

Submission to the Labour Rural Research Group evidence call, December 2025



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1. About this submission

This submission is relevant to the call's focus on Housing & Living Environment: *Affordability, quality and accessibility of housing; housing support and rural homelessness; energy efficiency and energy costs*. The submission draws on evidence published within two recent, in-depth reports of research led by Dr Demelza Jones at the [Countryside and Community Research Institute \(CCRI\)](#) – an internationally recognised independent rural research centre based at the University of Gloucestershire:

1. [English Devolution and Rural Affordable Housing: Opportunities and Risks](#) (CCRI). Commissioned by the Rural Housing Network, published December 2025
2. [Evaluation of the Defra-funded Rural Housing Enabler Programme](#) (CCRI & EAP Research Consultancy). Commissioned by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE), published August 2025

The submission incorporates both findings from original qualitative and quantitative research undertaken within these projects (including interviews, workshop discussions, surveys, administrative data analysis and Social Return on Investment modelling), and the secondary evidence of academic and policy literature reviewed and cited within the reports. Both research projects focused on England, although other CCRI research, such as the [RUSTIK project](#), works in Wales, and identifies comparable concerns about housing affordability impacting upon the viability of rural locations for younger and/or lower income residents.

The combined evidence base is highly relevant to Labour's rural policy agenda, demonstrating the housing challenges facing rural communities and the economic and social implications of this for both rural communities and wider society, the challenges to meeting rural housing needs, and the policy levers that could deliver meaningful improvements in rural housing affordability, quality, and security.

1.1. Evidence base

The evidence presented in this submission is derived from two complementary CCRI-led research projects published as research reports in 2025, and reflects a robust mixed-methods approach:

Primary empirical research

English Devolution and Rural Affordable Housing (research undertaken May – October 2025):

- Qualitative interviews with combined authority and local authority officers, Registered Providers, Rural Housing Enablers and Community Land Trust representatives across three case study areas. Case studies were selected to capture both predominantly rural and mixed rural-urban areas of England, as well as areas at different stages of the devolution process.
- Analysis of devolution deals and proposals, and strategic documents relating to rural development and/or affordable housing from devolved authorities across England
- Online workshop discussion with housing and local government professionals from a wider range of rural or mixed rural-urban areas, representatives of national housing and rural organisations, and central government.

Evaluation of the Rural Housing Enabler programme (research undertaken May 2024-May 2025):

- Qualitative interviews with Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs), local government officers, Registered Providers, housing/rural development charities and residents of rural affordable housing schemes across case study areas selected to reflect regional variations in rural affordability levels and stage of RHE service (established, restarted or new service)
- Surveys of Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) and delivery partners across England;
- Analysis of programme-wide administrative and monitoring data;
- Social Return on Investment (SROI) modelling based on case-study completed rural affordable schemes.

Both projects also included secondary evidence and literature, drawn from an extensive review of academic, policy and sector research which informed both research projects and is cited within the two reports. Evidence from this literature situates the empirical findings within the wider national evidence base on rural affordable housing.

2. Affordability and supply of rural housing

2.1. Persistent and deepening affordability pressures

The need for affordable housing is a critical challenge affecting rural communities. In England, house prices in rural areas have increased to a greater extent than in urban areas and have outstripped rural wage increases to represent an average 10% gap between rural house prices and wages (CPRE, 2023), while the average lower quartile income to house price ratio is 8.8 in rural areas - higher than the 7.6 average ratio across urban England (Defra, 2024).

Less rural housing stock is owned and managed by affordable housing providers than in urban areas, and between 2019 and 2022 rural social housing waiting lists rose by 31% compared to 3% in urban areas, indicating a deepening divide (Bullock et al., 2025). Rural homelessness and rough sleeping have increased by an estimated 40% since 2018/19 (CPRE, 2023), although often remains hidden (Tunaker et al., 2023).

In regions with strong visitor economies such as coastal areas and national parks, proliferation of second homes and properties used as holiday lets further reduce supply and challenge the year-round prosperity and sustainability of communities. In these places, the gap between the lowest quartile of local earnings and house prices is at its widest reflecting prevalence of low wage or seasonal employment (Marmot et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2025; Ovendon-Hope et al., 2025; Tunaker et al., 2023). At the same time, counter-urban mobilities have impacted not just the rural purchase market but contributed to a sharp increase in rural renting, placing further pressures on supply and affordability for those whose incomes are linked to local rural economies, rather than urban labour markets (the latter via rural-to-urban commuting or hybrid/remote working) (County Councils Network 2024). The predominance of larger detached properties in rural markets further exacerbates the exclusion of lower income populations (Bullock et al., 2025; Lavis and Satsangi, 2025), while high running costs linked to older, energy-inefficient or off-grid housing stock intensifies cost-of-living challenges for some rural households (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2025).

Younger people, in particular, can be compelled to leave rural communities to access affordable housing (CPRE, 2021). This leads to skills and labour shortages causing economic growth challenges and undermines informal support networks as younger families move away from ageing relatives. For interviewees across both CCRI projects, the ability for those who wish to remain in their home communities being able to do so was seen as a key outcome of the development of rural affordable schemes, with social and economic benefits flowing from this. The requirement applied to Rural Exception Site social-rent developments, that home allocation prioritises local connections, means that scheme residents tend to have roots in the local area. When a resident's family and friends live locally this enables the giving and receipt of informal care and support – for example, care for the elderly or help with childcare. Proximity to informal support networks was cited by scheme residents interviewed in our research as an important way in which the move had improved their lives, and local partners involved in delivering these schemes reported that enabling these informal care networks

through the provision of affordable homes reduced social isolation and reliance on public services, with associated public savings:

‘If you don't have sufficient affordable housing, it's likely to force younger families away who may never return, and consequently an ageing population ... there's an issue around more informal care networks, and if you live in a village and you've got elderly parents and they're getting a bit frail, you might want to take them to the nearest town to do shopping. Obviously, those arrangements are very informal, very local. But if you didn't have them in place, older people would probably have to move away, or you have to provide more bus services to get them into the nearest town.’ (research interview with local authority officer – Jones et al., 2025b).

A local rural population heavily skewed towards elderly residents also places local services and amenities at risk due to issues with workforce recruitment, and the closure of amenities such as primary schools and bus routes due to lack of local demand. This can create a ‘vicious cycle’ whereby planning applications for new affordable developments may be turned down as an area lacks the transport links and amenities that a balanced population enabled by more affordable homes could support (Jones et al., 2025a; 2025b; Lavis and Satsangi, 2025):

‘if you have a village which doesn't have a shop, a pub, a post office, all that kind of stuff, and a bus service, then it won't get development. Yet it's precisely [development] that will save the school, save the post office, save the pub and the bus’ (research interview with Rural Housing Enabler – Jones et al., 2025b).

There is clear evidence that truly affordable, good quality homes tailored to local communities’ needs are essential for a sustainable and thriving countryside, and that there are tangible social and economic benefits that would flow from meaningful remedial action for the rural affordability crisis. Research commissioned by CPRE, English Rural and the Rural Services Network found that every 10 new affordable rural homes built could boost the economy by £1.4 million, supporting 26 jobs and generating £250,000 in government revenue, while the demographically balanced population enabled by a range of housing types and tenures in a village sustains local businesses and public services to the benefit of residents of all ages (Jarvis et al., 2020).

2.2. Barriers in the planning system and underutilisation of rural delivery mechanisms

Pressures on rural housing supply have been exacerbated by a national planning framework ‘dominated by urban-centric policies’ with the impact of ‘marginalis[ing] rural affordable housing and unintentionally undermin[ing] its delivery’ (Lavis and Satsangi, 2025: 42; see also Moore et al., 2025). Requirements of a minimum unit number before affordable housing contributions can be taken by local planning authorities has meant that this is seldom achieved in rural developments, which tend to be at a smaller scale. Meanwhile, Rural Exception Sites (RES) – the key planning mechanism enabling small schemes of new affordable rural homes to meet local need – are underutilised by councils. Only 17% of rural local planning authorities progressed RES schemes in 2021-2022 (Gallent et al., 2024).

Barriers to RES developments identified across the literature and confirmed through empirical research include financial viability concerns for Registered Providers, planning complexity, limited capacity and churn within planning departments who capacity has been undermined through consistent real-term reductions to the local government settlement, and local opposition to even modest rural development (Gallent et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2025). Empirical evidence from CCRI's research interviews shows that these barriers interact cumulatively in rural contexts, meaning that without specialist support, schemes frequently stall at early stages, leaving communities' housing needs unmet and endangering trust in the consultation and planning process (Jones et al., 2025b).

The evidence further demonstrates that rural affordable housing delivery can struggle to compete within strategic funding and planning frameworks that prioritise scale and speed. Larger urban and peri-urban schemes are often favoured because they better meet numerical housing targets, against smaller-scale rural schemes which must address housing need which is geographically dispersed or may be in 'pockets' among otherwise relatively affluent communities. Interviewees across local government and the housing sector in our research into the impacts of English devolution on rural affordable housing told us that this was a major barrier to devolved combined authorities giving due attention to rural affordable schemes in the Spatial Development Strategies and Strategic Place Partnerships that will inform the bids taken forward to the government's Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP):

'The biggest risk is the housing numbers, and the planners looking at the numbers and it becomes a conversation about allocating big sites to get those big wins. You're never going to be able to do that in a rural space' (research interview with combined authority officer – Jones et al., 2025a).

Furthermore, housing deprivation in rural areas is not well captured by traditional measures of housing need such as social housing waiting lists. An interviewee in our evaluation of the Rural Housing Enabler programme, for example, told us that it was a struggle to encourage people in rural communities to put their name on the waiting list as there was such widespread cynicism that affordable homes would ever be built in their villages: *'why would you wait at a bus stop when the bus is never going to come?'* (research interview with Registered Provider – Jones et al., 2025b).

2.3. The critical role of Rural Housing Enablers

Both CCRI reports find strong evidence that Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) - independent specialists who work with rural communities, Registered Providers, landowners and planners to progress small rural affordable schemes - are critical to the success of RES developments. RHEs' work with communities was viewed by local actors interviewed in our research as essential in progressing schemes through encouraging community and Parish Council enthusiasm for schemes, sourcing suitable sites and development partners, evidencing local needs via Housing Needs Surveys to meet planning requirements, mitigating and finding ways through local objections via extensive engagement and discourse, and maintaining

momentum and enthusiasm through a lengthy and complex planning and development process. The skillset, resources and networks required for RHEs' community-based work are outside the scope and capacity of local authorities, whose officers commented that without RHE capacity, affordable rural development in their area would be unlikely to progress or would progress at a reduced scale and rate:

'We [local authority] tried to deliver rural housing independently with government funding and failed because we didn't have the trust, independence, level of focus or the skillset of the RHE ... There's a very clear skillset around community work that isn't embedded in local authorities' (research workshop discussion with local authority officer – Jones et al., 2025b).

Furthermore, RHEs are recognised as important facilitators of local rural housing partnerships and champions for rural communities whose needs would otherwise be subsumed within local authorities' competing housing priorities; such as the need for large-scale schemes to meet government housing targets outlined above (Jones et al. 2025b). Our evaluation of the current Defra-funded national RHE programme included a bespoke Social Return on Investment (SROI) model, which calculated that within the first three years of an RHE's involvement in a prospective affordable housing scheme, for every £1 invested over the time period there is an estimated £3.30 generated in social outcome benefits (Jones et al., 2025b).

However, the evaluation highlights that short-term and precarious funding undermines the effectiveness of RHEs, given that rural housing schemes typically take 7–8 years from inception to completion, and that continuity in building trusted relationships with communities and local partners is an essential aspect of the role. The current Defra-funding of the national RHE network for England offers funding for one 1.0 FTE RHE post per county and initially ran from late 2023 to March 2025, with a 12-month extension granted which is currently set to end in March 2026. Ensuring longer-term, secure funding for the RHE programme is essential for its continued effectiveness and would provide continuity in service provision and maximise the outcomes of RHE activity for rural communities in alignment with the Labour government's inclusive growth and affordable housing missions. Transitioning to multi-year funding commitments (5+ years) or a permanent funding stream would enable RHEs to support new rural schemes through to completion, retain experienced staff, and maintain productive community and partner relationships as housing and strategic planning competencies transfer to combined authorities under the English devolution programme (Jones et al., 2025a; 2025b).

3. English devolution: Opportunities and risks for rural affordable housing

The ambition for universal 'devolution by default' in the Labour government's English Devolution White Paper and Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will see unprecedented inclusion of rural areas within devolved combined authorities. This contrasts with prior iterations of English devolution that have primarily centred on city regions.

Housing and spatial planning is among the devolved competencies within the Bill and given the absence of a rural target in the government's Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP), combined and strategic authorities will be crucial actors in determining whether rural communities receive an appropriate share of new affordable homes - an issue of critical importance for inclusive economic growth, social wellbeing and sustainability of rural services. Rural MPs and rural advocates have expressed concerns that the current devolution programme imposes an urban-centric model on rural or mixed rural-urban areas, and risks reinforcing rather than addressing marginalisation of rural needs (Jones et al. 2025a).

CCRI's research in the impacts of English devolution on rural affordable housing (Jones et al., 2025a) finds that the current programme of English devolution poses both opportunities and risks. On the one hand, devolved authorities' ability to develop locally appropriate approaches means that local needs, and the unique planning and funding requirements of rural affordable schemes can potentially be recognised and built into the Spatial Development Strategies and Strategic Place Partnerships that will shape bidding to the SAHP. An alternate outcome risks transplanting the urban-rural/core-periphery dynamic to a new layer of governance, sidelining rural needs and prioritising larger, urban or peri-urban schemes. These schemes offer greater scope to meet the government's affordable homes targets in numerical terms alone but leave rural communities' needs unmet and fail to foster truly inclusive growth if they dominate investment plans.

The research evidences a complex set of contextual factors that influence if rural affordable housing is included (and kept) on the agenda as devolved housing and strategic planning approaches evolve. This includes spatial and geographic determinants. In devolved areas that are predominantly rural, 'housing *is* rural housing' (research interview with combined authority officer – Jones et al., 2025a) and must be prioritised. But there are steeper challenges in mixed rural-urban geographies or where rural hinterlands surround an urban core. Here, rural housing advocates may have to fight for a place at the table and persuade decision-makers who have less knowledge and experience of rural needs and delivery challenges of the case for new rural affordable homes.

The research shows that local rural housing partnerships and delivery legacies are also very important. Where rural housing partnerships are strong, actors can advocate with one voice and showcase past successes, increasing the chance of gaining traction with decision-makers early in the devolution process and influencing housing and spatial strategies that embed rural delivery. The report recommends that such networks are leveraged as fully as possible and at the earliest stage possible of devolution processes. Where these networks are absent or weak, advocates will struggle to secure attention to rural needs unless they are developed and strengthened – particularly in mixed rural-urban or hinterland-core areas. By utilising existing partnerships early and by drawing on an effective track record of rural delivery, areas such as York and North Yorkshire have achieved clear successes in influencing the devolution conversation; embedding rural need in emerging strategies and informing mayoral priorities. As devolution advances, the expanded group of mayors governing rural or mixed character

areas have the potential to be powerful champions for improved rural housing policies via their direct line to government. But again, this relies upon early and consistent engagement and effective framing of rural affordable housing as intrinsic to inclusive economic growth and social wellbeing, as well as steps to ensure that non-mayoral authorities who have access to lesser powers and funding to tackle housing need, also have their voices heard and are not ‘left behind’.

Part of this work is establishing a robust data-driven evidence base of rural need to inform emerging housing and spatial planning strategies, given that traditional measures of housing need based on deprivation data or social housing waiting lists can result in rural needs being overlooked. Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) are a key node in rural housing partnerships and intelligence gathering on rural housing needs, and the report also recommends sustained funding of RHE services, allowing their continuation under new governance structures with adapted delivery to reflect expanded devolved geographies.

4. Policy implications and evidence-informed recommendations for Labour

The evidence from both CCRI studies points to a clear set of policy actions that would materially improve housing affordability, quality and living conditions in rural England, while aligning with Labour’s wider objectives on inclusive economic growth and community wellbeing.

4.1. What Labour should do: Evidence-based actions

1. Embed a statutory rural duty within housing and devolution frameworks

National government should require devolved authorities to include rural representation in governance structures and to incorporate addressing rural needs in their strategies and investment planning. This would be achieved most effectively via amendments to the Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. Evidence from this research highlights the risk that devolved authorities overlook rural communities’ housing needs or sideline small rural schemes as too costly or complex. While the recognition of the higher costs of rural delivery and the commitment to contextual Value for Money assessment in the SAHP guidance is welcome, the lack of a rural target means that the priority given to rural affordable housing in Strategic Place Partnerships and Spatial Development Strategies will play a large role in determining whether rural affordable housing schemes gain the grant funding they need. Bill amendments that place a duty on combined authorities to consider the needs of rural communities would help ensure that rural housing is not overlooked in favour of urban-focused strategies and investment plans, and that accountability mechanisms are available to rural communities and advocates.

2. Secure long-term, multi-year funding for Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs)

Treat RHE services as essential delivery infrastructure rather than short-term projects. Empirical and SROI evidence demonstrates that RHEs unlock schemes that would

otherwise stall, generate significant social value, and surface hidden housing need, but short-term and precarious funding undermines their effectiveness (Jones et al., 2025b). Government should commit to longer-term funding for RHE services beyond the current March 2026 grant-end and encourage local authorities and devolved authorities to co-fund services and embed them within their housing plans. RHE services are critical infrastructure in rural affordable delivery, particularly for delivery via Rural Exception Sites (Gallent et al., 2024; Jones et al., 2025b). They are key actors within rural housing partnerships and important sources of the evidence needed to inform rural-proofed housing strategies, as shown in York and North Yorkshire, where the RHE network provided crucial rural pipeline data informing the action plan to deliver on rural priorities (Jones et al., 2025a). As RHE services are currently largely based on district or county-level geographies, RHEs, host organisations and their funders should explore adapted models and enhanced collaboration to reflect the expanded geographies of devolved regions, without compromising trusted relationships and local expertise.

3. **Prioritise genuinely affordable, energy-efficient rural homes - especially social rent**
Focus investment on housing that is affordable relative to rural incomes and reduces long-term energy costs. The evidence shows that high-quality, energy-efficient rural affordable housing delivers benefits for residents' health, wellbeing and financial resilience, helping address both housing insecurity and fuel poverty (Jones et al., 2025b). The current affordability measure of 80% of market value applied to purchase or private rental affordable schemes still excludes a swathe of households given the gulf between average local wages and house prices in many rural areas. As such, social rent programmes should be prioritised where possible to meet evidenced local housing need, and prioritising local connection to enable people who wish to do so to build a life in their home communities; supporting the local economy and public services, and informal caring networks.
4. **Strengthen rural planning mechanisms, particularly for Rural Exception Sites**
Government should reinforce support for Rural Exception Sites and small-scale affordable developments by reviewing thresholds and encouraging local policies which set out lower thresholds for affordable home requirements for rural areas, as allowed under the revised NPFF. Government should develop planning processes that better match rural realities and support local government to invest in planning capacity - reducing the delays caused by under-resourcing and staff churn. This would help address the issue of the increased cost and complexity of rural schemes, which both CCRI's and others' research (Gallent et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2025) suggests is a key barrier to the adoption of rural housing priorities.
5. **Improve rural housing data, including hidden homelessness**
Invest in consistent, place-based evidence on rural housing need and rural homelessness to inform strategic decision-making. The research shows that rural housing need, homelessness and housing insecurity are often hidden and therefore underestimated, leading to under-allocation of resources.

4.2. Why this matters for Labour's rural electoral offer

The evidence demonstrates that housing affordability, quality and energy costs are not marginal rural concerns, but central determinants of whether rural communities remain viable, inclusive and economically productive. Persistent housing pressures are driving younger and working-age households out of rural areas, weakening local labour markets, undermining public services and eroding community sustainability.

An evidence-led approach to rural housing that balances meeting evidenced housing need with preserving the countryside and which engages rural communities in this process will allow Labour to address cost-of-living pressures, tackle visible inequalities between rural and urban areas, and long-standing perceptions that rural needs are overlooked in national policy.

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