

**Housing Executive**

**Working Together for Safer Communities**

**Community Safety Strategy 2020-2023**

Response to the Consultation by the  
Rural Residents' Forum

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## **Background on the Rural Residents' Forum**

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

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

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

## **Key points**

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation. Our response is based on discussions at the RRF meeting and on a presentation/question & answer session with the Housing Executive Community Safety Manager Jill Smyth at a RRF meeting on 5 November 2019.

The RRF is concerned that the Strategy and Action Plan are presented without any clear picture of the extent of ASB across the Housing Executive estate. The Strategy contains very little detail on the extent of ASB, where most incidents happen or the nature of ASB. We have no idea of the long-term trend in ASB. Are the number of incidents rising or declining? Some snapshot data on the number of incidents and the number of individuals affected over the past 4 years is included on page 13 but it would have been more informative to have included a more detailed analysis of data to inform discussion on the proposed strategy. If this analysis had been included, we could give a more informed opinion on whether the proposed actions were proportionate to the scale of the issue.

The Strategy does include some data on page 13 about Community Safety issues over the past 4 years. It is reassuring that nearly 60% of cases (5725 cases out of a total of 9802 alleged ASB reports) are closed after the issue of warning letters and visits by local office staff. A further 190 cases were addressed using the Community Safety Mediation service. No further information is provided on the outstanding 3887 cases. It would have been useful to know how these cases were resolved.

Community Restorative Justice partner organisations received 1067 referrals over this 4-year period but it appears as if this service is only available to people in Greater Belfast and North Down. Is access to a similar service required across Northern Ireland? If restorative justice services are not available to tenants across NI what other services can be accessed to address anti-social behaviour that affects residents in rural areas?

The detail accompanying the strategy in sections 2-7 includes many examples of interventions and actions undertaken by Housing Executive and partner organisations to

enhance community safety but no systematic evaluation of the outcomes these interventions have produced is included.

RRF welcomes the fact that the strategy identifies a range of partner organisations that the Housing Executive will work alongside to deliver the Community Safety Strategy. It does not appear to address the impact of ASB in rural communities where PSNI resources are often stretched across a much wider catchment area. In some rural communities and in Border areas local communities remain mistrusting of the PSNI and in some rural communities they may be reluctant to engage with the PSNI due to ongoing issues with paramilitary control. Our understanding is that a rural needs impact assessment of the Community Safety Strategy is being undertaken but has not yet been completed. The guidance issued by DAERA to public authorities subject to the Rural Needs Act advises:

*“The undertaking of a Rural Needs Impact Assessment should be an integral part of the development, adoption, implementation or revising of a policy, strategy or plan or the design or delivery of a public service.”*

RRF requests that the Rural needs Impact Assessment is made publicly available and we look forward to commenting on it as we believe that the Community Safety Strategy needs to consider the specific needs of rural tenants. For example, are there specific types of ASB that only occur in rural communities or that are more prevalent in rural communities? Are ASB incidents more or less likely in rural areas? Further analysis of the data on ASB will be an essential part of the RNIA process to inform these discussions.

### **Comments on the Strategic Plan and Action Plan**

Much of the document focuses on the Housing Executive, the policies it will implement and the actions it will take to implement its Community Safety Strategy. The Strategy is less clear about the outcomes the plan is seeking to achieve. Is the aim to eradicate all ASB or merely to reduce the number of incidents?

RRF would not disagree with any of the actions identified and are supportive of measures to ensure that tenants/residents report incidents of ASB. We also welcome the actions to support witnesses and victims of ASB.

We are concerned that many of the actions in the draft Community Safety Strategy fall to Patch Managers to implement. Patch Managers already perform a very busy role and may need considerable additional support to effectively manage ASB issues which, by their nature, can be time consuming. It may be worth considering how some of the responsibilities allocated to patch managers in the draft strategy could be delegated to Neighbourhood Wardens. The strategy contains little detail of how the Patch Managers will interact with the Community Safety Team but we assume there will be a clearly defined process and the more intractable cases are escalated to the Community Safety team.

We welcome the partnership with the Housing Executive’s independent mediation provider TIDES and assume that this mediation service is available across NI including in rural communities.

We believe that the resources dedicated to the Community Safety Strategy should have been set out in detail to enable consultees make some informed comment on whether the scale of resourcing was commensurate with the issue.

The strategy doesn't set a target for a reduction in the numbers of ASB incidents. It doesn't set a specific target for how quickly it will respond to ASB incidents nor does it set a target for how quickly it will aim to resolve ASB issues. Without these types of target, we would suggest that it will be difficult to monitor progress and measure outcomes.

We welcome the commitment to explore new approaches to tackling ASB using intelligence led models based on problem solving and would encourage the Housing Executive and partner agencies to learn from international best practice.

We acknowledge that the Housing Executive approach to ASB must balance the rights of victims and witnesses to speedy resolution with support for customers to sustain tenancies and remain in their homes. The low number of dwellings which the Housing Executive has taken back into its possession in the past four years bears this out.

We welcome the action to:

“Increase Awareness and Improve understanding of what ASB represents within our communities and how the Housing Executive can address it by delivering awareness sessions to Regional and Area HCN, and Housing Community Network members.”

We suggest that this could be developed further by ensuring that the Community Safety Strategy is included regularly on the agenda of HCNs to enable effective scrutiny.