

A RURAL COMMUNITY TOOLKIT

MAKING DEVOLUTION WORK FOR AFFORDABLE RURAL HOUSING

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PARISH COUNCILS, COMMUNITY GROUPS,
RURAL COUNCILLORS AND HOUSING ADVOCATES

July 2026



Aligned to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026.

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At a glance

The whole toolkit in five minutes. Read this if you read nothing else.

WHAT HAS CHANGED

From April 2026, new strategic authorities — many led by elected mayors — will hold the main levers for housing, planning and infrastructure funding outside London.

WHY RURAL'S MOMENT MATTERS

Active engagement keeps small settlements clearly visible alongside cities and larger towns. When rural voices show up early, investment follows.

THE SINGLE BIGGEST LEVER

Every strategic authority must produce a Spatial Development Strategy with at least a 20-year horizon. Securing rural housing within it shapes investment for a generation.

DO THIS FIRST

Form a rural housing partnership (Part 3, Action 2). Commission a parish housing needs survey through your Rural Housing Enabler. Send Template 1 to your strategic authority leader.

KEEP DOING

Show up, write in, follow up, evidence everything. Decision-makers hear most from those who turn up most often. Persistence shapes outcomes.

Introduction

This toolkit is for everyone who wants to make sure that people living in rural England can access the affordable homes they need — today and for generations to come. Whether you are part of a parish council, a community group, a ward councillor, a rural housing advocate or a local authority officer, your involvement can shape a better future for rural communities.

Devolution is changing how housing decisions are made. The structures are new, the timetable is energising and the rural voice has a real opportunity to lead. The pages that follow give you the facts, the arguments and the practical tools to make it happen.



PART 1

UNDERSTANDING DEVOLUTION

The structures, the timetable and where rural fits.

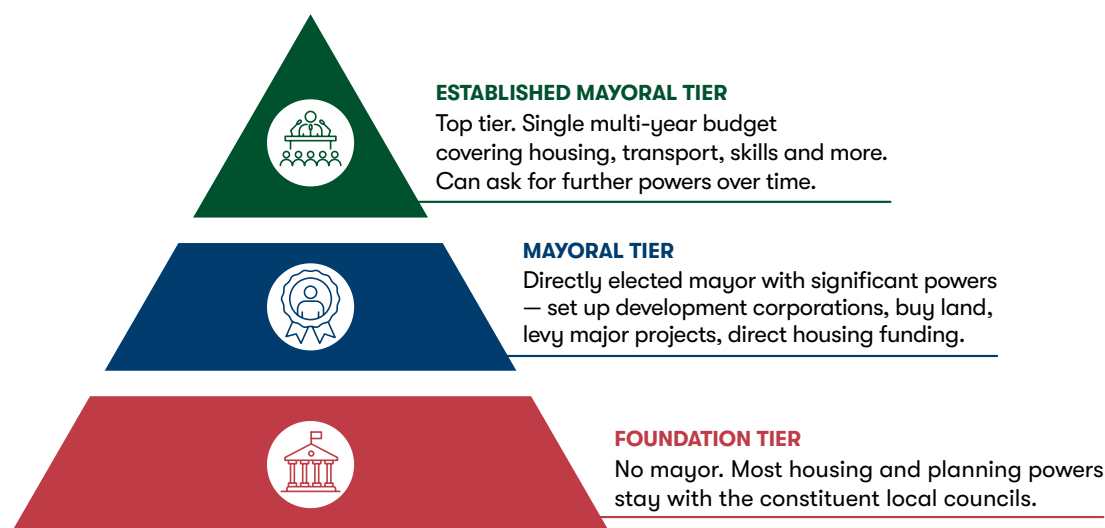
WHAT IS DEVOLUTION?

Devolution means moving power away from central government and giving it to regional and local bodies instead. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 received Royal Assent on 29 April 2026 after intense parliamentary debate.

In many areas, devolution will mean the end of the current county and district council structure. Powers held by local councils will be reorganised between

new unitary councils, strategic authorities and — where they exist — directly elected mayors.

It gives those authorities new powers over housing, planning, transport and skills, and introduces a set of community empowerment measures including a stronger Community Right to Buy for assets of community value.



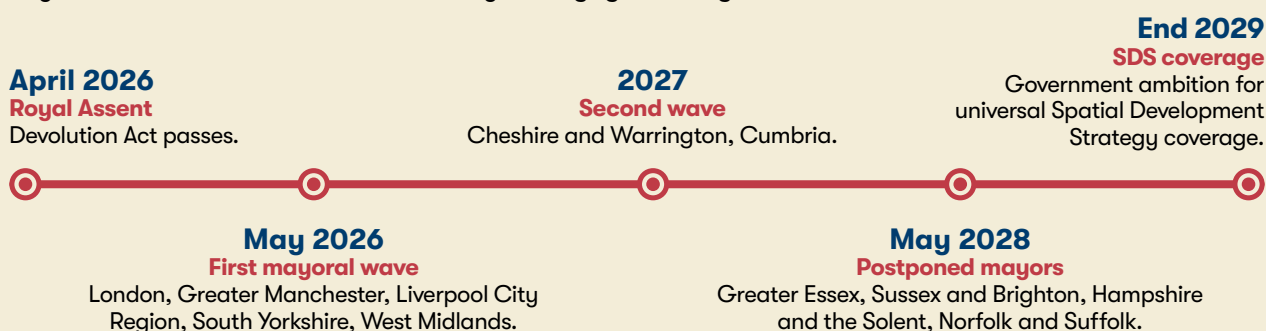
WHERE RURAL FITS IN

Strategic authorities cover much wider areas than today's councils. By engaging early, smaller villages and market towns secure a confident

place alongside cities and urban centres in regional plans. The opportunity belongs to rural communities ready to organise and lead.

THE DEVOLUTION TIMETABLE

Key dates between now and 2029. Plan your engagement against this calendar.



MAYORAL ELECTIONS: THE 2028 OPPORTUNITY

Elections for Greater Essex, Sussex and Brighton, Hampshire and the Solent, and Norfolk and Suffolk were originally planned for May 2026 but have been postponed to May 2028. For rural communities, that postponement is an asset, not a setback. It buys roughly two years to build partnerships, gather evidence and shape the priorities of the incoming mayor before the first vote is cast.

SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES: WHY THIS IS THE PRIZE

Each strategic authority must publish a Spatial Development Strategy covering at least 20 years. It sits above local plans and sets where housing, infrastructure and regeneration investment lands. Securing rural recognition within it ensures small settlements stand alongside cities and larger towns in regional investment decisions. This is the single most influential planning document of the decade — and a once-in-a-generation opportunity for rural England.

THE CASE FOR RURAL INVESTMENT

Use these figures in letters, motions and meetings. Sources listed in Part 8.

300,000+

people on rural social housing waiting lists in England.

8.8×

rural house prices to local lower-quartile earnings.

+73%

rise in rural homelessness since 2018.

-32%

fall in social housing construction since 2012.

50% higher

affordable housing need in rural areas than in urban areas outside London.

20 yrs

minimum horizon proposed for every Spatial Development Strategy.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Writing rural priorities into devolution plans now sets a generation of investment on the right course. The next twenty-four months are the

window to shape what gets written down — a once-in-a-decade chance to make rural England visible, valued and built.

HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

Read Part 2 to identify the people who shape rural housing decisions in your area. Then move to Part 3 to choose the actions that will have most impact. Parts 4 and 5 give you ready-to-adapt checklists and templates. Parts 6 to 8 are the reference shelf — pick them up as you need them.

- **Skim** the whole booklet first to see how the parts connect.
- **Choose** one action from Part 3 that fits your capacity this quarter.
- **Share** the briefing note in Part 5 with your parish council, ward councillor and Member of Parliament.

PART 2

WHO TO ENGAGE WITH

Strategic authorities are bigger and more relational than local councils. Knowing who to speak to opens the right doors at the right time.

THE MAYOR, WHERE THERE IS ONE

What they do

Chairs the strategic authority, sets the regional vision, decides how devolved housing funding is used.

How to engage

Before election: invite candidates to visit a rural scheme. After: build a relationship through the rural housing partnership.

THE BOARD OR CABINET

What they do

Made up of the leaders of constituent councils. In Foundation authorities the board is the main decision-making body.

How to engage

Use your existing relationships with council leaders. They can raise rural issues at the strategic authority table that would otherwise be invisible.

THE HOUSING OR PLANNING DIRECTOR

What they do

Senior officer translating political priorities into delivery programmes, funding calls and contracts.

How to engage

Often easier to access than mayors and just as influential over where money lands.

LOCAL AUTHORITY HOUSING OFFICERS

What they do

Rural district and unitary housing officers. They commission needs assessments, set policy, negotiate Section 106 agreements.

How to engage

Strong relationships matter at every stage — these are the people in the room with developers.

YOUR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

What they do

MPs can raise rural housing in Parliament, table written questions, support amendments and lobby ministers.

How to engage

Concise briefings, local case studies, specific asks. Use Template 2.

RURAL HOUSING SPECIALISTS

What they do

Your Rural Housing Enabler is usually the single most valuable contact for a parish council. Independent, knows the sector, opens doors.

How to engage

Form a rural housing partnership early. See Part 3, Action 2.



PART 3

FIVE ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE

Ordered by impact. Even modest efforts, consistently applied, make a difference.

PRIORITY KEY

● Highest ● High ● Medium

Action 1: Influence the Spatial Development Strategy Highest

This is the single most important action. The SDS shapes investment for a generation. Ask your strategic authority five questions in writing, and ask for written answers:

- Will the SDS contain a dedicated rural housing chapter?
- Will it set measurable targets for affordable housing in settlements of fewer than 3,000 people?
- Will rural exception sites and community led housing feature in the delivery strategy?
- Will Rural Housing Enablers be recognised as delivery partners?
- How will rural representation be built into governance?

Action 2: Build a rural housing partnership High

Housing associations now engage with strategic authorities through regional partnerships. Rural communities should do the same. A partnership brings together parish councils, specialist rural housing associations, Rural Housing Enablers, community led housing groups, Rural Community Councils, local authority officers and rural charities.

- It does not need to be formal — a shared voice is what matters.
- Produce a short rural housing prospectus: what the partnership can deliver, what communities need, what the right backing unlocks.
- Keep it short, rural-focused and visual.





Action 3: Build the evidence base

High

Evidence beats emotion at strategic authority level. Three things are powerful:

- **Housing needs surveys.** Your Rural Housing Enabler can commission a parish housing needs survey, often free to parishes with populations under 3,000. The foundation of any exception site application and a strong input to consultations.
- **Local data.** Map the housing association stock in your parish. Note what has been delivered in the last decade and what is missing. Compare rents with local earnings — the gap tells the story.
- **Community stories.** Behind every statistic is a family. Collect short, consented case studies: the carer who cannot live near the person they look after, the teacher commuting thirty miles, the young family priced out of the village they grew up in.

Action 5: Engage politically and persistently

Medium

Devolution deals are negotiated between strategic authorities, mayors and central government. Funding, targets and rural protections are all political decisions.

- Write to your MP, attend hustings, ask specific questions at public meetings.
- Propose motions at parish level (Template 3) and respond to every relevant consultation.
- Support the Rural Coalition, the Rural Housing Alliance, CPRE and the Rural Services Network.
- Above all, be persistent. Decision-makers hear most from those who show up most often.

Action 4: Champion rural-specific planning tools

Medium

Rural England has its own planning tools — many councils use them rarely. Push for them to be used more.

- **Rural exception sites.** Small sites on the edge of villages, often on land a landowner would not otherwise sell, used to deliver permanently affordable housing for people with a local connection. UCL and English Rural research found only a minority of authorities deliver any. Ask why.
- **Community led housing.** Community Land Trusts and cooperatives have delivered over 1,700 affordable rural homes, with thousands more in the pipeline. Ask whether your local plan actively supports them.
- **Small sites threshold.** In designated rural areas, councils can require affordable housing contributions on market-led developments of five or fewer units, rather than the usual ten-or-more threshold. Check whether your council is using this power.
- **Section 157 designation.** Restricts the resale of former council homes in designated rural parishes to people with a local connection. CPRE found only around half of rural parishes currently benefit. Check yours.

PART 4

RURAL CHECKLISTS

Two diagnostic tools. Tick, query or cross — then act on the gaps.



CHECKLIST 1:

IS OUR SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY RURAL PROOFED?

☐

Does the Spatial Development Strategy identify the rural geography of the area separately from the urban?

☐

Does it commit to working with Rural Housing Enablers?

☐

Does it include a specific chapter or section on rural housing?

☐

Does it recognise the role of specialist rural housing associations?

☐

Does it recognise housing need in settlements of fewer than 3,000 people?

☐

Does it address the impact of second homes and short term lets on rural affordability?

☐

Does it include measurable affordable housing targets for rural settlements?

☐

Does it require viability assessments to reflect rural realities?

☐

Does it identify rural exception sites as a delivery mechanism?

☐

Does it link rural housing to rural economic strategy, transport and services?

☐

Does it support community led housing?

☐

Does it give rural voices a seat on governance and delivery boards?

SCORE 12 out of 12 — rural proofed. 9 to 11 — strong, push on the gaps. 6 to 8 — partial, ask for revisions. 5 or fewer — not rural proofed, escalate.



CHECKLIST 2: IS OUR PARISH READY TO ENGAGE?

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Do we have a current housing needs survey? | ☐ Is housing a standing item on our parish council agenda? |
| ☐ Do we know who our ward councillor, leader of council and MP are? | ☐ Do we have a named lead for housing issues? |
| ☐ Do we have a relationship with our Rural Housing Enabler? | ☐ Do we have a clear, short summary of our local housing need? |
| ☐ Are we connected to at least one specialist rural housing association? | ☐ Have we sent a letter to our strategic authority leader (Template 1)? |
| ☐ Have we responded to the last relevant consultation? | |

SCORE 9 out of 9 — well placed to engage. 6 to 8 — strong, fill the gaps. Fewer than 6 — start with Part 3, Action 1.



PART 5

TEMPLATES

Adapt to your circumstances. Replace bracketed text with your own details.

TEMPLATE 1: LETTER TO THE LEADER OF A STRATEGIC AUTHORITY

Subject: Rural affordable housing in the [Name] Strategic Authority

Dear [Leader's name],

I am writing on behalf of [parish council or community group] to ask how rural affordable housing will be addressed in the emerging Spatial Development Strategy and wider plans for the [Name] Strategic Authority.

Our area includes [number] settlements with populations below 3,000 and a combined rural population of approximately [number]. Local housing need is significant. Recent figures show [local statistic, for example average house prices in our area are X times local median earnings]. Our parish housing needs survey identified [number] households in need of affordable housing locally.

We ask the Strategic Authority to:

1. Include a dedicated rural housing chapter in the Spatial Development Strategy.
2. Set measurable affordable housing targets for settlements of fewer than 3,000 people.
3. Recognise rural exception sites and community led housing as core delivery mechanisms.
4. Support the continuation of the Rural Housing Enabler programme in our area.
5. Ensure rural communities are represented in the governance of the Strategic Authority.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet to discuss how our partnership can support the Strategic Authority in delivering rural affordable housing. We stand ready to offer local knowledge, landowner contacts and community engagement capacity.

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[Position]

[Contact details]

TEMPLATE 2: LETTER

LETTER TO YOUR MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

Subject: Rural housing and the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026

Dear [MP's name],

I am writing as a [constituent, parish councillor or chair of our rural housing group] to request your continued support in making sure rural affordable housing remains a priority as the new strategic authorities take up their powers.

The case for action is strong. More than 300,000 households are waiting for affordable homes in rural England, and rural homelessness has risen substantially since 2018. Rural communities are ready to deliver — and explicit rural recognition within the Act would unlock the investment our countryside needs.

We ask you to:

1. Champion the inclusion of a rural representative — for example a Rural Affairs Commissioner — on each strategic authority.
2. Press the government to confirm long-term funding for the Rural Housing Enabler programme.
3. Raise the need for continued protection of affordable rural housing through Section 157 designation and rural exception site policy.

We would welcome the opportunity to brief you in person and to arrange a visit to a rural affordable housing scheme in the constituency.

Yours sincerely,

[Name]

[Position]

[Contact details]

TEMPLATE 3: COUNCIL MOTION FOR A PARISH OR TOWN COUNCIL MEETING

Title: Rural housing and devolution

This council notes:

- That rural communities in England have substantial affordable housing needs, with more than 300,000 households waiting for affordable homes.
- That the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 transfers significant housing powers to strategic authorities.
- That Spatial Development Strategies will shape housing investment for at least twenty years.

This council resolves:

1. To write to the [Name] Strategic Authority requesting a dedicated rural housing chapter in the Spatial Development Strategy.
2. To write to [MP name] asking for support for rural amendments to devolution legislation.
3. To commission a parish housing needs survey through the Rural Housing Enabler within the next [six] months.
4. To seek membership of the [Name] rural housing partnership once established.
5. To adopt rural affordable housing as a standing item on council agendas.

Proposed by: [Name]

Seconded by: [Name]

Date: [Date]

TEMPLATE 4: BRIEFING NOTE FOR COUNCILLORS AND CANDIDATES

Briefing note for councillors and candidates — Rural housing key facts

The scale of rural housing need in England

- Over 300,000 households on rural social housing waiting lists.
- Rural house prices between eight- and fourteen-times local earnings in most areas.
- Rural homelessness up by around 73 per cent since 2018.
- Rural social housing delivery around a third below the level of 2012.

What the Act does

- Creates three tiers of strategic authority.
- Transfers housing, planning and funding powers to mayors in the upper tiers.
- Requires a Spatial Development Strategy with a minimum twenty-year horizon.
- Introduces a Community Right to Buy for assets of community value.

Where the Act can go further

- A statutory duty to address rural need would secure long-term focus.
- A national rural housing target would set a clear direction.
- A ringfenced rural allocation in the new Social and Affordable Homes Programme would unlock delivery.

What we ask

- Dedicated rural housing chapter in our Spatial Development Strategy.
- Measurable targets for affordable homes in settlements of fewer than 3,000 people.
- Continued Rural Housing Enabler funding in our area.
- Rural representation in strategic authority governance.

Contact: [Name, details]

TEMPLATE 5: SOCIAL MEDIA
POSTS FOR X, FACEBOOK, LINKEDIN AND BLUESKY

Short post (X / Bluesky)

Your Name

...

Rural England has over 300,000 households waiting for affordable homes — and a real chance through devolution to deliver them. Let’s put rural communities at the heart of the next 20 years. [Link] #RuralHousing #Devolution



15K

27K

39K

82K

Longer post (Facebook / LinkedIn)

Your Name

...

Our [village/parish/area] is ready to deliver affordable homes for young families, carers, teachers and key workers. The new strategic authority will shape housing decisions for the next twenty years — and we’re asking for a dedicated rural housing chapter in its Spatial Development Strategy. Add your voice. [Link] #RuralHousing #Devolution



15K

27K

39K

82K

Tag your mayor, your strategic authority, your MP and the local press.

PART 6

GLOSSARY

Plain English definitions of every technical term used in this toolkit.

Affordable housing. Housing provided at below market levels, including social rent, affordable rent, shared ownership and other intermediate tenures.

Community led housing. Housing developed through a community-controlled organisation, such as a Community Land Trust or housing cooperative.

Community Land Trust. A community controlled, not-for-profit organisation that owns land and holds it in trust for the local community.

Designated rural area. A rural parish that benefits from specific planning and housing protections under the Housing Act 1985.

Devolution. The transfer of power from central government to regional or local bodies.

Established Mayoral Strategic Authority. The top tier of strategic authority, with the broadest powers and a single multi-year settlement.

Foundation Strategic Authority. A non-mayoral combined authority with limited devolved powers.

Homes England. The government's housing and regeneration agency, responsible for most affordable housing funding outside London.

Local plan. The main statutory planning document of a district, borough or unitary authority.

Mayoral Strategic Authority. A strategic authority with a directly elected mayor.

Neighbourhood plan. A plan prepared by a parish council or neighbourhood forum which, once made, forms part of the statutory development plan.

Rural exception site (RES). A small site on the edge of a village that would not normally gain planning permission, used to deliver permanently affordable housing.

Rural Housing Enabler (RHE). An independent adviser, normally funded through the Defra programme managed by ACRE, who supports rural communities to identify need and develop schemes.

Section 106. A legal agreement under the Town and Country Planning Act that typically secures affordable housing contributions from developers.

Section 157. A provision of the Housing Act 1985 that restricts the resale of former council homes in designated rural areas to people with a local connection.

Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP). The government's main affordable housing funding programme, worth £39 billion over the period 2026–2036.

Spatial Development Strategy (SDS). A high-level plan produced by a strategic authority, identifying locations for housing, infrastructure and regeneration over a minimum twenty-year horizon.

Strategic authority. A combined authority or combined county authority, with or without a mayor, that exercises devolved powers over a region.

PART 7

WHO TO CONTACT

Specialist organisations most useful to rural communities working on housing and devolution.

Rural Services Network

rsnonline.org.uk

Membership network for rural local authorities and service providers. Policy updates and advocacy.

CPRE, the countryside charity

cpre.org.uk

National rural charity with strong research on rural housing affordability.

ACRE

acre.org.uk

Action with Communities in Rural England. National body for Rural Community Councils and host of the Rural Housing Enabler programme.

Rural Community Councils

acre.org.uk

Local delivery arm of ACRE. Many provide Rural Housing Enabler services.

Community Land Trust Network

communitylandtrusts.org.uk

National membership body for Community Land Trusts.

National Housing Federation

housing.org.uk

Trade body for housing associations. Hosts the Rural Housing Alliance.

Rural Housing Alliance

<https://housing.org.uk/our-work/rural-housing/rural-housing-alliance/>

Specialist network of around thirty rural housing providers.

National Association of Local Councils

nalc.gov.uk

Representative body for parish and town councils.

Rural Coalition

acre.org.uk/rural-coalition

Alliance of national rural organisations.

Plunkett UK

plunkett.co.uk

Support for community-owned shops, pubs and community buildings.

Locality

locality.org.uk

Support for community organisations, including community asset transfer.

PART 8

FURTHER READING

Source documents for the statistics and arguments used in this toolkit.

- CPRE, Unravelling a Crisis: The State of Rural Affordable Housing in England, 2023.
- CPRE, Strategic Housing Market Assessment update, 2025.
- National Housing Federation, Rural Life Monitor, 2024.
- Rural Services Network, Parish Councillors' Guide to Rural Affordable Housing, 2021.
- ACRE, Evaluation of the Defra-funded Rural Housing Enabler Programme, 2025.
- Homes England, Rural Housing Statement.
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Social and Affordable Homes Programme 2026–2036 prospectus, 2025.
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, National Planning Policy Framework, 2024.

A NOTE ON USING THIS TOOLKIT

Rural housing and devolution are moving quickly. Check the latest position with your Rural Housing Enabler, your local authority or the Rural Services Network before taking formal action. If you spot something in this booklet that could be improved, please tell us — future editions will reflect what works on the ground.

English Rural | englishrural.org.uk

National Housing Federation | housing.org.uk

