

Reaching Rural – Housing Executive Draft Rural Strategy RRF Response

I am responding on behalf of an organisation

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1. Do you agree with the proposed themes, outcomes and priorities which have shaped this draft Rural Strategy?

RRF is supportive of the proposed overall themes and outcomes. We are also supportive of the priorities identified but would make the following points:

Theme 1 Supporting Our Rural Customers:

There should be greater priority directed towards tackling the growth in rent arrears in rural communities. A targeted approach and identification of specific rural issues contributing to the growth in arrears in rural tenancies should be considered. Further research on the factors contributing to the growth in rent arrears and the impact of “welfare reform” in rural communities should be carried out. This work needs to be developed in partnership with local patch managers/housing officers to identify specific issues affecting rural tenants and potential solutions.

Rural tenants need to be made aware of the housing advice and options service available through their local office - more awareness is generally needed of this service amongst rural citizens - only 25% of tenants aware of this service. We agree that further GIS analysis of gaps in Supporting People provision for disadvantaged and hard to reach groups is needed and efforts to ensure Supporting People services meet the needs of vulnerable rural dwellers is welcome.

Homelessness in rural areas is on the rise as seen from the statistics provided in the strategy document. Homelessness is less visible in rural communities but the rise in FDAs in some rural areas is very concerning and RRF believes NIHE needs to take more action to address it.

RRF is happy to continue to work with the Housing Executive to develop and enhance its role and ensure it remains relevant and representative of rural housing communities.

RRF would like to see the Housing Executive pilot a scheme in a rural community(ies) trialling assistive technology with older/disabled tenants.

We welcome the ongoing work with rural tenants and residents through the Housing Executive's Community Cohesion Strategy. RRF can continue to offer advice and support on reaching rural tenants and residents on any community cohesion initiatives that the Housing Executive is developing or promoting.

We welcome the intention to provide more assisted housing in rural communities to meet the needs of an ageing population although RRF is concerned that funding for adaptations or new builds will not meet the level of need. At March 2021, 99 applicants on the waiting list for a social home in a rural area required a wheelchair accessible property and 1,396 applicants required a home which was suitable for a household member with complex needs.

Theme 2 Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes

We support the action to undertake cyclical analysis of rural waiting lists and ensure that rural areas of unmet need are highlighted on the Annual Commissioning Prospectus. RRF would suggest that the Housing Executive begin to publish figures on unmet social housing need and the projected target for new build social housing in a more public way on their website as a way of publicising the need for more new build in rural communities.

We welcome the commitment to an ongoing programme of hidden rural need tests to try and ensure as many people as possible in housing need in rural communities are identified and places with housing need are placed on the Annual Commissioning Prospectus.

We agree that the Rural Unit should facilitate a rural housing health check/housing clinic approach in communities where they are undertaking tests for hidden need. Where possible (public health regulations permitting) these should be face to face events to enable Housing Executive staff and partner agencies to explain the full range of housing services and options available in a community.

We support the action to engage with Community Planning partners in the rural housing need testing process to maximise reach in rural communities. However, the Housing Executive needs to consider how well the Community Planning process is working across all Council areas as our understanding is that Community Planning is at a more advanced stage in some Council areas compared to others. We suggest that the Housing Executive also consider how wider Council staff/structures can support the rural housing need testing process. However, as the Housing Executive uncovers more housing need and areas are identified to be placed on the Annual Commissioning Prospectus expectations amongst people in housing stress and in those communities are raised. More needs to be done by housing associations and DfC to ensure the rural new build targets are met.

RRF strongly supports the need for a separate rural target for new build social housing. We have worked hard over the past 5 years to identify blockages to provision of new build social housing and lobby Housing Associations, DfC officials and MLAs to do more to ensure the target is met. At present the Housing Executive is unable to develop new social housing so its role is limited to mapping social housing need and encouraging Housing Associations to meet that need. The rural new build target has been missed in 6 of the 7 previous years and

RRF has continued to highlight this shortfall with all stakeholders across the housing supply delivery chain. We agree that there is an opportunity for the Housing Executive to work more closely with local Councils in the local development plan process to ensure that projections for social housing need and demand for social housing is identified within settlements to ensure that land is zoned accordingly.

We support the need to ensure affordable housing is available in rural settlements. The Housing Executive should continue to use its influence as a statutory consultee in the LDP process to ensure that Councils include both a development management policy and an allocations policy which can set key site requirements and zone land for affordable housing.

Is there scope for the Housing Executive to better understand how demand for private sector housing in a HMA makes housing affordability more of a problem and increases demand for affordable and social housing. Can the Housing Executive work more closely with Councils to identify housing affordability issues earlier and use planning policy to release more land for development?

See comments below on Community Led Housing at Question 6.

Theme 3

See comments below at Q7

2. Have the housing related challenges which face people living in rural areas been sufficiently considered?

Challenges have been considered but RRF is not sure that actions have been identified that will meet the challenges, as most require action across a range of government Departments.

An ageing society has been identified as a challenge along with the potential care gap that may arise. This is undoubtedly an issue in rural communities but will need further in-depth analysis as to what the Housing Executive can practically do to support older people in rural communities to remain within their home and how much any adaptations programme may cost.

RRF agrees that the Covid pandemic has changed how many people see rural communities as a place to live and work from. There may be opportunities for rural settlements to grow but the Housing Executive needs to consider how additional demand for private housing in rural settlements will impact on the private rented sector and demand for social or affordable housing.

The data presented on p11 clearly shows the challenges for rural dwellers around transport and mobility. To date the challenges around de-carbonising transport, promoting public and active transport in rural communities has been largely ignored in NI.

RRF believes further reference should be made to addressing sectarianism/racism in rural communities as the Housing Executive has a track record of proactively addressing these issues in its estates.

3. Have the needs of those with additional housing support requirements (i.e. older people, those with a disability or mental health issues, young people, those faced with homelessness) in rural areas been appropriately considered?

Homelessness in rural areas is on the rise as seen from the statistics provided in the strategy document. Homelessness is less visible in rural communities but the rise in FDAs in some rural areas is very concerning and RRF believes NIHE needs to take more action to address it. Whilst the strategy provides a description of the increase in homelessness in rural areas it is less specific on actions the Housing Executive will take.

RRF supports the proposal to ensure that Equality and Good Relations will be included as standing items on the Rural Residents' Forum and the Rural Housing Policy Implementation Panel meetings in future.

The incidence of poverty amongst rural pensioners is particularly concerning (almost twice the rate of pensioners in urban areas) and more consideration of their needs will be required.

RRF welcomes the provision of 1,452 disabled facilities grants between 2016-2020 in the private sector in rural communities. Whilst this is a significant investment it would be useful to know what percentage of demand this for disabled facilities grants this represents over this period.

4. Will rural housing need tests which incorporate the proposed 'housing health-check' service offer an appropriate level of engagement with rural communities to encourage those in need of support to come forward?

RRF believes it is important that the programme of rural housing need tests continue and that these could be developed into a broader housing health check or housing clinic events that would be an important development. The Rural Unit has already piloted this approach on Rathlin and in other rural communities. However, the delivery of more social housing to meet rural housing need will provide more encouragement to people to come forward to register with their housing need/seek housing advice from the Housing Executive.

The Housing Executive should also continue to explore and develop online tools/engagement channels to encourage people with housing needs in rural communities to come forward. Whilst there are still issues of digital exclusion in rural communities online engagement channels may work more effectively for younger people and families.

5. Do you agree with the emphasis on facilitating the development of both social and intermediate housing within mixed-tenure environments to promote cohesion and sustainability in rural areas?

Yes, RRF agrees that the development of both social and intermediate housing should be built where housing need specifies that type of mixed tenure environment. We believe that the Housing Executive should do more than just highlight the need for mixed tenure to Councils and should work proactively to facilitate and encourage these developments in rural settlements.

6. Do you agree with the proposal to examine the potential for community-led housing as an additional way of addressing housing supply issues in rural areas in NI?

RRF has no issue with the Housing Executive further exploring the potential of community led housing as another way of addressing housing supply issues. Our one reservation over the use of this approach in NI is how community led housing will be allocated. The common waiting list prioritises people for social housing using a points-based system - housing allocations based on need being a fundamental principle of the Housing Executive since its inception. Any exploration of the potential for community led housing needs to address the issue of allocations.

If this issue can be resolved then Community led housing may have potential to identify hidden housing need in rural communities as well as utilise local knowledge to identify potential sites for social housing.

7. Have the challenges associated with increasing energy efficiency in rural housing stock, the reliance on carbon-based heating systems in rural areas and the measures required to address these issues, been sufficiently considered?

They have been considered but will require massive investment over the coming decades that will add further to the Housing Executive's maintenance and repair backlog. The scale of investment required will need to be supported by funding from the Westminster government as part of plans to tackle climate change and reduce carbon emissions.

There may also be scope for the Housing Executive to continue to pilot energy efficiency schemes and measures to reduce carbon and tackle fuel poverty. The Handiheat and RuLet projects are examples of small-scale pilot schemes. The challenge now is for the Housing Executive to disseminate the learning from such schemes to Housing Associations, Councils and Assembly Departments and to develop a larger scale proposal for rural retro fit scheme.

The Energy Strategy for NI has identified Air Source heat pumps as the most cost-effective method of de-carbonising homes in rural areas who have no access to mains gas. RRF suggests that the Housing Executive consider a further trial using air source heat pumps in a rural location to gather evidence on costs and benefits of this approach.

The Rural Strategy should also consider rural mobility and how social housing tenants in rural communities can be connected to the public transport network using active travel and

community transport where appropriate. Approximately 23% of emissions of carbon in NI are generated from transport with a high reliance on private transport in rural communities. The Housing Executive should undertake partnership work with the Department for Infrastructure, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Translink, local councils, community transport providers and communities to develop a pilot project to address this issue.

8. Will the various forms of promotion and consultation outlined throughout the draft Strategy (e.g. consultation events, magazines, local press, social media) be sufficient to reach those in rural communities who could benefit from them? If not, please outline other methods of communication which should be considered.

RRF believes the Housing Executive should consider how information on social housing and homelessness can be disseminated in rural communities. There is still a role for hardcopy leaflets/posters/information in GP surgeries, Advice centres, community organisations, churches, sports clubs and post offices. A strong rural community group infrastructure exists across the region and the NIHE should make use of this to disseminate information on housing issues. This is particularly relevant for information on homelessness services.

9. What would you determine to be the main challenges facing the delivery of this strategy over the next four years?

Massive challenges over tackling climate change and retro fitting existing Housing Executive properties in rural communities. Will need significant additional funding from Westminster to address the scale of this issue in any meaningful way.

Even if the rural new build target can be met – at an average of 200 units per year it will take decades to meet the housing need of all those in housing stress on the waiting list. This will require a level of investment in social housing not seen since the 1980s in NI.

RRF supports, in principle, the desire of the Housing Executive to return to building new social housing. We would question whether the necessary political support, legislation and governance changes required within the Executive will be achieved in the next 4 years.

10. Please provide any other comments which should be considered in the development and delivery of this 4-year Rural Strategy.

The new strategy will need to complement the four social strategies currently being formulated by DFC using a co-design process. It will also have implications for DAERA's rural policy framework which will replace the Rural Development Programme. There will be specific challenges for rural border region communities post Brexit – potentially most of these will be about cross border working and cross border access to

services. The Housing Executive will need to offer additional support to tenants in border communities facing a changing landscape as Brexit unfolds.

The Housing Executive should continue to learn from work in other regions of the UK and Ireland and across Europe in relation to innovation, homelessness, climate change and addressing poverty.