

# Written Ministerial Statement

*The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.*

## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

### RURAL NEEDS ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT APRIL 2020 — MARCH 2021

*Published at 12.00 noon on Wednesday 23 March 2022.*

**Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs):** In accordance with Section 3 (2) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (The Act), my Department laid the Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report April 2020 - March 2021 before the Assembly on 15 December 2021. The report has been published on my Department's website and covers the reporting period 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (the Act) places a statutory duty on departments, district councils and certain other public authorities (listed in the Schedule to the Act) to have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas in the development, adoption, implementation, and revision of policies, strategies and plans and in the design and delivery of public services. This helps to ensure that public authorities consider rural needs when undertaking these activities helping to ensure a more equitable outcome for those who live in our rural areas.

The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report April 2020 – March 2021 is an extensive document that provides a formal record of Rural Needs Impact Assessments undertaken by public authorities in order to fulfil their duty under Section 1 (1) of the Act. It is encouraging to see from this report that consideration of rural needs is now becoming firmly embedded within public authorities and it has become an integral part of the policy making process. Many of the activities will not impact differently on people in rural areas from those in urban areas and indeed some activities, by their very nature, will have positive impacts. It is nonetheless reassuring to note that in some instances when negative impacts have been identified that public authorities are considering these impacts and putting measures in place if appropriate.

For example, within my own Department the Warm, Well & Connected initiative was established to provide support in response to the impacts of the ongoing pandemic and Covid 19 restrictions. The Department considered the impact of Covid 19 on the health and wellbeing of vulnerable groups in rural areas, and how living in rural areas can exacerbate those impacts. The 'connected' element of the programme was therefore directed, and funding allocated more directly, towards the outcomes set for rural delivery partners.

The Shared Lives NI for Older People, procured by the Health and Social Care Board's, will have a positive impact on people in rural areas. The aim of Shared Lives is to deliver an accessible regional service for Older People which will provide an alternative to day opportunities, short breaks or long term care for some adults in need of support. The very nature of this service means that it is accessible to rural communities and is suited to rural circumstances. The needs and special considerations of rural communities and areas have been objectively considered as part of the development process. This approach offers a model of social care that is based on relationships which enables service users to remain living in their communities (rural and urban), build long term sustainable relationships and reduce social isolation.

The above examples clearly illustrate that consideration of rural needs is having a direct impact on the lives of rural dwellers and I am heartened to see this. As the Department with responsibility for the Act, my Department will continue to provide a range of support to the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Act to help ensure they comply with the requirements of the legislation. This support includes the provision of advice on the implementation of the due regard duty, the undertaking of Rural Needs Impact Assessments, the completion of Rural Needs Impact Assessment templates, engaging with rural stakeholders and monitoring and reporting.

One of the recommendations in the report on the Review of the Implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was that my Department would review the structure and content of the 'Rural Needs' section on DAERA's internet site with a view to making the information more user-friendly. This has now been implemented and the new rural needs section is now live and the new web address is <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/rural-needs>.

Some new features include the development of a number of 'Help With' guides for Public Authorities, the incorporation of a 'rural research hub' with information on available rural related research and publications, and details of the range of support measures and other resources available to assist Public Authorities.

DAERA also undertook a Review of the Schedule of the Act in autumn 2020. This will help to broaden the reach of the Act thereby help to ensure that rural needs are given due regard to with the ultimate aim of improving outcomes for rural dwellers.

Finally I would like to thank those public authorities who have contributed to this Annual Monitoring Report. It is encouraging to see the extensive contribution from public authorities and I hope that by continuing to work together we can deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.