

Eco-home shows way to affordable housing

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ANCIENT building skills being revived by north Dorset craftsmen could be the key to low-cost "green" homes in the county.

A new house being built in Fifehead Neville by Greenwood Futures, run by Steve King of Shaftesbury, is claimed to be one answer to Dorset's affordable-housing shortage.

The private company has been constructing a timber frame for the energy-efficient ecobuilding in the barn of the Dorset Centre for Rural Skills at Farrington.

The centre was set up last year, under the leadership of Rob Buckley, to create permanent facilities for traditional building, pottery, smithcraft, glass-blowing and weaving, with lecture rooms and other facilities demonstrating low-impact, low-energy and low-cost sustainable building.

Last week the Greenwood team transported the beams and joists to a site at Fifehead Neville owned by a private client, to clad the main structure which took only three days to create.

Mr King said: "This way we can provide sustainable rural employment by training people in quality woodworking. We can also increase the value of the timber being extracted from local woodland, which is the cheapest it has ever been at the moment, by using it for low-cost housing.

"We can train and educate self-build groups in low-cost housing, keeping rural skills alive and creating employment at the same time, with the potential of at least 1,000 jobs in the South West."

The cost of housing built in this way is about two-thirds that of a conventional building. The project was a demonstration for local councils, which have already backed the idea. The Dorset Centre



BEAM TEAM: Steve King, right, watches colleagues James Ross, left, Chris and Dave Waldon assemble the timber frame for an energy-efficient building at Fifehead Neville.

for Rural Skills has Leader Plus funding to help meet its aims of sustainable development, and negotiations are in hand to set up a co-operative to continue timber-framed self-build.

"We are addressing the crisis in rural housing by developing practical, simple and traditional environmental techniques," said Mr King, a local farmer's son who was concerned about the loss of the environment and studied sustainable development and woodland management at Bristol.

"This is our fourth pilot. We have done two in Ireland, and the reception building at the Dorset Centre for Rural Skills."

Colleague James Ross built the environment centre near Castle Cary in Somerset from Douglas fir,

the same type of wood as used at Fifehead Neville.

Mr King said: "This has come from a private woodland at Fovant, near Salisbury, which is being restored into ancient semi-natural woodland.

"The frame will be clad with a breathing membrane, and then with western red cedar, which the large sawmills cannot handle. They

are American trees which were imported in the 19th Century to make pit props, and have recently had to be used in high volume, low-value markets instead of being used locally."

● ANYONE interested in becoming involved in the self-build project can contact Steve King on 01747 811099.