

A scenic photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there is a lush green field. In the middle ground, a cluster of white houses with dark roofs is visible, surrounded by trees. The background features rolling green hills and a range of rugged, grey mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds.

Housing
Executive

SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES

Draft Rural Housing Policy Proposals
Executive Summary
January 2016

**Consultation response
template enclosed**

CHAIRMAN'S FOREWORD



The Northern Ireland countryside provides environmental, social and economic benefits to all dwellers, both urban and rural.

It is our greatest asset and should be enjoyed, promoted, protected and enhanced. However, for the rural population who live in, work and maintain this asset, basic services are often less accessible and housing more unaffordable. When considering rural sustainable development it is important to recognise that achieving a healthy rural environment is inextricably linked with sustaining our rural communities who are essential to supporting and maintaining a vibrant rural economy.

The review of our Rural Homes and People Policy (2007-2015) is timely given the growing pressures from rural communities for local, affordable homes, the need to address increasing levels of unfit and fuel poverty in rural areas and the national recognition that there is a need to support an ageing population, especially in isolated rural areas.

Since the last rural housing review in 2006, there have been comprehensive structural changes, including the Reform of Local Government, the emergence of the 11 new councils and the revised administrative structure of the Housing Executive in line with the Social Housing Reform Programme.

It is an appropriate time for us to revisit our rural housing approach, responding to the specific housing

needs of rural communities and the need to work collaboratively with our key partners and the community to better meet these needs.

Therefore, at the heart of the rural housing policy framework there is a commitment to partnership working. Community Planning will present a new engagement framework with local councils and an opportunity to continue and extend our commitment to joint working.

We continue to endorse the view that 'rural housing should not be considered as an isolated policy issue but rather an issue that connects to a range of environmental, social and public policy concerns'¹.

Views on our proposals are therefore welcome from as wide a constituency as possible including rural dwellers of all ages and backgrounds, community representatives as well as statutory, private and voluntary bodies.

The views of respondents will be used to develop, prioritise and where needed, amend our rural housing policy proposals and develop an associated action plan. We hope that this process will help us to maximise our contribution to enabling and supporting sustainable rural communities.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donald Hoodless".

Donald Hoodless,
Chairman

INTRODUCTION

Policy Background

The first rural housing policy review by the Housing Executive in 1990/91 highlighted that rural housing circumstances were different from those in urban areas and in order for the Housing Executive to carry out its statutory duties across its full statutory remit, a specific rural approach was required.

The 'Rural Homes and People' policy commenced in May 2007 and was scheduled to be implemented over a 6 year period to coincide with the implementation of the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2007-2013, administered by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD).

The policy was extended in 2013 to take account of the timescales involved in the Review of Public Administration and the associated Reform of Local Government.

¹ Northern Ireland - Republic of Ireland perspectives on rural planning and development - Murray M. and Scott, M.



VISION

The Housing Executive believes that the revised policy should contribute to the following overarching vision:
'Housing Services working in partnership to enable and support vibrant, shared and sustainable rural communities and provide economic, social and environmental benefits in rural areas'

The timescale for the current review of rural housing policy is influenced by two key factors:

1. DARD's RDP 2014-2020 was launched in August 2015 and;
2. The implementation of the Reform of Public Administration and the introduction of the 11 new super councils with increased delivery powers and the legislative framework for Community Planning.

This consultation booklet summarises the proposals for a revised rural housing policy - 'Sustainable Rural Communities'. The full version of the draft policy can be viewed at:

<http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/corporate/consultation.htm>

This document is available on request in alternative formats.

PRINCIPLES

The policy principles which were agreed through intensive consultation for the first rural policy have been enshrined in the development of subsequent rural policies, 'Places for People' (2000-2006) and 'Rural Homes and People' (2007-2015).

During preparation and pre-consultation for 'Sustainable Rural Communities', stakeholders agreed that these principles are still appropriate and should continue to shape this rural housing policy review and the associated action plan.

- The rural housing policy should contribute towards rural development objectives, within a framework of sustainable development;
- A rural approach is necessary not a revised urban approach;
- Partnership with others is critical for success;
- Tailoring to local circumstances is necessary in recognition of the diverse nature and sense of place existing in rural NI;
- Working with rural communities is essential for effective rural development;
- Affordability and accessibility are at the core of potential housing solutions;
- Investment and resources must be directed to where they are most needed and to those who need them most;
- The rural housing policy should be mindful of Section 75 Equality legislation, with the emphasis on promotion of equality of opportunity in rural areas; and
- Opportunities should be availed of to test new approaches, learning from policy and best practice elsewhere.

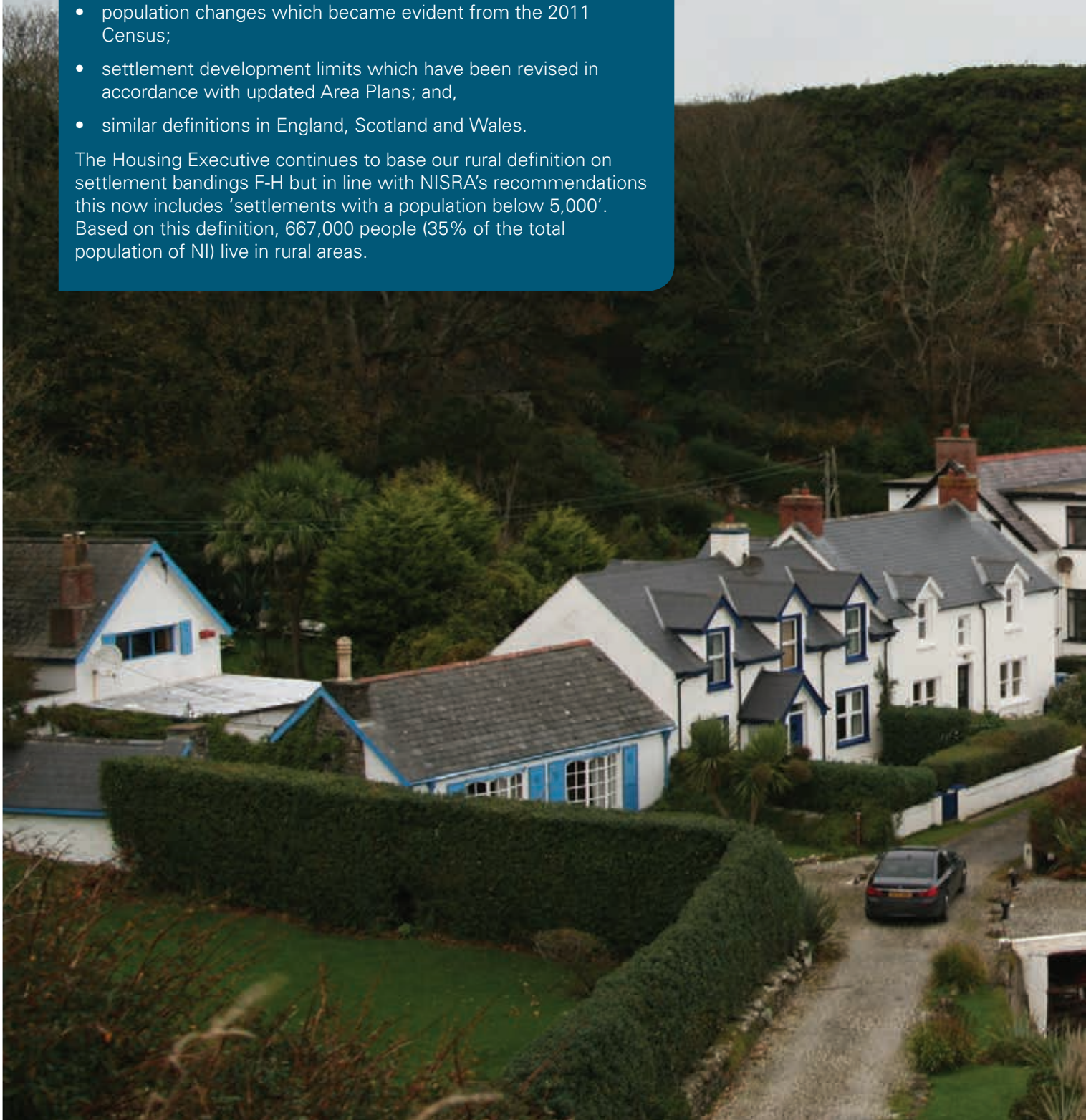


WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'RURAL'?

In March 2015, NISRA published the 'Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements' which sets out a revision of the default urban/rural definition which was published in their 2005 report. A number of changes to the settlement bandings were recommended based on:

- population changes which became evident from the 2011 Census;
- settlement development limits which have been revised in accordance with updated Area Plans; and,
- similar definitions in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Housing Executive continues to base our rural definition on settlement bandings F-H but in line with NISRA's recommendations this now includes 'settlements with a population below 5,000'. Based on this definition, 667,000 people (35% of the total population of NI) live in rural areas.



REVISED RURAL HOUSING POLICY PROPOSALS

The Housing Executive's contribution to supporting sustainable rural communities focuses on two key elements: planning, enabling and improving rural homes; and supporting and investing in rural people. Based on this the following five policy objectives are proposed:

1. To plan and enable the provision of affordable homes which meet rural housing needs.
2. To improve the condition of rural housing stock and reduce fuel poverty.
3. To provide housing support to vulnerable people in rural areas.
4. To contribute to the development of safe, cohesive and engaged rural neighbourhoods.
5. To work in partnership with others to assist in rural development.



POLICY OBJECTIVE 1

To plan for and enable the provision of affordable homes which meet rural housing needs

The Housing Executive recognises that because there is less existing social housing located in rural areas (approximately 14% of Housing Executive stock), people living in these areas are less likely to come forward and register on the social housing waiting list or will register for the nearest town or city where they have a more realistic chance of achieving a home to meet their needs.

In order to address this issue and to enable the planning and delivery of rural homes, every year the Housing Executive works with local communities to identify hidden housing need in selected rural settlements - 'latent demand tests'. We also liaise with Planning Service (now local councils) and housing providers to facilitate the provision of affordable homes which meet rural housing needs.

Achievements under the Rural Homes and People policy

Significant progress was made under the Rural Homes and People policy in addressing the gap between social housing need and the delivery of social new build in rural areas.

- a) The implementation of a 'rural housing enabler service' influenced by the success of the role in facilitating the development of affordable housing in rural areas in Great Britain. The Housing Executive's approach involved engaging with rural communities in order to determine their housing needs, undertaking site identification work in areas where need had been established and liaising with housing associations to support the delivery of social housing



POLICY OBJECTIVE 1: TO ENABLE THE PROVISION OF AFFORDABLE HOMES WHICH MEET RURAL HOUSING NEEDS

Outputs - Policy Actions

- 1) Set out specific rural housing requirements at council level in the Housing Executive Commissioning Prospectus.
- 2) Review the current process of rural latent demand testing taking into consideration the increasing need for intermediate/mixed tenure housing in rural areas.
- 3) Support and encourage the provision of rural housing through the identification and investigation of potential housing sites in rural areas with unmet housing need.
- 4) Increase the capacity of Housing Executive operational housing staff to examine all available housing options with rural customers.
- 5) Develop a model for the delivery of rural intermediate/mixed-tenure housing schemes based on the outcomes of the affordable housing pilots and other examples of best practice.
- 6) Examine other models of housing delivery in rural areas, learning from and building on the success of pilots and other examples of best practice
- 7) Investigate the opportunities for rural housing development which are presented through new and existing planning policies.

schemes to meet these needs.

- b) The introduction of an enhanced 'latent demand testing' process which was aimed at uncovering hidden need for social housing in rural locations, was applied in 98 rural locations across the province and to date has enabled the support of 18 rural new build schemes delivering 161 social housing units;
- c) The introduction of a rural target within the Housing Executive 'Strategic Guidelines' aimed at achieving an equitable share of the Social Housing Development Programme in rural locations based on levels of rural housing stress. The introduction of the rural target contributed to the delivery of 983 housing units in rural locations over the policy period.

KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

- Rural applicants make up 13.5% of the total waiting list for social housing;
- The proportion of social housing stock in rural areas (7%) remains significantly lower than in urban areas (18%);
- It is becoming increasingly difficult for housing associations to deliver rural schemes due to a difficulty in identifying suitable land and the costs associated with developing and managing small, dispersed housing schemes in rural locations.
- The affordability gap is greater in rural areas where average weekly incomes are lower, (particularly in the west of the province where almost 24% of individuals with income below £264 a week reside), and house prices are on average 19% greater.

POLICY PROPOSALS

The Housing Executive's policy proposals for increasing the supply of affordable homes in rural areas focus on:

- The opportunities which will arise through the new councils and the Community Planning Framework;
- A review of the current latent need testing process focusing on working with housing associations in areas where land has been identified;
- Facilitating the delivery of affordable (social and intermediate) and mixed tenure schemes.



SING NEEDS

Outcomes - Short Term	Outcomes - Medium Term	Long Term Impacts
<p>Potential rural social housing schemes identified with housing providers.</p> <p>The need for rural housing is investigated through local housing needs tests.</p>	<p>Meet the rural % target of the Social Housing Development Programme.</p>	<p>Social housing is provided in rural areas where unmet need has been identified.</p>
<p>Demand for affordable/intermediate and mixed-tenure housing is evidenced at council level and investigated through local needs tests.</p>	<p>Increased rural schemes are identified with housing providers.</p>	<p>Affordable/intermediate and/or mixed-tenure housing is provided in rural areas where demand has been identified.</p>

POLICY OBJECTIVE 2

To improve the condition of rural housing stock and reduce fuel poverty

The most recent House Condition Survey (2011) attributes increasing rates of unfitnes in rural areas over the period 2009-2011, to the aging stock, higher vacancy rates, lower disposable income and the reduced availability of home improvement grants.

For many rural people, living in sub-standard and deteriorating conditions could have direct consequences for their health and wellbeing.

The objective of 'improving rural house conditions' has been a priority in previous rural housing policies with private sector improvement grants promoted as the key mechanism for addressing rural unfitnes. Under Rural Homes and People, the Housing Executive set out to continue with this proactive approach, also seeking to target concentrations of unfitnes designated as 'Rural Priority Areas'. However, the reduction in the private sector grants budget since 2009 has resulted in restricted approval of discretionary grants (replacement, renovation and home improvement grants for owner occupiers) and instead a greater focus on the promotion of mandatory grants (Disabled Facilities Grants and Home Repairs Grants for Landlords).

Achievements under the Rural Homes and People policy

- The introduction by DSD of a rural target (40% - based on the rural % of the population) for the Warm homes Scheme which was met consistently over the past 8 years and resulted in over 21,500 Warm Homes installations;
- The promotion of the Boiler Replacement Scheme which has resulted in approximately 30% (5,427 approvals) in rural areas over the past 2 years;
- The approval of approximately 1658 private sector improvement grants (Disabled Facilities Grants, Renovation & Replacement Grants and Home Repairs Assistance Grants) in rural areas which will have contributed to the improvement of fabric and energy efficiency of these rural properties;
- The introduction of an Oil Buying Clubs Scheme in 2015 in partnership with Bryson Energy. To date 27 oil-buying clubs have been set up in rural areas enabling members to pool their oil purchases and order smaller amounts resulting in considerable savings.

POLICY OBJECTIVE 2: TO IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF RURAL HOUSING STOCK AND REDUCE FUEL POVERTY

Outputs - Policy Actions

- 1) Ensure that Housing Executive programmes deliver investment to achieve and maintain modern social housing standards in Housing Executive rural housing stock in accordance with our new Asset Management Strategy.
- 2) Promote new and existing Private Sector Improvement Grants which could improve the fabric of housing in rural locations.
- 3) Promote new and existing initiatives which are available to owner occupiers to improve the fabric and thermal efficiency of their homes and help to tackle fuel poverty in rural areas.
- 4) Consider alternative sources of energy and innovative technologies which could improve the energy efficiency of Housing Executive stock in rural areas.


KEY ISSUES

- Dwelling vacancy levels are higher in rural areas, particularly isolated rural areas where there are also higher levels of interior and exterior disrepair and where there has been a significant rise in unfitness from 5% to 14%;
- Fuel poverty is higher in rural areas (44%) than in urban areas (41%) and 50% of those living in isolated rural areas are faced with fuel poverty.

POLICY PROPOSALS

The Housing Executive's policy proposals for improving the condition of rural housing stock and reducing fuel poverty include:

- Investing in rural Housing Executive stock to achieve and maintain a modern standard;
- Promoting available home improvement grants;
- Investigating and promoting energy efficiency measures both for Housing Executive and private sector stock.



Outcomes Short Term	Outcomes Medium Term	Long Term Impacts
<p>Rural Housing Executive housing in need of repair and improvement identified through Stock Condition Survey.</p> <p>Available grants promoted at rural events and through rural publications.</p>	<p>Rural housing included in Housing Executive stock improvement programmes.</p> <p>% target of private sector grant approvals in rural areas achieved.</p>	<p>Existing rural homes benefit from improvement and investment.</p>
<p>Available grants and energy initiatives promoted at rural events and through rural publications.</p> <p>Rural Housing Executive stock included in pilot of new technologies.</p>	<p>Oil Buying Clubs established in rural areas.</p> <p>% target of Affordable Warmth and Boiler Replacement approvals in rural areas.</p> <p>Uptake of the Solar PV scheme and other energy conservation initiatives in rural areas.</p>	<p>Decreased costs to rural dwellers to provide heat and power in their homes.</p>



POLICY OBJECTIVE 3: TO PROVIDE HOUSING SUPPORT TO VULNERABLE PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

Outputs - Policy Actions

- 1 Focus on the prevention of homelessness in rural areas by examining all available options which will help people to stay in their existing homes where possible, close to existing family/support networks.
- 2 Work in partnership with other agencies to provide vulnerable rural applicants with tailored advice and wrap-around support which could help them to sustain existing tenancies.
- 3 Develop cross-departmental data sharing systems which will facilitate more efficient housing support services in rural locations.
- 4 Encourage the provision of accessible stock to meet the needs of an aging rural population.
- 5 Monitor the impact of pending Welfare changes and mitigations on Housing Executive activities to determine if any changes are required as a consequence.

POLICY OBJECTIVE 3

To provide housing support to vulnerable people in rural areas

For people who are vulnerable, in need of additional support or have specific care needs, living in a small and/or dispersed rural community may increase feelings of loneliness, helplessness and isolation.

When examining the processes for assisting vulnerable rural people in achieving a suitable housing solution or providing tailored housing support, the Housing Executive acknowledges that the urban approach may not always work in the rural context.

For example, in rural areas there are often higher concentrations of owner occupiers and elderly people and therefore, there will be increasing demand for tailored services such as floating support, which enable people to maintain independence in their home. Models of support service delivery should be flexible to allow for specific solutions to be developed.

Achievements under the Rural Homes and People policy

- Provision of Supporting People funding which enabled the development and extension

of floating support services including bespoke services for older people, people with mental health issues, people with dementia and women at risk of domestic violence. Such services were extended to broaden their geographical coverage and provide support for people living in the most isolated rural areas;

- The provision of funding for accommodation based services throughout rural NI;
- The 'Rural Guide to Homelessness' was developed and distributed through our local offices in order to raise awareness in rural communities of how people could get assistance if they were faced with the prospect of becoming homeless.



KEY ISSUES

- Approximately 12% of people who are currently registered as homeless wish to be housed in a rural location;
- Moving forward, the Housing Executive recognises that the population is ageing and that there will be an increasing need to provide housing support services which are flexible and sustainable and also to facilitate housing which is suitable for current needs but which is also adaptable to meet the future accessible needs of rural dwellers.

POLICY PROPOSALS

The Housing Executive's policy proposals for providing housing support to vulnerable people in rural areas include:

- Providing support through advice and referrals to reduce rural homelessness;
- Working collaboratively with other agencies to deliver efficient housing support services in rural areas;
- Focus on the provision of accessible stock which meets the needs of aging rural population;
- Making provision for smaller households who may be affected by welfare reform proposals.

Outcomes - Short Term	Outcomes - Medium Term	Long Term Impacts
<p>Housing support services for homeless and/or vulnerable rural residents are promoted through rural publications.</p> <p>Rural needs are factored in the commissioning of support services.</p>	<p>Increased uptake of Housing Executive funded support services in rural areas</p>	<p>Increased number of rural people helped to 'solve their housing problem'.</p>
<p>Need for accessible housing assessed in rural areas and highlighted with housing providers.</p> <p>Identification of any resultant housing issues relevant to rural areas.</p>	<p>Increase in number of accessible properties provided in rural social housing schemes.</p>	<p>Accessible housing is provided in rural areas where need has been identified.</p>

POLICY OBJECTIVE 4

To contribute to the development of safe, cohesive and engaged rural neighbourhoods

Some of the poorest and most deprived people in Northern Ireland currently reside in social housing, much of which is still located within Housing Executive estates in both urban and rural areas.

In our capacity as landlord, the Housing Executive is often presented with a range of issues which may not always be physical and/or easily rectifiable.

Social issues are much more complex and there is not always a quick fix solution but instead a need for intervention, building relationships and capacity building.

The Housing Executive's Communities Department is dedicated to working with our communities, offering them the tools they need to create safe and inclusive neighbourhoods and improve outlook and quality of life.

Achievements under the Rural Homes and People policy

- The Rural Residents Forum was introduced in 2009 and

comprises 12 community group representatives from across the province. The Forum is coordinated by Rural Community Network and serves as a focus group where housing issues can be discussed and rural views heard;

- In accordance with Rural Action Plans, both the Shared Communities Programme and the Building Relationships in Communities (BRIC) programme have included a focus on rural estates e.g. Claudy, Sion Mills, Armoy, Fivemiletown, Killyleagh, Fox Park, Omagh;
- Shared housing schemes have been developed in Sion Mills, Loughbrickland and most recently in Saintfield;
- The first Rural Community Awards competition was launched in Spring 2014 and generated great interest among rural community groups who were keen to demonstrate their success in improving the environment and working together to create vibrant and inclusive rural communities.

KEY ISSUES

- Community development and empowerment programmes are equally as important in rural areas where social issues can exist, albeit on a smaller scale than in the urban context;
- Invisible divisions between people of different community background and traditions may limit access to services for residents of some areas or create duplication of services in others;
- If the Rural Needs Bill is introduced in 2016, the role of the Rural Residents Forum in contributing their views on Housing Executive policies and services will be critical in enabling the Housing Executive to fulfil a statutory obligation.

POLICY PROPOSALS

The Housing Executive's policy proposals for contributing to the development of safe, cohesive and engaged rural neighbourhoods include:

- Focusing on developing good relations around and within rural Housing Executive estates;
- Developing the role of the Rural Residents Forum;
- Promoting internal and external initiatives which support and facilitate community development.





**POLICY OBJECTIVE 4:
TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SAFE, COHESIVE AND ENGAGED RURAL NEIGHBOURHOODS**

Outputs - Policy Actions		Outcomes - Short Term	Outcomes - Medium Term	Long Term Impacts
1	Promote and develop the role of the Rural Residents Forum in the rural proofing of new and revised Housing Executive policies and strategies.	Increased number of Housing Executive policies and strategies presented to Rural Residents Forum for review.	Rural issues taken into account in the development of new and revised Housing Executive policies and strategies.	An equitable share of housing and housing services available in rural areas.
2	Ensure that rural areas are considered where possible for funding/support programmes stemming from the Housing Executive's Community Cohesion Strategy.	Rural areas included in community cohesion programmes. Rural schemes included in shared new build programme.	Community projects to build capacity and encourage shared living in rural areas. Increased number of new build housing schemes which enable shared living in rural areas.	Safe, inclusive and shared rural communities.
3	Promote opportunities presented through Housing Executive funded community initiatives in rural areas and explore linkages between these and other external funding programmes.	Increased number and geographical spread of rural community groups availing of community funding opportunities.	Rural community projects promoting and improving health and well-being.	Improved social inclusion and access to community services in rural areas.



POLICY OBJECTIVE 5

To work in partnership with others to assist in rural development

The Housing Executive has a long history of working with development partners, local authorities and community groups to regenerate neighbourhoods in decline.

Investment in new housing is a vital element in rebuilding communities and restoring a sense of pride and belonging. In rural areas in particular, new housing can be fundamental in sustaining the population and supporting local infrastructure and services.

The Housing Executive have worked with and on behalf of many rural communities to identify the need for and enable the delivery of social housing as well as offering financial support to owner occupiers to improve their homes.

POLICY OBJECTIVE 5: TO WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH OTHERS TO ASSIST IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT				
Outputs Policy Actions		Outcomes Short Term	Outcomes Medium Term	Long Term Impacts
1	Work in partnership with DARD, councils and other funding agencies to support and contribute to rural development.	Increased collaboration with local councils and other public agencies.	Increased number of joint funded community projects in rural areas.	Increase in number/quality of community services and facilities in rural areas
2	Promote the use of surplus Housing Executive land and property in rural areas for community based projects which will promote health and well-being and/or facilitate social enterprise	Community projects identified through Housing Executive RDP match funding initiative.		



Achievements under the Rural Homes and People policy

- The contribution to the development of the Rural White Paper Action Plan through which we report biennially through the DSD on rural housing issues;
- The introduction of a Rural Development Programme (RDP) match-funding initiative which resulted in the funding of 53 'Village Renewal' projects and a total investment of over £480K.

KEY ISSUES

- The recent reform of local government brings with it a renewed focus on supporting a 'bottom-up' approach to regeneration. All 11 of the new councils (including Belfast) will now have a rural component and increased powers to deliver to rural communities through the community planning process. It is hoped that rural issues and regeneration in particular will be afforded greater consideration and investment and that the new councils will appreciate the value in sustaining their vibrant rural communities.

POLICY PROPOSALS

The Housing Executive's policy proposals for working in partnership to assist in rural development include:

- Promoting and supporting funding opportunities which could assist in rural regeneration;
- Maximising opportunities presented through Community Planning for a collaborative approach to area based rural regeneration.

EQUALITY AND RURAL PROOFING

The Housing Executive has carried out the following screening exercises on the draft rural housing policy proposals:

- Equality and Human Rights - to assess the potential impacts on Section 75 groups, human rights implications and opportunities for promoting good relations; and
- Rural Issues Statement - to assess the potential impacts of a policy on people living in rural areas.

The screening documents are available to download at:
www.nihe.gov.uk/index/corporate/consultation.htm.

Based on the evidence considered in these screening exercises, the Housing Executive has concluded that further assessments of impacts are not required (i.e. the policy has been screened out).

Equality and good relations are viewed as dynamic factors within this policy.

Equality needs and good relations issues change constantly and this policy must remain flexible to address needs as and when they arise. It is proposed that equality and good relations will be included as standing items on the agenda at future meetings of the Policy Implementation Panel and the Rural Residents Forum to ensure that there is an opportunity for any panel/forum member to introduce issues at any time during the lifespan of the policy.

Embracing all our neighbours



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