



# Reaching Rural

Rural Strategy

# 2021-2025

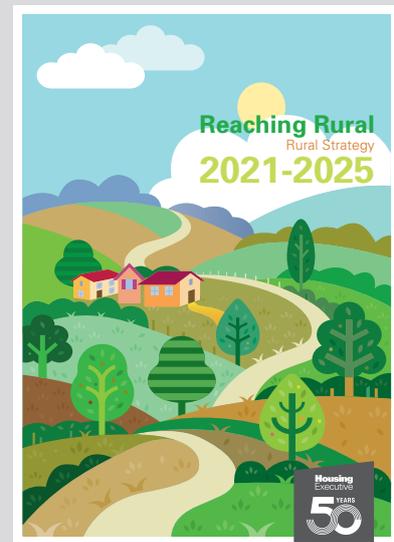
Housing  
Executive

50 YEARS

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On the cover: Reaching Rural



# 1. Foreword

**We are pleased to present the Housing Executive's 2021-25 Rural Strategy & Action Plan, which sets out in detail our plans to contribute to the sustainable and inclusive growth of our rural communities dispersed across Northern Ireland over the next four years.**

This Strategy has been shaped by the growing demand and changing policy context for the development of new rural homes, the need to consider the housing requirements of an ageing population, the growing recognition of the requirement for carbon neutral, energy efficient rural homes and the challenges and opportunities that all of these factors will present.

At the heart of the Strategy however, is an ambition to address the continuing and emerging needs of our rural customers. We seek to build on what we currently do well and to identify what we need to do differently to ensure that we are 'reaching rural' communities with the housing and related support that our customers require to enjoy stable and fulfilled lives.

**The Housing Executive recognises the value of a more localised approach based on community engagement and partnership working.**

When investment is only channelled to the areas with the greatest concentration of need, then rural areas with a more dispersed population will inevitably be faced with disadvantage and gradual decline. The Housing Executive recognises the value of a more localised approach based on community engagement and partnership working. Understanding rural needs is interlinked with understanding rural communities: the demography, access to employment, infrastructure and basic services, but also their uniqueness, their local character and their aspirations.

It is based on this premise that the Housing Executive developed its first Rural Strategy in 1991 and why 30 years later and in the sixth iteration of our Rural Strategy, we still believe that a 'different approach' is often required to ensure that our tenants, customers and stakeholders experience an equitable level of service and support, regardless of their location.

Reflecting on the achievements of the outgoing 2016-2020 Rural Strategy and reviewing the overall progress of our rural agenda since 1991, it is evident that effective communication with those we want to help, is paramount and the pace of change in how we communicate is accelerating. This Strategy has been developed in the midst of a global pandemic when, like many public authorities, the Housing Executive has had to rethink traditional methods of customer interaction in order to continue to deliver a service that is safe for both staff and customers. One of the key lessons we can take from this, is the importance of communication in times of change. Making use of video conferencing and social media has enabled us to continue to deliver our business objectives, and we hope to build on these newly realised opportunities in this Strategy, both to broaden our customer base and to learn from rural stakeholders in other jurisdictions.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the internal and external stakeholders involved in the preparation of this Strategy and those who took the time to provide a response during the 8 weeks of public consultation.

We look forward to now beginning to implement the themes, outcomes, priorities and actions set out in the Rural Strategy & associated Action Plan(s) and in identifying new and strengthening existing partnership working opportunities to help us achieve our vision for rural communities:

***'Towards vibrant, shared, healthy and sustainable rural communities where everyone has access to decent and affordable housing'***



**Professor Peter Roberts,  
Chair**



**Grainia Long,  
Chief Executive**

# 2. Executive Summary

## **The need for a Rural Strategy:**

In accordance with the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, the Housing Executive has a statutory duty to pay due regard to the needs of rural communities in the development of our policies, strategies and plans and in the delivery of our services.

We also have a range of statutory duties in relation to the provision of a housing service to those living in both urban and rural areas across Northern Ireland. Our first Rural Policy developed in 1991 recognised the need to identify housing need which was often hidden or 'latent' in rural areas and the requirement for targeted investment and support to increase housing supply and address unfitnes.

## **Background:**

The Housing Executive understands that a specific rural approach is required in order to ensure an equitable delivery of our housing related services in rural communities, to address the housing issues faced within these areas and to contribute to sustainable rural communities.

The sixth Housing Executive Rural Strategy has been developed in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic as the long-term impacts are beginning to be considered. The Strategy considers the changing policy context with the development of the new Local Development Plans, the plans emerging in relation to the Climate Change emergency and also identifies how we will contribute to the draft Programme for Government outcomes and indicators.

## **The aim of this strategy:**

The Rural Strategy considers the various ways in which the Housing Executive can contribute to our overarching vision for rural communities:

***'Towards vibrant, shared, healthy and sustainable rural communities where everyone has access to decent and affordable housing.'***

Over the next four years we will focus on the delivery of high level outcomes, priorities and actions which are set out under the three cross cutting themes of:

## **Theme 1: Supporting our rural customers**

### **Outcome:**

We ensure that our tenants and customers in our rural communities feel secure in their environment and can access additional housing support when it is required.

### **Priorities:**

- 1) We will consider the particular needs of our rural customers in the delivery of our housing solutions and support service;
- 2) We will continue to review and improve our housing support services to meet the needs of an ageing rural population;

- 3) We will invest in accessible housing solutions in rural areas;
- 4) We will support those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas;
- 5) We will facilitate the delivery of community-based support programmes which promote inclusion, cohesion and create opportunities for those living in our rural communities.

## **Theme 2: Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes**

### **Outcome:**

We enable the provision of affordable homes to contribute to balanced, inclusive and sustainable rural communities.

### **Priorities:**

- 6) We will enable the provision of affordable homes which address rural housing needs;
- 7) We will work with local councils to help shape planning policies which will deliver affordable homes and contribute to balanced and inclusive rural communities;
- 8) We will examine the potential to support the development of models of community-led housing in rural areas.

## **Theme 3: Securing the future of our rural communities**

### **Outcome:**

We contribute to the inclusive and sustainable growth and increased climate resilience of our rural communities.

### **Priorities:**

- 9) We will invest in the improved energy efficiency of our rural housing stock and consider solutions for the future de-carbonisation of rural household heating systems;
- 10) We will support and encourage the improved energy efficiency of private sector homes in rural areas;
- 11) We will support and encourage the inclusion of planning policies in Local Development Plans which aim to promote climate change resilience within our rural communities;
- 12) We will work with partners to maximise the use of existing land and property assets in rural areas.

### **How it will be delivered:**

The Rural Strategy & associated Action Plan(s) will be delivered by a cross-divisional implementation panel comprised of departmental leads representing key areas of Housing Executive business delivery. The panel will be supported by external partners and rural stakeholders including the Rural Residents' Forum.

Updates will be compiled on a quarterly basis and published in an annual progress report.

# 3. Themes, Outcomes, Priorities



## People

We will consider the particular needs of our rural customers in the delivery of our housing solutions and support service;

We will continue to review and improve our housing support services to meet the needs of an ageing rural population;

We will invest in accessible housing solutions in rural areas;

We will support those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas;

We will facilitate the delivery of community-based support programmes which promote inclusion, cohesion and create opportunities for those living in our rural communities.

## Property

We will enable the provision of affordable homes which address rural housing needs;

We will work with local councils to help shape planning policies which will deliver affordable homes and contribute to balanced and inclusive rural communities;

We will examine the potential to support the development of models of community-led housing in rural areas.

## Place & Planet

We will invest in the improved energy efficiency of our rural housing stock and consider solutions for the future de-carbonisation of rural household heating systems;

We will support and encourage the improved energy efficiency of private sector homes in rural areas;

We will support and encourage the inclusion of planning policies in Local Development Plans which aim to promote climate change resilience within our rural communities;

We will work with partners to maximise the use of existing land and property assets in rural areas.

# 4. Key achievements from the 2016-2020 Rural Strategy

**During the lifespan of the outgoing Rural Strategy & Action Plan 2016-2020 the Housing Executive invested a total of approximately £204.13 million in our rural communities where just under 18% of our housing stock is located. We delivered a range of positive outcomes for our rural customers which included:**

- We revisited our approach to rural housing need testing which resulted in a higher response rate to consultations and enabled us to support and enhance housing association delivery in rural areas. We helped rural communities in 36 locations across NI to examine the need for new social and affordable housing in their areas and 12 new housing schemes have so far been supported as a result.
- Work commenced on 425 new build social homes in rural areas helping to address social housing need and support the growth of these communities.
- Approximately £82.4 million was invested in the maintenance and improvement of our rural housing stock.
- Some £26.5 million of Supporting People funding was provided for accommodation-based and floating support services in rural areas.
- We invested approximately £1.63 million into Social Enterprise projects, Community Grants, Community Cohesion funding and capital funding for regeneration projects.
- We worked in partnership with government departments, agencies and rural stakeholders to support projects which enabled the provision of basic services and enhanced the streetscape and built heritage of many villages throughout Northern Ireland.
- We introduced our Rural Community Awards to recognise the vital contribution that community groups and volunteers make in addressing social isolation and loneliness in rural areas and this competition has grown in popularity every year, extending our presence in rural areas and helping us to promote our services.



## Key achievements from the 2016-2020 Rural Strategy



# 5. The Strategy Framework

## 2021-2025

**As Strategic Housing Authority for Northern Ireland, the Housing Executive's role extends beyond that of a landlord for just under 84,700 social rented properties and includes a range of statutory duties in relation to the provision of a housing service for people living in both urban and rural areas. In order to fulfil this duty, we have had to continuously develop our understanding of housing needs and requirements, the external factors that impact on the spatial variation of housing need and the barriers to an equitable distribution of our services.**

This Strategy considers how we can maintain the momentum achieved over the last 30 years in channelling investment and support into our rural communities and identifies the issues and challenges which must be addressed through local engagement, investment and collaborative working over the next four years.

These challenges include:

- The existing shortage of homes which are affordable and accessible;
- Hidden housing need in rural villages and small settlements;
- The often reduced access to basic services, facilities, advice and support; and
- A higher occurrence of less energy efficient homes and fuel poverty.

The areas of work borne out of the Housing Executive's wide range of functions presents many opportunities for us to help address these issues and to achieve our overarching vision for rural communities:

***'Towards vibrant, shared, healthy and sustainable rural communities where everyone has access to decent and affordable housing'***

The principles which were agreed through consultation for the first rural policy have been enshrined in the development of the subsequent rural policies/strategies, 'Places for People' (2000-2006), 'Rural Homes and People' (2007-2015) and 'Sustainable Rural Communities' (2016-2021). We feel that these principles are still appropriate and should continue to shape the approach moving forward.

### **Principles:**

- The Rural Strategy 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 Northern Ireland;
- 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 Strategy 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.

This Rural Strategy sets out three high level outcomes and twelve priorities under the three cross cutting themes of:

- 1. Supporting rural customers;**
- 2. Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes; and**
- 3. Securing the future of our rural communities.**

The themes are in keeping with the Housing Executive's corporate strategic themes of 'People', 'Property' and 'Place and 'Planet'. Each is considered in the context of our corporate high level outcomes:

- Helping People to find a suitable and sustainable housing solution;
- Delivering better homes;
- Fostering vibrant sustainable communities;
- Helping to sustain the environment for future generations; and
- Enabling the delivery of high quality public services for our customers.

Throughout the preparation, consultation on and delivery of this four year Rural Strategy, we will apply and promote the values of our organisation – **making a difference; fairness; passion; and expertise.**

### **Equality Screening and consideration of Rural Needs**

The Housing Executive has considered the following in the preparation of the Rural Strategy & Action Plan:

- a) Equality and Human Rights – to assess the potential impacts on Section 75 groups, human rights implications and opportunities for promoting good relations; and
- b) Rural Needs Impact Assessment– to assess the potential impacts of this Strategy on people living in rural areas.

Equality and good relations are viewed as dynamic factors within this strategy. Equality and good relations issues change constantly and this strategy 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 Rural Strategy 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 strategy.

The Rural Needs Impact Assessment determined that the draft Rural Strategy has examined the housing needs of rural communities in detail and that the outcomes from the proposed priorities and actions will have only a positive impact in rural areas.

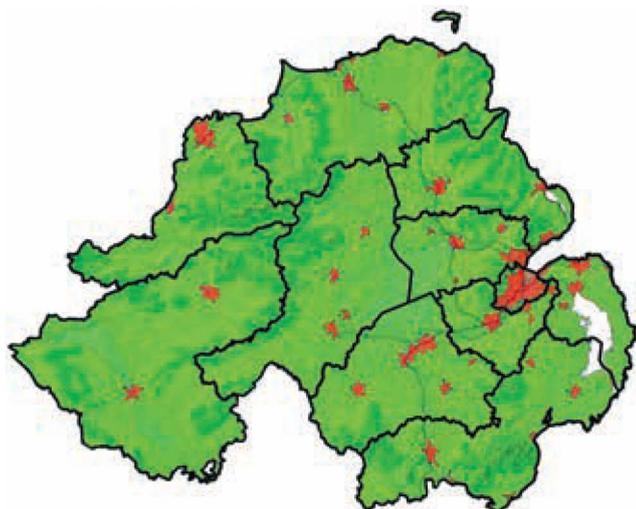


# 6. Defining Rural

**The Housing Executive use the widely accepted urban/rural default definition as recommended by the Northern Ireland Statistical Research Agency (NISRA) in the ‘Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements’ which was published in March 2015.**

NISRA classify every settlement as defined in extant Area Plans, based on their population size in the 2011 Census. All settlements included within population bands A-E (greater than 5,000) are considered to be urban and all settlements included within population bands F-H (less than 5,000) are considered to be rural<sup>1</sup>. Based on this definition, there are currently 596 adopted rural settlements located within an extensive rural hinterland which accounts for more than 80% of the total land mass of Northern Ireland.

Just over 14,700 of the Housing Executive’s 84,700 homes (17.7%) are located in rural areas.



**Figure 1: Urban/Rural Definition NI: NISRA March 2015**

- Rural (Settlements and open countryside population <5,000)
- Urban (Settlements with population >5,000)

In 2018, just under a third (36%) of the total population of Northern Ireland resided in a rural area. Between 2001 and 2018, the population of rural areas rose by 16%, compared to an increase of just 6% for urban areas. Areas with the fastest growth were those close to urban centres, either in mixed rural/urban areas (32%) or less than an hour’s commute from Belfast (21%).

<sup>2</sup>The classification also incorporated measures of distance to settlements with a population of 10,000 or more. These measures demonstrate accessibility to settlements of this size which are recognised as accommodating key services.

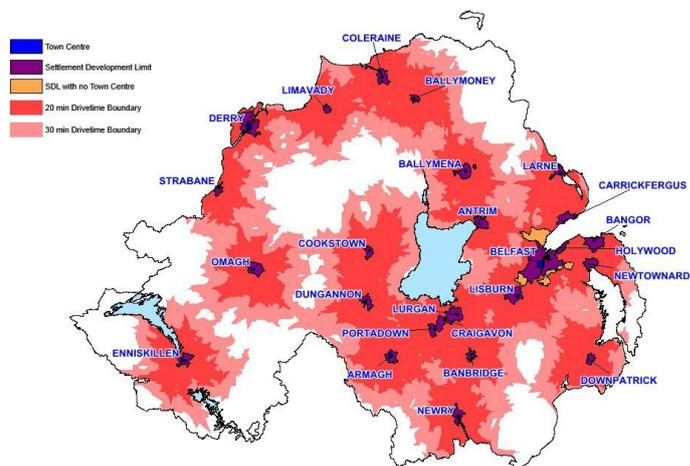
<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/review-statistical-classification-and-delineation-settlements>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/MYE18-Bulletin.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/daera/Key%20Rural%20Issues%202020%20-%20Final.pdf>

Figure 2 shows rural and urban areas of NI as defined by the review, as well as 20 and 30 minute drive time boundaries to urban settlements, above the 10,000 population threshold.

In 2018, 41% of the rural population in NI lived further than 20 minutes from a settlement of this size.



**Figure 2: Urban and Rural areas with 20 and 30 minute ‘drive time’ boundaries from settlements with a population of 10,000 or more**

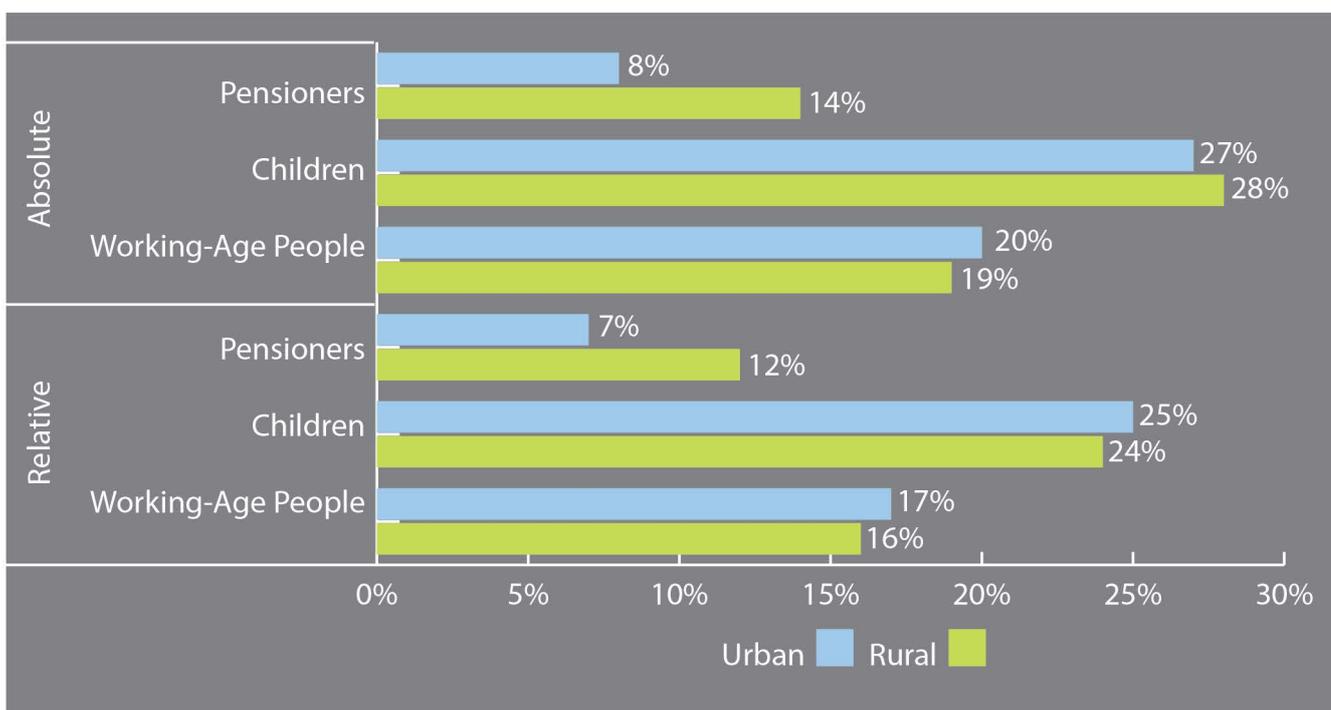
In the ‘Key Rural Issues’<sup>3</sup> report produced by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in 2020, a range of data from across Government Departments was collected in order to highlight key urban/rural differences and identify those issues and challenges which should be addressed by public policy makers.

The report identified the following positive trends for those residing in rural areas:

- In 2018/19, people living in rural areas were consistently more likely than those in urban areas to report high **happiness** levels (43% compared to 35% respectively) and high **life satisfaction** (42% compared to 34%).
- In 2017/18, school leavers from rural areas were more likely than those from urban areas to enter **higher education**. Almost half (48%) of pupils living in rural areas within an hour of Belfast proceeded to higher education, compared with 43% of those in rural areas more distant from Belfast, and 41% of school leavers from urban areas.
- Rural people of working age are more likely to be in **full-time employment** (74%), and less likely to be economically inactive, compared with those living in towns and cities in full-time employment (66%).

- On average, public sector earnings are higher in urban areas, while private sector earnings in rural and urban workplaces are similar.
  - Workers who live in rural areas tend to be more highly skilled, and enjoy higher job satisfaction (84%) than those who live in towns and cities (78%).
- However, in contrast, the following statistics highlight the challenges which can face rural dwellers:
- Workers from rural areas **commute** for almost one and a half times longer than urban workers, and travel on average over 400 miles more annually to get to work.
  - Rural workers (91%) are also much more likely to use **private transport** to commute than those from urban areas (74%). Urban workers are much more likely to walk to work (12%) or to travel by bus (7%) than those from rural areas (6% and 1% respectively).
  - More than half (58%) of **NI businesses** are in rural areas, yet rural businesses account for less than a quarter (20%) of employees and around a quarter (25%) of total business turnover.
  - **Broadband** speed and availability, though improving, is still much lower in rural than in urban areas. In 2019, 19% of internet-enabled rural premises in NI were still unable to achieve a 'decent' broadband speed compared with % in urban properties.
  - Access to **public transport** in rural areas is much lower than that in towns and cities. Less than a quarter (20%) of rural dwellers live within a 3 minute walk of the nearest bus stop compared with 39% of those living in urban areas. 9% of rural dwellers live a 44 minute or longer walk to their nearest stop.
  - Journey times to **key services** by car are on average twice as long for rural dwellers. Those living in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast are on average a 26 minute drive away from an Accident and Emergency department, compared to an average 13 minute drive time for those living in urban areas.
  - Life expectancy is notably higher in rural areas – but rural dwellers experience longer **waiting times** for emergency services than their urban counterparts.
  - The number of recorded **crimes** with a racist, sectarian or homophobic motivation has increased in rural areas from 2018-19, despite a decline in urban areas.
  - **Poverty** levels in both children and adults of working age are very similar in urban and rural areas as a whole. However, rural pensioners are almost twice as likely to be in relative or absolute poverty as their urban counterparts.
  - Levels of **home ownership** are higher in rural than in urban areas (80% to 63%), with house prices in rural areas higher on average than in towns and cities.

**Figure 3: Proportion of Individuals in Poverty (after Housing costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2018/19 (DAERA Rural Issues Report 2020)**



# 7. Consultation Responses

## **Pre-consultation Questionnaire December 2020**

In December 2020, the Housing Executive issued a focused pre-consultation questionnaire. The aim of this was to gain insight and perspective from customers and stakeholders representing rural areas on the housing issues facing rural communities, awareness in these areas of the housing services already on offer and to identify how we can improve on this in the future.

We received a total of eight responses which were comprehensive and included representation from customers, community groups, voluntary organisations and political parties. The feedback reinforced much of what we already understood in relation to the challenges of accessing a home which is affordable in many rural areas but also highlighted the scale of the issue and the perceived potential impact on the future of many rural communities. It also emphasised the importance of communicating information on our services and ensuring this communication is accessible, understandable and delivered on an ongoing basis.

The issues raised through the pre-consultation responses were fully considered in the preparation of this Strategy.

## **Public Consultation 02/08/2021 – 30/09/2021**

A total of 18 consultation responses were received during the eight weeks of public consultation on the draft Rural Strategy report which was launched on the Housing Executive website and promoted through social media in August 2021.

We received representation from local councils, political parties, regional bodies, housing associations and agencies representing the community and voluntary sector. The responses were largely supportive of the measures set out in the draft Report with a range of focused comments relevant to each area of interest. The most relevant recommendations are considered below along with any resulting amendments to the Rural Strategy.

### **Summary of key issues/recommendations:**

In relation to the theme of 'Supporting our Rural Customers', the key recommendations were:

- ***The Housing Executive should consider pre-tenancy engagement with customers in rural communities to ensure that housing needs are addressed appropriately and tenancy failure is kept to a minimum.***

Our Housing Information and Tenancies' team has confirmed that there is engagement both at application stage and during the early stages of a new tenancy to ensure that the tenant can access the support they require. Further information has been

included in this Strategy on a 'Sustaining Tenancies' fund which will be open to community and voluntary organisations for projects to help support new tenants within their areas.

- ***There should be greater priority directed towards tackling the growth in rent arrears in rural communities... Rural tenants and dwellers need to be made aware of the housing advice and options service available through their local office.***

There is a particular focus throughout this Strategy on promoting the availability of support services to encourage tenancy sustainment in rural areas including financial inclusion measures and other tenancy related advice.

- ***There is merit in looking at innovative ways of making housing support more accessible in isolated rural locations through partnership with the voluntary and charitable sector.***

The Housing Executive's Homelessness Prevention Fund will provide an opportunity for third sector organisations based in rural areas to receive funding to provide support services for people who are faced with homelessness or are having difficulty in sustaining a tenancy.

In relation to the theme of 'Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes', the main issues/recommendations were:

- ***There is concern about the current offer of housing products in rural areas to suit a range of individuals at various stages of life... There is concern about the number of rural settlements that have consistent unmet housing need... There is an issue with affordability in rural areas where local people cannot afford inflated prices caused by a competitive housing market.***

The Housing Executive recognises the growing concern that the rural element of the Social Housing Development Programme has fallen short of the strategic target in recent years. Through this Strategy we underline our commitment to continue to work with associations to facilitate new build schemes in areas of consistent unmet need and to promote the need for local planning policies which will support the delivery of affordable rural housing where need has been identified.

There were various recommendations from a range of respondents in relation to how the rural housing need test could be expanded in order to reach a wider and more diverse range of rural dwellers. These included:

- ***Greater emphasis should be placed on engaging farming communities through social media platforms and local press;***
- ***Libraries should be considered for posting***

*information on rural housing need test events and other housing support information;*

- ***Greater emphasis should be placed on engaging migrant communities through local groups and clubs and in providing access to interpreters as required;***
- ***Face-to-face events should be accommodated where possible but the use of online engagement platforms should also be developed to engage those unable to attend community events;***
- ***Distribution of leaflets/newsletters in and around the test settlement should be considered;***
- ***Housing associations should be included in rural need consultations where possible;***
- ***'Housing health check' services should be made available in pre-arranged one-to-one meetings and online platforms as well as through drop-in events.***

The Housing Executive welcome all of the suggestions to broaden and improve the rural housing need testing process and these changes will be implemented in Year 1 of the Strategy.

- ***It is fundamental that the Housing Executive ensure prompt site identification in areas where need has been evidenced, and proactively work to ensure people who need social housing in rural areas are assessed and supported to obtain housing as a matter of urgency.***

The Strategy makes reference to the Housing Executive's recently developed policy and procedure on the preparation of Site Identification studies which is hoped will lead to a greater volume of studies being circulated to housing associations, encouraging the development of homes in line with strategic guidelines.

- ***The Housing Executive should consider incentives to housing providers to increase the delivery of rural schemes which might not be viable within the current funding regime.***

This recommendation has been noted and while it has not been included as a specific action within the Strategy, it will be raised with relevant internal and external departments for further investigation.

- ***Self-development of mixed tenure schemes in rural areas continues to be a high-risk venture for housing associations... Housing associations should be considered as a provider of market or mid-market rent products in rural areas through the long lease of existing properties;***
- ***The internal and external space standards of social housing should be reconsidered to reflect the post-pandemic shift of homes becoming a place to work, study and live instead of reflecting welfare policies that demand smaller homes.***

These recommendations have been noted and while specific actions have not been included within the Strategy, they will be raised with relevant internal and external departments for further investigation.

In relation to the theme of 'Securing the future of our rural communities', the main comments focused around:

- ***The cost of decarbonisation and increasing the energy efficiency of rural homes must not be passed on to low-income customers.***
- ***Any retrofit project should include a 'deep retrofit' which is defined by a 70% increase in energy efficiency above the existing rating of the building.***
- ***All new build social housing should incorporate the best of Passivhaus within the constraints of the grant funding regime.***
- ***In order to meet climate change targets, all rural housing stock should be heated by means of heat pump technology with electricity generated from renewable sources.***

These recommendations have been noted and while specific actions have not been included within the Strategy, they will be raised with relevant internal and external departments for further investigation.

# 8. Strategic Context

**The strategic context for the Housing Executive's Rural Strategy has changed somewhat since 2016. The four main strategic elements which have shaped the development of this Strategy have been outlined below. Given that the Strategy was drafted during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we have also considered the lessons learned during the last 12 months in the preparation of each of the outcomes, priorities and high level actions.**

1. The introduction of the **Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016**<sup>4</sup> which came into effect for the Housing Executive in June 2018 (as a named public body in the Schedule to the Act). Already advanced in terms of our established approach to rural proofing and having a dedicated Rural Unit, this new statutory duty has been welcomed by the Housing Executive and has provided us with an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to the provision of an equitable service for those living in rural areas.

Since the duty came into effect, we have undertaken extensive internal training and communications in relation to the Rural Needs Act to ensure that our policy owners consider the needs of our rural customers from the outset of policy/strategy review and development. This has greatly benefitted the development of this draft Rural Strategy which includes many cross-cutting outcomes and priorities which are mirrored in other Housing Executive strategies to underline our commitment to 'reaching rural' communities.

2. The publication of '**New Decade, New Approach**' in January 2020, which set out the process and approach for developing the NI Executive's Programme for Government (PfG) and the subsequent publication of the draft **Programme for Government** outcomes and indicators (January 2021) which will support the delivery of social and affordable housing in NI.

The proposed strategic framework comprises nine strategic outcomes which set a clear direction of travel and enable continuous improvement on essential components of societal wellbeing. The outcomes are as follows:

- We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment;
- We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect;
- We all enjoy long, healthy active lives;
- Everyone can reach their potential;
- Our economy is globally competitive, regionally balanced and carbon-neutral;
- Everyone feels safe – we all respect the law and each other;
- We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives;
- People want to live, work and visit here.

Through the provision of good quality housing and the delivery of supportive housing services, the Housing Executive will contribute in varying ways to all of the draft outcomes and this has been considered throughout this Rural Strategy.

3. The UK's exit from the **European Union**; and in particular the end of major European investment programmes such as the NI Rural Development Programme. Consultation on DAERA's draft '**Rural Policy Framework**'<sup>5</sup> completed on 6th September 2021. The draft reports sets out DAERA's priorities for future rural investment and support, their projected outcomes and also provide the foundations for partnership working which can benefit rural communities.

We will continue to seek opportunities for partnership enabled activities driven by DAERA's **Tackling Rural Poverty & Social Isolation Framework** which is focused on improving the quality of life of rural dwellers across of range of areas which are impacted by isolation, lack of connectivity, poverty and disadvantage.

4. Climate change is at the forefront of public concern, and in February 2020 the Northern Ireland Assembly declared a '**Climate Change Emergency**'. The NI Executive's 'New Decade, New Approach' recognises the need for a co-ordinated and strategic approach within the Programme for Government to the challenges presented by climate change. Actions and interventions will be required across a wide range of areas in order to address both the immediate and longer term impacts of climate change in a fair and just way. To this end, the Executive has made a commitment to:

- Review its strategies to reduce carbon emissions in light of the Paris Climate Change Accord and the climate crisis;
- Set ambitious targets and actions for a fair and just transition to a zero-carbon society via an Energy Strategy;
- Bring forward a Climate Change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning;
- Establish an Independent Environmental Protection Agency to oversee this work and ensure that targets are met;
- Support clean and inclusive growth and create jobs as part of a Green New Deal via its Economic Strategy;
- Create a plan to eliminate plastic pollution;
- Close the Renewable Heat Incentive scheme and replace it with a scheme that effectively cuts carbon emissions.

In Theme 3 of this Rural Strategy we have considered the particular measures which can be taken to reduce carbon emissions and develop climate resilience within our rural areas.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/19/contents>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/consultations/rural-policy-framework-northern-ireland-consultation>

5. DfC is also currently in the process of developing a new **Housing Supply Strategy for Northern Ireland**.<sup>6</sup> The call for evidence which closed in July 2021, was the first formal stage in an ongoing public engagement process to help inform the development of the Strategy.

The proposed objectives for the strategy are as follows:

- Increase housing supply and affordable options across all tenures to meet current and future demand.
- Reduce housing stress and homelessness and improve housing solutions for the most vulnerable.
- Improve housing quality.
- Ensure the provision of housing options that contribute to the building and maintaining of thriving, inclusive communities and places.
- Support the transition to carbon neutrality by reducing whole-life carbon emissions from both new homes and existing homes.

It is proposed that the strategy which will be developed with a focus on a 'whole system' approach will cover a 15-year timeframe, which is comparable to other relevant strategic plans such as the Regional Development Strategy (RDS 2035) and Local Development Plans (LDPs).

It is anticipated the Strategy will be underpinned by a high-level Delivery Framework supported by multi-year action plans.

The Housing Executive has provided a comprehensive response to the call for evidence and look forward to working with the Department to develop and implement a strategy which will enable the provision of homes which are affordable and accessible to all citizens and which support an inclusive society.

The specific housing issues raised in relation to rural areas reflect those considered in detail within this report and it is anticipated that the Housing Supply Strategy will present opportunities to achieve shared objectives for rural communities.

Over the Strategy period, we will also continuously monitor and assess the potential impact of the **Covid-19** pandemic on housing need. We will consider in particular, the impact on the demand for rural housing given the increase in remote working and the potential for public and private sector employers to reconsider the requirement for city/town centre office space. An increasing demand for rural living will inevitably bring with it an increased demand for improved connectivity and access to services in rural locations. As Strategic Housing Authority, it will be important for the Housing Executive to recognise both the challenges and opportunities which may face rural communities as a result of the pandemic and to ensure that we support and enable the provision of homes in areas where need has been identified

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-new-housing-supply-strategy-call-evidence#:~:text=The%20Department%20for%20Communities%20%28DfC%29%20is%20currently%20in,to%20help%20inform%20the%20development%20of%20the%20Strategy>.



# 9. Theme 1: Supporting our rural customers

**The strategic theme of 'Supporting our rural customers' sets out how the Housing Executive will ensure that our customers living in rural areas can access the housing support they require in order to live independently in a home which meets their needs in a stable, safe and inclusive environment.**

**This has been considered in the context of our corporate high level outcomes 'helping people to find a suitable and sustainable housing solution' and 'enabling the delivery of high quality public services for our customers'; the theme of the 'Anti-poverty' and 'Wellbeing & Inclusion' in DfC's Building Inclusive Communities Strategy, and will contribute to the delivery of the draft PfG outcomes 'Our children and young people have the best start in life', 'We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect', 'Everyone can reach their potential' and 'We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives'.**



Our tenants and customers are at the heart of everything we do in the Housing Executive. In line with our corporate mission statement, our aim is to ensure that "everyone is able to live in an affordable and decent home, appropriate to their needs, in a safe and attractive place". We recognise that the journey to achieve this will be different for every customer we encounter.

Throughout this Rural Strategy we have considered the particular journey of the rural customer, how it may differ and what we can change or improve to ensure that we can provide the same level of customer service regardless of location.

The journey usually begins with a visit or a call to one of our local offices and a discussion with a Housing Advisor. This discussion may focus on establishing the customer's requirements for social housing and the options available to them within their area(s) of choice. This could result in the allocation of a home, the individual being added to the waiting list to wait for the appropriate social property becoming available or advice could be given in relation to a private rental tenancy.

However, for many people, the journey will not end there. There are those who will require additional support to commence and sustain a tenancy, those with health issues or disabilities who require assistance to live independently and those who are faced with homelessness and require an emergency housing solution.

Any individual or household can face challenges for which they may require additional support to help them to maintain independence, stability, security and dignity. However, these challenges may be exacerbated for people living in rural locations, particularly the more remote areas from which the main service centres are less accessible, the referral route for support services may be less visible and social isolation and loneliness can be more prevalent.

In order to achieve our high level outcome **'We ensure that our tenants and customers within our rural communities feel secure in their environment and can access additional housing support when it is required'**, we have identified the following priorities:

- 1) We will consider the particular needs of our rural customers in the delivery our housing solutions and support service;
- 2) We will continue to review and improve our housing support services to meet the needs of an ageing rural population;
- 3) We will invest in accessible housing solutions in rural areas;
- 4) We will support those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas;
- 5) We will facilitate the delivery of community-based support programmes which promote inclusion, cohesion and create opportunities for those living in our rural communities.

**1) We will consider the particular needs of our rural customers in the delivery our housing solutions and support service.**

Our Housing Advisors and Patch Managers based in our 35 local offices across Northern Ireland, are the first and continuing point of contact for new and existing customers. They have a crucial role in ensuring that every contact counts and from the outset they gain the trust of the customer in order to help them with their housing journey.

We recognise that every customer we engage with will require an approach that is tailored to reflect their unique circumstances, whether this is due to their age, mobility, physical or mental health or their financial circumstances. The ongoing interaction with our customers and with other service and advice providers helps us to continuously develop our understanding of the range of needs we should recognise in order to provide a meaningful response.

Our housing support response could include (but is not limited to):

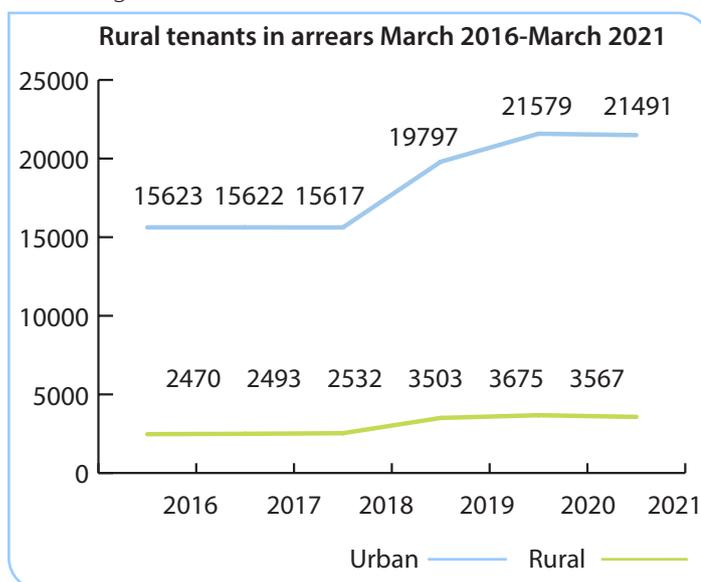
- Providing in-house advice which can assist with tenancy sustainment;
- Referring an individual to a relevant service provider to access necessary support;
- Providing support and adaptations for tenants with specific needs;
- Providing advice and assistance in relation to our private sector grants;
- Helping the individual to find an alternative home which is more suitable for their specific needs.

In our Customer Support & Tenancy Sustainment Strategy 2019-2022<sup>7</sup> we have set out a range of actions to encourage tenancy sustainment, recognising that this is the first important step before planning for a better future.

We are aware of the increasingly complex range of challenges that are faced by many of our tenants and customers. Tenancy instability or failure is the reason behind many initial customer requests for advice and support and we recognise the importance of providing a service which is holistic and person-centred and which allows customers to understand the options available to address their immediate and long-term housing needs. We are committed to making a lasting difference for both social and private tenants who are faced with such difficulties and will act to prevent them from leading to homelessness.

Financial pressures can put a strain on a tenant's ability to pay their rent. Between 2016 and 2021, the number of rural social housing tenants with rent arrears has fluctuated peaking at 3,675 in 2020.

Arrears in rural areas have increased by 44% over the five year period. Tenants can avail of housing benefit/universal credit if they are struggling to pay rent on their property. At March 2021 there were more than 11,600 rural tenancies in receipt of housing benefit or universal credit.



**Figure 1: Rural tenants in arrears March 2016 – March 2021**

## Pre and Early Tenancy Support

Our Housing Advisors provide pre-tenancy advice and assistance on a person-centred basis and prepare a Housing Support Plan for each applicant. This support is carried forward by Patch Managers when an applicant is offered a tenancy. The Patch Manager will meet the new tenant during the property viewing, and provide the necessary information on maintaining their new home during the sign-up and early tenancy counselling visit, discussing matters such as;

- understanding rights and responsibilities as a Housing Executive tenant,
- benefit entitlement,
- managing rental payments,
- setting up utilities,
- the requirement for referrals for floating support or other health and support services.

Through our in-house Financial Inclusion service 'Making Your Money Work', impartial advice is available on budgeting and debt management or on access to benefits, energy saving advice and how to reduce household costs.

Where it is required, our Housing Advisors and Patch Managers can also refer customers to the relevant health and support services for mental health, addiction or other health or disability related challenges which may impact on their well-being and/or put their tenancy at risk.

Housing options discussions are most effective where there is stock available to follow through on the advice provided. In rural areas where there is often a limited availability or turnover of social housing, our advisors explore all alternative solutions which could prevent someone reaching the point of homelessness, including private tenancies or remaining where they are with wrap-around support.

We recognise that in rural areas that are located a distance from our local offices, it may be more difficult for us to reach individual households who are faced with issues which may put their current tenancy at risk. In a recent Housing Executive Continuous Tenant Omnibus Survey (CTOS) carried out between January and March 2020, only 24.9% of 650 tenants surveyed stated that they were aware that they could access a housing advice and options service through their local office.

Targeted promotion will help us to ensure that our frontline services are both visible and accessible to those living in rural areas. This could include the provision of leaflets, presentations and regular updates to our Rural Residents' Forum and stakeholders such as Rural Community Network and also features in our rural publications including our "Rural Matters" magazine which is published on our website and promoted through social media.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Customer-Support-and-Tenancy-Sustainment-Strategy/Customer-Support-Tenancy-Sustainment-Strategy>

We will also maximise the platform we are given with rural communities through consultation events and in particular those which form part of our rural housing need testing process. When we engage with rural communities to examine the need for additional affordable homes in the area, we invite those in need of a home to come forward and speak to our frontline staff. This provides an opportunity for us to raise awareness of the housing support services we have to offer and how they can be accessed.

### ***Sustaining Tenancies Funding Programme***

Through the Sustaining Tenancies Funding Programme 2021-2024, the Housing Executive will offer grants up to £50,000 to voluntary and community sector organisations to develop and deliver projects which are aimed at supporting more resilient, sustainable tenancies in the short, medium and long term, and in particular, vulnerable customers who are at greater risk of tenancy breakdown.

In order to ensure that our customer-centred approach is visible and accessible for our rural customers, ***We will promote the availability of tenancy sustainment advice and funding support through our Rural Residents' Forum, our rural publications and at rural housing information events.***

Over the period of the Strategy we will examine the potential to pilot a rural 'housing health-check' service as part of a rural housing need test event. This will include both Housing Advisors and Financial Inclusion Managers in order to provide advice which could help customers sustain existing tenancies, seek alternative more suitable accommodation and ultimately to help prevent as many rural customers as we can from being faced with homelessness.

***We will pilot a rural housing health check service as part of a housing need test event, where we can provide advice on a range of services related to tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.***

### ***Securing the provision of housing support services***

The Supporting People Programme, administered by the Housing Executive on behalf of the Department for Communities, provides grant funding to organisations to deliver housing assistance to those who need help to live more independently. Approximately 850 services are delivered through 85 provider organisations, supporting up to 19,000 service users across four thematic groups:

- 1) Disability & Mental Health;
- 2) Homelessness;
- 3) Older People; and
- 4) Young People.

Supporting People Services are provided through supported accommodation and through floating support delivered directly into the service user's home. There are currently 87 accommodation based services located in

rural areas across NI and floating supported is provided to approximately 1,200 people who live in a rural location.

Housing Related Support provided through Supporting People funded services can include help in setting up and maintaining tenancies, claiming and maximising benefits, developing key life skills, accessing training/employment, establishing community links and maintaining emotional and physical wellbeing.

The Supporting People Provider Investment Fund (PIF) which is a competitive fund that aims to support improvements to the delivery of Supporting People Programme has had positive impacts for services in rural areas.

In 2019/20, the **Fermanagh Women's Aid** 'Maintaining Tenancies through Empowerment project', received £7,510 of funding from the Supporting People Provider Innovation Fund to deliver personal development programmes for women who have experienced Domestic Violence. This project enabled the delivery of peer group support for women, who have shared experiences, to improve their life skills, maintaining physical health, mental wellbeing and their own tenancies.

The Supporting People Review 2015 noted that the Floating Support model 'plays a key role in early intervention and prevention' and highlighted the potential to extend Supporting People services across a wider geography, particularly rural areas. In response, through the 2019/20 Supporting People Plan a competitive selection exercise was initiated which resulted in new floating support services for Older and Younger people in a range of locations, some with a significant rural element.

The recently developed Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA) for housing support services in NI has identified a gap of around 14% between the current levels of Supporting People funded services and estimated levels of need for housing support. Without the necessary interventions, this gap is also set to increase over time. Older people, homeless people with drug and alcohol problems, people with mental health issues and women who are at risk of domestic violence are identified as the client groups with the largest supply gap.

Through the development of the Supporting People Strategy 2021 – 2024, there is an opportunity to further develop our understanding of where gaps in housing support services exist and how they can be addressed, particularly in rural areas where the dispersed location of service users and their distance from service hubs require different models to be considered.

***Throughout the development of the Supporting People Strategy 2021-2024, we will pay due regard to the particular needs of customers living in rural areas.***

## **2) We will continue to review and improve our housing support services to meet the needs of an ageing rural population.**

The proportion of the population of Northern Ireland population aged 65 and over is projected to increase by 25% between 2016 and 2041 (one in four of the population). Increases are projected in all Local Government Districts, ranging from 15.2% in Belfast to 31.4% in Newry, Mourne and Down and 32% in Mid Ulster. By 2041, it is projected that the proportion of those aged 85 or over will grow by over 40%, in five of the 11 LGDs, with Mid Ulster set to experience the highest percentage growth in this age category (1,200, equating to growth of 48.1%).

Whilst people are living longer, an increasing number of older people experience ill health. The 2019/20 NI Health Survey: First Findings highlights that the prevalence of long-standing illness increases with age, with 17 % of those aged 16-24 reporting a limiting long-term condition compared with 52% of those aged 75 and over.<sup>8</sup>

Given the future challenges of a rapidly ageing society with increasingly complex needs associated with health and disability and any potential care gap that could arise, it is more important than ever that wherever possible, we can offer our customers a home within which they feel secure and able to manage independently.

### **Housing Support**

To inform the development of our Older People's Housing Strategy<sup>9</sup>, in 2019 the Housing Executive commissioned a research study entitled 'Older People, Housing Issues, Aspirations and Needs' (Boyle, 2019). The report recognised that for some older people supported accommodation based services are necessary, especially for those who are particularly frail or vulnerable. However, the research found that where possible, older people generally wish to remain in their own home and that future models of support for older people should focus on enabling this. Emphasis was given to rural areas, where "there is a lack of appropriate and size specific accommodation and reduced choice".

Our Older People's Housing Strategy highlights the particular benefits of floating support services for older people in rural areas. It also references the wide range of physical and technological aids which can help older people maintain independence in their homes.

### **Assistive Technology**

Assistive technologies such as home environmental controls will have an important contribution to make in the future in complementing personal care packages.<sup>10</sup>

In line with our Older People's Housing Strategy, the Housing Executive are giving consideration to how we can provide elderly and vulnerable tenants with Assistive Technology in their homes. This could help maintain or improve their ability to perform everyday activities and tasks by assisting with difficulties such as memory and mobility problems. With relatively low set-up and maintenance costs, this technology could minimise the frequency of support required and have positive outcomes for loneliness and isolation.

To test the effectiveness of this approach, we are currently renovating an empty block of 6 maisonettes in the Lisnafin estate in Strabane and installing broadband enabled Assistive Technology. Once completed, this scheme will be allocated to over 55s from the local waiting list and outcomes will be monitored through our local office.

***We will commence on site with an Assisted Technology pilot and review with a view to providing similar applications in future schemes.***



Following an award winning **Dementia Friendly** Pilot in the South Down area, we have developed a dementia referral process in partnership with local Health Trusts and Dementia Navigators. This enables our frontline staff to visit tenant's homes and offer practical advice and support as well as providing a 'Dementia Friendly Pack' to aid independent living. A large number of frontline staff have volunteered to become 'Dementia Champions' and we are on track to ensuring that our network of Area Offices is fully Dementia Friendly. As part of our Dementia Friendly service we also offer Dementia friendly design for our minor adaptations including for example, lever taps and contrasting coloured elements for better visibility.

***We will continue to further develop the 'Dementia Friendly' approach and increase awareness and our understanding of dementia across our network of local offices to support independence and dignity for tenants who are impacted by dementia.***

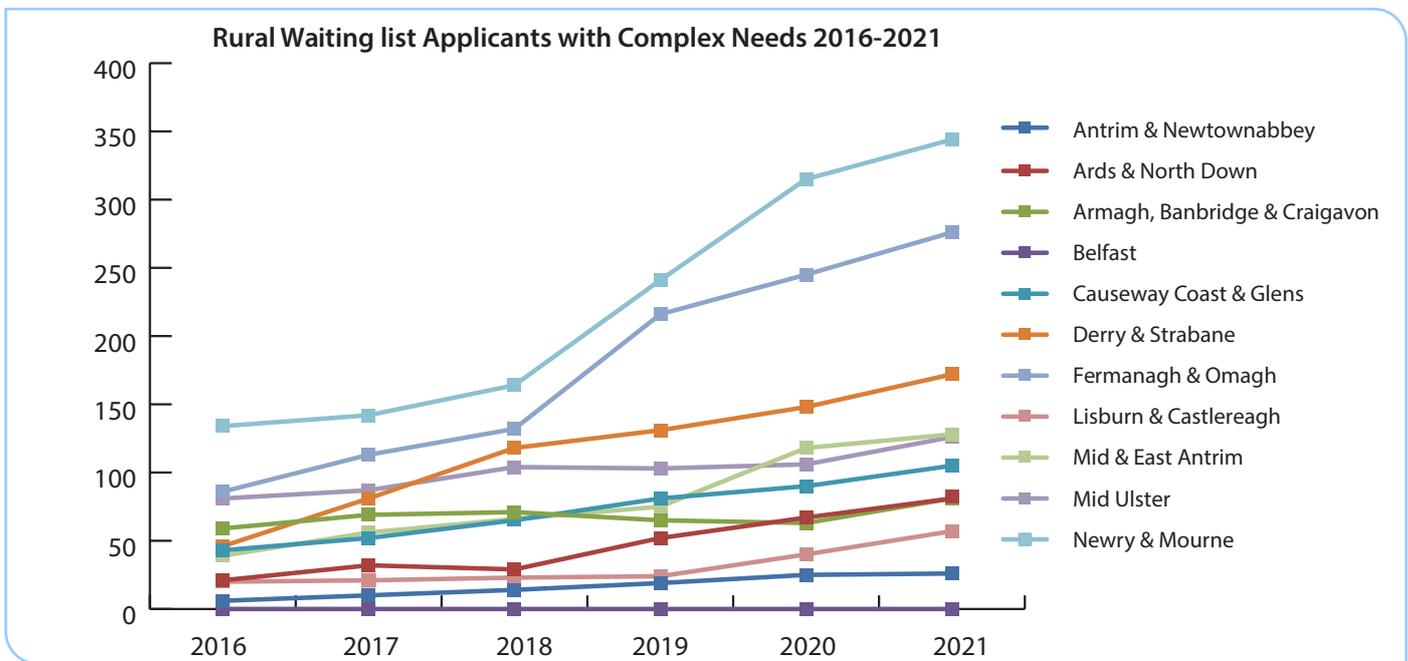
## **3) We will invest in accessible housing solutions in rural areas.**

Accessible housing is a growing requirement for an ageing population. Over a third (38%) of all those who registered as a new wheelchair user in 2020, reside in a rural area (Musgrave Park Hospital).

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hsni-first-results-19-20.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/About-Us/Corporate-Strategies/Older-People>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Adaptations-services-review/housing-adaptations-review-final-report>



**Figure 2: Rural waiting list applicants with complex needs 2016-2021**

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. Whilst the proportion of rural applicants requiring a wheelchair accessible property has fluctuated around 1.5% since 2016, the proportion of rural applicants assessed as requiring a property to meet complex needs has more than doubled from 10.4% in 2016 to 21.5% in 2021. This increase is particularly evident in Newry, Mourne & Down and Fermanagh/Omagh LGD's where complex needs applicants have risen by 157% and 221% respectively.

At March 2021, small family applicants represented the largest household group of all applicants on the waiting list for a wheelchair accessible property (27%). Singles under the age of 55 represented the largest household group on the waiting list for a home which is suitable to meet complex needs (40.5%).

Allocations of rural Housing Executive properties to applicants who require the use of a wheelchair has remained steady at around 20 per year since 2016. Rural allocations to complex needs applicants has risen from 214 in 2016 to 383 in 2021.

One and two bedroom Housing Executive owned bungalows and ground floor accommodation are excluded from the House Sales Scheme in order that they are retained for the growing number of tenants and applicants who require this type of accommodation. We currently have tenants in over 6,000 bungalows located in rural areas across Northern Ireland.

In addition, every year we carry out a programme of planned and response maintenance to our housing stock which includes adaptations required by tenants to increase the accessibility of their home, to improve physical and mental health and well-being and to prevent them from having to move to an alternative property.

Between 2016 and 2020 we carried out extensive adaptations to our homes in rural areas including 199 bathrooms replacements and 20 adaptations extensions. Over the same period, we carried out over 9,000 minor adaptations on our rural properties which ranged from the installation of grab rails and ramps to help prevent falls and injuries in the home, ramps for wheelchair access and accessible kitchen units and sanitary ware.

In exceptional circumstances where it is not possible to adapt an existing house to facilitate the needs of a household with someone who has complex needs, we will consider a number of alternative options with a nominated housing association such as:

- Purchasing a home for sale on the open market or from a new build scheme which is suitable or can be adapted; or
- Building a new home to the specified standard of the Health Trust Occupational Therapist, within the agreed area of choice.

**Accessible Housing Register**

In conjunction with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) we are currently developing an In-house Accessible Housing Register (AHR) solution for social housing in Northern Ireland.

The AHR has evolved from being used solely as an information source, to a feature within our Housing Prospects Report which can assist frontline staff in advising customers on the location and type of available accessible stock within their area of choice. The Register will be complimented by a 'Tenant Incentive Scheme' offering tenants in an adapted/accessible property which they no longer need a monetary incentive to move to an alternative property. Together, these initiatives will enable us to assist those with disabilities or mobility issues to make informed housing choices, helping them to access a social home in which they can maintain independence.

The AHR information will also help us to identify rural areas where there may be a particular shortage of accessible homes and assist with the planning and support of new housing schemes on the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP).

***When it is fully established, we will analyse information from the Accessible Housing Register to help determine the need for increased accessible housing within new affordable housing schemes in rural areas.***

### **Improving accessibility in private sector homes**

The Housing Executive offers a range of grants for the improvement of homes in the private sector. Our Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs) are available to home owners, landlords and private tenants who require adaptations to support a person within their household who is living with a disability. The grants are specifically for adaptation works which are recommended by an Occupational Therapist such as improving access, a home extension to accommodate a new bedroom or bathroom or upgrading lighting and heating controls to ensure that they are user friendly.

Between 2016 and 2020, 1,452 Disabled Facilities Grants were completed for homes in rural areas. This represented 43% of all DFG completions and an investment of approximately £17.7m into the improved accessibility of private sector homes in rural areas.

### **Lifetime Homes**

The Department of Communities' Housing Association Guide promotes accessibility in social housing through the Lifetime Homes and the Wheelchair standards.

The **Lifetime Homes Standard** was developed to ensure that new social homes are accessible and inclusive, to support the changing needs of individuals and families at different stages of life. Lifetime Homes are flexible, designed to create better living environments for everyone, from raising children, coping with illness or dealing with reduced mobility in later life, allowing people to remain independently for longer in their own homes. The development of homes within these standards is especially important in the context of an aging population and can prevent the need for costly and disruptive adaptations.

**Wheelchair standard homes** support independent living, promote an inclusive society and reduce the need for costly and disruptive adaptations.

As statutory consultees in the process to develop the new suite of Local Development Plans, the Housing Executive is actively encouraging local councils to incorporate, within the Local Development Plan (LDP), a requirement that all new housing should meet Lifetime Homes standards. We believe that all new housing should be suitable for everyone, from young families to older people, and individuals with a temporary or permanent physical impairment.

Bringing Lifetime Homes design into the general housing stock should, over time, allow older people to stay in their own homes for longer, reduce the need for home adaptations and give greater choice to disabled people who cannot achieve independent living due to lack of suitable housing.

We also encourage local councils to include a proportion of wheelchair units, to be provided on all housing developments, including market housing, over a certain threshold. The purpose is to increase accessible housing stock, addressing an undersupply of appropriate housing for all, in the long term.

This will have particular advantages in rural areas, where the demands on the local housing market may make it difficult to find a home to meet the space requirements of a growing household or which is suitable to the needs of individuals with health or mobility issues.

***We will continue to influence local councils to incorporate within their Local Development Plan a policy requiring all homes to be designed to Lifetime Homes standard and a proportion of wheelchair accessible homes in general housing stock in rural areas.***

### **4) We will support those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas.**

In accordance with the Housing (NI) Order 1988 (as amended) the Housing Executive are responsible for responding to homelessness. The Housing Executive must provide interim and/or permanent accommodation for certain homeless households, dependent upon investigations and assessment of their circumstances. In order to be "accepted" as statutorily homeless, a household must meet the four tests of Eligibility, Homelessness, Priority Need and Intentionality.<sup>11</sup>

Any household that meets these four tests will be accepted as a "Full Duty Applicant" (FDA) and will be owed a full housing duty. This duty requires us to ensure that accommodation is made available for the household, temporary accommodation is provided where necessary and assistance is given with the protection of the household's belongings.

For some Full Duty Applicant Households, an immediate permanent housing solution may not be available. In such circumstances, the Housing Executive will seek to discharge its duty in stages, via temporary accommodation placements where necessary.

The 2017-2022 NIHE Homelessness Strategy, "Ending Homelessness Together", highlighted that the main factors contributing to the increasing number of households meeting the criteria for FDA were; an ageing population and instances of complex needs such as disability, mental health problems and addictions. In responses to the consultation for this strategy it was cited that "while streets in rural areas may not evidence rough sleeping,

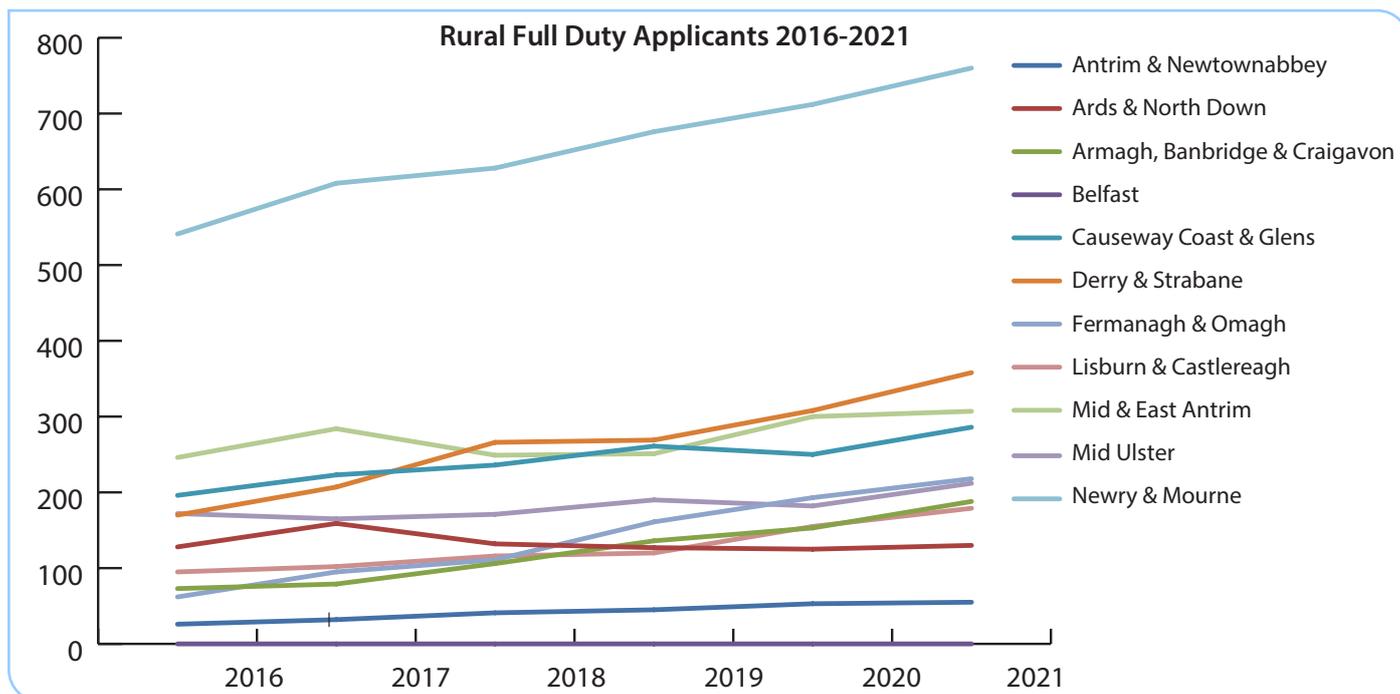
<sup>11</sup> [https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=.](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-strategy-northern-ireland-2017-2022.aspx?ext=)

chronic homelessness may be evidenced with individuals/ households being homeless for a sustained period of time, regularly requiring temporary accommodation or repeatedly presenting as homeless.”

Between 2016 and 2021, the number of FDAs on the waiting list for a home in a rural area increased from 1,709 to 2,693 and the proportion of FDAs of all rural waiting list applicants increased from 33% in 2016 to 38% in 2021. This increase was particularly evident in Fermanagh & Omagh, Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon and Derry City and Strabane LGDs where the number of waiting list applicants with FDA status rose by 252%, 158% and 111% respectively.

risk of infection due to the shared nature of homeless accommodation settings and barriers to preventive behaviours. The “Everyone In” approach sought to minimise the risk of individuals who were rough sleeping from contracting or spreading the virus. In conjunction with sector partners, all identified rough sleepers were placed in temporary accommodation, including individuals who were not eligible for housing assistance.

As a result of the pandemic, the availability and throughput of standard temporary accommodation was reduced due to social distancing and self-isolation requirements, necessitating an increase in the use of non-standard accommodation.



**Figure 3: Rural waiting list applicants with ‘Full Duty’ homeless status, 2016-2021**

At March 2021, the top homelessness presentation reason for all FDAs on the waiting list for rural areas was ‘Accommodation not reasonable’ which includes cases where the current home is unsuitable to meet the specific or general needs of the household. This was followed closely by ‘Breakdown of sharing arrangement/family dispute’ and then ‘Loss of Private Rental Accommodation’, ‘Relationship breakdown’ and ‘Domestic Violence’.

The average time on the waiting list for rural FDAs is 44.5 months and the median age of lead tenant at application is 39.

### Temporary Accommodation

In 2020/21, the Housing Executive adopted a co-ordinated response to address the impacts of Covid-19 in terms of homelessness in Northern Ireland. This response included accelerated progression of existing strategic commitments in relation to homelessness and ‘The Way Home’ Reset Plan<sup>12</sup> set out how we plan to continue with this progressive work whilst also reflecting on the learning from this time. We recognised from the outset that many people experiencing homelessness were at an increased

The response included an increase in the supply of single-lets, Dispersed Managed Emergency Accommodation and non-standard accommodation e.g. B&Bs. The Housing Executive also added 100 units of furnished accommodation to the temporary accommodation portfolio, including 10 units in rural areas.

There are many lessons from the pandemic response that will be considered in the review of the current Homelessness Strategy, the Chronic Homelessness Action Plan and the Strategic Review of Temporary Accommodation. It is evident that the existing offer of temporary accommodation must be increased to reduce the requirement for non-standard options and we should look strategically at where accommodation should be located in order to address the needs of those who present from both urban and rural locations. It is also evident that a flexible model is particularly important for rural areas and that forward planning will be required to ensure that mechanisms are in place to access single-lets when a need for temporary accommodation is identified.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Homelessness/homelessness-reset-plan-the-way-home>

***Considering the learning from the coordinated response to Covid-19, we will consider how on an ongoing basis, we can adopt a flexible approach to accommodate the emergency needs of those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas.***

### ***Wrap-around support***

For many households, a roof over their head is only one aspect of the support required to address their challenging circumstances. Additional support and assistance can often be required from a range of agencies and the structured coordination of information sharing and referrals is both challenging and necessary in order to provide an appropriate response. Early intervention and multi-agency working is proven to help with tenancy sustainment and to help prevent further instances of homelessness.

The Housing Executive recognises the importance of a housing led approach and priority is given to developing and expanding the “Housing First” model which aims to identify, assess, place and support individuals into permanent housing from a range of accommodation sources and to co-ordinate support to those individuals. The Supporting People Housing First programme currently operates in Belfast and in Derry/Londonderry providing 61 units of service. The expansion of this service into rural areas where a need has been identified will be particularly important given there will likely be fewer alternative emergency or long-term housing solutions available. The current use of social housing stock to meet the needs of homeless households as well as the potential to acquire or lease private sector units to facilitate the Housing First approach will be further considered.

***We will consider the expansion of the “Housing First” model into rural areas where suitable accommodation is available and a need has been identified.***

### ***Homelessness Prevention***

Each of our Area offices has developed a **Local Homelessness Action Plan** which seeks to address the specific homelessness related issues and needs of local communities. Each of these plans will consider preventative measures as well as the emergency support which is available in that locality. The accessibility of our housing advisors in the local offices, their role in promoting tenancy sustainment and in making referrals for ‘wrap-around’ floating support services is vital in reducing presentations of homelessness at a local level.

In line with our Homelessness Strategy, in 2019/20 we also introduced a Homelessness Prevention Fund which can be accessed by constituted groups acting on behalf of a community to help individuals within their area from becoming homeless. A range of projects have been supported to date which raise awareness, identify methods of early intervention and facilitate training

and personal development. This fund has already been recognised as a cost-effective and outcomes focused approach which will help prevent individuals and households from reaching the point where they require emergency intervention.

Reaching out to community groups to promote our role and services is often an effective way of ensuring that those in need can access the support they require. Through our Housing Community Network structure which includes our Rural Residents’ Forum, we will share an analysis of homelessness trends at council level, the actions we are taking to help those who are homeless and also the early intervention measures we have identified which can be delivered through the Homelessness Prevention Fund.

***We will communicate homelessness prevention advice and funding support through our Rural Residents’ Forum, our rural publications and at rural housing information events.***

***5) We will facilitate the delivery of community-based support programmes which promote inclusion, cohesion and create opportunities for those living in our rural communities.***

Local community groups and support networks in the community/voluntary sector are often ideally placed to identify and reach out to those who are most vulnerable in rural areas. Our Community Involvement structure enables a two-way flow of information directly from our various support-focused teams to the tenants and residents of our estates and communities. Our local housing forums and in particular our **Rural Residents’ Forum** regularly communicate information on available services and initiatives.

The Rural Residents’ Forum is comprised of tenants and residents from a number of our rural housing communities across Northern Ireland. The Forum which is supported by Rural Community Network<sup>13</sup>, scrutinises housing related strategies, policies and services from a rural perspective and provides an invaluable insight into the particular housing-related issues that are faced within their communities. Members are also involved with their individual area based housing forums and there is cross-representation at the Central Housing Forum and at the Disability Forum. This allows for relevant information to be disseminated directly from policy makers in the Housing Executive to community representatives who can in turn advise tenants and residents within their areas.

***We will continue to develop and enhance the role of the Rural Residents’ Forum, ensuring that they remain relevant and representative of our rural housing communities and that they provide a mainstream consultation service for all Housing Executive strategies and policies.***

<sup>13</sup> <http://ruralcommunitynetwork.org/>

Our 'Communities' department is dedicated to supporting the Housing Community Network structure and area-based Good Relations Officers provide hands on advice and support to engage, enable and empower community groups. Pivotal to this approach, is the range of community funding programmes we administer which are targeted at promoting community involvement, good relations and equality of opportunity with people of different ages, community backgrounds and race.

- Through our **Community Cohesion** Strategy and funding programme, we actively encourage communities to develop projects and activities which provide a positive common focus for people of all ages helping to increase local participation and also embracing differences in culture and community backgrounds. Between 2016 and 2020, our Community Cohesion Team led by our area-based Good Relations Officers, worked in partnership with 99 rural community groups across Northern Ireland to deliver estate-based projects. This funding was awarded for a range of projects and initiatives in rural areas including re-imaging and estate enhancement schemes, community gardens and community festivals, fund days and educational events.

In 2018, the Housing Executive supported Fox Park Residents Group in Drumnakilly with a project to create a new community garden and meeting space within their estate. The garden offers tenants and residents of this rural housing area an attractive and accessible space which they can enjoy and where they can socialise with neighbours.

Fox Park Residents Group received funding through our Community Cohesion Programme and also worked with Housing Executive's Grounds Maintenance staff to create raised beds, plant flowers and shrubs, and install a picnic area.

This relatively small-scale project was successful in bringing people in the area together with a common goal to enhance the area by developing an underused asset for the enjoyment of the community.

- The Housing Executive also provided 71 rural community groups with **Community Grants** delivered through our Area Offices to undertake projects aimed at:
  - Bringing people from different generations together;
  - Improving the health and well-being of local residents;
  - Helping people get online or enhance their digital skills; and
  - Improving the local environment.

During 2020/21, this fund was replaced with an enhanced **Covid-19 Community Support Fund** to meet the emerging needs of our housing communities and to promote the welfare and comfort of Housing Executive tenants and residents during this time of hardship for many. The funding enabled community groups to deliver essential supplies and emergency packs, support foodbank deliveries and provide necessary communications to those who were particularly isolated and vulnerable during periods of lockdown. 32 community groups based in rural areas were successful in their applications for this fund which enabled many of our rural tenants and residents to benefit from support during this time.

- Our communities also have an important role in improving and maintaining community safety and helping to prevent anti-social behaviour within their housing areas. Our recently published Community Safety Strategy<sup>14</sup> highlights the value of local initiatives in creating safer communities where there is less fear of crime and intimidating behaviour. The Housing Executive has contributed to a range of the initiatives which have benefited our rural communities including the 'Good Morning Down' service through which check-in calls are made to older and vulnerable residents and the Mid & East Antrim Agewell Partnership through which activities and services which focus on access to transport, literacy support and befriending are provided to help frail and elderly people who are faced with isolation and loneliness. Our participation on the local Policing & Community Safety Partnerships helps to ensure a strategic multi-agency approach which is shaped by local circumstances and available services.
- **The Futures Programme**<sup>15</sup> is a Peace IV funded personal development programme which is delivered by the Housing Executive in partnership with Belfast Met and Start 360. The initiative offers the opportunity for young people aged between 16 and 24 to access training which will help to improve confidence and self-esteem, develop leadership, decision-making and teamwork skills, develop their awareness of other cultures and understand how they can make a difference within their communities. Participants are awarded an OCN Level 2 Qualification (comparable to a GCSE Grade A-C) upon completion. To date, 86% of participants have progressed onto either further education, training, volunteering or employment upon completion.
- The **Listen Share Change** programme is delivered by the Housing Executive in partnership with the Verbal Arts Centre and focuses on encouraging increased contact, support and friendship to individuals through conversational reading rooms. Participants engage in friendly and lively conversations with their friends, families and group members based around a short story.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Community/Community-Safety-Strategy.aspx?ext=>

<sup>15</sup> [The Housing Executive - Housing Community Network \(nihe.gov.uk\)](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Community/Community-Safety-Strategy.aspx?ext=)



## Fox Park Opening



This programme creates an inclusive and supportive safe space using high-quality, themed literature to engage with cross community groups of all ages, embracing commonality and helping to promote community cohesion.

- Connectivity is an issue that impacts many customers, particularly in rural areas, and the Housing Executive recognises the wide ranging benefits of facilitating community based programmes aimed at improving digital awareness and accessibility.
- The **ONSIDE** (Outreach and Navigation for Social Inclusion and Digital Engagement) programme is a €5.6m cross border project led by Disability Action NI in partnership with the Housing Executive, Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI), Supporting Communities NI and Interreg. The aim of the Programme is to engage with people living with disabilities and to provide the IT equipment, connectivity and training to enable them to identify and access the services they require online, e.g shopping, banking, ordering prescriptions and home heating oil. Participants are provided with a digital device for training which is signed over to them upon successful

completion of the six week programme which is focused on developing digital awareness and skills, and improving knowledge of and confidence in using the internet.

Over the periods of lockdown imposed over the last 12 months as a result of Covid-19, the ONSIDE project was realigned to be delivered entirely online and has delivered further unexpected benefits with participants being able to virtually connect with family and friends. This will have helped to reduce the impact of social isolation and helped participants to continue to access services which may have otherwise been particularly difficult for them at this time.

### **Reaching Rural Customers**

Our team of area-based Good Relations Officers are committed to reaching out to all groups or individuals who may benefit from our wide range of community support programmes and recognise the added difficulties with rural areas where there may be limited representation. Our Rural Residents' Forum and stakeholders such as Rural Community Network often provide useful contacts in these areas.

In recent years, rural community networking events have provided a useful platform for the Housing Executive and other support providers to communicate what they have to offer and for community groups to share their experiences and learn from examples of best practice.

Digital communications are an increasingly effective way of promoting our services and housing related advice to tenants and customers. In May 2020, the Housing Executive launched the 'My Housing Executive' digital tenant portal which enables tenants to access tenancy related information from a digital device. In August 2020, we published our first 'Rural Matters' e-zine which increased the number of recipients of this publication compared to previous years and enabled us to provide digital links to useful information and funding opportunities on our website. Social media is also proving to be a vital part of the promotion of community support and is particularly successful in encouraging young people to get in contact with us.

***We will promote our community-based funding and support programmes within rural communities through our dedicated Rural Unit, our area-based Good Relations Officers, our Rural Residents' Forum, community events and through rural publications and digital communications.***



### ***Rural Community Awards***

The Housing Executive's Rural Community Awards Competition was launched in 2014 following consultation with young people which highlighted the need to address littering and vandalism in some rural villages across Northern Ireland. The competition was initially shaped to reward the work of the many volunteers who come together to improve their areas for residents and visitors and has been further developed each year to recognise the different, complementary aspects of community work in rural areas.

In order to reach out to rural communities across Northern Ireland, every year the Rural Community Awards Competition has been launched at the Balmoral Show in May. The winners are presented with their awards at a community networking event in alternate council areas. This provides an opportunity for community groups in that area to come together and exchange ideas and experiences and for the Housing Executive to promote our services and relevant funding programmes.

The competition offers three awards (the Rural Community Spirit Award, Cleaner and Greener Rural Community Award and the Sustainable Village of the Year Award) with a category for small and large villages for each award. In 2020, we amended the format of the competition to reflect the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions and to take account of the commendable community work undertaken to help isolated and vulnerable community members through periods of lockdown. A new award for 'Rural Community Champion' was introduced.

Over the past seven years, the competition has generated a significant level of interest and the prize money has supported the ongoing work of the rural community groups who have so far been successful as well as inspiring other community organisations with their award winning projects.

***We will continue to develop and deliver the Housing Executive Rural Community Awards Competition, using the annual presentation events as an opportunity to promote a range of community-based services with rural communities.***

# 10. Theme 2: Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes

**The strategic theme of 'Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes' sets out how the Housing Executive will identify the need for and facilitate the provision of the social and intermediate homes required to support our rural communities over the next four years.**

**This has been considered in the context of our corporate high level outcomes 'delivering better homes' and 'fostering vibrant, sustainable communities', the theme of the 'Anti-poverty' and 'Sustainability & Inclusive Growth' in DfC's Building Inclusive Communities Strategy, and will contribute to the delivery of the draft PfG outcomes 'We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment', 'We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives' and 'People want to live, work and visit here'.**



As Strategic Housing Authority, landlord of just over 14,700 homes across rural NI and statutory partners in the delivery of each of the local council Community Plans, the Housing Executive has a strategic role in shaping the growth and development of rural settlements which focuses on but is not limited to enabling new housing in these areas.

As we begin to emerge from a time of unprecedented change during the Covid-19 pandemic, we will review the impact on housing market areas resulting from this period of mandatory home-working, considering in particular the impact on rural housing.

The provision of social and intermediate housing is a vital element in ensuring that everyone has access to a home that they can afford and in helping communities to grow and thrive. The two main issues which often impact on the provision of affordable housing in rural areas are the availability of sites which are suitable for housing development and identifying sufficient demand for this type of housing. The Housing Executive has developed specific rural policies in relation to the identification of housing need and the delivery of the Social Housing Development Programme.

In order to achieve our high level outcome **'We enable the provision of affordable homes to contribute to balanced, inclusive and sustainable rural communities'**, we have identified the following priorities:

- 1) We will enable the provision of affordable homes which address rural housing needs;
- 2) We will work with local councils to help shape planning policies which will deliver affordable homes and contribute to balanced and inclusive rural communities;
- 3) We will examine the potential to support the development of models of community-led housing in rural areas.

## **1) We will enable the provision of affordable homes which address rural housing needs.**

The Housing Executive has a number of statutory responsibilities to facilitate the provision of social housing in rural areas which include:

- Identifying housing need in rural areas;
- The assessment of housing need at a localised level;
- The development of Strategic Guidelines which set annual geographic and needs based targets for the delivery of the SHDP, including a rural target; and
- Management of the 3 year Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP).

### **Identifying & assessing housing need in rural areas**

Any individual or household, who find that their housing circumstances are not adequate or affordable, can apply to the Housing Executive to be assessed for a property within their area of choice. Both Housing Executive and housing association properties are allocated to those on the Common Waiting list based on their priority of need i.e. no. of points as per the Housing Selection Scheme.

Where there is a consistent shortage of properties to meet the needs of the applicants on the waiting list, this will be identified in the annual Housing Need Assessment (HNA) where the waiting lists for every Common Landlord Area (CLA)<sup>16</sup> across Northern Ireland are analysed. Five year housing need projections are calculated for every CLA based on the residual levels of housing stress<sup>17</sup> after the allocation of existing Housing Executive and housing association properties and taking into account any new build schemes which are planned for the area.<sup>18</sup>

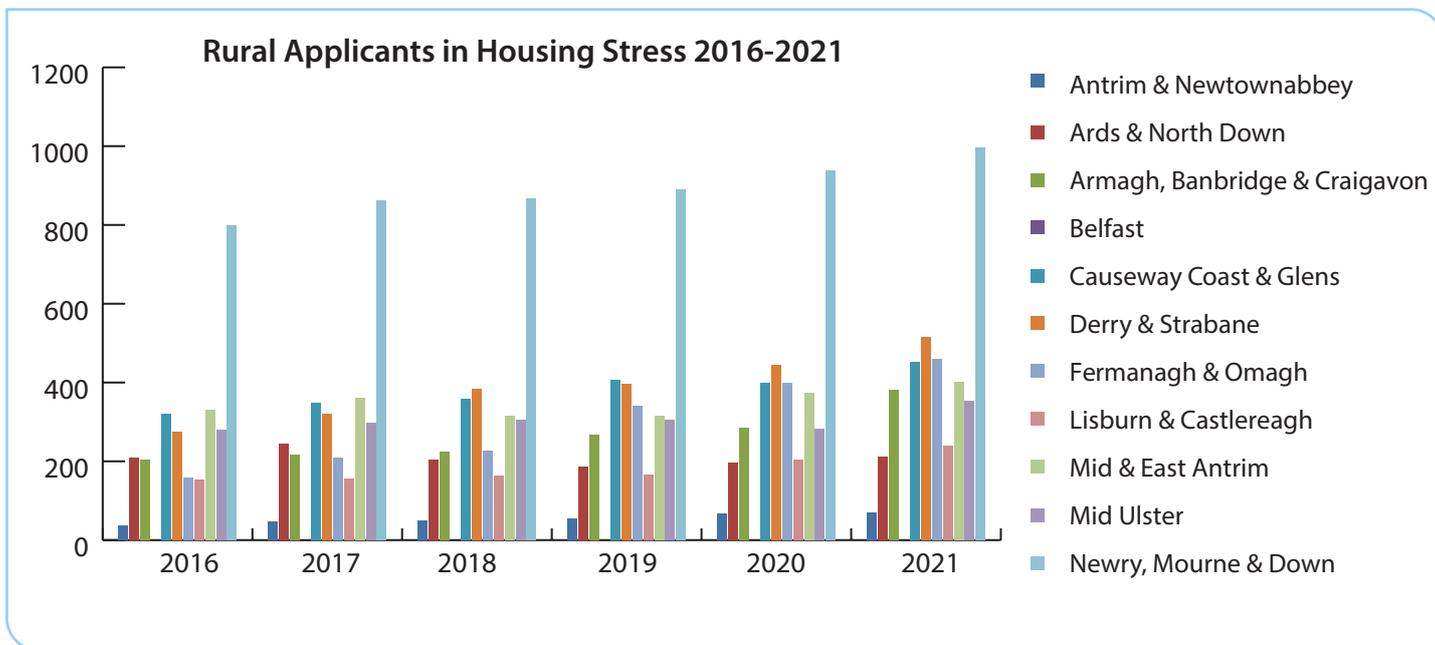
<sup>16</sup> A CLA is an area where there is an existing stock of housing owned either by the Housing Executive or a housing association and varies in size between a whole rural settlement and a cluster of estates within a town or city.

<sup>17</sup> Applicants who have been awarded 30+ points are deemed to be in housing stress (Housing Selection Scheme NI)

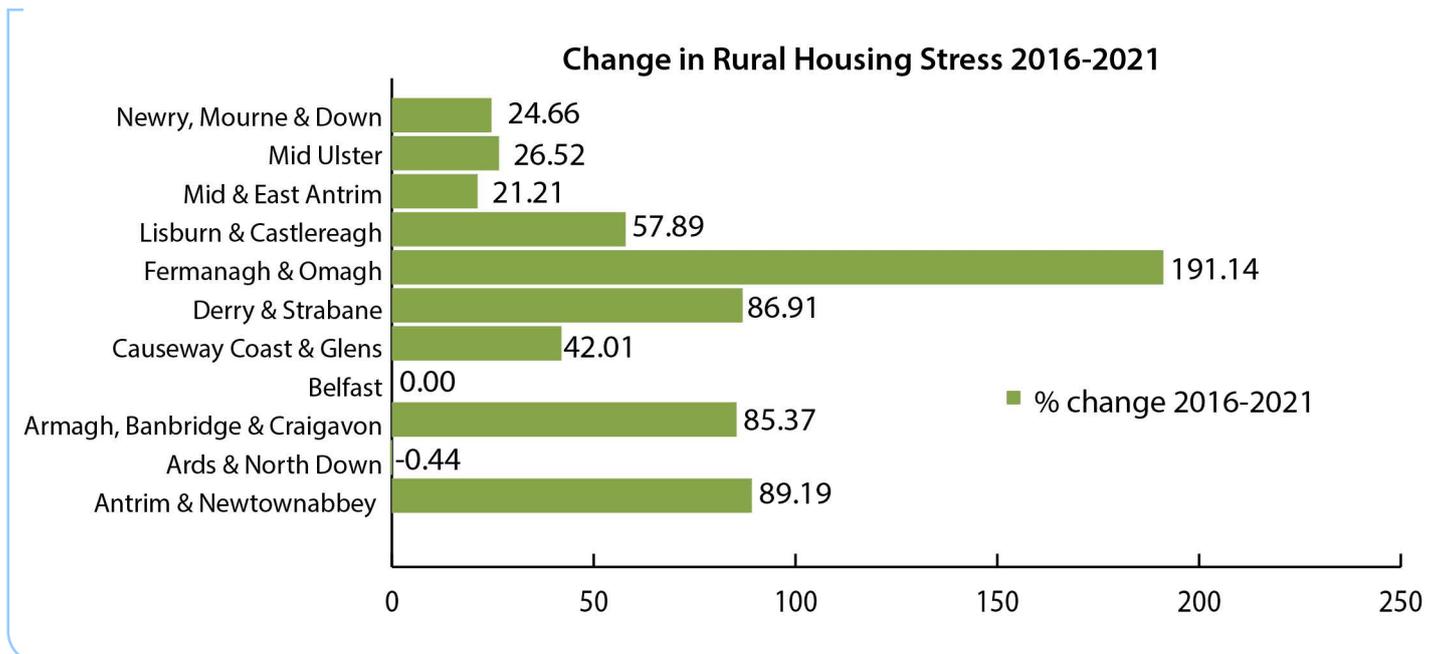
<sup>18</sup> Other factors such as the rate of turnover of remaining lettable stock and an analysis of local housing management issues are also taken into account in this calculation.

At March 2021, there were 6,491 applicants on the waiting list for a home in a rural area. This represents 14.8% of all waiting list applicants. Between March 2016 and March 2021, the number of rural applicants on the waiting list has fluctuated but has gradually increased by 27%. This increase is more evident in Fermanagh & Omagh and Causeway Coast and Glens council areas where the number of applicants has risen by 78% and 62% respectively.

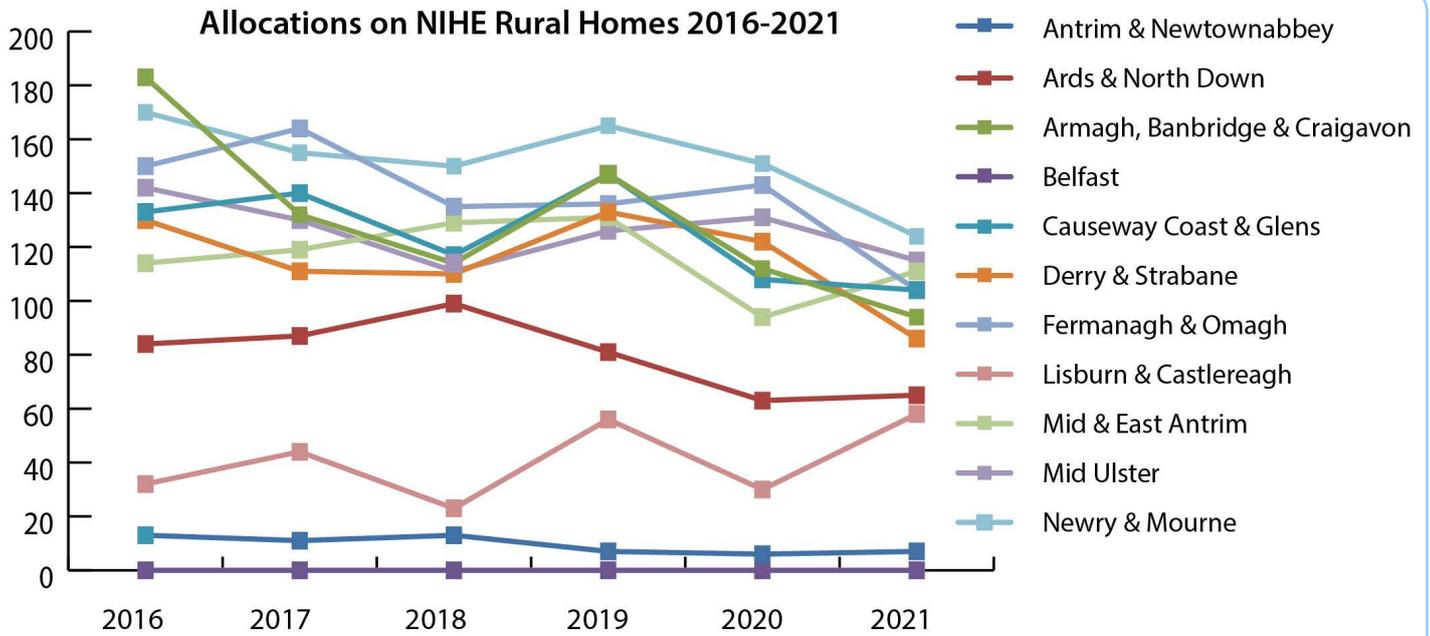
As in urban areas, since 2016 the overall increase in the number of applicants on the waiting list for rural areas has been relatively modest. However, the proportion of applicants in housing stress has continued to rise year on year in both urban and rural areas, demonstrating the difficulty many applicants face in achieving a social tenancy and the need for an increase in affordable housing solutions.



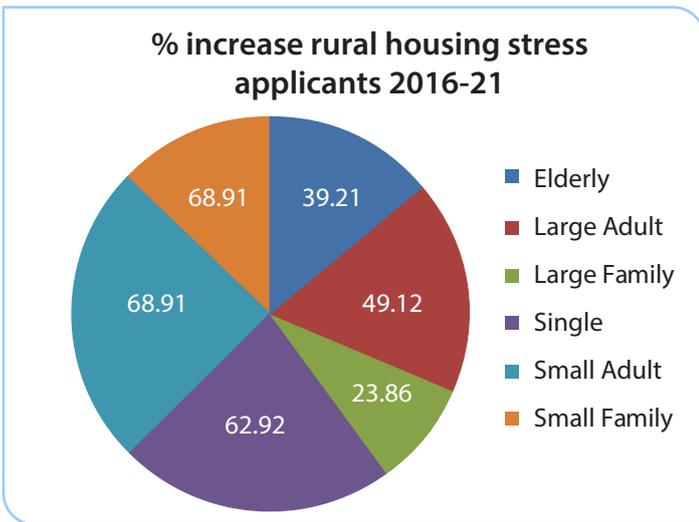
**Figure 4: No. of rural waiting list applicants in housing stress (30+ points) 2016-2021**



**Figure 5: % change in no. of rural waiting list applicants in housing stress 2016-2021**



**Figure 6: No. of allocations of Housing Executive properties in rural areas 2016-2021**



**Figure 7: % increase in rural applicants in housing stress 2016-2021**

Between 2016 and 2021 the number of rural applicants in housing stress on the waiting list has risen by 47.6%. This increase is evident across 9 of the 11 council areas but is most stark in Fermanagh & Omagh where over this five year period the number of applicants in housing stress increased by 191.1%.

Newry, Mourne and Down continues to be the council area with the highest levels of rural housing stress. Table 1 highlights that a total of 672 new homes are required between 2020 and 2025 to address the projected housing need, this represents almost 42% of the total number of homes required across rural Northern Ireland.

Meanwhile in Derry & Strabane and Causeway Coast & Glens, the substantial projected housing requirements are attributed to a small number of rural settlements, putting significant pressure on the already limited land supply available within the Settlement Development Limits of these areas.

Figure 7 demonstrates that the highest increase in housing stress has been in the small adult household group and in singles.

Over the same period (2016 – 2021), the number of rural homes allocated within a 12 month period has decreased by around 25%. However in 2020 and 2021, the pandemic has inevitably impacted on the turnover of our stock in all locations.

The number of allocations has been consistently low in Newry, Mourne and Down despite the high and increasing levels of housing stress, underlining the need to increase social stock in the rural villages within this council area.

Cyclical analysis of rural waiting lists enables the Housing Executive to determine the additional housing supply required to address housing need and this is highlighted in the Annual Commissioning Prospectus to focus developing housing associations in their identification of housing development opportunities. We are mindful that housing need in rural areas is made up of many component parts. Over the lifespan of the strategy we will review local waiting lists closely to ensure that housing need projections take account of demographic changes, migration and the wider potential impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our rural communities.

***We will undertake cyclical analysis of rural waiting lists and ensure that rural areas of unmet need are highlighted for our developing partners in the Annual Commissioning Prospectus.***

**Table 1: Overview of rural housing need by Local Government District**

<b>LGD</b>	<b>% change in Rural Housing Stress 2016 – 2021</b>	<b>Average No. of Annual Allocations of Rural Properties 2016-2021</b>	<b>Projected No. of additional homes required in rural areas 2020-2025</b>	<b>Rural settlements identified as having consistent unmet housing need</b>
<b>Antrim Newtownabbey</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>71</b>	Doagh, Oakview/Roughfort Hyde Park/Parkmount.
<b>Ards &amp; North Down</b>	<b>-1</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>160</b>	Ballygowan, Ballywalter, Carrowdore, Cloughey, Crawfordsburn, Greyabbey, Groomsport, Helen's Bay, Killinchy, Kircubbin, Millisle, Portaferry and Portavogie.
<b>Armagh, Banbridge &amp; Craigavon</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>65</b>	Aghagallon, Bleary, Derrymacash/Derrytrasna/ Kinnego, Dromore, Lawrencetown, Loughbrickland, Middletown and Rathfriland.
<b>Causeway Coast &amp; Glens</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>261</b>	Greysteel, Ballykelly, Castlerock, Cushendall, Dungiven and Portballintrae.
<b>Derry Strabane</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>227</b>	Eglinton, Sion Mills, Ballymagorry, Claudy, Strathfoyle.
<b>Fermanagh Omagh</b>	<b>191</b>	<b>139</b>	<b>100</b>	Arney/Bellanaleck, Ballinamallard, Belleek, Beragh, Brookeborough, Derrylin, Dromore, Drumquin, Florencecourt, Gortin, Irvinestown, Kesh, Kinawley, Lisbellaw, Lisnaskea, Maguiresbridge, Rosslea and Tempo.
<b>Lisburn Castlereagh</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>181</b>	Glenavy, Hillsborough and Moira.
<b>Mid Ulster</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>130</b>	Ardboe, Moortown, Ballinderry, Aughnacloy, Ballygawley, Ballyronan, Bellaghy, Benburb, Castlecaulfield, Castledawson, Donaghmore, Draperstown, Moy, Maghera, Newmills, Stewartstown, Swatragh and Tullyhogue.
<b>Mid &amp; East Antrim</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>192</b>	Broughshane, Ahoghill, Whitehead and Carnlough.
<b>Newry, Mourne &amp; Down</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>672</b>	Annalong/Longstone/Glassdrumman, Ardglass, Ballymartin, Bessbrook/Derramore, Burren, Camlough, Castlewellan, Crossgar, Crossmaglen, Culloville, Cullyhanna, Drumaness, Drumintee, Forkhill, Hilltown, Jonesborough, Kilcoo, Killeen, Killough, Killyleagh, Kilmore/Loughinisland, Lurganare/Barnmeen, Mayobridge, Meigh, Mullaghbawn, Newtowncloghogue, Rostrevor, Saintfield, Silverbridge, Strangford, The Commons/ Ballyholland and Whitecross.

## Hidden rural need (Latent demand)

The figures illustrated above provide evidence of the growing need for an increase in the supply of social housing in many rural settlements across Northern Ireland. However, as far back as our first rural housing policy in 1991, the Housing Executive has recognised that there are also rural areas where there are fewer (if any) social properties or a low turnover of existing stock and therefore individuals in need of support may not come forward to be considered for social housing. The CTOS survey carried out between January and March 2020, highlighted that only 38.2% of 650 tenants surveyed stated that they were aware of the Housing Executive's role in the provision of new social housing in rural areas.

Limited awareness and subsequent low number of people coming forward, perpetuates the issue of a lack of housing supply in these areas as the need for new social homes for any area is primarily evidenced from the waiting list. It is vital therefore, that, additional measures are taken to engage at a local level to ensure that those who require a social home in rural areas, are aware of the role of the Housing Executive and the range of services we have to offer.

In an effort to address this issue, we undertake an annual programme of Rural Housing Need Tests (latent demand tests). These tests are simply a focused consultation with an individual community to encourage anyone in need of a home to come forward and have an initial discussion with a housing advisor about their housing circumstances and the housing options available within their area of choice.

The rural housing need testing programme is mainly comprised of rural settlements where a test has been requested by a community representative who has been made aware of a lack of affordable housing in the area. We also include settlements which we have identified as having limited housing options for customers, settlements where we maintain land which may be suitable for future housing development and rural locations where a housing association has identified a potential new build opportunity which cannot be supported from the existing waiting list.

If, as a result of the test, we determine there is a need for more housing in the area we will either consider support for a housing association proposal or highlight the area in the Annual Commissioning Prospectus. Of the 36 tests undertaken during the outgoing Strategy (2016-2020), 12 have so far resulted in new build schemes being added to the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP), which should deliver around 142 new social homes in rural locations. Since testing first began in 2000, we have carried out almost 200 tests which has resulted in over 400 new units of housing in these areas, this accounts for



approximately 20% of all rural schemes delivered over that period. We will seek to build on this success over the next 4 years in enabling further social housing schemes but we also hope to encourage and support the delivery of other affordable housing products (e.g. equity sharing) in rural areas where this need emerges.

***We will continue to deliver an annual programme of at least ten rural housing need tests which is shaped by requests from rural community representatives, analysis of existing waiting lists and land availability.***

Rural housing need tests offer a brief window of opportunity to reach out to those in need and the process can enable many positive outcomes for rural households who require support to improve their housing circumstances. As discussed in the 'Supporting our rural customers' theme, we plan to maximise this opportunity to promote the range of housing support services that are available to new and existing customers. Every housing discussion is tailored to the individual and the preferred outcome may be a social housing tenancy, it could be private rented accommodation or it could be remaining in an existing tenancy with some additional support.

We will examine the potential to offer a rural "housing health-check" service through the testing process. This will be facilitated through a focused information event where we can offer face-to-face sessions with our housing advisors in order to provide advice on a range of services including tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.

We shape every housing need test around the community we are reaching out to, ensuring that local representatives are engaged in the process and that our consultation is both meaningful and inclusive. In the past, our most successful tests were those undertaken with community/ residents groups, local representatives and housing associations. We will ensure that over the next four years, housing need tests will be wide-reaching and inclusive with an emphasis on expanding on current methods of consultation to engage as many people as possible

The Community Planning partnerships offer another avenue to raise awareness of rural housing need tests with local councils, elected members and other public sector bodies and community representatives. Focused engagement on rural housing issues at this level could help to increase the support for each test and maximise the impact of each consultation but it could also unlock other opportunities such as accessing land for housing development where it is needed.

***We will examine how we can engage our Community Planning partners in our rural housing need testing process, considering all new channels of communication in order to maximise our reach in rural communities.***

***The delivery of affordable housing in rural areas***

Our Strategic Guidelines are used to shape the 3 year Social Housing Development Programme to ensure that new housing is delivered in an equitable way. As the overall requirement for new build (discussed above) in any year

“Housing for All” Old Court Mill, Sion Mills: Rural Housing Association 2018/19



exceeds the budget available, strategic guidelines help us to allocate new build targets per council area. The guidelines also include strategic targets for wheelchair accessible units, single beds, supported living accommodation and rural housing in order to facilitate the delivery of a balanced and sustainable housing programme.

Of the total of 5,850 social housing units to be delivered between 2021/22 and 2023/24, the strategic target for rural areas for the next 3 years is **719** units (12.3%).<sup>19</sup>

**Table 2: SHDP targets 2021-2024 (includes supported housing and traveller units)**

2021/22	1,900	234
2023/24	2,000	246

Between 2016 and 2021 the provision of a total of **671 new social housing units** commenced in rural areas through the SHDP. This included 392 new build units and 272 units which were Existing Satisfactory or Off the Shelf housing association purchases. The new build units included five shared future or **'Housing for All'** schemes (74 units) which were co-funded by the Together Building United Communities programme.

The development of these homes has provided housing solutions for 671 households within these rural areas. Not only have these households been given access to a home which meets their specific requirements and is affordable to them but this investment will have had a positive knock-on effect in terms of supporting schools, services and local businesses within these rural communities.

However, despite this positive outcome, rural SHDP delivery fell short of the strategic target for this four year period by 355 units.

Through engagement with housing associations, we have established that the main issues which have contributed to this shortfall are:

- The increased difficulty in accessing land which is suitable and available for housing development; and
- The impact that the cost of required infrastructure and in particular the ongoing capacity issues with NI Water infrastructure will have on the feasibility of small schemes.

There are other issues which have prevented housing schemes from commencing on-time or at all, such as delays in achieving planning approval, unforeseen site constraints and even lack of community support. However these issues are not solely attributed to rural

schemes and can equally impact on new build proposals in urban areas.

It is evident that in many rural settlements where we have the greatest housing need, there is often limited land remaining within development limits and/or existing land prices are competitive due to a high demand for private sector homes.

Through our rolling programme of Site Identification Studies we will assist housing associations in identifying available land in rural areas of unmet housing need. This approach will help to promote the inclusion of rural schemes on the SHDP to meet the strategic target. It will

also further develop our understanding of local land, infrastructure and planning related issues which will inform our ongoing consultation with the local councils with regards the development of Local Development Plans.

***We will carry out site identification work to assist developing partners in delivering affordable housing schemes in rural areas of unmet need.***

### ***Housing opportunities***

Over the strategy period, we will continue to consider, along with developing partners and stakeholders, all available opportunities to increase the rural Social Housing Development Programme and the availability of homes to meet the needs of rural waiting lists. This could include, for example, the acquisition of existing market stock in areas of consistent unmet need.

In an effort to boost housing provision and to pilot alternative sustainable housing models, the Department for Communities has approached the Housing Executive to develop a pilot new build project for social housing utilising Modern Methods of Construction and Low Energy technology. A business case for such a scheme at Sunningdale estate in Belfast is currently being considered by the Department as well as a rural scheme at a site in Hunter's Park, Bellaghy.

Over the next 3-4 years the remit of the Housing Executive will evolve, following the announcement of the Minister of Communities in November 2020 to make the necessary legislative changes to enable us to embark on a new build programme once again. There will be a focus on the opportunities which could be borne out of this transition and we will consider the particular benefits to rural areas including redevelopment and infill housing

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Commissioning-Prospectus-2021-23.aspx?ext=.](https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Corporate/Commissioning-Prospectus-2021-23.aspx?ext=)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/articles/about-together-building-united-community-tbuc>

within our existing rural estates and the use of sustainable house types which encourage reduced energy and fuel consumption.

***We will continue to identify and assess a range of alternative options to increasing housing supply and addressing housing need in rural areas.***

***2) We will work with local councils to help shape planning policies which will deliver affordable homes and contribute to balanced and inclusive rural communities.***

The preparation of new Local Development Plans is a long-awaited opportunity to ensure that sufficient land is made available to enable an increase in the supply of affordable housing to meet the current and future needs of rural communities.

Following a major reform of both local government and planning legislation in Northern Ireland in 2015, each of the 11 Councils across Northern Ireland are in the process of preparing Local Development Plans (LDPs) which will set out the vision, objectives, growth strategy and strategic policies for the Council area. The plans will allocate land for different land uses such as housing, employment and community facilities, while protecting important landscape and environmental features. The LDPs will consist of a Plan Strategy and a Local Policies Plan which will include local and detailed policies and proposals, such as settlement limits and zones as well as council specific development management policies to guide decision-making in the determination of planning applications.

As the strategic housing authority for Northern Ireland and statutory consultees in the Local Development Plan process, we are responsible for providing details of social and affordable housing need at both council and settlement level to enable the provision of the land required to meet existing and future housing needs and also to shape planning policies which will help deliver the housing required over the next 15 years. The scale and composition of rural housing developments will vary from council to council and the policy requirements to enable social housing within mixed tenure environments will take account of an analysis of previous planning permissions. The Housing Executive recognises that such policies could differ greatly based on the rurality of the council area and will continue to liaise with planning teams to ensure the policy provisions are in place to address housing need over the plan period.

This is an important opportunity for us to ensure that the housing needs of rural communities are evidenced and there are policies which will deliver the homes required over the plan period, enabling and shaping the sustainable growth of rural settlements.

## **Affordable Housing**

Our previous and ongoing consultations with rural communities through rural housing need tests, demonstrate time after time that there is often a lack of affordable housing options for those households who do not wish to access social housing but yet cannot afford owner occupation without support.

The Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) defines affordable housing as “social rented housing and intermediate housing”, which it further breaks down as ‘shared-ownership housing’.

Following consultation in 2019, DfC provide the following **definition of affordable housing:**

*“Affordable housing is:*

- a) Social rented housing; or*
- b) Intermediate housing for sale; or*
- c) Intermediate housing for rent,*

that is provided outside of the general market, for those whose needs are not met by the market. Affordable housing which is funded by Government must remain affordable or alternatively there must be provision for the public subsidy to be repaid or recycled in the provision of new affordable housing”<sup>21</sup>

It is hoped that this definition will provide clarity on the range of affordable housing products that are required to meet the needs of those who are unable to access adequate housing through the market.

In parallel to this, the Housing Executive has commissioned the preparation of **Strategic Housing Market Analysis reports** (SHMAs) which when completed, will set out projections of future housing need and demand for the period 2020 to 2035. The main purpose is to assist policymakers in their understanding of the dynamics of the 11 defined Housing Market Areas and to inform Local Development Plans. Each report will provide housing need projections across all tenures for 15 years at Housing Market Area and Local Authority level within the Housing Market Area, i.e. total, intermediate and social housing need requirements.

Both the affordable housing definition and the SHMAs will inform affordable housing policies within each of the 11 LDPs and also shape future investment in affordable housing products, which is to be examined in more detail in DfC’s ‘Housing Supply Strategy for NI’ which is currently under development.

## **Mixed-Tenure Housing in rural areas**

‘Mainstreaming mixed-tenure in Northern Ireland’ – DfC & NIFHA 2018<sup>22</sup>, identifies that the inclusion of a range of tenure options in a mixed-tenure environment, can “foster a greater social, economic and community mix

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/communities/dfc-consultation-definition-of-affordable-housing-stakeholder-engagement.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-mixed-tenure-in-northern-ireland-report.pdf>

to support thriving and sustainable communities". The development of mixed tenure residential areas can reduce concentrations of deprivation, thereby increasing investment in services and facilities and reducing geographical inequalities.

As a result of the House Sales Scheme, existing Housing Executive estates provide the current most recognisable example of mixed-tenure housing environments in Northern Ireland. The Housing Executive also supports and promotes a mixed-tenure approach to new residential development recognising the many benefits which can be realised in a more balanced and inclusive society. Not only do we encourage and support proposals brought forward by housing associations and regeneration partners but we believe that the new LDPs present an opportunity to enable inclusive communities through the introduction of planning policies which mainstream the provision of affordable housing.

We support the inclusion of a development management policy in LDPs which would require that a proportion of affordable housing is required from all private housing developments which meet a certain threshold (e.g. 10 units). However, for many rural settlements it is unlikely that a development management policy approach alone could address affordable housing need and therefore, where a need exists for 10 units or more, we also support the inclusion of an allocations policy which can set Key Site Requirements (KSR) and zone land for affordable housing.

We also advocate the retention of a rural exceptions policy (CTY5, in PPS 21 and within the SPPS) to allow a planning intervention should need arise. An exceptions policy is important to provide flexibility within the Plan, due to the difficulty in accurately predicting affordable housing and housing need in the long term/15-year period. A Plan Review may also be able to identify additional land for affordable housing.

***We will highlight the need for both social and intermediate housing in rural areas to each of the local Planning Authorities and the requirement for plan policies and land zonings which will facilitate the development of affordable housing within mixed-tenure environments promoting cohesion and sustainability.***

### **3) Community-led Housing in rural areas**

Community-led housing is a localised approach where the community leads the delivery of affordable homes to address housing needs within their area. It is an approach which is growing in popularity in other jurisdictions across the UK and has resulted in a range of bespoke housing schemes that are not only affordable to local people but often innovatively designed to maximise energy efficiency and thermal comfort and to minimise the impact on the environment.

Community-led housing can take many forms including:

- A **Community self-build** scheme with groups of local people building homes for themselves with external support;

- **Cohousing** schemes where people come together, often as a Housing Cooperative, to provide self-contained, private homes for themselves, but manage their scheme together and share activities, often in a communal space;
- Communities working in **partnership** with a housing association, local authority or private developer to provide homes for affordable rent or home ownership.

The Housing Executive has a long history of working with partners to contribute to the regeneration of rural areas and support the provision of homes to meet local needs. Every successful project is initiated by an active community who see an opportunity to address local issues and provide more for future generations. We have had various examples of community-led initiatives whereby a community based organisation has worked with partners to deliver housing within their area. These include:

- Established in 2000, **Lisburn Community Self Build Ltd** is a social economy construction business, supported by The Resurgam Trust which provides training in construction, life skills and employability for young people. The Housing Executive has worked in partnership with Resurgam Trust on a number of projects to enable the construction of homes including two community self-build schemes in Lisburn.
- In 2017, **Broughshane & District Community Association** secured the ownership of a former PSNI station with the support of Mid & East Antrim Council. The vacant building was restored to provide commercial units and a community run social enterprise within the village. The lands to the rear of the building were then transferred to Triangle Housing Association for the development of eight units of social housing which were supported by the Housing Executive.



- As part of our **Heritage in Housing programme**, the Housing Executive contributed to Townscape Heritage Initiatives in the villages of Richhill and Portaferry between 2015 and 2018. This initiative, for which the Heritage Lottery Fund was the chief funder, enabled the restoration of vacant buildings within designated conservation areas, revitalising the village centres which had been in decline. The Housing Executive's contribution was targeted at the provision of affordable rental accommodation in these areas.

Currently, the most common form of community-led housing for rural areas in Northern Ireland, is the partnership process whereby community representatives and

## Heritage in Housing Programme: Tandragee Street, Richill



HIH launch: Ferry Street, Portaferry

organisations approach the Housing Executive to examine the need and potential for affordable homes in their area. Community representation is invaluable to helping the Housing Executive develop an understanding of rural housing needs, particularly in areas where the waiting list does not provide evidence of the need for additional homes. The Housing Executive has an important enabling role, both in terms of identifying and assessing the housing need and in working with housing associations to support the delivery of new build schemes.

The advantages of this method include:

- The housing association can access Housing Association Grant funding;
- The housing association will take ownership of the housing and will be responsible for tenancy management, maintenance and upkeep;
- The homes will be designed in accordance with the Housing Association Guide; and perhaps most importantly,
- The homes will be allocated to those in the greatest need.

The main drawbacks are that the communities' involvement is restricted to highlighting the need for new housing and tenure is usually limited to social rent which may not cater for every household in need of an affordable home in the area.

In England, Scotland and Wales, community-led housing has been favoured by rural communities who have a vested interest in providing genuinely affordable homes for rent, shared ownership or sale for those in need. Schemes are often small in scale, with a range of house types to cater for differing needs and affordability. One of the basic principles of the community-led housing concept is that steps are taken to ensure that the homes remain affordable in perpetuity so that future generations will continue to realise the benefits of the initiative.

***We will engage with housing authorities and organisations involved in the funding and support of community-led housing across the UK to examine how this approach could help to address housing supply issues faced by our rural communities.***

### **Case Study: Castle Crescent Passivhaus Scheme, Closeburn, Dumfries & Galloway, Scotland<sup>23</sup>**

In August 2020, Nith Valley LEAF Trust (NVLT) completed a small housing development of three units on a gap site within the village of Closeburn, Dumfries & Galloway Council. The community trust identified that a lack of suitable housing, particularly for families, was causing people to move away from the village, and impacting on the small primary school roll. In addition, fuel poverty was identified as a major issue prevalent in local housing stock.

Through a community asset transfer, NVLT were able to attain a piece of surplus land from the council which was suitable for housing development.



A design was produced by John Gilbert Architects that met the community's low carbon, sustainable, high quality housing objectives.

Castle Crescent will be Scotland's first community-owned Passivhaus certified housing. As well as creating affordable homes for the tenants, the project has been a real boost to community energy, and brought people together as they witnessed what a locally led solution could achieve.



**Closeburn**

(Image credit: DGSCHT)

<sup>23</sup> [CS\\_1-Nith-valley\\_Closeburn\\_d2.pdf \(communitylandscotland.org.uk\)](#)

# 11. Theme 3: Securing the future of our rural communities

**The strategic theme of 'Securing the future of our rural communities' sets out how the Housing Executive will contribute to the sustainable and inclusive growth and increased climate change resilience of our rural communities over the next four years, through investment in rural homes and rural people.**

**This has been considered in the context of our corporate high level outcomes 'delivering better homes' and 'fostering vibrant sustainable communities', the theme of 'Sustainability and Inclusive Growth' in DfC's Building Inclusive Communities Strategy, and will contribute to the delivery of the draft PfG outcomes 'We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment' and 'People want to live, work and visit here'.**



The UK Government has set an ambitious target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emission reductions by 2050. In Northern Ireland, the Programme for Government and New Decade New Approach has also identified the need for environmental and climate change targets. A public consultation has taken place on the introduction of a Climate Change Bill for NI<sup>24</sup>, DAERA are working on a Green Growth Strategy and DfE are preparing the Energy Strategy 2050<sup>25</sup>, all of which will consider how public policy and investment can influence the behavioural changes required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Rural communities are essentially the custodians of our rural environment and their sustainability is intertwined with the sustainability of the rural economy, agriculture and tourism. The right balance has to be found in facilitating the necessary growth of our villages and small settlements without compromising our natural landscape.

Through this strategic theme, we have considered the ways in which the Housing Executive can contribute to the increased resilience and sustainability of our rural communities, whilst also delivering a range of outcomes for individual customers and households.

This will require a holistic approach, examining the investment required to improve our existing housing stock, our role in contributing to policies which promote the green agenda and maximising opportunities to foster sustainable communities through partnership working and community engagement.

In order to achieve our high level outcome **'We contribute to the inclusive and sustainable growth and increased climate resilience of our rural communities'**, we have identified the following priorities:

1) We will invest in the improved energy efficiency of our rural housing stock and consider solutions for the

future de-carbonisation of rural household heating systems;

- 2) We will support and encourage the improved energy efficiency of private sector homes in rural areas;
- 3) We will support and encourage the inclusion of planning policies in Local Development Plans which aim to promote climate change resilience within our rural communities;
- 4) We will work with partners to maximise the use of existing land and property assets in rural areas.

**1) We will invest in the improved energy efficiency of our rural housing stock and consider solutions for the future de-carbonisation of rural household heating systems.**

Housing accounts for 13% of greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland, which is above the UK average. Reduced emissions cannot be achieved without first ensuring that homes are well insulated in order to emit as little carbon as possible and this will offer many benefits including warmer homes with lower energy bills. As the Home Energy Conservation Authority (HECA) for Northern Ireland, the Housing Executive believes that energy efficiency should be delivered in a three-tiered response: firstly, to reduce demand by changing household behaviours; secondly, to improve energy efficiency within buildings (for example, through more insulation); and finally, to provide renewable energy source alternatives where possible. This principle promotes the 'fabric first' approach which must be considered when planning to install renewable energy systems.

This approach will particularly important for rural dwellers who are more likely to experience fuel poverty. Fuel poverty is experienced when a household cannot afford to keep adequately warm at a reasonable cost, i.e. 10% of their total income.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Discussion%20Document%20on%20a%20Northern%20Ireland%20Climate%20Change%20Bill%20-%20Full-length%20version\\_0.pdf](https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/daera/Discussion%20Document%20on%20a%20Northern%20Ireland%20Climate%20Change%20Bill%20-%20Full-length%20version_0.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/economy/energy-strategy-e-bulletin-issue-9.pdf>

This can be caused by:

- Low income;
- High energy prices;
- Poor energy efficiency such as inadequate insulation and old or inefficient heating systems.

The 2016 NI House Condition Survey found that 31.5% of people living in rural areas were in fuel poverty compared to 16.2% in urban areas and that rates were higher still for those living in small villages and hamlets at 34.1%. The highest rates of rural fuel poverty were in Mid Ulster (32%) and Derry/Strabane (31%).<sup>26</sup>

As the largest social landlord with a stock of just under 84,700 homes across NI, the Housing Executive recognise both the challenges and opportunities that carbon reduction targets will present. Our Energy Efficiency Strategy focuses on the energy efficiency and sustainability of our housing stock, how we can help those of our tenants and customers who are faced with fuel poverty and the investment required to 'futureproof' Housing Executive homes. Work has also commenced on a corporate 'Sustainability & Climate Change' Strategy which will consider the measures and behaviour changes required to ensure that we mainstream sustainability across all of our business activities.

There will be particular challenges in bringing our rural stock up to necessary energy efficiency standards and in providing heating systems which do not rely on fossil fuels.

### **Energy Efficiency of rural stock.**

26% of the SAP<sup>27</sup> energy cost efficiency scores on the Energy Performance Certificates for Housing Executive homes fall between bands A-C. Only 4% of our rural homes are currently in this category which demonstrates that the thermal performance is lower. In part, this is due to the number of rural properties which are older, with solid walls or more of their outside walls exposed e.g. semi-detached cottages and bungalows.

Through our ongoing planned maintenance programme, we make ongoing improvements to the energy efficiency of our stock through a range of measures. Between 2016 and 2020, we have installed new double glazing in 1,455 rural properties and completed 1,613 heating installations.

We have also identified properties with particularly poor SAP ratings for focused projects aimed at determining the benefits and feasibility of retrofitting with a range of measures to increase energy performance.

### **Energy Efficiency in Social Housing Project**

We are currently mid-way through a multi-million pound investment programme to improve the energy efficiency of almost 2,700 of our non-standard construction stock including aluminium bungalows and No Fines properties.

This scheme which was part funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) improves the thermal efficiency of these homes with the installation of cladding, new double glazing and insulation. A number of schemes have already been completed or are currently onsite across South Antrim, Causeway, Magherafelt and Omagh.

### **Newry Retrofit Project**

We identified a terrace of five dwellings in Loanda Crescent in Newry which before any intervention had a SAP rating of 42 (Band E).

A mix of energy efficiency improvement measures were installed in each of the properties including triple glazing, more efficient external wall insulation, thermal bridge detailing, increased air tightness, continuous whole-house Mechanical Extract Ventilation and solar panels.

The measures resulted in a significant improvement in SAP ratings (the greatest improvement was to Band B) as well as a reduction in energy usage and fuel costs, and a significant improvement in the level of comfort experienced by the tenants.

***We will continue to assess the investment required to improve the energy performance of our rural housing stock.***

### **Future de-carbonisation of heating systems in rural stock.**

At present, Northern Ireland has the highest level of dependency on high-carbon fossil-fuel across the UK: 68% of households dependent upon home heating oil. Many rural areas, particularly in the west of the province, are impacted by limited access to the natural gas network despite expansion in recent years. Through the Housing Executive's Boiler Replacement Scheme, in 2018/19, 89% of boiler replacements in the Belfast City Council area resulted in a gas installation, compared to 1% in Mid Ulster council and 0% in Fermanagh & Omagh council.<sup>28</sup>

At present, natural gas is the preferred heating source for Housing Executive heating conversions due to price security, regulated energy supply, less greenhouse emissions and the potential to use infrastructure to convert to non-carbon based fuel sources in the future. However, at present the only available option for many rural heating conversions is oil and the future decarbonisation of heating of properties off the gas network will be a challenge.

### **Finding solutions for the future**

The Housing Executive has taken the lead on two projects which aim to test technologies which could improve the energy efficiency and thermal comfort of our stock and reduce energy costs for tenants. Both of these pilot initiatives will be located in rural areas in the west where there is currently a reliance on oil heating.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/Research/HCS-2016-Main-Reports/HCS-Main-Report-2016.aspx>

<sup>27</sup> The Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) is the Government's standard method of rating the energy efficiency of a dwelling.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.nihe.gov.uk/Documents/News/Home-Energy-Conservation-Authority-Annual-Progress.aspx?ext=>

## Newry Retrofit Project: Loanda Crescent, Newry



Case studies



## 1) HANDIHEAT Pilot - 6 Housing Executive homes in Co Fermanagh:

The Housing Executive is the lead partner in the HANDIHEAT Project which commenced in October 2018. With support from the Northern Periphery & Arctic Programme (NPA) and the European Regional Development Fund, the project aims to:

- Compare current home energy policy and practice across Northern Europe;
- Develop viable business models, with innovative solutions to tackle energy problems in rural areas; and
- Identify opportunities for rural communities to access renewable energy sources and reduce their reliance on fossil fuels.

As part of the project, we are currently carrying out a pilot demonstration study in six of our rural homes in Lisnaskea, Co.Fermanagh. The aim of this pilot is to assess the capital cost, household energy bills and carbon savings with the installation of non-intrusive energy efficiency measures and a new lower carbon heating system, within a budget of £7,000.

After the first year of this pilot project the Housing Executive and Ulster University, will assess the data against the three metrics of capital cost, savings in household energy bills and carbon savings. A key output for the Housing Executive is to ensure this is functional and autonomous for the householder, whilst improving their thermal comfort, reducing energy bills and minimising the impact on the environment.

### • RULET (Rural Leading the Energy Transition) 10 NIHE Houses in Co Tyrone

This research project is due to commence in summer 2021, jointly led by the Housing Executive and Ulster University. The proposal is to trial energy efficiency measures and low carbon heating within a budget of £7,000 per property. Ten houses in Omagh, Co Tyrone have been earmarked for this project, as Omagh is identified as an area with a 'network constraint'<sup>29</sup> on the electric transmission network, and due to the close proximity to wind farms, there is an opportunity to take advantage of wind curtailment<sup>30</sup>.

Within the RULET project an agile electricity tariff will be applied to all ten properties and three different heating systems will be demonstrated to test improved energy efficiency outputs. These include:

- 1) A hybrid heat pump with a gas boiler to three properties;
- 2) A hybrid heat pump with an oil boiler using 100% bio fuel to properties; and
- 3) A heat pump combined with a heat battery to four properties.

The second work stream of the RULET project is the wind curtailment opportunity. This is based on a proposal from a commercial research partner, Climote who have created a not-for-profit social enterprise to enable the proof of concept. The concept is to exploit this curtailed wind energy and examine how to utilise this green electric to heat hot water across social housing. This work stream will quantify the value which could be created by significant uptake of flexible, low-carbon electric heating in social housing in Northern Ireland.

The same outputs of capital costs, household energy savings and carbon savings will be assessed after a trial period of 12-18 months. The two main differences with this project will be the introduction of a new agile electricity tariff for tenants and the Energy Cloud proposal which seeks to exploit curtailed wind energy rather than letting it go to waste, and examining how we can utilise this green electric to heat hot water across our housing stock.

***We will continue to develop and monitor the outcomes of energy efficiency and renewable energy pilots such as the HANDIHEAT and RULET Projects to identify alternative energy sources for our rural properties which will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in these areas.***

### 2) We will support and encourage the improved energy efficiency of private sector homes in rural areas

The Housing Executive offers two private sector grants which are aimed at improving energy efficiency and reducing home heating costs.

The **Affordable Warmth Scheme** is a central element in the NI Executive's Fuel Poverty Strategy. The Housing Executive works in partnership with local Councils to target interventions via an area based approach. It is directed at low income households who are home owners or private tenants and are experiencing the effects of fuel poverty and energy inefficiency.

Between 2016 and 2020, the Housing Executive invested approximately £29.7m in 6,862 homes located in rural areas. This represented nearly 45% of the total number of properties which had work completed through the Affordable Warmth Scheme during this time. These home owners are now benefitting from energy efficiency measures including insulation, ventilation, draught-proofing, heating, window replacement and solid wall insulation.

The **Boiler Replacement Scheme** is for owner occupiers whose total gross income is less than £40,000 and is to help with the cost of replacing gas and oil boilers which are 15 years or older with new boilers and controls. Between 2016 and 2020, 2,790 rural home owners

<sup>29</sup> Network constraint is where the electric transmission can't transmit power to a location on demand due to congestion. This issue has become prominent with the vast number of renewable generators entering the network over recent years.

<sup>30</sup> Wind Curtailment is caused when the electricity from the wind farms can't be utilized into the electricity transmission network. Currently in NI 18% of this potential energy sourced from wind farms is dumped, which has a potential value of £50m for the first 6 months of last year.

## HANDIHEAT Pilot: County Fermanagh



replaced central heating boilers which were over 15 years old with a new high efficiency 'A' rated condensing type boiler. This represented almost 25% of all completed boiler replacements and an estimated investment of £1.8m in these areas.

These grant initiatives deliver reduced fuel costs for householders and a significant improvement in the energy efficiency of these rural homes.

### **Oil-buying clubs**

In recognition of the over-reliance on oil heating in rural areas across Northern Ireland, in 2014 the Housing Executive launched an **Oil Buying Clubs** initiative in partnership with Bryson Energy. 27 Oil Buying Clubs have now been established through the scheme and there are over 4,000 members, many of which live in rural areas, who benefit from lower oil costs and the availability of smaller and more regular deliveries of oil as required.

### **Energy Advice Service**

As the Home Energy Conservation Authority for Northern Ireland, the Housing Executive has a role in providing energy advice to home owners.

In April 2020, we launched a refreshed NI Energy Advice Service which offers free and impartial advice on energy saving matters including tips on how to reduce energy consumption, advice on switching energy providers or upgrading a heating system and providing details on the availability of grant support both from the Housing Executive and through the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme (NISEP).

A further component of this service is the Housing Executive's **Schools' Energy Efficiency Awareness Programme** (SEEAP) which seeks to promote awareness of the need to reduce energy use among young people through informative presentations, activities and learning resources. This work has been enhanced through a recent collaboration with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful which has enabled the Housing Executive to join other partners and sponsor organisations in funding the NI Eco-Schools programme through which we will sponsor the 'Energy' topic for all NI Eco-Schools.

In recognition of the particular need to help address fuel poverty in rural areas and to offer advice and support in tackling the issues associated with heating rural homes which are often older with more exposed outer walls, the Housing Executive takes every opportunity to promote our Energy Advice Service in rural areas. This includes the provision of information and advice to attendees at rural events such as the prestigious Balmoral Show, through other community-focused events and seminars and through features and case studies in our 'Rural Matters' magazine.

***We will promote our Energy Advice Service and the availability of our Energy Efficiency Grants for private sector homes through our 'Rural Matters' publication and at rural-focused events and seminars.***

### **3) We will support and encourage the inclusion of planning policies in Local Development Plans which aim to promote climate change resilience within our rural communities.**

As statutory consultees in the process to develop Local Development Plans for each of the 11 local council areas, the Housing Executive welcomes the opportunity to promote climate change resilience through the planning process.

The Local Development Plans are the mechanism by which the ambitions for sustainable growth set out in the NI Regional Development Strategy can shape development at a local level. As Strategic Housing Authority, the Housing Executive is primarily concerned with addressing the growing demands of our customers for good quality, affordable housing, but we also recognise that this has to be delivered in a sustainable way. Sustainable development will deliver short and medium term benefits for our customers in terms of increased connectivity, accessibility to services, reduced energy costs and increased thermal comfort. The long term benefits could include an improvement in health and well-being and an increase in environmental awareness but most importantly, a reduction in carbon emissions and an increase in 'green' development which will help to protect our rural environment for future generations.

Within each of the councils' draft Plan Strategies we support policies which will:

- Promote **solar gain, energy efficiency measures** and the use of **renewable energy** within residential buildings. Improved energy efficiency including the integration of renewable energy, will enhance the sustainability of new and existing homes, helping to improve the quality of life and health and wellbeing of all residents, as well as helping to improve air quality, and bringing many social, economic and environmental benefits.
- Promote the use of **Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems**, which can be used effectively to manage surface water run-off by, for example, the use of green roofs/walls, tree pits and swales, which help integrate green and blue infrastructure into the public realm/buildings and enhance nature conservation and biodiversity. This will help to mitigate flood risk and improve climate resilience.
- Support the protection of woodland and the introduction of **tree planting**. As well as offsetting carbon, trees and woodland contribute significantly to the natural environment, providing habitats and sustaining biodiversity. Ireland is the least wooded region in Europe, with 7% wood cover, compared to a European average of 44%. Of the trees in Northern Ireland, 80% are recent conifer plantations, as opposed to native species, which can better support wildlife. In addition, the provision of trees and green open space

can aid flood protection and water management, help mitigate the effects of climate change, promote regeneration and investment and increase a sense of place and well-being.

- Promote the integration of **transport** to create **sustainable patterns of development**. In line with the Regional Development Strategy 2035<sup>31</sup>, we support policies which will promote the integration of local transport to meet the needs of those living in rural areas and to reduce the reliance on private cars. Wherever possible, housing should be located within settlements (urban and rural) with access to public transport. As well as contributing to the reduction of greenhouse gases and promoting active lifestyles, a reduction in car use can lead to increased interaction and help to address social isolation and loneliness.
- Promote the need to revitalise small towns and villages through an integrated approach and which explore ways of improving **connectivity** and bringing services into rural communities which will reduce the need for travel. The disadvantage experienced in many rural communities could be lessened by investment in innovative technologies and in community spaces which could facilitate services usually provided in urban settlements.

***We will use our role as statutory consultees in the preparation of Local Development Plans to promote the need for planning policies which support sustainable development, increased energy efficiency and a reduction in carbon emissions.***

#### **4) Unlocking the potential of community assets in rural areas.**

Maximising the use of vacant land and property assets within designated settlements is a fundamental principle of sustainable development and can help to reinvigorate villages, securing their future as places where 'people want to live, work and visit'. This form of regeneration is particularly important when it delivers spaces and services which will benefit the wider community such as community centres, multi-use hubs, enterprise units or simply somewhere accessible for local social interaction.

Equally as important as physical renewal, is our investment in the most valuable community asset, the community themselves. Behind every successful community project is a group of individuals with the ambition and drive to raise issues and seek support in order to improve the quality of life of residents. Based on experience and learning gained through many years of tenant engagement the Housing Executive has developed support programmes which help to increase the confidence and capacity of community and residents groups within our housing areas. Not only does this benefit those individuals directly involved but can encourage wider community involvement and lead to positive outcomes associated

with health and well-being, tackling social isolation and loneliness and contributing to more cohesive and resilient communities.

We actively promote our various community support programmes with our Rural Residents' Forum, with our rural stakeholders and community contacts and through our Rural Strategy publications.

#### **Social Economy**

The Housing Executive recognises that social economy can make an important contribution towards driving and delivering inclusive economic growth. The Housing Executive's Social Housing Enterprise Investment Scheme has supported a range of social enterprises which are based in or serve our rural housing communities. Like traditional businesses, social enterprises aim to make a profit, but profits are reinvested or donated to create positive social change.

An external evaluation of the first Social Housing Enterprise Strategy 2015-2018, was completed in January 2020 and indicated that the funding programme is making significant differences in our communities by providing services, creating new jobs and sustaining existing jobs in the heart of our estates. Using an accredited formula, the independent evaluation established a Social Return on Investment for communities worth £4.97 for every £1 invested. Over the Strategy period, 14 rural Social Enterprises received support through our Social Enterprise initiative.

Programme funding has been awarded to groups which offer opportunities to develop and train local people, to help people improve life skills and provide important services. These include businesses, organisations and agencies such as cafés, handyman services, indoor play areas, health and fitness centres and tourism enterprises.

During the Covid-19 lockdown and the ongoing restrictions, many social enterprises proved to be invaluable in both identifying community and individual needs at a time of great uncertainty and by stepping up and diversifying to provide necessary services to those who needed them in isolated rural communities. We aim to continue to build on this success through the Social Enterprise Plus Strategy 2020 - 2024 which has three key objectives.

1. To strengthen our communities
2. To improve our customer's economic circumstances
3. To find new ways to work in partnership

***We will continue to promote our Social Enterprise programme in rural areas recognising the particular benefits to our rural housing communities from supporting and enabling new social enterprises in these areas to realise their full potential.***

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/infrastructure/regional-development-strategy-2035.pdf>

## **Community Planning**

We have not long commenced the journey of Community Planning in Northern Ireland but through focused engagement we are beginning to identify Place Shaping projects which could be delivered through collaborative funding and partnership working. The Housing Executive continues to promote the importance of maximising opportunities to unlock the potential of existing land and property assets not only for housing but also for community infrastructure, social enterprise and small business growth in rural areas.

Engaging with Community Planning partners on localised rural housing issues and working in partnership to promote the Rural Housing Needs Testing programme will help to identify rural areas which require focus and intervention.

One of the most notable achievements of the last Rural Strategy was the provision of a match funding programme to support the delivery of the 2014-2020 NI Rural Development Programme (RDP) administered by DAERA. Through this initiative, the Housing Executive provided funding to a total of 55 rural groups for the delivery of a range of community based projects under the Basic Services and Village Renewal measures of the NI RDP. These projects ranged from small environmental improvement schemes to the construction of multi-functional community hub buildings. The Housing Executive's investment enabled each of these groups to satisfy the match funding requirements of the RDP programme and proceed with the delivery of these ambitious capital projects.

### **Case Study: Kildress Community Hub, RDP match funding project 2019/20**

In 2019/20, the Housing Executive contributed £20,000 in RDP Match Funding towards the development of Kildress Community Hub in Gortacladdy, Co.Tyrone. The project was funded under the Basic Services measure of RDP with further funding provided from Mid Ulster District Council and the community group's own resources and borrowing.

The project delivered a permanent 1,460m<sup>2</sup> two-storey building containing a multi-use community hall, a gym, a café and a range of multi-activity spaces to facilitate activities relating to arts, culture and heritage, outreach and community interaction activities.

The Hub has provided an integrated, fit-for-purpose setting for a range of community services, service outreach and health and well-being activities for this rural community. It will also enable the development of these services and encourage other service providers to make use of the facility.

The project lead commented "The NIHE contributed 7% of the funding required and helped create project momentum, build morale here, and helped us drive forward with our own fund-raising. We apportioned the NIHE money to the build of our 'Learning Room' in the building. Without each other we are nothing. 'Ar scath a cheile a mhaireann na daoine ... People live in one another's shelter."

## **Village Catalyst Programme**

In 2020, we were presented with the opportunity to become involved in the 'Village Catalyst Programme' which is being led by DAERA and the Historic Environment Division of DfC with support from the Architectural Heritage Fund and the Heritage Lottery Fund. The programme is aimed at restoring buildings at risk within rural settlements through joint funding and specialist support. The vision is to enable rural community groups to access underused buildings for community infrastructure and enterprise which will help to broaden the scope of the group and maximise their impact on tackling poverty and social isolation in these areas. In one of the four pilot projects earmarked in Rathfriland, a vacant property will be converted to provide community space as well as apartments for affordable rent. It is hoped that this approach can be replicated in other rural villages to encourage the reuse of assets with heritage value whilst also addressing community needs including the need for affordable housing.

***We will maximise opportunities to facilitate the sustainable growth of rural communities through collaborative investment and support.***

## Kildress Community Hub: RDP Match funding 2019/20



**Table 3:  
Summary of Strategic Themes, High Level Outcomes, Priorities & Proposed Actions**

Strategy Theme & High Level Outcome	Priorities	Proposed Actions
<p><b>People</b></p> <p><b>Supporting our rural customers</b></p> <p><i><b>We ensure that our tenants and customers within our rural communities feel secure in their environment and can access additional housing support when it is required.</b></i></p>	<p>We will consider the particular needs of our rural customers in the delivery of our housing solutions and support service;</p>	<p>1. We will promote the housing solutions &amp; support service provided through our local offices with our Rural Residents' Forum and rural stakeholders and in our targeted rural publications.</p>
		<p>2. We will pilot a rural housing health check service as part of a housing need test event, where we can provide advice on a range of services related to tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention.</p>
	<p>We will continue to review and improve our housing support services to meet the needs of an ageing rural population;</p>	<p>3. Throughout the development of the Supporting People Strategy 2021-2024, we will pay due regard to the particular needs of customers living in rural areas.</p>
	<p>We will invest in accessible housing solutions in rural areas;</p>	<p>4. We will commence on site with an Assisted Technology pilot and review with a view to providing similar applications in future schemes.</p>
		<p>5. We will continue to further develop the 'Dementia Friendly' approach and increase awareness and our understanding of dementia across our network of local offices to support independence and dignity for tenants who are impacted by dementia.</p>
		<p>6. When it is fully established, we will analyse information from the Accessible Housing Register to help determine the need for increased accessible housing within new affordable housing schemes in rural areas.</p>
		<p>7. We will continue to influence local councils to incorporate within their Local Development Plan a policy requiring all homes to be designed to Lifetime Homes standard and a proportion of wheelchair accessible homes in general housing stock in rural areas.</p>
	<p>We will support those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas;</p>	<p>8. Considering the learning from the coordinated response to Covid-19, we will consider how on an ongoing basis, we can adopt a flexible approach to accommodate the emergency needs of those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas.</p>

**Table 3:  
Summary of Strategic Themes, High Level Outcomes, Priorities & Proposed Actions**

Strategy Theme & High Level Outcome	Priorities	Proposed Actions
		9. We will consider the expansion of the “Housing First” model into rural areas where suitable accommodation is available and a need has been identified.
		10. We will communicate homelessness prevention advice and funding support through our Rural Residents’ Forum, our rural publications and at rural housing information events.
	We will facilitate the delivery of community-based support programmes which promote inclusion, cohesion and create opportunities for those living in our rural communities.	11. We will continue to develop and enhance the role of the Rural Residents’ Forum, ensuring that they remain relevant and representative of our rural housing communities and that they provide an mainstream consultation service for all Housing Executive strategies and policies.
		12. We will promote our community-based funding and support programmes within rural communities through our dedicated Rural Unit, our area-based Good Relations Officers, our Rural Residents’ Forum, community events and through rural publications and digital communications.
		13. We will continue to develop and deliver the Housing Executive Rural Community Awards Competition, using the annual presentation events as an opportunity to promote a range of community-based services with rural communities.
<b>Property</b> <b>Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes</b> <i>We enable the provision of affordable homes to contribute to balanced, inclusive and sustainable rural communities.</i>	We will enable the provision of affordable homes which address rural housing needs;	14. We will undertake cyclical analysis of rural waiting lists and ensure that rural areas of unmet need are highlighted for our developing partners in the Annual Commissioning Prospectus.
		15. We will continue to deliver an annual programme of at least ten Rural housing need tests which is shaped by requests from rural community representatives, analysis of existing waiting lists and land availability.
		16. We will examine how we can engage our Community Planning partners in our rural housing need testing process, considering all new channels of communication in order to maximise our reach in rural communities.
		17. We will carry out site identification work to assist developing partners in delivering affordable housing schemes in rural areas of unmet need.
18. We will continue to identify and assess a range of alternative options to increasing housing supply and addressing housing need in rural areas.		

**Table 3:  
Summary of Strategic Themes, High Level Outcomes, Priorities & Proposed Actions**

Strategy Theme & High Level Outcome	Priorities	Proposed Actions
	We will work with local councils to help shape planning policies which will deliver affordable homes and contribute to balanced and inclusive rural communities;	19. We will highlight the need for both social and intermediate housing in rural areas to each of the local Planning Authorities and the requirement for plan policies and land zonings which will facilitate the development of affordable housing within mixed-tenure environments promoting cohesion and sustainability.
	We will examine the potential to support the development of models of community-led housing in rural areas.	20. We will engage with housing authorities and organisations involved in the funding and support of community-led housing across the UK to examine how this approach could help to address housing supply issues faced by our rural communities.
<b>Place &amp; Planet</b>  <i><b>Securing the future of our rural communities</b></i>  <i><b>We contribute to the inclusive and sustainable growth and increased climate resilience of our rural communities.</b></i>	We will invest in the improved energy efficiency of our rural housing stock and consider solutions for the future decarbonisation of rural household heating systems;	21. We will continue to assess the investment required to improve the energy performance of our rural housing stock.
		22. We will continue to develop and monitor the outcomes of energy efficiency and renewable energy pilots such as the HANDIHEAT and RULET Projects to identify alternative energy sources for our rural properties which will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions in these areas.
	We will support and encourage the improved energy efficiency of private sector homes in rural areas;	23. We will promote our Energy Advice Service and the availability of our Energy Efficiency Grants for private sector homes through our 'Rural Matters' publication and at rural-focused events and seminars.
	We will support and encourage the inclusion of planning policies in Local Development Plans which aim to promote climate change resilience within our rural communities;;	24. We will use our role as statutory consultees in the preparation of Local Development Plans to promote the need for planning policies which support sustainable development, increased energy efficiency and a reduction in carbon emissions.
	We will work with partners to maximise the use of existing land and property assets in rural areas.	25. We will continue to promote our Social Enterprise programme in rural areas recognising the particular benefits to our rural housing communities from supporting and enabling new social enterprises in these areas to realise their full potential.
		26. We will maximise opportunities to facilitate the sustainable growth of rural communities through collaborative investment and support.

# 12. Monitoring & Reporting

## **Monitoring**

The Housing Executive will have overall responsibility for implementation of 'Reaching Rural' – Rural Strategy & Action Plan (s) 2021-25 and progress will be monitored by an internal **Rural Inter-Divisional Advisory Group** chaired by the Director of Regional Services. The Panel will meet biennially to review progress, oversee the general implementation of the Strategy and advise on organisational priorities which may impact on delivery of the Strategy.

The high-level actions discussed throughout the Strategy and summarized in Table 3, will provide the basis for the initial Rural Action Plan (2021-2022). This Plan will be reviewed on an annual basis to ensure that it remains relevant over the four year period and there is an opportunity for the Rural Inter-Divisional Advisory Group to change or add to the plan during the review period each year.

We will also seek to re-establish an external **Rural Advisory Panel** to gain a range of insights from representatives from regional bodies, housing associations and the community and voluntary sector with an interest in rural housing and to identify opportunities for collaborative projects in line with our strategic priorities.

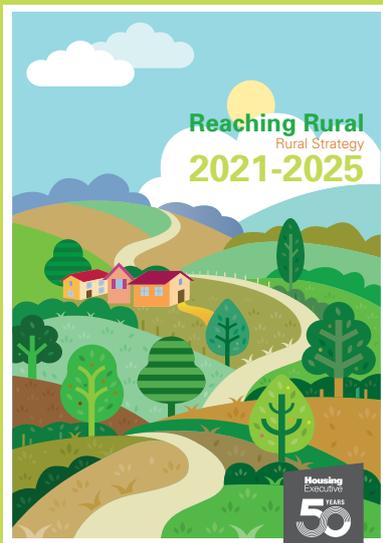
## **Reporting**

The Rural Action Plan will be monitored on an ongoing basis by the Housing Executive's Rural & Regeneration Unit and quarterly updates will be provided to the Rural Inter-Divisional Advisory Group and internal departmental leads. This will be supplemented by a quarterly statistical report which will detail rural waiting list statistics and information on the delivery of key business programmes in rural areas.

An **annual update** on progress of the Strategy and an overview of the outcomes achieved will be presented to the Housing Executive's Executive Team for approval before being published and shared with partners and stakeholders.

Our '**Rural Matters**' publication will also showcase projects which have been successfully actioned as a result of the Strategy and will promote the numerous Housing Executive services discussed throughout the Strategy which can benefit our rural customers and wider rural communities.





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