

## **Public Consultation on the Sustainable Rural Communities - Full Policy Framework**

**[Northern Ireland Housing Executive]**

### **Consultation Response from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.**

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on 'Sustainable Rural Communities - Full Policy Framework' which specifically looks at the Draft Rural Housing Policy Proposals.

#### **Brief Background for Fermanagh and Omagh District Council**

The District Council area is home to 114,992 people (as of 30 June 2014). The District Council area is Northern Ireland's largest region in terms of land mass - approximately 3,000km<sup>2</sup>, or 20% of NI - and the smallest in terms of population. As a result, the population density of approximately 41 people per km<sup>2</sup> is the sparsest in NI. This is a feature of the region which also provides challenges to service delivery.

#### **Consultation Feedback**

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council (Council) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the Northern Ireland Housing Executives Public Consultation on 'Sustainable Rural Communities - Full Policy Framework'. The Council views this document as extremely important to sustaining and improving rural parts of Northern Ireland, particularly within the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council area which consists of many areas which are defined as rural.

Within the last number of years, there have been a number of policies and strategies put forward for other areas (for example England and Scotland) and the Council would recommend that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive review these and any resultant good practice.

As stated within the consultation Documents, there are a number of Government Department, policies, frameworks and strategies which can have a major impact on the Housing Executive's Rural Housing Policy. Therefore, there should be no underestimation of the importance of partnership working with regards to working towards Sustainable Rural Communities.

It is also worth noting that as part of the Council's Community Planning function, Sustainable Development is a key theme and as such, the Council is keen for its statutory partners to embrace all areas of Sustainable Development, including the development of Sustainable Rural Communities.

In response to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's recent consultation process on the Corporate / Business Plan and Key Priority Areas, the Council believes that the Housing Services Department plays a key role within the Housing Executive delivery of services, as well as sustaining/improving rural communities.

With regards to Community Planning, one of the key emerging priorities is:

‘Tackling deprivation in rural and urban areas including the working poor’.

With this in mind it is clear that there needs to be a direct partnership between the Council and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive with regards to Community Planning. The Council is pleased to see Community Planning referenced throughout the document, and the opportunities that this will create. However, the Council would like to see an increased emphasis on the opportunities for partnership approaches that Community Planning will inevitably create.

### **Principles within the Policy**

The principles within the policy are welcomed by the Council and are seen as appropriate to ensure the success of the Policy. The one addition that the Council would like to see included is to include a principle regarding Community Planning.

The wording for this could be similar to:

‘The new policy should be flexible in order to meet the needs, or take on board the findings, from public engagement by both Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other external organisations, e.g. Community Planning.’

### **Definitions of Rural**

The Council welcomes that within the document there is a clear definition of the term ‘rural’ i.e. settlements below 4,500 people. However, within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there are a number examples of other towns which are not classed as ‘rural’, yet still experience problems that are rural in nature due to their location. Examples of these towns include, Enniskillen, Lisnaskea, Irvinestown and Omagh, all of which are above the 4,500 threshold yet experience difficulties associated with rural areas i.e. reduced public transport facilities and services, infrastructure, lack of motorways/dual carriageway and so forth.

As stated, the Fermanagh and Omagh District is a very sparsely populated area however it is the largest Council within Northern Ireland by geographical size.

### **Policy Framework and Proposals**

The five outlined policy proposals (detailed below) are very much welcomed by the Council.

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

The Council believes that as part of point number five, it may be beneficial to outline some of the partnership working that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive will look to be involved in i.e. access to services, encouragement of new businesses and so forth. Whilst the Council understands that these issues are not necessarily the sole responsibility of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, they are key elements to sustaining rural communities.

The Council believes that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should consider amending the wording of bullet point number five to:

‘Working in partnership to empower rural communities through localised and individual planning’.

This would ensure that each local area would have an individual approach, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach.

### **Policy Objective One**

It is vital to the success of the policy that enough homes are made available to meet the needs of rural people. It is also crucial that all houses that are made available are affordable to those that are in need.

The Council believes that the very fact that only 14% of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive’s Social Homes are located within rural areas, demonstrates the fact that Northern Ireland Housing Executive services may not be as accessible to those in rural areas.

The Council understands that within some rural areas, individuals are placing themselves on waiting lists for urban areas away from their family support networks, as there is a better chance of success within urban areas. This is something that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should look to eliminate and provide enough social housing to meet the demand of individuals within rural areas.

Affordable housing within rural areas, particularly within the Fermanagh and Omagh District, is a very important issue. There are a number of studies and statistics which have been published which demonstrate that salaries are substantially lower for those in rural areas as opposed to those in urban areas. Statistics published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment demonstrate that there is also a difference in the average annual incomes of those situated within rural areas, with those situated in the ‘rural west’ of Northern Ireland earning less than those situated in the ‘rural east’ of the country.

Although the Council understands that there are various barriers to affordable housing schemes within rural areas, for example on the basis of cost (i.e. because of infrastructure, services, extra distance), NIHE must continue to consider alternative ways to address such barriers as the benefits of these schemes have a significant positive impact on local rural communities, rural economies, and rural-based businesses.

For the Fermanagh and Omagh Council District, the below table demonstrates the most up-to-date figures for local houses and their ownership.

### Dwelling Tenure by proposed New Council Area 2011

Proposed New Council Area	Owner Occupied		Social Housing		Private Rented & Other		Vacants		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
	Fermanagh & Omagh	31,620	58.2	10,210	18.8	5,270	9.7	7,250	13.3

SOURCE: NIHE, NI House Condition Survey

As can be seen from the diagram, there is a substantial number of 'Vacant' houses within the Council District. This is something that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should investigate further as these vacant properties may help to alleviate any housing stresses felt within rural areas in a cost-effective way, where there is a genuine wish to relocate.

### Policy Objective Two – 'Reduce Fuel Poverty'

Reducing fuel poverty is another aspect which should have a hugely beneficial effect on local rural communities and residents. One aspect which the Council believes should be included is the provision of 'ongoing education' regarding fuel poverty. This could take the form of leaflet drops, press releases in local newspapers as well as an online/social media communications campaign.

It would be most beneficial for this communication to be co-ordinated with the timing of the promotion of tiny 'Improvement Grants'. This will allow people to understand what exactly fuel poverty is, if it applies to themselves, as well as the types of forms/methods of assistance available.

In the longer term, Council recommends that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive considers various other energy efficient forms of fuel, and allocating funding to install these into current Northern Ireland Housing Executive social houses, as well as newly acquired developments.

### Policy Objective Three – 'Providing support to vulnerable people in rural areas'

This is one of the most important aspects of the new policy. It ties in quite well to the Council's response to the recent consultation on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's 'Corporate / Business Plan and Key Priority Areas'. In this document the Council stated that the key areas for Northern Ireland Housing Executive (as a whole) to focus on for 2016/2017 were as follows:

1. New House Building
2. Repairs and Improvements
3. Increasing thermal efficiency of homes.
4. Adaptions to homes for people with disabilities.
5. Community Safety.
6. Better housing opportunities for homeless people.

All of the above mentioned six themes are applicable to rural areas.

One major area which is not mentioned within the new policy directly is to increase the accessibility to various social housing, particularly within rural areas. This could include adaptations for people with certain physical disabilities, people who have various mental disabilities, or people with hearing/visual impairments. The Council is very committed to ensuring that all local residents are not discriminated against with regards to accessibility and as such, has introduced an Access and Inclusion Forum which consists of people with disabilities and/or access requirements, groups that represent people with disabilities as well as Council Officers.

It could be worthwhile for Northern Ireland Housing Executive Officers to consult with this group regarding any issues that are emerging within rural areas, particularly with regards to housing.

#### **Policy Objective Four – ‘Developing Safe and Cohesive Rural Neighbourhoods’**

Within the Fermanagh and Omagh District there have been a number of good examples of developing stronger and more cohesive rural neighbourhoods and communities.

#### **Rural Residents Forum**

One of the key success stories of previous policies and strategies in place by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive includes the Rural Residents Forum, which was developed almost as a sounding board for rural issues. The Council would like to see included within the new policy an increased role for the Rural Residents Forum. Although the Forum is comprised of 12 community representatives from across Northern Ireland, the Council would like this Forum to be more visible in rural areas. For example, this could take the form of annual meetings within each Council District, visiting rural areas as well as talking with rural groups/individuals on specific issues.

This Forum is comprised of local community representatives and their expertise should be availed upon, with regards to rural housing issues, as well as other rural issues.

It would also be useful for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to share more details on the Rural Residents Forum (its role, its membership, its responsibilities) with Elected Representatives within each Council District.

#### **Other Initiatives**

Another very successful programme which the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has been a key partner (along with Fermanagh and Omagh Policing and Community Safety Partnership) is the ongoing Community Safety Warden programme. Not only has this programme benefitted Enniskillen, but other towns such as Irvinestown and Lisnaskea.

The Council would like to see programmes such as these be continued, as well as be developed upon further.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation process on 'Sustainable Rural Communities - Full Policy Framework'.

In principle, the Council accepts and supports the principles and recommendations contained within the Consultation documents, however it would urge the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to take note of the comments contained above.