

WRITTEN MINISTERIAL STATEMENT BY EDWIN POOTS MLA

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report

- 1 In accordance with Section 3 (2) of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (The Act), my department laid the second Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report before the Assembly on 12 December 2019. The report was published on my department's website and covers the reporting period 1 April 2018 – 31 March 2019.
- 2 The Rural Needs Act was introduced to help deliver fairer outcomes for the 670,000 people who live in rural areas in Northern Ireland (2011 Census). The purpose of the Act is to ensure 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 provides a mechanism for ensuring greater transparency in relation to how public authorities consider rural needs when undertaking these activities.
- 3 The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report is an integral part of the monitoring process. It contains the information sent to my department by public authorities on the exercise of their functions under section 1 of the Act. It provides a formal record of all the Rural Needs Impact Assessments undertaken by public authorities. A Rural Needs Impact Assessment is the process recommended by my department to assist public authorities in fulfilling their due regard duty when carrying out activities specified under Section 1(1) of the Act.
- 4 The 2nd Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report is an extensive document and I am encouraged by the breadth of activities undertaken by public authorities. There are examples in the report of measures where the duty to have due regard to rural needs has impacted on the activity and subsequently led to public authorities altering their policies, strategies or plans to ensure better outcomes

for rural citizens. This is the purpose of the Act and I very much welcome the improvements being made. I would very much encourage public authorities to review the report and consider the examples of good practice. This should assist public authorities in making better policies and deliver better public services that are truly reflective of all our society. It will also help to share learning and understanding of the unique rural circumstance that many of our citizens tolerate and ensure that this is reflected in public policy delivering better outcomes for all of our citizens regardless of where they live.

- 5 The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 places additional duties on my department and the report includes information on the exercise of these duties. The report refers to the engagement DAERA has undertaken with public authorities, providing advice and support on fulfilling their obligations under the Act. The report also highlights how DAERA has encouraged co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities.
- 6 The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report, coupled with the requirement for public authorities to compile and report in their own annual reports, increases the level of transparency and provides stakeholders with information that enables them to evaluate the implementation of the Act across a wide and diverse range of public authorities. The information contained in the report provides those governed by the Act with an opportunity to share learning and exchange information to ultimately achieve better outcomes for rural dwellers.
- 7 The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is a key policy tool for my department and forms part of a suite of measures which aim to improve outcomes for rural citizens. The impact of a policy or the delivery of a public service can therefore be different for people in rural areas than in urban areas and it is important for public authorities to recognise that a one size fits all approach may not always be appropriate.
- 8 Of course, DAERA is not solely responsible for all things rural and all Departments have responsibilities in relation to rural areas. As the Minister with responsibility for rural affairs it will be a key priority of mine to work closely with my Executive colleagues in seeking to ensure that all Departments comply fully

with their duties under the Rural Needs Act and that they work collaboratively in seeking to address the needs of people in rural areas.

- 9 I recognise that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 has only been in operation for a relatively short time and that there is still scope for more to be done to support public authorities in implementing the legislation. My department will continue to work with public authorities to ensure that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is implemented effectively and deliver positive and meaningful benefits for rural dwellers in the future.
- 10 I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the Public Authorities for their contribution to this report.