Scottish Government Review Of Rural Housing Enablers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Scottish Government commissioned this research to review Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) across the UK, and to establish their activities and coverage in Scotland. The Housing Supply Task Force wishes to explore potential measures to ease housing supply pressures in rural Scotland, and Rural Housing Enablers have been cited as a possible mechanism to act as local brokers of housing solutions to increase housing supply.

Aims and objectives

A key aim for the research was to identify the activities and coverage of RHEs in Scotland. A further aim for the project was to draw out lessons from evaluations of RHEs carried out in other countries within the UK, examining conclusions on the impact of RHEs in England and Wales. The aims of the project gave rise to the following objectives:

- Describe the aims, activities, governance and financing of RHEs in Scotland;
- Explore the extent to which RHEs in Scotland have been able to meet their aims;
- Explore why RHE have been established in some rural areas in Scotland, but not all;
- Explore the role, operation and impact of RHEs elsewhere in the UK;
- Draw conclusions on the role of RHE in the UK and their activities and coverage in Scotland.

Methods

Analysis of documentation

An analysis of relevant documentation relating to the Scottish RHEs was undertaken, including the websites of key organisations. Information was drawn from a variety of sources including business plans, Annual outcomes and performance returns from Housing Voluntary Grants from the Scottish Government and other monitoring reports. Information was also drawn from existing reports and evaluations of RHEs in other countries within the UK.

Semi structured qualitative telephone interviews

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with fifteen respondents. Four respondents in England and Wales were contacted to discuss the current situation with regard to RHEs in these two countries, and to describe the impacts of RHEs. Eleven interviews were conducted in Scotland, including representatives of agencies undertaking RHE type work or RHEs themselves, local authorities where RHEs are sited, and also two local authorities where there are no RHEs at present.
Findings

An overview of RHEs in Scotland

Shelter Scotland has provided a helpful definition of RHEs and the work that they undertake, noting that the term is used to ‘describe work which engages with rural communities in order to better chart their housing needs and to bring forward solutions to meeting those needs’ (Shelter, 2007, p1). For the purposes of this report, the following agencies and individuals were included as undertaking rural housing enabling:

- Highland Small Communities Housing Trust
- Dumfries & Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust
- Moray Rural Housing Enabler
- Aberdeenshire Rural Housing Enabler
- Rural Housing Service
- Development Worker for West Highland Housing Association (formerly Argyll Development Worker for the Rural Housing Service)
- Development Co-ordinator, Lewis and Harris Rural Community Housing Pilot, Western Isles.

RHE activity in Scotland has helped to bring about new affordable housing across different tenures in rural and remote areas, including facilitating developments for social renting as well as low cost home ownership. For example, rural housing enabling on Colonsay identified levels of housing need that had previously gone unrecorded, prompting the development of a housing strategy for the island and contributing to the development of four affordable homes for rent. RHEs have also contributed to a more effective use of the existing housing stock, helping to bring empty dwellings back into use, and also utilising the potential of conversions and adaptations to achieve housing solutions for the residents of rural communities. An additional dimension to the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust, and which the more recent Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust aims towards, is a landbanking function. This function allows the Trust in the Highlands to buy land on behalf of communities and sell the land on for affordable housing to housing associations or directly to individuals. Rural Housing Burdens are used to ensure such housing remains affordable in perpetuity.

An emerging role for RHEs is working with landowners, as well as community buy outs, not only in relation to identifying potential sites for development for social rent or home ownership, but with regard to the development of affordable housing by private landlords as part of the Rural Homes for Rent scheme.

RHEs are pioneering innovative solutions to maximise the potential of the mechanisms that are available to meet the housing needs of rural communities, with the development of Rural Housing Burdens perhaps the most notable example.

RHEs have been financed in a number of different ways. Some RHEs received a single source of grant payment by charitable organisations. Other RHEs are funded by a variety of local stakeholders. A crucial feature of the longer standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust has been part funding by the Scottish Government in the form of Housing Voluntary Grants Scheme (HVGS).
RHEs are operating either as individuals or as small organisations. The governance of RHEs is a reflection of the role that enablers play with regard to facilitating joint working and developing community led housing solutions. There was a strong focus on either boards or advisory groups at local level, comprising key stakeholders in the delivery of affordable housing within each RHE’s area of operation across all tenures. A feature of these agencies is the level of ownership by, and responsibility to, representative bodies of rural communities themselves.

**The experience elsewhere: RHEs in England and Wales**

National evaluations of RHE activity in England and Wales have consistently reported the positive impacts of these posts in helping to deliver housing solutions for rural communities, and key recommendations have revolved around suggestions for an expansion of these posts geographically. The evaluations highlight a number of features of RHE work, including:

- RHEs add value wherever they operate;
- Working with communities requires long timescales;
- The independent position of enablers;
- A considerable amount of the positive work that RHEs undertake can easily pass unnoticed, especially negotiating, brokering and mediating between all groups, individuals and agencies involved in affordable housing delivery.

Recent inquiries and Commissions have also endorsed the substantive conclusions of these evaluations and have supported the continuation and growth of these posts. However, these countries have gone down different funding routes in the last year. Wales has witnessed an expansion of its RHEs, with the Welsh Assembly Government announcing in 2008 that it is to provide part funding in partnership with local authorities, RSLs and other bodies such as national parks. In contrast, central government financial support for RHEs came to an end in England in 2008 after a number of years of support, and agencies such as ACRE are currently monitoring the diverse range of responses to funding RHE posts at local level.

Central government support in England has always been time limited, with the aim of demonstrating the value of RHEs to housing providers and local authorities. Although a number of models for the local funding of RHEs has developed, the Taylor Report (2008) pointed out that it was not clear how present policy was going to achieve wider coverage, given that funding for some of the RHEs that have been in post has ceased, and that many local authorities are not funding RHE posts at all. Further, reports emphasise that an underlying weakness of RHEs in England has been the funding structures that underpin these posts.

**Barriers**

One difficulty that RHEs face is the potential for becoming isolated, both in terms of isolation from local networks of key stakeholders, and also isolated from peer support. Even if RHEs were more widely adopted across the country, they would still constitute just a handful of individuals.

RHEs also need to be supported by training and personal development to achieve the broad range of skills required to undertake the variety of tasks and roles that they are expected to perform.
A network of peer group support needs to be adequately resourced at national level, not only to provide training, but to draw on the expertise already available in Scotland across all organisations engaged in RHE type activities, as well as elsewhere. An organisation such as the Rural Housing Service is ideally placed to undertake this role.

The type of governance structures that are in place can have a crucial role in reducing the potential for isolation. An RHE can retain an independent position by being based outside of public agencies, and yet benefit from very effective partnership working via local steering groups, and also from local cultures that support partnership working, as evidenced by approaches to joint working in the Highland Council area.

A consistent theme running through some of the comments from respondents in Scotland, and also the results of evaluations elsewhere in the UK, was a tension between the expectations of partner organisations and the actual activities of RHEs. Partner agencies tend to favour a focus on identifying sites for affordable housing, whereas RHEs’ attention may be focused on undertaking needs assessment and community development work.

Conclusions

There is no one blueprint in the way that RHEs can achieve their aims and objectives. An essential aspect of developing a RHE role within a specific locality is agreeing and setting priorities tailored to local circumstances and partnership working arrangements. The balance of tasks undertaken by a RHE will vary by area. For example, the priority in one area may be site identification, whereas in another area, there may be more of a focus on establishing housing needs, prior to helping to deliver affordable housing – RHEs have a contribution to make to both approaches.

A necessary element in establishing and sustaining effective partnership working is that there is a shared agreement that the RHE adds value to the local housing system, and does not duplicate work done by other agencies.

The policy environment has a crucial role to play in enhancing the potential role of RHEs with regard to the mechanisms at their disposal for helping to deliver affordable housing. Consideration should be given to:

- Clarifying the future of key mechanisms for rural communities such as Rural Home Ownership Grants and Rural Empty Property Grant;
- Assessing the implications of changes to Housing Association Grant funding for rural areas;
- Broadening the range of mechanisms at the disposal of RHEs and other stakeholders in rural areas, for example by taking on board the potential of exception sites in local plan policies.

A challenge for organisations engaged in RHE activity is to develop income streams to potentially provide match funding, which is also an area in which the policy environment has a key role to play. In Scotland, an agency role for RHEs in promoting and administering a scheme such as RHOGS, or perhaps a future equivalent, could provide just such an income stream. If an RHE programme was
taken forward then it would be necessary to assess the resource capacity of existing mechanisms such as, for example, the Rural Homes for Rent scheme, to sustain developing activity.

The core conclusion from this review is that rural housing enabling works. The evaluations of the impact of RHEs elsewhere in the UK have demonstrated the added value that RHEs have brought to rural communities. Evaluations from elsewhere in the UK also point to the value of some element of central government grant funding to underpin the successful delivery of housing solutions in rural areas by RHEs in the long term. In Scotland, the part funding of long standing organisations such as the Rural Housing Service and the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust by the Scottish Government already shows how the long term sustainability of these organisations can contribute towards a continuous flow of affordable housing in rural communities.