

# Written Ministerial Statement

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## Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

### SIXTH RURAL NEEDS ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT

*Published at noon on Wednesday 13 March 2024.*

**Mr Muir (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 sixth Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report before the Assembly on 9 January 2024. The report has been published on my Department's website and covers the reporting period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was introduced to help improve outcomes for rural dwellers in Northern Ireland by ensuring that public authorities have due regard to the social and economic needs of people in rural areas when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services. It also helps to ensure greater transparency in relation to how public authorities consider rural needs when undertaking their functions.

The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report is an integral part of the monitoring and reporting requirements provided for in the Act and contains the information sent to DAERA by departments, local councils and the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. It provides a formal record of Rural Needs Impact Assessments (RNIAs) undertaken by each public authority during the period 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023 and demonstrates how public authorities have considered the needs of people in rural areas when exercising their functions.

The combination of geographical isolation, fewer public transport links and low population density often impact on the ability of people in rural areas to access public services and, therefore, adopting the same approach to public service delivery in rural areas as in urban areas may not always be appropriate. The Rural Needs Impact Assessment process helps ensure that public authorities understand the impact of their policies on people in rural areas and consider how any differential impact might be addressed to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged.

The report includes details of 502 Rural Needs Impact Assessments, including 165 undertaken by Northern Ireland government departments, 162 undertaken by local councils and 175 undertaken by other public authorities. These cover a wide range of policy areas and the volume and diverse range of the activities covered indicates that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is now well embedded within public authorities and that policymakers are now more aware of the duty to consider the needs of people in rural areas when developing and implementing policies and when designing and delivering public services.

An important development during the period of the report was the launch of the Rural Needs Toolkit for Health & Social Care which is designed to help those working in the health and social care sector to address the needs of people in rural areas when designing and delivering health and social care services. The Toolkit recognises that people in rural areas can face particular challenges in accessing health and social care services and will be a valuable resource for policy makers across the health and social care sector in seeking to improve outcomes for rural dwellers.

The report also sets out details of the support provided by DAERA to public authorities during the period of the report to assist them with implementing the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. This included the delivery of five intensive classroom-based training courses for Rural Needs Co-ordinators in public authorities to ensure they have the knowledge and expertise required to perform their role effectively and the provision of a range of resources on the Rural Needs section of the DAERA website to support decision makers including guidance, rural statistics and a rural research and information hub.

During the period of the report, DAERA held the first two face-to-face meetings of the Rural Needs Network which was established to facilitate co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities and on which all public authorities are represented. The Rural Needs Network provides an opportunity for DAERA to engage directly with public authorities to share learning and best practice which helps to ensure better quality Rural Needs Impact Assessments.

I recognise the importance of DAERA working in partnership with other departments to help ensure that the particular needs of rural communities are addressed and my Department will continue to provide support to other public authorities with implementing the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 to help deliver better outcomes for rural dwellers.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank all public authorities for their contributions to the report and for their co-operation and their willingness to engage with my Department in the compiling of the report.