



RURAL STRATEGY **2026-2031** CONSULTATION

Foreword

We are delighted to introduce the Housing Executive's draft Rural Strategy for public consultation.

This draft document builds on progress we have made, working alongside communities, to ensure the right homes are built in the right places, across Northern Ireland. In recent years, our place shaping teams have worked directly with local communities to identify existing or emerging housing need through Latent Demand Tests, and several of these have directly led to the provision of new build social housing in rural areas. This strategy seeks to deliver more homes, and more quickly, recognising the positive social, economic and environmental impact of housing for rural areas.

The document also recognises that bespoke housing solutions are required for distinct rural needs, including a specific focus on homelessness prevention, on housing for older people and investment in community cohesion. Importantly it also emphasises the critical role which climate adaptation will play, in this decade, to keep people in rural areas safe and protected.

We are very grateful for the inclusive way in which this draft Strategy has been developed so far, with many of our tenants and partner organisations already feeding forward their views. We look forward to an engaged conversation as we improve upon the draft Strategy, so that the final version will have a positive impact on people, homes and communities across our rural areas.

Nicole Lappin

Chair

Grainia Long

Chief Executive

Executive Summary

The Housing Executive's Rural Strategy 2026–2031 sets out how we will meet the needs of rural residents across Northern Ireland through targeted action, strong partnerships, and clear accountability. The Strategy is grounded in our statutory duties under the **Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016** and equality obligations under **Section 75**, and is fully aligned to the **Draft Corporate Strategy 2025/26–2027/28**, directly advancing the objectives to:

- **Ensure the right homes are built in the right places;**
- **Reduce housing-led health inequalities;**
- **Regenerate and invest in communities; and**
- **Align our economic and environmental impact.**

Rural communities face distinct challenges—dispersed settlement patterns, hidden housing need, affordability pressures, older housing stock, limited access to services and transport, and greater exposure to fuel poverty and climate risk.

As of March 2025, the Housing Executive owns around **14,250 rural homes (17.6% of stock)**. Rural applicants in housing stress have increased substantially in recent years, while allocations have not kept pace. This Strategy responds with a **place-based and outcomes-focused** approach backed by robust governance, a practical action plan, and measurable indicators.

Vision: *Thriving and sustainable rural communities where people of all backgrounds can access affordable housing and enjoy a decent quality of life.*

Strategic Themes and Priorities (consistent numbering across the Strategy):

Theme 1 – Supporting Our Rural Customers

1. Deliver tailored solutions that address distinct rural needs.
2. Enhance support for an ageing population.
3. Invest in accessible housing options to meet growing demand.
4. Provide homelessness prevention and support in rural areas.
5. Promote inclusion and cohesion through community-based programmes.

Theme 2 – Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes

6. Enable new affordable homes in areas with identified need (including hidden/latent demand).
7. Collaborate with councils to shape planning policies that support inclusive rural growth.
8. Promote affordable homes within mixed-tenure environments.

Theme 3 – Securing the Future of Our Rural Communities

9. Improve the energy efficiency of rural housing stock.
10. Encourage energy upgrades in the rural private sector to reduce fuel poverty.
11. Promote climate-resilient planning through Local Development Plans.
12. Maximise the use of existing land and property assets in rural areas.

High-Impact Priorities for Delivery

The Strategy prioritises five critical workstreams to drive rural outcomes:

- **Rural Housing Needs Tests:** Expand annual testing to uncover hidden demand and inform the Social Housing Development Programme.
- **Rural Housing Steering Group:** Collaborate with DfC, DAERA, and LPS to address structural barriers such as land availability, planning delays, and infrastructure constraints.
- **Energy Efficiency & Low-Carbon Pilots:** We will endeavour to deliver a stock-wide low carbon/thermal retrofit programme, however this will be contingent on availability of funding.
- **Community Planning Engagement:** Strengthen partnerships and use rural forums to embed local voices in housing and land-use decisions.
- **Rural Community Awards:** Continue recognising and supporting rural groups to foster inclusion, resilience, and community-led solutions.

Equality and Rural Needs:

The Strategy has been **equality-screened** and subject to **RNIA**. Screening indicates positive impacts for rural residents and protected groups, particularly older people and disabled people. Equality and rural considerations will be **standing items** within Strategy governance and built into monitoring and reporting.

Governance and Accountability

Delivery will be overseen by a **Rural Interdivisional Working Group (and Sub-Group)** with **quarterly performance reporting** and **annual public updates**. Actions are assigned to owners with milestones and measurable indicators.

Consultation and Implementation

An eight-week public consultation will test and refine priorities and measures. Subject to approvals, implementation will commence 2026 with a five-year delivery period to 2031, with mid-term review in 2028/29.

Defining Rural

The Housing Executive adopts the definition of 'rural' as set out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). To this classification, rural areas are defined as settlements with a population of fewer than 5,000 people, as well as the surrounding open countryside.¹ As of 2024, there are over 600 recognised rural settlements across Northern Ireland with rural areas comprising more than 80% of the region's total land area. According to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) *Rural Statistics for Northern Ireland* (2023)², approximately 36% of the population reside in rural areas, which equates to around 690,000 people.³ The distinct needs and characteristics of rural communities require a targeted and place-based approach. This informs the Housing Executive's commitment to a rural strategy, including the provision of affordable, energy-efficient homes, support for tenancy sustainment and collaborative planning that reflects local aspirations and constraints.

Housing Executive Rural Housing Stock

As of March 2025, the Housing Executive owns approximately 14,250 homes in rural areas and this represents around 17.6% of its total housing stock (of approximately 81,000 properties).

90% of Rural workers are more likely to use their own transport to commute than those from urban areas (82%), though this gap is narrowing. Commute distances and travel times to essential services are significantly higher for those living in rural areas, which is worsened by a reliance on cars, due to unreliable or non-existent public transport. The average commute miles per year by rural dwellers (1,261) is almost double those living in urban areas (646).

Between 2001 and 2020, the population of rural areas in Northern Ireland grew by approximately 20%, in contrast to a 7% increase in urban areas. These figures reflect the geographical and settlement characteristics of Northern Ireland, where a dispersed population and strong rural community ties have contributed to sustained population growth in more rural areas. Housing affordability, lifestyle preferences and access to green space have encouraged movement to and retention in rural communities, despite the relative inaccessibility of some key services.

¹ [Rural statistics | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

² [Key Rural Issues 2023 Publication | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

³ [DAERA Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2024](#)

Below is a map which highlights the urban/rural split in Northern Ireland.



□ Rural Areas

□ Urban Areas

Key Social and Economic Characteristics (DAERA 2023/4)

Positive rural trends:

- **Higher life satisfaction** and wellbeing, with people in rural areas exhibiting lower anxiety levels.
- **Higher rates of full-time employment** with 61% of working age more likely to be in full-time employment.
- **Greater rates of home ownership:** levels are higher in rural (83%) than those in urban areas (67%).

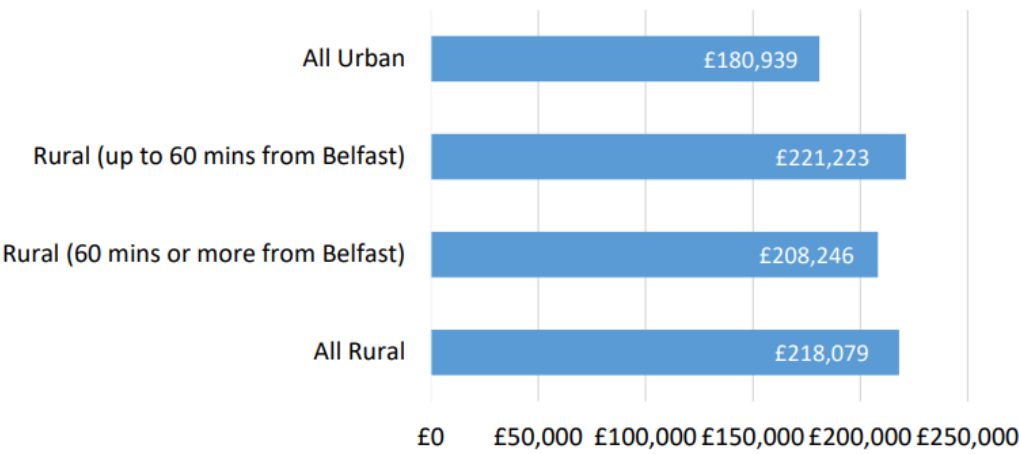
Challenges facing rural communities:

- **Limited access to services:** only 61% of rural households lived within a 13-minute walk of their nearest bus stop, compared to 92% of households living in urban areas.⁴

⁴ [Travel Survey for Northern Ireland In-depth Report 2021](#)

- **Transport dependence:** 90% of rural workers commute by private car, compared to 82% in urban areas.
- **Housing affordability:** average house prices in rural areas exceed those in towns and small cities.

Figure 50: Average House Prices (NI), Urban/Rural Comparison, Q3 2024



Strategic Context

Rural communities across Northern Ireland face a unique set of challenges—from limited access to essential services and affordable housing, to heightened risks of fuel poverty and the growing impacts of climate change.⁵ These issues demand tailored, long-term solutions that promote fairness, equity, and resilience. This Rural Strategy is shaped by a robust strategic and legislative context. Together, these frameworks reinforce our commitment to delivering sustainable housing solutions that respond to the evolving needs of rural communities.

This strategy aims to integrate and consolidate the overlapping objectives from these and other strategic plans to create a single action plan focussed on rural delivery, ensuring consistency and cross departmental collaboration.

1. Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Rural Needs Act places a statutory duty on all public authorities, to give *due regard* to the needs of rural communities when developing or revising policies, strategies and services.

DAERA guidance recommends using Rural Needs Impact Assessments (RNIA) to meet this duty⁶, helping identify how decisions affect rural areas. The Housing Executive reports RNIA's annually to DAERA and publishes them in its Annual Report.

2. The Importance of Delivering Affordable Housing for Rural Areas in NI

This strategy prioritises enabling the delivery of rural homes and addressing identified need, including affordable housing.

As of March 2025, Northern Ireland currently has over 48,000 households on the Common Waiting List for social housing, including significant rural demand.

Between 2021 and 2025, over 3,200 allocations and 504 new starts were delivered in rural areas, supported by ongoing rural housing needs tests.

Research by the University of Liverpool and UCL has made six recommendations⁷ to strengthen rural supply, now being considered by a cross-departmental working group. Ongoing engagement with NI Water ensures rural infrastructure constraints are actively managed, with this operational engagement informing the risk management of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP)⁸ delivery and future planning.

3. The Fuel Poverty Strategy

The draft Fuel Poverty Strategy will provide a long-term framework for reducing fuel poverty, which disproportionately affects rural households due to older housing stock, oil dependence and higher heating costs.

The Strategy is expected to focus on energy efficiency improvements and targeted support for

⁵ [DAERA Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2024](#)

⁶ [Advice on Undertaking a Rural Needs Impact Assessment | Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

⁷ [Delivering new social and affordable housing in rural areas: a review of barriers and opportunities](#)

⁸ [The Housing Executive - Social housing development programme](#)

vulnerable households. The Housing Executive will use it as a practical tool to guide interventions that lower fuel costs and improve living conditions in rural areas.

4. The Climate Change Act

The Climate Change Act sets legally binding targets to reduce emissions by at least 48% by 2030 and achieve Net Zero by 2050, with residential properties forming a key part of these targets.

Many rural homes are older and reliant on fossil fuels, making energy efficiency and decarbonisation essential. The Housing Supply Strategy commits to improving rural housing stock, supporting low-carbon construction and retrofitting.

5. The Housing Supply Strategy

The strategy sets an ambitious target of delivering at least 100,000 homes over its lifetime, with 33,000 designated as social homes.

The Housing Supply Strategy 2024–2039 sets out a collaborative approach to delivering 100,000 homes, including 33,000 social homes. It aims to provide good-quality, affordable and sustainable homes within thriving communities.

For rural areas, the strategy highlights affordable housing, infrastructure capacity (particularly wastewater), and better use of land as critical to sustaining rural populations.

The Housing Executive supports the strategy's ambitions and is prepared to expand its new-build programme following the success of its Sunningdale pilot. Housing Associations and NI Water remain key partners in overcoming delivery constraints.

The Housing Executive is ready to deliver on the strategy's objectives. The strategy supports the Housing Executive in building more social homes and revitalizing its operations to maintain and provide good quality, affordable homes. Our ambition is to develop our new build programme after the success of a pilot scheme at Sunningdale that saw 6 new build, energy efficient homes constructed.

Recognised as trusted and reliable partners in delivering social and affordable homes, Housing Associations are prepared to meet the strategy's ambitions over the next 15 years. The Housing Executive will continue to work collaboratively with Housing Associations and NI Water to resolve wastewater capacity issues which may have the potential to impede development.

The Housing Supply Strategy's success for rural communities will depend on a joined-up approach across central and local government, the wider housing and construction industry, private and voluntary sectors to unlock new solutions, maximize financial resources and implement necessary legislative and policy changes.

Added Value of the Rural Strategy

This Strategy adds value beyond existing programmes by:

- **Applying a Rural Lens:** Embeds a distinct, place-based approach across policies and services, ensuring rural settlement patterns, access constraints, and hidden need are explicitly factored into design and delivery.
- **Consolidating Delivery into One Plan:** Integrates overlapping rural elements from multiple strategies (housing supply, homelessness, Supporting People, sustainability) into a single action plan with clear owners, milestones, and KPIs.
- **Strengthening Governance & Accountability:** Establishes a dedicated Rural Interdivisional governance structure with quarterly monitoring, enabling challenge, escalation, and course correction.
- **Improving Evidence & Insight:** Commits to cyclical rural analytics (e.g., rural housing stress, allocations, size/type need, accessible homes data), targeted Housing Need Tests, and improved AHR data with rural breakouts.
- **Targeting Investment and Delivery:** Focuses capital and revenue effort where rural impact is greatest (e.g., land identification, viability support, retrofit and accessibility), aligning with SHDP and Local Development Plans.
- **Shaping Policy & Planning:** Proactively influences LDP policy (e.g., Lifetime Homes, wheelchair units, mixed tenure, rural exceptions) and coordinates with NI Water and partners to address infrastructure constraints.
- **Reducing Fuel Poverty:** Prioritises energy efficiency and low-carbon heating pathways suited to off-gas rural areas, combining fabric first, advice, grants, and pilots to reduce bills and emissions.
- **Embedding Community Voice:** Uses the Rural Residents' Forum and community networks to continuously surface need (including hidden demand) and co-design responses.
- **Clear Measures of Success:** Defines rural-specific KPIs and transparent reporting to demonstrate progress on supply, condition, affordability, accessibility, and resilience.

THEME 1 – SUPPORTING OUR RURAL CUSTOMERS

Theme 1 outlines the Housing Executive’s approach to ensuring that people in rural areas can access the housing support services they require at the right time. This approach is designed to help customers live independently in safe, stable, and inclusive communities. We are also committed to identifying issues and working to tackle community safety issues that affect our residents, our communities and our estates.⁹

The theme acknowledges the distinct experiences and needs of rural customers compared to those in urban settings, where challenges such as limited access to support services, restricted referral pathways, and heightened risks of social isolation are often compounded. This strategy commits to eliminating geographic disparities in service provision, ensuring housing services remain accessible, inclusive, and responsive regardless of location.

The high-level outcome is to ensure that rural tenants and customers feel safe, supported, and empowered to access the housing and related services they need aligning directly with the Corporate Strategy objective of “Reducing housing-led health inequalities”

Priority 1 – Deliver tailored housing solutions that address the unique needs of rural customers

Our local office staff play a vital role in delivering frontline services, ensuring that the distinct needs of rural customers are both recognised and addressed. Our Housing Advisors and Patch Managers are based throughout our 35 local Area offices. Through daily interaction with applicants, tenants and communities they have developed a deep understanding of the issues faced in rural areas, including geographic isolation, limited access to essential services and the growing demand for housing solutions that reflect the realities of rural life in Northern Ireland.

Regular engagement with Fora such as the Rural Residents Forum remains a vital mechanism for capturing the voices and lived experiences of rural communities. The Forum provides valuable insight into emerging challenges and opportunities, informing strategic decision-making and service design. It also serves as an effective platform to share and promote positive stories from rural areas, the promotion of useful tools, resources and information that is tailored to rural living targeted to ensure the Forum reflects and represents the broad diversity of rural communities is an on-going challenge which will continue to be a priority throughout the lifetime of this strategy. Ongoing engagement with Housing Associations and tenants is central to this work through forums such as the Rural Residents Forum.

By combining the local knowledge of frontline staff with the perspectives shared through the community platforms we engage with, the Housing Executive can shape policies and services that are grounded in the lived experience of rural life. This collaborative approach strengthens trust, promotes inclusivity, and ensures that housing solutions remain responsive, effective, and meaningful for all rural customers.

⁹ [Community Safety Strategy 2025-2030](#)

Housing Support and Tenancy Sustainment

The Housing Executive is committed to sustaining tenancies and preventing homelessness through a holistic, person-centred approach. Our vision of “*tenancies that thrive*” ensures that homes provide a secure foundation for wellbeing, independence, and resilience.

We achieve this through:

- Frontline Support and Early Intervention – proactive engagement to address issues before they escalate.
- Targeted Support for Vulnerable Tenants – tailored assistance for those at greatest risk of tenancy breakdown.
- A Holistic, Inclusive Approach – integrating housing, health, and community support to meet diverse needs.
- Pre- and Early Tenancy Support – preparing tenants for successful occupancy and sustaining tenancies from the outset.

Rural-Specific Challenges and Responses

The Rural Unit will continue delivering training to local offices on rural housing issues. We will also strengthen targeted communication and engagement, ensuring visibility of housing advice and support services through:

- Regular updates via the Rural Residents’ Forum
- Partnership working with the Rural Community Network/local councils
- Features in our quarterly newsletter
- Consultation events and rural housing needs testing

The Emergency Response Plan¹⁰ provides a structured framework for how the Housing Executive manages incidents of any scale. It outlines the organisational response arrangements, including the activation of appropriate management structures and the coordinated response to specific incidents. The plan also sets out key roles and responsibilities, action-logging templates and post-incident debrief proformas to assist reflection and learning for future responses.

Recent events, such as Storm Eowyn in 2025, highlight the value of this coordinated approach. This incident required a multi-agency response to focus on the vulnerability and humanitarian need, particularly within rural and isolated areas experiencing prolonged power outages. This was led by Northern Ireland Electric (NIE), with the Housing Executive as partner, leading to a collaborative response to reach affected communities and individuals.

¹⁰ [Emergency Response Plan](#)

The Sustaining Tenancies Grant Funding Programme

- The Sustaining Tenancies Grant Funding Programme (STGFP) will continue to invest in voluntary and community sector organisations to deliver targeted support that strengthens resilient, sustainable tenancies, particularly for vulnerable households.
- As a core delivery mechanism for the *Landlord Tenancy Support & Sustainment Strategy 2025–2030: Tenancies That Thrive*, the STGFP advances early intervention, person-centred support and equitable service provision.
- The programme recognises the specific challenges faced by rural tenants, including isolation and limited-service access, and will prioritise flexible delivery models and coordinated partnerships with local organisations.
- In 2025, grants of up to £100,000 will be available to voluntary, community and charitable organisations, with a priority focus on rural areas to support community-led, practical solutions.

Priority 2 - Enhance support services for an ageing population

Strengthening Housing Support Provision

The Strategic Needs Assessment (SNA) has highlighted a persistent shortfall between current provision and levels of demand, with a gap of around 14% (projected to rise to 22–30% within 3 years & up to 43% within the next 10 if not addressed). The most significant pressures are evident in services for older people wishing to live independently for longer, people with mental health needs, single people experiencing homelessness with alcohol or drug-related problems and women at risk of domestic abuse.

The extension of the current Supporting People Strategy to March 2026 provides an opportunity to re-focus delivery and strengthen the programme for the future with a key priority to close the supply gap by prioritising investment in areas of highest unmet need, particularly in rural communities where access to services is more limited.

Rural needs will remain a central focus in the delivery of Supporting People services. The Housing Executive recognises that geographic isolation, limited transport infrastructure, and distance from service hubs present distinct challenges for rural communities. Addressing these requires tailored, flexible approaches.

- Outreach and mobile support
- Digital access and remote engagement
- Community-based delivery mechanisms
- Flexible, locally coordinated interventions

By embedding rural-specific considerations into service planning and delivery, the Housing Executive will continue to promote inclusive, responsive support across all tenures and geographies. The Rural Strategy will align closely with the Supporting People programme through quarterly monitoring reports, working-group meetings to ensure that rural and often 'hard to reach areas' have equitable access to the service.

Housing Support and Assistive Technology

Ensuring that older people in rural Northern Ireland can live safely and independently is a core priority of this strategy. The following points outline the key measures and programmes that strengthen independence, safety and wellbeing for older rural residents.

- Rural older people face higher risks of isolation, fuel poverty and limited access to services, making housing support essential.
- Over 10,000 supported housing units exist across NI, but rural areas continue to report insufficient provision.
- The Supporting People programme funds vital housing-related support that enables vulnerable rural households to remain independent.¹¹
- The Disabled Facilities Grant¹² provides essential home adaptations for older people in private housing, based on occupational therapist referrals.
- Pilot projects using smart assistive technologies have improved home safety and independence for older rural tenants.
- Combined approaches such as modern design, digital aids, targeted outreach and flexible delivery help enhance independent living for rural older residents.

Priority 3 - Invest in accessible housing options to meet growing demand.

Responding to Demographic Change: Strengthening Rural Housing Provision

Northern Ireland is experiencing a demographic shift, with an increasingly ageing population driving demand for suitable, accessible housing. This strategy reaffirms the Housing Executive's commitment to inclusive and sustainable rural growth, with a focus on:

- Delivering affordable homes
- Improving energy efficiency to address fuel poverty
- Enhancing local engagement to support tenancy sustainment

Protecting and Enhancing Rural Housing Supply

To safeguard housing options for rural communities, the Housing Executive must retain and invest in its existing stock of accessible homes. This includes:

- Greater investment in retrofit and adaptation to meet accessibility needs
- Upgrades to improve energy efficiency in ageing rural housing stock
- Adoption of future-proof design principles in new social housing development

These measures are essential to ensure that rural housing provision keeps pace with demographic change and continues to meet the needs of older residents and those with additional support requirements.

¹¹ [The Housing Executive - Health and welfare research](#)

¹² [The Housing Executive - Types of grants available](#)

Accessible Housing Register (AHR)

The Housing Executive is enhancing how accessible housing is identified, managed and allocated across Northern Ireland to better support people with disabilities, including those in rural communities. Through improved data, targeted incentives and clearer operational processes, these initiatives strengthen independent living and ensure rural areas are not disadvantaged in access to suitable homes.

Lifetime Homes, Accessible Housing Standards and Wheelchair Standard Homes

Inclusive, adaptable housing is essential to supporting rural communities, particularly as rural areas face an ageing population, geographic isolation and limited access to services. Embedding Lifetime Homes and Wheelchair Housing Standards in new rural developments future-proofs housing stock, reduces long-term pressures on health and social care, and ensures rural residents have equal access to safe, accessible and independent living.

Promoting Accessible Housing in Rural Areas Through Local Development Planning

Accessible and wheelchair standard homes are especially important in rural areas, where limited housing supply, an ageing population and infrastructure constraints make it harder for residents with mobility needs to find suitable accommodation. Embedding inclusive design in new rural developments helps future-proof housing, supports independent living and ensures rural communities are not disadvantaged by location.

Priority 4 - Provide homelessness prevention and support in rural areas.

Preventing and addressing homelessness in rural areas requires tailored, accessible and proactive approaches, given geographic isolation, limited services and rising housing pressures. The Homelessness Strategy 2022–2027 embeds rural needs within both strategic planning and local delivery, ensuring that rural communities benefit from effective prevention, early intervention and supported housing pathways.

Key Strategic Points

- Independent research commissioned by the Housing Executive will assess how Housing First can be effectively delivered in rural contexts.¹³
- Local Homelessness Groups develop Local Area Action Plans that reflect rural challenges and map local support services.
- Accessible Housing Advisors in local offices play a critical role in rural areas by providing early intervention, tenancy sustainment advice and referrals to floating support.

Rural Prevention and Early Intervention

¹³ [Housing First Feasibility Study - Final Report December 2025 accessible](#)

- Rural engagement is embedded through the Homelessness Prevention Fund¹⁴, which supports community-led projects promoting awareness, early intervention and training.
- The Fund has proven to be cost-effective and outcome-focused, helping reduce reliance on emergency interventions.
- Ongoing outreach is delivered through the Rural Forum's, rural publications and targeted participation in rural housing events.
- Collaboration with Central Homelessness Forum enables homelessness awareness sessions across rural communities, improving understanding of risks and available support.

The Housing Executive aims to ensure that rural individuals and families are informed, supported and able to access help early.

Priority 5 - Promote inclusion and cohesion through community-based support programmes.

Strong community-based support is essential to addressing isolation, inequality and limited-service access in rural areas. The Housing Executive works closely with rural tenants, residents and local organisations to ensure that housing policies and services reflect local needs, strengthen community resilience and enable vulnerable households to access timely support. Through active engagement structures, targeted funding and continued research into community-led housing, we aim to create inclusive and sustainable rural communities.

- Community organisations play a key role in identifying and supporting vulnerable rural households.
- Housing Executive Community Involvement framework facilitates two-way communication between residents and Housing Executive staff from Area Offices Regional Offices and Policy Teams.
- The Housing Community Network (HCN) operates across NI using a co-design and co-delivery approach to inform and develop our service delivery to tenants, residents and leaseholders in our estates.¹⁵
- The Rural Residents' Forum provides dedicated rural input into Housing Executive strategies and decision-making forums.
- Continued investment will strengthen the Forum's role and ensure it remains inclusive and representative.
- Rural funding streams—including the Homelessness Prevention Fund and Supporting People Programme—support community-led initiatives that reduce isolation and sustain tenancies.
- Research into Community-Led Housing (CLH) gathers rural community perspectives to inform locally appropriate and scalable delivery models.
- Partnership working with rural communities supports stronger, more cohesive places and accessible, equitable housing support.

¹⁴ [NIHE Homeless Prevention Grant Fund Programme for 2025/26 — Supporting Communities](#)

¹⁵ [The Housing Executive - Community Involvement and Cohesion Strategy](#)

Investing in Rural Community Cohesion and Involvement

The Housing Executive's Community Involvement and Cohesion Unit supports rural communities through the Housing Community Network and area-based Good Relations Officers, who provide direct assistance to engage, enable, and empower local groups. Through targeted funding programmes, we promote good relations, equality of opportunity, and active participation, guided by the Community Involvement and Cohesion Strategy 2024–2029.

We currently work with around 166 rural community groups, 102 of which receive Community Cohesion funding. Between January 2020-2025, £398,850 was invested in rural projects including estate re-imaging schemes, community gardens, and local festivals.

In 2024/25, 38 rural groups received Community Involvement Grants to support projects focused on:

- Intergenerational engagement
- Health and wellbeing
- Digital inclusion
- Environmental enhancement
- Addressing poverty and cost-of-living pressures

These investments demonstrate our commitment to strengthening rural communities through inclusive, community-led initiatives that foster connection, resilience, and long-term local benefit.



Members of Draperstown's Cornerstone Youth Club joined forces with pupils from St. Colm's High School, with support from the Housing Executive in a community initiative to brighten Plantin Park.

Both groups worked together to plant bulbs that will bloom into a stunning display of flowers in the Spring, adding vibrant colour to the heart of the town.

Co-ordinated with the aim of engaging local people with meaningful community work, encouraging teamwork, environmental stewardship, and pride in public spaces.

Speaking about the event, Sharon Crooks, Mid-Ulster Area Manager for Housing Executive said:

"This project is about more than just planting bulbs; it's about planting the seeds of community spirit. Watching the young people work together with such enthusiasm and dedication is truly inspiring.

"These flowers will brighten Plantin Park for everyone to enjoy, and I am so proud of the effort they've put into making this happen."

All young people involved have been commended for their hard work and enthusiasm, with many expressing pride in their contribution to improving the local environment.

"This project is part of a broader effort by Cornerstone Youth Club to promote positive youth engagement and environmental awareness in the Draperstown community."



Enhancing Digital Engagement in Rural Communities

Digital communication is increasingly central to how the Housing Executive delivers services and advice, particularly to rural communities with limited physical access to offices. The ***My Housing Executive*** portal provides secure, flexible access to tenancy information and services from any device.

Rural outreach is further strengthened through the quarterly ***Reaching Rural Newsletter*** offering practical tips, funding updates, and community news in an accessible format. Social media also supports engagement, especially with younger audiences, enabling timely and wide-reaching communication.

Multi-channel promotion ensures rural communities remain informed and supported, using:

- The Rural Unit and Forum's
- Area-based Good Relations Officers
- Rural publications, newsletters, and community events
- Housing information sessions and targeted digital communications

This integrated approach helps rural residents access services, funding, and support while staying connected and engaged with Housing Executive initiatives.

Celebrating Rural Excellence through the Rural Community Awards

The Housing Executive's Rural Community Awards¹⁶, launched in 2014, recognise the efforts of volunteers and community groups improving rural areas across Northern Ireland. Since inception, 308 applications have been received, reflecting the creativity, resilience, and community spirit of rural groups.

Aligned with the Rural Strategy 2021–2025, £27,500 in prize funding has supported three award categories:

- Rural Community Spirit Award, Cleaner and Greener Award & Community Champion Award.

Enhancements in 2024—including partnership events with the Rural Community Network (RCN) and runner-up prizes—have broadened participation and highlighted initiatives promoting health, social inclusion, sustainability, and local resilience.

Beyond recognition, the Awards provide a platform for rural groups to share experiences, exchange ideas, and access information on Housing Executive services and funding. The Housing Executive will continue to collaborate with RCN to expand the Awards' reach, ensuring rural volunteers and community groups are supported, celebrated, and inspired to strengthen their communities.

¹⁶ [The Housing Executive - Rural Community Awards](#)

THEME 2: ENABLING THE PROVISION OF AFFORDABLE RURAL HOMES

The strategic theme of Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes sets out the Housing Executive's plan to identify the need and facilitate the provision of social and intermediate homes needed to support rural communities over the next five years. This theme directly supports the Corporate Strategy objective of "Ensuring the right homes are built in the right places", and aims to facilitate the availability of affordable homes, thereby fostering balanced, inclusive, and sustainable rural communities. Delivery is challenged by limited suitable sites and the difficulty of identifying 'hidden demand'. The theme achieves this high-level outcome through three strategic priorities.

The high-level outcome is to facilitate the availability of affordable homes, thereby fostering balanced, inclusive, and sustainable rural communities.

Priority 6 - Enable new affordable homes in areas with identified need.

The Housing Executive has several statutory duties to facilitate the provision of social housing in rural areas to include –

- Identifying housing need (including areas where there is hidden demand)
- Assessing housing need at a local level
- Developing Strategic Guidelines setting out annual geographic and needs based targets for the delivery of SHDP
- Managing the 3-year SHDP programme

Identifying and Assessing Housing Need (including areas where there is hidden demand)

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.¹⁷ 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) across Northern Ireland are analysed. Five-year housing need projections are calculated for every CLA based on the residual levels of housing stress after the allocation of existing Housing Executive and housing association properties and considering any new build schemes which are planned for the area.

The Fundamental Review of Allocations (FRA) removed the two-area cap in 2023 and now allows applicants to select as many areas of choice as they wish. This change gives rural applicants greater

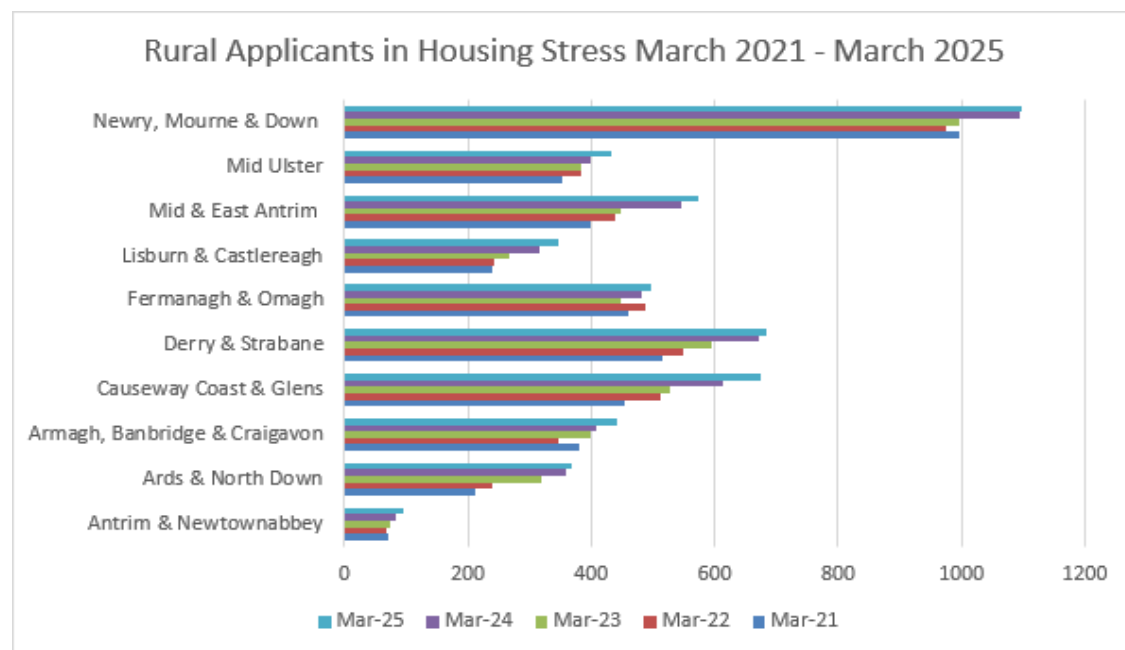
¹⁷ [Housing Selection Scheme Rules](#)

flexibility in where they want to live by increasing the pool of properties they can be matched to. With each applicant potentially selecting multiple areas of choice, the Housing Executive can collate a stronger map of expressed demand, making it possible to identify under-served small settlements, spot demand spillovers between settlements and create a data analysis of size realistic catchments for proposed new-build schemes.

Whilst steps are taken to identify housing need in rural areas, there are those that do not meet social housing eligibility thresholds and remain unable to buy a home on the open market without assistance, commonly referred to as ‘intermediate housing need’. Applicants that fall into this category will be sign-posted to Co-Ownership and similar shared ownership schemes, as they directly address this need by offering an affordable route to home ownership and reduce pressure on social housing.

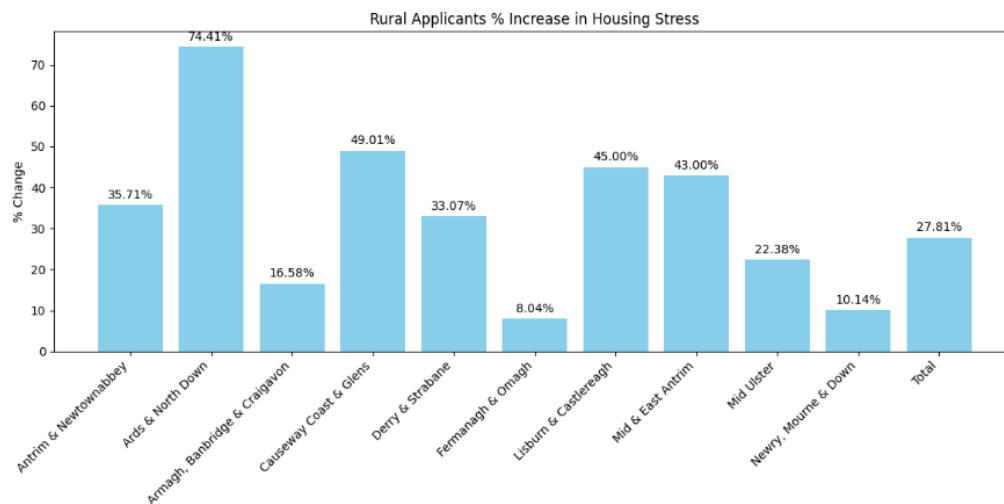
Rural Housing Stress

Figure 1



Between March 2021 and March 2025, the number of rural applicants in housing stress across Northern Ireland rose from 4,077 to 5,211 (Figure 1), representing a 28 % increase. The figures indicate a year-on-year growth trend, highlighting the continually increasing level of unmet housing need in rural communities, occurring alongside relatively static levels of new allocations.

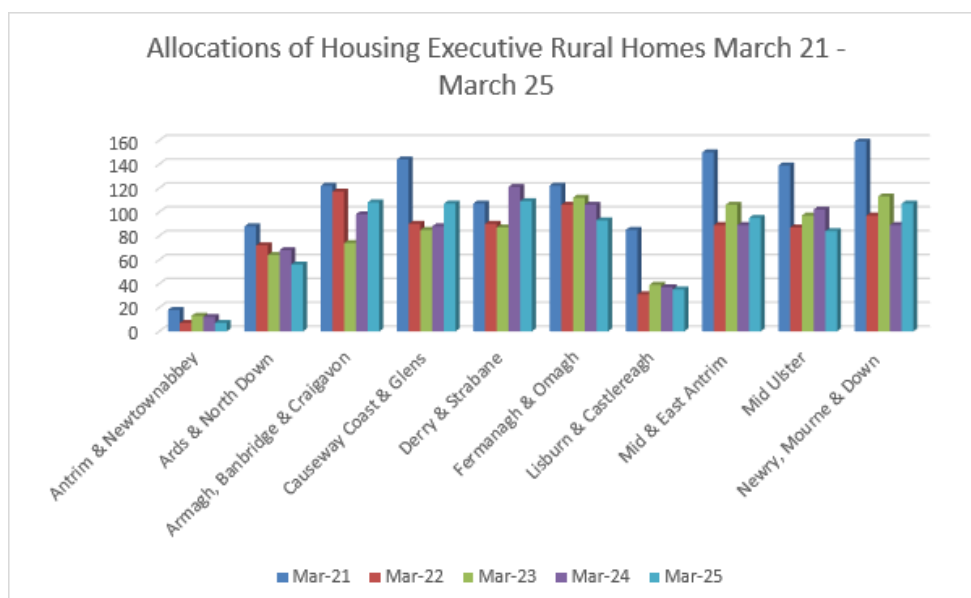
Figure 2



Every local government district experienced an increase in rural housing stress during this period (Figure 2). The most significant rises were recorded in Ards and North Down (74%) and Causeway Coast and Glens (49%). Newry, Mourne and Down continued to record the highest absolute number of rural applicants in housing stress, reaching 1,097 by 2025 and accounting for more than one-fifth of the total rural need.

Allocations of NIHE property

Figure 3

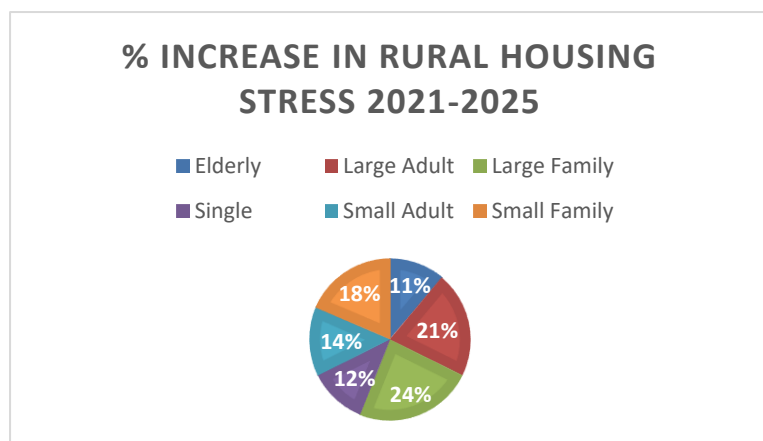


Allocations of NIHE rural homes have not kept pace with this rising demand (Figure 3). Total rural allocations declined from 1,134 in 2021 to 801 in 2025, a fall of 29%. This reduction in supply has occurred in parallel with growing demand, widening the overall gap between need and

delivery. Following this initial decrease, the overall number of allocations remained largely static, recording 790 in March 2023, and 801 in March 2025. By March 2025, the highest allocation volumes were recorded in Derry & Strabane (109), Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon (108) and Newry, Mourne & Down (107).

Demographics/Household Types

Figure 4



Single-person households continued to make up the largest share of those in housing stress, increasing from 1,784 in 2021 to 2,184 in 2025, a rise of 22%. This growth reflects a shortage of smaller rural homes suited to single applicants. Small family households, which increased from 1,048 to 1,418 (35%), also contributed significantly to the overall rise, indicating growing difficulties for young families seeking to remain in or move to rural areas. Large family households grew from 327 to 474, an increase of 45%, suggesting intensifying demand for larger homes that are also often limited in rural housing stock (Figure 4).

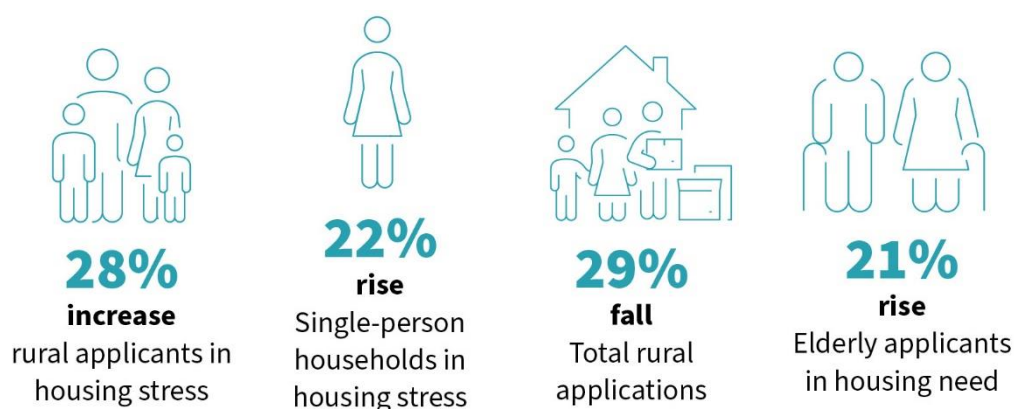
Elderly applicants increased from 632 in 2021 to 763 in 2025, a 21% rise, demonstrating the growing impact of an ageing rural population on housing need. The number of large adult and small adult households remained relatively low but rose modestly over the period, reflecting a gradual increase in demand from multi-adult and couple households.

Recent data indicates a rising level of rural housing stress across Northern Ireland, affecting all household types. The most significant increases are observed among single-person households, small families, and larger family households. This trend reflects a growing misalignment between housing supply and need, compounded by an inadequate mix of housing sizes and tenures.

To address these pressures, a coordinated and strategic approach to rural housing delivery is required. Policy measures must also ensure that older residents are supported to remain within their communities, preserving social cohesion and reducing displacement. A comprehensive response will require cross-sector collaboration, improved planning mechanisms, and a renewed focus on rural housing within broader housing policy frameworks.

A sustained increase in housing stress (Figure 1), coupled with declining allocation rates (Figure 3), indicates that the current supply of new rural homes is falling short of need. Tackling this issue will require targeted investment in areas where demand is rising most rapidly, such as Ards and North Down, and Causeway Coast and Glens. Additional support for new build developments will also be

essential in regions with the highest overall demand, including Newry, Mourne and Down, and Derry and Strabane. To effectively meet housing need and prevent further exclusion in rural communities, it will be critical to enhance land availability, introduce greater planning flexibility, and maintain a strong policy focus on rural housing.



Housing Need Tests (Latent/Hidden Demand)

To help address rural housing need, the Housing Executive operates an annual programme of Rural Housing Need Tests. These tests involve direct engagement with rural communities, encouraging individuals to speak with housing advisors about their circumstances and explore potential housing options. Tests are initiated where local representatives identify unmet need, where the Housing Executive holds land with development potential, or where housing association proposals cannot be justified solely through the existing waiting list.

The impact of this programme has been significant. Between 2021 and 2025, 44 need tests were completed. Five have already led to new-build schemes delivering 38 rural social homes, and a further five settlements have been added to the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP), with an estimated 59 additional homes in the pipeline. Since its inception in 2000, the programme has initiated delivery of over 450 new social homes—accounting for approximately 8% of all rural schemes during that period.

Despite these successes, awareness of the Housing Executive's role in rural housing provision remains limited. Many individuals in need do not engage with the system, resulting in underrepresentation and missed opportunities for intervention. Housing delivery continues to lag the scale of need, as evidenced by rising waiting lists.

The Housing Executive maintain regular engagement with rural communities, strengthening outreach and awareness efforts, and developing new methods for identifying hidden demand. This strategy will build on the success of the need-testing programme, ensuring rural communities are fully represented in the commissioning process. It will also seek to overcome delivery barriers and expand the range of affordable housing options available in rural areas—including shared equity and intermediate housing—where full social housing provision may not be viable. This integrated approach will be critical to ensuring that rural housing need is not overlooked and that the right mix of housing is delivered to support sustainable, inclusive rural communities.

Affordable Housing Delivery in Rural Northern Ireland

Developing Social Housing Development Guidelines (formerly Strategic Guidelines) setting out annual geographic and needs based targets for SHDP

Delivering affordable housing in rural Northern Ireland remains a strategic priority. The Social Housing Development Guidelines shape the three-year Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP), ensuring equitable distribution of new homes, including wheelchair-accessible dwellings, supported housing, and sustainable developments. Given that demand consistently exceeds funding, these guidelines direct resources to areas of greatest need.

Managing the SHDP (2025–2028)

- Target: 6,750 new social homes over three years, with 908 (13.45%) for rural areas.
- From 2021–2025, 504 rural homes commenced, including 97 under the *Housing for All* Shared Housing Programme.¹⁸
- *Housing for All* (originating from TBUC Strategy 2013)¹⁹ now managed by the Housing Executive in partnership with 12 Housing Associations, delivering pre-handover and five-year Good Relations Plans to benefit residents and surrounding communities.
- The rural Shared Housing Programme supports 6 Housing Associations working across 13 developments, totalling 229 homes delivered or in development.
- Current shortfall of 355 rural homes highlights ongoing challenges in coordination, funding, and land availability.

Supporting Rural Housing Delivery

- The Rural Housing App (developed with Land & Property Services) identifies vacant or underutilised public land suitable for social housing.
- Site Identification Studies (SIS) enable Housing Associations to pinpoint land in areas of unmet rural need, considering planning constraints and infrastructure capacity.
- The Housing Executive engages with government departments and Community Planning partnerships to secure additional sites, inform Local Development Plans, and expand SHDP delivery.

This targeted, place-based approach aims to close the gap between rural housing demand and supply while supporting inclusive and sustainable rural communities.

¹⁸ [The Housing Executive - Shared housing](#)

¹⁹ [Together Building a United Community](#)

Housing for all scheme Cushendall 2025/26 programme



A new development of 34 homes being delivered by Rural Housing Association as part of the Housing for All programme, which supports the creation of inclusive and shared communities across Northern Ireland. The programme is rooted in the Northern Ireland Executive's Together: Building a United Community Strategy, reflecting a long-standing commitment to improving community relations and fostering a more united and shared society. A total investment of £4.4 million has been committed to the development and its associated five-year Good Relations Plan.

Housing opportunities

Throughout the strategy period, we will continue to work collaboratively with delivery partners and stakeholders to explore all viable opportunities to expand the rural Social Housing Development Programme. This includes increasing the availability of homes to meet the needs identified on rural waiting lists. A sustained focus will be placed on identifying land, securing investment, and aligning delivery with local infrastructure and planning priorities to ensure that rural housing provision remains responsive, equitable, and strategically targeted.

Housing Executive New Build

Sunningdale

In 2024 the Housing Executive delivered our first housing scheme in 25 years.²⁰ This pilot in Sunningdale in North Belfast showcases the future of energy efficiency in the social housing sector. The six semi-detached homes were built using Modern Methods of Construction and ultra-low energy building techniques to Passive House Standard.



²⁰ [The Housing Executive - News](#)



Hunter's Park Bellaghy – first rural pilot

The proposed scheme comprises a small-scale development of four new-build dwellings (three two-bedroom, two-storey homes built to *Lifetime Homes* (LTH) standards and a fully accessible single storey detached unit to meet complex needs requirements).

The scheme will incorporate off-street parking and amenity space and will be delivered in accordance with the guidance provided in *Creating Places – Achieving Quality in Residential Developments*.²¹ This ensures the design respects the local context, responds appropriately to the site, and contributes to an attractive residential environment.

Priority 7 - Collaborate with Councils to Shape Planning Policies that Support Inclusive rural Growth

Affordable housing²² is defined by the Department for Communities as social or intermediate homes provided outside the general market for households whose needs cannot be met. It is a pressing issue for many rural communities. Engagement shows that rural households often fall between thresholds: they do not qualify for social housing but cannot afford home ownership without support.

To inform long-term policy and planning, the Housing Executive completed 15-Year Housing Market Assessments (HMAs) in 2022, projecting need and demand across all tenures from 2020–2035²³. These assessments provide robust evidence for all 11 Local Government Districts and guide councils in planning for the right mix, scale, and distribution of homes.

HMAs underpin affordable housing policies within Local Development Plans (LDPs), shaping land allocations and ensuring planning decisions respond to demographic trends, affordability pressures, and changing rural needs. This rural housing strategy aligns with the wider Housing Supply Strategy by focusing on rural-specific challenges such as affordability, accessibility, demographic change, and the transition to low-carbon housing.

As the Strategic Housing Authority and a statutory consultee in the LDP and Development Management processes, the Housing Executive provides detailed assessments of affordable housing

²¹ [Creating Places - Achieving Quality in Residential Environments](#)

²² [Definition of affordable housing | Department for Communities](#)

²³ [The Housing Executive - Housing market analysis](#)

need at council and settlement levels. Ongoing collaboration with local councils ensures that land provision and planning policy remain responsive throughout each LDP's 15-year lifespan. This coordinated approach is essential to supporting sustainable rural settlements and delivering the homes required across the strategy horizon.

Research commissioned jointly by the Housing Executive and the University of Liverpool highlights the structural barriers affecting rural social housing delivery.²⁴ The main issues identified include:

- Limited availability of suitable and affordable land within rural settlement development limits, with high competition from private housing demand.
- The cost and viability challenges associated with delivering infrastructure, particularly wastewater and sewerage services where NI Water capacity remains constrained.
- Rising construction costs and inflationary pressures, which disproportionately affect small rural schemes.
- Planning delays, including lengthy approval processes and additional assessments linked to rural or environmentally sensitive locations.
- Unforeseen site constraints such as ground conditions or access issues, which increase development costs.
- Variable levels of local community support for new social housing proposals, which can delay or prevent schemes.
- The cumulative impact of these factors on scheme feasibility, resulting in some projects being deferred or withdrawn.

A strategic focus will be maintained on aligning delivery of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) with the capacity of rural infrastructure. This includes accelerating planning approvals and enhancing land availability through proactive engagement with local councils and landowners. These measures are essential to ensuring that rural housing delivery is both responsive and feasible within existing infrastructure constraints.

Priority 8 – Promote the development of affordable housing within mixed tenure environments

Mixed-Tenure Housing in Rural Areas

Mixed-tenure development is central to creating inclusive, resilient, and sustainable communities. As highlighted in the 2018 *Mainstreaming Mixed-Tenure in Northern Ireland* report²⁵, integrating a range of housing tenures promotes social and economic diversity, reduces deprivation, and supports access to services and infrastructure.

The King's Hall mixed-tenure scheme in South Belfast²⁶, which was Northern Ireland's first fully integrated apartment development demonstrates the benefits of this approach. Delivered as part of

²⁴ [Delivering new social and affordable housing in rural areas: a review of barriers and opportunities](#)

²⁵ [dfc-mixed-tenure-in-northern-ireland-report.pdf](#)

²⁶ [Ministerial visit to NI's first mixed tenure scheme ...](#)

a wider regeneration project, it provides 81 high-quality homes for social and private tenants, with shared communal spaces and design standards such as Lifetime Homes and Secured by Design Gold. The scheme expands housing choice, reduces tenure stigma, and contributes to sustainable redevelopment, offering a valuable model for both urban and rural contexts.

Northern Ireland already has naturally occurring mixed-tenure communities due to the legacy of the House Sales Scheme. Building on this, the Housing Executive and the Department for Communities' Housing Supply Strategy continue to promote mixed-tenure models in new developments, supporting proposals that combine affordable and private housing.

Local Development Plans (LDPs) are a key mechanism for embedding mixed-tenure principles within planning policy, including requirements for affordable housing in private schemes. In rural areas, where developments may fall below policy thresholds, alternative tools such as land zoning and Key Site Requirements (KSRs) can help secure affordable housing delivery. Flexibility remains essential, with policies such as the rural exceptions policy enabling targeted provision outside settlement limits where specific need exists.

Mixed-tenure approaches provide an effective mechanism to meet increasing housing need, supporting social cohesion, economic diversity, and long-term sustainability. By embedding mixed-tenure principles within rural planning and housing delivery, Northern Ireland can ensure rural communities benefit from inclusive, high-quality, and future-proofed development.

Community-led housing (CLH) represents a locally driven approach to delivering affordable homes²⁷, where communities take the lead in addressing specific housing needs. These initiatives often involve retaining stewardship or ownership to ensure long-term affordability and deliver lasting benefits to the local area. While the concept is not new to Northern Ireland, the sector remains underdeveloped in comparison to other UK regions, particularly in terms of enabling legislation, policy frameworks, and access to finance.

Strategically, CLH offers significant potential to expand the supply of affordable housing across both urban and rural contexts. It can also deliver wider social and economic benefits, including enhanced community cohesion, local empowerment, and economic resilience. However, realising this potential requires urgent policy intervention to address key barriers—most notably the absence of effective Community Asset Transfer legislation and General Disposal Consent. Additionally, the lack of dedicated capital and revenue funding, coupled with limited technical support, presents challenges for community groups, particularly in pre-construction phases such as site acquisition, business planning, and securing finance.

CLH can take various forms, including:

- **Community self-build schemes**, often structured as housing cooperatives, where groups of local people build and manage their own homes.
- **Partnership models**, where communities collaborate with housing associations, local authorities, or private developers to deliver homes for affordable rent or ownership.

²⁷ [Microsoft Word - DTNI Community Led Housing in Northern Ireland February 21022023\[31\].docx](#)

The Housing Executive has a longstanding commitment to supporting rural regeneration and meeting local housing needs. Successful CLH projects are typically initiated by active communities seeking to address local challenges and create opportunities for future generations.

In 2021/22, the Housing Executive undertook research to explore the potential of CLH models in addressing rural housing supply challenges. This work concluded in 2022/23 and laid the foundation for strategic engagement with UK-wide organisations involved in CLH funding and delivery. The Housing Executive has since participated in key sector events, including the Rural Community Ownership Conference (October 2023) and a British–Irish Council meeting in Scotland, where CLH featured prominently.

In 2024/25, the Housing Executive extended its support to a proposed CLH scheme in Strangford, comprising 19 social housing homes within a mixed-tenure development. The scheme prioritises sustainability and community engagement and is currently listed in the draft Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) for delivery in 2027/28, subject to funding and statutory approvals.

As part of its ***Heritage in Housing*** programme, the Housing Executive has also contributed to Townscape Heritage Initiatives in Carrickfergus, Armagh, and Lurgan. These projects, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, enabled the restoration of vacant buildings within conservation areas, revitalising village centres and delivering affordable rental accommodation.

Together, these initiatives demonstrate the Housing Executive's commitment to exploring innovative housing models, supporting community empowerment, and contributing to the sustainable development of Northern Ireland's rural and heritage-rich areas.

Upper English Street, Armagh

Before



After



Before



After



In rural areas of Northern Ireland, the most common form of community-led housing (CLH) emerges through partnership-based processes, where community representatives and organisations engage with the Housing Executive to explore the need and potential for affordable homes. This approach is particularly valuable in areas where traditional waiting list data does not reflect the full extent of housing need—often referred to as ‘hidden need’.

The Housing Executive plays a pivotal role in this process, both in identifying and assessing local housing need and in working with housing associations to support the delivery of new-build schemes. This collaborative model enables communities to initiate housing conversations and influence local provision.

However, the current model has limitations. Community involvement is typically confined to the initial identification of need, with limited influence over design, tenure mix, or long-term stewardship. Furthermore, tenure options are often restricted to social rent, which may not fully address the diverse affordability requirements of households in rural areas.

To unlock the full potential of CLH in Northern Ireland, policy development must focus on expanding tenure flexibility, enhancing community participation throughout the development lifecycle, and addressing structural barriers such as funding, land access, and legislative support. Doing so will enable more responsive, inclusive, and sustainable housing solutions tailored to the unique needs of rural communities.

Case Study - Portaferry Cohousing, County Down

Portaferry Cohousing is a resident-led initiative developing an eco-friendly, entirely private intergenerational neighbourhood of around 32 homes with shared green spaces and communal facilities. The project reflects growing demand for collaborative, sustainable living in Northern Ireland. Alongside the £2 million Portaferry Public Realm regeneration scheme, which revitalised Market Square and improved pedestrian spaces, this initiative illustrates how community participation in housing and placemaking can drive rural regeneration, strengthen social cohesion and support long-term wellbeing and environmental goals.

THEME 3 – SECURING THE FUTURE OF OUR RURAL COMMUNITIES

The strategic theme “Securing the Future of Our Rural Communities” shows the Housing Executive’s commitment to enabling sustainable and inclusive growth across rural areas, while building resilience to climate change over the next five years. This will be delivered through targeted investment in rural housing and community infrastructure, alongside the strategic use of land and assets to support future development.

This approach is fully aligned with the Housing Executive’s corporate strategy and core objectives, including “*Ensuring the right homes are built in the right places*” and “*Regenerating and investing in communities*.”. The Housing Executive’s Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy and Action Plan (2022-2027)²⁸ sets our clear targets on what we can do to as an organisation to contribute to the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 from reduction in emissions through our transport provisions, investing in our own office accommodation and ensuring the properties we landlord are more efficient to help to achieve our overall target of 25% reduction in CO2 emissions by 2031.

Supporting Rural Sustainability

The UK Government has set a clear and ambitious target to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The Northern Ireland Executive’s Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy sets our clear targets on what we can do to as an organisation. Transport is the second largest carbon emitter in Northern Ireland accounting for approximately 33% of emissions. Due to our relatively large rural population and limited public transport network, the majority of journeys in Northern Ireland are by car. Shifting preferences from private car travel to active travel, such as walking and cycling, and public transport is important for decarbonisation, air quality, congestion, and public health. This can be a challenge in rural areas.

Evidence from the NIHE Stock Condition Survey highlights both the challenges and opportunities within rural housing, particularly in relation to energy efficiency, fuel poverty, and the retrofitting of older properties

High-Level Outcome.

Rural communities will become more sustainable and inclusive through targeted investment in housing, land, and infrastructure that enhances climate resilience. By prioritising improvements in energy efficiency, tackling fuel poverty, and promoting sustainable land use, the Housing Executive will contribute to a low-carbon future that supports both people and place. This rural strategy will enable consistent consideration of specific rural outcomes in sustainability by monitoring ongoing progress and performance against targets through the action planning and governance reporting structures

²⁸ [Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy and Action Plan \(2022-2027\)](#)

Priority 9 - Improve the energy efficiency of rural housing stock

In 2023, housing and buildings accounted for 13.8% of Northern Ireland's total greenhouse gas emissions—one of the highest contributions across all sectors. This underscores the critical importance of improving energy efficiency within the domestic housing stock.

Current data shows that 49% of dwellings are rated EPC band C or above. As Northern Ireland's designated Home Energy Conservation Authority (HECA)²⁹, the Housing Executive is committed to ensuring that homes emit minimal carbon while providing warmer, healthier, and more affordable living conditions.

To achieve this, the Housing Executive advocates a layered, three-tiered approach:

1. Reducing energy demand through household behaviour change and awareness.
2. Upgrading the building fabric, including insulation and airtightness improvements.
3. Supporting the adoption of renewable heating technologies, aligned with decarbonisation targets.

This strategic framework is designed to deliver measurable progress on climate goals while addressing fuel poverty and improving housing quality across rural communities.

Fuel Poverty in Rural Northern Ireland

Fuel poverty occurs when a household must spend more than 10% of its income on energy to maintain adequate warmth and comfort. In Northern Ireland, this is formalised as the amount needed to sustain 21 °C in the primary living space and 18 °C in other occupied rooms.

Fuel poverty remains a significant challenge in Northern Ireland. In 2016 the House Condition Survey recorded overall levels at 22%, more recent analysis by National Energy Action (September 2024) indicates that around 40% of households are now spending more than 10% of their income on energy³⁰, reflecting a sharp increase in energy-related hardship.

Rural households remain at risk as they have an increased reliance on unregulated and higher-cost fuels such as home heating oil (used by 68% of households, increased to 82% for rural areas)³¹, initial planning by the Housing Executive is based on electrifying heating, especially in rural areas as the prevalence of older housing stock with poor energy efficiency.

Energy Efficiency of Rural Housing Stock

A targeted investment totalling £110.47 million has been allocated to Housing Executive rural housing stock for maintenance and enhancements in the last 5 years. This encompasses heating upgrades, roof space insulation, double glazing and other energy performance improvements. We

²⁹ [Home Energy Conservation Authority Annual Progress Report 2023/24](#)

³⁰ [Northern Ireland - National Energy Action \(NEA\)](#)

³¹ [heatingoil_fuel-poverty.pdf](#)

will continue to deliver energy efficiency measures to our rural stock and hope to deliver a stock-wide retrofit thermal improvement programme subject to the necessary funding becoming available.

We are committed to a comprehensive Fuel Poverty Strategy that places energy efficiency and addressing disproportionate levels of fuel poverty at its core. These measures will ensure rural homes are future-proofed and aligned with long-term carbon reduction targets.

The aim of this is to:

- reduce fuel poverty from current estimates of 25–40% closer to, or ideally below, the baseline of 22%;
- improving household comfort;
- lowering energy-related financial pressures;
- increase household spending power.

These actions will contribute to climate mitigation efforts, delivering a more sustainable and lower-carbon housing stock across rural Northern Ireland.

Decarbonisation of Heating Systems in Rural Areas

Northern Ireland continues to have the highest dependency on high-carbon heating sources within the UK, with 68% of households (82% in rural areas) reliant on home heating oil. Many rural areas remain outside the natural gas grid, leaving them with limited options for lower-carbon heating.

In 2024/25 a total of 1,349 heating measures were approved, including new high-efficiency boilers in private sector homes through the Affordable Warmth Scheme. There were 3,237 Heating and Boiler conversions in Housing Executive properties (£15.5m).

In 2024/25, the Housing Executive facilitated over 4 million litres of home heating oil orders through its Oil Savings Network, delivering £408,968 in savings for 16,493 requests.

Significant investment is being made to reduce this reliance:

- £50.45m invested in energy efficiency measures in 2024/25 (Housing Executive & DfC through the Affordable Warmth Scheme).
- Delivery of the 300 Low Carbon Programme³² (retrofit pilot) to integrate air source heat pumps, hybrid heating, renewable power and behavioural change support.
- Construction of six new Passive House-standard homes in Belfast.

This reliance on heating oil remains a critical barrier to decarbonisation. The Housing Executive's Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy (22-27) highlights Initial planning by the Housing Executive is based on electrifying heating, ensuring that rural households can transition to sustainable heating solutions and try to achieve the statutory climate target of net zero by 2050 under the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

³² [The Housing Executive - News](#)

Priority 10 – Encourage energy upgrades in the rural private sector to reduce fuel poverty

The Housing Executive is currently developing pilot low-energy schemes in Poleglass (urban) and Bellaghy (rural), this will bring current Housing Executive properties up to Passive House standard using Modern Methods of Construction (MMC). These pilots apply ultra-low energy design principles that reduce carbon emissions and lower heating costs for tenants. Innovative construction techniques can support Northern Ireland's climate targets while simultaneously addressing housing need and fuel poverty, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities.



Affordable Warmth Scheme

The Housing Executive administers the Affordable Warmth Scheme on behalf of DfC. Established in 2014, the scheme targets low-income households—including owner-occupiers and private renters—with a gross annual income below £23,000. Eligible households can access a range of energy efficiency measures to include cavity wall and loft insulation, draught-proofing, low-carbon heating systems, and replacement of single-glazed windows.

Between April 2014 and March 2025, approximately 30,000 homes have been improved (£136 million), delivering significant benefits to households and the wider economy. Around 45% of supported homes (13,500 properties) are located in rural areas, with £64 million invested to enhance energy efficiency and improve thermal comfort in these communities.

NI Energy Advice Service — Supporting Rural Households

The Housing Executive delivers its statutory responsibilities by promoting energy efficiency advice through the Northern Ireland Energy Advice Service (NIEAS). Established in 2020, NIEAS has supported over 55,000 households with free, impartial advice on reducing fuel bills, managing heating systems, tackling damp and condensation, and accessing financial or grant support.

Specific challenges are faced by rural households, such as older and detached homes with higher exposure and heating costs. The Housing Executive has prioritised rural engagement through local outreach, roadshows, and participation in events like the Balmoral Show and community energy seminars. Around 65% of annual enquiries are referred for additional support, including the Affordable Warmth Scheme and NI Sustainable Energy Programme.

NIEAS also incorporates the NI Oil Savings Network (OSN), which provides collective purchasing power for households reliant on heating oil, approximately 82% of rural homes. In 2024/25, the OSN achieved savings of £408,968 for members, with £351,437 (86%) of these savings benefitting rural participants. By enabling smaller, more manageable oil purchases and providing weekly energy-saving advice, the OSN helps reduce fuel poverty and strengthen rural household resilience.

The Housing Executive aims to expand NIEAS as a universal “front door” to all energy advice and grant services, aligning with the Programme for Government outcomes on fairness and inclusion, NIHE’s Sustainable Development Strategy³³ and the UN Sustainable Development Goals on reduced inequalities and sustainable communities.

Priority 11 - Promote Climate-Resilient Planning through Local Development Plans

As a statutory consultee in the preparation of Local Development Plans (LDPs) across Northern Ireland’s 11 council areas, the Housing Executive is committed to embedding climate resilience through sustainable spatial planning.

LDPs are a key mechanism for delivering the sustainable growth objectives of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS 2035).³⁴ They provide a framework for development that responds to climate priorities, supports community well-being, and safeguards Northern Ireland’s natural and built environment. This Strategy will deliver this through quarterly updates of the Action Plan and monitored via the Rural Interdivisional and Working Group oversight meetings.

We support plan policies that contribute to:

- **Climate Adaptation and Mitigation**
- **Energy Efficiency**
- **Low-Carbon and Energy-Efficient Design Standards**
- **Infrastructure and Connectivity**

Priority 12 - Maximise the Use of Existing Land and Property Assets in Rural Areas

Maximising the use of vacant land and property assets within designated settlements remains a core principle of sustainable rural development. Repurposing disused buildings and underutilised spaces in rural areas is essential to securing their long-term future as vibrant, liveable places that support economic activity, social cohesion, and environmental resilience.

The Village Catalyst Programme plays a key role in this process by transforming vacant or derelict buildings into community facilities, social enterprises, or residential spaces. These projects not only safeguard local heritage but also stimulate economic development and foster social connection. Examples include the creation of community centres, multi-use hubs, enterprise units, and accessible social spaces that respond directly to local needs. In areas where access to services is limited, such interventions help address rural challenges such as isolation, lack of facilities, and housing shortages.

³³ [Corporate Sustainable Development Strategy and Action Plan \(2022-2027\)](#)

³⁴ [Regional Development Strategy 2035](#)

Equally important as physical regeneration is the investment in people and communities. The Housing Executive recognises that successful projects are driven by committed individuals and organisations with a shared vision for improving local quality of life. Building on its longstanding experience in tenant and resident engagement, the Housing Executive has developed tailored support programmes that build the confidence and capacity of community groups, enabling them to lead and sustain local initiatives.

Social Economy

The Housing Executive recognises the vital role that Social Enterprises play in supporting local communities and driving inclusive socio-economic growth. Through its Social Enterprise programmes, the Housing Executive has supported a diverse range of initiatives based in, or serving, rural housing communities. Like traditional businesses, Social Enterprises aim to generate profit—but crucially, profits are reinvested or donated to deliver positive social impact.

To assess the impact of the Social Enterprise Plus Strategy (2020–2024)³⁵ and its associated investment programme, the Housing Executive commissioned an independent evaluation (2025). The review considered both the financial investment and the non-financial benefits delivered to communities.

As part of the previous Strategy, for every £1 invested there was £5.09 of a return

- **£3,751,169 of social value in project benefits achieved**

Over the lifetime of the Social Enterprise Plus Strategy (2020–2024), the Housing Executive supported 13 rural social enterprise initiatives, reflecting a targeted investment in community-led economic development. These investments have supported a diverse range of rural enterprises, including community cafés, handyman services, indoor play areas, health and fitness centres, and tourism-focused initiatives.

The Housing Executive’s Social Investment Strategy (2025 – 2030)³⁶ sets out three new priorities: 1) Community Wealth Building 2) Social Value and 3) Employability and Apprenticeships.

We look forward to engaging with our partners in the rural community during the lifetime of this strategy and would encourage those rural social enterprises based in or serving Housing Executive communities to get in contact.

Strategic Delivery

The Rural Housing Strategy 2026–2031 provides the strategic direction for supporting the sustainable, inclusive development of rural communities across Northern Ireland. Its framework is aligned with the Housing Executive’s statutory responsibilities and is fundamentally guided by the Draft Corporate Strategy 2025/26 – 2027/28³⁷. The Strategy’s core focus is to meet the current and

³⁵ [Social Enterprise Plus Strategy 2020-2024](#)

³⁶ [Social Investment Strategy](#)

³⁷ [Draft Housing Executive Corporate Strategy](#)

emerging housing needs of rural residents, ensuring access to housing and support services required to lead secure, fulfilling lives.

Framework and Corporate Alignment

The Strategy outlines three cross-cutting themes, each with a high-level outcome, designed to meet challenges specific to rural communities, such as persistent shortages of affordable homes, hidden housing needs, and infrastructure constraints. These outcomes directly contribute to the Housing Executive's high-level Corporate Strategy objectives:

Rural Strategy Theme/Outcome	Corporate Strategy Alignment (High-Level Objectives)
Theme 1: Supporting Our Rural Customers (Outcome: Secure living environments and equitable access to essential housing support services)	Supports “Reducing housing-led health inequalities” and contributes to “Regenerating and investing in communities”.
Theme 2: Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes (Outcome: Availability of affordable homes fostering balanced, inclusive, and sustainable rural communities)	Directly supports “Ensuring the right homes are built in the right places”.
Theme 3: Securing the Future of Our Rural Communities (Outcome: Inclusive and sustainable development, and enhanced climate resilience)	Strongly ties into “Aligning our economic and environmental impact” (by tackling climate change and improving energy efficiency) and contributes to “Regenerating and investing in communities”.

Governance and Feasibility

- **Dedicated Governance:** The successful implementation of the Strategy will be overseen by a dedicated Rural Interdivisional Working Group and Sub-Working Group, comprising senior leaders from across key Housing Executive departments, to drive progress and maintain momentum.
- **Accountability:** Governance includes quarterly monitoring and annual progress reporting to track delivery against agreed actions and outcomes, ensuring transparency and accountability to rural communities.
- **Community-Led Approach:** The Strategy is guided by principles that mandate a Distinct Rural Approach and prioritise Localised and Community-Led Solutions informed by direct engagement. This also involves vital collaboration with a broad network of external stakeholders, including the Rural Residents’ Forum.
- **Statutory Compliance:** The Strategy confirms alignment with the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 and promotes Equality and Inclusion in line with Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

³⁸Strategy Development and Consultation

The consultation plan for the Rural Housing Strategy 2026-2031 is founded on our commitment to provide direct engagement and flexible communication methods, allowing us to gather valuable insights and ensure the strategy is grounded in the reality of rural life. Consultation will run for 8 weeks via online survey, the Rural Residents' Forum, targeted workshops and engagement with local councils and relevant stakeholders.

Appendix 1 - Achievements Under the Outgoing Rural Strategy

Over the course of the outgoing Rural Strategy (March 2021 – March 2025)³⁹, we have invested approximately £243.47 million in rural communities. This investment has supported a broad range of initiatives which include:

- **Social Housing Allocations:** More than 3,200 properties were allocated in rural areas, providing essential housing for rural applicants.
- **Rural Housing Need Tests:** A total of 44 rural housing need tests were conducted during the strategy period. These assessments helped identify hidden housing demand and informed the development of new schemes, including new build projects in Darragh Cross (2021/22), Kilrea, Garvagh, Draperstown, Clabby (2022/23), Tamnaherin (2023/24), and Swatragh (2024/25).
- **New Social Housing Development:** Construction commenced on 504 new social homes in rural locations with £51.75m invested, broken down as follows: 128 homes in 2021/22, 71 in 2022/23, 117 in 2023/24, and 188 in 2024/25.
- **Maintenance and Improvement of Housing Stock:** An estimated £110.47 million was invested in the upkeep and enhancement of existing Housing Executive rural housing stock.
- **Supporting People Programme:** Continued support through the Supporting People Programme saw an investment of approximately £30 million in rural areas. This funding enabled the delivery of both accommodation-based and floating support services.
- **Community-Based Funding:** A total of £750,000 was allocated to community-focused initiatives in rural areas. This included support for Social Enterprise projects, Community Grants, Community Cohesion funding and capital funding for regeneration projects.
- **Rural Community Awards:** The Housing Executive Rural Community Awards Competition distributed £27,500 in prize money over the strategy period, recognising and celebrating the vital contributions of rural groups and individuals.

³⁹ [SHA-13-08-25-JG - Reaching Rural 21-25 Final Progress Report](#)

Appendix 2 – High Impact Priorities

The following major work streams are prioritised for successful implementation:

1. Rural Housing Needs Tests (HNTs)

The strategy maintains and strengthens the HNT programme as a critical tool for uncovering hidden demand for affordable housing in dispersed rural settlements, supplementing reliance on traditional waiting list data. Since 2000, HNTs have initiated the delivery of over 450 new social homes. Between 2021 and 2025 alone, 44 need tests were completed, leading to new-build schemes or adding settlements to the SHDP pipeline. The Strategy commits to strengthening outreach to understand and increase housing provision in rural areas.

2. Participate in Rural Housing Steering Group

The Housing Executive participates in a dedicated working group led by DfC to investigate and overcome structural barriers limiting affordable rural housing supply. This operational engagement is crucial for specifically addressing persistent challenges such as land availability, planning delays, and major infrastructure constraints, notably NI Water capacity issues.

3. Development of Outcomes for Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy Pilots

High priority is placed on piloting new approaches to decarbonise rural housing stock. Pilots include the 300 Low Carbon Programme (a retrofit pilot integrating heat pumps and renewable power due for completion in 2026) and low-energy social housing schemes built to Passive House standard using Modern Methods of Construction (e.g., Bellaghy). These schemes aim to reduce fuel poverty (below the 22% baseline), improve thermal comfort, and evaluate innovative delivery methods.

4. Engagement with Community Planning Partners to Maximise Reach in Rural Areas

The Housing Executive collaborates with Community Planning Partners to ensure targeted, place-based solutions are delivered. Engagement includes providing detailed affordable housing need assessments to inform land allocation. The multi-tiered HCN structure, including the Rural Residents' Forum, channels rural voices into decision-making structures.

5. The Rural Community Awards

The Rural Community Awards celebrate the invaluable efforts of rural volunteers and community groups. The Housing Executive reaffirmed its commitment by allocating £27,500 in prize funding during the 2021–2025 Strategy period. Delivered in partnership with the RCN, these events serve as vital platforms for rural groups to exchange ideas and engage directly with the Housing Executive regarding wider services and funding programmes.

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
Theme 1: Supporting our rural customers: High level outcome: Rural tenants and customers feel secure and can access the support services they need.						
1. Promote the availability of tenancy sustainment advice and funding support through our Rural communication streams.	Specific to the Rural Strategy Rural Unit (Lead Dept), Supported by Communications, Housing Services, Financial Inclusion and Local Offices	1. Information communicated to rural community groups.	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of increased awareness of Housing Services in CTOS Survey to record impact of new Rural newsletter issued annually. Recording of local office staff numbers at rural training and feedback forms.
		2. Include at least one article in 'Reaching Rural' Newsletter each year - aimed at supporting tenants.	Annually – March 2027			
		3. Deliver training and awareness sessions to local office staff regarding rural issues and concerns.	Annually – March 2027			
2. Throughout the implementation of the Supporting People service, (2026-31) we will pay due regard to the particular needs of customers living in rural areas.	Supporting People (Lead Dept) Supported by the Rural Unit	1. Promote the SP service & Implementation Plan with rural stakeholders to ensure the needs of rural customers are reflected in the plan.	March 2031			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of increased engagement and Communication with rural groups. Supporting People service provision in rural areas contained in SP Annual Report. Identification of opportunities for potential promotion and implement as appropriate
		2. Showcase projects funded by Supporting People to include: SP Annual Report Housing Executive website Social Media	Annually – March 2027			
3. We will work to ensure that every tenant has access to the housing services they need, when they need them, to sustain their tenancy and live with	Housing Services Tenancy Sustainment and Funding Teams (Lead Dept) Supported by the Rural Unit	1. Engage with the Rural Unit during the development of the <i>Tenancies that Thrive Annual Action Plan</i> to ensure rural tenants' needs—such as geographical isolation and gaps in service provision—are fully considered and reflected in planned actions as appropriate.	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An annual action plan will be developed and an annual progress report compiled. Monitor the number of rural funding applications received /funding awarded to

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
independence, confidence and the ability to thrive.						rural VSCE partners and monitor outcomes of any funded projects delivering in rural locations.
		2. We will ensure that the particular needs of tenants living in rural areas are considered when setting funding priorities for each annual round of the STGFP.	Annually – March 2027			
4. 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	Planning Policy (Lead Dept) Placeshaping Supported by the Rural Unit	Ensure rural housing perspectives are included in statutory corporate responses to Local Development Plan Consultations.	March 2031			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record the number of Local Development Plan policies adopted that we have supported.
5. We will continue to consider how on an ongoing basis, we can adopt a flexible approach	Homelessness (Lead dept) Supported by the Rural Unit	1. Provide quarterly data reports for analysis by Homelessness Local Area Groups taking account of any requests from local representatives and report	Quarterly until March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Progress will be measured through the outcomes of actions within Local Homelessness Action Plans

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date -	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
to accommodate the emergency needs of those who are faced with homelessness in rural areas.		quarterly on progress at Homelessness Local Area Groups.				
6. We will communicate homelessness prevention advice and funding support through our Rural communications.	Homelessness (Lead dept) supported by the Rural Unit	1.Have at least one homeless support article in Rural Publication	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evidence of increased awareness of Housing Services in CTOS
		2. Issue all relevant funding calls to Rural Forums and attend events as necessary	Annually – March 2027			
7. Priority deliverable - We will continue to develop and deliver the Housing Executive Rural Community Awards Competition.	Specific to the Rural Strategy Rural Unit (lead Dept) Supported by Communications	1. Develop a Rural Community Awards competition to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assess award applications - promote and hold public event - evaluate success of event 	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record number of applications Record number of attendees Evaluation of success of event via QR questionnaire
Theme 2: Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes High level outcome: The supply of affordable homes to build balanced, inclusive and sustainable rural communities.						

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date -	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
8. 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 Housing Development Commission.	Housing Analytics (Lead dept) Placeshaping Supported by the Rural Unit	1. Monitor on a quarterly basis, the number of applicants who want to be housed in a rural area to include: - housing stress - Full Duty Applicants - wheelchair accommodation - complex needs	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quarterly waiting list reports sent to Rural Unit Produce and publish Housing Development Commission annually.
		2. Monitor on a quarterly basis the number of rural NIHE properties allocated to each of the above categories.	Annually – March 2027			
		3. Agree 5 year Rural Housing Need Projections with Regional Place Shapers	Annually – March 2027			
9. Priority deliverable - We will continue to deliver an annual programme of Rural housing need tests which is shaped by requests from rural community representatives, analysis of existing waiting lists and land availability.	Specific to the Rural Strategy Rural Unit, (Lead Dept), supported by Housing Services Communications, Local Offices,	1. Agree an annual programme of rural needs test locations with Regional Placeshaping teams	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Carry out programme of tests Number of households assisted with their housing circumstances Increase in social housing waiting list for the area Record any schemes programmed as a result of a test
		2. Liaise with community reps/groups to organise and deliver tests which are accessible and promoted as widely as possible.	Annually – March 2027			
		3. Continue to develop and expand a multimedia approach to communicating housing advice and support in rural areas	Annually – March 2027			

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date -	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
10. Priority deliverable - We will engage with our Community Planning partners to highlight rural housing issues, considering all channels of communication in order to maximise our reach in rural communities.	Specific to the Rural Strategy Placeshaping (Lead dept) Supported by the Rural Unit	1. We will engage with Community Planning partners to highlight local imbalances between rural housing need and supply.	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record number of ‘call for sites’, SIS studies, Housing needs tests carried out per Council Area and increase/decrease in Rural Housing need projections as well as schemes delivered.
		2. We will maximise opportunities to work with partners to unlock opportunities for rural housing including Housing Needs Tests, Site Identification Studies and surplus public sector assets.	Annually – March 2027			
		3. Based on outcomes and lessons learned, share best practice approach with other Community Planning teams.	Annually – March 2027			
11. Priority deliverable - We will participate in a Rural Housing Steering Group with DfC, DAERA & LPS to explore the barriers to rural housing development and implement a plan to address them.	Specific to the Rural Strategy Rural Unit (lead dept) supported by local office, Community Cohesion	1. Investigate the recommendations from the research and explore options on how to support the creation of an independent ‘Housing Enabler Network’ to proactively engage rural communities, identify housing need, and build support for development	March 2031			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record any increase in social housing waiting list for the area Housing need projection figures Impact of changes made by research recommendations brought forward.
		2. Conduct research to understand rural community perspectives on a number of rural factors to include housing need, demand, and aspirations.	March 2031			

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
12. Support each of the local Planning Authorities to develop planning policies and zone land that will facilitate the development of affordable housing within mixed-tenure environments promoting cohesion and sustainability.	Planning Policy (Lead dept) Placeshaping Supported by the Rural Unit	Ensure rural housing perspectives are included in corporate responses to Local Development Plan Consultations.	March 2031			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record number of Local Development Plan Planning policy responses which include rural housing perspectives Record number of LDP Plan Strategies adopted with rural exception policies
Theme 3: Securing the future of our rural communities High level outcome: Rural communities grow inclusively, with improved resilience to climate change.						
13. We will continue to assess the investment required to improve the energy performance of our rural housing stock.	Asset Management Supported by the Rural Unit	1. Analyse the data from the new Stock Condition Survey to include both an updated assessment of thermal performance and the investment required to improve this and achieve significant decarbonisation in rural areas.	Annually - March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyse data to determine the needs of our rural stock. Know investment required and scheme to address this.
		2. To continue to maintain and improve our rural dwellings through our stock investment programme and services.	Annually - March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No. of scheme started. Investment in Rural properties.

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
14. Priority deliverable - We will continue to develop and monitor the outcomes of energy efficiency and renewable energy pilots (e.g. HANDIHEAT and RULET) to identify alternative energy sources for rural properties to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.	Sustainable Development (lead Dept)	1. Monitor progress of the implementation of the RULET project quarterly	Annually - March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review the household bill savings Review the carbon reduction Review the qualitative assessments based on tenant interviews
	Supported by the Rural Unit	2. Continue to assess RULET houses. The RULET project is now in monitoring phase and installation measures.	Annually - March 2027			
15. We will promote our Energy Advice Service and the availability of our Energy Efficiency Grants for private sector homes through our Rural publications and at rural-focused	Sustainable Development Unit	1. Include at least one article in Rural publications aimed at promoting energy efficiency grants.	Annually – March 2027			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved energy efficiency ratings in Rural homes. Update attendees on the latest NIHE sustainable solutions and how we are working towards meeting the Net Zero target by 2050.
	Supported by the Rural Unit	3. Deliver a sustainability Symposium event to disseminate information on pilot innovation; lessons learned to help plan energy efficiencies for future years.	Annually – March 2027			

Action	Responsible Department	Milestones – progress in 2026/27	Target Date	Progress (RAG)	Q update	How we will measure success
events and seminars.		3. Share information on energy efficiency support at rural housing events	Annually – March 2027			
16. 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.	Planning Policy (Lead Dept) Placeshaping Supported by the Rural Unit	1.Ensure sustainable development perspectives are included in corporate responses to Local Development Plan Consultations.	March 2031			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Record the number of Local Development Plan policies adopted that we have supported.

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