

**A**s the availability of rural homes decreases, it is increasingly difficult for farming people to live in their local communities.

The agricultural transition and the UK Government's lump sum exit scheme presents further radical changes for many individuals' circumstances. What may previously have been considered a certainty for many farming people: a home for life, on or close to the farm where they have always lived and worked, is no longer a realistic option.

The demand for affordable rural housing continues to outstrip supply. Second homes also continue to increase in rural areas, often pricing rural people out of their local communities.

The CLA's report on *Sustainable Communities* and housing shows the importance of organic, incremental growth in rural areas. In 2019, only 9% of rural dwellings were affordable, compared to 19% of urban dwellings, and more than 260,000 people were on a housing waiting list in rural areas in 2020. Fewer than 4,500 social homes were built in rural areas in 2019/20.

In response, farming charity RABI and the Almshouse Association are supporting a new, potentially innovative solution that could help farming people stay within their rural communities.

### The rural housing need

Alicia Chivers, Chief Executive at RABI, says the charity is concerned about the number of farming people having to move away from their local communities. "Too many farming people are unable to find suitable, affordable accommodation where they want to live, within their farming community," she says. "This issue has an impact across the farming community, including younger people.

"Agricultural employment with tied accommodation is reducing, and farming salaries are frequently unable to compete with the soaring prices of rural living. Farming people, whether working or retired, therefore often have no choice but to move to urban areas to find affordable housing."

The RABI's *Big Farming Survey* report shows that feeling valued is a big

Two leading charities are seeking landowners interested in the potential of an affordable housing project for farming communities

# Supporting farming communities





aspect of positive mental health and wellbeing. "Being isolated from the rural community you are familiar and comfortable with can be very lonely," says Alicia. "Feeling valued by those around you is essential, as is a sense of community belonging – both can impact significantly on mental wellbeing."

### A solution

Both charities believe there is an opportunity to provide more than 100 new almshouses for farming people during the next decade. To achieve this, a committed group of landowners and benefactors are needed to come forward to champion the project.

Alicia says: "Landowners have an incredibly strong duty of care to those working and living in their communities, and their commitment will be pivotal to the project's success."

"In my experience and in conversation with landowners, I consistently hear how incredibly passionate they are about being part of the solution to these housing issues. There is a real willingness to support the community they care so deeply about and have done for many generations. We want to understand, more than anecdotally, whether there is a real appetite from landowners to support this project."



## 'Being isolated from the rural community you are familiar and comfortable with can be very lonely'

"In my opinion, the agricultural sector has the strongest duty of care of any profession or sector in the UK. The strong sense of community we have within farming is rare, and this is something the project can build on."

### The almshouse project

Almshouses have provided good quality homes for the relief of financial hardship for 1,000 years, and the Almshouse Association houses more than 36,000 people today. Each almshouse is an independent charity, and of the 1,600 current almshouses, each one is reporting an uplift in demand.

"Almshouses are the oldest form of community housing," explains Nick Phillips, Chief Executive of the Almshouse Association. "Each almshouse is led by volunteers acting as trustees, and they are very often funded by local benefactors."

"The growing demand for affordable housing is relentless and the demographic is changing, with more young people needing affordable housing. Almshouses provide more than just a roof over people's heads, it's also about providing connection and companionship."

Research shows that almshouses help to save the health and social care sector £43m per year, demonstrating the link between physical and mental wellbeing.

"By tackling isolation, almshouse communities are reducing the need for home care, ambulance callouts, GP and A&E visits. This is even more relevant in rural communities," Nick adds.

"Companionship is key. We promote independent living, which is supported by a network of neighbours and friends."

The drive to set up almshouses is often fuelled by a connection to the residents and industry. "For example, in the past there have been examples of landowners and benefactors who are ex-military providing housing for ex-service people. Other benefactors over the years are simply driven by the ambition to provide quality housing in a caring environment for local people in need."

"Our almshouse project offers an opportunity for compassionate individuals to give back to a community they have an affinity to, and leave a positive legacy, potentially for centuries."

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[almshouses.org](http://almshouses.org)

### An opportunity for landowners

The project is currently in its initial stages. "Supported by RABI, we are raising awareness of a new almshouse initiative we're looking to establish specifically for farming communities," says Nick. "Each almshouse must be set up as a charity by a benefactor, and will be run by trustee volunteers. We are looking for landowners to come forward to host them."

"Landowners are naturally positioned to be in touch with rural communities, with a unique understanding of the challenges that farming people face. We are looking to them to spearhead local projects, providing long-term benefits to rural families."

"Farming support charities like RABI understand the impact of isolation in rural communities and we are collaborating with them to support those who don't have an affordable housing choice."

Landowners who are passionate about giving back to the farming community are encouraged to come forward. At this stage, involvement in the project carries no enduring commitment. Those interested should email Nick directly at [nickphillips@almshouses.org](mailto:nickphillips@almshouses.org).