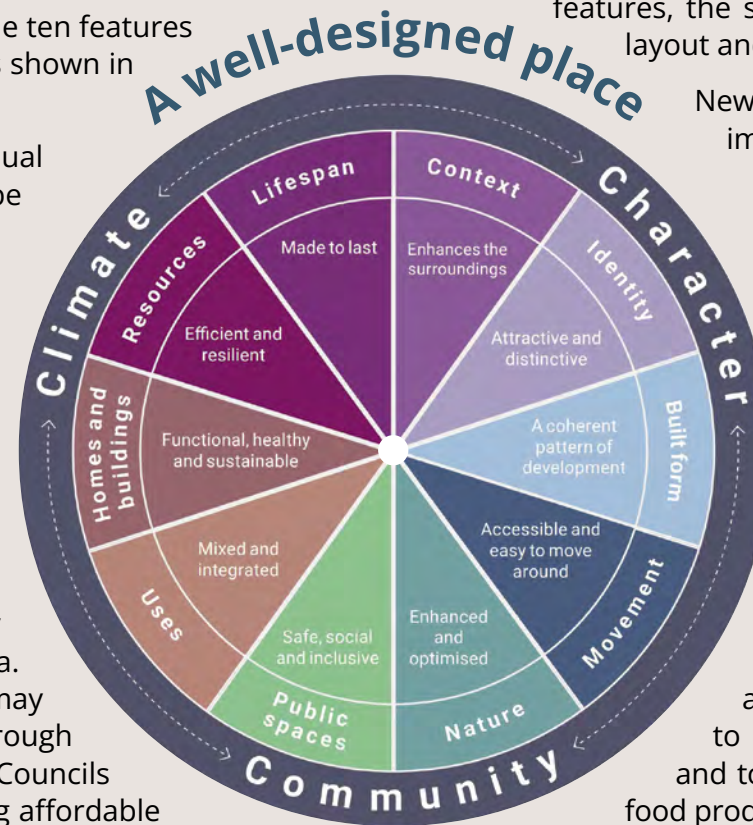
New developments must also provide a 10% improvement to the site's biodiversity. With the urgent need to tackle climate change, planners will look for developments that help achieve net-zero carbon emissions.

Throughout this process it is necessary to apply flexibility and creativity to ensure that planning applications are well-designed, financially viable, and achievable.

Planners apply these principles and practices to all developments, including affordable housing on rural exception sites, which are often in sensitive locations such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and National Parks. However, they also recognise that all rural areas need homes, especially affordable homes, to help their communities and economies thrive and to achieve goals for nature recovery, sustainable food production, and the transition to net-zero.

A well-designed affordable housing development addresses these needs and serves as a practical example of sustainable development in action, meeting the purpose of the planning system.

Jo Lavis, Consultant
Rural Housing Solutions



Designing with Tradition

Designing new homes in rural areas requires a delicate balance between respecting the rich architectural heritage of our villages and embracing innovative solutions that meet the needs of modern living. By carefully considering the local landscape, character and building traditions, we can create housing that seamlessly integrates into the existing fabric of the community, while offering the comfort, efficiency and sustainability that residents expect. The following principles outline how we can achieve this balance and build homes that are both timeless and forward-thinking.



Merging into the landscape

1. Respecting our heritage: a key principle in designing rural housing is to harmonise new structures with the natural landscape, historical context and local architectural traditions. The most successful schemes identify the distinctive features that give a settlement its unique character and sense of place. Understanding these features should be a critical part of the early design process.

2. Respecting the land: before starting the design process, a thorough analysis of the site's topography, vegetation and views is essential. Thoughtful positioning of buildings can minimise disruption to the landscape. For instance, placing a house on a gentle slope rather than a prominent hilltop allows it to blend seamlessly into its surroundings.

3. Respecting local character: when planning new rural housing, consider how the proposed buildings will fit into the existing village, paying attention to local building traditions, typical shapes and sizes of homes in the area. Modern designs with complex layouts and rooflines may look out of place in these settings.



4. Thoughtful details: incorporating locally sourced materials that echo those used in the area connects the building to its environment, weathers gracefully, and blends the new with the existing. Respecting local patterns, such as window proportions and the depths of eaves and reveals, is crucial in maintaining local identity. Variation in rooflines, with an assortment of chimney types and pots, significantly contributes to the overall character. High-quality traditional materials with natural colour variations, alongside contemporary building techniques, can allow new developments blend harmoniously with the existing local character.



Everyone welcome

1. Friendly streets: well-designed and carefully planned streets and lanes promote good neighbourliness and create friendly, safe places to walk. Gently curving, tree-lined rows of homes can create a pleasing rhythm. Street furniture and lighting should be restrained and kept to a minimum, always serving a purpose. Distinct separation of pedestrian and vehicle areas through design elements like curbs and surface treatments are known to improve pedestrian safety by reducing driving speeds.



2. Distinctive yet harmonious:

the design of buildings and structures impacts the overall appearance of the space. Attention to proportions, scale, and architectural details ensures a cohesive and visually appealing environment. Giving each street a distinctive personality adds variety and helps residents and visitors orient themselves more easily. The use of sash, casement, and selected bay windows crafted from painted wood, with an array of glazing bar patterns, should mirror the local character. Prominent homes may highlight signature windows or incorporate specific regional motifs. Timber doors painted in a carefully chosen range of shades and set within elegant surrounds on more substantial homes can bring a charm and appeal to the street scene.

3. Facing the street: where appropriate, the front doors and principal facades of homes should face the street, with clearly defined public frontages and private rear spaces. Active frontages, such as bay windows (where they align with local styles), enliven a street with human activity.



4. Feeling safe: well-designed housing can reduce unwanted behaviours and the potential for crime. Corner buildings with windows on both elevations provide multiple sightlines that can deter antisocial activity. Most importantly, a truly mixed development will include those who leave for work and others who remain at home, providing a sense of guardianship.



“Designing new homes in rural areas requires a delicate balance between respecting the rich architectural heritage of our villages and embracing innovative solutions that meet the needs of modern living. By carefully considering the local landscape, character and building traditions, we can create housing that seamlessly integrates into the existing fabric of the community, while offering the comfort, efficiency and sustainability that residents expect.”



Smart and considerate planning

1. Public spaces matter: integrating public spaces is key to creating harmonious and functional residential areas. Squares, parks, and village greens encourage social interaction and community engagement. Thoughtfully placed benches and gathering spots should foster everyday interactions. Greenery, trees, and landscaping soften the built environment, provide shade, and create pleasant vistas. Warm-white, thoughtfully placed led lighting can be carefully planned to reduce disruption to nocturnal wildlife. Hardscaping elements drawn from the regional vernacular, including pressed gravel, stone kerbs, flags and setts, interspersed with time-honoured swales and channels, strengthen the sense of the place and contribute to the overarching ambience of the neighbourhood.

2. People first: the way local authorities apply transport regulations can often lead to an excessive focus on the car. There are good examples around the country where kerbs, lines and bollards have been dispensed with. Cars should, where possible, be parked in groups behind the houses and not on the road or front garden. Bike stores and bins should also be discreetly situated, leaving the roadside and pavement for walking and for trees and grass. Villages should be for people.

Past and future

1. Respecting tradition: anchoring modern design and construction in local historical practices ensures that new rural housing creates a warm and inviting environment with aesthetic and sensory appeal to established residents. They will want reassurance about impacts on the natural and built environment of the locality, its links to local heritage and a keen sense of respect and continuity. This is easier to say than to do. Constrained budgets and soaring building costs have made all but the most basic enhancements seem unaffordable. However, this may be a false economy, as in the long term, a beautiful house and street will be better looked after and better for people.

2. Innovative yet familiar: the best-designed rural housing emerges from a delicate balance between tradition, innovation and sensitivity to the environment. By carefully selecting design elements from local traditional buildings and weaving them together with contemporary construction techniques and materials, the energy performance, light and comfort within those homes can be enhanced. Passive solar design, insulation and a fabric-first approach to construction all contribute to comfortable, sustainable, 21st-century living.



In this small development of 12 affordable/shared ownership homes in Rolvendon in Kent, the architect has provided discreet parking behind the houses in small courtyards. In front of the houses, 'shared space' principles are used to achieve and maintain attractive and safe areas and minimise signs and rules, lowering vehicle speeds and allowing children to play in safety where they can be supervised.



Building Towards Tomorrow

As we embark on the journey of creating new homes in our rural communities, it is crucial that we keep our sights set on a sustainable and environmentally responsible future. By embracing green solutions, minimising energy usage, supporting local wildlife and ecology, and adapting to the challenges posed by climate change, we can build homes that not only enhance the lives of their residents but also contribute to the health and resilience of our planet. The following principles provide a roadmap for how we can construct homes that are built to last, both for the people who inhabit them and for the world around them.

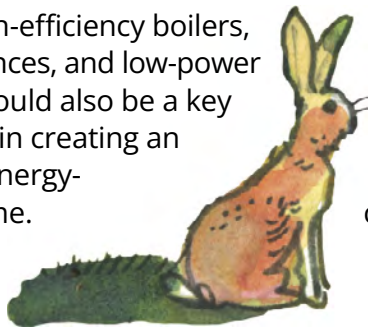
Embracing green solutions

- 1. Eco-friendly practices:** when building homes in the countryside, endeavour to prioritise environmentally friendly approaches that support a sustainable future. This means designing houses that blend in with the natural surroundings, incorporating eco-friendly materials where practical and possible, and include features that support residents' health and happiness. By taking these steps, we can create communities that people are proud to call home and that contribute to a greener future for all.
- 2. Greener still:** growing food in gardens, local orchards, and community allotments reinforces strong communities and helps build new ones, creating a sense of belonging and a connection to the land. When building, only include what is necessary and limit the use of hard surfaces. This approach saves money, reduces water runoff, lowers maintenance needs, and creates a more natural, greener environment.
- 3. Build with care:** using natural materials, like sustainably sourced timber and insulation, reduces the use of resources and supports rural craftsmanship and local suppliers. These materials have lower energy use and carbon emissions throughout their life cycle and are easier to reuse or recycle. When local options are limited, consider products with high recycled content. Using natural paints can reduce environmental impact and improve indoor air quality.
- 4. Sustainability matters:** using better quality components and materials, ensuring proper installation, and maintaining them in the long term extends product lifespan and reduces failures. These factors reduce the embodied carbon and energy of a development.



Minimising energy usage

1. Smart design: buildings with a more compact shape have less surface area for heat to escape compared to sprawling floor layouts and design features that project building structures outwards. Properly orienting homes optimises natural light and minimises heating and cooling needs. A fabric-first approach focuses on the quality of insulation and its installation to reduce energy consumption and ensure thermally comfortable indoor environments. This includes paying particular attention to construction quality to improve airtightness. Installing double- or triple-glazed windows can significantly boost insulation and energy efficiency. Incorporating mvhr (mechanical ventilation with heat recovery) technology introduces a steady stream of purified, fresh air while conserving warmth from the outgoing airflow, minimising the risk of mould and condensation. Opting for high-efficiency boilers, kitchen appliances, and low-power led lighting should also be a key consideration in creating an eco-friendly, energy-conscious home.



2. Renewable power: rural areas often have ample sunlight, making rooftop solar photovoltaic panels an excellent choice for all new homes, particularly when used in conjunction with solar battery storage. When coupled with a well-insulated fabric, integrated air-source or ground-source heating and hot water systems offer a clean and efficient alternative to traditional fossil-fuel-dependent heating. Integrating ev (electric vehicle) charging infrastructure ensures that residents can transition to electric vehicles seamlessly. Measures like this demonstrate and promote environmental responsibility while contributing to national and global efforts to combat climate change.

3. Managing water wisely: when designing, consider using sustainable drainage systems like permeable paving and basins to reduce water runoff and help recharge groundwater. Integrate these features into the landscape to manage flood risks, prevent pollution, and support plants. Collecting rainwater for tasks like car-washing, toilet flushing, and watering plants can greatly reduce the need for mains water. Inside the home, installing water-efficient fixtures such as low flow-rate showers, taps and dual-flush toilets can significantly reduce water consumption, helping to conserve this precious resource.



"By embracing green solutions, minimising energy usage, supporting local wildlife and ecology, and adapting to the challenges posed by climate change, we can build homes that not only enhance the lives of their residents but also contribute to the health and resilience of our planet."



Supporting wildlife and ecology

1. The joy of nature: living among birds and animals brings joy to our lives. The sight of wildlife, the discovery of a blackbird's nest, or the sound of the dawn chorus makes our spirits soar. When building, we have the opportunity to embrace and encourage wildlife, rather than driving it away.

2. Enhancing biodiversity: all developments must now show a Biodiversity Net Gain of at least 10% to achieve governmental climate change targets. By designing landscapes with nature in mind, we can maintain the ecological balance and integrity of rural areas while reducing the need for irrigation, fertilisation, and pest control. This approach not only lowers maintenance costs but also minimises the environmental footprint of the development. Many rural communities have their own environmental plans that can guide efforts to enhance local wildlife. Strategically planting trees, landscaping with native species, designing green corridors, incorporating ponds and wetlands, and integrating wildlife-friendly features into structures all contribute to supporting biodiversity.

3. Creating homes for all: by taking these steps to enhance biodiversity and create wildlife-friendly environments, we can create developments that not only provide homes for people but also support the diverse flora and fauna that make our rural areas so special. This approach ensures that our built environments harmoniously coexist with the natural world, preserving the unique character and ecological value of rural landscapes for generations to come.



Adapting to climate change

1. Flood-resilient design: with flooding becoming more severe and frequent, adopting flood-resilient design strategies is crucial. In vulnerable locations, homes should be elevated on raised foundations above flood levels. Sustainable drainage systems (suds), such as permeable paving and rain gardens, can be incorporated to manage surface water runoff effectively, reducing flood risk and improving water quality.

2. Comfort and durability: to create homes that are comfortable, energy-efficient, and long-lasting in the face of climate change, we should use passive design principles and durable materials. This means designing homes that work with the local climate by positioning windows and shading to make the most of the sun, allowing natural ventilation, and using materials that store heat. By doing this, we can reduce the need for heating and cooling systems, making homes more comfortable and energy efficient. Choosing strong, weather-resistant materials will also help our homes stand the test of time as the climate changes.



Making Good Design a Reality

Creating beautiful, affordable rural housing often requires practical discussions about how to achieve a sensitive balance between competing aspirations. While striving for the highest standards of design and sustainability, taking a creative and flexible approach is also crucial, as is listening to the views of those who will live in the homes and understanding how their day-to-day needs will best be met.





A driving influence should be the aim to create quality, comfortable and energy-efficient homes that are affordable to run. Exploring at an early stage how well-proportioned rooms, high-quality insulation and efficient heating systems can be aligned with external appeal and layout helps to strike a balance between aesthetics and financial resources that can be secured to support projects. As can be seen throughout the report, incorporating local vernacular and materials can add context and character to rural housing, helping to integrate new developments seamlessly into the existing settlement. However, it is important to acknowledge that building homes using traditional materials and crafts can be prohibitively costly, especially if access to these is limited. Alternative solutions that blend traditional designs and materials with modern methods and standardisation can usually achieve an equally pleasing outcome while ensuring that homes are both environmentally friendly and financially feasible.

By working together to determine design priorities, informed decisions about where to allocate resources can be made, delivering homes that achieve collective aims. This pragmatism is particularly important when considering the challenges of building on a smaller scale in rural areas, such as limited access to skilled labour and the need for just-in-time deliveries, which can significantly impact costs and timelines.

Long-term maintenance implications should also be understood when designing rural homes. Complex designs or building methods will result in higher future maintenance costs and this should be considered as part of the design process. Minimising future maintenance costs

and ensuring the longevity of homes also helps to make them more sustainable and reduces environmental impact.

Rural developments often face additional costs associated with infrastructure and utilities. By factoring these requirements into planning and budgeting processes from the outset, homes can be properly serviced without compromising on quality or affordability. Similarly, meeting new ecological standards, such as Biodiversity Net Gain, requires an approach that maximises design opportunities to incorporate green spaces, wildlife-friendly features and sustainable drainage solutions.

Each of us is likely to have a view on what constitutes 'good design.' This diversity of opinion means that it is essential to engage in open and constructive dialogue with all stakeholders from the outset and be willing to adapt and compromise to achieve a positive outcome. By doing so, the homes that get built will meet the necessary standards and regulations while still aligning with an overall vision for beautiful housing.

By balancing aspirations with a pragmatic approach to rural housing development, homes can be built that are not only visually appealing and contribute to their surroundings but also are comfortable, efficient and affordable to live in. Delivering proportionately scaled developments that enhance rural communities and benefit all those who live in them.

Richard DeVille
Development Director, English Rural

Postscript

Matthew Rice

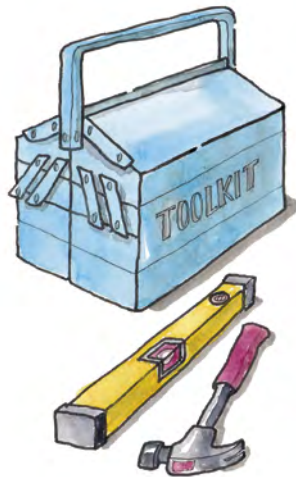


This GREAT REBUILDING is an exciting time for the country. It brings with it the possibility of revival and invigorating disruption. Growing the villages and country towns in which we want to live without damaging those places is a challenge worth facing and one that requires all our wits to be engaged. Design and planning, ecology and environment, decisions about how and where to build - all these are momentous decisions. If we get them right and make new places to live that complement existing settlements rather than scarring or overwhelming those loved and important places, we will be putting in place the plans for the bigger, better, and happier villages of the future. There is no excuse for bad building or out-of-scale developments spreading recklessly across farmland, heedless of context or real local need.

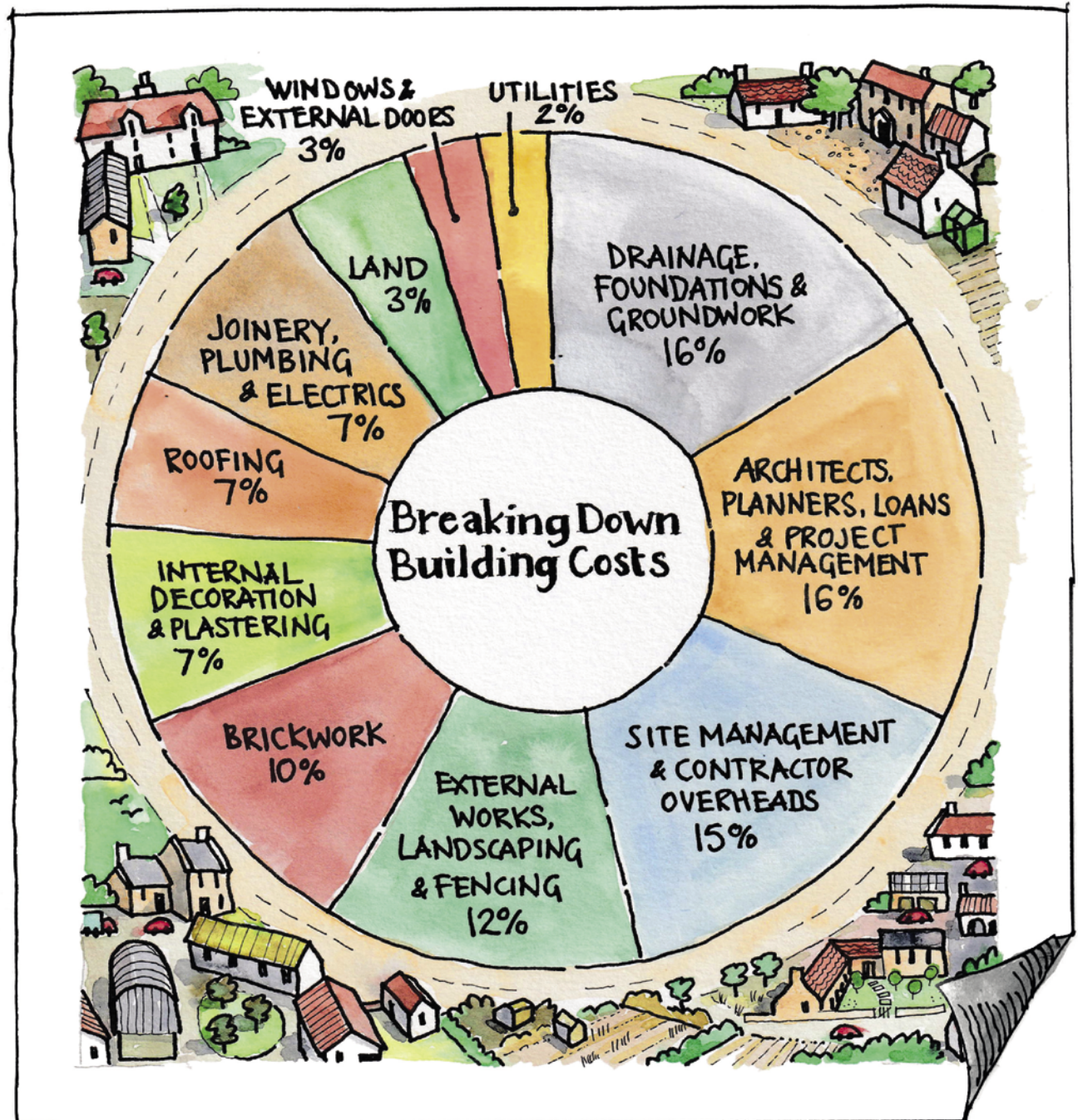
**The time for that is over;
this is the moment.**



Rural Housing Design Guide Toolkit



This Toolkit is a resource designed to inspire and guide Parish Councillors, communities, and other rural stakeholders in creating beautiful, sustainable, and affordable housing. This toolkit aims to help you prioritise design elements that enhance community well-being while maintaining the unique character of your village.



Approach this toolkit with creativity and an open mind. Use the checklist as a starting point to identify the most important aspects for your project, and feel free to add or adapt items to suit your community's specific needs and aspirations.

To help bring your vision to life, we recommend creating a 'mood board' that visually captures the characteristics that make your village unique. Gather images, sketches, and samples of materials that inspire you and reflect the local design, styles, and local community. This will serve as a guide throughout the planning and design process, helping you communicate your ideas to rural architects, housing associations, developers, and planners.

CHECKLIST

Use this checklist as a starting point for your rural housing project. Consider each item carefully and prioritise them based on your community's needs, values, and aspirations. Feel free to add or modify items to create a bespoke checklist that reflects your unique vision.

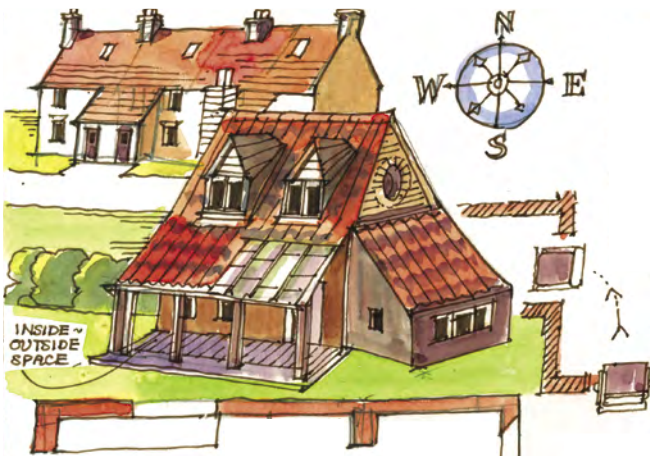
Items highlighted in bold green text are considered "given" factors that should be included in any design considerations. Items not highlighted in bold should be discussed and agreement reached on how important each is and what trade-offs might be made.

Our Village, Our Future

1. Have you considered and prioritised possible sites for affordable, flexible, and diverse housing options that cater to a wide range of income levels and household types?
2. How will you make sure that community stakeholders, including residents and the Parish Council, are kept engaged throughout the planning process and informed about the benefits of sustainable design and construction?
3. Are the homes designed to be comfortable, energy-efficient, and aesthetically pleasing, with thoughtful layouts and ample natural light?
4. Where they exist, is there access to local amenities, facilities, green spaces, and sports and play provisions?
5. Incorporating accessibility features for residents with mobility challenges, sensory limitations, and dementia-friendly design?
6. Well-connected footpaths and cycle routes created to encourage active travel and reduce car dependency?
7. Proximity to public transport been considered when planning new developments?
8. Making sure that new housing developments connect to vital services to support the local economy?

Our House is a Very, Very, Very Fine House

1. Do the layouts cater to household needs and encourage outdoor living, with features like porches and verandas?
2. Is natural light maximised and are homes oriented for solar gain and energy efficiency?
3. Using local materials to create a strong sense of place and support local businesses?
4. Flexible spaces designed to adapt to changing needs over time, such as home offices that can become playrooms or granny flats?
5. Features suitable for all ages and abilities been incorporated, such as wide doorways and step-free entrances?
6. A mix of housing tenures to foster inclusive communities, with affordable and market-rate properties indistinguishable from one another?



Our Village Landscape

1. Does the design draw inspiration from traditional village layouts and patterns, such as clustered buildings and focal points like village greens?
2. Have walkable links been created to connect new developments with the existing community, accommodating wheelchairs and mobility aids?
3. Are green spaces, gardens, orchards, and allotments integrated, with homes oriented to capture views of nature?
4. Have trees been planted, existing vegetation preserved, and lush, green environments created to support biodiversity, improve air quality, and enhance climate resilience?
5. Locally sourced materials that blend with the rural landscape and support local suppliers being used?
6. Paths that are attractive, safe, and well-lit, with natural features like sweet-smelling shrubs and fruit trees?
7. Community spaces for events, workshops, and gatherings being provided, making use of existing venues where possible?
8. Access to fast broadband and reliable mobile coverage to support remote working and digital connectivity?



Designing with Tradition

1. Do new structures harmonise with the natural landscape and local architectural traditions?
2. Does the design respect local character, building traditions, and proportions, such as the typical shape and size of homes in the area?
3. Are streets designed to promote neighbourliness, safety, and walkability, with features like gentle curves and tree-lined rows?
4. Are public spaces integrated to encourage social interaction and community engagement, with thoughtfully placed benches and gathering spots?
5. Does the design prioritise people over vehicles, with discreet parking and bike storage?

6. Minimising disruption to the landscape through thoughtful building positioning, such as placing homes on gentle slopes rather than hilltops?
7. Incorporating local design patterns and details to maintain identity, such as window proportions and depths of eaves?
8. Using design to create distinctive yet harmonious street characters that add variety and aid orientation?
9. That homes front the street with clear public and private spaces, using features like bay windows to enliven the streetscape?
10. Homes designed to provide natural surveillance and deter crime, such as corner buildings with windows on both elevations?



Building Towards Tomorrow

1. Are eco-friendly practices and sustainable materials prioritised, such as sustainably sourced timber and insulation, following a 'fabric-first' approach?
2. Are natural, locally sourced, and recycled materials with low environmental impact being used, such as products with high recycled content?
3. Are buildings designed to be compact and energy-efficient, minimising heat loss through high-quality insulation and a fabric-first approach?
4. Is long-term sustainability ensured through quality materials, proper installation, and regular maintenance to extend product lifespans?
5. Are natural light and ventilation optimised while ensuring thermal comfort, using features like Mechanical Ventilation with Heat Recovery (MVHR) systems and double- or triple-glazed windows?
6. Is there a demonstrated commitment to Biodiversity Net Gain of at least 10%, maintaining ecological balance and minimising environmental impact?



7. Have sustainable drainage systems like permeable paving and rainwater harvesting been incorporated to manage flood risks and support plants?
8. Designing to support food growing in gardens, orchards, and allotments encouraged to promote community resilience and well-being?
9. Having renewable energy systems like rooftop solar panels and electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure been integrated to reduce fossil fuel dependency?
10. Incorporating native planting and create green and blue corridors that connect to surrounding green infrastructure assets and support wildlife?
11. Designing homes to be resilient to flooding and climate change impacts, using raised foundations and flood-resilient materials in vulnerable locations?
12. Using durable, climate-responsive materials like brick and stone used to ensure longevity in the face of changing weather patterns?

Creating Your Mood Board

A mood board is a creative tool that helps you visualise and communicate your design ideas. Follow these steps to create a mood board that captures the essence of your ideal affordable rural housing development:

- **Gather inspiration:** Collect images, sketches, and samples of materials that reflect the local character and your desired design aesthetic. These might include:
 - Photographs of local architecture, landscape features and public spaces
 - Examples of sustainable design elements and materials
 - Other developments that you like and the reasons why
 - Headline feedback on what the local community feel is most important
 - Relevant content from parish surveys or plans that already exist



- **Identify key themes:** Look for recurring patterns, colours, and textures in your collected materials. Group similar items together to identify the key themes that will guide your design decisions.

- **Create a collage:** Arrange your collected materials on a large sheet of paper or canvas or use a computer to create a virtual mood board. Experiment with different layouts and compositions until you achieve a balanced and visually appealing result.

- **Add annotations:** Include brief notes or labels to explain the significance of each element on your mood board. This will help you communicate your ideas to others and ensure that important design principles are not overlooked.

- **Share and refine:** Present your mood board to the local community, architects, and developers to gather feedback and new ideas. Use their input to refine your mood board and checklist, ensuring that your vision aligns with the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders.



Engaging with the Community

- Host regular community meetings and workshops to gather input and feedback throughout the planning and design process.
- Use a variety of communication channels, such as social media, local newspapers, and parish newsletters, to keep residents informed and engaged.
- Partner with local schools, community groups, and businesses to build support and gather diverse perspectives.
- Engage with design professionals, such as architects and planners, who have experience working with rural communities and affordable housing projects.
- Communicate the benefits of sustainable design and construction, such as lower energy bills, improved health and well-being, and reduced environmental impact, to encourage community buy-in and support.





Understanding Local Context

- Research the history of your village, including its origins, growth patterns, and significant events or landmarks.
- Study the local vernacular architecture, including common building materials, roof pitches, window styles, and other design details.
- Analyse the village layout and landscape, noting key features such as village greens, public spaces, and walking routes.
- Consult with local heritage societies, museums, and archives to access historical maps, photographs, and other resources.

Sustainable Design Strategies

- **Fabric-first approach:** Prioritise high-quality insulation, airtightness, and thermal bridging to reduce energy consumption and improve comfort.
- **Passive solar design:** Orient buildings and windows to maximise natural light and heat gain in winter while minimising overheating in summer.
- **Green roofs and walls:** Incorporate vegetation on roofs and walls to improve insulation, reduce stormwater runoff, and support biodiversity.
- **Renewable energy systems:** Install rooftop solar panels, wind turbines, or biomass boilers to generate clean energy and reduce reliance on fossil fuels.
- **Water conservation:** Use low-flow fixtures, rainwater harvesting, and greywater recycling to reduce water consumption and waste.
- **Sustainable materials:** Choose materials with low embodied energy, high recycled content, and minimal environmental impact, such as FSC-certified (Forest Stewardship Council) timber and low-VOC (volatile organic compound) paints.

Partnership Opportunities

- **Rural Housing Enablers:** Professionals who work with local authorities, housing associations, and communities to facilitate the development of affordable rural housing.
- **Rural Housing Associations:** Not-for-profit organisations that provide affordable housing and can partner with communities to develop and manage rural housing projects.
- **Local Councils:** Local councils are responsible for the planning and development policy covering your village. Engage with them via dedicated housing and planning officers, or your locally elected councillors.



Remember, this Toolkit is a starting point for your journey towards creating exceptional affordable rural housing. By approaching the process with creativity, collaboration, and a commitment to sustainable design, you can develop homes and communities that enrich the lives of residents and contribute to the unique character of your village for generations to come.

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Resources & Contacts

There is a great deal of information and support out there for those who want to find out more about good design and getting affordable rural homes built. A network of organisations and individuals exist who can help by offering expertise and support, normally for free.

To make sure that resources and contacts supplied to those reading this guide remains current and comprehensive, a dedicated online page has been built and can be accessed by scanning the QR code below.



SCAN ME





**“Let us build homes that nurture the soul,
enrich rural communities, and cherish the earth,
creating a legacy of beauty, resilience,
and harmony for generations to come.”**

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