



## **Beyond the numbers: rural housing need across Cambridgeshire**

**What Housing Needs Surveys reveal about rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough**



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## Foreword

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Rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are changing.

Behind the picture of attractive villages and thriving communities lies a growing challenge: ensuring local people can continue to afford to live in the places they call home.

During 2025–26, Cambridgeshire ACRE completed eight Housing Needs Surveys, working alongside parish councils, local authorities and housing association partners to better understand local housing need. Together, these surveys engaged almost 900 households and identified evidence of need for 175 affordable homes across the communities surveyed.

While every village is different, the same themes emerged time and again. Younger households struggling to remain locally. Older residents unable to downsize within their community. A shortage of smaller, affordable homes. And communities wanting to support local people while protecting the character and identity of the places they care about.

Housing Needs Surveys provide something increasingly valuable: independent local evidence. They help communities move beyond assumptions and have informed conversations about housing need, future growth and the long-term sustainability of rural villages.

This report brings together what we have learnt during the past year. It combines local evidence, resident voices (the **quotes** used throughout the report) and wider housing trends to paint a picture of rural housing need across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, while recognising both the opportunities and the challenges of delivering affordable homes in rural communities.

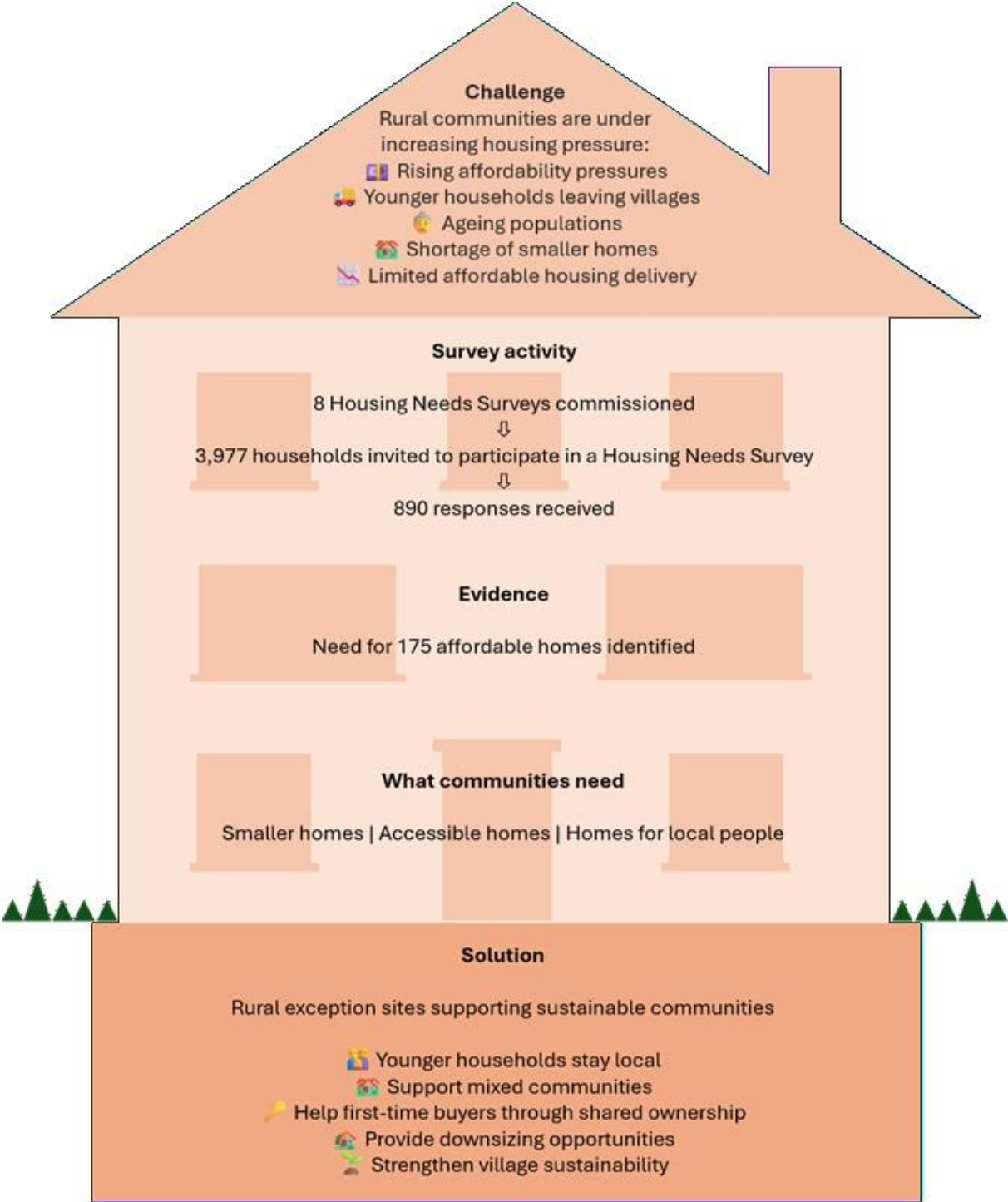
I hope it provides a useful insight for parish councils, local authorities, housing associations, landowners and anyone with an interest in the future of our rural communities.



**Hayley Neal**  
**Chief Executive**

*“My children grew up in this village, but there is no realistic way they could now afford to stay here.”*

Key findings at a glance



## The hidden picture of rural housing need

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For many people, rural housing need is invisible.

Cambridgeshire's villages are often viewed as prosperous and well housed places, yet Housing Needs Surveys undertaken across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough reveal a more complex picture beneath the surface.

Across many rural communities, housing pressures are increasingly shaped not simply by the number of homes available, but by whether villages continue to provide homes for people at different stages of life.

*“Buying a (small) family home in South Cambs is unaffordable for anyone in the public sector or on an average salary, even with two salaries; unless they have substantial inherited wealth, leading to most people having to relocate at a distance even if they don't want to. Renting is similarly unworkable for young people. Biotech salaries are great for some but people need teachers, nurses etc need to be able to afford to live locally as well.”*

Cambridgeshire sits within one of the UK's strongest and fastest growing economic regions. As the wider Cambridge economy continues to grow, house prices and rents in surrounding rural areas are increasingly influenced by proximity to employment hubs rather than by local wages alone.

At the same time, many villages remain physically small and constrained by planning policy, environmental designations, infrastructure limitations and flood risk. The result is that many rural communities experience levels of housing pressure that are disproportionate to their size.



*Photo 1: Rural Housing Enabler, Gary Roffey, shows former Minister of State for Food Security and Rural Affairs, Daniel Zeichner, a new rural exception site at Newton, South Cambridgeshire (Mar-2025)*

Surveys in villages including Grantchester, Horseheath and Ickleton identified notably lower proportions of younger adults, particularly those aged between 20 and 39. This can indicate that younger households are increasingly leaving rural communities because suitable homes are unavailable or unaffordable.

At the same time, many older residents remain living in larger family homes because suitable downsizing options within the village do not exist.

*“We want to stay in the village, but our house is now too large and difficult to manage.”*

Many communities have also seen very limited affordable housing delivery over long periods. Recent surveys identified no affordable homes built in Ickleton since 2001, only six affordable dwellings completed in Grantchester between 2002 and 2014 and only three social housing homes delivered in Horseheath over the previous twelve years.

Housing need in rural areas is often hidden rather than absent. Many younger adults remain living with parents for longer than intended, delay moving, commute long distances or leave the area altogether because they do not believe suitable local housing will become available.

Housing Needs Surveys help communities better understand these pressures by combining local evidence, affordability analysis and direct engagement with residents themselves.



*Photo 2: Parish Councillors take part in a Mytbuster Tour organised by Cambridgeshire ACRE*

We work alongside parish councils throughout the process, helping them understand local housing need, engage with residents, navigate planning policy and work constructively with local authorities and housing association partners. As one parish council reflected after completing a project with us, *“we simply couldn't have achieved this without the support and guidance we received.”*

Together, the evidence gathered through Cambridgeshire ACRE's work highlights a growing challenge for rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough: ensuring villages remain places where people at different stages of life and from different income backgrounds are still able to live, work and belong.

## What our surveys revealed this year

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During 2025–26, Cambridgeshire ACRE completed eight Housing Needs Surveys across rural communities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, working alongside parish councils, local authorities and housing association partners to better understand local housing pressures and emerging need. Nearly 4,000 households were invited to take part, with almost 900 responding, meaning one in four households responded. The surveys identified evidence of local need for at least 175 affordable homes across the communities surveyed.

The scale of need varied considerably between communities. While some villages identified demand for fewer than ten affordable homes, the Housing Needs Survey in Duxford alone identified evidence of need for **63 affordable homes**, demonstrating that significant unmet housing need exists in some of Cambridgeshire's larger rural communities.

*“We need smaller homes for local people, not large executive houses.”*

While every parish is different, the surveys repeatedly identified similar themes across rural Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, including:

- shortages of smaller and more affordable homes
- growing demand for bungalows and accessible housing
- younger households struggling to remain locally
- older residents wishing to downsize within their community
- concerns about the long-term balance and sustainability of village life

Smaller villages consistently achieved the highest response rates, often between 24% and 30%. Larger communities generally returned lower response rates but produced much larger numbers of completed questionnaires, demonstrating that robust local evidence can be gathered in communities of every size.

The surveys also highlighted the importance rural communities place on housing issues. Response rates regularly exceeded expectations for postal consultation exercises, demonstrating strong local engagement and interest in shaping the future of rural communities.



*Photo 3: Rural Housing Enabler, Gary Roffey, speaking during a site visit*

Importantly, the evidence suggests that housing need in rural areas is often hidden. Many households identified through surveys included adult children hoping to remain near family, local workers, newly forming households and residents living in homes that no longer met their needs.

Across many communities there was also clear support for small-scale, well-designed affordable housing that prioritises people with local connections and reflects the character and scale of the village.

Housing Needs Surveys do more than quantify demand for homes. They help communities understand demographic change, identify gaps in the local housing market and support evidence-led discussions about the future of rural Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

## What happens after a survey?

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A Housing Needs Survey does not automatically lead to development.

Instead, it gives a parish council and its community independent evidence about local housing need, affordability pressures and the types of homes that may be required.



*Photo 4: Attendees at an event organised to dispel some of the myths around rural affordable housing*

High response rates are only possible because parish councils play a vital role in promoting the survey locally, encouraging residents to participate and helping ensure the findings genuinely reflect their community.

For some communities, the survey is mainly a way to understand changing local circumstances and inform future planning. For others, it becomes the first step in exploring whether a small, locally focused affordable housing scheme could help meet identified need.

Where a community chooses to explore options further, the process is collaborative and usually takes several years. Cambridgeshire ACRE works alongside parish councils, local authorities, housing associations and landowners to help move from evidence to discussion, site exploration and, where appropriate, scheme development.

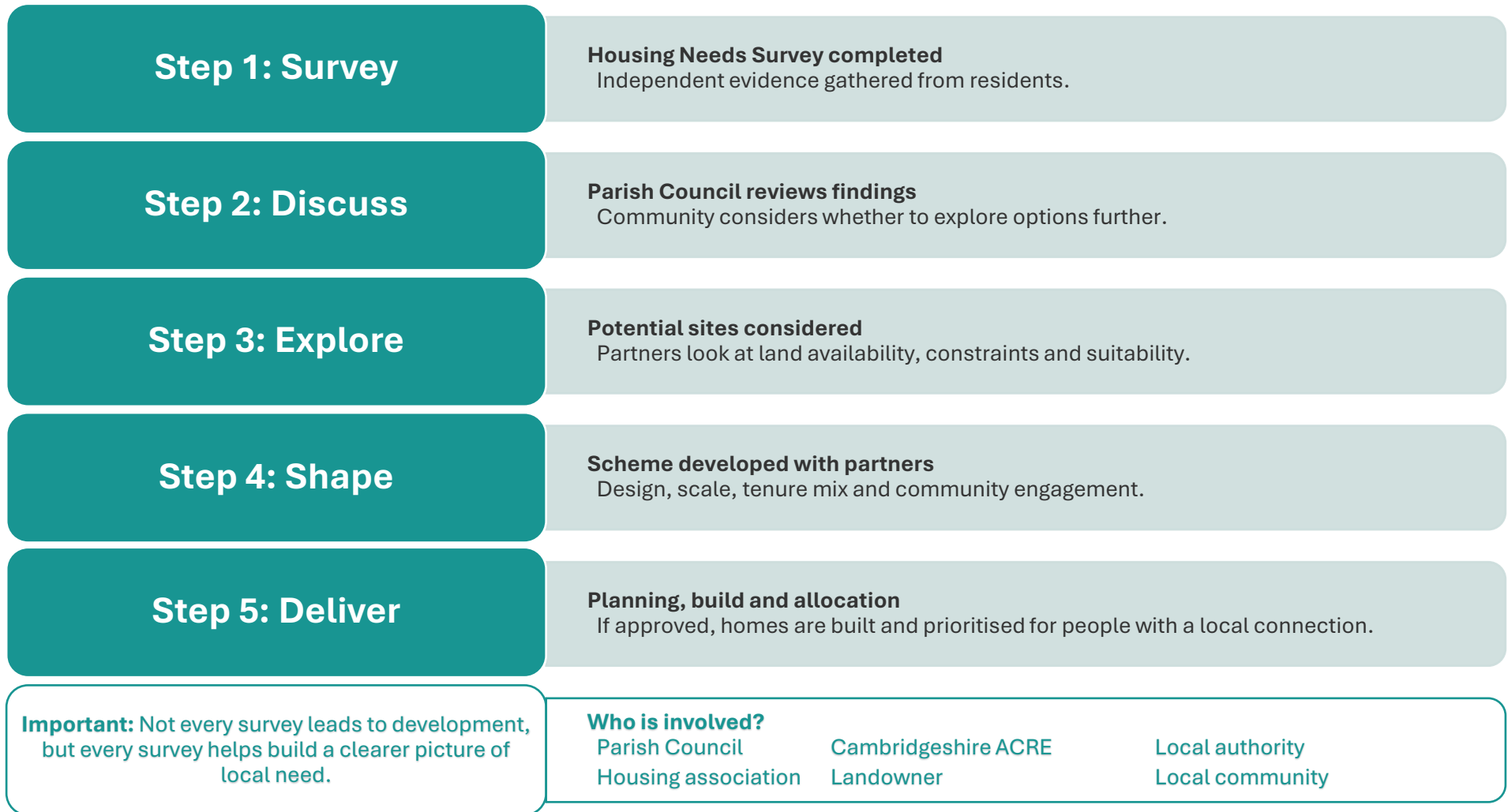
Throughout the process, Cambridgeshire ACRE supports parish councils with survey design, community engagement, interpreting the findings and, where appropriate, exploring the next steps with local authority and housing association partners.

In cases where a survey does not lead to new homes, this might be because villages decide not to proceed, some cannot identify a suitable site and some schemes are delayed by viability, infrastructure or planning constraints.

However, every survey provides valuable local evidence. It helps communities move beyond assumptions, understand who is struggling to access housing locally and make more informed decisions about the future of their village.

*“The survey helped us understand the real level of local need rather than relying on assumptions.”*

From survey to delivery



The process is evidence-led, locally informed and shaped by partnership working.

## Case studies: Homes that help communities thrive

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### West Farm Close, Etlisley

One of the clearest examples of the impact rural affordable housing can have on a community can be seen at West Farm Close in Etlisley.

Delivered through partnership working between Etlisley Parish Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, Homes England, Hastoe Housing Association, local landowners and Cambridgeshire ACRE, the scheme provides:

- seven affordable rented homes
- two shared ownership homes
- energy-efficient properties designed to support long-term affordability and sustainability.

What makes schemes like this particularly significant is not simply the number of homes delivered, but the impact they have on the people and communities involved.

Many of the residents moving into West Farm Close had long-standing connections to Etlisley and had previously been unable to afford suitable housing locally. During the official opening event, one resident described receiving the offer of a home by saying:



Photo 5: The affordable homes built at West Farm Close, Etlisley

*“I cried when I got the call, it has completely changed my life and I love it.”*

That response reflects a wider theme identified throughout Housing Needs Surveys across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. For many rural residents, affordable housing is not simply about accessing a property. It is about:

- remaining close to family and support networks
- staying within the community where they grew up
- continuing to contribute to village life
- accessing stability and security
- allowing future generations to remain connected to rural communities

The scheme also demonstrates the importance of strong local partnership working. Etlisley Parish Council played an important role in supporting the project and helping shape a locally focused approach to meeting housing need.

Like many successful rural affordable housing developments across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the homes at West Farm Close were designed to reflect both local need and the wider future sustainability of rural communities. Features including air source heat pumps, increased insulation and electric vehicle charging points help reduce energy costs while supporting environmental sustainability.

## A wider pattern across Cambridgeshire

West Farm Close is not an isolated example.



*Photo 6: The affordable housing development at Teal Close, Fen Drayton*

In Fen Drayton, a Housing Needs Survey facilitated by Cambridgeshire ACRE identified demand for up to 18 affordable homes within the village. The survey achieved a 26 per cent response rate, with 70 per cent of respondents supporting a small development of affordable homes for local people.

This evidence helped support the delivery of Teal Close, a rural exception site development providing 14 affordable homes for rent and shared ownership.

The scheme was specifically designed to help local people who had been priced out of the local housing market remain within the community.

Together, these examples demonstrate how locally evidenced, partnership-led affordable housing schemes can help rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough remain mixed, sustainable and connected

to future generations.

## The Complexities of Delivering Rural Affordable Housing

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Across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, many rural communities face growing housing pressures. House prices and rents continue to rise, smaller homes remain limited and younger households are increasingly struggling to remain within the villages where they grew up.

At the same time, delivering affordable housing in rural areas remains complex and challenging.

*“Without affordable homes, villages risk becoming places only certain people can afford to live.”*

In many villages, rural exception sites represent one of the few realistic opportunities to deliver affordable housing specifically for local people.

These small-scale developments are designed to respond to identified local need and are often supported by Housing Needs Surveys, helping communities understand:

- who is struggling to access housing locally
- what types of homes are needed
- whether younger households are leaving the area
- whether older residents are unable to downsize

Unlike speculative market development, rural exception sites are intended to prioritise local people and help maintain balanced and sustainable rural communities.

However, delivering affordable housing in rural areas is rarely straightforward.

Across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, projects often face barriers including:

- limited land availability
- high land values
- planning and environmental constraints
- infrastructure concerns
- viability pressures on small schemes
- community concerns about scale and change

*“People support homes for local families, but they are worried about losing the character of the village.”*

Many communities support small-scale affordable housing in principle, particularly where homes are prioritised for local people and designed to reflect village character. At the same time, residents may have understandable concerns about traffic, flooding, pressure on services and the cumulative impact of growth.

As a result, delivering rural affordable housing often requires long-term partnership working between parish councils, local authorities, housing associations, landowners and organisations such as Cambridgeshire ACRE.

Where schemes are delivered successfully, they can help younger households remain locally, provide downsizing opportunities for older residents and support the long-term sustainability of rural communities across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

## Rural communities in a changing Cambridgeshire

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Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are experiencing significant growth and change.

The continued expansion of sectors including life sciences, research and technology is creating increasing pressure for new homes, infrastructure and employment land across the region. Local plans across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough include major proposals for urban extensions, new settlements and continued development around Cambridge and key transport corridors.

*“Growth is important, but villages need to remain communities, not simply become extensions of Cambridge.”*

While this growth brings opportunity, it also creates challenges for rural communities.

Across Cambridgeshire, many villages are already experiencing:

- rising house prices
- increasing commuter demand
- pressure on infrastructure
- demographic imbalance
- the gradual loss of younger households

At the same time, many communities are concerned about maintaining village identity, protecting landscape character and ensuring growth is genuinely sustainable.



*Photo 7: A rural community in Cambridgeshire*

For many rural communities, there is a significant difference between speculative or market-led expansion and locally supported affordable housing designed to meet identified need.

This distinction is particularly important in Cambridgeshire, where high land values and strong market demand can place enormous pressure on villages close to Cambridge and major employment centres.

Housing Needs Surveys across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough consistently show that communities are often seeking something very specific:

- homes for local people
- opportunities for younger generations to remain locally
- downsizing options for older residents
- smaller-scale development that reflects village character

This is why community-led and evidence-based approaches remain so important.

Rural exception sites and similar affordable housing schemes are fundamentally different from strategic growth allocations because they are designed to respond directly to identified local need rather than wider market demand alone.

The long-term challenge for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is therefore not simply delivering more homes, but ensuring rural communities remain mixed, sustainable and locally distinctive places where people at different stages of life can continue to live and belong.

## Looking ahead

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*“Affordable housing is not just about homes. It is about whether future generations can continue to belong to rural communities.”*

The evidence presented throughout this report demonstrates that rural housing need across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is real, persistent and increasingly complex.

Behind the statistics are younger households unable to remain within the communities where they grew up, older residents unable to downsize locally and villages working to balance growth, affordability and community identity in the face of significant change.

Housing Needs Surveys continue to show that rural communities are not resistant to all change. In many cases, residents recognise the importance of providing homes for local people and sustaining balanced communities for future generations.

However, the evidence also demonstrates that rural affordable housing delivery is rarely straightforward.

Across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, communities are navigating:

- rising land values
- infrastructure pressures
- planning complexity
- environmental constraints
- viability challenges
- wider strategic growth pressures

At the same time, expectations placed upon rural communities continue to evolve as the region grows and changes.

The challenge for the future is not simply delivering additional homes. It is ensuring that rural communities remain places where people at different stages of life and from different income backgrounds are still able to live, work and contribute to village life.

This requires long-term thinking, partnership working and meaningful community engagement.

It also requires recognition that rural affordable housing is not solely a housing issue. It is connected to:

- economic opportunity
- transport
- health and wellbeing
- ageing populations
- climate resilience
- local services
- community cohesion
- the long-term sustainability of rural places

During the past year alone, Housing Needs Surveys engaged almost **900 households** across rural Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. They remain an important part of understanding local housing need because they provide independent evidence rooted in the experiences of rural residents themselves.

As Cambridgeshire and Peterborough continue to grow, maintaining mixed, sustainable and locally distinctive rural communities will remain one of the defining challenges facing the region.

Cambridgeshire ACRE will continue working alongside parish councils, local authorities, housing associations, landowners and rural communities to help ensure that local voices, local evidence and local need remain central to conversations about the future of rural housing.