# Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Draft Rural Strategy 2026-2031

## March 2026

**Summary of NIFHA View:**

- NIFHA are supportive of the draft Rural Strategy 2026 – 2031 and welcome the recognition that housing associations are key delivery partners in increasing rural housing supply.
- NIFHA support the importance of promoting rural choice for applicants to the social housing waiting list and ensuring that rural areas are seen as realistic housing option.
- We have placed emphasis in our response on the importance of Priority 6 of Theme 2: Expanding Rural Needs Tests and ensuring identified need translates into delivery.
- NIFHA support mixed-tenure developments and broader housing pathways, including Co-Ownership to bridge the gap between social renting and full market ownership.

### About NIFHA

The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA), formed in 1977, is the representative body for Northern Ireland's 19 registered housing associations.

Our members are all not-for-profit organisations. Together, supported by the Department for Communities and the Housing Executive, they provide over 62,000 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 3,400 people and manages total assets of £5.4 bn.

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to respond with our views on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Draft Rural Strategy 2026 – 2031.

## Response to consultation

NIFHA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NIHE Draft Rural Strategy 2026 – 2031 and we support the vision of the strategy 'to foster thriving and sustainable rural communities where people of all backgrounds can access affordable housing and enjoy a decent quality of life'.

We welcome that the strategy recognises both the unique challenges and opportunities within rural areas, especially on the construction of new homes. As the representative body for registered housing associations in Northern Ireland, our members are key strategic partners in the delivery of social and affordable housing. While we are supportive the themes outlined in the draft strategy document, our response and feedback focuses primarily on Theme 2: Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes, reflecting our member's key role in delivering new housing supply.

### Theme 2: Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes

NIFHA strongly supports the emphasis placed by the draft strategy on increasing the supply of affordable housing in rural areas and the recognised importance of partnership working between housing associations, NIHE and local councils to achieve this. Housing associations will be critical to achieving the strategic objectives of this strategy, particularly through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP).

We welcome the acknowledgement in the strategy document of the structural barriers to rural housing delivery including land availability, planning constraints, infrastructure capacity (specifically NI Water) and viability concerns. We believe that addressing these barriers will be essential if the ambitions of the strategy are to be realised. Moreover, a functional and sustainable funding model for social housing delivery is essential for housing associations to plan, build and maintain homes in rural areas.

NIFHA are supportive of Priority 6 of the strategy which focuses on identifying areas of housing need, including hidden / latent demand. The continued and expanded use of Rural Needs Tests is especially important. These tests provide a vital mechanism for uncovering demand that is not always visible through traditional waiting list data, particularly in smaller or more remote areas. Strengthening the use of rural needs tests will ensure that housing provision is aligned with actual local need and will support targeted and effective delivery of social homes. We note that the current Social Housing Development Programme (2025-2028) currently identifies a shortfall of approximately 355 rural homes. In this context, the enhanced identification of housing need through rural needs tests will be critical in informing pipeline development and ensuring that rural delivery targets can be met. We would therefore encourage the NIHE to continue to expand the scale and frequency of rural needs tests, in partnership with our member housing associations who are delivering the new build social housing programme in rural communities. We would also encourage that these findings are quickly translated into deliverable schemes within the Social Housing Development Programme.

NIFHA supports the focus of Priority 7 of theme 2 on strengthening collaboration with local councils to shape planning policies. Effective planning policies are essential to unlocking land and enabling delivery. We believe it is imperative that housing associations, as the primary delivery partners of new build social housing are fully included in these discussions. Housing associations bring critical practical experience of site acquisition, scheme viability, planning challenges as well as infrastructure

constraints. Early and meaningful involvement with our members will help ensure that planning policies are deliverable and are responsive to current building environments.

NIFHA welcomes the recognition within the strategy of the need for continued collaboration between housing associations, NIHE and NI Water to address wastewater capacity issues. Independent analysis commissioned by NIFHA, the NI Chamber and the Construction Employers Federation and carried out by Grant Thornton and Turley, together with the findings of the NI Fiscal Council, estimate that there is a £2 billion funding gap in capital infrastructure for wastewater.[1] These constraints are a significant and immediate barrier to housing delivery across Northern Ireland, including the social housing sector. In the short term, enhanced collaboration and coordination is required to identify and implement practical solutions that allow schemes currently in planning or development to proceed. This will be critical to avoid any delays to much needed housing delivery. There is also a pressing need for a longer term strategic approach to overcome some of the challenges. Without sustained investment and forward planning to address water / wastewater capacity, there is a profound risk that future housing delivery will continue to be constrained, including in rural areas. NIFHA emphasises the importance of continued collaboration to address immediate constraints, and in the longer term, a coordinated infrastructure strategy that is supported by adequate funding to ensure that water / wastewater capacity does not act as a barrier to future rural housing supply.

NIFHA supports the draft strategy's promotion of mixed-tenure developments as a means of creating sustainable rural communities. We also support the use of alternative planning and delivery tools, including land zoning requirements. These tools can help unlock sites and support social and affordable housing provision.

We welcome the draft strategy's reference to the important role of Co-Ownership and the value of signposting social housing applicants, who do not meet the social housing eligibility threshold to other housing options. Providing alternative housing options, including Co-Ownership (shared ownership) is an important element of the housing mix in Northern Ireland, as it bridges the gap between social renting and full market ownership. Co-Ownership supports households to access suitable and affordable housing within rural communities and helps reduce pressure on the social housing waiting list.

In conclusion, NIFHA are supportive of the draft Rural Strategy 2026 – 2031. Our feedback above has focused on Theme 2 of the strategy 'Enabling the Provision of Affordable Rural Homes', reflecting our member's key role in delivering new social and affordable housing supply. The strategy provides a welcome framework for supporting thriving and sustainable rural communities. However, from a housing association perspective, the successful implementation of this strategy will depend on a sustainable funding model for housing associations to deliver much needed homes in rural communities. It will also depend on a strong alignment of housing need identification, planning policy and infrastructure provision.

Furthermore, housing associations will play a central role in delivering the homes required to meet rural need, and it is therefore paramount that they are fully embedded as key partners in policy development and delivery structures. Ultimately, the success of the strategy will depend on delivery, and we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with NIHE and other stakeholders to deliver high-quality, affordable homes for our rural communities in Northern Ireland.

ENDS

[1] https://nifha.org/2025/06/26/report-on-potential-solutions-to-niw-infrastructure-deficit-launched-today/

Submitted on behalf of NIFHA by:

Clára Robinson
Policy and Research Manager
**Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations**