

# Reaching Rural Draft Rural Strategy 2021-2025

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## Response to Consultation

### Key points

- **Financial impact of Covid-19 and Brexit**
- **Allocation of sufficient resources to deliver the Strategy**
- **Access to land in Rural Communities to increase capacity to deliver affordable housing in Rural Communities**

**Date 30 September 2021**



## ABOUT NIFHA

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, formed in 1977, is the representative body for Northern Ireland's 20 registered housing associations.

Our members are all not-for-profit organisations. Together, supported by the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive, they provide just under 56,000 social and affordable homes.

Housing associations access private finance to effectively double the number of homes they could build with government housing association grant alone.

Housing associations also deliver high quality care and support to help people stay as independent as possible.

Working in partnership with other organisations, they also invest millions each year in community services and facilities.

Our sector employs more than 3,200 people and manages housing assets worth £4.5 bn.

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to comment on Reaching Rural Draft Rural Strategy 2021-2025

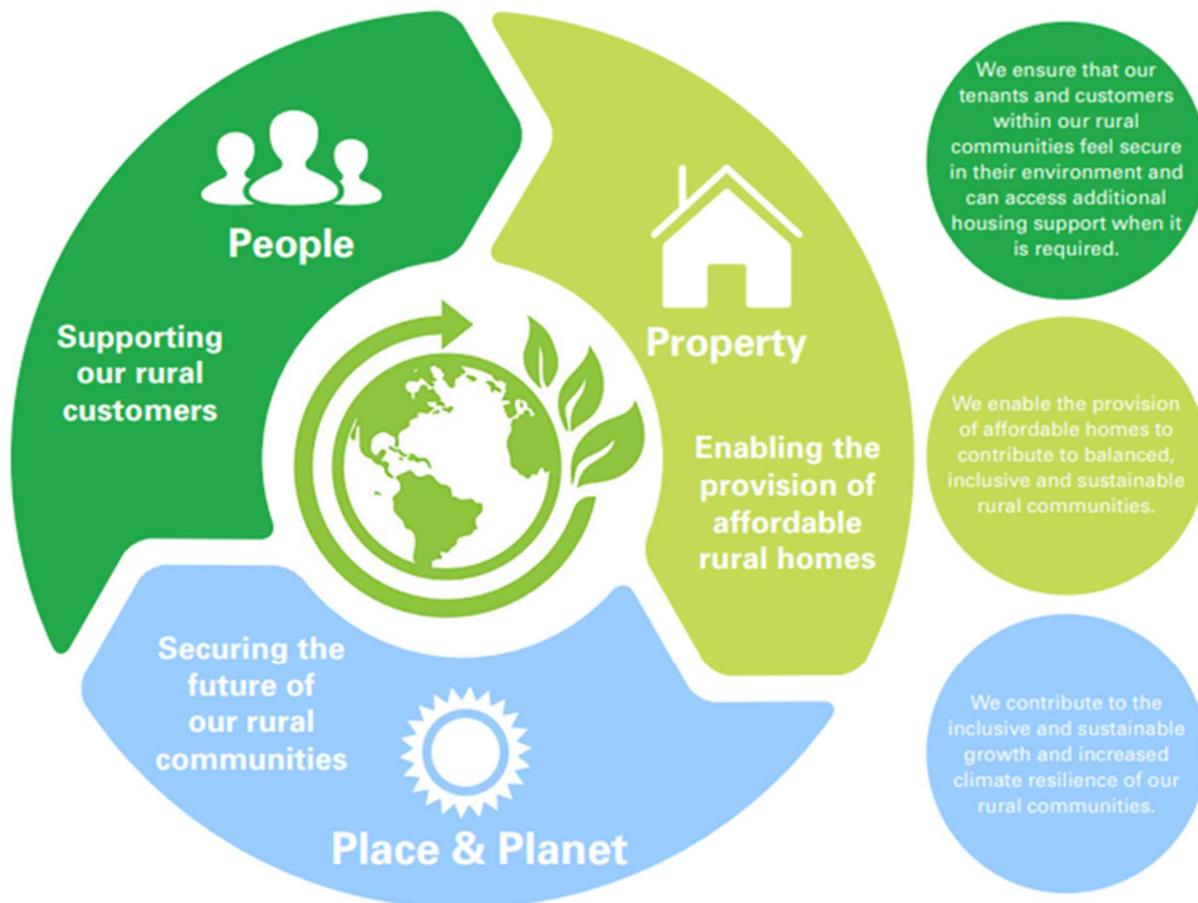
## PART 1: SETTING THE CONTEXT

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

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

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

## Themes, Outcomes, Priorities



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

Yes, We support the proposed themes, outcomes and priorities that have shaped this draft rural strategy. We recognise the challenges in developing a rural housing strategy. NIHE have an important role in motivating and enabling others to support the particular needs of rural dwellers. It is refreshing to see this reflected through a People, Property, Place and Planet approach.

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

The challenges facing rural dwellers have been sufficiently considered.

While we acknowledge the high need for rural accommodation for young families, elderly and those with mobility requirements, those groups are an important subset of an overarching challenge to provide any type of social housing in rural areas.

Lack of affordable sites, poor infrastructure including access to support services / IT connectivity issues may continue to present challenges, delays in planning and high costs in building smaller rural schemes all add up to specific challenges in building in rural areas.

We cannot underestimate the challenge of the impact of welfare reform which has weighed heavily on rural dwellers and especially the impact of the bedroom tax. Although mitigated against it remains a challenge to households and their landlords in managing those mitigations and until such times as it is legislated for properly, it will continue to be a problem for rural dwellers.

Further consideration may be required on the impact of Brexit and the increasing costs associated with the construction industry and the financial challenges this may bring moving forward in delivering affordable homes in Rural Communities.

Rural communities have unique needs and often “hidden” homelessness and poverty issues, and barriers to access good essential services such as lack of public transport and social housing provision.

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

Yes, however the ability to access support services may present further challenges e.g., access to health, social services etc. to promote independent living and tackle poverty issues.

There are challenges for popular rural coastal communities who are being pushed out of the market by 2nd homes/tourism accommodation.

We particularly welcome the NIHE's commitment to the Accessible Housing Register.

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

Rural Housing Need tests are vital to understanding the hidden need for housing which exists in our rural communities. It is important that the NIHE continue to work in partnership with housing associations to deliver these tests, as housing associations can help provide a vision of appropriate housing solutions at meetings and consultations.

Rural Housing Need Tests continue to provide much needed engagement opportunities with rural community groups and residents, this is vital to encouraging those in housing need in rural communities to come forward. The inclusion of proposed ‘housing health checks’ as part of Rural Housing Needs Tests events is a welcome addition.

This will provide key opportunities for rural residents to engage with Housing Advisors and Financial Inclusion Managers, who can provide crucial advice. One-to-one ‘housing health checks’ online, via telephone or at locations where people feel comfortable i.e., local area office, pre-arranged one-to-one meetings at a community centre, could provide more appropriate settings.

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

Yes, there needs to be access to social housing and low-cost home ownership, in mixed tenure environment i.e., social, affordable, and private homes.

It is widely accepted that without good secure homes the impact on health and wellbeing is greatly compounded. Enablers to support more provision of social housing should be a priority in mixed tenure residential development which combines a range of tenure options, i.e., social, affordable, and private.

It should be noted that a long-standing type of mixed tenure has been operated by Housing Associations in rural areas for some time through the purchase of existing satisfactory purchases off the open market as well as the purchase of off the shelf properties from developers. These types of mixed tenure environments have provided many benefits to the local residents and ensures social housing in smaller population areas can be accessed by those in need where self-development by a Housing Association would not be viable. We would welcome the continued financial support for this type of development which is not always highlighted as mixed tenure but provides much needed homes in rural areas.

Self-development of mixed tenure schemes by housing association in rural areas continues to be a high-risk venture. Without the input of grant or low-cost loans and support from the Department for Communities and the NIHE we expect the development of homes for sale will not develop as required.

There is a the lack of housing choice in rural areas with many having to either rely on private tenancies or move to a larger urban area. Housing Associations could be used to provide a market or mid-market rent choice for rural dwellers in certain areas, either through long term lease of existing properties or within the provision of mixed new build developments, again with grant or low-cost long-term loans.

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

Yes – the potential for community-led housing certainly needs explored in more detail. Given the supply issues nothing should be ruled out unless thoroughly examined.

Community led housing could play a vital part in offering a sustainable choice for rural dwellers..

We would suggest that tenure types used in specific community build could be extended from purely ownership to long lease rental models providing more affordable and accessible tenures.

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

Yes, the challenges associated with increasing energy efficiency and tackling fuel poverty have been sufficiently considered although new build social homes are worth considering as well.

We agree with the fabric first approach to enable improvement to energy efficiency to current social homes and would encourage the NIHE to support grants or long-term loans for housing associations for such retrofitting in rural areas.

New build social housing standards for rural areas should now be taking the best of Passivhaus and adapting that to provide new affordable homes within the constraints of the grant regime.

Other housing design issues impact on carbon reduction. New build social housing design should look at the trend of the rural home becoming a place to work and study instead of reflecting welfare policies that demand smaller and smaller homes. Reductions in the use of car travel to places of work can then contribute to a further reduction in carbon.

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

We think that the various forms of promotion and consultation outlined throughout the draft Strategy (e.g., consultation events, magazines, local press, social media) will be sufficient to reach those in rural communities who could benefit from them.

The last two years have shown the benefits of remote and virtual meetings, all of which provide additional methods for remote rural dwellers to take part and influence policy and practice.

More collaboration between NIHE, NIFHA and the housing association comms teams could ensure the message of the entire Social Housing sector gets out effectively to rural stakeholders.

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

Allocation of sufficient resources to deliver the Strategy.

In the short to medium term means of communicating and delivering the strategy will face the challenge of the impact of Covid-19 on rural communities. There may be a need to be flexible in the strategy to reflect and respond quickly to as yet unknown results of Covid-19, including physical and mental challenges for rural dwellers such as social exclusion, isolation or loneliness, lack of access to GP's.

The impact of the end of Covid-19 financial mitigations will also provide further challenges to rural dwellers as furlough ends and long-term unemployment rates rise, while changes in working patterns may increase demand in rural areas. Housing Needs analysis will require to be continually updated to reflect this and we welcome the NIHE's commitment that they carry this out.

Access to land in Rural Communities to increase capacity to deliver affordable housing in Rural Communities. Land and money are key, but if there isn't the infrastructure e.g., water, energy etc then that will also stop needed development

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

There is a need to enable provision of access to land and appropriate funding for affordable rural social housing homes. Delivery will also require access to specialised care and support models with appropriate levels of funding to sustain independence and promote tenancy sustainment for rural households.

We would like to see how funding streams can be provided to help provide more choices in tenure in rural housing schemes.

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