

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

RURAL NEEDS ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT APRIL 2019 – MARCH 2020

Published at noon on Wednesday 10 February 2021.

Mr Lyons (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 2019 - March 2020 before the Assembly on 14 December 2020. The report has been published on my department's website and covers the reporting period 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 is a key rural policy tool for my department in supporting rural communities. The aim of the Act is to improve outcomes for rural dwellers by ensuring that the social and economic needs of people in rural areas are given due regard to by public authorities in their decision making processes and to increase transparency on how public authorities consider rural needs when undertaking their functions.

The Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report remains an integral part of the rural needs monitoring process as it provides a formal record of all Rural Needs Impact Assessments undertaken by public authorities. There has been a significant increase in the volume of activities reported on by public authorities in this year's report. The information contained in this report includes a list of activities undertaken by public authorities for which a Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been undertaken and, where appropriate, includes information on (i) the rural needs identified in respect of the activity, (ii) the issues considered in relation to these rural needs and (iii) how the activity had been influenced by these rural needs.

For example, in my own department the Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme 2019 has been designed to address the needs of rural communities by focusing on local issues relating to access poverty, financial poverty and social isolation while DAERA's Forest Park Scheme seeks to promote positive mental health and wellbeing among rural dwellers by investing in forest parks in rural areas to create a welcoming environment for people in rural areas to participate in activities which help to reduce the social impacts of rural isolation.

DAERA has also been working in partnership with the Department for Communities on the Libraries NI 'Out of Hours Service' which helps address the needs of rural communities by providing extended access to library facilities in six rural areas. NI Libraries has extended the pilot project beyond the six rural areas to include a library in a market town serving an extensive rural hinterland. This project was developed specifically to meet identified rural needs i.e. access to libraries, access to broadband and access to community space.

The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust's Hospital Travel Costs Scheme (HTCS) is available to help people on a low income or income based benefit who may be entitled to reclaim travel costs incurred to and from hospital. The protocol states that the patient will receive one return fare based on the cheapest form of public transport available, which may have a possible negative impact on those living in rural areas with limited access to public transport. The scheme takes account of rural needs by providing for the fare to be calculated on the basis of mileage from the patient's home to the hospital attended where the bus or train fare is not available for patients travelling by car, as may be the case for patients in rural areas.

In the case of many activities no rural needs were identified in the Rural Needs Impact Assessment and therefore the activity was not influenced by rural needs. In some cases a policy was an internal policy

which had no potential to impact on people in rural areas while in other cases the policy, strategy, plan or public service was considered not to impact differently on people in rural areas from those in urban areas.

The Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 also places additional duties on my department, namely to publish an annual report and to make arrangements with public authorities with a view to securing co-operation and the exchange of information. The Act also requires my department to review, at least every 3 years, the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule to the Act. This review will be undertaken during the 2020-21 reporting period.

My department has continued to provide a range of support to other public authorities to help ensure they comply with the requirements of the legislation. This support included 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, monitoring and reporting and the provision of guidance and monitoring.

In September 2019, my department undertook a review of the implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. The purpose of the review was to assess how the legislation was being implemented by public authorities and to identify any further support measures that might be introduced to help public authorities comply with the legislation. A Rural Needs Working Group was established for the purposes of taking forward the review consisting of representatives of government departments, district councils, academia, rural stakeholder organisations and the other public authorities listed in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. As part of the review the working group collected evidence from a wide range of public authorities and rural stakeholders to ensure that the review was evidence-based.

The Rural Needs Working Group produced its report on the review in January 2020 which included 25 recommendations including the establishment of a Rural Needs Network for the purposes of facilitating co-operation and the exchange of information between public authorities, the redesign of my department's Rural Needs website and the development of comprehensive training for Rural Needs Co-Ordinators.

The majority of the recommendations were for my department, and these have been accepted and an Action Plan developed to monitor their implementation. A small number of recommendations were for all public authorities and my department wrote to all public authorities encouraging them to implement these recommendations. 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 remains 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 (NI) 2016 and that they work collaboratively in seeking to address the needs of people in rural areas.

The introduction of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 was an important milestone in rural life. It is recognised that that policies and strategies often have a different impact in rural areas than urban areas and the Act helps ensure that the particular needs of people in rural areas are given due regard to. Although the Act has only been in operation for a relatively short time, it is clear from the report that consideration of rural needs is now becoming more firmly embedded within public authorities and that is something which I welcome. I would encourage public authorities to continue to engage with rural communities to help understand the challenges they face and in doing so, provide meaningful outcomes for our rural citizens.

I also recognise that there is still scope for more to be done to ensure that rural needs are taken account of in the development and implementation of policy and in the design and delivery of public services. My department will continue to work with public authorities to help them implement the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 effectively and help deliver positive and meaningful outcomes for rural dwellers in the future.

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