

THE NORTHERN IRELAND FEDERATION OF HOUSING ASSOCIATIONS

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12th January 2007

**Mr Michael Conway
Rural Housing Coordinator
Northern Ireland Housing Executive
2 Adelaide Street
BELFAST
BT2 8PB**

Dear Michael,

Re: Rural Homes and People: A Review of Housing Executive Rural Policy

I refer to the above document and would like to thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultative process. The Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) represents 44 independent voluntary organisations, which benefit the community by providing affordable accommodation and related housing services to those in greatest housing need. Taken together, our members manage almost 30,000 units of accommodation and build over 1,500 dwellings each year throughout Northern Ireland.

In the last twenty-five years housing associations have undertaken a range of projects in response to the needs of a diverse society including the provision of rural accommodation and services. NIFHA supports the proposals set out in this document, but we would urge a stronger approach through consideration of additional measures as outlined below:

- Examine some mechanisms to help curtail the haemorrhaging of existing stock;
- Seek assistance and efforts from the planning authorities in order to boost the supply of social and affordable housing
- Test any new ideas and initiatives of rural enablers and strategic partnerships in conjunction with housing associations
- Adjust TCI in rural areas to help pay for sewage facilities, small schemes etc.
- Take a more radical approach to environmental sustainability through conditions attached to grants for private owners
- Work closely with new and existing local authorities to strengthen their role in helping provide rural housing
- Agree a wider basis for the analysis of need for social rented housing
- We would anticipate that those “Housing Services” working in partnership, as mentioned in the overarching vision, include housing associations as well as regular discussions with the planning authorities, local representatives and rural community development organisations.

Representing and promoting housing associations in Northern Ireland


Chairperson: Mr Arthur Canning Dip (Est Man) MBEng Chief Executive: Mr Chris Williamson MCIH

On behalf of our members, we would also like to make the following specific comments in relation to the document:

- We accept the NIHE requirement to assess housing need under PPS12 and acknowledge those restrictions under PPS14. However, our members feel that it is important to take a more radical approach for the delivery of accommodation and support services in rural areas. For example, give approval to provide accommodation and match this with need and/or demand upon completion.
- In most instances, application of the urban criteria does not work and area plans need to be updated and allow more flexibility, in order to tackle significant problems in providing new housing initiatives.
- We call for existing planning measures to be put into operation to help the supply of social rented housing.
- NIFHA supports a balanced approach to the protection of the countryside, alongside the sustainability and viability of rural communities. However, we would urge that any relevant policy ensures adequate infrastructure and access to services for the rural population, similar to those of their counterparts in urban areas, in order to avoid social exclusion and/or disadvantage.
- It is important to take account of the economic and environmental factors, which clearly have an impact on rural development. There may be some merit in exploring examples across Europe in more depth to see how these might be successfully implemented in Northern Ireland and help bring policies into line with our European counterparts.
- We would challenge wording in paragraphs 4.4.2, 4.46 and 5.7 which imply that all sheltered housing in rural areas is underused and may not be being used to address the needs of homeless older people. We do however accept the proposals for schemes that are consistently underused.
- Paragraph 3.8 stress that social rented housing stock in rural areas has dropped from almost 11% to less than 6% in five years. This highlights the need to urgently review the statutory house sales scheme and, as a minimum, remove the time limitation on the option for social landlords to buy back rural homes sold under this scheme.
- The report recognises the increasing diversity of the rural population, given the influx of other nationalities and goes at some length to provision of meeting their needs. This should coincide with all relevant organisations advocating and encouraging a concept of “community ownership”.
- Our members call for all government departments and relevant organisations to work collectively to encourage future activity in the countryside as a means “to develop an attractive and prosperous rural area”.
- NIHE should consider devising initiatives to tackle unfitness in conjunction with other organisations through promoting existing schemes e.g. Fold’s “Staying Put Service” and sourcing other finance to help target those most in need, and particularly where it is feasible for those households to remain in an existing dwelling.

I trust you will find these comments useful and should you wish to discuss any of the points raised above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature consists of a large, stylized initial 'D' followed by the name 'Henderson' in a cursive script.

**DONALL HENDERSON
HOUSING POLICY AND RESEARCH MANAGER**