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**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network**

**Northern Ireland
Rural Women's Network (NIRWN's)
Response To**

**Sustainable Rural Communities: Consultation
Review of the housing Executive's Rural Housing
Policy**

Housing Executive

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NIRWN

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1 Introduction

1.1 NIRWN's vision is a rural community where women are respected and valued and where they have the opportunities, confidence and ability to visibly take up positions of power and influence in all areas of life.

NIRWN key objectives:

- Increasing the voice of rural women through giving them a voice at Policy level
- Playing an advocacy and lobbying role on behalf of rural women
- Encouraging women in decision-making and providing representation for rural women
- Information and networking opportunities for rural women
- Working within the Regional Support for Women in Disadvantaged and Rural Areas Programme, funded by DSD and DARD to give a voice to rural women

Mission

NIRWN's mission, as a rural regional support organisation, is to advance rural women's equality and participation in society. We will ensure rural women are recognised and supported to fully participate as equal citizens in the development of sustainable rural communities and society.

1.2 NIRWN, as a member of the Women's Regional Consortium funded through DSD, welcome the opportunity to respond to the Consultation for the Review of the Housing Executive's Rural Housing Policy.

1.3 This response is informed by our membership's views on social housing in rural areas and a stakeholder engagement event held in Hilltown on 07.03.16 on this consultation.

2 Comments:

2.1 GENERAL

NIRWN and its membership commend the NIHE on a comprehensive Review of the Housing Executive's Rural Housing Policy. It is worth noting that the long term existence of a Rural Unit within NIHE has effectively delivered services tailored to rural needs in NI with a clear, developed understanding of what the issues pertaining to rural dwellers are. The NIHE in this respect is an example of how other agencies should be delivering for rural dwellers. This is evident in the Draft Rural Housing Policy Proposals which have clear Outputs together with Short, Medium and Long Term Outcomes. The specific comments NIRWN and our Focus Group have are detailed below.

2.2 VISION & PRINCIPLES

Our organisation and those we consulted agree that the proposed vision and principles for the Rural Housing Policy are appropriate. The Principles in particular reflect an understanding of how a 'rural approach is necessary not a revised urban approach' and this underpinned most of what our members reflected to us.

2.3 RURAL CONTEXT

The 2013 DSD Family Resources Survey (FRS)¹ demonstrated that the average weekly earnings of people in rural areas were consistently below those living in urban areas from 2007-2012. The FRS also highlighted that almost ¼ (24%) of individuals in relative low income resided in the rural west of the region. Less available housing stock in rural areas; fuel poverty² together with lower incomes all mean that rural housing issues can only be addressed by a specific rural approach. Our Focus Group were very keen that a Rural Housing Unit in the Housing Executive be maintained, particularly in light of local government reform and the opportunities to work collaboratively to address rural issues in a local context. Rurality presents additional problems such as; distance, isolation, lack of services, and smaller populations. This has an impact on equity and social justice in rural areas. In times of difficulty, and reduced funding, it is easy to make a case for addressing the needs of the greatest number in a community or society and having them receive greatest attention. This focus may, however, leave the needs of the marginalised and disadvantaged even more excluded than usual; particularly if they do not have specialist support.

¹ DSD FRS Urban Rural Report NI <https://www.dsdni.gov.uk/publications/urban-rural-report-northern-ireland-2012-2013>

² Highest rate of fuel poverty found in households living in isolated rural areas (2011 House Condition Survey)

2.4 GENDER

The Housing Rights Service had a 300% increase in debt advice clients in 2008-2009³ and domestic violence was a characteristic of many cases to it and other agencies. Twenty percent of those aged 65+ and fifty one percent of those separated, widowed or divorced using prepayment meters have gone without electricity. ⁴ Due to a lack of gender disaggregated data on fuel poverty, it is impossible to say how many of these are women but it is probable that the majority are women as they form the larger proportion of these categories. High-risk selling has left low-income women with interest-only mortgages unable to pay the capital, and the cut in Mortgage Interest Rate Support will lead to further financial difficulties and possessions. ⁵ Legal aid to defend against house possession and strong support for social housing are necessary measures.

2.5 AGE

Women are 59% of those aged 70+ and nearly seven in ten of those 85+; their numbers will increase between three and fivefold by 2041⁶. Two-thirds of older people in households with incomes less than 60% of the median are women. ⁷ The proportion of the 75s+ in fuel poverty is extremely high at 76% and for single, mainly female, older citizens it is 83%. ⁸ We are an ageing population and women are living longer than men. Our focus group articulated a desire for homes to be adapted/built for lifelong use but additionally felt the Housing Executive could work with others to build sheltered housing in rural areas where older people could have their own flat/space; feel secure and have additional care as and when needed. This would potentially 'free up' existing housing stock and ensure older people can live a quality life in the rural area they are from. This would clearly fit with Policy Proposal 3; to provide housing support to vulnerable people in rural areas.

2.6 PRIVATE RENTING

Recent research⁹ states that the housing costs associated with private renting increased the relative poverty substantially for women rather than men. This factor is particularly concerning when coupled with the fact that the proportion of housing stock in rural areas (7%) remains significantly lower than in urban areas (18%). This echoes the concerns expressed by our members.

Our focus group articulated that young people and those returning to their rural area cannot get a Housing Executive property due to lack of availability. When the area was

³ Advice NI, Crunch Times at the Frontline, Advice NI AGM Report, February 2009, p8

⁴ Social Market Research (SMR), with Advice NI and Social Research Centre, Social Action Plan, Helping Customers to Avoid/Manage Debt, Social Market Research (June 2010), pp58-59.

⁵ Advice NI, Response to Support Mortgage Interest Scheme (September 2010)

⁶ P McGill, Illustrating Ageing in Ireland North and South: Key Facts and Figures, Belfast: Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (2010), p16

⁷ OFMdFM, A profile of older people in Northern Ireland, August 2009, p9

⁸ NIHE, Northern Ireland Housing Conditions Surveys 2006 and 2009

⁹ 'Housing and Communities' Inequalities in Northern Ireland, University of York for ECNI

assessed for need it was established that there was no need for more properties in the area due to the lack of a waiting list but our focus group believed there is no waiting list because there are no vacant properties to wait on. As a result young families applying for social housing are applying to be housed in the nearest very large town some 10 miles away, not through choice but necessity. This impacts on: the demographics of the village; quality of life; freedom of choice where to live and an over reliance then on private rented accommodation. Our focus group clearly stated that if you wanted to live in their village your options were: private rented accommodation or, buying a property.

2.7 SAFETY

There is a need to challenge age-old presumptions about the nature of rurality and crime. Myths that still hold firm in the minds of the public, politicians, policy-makers and media of the stereotypical picture of rural communities; the vision of a homogeneous, tightly-knit, caring community can still persist in our collective consciousness.¹⁰ Not only does rural crime need to be addressed but we need to acknowledge and address the perceptions of safety and fear of crime. The fear of crime is a significant factor in how safe people feel in their communities. Fear of crime is a prevalent issue today. Many people in Northern Ireland express anxiety and fear about crime and about being victimised. The level of fear that a person holds depends on many factors: gender, age, past experiences with crime, where someone lives, sexual orientation and their ethnicity. All of these factors have an impact on fear levels. The links between social exclusion and the incidence of crime in deprived communities and the negative consequences especially for older people are well documented. Gender has been found to be the strongest predictor of fear. Women have a much greater fear of crime than men. Women's fear comes mostly from their vulnerability to sexual aggression: women are ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted than are men.¹¹

This is in the context of a much reduced police presence in rural areas. The closure of rural police stations and the reduction in police resources presents huge difficulties for people living in rural and remote areas. The Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) approved the PSNI Estate Strategy in May 2005 and since then 21 police stations, 20 in rural regions on the station review list have been closed.¹²

Fear of crime is certainly something our members frequently raise with us and when considering this consultation in particular; the issue of lighting was raised. One person cited that she had requested, from the Housing Executive, an extra light for the exterior of her premises to address her fear of intruders and was declined. Her property is an end terrace property and her main entrance is at the rear of her home however she cannot see nor hear anyone approaching from the side of the property until they are right at her back door. This has led to an increase in her level of fear and she would really appreciate a light at the side of the house and preferably one which is motion

¹⁰ 'Rural Issues', Ciaran Lynch, Tipperary Institute

¹¹ Understanding Violence against Women, Crowell N & Burgess A

¹² PSNI Estate Strategy

sensored.

2.8 COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

It is the view of NIRWN that NIHE in rural areas makes very tangible and successful efforts to engage with the community and contribute to sustainable, rural communities. Our focus group were very interested in this part of your work but had until our session not realised that the NIHE engaged in this type of activity. Information sharing can be challenging in rural areas but our focus group felt they could benefit from this sort of engagement and would like to learn more about how they could work with NIHE and others to contribute to the development of safe, cohesive and engaged rural neighbourhoods.

It is the view of NIRWN and our members that RPA together with the Rural Needs Bill have the potential to impact positively on the development of rural areas and communities. It is not necessary always to spend more as working collaboratively towards common goals is likely to be more effective and cost efficient.

CONCLUSION

NIRWN look forward to supporting the NIHE in the implementation of the Proposals when they are finalised.

NIRWN would add that any consultative engagement process or development of a Rural Resident's Forum/Group should be gender balanced (taking account of CEDAW¹³ and UN Security Resolution 1325¹⁴), and reflect the multiplicity of society in their locality.

¹³ UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women,
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations>

¹⁴ <http://www.peacewomen.org/un/sc/1325.html>

UNSC 1325 emphasises the distinct position of women in conflict and post conflict situations. It calls on member states to act in several areas, including the promotion of women in decision making institutions