



## Rural housing in the Scottish Highlands

Everyone who lives in the Highlands will be aware of the realities of owning or renting a home in our rural area. Unlike Scotland's big cities or ever-growing towns, we are not inundated with new housing estates emerging, one after the other, and most of us would agree that we prefer it that way.

However, as we age and have a greater need for support at home, our focus shifts. While we previously relished the quiet life away from the hustle and bustle, we now find ourselves thinking more and more about how steep the stairs are, how narrow the hallway is, or indeed whether or not we or a family member can easily get into or out of our home. At the same time, many old houses in the Highlands are not easy to adapt for those with growing care at home needs. This can lead to people needing to move away from their community to find a property that is more accessible.

The cost of owning or renting a property in the Highlands is often too much for residents to manage. As we know, fuel poverty is an increasing problem in our area, particularly with the large numbers of older properties with little or no insulation. The Scottish House Condition Survey 2012-2014, released in December 2015, highlighted that 72% of those of pension age in the Highlands are experiencing fuel poverty (over 10% of income spent on household fuel), with 36% suffering extreme fuel poverty (over 20% of income).

So, what can be done about this? At Dementia Friendly Communities, we are working closely with a number of partners on this issue, including Helmsdale & District Development Trust, the Scottish Government, Highland Council, NHS Highland, Highland Small Communities Housing Trust and Albyn Housing Society.

On 21<sup>st</sup> March, the Sutherland Rural Housing Conference – *Doing it for Ourselves* took place at Helmsdale Community Centre. One of the important points discussed at the conference was the introduction of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and Land Reform Bill 2015. This new legislation, alongside the newly-announced Rural Housing Fund provides a great opportunity for our communities to establish the key housing issues we face and address them ourselves through effective partnerships from various sectors.

Paul Harrington, Local Development Officer for Helmsdale & District Development Trust said: "Given the tools to deliver affordable rural homes, as well as access to the potential partnerships and funding streams, the barriers and hurdles have been removed to deliver not only affordable housing in rural communities, but also housing that is to be regarded as the norm: housing that can be accessed by people

regardless of their age, health condition, or disability and allow communities to become more resilient, provide meaningful impacts with tangible outcomes.”

One of the ways we are moving forward with this work is to establish a Dementia Friendly Rural Housing Charter, which will provide advice to housing providers on how properties can be dementia friendly and, as a result, people friendly. For example, an entrance hall big enough to accommodate an elderly person's wheelchair will also be big enough to store a child's pram. We are also focussing on making adaptations easier and more affordable for existing homes. Our older houses and buildings are an important part of our heritage and have often been home to a number of generations of the same family. We hope this work will help to retain this heritage, make our houses suitable for all and support our residents to remain within the community for as long as they possibly can.

For more information about this work, contact Dementia Friendly Communities by phone 01431 821655 or email [hello@dementia-friendly.com](mailto:hello@dementia-friendly.com)