Chris France, North York Moors

Welcome to Communities Building Homes, a new podcast brought to you by community led homes, North Yorkshire and East Riding.

In this podcast, we're meeting people who are at the forefront of doing, supporting and enabling communities to make great housing, building new homes or refurbishing old buildings, people who are truly making homes to live in and meeting local housing need.

I'm journalist and presenter Peg Alexander. My guest today is Chris France. Chris is the head of planning at the North York's Moors National Park, or Heartbeat Country, as some of you may know it. Some of the most beautiful scenery in the whole of England. The National Park stretches from just outside Gisborough and Great Aiton in the North, To Pickering and Helmsley in the south, it covers 544 square miles and 26 miles of coastline.

A special place forged by nature and shaped over generations. But, as one of 15 national parks in the UK, it's also the body responsible for planning decisions within its boundary. So, not only responsible for preserving the countryside and landscape, but also supporting the needs of local communities.

Chris, welcome to the podcast.

Thank you, Peg. It's good to be here.

Oh, it's really good to be talking to you about this very, well, I was going to say special issue, because obviously we have got 15 national parks. Each of them will have responsibility for housing and planning and some of the most beautiful parts of the country. But first kind of give us the sell of Yorkshire, if you like, tell us about the North York Moors National Park and what's so special about it.

Absolutely, and I've just got back from a site visit, and I keep pinching myself about how lucky I am. In my job I don't actually get out that often, but every so often I do, so I've just come back from Rosedale, right in the heart of the North York Moors.

Ah, it's wonderful, Rosedale is. There's an old medieval abbey up at Rosedale, isn’t there.

There’s very little left of it, a lot of it is being used in the actual houses there. But yeah, I’m just driving back over there, the heathers just coming out and you've just got these miles of wonderful moorlands with, with also a lot of more varied landscape. A lot of people think that North York Moors is just moorland, but it's not.

It's the most wooded national park, particularly in the north of England. It's got the greatest concentration of veteran trees and ancient woodlands. And as you've mentioned, it's arguably one of the best coasts in the country, certainly again in the north of England. And fantastic settlements. As a National Park Authority we're aware that it's also not just one of the most beautiful parts of England, but it's home to 25,000 people.

And those people living in deeply rural areas have got issues, economic, social issues, that we as a national park authority and local planning authority are acutely aware of and, you know part of our remit is to actually help those social and economic needs and deliver a development that's absolutely required there.

Yeah, I mean you're saying there are 25,000 people living in the national park I mean, it's impossible to say what kind of people live there, but you know, I mean, I imagine you've probably got quite a lot of second homes as well, but you know, people who do live there permanently, what sort of work are they doing these days?

Yeah, that's a good question. It is quite varied our economy. I mean, essentially tourism and the hospitality sector play, play an important role. Tourism in the North York Moors and the surrounding area is worth an incredible 0.6 billion pounds annually. Also you would, wouldn't be surprised to know that forestry and farming are big sectors, but it is quite varied.

We've got two potash mine that employs 500 people, the largest employer in our national park. We’ve also got RAF Filingdales right in the centre of the National Park.

And of course, for, for anyone who doesn't know about RAF Filingdales, that's the one commonly known as the golf balls. I mean, it's quite unbelievable, isn't it?

Oh no, that's wrong. I'm wrong, aren't I?

The golf balls were removed 30 years ago this year and replaced with a sort of truncated pyramid that does a better job at early warning and also space tracking. But I think the point is we, we've got quite a varied national park, still a bit of fishing going on the coast, but I think essentially it's those rural industries, you know, forestry farming and tourism, which are notoriously low paid.

So we do have very much below average household incomes. And as we're talking about affordable housing, much higher than average housing prices. In fact, 275, 000 pounds is the average house price in the last year in the, in the national park.

Yeah, it's high, really high. What, what was the second home situation in the national park?

It's quite bad. It's not, it's not an issue right across the National Park, but it is very focused and concentrated in, in some of our settlements, particularly along the coast. Overall, 17 percent of our households are second homes. So if you can imagine walking down the street of a village, every fifth house is either, you know, somebody on holiday or empty and in places like Robin Hood's Bay and Runswick Bay on the coast, the figures are very much higher into 60, percent in, in Runswick Bay, which when you have that sort of focus and concentration as they do in the Lake District in particular, it changes the, the whole community, and you know, you do lose things like the pubs, the schools, the cricket teams, the fabric of rural life that has kept these places going for centuries.

Absolutely. Absolutely. So, I mean, let's kind of talk about what that means for you in terms of planning and those decisions, because obviously, as you were saying that, you know, you've got 25,000 people who live there, the majority of those on wages that are not high wages. You've obviously got a need for new homes. How do you marry up the need to want to get new homes to enable people to stay in the area, with preserving the beauty and the gorgeousness and the history and character of some of these villages?

Well, it's the classic dilemma, isn't it? And it's a, it's a great question because a lot of people could see national parks as part of the problem, and we have to accept that as protected landscapes, where the government and the national policy expects development to be limited and restricted. That, you know, you, you add to that the deeply rural nature and remoteness of some of these places and the costs of building in remote places. And the high house prices and the land prices, you do have an issue. Unfortunately you do tend to get a concentration of, in some areas, a bit of an nimby attitude as well.

If you talking to local communities about an affordable housing scheme in their village, at that level, they're all sort of, yeah, that, that'd be a good idea. As soon as you come to a site, the attitude quite often changes and I've, I've had experience of very difficult meetings where local communities just do not want some additional development in there.

But the real answer is National Parks have been grappling with this issue for decades now and we've come up with a whole series of bespoke planning policies that focus on delivering affordable housing, also housing to meet local needs that are subject to local occupancy conditions. And more recently, in this national park, our new local plan that was adopted last year is seeking more development, so we're actually looking for additional sites, particularly in our larger villages, for housing that we would then call principal residence housing.

So that's subject to a condition that that new house has to be the principal residence of the occupier and that does stop it from becoming a second or holiday home. And you know, we're very active. We prioritise housing for local people and affordable housing needs. That is where our corporate priority is in terms of being a local planning authority.

And we work really hard with the other key players in delivering housing. So we're not the housing authority that's still with the district council. We have to work very closely with them. We work closely with the parish councils. And importantly, we're part of the wider strategic housing partnership for the region, which we contribute financially to every year, and that gives us access to what I must plug is as remarkable people, which are rural housing enablers, who actually are the sort of honest brokers that go out there, and they deal with all these various different players that I've mentioned.

It's quite complex you know, dealing with the communities, the landowners, ourselves as a planning authority, rural housing providers, housing associations, the list is endless, to try and identify sites with us to bring housing forward and we've, you know, our experience is that is a very, very successful model.

Yeah, and of course, all those rural housing enablers working very, very closely with the hub, and it's all linked in together. I mean, is this where the concept of community led housing can really come into its own and make a difference? Because what we do know nationally is that where schemes are community led, there is less objection, from other people and from other communities in them because it's communities themselves who are saying these are the kind of homes we want, this is what we want, we want to make it happen and we want to make sure along with yourselves that it's for local people and affordable.

I think that's a really good point you've made there. We haven't delivered yet any community led housing schemes, but that's not through, you know, lack of trying and we're very supportive of that approach. We are actually dealing with one in the National Park at the moment at Leel Home, where we have identified a site and we are bringing that one forward.

But I guess, and there's funding as well, you know, that that's gone through from government and certainly I know one of our district council Scarborough was very successful in obtaining some of that funding to deliver community led housing. I guess it's just the complexity. If you, you know, if, if you're a local community and you don't have people in that community that are fully aware of the planning issues and the legal issues and land ownership issues, they really do need help and advice. And that's sort of cutting through all of that complexity to try and deliver it. But, you know, we can certainly help.

We can, we can actually help. Clearly with planning advice, we don't charge for affordable housing, pre application advice, that's free. And we can even help with their legal support. We can't obviously help with financial advice, but we can certainly again, advise in terms of the mortgage lenders that are more willing to lend, you know, and some of them a lot, a lot more experienced in lending in shall we say not a straightforward situation, but where there's potential clauses in the arrangements. So there's a lot we can do.

Of course, that's where, that's where the hub as well. And the rural housing enablers can, can come in and help. As you said, there's actually quite a lot of advice and help for people specifically in the North York's Moors area.

Absolutely.

And I mean, one of the other things it seems to me is that a lot of the community led housing schemes in rural areas are quite small schemes and, you know, maybe two, three houses in a, in a, what they call a small rural exception site. And that feels to me, something that some communities may feel more comfortable with as well. You know, because you're not talking about big, massive estate of four or five bedroom homes, maybe for commuters being built on, or for second homes being built on the edge of small pretty villages. You're talking about a small number of homes that can be designed specifically to fit in.

Yes. I mean, we have got experience of dealing with that lower scale of development. I think our largest rural exception scheme is, is about 12. But quite frequently, we're dealing with six and four, and, you know, it is important to get the site right. We look at sites where ordinarily housing wouldn't be allowed, and that's the whole point of getting the land at an affordable rate. But in a national park, you do have to be very careful about that and we do obviously seek to try and get high quality design and, um, and materials that reflect the character of the place. I think we've been successful at that. I mean, you look at some of our rural housing schemes, one of them not that long ago in Osmotherley won a housing award. A national housing award, and there was not a single objector to that scheme and you look at it and it is really good quality housing, both in terms of what it looks like, but also in terms of its, you know, performance in terms of sustainability. So it's important to get that quality.

Let's talk a bit more about that design, about the sort of aspect of it because you were saying there that they are, you know, really good, high quality homes. They look great. You're using local materials, things that fit in. I mean, you've also got a remit. I know at the national park around sustainability of the park as well. How important when it comes to planning applications, are the fact that homes also are doing everything they can to be as carbon neutral as possible. Well, as you'd imagine, it's more and more important and, you know, everybody now is on board with trying, trying to address climate change and deal with, you know, some local authorities have cited it as a climate emergency, but for a long time now, renewable energy and low carbon forms of energy have been part of these affordable housing schemes, and it's almost a sort of standard.

So we're obviously very flexible with that, whether it be photovoltaic cells, solar panels, air or ground source heat pumps, the whole range of renewable energy is there for us to actually accept, and all our schemes are have that embodied within them and, you know, as a sustainable as the costs can allow at the moment.

And that thing about the kind of, if you like, the visual design as well, what they look like. So are you sort of saying, okay, you've got to use local stone, that they've really got to look very much like the houses that sit around them. Is that the kind of rules that you're setting? Yes and no is the answer to that.

High quality design doesn't actually have to be just repeating the, you know, the vernacular and the style that has always been there. And we're very open to contemporary design. But so you can have modern design and it's good design or you can have modern design and it's bad design. It's all about looking around you, getting that sense of place, what is the North York Moors about, using that palette of materials, and essentially it is about elements of the local stone, certainly, pantiles, you see our red pantiles are a real signature of this national park, but we also encourage, you know, use of timber, use of glass, and we've got a scheme at Slites, in the Esk Valley that was built quite a way out of the, the village. We were slightly concerned about its impact in the, in the landscape. So we asked the architect to design it as though it looked like a farmstead. So you've got a little sort of cluster and courtyard of about six to eight houses there, that the architect has tried to replicate a farmstead. So you've got what would obviously look like the main farmhouse, and then you've got outbuildings and agricultural style buildings. And there's a brilliant open cycle shed that just looks like an old field barn. So, there's a lot of different ways of addressing the design issue, and I must stress, it's not just replicating, you know, the past periods of architecture.

Yeah. My guess is that you probably link up with your equivalents in the other national parks. I would guess around the country. I mean, do you think the kind of way that you were approaching it and the things you've told us about so far are pretty typical for all national parks? And if anybody's listening there from a scheme in another national park, do you think it would be a kind of similar approach?

I do. I do think that is a very you know, pretty accurate portrayal that we, we work together as a national family of national parks. There's a national body called National Parks England. We share experience. Before COVID, we used to actually go and visit each other and look at schemes in different national parks as well.

Surely not. In person? Ha.

Yeah. And actually see development on the ground. It seems a long time ago now, but you get a lot of experience and a lot of good practice from doing that. But yeah, the, the policies that have been around, you know, the rural exception sites policy that was actually created in the 1980s at Exmoor National Park, became mainstreamed back, back in those days.

Local occupancy conditions, I think they originated in the Lake District National Park in the 1970s. So we are all aware of innovative planning policies and ways of focusing our development and our design to meet affordable and social and economic needs. And at the same time, try and restrict, you know, the plethora of external demand and open market housing.

We have had some success, I must say, actually, in our largest settlement, Helmsley, where we've allocated substantial areas of land for housing. We're talking about 200, 250 dwellings as part of a local plan exercise we did with Helmsley. And on the back of those open market houses, we got 40 percent affordable housing as part of that scheme, which was, which was pretty good.

I mean, Helmsley is a very viable place because of the high house prices. Oh, Helmsley is. I mean, if anybody doesn't know Helmsley, it's a town and it, well, it's blooming gorgeous, isn't it?

And it's, it's still a working town. It's, you know, it won the best delicatessen of the year, about two years ago.

One of the best high street. It's very dinky doo. That's my phrase. It's very dinky doo.

But again, you know, because of those high prices and, and high land values, there's a need for affordable housing. And we've worked really hard with the surrounding estate, the Duncan Park estate and got, as I said, we've worked a very high quota of affordable housing on the back of that open market housing.

So that I'm saying that is a good way of doing that if you've got a main settlement and most national parks have got a main town or settlement. I'm talking about 3000 people, 5000 people, you know, the likes of sort of Bakewell or Keswick, our equivalent is Helmsley. You can't replicate that in your smaller villages.

But if you do allocate housing in your larger towns, you can really seek to get affordable housing on the back of that.

Which is just wonderful, because as you say, it's keeping people in the parks, in the areas, you know, local people, their areas, especially young people, you know, so that they don't feel like they have no option but to move.

Well, that's right. And I don't know if you're aware, but there's a report that's just coming out by the Rural Commission of North Yorkshire. I think it's being launched this week at the Great Yorkshire Show. And it's highlighting the way forward for North Yorkshire and highlighting all these issues.

And we're aware, and the Yorkshire Dales are aware, that we have an imbalanced population and a declining population. We've lost 5 percent of our people over the last two decades. And if you look at the age structures, it's really imbalanced. It is indeed across the whole county. And I think the headline of that is they're saying, If there are as many young people in North Yorkshire as the national average, it would add 1.

5 billion pounds to the regional economy is, you know, as significant as that. So we're taking note of that. Our new local plan is more flexible. And one of its key objectives is to try and address that population decline through seeking more opportunities to deliver housing.

As you say, so that people can stay.

We're coming up to the end of the podcast. Chris, it's been wonderful to talk to you. I know we could talk for quite a bit longer. So I just want to sort of finish by asking if you could give one or two, three bits of major advice to anyone that's maybe in, in a community led housing scheme or thinking about setting up a community led housing scheme in your national park or other national parks, what would be the main bits of advice you would give to someone right from the start so they can get this right?

I would say the first thing to realise is that we're with you, we're positive, we want to do what you want to do and try and get over a perception that some people might have that national parks are about places where things don't happen and we always say no, we don't. Our approval rate is 95 percent so we want to be seen to be positive, to be accessible and to be part of the solution.

The second thing is, once you realise that, come and talk to us. Pick up the phone, email us, look at our website, or come and talk to us. And we're part of getting that sort of scheme going. And equally, get in touch with your, your local parish council, your local ward member. We have parish councillors on our National Park Authority board.

They're as keen as officers are to deliver housing for local people. Speak to them and we'll get, we'll get it going. It's complicated, but we'll help you through that complex process. And I think our track record will hopefully reflect that. You know, if you look at the amount of affordable housing schemes we've delivered over the last decade, it's substantial.

It's not enough. And we want to do more. And that's the other message I want to leave you with.

Yeah, brilliant. I mean, I think that's a really clear message. If anyone's thinking of doing it, get in touch as early as possible and, and see it, see it as a partnership, see it as a working together to make this happen. Because ultimately, anyone who wants to set up a community led housing scheme in the National Park will love the National Park as much as you do. You know, they would do it because they love their areas, they want their areas to be brilliant and they're not going to want to do something that doesn't work.

Do you know what I mean? They're going to want those same things as you do for it to fit in, for it to be right, you know.

People in the North York Moors love the North York Moors and, you know, they want to safeguard it as well, but they want to make sure that they can live there and work there.

Absolutely. Oh, Chris, it's been an absolute delight to talk to you. As you started off the podcast by saying how lucky you are that you've got a job where you can go out and walk across those malls, go to that coastline. You've made me very, very jealous cause I'm sitting in Leeds in the city as we're recording this and it’s made me want to get back out to Heartbeat country cause it's been a while.

I particularly do like Goverland, I must admit, or Whitby. Yeah. I mean Whitby is just.

It's a great, it's a great day out. But Peg, that's the beauty of our county, isn't it? Yorkshire. You've got two national parks, two AOMBs and they're not that far away.

Absolutely. So anybody else who's listening from elsewhere, get yourself to North Yorkshire, to the North York Moors, basically.

I'd echo that. Yeah.

Absolutely. Come on holiday, come and visit us. Chris, it's been wonderful to Thank you so much for your time today. Keep up the amazing work and keep developing and protecting our park.

Thank you. Bye bye. Cheers.

Communities Building Homes is brought to you by Community Led Homes North Yorkshire and East Riding. They're at comledhomesnyer on social media. That's com with one M. The podcast was presented and produced by me, Peg Alexander. I'm at TV Radio Peg on social media.