

Presentation script: Identifying Rural Housing Need

Sinéad Collins, Northern Ireland Housing Executive

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Hello, my name is Sinéad Collins and I am the Rural & Regeneration Manager for the Housing Executive which apart from being the largest social landlord, is also the Regional Housing Authority for NI. On one side of the business we manage just under 85,000 social homes dispersed around 11 local councils, the grounds and assets associated with these housing estates and of course the services we provide to our many tenants and customers.

On the other side of the business we assess housing need against the common waiting list which is currently made up of around 26,000 people and we manage the 3 year

Social Housing Development Programme to address this housing need with new build schemes delivered by our developing housing association partners. We have not ourselves built new homes since 1994 but a Ministerial announcement last November launched a period of transformation for the Housing Executive where a change in legislation will provide us with the powers to borrow and to once again embark on a new build programme. So exciting times ahead.

I work within the Regional side of the business and am responsible for our Rural Housing Strategy as well as ensuring that the organisation fulfil our duty with regards the Rural Needs Act for NI - which I will speak more about later.

I was really excited when our friend Kirsten in Rural Housing Scotland contacted me to see if the Housing Executive would be interested in getting involved in their housing conference this year. The invitation was timely as I am in the midst of developing a new rural housing strategy for the organisation and keen to explore new and different ways of addressing the ongoing housing issues which face our rural communities. I hadn't initially thought about what we could bring to the summit but when I reflected on the impact our rural strategy has had, our role in identifying housing need in rural areas is for me one of the most important aspects of our work and a clear example of how meaningful community engagement is the first step in delivering results for those we are trying to help.

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Before I took on the role of managing our Rural Unit in 2013, I had researched the post and I thought I had an idea of what the team was about, the issues facing rural dwellers and why we needed a specific rural focus. My background is in town planning and in policy development and although I have assessed many rural planning applications and assessed land in rural areas for housing, I had no experience of our local office, the counter, our frontline. Rural housing need testing was in fact my first real experience of dealing directly with rural customers and it was an eye opener. The case that stands out for me was one in the area I live myself and the one that I couldn't help.

A couple of years ago, we carried out a housing needs test in the village where I live. I knew from the outset that we would get a positive result as I knew first-hand of the difficulties in finding an affordable home in the area, we had waited ten years for the right house to come up. However, I was totally blown away by the response. So many young couples living with their parents and their children in overcrowded conditions, older people desperate to downsize to a more accessible home but not willing to move into town, families with children with complex needs who wanted to stay close to their support networks and few of these people were on the waiting list, it wasn't on the radar at all.

However, I got a call from a lady one afternoon shortly after the test had closed. She was aware of a Housing Executive house that had become available because the elderly tenant had passed away and she wanted to know if I could help her to be considered for the property as she had been given her notice at a private rented property and she had been on the waiting list for a social home in the area for some time. This was a 2-bedroom house. She was a single mother with 5 children. Needless to say she wouldn't be considered for a home that wasn't big enough to meet her needs.

However, her situation was desperate and she couldn't afford to wait for new homes to be built in the area. So she remained on the waiting list for a while but I later found out that she considered living in a caravan in her parents garden but instead accepted an offer of a housing executive home, she had to move 20 miles to get a 4 bedroom house, uprooting her children once again, taking them away from school, clubs, friends and away from her parents who provided vital support. 20 miles is a long way in ni.

This to me, brought home the harsh reality that can face anyone who needs to find an affordable home which will meet the needs of their family, especially in a time of crisis. But this can be exceptionally more difficult for someone wishing to live in a rural area where affordable housing options are so often in such short supply. In order to deliver our statutory housing functions in both urban and rural areas, we need a targeted approach to ensure that we identify housing needs in rural areas and break the cycle for future generations.

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3 areas of focus

- 1** Why 'Rural Matters' to the Housing Executive.
- 2** Our rural housing need test and our guide to a successful test.
- 3** Next steps, challenges and opportunities.

RURAL HOUSING SUMMIT

Housing Executive

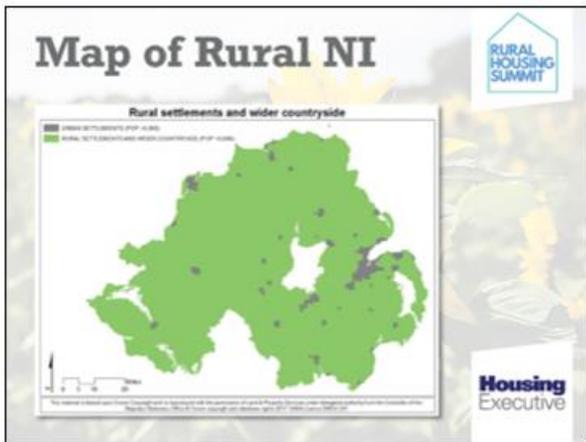
So this afternoon, I'd like to explain how we go about identifying housing need in rural areas, focusing on:

Why 'rural matters' to the housing executive;

Our rural housing need test and our guide to a successful test;

Next steps, challenges and opportunities

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In the Housing Executive we use the NISRA default urban/rural definition which defines the rural area as all settlements with a pop of under 5000 people and under and the surrounding open countryside.

Based on this definition, around 670,000 people in Northern Ireland live in a rural area, that's approximately 37% of the population. This 37% are dispersed across a large area which represents around 95% of the total land area in NI and includes, under our current dev plan system, some 596 villages and small settlements.

Within this area, the Housing Executive still maintains just under 15,000 homes which accounts for around 17% of our total stock – although according to the latest house condition survey, social housing only accounts for approximately 7% of all rural homes compared to 20% of all homes in urban areas.

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Another way to picture rural Northern Ireland is to consider it from the perspective of distance. In 2015, NISRA expanded their rural classification to look at service provision, by categorising rural areas based on their drive time from the centre of a settlement with a population of 10,000 or more, which they classified as a service centre. NI is not a big place, approximately 93% of people live within 30 minutes of a large settlement. However, you can see from the map that there are areas in white where the population are over 30 minutes away from key services such as doctors, hospitals and higher education facilities.

This includes areas of high scenic value such as the Mourne, the Glens, the Sperrins, the Ards peninsula. These areas do have very obvious topographical constraints to building new homes i.e. mountains and valleys, however they also have vibrant and growing resident populations as well as being our most popular tourist destinations. In areas like Cushendall, Cushendun, Rostrevor, and Warrenpoint, it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure sites for new social housing, mainly because of the competitive cost of land. This can result in local people who cannot afford a home, having to move away from their family circle.

In contrast though, in the more remote areas of Fermanagh which are outside the commuter zones for Belfast and Derry, there is a much more dispersed population with a steady loss of young people to the cities. Average household incomes in Fermanagh are approximately 40% lower than that in Belfast. It can still be difficult to evidence the need for new social homes in the villages in this area though despite representations from local councillors and the longer it is before we provide new opportunities, the greater the risk to these communities.

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There are challenges which can face rural residents, especially those living in the more remote areas. Challenges such as having to travel to access key services with a reduced public transport system and an over reliance on private cars, slower broadband speeds, patchy phone signals and of course the difficulty in evidencing the demand for government intervention when the population is dispersed and the numbers aren't there.

There has been a significant push in NI, led by Department AgricRuralDev (now DepAgricEnvRuralAffairs) to make the rural proofing of public policy mandatory across all government departments. The policy on rural proofing

was signed up to by the NI Executive in 2002 and the Executive subsequently reaffirmed this commitment in 2009. However there continued to be concerns that rural proofing was not being implemented as effectively as it could be and that some policies were still urban focused and not as effective in rural areas. Finally by 2016, the rural agenda had gained sufficient momentum and the first rural legislation in NI 'the Rural Needs Act' was introduced.

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The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 came into operation for government departments and local councils on 1 June 2017 and was introduced for a list of named public authorities including the Housing Executive on 1st June 2018.

The Act introduced a new duty on public authorities in Northern Ireland to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. It also requires public authorities to compile information on the exercise of the due regard duty and for this information to be published.

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The Housing Executive were stakeholders in the advisory group who brought the new legislation together. However, our commitment to identifying and addressing the needs of rural communities predates the concept of rural proofing by many years...

The Housing Executive has a statutory responsibility to assess housing needs, research housing conditions and to ensure programmes are in place to meet identified needs. This applies equally to urban and rural areas across Northern Ireland.

However, the large-scale regeneration led by the Housing Executive in the 70s and 80s was concentrated in urban areas where the evidence of need was greatest. The strength of urban housing policy lay in its ability to deal directly with the very worst housing through rehabilitation and large-scale new build, its weakness however was that it was not delivering for rural dwellers living in similar conditions. By the mid-1980's, it had become evident that there were areas

outside of the main urban settlements in which housing needs were just as great, but were often concealed because households were more dispersed, and were prepared to stay in poor housing conditions rather than relocate to access new social housing.

The 1984 House Condition Survey demonstrated the widening gap between rural and urban house conditions, with increasing concentrations of unfitness in more isolated rural areas. A report at this time – the Roslea study, found that in this village in Co. Fermanagh, 22% of homes lacked a bath or shower, 20% lacked an internal WC and actually 13% of homes in Rosslea in 1986 lacked an internal water supply.

The Housing Executive recognised that a lack of social and affordable housing, along with the poor condition of many existing owner/occupied homes, could threaten the sustainability of some of our rural communities. It was determined that in order for us to deliver on our statutory responsibilities – we should define what the issues were facing rural communities and develop a specific approach, not just for housing delivery, but for improvement of existing properties, homelessness and for broader rural regeneration.

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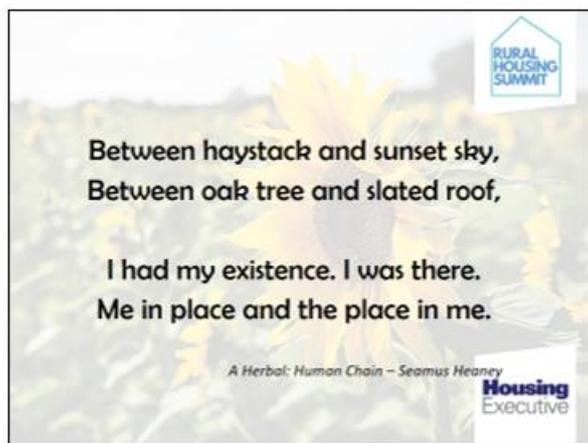


Since our first Rural Housing Policy was introduced in 1991, this specific approach has evolved amidst a changing housing policy context, and we are now in the midst of developing our 5th Rural Strategy. We are one of the only public agencies in NI to have a dedicated Rural Unit, a focused rural strategy, a rural residents' forum who scrutinise our policies and services through a rural lens and we have a separate news publication for rural tenants and customers.

Since it was first introduced in 2002, we have also endorsed and embraced rural proofing. Probably the best and most meaningful example of rural proofing is the

introduction of a separate policy for identifying rural housing need.

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I've included this quote from the main man Seamus Heaney and his poem A Herbal. This quote is on the wall as you enter the Seamus Heaney homeplace near Bellaghy in Co. Antrim and when I seen it there, I thought, this really captures how it feels to belong somewhere even when you know that the place will be there even when you're not any longer.

The experience in NI will be im sure similar to that of each of your jurisdictions, in that people are quite parochial and feel a sense of belonging to somewhere and this seems to be especially true for rural areas. Each of our rural settlements regardless of size will have an identity unique

from other neighbouring villages and indeed from district towns and from the cities and main urban centres which serve them. Our very first rural housing policy highlighted attachment to place and the importance of helping rural dwellers wherever possible to find housing solutions close to their family network and within the community they feel a part of. It also highlighted that there can be significant challenges in achieving this.

One of the biggest challenges is identifying the evidence that new homes are required in a rural area. Housing needs can often be hidden or latent and won't be flagged up by running reports on waiting lists.

We have many rural settlements across our 11 council areas, which don't have and have never had, a supply of social housing. In these areas people may not realise or understand the role of the HE with regards to housing and homelessness or perhaps they know but can see that there is no stock available and that they would have to relocate to access social housing. Or perhaps there is social housing but there is little to no turnover of the stock and so people may think that there is no point in applying. It's very simple, if there is no waiting list then we may not pick up that there is demand.

This highlights the need for us as regional housing authority to promote the range of services we offer to people who for whatever reason have difficulty in accessing decent and affordable housing which meets their needs.

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Our rural housing need tests are aimed at doing exactly this. At reaching out one community at a time to give people the opportunity to say, I need a home -an opportunity to have a discussion with a housing advisor to lay out what their realistic housing options are.

This could be social housing, it could be remaining where they are with some level of support, it could be the private rented sector or increasingly what we are finding at our community information events is that at least half of the people who come forward aspire to home ownership but there are no affordable options in the area.

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Choosing where to test...

Our annual testing programme is compiled based on 2 factors;

1 - rural areas where we notice that there is little movement on the waiting list and there is very low turnover of our remaining stock; especially those areas where we own land which may have potential for housing development;

2 - areas for which a representation has been made by a local councillor or from the local council. We will scrutinise any available waiting list data before we add such areas to

the programme to ensure that a test is required, for example, we will not usually proceed if our existing stock is proving difficult to let.

At this early stage we make a commitment to community reps to 'examine the demand and potential for the provision of new affordable homes'. However, before we proceed to consultation, we must first determine if the development of new housing is likely to gain planning approval in this location. This is usually a desk top exercise undertaken by our in-house planners to simply identify the availability of remaining land within settlement limits and/or if our rural exceptions policy (CTY5 of PPS21) will apply. In many cases we will take this a step further and carry out additional feasibility of available lands, contact landowners to gauge interest in selling for housing and then pass this information on to a nominated housing association.

This is a vital part of the process for 2 reasons...

Firstly, there is no point in engaging with communities on housing need which can be such a sensitive issue for many - unless we feel there is a realistic prospect that new housing could be delivered. We have

one shot at meaningful consultation and the last thing we want to do is to raise expectations unnecessarily.

Secondly, from experience we know that we get a better response when we carry out consultation in partnership with a developing housing association. It is only natural that more prospective applicants will come forward to see plans for a site, to look at potential house designs, to see something on paper that looks like it will provide what they need.

So I have this short video which was put together to share on social media to explain a bit about our testing process...

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Watch the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1LLbrIDBZAO>

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I feel that the strength in our process is the flexibility to adapt each rural housing need test to suit the community we are trying to help. Some communities will respond well to a large public consultation whereas others would prefer a lighter touch.

As I said earlier, the test is very simply a 4-6 week long consultation where we reach out to anyone in need of a home in a particular area, to come forward and register an interest with us. We take details either face to face, over the phone or by email and we arrange a meeting with one of our housing advisors from the nearest local office to the carry out a housing assessment.

This initial discussion may lead to the individual or household being added to the waiting list, it may lead to the allocation of an existing available home or it may simply result in some advice on how to commence or sustain a tenancy in a private rental. There have been cases where during a test, people have come forward to present as homeless and given our statutory responsibility, our housing advisor will have had to take the necessary steps to find them suitable temporary accommodation. I suppose my point here is that although the individual or household has been identified through the test, the approach is the same as it is for anyone who comes forward to a local office. The aim of the test is not just to identify the need for new homes but to help anyone who is faced with housing difficulties in that area to speak to us and let us help them to find a solution. Every housing assessment will be tailored to the individual.

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Over the test period, the main elements of the consultation can include:

Engagement with a range of **community reps**;

Adverts in the **local press**;

Posters, flyers, leaflets to be distributed with **points of contact in the village** - community centres, shops, clubs, churches;

Posts on **social media** - particularly useful in recent years;

An art competition with the **local primary school** 'design my dream home';

Sharing through reps on our **Rural Residents Forum** and through contacts in **Rural Community Network**;

Promotion through housing advisors in our **local office**;

A **public** meeting or housing information event which can include the **housing association** and also other **housing executive depts** with grants and other housing support to promote.

It is important to identify a range of **local community reps** and when I mean a range, I'm referring to the NI sense of the word where it is still important to strike the right balance in terms of community background. Local councillors are a way into the community, although we do have to ensure that we promote an understanding of what we mean by social and affordable or intermediate housing and explain how social homes are always allocated by our legislated housing selection scheme which is essentially a points system to determine those in the greatest need. There is no opportunity for a local lettings policy.

Community reps can raise awareness through word of mouth but more often and more successfully in recent times, particularly with current restrictions, through social media outlets.

It helps immensely when we have the focus of a housing information event to kick start the testing process. This is an opportunity for us to explain face to face the purpose of the test and to explain what could happen as a result. These events have taken many forms over the years.

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My favourite example is of the tests we carried out in 2009 and again in 2015 on Rathlin Island, our only inhabited island where social housing has actually helped to sustain the growing population. (pic of scheme from 2013)

The population of Rathlin has doubled in the last 10 years and the demand is growing for housing to accommodate young families and the people directly employed on the island. Private rented accommodation often has other demands during the holiday season.

Rathlin Development & Community Association were pivotal in engaging gov departments to recognise the

problems the islanders faced due to a sustained lack of investment and to prepare and deliver a cross departmental Action Plan. The community group also approached the Housing Executive to examine the need for new homes on the island. The rural housing need test we carried out back then in 2009 led to the development of a 10 unit scheme at Church Bay.

However it was only 3 years later when the community group came back to us, concerned that the lack of housing was forcing people to settle on the mainland, even the local primary school teacher was having to commute, which isn't ideal when you're relying on a ferry.

We worked with the community group and with Rural Housing Association to organise a day long drop-in session to maximise engagement with community members. We spoke to parents as they picked up their children from school, we met the Tuesday club for pensioners and the mother and toddler group in the island café. We spoke to existing tenants and their families. Our housing advisors used side rooms to carry out housing assessments there and then. Meanwhile we had our grants team offering other home owners advice on our home improvement and energy conservation grants. It was a fantastic engagement and as a result, another scheme is on the new build programme for 2021/22 and we can't wait to see the result.

In our current Action Plan, our target is to carry out 10 tests a year. However, we always allow for in-year requests from community reps and usually carry out up to 15 tests.

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Over the last 4 years - the lifespan of our outgoing rural strategy, we carried out 36 tests Across NI. To date, 12 new housing schemes have been programmed, which should deliver at least 140 units of new social housing in areas where previously we had no firm evidence of demand. Infact since it was first introduced around 2002, just over 400 units have been developed in test areas, this is around 20% of all rural schemes delivered over that period.

Our tests have gained momentum in recent years. Since the return of the NI Assembly in 2020, housing issues are high on the agenda once again and rural councillors are

keen that their communities are not left behind.

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Although, we can never predict the response we are going to get, there are common factors in our most successful tests. These include:

A site for a potential housing development and a housing association who are happy to speak to interested parties about the development process and what could be on offer;

Community contacts who are invested in the process and eager to help us maximise the return;

A community event, whether it is a church hall, a community centre or a Tuesday club in the local bar. I think people respond better to face to face engagement, even if they don't feel comfortable speaking to us there and then;

The **appropriate people** at the event to answer any possible questions and more importantly to have what can be a very difficult and personal conversation for many people;

Social media communication. Increasingly the best way to engage with a range of individuals of different ages.

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Now, in the midst of reviewing the last Housing Executive Rural Strategy and consulting internal and external stakeholders with regards to how the new strategy should be shaped, I can pick out what we did successfully and those issues which we have yet to crack.

Identifying rural housing need has to remain one of the most important outcomes. We still have a long way to go to completing the picture of what new housing is required to sustain the future of our rural communities and this will never remain static, we will likely always need a different approach for rural.



We will continue to identify and strengthen partnership arrangements which can help us to deliver local housing solutions. We have just really commenced the journey of Community Planning in NI, and already new opportunities are emerging in terms of pooling budgets, land assets, and of course, expertise from the various statutory partners. Working in partnership with other public authorities has begun to unlock the potential of existing assets, and help communities to realise a range of benefits.

Community planning partnerships could be in my view, the perfect forum to raise the profile of housing need

tests. The council want to deliver community planning outcomes, councillors want to address issues which face their constituents and we want to maximise the reach of our local consultations. I have just written to stakeholders to get views on trialling with one rural council, how we could expand our focus and instead of examining individual settlements, we could look at all of the settlements in a particular District electoral area both in terms of land availability and housing need. We hope that this could be a way of channelling resources and maximising the outcome of the test – getting a true picture of need and hopefully identifying some opportunities to address it.

This is one opportunity but there are some challenges which will be tough nuts to crack...

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Whilst crucial in breaking the cycle of inactivity, identifying need is not the only barrier to providing affordable housing in rural areas.

Having engaged with communities in an effort to develop waiting lists which capture rural housing need, the cyclical analysis of this need helps us to set an annual strategic target for new rural social housing development.

However, our housing association colleagues do often face challenges in meeting this target. The main challenge is **accessing land** which is suitable for housing development and which is within an area where planning

approval would be considered. This is not an easy challenge to overcome as many of you will fully understand.

We see our role as statutory consultees with the 11 local planning authorities as being the key to turning this curve. Following a major reform of both local government and planning legislation in NI in 2015, we are now eagerly awaiting a full suite of new local development plans for NI. As the regional housing authority for NI, we are responsible for providing details of social housing need at both council and settlement level to enable the provision of the land required to meet existing and future housing needs and also to shape planning policies which will help deliver the housing required over the next 15 years.

We want to maximise this opportunity to not only secure land for social housing where there is a high unmet need but also to introduce, really for the first time, a requirement to encourage the development of **other new build housing products** which are affordable and accessible for lower income households. Our previous and ongoing consultations demonstrate that there are many people who do not wish to access social housing but yet cannot afford owner occupation. We have co-ownership products available but the property has to be there with a price within the threshold. We need much more new housing that is developed for the people that fall in between the 2 stools of social and owner occupation - products developed specifically for equity sharing or rent to buy.

This is a long-awaited opening for us to demand more from the planning process - not only for more affordable housing but also for policies which will deliver higher quality, low-carbon housing which is energy efficient and adaptable to meet the needs of an ageing population.

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There's a lot for us to learn from this summit about how **community led housing** has been facilitated in other jurisdictions. This is something we haven't yet cracked in NI. But we have seen examples of cooperative-housing like that provided in Cloughjordan a rural area outside Tipperary where with the right private investment and a huge community effort, a new eco village was created where community ethos goes beyond neighbourly gestures and into food production, shared transport and supporting each household with the individual challenges they may face. How can we facilitate this in NI though? That's something that warrants much more investigation

on our part.

As I mentioned previously, the Ministerial announcement about the future of the HE marks the start of an exciting period of transformation for us and also a time when we can focus on how we can use our housing need expertise and our understanding of local housing markets, to deliver a programme of new and innovative housing which will provide affordable homes to those who need them. We hope that this will result in positive outcomes for our rural communities.

You'll probably be glad to know that I've reached the end of my presentation, and I hope that I've given you a fair insight into how and why we take a different approach to identifying housing need for rural areas in NI. I'd be more than happy to take questions now and just hope that I can answer them for you!

N.B. - this script does not contain the content of the Q&A session which followed the presentation.