



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Please use this form to submit written submissions in relation to the Rural Needs Bill. Return to committee.agriculture@niassembly.gov.uk

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Organisation: (if applicable) Libraries NI

Date: 17 November 2015

Introduction

- 1.1 Libraries NI is the single public library service for Northern Ireland, created by the Libraries Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. It came into being on 1 April 2009 as part of the Review of Public Administration.
- 1.2 Its services are regionally planned and locally delivered through a network of 96 branch libraries, 2 heritage libraries, 15 mobile libraries, a Homecall service for people who are housebound, outreach and online services.
- 1.3 29 branch libraries are located in rural settlements i.e. those in Bands F, G and H (communities of 5,000 or less) in the Review of Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements (March 2015, NISRA). A number of other libraries are based in towns with large rural hinterlands
- 1.4 Libraries play an important role in the lives of rural dwellers and rural communities. In a recent consultation rural dwellers highlighted the role of the library as a community hub and shared social space, sometimes the only such space in a community, as well as an important source of free Wi-Fi and broadband access, reading materials, programmes for children, information, IT skills and other learning programmes and a place to meet people.
- 1.5 This role has been enhanced through Libraries NI's partnership work with DARD, underpinned by a Memorandum of Understanding. The partnership exists to promote the sustainability of rural communities by:
 - enhancing the sustainability of rural libraries
 - ensuring that libraries contribute to the sustainability of rural communities
 - supporting individuals and communities, including farmers, farm families and rural dwellers, to access and benefit from library services.

It has resulted in additional programmes and activities addressing mental health and wellbeing and digital inclusion as well as enhanced access to services

- 1.6 Libraries NI welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the draft Rural Needs Bill. This submission is based on our experience of rural proofing. Libraries NI has produced rural impact assessments as part of the development and consultation process for a number of major policies. This has proved extremely beneficial and has influenced the final policies.

2. Duty of Public Authorities to Consider Rural Needs

- 2.1 Libraries NI is of the view, based on its experience, that any statutory body which provides services which impact, or are likely to impact, in any way on the lives of rural dwellers should have a duty, in developing policy, to assess the needs of rural dwellers and the impact of that proposed policy on rural dwellers.

3. Guidance, Advice and Information

- 3.1 It will be important that guidance, training and advice is available about meeting rural needs. Libraries NI has benefited previously from such training and advice.

4. Monitoring and Reporting

- 4.1 The proposed approach appears to offer monitoring systems and processes which will ensure compliance and a consistent approach without being unduly bureaucratic.

5. Co-operation with Other Bodies

- 5.1 A joined-up and collaborative approach to considering and taking account of rural needs when designing services is required since this will enable a holistic approach to be taken to assessing and meeting the needs of rural communities. It is recognised that various government departments, as well as other organisations, will hold relevant data and information about rural communities and if rural proofing is to be effective and consistent, there must be a process to enable this information to be shared.

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