

Housing Executive Draft Older People's Strategy Consultation

Response to the Consultation by the
Rural Residents' Forum

For further information contact:

Rural Community Network

38a Oldtown Street

Cookstown

Co Tyrone

BT80 8EF

Tel: 028 8676 6670

aidan@ruralcommunitynetwork.org

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Background on the Rural Residents' Forum

The Rural Residents' Forum was established in 2009 as part of the NI Housing Executive Rural Homes and People Strategy. The need for a Rural Residents' Forum was re-affirmed by the NIHE Rural Unit's Rural Housing Strategy 2013-2015. The Rural Residents' Forum is an integral part of the NIHE's Community Involvement Structures.

The Rural Residents' Forum provides a consultation mechanism for NIHE on all policy, strategy and financial decisions affecting rural dwellers of all tenures that live in estates where there are NIHE properties.

The Rural Residents' Forum identifies and articulates issues that affect rural dwellers across all tenures that live in estates where there are NIHE properties.

A list of Rural Residents' Forum members is attached at the end of this consultation response.

Response to the Consultation

The Rural Residents' Forum (RRF) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Housing Executive consultation on its draft Older People's Housing Strategy. This response is based on comments made at a consultation workshop delivered by the Housing Executive via Zoom to the Rural Residents' Forum meeting on 6 October 2020.

Whilst we welcome the development of an Older People's Strategy by the Housing Executive and generally accept the rationale put forward to explain why it is important, our main initial concern is how the Housing Executive plans to fund the proposals within the Strategy. Many of the actions identified across the themes appear to be contingent on continued funding for the Supporting People programme. This is a concern as the Supporting People programme has been under threat of closure for some time and subject to an ongoing campaign by CHNI, Housing Associations and other community and voluntary sector stakeholders. The Housing Executive needs to be honest about what it can achieve within the current limitations on its budgets and the precarious nature of the Supporting People programme. Having acknowledged those constraints, it then needs to be much more ambitious and assertive about stating its case for more funding to meet general need for social and affordable housing including the housing needs of older people.

Why Developing an Older People's Strategy is Important?

The demographic trends show an increasingly ageing population in Northern Ireland and this has been the case for several decades. The strategy should include some analysis of the rate of ageing in rural communities as NISRA statistics show that rural communities have a higher proportion of older people and are ageing at a faster rate than urban communities. People ageing in rural communities may face additional challenges in terms of housing as they will have fewer opportunities to downsize in rural communities. They are also likely to endure greater challenges in accessing services as they age if they suffer ill-health or disability due to the limited coverage of public transport networks in rural areas and dependence on the private car.

How will we know we are successful?

The following two indicators are identified as part of the criteria for judging success of the Strategy:

- explored a range of housing options for older people, leading to better planning decisions in relation to new models for the future.
- supported people to remain in their homes where appropriate.

RRF would suggest that this is a difficult balance to achieve and in some ways these indicators are contradictory. RRF believes that supporting people to remain in their homes for as long as possible and, where appropriate, is the default position. It is often even more challenging to persuade older people to leave their family home in rural communities if it is attached to a family farm due to the deep family and emotional connections people have. Often older people who can no longer remain in their homes must move to a town or area where they have no network of family and friends.

The development of the Strategy presents an opportunity to explore new models for providing housing options closer to where they live when people are no longer able to remain in their homes.

Introduction

The introduction should acknowledge the issue of long waiting lists for social housing in many areas across Northern Ireland and the under-supply of social/affordable housing right across all age groups.

Research

RRF agrees that defining who is in the 'older person' category is not straightforward and that people over fifty age at different rates and have different life experience which influence the

ageing process such as health issues, loneliness, loss of partner and connection to family and neighbour networks. RRF strongly recommends that in all NIHE's work it works with each older tenant/resident on an individual basis to establish how best to meet their changing housing needs underpinned by principles of human rights and dignity.

"Housing needs and aspirations of older people are multiple and complex, and their expectations are increasing."

RRF concurs completely. This is challenging work and the only way to get it right is by continuous development and partnership working with older people and their representative organisations.

Strategic Context

RRF understands that the next Programme for Government may include an additional outcome on housing. If this is the case it may be appropriate to include some indicator around meeting the complex housing needs of older people.

RRF notes that several council area populations with large rural hinterlands are projected to age quickly by 2028 and 2041. These councils contain largely rural areas with significant levels of housing demand and need and additional service delivery challenges.

Community Involvement

RRF believes that the Strategy should include a comment here about Lifetime Homes standards that stresses the need for more innovative design and stricter planning and building control standards for private developers to ensure people's homes can adapt with them as they age.

Older People's Housing Strategy

Missing from the strategy is a commitment from the Housing Executive to deliver purpose-built housing to meet older people's needs or adapt existing housing. RRF believes the strategy should include a further delivery theme focusing explicitly on providing/adapting housing to older tenants' needs.

Theme 1 Planning for the Future

A better strategy and a more consistent approach to down-sizing could reap benefits across society freeing up family homes particularly in areas where there is high housing need.

Intermediate Housing for Older People

The Department for Communities recent consultation on Affordable Housing suggests a key target group for affordable housing is active older people:

“Active Older People – demographic change is expected to result in a growing demand for housing designed to meet the needs, expectations and aspirations of older people. For this group, housing that is easy to maintain and is fit for purpose as they age and is within or close to their current neighbourhoods is likely to provide an attractive product. Housing which conforms to the HAPPI principles could fill this key gap in the market, but additional assistance may be required to help some individuals within this category to transition to these more suitable homes.”

RRF agrees that affordable housing for active older people may be an attractive option but the Housing Executive needs to consider how this type of housing could be delivered in small rural settlements.

Extra Care Housing

We believe the Housing Executive would need to conduct more in-depth research on this model. It may work well in England but that does not necessarily mean it will transfer easily here.

Hub and Spoke Model

RRF believes this model could have potential in rural Northern Ireland. Is the rural housing need test programme picking up need for seniors for either social/affordable housing or inquiries about down-sizing? If this is not currently a part of the rural housing need test process, then it should be factored into further tests by Housing Executive Rural Unit.

Lifetime Homes

The 9 additional DfC criteria for grant aided social housing should be extended to private sector developments so that Lifetime homes becomes a minimum standard for all new development across the North. This is important in rural communities where the private sector will remain an important source of housing for older people?

“Improved design in relation to space, lighting, balconies and manageable outdoor space, ventilation, room to move and good storage have particular relevance to older people’s housing which needs to offer an attractive alternative to traditional family

homes. In short, cleverly designed models of housing that work for older people, work for everyone else, and would allow people to remain in one place.”

RRF agrees with the principle of improved design to ensure housing designed for older people is an attractive alternative but the challenge will be implementation. Private sector developers aim to maximize profit. RRF is concerned that previous attempts to impose higher standards or planning conditions on private developers in Northern Ireland have been resisted or ignored.

“We, along with partner agencies, should raise awareness of the range of options available to older people, including newer models of provision, for example, retirement villages, and existing models of provision such as sheltered housing. This would allow older people to be more informed of their choices and options”

RRF questions whether all these options are available to older people across NI. It will be useful for stakeholders if future versions of the Older People’s Strategy mapped the location of all types of housing provision aimed at older people across NI.

“We will explore the feasibility of innovative options for the off-site construction of modular adaption pods to further enhance our major adaptations process”

In our view the first step (if not yet undertaken) would be to assess what proportion of the Housing Executive stock could accommodate a modular adaption.

Floating Support

RRF would question how older people are referred to floating support? Is there additional need out there in rural communities amongst older vulnerable residents that is not being met? How do we plan for additional need as population ages?

RRF agrees that assistive technology has definite potential to help older people remain in their homes for longer. We suggest that a similar pilot using assistive technology with rural older tenants would be important to check how these innovations might work with the more limited broadband connections in many rural communities.

Theme 2 - Promoting and Maintaining People’s Dignity

Does NIHE have an older persons' forum? How does it take on board the views of older people on its service provision? As already discussed in this consultation response continuous

development and partnership working with older people and their representative organisations should be a fundamental principle.

Theme 3 – Housing Advice for Older People

Barriers to Moving in Later Life

There is a specific rural dynamic to this issue as there are likely to be fewer options to right size for older people in a rural community or even in a neighbouring village or small town with limited housing options in many rural communities for people across all ages.

There may be specific issues in rural communities for older people who need to trade down to smaller accommodation/have support needs but whose home is on a family farm.

Theme 4 – Promoting Participation

RRF agrees that loneliness is a factor in many older people's lives. Is there any evidence as to whether loneliness is worse/better for older people in rural communities?

“Through our Social Enterprise programme, we recently funded Hanwood Gym in East Belfast £25,000 from the Social Enterprise programme to update its gym equipment so that it can attract more users and offer GP referral programmes and other fitness courses to benefit local residents, particularly older people both in terms of healthy ageing, but also in terms of community participation.”

RRF would suggest that there are clear links between the Housing Executive Older People's Strategy and the Health Trust's social prescribing programmes particularly under themes 2 and 4 and these links should at least be referenced in the final strategy.

Could some of the Social Economy projects discussed in the Strategy be targeted at sustaining older people's tenancies for example, handyman projects, projects that help people move home or declutter, dementia support services etc.

Many older people are already representing their communities particularly in Housing Executive estates and should be enabled with opportunities to become more involved – whether it's through specific criteria for funding, training, one-to-one support or even the local Patch Manager being aware of their tenants and identifying and encouraging those willing and able to contribute.

Once they are involved, they should be offered ongoing support to allow their participation to continue. Rural Community Network, Supporting Communities and other community development organisations have a role in facilitating and supporting community involvement.

The benefits to older people who get involved in community engagement structures can be seen through their own learning and development and the networking with others that participation provides.

Rural Residents' Forum Membership

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| Patricia | McQuillan | Moneydig Community Association (chairperson) |
| Phyllis | Clarke | Fivemiletown Residents Association |
| Linda | Wilson | |
| Martin | McCartney | Maydown Community Association |
| June | Livingstone | |
| David | Quinney Mee | Rathlin Development Community Association |
| Helen | Rowland | Dungormley/lir Grove Residents Association Newtownhamilton |
| Micheal | Connell | Dungormley/lir Grove Residents Association Newtownhamilton |
| Orla | McCann | Supporting Communities NI |
| Anne | Quinn | Cushendall Development Group |
| Sheila | McWilliams | Coolessan Community Association |
| Clifford | Wylie | Huntly Community Estates, Banbridge |
| Mary | Watson | |
| Nelson | Bryce | |