

2024 Affordable Housing Initiative

During the Spring of 2024, the Parish Council agreed to start an Affordable Housing Initiative for the Parish of Beenham. The Parish Council had previously undertaken an Affordable Housing Needs Survey in 2013 that had identified a need for affordable housing in the Parish, and with the housing crisis being even greater today, the Parish Council wanted to restart this scheme.

This initiative is being run with [Connecting Communities Berkshire](#) (CCB), which is an independent charity with 50 years of experience in community development work. One of the many things they do is help run Affordable Housing Initiatives with local communities.

The Parish Council is grateful for the help and support they provide, as we could not do this without them.

The Parish Council greatly appreciates that engagement and support of the community. The progress that has been made could not have been made without this.

Further updates will be published as the initiative progresses. The Parish Councillor running this initiative is David Hancock, and he can be contacted by email: d.hancock@beenham-pc.gov.uk or by phone: 07471 148256

The Affordable Housing Needs Survey undertaken in 2013 showed a need for affordable housing in the parish. However, the crisis in house affordability has worsened since then.

In Spring 2024

- The cheapest house in the Parish was 7 times the average annual income
- The average house price was 12 times the average annual income.

Previously, families had some choice of where they lived, so we were able to grow up with family near them in a community we knew, if we wanted. Communities could sustain local schools and some amenities. As people moved on from running the community's clubs and associations we had their successors, young people, rooted in community.

Today this is being lost in Beenham because of the housing crisis

We need to be able to handover to the young custodianship of those things that keep our community going, the running of clubs, events, the church, parish council etc. We need to keep the school as it is a cornerstone of our community. West Berkshire Council forecasts that the school's annual reception year intake numbers will be below the school's set Pupil Admission Number of 15

children per year group, which is only set to get worse with the lack of affordable housing in the parish. We need to keep a thriving community that as times change can adapt and renew itself. We need community because that is the biggest determinant on our health as we get older.

We can do something about this, which is why the Affordable Housing Initiative has been started.

What Makes Rural Affordable Housing Initiatives Different?

Rural housing initiatives are different to others in several key ways;

Community Focused

They are run with a community-centered approach where the community plays a central role in agreeing on what is built where. It is only through this approach that we can gain the community's support.

Housing for the Community

Housing is guaranteed to be only for people who live in the community or who have links to the community in perpetuity. Any property is not eligible for "right to buy"

Scale of Development

The scale of development is far smaller with typically no more than 10 housing units in a development.

Development Design

The design of any development is a key consideration, and this includes:

- Harmonizing new structures with the natural landscape and local architectural traditions
- Using locally sourced materials to tie new housing to its context
- Respecting the existing village layout and character

Rural Exception Sites

Rural Exception Sites are a unique planning policy tool designed to address affordable housing needs in rural communities. These sites have several key characteristics and purposes:

- Located on the edge of rural settlements, typically abutting the village boundary
- Usually small in size, often around 10-12 properties, though smaller schemes of 2-6 properties are common in smaller parishes
- Situated outside the settlement envelope, in areas not normally considered for residential development

Other Important Aspects

Rural housing projects often emphasize:

- Energy efficiency and sustainability in design

- Preserving the natural environment and local wildlife
- Supporting local services and maintaining community viability

Keys to Success – Feasible Sites and Supportive Landowners

Once a need for affordable housing has been established, there is still a long process to follow, but there are two things that can stop an initiative in its tracks early in the process

- No Feasible Sites
- Landowners unprepared to gift land or sell cheaply

Feasible Sites

There are many considerations which make a site feasible or not. These include:

- The support of the community for a site
- The site design needing to respect the existing village layout and character.
- Transport and Highways approval for a site

If there are no feasible sites, then the initiative will stop.

Supportive Landowners

A rural exception site will be on private land, so to build the development, a landowner must gift the land or sell it cheaply. With the land being a rural exception site, the land cannot be used for commercial development, so it is hoped that a landowner would be supportive and gift or sell the land to the Registered Provider that will develop and run the affordable housing.

If a landowner will not gift or sell the land cheaply, then the initiative will stop.

Overview of the Process

There are 8 stages in the process that need to be completed.

1 Identifying Housing Need

This stage includes

- Conducting a Housing Needs Survey

- Analyzing results to determine local housing requirements
- Presenting findings to the parish council for consideration

This stage has been completed

2 Site Selection

This stage includes

- Identifying potential sites, often on the edge of rural settlements
- Evaluate sites through a collaborative process involving:
 - Parish Councillors
 - District/Borough Councillors
 - Local planning authority officers
 - Housing associations

This stage is nearing completion

3 Land Acquisition

This stage includes

- Negotiating with landowners on terms of sale
- Registered Provider (organisation that will build and manage the affordable housing) acquiring the land

4 Planning and Approval

This stage includes

- Engage in pre-application discussions with relevant authorities
- Submit planning application
- Secure planning permission and agree on Section 106 conditions

5 Funding

This stage includes

- Apply for funding, typically through the Affordable Homes Programme
- Secure additional financing if necessary

6 Development

This stage includes

- Commission architects and construction companies

- Build the new homes

7 Allocation

This stage includes

- Local people apply for the new homes
- Verify local connection criteria
- Allocate homes to eligible residents

8 Community Engagement

This stage includes

- Continuous process of community engagement to
 - Raise awareness and hold information events for residents
 - Involve local people in developing initial proposals and designs

Within the report, it is important to understand what the 11 identified sites in the report are. These are sites that those attending the meeting identified as potential sites. These sites have neither been assessed for feasibility nor have owners of the land been approached.

Attendees were asked to identify potential sites as this is a community-driven initiative. Any site that gets developed must have community support, so any site that goes through feasibility assessment and whose landowner is approached to gift or sell the land must be a site the community wants to be used for a development..

Where We Are in the Process Today

In the process outlined above, we are coming to the end of Phase 2, where we identify and evaluate sites. We are completing the feasibility assessment of the sites, and once finalised, the Parish Council will agree the sites to go to the next stage and for the landowners of those sites to be approached.